

The Fundamentals Are Now a Competitive Advantage

What the 2025 NACCAP/CCCU Research Suggests About Enrollment Strategy

Every enrollment decision is made in service of something larger.

For Christian colleges and universities, enrollment sustains more than an institution. It sustains a mission of educational, spiritual, and vocational formation that extends across generations. Each entering class represents a renewed opportunity to prepare students for lives of service, leadership, and calling while ensuring that the institution itself remains capable of carrying that mission forward.

That perspective makes the 2025 NACCAP/CCCU Market Research Project particularly valuable. Commissioned jointly by the North American Coalition for Christian Admissions Professionals (NACCAP) and the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU), with Liaison International serving as a cornerstone sponsor, the study offers one of the most comprehensive examinations in more than a decade of how students and families evaluate Christian higher education. Its findings on affordability, institutional reputation, career preparation, and changing student expectations deserve careful attention.

The report also raises a broader strategic question: If students are changing the way they discover, evaluate, and choose institutions, where does competitive advantage now come from? No single finding provides the answer. Instead, it emerges from the connections among several of the report's observations.

Students arrive later. Their decisions begin earlier.

Perhaps the most consequential idea in the report is the researchers' description of the hidden student choice journey. Long before a student submits an inquiry, attends a campus visit, or speaks with an admissions counselor, a process of evaluation has already begun. Students compare institutions through conversations with family and friends, institutional websites, rankings, social media, online reviews, videos, search engines, and, increasingly, AI-generated summaries.

The research suggests that institutions often enter the conversation after many of those early impressions have already formed.

That observation helps explain another finding. Many prospective students move from exploration to application without first becoming an inquiry. The traditional enrollment funnel remains useful, but it no longer captures the full complexity of the student's decision-making process. A growing portion of that process now unfolds far before institutions have the opportunity to engage directly.

For enrollment leaders, this changes less about recruitment than about where recruitment begins. Institutional reputation, digital presence, discoverability, and the clarity of publicly

available information become part of the enrollment experience rather than simply its introduction.

Value is larger than price

Another finding appears repeatedly throughout the research. Cost remains one of the primary reasons prospective students remove institutions from consideration. At the same time, many enrolled students report that their education ultimately proved more affordable than they expected once financial aid was taken into account.

Viewed through that lens, financial aid communication becomes much more than the traditional, triggered email with the autofill text detailing award amounts. The way institutions explain value, communicate aid, answer questions, and address misconceptions influences enrollment well before a financial aid package is awarded. But the question of value extends beyond what an education costs. The research also suggests that students and families are evaluating institutions through what an education will make possible after graduation: preparation for a career, confidence in future opportunities, and a clearer connection between education and vocation. That makes career outcomes part of the value conversation rather than a separate consideration that enters only near the end of the college search.

For Christian colleges and universities, there is an especially important connection here. Career preparation and vocational formation need not be competing ideas. Institutions can help students understand both the practical return on their education and the larger purposes it is intended to serve: how academic programs prepare graduates for meaningful work, how alumni translate their education into careers and service, and how the institution's mission shapes the lives students are preparing to lead.

The report treats affordability and value as practical enrollment considerations, but together these findings point toward something larger. Students are trying to understand not only whether they can afford an institution, but whether the experience and outcomes justify the investment. Institutions increasingly compete on how clearly and credibly they can answer that question.

The report keeps returning to the fundamentals

One of the more interesting aspects of the NACCAP/CCCU research is that its recommendations are remarkably familiar. Across discussions of affordability, career preparation, communication, engagement, and enrollment strategy, the report repeatedly returns to practices that have long occupied the center of enrollment management: timely communication, clear guidance about cost and value, meaningful engagement with prospective students, careful attention to behavioral signals, and administrative processes that support rather than impede student progress.

And while there is little novelty in that list, the report does not present it as though there should be. Instead, a different pattern emerges. The circumstances surrounding

enrollment have changed considerably over the past decade. Students discover institutions through different channels, evaluate them with different tools, and arrive with different expectations. Institutions operate amid demographic shifts, financial pressures, policy uncertainty, and rapidly evolving technology. Against that backdrop, the research repeatedly points back to the same operational disciplines that have shaped effective enrollment management for years.

Read in that light, the recommendations are less a call for reinvention than a reminder that enduring capabilities often become most valuable when the environment around them becomes less predictable. The fundamentals have not acquired new importance because they are new. They have acquired new importance because the conditions under which they are practiced have changed.

The source of competitive advantage is changing

Students devote more of the college search to independent exploration before making contact with an institution. Early perceptions of affordability, institutional quality, career opportunity, and campus culture often develop before an admissions counselor has an opportunity to answer questions or provide additional context.

By the time a prospective student requests information or schedules a visit, portions of the evaluation have already taken place.

The opportunities institutions have to shape those decisions have not disappeared, but they have become more concentrated. Each interaction carries a greater share of the work. A timely response, a clear explanation of financial aid, compelling evidence of graduate outcomes, a campus visit that reflects the institution's character, or an application process that feels intuitive contributes to the confidence students gradually develop as they decide where they belong.

Students encounter institutions less as a collection of offices than as a single experience. Marketing, admissions, financial aid, career services, faculty, student ambassadors, technology, and campus visits may operate through separate administrative structures, but those distinctions are largely invisible to the prospective student. The enrollment journey is experienced as a whole.

That perspective places familiar institutional functions in a slightly different relationship to one another. Enrollment marketing extends beyond generating awareness; it shapes the expectations students bring with them when they first engage the institution. Financial aid communication influences not only affordability but confidence. Career outcomes give students evidence of what their investment can make possible. Admissions operations contribute to institutional reputation each time they make it easier (or more difficult) for students to move forward. Technology becomes valuable to the extent that it helps these interactions feel coherent, unified, and holistic rather than fragmented and transactional.

None of those responsibilities belong to a single office, nor does the research suggest that they should. Their effectiveness depends largely on how well they reinforce one another. Institutions rarely distinguish themselves through a single exceptional interaction. More often, they create confidence through a series of experiences that are consistent in tone, responsive to student needs, grounded in credible evidence of value, and aligned with the mission they seek to communicate.

Enduring strengths, renewed importance

Much of the conversation surrounding higher education has focused, understandably, on disruption. Demographic change, affordability, artificial intelligence, public confidence, shifting expectations about career outcomes, and changing patterns of student behavior have all reshaped the conditions in which enrollment leaders make decisions. The 2025 NACCAP/CCCU Market Research Project documents those changes in considerable detail, offering a timely picture of how prospective students now discover, evaluate, and choose institutions. And the report is equally notable for what it does not recommend.

Nowhere does it suggest that institutions should abandon the principles that have guided effective enrollment management for decades. Its recommendations return instead to capabilities that most enrollment leaders would recognize immediately: communicating with clarity, helping students understand affordability and value, connecting education to career opportunity and vocation, creating meaningful opportunities for engagement, removing unnecessary barriers from institutional processes, and paying close attention to the points at which students hesitate or disengage.

The research ultimately suggests that the engine driving institutional strength has become less dependent on discovering entirely new approaches and more dependent on the consistent execution of practices that have long been understood, but not always equally well implemented—a reassuring conclusion.

Periods of significant change often create pressure to search for entirely new strategies, but this research points in a more measured direction. It suggests that institutions remain well served by strengthening the relationships, systems, and practices through which their mission and value are experienced by prospective students. Innovation retains an important place in that work, particularly as technology continues to reshape how students gather information and interact with institutions. Its value, however, depends largely on the strength of the foundation upon which it is built.

The fundamentals of enrollment management endure; what has changed is the importance of executing them consistently in an increasingly complex environment.

About the Research

This article reflects on the 2025 NACCAP/CCCU Market Research Project, commissioned jointly by the North American Coalition for Christian Admissions Professionals (NACCAP) and the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU), with Liaison International

serving as a cornerstone sponsor. The study combines surveys of prospective students, current students, parents, alumni, school counselors, enrollment outcome analysis, and large-scale social listening research to examine how students and families evaluate Christian higher education.