

2026

# MYSTERY SHOP RESULTS



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# INTRODUCTION

Seismic shifts in higher education are driving universities to diversify revenue, streamline operations, and prioritize the growth of Professional, Continuing, and Online (PCO) programs. As traditional enrollment declines, PCO programs have become essential revenue drivers. However, the market is increasingly competitive, requiring universities to engage inquiries with greater speed, personalization, and persistence.

What makes leading online universities such as SNHU, Liberty, ASU, and UMGC so successful? Beyond media spend and program variety, one of the greatest differentiators is the inbound web engagement process. These institutions value inquiries and execute highly effective strategies to capture, respond to, and nurture prospective students.

Too often, universities struggling with online and graduate enrollment respond by investing more in marketing or technology without improving the admissions engagement process itself. Ultimately, enrollment success comes down to one thing: converting leads into students.

To better understand current market performance, Education Connex mystery shopped more than 120 tuition-driven universities, including regional public and nonprofit private institutions offering graduate and adult online programs. The purpose of the study was to evaluate:

- 1. Page Optimization:** Opportunities to improve conversion rates and increase organic inquiries.
- 2. Promptness:** Response time and engagement speed using both live staff and AI tools.
- 3. Persistence:** Long-term follow-up and omnichannel nurturing practices during peak enrollment interest.

These three pillars represent the foundation of quality inbound engagement and create the type of differentiated student experience that drives enrollment growth.

# MYSTERY SHOP



## Who we evaluated:

We evaluated more than 120 four-year universities, including regional public and nonprofit private institutions actively promoting online or graduate programs. Organic inquiries were submitted directly through institutional websites.



## What we measured:

Inbound lead engagement was evaluated across three core areas:

- Page Optimization: Presence of Request for Information (RFI) forms, prominent phone numbers, live chat, and AI engagement tools.
- Response: Speed-to-contact and persistence over a 30-business-day period.
- Omnichannel Engagement: Use of phone, email, SMS, social, and live engagement strategies.

University marketing teams work hard to drive traffic and generate inquiries. However, in today's digital-first and mobile-first environment, generating traffic alone is no longer enough. Institutions must optimize program pages to quickly move prospects from discovery to engagement.

A recent McKinsey & Company report noted that AI-powered search tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews are fundamentally changing how consumers research and evaluate brands. As AI search behavior grows, institutions may experience a 20%–50% decline in traditional organic traffic if they fail to adapt.

The result: when prospects do find your website, the experience must be seamless. Program pages must make it easy for prospects to request information, connect with staff, or engage immediately through phone, live chat, or AI-assisted support.

# Key Findings—Page Optimization

Our goal was to measure overall Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO) and determine how effectively institutions convert organic website traffic into inquiries. This allowed us to assign an “Inbound Quality Score” based on the presence and effectiveness of key conversion tools.

The findings were clear: many institutions are leaving enrollment opportunities on the table. While universities continue investing heavily in paid media and technology, most have not optimized their primary website experience for organic lead generation.

## ***Key findings included:***

- ***85% of schools did not display a prominent phone number on program pages, despite inbound calls and live engagement producing significantly stronger conversion rates than standard RFI submissions.***
- ***Only 10% of schools utilized live chat with real human interaction. Many institutions are replacing live chat with AI agents.***
- ***Several schools used AI agents for inquiry response, but many interactions felt impersonal or obviously automated.***

# RFI FINDINGS

- More than 25% of institutions either lacked an RFI form on their main website or had forms that were difficult to access or nonfunctional.
- Many RFIs requested too much information upfront, including unnecessary personal details. In contrast, leading online universities typically requested only name, program of interest, email, and phone number.
- RFIs were frequently buried in footers or non-prominent areas of pages.
- Excessive page copy often distracted from clear calls-to-action.

Despite significant marketing investments, 78% of schools evaluated received a weak inbound conversion score. Many institutions also fail to properly attribute lead sources, limiting their ability to measure enrollment performance and cost-per-enrollment metrics.

*"If you can't measure it, you can't manage it."*

Based on the opportunities identified, we believe institutions can achieve:

- A 25% increase in high-intent organic inquiries for graduate and online programs.
- Increased web traffic and broader audience reach.
- Improved return on marketing investment.

As institutions adopt AI tools, they should be cautious about replacing human engagement entirely. Hybrid engagement strategies continue to outperform fully automated experiences.

# PROMPTNESS

Today's enrollment journey is overwhelmingly digital and mobile-driven. Once a prospect expresses interest, every minute matters.

Prospective students often inquire with multiple institutions simultaneously. Undergraduate students commonly engage with three to five schools, while graduate students typically inquire with two to three institutions. This creates intense competition during the critical inquiry stage.

Interest is highest immediately after a prospect submits an inquiry. Faster response times directly correlate with higher conversion rates.

According to Harvard Business Review, organizations that respond within the first hour are seven times more likely to convert inquiries into enrollments or sales opportunities.

Live human engagement remains a significant differentiator. Prospects consistently respond more positively to personalized outreach from real admissions staff compared to fully automated AI interactions.

## Key Findings

- Over 75% of institutions had an RFI form available.
- However, nearly 60% of schools did not place a single phone call after inquiry submission.
- Only 27% of schools responded via phone the same day.
- Just 10% of schools contacted prospects within 60 minutes.

The strongest-performing institutions — including many OPM-supported programs and major online universities — demonstrated near-immediate outreach and consistent follow-up.

Several OPM-supported institutions also introduced themselves by the OPM company name rather than the university brand, which created confusion for prospective students.

As AI search and digital discovery continue reshaping student behavior, institutions must prioritize fast, personalized engagement that bridges the gap between digital inquiry and human connection.

# PERSISTENCE

Persistence remains one of the largest enrollment challenges facing universities today.

Admissions cadence — the number and variety of follow-up interactions with a prospect — plays a critical role in enrollment conversion. Successful institutions execute coordinated omnichannel nurturing strategies that include phone calls, voicemail, SMS, email, and personalized outreach over an extended period.

Our mystery shop revealed that most schools do not persist long enough or use enough communication channels to maintain engagement.

## Key Findings

- 60% of schools did not place a single follow-up phone call.
- Approximately 30% called twice.
- Roughly 25% called three times.
- Only 20% maintained outreach over a full 30-day period.

The institutions that demonstrated strong persistence also integrated omnichannel nurturing strategies across voice, email, and text messaging. Not surprisingly, these institutions are among the leaders in online education enrollment performance.

In today's environment, multiple engagement touchpoints are essential. Effective persistence ensures institutions remain visible and responsive throughout the student decision-making process.

# CONCLUSION



Google defines “micro-moments” as intent-driven moments when consumers turn to their devices to act on an immediate need. In higher education, these moments happen constantly — and they are becoming faster and more competitive.



Prospective students expect immediate, personalized engagement when researching programs online. Institutions must create digital experiences that allow students to move seamlessly from online exploration to meaningful human interaction.



Capturing inquiries is only the beginning. Institutions must respond quickly, engage personally, and nurture consistently across multiple channels in order to remain competitive.

## Contact

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The institutions that succeed will be those that combine optimized digital experiences with timely, human-centered engagement strategies designed around the expectations of today’s students.