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## What's AHEAD Poll # 3: Fall Enrollment: A Common Topic of Conversation Among Higher Education Leaders

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This report describes responses from 115 individuals holding senior level positions at higher education institutions in the United States. Most of these individuals (67%) are leaders of private not-for-profit four-year institutions. One-fifth (20%) are leaders of public four-year institutions, 4% are from private for-profit four-year institutions, 5% are from public two-year institutions, and 2% are in administrative units (system offices). Half (51%) are in administrative roles, 30% in academic positions, 10% in finance positions, and 9% in student affairs. A third (32%) of respondents reported a strong direct connection to or responsibility for enrollment, 28% reported some connection to or responsibility for enrollment, and 40% reported little direct connection to or responsibility for enrollment.

Additional commentary is available at <https://ahead-penn.org/whats-ahead-commentary-poll-3>

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### Keywords

student enrollment, college enrollment, college leader perceptions

### Comments

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## POLL #3

### FALL ENROLLMENT: A COMMON TOPIC OF CONVERSATION AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS

What's AHEAD draws on the expertise of higher education trend-spotters to offer insights into important issues in higher education management. Our third poll focuses on fall enrollment.

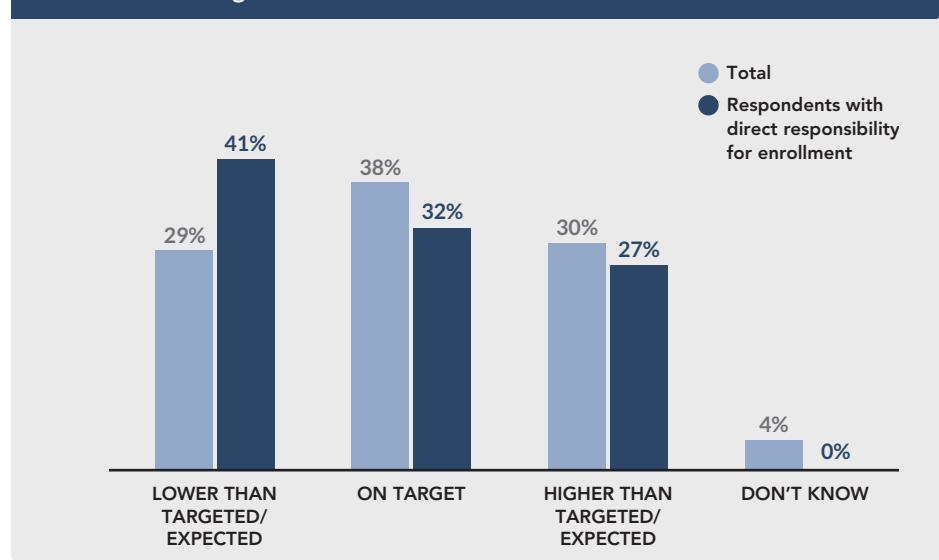
Given the centrality of enrollment to an institution's activities and operations, it is not surprising that 85% of the 120 senior executives at public and private colleges and universities responding to a July 2014 survey by KPMG reported being at least "somewhat concerned" about their institution's "ability to maintain current enrollment levels." Perhaps more worrisome is the finding that the share of respondents reporting concern has steadily increased over the past three years.

The most recent AHEAD poll provides insight into the enrollment-related concerns of higher education institutions. Fall 2014 first-time, full-time undergraduate enrollment exceeded the target at some institutions, but fell below the target at a noteworthy share of colleges and universities. Whereas institutions with greater than expected enrollment may be challenged to accommodate additional students, schools with lower than expected enrollment are often faced with addressing the budgetary implications that come with lower than expected tuition revenues. Senior administrators and managers on most campuses are talking about enrollment at least as much as they were a year ago. The most commonly reported enrollment-related issue being discussed is increasing the number of undergraduates. "Finances" is the most common reason leaders report for why undergraduates they thought would enroll in fall 2014 did not.

#### More than a fourth of respondents report lower than expected fall enrollment.

About 29% of all higher education leaders who responded to this survey—and 41% of responding leaders who have strong direct responsibility for enrollment—reported that first-time, full-time fall undergraduate enrollment in fall 2014 fell below the target. About 30% of higher education leaders reported that fall 2014 first-time, full-time undergraduate enrollment exceeded expectations.

FIG. 1 The extent to which first-time, full-time fall undergraduate enrollment met the target

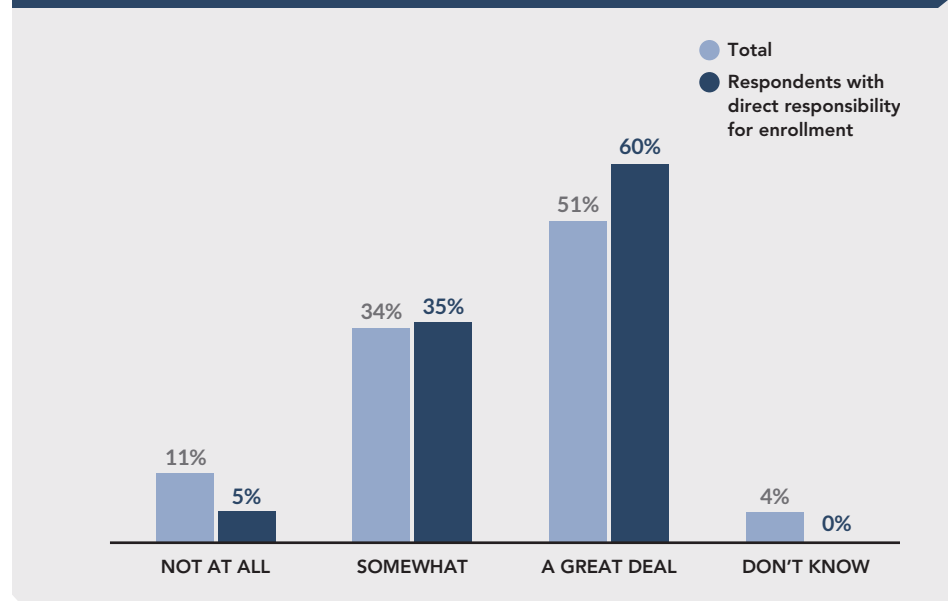


## FALL ENROLLMENT: A COMMON TOPIC OF CONVERSATION AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS

**Most campus leaders are talking about the implications of fall enrollment.**

About half (51%) of all responding higher education leaders reported that senior administrators and managers on campus are talking about the implications of fall undergraduate enrollment “a great deal.” Only 11% of leaders reported that senior leaders are not talking about the implications of fall enrollment.

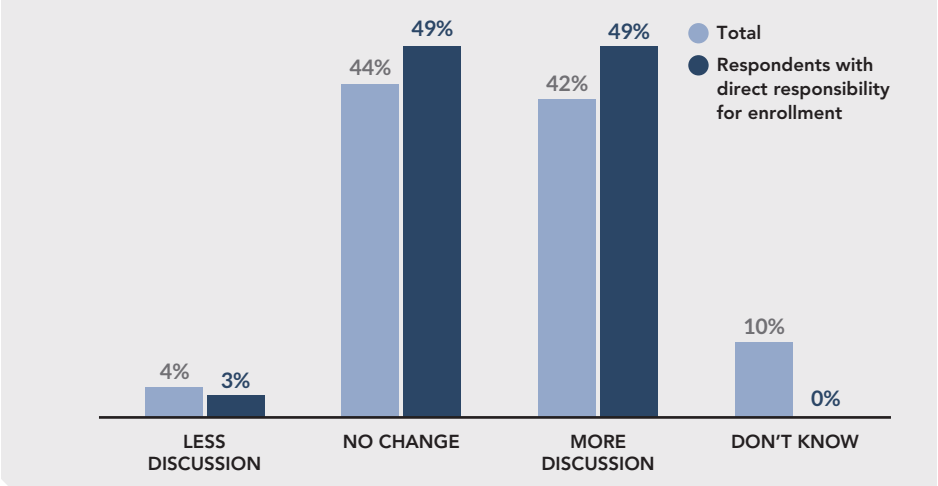
FIG. 2 The extent to which senior administrators and managers are talking about fall enrollment

**On many campuses, leaders are talking more about fall enrollment now than they were a year ago.**

About half (42%) of all responding higher education leaders—and 49% of those with strong direct responsibility for enrollment—report more discussion of undergraduate enrollment now than a year ago. Leaders offered several reasons for an increase in discussion. Some reported greater discussion because of a change in campus leadership. A few leaders attributed the increased discussion to their campuses' need to serve more students with reduced state funding and address the impact of over-enrollment on dorms and facilities. Others explained that the increase in discussion reflects concerns about expected declines in enrollment into the future, as some leaders see “fewer students in the pipeline.” The most common explanation offered for more discussion pertained to the budgetary implications of declining enrollment. These implications are particularly important at tuition-driven institutions.

Only 4% of respondents indicated that there is less discussion about enrollment now than a year ago. Comments from respondents suggest that, on campuses where there is now less discussion, fall enrollment exceeded targets.

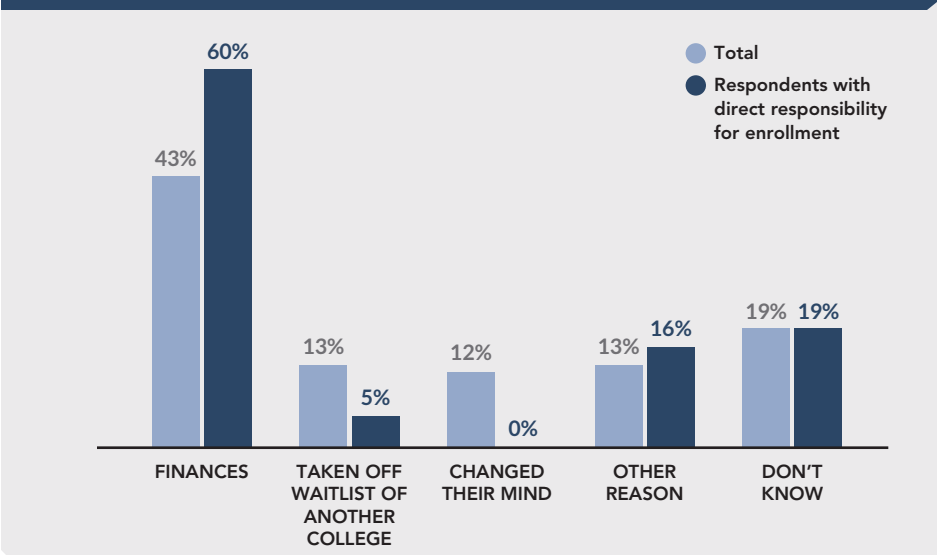
**FIG. 3** The extent to which discussion about undergraduate enrollment has changed from one year ago



**The most common reason respondents believe that undergraduates do not enroll is finances.**

Nearly half (43%) of all respondents—and 60% of respondents with strong direct responsibility for enrollment—report that the reason undergraduates who were expected to enroll in fall 2014 did not was “finances.” A considerable share of leaders—one in five—reported not knowing why these undergraduates did not enroll. Some respondents volunteered other potential reasons for non-matriculation, including the possibility that students decided to enroll in another (perhaps higher-ranked) institution, were uncertain about the value/benefits, or decided to work rather than enroll.

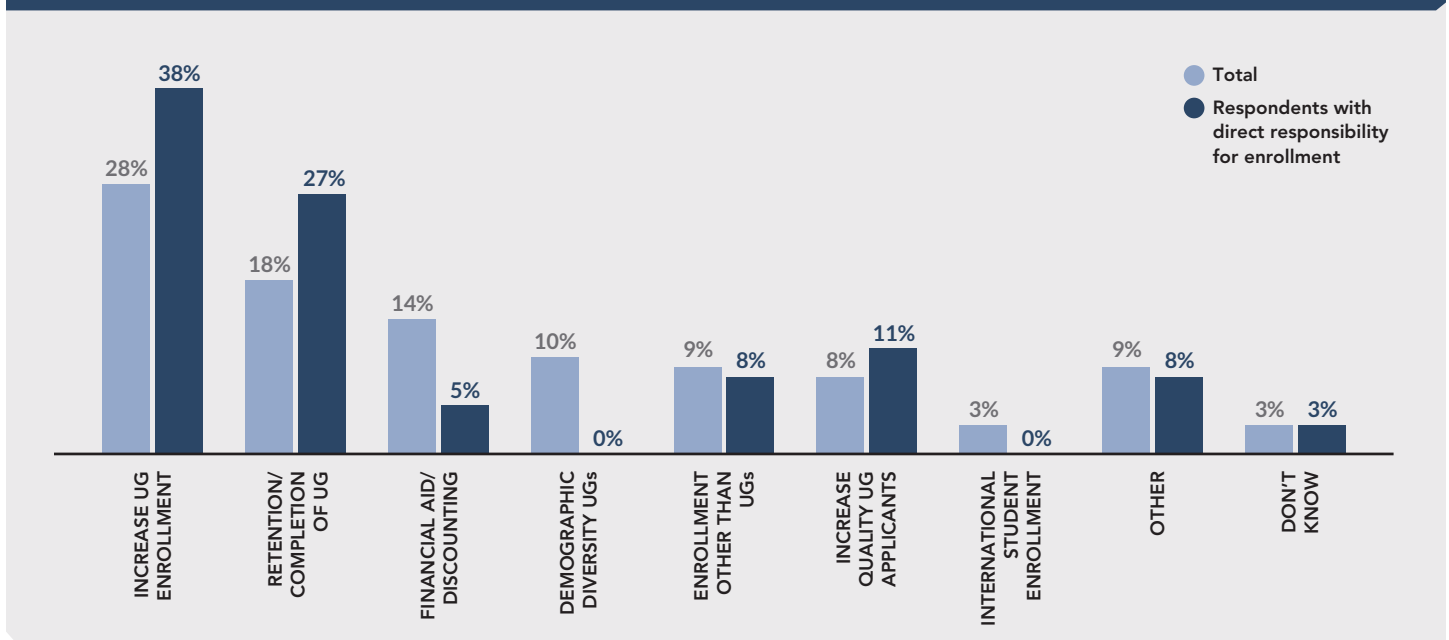
**FIG. 4** The most common perceived reasons why undergraduates do not enroll



**Increasing undergraduate enrollment is a common theme of enrollment discussions.**

The most commonly reported enrollment-related issue being discussed on the campuses of responding higher education leaders is increasing the number of undergraduate enrollments. Less common topics are the retention and completion of undergraduates, financial aid and tuition discounting, demographic diversity of undergraduates, increasing the quality of the undergraduate applicant pool, and enrollment of international students. Some leaders volunteered “other” issues, including increasing tuition for in-state students, accommodating more students when enrollment exceeds targets, providing online education, generating sufficient net revenue, providing advising, and increasing yield. Some leaders reported that conversations are also occurring about graduate enrollment—which is declining on some campuses but increasing on others.

FIG. 5 The most common enrollment-related issues discussed on campus



### About This Poll

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### Suggested citation

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### About AHEAD

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