2020 Cost of Recruiting an Undergraduate Student Report

Benchmarking data for four-year colleges and universities

ENROLLMENT

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SURVEY INFORMATION

66 INSTITUTIONS POLLED

45
Four-year private institutions

21
Four-year public institutions

ENROLLMENT SIZES (NUMBER OF STUDENTS)

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	
Smallest third	**<1,323**
Middle third	**1,324–2,286**
Largest third	**2,287>**

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	
Smallest third	**<3,828**
Middle third	**3,829–12,610**
Largest third	**12,611>**

WHY BENCHMARKING YOUR MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT COSTS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

As institutions entered 2020, the higher education environment was already incredibly competitive and challenging for colleges and universities. A shrinking pool of traditional students, continuously changing methods of engaging prospective students, and budgets already stretched for most institutions made enrollment a difficult and stressful endeavor.

Then COVID-19 delivered the most difficult crisis ever faced by colleges and universities.

Simply put, the margin for error for colleges and universities has all but evaporated. To succeed and even stay afloat, campuses have to make sure they are spending their limited marketing and recruitment dollars on the right initiatives and in ways that maximize ROI.

Cost of recruiting data provide a key benchmark for ROI

This report provides data collected from enrollment and admissions professionals at 66 four-year institutions, public and private (see p. 12 for details about methodology). 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.

Benchmarking in the wake of COVID-19

This survey was conducted before the impact of COVID-19 reached campuses. Because there is no historical precedent for the pandemic's effect on enrollment, what's considered "normal" operations has changed and will continue to change. However, these results still provide strategic insight into how your campus performs compared to peer institutions.

USE OUR WORKSHEET ON P. 14, 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. 14. We can also help you assess your enrollment strategies and optimize your efforts.

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

BENCHMARK SNAPSHOT: KEY DATA FROM PARTICIPANTS

All values are median; see the following pages for additional data by percentile groups.

	MEDIAN COST		CHANGE
	$2,114 (2020)	$2,357 (2018)	-10%
	$470 (2020)	$536 (2018)	-12%

2020 BUDGETS CHANGES FROM PREVIOUS YEAR

Reported recruitment budget changes for 2019–2020 compared to previous year

Change	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Decreased	25%	30%
No change	54%	39%
Increased	21%	30%

TOP THREE BUDGET AREAS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE INCREASES

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS
Web services and digital advertising	Transfer recruitment
Student search (purchased lists)	Prospective student communications
Events	Web services and digital advertising

Definition of enrollment size

To determine differences by enrollment size, four-year institutions with total enrollments below the 33.3rd percentile for enrollment size were classified as "small," while institutions with enrollment sizes above the 66.7th percentile were classified as "large." For four-year private institutions, the 33.3rd percentile for total enrollment size was 1,323, and the 66.7th percentile was 2,287. For four-year public institutions, the 33.3rd percentile for total enrollment size was 3,828 and the 66.7th percentile was 12,611.

1 COST OF RECRUITING A SINGLE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT

Current results with a comparison to the *2018 Cost of Recruiting an Undergraduate Student Report*.

Figure 1

All 2018 results are from the *2018 Cost of Recruiting an Undergraduate Student Report*.

Cost of Recruiting One:	PRIVATE 2020	PRIVATE 2018	PUBLIC 2020	PUBLIC 2018
Undergraduate student	$2,114	$2,357	$470	$536
Transfer student	$333	$302	$27	$32
International student	$585	$735	$125	$400

2020 Staffing Levels For:	PRIVATE	PUBLIC
Average number of new undergraduates enrolled per full-time-equivalent enrollment staff	39	181
Average number of FTE student employees used in student recruitment/admissions per institution	15	17
Average number of new undergraduates enrolled per outreach enrollment staff	60	291

2 COST OF RECRUITING A SINGLE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT IN 2019 BY ENROLLMENT SIZE

Figure 2

2020 Overall Median Cost and Median by Enrollment Size							
PRIVATE				PUBLIC			
MEDIAN COST	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	MEDIAN COST	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
$2,114	$2,415	$2,775	$851	$470	$972	$350	$422

2018 Overall Median Cost and Median by Enrollment Size							
PRIVATE				PUBLIC			
MEDIAN COST	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	MEDIAN COST	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
$2,357	$2,723	$1,774	$2,380	$536	$1,149	$491	$441

3 2020 COST OF RECRUITING A SINGLE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT MINUS PERSONNEL COST

The following table shows recruitment cost distribution without personnel costs. The costs are broken down by the enrollment size of the institutions and also show the 25th and 75th percentile along with the median to show the range of the costs institutions spend after removing the cost of personnel.

Figure 3

Percentile	**PRIVATE** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				**PUBLIC** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
25th percentile	$370	$831	$528	$314	$43	$41	$64	$153
Median	$1,086	$1,200	$1,234	$828	$214	$592	$249	$171
75th percentile	$1,664	$1,764	$1,849	$1,331	$614	$743	$665	$235

4 2020 STAFFING BENCHMARKS FOR FULL-TIME-EQUIVALENT (FTE) EMPLOYEES

Figure 4

Number of new undergraduates for each FTE employee in undergraduate recruitment or admissions

Percentile	**PRIVATE** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				**PUBLIC** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
25th percentile	29	24	29	23	76	54	100	120
Median	34	31	35	39	110	67	115	177
75th percentile	44	42	46	54	194	107	191	274

Figure 5

Number of FTE student employees utilized in undergraduate recruitment or admissions

Percentile	**PRIVATE** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				**PUBLIC** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
25th percentile	2	1	2	5	2	3	4	9
Median	4	2	3	12	9	4	8	10
75th percentile	12	4	7	20	15	10	13	30

Figure 6

Number of FTE employees who were involved in face-to-face outreach for undergraduate recruitment or admissions

Percentile	PRIVATE (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				PUBLIC (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
25th percentile	6	3	6	13	6	7	5	11
Median	8	6	8	14	12	9	11	14
75th percentile	14	7	12	19	14	12	15	21

Figure 7

Number of new undergraduates for each FTE employee involved in face-to-face outreach for undergraduate recruitment or admissions

Percentile	PRIVATE (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				PUBLIC (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
25th percentile	43	27	45	48	94	40	149	255
Median	60	53	63	67	180	84	267	401
75th percentile	77	61	74	87	383	122	352	506

5 BUDGET CHANGES AND ALLOCATIONS

For the following items, respondents discussed items related to their overall marketing and recruitment and how they allocate their recruitment activities.

Figure 8

Percentage changes in budget for recruitment and admissions each of the last two years

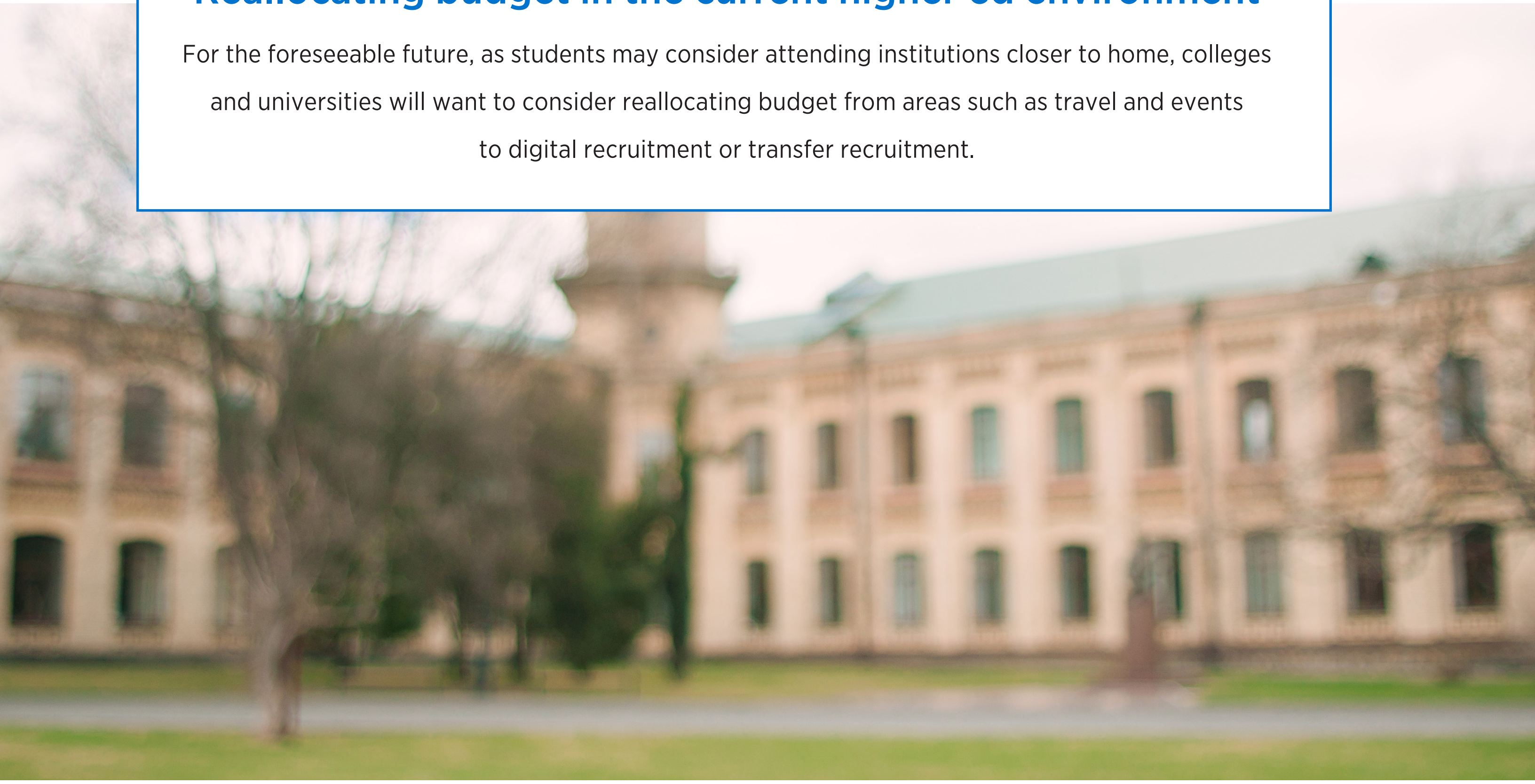
Budget Change	2019–20 BUDGET VS. 2018–19	2018–19 BUDGET VS. 2017–18
PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS		
Budget **decreased** more than 2%	25%	15%
Budget stayed the same	54%	60%
Budget **increased** more than 2%	21%	25%
PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS		
Budget **decreased** more than 2%	30%	26%
Budget stayed the same	39%	44%
Budget **increased** more than 2%	30%	30%

Figure 9
Percentage of budget allocated to marketing/recruitment activities

	PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS
Travel	17%	16%
Student search (purchased lists)	14%	12%
Prospective student communications	13%	17%
Events	12%	11%
Recruitment publications	11%	15%
Web services and digital advertising	11%	13%
Traditional advertising	6%	6%
International recruitment	5%	3%
Transfer recruitment	4%	4%
Other	8%	3%

Reallocating budget in the current higher ed environment

For the foreseeable future, as students may consider attending institutions closer to home, colleges and universities will want to consider reallocating budget from areas such as travel and events to digital recruitment or transfer recruitment.



For Figure 10, respondents noted which activities were likely to increase or decrease in the next two years. Again, these responses were collected before the full impact of COVID-19 hit institutions.

Figure 10
Anticipated changes to activity allocations in the next 12–24 months

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

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	
Web services and digital advertising	65%
Student search (purchased lists)	55%
Events	43%
Transfer recruitment	40%
Prospective student communications	40%

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	
Transfer recruitment	57%
Prospective student communications	57%
Web services and digital advertising	48%
Recruitment publications	44%
Events	39%

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

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	
Recruitment publications	28%
Traditional advertising	26 %
Travel	21%

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	
Student search (purchased lists)	26%
Travel	13%

DIGITAL IS KEY TO STRONG STUDENT RECRUITMENT

Both public and especially private institutions recognize that web services and digital advertising are critical areas for budget investment. Being able to reach students and families on the devices they use every day allows your institution to increase engagement anywhere, at any time.

If your institution is not sure what your digital strategy should be or you're not getting the results you want from your investment, talk with RNL digital experts and get helpful advice.

Visiit **RuffaloNL.com/DigitalDiscussion**

NEW: Budget investment areas

For the first time, respondents ranked 12 areas to invest their budgets, with a rank of 1 being most important and 12 being least important. Figure 11 shows how these potential investment areas ranked as higher (1-4), medium (5-6), and lower (7-12) priorities based on these scores.

Figure 11
Future budget investment areas
(sorted by Higher Priority category)

PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS			
Budget Investment Area	HIGHER PRIORITY	MEDIUM PRIORITY	LOWER PRIORITY
Website (content, functionality, etc.)	76%	22%	2%
Campus Events	74%	24%	2%
Digital Advertising	54%	37%	9%
Search Engine Optimization	52%	41%	7%
Social Media	46%	48%	7%
Traditional Communication Channels	24%	35%	41%
Virtual Tours	17%	52%	30%
Text Messaging	17%	52%	30%
Personalized Video	11%	39%	50%
Chatbot	11%	24%	65%
Traditional Advertising	7%	17%	76%
Streaming Digital Audio	2%	7%	91%

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS			
Budget Investment Area	HIGHER PRIORITY	MEDIUM PRIORITY	LOWER PRIORITY
Website (content, functionality, etc.)	73%	23%	5%
Search Engine Optimization	59%	23%	18%
Campus Events	46%	46%	9%
Digital Advertising	46%	41%	14%
Social Media	41%	46%	14%
Chatbot	41%	5%	55%
Virtual Tours	32%	46%	23%
Text Messaging	32%	46%	23%
Personalized Video	18%	36%	46%
Traditional Communication Channels	18%	23%	59%
Traditional Advertising	5%	18%	77%
Streaming Digital Audio	0%	27%	73%

Align budget priorities with student search behavior

The responses to this question show some misalignment with what we know about student search behavior. For instance, in the *2019 E-Expectations Report*, students rated video and text messaging as top resources for researching colleges, ahead of social media posts from institutions. Make sure that your priorities align with what students find more engaging, which tends to be personalized digital communications and video content.

6 COST OF RECRUITING A TRANSFER STUDENT

Figure 12

2020 transfer student recruitment costs

PRIVATE (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				**PUBLIC** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
$333	$490	$442	$217	$27	$93	$25	$20

2018 transfer student recruitment costs

PRIVATE (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				**PUBLIC** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
$302	$235	$312	$319	$32	$0	$46	$30

7 COST OF RECRUITING AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

Figure 13

2020 international student recruitment costs

PRIVATE (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				**PUBLIC** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
$585	$458	$1,000	$417	$125	$0	$513	$150

2018 international student recruitment costs

PRIVATE (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				**PUBLIC** (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD	OVERALL	SMALLEST THIRD	MIDDLE THIRD	LARGEST THIRD
$735	$99	$735	$1,003	$400	$1,209	$325	$286

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND OBSERVATIONS

These benchmarks provide useful comparisons between your institution and your peers. They are especially useful for identifying areas where your institution could be more efficient or cost-effective.

1. **Look for greater increases in efficiency if your costs or staff levels are at higher levels.** If you trend significantly above the median with recruiting costs or staffing levels, look for ways to increase ROI: more targeted list purchases, better applicant cultivation, and especially increasing yield rates.

2. **Make sure you are not underfunded or understaffed.** If you are struggling to meet enrollment goals and are in the bottom quartile for costs or staffing, you may need to invest more resources to compete effectively and manage your recruitment efforts.

3. **Align your budgeting with the way students search today.** 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.

4. **Strengthen transfer student recruitment efforts.** With domestic enrollment flattening, international recruitment disrupted, and more students considering transferring for a variety of reasons, it's more important than ever to step up your strategies and spending if you're going to compete for transfer students.

5. **Be prepared to pivot in a post-pandemic environment.** With the massive disruption from COVID-19, make sure your institution can pivot on recruitment efforts (from in-person to digital) and learning continuity (in-person, hybrid, and online only) so you can keep engaging students and deliver the academic experience they expect.

METHODOLOGY

Data in this report reflect responses from enrollment and admissions officers at 66 nonprofit four-year colleges and and universities. Respondents participated in the RNL national electronic poll of undergraduate recruiting costs at the end of 2019.

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

FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Adams State University

Arkansas Tech University

CUNY City College

Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis

Kansas State University-Polytechnic Campus

Kennesaw State University

Lake-Sumter State College

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

North Dakota State University-Main Campus

Oregon State University-Cascades Campus

Peru State College

Plymouth State University

Portland State University

Purdue University-Polytechnic Institute

SUNY College at Oswego

The Evergreen State College

University of Colorado Boulder

University of Houston-Clear Lake

University of New Mexico-Main Campus

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg

University of Puerto Rico-Arecibo

University of Wisconsin-Superior

FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

The American College of Greece

Augustana University

Bethel College-Indiana

Beulah Heights University

Bucknell University

Carlos Albizu University-Miami

Columbia Bible College (Canada)

Dominican University of California

Dordt College

Dunwoody College of Technology

Emmanuel College

Fairfield University

Flagler College-St Augustine

Georgetown University

Houghton College

Houston Baptist University

John Brown University

Kentucky Wesleyan College

Keystone College

King's College

Lakeview College of Nursing

Lebanon Valley College

Lewis University

Loyola University New Orleans

Luther College

Marietta College

Marist College

Mary Baldwin University

Marymount California University

North Central University

North Park University

Oral Roberts University

Pace University

Prairie College (Canada)

Robert Morris University

Rockford University

Roosevelt University

Siena Heights University

Southern States University

Southern Wesleyan University

Southwest Baptist University

Stephens College

Texas Wesleyan University

Trocaire College

University of Puget Sound

Wagner College

William Jewell College

Xavier University

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 (see pages 13-14 for details on participants). 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 2019–20, 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, 2020 (e.g., spring, summer, and fall terms of 2020).
Include all new first-year, transfer, full-time, part-time, online, on-campus, international, and adult undergraduate students in 2020.

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 2019–20 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 2020 enrollments and the proportion of 2019–20 budgets relevant to these students.

TAKE THE NEXT STEP TOWARD A STRONGER ENROLLMENT STRATEGY. TALK WITH RNL'S ENROLLMENT EXPERTS.

More than 3,000 colleges and universities have partnered with RNL over the last 50 years. They turn to us to help assess their enrollment strategies, optimize their outreach, and bring in the classes they want.

Let's talk about how you can reach your objectives and keep your campus on a path to success. Visit RuffaloNL.com/Consulation

ABOUT RNL

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.

Visit RuffaloNL.com/Enrollment
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Call **800.876.1117**

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