software verdict

ENROLLMENT REPORT

A Year of Resilience & Growth

The Strategic Reconfiguration of Higher Education Enrollment Marketing

A Survey-Based Analysis of Cost-Per-Lead Optimization and Autonomous Recruitment Systems

PREPARED FOR

Strategic Marketing Leadership at Universities & Schools

POWERED BY

SchoolXP

About the Study

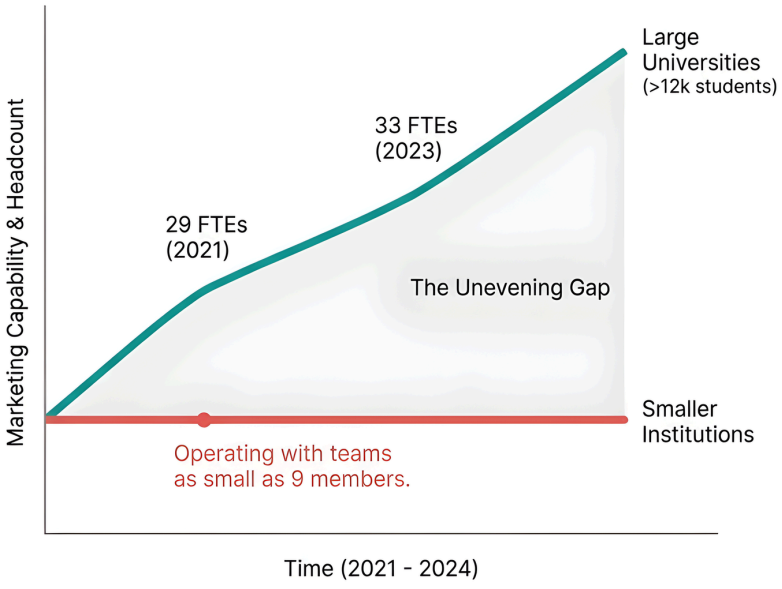
The higher education sector is currently navigating an unprecedented structural transformation, characterized by a convergence of demographic shifts, heightened regulatory oversight, and a fundamental change in the digital behavior of prospective students. As traditional-age student populations in the United States are projected to decline by 13% by 2041—a phenomenon commonly referred to as the demographic cliff—university marketing and admissions executives are under immense pressure to achieve more with diminishing resources. This report synthesizes data from the 2024-2025 Higher Education Marketing Executive Surveys, including findings from UPCEA, SimpsonScarborough, and Search Influence, to provide a comprehensive roadmap for reducing cost-per-lead (CPL) while simultaneously increasing enrollment yields through strategic automation and channel optimization.

The Macroeconomic Landscape of Student Acquisition

The financial realities of student recruitment have reached a critical threshold, where the cost of generating a single inquiry often masks the deeper complexities of the enrollment funnel. According to the 2025 Higher Education Marketing Benchmarks, institutions are spending an average of $140 on digital advertising to generate a single prospective student inquiry at the top of the funnel.

The "Great Unevening" Divergence

Only 32% of marketing leaders report possessing a budget robust enough to meet their institutional goals, forcing a reliance on technological efficiency over headcount.



However, this figure is merely a preliminary metric; the true cost per enrollment (CPE) for professional, online, and continuing education programs has escalated to an average of $2,849 per new student.

A pervasive trend identified in recent CMO surveys is the "Great Unevening," a widening gap between large institutions with robust technological infrastructures and smaller institutions struggling to maintain market share. While large universities (>12,000 students) continue to expand their marketing staff—averaging 33 full-time employees in 2023 compared to 29 in 2021—smaller schools often operate with teams as small as nine members, creating a significant disadvantage in managing complex multi-channel campaigns. This resource disparity is compounded by the fact that only 32% of marketing leaders believe their current budget is robust enough to meet institutional goals.

Program Type	**Average Cost Per Inquiry (CPI/CPL)**	**Average Cost Per Enrolled Student (CPE)**
Graduate Programs	$157	$3,804
Undergraduate Programs	$128	$1,505
Non-Credit / Certificate	$51	$599
National Average	**$140**	**$2,849**

Cost-Per-Lead and Enrollment Benchmarks by Program Level

The economic architecture of lead acquisition varies significantly by degree level and program complexity. Graduate programs, which often require high-touch counseling and longer nurturing cycles, command the highest acquisition premiums. Conversely, non-degree and certificate programs demonstrate the highest levels of cost efficiency.

The variation in these costs is driven by competition levels in specific sectors. For specialized graduate programs, some estimates place the cost of recruitment as high as $5,000 per student. Public institutions generally maintain a lower CPE profile, averaging approximately $494 per student, largely due to established brand equity and significant organic search dominance. In contrast, private institutions spend nearly six times more, averaging $2,795 per student, to compete for the same prospective pool.

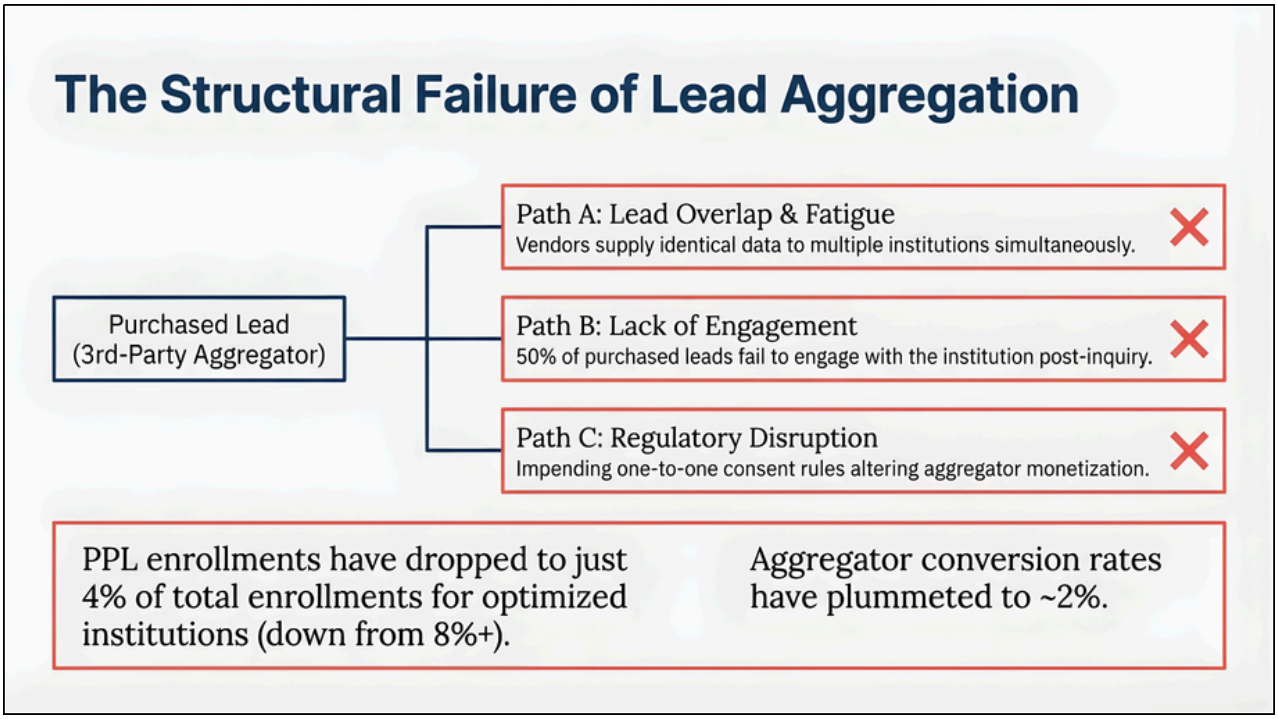
The Crisis of Traditional Marketplace and PPL Models

A central theme emerging from recent executive surveys is the diminishing return on investment provided by traditional Pay-Per-Lead (PPL) marketplaces and third-party aggregators. For years, these aggregators served as the primary engine for top-of-funnel lead volume. However, the 2024-2025 data indicates a sharp decline in PPL effectiveness. Conversion rates for PPL leads have dropped to approximately 2%, significantly underperforming the 4–5% conversion rates observed for first-party leads—those generated directly through an institution's own digital properties.

Structural Failures in Lead Aggregation

The dissatisfaction with PPLmodels is rooted in several systemic issues. Market-wide benchmarks reveal that approximately 50% of purchased leads fail to engage with the institution at all after the initial inquiry is captured. This lack of engagement is often attributed to "lead overlap," where vendors supply identical lead data to multiple institutions simultaneously, leading to immediate competition and student fatigue.

Furthermore, impending regulatory changes, such as the "one-to-one consent" rule, are poised to fundamentally disrupt how aggregators monetize student data. These shifts are forcing institutions to re-evaluate their media mix. For example, Level Agency clients have seen PPL enrollments drop to just 4% of total enrollments, down from over 8%, as institutions pivot toward first-party demand generation.



Metric	Pay-Per-Lead (PPL/3rd Party)	First-Party Leads (Institutional)
Average Conversion Rate	0.5% - 2%	4% - 12%
Cost Per Lead (CPL)	$60 - $200	$96 - $1,000
Enrollment Share Trend	Declining (currently ~4%)	Increasing
Intent Level	Low to Moderate	High

While the initial CPL for first-party leads may appear higher, the cost-per-acquisition is frequently lower due to the superior quality and intent of the leads. Aggregators typically operate at a larger scale, but their products often suffer from lower intent and less focus on specific institutional programs compared to organic or direct-paid search leads.

Ad Spend Optimization: Strategies for the 2025 Landscape

To counteract rising digital advertising costs, which represent an average annual spend of $800,970 per university, marketing teams are adopting more sophisticated optimization tactics. The 2025 landscape is defined by a shift from broad-match awareness to machine-learning-driven conversion strategies.

The Impact of Google Performance Max (PMax)

Google's Performance Max campaigns have emerged as a transformative tool for higher education marketers. By utilizing machine learning to optimize ad delivery across Search, YouTube, Gmail, and the Display Network, PMax has been found to drive a lower cost-per-application compared to traditional Facebook and non-brand search campaigns. This efficiency is particularly valuable as non-brand search terms experienced a dramatic 13% decrease in CPC from 2023 to 2024, making it more cost-effective to bid on broader educational terms that were previously price-prohibitive.

Propensity Scoring and Level.Signal

Sophisticated marketing teams are moving beyond basic demographic targeting toward "propensity scoring." This methodology evaluates prospects based on their interactions across various channels to predict the likelihood of enrollment. Tools like Level.Signal integrate website activity, lead data, and media engagement to identify high-quality prospects. One higher education client using this AI-powered measurement solution achieved a 48% increase in applications and a 30% reduction in cost-per-application by redirecting spend toward behavioral signals that predicted enrollment intent.

The "Mission-Fit" Keyword Strategy

A critical strategy for reducing CPL involves pivoting from high-volume, generic keywords (e.g., "Online MBA") to long-tail, "mission-fit" keywords. Competition for broad terms is intense, often involving massive state schools and for-profit entities with seven-figure monthly budgets. By targeting specific queries—such as "adult degree completion nursing programs in [City]"—institutions can drop their cost-per-click while increasing conversion rates, as they are reaching students specifically looking for their unique institutional culture.

Admission Process Automation: The Role of Voice AI Agents

The most significant bottleneck in the enrollment funnel is often the manual follow-up process. Research indicates that speed-to-contact is the single most influential factor in conversion, with 78% of students enrolling with the first institution that responds to their inquiry. In a global marketplace, human teams cannot provide the 24/7 responsiveness required to capture these high-intent leads.

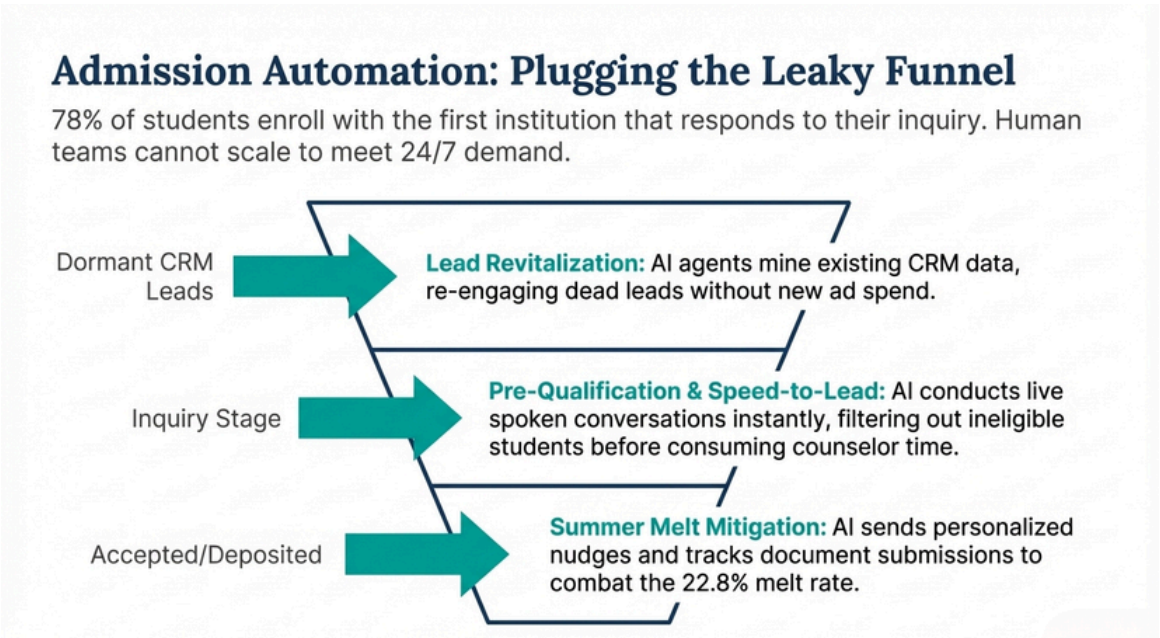
The Evolution of Autonomous Voice Agents

Unlike traditional chatbots that provide scripted text responses, autonomous Voice AI agents conduct live, spoken conversations over the phone. These agents can greet the caller, identify the course of interest, answer FAQs regarding tuition and deadlines, and schedule counseling sessions directly into a staff member's calendar. For institutions like those using AI, the results have been staggering: one school reported application numbers simultaneously grew by 200%.

Benefits of Automation in Admissions

The integration of AI agents provides several operational advantages that directly contribute to CPL and CPE reduction:

1. **Lead Revitalization:** AI agents can re-engage dormant leads in a CRM that human teams typically do not have the capacity to pursue, essentially "mining" existing data for opportunities without additional marketing spend.
2. **Pre-Qualification:** By explaining entry requirements and filtering out ineligible students based on financing or language proficiency, AI agents ensure that the paid time of admissions counselors is spent only on high-value, qualified prospects.
3. **Summer Melt Mitigation:** Accepted students fail to enroll at a rate of 22.8%. AI agents combat this by sending personalized "nudges," tracking document submissions, and identifying students showing signs of disengagement.
4. **Scalability:** During peak enrollment weeks, AI can handle thousands of concurrent calls, scaling instantly without the need for temporary staff hiring or training.



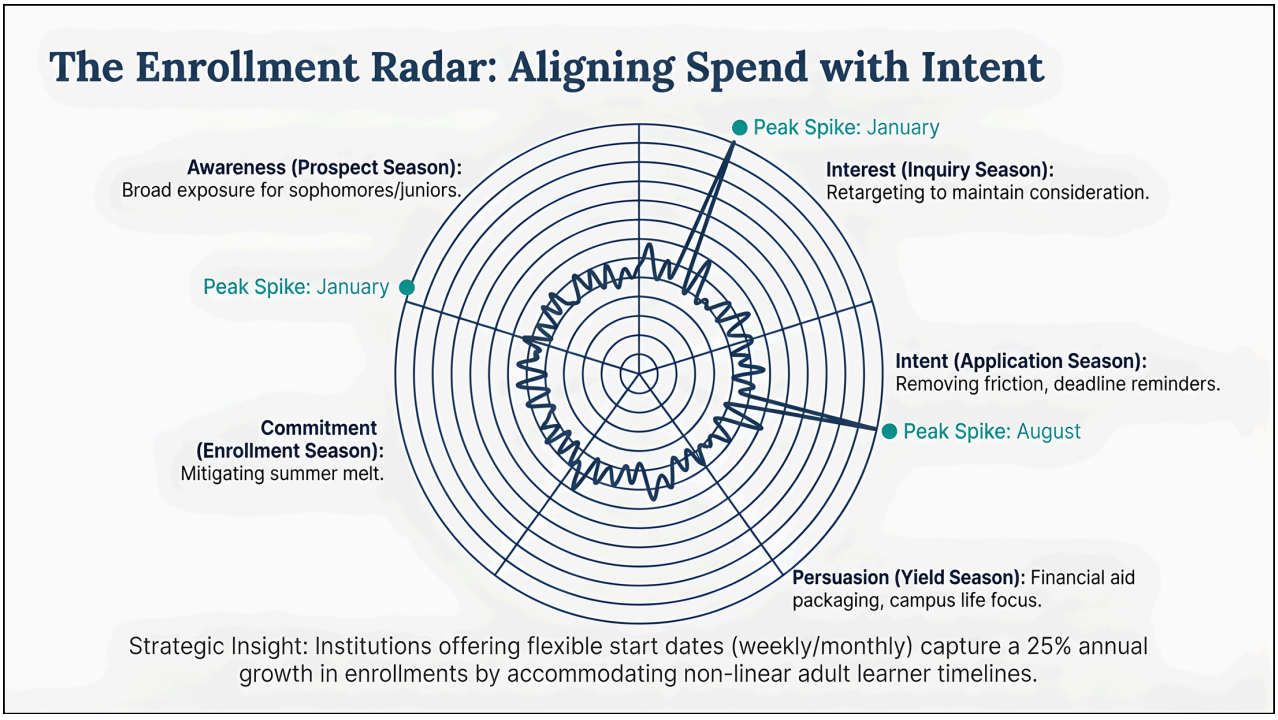
Optimal Timelines for Admission Preparation and Campaign Launch

Strategic CPL reduction requires an intimate alignment with the academic calendar. Marketing executives emphasize that brand awareness must be built early to ensure the institution is part of the "consideration set" before the student enters the high-intent inquiry phase.

The Five Seasons of the Enrollment Cycle

Understanding the rhythm of the enrollment cycle allows marketing teams to align budgets and messaging with student decision-making stages.

1. **Prospect Season (Awareness):** This phase begins with broad exposure. For high school juniors and sophomores, content focuses on exploration and academic interest areas.
2. **Inquiry Season (Interest):** By late summer and early fall, prospects begin forming preferences. Retargeting is crucial here to keep the institution top-of-mind.
3. **Application Season (Intent):** During the late fall (October/November), the focus shifts to removing friction. Messaging should be personalized by intent and include reminders about deadlines.
4. **Yield Season (Persuasion):** After decisions are released, marketing focus shifts toward persuasion, highlighting financial aid packages and campus life.
5. **Enrollment Season (Commitment):** The final stage involves deposit payment and preventing "summer melt" through emotional reinforcement.

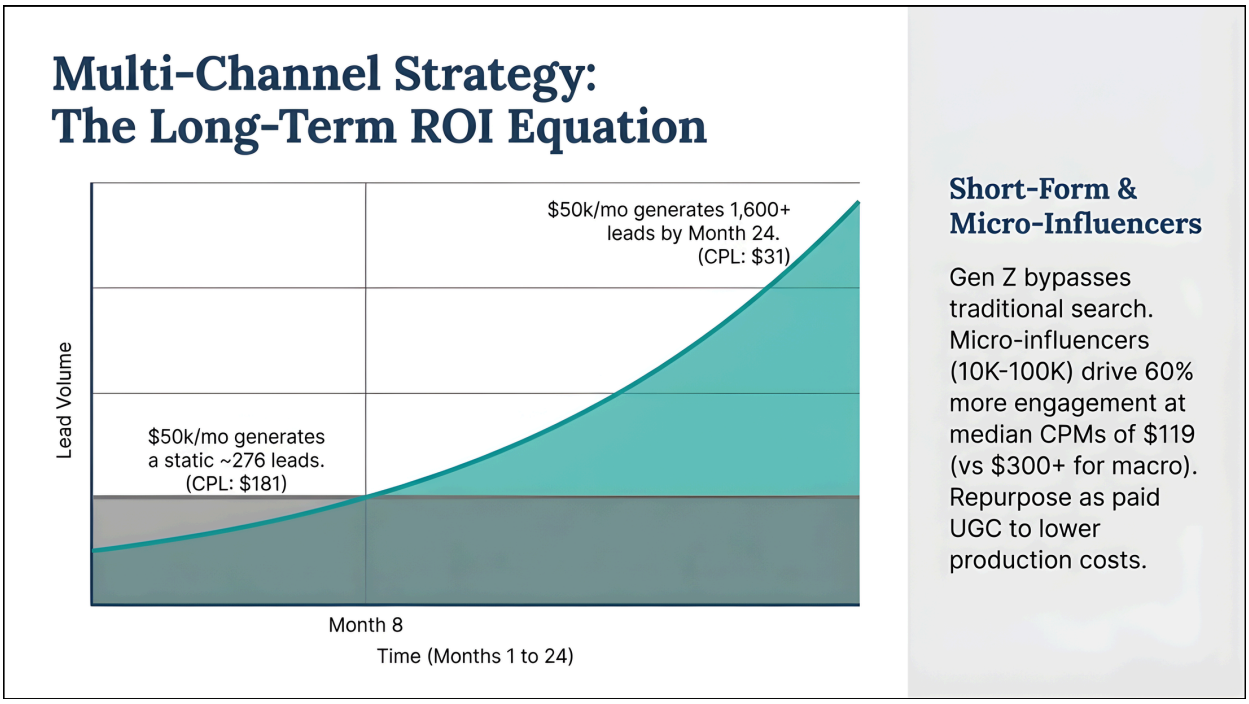


Peak Intent Windows

Interest in higher education consistently spikes in **January and August**. These months represent the most expensive times for paid search but also the highest conversion potential. Effective strategies involve building awareness in the "off-months" to reduce the reliance on expensive bottom-funnel competition during peak spikes. Furthermore, institutions offering flexible start dates (weekly or monthly) see a 25% annual growth in enrollments, as they accommodate the non-linear timelines of modern adult learners.

Multi-Channel Strategy: Leverage the Right Platforms

The modern student journey is multi-channel, non-linear, and filled with digital touchpoints. Survey data shows that 84% of prospects rely on search engines, and 63% rely on university websites to explore programs.



The SEO vs. PPC Long-Term Return

While PPC (Pay-Per-Click) provides immediate lead flow, SEO (Search Engine Optimization) is far more economical over time. Research shows that SEO delivers 5.8x more leads per dollar than PPC. A $50,000 monthly PPC budget might generate 276 leads, but the same budget allocated to a content-heavy SEO program could generate over 1,600 leads per month by the end of the second year.

Short-Form Video and Influencer Marketing

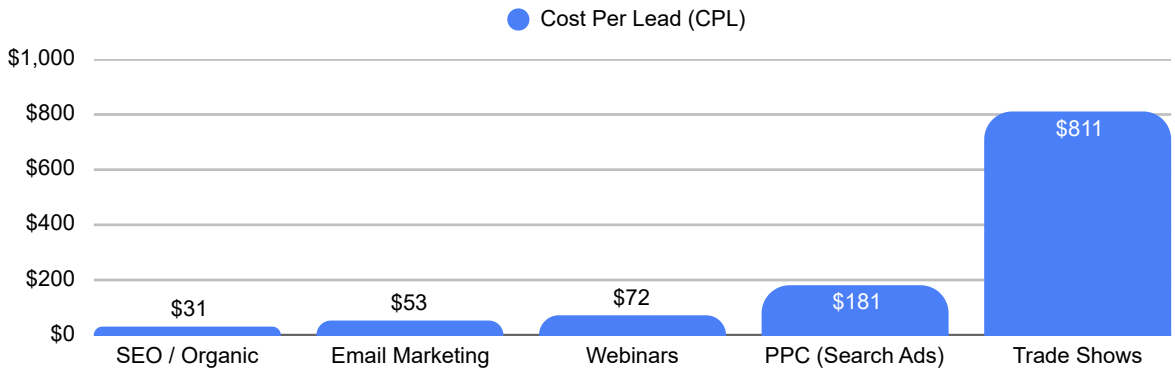
Gen Z audiences are increasingly bypassing traditional search engines for platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. Savvy marketing teams are enlisting student ambassadors and micro-influencers (10K-100K followers) to share relatable campus content. Micro-influencers drive up to 60% more engagement than macro-influencers and are more cost-effective, with median CPMs around $119 compared to $300+ for larger accounts. Repurposing this user-generated content (UGC) into paid ads can further reduce content production costs while increasing authenticity.

Attribution Modeling: Moving Beyond Last-Click Bias

To truly reduce CPL, institutions must understand which touchpoints are actually driving conversions. Traditional "last-click" attribution often over-credits search ads while ignoring the weeks of social media engagement and content consumption that preceded the click.

The SEO vs. PPC Long-Term Return

Channel	Cost Per Lead (CPL)	Lead Intent / Quality
SEO / Organic	$31	High (Inbound Demand)
Email Marketing	$53	High (Segmented/Nurtured)
Webinars	$72	Very High (Engagement-based)
PPC (Search Ads)	$181	High (Capturing Demand)
Trade Shows	$811	Varies



Attribution Evolution: Moving Beyond Last-Click Bias

Higher education sales cycles routinely exceed 90 days. Last-click attribution fatally ignores the preceding weeks of social and content engagement.

	Model Description & Benefit	Touchpoint Credit Distribution (5-Touchpoint Example)
1	Linear Attribution: Distributes credit evenly across all touchpoints.	
2	Position-Based (U-Shaped): 40% First Touch / 20% Middle / 40% Last Touch. Balances brand awareness with final conversion.	
3	W-Shaped: 30% / 30% / 30% split. Cited as the most effective model for high-consideration education purchases.	

Multi-Touch Models for Higher Education

Given the long sales cycle of higher education (often 90+ days), multi-touch attribution models provide a more accurate picture of ROI.

- **Linear Attribution:** Distributes credit equally across all touchpoints, acknowledging the entire journey
- **Position-Based (U-Shaped):** Assigns 40% of the credit to the first and last touchpoints, with 20% distributed in between. This model balances the importance of brand awareness and the final conversion.
- **W-Shaped Attribution:** Allocates 30% of the credit to the first touch, the lead creation touch, and the opportunity creation touch. This is often cited as the most effective model for high-consideration purchases like education.

By implementing these models, institutions can identify "waste" in their budget—channels that may have high impression counts but zero contribution to the actual enrollment path—and reallocate those funds to higher-performing tactics.

Enrollment-Driven Marketing Strategies

To reduce CPL, marketing leaders must prioritize enrollment outcomes over creative pride. This involves:

1. **Organizational Restructuring:** Moving marketing reporting lines under the enrollment or admissions umbrella to ensure budget and team roles are tied directly to enrollment goals.
2. **Product-Market Fit Analysis:** Assessing whether the "product" (the academic program) matches market demand. If ads reach people but no one applies, the issue may be the program's value proposition or price rather than the marketing strategy
3. **Conversion Optimization:** Ensuring the "bucket" (institutional website and application portal) isn't leaking. This includes breaking long forms into shorter segments, providing clear checklists, and using explainer videos to demystify the process.
4. **Bot Mitigation:** As much as 30% of traffic can be non-human activity. Implementing filters in Google Analytics to remove bot traffic is essential for data integrity and accurate resource allocation.

Structural Alignment: Marketing as a Growth Engine

A common finding in the SimpsonScarborough CMO study is the "misalignment gap" between marketing and enrollment teams. Historically, marketing was a support function focused on "brand decoration" and reputation management. In 2025, marketing must be viewed as a growth engine directly accountable for recruitment results.

Conclusion: A Roadmap for Sustainable Recruitment

The reduction of cost-per-lead is not merely an exercise in budget cutting; it is a strategic pivot toward efficiency, automation, and first-party data ownership. The consensus among higher education marketing executives is that the era of relying on high-volume, low-intent leads from third-party aggregators is ending.

Institutions that thrive in the 2026 landscape will be those that:

- Invest in **autonomous Voice AI** to win the "speed-to-lead" race and provide 24/7 engagement.
- Transition from broad-match search to **AI-driven Performance Max** and mission-fit long-tail keyword strategies.
- Leverage **micro-influencers and user-generated content** to build trust with Gen Z and Gen Alpha audiences.
- Establish **multi-touch attribution models** to eliminate waste and optimize budget allocation across the long enrollment funnel.
- Foster **structural alignment** between marketing and enrollment, ensuring that every marketing dollar is tied directly to a student starting their first day of class.

By embracing these technological and strategic shifts, universities can insulate themselves from the pressures of the demographic cliff and build a sustainable, cost-effective recruitment engine for the future.