

5 Ways Enrollment Teams Can Support More Students

Without Adding Headcount

How the right tools empower existing staff to work smarter, respond faster, and connect where it counts most



drips

The Math Has Changed. So Must Your Strategy.



Enrollment leaders know this bind well: do more with less. But the pressure has fundamentally shifted. U.S. college enrollment has dropped from 18.1 million to 15.4 million students over the past decade. More than half of private universities rated by S&P Global generated operating deficits in 2024. The enrollment cliff, a projected 13% decline through 2041, is no longer a horizon threat. It's already reshaping operations today.

Inside institutions, the human cost is equally stark. Graduate enrollment marketing teams average just 4.4 full-time employees to manage the entire pipeline from inquiry to enrollment. Individual admissions counselors at public universities process 600 to 650 applications per person annually. Voluntary staff turnover has reached its highest level since tracking began, with 71% of admissions counselors having been in their roles for three years or less.

The answer cannot be "hire more people." Budgets won't allow it. The labor market won't supply it. And even if both barriers disappeared, hiring alone wouldn't solve the core problem: up to 70% of student inquiries never receive a direct response.

The institutions pulling ahead have stopped asking "how do we find more staff?" and started asking "how do we help our existing team reach more students?" That mindset shift is where real transformation begins.

A new generation of enrollment tools is emerging as the answer. Not as a replacement for human connection, but as the infrastructure that makes human connection possible at scale. Solutions that persistent inquiries, deliver accurate answers to common questions, and hand off to staff when a human touch is needed are helping institutions close the gap between student expectations and team capacity.

Admissions offices operate 40 hours out of each 168-hour week, leaving 76% of inquiry hours with zero human coverage.

EAB / Rework speed-to-lead research, 2024–2025

1

Respond at the Speed Students Expect

Speed-to-lead research has produced one of the starkest findings in enrollment management: a prospect contacted within five minutes is 100 times more likely to be reached than one contacted after 30 minutes. After one hour, the odds of qualifying that lead drop sevenfold.

The gap between what the data demands and what most institutions deliver is enormous. While top-performing teams target automated acknowledgment within five minutes, the median institutional response time still stretches to 24–72 hours. One study of community colleges found that 14% of email inquiries received no follow-up at all.

This isn't a technology gap. It's a capacity gap. Enrollment counselors managing 30 to 50 new inquiries daily during peak season, while simultaneously reading applications, staffing recruitment events, and fielding financial aid questions, cannot respond at the speed students now expect. That's not a failure of effort. It's a structural limitation.

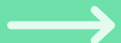
The right tools close this gap through instant acknowledgment, intelligent triage, and after-hours coverage that human staffing models simply can't replicate. Nearly 40% of automated student interactions across institutions occur outside business hours, precisely when non-traditional, working adult students are most likely to engage.



78%

of students enroll at the first institution that responds to their inquiry.

Rework / EducationDynamics speed-to-lead research, 2024



The shift: From “we’ll get back to you” to “we’re here right now.”

2 | Reserve Counselor Time for High-Impact Conversations

Not every student interaction requires a trained enrollment counselor. Questions about application deadlines, document requirements, and financial aid timelines are important, but they're also predictable and repetitive. Your most skilled staff deserve to spend their energy on conversations that actually require their expertise.

Institutions that have deployed automated solutions to handle routine enrollment inquiries report significant efficiency gains. Peer-reviewed research and industry case studies consistently show that automating answers to predictable questions can free the equivalent of multiple full-time employees to focus on high-touch student support.

With that capacity freed up, counselors can redirect their energy to the conversations that genuinely demand human judgment: students wrestling with major decisions, navigating complex financial situations, or needing the kind of reassurance only a person can provide.

This is the core reframe. Automation isn't about doing less for students. It's about making sure that counselor attention flows to where it matters most, while every other student still receives an immediate, accurate response.



Industry research shows institutions deploying enrollment automation typically save thousands of staff hours annually while improving retention by 2–4 percentage points.

EAB / Modern Campus industry benchmarks, 2024



The shift: From “everyone waits in the same queue” to “routine questions get instant answers; complex situations get human attention.”

3

Catch Students Before They Fall Through the Cracks

The traditional enrollment communication model is calendar-driven: send the welcome email on Day 1, the financial aid reminder on Day 14, the orientation nudge on Day 30. The problem is that students don't disengage on a schedule.

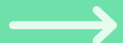
A student who stops opening emails in week two has a very different challenge than one who goes silent in week six. A student who visits the withdrawal page three times is sending a signal that a scheduled drip campaign will never catch and never address.

The most effective enrollment operations have shifted from time-based to behavior-triggered communication. When an admitted student misses a deposit deadline, the system escalates. When a deposited student skips an orientation task, a targeted reminder fills the specific gap. When engagement patterns suggest someone is pulling away, a check-in fires before that student disappears entirely.



Institutions using behavior-triggered outreach report identifying hundreds of at-risk students per cycle and re-enrolling a significant share before they disappear from the pipeline entirely.

EAB / Modern Campus industry benchmarks, 2024



The shift: From “hope they see the email” to “detect the signal and respond.”

4

Extend Your Reach Without Extending Your Hours

Admissions offices operate 40 hours out of each 168-hour week. That leaves 76% of the week with no human coverage: evenings, weekends, holidays, and the late-night hours when anxious students and parents are most likely to seek answers.

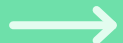
Unlike phone calls, text-based conversations don't require both parties to be available at the same time. A student can ask a question at 11 PM, the AI responds instantly, and a counselor can review flagged conversations the next morning. No one falls through the cracks because the office happened to be closed.

This asynchronous, always-on persistence model is especially important for the students who need it most: working adults, parents, and first-generation students balancing jobs and family obligations who often can't engage during standard business hours. Meeting students where and when they are isn't just good service. It's an equity strategy.



Text messages achieve ~98% open rates and 45% response rates, compared to ~22% and 6% for email.

Modern Campus / Ocelot industry benchmarks, 2024



The shift: From “call us during business hours” to “reach us whenever you need us.”

5 | Close Equity Gaps Through Judgment-Free Support

Across every major study of AI-driven student outreach in higher education, one finding surfaces consistently: first-generation and low-income students engage at higher rates than their peers, and they benefit more.

In randomized controlled trials, first-generation students sent nearly 10% more messages and showed an eight percentage point increase in financial aid loan acceptance when supported by automated, two-way outreach.

For first-generation students navigating unfamiliar processes, the ability to ask unlimited questions without embarrassment isn't a convenience. It's a lifeline. For institutions committed to equity and access, that impact extends far beyond the enrollment funnel.



Students reported they valued not feeling “judged” for asking questions they perceived as basic. The most common student message to AI support tools across platforms? “Thank you.”

Higher education AI-driven outreach research, 2020–2024

→ **The shift: From “students who know how to ask get answers” to “every student gets support.”**

What's Next: From Conversation to Action

The next wave of AI in enrollment isn't about better tools in isolation. It's about AI that doesn't wait to be asked, but autonomously follows up on incomplete applications, detects barriers and can pivot conversations accordingly, and coordinates multi-step enrollment processes across departments.

Early adopters are already integrating solutions into their workflows. Moving to conversational AI outreach represents the next operational frontier, where systems don't just send static messages but drive outcomes. For enrollment leaders planning beyond the current cycle, the question is no longer "should we use AI?" It's "how do we build the infrastructure to use it well?"

The institutions that answer that question first will be the ones still thriving on the other side of the enrollment cliff.

Key Takeaways

Insight	Action
The staffing crisis is structural, not cyclical	Build better systems, not bigger headcounts
Speed wins enrollment	78% of students choose the first institution to respond
The right tools protect counselor capacity	Automate the routine; elevate the human
Behavior-triggered outreach outperforms drip campaigns	Right message, right moment beats volume every time
Underrepresented students benefit most from always-on support	Judgment-free access is an equity imperative

Ready to drive outcomes through conversations?

Contact Drips

Research Sources

Statistics cited in this whitepaper draw from third-party research including: Deloitte 2026 Higher Education Trends; CUPA-HR Higher Ed Workforce Reports (2023–2025); EAB Graduate Enrollment Benchmarks (2024–2025); Rework / EducationDynamics Speed-to-Lead Research (2024); peer-reviewed RCTs on AI-driven outreach and summer melt published in Research in Higher Education (2021); Modern Campus / Ocelot channel effectiveness research; Inside Higher Ed AI predictions (2026); NACAC AI in College Admissions SIG proceedings.