

The Enrollment Marketing *Field Guide*.

How private and regional universities turn marketing spend into applications and deposits, in a search environment that increasingly answers the question without sending the click.

A PRACTICAL REFERENCE,
WRITTEN FOR THE STRATEGIC
AND OPERATIONAL DECISIONS
IN FRONT OF YOU THIS CYCLE
AND NEXT.

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A NOTE FROM THE PRACTICE

The job in front of you.

You run marketing or enrollment at a university with somewhere between two thousand and fifteen thousand students. Your president wants a bigger class. Your CFO wants net tuition revenue and has noticed that the discount rate keeps climbing. Every dean believes their programs are underfunded, and several of them are right. Your board read something about AI over the summer and now asks about it at every meeting. The pool of eighteen-year-olds in your recruiting territory is smaller this year than it was last year, and it will be smaller again next year.

This is a field guide for that job.

It is not a list of trends, and it is not another explainer about the demographic cliff, which you have already read four versions of. It is a practical reference for the decisions in front of you this cycle and next. Which channels deserve funding while the pool is contracting. How prospective students are actually building their lists now, and what that means for your website. What to measure so that marketing survives the next budget conversation. How to settle the standing argument between central marketing and the deans.

The opinions in this document are the ones we share with new clients in our first meeting. Some of them will contradict what your current vendors are telling you. We think that is the point.

The enrollment math has changed.

For twenty years, enrollment marketing worked as a funnel measured from the inquiry down. You bought names, ran search and display against program keywords, captured inquiries on a form, and handed them to counselors who worked them toward an application and a deposit. Cost per inquiry was the number that mattered, the pool was stable or growing, and Google was the front door to the entire process.

Three forces have broken that model.

i. The pipeline is redistributing, not simply shrinking

The headline everyone repeats is that enrollment is falling, and that is not what the data says. Total postsecondary enrollment grew 1.0% in fall 2025, with community colleges up 3.0% and public four-year institutions up 1.4%, while private nonprofit four-year institutions fell 1.6%. Spring 2026 repeated the pattern. Students are still enrolling. They are choosing different institutions. Underneath that redistribution sits a real contraction, since high school graduates peaked at

roughly 3.9 million in 2025 and are projected to fall 13% through 2041. The decline is regional rather than even, with New York projected to lose 27% of its graduates and Illinois 32% between 2023 and 2041, while Tennessee, South Carolina, and Florida grow by double digits. If you are a private or regional institution in the Northeast or Midwest, you are losing share inside a shrinking pool, and those are two separate problems that need two separate responses.

ii. The front door moved

Forty-six percent of high school students now use AI tools during their college search, up from 26% in spring 2025. Eighteen percent have already removed a college from consideration based on what AI-generated results told them. Among students using AI, 62% use it to find colleges that fit them, and 34% say their interest in an institution

grew because of what they found. The consideration set is now assembled in a channel where you cannot bid, cannot buy placement, and in most cases cannot see the query. By the time a student completes an inquiry form, the decision about whether you belonged on the list was made somewhere you were not watching.

iii. Measurement stops before the number that matters

Between 43% and 46% of institutions track cost per lead or cost per enrolled student. Education keyword costs reached \$6.23 per click in 2026, a 40% increase year over year, while 69% of higher education marketing budgets stayed flat or decreased into the 2025-26 academic year and

80% of marketing leaders name limited budget as their top barrier to hitting enrollment goals. A program that cannot connect spend to deposits loses the budget argument every time, and the line item that loses first is always awareness.

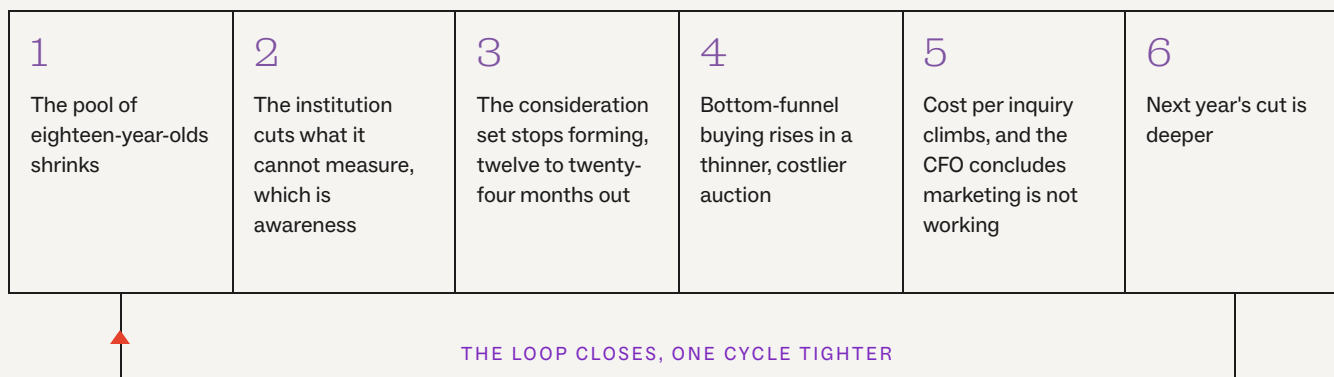
These three forces compound in a specific and damaging sequence. The pool shrinks, so the institution cuts what it cannot measure, which is awareness. That awareness spending was the thing building the consideration set, which now forms inside AI answers twelve to twenty-four months before an inquiry ever fires. The institution then buys harder at the bottom of the funnel in a thinner and more expensive auction, and reports a rising

cost per inquiry to a CFO who reasonably concludes that marketing is not working. The following year, the cut is deeper.

Every institution in this position is making the same trade without naming it. Cutting awareness spending in 2026 is borrowing against the fall 2028 class, and the loan comes due in a year when the pool will be smaller still.

DIAGRAM A

THE COMPOUNDING SEQUENCE



The institutions that hold enrollment through this decline will be the ones that fund being known, and can prove it moves deposits.

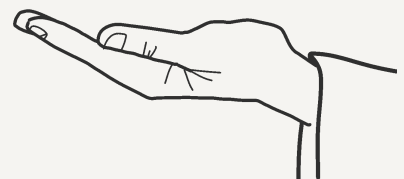
What this guide is. *What it isn't.*

This is a field guide rather than a manual. We have chosen depth over completeness in four areas where we see institutions leaving the most on the table.

It does not cover the admissions funnel itself, financial aid strategy, or discount rate modeling. Those matter enormously to your net tuition revenue, and your enrollment consultants are already working on them. It does not spend pages on demographic projections beyond what you need in order to act, because that ground has been covered thoroughly by people with better data than ours.

It is opinionated. Where the sector has settled on a practice we think is wrong, we say so. Where we have seen something work repeatedly across institutions, we describe it. Where we do not have a strong view, we say that too.

It assumes you are investing at least \$250,000 a year in working media at the institution level. The tactics that work at \$50,000 are different from the tactics that work at \$2 million, and the ranges discussed here assume the middle ground.



I. Awareness is the top of the funnel now.

Most private and regional universities run a marketing program built around four things: paid search, retargeting, purchased name lists, and email. That stack harvests existing demand rather than creating it. While the pool was growing, harvesting was enough. It is not enough now, because the students who would have found you on their own are fewer every year, and the ones who remain are building their lists somewhere your harvesting stack cannot reach.

FIGURE 01

The enrollment marketing channel stack.

CHANNEL	PRIMARY VALUE	CPM RANGE	MIN ANNUAL INVEST	MEASUREMENT MATURITY
Connected TV	Addressable household reach with campus visit measurement	\$28-\$50	\$60K	Mature
Programmatic display	Territory coverage and program-level retargeting at scale	\$3-\$9	\$50K	Mature
Digital out-of-home	Presence inside a defined recruiting territory	\$4-\$9	\$30K per market	Directional
YouTube and online video	Program proof and campus experience at low cost per view	\$10-\$20	\$40K	Mature
Streaming audio	The parent audience during the commute	\$15-\$25	\$30K	Mature
Paid social	Student reach, parent reach, and event promotion	\$8-\$18	\$50K	Mature
Paid search	Demand capture and brand defense	CPC model	\$75K	Mature
Purchased name lists	Volume at the top of the CRM	Per name	Varies	Weak

CPM and investment ranges reflect typical media costs in higher education at the time of writing. Measurement maturity reflects each channel's ability to support campus visit or enrollment measurement at modest investment levels.

Connected television

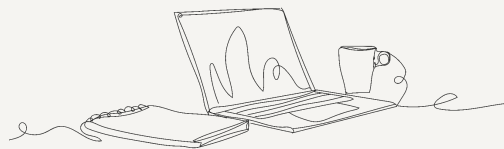
Connected television is the most underused channel in enrollment marketing, and it has become a performance channel rather than a brand channel. Most institutions still treat television as something you buy for the president to see during a basketball game, which is why it was the first line cut when budgets tightened.

For a university with a defined recruiting territory, CTV does three things that broadcast never could. It targets households rather than programs, so you can reach homes with a high school junior or senior inside the specific counties and ZIP codes your admissions team already works, rather than paying to reach retirees in the same media market. It measures campus visits, because CTV platforms now integrate with location data providers that report lift in visits among exposed households with enough statistical confidence to survive a CFO conversation. And it produces a usable creative signal in two to three weeks rather than the eight weeks a broadcast test would take, which matters when your application cycle gives you a narrow window to correct course.

The practical investment level starts at roughly \$60,000 a year at the institution level. Below that you cannot generate enough impressions in any single county to support visit measurement.

\$60,000

ANNUAL INSTITUTION-LEVEL FLOOR
FOR CONNECTED TV WITH VISIT
MEASUREMENT



Digital out-of-home and the territory advantage

Universities have an advantage that most advertisers do not, which is that your recruiting territory is already defined, written down, and agreed upon by admissions. Digital out-of-home lets you own that territory at a cost that has nothing to do with the billboard buys of a decade ago.

Inventory now trades programmatically through the same exchanges as digital display, which means you can buy screens inside high school athletic facilities, at transit stops on the routes your students actually take, in the shopping centers

where families in your target ZIP codes spend Saturdays, and around competitor campuses during their admitted student days. Creative changes dynamically, so an application deadline message runs in the two weeks before the deadline and a scholarship message runs after it.

Measurement here remains directional rather than precise, and we say so plainly. Out-of-home pairs well with CTV in the counties where you want frequency against a household you have already reached, and it works poorly as a standalone line item you are asked to defend on its own numbers.

Streaming audio and the parent audience

The parent is a co-decider in almost every undergraduate enrollment decision and an afterthought in almost every enrollment marketing plan. Streaming audio reaches that parent during a commute, targetable by household income, geography, and daypart, at costs between \$15 and \$25 per thousand impressions.

The message to a parent is different from the message to a student, and this is the channel where that difference is easiest to act on. Students

respond to program specifics, campus life, and whether they can picture themselves there.

Parents respond to outcomes, cost, safety, and whether the institution will still be open in four years, which is a question families now ask out loud in a way they did not five years ago. Run separate creative. Most institutions run one message at both audiences and wonder why neither converts.

TO THE STUDENT

Program specifics, campus life, and whether they can picture themselves there.

TO THE PARENT

Outcomes, cost, safety, and whether the institution will still be open in four years.

Paid search has become a harvesting channel

Paid search still belongs in the plan, and it should stop being asked to do a job it can no longer do. At \$6.23 per click and rising 40% year over year, with AI Overviews absorbing the informational queries that used to produce top-of-funnel clicks, search is now where you capture demand you created elsewhere and defend your own brand terms against competitors bidding on them.

Two practical consequences follow. Your brand campaign is a defensive necessity rather than a performance win, and you should stop reporting its

return as though it were incremental. Your non-branded program campaigns should be funded to capture the students who are already considering that program, which means they scale with awareness investment rather than independently of it. An institution that increases non-branded search budget without increasing awareness investment is bidding harder for the same shrinking set of in-market students, and the cost per inquiry will tell that story within a quarter.

One we recommend against scaling

Buying undifferentiated name lists at volume does not work, and it has not worked for several years. We have watched institutions load six-figure name buys into Slate, run them through a nurture sequence, and produce inquiry counts that look excellent in a board deck and application yields that are close to noise.

The problem is that a purchased name carries no signal about intent. The student checked a box on a test registration form two years ago. Meanwhile

the cost of working those names, in counselor hours and email deliverability and CRM hygiene, is real and rarely counted against the channel.

Name buys have a legitimate role when they are narrow, recent, and behaviorally qualified. They are a poor substitute for demand creation, and most institutions are using them as exactly that.

IN PRACTICE

A private university in the Northeast running roughly \$1.5 million in annual working media allocated 43% of that budget to programmatic display and another 16% across connected TV, online video, and digital out-of-home, leaving 15% in paid search. Across the 2025-26 cycle the program delivered 8,687 inquiries and 2,331 applications at a blended cost of \$633 per application, against a published sector benchmark of \$1,505 per enrolled undergraduate student.

8,687

INQUIRIES

2,331

APPLICATIONS

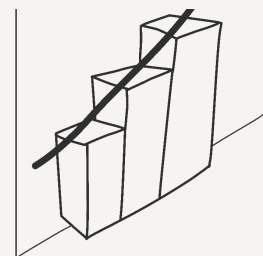
\$633

COST PER APPLICATION

59%

OF MEDIA IN DISPLAY, CTV,
VIDEO, AND OUT-OF-HOME

Cost per application and cost per enrolled student are different measures, and the comparison above is directional rather than like for like. An institution's cost per enrolled student will always be higher than its cost per application, because not every application yields a deposit. We include the benchmark because it is the number most readers already have in hand.



II.

Being found by the machine.

This is the part of the guide we would read first. Prospective students have changed how they build a list, and almost no institution has changed its website in response. The gap between those two facts is the largest unclaimed advantage in enrollment marketing right now, and it will close within two admissions cycles.



Your organic traffic decline is real, and it is not the whole story

Across the institutions we work with, traditional organic search is compressing as AI Overviews answer more queries directly on the results page. At one private university in the Northeast, organic search sessions fell 8% year over year across the 2025-26 cycle. Read on its own, that number starts a painful conversation about whether the SEO investment is working.

The number sitting next to it tells a different story. Direct sessions at the same institution rose 28% over the same period. AI assistants frequently strip the referrer when they send a user to a site, which means a real and growing share of what your analytics platform reports as direct traffic is people arriving from an AI answer. If you are reading organic and direct as separate stories, you are misreading both.

-8%

ORGANIC SEARCH SESSIONS,
YEAR OVER YEAR

+28%

DIRECT SESSIONS,
SAME PERIOD

AI referrals are small in volume and the best traffic on your site

ENGAGEMENT RATE BY SOURCE, ONE INSTITUTION

ChatGPT		82%
Organic		69%
Paid search		49%
Paid social		28%

Total AI-referred volume was under 1% of sessions.

At that same institution, sessions referred from ChatGPT engaged at 82%. Organic search engaged at 69%. Paid search engaged at 49%. Paid social engaged at 28%.

Total AI-referred volume was under 1% of sessions, which is precisely why most institutions look at the number once and move on. That is the wrong read. A visitor who arrives from an AI answer has already been told, by a source they trust, that your institution fits what they described. They behave like someone much further along than a cold click, because they are. The question is not whether the volume justifies attention today. It is what happens to your funnel when that channel is 10% of sessions in two years and your competitors have spent those two years making themselves easy to cite.

The program page is the unit of AI visibility

This is the most actionable thing in this guide. At the same institution, ChatGPT referrals landed on 694 distinct pages over twelve months, and the homepage accounted for roughly 6% of that traffic. The pages doing the work were individual program pages, including a graduate certificate in school building leadership, an applied behavior analysis master's, the nursing programs at two separate campuses, and a newly funded MSW.

AI assistants do not recommend universities in the abstract. They answer questions about specific programs, in specific places, with specific attributes, and they cite the page that answers the question directly. Your brand site is not the asset here. Your program pages are, and at most institutions those

pages were written by the department, last revised three years ago, and say nothing concrete about cost, length, format, licensure, outcomes, accreditation, or how to apply.

The work follows directly from that. Rewrite program pages so each one answers, in plain text a machine can lift, what the program is, who it is for, what it costs, how long it takes, whether it runs online or on campus, what license or credential it leads to, and what graduates do. Add question-and-answer blocks phrased the way students actually ask. Mark the pages up with structured data. Confirm your robots configuration allows the AI crawlers you want citing you, because a surprising number of institutions have blocked them by accident.

DIAGRAM B

THE 694 PAGES FINDING

The brand site is one page. The visibility is in the other 693.



6%

HOMEPAGE · ONE PAGE

693 OTHER PAGES · ROUGHLY 94%

693

GRADUATE CERTIFICATE, SCHOOL BUILDING LEADERSHIP

APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS MASTER'S

NURSING, TWO CAMPUSES

NEWLY FUNDED MSW

Share of ChatGPT-referred sessions across twelve months at one private university in the Northeast. Each tick represents a group of landing pages in the tail.

Branded visibility is not the same as being findable

Across Happy Cog clients we track how often an institution surfaces in AI answers for both branded prompts, which name the institution, and non-branded prompts, which describe what a student wants. The gap is consistent and wide. Institutions surface almost universally when the prompt names them, which is reassuring and close to meaningless, since a student who already knows your name was never the problem.

The geographic pattern inside the non-branded results is sharper. One client surfaces in roughly seven out of ten answers to a question about the best nursing programs in its immediate region, and in almost none of the answers to the same question asked at the state level. Visibility is won at the intersection of a specific program and a specific place, and it is lost at the level of general institutional reputation. That is good news for a regional university, because the regional question is the one you can actually win.

FIGURE 02

Where AI visibility is won, and where it is lost.

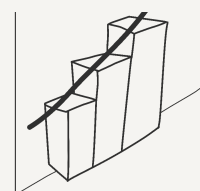
PROMPT TYPE	EXAMPLE	TYPICAL VISIBILITY	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Branded	<i>Tell me about [institution]'s nursing program</i>	 Near universal	Confirms the model has you. Says nothing about discovery.
Program plus region THE WINNABLE BAND	<i>What are the best nursing programs on Long Island</i>	 Strong where program pages are specific	This is the winnable question. Fund it first.
Program plus state	<i>Best nursing schools in New York</i>	 Weak for most regional institutions	Contested by flagships and national brands. Expensive to win.
Institution category	<i>Best private universities in New York</i>	 Very weak	Reputation-driven and slow to move. Do not lead here.
Attribute-qualified	<i>Affordable online MSW programs near me</i>	 Strong where cost and format are stated plainly on the page	Cheapest visibility available. Most institutions omit the attributes.

Visibility patterns reflect Happy Cog prompt tracking across client institutions in 2026. Individual results vary by program mix, geography, and competitive density.

III.

Measurement that survives the board meeting.

Measurement is where enrollment marketing programs quietly break. The marketing team has metrics that work for weekly decisions, the CFO has metrics that work for the budget, admissions has metrics that work for the funnel, and none of the three reconcile. The result is a meeting in which everyone is right and nothing gets decided, and the awareness line gets cut because it is the one nobody can defend with a number.



The north-star metric

Every enrollment marketing program needs one primary metric, and it should be cost per enrolled student, measured by program and attributed by channel, rolled up to the institution. Published benchmarks put this at roughly \$1,505 for undergraduate programs and \$3,804 for graduate programs, which gives you somewhere to stand when you report it for the first time.

This metric solves three problems at once. It is the number the CFO already thinks in, because it sits next to net tuition revenue. It is the number a dean can act on, because it is reported at the program level. And it

is the number that finally makes awareness defensible, because a channel that produces no inquiries but measurably raises application volume in the counties where it ran will show up here and nowhere else.

Building it requires three feeds: media spend allocated to program, funnel data from the CRM covering inquiry through deposit, and a method for measuring the channels that produce no click. For most institutions in this market the CRM is Slate, and the join between Slate and the ad platforms is the piece that does not exist today.

\$1,505

BENCHMARK COST PER ENROLLED UNDERGRADUATE

\$3,804

BENCHMARK COST PER ENROLLED GRADUATE STUDENT

Closing the loop between the CRM and the ad platforms

Most institutions send data one direction. A student clicks an ad, fills out a form, and enters Slate, and that is where the connection ends. The ad platforms never learn which of those inquiries became an application, an admit, or a deposit, which means their bidding algorithms optimize toward form fills rather than enrolled students.

Our analytics team closes this loop with offline conversion imports, feeding deposit and application events back into Google Ads, Meta, and the DSP with the original click identifier attached. The platforms then optimize toward the outcome you care about.

Institutions that make this change typically see cost per inquiry rise and cost per enrolled student fall, which is exactly the trade you want and exactly the chart you need to explain carefully the first time you present it.

Two technical prerequisites sit underneath. Your tracking needs to move server-side, because browser-based measurement degrades further every year. And your form and CRM need to carry a persistent click identifier from first touch through to deposit, which is usually a two-week Slate configuration project that has been sitting in someone's queue for a year.

Measuring the channels that produce no click

Connected TV, out-of-home, and audio do not produce clicks in any useful volume, and no amount of attribution modeling will make them. The honest method is a geographic holdout test: run the channel in a matched set of counties, withhold it in another, and compare inquiry and application volume between them across a full cycle.

This is less precise than a conversion pixel and considerably more truthful. It is also the only evidence that will hold up when a board member asks whether the television money did anything. Design the test before the campaign launches rather than after, because a holdout you define retroactively is not a holdout.

FIGURE 03

One metric, five audiences.

AUDIENCE	WHAT THEY CARE ABOUT	WHAT TO SHOW THEM	CADENCE
President and Board	Class size, net tuition revenue, institutional standing	Cost per enrolled student against benchmark, plus applications by territory	Quarterly
CFO	Net tuition revenue, discount rate, return on the marketing line	Cost per enrolled student by program, with contribution margin by channel	Monthly
VP Enrollment	Funnel health and yield at each stage	Inquiry to application to admit to deposit conversion by source and program	Weekly
Deans	Whether their programs are getting attention and what it produced	Program-level spend, inquiries, applications, and AI visibility	Monthly
Marketing team	Channel and creative decisions	Channel-level cost per inquiry, engagement rate, holdout test reads, prompt visibility	Weekly

Every audience above reads the same underlying data. The view changes and the source of truth does not.

IV. The brand-to-program handoff.

Everything in this guide depends on the relationship between central marketing and the academic units working. Central marketing builds awareness of the institution. Programs convert that awareness into applications. The handoff between them is where most universities lose a quarter of their marketing program's value, and the loss is political rather than technical.

The budget politics problem

Central marketing wants consistency and scale. Deans want control and responsiveness. Central marketing wants the money spent on activities it can measure. Deans want the money spent on activities they can see. Neither side is wrong, and the standoff costs both of them.

The institutions that resolve this well share three habits. They publish a clear list of what central marketing funds and what a dean's discretionary

budget is expected to cover, so nobody is negotiating from scratch every spring. They provide program marketing as a service, so a dean receives campaign support without hiring an agency or a work-study student to run Instagram. And they report program-level results back to the deans with the same rigor they report institutional results to the board, which earns central marketing the standing to be more directive the following year.

Three programs that work

The program marketing menu gives each dean a defined set of campaign packages, priced in contribution from the program budget and executed centrally. The dean chooses the package rather than the tactics, and central marketing keeps the media buying consolidated, which is where the efficiency lives.

The new program launch package deploys automatically whenever the institution approves a new degree or certificate, covering the program page build,

search campaigns, and a geographic display and video flight. Most institutions launch new programs with a catalog entry and an announcement, which is why so many new programs miss their first-year targets.

The application deadline sequence runs institution-wide against students already in the funnel, timed to each cycle's deadlines, and it belongs to central marketing because no individual program has the volume to run it well.

One that does not work

Centrally managed social media accounts for individual academic departments do not work at scale. We have watched several institutions try it. Each department account has too few followers, too specific a community, and too much need for faculty voice for central management to do better than neglect. Give departments the tooling, the brand assets, and a quarterly training session, and let them run their own accounts.

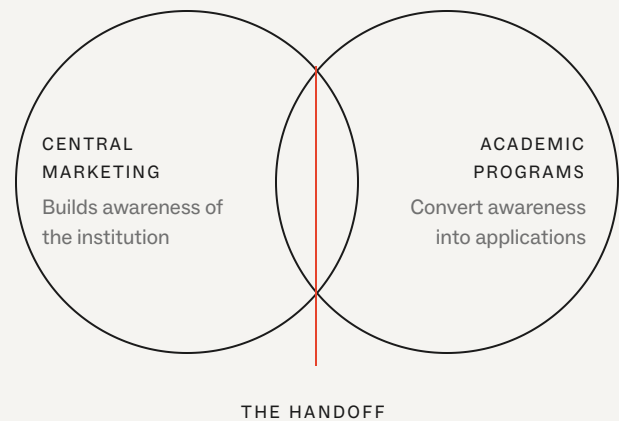


FIGURE 04

What to centralize. What to give the programs.

ACTIVITY	CENTRALIZE	PROGRAM	WHY
Institutional brand campaigns (CTV, out-of-home, audio)	Yes	No	Scale and consistency exist only at the institution level
Program search and social campaigns	Yes	Contributes	Central buying power, program-level targeting and budget
New program launch packages	Yes	No	Predictable trigger, standard package, institutional efficiency
Program page content	Template and standards	Subject matter	Marketing owns structure and AI readability, faculty own accuracy
Department social accounts	Tooling only	Yes	Faculty voice and community scale do not centralize
Application deadline campaigns	Yes	No	Institution-wide timing against the existing funnel
Open house and visit events	Yes	Co-hosts	Central promotion, program-level participation
Measurement and reporting	Yes	Receives	Single system, single dataset, reported back to programs

Treat this matrix as the starting point for a conversation with your deans rather than a verdict.

The next 90 days.

A sequence for a marketing or enrollment leader reading this guide and wondering where to start.

DAYS 01-30

Audit the chain from ad click to deposit.

Map every conversion action across every channel and trace whether a click identifier survives from the ad to the Slate record. Most institutions find that it does not, and that between a third and half of reported conversions are firing incorrectly or not at all. This audit costs nothing and tells you more about your program than any other single activity.

DAYS 30-60

Baseline your AI visibility and rewrite five program pages.

Run prompt visibility tracking across your ten highest-priority programs, branded and non-branded, at both regional and state level. Then rewrite the five program pages with the widest gap between enrollment need and visibility, stating cost, length, format, licensure, and outcomes in plain text. Measure again in sixty days.

DAYS 60-90

Put one awareness channel under a real test.

Choose connected TV or digital out-of-home based on how concentrated your recruiting territory is. Allocate a pilot, define the holdout counties before launch, and commit to reading it across a full cycle rather than a quarter.

This sequence builds evidence before it asks for money, which is the order that works when budgets are frozen. It produces a measurement story you can take to a CFO, a visibility story you can take to the deans, and a channel test you can take to the board.

What we expect in 2027.

Five predictions for the coming year, written for a president, a provost, or a board member as much as for a marketer. We have attached our confidence to each, because a prediction without one is just an opinion in a nicer font.

01 AI-mediated discovery becomes the majority path for program research.

HIGH CONFIDENCE

Use rose from 26% to 46% of high school students inside a single year. The next doubling takes it past the halfway mark, and graduate and adult learners will move faster than undergraduates because their searches are more specific and better suited to a conversational tool. Institutions that have not made their program pages machine-readable by the fall 2027 cycle will be competing for a shrinking share of a shrinking pool.

02 Sector redistribution continues, and the pressure concentrates regionally.

HIGH CONFIDENCE

Community colleges and public four-year institutions will keep taking share from private nonprofits. The Northeast and Midwest will absorb most of the damage, and Fitch has already moved the sector to a deteriorating outlook. Expect more closures and more mergers, and expect families to start asking admissions counselors directly about institutional financial health.

03 International enrollment weakens further and stops being a hedge.

MODERATE CONFIDENCE

Sixty-three percent of institutions forecast a decline in international enrollment for 2026-27, driven by visa barriers and competition from other countries. Institutions that built graduate program economics around international demand will need a domestic answer within two cycles, and the domestic answer is almost always a marketing and program design problem rather than a recruiting problem.

04 Marketing budgets shift from lead volume toward demand creation.

MODERATE CONFIDENCE

With 69% of budgets flat or declining and inquiry costs climbing, the institutions that reallocate rather than cut will separate from the ones that keep buying names. We expect the first clear performance gap between those two approaches to show up in fall 2027 application volume, and we expect it to be visible enough to change how the sector talks about awareness spending.

05 The value question moves from cost to relevance.

LOWER CONFIDENCE, HIGH CONSEQUENCE

Public confidence in higher education sat at 42% in 2025, down from 57% a decade earlier, and 39% of students now say advances in AI are pushing them to consider alternatives to college. The affordability argument is losing ground to a harder question about whether a given degree still leads anywhere. Institutions that can answer that concretely, at the program level, with outcomes data on the page, will find it a marketing advantage before it becomes a marketing requirement.

Nice people with interesting problems.

Happy Cog has been building and running digital programs since 1999, and we have worked with universities on both sides of the problem this guide describes. Our digital marketing practice runs paid media, search, AI visibility, and analytics for institutions investing between several hundred thousand and several million dollars a year. Our design and development teams build the websites and program pages that the rest of it depends on.

That combination is the reason this guide exists. Most agencies can tell you that your program pages need to be readable by AI systems. Rebuilding several hundred of them, wiring the measurement from the ad click through to the deposit in Slate, and running the media against them is a different kind of engagement, and it is the one we are built for.

We think the best marketing work is plainspoken, evidence-driven, and respectful of the operational realities our clients live with. We believe in people first.

If the questions in this field guide describe your situation, the next thirty minutes with us is probably worth your calendar.

LET'S HAVE A CONVERSATION

happycog.com/contact

