



PARENT & student

ANNUAL SURVEY



ADVANCE EDUCATION

2025

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Introduction

As we approach 2025, the landscape of higher education is undergoing seismic changes, driven by evolving societal needs, technological advancements, and economic pressures. To better understand the perspectives and preferences of those at the heart of this transformation, we conducted our 2nd Annual Parents and Students Post-Secondary Education Survey.

CHALLENGES

This survey uncovers the motivations driving most targeted segments for education marketers: high school students and their parents. Public and private four-year institutions, community colleges, and vocational education programs are facing significant challenges impacting enrollment:

- 1 Enrollment Cliff Impacts (Learn more about the Enrollment Cliff in [our whitepaper here.](#))
- 2 Labor Market Demands for Vocational Workers
- 3 Rising Education Costs
- 4 The ROI of Post-Secondary Education

Public and Private Four-Year Institutions

1. **DECLINING ENROLLMENT:** Colleges and universities will face a substantial decrease in the number of prospective students. This decline is projected to be 15% over the next few years, translating to a loss of approximately 576,000 students caused by a drop in birth rates during the 2007 Great Recession.
2. **FINANCIAL STRAIN:** With fewer students, institutions will experience reduced tuition revenue, which could lead to budget cuts, downsizing, and even closures of some colleges, particularly those that are already financially vulnerable.
3. **INCREASED COMPETITION:** Schools will need to become more competitive to attract a shrinking pool of students. This might involve enhancing marketing efforts, offering more scholarships, and developing unique programs to stand out. Many schools are trying to grow by offering more online or hybrid options to boost enrollment while increasing competition overall.
4. **SHIFT IN PROGRAM OFFERINGS:** There will likely be a greater emphasis on career-oriented and skill-based programs to meet the demands of the job market and attract students looking for practical, employable skills.

Community Colleges

1. **BRIDGE TO 4-YEAR EDUCATION:** Demand for 2-year community colleges will likely increase as four-year institutions are grappling with perceptions of high cost and an overall decline in population due to the enrollment cliff. *“Start here!”* messaging will be attractive to cost-conscious prospects and their parents who will save on tuition and campus housing associated with 4-year options.
2. **VOCATIONAL AND ASSOCIATE DEGREES:** For some states, community colleges fill the vocational education niche completely. In addition to transfer students, these colleges offer 2-year degrees and shorter certificate programs that graduate students who are pre-matched to workforce demands in their area.

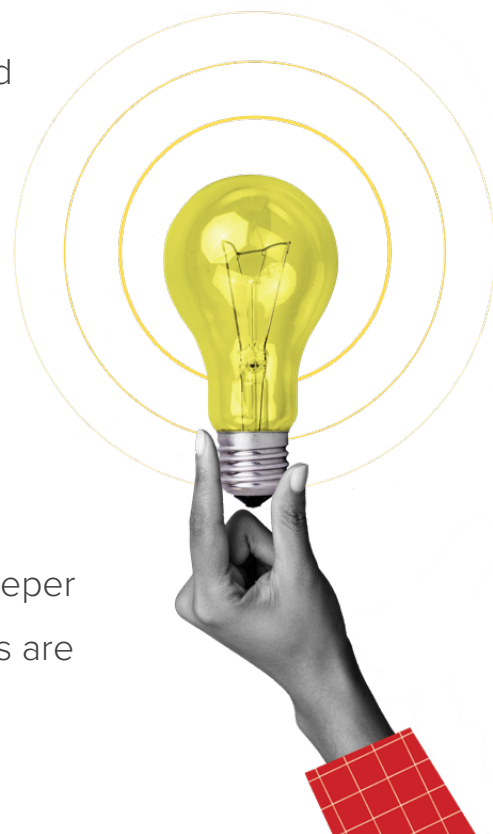
Vocational Education Programs

- 1. RISING DEMAND:** As traditional four-year institutions struggle with enrollment, vocational and technical education programs may see an increase in interest.
These programs offer direct pathways to employment, which can be appealing in a tight job market.
- 2. EXPANSION OF PROGRAMS:** Vocational schools may expand their offerings to include more diverse and advanced training programs, aligning with industry needs and technological advancements.
- 3. PARTNERSHIPS WITH INDUSTRY:** To ensure their programs remain relevant, vocational schools will likely strengthen partnerships with local businesses and industries. This collaboration can help tailor curricula to the skills employers are seeking.
- 4. FLEXIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY:** Vocational education programs should focus on increasing flexibility and accessibility, offering more online and hybrid learning options to accommodate a wider range of students.

OPPORTUNITIES

This whitepaper delves into these issues, offering insights and recommendations for stakeholders to navigate the evolving higher education environment.

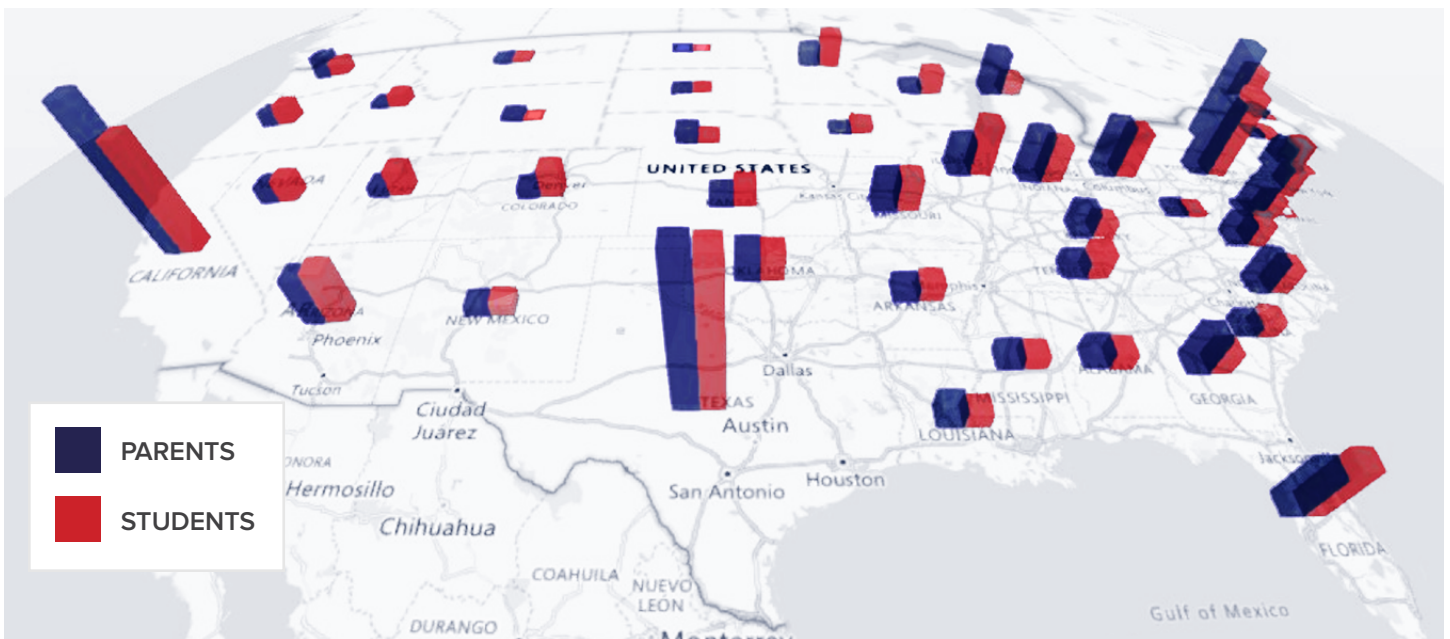
Through this report, we will shed light on the critical factors driving educational choices and offer actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions striving to meet the needs of the next generation of students. Join us as we explore the findings of the 2025 outlook and gain a deeper understanding of the pathways that students and their families are considering in their pursuit of higher education.



THE SURVEY:

How Students and Parents are Making Post-Secondary Decisions





THE RESPONDENTS

Advance Education surveyed more than 500 high school students and over 500 parents of high school students about their journey to decide what's next after high school graduation. The respondent samples were taken from all 50 states in quantities representative to the population.

STUDENT'S GENDER

52.4%

FEMALE

45.3%

MALE

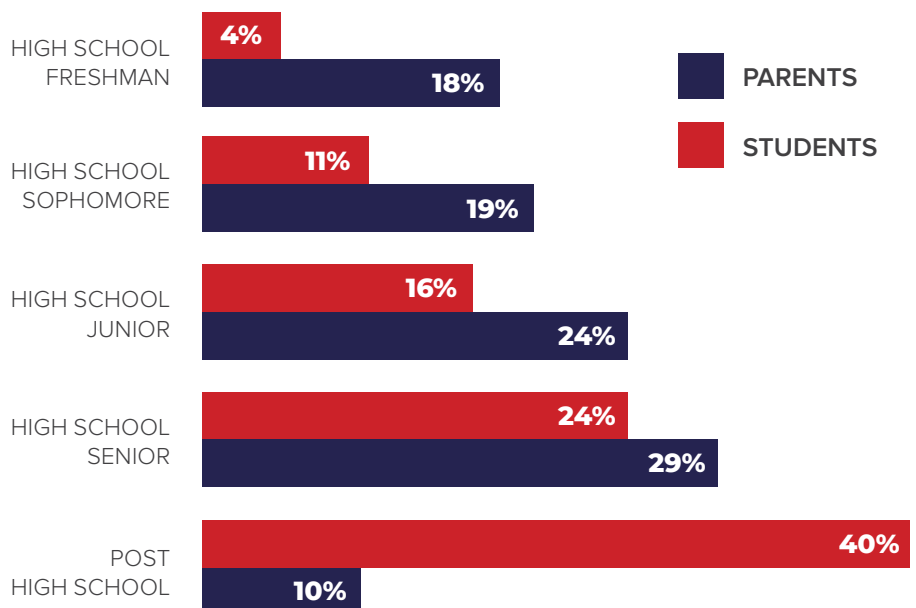
1.9%

PREFER NOT TO SAY

.4%

I IDENTIFY AS...

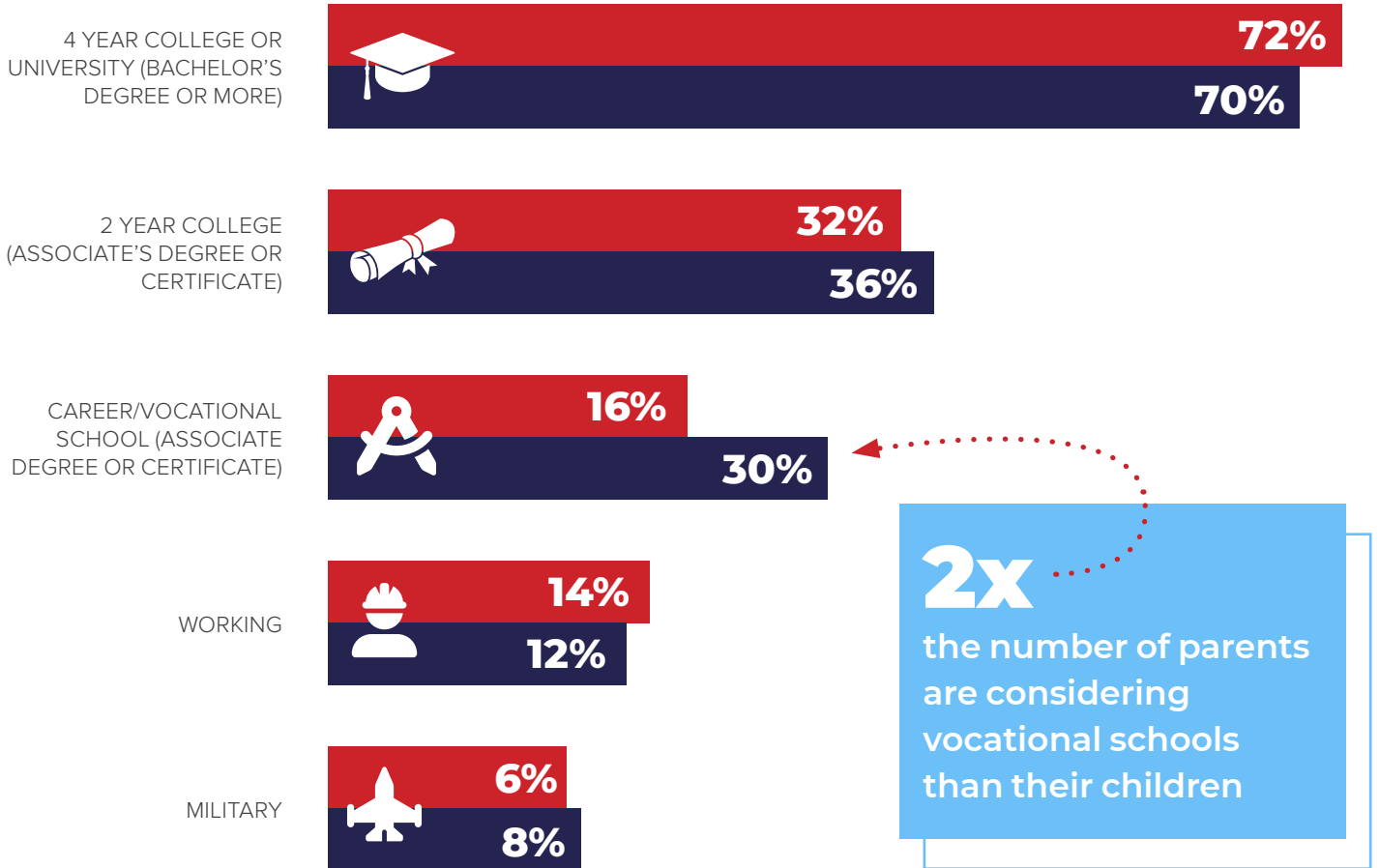
STUDENT'S GRADE LEVEL



STUDENT RESPONDENTS ARE BETWEEN 15-19 YEARS OLD.

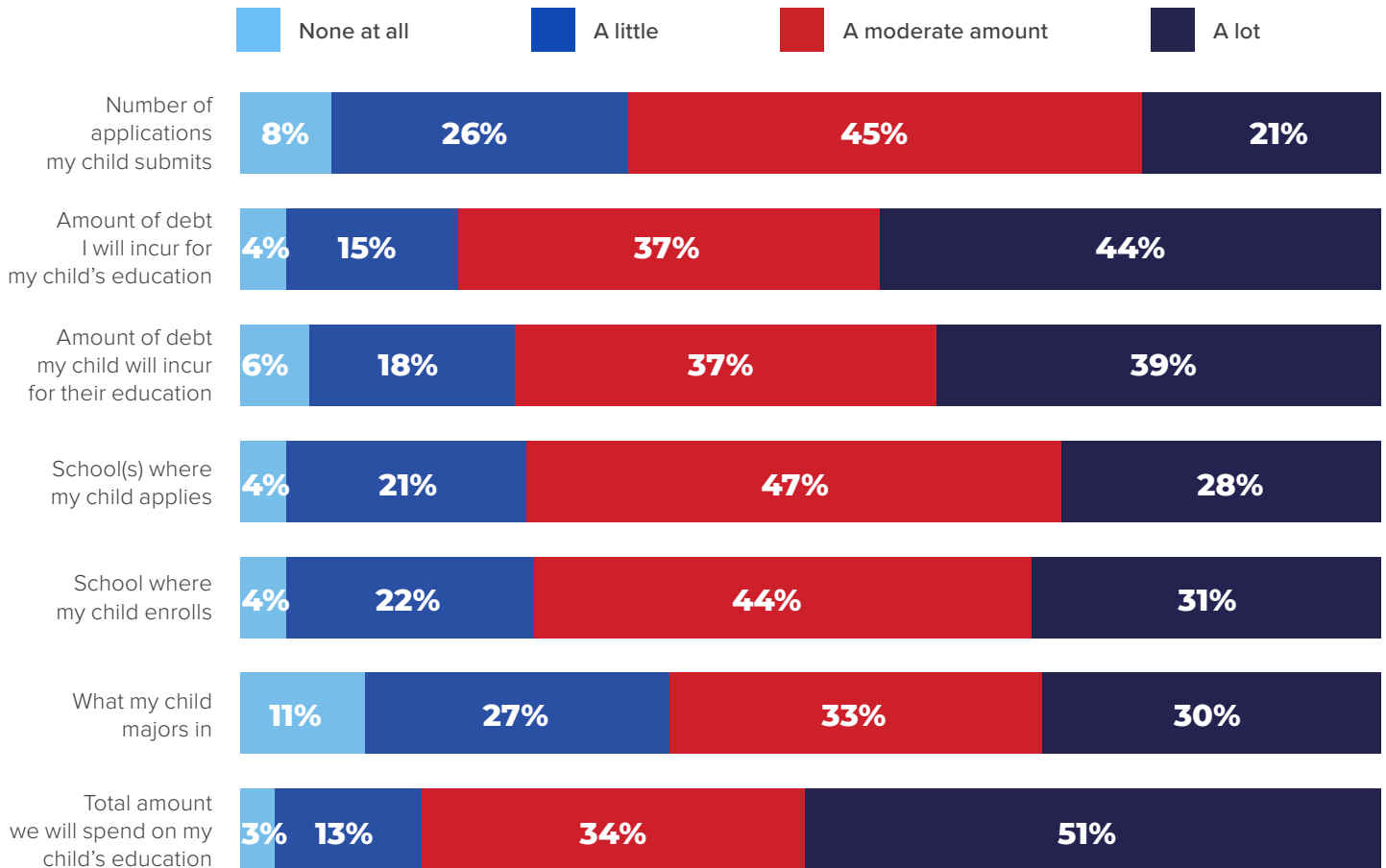
WHAT OPTIONS ARE PARENTS AND STUDENTS CONSIDERING?

PARENTS
 STUDENTS



Students and their parents are in lock step when it comes to the consideration of 4-year and 2-year options. But a schism appears when it comes to vocational programs regardless of where they are offered (within 2-year community colleges or through private vocational schools). Twice the number of parents are considering vocational schools than their children. With the pressures of increased college costs and the changing needs of our tight labor market, parents are encouraging their kids to consider the cost/benefit equation of these options.

PARENTS ARE MAJOR INFLUENCERS IN THEIR STUDENT'S HIGHER EDUCATION DECISIONS



Overall, parents are an essential part of the entire decision-making process influencing or directing key decisions. Parents play a crucial role in the logistical and financial aspects of their child's post-secondary education decisions, while students maintain more control over their academic and career choices. Both groups are balancing parental guidance and support with student independence and personal growth.

1. NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS: High OR Moderate Influence

66% of parents report having significant influence on the number of applications their student submits. This suggests that parents are actively involved in guiding their students through the application process, helping them identify and apply to multiple institutions to increase their chances of acceptance.

2. AMOUNT OF DEBT: Moderate to High Influence

Parents have significant influence over the amount of debt their student will incur, with 44% indicating “A lot” of influence and 37% indicating “A moderate amount.” This reflects parents’ concern about the financial implications of higher education and their role in managing or mitigating student debt.

3. SCHOOL CHOICES: High AND Moderate Influence

When it comes to the schools where their student applies and enrolls, three-quarters of parents report a moderate or high level of influence. This indicates schools must engage and influence two audiences at every stage of the enrollment journey – and connect with each in an authentic way.

4. FIELD OF STUDY: Lower Influence, but still strong

Parents have less overall influence over what their student chooses major in or study. However, there is a strong correlation between the choice of major and the return-on-investment (ROI) of post-secondary education. We’ll see later in the study that students themselves are more selective in their course of study, factoring in likelihood of finding a job and future earnings.

Next, we will dive deeper into the student and parent journeys. Each group approaches the college search in their own way from how they determine value to the digital channels they use to research and inform their decisions.

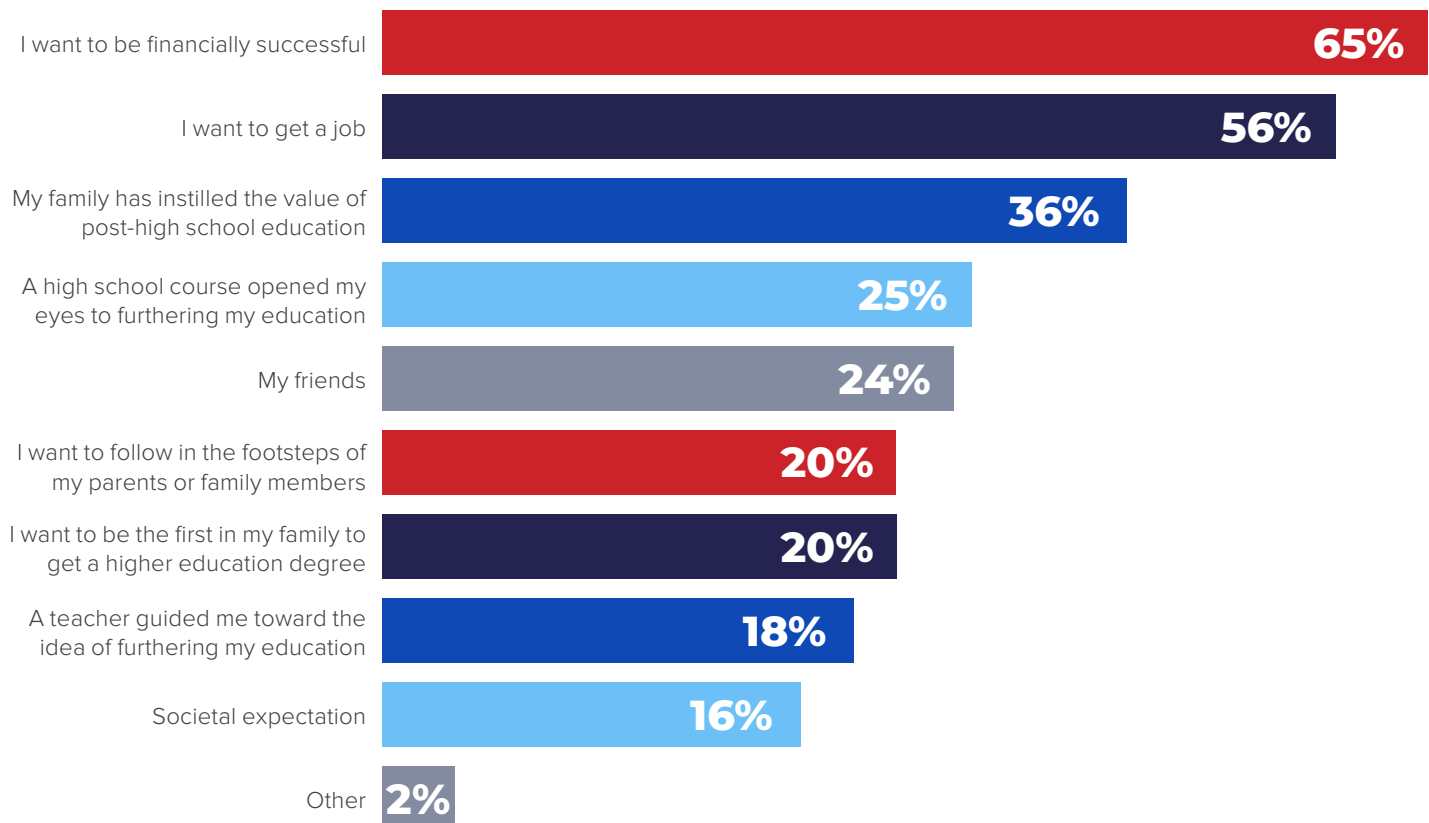
Marketers will begin to see how **crafting separate campaigns to each group** will help to increase engagement and combat enrollment challenges.

THE COLLEGE SEARCH: Students

Knowing what motivates students' choices after high school can help marketers zero in on the right messaging.



WHAT MOTIVATES STUDENTS' CHOICES?

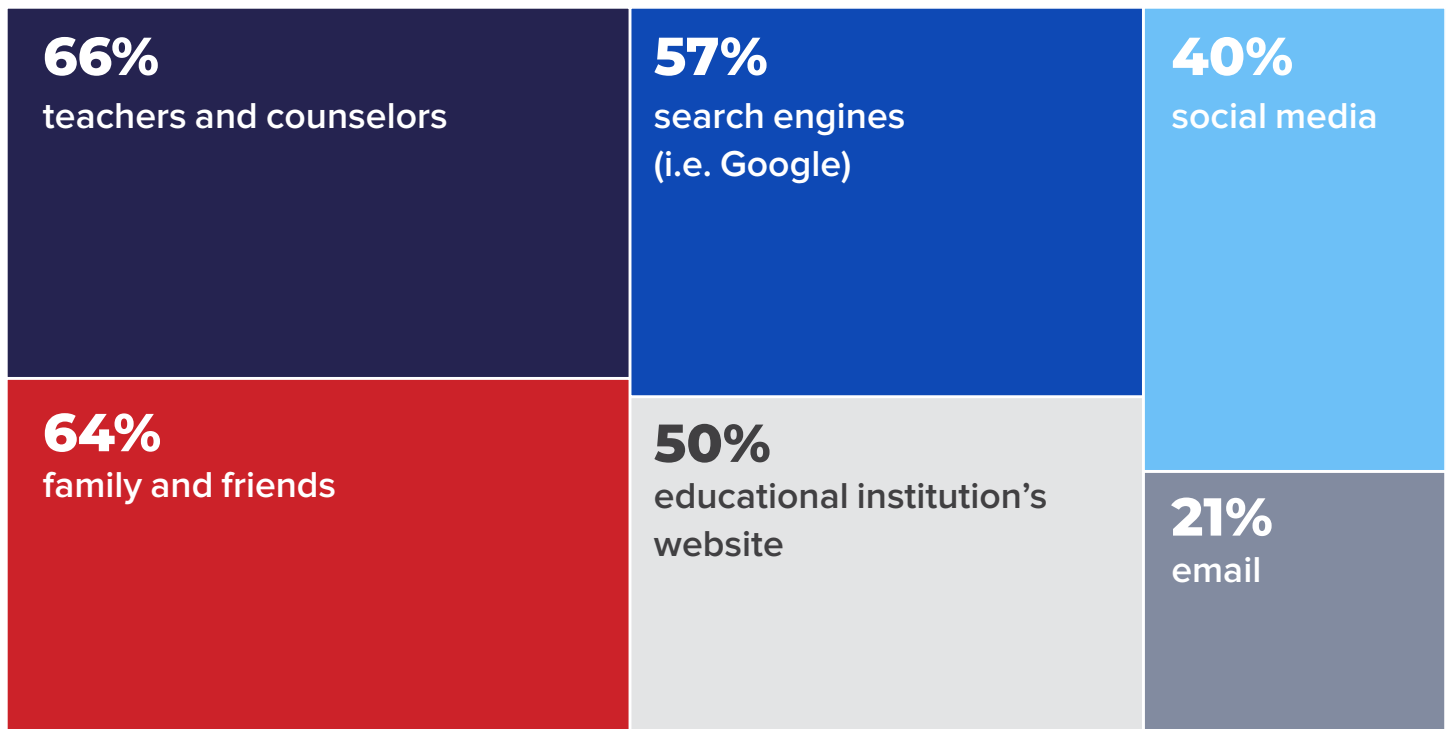


Top of mind for students is the value proposition of higher education. First and foremost, students' investment in post-secondary education should lead to financial success, according to respondents. Getting a job upon graduation (or soon after) that brings financial success is the most desired outcome.

Family influence is the next highest area of influence followed by friends and teachers.

WHEN RESEARCHING OPTIONS, WHERE DO STUDENTS BEGIN?

Students selected their top three.



Understanding where students start their search can help education marketers with their top-of-funnel messaging and tactical budgets.

1. SEGMENTATION OF PROSPECTS

Parents, students, teachers and counselors should be addressed separately in your marketing strategy. There is no one-size-fits-all plan when you are trying to maximize the impact of your enrollment marketing. Each group has unique media channels and needs specific information addressing their unique role in the search process.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA IS WHERE EVERYONE IS

But everyone is NOT on the same channels OR communicates in the same way. Marketers need to create ads and messaging that is written for each target segment.

3. SEARCH ENGINES AND INSTITUTION WEBSITES GO HAND IN HAND

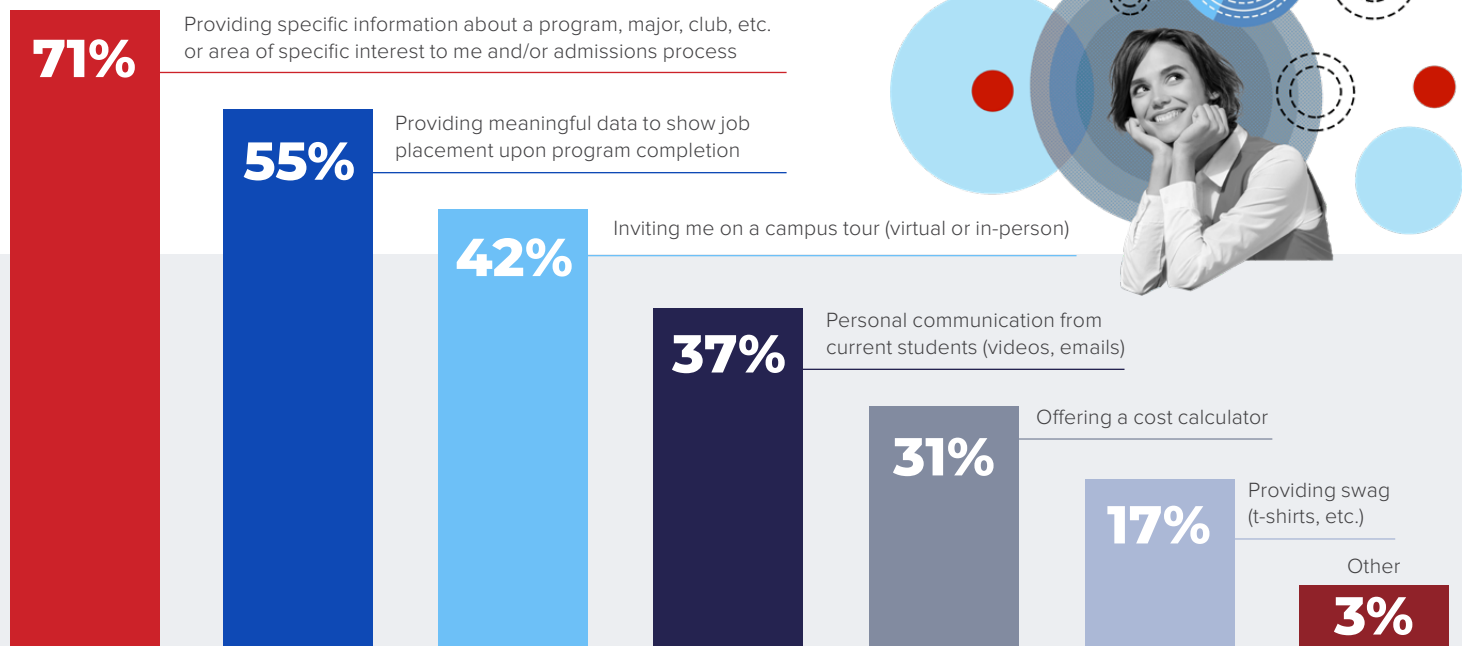
Make sure you have the information each segment is seeking – and make it easy to find. A well-designed website with the right information will get pushed up in organic search rankings AND help your paid search work better. For more information on making your website work for you check out [our SEO whitepaper](#).

4. EMAIL STILL WORKS

It's not where everyone starts, but it's important to start warming up the relationship and consistently landing in the inbox so prospects can engage when they are ready.



WHAT INFORMATION DO YOU NEED TO CONSIDER A SPECIFIC SCHOOL?



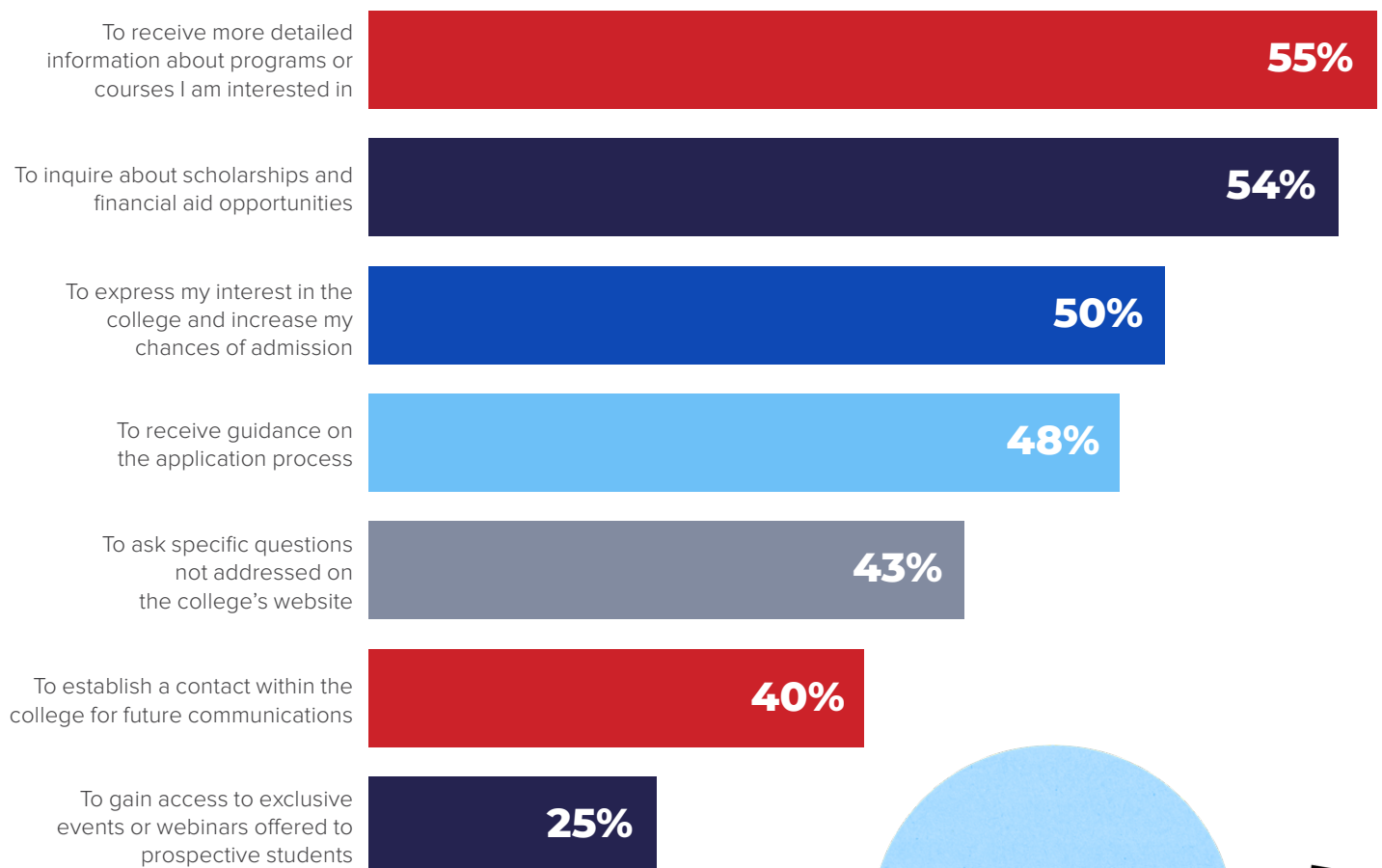
The top spot on the list is a no-brainer – or is it? For applicants with an idea of what they want to study, you need to have specific information on your website about the student’s major or program. For many schools, the information is there but isn’t easy to find or understand. Put another way, is there enough information about specific testing, entrance, and scholarship requirements for the major?

The second most needed bucket of information is job placement rates for specific programs. As students become more ROI focused, they are looking for schools that can demonstrate student success beyond the classroom.

Number three and four – invitations to a personal tour and personal communication from current students – point to the need to feel wanted and understood at the earliest stages of the search process. Student to student testimonials, emails and live chats can help warm up the relationship quickly and build a level of trust that breaks through better than generic direct mail brochures and free t-shirts.

WHAT MOTIVATES STUDENTS TO REQUEST MORE INFORMATION FROM A SCHOOL?

One of the key measures of success for many institutions is the “request for information” form-fill, chat-bot, or email. No matter the format, this is one key indicator to schools that a prospect has transitioned from casual tire-kicker to interested student prospect.



In many ways, students reaching out to colleges and vocational schools is 100% positive. However, it is a challenge for education marketers to build infrastructure that provides multiple channels for students to easily connect with the school in a way that gives them near instant gratification.

Today's Gen Z prospect pool is accustomed to always available instant send/receive interactions. The schools who can give them that experience in a way that feels authentic and personal – with as little friction as possible – will win more inquiries, visits, and applicants. AI, chatbots, and other technologies are good tools that can significantly enhance the responsiveness of educational institutions to student prospect inquiries.



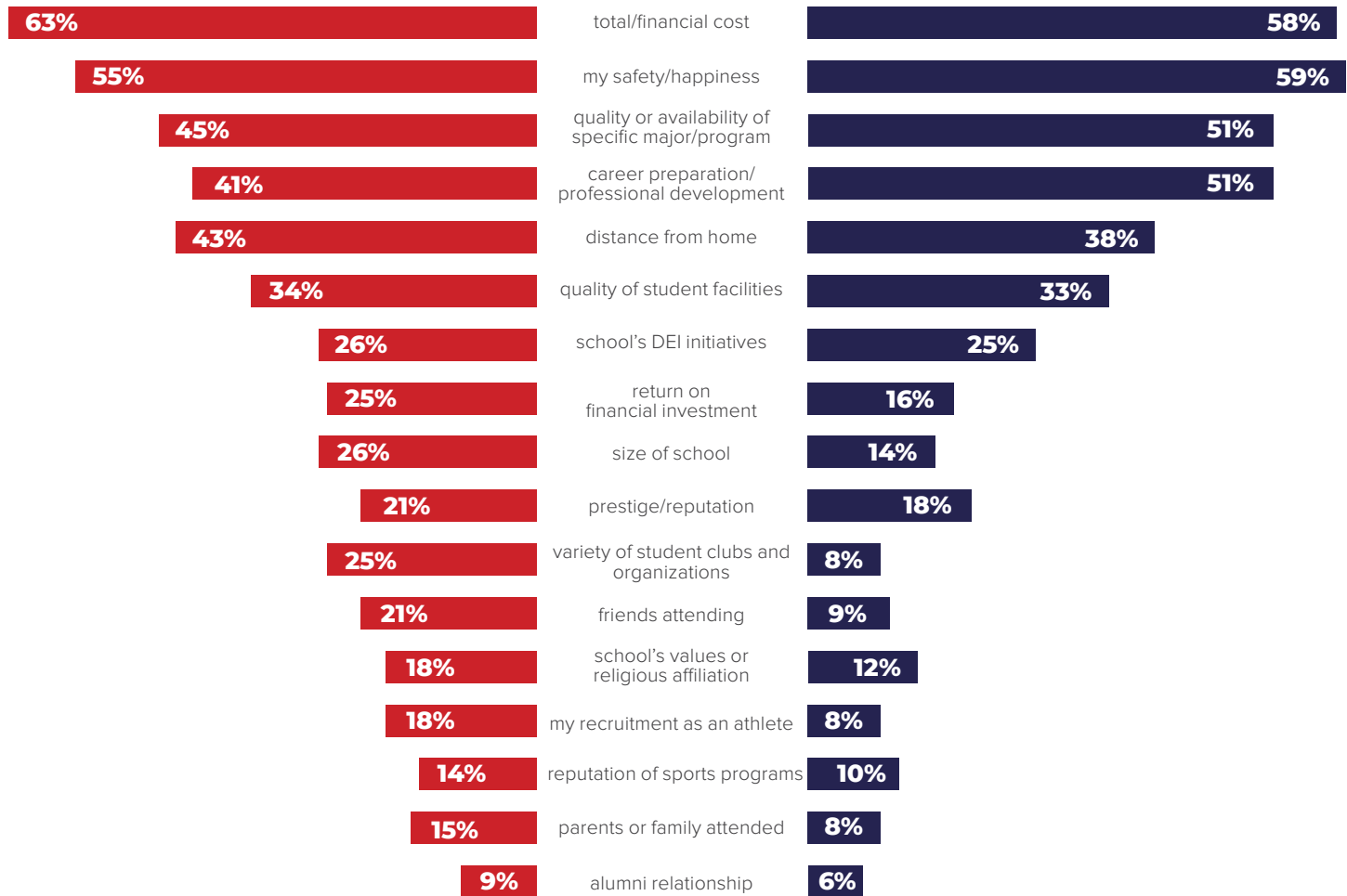
THE COLLEGE SEARCH:

Parents and Students Value Proposition Compared



From the moment their kids are born, parents strive to raise them with a similar world view. In their formative years, the pushback from teens might seem constant, but our survey reveals many similarities when it comes to how both groups tally up the positives and negatives as they build their post-secondary wish list.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN THE SEARCH PROCESS?

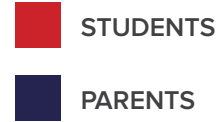


Students and parents alike are increasingly concerned about the rising costs of higher education, a topic that weighs heavily on their minds. Students' selection of cost as a top concern is 9% higher than the parents' responses.

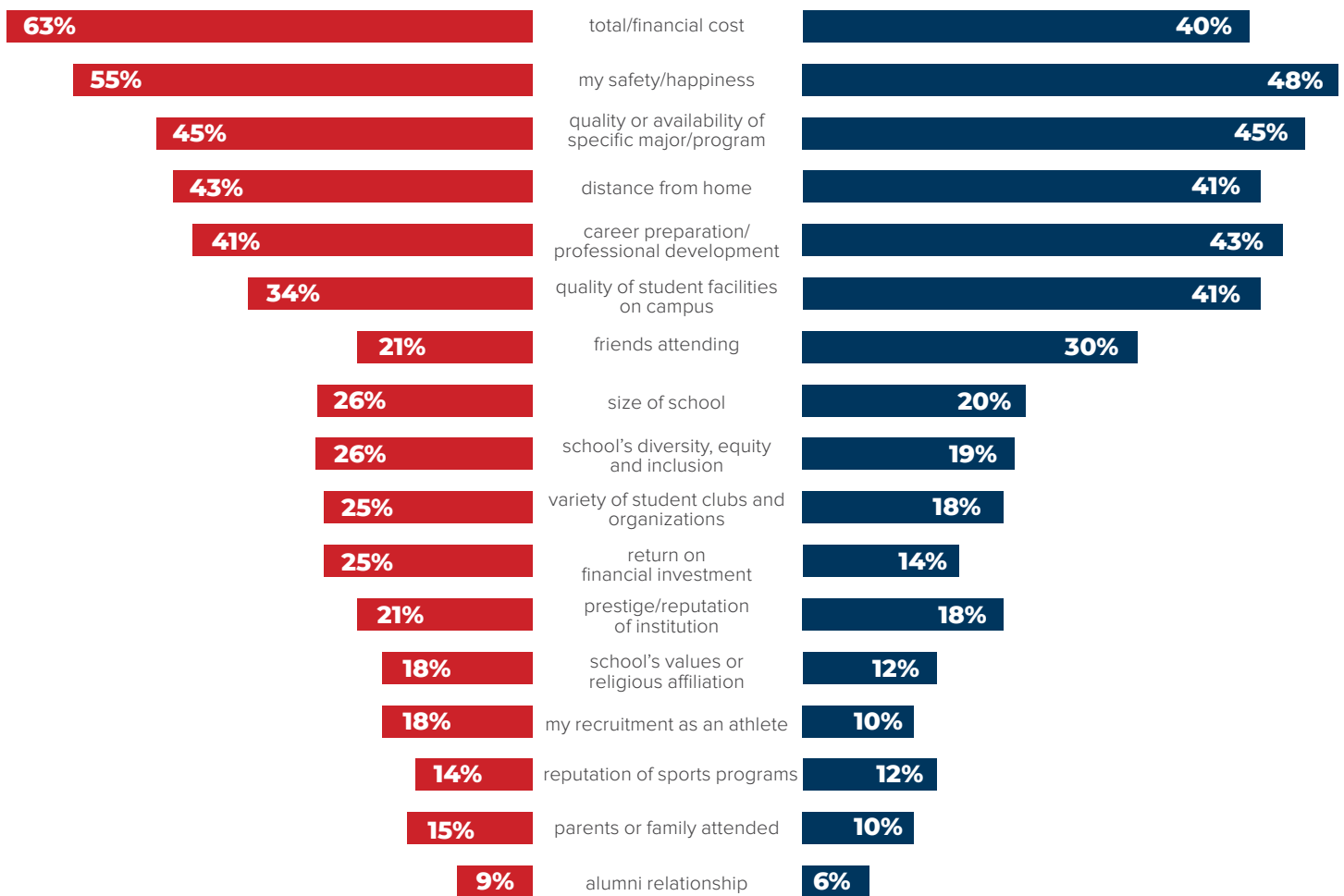
Both groups place a high value on overall happiness, recognizing its importance as an emotional measure of well-being.

While financial considerations are crucial, students also value elements of campus life, including the presence of friends, the size of the school, and the variety of clubs available, as these factors significantly influence their college experience and satisfaction.

DO PARENTS KNOW WHAT THEIR STUDENTS VALUE?



After asking parents what they value – and seeing the comparisons line up with students, we wanted to know if parents understood what their teenagers were thinking when it comes to ranking post-secondary options. In many cases, the students were underestimated by the parents who thought they weren't as concerned about finances as they would be about campus facilities and attending where their friends are attending.





Addressing the Cost of Higher Education with Parents & Students

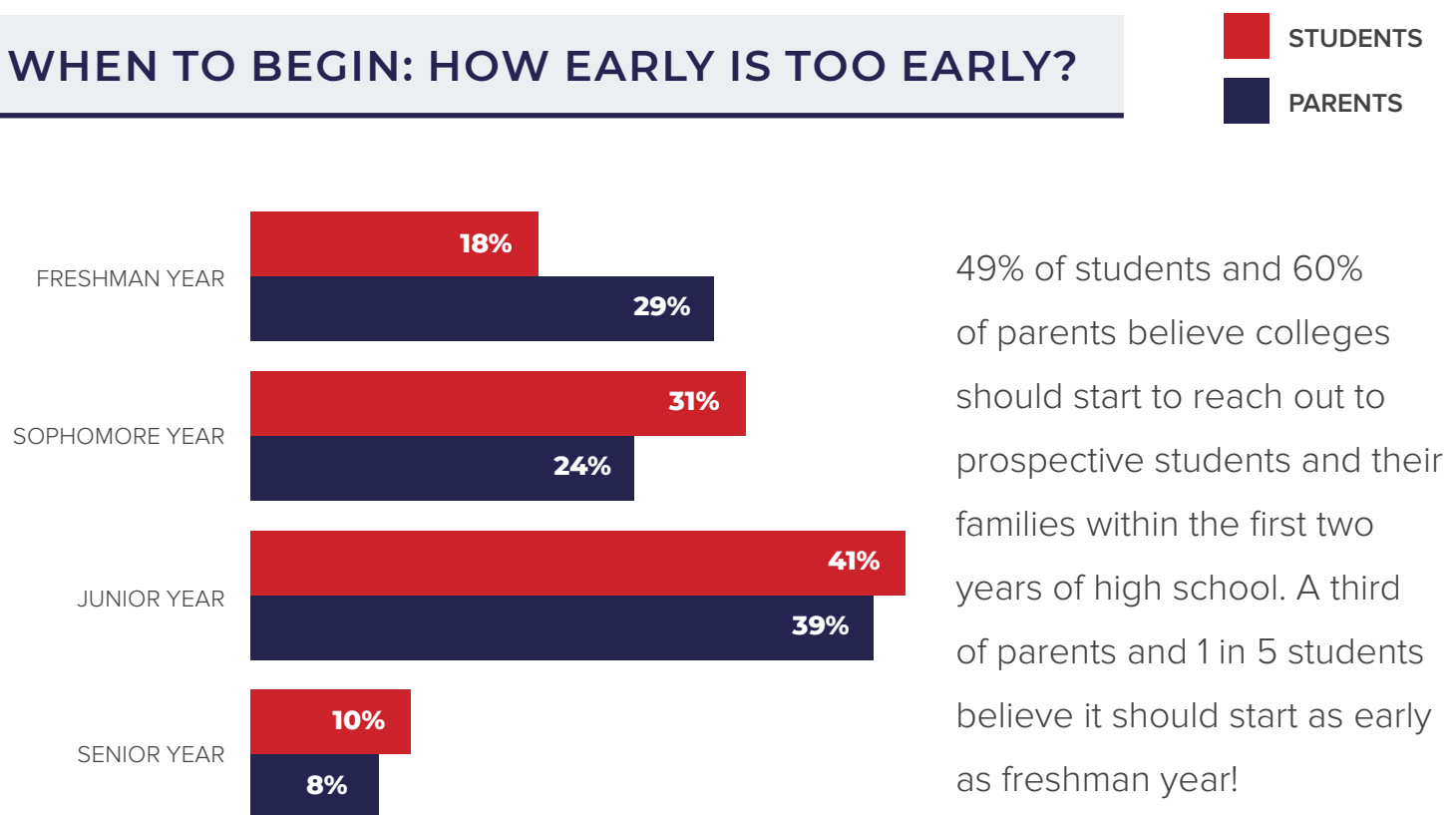
- 1. TRANSPARENT PRICING:** Cost calculators and transparent pricing helps students, and their parents add up the costs and make informed decision.
- 2. SCHOLARSHIPS AND FINANCIAL AID:** Setting the expectation for families can help them determine what scholarships are likely to apply to them. Many schools offer automatic scholarships based on the combination of a students' GPA and standardized test scores. Setting the expectation up front can help students know what's possible for them.
- 3. FINANCIAL PLANNING HELP:** As parents and students begin their search early in their high school years, schools can create digital resource guides on funding higher education including blogs, webinars, savings plans and work-study opportunities.
- 4. VALUE TO COST/ROI:** Not every degree is created equal and job market conditions can vary. Schools can showcase hiring rates for recent graduates and average earnings for new grads by degree program.

Institutions have historically focused on the school amenities, campus life and prestige branding in their enrollment marketing. Today's student is still interested in these shiny objects, but only if they can ascertain whether the price tag is worth the future payoff. For colleges and vocational schools to compete, costs and benefits, scholarships and financial aid must become a part of the up-front messaging targeting students as well as parents.

ENROLLMENT MARKETING INSIGHTS:

How Parents and Students are Engaging with Post-Secondary Advertising

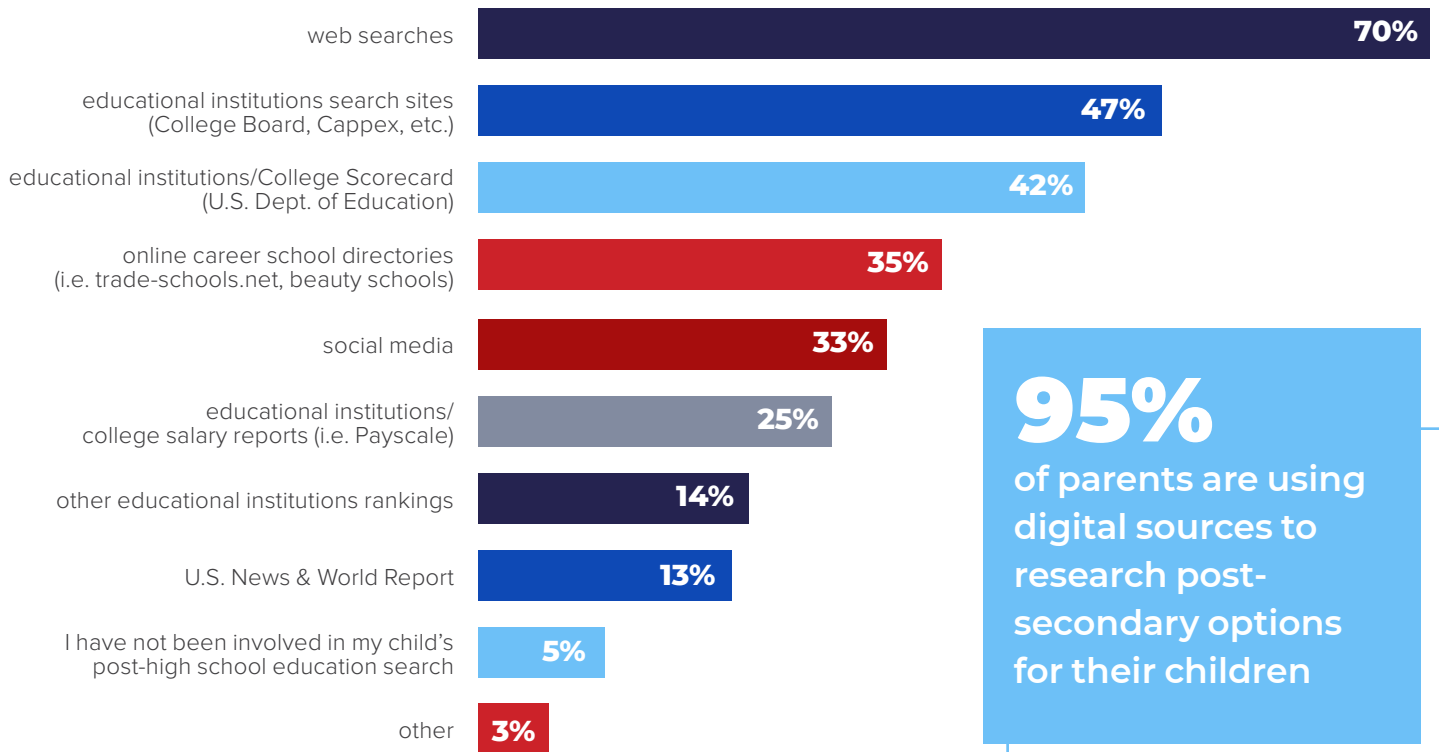
WHEN TO BEGIN: HOW EARLY IS TOO EARLY?



49% of students and 60% of parents believe colleges should start to reach out to prospective students and their families within the first two years of high school. A third of parents and 1 in 5 students believe it should start as early as freshman year!

We know that most students aren't making final decisions in these early years. But brand building takes time, and schools that start building a relationship early can deepen engagement and strengthen the relationship over time ensuring your school makes the application list.

HOW PARENTS USE ONLINE/DIGITAL SOURCES TO GUIDE THEIR POST-SECONDARY SEARCH

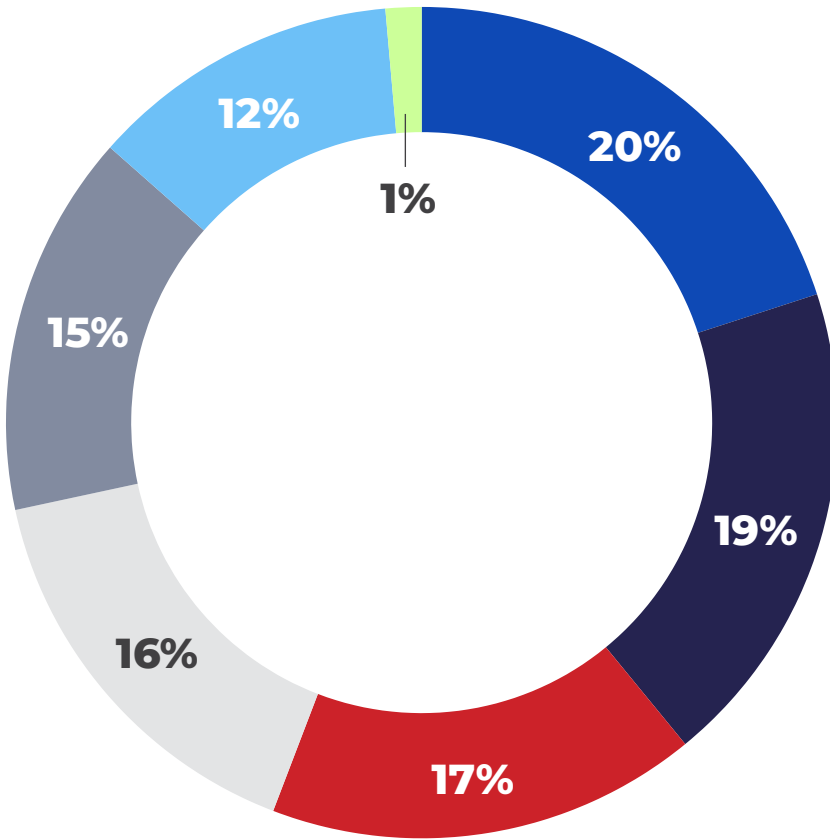


Parents are diving into the digital world to help their kids find the perfect post-secondary path for their situation. A staggering 95% of parents are in on the action, leaving just 5% who are not involved. For institutions to compete, they must have marketing strategies that speak directly to parents.

Good SEO and SEM practices are crucial since 70% of parents are using web searches to do their research. Read our whitepaper [Demystifying SEO for Higher Education](#) for an in-depth guide to digital success.



PARENTS: WHAT OTHER SOURCES ARE YOU USING?



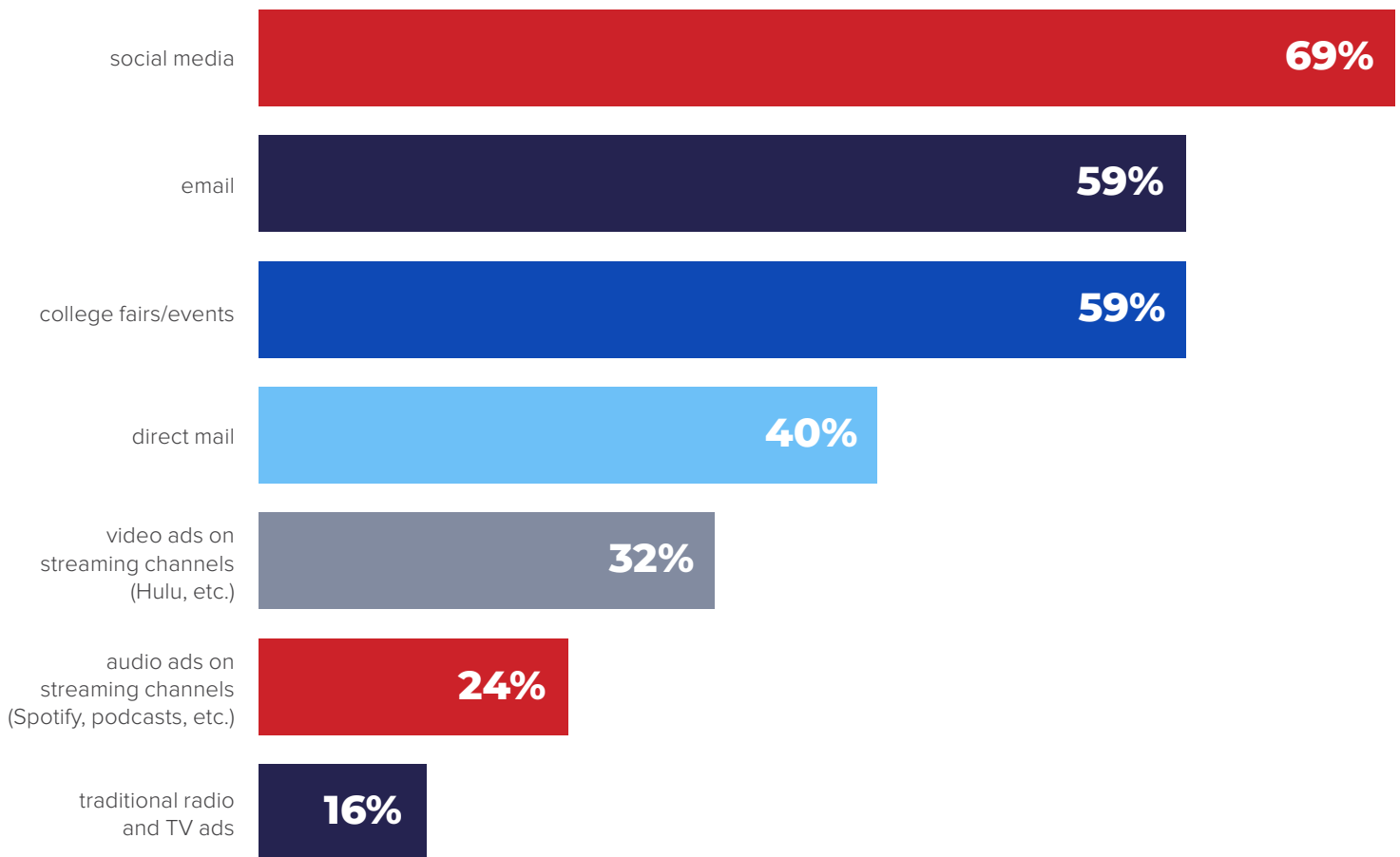
- educational institutions and/or career school open houses
- testing services (ACT, College Board)
- educational institutions guidebooks
- educational institutions fairs
- community-based organizations/ college readiness programs
- job fairs
- other

Education search sites are important, but to rise above the noise, you need a robust branding strategy utilizing search, streaming, search, and SEO to stand out on ranking sites and raise your profile. Read more about streaming strategies in our [whitepaper here](#).

For parents focused on career schools, they are often checking out specialized directories. So, if you are targeting this group, make sure your marketing is set up to meet their needs. It's all about being visible and relevant in the right places.



STUDENTS: WHERE DO YOU PAY ATTENTION TO SCHOOL ADVERTISING MESSAGES THE MOST?



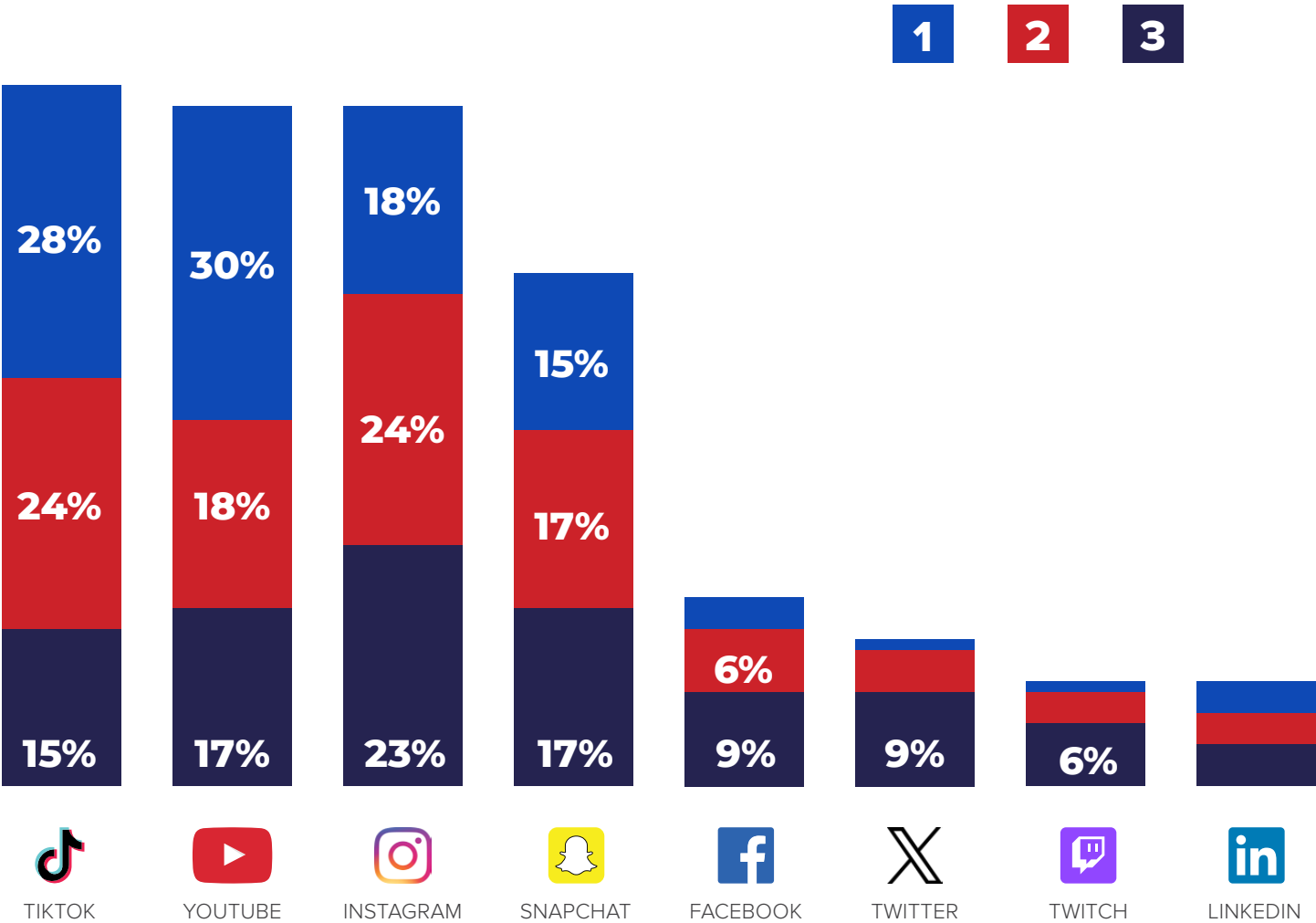
High school students are all about social media—it is their go-to for both information and entertainment. So, if you are trying to catch their eye, you need a solid content plan that includes video storytelling tailored to each platform.

Email is still a powerful tool for getting noticed and building your brand. Some automated emails will be part of the student’s journey, especially once they’re already in talks with a school. But cold emails, from ACT/SAT lists or other sources, can also be effective and they are a high funnel branding play that can introduce the student and parent to the school.

An effective marketing strategy requires schools to reach students on multiple channels to drive them to engage more deeply. Off-line events and college fairs will see greater success if schools have previously warmed up prospects, students, and counselors with social, email and digital advertising touches.

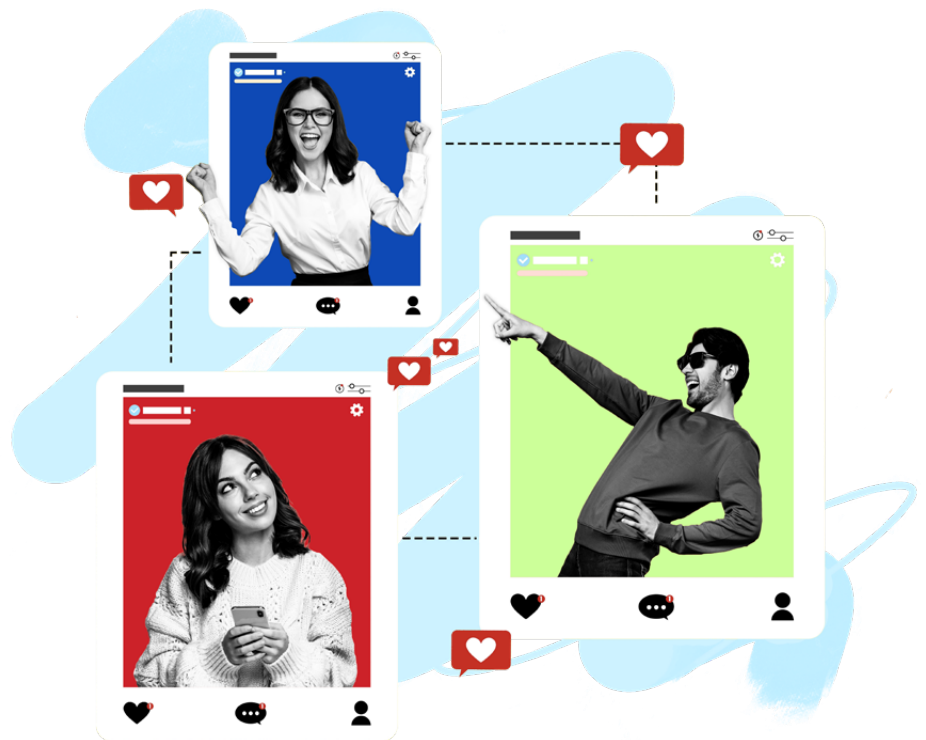
The key is to have a complete view of each prospect, segmenting your approach based on the way each group engages with digital and traditional media.

STUDENTS: WHAT ARE YOUR TOP 3 SOCIAL CHANNELS?

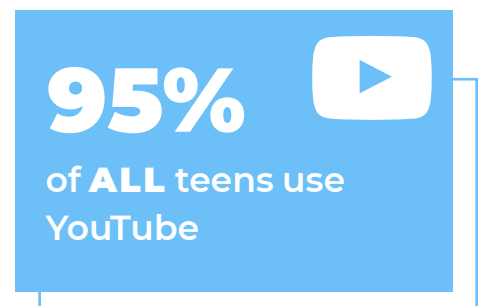


Understanding where higher education prospects spend their time online and tailoring content to those platforms is key to effectively reaching them. We know students don't use one social channel exclusively, but rotate their time based on the user experience and how they prefer to interact with peers.

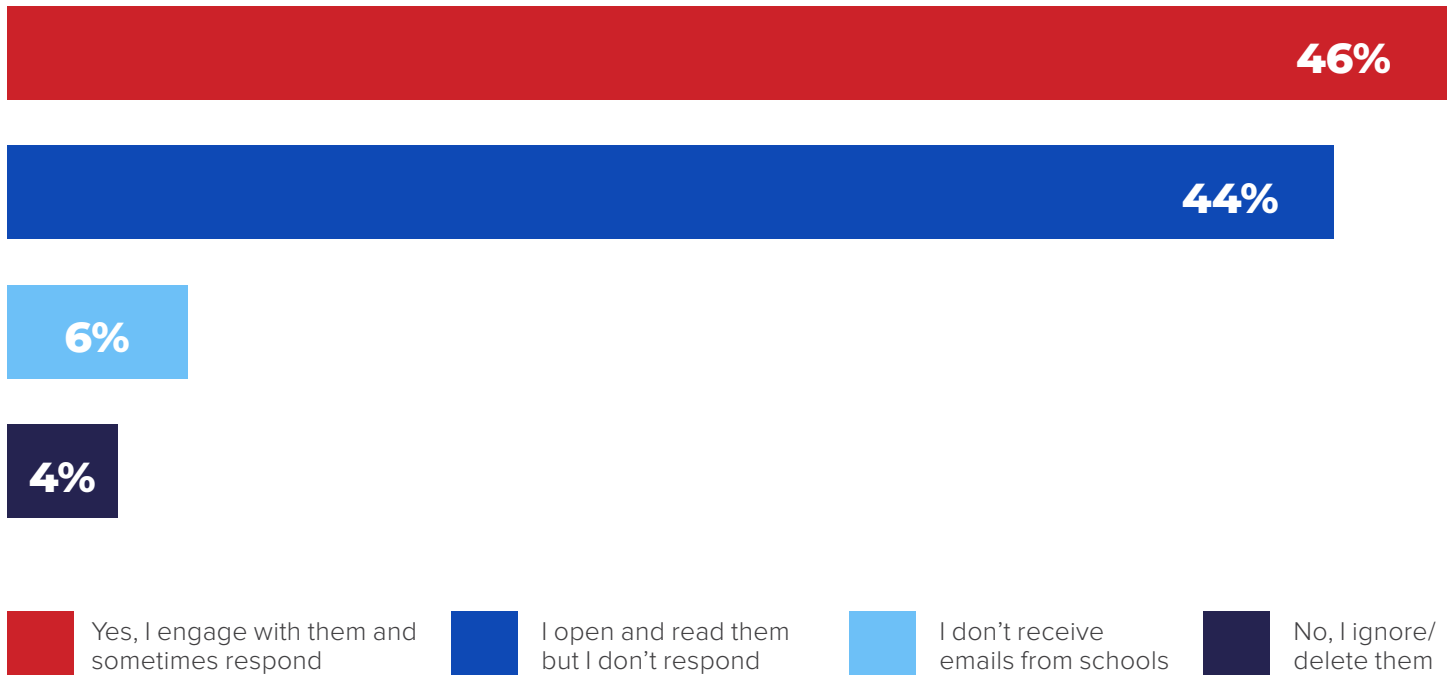
Our survey asked students to rank their top three social platforms. YouTube, TikTok and Instagram are in a virtual tie for total usage followed by Snapchat. It's important for schools to understand the different user experiences on each channel and to build content specifically tailored to make the most of the platforms' strengths.



High school students use social media as their primary source for information and entertainment. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are particularly popular. According to Pew Research Center about 95% of ALL teens use YouTube, making it the most widely used platform overall. TikTok follows closely, with 67% of teens using it, and 16% of them are on it almost constantly. Instagram and Snapchat are also favorites, each used by around 60% of ALL teens.



STUDENTS: HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH EMAIL FROM SCHOOLS?



While social media is a dominant platform where students spend much of their digital time, email remains a crucial tool for reaching them during their search for post-secondary options. Combining email with social media, Search Engine Marketing (SEM), and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) creates a comprehensive strategy that maximizes impact.

Emails provide a direct, personalized communication channel that can deliver detailed information and follow-ups, which is essential for nurturing student interest. Meanwhile, social media engages students with interactive content and real-time updates, SEM ensures visibility in search results, and SEO enhances organic reach. Together, these methods create a multi-faceted approach that effectively captures students' attention and guides them through their decision-making process.

APPLYING THE FINDINGS TO OPTIMIZE YOUR ENROLLMENT STRATEGY

The findings from the 2nd Annual Parents and Students Higher Education Survey provide valuable insights that vocational schools, community colleges, and four-year universities can leverage to optimize their 2025 enrollment marketing strategies.

Vocational Schools

Vocational schools can capitalize on the rising demand for career-oriented education by emphasizing the direct pathways to employment their programs offer. The survey highlights that in a tight job market, students and parents are increasingly looking for education options that lead to immediate job opportunities. Vocational schools should enhance their marketing efforts to showcase success stories of graduates who have quickly transitioned into the workforce.

Additionally, expanding program offerings to include more diverse and advanced training aligned with industry needs can attract a broader range of students. Strengthening partnerships with local businesses and industries will ensure that curricula remain relevant and appealing to prospective students. By offering flexible and accessible learning options, such as online and hybrid programs, vocational schools can cater to students who need to balance education with other commitments.

Community Colleges

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge to four-year education, especially for cost-conscious students and their families. The survey indicates that “*Start here!*” messaging is particularly attractive, as it allows students to save on tuition and housing costs associated with four-year institutions. Community colleges should emphasize their role in providing affordable, high-quality education that can seamlessly transfer to four-year programs. Highlighting partnerships with local industries and the availability of vocational and associate degrees that meet workforce demands can further enhance their appeal. Marketing strategies should focus on the value proposition of starting at a community college, including the potential for reduced student debt and the opportunity to explore different fields of study before committing to a four-year program.

Four-Year Universities and Colleges

Four-year institutions face significant challenges, including declining enrollment and financial strain. To overcome these hurdles, universities and colleges need to become more competitive and innovative in their marketing strategies. Schools should highlight unique programs and experiences that set them apart from other institutions. Developing targeted marketing campaigns that address the specific needs and concerns of high school students and parents separately can deepen engagement with each group. Parents and students are focused on the ROI of higher education and the likelihood that specific majors will result in successful careers immediately following graduation. Promoting this information will help establish trust and drive students and parents to take the next steps in the search journey.

Conclusion

Leveraging the survey's insights empowers vocational schools, community colleges, and universities to craft enrollment marketing strategies that resonate with high school students and their families. To combat enrollment declines and escalating education costs, institutions must adopt a comprehensive approach. This strategy should highlight affordability, showcase strong employment outcomes, and articulate the enduring value of higher education. By implementing precision-targeted messaging and sophisticated multi-channel digital campaigns, institutions can not only attract but also retain a diverse and vibrant student body.

This approach is critical for ensuring long-term growth, financial sustainability, and most importantly, for fulfilling higher education's fundamental mission: empowering the next generation with the knowledge and skills to thrive in an ever-evolving global economy. 🎓

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About Advance Education

Advance Education is a digital marketing agency specializing in enrollment marketing for higher education, community colleges, and vocational schools. With partnerships with traditional four-year universities, community colleges, and technical and career schools, we help institutions level up marketing strategies for student recruitment as well as alumni outreach.

Advance Education provides sophisticated enrollment marketing campaigns for the digital age.

What makes us unique? We focus on student success while empowering post-secondary education institutions to meet their enrollment goals. We craft customized, adaptable marketing campaigns, propelling institutions toward their enrollment goals, all while accounting for the human element.

Connections matter to students, and we excel in facilitating these crucial links for you. We can help you nurture lasting, meaningful relationships that support student success through data-driven insights and bespoke campaigns.

We also understand that no two organizations are alike – that's why we personalize our campaigns to each individual institution. Whether you're a 2-year college, a vocational school, or a graduate degree program, we can help you build meaningful connections with prospective students.

Learn more about [our approach](#) to see how we can transform your marketing campaigns.

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