



2021 E-Expectations[®] Trend Report

Understanding the Impact of the
Pandemic on Online College Search

Research for this report was co-sponsored by:

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Introduction

High school students nationwide spent the whole academic year fully online or in and out of a cobbled together hybrid format. While these students are digital naturals, they were asked to do even more online and lost opportunities to engage traditional in-person milestones like prom, graduation, and college visits.

After a year of “Zooming it in,” what impact did the pandemic have on high school student digital preferences and behaviors?

RNL and our partners have compared our pre-pandemic data to this year’s comprehensive E-Expectations research findings to provide a glimpse at how the pandemic affected the screen-based side of college search and selection.

The *2021 E-Expectations Report* Trend Report answers questions such as:

- Did the pandemic make students more interested in engaging directly with college admissions through digital channels?
- How did the pandemic affect the student inquiry process?
- Has student interest in print communications been outpaced by digital?
- Are students more open to receiving texts from admissions counselors, and if so, when?
- How do students feel about digital ads and what actions do they take after clicking on an ad?
- Which social media platforms are students using for their college search and what do they hope to learn from them?
- On which platform do students watch college videos and what’s the ideal length of video playtime?
- How has parent and family engagement changed?

About the 2021 Study

RNL partnered with Plexuss and Teen Life to contact high school students via email early in 2021.

2,087
participants

47%
seniors

33%
juniors

20%
sophomores

For full demographic details, see p. 28.

The characteristics of Gen Z high school students

Here are some preferences of today's high schoolers that may influence how they search for colleges.*

Screen time

86%

own an iPhone

34%

of daily video watching is on Netflix, followed by YouTube

10%

of teens' expenditures are on video games

Strongly held values

97%

list environmental issues as a top concern

(Students say they have made personal changes such as driving less, walking, or cycling more, recycling, and reducing their trash production.)

82%

said racial discrimination is a problem for their generation

91%

of Black teens think race-based discrimination is here to stay

What they eat

18%

consume plant-based meat



Chick-fil-A, Chipotle, and Dunkin' Donuts are top favorites

Where they shop

50%

have purchased secondhand clothes

(Nearly 60% have sold clothes secondhand.)



Amazon is the top retailer

*Taken from *Taking Stock With Teens: 20 Years of Researching U.S. Teens GenZ Insights*. Minneapolis: Piper Sandler Investment Research, 2020. <https://www.pipersandler.com/1col.aspx?id=6216>

Most Influential Sources

The sources high school students rank as most influential in their college search

1-5 scale, 5=most influential, sorted by 2021 seniors

RESOURCE	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
The college's website	3.99	3.91	3.91	4.08
Results from a financial aid or scholarship calculator	3.84	3.85	3.77	3.90
Statistics on salaries of recent college graduates	3.69	3.79	3.74	3.65
Videos of campus, classrooms, students, residence halls	3.75	3.73	3.70	3.86
Email from a particular school	3.75	3.70	3.79	3.90
Phone calls from admissions counselors	3.64	3.58	3.80	3.73
Texts or live messages from admissions counselors	3.62	3.54	3.59	3.66
Virtual reality videos	3.50	3.53	3.41	3.43
Social media posts	3.36	3.51	3.46	3.28
Virtual tours	3.51	3.51	3.59	3.78

The most influential sources for college selection

These are the top resources that help students select a college after they have searched for it.

RESOURCE	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
More information (digital content) about the school or program you are considering	3.71	3.81	3.69	3.77
Experience during an on-campus visit (either self-guided or guided)	3.68	3.78	3.75	3.96
Visit from/with a school counselor	3.43	3.40	3.44	3.47

Takeaways

- **Answer their financial and procedural questions.** These students want to know what their education will cost, what's the return on investment (ROI), what it takes to get in, and what it will be like. Organize communications across channels to provide quick access to costs, scholarships, graduate outcomes, and application information.
- **Focus on authentic virtual interactions.** Even as the world opens up after the pandemic, students and families will likely desire virtual interactions as well as in-person. Dedicate extra resources to virtual campus tours, web casts, livestreams, and digital community interactions.
- **Give students easy ways to access you directly.** Communications should feature an invitation to get in touch and provide updated contact information to admissions counselors. Consider email services with embedded video capacity to provide admissions counselors the ability to record short clips of themselves and invite students to record a response and email it back.

Facilitating Inquiry



Student inquiry methods become more direct as students approach graduation

Compared to sophomores, a higher percentage of seniors said they emailed or called a campus. Conversely, a higher percentage of sophomores responded to letters and brochures and relied on college planning sites.

Student preferences for reaching out for information

Sorted by 2021 seniors.

METHOD FOR REQUESTING INFORMATION	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
I fill out a form on the school's website to get more information	60%	59%	67%	67%
I email the school	53%	55%	42%	42%
I schedule a visit to the campus	28%	32%	27%	13%
I use college planning sites	32%	25%	40%	39%
I respond to brochures or letters I get in the mail from specific schools	27%	20%	33%	37%

Fewer respondents in 2021 said they initiated inquiry than in 2019.

METHOD FOR REQUESTING INFORMATION	OVERALL 2021	OVERALL 2019
I fill out a form on the school's website	60%	76%
I email the school	53%	46%
I schedule a visit to campus	28%	40%
I use college planning sites	32%	49%
I respond to brochures or letters I get in the mail from specific schools	27%	39%

In 2019, 59 percent of seniors reached out to schedule a campus visit. In 2021—for obvious reasons—that number fell to 32 percent. However, even pandemic-accessible modes of outreach such as use of college planning sites and response to brochures were also down. Email was the only exception of a mode of inquiry that went up.

What drives inquiries?

While there are plenty of issues that motivate prospective student inquiries, the biggest driver is their interest in a specific program, particularly for sophomores at the beginning of their college search.

“I need information about a major or program.”

31%
seniors

37%
juniors

49%
sophomores

Takeaways

- **An omnichannel search strategy will be more important than ever.** Student-initiated engagement took a hit in 2021, presumably as students hunkered down and adjusted to online school. Campuses need to use a variety of methods for generating leads and inquires so they can engage students wherever they are.
- **Keep sending email.** Email was the only form of student-initiated outreach to go up in 2021. Make sure admissions email addresses are easy to find and responses are specific and encouraging with next steps and calls to action. If possible after initial inquiry, facilitate email access to program chairs to connect students with questions about specific majors.
- **Add chatbots as inquiry options.** Students seem comfortable using them. Test the chatbots with real students before rolling out to make sure the answers are perceived as genuinely helpful and then carefully watch metrics about who engages them the most and their most-commonly asked questions.
- **Provide the opportunity to select topics of interest when requesting information.** Let students identify the topics on which they want more information and customize their communications flow accordingly. Start the list of optional interest areas using the sources of influential information: tuition and scholarship calculators, program-specific descriptions, opportunities for direct interaction (i.e., email, call, and texts), virtual tours, videos, and access to assiduously maintained social media feeds.

Request for Information (RFI) Web Forms

Information students are willing to share

Email and mailing addresses are still the sources of personal information students are most willing to share.

INFORMATION STUDENTS WOULD SHARE	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Name	97%	96%	98%	98%
Email address	97%	96%	98%	97%
Mailing address	90%	89%	91%	89%
Programs they are considering	90%	89%	90%	91%
Cell phone	78%	81%	76%	77%
High School	84%	81%	83%	87%



Younger students are increasingly willing to share access to their phones.

Seniors' willingness to opt into text messages stayed steady at 47 percent between 2019 and 2021 but went up from 29 percent to 40 percent for sophomores.

Best way to respond to students who filled out an RFI form

In 2019, students' first choice for follow-up was to receive a brochure. In 2021, it was an **email with recommendations**.

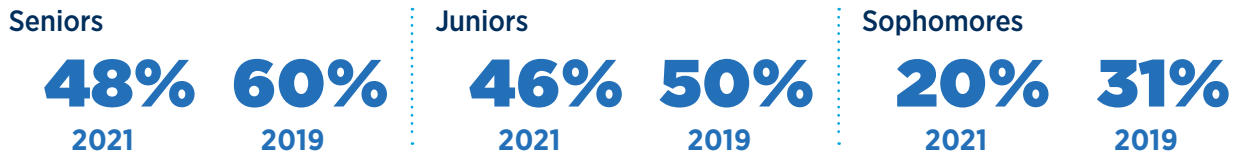
RESPONSE	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Send an email with recommendations for next steps and links to other online resources	51%	48%	50%	65%
Send brochures in the mail	49%	46%	52%	53%
Have an admissions counselor email me	46%	46%	46%	52%

Takeaways

- **Optimize email technologies.** Two of students' top three preferred follow-up responses to a completed RFI were to receive an email. Personalized videos sent via email are a good way to personalize a request for information with dynamic presentations tailored to student interests.
- **Use a mix of email and direct mail.** Analyze the appropriate timing and type of direct mail to ensure that each piece is engaging and leaves a powerful impression to justify the cost and impact on the environment. Promote your decision of eco-friendlier paper options if you use them.
- **Target sophomores for brand-awareness building.** Younger students in the early phase of their search are more open to all forms of interaction from colleges. Take advantage of this willingness to establish mindshare before they narrow their lists. Include parents into early communication strategies as well so they can be informed advocates.
- **Make texts opt-in.** Students—especially younger students—are increasingly open to receiving texts, but give them the option so they can tell you which stages of the process they would be more willing to receiving them.

Meeting With Admissions

Who has met with an admissions counselor?



In 2019, 56 percent of seniors had met with 3 or more admissions counselors compared to only 26 percent in 2021.

While the pandemic disrupted meetings with admissions counselors last year, 73 percent of students said they would be willing to video call with an admissions counselor before a campus visit.

Actions students take after meeting with admissions counselors

Top 3 responses

ACTIONS	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
I went to the website	53%	55%	46%	75%
I filled out a form to get more information	45%	51%	39%	40%
I looked at application requirements	45%	42%	48%	46%

While the top three student actions after admissions meetings were the same as they were in 2019, the percentages of those who'd taken those steps were down.

ACTIONS	OVERALL 2021	OVERALL 2019
I went to the website	53%	71%
I filled out a form to get more information	45%	61%
I looked at application requirements	45%	52%

Takeaways

- **Revitalize all forms of admissions counselor outreach.** Develop multichannel, direct communication strategies with admissions counselors to reanimate student response.
- **Provide clear follow-up steps.** Students—particularly first-generation students—may not know exactly what to do after meeting with an admissions counselor. Give them specific instructions on how to follow up and how long the next phase of the process takes to calibrate their expectations.

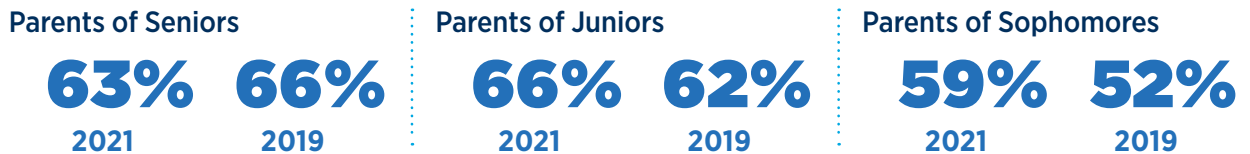


Parent Involvement

Have your parents been involved in your college search?



Parents of seniors were less involved this year than they were in 2019. However, many of this year's seniors were also relying on direct communication (e.g., email) with schools than in previous years where a family might have visited campus together.



Takeaways

- **Harness parent interest.** Two-thirds of the students said their parents have been involved in their college search. Target parents early to build brand awareness, then keep engaging them throughout the funnel when they are not only in the position to influence their own student, but also to influence other parents.
- **Segment outreach to parents of males.** Assess the questions and needs of prospective male students to see if their questions are different from females and if there are better ways to engage them and their families.

For more on parent involvement in the college process, read *College Planning and the Perceptions of Parents After COVID-19* at RuffaloNL.com/ParentPerceptions.

Email

5 key email insights from the 2021 students

- 1 They're open to it: 97 percent overall are willing to share their email address.
- 2 They use it to reach out: 53 percent will contact a school via email.
- 3 They like it as a response: 51 percent prefer email as the response after they request more information.
- 4 It's an easy path back to the college: 42 percent link directly to a college website from an email.
- 5 Communications should be personal: 46 percent like to see their name and interests used in emails and brochures.



Motivation to open emails from schools slumped in 2021

Although email remained one of the top resources for students in 2021, the relative percentages of student motivation dropped significantly from the 2019 survey.

Sorted by 2021 seniors.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO OPEN YOUR EMAILS?	OVERALL 2021	OVERALL 2019	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
I'm interested in enrolling in this school	57%	73%	59%	51%	63%
I'm curious to learn more about this school	62%	76%	54%	39%	40%
The subject line caught my attention	41%	46%	43%	39%	37%

Takeaways

- **Focus on best email practices.** The keys to good emails are creative subject lines, use of the student's name, concise personalized content, compelling visual design, and clear calls to action.
- **Include dynamic content.** Email has the benefit of also serving as a vehicle for other forms of content such as video. Email with personalized video content has been proven to improve attention, retention, and conversion rates.
- **Work your data.** Personalizing the content in an email will only be possible if you have and use good source lists and CRM data that help you parse sub-segments of students and speak directly to their backgrounds and interests.

Texting

9 out of 10 students are open to receiving text messages during the enrollment process.

PREFERRED TEXT FORMAT	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Only text (SMS) messages	39%	43%	33%	37%
Both text and messaging apps are OK	35%	32%	36%	41%
Only messaging apps	15%	15%	20%	9%
No text or messaging app contact at all	11%	10%	11%	13%

When is the best time to text?

Overall, most students—particularly seniors—would prefer to get a text after they have applied. Sophomores, however, seem to be willing to engage via text before, during, and after they are admitted.

PREFERRED TIMING FOR TEXTS	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Before I submit my application	36%	27%	38%	59%
After I submit my application	62%	65%	57%	59%
After I am admitted	46%	50%	41%	43%
After I register for my first semester	24%	23%	24%	27%

Although the 2021 preferred timing for texts are in line with those of the 2019, the percentages are lower—just as they were for student motivation for opening college email.

PREFERRED TIMING FOR TEXTS	OVERALL 2021	OVERALL 2019
Before I submit my application	36%	56%
After I submit my application	62%	66%
After I am admitted	46%	59%
After I register for my first semester	24%	39%

Takeaways

- **Incorporate text at the right time.** The best time to incorporate texts is right after students have submitted their application and after they've been admitted. However, sophomores welcome texts earlier in the search process. Give students the chance to opt in to the types of texts they'd like to receive.
- **Make texts actionable.** Avoid wearing out your welcome on student phones by making sure all texts contain useful, actionable information such as scholarship eligibility, upcoming deadlines, reminders of events to which they RSVP'd, and meetings with admissions counselors.
- **Test sender preferences.** Consider A/B testing to see if the sender of the text makes a difference to your students. You might learn that some messages are best delivered via text and from a fellow student.

Social Media



Instagram moves past YouTube and Facebook as most useful for college planning

In 2019, YouTube and Facebook were the most useful social media sites for college planning, but this year Instagram surged ahead. Facebook also plummeted in daily use, down from 50 percent in 2019 to 35 percent today.

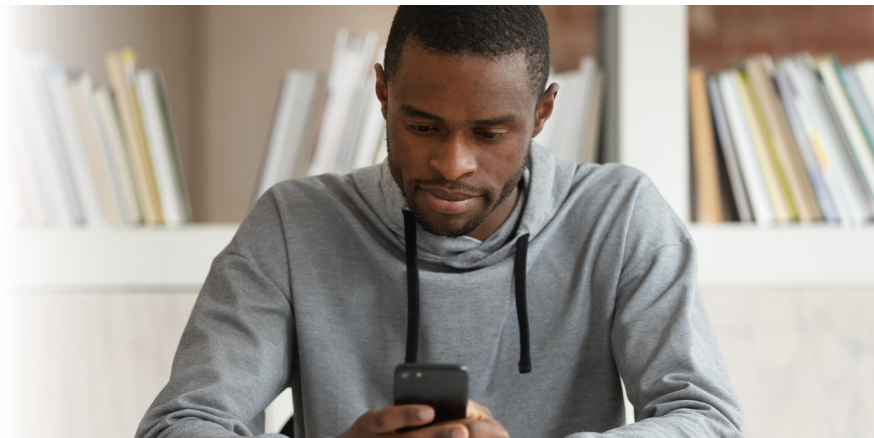
Platforms teens use daily vs. the platforms they use for college search

Top 5 Used Daily

Snapchat
Instagram
YouTube
TikTok
Facebook

Top 5 Most Useful for College Search

Instagram
YouTube
Facebook
Twitter
TikTok



Sorted by seniors' college planning preferences for social media use.

	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Instagram				
Daily use	70%	70%	70%	70%
College planning	47%	44%	47%	52%
YouTube				
Daily use	62%	62%	61%	61%
College planning	38%	37%	40%	39%
Facebook				
Daily use	35%	36%	37%	28%
College planning	26%	27%	29%	18%
TikTok				
Daily use	41%	40%	42%	44%
College planning	20%	22%	23%	22%
Twitter				
Daily use	27%	30%	24%	26%
College planning	20%	22%	21%	12%

Social media can be an early brand builder

WHEN IS SOCIAL MEDIA HELPFUL?	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Just as I'm learning more about the school	51%	45%	54%	63%
After I've seen some of the website and/or items they send in the mail	42%	39%	43%	46%

Most compelling social media content

Sorted by 2021 seniors' content preference

PREFERRED CONTENT	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Photos	53%	53%	52%	55%
Videos	51%	51%	50%	51%
Student takeovers	31%	33%	28%	32%
Short text	31%	32%	31%	30%
Event invitations	33%	30%	36%	33%
Links to news stories or features	26%	23%	28%	30%
Livestreaming from events	20%	20%	20%	19%
Stories	22%	19%	22%	29%

Livestreams

Students watching livestreams **doubled** between 2019 and 2021.

Compared to other content, livestreaming is not among students' top preferred formats for social media. However, when asked if they had watched a livestreamed event, the overall percentage of students in 2021 nearly doubled over that of 2019. Juniors and seniors are the most likely to watch a livestreamed event.

Students who watched a livestream

39%
overall

40%
seniors

46%
juniors

23%
sophomores

Topics of greatest interests on social media

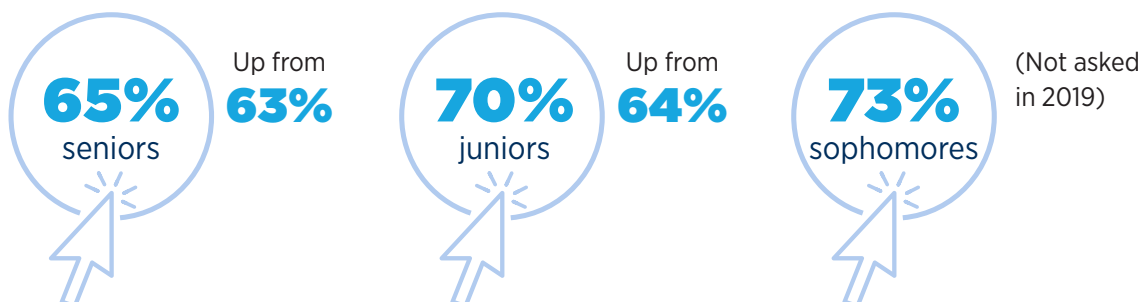
TOPIC	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
What social life is like on campus	54%	56%	49%	58%
What it's like to live on campus in the dorms	52%	50%	49%	64%
What it will be like to be in classes	43%	42%	43%	49%
How I'll pay for college	44%	40%	45%	53%
What I need to do to apply	41%	34%	43%	56%
What qualification I need to have to be accepted	42%	34%	49%	51%

Takeaways

- **Strategically select social media platforms.** Just because students are using a platform doesn't mean they want to interact with a college on it. Choose to be engagingly social on the platforms where students are open to college engagement and target their personal platforms for brand-building ads.
 - **Prioritize visual content.** Students are more likely to engage a post if it has a compelling visual component—either great photography or interesting video. Limit text length and use it as descriptive of the visual component. Provide links to longer text if needed.
 - **Get current students involved.** The marketing adage “show, don't tell” has never been truer than in social media during a pandemic. Give prospective students the sense they're seeing the authentic college experience by asking existing students to share their favorite parts of campus and the fun, quirky parts of the student experience.
 - **Use YouTube to convey detailed instructions.** Gen Z is very accustomed to looking to YouTube for advice on how to do everything. Use YouTube for a detailed walk-through of the procedural processes like applications, registration, FAFSA forms, paying tuition, and other college-specific activities.
 - **Incorporate livestreaming into your event calendars.** Whether they are live or livestreamed, these digital natives look to social media to find out what's upcoming and are increasingly comfortable with attending a virtual event. Carefully plan virtual events to keep the visual component interesting, provide a variety of speakers, and create opportunities for the audience to engage.
-

Digital Advertising

Clicks on paid ads are higher than ever (2021 vs 2019)



Where students are clicking ads

SITE	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Google search	47%	45%	49%	50%
Facebook	39%	38%	41%	38%
YouTube	34%	32%	36%	37%

What students do after clicking an ad

ACTION AFTER CLICKING	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Looked at information on a website	63%	56%	65%	78%
Filled out a form to have information sent by postal mail	29%	32%	30%	19%
Watched a video	29%	31%	26%	29%

Takeaways

- **Ensure your brand messaging is on point.** Make sure that those 63 percent of students who visited the website after clicking an ad left with a truly clear idea of your brand attributes. Further, carefully weave those brand attributes throughout all social media content to reinforce any subsequent exposure.
- **Connect digital ads to calls for action.** Create landing pages, RFI forms, and invitations to follow your social media platforms to give the 63 percent of students who go from ad to website something specific to do to move them further down the funnel of awareness and inquiry.

Artificial Intelligence (AI), Chat, and Live Chat

Chat is rising as a trusted tool.

Who has used live chat?



Live chat was helpful in learning more about a school



OPINION OF CHAT TOOLS	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
They're OK but I would probably try to find what I need on my own	43%	43%	41%	47%
They can be helpful ways to get quick answers	29%	31%	30%	19%
They are annoying; I don't use them	26%	27%	27%	20%
I love it when a school has them on their site	11%	12%	11%	5%
I don't really understand what you mean	11%	10%	12%	11%
I've never experienced this	7%	6%	6%	14%

Chatbots

Half of juniors and seniors said they had used a chatbot to engage a school rather than completing a school's website RFI form.



Takeaways

- **Incorporate live chat and chat bots.** Students are increasingly comfortable with chat in either live or AI format. Build in calls to action to capture stealth chatters by asking them to complete RFI forms or giving them the option to directly connect to an admissions counselor via email, phone, or text.
- **Track chat FAQs.** Older students are using chat more than sophomores; track their questions to look for trends. If you find recurring issues, look for additional ways to proactively answer those questions across a variety of channels.

Online Search

How students navigate to college websites

Sorted by 2021 seniors.

METHOD	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
I use a search engine like Google, Bing, or Yahoo	57%	55%	53%	69%
I link to the website from an email message	42%	39%	43%	45%
I know and use the address to the website	32%	36%	27%	30%
I search social media	32%	29%	37%	32%
I find the website's address/URL on something printed that they've shared with me	24%	23%	31%	15%

Search terms students use to search for college websites

TERM	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Name of school	72%	72%	69%	75%
Name of a specific major or academic program	61%	60%	61%	66%
Name of a career interest or general academic area	50%	47%	53%	55%
Location where I want to attend a college or university	49%	46%	49%	54%

Most commonly used search terms

60%
College financing terms (financial aid, scholarships, affordable, tuition, cost, grants)

48%
Subject area/major/field of study (major and location, major and type of institution)

24%
Name of the school

12%
Location (state, city, region of the country)

Search by voice



“I was searching by phone and it’s easier than typing.”

In 2021, 44 percent of students searched by voice, up from 36 percent in 2019.

Who used search by voice

41%

seniors

49%

juniors

47%

sophomores



Takeaways

- **Build your brand names.** Most online search is done by students who already know the name of the institution they’re searching and/or the program they want to study. This is a clear testament to the importance of building brand-name awareness for your institution and for your strongest programs.
- **Provide plenty of link-backs.** Students link to your website via email, social media, and even print mail, so make sure to provide link-backs and the web address(es) in outbound correspondence and social media posts to drive traffic back to your site.
- **Optimize your program pages.** Search can turn any program page into a “home” page, so make sure your program pages are optimized for both keywords and clear calls to action for students who want to inquire.
- **Answer their money questions.** The most commonly used search terms pertain to financing higher education. Link funding-specific search words to ads with cost calculators, information about scholarships, and evidence of programmatic ROI.
- **Get mobile and voice search friendly.** This digitally sophisticated student market has proven it is comfortable quickly adopting digital innovations, and they do more from their phones. Make sure your content is easily searchable and has mobile-friendly visuals.

Website Content

“Do you have my program and can I afford it?”

Students ranked college websites as the most influential source of information in their college search. What is the information they want?

Most valuable college website content to students

This list of the information students seek on college websites has remained consistent over time.

CONTENT	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Cost/tuition information	71%	71%	69%	77%
A list of academic programs or degrees	61%	53%	68%	70%
Scholarship listings	57%	52%	59%	67%
Scholarship and financial aid information	50%	49%	49%	56%
How to apply for admission	48%	48%	49%	46%

Top Website Experiences Students Like

- ① Easy to see which programs and degrees are offered.....**31%**
- ② Details about academic programs.....**27%**
- ③ Ability to find the website through a search engine.....**25%**

Top Website Experiences Students Dislike

- ① Hard-to-read pages.....**31%**
- ② Lack of visual appeal of the site.....**30%**
- ③ Hard to see which programs and degrees are offered.....**25%**

How many students will look at another website if frustrated with a school's website?

27%
overall

24%
seniors

30%
juniors

32%
sophomores

Forms students most commonly complete on their phone

MOBILE FORM COMPLETED	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Request information	37%	38%	35%	35%
Campus visit scheduler	27%	31%	28%	14%
Cost calculator	26%	29%	25%	20%
Admissions application	23%	28%	18%	15%
Scholarship calculator	23%	25%	23%	18%

Takeaways

- **“First, do no harm.”** Avoid the things that drive students away. Make your website easy to find by keeping your SEO up to date and remember that “easy to read” no longer just means well-written content. Website content is scanned more than read, so keep text to a minimum and prioritize the visual appeal of format and photos.
 - **Make a program search available on top-level pages.** A staggering majority of students value site search and they’re looking for program information. Help them find it quickly with as few clicks as possible.
 - **Encourage mobile-based inquiry.** Include calls to action in the content students are likely to open on their phones like their social media and texts.
-

How Students Use College Websites For Information About Financing

Used scholarship calculator

53%

2021

44%

2019

Seniors in particular used scholarship calculators at a much higher rate

61%

seniors

48%

juniors

38%

sophomores

Are the calculators helpful?

More than half of students who had used calculators thought they provided an informative picture of what the investment would be. But a significant number also thought the calculators painted an inaccurate picture of college costs.

56%

It is helpful to see what I'll be paying or earning in scholarship money.

39%

I feel that the costs reflected are not always realistic.

What information do students value when researching their investment in higher education?

INFORMATION	OVERALL
How much scholarship or financial aid I will get	60%
How much I will pay out of pocket each year	50%
How much I will owe after all my years in school	26%
How much I can expect to earn in my first few years after graduating	13%
How much I can expect to earn over the course of my career	8%

Takeaways

- **Calculators should be easy to find and accurate.** Providing for student needs for costs is not only practical, it's an early test of value and credibility—especially given that nearly 40 percent of students who said they doubt the accuracy of the college calculators. Students will lose faith in the institution if they sense the information they receive equivocates or is inaccurate.
- **Add additional financial communications outreach to mid-funnel strategies.** As graduation approaches, students get more serious about the real issues of financing. Add additional communications for older students and their parents that explain the difference between scholarships, grants, and loans.

Video

70% of students have viewed a video on a college website

Video topics students prefer

TOPIC	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Videos showing the campus	50%	49%	47%	61%
Videos of campus activities	46%	43%	51%	46%
Current students talking about their experiences in the classroom and on campus	44%	42%	40%	60%
Video tours of residence halls	35%	34%	34%	41%
Alumni talking about how their degree is supporting their career	31%	32%	28%	34%
Video tours of classrooms	33%	30%	31%	44%

How long is too long for a college video?

Most students agree that any video over 3 minutes is too long. However, seniors are more tolerant of long videos than younger students.

	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
More than 15 seconds	4%	5%	4%	0%
More than 30 seconds	12%	12%	15%	3%
More than 1 minute	19%	19%	24%	7%
More than 2 minutes	11%	12%	10%	10%
More than 3 minutes	55%	52%	47%	79%

How many students check video length before watching?



69%

2021

58%

2019

Student preference for accessing websites with a computer

In 2019, more than half of students said they used a mobile device for *nearly all* the web browsing they do. In 2021, with more students at home during the pandemic, that number fell significantly. Instead, more than half of students would use a mobile device to browse college websites if they did not have access to a computer.

How students access the web

WEB ACCESS METHOD	2021	2019
I use a mobile device for nearly all of the web browsing I do	40%	53%
I will use a mobile device to access websites if I don't have access to a laptop or personal computer	52%	42%
I rarely use a mobile device to access websites	8%	5%

Takeaways

- **Prioritize video development to use across all digital channels and track the ones that get watched and shared the most.** Videos are vital assets in communications strategies. Students look to them for measures of “fit” and are often willing to watch them.
- **Keep video content focused and concise.** Avoid long speeches from administrators. Prospective students want to know what their experience will be like by seeing what college is like from the perspective of current students. Use current students in the creation and filming of video and keep them under three minutes long.
- **Use video to highlight programs.** Students look for program-specific information on the website, start to develop a collection of short videos by identifying popular undergraduate programs and use them in outreach communications for students who've indicated interest on their RFI forms.
- **Make sure videos are mobile friendly.** Students consume much of their video media on their phones and are willing or prefer to watch college videos on their phones as well.

5 Key Major Takeaways

After reviewing all of the data for the 2021 E-Expectations study, here are several broader takeaways that will help your campus engage more students and their parents.

- 1 **Optimize your omnichannel approach.** More than ever, students use a wide variety of methods to search for college: digital ads, video, search engines, social, and more traditional sources such as email and print. Research your target audiences so you can optimize your mix and balance outreach with ROI.
- 2 **Video is essential to engagement.** Moving images are what move students in 2021, especially those showing what life on campus is like. These videos do not have to be big productions—students today value authenticity above all else—but keep videos under three minutes as much as possible.
- 3 **Personalize at scale.** Students have grown up in an era of curated content and personalized experiences. They expect no less from your institution. You need to be able to deliver personalized content for web pages, communications, videos, and tools such as net cost calculators. Make sure you are aware of all the innovations in personalization that are at your disposal.
- 4 **SEO and conversion is critical for your program pages.** Six out of 10 students search for academic programs, which means many will arrive at web pages for your programs instead of coming through your home page. Make sure those program pages not only rank against your competition for search, but that they have clear calls to action so you convert those visitors to inquiries.
- 5 **Keep your social visual.** Instagram and YouTube have leapt ahead of Facebook as the social media that students rely on more for college search—and TikTok is gaining as well. This illustrates that students are increasingly engaged by video and images, and your campus needs to have a strong presence on the social networks that are visually oriented.



LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW YOU CAN MEET THE E-EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS

Ask for a free consultation with our digital enrollment experts. We can discuss your website, communications, digital advertising, social media strategy, and more.

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About The Participants

The teens we surveyed for this project ranged in age from 14 to 17; they are the students graduating from high school between 2021 and 2023. They were contacted by Plexuss and Teen Life via email, between January 15 and February 28, 2021. No personally identifiable data were collected. Only the principal researcher has access to the raw data.

Class/graduating year



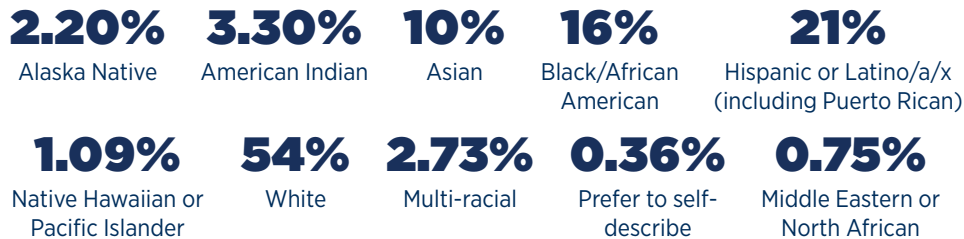
Parent education



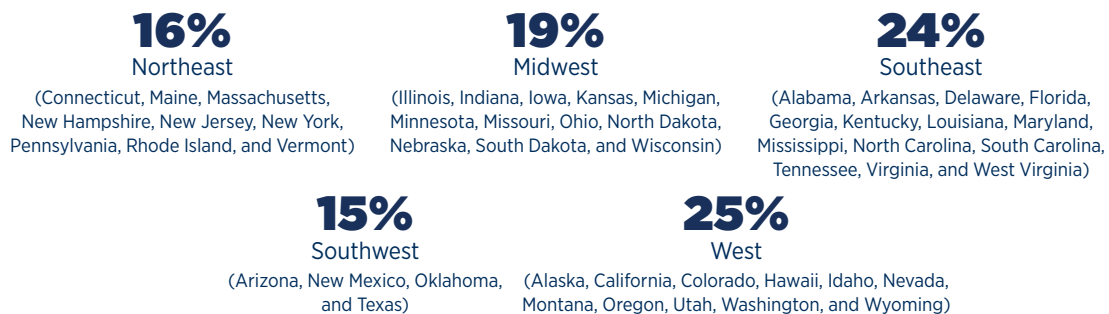
Academic ability



Ethnicity



Residence



Gender



About The Survey Sponsors



About RNL

RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,900 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

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About Modern Campus

Modern Campus is obsessed with empowering its 1,200+ higher education customers to thrive when radical transformation is required to respond to lower student enrollments and revenue, rising costs, crushing student debt and even school closures. Powered by Omni CMS, DIGARC, Presence, and Destiny One, the Modern Campus modern learner engagement platform enables innovative institutions to create a “learner to earner” lifecycle that engages modern learners for life. Delivering massive personalization, AI-driven recommendations and a modern e-commerce engine, Modern Campus creates a student-first digital experience and removes silos across campus.

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About Mongoose

Mongoose offers student engagement software solutions to help colleges and universities actually reach their constituents. Cadence, higher ed’s premier texting platform, and Harmony, the virtual assistant chatbot solution, help over 600 institutions make instant, meaningful connections. With support and “Client Love” unmatched in the industry, Mongoose is focused on one goal—helping schools continuously improve the ways they communicate with students and alumni.

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About PLEXUSS

PLEXUSS is a mission-driven digital platform impacting how prospective students and post-secondary institutions connect. Since 2015, the PLEXUSS Global Student Network™ has grown to over 7 million student users and nearly 18,000 post-secondary institutions worldwide. By leveraging proprietary AI technology, PLEXUSS engages students over longer periods, getting to know each student’s individual needs and goals.

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About TeenLife

TeenLife.com is the leading platform for finding teen-centered programs and services, such as pre-college summer programs, gap programs, and college admission resources. Millions of parents, students, and counselors use TeenLife annually to find learning opportunities that help middle and high school students to succeed in college and life beyond school.

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