



College Planning and Student Emotions Report

Addressing Prospective Students' Emotional Needs Through Enrollment Marketing and Engagement Strategies

Co-sponsored by:



How Are Prospective College Students Really Feeling?

After years of pandemic, lockdowns, remote learning, and anxiety, it is no surprise that high school students are feeling stressed. But how does that stress affect them as they search for colleges?

To answer that, RNL and ZeeMee went straight to the source and polled high school seniors about the stress, anxiety, and worry they are feeling. Their answers should be enough to make us reconsider how we communicate with them and what we communicate during the college planning and enrollment process.

Business cannot continue as usual with enrollment. We need to understand what students are going through and engage them beyond transactional information-relay forms of communication.

Stress and anxiety among high school seniors

86% are stressed often
31% are stressed most of the time

82% feel anxious often
34% feel anxious most of the time

73% worry often
22% worry most of the time



The vast majority of 12th-grade students are frequently dealing with difficult emotions. Moreover, their stress, worry, and anxiety do not ease much during their last year of high school.

Emotional changes during 12th grade

Here is how students' stress, anxiety, and worry change during their final year of high school.

MONTH	STRESSED OFTEN	ANXIOUS OFTEN	WORRIED OFTEN
October	88%	80%	72%
December	84%	79%	70%
March	85%	81%	72%
May	87%	87%	76%
July	84%	83%	73%

Students' Feelings About College Planning

We cannot assume that college planning is void of emotions, that all students are fully ready to tackle all the steps, and they are 100 percent excited and happy about everything ahead of them. Nor can we assume that college life looks and feels like a unique, exciting adventure for all students.

Instead, college is often a stress-filled journey for high school students. Here is what students told us when we asked them about their biggest sources of difficulty with everyday college planning activities and steps.

Top sources of stress, anxiety, and worry during college planning

78% Not knowing if they will be able to pay for college	71% Forgetting to submit a required form or document	56% Doing an admissions interview	56% Not knowing if/when they will "get in"
55% Financial aid process and qualification	52% Financial aid and scholarship forms	47% Writing an admission essay	44% Filling out the FAFSA



How can we help ease this source of fear and stress in each one of these areas?

Here is our list of ways to help alleviate the stress and worry of some of these activities—you may already be doing some of these things.

- **Fear of not knowing if they will be able to pay for college**
 - Provide clear information that is free of admissions jargon.
 - Conduct early outreach.
 - Promote family involvement.
 - Provide one-on-one financial counseling.
- **Forgetting to submit a required form or document**
 - Send personalized checklists.
 - Nudge students via text and phone calls.
- **Doing an admissions interview**
 - If your institution does not have an interview, make sure you state it is not required.

If your institution has an interview:

- Share videos on how to prepare for an interview.
- Share videos of "mock interviews."
- Invite students to virtual sessions to ask questions.
- Invite current students as social media ambassadors to share their experiences during their interviews.

- **Not knowing if they will get in or when they will receive a decision**
 - Communicate with clarity and transparency at each stage.
 - Provide timelines.
- **Financial aid and scholarships forms/filling out the FAFSA**
 - Provide one-on-one coaching to help with filling out forms and other questions about financial and scholarships.
 - Establish clear qualification matrices.
 - Invite students to connect with financial aid staff via email, text, and telephone and ask questions or ask for help.
- **Writing an admissions essay**
 - If your institution does not have an essay as an admission requirement, make sure students know.

If your institution has an essay as an admission requirement:

- Share videos on how to write a good essay (consider partnering with some of your professors for these videos).
- Hold virtual events/workshops on how to write an admissions essay early in 12th grade— even if they are not considering applying to your institution, that might be a fantastic way to connect with them.
- Invite students to virtual sessions to ask questions.
- Invite current students as social media ambassadors to share their experiences with their essays.

Feelings About College Life

The transition to college can be both exciting and terrifying. However, students showed that some exciting things are also sources of stress. We need to acknowledge the duality of these experiences.

What are students excited about?



By understanding what students are excited about, you can tailor your communications to build on that excitement. Early in 12th grade, you should communicate about the many groups, organizations, clubs, and teams students can join once they arrive on campus. Invite these organizations to make short videos (2-3 minutes at most) and put them on your website. Likewise, invite these organizations to tag your social accounts so that you can use their fresh and authentic social media experience. Remember that social media is where students live; it's their search engine.

It's also important to make these communications feel authentic. For all the experiences listed in the above graphic, authentic content that conveys the depth and breadth of all the resources available on your campus will truly engage students.

What are students stressed about?



83%

Having a roommate

80%

Not having enough money

77%

Grades

73%

Living in a dorm

64%

Having a hard time making friends

60%

Not fitting in

As complex as our students are, so are their emotions about college. Their sources of stress show parallels to what they are excited about—meeting new friends and finding themselves but also having a hard time making friends or not “fitting in.” Here are our insights into how you can support students with these concerns.

How can you support students with their sources of stress about college?

• **Having a roommate and living in a dorm**

Many students may have never had to share a room with a sibling, so the idea of a roommate can be daunting. Fears of not getting along, having different schedules, and similar concerns are common. These strategies can help address these concerns:

- Communicate which resources available to help them find a “good match.”
- Share videos of students talking about their roommate experiences.
- Share resources available to students when they run into issues with roommates.
- Invite students to be part of an online community where they can meet other students with similar interests and could potentially be a good match.

• **Not having enough money**

- Offer financial counseling during the college planning process.
- Connect students with on-campus job resources.

• **Grades**

Although taking new classes was mentioned on the positive/exciting side, keeping grades up and doing well is a source of stress.

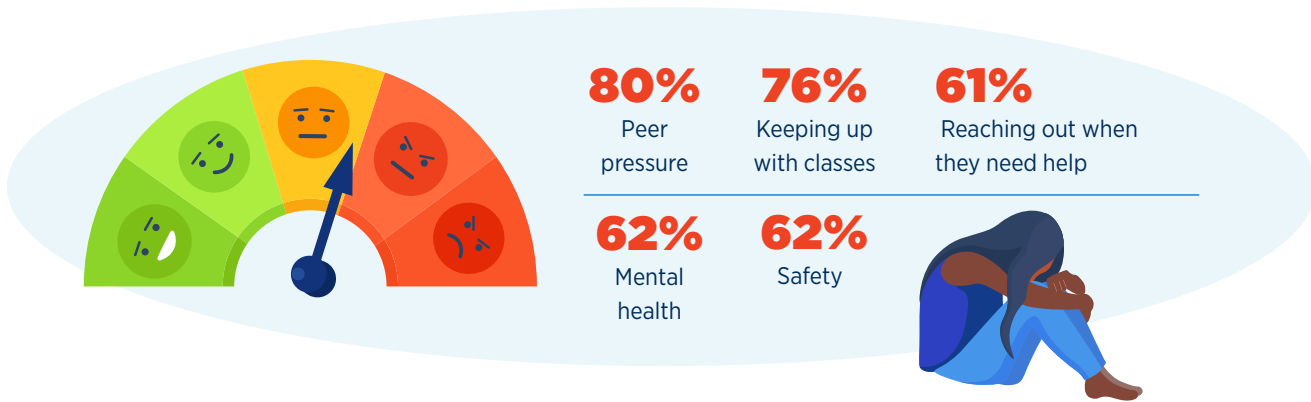
- Do not wait until the students start their classes in the fall to share academic support services and resources. Share the information during college planning.
- Partner with different areas of the institution that offer these services and help prospective students understand the depth of the support they will receive. Some ideas are:
 - o Short videos of staff and students who have used the services.
 - o Virtual open houses for students and their families showcasing the resources.
 - o Survey your students as soon as they arrive to understand their needs, fears, and potential red flags. Use this data to help them.

• **Having a hard time making friends and “not fitting in.”**

Reassuring students about fitting in is similar to how you get students excited about meeting new friends:

- Communicate early in 12th grade about the organizations and groups students can join. Videos from these groups can be very helpful.
- Have these organizations tag your social accounts so students can have authentic interactions with them.
- Invite students to be part of an online community where they can meet other students and “find their people.”

What are students worried about?



Similarly to the experiences that stress students, they have a number of related worries. The truth is that these two categories are very fluid, and you could easily swap the terms and activities. What truly worries them most likely stresses them out, and vice versa.

How can you help students with their top worries about college?

- **Reaching out when they need help and connecting them with resources they need**

- Share resources that can help before the term begins. As mentioned earlier, your institution has many resources to help and support your students' success. Do not wait until they move into residence halls or start classes to share these.
- Partner with those offices and teams across your institution and start showcasing them during college planning. Some ideas:
 - o Short videos of staff and students who have used the services.
 - o Virtual open houses for students and their families showcasing the resources.
 - o Survey your students as soon as they arrive to understand their needs, fears, and potential red flags.

- **Safety**

This is an issue that is in the minds of many students, so do not think they are unaware or that you can avoid addressing it.

- Be upfront about all students' safety issues in college and educate them on how to prevent issues, stay safe, protect each other, and ultimately what to do when something happens.
- Ensure safety and crime prevention resources are on your website.

Learn more about the social media and content preferences of students in the 2023 E-Expectations Report, available at [RNL.com/Expectations](https://www.rnl.com/Expectations)

Best Practices to Communicate With Students During College Planning

In light of these survey results, here are a number of key areas that can help you maximize the excitement students have about attending college while mitigating their stress, anxiety, and worries.

Convey affordability early and often

Start the conversation early and continue it throughout the entire process. Make sure financing and affordability conversations are understandable to students (acronyms, terms, steps, forms, etc.)

Send deadlines reminders and updates on missing items

Use technology to remind students of upcoming deadlines, missing documents, and other information needed each step of the way.

Make key info clear and easy to find on your website

Ensure your website is comprehensive and up to date with the latest requirements, deadlines, and other key info. Be upfront about your admission requirements (essay, interview, test policy). Students may assume things such as essays are required, so make it clear what is required and what is not needed.

Keep the communication flowing in 12th grade

The final year of high school is pivotal to enrollment and also clearly when students are feeling the pressure of taking that next big step in their lives. Communicate often to help put them at ease.

Engage students over the summer to boost yield and reduce “summer melt”

Continue to engage students after deposits to keep them moving toward enrolling. Share experiences that will excite them about attending while also clearly explaining their options for academic, health, social, and other types of support on campus.

Assess where students are when they arrive on your campus

Understand where they are, what worries them, and what risk factors they are dealing with (social, academic, financial, etc.) First-year student assessments, first-year programs, and advising are perfect for getting a pulse immediately.

Create a community during their search

Invite prospective students to be part of a community and meet other prospective students interested in the same institution. Do not wait until they are admitted—you can use virtual communities to build those connections early. Prospective students want to connect and engage with each other long before applying.

Deliver authentic engagement on social media

Use social media to engage students with fresh, authentic content about critical topics to their interests. This will help your institution feel more “real” and genuine to them.

Learn more about how you can engage and excite students at every stage of the enrollment journey

Ask for a complimentary consultation with our enrollment experts. We can share the many ways we can help your campus engage students and address their concerns using:

- Engaging communication flows that reach students in their inbox, through their phones, and the other channels they use every day.
- Online student communities that will help prospective students feel like they already “fit in” at your institution.
- Family engagement that turns parents and guardians into enrollment influencers for your institution.

Request your complimentary consultation at RNL.com/Consult



About the Study

The survey that underpins this report was administered electronically in March 2023. RNL and ZeeMee surveyed 10,821 students in 12th grade (class of 2023) between October 2022 and July 2023 via the ZeeMee app. No personally identifiable information was collected.

RACE/ETHNICITY	ALL RESPONDENTS
American Indian	3%
Asian	11%
Black	28%
Hispanic	19%
Native Hawaiian	1%*
Other	2%*
Prefer not to say	2%*
White	51%

GENDER IDENTITY	ALL RESPONDENTS
Male	45%
Female	47%
Non-binary/third gender	6%
Prefer to self-describe	1%*
Prefer not to say	2%*

*Not reported



About the 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.

[Visit RuffaloNL.com](https://www.ruffalonnol.com)



ZeeMee is the #1 community app for students heading to college. Millions of students use ZeeMee to make friends, find roommates, chat with college administrators, discover hyper-local events, and plug into life on campus. Connected students thrive, and ZeeMee is helping make the connections that matter. In an effort to help more students succeed, ZeeMee partners with colleges across the country, building community for their students and dramatically improving recruitment and retention outcomes. With highly active students at more than 2,500 U.S. colleges and universities, ZeeMee is changing the way students find each other and belong, giving every student the opportunity to find their best friends and succeed. ZeeMee is consistently a Top 50 most downloaded apps in the App Store and has been featured numerous times as “Hot App of the Week” by Apple.

[Visit colleges.zeeemee.com](https://colleges.zeeemee.com)

Learn more about how you can engage and excite students at every stage of the enrollment journey

Ask for a complimentary consultation with our enrollment experts. We can share the many ways we can help your campus engage students and address their concerns using:

- Engaging communication flows that reach students in their inbox, through their phones, and the other channels they use every day.
- Family engagement that turns parents and guardians into enrollment influencers for your institution.
- Online student communities that will help prospective students feel like they already “fit in” at your institution.

Request your complimentary consultation at [RNL.com/Consult](https://www.ruffalonnol.com/Consult)



Visit [RuffaloNL.com/Enrollment](https://www.ruffalonnol.com/Enrollment)
Email ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com
Call **800.876.1117**

How to cite this report

RNL & ZeeMee (2023). *College Planning and Student Emotions: Addressing Prospective Students' Emotional Needs Through Enrollment Marketing and Engagement Strategies*. Cedar Rapids, IA: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.
Available at [RNL.com/Emotions](https://www.ruffalonnol.com/Emotions).

All material in this document is copyright © 2023 by RNL.
Permission is required to redistribute information from RNL either in print or electronically.