

# HIGHER EDUCATION OUTLOOK:

How students and parents make  
post-secondary education decisions



## INTRO

Right now, you have a powerful tool within reach that could be difference between meeting your enrollment goals and falling short. What is this tool? It's your data. Understanding how to effectively leverage it to engage potential students is one of the main challenges facing higher education marketers.

In some cases, institutions are inundated with data, making it difficult to organize and utilize effectively. In other cases, there's a lack of data points on students, parents, and what influences them, hindering the ability to make informed decisions.


That's where we can help.

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In the following pages, we'll share insights from a recent survey on how people perceive higher education, where they turn for information during their decision-making process, and how you can strategically position your messages to influence those decisions. By combining our insights with your data, you'll gain a clearer understanding of how to craft compelling campaigns that attract the right students to your institution.

Competition for student attention remains fierce. In 2022, there was a significant 21% increase in applications, signaling a shift into a post-COVID era, and this trend has persisted into 2023 and 2024.

# THE EARLY DECISION BECOMES THE DECISION

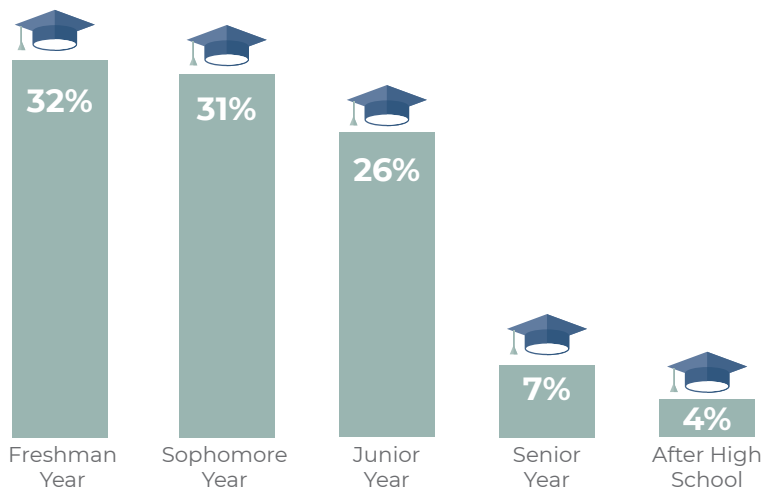
Most early decision applications are due in November of a student's senior year. While most regular decision deadlines are early the following semester (or year of admission) and rolling admissions vary by institution.

**The Common App reports that 2024 early applications are**

UP **41%**

**over 2019 data – the last data point before COVID.**

## When did your family begin discussing college selection with your student?



While some institutions adopt early admission strategies to align with early application trends, the utilization of such programs across colleges and universities remains relatively low. Consequently, students and their families often find themselves in a state of uncertainty. They are urged to expedite their applications only to be met with prolonged waiting periods, sometimes much lengthier than those encountered by students applying in January.

This dilemma underscores the importance of advice from experts like Lauren Dodington, representing The Best U, who recommends students cast a wider net when applying, including institutions with acceptance rates exceeding 50%. Considering that the average student typically applies to just six institutions, how can this insight be leveraged to not only capture their attention from the outset of their search but also sustain their interest through to freshman orientation?

Interestingly, our survey findings align closely with the national trend regarding the timing of student and parent engagement in the higher education journey. While parents typically begin contemplating and even actively researching colleges and universities as early as their child's freshman year, students often delay their consideration until they are entering their junior year. This presents a unique opportunity for your institution to capitalize on parental involvement, acknowledging and rewarding their commitment to shaping their child's future. Concurrently, there's potential to develop engaging organic content that resonates with students, even when they're not actively in decision-making mode yet.

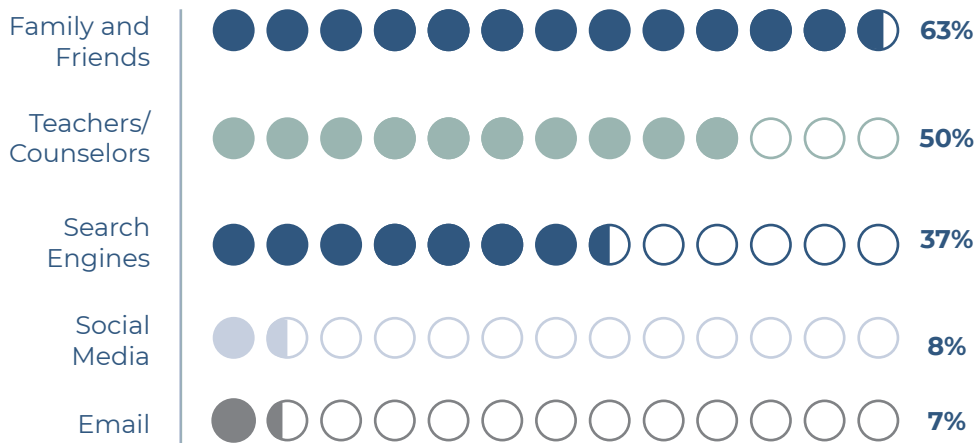




# 91% ARE COLLEGE BOUND AT A 4-YEAR INSTITUTION

Of those responding to the cleveland.com survey, 91% are considering a 4-year college or university. This represents a chance for 2-year or vocational schools to increase messaging about their competitive point of difference in the form of content designed to raise awareness for another option beyond a 4-year institution.

## Where did the post-high school education search begin?



OPPORTUNITY

If you are an institution in that 91%, how do you become one of the six schools to which a student applies but ultimately becomes the one they select for enrollment?



# START BY UNDERSTANDING THE WHY



**Eric Hultgren,**  
Director of Brand Strategy



It is more important than ever that you know what your customer is doing, to get as close to acting as an anthropologist as possible so that your messaging mirrors how they see themselves in the world and how you help them achieve that.”

The motivation driving parents’ involvement in the college selection process is evident, **with 57% of respondents citing financial success as the primary factor influencing their consideration of a particular institution.** Additionally, a significant percentage expressed a desire for their child to be the first in the family to pursue a degree. Notably, first-generation college applications surged by 67% in 2024, with Midwest states like Ohio experiencing particularly rapid growth, following closely behind Texas.

# 67%

**Increase in  
First-generation  
College  
Applications  
in 2024**

Conversely, when examining students’ perspectives, we encounter a broader range of motivations and considerations in choosing an educational institution. While financial stability remains a top priority, students also express diverse aspirations and concerns. Notably, recent surveys reveal that 65% of Gen Z individuals feel they are starting from behind compared to previous generations, with traditional markers of the “American Dream,” such as homeownership, seeming increasingly unattainable.

With this in mind, it’s increasingly crucial to tailor messaging to students differently than to parents. Students are navigating an evolving landscape and redefining notions of work-life balance and success. They are seeking educational experiences that align with their vision for the future and address their unique challenges and aspirations.

As Eric Hultgren, Director of Brand Strategy, aptly notes, understanding your audience is paramount. Marketers must adopt an anthropological approach, gaining insights into how students perceive themselves and their place in the world. By aligning messaging with students’ self-perception and aspirations, institutions can effectively engage and support them on their educational journey.





## ORIGIN STORIES

While the timing of a student's journey towards selecting a college or university may fluctuate, the underlying dynamics remain rooted in human behavior. People naturally look to others, rather than institutions, for guidance when making decisions. This phenomenon is evident in various aspects of culture, from the clothes we wear to the beverages we consume and the cars we drive. Renowned marketing expert Seth Godin encapsulates this concept succinctly: "People like us, do things like this." Similarly, Emile Durkheim describes it as a "cultural effervescence," where communities collectively define norms and behaviors.

In the realm of higher education, the same principle applies. Individuals are influenced by the actions and choices of those within their social circles. Whether it's friends, family members, or inspirational teachers, these influential figures often initiate conversations about college choices.

Subsequently, it falls upon institutions to craft omnichannel campaigns that resonate with students and their families, guiding them towards selecting the institution. It's not merely about employing external marketing tactics; rather, it's about leveraging the power of interpersonal connections and cultural norms to create a compelling narrative that aligns with the aspirations and values of prospective students. By fostering a sense of belonging and community, institutions can effectively engage with students throughout their decision-making journey and ultimately encourage them to choose their institution.



## LET'S GO

Guiding a student through the decision journey to ultimately select your institution begins with understanding your strengths and aligning them with the type of student that would be most interested in them. Remember in the beginning when we talked about the importance of your data? When was the last time your team checked the health of your CRM (customer relationship management) list?

Using your data and creating lookalike audiences to reach out to potential students and their parents to provide them with specific information about programs or clubs that interest them **was the number one answer as to why they would reach out to a potential college or university.**



In the realm of marketing, there's a concept of distinguishing between deep impressions and superficial ones. **Our survey audience highlighted branded merchandise, or "swag," as the least compelling reason to engage with an institution.** This finding underscores the notion that swag tends to put the cart before the horse; it's unlikely to resonate with students who haven't yet chosen the institution. Consequently, they're less inclined to proudly display or endorse the brand through merchandise.

Recognizing this, it becomes evident that investing in swag as a marketing tactic may not yield the desired results. Instead, reallocating that budget towards strategies that foster deeper engagement with potential students as they progress towards enrollment is more prudent. **By focusing on tactics that resonate with students at pivotal points in their decision-making journey, we can effectively guide them towards choosing our institution and ultimately towards move-in day.**







## WHERE IN THE WORLD ARE THEY?

Reaching parents along their child's decision journey can pose a significant challenge, often more so than reaching the students themselves. Our surveyed audience falls into the category of digital nomads, constantly exposed to ads across various mediums based on their current engagement. This dynamic complicates the task of locating and engaging with them effectively.

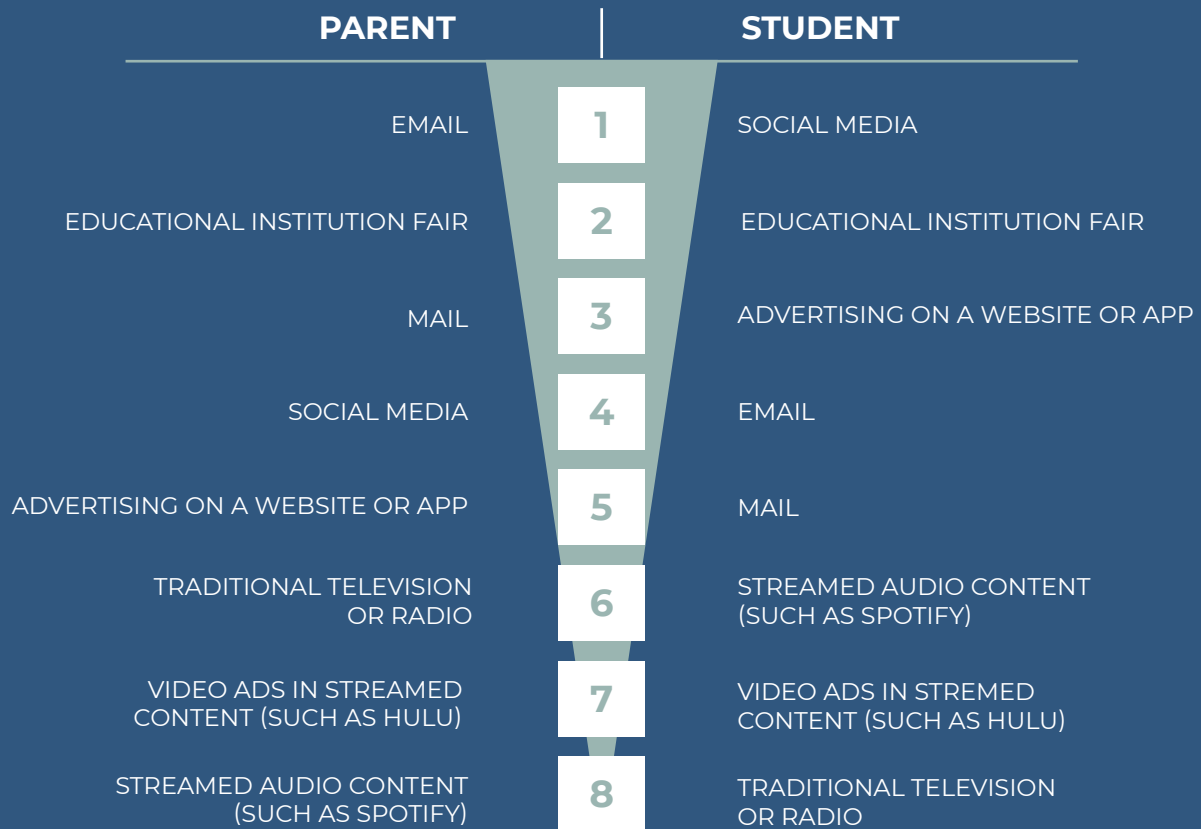
However, this challenge underscores the importance of maintaining a healthy and robust Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. A comprehensive CRM not only facilitates the tracking and management of interactions with potential parents but also enables brands to make informed and impactful marketing decisions. By leveraging data collected through the CRM, institutions can better understand parent preferences, behaviors, and pain points, allowing for more targeted and personalized communication strategies. Ultimately, a well-utilized CRM becomes an invaluable tool in navigating the complexities of reaching and engaging parents throughout their child's educational decision journey.



When it comes to capturing student attention, there's a clear consensus on the mediums that dominate their digital landscape. Social channels, particularly TikTok and Instagram, have emerged as the modern representation of the internet, where students spend a significant portion of their time.

For institutions looking to connect with students, having a strategy for TikTok, Reels, and Shorts on YouTube is imperative. These platforms have become the preferred spaces for students to engage with content, making it essential for institutions to speak their language on their preferred platforms.

## PARENTS VS. STUDENTS MARKETING CHANNELS CONSUMED RANKED HIGH TO LOW





# MESSAGING IDEAS FOR STUDENTS AND PARENTS



## Tailored Career Opportunities

Highlight how your institution prepares students for successful careers, addressing specific interests and aspirations through personalized career development resources and alumni success stories.



## Financial Assistance

Personalize messaging to parents by providing targeted information about financial aid options, scholarships, and tuition payment plans that align with their financial situation and concerns.



## Campus Life Experience

Showcase personalized campus life experiences, including extracurricular activities, clubs, and social events, tailored to the interests and preferences of both students and parents.



## Academic Support

Provide personalized messaging about academic support services, tutoring programs, and faculty mentorship opportunities, addressing individual learning needs and goals.



## Alumni Engagement

Engage both students and parents through personalized messaging about alumni networks and opportunities for networking, mentorship, and career advancement.



## ROI and Value Proposition

Personalize messaging to demonstrate the institution's ROI and value proposition, illustrating how the educational investment will lead to long-term success and fulfillment for both students and parents.



## Community and Diversity

Highlight personalized messaging about the institution's inclusive community and diverse campus culture, addressing the unique backgrounds, interests, and values of both students and parents.



Moreover, given the rapidly evolving landscape of digital platforms and apps vying for consumer attention, it's crucial to develop marketing campaigns and student interactions that can adapt to these changes. Failure to adapt risks missing out on opportunities to captivate and engage potential students effectively.

Our data underscores the importance of adapting to these shifts in student behavior. Institutions that fail to do so may find themselves relying solely on parental influence in the decision-making process, despite our findings indicating that students play a significant role in these decisions. Therefore, embracing the native platforms and communication styles of students is essential for institutions aiming to resonate with this demographic effectively.

# PRICE, CHANCE, + CONSIDERATION

When parents and students sit down to make the crucial decision of selecting a college or university, several key variables come into play.



Both parents and students agree that the

# #1

**REASON** for the pursuit of post-secondary education is **financial stability and success.**

IN AGREEMENT

First and foremost, parents are concerned with how well-equipped the institution is at preparing graduates for successful careers in a volatile job market. They want assurance that their investment will result in tangible outcomes for their child's future. This assertion of parental perspectives is supported in "Parent Survey on College and Career Readiness" conducted by The College Board. This survey examines parental attitudes, concerns, and expectations regarding their children's post-secondary education and future career prospects.

Following this consideration, parents weigh the total cost of education against the perceived value and potential return on investment (ROI). Institutions can leverage messaging and content focused on ROI to illustrate why their institution is the right choice and how it will continue to yield dividends for the student well beyond graduation.



For students, the decision-making process involves evaluating the skills they will acquire and the time investment required to obtain those skills. They recognize that they've already spent at least 13 years in school and must weigh the benefits of additional education against the cost. Additionally, with an increasing number of careers de-emphasizing the need for a degree, students are keenly aware of the significance of their decision.

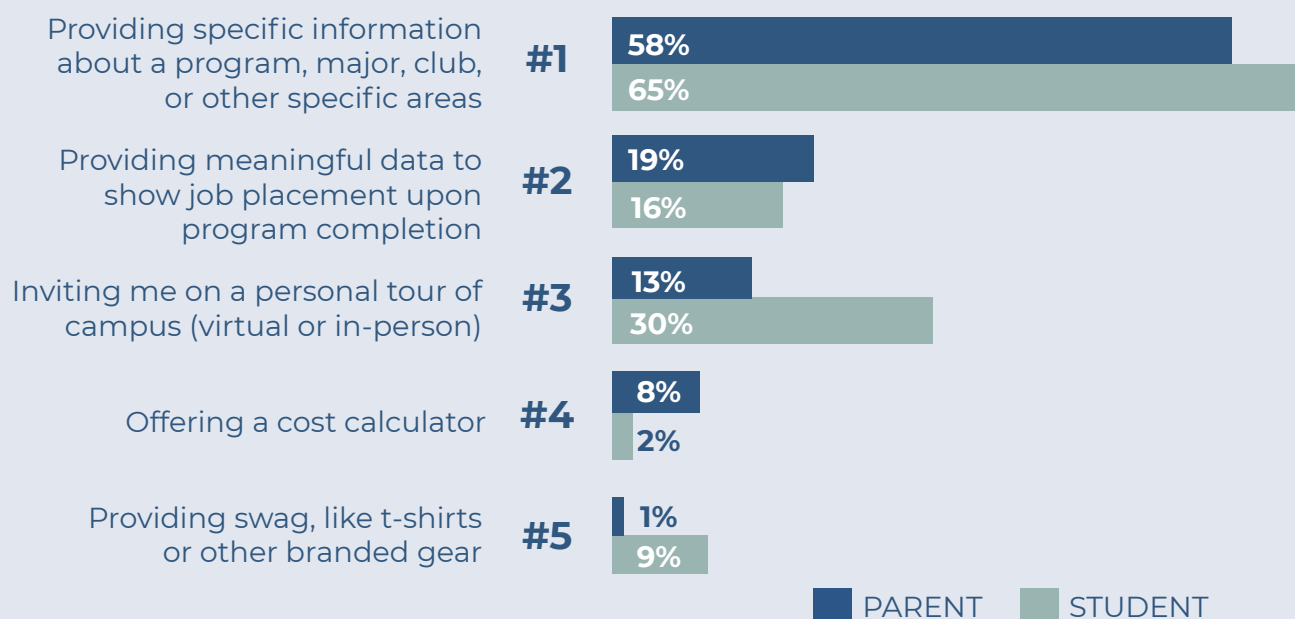
Messaging directed towards students should emphasize how the institution is committed to helping them achieve their version of the "American Dream." This involves providing concrete examples, leveraging alumni success stories, addressing common questions and concerns, and highlighting the broader social benefits of obtaining a four-year degree.

In summary, the decision-making process for both parents and students revolves around the institution's ability to prepare graduates for successful careers, the cost of education versus the expected ROI, and the perceived value of obtaining additional skills and education. Effective messaging should address these concerns and highlight the institution's commitment to student success and societal advancement.



## PARENT vs STUDENT

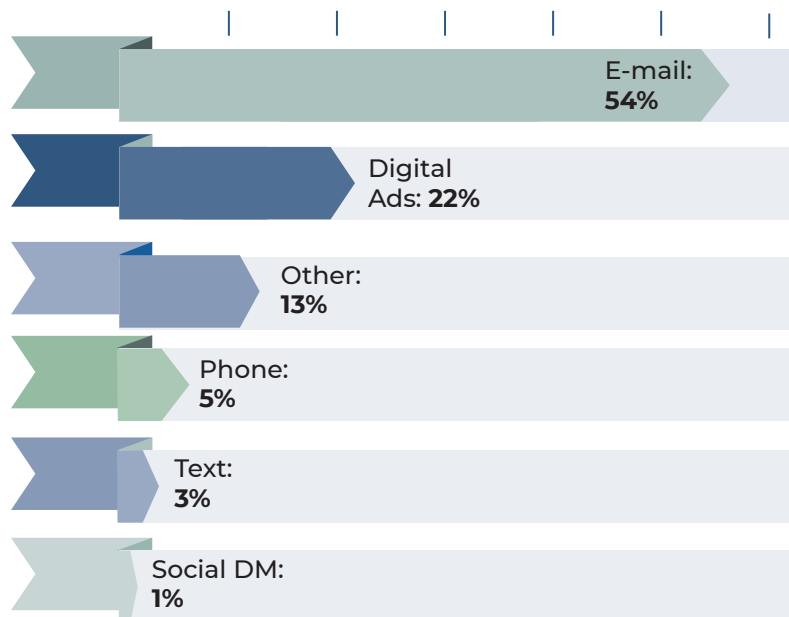
**What motivates you to reach out to a school, as answered by the parent vs student?**



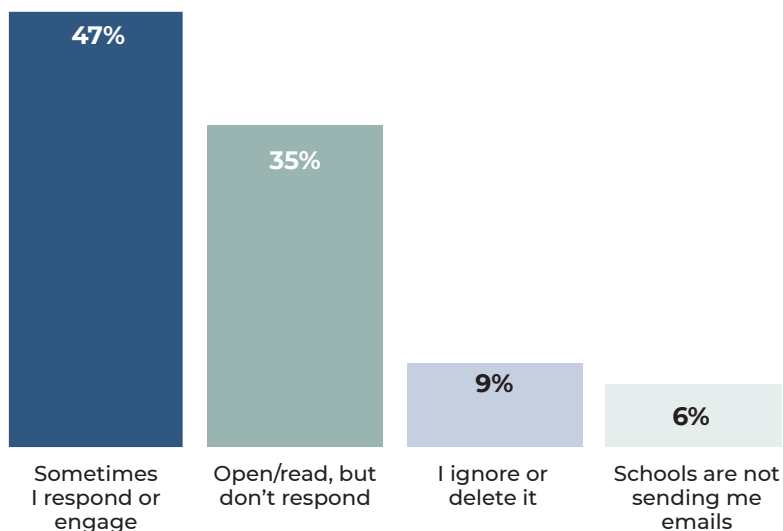
# YOU'VE GOT MAIL

When it comes to reaching out to potential students and parents, both groups have identified email as a primary communication channel. This insight suggests that there's a genuine interest from recipients in hearing from the institution through this medium.

## Ways schools have reached out to you, as a parent or student (all that apply)



## If schools are reaching out to you by email, how do you respond?







**Ryan Winfield**  
Director of Digital Strategy

As Ryan Winfield, Director of Digital Strategy, highlights, the key is to capitalize on this interest and use it to build and nurture the institution's CRM database. Understanding the frequency of email communications and ensuring that they continue to provide value to both students and parents throughout the relationship is crucial.

To expand the CRM database, Winfield suggests leveraging strategies such as search and social messages to generate early interest, as well as incorporating streaming television and audio to reach parents effectively.



“The story here is once you have them in your CRM they **WANT** to hear from you.”

In today's constantly evolving marketing landscape, it's essential for institutions to adapt to the ever-changing consumer behavior and preferences. By developing customer journeys grounded in an understanding of human behavior, institutions can tailor their messaging to guide these journeys across any medium currently holding the consumers' attention.

Moreover, organizations that can discern the subtle shifts in motivations between parents and students will be better positioned to thrive regardless of external conditions or enrollment challenges. By aligning messaging with the unique needs and aspirations of both audiences, institutions can foster stronger connections and drive success in the long term.





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