



2022 Prospective Family Engagement Report

A survey of 6,400 families of
prospective college students

Co-Sponsored by



HOW CAN YOU ENSURE EQUITY IN ACCESS TO COLLEGE PLANNING INFORMATION FOR THE FAMILIES OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS?

Nearly all parents and guardians of college-bound high school students are involved in the college search process. Most colleges and universities understand this and would say they communicate with those families or provide information for them.

However, is that information really reaching families? Is it accessible, comprehensible, and useful to them?

Even if you have relevant information for families on your website or have sent emails to them about a topic, it does not mean families have received, seen, and understood the information. That's what families told us in this new study of family engagement of prospective college students.

RNL, CampusESP, and Ardeo Education surveyed more than 6,400 families of prospective college students to ask them about their experiences, expectations, concerns, and frustrations with the college search process. This report looks at responses related to information interests and access, communication preferences, paying for college, campus visits, and distance to attend college. These findings will help provide you with actionable information so that your institution not only communicates with families, but ensures they have received and understand that information.



8 OUT OF 10

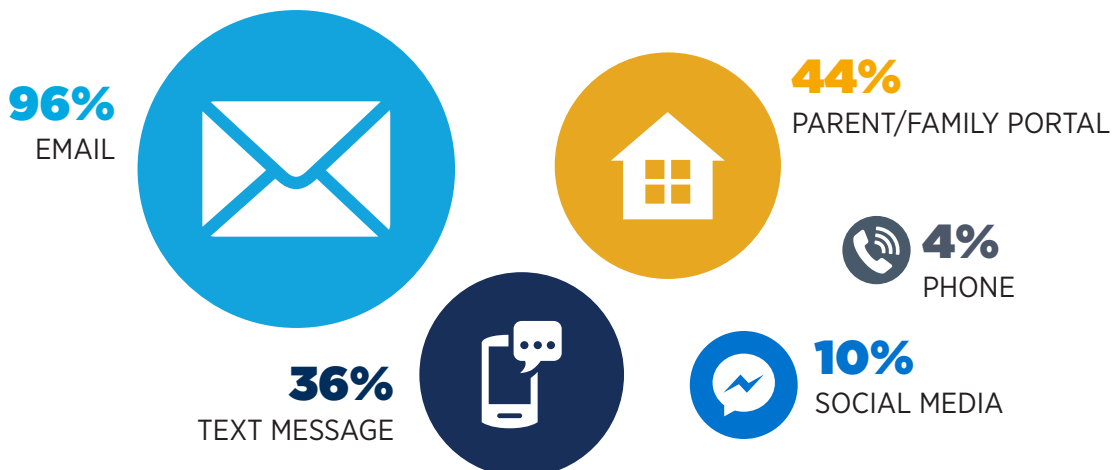
parents in this survey think college is a worthwhile investment for their students

Look at how you can channel their general enthusiasm about college enrollment toward your institution.

Key findings on communication and information preferences

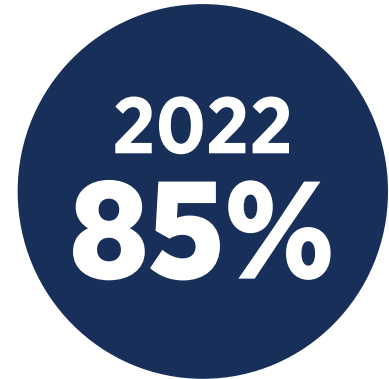
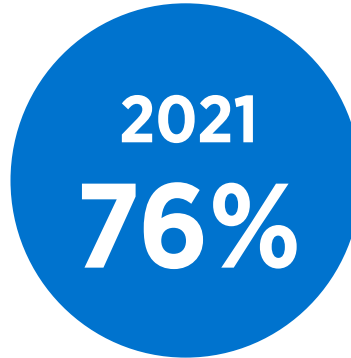
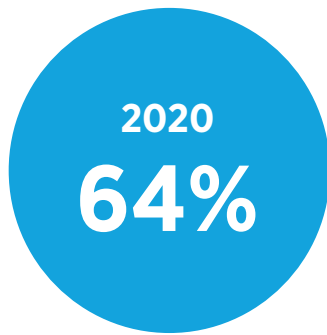
Here are a few key results from respondents—more details are provided in their corresponding sections.

PREFERRED CHANNELS FOR COMMUNICATION BY FAMILIES



PREFERRED COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY

At least once per week



PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES WHO SAID THESE TOPICS WERE IMPORTANT TO THEM

Academics (programs, majors, minors, etc.)	99%
Admission requirements	98%
The strength of the academic programs (ratings, rankings, etc.)	97%
The cost (tuition, fees, room, board, etc.)	97%
Housing	96%
Community life and activities	95%
Application process and timeline	95%
Safety precautions	95%
Financial aid and scholarships	94%
The location (town, area, local spots, etc.)	94%
Food services and dining	93%
What makes the institution different	92%
Account services and paying the tuition bill	91%
Options to finance college education (financial aid, loans, etc.)	86%

Coordinate your communications and assess access to that information

Many institutions have more than one office or team communicating with prospective families, which may cause confusion for families receiving information from them. Look at how your institution can coordinate your communication calendar and align the information that you send out. Think about questions such as:

- Who owns communication with prospective families at your institution?
- Who needs to communicate with prospective families?
- What should be an email/direct email/text, and what should be on your website?

FAMILY PLANS FOR VISITING AND ATTENDING COLLEGE

Parents are less likely to say they want their children to stay close to home for college or conduct virtual tours instead of visiting campuses in person.

PARENTS WHO WANT THEIR STUDENTS TO...	2020	2021	2022
Enroll at a college that's close to home	54%	66%	41%
Take virtual campus tours instead of traveling to the campuses to visit in person	58%	30%	16%
Live at home and commute to college	32%	20%	13%

MORE LIKELY TO



Want students to enroll at college close to home

- Asian families
- Family income < \$60,000
- Families in the Southeast and West
- First-generation families



Want students to live at home and commute

- Hispanic and Asian families
- Family income < \$60,000
- Families in the West
- First-generation families



Want students to take virtual campus tours instead of traveling to campus

- Black families
- Family income < \$60,000
- Families in the West
- First-generation families

Distance and out of state

HOW FAR ARE PARENTS WILLING TO LET THEIR STUDENTS GO TO COLLEGE?

Less than 25 miles	5%
26-50 miles	4%
51-100 miles	5%
101-250 miles	11%
251-500 miles	13%
501 miles or more	62%

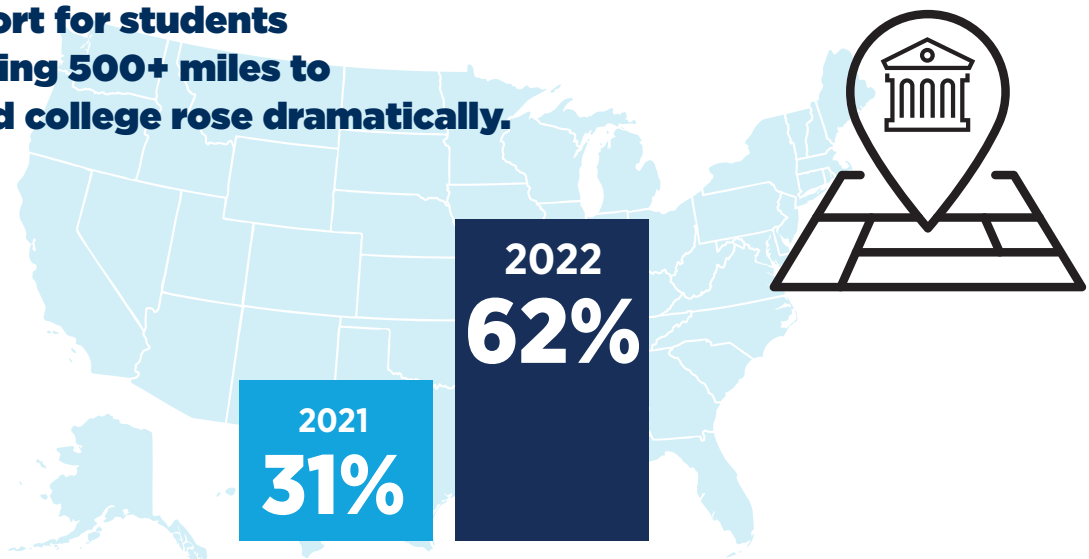
MORE LIKELY TO



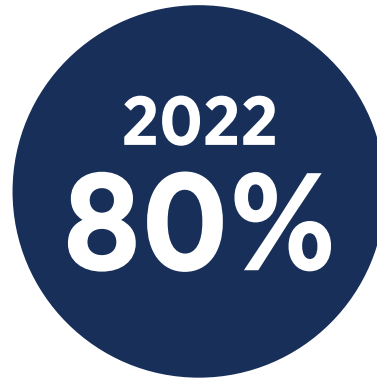
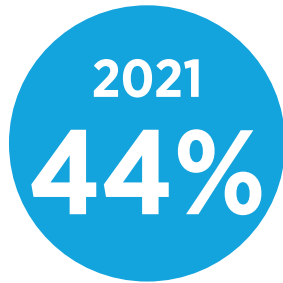
Let students travel 500+ miles

- Family income \$150,000+
- Families in the Northeast and Southwest
- Non-first-generation families

Support for students traveling 500+ miles to attend college rose dramatically.



Families considering out-of-state institutions



LESS LIKELY TO



Consider out-of-state institutions

- Asian families
- Family income < \$100,000
- Families in the Northeast and Southwest
- First-generation families

Plans for college entrance exams

In the next several sections, we compare the responses given by families in this survey to high school students whose responses were taken from the forthcoming *2022 RNL College Planning Report*.

STUDENT TESTING PLANS	FAMILY	STUDENT
Will take the SAT	40%	32%
Will take the ACT	22%	20%
Will take both the ACT and SAT	23%	34%
No plans to take any tests	15%	14%

MORE LIKELY TO



Not plan to take any tests

- Family income < \$30,000
- Families in the West
- First-generation families

REASON FOR THE STUDENT NOT TAKING UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMS*	FAMILY	STUDENT
Student is not planning on applying to colleges that require tests	57%	42%
Family does not believe tests are a good measure of student	52%	41%
Student is not a good “test taker”	27%	39%
Family cannot afford to pay for tests	5%	19%

*Respondents could choose more than one reason

PERCEPTIONS OF TEST-OPTIONAL INSTITUTIONS	FAMILY	STUDENT
All should be test optional	48%	47%
Institutions that require tests are better/more prestigious	27%	21%
There is no difference	25%	36%

MORE LIKELY TO



Think that institutions that require tests are better

- Families in the Southeast
- Non-first-generation families



Think that all institutions should be test-optional

- Families in the Northeast
- First-generation families



Online education

10%

PARENTS WHO WOULD CONSIDER LETTING THEIR STUDENT ATTEND COLLEGE ENTIRELY ONLINE

19%

STUDENTS WHO WOULD CONSIDER ATTENDING COLLEGE ENTIRELY ONLINE

MORE LIKELY TO



Consider their student attending college online entirely

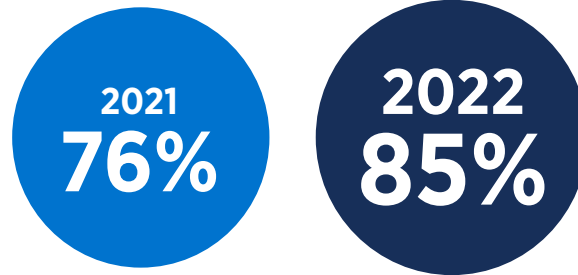
- Hispanic families
- Family income < \$60,000
- First-generation families

PERCEPTIONS OF COST OF ONLINE EDUCATION	FAMILY	STUDENT
Online education should be cheaper than in person	90%	77%
Online and in-person education should cost the same	9%	20%
Online education should be more expensive than in person	1%	4%

COMMUNICATION FROM COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

How should institutions communicate with prospective families?

PARENTS WHO WANT TO RECEIVE COMMUNICATIONS AT LEAST ONCE PER WEEK



PARENTS WHO WANT TO RECEIVE COMMUNICATIONS AT LEAST ONCE PER WEEK WITH...



COMMUNICATION CHANNELS	USED BY INSTITUTIONS	PREFERRED BY FAMILIES
Email	98%	96%
Parent/Family portal	40%	44%
Text message	19%	36%
Social media	20%	10%
Phone	6%	4%

MORE LIKELY TO



Prefer text message

- Black, Hispanic, and Asian families
- Family income < \$60,000
- First-generation families
- Families of students in 12th grade



Prefer parent/family portal

- White families
- Family income \$100,000+
- Non-first-generation families



Prefer telephone

- Family income < \$60,000

INFORMATION FROM COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Importance of and access to information

TOPIC	IMPORTANT	HAVE ACCESSED THIS INFORMATION
Academics (programs, majors, minors, etc.)	99%	91%
Admission requirements	98%	87%
The cost (tuition, fees, room, board, etc.)	97%	80%
The strength of the academic program (ratings, rankings, etc.)	97%	80%
Housing	96%	64%
Application process and timeline	95%	84%
Community life and activities	95%	74%
Safety precautions	95%	50%
Financial aid and scholarships	94%	81%
The location (town, area, local spots, etc.)	94%	74%
Food services and dining	93%	54%
What makes the institution different	92%	74%
Account services and paying the tuition bill	91%	42%
Options to finance college education (financial aid, loans, etc.)	86%	64%
Diversity and other demographics	73%	63%

There were no differences among different demographic groups of families in what they deemed important to know. The difference was in **access** to that information and noting that they had seen it.

MORE LIKELY TO



Have access to information

- White families
- Family income \$100,000+
- Non-first-generation families



Not have seen or received information on important topics

- Hispanic and Black families
- Family income <\$60,000
- First-generation families

Importance of experiences

Families rated the importance of various experiences in supporting their students as they research colleges to attend.

EXPERIENCE	PARENTS WHO SAID THIS WAS IMPORTANT
Experience during an on-campus visit (self-guided or guided)	96%
Meeting an admissions staff member (in person, virtual meeting, or a phone call)	93%
More information (digital content) about the school or program	91%
Meeting a faculty member in the program your student is considering (in person, virtual meeting, or a phone call)	90%
Meeting a current student's parent or family member at the university (in person, virtual meeting, or a phone call)	78%
Experience during a virtual visit	73%
Experience with, or information received from, a high school counselor	72%
Experience, or information received, at a college fair	67%

MORE LIKELY TO VALUE INFORMATION THEIR STUDENTS RECEIVED...



During a virtual visit

- Hispanic and Black families
- Family income <\$60,000
- First-generation families



During a college fair

- Hispanic and Black families
- Family income <\$60,000
- First-generation families

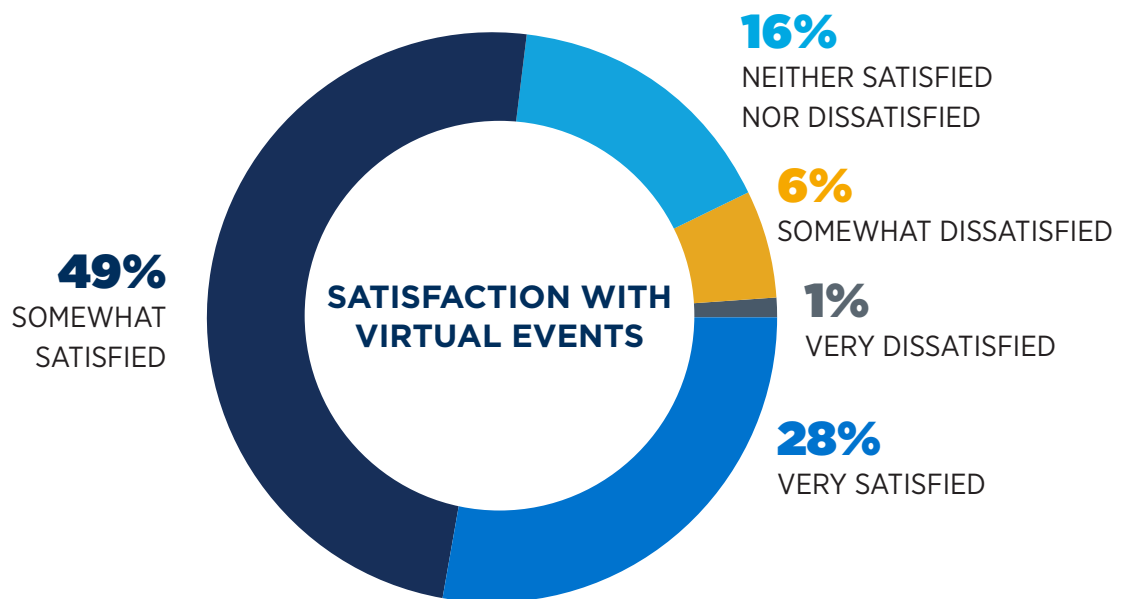
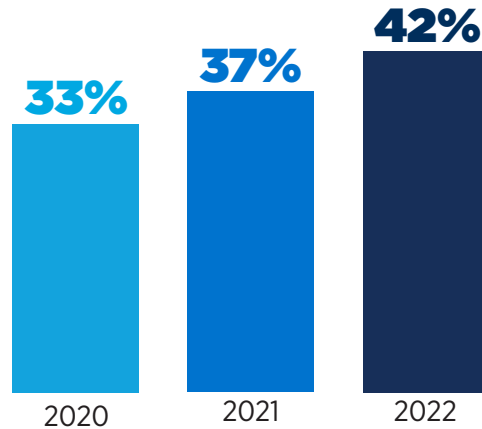


From a high school counselor

- Hispanic and Black families
- Family income <\$60,000
- First-generation families

Virtual events for prospective families

NUMBER OF FAMILIES THAT HAVE PARTICIPATED IN VIRTUAL EVENTS



MORE LIKELY TO



Have participated in virtual events

- Family income \$100,000+
- Families in the Northeast
- Non-first-generation families

Campus tours



MORE LIKELY TO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN...



In-person campus tours

- White families
- Family income \$100,000+
- Families in the Northeast, Midwest, and Southeast
- First-generation families



Virtual campus tours

- Family income \$100,000+
- Families in the Northeast
- Non-first-generation families

SATISFACTION WITH TOURS	IN-PERSON CAMPUS TOURS	VIRTUAL CAMPUS TOURS
Very satisfied	59%	14%
Satisfied	34%	44%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	6%	29%
Somewhat dissatisfied	2%	11%
Very dissatisfied	0%	2%

Videos on university websites

96%
ARE INTERESTED IN
WATCHING VIDEOS ON
COLLEGE WEBSITES



81%
HAVE ALREADY
WATCHED VIDEOS ON
COLLEGE WEBSITES

TOP VIDEO TOPICS FAMILIES WANT TO WATCH ON COLLEGE WEBSITES

General institution overview	80%
Student life	80%
Specific academic department	69%
Virtual tour	65%
Admissions general video	62%



COLLEGE FINANCING

Difficulty paying for student's college education

The percentage of families who think paying for college will be difficult has decreased from a year ago. In 2021, 57 percent of families said it would be difficult or very difficult to pay for their student's college. That number fell to 45 percent in 2022.

DIFFICULTY PAYING FOR STUDENT'S COLLEGE	2021	2022
Very difficult	28%	19%
Difficult	29%	26%
Somewhat difficult	33%	39%
Not difficult	10%	16%

MORE LIKELY TO



Think paying for college will be difficult

- Black and Hispanic families
- Family income <\$150,000
- Families in the Northeast, Midwest, and Southeast
- First-generation families

Importance of financial aid in the enrollment decision

IMPORTANCE OF FINANCIAL AID AND SCHOLARSHIPS	2021	2022
Very important	79%	63%
Important	12%	17%
Somewhat important	7%	13%
Not at all important	2%	7%

MORE LIKELY TO



Think that scholarships and financial aid are important

- Black and Hispanic families
- Family income <\$150,000
- First-generation families

Ruling out institutions based on the sticker price



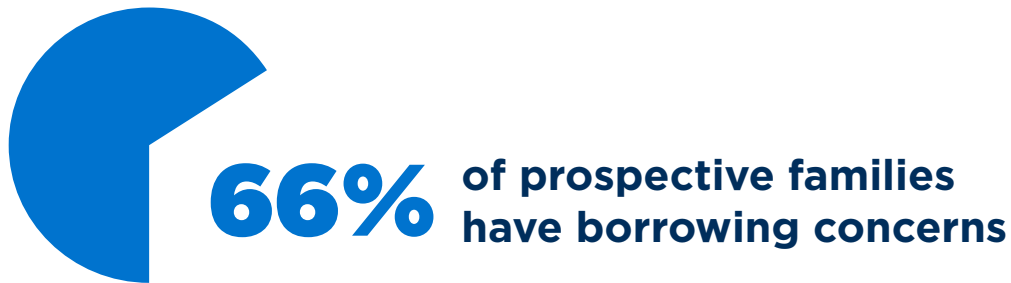
MORE LIKELY TO



Have ruled out institutions based on price

- Hispanic families
- Families considering out-of-state institutions
- Families who have concerns about taking loans to pay for college
- Families considering taking student or parent loans
- Families who are unsure about taking student or parent loans

Concerns about borrowing



MORE LIKELY TO



Have borrowing concerns

- Black and Hispanic families
- Family income <\$100,000
- Families in the Southwest
- Families considering in-state institutions
- Families who ruled out institutions based on the sticker price
- Families who have not taken part in an in-person campus tour or visit

Plans for college loans

	UNSURE, MAY OR MAY NOT CONSIDER THIS TYPE OF LOAN IN THE FUTURE	PLANNING ON TAKING THEM	NO PLANS FOR THIS TYPE OF LOAN AT THIS TIME
Student loans	37%	33%	31%
Parent loans	34%	13%	53%

MORE LIKELY TO



Plan on taking student loans

- Family income \$30,000 to \$149,000
- First-generation families
- Families who have ruled out institutions based on the sticker price



Plan on taking parent loans

- Family income \$100,000 to \$149,000
- First-generation families
- Families who ruled out institutions based on the sticker price

EXPECT TO BORROW	2021	2022
Less than \$10,000	10%	9%
Between \$10,001 and \$20,000	15%	11%
Between \$20,001 and \$40,000	20%	18%
More than \$40,001	14%	15%
I don't know how much we will need to borrow	42%	46%

STUDENT ATHLETE

Importance of factors in athletic recruitment

Connecting with college coaches	67%
Roster spot availability due to returning collegiate student-athletes	55%
Amount of athletic aid available	49%



Connecting with college coaches is more likely to be more critical for

- Black families
- Non-first-generation families



Roster spot availability due to returning collegiate student-athletes is more likely to be essential for

- Black and Hispanic families
- Families in the Southwest and West
- Non-first-generation families



Amount of athletic aid available is more likely to be important for

- Black and Hispanic families
- Family income <\$100,000
- Families in the Southwest
- First-generation families

Families of prospective student-athletes are more likely to state their loan concerns are impacting their student's college planning.



FAMILIES IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We asked families if they wanted to share additional insights about their college planning experience. Here are the themes we found in their responses as well as quotes from some of the respondents.

1. Paying for college was the most common comment, and much of that concern was about being aware of how the process works and having transparency about the total cost to attend college. They want to:
 - Understand the financial aid processes
 - Know how to complete the FAFSA and have a resource for asking questions about it
 - Understand how their students will qualify for scholarships and grants
 - See the total tuition versus the sticker price
 - Have more transparency about cost and awards as well as that information earlier in the search process

The cost of college is huge for families. During our college enrollment and up to the days of getting our student settled on campus, we received several cost sheets, and the numbers were constantly changing. Very frustrating trying to figure out what the final cost was for her first year and then how to pay for her first year.

I think parents still paying off their own student loans should be considered when discussing new loans for incoming students. It's making the financial aid situation much more tenuous.



FAMILIES IN THEIR OWN WORDS (CONTINUED)

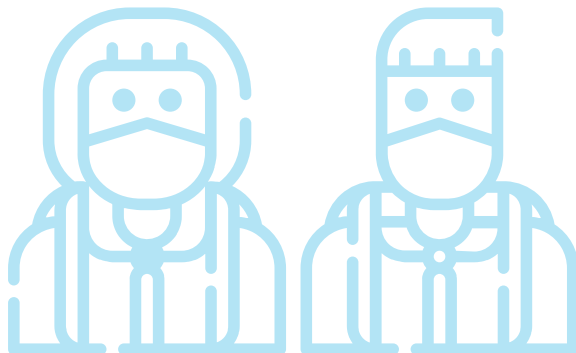
2. COVID continues to have an impact on families searching for colleges with their students. The pandemic has made the entire process more challenging and difficult overall. The polarization of safety protocols has had an impact, as some families are happy institutions have required vaccine or mask mandates while others have viewed those requirements negatively—and both groups said this would factor into their decisions. Families also want in-person tours but they appreciate that institutions have provided virtual options.



Please make families aware that if a student does not take the SAT/ACT, they will not be considered for the academic entrance scholarships. Due to COVID the test opportunities were not available and we did not find out about this fact until reading the fine print on website after my son was accepted. He had to cram and take the SAT on the only date it was offered in our area before the school's scholarship deadline.



It would be nice to know if colleges are thinking about **how to deal with students' mental health challenges** during these uncertain times.



FAMILIES IN THEIR OWN WORDS (CONTINUED)

3. Families want better communication with colleges and universities, with better information for both them and their students. They asked for:

- More information about and resources to navigate, clarify, and simplify the admissions process
- Faster delivery of notifications of admission decisions as well as notifications that are easier to understand
- Greater transparency about what stage an application is in
- More communication between when the application is complete and the admission decision is made
- Physical resources—families appreciate useful information that comes in the mail
- The ability to speak with someone on the phone when they have questions
- Greater personalization in communications, with information about topics related to the interests of their students. Families of student-athletes in particular wanted information specifically about the athletic department

Being able to talk directly to instructors or department heads of programs my daughter is interested in would have a big impact on our decision.

Feeling a **warm, personal connection to the staff** is what led each of my daughters to choose the schools they chose.

It's difficult not knowing what's been communicated to my student that they may not have let me know about. I'm worried we will miss important info or deadlines.

Enjoyed the in-person tours we took so far. It gives you a better idea of how things work and what the campus is like. Also, allows you to see the surrounding area of the school.

Having a platform available to freshmen to meet other freshmen is very important before they attend their school of choice. Class selection is very stressful on students and should be something that is reviewed prior to enrollment.

I have been so impressed how all of the admissions departments have excelled in shifting to the current need of online virtual visits.

FAMILIES IN THEIR OWN WORDS (CONTINUED)

4. Parents have concerns about standardized tests. They would like the requirement to be removed, and if that is not possible, to not have it weighed so heavily even if it is not required. Parents would also like to have more transparency about how the scores are used.

“

Please consider getting rid of ACT/SAT test requirements.

The students should not have to stress about test scores especially when they have an above-average GPA and have met high school graduation requirements.

”

The test-optional portion of the application process was very confusing. Impossible to know if the decision to submit scores was the right decision. It should either be required for all applicants or not considered at all for all applicants.

5. Many respondents find the college search process overwhelming, confusing, frustrating, and stressful.

“

It is overwhelming, especially with costs. FAFSA only looks at income, if a family has other debt due to a natural disaster or family/medical/pet emergency, it is not accounted for. Also, the cost of living and housing in each state varies.

”

It's an overwhelming experience. **I hope I survive.**

10 RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENSURE EQUITY IN FAMILY COMMUNICATIONS

Here are 10 ways to help your communications reach the widest audience and resonate with more families. Following these will help maximize the number of families who will be engaged and encouraged to be enrollment champions for your institution.

- 1** Make sure the prospective family area on your website is easily accessible and includes the information parents want and need, including contact information to ask questions.
- 2** Not all families have a college experience, so always explain things clearly and include a glossary of terms you are using (do families know what a “deposit” means, for example).
- 3** Avoid higher-ed/admissions/financial aid jargon, idioms, and expressions that parents may not understand.
- 4** Take an omnichannel approach with communications. Not only do parents want to receive things like direct mail, remember that some family members may not have access to a computer at home or be able to go online very often. They may also have to rely on their phones to access their email and browse the web.
- 5** Continue to invite families to virtual live events where they can ask questions.
- 6** Likewise, continue to invite families to participate in both virtual and in-person campus tours.
- 7** Translate your messages to ensure you reach all families if they prefer to receive communications in a language other than English.
- 8** Set up groups for special interests (for example, athletics, majors, orchestra players, or international families), allowing parents to opt-out.
- 9** Most families are interested in watching videos on your website, but make sure those videos are engaging whether seen on a larger computer screen or on a mobile device.
- 10** You can never assume that all family members are hearing. To increase the inclusion of all families, institutions should provide captioning across all events, webinars, and videos. Think about how this applies to on-campus events and tours.

Takeaways

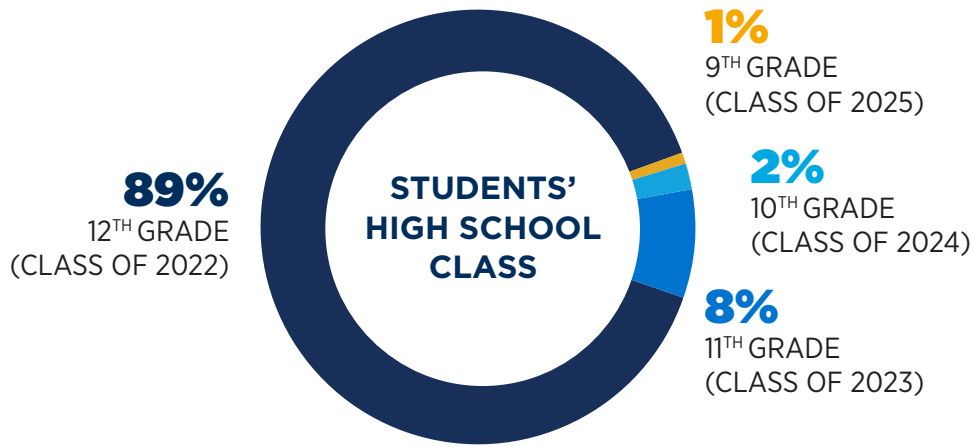
- **Communicate the value of an education regardless of its modality.** The vast majority of parents and students believe online education should be cheaper than in-person classes. One way to address this concern is to show educational and employment outcomes to families so they understand the value of the education you are providing, whether in the classroom or via online education.
- **Communicate often and across channels with parents.** Parents want frequent communications more than ever, and many are willing to receive communications across multiple channels. Be sure you give them the opportunity to opt-in to communications such as text messages and provide ways for them to contact your institution across multiple channels if they need help.
- **Make sure that all families can access key information.** For first-generation students, the college process can seem very daunting to themselves and their parents. Similarly, students with lower family incomes may not have the same access to information or communication channels as other families. Be sure that information such as financial aid, admissions requirements, and financing are both easy to find and easy for students to understand, regardless of background. Be sure to have clear contact information with that content in case parents or students have questions.
- **Build engagement opportunities with families in person and online.** Most families have welcomed the return of in-person interactions, but they also appreciate online interactions such as virtual tours. Assess your online experiences and make sure they answer questions and showcase what your institution has to offer as well as your in-person experiences. Also try to give students and families the opportunity to connect with members of the campus community where possible—it will increase their engagement with your institution.
- **Communicating affordability is crucial.** With nearly half of parents saying paying for college will be difficult and almost 60 percent ruling out colleges based on cost, you need to make sure families and students can find information on aid, scholarships, and affordability quickly and early in the process. Likewise financial aid awards need to explain how much aid students will receive in a way they can understand. Tools such as personalized financial aid award videos can go a long way toward making financial aid easy to understand.
- **Educate families early about different options to finance college such as loans.** Families who could benefit from loans (such as those with lower incomes or ability to pay for college) may also be more likely to have fears about borrowing. Help families understand the benefits and considerations of these options early so that borrowing fears do not negatively impact their ability to plan for college.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Thirty institutions participated in the study. The survey was sent electronically to parents and other adults who care for and support high school students between December 2021 and January 2022. We collected a total of 6,455 completed responses.

We thank our research sponsors and partners, participating institutions, and, most importantly, every single family who responded to our survey.

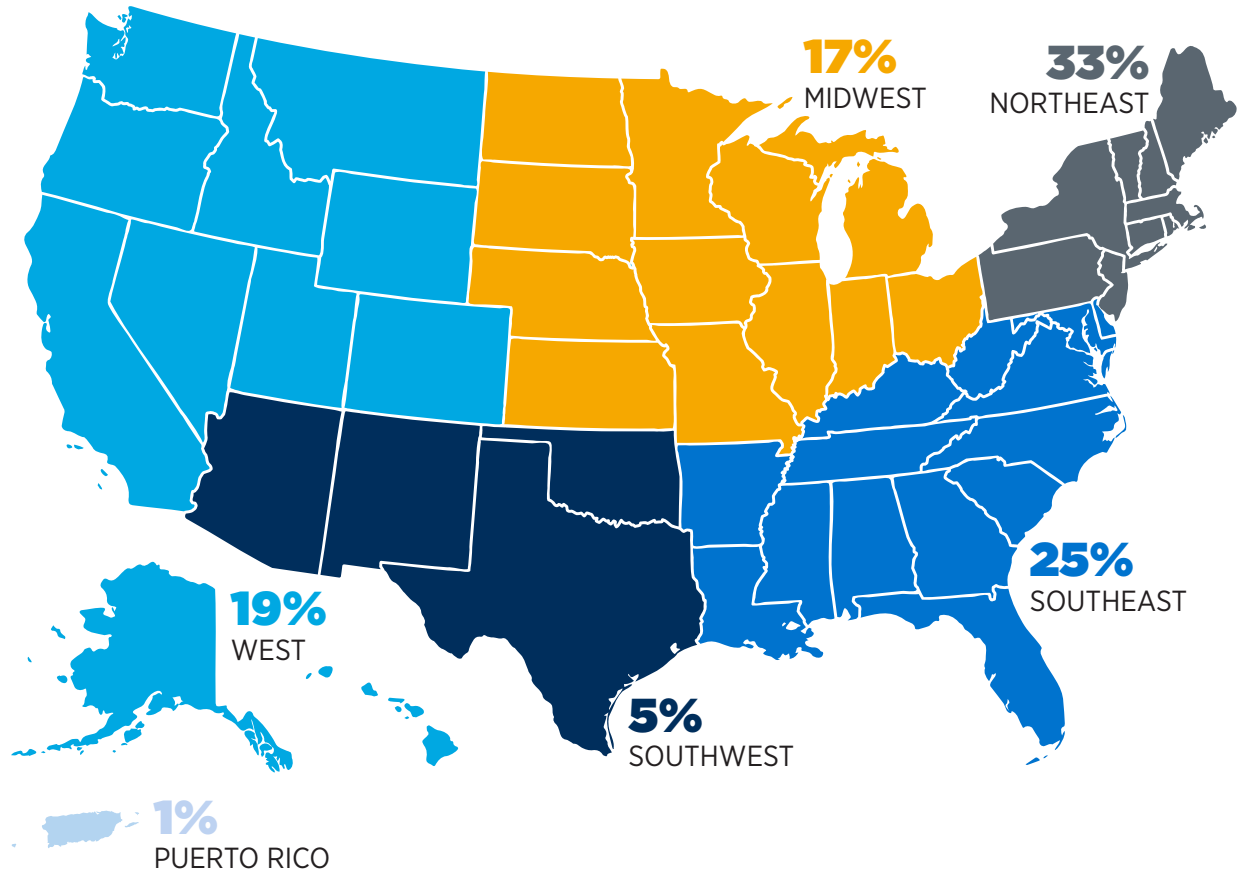
Demographics



ETHNICITY

Asian/Pacific Islander	5%
Black or African American	6%
Hispanic or Latino	9%
Middle Eastern	1%
Native American or American Indian	1%
White	75%
Multi-racial	2%
Prefer not to disclose	6%
Other (specify)	1%

US LOCATION



FAMILY INCOME

Less than \$30,000	4%
\$30,000 to \$59,999	8%
\$60,000 to \$99,999	16%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	24%
\$150,000 or more	49%

PARENTS' EDUCATION

First-generation	30%
Non-first-generation (received at least a two-year college degree or more)	70%

Participating Institutions

Alvernia University	South Puget Sound College
Arapahoe Community College	The New School
Ashland University	Transylvania University
Azusa Pacific University	Union University
Chadron State College	University of Georgia
Columbia Basin College	University of Montana
Columbus College Of Art & Design	University of New Orleans
Concordia University, St. Paul	University of Tampa
Dixie State University	University of the Pacific
Embry-Riddle University	University of Minnesota, Morris
Kings College	Utah State University
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New Mexico State University	Wilkes University
North Central College	William Peace University
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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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CampusESP is a strategic family engagement platform that enables institutions to inform the greatest influencers in students' lives—their parents. From impacting enrollment, to student success, to annual giving—keeping parents effectively engaged has proven to be critical for institutions looking to better support their institutional goals. With CampusESP, institutions can increase their numbers and satisfy the needs of parents, all while reducing administrative burden and hours on their staff.

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Ardeo Education Solutions is a public benefit company dedicated to increasing access to the life-changing impact of higher education. Ardeo has worked with more than 200 colleges and universities to improve access and increase enrollment. Our Loan Repayment Assistance Programs (LRAPs) remove the fear of student loan debt with this powerful promise: if income after graduation is modest, our program will help repay federal student, private alternative, and parent PLUS loans.

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