ARTICLE

The Hidden Cost of Manual Work

See how recurring administrative tasks consume staff time and where efficiencies could help.



STELLIC

INTRODUCTION

Every staff hour carries more weight

With budgets under pressure at many institutions, every enrollment and every staff hour carries more weight. Many schools already have initiatives underway to make the most of staff time and support more students with the teams they have, but the full financial impact of these challenges isn't always easy to quantify.

And without a clear sense of what they cost, it's hard to make the case for the resources needed to address them. We wanted to take a closer look at three in particular:

THREE HIDDEN COSTS

1 **Student attrition:** students who leave before finishing their degree

2 **Missed transfer enrollment:** prospective transfer students who may go elsewhere when they can't see how their credits will count

3 **Staff capacity:** advisor and registrar time spent on recurring manual work THIS ARTICLE

In this article, we'll cover staff capacity, the one of the three that shows up in hours more than dollars. To put this into context for your teams, check out the Campus Opportunity Calculator, which estimates how much of your team's time goes to recurring work and how much could be redirected.

THE COST

The cost of time spent on manual work

Time with students matters. It makes sense that advisors have such a big impact on retention, and the research backs it up.

13%

higher odds of being retained with each additional advising meeting, in a study of first-generation students

SWECKER, FIFOLT, AND SEARBY, 2013

~667

students a year at Utah State that advising was estimated to help retain who otherwise weren't expected to persist

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY, 2019

That makes every hour advisors spend with students valuable. But much of advisors' and registrars' week goes to work that repeats every term, every week, and even every day: checking audits, updating plans, processing exceptions, and clearing graduation candidates. With appointments averaging about 30 minutes (Tyton Partners, *Driving Toward a Degree 2026*), every minute spent pulling together a student's record comes out of that conversation.

For the school, those hours add up, and the costs reach beyond the hours themselves:

- **Outreach that doesn't happen:** Less time per student means less proactive outreach, which affects who stays enrolled. The student attrition article covers this in more detail.
- **Slower transfer answers:** Manual credit evaluations take longer, and prospective transfer students often decide before they get an answer. The missed transfer enrollment article covers this in more detail.
- **Burnout and turnover:** Half of higher ed employees report working beyond full-time hours (CUPA-HR), and when staff leave, they take institutional knowledge with them.
- **Longer-term work that waits:** Requirement setup and audit maintenance get pushed back when recurring tasks fill the week.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Where schools can step in

~350

Advising caseloads average around 350 students per advisor at public four-year and two-year colleges, and administrative work takes up more of advisors' time than anything else. At the same time, only about a quarter of institutions expect their student support budgets to grow.

TYTON PARTNERS, *DRIVING TOWARD A DEGREE 2026*

Better workflows can give existing teams more capacity, though they don't replace appropriate staffing, and most schools will be working on both at once.

Not all of this work can or should be automated. Some of it needs human judgment, but some repeats the same steps every time, and that's the work that can be streamlined. For example:

- Advisors piecing together a student's record before each meeting from an average of 3.4 systems (Tyton Partners)
- A registrar's office reviewing hundreds of graduation candidates by hand each term
- Exception requests and course substitutions routed by email and tracked by hand

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THE OPPORTUNITY

Handing the repeatable work to systems lets staff walk into every conversation ready and spend their judgment where it matters.

ACROSS CAMPUS

What staff capacity means for your role

Advisors and registrars feel this cost most directly, but how their time gets spent is shaped by decisions across campus. That's a good thing, since it means more people can help give that time back to students. Here are some of the ways staff capacity can affect you:

ROLE	WHAT STAFF CAPACITY MEANS FOR YOU
Advisors	• Advisors do their best work in conversation with students, and heavy caseloads and long administrative days leave less room for it. • Time back from manual planning and audit checks can go straight into meetings and outreach, so one advisor can reach more of the students who need them.
Registrars	• Requirement setup and audit maintenance take time away from longer-term work, like keeping the catalog and the degree audit in sync. • Fewer recurring manual tasks mean more time for keeping requirements and degree audits accurate, and more chances to catch issues before they become surprises for students.
Provosts and institutional leaders	• Provosts fund and structure advising and registrar capacity. • With support budgets flat or shrinking at most institutions, headcount is one lever among several. • Provosts can also drive initiatives that put freed-up time to work, like proactive outreach campaigns or dedicated support for students with complex cases.
CIOs	• Recurring tasks tend to stay manual wherever systems don't handle them. • Tool and architecture choices determine how much of this work can be automated, and CIOs are accountable for whether technology spending gives staff time back.

ESTIMATE IT

How to estimate the time manual work takes at your school

Stellic built the Campus Opportunity Calculator to help answer two questions: how much of your team's time goes to recurring work, and how much of it could be redirected. Inputs start from your enrollment and national benchmarks and can be edited to match how your teams work.

What the calculator looks at

- **Advising tasks:** the work around meetings, like checking audits, updating plans, and daily administrative time
- **Registrar tasks:** curriculum and audit setup, graduation checks, exception requests, and transfer credit evaluations
- **Task volumes and time per task,** starting estimates scaled to your enrollment and Tyton's caseload benchmarks, plus hourly staff costs

How it works

The calculator multiplies each task's volume by the time it takes and adds them up to get hours per year, then converts those hours into their dollar value and a full-time staff equivalent. That dollar figure reflects the value of the time to your school, not expected budget savings.

For a longer walkthrough of the math, see how we calculate staff capacity.

What you'll see

- Total hours per year your teams spend on recurring manual tasks
- The dollar value and full-time staff equivalent of that time
- A range of hours that could potentially be redirected to student-facing work
- The assumptions and math behind every result

The redirected-time scenario uses two kinds of estimates. Savings for graduation checks, course planning, scheduling, and other administrative tasks come from published Stellic partner results, and savings for the remaining tasks are Stellic's internal estimates. Actual results depend on each school's processes, adoption, and implementation.

NEXT STEP

See how much of your team's time could be redirected

Every hour back is an hour that can go to the students who need it. Seeing how much of your team's time goes to recurring work, and how much could be redirected, makes it easier to decide where to invest.

CAMPUS OPPORTUNITY CALCULATOR

Calculate your staff capacity opportunity

Start from your enrollment and national benchmarks, then edit inputs to match how your teams work.

Calculate your opportunity →

stellic.com/resources/campus-opportunity-calculator

SEE HOW SCHOOLS ARE APPROACHING ALL THREE

The Campus Opportunity Guide

READ THE GUIDE →

SOURCES

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3. Tyton Partners, *Driving Toward a Degree 2026*. tytonpartners.com
4. CUPA-HR, employee retention survey. cupahr.org