



2024 High School Student College Planning Report

A study of college-bound student search behaviors and preferences

Co-sponsored by: **HALDA**



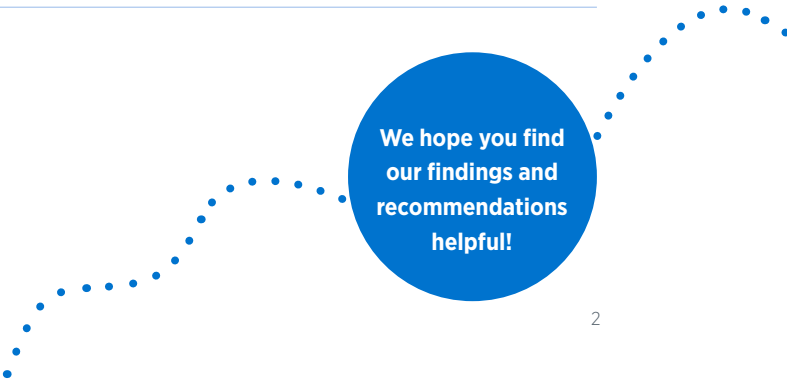
Introduction

How do college-bound high school students approach the college planning process? What are their expectations, perceptions, and concerns?

The *2024 High School Student College Planning Report* presents findings from a survey of more than 2,200 students in the 10th-12th grades. This report dives into many details about the college search process for high school students. It is the second in this series, and we have noted how student expectations have changed from our 2022 survey.

Here are several key highlights and recommendations:

THE 2024 DATA SHOW...	INSTITUTIONS SHOULD...
There is a rising skepticism about the return on investment in higher education.	Highlight the value proposition for students with transparent presentation of costs and financial aid coupled with evidence of student support services, internships and networking opportunities, and graduate outcomes.
Students have significant anxieties about affording college, and they increase as they approach graduation.	Start financial aid education early in the enrollment journey to help allay rising concerns.
First-generation students question their family's ability to pay for college at a higher rate than continuing students.	Develop targeted communications to meet first-generation families where they are in their concerns by providing clear, jargon-free information about costs and funding options.
Fewer students are opting to take standardized tests. Continuing students have less confidence that the tests are fair and that they will do well compared to first-generation students, but cost is a significant deterrent for first-generation students.	Make admissions requirements—especially pertaining to test requirements and deadlines—very clear. Offer financial aid for first-generation and low-income students to eliminate this barrier.
The information students search for most is program-specific information.	Make programs easily searchable and provide program-specific examples of alumni outcomes so prospective students and families get a relevant example of the benefits and outcomes.
Timely and responsive communications throughout the admission process positively impact conversion.	Offer personalized communications tailored to program-specific interests and proactive engagement and support. Use AI and automation to increase the ability to respond to students quickly.
Student preferences for amount and type of communications varies by year and channel.	Offer opt-in communication preferences and customize communication flows with the CRM. AI can again help with personalizing communications at scale.



We hope you find our findings and recommendations helpful!

Top 10 Findings

93% are concerned about the cost of college

85% think college will be hard

73% do not know if their family will be able to afford to pay for their college education

72% think applying to college is difficult

63% expect a job after graduation

63% don't know how to choose the right college

60% wonder if college is worth the time, money, and effort

59% want college to equip them with specific job skills for the workplace

57% started their college planning before the start of 10th grade

50% wonder if they can make a good living without a college degree

Goals for College

PRIORITIES (ALL STUDENTS: STUDENTS PICKED TOP 2 PRIORITIES)	2022	2024
A job offer upon graduation	49%	63%
Specific skills for the workplace	65%	59%
To have fun on campus	28%	31%
Networking abilities	18%	23%
I'm doing this because it is expected of me	6%	6%

2024 STUDENT POPULATION	SPECIFIC SKILLS FOR THE WORKPLACE	NETWORKING ABILITIES	TO HAVE FUN ON CAMPUS	A JOB OFFER UPON GRADUATION	I'M DOING THIS BECAUSE IT IS EXPECTED OF ME
Continuing generation	48%	25%	40%	60%	4%
First generation	69%	20%	25%	70%	9%

Students approach their college search with the practical goal of preparing themselves for success in their chosen fields. Receiving a job offer upon graduation is the top goal of students in 2024 and jumped from 49 percent to 63 percent in the last two years. Getting specific skills for the workplace was also a high priority.



Nearly 60 percent of students—down from 65 percent in 2022—prioritize acquiring specific skills tailored for the workplace.

Many more first-generation students (69 percent) chose acquiring specific skills for the workplace than continuing-generation students (48 percent).

While academic and career-oriented goals dominate the students' top goals, one-third of students (up from 28 percent) expressed a desire to have fun on campus. This emphasis on campus life might suggest students have a holistic approach and want personal fulfillment alongside academic and career pursuits. It might also indicate a renewed hope for social interaction from a post-pandemic mindset.

Close to one-quarter of high school students said they hope to improve their networking abilities. Given that their goals for “specific skills for the workplace” dropped from 65 percent in 2022 to 59 percent in 2024 while interest in networking increased from 28 percent to 31 percent, it is possible students are approaching their futures with a greater awareness of the need to be well-connected and flexible, able to connect, learn, and pivot by leveraging social capital for sustainable professional health.

Practical implications for institutions

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Build the relationship.

Assuage student concerns by building relationships they feel they can trust. Admissions offices should create opportunities to engage prospective students and have them engage with each other in person and online. Forming these connections builds the rapport necessary to share relevant content about campus life, academic programs, career services, and alumni achievements. Consider interactive online features such as live Q&A sessions or virtual campus tours to broaden access to opportunities for direct engagement, and pivot by leveraging social capital for sustainable professional health.



Clarify and promote your distinctive value proposition.

Overcome rising student anxiety and rising skepticism with a very clear presentation of costs and evidence of how current students and graduates have experienced a return on their investment.



Highlight career preparation opportunities.

Show prospective students how their college experience will be a thoughtfully planned pathway through which they will be prepared for their future.

- Promote your institution's career services offerings and internship opportunities.
- Emphasize networking initiatives by highlighting current students who made valuable contacts that strengthened their resumes.
- Highlight the breadth and strength of your alumni network with case studies of students who received internships or job offers from well-placed alumni.



Illustrate outcomes.

Help prospective students envision the outcome of their education with examples of recent and impressive alumni examples.

- Showcase alumni success stories. Be sure to include younger alumni with stories prospective students might find relatable.
- Highlight industry partnerships and the students who have found careers through those contacts.
- Track and promote your institution's track record of graduate employment after graduation. Present these metrics by discipline to illustrate how graduates leveraged their degree to find jobs in their field.



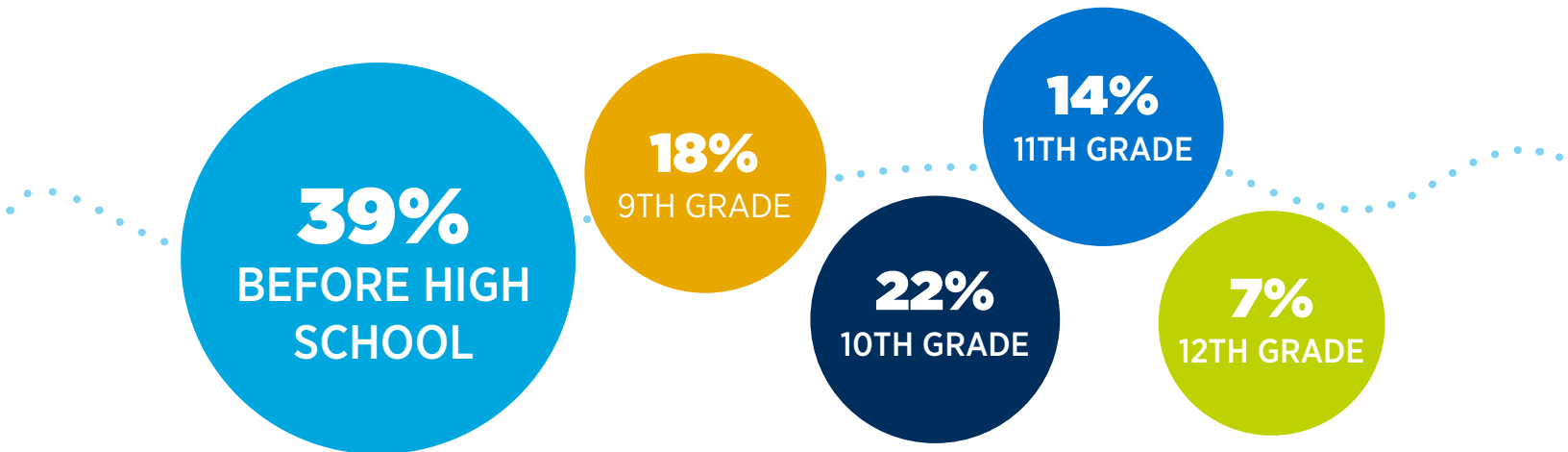
Promote the positive life.

Illustrate empathy for the nervous-but-hopeful post-pandemic students with communication strategies that emphasize the fun of new experiences, new relationships, and campus activities that support and broaden the students' learning. Use current student voices to tell the story of how they have found their people and their purpose to attract students who are seeking a holistic college experience.



The start of college planning

When do students begin planning for college?



The 2024 data about when students start their college planning did not change over 2022. What remains the same is that more than nine out of 10 students have started thinking of college before their senior year, and nearly 40 percent said they started thinking of college before stepping foot into high school. This indicates that these students prioritize long-term educational goals from an early age and underscores the importance of early exposure to institutional awareness-building.

By 10th grade, an additional 22 percent have begun their college planning. This stage often involves more active planning and exploration of college options, including researching potential majors, visiting campuses, and considering financial aid options.

Eleventh grade marks a pivotal phase in the college preparation journey, with 14 percent of students indicating that they start seriously contemplating their higher education options. That means only 7 percent of students surveyed said they did not start college planning until 12th grade. This smaller percentage of students who delay their college planning might include those considering a gap year or non-college career pathways.

Practical implications



Build awareness early.

Enrollment offices should implement outreach programs targeted at middle school students or even earlier to engage families and students in discussions about higher education and long-term career aspirations. Prioritize relationships with important influencers like middle and high school counselors and parents. Consider hosting informational sessions, distributing materials about the value of college education, and providing resources for academic planning and goal setting.



Personalize communication at each grade level.

Communication strategies should address the evolving needs and concerns of students as they progress through high school. For example, messaging for 9th graders may focus on the importance of academic preparation and exploring interests, while communication with 11th graders could emphasize the college application process and financial aid opportunities.



Offer virtual campus tours and information sessions.

Given the importance of campus visits in the college exploration process, admissions offices should host virtual campus tours, information sessions, and interactive Q&A sessions to provide prospective students with insights into campus life and academic offerings, regardless of their geographic location.



Perceptions of the college planning process

Difficulties students say they have with the planning process

ALL STUDENTS

Applying to college is difficult	72%
I don't know how to choose the right college	63%
I don't know where to find help for my college planning	53%
I don't think I can find a college that fits my needs	29%

APPLYING TO COLLEGE IS DIFFICULT

10th grade	85%
11th grade	80%
12th grade	65%

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT COLLEGE

10th grade	69%
11th grade	73%
12th grade	56%

I DON'T THINK I CAN FIND A COLLEGE THAT FITS MY NEEDS

10th grade	31%
11th grade	34%
12th grade	27%

I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO FIND HELP FOR MY COLLEGE PLANNING

10th grade	56%
11th grade	57%
12th grade	51%

These responses illustrate how overwhelming the college search process feels to students—particularly younger students who are beginning to think of college but haven't yet received specific information about how best to conduct their search. The good news is that anxiety and uncertainty appear to decrease as students age, which demonstrates the salving impact of the information, outreach, and support that high school counselors and enrollment offices offer as they more engage with prospective students.

The finding that nearly two-thirds of students do not know how to choose the right college highlights a fundamental dilemma many applicants encounter now that the common application has increased the number of schools students keep on their “short” list. Admissions offices should address this by identifying and communicating the distinctive benefits and outcomes about the institution's academic programs, campus life, and support services, to help students make informed decisions that align with their interests and goals.

The fact that more than half of participating students said they did not know where to find help for their college planning underscores the critical role admissions offices play in guiding them through the search and application process. Colleges should ensure that information about support services, including counseling, advising, and financial aid resources, is easily accessible and widely disseminated.

Finally, 29 percent of students saying they do not think they can find a college that fits their needs underscores the importance of personalized guidance and tailored support. Admissions offices should highlight specific programs, resources, and opportunities to reassure students that there are suitable options available to them.

Practical implications



Audit communications for clarity and accessibility.

Allay apprehensions by assessing and simplifying all communications to ensure they are easy to find and understand from the perspective of someone who has no idea where to start. This is particularly true of first-generation students but also remains true for continuing-generation students who are the oldest or only children. Even though their families have attended college, they may not have engaged with the process for decades.



Showcase unique institutional offerings.

The data show that even later in their search, students are unsure of how to make the right choice. Identify the elements that make the institution distinctive. Highlight special programs, research opportunities, extracurricular activities, and campus amenities that set the college apart. Emphasize the benefits and outcomes of these distinctive offerings to demonstrate how the investment is worth the time and money and appeal to the right-fit students.



Promote support services.

Ensure students that academic support is available by promoting student support services such as counseling, advising, financial aid assistance, and centers that offer academic support.



Consider segmenting outreach for personalized guidance.

Analyze past matriculant data to tailor student outreach approaches for students with specific needs such as first-generation, transfer, military, or out of state students. Include individualized advising sessions and targeted communications to address the needs of segments more specifically and to send a clear message that the institution cares about and will support its students.

Concerns about college affordability

73%

I don't know if I can (or my family can) afford college

93%

I'm concerned about the cost of college

The vast majority of students are concerned about the cost of college and 73 percent of students are also uncertain about their or their families' ability to afford it. These concerns increase as students get closer to attending college.

I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN (OR MY FAMILY CAN) AFFORD COLLEGE		I'M CONCERNED ABOUT THE COST OF COLLEGE	
10th grade	64%	10th grade	92%
11th grade	73%	11th grade	92%
12th grade	76%	12th grade	94%

Nearly two-thirds of 10th-grade students say they are unsure of how their family will afford college, and that number rises significantly in the next two grades. Those cost concerns can be a significant barrier to attending college. Admissions and financial aid offices must recognize the financial burden that students face and take proactive steps to address these concerns. These findings also underscore the importance of being transparent about total costs, clarifying financing options, explaining financial aid offers, and educating students and families on the difference between loans, grants, and work-study opportunities.

I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN (OR MY FAMILY CAN) AFFORD COLLEGE		I'M CONCERNED ABOUT THE COST OF COLLEGE	
Continuing-generation students	69%	Continuing-generation students	93%
First-generation students	85%	First-generation students	93%

The data also show that although continuing- and first-generation students are equally concerned about the cost of college, 85 percent of first-generation students are unsure if their families can afford it compared to 69 percent of continuing students.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing affordability concerns with first-generation students in particular. Providing tailored support services, such as financial aid workshops, one-on-one counseling, and comprehensive information about available resources, can help alleviate some of the anxiety and uncertainty surrounding the cost of higher education. Further, by actively engaging with first-generation students and their families and offering targeted assistance, institutions can ensure equitable access to higher education opportunities and support the success of historically underserved populations.

Practical implications



Proactively engage students about financing.

Enrollment and financial aid offices can help prevent the rise of anxiety by engaging with students and families by 11th grade to provide guidance on navigating the financial aid process. This may involve hosting workshops, webinars, and information sessions, as well as offering one-on-one advising to assist students in understanding their options and completing financial aid applications.



Offer targeted financial literacy programs.

Develop and implement targeted financial literacy programs aimed at high school juniors and seniors. These programs can provide students with essential knowledge and skills related to budgeting, financial planning, and understanding college costs and financial aid options. Support the presentation of costs with the institution's value proposition to reinforce student confidence in their ROI.



Implement first-generation outreach programs.

First-generation families don't know what they don't know, making navigating the FAFSA and awarding process daunting. Consider the following targeted initiatives:

- Conduct outreach to local high schools where first-generation families will feel comfortable attending informational sessions, workshops, and events focused on navigating the college application process, understanding financial aid options, and addressing concerns about college affordability.
- Forge partnerships with community organizations and nonprofit agencies that serve first-generation students and their families to extend the institution's reach and support services, such as financial literacy workshops, scholarship opportunities, and college readiness programs.
- Create dedicated web pages, informational materials, and online portals specifically tailored to the needs of first-generation students and their families. Depending on the regional immigration trends, consider offering translated materials and interpreted sessions. Also research and consider executing campaigns on platforms commonly used by certain populations (e.g., WhatsApp or WeChat).



Assess long-term affordability planning

Consider institutional initiatives to explore long-term affordability planning strategies to address the rising costs of higher education. This may include looking at innovative tuition models, expanding financial aid resources, debt forgiveness strategies, and advocating for policy changes that promote college affordability at both the institutional and governmental levels.



Students' Perceptions of the Value of College

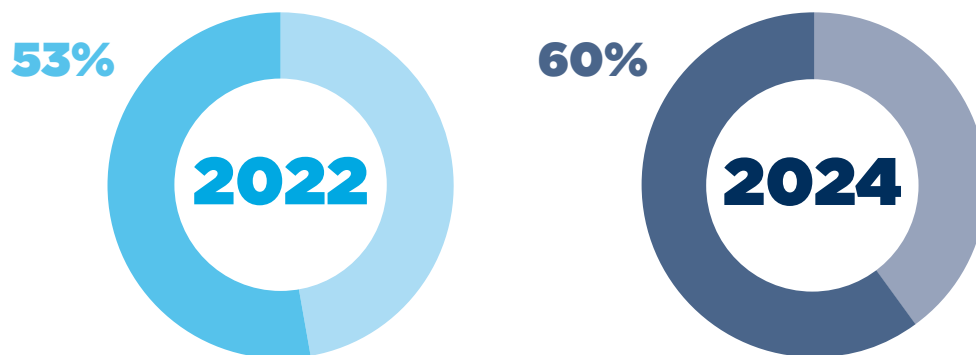
Students who think they can make a good living *without* a college degree



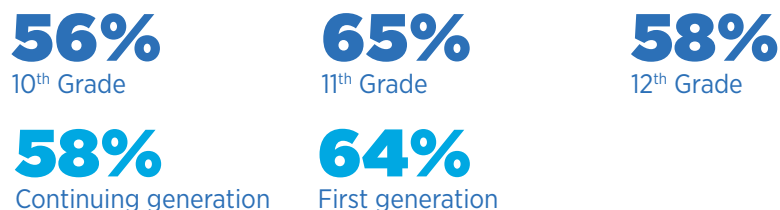
Half of respondents said they believe they can make a good living without a college degree. Given the significant economic investment in a college education, this sentiment underscores the need for colleges to demonstrate the tangible benefits to higher education including personal development, networking, higher earning potential, career advancement opportunities, and enhanced job security.

Questioning the ROI of college

I wonder if college is worth the time, money, and effort



I wonder if college is worth the time, money, and effort



These responses also show rising skepticism about the value of college, with 60 percent of students saying they wonder if it is worth the time, money, and effort. The strongest doubters are 11th-grade students, with two-thirds expressing doubts that college is worth it. First-generation students also reported higher levels of doubt than continuing-generation students.

Practical implications



Build the case for a college education.

The high levels of doubt about the value or necessity of a higher education highlight the importance starting early in the funnel to address misconceptions as well as provide metrics and testimonials of outcomes that illustrate the long-term benefits of higher education.



Demonstrate value to first-generation students and families.

First-generation students and their families are less familiar with the personal and professional benefits of higher education. Enrollment offices should collect and share stories of their first-generation alumni who chose college and have changed the career path and earning trajectory of their families as a result.

Perceptions about the challenges students anticipate in college

I think college will be hard



An overwhelming majority of students perceive that college will be hard, indicating a prevalent concern among students about whether they are academically ready for higher-level work. This sentiment is consistent across different grade levels, with slight fluctuations observed as students progress through high school. However, even though there is a drop in this perception among 12th-grade students, eight out of ten still believe college will be hard.

Overall, the survey data highlights the prevalent concerns among high school students regarding the difficulty of college. Enrollment offices should address these concerns by highlighting the academic and student support services the institution offers to make sure students are successful.

College entrance exams

Plans to take college entrance exams

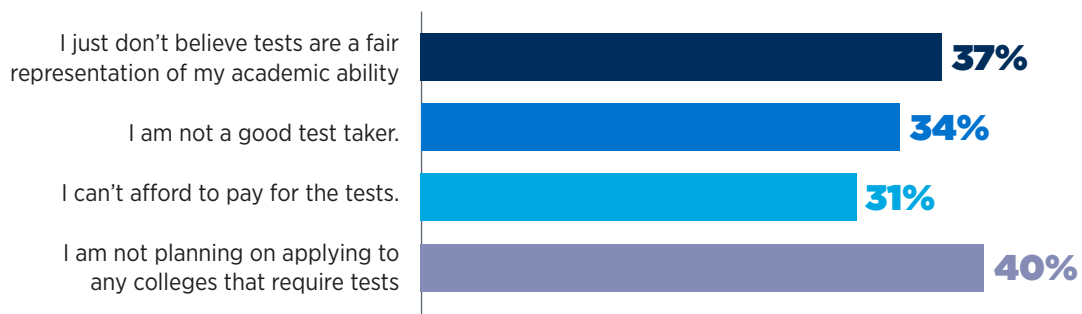
STUDENTS PLAN TO TAKE	2022	2024
SAT	32%	37%
ACT	20%	15%
Both ACT & SAT	34%	28%
Not testing	14%	20%

	BOTH	ACT	SAT	NOT TESTING
Continuing-generation students	30%	16%	38%	16%
First-generation students	25%	13%	33%	29%

One in five students do not plan to take a college entrance exam in 2024, compared to 14 percent in 2022. This trend will be one to continue to monitor in the current test-optional environment.

The higher percentage of first-generation students abstaining from testing may stem from various factors such as limited access to test preparation resources, financial constraints, or a lack of familial guidance in navigating the college admissions process.

Reasons not to take entrance exams



	I JUST DON'T BELIEVE TESTS ARE A FAIR REPRESENTATION OF MY ACADEMIC ABILITY	I AM NOT A GOOD TEST TAKER.	I CAN'T AFFORD TO PAY FOR THE TESTS.	I AM NOT PLANNING ON APPLYING TO ANY COLLEGES THAT REQUIRE TESTS
Continuing-generation students	40%	38%	25%	45%
First-generation students	32%	27%	39%	31%

The reasons for not taking a test present interesting insights into student perceptions and challenges.

40%
Not applying to colleges that require tests

There's no need to take a stressful test if the school makes it optional. However, it is important to let students and families know if standardized tests are tied to financial aid awards.

37%
Tests are not a representation of ability

A significant number of students have concerns about tests providing an accurate assessment of their academic performance. It is interesting that first-generation students were less likely to have this concern than continuing-generation students.

34%
Not applying to colleges that require tests

One-third of this year's students expressed concerns about the ACT and SAT because they label themselves poor test takers. Again, test anxiety was higher for continuing students (45 percent) than first-generation students (31 percent). This might explain why so many more continuing students plan to apply to schools that do not require tests.

31%
Cost of the tests

For one out of three students, the cost of a test was also a deterrent. This was particularly true for first-generation students (39 percent). Part of the argument against standardized tests pertains to an unfair advantage it might give to wealthier students who can afford coaching or take the test several times to try to improve scores.

REASONS TO TAKE ENTRANCE EXAMS	2022	2024
It will allow me access to additional scholarship opportunities.	51%	55%
Everyone in my high school takes the tests.	32%	50%
I am planning on applying to colleges that require tests.	32%	32%
I believe tests are a fair measure of my academic ability.	25%	28%
My parents, other family members, or other authority figures are telling me I should take the tests.	17%	17%

These reasons to take tests also provide some interesting insights.

55%

For scholarship opportunities

The allure of scholarships is this year's top motivator for students to take college entrance exams. By achieving high scores, students unlock access to scholarship opportunities that might ease the financial burden of higher education.

50%

School/state mandate

In some cases, students feel compelled to take college entrance exams because it is a requirement at their high school. Whether it's mandated by school policy or integrated into the curriculum, the expectation of participation in standardized testing motivates students to fulfill this obligation and stay on track with their peers.

32%

College requirement

Strategic planning drives many students to take college entrance exams, especially if they aspire to attend institutions that require standardized test scores as part of their admissions criteria. By meeting these requirements, students position themselves as competitive candidates in the college application process.

28%

Belief in fairness

Actual confidence in the reliability of the test is the second-lowest measure in this year's data. Less than one-third of students view standardized tests as a fair measure of their academic prowess.

17%

Influence of authority figures

The lowest cited reason for taking the test is to fulfill the expectations of authority figures in their lives. Whether it's parents, family members, or teachers, these influencers emphasize the importance of standardized testing as a crucial step toward college admission and future success and some—not many—students will take it for that reason.

Practical implications



Diversify assessment methods.

This year's data show that students will take a standardized test because it's required for admission or access to scholarships. Most do not believe these tests are a true measure of their academic potential. Enrollment offices should explore alternative methods of evaluating applicants beyond test scores to ensure greater buy-in of the process.



Provide transparent communication.

Given student skepticism about the validity of tests, colleges that continue to require them should make the requirements, ranges, and deadlines very clear. Additionally, enrollment counselors should be prepared to explain why the institution continues to believe in testing as a reliable predictor of academic performance.



Enhance financial accessibility.

Cost is the biggest deterrent to test-taking among first-generation students. Consider waiving or reducing testing fees for students from low-income backgrounds, providing fee waivers for eligible students, and promoting awareness of available financial assistance programs.



Address test anxiety.

Provide resources and support to help students manage stress and improve their test-taking skills by offering free or subsidized test preparation programs, strategies, and counseling services.

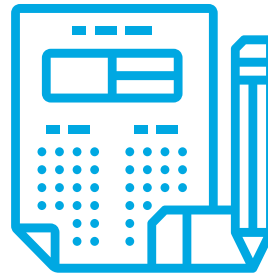


Expand scholarship opportunities.

Enrollment offices that require test scores should emphasize the link between standardized test scores and scholarship eligibility as students are clearly willing to do what they can to help fund their education.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEST-OPTIONAL INSTITUTIONS	2022	2024
I think colleges that require entrance exams are more prestigious.	21%	29%
I think colleges that don't require entrance exams are more welcoming.	47%	43%
I don't think there is a difference.	36%	39%

More than 80%
of institutions are now test-optional. How does this influence the perceptions of students as they search for institutions?



43%
Sense of welcoming environment

While a significant number of students perceive test-optional institutions as more welcoming, this percentage went down slightly in 2024 from 2022. The higher percentage of students who saw the test-optional policy as “welcoming” in 2022 might have been a nod to perceived institutional flexibility during the pandemic.

39%
Norming of test-optional policies

There appears to be a growing acceptance of test-optional as the norm with four out of 10 students saying they do not see a difference between these institutions. For these students, other factors such as academic programs, campus culture, and location may carry more weight in their college decision-making process.

29%
Test requirements are more prestigious

On the other hand, 2024 did see a jump in the percentage of students who associate required test scores as the policy of more prestigious schools. They may believe that stringent admissions criteria, including standardized testing, are indicative of a higher academic caliber and reputation.

Practical implications



Manage your reputation.

Institutions that require entrance exams must actively manage their reputation and address perceptions of prestige. Admissions offices should highlight the strengths and unique attributes of the institution beyond standardized testing requirements, emphasizing academic excellence, research opportunities, and student success stories.



Promote inclusivity.

Test-optional institutions have an opportunity to capitalize on their perceived welcoming environment. Admissions offices should actively promote their inclusive policies and commitment to holistic review processes. By showcasing their dedication to evaluating applicants based on their individual merits and potential, these institutions can attract a diverse pool of talented students.



Expand outreach efforts.

Test-optional institutions should do targeted outreach efforts to reach students who may be unaware of test-optional policies or hesitant to apply without submitting test scores. Collaborate with high schools, community organizations, and college access programs to clarify admission policies and what—if not test scores—the institution uses to make admission decisions.

College Planning Information

What college planning information do students want to learn?

Availability of academic programs and/or majors	95%
Financial aid and scholarships	95%
Cost (tuition, fees, room, and board, etc.)	94%
Financial aid and scholarships (how you qualify for them)	94%
Admission requirements	89%
Housing	89%
Safety information	89%
The location (town, area, local spots, etc.)	87%
Application process and timeline	86%
Community life and activities	86%
Food services and dining	86%
Strength of the academic programs (ratings, rankings, etc.)	86%
How inclusive the campus is towards all students	81%
Athletics	78%
Co-curricular activities (for example, Greek Life, student government, foreign language clubs, visual and performing arts, and volunteering)	73%
Why the institution is unique	68%
Diversity and other demographics	67%
How accessible the campus facilities are for students with limited mobility	64%
Alignment with my personal or political views and philosophy	57%
Information about the art scene in the area (concerts, museum, etc.)	54%
Information about the outdoor options in the area (hiking, camping, etc.)	51%
Information about faith and religious opportunities	45%
Religious affiliation	40%

Practical implications



Make program information accessible.

Make sure program information is easily searchable. Showcase stronger programs and the outcomes of graduates who have achieved career success with their degree in that program.



Clarify costs and financing.

Three of the top 10 things students said they look for pertain to cost and financing. Provide a tuition calculator, housing costs, and other fees as well as typical award amounts to provide a complete perspective of costs and affordability.



Show housing and present safety initiatives.

This year's data show that students are looking for information that gives them a sense of where they'll live. Offer virtual tours, photos of housing options, and content that highlights the community around the campus. Reassure parents and students about campus safety by presenting information about campus safety and the measures taken to protect students.

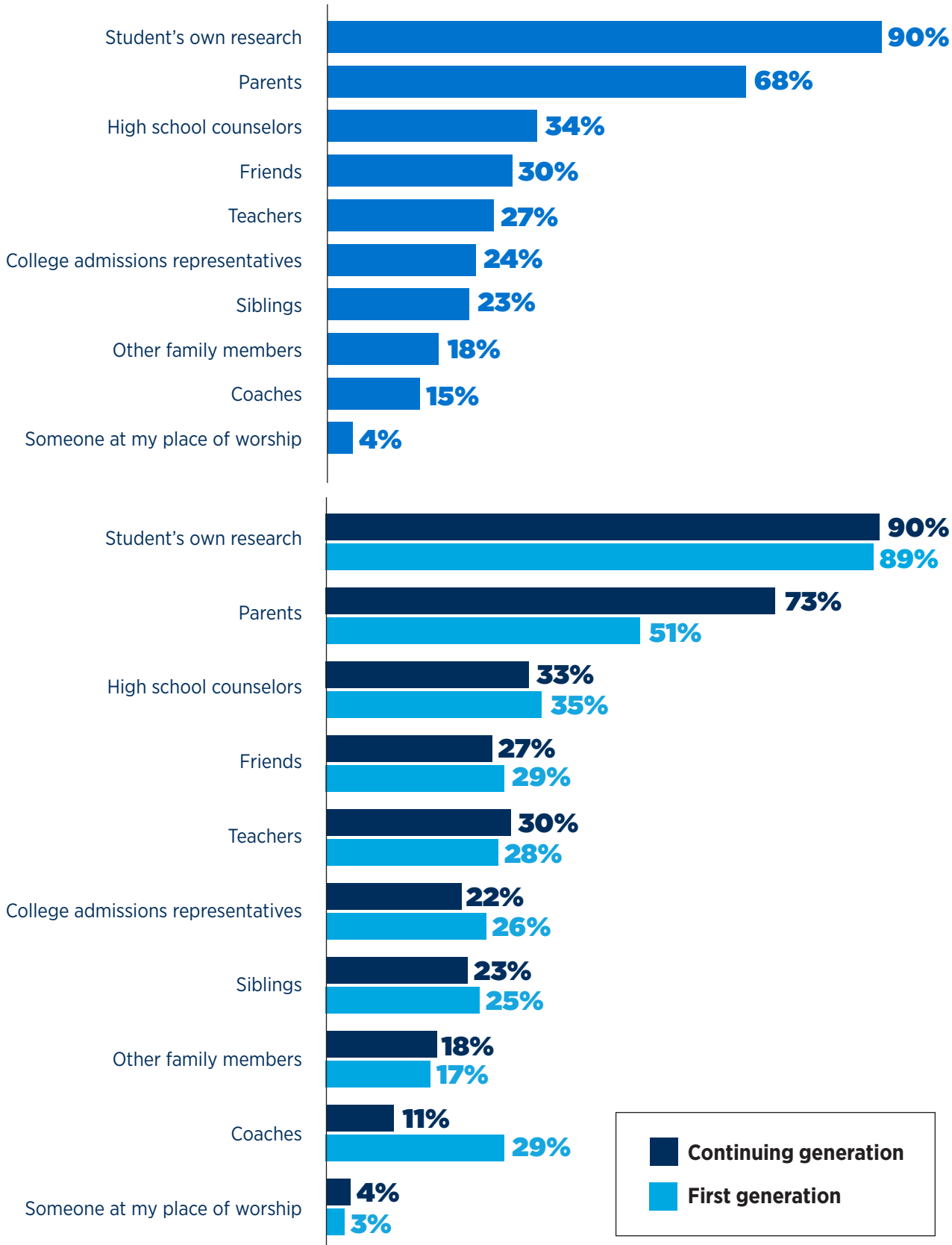


Connect prospective students to current students.

Prospective students want the real scoop about what it's really like and trust current students to be: a) close enough to their age and interests to share values, and; b) to be able to offer authentic insights. Offer opportunities for prospective students to connect live and online with current students.

Student Decision Making

Who influences students' college decisions?



The student’s own research has the greatest influence on their college choice, regardless of student population. But the most interesting difference is how much more influential parents are for continuing-generation students—a 20-point difference. In addition, more than one-third of students rely on high school counselors as a resource when researching college.

Practical implications



Offer family engagement initiatives.

Develop targeted outreach initiatives to engage parents and provide them with the information and resources they need to support their student’s college aspirations. Send out regular newsletters and offer parent-specific workshops to address their questions and concerns.



Enhance guidance resources.

Offer workshops and online tools to help students research effectively. Provide access to student-created content and videos, virtual campus tours, and informational webinars to empower students in their college planning journey.

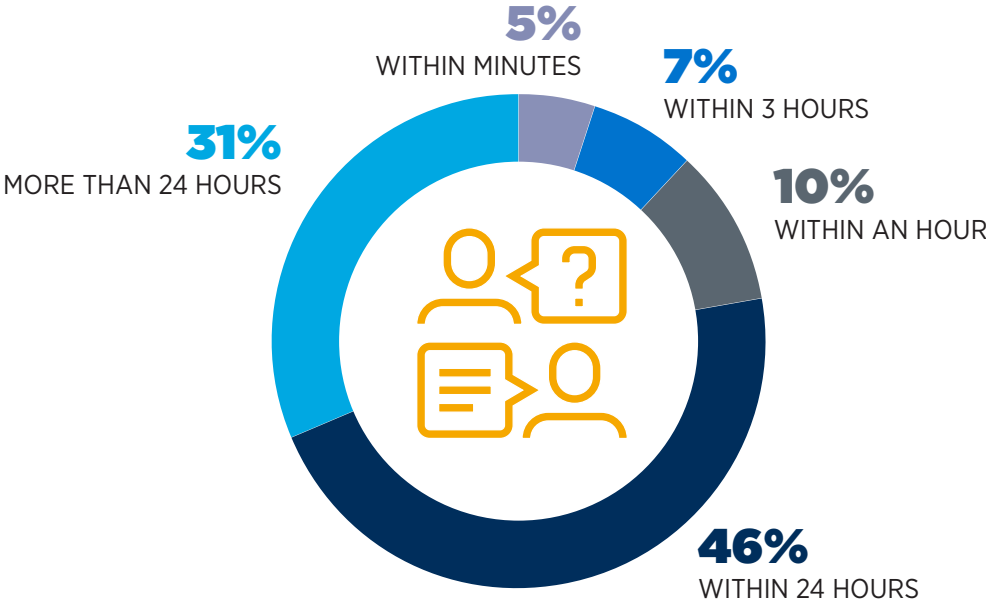


Partner with educational and community organizations.

Forge partnerships with high school counselors and teachers. Provide professional development opportunities, offer informational sessions, and establish communication channels to build institutional awareness and facilitate collaboration for students.

Student Expectations for Response

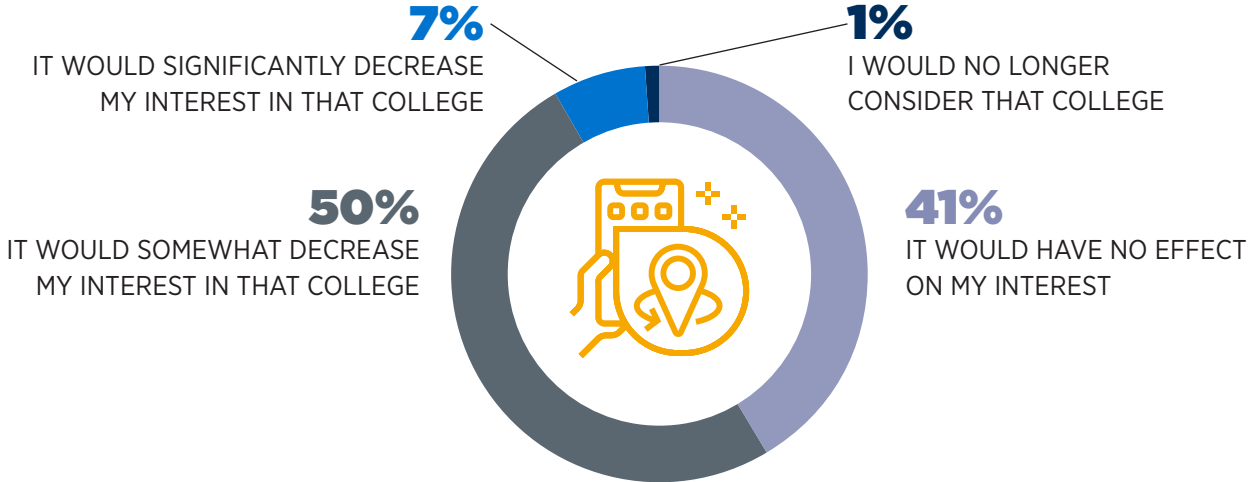
How quickly do students expect a response after submitting an inquiry or asking a question?



GRADE LEVEL	WITHIN MINUTES	WITHIN AN HOUR	WITHIN 3 HOURS	WITHIN 24 HOURS	MORE THAN 24 HOURS
10th grade	5%	12%	5%	41%	37%
11th grade	6%	8%	7%	48%	32%
12th grade	6%	11%	8%	48%	28%

The data show that as students progress through high school, their expectations regarding response times from colleges become more pronounced. In 10th grade, a higher percentage of students indicate that delayed responses would not affect their interest, whereas by 12th grade, a larger proportion express that delayed responses would somewhat or significantly decrease their interest.

The effect of a slow response on a student’s interest



GRADE LEVEL	IT WOULD HAVE NO EFFECT ON MY INTEREST	IT WOULD SOMEWHAT DECREASE MY INTEREST IN THAT COLLEGE	IT WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY DECREASE MY INTEREST IN THAT COLLEGE	I WOULD NO LONGER CONSIDER THAT COLLEGE
10th grade	51%	48%	1%	0%
11th grade	41%	51%	7%	1%
12th grade	39%	51%	9%	1%

These responses highlight the significance of timely communication in the college admissions process. For a substantial portion of high school students, delays in hearing back from colleges can lead to a decline in interest. This underscores the importance of colleges prioritizing prompt and efficient communication with prospective students.

Practical implications



Set and deliver on expectations.

Be transparent about response times and communication protocols. Clearly communicate to students what they can expect in terms of response times for inquiries, applications, and other communications.



Provide updates.

Provide regular updates on application status and important deadlines to keep students informed and engaged even when there isn't any new news to report. Regular communication can help alleviate concerns, keep lines of communication open, and demonstrate the college's commitment to student success.



AI and automation can speed up response.

Students have grown up in a world where they expect immediate response when they interact with businesses and organizations. Those expectations carry over to colleges and universities. Consider how AI tools such as conversational assistants can engage students intelligently and answer questions 24/7, helping you meet expectations for response.



The importance of personalized communication

What personalization do students want in communications?

Send me information specific to my program of interest	96%
Answer my specific questions	96%
Appear to know me and my situation when I make contact	84%
Use my first name in emails and other communications	83%
Use my first language in communications such as emails and direct mail	83%
Share information reflecting/related to my demographic (age, background, etc.)	77%
Call me regularly to check in on my needs and questions	60%
Use my name in videos	54%

The top results of this question show that students want relevant information. They want to learn about their program of interest, feel like they are understood as individuals by the institution, and have their specific questions answered.

Practical implications



Tailor program-specific information.

Since 96 percent of students want program-specific information, admissions offices should be ready to provide detailed program overviews, faculty profiles, and student testimonials to illustrate the experience and outcomes of programs of interest.



Offer responsive communication channels.

All students want their questions answered. Admissions offices should offer platforms such as live chat support, virtual Q&A sessions, and dedicated admissions counselors so students can seek information with a timely and relevant response.



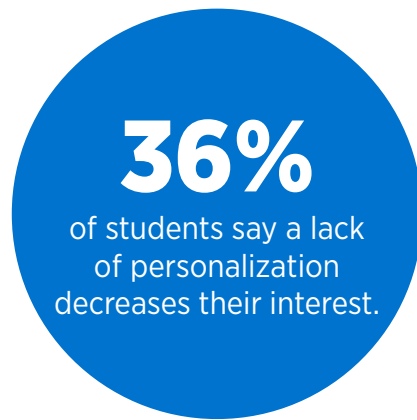
Ensure communications are representative.

With 77 percent of students reporting they value communications that reflect their age and background, admissions offices should ensure that their communication and outreach efforts reflect the diversity of their student population to foster a welcome for all students.



Technology can help institutions personalize at scale.

AI can make it much easier for campuses to deliver relevant, engaging information to students when they need it. On websites, AI and automation can deliver more relevant content that resonates with students, making them feel like they are being treated as individuals and more likely to return for future visits. AI can also help personalize video content, which 54 percent of students said they were interested in. More importantly, these technologies can help institutions meet these expectations in a cost-effective manner.



While the majority of students said that a lack of personalization would not impact their interest in an institution, 36 percent said that their interest would decrease. These findings indicate that when communications are personalized, students are more likely to feel seen and valued. When personalization fails to meet their expectations, students may feel overlooked or undervalued, leading to a decline in their interest and enthusiasm for the institution.

Practical implications



Customize communication and outreach efforts.

Tailor communication and outreach efforts to reflect the individual interests, preferences, and needs of prospective students. This includes addressing students by their first names in emails and other correspondence, incorporating personalized content in recruitment materials, and offering information sessions and campus tours tailored to specific academic programs or extracurricular interests.



Offer virtual engagement opportunities.

In light of increasing comfort with virtual platforms, include virtual engagement opportunities for prospective students. Virtual information sessions, webinars, and panel discussions that feature current students, faculty members, and alumni will provide prospective students with different ways to interact with the college community and gain valuable insights into campus life and academic offerings.

Communication Preferences

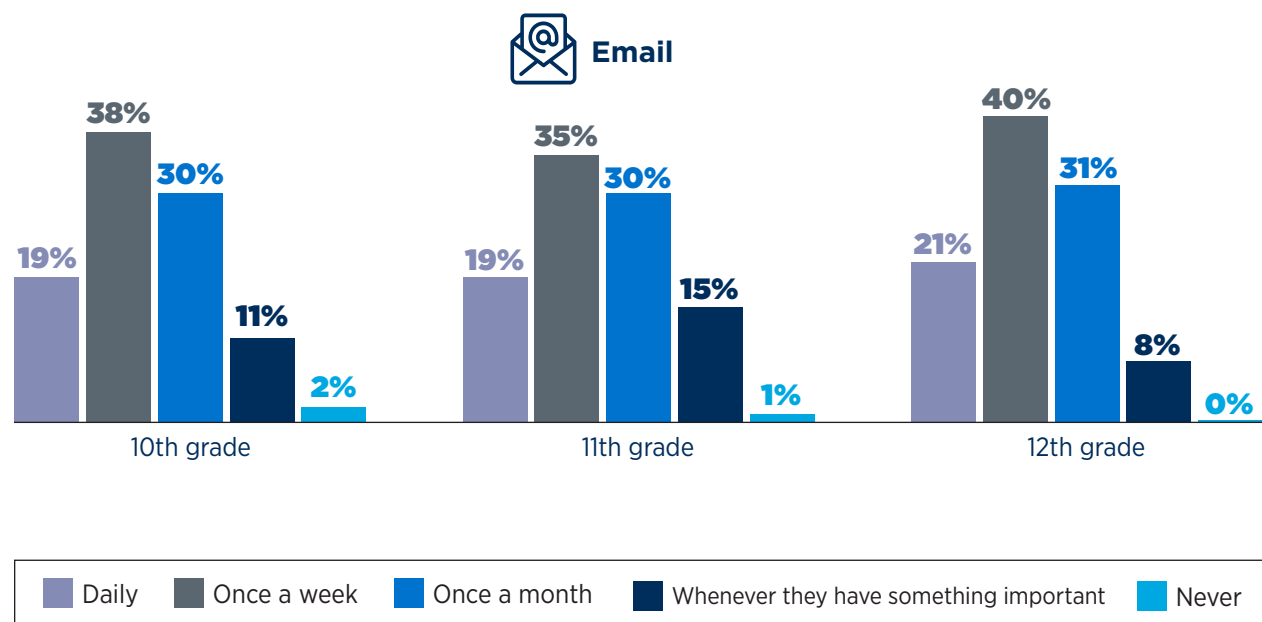
Preferred frequency and channels to hear from an institution

CHANNEL	DAILY	ONCE A WEEK	WHENEVER THEY HAVE SOMETHING IMPORTANT	ONCE A MONTH	NEVER
Email	20%	38%	31%	10%	1%
Direct mail (anything you receive in the mail)	16%	23%	37%	20%	4%
Telephone calls	11%	16%	39%	12%	22%
Text messaging	19%	22%	40%	11%	8%

These results show the importance of an omnichannel approach to student communications. Students use a variety of channels, and many want to hear from an institution regularly or whenever they have something important to share across those channels.

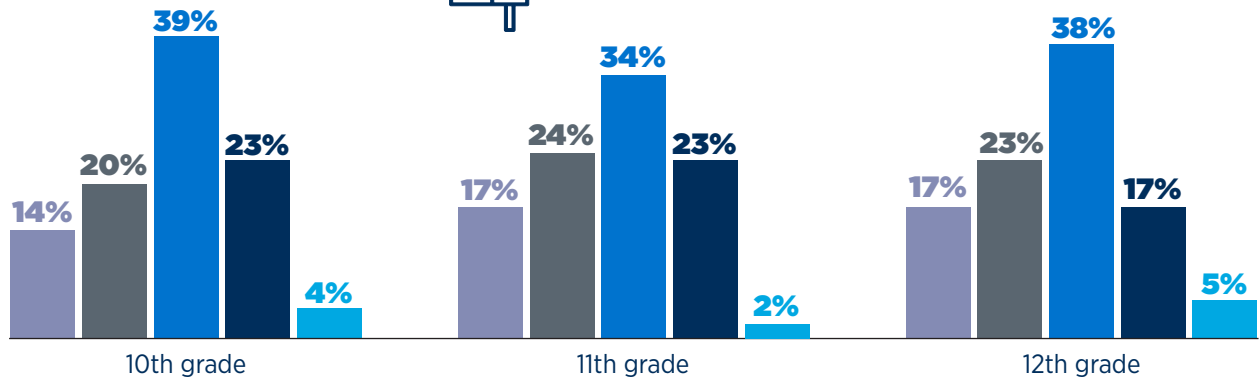
There were also some changes in preferences across grade levels.

Communication frequency by channel and grade level

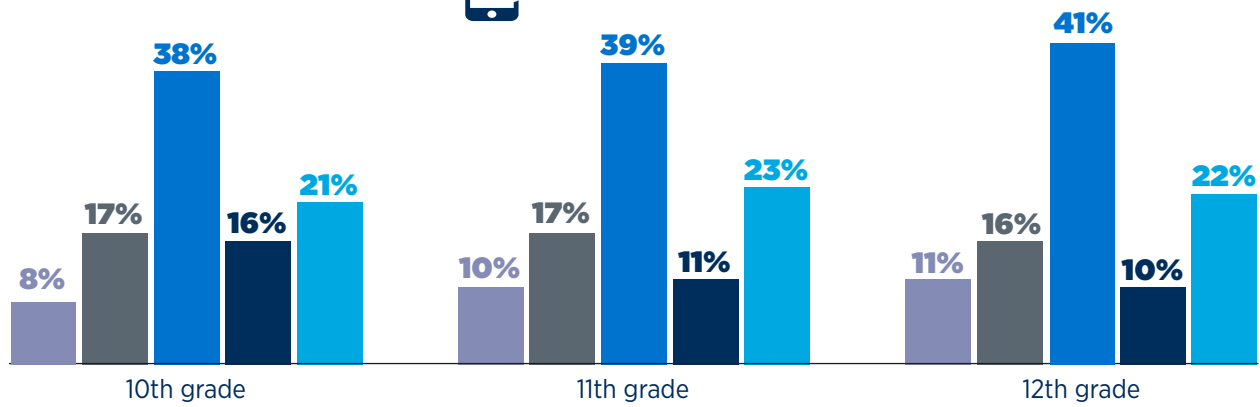




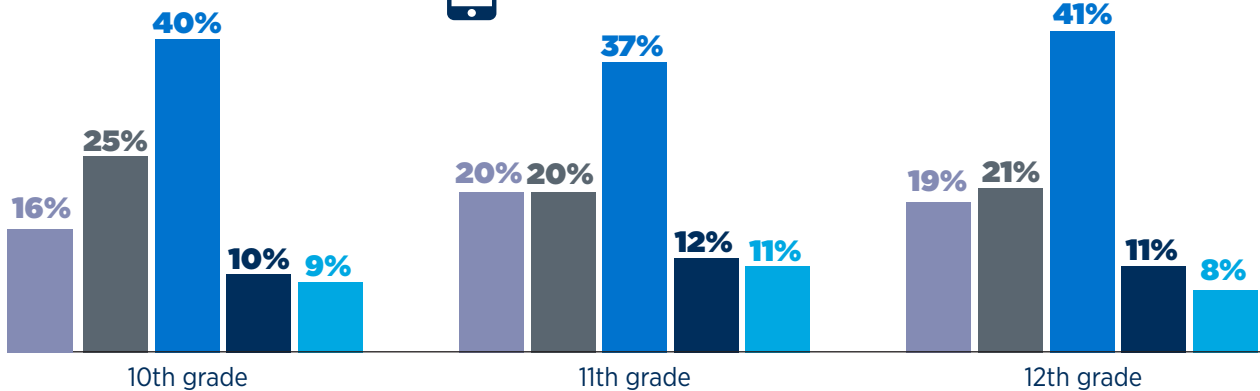
Direct Mail



Telephone Calls



Text Messaging



Practical implications



Offer opportunities to opt-in.

Implement opt-in mechanisms for communication preferences, allowing students to specify how often they want to hear from the institution and through which channels, thereby respecting their autonomy and preferences. This is especially important for calling and texting, which are terrific ways to engage students but require institutions to respect students' preferences for privacy.



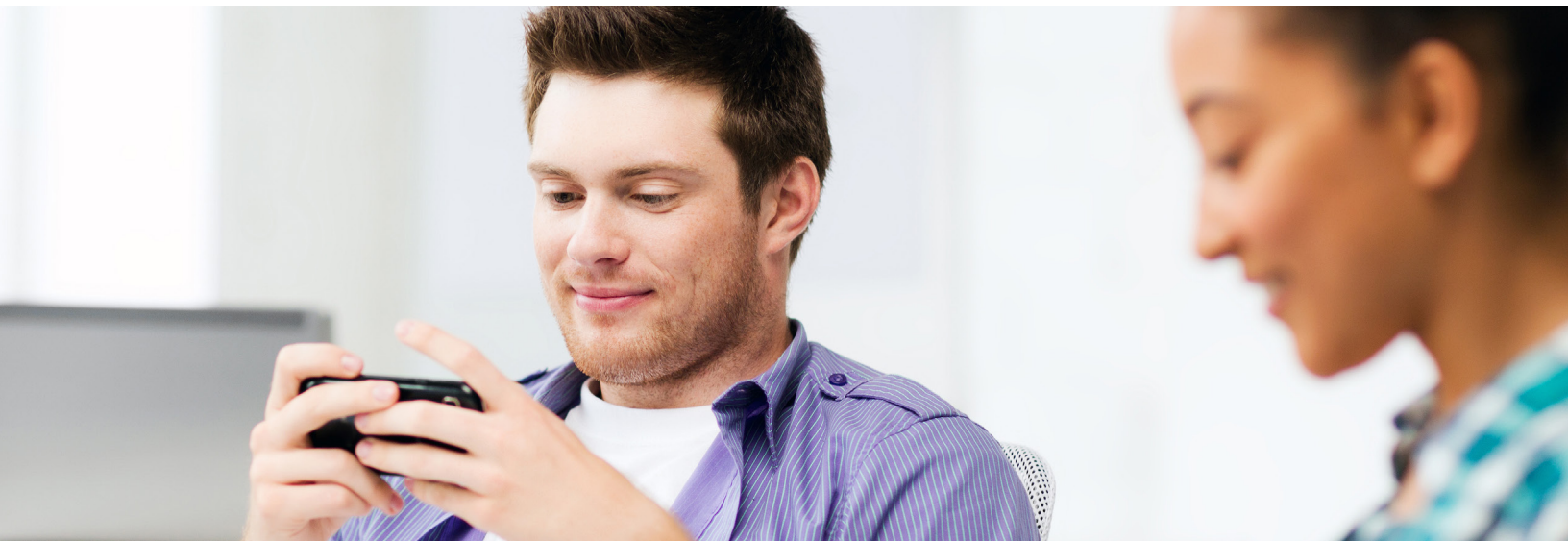
Develop segmented communications.

Utilize CRM systems to categorize students and tailor communications accordingly so students receive information at a frequency and through channels that align with their preferences.



Use omnichannel communication strategies.

Reach students across various platforms using a combination of email, direct mail, telephone calls, social media messaging, and text messaging to layer key messages and maximize engagement opportunities.



Enrollment Factors

Most important factors to enroll at an institution

1	Final cost (after all financial aid and scholarships)	80%
2	Availability of my intended academic major or area of study	53%
3	Academic scholarships	48%
4	Academic reputation	36%
5	Financial aid opportunities	30%
6	Campus facilities	29%
7	Feeling that I "fit in" at the college or university	28%
8	Location (the area, the town)	23%
9	Distance from home (I want to be near my family)	22%
10	Dining options	18%

Practical implications



Be clear about costs and financial aid.

Provide transparent information about financial aid options and scholarship opportunities. Offer financial aid calculators and personalized financial aid counseling services to help students understand the true cost of attendance and available funding sources.



Promote program-specific information.

Use targeted marketing efforts and communication channels to showcase faculty expertise, innovative programs, and research opportunities to highlight the institution's academic strengths and program offerings.



Develop strategic scholarship programs.

Offer merit-based scholarships, academic achievement awards, and talent-based scholarships to attract top-performing students.



Invest in brand building.

Enhance the institution's academic reputation to attract students seeking a high-quality academic experience. Highlight achievements, accolades, and notable alumni through marketing campaigns, media outreach, and digital platforms.



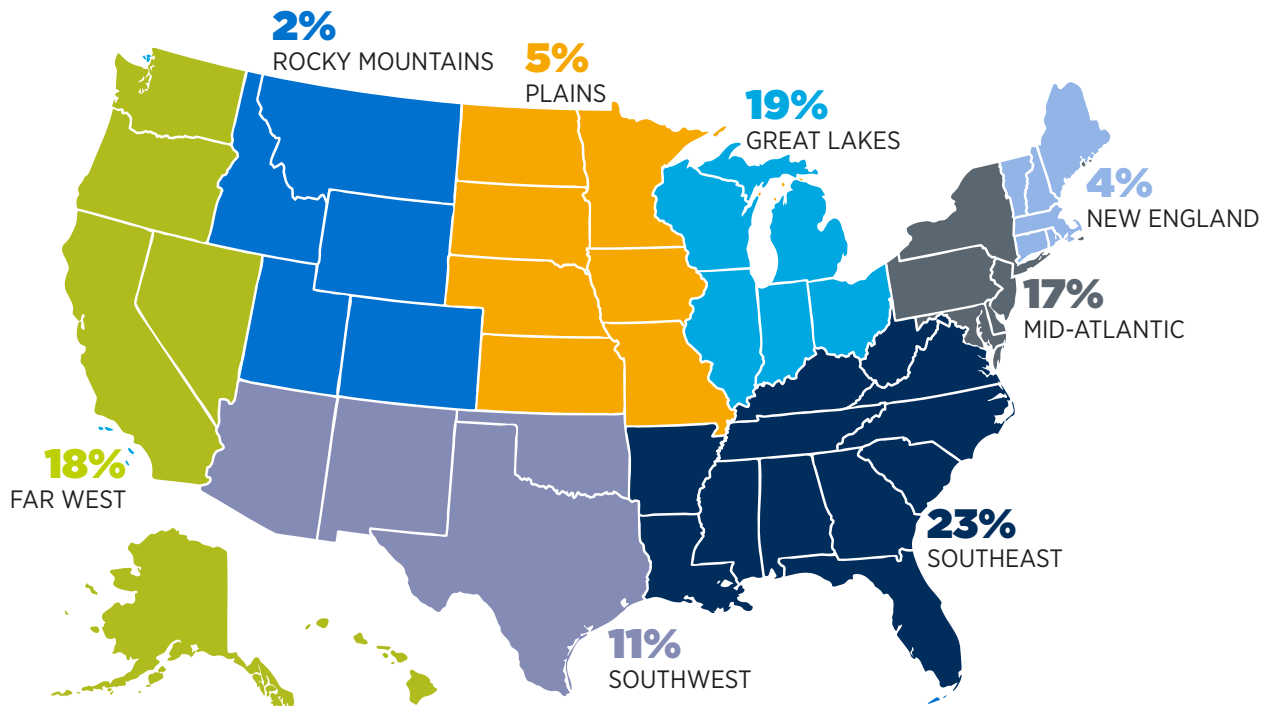
Improve the campus experience.

Improve infrastructure, modernize facilities, and expand recreational and dining options to enhance the overall campus experience and promote campus appeal, and increase student satisfaction and retention.

About the Study

The survey took place electronically in the first two weeks of February 2024. The survey was anonymous and did not collect personally identifiable data.

2,242 responses



1%
Alaska Native

2%
American Indian

8%
Asian

26%
Black/African American

17%
Hispanic

2%
Middle Eastern

3%
Multi-racial

1%
Native Hawaiian

38%
White

74%
Continuing generation

26%
First generation

20%
10th grade (class of 2026)

25%
11th grade (class of 2025)

55%
12th grade (class of 2024)

59%
Female

36%
Male

1%
Transgender

3%
Non-binary/third gender/
non-conforming

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