



2019 Adult Undergraduate Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report for Four-Year Institutions



ENROLLMENT





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INTRODUCTION

Nontraditional is the new normal in college undergraduate enrollment

More nontraditional learners are entering undergraduate programs at American colleges than ever before. This is breaking the mold of the traditional 18-24 year-old college student and has significant implications for how colleges must serve their undergraduate populations.

According to the National Center of Education Statistics, as of 2017 there were 4.5 million adult undergraduate students (age 25 and older) out of the existing pool of 16.7 million undergraduates, meaning one in four undergraduates is an adult student.¹ However, a recent report by the American Council on Education (ACE) indicates that 58 percent of all undergraduates are “post-traditional” with at least one of the following characteristics:

- **Over age 25**
- **Financially independent**
- **Working full time**
- **Connected with the military²**

As working adults balancing family, jobs, and school, adult undergraduates come with different mindsets and priorities than traditional students. Institutions may need to adopt new recruitment practices to attract these nameless, boundless, diverse, and distracted students.

To help institutions understand this rising population of nontraditional undergraduates, RNL polled nearly 70 institutions about their marketing and recruitment practices for adult learners. This report summarizes and analyzes our findings while offering key insights into opportunities for enhancing communication and recruitment practices to this ever-growing market.

About the poll

RNL polled institutions in spring of 2019 about their recruitment practices for adult undergraduate students (age 25 and up). Of those polled, 21 four-year public and 46 four-year private institutions responded.

HOW CAN YOU TURN BENCHMARKS INTO STRATEGY? ASK OUR ENROLLMENT EXPERTS.



The enrollment strategists at RNL have helped four-year public and private institutions use their resources more effectively to meet their enrollment goals—for traditional undergraduates, adult undergraduates, online learners, and graduate students. As you look at these benchmarks and wonder how to translate them into strategic action, ask for a consultation.

- **Visit RuffaloNL.com/Strategy**
- **Call 800.876.1117 and ask to speak with our enrollment strategists**

¹ National Center for Education Statistics (2018). *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), spring 2014, 2016, and 2018, fall enrollment component*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education

² Soares, L. J. & Nellum, C. (2017). *The post-traditional learners manifesto revisited: Aligning postsecondary education with real-life for adult student success*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

UNDERGRADUATE ADULT LEARNER PROGRAM OFFERINGS

1. Academic calendar offerings

Note: respondents selected all that applied

Length of term	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
Full semester	53%	77%
12 weeks	11%	23%
10 weeks	2%	14%
8 weeks	43%	32%
6 weeks	9%	18%
4 weeks	2%	5%
Other	26%	18%

2. Program format

Note: respondents selected all that applied

Type of program	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
Cohort-based	28%	18%
Evening classes	72%	64%
Weekend-based	32%	18%
On-ground, on-campus	57%	64%
On-ground, off-campus (e.g., a satellite learning center)	36%	41%
100% online	64%	73%
Mixed modalities (online and on-ground)	68%	64%
Self-paced	9%	14%
Competency-based model	4%	5%

3. Percentage of undergraduate learners who take courses online

Percentage	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
0%	2%	0%
1%-25%	30%	32%
26%-50%	21%	23%
51%-75%	11%	20%
76%-99%	19%	23%
100%	17%	9%

4. Introduction of undergraduate adult learner programs

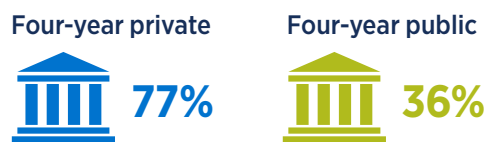
First introduced...	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
Less than one academic year	4%	14%
One to three academic years	2%	18%
Four to five academic years	13%	9%
More than five academic years	19%	27%
More than 10 academic years	62%	27%

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Offer more flexible course schedules.** Both public and private institutions continue to favor the traditional full semester or eight-week format. With adult learners often balancing family, work, and school life, an opportunity may exist to present more flexible course schedules that would better fit their busy schedules.
- **Advertise your online program offerings.** The majority of public institutions are not taking advantage of the online courses they offer, which would appeal to adult learners. Target adult learners with the opportunity of flexible online learning to increase enrollment for this segment.
- **Develop and evolve adult learner-specific programs.** Private institutions seem to have a head start on adult undergraduate programs—62 percent of private four-year schools have been offering adult learner-specific programs for more than 10 years compared to only 27 percent of public four-year schools. This may be an area of opportunity for public institutions. In addition, long-serving institutions must not be complacent. Adult students' lives have changed dramatically in the last decade or more, and so must programs that seek to serve them.

COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING PLANS

5. Number of campuses with a formal communication plan for undergraduate adult learners



6. Number of campuses with specific marketing and recruitment plan for undergraduate adult learners



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Public institutions have a huge opportunity to expand their adult undergraduate enrollment efforts.** While most private institutions have formal, targeted communication plans for adult undergraduate students, few four-year public schools do the same for the growing population of nontraditional learners.
- **Many institutions lack adult-specific marketing plans.** Nearly one in four private and seven in 10 public institutions lack segmented marketing and recruitment plans for adult undergraduate learners.
- **Adult undergraduate enrollment efforts will not be effective without formal plans.** Developing a formal marketing and enrollment campaign targeted to the needs and priorities of adult learners would have significant impact on increasing enrollment for this population for both private and public institutions.

TIMING AND CHANNELS FOR FIRST CONTACT

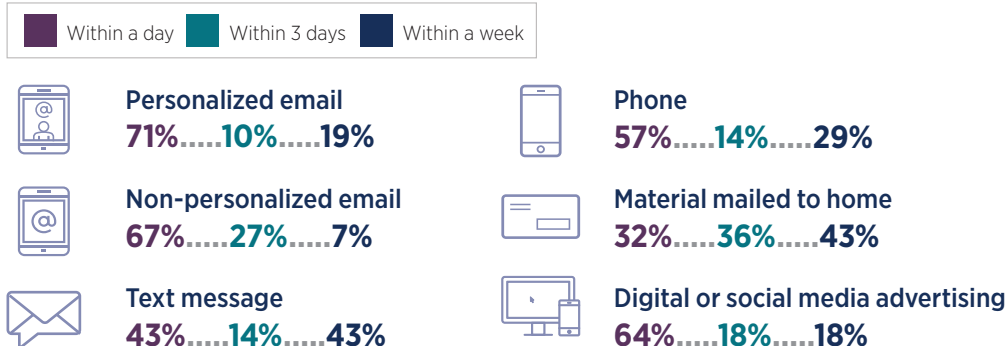
7. Time to first contact

The results below show the methods institutions use to respond to inquiries and how quickly they may respond using those methods.

FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS



FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



GET EXPERT GUIDANCE WITH YOUR ADULT UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT PLANNING

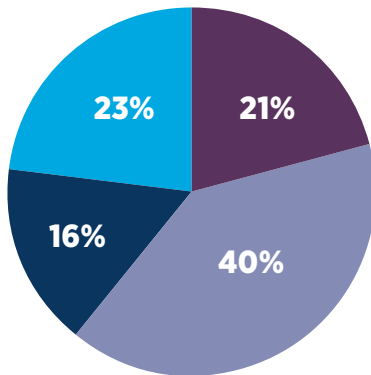


RNL specializes in developing targeted marketing and recruitment campaigns to help four-year public and private institutions more effectively reach their enrollment goals. Ask for a free consultation with our experts.

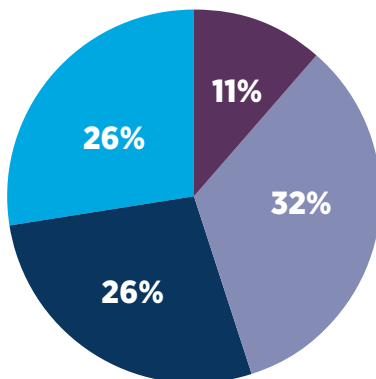
- Visit RuffaloNL.com/Strategy
- Call 800.876.1117 and ask to speak with our enrollment strategists

8. Time between initial follow-up contact(s) and an appointment with an enrollment representative

FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS



FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

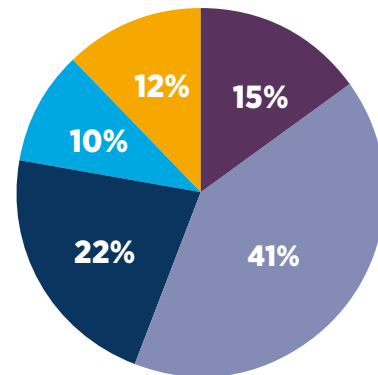


CONTACT TIME

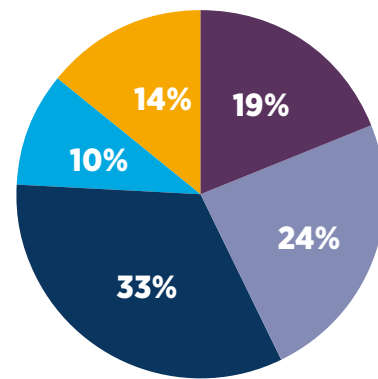
- 24 hours
- 1-3 days
- 4-7 days
- More than 7 days

9. Time between receipt of a completed application and an admission decision

FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS



FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



CONTACT TIME

- 24 hours
- 1-3 days
- 4-7 days
- 1-2 weeks
- More than 2 weeks

10. Department responsible for following up with inquiries

Department	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
Adult and/or online enrollment department	70%	44%
Traditional undergraduate enrollment department	23%	50%
Third party vendor	2%	6%
Faculty	2%	0%

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Respond quickly.** Adult undergraduate students tend to have shorter decision cycles than traditional undergraduates, so schedule an appointment call or in-person meeting as soon as possible with adult undergraduates.
- **Use multiple communication channels.** As adult learners may be more preoccupied by family, work, and other responsibilities, using multiple communication channels such as digital ads, text messages, emails, social media, and other communication methods gives you the greatest opportunity to grab their interest across any channel they are using.
- **Designate an adult learner enrollment specialist.** In order to best respond to the unique behaviors of adult learners, an adult or online enrollment specialist is best suited to address and manage inquiries and questions.

ADULT UNDERGRADUATE COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

11. First communication contact methods: use and effectiveness

FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS



Personalized email
100%.....100%



Phone
95%.....95%



Material mailed to home
95%.....95%



Digital or social media advertising
95%.....95%



Text message
77%.....93%



Non-personalized email
83%.....45%

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

The "effective" figure on the following pages combines practices rated *highly effective* or *effective* by respondents.

FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



Personalized email
100%.....86%



Text message
44%.....88%



Phone
80%.....75%



Digital or social media advertising
80%.....75%



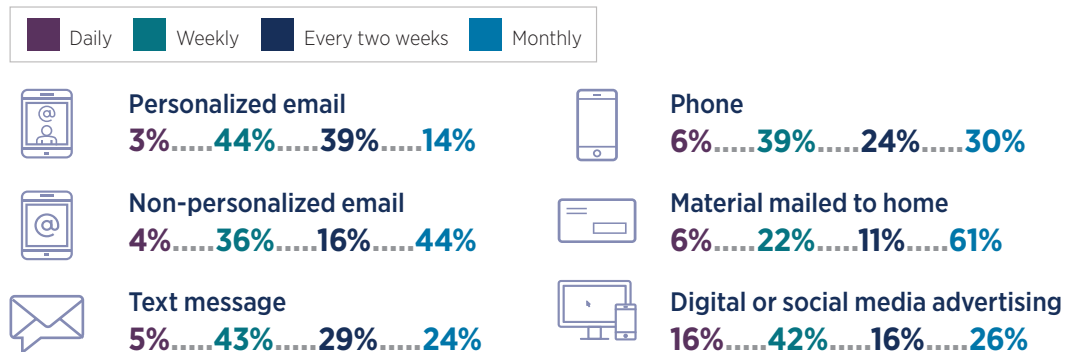
Material mailed to home
80%.....75%



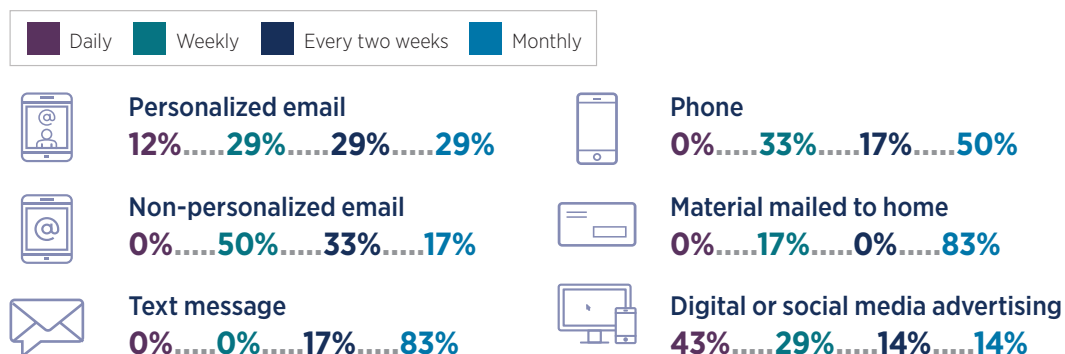
Non-personalized email
84%.....69%

12. Frequency of communication

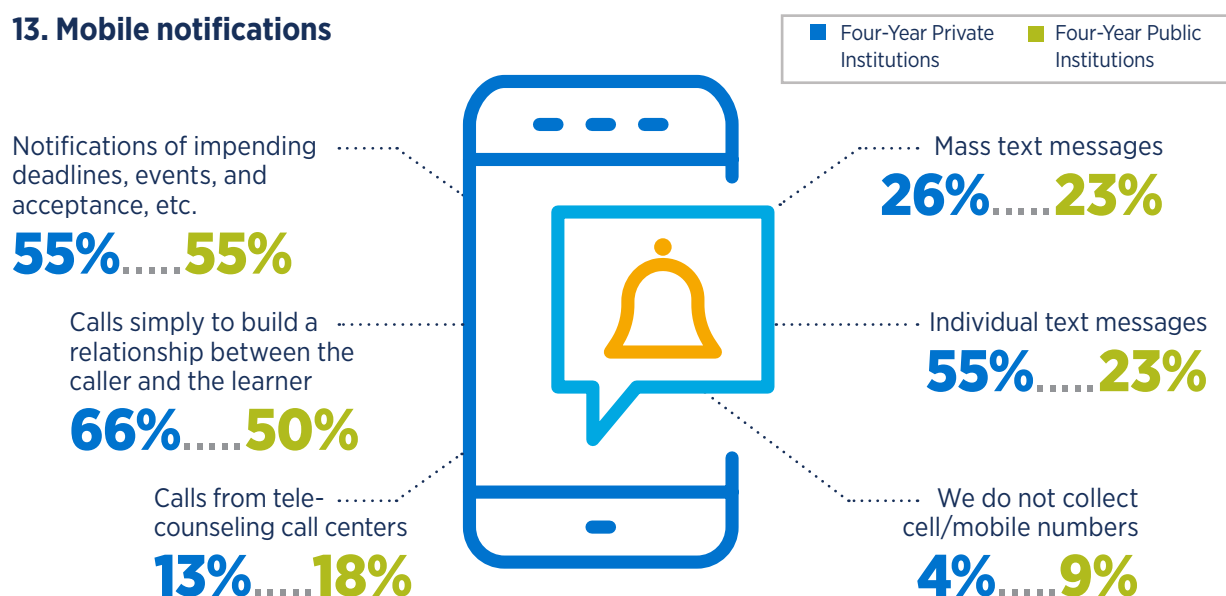
FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS



FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

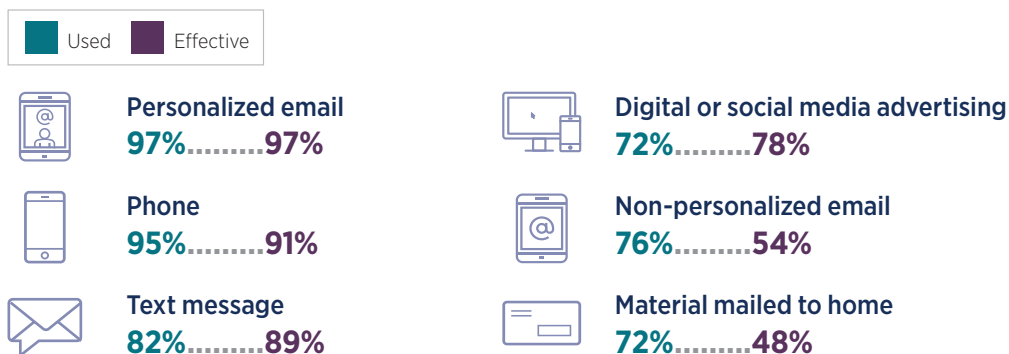


13. Mobile notifications

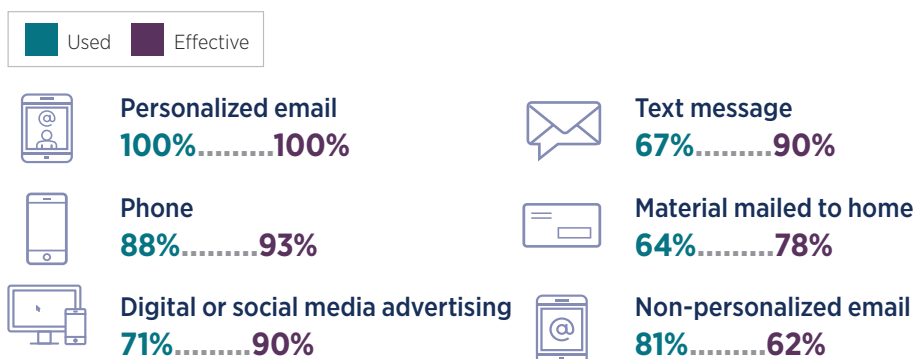


14. Follow-up communication practices: use and effectiveness

FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS



FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Get on a first-name basis.** Institutions report that personalized communication is nearly 100 percent effective for first contact with an adult undergraduate. In today's era of marketing and technology, personalized email should be the communication mode of choice, with opportunities for improvement in text message communications and the strategic use of telephone calls.
- **Put your message at their fingertips.** Public institutions seem to be missing an opportunity to communicate weekly or biweekly via text message. None of the public institutions that participated said they sent weekly text messages to prospects, while 43 percent of private institutions did.
- **Take advantage of mobile notifications.** With 77 percent of Americans owning a smartphone³, institutions would be prudent to utilize mobile notifications for sending application deadlines, event notices, text messages, and personalized voice calls to build relationships with their prospects. And given that 90 percent of institutions collect mobile numbers, not using mobile notifications is a missed opportunity.
- **Use direct mail sparingly.** Considering the expense and low effective rate of direct mail, institutions may want to target direct mail more strategically to students who have a higher propensity to enroll or are from a desired student population.

³ Pew Research Center (5 Feb 2018). *Mobile fact sheet*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/>

ENROLLMENT STRATEGIES FOR UNDERGRADUATE ADULT LEARNERS

15. Enrollment office strategies

Most frequently used practices	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
Qualifying inquiries	89%	63%
Qualifying admits	88%	63%
Statistical modeling to predict the likelihood of a prospective adult learner enrolling at your institution	88%	63%
Use of behavioral/engagement scoring with digital/web tracking for adult learners	88%	60%
Use of financial aid resources to determine ability to pay in relation to financing education, scholarship distribution, and managing the discount rate percentage	88%	63%

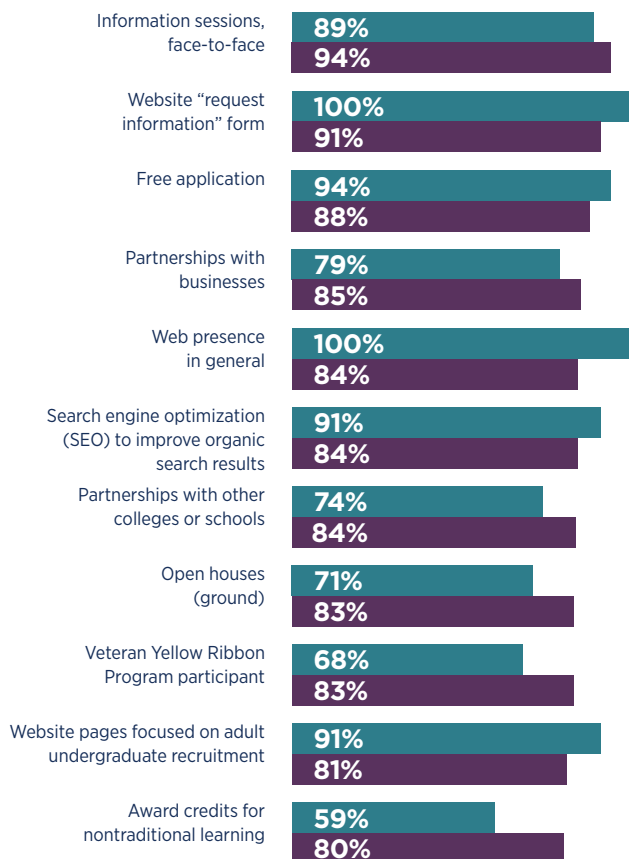


Practices and ROI: Using specialists vs. doing it yourself

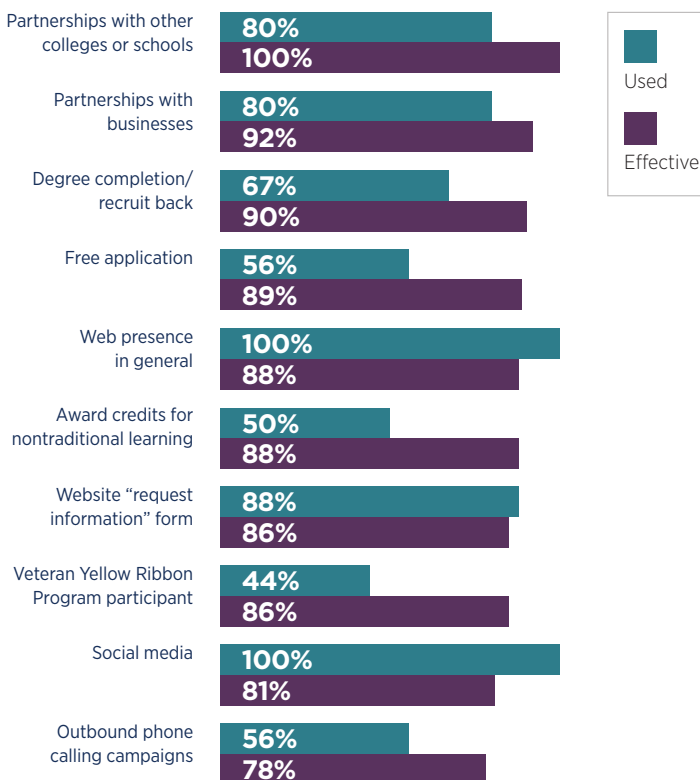
Eight out of 10 private institutions and 60 percent of public institutions do these practices on their own. While there are benefits to doing them in house, in the increasingly complex world of enrollment, it may make more sense to use outside specialists for statistical modeling, digital marketing, communication flow development, and other more complex tasks.

16. Most effective marketing strategies and use by institution type



FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS



FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

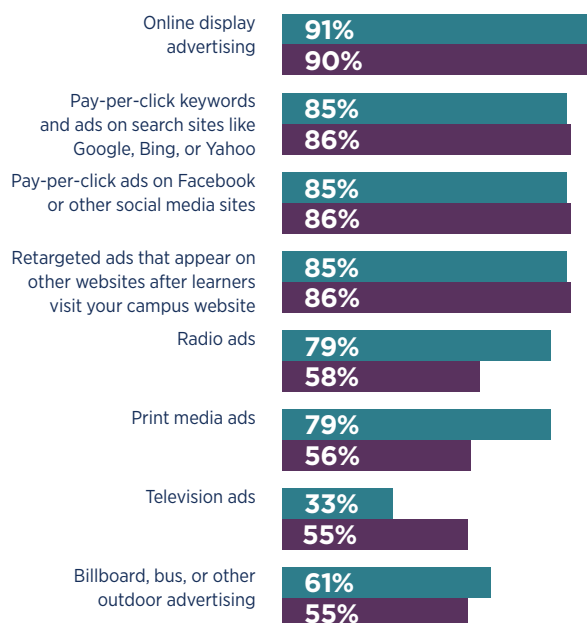


Top 5 ineffective marketing practices

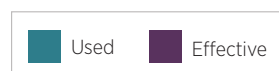
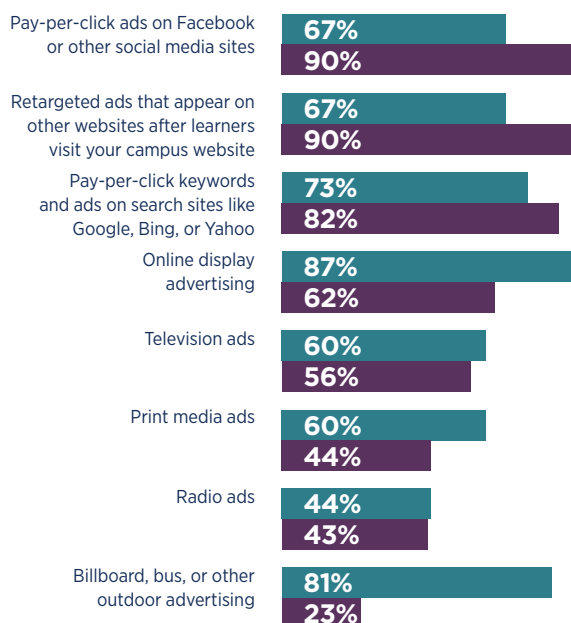
FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	INEFFECTIVE	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	INEFFECTIVE
			
Email blasts to purchased email lists	68%	Online chat	56%
Open houses (virtual)	60%	Information sessions via webinars	50%
Purchasing names of prospective learners from list vendors	57%	Open houses (ground)	50%
Online chat	50%	Open houses (virtual)	50%
Information sessions via webinars	38%	Referral program	43%

17. Most effective advertising strategies and use by institution type

FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS



FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Develop engaging webinars and online chats.** Recruitment strategies like online chats and webinars can be effective but only when done well. Interaction, presentation, engagement, and other key factors can make these effective ways to reach a large number of adult undergraduate learners.
- **Spend advertising dollars where they will be most effective and accountable.** When building a robust advertising campaign, institutions should invest in measurable advertising as they balance ROI, visibility, and effectiveness. Digital advertising such as online display ads, pay-per-click, and retargeting ads are sound mediums to invest in as they provide precise metrics and allow campuses to accurately assess ROI.
- **Consider the ROI of working with specialists for complex enrollment tasks.** Many enrollment office tasks can be cumbersome and time consuming to effectively complete in house. Institutions may find using a vendor that specializes in building a statistical model, leveraging financial aid, or developing a targeted marketing and enrollment campaign proves more efficient, effective, and better for the bottom line.



ABOUT THE SURVEY

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

Data in this report reflect responses from 67 nonprofit four-year colleges and universities, public and private:

46 private

21 public

Respondents participated in an RNL national electronic poll of adult undergraduate practices for marketing and student recruitment in the spring of 2019. The poll was emailed to enrollment and admissions officers at accredited, degree-granting institutions across the United States.

Standard descriptive statistics (such as sample means) were used to analyze the results of the poll for central tendency and variation. Due to the relatively small sample size, the results should be read as indicators.

To report the findings as accurately as possible, the rankings of effectiveness were based only on the relative effectiveness options that were given to respondents: **“effective,” (responses of “highly effective” or “effective”)** and **“not effective.”** This approach of excluding “practice not used,” allowed promising, less-frequently-used practices to be included.

HOW DO YOU TURN BENCHMARKS INTO STRATEGY? ASK RNL



The enrollment strategists at RNL have helped four-year public and private institutions use their resources more effectively to meet their enrollment goals—from growing and shaping enrollment to breaking into new markets. As you look at these benchmarks and wonder how to translate them into strategic action, ask for a consultation.

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- **Call 800.876.1117 and ask to speak with one of our enrollment experts**

LIST OF PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

PRIVATE

Augustana University SD
 Barry University FL
 Belhaven University MS
 Belmont Abbey College NC
 Bethel College IN
 Bethel University IN
 Bloomfield College NJ
 Bryan College TN
 Buena Vista University IA
 California Lutheran University CA
 Cambridge College MA
 Chowan University NC
 Concordia University OR
 Curry College MA
 Dallas Baptist University TX
 Edgewood College WI
 Finlandia University MI
 Florida Southern College FL
 Franklin University OH
 Holy Family University PA
 John Brown University AR
 Kate Demello MA
 Keiser University International
 Language Institute NI
 Lindenwood University-Belleville IL
 Malone University OH
 Mercyhurst University PA
 Mount Aloysius College PA
 Mount Mercy University IA
 Newberry College SC
 Nichols College MA
 North Greenville University,
 the Greer Campus SC
 Northwest Nazarene University ID

Nossi College of Art TN
 Oklahoma Baptist University OK
 Point Park University PA
 Presbyterian Theological Seminary
 in America CA
 Roberts Wesleyan College NY
 Saint Louis University MO
 Simmons University MA
 Southern Nazarene University OK
 Springfield College MA
 St. Catherine University MN
 The College of Saint Scholastica MN
 The King's College NY
 Tufts MA
 William Peace University School of
 Professional Studies NC

SUNY Oswego NY
 The University of Arizona Online AZ
 University of Arizona AZ
 University of Louisville KY
 University of Nebraska at Omaha NE
 Washington State University WA

PUBLIC

Bluefield State College WV
 Bowling Green State University OH
 Central Michigan University MI
 Clarion University of Pennsylvania PA
 Jacksonville State University AL
 Kent State Trumbull OH
 Lincoln University-School of Adult &
 Continuing Education PA
 Louisiana Tech University LA
 Muskegon Community College MI
 Northwood University MI
 Ohio University OH
 Penn State University, Berks Campus PA
 Salisbury University MD
 Southeast Missouri State University MO
 Southern Oregon University OR



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RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. More than 1,900 colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations rely on RNL for advanced analytics, personalized engagement, and industry-leading insights to achieve their missions. The firm is distinguished by its powerful portfolio of solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right college or university, graduate on time, secure their first job, and give back to support the next generation. RNL conferences, research reports, papers, and articles help clients stay on top of current trends.



LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR SOLUTIONS FOR ENROLLMENT

RNL offers a full suite of solutions for student marketing, recruitment, and financial aid, including:

- **Student search**
- **Application cultivation**
- **Financial aid management**
- **Net cost calculators**
- **Yield and engagement to prevent stop-outs**
- **Strategic enrollment planning**

ASK FOR A FREE CONSULTATION

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