2026

The Campus Recruiting Experience

What college students really think about how employers recruit them, and what the best recruiting teams are doing differently.

BASED ON A SURVEY OF
900 college students

CAREER FAIR

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Introduction

The Gap Between What Employers Do and What Students Expect

Campus recruiting is one of the most competitive talent acquisition strategies an organization can run. Employers invest heavily in career fair presence, university partnerships, and early-career programs. Yet many are operating with an incomplete picture of what students actually experience, expect, and respond to.

This report presents findings from a survey of 900 current college students on every stage of the campus recruiting journey: from what draws them to a booth at a career fair, to what convinces them to apply, to what they wish employers understood about recruiting them.

The findings reveal a significant gap between how most employers recruit and what today's students expect. That gap represents both a risk and an opportunity for organizations willing to prioritize clarity and authenticity.

The Career Fair Experience

Students are selective and making quick decisions. Career fairs are crowded, fast-moving environments. Students typically stop and speak to a handful of companies at each event, which means the window to make a strong first impression is short.

Clear information on open roles and friendly recruiters who know their stuff. Flashy booths and swag are secondary to whether a recruiter can clearly explain what the work the student would actually be doing.

> **I look for companies that can explain the actual tasks I'll be doing. Generic HR pitches feel like a waste of time—I want to know what my first month looks like.**

> **If I can't immediately tell if they have a role that fits my skills or what that role entails day-to-day, I keep walking.**

⭐ **RECOMMENDATION**

A well-designed, clearly branded booth presence with recruiters who can articulate the company's culture and early-career opportunities in plain language is the single biggest driver of candidate engagement at events. Investment in employer brand materials pays off before a single conversation happens.

The Follow-Up Gap

Students expect speed.
Most employers deliver slowness.

Of all the findings in this survey, the follow-up data is the most actionable and the most alarming for recruiting teams operating with manual processes.

Most recruiting teams don't come close to meeting that expectation. After an event, data is manually compiled, contacts are entered into systems, and follow-up emails go out days later. Often generic, often late, and from a different system than the one managing the rest of the candidate experience.

54%

of students want to hear back within 48 hours of meeting a recruiter at an event.

91%

want follow-up within a week — nearly all students surveyed

The consequences are real. Candidates who were interested enough to stop, engage, and walk away with a positive impression are making decisions about where to apply during the hours and days immediately after an event. A slow follow-up doesn't just feel bad. It hands the candidate to a competitor who responded faster.

> "When I don't hear back quickly, I assume the company isn't that interested or that they're disorganized. Neither is a good look."

> "I've had companies reach out two weeks after a career fair. By that point I've already applied somewhere else and moved on."

> "The worst is when you have a great conversation and then radio silence. It makes you question whether the recruiter actually remembered talking to you."

⭐ **RECOMMENDATION**

Treat post-event follow-up as a time-sensitive operation, not an administrative task. Automated follow-up workflows that trigger within hours of an event are now a competitive necessity, not a nice-to-have.

What Convinces Students to Apply

It's not the swag. It's the experience. After meeting a recruiter at an event, students were asked what convinces them to take the next step and apply. The top responses were consistent: a clear, personalized follow-up and a strong employer brand presence online. What students are not motivated by: generic email blasts, overly formal application processes, and anything that feels copy-pasted.

> When a company follows up with something specific to our conversation, I notice. It shows they actually listened."

> If the follow-up email is clearly a template with my name dropped in, I'm less likely to apply. It signals how they'll treat me as an employee."

⭐ **RECOMMENDATION**

The follow-up and the career site work together. Personalized, on-brand follow-up that directs students to a compelling landing page significantly increases the likelihood of an application. Generic follow-up to a generic page loses candidates who were already interested.

The Pre-Application Relationship

Students want to follow you before they're ready to apply. One of the most underutilized opportunities in campus recruiting is the period between a candidate's first interaction with a company and the moment they submit an application. For many students, that window can be months, especially for students who meet recruiters in their freshman or sophomore year.

> I wish more companies had a way to stay connected that wasn't just 'apply now.' I'm not ready to apply yet, but I'm interested."

> The companies that keep me warm with relevant updates are the ones I actually apply to when I'm ready."

⭐ **RECOMMENDATION**

Empower the experts. The single biggest driver of candidate engagement at Career Fair is the recruiter's ability to move past the boilerplate pitch and into the technical and operational reality of the job.

What Students Wish Employers Knew

Some of the most useful data in this survey came from asking students directly: what do you wish employers knew about recruiting you? And what's the most annoying thing companies do? The themes were consistent across hundreds of responses.

♥ On being treated like a person, not a pipeline

> "We can tell when you're just trying to hit a headcount number. The companies that actually seem to care about us as individuals stand out."

> "Be real with us. We don't want a polished sales pitch. We want to know what it's actually like to work there."

◹ On communication and follow-through

> "If you say you'll follow up, follow up. Nothing is more discouraging than being told 'we'll be in touch' and hearing nothing."

> "Tell us where we stand. Ghosting is not okay, even from employers."

◔ On what actually works

> "The best recruiters remember details from our conversation. Even something small makes a huge difference."

> "Make it easy. If your application process is 45 minutes long, I'm probably going to apply somewhere else first."

⭐ **RECOMMENDATION**

Students are evaluating employers the same way employers evaluate candidates. Every touchpoint — the booth, the follow-up, the career site, the application process — sends a signal about what it's like to work at your company. The recruiting experience is the first chapter of the employee experience. Treat it that way.

Recommendations + Methodology

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

The findings from this survey point to a clear set of priorities for campus recruiting teams looking to improve their results in 2026.

1 **Show the Work**
Create resources with "Day-in-the-Life" video snippets, testimonials, and onboarding roadmaps. These allow recruiters to have grounded and authentic conversations.

2 **Automate post-event follow-up.**
The 24-hour expectation is the baseline students are measuring you against. Manual follow-up processes that take days are actively costing you candidates who were already interested.

3 **Build a pre-application engagement strategy**
Students want to stay connected before they're ready to apply. A structured, consistent nurture strategy keeps your company top of mind through graduation and beyond.

4 **Connect the recruiting experience to the program experience**
Organizations that connect top-of-funnel recruiting to a strong post-offer program experience see lower reneges, higher conversion, and stronger employer brand advocacy among early-career hires.

5 **Personalize at every stage**
Personalization — in follow-up emails, in content, in the conversations recruiters have — is the single biggest differentiator between companies students apply to and companies they forget.

Methodology
This report is based on survey responses from 900 current college students. Respondents attended at least one career fair in the past calendar year. The survey was conducted in 2026 and covered topics including career fair behavior, post-event communication preferences, application decision drivers, and overall recruiting experience feedback.

Ready to
Close the Gap?

Give Candidates the Experience They Actually Expect

Abode Recruit gives campus recruiting teams the tools to build a stronger employer brand, capture candidate interest at events, follow up automatically, and connect every interaction to a world-class post-offer experience.

Schedule a Demo

About Abode
Abode is the AI-powered platform built for the entire early-career talent journey, from recruiting at campus events to managing programs, converting interns to full-time hires, and building alumni communities.

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