



2019 E-Expectations[®] Trend Report

How to Amplify Digital Engagement
of High School Students During the
College Search Process

 **OmniUpdate[®]**



ENROLLMENT



INTRODUCTION

The high school students you want to recruit spend nine hours a day on their digital devices.¹ That’s four times the average time they spend doing homework,² twice the average time spent on daily extracurricular activities, and even more than the average 8.5 hours they spend sleeping.³ In fact, almost half of teens report that they’re online almost constantly.⁴

These startling statistics confirm what higher education marketers and administrators have witnessed in recent years: digital engagement is the most important strategy for engaging Generation Z.

But what are the right solutions and strategies to maximize your engagement with this crucial target market? Which approaches align with the expectations of the students you are trying to reach? And more importantly, how can you make your institution’s unique brand stand out in a technological sea of messages?

The *2019 E Expectations® Trend Report* will help you answer these questions with insightful data about the digital habits of high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors. **This extensive report identifies new preferences related to college search and answers key questions such as:**



What search terms do students use when looking for colleges online?



What are teens’ attitudes about images and videos on college websites?



How do teens feel about artificial intelligence (AI) on websites such as automated chats?



What are the preferred methods of communication for sophomores, juniors, and seniors?



Do teens conduct voice-activated online search—and how?



How involved do parents continue to be in the college search process?

ABOUT THE 2019 STUDY

NEW FOR 2019
Survey data from
sophomores

BASED ON
900
participants

PLEXUSS™

PLEXUSS provided
a survey list of 25,000
sophomores, juniors,
and seniors for this study.

26%
SENIORS

37%
JUNIORS

37%
SOPHOMORES

¹Common Sense Media (2015). [U.S. teens use an average of nine hours of media per day.](#)

²ICAN Education (2017). [How much time should be spent on homework based on grade?](#)

³Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016). [American time use survey.](#)

⁴Pew Research Center (2018). [Teens, social media, & technology 2018.](#)

MOST INFLUENTIAL RESOURCES

Most influential resources students use for college search



FACT: Students at all class levels take a multichannel approach to college search. They typically visit the website first, but complement their search with information from email, social media, video, and texts.

MOST INFLUENTIAL INFORMATION RESOURCES

(1-5 scale, 5=most influential, sorted by 2019 juniors)

RESOURCE	2019 SENIORS	2018 SENIORS	2019 JUNIORS	2018 JUNIORS	2019 SOPHOMORES
College's website	4.09	4.02	4.04	4.16	4.06
Results from a financial aid or scholarship calculator	3.72	4.05	3.95	3.9	3.96
Phone calls from admissions counselors	3.44	3.14	3.85	3.49	3.93
Email from a particular school	3.51	3.73	3.76	3.73	3.81
Texts or live messages from admissions counselors	3.49	3.03	3.73	3.37	3.92
Videos of campus, classrooms, students, residence halls	3.63	3.31	3.67	3.33	3.76
College planning website	3.29	2.99	3.58	3.46	3.64
Virtual reality videos	3.35	2.57	3.57	2.73	3.57
Printed brochures about the school	3.25	3.27	3.54	3.49	3.58
Virtual tours	3.27	2.95	3.37	3.03	3.5
Social media posts	2.99	2.6	3.08	2.87	3.11
Rankings found in magazines	3.12	2.93	3.06	3.02	3.32

KEY TAKEAWAYS



CONTINUE CALLING AND TEXTING—THEIR INFLUENCE CONTINUES

Text messaging and calls from counselors are becoming more influential in the decision-making processes for juniors and sophomores.



INCORPORATE MORE OUTCOMES-FOCUSED INFORMATION

Statistics that show salaries attained by recent graduates was the fourth highest-rated influencer.



CONSIDER VIRTUAL REALITY (VR) AS ITS USE IS GROWING

VR videos had the biggest gain in influence than any other communication method between the 2018 and 2019 studies. Campuses may want to consider moving into VR videos as a way to engage students about campus life and learning.

INQUIRING ABOUT COLLEGE

When students want to learn more, what are their preferred ways to reach out?



FACT: Inquiring about majors or programs of study is the most popular reason for contacting a campus.

By a large margin, most students start with a form on a school's website to get more information.

HOW STUDENTS WILL CONTACT AN INSTITUTION

ACTION	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
I fill out a form on the school's website to get more information	76%	72%	81%	75%
I list the school when I fill out the PSAT, SAT, or ACT forms	54%	65%	58%	38%
I use college planning sites	49%	38%	53%	59%
I email the school	46%	63%	29%	43%
I schedule a visit to the campus	40%	59%	41%	18%
I respond to brochures or letters I get in the mail from specific schools	39%	32%	34%	54%
I complete a cost or scholarship calculator form online	28%	40%	17%	27%
I call the school	13%	25%	7%	4%
I fill out a form on the athletics page of the website	8%	6%	5%	13%
My parent(s) or guardian(s) contact schools for me	4%	4%	2%	5%

KEY TAKEAWAYS



MAKE IT EASY FOR STUDENTS TO FIND AND ENGAGE WITH YOUR REQUEST FOR INFORMATION FORM

Given their keen interest in academic programs and majors, be sure to highlight the request for information form as a key call to action on these pages.



HELP SENIORS TO PLAN A VISIT

Seniors are more likely to plan a campus visit (24 percent compared to only 4 percent of juniors and 2 percent of sophomores).



PROVIDE MULTIPLE WAYS TO INTERACT

Students use website forms the most, so make them easy to find on your website. Also provide other channels to communicate such as texts, emails, chats, and even snail mail.



REQUEST FOR INFORMATION (RFI) FORMS

TMI is a turnoff

Results show that students stop completing RFI forms when too much information is required. In other words, keep it simple.



FACT: Best way to respond to an RFI? Seniors say “text me.” Juniors want an email, and sophomores want brochures.

When forms are easy to follow, students will provide most of the information a school requires.

HAVE STUDENTS STOPPED FILLING OUT A FORM BECAUSE IT ASKED FOR TOO MUCH INFORMATION?

YES	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
	40%	47%	34%	38%



INFORMATION STUDENTS ARE WILLING TO SHARE WITH INSTITUTIONS

ACTION	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Name	96%	94%	95%	99%
Mailing address	90%	91%	85%	95%
Email address	98%	99%	98%	96%
Cell phone	77%	79%	78%	73%
Home phone	31%	37%	31%	25%
Parent email	57%	54%	69%	46%
Parent phone	42%	41%	53%	32%
High school	82%	81%	80%	85%
Programs you're considering	89%	91%	90%	86%
Career aspirations	72%	63%	78%	77%
How you learned about the school	62%	68%	61%	57%
Preferences for future communication	56%	54%	61%	54%
Opt in for text messages	39%	47%	39%	29%
I wouldn't share any personal information	1%	0%	2%	0%

BEST WAY FOR COLLEGES TO GET BACK TO STUDENTS AFTER SUBMITTING A FORM

DESIRED RESPONSE	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Send brochures in the mail	63%	43%	65%	86%
Send an email with recommendations for next steps and links to other online resources	61%	52%	72%	61%
Have an admissions counselor email me	56%	50%	61%	57%
Text me	46%	54%	44%	38%
Show me confirmation screen with recommendations for next steps and links to other online resources	29%	31%	26%	29%
Call me	17%	25%	18%	5%
Message me through an app	11%	7%	7%	18%
Connect me with someone on campus through a live chat tool	7%	7%	5%	7%

KEY TAKEAWAYS



KEEP IT SHORT

To get as many completed RFI forms as possible, make your form requirements streamlined and simple.



RESPOND OVER MULTIPLE CHANNELS

The desired response results show that students like to receive responses across a variety of digital and traditional channels.

MEETING WITH ADMISSIONS COUNSELORS

How many counselors do students meet with, and what steps do they take after?

There are many ways for students to demonstrate interest in a college or university. They can meet admissions counselors in person when the counselors visit their high school, or they can reach out via phone, Skype call, or live chat. Face-to-face meetings are the gold standard for most seniors, just over half of the juniors, and a third of sophomores in this study.

HOW MANY MEETINGS DO STUDENTS HAVE WITH ADMISSIONS COUNSELORS?

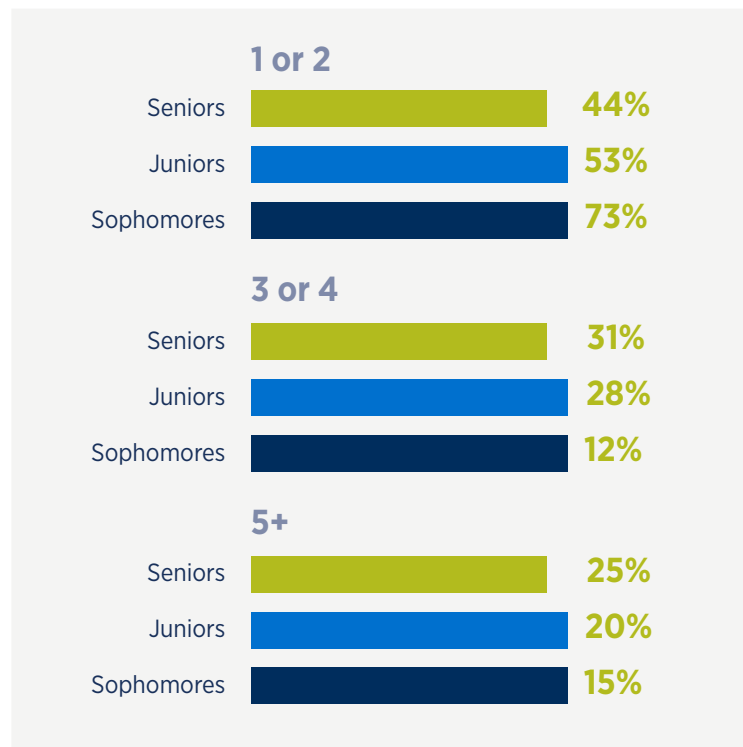


FACT:

60%
of seniors

51%
of juniors,
and

31%
of sophomores
met admissions
counselors



The actions students take after meeting with an admissions counselor shed light on the path to admission.

ACTION AFTER MEETING WITH ADMISSIONS REPRESENTATIVE AT HIGH SCHOOL

ACTION	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Went to the website	71%	73%	69%	69%
Filled out a form to get more information	61%	58%	67%	58%
I looked at application requirements	52%	56%	56%	39%
I told my parents about the school	48%	44%	51%	50%
I looked at their social media sites (like Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube)	38%	31%	39%	50%
I applied for admission	29%	58%	10%	4%
I watched videos on the site	21%	23%	18%	23%
I registered for an open house or planned a visit	20%	25%	21%	12%

KEY TAKEAWAYS



DRAW ON THE INSIGHTS OF YOUR ADMISSIONS COUNSELORS

Because your counselors speak one-on-one with prospects, they have intimate knowledge about how students think and what they are looking for in the college admissions process. Their insights are invaluable when looking for ways to keep your website and other marketing channels fresh and relevant.



CREATE CLEAR CALLS TO ACTION AFTER A MEETING

Students will take many different types of actions after a meeting with a counselor, so direct them to the paths that will increase their engagement and keep them communicating with you.



EXPERIMENT WITH SPECIFIC LANDING PAGES FOR HIGH SCHOOLS OR COUNSELORS

Given students' high likelihood of visiting your website after a counselor visits their school, experiment with providing unique landing pages that correspond to their school or your counselor to aid in tracking and engagement.

APPLICATIONS

Comparing the Common Application with the Coalition Application

The Common Application makes it easy for students to apply to multiple institutions because it allows them to enter information only once and then auto-populate fields in various applications. It also allows students to keep track of their applications on one website. The Common Application is now used by more than 800 institutions. It is free to complete, but most institutions charge a fee to apply.

The Coalition Application was introduced in 2016 as a way to curtail perceived bias against low-income students by removing barriers created by the language and semantics of the Common Application. The Coalition Application is also free to complete and includes additional resources and tools for students to use during the college application process, as well as a locker for storing documents in the cloud. It is currently used by more than 130 institutions, most of which also require a fee. Has the introduction of this second application option changed how students apply to college?



FACT:

Average number of applications students submit:

**CURRENTLY APPLYING
(AVERAGE)**

6.45

**HAVE APPLIED TO
(AVERAGE)**

6.74

Which application have students used?

**COMMON
APPLICATION**

55%

**COALITION
APPLICATION**

14%

**NOT
SURE**

14%

**HAVE NOT
USED**

29%

KEY TAKEAWAYS



OFFER CLEAR AND EASY-TO-FIND DIRECTIONS FOR YOUR APPLICATION OPTIONS AND PROCESS

Students want to understand the process of applying before they begin. Regardless of your application options, be sure they have access to instructions and opportunities to engage with your team.



PROVIDE MULTIPLE PATHWAYS FOR APPLYING

As students become more aware and more schools join, the Coalition Application may increase in popularity. If you are not yet signed up to offer the Coalition Application, you may want to consider it, as one in 10 applicants are currently using it.



KEEP RECRUITING AFTER APPLICATIONS

It's important to qualify applicants by offering them multiple paths to engage. Since many apply to a half-dozen schools or more, you want to give them lots of ways to further explore their interests and engage with potential mentors and peers so they continue toward enrolling.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parents are involved at some level with the majority of students



FACT:



6 out of 10 students

say their parents are engaged during the college search process, similar to our 2018 E-Expectations study.

Have parents done anything to help students review college options?



KEY TAKEAWAYS



GIVE PARENTS A PATH FOR EXPLORATION AND INTERACTION

Make sure to have communication streams and engagement opportunities for parents so they can become advocates for enrollment at your institution. Give them an opportunity to identify themselves as parents on your request for information or visit registration forms.



EMAIL

Email continues to be the preferred way to communicate with colleges

Students remain comfortable using email as a communication tool, especially as they get closer to the application process. It shows they're serious and want to start a conversation. But, students also show that they prefer emails with visual elements to them.

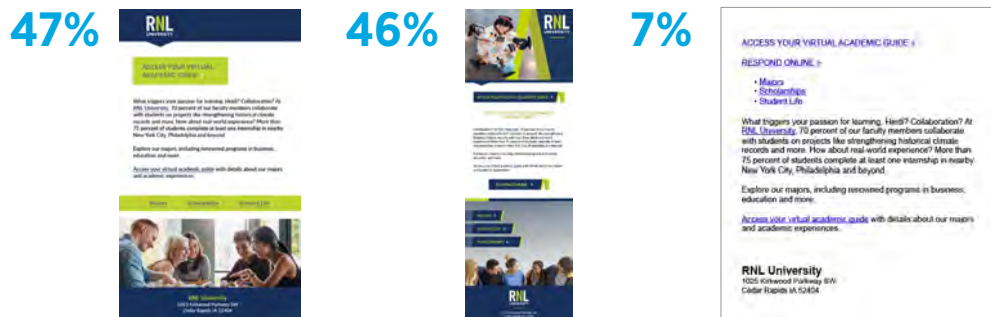


FACT:
98% of students are willing to share their email address with you.

Design matters

Emails that include compelling graphics win out over the text-only option.

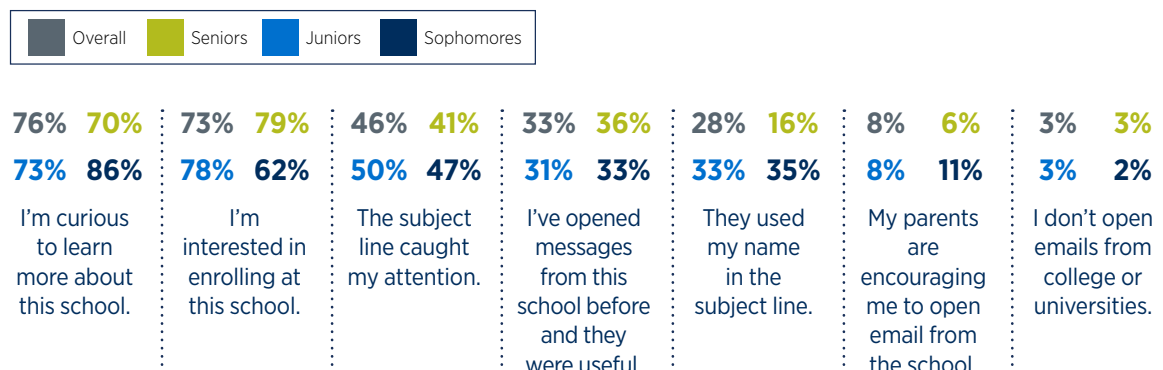
WHICH EMAIL DESIGN APPEALED MOST TO STUDENTS?



Each of these emails used the same amount of text, but students clearly preferred the two that incorporated images and graphics to accentuate the message.

96% of students use email at least one per week.

WHAT MOTIVATES STUDENTS TO OPEN YOUR EMAILS?



5 key email insights from the 2019 results

- 1** **Half of students will contact an institution via email.**
 46% overall: **63% seniors** | **29% juniors** | **43% sophomores**
- 2** **Email is a preferred response after requesting information.**
 After prospects fill out an RFI, they prefer:

<p>Email with next steps and links 61% overall: 52% seniors 72% juniors 61% sophomores</p>	<p>⋮</p>	<p>Email from admissions counselor 56% overall: 50% seniors 61% juniors 57% sophomores</p>
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- 3** **Email is an influential resource.**
 Power of email to provoke interest in school (1-5 scale, 5=most influential)
3.71 overall: 3.51 seniors | **3.76 juniors** | **3.81 sophomores**
- 4** **Email is one of the primary paths to a college website.**
 “I link to the website from an email message.”
51% overall: 48% seniors | **52% juniors** | **53% sophomores**
- 5** **Email makes it personal.**
 “I like seeing my name and interests included in emails and brochures.”
66% overall: 55% seniors | **71% juniors** | **53% sophomores**

KEY TAKEAWAYS



KEEP EMAIL MARKETING A PRIORITY

Follow best practices with email: test subject lines, use personalization, and version your messages by student segments. Almost anything you can do with this channel to increase its effectiveness will pay off in measurable ways.



FOLLOW SUBMISSIONS OF REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION WITH EMAILS

Six out of 10 students said that is how they want to hear back from institutions after submitting an RFI form. Make sure your email provides clear calls to action to keep students engaged.



GET VISUAL

Students clearly prefer emails with a visual component. Use images and video to add more visual appeal so they will read, react, and respond.

TEXTING

Texting surges in popularity

The ubiquity of smartphones makes texting one of the easiest ways to get messages in front of students. It is especially effective for getting news to prospects about their applications, and it is a great tool for getting the conversation started and keeping it going.

BEST USES FOR TEXT MESSAGING:

- ✓ **POST-APPLICATION STATUS**
- ✓ **DEADLINE REMINDERS**
- ✓ **SCHOLARSHIP AVAILABILITY**
- ✓ **ACCEPTANCE NOTIFICATIONS**
- ✓ **CAMPUS EVENTS**
- ✓ **CHECK-INS WITH ADMISSIONS COUNSELORS**



TEXTING, A GREAT TOOL FOR PROSPECTING

Among students, **67 percent of juniors** and **51 percent of sophomores** are open to receiving general information about academic programs and majors through texts.

TEXT FORMAT PREFERENCES

FORMAT	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Only text (SMS) messages	37%	49%	32%	29%
Only messaging apps	8%	1%	5%	17%
Both text and messaging apps are OK	41%	38%	43%	42%
No text or messaging app contact at all	14%	12%	19%	12%

WHEN DO STUDENTS SAY THEY WANT TO BE TEXTED?

TIMING	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Before submitting application	50%	35%	63%	51%
After submitting application	67%	75%	60%	65%
After being admitted	59%	74%	45%	58%
After registering for first semester	40%	38%	42%	40%
After deciding to attend elsewhere	7%	9%	5%	7%

KEY TAKEAWAYS



MAKE TEXTING PART OF YOUR MULTICHANNEL OUTREACH

Adding text messaging to your communication flows gives you another way to keep students engaged and drive them to next steps in the enrollment process.



ADJUST TEXT STRATEGY FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

Seniors want a text after they apply or are admitted. Juniors and sophomores are more open to texting before applying.



TEXT OFTEN, BUT DON'T BE INTRUSIVE

Only text if you have a significant piece of information to communicate: milestones like application follow-up, admission notice, financial aid announcements, and important events.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Share your story in pictures—students increasingly conduct college search via visual social media

A Pew Research Center study found that teen social media use is moving away from Facebook and toward visually dominant platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube.⁵ E-Expectations research has shown this as well, as Facebook has also fallen to the fourth most-used social media platform on a daily basis. However, it remains the second highest-rated social media tool for college search.

This shift in popularity toward more visual forms of social media channels shows that, regardless of the digital format, the power of images and videos is undeniable—especially when illustrating campus life for prospective students. Colleges and universities need to increase their expertise at visual storytelling.



FACT: The percentage of 2019 seniors watching a live streaming event (32 percent) was almost double the percentage in 2018 (17 percent).

TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS STUDENTS FIND MOST INTERESTING



PHOTOS

67%
overall

76%
juniors

59%
seniors

(11% DROP COMPARED TO 2018)



VIDEOS

49%
overall

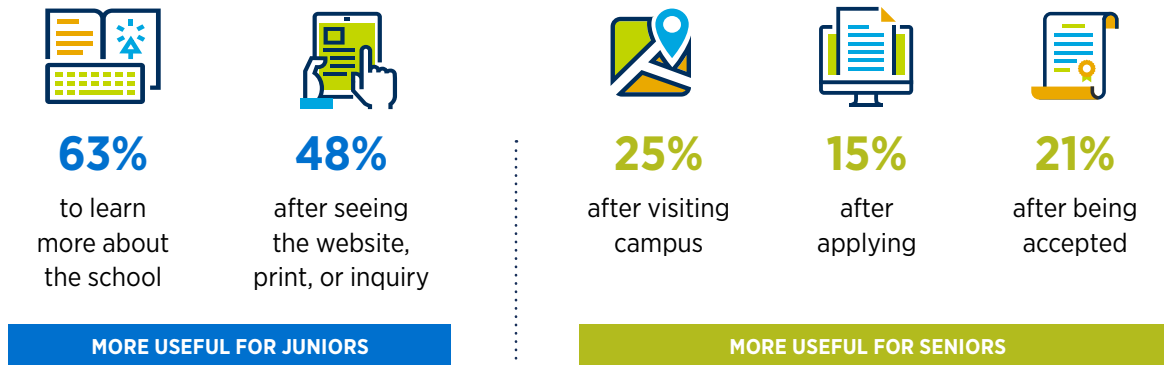


NEW! STUDENT SOCIAL MEDIA TAKEOVERS

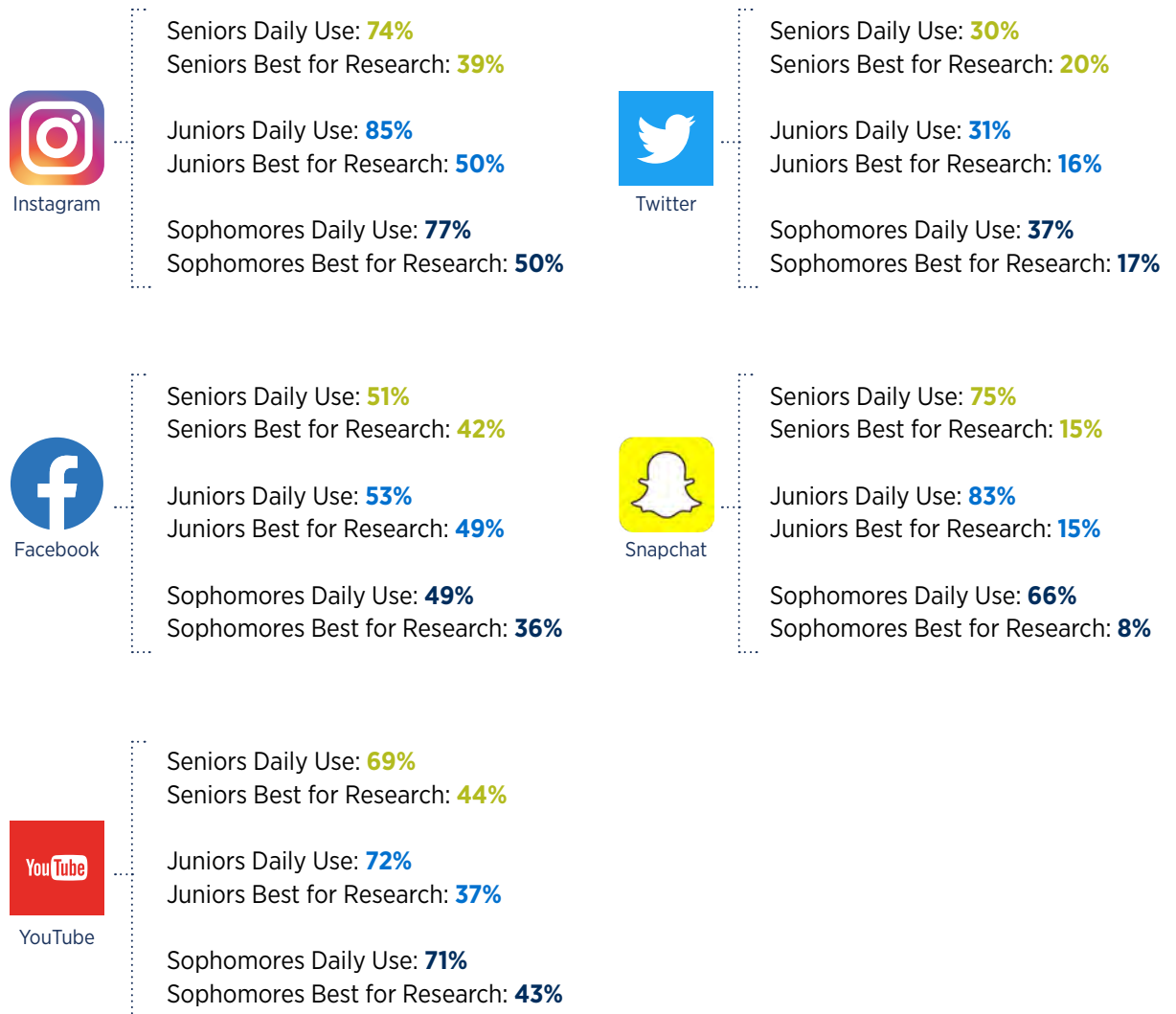
45%
overall

⁵Pew Research Center (2018). [Teens, social media, & technology 2018](#)

HOW/WHEN ARE SOCIAL MEDIA SITES MOST HELPFUL?



SOCIAL MEDIA: BEST FOR COLLEGE RESEARCH VS. DAILY USE



TOP 10 MOST INTERESTING TOPICS ON SOCIAL MEDIA 2018-19

(note: ordered by responses from 2019 juniors)

TOPIC	2019 SENIORS	2018 SENIORS	2019 JUNIORS	2018 JUNIORS
1 What it's like to live on campus in the dorms	84%	60%	73%	64%
2 What social life is like on campus	71%	63%	68%	66%
3 What qualifications I need to have to be accepted	36%	45%	65%	62%
4 What it will be like to be in classes	67%	57%	58%	64%
5 How I'll pay for college	42%	55%	58%	58%
6 What my path to finding a career will be	42%	44%	50%	56%
7 What I need to do to apply	32%	45%	49%	57%
8 What internships might be a part of my academic program	45%	49%	47%	59%
9 What the other students are like as people	39%	47%	42%	40%
10 What events I can attend	42%	51%	42%	51%

KEY TAKEAWAYS



DRIVE SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT VISUALLY

Social media has increasingly become a visual medium for students, so it is critical for campuses to post content that uses images, videos, and other visuals to engage students and convey key information.



INCREASE INTERACTION VIA STUDENT SOCIAL MEDIA TAKEOVERS

More and more schools are embracing this tactic and its potential for authenticity. Choose your ambassadors carefully, however, and be sure they are ready to respond in a way that aligns with your brand.



SHOW ALL SIDES OF CAMPUS LIFE

Compared to the 2018 E-Expectations study, 25 percent more seniors are previewing dorms and campus life. Give them pros and cons for choosing living learning communities, one dorm style over another, and even the benefits of living on campus as compared to living off campus.

PAID INTERACTIVE MEDIA

Long live the banner ad



FACT: Prospects are clicking on more paid ads than ever.

SENIORS

63% in 2019 compared to **41%** in 2018

JUNIORS

64% in 2019 compared to **45%** in 2018

Banner ads show a marked increase in response in this year's study, and the site where they get clicked on most is Facebook.

SITES WHERE STUDENTS CLICKED ON SOCIAL MEDIA ADS IN 2019

SITE	SENIORS	JUNIORS	TRENDS SINCE 2018
Facebook	62%	62%	Seniors: up from 50% ↑ Juniors: up from 26% ↑
Instagram	27%	43%	No 2018 data
Google Search	44%	41%	Seniors: down from 56% ↓ Juniors: down from 68% ↓
YouTube	31%	33%	Seniors: up from 28% ↑ Juniors: up from 30% ↑
Other social media or blog posts	22%	24%	Seniors: down from 37% ↓ Juniors: down from 34% ↓
Display ad on website	20%	21%	Seniors: down from 25% ↓ Juniors: down from 26% ↓

TOP 5 REASONS FOR CLICKING ON AN AD

- 1** "Wanted to know more about the school."
Seniors: 52% ↑ Up from 50% in 2018
Juniors: 64% ↑ Up from 50% in 2018
- 2** "Offer in ad interested me."
Seniors: 38% ↓ Down from 47% in 2018
Juniors: 52% ↑ Up from 44% in 2018
- 3** "Looking for new information about the school."
Seniors: 39% ↔ Same as 2018
Juniors: 43% ↓ Down from 52% in 2018
- 4** "Reminded me about needed enrollment actions."
Seniors: 40% ↑ Up from 27% in 2018
Juniors: 27% ↓ Down from 29% in 2018
- 5** "Looking to see if the website had improved since last visit."
Seniors: 10% ↑ Up from 8% in 2018
Juniors: 10% ↓ Down from 12% in 2018

Actions taken after clicking on an ad

ACTION	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Looked at information on a website	89%	84%	93%	91%
Watched a video	18%	18%	29%	9%
Filled out a form to have information sent by postal mail	18%	13%	10%	29%
Filled out a form to receive a PDF brochure	8%	7%	5%	11%
Registered to attend an event	5%	9%	5%	0%
Called a phone number offered in the ad	4%	7%	0%	4%
Nothing	5%	9%	2%	2%

KEY TAKEAWAYS



PAID ADS PAY OFF

With two out of three students saying they clicked on ads, it's critical to have a paid digital advertising strategy so you can reach more students on the sites they use daily.



MAKE SURE ADS ARE MOBILE FRIENDLY

Design for mobile and PCs so that ads look good across platforms. The same applies to your landing pages.



USE VIDEO ON YOUR LANDING PAGES

After clicking a paid ad, video viewership doubled for juniors compared to 2018.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) CHAT AND LIVE CHAT

As AI chat improves, it is becoming more common on college websites



FACT:

Although AI chat and live chat are appearing more frequently on sites,

1 in 3 students

still say they have never encountered these tools or that they don't know about them.



AI chats and live chats have become very common on commercial as well as college websites. Colleges and universities are using them to engage students in the application process, and among the students who have used these tools, three out of four found them very helpful.

Live chat and AI chat bots can be used to answer general questions about financial aid, help students navigate the application process, and provide the next steps for applying.

Top 6 opinions about AI and live chat experiences

- 1 “They’re OK, but I’d probably search on my own.”
40% seniors | 30% juniors | 29% sophomores
- 2 “They can be helpful in getting quick answers.”
28% seniors | 30% juniors | 18% sophomores
- 3 “I’ve never experienced this.”
14% seniors | 22% juniors | 24% sophomores
- 4 “They are annoying; I don’t use them.”
23% seniors | 12% juniors | 18% sophomores
- 5 “I don’t understand what you mean.”
13% seniors | 12% juniors | 10% sophomores
- 6 “I love it when a school has it on their site.”
10% seniors | 5% juniors | 5% sophomores



LIVE CHAT OPPORTUNITY

17%

of students said they have used live chat when looking at a college or university

73%

of those students said it was helpful

KEY TAKEAWAYS



IMPLEMENT LIVE CHAT AND MAKE IT STUDENT FRIENDLY

Seven out of 10 who use it find live chat helpful. Look for ways to make it easier for students to start a chat.



CREATE A COMMUNICATION PROCESS THAT MOVES STUDENTS FROM AI TO A CONVERSATION WITH A LIVE ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR

As AI chat capabilities improve, have a communication process in place that ultimately ends with the student chatting with a live admissions counselor.

ONLINE SEARCH

New in 2019! Search terms straight from the students themselves

THREE KEY DISCOVERIES ABOUT SEARCH INTENT

1

TOP SEARCH CRITERIA

44%

in the study enter a specific major

2

STUDENTS USE SUPERLATIVES:

“Best colleges for math”

“Top college basketball programs”

“Best campus life”

3

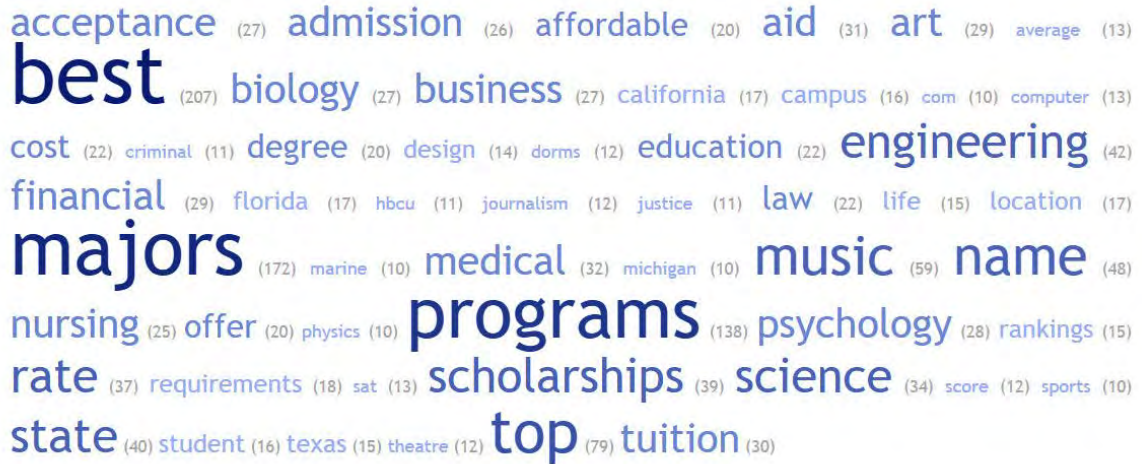
NON-BRANDED SEARCH

84%

of students conduct an internet search without reference to a specific institution

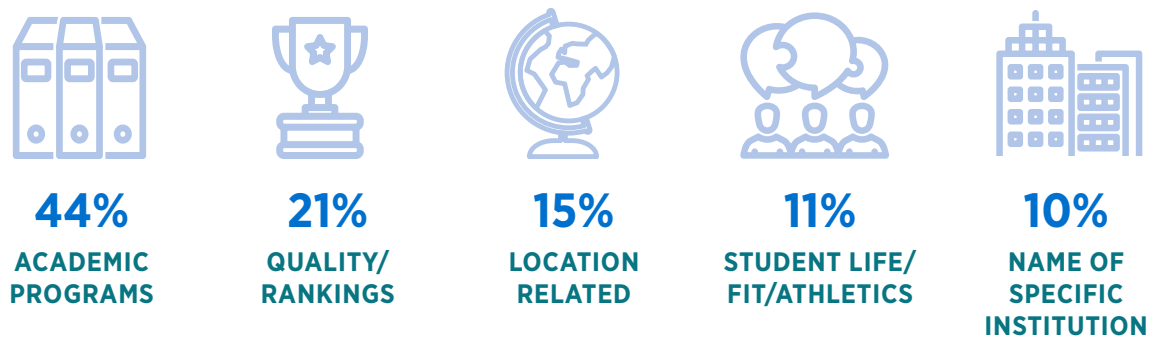
Free-form response—top search terms students use when researching colleges

What better way to attract students than to know what they're searching for? The 2019 survey gathered top search terms from students.



Top 5 response categories revealed by free-form response

We gathered the terms students told us they use and organized them into 5 buckets ranked by importance:



KEY TAKEAWAYS



INVEST IN SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO) TOOLS FOR YOUR WEBSITE

Implementing good SEO on your website is the difference between your school's page appearing on the first page of search, where most clicks are made, or being buried on page two and beyond. As Google moves from clicks to providing snippets and other information within search, your marketing strategy must include data analytics.



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Though not a top search category, location helps narrow school choice and can help your college or university appear much higher in localized search rankings.



GOOD! BETTER! BEST!

Students used terms like "best" and "top" when searching for institutions and specific programs. Expand your keyword sets to include a few superlatives.

WEBSITE CONTENT

Build logical steps for navigating from your top content pages to secondary pages

Tuition, financial aid, and scholarships continue to be the top pages that students read on your website. However, if you provide them with logical steps for navigating to other pages, you can boost the visits and credibility of these secondary pages. The 2019 E-Expectations survey found that these pages drive more than 50 percent of the traffic to your website.





FACT: Students like to get personal. More than half (54 percent) report they prefer websites that allow them to personalize content to meet their interests.

MOST VALUABLE WEBSITE CONTENT FOR STUDENTS (ORDERED BY JUNIORS)

INFORMATION	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Cost/tuition	90%	90%	88%
Scholarships	75%	90%	84%
Academic programs	79%	82%	77%
Financial aid	72%	73%	70%
Location appeal	45%	72%	70%
Student life	49%	48%	68%
How to apply	50%	62%	53%
Program rankings	49%	49%	58%

Likes and dislikes

 <p>TOP 3 THINGS STUDENTS PREFER:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <p>1 Easy to see which programs/degrees are offered</p> <p>35% seniors 41% juniors 45% sophomores</p> <p>2 A feel for the school and how the student will fit in</p> <p>30% seniors 36% juniors 20% sophomores</p> <p>3 Details about academic programs</p> <p>28% seniors 32% juniors 29% sophomores</p> 	 <p>TOP 3 THINGS THAT DRIVE STUDENTS AWAY:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <p>1 Lack of visual appeal of the site</p> <p>31% seniors 28% juniors 27% sophomores</p> <p>2 Hard to see which programs and degrees are offered</p> <p>30% seniors 43% juniors 33% sophomores</p> <p>3 Hard to read pages</p> <p>28% seniors 26% juniors 34% sophomores</p>
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Make sure your website forms are mobile responsive

As students increasingly browse college sites on their mobile devices, pages not only have to look good, but any forms need to be mobile responsive as well.

TOP 5 FORMS COMPLETED ON MOBILE DEVICES

	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Request for information	51%	53%	57%	46%
Cost calculators	28%	35%	23%	24%
Scholarship calculators	25%	34%	20%	22%
Campus visit scheduler	20%	30%	20%	10%
Admissions application	19%	35%	13%	10%

KEY TAKEAWAYS



PROVIDE INTERACTIVE FINANCIAL TOOLS TO CALCULATE THE BOTTOM LINE

Money matters, so provide students with more than the cost of attendance. Help them estimate financial aid not just for one year, but for four. Provide links to external and internal scholarships and keep these up to date. The cost of tuition continues to increase, so knowing the bottom line up front will become even more important to future students.



PERSONALIZE YOUR WEB PAGES AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

Students not only want to find the academic programs most suited to their interests, but they want to know what classes they'll be taking, what jobs they will qualify for with a certain degree, and what salaries they can expect to make.



TRANSFORM DEPARTMENT WEB PAGES INTO LANDING PAGES

Playing into the personalization of your website, consider creating specific landing pages for specific programs. For example, have an internet ad for engineering students click through to a specific landing page only about engineering—and include the steps to applying here as well.

PHOTO PREFERENCES

Keep it real with your photo choices

Students tell their own stories in pictures, whether the images live on Instagram, Snapchat, or Facebook—and they report that they can spot stock photos.

Your audience appreciates authenticity rather than phony posing—the more believable the better.

In the 2019 E-Expectations survey, we tested photos among seniors, juniors, and sophomores. All report their affinity for visuals of the campus, lifestyle, and peer interactions.

Conversely, all three groups identified posed images as disingenuous. Other images that were a turn-off include generic classroom pictures and the isolated-student “thinker.”

What works: Highest-rated images

TOP IMAGE, ALL CLASSES



SECOND



Seniors



Juniors



Sophomores

THIRD (ALL CLASSES)



Juniors and seniors like images of the quintessential college campus with classic architecture. And don't be too concerned about portraying an idealized sunny landscape. Crisp white snow can add to visual appeal. If your campus is located in a four-season environment, don't be afraid to show it.

What to avoid: Lowest-rated image styles

LEAST-APPEALING FOR SENIORS AND SOPHOMORES



LEAST-APPEALING FOR JUNIORS



These three image styles all received the lowest rating from respondents. Students rated “least appealing” any images that resembled a stock photo. One-third said they would not be interested in the campus, particularly if they saw any images that communicate a generic feel.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



CONVEY A SENSE OF PLACE WITH YOUR PHOTOS

This trend appears to be perennial: Prospective students simply like big views of campuses. Give students a chance to see what your campus looks like so they can picture themselves there. Also, don't be afraid to show your school in winter.



MARKET FOR YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE—NOT THE GREATER POOL OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

One size does not fit all when it comes to choosing a college, so avoid generalizing your campus and don't be afraid to showcase your school's specific offerings. Ultimately, an authentic portrayal of your college or university directs your marketing dollars toward the students you actually want on your campus.

VIDEO

Video makes the student experience come alive

Video content is an essential tool for portraying campus life, whether in the classroom, on the playing field, at social activities, or in dorms. Seniors, juniors, and sophomores all rate the medium highly. And they show increasing tolerance for the time they will give to a video. Anything under three minutes is OK.

Video content around tuition and financial aid rated lower for all groups, but even these generate significant interest (31 percent overall). Students also like tours and personalized content that matches their interests.

Video topics that appeal most to students

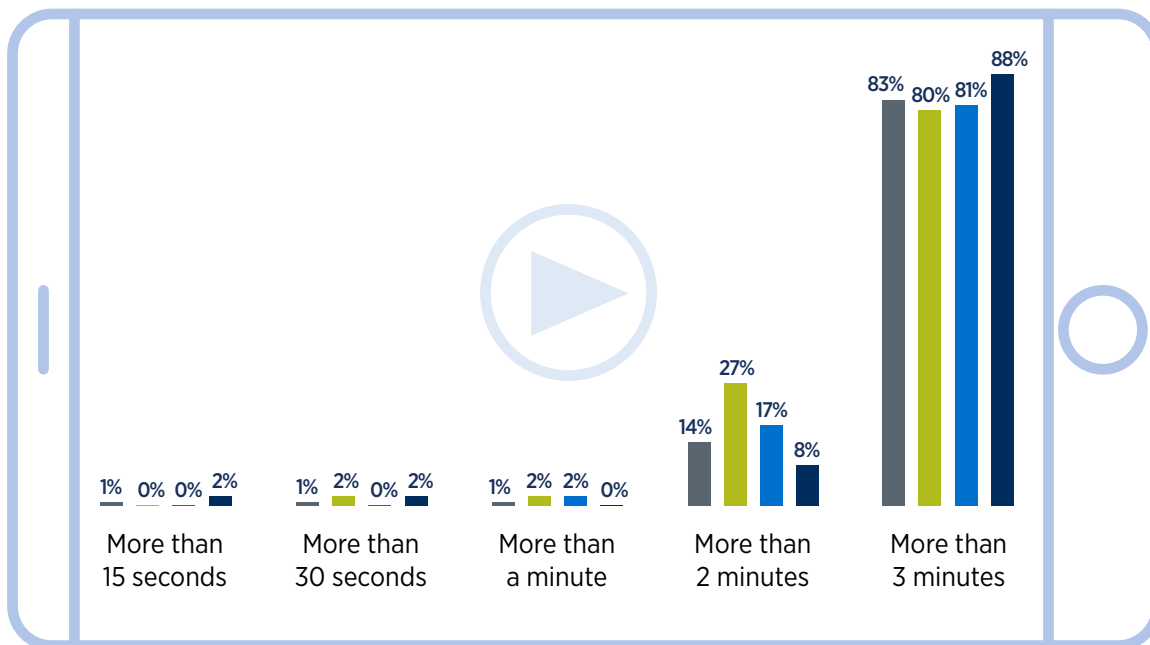
✓	Experiences/classroom and on campus	69% Overall	70% Seniors	74% Juniors	65% Sophomores
✓	Campus activities	64% Overall	70% Seniors	74% Juniors	65% Sophomores
✓	Campus tours	60% Overall	68% Seniors	63% Juniors	48% Sophomores
✓	Residence hall tours	50% Overall	58% Seniors	46% Juniors	46% Sophomores
✓	Classroom tours	42% Overall	46% Seniors	46% Juniors	35% Sophomores
✓	Customized content/programs, activities	38% Overall	41% Seniors	41% Juniors	33% Sophomores
✓	Faculty talking about classes	36% Overall	51% Seniors	29% Juniors	29% Sophomores
✓	Alumni talking about degrees/careers	33% Overall	38% Seniors	35% Juniors	27% Sophomores
✓	Application tutorials	28% Overall	19% Seniors	44% Juniors	25% Sophomores
✓	Tuition/financial aid tutorials	31% Overall	19% Seniors	39% Juniors	27% Sophomores

How long is too long to watch a video?

HERE'S WHAT SENIORS, JUNIORS, AND SOPHOMORES HAD TO SAY:

Will stop watching if video is...

■ Overall ■ Seniors ■ Juniors ■ Sophomores



KEY TAKEAWAYS



KEEP YOUR VIDEOS TO FEWER THAN THREE MINUTES

Students love video, but they won't stick around if you make your school's longer than three minutes. If you have video content that runs longer than that, consider dividing it into multiple videos.



ANALYZE VIDEO ANALYTICS AND ADJUST CONTENT ACCORDINGLY

Check metrics on your videos and see when students quit watching. If students keep clicking away early, consider editing or replacing a video.



CREATE INTERACTIVE VIDEO TOURS OF SPECIFIC DEPARTMENTS, DORMS, AND OTHER AREAS ON CAMPUS

Tours of all sorts score highly. Make sure yours are engaging and include real students.

6 BIG TAKEAWAYS FOR 2019

After reviewing all of the data for the 2019 E-Expectations study, here are five broader takeaways that will help your campus strengthen your digital presence and engage more students.

- 1 Optimize your multichannel mix.** Students use a wide variety of methods for researching colleges, from the traditional print and email to the emerging like VR tours. It's key to analyze which channels are the best investment for your target audience so you can expand your reach while also managing those channels well.
- 2 Communicate visually as much as possible.** Generation Z is a generation of images, videos, memes, and visual communication. The more visual your content can be, the greater levels of engagement you will achieve.
- 3 Invest in search.** SEO requires strategies built on sound analytics and data. To dominate the search categories you want, you need to balance both organic SEO strategies as well as smart paid interactive marketing so that you can capture student interest for all the terms you want.
- 4 Make search a truly mobile experience.** Go beyond mobile optimized web pages and think more broadly about how to engage students on their phones. Shorter responsive forms, more visual content, text messaging flows—do everything you can to make it easier for students to research your institution from the palms of their hands.
- 5 Have a website with multiple “welcome” mats.** More and more students are not coming through the front door of your home page. They are finding pages on academics, campus life, cost, and other key considerations. Make sure that, no matter where they may end up, they can start engaging with your campus and find their own informational pathways.
- 6 Personalize at every opportunity.** Finally, an overarching theme of open-ended responses and specific questions in the study this year demonstrate that students appreciate and expect your communications with them to be personalized. They appreciate tools on your website that allow them to customize and filter their experiences. They want you to let them know how your institution and programs will meet their unique needs AND that you want them to enroll.



Build a digital presence that engages the students you want
CONTACT US FOR A DIGITAL ASSESSMENT

How can you turn the findings from E-Expectations into a winning digital strategy?
Ask us for a free consultation.

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How to cite this report

Ruffalo Noel Levitz & OmniUpdate. (2019). *2019 E-expectations trend report*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.
Available at www.RuffaloNL.com/Expectations

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