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DATA-DRIVEN STUDENT SUCCESS AS AN ENROLLMENT IMPERATIVE

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For decades, enrollment success was measured by a familiar sequence: inquiries, applications, admits, deposits, and finally, who showed up on move-in day. That model is now insufficient. As higher education confronts the Enrollment Cliff, intensifying competition, and growing public scrutiny, the FAFSA has emerged as a new and consequential accountability instrument. With the Department of Education now flagging institutions whose graduates earn less than high-school diploma holders, FAFSA is no longer just a gateway to aid — it is an early signal of institutional performance.

This shift creates both risk and opportunity. Institutions can no longer treat FAFSA as a back-office compliance task or a last-mile enrollment hurdle. Instead, enrollment teams must lean in and position FAFSA as a strategic asset — one that aligns recruitment, affordability, persistence, and outcomes into a coherent enrollment narrative.

First, enrollment leaders must move FAFSA upstream. Historically, financial aid conversations were deferred until after admission, sometimes even after deposit. In today's environment, that delay creates vulnerability. Students and families now encounter outcome-based signals directly within the FAFSA process, meaning enrollment teams must proactively frame cost, value, and career outcomes early and often. Clear messaging about graduation rates, employment pathways, and alumni outcomes should accompany recruitment conversations, not follow them.

Second, enrollment management must deepen its partnership with financial aid and student success teams. FAFSA data reveals far more than eligibility — it surfaces risk signals tied to melt, stop-out, and non-completion. Enrollment offices should use FAFSA completion status, verification delays, unmet need, and borrowing patterns as predictive indicators. Leaning in means treating these data points as enrollment intelligence, triggering early outreach, personalized counseling, and coordinated support before students disengage.

Third, enrollment leaders should recalibrate how they define and communicate "fit." In the FAFSA era, fit is no longer just academic or social; it is financial and economic. Recruiting responsibly means ensuring students understand not only whether they can enroll, but whether they can persist and graduate with a credential that delivers value. Institutions that align program messaging with labor-market outcomes — and are honest about costs and returns — will build trust in a marketplace increasingly shaped by transparency.

Fourth, enrollment teams must collaborate closely with career services.

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Be Prepared

Beginning July 1, 2026, the Graduate PLUS loan will end. New annual and lifetime borrowing limits mean students will face serious funding gaps making it harder to attend graduate and professional school.

The FAFSA's new earnings indicator reinforces what students already believe: outcomes matter. Enrollment can lean into this by integrating career pathways, internship access, licensure rates, and first-destination outcomes directly into recruitment materials and conversations. This is not marketing spin; it is evidence-based enrollment.

Finally, this moment demands a cultural shift. Enrollment success can no longer be measured solely by who arrives in August. It must be measured by who completes, who advances economically, and who thrives after graduation. Enrollment leaders must become lifecycle strategists — accountable not just for headcount, but for momentum, completion, and value delivered.

The FAFSA has become a mirror, reflecting institutional outcomes back to students and families earlier than ever before. Institutions that lean in — aligning enrollment strategy with affordability, transparency, and post-graduation success — will not only navigate this new era but lead it. In the years ahead, enrollment will not be about persuading students to come. It will be about proving they should stay — and that the investment is worth it.

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Recruitment and Financial Aid Strategies are Changing at Many Graduate Schools

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The marketplace for graduate schools is changing.

- The elimination of Grad PLUS loans will impact education plans for prospective students.
- Federal loans for non-professional graduate school have been capped at $20,500.
- The changes in recent legislation will force more students to borrow in the private sector.
- Recent studies indicate that almost 40% of master's degrees offer no net financial value.
- Visa restrictions are hampering enrollment opportunities for international students.
- Many colleges and universities have been implementing significant adjustments to their recruitment and financial aid tactics and strategies to respond to the new, more challenging landscape.
- Across the country, colleges and universities are looking for revenue streams and the pressure is on graduate programs to produce revenue like never before.
- Even many of the most prestigious institutions are no longer able to rely on academic reputations alone to meet their graduate enrollment objectives.
- Competition continues to increase as more schools add new graduate offerings.
- Opportunities for students to cover their graduate education expenses by utilizing employee benefits are declining.

We know that the marketplace has changed. Why are so many schools struggling to identify the appropriate approaches that will improve outcomes?

- Many schools have operated for decades without employing professional admission administrators and counselors.
- Just identifying the customer base at a reasonable price for graduate recruitment is difficult. Unlike the testing services for undergraduate students, there is no central database available to identify students who might be interested in graduate school.

- Available research data on important metrics in graduate recruitment is scarce. Trying to find reliable industry standards for application rates, the size of inquiry pools, acceptance rates, discount rates and yield rates is virtually impossible.

- More institutions will need to evaluate their program offerings considering market demand. MBA programs, for example, are likely to continue their decline in popularity.

What are colleges and universities doing to improve recruitment outcomes for graduate enrollment?

- Some schools are moving graduate recruitment and financial aid out of the academic departments and into centralized enrollment divisions.

- There is movement from graduate professionals acting as gatekeepers, to enrollment professionals serving as recruiters.

- Some schools are conducting reviews of recruitment tactics and assessing “return on investment” for the first time.

- Financial aid, including scholarships, grants and assistantships, is being more effectively targeted to meet enrollment goals.

- More institutions are front-loading scholarship offers to encourage students to apply for admission.

- Deals are being negotiated with companies for discounts for employees enrolling in graduate programs at some institutions.

- Colleges and universities are starting to begin recruitment activities at the inquiry stage rather than the traditional method of just working with prospective students after they apply for admission.

- Schools are generally taking a more data-driven approach to graduate recruitment.

- More institutions are focusing on flexibility in delivery systems to better meet the needs of prospective students.

- Increasing digital presence is important, but the costs are often prohibitive.

- It may be time to increase investments in student support services for graduate students to improve retention and graduation rates.

- Offering robust career counseling and resources can improve employment opportunities for graduates.

The marketplace has changed and many graduate schools are slowly adapting to new realities. If you have not already done so, now would be a good time to review your program offerings, recruitment strategies, financial aid options and student support services.

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THE DYSART GROUP
ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT & HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICES

The Dysart Group is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided consultation services to more than 250 colleges and universities throughout the United States with extraordinary results.

We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment. Our institution-specific recommendations have helped increase the number of admission applications as much as three-fold. Improved communication strategies and new tracking metrics have resulted in higher folder completion rates and increased the number of students accepted for admission. New student enrollments have grown by as much as 70% in a single cycle while discount rates have been controlled. Proven strategies have increased retention rates by as much as 7% in one year.

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