

# 2020 Marketing and Recruitment Practices for Graduate Students Report

Research Partner

Effective practices for graduate enrollment as rated by campus officials





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# THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF GRADUATE ENROLLMENT TO INSTITUTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

Graduate student enrollment has become increasingly important for universities. As traditional undergraduate enrollment has flattened due to a shrinking pool of traditional high school graduates, institutions must expand their enrollment efforts with nontraditional college students—graduate, adult, and online learners—if they wish to maintain enrollment growth and long-term sustainability.

This also means as graduate students become more vital to institutional enrollment success, the competition for those students has already begun to increase. Campuses and graduate programs have to elevate their recruitment efforts to engage prospective graduate students and cultivate their enrollment, much in the same way undergraduate programs have done in the last decade. This means more personalization with communications, more digital outreach, and more strategic targeting to focus limited resources on prospective graduate students who are more likely to enroll.

However, graduate student marketing and recruitment requires different approaches than undergraduate recruitment. Graduate students have different motivations, expectations, and behaviors than undergraduate students. Graduate programs need to demonstrate outcomes, investment, and differentiators to attract the students they want the most or risk losing them to competing programs.

This benchmark survey report provides data to showcase best practices and trends in graduate student marketing and recruitment. RNL polled nearly 80 institutions about their enrollment practices for graduate students. This report summarizes and analyzes our findings while also highlighting opportunities for programs to elevate and evolve their enrollment efforts.

## **About the poll**

RNL and NAGAP (The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management) partnered together to survey institutions in fall 2019 about their recruitment practices for graduate students. The results on the following pages are pulled from responses from 79 institutions—43 private universities and 36 public campuses.

For more details about the survey, see page 19.



#### **GRADUATE LEVEL PROGRAM OFFERINGS**

## 1. Graduate level program offerings

LEVEL OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS OFFERED	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Post baccalaureate certificate	44%	39%
Post baccalaureate certification prep/licensure	9%	28%
Master's degree	91%	86%
Post graduate certificate	44%	47%
Post graduate certification prep/licensure	21%	22%
Doctorate degree	63%	81%
Professional doctorate (JD, MD, DO, etc.)	19%	19%

## 2. Graduate academic calendar offerings

TERMS OFFERED	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Full semester	91%	94%
12-weeks	9%	8%
10-weeks	19%	11%
8-weeks	26%	22%
6-weeks	7%	19%
4-weeks	5%	8%

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

While more than 90 percent of institutions offer traditional semester programs, three out of four graduate students prefer term options besides traditional semesters. For institutions that offer more flexibility, highlighting that can offer a key benefit. For those that do not, consider incorporating shorter terms to attract students.

## **READ OUR ADDITIONAL REPORT ON ADULT UNDERGRADUATES**



**Visit RuffaloNL.com/AdultUndergrad** to read the *2019 Adult Undergraduate Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report.* 

<sup>1</sup>Jeffe, S. A., & Aslanian, C. B., (2018). *Post-traditional graduate students: Insights for program development and marketing.* Hoboken, NJ: EducationDynamics, LLC.



## 3. Graduate program format offerings

Formats	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Cohort-based	81%	69%
Evening classes	72%	72%
Weekend-based	26%	22%
On-ground, on-campus	93%	97%
On-ground, off-campus (e.g., satellite learning center)	28%	42%
100 percent online	51%	64%
Online classes	58%	69%
Self-paced	21%	11%

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

As with term offerings, graduate students desire flexibility and choice in how programs are offered. Online learning in particular is in demand by graduate students who may be balancing professional and personal commitments that make it difficult to take classes in person. It is encouraging to see half of private institutions and two-thirds of publics offering 100 percent online formats. For those not yet doing this, it typically is easier to move forward with fully online programs at the graduate level than the undergraduate level and something institutions should strongly consider.

## 4. Budget for marketing and recruitment of graduate students

Do institutions have a separate budget for marketing and recruitment of graduate students?







76% 37 PRIVATE



58% 4

PUBLIC



## 5. Average budget for marketing and recruitment of graduate students in 2018

(amounts are means)





#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

These budgets provide an excellent opportunity for institutions to benchmark themselves by dividing their overall budget for graduate marketing and recruitment by the number of qualified leads expected:

#### TOTAL GRADUATE RECRUITMENT BUDGET

= COST/LEAD

#### **QUALIFIED LEADS**



With that Cost/Lead figure determined, you can work backward with conversion metrics to determine an accurate spend estimate throughout the recruitment funnel. It also offers a chance to benchmark against your institution's undergraduate cost per lead, which is often much higher.

## 6. Graduate recruitment, admissions, and marketing organization

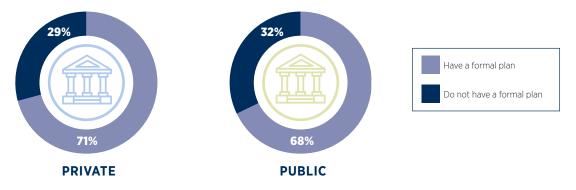
THE ORGANIZATION IS	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Centralized: Solely or primarily handled within a single unit.	58%	26%
Decentralized: Coordinated and staffed by individual schools or programs. (May have central application management.)	39%	68%
Collaborative: Shared responsibility for achieving enrollment goals across multiple units with no single unit bearing primary responsibility.	16%	23%

### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

The dichotomy between public and private graduate recruitment organization is very interesting. The decentralized model (used most by public institutions in this poll) used to work when graduate enrollment goals were less aggressive and the institution or programs did not need to spend as much money to market to their target audiences.

However, as many graduate students are program-focused rather than institution focused, marketing needs to be more program based rather than relying on the school or institution's brand.

## 7. Institutions that have a formal graduate recruitment plan and focus of that plan





FOCUS OF THE PLAN	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
100 percent focused on graduate programs	45%	40%
Sub-plan of a larger recruitment plan that is not 100 percent focused on graduate programs	0%	16%
Plan focuses on recruiting graduate students into	55%	44%

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

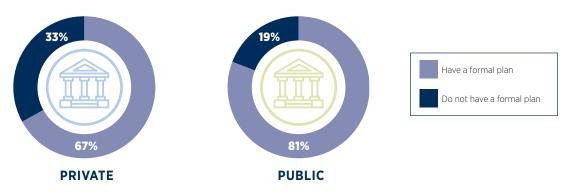
As mentioned previously, many graduate students are program focused, yet only half of the responding institutions in this poll said their plans focused on recruiting students into specific programs. That disconnect could cause challenges for graduate recruitment for an institution, particularly for one with aggressive enrollment goals.

INTERNAL OPERATIONS FOR THE RECRUITMENT OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

## 8. Length inquiries from graduate students are kept in system

LENGTH	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
3 months	3%	0%
6 months	0%	3%
1 year	11%	49%
2 years	86%	49%

## 9. Formal communication plan for graduate students



#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

The key with formal communication plans is for institutions to follow them consistently. Plans should provide clear direction that staff members can follow so that communications with inquiries and applicants are consistent and persistent.

## 10. Time between initial follow-up contact and an appointment with an enrollment representative

LENGTH	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Fewer than 24 hours	3%	3%
24 hours	8%	21%
1-3 days	33%	18%
4-7 days	31%	27%
More than 7 days	25%	30%

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

These findings show a very serious gulf between the expectations of prospective students and the behavior of institutions. In today's instant age, students expect responses quicker than ever. Requiring a prospective student to wait more than 24 hours before a follow-up with an enrollment representative is not acceptable. These students are often carving time out from their busy schedules to inquire, and they expect institutions to respond quickly.

## 11. Time between receipt of application and an admission decision

LENGTH	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Fewer than 24 hours	2%	3%
24 hours	5%	3%
1–3 days	16%	11%
4–7 days	30%	11%
Between 8–14 days	7%	11%
Longer than two weeks	40%	61%

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Quick enrollment decisions are critical in graduate recruitment. The vast majority of graduate students enroll at the institution that admits them first.<sup>2</sup> Institutions with long admissions decision cycles stand to allow competitors to enroll students that would have otherwise selected them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Jeffe, S. A., & Aslanian, C. B., (2018). *Post-traditional graduate students: Insights for program development and marketing.* Hoboken, NJ: EducationDynamics, LLC.



## 12. Time between application and first day of enrollment

LENGTH	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
1–3 days	5%	0%
4-7 days	0%	0%
Between 8–14 days	2%	6%
Longer than two weeks	93%	94%

### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

These results reflect the institutions having limited starts for their programs rather than a reluctance on the student's part to wait to enroll. Look for ways to get admitted students enrolled and started as quickly as possible to increase their engagement and commitment to finish.

## 13. Personnel responsible for generating graduate inquiries

STAFF RESPONSIBLE	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Adult and/or online enrollment department	0%	0%
Traditional undergraduate enrollment department (undergraduate admissions department)	71%	69%
Traditional graduate enrollment department (graduate admissions department)	12%	11%
Marketing department	2%	6%
Faculty	2%	0%
A third party partner	12%	14%

## **KEY TAKEAWAY**

These results reflect that many institutions do not recognize or are not set up to handle the profound differences in marketing and recruiting for graduate students compared to undergraduates. The data also raise concerns that many institutions are not providing a level of marketing sophistication prospective graduate students expect. Institutions looking to elevate their graduate enrollment results need to invest in a modern marketing approach using professionals who have expertise in digital marketing in particular.

## 14. Personnel responsible for first contact with inquiries from graduate students

STAFF RESPONSIBLE FOR FIRST CONTACT WITH INQUIRIES	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Internal lead qualification call center	0%	3%
Graduate admissions counselor	77%	61%
Graduate program coordinator	7%	17%
Faculty member	14%	8%
Whoever is available at the time of inquiry	2%	11%
Third party partner call center	0%	0%

# 15. Personnel responsible for following up with inquiries from prospective graduate students

STAFF RESPONSIBLE FOR FOLLOWING UP WITH INQUIRIES	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Adult and/or online enrollment department	0%	6%
Traditional graduate enrollment department (graduate admissions department)	86%	60%
Faculty	2%	9%
Other	12%	26%

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

The role of the graduate admissions counselor is evolving into the role of a recruiter who needs to create a compelling case for enrolling as well as providing information. Institutions need to train and equip their counselors to move students from inquiry to enrollment at a high rate, especially to meet increasingly aggressive graduate enrollment goals.

## 16. Personnel responsible for admission decision for graduate students

STAFF RESPONSIBLE FOR ADMISSION DECISIONS	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Graduate admissions department	7%	11%
Graduate academic program coordinators	28%	37%
Admissions review committee	47%	34%
Other	19%	17%

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

As mentioned previously, admissions speed is crucial for graduate enrollment. Analyze who makes your enrollment decisions and how they do it to identify ways to increase how quickly you can make admissions decisions. Additionally, institutions should consider allowing admissions staff to admit candidates who obviously meet all requirements.



# COMMUNICATION AND FOLLOW-UP WITH INQUIRIES FROM GRADUATE STUDENTS

### 17. Communication channels with new graduate student inquiries

#### **PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS**





Personalized email

98%.....100%



Non-personalized email

66% 87%



Phone

**60% 73%** 



Material mailed to home

59% 100%



Digital or social media

**54**% **.....65**%



Text message

38% 100%

#### **PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**





Personalized email

100% 100%



Non-personalized email

66% 83%



Digital or social media

66% 79%



Phone

57% 64%



Material mailed to home

29% 100%



Text message

14% 100%

## 18. Timing and channels used for first contact with inquiries

#### **PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS**

TIME BETWEEN INQUIRY AND FIRST CONTACT	IMMEDIATELY	WITHIN HOURS	WITHIN A DAY	WITHIN 3 DAYS	WITHIN A WEEK
Personalized email	19%	14%	44%	16%	7%
Non-personalized email	52%	16%	19%	6%	6%
Text message	20%	0%	10%	0%	70%
Phone	4%	8%	21%	21%	46%
Material mailed to home	5%	0%	5%	30%	60%
Digital or social media advertising	21%	14%	21%	0%	43%

#### **PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**

TIME BETWEEN INQUIRY AND FIRST CONTACT	IMMEDIATELY	WITHIN HOURS	WITHIN A DAY	WITHIN 3 DAYS	WITHIN A WEEK
Personalized email	23%	7%	53%	13%	3%
Non-personalized email	57%	4%	13%	13%	13%
Text message	0%	33%	0%	0%	67%
Phone	8%	17%	33%	25%	17%
Material mailed to home	0%	0%	44%	0%	56%
Digital or social media advertising	25%	8%	33%	17%	17%

## **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Institutions are putting themselves in jeopardy by not immediately responding to inquiries with personalized messages. Waiting an entire week for communications such as texting and phone calls is far too long when there is an opportunity to reach inquiries immediately through their smartphones. It is imperative to look for ways to speed up contact with graduate students given their own decision timeframes.



## 19. Frequency and channel used for follow-up contact

#### **PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS**

CHANNEL AND FREQUENCY	DAILY	WEEKLY	EVERY 2 WEEKS	MONTHLY
Personalized email	3%	26%	26%	46%
Non-personalized email	0%	24%	31%	45%
Text message	8%	25%	25%	42%
Phone	11%	14%	25%	50%
Material mailed to home	13%	13%	0%	75%
Digital or social media advertising	11%	26%	21%	42%

#### **PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**

CHANNEL AND FREQUENCY	DAILY	WEEKLY	EVERY 2 WEEKS	MONTHLY
Personalized email	4%	30%	26%	41%
Non-personalized email	0%	17%	33%	50%
Text message	0%	25%	0%	75%
Phone	25%	13%	63%	0%
Material mailed to home	0%	25%	0%	75%
Digital or social media advertising	0%	67%	0%	33%

### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Having a monthly frequency for graduate recruitment communications is not a strategy for success. Engaging prospective graduate students requires quicker contact and more engagement through multiple channels, otherwise there is a risk of missing the window of their enrollment decision.



## 20. Perceived effectiveness of follow-up communication channels

#### **PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS**





Personalized email

92% 97%



Non-personalized email

67% 83%



Phone

**65% 78%** 



Digital or social media

45% 64%



Material mailed to home

23% 40%



Text message

**37**%.....**40**%

#### **PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**





Personalized email

94% 97%



Non-personalized email

81%.....93%



Digital or social media

56% 67%



Phone

41% 52%



Text message

19% 19%



Material mailed to home

**17% 25%** 



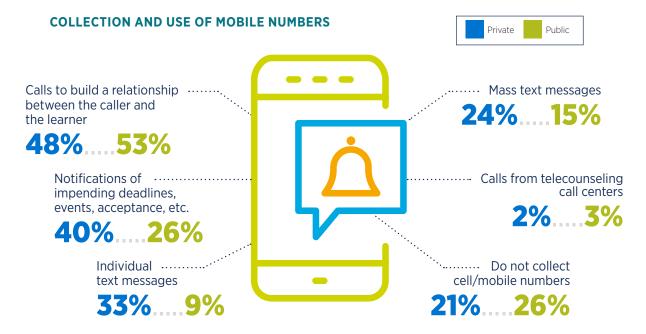
#### **ENROLLMENT OFFICE STRATEGIES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

## 21. Internal enrollment office strategies for the recruitment of graduate students

PRACTICES	PRIVATES USING	PUBLICS USING
Systematically contacting graduate admitted students to assess their level of interest in enrolling at your institution ("qualifying admits")	88%	79%
Systematically contacting graduate student inquiries to assess their level of interest in enrolling at your institution ("qualifying inquiries")	76%	69%
Use of financial aid resources to determine ability to pay in relation to financing education, scholarship distribution, and managing the discount rate percentage	35%	31%
Use of behavioral/engagement scoring with digital/web tracking for graduate students	26%	29%
Statistical modeling to predict the likelihood of a prospective graduate student enrolling at your institution	23%	27%



### 22. Graduate student mobile communications



#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Texting is an area where graduate recruitment needs to improve, both in terms of frequency and engagement. With graduate students using text more frequently in their day-to-day communications, more campuses need to follow suit.



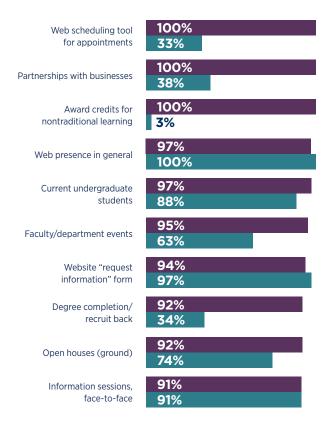
### 23. Top strategies to generate inquiries from prospective graduate students



#### **PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS**



#### **PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**



#### **LEAST EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES**

	<b>EFFECTIVE</b>	USED		<b>EFFECTIVE</b>	USED	
PRIVATE	$\bigcirc$	···	PUBLIC	$\bigcirc$	·	
Purchasing names of prospective learners from list vendors	30%	71%	Purchasing names of prospective learners from list vendors	56%	53%	
Award credits for	33%	<b>7</b> %	Partnerships with military	<b>57</b> %	22%	
nontraditional learning			Outbound phone calling	60%	<b>30</b> %	
Direct mail (USPS)	<b>54</b> %	<b>57</b> %	campaigns			
Open houses (virtual)	56%	44%	Direct mail (USPS)	<b>67</b> %	<b>36</b> %	
Outbound phone calling campaigns	67%	36%	Email blasts to purchased email lists	67%	53%	

#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

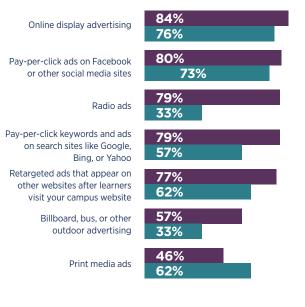
Public and private institutions reported significant differences in the types of activities they considered most effective (and ineffective) for producing inquiries. Stakeholders should consider consulting colleagues from alternate sectors to see how to improve the effectiveness of various activities.



# 24. Most effective advertising strategies to generate inquiries from prospective graduate students

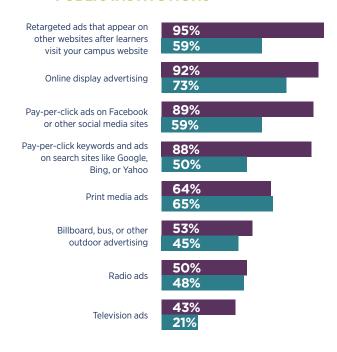


#### **PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS**



Note: Because only a small number of respondents said they used television ads, they are not included. However, they were rated 100 percent effective.

#### **PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**



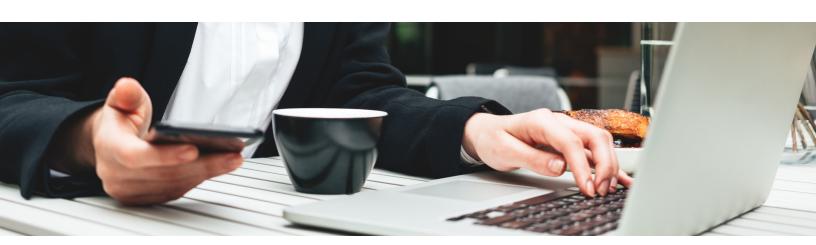
#### **KEY TAKEAWAY**

Institutions are clearly seeing the effectiveness of digital advertising and search engine marketing, which are not only important strategies but also highly quantifiable in terms of tracking results. However, those strategies, along with strategically aligning your marketing mix with your audiences and goals, requires a high degree of sophistication. If your institution does not already work with outside firms specializing in these areas, we recommend at least investigating working with specialists to maximize the enrollment impact of your efforts.



#### 5 OVERALL TAKEAWAYS FOR GRADUATE MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT

- Speed is critical. Prospective graduate students are on a much more accelerated timeframe to research, apply, and enroll at a program of study. Yet many respondents in this study said they often took days or even a week to respond to inquiries. It's critical to use tools such as automation and artificial intelligence (AI) to help speed up tailored responses to prospective graduate students sothey are immediately engaged.
- Optimize your programs for online searchers. Graduate students are program driven, and their online searches for your program of study could be the difference between a potential inquiry and a lost opportunity. Work with SEO specialists to ensure you optimize your web presence for the right terms, such as programs in a specific location, best job placement for a program, and other terms with high traffic potential.
- Put your marketing budget toward digital advertising and retargeting. While it is important to take an omnichannel approach to advertising your programs, digital advertising and retargeting are cost-effective means that are also some of the most trackable advertising methods available. If you currently use these methods but are not sure about how effective they are, consider consulting with experts who can help you optimize your approach
- **Emphasize outcomes and flexibility with your recruitment.** Prospective graduate students want to make sure their investment will pay off, so demonstrating career and educational outcomes is imperative for differentiating your programs. Likewise, communicating flexibility in how programs are offered—or altering how students can take classes and complete their course of study—is another strong way to make your programs more appealing and competitive.
- Create a dedicated, focused, and robust graduate recruitment program. As competition for graduate students increases, institutions will need to approach graduate recruitment much more like undergraduate recruitment, with dedicated planning and communications fine tuned for the graduate market. Your institution will not be able to increase market share or maintain your competitive advantage without dedicating resources specifically to graduate recruitment.





#### **ABOUT THE SURVEY**

#### **ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY**

Data in this report reflect responses from 79 nonprofit four-year colleges and universities, public and private:

## 43 private

## 36 public

Respondents participated in an RNL and NAGAP national electronic poll of practices for graduate marketing and student recruitment in the fall of 2019. The poll was emailed to enrollment and admissions officers at accredited, degree-granting institutions across the United States.

Standard descriptive statistics (such as sample means) were used to analyze the results of the poll for central tendency and variation. Due to the relatively small sample size, the results should be read as indicators.

To report the findings as accurately as possible, the rankings of effectiveness were based only on the relative effectiveness options that were given to respondents: "effective," (responses of "highly effective" or "effective") and "not effective." This approach of excluding "practice not used" allowed promising, less-frequently-used practices to be included.

# HOW DO YOU TURN BENCHMARKS INTO STRATEGY? ASK RNL



The enrollment strategists at RNL have helped public and private institutions use their resources more effectively to meet their graduate enrollment goals—from growing and shaping enrollment to breaking into new markets. As you look at these benchmarks and wonder how to translate them into strategic action, ask for a consultation.

- Visit RuffaloNL.com /GraduateConsult
- Call 800.876.1117 and ask to speak with one of our enrollment experts



### ABOUT THE SURVEY SPONSORS



RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,900 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

#### Visit RuffaloNL.com



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 Graduate Enrollment Management Summit, professional development institutes, membership directory, weekly NAGAP News, *Perspectives* newsmagazine, mentor program, and chapter affiliations all help facilitate communication among members.

Visit NAGAP.org



#### LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR SOLUTIONS FOR ENROLLMENT

RNL offers a full suite of solutions for student marketing, recruitment, and financial aid, including:

Student search

- Net cost calculators
- Application cultivation
- Yield and engagement to prevent stop-outs
- Financial aid management
- Strategic enrollment planning

#### **ASK FOR A FREE CONSULTATION**

Talk with our experts today. Ask for a free consultation at RuffaloNL.com/GraduateConsult.



#### How to cite this report

Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2020). 2020 Marketing and Recruitment Practices for Graduate Students Report. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Retrieved from RuffaloNL.com/GraduateRecruitment.

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JANUARY 2020