2024 Online Program Marketing and Recruitment Practices

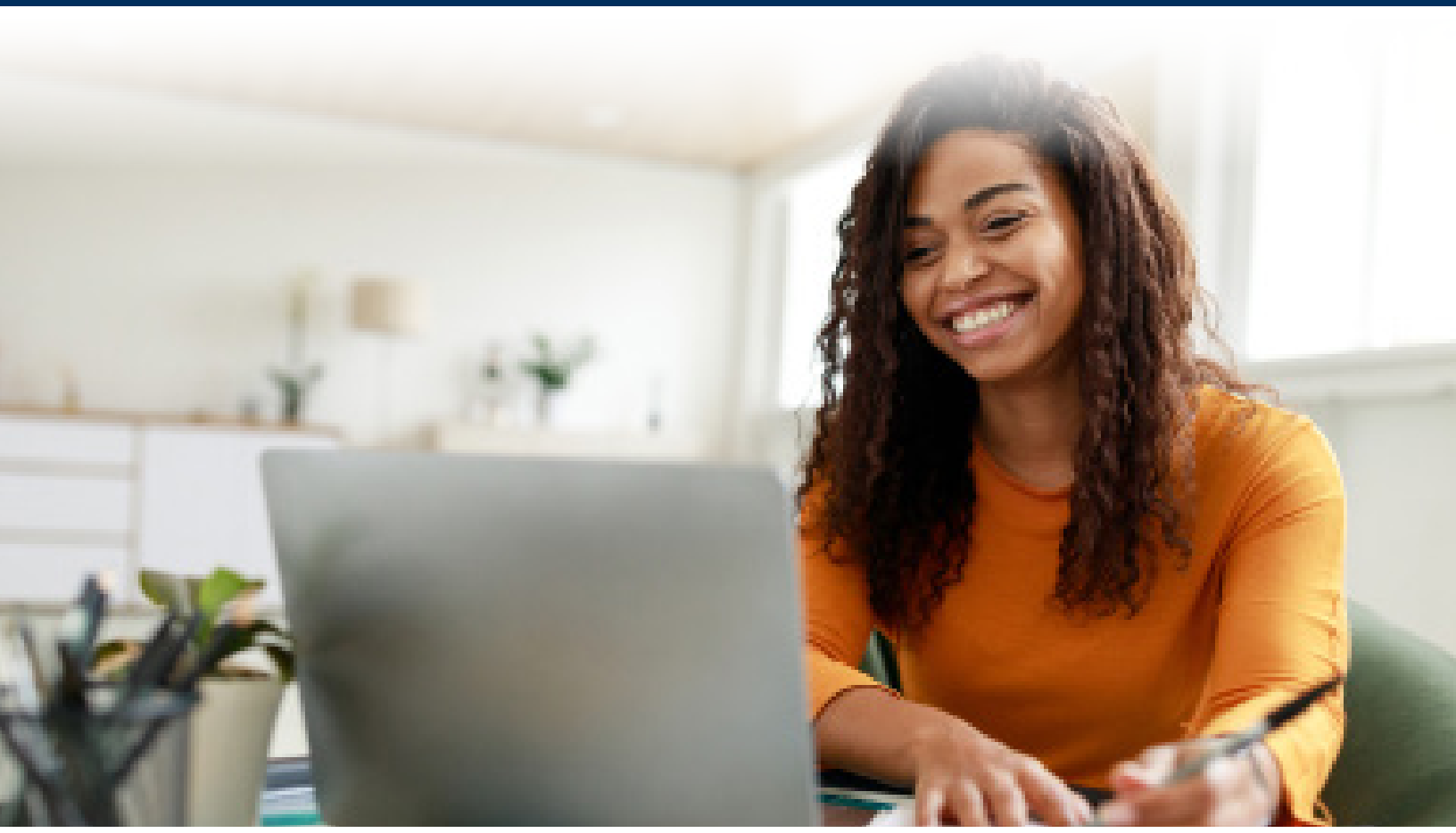
How Online Programs Are Leveraging AI, Communications Planning, ROI, and More to Maximize Yield.

How can we help?

RNL works with colleges and universities to take their online programs to the next level… wherever you need help:

- Digital lead generation
- Search engine optimization
- Instructional design
- Market research
- Program planning
- Organizational/operations consulting

Contact us to schedule a consultation with an RNL enrollment expert.
RNL.com/OnlineEnrollment



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5 Action Items for Online Marketing and Recruitment Leaders

The *2024 Online Program Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report* captures the results from a survey of 214 marketing and recruitment professionals. Key findings are built around five interlinked institutional imperatives that must be in place for institutions to successfully grow online enrollment and are underpinned by what online students told us was most important.

1. Incorporate AI into key processes to improve service and efficiency for online programs

74%: Online programs indicate that the ability to **improve conversion rates** is their most frequent motivation for implementing AI solutions.

40%: Many have already launched an **AI-driven chatbot** (and 28 percent more will do so in the next year).

31%: Building AI-driven **predictive modeling/analytics** is the most common AI next step.

What students told us about AI: About 70 percent of online students said they used an AI-driven chatbot during their search and nearly 80 percent indicated that they were at least somewhat satisfied with their experience.

2. Align marketing practices with student search patterns

45%: Fewer than half of online programs have **updated their SEO** in the last three months.

60%: The largest share of the marketing budget is being dedicated to **paid digital advertising**.

54%: About half are considering **market opportunity** when allocating marketing dollars.

What students told us about their search: Forty percent of online students start their search on a search engine, another 52 percent indicate that it is their second step, and four of the five highest rating information sources are digital platforms.

3. Ensure recruitment practices match student preferences

93%: Online programs use **professional recruiters/counselors** to respond to inquiries and questions.

68%: The majority send a **personalized email** as their first response.

25%: Only one-quarter **respond within three hours** to initial inquiries.

What students told us about their enrollment experience: Nearly half (48 percent) expect a response within three hours, and 45 percent indicate that a slower than expected response indicates that they are not important to the program.

4. Match communication planning with student expectations

90%: Online programs agree that **communicating regularly through a mix of channels** is the best way to maximize enrollment yield.

73%: Nearly three-quarters are employing **texting in their communication plans**.

70%: Most contact prospective students **at least once per week**.

What students told us about their communication expectations: More than half of online students expect a personalized email in response to their initial inquiry, and more than 75 percent want texting used as part of the communication mix. Nearly 70 percent expect contact on a weekly basis.

5. Measure results and return on investment

61%: The majority are **monitoring marketing performance** at the program level, while only 46 percent are monitoring by cost.

81%: Most marketers have **"down funnel" visibility** into leads performance, but fewer recruiters (45%) have "up funnel" visibility.

82%: Most online programs **evaluate the success** of their efforts through **Conversion Rate Analysis**, but only 53 percent use formal ROI Measurement.

These findings represent a combination of best practices and current practices that are not necessarily optimal. Either way, they document what is happening today in online program marketing and recruitment. The findings, however, represent a larger share of best practices than in any previous similar study conducted by RNL. This is an indicator that increasing numbers of online programs have "upped their game" in terms of marketing and recruitment. The reader should use these findings as a checklist to assess their own operation's current status and identify those areas where they are not aligned with peer practices and/or not aligned with core student expectations.

Introduction: No More Guessing

As institutions prepare for the first of two demographic cliffs that will extend through 2040, online programming has become an essential element in overall enrollment health. Online program marketing and recruitment leaders need to know what works and what doesn't. This study provides insights from more than 200 marketing and recruitment leaders about marketing, recruitment, communication planning, and the use of AI. In order to help institutions assess each finding, we have included critical data from our 2024 Online Student Recruitment Report that align with each area covered in this survey.

The extent to which institutions are aligning marketing and recruitment processes with student expectations is critical to institutional health. Why? Because the "Millennial/GenZ" audience (now comprising 75 percent of the online market) grew up experiencing customized and personalized processes which they extend to their higher education choices. When combined with the level of "choice" available to them, online programs must be responsive. This report helps you both benchmark against your peers and with key student expectations.

The report is organized around a set of interlinked institutional imperatives essential for online growth:

1. **Incorporate AI into key processes to improve service and efficiency**
2. **Align marketing practices with student search patterns**
3. **Ensure recruitment and communication strategies match student preferences**
4. **Measure results and return on investment**

The highest quality, most market relevant programs, however, will not result in robust enrollment if underpinning foundations—effective follow-up, targeted messaging, state-of-the-art marketing, and AI-infused into everything you do—are not in place at the point of program launch.

This report presents findings from a survey of more than 200 institutional marketing, recruitment, and enrollment leaders. The survey was administered online in September 2024 with discreet sections focused on online program marketing practices and recruitment practices. The data we present portrays the current state of operations, with RNL expert commentary focused on how institutions can maximize their success.

Data throughout this report aggregate data are presented with call outs where findings differ significantly by sector, by number of online programs, by total online student enrollment, or by the professional function of the respondent (marketer v. recruiter.)

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS:

Total Respondents: 214

Sector: Public: 45% | Private Non-Profit: 55%

Online Offerings: Undergraduate Degrees: 70% | Graduate Degrees: 87% | Certificates: 74%

Number of Online Offerings: 10 or fewer: 43% | 11-20: 24% | More than 20: 34%

Number of Online Students: Under 500: 54% | 500-1,500: 23% | More than 1,500: 23%

Number of New Programs Per Year: 1-2: 77% | 3-5: 17% | More than 5: 6%

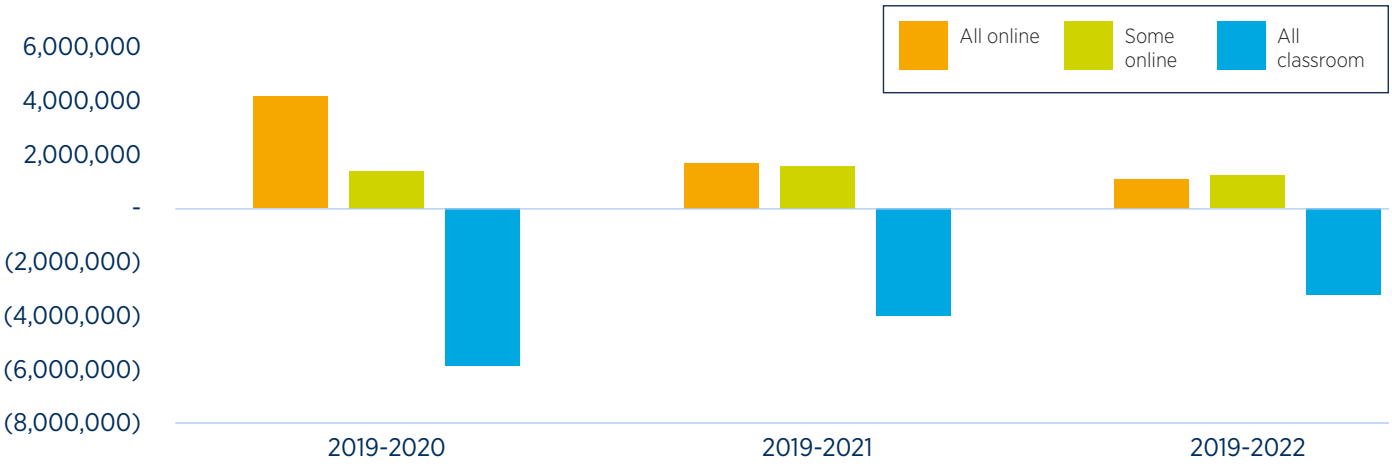
Is Online Education in Decline? No

There is no denying that the most recent enrollment trend data indicate that the number of students opting to enroll in all online courses contracted year over year for the second year in a row. But this does not reflect diminishing interest in online education among today's students. Rather, it reflects that three years after millions of students were forced into online/remote education, some (but not all) students have returned to the classroom.

While year-over-year data would indicate that online demand has contracted, when comparing each of the post-pandemic years to 2019 (the last pre-pandemic year), demand continues to surpass pre-pandemic levels, with millions of additional students choosing fully (and partially) study.

Undergraduate: In 2022, 2.2 million more undergraduate students decided to enroll in all or some online courses than did in 2019, with those opting for "some online" outpacing "all online." Compare this with 3.2 million fewer who opted to enroll in all classroom study.

Figure 1: Undergraduate Pre- and Post-Pandemic Enrollment Growth by Format

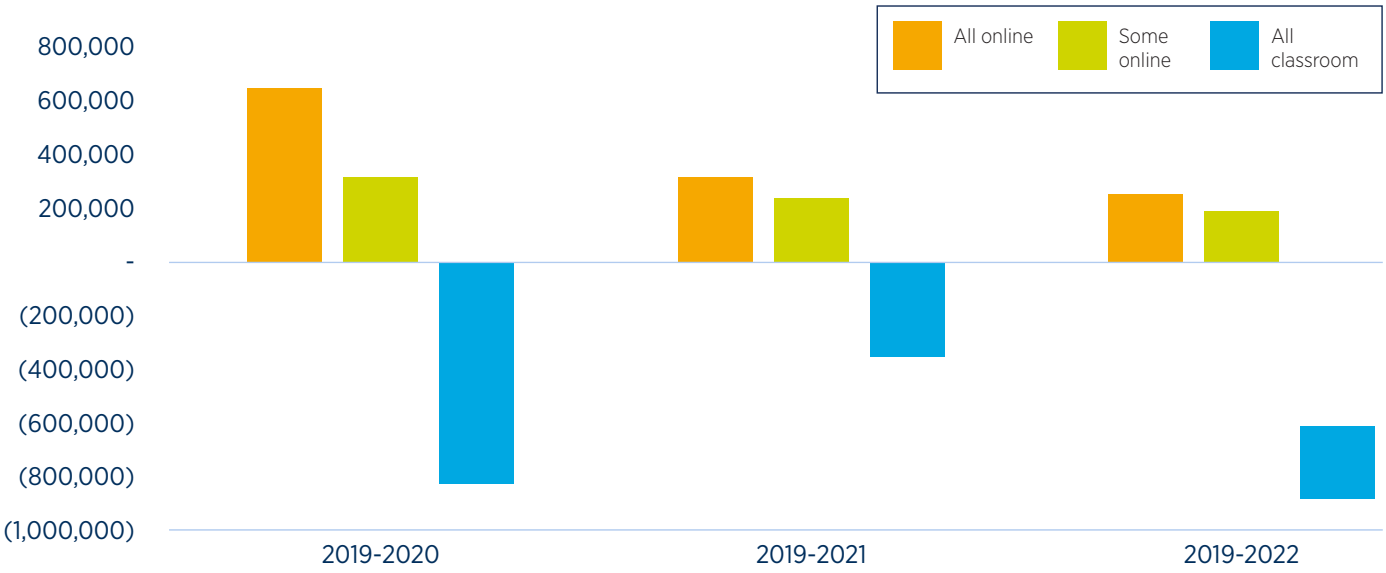


Source: RNL Analysis of IPEDS Fall Enrollment Snapshot data. (U.S. degree-granting institutions of at least two years.)

When looking at "unduplicated" headcount data for an academic year (instead of the Fall Snapshot data that documents the number of students enrolled after the fall semester is in progress), an additional 5 million undergraduates enrolled at other points in the year and all but 200,000 selected all or some online courses.

Graduate: In 2022, 424,000 more graduate students decided to enroll in all or some online courses than in 2019—with those opting for "all online" significantly outpacing "some online." Compare this with more than 284,000 fewer who opted to enroll in all classroom study.

Figure 4: Graduate Pre- and Post-Pandemic Enrollment Growth by Format



Source: RNL Analysis of IPEDS Fall Enrollment Snapshot data. (U.S. degree-granting institutions of at least two years.)

Like undergraduate trends, the IPEDS 12-month unduplicated academic year data indicate that more than 812,000 additional graduate students enroll at other times of the year, and every single one of them selects all or some online courses.

Note: Data in this report are organized in "rank order" on the basis of the findings among all respondents. In cross-tabulated tables, data that do not appear to be in sequential or rank order represent areas in which that subset diverges from overall findings. Areas in which there is a difference of 10 points or more are areas of particular interest.

Four Interlinked Institutional Imperatives

1. Incorporate AI Into Key Processes to Improve Service and Efficiency

AI emerged in 2023 and 2024 as one of the most important ingredients in advancing the efficiency of nearly every process people are doing today. Higher education was not an exception, but institutional stakeholders need more information about what their peers are doing, how they feel about AI, where the support for advancing AI exists, and early use cases that demonstrate success. All of these factors provide the underpinning of the questions administered in this survey. Before we review the data, what did online students tell us about AI in the RNL *2024 Online Student Recruitment Report*?

What online students say about AI

(All data are derived from the 2024 Online Student Recruitment Report)

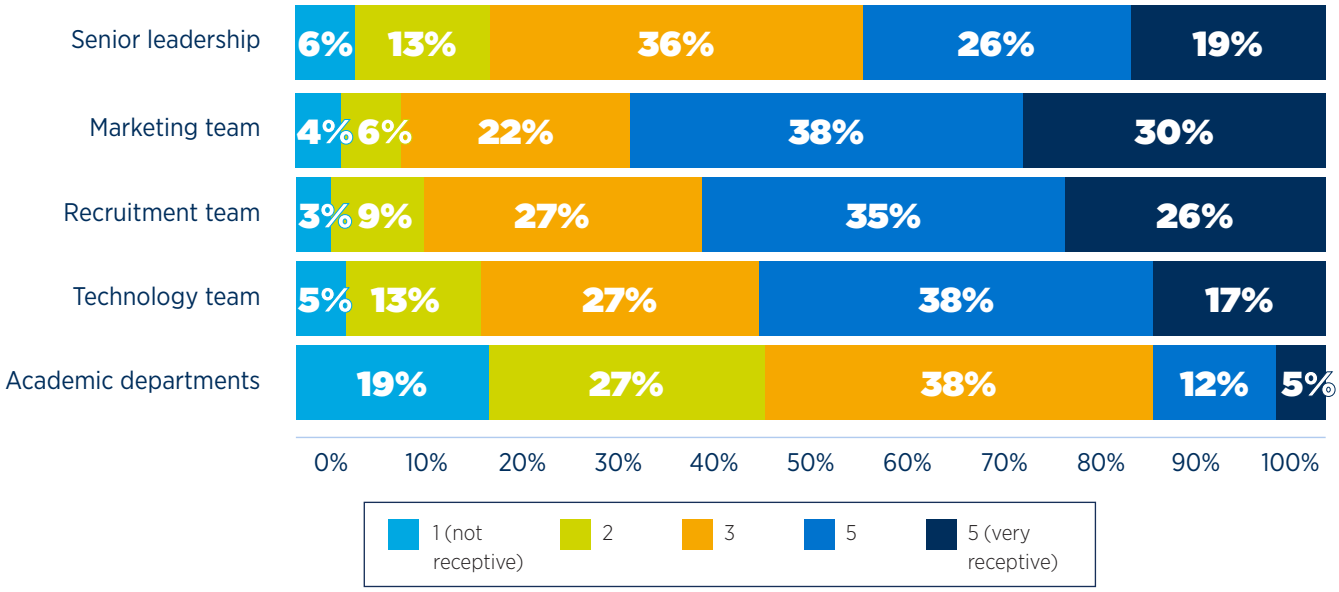
- Nearly half use an AI platform one or more times per week.
- Nearly half would use a virtual writing or virtual research assistant if available.
- About 70 percent used an AI-driven chatbot during their search.
- Between 50 and 60 percent of online students would be comfortable accessing tuition, course, financial aid, admissions, or program requirement information on an AI-driven chatbot.
- Nearly 80 percent were at least moderately satisfied with their chatbot experience.

What online leaders say about AI

Only 11 percent of online marketing and recruitment leaders indicate that their institution has no current plans to implement AI-driven marketing or recruitment solutions, with only 24 percent indicating that they have not yet seen any positive impact (likely due to recent implementation). However, only one-quarter of respondents rate their current AI skills as quite capable (a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale). Other important insights include:

- They think their senior leadership is quite receptive to implementing AI solutions, while also thinking that roughly the same proportion of academic departments are not receptive. The most receptive stakeholders are marketing leaders.
- Their institutions are most frequently motivated to implement AI solutions in order to improve conversion rates, create better targeted marketing, and to improve the student journey.
- AI is most frequently being used today in marketing content creation and in AI-driven chatbots, while AI next steps (next 12 months) focus on centralized data analysis, student and parent Q&A support, and (again) AI-driven chatbot implementation.
- AI-driven marketing content creation, centralized data analysis, and predictive modeling/analysis are rated as the most effective AI solutions, albeit with fewer already having implemented either centralized data analysis and predictive modeling.
- In terms of near-term impact, personalizing the student experience will have the greatest positive impact on their operations, and that the potential for AI to free up staff time and streamline routine tasks will be the most important internal improvements.

1. How receptive are key institutional stakeholders to implementing AI solutions?

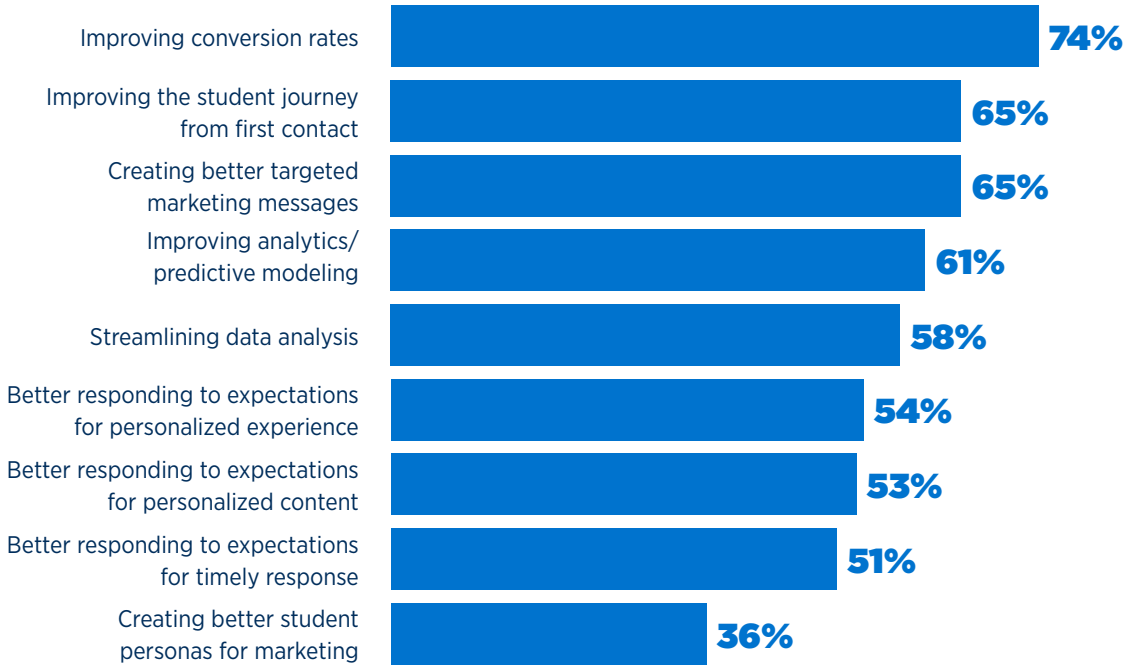


Notable differences

There are no significant differences in respondents' assessment of receptivity among key stakeholder groups when viewing the data by institution type, number of online programs (scope of operation), total online enrollment (size of operation), number of annual new programs (growth mindset), or respondent job function.

Note that "Large" operations imply total online enrollment of more than 1,500 students, "Mid-Sized" operations are those enrolling 500-1,500, and "Small" operations are those enrolling fewer than 500.

2. What is motivating your institution to implement AI marketing and enrollment solutions?



Notable differences

83%
Large online operations are even more driven to use AI to **improve conversion rates**.

74%
Large online operations are even more driven to use AI to **improve the student journey**.

70%
Large online operations are even more driven to use AI to **streamline data analysis**.

3. What is your timeline for implementing AI-driven marketing/enrollment solutions?

DOING IT NOW

Marketing content creation	43%
AI-chatbot/digital assistant	40%
Predictive modeling/analytics	22%
Centralized data analysis	17%
Persona development	14%
Student and parent Q&A support	13%
Centralized information source for admissions team	11%
AI-driven strategy development	8%
Transcript evaluation	7%
Financial aid modeling	4%
Essay scoring	3%
Application assessments	2%

NEXT 12 MONTHS

Predictive modeling/analytics	31%
Centralized data analysis	30%
Student and parent Q&A support	29%
Centralized information source for admissions team	29%
AI-chatbot/digital assistant	28%
AI-driven strategy development	27%
Persona development	27%
Marketing content creation	24%
Transcript evaluation	19%
Financial aid modeling	16%
Application assessments	15%
Essay scoring	8%

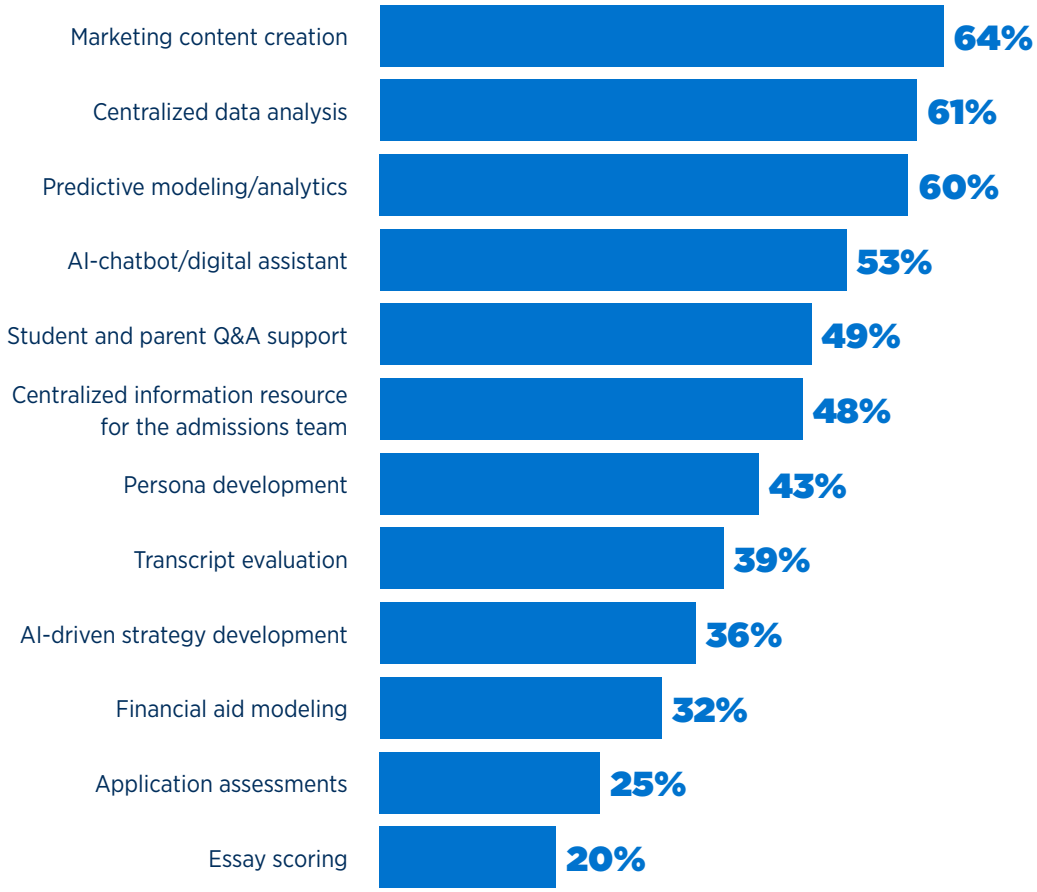
Notable differences

53%
Even more Private Non-Profits are now using AI to **create marketing content**.

37%
Even more Mid-Sized operations plan to launch an **AI chatbot/ digital assistant** in the next year.

33%
Even more Large operations are using AI to do **predictive modeling/analytics**.

4. Which AI solutions are most likely to be effective in achieving your enrollment goals?



Notable differences

74%

Even more Large operations rate **AI-driven predictive modeling** as effective.

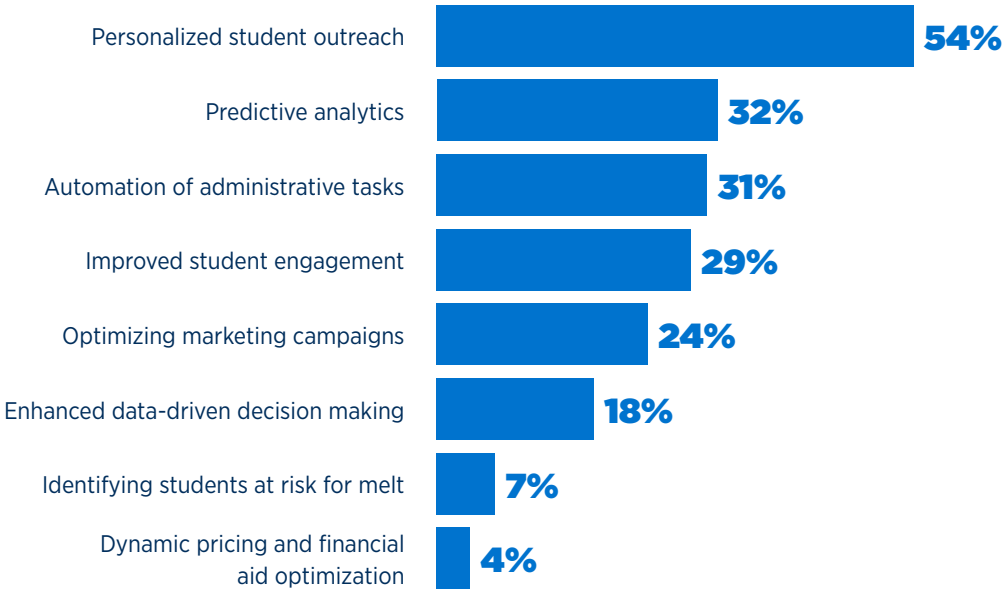
67%

Even more Mid-Sized operations rate their **AI-driven chatbot/ digital assistant** as effective.

51%

Even more Mid-sized operations rate **AI-driven transcript evaluation** as effective.

5. How can AI most positively impact your marketing and recruitment operation over the next three years?



Notable differences

63%

Even more Private Non-Profits think that AI will have a positive impact on **personalizing student outreach**.

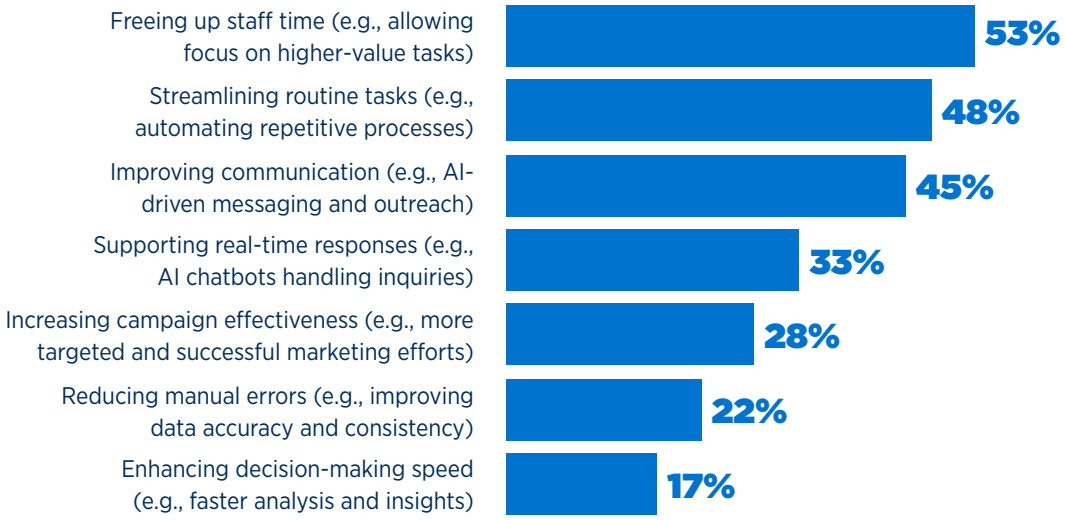
33%

Even more Mid-Sized operations think that AI will have a positive impact on **automating administrative tasks**.

45%

Even more Large operations think that AI will have a positive impact on **student engagement**.

6. How are AI solutions helping improve the efficiency of your team/operation?



Notable differences

61%

Even more Marketing leaders think that AI is already **improving communications**.

16%

Fewer recruitment leaders think that AI is already increasing **campaign effectiveness**.

38%

Fewer Mid-Sized operations have yet to see AI **streamline routine tasks**.

7. What is inhibiting your implementation of AI solutions?

Budgetary challenges	68%
Stakeholder preparedness to adopt and use AI	64%
Inadequate technical infrastructure or IT support	50%
Staff training and readiness	45%
Stakeholder concerns about the technology	41%
Ethical/legal concerns	36%
Lack of time to learn about and implement AI solutions	36%
Data privacy/security concerns	32%
Stakeholder resistance to change	18%
Environmental impact concerns	0%
Insurance concerns	0%

Notable differences

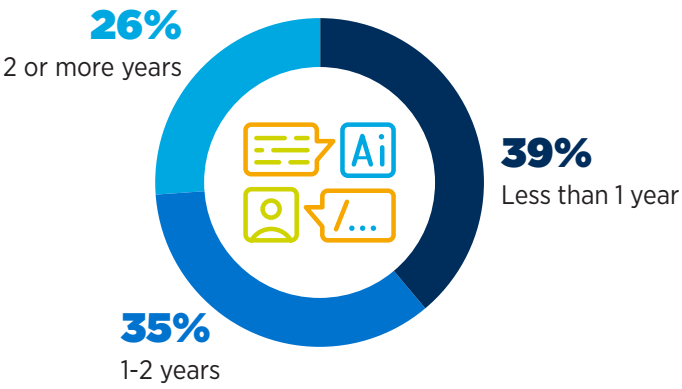
Only 22 of our more than 200 respondents indicated that their institutions have not made any significant moves with AI over the last year or so. Therefore, there is insufficient data to analyze differences in why various online operations may not have yet implemented any AI solutions.

8. Do you have an AI-driven chatbot/digital assistant on your website/program pages?

63% No

37% Yes

9. How many years has your chatbot/digital assistant been in place?



Notable differences

53%
Even more Private Non-Profits have implemented a chatbot in **the last year**.

50%
Even more Mid-Sized operations implemented a chatbot **more than two years ago**.

50%
Even more Large operations implemented a chatbot **1-2 years ago**.

10. Has your chatbot/digital assistant reduced the number of emails, calls, etc., that your team has to respond to?

66% Yes

34% No

Implications for institutions

The widespread adoption of AI technology in higher education is reshaping how universities approach marketing and recruitment. These findings make it clear that institutions are increasingly leveraging AI to craft targeted, personalized marketing messages faster, streamline communication flows, and make sense of complex data on student behavior and engagement. This shift toward automation and personalization is already enhancing the student experience during recruitment, allowing institutions to better cater to individual interests and preferences. When approaching the integration of AI technology, universities should:

- **Assess needs and goals**: Clearly define the institution's objectives and identify specific areas where AI can add value, such as recruitment, student support, or administrative tasks.
- **Ensure data privacy and security**: Prioritize solutions that adhere to strict data privacy regulations and have robust security measures to protect sensitive information.
- **Select customizable tools**: Choose AI tools that can be tailored to the institution's unique operational needs and student demographics.
- **Invest in training**: Provide adequate training for staff and faculty to effectively use AI tools and integrate them into their workflows.
- **Monitor and evaluate**: Continuously monitor the performance of AI tools and gather feedback from users to make necessary adjustments and improvements.

If your institution hasn't yet integrated AI into its recruitment strategy, it's likely only a matter of time. AI's ability to handle the repetitive workload of responding to student inquiries with accuracy and efficiency—especially through generative AI chatbots—is proving invaluable in helping students make informed decisions about applying or enrolling.

AI in recruitment strategy: While 37 percent of respondents have already implemented AI chatbots, a notable 63 percent have not, presenting a significant opportunity for institutions, particularly those offering online programs to enhance their digital engagement. Institutions that have adopted chatbots within the last 1-2 years—especially larger, mid-sized, and private non-profits—are seeing the value in automating routine inquiries and improving the user experience.

For higher education, where efficiency in handling prospective student inquiries is critical, the fact that two-thirds of respondents reported a reduction in emails, calls, and other communications is a key takeaway. By integrating chatbots or other AI tools into their digital strategy, institutions can streamline communication, allowing admissions teams to focus on more complex interactions and improving overall operational efficiency.

The implications for institutions offered throughout this report were developed by RNL staff who lead our efforts to help online programs and institutions succeed. Review contributors at the end of this report.

2. Align Marketing Practices With Student Search Patterns

Best practices in marketing online programs have become a moving target. With constant changes to search engine algorithms, varying patterns of where the most likely prospective online students spend their (digital) time, and the changing of the target generations that comprise the bulk of the online student population, institutional marketers have their hands full. All of this is happening at a time of particular financial pressure on institutions, with constrained budgets and urgent needs for enrollment growth.

What online students say about their program searches

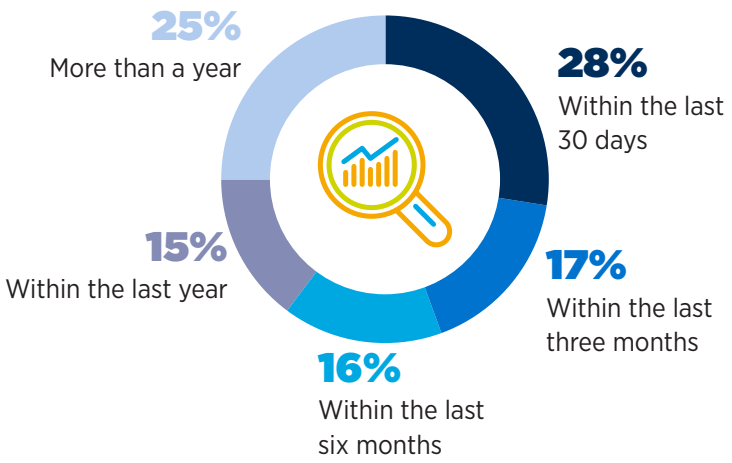
(All data are derived from the 2024 Online Student Recruitment Report)

- Forty percent of online students indicate that they begin their program search on a search engine, while an additional 52 percent indicate it is the second thing they do.
- Digital marketing techniques account for four of the top five sources cited by online students as effective in their decision making.
- Three-quarters of online students click on digital ads during their search—most frequently because the ad copy interested them.
- Online students consistently indicate that all of the advertisements and other information on online programs that they remember were from digital sources.
- About 60 percent of online students attend a virtual open house during their search process.

What online leaders say about their marketing

- Nearly half (45%) of online programs have updated their SEO within the last three months, while nearly as many did so either more than a year or approximately a year ago.
- Online marketers are spending a significant majority of their marketing budgets on paid digital advertising. The balance between funds dedicated to paid digital and SEO may be somewhat out of balance given the degree to which online students begin their search on a search engine.
- Online marketers indicate that paid digital advertising most often produces their highest quality leads, with organic search leads being second-most common. The infrequency of SEO updating among many online programs likely plays a role in SEO leads not being the best quality lead source for many institutions.
- While nearly all online programs are basing marketing decisions on enrollment goals, only half are taking emerging market opportunities into account. Nearly two-thirds prioritize past program performance, which may lead to overspending on programs for which demand is falling.
- The median marketing budget of $200,000 is not sufficient for the competitive and expensive environment today. At that level, institutions would struggle to market more than a handful of programs effectively.

10. When did you last update your SEO?



Notable differences

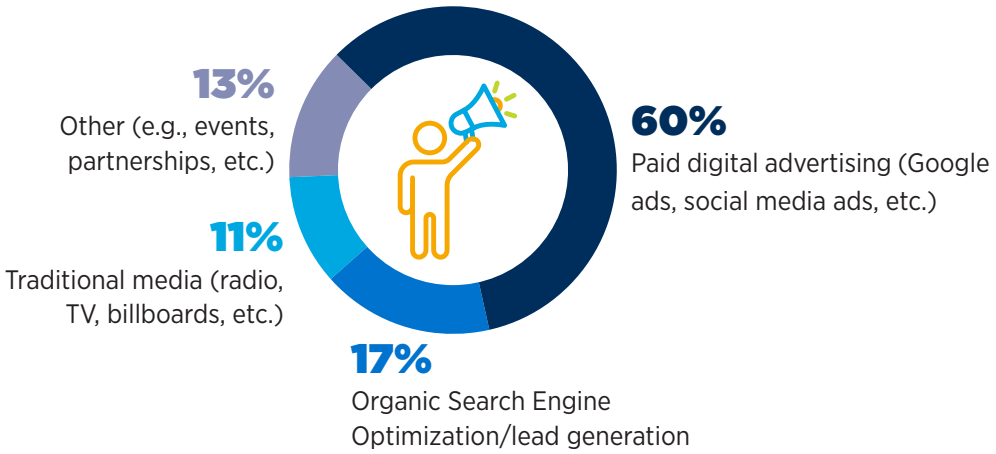
38%

Large online operations are even more likely to have **updated their SEO within the last month**.

19%

Private Non-Profits are even less likely to have **not addressed SEO within the last year**.

11. How do you allocate that marketing budget across the following broad categories?



Notable differences

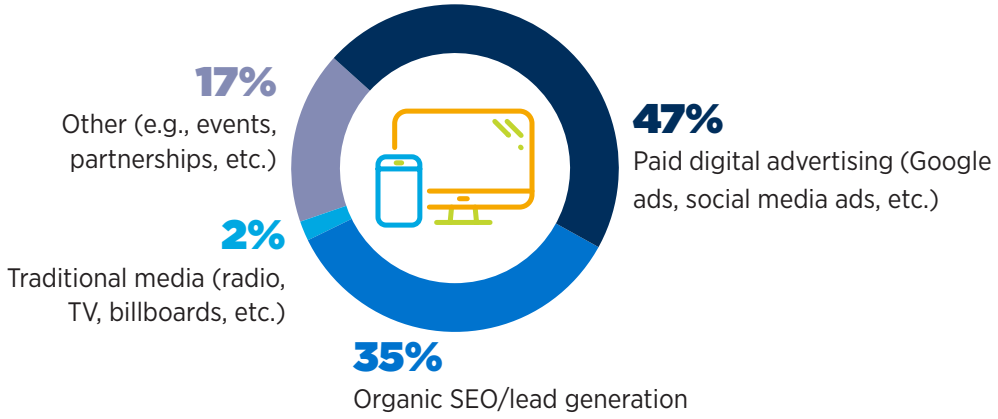
48%

Small online operations dedicate a smaller portion of the typical budget to **paid digital advertising**.

25%

Large online operations spend more of their budget on **organic search engine optimization**.

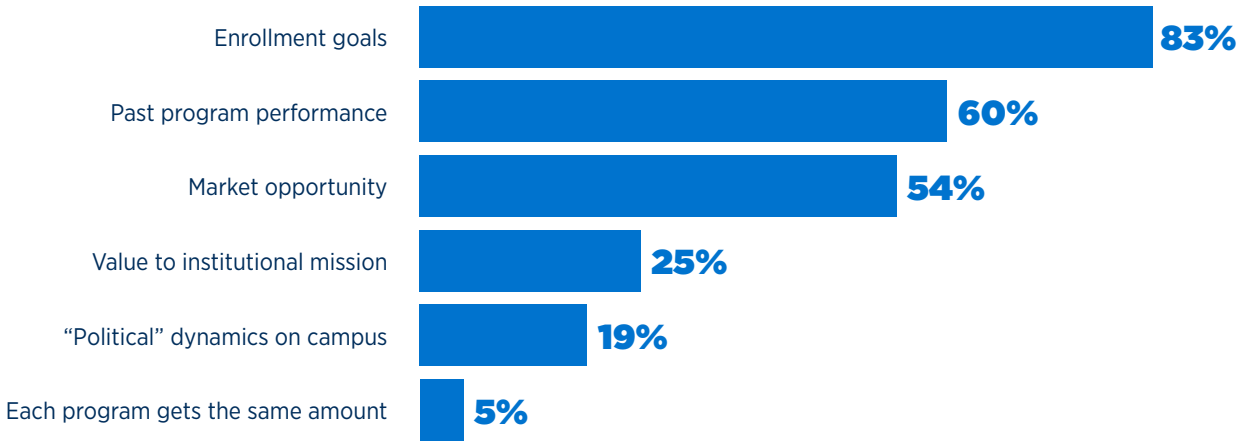
12. Which source produces your highest quality leads/inquiries?



Notable differences

There is no significant differentiation among respondents by any of our points of comparison.

13. How do you decide how to allocate your marketing budget across your online programs?



Notable differences

91%

Large operations are even more likely to base marketing allocations on **enrollment goals**.

70%

Mid-Sized online operations are even more likely to base marketing allocations on **market opportunities**.

0%

No Large online operations make marketing allocations on a **uniform basis across all programs**.

14. What is your total annual marketing budget for your online programs?

	Overall:	Private (35)	Public (34)	Largest	Smallest
Mean:	**$493,825**	**$379,912**	**$708,735**	**$10,100,000*** (40 programs)	**$5,000** (1 program)

*This budget represents such an outlier in the data that it and two other institutional budgets (of $10,000,000 and $4,700,000) were removed from the calculation of the averages.

15. For how many programs do you spend marketing dollars?

	Overall:	Private	Public	Largest	Smallest
Mean:	**27**	**22**	**30**	**100**	**1**

16. What specific channel/source generates the largest number of high-quality leads?

TOP 5 CHANNELS/SOURCES

Ads on Google/other search engines	**50%**
Organic SEO	**38%**
Facebook	**36%**
Instagram	**28%**
LinkedIn	**28%**
YouTube	**14%**

BOTTOM 5 CHANNELS/SOURCES

X (formerly Twitter)	**2%**
Ads on podcasts	**2%**
Reddit	**2%**
Digital out of home (e.g., Gas station TV or digital billboards)	**2%**
Ads on broadcast television	**0%**
Snapchat	**0%**

Notable differences

63%

Large operations are more likely to find **Google ads** to be among their best quality lead sources.

53%

Large operations are more likely to find that **organic leads (from SEO)** are among their best quality lead sources.

54%

Mid-Sized operations are more likely to find that **Facebook** is among their best quality lead sources.

Implications for institutions

The rapidly evolving landscape of digital marketing for online (and all other) programs presents challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions. With constant shifts in search engine algorithms and changes in where prospective students spend their time online, institutional marketers must remain adaptable. Financial pressures from constrained budgets and the approaching enrollment cliff make it even more crucial for institutions to focus on growing alternative student populations such as online learners. Success will come to those who effectively align their programs and marketing strategies with the evolving preferences of prospective students.

SEO: The data shows that 40 percent of prospective online students begin their program search on search engines (and an additional 52 percent do a search as their second step), and 74 percent click on digital ads—most often because the copy interests them. However, a successful marketing strategy requires more than just paid advertising. SEO plays a pivotal role in marketing success, not only improv organic visibility but also making paid ads more cost-effective by lowering the cost-per-click (CPC). Many institutions, however, have neglected their SEO strategies, with 25 percent having not updated them in over a year, potentially limiting their reach and effectiveness.

Digital advertising: Respondents indicate that the largest share of their marketing budget is dedicated to paid digital advertising, and that, typically, paid digital ads generate the highest quality leads for 47 percent of institutions. However, they also indicate that 35 percent of the highest-quality leads come from SEO efforts.

In addition to balancing SEO and paid ads, institutions need to consider which specific digital channels are most effective for reaching prospective students. The data indicates that Google ads and other search engine ads are the top sources for generating high-quality leads, followed closely by Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Interestingly, platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and podcast ads are rarely cited as high-quality lead sources. Institutions need to be strategic in allocating their budgets—60 percent of which is currently going toward paid digital ads—to the channels that produce the best results.

Finally, the average marketing budget stands at about $490.000 with significant differences between private ($379,912) and public ($708,735) institutions. While the public sector budget has improved since our last study, the private—and the overall—average is not sufficient to allow multiple programs to complete among the vast array of online providers with which your prospective students are no doubt interacting. While each program, every region, and each school will encounter significant differences in what it costs to ensure marketing success, marketing investments need to be increasingly decided on the basis of the revenue that each student will add to the institution's bottom line, and a firm understanding of what it costs to recruit each enrolled student. However much you have to spend, you need to concentrate on finding the right mix of channels while balancing paid digital efforts with ongoing SEO will be essential for maximizing lead quality and driving enrollment growth.

3. Ensure Recruitment and Communication Strategies Match Student Preferences

Unlike marketing best practices, which seem to be in a constant state of change, recruitment best practices in the online education space (as well as the graduate education space) have become increasingly consistent over the last several years. Speed and personalization are at the core of recruitment and communication best practices. Over five studies of online students and graduate students RNL has conducted since 2020, students have confirmed that they consistently apply the same expectations to their higher education experience that they do with any other "product or service" interaction they have.

With the level of choice that online students have today (at just the graduate level, an average of 300 new online programs are being launched each year) it is only by meeting these expectations that institutions will "win" the student.

What online students say about their enrollment preferences

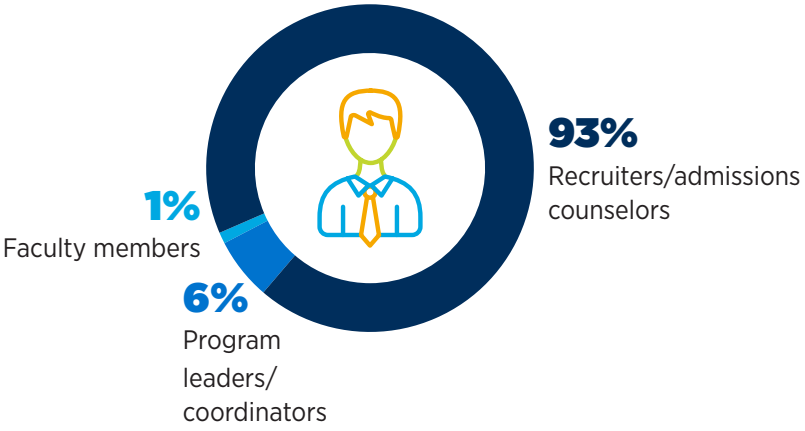
(All data are derived from the 2024 Online Student Recruitment Report)

- More than three-quarters of online students expect a response to their first inquiry (and follow-up questions) on the same business day, with more than one-quarter expecting a response within minutes.
- Nearly three-quarters of online students—undergraduate and graduate—prefer to interact with a professional recruiter/admissions counselor as opposed to a program leader or faculty member.
- Nearly 80 percent of online students want to interact with programs of interest via text, with even more wanting to communicate via email.
- More than two-thirds of online students expect to hear from programs of interest at least once per week, with one-quarter preferring contact more than once per week.
- More than half of online students think that a slower-than-expected response is an indicator that they are not important to their program of interest.

What online leaders say about their recruitment process

- Half of online programs respond to initial inquiries within the same business day, with another third responding within 24 hours (although not same business day), and only 12 percent taking more than 24 hours.
- Professional recruiters/counselors are responsible for responding to first inquiries for more than 90 percent of online programs, with only 6 percent indicating that a program leader makes this vital contact.
- More than 70 percent of online programs are using texting as part of their communications strategy, although only 5 percent use texting to respond to initial inquiries.
- Two-thirds of online programs communicate with prospective students at least once per week, with one-quarter communicating more than once per week.
- Online recruitment leaders indicate that emails focused on academic program details, application checklists, and financial aid and scholarship information are the most effective in moving students forward in the enrollment process.
- Nothing works better to increase yield and reduce melt than regular communication through a mix of channels and timely reminder emails about important deadlines.

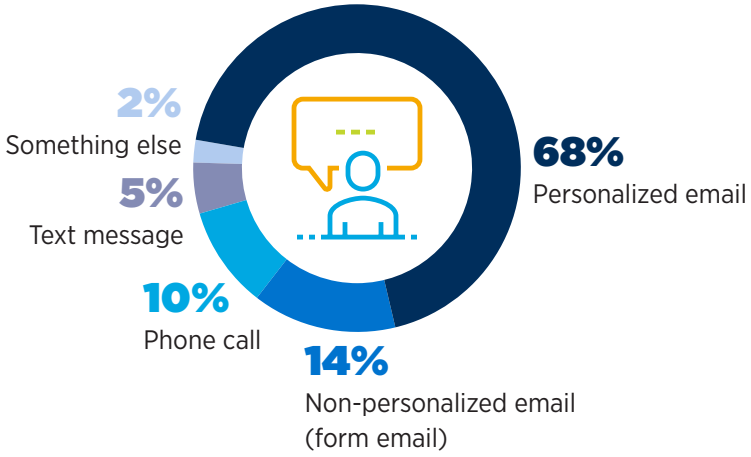
17. Who responds most frequently to first inquiries?



Notable differences

There is no significant differentiation among respondents by any of our points of comparison.

18. What is the very first thing your team does after first contact?



Notable differences

83%

Mid-Sized operations are considerably more likely to send a **personalized email** as a first response.

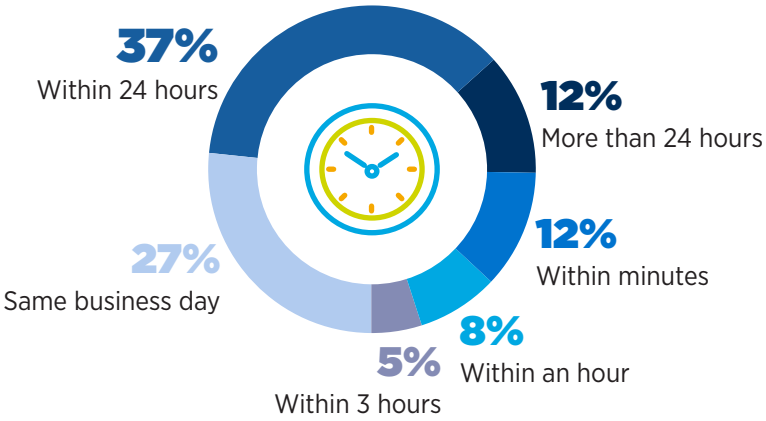
58%

Large operations are considerably less likely to send a **personalized email** as their first response.

3%

Mid-Sized operations almost never send a **non-personalized email** as their first response.

19. What is your typical response time for first contact?



Notable differences

33%

Large operations are considerably more likely to **follow up within minutes**, although they are less likely to use a personalized email.

18%

Mid-Sized operations are more likely than the average to **follow up within an hour**.

20. Communications method with typical timing

COMMUNICATION METHOD	WITHIN MINUTES	WITHIN AN HOUR	WITHIN 3 HOURS	SAME BUSINESS DAY	WITHIN 24 HOURS	MORE THAN 24 HOURS
Personalized email	12%	11%	6%	28%	34%	10%
Non-personalized email (form email)	0%	5%	0%	23%	55%	18%
Phone call	19%	0%	0%	38%	38%	6%
Text message	38%	0%	25%	0%	25%	13%
Something else	0%	0%	0%	33%	0%	67%

21. What strategies work best to yield online students and reduce melt?

Regular communication through multiple channels	90%
Timely reminders for important deadlines	68%
Financial aid counseling and assistance	46%
Early engagement programs (e.g., online orientations, webinars)	44%
Scholarship offers and incentives	41%
Engagement events for admitted students	31%
Virtual campus tours and interactive content	31%
Flexible payment plans	27%
Pre-application review of previous credit	24%
Creating a sense of community through virtual platforms	22%
Offering micro-credentials/certificates prior to enrollment	10%
Peer mentorship programs	8%
Early access to course materials and resources	5%

Notable differences

82%
Large operations are considerably more likely to use **timely deadline reminders**.

21%
Mid-Sized operations are considerably less likely to use **engagement events**.

58%
Large operations are considerably more likely to use early **engagement programs (orientations, etc.)**.

22. Which channels do you use to communicate with online students between first contact and application submission?

98%
Email

79%
Call

73%
Text

30%
Direct mail

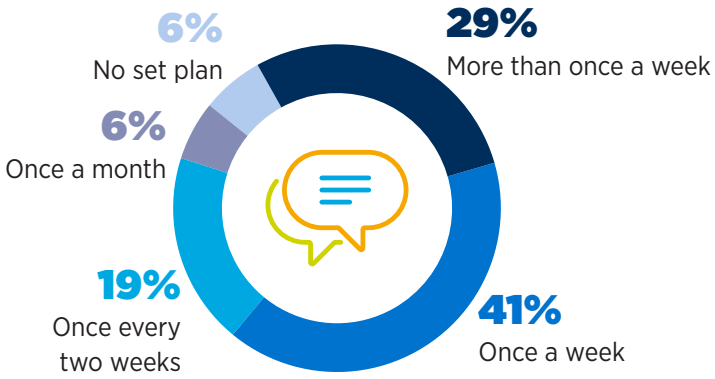
Notable differences

65%
Public institutions are less likely to use **texting** as a communication channel.

89%
Large operations are considerably more likely to use **texting** as a communication channel.

87%
Large operations are considerably more likely to use **telephone calls** as part of their communication strategy.

23. How frequently are you in touch with online students between first contact and application submission?



Notable differences

43%
Large operations are considerably more likely to communicate with prospects **more than once a week**.

24%
Mid-Sized operations are less likely to communicate with prospects **once a week**.

10%
Mid-Sized operations are more likely than any other subset to have **no set communication plan**.

24. How long do you continue to communicate with online students who do not complete an application?

1-2 weeks	**8%**
1 month	**11%**
2-3 months	**20%**
4-6 months	**12%**
6-12 months	**14%**
We don't stop communication	**21%**
We don't have an organized communication plan	**7%**

Notable differences

17%
Mid-Sized operations are considerably more likely to have a **1-2 week communication plan**.

27%
Large operations are considerably more likely to have a **6-12 month communication plan**.

0%
No Large operations lack an **organized communication plan**.

25. How do you personalize communications with prospective students throughout the funnel?

Preferred name	87%
Academic area of interest	78%
Application status/enrollment stage	62%
Program start date	56%
Recalling previous interactions or inquiries	24%
Geographical location	23%
Exclusive scholarship opportunities	22%
Extracurricular interests	7%
Do not personalize communications	4%

Notable differences

89%

Large operations are more likely to personalize messaging with **academic area of interest**.

44%

Public institutions are considerably less likely to use **program start dates** in personalization.

31%

Private Non-Profits are considerably more likely to include **exclusive scholarship** in their personalization.

26. What email topics are most effective in engaging your top-of-funnel prospects?

Academic program details	63%
Application checklists and deadline reminders	56%
Financial aid and scholarship information	52%
Recruitment event invitations	38%
Student success stories	29%
Personalized greetings and welcome messages from leadership	24%
Alumni spotlights	16%
Faculty introductions	13%
Career services information	11%
General campus updates	5%

Notable differences

71%

Large operations are more likely to find that emails with **academic program details** successfully engage prospects.

71%

Public institutions are more likely to find that emails with **academic program details** successfully engage prospects.

74%

Large operations are more likely to find that **application checklists and deadline reminders** engage prospects.

Implications for institutions

It is increasingly important for institutions to tailor their outreach to meet the evolving expectations of prospective online students, particularly when those students may come from audiences your programs have not traditionally served (a common scenario with more accessible online formats). To remain competitive in a growing market, institutions must adopt strategies emphasizing speed, personalization, and multichannel communication, while leveraging technology to streamline and enhance recruitment efforts. Based on these insights, here are some key implications for institutions:

Emphasize speed in response times: With over three-quarters of students expecting prompt responses to inquiries—preferably on the same business day—it is essential that institutions streamline their communication processes. Implementing technology, such as automated chatbots or CRM systems, can help improve response times and meet these expectations. Programs that act swiftly demonstrate a commitment to prospective students' needs, enhancing engagement, and reducing the likelihood of losing leads to competitors.

Leverage professional recruiters: Nearly three-quarters of online students prefer interacting with professional recruiters rather than faculty or program leaders. Institutions should ensure that trained admissions counselors or recruiters are positioned as the first point of contact, offering tailored information to each prospective student. These professionals play a critical role in shaping the student's early impression of the institution and their ability to meet individual needs.

Utilize text and email as primary channels: With almost 80 percent of students favoring text communication, programs must expand their use of texting alongside email to engage students at key stages of the recruitment process. While many institutions are beginning to use these methods, more can be done to optimize text messaging, especially for initial outreach. Multichannel communication ensures students remain engaged and connected throughout the process.

Maintain regular and personal communication: Consistent and frequent communication is essential for keeping prospects engaged. More than two-thirds of online students expect to hear from programs at least once per week. Institutions should develop structured communication plans that include a mix of personalized emails, texts, and phone calls. These touchpoints should also incorporate timely reminders about application deadlines, financial aid opportunities, and program-specific details, all of which help guide students through the enrollment journey.

Enhance personalization throughout the student journey: Personalization plays a critical role in student engagement. Institutions that tailor communication based on prospective students' academic interests, application status, and program start dates will see better conversion rates. Additionally, incorporating data from past interactions and offering exclusive scholarship opportunities can make communication more relevant and meaningful, building a stronger connection with students.

Adopt technology to automate and streamline communications: The adoption of CRM systems and other automation tools is critical for managing the complex communication needs of prospective students. These technologies enable institutions to automate routine tasks, such as sending personalized responses and follow-ups, while allowing recruiters to focus on higher-value interactions. By integrating these systems, institutions can efficiently handle larger volumes of inquiries and ensure timely, personalized responses.

By aligning recruitment and communication strategies with student preferences—through speed, personalization, and effective use of technology—institutions can enhance their recruitment efforts and better position themselves in the competitive landscape of online education.

4. Measure Results and Return on Investment (ROI)

"You can't manage what you can't measure" has long been a maxim for results-based organizations. As institutional budgets grow ever tighter, it is essential that marketing and recruitment leaders ensure that the money and time they are spending on strategies and tactics are resulting in the maximum number of enrolled students. More specifically, institutions need to know things like:

- Does a given marketing channel draw in any leads that result in enrollment?
- Has a given marketing channel stopped drawing in leads that result in enrollment?
- Do leads generated by more costly marketing channels result in more enrollments than do less costly channels?
- Do leads generated by various channels require more or less time to convert into enrolled students?
- Do various recruitment practices result in more or fewer leads converting to enrolled students?

Each of these examples has two things in common: 1) that measurement practices are in place to have an answer to each of the questions, and 2) that the result (the data) requires that the marketing and recruitment teams work together at every stage with an eye on enrollment. Generating the data is only the first step. The critical ingredient is removing the silos and ensuring that marketing and recruitment teams are perpetually in sync.

What online leaders say about their recruitment process

Perhaps the most important finding about measuring results and ROI is that there were fewer institutions than ever before that indicated in these question sets that they were not tracking or measuring results. Just 14 percent indicated they do not monitor marketing strategies by program, channel, or cost, and only 5 percent indicated that they are not using any of the best practice recruitment processes evaluation methods. Other important findings include:

1. Nearly two-thirds of online programs are tracking marketing effectiveness by program or channel, but fewer than half are monitoring by cost (of the lead).
2. Nearly 70 percent of online programs indicate that they are evaluating their marketing spend based on either leads that convert to applicants or leads that convert to enrollment. These percentages reflect the highest over the last five years of similar studies.
3. More than 80 percent of online programs are using conversion rate analysis to measure the success of their recruitment (and marketing) processes.
4. Only half of online programs are specifically engaging in an ROI analysis as a formal aspect of evaluating the success of their recruitment (and marketing) processes, and less than a third are using time-to-decision analysis.
5. Information sharing between marketers and recruiters is spotty, with 82 percent of marketers indicating they have "down funnel" visibility into the performance of leads, but only 45 percent of recruiters indicate that they have "up funnel" visibility into the mechanics of marketing tactics.

27. How do you monitor the effectiveness of your marketing strategies?

61% By program

61% By channel

46% By cost

14% We aren't monitoring in these ways

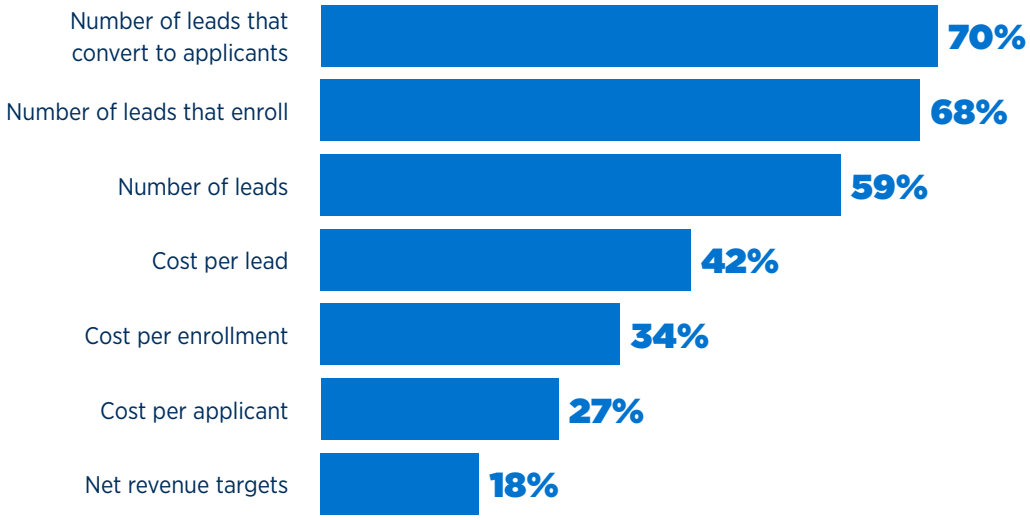
Notable differences

75%
Large operations are even more likely to monitor effectiveness at the **program level**.

52%
Mid-Sized operations are less likely to monitor marketing effectiveness **by channel**.

69%
Large operations are considerably more likely to monitor marketing effectiveness **by cost**.

28. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your marketing spend?



Notable differences

62%
Mid-Sized operations are more likely to evaluate on the basis of **leads that convert**.

81%
Large operations are more likely to evaluate on the basis of **leads that enroll**.

47%
Large operations are more likely to evaluate on the basis of **cost per enrollment** (and the **cost per applicant**—41%).

29. How far “down funnel” does your marketing operation have visibility into lead performance?

24% Before application

19% To application

37% To enrollment

19% We don’t have “down funnel” visibility

Notable differences

47%
Large operations are even more likely to have visibility through **to enrollment**.

33%
Mid-Sized operations are more likely to have no **“down funnel” visibility**.

6%
Almost no large operations lack all levels of “down funnel” visibility.

30. Does your recruitment operation have “up funnel” visibility (e.g., marketing dashboard, etc.) into the creation and performance of leads?

55% Yes

45% No

Notable differences

44%
Public institutions are considerably less likely to have **“up funnel” visibility**.

65%
Private Non-Profits are considerably more likely to have **“up funnel” visibility**.

31. How are you evaluating the success of your recruitment strategies?

Conversion Rate Analysis: Tracking conversion rates at arious stages of the recruitment funnel **82%**

ROI Measurement: Calculating return on investment for different recruitment channels and campaigns **53%**

Student Feedback: Gathering feedback from students on their recruitment experience **51%**

Retention and Success Metrics: Evaluating how well recruited students are retained and finish **47%**

Event Effectiveness Assessment: Evaluating the success of recruitment events (e.g., open houses, webinars, etc.) **46%**

Time-to-Decision Analysis: Measuring the time taken from application to admission decision, identifying any delays or inefficiencies **31%**

None of these **5%**

Notable differences

61%

Private Non-Profits are more likely to evaluate success using **ROI Measurement** (as are Large operations: 67%).

63%

Mid-Sized operations are more likely to evaluate success using **Student Feedback** (while Private Non-Profits are less likely: 41%).

58%

Large operations are more likely to evaluate success using **Retention Metrics** (as are Mid-Sized operations: 56%).

48%

Large operations are more likely to evaluate success using **Time to Decision** (and Mid-Sized are less likely: 19%).

Implications for institutions

To measure results and ROI, online programs need to establish a sound reporting structure that tracks the success of their overall marketing and recruitment plan.

The data make it clear that institutions must take a more comprehensive approach to data measurement and collaboration between marketing and recruitment teams. The data show that while 61 percent of institutions monitor marketing effectiveness by program or channel, only 46 percent track it by cost, and less than half engage in formal ROI analysis. Given the high stakes in budget allocation, it's essential for institutions to incorporate cost-based metrics to evaluate which marketing channels deliver the best return on investment. With nearly 70 percent now evaluating marketing spend based on leads converting to applicants or enrollments, this represents a positive trend. However, less than a third are using time-to-decision analysis, an overlooked metric that could help streamline recruitment processes by identifying bottlenecks that delay student enrollment.

One of the critical missing pieces is often that while many (82%) are using conversion rate analysis to assess success, fewer are bringing conversion and cost together through cost per application (27%), cost per enrollment (34%), and cost per lead (42%). While cost per lead is most prevalent it is also the least important in ensuring good stewardship of institutional resources.

To effectively monitor and assess marketing and recruitment performance, online programs must create key performance indicators (KPIs) to track not only new enrolling students, but also retention rates (only 47 percent of online programs report doing so). By analyzing data, institutions can identify areas for improvement and adjust their strategies accordingly. Additionally, institutions should utilize CRM data to monitor ROI and make data-driven decisions. It is essential to track and measure marketing efforts continuously, not just as an event, to make ongoing changes to strategy. Other actionable takeaways include:

1. Establish a sound reporting structure:

- Ensure that KPIs used to evaluate the success of marketing and recruitment efforts include not only conversion rates, but also the cost per enrollment and cost per applicant.
- Track KPIs that will specifically enhance the ability of the program to increase online student retention and success.

2. Utilize CRM data:

- Set up engagement reporting to track open and click rates, contact tracking, and funnel management.
- Use data to manage ROI and make data-driven decisions.

3. Monitor marketing efforts continuously:

- Track email engagement data and funnel management.
- Benchmark against historical data and competitor set where available.
- Align strategic investments to those with the greatest return.

4. Invest in recruitment:

- Develop a comprehensive budget for recruitment efforts that aligns with your institution's strategic goals and allocates funds effectively.
- Consider the investment in recruitment efforts as a strategic investment in the institution's future.

About the RNL Contributors

Scott Jeffe: Scott Jeffe is the principal researcher for this report. He is vice president of graduate and online research at RNL. Over more than 25 years, Scott has worked with nearly 400 institutions in 40+ states to apply market data to strategic decision making in relation to graduate, adult undergraduate, and online programs. In these experiences, he has developed expertise in how institutions can align with student demand while upholding institutional mission and values. He is a co-author of RNL's *Strategic Enrollment Planning: A Dynamic Collaboration* (3rd Edition), as well as being the principal researcher for RNL's *Online Student Recruitment Report series, Graduate Student Recruitment Report series, Graduate Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report series, Two Demographic Cliffs white paper, Serving the Underrepresented: A Review of Graduate Student Data*, and dozens of RNL blogs and articles.

Rebecca Jenkins: Rebecca Jenkins is responsible for crafting and implementing robust marketing strategies for RNL's AI solutions and communicating how they strengthen enrollment and fundraising for universities. Her expertise spans expertise brand management, AI product marketing, education technology marketing, enrollment marketing, international marketing and recruitment, inbound marketing, SEO, CRM implementation and management, digital marketing, public relations, advertising strategy and media buying, Google Analytics, and social media strategy. Previously, Rebecca served as the assistant vice president of enrollment management and marketing at the University of Findlay. She also has served in public relations positions at the University of Toledo and at the Lima Memorial Health System.

Reena Lichtenfeld: Reena Lichtenfeld, Ed.D brings more than 20 years of experience in higher education administration to RNL as vice president for consulting services. Her areas of expertise include graduate, undergraduate, and online admissions; strategic recruitment and enrollment management/planning; and policy, accreditation, governance, and compliance. Dr. Lichtenfeld is a results-driven passionate higher education professional who brings a broad spectrum of proven tools and strategies to the table. Prior to joining RNL, she served as assistant dean for enrollment management at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development (TN).

Rebecca Murison: Becki Murison serves as vice president of digital marketing at RNL. In that capacity, she leads the development and execution of data-driven Pay-Per-Click and social media campaigns to promote bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs in both online and classroom formats for some of the most prestigious institutions in the United States. She lead a team of digital strategists that she was once a part of, providing a unique leadership voice to RNL's digital marketing efforts. She has held strategic and leadership roles in digital and integrated marketing for nearly 15 years.

Shane Pruitt: Dr. Shane Pruitt brings 15 years of recruitment and enrollment experience to his role as associate vice president, enrollment consulting services, He has a proven track record of successfully implementing data-informed enrollment strategy as an on-campus administrator, EdTech consultant, and higher education subject matter expert for a leading management consulting firm. His areas of expertise include undergraduate, graduate, and professional programming; enrollment data analysis and interpretation; and external partnership-building and pipeline development. He previously served as Director of Student Recruitment and Advising at University of Georgia.

Dani Rollins: Dr. Dani Rollins brings a depth of experience and transformational leadership practices to bear on her work with RNL. Dani has been an enrollment management professional for over 20 years and has worked in both the public and private educational sectors, with extensive experience in recruitment, admissions processing, data analysis, and marketing. Prior to joining RNL, Dani served in senior leadership roles at a variety of institutions, including Reed College (OR), Northern Illinois University, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and, most recently, at the University of Arizona.

About RNL

RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,500 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, ensuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL helps institutions scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

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