

ENROLLMENT PROCESS REVIEW SECRET SHOPPER ANALYSIS

DECEMBER 2025

Bruce Etter

Senior Director of Research & Consulting
UPCEA

Emily West

Senior Market Research Analyst
UPCEA

Deja Sullberg

Data Analyst
UPCEA

Madeleine Morelli

Research Assistant
UPCEA



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Key Findings.....	4
Methodology	5
Secret Shopper Results.....	6
Overall Results.....	6
Email Inquiry Analysis.....	12
Request for Information (RFI) Form Analysis	14
Year-over-Year (YoY) Analysis.....	19
Best Practices	23
<i>Maintaining Engagement with Inquirers</i>	23
<i>Personalized Engagement with Inquirers</i>	24
<i>Open Field for Additional Information on Inquiry Forms</i>	26
Areas for Improvement	28
<i>Requiring Physical Addresses on Inquiry Forms</i>	28
<i>Low-Quality Automated Emails</i>	30
<i>Technical Issues on Webpages and RFI Forms</i>	31
<i>Lengthy Request for Inquiry Forms</i>	32
<i>Not Useful or Informative Email Responses</i>	34
Impact on Higher Education.....	35

Executive Summary

The 2025 UPCEA Enrollment Process Review - Secret Shopper Benchmarking Study reveals a critical breakdown at the top of the enrollment funnel. Nearly half of all prospective student inquiries (44 percent) received no response. At a time when digital advertising costs are rising, search is changing, and prospective students expect rapid, personalized engagement, this level of unresponsiveness represents a direct loss of marketing investment and institutional credibility.

Even as institutions adopt more advanced CRMs, automation tools, and communication platforms, overall responsiveness is declining. The median response time has increased since 2023, and personalized follow-up remains the exception rather than the norm. Too often, institutions treat inquiry management as an operational afterthought instead of a strategic function.

Not all inquiry pathways performed equally. Inquiries submitted through Request for Information (RFI) forms were more likely to receive a response and were answered more quickly than those sent to individual or centralized email addresses. Sixty-two percent of emails sent to individual staff went unanswered, compared to just 37 percent of RFI inquiries. This gap highlights the importance of directing inquiries into structured, trackable systems and away from inboxes that lack oversight and accountability.

The engagement gap was even more striking. Seventy-eight percent of RFI inquiries entered an institution's promotional or nurturing sequence, compared to only 2% of email inquiries. This indicates that most email-based inquiries are never captured in a CRM, greatly limiting an institution's ability to build awareness, sustain interest, and move prospective students toward enrollment.

In today's competitive marketplace, responsiveness is a signal of institutional value and student support. As prospective students increasingly rely on AI-powered tools and conversational search to evaluate options, the first human interaction with an institution carries more weight than ever. Marketing and enrollment leaders must close the gap between lead generation and lead conversion. Every unanswered inquiry is not just a lost enrollment. It is a lost relationship. This report offers clear evidence of where the system is breaking down and where improvement is not only possible, but urgent.

Key Findings

- Overall, **44% percent of inquiries that were sent did not receive a response**, slightly higher than 2023 (40%) and 2021 (42%) benchmark years.
- The **average response time to inquiries placed was 14 hours and 23 minutes**, with a **median of 3 hours and 18 minutes**. The average response time in 2025 was significantly slower compared to 2023 (7 hours and 22 minutes) and 2021 (11 hours and 47 minutes). Median response times were more comparable.
- Inquiries that were sent through **RFI forms had the fastest average response time (9 hours and 33 minutes)**, followed by those sent to an individual email address (20 hours and 8 minutes), and those sent to a centralized email address (20 hours and 32 minutes).
- **Sixty-two percent of inquiries placed through an individual email did not receive a response**, followed by 40% of centralized email inquiries, and 37% of RFI forms.
- **Three quarters (75%) of RFI forms did not offer the opportunity to ask a question** within the form, while one quarter (25%) did.
- For RFI forms without a question box, **median response time was slightly slower (2 hours and 59 minutes)**, compared to RFI forms with a question box (2 hours and 27 minutes).
- RFI forms without a question box had a **higher percentage of inquiries that did not receive a response (39%)** compared to RFI forms that had a question box (32%).
- **All RFI forms required the inquirer's name, and nearly all (99%) required an email address**. Sixty-one percent asked for a program of interest, followed by phone number (49%), start term (43%), and date of birth (24%).
- Among all inquiries, 78% of those placed via an RFI form received promotional materials from the institution, while **only 2% of email inquiries received those materials**.

Methodology

Between Monday, July 14 and Monday, September 22, 2025, UPCEA conducted a benchmarking secret shopper analysis. During that time, 1,000 inquiries were made to member programs. UPCEA staff inquired about five programs from 164 institutions, and 10 programs from 18 institutions, all picked at random (due to the randomized nature of the study, some institutions were selected twice, thus accounting for 10 programs instead of five). Requests were made either through the request for information form (RFI), an individual email to the designated contact for a given program, or a centralized email (e.g., graduate@institution.edu, business@universitya.edu, etc.) listed as contact for a given program. Time was measured only during traditional business hours, defined as 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM Monday through Friday, with time zones adjusted depending on the institution's location. Responses were only counted if they were not automated. UPCEA stopped monitoring responses to inquiries on September 22. To protect the identity of secret shoppers and institutional staff, names attached to inquiries or responses are not included in this report.

Secret Shopper Results

Overall Results

Table 1 highlights the response times for all information requests made by UPCEA shoppers through a digital format. Overall, the average response time to inquiries placed was 14 hours and 23 minutes. The fastest response time was 0 hours and 0 minutes, which means an inquiry was placed and responded to the same day during non-business hours (e.g., an inquiry was placed at 7:00 AM EST and responded to prior to 9:00 AM EST). Five hundred Inquiries were placed through emails, either to individuals listed as contacts for a given program or centralized emails for a given program, and another 500 through request for information (RFI) forms. Inquiries sent through RFI forms had the fastest average response time (9 hours and 33 minutes), followed by those sent to an individual email address (20 hours and 18 minutes), and those sent to centralized email addresses (20 hours and 32 minutes).

Overall, inquiries that received a response had an average response time of 14 hours and 23 minutes, with a median of 3 hours and 18 minutes. Among all inquiries placed, 30% received a response the same day. Among all responses received, 54% were on the same day. Forty-four percent of inquiries that were sent did not receive a response. Inquiries sent via email had a higher percentage that weren't responded to (50%). This suggests that inquiries submitted through less structured channels, such as individual email addresses, are more likely to go unanswered, indicating potential gaps in tracking and accountability when inquiries are not routed through a centralized system or CRM.

Table 1: Secret Shopper Results by Inquiry Type

Inquiry Type	# of Inquiries	Average Response Time	Median Response Time	Best Response Time	Worst Response Time	% of Same Day Responses of All Responses	% of Same Day Responses of All Inquiries	% Inquiries without Response
Overall	1,000	14:23	3:18	0:00	310:00	54%	30%	44%
Email Inquiry	500	20:27	3:49	0:00	310:00	50%	25%	50%
Inquiry Form	500	9:33	2:56	0:00	158:24	56%	35%	37%

Figure 1 is a graph comparing average and median response times by inquiry type. Inquiry forms had faster average and median response times.

Figure 1: Average and Median Response Times by Inquiry Type

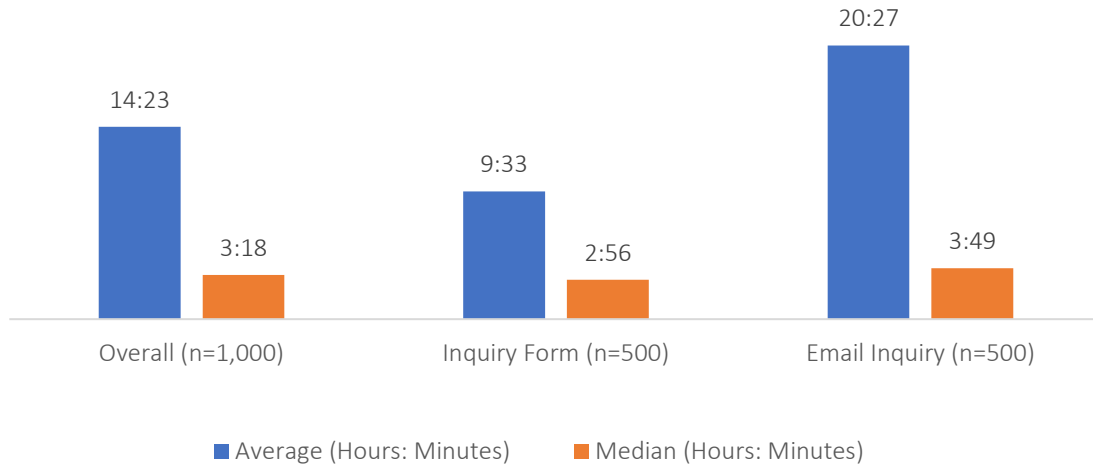


Table 2 displays the secret shopper results by credential. Among various credential types, associate programs had the fastest average response time (0 hours and 0 minutes), though the sample size only included four inquiries, and only one received a response. Among all other credential types, undergraduate certificates had the fastest average response time (12 hours and 36 minutes), while non-credit/other programs had the fastest median response time (2 hours and 32 minutes), closely followed by graduate degree programs (2 hours and 37 minutes). Overall, there was a large discrepancy between average and median response times for all credential types, indicating the presence of extreme outliers. For example, some of the slowest response times occurred through email inquiries, where institutional representatives took up to 38 business days, approximately seven calendar weeks, to respond.

Among all inquiries, graduate degree programs had the largest percentage of same day responses (35%). Courses had the lowest percentage of inquiries without a response (25%); however, only four course inquiries were placed. The next lowest percentage of inquiries without a response was professional certificates (41%).

Table 2: Secret Shopper Results by Credential Type

Inquiry Type	# of Inquiries	Average Response Time	Median Response Time	Best Response Time	Worst Response Time	% of Same Day Responses of All Responses	% of Same Day Responses of All Inquiries	% Inquiries without Response
Overall	1,000	14:23	3:18	0:00	310:00	54%	30%	44%
Associate Degree	4	0:00	0:00	0:00	0:00	100%	25%	75%
Bachelor’s Degree	240	13:04	4:03	0:00	300:42	49%	28%	43%
Graduate Degree	252	16:02	2:37	0:00	310:00	62%	35%	43%
Courses	4	19:45	27:00	0:08	32:07	33%	25%	25%
Undergraduate Certificate	82	12:36	3:04	0:00	151:20	55%	29%	46%
Graduate Certificate	163	12:40	3:20	0:00	128:45	57%	30%	47%
Professional Certificate	158	13:52	4:49	0:00	198:33	48%	28%	41%
Non-Credit Other	97	18:24	2:32	0:00	251:44	47%	27%	43%

Figure 2 highlights average and median response times across credential types. For all credential types, the large gap between the two measures suggests the presence of significant outliers — some inquiries were answered several days or even weeks after the initial contact. However, these delayed responses do not represent the overall trend, as median response times are less sensitive to outliers.

Figure 2: Average and Median Response Times by Credential Type

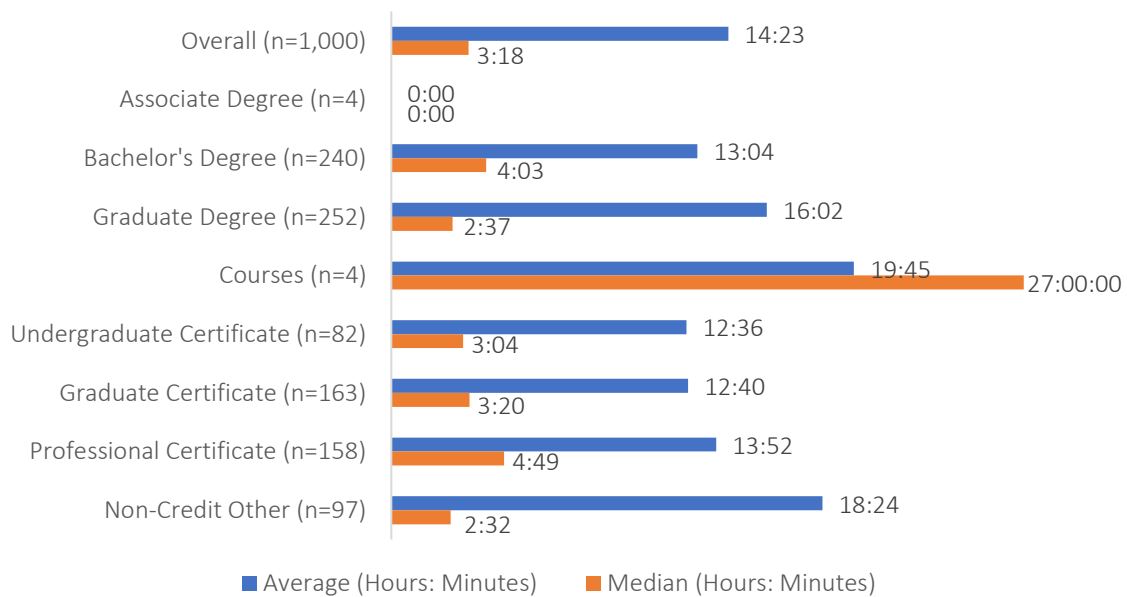


Table 3 shows secret shopper results for credit and non-credit programs by different forms of inquiry. Overall, credit programs had a slightly faster average response time (14 hours) than non-credit programs (15 hours and 25 minutes). However, there is significant disparity in the number of inquiries, with credit programs having nearly triple the number of inquiries than non-credit programs. For credit programs, inquiries placed through RFI forms had a significantly faster average response time (9 hours and 40 minutes) than email inquiries (20 hours and 05 minutes). The same is true for non-credit programs, with RFI inquiries having less than half the average response time (9 hours and 12 minutes) than email inquiries (21 hours and 14 minutes).

Overall, 42% of non-credit program inquiries did not receive a response, nor did 44% of credit program inquiries. Of the non-credit program inquiries that did receive a response, nearly half (47%) were on the same day. Among all credit program inquiries that received a response, over half (56%) came on the same day.

Table 3: Secret Shopper Results by Credit vs Non-Credit

Inquiry Type	# of Inquiries	Average Response Time	Median Response Time	Best Response Time	Worst Response Time	% of Same Day Responses of All Responses	% of Same Day Responses of All Inquiries	% Inquiries without Response
Overall	1,000	14:23	3:18	0:00	310:00	54%	30%	44%
All Credit Programs	734	14:00	3:11	0:00	310:00	56%	31%	44%
Credit Email Inquiry	352	20:05	3:27	0:00	310:00	51%	24%	52%
Credit Inquiry Form	382	9:40	2:56	0:00	158:24	60%	37%	37%
All Non-Credit Programs	266	15:25	3:56	0:00	251:44	47%	27%	42%
Non-Credit Email Inquiry	148	21:14	5:02	0:00	251:44	49%	26%	46%
Non-Credit Inquiry Form	118	9:12	2:40	0:00	101:44	45%	29%	36%

Figure 3 shows the average and median response times by credit type. The results indicate that response times were relatively consistent between credit and non-credit programs.

Figure 3: Average and Median Response Times by Credit Type

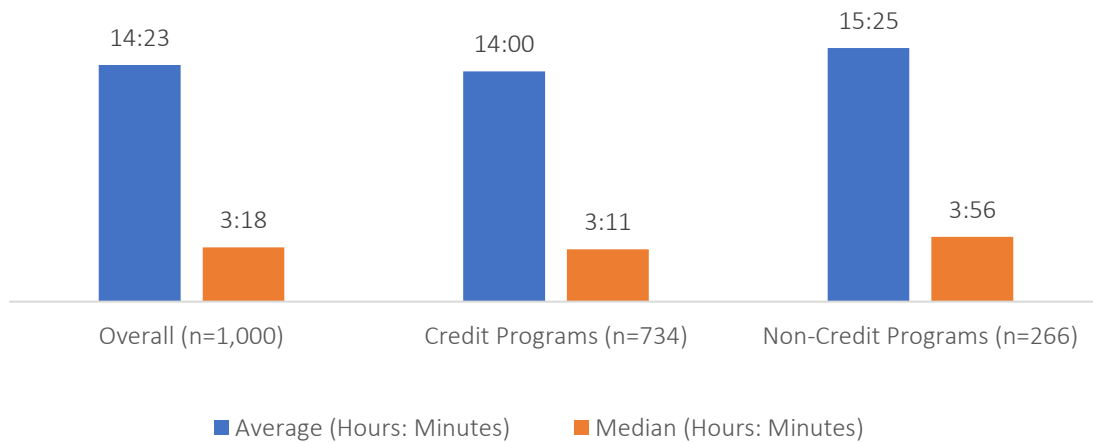


Table 4 details secret shopper results for undergraduate and graduate programs by inquiry type. Undergraduate programs consisted of associate and bachelor’s degrees and undergraduate certificates, while graduate programs were for master’s degrees and graduate certificates. Undergraduate programs had a faster average response time (12 hours and 53 minutes) compared to graduate programs (14 hours and 46 minutes). However, graduate programs had a faster median response time (2 hours and 52 minutes), compared to undergraduate programs (4 hours and 2 minutes). Both undergraduate and graduate program RFI inquiries had significantly faster average response times than email inquiries.

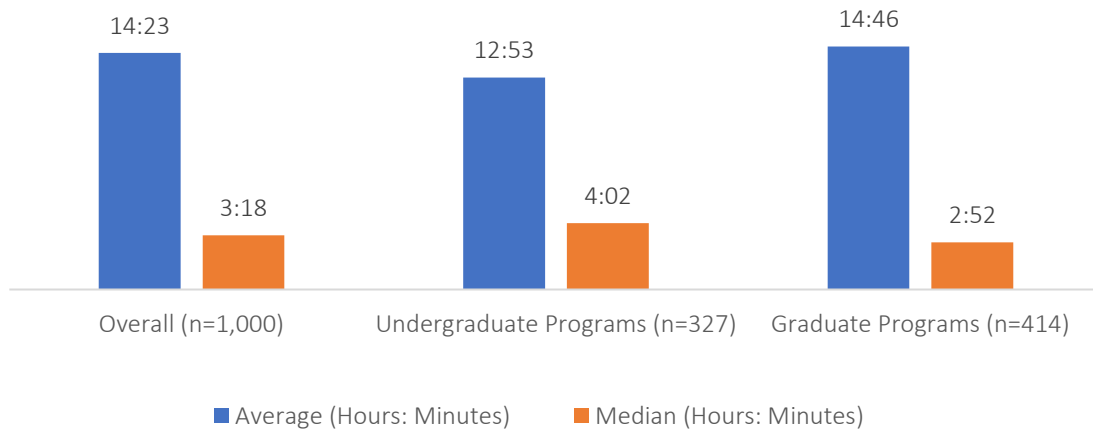
Among all graduate inquiries placed, a third (33%) received same day responses, compared to 28% of all undergraduate inquiries placed. Among all graduate program inquiries that received responses, 60% were on the same day that the inquiry was placed.

Table 4: Secret Shopper Results by Undergraduate vs Graduate

Inquiry Type	# of Inquiries	Average Response Time	Median Response Time	Best Response Time	Worst Response Time	% of Same Day Responses of All Responses	% of Same Day Responses of All Inquiries	% Inquiries without Response
Overall	1,000	14:23	3:18	0:00	310:00	54%	30%	44%
All Undergraduate Programs	327	12:53	4:02	0:00	300:42	50%	28%	44%
Undergraduate Email Inquiry	157	16:14	3:31	0:00	300:42	49%	23%	53%
Undergraduate Inquiry Form	170	10:36	4:02	0:00	151:20	51%	33%	36%
All Graduate Programs	414	14:46	2:52	0:00	310:00	60%	33%	45%
Graduate Email Inquiry	199	22:38	3:25	0:00	310:00	52%	26%	51%
Graduate Inquiry Form	215	8:53	2:24	0:00	158:24	66%	40%	39%

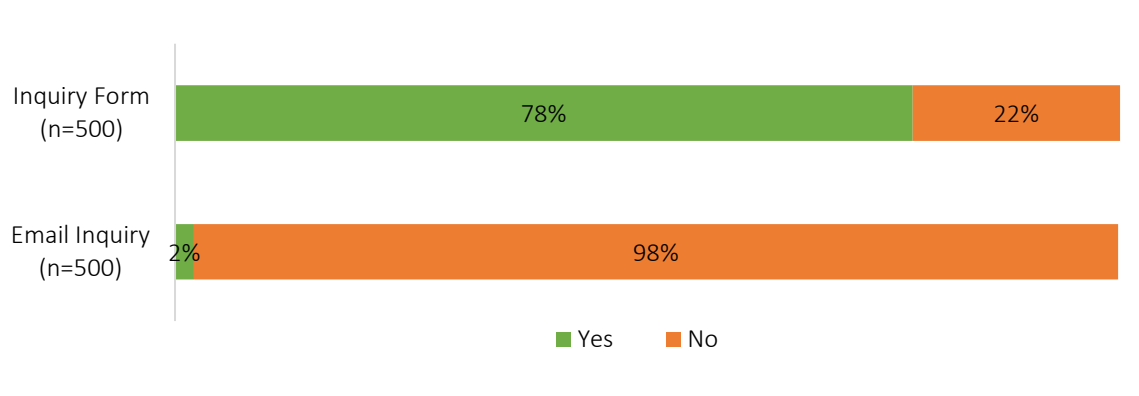
Both undergraduate and graduate programs had average and median response times that were relatively consistent with the overall average and median.

Figure 4: Average and Median Response Times by Undergraduate vs. Graduate



Among the 500 inquiries placed by email, only 2% received promotional materials from the institution within the first 30 days, which indicates nearly all of these inquiries were not entered into institutional CRMs. RFI inquiries fared significantly better, as 78% received promotional emails from the institution.

Figure 5: Percentage of Inquiries That Received Promotional Emails



Email Inquiry Analysis

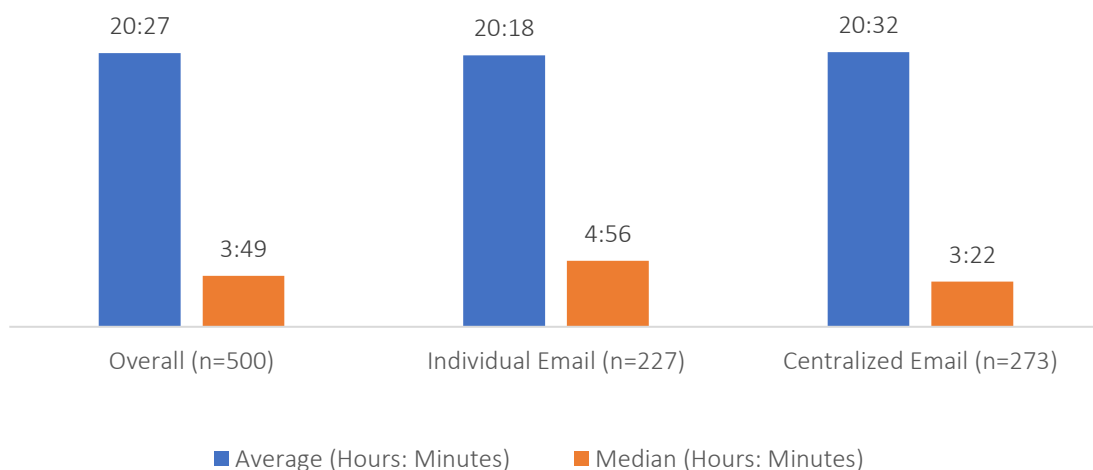
Of the 500 emails sent, 227 were sent to individual email addresses, meaning an individual staff member’s email was listed as a program contact. Another 273 email inquiries went to centralized emails, which were defined as unit or other non-staff person-specific emails (e.g., graduate@institution.edu, business@universitya.edu, etc.).

Table 5: Secret Shopper Results by Email Type

Inquiry Type	# of Inquiries	Average Response Time	Median Response Time	Best Response Time	Worst Response Time	% of Same Day Responses of All Responses	% of Same Day Responses of All Inquiries	% Inquiries without Response
Overall	1,000	14:23	3:18	0:00	310:00	54%	30%	44%
Email Inquiry	500	20:27	3:49	0:00	310:00	50%	25%	50%
Individual Email	227	20:18	4:56	0:00	310:00	44%	17%	62%
Centralized Email	273	20:32	3:22	0:00	300:42	53%	32%	40%

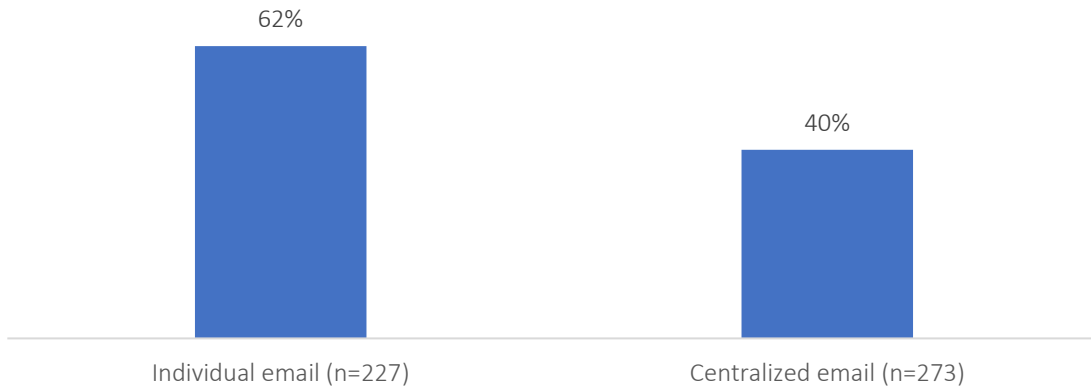
Figure 6 is a graph comparing average and median response times by email type. Inquiries sent to both individual and centralized email addresses had similar average response times, with centralized emails having a faster median response time (3 hours and 22 minutes).

Figure 6: Average and Median Response Times by Email Type



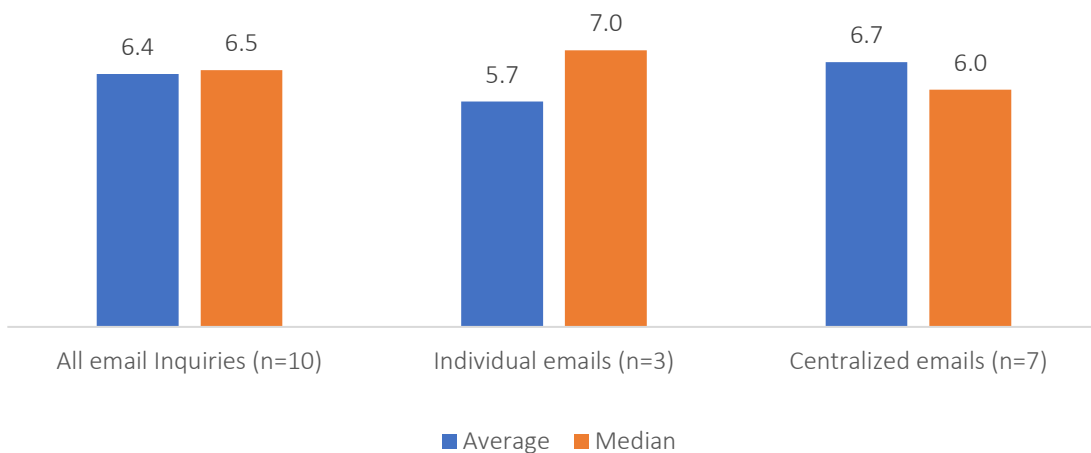
Inquiries sent to individual email addresses had a higher percentage of inquiries that did not receive a response (62%) compared to those sent to centralized email addresses (40%).

Figure 7: Percent of Inquiries Without Response by Email Type



Of all inquiries sent via email, only 10 received additional follow-up emails within the first 30 days after inquiry. Of those, the average number of follow-ups during that time period was 6.4, with a median of 6.5. Such a low percentage of follow-ups for email inquiries indicates a significant missed opportunity for institutions to capture and nurture prospective students who have already expressed interest.

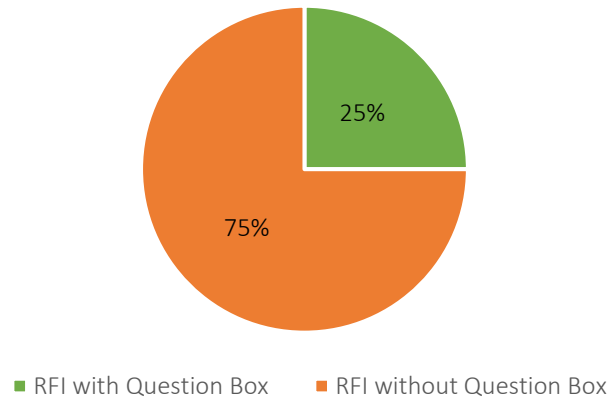
Figure 8: Average and Median Number of Follow-Up Emails by Email Type



Request for Information (RFI) Form Analysis

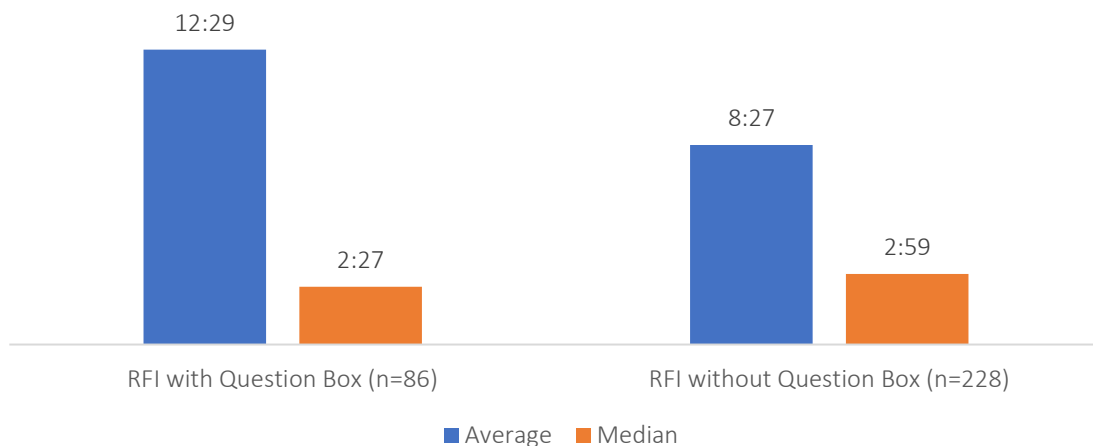
Three quarters (75%) of RFI forms did not have the opportunity to ask a question within the form, while one quarter (25%) did. This data indicates that most institutions are missing a key opportunity to encourage engagement and gather valuable insights from prospective students by not including a space for open-ended questions.

Figure 9: Type of RFI Forms (n=500)



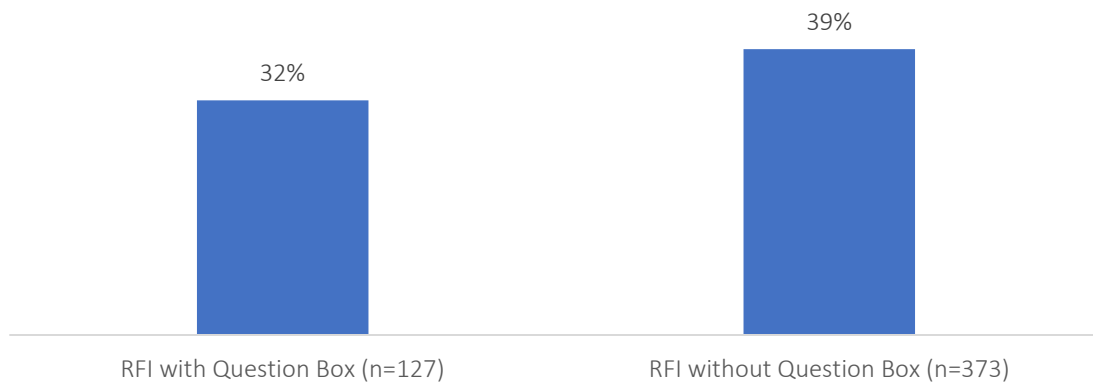
RFI forms without a question box had a faster average response time (8 hours and 27 minutes) compared to RFI forms with a question box (12 hours and 29 minutes). However, the RFI without a question box median response time was slightly slower (2 hours and 59 minutes), compared to RFIs with a question box median response time (2 hours and 27 minutes). This difference may suggest that when prospective students include questions, institutional representatives take additional time to craft more personalized or detailed responses, whereas forms without questions likely receive quicker, more standardized replies.

Figure 10: Average and Median Response Times by Type of RFI



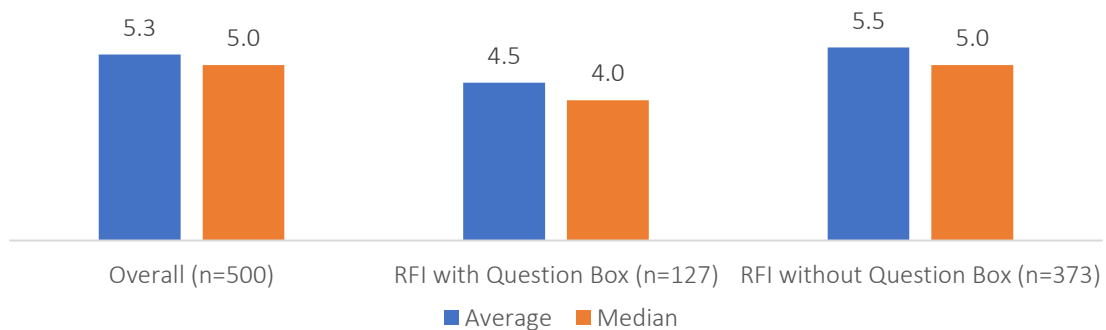
RFI forms without a question box had a higher percentage of inquiries that did not receive a response (39%), compared to RFI forms with a question box (32%). This data suggests that when prospective students have the opportunity to ask a question, institutions may be more likely to respond, potentially because a direct question prompts a more personalized interaction and signals higher likelihood of enrollment or engagement. For institutions, including a space for questions may not only improve response rates but also enhance the quality of engagement with prospective students.

Figure 11: Percent of Inquiries Without Response by Type of RFI



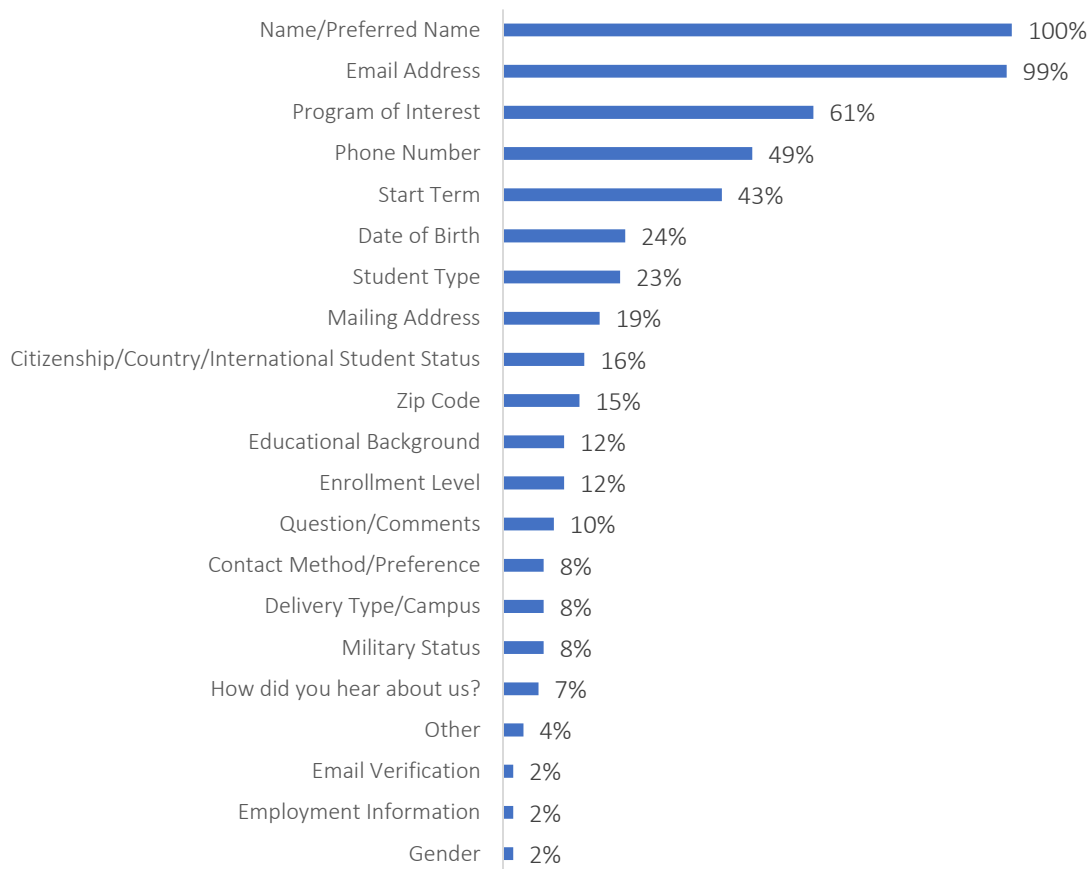
On average, RFI forms included 5.3 required fields, with a median of 5.0. RFI forms without a question box had a higher average number of required fields (5.5) compared to RFIs with a question box (4.5).

Figure 12: Average and Median Number of Fields Included in RFI by Type of RFI



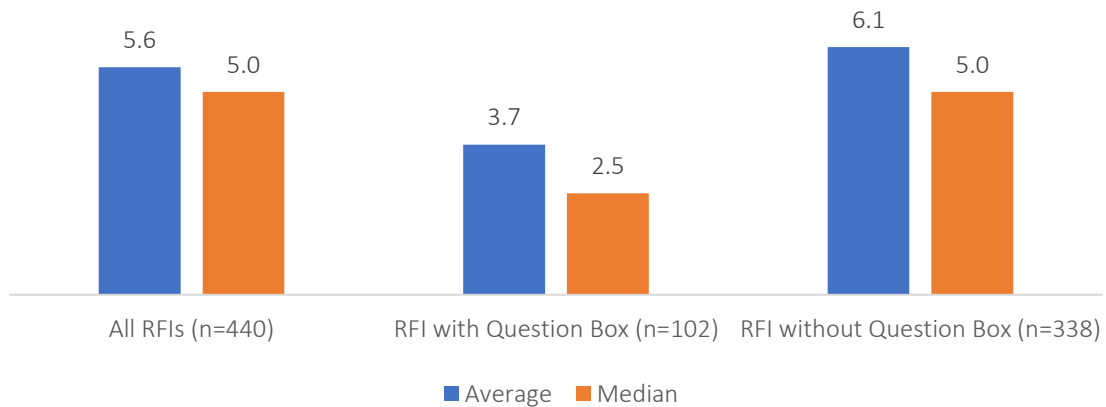
All RFI forms required the inquirer’s name, and nearly all (99%) required an email address. Sixty-one percent asked for a program of interest, followed by phone number (49%), start term (43%), and date of birth (24%). Notably, nearly one in five forms (19%) required a mailing address, which may deter prospective students who are hesitant to share personal information early in the inquiry process. Institutions should avoid requiring highly personal details, such as mailing address or date of birth, and instead make these fields optional or request them later in the enrollment process.

Figure 13: Most Common Fields Included in RFI (n=500)



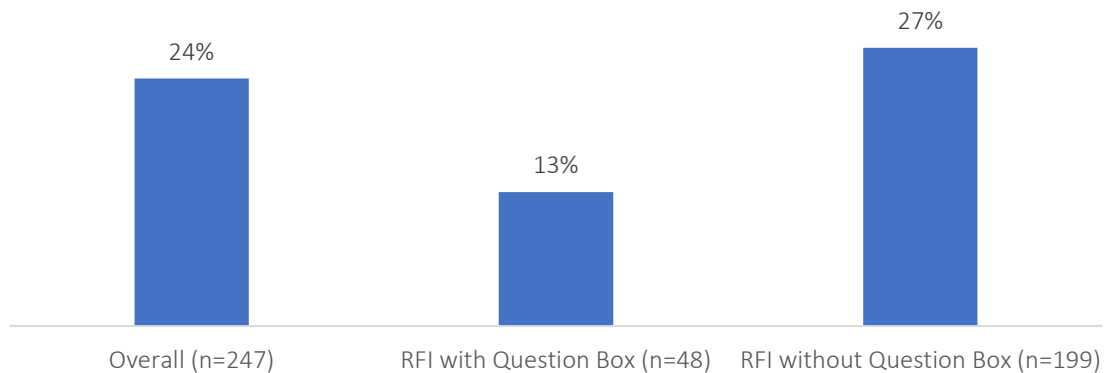
Overall, among all RFI inquiries that received an email response, an average of 5.6 emails were received within the first 30 days after inquiry, with a median of 5.0. RFIs without a question box had a higher average number of emails received within the first 30 days (6.1) compared to RFIs with a question box (3.7). This pattern suggests that institutions may rely more heavily on automated or standardized email sequences when inquiry forms lack open-ended fields, whereas forms that dedicate an open field for questions may prompt more targeted, personalized outreach requiring fewer follow-up messages.

Figure 14: Average and Median Number of Follow-Up Emails by Type of Inquiry



UPCEA secret shoppers left a phone number on nearly half (49%) of all RFI inquiries placed. Of those, nearly a quarter (24%) received at least one phone call within the first 30 days after inquiry. RFI inquiries without a question box were twice as likely to receive a phone call follow-up within the first 30 days (27%) than those with a question box (13%). This suggests that institutions are more likely to follow up by phone when less context is initially provided, while inquiry forms with a question box may not require phone contact.

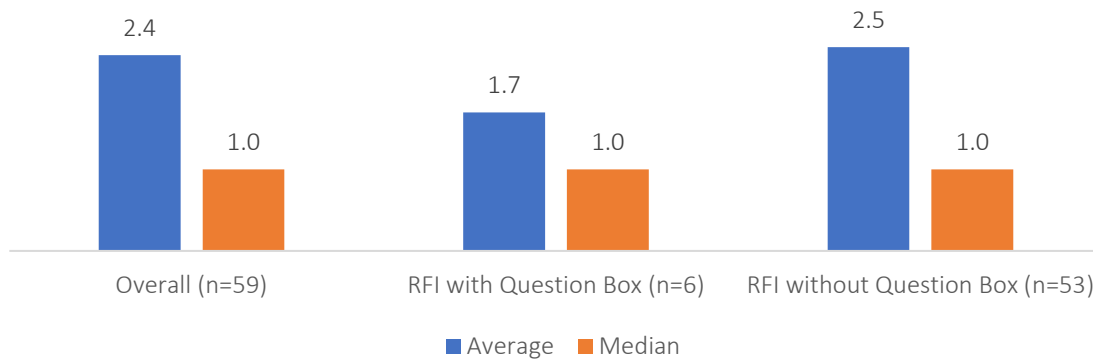
Figure 15: Phone Call Received by Type of RFI



Among all RFI inquiries that received a phone call response, an average of 2.4 phone calls were received within the first 30 days after inquiry, with a median of 1.0. RFIs without a question box had a higher average number of phone calls received within the first 30 days (2.5) compared to RFIs with a question box (1.7).

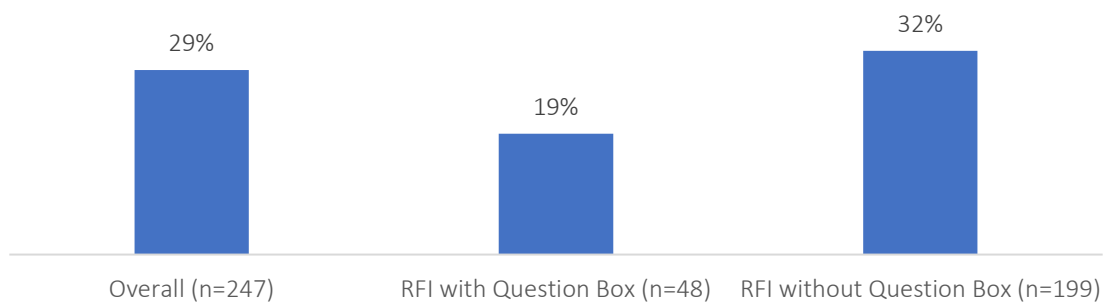
It's important to note that the sample size for phone call responses is smaller than for email or text follow-ups, as some incoming calls could not be identified as institutional representatives. Additionally, for some inquirers, only cases where a voicemail was left were recorded, since unidentified or missed calls could not be reliably tracked.

Figure 16: Average and Median Number of Phone Calls by Type of RFI



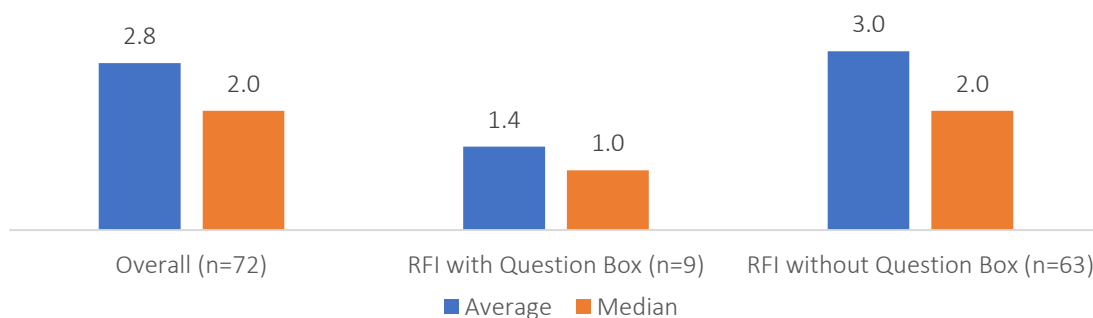
Among RFI inquiries where a phone number was provided, 29% received at least one text message within the first 30 days after inquiry. RFIs inquiries without a question box received a significantly higher rate of text message follow-ups within the first 30 days (32%), compared to inquiries with RFIs with a question box (19%).

Figure 17: Text Message Received by Type of RFI



Among all RFI inquiries that received a text message response, an average of 2.8 text messages were received within the first 30 days after inquiry, with a median of 2.0. RFIs without a question box had a higher average number of text messages received within the first 30 days (3.0) compared to RFIs with a question box (1.4).

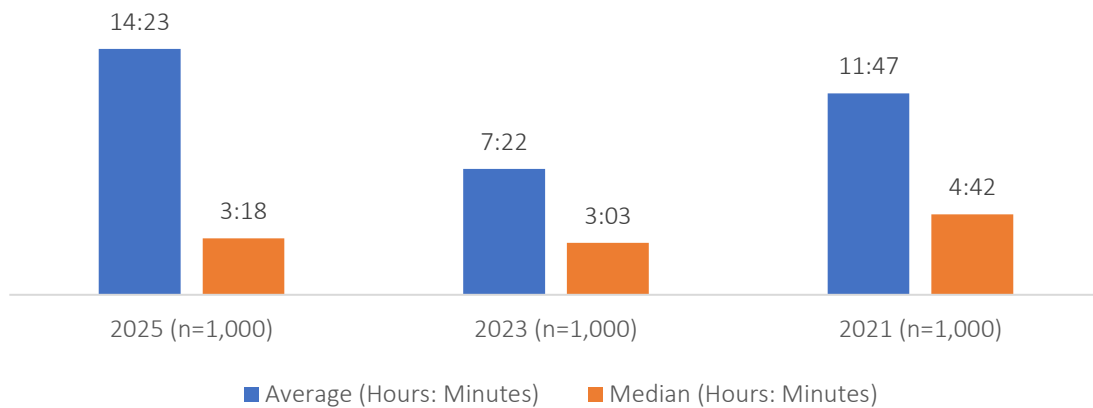
Figure 18: Average and Median Number of Text Messages by Type of RFI



Year-over-Year (YoY) Analysis

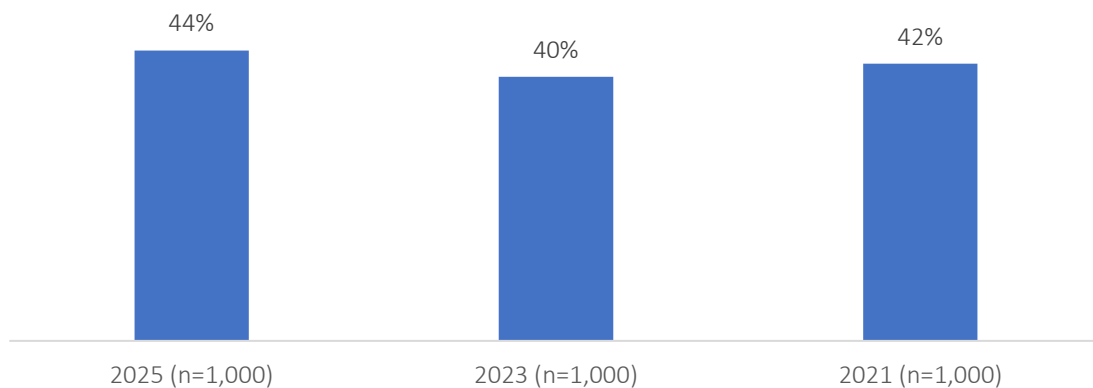
The average response time in 2025 (14 hours and 23 minutes) was significantly slower compared to 2023 (7 hours and 22 minutes) and 2021 (11 hours and 47 minutes) benchmark years. Median response times were more comparable, with the 2025 median response time (3 hours and 18 minutes) being just slightly slower than 2023 (3 hours and 3 minutes), but faster than 2021 (4 hours and 42 minutes). This suggests that while most institutions continue to respond within a few hours, a small but growing group of very delayed responses is inflating the averages.

Figure 19: Average and Median Response Times by Benchmark Year



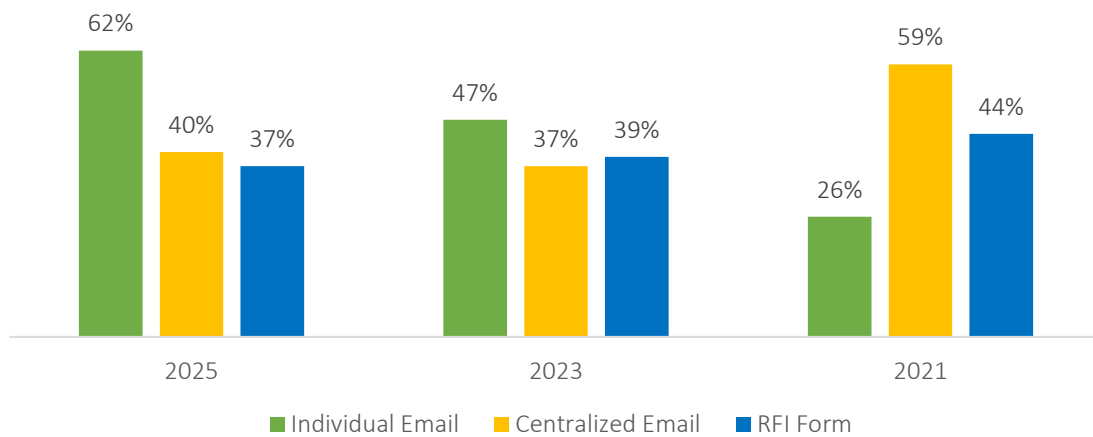
In 2025, 44% of inquiries did not receive a response, slightly higher than 2023 (40%) and 2021 (42%) benchmark years. This slight increase in non-response suggests a decline in overall follow-up consistency, highlighting an opportunity for institutions to strengthen inquiry management and engagement practices.

Figure 20: Percent of Inquiries Without Response by Benchmark Year



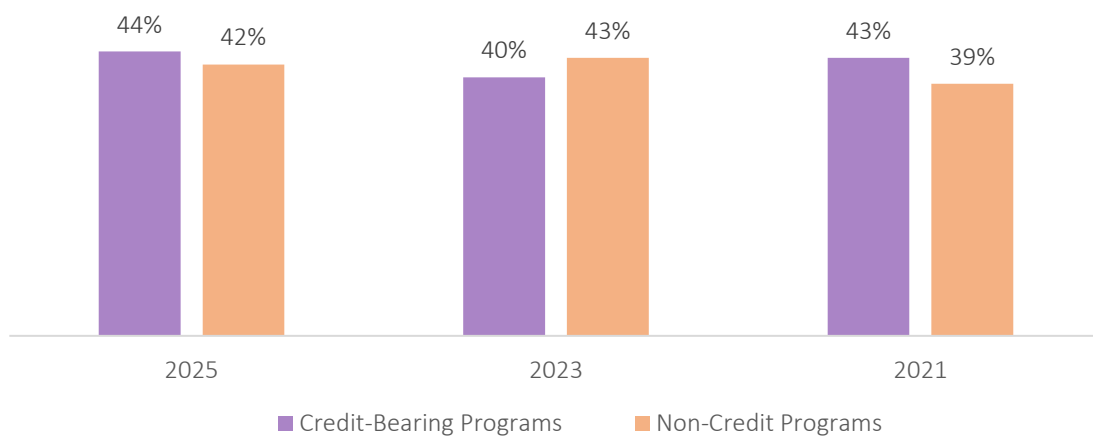
Compared to 2023, response rates declined across most inquiry types in 2025. Individual emails had the highest share of non-responses (62%, up from 47% in 2023), followed by centralized emails (40%, up from 37%). However, RFI forms showed a slight improvement, with 37% not receiving a response compared to 39% in 2023. In 2021, the trend was reversed, with individual emails yielding the strongest response rates. The overall rise in non-responses since 2023 highlights a need for institutions to re-evaluate inquiry management and follow-up practices to sustain engagement.

Figure 21: Percent of Inquiries Without Response by Inquiry Type & Benchmark Year



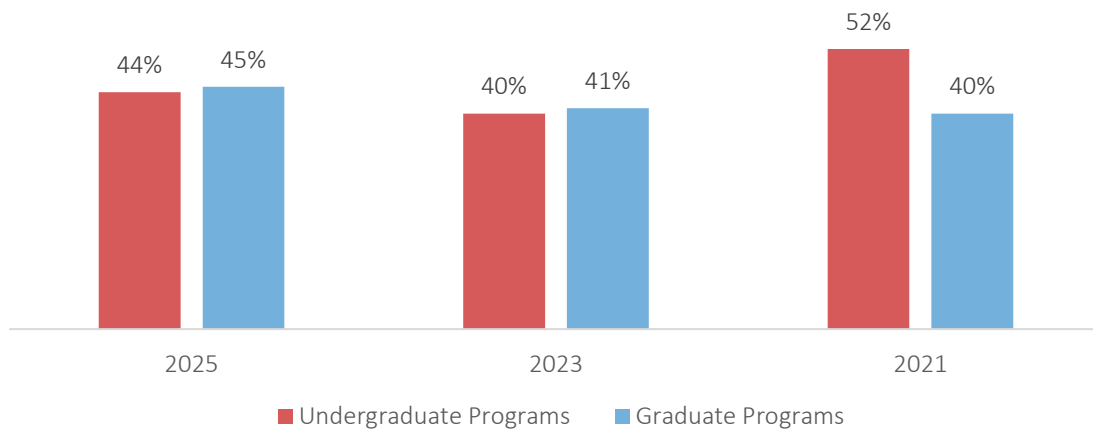
Response rates were similar across credit-bearing and non-credit programs in 2025, with 44% and 42% of inquiries, respectively, receiving no response. Compared to 2023, non-responses increased slightly for credit-bearing programs and decreased very slightly for non-credit programs. Overall, both program types experienced modest declines in responsiveness since 2021.

Figure 22: Percent of Inquiries Without Response by Credit Type & Benchmark Year



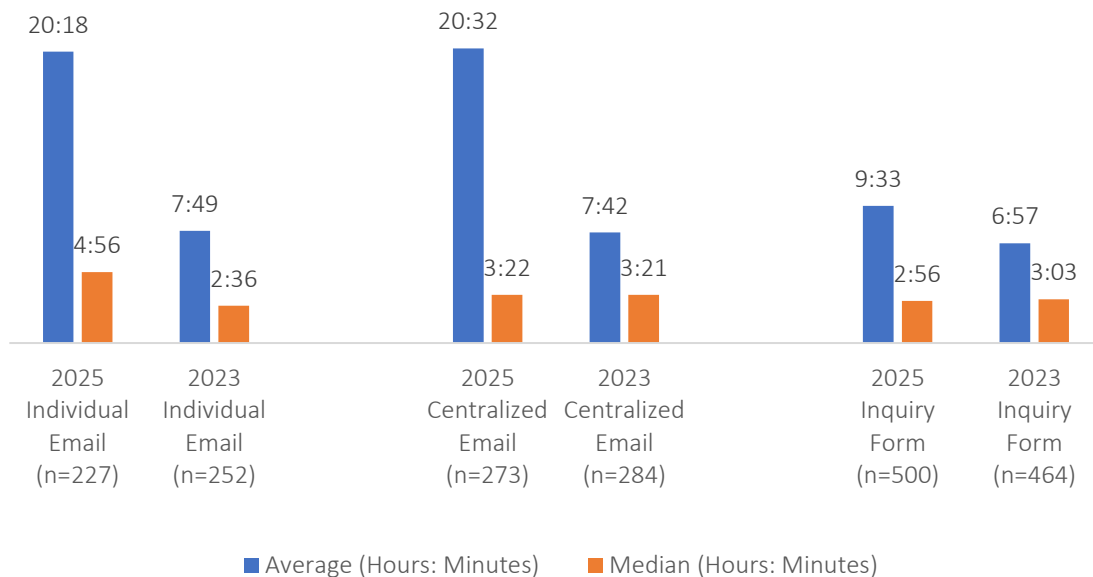
In 2025, non-response rates were nearly identical for undergraduate (44%) and graduate (45%) programs, both slightly higher than in 2023. While undergraduate response rates have improved since 2021, the overall rise in non-responses since 2023 highlights a need for stronger engagement practices across program levels.

Figure 23: Percent of Inquiries Without Response by Graduate Type & Benchmark Year



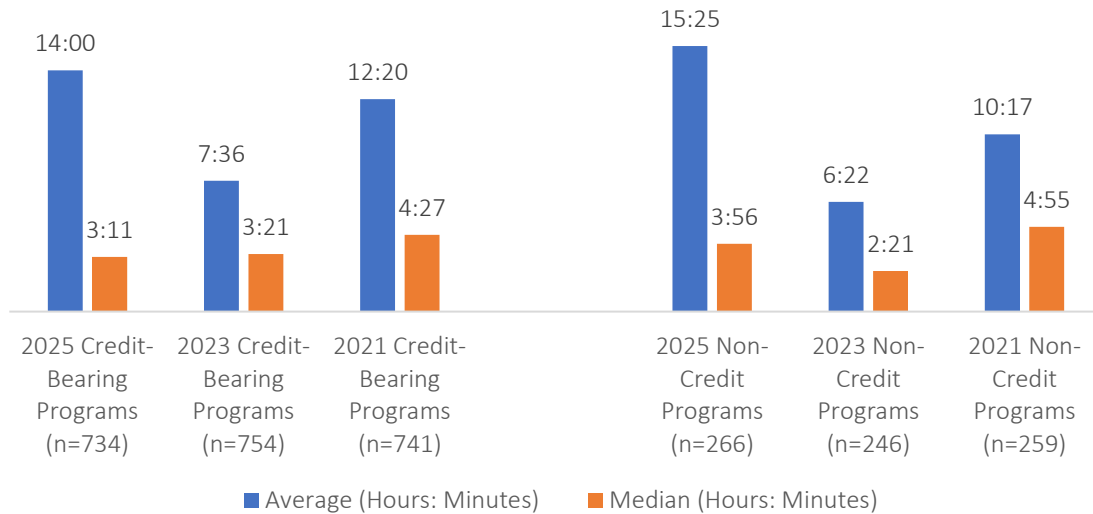
On average, 2025 response times were significantly slower than 2023 response times across all inquiry types. Median response times varied less when comparing 2025 benchmark data to 2023.

Figure 24: Response Time, Inquiry Type by Year



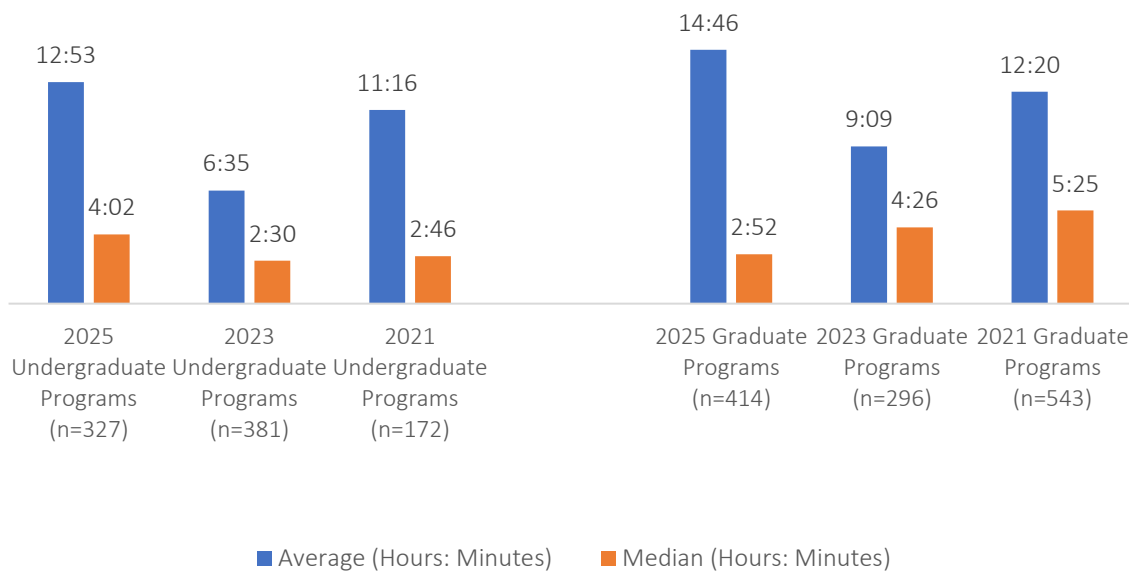
Average response times for both credit and non-credit programs were significantly slower in 2025 compared to 2023, and while they remained slower than in 2021, the gap was smaller. The median response times for credit-bearing programs, however, was fastest in 2025.

Figure 25: Response Time, Credit vs. Non-Credit by Year



For both undergraduate and graduate programs, the average response times in 2025 were roughly twice as long as those recorded in 2023. However, median response time was slower for undergraduate programs in 2025, but faster for graduate programs.

Figure 26: Undergraduate vs. Graduate by Year



Best Practices

Of the 1,000 inquiries sent by UPCEA, 56% received responses from the 182 institutions contacted. This demonstrates a mixed level of engagement, as just 63% of RFI form inquiries received a response and only 50% of those sent by email. Of those institutions that did respond, many took proactive steps to acknowledge and respond to prospective students' questions.

These institutions showed clear dedication to communication and service, supported by strong internal systems that allowed them to respond efficiently and personally. Their ability to manage inquiries promptly reflected a genuine commitment to guiding prospective students through their decision-making process and nurturing continued interest in their programs.

Many of the email responses shared meaningful insights, helpful resources, and relevant information that added value for students exploring their options. These thoughtful replies reflected a sincere effort to provide clarity and support, helping prospective students better understand available programs and opportunities.

This section outlines the best practices observed among these institutions with examples of how they effectively engaged and maintained communication with prospective students. These approaches included personalized outreach, consistent follow-up, comprehensive information sharing, and creative use of engaging materials. Together, these practices helped foster meaningful connections and sustained engagement.

By highlighting these examples, UPCEA aims to share proven strategies that institutions can adapt to strengthen their own recruitment and communication efforts. These insights offer a framework for creating a more impactful, student-centered inquiry experience.

Maintaining Engagement with Inquirers

Among the institutions that were contacted, a select few continued their outreach beyond the initial contact. This highlights the importance of sustained engagement with individuals who inquire about specific programs. Periodic follow-ups serve several key purposes: they allow institutions to address lingering questions, strengthen relationships, and keep prospective students informed and connected. Follow-up communication also creates opportunities to highlight additional institutional offerings or resources, such as webinars, events, or related programs that align with students' interests.

One university demonstrated this approach by sending a thoughtful sequence of nine follow-up emails within one month of an initial RFI submission. (Figure 27) Each message focused on a different aspect of the student experience, including financial aid options, program formats, and links to connect with advisors or begin an application. This intentional communication strategy offered comprehensive support and guidance, helping prospective students make confident, well-informed decisions about their educational path.

Figure 27: Follow-Up Emails

Inbox	Taylor, change your life with a	B.A. - That's what	School of Continuing Studies is all about. Intrigued? ...	Sep 23
Inbox	Why a	Degree? - That's why	evening program is built for you! Imagine getting your bachelor's without s...	Sep 18
Inbox	Taylor, don't wait. Finish the degree.	- out about	; adult education programs - now it's time to take the next step!"T...	Sep 12
Inbox	Checking in, Taylor!	- Nathanael with	continuing Studies here. Are you still interested in attending Teac...	Sep 10
Inbox	Taylor's path to success: Making school fit your life.	- ? Enter	We get that adulting is complicated, which is why w...	Sep 7
Inbox	What will a	degree do for you, Taylor? - team at	financial aid office is your ... Unsubscribe	
Inbox	Any questions, Taylor?	- Nathanael with	continuing Studies here. I wanted to check in with you and see if you had any...	Aug 29
Inbox	Worried about costs, Taylor? Let's talk options!	- you know	Adult Education Programs offer a significantly reduce...	Aug 26
Inbox	Taylor, Your Future Starts Now!	- out about	; adult education programs - now it's time to take the next step!Classes...	Aug 23

Personalized Engagement with Inquirers

Some institutions took additional steps to create more personalized connections with prospective students. They did so through video introductions, embedded surveys on engagement, and detailed responses tailored to each student’s questions. This kind of personalized, ongoing communication can be a powerful factor in converting inquirers into actual enrollments.

Figure 28 illustrates one such example, an institution using personalized video introductions to engage prospective students. These videos offer a human, interactive touchpoint, allowing inquirers to get a sense of the institution’s community, values, and staff. This approach underscores the growing importance of personal communication and demonstrates how institutions can meaningfully address the individual needs and interests of prospective students.

Figure 28: Video Introduction Engagement

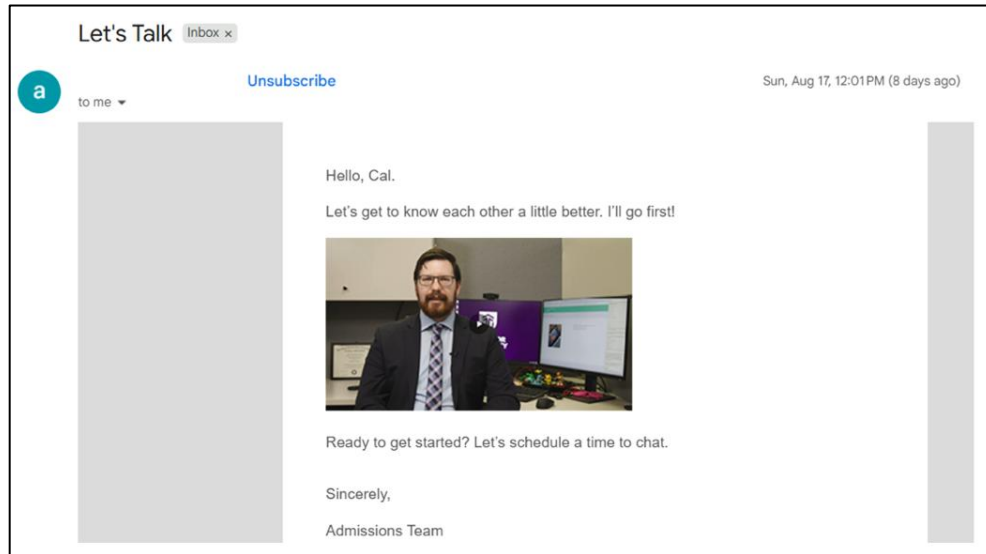
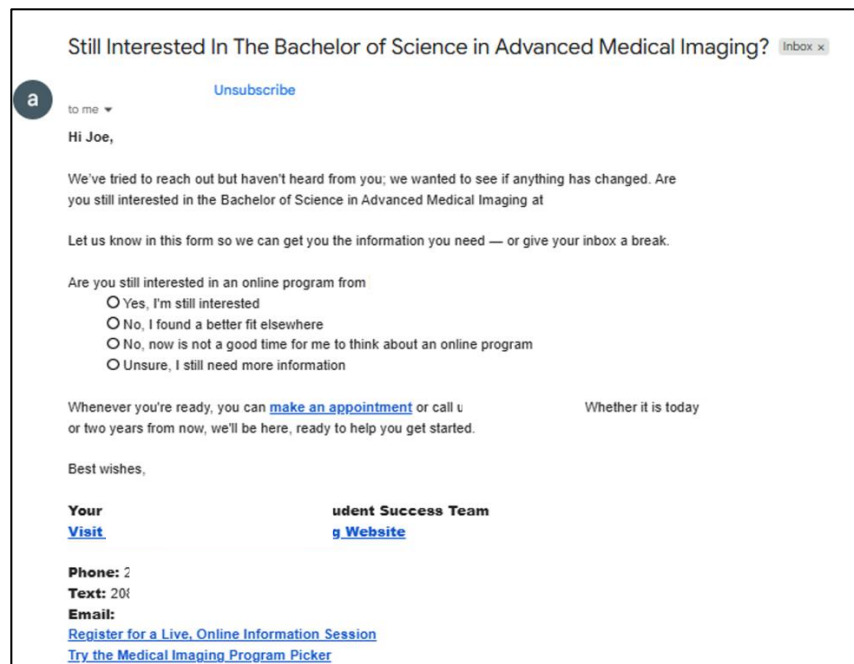


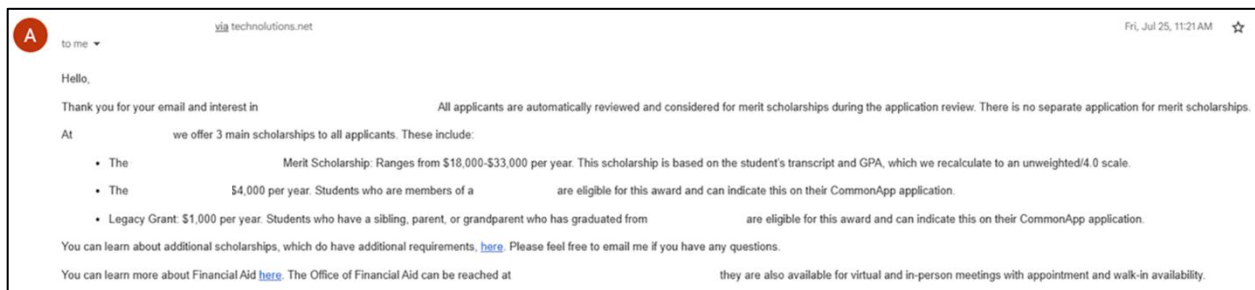
Figure 29 shows a follow-up email from an institution, which includes a simple, one-question survey for inquirers to complete about their interest in the program they initially asked about. This quick interaction not only encourages engagement from potential students but also allows them to easily indicate whether they wish to receive further follow-up communications. For institutions, this type of built-in survey can be a valuable tool for gauging interest levels and identifying which leads are most worth pursuing with additional resources and outreach.

Figure 29: Built-In Survey for Continued Engagement



In Figure 30, an inquirer asked about available scholarships at the institution. While many institutions typically respond by directing inquirers to external webpages or resource links, this representative provided a detailed explanation directly within the email. This approach is particularly helpful for prospective students, as it eliminates the need to search through institutional websites and allows them to access all relevant information in one place. Institutions should aim to make the inquiry experience as seamless and straightforward as possible, ensuring that students can easily find the information they need. Maintaining this level of personal engagement is essential for building trust, nurturing relationships, and strengthening the connection between institutions and prospective students.

Figure 30: Comprehensive Scholarship Information



In addition to providing personalized, engaging, and thorough responses, institutions should ensure that all inquiries, including those received via email, are entered into a centralized CRM system. This allows for more comprehensive tracking of engagement, better informed decision-making, and more personalized follow-up communications based on accurate, consolidated data. Likewise, ensuring that outbound calls to prospective students display a recognizable caller ID or institutional name helps build recognition and transparency, increasing the likelihood that inquirers will answer and engage.

Open Field for Additional Information on Inquiry Forms

Several inquiry forms on institutional websites include a valuable feature, an open text field where prospective students can share additional details or ask specific questions. This comment box is particularly useful for individuals seeking clarification or hoping to receive more tailored responses. Among the 500 requests for information forms that were filled out, only a quarter (25%) had this open field for inquirers to ask specific questions. Institutions that offer this feature exhibited higher response rates but also, slightly longer response times, which may reflect the added effort to craft personalized replies. Including this space benefits both students and institutions as it allows for more meaningful engagement, and when questions are categorized within a CRM, it can provide actionable insights into student interests, helping institutions refine marketing messages and outreach strategies.

For example, the RFI form shown in Figure 31 features a large open field where inquirers can pose program-specific questions, allowing institutions to provide more personalized and relevant follow-up communications.

Figure 31: Open Field for Question on RFI Form

The image shows a screenshot of an RFI form. It contains the following fields and elements from top to bottom:

- First Name ***: A text input field.
- Last Name ***: A text input field.
- Email ***: A text input field.
- Phone**: A text input field.
- How did you hear about the program ***: A dropdown menu with the text "Please select..." and a downward arrow.
- Questions/Comments**: A large, empty text area for providing questions or comments.

Areas for Improvement

While many institutions demonstrated strong practices in responding to inquiries, UPCEA also identified several recurring issues that may discourage prospective students from continued engagement or enrollment. These challenges included overly long or intrusive RFI forms, low-quality automated email responses, and replies that lacked sufficient detail or personalization. Each of these factors can create barriers to enrollment and weaken a student's connection with the institution.

It's important for institutions to recognize that every inquiry, whether through email or an RFI form, represents a valuable opportunity to make a positive impression and build a relationship with a potential student. Addressing these areas for improvement is therefore essential to strengthening engagement and enrollment outcomes.

This section explores these improvement areas in greater depth and offers practical recommendations for institutions to consider. It outlines specific steps that can help institutions enhance communication quality, streamline their processes, and create a more positive, student-centered inquiry experience. By reassessing their current practices and implementing these strategies, institutions can more effectively engage prospective students and support their journey toward enrollment.

Requiring Physical Addresses on Inquiry Forms

A number of institutions required prospective students to provide a physical mailing address when completing their online RFI forms. In these cases, the form could not be submitted without entering that information. However, this practice presents a significant concern, as physical addresses are often viewed as highly personal details. Many students may feel uneasy about disclosing such information, and, as a result, choose not to complete the form at all.

Mandating physical address submission also raises important questions about privacy and data security. Prospective students may worry about how their information will be stored or used, leading to hesitation or withdrawal from the inquiry process. This can ultimately reduce the number of completed submissions and limit an institution's ability to engage with interested students.

Figure 32: Inquiry Form Requiring Physical Address

WHAT TYPE OF PROGRAM ARE YOU SEEKING?
<input type="text"/>
FIRST NAME *
<input type="text"/>
LAST NAME *
<input type="text"/>
BIRTHDATE*
<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>
EMAIL ADDRESS *
<input type="text"/>
PRIMARY COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP *
<input type="text"/>
MOBILE PHONE NUMBER
<input type="text"/>

Mailing Address
COUNTRY *
<input type="text" value="United States"/>
STREET *
<input type="text"/>
CITY *
<input type="text"/>
STATE *
<input type="text" value="Select State"/>
POSTAL CODE *
<input type="text"/>
If you live outside of the United States and do not have a postal code, please input: 00000

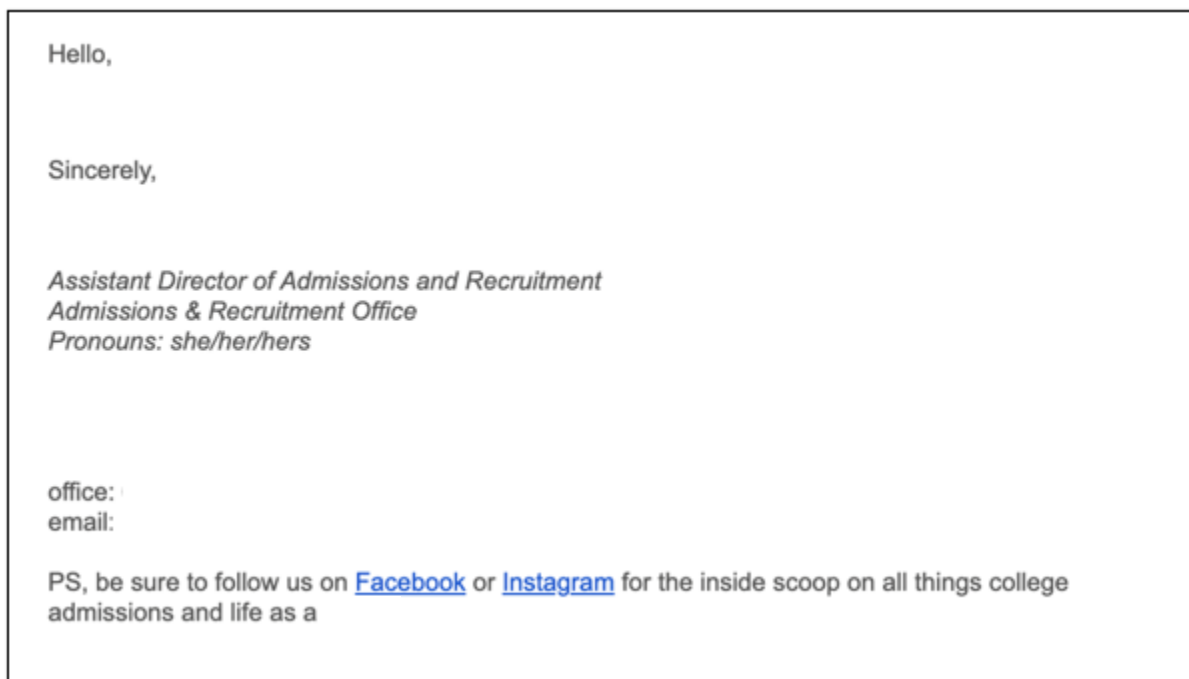
To address this issue, institutions should thoughtfully evaluate whether collecting physical addresses is truly necessary, and, when it is, clearly communicate why the information is being requested. Offering transparency about data usage and privacy protections can help ease concerns and build trust with prospective students.

Institutions might also consider less intrusive approaches to gathering contact information. For instance, making address fields optional or offering alternative communication methods can respect inquirers' privacy preferences while still enabling meaningful follow-up. These small adjustments can help ensure that prospective students feel comfortable completing inquiry forms without the pressure to disclose sensitive personal details.

Low-Quality Automated Emails

Some institutions sent automated emails of poor quality, reflecting missed opportunities for engagement. Common issues included minimal content, inconsistent formatting, visual errors, or a lack of institutional branding. In Figure 33, for example, the email body contains only a greeting and the representative's signature, suggesting that a template may have been used without being properly completed or personalized to the inquirer. No follow-up message was sent afterward, which is a significant oversight that could appear careless and leave a negative impression on prospective students.

Figure 33: Low-Quality Automated Email



Technical Issues on Webpages and RFI Forms

Some institutions experienced technical issues with their RFI forms or webpages, preventing prospective students from successfully submitting their inquiries. In one notable example, shown in Figure 34, the form displayed an “Access Denied” message after the user completed all required fields, blocking submission entirely. Such errors create a significant barrier for prospective students, as they prevent access to key information and may discourage further attempts to engage with the institution.

Figure 34: “Access Denied” RFI Form

The screenshot shows a web form with a yellow banner at the top that reads "Access Denied". Below the banner, there is a legend: "* = Required Field". The form contains several input fields, all of which are filled with text. The fields are: "First Name *" with the value "Taylor"; "Last Name *" with the value "Deemer"; "Email Address *" with the value "taylordeemer98@gmail.com"; "Program Type *" with a dropdown menu showing "Traditional Day Students"; "Academic Interest" with a dropdown menu showing "Finance"; "Anticipated Start Term" with a dropdown menu showing "Fall 2026"; and "Student Type" with a dropdown menu showing "Freshman". At the bottom of the form, there is a blue "Submit" button.

UPCEA also identified a technical issue on another RFI webpage where the website did not allow inquirers to submit the RFI form with 2026 as the anticipated program start year. For many prospective students, 2026 could be a realistic start date, yet the error prevented them from submitting the form, which potentially could lead to confusion, or discourage them from completing the form.

Figure 35: Request for Information Webpage Error

Transfer
 Non-Degree Seeking
 Graduate

Anticipated Start Term *
Anticipated Start Year *

You must select an item from the list

Graduate Academic Program Interest

Another similar technical issue is shown below, where the RFI form fields appear to be outdated. The available entry terms listed for the program include dates that have already passed. Institutions should ensure their RFI forms and webpages are regularly updated to maintain a professional, accurate, and user-friendly online presence.

Figure 36: Out-of-Date RFI Fields

This form is for students who wish to enroll in courses without admission to a degree program.

(*) denotes required information.

Student Information

Entry Term *

- 2021 Fall
- 2022 Spring
- 2022 Fall
- 2023 Spring
- 2023 Fall
- 2024 Spring
- 2024 Fall

Birthdate *

Lengthy Request for Inquiry Forms

While RFI forms are valuable tools for collecting key details from prospective students, some were found to be excessively long and required more information than necessary. Such lengthy forms can serve as deterrents, discouraging students from completing them and ultimately reducing inquiry submissions. One example can be found in Figure 37, where there are 10 required fields of student data.

Figure 37: Lengthy Inquiry Form

Student Information

First Name * <input type="text"/>	Name you go by (if different than your first name) <input type="text"/>
Last Name * <input type="text"/>	Email (allows us to share updates/info with you) * <input type="text"/>
Cell Phone (opting into potential texts) <input type="text"/>	Sex * <input type="radio"/> Female <input type="radio"/> Male
Birthdate * <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/>	Grade * <input type="text"/>

Academic Information

What type of student would you be? *

What would you like to know more about?

- Academic Information
- Financial
- Visiting

Mailing Address

Country *

Street *

City *

State *

Postal Code *

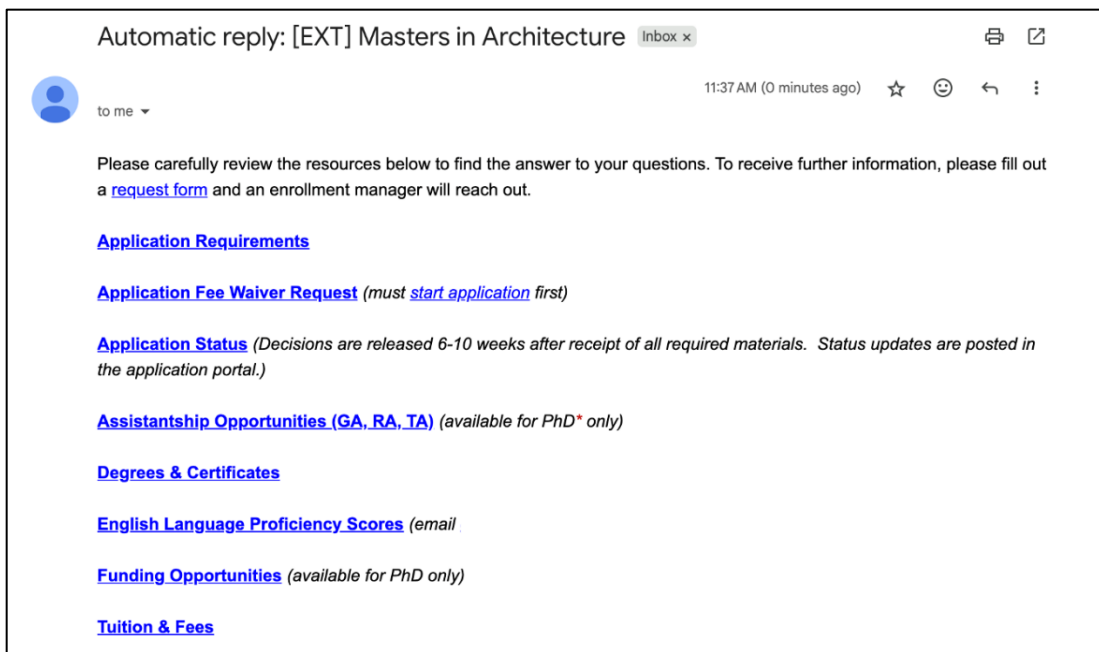
The extensive nature of these forms can easily overwhelm prospective students, increasing the likelihood of abandonment or incomplete submissions. Institutions should aim to strike a balance by designing RFI forms that collect essential information without placing an undue burden on respondents. Streamlining the forms and limiting required fields to only the most relevant details can significantly improve completion rates and ensure institutions receive the information they need.

Not Useful or Informative Email Responses

Although most institutions responded to inquiries, the quality of some responses fell short in providing clear and informative answers to students' questions. In one case, the initial RFI form did not include a field for submitting questions. The automated reply that followed, shown in Figure 38, contained several resource links, including another link to an RFI form, through which an enrollment manager was expected to follow up.

However, the linked RFI form also lacked a question box, and no outreach from an enrollment manager occurred. This creates a frustrating loop for inquirers, preventing them from directly communicating with an institutional representative and ultimately limiting their ability to receive personalized guidance.

Figure 38: Not Useful Automated Reply



From the inquirer's perspective, receiving a response like this can feel impersonal or inattentive. It may suggest that the institution did not take the time to understand their specific question or provide a tailored reply. Additionally, sending a long list of links is not always helpful, especially for students who have a particular concern or need personalized guidance. Sorting through multiple resources can feel overwhelming and may discourage further engagement.

Impact on Higher Education

UPCEA's review of institutional inquiry responses revealed a wide range of practices that influence prospective student engagement. Many institutions demonstrated strong communication strategies, such as timely responses, personalized follow-ups, and the inclusion of helpful resources that supported students in making informed decisions. These best practices highlight the importance of responsiveness, personalization, and ongoing communication in fostering trust and guiding students toward enrollment.

At the same time, several opportunities for improvement emerged, particularly around the structure and management of inquiry pathways. Excessively long or intrusive RFI forms, low-quality automated emails, technical errors, and limited opportunities for two-way communication hinder engagement. Inquiries submitted through unstructured channels, such as individual staff or faculty email addresses, were also far less likely to receive a response. Relying on a single person's inbox can quickly create bottlenecks, especially when program interest is high and that individual is balancing other responsibilities, resulting in unrealistic expectations and delayed or inconsistent follow-up. Routing email inquiries through a centralized system or CRM helps distribute workload more effectively and greatly increases the likelihood of timely, reliable responses to inquirers.

To further foster personalized communication with inquirers, RFI forms that invited prospective students to ask questions were associated with stronger engagement and more meaningful follow-ups. This finding suggests that creating room for dialogue – not just collecting data – supports better connection and conversion. The open field on an RFI form also enhances CRM tracking of question types, enabling institutions to adjust their marketing strategies in response to evolving learner preferences. Making small changes, such as the addition of an open field to RFI forms (or removal of requirements such as mailing addresses), presents a low lift, high-impact opportunity for institutions to strengthen their outreach processes, simplify the inquiry experience, and ensure that every interaction reflects professionalism, clarity, and care.

By adopting the effective strategies observed and addressing the challenges outlined, institutions can create a more student-centered inquiry process, one that informs but also builds meaningful connections that lead to long-term engagement and enrollment. Prioritizing clear communication, continual data collection, structured systems, and opportunities for personalization will not only strengthen institutional responsiveness but also cultivate trust and engagement that extends beyond the initial inquiry to long-term enrollment and retention.



UPCEA is the online and professional education association. Our members continuously reinvent higher education, positively impacting millions of lives. We proudly lead and support them through cutting edge research, professional development, networking and mentorship, conferences and seminars, and stakeholder advocacy. Our collaborative, entrepreneurial community brings together decision makers and influencers in education, industry, research, and policy interested in improving educational access and outcomes.

Suggested Citation: Etter, B., West, E., Sullberg, D., & Morelli, M. (2025). Enrollment Process Review Secret Shopper Analysis [Review of Enrollment Process Review Secret Shopper Analysis]. UPCEA.