

NAGAP

Survey of Graduate Program Marketing and Recruitment Practices

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Spotlight on Graduate Enrollment and Marketing

It should be no surprise to find that graduate students as a group are highly motivated and eager to enroll. Most seek a graduate degree with clear career-based goals in mind. And about 22% expect their graduate degree to help them achieve a raise in salary, while 21% want to transition to a new career.

From their first contact with enrollment teams, they are hot prospects. According to 2020 and Beyond, Attracting and Serving Post-Traditional Students^[1]:

- **24% of prospective graduate students make their first contact through the website information request form.**
- **23% skip right to submitting an application as their first contact.**

[1] 2020 and Beyond, Attracting and Serving Post-Traditional Students, Carol B Aslanian, Steven Fischer



Most prospective graduate students expect to start their education within 8 weeks of their first contact.

What might surprise you, however, is just how much opportunity there is for improvement when it comes to communicating with these same hot prospects. While the graduate marketing and recruitment industry does many things well, especially when it comes to email communications, we can do more to connect with prospective students.

Most prospective graduate students expect to start their education within 8 weeks of their first contact. The most successful institutions move quickly to keep these students in the pipeline and meet their expectations. To do so, the model institutions connect and communicate with students on their terms, using their preferred communication methods and platforms.

Clear, consistent communication with students builds trust that the organization is committed to the student's success. Building strong relationships based on trust and a consistent message helps institutions increase enrollments and reduce melt. This report, based on a survey of NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management members, conducted December 2019 through January 2020, reveals that graduate enrollment departments and teams can do more to connect with these highly motivated potential students.

While each institution may feel its own strengths and weaknesses in this area, the aggregate results are clear: Enrollment and marketing have room for improvement.

Fortunately, the results also reveal strategies that institutions can put into place to strengthen their marketing and enrollment programs. When examined in the context of the higher education industry as a whole and combined with data on graduate students, the findings represent a wealth of opportunity for graduate marketing and enrollment programs.

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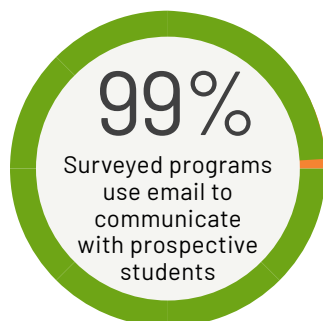
Successes, and room for improvement



Three key patterns emerged from a detailed investigation of graduate program marketing and recruitment processes.

1. Graduate programs rely heavily on email.

Almost all (99%) surveyed programs use email to communicate with prospective students. Many have built recruitment strategies around drip campaigns, triggered follow-ups, and email blasts. In short, most programs are using email marketing well but opportunities for improvement may still exist.



The positive performance around email comes with a caveat. Programs are pinning all of their hopes on that modality and ignoring others that could enhance connections with prospective students. Modalities like texting can feel more immediate and personal.



2. A majority of programs lack robust contact strategies.

While almost all institutions use email, most programs are underutilizing other modalities that could make their contact strategies more robust. Many programs lack the key elements of a successful contact strategy, like a planned cadence and clear triggers. For example, only 29% have a defined timeline for when follow-up phone calls should be conducted. When dealing with highly motivated prospects who measure time to enrollment in weeks, not months, lack of follow-up can lead to melt.

3. Compliance could pose a problem for many institutions.

When asked whether their institution regularly conducts compliance reviews of campaigns and marketing content, only 31% of programs answered “always” or “most of the time.” A staggering 45% said they weren’t sure.

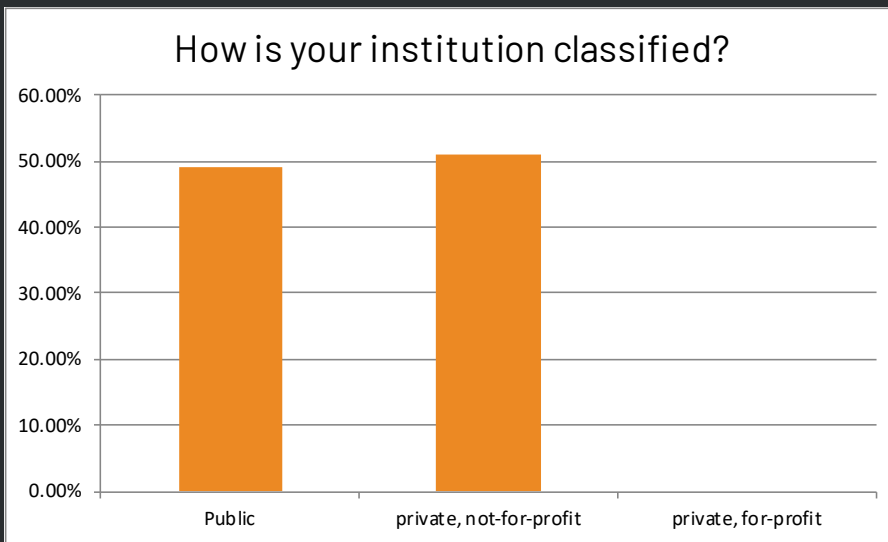
Graduate programs ignore privacy and compliance issues at their peril. Students are more concerned with privacy than ever before, and they quickly sour against unsolicited marketing messages. Not only does ignoring compliance damage your relationship with students, but it also puts your institution at risk.

In short, while many graduate programs excel at email, a lack of contact strategy is keeping many from transforming queries into enrollments. Meanwhile, they’re putting their programs and their relationships with students at risk by ignoring privacy and compliance concerns.

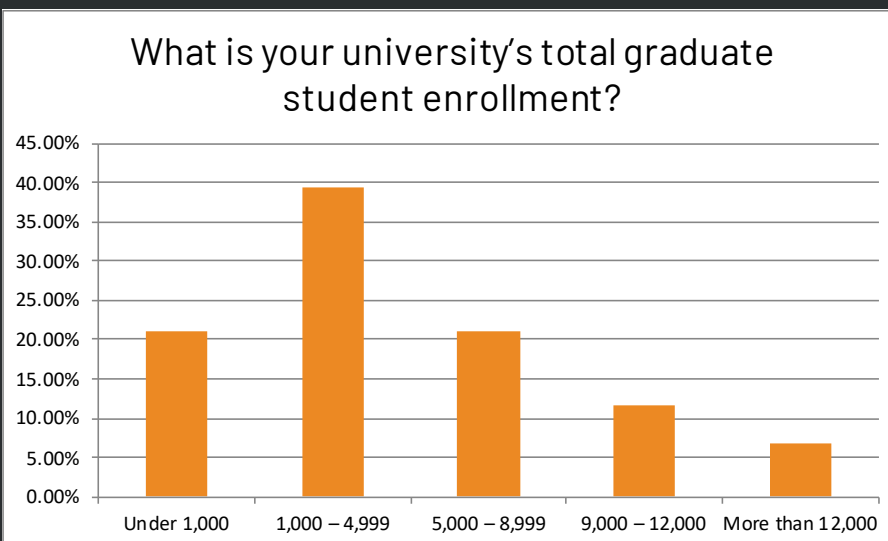
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Who Participated?

Respondents of the survey were split almost evenly between public institutions and private, not-for-profit schools.

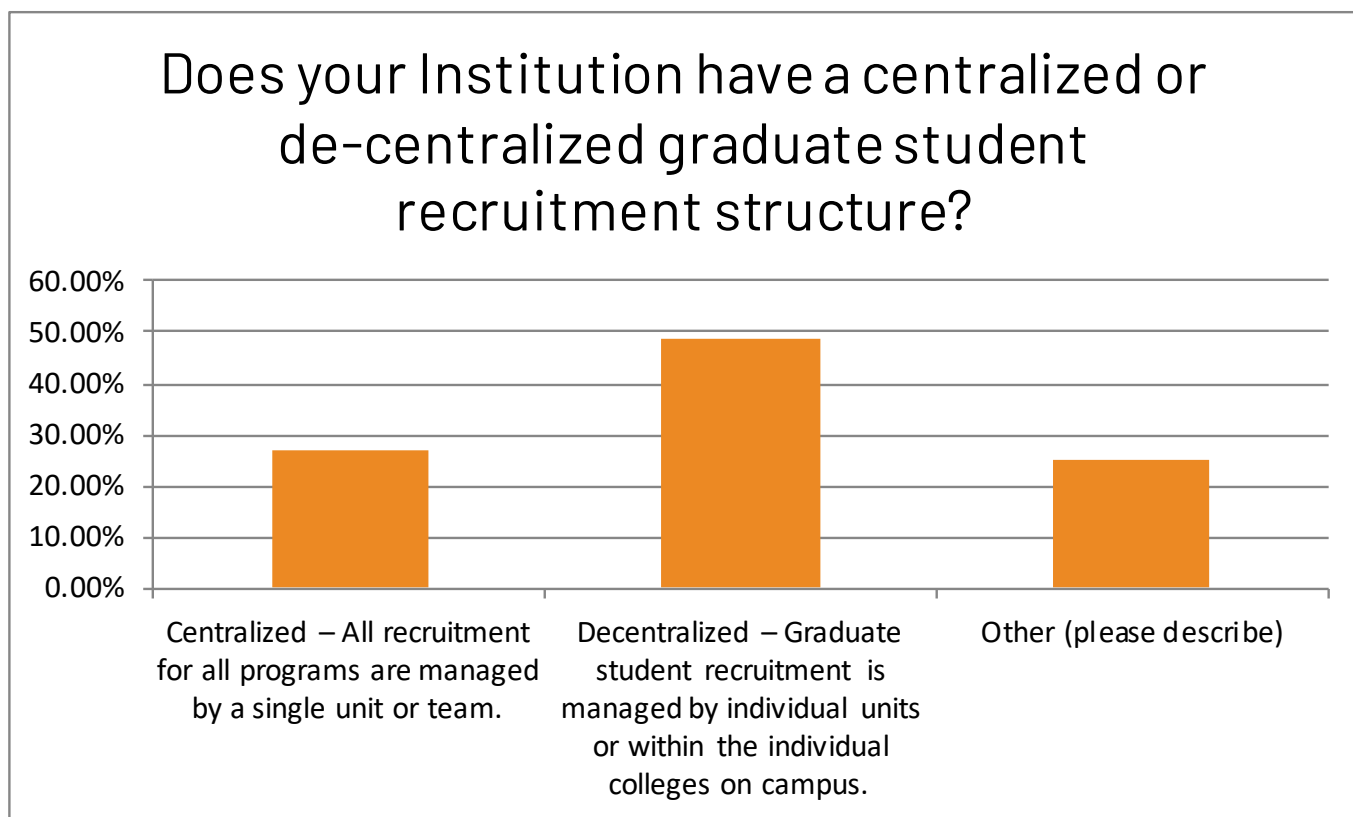


Their total graduate enrollment ranged from fewer than 1,000 students to more than 12,000. Most respondents represented mid-sized institutions with graduate enrollments between 1,000 and 8,999 graduate students.





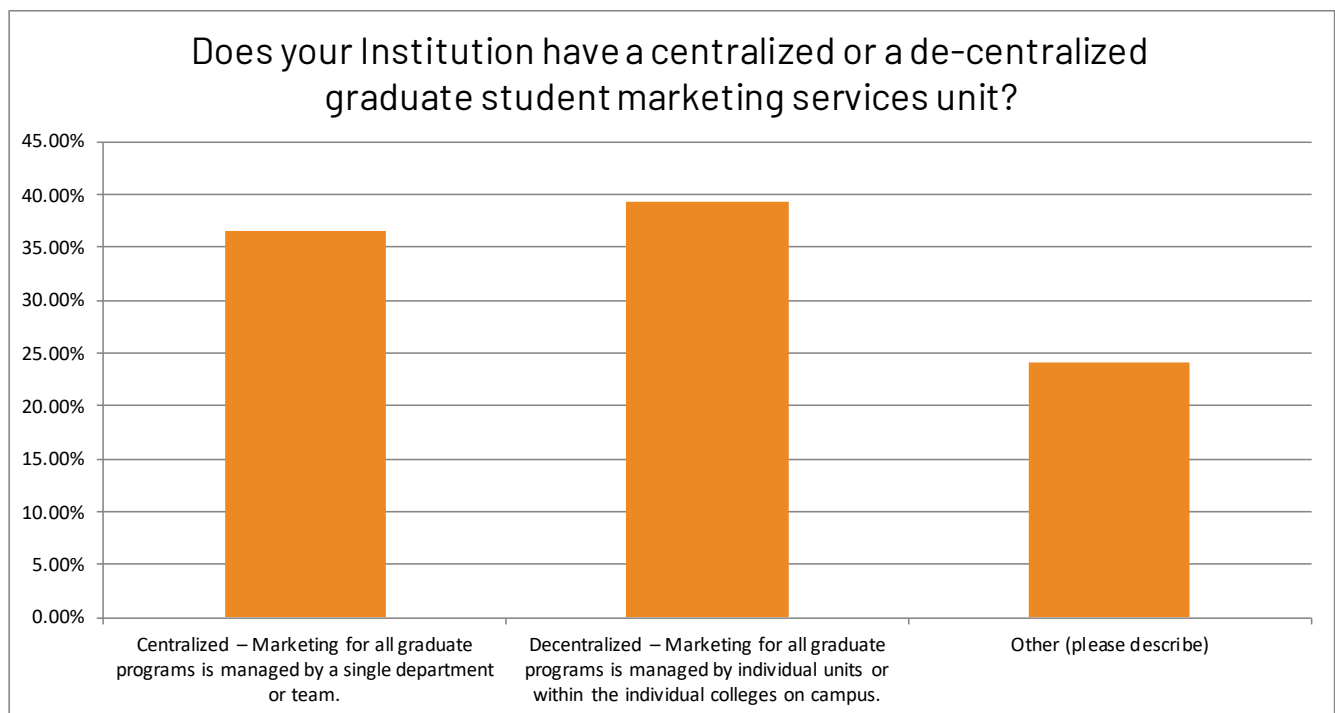
Decentralized recruiting structures were more common than centralized structures. Nearly a third of institutions used some sort of hybrid model.

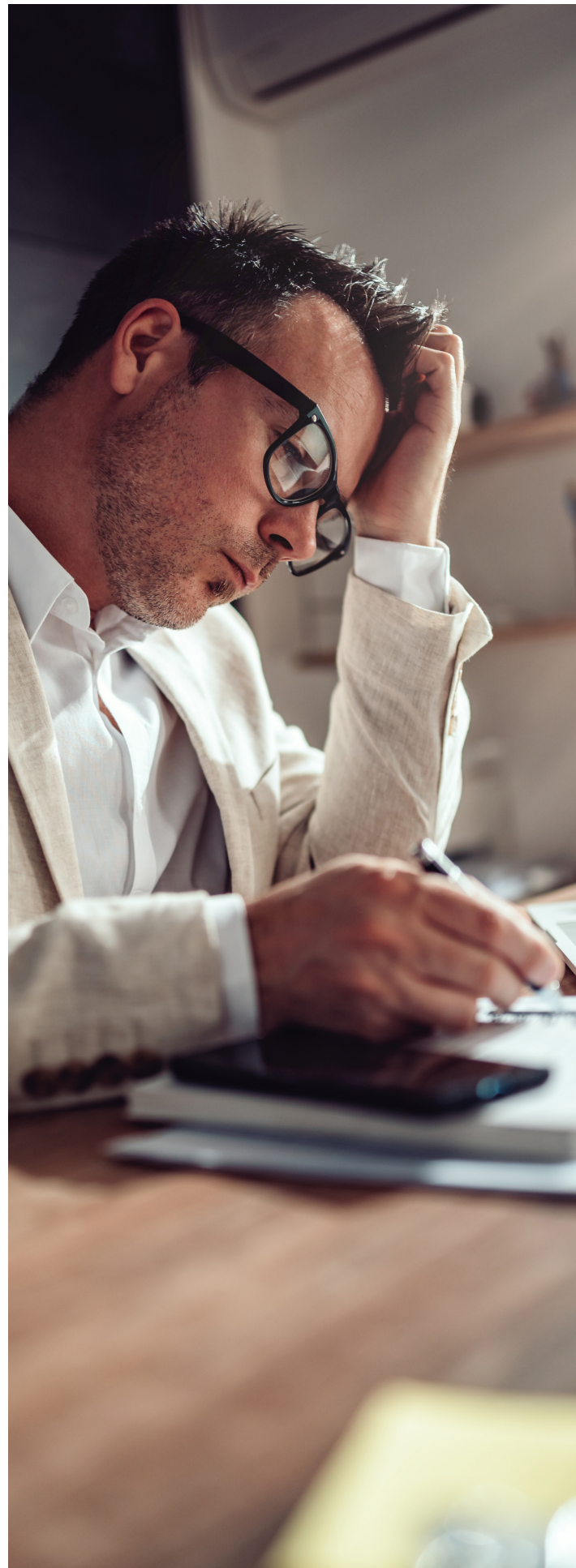




For example, recruitment responsibilities were shared across departments or the work was split between a centralized office and departmental offices.

Marketing service models were more evenly distributed with more than 36% centralized and just under 40% decentralized.



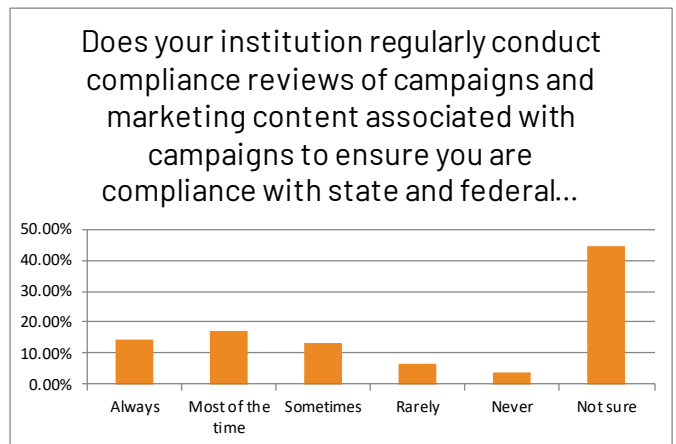


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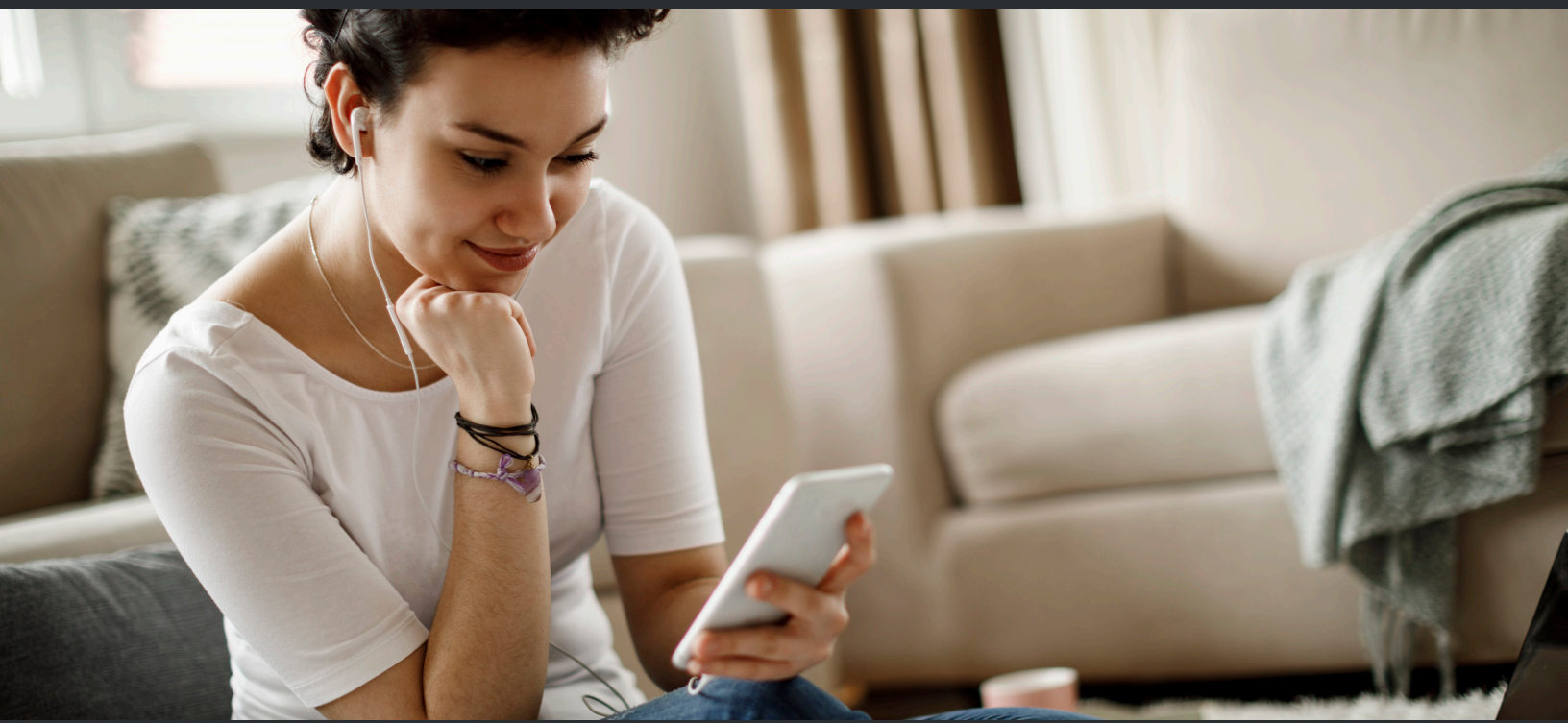
Issues of Compliance

Compliance with privacy guidelines and regulatory measures can safeguard institutions from costly penalties. It also helps to maintain goodwill with students who increasingly value privacy and information security. Unfortunately, many programs fall short when it comes to vital compliance issues.

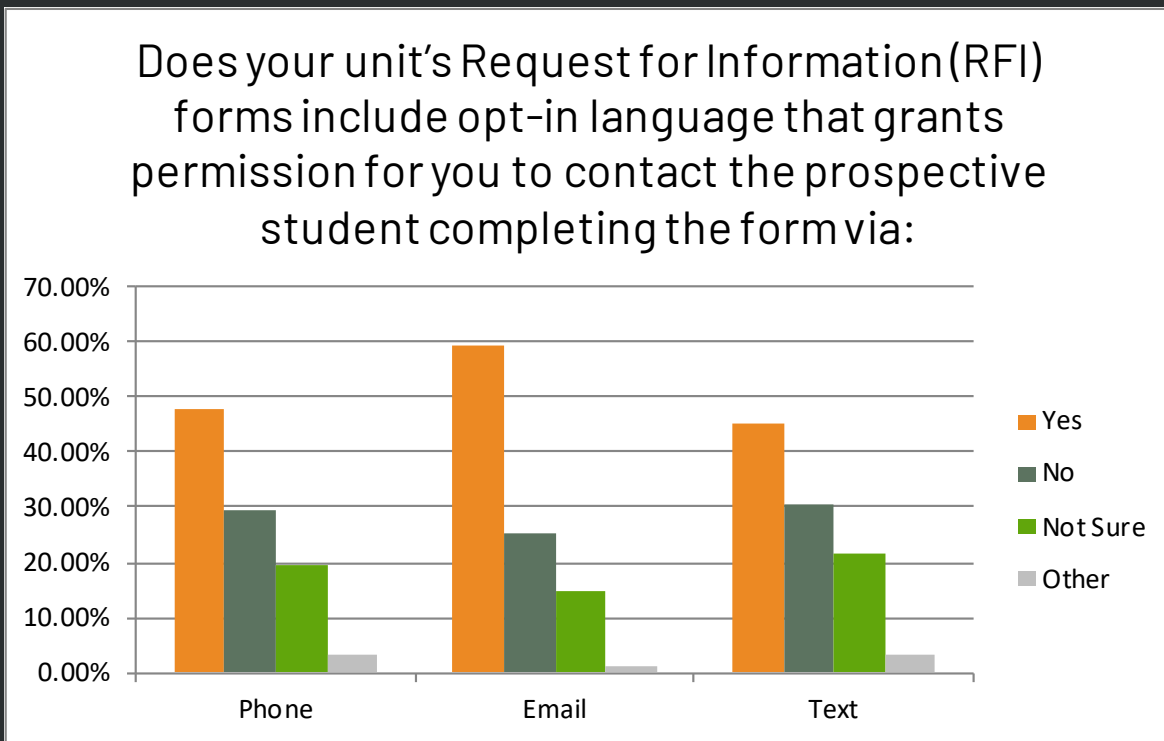
A staggering 45% of respondents said they weren't sure if their program regularly conducted compliance reviews of campaigns and marketing content. Meanwhile, only 31% answered *Always* or *Most of the Time*.



Less than one-third of graduate programs are certain of their compliance status. The rest are putting their reputation and their programs at risk every time they contact a prospective student.



The practices around opt-in language could also be stronger. Less than half of respondents said their request for information forms included opt-in language granting the program permission to contact the prospective student via phone or text. Slightly more, 59%, collected such permissions for email.



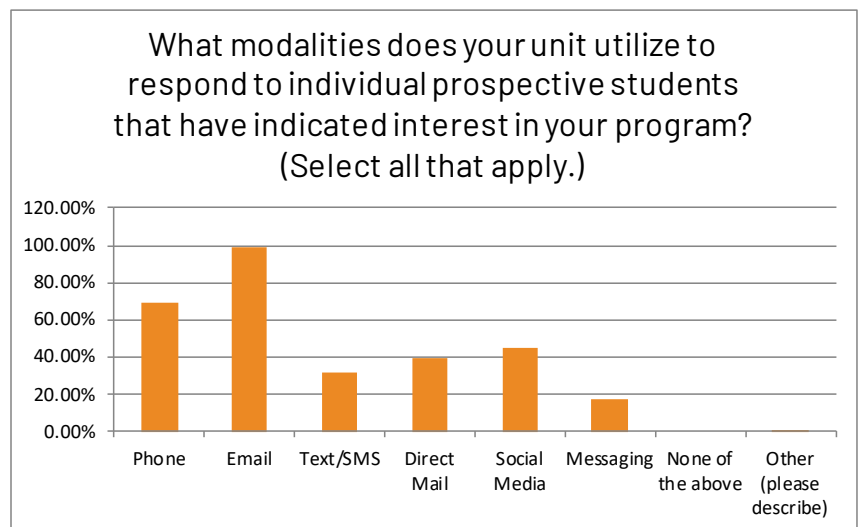
Without the right permission, programs run the risk of being perceived as spammers. Students may wonder whether they can trust the program with their information, and by extension, their education.



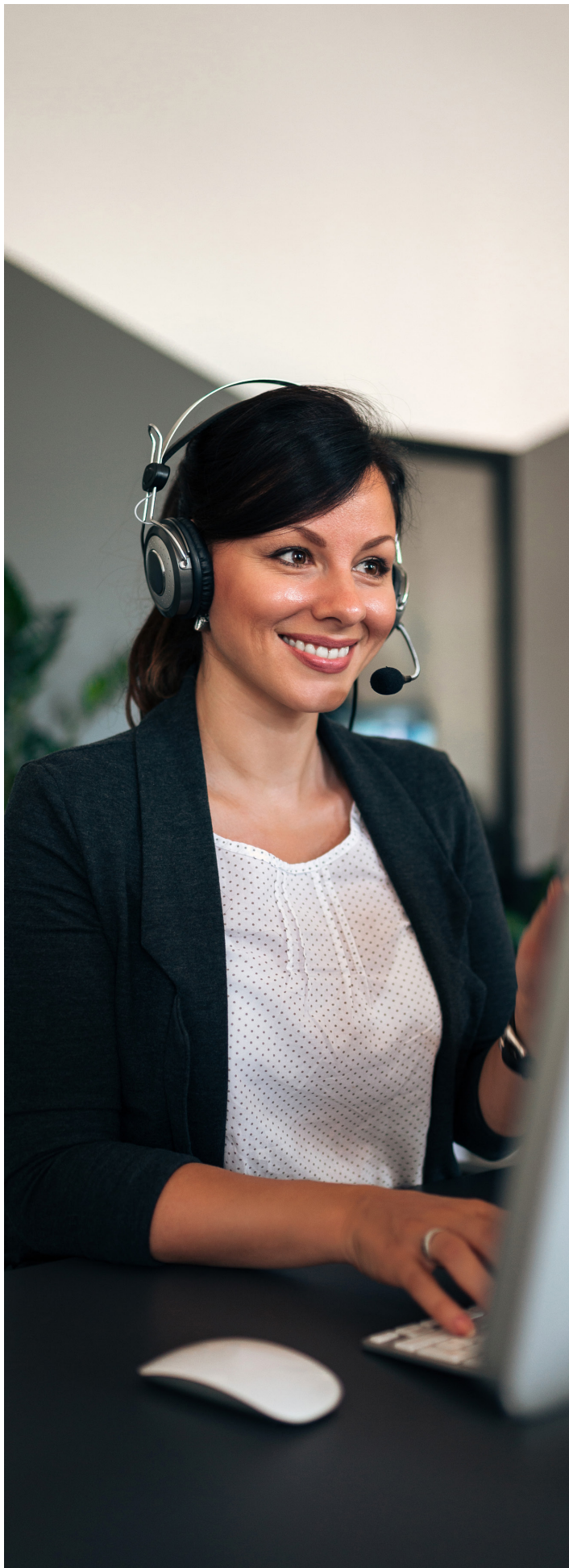
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Opportunities Abound in Many Modalities

Almost all (99%) institutions use email to communicate with students. Utilization is much less consistent for other modalities.



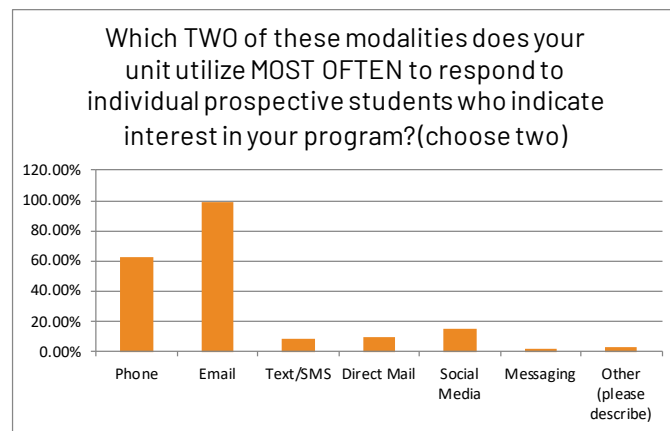
This raises the question of whether programs are communicating in the ways most convenient for prospective students. If not, they may be missing valuable opportunities.



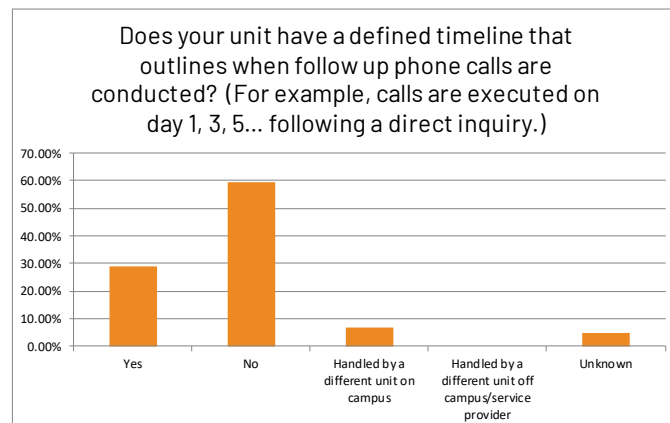
According to the 2020 post-traditional students report¹ 38% of graduate students expect weekly contact after their first inquiry, while 14% expect daily interactions. Most of these students spend time on social media platforms and using mobile devices that programs could leverage to meet students where they already spend their time. For example, 79% of graduate students use a mobile device to conduct at least some of their college search. Modalities like texting use these devices to help programs reach potential students.

Phone

Although 63% of institutions name phone calls among their top two communication methods,

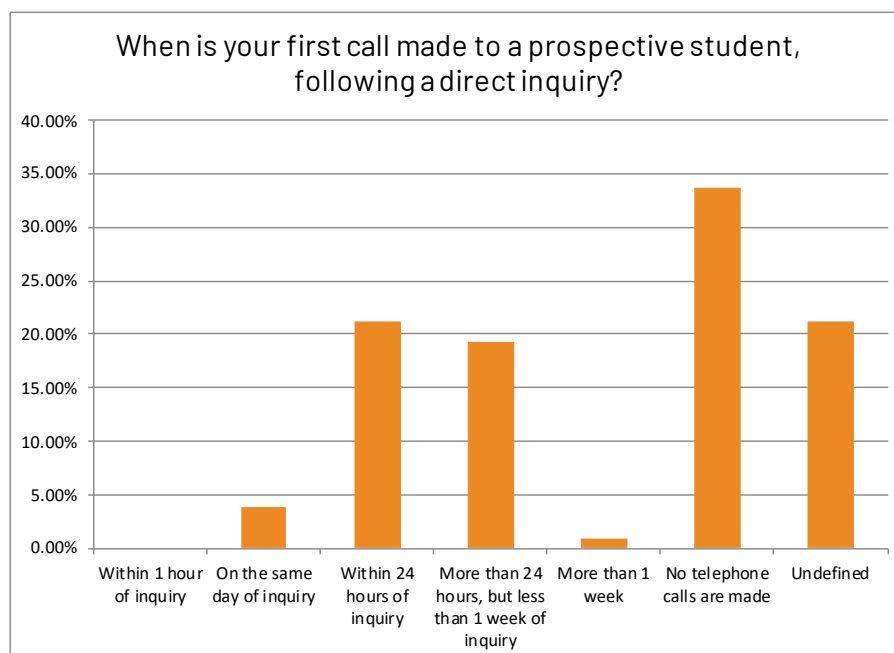


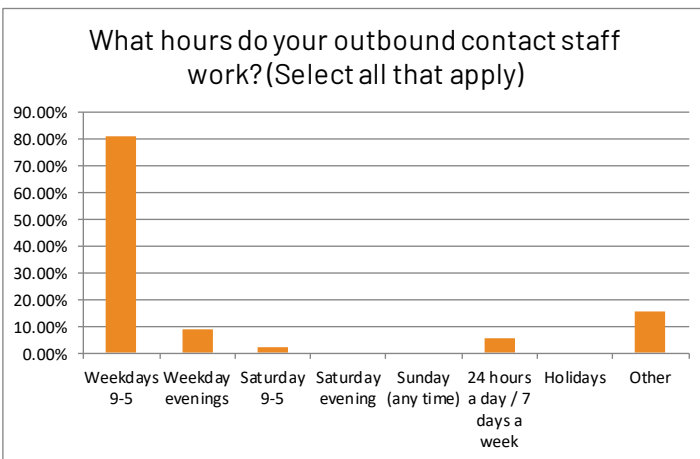
only 29% have a defined timeline for when follow-up phone calls should be conducted.





In general, institutions are slow to respond to inquiries. At a time when prospective students can reach their favorite brands instantly, none of the programs surveyed contacts students within an hour of their direct inquiry. Only 25% said they responded within 24 hours.





With most graduate students considering more than one institution², responding to students first is likely the difference between securing the enrollment and losing it to another school. In fact, a recent survey of current and recent students showed that 61% of students enrolled at the school that responded with information first.³

To quickly contact prospective students, programs should develop a team of outbound staff who work when students are available. Most outbound contact staff work during normal business hours, but very few are assigned to evenings and weekends. Meanwhile, most prospective graduate students are working professionals. They may not want or be able to take follow-up calls during the workday.

¹ 2020 and Beyond Attracting and Serving Post-Traditional Students, Carol B Aslanian, Steven Fischer

² ^[1] 2020 and Beyond, Attracting and Serving Post-Traditional Students, Carol B Aslanian, Steven Fischer

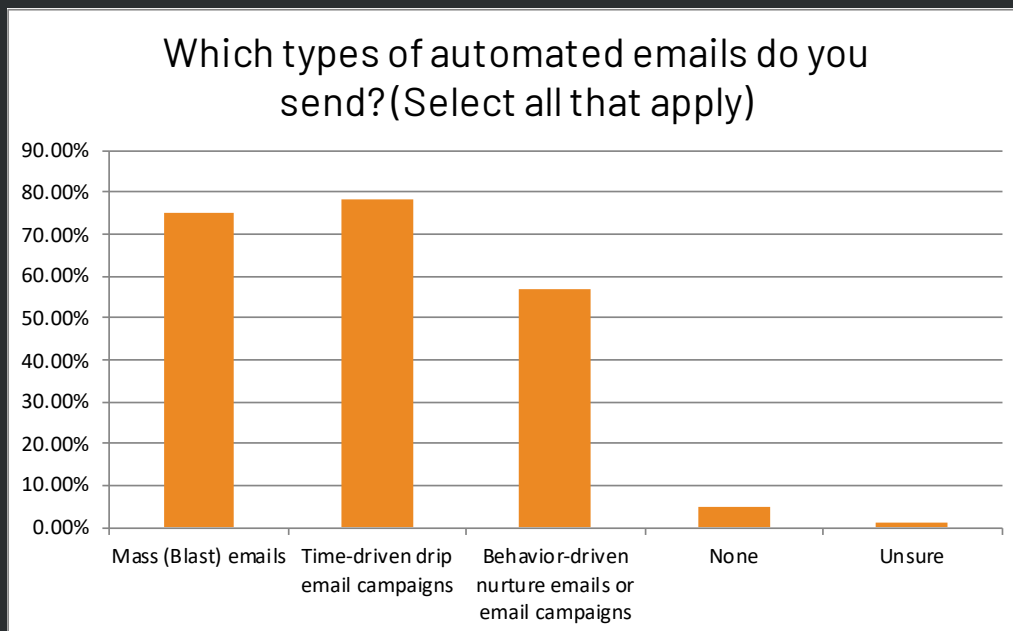
³ 2017 Online College Students Report, Carol B Aslanian, David Clinefelter



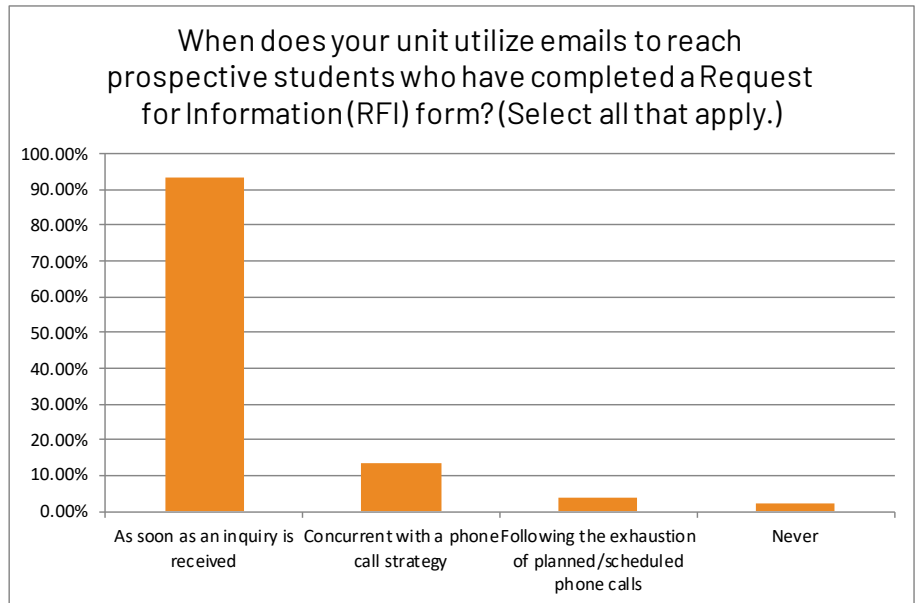
More than 34% of programs make no phone calls at all. Of those that do, most make between two and four calls. Only 11% averaged more than 5 phone calls per prospective student. Programs could see better results if they were more persistent in their attempts to contact students by phone.

Email

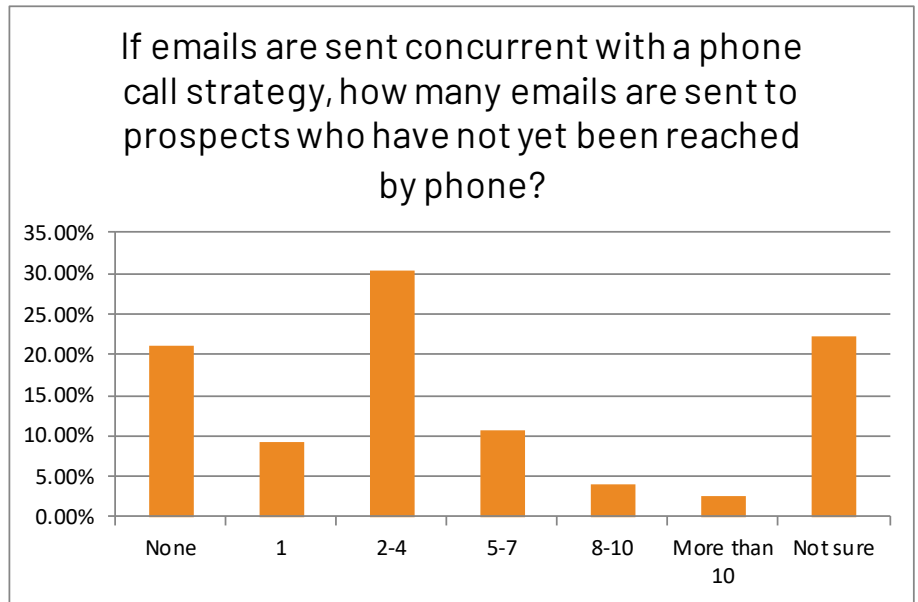
Many programs have built robust contact strategies around email. More than three-quarters of all programs sent both mass emails and time-driven drip email campaigns.



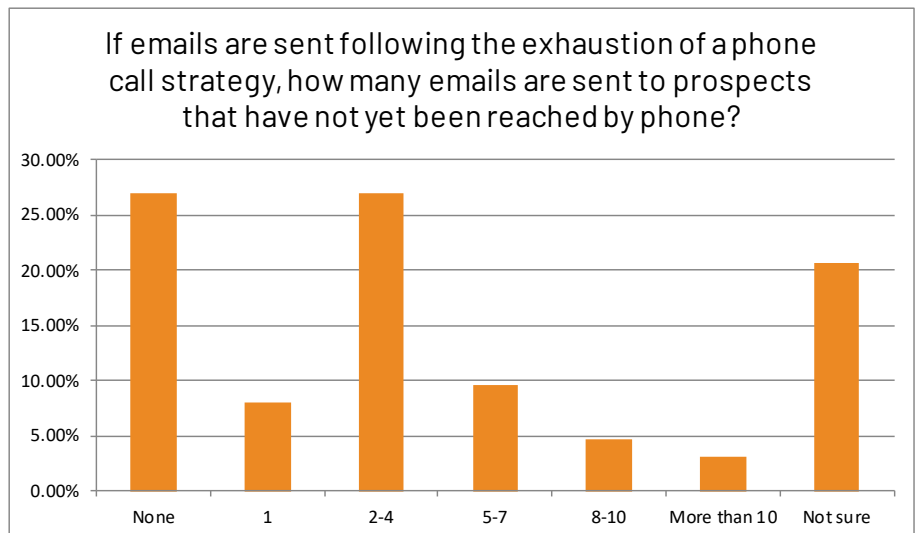
Almost all programs send a follow-up email as soon as a request for information is received.



A handful, 15%, have a concurrent phone call strategy in place.

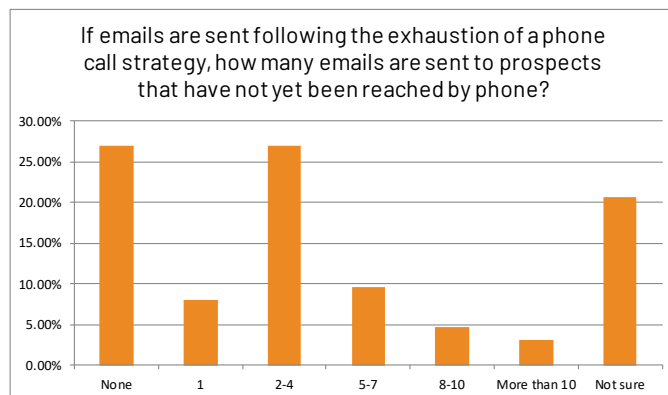


Of these, most send between two and four emails to prospective students who have not yet been reached by phone.

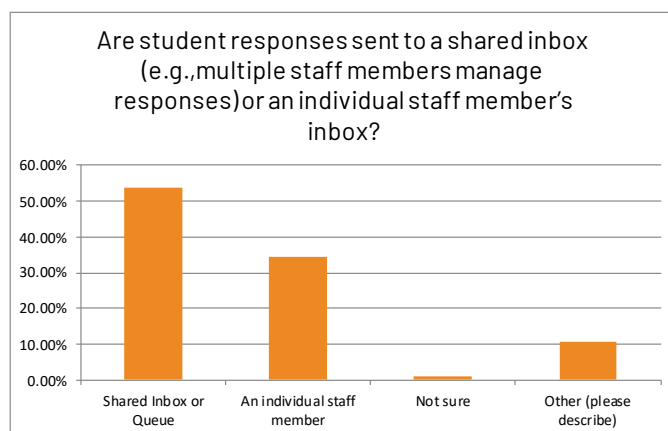




Programs take a similar approach to email after a phone call strategy has been exhausted. Most send between 2 and 4 emails. Only 3% send more than 10.



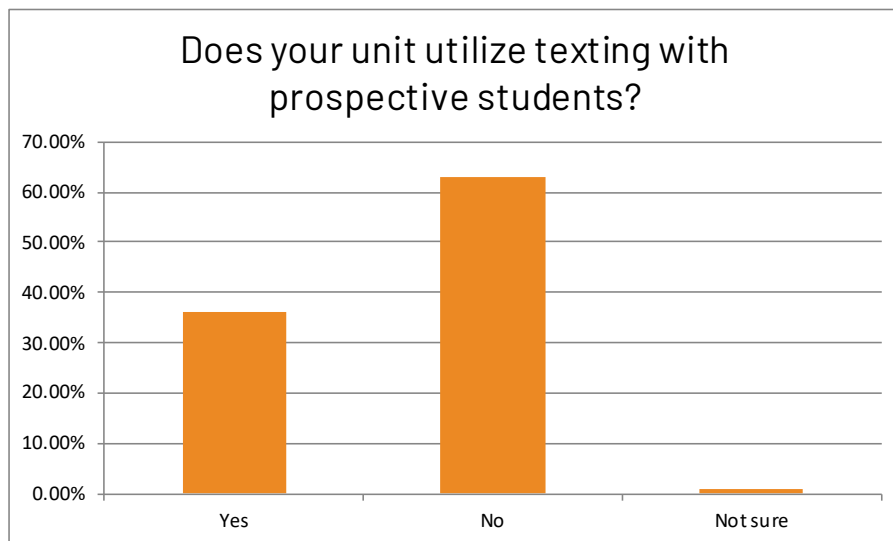
About half of programs receive student responses in a shared inbox. While such inboxes are easier to manage, they are also less personal and tend to get a lower response rate. Whenever possible, use a personalized address to help build relationships with prospective students.





Texting

Texting is much less commonly used than either phone or email communication. Only about 36% of respondents said they use text messages.



Of those, about 50% said their text messages were staff-initiated. Meanwhile, more than 35% said they weren't sure how text messages were sent. This illustrates the secondary importance most institutions ascribe to text messaging.

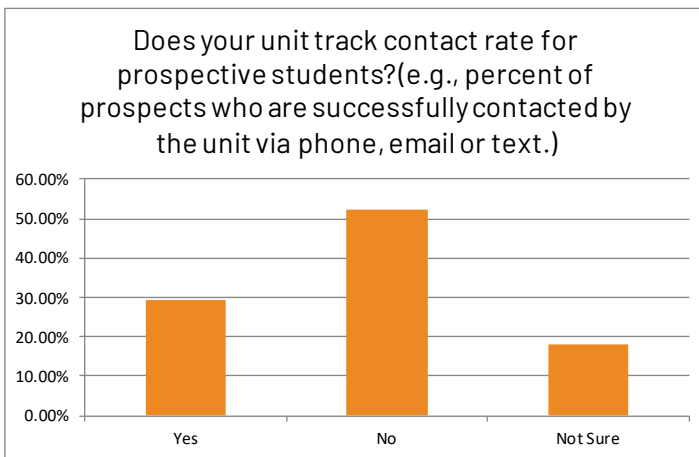
Yet texting is becoming increasingly important and continues to grow in preference among prospective students. According to the ThruLine 2019 Higher Education Benchmarking Report, adding a texting element to a campaign can increase conversions by up to 300%⁴. To know whether this lack of communication type diversity is a mistake, programs could look to contact rates.

⁴ 2019 Higher Education Benchmarks, ThruLine Marketing thru-line.com/2019-higher-education-benchmarks

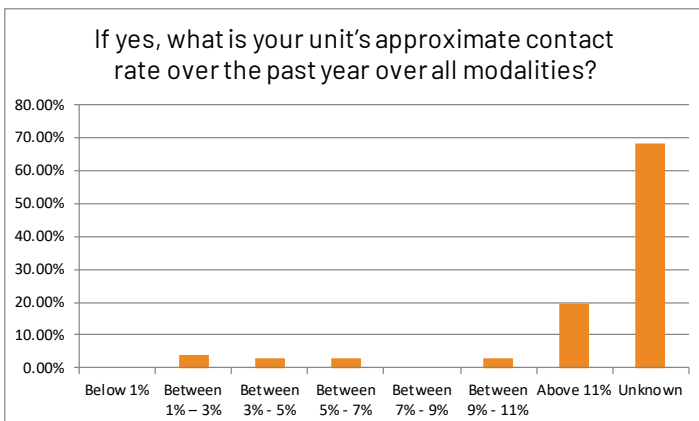
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Contact Rates

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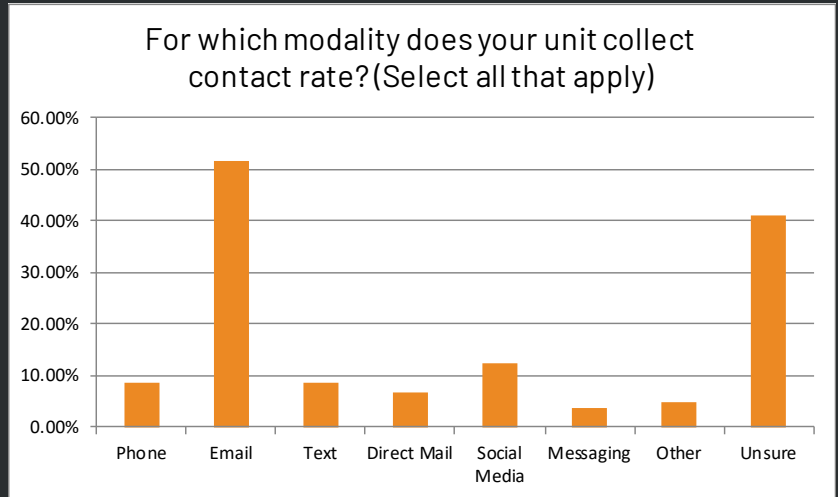


Most programs collect no data on the percent of prospects who are successfully contacted via phone, email, text or other modalities. Among those that do track responses, a majority report contact rates of greater than 11%.

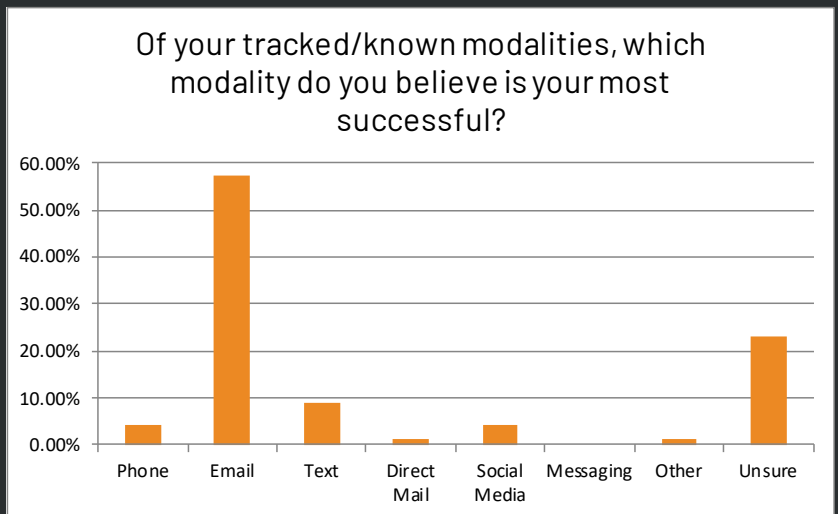




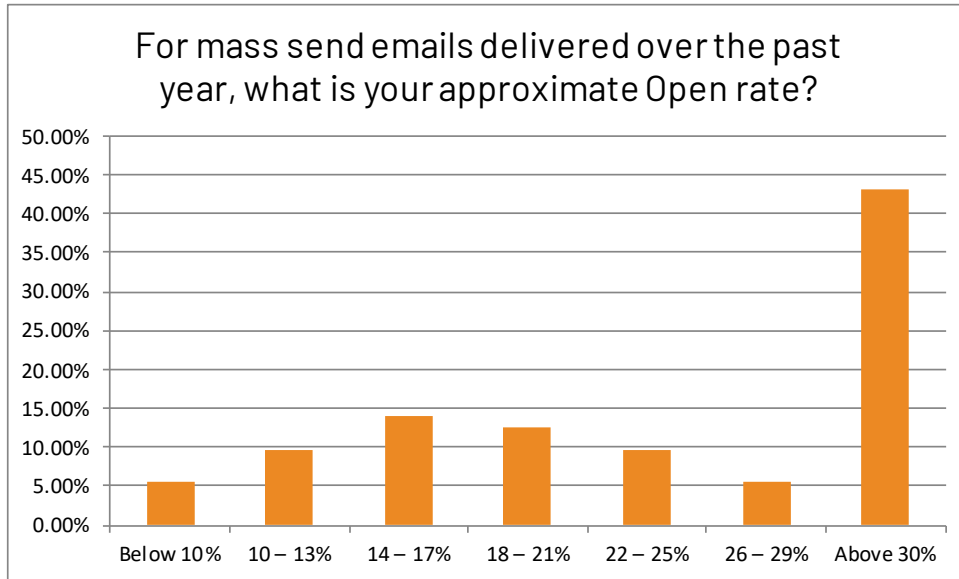
Just as programs are most likely to use email communications, they're also most likely to track email contact rates.



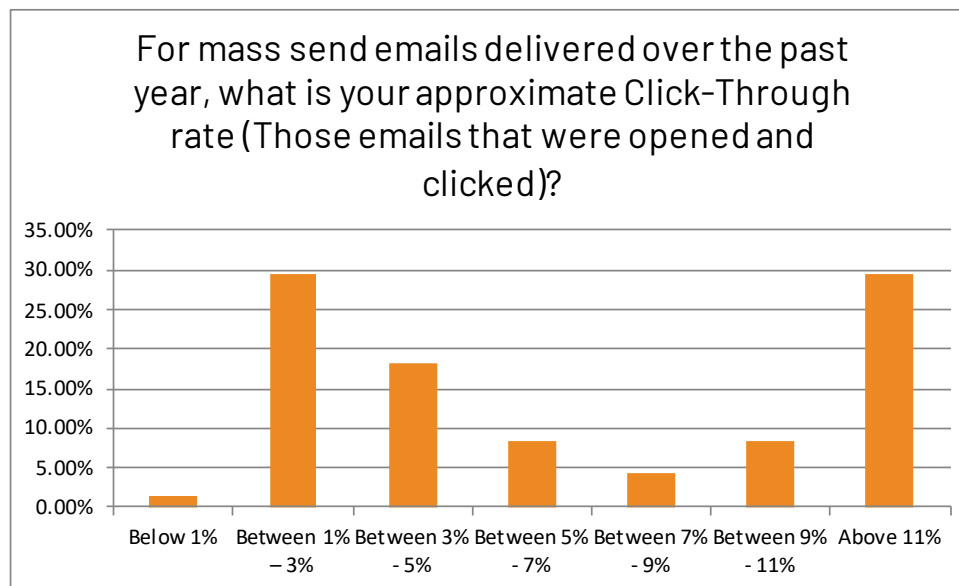
This may be because most email service providers include easy tools to track email performance. Unsurprisingly, the majority of programs believe that email is their most effective contact tool.



Email really is a powerful contact method. According to the 2019, Marketing Benchmarking report from Acoustic, the median open rate for schools and education emails is 21.5%⁵. Meanwhile, more than half of graduate programs said they were achieving 22% or higher open rates on mass emails.

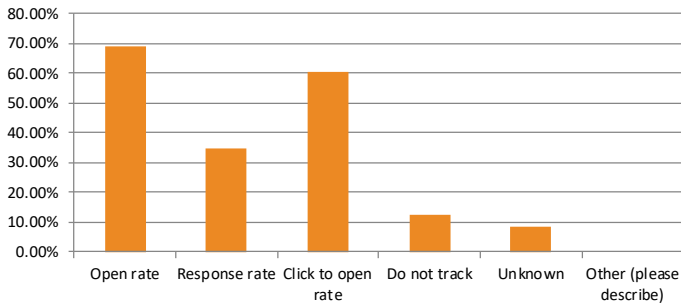


The Acoustic report found a median click-through rate for schools and education emails of 1.9% with the top quartile achieving 14.7%. Meanwhile, two thirds of our respondents achieved a higher than 3% click-through rate on mass emails.





What are the key performance metrics you use to determine performance of your mass-send emails? (Select all that apply)

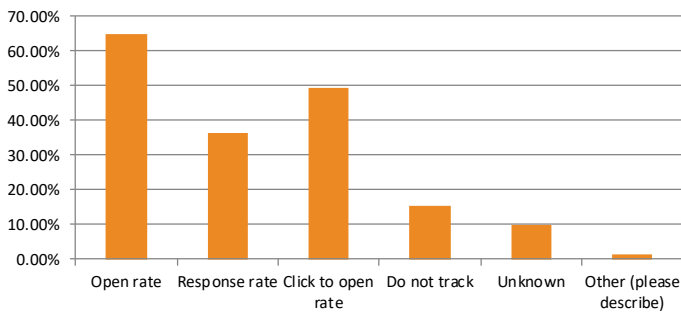


Open rate is the most commonly used email performance metric by graduate programs that track mass-send email performance, followed closely by click to open.

Programs track the same metrics for drip campaign emails.

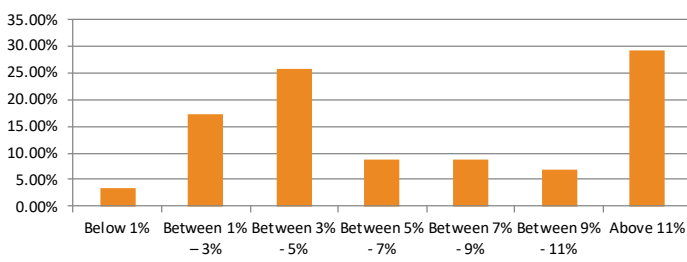
Nearly 40% of programs achieve an open rate above 30% on drip campaigns. A further 20% achieve between 14 and 17%.

What are the key performance metrics you use to determine performance of your drip/nurture emails? Check all that apply



Almost one third of graduate recruiting drip campaigns achieved a click-through rate above 11%.

For drip/nurture emails delivered over the past year, what is your approximate Click-Through rate (Those emails that were opened and clicked)?



06

Overall Program Performance



For any graduate enrollment program, the true proof of success can be found in their key performance indicators. These metrics track the number of leads that turn into applications, admissions, and enrollments. Unfortunately, nearly 90% of graduate programs skipped these questions on the survey. We can't say for certain whether programs are tracking these critical KPIs or what they might find if they did.

⁵ Marketing Benchmarking Report, Acoustic, 2019
acoustic.com/2019-marketing-benchmark-report



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Three Key Takeaways

Add all of this data together and you should have a good picture of where your program stands compared to others who are recruiting and marketing to graduate students. If you're not consistently bringing in leads and achieving enrollment goals, your communication strategy, privacy compliance, or speed to respond might provide opportunities for growth. Start working on these areas and see how your metrics improve. For programs looking to bring in more qualified leads and achieve more enrollments, three key opportunities stand out.



1. Improve compliance to avoid costly penalties

As we noted in the 2020 Marketing Trends Report⁶, compliance is more important than ever. Consumers, students included, value their privacy. Aware of this, governments are rolling out new rules to protect consumer privacy.

All of this means that you should always secure explicit permission to contact leads. Make permission one of your first contacts. While you're at it, use this contact to understand the prospective student's preferred method of engagement. Let them choose phone, email, text, social media or direct messaging, and then respect their preferences. You'll build trust and show you care about them as an individual.

Programs should have clear procedures, track results, and strive to meet all compliance and privacy guidelines. Only when graduate programs meet all three of these conditions, can they achieve the best possible results for their institutions.

⁶ 2020 Marketing Trends Report, EducationDynamics, 2020

2. Develop a strong contact strategy

A well-designed contact strategy can help you reach more prospective students and engage with them effectively. A [successful contact strategy](#) uses a mix of modalities to reach prospective students when, where and how they want to interact.



A contact strategy can take many forms, but all have a few basic parts⁷:

- **Messaging** - What the student needs to know right now to move them closer to your ultimate goal of enrollment.

⁷Developing a Contact Strategy For Converting Prospects into Enrollments, EducationDynamics, 2020

⁸ 2020 and Beyond, Attracting and Serving Post-Traditional Students

- **Medium** - The form of communication you will use. This might include phone calls, emails or text messages.

- **Cadence** - How often you will reach out to the student and how long you will do so before moving them to a nurturing campaign.

- **Triggers** - The actions you want the student to take. This could include clicking on a link, which triggers a phone call or responding to a text, which triggers a follow-up.

- **Goals** - Your ultimate goal is enrollments. Define clear milestones to mark your progress along the way. Have a plan to measure progress and improvement.

Even those programs with robust contact strategies may be giving up too soon. Remember that many prospective graduate students are busy adults. According to the 2020 and Beyond report, 80% of post-traditional graduate students are employed full-time and almost 50% have children in the home⁸. A lack of response after your first few contacts may not prove disinterest; they might just be busy. So keep trying across multiple modalities until the student responds or asks you to stop. If persistent attempts don't yield results, move leads into nurturing campaigns that can help keep your program top of mind until they are ready to move forward with their education.



3. Know your KPIs

Key performance indicators are a vital part of any contact strategy. You can't improve what you don't track. The majority of respondents to this survey weren't able to tell us how their content strategy was performing. That means they can't improve it. Any improvements they do make are bets on feelings or observations rather than data.

We recommend tracking, reporting, and managing the following Key Performance Indicators:

- Contact rate
- Click to open
- Open rate
- Conversion rates
- Admission rates
- Enrollment rates

Track each of these for your programs in general and by contact modality. These essential pieces of data will help you test, refine, and iterate your contact strategy.

Graduate students as a group are motivated, committed to their education, and eager to enroll. It's up to marketing and enrollment teams to meet their expectations through strategic communication that respects their privacy and their preferences. In short, meeting student expectations can help you meet enrollment goals as well. While the data in this report represent the graduate student marketing and enrollment industry as a whole, the resulting insights can help all institutions bring in more qualified leads, enroll more students, and improve their marketing and recruitment efforts.

08

Sources:

1. Post Traditional Graduate Student Report, Aslanian Market Research, a Division of EducationDynamics.
learn.educationdynamics.com/post-traditional-graduate-students-report

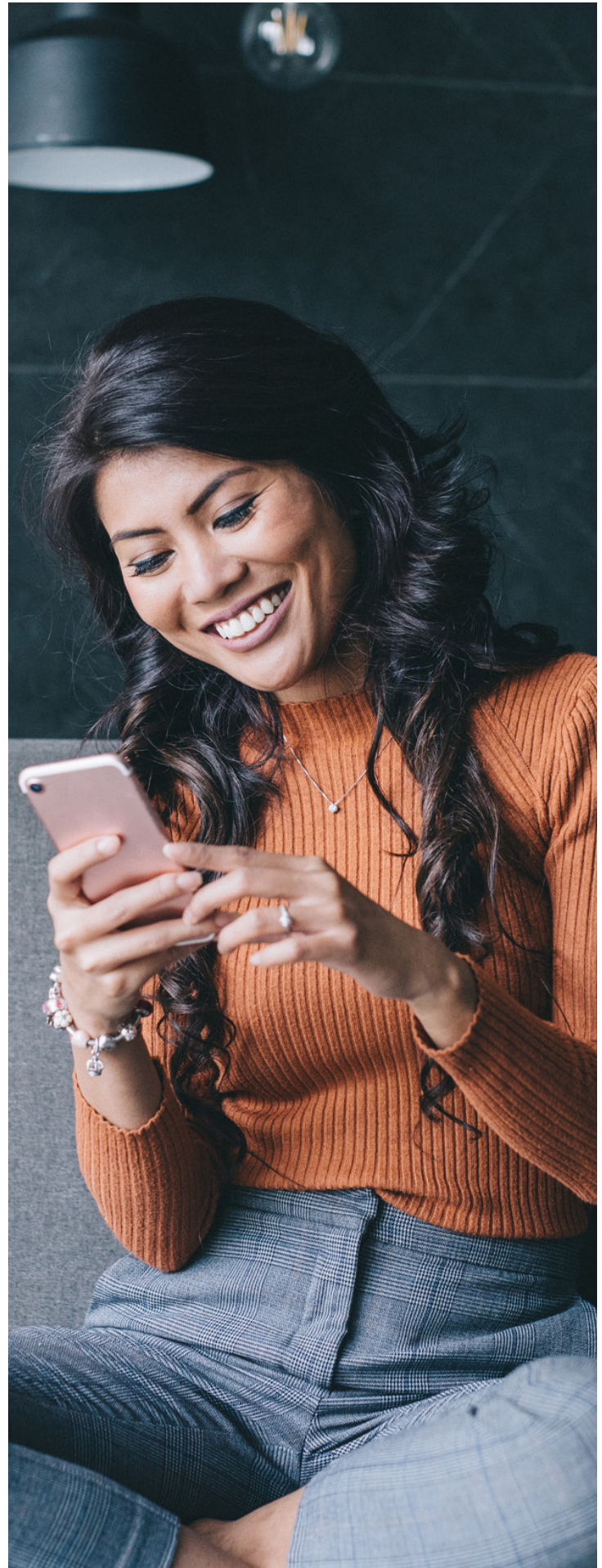
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