

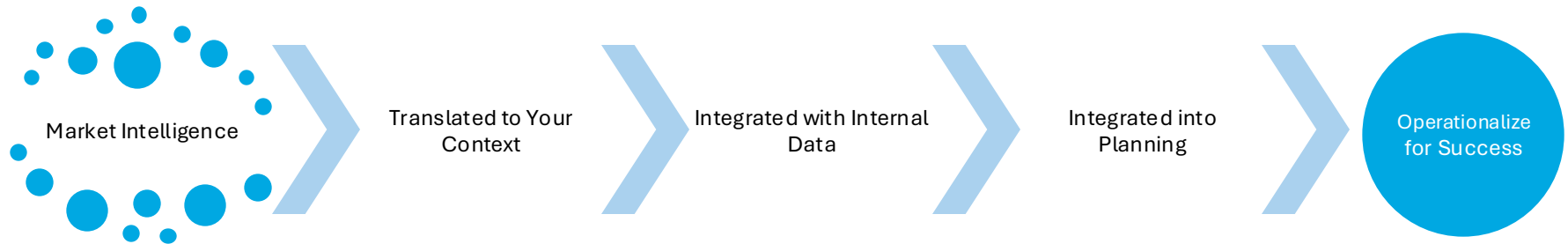
# A Data-Driven Approach to Graduate Program Communications

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# Using market knowledge for communication planning

Planning should be informed by a data-informed understanding of market







# **The Graduate Market**

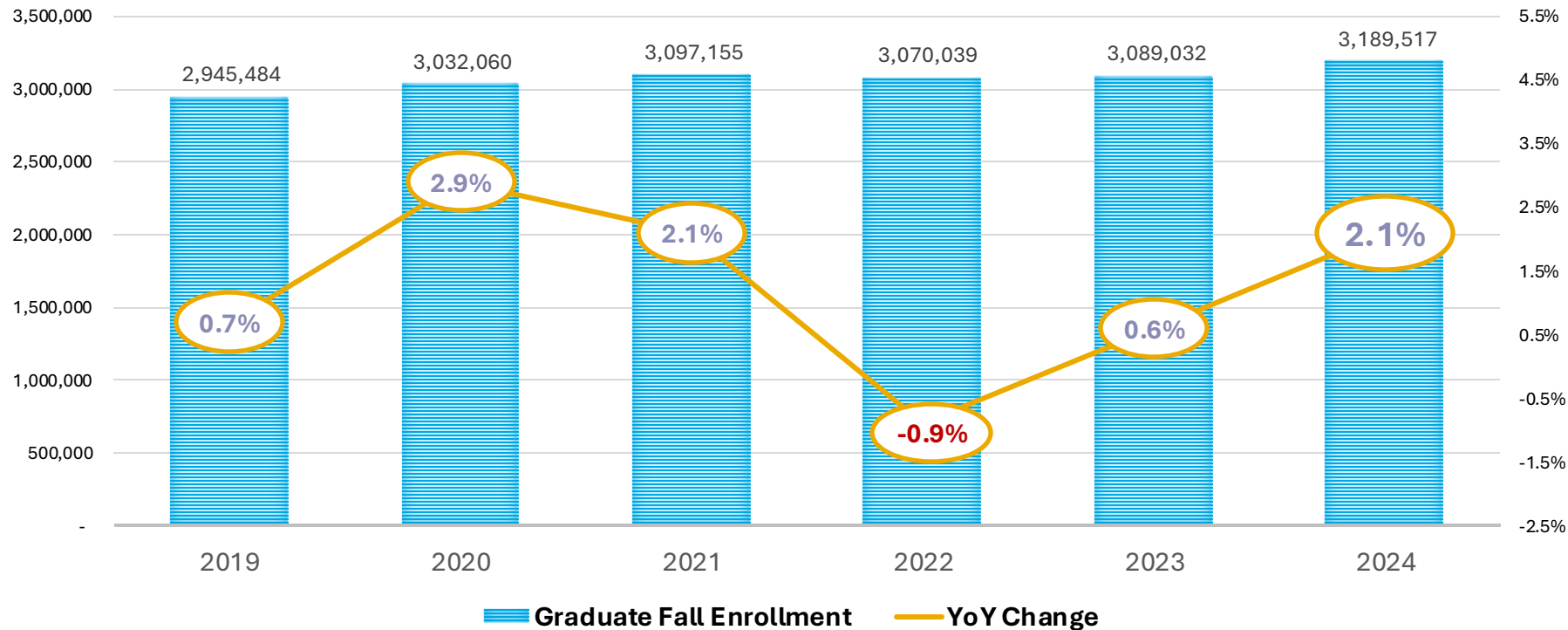


**1**



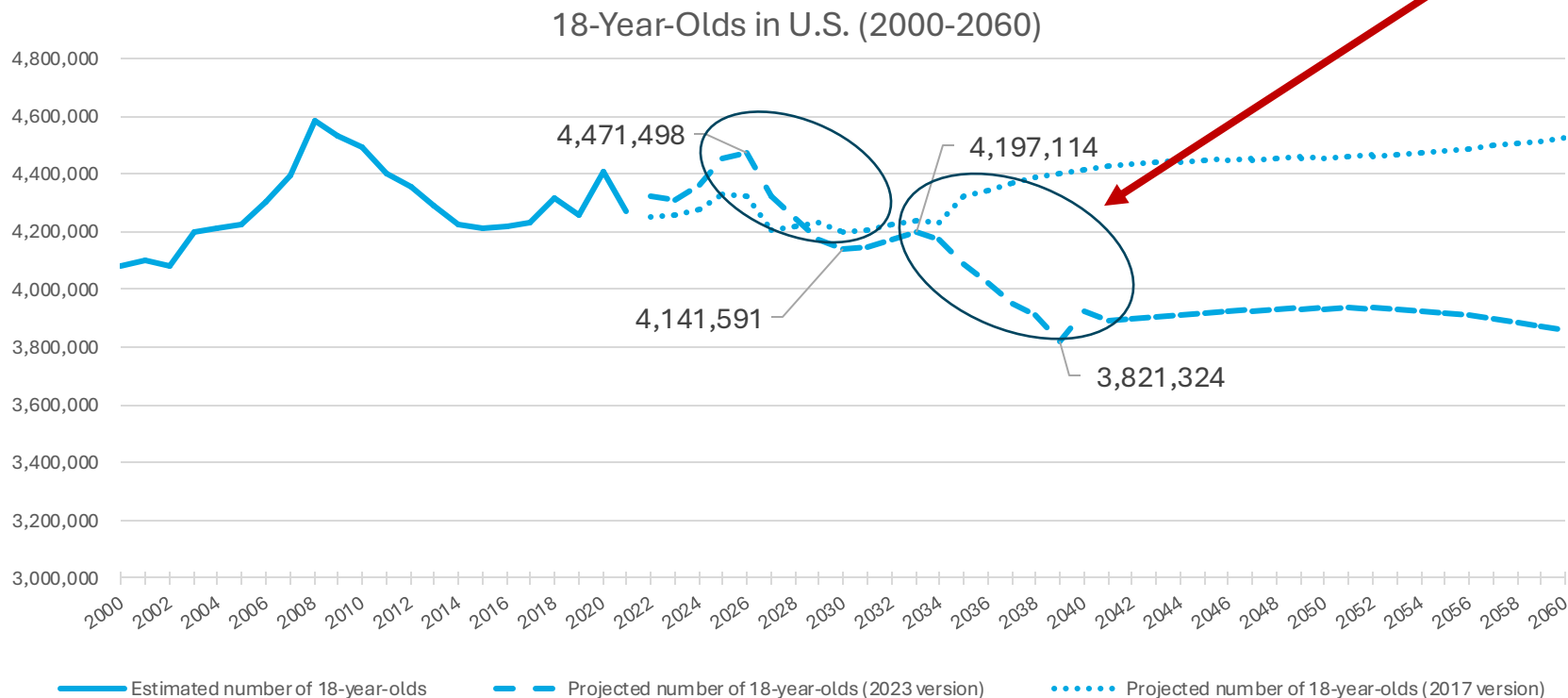
# Graduate enrollment growth continues to be strong

## Fall Graduate Enrollment





# We are on the cusp of TWO demographic cliffs

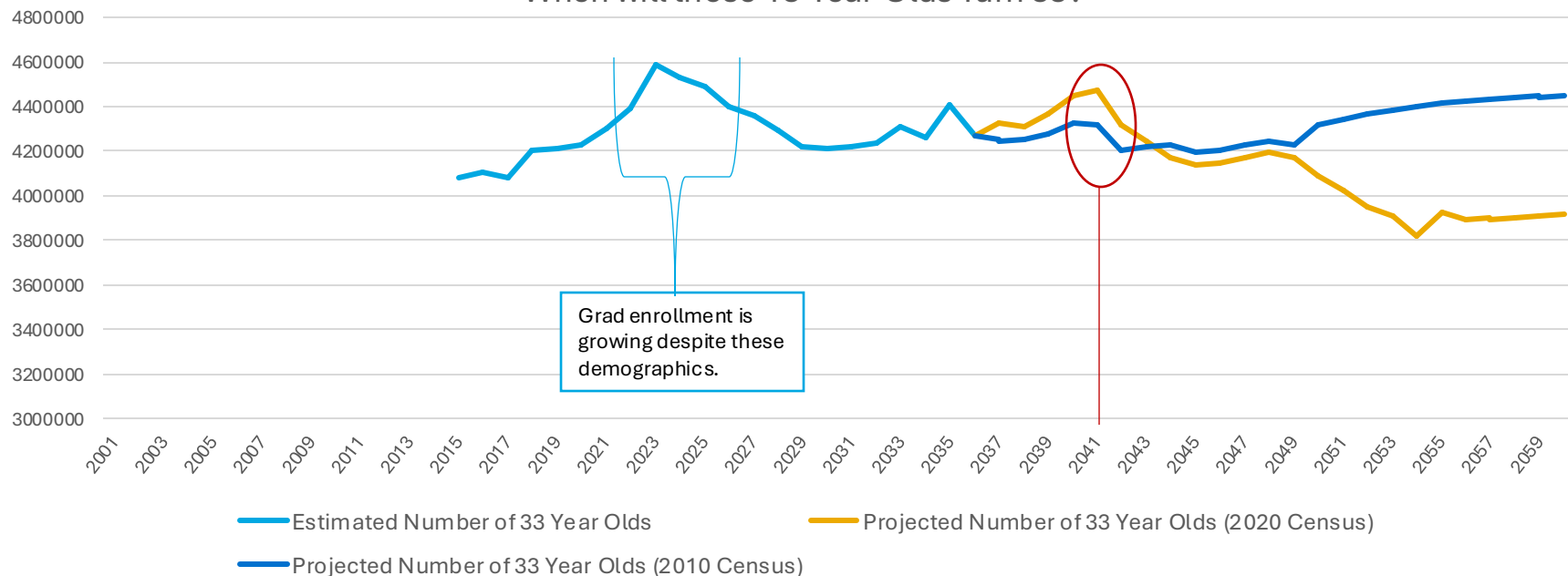




# The ripple effect of the cliff(s) will likely impact graduate enrollments

*The Council of Graduate Schools has calculated the average age of a graduate student as 33 years old.*

When will those 18-Year-Olds Turn 33?





# Why have student expectations changed?

2023 Graduate Students by Generation



Source: RNL's 2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report

## PAST STUDENT EXPECTATION



"Me" centric  
view of the  
world



Rise in  
consumer  
mentalities



Need for  
speed



Meaningful  
connections



# Online students are even more likely to be local than are classroom (or hybrid)

How far from where you reside (or resided at the time) was the furthest school/program you considered?



**38%**

Within 25 miles

**27%**

25-50 miles

**11%**

51-75 miles

**6%**

75-100 miles

**17%**

More than 100 miles

## Distance from home by format

DISTANCE	ALL ONLINE	PARTIALLY ONLINE	ALL CLASSROOM
Within 25 miles	40%	37%	34%
25-50 miles	25%	31%	26%
51-75 miles	11%	14%	8%
75-100 miles	6%	6%	6%
More than 100 miles	19%	12%	25%



# Graduate enrollment is facing unforeseen challenges

## A landscape in flux



June 03, 2025

## Where International Students Stand Now

After a series of court losses spurred Trump officials to change course on their international student agenda, they've returned with a slate of new and devastating policies.

By [Liam Knox](#)



March 19, 2025

## International Enrollment's Precarious Moment

International students are a financial lifeline for many colleges, and enrollments are just recovering from the pandemic. The Trump administration is pushing them away.

By [Liam Knox](#)





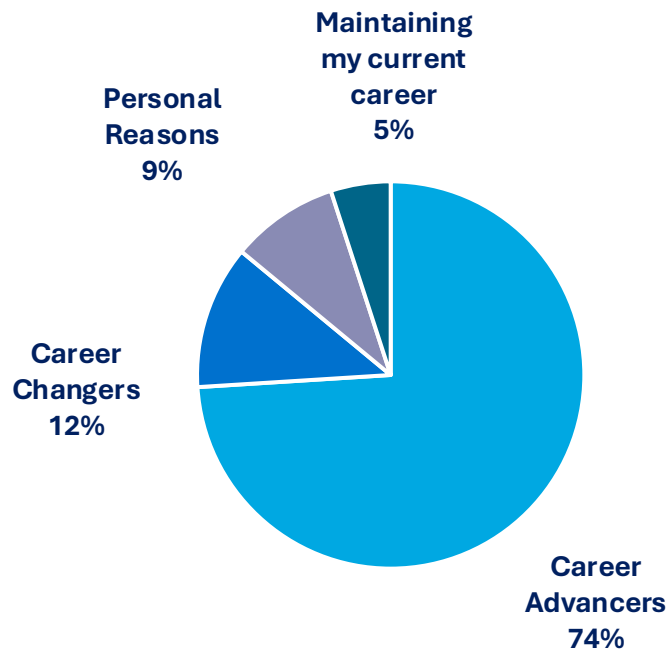
# **Motivations & Expectations that Impact Communications Plans**



**2**



# Graduate students are motivated by careers



**91%**

Report Related  
Career  
Information  
Important in  
Program Search



# Cost, future employment, and flexible course options drive enrollment decisions

IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS IN ENROLLMENT DECISIONS	NOT IMPORTANT (NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT, AND NOT VERY IMPORTA		NEUTRAL (SOMEWHAT UNIMPORTANT, NEUTRAL, SOMEWHAT IMPORTAN		IMPORTANT (IMPORTANT AND VERY IMPORTANT)	
	NOT YET ENROLLED	ENROLLED	NOT YET ENROLLED	ENROLLED	NOT YET ENROLLED	ENROLLED
Cost	3%	3%	20%	25%	77%	72%
Future employment opportunities	4%	6%	26%	24%	70%	70%
Flexible course options (online, evening, weekend, etc.)	3%	7%	25%	30%	72%	63%
Financial aid/scholarship opportunities	3%	5%	28%	29%	69%	68%
Academic reputation	3%	3%	31%	29%	66%	69%
Campus location (close to work/home)	8%	13%	38%	35%	54%	53%
Personalized attention prior to enrollment	8%	9%	53%	50%	39%	41%
Recommendations from family/friends/employer	10%	12%	57%	54%	33%	36%
Size of institution	22%	18%	57%	54%	22%	28%

\*Note: data are organized by the percent of ALL respondents who indicated that each factor was important.

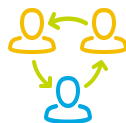


# Keys to a successful growth strategy start in the recruitment process



**69%**

Expect an initial response within **same business day** and prefer a **personalized email or text**.



**45%**

Expect communication at least **once per week** before applying.



**61%**

Expect communication at least **once per week** after applying.



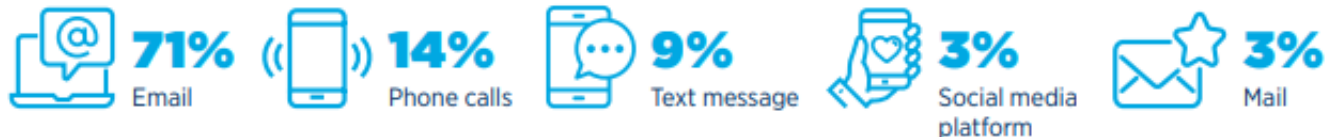
**70%**

Expect to be **admitted** within **one week** of submitting a completed application.



# Graduate students prefer email communication, but a communications plan must include more

How do you prefer schools/programs respond to you?



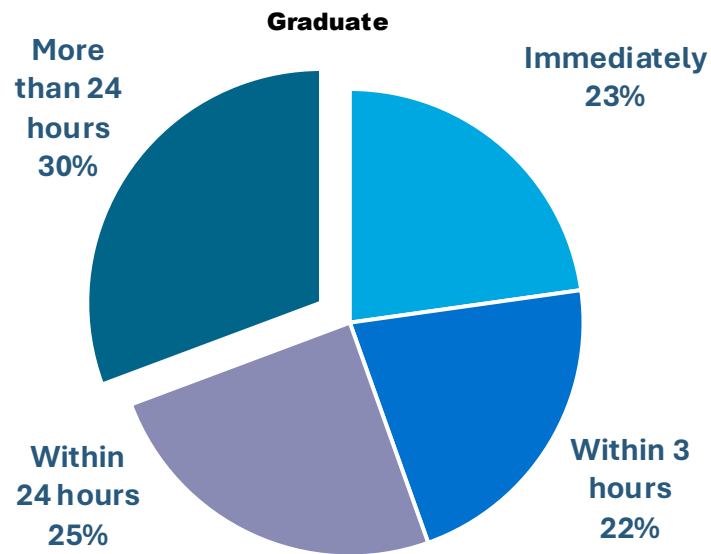
Preferred contact method by program format

PREFERRED CONTACT METHOD	ALL ONLINE	PARTIALLY ONLINE	ALL CLASSROOM
Email	73%	68%	76%
Phone calls	13%	16%	13%
Text message	9%	9%	7%
Social media platform	3%	3%	3%
Mail	2%	4%	2%

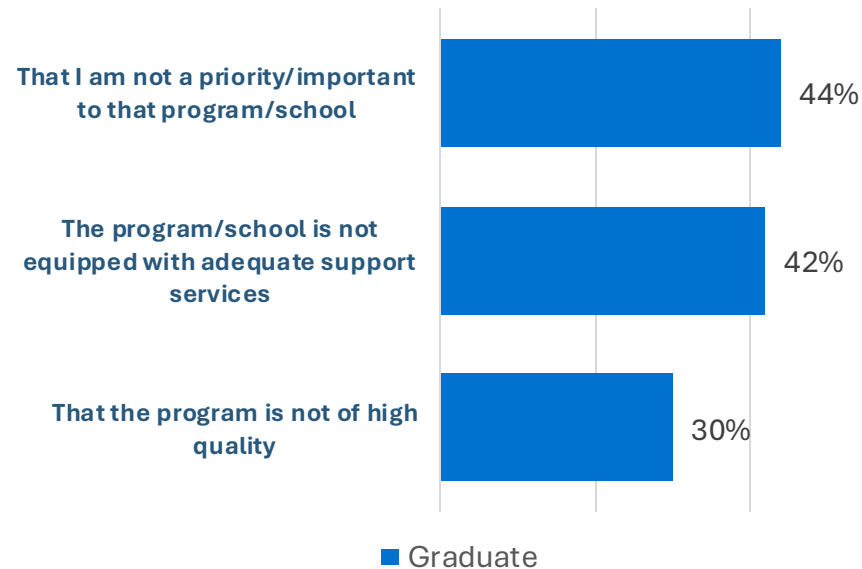


# Online students expect a speedy response both initially and throughout their experience

How soon after submitting an inquiry do you expect to hear from the program?



What does a slower than expected response signify to you?





## Graduate recruitment operations are responding faster than ever— at both the inquiry and application stage

### WHAT IS YOUR TYPICAL RESPONSE TIME FOR THAT FIRST CONTACT?

Within minutes	17%
Within an hour	10%
Within same business day	25%
Within 24 hours	35%
More than 24 hours	13%



**65%**

**...of students expect  
a personalized  
response same  
business day.**

**60% of recruiters  
indicate that the first  
response is not  
personalized.**



## Grad programs have multiple stakeholders involved in admission decision making

WHO MAKES ADMISSIONS DECISIONS?	ALL
A mix of these stakeholders	55%
Academic program directors/coordinators	22%
Program faculty	17%
Admissions department	5%

**This prevents many programs from being able to notify students in their preferred timeline**

WHAT IS THE TYPICAL TIME UNTIL STUDENTS ARE NOTIFIED OF ADMISSION?			
ROLLING ADMISSIONS		FIXED ADMISSIONS	
Within 24 hours	9%	Within 24 hours	12%
2-3 days	16%	2-3 days	15%
4-7 days	19%	4-7 days	14%
8-14 days	20%	8-14 days	14%
15-30 days	21%	15-30 days	17%
Longer than a month	14%	Longer than a month	27%

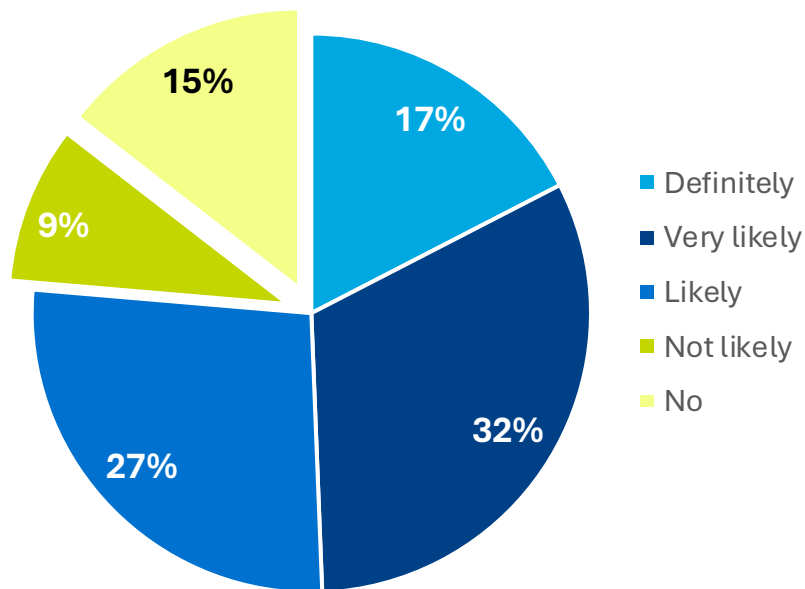
# 70%

...of students expect an admissions decision within 1 week.

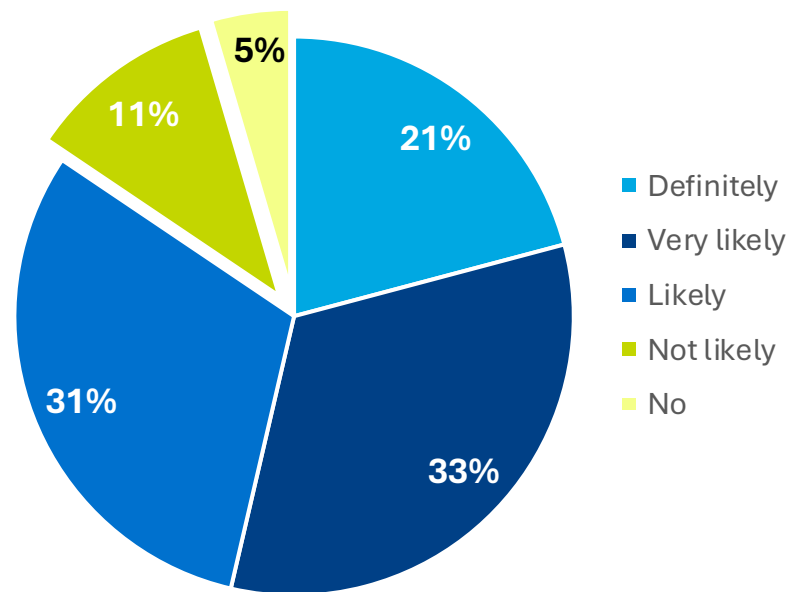


# Why is all of this SO important?

**Likelihood of Enrolling:**  
First Program to Respond



**Likelihood of Enrolling:**  
First Program to Admit





# Personalized attention is vital to successful recruitment and appreciate reminders



**53%**

Report personal  
contact as  
important in  
choosing their  
program

Regular Reminders from Programs Throughout the Funnel (“important and very important”)		All
From inquiry to application		80%
From application submission to acceptance		83%
From acceptance to registering for your classes		85%
From registering for classes to first day		83%



# Meeting personalization expectations may be easier than you think

Preferred Ways to Personalize Communication	All
Send information on my program of interest	61%
Answer my questions quickly and accurately	61%
Use my first name in emails and communications	38%
Appear to know me and my situation when I make contact	33%
Use my first language in communications	28%
Share information reflecting/related to my demographic (age, background, etc.)	24%
Call me regularly to check in on my needs and questions	23%
Use my name in customized videos about my program	12%
Use my name in customized videos about financial aid/scholarships	6%





# **Student Communication Preferences**



**3**



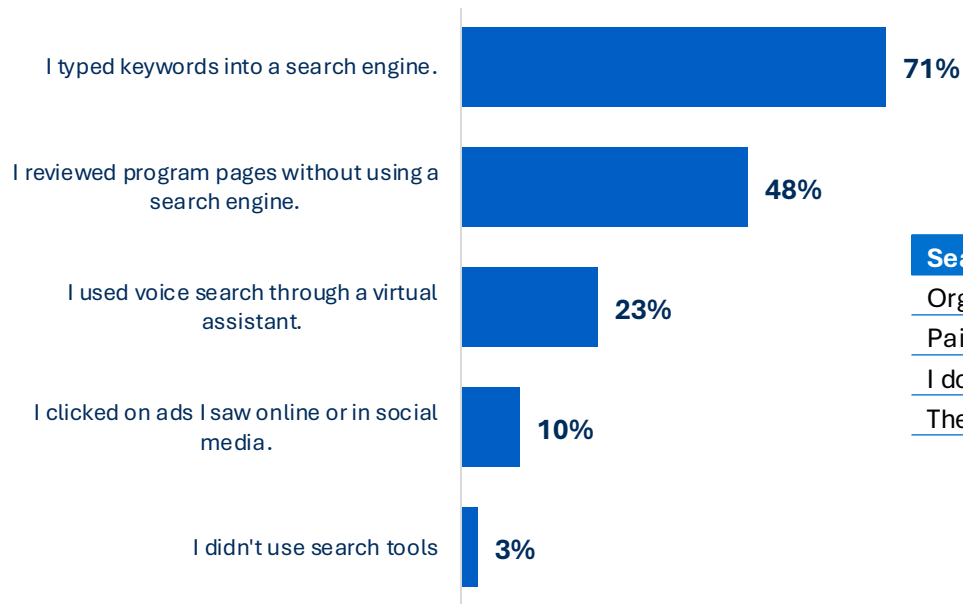
# Institutional websites—the ultimate destination of the search—are a critical recruitment tool

OTHER EARLY SEARCH METHODS	ALL ONLINE	PARTIALLY ONLINE	ALL CLASSROOM
Search engines	52%	54%	48%
Institutional websites	47%	52%	50%
Printed materials from institutions	16%	27%	29%
Ads on social media sites	21%	22%	17%
Other websites	21%	23%	18%
Videos on YouTube or elsewhere	17%	21%	17%
Ads on websites	17%	17%	13%
Printed rankings guides	13%	19%	24%
Ads on streaming TV	14%	13%	9%
Ads on broadcast or cable TV	10%	11%	7%
Ads in newspapers, magazines, etc.	7%	8%	7%
Ads on streaming radio	7%	8%	4%
Ads on billboards, buses, other outdoor	6%	8%	8%
Ads on local broadcast radio	6%	6%	6%



# The web search is an early and important step for graduate students

First Step in Web Search

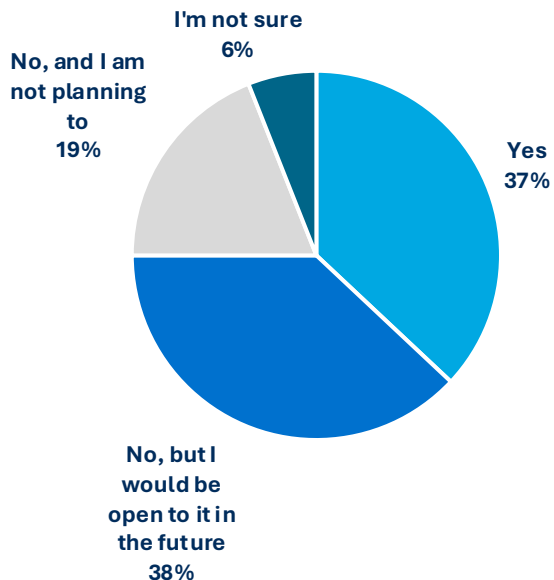


Search Results Clicked on Most Often Used	All
Organic (unpaid) results	54%
Paid ads or sponsored results	20%
I don't pay attention to which they are	14%
The results in an AI-driven summary at top of the page	11%



# Use of AI in graduate program search

Use of AI in Search



73%

Agree that AI-derived program information is accurate

How AI Was Used in Program Search	All
Program research	63%
Scholarship research	46%
Career planning	43%
Essay writing	40%
Application assistance	27%



# One in ten institutions has incorporated AI into its marketing efforts

Are you using AI in any of your recruitment/enrollment operations?

**YES**



**12%**

All

**NO**



**88%**

All

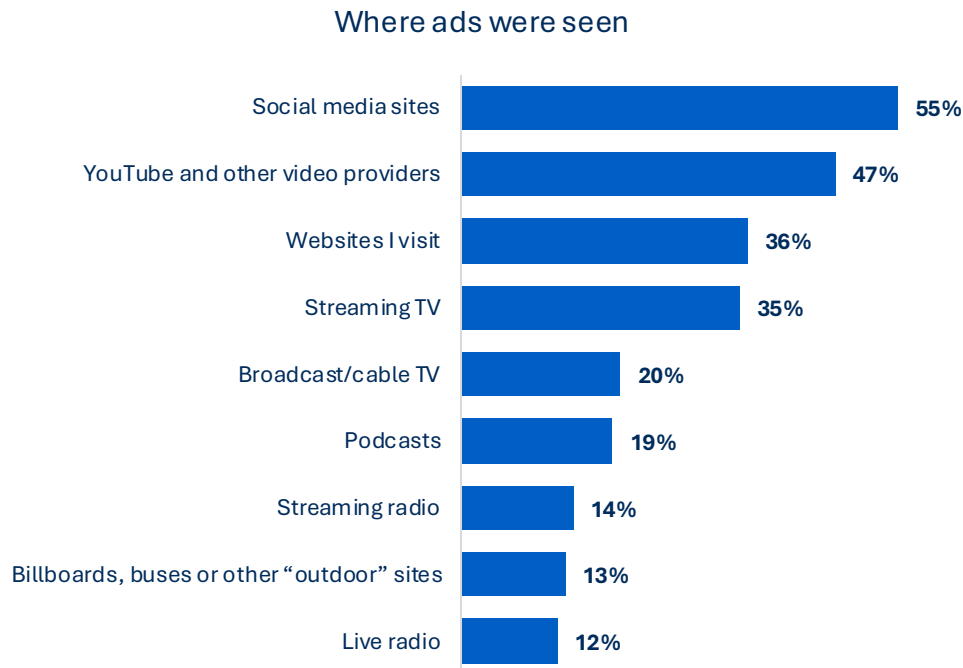
**Please, describe:**

- Use AI to help write copy for drip campaigns
- We use a platform that can create template content based on the questions students answer
- To help with communication copy
- Content writing, primarily (blogs, etc.)
- Use of a chatbot for general information
- Chatbot is used for inquiries in programs
- We offer a master's program in AI Engineering
- Content generation
- Use AI to generate some general content about the field and industry
- Generating content for emails
- We use a chatbot to greet visitors
- Content creation
- We use AI to help draft emails and other communications with prospects
- Drafting communication plans, recruiting plans and text for emails and text messages



# Nearly all graduate students click on search results that match what they are searching for and remember ads on social

Reasons for Clicking Search Results	All
The result best matches what I'm searching for.	75%
The institution/program name is familiar to me.	36%
The result appears at the top of the page.	36%
The result is not labeled as an ad or "sponsored."	16%
The result is labeled as "sponsored" or an ad.	2%

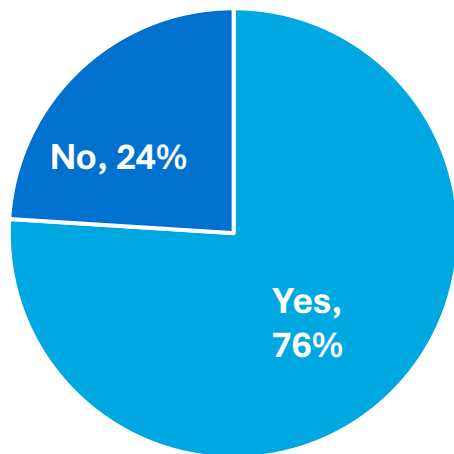




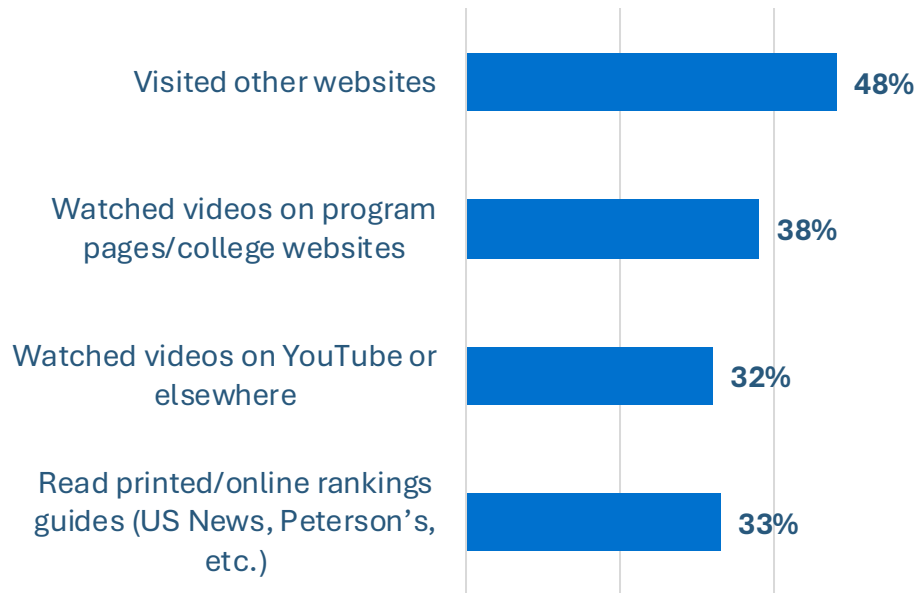
# Online students learn about programs of interest by watching videos (and reading material)

## Watched Videos

Did you watch videos during your search?



## Online Grad Students Researching Specific Programs





# Digital channels lead specific channels and platforms, with paid search, organic SEO, and social media being rated as most effective at generating leads

WHICH SPECIFIC MARKETING CHANNELS ARE YOU USING?  WHICH TACTIC IS MOST EFFECTIVE IN GENERATING LEADS?	SMALL		MID-SIZE		LARGE	
	USED	MOST EFFECTIVE	USED	MOST EFFECTIVE	USED	MOST EFFECTIVE
Ads on consumer social media (Facebook, etc.)	89%	30%	88%	23%	79%	19%
Organic SEO	82%	19%	85%	23%	79%	22%
Paid search ads (Google, etc.)	86%	15%	88%	31%	74%	41%
Re-targeting ads	71%	22%	77%	13%	71%	13%
Ads on professional social media (LinkedIn, etc.)	79%	7%	73%	0%	68%	0%
Direct mail campaigns	46%	4%	58%	8%	41%	3%
Newspaper/Magazine ads	46%	0%	56%	0%	38%	0%
Ads on Billboards, buses, or other outdoor	43%	0%	42%	2%	35%	0%
Ads on broadcast radio	39%	4%	27%	0%	29%	0%
Ads on streaming TV	14%	0%	27%	0%	18%	0%
Ads on streaming radio	21%	0%	21%	0%	21%	0%
Ads on broadcast television	18%	0%	19%	0%	18%	0%
Ads on podcasts	11%	0%	19%	0%	9%	0%



# **Cost and program rankings were most effective digital ad content**

**55%**

**Clear cost  
breakdown**

**54%**

**Highlighted  
program rankings**

**41%**

**Student  
testimonials**

**35%**

**Videos showcasing  
campus life or  
program**

**32%**

**Alumni success  
stories**

**5%**

**I did not or will not  
click on any  
digital ads**





# Things to Do Today

4



# What does this mean for **Graduate Communication** planning?

**1**

**Lead with career outcomes in messaging.**

**2**

**Invest in search + social (YouTube, Meta) for full-funnel strategy, brand equity.**

**3**

**Emphasize value: Cost, flexibility, career ROI.**

**4**

**Aim for 1st response within 1 day via personalized email/text, and 1-week admissions decision timeline.**

**5**

**Personalize the journey across the funnel.**



# Thank you!



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