



2022 High School Counselor Report

A survey of 1,200 counselors about their experiences working with colleges and families

Co-sponsored by:



HOW CAN COLLEGES BETTER ENGAGE HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS?

High school counselors play a vital role in helping students prepare for attending college. They are the link between students and families and institutions, providing counseling, information, and motivation to help students make it through their enrollment journeys. Along the way, they have to help students cope with a wide variety of challenges: academic, financial, educational, emotional, social, and more.

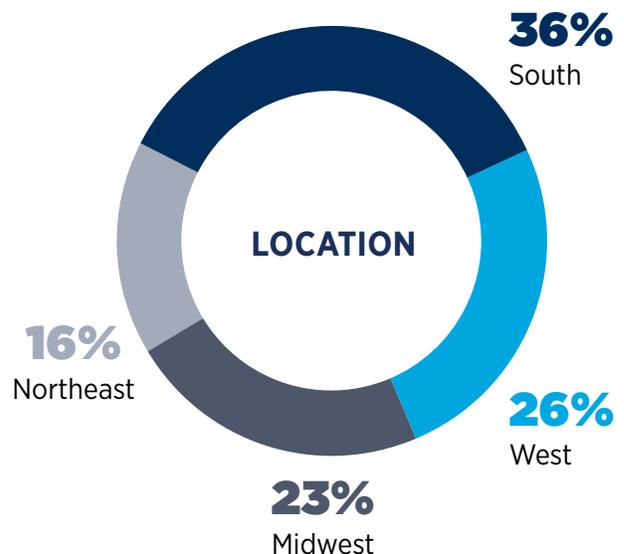
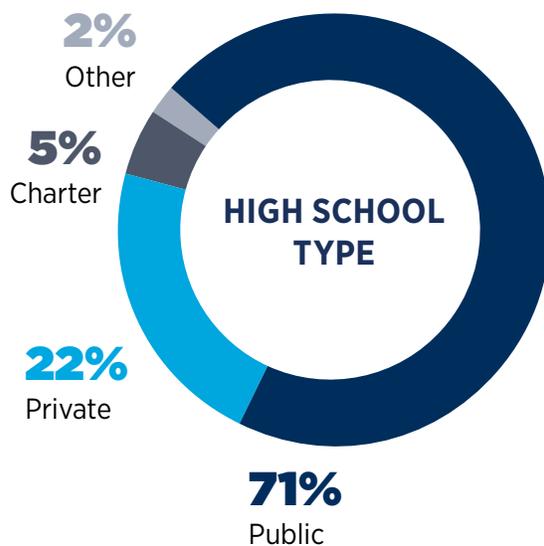
The pandemic caused incredible disruption to their work and ability to engage both families and college representatives. Many campuses had to cut back on counselor outreach or rapidly switch to virtual interactions (webcasts, video calls, virtual college fairs). In addition, major changes such as test-optional policies have created some confusion about how counselors should advise students on preparing for college.

To help enrollment managers better understand how to engage counselors and work with them to engage more students and families, RNL conducted a nationwide survey of counselors, asking them for:

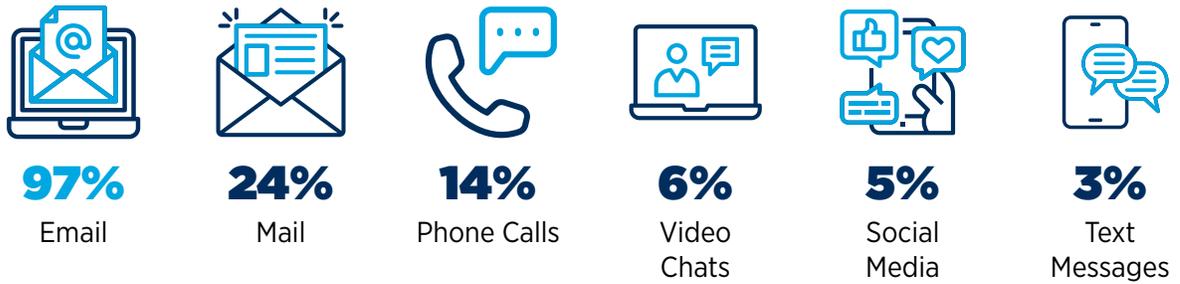
- Resources counselors use and which are the most effective.
- The top topics they want to see from those resources.
- The challenges they face in working with students and college representatives during the pandemic.

About the survey

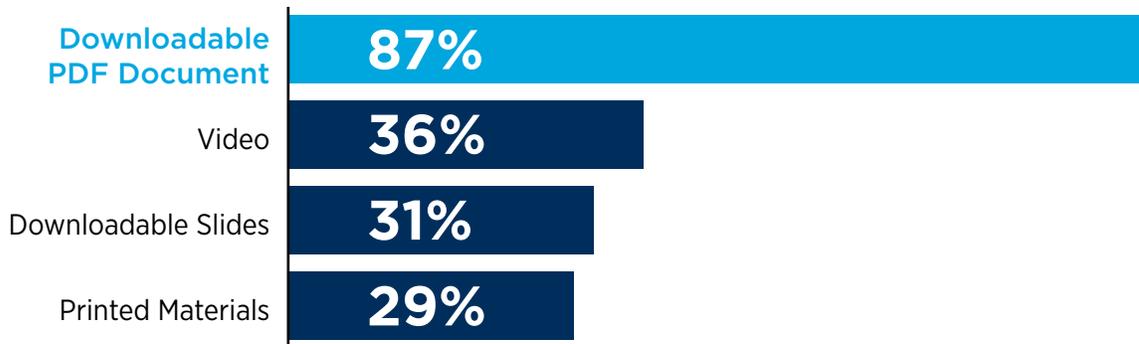
This report is based on responses from 1,246 high school counselors polled in fall 2021. The survey was conducted electronically using data provided by High School Counselor Marketing.



How do counselors prefer to be contacted by colleges and universities?



What types of information should colleges and universities have available for high school counselors?



Counselors overwhelmingly requested downloadable PDFs of key information from colleges and universities. This is likely because PDFs are easily shareable with students and parents. However, video was also important for about one-third of counselors, along with downloadable slides.

We then asked counselors to list the top topics they wanted to see by the type of content.

TOPIC	PDF
Tuition and costs	92%
Scholarship and financial updates	91%
Test-optional policies	91%
Deadline extensions (e.g. course registration, decision deadlines)	90%
Admission criteria	90%
Payment options (installments)	87%
Updates on online and hybrid learning options	86%
Financing options (types of loans, differences, qualification, re-payment options, etc.)	85%
Housing/residence updates	85%
Information and updates about orientation	85%
Updates to health services	83%
How to take a virtual campus visit	79%



TOPIC	DOWNLOADABLE SLIDES
Financing options (types of loans, differences, qualification, re-payment options, etc.)	46%
Admission criteria	41%
Scholarships and financial aid updates	32%
Tuition and costs	30%
Payment options (installments)	30%
Housing/residence updates	28%
Information and updates about orientation	28%
Test-optional policies	28%
Updates on online and hybrid learning options	27%
How to take a virtual campus visit	27%
Deadline extensions (e.g. course registration, decision deadlines)	26%
Updates to health services	26%

TOPIC	VIDEO
How to take a virtual campus visit	41%
Financing options (types of loans, differences, qualification, re-payment options, etc.)	38%
Housing/residence updates	35%
Payment options (installments)	31%
Information and updates about orientation	26%
Admission criteria	24%
Updates on online and hybrid learning options	23%
Scholarship and financial aid updates	22%
Updates to health services	21%
Tuition and costs	20%
Test-optional policies	19%
Deadline extensions (e.g. course registration, decision deadlines)	18%

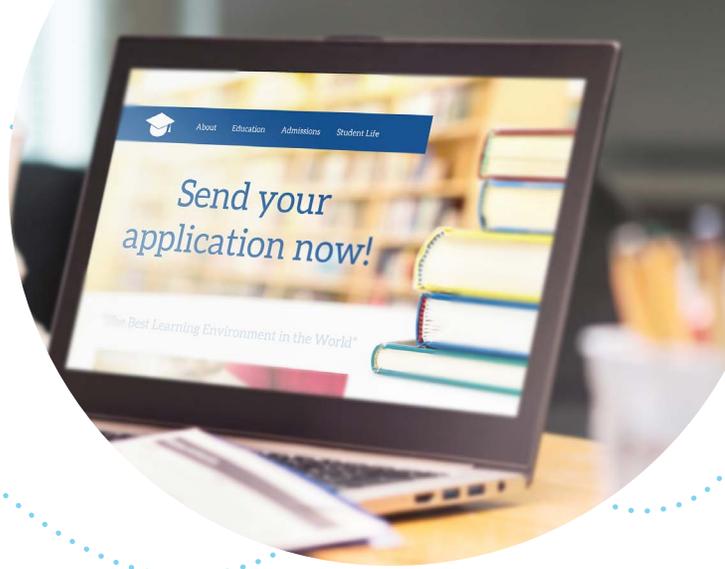
TOPIC	PRINTED MATERIAL
Tuition and costs	41%
Scholarship and financial aid updates	41%
Financing options (types of loans, differences, qualification, re-payment options, etc.)	37%
Information and updates about orientation	36%
Admission criteria	28%
Deadline extensions (e.g. course registration, decision deadlines)	26%
Test-optional policies	26%
Housing/residence updates	24%
Payment options (installments)	23%
Updates on online and hybrid learning options	23%
How to take a virtual campus visit	20%
Updates to health services	20%

Resources used by counselors to gather information on colleges and their effectiveness

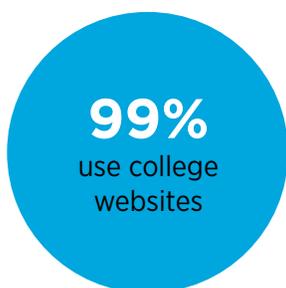
SORTED BY EFFECTIVENESS

RESOURCE	USE IT	VERY EFFECTIVE
College representatives working with our school	97%	76%
Contacting the college with specific questions	97%	65%
College's website	99%	62%
Online college guides	88%	39%
Printed materials that the college sends you	85%	35%
College planning websites	77%	33%
Search engines	95%	30%
Printed college guides	79%	30%
Virtual tours	86%	29%
College view books	65%	24%
College's social media site(s)	53%	21%

Counselors rated two forms of direct contact with colleges as the most effective resources: working with college representatives and contacting colleges with specific questions. They also use a wide variety of resources even if they did not find them very effective. Campuses should review their resources for high school counselors and be sure that those resources are addressing the informational needs of high school counselors (and by extension students and parents).

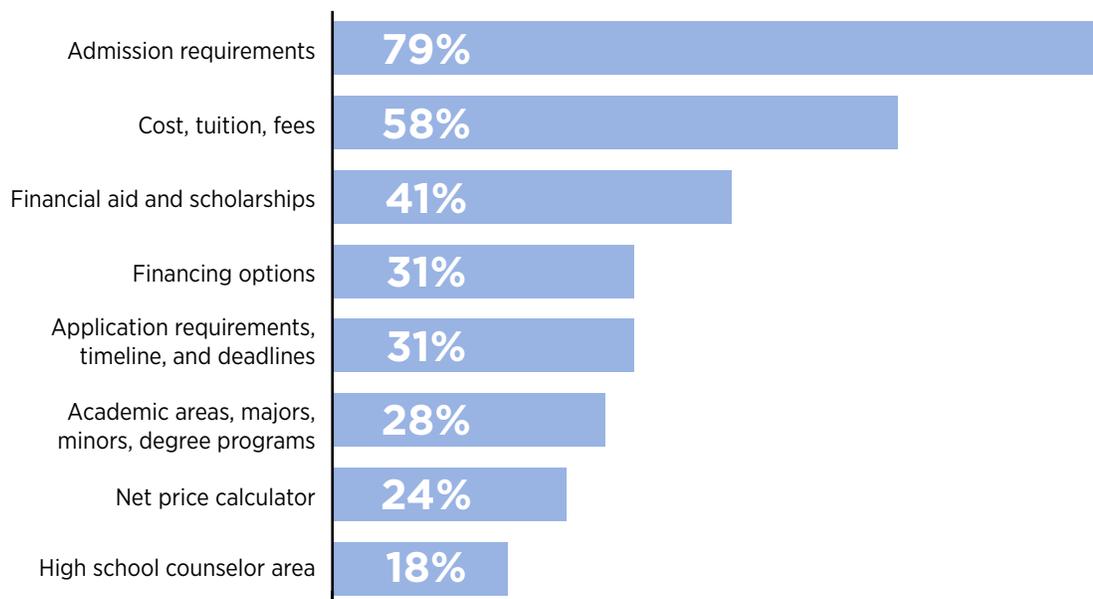


COLLEGE WEBSITES



Here are some additional details on their experiences with websites.

COLLEGE WEBSITE PAGES THAT HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS CHECK



What do counselors find frustrating in college websites?

Hard to navigate

Contact information not easily found—who's my representative this year?

Information buried in places hard to find

COA, tuition, and fees are not easily found

Admission requirements are not clearly stated

Circular/broken links

Information about academics (majors, minors, programs) not clearly explained

Too many pop ups!

Deadlines are outdated

Financial aid and scholarship area is difficult to understand

Class profile missing or hidden

Inconsistency of information: requirements, cost, application deadlines

No easy way to search for answers

High school counselor area/portal missing

Lack of transparency

Not finding the net price calculator

Plain language—Website information seems to be written for experts (How do I translate that to parents?)

Rah, rah, rah, rather than nuts and bolts

What do counselors want to see in college websites?

Up to date, streamlined, and to the point area just for high school counselors

Information on tours, links to register

Need basic information on one page to download and share (deadlines, admissions criteria, application requirements, etc.)

Ability to speak to a human being

Current deadlines listed in one place (application, deposit, housing)

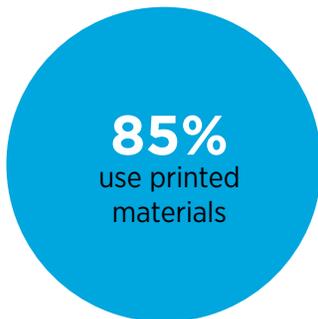
English proficiency requirements

Housing options and deadlines

Testing requirements



PRINTED MATERIALS



Here are some of the types of printed materials counselors said they use:

PRINTED MATERIAL
1-page information about cost and financing
1-page document on admission basics
1-page document on scholarship basics
Class profile
College essay guide materials
FAFSA handouts
Information on open houses and how to sign up for a visit
List of majors
Planning guide
Postcard with contact information for the admissions office
Poster
Printed deadlines to check off

Counselors' views of test-optional policies

At the time of this report, approximately three out of four colleges and universities have gone test-optional. When asked about this change, the vast majority of high school counselors expressed positive views of test-optional policies. (Note: respondents could choose more than one answer.)



Comments on test-optional policies

They remove barriers to college access. Merit scholarships should not be attached to test scores.

They have been a game changer for my students.

They are great because they allow students who are not great test takers a chance to attend and do well in college.

They address the equity disparity in college admissions.

There are some amazing students that just do not score high on high stakes testing. Colleges miss out on some wonderful students when they are dismissed due to their scores not being high enough.

The widespread availability of test-optional policies has decreased student anxiety (one less task to worry about, one less static measure to compare themselves to their peers) and increased student confidence in applying to schools they believe are a good fit.

Students who are not good test takers but good in their classes have more opportunities.

The only downside is that it makes selective admissions even less predictable, but the benefits in equity more than make up for that.

Transparency—what percentage of students applied to an institution and what percentage were admitted to it?

Colleges are not clear whether test-optional is admission-only or is applied to merit-based financial awards—it's difficult to find this info.

Colleges should explain that, right now, test-optional does not equal test-blind. Students think it does and it's causing many of them to apply to schools they have no chance of getting into.

The language should be clear and easy to understand. The admitted student data should always be provided for test submitting and no-test students and easy to find.

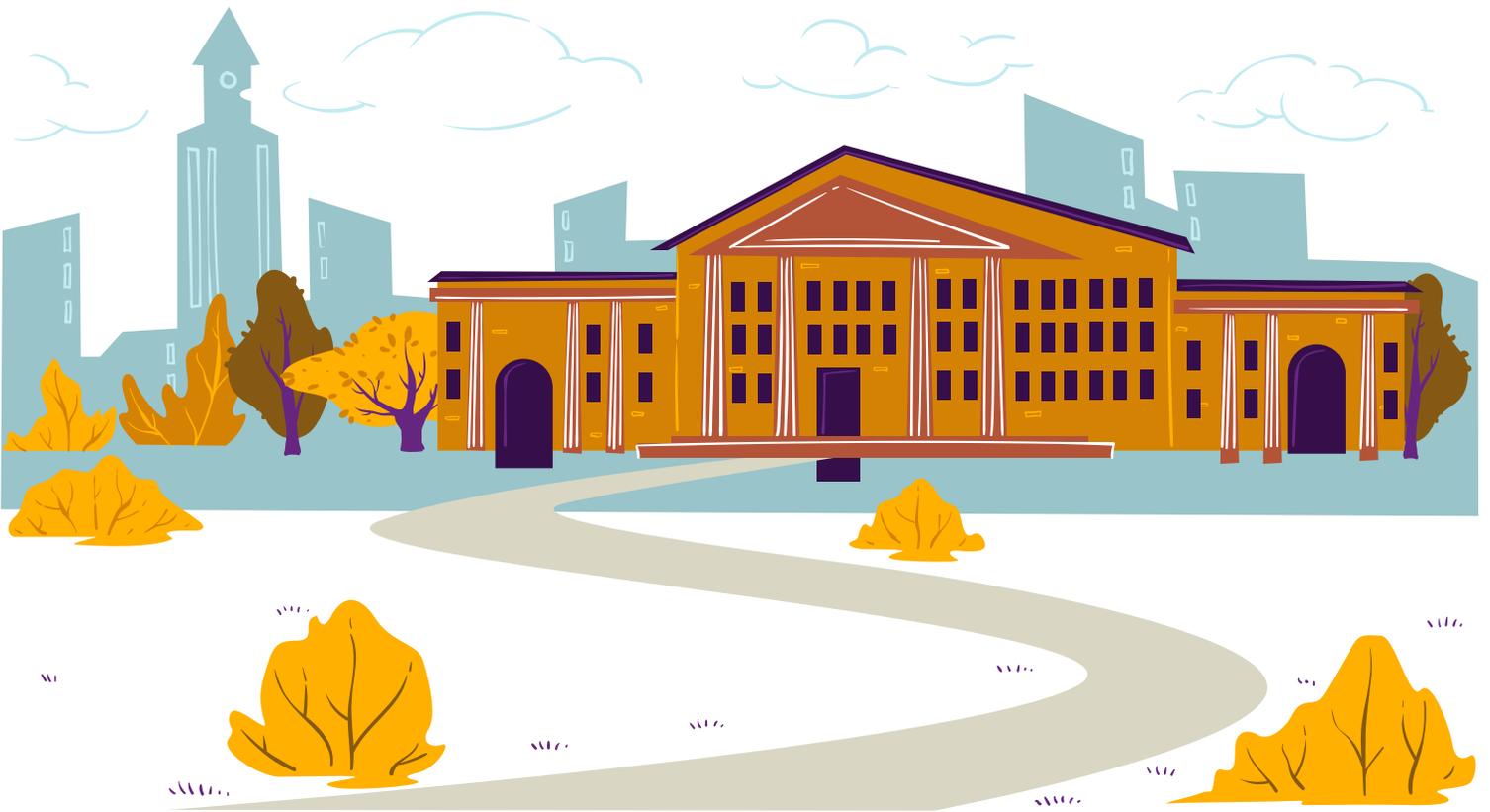
Comments on test-blind policies

Test-blind/test-free is even better. Test-optional policies do continue to advantage the advantaged families who can afford to continue with test prep and multiple test dates. That's why I'd prefer test-free policies, which makes more sense from an equity and access standpoint.

Test-blind and test-optional need to be explained clearly to kids and families by colleges.

Test-blind would be better. Test-optional will eventually widen the disparities between the super savvy haves and the unknowing have-nots. And some colleges can't help themselves with testing. It will be hard to maintain that the process is equally fair for those students who don't or can't submit tests.

Test-blind policies are preferred. Test-optional policies still lead to inequities and sometimes colleges require more essays/materials/other test scores leading them to be less accessible.



COLLEGE FAIRS AND COLLEGE REPRESENTATIVES

Effectiveness of college fairs

EFFECTIVENESS	IN PERSON	VIRTUAL
Very effective	52%	6%
Somewhat effective	43%	59%
Not effective at all	5%	35%

Counselors rated in-person college fairs much more effective than virtual college fairs, although two out of three counselors rated virtual fairs at least somewhat effective. But given that virtual experiences are both convenient and increase access to college fairs, institutions should analyze their virtual college fairs and make sure the experience is really optimized for the virtual environment. Is it as engaging as an in-person college fair? Does it provide opportunity for quality interaction?

Effectiveness of college representatives' visits to high schools

EFFECTIVENESS	
Very effective	62%
Somewhat effective	36%
Not effective at all	2%

Nearly all high school counselors surveyed reported using the resources offered by the college representatives working with their high school, which was rated as the most effective tool counselors had in their work

Characteristics of good high school representatives and visit experiences

We asked counselors a series of questions about what they value in high school representatives and what makes for a good high school visit experience. Here some key takeaways from their answers:

-  *High school representatives need to be able to present information about the college and the application process in a way that is clear to students.*
-  *Engagement is critical. Representatives need to have genuine enthusiasm—to be excited about the institution they represent but not overly salesy. They also need to be available to talk with students if they have questions or need more information.*
-  *Preparation and organization will make interactions smoother. Having takeaway materials and resources such as videos allow students and parents to have additional information they can review after meeting with representatives.*

What are the characteristics of a good college representative?

Well-trained and energetic.

Knows the high school and the population they enroll.

Is willing to answer questions and follows up after visit.

Brings materials the students can take home.

Offers to help with application.

Explains timeline of application and how admission works.

Encourages students to visit.

Offers to connect students with current students from that high school who are currently enrolled or students in their academic area of interest.

What makes a high school visit a good experience for students?

They came prepared with college-specific information plus gave personal insights and experiences.

The admissions rep was here in person and used specific student transcript examples and college app examples, which was very helpful for our students.

It is helpful when a college sends us a list of students who have shown interest in the college beforehand.

Sending representatives who are EXCITING as well as knowledgeable makes all the difference in the world. The engaging visit = students applying.

The representatives are very personable and time is no worry. They will not leave until all questions are answered. The biggest thing is that I get communications back from some schools on how our students are doing in college. Mostly these are small colleges.

What are the most pressing issues counselors are dealing with now?

Counselors are dealing with a wide variety of challenges. Here are some of the ones flagged by our survey respondents, many related to the ongoing issues of the pandemic.



Academics. Students have had struggles with instruction during COVID and also re-acclimating to in-person learning after long periods of remote learning. There are also concerns about the two-year delay in academic/social/emotional development.



Access to students and parents. COVID restrictions have greatly limited this.



Anxiety, emotional well-being, and mental health. Counselors repeatedly said students are more stressed, depressed, and anxious because of the massive disruptions of the pandemic. This is especially true for students in difficult economic or social circumstances.



Advising students. This challenge is both related to access but also to how much education, the economy, and the world at large have changed in the last two years.



Financial aid and creating access for educational opportunity. Many students need aid to attend college more than ever, and counselors are trying to inform them of all the aid and educational opportunities that are available.



The “new normal.” As one counselor put it, Are we going back to the way things were, or is this our new normal? This reflects everything from the high school experience to advising to applying for college.



“Pressure to be perfect.” The drive to get into the “best schools” has students taking the hardest course loads possible, pushing themselves to get the best grades, and generally stressing themselves out over school.



Resources. There are simply not enough people in the office to meet all of the students’ needs in social/emotional, academic, and college/career areas.

What else do counselors want colleges and universities to know?



College fairs are the way to go!

High school students are looking for college admission representatives to connect with them! Be genuine and take a sincere interest in them wanting information about your school. Let's see if your college is the right FIT for them and their family!

Students often remark how colleges all "sound the same" in info sessions, virtual sessions, and college rep visits. I worked in admission for almost a decade prior to becoming a college counselor, and I think a helpful exercise for many admission counselors would be to sit in on virtual presentations for a few of their "peer" institutions. We often expect students to be able to pull out these nuanced differences in schools in their "Why Us" supplements, but colleges are not always successful in doing their part to present how they are distinct.

My very top request is to get information that is directed to students. I want to be able to cut and paste from my email and put it in a newsletter or email to students. I cannot go to and know all the counselor info sessions and track all the programs, but if you give me an opportunity for my students to go/know/be involved, I will share it!

At our small, rural public school, students really range in their desire to even attend college and in the senior year they may not even have a list yet. Students are even more lost or concerned right now due to the pandemic and they may not have support at home. Pressure or lack of support at home plays such a big role.



Every high school should have a college rep that comes out and helps students with FAFSA.





During COVID, we were online only and communication was difficult. Our absence and failure rates were very high. I think bringing back the in-person visits and fairs is a welcome change!

Be careful when you tell our students to be in the most rigorous curriculum or take the most challenging course load. They'll do it at a cost to their physical and mental well-being, because they were told to by a college or university they have their heart set on.

Make it clear to parents and students if demonstrated interest is part of the application review process. Since parents and students have an easier time finding information, whether it's accurate or not, understand that counselors are often caught in the cross-hairs and our expertise/experience in the industry is brought into question. Please stand by us when this happens.

Colleges used to accept applications during certain, generally agreed upon windows. Students could manage their process, apply, and then live their lives. Now the college process is a constant over many months. It isn't healthy for them.

5 key takeaways for engaging counselors, students, and families

1. A strong partnership between college admissions staff and high school counselors is very valuable, because a well-informed counselor can be an tremendous ally in the admissions process.
2. The most effective way for admission offices to communicate with counselors is using a varied, multichannel approach that includes an easy-to-navigate website as well as tangible takeaways like brochures or downloadable PDF resources.
3. Keep content clear and consistent, especially as it relates to requirements, deadlines, financial aid, and other admission policies.
4. Counselors, students, and families really value personal and face-to-face interaction, whether it is at college fairs, individual school visits, or other receptions and events.
5. Admissions staff who are well-trained, engaging, and energetic are your most effective resource for communicating the value of your institution to counselors, students, and families.



If you haven't considered test-optional, why not? You are missing out on great students who will make your class discussions lively and engaging. Rewarding students with the financial means to hire private tutors and enroll in test prep boot camps and/or who have parents that are engaged in their education. You are rewarding multiple facets of privilege in this society. Consider the type of student you want.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH SPONSORS



RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,900 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

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How to cite this report

Ruffalo Noel Levitz & High School Counselor Marketing (2022). *2022 High School Counselors Report*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

Available at: RuffaloNL.com/Counselors2022

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