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# The Admission Benchmarking Study

A Study of  
the Cost to Recruit a Traditional Student  
and the Admission Funnel  
at NACCAP Member Institutions  
Fall 2016 Edition

Tim Fuller  
Senior Vice President/Owner  
NACCAP Enrollment Research Project Leader  
Thayle Heggie, Project Manager  
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## Introduction

This is the 24<sup>th</sup> annual Admission Benchmarking Study (ABS). The purpose of the study is to help institutions compare their budget resources, staffing, return on investment and admission funnel ratios to similar institutions for the recruitment of traditional undergraduate students. For most NACCAP members, tuition and related revenues provide at least 85% of their total revenue, underscoring the importance of a regular and careful review of student recruitment resources, staffing and ratios.

The study follows NACCAP's regional boundaries for these purposes and breaks participants into five levels of enrollment. Participants are also divided into Christian liberal arts (defined as membership in the CCCU), Bible college (defined as accredited by ABHE) and an "other" category (includes Christian liberal arts institutions who are not members of the CCCU). Perhaps the most helpful grouping of all is the ability each participating institution has to create its own comparison set using the "watch list" feature, allowing for a mix of regions and other key variables.

The study does not include analysis of enrollment by adult learners in degree completion programs at either the undergraduate or graduate level, nor does it include data on traditional graduate programs and/or seminaries. NACCAP's leadership continues to explore the issues of the cost to recruit and other recruitment benchmarks for the adult and graduate programs on member campuses.

Coordination of data collection and analysis continues under the leadership of Tim Fuller, Credo Senior Vice President/Owner and former Senior Research Fellow for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Thayle Heggie has served faithfully for several years as Project Manager for this important research.

## Methodology

There are more than 200 NACCAP members with undergraduate programs for traditional students. The chief enrollment officer at each of these institutions was invited to participate in the study via email. Multiple reminders from the project team, as well as NACCAP's headquarters, helped increase the participation rate. 86 member institutions chose to share their complete data, and those members will have access to the member-by-member results; summary results such as those outlined in this report are available to all NACCAP members and, through the postings on [www.naccapresearch.org](http://www.naccapresearch.org), to other interested parties. Participants sharing their data and receiving access to full study findings agree not to share the member-by-member results with non-participating members and other higher education entities, including non-member institutions, associations and consulting firms.



Participants completed four separate worksheets that outlined data elements as follows:

- Budget resources
- Enrollment data (new students and total)
- Staffing and salary information
- Admission funnel numbers

The data from each participant was reviewed by the project team, compared against key ratios and other data checks to ensure accuracy, reviewed against other participants' data and then finalized for inclusion in overall, regional and enrollment size breakdowns. In some cases, potential errors were caught by website functionality; in others through project team review.

Several other NACCAP members completed portions of the study – their partial data is not included in the analysis that follows.

### Participants

As mentioned above, 86 NACCAP members participated in the Fall 2016 study. Participation by region and enrollment size is outlined in the chart that follows:

<b>NACCAP Admission Benchmarking Study</b>					
2016 Participant Breakdown					
<u>NACCAP Region</u>		<u>Enrollment *</u>		<u>Institution Type</u>	
Canada	8	Smallest (<450)	15	CCCU	54
Great Lakes	16	Small (451 - 799)	21	ABHE	17
Midwest	13	Medium (800 - 1,199)	15	Other	15
Northeast	10	Large (1,200 - 1,799)	18		
Northwest	9	Largest (> 1,799)	17		
Southeast	20				
Southwest	10				

\* defined as full-time enrollment in traditional undergraduate programs



## Study Limitations

Much of the data in this study is self-reported. It has been analyzed carefully – in some cases, numerous emails and phone calls to clarify data questions took place. The most common areas under discussion were:

- Professional and support staff FTEs
- Funds split between multiple budgets, especially marketing dollars on campuses where marketing is a centralized function

The website worksheets on which data was entered and analyzed include validity tests that flagged some of the above issues; others came up as the project team reviewed the data in comparison to other participants and/or due to experience with particular institutions. Other data points such as budget amounts for advertising, publications and travel do not lend themselves to ratio analysis or other means of verification so the project team has, for the most part, taken them at face value. In a few cases the project team has investigated further, always working towards the kind of uniform comparison that makes this study most helpful.

An issue that causes some challenges in reporting and gathering data is the increasing number of institutions with centralized marketing functions. In this model, much of the decision making about marketing activity and all or nearly all the funding for publications, advertising, direct mail and the website is gathered together, making it difficult to isolate funds devoted solely to the recruitment of traditional undergraduate students.

The results of the study are reviewed in the pages that follow. Even though some questions may still exist about the veracity of certain data points, the overall value of the study is sound, providing good comparisons in key budget, staffing and funnel categories that are critical to enrollment managers and the institutions they serve. Please contact the project team with any question regarding data.

## Cost to Recruit a Student

A major focus of this study is determining both institution-specific costs to recruit one new student as well as averages across the whole participant group, regions and levels of enrollment. The cost of recruiting a student includes typical budget items like travel, publications, direct mail, electronic media and other forms of advertising, campus visits, phone, postage and office supplies. Professional and support staff salaries, student wages and fringe benefits are also included, the latter through an estimated “tax” applied uniformly across all participants to account for institutional differences. A survey of a sampling of chief financial officers with whom Credo works suggested that 30% was a reasonable estimate for a benefits “tax” (including the value of tuition benefits for employees and their dependents). Other factors such as the square footage the admission office occupies or “taxes” for shared services such as custodial, maintenance or IT were not included in this study.



The chart that follows outlines how the average cost to recruit a student has changed since the first study of the fall 1993 cycle.

<b>NACCAP Cost to Recruit a New Student Study Results 1993-2016</b>						
	<b>Cost to Recruit a Student</b>	<b>Increase Over Previous Year</b>		<b>Cost to Recruit a Student</b>	<b>Increase Over Previous Year</b>	
<b>Fall of</b>				<b>Fall of</b>		
2016	\$ 3,316	3.2%		2004	\$ 2,143	5.4%
2015	\$ 3,214	6.6%		2003	\$ 2,034	-0.5%
2014	\$ 3,015	5.3%		2002	\$ 2,045	7.8%
2013	\$ 2,862	-0.2%		2001	\$ 1,897	2.5%
2012	\$ 2,867	9.3%		2000	\$ 1,850	5.4%
2011	\$ 2,623	3.0%		1999	\$ 1,756	4.6%
2010	\$ 2,547	2.4%		1998	\$ 1,678	6.1%
2009	\$ 2,487	0.9%		1997	\$ 1,582	1.8%
2008	\$ 2,464	5.9%		1996	\$ 1,554	3.9%
2007 **	\$ 2,326	12.4%		1995	\$ 1,496	-0.4%
2006*	\$ 2,070	-2.0%		1994	\$ 1,502	6.2%
2005	\$ 2,112	-1.4%		1993	\$ 1,414	
* spring new students included for first time				Total Increase		134.5%
** survey oversight switches to NACCAP from CCCU						

As with previous studies, the data reflects the economies of scale at work with student recruitment. Over the span of this research, an inverse relationship between enrollment and cost to recruit – the larger the enrollment, the lower the cost to recruit – has been evident. In general, the cost to recruit is higher at rural institutions than urban/suburban institutions, due in part to increased travel costs and the lack of a large, local group of potential students.

As the chart suggests, the cost to recruit a student has more than doubled over the 24 years of the study. This is the first of several data points reflective of the combined impact of competition, the economy, public perceptions and demographics on the business of recruiting students. According to the Department of Labor’s CPI Inflation Calculator, only about half of this increase could be attributed to inflation during this period.

The comparative cost to recruit a student overall, by region and by enrollment size is outlined in the following chart (and in ABS summary documents on [www.naccapresearch.org](http://www.naccapresearch.org)).



Cost to Recruit a Student - 2016			
All Participants	\$ 3,316		Smallest # \$ 3,901
Canada	\$ 3,333		Small # \$ 3,542
Great Lakes	\$ 3,460		Medium # \$ 3,563
Midwest	\$ 3,510		Large # \$ 2,969
Northeast	\$ 3,399		Largest # \$ 2,671
Northwest	\$ 3,412		Bible College \$ 4,009
Southeast	\$ 3,206		CCCU \$ 3,226
Southwest	\$ 2,873		Other CLA \$ 2,854

As this chart shows, the cost to recruit a student varies by category. In general, there are some economies of scale in larger operations which, along with brand recognition, lead to a lower cost to recruit a student. Regular participants will note the deviation from the normal pattern where the cost to recruit is lower as enrollment increases; this year’s participants in the “medium” category (800 – 1,199 total traditional undergraduates) once again spent more to recruit than those in the “small” category (see year by year comparison below for additional perspective).

The following chart shows how the cost to recruit a student by category has changed over the last six years of this study. Changes in participation within some of the smaller categories can lead to the appearance of substantial increases in the cost to recruit a student. The trend is clear, though; it costs more to recruit a student now than it did six years ago; specific factors driving this increased cost are outlined in the latter sections of this report.

Cost to Recruit a Student - 2011-2016						
Category	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
All Participants	\$ 2,623	\$ 2,867	\$ 2,862	\$ 3,015	\$ 3,214	\$ 3,316
Canada	\$ 2,672	\$ 3,560	\$ 2,959	\$ 3,026	\$ 3,783	\$ 3,333
Great Lakes	\$ 2,628	\$ 2,830	\$ 2,976	\$ 3,376	\$ 3,332	\$ 3,460
Midwest	\$ 2,607	\$ 2,623	\$ 2,962	\$ 2,747	\$ 2,910	\$ 3,510
Northeast	\$ 2,891	\$ 3,178	\$ 3,397	\$ 3,459	\$ 3,659	\$ 3,399
Northwest	\$ 2,489	\$ 3,505	\$ 3,349	\$ 3,113	\$ 3,265	\$ 3,412
Southeast	\$ 2,869	\$ 2,852	\$ 2,484	\$ 2,839	\$ 3,006	\$ 3,206
Southwest	\$ 2,180	\$ 2,531	\$ 2,299	\$ 2,468	\$ 2,914	\$ 2,873
Smallest #	\$ 2,822	\$ 3,324	\$ 3,273	\$ 3,540	\$ 4,056	\$ 3,901
Small #	\$ 3,131	\$ 3,712	\$ 3,219	\$ 3,178	\$ 3,677	\$ 3,542
Medium #	\$ 2,639	\$ 2,816	\$ 2,996	\$ 3,580	\$ 3,158	\$ 3,563
Large #	\$ 2,482	\$ 2,636	\$ 2,724	\$ 2,785	\$ 3,321	\$ 2,969
Largest #	\$ 2,183	\$ 2,212	\$ 2,196	\$ 2,375	\$ 2,389	\$ 2,671
Bible College	\$ 2,552	\$ 3,280	\$ 3,100	\$ 3,362	\$ 3,896	\$ 4,009
CCCU	\$ 2,535	\$ 2,861	\$ 2,800	\$ 2,898	\$ 3,071	\$ 3,226
Other CLA	\$ 3,617	\$ 2,276	\$ 2,983	\$ 3,285	\$ 3,137	\$ 2,854



### Staffing/Recruiting: Size of Staff and Relevant Ratios

NACCAP institutions participating in this study spend, on average, 56.1% of their budget resources on personnel including salaries, fringe benefits and student wages. One of the most frequently discussed topics within this study is how the staff resources an institution has committed to the recruitment/admission function compare to relevant benchmarks. The study gathers staffing information in three categories:

- Professional staff
- Recruiting staff (a subset of professional staff defined as those who have a recruitment territory)
- Support staff

Each category is reported in an FTE format to capture the portion of an employee’s time devoted to the undergraduate admission/recruitment function or to recruitment in the case of the recruitment FTE.

At first glance, the data suggests campuses are cutting back on admission staff in a few categories. At a time where the pressure to meet or exceed new student enrollment targets continues to rise (for fall 2017, **almost 76% of 148 NACCAP members reporting their fall funnel data missed their new student enrollment goal**), it is highly unlikely staff sizes are decreasing. The explanation for the drop in some categories is due to differences in institutional participation rates.

Here is an overview of staffing FTEs by category for the last five years of the study:

Staff Size - Professional Staff FTE						Staff Size - Recruiting FTE					
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>Overall</b>	9.0	9.0	9.0	9.6	8.8	<b>Overall</b>	6.5	6.3	6.3	6.5	6.0
<b>Canada</b>	6.9	7.0	6.7	5.5	7.5	<b>Canada</b>	5.2	4.8	4.9	3.8	5.8
<b>Great Lakes</b>	9.3	10.2	10.1	10.7	9.9	<b>Great Lakes</b>	6.5	7.0	6.8	7.0	6.6
<b>Midwest</b>	10.5	10.0	9.5	10.2	9.2	<b>Midwest</b>	7.9	7.4	7.0	7.6	6.8
<b>Northeast</b>	8.8	7.9	7.8	8.8	8.0	<b>Northeast</b>	6.9	5.8	6.1	6.4	5.5
<b>Northwest</b>	7.0	8.1	8.8	8.2	7.9	<b>Northwest</b>	5.0	5.9	6.3	5.5	5.2
<b>Southeast</b>	8.9	8.3	8.2	9.1	7.1	<b>Southeast</b>	6.0	5.6	5.4	6.1	4.6
<b>Southwest</b>	8.6	9.1	10.0	11.4	12.7	<b>Southwest</b>	5.8	6.1	6.7	7.6	8.6
<b>Smallest</b>	4.9	4.6	4.3	4.2	4.2	<b>Smallest</b>	3.4	3.1	2.9	2.8	2.8
<b>Small</b>	6.7	6.5	6.5	6.6	6.3	<b>Small</b>	4.8	4.5	4.5	4.7	4.1
<b>Medium</b>	8.5	8.6	8.5	9.0	8.9	<b>Medium</b>	6.0	6.0	5.6	5.9	6.0
<b>Large</b>	9.1	9.5	9.4	9.7	9.0	<b>Large</b>	7.0	6.9	6.7	6.8	6.0
<b>Largest</b>	13.2	13.8	14.4	14.8	15.7	<b>Largest</b>	9.1	9.5	9.8	10.0	11.3
<b>ABHE</b>	5.4	5.3	4.9	5.0	4.7	<b>ABHE</b>	3.8	3.7	3.5	3.5	2.9
<b>CCCU</b>	9.8	9.8	10.1	10.7	10.4	<b>CCCU</b>	7.0	6.9	7.1	7.3	7.3
<b>Other</b>	9.3	8.2	8.4	9.2	7.8	<b>Other</b>	6.4	5.5	4.9	6.0	5.0



Analysis of this data suggests that the gap between Professional Staff FTE and Recruiting FTE is the largest at the largest institutions, reflective of the additional layers of management and administrative support necessary to keep this size operation running smoothly.

Another way to look at the difference between Professional Staff FTE and Recruiting FTE is demonstrated in the chart that follows. This difference can be defined as administrative overhead. Campus guest coordinators often do not carry recruiting responsibilities; as enrollment leadership responsibilities increase, recruiting responsibilities (and portion of FTE load) typically decrease. This overhead benchmark is worth watching to ensure an office is functioning as efficiently as possible with overhead kept to a productive minimum.

Professional Staff Overhead*					
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Overall	2.6	2.7	2.8	3.0	2.8
Canada	1.8	2.2	1.8	1.7	1.7
Great Lakes	2.8	3.2	3.4	3.7	3.3
Midwest	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.7	2.4
Northeast	1.9	2.1	1.7	2.3	2.5
Northwest	1.9	2.1	2.6	2.7	2.7
Southeast	2.9	2.7	2.8	3.0	2.5
Southwest	2.8	3.0	3.3	3.8	4.1
Smallest	1.6	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.4
Small	1.9	2.1	2.1	1.9	2.2
Medium	2.5	2.5	2.8	3.0	2.9
Large	2.0	2.6	2.7	3.0	3.0
Largest	4.0	4.3	4.6	4.7	4.4
ABHE	1.6	1.6	1.4	1.4	1.8
CCCU	2.7	2.9	3.1	3.4	3.1
Other	2.9	2.6	3.5	3.2	2.8
* defined as the difference between professional staff and recruiting staff FTE					

In the author’s experience many, if not most, admission teams believe they are understaffed and often at the admission counselor level. When analyzed at a campus level in comparison to relevant benchmarks, this data often suggests **additional support staff might be the most strategic investment, especially if this addition enabled those with recruitment responsibilities to divest themselves of support-type duties and focus exclusively on building relationships with prospective students and those who influence them.**

Another recent factor influencing staff sizes is the fall “roadrunner” counselor hired on a short-term basis to cover fall travel. In theory, this reduces wear and tear on full-time staff, creating additional time and energy for focus on direct recruitment of students and other office priorities. It could also create a



ready pool of trained counselor candidates should an opening arrive. For some enrollment leaders, minimizing time on the road for full-time team members is an attempt to encourage longer tenures. Time will tell if these goals are achieved and if these gains offset the potential loss of regional connections for a well-trained counselor serving a territory over a period of several years.

<b>Staff Size - Support Staff FTE</b>					
	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>
<b>Overall</b>	3.3	3.1	3.2	3.3	2.9
<b>Canada</b>	1.8	1.4	1.6	0.8	1.0
<b>Great Lakes</b>	3.6	4.1	4.0	4.1	4.2
<b>Midwest</b>	3.3	3.0	3.2	3.3	2.8
<b>Northeast</b>	3.9	2.8	3.0	2.6	2.5
<b>Northwest</b>	2.4	2.8	2.6	2.1	1.7
<b>Southeast</b>	3.0	2.5	2.6	3.1	2.7
<b>Southwest</b>	3.2	3.6	3.6	5.0	4.4
<b>Smallest</b>	1.9	0.7	0.8	1.1	1.2
<b>Small</b>	1.8	1.6	1.8	1.6	1.5
<b>Medium</b>	2.6	2.5	2.7	2.5	2.5
<b>Large</b>	3.7	3.3	3.0	3.5	3.3
<b>Largest</b>	5.2	6.0	6.1	6.2	6.0
<b>ABHE</b>	1.9	1.1	1.3	1.2	1.3
<b>CCCU</b>	3.7	3.6	3.7	4.0	3.7
<b>Other</b>	2.3	1.6	1.7	2.1	1.6

One of the most frequently asked questions about this study relates to the number of new students that a professional staff member does/should generate. Presidents and board members often ask this question, looking to either evaluate the performance of their current team or calculate the potential return on investment in an additional admission counselor. As a reminder, the Recruiting FTE in this study represents the proportion of the Professional Staff FTE who actually recruit students directly (as in manage a recruitment territory or population) as opposed to supporting these efforts through administrative oversight (most vice presidents/deans) and other tasks (data and systems, admission marketing, campus visit, tele-counseling or communication flow coordination, etc.).

The summary numbers that follow create a comparison point to answer these questions, or at least begin to answer them. Enrollment managers and others should exercise caution in the application of these numbers, recognizing that there are many other factors at work in determining the effectiveness of an enrollment team or admission counselor. Consider the difference, for example, in the work of an admission counselor responsible for recruiting students solely within a 25-mile radius of a suburban or urban campus with that of a counselor on a rural campus responsible for a four-state area in the Great Plains. Consider recruiting for a campus that has a long history and strong reputation against the far different challenge recruiting for a struggling campus. Both examples underscore the note of caution expressed above.



The ratios that follow reflect an efficiency measure and return on investment in staff. The trend over the life of this study has been towards reduced efficiency. Along with the cost-to-recruit data, this suggests that maintaining and growing enrollment has been an increasing challenge, requiring ever-increasing investments in budget and staffing. For fall 2016 there was a substantive drop in this ratio, reflective of a challenging year in student recruitment, struggles with return on investment and some differences generated by varying institutional participation.

<b>NACCAP - Ratio of New Students to Professional Staff FTE: 1993-2016</b>						
	<b>New Students Per Professional Staff FTE</b>	<b>Change From Previous Year</b>		<b>New Students Per Professional Staff FTE</b>	<b>Change From Previous Year</b>	
<b>Fall of</b>	<b>Staff FTE</b>	<b>Year</b>		<b>Fall of</b>	<b>Staff FTE</b>	<b>Year</b>
2016	42.4	-8.0%		2004	58.4	0.6%
2015	46.1	-5.1%		2003	58.0	-3.5%
2014	48.6	-1.0%		2002	60.1	0.6%
2013	49.1	-1.2%		2001	59.8	-1.9%
2012	49.7	-2.9%		2000	61.0	4.7%
2011	51.1	-5.9%		1999	58.2	-3.4%
2010	54.3	3.6%		1998	60.3	-2.4%
2009	52.5	-0.8%		1997	61.7	2.1%
2008	52.9	-4.6%		1996	60.5	-4.3%
2007 **	55.4	-6.1%		1995	63.2	0.9%
2006*	59.1	2.7%		1994	62.6	-5.8%
2005	57.5	-1.5%		1993	66.4	
* spring new students included for first time				Total Efficiency Change		-36.2%
** survey oversight switches to NACCAP from CCCU						



As mentioned above, the study breaks out professional staff with specific recruiting responsibilities. Since year-to-year comparisons offer limited value initially, the following chart reflects the differences by region and enrollment for the last five years of the study. This data is another of several indicators in this study about how much more challenging it is to recruit traditional new students each year.

<b>NACCAP - Ratio of New Students to Professional Staff Recruiting FTE</b>					
	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>
<b>Overall</b>	70.3	71.1	72.0	68.2	65.6
<b>Canada</b>	43.8	54.6	48.6	47.2	46.0
<b>Great Lakes</b>	71.8	72.1	68.7	68.8	66.1
<b>Midwest</b>	65.7	58.1	69.0	67.8	57.7
<b>Northeast</b>	53.9	56.0	54.6	50.0	57.3
<b>Northwest</b>	54.6	69.1	80.4	65.1	65.1
<b>Southeast</b>	80.6	79.8	78.2	74.0	70.5
<b>Southwest</b>	91.5	102.3	96.0	87.1	72.1
<b>Smallest</b>	46.5	42.9	45.8	40.1	50.5
<b>Small</b>	55.0	56.1	60.0	50.8	55.0
<b>Medium</b>	64.2	62.4	60.5	59.4	54.4
<b>Large</b>	73.1	78.1	77.5	69.3	80.6
<b>Largest</b>	95.7	106.1	101.0	101.0	85.9
<b>ABHE</b>	57.6	57.6	55.4	40.8	54.7
<b>CCCU</b>	73.0	75.2	75.8	75.5	68.1
<b>Other</b>	70.5	59.0	77.0	61.7	68.7

As with the cost to recruit data, there is a correlation between enrollment and this Recruiting FTE. Typically, the larger the school, the larger the number of new students generated per counselor, although this year, due in large measure to a few institutions in the Smallest and Small category, the typical pattern did not repeat completely. This correlation probably reveals more about institutional momentum and marketing strength than it does about individual admission counselor effectiveness or productivity.

In addition to the notes of caution mentioned above, it is important to understand what this last ratio does not, or at least may not mean for staffing decisions. It does not mean, for example, that a Great Lakes region campus looking to grow by 66 new students should expect the mere addition of a full-time admission counselor focused exclusively on recruiting will accomplish this goal. On some campuses the best way to focus more energy and effort on recruiting new students may be to hire another support staff person who can relieve counselors of routine tasks that are keeping them from building relationships with prospective students. On other campuses, admission counselors may be highly efficient and focused already with reasonably-sized territories where further sub-division may not add to efficiencies and generate a positive return on investment; rather, the institution may need to make additional investments in marketing to build overall awareness or develop a better mix of programs.



## **New Student Patterns by Term and Enrollment Type**

Most new students enroll at participating institutions in the fall semester; on average, 92.1 % of the 31,693 new students who enrolled in the 2016 recruitment cycle enrolled in the fall. While spring semester enrollment is generally neither typical or preferred, campuses that organize themselves to leverage spring enrollment, including support services and new student orientation, may see solid returns on investment. On most NACCAP campuses, fall-to-spring attrition and December graduates outnumber new spring semester students, creating a net loss in enrollment. Housing is often available as is space in classes, creating further rationale for some spring semester recruitment initiatives.

Of the new students who enrolled at participating institutions in fall 2016, 26.4% were transfers, a noticeable increase from 2015's 21.8%. In recent years, many private colleges and universities have become much more intentional with transfer recruitment strategies, so it is encouraging to see this improved performance and a greater return on an investment in transfers.

Participating NACCAP schools reflect the gender ratio present in North American higher education today with women representing 55.5% of total student enrollment in traditional programs. Participants whose enrollment reflect a more balanced gender split usually achieve this based on program offerings, the presence of a football team or a more selective admission picture that allows for shaping of the new student class.

What do these ratios mean for individual campuses? Comparing individual campus ratios to overall, regional and/or enrollment-based ratios may reveal a potential source of untapped students. On the other hand, and for example, a low transfer ratio may reflect institutional strategy out of a position of enrollment strength, indicating a strong preference for enrolling new students for four years, not two or three.



## Spending by Category

In the 2015-16 budget year, the participating institutions spent over \$102 million on salaries, fringe benefits, student wages and other student recruitment expenses, an average of approximately \$1.19 million per institution. If you consider only 86 of the 200 plus eligible NACCAP institutions participated in the study and extrapolate these results, the projected economic impact of student recruitment efforts among NACCAP member institutions exceeds \$238 million (and this figure only covers the recruitment of students in traditional programs)!

The largest proportion of budget resources was allocated to labor costs – salaries, fringe benefits and student wages. On average, participating institutions spent 56.1% of their budget dollars on labor costs, an increase from the 2015 figure of 54.4%.

The category “Percentage vs. Total Non-Salary Budget Dollars” gives a clear picture of institutional strategy and priority. For example, one college or university with limited resources may choose to commit funds to personnel to make recruitment as personal as possible; another may spend more on a dynamic website and extensive direct mail, generating good impressions and a wider audience.

Please see the summary documents for specific category spending and percentage averages.

## Compensation

The study captures salary information for new admission counselors and other professional positions in the admission office. New counselor salary information is shared on a school-by-school basis for participating institutions; other salary information is reported in summary form only since it represents the individual salary information for a specific person. “Length of service” and “Time in current position” data is also gathered to provide some additional context for salary figures. No attempt is made to capture variances in fringe benefits, either from institution to institution or between positions.

The following chart shows average compensation patterns for the last four years of the study. The most helpful comparisons are within regions or enrollment categories since they account for differences in cost of living or institutional resources. Additional information including salary means by region and enrollment size is available on the summary documents from this study. Information about how length of service and other factors impact salary is available upon request.



<b>Admission Professional Salary Survey 2013-2017</b>							
	<b>2013-14</b>		<b>2014-15</b>		<b>2015-16</b>		<b>2016-17</b>
	<b>Salary</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Salary</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Salary</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Salary</b>
<b>Admission Counselor</b>	\$ 30,582	2.66%	\$ 31,397	1.62%	\$ 31,905	0.10%	\$ 31,938
<b>Senior Admission Counselor</b>	\$ 34,546	5.76%	\$ 36,536	2.23%	\$ 37,351	-0.03%	\$ 37,338
<b>Assistant Director</b>	\$ 39,682	1.57%	\$ 40,306	1.28%	\$ 40,821	1.35%	\$ 41,371
<b>Associate Director</b>	\$ 44,514	-0.37%	\$ 44,349	6.43%	\$ 47,201	2.18%	\$ 48,228
<b>Director of Admission</b>	\$ 57,507	1.88%	\$ 58,588	4.38%	\$ 61,157	0.18%	\$ 61,269
<b>VP/Dean of Enrollment</b>	\$ 91,780	3.41%	\$ 94,908	6.30%	\$ 100,885	-6.84%	\$ 93,983

The changes in participation in the study probably explain most of the average salary increases over the last few years. These salary figures do not reflect additional compensation losses that may have occurred around fringe benefits. In recent years, many private colleges and universities have rolled back retirement account matching, increased health insurance participation fees/deductibles and taken other steps to curb personnel costs. Given the critical dependence on tuition revenues and the corresponding importance of maintaining an experienced, talented admission team, these compensation patterns cause concern for enrollment leaders and those to whom they report. Institutions looking to break the cycle of constant turnover in the all-too-critical admission counselor role should create clear avenues for promotion, professional development and salary increases designed to attract and keep good people in these vital positions.

The salary data from this study provide a foundational context on which to build a staff retention plan with promotions and compensation improvements. Customized salary case studies can be created upon request. For example, an enrollment leader from a campus in the Midwest reached out several years ago, eager to determine a competitive salary for a newly approved associate director position. Careful research by project staff enabled him to create the right salary for this new position as well as a reasoned, data-informed plan to present to his cabinet colleagues for enrollment office compensation throughout his team.

The biggest year-over-year gains were realized at the three highest levels. Enrollment leadership skills and a successful track record are becoming an increasingly rare combination; these salary trends reflect one strategy to attracting and keeping strong enrollment leaders.

The existence of a senior admission counselor position reflects the value that many institutions place on experienced counselors remaining on the recruitment team for more than the typical tenure. 52.3% of the participating institutions report the presence of a senior counselor position, an increase from last year's 46.7%; for those who do, the average difference between a starting counselor and a senior counselor salary is just over \$4,400. Four institutions place tremendously high value on the senior counselor position with salary bumps exceeding \$10,000/year over a starting counselor salary (and one of these has a bump exceeding \$20,000)!



Nine NACCAP members provide vehicles for at least one member of the admission team. Only five of the 86 participating institutions give admission counselors a car as a part of their compensation package. Two directors and six vice presidents receive a car or car allowance as part of their compensation package. For purposes of this study, \$5,000 was added to the salary figure to account for the provision of a vehicle.

Here is another look at average salaries by position and category.

2016 NACCAP Admission Benchmarking Study						
Grouping	Starting Counselor Salary	Senior Counselor Salary	Assistant Director Salary	Associate Director Salary	Director Salary	VP Enrollment Mgmt Salary
<i>All Participants</i>	\$ 31,938	\$ 37,338	\$ 41,371	\$ 48,228	\$ 61,269	\$ 93,983
<i>Canada</i>	\$ 34,830	\$ 41,310		\$ 57,767	\$ 59,867	\$ 77,642
<i>Great Lakes</i>	\$ 30,351	\$ 35,331	\$ 39,657	\$ 42,548	\$ 56,853	\$ 94,343
<i>Midwest</i>	\$ 29,833	\$ 36,561	\$ 36,241	\$ 45,990	\$ 58,653	\$ 96,359
<i>Northeast</i>	\$ 30,360	\$ 37,076	\$ 39,100	\$ 45,355	\$ 58,793	\$ 102,904
<i>Northwest</i>	\$ 34,211	\$ 35,595	\$ 43,296	\$ 52,183	\$ 61,430	\$ 84,087
<i>Southeast</i>	\$ 28,757	\$ 33,246	\$ 39,917	\$ 42,752	\$ 55,989	\$ 90,829
<i>Southwest</i>	\$ 40,208	\$ 45,098	\$ 50,408	\$ 58,496	\$ 86,397	\$ 109,574
<i>Smallest #</i>	\$ 28,354	\$ 34,714	\$ 37,333	\$ 37,389	\$ 42,727	\$ 62,250
<i>Small #</i>	\$ 31,561	\$ 37,669	\$ 42,289	\$ 49,718	\$ 56,908	\$ 85,070
<i>Medium #</i>	\$ 32,244	\$ 34,804	\$ 38,807	\$ 43,231	\$ 57,415	\$ 87,372
<i>Large #</i>	\$ 30,593	\$ 32,447	\$ 38,732	\$ 47,954	\$ 58,589	\$ 97,226
<i>Largest #</i>	\$ 36,299	\$ 44,173	\$ 49,056	\$ 53,726	\$ 81,775	\$ 122,365
<i>Bible College</i>	\$ 29,140	\$ 37,266	\$ 40,900	\$ 39,392	\$ 42,818	\$ 75,932
<i>CCCU</i>	\$ 32,385	\$ 37,522	\$ 41,619	\$ 49,666	\$ 67,205	\$ 99,147
<i>Other CLA</i>	\$ 33,126	\$ 36,555	\$ 40,361	\$ 46,655	\$ 56,332	\$ 88,599

### Education Levels

Participants were asked to list the minimum degree requirements for five levels of professional admission staff positions – admission counselor, assistant director, associate director, director and vice president/dean. The results are as follows (school by school details available to participating institutions on request):

- All but three require a minimum of a bachelor’s degree for employment as an admission counselor. Two report requiring master’s degrees for counselors.
- Assistant or associate director – 7 require a master’s degree and 2 require something less than a bachelor’s degree; the balance consider a bachelor’s degree the minimum level of education
- Director – 34 institutions require a master’s degree; the balance a bachelor’s degree



- VP/Dean – 15 institutions consider a bachelor’s degree the minimum qualification, 3 require a doctorate, and 68 require a master’s degree.

This question about qualifications was answered in most cases by the person occupying the chief enrollment officer position, typically the vice president or dean. The question of minimum qualifications for a chief enrollment officer might have been answered differently by a president. A vice president with a master’s degree might conclude that he/she has minimal credentials, for example, even though the president might choose to require a doctorate the next time the position is open. A vice president with an earned doctorate might conclude that his/her successor would be required to have the same degree when, in fact, the president might see this differently.

## The Admission Funnel

The study measures five key recruitment data points and the yield rates they produce. The institutional view of the recruitment process, whereby a large number of potential students produces a relatively small number of matriculating new students, is commonly referred to as the admission funnel. Unlike the funnels used in kitchens and garages, though, everything put into the top of this funnel does not come out the bottom! The funnel concept illustrates the narrowing process from inquiry through application to eventual enrollment – some colleges and universities carry this concept further, extending the funnel to persistence to the sophomore year, to graduation and even to the point of becoming a productive member of the alumni association.

Increasing numbers of stealth applicants have changed some funnel dynamics as more and more students bypass the inquiry stage. This change has forced colleges to rework communication plans to fill gaps for stealth applicants.

Definitions are critical in developing meaningful comparisons – for purposes of this study, the five key recruitment data points were defined as follows for the study’s exclusive focus on new students in traditional, undergraduate programs:

1. Inquiries – potential first-year college students who expressed interest in the institution. For example, this number was not to include those who were targeted with direct mail efforts but never responded.
2. Applicants – potential first-year college students who applied for admission.
3. Completed applicants – potential first-year college students who submitted an application for admission as well as all other required documents (SAT/ACT scores, high school transcript, recommendation(s), etc.) so that an admission decision could be made on their behalf.



4. Admitted applicants – potential first-year college students who were admitted to the institution, regardless of their eventual college choice.
5. Enrolled students – as the label implies, those potential first-year college students who decided to enroll at the institution.

Six different yield rates emerge from these five key funnel points and are presented on the summary documents.

As experienced enrollment managers know, the funnel analogy falls apart at some key points as the following fictitious example illustrates:

<b>The Funnel Analogy Breakdown</b>					
<b>Category</b>	<b>Initial Funnel Numbers</b>	<b>Yield Rates</b>	<b>Top of the Funnel Investment Numbers</b>	<b>Reality Check Yield Rates</b>	<b>Reality Check Funnel Numbers</b>
Applications	1,000		2,000		2,000
Completed Applications	800	80.0%	1,600	60.0%	1,200
Admits	780	97.5%	1,560	97.6%	1,171
Matriculants	300	38.5%	601	28.0%	328

In this fictitious example, the institution was convinced a big investment in the top of the funnel to increase applications (the Top of the Funnel Investment Numbers column) would produce a dramatic enrollment increase, assuming that yield rates along the funnel would hold constant. The flaws in this kind of thinking include assumptions that:

- There are systems in place to handle increased application traffic.
- The staffing levels are adequate to deal with more applications – assuming a staff of four admission counselors, for example, the applications/counselor ratio just doubled!
- These new applications would progress through the funnel at the same rate as historical inquiries that were probably developed from relatively high-yield sources (SAT/ACT scores, alumni and current student referrals, unsolicited inquiries from the institutional website, etc.).

The ‘Reality Check’ column suggests the more likely outcome, with decreased yield rates throughout the funnel. A careful return on investment analysis would need to be done before concluding that adding 28 new students was worth the investment necessary to generate this kind of increase in the inquiry pool. This analysis does not consider the financial aid/tuition discount factors, either, as it might take



more financial aid resources to attract these potential students who lack a strong connection to the institution.

This example is a reminder of several important admission funnel principles:

- More applications (or inquiries) are not always a good thing if they are the wrong “more” in terms of mission fit.
- The point is not to get more applications; the point is to enroll more students, and more applications may distract you from the more important goal.

This study focuses exclusively on the admission portion of the funnel and on potential first-year college students only. Transfers are not part of the funnel discussion herein.

The issue of completed applications is increasingly critical as a measure of applicant interest – surprisingly enough, many participants do not track this regularly. An uncomplicated way to calculate this number is to add the number of students who were denied admission (completed the application process, were considered for admission but not granted admission) to the total admit number. Dividing this completed application number by the total application number yields the completion rate outlined in the study as presented in the example below.

Calculating a Completion Rate	
Category	Number
Applications	1,566
Denials	51
Admits	871
Completed Applications	922
Completion Rate	58.9%
Admission Percentage	94.5%
Denial Percentage	5.5%

For the last two decades, this study has highlighted the importance of completion rates. The challenges to reaching and/or maintaining a healthy completion rate have increased with heavy levels of investment in direct mail and “fast app” strategies designed to make applying easier for students. In some cases, making the application process simpler is a worthy goal, especially if an institution is requiring steps that are no longer relevant, or even inappropriate, given their level of selectivity. However, the ultimate goal of a recruitment process is to enroll (and retain) as many great fit students



as possible and increasing application totals may not always be a means to this end. For some institutions, increasing the completion rate may be a more productive strategy than increasing application totals.

A low completion rate may be a sign of one or more of the following factors:

- An application which takes minimal effort to complete – this can lead to misleading application totals
- Application requirements which are too rigorous – a good admission office exercise is comparing your application requirements to your top five competitors on a regular basis. Requiring three recommendations at a time when your competitors are not requiring any should inspire reflection on the reasons for each recommendation and its actual utility in making admission decisions.
- The need for additional focus on completion rates by territory managers – set a completion rate goal for your team based on your recent performance and/or relevant NACCAP benchmarking data, then hold them accountable to achieve this goal.

The example above also highlights one of the most misunderstood concepts in admission, perpetuated by *U.S. News & World Report* and other college publications reporting “acceptance rates” which make campuses appear much more selective than they are. In most of these publications, the reported acceptance rate compares admitted applicants to total applicants, not completed applicants. While it is technically true that an incomplete application represents behavior befitting an “applicant,” the reality is they were not denied admission if they never fulfilled the requirements necessary to have such a decision rendered.

Why does this matter? Misreporting acceptance rates does not give a true picture of selectivity and even the academic climate on the campus, perhaps discouraging some potential students and giving a false impression to others.

The Funnel Study Summary documents from the 2016 Admission Benchmarking Study highlight both average numbers and yield rates along the funnel for the overall study as well as by the regional and total enrollment breakdowns that are typically more helpful – here are a few highlights from this summary:

- On average, 17.3% of all inquiries apply for admission – these rates varied widely by region and enrollment size and increased from last year’s 15.25%. The variations in this rate are reflective of changes in participation (smaller institutions tend to have higher inquiry to application rates) and the continued emphasis on high-volume top of the funnel strategies. The increase for this year may suggest several factors:



- Continued de-emphasis of mass “top of the funnel” strategies and a switch to more focused efforts
- The stealth applicant factor
- More consistent application of predictive modeling to recruiting strategies.
- Over the last five years of this study, the overall completion rate dropped from 72% to 68.6%. In other words, the average college or university with 1,000 applicants could count on 314 of these students dropping out of the application process prior to an admission decision. As mentioned earlier in this study, enrollment leaders should focus their teams on improving completion rates by studying their causes and developing appropriate action plans.
- 91.1% of all completed applicants were granted admission – therefore, there is little room to grow the new student population at the typical participating institution by dropping admission standards.
- On average, 39.2% % of all admitted students enrolled for fall 2016, a sizeable increase from last year’s 36.7% and a reversal of a pattern of decline in this key metric from the 44% figure for fall 2010.

The chart that follows highlights average yield rates down the funnel for the overall, regional and enrollment categories of this study.



### Average Yield Rates - 2016 Study

Grouping	Inquiry to Application	App to Completed App	Completed App to Admitted	Admitted to Enrolled	Inquired to Enrolled
<i>All Participants</i>	17.3%	68.6%	91.1%	39.2%	4.1%
<i>Canada</i>	20.8%	77.3%	92.1%	60.6%	8.9%
<i>Great Lakes</i>	15.3%	74.7%	93.8%	32.9%	3.7%
<i>Midwest</i>	24.7%	64.6%	89.1%	33.8%	4.2%
<i>Northeast</i>	11.8%	70.3%	92.9%	44.5%	3.5%
<i>Northwest</i>	16.9%	68.9%	91.8%	31.8%	3.8%
<i>Southeast</i>	15.1%	61.9%	89.5%	41.3%	3.0%
<i>Southwest</i>	18.4%	67.6%	89.0%	35.9%	3.6%
<i>Smallest*</i>	18.5%	61.3%	97.2%	59.3%	6.7%
<i>Small*</i>	17.4%	68.0%	89.2%	45.2%	4.3%
<i>Medium*</i>	13.3%	69.9%	91.7%	32.6%	3.1%
<i>Large*</i>	20.3%	68.3%	90.8%	28.1%	3.5%
<i>Largest*</i>	16.9%	74.7%	87.7%	31.5%	3.1%
<i>Bible College</i>	16.3%	60.4%	96.8%	56.8%	5.9%
<i>CCCU</i>	15.0%	71.4%	89.4%	32.8%	3.1%
<i>Other CLA</i>	26.8%	67.6%	90.4%	42.1%	5.6%
* Enrollment categories for total, full-time undergraduates in traditional programs					
Smallest: 0 to 450					
Small: 451 to 799					
Medium: 800 to 1,199					
Large: 1,200 to 1,799					
Largest: 1,800 or more					



## Using this Study

Beyond the gathering of historical trends and comparison points, this study is most valuable to individual institutions attempting to determine how key ratios, spending levels and the cost to recruit compare to peer institutions. Strategies employed by past participants to effectively utilize this study include:

- Tracking year-to-year patterns and setting targets – are you making progress key strategic metrics?
- Using the budget categories and funnel definitions in this study as a means of altering standard operating procedures to align with participants for comparison purposes
- Reviewing budget percentages and the priorities they reflect against key peer institutions/competitors and developing strategies accordingly
  - To reallocate resources
  - To leverage additional budget resources/staffing

When utilizing study data for these purposes, remember to find the right comparison group and carefully consider institutional differences. There are lots of successful models for budgeting and staffing; the model which works for someone else may not work for you given your unique setting and mission.

Consider involving several team members in the review of your institutional data, making use of the tools on the research site for displaying your data against some key benchmark groups or individual campuses. As you look at your data, try and imagine how the data might appear to your president or CFO; how would you address their questions about it?

Your study of the data should result in some areas for further investigation and even some short and long-term goals to increase or restructure staff resources, improve your ratios and develop more efficient processes and systems (doing more with less). Consider how you will share your analysis of the data and your resulting goals with your team and your leadership colleagues.

The data from the study raises several important questions, though. First of all, in a time where institutional resources are scarce and it is costing more to recruit, are there alternatives to ongoing increases to recruitment and marketing budgets? The cost to recruit a student more than doubled in 24 years; can the Christian college industry absorb this pattern going forward?



At tuition-driven institutions, increased net revenue comes from one or more of several sources:

- Enrollment growth (traditional, online, non-traditional and graduate)
- More efficient use of existing resources in recruiting, financial aid and marketing
- Improved retention

Increases in annual fund and endowment, changes in program mix (deleting unproductive curricular and co-curricular programs, adding new tuition generating programs), cooperative ventures with other institutions (group purchasing, partnerships, mergers/acquisitions) and the development of alternative revenue streams (summer conference revenue, athletics/academics camps, etc.) are other potential sources of net revenue as well. Since this study focuses on the enrollment of traditional new students, the next few paragraphs address some possible answers to the questions raised in the preceding paragraph.

Rather than simply accepting this rising cost to recruit a student, here are some recommendations to consider with a goal of more efficient/effective recruitment operations and strategies:

- Technology and streamlining processes and systems – the author continues to be surprised by highly manual operations in relatively sophisticated admission offices; as funnel volume grows through aggressive top of the funnel strategies and because of a buyer’s market, manual processes are often not scalable without significant investments in additional staff. Does your ERP (and/or CRM) facilitate efficient gathering, storing, retrieving, analysis and application of data?
- Organizational capabilities – to borrow language from the author Jim Collins, do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Do you have enough of the right people? Finding the right people to carry out key recruitment tasks is critical to efficient, effective operations. How is your team configured to gather data, develop strategies, provide welcoming experiences for campus guests, lead at several levels, build critical campus partnerships and recruit students?
- Analytics and metrics – how carefully are you studying the return on investments you are making in marketing and recruiting? For example, the answer to enrollment declines is not solely increasing the volume of leads without a careful analysis of their likelihood to enroll at your institution and/or the necessary resources to effectively communicate with and nurture them. Aggressive, top-of-the-funnel strategies can backfire. In some cases, it may be better to focus on more modest approaches to building the enrollment funnel. In other cases, the high-volume approach needs to be accompanied by a focus on the systems, processes and staffing (levels and deployment) necessary to maximize their impact. In all cases, it is essential to count the added cost versus the needed additional enrollment numbers; in other words, the return on investment.



Another target for analytics and metrics is other peer and aspirational campuses. What can you learn from studying their metrics like funnel ratios and cost to recruit a student? Close attention to the data might reveal some peers who are both successful and efficient, creating opportunities for conversation with them.

The data in this study focuses exclusively on admission and recruitment factors such as budget, staffing and funnel ratios; and on some promotional/marketing factors. In the language of the classic “4 P’s of Marketing,” issues related to Product, Place and Price (and People) are also critical in achieving strategic enrollment health.

For example:

- Does the college offer the right programs in the right delivery modality with appropriate levels of student engagement in the learning process? Are you relevant to your target audience?
- Are faculty functioning both as great classroom professors and personal mentors for students exploring their sense of calling in light of their gifts and talents?
- Does the physical environment, the factors of Place, help drive enrollment decisions?
- How is Price factored into the enrollment equation through financial aid and other strategies?
- Are you organized for marketing success and to prioritize enrollment marketing in particular? What messages are you using to drive traffic to your website and move students down the funnel?
- Are you alone in this effort or are others in key functions helping you? Wise enrollment leaders are experts at mobilizing key campus partners to help achieve enrollment goals.

As a reminder, participants agree not to share the school-by-school results of this study with other members, organizations, etc. The summarized results are considered public information and, as such, will be posted on [www.naccapresearch.org](http://www.naccapresearch.org), utilized as the basis for presentations at the annual NACCAP conference and used in other forms and venues.

### **About the Author**

Tim Fuller serves as Project Leader for NACCAP Enrollment Research and this annual study. He joined Credo in 2007 after a 27-year enrollment career at Houghton College (NY). During his tenure in enrollment leadership at Houghton he served as both Vice President and then President of NACCAP (1985-1988) and also served on the CCCU’s Commission of Chief Enrollment Officers for 14 years (1990–2004). In 1993 he began conducting a cost to recruit study for the CCCU, building on similar work done for several years prior for the Christian College Consortium. In Tim’s current role as Senior Vice President at Credo, he leads the firm’s work with Christian colleges and universities in the areas of enrollment, strategic planning, research and comprehensive projects.



Thayle Heggie serves as Project Manager for NACCAP Enrollment Research. She is a graduate of Guilford College and joined Credo after a 13-year career in the admission office of her alma mater specializing in transfer recruitment and campus guest experiences.

Several members of Credo's Enrollment Solutions team (Amy Tomko, Dave Burke and Roger Kieffer) contributed to the concluding section of this study, offering insights on the application of this data based on their campus and enrollment consulting experience.

For more information about this study, please contact Tim or Thayle via:

Phone – (336) 585-1044

Email – [tfuller@credohighered.com](mailto:tfuller@credohighered.com) or [theggie@credohighered.com](mailto:theggie@credohighered.com)

For more information about Credo please visit [www.credohighered.com](http://www.credohighered.com)