

5 Key Barriers to Enrollment

And How Institutions Can Fix Them

A Guide for Enrollment and Admissions Leaders



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The Enrollment Problem Hiding in Plain Sight



A 1% yield improvement at a mid-size public institution translates to

~\$2.4 million

in lifetime tuition revenue from a single cohort.

College Board / IPEDS /
Trellis Strategies, 2024–2025

Institutions struggle to follow through.

Every enrollment cycle, thousands of prospective students express genuine interest by visiting a website, requesting information, or starting an application. Somewhere between that first spark of intent and the first day of class, they disappear. Not because they changed their minds about education, but because the journey asked too much of them at the wrong moments, in the wrong ways, with too little support.

The cost is staggering. When a student abandons an application, delays financial aid paperwork, or ghosts during the summer before their start date, institutions don't just lose a student. They lose the tuition revenue, the retention metrics, and the mission impact that student represented. And because the dropout happens silently across dozens of steps, it's easy to mistake a systemic engagement failure for individual student disinterest.

This guide identifies five of the most common barriers that prevent prospective students from completing the enrollment journey and offers practical strategies for institutions to address each one.

Barrier 1:

Application Abandonment



What it looks like

A prospective student begins an application—sometimes getting 60–70% of the way through—then stops. They don't submit. They don't call. They simply move on, often without the institution knowing why.

Why it happens

Application forms are often built for institutional convenience, not student clarity. As a result, students encounter unfamiliar terms, missing documents, or steps that feel overwhelming without context. The process becomes less about qualification and more about patience and confidence.

24.4% of students who started a Common App application never submitted it — over 297,000 students in a single cycle.

Common App data, Odle & Magouirk
via University Business, 2023



When students abandon the process, most institutions respond with generic email reminders that get lost in crowded inboxes. Instead of addressing specific concerns, these messages offer little reassurance. Research shows that frustration with the enrollment process—and lack of meaningful follow-up—are leading reasons students opt out after showing initial interest.

At the graduate level, these challenges are even harder to track—and just as significant:

- 27–45% of graduate inquiries never convert to completed applications
- Applications often require 6–10 components (e.g., statements, recommendations, transcripts, test scores)
- The total effort is comparable to a three-credit course (APA)
- 80% of prospective graduate and adult learners decide whether to apply before ever contacting an institution

Without a centralized system like the Common App, institutions lack visibility into where applicants drop off. And because many graduate prospects are “stealth shoppers,” by the time they engage, their decision is often already made.



How to fix it

- Break the application into clear, labeled stages so students always know where they are and what’s next
- Intervene when a student stalls with a specific, low-pressure question about what’s blocking them
- Tailor follow-up using behavioral signals instead of sending the same message to every incomplete applicant
- Treat the application as a conversation to guide and support students through to completion

Barrier 2:

The Expectation Gap



What it looks like

A prospective student visits an institution's website, fills out an inquiry form, and waits. And waits. Meanwhile, the last five things they bought online arrived with instant confirmation, real-time tracking, and a follow-up message asking if they were satisfied. The enrollment process feels like a different era entirely—and students notice.

Why it happens

Students don't separate their experiences. Every interaction they have as a consumer shapes expectations for speed, relevance, and ease. When an institution responds with a generic email days later, it signals a lack of attention.

93% of prospective students say personalized outreach would make them more likely to engage with a school. Only 36% feel the outreach they receive meets that standard.

EAB, 2024; Niche Junior Survey, 2025



The data makes the gap clear:

- 64% of prospective students say college outreach isn't personalized
- 93% say personalization would make them more likely to engage

This isn't a perception issue, it directly impacts enrollment.

Speed is the other half of the equation. Students are often comparing multiple institutions at once, and the first meaningful response has a clear advantage:

- 78% of graduate students are likely to enroll in the first program that reaches out
- First contact shapes whether an institution feels responsive or indifferent

Together, speed and personalization are baseline expectations from today's students.



How to fix it

- Respond first—and fast—with a relevant, specific message that sets the tone from the start
- Audit the enrollment journey from the student's perspective; identify where it feels confusing, slow, or impersonal
- Match each message to the student's stage; use behavioral signals to guide timely, specific outreach
- Start small with personalization; make targeted improvements without overhauling your tech stack

Barrier 3:

Registration and Administrative Friction



What it looks like

Students have been admitted, understand their financial aid, and intend to enroll—but fail to complete registration steps like course selection, orientation sign-up, immunization records, or technology setup. Each incomplete step delays or prevents enrollment from becoming official.

Why it happens

Registration is where multiple institutional systems converge on a single student—and none of them are talking to each other. The registrar's office sends one set of instructions, student health sends another, IT sends a third. The student receives a barrage of disconnected tasks with no clear prioritization or sequencing.

About half of all applicants stop out before completing enrollment—not because they lost interest, but because the process itself asks too much of them without enough guidance.

EAB enrollment research, 2021–2025



EAB's secret shopping research across 100+ institutions found that moving from application to registration often requires students to navigate disconnected offices, systems, and requirements—without a clear point of contact.

Students are most likely to disengage when they feel:

- Uncertain about next steps
- Overwhelmed by complexity
- Anxious about navigating the process

Graduate programs face a more structural version of the same issue. Admissions is often decentralized, with inconsistent review standards and fragmented processes across departments. The experience lacks coordination, and timelines can stretch from 6 to 18 months.

The impact is clear:

- Students are passed between offices without clear guidance
- Many who intend to finish the process don't return
- 32% of graduate programs missed Fall 2024 headcount goals



How to fix it

- Coordinate outreach across departments to deliver a single, sequenced checklist
- Prioritize next steps so students know what to do now vs. later
- Follow up on incomplete steps with timely, specific outreach that makes action easy
- Reduce required systems and logins to eliminate unnecessary friction

Barrier 4:

The Confirmation Gap



What it looks like

Students have been admitted, may have even committed to enrolling, but there's a gap between that commitment and actually showing up. Deposits are paid but orientation is skipped. Course schedules are built but never finalized. The institution considers the student "enrolled" while the student is still quietly weighing whether to follow through.

Why it happens

Commitment is not a single moment—it's a series of small confirmations that happen over weeks. Between the decision to enroll and the first day of class, students face competing pressures like other offers, family opinions, financial second-guessing, and the uncertainty of starting something new.

Even an **8–10% melt rate** at a single institution can result in six- or seven-figure annual revenue losses.

Watermark Insights, 2024



Even a modest melt rate carries real consequences. An 8–10% drop-off can translate into six- or seven-figure tuition losses. The students who melt aren't always the ones institutions expect either.

EAB data highlights the risk:

- ~60% of students are questioning the value of a college education
- Doubt often grows in the gap between deposit and day one—especially when institutions go quiet

At the graduate level, the pattern looks different but leads to the same outcome. Yield rates remain relatively high (50–70%) but are declining:

- Top 10 business schools saw yield drop 14+ points (64% in 2016 → <50% in 2024)
- Despite rising applications, 40 of the top 100 MBA programs reduced class sizes

The issue isn't demand, it's conversion. Many admitted students are still undecided:

- 65% of “probably” or “maybe” enrollees say they need more information, especially on cost and financial aid.

These students haven't opted out, they're waiting for clarity and engagement that often never comes.



How to fix it

- Build a structured engagement sequence from deposit to start date to maintain momentum without overwhelming students
- Address key concerns like affordability, readiness, logistics, and belonging before students raise them
- Connect students early to peers, advisors, and resources through ongoing, responsive touchpoints
- Monitor behavioral signals and intervene quickly when engagement drops

Among admitted grad students who say they'll “probably” or “maybe” enroll, **65% need more financial information to decide**. They haven't said no, they're waiting for engagement.

Barrier 5:

The Pre-Term Silence



What it looks like

In the weeks before classes begin, institutions often shift focus from recruitment to operations preparing for the incoming class rather than supporting them. Students, meanwhile, enter a communication dead zone. The result: summer melt, late drops, and no-shows on day one.

Why it happens

The research on summer melt is sobering. Foundational work from Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research established that 10–40% of college-intending students who were accepted and committed fail to enroll in the fall, with rates highest among low-income, first-generation, and community-college-bound students.

10–40% of admitted, committed students fail to enroll with low-income and first-generation students at the highest risk. One district documented a 48% melt rate overall and 56% for low-income students.

Harvard Strategic Data Project / School District of Philadelphia, 2012–2025



The handoff from admissions to student services often creates a gap in ownership. Admissions steps back, student services hasn't fully engaged, and the student, who is likely accustomed to consistent outreach, suddenly hears nothing. That silence is often interpreted as indifference.

At the same time, external pressures start to take hold:

- Summer jobs, family events, and financial setbacks
- Doubt or second thoughts ("cold feet")
- Competing priorities that pull attention away

Without clear ownership during this transition, there's no mechanism to catch disengagement early. By the time it shows up in enrollment numbers, it's too late.

For graduate students, the pressures are even more pronounced. They're balancing enrollment against:

- Full-time jobs or competing offers
- Family responsibilities
- Financial uncertainty

Their decisions are often fluid and extend over long timelines. A strong labor market only increases the likelihood of deferral or drop-off.

- 85% of graduate students enroll at the first school that admits them

This makes the window between admission and commitment a speed challenge. When institutions respond slowly—or go quiet—they lose control of the decision.



How to fix it

- Assign clear ownership of the pre-term experience from admission through the first week of class
- Maintain consistent, light-touch engagement with regular check-ins, reminders, and connection opportunities
- Ask targeted questions to gauge student readiness and identify who needs support
- Monitor early indicators (e.g., logins, financial aid, orientation) and intervene before the term begins

From Awareness to Action



Text messages achieve a 98% open rate vs. ~20–25% for email. Large-scale research confirms that generic text campaigns have zero measurable effect on enrollment. Personalization is the variable that matters.

Gartner / NBER Working Paper No. 27897, Avery et al., 2020

None of these barriers are new. Enrollment leaders live with them every cycle. What's changed is the scale of the problem and the diminishing effectiveness of the tools most institutions use to address it.

Batch emails, robocalls, and generic reminders were built for an era when students had fewer options and more patience. **Today's prospective students need guidance that meets them where they are.**

The channel data underscores the point. Text messages see open rates near 98%, compared to 20–25% for email, and most are read within minutes. But even text fails when it's generic or one-directional. The advantage isn't the channel but the quality of the message. More outreach doesn't solve the problem. Better outreach does.

The institutions that are solving this problem are doing it by rethinking how they engage students at each critical milestone:

- breaking big asks into small steps
- replacing generic outreach with meaningful conversations
- intervening at the moment a student stalls rather than after they've disappeared.

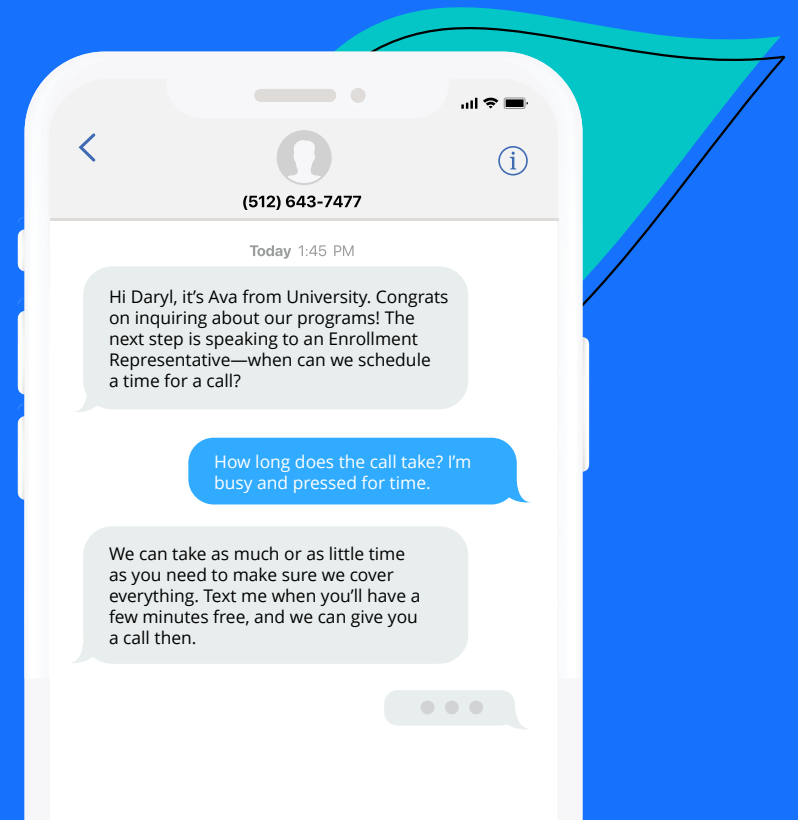
That approach works whether the student is a first-generation 18-year-old navigating their first FAFSA or a 34-year-old professional quietly weighing an MBA against a job offer. The barrier is different. **The solution is timely, personalized, responsive engagement.**

Key Takeaways

- Focus on guiding students through each step between inquiry and day one instead of just generating interest
- Identify friction at every enrollment milestone and intervene at the right moment
- Treat stalled students as needing support; address confusion, overwhelm, or unanswered questions
- Replace broadcast outreach with timely, specific, two-way conversations
- Close the follow-through gap to improve enrollment and deliver on the student promise

Ready to drive outcomes through conversations?

Contact Drips



Research Sources

Statistics cited in this guide draw from third-party research including: Common App / University Business (2023); EAB enrollment research (2021–2025); EAB-NAGAP Graduate Enrollment Survey (2025); EAB Adult Learner Survey (2025, n=8,106); Ruffalo Noel Levitz / NAGAP Graduate Benchmarks (2023–2024); GMAC Prospective Students Survey (2024–2025); CGS/ETS Graduate Enrollment and Degrees Report (2024); NSC Research Center Graduate Enrollment Data (2025–2026); Salesforce State of the Connected Customer Report (2020–2022, n=17,000+); Salesforce Connected Student Report (2022, 2024); EAB Communication Preferences Survey (2024); Niche Junior Survey (2025); Spark451/Jenzabar personalization survey (2024); NBER Working Paper No. 27897, Avery, Castleman et al. (2020); Harvard Strategic Data Project summer melt research, Castleman & Page (2014–2015); Watermark Insights (2024); NACUBO Tuition Discounting Study (2024–2025); College Board Trends in College Pricing (2025); IPEDS / Trellis Strategies (2024); CUPA–HR Workforce Reports (2024–2025); Third Way ROI analysis (2022–2025); NCES NPSAS:20 (2023); Poets&Quants MBA yield analysis (2024–2025).