

CLASS OF 2029 COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENT SURVEY

SEPTEMBER 2025

14th
Annual
Edition!

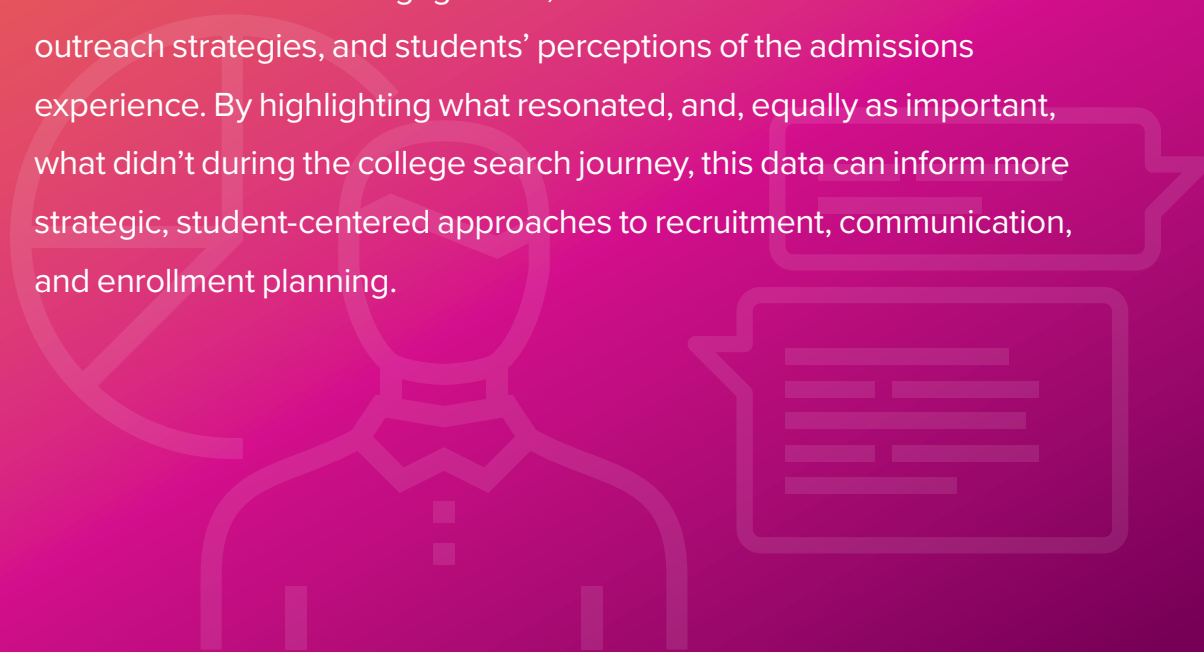


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OVERVIEW

This report presents findings from a post-graduation survey administered to high school seniors, aimed at gathering feedback on their individual college search experiences. Over 1,800 respondents reported a wide range of post-secondary plans, including enrollment at private and public universities, religiously affiliated schools, liberal arts colleges, research institutions, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Some students opted for community colleges, technical schools, took a gap year, or chose to enlist in the military.

This report offers actionable insights for college marketing and enrollment leaders seeking to better understand the mindset and decision-making processes of today's prospective students. It explores trends in social media engagement, the effectiveness of various outreach strategies, and students' perceptions of the admissions experience. By highlighting what resonated, and, equally as important, what didn't during the college search journey, this data can inform more strategic, student-centered approaches to recruitment, communication, and enrollment planning.



POSTING, PLATFORMS, AND PREFERENCES

For the second year in a row, over 90% of students reported spending at least one hour a day on social media, with almost 60% spending three hours or more on social media each day. When you consider the schedule of a typical high school student who sleeps for eight hours and is in school for another six, those 60% of students are spending more than a third of their free time on social media.

When asked to identify which social media channels students spend the most time on, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok were the top three, with Snapchat falling closely behind. Not only are students spending the most time on these three platforms, but they also reported using these three as tools for their college search. 70% used Instagram to find information about colleges, 52% used YouTube, and 48% used TikTok. Only 7% of students said they did not use social media to find information about a school.

Although students are spending this much time on social media and using it to seek information during their college search, less than 40% reported seeing communications from colleges or universities through these channels.

While social media originated as a place to post about your own life and keep up with friends far and wide, there continues to be a shift away from using social media as a place to share.

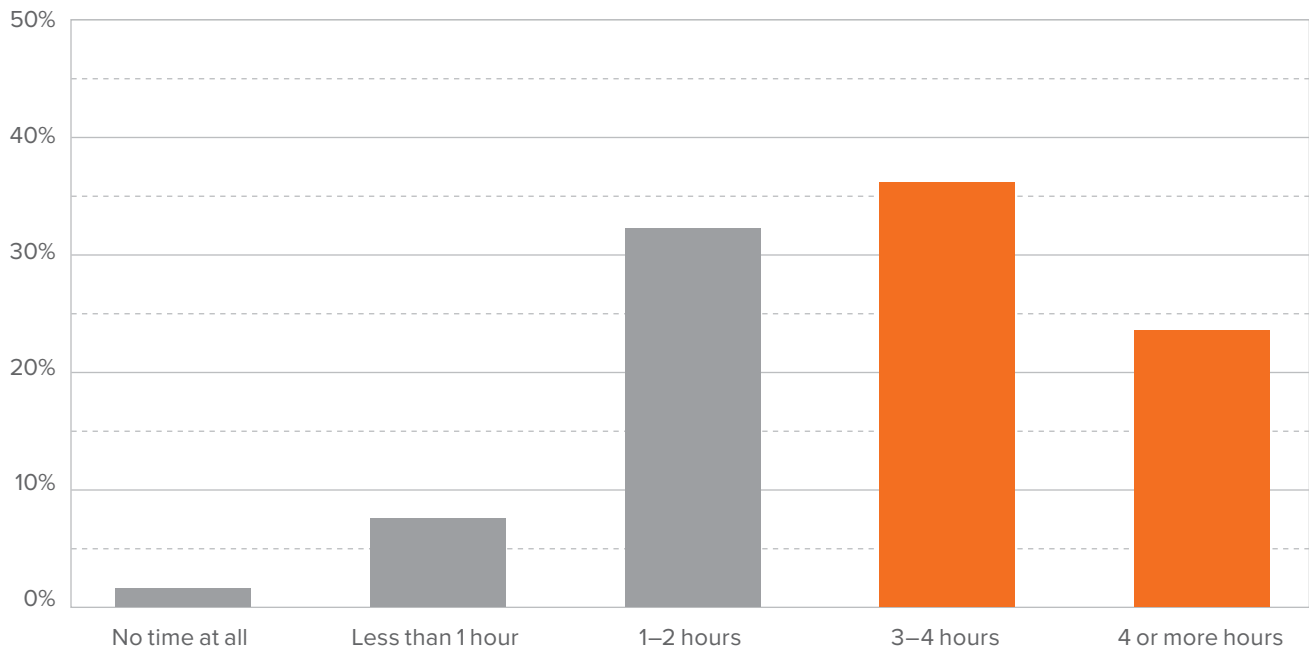
Instead, it is a place to search. Almost 50% of students reported that they didn't share any information about their college search on social media. Of those that did, they were most likely to post (in order) final college selection, acceptance letters, and scholarship offers. The key takeaway: When asked about how they sought answers for questions about a college or university, 48% said they used social media.

POSTING, PLATFORMS, AND PREFERENCES

60%

of recent grads spend
at least 3 hours on
social media daily

On average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media?

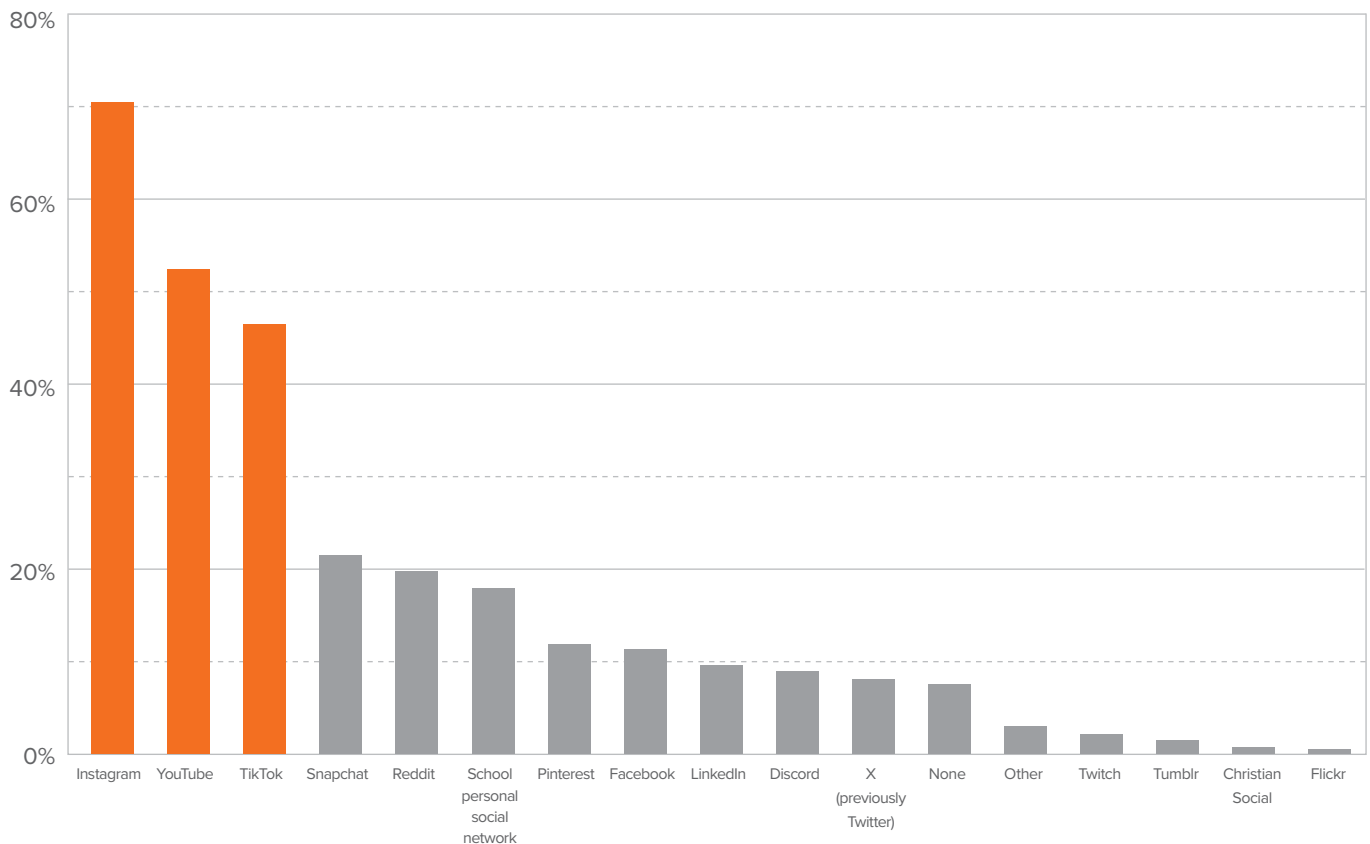


POSTING, PLATFORMS, AND PREFERENCES

INSTAGRAM, YOUTUBE, AND TIKTOK

continue to reign as the top social media channels used by students during their college search

Which social media channels did you utilize throughout your college search process?

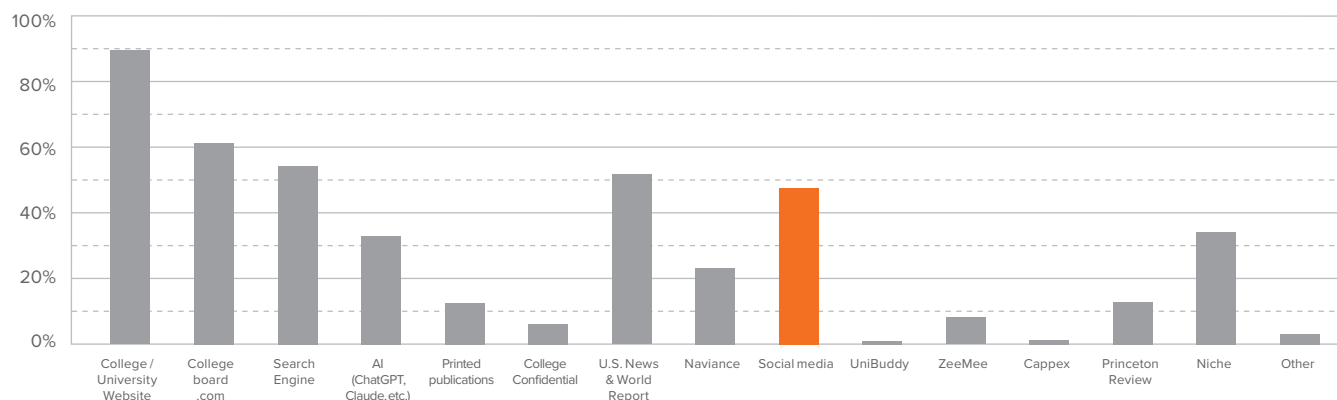


POSTING, PLATFORMS, AND PREFERENCES

Which of the following resources did you use to obtain information about your preferred colleges or universities during your search?

48%

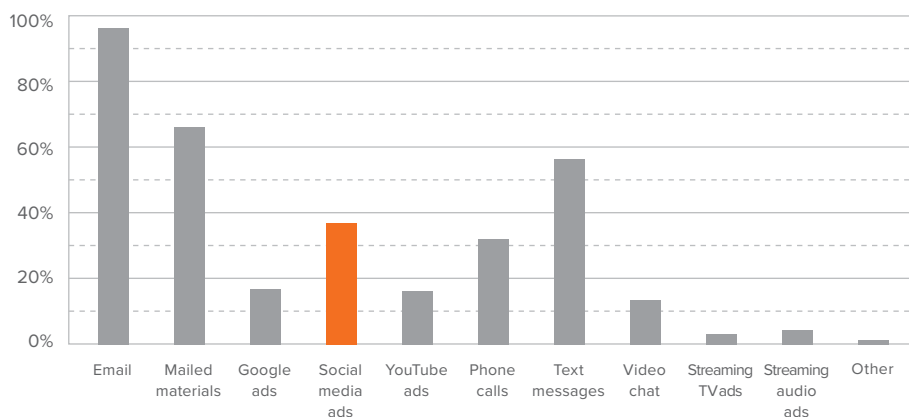
of respondents used social media to obtain information about colleges and universities during their search



38%

of students recall receiving a social media ad from a college or university

Which types of communication from colleges did you receive during your college search?



STUDENTS AND SCREENS

Students are spending much of their limited free time on social media, and overwhelmingly, they're doing so on their phones. In fact, mobile dominates: more students report using their phone than any other device, with 82% regularly using an iPhone.

Given this mobile-first behavior, it's essential to ensure that every piece of digital communication, from emails, webpages, RFI forms, and beyond, is fully optimized for mobile. Regular audits across platforms can help ensure that content displays correctly and functions seamlessly on smaller screens.

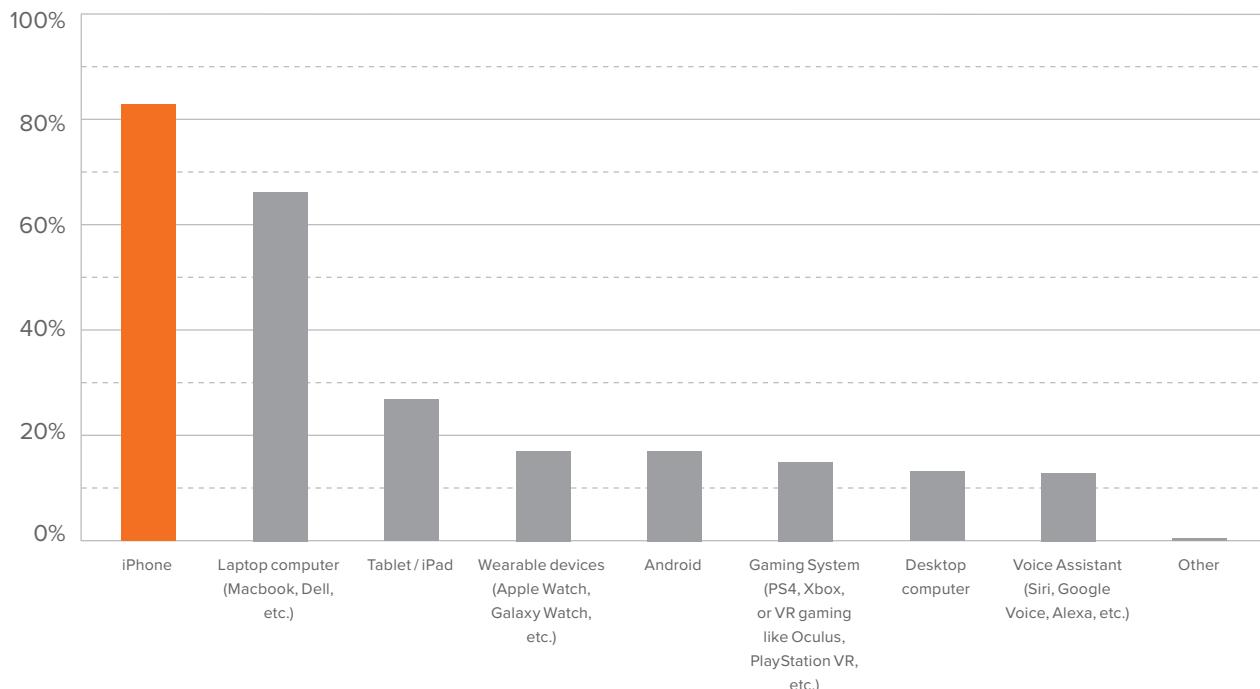
While laptops are still the second most-used device among students, there's been a shift in the tech landscape: tablets and wearable devices have now overtaken gaming systems like Xbox, PlayStation, and VR headsets in popularity.

Similarly to last year, nearly one in three students said they used an AI tool to support their college search. What were they looking for? The top three areas of interest included academic programs, affordability and scholarships, and details about the application process and requirements.

82%

of respondents
use iPhones

Which of the following devices do you use regularly?

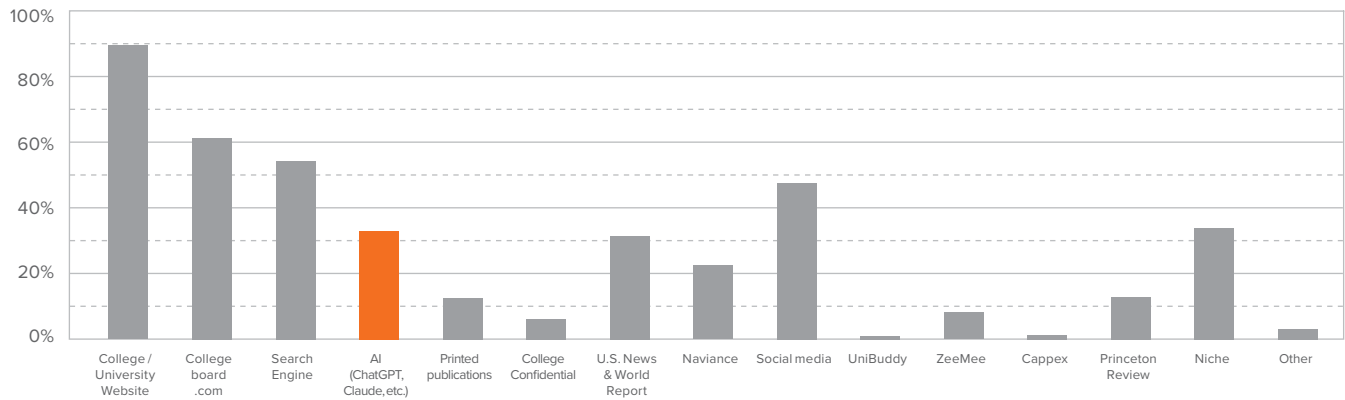


STUDENTS AND SCREENS

1/3

of students used an AI tool
to obtain information about
their preferred college or
university

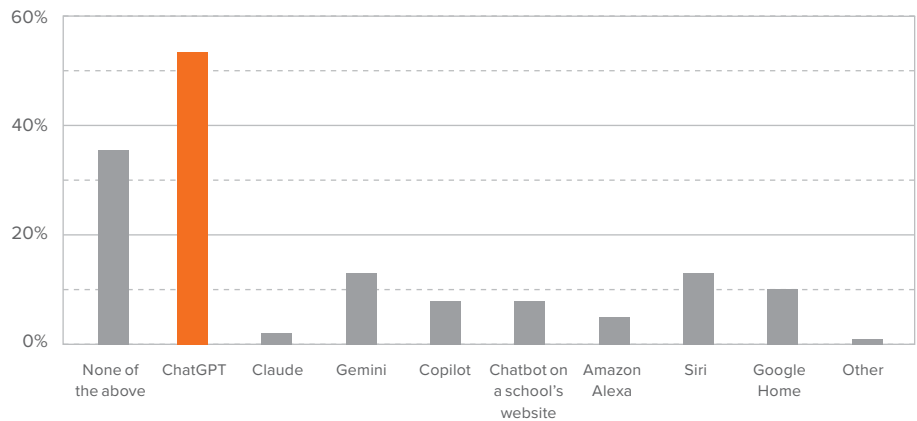
Which of the following resources did you use
to obtain information about your preferred
colleges or universities during your search?



CHATGPT

was the top AI tool used
by students during their
college search process

Did you use any of the following AI tools
in your college search?

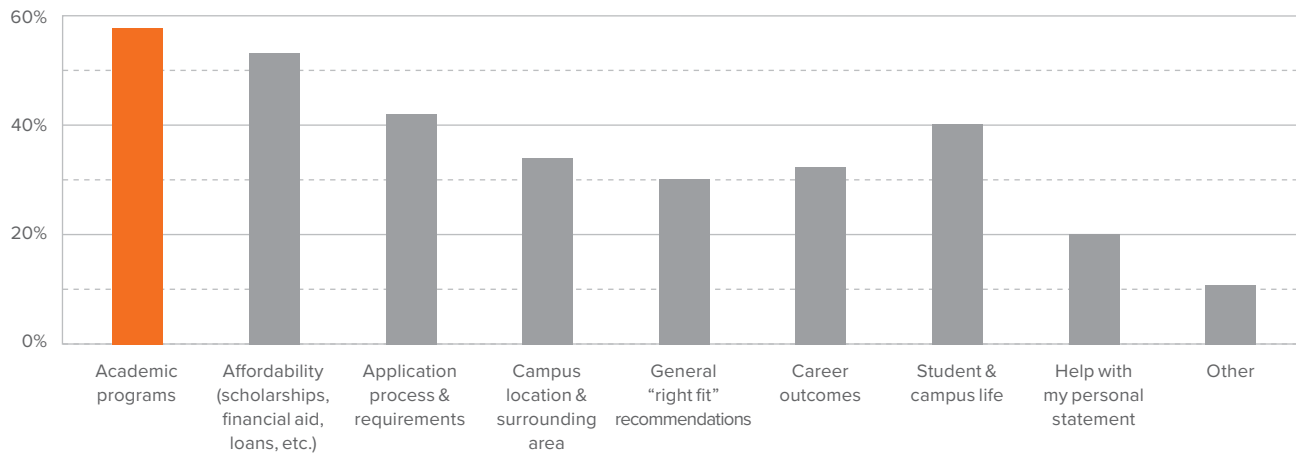


STUDENTS AND SCREENS

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

was the top topic students asked an AI tool about during their search process

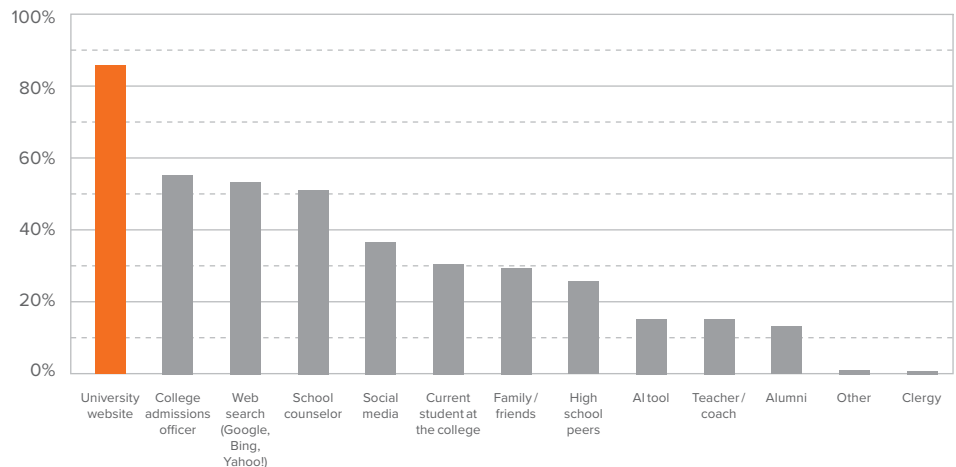
What types of topics did you ask AI about during your search process?



SCHOOL WEBSITES

were students' top destination for getting answers to their questions about specific institutions

When you had questions about a college / university, how did you seek answers?



CHANNELS, CHOICES, AND CLICKS

More than half of students (54%) say they seriously begin their college search during junior year. That gives them over a year to engage with schools and evaluate the flood of marketing materials they receive—and many already have strong opinions about what works (and what doesn't). Interestingly, the timeline is starting to shift even earlier: Just two years ago, 85% of students began searching the summer before junior year or later. Now, that number has dropped to 78%, with more than one in five starting as sophomores or younger.

Email remains the clear favorite for college communication. It's the most preferred channel by far, but print (despite assumptions that it's outdated) still holds significant value. In fact, direct mail ranks second in preference.

So what kind of print do students actually want? A simple, personalized letter. For a generation that rarely receives physical mail, something tangible and tailored stands out. But personalization goes beyond using a student's first name. Students respond best to letters that reference their interests, like their intended major, hometown, or relevant student organizations.

When it comes to email, students are selective. The top factor influencing whether they open a message is whether they recognize the school's name. If a college is already on their radar, they're far more likely to engage. If not, the message is often deleted without being opened.

The second biggest reason students delete emails? A generic, impersonal tone. Customization matters, especially in crowded inboxes.

Text messaging is becoming more common in the college search experience. Today, 56% of students report receiving texts from schools, up more than 10% compared to two years ago. While only a small minority (less than 3%) say they never want to be texted, preferences do vary: about one-third say texting is okay after they've inquired, and another 30% are fine with receiving texts at any point.

All of these email, text, and outreach efforts ultimately point students to one place: your website. That makes content management and accessibility critical. When students have questions, 86% say a school's website is their first stop.

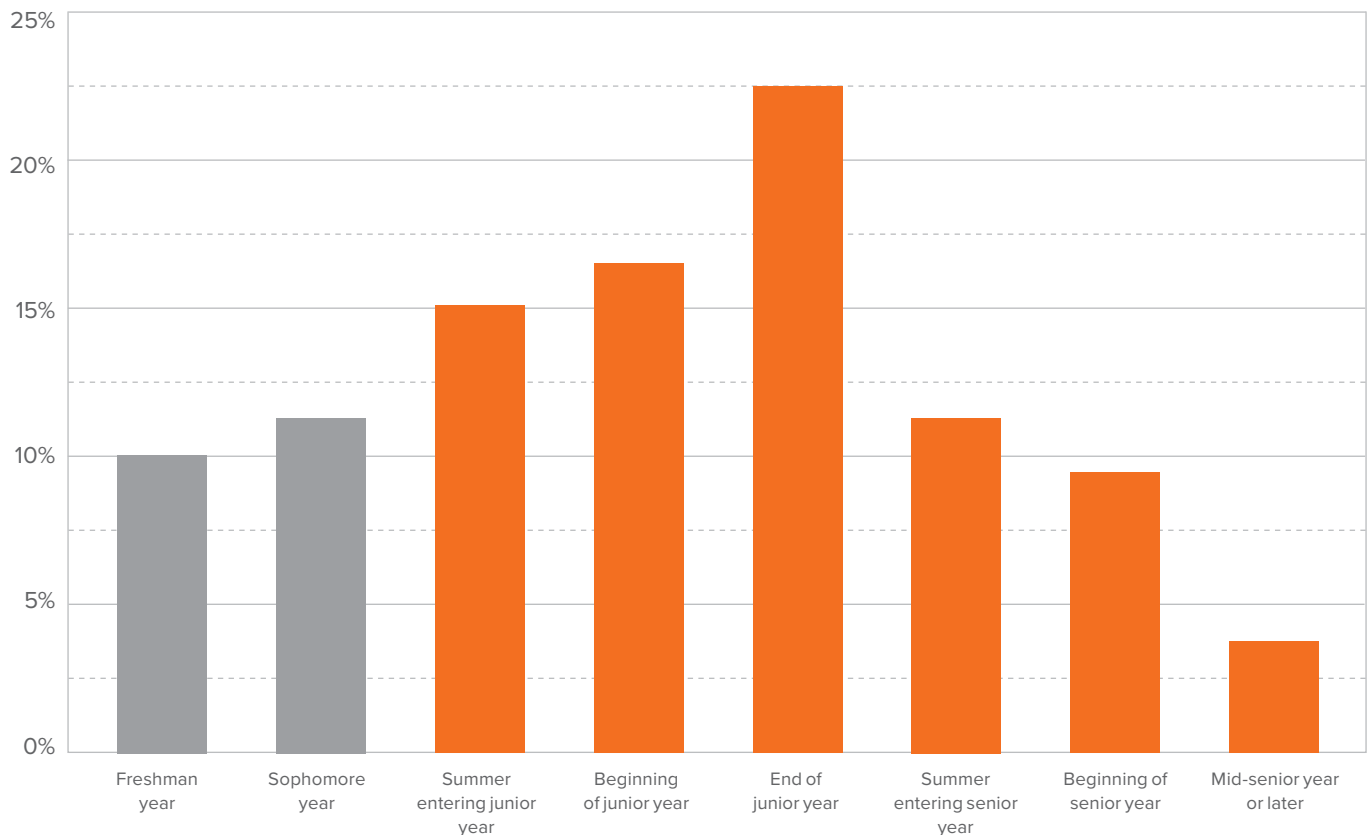
Regular audits of admissions pages are essential, but don't stop there. Many students also rely on third-party platforms to gather information, so it's important to keep your presence updated on sites like CollegeBoard (the second-most used source after your website), Naviance, Niche, Cappex, Unibuddy, ZeeMee, Scoir, and the Common App.

CHANNELS, CHOICES, AND CLICKS

78%

of students began their college search process the summer entering junior year or later

At what point in high school did you first begin to seriously look at college materials?

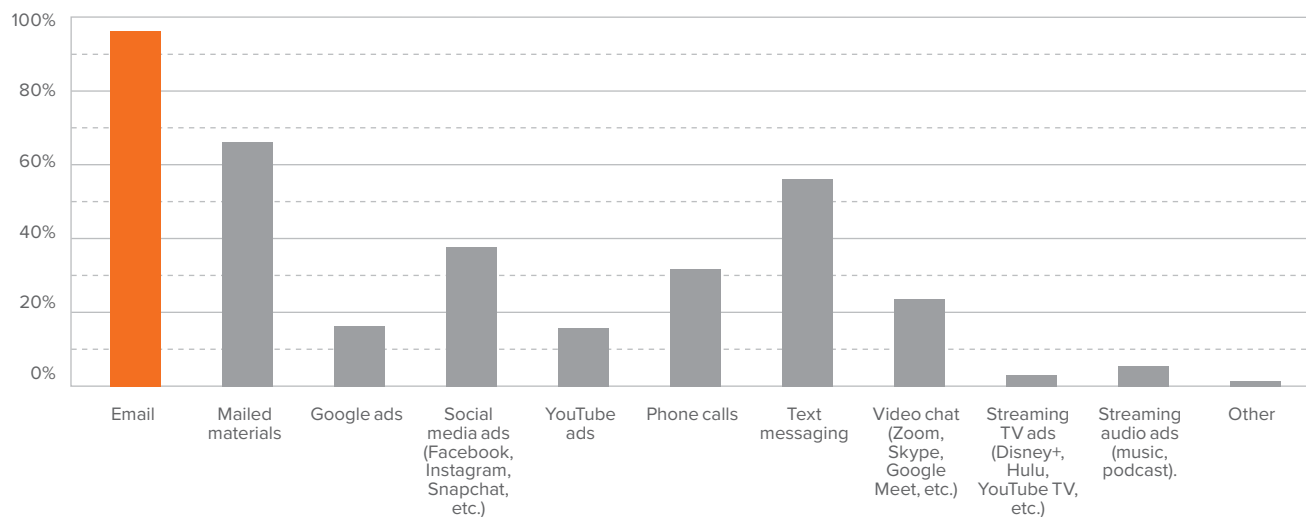


CHANNELS, CHOICES, AND CLICKS

97%

of students used email to communicate with colleges

Which types of communication from colleges did you receive during your college search?



EMAIL AND PRINT MAIL

were the top two outbound communication methods students preferred during their college search

Rank how you prefer potential schools to communicate with you.

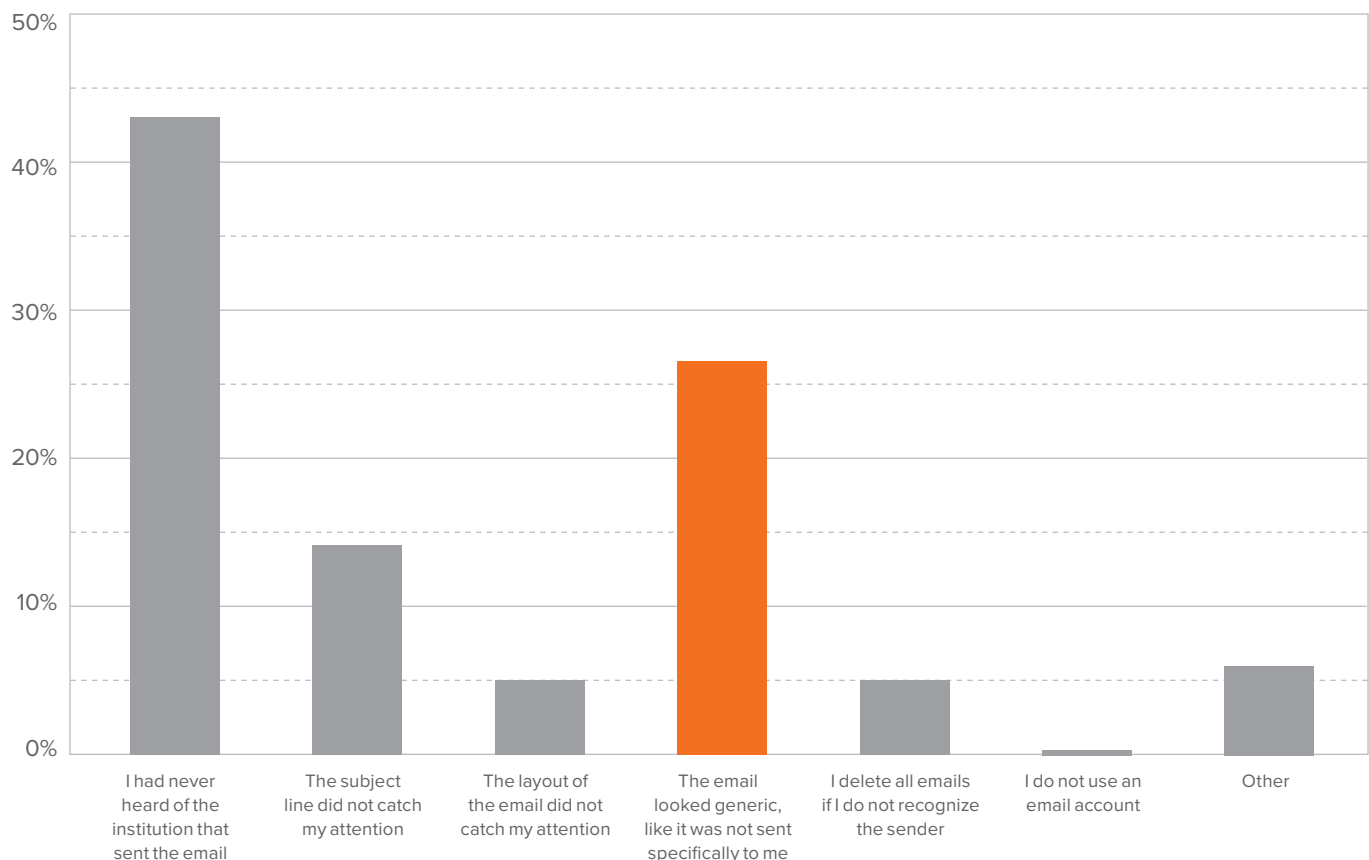
- | | | | |
|---|----------------|---|--------------|
| 1 | Email | 4 | Social Media |
| 2 | Mail | 5 | Phone Calls |
| 3 | Text Messaging | | |

CHANNELS, CHOICES, AND CLICKS

26%

of students did not open emails because they looked generic and not personalized

Regarding the emails you didn't open or read, what was the reason why you did not open it?

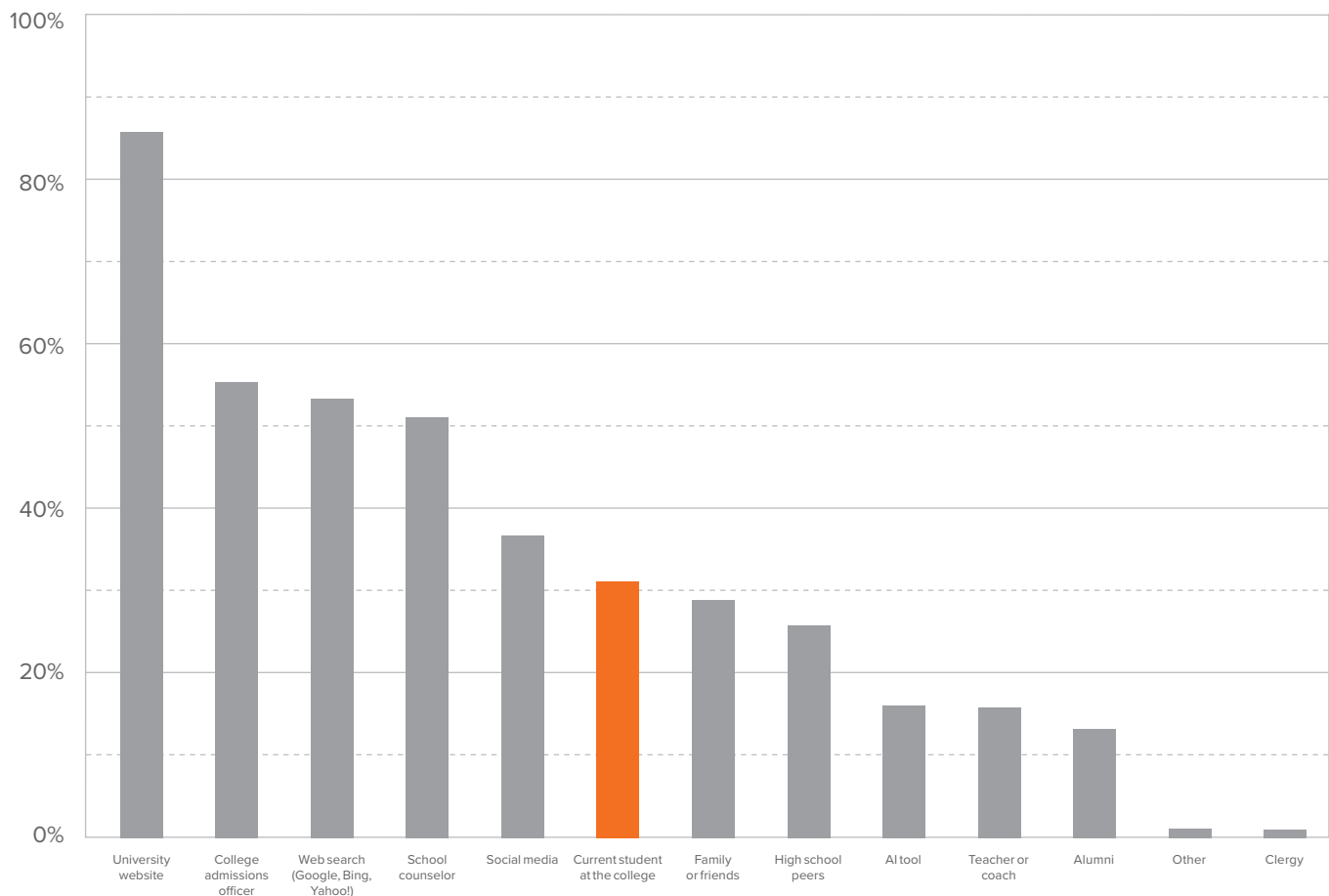


CHANNELS, CHOICES, AND CLICKS

31%

of survey respondents
reached out to a current
student to get answers
about a school

When you had questions about a college / university,
how did you seek answers?

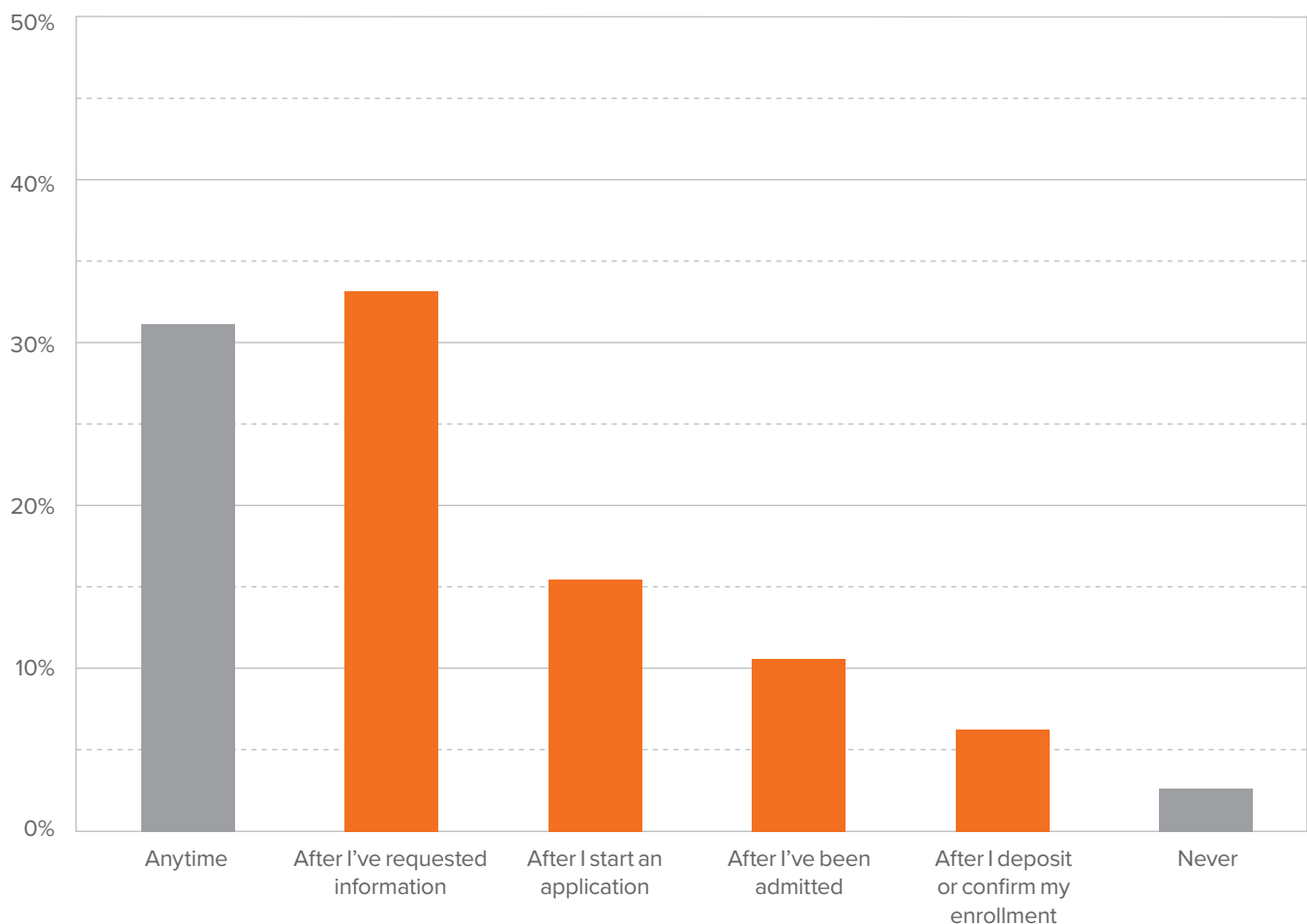


CHANNELS, CHOICES, AND CLICKS

66%

of students say it's okay
for colleges to text them as
early as inquiring, with 31%
saying that they are okay
with it anytime

When is it okay for a college to text you?



CHANNELS, CHOICES, AND CLICKS

Based on the various print materials you
have received from different schools,
which did you like most?

- 1 Letter Tailored to Your Interest
(Major, Location, etc.)
- 2 Swag (Sticker, Pennant, etc.)
- 3 College Overview Catalog
- 4 Foldout Brochure
- 5 Postcards

PERSONALIZED LETTERS

were once again
the preferred printed
marketing touchpoints
by most college-bound
students

APPLYING ON THEIR TERMS

Up from 45% last year (and 39% in 2023), over 50% of students applied to 10 or more schools. This explains how application pools continue to grow despite the population shrinking.

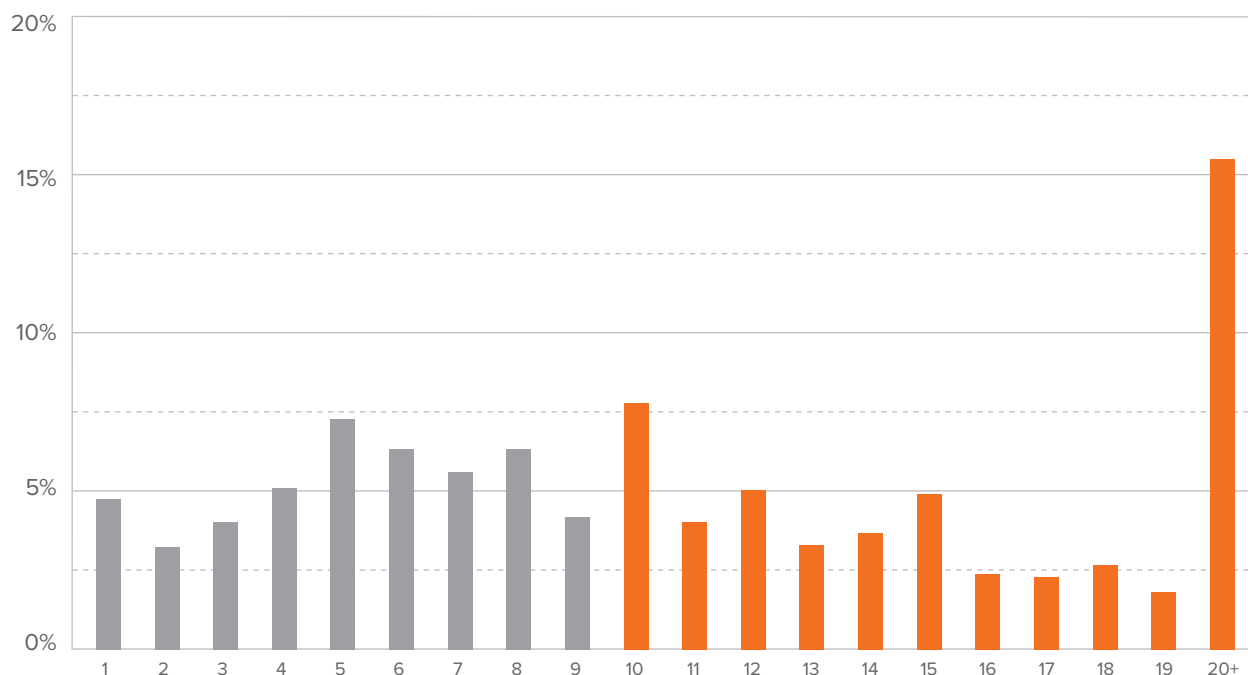
Why apply to so many schools? Convenience is a key reason. More than 80% of students said they found the Common Application to be the most attractive option for applying. Cost also plays a major role—65% of respondents applied to more schools than they originally intended because they received fee waivers. Lastly, the reduced number of application requirements is helping broaden access.

Though convenience is king, the appeal of test-optional policies seems to be declining. In 2024, 44% of respondents said a school's test-optional policy was a factor in applying. That number dropped slightly to 40% this year. And while previously 50% either didn't take a test or didn't submit their scores, that number dropped significantly this year to 38%.

53%

of students applied to 10 or more schools

How many schools did you apply to?

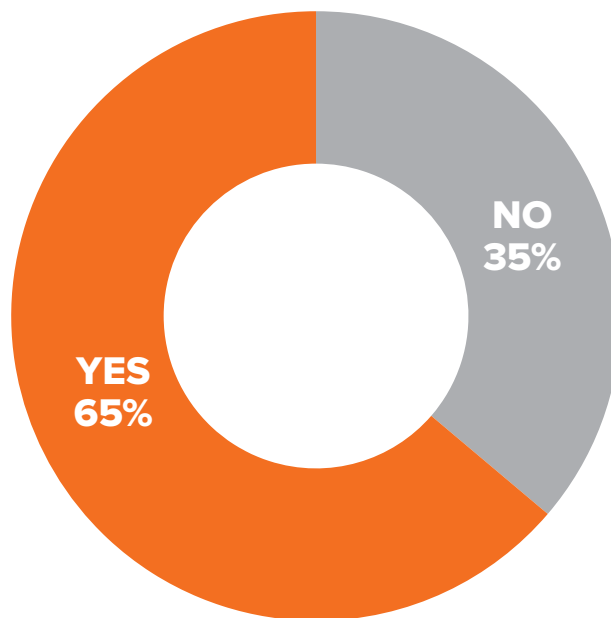


APPLYING ON THEIR TERMS

Was the offer of an application
fee waiver a factor in choosing
where to apply?

65%

of students were motivated
to apply to certain schools
because they received
application fee waivers

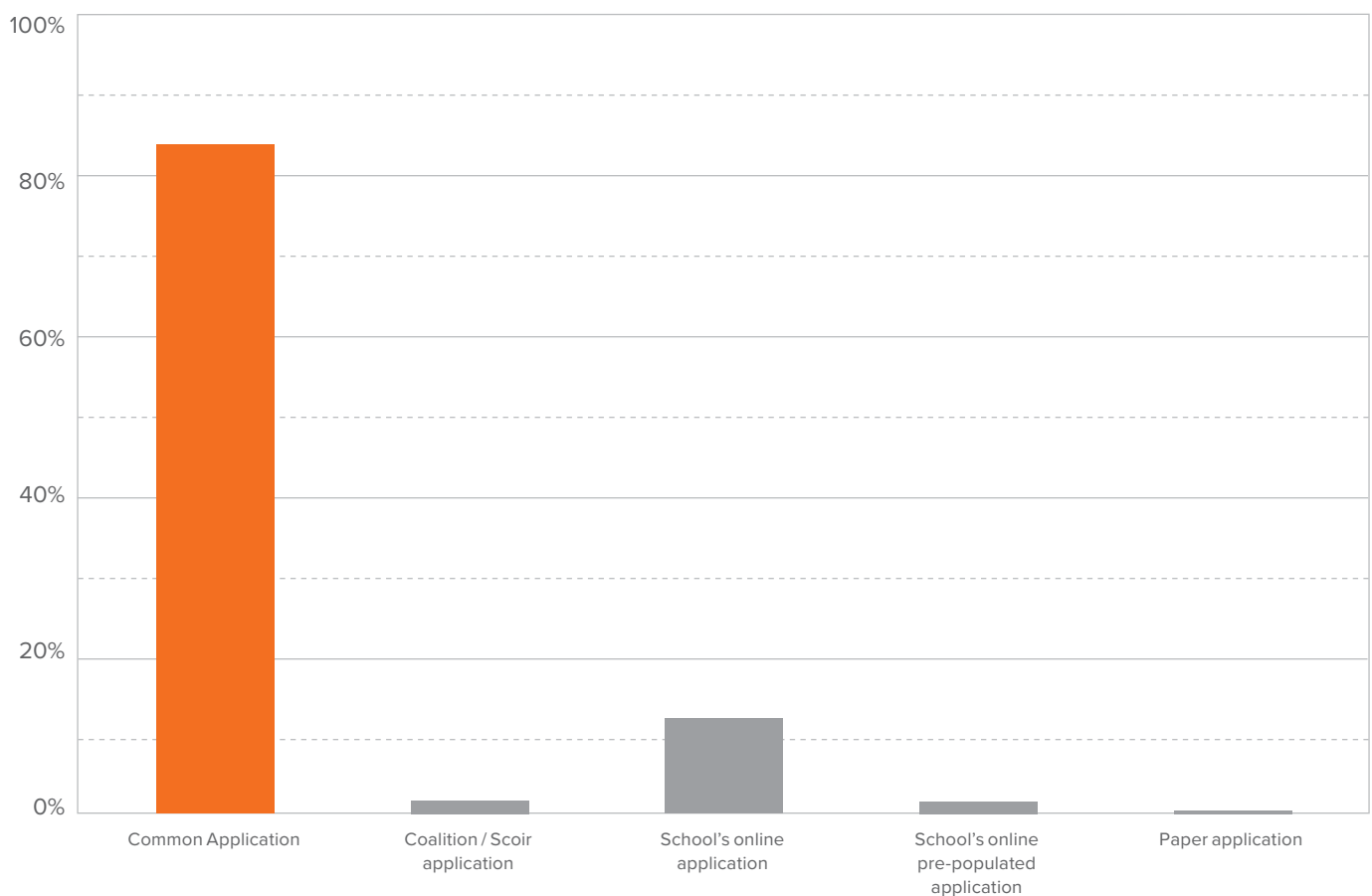


APPLYING ON THEIR TERMS

84%

of students found the Common App the most appealing way to apply

Which method do you believe was the most appealing way to apply?

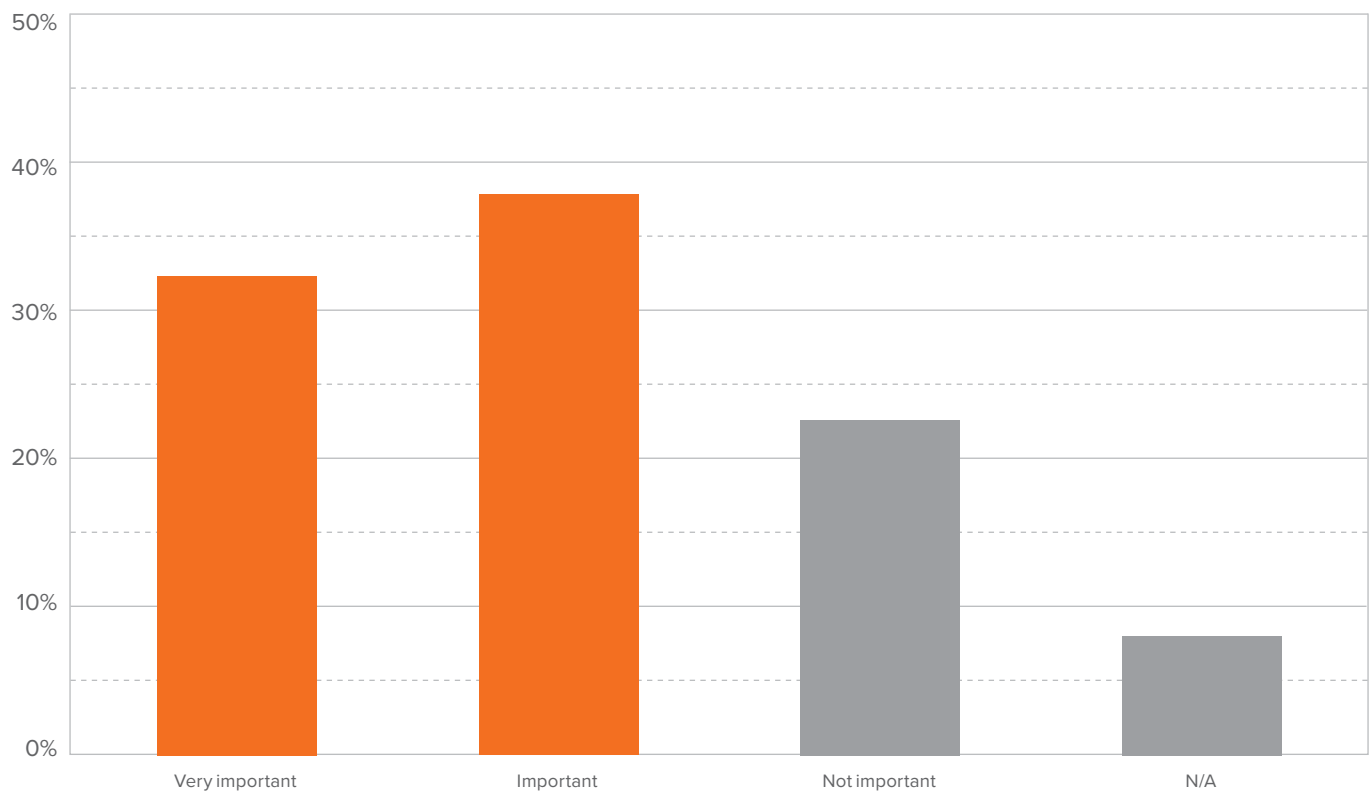


APPLYING ON THEIR TERMS

70%

of students ranked the acceptance of their high school college credits as important or very important

In selecting your school of choice, how important was the acceptance of college credit taken in high school?



THE WHY BEHIND “YES”

The high school class of 2025 belongs to a generation of savvy, self-directed consumers who value authenticity and expect to find information on their own terms. When weighing college options, their priorities remain consistent: Academic quality and affordability continue to rank as the most important factors, followed closely by scholarship opportunities. Notably, campus safety made its first appearance this year as a key consideration—another reflection of how students are evaluating both fit and long-term value.

This year, we asked students about their experiences with direct admissions. One in three reported applying to at least one school through a direct admit program. However, fewer than half of those students chose to enroll at the school that admitted them directly. The takeaway: While direct admissions programs are generating interest and contributing to increased application volume, they have yet to significantly influence final enrollment decisions or class size.

Geography still plays a role in college choice, but it's evolving. This year, 71% of students applied to a mix of in-state and out-of-state schools. Among those who looked beyond their home state, top motivators included access to specific academic programs and the desire for new experiences. Ultimately, though, nearly 60% chose to stay in-state. Still, distance doesn't deter everyone—almost 30% of students are attending a school more than four hours from home. However, location isn't everything. Three out of four students said that a college's political stance would influence their decision to enroll.

Despite the rise of virtual resources, the campus visit continues to be one of the most influential moments in a student's decision-making process. For 45% of students, visiting a campus was their first step in learning about a school, while 39% visited after being admitted. And for 25% of respondents, it was that initial visit that confirmed a school was the right fit. Among those who didn't visit, reasons included feeling well-informed through other means, scheduling issues, or financial limitations.

THE WHY BEHIND “YES”

ACADEMIC QUALITY and COST

were the most important
factors that influenced
students' enrollment decisions

How important were the following in making your college decision?

- | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 Academic Quality | 7 Housing Availability | 13 School Size |
| 2 Cost / Financial Aid | 8 Campus Appearance | 14 Average Class Size |
| 3 Scholarship Offer | 9 Campus Admissions Visit | 15 Athletics |
| 4 Campus Safety | 10 On-Campus Counseling Services | 16 School's Religious Affiliation |
| 5 Location / Setting | 11 Diversity | 17 Family / Alumni |
| 6 Extracurricular Activities | 12 Proximity to Home | |

THE WHY BEHIND “YES”

PARENTS

are the most powerful
influencers when it comes
to choosing a college

How much of an impact did the following person(s)
have on your decision?

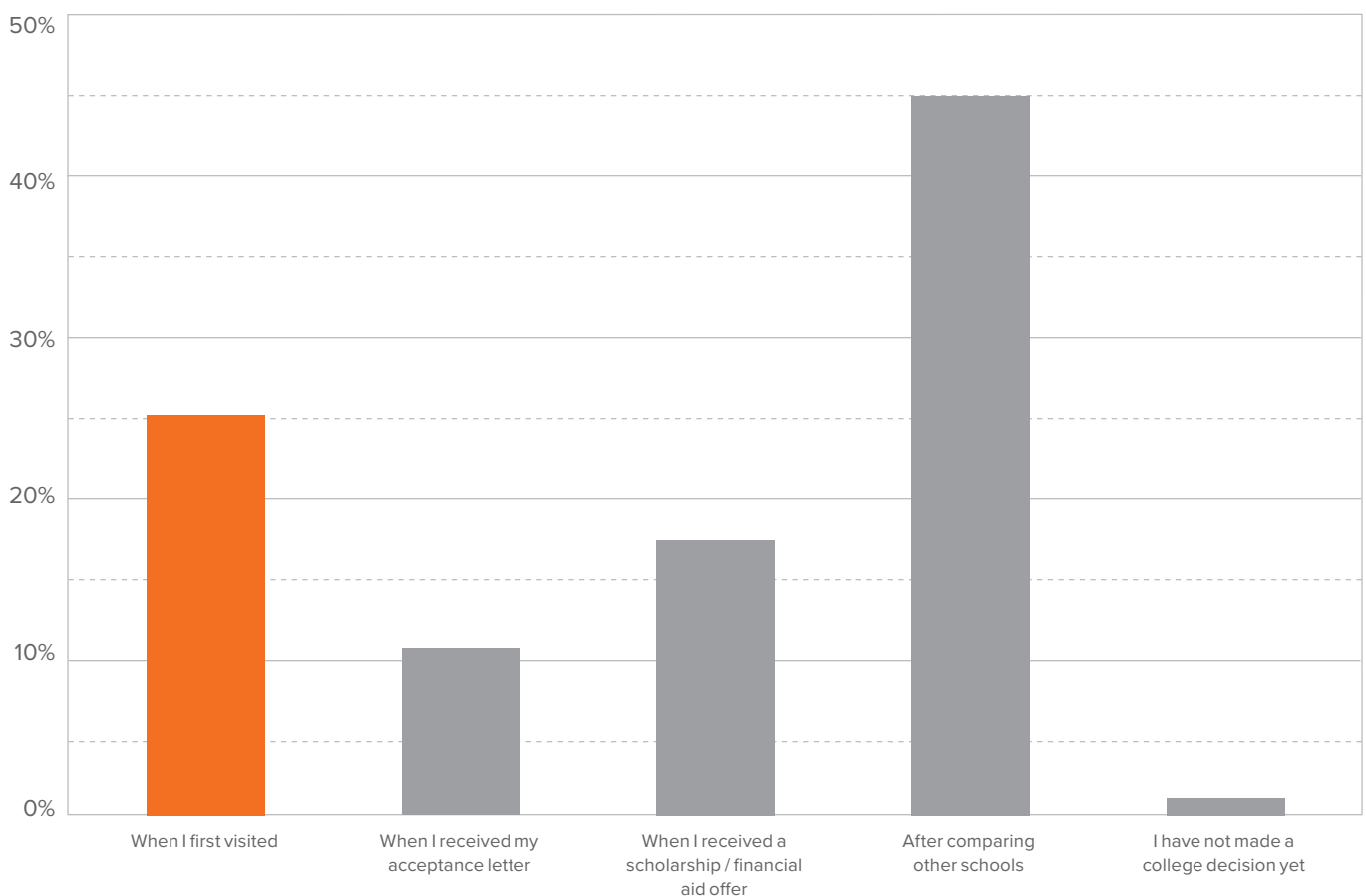
- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| 1 | Parent | 6 | Friend / Neighbor |
| 2 | College Admissions
Representatives | 7 | Extended Family / Relative |
| 3 | Current College Students | 8 | Alumni |
| 4 | High School Counselor | 9 | Coach |
| 5 | Teacher | | |

THE WHY BEHIND “YES”

25%

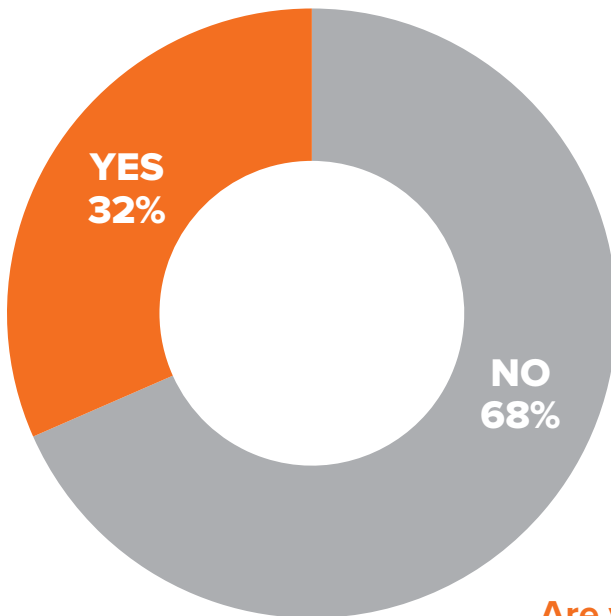
of students knew
they'd found the
right school upon
their first visit

When did you know the school you chose was right for you?



THE WHY BEHIND “YES”

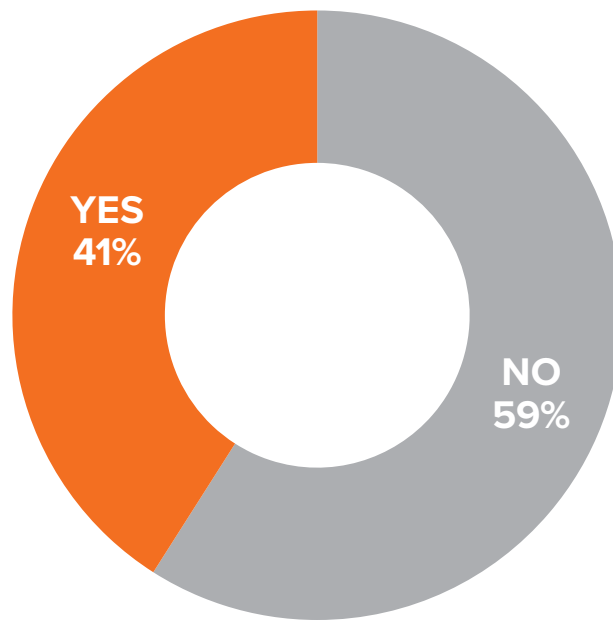
Did you apply to any school using
a direct admit program?



32%

of students applied to
a direct admit program
they were invited to

Are you attending a school you were
admitted to via the direct admit program?



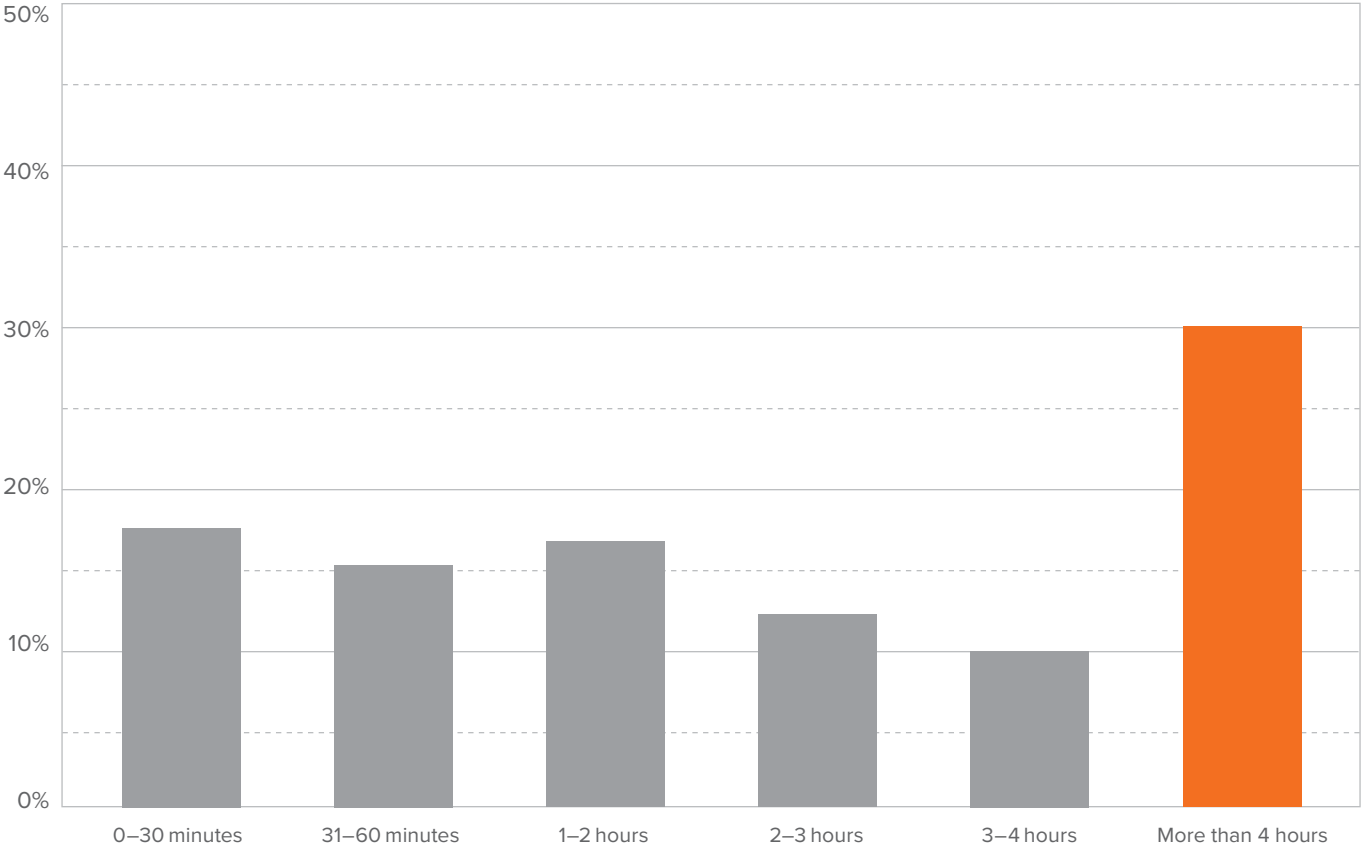
41%

are actually attending
that school due to the
direct admit program

THE WHY BEHIND “YES”

4+ HOURS
is the most common
distance from home

How far from home is the school you chose?

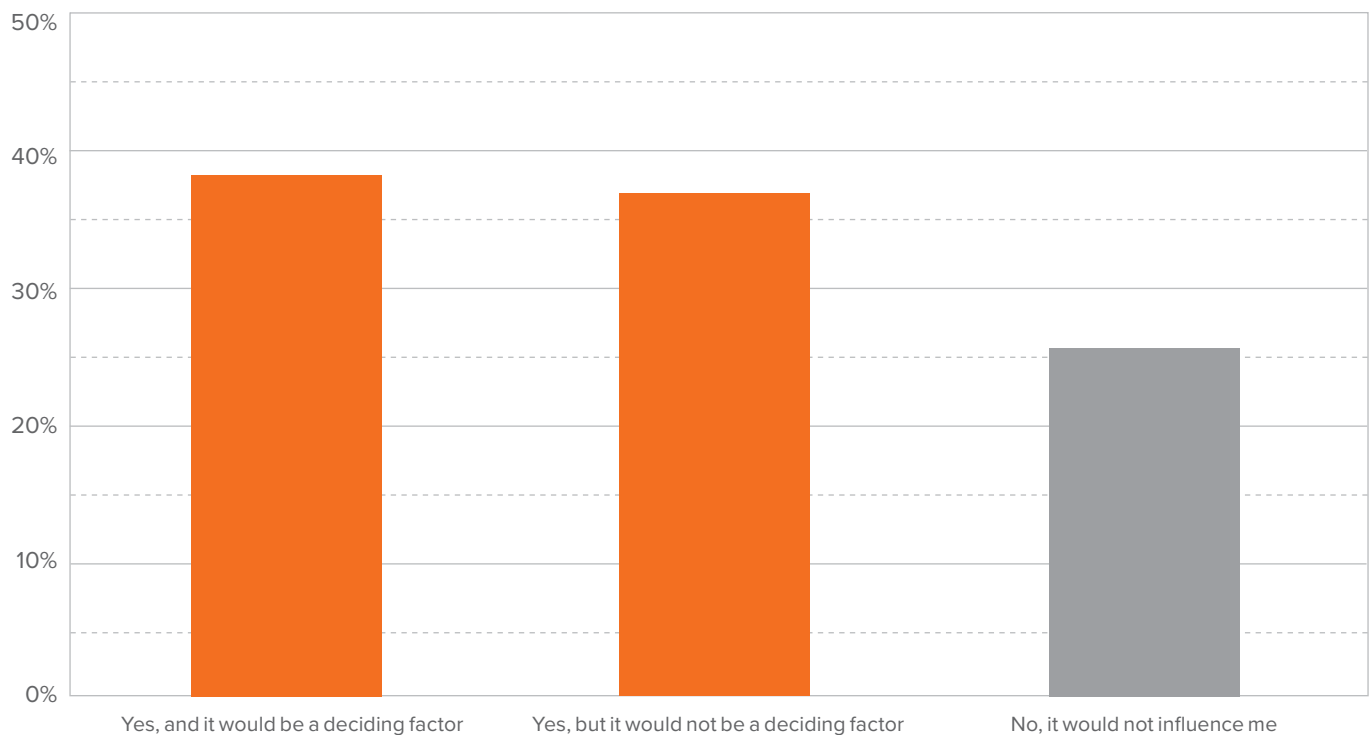


THE WHY BEHIND “YES”

74%

of students reported that a college’s political stance would influence whether they chose to attend that college

Would a college’s political stance (e.g., DEI, climate change, abortion, human rights, immigration, gun control, social justice, etc.) influence whether you chose to attend that college?



LOOKING FORWARD

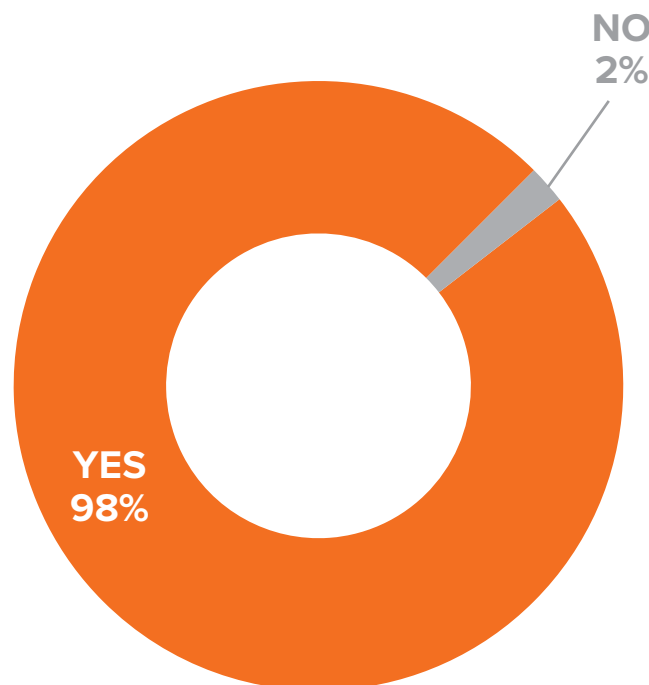
98% of survey responders had made their college decision by the time they took the survey this summer—94% of whom are heading to higher education. The others have chosen to join the military or workforce, some are taking a gap year and some plan to enroll in the spring.

Though the tools and trends of a student's search process may shift slightly from year to year, the core of it remains the same: They have access to an incredible amount of information online and therefore expect that any information sent directly to them is not the same as what they can find on their own. Luckily, 70% of students reported being satisfied with their admission process this year—an increase from 62% in 2024. That speaks to the hard work and dedication that our industry puts into helping each and every student find their right fit.

98%

of students who knew they were attending somewhere this fall made their final college decision by the time they completed the survey in summer 2025

At this time, have you made your final decision as to which school you will be attending this fall?

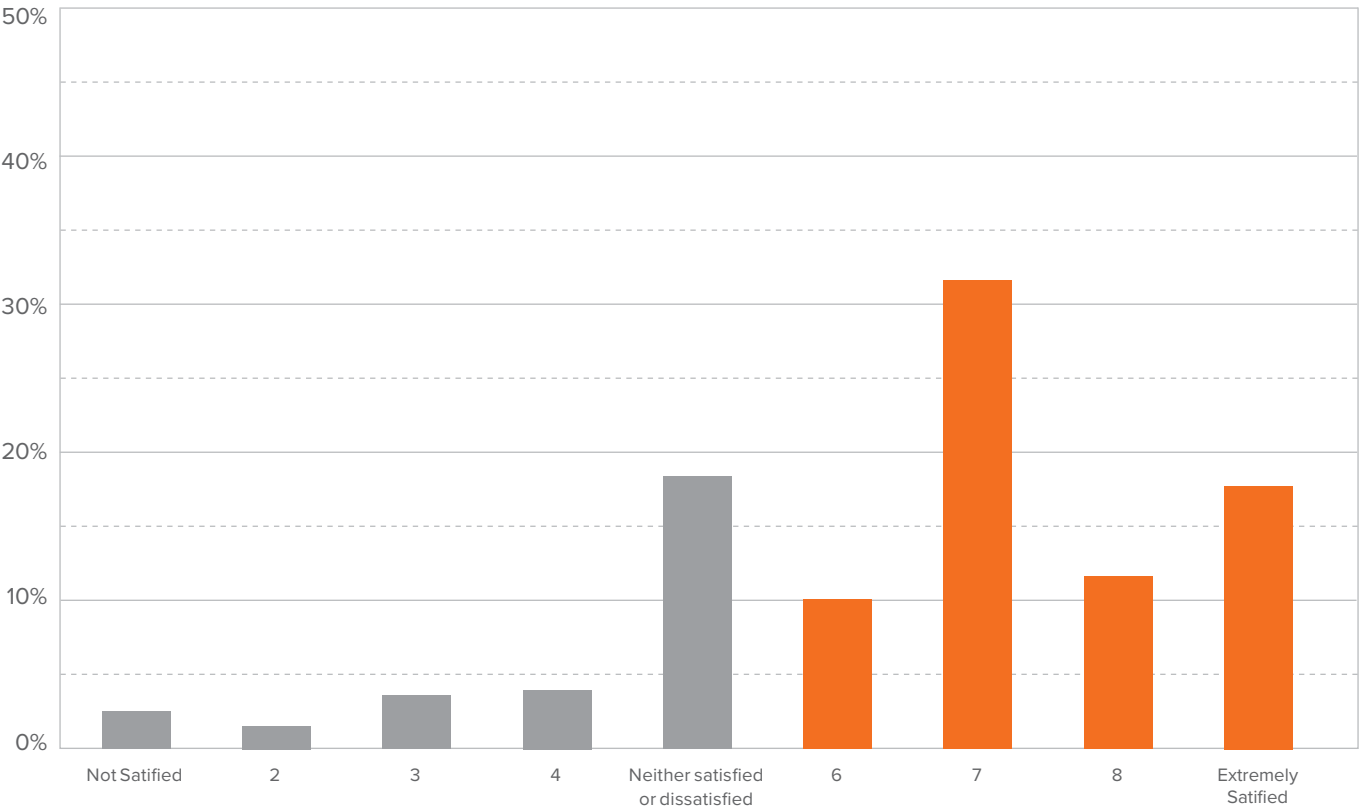


LOOKING FORWARD

70%

of students were satisfied to extremely satisfied with the admission process

How satisfied were you with the admission process?



ABOUT SPARK451

Spark451, a Jenzabar company, is a higher education enrollment strategy, technology, and marketing firm that combines creativity with powerful technology to achieve measurable results. With a mission to help colleges and students fuel their future, the firm integrates a multitude of communication channels and platforms for effective enrollment marketing, student search, creative services, and digital media. Since 2011, Spark451 has worked with over 200 colleges and universities nationwide.

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