



The 2025 Graduate Inquiry Response Project Report

Closing the Gap Between Interest and Enrollment



ABOUT NAGAP

NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, is the only professional organization devoted exclusively to the concerns of individuals working in the graduate enrollment management environment.

Membership in NAGAP provides an opportunity to network with professional colleagues at all sizes and types of institutions: large and small, public and private, secular and non-secular.

The annual conference, professional development institutes, membership directory, weekly NAGAP News, Perspectives newsmagazine, mentor program, and chapter affiliations all help facilitate communication among members.

The mission of NAGAP is to engage and advance Graduate Enrollment Management Professionals by promoting excellence and collaboration through education, research, and professional development.



ABOUT LIAISON

Through a powerful combination of technology and services, Liaison assists higher ed institutions and students in making informed enrollment decisions. Our vision of fostering a more educated world fuels our passion for expanding access, simplifying experiences, and empowering decision makers. With over 30 years of experience, we've served over 1,200 campuses and supported 40,000 programs globally, empowering individuals, partnering with institutions, and strengthening communities in the pursuit of knowledge and success.

Table of Contents

4 Introduction

Overview of the 2025 NAGAP–Liaison Graduate Inquiry Response Project and the evolving challenges in graduate student recruitment.

6 Key Findings

Summary of five essential strategies for improving inquiry response: visibility, speed, personalization, omnichannel outreach, and ongoing evaluation.

7 Methodology

Explanation of how the study was conducted, including secret shopper research and survey results from NAGAP-member institutions.

9 Research Insights

Detailed analysis of each key strategy, supported by data and real-world examples from observed and self-reported institutional practices.

16 Supporting Data and Broader Trends

Highlights of national trends in graduate education, student behavior, and communication preferences that frame the study's findings.

17 Recommendations for Institutions

Actionable steps for graduate programs to enhance inquiry response workflows and drive enrollment outcomes.

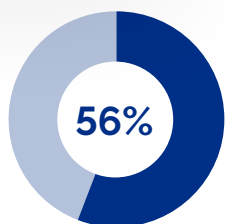
18 Conclusion

Final thoughts on building responsive, personalized, and scalable strategies to connect with today's prospective graduate students.

19 References

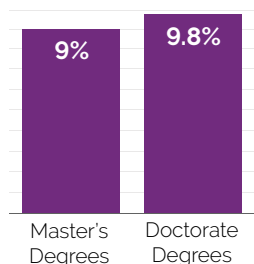
Introduction

Industry Data



OF STUDENTS ARE
ENROLLED IN PROGRAMS
WITH ONLINE OR
FLEXIBLE FORMATS

Graduate Degree Growth Between 2021 and 2023



THERE IS A PROJECTED
SHORTFALL OF

21,000

GRADUATE-EDUCATED
PROFESSIONALS IN
KEY FIELDS

Graduate enrollment is evolving in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Applications to graduate programs rose 5.6% from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023, with especially sharp increases at master's colleges and universities (15.8%) and doctoral/professional universities (22.1%), according to CGS (2024). Yet actual enrollment growth has lagged significantly, hovering around just 1%, highlighting the growing competition and ongoing challenges in converting interest into action (NCES, 2025).

Demographics are also shifting. More Black, Hispanic, and older students are enrolling in graduate programs, alongside increases in international student participation (CGS, 2024). Online and hybrid learning options now dominate the landscape, with over 56% of graduate students enrolled in programs offering online or flexible formats (NCES, 2025). Meanwhile, the number of degrees awarded continues to climb. Master's degrees were up 9% and doctoral degrees were up 9.8% between 2021 and 2023. But even with that growth, there's a projected shortfall of more than 21,000 graduate-educated professionals in key fields like education administration and career counseling (CGS, 2024).

In short, demand is growing, but so are expectations. And in many cases, institutions aren't keeping pace.

Despite their best intentions, most graduate programs are missing key opportunities to engage prospective students. Inquiry forms remain difficult for students to find. Responses, when they come at all, often lack relevance or personalization. Many institutions still rely on a single channel—typically email—when today's applicants expect real-time, multichannel interactions.



About the Inquiry Response Project

To investigate these gaps and identify ways forward, the 2025 NAGAP–Liaison Graduate Inquiry Response Project examined how graduate institutions engage prospective students at the inquiry stage. Through secret shopper research and a national survey of over 1,100 NAGAP members, the study assessed five critical dimensions of communication: visibility, speed, personalization, channel diversity, and strategy evaluation.

This report outlines key findings from that study and presents five actionable strategies institutions can use to improve inquiry response, deepen engagement, and drive yield in an increasingly competitive environment.

Key Findings

The results of the 2025 Graduate Inquiry Response Project point to five essential elements of successful inquiry response strategies for graduate programs:



Enhance visibility | Inquiry forms and key information should be easy to locate—ideally within one click from the home page.



Respond quickly | Institutions should aim to respond to inquiries within minutes, not days, to maintain student interest and momentum.



Personalize communication | Outreach should go beyond using a student's name, offering tailored information about programs, outcomes, and opportunities that reflect individual interests.



Use multiple communication channels | A coordinated mix of email, SMS, print, chatbots, and social media increases both reach and engagement.



Evaluate and optimize | Regular audits and data-driven improvements help ensure inquiry workflows remain effective and responsive to evolving student expectations.

Drawn from thousands of interactions and institutional data points, these findings form a framework for actionable change, enabling graduate schools to close communication gaps, boost engagement, and drive enrollment success.



Methodology

To understand how graduate institutions engage with prospective students during the inquiry phase, the 2025 Graduate Inquiry Response Project deployed a two-pronged research approach: a secret shopper study and a NAGAP-member-wide institutional survey. Together, these methods provided both a performance-based and a perception-based lens on how schools are managing prospective student outreach.

A. Secret Shopper Study

Liaison researchers evaluated 422 NAGAP-member institution webpages using a mystery shopper methodology. Each institution was assessed based on a prospective graduate student experience:

- Researchers searched for inquiry forms or other ways to indicate interest.
- Once located, forms were submitted, and the date and time of inquiry were logged.
- Over the following four weeks, all institutional responses were tracked across:



Email

Timing, frequency, and degree of personalization.



Print

Type of materials, date received, and personalization level.



Phone and Text

Type of contact, tone, and messaging relevance.

This method revealed how quickly and effectively institutions responded and whether they followed up at all.

B. Institutional Survey

To compare perceived practices with real-world performance, a survey was distributed to more than 1,100 NAGAP members. The survey had an 18% response rate and a 95% completion rate.

Institutions self-reported their strategies and capabilities across key communication metrics:

- Response speed.
- Use of personalization.
- Number and type of communication channels.
- Mobile optimization.
- Frequency of strategy audits.

Comparing Self-Reported vs. Observed Practices

One of the most revealing aspects of this project was the gap between what institutions believed they were doing and what prospective students actually experienced. For example:

62%

of institutions said they respond to inquiries within 24 hours,

yet only 21% did.

66%

of institutions reported their inquiry forms were mobile-optimized,

but only 43% were.

81%

of institutions claimed to personalize email responses,

though fewer than half included details beyond the student's name.

This comparative lens exposes the perception gaps that can quietly undermine enrollment strategies—and offers a roadmap for closing them.

Research Insights

5 Keys to Inquiry Response Success

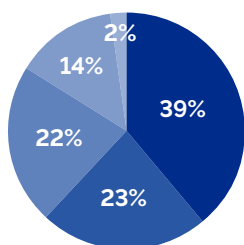
1. Enhance Visibility

Before a prospective student ever fills out a form or reads a brochure, they face a simple question: *Can I easily find the information I need?* For many graduate programs, the answer is no.

While 55% of NAGAP-member institutions reported that their inquiry forms were accessible within one click of the institution's home page, the secret shopper data told a different story—only 39% actually achieved that level of visibility. In an era when prospective students expect seamless digital experiences, a buried or hard-to-navigate form is a missed opportunity.

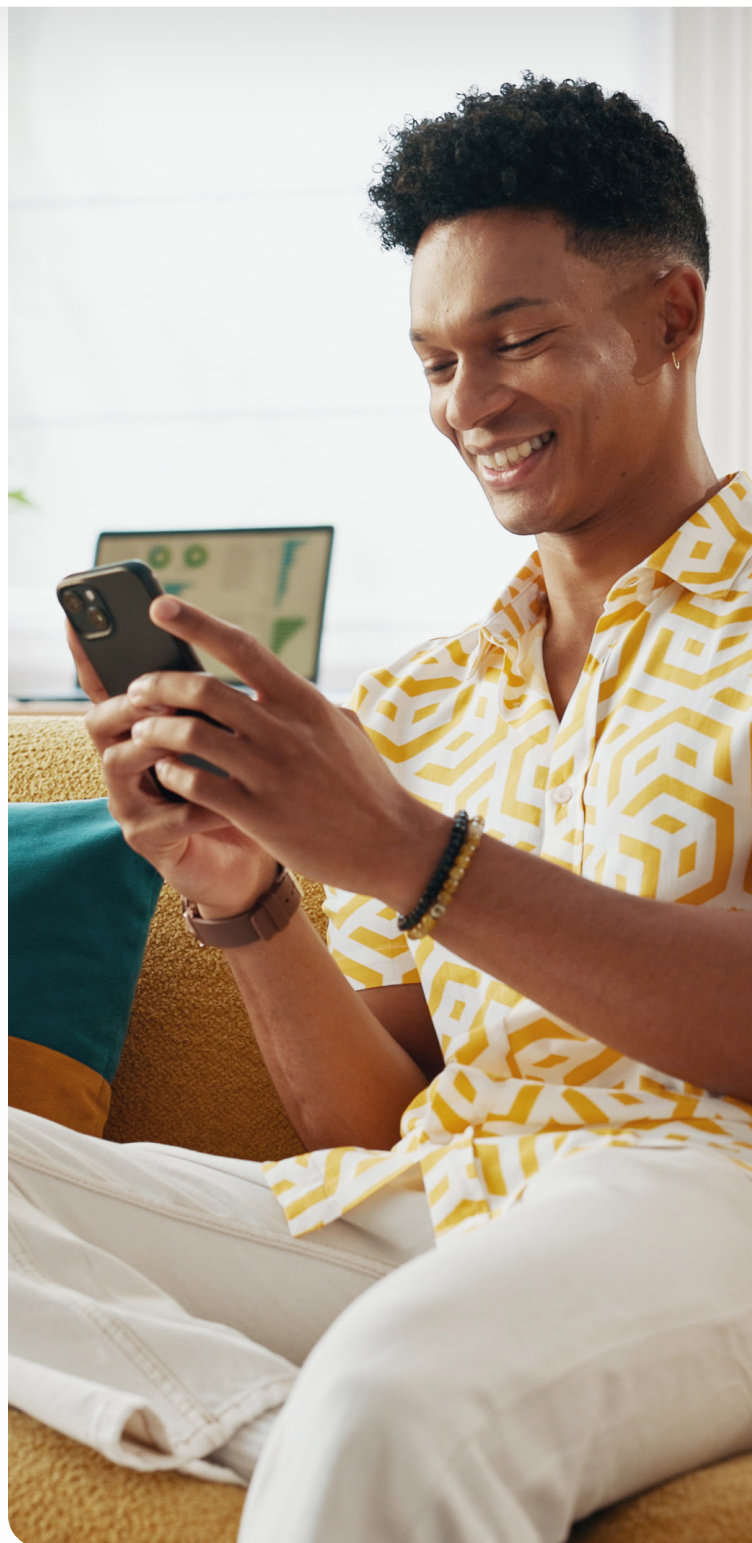
Secret Shopper Data

How easy is it for a prospect to access an RFI form from the home page?



Number of Clicks

- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- More Than Four



The visibility gap doesn't end with navigation. After secret shoppers submitted an inquiry, most schools (73%) sent a generic confirmation message such as, *"Thank you for your message. It has been sent."* Only 4% of institutions responded with personalized microsites (or PURLs) that continued the engagement journey. And while 45% of survey respondents said students receive a detailed follow-up after submitting a form, the majority of responses lacked any meaningful next step.

When inquiry forms are difficult to find—or when the follow-up feels like an afterthought—institutions risk losing students before the conversation even starts.

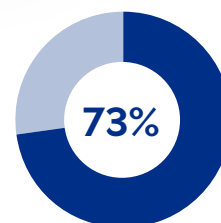
Best Practices

- **Streamline navigation** from the institution's home page so that inquiry forms are clearly visible and accessible with one click.
- **Limit the number of form fields** to five to seven to increase completion rates without sacrificing key data collection.
- **Incorporate personalized landing pages** or microsites that reflect the student's program of interest and next steps accessible upon inquiry form submission.
- **Use branded confirmation messages** that invite continued engagement, such as booking a call or exploring program highlights.

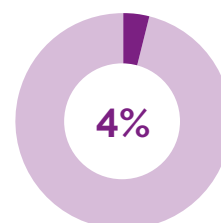
Why It Matters

Improved visibility isn't just good UX; it's directly tied to outcomes. Improving the user experience in online forms can boost conversion rates by up to 87% (*FormAssembly, 2024*). In a crowded graduate education market, simplifying the first step can be a decisive advantage.

Secret Shopper Data

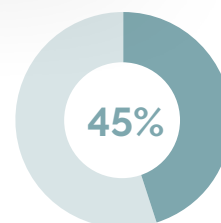


OF SCHOOLS SENT A
GENERIC CONFIRMATION
MESSAGE



OF INSTITUTIONS RESPONDED
WITH PERSONALIZED MICROSITES
(OR PURLS) THAT CONTINUED THE
ENGAGEMENT JOURNEY

NAGAP-Member Survey Data



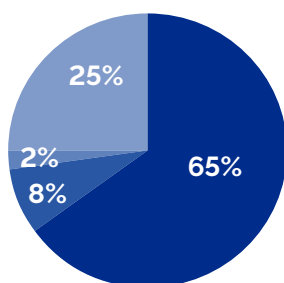
OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS
SAID STUDENTS RECEIVE A
DETAILED FOLLOW-UP AFTER
SUBMITTING A FORM

2. Respond Quickly

Graduate prospects aren't waiting around. They're comparing programs, evaluating career ROI, and forming first impressions quickly—often within hours of submitting an inquiry. For institutions, that means every minute matters.

Secret Shopper Data

Twenty-One Percent of Schools Responded in 24 Hours



- 0-1 Hours
- 2-4 Hours
- 5-8 Hours
- 16-24 Hours

While 62% of NAGAP-member institutions said they respond to inquiries within 24 hours, only 21% actually did, according to secret shopper data. Even more concerning: 71 schools failed to respond at all within two weeks. Those are weeks when prospective students may lose interest, look elsewhere, or enroll in a program that simply responded first.

The cost of delay can be high. Research shows that 8 out of 10 consumers expect a response within 10 minutes (*Inside Sales, 2021*). And the perception impact is just as significant: 60% of graduate students say that the speed of a school's communication influenced their decision to apply (*NACAC, 2021*).

Secret Shopper Data



71

SCHOOLS FAILED TO RESPOND AT ALL WITHIN TWO WEEKS

These numbers send a clear message: Being first isn't a bonus; it's a baseline expectation.

Best Practices

- **Automate initial responses** using CRM tools, marketing automation, and AI chatbots to provide timely and relevant follow-ups immediately after inquiry submission.
- **Trigger a "first-touch" message** that outlines next steps, introduces the program, or invites the prospect to take a deeper action (like scheduling a call or viewing a webinar).
- **Monitor inquiry response time regularly** to ensure standards are being met consistently across teams and programs.

Why It Matters

Timeliness signals value. When a school replies quickly, it demonstrates organization, interest, and respect for the student's time—qualities that build trust from the first interaction. In a digital environment defined by instant gratification, delayed communication is more than a missed opportunity. It's a quiet exit point for students who were ready to engage.

3. Personalize Communication

Graduate students are rarely casting a wide net. Instead, they're seeking programs that align with their career goals, values, and personal circumstances. That makes relevance nonnegotiable. In addition to being forgettable, a generic response can actively deter a student from engaging further.

While 81% of NAGAP-member institutions reported that their email responses were personalized, secret shopper data showed that only 42% went beyond using the student's name. Most failed to include basic program-specific details, career outcomes, or acknowledgment of the student's stated interests.

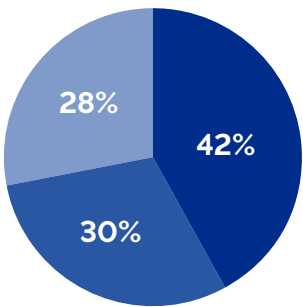
For students who have already done their research and are looking for alignment, this

disconnect can be jarring. Forty-five percent of graduate prospects expect communication tailored to their specific program of interest, and misaligned messaging can lower engagement and increase drop-off rates.

On the other hand, schools that personalize well—highlighting faculty expertise, accreditation, program outcomes, or how a degree supports a student's career path—establish early credibility and connection.

Secret Shopper Data

Email Personalization



- Personalized
- Full Variable
- Generic

Best Practices

- **Go beyond name-based personalization** to include the program of interest, geographic location, start term, and potential career goals.
- **Leverage dynamic content** in emails and microsites that adapts to the student's profile or inquiry data.
- **Reference faculty, curriculum, or outcomes** relevant to the student's field to make communications feel intentional and informed.
- **Balance tone and clarity**, avoiding overly formal or robotic language while still maintaining professionalism.

Why It Matters

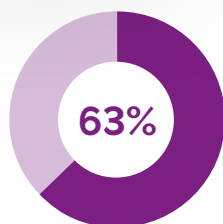
Today's graduate students are discerning. When they take the time to express interest, they expect to feel seen in return. Personalized outreach builds trust, conveys value, and moves the conversation from transactional to relational. In an environment where options abound, relevance is what makes a message resonate.

4. Use Multiple Channels

One email is never enough. In a media environment where prospective students are bombarded with up to 10,000 ads per day and inboxes are overflowing, it takes a coordinated, multichannel approach to cut through the noise and sustain engagement (*American Psychological Association, 2021*).

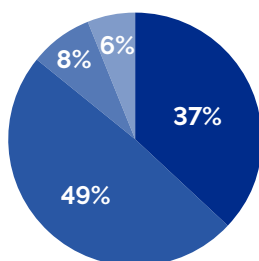
Most institutions understand this in theory. For example, 72% of NAGAP-member respondents said they use multiple channels to engage prospects. However, the reality was more modest: Only 63% of institutions actually delivered outreach across more than one channel during the four-week research window.

Secret Shopper Data



63% OF INSTITUTIONS
DELIVERED OUTREACH
ACROSS MORE THAN
ONE CHANNEL

Number of Channels Used to Engage Prospects

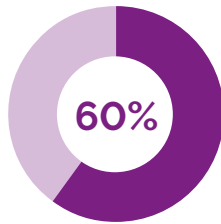


- One
- Two
- Three
- Four or More

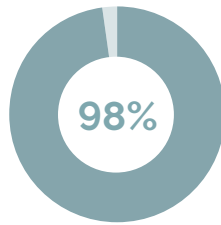


Industry Data

DIRECT MAIL
CAMPAIGNS HAVE
BEEN SHOWN TO
INCREASE RESPONSE
RATES BY UP TO



TEXT MESSAGES HAVE
AN OPEN RATE NEAR



Email remains foundational, but today's graduate prospects are engaging on their own terms via text, chatbot, print, and social platforms. When schools meet students across these touchpoints in a consistent, personalized way, the results are dramatic.

Omnichannel campaigns that focus on individualized outreach see performance boosts of up to 202% (*Higher Education Marketing, 2023*). Print marketing should also be used strategically, as direct mail campaigns have been shown to increase response rates by up to 60% (*Mailing.com, 2025*). Variable data printing (VDP) can further enhance outreach by creating personalized materials that cater to prospective students' specific interests.

Other underused tools, like SMS and chatbots, also show significant upside. Text messages have an open rate near 98% (*Top Echelon, 2024*), and 3 in every 5 students report positive experiences with school chatbots, citing fast answers and smoother follow-up (*Higher Ed Dive, 2021*).

Industry Data



3 IN 5

STUDENTS REPORT
POSITIVE EXPERIENCES
WITH SCHOOL CHATBOTS

Best Practices

- **Integrate SMS, email, chatbots, print, and social** to create a true omnichannel experience across the enrollment journey.
- **Use VDP for print** to tailor postcards, brochures, or letters with a student's name, program of interest, or regional relevance.
- **Employ drip campaigns** that sequence communications over time, using varied formats to keep students engaged without overwhelming them.
- **Map communication flows** so that each channel supports the others, thereby building familiarity, reinforcing messages, and encouraging next steps.

Why It Matters

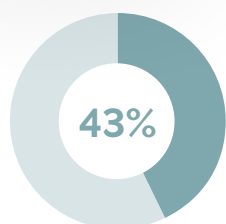
Multichannel communication isn't just about reach—it's about resonance. Students are more likely to engage with messages they see in multiple contexts across platforms they already use. Institutions that embrace this diversity in outreach not only connect but also stay top of mind.

5. Evaluate and Optimize

Many institutions think their inquiry response strategies are working, but few are measuring them closely enough to know with certainty. Without regular audits, mobile testing, or performance tracking, gaps go unnoticed, and opportunities slip by.

According to the NAGAP-member survey, 89% of institutions had not conducted a formal audit of their inquiry response strategy within the past year. And while 66% said their forms were mobile-friendly, secret shopper testing revealed that only 43% truly were.

Secret Shopper Data

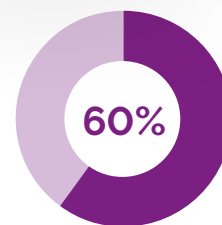


OF INSTITUTIONS' FORMS WERE FOUND TO BE MOBILE-FRIENDLY

This matters because mobile is now the dominant medium for student research. Over 60% of all web traffic comes from mobile devices (*Exploding Topics, 2024*), and Gen Z and Millennial students spend an estimated 6 and 4 hours per day on their phones, respectively (*Exploding Topics, 2025*). If a form loads slowly, isn't mobile-optimized, or breaks the user experience, the lead may be lost instantly.

Worse, a lack of insight into performance metrics means schools are flying blind. A quarter of institutions reported they do not track the effectiveness of their inquiry strategy at all. As a result, they end up missing valuable data like bounce rates, time to response, and inquiry-to-application conversion.

Industry Data



OF ALL WEB TRAFFIC COMES FROM MOBILE DEVICES

MILLENNIAL AND GEN Z STUDENTS SPEND

4-6 HOURS

ON THEIR PHONES PER DAY



Best Practices

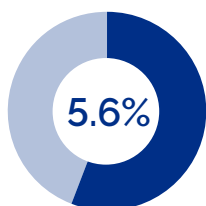
- **Conduct quarterly audits** of inquiry workflows, from form accessibility to follow-up content and timing.
- **Test mobile responsiveness** regularly across devices, screen sizes, and browsers.
- **Use analytics dashboards** to monitor key metrics like open rates, response time, form abandonment, and channel effectiveness.
- **Refresh content periodically** to reflect evolving student needs, academic calendars, and program updates.

Why It Matters

Optimization isn't a one-time fix; it's a habit. Institutions that regularly evaluate their strategies and adapt to shifting behaviors stay ahead of the curve. In a highly competitive market, continuous improvement is what separates good from great—and ensures that inquiry response isn't a liability, but a lever for growth.

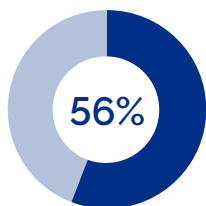
Supporting Data and Broader Trends

The insights uncovered through the Graduate Inquiry Response Project are reinforced by broader shifts in graduate education and student behavior. These trends underscore why visibility, speed, personalization, multichannel communication, and continuous evaluation are no longer “nice to have.” They’re critical for success.



Application Volume Is Up, But Yield Is Flat

Graduate programs saw a 5.6% increase in applications from Fall 2022 to Fall 2023. Growth was especially strong among master's colleges and universities (15.8%) and doctoral/professional universities (22.1%) (CGS, 2024). Despite this influx, actual enrollment growth hovered around 1%, highlighting a widening gap between interest and action (NCES, 2025). Institutions are attracting attention but struggling to convert it into commitments.



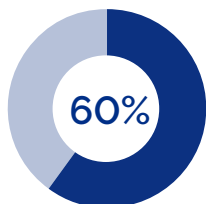
Demographics Are Evolving

This year marked a notable rise in graduate enrollment among Black and Hispanic students, women, and students over age 24, along with growth in international student participation, according to CGS (2024). Meanwhile, more than 56% of graduate students are now enrolled in programs with online or flexible formats (NCES, 2025). Institutions must communicate in ways that reflect the diversity, digital habits, and expectations of today's graduate applicants.



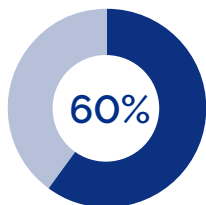
Marketing Saturation Is Real

Prospective students are navigating a landscape of information overload. With an estimated 4,000 to 10,000 ads per day (American Psychological Association, 2021) and 361 billion emails sent daily (Statista, 2024), inbox fatigue is real. Emails alone are no longer enough to capture or hold attention. Without personalization or multichannel follow-up, even the most well-designed campaigns risk being ignored or deleted.



Speed and Relevance Drive Decisions

Timeliness can be the tipping point: 60% of graduate students say the speed of a school's communication influenced their decision to apply (NACAC, 2021). Speed alone isn't enough—what you say matters just as much as when you say it. Tailoring outreach based on a prospect's interests and behaviors ensures that fast responses also feel personal and meaningful.



Print Still Works (When Done Right)

Digital may dominate, but print is far from obsolete. Personalized direct mail, especially when integrated with digital campaigns, continues to cut through the clutter. Mailing.com (2025) found that direct mail increases response rates by up to 60%. And personalized omnichannel campaigns can outperform single-channel strategies by over 200% (Higher Education Marketing, 2023). Prospects not only remember physical mail—they often act on it.



Recommendations for Institutions

The findings from the 2025 Graduate Inquiry Response Project reveal not just where institutions are falling short but exactly how they can improve. Whether your team is just beginning to rethink inquiry communications or already running advanced campaigns, the following strategies offer a roadmap to better visibility, faster follow-ups, more relevant messaging, and, ultimately, stronger enrollment outcomes.

A. Immediate Actions

- **Redesign the home page layout** to prioritize the inquiry form. Ensure it's accessible within one click and optimized for both desktop and mobile devices.
- **Launch automated response workflows** that trigger branded, personalized messages within minutes of an inquiry submission.
- **Include microsites or PURL links** in confirmation emails, giving students personalized next steps and program-specific content.

B. Mid-Term Fixes

- **Expand omnichannel strategies** by integrating SMS, chatbot engagement, print, and social media into your recruitment flow.
- **Segment email content** based on program of interest, start term, and applicant type (e.g., domestic vs. international, recent undergrad vs. returning professional).
- **Conduct mobile usability testing** to identify and resolve friction points across form pages, confirmation flows, and microsites.

C. Long-Term Strategies

- **Institutionalize quarterly audits** of inquiry response strategies, reviewing everything from form placement and messaging cadence to personalization quality and response times.
- **Invest in CRM platforms, AI tools, and analytics dashboards** that can automate follow-ups, personalize at scale, and track key metrics in real time.
- **Benchmark performance** against peer institutions using Liaison's secret shopper insights to identify strengths and areas for improvement.



Conclusion

Graduate students are asking more from the institutions they consider—and they're deciding faster than ever before. In this high-stakes environment, schools that fail to respond quickly, personally, and across multiple channels are ceding ground to competitors who can.

There is good news, however: The tools, data, and strategies needed to build a better inquiry experience already exist. The 2025 NAGAP–Liaison Graduate Inquiry Response Project has shown that even modest improvements in visibility, responsiveness, and personalization can significantly influence student engagement and enrollment outcomes.

To thrive in today's enrollment climate, institutions must treat inquiry response not as a transactional step, but as the beginning of a relationship. That involves:

- Making it easy for students to find and complete inquiry forms.
- Responding with speed, relevance, and intention.
- Meeting students where they are across channels and devices.
- Evaluating performance consistently and optimizing based on results.

Institutions that embrace these practices will be better equipped not just to reach more students but to connect with the right ones, build trust early, and improve their graduate yield in meaningful, measurable ways.

Discover the impact of a personalized omnichannel inquiry response strategy. [Enroll in Liaison's sample campaign here.](#)



Request your institution's Inquiry Response Project scorecard today.

Contact Stephen Taylor, Vice President for Graduate Enrollment Strategy at staylor@liaisonedu.com. Liaison can secret shop your institution, share your results, and provide benchmarking data against regional or peer institutions through a personalized consultation.

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