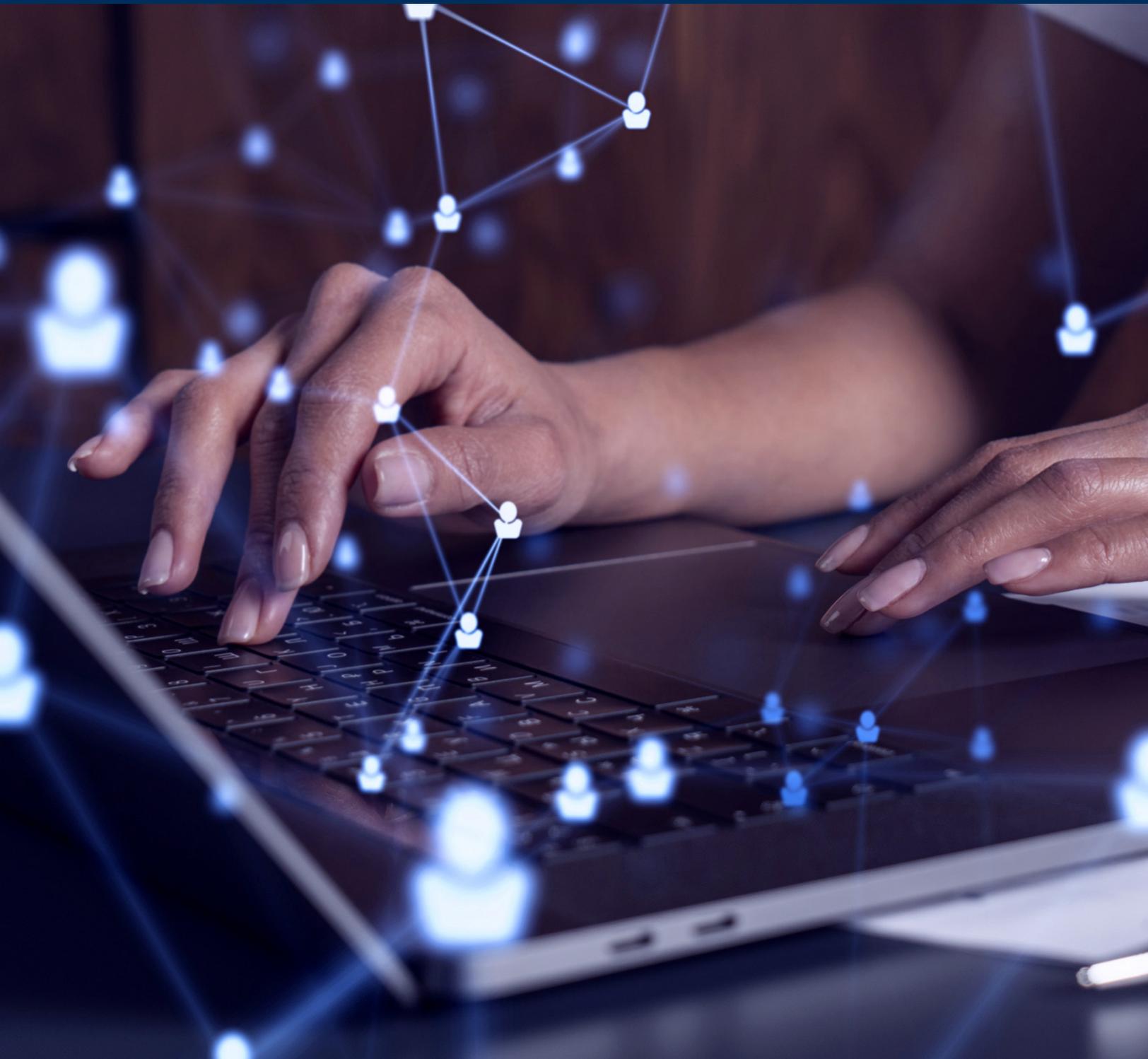# RNL®

2022 Cost of Recruiting an Undergraduate Student Report

Key metrics for four-year colleges and universities

Maximizing every recruitment dollar: Why benchmarking cost is critical in today's environment

When RNL conducted the last *Cost of Recruiting an Undergraduate Student* survey at the end of 2019, colleges and universities were already experiencing steep challenges. The increased competition for a flattening pool of traditional college students, the escalating financial need of students and families, and the digital transformation of student search stretched campus resources and made student recruitment more challenging and expensive for many institutions.

Now after two years of disruption due to the pandemic, those challenges are even greater and the cost of recruiting students higher. The latest data show that the cost to recruit a student rose by nearly 32 percent for four-year private institutions and 5 percent for four-year publics. It's more important than ever for campuses to understand how much they are spending to recruit the students they want, where those costs stand in relation to their peer institutions, and how they can improve their ROI.

Cost of recruiting data provide a key benchmark for ROI

This report provides data collected from enrollment and admissions professionals at four-year institutions, public and private (see pp. 9-10 for details about methodology and participating institutions). While every institution is unique, these benchmarks should provide insight into how much ROI your campus has on its marketing and recruitment dollars, including:

• **Metrics for first-time-in-college undergraduates, transfer students, and international students.**
• **Data on staffing levels related to recruitment.**
• **Survey results on budget priorities and allocations.**

Use our worksheet on P. 11, then talk with us about your results

You can quickly calculate your own costs for recruiting and compare the results to these benchmarks—simply use the worksheet on p. 11. We can also help you assess your enrollment strategies and optimize your efforts.

Set up a time to talk with our enrollment experts at **RNL.com/Consultation**

Survey Findings

All results in this report are *median* figures unless otherwise noted.

1 **COST TO RECRUIT AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT**

PRIVATE

$2,795 **$2,114** ·········· **+32%**
2022   2020   **CHANGE**

PUBLIC

$494 **$470** ·········· **+5%**
2022   2020

Note: All 2020 results are from the *2020 Cost of Recruiting an Undergraduate Student Report.*

COST OF RECRUITING A SINGLE STUDENT

COST OF RECRUITING ONE ...	PRIVATE 2022	PRIVATE 2020	PUBLIC 2022	PUBLIC 2020
Undergraduate student	$2,795	$2,114	$494	$470
Transfer student	$278	$333	$109	$27
International student	$855	$585	$0*	$125

*Because RNL uses the median for cost, the international student amount was $0 for public institutions that provided data on international student recruitment costs.

2 **COST OF RECRUITING A SINGLE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT *MINUS* PERSONNEL COST**

PRIVATE

$1,652 **$1,086**
2022   2020

PUBLIC

$282 **$214**
2022   2020

Staffing Benchmarks

FTE = full-time equivalent	Figures refer to the number of employees or students during the 2020-21 budget year

3 **FTE EMPLOYEES IN UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS OR RECRUITMENT OFFICE**

PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Average: 26 Median: 14	Average: 15 Median: 15

4 **NEW UNDERGRADUATES IN 2021 FOR EACH FTE EMPLOYEE IN UNDERGRADUATE RECRUITMENT OR ADMISSIONS**

PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Average: 37 Median: 30	Average: 141 Median: 91

5 **FTE STUDENT EMPLOYEES UTILIZED IN UNDERGRADUATE RECRUITMENT OR ADMISSIONS**

PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Average: 8 Median: 5	Average: 11 Median: 6

6 **FTE EMPLOYEES INVOLVED IN FACE-TO-FACE OUTREACH FOR UNDERGRADUATE RECRUITMENT OR ADMISSIONS**

PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Average: 9 Median: 7	Average: 9 Median: 8

7. NEW UNDERGRADUATES IN 2021 FOR EACH FTE EMPLOYEE WHO WAS INVOLVED IN FACE-TO-FACE OUTREACH FOR UNDERGRADUATE RECRUITMENT OR ADMISSIONS

PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Average: **73** Median: **53**	Average: **216** Median: **160**

8. FTE EMPLOYEES DEDICATED TO TRANSFER STUDENT RECRUITMENT

PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Average: **1** Median: **1**	Average: **2** Median: **2**

9. FTE EMPLOYEES IN INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS OR RECRUITMENT OFFICE

PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Average: **1** Median: **1**	Average: **2** Median: **1**

Budget

10. PERCENTAGE CHANGES IN THE BUDGET FOR RECRUITMENT AND ADMISSIONS

2021-2022 Budget vs. 2019-20 Budget

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	
⬇ Budget **decreased** more than 2%	22%
⊜ Budget stayed the same	25%
⬆ Budget **increased** more than 2%	53%

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	
⬇ Budget **decreased** more than 2%	21%
⊜ Budget stayed the same	8%
⬆ Budget **increased** more than 2%	71%

11 BUDGET ALLOCATION

The following two tables show the percentage of budget allocated to marketing and recruitment activities for private and public institutions. *Numbers are means.*

PRIVATE	2022	2020
Student search (purchased lists and full costs if outsourced to a vendor)	16%	14%
Digital advertising	12%	n/a*
Web services (i.e., SEO, consulting, general maintenance)	9%	11%
CRM costs	9%	n/a
Travel	8%	17%
Prospective student communications (phone, email, direct mail, and texting)	8%	13%
Recruitment publications	7%	11%
Events (on-campus, off-campus, virtual)	7%	12%
Digital lead generation	7%	n/a*
Traditional advertising	5%	6%
Transfer recruitment	4%	4%
International recruitment	3%	5%
Other	2%	8%
Chat	0.5%	n/a

PUBLIC	2022	2020
Student search (purchased lists and full costs if outsourced to a vendor)	15%	12%
Travel	14%	16%
Recruitment publications	13%	15%
Events (on-campus, off-campus, virtual)	12%	11%
Prospective student communications (phone, email, direct mail, and texting)	9%	17%
Digital advertising	7%	n/a*
Transfer recruitment	6%	4%
Web services (i.e., SEO, consulting, general maintenance)	6%	13%
CRM costs	5%	n/a
Traditional advertising	4%	6%
Other	3%	3%
Digital lead generation	2%	n/a*
International recruitment	1%	3%
Chat	1%	n/a

*Digital advertising and digital lead generation were new answers added for the 2022 survey.

13 **ANTICIPATED CHANGES TO ACTIVITY ALLOCATIONS IN THE NEXT 12-24 MONTHS**

Respondents noted which activities they expected to increase in the next two years and which they expected to decrease. Here are the top areas in both categories.

TOP AREAS OF INCREASE
(percentage of respondents who indicated an increase)

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	
Events	56%
Travel	53%
Student search	50%
Digital advertising	50%
Web services (i.e., SEO, consulting, general maintenance)	41%

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	
Travel	67%
Events	54%
Prospective student communications (phone, email, direct mail, and texting)	46%
Transfer recruitment	42%
Digital advertising	39%

TOP AREAS OF DECREASE
(percentage of respondents who indicated decrease)

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	
CRM costs	78%
Chat	74%
Transfer recruitment	67%

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	
International recruitment	73%
Traditional advertising	71%
Web services (i.e., SEO, consulting, general maintenance)	67%
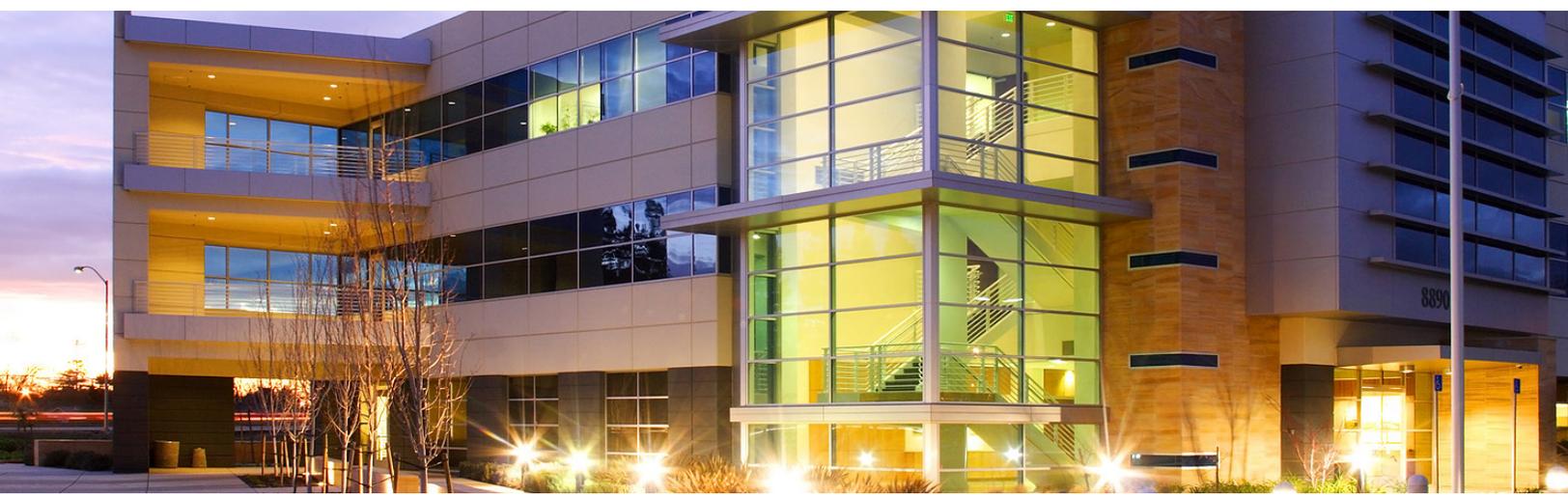
(14) BUDGET INVESTMENT AREAS

Respondents ranked 13 areas to invest their budgets, with a rank of 1 being most important and 13 being least important. The following charts show the percentage of institutions that assigned these areas a higher or lower budget priority.

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS		
BUDGET INVESTMENT AREA	HIGHER PRIORITY	LOWER PRIORITY
Website (content, functionality, etc.)	75%	8%
Operational efficiency	42%	39%
Digital advertising	39%	19%
Campus events	39%	22%
Search engine optimization	28%	50%
Digital lead generation	25%	47%
Social media	22%	39%
Traditional communication channels (email, direct mail, and telephone)	11%	72%
Text messaging	8%	67%
Virtual tours	6%	78%
Personalized video	3%	75%
Traditional advertising (TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, billboard, etc.)	3%	92%
Chatbot	0%	97%
Streaming digital audio (Spotify, Pandora, etc.)	0%	94%

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS		
BUDGET INVESTMENT AREA	HIGHER PRIORITY	LOWER PRIORITY
Website (content, functionality, etc.)	71%	13%
Operational efficiency	42%	38%
Campus events	38%	29%
Digital advertising	25%	54%
Search engine optimization	21%	63%
Virtual tours	21%	75%
Text messaging	13%	67%
Personalized video	13%	79%
Social media	8%	29%
Digital lead generation	8%	54%
Traditional communication channels (email, direct mail, and telephone)	8%	75%
Chatbot	4%	88%
Traditional advertising (TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, billboard, etc.)	4%	92%
Streaming digital audio (Spotify, Pandora, etc.)	0%	96%

Strategies to increase ROI and reduce cost

These results provide useful comparisons between your institution and your peers. They are especially helpful for identifying areas where your institution could be more efficient and increase your ROI.

(1) Increase efficiency and ROI if your costs or staff levels are at higher levels. If you trend significantly above peer institutions in recruiting costs or staffing levels, identify opportunities to increase ROI. Do staff members have the right technology to do their jobs more efficiently? Can you use automation and artificial intelligence to scale your ability to engage students? Are their duplications or inefficiencies in your process? Does your territory management model need to be re-scoped?

(2) Make sure you are not underfunded or understaffed. If you are struggling to meet enrollment goals and are well below the median in costs or staffing, you may need to invest more resources to compete effectively and manage your recruitment efforts. The data found in this report can help you make the case with senior leadership.

(3) Look at your marketing and recruitment efforts across the funnel. Student search is no longer a top-of-funnel event. It's a full-funnel experience for both students and parents. Make sure you're examining your strategies and engagement at every stage so you can optimize your marketing and recruitment throughout the student enrollment journey.

(4) Align your budgeting with today's digital environment. The participants in this poll prioritized web, SEO, and digital advertising, which is where campuses should prioritize their efforts. But they gave less importance to video, texting, and other digital communications students use every day—communications that are also easily tracked, measured, and optimized.

(5) Look for opportunities with transfer students and international enrollment. The pandemic seriously disrupted enrollment with both of these populations, but enrollment opportunities are opening up with them again. For transfer students, campuses should specifically focus on credit evaluation and scholarship practices. This population is wanting to understand time to graduation and overall costs when making their decisions.

Methodology

Data in this report reflect responses from enrollment and admissions officers at 59 nonprofit four-year colleges and universities. Respondents participated in the RNL national electronic poll of undergraduate recruiting costs at the end of 2021.

To save time completing the poll, respondents were given the option to estimate all outlays and to calculate approximate employee benefits as a percentage of salary. Respondents were also given this hint: The total budget figure requested is usually the sum of the admissions/recruitment office budget, including events and any costs associated with recruiting and admissions that are covered by departments outside the admissions office such as marketing and communications.

Standard descriptive statistics (such as sample means) were used to analyze the results of the poll for central tendency and variation. Due to the relatively small sample size, the results should read as indicators.

Participating Institutions

PRIVATE

Agnes Scott College, Georgia

American University in Bulgaria

Bethel University, Indiana

Bloomfield College, New Jersey

Bridgewater College, Virginia

Bryant University, Rhode Island

Chowan University, North Carolina

Christian Brothers University, Tennessee

Columbia College, Missouri

Corban University, Oregon

Dominican University of California, California

Elmira College, New York

Franklin & Marshall College, Pennsylvania

Freed-Hardeman University, Tennessee

Gallaudet University, District of Columbia

Goddard College, Vermont

Gonzaga University, Washington

Goshen College, Indiana

Hampshire College Massachusetts

Hiram College, Ohio

John Cabot University

Mercy College, New York

Metropolitan College of New York

Millsaps College, Mississippi

Montreat College School of Adult and Graduate Studies,
  North Carolina

Moravian University, Pennsylvania

Point University, Georgia

Rollins, Florida

Saint Mary's College of California

Southeastern University, Florida

Sullivan University, Kentucky

Thomas More University, Kentucky

University of Fort Lauderdale, Florida

University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, Texas

Wheeling University, West Virginia

PUBLIC

Alabama State University

Athens State University, Alabama

Colorado Mesa University

Edinboro University, Pennsylvania

Fisher College, Massachusetts

Florida A&M University

Fort Lewis College, Colorado

Glenville State College, West Virginia

Kutztown University, Pennsylvania

Northwestern State University, Louisiana

Portland State University, Oregon

Purdue Polytechnic Institute, Indiana

Purdue University, Krannert School of Management, Indiana

Salisbury University, Maryland

San Francisco State University, California

Shippensburg University, Pennsylvania

Snow College, Utah

Southeast Missouri State University

Texas A&M - San Antonio

University of Baltimore, Maryland

University of Hawaii

University of North Texas at Dallas

University of Vermont

Warren Wilson College, North Carolina

Benchmark Worksheet

Here's how our participants provided the data and how you can compare your institution.

This report is compiled from a survey of four-year public and private institutions about their costs for recruiting undergraduate students. Follow these instructions below to calculate your own cost of recruiting a student to benchmark your institution.

1) Determine your total approximate budget for undergraduate recruitment for 2020-21, rounded to the nearest thousand dollars.

1) _____

Budget components should include direct recruitment and admissions costs only, including:
- All costs incurred by the recruitment/admissions office or other offices associated with undergraduate recruiting and admissions, including recruitment marketing but excluding general institutional marketing, general website maintenance and development, and grants and/or scholarships;
- Staff salaries, prorated, for all full- or part-time employees working with undergraduate recruitment or admissions, including temporary or work-study employees and estimates of prorated salaries for supervisors who have additional responsibilities outside of undergraduate recruitment and admissions;
- Capital costs (equipment, if any);
- Supplies;
- Travel (if any);
- Recruitment publications;
- Advertising related to recruitment;
- Web and electronic communications costs related to recruitment;
- Consultant services (if any);
- CRM cost; and
- Any additional expenses related to recruitment and admissions not named.

2) List your total number of new, undergraduate students who enrolled in all terms between January 1 and October 1, 2021 (e.g., spring, summer, and fall terms of 2021).
Include all new first-year, transfer, full-time, part-time, online, on-campus, international, and adult undergraduate students in 2021.

2) _____

3) List your total number of full-time-equivalent (FTE) employees, including student workers, who worked in the undergraduate recruitment or admissions office during the 2020–21 academic year.

3) _____

4) Calculate the cost of recruiting a single undergraduate:
Total budget in No. 1/Total new undergraduates in No. 2

4) _____

5) Calculate the number of new enrolled students to staff:
Total new undergraduates in No. 2/Total FTE staff in No. 3

5) _____

This same approach was used to create parallel benchmarks for transfer students and international undergraduate students, based on 2021 enrollments and the proportion of 2020–21 budgets relevant to these students.

RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,900 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

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• Strategic financial aid management

• Strategic enrollment planning

• Analytics and insights for enrollment

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