2017 E-Expectations Trend Report

Discover the Keys to Greater Engagement With Both High School Students and Parents

RUFFALO NOEL LEVITZ

NRCCUA

OmniUpdate®

CollegeWeek Live

INTRODUCTION

An initial measure of success for any higher education enrollment or marketing effort is engagement. And, while students and parents may be engaged with several prospective schools, stronger engagement with your institution may affect their final choice.

With the value of engagement in mind, the 2017 E-Expectations report from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, NRCCUA, OmniUpdate, and CollegeWeekLive explores the keys of engagement by answering four guiding questions.

1. **When and how do parents engage in the college admission process?**
2. **How do parents and students engage when they seek information?**
3. **When and how do parents and students engage to signal their interest?**
4. **What information do parents and students want, and how do they prefer to receive it?**

These guiding questions align directly with four action steps that encapsulate the student and parent journey in making their final choice of a higher learning institution.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- Results from online surveys conducted between 3/28/17 and 4/11/17

- List used was MyCollegeOptions

- 4,274 students from high school sophomores through seniors participated

- 2,138 parents of sophomores through seniors participated

To help you create and execute an engagement strategy that optimizes online, digital, and social media channels, you'll find key takeaways and practical recommendations in each section. We're sure you'll find **new insights into what resonates most with parents and students**, making it easier for you to create your own engagement strategy **for tangible results**.

BEGINNING ENGAGEMENT

## When and how do parents engage in the college admission process?

Where does it start?

Discovery and **signaling interest** are the typical parent behaviors as they begin their engagement with a college or university. Although we'll go into greater depth with our findings on signaling interest on page 11, it's worth noting that 90 percent of parents of seniors say they contacted at least one college on behalf of their student.

Discovery for parents starts online, with 75-80 percent of parents supporting their student's college decision process by visiting the website.

Parents become more engaged as the decision time gets closer

PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS THAT HAVE ACTED TO SUPPORT ENROLLMENT

80% of parents of sophomores

89% of parents of juniors

98% of parents of seniors
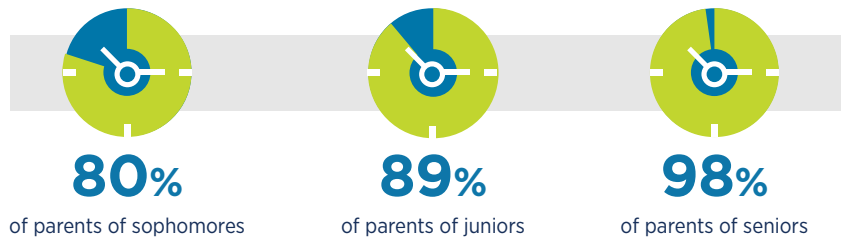
FACT: Many parents of seniors complete applications on behalf of students

COMPLETED COLLEGE APPLICATIONS FOR THEIR STUDENT

Parents of sophomores **4%**

Parents of juniors **4%**

PARENTS OF SENIORS **62%**

PARENTS VALUE "REAL" OVER "RAH-RAH"

When asked what a college or university could share through its website, social media channels, email, or messaging that would help strengthen their interest, parents clearly valued authenticity. They wanted genuine portrayals of campus life and school experiences. A small sampling of comments show that parents are looking for:

• "a realistic perspective, rather than the rah-rah 'this is the greatest school ever' pitch"

• "a true feel of life there... on a daily basis"

• "an honest view of the school, with real images and real people"

• "images of the campus and what it's like to live there"

• "a possibility to interact with current students for... (their) perspective"

BEGINNING ENGAGEMENT: TAKEAWAYS

The early stages of engagement are crucial to establishing a foundation of interest and discovery through influential channels like the school website. Signaling that interest is part of these initial stages. This is truer for parents who report that they are much more engaged (80-98 percent) than students (60-74 percent) early on.

Targeting parents sooner than you might currently be doing could be an effective strategy. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind.

ALWAYS KEEP PARENTS IN MIND, EVEN FOR WHAT YOU MIGHT PRESUME TO BE STUDENT MATERIAL

Parents are important partners in the college planning process. Expanded parent communication and programming are essential in college marketing and enrollment management. **Realize that when you communicate with students, parents are also reading the materials.** The days of only engaging students are long past.

INCLUDE THEM IN THE PROCESS

There is real opportunity to include parents in the enrollment and application process sooner, creating an initial bond. Open-ended responses from parents indicate that they are looking for tools, lines of communication, and processes that make it easy for them to engage early on. **Ensure you have paths to communicate with parents of juniors and sophomores, many of which are not engaged in the application process yet.** For example, RNL Demand Builder engages parents through the important lens of affordability in the beginning of the process.

KEEP THE PIPELINE FLOWING

If you don't already have a plan to develop an early pipeline of engagers with messaging and guidance specifically for sophomores and juniors, you need to step it up. **Start outreach efforts and campaigns earlier than you usually might.** This will bear fruit down the road.

STOKE THE FIRE

Catching them early will **create connections with parents who are enthused and energized at the initial exploration stage of the decision-making process.** Latching on to this enthusiasm will give your institution the most opportunity to have an active prospect.

SEEKING INFORMATION

How do parents and students engage when they seek information?

FACT: Search engines rule how they find information on your site

High school students and their parents use **search engines** more than site navigation to find specific information within a college's website.

Site navigation and **internal search tools** come in at second and third place, respectively.

VIRTUAL TOURS?

Virtual tours are a buzz in the industry, but the return is low according to our data. They also tend to be expensive to produce, and dollars may be better spent on website and SEO. Authentic and student-focused content is key.

Multiple channels a must for information gathering

The college decision-making process has flipped. It's not as much about controlling information anymore; it's about providing a multichannel experience. When you look at the top five influencers below, they represent **a diverse array of influential channels**, and their impact is spread across all student classes, as well as parents.

TOP 5 INFORMATION RESOURCE CATEGORIES THAT INFLUENCE STUDENT INTEREST

1 WEBSITE top pick for all classes

2 CALCULATOR 2nd for seniors, 3rd for juniors

3 EMAIL 2nd for juniors and sophomores, 3rd for seniors

4 VIDEOS (authentic classroom, campus)— 4th for all classes

5 PRINTED BROCHURES 3rd for sophomores

What about parents?

All three parent groups rate college **websites**, **financial aid calculator** results, and **print materials** as most influential.

Online calculators are almost as much of an influence as websites, especially with seniors. That makes a fully customized and user-friendly net price calculator a vital engagement tool. Explore the **RNL TrueCost Calculator™**.

What if they have a bad experience on a school website?

30%
of seniors
will call
the school.

27%
of juniors
will look on other
websites.

25%
of sophomores
will ask a parent or counselor
for help, or will look on
other websites (tie).

**ALL
CLASSES**
Parents will call
the school.

Request for Information (RFI) on mobile

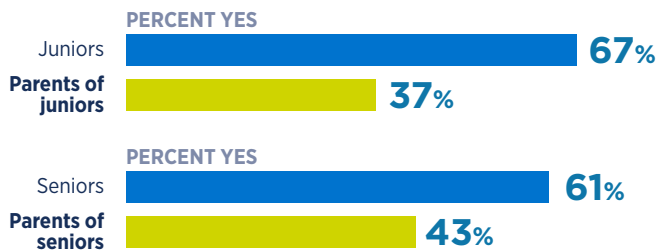RFI forms were completed on mobile by **41 percent of seniors** and **38 percent of juniors**.

Parents have less experience completing forms on mobile, but RFI was the highest rated **(26-33 percent)** activity.

FACT: 60 percent of students use college planning websites, as do 40 percent of parents

Almost **two-thirds of students use college planning sites**, but the **inverse is true with parents**.

HAVE YOU EVER USED A WEBSITE TO HELP YOU WITH YOUR COLLEGE PLANNING?

PERCENT YES
Juniors **67**%
Parents of juniors **37**%

PERCENT YES
Seniors **61**%
Parents of seniors **43**%

Note: Sophomore data was not available for this item.

Top planning sites

✓ **Collegeboard.org**
(**74-75%**)

✓ **myCollegeOptions**
(**64-77%**, juniors at the higher end)

✓ **Fastweb**, **Naviance**, and **Niche** were all between **34-37%** for seniors

Digital ads continue to play a key role with increasing impact

Digital ads are continuing to emerge as a prevalent way to find information. Compared to the 2016 study, there has been an 8 percent increase in ad clicks for both juniors and seniors.

Digital ads are most effective at the top of the funnel. Students earlier in the process pay more attention to these, like parents. Based on the number of respondents that clicked, digital ads are much more about students than parents.

Based on the diverse array of the top influences cited on page 5, a digital ad should be one component of a multichannel strategy. **If students are more aware of your school through other channels, such as email, they are much more likely to click your ad.**

FACT: Paid digital ads are often clicked, and sophomores lead the way

HAVE YOU EVER CLICKED ON AN AD FOR A COLLEGE THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE SEEN ONLINE? THIS COULD HAVE BEEN ON A WEBSITE, OR ADS IN SEARCH RESULTS, SOCIAL MEDIA, OR SOME OTHER WEBSITE.

SOPHOMORES ARE CLICKING ON PAID LINKS

Sophomores **61**%

Parents of sophomores **38**%

JUNIORS ARE CLICKING ON PAID LINKS

Juniors **55**%

Parents of juniors **36**%

SENIORS ARE CLICKING ON PAID LINKS

Seniors **47**%

Parents of seniors **33**%

Was the student or parent aware of the school before clicking an ad?

46 percent of both seniors and their parents had visited the website for the school before.

53 percent of sophomores and 45 percent of their parents were aware of the school, but had never visited their website.

52 percent of juniors and 51 percent of their parents were aware of the school, but had never visited their website.

A low percentage **(10-15 percent)** of digital ads were clicked by all students when they had never heard of the school before. The same was true of parents **(11-17 percent)**. This implies that paid strategies are likely to be most effective with students and parents who already have some knowledge of, or engagement with, a college or university.

Leading digital venues for ads

Ads on **Google** led all students at 73-76 percent, and parents at 71-72 percent, followed by **Facebook. YouTube** is also a top driver for digital ads with students, but not as popular with parents.

. . . .

FACT: Snapchat is #1 for daily use by high school students, but Facebook is #1 for learning about a college

WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA IS USED TO SEEK INFORMATION?

- Just over half of seniors use **Facebook** daily, compared to 45 percent of juniors and 41 percent of sophomores.
- Of those students who use it, 53-68 percent have visited a school-specific Facebook page.
- 74-76 percent of parents primarily use it.
- Both students and parents cite it as the best social media channel for learning more.

Parents most often engage with a college-specific Facebook page by clicking "like."

- Sophomores lead the way in use of **Snapchat** by a small margin.
- 67-74 percent of students use it daily.
- Only 11-13 percent say it is a best resource for school discovery, and just 12-16 percent use it in their research.
- Only 15-21 percent of parents use it daily.

- More sophomores than juniors and seniors use **YouTube** by a small margin.
- Students cite it as one of the best social media sites for learning more about a school.

- Parents rely on **Google+** as a leading option for learning more about a college or university.
- However, it is used with much less frequency compared to **Google+** usage among students.

- Sophomores also lead the way in use of **Instagram**.
- About 29 percent of students say it is one of the best social media sites for learning more about a school.

More than half of students find social links through the school's website. The second-highest rated method was through links in emails sent by the school. Parents also used school websites to find social links (48-65 percent).

FACT: Students' #1 place to find social media links is the college's website

HOW DO YOU FIND SOCIAL MEDIA SITES THAT ARE SPECIFIC TO A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY?

THROUGH THE SCHOOL'S WEBSITE

Sophomores	**57**%
Juniors	**54**%
Seniors	**58**%

Parents agree. Going to the college's website was their top choice, too, for finding links to a college's social media pages.

What content do they look at on social media?

Photos (84-85 percent) and **videos (63 percent)** are the most interesting types of social media posts for students.
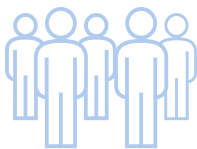
The long list of topics that interested seniors and juniors was homogeneous. Juniors, however, seemed more interested in **"what social life is like on campus"** at **66 percent**, compared to **29 percent** of seniors. Juniors were also a little more interested in **"what I need to do to apply"** at **67 percent**, compared to **54 percent** of seniors.

For parents, posts with photos (75-78 percent) and **links to news or feature stories (57-59 percent)** garnered the most interest.

Students want to "share"and see, while parents are more "hands on."

Example of student comment:
"I love seeing social media posts from groups at that school, and what student life is truly like."

Example of parent comment:
"I like to see social media for specific programs, but I am more hands-on and would like to visit the college."

SEEKING INFORMATION: TAKEAWAYS

Today's students and parents have a wealth of resources to find information on schools. The challenge for institutions is to develop effective engagement channels and a great content strategy aligned with the information-seeking behaviors of parents and students.

Here are recommendations, based on our findings.

MAKE IT MULTICHANNEL
The top six categories are put forth by the institutions, so schools must prioritize and rely heavily on their website, calculator results, emails, and other top channels. Students and parents decide when and how to get the information they seek, but institutions need to be present on multiple channels.

CONTINUE TO INVEST IN SEO
Students and their parents prefer using a search engine to find information on your website.

BUILD A STRONG PRESENCE ON COLLEGE PLANNING SITES
Choose credible college planning sites and make sure they maintain accurate, up-to-date information that appropriately portrays your brand. Also, be sure to consistently track referral traffic from these sites.

BUDGET FOR A DIGITAL AD CAMPAIGN
Paid online ads should be an established part of your college marketing mix for all high school grade levels and for parents. If you don't have a digital specialist on campus, consider outsourcing immediately.

Conditioning is key here: Students like to be familiar with a school, and they need to be aware of it. Occasional ads (versus a consistent and ongoing campaign) are usually ineffective.

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE VALUE OF YOUR WEBSITE CALCULATOR
Provide a net price calculator on your website that is easy to complete within just a few minutes. The calculator should be a primary call to action on your site at the same level as "request information," "apply for admission," and "schedule a campus visit." At Ruffalo Noel Levitz, we recommend a scholarship calculator in addition to net price.

UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE IN HOW STUDENTS AND PARENTS USE SOCIAL MEDIA
Students' daily use reflects storytelling and high imagery preferences, such as what you'll find on Snapchat and Instagram. Parents' use reflects more traditional check-ins via social media channels like Facebook. With students, you can't control how they get there—content and mediums that drive a great online experience are essential. Parents are a different story; they tend to go through your school's website.

HAVE GOOD CONTENT ACROSS ALL SOCIAL MEDIA
There's value in having a noticeable presence on all prevalent social media platforms, but especially those that are consistently valued sources of information for students and parents alike. Use a mix of social media, as students and parents both reference a variety of channels. Videos and photography are key. Consider assigning a social media expert on staff to make sure it is managed well.

MAKE SURE SOCIAL MEDIA LINKS ARE EASY TO FIND ON YOUR WEBSITE
Place social media links in a conspicuous location throughout your website. It is common to place these at the very top, very bottom, or both. Also, consider publishing live feeds from social media on your homepage.
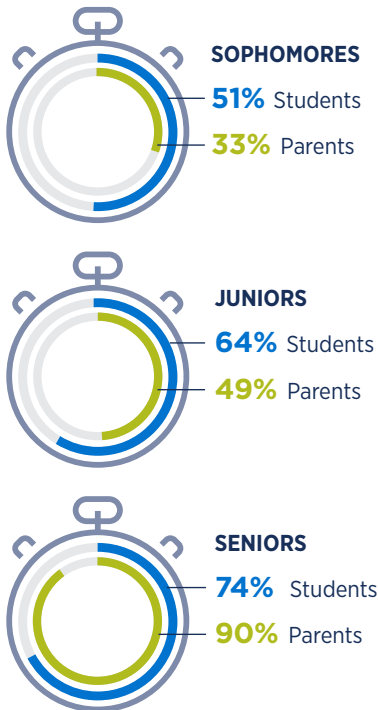
SIGNALING INTEREST

When and how do parents and students engage to signal their interest?
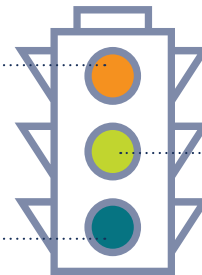
WHEN they signal interest

Like the timing of any initial engagement, both students and parents tend to signal their interest as it gets **closer to decision time, with 90 percent of parents of seniors reaching out to schools**.

SOPHOMORES
51% Students
33% Parents

JUNIORS
64% Students
49% Parents

SENIORS
74% Students
90% Parents

HOW they signal interest

Top 3 ways **students** signal interest

Sophomores
1 RFI on website
2 Email
3 List on standardized tests

Juniors
1 RFI on website
2 List on standardized tests
3 Visit campus

Seniors
1 Visit campus
2 RFI on website
3 Email/list on standardized test (tie)

Top 3 ways **parents** signal interest

Parents of Sophomores
1 RFI on website
2 Register student for standardized tests
3 Visit campus

Parents of Juniors
1 RFI on website
2 Register student for standardized tests
3 Visit campus

Parents of Seniors
1 Register student for standardized tests
2 Visit campus
3 RFI on website

What are they willing to share on an RFI form?
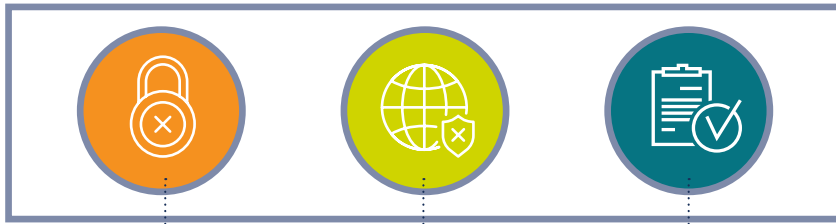
Parents are less likely to share:

Cell phone

Home phone

Student's email

Student's phone

Career aspirations

How they learned about the school

Students are less likely to share:

Home phone

Parent email

Parent phone number

How they learned about the school

Most respondents (70-96 percent of students and 62-90 percent of parents) **are willing to share:**

Name

Mailing address

Email

Mobile number

High school

Graduation year

Programs of interest

Career aspirations

INSIGHT: Parents and students are usually involved in a college search together. But, when it comes to sharing, students don't want to disclose their parents' information.

INSIGHT: If you're looking to get parent information, you need to ask the parents. Students are less willing to disclose information on behalf of their parents. To overcome this obstacle, communicate to the student that delivering relevant content specifically for parents is an important part of the process.

Once they've signaled interest through an RFI form, how do they prefer to be contacted?

EMAIL, PRINT BROCHURES

76-77%
of students prefer an email for RFI response.

68-74%
of parents also prefer an email for RFI response.

51-61%
of parents want a brochure mailed to them.

APPS, TEXTS

23-29%
of students want a text response.

68-74%
of parents want texts.

51-61%
of students want an app messaging response.

For more insights on communication channels students and parents prefer, see page 5.

SIGNALING INTEREST: TAKEAWAYS

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

There's a **significant difference in signaling interest in college research between students and parents**. Students are more proactive, and parents are more reactive. Parents get students on lists in the discovery phase, but then have different priorities and interests as the process progresses.

As the mindset of parents diverges from their son or daughter in the latter stages, schools need to address their specific concerns, which tend to be more practical and often relate to costs. So, while students and parents are both progressing in the engagement journey, consider developing specific programs and content messaging that cultivates and nurtures each camp's unique path toward a final decision.

RESPECT THEIR PRIVACY

Some social media privacy concerns clearly exist, and institutions need to **be keenly aware and sensitive to these concerns for students and parents alike**. This is a good place to focus on brand awareness and messaging. Avoid calls to action and requesting personal information on a form.

CONSIDER DIRECT ENGAGEMENT

Students seek more direct engagement—a call, email, or personal text message. There is an opportunity here to reach out to them personally and fulfill the interest in engagement. If you aren't already doing so, this is a good way to expand your direct engagement. You have the undivided attention of parents early on, so this is a time to feed them affordability messaging and other top concerns when there is less noise.
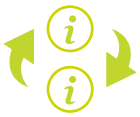
RECEIVING INFORMATION

How do parents and students prefer to receive information from a school, and what information do they want?

How information is communicated to parents and students can have a profound impact on their decision. The choice of communication channel is particularly important, especially as technology evolves. In this year's report, we've added social media apps to the research mix.

Email still rules—and they check them on smartphones

Nearly everyone (96-99 percent of parents and students) is using email at least once a week, and most everyone checks mail on smartphones.

Up to 83 percent of parents check email on a smartphone at least once a day; **up to 61 percent** check multiple times a day.

That makes responsive emails important—**most students and parents want to see messages that adjust to fit their smartphone screens**.

FACT: Most are open to texting, but few receive texts from institutions

Are students open to texting and messaging, including social apps?

62-68 percent of students are open to receiving text messages.

33-48 percent are open to receiving messages through social applications (seniors lowest, sophomores highest).

Most students have not received a text or app message **(58–78 percent)**.

What do parents think of texting and messaging apps?

59-69 percent of parents are open to receiving text messages, with those of seniors scoring the highest.

Only 22-25 percent of parents are open to receiving messages via a social app. Most parents have not received a text or app message **(82-89 percent)**.

TOP 3
MESSAGE TOPICS

1. Deadline reminders
2. Acceptance notifications
3. Application details

RECEIVING INFORMATION: TAKEAWAYS

Our findings this year reveal some good opportunities for institutions to send information to students and parents in new ways and with greater effectiveness. These takeaways also illustrate the importance of catering to the devices that are used to access this information.

Here are some practical recommendations.

BEGIN TO INCORPORATE TEXTING

Findings of a separate 2017 report from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, *Marketing and Student Recruitment Report of Effective Practices*, confirmed that texts are effective for recruitment. Students indicate they are fine with receiving texts, but they aren't being used in practice. There is a growing demand to receive texts; however, be specific and relevant in what you're texting.

FOCUS ON TEXTS THAT MATTER TO THEM

When you first start your texting communications, make sure to stick to the top topics: deadline reminders, acceptance notifications, and application details. Without this focus, you risk losing your audience as text subscribers.

ASSESS YOUR EMAIL STRATEGY

Email is part of the everyday newsfeed, and behaviors are now trigger-related rather than timing-related. It's important to build a new email strategy to engage with students and parents proactively and reactively.

MAKE YOUR EMAIL SMARTPHONE-FRIENDLY

Students and parents frequently check email on a smartphone. All recipients of your communications must be able to easily view messaging and navigate links or other elements of your email without fumbling around. Mobile viewing matters—templates, if used, should be responsive, especially those sent to parents.

FINAL WORD

Digital devices, digital ads, email, SEO, and social media continue to dominate this year's E-Expectations findings. In the context of the different action steps of engagement, it's clear that institutions must strategically plan their enrollment efforts to align with how students and parents find their school, signal interest, request information, and receive communications.

By using today's enrollment tools and technologies, universities and colleges can easily optimize their websites for search engines, create data-driven and personalized digital campaigns, and much more. By first understanding the engagement lifecycle, then marrying those insights with the latest innovations, educational institutions can not only find the right students and parents, but engage them throughout the enrollment process in the most effective way.

YOUR COMPLETE ENROLLMENT SOLUTION

Effective engagement with both students and parents involves a lot of moving parts, especially considering this latest research that shows the value of a multichannel strategy. RNL offers a turnkey solution for your enrollment team that will boost engagement of students and parents through effective multichannel campaigns, SEO, web development, and other digital strategies.

Whether you need **strategic enrollment planning**, advanced marketing strategies, or other **complete enrollment solutions**, RNL provides you with comprehensive solutions powered by our advanced analytics, industry expertise, and innovative engagement strategies.

CHANGE IS COMING.
BE PREPARED.

Stay tuned as RNL uses this research to embark on a revolutionary change taking place in the enrollment management industry.

BUILDING YOUR STRATEGY FOR DIGITAL MARKETING?

Ask for a free consultation and learn how to engage prospective students and parents, adapt to a changing landscape, and tailor your strategies to exceed your goals. To learn how RNL solves enrollment challenges through RNL Complete Enrollment, call 800.876.1117 or email ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com.

About the survey sponsors

Ruffalo Noel Levitz is the leading provider of enrollment management, student success, and fundraising solutions. Each year, more than 1,900 colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations rely on RNL best-in-class analytics, engagement technology, and industry-leading insights to achieve their mission.

NRCCUA (National Research Center for College & University Admissions) is an educational data science platform and research organization based in Lee's Summit, MO, Boston, MA, New York, NY, and Austin, TX. For 44 years, NRCCUA has been a leading provider of data, technology and programs serving students, high school educators, colleges and universities. These solutions represent the link between students making important life decisions and providing the resources and information they need to succeed in their post-secondary educations and careers.

OmniUpdate is the leading provider of content management solutions designed to streamline content administration and solve the digital marketing and communication challenges of higher education. With the largest support team, development team, and user community among higher ed CMS providers, OmniUpdate delivers an award-winning CMS that meets the unique needs of colleges and universities.

CollegeWeekLive is used by one in three college-bound students to help find the best college match. Students, parents, and counselors visit CollegeWeekLive to engage directly with universities at every stage of the enrollment process. Through online chats and virtual college fairs, they have live, candid conversations with admissions counselors and current college students from hundreds of colleges and universities to explore their degree programs, financial aid opportunities, career paths, campus life, and much more.

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