

# 2017 Research Report

# High School Counselors and Their Role in College Planning



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**RUFFALO**<sup>SM</sup>  
**NOEL LEVITZ**



In partnership with the American School Counselor Association



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## INTRODUCTION

School counselors have helped high school students find their way to college, sparking the college dreams of many generations. Yet, college and university enrollment leaders know little about this group of professionals and their role in college planning today. In the summer of 2016, Ruffalo Noel Levitz collaborated with the NAIA and CampusESP to learn more about high school counselors' perceptions of their students' college planning journey and what they do to help students find their way through the college recruitment process.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the survey, "2016 High School Counselors and Their Role in College Planning." The survey obtained interviews with a nationally representative sample of high school counselors (with a population of 6,300 and a response rate of 7 percent). The surveys were conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz during June 2016, with the responses being anonymous and confidential.

## COUNSELOR DEMOGRAPHICS

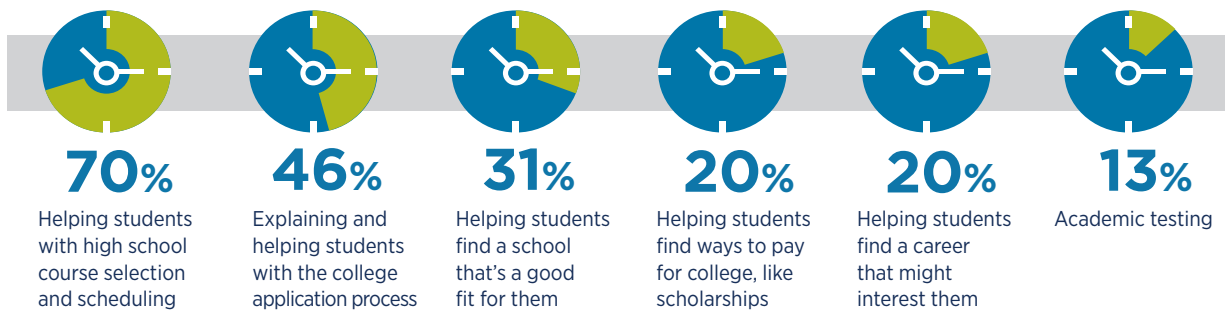
REGION		TYPE OF SCHOOL		YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	
International	3%	Charter	4%	1 - 5 years	28%
Midwest	21%	Private	15%	6 - 10 years	24%
Northeast	23%	Public, rural	28%	11 years or more	48%
South	29%	Public, suburban	39%		
West	24%	Public, urban	15%		

The reader needs to keep in mind that this study is national in scope. By no means is it designed to take the place of research that is unique to your institution, your specific recruiting needs, or the students in your region.

# THE ROLE OF HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN COLLEGE PLANNING ACTIVITIES

While counselors report that they spend the majority of their time helping students select and schedule their high school courses, they also spend a significant amount of time on college planning activities that range from the application process to finding a school to college financing.

## COLLEGE PLANNING SUPPORT ACTIVITIES: How Counselors Spend Time



NOTE: Percent of counselors who ranked activity as either first or second among the six options.

### Implications



- Counselors need current information to help as they guide students in course selection in preparation for college coursework.
- Provide easy access to contact information (especially direct email addresses and phone lines) that will get high school counselors directly to campus staff who can answer their questions.

## FACTORS COUNSELORS RATE AS IMPORTANT TO RECOMMEND A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

Counselors fully understand the importance of academic programs and financial aid/cost in the college choice process for their students.

### IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY FEATURES: When Counselors Are Deciding Whether or Not to Recommend a School to Students

School has programs that the student is interested in	99%
Availability of financial aid and scholarships	98%
Cost	97%
Quality of the program that the student is interested in	97%
Overall reputation of the school	91%
Quality of faculty as teachers	84%
Percentage of students who are admitted to college (selectivity)	77%
Quality of athletic programs (if the student is an athlete)	73%
Campus social life	58%

NOTE: Percent of counselors who rated the factor very important or important.

### Implications



- Make sure that counselors have the academic information they need to share with parents and students in various grades and from different backgrounds.
- Establish a multichannel marketing and recruitment plan that embraces transparency, engagement, and discussion around cost with the high school counselors as a key influencer.
- Minority and first-generation students tend to overestimate the costs of college and underestimate the availability of financial aid. Schools that offer direct assistance with the application and financial aid process see better results than those that just “distribute” information on the process. How are you prepared to help counselors know about these processes so they can help students?

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS

Almost 60 percent of counselors recommend applying to between four and five colleges and universities.

### APPLICATION NUMBER: Counselors' Recommendation for Number of College/University Applications That Students Submit



## PREFERRED COMMUNICATION METHODS

Email is the preferred method of communication for high school counselors, as it is for prospective students (see E-expectations, 2016 Report).

### METHODS FOR RECEIVING COLLEGE UPDATES: Counselors' Preferred Methods for College/University News About Important Changes



### Implications



- While nearly a third of counselors prefer to receive updates during visits by admissions representatives, an ongoing flow of email communications will ensure that communication between your institution and these valuable decision influencers is steady and not dependent upon a single channel.

## TOP RESOURCES COUNSELORS USE TO SUPPORT COLLEGE SEARCH

High school counselors rated visits from college representatives and college planning websites as their top resources for helping with the college planning process.

### **SOURCES OF INFORMATION: Most Useful and Practical Sources Counselors Use When Helping Their Students Search for the Right College**

College and university representatives who visit your school	75%
College planning websites	60%
Contacting the college or university by phone with specific questions	41%
Google and other search engines	41%
Contacting the college or university by email with specific questions	37%
Printed college guides	14%
Catalogues sent by the college or university	8%
Social networking sites	7%
Direct mail colleges and universities send you	6%

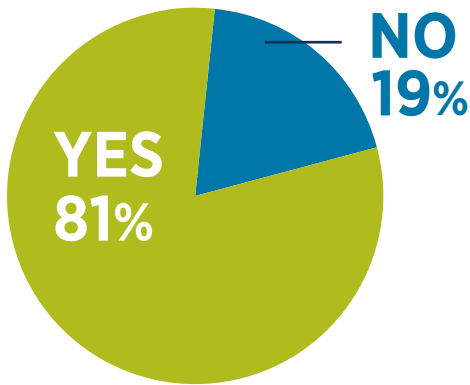
NOTE: Percent of counselors who rated the sources as one of four most useful/practical sources (survey participants were asked to select the four most useful sources from a list of 11).



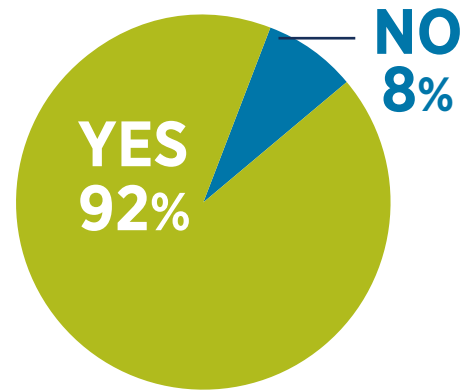
## USE OF ELECTRONIC SOURCES

**Over 80 percent** of high school counselors surveyed work with parents on how to use electronic sources to help students search for colleges. Nearly all counselors surveyed share specific links to websites when helping students search for colleges.

### WORK WITH PARENTS ON HOW TO USE ELECTRONIC SOURCES: To Help Students Search for Colleges



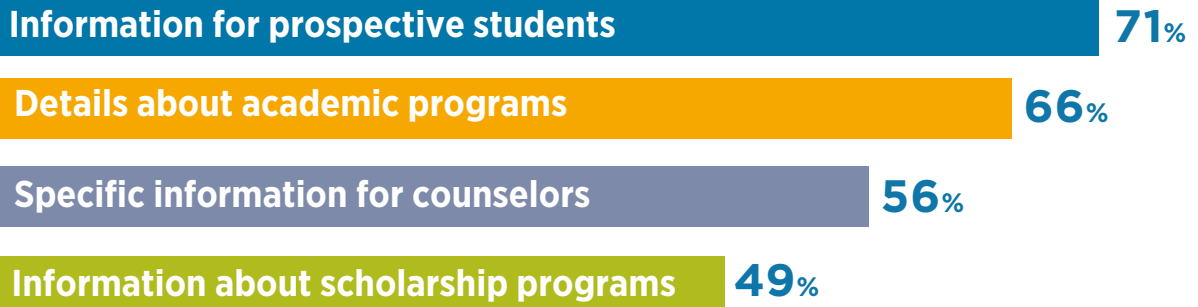
### PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LINKS TO WEBSITES: When Helping Find Colleges



### Implications



- Engage with college planning sites to ensure that they present your institution accurately with current links to your site, social outlets, and contact information.
- Admissions and market staff have the opportunity to support high school counselors in their engagement with parents through the creation of website resources directed specifically toward families considering their college options. Counselor- and parent-specific sections of the website, newsletters, and social media content resources should be highlighted in an ongoing flow of messages to counselors, encouraging them to share links and resources directly with students and families.
- The results from this question inspire the idea for admissions counselors to craft email messages to counselors that carefully curate links to specific assets within their websites. These messages should be easy to forward to students and families.
- Content should include a blend of value proposition messaging, deadline, and event reminders and links, not to the campus home page, but to specific pages within the site that highlight academic program options, financial aid and scholarship resources, and social media assets.

**WEBSITE INFORMATION:****What Counselors Look for When Reviewing College/University Websites*****Implications***

- Your digital presence is key. It's critical to understand how your institution is perceived via a web search. Having effective SEO is a necessity, not a luxury as is a comprehensive, easy-to-navigate website with robust search functionality. Just as you plan a campus visit experience and track visit metrics, you must do the same for your web presence. Understand your website visitors, what drives web activity, where students, counselors, and parents are seeking information, and how you can best facilitate their online experience.
- Recognize that your website is how students, parents, and counselors will “reply” most often—so make sure the important answers and next steps are easy to find.
- Many will respond to your initial outreach by first visiting your institution online. Infuse your site with compelling and easily accessible content. Place particular emphasis on academic programs, scholarships/financial aid, and the admissions process/requirements.
- Use search engine optimization tactics to ensure counselors (and their students) can easily find your content related to programs, cost, admissions process, events and deadlines, athletics, and student life.
- Web and marketing teams have taken various approaches to their website architecture and content strategy to support high school counselors as an important user group. The data from this study makes a compelling case for the creation of specific content channels targeted toward high school counselors. Content for this resource should include:
  - An overview of the academic programs/areas of emphasis and an alpha-ordered list of programs, each linked to a specific page with details about the distinctive benefits and qualities of each program and views into the success of alumni.
  - A summary of the institution’s resources for exploration of cost, financial aid, and scholarships.
  - Upcoming admissions deadlines, open house events, counselor travel schedules, counselor contact information (by territory), campus visit options, and enrollment process details.



## PARENTS AND THE COLLEGE PLANNING PROCESS

Parents play a key role in the college selection process. At minimum, the parent’s perception of college and their expectations of the student to attend (or not attend) college can greatly affect college enrollment.

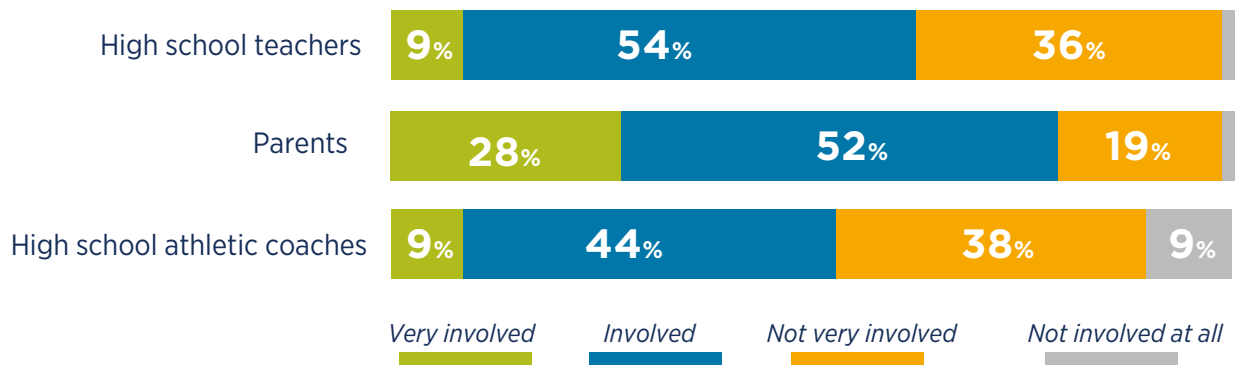
It is increasingly important to educate the full family to accelerate student success and persistence, even as early as the application process. According to Radford, Ifill, and Lew (2015), 63 percent of students talk with their high school counselors about career options beyond high school, and over 50 percent of parents surveyed had also engaged in conversations with counselors.

Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015) reported that those students whose parents were involved in the postsecondary planning process were much more likely to initiate contact with a college than those students reporting their parents were not involved. Additionally, those families where parents were not involved resulted in much lower probability that the student would use social media or even Internet searches to explore colleges, than families with even some parental involvement.

Radford, Ifill, and Lew (2015) found similar results. Families that have spoken with a counselor are much more likely to visit a college, and those students with overlying expectations from their parents of attending college were 98 percent more likely to take a college tour.

This study reinforces the parental role. Eighty percent of counselors perceive that parents are very involved or involved in the process.

### INVOLVEMENT IN COLLEGE PLANNING: Counselors’ Perceptions of Those Involved in College Planning



### Implications



- Create communications and information that can speak to parents, teachers, counselors, and coaches who are involved with the college planning process.
- Help teachers, parents, coaches, and counselors share useful information about your institution with their students.

## HOW PARENTS HELP WITH COLLEGE PLANNING

According to the survey results, counselors see parents involved in the following college planning activities:



NOTE: Percent of counselors who rated the activity as one of four areas that parents help their children with when it comes to college planning.

### *Implications*



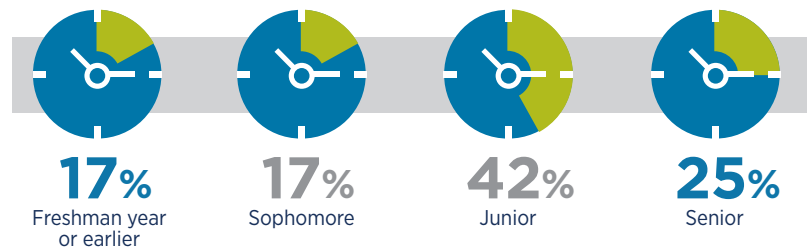
- Many parents, specifically those who did not attend college themselves (or did not attend in the United States) are unfamiliar with most of the terms we use to describe the different higher education institutions and options available to students. Make sure counselors have information they can easily share and use with parents so that this early part of the planning process is easier.
- Get campus visit information to the counselors that they can forward to the parents. *For example, when are campus visit dates and how do families register for them (online, phone)?*

## TIMING OF COLLEGE PLANNING

According to survey respondents, only one-third of high school students start college planning before their junior year.

College planning does not necessarily mean “contacting” colleges and universities students may be checking out. Students today wait longer to become an inquiry, preferring “stealth” shopping. We know (Bermejo, 2016) that nearly one in four rising high school seniors has not started their college search by the end of their junior year, and first-generation students are more likely to exhibit this behavior than non-first-generation students.

### EARLY and LATE college searches WHEN DO STUDENTS BEGIN SEARCHING?



### Implications



- Are your materials and communications for high school counselors (print and/or web) created assuming all students start their planning at the same time?
- Minority and first-generation students tend to start their college planning later in high school and tend to skip the “search” phase. Are you prepared for that? How can you help counselors assist this population?
- Waiting until the senior year to educate students on financial aid and college costs is too late.
- Continue to work with high school counselors with information specifically geared toward high school seniors who may be starting their college planning as late as the fall of their senior year. Bermejo (2016) shows that, especially with populations more likely to start their college search as seniors, it’s important to be proactive. You should include counselor outreach as part of your continuous student search campaigns—with clear and accessible information about opportunities—that extend until at least November of the senior year. This is particularly important if your institution attracts a substantial number of first-generation and minority students. These initial search programs should utilize four channels, i.e., direct mail, email, phone, and emerging digital channels (such as retargeting and social media advertising), to increase the probability of engaging these students and their parents.
- Provide opportunities for students, counselors, and parents to contact your institution at any point in their search process and to receive answers to their questions in a way that does not make them feel they are part of generic marketing.

# HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' COLLEGE PLANNING CONCERNS

Counselors rate grades/test scores and ability to pay/finances as the top issues their students worry about as they are searching for a college.

## COUNSELORS' VIEWS OF THEIR STUDENTS' CONCERNS: Issues Students Worry About When Searching for a College



*NOTE: Percent of counselors who rated the issues that high school students worry about as Very Concerned and Concerned.*

Among the most important influencers of college choice is cost. According to Bermejo (2016), 35 percent of rising seniors report that financing their college education will be quite difficult, and this figure rises to 42 percent for first-generation students. Meanwhile, less than 15 percent of students report that financing their college education will not be difficult, and in the same study 80 percent of rising seniors report financial aid is an important part of their college planning. Nearly three-quarters of parents share this belief.

We also know that some families do little research on college financing and planning before the student's senior year, and that may already be too late. Three-quarters of rising seniors and their parents report that they have done very little or no research about financial aid. Importantly, this figure rises to 80 percent for first-generation students and among all families who say financing a college education will be "quite difficult" (Bermejo, 2016). Simply put, families who need the most financial assistance are often least likely to have researched scholarship and financial aid opportunities as they transition to their senior year of high school.

We need to talk affordability earlier and in more detail, and that means we need to get information to the high school counselors about financing and financial aid way earlier than we historically have.

### Implications

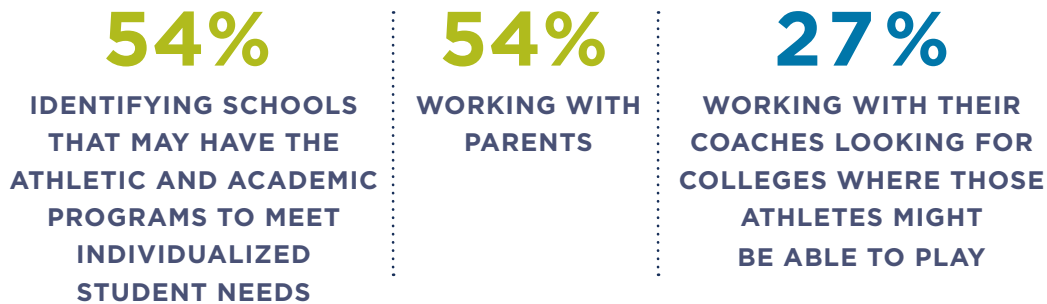


- It's critical to start the financing conversation early and embed it in your communication plans no later than the start of junior year. Evidence is clear that institutions are allowing others to inform students and families about their affordability. Own your affordability message.
- Some students are already ruling institutions out on sticker price alone: provide them an opportunity to explore what their price might look like beyond "sticker." Ensure that your net price calculator is actively promoted with high school counselors and that they can attend a webinar or an on-demand training so they can help families understand how it works. It should be a primary call to action on your website at the same level as "request information," "apply for admission," and "schedule a campus visit."

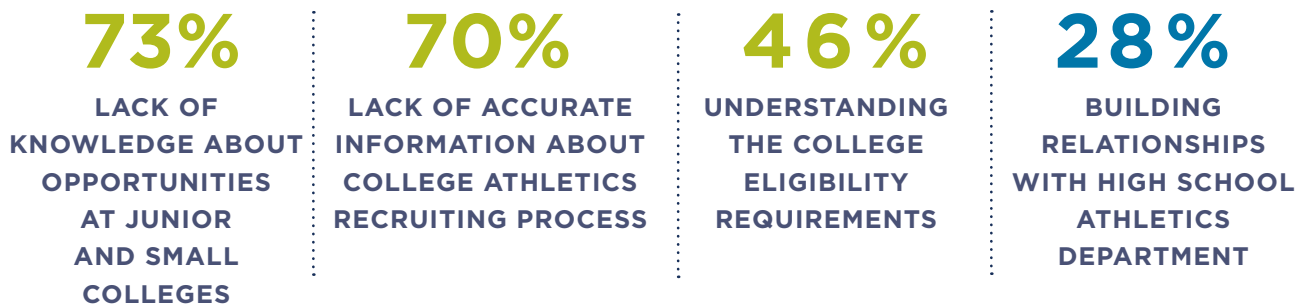
## HOW COUNSELORS HELP ATHLETES

For many high school students, the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate athletics is among the primary factors in the college search process. According to Bermejo (2016), 36 percent of high school rising seniors intend to participate in intercollegiate athletics, and over half of them expect to receive financial aid based on their athletic abilities. The National Federation of State High School Associations (2016), reports that over 8 million high school students participated in high school sports in the 2015-16 school year, a number that has increased annually for more than 25 consecutive years (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2014). NAIA and NCAA four-year institutions together offer intercollegiate athletic programs involving more than 500,000 men and women, which means **that only one in every 16 high school athletes (about six percent) will find a roster spot in college athletics (NCAA, 2016).**

### COUNSELORS' ROLE IN COLLEGE PLANNING FOR HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES



### COUNSELOR CHALLENGES: When Working With High School Athletes



When high school counselors help high school athletes in their college search, their biggest challenges are lack of knowledge about junior/small college opportunities, lack of familiarity with the recruiting process, and the eligibility requirements surrounding college sports.

## Implications



- In order to make high school counselors more successful at helping high school student athletes find the right school, more time and attention must be given to educating them on the athletic recruiting and eligibility requirements surrounding college sports.
- Make sure your admission requirements are clear and easy to understand for all students, including athletes.
- Access to college athletics can open doors to financial assistance. Among the 250 NAIA member universities/colleges, student-athletes have access annually to \$424 million in athletically related financial aid. Greater awareness of the financial assistance available at colleges and universities is critical to help reduce the concern around student-athlete ability to pay for college.
- High school coaches can help bridge the gap in information about college athletics recruiting and eligibility. More than half of high school counselors responding to our survey reported high school coaches being involved or very involved in high school athletes' college searches. Getting the right information to the counselors so that they can forward it to the appropriate coaches will become increasingly important.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Counselors and parents are the most influential people in a student's search for the right college. Assuring that your marketing messages resonate with students is key and can encourage them to engage with their counselors and parents in the all-important question: "What do you know about this college?"

- Better informing parents and counselors early about the college application process, its financial and affordability opportunities, and the expectations of both academic and co-curricular education can greatly increase the likelihood of a student applying to and enrolling in college.
- With enrollment growth slowing in many regions of the country, more first-generation and non-Caucasian students are key to building a strong enrollment pipeline. RNL Demand Builder™ aligns with our partners' targeted enrollment goals to generate the best return on marketing efforts with the right students.
- Understanding the student mindset is critical. Reach out to RNL to learn how we meet the student mindset today with our student engagement campaigns.
- Assure that your website meets the needs of high school counselors, parents, and students. RNL's web services team can provide a digital marketing assessment to provide you with this level of detail.
- Affordability is a significant concern. RNL TrueCost Calculator™ provides easy access for counselors to help students run cost estimates, early in the process. In addition, RNL Advanced FinAid Solutions™ coupled with the RNL Affordability Predictor, positions campus partners to send the right financial aid information as early as the sophomore year in their RNL Demand Builder Campaigns.

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## Questions? Call 800.876.1117

We hope you found this report to be helpful and informative. If you have questions and would like to schedule a complimentary conversation, please call us or email [ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com](mailto:ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com). Our consultants are also available to come to your campus to conduct assessments of marketing and enrollment management operations.

For more information, visit [www.RuffaloNL.com](http://www.RuffaloNL.com).

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**Ruffalo Noel Levitz** provides higher education and nonprofit organizations with technology-enabled services, software, and consulting for enrollment and fundraising management. Since 1973, we have partnered with more than 3,000 colleges and universities and numerous nonprofit clients worldwide. For more than 20 years, we have conducted national surveys to assist higher education with benchmarking its performance.

**NAIA:** The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) is a governing body of small athletics programs that are dedicated to character-driven intercollegiate athletics. Since 1937, the NAIA has administered programs and championships in proper balance with the overall college educational experience. Each year more than 60,000 student-athletes have the opportunity to play college sports at NAIA member institutions.

**CampusESP:** CampusESP is a strategic parent and family engagement platform enabling institutions to keep the most important influencers of their students informed—parents. From impacting enrollment, to student success, to annual giving, keeping parents effectively engaged has proven to be critical for institutions looking to better support their institutional goals. In fact, 94 percent of admissions officers say engaging parents helps with recruiting efforts. Institutions can reduce administrative backlog and provide a FERPA-compliant system.

**American School Counselor Association:** The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is the foundation that expands the image and influence of school counselors through advocacy, leadership, collaboration, and systemic change. ASCA empowers school counselors with the knowledge, skills, linkages, and resources to promote student success in the school, the home, the community, and the world. With a membership of school counseling professionals from around the world, ASCA focuses on providing professional development, enhancing school counseling programs and researching effective school counseling practices.

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