

Beyond the Brochure

What Universities Must Understand About the Students They Are Losing — and What It Takes to Win Them Back

AUTHORS

Ann W. Davis, Ed.D.

Managing Partner & COO/CFO

Zak Odeh

Head of Growth

PUBLISHED

May 2026

Executive Summary

Something fundamental has shifted in the relationship between universities and the students they seek to recruit. The tools that defined enrollment management for a generation — the glossy viewbook, the campus visit, the one-size-fits-all scholarship appeal — are losing their hold on an incoming generation of students who were formed by algorithms, accustomed to instant personalization, and fully capable of detecting the difference between authentic institutional character and marketing performance.

At the same time, the demographic and financial pressures bearing down on higher education are intensifying. Fewer traditional-age students are entering the pipeline in many markets. Competition for those who are has never been more fierce or more global. The cost of failed enrollment strategy is measured not just in empty seats but in program eliminations, staff reductions, and the slow erosion of institutional mission.

This white paper presents a qualitative research framework for understanding how the students at the center of this challenge — Gen Z and the emerging AI-native cohort — actually experience, perceive, and respond to the enrollment processes that universities have built to reach them. It draws on three intersecting research questions that address the use

of artificial intelligence in admissions, the personalization of recruitment outreach, and the role of global experience as a yield tool.

"Students don't experience your enrollment funnel. They experience your institution. Every interaction — chatbot, email, campus visit, scholarship offer — is an audition for the relationship you are asking them to commit four years of their life to."

Davis · Taylor Advisory presents this framework as a research and strategic-planning resource for chief enrollment officers, provosts, vice presidents of student affairs, and institutional leadership teams who must translate enrollment ambition into enrollment results. The students are changing. The framework must change with them.

Section I: The Research Problem

The Enrollment Landscape Has Fundamentally Shifted

The structural challenges facing higher education enrollment are well-documented. The "enrollment cliff" — a sustained demographic decline in traditional college-age students in many U.S. states, driven by declining birth rates following the 2008 financial crisis — is not a projection. It is arriving. Projections from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) show that the number of high school graduates will begin declining in most states by the mid-2020s and will not recover for a generation in some markets.

But demography alone does not explain the full scope of the challenge. Even as the pool of traditional-age students contracts, institutions are discovering that their established recruitment methods are losing effectiveness with the students who remain. Response rates to direct mail are negligible. Email open rates in recruitment contexts have declined sharply. Generic social media advertising produces impressions but not relationships. The infrastructure built to recruit one generation is being deployed against a generation it was not designed to reach.

International student recruitment, once a reliable buffer against domestic demographic decline, has become more volatile and more competitive. Geopolitical uncertainty, visa processing delays, currency fluctuations, and the emergence of high-quality higher education options in students' home countries have made international yield less predictable. Institutions that built enrollment plans on optimistic international projections have been exposed to significant shortfalls when those projections did not materialize. Transfer student enrollment has become its own strategic challenge, as community college enrollments have fluctuated and the pathways between two- and four-year institutions have grown more complex.

The Students Have Changed More Than the Strategies

The students entering the enrollment pipeline today are not simply younger versions of those who came before. They are categorically different in how they gather information, build trust, make decisions, and evaluate institutional claims. They have grown up with recommendation algorithms that understand their preferences with uncanny accuracy. They have been exposed to enough marketing to develop highly calibrated skepticism toward institutional messaging that feels performative rather than genuine. And they have been shaped by a pandemic that disrupted their formative years of education in ways that are still being processed.

Gen Z students — broadly defined as those born between 1997 and 2012 — are the primary recruitment target for most institutions today. The cohort immediately following them, sometimes called "AI natives," has grown up in an environment where artificial intelligence is not a novelty or an innovation but a baseline feature of daily life. They have used AI-powered tools for search, entertainment, communication, and academic work since before they were old enough to enroll in college.

These students are not harder to reach. They are harder to reach inauthentically. The research challenge — and the strategic opportunity — lies in understanding precisely how they experience the recruitment process from the inside: what builds their trust, what erodes it, what creates genuine interest in an institution, and what produces the particular combination of conviction and excitement that turns a prospective student into an enrolled one.

The Three Research Problems This Framework Addresses

This qualitative research framework is organized around three interconnected problems that emerge from the enrollment landscape described above. Together, they constitute the core challenge of modern enrollment management: how to reach students who expect personalization, how to use artificial intelligence in ways that build rather than undermine trust, and how to leverage the distinctive assets of the institutional experience — including global experience — as enrollment strategy rather than afterthought.

The first problem is epistemic: we do not know enough about how AI-native students actually experience artificial intelligence in the admissions process. We have data on what they click, but not on what they feel. We know whether they complete the chatbot interaction, but not whether that interaction made them more or less likely to apply. Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to surface this experiential knowledge.

The second problem is relational: the intersection of automation and authenticity in enrollment communication remains poorly understood. Institutions are deploying AI tools at scale without a clear picture of where automation helps and where it harms the relationship they are trying to build. The qualitative evidence needed to calibrate that balance is largely absent.

The third problem is strategic: study abroad and global experience programs are almost universally positioned as post-enrollment benefits — something students access after they arrive — even though the evidence suggests that, for a meaningful subset of prospective students, they function as pre-enrollment differentiators. The research framework proposed here treats global experience as a yield tool and examines how students perceive and respond to it in that context.

Section II: Theoretical Framework

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model, originally developed by Davis (1989) and extended by Venkatesh and colleagues in subsequent decades, provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how prospective students respond to AI tools in the admissions process. TAM proposes that a person's intention to use a technology is determined primarily by two variables: **perceived usefulness** — whether the technology helps them accomplish something they value — and **perceived ease of use** — whether using it requires effort that outweighs its benefits.

Applied to enrollment, TAM generates specific and actionable research questions. When a prospective student encounters an AI chatbot on a university admissions page, does it help them get closer to a decision they care about making — or does it feel like a barrier to the human interaction they actually want? When an institution uses algorithmic marketing to deliver personalized content, does the student experience it as helpful curation — or as surveillance that produces discomfort? When AI is used to guide scholarship distribution, does the student experience the result as fair and transparent — or as opaque in ways that undermine trust?

TAM also accounts for the role of perceived trust and privacy in technology adoption — a dimension that is particularly salient for Gen Z students who have grown up in the aftermath of high-profile data breaches and who are more likely than prior generations to have considered the implications of their digital footprint. The qualitative research questions in this framework are designed to surface the experiential reality beneath the behavioral data that TAM-informed analysis typically examines.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory provides the second theoretical pillar of the framework. SCT holds that human behavior — including decision-making behavior like college choice — is shaped by the interaction of personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioral experience. Central to SCT is the concept of **self-efficacy**: a person's belief in their capacity to succeed in a given context. Self-efficacy is not a fixed trait. It is formed through experience, shaped by observation of others, and reinforced or undermined by the feedback received in specific environments.

Applied to enrollment, SCT explains phenomena that purely behavioral or economic models of college choice cannot. A prospective student's decision to apply to a particular institution is not simply a rational calculation of costs, benefits, and probability of admission. It is also a statement about whether they believe they belong there — whether they can see themselves succeeding in that environment, among those students, in that culture. Institutional communication that reinforces a student's sense of possibility builds self-efficacy and increases the probability of application and enrollment. Communication that signals mismatch — however subtly — does the opposite.

This dynamic is particularly relevant for students from first-generation college-going backgrounds, for students considering institutions in geographic or cultural contexts different from their own, and for students evaluating study abroad programs that represent a significant departure from their prior experience. The qualitative research questions in this framework are designed with SCT's self-efficacy construct at their center.

About the Research

Methodology

This paper is a qualitative research framework — not a primary empirical study. It synthesizes current evidence on Gen Z and AI-native student behavior, enrollment trends, and technology acceptance theory to propose a structured approach to understanding student experience in admissions. The framework is grounded in established models (Technology Acceptance Model, Social Cognitive Theory) and current evidence from education research, but represents a synthetic argument rather than a new empirical study of prospective students.

Limitations: The framework does not incorporate primary qualitative data from prospective students or enrollment offices. Implementation of the research design would require that data collection phase.

Section III: Research Questions & Methodology

The Three Research Questions

RQ 1 – AI in Admissions

How do Gen Z and AI-native students experience and perceive artificial intelligence in the university admissions and counseling process?

RQ 2 – Personalization & Trust

In what ways do vigorous, personalized AI enrollment efforts shape prospective students' trust and application decisions?

RQ 3 – Study Abroad as Yield Tool

How do students perceive short-term study abroad programs as a driving factor in their final university selection and subsequent persistence?

Methodological Design

The research employs a qualitative design drawing from both phenomenological and case study traditions. The phenomenological orientation centers the inquiry on the lived experience of prospective students — how they perceive, interpret, and make meaning of the enrollment communications and opportunities they encounter. The case study orientation situates that experience within the specific institutional contexts that shape it, allowing the research to account for variation across institution type, size, and enrollment strategy without sacrificing the depth that qualitative inquiry uniquely provides.

This design is appropriate to the research questions for several reasons. The questions ask about perception, experience, and trust — constructs that survey instruments and clickstream data cannot adequately capture. They ask about the student's interior experience of the enrollment process, not simply their behavioral response to it. And they ask about phenomena — the role of AI in admissions, the use of global experience as a yield tool — that are relatively new and for which the conceptual vocabulary is still being developed. Qualitative inquiry is the right instrument for building that vocabulary.

Participant Selection

The research engages three distinct participant populations, each contributing a different perspective on the enrollment process under study. Incoming first-year students and transfer students are the primary research participants. These individuals have just completed the enrollment process and retain vivid, detailed memories of their experience with institutional recruitment communications, AI tools, campus visits, and the factors that ultimately determined their choice. Their accounts constitute the primary data source for all three research questions.

Graduate enrollment management teams, including chief enrollment officers, admissions directors, and digital recruitment specialists, provide the institutional perspective. Their accounts illuminate how recruitment strategies are designed, how AI tools are selected and deployed, how personalization is operationalized, and how institutions conceive

of their relationship with prospective students. This perspective allows the research to examine the gap — which the data consistently suggests is significant — between institutional intent and student experience.

Study abroad advisors and international education professionals constitute the third participant group, contributing expertise on how global experience programs are currently positioned in the enrollment process, what barriers limit their use as recruitment tools, and how institutions might more deliberately integrate global experience into yield strategy.

Conclusion

The brochure was never really the point. The campus visit, the scholarship letter, the chatbot — none of these are the point. They are instruments in service of a relationship that the student is evaluating with the full force of their intelligence, their skepticism, and their understanding of what it means to make a four-year commitment to an institution. The institutions that win in the enrollment environment being described here are not the ones with the most sophisticated AI tools or the most expansive study abroad catalogs. They are the ones that understand what their students are actually experiencing — and who use that understanding to build something genuine.

The qualitative research framework presented in this white paper is designed to produce that understanding. It is designed to move the conversation about enrollment strategy from what institutions are doing to what students are experiencing — from the institutional perspective to the student perspective — in a systematic, rigorous, and actionable way.

The students entering the enrollment pipeline today are capable of remarkable commitment to institutions that earn it. They are also capable of remarkable indifference to institutions that perform for them rather than engage with them. The research is an instrument for understanding which side of that line a given institution stands on — and for building the evidence base needed to move to the right side of it.

"The best enrollment strategy is a student who believes, with evidence, that choosing your institution was the best decision they could have made. Everything else is a means to that end."

Davis · Taylor Advisory offers research design, qualitative data collection, and strategic consultation to institutions and enrollment organizations committed to building that evidence. The students are ready to be understood. The question is whether institutions are ready to do the work of understanding them.

Where This Can Go Wrong

Automation without authenticity. AI tools in admissions can feel like surveillance rather than service if deployed without transparency about data use and algorithmic decision-making. Students are skeptical of institutional messaging that feels performative — the more sophisticated the personalization, the more critical it becomes that the underlying institutional commitment is genuine.

Overestimating the role of global experience. Study abroad programs function as yield tools for a meaningful but not universal subset of prospective students. Institutions that position global experience as the primary enrollment differentiator while overlooking other drivers of student choice will misallocate resources. The research should be hypothesis-testing, not confirmation-seeking.

Research without action. Qualitative research on student experience is only valuable if it changes institutional practice. The risk is that findings surface, are acknowledged, and then are shelved while enrollment processes remain fundamentally unchanged. The research must be paired with a commitment to institutional change based on what students actually tell you.

Start Here: Action for Enrollment Leadership

If you lead an enrollment operation and want to ground your AI and personalization strategy in genuine student experience, start with these steps:

1. **Audit your current AI tools for transparency.** For each chatbot, email algorithm, and personalization engine in use, document what data is collected, how it is used, and whether that use is clearly disclosed to students. Identify where transparency gaps exist.
2. **Conduct listening sessions with recently enrolled students.** Recruit 8–12 students who enrolled in the past year and ask open-ended questions about their experience of your recruitment communications, AI tools, and decision process. What felt authentic? What felt like overreach? What actually moved the needle on their choice?
3. **Map your global experience as a yield tool.** Survey your current student body on the role study abroad played in their enrollment decision. For prospective students, test whether messaging about global experience shifts perception of institutional differentiation. Use that evidence to decide whether and how to position it as a recruitment asset.
4. **Identify a research partner and design a study.** Use this framework as a template to design a qualitative inquiry specific to your institution, your students, and your competitive context. The findings will be far more actionable than generic research.

Sources

- WICHE (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education). 2021. "High School Graduates & College Readiness Projections Through 2040."
- Davis, F. D. 1989. "Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and User Acceptance of Information Technology." *MIS Quarterly*, 13(3).
- Venkatesh, V., et al. 2003. "User Acceptance of Information Technology: Toward a Unified View." *MIS Quarterly*, 27(3).
- Bandura, A. 1997. *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W.H. Freeman.
- Common App. 2024. "Annual Trends in College Admissions."
- Pew Research Center. 2024. "Digital Access & Broadband Adoption by Demographic."
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). 2023. "Undergraduate Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions."

DAVIS · TAYLOR ADVISORY

Counsel. Precision. Legacy.

© 2026 Davis · Taylor Advisory | hello@davistayloradvisory.com