



THE ADMISSIONS PERSPECTIVE

How academic leaders are facing a
continuously changing state of admissions

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The Admissions Perspective: How Academic Leaders Are Facing a Continuously Changing State of Admissions is based on surveys conducted by Maguire Associates, Inc. in 2014 and 2015 and was written by Dan Webster, edited by Karin Meadows, and is sponsored by IBM. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. Copyright 2016.

Executive Summary

Shifting demographics and financial constraints are posing great challenges to higher education enrollment and those working in admissions. Since the Great Recession of 2008, institutions have less and less money to support students financially, yet the very group that traditionally has fueled higher education's growth—students who can afford to pay full tuition costs—is declining and the number of students who need financial support is growing. To make matters worse, birth rates in the U.S. are falling (except among Hispanics) in most regions of the country, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest, making the pool of future students smaller.

While a handful of the most prestigious public and private institutions remain attractive to students—and maintain healthy financial outlooks—half of small U.S. private colleges and regional public universities either have struggled to fill incoming classes or have discounted tuition to fill their enrollment quotas.

In order for their institutions to remain vibrant, college and university enrollment officers must take a hard look at how the college admissions process is evolving. Yet the methods enrollment managers use to promote their institutions have changed little for decades. Quoted in a 2014 Chronicle of Higher Education article, William T. Conley, vice president for enrollment management at Bucknell University, stressed why college administrators need to study the realities caused by a changing market. “If they weren’t born,” Conley said of potential future students, “they’re not going to go to college.”

In addition to financial struggles and lower student populations, various stakeholders, including parents and students, are increasingly asking higher education officials for proof of the value of a degree from their institutions. The U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard has made available key indicators about the cost and value of institutions across the country to help students choose a school that is well-suited to meet their needs, priced affordably, and is consistent with their educational and career goals.

Though the changing enrollment landscape is causing anxiety among the ranks of enrollment officials, surveys fielded by the Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc., in 2014 and 2015 indicated a steady level of job satisfaction among college and university admissions officials. The two surveys, completed by more than 400 enrollment managers at four-year U.S. colleges and universities, focused on the attitudes of senior admissions officials and enrollment managers about the state of their profession, incoming classes, demographics and marketing, and other enrollment issues. This report looks at emerging trends in these important areas as admissions officers grapple with what's next for the current high-cost, high-discount model of higher education.



RECRUITING THE CLASS

Public institutions outpaced private institutions in both 2014 and 2015 in meeting top enrollment goals, which included increasing diverse students, net revenue, headcounts, and the percentage of students paying full tuition.



MERIT AID VS. NEED-BASED AID

Merit aid has been used increasingly over the past two decades to lure better students by offering some scholarship dollars to applicants who can afford to pay a large share of the tuition bill. Both private and public colleges continue to use merit aid to help fill incoming classes. Overall, the use of “need-blind” financial aid is declining.



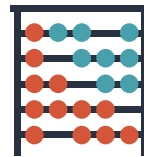
DEMOGRAPHICS ARE SHIFTING

Two-thirds of private colleges and half of public institutions are experiencing a changing economic mix of students and declining regional markets of prospective students, but very few have reduced enrollment targets. In response to changing demographics, the most common response has been to reconfigure marketing and recruiting plans.



MORE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BEING RECRUITED

Enrollment leaders say developing international markets is just as or more important than developing domestic markets, with more than half of institutions making efforts to increase international student enrollment. Public institutions performed much better in 2015 than in 2014 in hitting their goals in recruiting international students. Private institutions lost ground in 2015 in their recruitment of this same student population.



VALUE OF A DEGREE

More than half of admissions officials surveyed expressed strong concerns about increased public focus on the value of a college education, in terms of affordability, student loan debt, and earnings potential. The growing focus on value, including the U.S. Department of Education’s recent launch of College Scorecard, is causing admissions officials to worry they will be compared to other institutions much as consumers compare other purchases, such as cars or televisions. However, admissions officials showed little confidence in the ability of their institutions to adapt academic offerings to align with the job market and to gather compelling evidence on student outcomes.

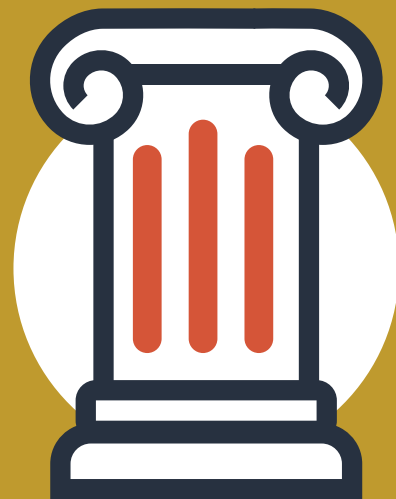


HIGH JOB SATISFACTION

Despite the turmoil in admissions, most enrollment officials are “mostly” to “extremely satisfied with their jobs.” Scarce resources and unrealistic expectations by their leaders are among their most pressing concerns.

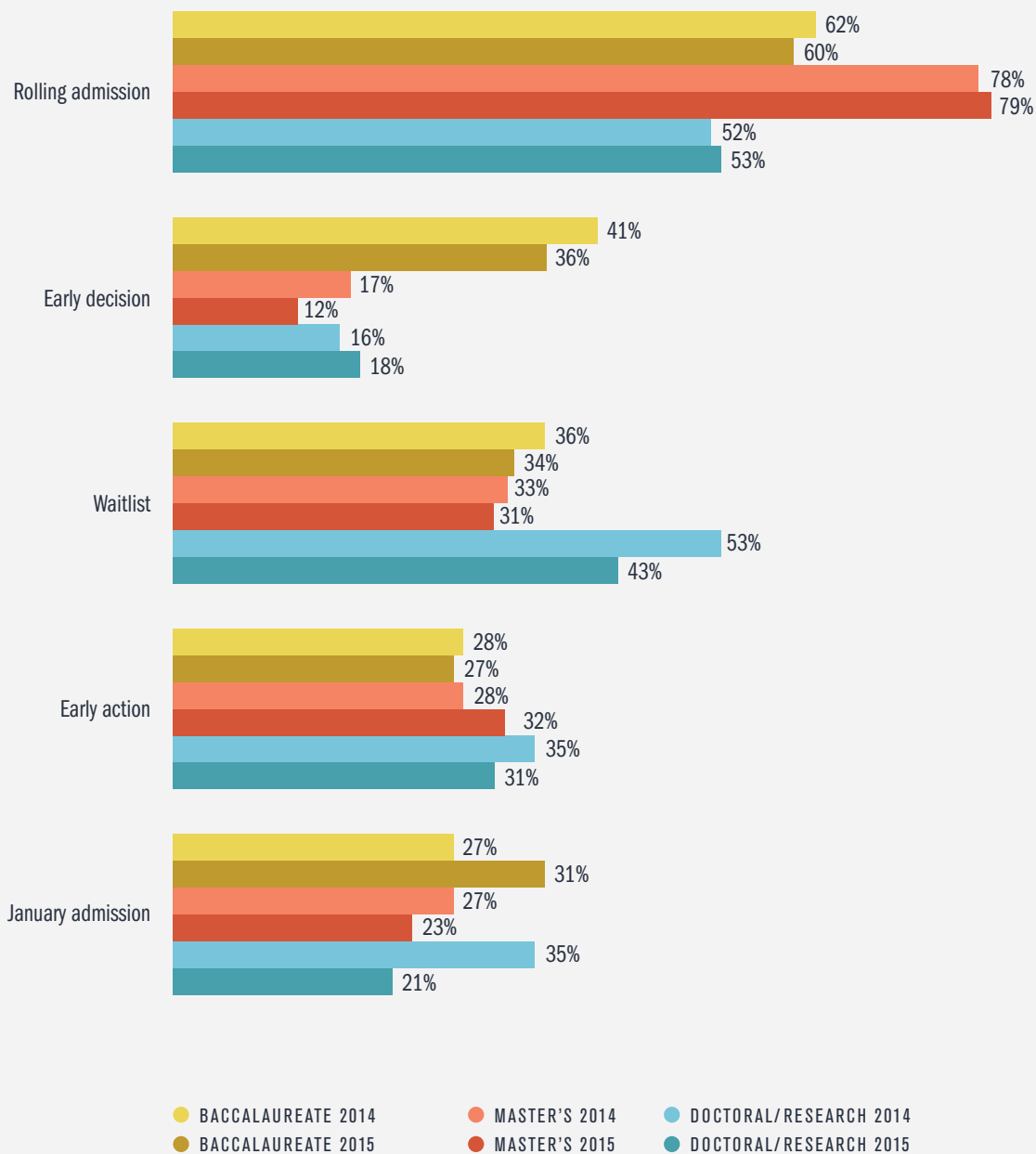
Recruiting the Class

Private institutions
fared far worse
than their public
counterparts in
several key metrics



Since the Great Recession of 2008, colleges and universities have increased the number of ways they recruit students, and the approaches can vary widely depending on the type of institution (see Figure 1). Baccalaureate and master’s institutions tend to favor rolling admissions and research institutions waitlist students more than baccalaureate and master’s programs do.

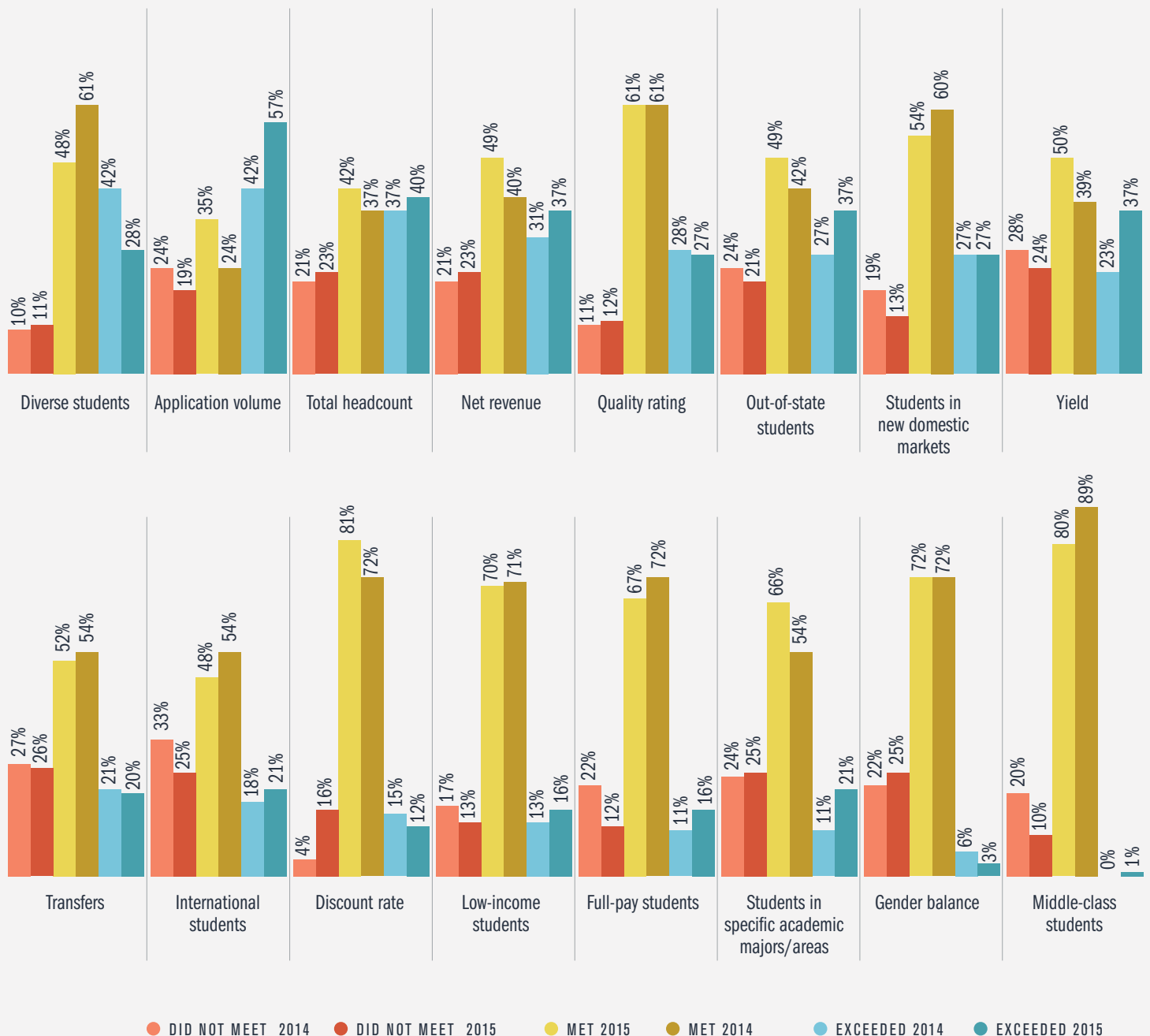
**FIGURE 1
PRACTICES USED TO MANAGE ENROLLMENT BY DIFFERENT TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS**



Public and private college admissions officials differed somewhat in their top recruiting goals in 2014 and 2015, with public institutions highly focused on application volume, headcounts, and finding diverse students and students in new domestic markets. Private institutions, in addition to volume and headcounts, listed net revenue and yield among their top priorities.

Public institutions improved in their quest to attract international students, with only a quarter missing 2015 goals, as opposed to one-third falling short in 2014. (See Figure 2).

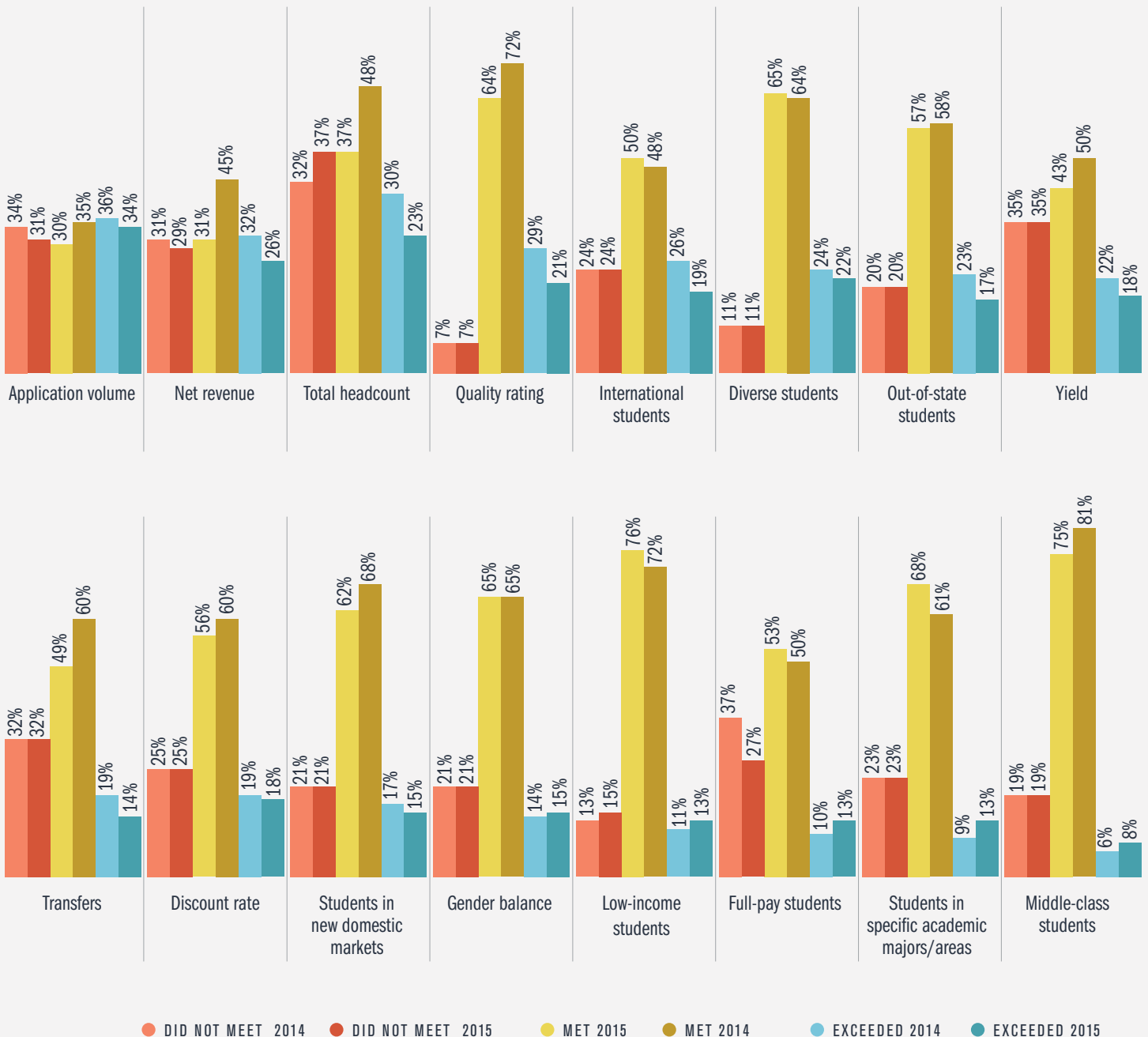
FIGURE 2
ENROLLMENT GOALS OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS VS. THEIR ACTUAL PERFORMANCE



Private institutions fared far worse than their public counterparts in several key metrics. One-third missed international student goals in 2015 versus a quarter in 2014. About one in three private colleges failed to achieve goals involving application volume, net revenue, and yield.

Neither private nor public sectors fulfilled their goals regarding transfer students, which is an important constituency since one in three students transfer at least once before earning a bachelor's degree (See Figure 3).

FIGURE 3
ENROLLMENT GOALS OF PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS VS. THEIR ACTUAL PERFORMANCE



Merit Aid vs. Need Aid

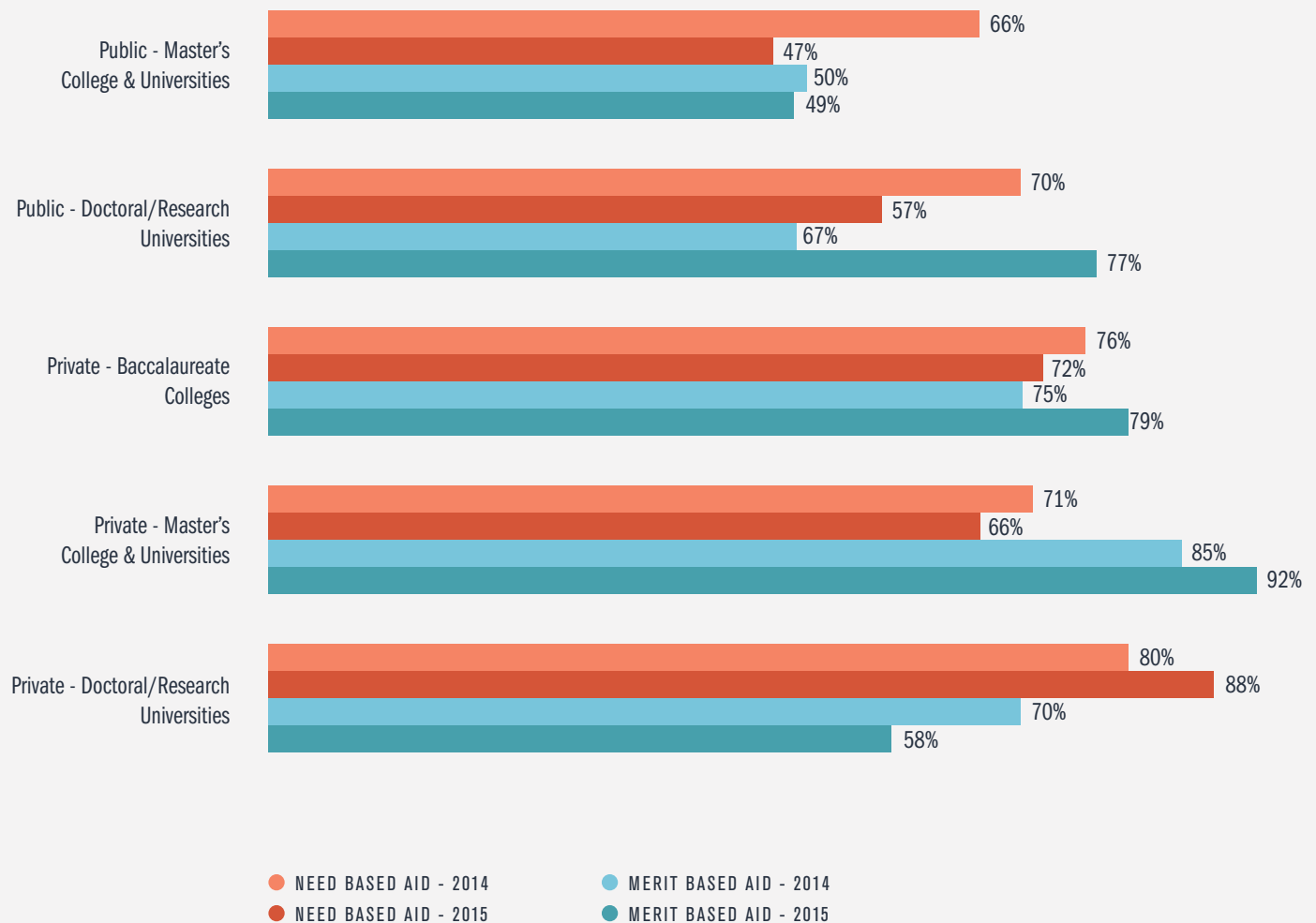
To fill incoming
classes, private
colleges are
increasingly
discounting tuition



Financial aid is one tool college enrollment officers traditionally used to attract students. Whether aimed at academically talented or financially secure students, the use of merit aid has increased dramatically over the past two decades, especially among institutions interested in being included in the top tier of *U.S. News & World Report's* annual rankings.

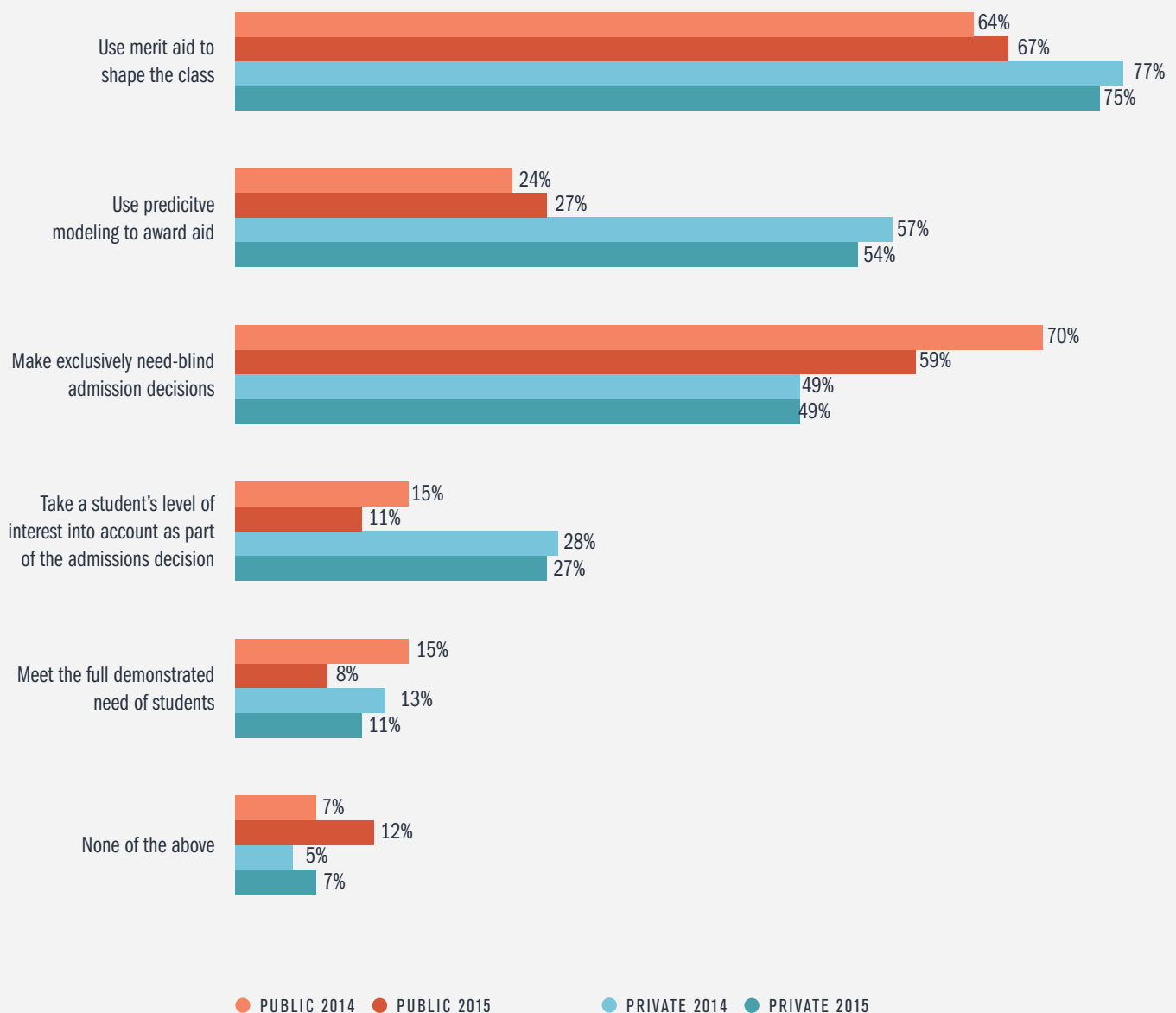
To fill incoming classes, private colleges are increasingly discounting tuition. According to the National Association of College and University Business Officers, the average discount provided for first-year students at private colleges stands at 46 percent. More emphasis on merit aid means less support for need-based tuition discounts (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4
FOCUS PLACED ON MERIT AID VS. NEED-BASED AID



The reality remains: college admissions officers are concerned about how much a student’s ability to pay should weigh on admissions decisions. Private colleges in particular depend on revenue from students paying full freight to support their institutional aid programs. So while private institutions continue to use merit aid to shape incoming classes (77 percent in 2014; 75 percent in 2015), the number of schools that “make exclusively need-blind admissions decisions” is declining (13 percent in 2014, 11 percent in 2015) Public institutions are much more likely to make need-blind admissions than privates. Another stark contrast: private colleges and universities are twice as likely to use predictive modeling to award aid than publics (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5
APPROACHES USED TO RECRUIT A CLASS



Where Will Tomorrow's Students Come From?

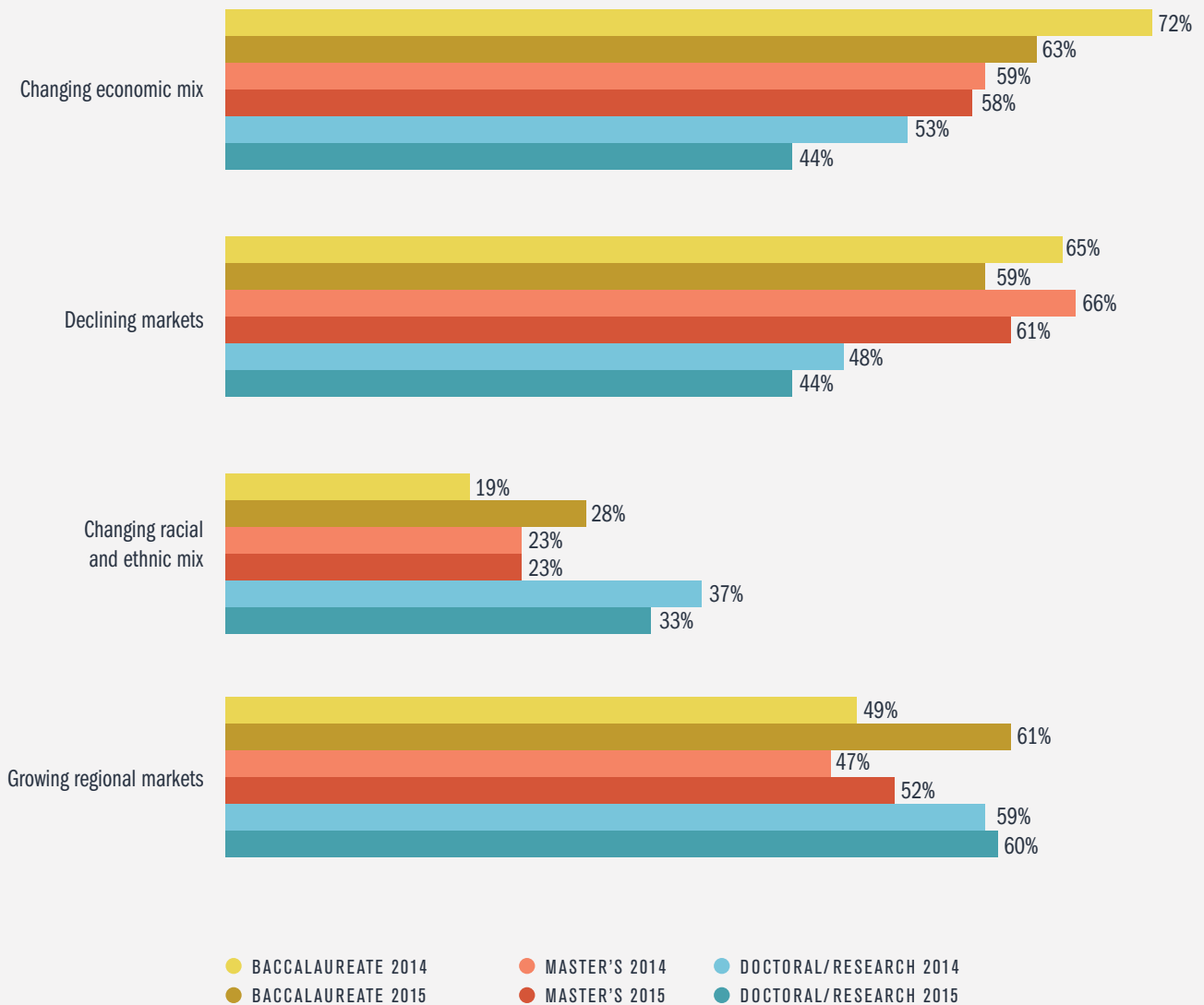
The next decade will see a decrease in the overall number of high-school graduates



According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, the next decade will see a decrease in the overall number of high-school graduates, with the Northeast and Midwest regions expected to experience the most significant declines. The demographic makeup of graduates also is changing, with less-affluent and more minority students applying to colleges.

College admissions officers are faced with a complicated problem: How do they replace the pool of affluent, well-prepared high-school students that has caused college classrooms to swell over the past decade? Small and medium-sized private colleges have already begun to experience this shift, with two-thirds of small liberal-arts colleges reporting changes in the economic mix of students, with more applications from less-affluent students. And some 60 percent of research universities reported a shifting racial and ethnic mix among their students (see Figure 6).

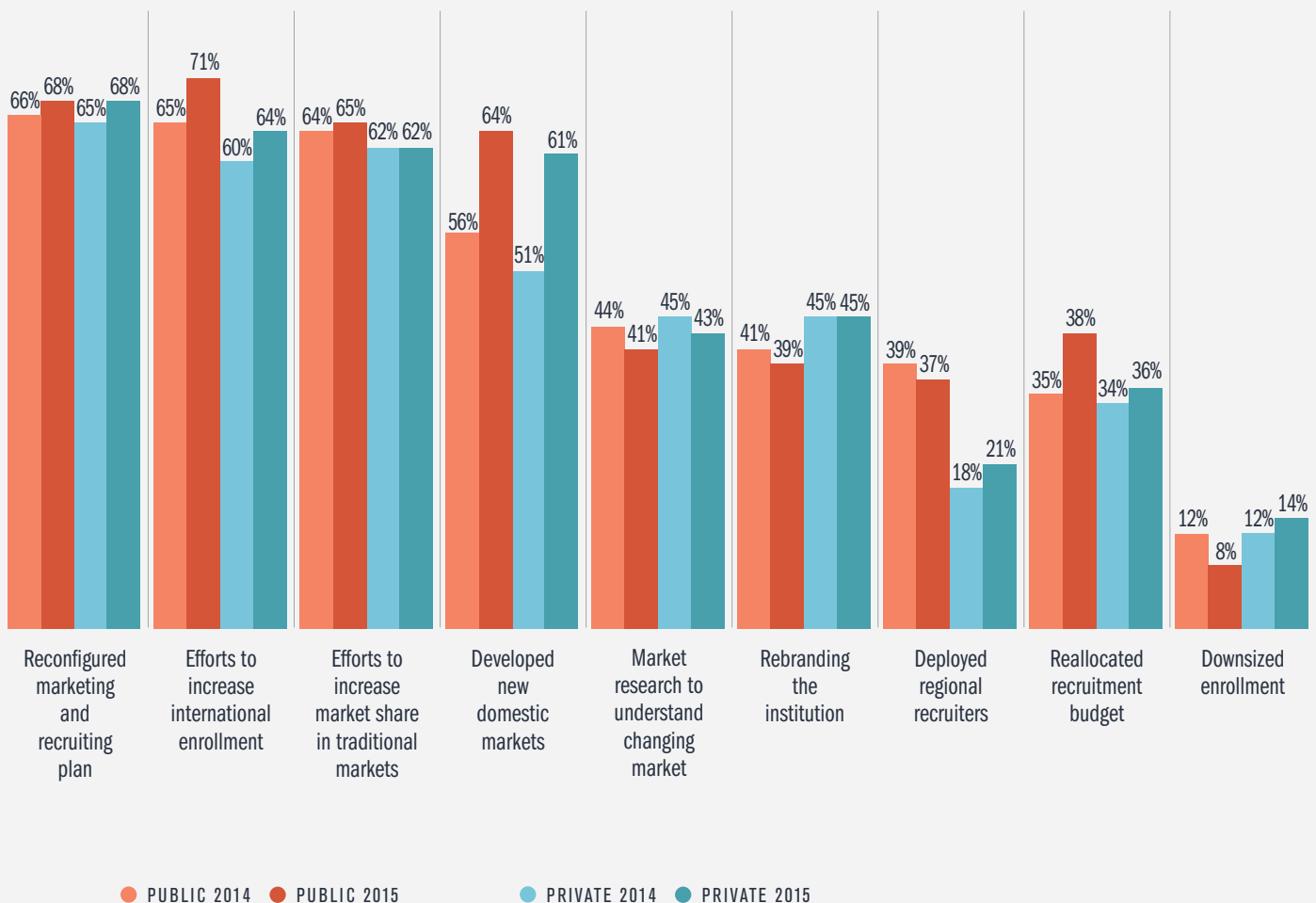
FIGURE 6
THE IMPACT OF SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS ON ADMISSIONS, BY INSTITUTION TYPE



Public and private colleges have responded to the demographic changes in various ways. Public colleges have used regional recruiters to develop new domestic markets, especially for full-pay students. Private institutions have turned to rebranding to increase appeal, while small private colleges have focused particularly on reconfigured marketing and recruiting drives and, more recently, increased the development of new domestic markets.

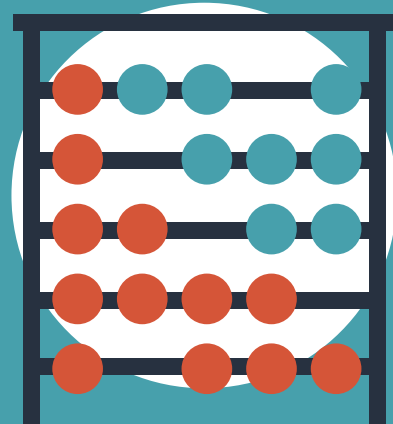
The Institute of International Education reports that the United States remains the world’s top destination for international students. International students, then, represent a growing source of new recruitment that is particularly important to top public research universities. More than half of enrollment managers surveyed stressed the importance of developing new international markets, while seven out of 10 research university admission officers ranked international recruiting as more important than domestic recruiting (See Figure 7).

FIGURE 7
RECRUITING STRATEGIES USED TO MITIGATE SHIFTS IN DEMOGRAPHICS, PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE



Value of a Degree

Public focus on
defining the value
of higher education
worries many senior
enrollment managers

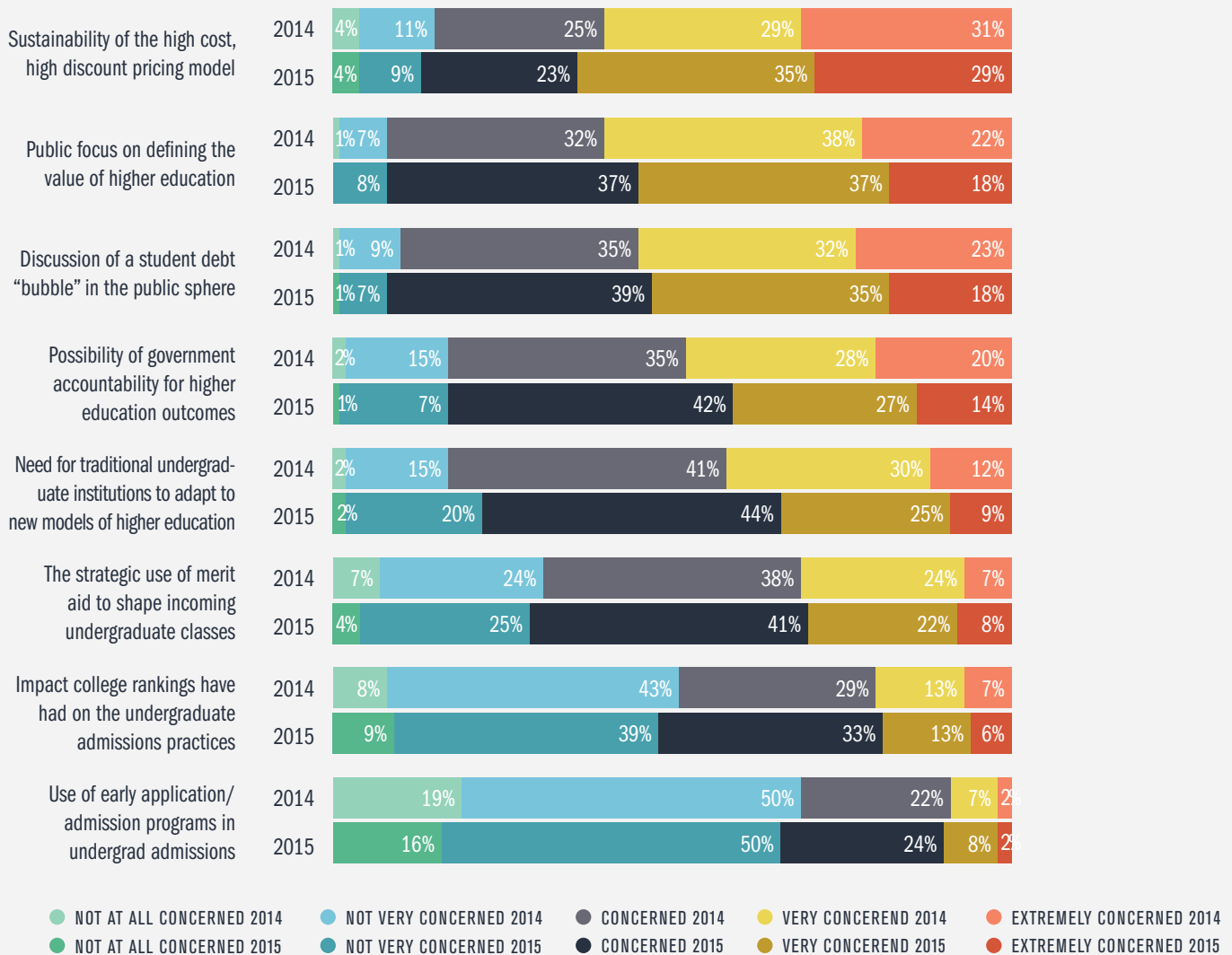


Students historically have had little more to go on than anecdotal information about the jobs and earnings they could expect upon graduation from a specific college or university.

But the launch of the U.S. Department of Education’s College Scorecard in the fall of 2015 has changed that, bringing for the first time transparency to the financial cost of getting a degree at thousands of American public and private colleges and universities. Students and families once armed with only college admissions and graduation rates to weigh one of life’s biggest financial decisions now have—at their fingertips for virtually every two-year and four-year institution in the country—tuition and housing costs, median student loan debt and repayment rates, and median earnings of former students.

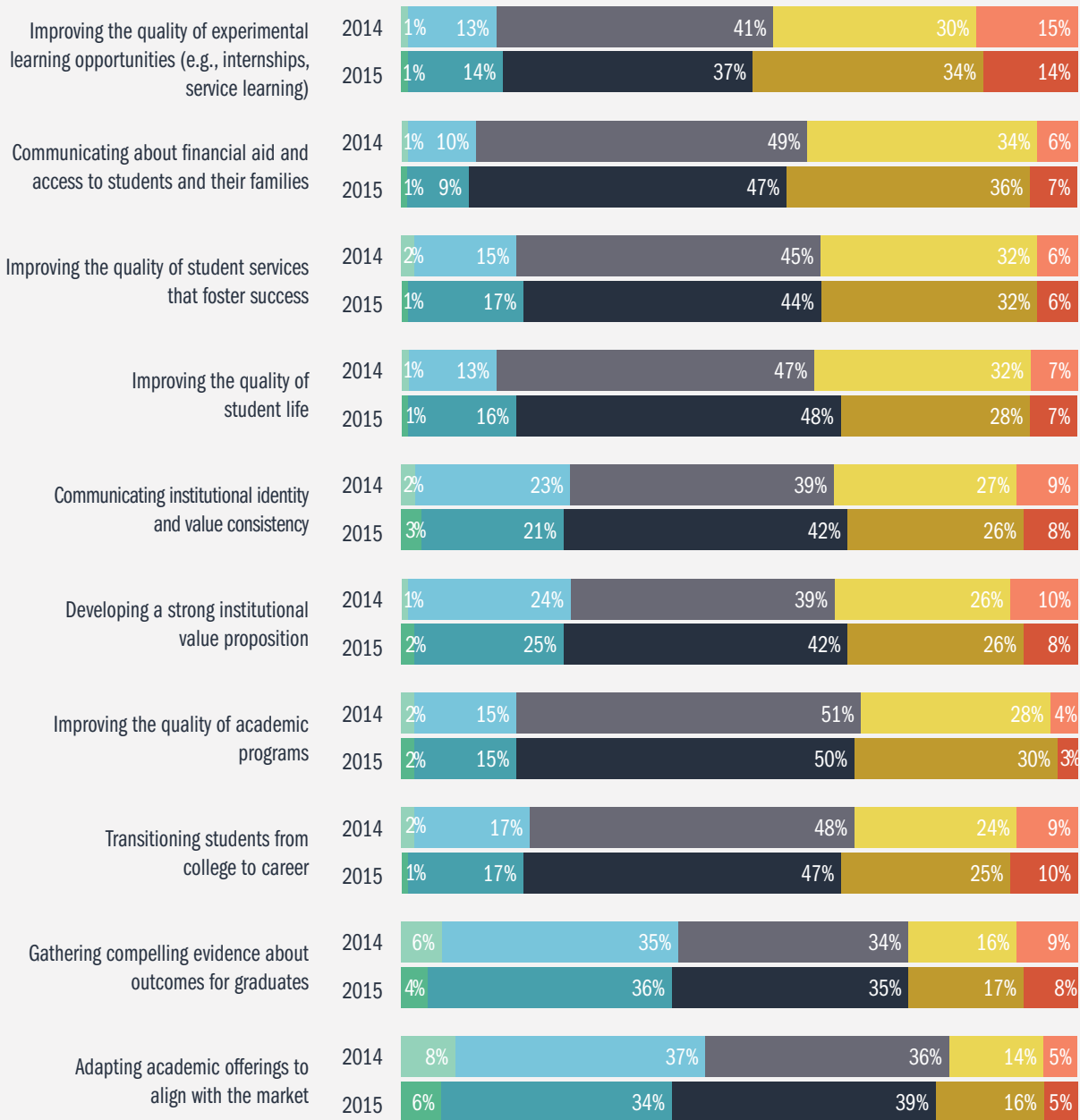
Public focus on defining the value of higher education worries many senior enrollment managers. And the concern is growing. More than half of the admission officers surveyed indicated they were “very concerned” or “extremely concerned” about public perceptions about “value” (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8
LEVEL OF CONCERN ABOUT ISSUES FACING THEIR INSTITUTIONS



Enrollment officials continue to have doubts about how effective their institutions are at gathering compelling evidence concerning outcomes for graduates. They're concerned, too, about how effective they are at adapting their academic offerings to align with the job market. Barely a quarter rated their institutions as "very" or "extremely effective" in this area (see Figure 9).

FIGURE 9
HOW CONCERNED ADMISSIONS OFFICERS ARE IN PROVING THE VALUE OF THEIR INSTITUTIONS



● NOT AT ALL CONCERNED 2014
 ● NOT VERY CONCERNED 2014
 ● CONCERNED 2014
 ● VERY CONCERNED 2014
 ● EXTREMELY CONCERNED 2014
● NOT AT ALL CONCERNED 2015
 ● NOT VERY CONCERNED 2015
 ● CONCERNED 2015
 ● VERY CONCERNED 2015
 ● EXTREMELY CONCERNED 2015

Job Satisfaction

Enrollment
managers with
the highest job
satisfaction
were working at
private research
universities



Enrollment challenges in higher education and financial upheaval following the economic downturn of the last decade have made the job facing college admissions officers more and more difficult. Yet they continue to show almost the same levels of job satisfaction as in 2008. Some 77 percent of those surveyed remained “extremely satisfied” or at least “moderately satisfied” with their jobs in 2015, compared to 80 percent in 2008 (see Figure 10).

Enrollment managers with the highest job satisfaction were working at private research universities. Their career happiness is perhaps due to large endowments and strong applicant pools at those institutions. Admissions officials with the lowest job satisfaction rates were at public regional colleges, which are often facing legislative budget cuts. Two areas—a lack of resources and unrealistic expectations by leadership—were the reasons most cited for job dissatisfaction.

Regarding the challenges facing admissions officers at colleges and universities today, the concerns are similar for both public and private institutions. By far the most pressing concern involves the problems posed by “allocating scarce resources efficiently.” Also cited as important is the need for “establishing or maintaining an enrollment-focused culture in the institution” (see Figure 11).

FIGURE 10
HOW SATISFIED ADMISSIONS OFFICERS ARE WITH THEIR JOBS

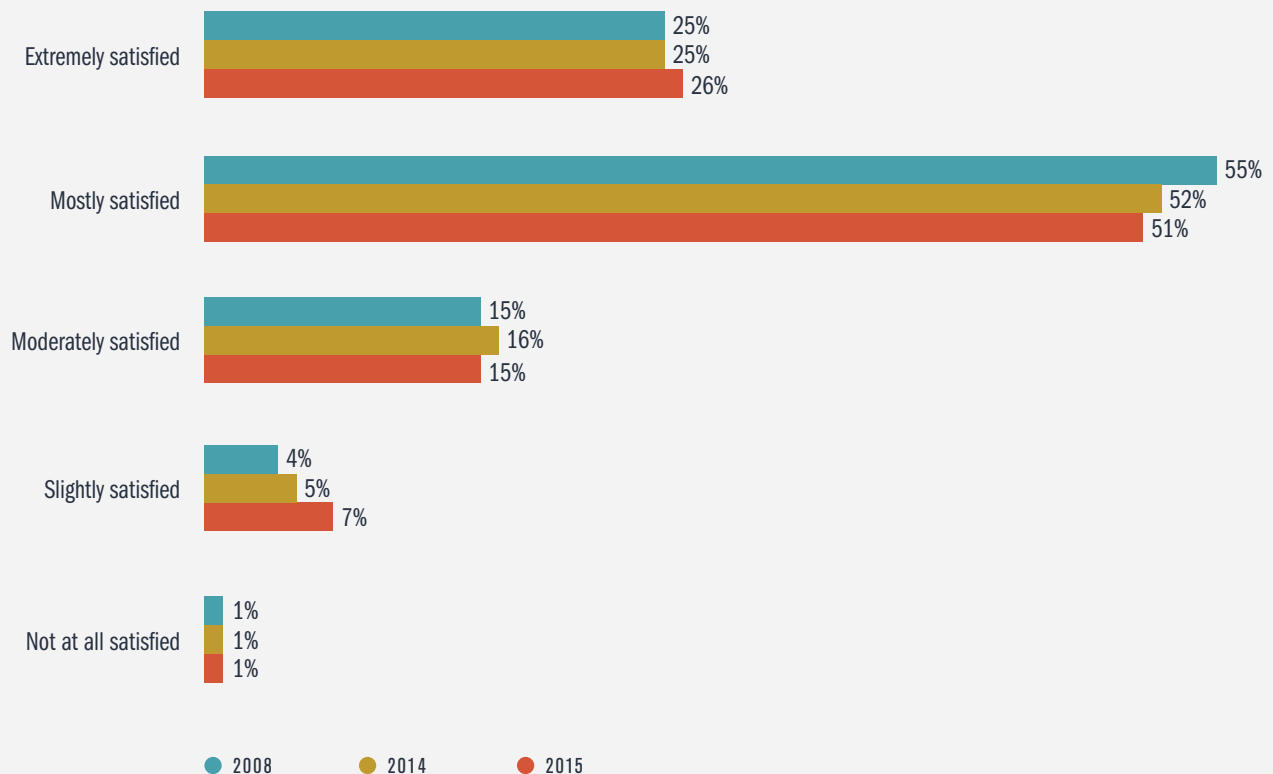
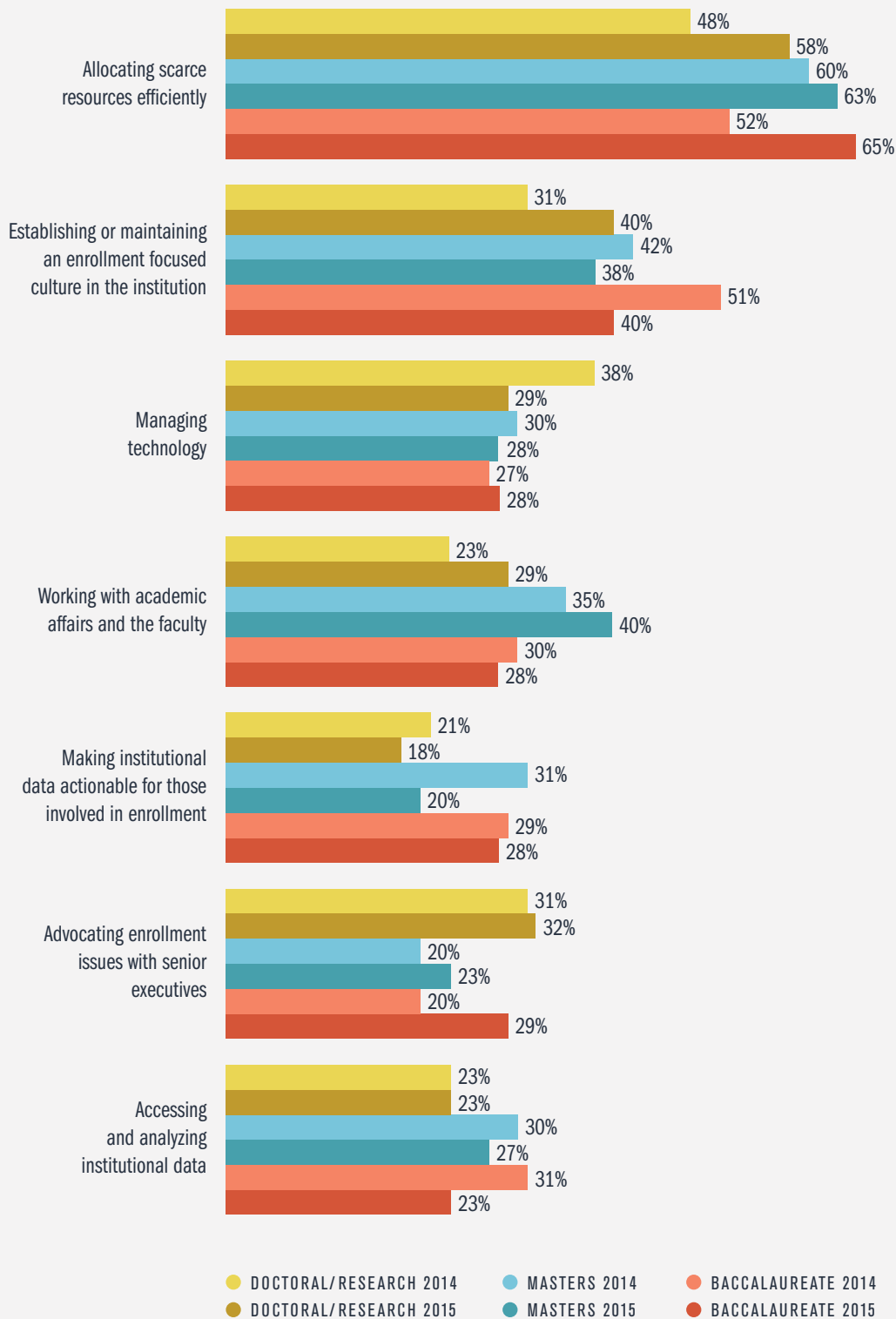


FIGURE 11
TOP CHALLENGES FACING ADMISSIONS OFFICERS



Conclusion

Since 2008, *The Chronicle* has conducted three surveys of senior enrollment managers at both public and private colleges and universities. Results of the two most recent surveys offer evidence that the world of higher education admissions is changing and point to the various reasons for shifts in tradition. Chief causes of the changing landscape are demographic shifts and, especially since the economic downturn of 2007 to 2009, financial constraints.

The surveys indicate that long-range planning at both public and private institutions

could be stronger. Many college administrators have not successfully adapted to the changing admissions landscape and, because of a lack of resources, vision or planning, or some combination of the three, are failing to make the difficult decisions necessary to maintain or increase enrollment.

It falls to admissions officers to find ways to attract students. This means addressing the expectations of both parents and students regarding the “value” of higher education. Many admissions officials believe their institutions are effective in areas such as promoting experiential

learning and providing student services; however, key among their concerns are whether the institutions can show how their academic programs align with market expectations and whether they can effectively gather information on student outcomes.

One thing is certain: admissions officials at public and private institutions have their work cut out for them. They must fill classroom seats and dorm room beds in an increasingly competitive environment amid economic instability and demographic shifts.

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Methodology

The Admissions Perspective: How Academic Leaders Are Facing a Continuously Changing State of Admissions is based on the results of surveys of enrollment leaders at four-year, not-for-profit institutions that fall into a selected group of classifications developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement Teaching. Maguire Associates, of Concord, Mass. invited random samples of enrollment leaders, and in both 2014 and 2015, 15 percent responded. The data collection took place in July 2014 and May 2015.

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