



2025 E-Expectations Trend Report

Examining the online experiences,
expectations, and behaviors of college-bound
high school students

Co-sponsored by: **HALDA** modern
campus™



Contents

Beyond the Click: How and Why Students Reach Out to Colleges 5

Click, Chat, Connect: Uncovering Student Patterns with AI College Assistants..... 7

Digital Footprints & Follow-Ups: Understanding How Students Share Information
With Colleges..... 9

Unraveling Students’ College Website Discovery Journey12

College Planning Playbook: What Works and What’s Used.....22

How Do Students Prefer to Hear From Colleges?24

Inbox Insights: What Drives Students to Engage With College Emails? 25

Lights, Camera, Engagement: What College Planning Videos Students Want29

Scrolling for Success: How Social Media Shapes College Planning for Students31

Texting the Path to College: What Works for Students36

Mapping the Student Journey: Experiences That Transform Campus Visits
Into Adventures..... 40

From Click to Campus: How Students Engage With College Ads 44

Final Thoughts49

Demographics50

About the Sponsors51

Introduction

College planning has transformed into a complex digital dance, where Instagram stories matter as much as campus tours and AI chatbots answer midnight questions about application deadlines. Colleges and universities need to be aligned with the expectations of today's college-bound high school students in order to engage them where they are in their journey and keep them moving toward enrollment.

This **2025 E-Expectations** report dives deep into how students navigate their college search today. Through extensive data analysis and student feedback, we've uncovered patterns that challenge conventional wisdom about student engagement. We found that while 31% of students still fill out traditional web forms, a nearly equal number now follow schools on social media. Perhaps most tellingly, 68% of students have already interacted with AI assistants on college websites—though not all student groups embrace these tools equally.

What makes this research particularly valuable is its student-centered approach. Rather than focusing on institutional metrics or enrollment targets, we examined students' behaviors and preferences at every stage of their college search. From 9th graders just beginning to explore their options to 12th graders making final decisions, we tracked how their engagement methods evolve and what they're looking for when they reach out.

The findings paint a picture of a generation that's both digitally native and surprisingly thoughtful about how they share information. While they're comfortable with AI chatbots and social media, they're also strategic about their engagement—59% will share their email address with a college, but only 32% will provide their home address. These aren't just statistics—they're insights into how students protect their privacy while seeking authentic connections with their future schools.

This report isn't just about documenting change and understanding it. Whether you're an admissions counselor trying to connect with first-generation students or a marketing director planning next year's outreach strategy, you'll find actionable insights backed by accurate student data. Ultimately, serving students better starts with understanding how they want to be served. Let's explore what today's students tell us about how they want to connect with colleges.

We hope you enjoy our report!

The RNL Research Team & Study Sponsors



10 Key Findings of 2025 E-Expectations

1. **91%** of students use college websites, making it the most-used resource, with **88%** finding them helpful—showing the critical importance of website optimization.
2. Despite being “digital natives,” students still value traditional methods: **80%** use in-person visits with an **88%** helpfulness rating.
3. **70%** of students have clicked on college ads, with Instagram being the dominant platform.
4. Email remains surprisingly relevant: **87%** of students across all grades use email weekly, with **74%** preferring it as their primary communication channel.
5. AI adoption is significant but varies by grade: **45%** have used college website AI assistants, with 10th graders showing the highest usage (**53%**).
6. There’s a clear personalization preference: **61%** favor personalized content but notably prefer user-controlled filtering (**45%**) over automatic personalization (**16%**).
7. Social media platform effectiveness shows interesting gaps: Instagram has the best alignment (**63%** use vs **53%** college content reach), while YouTube shows the largest missed opportunity (**50%** use vs **26%** college content reach).
8. Privacy concerns are significant: While **59%** will share email addresses, only **32%** will share home addresses.
9. Student life content drives social media follows: **37%** overall cite it as their primary reason for following college social accounts, peaking at **44%** for 12th graders.
10. Virtual tours are used by **77%** of students, with **84%** finding them helpful.



Beyond the Click: How and Why Students Reach Out to Colleges

Methods of contact: How students connect with colleges

Today's prospective students conduct their searches online, filling out online forms, sending emails, and following their dream schools on TikTok. This analysis of student engagement patterns reveals a stark shift toward digital channels, with nearly 90% of initial college contacts now happening electronically.

The chart below illustrates the modern landscape of college engagement, showing how students reach out and their reasons for doing so. The findings challenge conventional wisdom about student behavior while reinforcing the critical importance of meeting prospective students where they are—whether in their social media feeds or physical mailboxes. For institutions looking to build their next class of students, understanding these patterns isn't just helpful, it is **essential**.

How do you let colleges and universities know you want more information?

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
I complete a form on the school's website to get more information	31%	20%	23%	31%	34%
I email the school	28%	25%	24%	24%	33%
I follow their social pages	27%	30%	24%	26%	28%
I respond to an email from the school	24%	11%	16%	25%	28%
I use college planning sites	20%	15%	21%	21%	20%
I respond to printed materials from the school	18%	13%	15%	17%	20%
I schedule a visit to the campus	18%	9%	17%	19%	20%
I list the school when I fill out the PSAT, SAT, or ACT forms	15%	12%	17%	17%	13%
I complete a cost or scholarship calculator form online	12%	7%	11%	13%	14%
I use their mobile app	11%	14%	12%	9%	11%
My parent(s) or guardian(s) contact schools for me	11%	13%	17%	10%	9%
I call the school	10%	14%	12%	8%	11%
I visit the campus on my own without scheduling a tour	9%	7%	13%	9%	9%
I complete a form on the athletics page of the website	8%	6%	10%	11%	6%
I will not connect with a school; I'll wait for them to reach out to me	7%	20%	7%	7%	5%

What is your *primary* reason for contacting a college or university?

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
To get information about a specific major/program	25%	30%	15%	28%	24%
To get information about how to apply	14%	16%	19%	14%	12%
To get information about financial aid	11%	6%	8%	9%	14%
To talk to an admissions counselor	10%	15%	11%	9%	10%
I have questions about an application I have already submitted	7%	3%	8%	4%	8%
I have questions about an application that I have started	7%	4%	8%	7%	8%
To get information about a campus activity	7%	5%	7%	10%	5%
To plan a visit	6%	7%	6%	7%	6%
To talk to someone from the financial aid office	6%	2%	4%	6%	6%
To get information about athletic programs	4%	7%	8%	4%	3%
To talk to an athletic coach	4%	4%	6%	3%	4%

Key Findings

Digital engagement leads the way

- The majority of students engage with institutions through online forms (31%), emails (28%), and social media (27%). Younger students (9th-10th grade) are more likely to follow social media (30%), while older students (11th-12th grade) shift toward printed materials (33%) and online inquiry forms (34%).

Social media plays a key role in early engagement

- Nearly one-third (27%) of students follow colleges on social media, making it one of the top ways they engage. Ninth graders (30%) are the most engaged on social media, showing the importance of establishing early brand awareness.

Campus visits grow in importance over time

- Only 18% of students initially consider reaching out to a school by scheduling a visit, but this increases as students get older (from 9% in 9th grade to 20% in 12th grade).

Reasons for contact: What students want to know

Students reach out to colleges for various reasons, from program exploration to financial aid questions. Understanding these motivations allows institutions to refine their messaging and meet students where they are in the college search process.

Key Findings

Academic programs are the top priority

- **Students want information on majors**—25% of students contact colleges for information about specific majors or programs, making it the most common reason for outreach. Interest in majors is highest in 9th (30%) and 11th grade (28%).
- **Financial aid differences**—First-gen students (14%) are more likely to inquire about financial aid than continuing-gen students (10%).
- **Digital first**—The majority of students engage online, whether through inquiry forms (31%), email (28%), or social media (27%).
- **Social media is critical for early engagement**—9th graders (30%) engage the most with social media, showing the importance of building awareness early.
- **Email remains a strong engagement tool**—While social media is key for younger students, older students (12th grade, 33%) prefer email.
- **Financial aid support is needed earlier**—Only 12% of students use cost calculators.
- **Printed materials still have a niche audience**—While brochures (18%) aren't a top engagement tool, students respond well to print materials.



Recommendations for Institutions

Digital engagement leads the way

1. **Use digital-first strategies**, but ensure multichannel engagement (email, social media, and text messaging).
2. **Increase financial aid visibility**.
3. **Strengthen early social media engagement**, targeting 9th and 10th graders.
4. **Enhance accessibility for campus visits**.
5. **Make the application process more transparent and user-friendly**, as application-related questions are a top reason for outreach.

The data paints a clear picture: students' paths to college are increasingly digital, undeniably diverse, and more complex than ever. But this complexity presents an opportunity. Institutions that build flexible, multi-channel engagement strategies will connect more effectively with tomorrow's college class.

The institutions that thrive won't just tweak their outreach—they'll transform how they connect with students from the ground up. While platforms and outreach targets are essential, it is equally important to understand where students are—online and offline—and engage them at the most critical moments of their college search.

Click, Chat, Connect: Uncovering Student Patterns With AI College Assistants

Picture this: You're a high school student scrolling through college websites late at night, wondering if anyone's awake to answer your questions. A friendly chat bubble pops up: "Hi! I'm here to help!" It's an AI assistant ready to guide you through the maze of college planning. But who's clicking that chat button, and what happens next? This research reveals some surprising answers about who's embracing these digital guides—and who might be getting left behind in the college search revolution.

AI assistant usage: Who's engaging?

Have you ever used a digital AI assistant on a college or university website?

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Yes	45%	49%	53%	43%	43%



Key Findings

Nearly half (45%) of all respondents reported using a digital AI assistant on a college or university website, underscoring the growing role of technology in the college search process.

Usage by grade level

- Engagement with AI assistants is highest among younger students, with 9th (49%) and 10th graders (53%) leading the way.

Post-AI engagement: What happens after the chat?

What step(s) did you take after interacting with an AI assistant on a college website?

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Email the admissions office	29%	21%	33%	28%	30%
Look deeper into the college's website	28%	23%	21%	30%	30%
Fill out a form to get more information	27%	27%	22%	29%	27%
Apply to that school	24%	16%	24%	26%	25%
Follow their social media pages	24%	24%	24%	25%	23%
Have a phone conversation with an admissions/enrollment team member	18%	16%	20%	21%	15%
Reach out to friends or family who may have attended that institution	18%	19%	21%	21%	16%

MOST COMMON ACTIONS TAKEN AFTER INTERACTING WITH AI ASSISTANTS

- **Emailing the admissions office (29%)**—Nearly one-third of students followed up with an email, showing that AI assistants effectively prompt personalized communication.
 - 10th graders were the most likely to email admissions offices (33%), followed by 12th graders (30%).
- **Exploring the college website (28%)**—Students frequently visited the website for more detailed information after engaging with the AI assistant.
- **Filling out information request forms (27%)**—Over a quarter of students sought additional resources through college inquiry forms.
 - Filling out forms for more information reached its highest level among 11th graders (29%).
- **Applying to the school (24%)**—One in four students applied to the institution, demonstrating the AI tool's effectiveness in converting interest into action.
- **Following social media pages (24%)**—Students also engaged with colleges through social platforms, deepening their connection with the institution.
- **Direct conversations peak in middle grades**—Phone conversations with admissions staff were highest in 10th (20%) and 11th grades (21%) but dropped to 15% by 12th grade.



Recommendations for Institutions

1. **AI assistants most effectively encourage applications**, email outreach, and website exploration among 10th and 11th graders.
2. **Engagement declines in 12th grade**, likely due to decision finalization or fatigue.
3. **AI assistants drive further exploration**, information requests, and applications.
4. **Students favor digital interactions** over phone calls or personal outreach.
5. **AI-driven engagement** is strengthened when institutions provide seamless transitions to email communication, website exploration, and application platforms.

The story is clear: AI assistants aren't just fancy chatbots—they're becoming critical waypoints on the path to college. But like any new technology, their impact isn't reaching all students equally. As these digital guides become more common on college websites, institutions face a crucial challenge: ensuring that every student, regardless of their background or grade level, has access and confidence to engage with these powerful tools.

Digital Footprints and Follow-Ups: Understanding How Students Share Information with Colleges

In today’s digital-first world, the college search process has evolved dramatically. Students are more privacy-conscious and digitally savvy than ever before, carefully curating what personal information they share with institutions. Understanding these preferences isn’t just about data collection—it’s about building trust and creating meaningful connections with prospective students from their first point of contact.

Information that students are willing to share

How much personal information will you share with a college or university when you want them to send you more information?

INFORMATION	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Email address	59%	59%	46%	57%	65%
Name	47%	52%	36%	45%	51%
Major or programs I'm interested in	46%	39%	33%	42%	53%
The high school I'm attending	40%	40%	29%	43%	42%
Cell phone	39%	43%	29%	38%	42%
Career aspirations	34%	28%	28%	38%	35%
Home address	32%	26%	22%	32%	36%
How I learned about the school	29%	24%	24%	30%	31%
Preferences for future communication	28%	23%	26%	30%	28%
Cell phone number for my parents/family/adult	25%	28%	19%	25%	24%
Opt-in for text messages	25%	26%	16%	24%	29%
Email address for my parents/family/adult	24%	23%	23%	25%	26%
Home phone	19%	21%	14%	17%	21%



Key Findings

- **Email is the gateway**—59% of students share their email, making it the most commonly provided contact information.
- **Academic interests matter**—Nearly half (46%) share their intended major or program of interest, underscoring the importance of program-specific outreach.
- **Name and high school are important, but not universal**—47% provide their name, and 40% share their high school information.
- **Cell phone numbers, are provided selectively**—While 39% share their number, only 25% opt in for text messaging.
- **Career aspirations are less commonly shared**—Only 34% provide career interest details, showing that students may still be exploring options.
- **Limited home address disclosure**—Just 32% of students share their home address, suggesting mailed outreach should be highly targeted.
- **Parental contact information is provided sparingly**—25% provide a parent’s email, and 24% provide a parent’s phone number.
- **How they learned about the school is less of a priority**—Only 29% share this data, which could impact marketing attribution.

Key findings by grade

12th graders show the highest sharing percentages in several key categories

INFORMATION	ALL STUDENTS	12TH GRADE
Email address	59%	65%
Name	47%	51%
Major or programs I'm interested in	46%	53%
Cell phone	39%	42%
Home address	32%	36%

This increased willingness to share likely isn't just about being more open in general but reflects their college application stage. Twelfth graders are actively applying to colleges and universities, so they're more motivated to share their information in order to:

1. Receive important admission information
2. Stay updated about application deadlines
3. Learn about programs and opportunities
4. Maintain communication with potential schools

Tenth graders consistently show the lowest sharing percentages across most categories. This is likely because college applications feel far away, making them less motivated to share personal information.

After you complete a form to receive more information, what are the best ways for the college or university to get back to you?

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Email	68%	66%	66%	72%	61%
Text message	40%	41%	43%	40%	29%
Phone call	23%	27%	25%	22%	18%
Printed materials	22%	25%	24%	20%	24%
Show me a confirmation screen with recommendations for the next steps and links to other online resources	22%	15%	23%	22%	21%
Message me through an app	13%	17%	16%	10%	15%
Send me a video	11%	10%	10%	8%	22%
Connect me with someone on campus through a live chat	10%	8%	11%	9%	12%
I will not complete a form to receive more information	2%	2%	1%	2%	1%

Key Findings

Email is the preferred communication method—68% of students prefer to receive follow-up emails, reinforcing the importance of strategic email marketing.

Text messaging is gaining traction—40% of students prefer text messages, with younger students being more likely to opt in.

Traditional methods are secondary—Phone calls (23%) and printed materials in the mail (22%) have limited appeal but may still be effective for targeted audiences.

Digital engagement is important—22% prefer a confirmation screen with the next steps and links to more resources.

Younger students value mobile and instant communication—9th and 10th graders prefer text messaging, app-based outreach, and digital confirmations more than older students.

12th graders are more open to videos—Interest in video content surges in 12th grade (22%), likely due to virtual tours and decision-making content.

Recommendations for Institutions

Email is a must-have—Email remains the dominant channel for communication across all student groups, and outreach efforts should be optimized for personalization and engagement.

Strategic text implementation—Start with opt-in campaigns, emphasize time-sensitive and concise messaging, and tailor content by grade level to ensure relevance and impact.

Phone calls and printed materials have limited appeal—While they are still effective in some cases, these traditional methods should not be the primary focus of outreach strategies.

Enhanced digital experience—Create clear post-action pathways, develop robust resource libraries, implement smart calls-to-action, and design with a mobile-first mindset.

Mobile-first strategy—Optimize all content for mobile, develop app-based engagement options, create instant response systems, and focus on quick, digestible content.

Strategic video content—Include grade-specific messaging, focus on key decision-making topics, feature virtual tour experiences, and incorporate authentic student testimonials.

More Findings

Balance personalization with privacy—Students expect a tailored experience but are selective about what information they share, so institutions must be strategic in how they request and use student data.

Staged information collection—Instead of asking for everything upfront, institutions should collect information in phases that match students' readiness to share. For example:

- **Early stages (9th-10th grade):** Focus only on basic contact info and academic interests
- **Later stages (11th-12th grade):** Request more detailed personal information when students are more invested in the college search process

Explain WHY: Since students are more likely to share information they see as relevant to their college search (like majors and programs at 46%), institutions need to clearly communicate how each piece of the requested information will benefit them. For example, try explaining that providing a cell phone number means they'll receive timely updates about application deadlines or scholarship opportunities.

As institutions navigate the evolving landscape of student recruitment, one thing is clear: the future of college outreach lies in creating a balanced, multi-channel approach that respects student privacy while delivering the personalized experience they expect. Success will come to those institutions that can master this delicate dance—using the right channels at the right time, with messaging that resonates with each student's unique journey toward higher education.

Unraveling Students' College Website Discovery Journey

How students discover college websites

Gone are the days when college discovery meant thumbing through thick guidebooks or relying solely on high school counselors. Today’s students are digital natives, wielding tools from traditional search engines to AI assistants to find the perfect college. Yet beneath this technological evolution lies a complex web of preferences and behaviors that vary dramatically across student populations. Understanding these patterns isn’t just about improving visibility—it’s about ensuring every student can find their path to higher education, regardless of background or search habits.

How do you typically find a particular college website?

METHOD	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
I use a search engine	42%	41%	36%	45%	41%
I search social media	31%	37%	31%	28%	32%
I find the website in an email	54%	46%	53%	47%	60%
I go to a college planning website	20%	17%	20%	23%	18%
I know the URL address to visit the website	18%	16%	18%	19%	18%
I find their website through something printed	17%	18%	20%	17%	16%
I use AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Perplexity, Bard)	11%	10%	14%	12%	10%

How do you search for colleges and universities using a search engine (like Google)?

METHOD	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
By the name of the school	49%	43%	39%	48%	53%
By the name of a specific major or academic program	41%	39%	37%	39%	43%
By the location where I want to attend a college or university	39%	33%	32%	38%	43%
By the name of a career interest or general academic area	37%	37%	30%	38%	39%
By the college size (small, medium, large)	15%	14%	16%	15%	16%
By interacting with AI chat tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Bard)	13%	12%	21%	11%	11%
By the religious affiliation	11%	6%	21%	10%	10%

Have you searched for colleges using voice search in search engines (such as Google), smart speaker devices (Google Home, Alexa, or Siri), or AI systems (Perplexity, ChatGPT, Bard)?

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Yes	51%	53%	59%	54%	46%





Key Findings

Multichannel discovery patterns

- Email marketing maintains relevance, especially for 12th graders.
- Search engines lead (42% overall) with traditional search methods.
- Voice search shows surprising adoption (51% overall).
- Social media emerges as the second most popular gateway (31%).

Grade-level search behaviors

9th grade:

Heavy social media use (37%)
High voice search (53%)

10th grade:

Peak voice search (59%)
Highest AI tool use (21%)

11th grade:

Strong search engine use (45%)

12th grade:

Name-specific searches (53%)

Search intent evolution

Early years: Broad searches

Later years: Specific inquiries
Location importance grows with age
(from 32% to 43%)



Recommendations for Institutions

Comprehensive digital strategy

- Implement robust SEO optimization
- Develop voice search-friendly content
- Maintain an active social media presence
- Create grade-specific email campaigns
- Integrate AI-powered search solutions

Since search engines remain the top discovery method, ensuring the college website ranks high for school names, academic programs, and career interests is essential.

Grade-level search behaviors

9th grade:

Focus on social media engagement
Optimize for voice queries

10th grade:

Develop AI-friendly content
Enhanced voice search optimization

11th grade:

Strong SEO focus
Multichannel presence

12th grade:

Direct search optimization
Targeted email marketing

Content strategy alignment

- Create exploratory content for early years
- Develop detailed program pages for later years
- Enhance location-based content



The information students seek: What matters most on college websites

When you're searching for your future college, every click counts. Today's students aren't just looking for a list of majors or a campus photo gallery—they're seeking a comprehensive picture of where they might spend some of the most important years of their lives.

What information on a website is helpful when researching a college or university?

INFORMATION	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Academic majors/programs list or course catalog	57%	55%	47%	54%	63%
Scholarship and financial aid information	49%	49%	36%	47%	54%
Additional details about a specific major/program	46%	39%	41%	47%	48%
Cost/Tuition information	39%	34%	25%	37%	45%
Admissions process or contact information	38%	34%	33%	35%	43%
Campus and student life information	33%	32%	23%	31%	36%
Student support programs (such as tutoring)	33%	26%	29%	34%	34%
An online community for students where they can interact, ask questions, and make friends	32%	42%	37%	31%	29%
Housing information	30%	31%	21%	27%	34%
Campus location, city, and community information	29%	31%	22%	30%	31%
Student health resources (including mental health counseling)	29%	24%	28%	31%	29%
Photos showcasing campus life	28%	27%	27%	28%	27%
Safety information	28%	30%	25%	28%	29%
Open House, preview day, or other event information	27%	32%	25%	32%	23%
General college or university overview	26%	22%	18%	28%	28%
Rankings for the institution of specific programs	26%	27%	25%	28%	25%
Virtual tours	26%	32%	27%	24%	26%
Links to their social pages	24%	25%	22%	24%	24%
Graduate outcomes and statistics	23%	24%	14%	24%	25%
Videos showcasing campus life	23%	22%	20%	28%	21%
Campus visit information	22%	17%	17%	22%	24%
Athletic program(s) information	14%	17%	14%	15%	14%
AI digital assistant	13%	18%	15%	12%	11%
Faculty and staff directory	13%	9%	12%	10%	16%

Key Findings

THE MOST SOUGHT-AFTER INFORMATION:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic information dominates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listings of academic majors/programs is by far the most sought-after information (57%) - Interest in faculty directories remains low but increases senior year (9% to 16%) • Financial considerations are critical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scholarship/financial aid info (49%) - Cost/tuition information (39%) - Scholarship/financial aid interest is highest in 12th grade (54%) - Cost/tuition importance nearly doubles from 10th (25%) to 12th grade (45%) - Shows increasing financial awareness as college approaches • Core administrative information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Admissions process/contact info ranks fifth (38%) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student support and experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student support programs and campus life tie (33%) - Online community platforms (32%) - Student health resources (29%) • Practical considerations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Housing information (30%) - Campus location details (29%) - Safety information (28%) • Visual and interactive elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Photos of campus life (28%) - Virtual tours (26%) • General information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rankings (26%) - General overview (26%) |
|---|--|

GRADE-LEVEL EVOLUTION

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>9th grade: More exploratory interests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher interest in virtual tours (32%) • Strong focus on online communities (42%) • More interested in open house events (32%) | <p>10th grade: Notable dip in many categories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower interest across most categories suggests a possible “sophomore slump” in college planning |
| <p>11th grade: Renewed focus and practical details</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased interest in specific programs • More attention to student support services | <p>12th grade: Most practical/detailed focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highest interest in the admissions process (43%) • Peak interest in housing (34%) |

The research reveals a clear maturation in how students approach college research, shifting from exploratory to practical concerns as graduation approaches. These trends suggest colleges should consider grade-specific content organization on their websites to better serve students at different stages of their college planning journey.



Recommendations for Institutions

1. Create grade-level entry points

- Develop customized landing pages for 9th-12th graders
- Adjust content depth based on grade level (exploratory for 9th, detailed for 12th)
- Include grade-appropriate calls to action (virtual tours for 9th, application details for 12th)

2. Prioritize financial transparency

- Place cost calculators prominently on program pages
- Create clear pathways to scholarship information
- Provide real student budget examples and financial planning tools
- Include timeline-based financial planning guides

3. Build an interactive academic program exploration

- Develop major/minor comparison tools
- Include career outcome data within program pages
- Create virtual course catalogs with sample class experiences
- Add student testimonials within each program section

4. Enhance digital accessibility

- Ensure mobile-first design for all critical content
- Provide multiple format options (text, video, interactive)
- Create printer-friendly versions of key information
- Offer offline downloadable resources

5. Implement smart support systems

- Add chatbot support for basic questions
- Create grade-specific FAQ sections
- Provide clear pathways to live help
- Include multilingual support options information

6. Design clear navigation paths

- Create “quick links” for the most searched content
- Implement intuitive search functionality
- Develop guided exploration tools
- Include breadcrumb navigation

7. Foster student community connection

- Create moderated student discussion forums
- Host virtual meet and greets
- Develop peer mentorship programs
- Include student social media feeds

8. Integrate visual experience

- Add 360-degree campus tours
- Include day-in-the-life video content
- Showcase authentic student experiences
- Provide seasonal campus imagery

9. Emphasize support services

- Highlight tutoring and academic support
- Feature mental health resources
- Showcase first-generation student programs
- Include parent/family resources

10. Incorporate decision-making tools

- Create college fit assessment tools
- Develop program comparison features
- Add application timeline checkers
- Include college readiness quizzes

The college planning journey is deeply personal, yet the data shows clear patterns in what students value most as they navigate this crucial decision. Whether it's a 9th grader taking their first virtual campus tour, an 11th grader diving deep into program details, or a 12th grader comparing financial aid packages, every student deserves a clear path to the information they need most.

As institutions continue to evolve their digital presence, the focus must remain on serving students where they are. The goal is to make the complex journey of college selection feel less like a maze and more like a guided tour toward their future. After all, behind every click and search is a student dreaming about their next chapter in life.

Lost in the clicks: Students' top frustrations with college websites

Remember that late-night stress of trying to find information about your dream college program, only to hit dead ends and confusing navigation? You're not alone. For today's college-bound students, a university's website is often their first impression and main source of information. Yet many click through endless pages, struggling to find basic details about majors, admissions requirements, or career outcomes. Understanding these pain points isn't just about improving websites—it's about removing unnecessary obstacles from an already challenging college search journey.

What are the top 3 things about a college website that you find most frustrating?

FRUSTRATION	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Hard to find information about specific majors/programs	26%	28%	18%	29%	25%
Confusing directions related to the admissions process	21%	19%	15%	22%	22%
Lack of information about job opportunities related to each major	20%	19%	17%	20%	20%
Lack of information about admission statistics - how many students like me were admitted to particular majors, etc.	18%	16%	20%	19%	18%
Hard-to-use navigation or hard-to-use links	17%	22%	18%	17%	16%
Lack of personalized content aimed at my interests	17%	14%	18%	19%	15%
No website search tool to search for more specific information	17%	24%	12%	20%	15%
Online forms that request too much information	17%	16%	19%	17%	17%
Hard to find contact information (email addresses, phone numbers)	15%	15%	11%	17%	14%
Hard to read website pages	15%	17%	15%	16%	14%
Lack of information about salary (major/program specific)	15%	19%	15%	15%	14%
Lack of videos or photos showcasing campus life	15%	22%	12%	16%	15%
The website is not mobile-friendly	15%	14%	15%	16%	15%
Lack of information about outcomes of recent graduates	13%	12%	17%	14%	11%
Lack of visual appeal of the website	13%	16%	14%	15%	11%
No virtual tours	12%	13%	10%	13%	12%
Lack of (or hard to find) chatbot or digital assistant	9%	9%	11%	9%	8%

KEY FRUSTRATIONS AND SOLUTIONS



Frustration

Academic information is the hardest to find (26%)

The top frustration among students is finding information about specific majors and programs.

The admissions process is confusing (21%)

This is the second most-cited frustration. This concern increases as students approach application deadlines.

Admissions transparency is lacking (18%)

Students report a lack of admission statistics, such as acceptance rates for students with similar backgrounds and desired majors.

Website usability and navigation (17%)

Navigation challenges frustrate 17% of students, including broken links, confusing menus, and missing search tools.

Lack of personalization (17%) and visual content (15%)

Some students feel websites lack personalized content based on their interests, such as majors and career goals. They also cite the lack of videos or photos showcasing campus life, making it harder to envision themselves on campus.



Solution

Prioritize **clear, structured academic pathways** with prominent program descriptions, course requirements, and associated career outcomes.

Improve user experience with **step-by-step admissions guides, checklists, and FAQ sections** tailored to student demographics.

Highlight each major's career pathways, internship opportunities, alumni success stories, and job placement rates to address this gap.

Streamline navigation, fix broken links, and implement a robust search bar.

Adopt **dynamic content strategies**, where students see personalized program recommendations, career paths, and relevant events based on their interests.

Talk with our enrollment experts about increasing engagement with students

How can you meet student expectations during the college search process, make the journey more personal, and keep more students on the path to enrollment? Reach out for a complimentary consultation on:

- Student search campaigns
- Marketing channel strategy and optimization
- Intelligent web engagement and personalization

RNL.com/DigitalConsult

HOW WEBSITE FRUSTRATIONS EVOLVE THROUGHOUT THE COLLEGE PLANNING JOURNEY



Frustration

9th graders show higher frustration with navigation and visual elements

- ✓ Much more frustrated with website search tools (24% vs 15-20% for other grades)
- ✓ Higher frustration with videos/photos of campus life (22% vs 12-16%)
- ✓ More concerned about hard-to-use navigation (22% vs 16-18%)

This suggests that 9th graders, new to college planning, need more intuitive navigation and visual guidance.

10th graders show unique patterns

- ✓ Notably lower frustration with finding major/program information (18% vs 25-29%)
- ✓ Higher concern about admission statistics (20%)
- ✓ More concerned about graduate outcomes (17% vs 11-14%)

This suggests they focus more on big-picture outcomes than immediate application needs. The practical implication is that institutions should consider grade-specific user experiences, perhaps with different navigation paths or content emphasis based on grade level. This could help address the varying frustration points at different stages of the college search process.

11th graders show peak frustration with program-specific information

- ✓ Highest frustration with finding major/program information (29%)
- ✓ Most frustrated with contact information (17%)
- ✓ Higher concerns about admissions process confusion (22%).

This aligns with 11th grade being a critical research phase for college planning.

12th graders show declining frustration in many areas

- ✓ Generally lower frustration levels across many categories
- ✓ Less concerned with visual appeal (11% vs 14-16%)
- ✓ Less frustrated with website search tool (15% vs up to 24%)

This might indicate they've become more adept at navigating college websites or are more focused on specific information rather than overall experience.



Solution

Create a “New to College Search?” landing page with clear visual pathways and a prominent search bar. This could include video tours, photo galleries, and basic explanations of college terms—essentially a “College 101” section designed for beginners.

Develop an interactive outcomes dashboard that clearly displays admission statistics, career paths, and graduate success stories by major. This could help 10th graders envision their future while still in the early planning stages



Develop program-specific microsites or landing pages that consolidate all relevant information (major details, contact information, admission requirements) in one easy-to-find location. Include clear calls to action for the next steps in the admission process.

Create streamlined “Quick Links” sections specifically for seniors, featuring direct access to application portals, deadline information, and admission counselor contacts—essentially a “senior fast track” that bypasses the general marketing content.

It's very simple: Students are not asking for flashy designs or cutting-edge features; they want straightforward access to information that will help them make one of life's biggest decisions. Whether it's a first-generation student trying to understand the admissions process, a junior researching specific programs, or a 12th grader comparing career outcomes, every frustrated click represents a potential barrier to college access.

By addressing these common pain points, institutions can do more than improve their websites—they can help ensure that no student's college dreams are derailed by something as simple as hard-to-find information. Higher education should inspire academic growth—not be hindered by a complicated digital path.

How students find information: Website tools lead the way

Search tool on the college website	45%
Website links	43%
Links in emails	36%
Links found on college planning websites	30%
Chatbot/digital assistant	17%



Key Findings

- **Search tools on the college website** are the most commonly used resource for students (45%).
- **Website links** are also widely used, with 43% of students relying on them.
- **Links in emails** are accessed by 36% of students, indicating email remains an important channel.
- **College planning websites** provide links used by 30% of students.
- **Chatbots or digital assistants** are less commonly used, with only 17% of students engaging with them.



Recommendations for Institutions

Prioritize strong website search and navigation—these are students' top resources.	Maintain clear, up-to-date website links and content.
Continue using email for important updates—students still engage with it.	Keep info accurate on college planning platforms.
Offer website features that let students filter and personalize content— 61% expect this level of customization.	Chatbots/digital assistants have low usage—focus on improving awareness and usefulness, but don't let them replace core channels.

Personalization in college websites: What students want

Today’s students are looking for websites that understand who they are and what they’re looking for—whether they’re first-year students just starting to explore or seniors zeroing in on their dream school. However, not everyone gets the same personalized experience; some students are left behind in this digital transformation. This analysis explores what students want from their college search experience and, more importantly, who might miss out on these tailored tools.

How do you feel about personalization in communications or web experiences about a college or university?

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
I like using websites that allow me to filter and personalize content to meet my interests	45%	40%	46%	44%	45%
I expect websites to personalize content for me based on my interests and behavior	16%	19%	16%	16%	16%
I don't care whether or not a website is personalized	18%	13%	17%	19%	19%
I haven't experienced anything like this	13%	23%	13%	12%	12%
I don't like it when I receive personalized communications from colleges	8%	5%	8%	9%	8%



Key Findings

- Across all groups, students show a strong preference for personalization:
- **61%** of students overall either like or expect personalized web experiences.
- Peak interest occurs in **10th grade (62%)** when students explore colleges more seriously.
- Even among **9th graders, 59%** already appreciate or expect personalization.
- Interest remains high in **11th (60%)** and **12th grade (61%)**, though some fatigue emerges.

The message from students couldn’t be clearer: they want college websites that speak to them as individuals, not just anonymous visitors. But this isn’t just about fancy technology or tracking cookies—it’s about making the college planning process more human, relevant, and accessible for every student.

Whether a student is a first-generation pioneer navigating unfamiliar territory or a legacy applicant continuing a family tradition, the college search journey should feel personal, supportive, and intentionally designed. After all, choosing a college is one of life’s most personal decisions—the search process should reflect that significance.

College Planning Playbook: What Works and What's Used

In the real world of college planning, students are hunting for resources that cut through the noise and help them make one of the biggest decisions of their lives. This isn't about fancy marketing materials; it's about providing real, actionable guidance that helps teenagers figure out their future without losing their mind (or their savings accounts).

Think about the resources and tools available to explore college options. Which ones have you used? How helpful have those been so far? Sorted by “helpful”

RESOURCE	USED	HELPFUL
Emails from a particular school	89%	88%
Information I get when I visit the college in person	80%	88%
The college's or university's website	91%	88%
College planning websites	82%	85%
Information I get at a college fair	80%	85%
Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator	81%	85%
An online community where students can interact with other students	77%	84%
The information I get from my high school counselor	86%	84%
Texts or live messages from admissions counselors	77%	84%
Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls	83%	84%
Virtual tours or virtual reality experiences	77%	84%
Calls, texts, or emails from athletic coaches	70%	81%
Phone calls from admissions counselors	73%	81%
Printed materials	81%	81%
Social media posts	84%	80%
College/university rankings in magazines or on the web	78%	79%
Live chat tools on the school's website	71%	79%
AI-assisted recommendation engines	71%	75%
AI-powered chatbots (chatbots on college websites)	68%	74%
Voice Assistants	61%	72%



Key Findings

TOP 5 USEFUL RESOURCES

- **School emails still rule (88% found helpful)**
Remember all those emails flooding your inbox from colleges? Turns out they're not just digital clutter. Nearly 90% of students say these messages help them, especially when they're short and sweet. And with 89% of students reading them, they're doing something right.
- **The official college website is king (88% found helpful)**
No surprise here—when students want the real scoop, they head straight to the source. A whopping 91% visit college websites, making them the most-used resource. It makes sense: if you want to know what classes you can take or what the dorms look like, why not ask the school directly?
- **Nothing beats boots on the ground (88% found helpful)**
Virtual tours are nice but can't compete with the real thing. Campus visits may take more effort (only 80% of students manage to make them happen), but those who make those visits rarely regret it. Walking across that quad tells students whether or not a school feels right.

- **College planning sites make life easier (85% found helpful)**
Think of these as your digital guidance counselor. While not quite as popular as official school websites, these platforms help 82% of students keep their college search from becoming a mess. They're especially good at letting you compare schools side by side—no spreadsheets required.
- **College fairs still pack a punch (85% found helpful)**
Despite living in a digital age, good old-fashioned college fairs remain surprisingly effective. About 80% of students attend them, and most leave with helpful information they couldn't find online. Sometimes talking face-to-face with a real person resonates differently.

TOP 10 WIDEST GAPS BETWEEN USAGE AND HELPFULNESS

While many tools are rated highly, several resources remain underutilized despite their perceived value. These gaps highlight where colleges can improve promotion and accessibility.

In-person college visits: +8% gap (88% helpful vs. 80% used)

Campus visits provide invaluable insight but remain underused, often due to travel costs and scheduling challenges.

Virtual tours and VR experiences: +7% gap (84% helpful vs. 77% used)

Virtual tours effectively bridge access gaps but remain underpromoted.

Online student communities: +7% gap (84% helpful vs. 77% used)

Peer interactions provide authentic insights, but many students don't know these platforms exist.

Financial aid and scholarship calculators: +4% gap (85% helpful vs. 81% used)

These tools demystify affordability but aren't always easy to find.

Texts or live messages from admissions counselors: +7% gap (84% helpful vs. 77% used)

Students value personalized, real-time communication but rarely experience it.

Live chat tools on college websites: +8% gap (79% helpful vs. 71% used)

Instant answers can streamline exploration, but many students overlook these tools.

AI-powered chatbots: +6% gap (74% helpful vs. 68% used)

While chatbots can answer questions 24/7, some students remain unaware of their availability.

Voice assistants: +11% gap (72% helpful vs. 61% used)

Emerging technologies like voice assistants are well-received but underused.

AI-assisted recommendation engines: +4% gap (75% helpful vs. 71% used)

Personalized search platforms help students find the right fit but need broader implementation.

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculators: +4% gap (85% helpful vs. 81% used)

Students find these tools invaluable when planning for affordability.



Recommendations for Institutions

1. **Promote virtual experiences:** Highlight virtual tours, student communities, and interactive platforms, especially for students unable to visit in person.
2. **Highlight career pathways:** Ensure job-related content is prominent across platforms, showing students how academic programs connect to real-world opportunities.
3. **Enhance digital engagement:** increase the visibility of chatbots, live chat tools, and AI-driven recommendations, making them easily accessible on websites and in outreach materials.

- 4. **Expand financial planning support:** Proactively share scholarship calculators and cost-related tools early in the search process to empower families to make informed decisions.
- 5. **Personalized outreach:** Colleges should invest in platforms that allow counselors to send personalized texts and emails, maintaining clear communication throughout the college search journey.
- 6. **Make campus visits accessible:** Since in-person visits remain among the most impactful resources, colleges should consider offering subsidized travel, regional visit days, or enhanced virtual alternatives.

Here’s the bottom line: students don’t want a firehose of information. They want a GPS. Every resource you create should be a helpful navigation tool, guiding students from “I have no clue” to “I’ve got this.” The most successful colleges are not those with the slickest websites or the most email campaigns—they’re the ones that make the complex journey of college planning feel manageable, personal, and exciting.

How Do Students Prefer to Hear From Colleges?

Understanding how students prefer to receive information from colleges and universities is crucial for designing effective communication strategies.

COMMUNICATION	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Emails	74%	73%	68%	74%	77%
Printed materials	33%	33%	36%	37%	28%
SMS	33%	34%	26%	32%	36%
In-person (through their admissions staff)	22%	26%	21%	23%	20%
Telephone calls	22%	19%	23%	21%	23%
Videos	16%	13%	22%	16%	14%

When it comes to hearing from colleges, students have clear preferences—but they’re not putting all their eggs in one basket. Each communication channel serves a unique purpose in their college search journey.

TOP COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Emails

74% of students prefer email communication

- ✓ Provides comprehensive information
- ✓ Easy to reference and save
- ✓ Allows for detailed content

SMS (text messages)

Quick and Direct: 33% value text message updates

- ✓ Instant communication
- ✓ Great for time-sensitive information
- ✓ Feels personal and immediate

Printed materials

Tangible Touchpoint: 33% appreciate brochures, postcards, and letters

- ✓ Creates a physical connection
- ✓ Memorable keepsakes
- ✓ Stands out in a digital-heavy landscape

Additional channels with specific strengths

Tangible Touchpoint: 33% appreciate brochures, postcards, and letters

- ✓ Telephone calls (22%): Personal touch, direct conversation
- ✓ In-person admissions interactions (22%): Depth of engagement
- ✓ Videos (16%): Visual storytelling, campus glimpses

TRENDS BY GRADE LEVEL

9th and 10th Graders

- While emails (73%–68%) are preferred, younger students show a stronger interest in printed materials (33%–36%) and videos (13%–22%).
- In-person visits are more welcomed by 9th graders (26%).

11th Graders

- Email preference rises to 74%, while interest in printed material peaks at 37%.
- Interest in SMS (32%) increases between 10th and 11th grades.

12th Graders

- Email preference reaches its highest (77%), while printed material declines (28%).
- SMS becomes more significant (36%) as students approach application deadlines.



Recommendations for Institutions

1. **Prioritize email:** This remains the most effective and preferred communication channel.
2. **Use SMS for timely updates:** Give students the option to receive text messages so they can get key reminders.
3. **Print wisely:** While still valued by younger students, printed materials should be targeted.

Inbox Insights: What Drives Students to Engage With College Emails?

Although the way prospective students navigate a digital world has changed rapidly in the last five years, our research reveals a surprising truth—email remains a vital channel for connecting with college-bound students. Understanding how different students engage with email communication isn’t just about improving open rates—it’s about ensuring every student has equal access to life-changing college opportunities.

In general, do you use email at least *once a week*?

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Yes	87%	87%	87%	88%	87%

What motivates you to open an email from a college or university?

REASON	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
I’m interested in this school	54%	46%	43%	49%	63%
I’m curious to learn more about this school	50%	45%	43%	46%	55%
The subject line caught my attention	32%	29%	25%	32%	35%
I’ve opened messages from this school before, and they were helpful	27%	17%	29%	30%	26%
They used my name in the subject line	22%	20%	22%	24%	21%
My parents are encouraging me to learn about the school	18%	26%	24%	19%	15%
I don’t open emails from colleges or universities	3%	12%	4%	3%	2%



Key Findings

- **Subject lines spark attention**

While student interest is the primary driver, the subject line plays a crucial role:

- **32%** of students open emails because the subject line caught their eye.
- **22%** are more likely to engage if their name is included in the subject line.

- **Past experience builds future engagement**

Once a student engages with helpful content, they're more likely to open future emails:

- **27%** of students are motivated by previously useful messages.

- **Family influence matters—but less over time**

While parental encouragement plays a role, its influence decreases as students advance through high school:

- **18%** of students say they open emails because their parents encourage them to learn about the school.
- By grade level, **26%** of 9th graders report parental influence, compared to only **15%** of 12th graders.

- **Engagement by grade level shows interest peaks in upper grades**

Interest in school emails grows as students progress through high school:

- 9th grade: **46%** open emails due to school interest.
- 12th grade: This jumps to **63%**, reflecting increased focus during the application process.

Curiosity follows a similar trend:

- **45%** of 9th graders open emails to learn more, compared to **55%** of 12th graders.



Recommendations for Institutions

1. **Use email as a core strategy:** With **87%** of students checking email weekly, it remains an effective channel for outreach.
2. **Tailor messaging by grade:**
 - **9th and 10th grade:** Focus on exploration and family-centered messaging.
 - **11th and 12th grade:** Highlight specific school benefits, application tips, and next steps.
3. **Optimize subject lines:** Attention-grabbing, personalized subject lines are especially effective
4. **Deliver valuable content:** Consistent, relevant messaging encourages future engagement

Unforgettable inbox: Why students remember college emails

In a world where prospective students receive hundreds of digital messages daily, making emails stand out isn't just about clever subject lines or pretty graphics—it's about creating meaningful connections that resonate with real students at different stages of their college journey.

But what makes an email memorable enough to cut through the digital noise? Students revealed the types of messages that made them pause and take notice.

WHAT STUDENTS REMEMBER ABOUT COLLEGE EMAILS

Personalization that hits home

Students consistently remembered emails that felt tailored to them. Personalization made the difference between an ignored message and one worth opening:

- Using the student's name in the subject line or greeting.
- Mentioning specific interests, intended majors, or extracurricular activities.
- Acknowledging their grade level or stage in the college search process.

Content that captures curiosity

Emails with relevant, engaging content captured students' attention and encouraged them to learn more:

- Information about specific programs and majors of interest.
- Details about financial aid, scholarships, and affordability.
- Virtual tours and insights into campus life.
- Direct invitations to visit or apply.

Right message, right time

Stage-appropriate communication made emails more relevant and memorable:

- **9th and 10th graders:** Few have received college emails yet, but those who have noticed messages about early preparation.
- **11th graders:** Showed more engagement and remembered emails about campus visits, summer programs, and scholarships.
- **12th graders:** Responded best to deadline reminders, financial aid information, and application tips.

Format, follow-ups, and consistency

How an email looks matters. Students appreciated emails that were:

- Short, clear, and easy to scan.
- Visually appealing with school colors, mascots, and bold headings.
- Consistent but not overwhelming, with follow-ups that stayed relevant.

STUDENTS' VOICES

"I once got an email that specifically mentioned performing arts, which is the major I'd like to go into."

"They seemed to know personal things about me prior to sending the email."

"The campus invited me to tour the dorm rooms and see the academic areas."

"Recently, one college emailed me saying, 'Your future starts here,' and it showed successful graduates—I liked seeing what the future could look like."

"A college emailed me saying it's not too early to prepare for college—that stuck with me."

"I'm a junior and haven't signed up for many colleges yet—I'm waiting until senior year."

"One school's email stood out because it had their mascot and school colors—it felt official."

"One email I got from a school had 'A real college experience is here' in the subject line—it grabbed my attention."

Clear, relevant, and specific information

Students valued emails that provided direct answers to their questions and offered actionable next steps:

- Majors and programs of interest.
- Financial aid, scholarships, and affordability.
- Application processes and deadlines.
- Campus life and student experiences.

"I got an email that gave me virtual tour links and program details—everything I needed in one place."

"They used my name in the header and answered a question I'd been wondering about for a while."

Authenticity and real connections

Emails that felt like they came from a real person rather than an automated system stood out:

- A warm, conversational tone.
- References to past interactions, such as a campus visit or event.
- Avoiding overly formal or marketing-heavy language.

"It didn't look copy-pasted—it felt like someone was actually reaching out to me."

Action-oriented and interactive elements

Students were more likely to remember emails that encouraged them to take action:

- Clear calls to action: "Schedule a visit," "Start your application," "Sign up for a webinar."
- Embedded videos, virtual tours, or student testimonials.
- Follow-up emails that reinforced the next steps.

"Some colleges even offered discounts on student resources for signing up—that was memorable."

Subject lines that stop the scroll

A catchy subject line was often the first reason students opened an email:

- Personalization (e.g., using the student's name).
- Urgency or exclusivity (e.g., "Scholarship Opportunities Just for You!").
- Playful or creative wording (e.g., "CAWH CAWH" from a school with an eagle mascot).

"A subject line said, 'A real college experience is here' and that made me open it."

Emotional connection and personal touches

Emails that made students feel seen, valued, or celebrated were the most memorable:

- Recognition of achievements (acceptances, scholarships).
- Birthday greetings or personalized acknowledgments.
- Encouraging messages that highlight their potential.

"A school sent me a happy birthday email—that felt personal and thoughtful."

"They made it seem like they cared about me, not just about my application."



Recommendations for Institutions

Behind every opened email is a real teenager making one of life's biggest decisions, probably while also juggling AP classes, sports practice, and that history paper due tomorrow. Our mission isn't to be the loudest voice in their inbox—it's to be the most helpful, genuine, and maybe even the one that helps them see their future more clearly.

To craft memorable emails:

1. **Personalize:** Use the student's name, interests, and stage in the college search process.
2. **Highlight value:** Share details about programs, scholarships, and campus life.
3. **Be stage-specific:** Tailor content to students' grade level and application timeline.
4. **Prioritize visual appeal:** Use school colors, mascots, and clean formatting.
5. **Encourage action:** Include clear calls to action and interactive elements.
6. **Stay genuine:** Write in a warm, conversational tone that feels human.
7. **Celebrate achievements:** Recognize milestones, birthdays, and successes.

Lights, Camera, Engagement: What Students Want From College Planning Videos

The research reveals a clear story: students want to hear from other students. They're looking for authentic glimpses into real college life, practical guidance they can trust, and content that speaks directly to their unique situation. Whether it's a current student sharing their daily routine, a virtual freshman dorm tour, or step-by-step financial aid advice, video content can transform the college search from overwhelming to exciting.

The findings offer a roadmap for creating video content that truly serves students' needs—moving beyond generic marketing to deliver the authentic, helpful information they seek.

What kind of videos are most appealing to you regarding college planning?

VIDEO CONTENT/TYPE	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Current students talking about their experiences in the classroom and on campus	39%	37%	38%	38%	40%
Videos showcasing campus life and extracurricular activities	33%	31%	26%	31%	36%
Tutorial videos about financial aid and paying for college	32%	30%	22%	31%	36%
Tutorial videos about the application process	30%	35%	23%	30%	31%
Videos customized with content matching the programs and campus activities that interest me	30%	34%	27%	28%	32%
Videos showing the campus, buildings, and classrooms	30%	33%	26%	29%	32%
Video tours of residence halls	28%	21%	23%	26%	32%
Recent graduates talking about their job search, where they found a job, and their salaries	27%	24%	25%	31%	26%
Alums talking about how their degree is supporting their career	24%	24%	18%	25%	25%
Faculty talking about their classes	24%	23%	22%	24%	26%

Key Findings

Peer experiences matter most

The most appealing videos feature current students sharing their classroom and campus experiences (39%), while recent graduates discussing job searches, employment outcomes, and salaries appeal to 27% of students. Alumni sharing how their degree supports their career remains relevant but less prominent (24%).

Campus life and environment are key

Visualizing the college experience matters. Videos showcasing campus life and extracurricular activities (33%), tours highlighting buildings and classrooms (30%), and residence hall tours (28%) are popular, emphasizing the need for content that helps students picture their future campus experience.

Practical guidance is important

Students seek clear, actionable information. Tutorial videos about financial aid and paying for college (32%) and application process guides (30%) demonstrate the need for institutions to simplify complex processes through video content.

Campus life and environment are key

Visualizing the college experience matters. Videos showcasing campus life and extracurricular activities (33%), tours highlighting buildings and classrooms (30%), and residence hall tours (28%) are popular, emphasizing the need for content that helps students picture their future campus experience.

Personalized content is valuable

Videos customized to specific programs and campus activities attract 30% of students, indicating that tailored content enhances engagement by addressing individual interests.

Key findings by grade level: Shifting priorities

Peer experiences remain most appealing across all grades

- Current student experiences consistently rank highest across all grades (37% to 40%), with slight growth in 12th grade
- Interest in recent graduates discussing job search and salaries peaks in 11th grade (31%), when career focus intensifies

Career-oriented content gains traction in 11th and 12th grades

- Interest in alumni discussing career outcomes rises from 18% in 10th grade to 25% by 11th and 12th grades
- Similarly, faculty videos increase from 22% in 10th to 26% in 12th grade.

Campus life becomes more important in later years

- Interest in residence hall tours grows steadily, from 21% in 9th grade to 32% by 12th grade
- Campus life videos rise from 31% in 9th grade to 36% by 12th grade, alongside increased interest in campus and classroom visuals (26% to 32%)

Personalization matters, but dips in middle grades

- Customized videos appeal strongly to 9th graders (34%), dip in 10th and 11th grades (27%-28%), and rebound in 12th grade (32%)
- Younger students seek exploratory content, while older students prioritize specifics.

Practical guidance becomes critical by 12th grade year

As students approach decision-making, financial aid tutorials rise from 30% in 9th grade to 36% in 12th grade, while application process videos jump from 23% in 10th grade to 31% in 12th grade

Scrolling for Success: How Social Media Shapes College Planning for Students

Today’s college-bound students live in a complex digital ecosystem where Instagram reigns supreme, TikTok drives trends, and YouTube shapes opinions. However, while students spend hours on these platforms, most colleges are not showing up where it matters most.

The research cuts through the noise to reveal exactly where students are looking for college content—and where they’re not finding it. The data exposes surprising gaps between platform usage and college visibility, highlighting missed opportunities and untapped potential for institutional outreach.

Students revealed the types of messages that made them pause and take notice. While 63% of students are active on Instagram, only 53% encounter college content there. TikTok commands the attention of half of your prospective students, but just 32% see college-related posts.

This section maps out the social media landscape of college search, breaking down platform preferences by grade level, to present a roadmap for meeting students where they are—not where we assume they might be.

PLATFORM	USE	SAW COLLEGE INFORMATION ON PLATFORM
Instagram	63%	53%
YouTube	50%	26%
TikTok	49%	32%
Facebook	35%	28%
Snapchat	35%	10%
Pinterest	33%	9%
Discord	26%	12%
X (Twitter)	24%	14%
LinkedIn	21%	15%
Reddit	13%	7%
BeReal	9%	7%
None	3%	6%
Vimeo	2%	2%



Key Findings

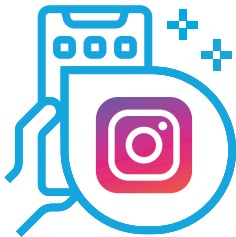
Instagram: The must-have platform

- Institutions risk missing their largest audience if they’re not effectively leveraging Instagram.
- It’s not just that 63% of students use the platform—many are actively searching for college-related content.
- With 53% of students encountering posts about colleges, Instagram remains one of the most impactful channels for reaching prospective students across all demographics.

Recommendations for Institutions

Make Instagram a home base

This isn’t just about posting regularly—it’s about creating content that serves every stage of the college search journey.



Key Findings

TikTok and YouTube: The missed connections

- Half of prospective students are on TikTok and YouTube, yet many institutions remain underrepresented on these platforms.
- Only 32% see college content on TikTok and a mere 26% on YouTube.
- This gap highlights a missed opportunity—these platforms are filled with potential students, but institutional content isn't reaching them effectively.

Facebook: The family factor

- Don't write off Facebook just yet.
- While only 35% of students use it regularly, 28% report seeing college content there.
- Translation? It's still valuable for reaching parents and families who influence college decisions.

Recommendations for Institutions

Close the TikTok gap

Prospects are there, but the content isn't connecting. Time to get creative with short-form video that speaks their language.



Keep Facebook in the family

Target content to students and parents, recognizing its unique role in college decisions.



Timing is everything: When social media matters most in the college search

Remember that prospective student who followed an institution's Instagram account at 1 AM? They weren't just killing time but taking their first step into a new campus community.

This research reveals a compelling pattern in how students use social media during their college search. That late-night scroll? It's often their first real connection with your institution. More than half (56%) of students say social media matters most when they're just beginning to explore colleges—before the viewbooks, campus tours, and application essays arrive.

This section shows when students turn to social media throughout their college search journey, how these patterns vary across different student populations, and when your content has the greatest potential for impact.

When does social media matter the most during college search?

Just as I'm learning more about the school	56%
After I've seen the websites or information, they send in the mail	42%
After I've visited the campus	25%
After I've applied for admission	22%
After I've been accepted	21%





Key Findings

Early exploration: the prime time for social media

Most students (56%) find social media most helpful when first learning about a school, making it a vital tool for attracting prospective students at the start of their search.

Social media as a secondary touchpoint

After reviewing websites or receiving mailed information, 42% of all students turn to social media for further exploration.

Engagement drops after in-person and application stages

Once students visit campus, only 25% find social media helpful. Similarly, engagement decreases after applying (22%) and acceptance (21%).



Recommendations for Institutions

Start strong

Engage students early with authentic, student-led content that showcases campus life, academic programs, and affordability.

Stay consistent

Ensure social media messaging complements websites and print materials.

Diversify content by audience

Highlight culturally responsive content for underrepresented groups and emphasize personalized support after acceptance.

Follow me: What makes students hit that button

Why do students follow an institution's social media? The answer might be surprising!

While every institution has posted campus beauty shots and acceptance letter celebrations, new data reveals that students are not only seeking pretty pictures. They're searching for glimpses of their future.

This research uncovers a fascinating hierarchy of content that drives students to follow (and keep following) college social media accounts. At the top? Real student life, capturing 37% of student interest. Not viewbook-perfect moments but authentic daily experiences that help prospective students answer their burning question: "Could this be my life?"

This section maps out exactly what content resonates with students at each stage of their college search, from 9th graders just starting to dream about college to seniors making their final decision. The findings offer a clear roadmap for institutions ready to move beyond the standard social media playbook and create content that truly connects.

In choosing whether or not to follow the social pages of universities, what content would be interesting to push the “follow” button?

CONTENT TO FOLLOW	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
The student life	37%	35%	25%	32%	44%
Activities and clubs for students	31%	35%	24%	31%	33%
What do I need to do to apply	31%	39%	26%	32%	30%
Content around students in the specific major or program I'm interested in	30%	28%	23%	30%	32%
What it's like to live on campus in the dorms	30%	24%	25%	30%	33%
What qualifications do I need to have to be accepted	30%	32%	23%	32%	31%
Current experiences of students attending that university	28%	25%	22%	28%	30%
Photos of the campus	27%	23%	19%	26%	31%
What are the options for food/dining on campus	24%	26%	14%	25%	26%
Student support (like mental health resources, counseling, tutoring, etc.)	23%	23%	23%	25%	23%
Graphics with key stats about students, campus, and job opportunities	22%	27%	22%	24%	20%
Stories about students doing study-abroad programs	21%	19%	16%	20%	24%
Stories that showcase the diversity of the college	20%	19%	18%	20%	22%
Stories that show students who look like me	19%	23%	15%	18%	19%
Success stories of alumni going into their professional careers	19%	19%	17%	21%	19%
Learning more about potential professors and their backgrounds	18%	12%	14%	19%	20%
Stories about international students	17%	16%	11%	13%	21%
The athletic programs and teams	17%	23%	17%	14%	18%
Live streaming from events on campus	15%	11%	14%	15%	15%
Links to news stories or features	12%	12%	16%	12%	11%



Key Findings

TOP 10 FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS TO FOLLOW

- **Student life takes the lead (37%)**—The most influential driver is content showcasing student life, including daily experiences, campus culture, and events.
- **Clubs and activities spark interest (31%)**—Opportunities for involvement, like clubs and organizations, help students visualize how to connect with peers.
- **Clear application guidance (31%)**—Step-by-step instructions on the application process make it less overwhelming, encouraging students to stay connected.
- **Major-specific content builds academic appeal (30%)**—Stories about students in specific programs allow prospects to imagine their academic path.
- **A look inside dorm life (30%)**—Content about on-campus living gives insight into daily life, an increasingly important factor as students progress through high school.
- **Understanding admissions requirements (30%)**—Posts about academic qualifications provide clarity, especially for younger students.

- **Real student experiences matter (28%)**—Testimonials and day-in-the-life content from current students build trust and relatability.
- **Campus visuals capture attention (27%)**—Photos and videos of the campus help students imagine themselves on campus.
- **Dining options are surprisingly important (24%)**—Content highlighting food choices reflects lifestyle considerations in the college decision process.
- **Student support resources (23%)**—Mental health services, tutoring, and academic support demonstrate a campus’s commitment to student success.

UNDERSTANDING GRADE-SPECIFIC SOCIAL MEDIA PREFERENCES IN COLLEGE SEARCH

9th grade: Application-focused followers

- Highest interest in application information (39% vs. 26-32%)
 - Strong interest in activities/clubs (35%)
 - More interested in athletic programs (23% vs. 14-18%)
- Higher interest in stats and graphics (27% vs. 20-24%) shows that 9th graders seem very focused on practical application aspects, perhaps indicating early planning.

10th grade: The disengaged year

- Consistently lower engagement across most categories
 - Notably low interest in dining options (14% vs. 25-26%)
 - Less interested in student life (25% vs. 32-44%)
- Lower interest in campus photos (19% vs. 23-31%)
- This suggests a potential “10th-grade slump” in college social media engagement.

11th grade: The transition year

- Numbers begin trending upward from 10th grade
 - Increased interest in student support (25%)
 - Growing interest in specific majors (30%)
- More focus on qualification requirements (32%) shows 11th graders beginning to engage more seriously with college content.

12th grade: Living the campus life

- Highest interest in student life (44% vs. 25-35% for other grades)
 - Stronger interest in campus photos (31% vs. 19-26%)
 - More interested in international student stories (21% vs. 11-16%)
 - Greater interest in dorm life (33%) and study abroad (24%)
- This suggests that 12th graders mentally prepare for their upcoming college transition.



Recommendations for Institutions

1. Create grade-specific digital communities

- Develop a secure, moderated platform where prospective students can connect with current students and other applicants.
- Use social media to promote these communities, but host them on a dedicated platform.
 - *Example: “Future Wildcats Connect,” where admitted students can find roommates, join major-specific groups, and chat with current students.*
- Use AI to match students based on interests, majors, and activities, creating more meaningful connections.

2. Leverage AI for personalized content delivery

- Implement AI-powered content recommendation systems that serve different content based on grade level.
- Ninth graders see more application basics and club information.
- Twelfth graders receive more dorm life and student experience content.
- Use predictive analytics to identify when 10th graders might disengage and proactively adjust content.

3. Build virtual peer communities by class year

- Create dedicated online spaces where students can connect with others in their grade.
- Use current students as paid ambassadors to moderate these spaces.
- Host grade-specific virtual events (9th grade college prep workshops, 12th grade admitted student meetups).
- Use social media to drive traffic to these communities rather than trying to build a community on social platforms.

4. Develop interactive experience platforms

- Create virtual spaces where prospective students can:
 - Take AI-guided virtual tours based on their interests.
 - Chat with current students in their intended major.
 - Join virtual club meetings.
 - Participate in online study groups.
- This addresses the clear desire for authentic connection while providing a safer, more structured environment than social media.

5. Combat the “10th grade slump”

- Create special engagement programs specifically for 10th graders.
- Focus on long-term relationship building rather than immediate recruitment.
- Host sophomore-specific events that connect them with 11th and 12th graders who can share their college search experiences.
- Use the community platform to maintain engagement during this typically disengaged period.

From the 9th grader curious about campus clubs to the 12th grader virtually touring dorm rooms at midnight, each click, like, and follow represents a student trying to see themselves at your institution. But social media is just the first chapter of their story—the real connections happen when we create dedicated spaces for meaningful community building.

For enrollment professionals, the implications are easy to see: ***your social media strategy needs to grow with your audience.*** The institutions that will thrive aren't just those with the prettiest campus photos or the most polished videos—they're the ones that understand when and how to share the right content at the right time. More importantly, they're the ones that recognize that social media should serve as a bridge to more controlled, purpose-built environments where authentic relationships can flourish.

Future students are out there, thumb hovering over the follow button. The question is: Do they have a reason to press it? Once they do, are institutions ready to welcome them into a community that goes beyond likes and shares—a space where real connections can grow, where questions find answers, and where their college journey truly begins?

Texting the Path to College: What Works for Students

Today's high school students navigate their college search through multiple digital channels, seamlessly switching between text messages, messaging apps, and social media. Understanding their communication preferences isn't just about reaching them—it's about respecting how they want to engage with potential colleges.

This research reveals that students aren’t looking for a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, they want colleges to meet them where they are, whether through traditional SMS messages, modern messaging platforms, or a combination of both. Their openness to college communication grows as they progress from 9th to 12th grade, but their expectations for meaningful, relevant content remain constant.

Which options depict how you would be comfortable receiving messages from a college or university?

MESSAGE PREFERENCE	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Both text and messaging apps are OK	47%	41%	50%	46%	48%
Only text (SMS) messages	31%	30%	24%	31%	33%
Only messaging apps	22%	16%	28%	24%	20%
DMs through social channels	19%	22%	21%	18%	19%
No text or messaging app contact at all	11%	17%	9%	10%	11%

Key Findings

- Nearly half (47%) of students prefer a combination of text (SMS) and messaging apps, making this multi-channel approach the most popular.
- 31% prefer only text messages, while 22% prefer only messaging apps.
- 19% are open to DMs through social media, and only 11% prefer no contact through these platforms.

PREFERENCES BY GRADE LEVEL

- Ninth and 10th graders are more open to non-traditional communication, with 41%-50% favoring text and messaging apps and 22% open to social media DMs.
- Eleventh and 12th graders align more closely with the overall trend, with nearly half (46%-48%) preferring multi-channel communication.
- Notably, the desire for no contact decreases from 17% in 9th grade to 11% in 12th grade, showing increased openness as students progress through high school.

The right moment: Strategic timing in student outreach

When do you think it is appropriate for a college or university to send you text messages? (Select all that apply)

Before I submit my application	39%
After I submit my application	60%
After I am admitted	44%
After I register for my first semester	29%
After I decide to attend elsewhere	9%
Never	3%





Key Findings

OVERALL COMMUNICATION TIMING PREFERENCES

- **60%** of students prefer messages after submitting their application—the most popular touchpoint.
- **44%** appreciate messages after admission, while **39%** are open to outreach before applying.
- **29%** find it appropriate to receive texts after registering for their first semester, while only **9%** think texts are appropriate after deciding to attend elsewhere.
- Just **3%** of students say colleges should never text them.

Content that counts: What students want to hear

While timing and method are crucial, the content of text messages determines whether students engage with or ignore them. Students favor messages about their application journey, financial aid, and key milestones.

Which type of text from a college or university would interest you? (Select all that apply)

TEXT MESSAGE	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Acceptance notification	55%	56%	41%	53%	61%
Deadline reminders	48%	45%	44%	48%	50%
Check-ins from my admissions representative	41%	35%	35%	42%	43%
Information about financial aid and scholarships	41%	36%	26%	40%	47%
Details about my application, such as missing documents or status	39%	34%	35%	44%	38%
Information about programs/majors	32%	29%	21%	32%	35%
Notifications about available scholarships	30%	28%	19%	25%	37%
Information about the application process and upcoming deadlines	29%	22%	21%	30%	32%
General well-being check-in	25%	24%	23%	23%	26%
Reminders about my application and status (missing documents, etc.)	24%	25%	17%	23%	26%
Information about upcoming events	23%	22%	18%	23%	24%
Information about joining an online student social media group for the college	19%	12%	17%	19%	21%
Notifications about upcoming campus events, such as preview days	18%	19%	14%	18%	18%
Photos or videos showing campus life	15%	12%	10%	13%	18%
Links to social media posts	13%	13%	11%	11%	14%
Links to website content	13%	11%	12%	13%	13%
Webinar or live chat invitations	12%	13%	9%	11%	14%



Key Findings

WHAT STUDENTS WANT

- **Acceptance notifications (55%)** are the most desired type of text, showing students value clear, exciting updates.
- **Deadline reminders (48%)** and **admissions rep check-ins (41%)** follow closely, emphasizing the need for timely, personalized outreach.
- **Financial aid and scholarship information (41%)** rank equally with admissions check-ins, highlighting affordability concerns.
- **Application status updates (39%)** and **program/major information (32%)** further reflect the need for clarity and relevance in messaging.

TEXT MESSAGE PREFERENCES: A GRADE-BY-GRADE EVOLUTION

9th grade: The early planners

- Surprisingly high interest in acceptance notifications
- Strong interest in deadline reminders

Being more interested in campus events (19%) than in later years shows 9th graders are more engaged in the process than conventional wisdom might suggest.

10th grade: The disengaged year

- Consistently lower interest across most categories
- Significantly lower interest in financial aid info
- Much lower interest in acceptance notifications

This shows another example of the “10th-grade slump” we saw in social media preferences.

11th grade: The process-focused year

- Highest interest in application status updates
- Strong interest in deadlines

A growing interest in admissions rep check-ins indicates that 11th graders are beginning to engage with the tactical aspects of college applications.

12th grade: The “need-to-know” phase

- Highest interest in acceptance notifications
- Strongest preference for financial aid/scholarship info
- Most interested in scholarship notifications
- Higher interest in program/major information

This suggests that 12th graders want immediate, actionable information that affects their college decisions.



Recommendations for Institutions

1. Deliver milestone messages

- Acceptance notifications, deadline reminders, and application status updates are most valued, especially for upperclassmen.

2. Add a personal touch

- Admissions rep check-ins and financial aid updates are key for building trust and engagement.

3. Provide a financial focus

- Scholarship and financial aid information rank highly, reflecting students’ cost concerns.

4. Practice content efficiency

- Social media links, campus photos, and webinars rank low, suggesting students prioritize informative texts over promotional content.

5. Develop a timing and content strategy

- Create grade-specific texting schedules
- Focus on the immediate needs of 12th graders
- Build engagement strategies to address the 10th-grade slump
- Start early with interested 9th graders

6. Adjust message frequency and type

- Increase frequency for 12th graders, especially around deadlines
- Keep 10th-grade messages minimal but meaningful
- Balance information vs. engagement for 11th graders
- Provide basic but encouraging content for 9th graders

7. Ask for permission and preferences

- Allow students to select their grade level and customize message types
- Respect the lower engagement preferences of 10th graders
- Increase frequency as students progress through high school
- Give options to opt in/out of specific message categories

Ultimately, successful student communication comes down to respect and relevance. Students tell us clearly that they want information that matters to them, delivered when it matters most, through their channels.

The data shows they’re most responsive when colleges honor their preferences: combining text messages with modern messaging platforms, timing outreach around key milestones in their college journey, and focusing on practical updates about acceptances, deadlines, and financial aid.

As students progress through high school, their engagement with college communication evolves—from initial curiosity as 9th graders to active participation as 12th graders. By listening to these preferences and adapting our approach accordingly, institutions can build meaningful connections that support students through one of their most important decisions while respecting their time and attention in an increasingly noisy digital world.

Mapping the Student Journey: Experiences That Transform Campus Visits Into Adventures

Virtual campus tours have evolved from a pandemic necessity to a powerful recruitment tool, fundamentally changing how students envision their college futures. These digital experiences don’t just showcase campuses—they actively shape application decisions. With nearly two-thirds of students reporting increased interest in applying after a virtual tour, these digital experiences are proving to be more than just convenient alternatives to in-person visits—they’re becoming critical catalysts in the college decision journey.

WATCHING A VIRTUAL TOUR ...	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
...made me a lot more likely to apply	21%	22%	25%	23%	19%
...made me somewhat more likely to apply	44%	42%	49%	34%	50%
...didn't make me more or less likely to apply	14%	17%	12%	14%	13%
...made me somewhat less likely to apply	8%	17%	13%	20%	8%
...made me a lot less likely to apply	13%	2%	1%	9%	10%

Key Findings

Virtual tours positively influence application likelihood

Two-thirds (65%) of students reported that their last virtual tour made them more likely to apply, with 21% saying they were “a lot more likely” and 44% saying they were “somewhat more likely.” This demonstrates virtual tours’ significant role in shaping students’ perceptions and encouraging applications.

Grade-level differences

Tenth and 12th graders were the most positively influenced, with **50% of 12th graders** and **49% of 10th graders** reporting they were somewhat more likely to apply.

Virtual reality in college planning

Virtual reality has emerged as a powerful new frontier in college exploration, promising to bridge the gap between digital browsing and physical campus visits. As institutions embrace this technology, nearly half of college-bound students are now experiencing their potential future campuses through VR headsets. However, this technological revolution in college planning reveals both promising opportunities and concerning disparities in who gets to step through these virtual doors.

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Watched a VR Video	49%	48%	56%	52%	46%

Key Findings

- Half of college-bound students have experienced VR college content, but access remains uneven.
- This emerging technology highlights both opportunities and challenges in modern college recruitment.
- While 49% of students have experienced college VR content, the exposure varies significantly by background.

The grade-level sweet spot

VR finds its strongest audience in the middle of high school.

- Tenth graders (56%) and eleventh graders (52%) report the highest exposure rates, suggesting that colleges target these critical exploration years.
- This timing makes sense—students are actively researching colleges but may not yet be ready for in-person visits.

Recommendations for Institutions

THE CONTENT OPPORTUNITY

With half of the students already experiencing VR content, colleges should focus on making these experiences more meaningful:

1. Create program-specific VR tours
2. Show authentic student life moments
3. Include diverse student perspectives
4. Highlight unique campus features
5. Build interactive elements

The data suggests higher ed is at a tipping point with VR in college recruitment. While the technology has reached many students, the uneven access means institutions must be intentional about deployment. The goal isn’t just to offer VR tours—it’s to use this technology to make college planning more accessible, engaging, and equitable for all students.

Student actions after viewing a virtual tour or VR video

Virtual tours and VR experiences have transformed from novel alternatives to powerful catalysts in the college search process. These digital windows into campus life don't just showcase institutions - they spark action.

The results reveal that students embark on various next steps after engaging with virtual campus experiences, from starting applications to scheduling in-person visits. This suggests virtual tours are critical turning points in the college decision journey.

What did you do after watching the virtual tour?

ACTION	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
I looked at information on a website	23%	22%	17%	21%	27%
I started an application	21%	24%	17%	15%	27%
I looked at an interactive map of the campus	20%	9%	21%	19%	22%
I watched a video	20%	18%	23%	20%	19%
I followed their social pages	19%	12%	19%	15%	23%
I emailed the admissions office	18%	19%	18%	15%	20%
I filled out a form to receive more information	18%	9%	15%	19%	20%
I emailed the financial aid office	16%	20%	15%	13%	18%
I scheduled a campus tour	15%	14%	16%	13%	16%
I registered to attend an event	14%	9%	22%	12%	15%
I interacted with AI chat tools	13%	8%	13%	16%	12%
I live-chatted with a college representative	11%	11%	13%	14%	9%
I called a phone number	10%	5%	15%	13%	8%



Key Findings

- **Increased engagement with college websites**
 - The most common follow-up action was exploring more details online, with 23% of students looking at information on a college website after viewing a virtual tour or VR video.
- **Application interest and intent**
 - One-fifth (21%) of students reported starting an application, indicating that virtual experiences can significantly influence college choice and application decisions.
- **Exploring campus and multimedia content**
 - Twenty percent looked at an interactive campus map, while another 20% watched additional videos, suggesting that virtual tours often prompt further exploration of campus and student life.
- **Social media and direct outreach**
 - Nineteen percent followed the college's social media pages, 18% emailed the admissions office, and 18% filled out a form to receive more information, reflecting increased interest and desire for further communication.
- **Taking the next step**
 - Sixteen percent of students emailed the financial aid office, and 15% scheduled an in-person campus tour, showing that virtual experiences can effectively motivate students to deepen their engagement.

AFTER THE VIRTUAL TOUR: GRADE-LEVEL RESPONSE PATTERNS

9th grade: The surprising mix

- Unexpectedly high rate of starting applications
- High rate of emailing the financial aid office
- Lowest rate of looking at interactive maps
- Least likely to call phone numbers

Ninth graders prefer digital engagement but surprisingly are highly interested in the early application.

10th grade: The event seekers

- Highest rate of registration for events
- Strong interest in watching videos
- Higher rate of calling phone numbers
- More likely to look at interactive maps

Tenth graders demonstrate unexpected engagement through specific channels, contrasting their lower engagement in other areas.

11th grade: The digital investigators

- Highest rate of AI chat tool interaction
- Strong interest in information forms
- Highest rate of live chat with representatives

Eleventh graders have a strong preference for immediate, digital communication methods

12th grade: The action takers

- Highest rate of starting applications Most likely to look at website information
- Highest rate of following social pages
- Strong interest in information forms

Twelfth graders are using virtual tours as a catalyst for concrete next steps.



Implications for Institutions

Reimagine the visit timeline

- Launch targeted preview days and summer programs for pre-application visits (41% preference)
- Create specialized tours for post-application visitors (26% of students)
- Design high-impact admitted student experiences
- Implement grade-specific programming from 9th grade exploration to 12th grade decision-making
- Focus virtual content on 10th and 12th graders, who show highest engagement rates

Personalize the experience

- Expand guided tours, which show 92% satisfaction for individual visits
- Develop peer-matching platforms connecting prospects with current students
- Organize small group tours based on academic interests
- Offer multilingual options and culturally sensitive programming
- Include program-specific virtual tours to highlight academic opportunities

Leverage technology strategically

- Deploy AI-enhanced virtual tours with real-time Q&A capabilities (65% of students are more likely to apply after virtual tours)
- Implement location-aware mobile guides with:
 - Interactive 3D maps
 - Personalized audio tours
 - Virtual reality overlays of campus life
- Build hybrid experiences combining virtual and in-person elements
- Use AI to personalize follow-up communication
- Showcase student life and unique campus features in virtual content

Break down access barriers

- Provide transportation assistance for group visits
- Offer travel stipends for admitted students
- Partner with high schools in underserved areas
- Create robust virtual options for remote access
- Develop school partnerships for early exposure
- Expand multilingual resources and financial aid information in virtual formats

Build community connections

- Partner with community organizations to reach underserved populations
- Facilitate virtual meetups before campus visits
- Create mentorship programs connecting current and prospective students
- Host community-based information sessions
- Develop relationships with college access programs
- Design virtual content specifically for first-generation families

Leverage virtual tours to drive applications

With 21% of students starting an application after a virtual experience, colleges should integrate clear calls to action, such as application links, during and immediately after virtual tours.



Enhance campus exploration tools

The popularity of interactive maps (20%) and additional videos (20%) suggests that expanding virtual campus experiences can keep students engaged and deepen their interest.

Promote further engagement opportunities

Since many students follow social pages (19%), email admissions (18%), and fill out inquiry forms (18%), colleges should ensure these channels are easy to access and responsive after virtual engagements.



Bridge virtual to in-person visits

The fact that 15% of students scheduled a campus tour after a virtual experience highlights the need for seamless transitions from online exploration to on-campus visits.

With 65% of students more likely to apply after virtual tours, digital engagement isn’t optional—it’s essential. The most successful institutions create seamless experiences across all formats, ensuring tours are grade-appropriate, program-specific, and culturally sensitive. This comprehensive approach doesn’t just improve access, it drives applications across all demographic groups.

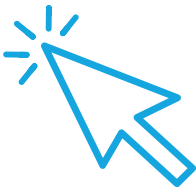
Today’s virtual visits should also feel more like Netflix—personalized, binge-worthy, and leaving students eager for the next episode. The campus tour should be the trailer for the best four years of a student’s life. Choosing a college shouldn’t feel like homework—it should feel like the start of the next great adventure.

From Click to Campus: How Students Engage With College Ads

College planning often begins with a simple click in today’s digital-first world. That journey to higher education increasingly starts in the digital realm, where a well-placed advertisement can spark a journey that leads to life-changing decisions. But what happens in those crucial moments between first contact and final commitment? This research reveals a digital landscape that is reshaping how students connect with potential colleges.

Have you ever CLICKED ON an advertisement for a college that you might have seen online? This could have been on a website or ads in search engine results, social media, or a website.

	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Clicked	70%	71%	74%	69%	68%





Key Findings

- **High overall engagement**
 - **The vast majority (70%)** of students have clicked on an online advertisement for a college or university, showing that digital marketing is an effective channel for reaching prospective students.
- **Interest peaks in early high school**
 - Engagement is highest among **10th graders (74%)** and **9th graders (71%)**, suggesting that students start exploring college options earlier than traditionally expected.

Platforms that drive student engagement with college ads

In the digital landscape of college recruitment, understanding where students click matters as much as what they click on. As students navigate their college planning journey, they're not just passive scrollers but active engagers across multiple platforms. The results show a clear hierarchy where students interact with college advertisements, with social media emerging as the dominant force in capturing prospective students' attention.

What did you do after watching the virtual tour?

PLATFORM	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Instagram	57%	46%	61%	53%	62%
TikTok	32%	36%	31%	29%	33%
Google search	26%	20%	25%	25%	29%
Facebook	21%	9%	23%	18%	25%
YouTube	21%	21%	15%	22%	24%
Snapchat	17%	14%	23%	14%	17%
X (formerly Twitter)	16%	15%	20%	14%	16%
LinkedIn	13%	15%	17%	14%	11%
BeReal	8%	9%	13%	7%	7%
Display ad on a web page	8%	7%	10%	8%	7%
Pinterest	8%	7%	9%	9%	7%
Other social media or blog posts	7%	6%	7%	6%	9%
A different search engine	4%	3%	3%	5%	4%
Bing search	4%	4%	3%	5%	4%
Yahoo search	4%	2%	7%	4%	3%



Key Findings

- **Social media drives engagement**
 - **Instagram (57%)** is the most common platform where students click on college ads, highlighting its dominance as a key channel for reaching prospective students.
 - **TikTok (32%)** follows, reflecting the growing influence of short-form video content in capturing student attention.
- **Search engines play a supporting role**
 - **Google search (26%)** ranks third, showing that while students engage heavily with social media, they also rely on search engines for college exploration.
- **Broader social reach**
 - While less dominant, platforms like **Facebook (21%)**, **YouTube (21%)**, **Snapchat (17%)**, and **X (formerly Twitter) (16%)** still attracts clicks, suggesting the value of a multi-platform approach.

WHERE STUDENTS CLICK: PLATFORM PREFERENCES BY GRADE

9th graders:

- Lowest Facebook engagement (9% vs. 18-25%)
- Strong TikTok presence (36%)
- Lower Instagram engagement (46% vs. 53-62%)

10th graders:

- Highest Snapchat engagement (23% vs. 14-17%)
- Strongest BeReal presence (13% vs. 7-9%)
- High X engagement (20% vs. 14-16%)

11th graders:

- Most consistent with overall averages
- Lower engagement on emerging platforms
- Steady engagement with traditional platforms

12th graders:

- Highest Instagram engagement (62%)
- Strong Facebook presence (25% vs. 9-23%)
- Highest YouTube engagement (24%)



Implications for Institutions

1. Platform-specific strategies

- Focus Instagram ads on 12th and 10th graders
- Target TikTok content consistently across grades
- Increase Google search advertising for 11th and 12th graders
- Consider grade-specific content on each platform

2. Emerging platform opportunities

- Test BeReal for 10th-grade engagement
- Maintain Snapchat presence for sophomore outreach
- Consider reduced investment in Pinterest and Yahoo
- Monitor new platform adoption rates by grade

3. Budget allocation

- Prioritize Instagram and TikTok across grades
- Adjust Facebook spending toward upper grades
- Invest in Google search ads for junior/senior targeting
- Reduce spending on lower-performing platforms



From interest to action: What students do after clicking college ads

A student’s click on a college advertisement marks the beginning of a journey, not the end. What happens in those crucial moments after engagement can make the difference between passing interest and serious consideration.

This research reveals that students take various actions after clicking college ads, with many seeking direct communication channels while others prefer self-guided exploration of digital resources.

What did you do after clicking on the ad?

ACTION	ALL STUDENTS	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
I emailed the admissions office	31%	19%	37%	29%	33%
I looked at information on a website	28%	25%	19%	30%	30%
I filled out a form to receive more information	26%	21%	23%	26%	29%
I followed their social pages	20%	15%	24%	17%	22%
I emailed the financial aid office	19%	14%	22%	19%	19%
I called a phone number	12%	17%	12%	10%	12%
I looked at an interactive map of the campus	12%	12%	8%	15%	11%
I watched a video	11%	14%	9%	12%	10%
I started an application	10%	2%	5%	6%	17%
I interacted with AI chat tools	8%	5%	11%	8%	8%
I took a virtual tour	7%	8%	4%	7%	8%
I live-chatted with a college representative	6%	5%	11%	6%	5%
I registered to attend an event	6%	5%	6%	5%	7%
I scheduled a campus tour	5%	3%	5%	7%	5%



Key Findings

- **Direct outreach to colleges**
 - The most common action after clicking a college ad was **emailing the admissions office (31%)**, indicating that many students seek direct, personalized communication following initial interest.
- **Exploring college websites**
 - **28%** of students **looked at information on a college website**, showing that ad clicks often lead to a deeper exploration of campus offerings, programs, and admissions details.
- **Seeking more information**
 - **26%** of students **completed an inquiry form**, reflecting a strong desire for personalized follow-up and continued engagement.
- **Engaging on social media**
 - **20%** of students **followed the college’s social media pages**, suggesting that students often extend their interest by staying connected through platforms they use daily.
- **Exploring financial and campus resources**
 - **19%** of students **emailed the financial aid office**, showing that affordability concerns often arise early in the exploration process.
 - **12%** explored further by **looking at an interactive campus map**, while **11%** **watched a video** for more insights.

GRADE-LEVEL PATTERNS IN POST-AD BEHAVIOR

9th grade: The cautious explorers

- Lowest application starts (2%)
- Highest rate of calling (17%)
- Strong video watching (14%)
- Lower rates of direct contact with offices

10th grade: The early engagers

- Highest rate of emailing admissions (37%)
- Most likely to follow social pages (24%)
- Highest rate of AI chat (11%) and live chat (11%) usage
- Strong financial aid office contact (22%)

11th grade: The researchers

- Highest rate of website information viewing (30%)
- Most likely to look at interactive maps (15%)

12th grade: The application-focused

- Highest rate of starting applications (17% vs. 2-6% in other grades)
- Strong email engagement with admissions (33%)
- Highest rate of information form completion (29%)



Implications for Institutions

Expand early digital outreach

With engagement highest among 9th and 10th graders, colleges should initiate digital marketing efforts earlier in high school, ensuring students become familiar with institutions before the application stage.

Prioritize high-impact platforms Instagram (57%) and TikTok (32%)

These platforms lead in ad engagement, making them essential platforms for outreach. Colleges should invest in visually engaging, authentic content tailored to each platform's style while maintaining a strong Google search (26%) presence to capture students actively exploring options.

Optimize ad-to-action pathways

Since 31% of students email the admissions office and 26% complete inquiry forms after clicking an ad, landing pages should feature clear calls to action, program information, virtual tours, and forms for personalized follow-up.

Highlight affordability

With 19% of students contacting the financial aid office after engaging with an ad, colleges should incorporate transparent cost and scholarship information within ad content and follow-up materials.

Leverage interactive and social content

Twenty percent of students followed social media pages, and 12% explored interactive campus maps after clicking an ad, demonstrating the importance of engaging, immersive content to sustain interest.

Grade-specific ad landing pages

- 12th grade: Direct application access
- 11th grade: Campus exploration tools
- 10th grade: Communication channels
- 9th grade: Informational content

Follow-up strategy

- Customize call-to-action based on grade level
- Provide grade-appropriate next steps
- Match the communication channel to grade preference
- Align content complexity with grade level

Resource allocation

- Focus application promotion on 12th graders
- Enhance digital tools for 11th graders
- Strengthen communication channels for 10th graders
- Develop exploratory content for 9th graders

The journey from initial click to campus commitment isn't linear—it's a web of interactions, explorations, and discoveries. While 70% of students engage with college ads, each click represents more than just a data point—it begins a potential transformation. For institutions, the challenge isn't just about being present in the digital spaces where students spend their time; it's about creating meaningful pathways that transform that first moment of curiosity into a lasting connection.

As digital natives continue redefining the college planning process, success lies in meeting students where they are—whether through an Instagram story, a TikTok video, or a Google search result. Every click represents a student taking the first step toward their future. The institutions that understand and honor this journey, making it more accessible, engaging, and personal, will be the ones that truly connect with tomorrow's students.

Final Thoughts

As we look to the future of college engagement, one thing becomes crystal clear: there is no one-size-fits-all approach to connecting with prospective students. The data tells us that a 9th grader discovering colleges through TikTok has fundamentally different needs than a 12th grader using AI chatbots to finalize their college choice.

These insights demand a fundamental shift in how institutions approach student engagement. It's no longer enough to have a presence across different platforms—institutions must create thoughtful, integrated experiences that evolve with students throughout their college search journey. This means meeting students where they are, both literally and figuratively: engaging them on their preferred platforms, speaking their language, and understanding their unique concerns and constraints.

The most successful institutions will be those that see beyond the surface metrics of clicks and form submissions to understand the deeper story: that every digital interaction is a chance to build trust, every shared piece of information is a sign of growing confidence, and every engagement is an opportunity to show students they belong. In an era where technology makes the connection more effortless than ever, the challenge—and opportunity—lies in making those connections meaningful.

As we move forward, remember that behind every data point in this report is a student trying to make one of life's most significant decisions. Our role isn't just to reach them—it's to get them in ways that make their college search journey clearer, more accessible, and more personal. The future of college engagement isn't about the platforms we use or the data we collect—it's about the students we serve and the paths we help them forge in their future.



Demographics

1,582 responses collected electronically in January 2025

GRADE	
9th grade (class of 2028)	8%
10th grade (class of 2027)	14%
11th grade (class of 2026)	31%
12th grade (class of 2025)	47%

GENDER	
Female	53%
Male	39%
Transgender Female	1%
Transgender Male	3%
Non-binary/third gender/Non-conforming	2%
Prefer to self-describe	1%
Prefer not to respond	1%

FIRST-GENERATION STATUS	
Continuing generation	66%
First generation	34%

US RESIDENTS/INTERNATIONAL	
United States resident	89%
International resident	11%

ETHNICITY (MULTIPLE SELECT)	
Alaska Native*	2%
American Indian*	3%
Asian	8%
Black	29%
Hispanic	17%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander*	2%
White	28%
Multi-racial*	4%
Don't know/ prefer not to respond*	2%
Middle Eastern or North African*	3%

US REGION	
Far West	20%
Great Lakes	18%
Middle Atlantic	10%
New England	3%
Plains	6%
Rocky Mountains	4%
Southeast	26%
Southwest	13%

*not reported

Talk with our enrollment experts about increasing engagement with students

How can you meet student expectations during the college search process, make the journey more personal, and keep more students on the path to enrollment? Reach out for a complimentary consultation on:

- Student search campaigns
- Marketing channel strategy and optimization
- Intelligent web engagement and personalization

RNL.com/DigitalConsult

About the Sponsors



RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,500 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, ensuring 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 helps institutions scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources. [Visit RuffaloNL.com](https://RuffaloNL.com)



Halda is an industry-leading provider of website conversion tools for higher education. With the help of data integration and AI implementation, Halda helps turn every website interaction into a personalized experience that converts throughout the enrollment funnel. [Visit HALDA.ai](https://HALDA.ai)



Modern Campus empowers 1,700+ higher education institutions to attract, engage, and retain learners for life with software solutions that enable a modern student experience. The Modern Campus learner-to-earner lifecycle platform powers solutions for web content management, conversational text messaging, catalog and curriculum management, career pathways, student engagement and development, and non-traditional student management. The result: innovative institutions engage their modern learners for life, while providing modern administrators with the tools needed to streamline workflows and drive high efficiency. Learn how Modern Campus is leading the modern learner-to-earner movement. [Visit moderncampus.com](https://moderncampus.com)



Visit RuffaloNL.com/Enrollment
Email ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com

How to cite this report

RNL, Halda & Modern Campus (2025). *2025 E-Expectations Trend Report*. Ruffalo Noel Levitz.
RNL.com/Expectations

All material in this document is copyright © 2025 by RNL.
Permission is required to redistribute information from RNL
either in print or electronically.