



2024 Prospective Family Engagement Report

Co-sponsored by:



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Introduction

Families are now an undeniable part of prospective students' college search process. As American higher education stands at the precipice of profound demographic shifts, colleges and universities must reexamine how they engage not just prospective students, but their families as well.

In collaboration with Ardeo and CampusESP, RNL collected and analyzed the findings of 11,309 families with college-bound students from across demographic and geographic backgrounds.

The key findings from this 2024 Prospective Family Engagement Report highlight the considerations and inclinations that shape families' awareness and decision-making processes. Insights cover subjects such as their comfort with distance from home, type of information they value, communication channels and the frequency with which they hope to hear from institutions, and their concerns about financing their students' degree. Importantly, our 2024 research underscores how family income, generational status, and ethnicity can shape these categories.

Our hope is that leaders in higher education institutions find the resulting recommendations to be a practical guide for developing proactive, targeted strategies to engage diverse families in the college planning process.

Most significant findings of the 2024 study



83%

families think financial aid and scholarships will be among the top five factors to choose an institution



69%

families have borrowing concerns



81%

families would welcome communication from institutions at least once a week



67%

families will rule out institutions based on "the sticker price"



76%

families think college is a worthwhile investment in their students' futures



58%

families are considering out-of-state institutions



71%

families think loan concerns are negatively impacting students' college planning



28%

families want their students to travel 100 miles or less to attend college

The most important topics families want information on

1. Campus safety
2. Costs and tuition
3. Academics (programs, majors, and minors)
4. Financial aid and scholarships
5. Health services (including mental health)
6. Account services and payment plans
7. Financial aid/scholarship calculator
8. Residential life/housing

Information families can't find

1. Success of graduates finding jobs
2. Career services
3. Alumni networking and events
4. Account services and payment plans
5. Health services (including mental health)
6. Campus safety
7. Academic support (e.g., student disability services, tutoring, writing support)
8. Contact information for administrators and faculty



College Planning Basics



Distance



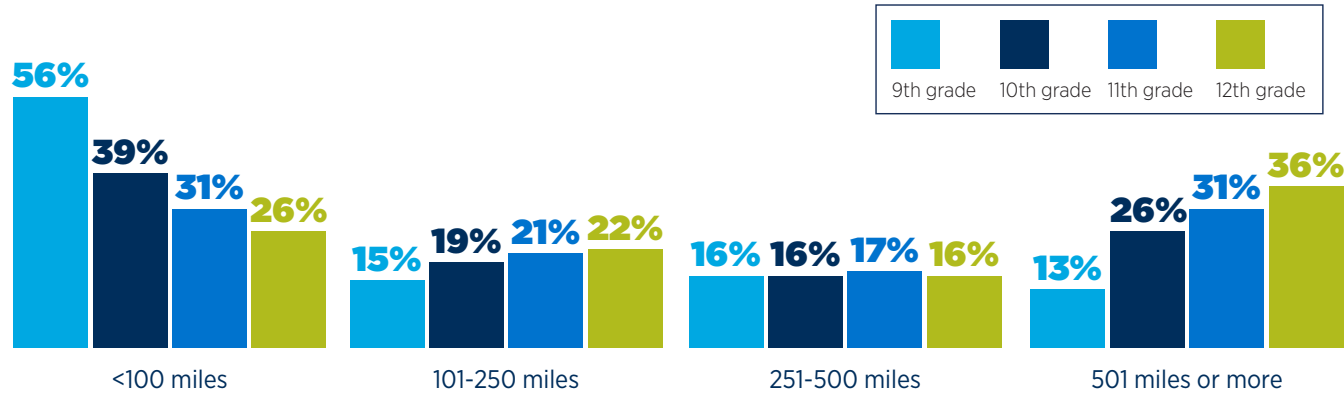
Key Findings

28% of respondents consider colleges within a 100-mile radius, while **34%** are open to colleges 501 miles away.

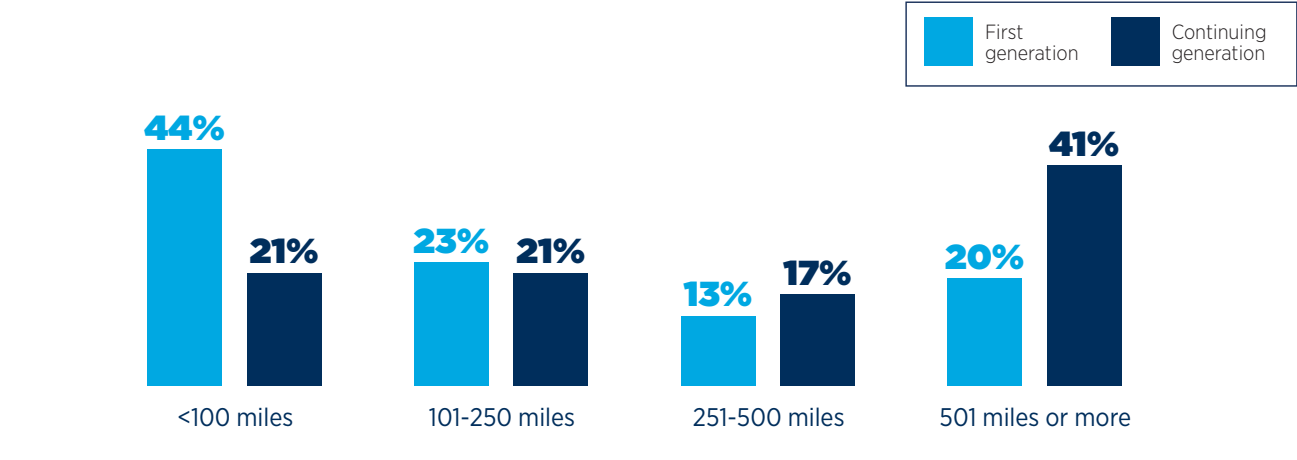
Variations in Comfort with Distance from Home

- As students get older and closer to high school graduation, families' willingness to consider more distant colleges increases.
- First-generation and lower-income families prefer closer institutions, while continuing-generation and higher-income families are more open to greater distances.
- White families are more open to institutions 501 or more miles away, while Hispanic and Black families prefer institutions within 100 miles.
- Family income significantly influences comfort with distance. Lower-income families overwhelmingly prefer colleges close to home, with 56% favoring institutions within 100 miles. In contrast, higher-income families are more open to their children attending college farther away. Among those earning \$250,000 or more, 56% are comfortable with a distance of 501 miles or more.
- Families considering private institutions are more receptive to their students traveling a longer distance than those considering public institutions.
- Sixty-three percent of families considering two-year institutions are more likely to choose closer proximity within 100 miles from home.

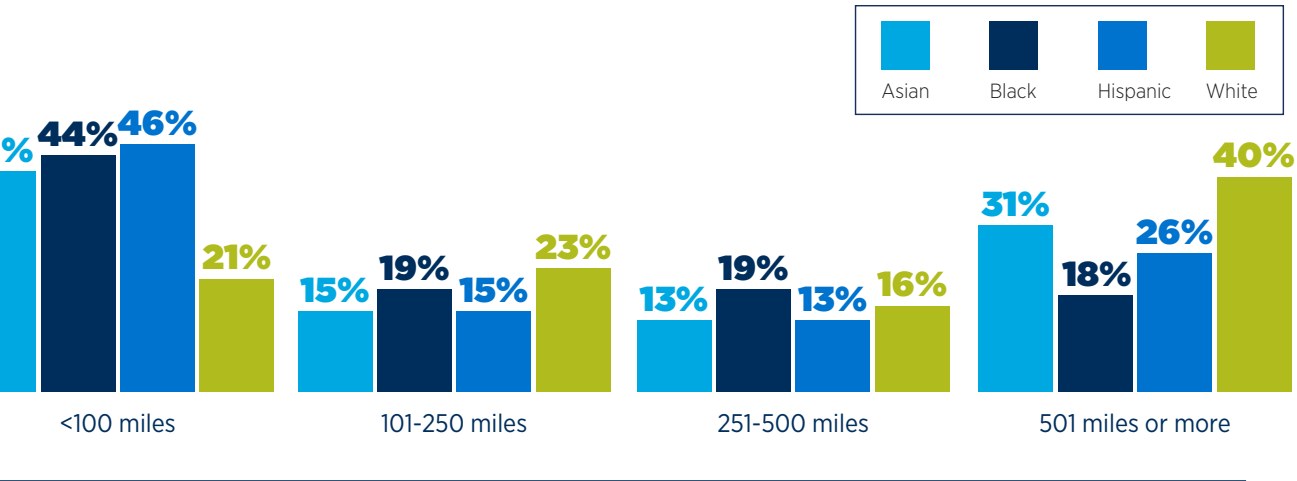
Distance families will consider their students travel to attend college by grade



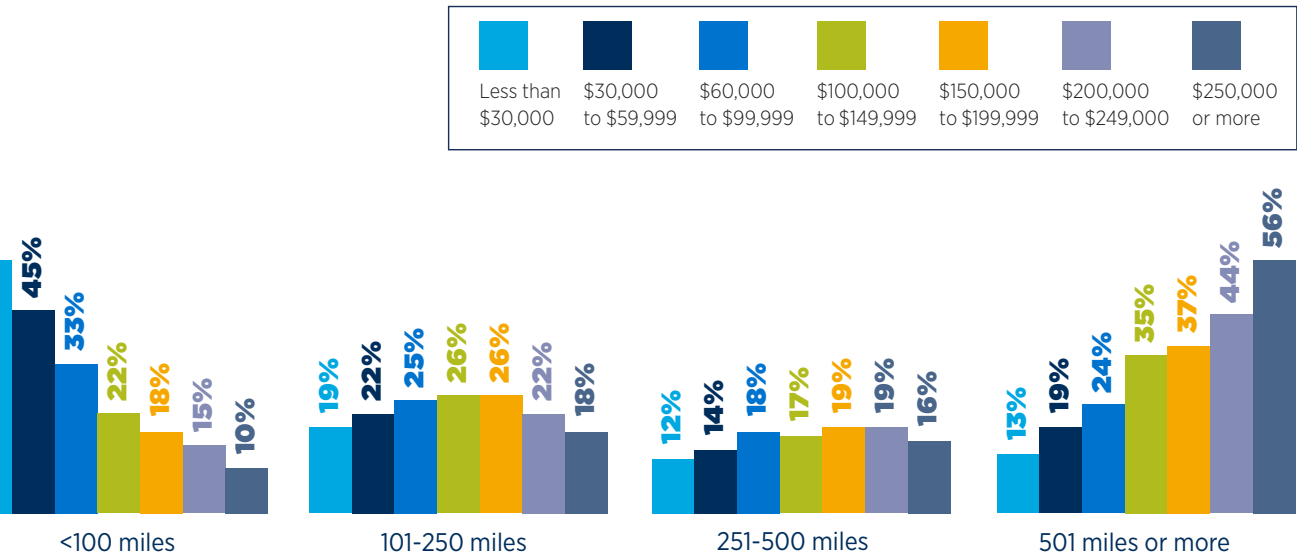
Distance families will consider their students travel to attend college by first-generation status



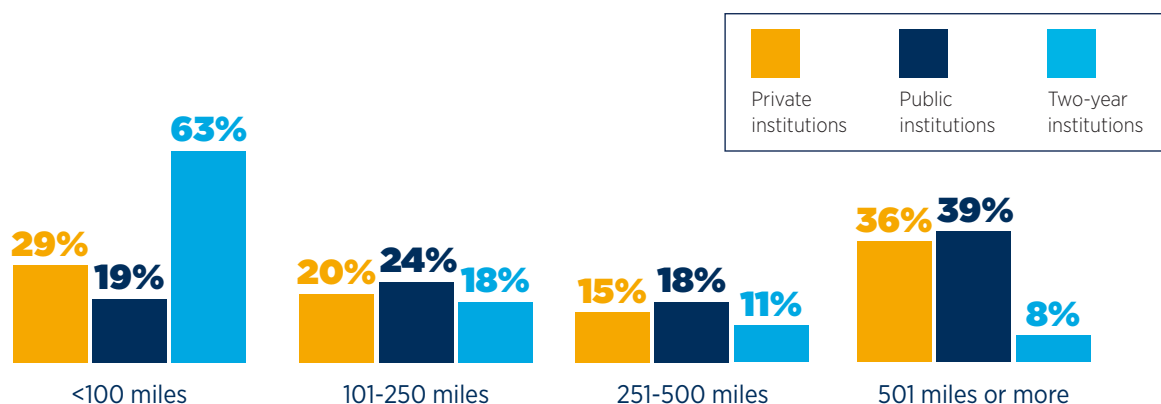
Distance families will consider their students travel to attend college by ethnicity



Distance families will consider their students travel to attend college by income



Distance families will consider their students travel to attend college by type of institution



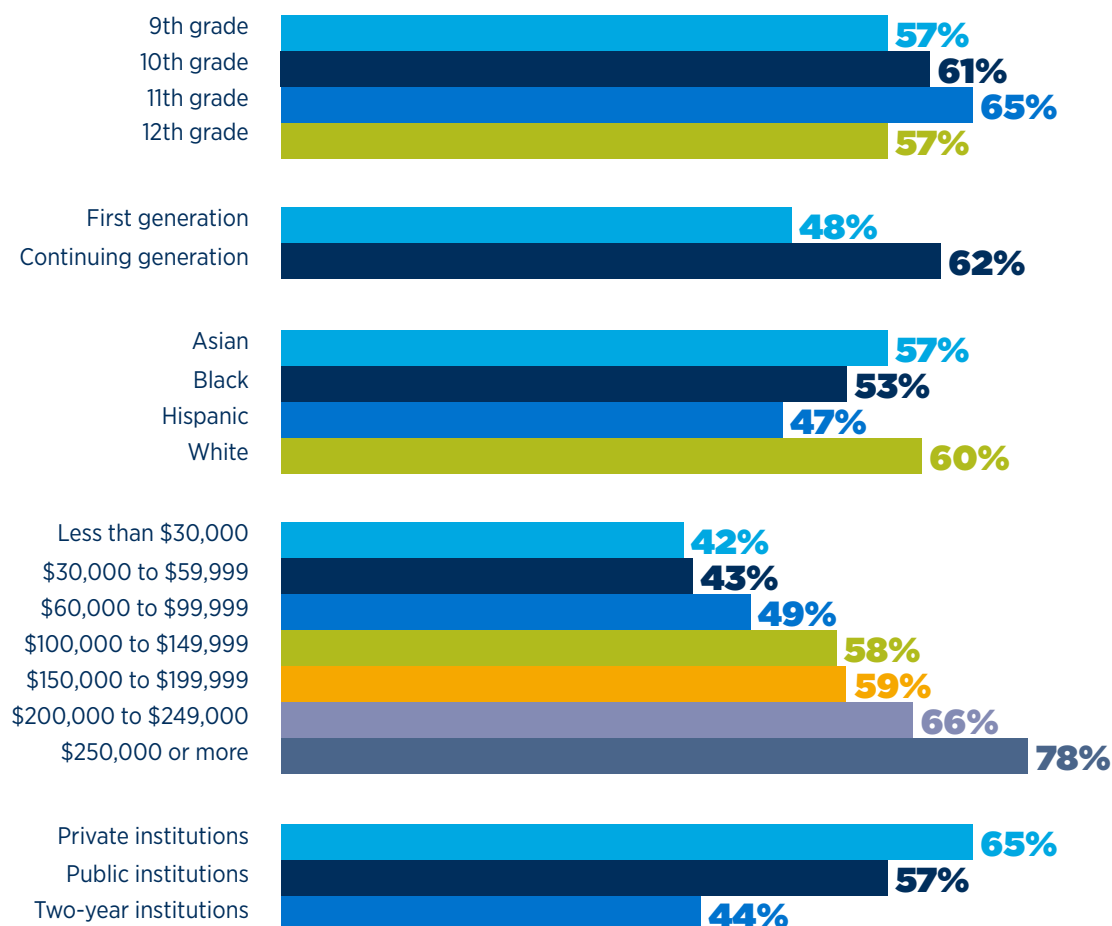
Out-of-state



Variations in Consideration of Out-of-State Institutions

- Willingness to consider out-of-state colleges peaks in 11th grade and decreases slightly in 12th grade.
- Continuing-generation families (62%) are more likely to consider out-of-state colleges than first-generation families (48%).
- White families (60%) are more likely to consider out-of-state colleges. Hispanic families (47%) are least likely to look out of state.
- Willingness to consider out-of-state colleges increases with family income; 42% of those earning under \$30,000 compared to 78% of those earning \$250,000 or more.
- Out-of-state consideration varies by preference for institution type. Sixty-five percent of families considering private institutions are more likely to choose out-of-state institutions, followed by 57% of families considering public institutions, and 44% of families looking at two-year institutions.

Families considering out-of-state institutions



College planning experiences

As prospective college families navigate the complex landscape of higher education, various experiences play a crucial role in shaping their decisions.

Families who say this experience is important

On-campus visit (either self-guided or guided)	96%
Information (digital content) about the school or program the student is considering	95%
The quality of the school's communication with parents and families	94%
Meeting a faculty member	91%
Meeting and admissions staff member	91%
Meeting a coach (for families of student-athletes)*	87%
Information received from a high school counselor	75%
College fair	74%
Virtual visit	69%
Meeting a current student's parent or family	68%

*Only asked of families of prospective student-athletes

EXPERIENCES BY HIGH SCHOOL GRADE	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Experience with a coach*	73%	78%	83%	89%
On-campus visit	74%	88%	94%	97%
Virtual visit	71%	71%	69%	69%
A college fair	71%	82%	75%	73%
Experience/information received from a high school counselor	69%	79%	76%	75%
Meeting an admissions staff member	68%	83%	90%	92%
Meeting a current student's parent	75%	71%	69%	68%
Meeting a faculty member	80%	88%	90%	92%
Information/digital content about the school or program	78%	84%	92%	97%
The quality of the school's communication with parents and families	84%	87%	89%	96%

*Only asked of families of prospective student-athletes

EXPERIENCES BY FIRST-GENERATION STATUS	FIRST GENERATION	CONTINUING GENERATION
Experience with a coach*	87%	87%
On-campus visit	94%	96%
Virtual visit	75%	65%
A college fair	82%	70%
Experience/information received from a high school counselor	84%	71%
Meeting an admissions staff member	92%	91%
Meeting a current student's parent	73%	67%
Meeting a faculty member	92%	91%
Information/digital content about the school or program	94%	95%
The quality of the school's communication with parents and families	94%	94%

*Only asked of families of prospective student-athletes

EXPERIENCES BY ETHNICITY	BLACK	ASIAN	HISPANIC	WHITE
Experience with a coach*	82%	77%	81%	88%
On-campus visit	88%	82%	91%	96%
Virtual visit	77%	71%	75%	64%
A college fair	80%	72%	82%	68%
Experience/information received from a high school counselor	80%	71%	82%	70%
Meeting an admissions staff member	85%	79%	86%	91%
Meeting a current student's parent	77%	76%	77%	64%
Meeting a faculty member	89%	83%	89%	91%
Information/digital content about the school or program	89%	86%	90%	96%
The quality of the school's communication with parents and families	88%	81%	89%	95%

*Only asked of families of prospective student-athletes

EXPERIENCES BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION	PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS
Experience with a coach*	91%	83%	87%
On-campus visit	94%	97%	95%
Virtual visit	68%	67%	77%
Experience/information received at a college fair	71%	73%	84%
Experience/information received from a high school counselor	71%	76%	84%
Meeting an admissions staff member	92%	91%	86%
Meeting a current student's parent	71%	67%	71%
Meeting a faculty member	93%	91%	90%
Information/digital content about the school or program	94%	96%	91%
The quality of the school's communication with parents and families	93%	96%	91%

*Only asked of families of prospective student-athletes

Implications

Segment communications by high school grade: Communications to prospective students should recognize that their concerns and interests evolve as they move through high school and closer to the college choice. Focus early search content on building brand awareness and establishing the value proposition. Focus later funnel communications on calls to action to visit, apply, and fill out the FAFSA.

Optimize the visit experience: Offer a menu of visit options (such as the ability to attend a class or see an additional amenity/facility) to address the specific interests of various segments of prospective students and families.

Make digital content easily searchable and relevant:

- Easy-to-find and high-quality digital content is crucial for families who cannot visit in person.
- Provide academic program-specific or campus life information when the student's interests are known.

Facilitate the high school counselor and admissions staff relationship: Ensure high school counselors regularly receive updated communications that help keep the institution on their radar. When prospective students apply, link each student to a recruitment official who can inform the counselor, so the student is jointly supported throughout the admissions journey.

Engage faculty and student life staff: Provide opportunities for families to engage with faculty and staff members in person and virtually to enrich their understanding of academic programs and campus life.

Facilitate support from athletic coaches: Ensure that the college or university athletic recruiting staff has insight into the information being sent by the institution. Offer workshops and training sessions to better equip them to guide student-athletes through the college planning process.

Participate in (targeted) college fairs: Maintain a presence at college fairs as a recruitment strategy targeted at first-generation and low-income families. Ensure that fairs are held in locations that are accessible and comfortable to the families and that materials are available in language appropriate to primary non-English-speaking segments. Implement a disciplined lead capture and follow-up communication strategy for students and families who participate at college fairs.

Make costs and financial aid information clear and easy to find: Provide all prospective families with transparent pricing information and detailed and easily accessible financial aid information, such as the availability of payment plans, scholarships, grants, and individualized counseling opportunities.



Participation in campus tours and visits

TOUR TYPE	HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THIS TYPE OF TOUR	NOT YET, BUT I PLAN ON PARTICIPATING IN THIS TYPE OF TOUR	NO, AND I AM NOT PLANNING ON PARTICIPATING IN THIS TYPE OF TOUR
Guided group tours	68%	21%	12%
Guided individual tours	40%	30%	31%
Tours we have taken on our own	47%	25%	28%
Virtual tours	39%	24%	37%

Pros and Cons of Tour Style

- Sixty-eight percent of families have already participated in group tours, finding value in structured overviews of the campus and opportunities to see a wide range of the school’s offerings. Only 12% of families plan not to tour, possibly due to practical, logistical challenges.
- Forty percent of families have taken part in guided individual tours, which can better tailor the experience to the family’s specific interests and questions. However, 31% of families do not plan on participating, perhaps due to the perceived exclusivity or additional cost associated with such tours.
- Forty-seven percent of families have taken self-guided tours and enjoyed the flexibility and control they provide. At the same time, 28% do not intend to do self-guided tours, possibly due to a preference for structured guidance.
- Thirty-nine percent of families have participated in virtual tours, finding them convenient and accessible. At the same time, 37% do not see virtual tours as a part of their planning, perhaps due to a preference for physical presence on campus.

PARTICIPATION IN TOURS BY HIGH SCHOOL GRADE	GUIDED GROUP TOURS	GUIDED INDIVIDUAL TOURS	TOURS WE HAVE TAKEN ON OUR OWN	VIRTUAL TOURS
9th grade	41%	29%	30%	38%
10th grade	34%	19%	27%	23%
11th grade	52%	30%	39%	29%
12th grade	73%	43%	50%	41%

PARTICIPATION IN TOURS BY FIRST-GENERATION STATUS	GUIDED GROUP TOURS	GUIDED INDIVIDUAL TOURS	TOURS WE HAVE TAKEN ON OUR OWN	VIRTUAL TOURS
First generation	55%	32%	34%	31%
Continuing generation	72%	42%	51%	41%

PARTICIPATION IN TOURS BY FAMILY INCOME	GUIDED GROUP TOURS	GUIDED INDIVIDUAL TOURS	TOURS WE HAVE TAKEN ON OUR OWN	VIRTUAL TOURS
Less than \$30,000	44%	26%	29%	30%
\$30,000 to \$59,999	50%	30%	29%	28%
\$60,000 to \$99,999	60%	35%	38%	34%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	70%	42%	45%	36%
\$150,000 to 199,999	74%	44%	54%	41%
\$200,000 to \$249,000	78%	46%	53%	44%
\$250,000 or more	80%	53%	67%	53%

PARTICIPATION IN TOURS BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION	GUIDED GROUP TOURS	GUIDED INDIVIDUAL TOURS	TOURS WE HAVE TAKEN ON OUR OWN	VIRTUAL TOURS
Private	71%	54%	49%	40%
Public	73%	34%	50%	42%
Two-year	38%	21%	28%	23%

Implications

Increase equity with expanded access to guided tours: To bridge the income gap in tour participation rates, proactively communicate the availability and benefits of guided individual tours to first-generation families, waive fees, and provide travel grants to increase tour accessibility for low-income families.

Improve the quality of virtual tours: Even though virtual tours are theoretically a great way to increase access, 37% do not plan to use them, likely because families question the quality of the experience. Invest in high-quality virtual tours that provide an immersive and interactive experience. Offer live virtual tours with Q&A sessions to improve engagement and the real-feel experience.

Implement pre- and post-tour communication and analyses:

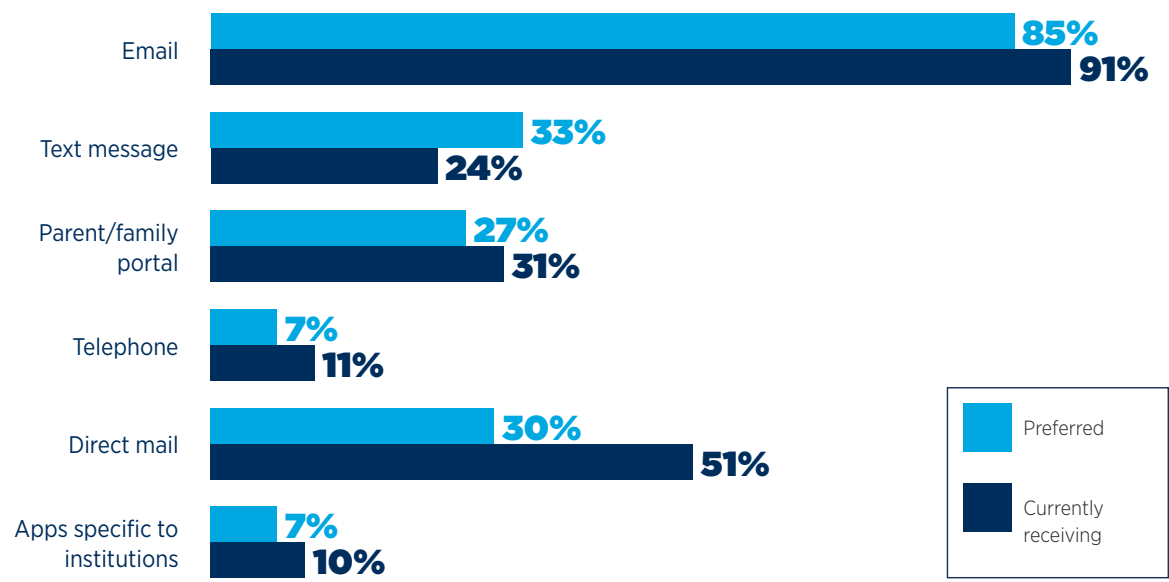
- Immediately after tour registration, send confirmation emails detailing the tour schedule, meeting locations, parking instructions, and necessary documentation.
- A few days before the tour, send reminder emails or text messages with contact information for last-minute questions to ensure families are prepared and to reduce no-show rates.
- Within 24 hours of the tour, send thank you emails expressing appreciation and providing additional resources or the next steps in the admissions process.
- Send post-tour surveys within 24-48 hours to gather feedback on their experience, focusing on key aspects like tour guide knowledge, tour content, overall satisfaction, and areas for improvement. Assign admissions counselors to follow up with personalized messages to address questions or concerns.

Enhance self-guided tour options: Provide detailed maps or mobile app guides to allow families to explore the campus at their own pace while viewing curated information. Augment self-guided tours with interactive elements such as QR codes linked to videos, additional information, or student testimonials.

Communication From Institutions

Communication channels

Percentage of families who put these as their top two preferred channels for receiving communications.



Key Findings

- Email is the most preferred and used method, with **85%** of families preferring it while **91%** of institutions use it.
- Direct mail is overused by institutions (**51%** usage) compared to family preference (**30%**).
- Text messaging is underutilized by institutions (**24%** usage) compared to family preference (**33%**).
- Parent/family portals align closely with institutional use (**31%**) and family preference (**27%**).

Variation in Communication Preferences

Grade level:

Email and text messaging become increasingly favored as students age.

- By 12th grade, 89% of families prefer email communication.
- Direct mail preference fluctuates: It increases from 9th to 11th grade, peaking at 40%, before decreasing to 28% by 12th grade.
- Family portal usage peaks in 12th grade: After remaining steady through 11th grade, portal usage increases to 29% in 12th grade.

First-generation status:

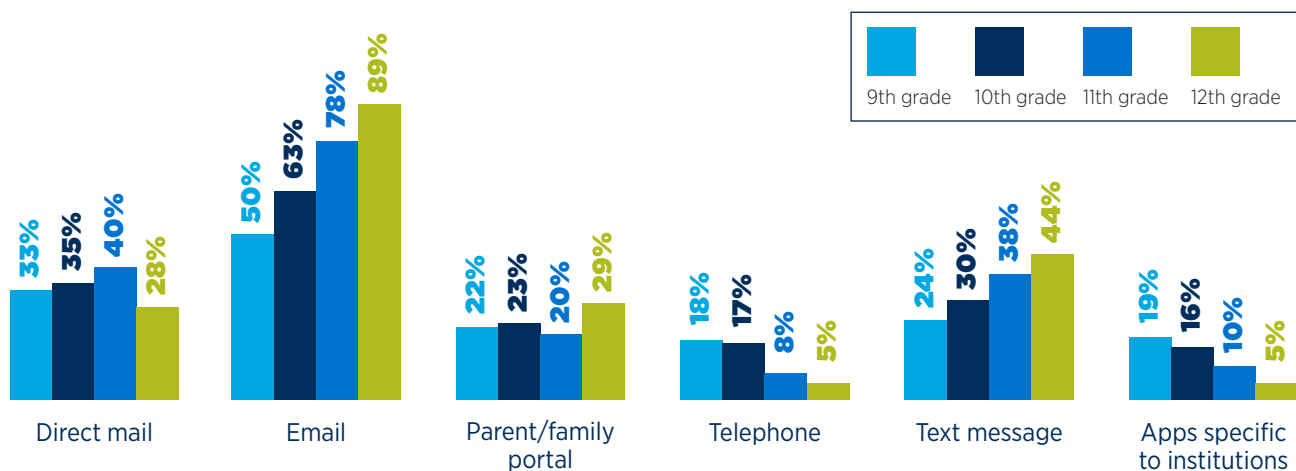
- Email is heavily preferred by first-generation (79%) and continuing-generation (88%) families.
- Both groups prefer direct mail, with first generation at 29% and continuing generation at 30%.
- Continuing-generation families (31%) prefer family portals more than first-generation families (20%).
- First-generation families have a notably higher preference for text messaging (44%) than continuing-generation families (29%).

Family income:

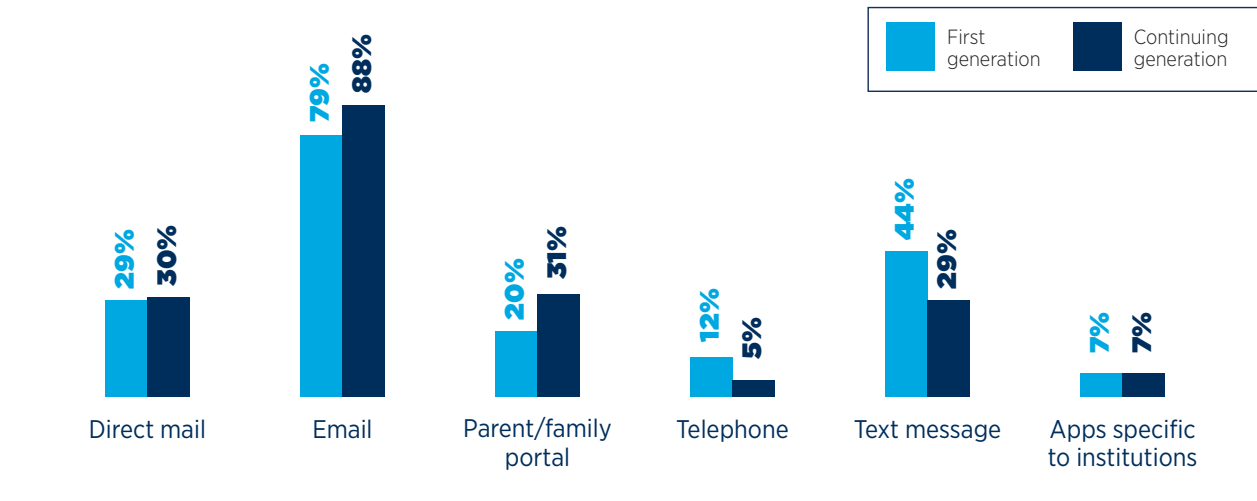
High-touch, direct communications are preferred by lower-income families.

- **Email preference increases with income:** While email is the most preferred method across all income levels, preference peaks at 88% for families with incomes above \$100,000.
- **Direct mail preference is fairly consistent:** Preference for direct mail ranges from 27% (< \$30,000) to 32% (\$60,000 to \$99,999).
- **Portal preference increases with income:** Preference for parent/family portals increases as income rises, peaking at 33% for the \$200,000 to \$249,000 income range.
- **Telephone preference decreases with income:** As income increases, preference for communication via telephone decreases, bottoming out at 4% for the highest income bracket.
- **Text messaging preference is highest among lower-income families:** Fifty-two percent of families with incomes less than \$30,000 prefer texting compared to 27% of families with incomes over \$250,000 prefer texting.

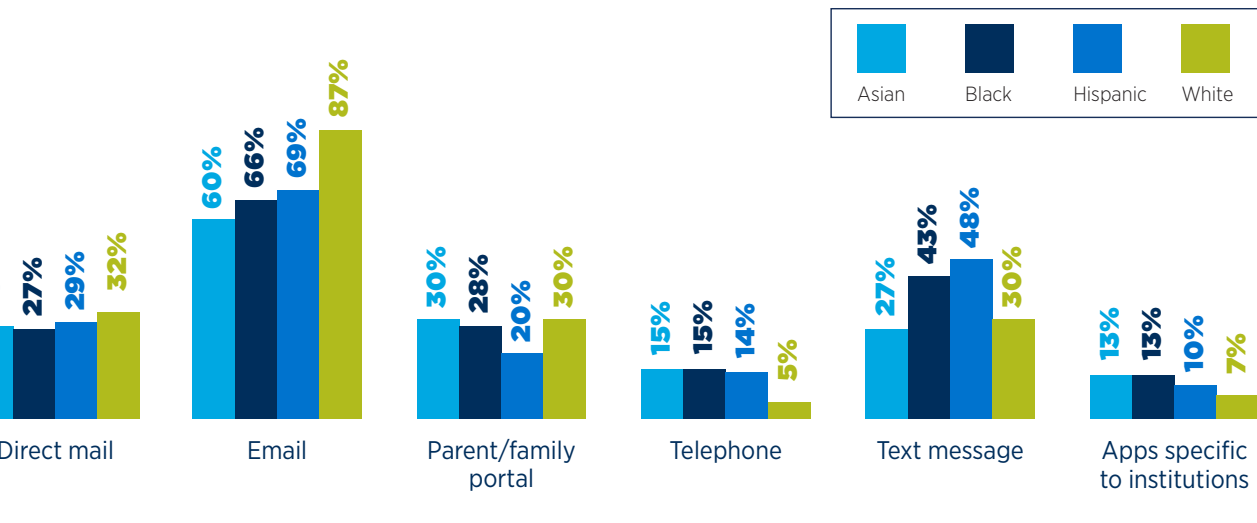
Preferred communication channels by high school grade



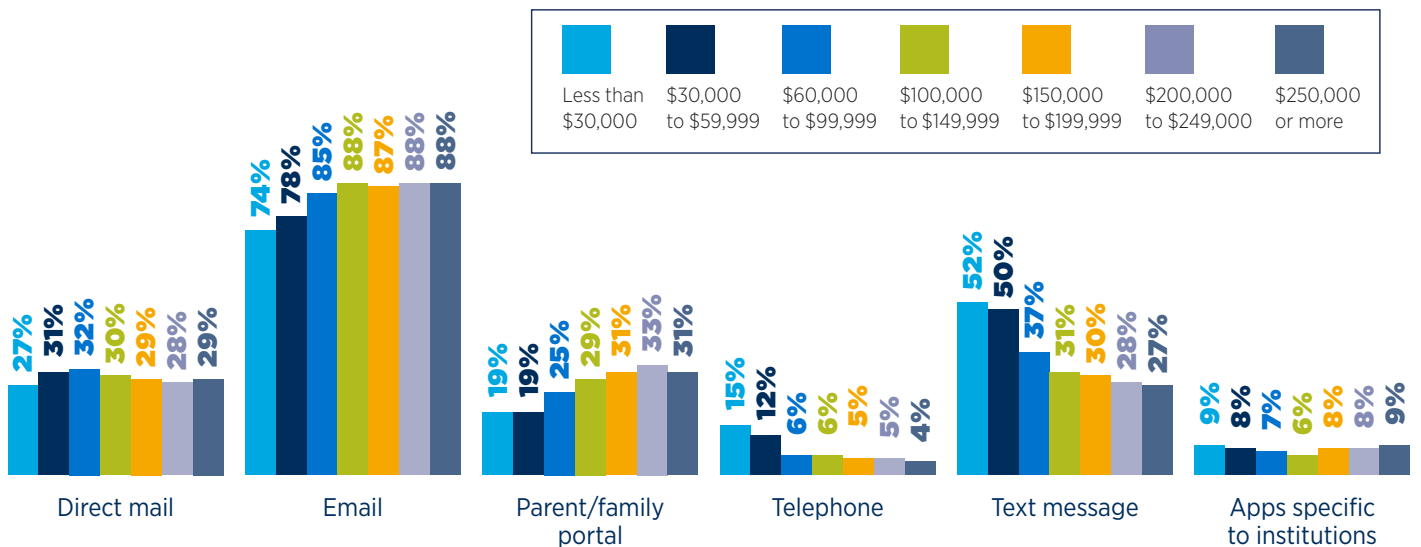
Preferred communication channels by first-generation status



Preferred communication channels by ethnicity



Preferred communication channels by family income



Implications

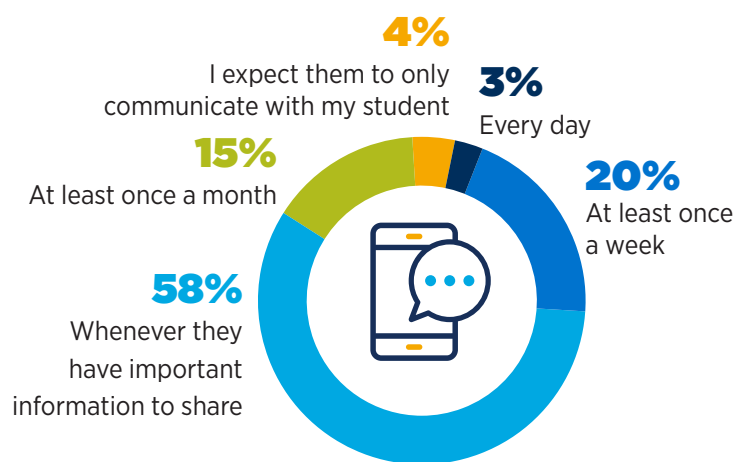
Align family preference with communications investments: Shrink the gap between the communications upon which the institution usually spends money and where families now prefer to receive information. For example, although print media is not dead, it's less preferred (and more expensive) than other media.

Segment campaigns: Develop segmented communication campaigns targeting specific student demographics and interests. Use interactive content like videos and virtual tour links to keep prospective students engaged.

Optimize parent portals to appeal to all families: Offer more features, such as real-time updates, event registrations, and personalized content based on student interests.

Use phone communication strategically for high-impact conversations: Reserve the high-tough, personal outreach of the phone for financial aid discussions or personalized follow-ups, especially with lower-income families who may have a higher preference for this method.

Frequent or relevant? A deep dive into prospective family communication preferred frequency of communication



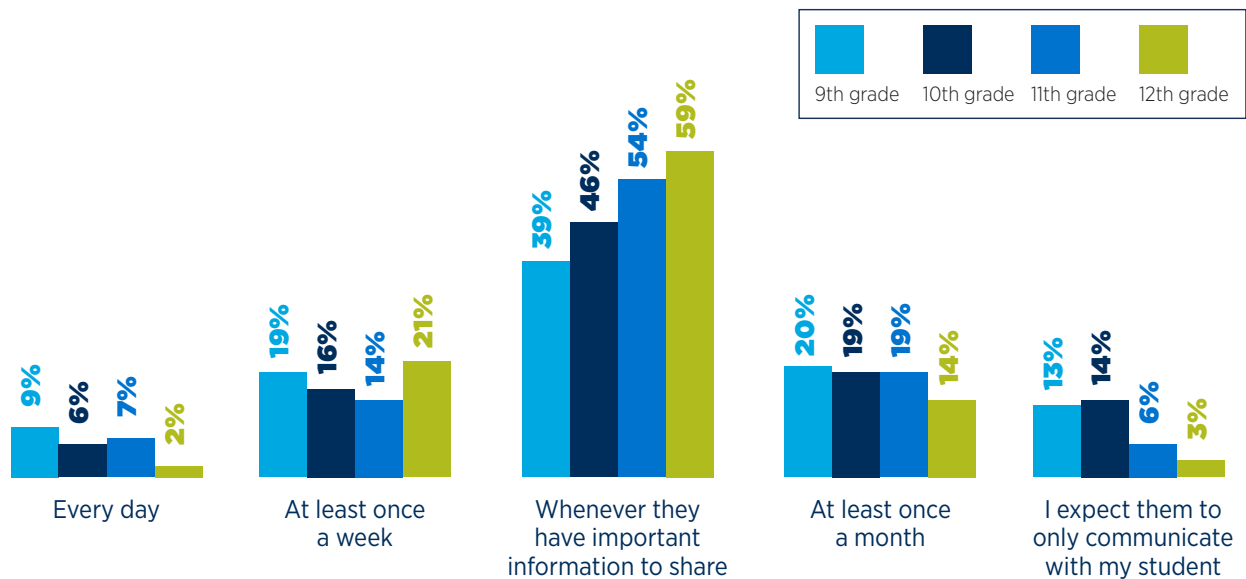
Key Findings

- **81%** of prospective families are open to hearing frequently from institutions.
- **58%** want to hear from you “whenever you have important information to share.”

Variations in Communication Frequency Preference

Grade level:

Preference for frequency declines with student age. Ninth-grade parents prefer more frequent communication, with 9% preferring daily updates. However, parents of upperclassmen (11th-12th grade) prefer less frequent communication, with 2-7% preferring daily updates.



Implications

Offer communication options: Offer families opt-in/opt-out options for how often families can receive updates to meet different needs and preferences.

Provide more regular outreach and guidance to first-generation, lower-income, and families of color: Make efforts to level the playing field in the admissions process by recognizing some families and more frequent communication to guide them through an unfamiliar process.

Conduct regular audits of communication preferences: Regularly check in with your institution's prospective families to listen to their preferred communication content and frequency and analyze opt-in/out trends over time to inform segmentation strategies.

Be mindful of the digital divide: Don't assume all families have reliable access to the internet and a preference for digital communication. Offer alternatives for families with limited online access with printed materials available through high school counselors.

Devices families use for college planning activities

DEVICE USED	WEBSITE BROWSING	EMAIL	ACCESSING FAMILY PORTAL	VIRTUAL TOURS	SCHEDULE A VISIT OR CAMPUS TOUR	VIEWING ONLINE VIDEOS
Computer	92%	83%	68%	72%	78%	79%
Cell phone	77%	89%	55%	37%	65%	70%
Tablet	75%	62%	45%	47%	49%	68%

- Computers are the most common device used for all college planning activities, with the highest usage for website browsing (**92%**) and viewing online videos (**79%**).
- While less commonly used than computers for most activities, cell phones are used by **89%** of families to check email and **70%** to view online videos.
- Tablets have the lowest usage across all activities compared to computers and cell phones but are still used by many, especially for browsing and viewing online videos.

Variations in Device Usage

- First-generation families report lower computer usage for college search than continuing-generation families.
- White families have the highest computer usage across most activities compared to other racial/ethnic groups.
- Computer usage increases as income rises, peaking in the highest income brackets.

DEVICES BY GENERATION	WEBSITE BROWSING	EMAIL	ACCESSING FAMILY PORTAL	VIRTUAL TOURS	SCHEDULE A VISIT OR CAMPUS TOUR	VIEWING ONLINE VIDEOS
Computer						
First generation	87%	67%	64%	69%	71%	72%
Continuing generation	94%	86%	70%	73%	80%	81%
Cell phone						
First generation	75%	89%	60%	43%	67%	73%
Continuing generation	78%	90%	52%	35%	64%	69%
Tablet						
First generation	72%	58%	46%	47%	49%	65%
Continuing generation	76%	64%	44%	46%	49%	69%

Implications

Optimize websites for all devices: Ensure your website and online content are easily accessible and user-friendly on computers and mobile devices to increase utilization across demographics.

Leverage video content: Ensure that video content is easily viewable on smaller screens.

Tailor communications channels to student grade level: Content type and device usage vary by grade level; make sure the search funnel reflects grade-based differences.

Make virtual tours mobile-friendly: Consider offering mobile-friendly options as well, given the significant usage of these devices for these activities—particularly for lower-income families.

Awareness and satisfaction with family resources

RESOURCE	THIS IS AVAILABLE	I DON'T KNOW
Website area for parents or families of prospective students	51%	45%
Parent/family portal	46%	49%
Parent/family newsletter	58%	39%

In this report, we omit the “This is not available” responses since they only represent 4%-5% of the total responses.

More than half of prospective families indicated they know family resources. However, a significant portion of respondents (ranging from 39% to 49%) expressed uncertainty about the availability of these resources, indicating a need for more promotion of these resources to families.

RESOURCE	I HAVE USED IT, AND IT'S BEEN HELPFUL	I HAVE NOT USED THIS YET
Website area for parents or families of prospective students	61%	33%
Parent/family portal	42%	53%
Parent/family newsletter	66%	26%

In this report, we omit the “I have used it, but I have not found it helpful” responses since they only represent 5%-8% of the total responses.

Key Findings

Most families have utilized family-specific resources:

- Sixty-one percent use the website area for parents or families of prospective students.
- Forty-two percent engage with the parent/family portal.
- Sixty-six percent access parent/family newsletters.
- Among those who have utilized these resources, the majority found them helpful, with only a small percentage reporting dissatisfaction.

However, a notable portion of families—33% for the website, 53% for the parent/family portal, and 26% for the parent/family newsletter—have not yet utilized these resources, indicating the potential for increased engagement.

Variations in Awareness of Resources

- Awareness of college planning resources increases with student grade level.
- Continuing-generation families report higher awareness of college planning resources than first-generation families.
- White families report the highest awareness of college planning resources.
- Awareness of college planning resources tends to increase as family income increases.

Variation in Perceived Helpfulness of Resources

- The percentage of families finding resources helpful generally increases as student age increases.
- Continuing-generation families are slightly more likely to find resources helpful.
- White families are the most likely to find resources helpful.
- Satisfaction with resources tends to increase as family income increases.

Implications

Build family awareness of available resources and update with data-based analyses: Use metrics of campus visits, website visits, and targeted communication engagement rates to understand which resources families utilize most.

Illustrate the benefits of resources: Clearly explain how to register for a family portal and use current parent quotes to illustrate the benefits of doing so by highlighting their positive reactions to personalized email updates, alerts on application deadlines, and reminders about events so prospective families see the perks of participation.

Implement targeted outreach for first-generation and low-income families: Partner with schools and community organizations that serve large numbers of these students.

Simplify information: Avoid insider jargon that might overwhelm families unfamiliar with the college admissions process.

Provide multiple access points: Give families multiple ways to get questions answered, e.g., through the website, phone, email, in-person events, one-on-one advising, webinars, or workshops.

College planning information topics

As enrollment offices strive to attract and engage prospective families, understanding their key areas of interest is paramount. By recognizing and addressing these priorities, we can create more targeted, effective recruitment strategies that resonate with prospective families and set institutions apart in a competitive landscape.

Importance

1. Campus safety	100%	12. Contact information for administrators and faculty ...	88%
2. Costs and tuition	97%	13. The athletic season	86%
3. Academics (programs, majors, and minors)	97%	14. Student-athlete's sport/team*	86%
4. Health services (including mental health)	96%	15. Academic calendar	85%
5. Financial aid and scholarships	96%	16. The location (town, area, local spots, etc.)	84%
6. Account services and payment plans	95%	17. Events on campus (athletics, plays, concerts, etc.)	82%
7. Financial aid/scholarship calculator	94%	18. What makes the institution different	74%
8. Residential life/housing	91%	19. Diversity and other demographics	63%
9. Success of graduates finding jobs	91%	20. Alumni networking and events	60%
10. Career services	91%		
11. Academic support (e.g., student disability services, tutoring, writing support)	90%		

*Only asked to families of student-athletes

Families' importance on various college planning topics varies primarily based on the student's high school grade, with less difference in the overall information they seek.

College planning becomes an increasingly important consideration as their students navigate high school. But what information is most crucial for families to have, and when? While many topics remain relevant across all four years, the urgency and emphasis shift as graduation approaches. List the top five college planning topics for families in each high school grade.

9th Grade: Laying the Foundation

- ① Academic support (e.g., student disability services, tutoring, writing support)
- ② Health services (including mental health)
- ③ Costs and tuition
- ④ Campus safety
- ⑤ Financial aid/scholarship calculator

10th Grade: Building Momentum

- ① Costs and tuition
- ② Financial aid and scholarships
- ③ Campus safety
- ④ Health services (including mental health)
- ⑤ Academics (programs, majors, and minors)

11th Grade: Focusing the Search

- ① Costs and tuition
- ② Financial aid and scholarships
- ③ Health services (including mental health)
- ④ Financial aid/scholarship calculator
- ⑤ Campus safety

12th Grade: Making the Final Decision

- ① Costs and tuition
- ② Financial aid and scholarships
- ③ Health services (including mental health)
- ④ Financial aid/scholarship calculator
- ⑤ Career services (assistance with resume, job search, interview skills, etc.)

While the specific emphasis shifts by grade, all families should seek to understand the full range of factors that make up the college experience. By staying proactive and informed, you can support your student in making the best possible decision for their future.

As prospective families research and compare higher education options, access to key information is crucial for informed decision-making. This table identifies the areas where families struggle to find the details they need, highlighting opportunities for enrollment and admissions offices to improve transparency and support. From post-graduation outcomes and career services to support for student well-being and diversity, families seek a comprehensive understanding of a university's offerings.

Information families can't find

1. Success of graduates finding jobs	65%
2. Career services	64%
3. Alumni networking and events	62%
4. Account services and payment plans	59%
5. Health services (including mental health)	57%
6. Campus safety	57%
7. Academic support (e.g., student disability services, tutoring, writing support)	57%
8. Contact information for administrators and faculty	52%
9. Financial aid/scholarship calculator	50%
10. Diversity and other demographics	49%
11. What makes the institution different	45%
12. Financial aid and scholarships	44%
13. Events on campus (athletics, plays, concerts, etc.)	43%
14. The athletic season	42%
15. Student-athlete's sport/team	42%
16. Residential life/housing	40%
17. Academic calendar	36%
18. Costs and tuition	31%
19. The location (town, area, local spots, etc.)	29%
20. Academics (programs, majors, and minors)	27%

Information hard to find by first-generation status (sorted by first-generation)

TYPE OF INFORMATION	FIRST GENERATION	CONTINUING GENERATION
Campus safety	58%	55%
Academic support (e.g., student disability services, tutoring, writing support)	58%	55%
Financial aid/scholarship calculator	56%	48%
Student-athlete's sport/team	52%	36%
Financial aid and scholarships	49%	38%
The athletic season	48%	38%
Residential life/housing information	46%	37%
Costs and tuition	40%	26%
Academics (programs, majors, and minors)	37%	22%
The location (town, area, local spots, etc.)	31%	27%

Information hard to find by family income (sorted by lowest income bracket)

TYPE OF INFORMATION	<\$59,999	\$60,000 TO \$99,999	\$100,000 TO \$199,999	\$200,000>
Academic support (e.g., student disability services, tutoring, writing support)	82%	60%	51%	43%
Financial aid/scholarship calculator	75%	65%	45%	28%
Graduates finding jobs	69%	66%	63%	63%
Health services (including mental health)	65%	58%	53%	51%
Account services and payment plans	60%	60%	58%	55%
Financial aid and scholarships	58%	48%	39%	34%
Residential life/housing information	51%	43%	39%	33%
Costs and tuition	45%	36%	27%	23%
Academics (programs, majors, and minors)	41%	31%	21%	19%

Implications

Improve accessibility of key information: Institutions should make critical information like academic support, financial aid calculators, graduate job outcomes, and health services easily accessible on their websites to support prospective families.

Income-specific outreach: Recognizing that lower-income families struggle more to find certain information, colleges could develop targeted outreach programs and resources for these families.

First-generation support: Colleges should proactively provide clear information and support specifically for first-generation college families who may face unique challenges in the college planning process.

Streamline financial information: Given the universal importance of costs, aid, and payment plans, colleges should simplify and present this financial information for all families.

Highlight what sets you apart: As students age, families seek to understand a college's unique value proposition. Colleges should clearly articulate what differentiates them from other institutions.

Showcase campus life: Offering easy-to-find information about residential life, campus events, and the surrounding location can help families envision their student's potential college experience.

Career services as a selling point: With career services becoming more important as graduation nears, colleges should highlight their career support as an asset for setting graduates up for success.

Mental health transparency: Given the growing focus on student mental health, colleges should be transparent about their counseling services and support for student well-being.

Athletics information for prospective student-athletes: For colleges with athletic programs, providing detailed information about teams, seasons, and athletic support becomes increasingly important as students specialize in sports.

Connect families with faculty and staff: Offering clear contact information for administrators and faculty can help families feel supported and build connections with the college community.

Financing Perceptions and Plans

Importance of financial aid and scholarships



Key Findings

- **Forty percent of families consider financial aid and scholarships to be the top factor** when planning for college, highlighting their crucial role in making higher education accessible and affordable.
- **Eighty-three percent place financial aid and scholarships among the top five factors.**
- **For 13% of families, financial aid and scholarships are necessary but not the primary factor.**
- **Only 4% of families do not consider financial aid and scholarships as a factor.**

Variations in the Importance of Financial Aid

Grade level:

In 9th grade, only 35% of families view financial aid and scholarships as the top factor in college decisions. However, by 12th grade, 40% of families rank financial aid as their top consideration, and 45% include it among their top five factors.

First-generation status:

51% of first-generation families view financial aid and scholarships as the top college decision factors. In contrast, 36% of the continuing-generation population considered it their top consideration.

Ethnicity:

Just over half (51%) of both Black and Hispanic families are more likely to view financial aid and scholarships as the top factor compared to 15% of White and 18% of Asian families.

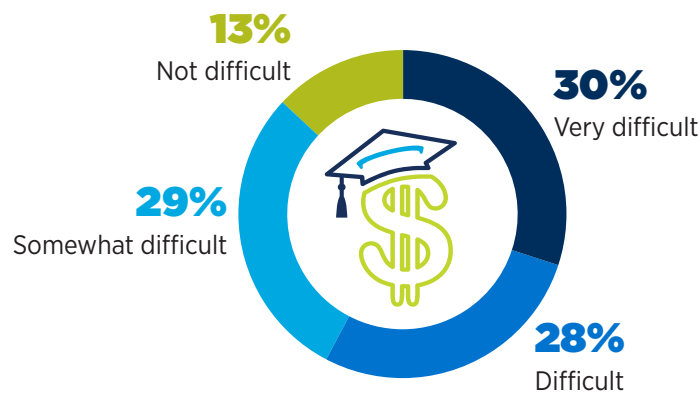
Family income:

An overwhelming 65% of lower-income families (less than \$30,000) consider financial aid the top factor. Although the percentage declines as income increases, 17% of the highest-earning families (over \$250,000) still place them as the top consideration.

Type of institution:

- For families interested in private institutions, 38% consider financial aid the top factor.
- For those interested in public institutions, 39% see financial aid as the top factor.
- Among families looking at two-year institutions, 46% consider financial aid the top factor.

Financing difficulty



Key Findings

Most prospective families (**87%**) find financing their students' college education difficult. Only **13%** do not find it difficult.

Variations in Financing Difficulties

Grade level:

Across all grades, 83% and 88% of families report difficulty financing college. Moreover, the percentage of families reporting difficulty increases slightly as their students progress from 9th to 12th grade.

First-generation status:

Thirty-seven percent of first-generation college families view college financing as difficult, compared to 27% of continuing-generation families who hold this perception.

Family income:

Families with lower incomes are more likely to view college financing as very difficult—55% of those earning less than \$30,000 hold this perception, compared to just 9% of those earning \$250,000 or more.

Ethnicity:

Hispanic and Black families are more likely to view college financing as very difficult, with 35% and 33% holding this perception, respectively.

In contrast, Asian and White families are more likely to view college as less difficult, with a higher percentage of these groups perceiving college financing as “somewhat difficult” or “not difficult.”

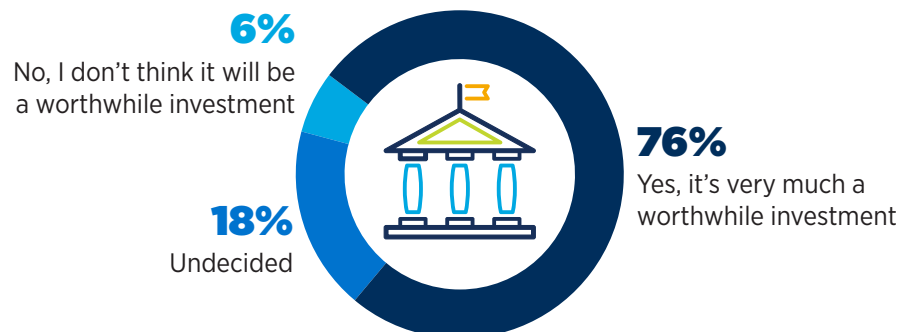
Implications

Offer easy-to-find, jargon-free information about financial aid and financing options. “How will we afford this?” is foremost on most prospective families’ minds. Make financial aid easy to find and easy to understand. Present it both from the students’ perspective and from the (likely more financially astute) parents’ perspective early in the search funnel.

Develop high-touch opportunities to assuage Black, Hispanic, and first-generation family concerns. Offer one-on-one counseling sessions and, where appropriate, translated resources.

Leverage personalized financial aid videos to help families better understand financial aid offers and final costs. Traditional methods often leave students and their families confused about the breakdown of grants, loans, work-study, and expected family contribution. Personalized videos, however, can clearly explain each component of a specific aid package in an engaging, easy-to-follow manner. This is particularly crucial for first-generation and international families who may be unfamiliar with the financial aid process in the U.S. By using the student’s name and their actual aid numbers, the videos humanize the experience and reduce anxiety. They can also be easily shared for a second opinion from a school counselor or other mentor.

Is college a worthwhile investment?



Key Findings

Most prospective families value a college education and believe it will yield long-term benefits for their students. However, about 1 in 4 families are either undecided or do not think college will be worth it.

Most prospective families (76%) believe a college education is a worthwhile investment.

Variations in Perceptions of the Investment—Value of College

Grade level:

By 12th grade, 79% of families believe college will be a worthwhile investment compared to 48% of 9th-grade families. Across all grades, a notable percentage of families remain undecided, suggesting persisting concerns about cost, value, and post-graduation outcomes.

First-generation status:

First-generation families have a slightly higher rate of undecided perceptions (21% versus 18% of continuing-generation families).

Ethnicity:

White families as the most likely (78%) to agree that college is a worthwhile investment and Asian families as the least likely (64%) to agree. Notably, a larger percentage of Black and Asian families express undecided views or outright skepticism compared to Hispanic and White families.

Family income:

Families earning under \$30,000 per year have a lower agreement rate (69%) of the investment value of college and a higher rate of undecided or negative views than higher-earning families.

Type of institution:

Prospective college families generally see college as a worthwhile investment. However, families interested in public institutions hold this view at the highest rate (79%). Those considering private institutions, or 2-year institutions are less convinced.

Ruling institutions out based on “the sticker price”



Key Findings

Most (**67%**) prospective families have ruled out institutions based solely on the sticker price. This underscores the importance of colleges communicating about financial aid, scholarships, and the true net cost of attendance to prevent sticker shock.

Variations in Family Response to Sticker Price

Grade level:

While 56% of 9th-grade families report having ruled out institutions by the sticker price, this percentage jumps to 68% among 12th-grade families.

First-generation status:

First-generation college families are more likely than continuing-generation families to rule out institutions based solely on the sticker price (68% versus 62%), but only by four points. This suggests that even though first-generation families might be less confident in the admissions process and the value of graduate outcomes, continuing-generation families might still be shocked by the dramatic rises in costs between the generations (e.g., since mom or dad went to college).

Ethnicity:

Prospective Black and Hispanic families are the most likely to rule out institutions based solely on the sticker price (79% and 75%, respectively). While White families (68%) are less likely than Black and Hispanic families to rule out options based on the sticker price, over two-thirds report that they had done so. Asian families were the most likely (47%) to report they would not rule out institutions based on the sticker price.

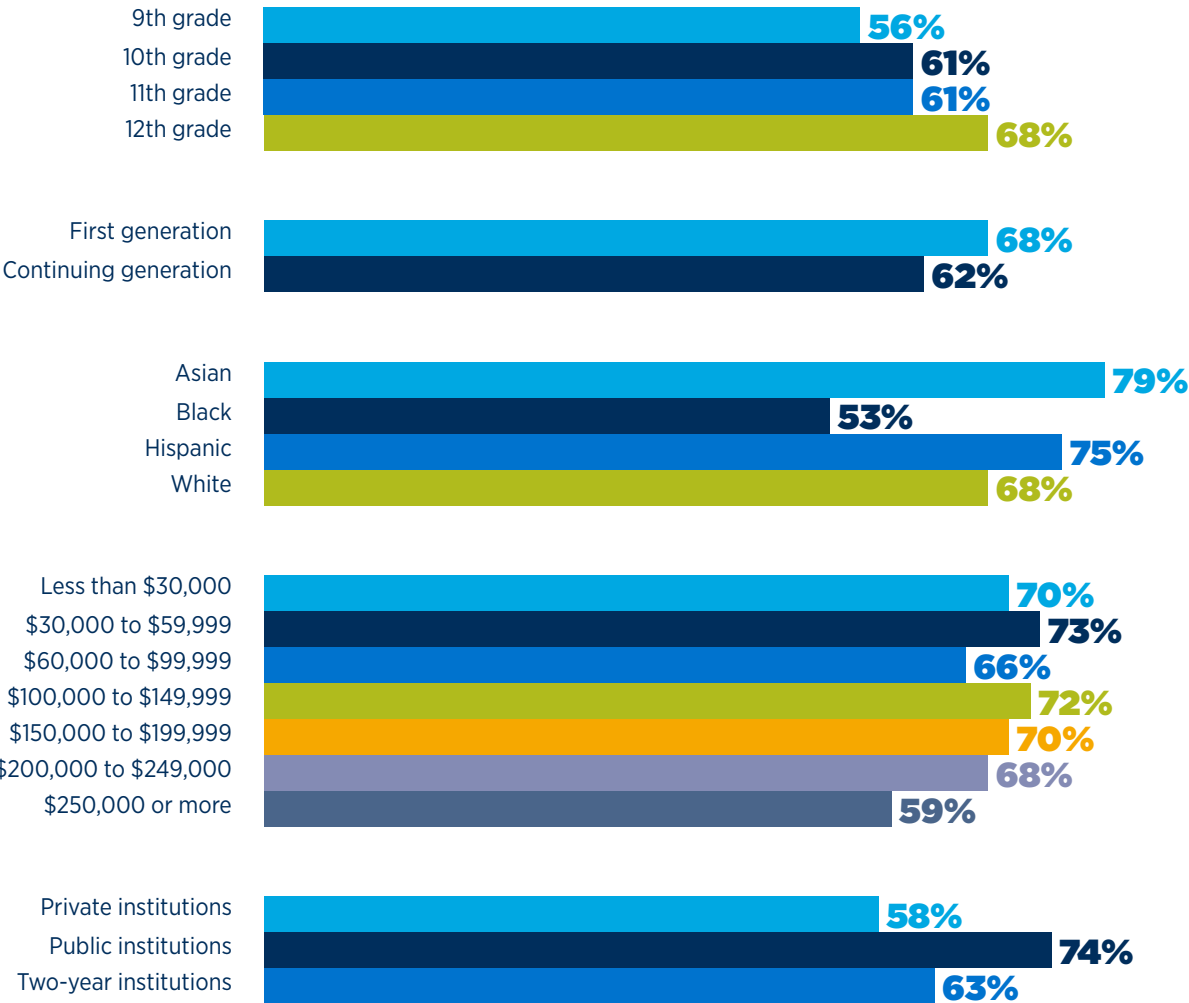
Family income:

Across income levels, most prospective families report ruling out institutions based on the sticker price, highlighting the power of initial cost perceptions in the college search process. However, the rates vary by income. Lower-income families (<\$30,000) and the highest-income families (\$250,000+) show the highest and lowest rates of sticker-price-based eliminations, respectively.

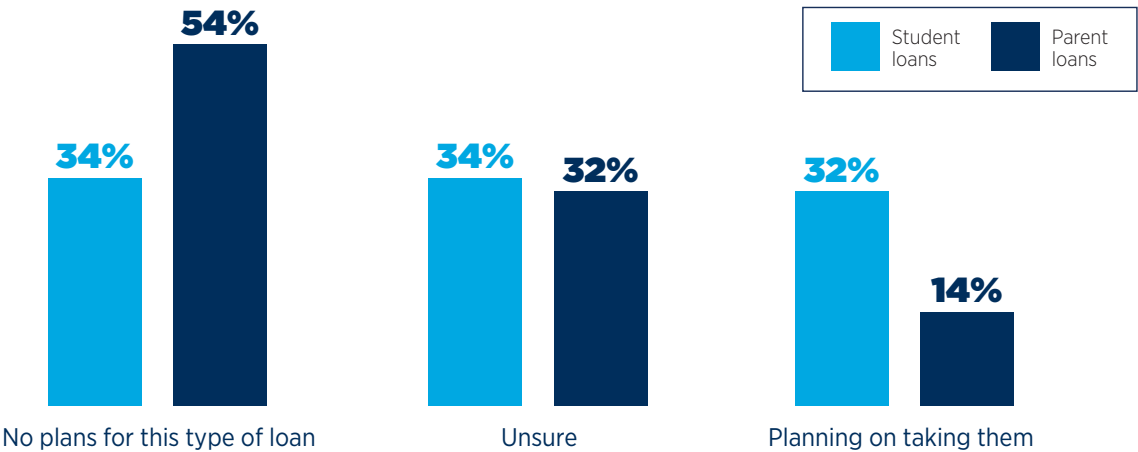
Type of institution:

Prospective families interested in public institutions are the most likely to rule out colleges based solely on the sticker price (74%), highlighting the potentially greater cost sensitivity among those considering these institutions. Comparatively, most families interested in private colleges (58%) and 2-year colleges (63%) have also ruled out options based on the sticker price.

Ruled out institutions based on the sticker price



Families' plans for college loans



Key Findings

- Many prospective families are unsure about their plans for student and parent loans.
- Compared to parent loans, twice as many families plan on taking out student loans or are open to considering them in the future.
- Over half of families have no plans for parent loans.

Variations in Plans for College Loans

Grade level:

Overall, the trend across grade levels indicates a progression from initial uncertainty to growing consideration of all options and, finally, a focus on student loans while avoiding parental debt as college becomes imminent.

First-generation status:

First-generation families are more likely to plan for student loans (**39%**) and parent loans (**36%**) than continuing-generation families.

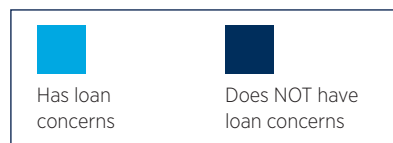
Ethnicity:

Asian families are the most likely to have no plans for student loans (**38%**), while Black and Hispanic families are the most likely to be planning for student loans (**37%**). Asian, Black, and Hispanic families are more likely to be planning for parent loans (**32%** of all three ethnicities). Compared to **55%** of White families planning on no parent loans.

Family income:

Highest-income families (earning \$250,000 or more) are the most likely to have no plans for both student loans (**55%**) and parent loans (**71%**). Conversely, lower-income families (earning less than \$30,000) are more likely to plan for parent loans (**34%**).

Borrowing concerns



Key Findings

Nearly 7 in 10 prospective families express concerns about borrowing for college, highlighting the widespread anxiety and uncertainty surrounding educational debt.

Variations in Loan Concerns

Grade level:

Concerns about borrowing increase as students progress through high school, with 71% of 12th-grade families expressing concern. This suggests that financial aid counseling and communication should be tailored by grade level, addressing families' evolving questions and concerns as they progress through the college planning process.

First-generation status:

Both first-generation (68%) and continuing-generation (69%) college families express high concerns about borrowing, highlighting that anxiety about educational debt is widespread across different socioeconomic backgrounds.

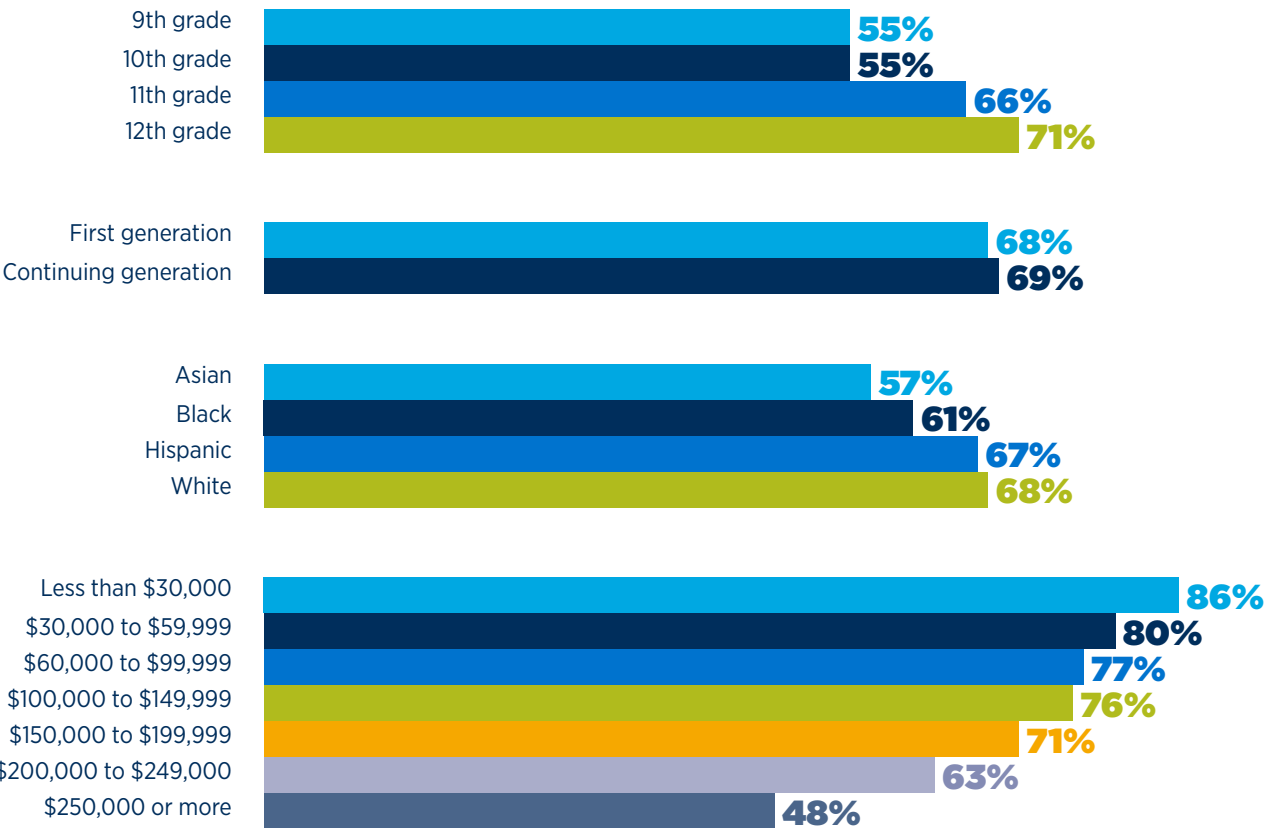
Ethnicity:

While the majority of families across all ethnic groups express concerns about loans to finance college, Hispanic (67%) and White (68%) families express the highest levels of concern, and Asian families (57%) the lowest.

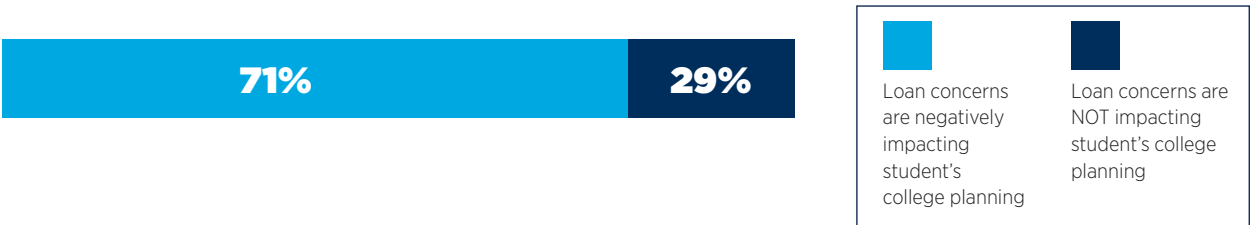
Family income:

There is a clear inverse relationship between family income and concerns about borrowing for college. Lower-income families (those earning less than \$30,000) express the highest level of concern (86%), while higher-income families (those earning \$250,000 or more) express the lowest level (48%).

Families who have loan concerns



Loan concerns negatively impacting college planning



Key Findings

Nearly three-quarters of prospective families report that concerns about borrowing negatively impact their student’s college planning. This is a clear sign that fears about educational debt are a major consideration and potential barrier to the college decision-making process.

Variations in Loan Concerns Impacting College Planning

Grade level:

The negative impact of borrowing peaks in 10th grade (76%), underscoring the need for early, proactive financial aid education and counseling.

First-generation status:

Both first-generation (75%) and continuing-generation (70%) college families report a significant negative impact from borrowing concerns.

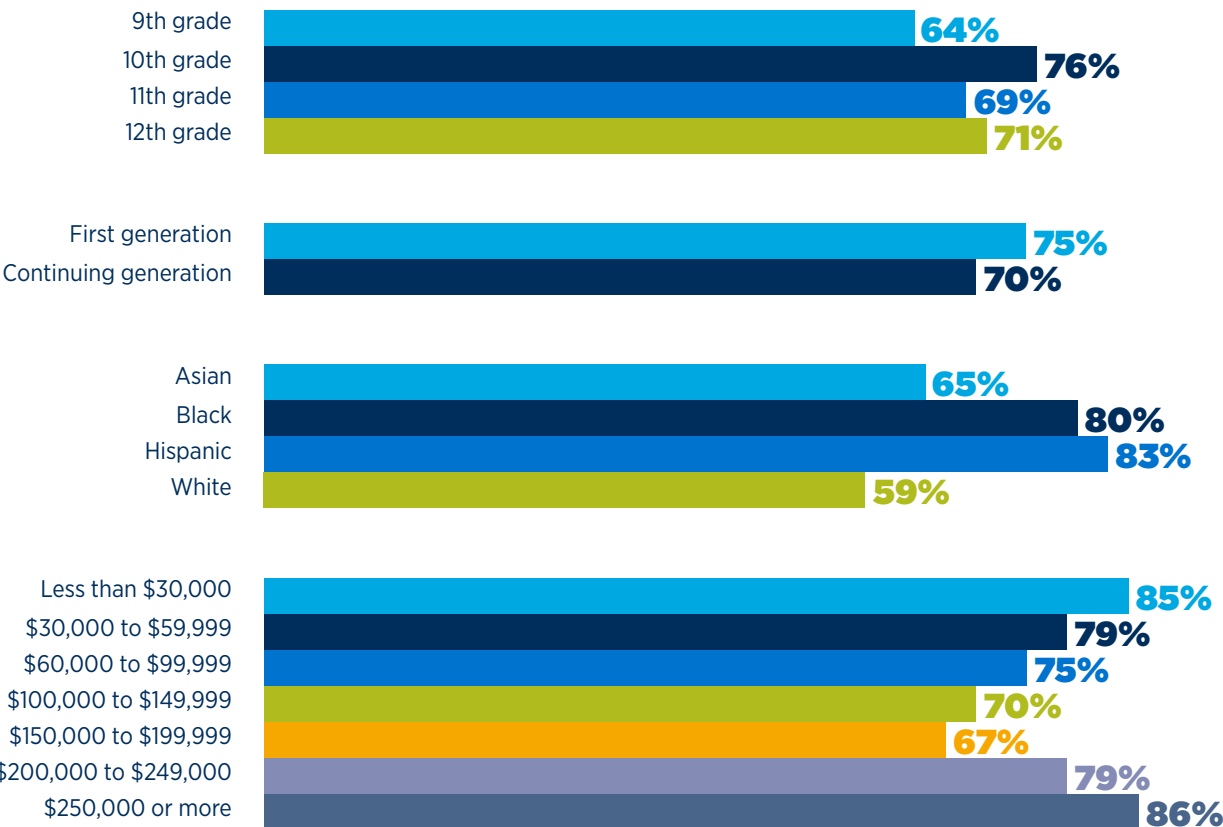
Ethnicity:

Prospective families across all ethnic groups report that concerns about borrowing are negatively impacting their college planning. Hispanic families (83%) and Black families (80%) express the highest levels of concern.

Family income:

Families with the lowest (<\$30,000 a year) and highest incomes (>\$250,000) report nearly identical levels (85% and 86%, respectively) of loan concerns negatively impacting their students' college planning, likely because the lowest family earners are entirely overwhelmed by sticker prices and the highest earning families suspect their incomes will render their student ineligible for loans.

Families whose loan concerns are impacting their students' college planning negatively



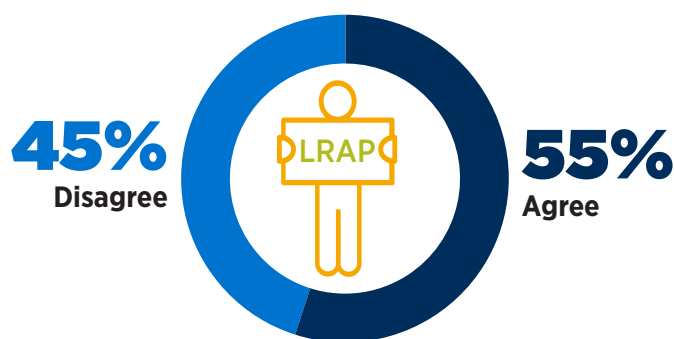
LRAP impact

Some colleges offer families a Loan Repayment Assistance Program (an LRAP) to help cover the cost of repaying student and parent loans. The program provides a safety net for graduates whose income may not allow them to cover the cost of repaying their loans. The amount of assistance varies based on the student's income after graduation (typically, incomes less than \$50,000 qualify).

In this year's survey, we asked respondents: "Please indicate your level of agreement with this statement":

"Being offered a Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) would impact where my student decides to enroll."

Over half of prospective families (55%) agree that being offered a Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) would influence their student's college enrollment decision. This suggests that the promise of post-graduation loan support is a significant factor in the college choice.



Variations in LRAP Impact

Grade level:

Tenth-grade families express the highest agreement (59%) that LRAPs would influence their student's college choice.

First-generation status:

A significantly higher percentage of first-generation college families (66%) agree that being offered a LRAP would influence their student's college enrollment decision compared to (50%) of continuing-generation families.

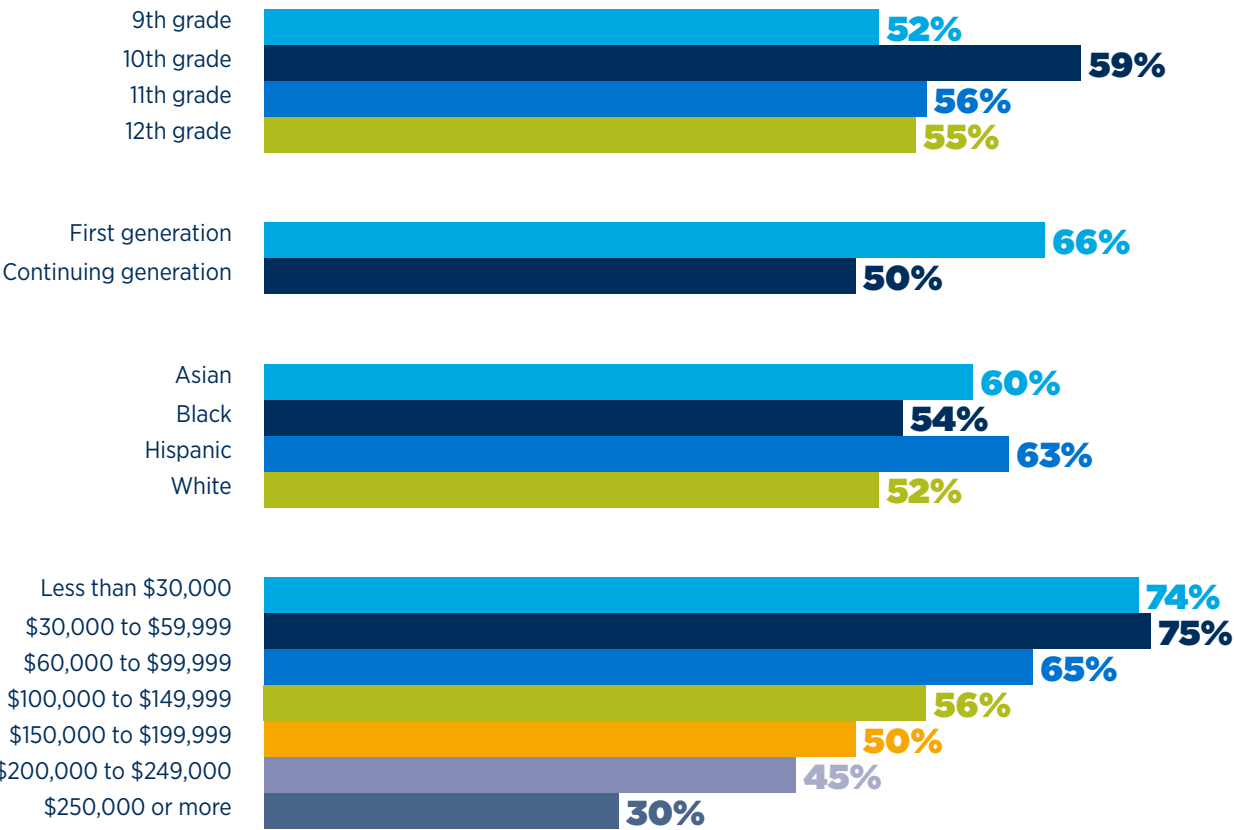
Ethnicity:

Notably, Hispanic families express the highest agreement (63%) that LRAPs would influence their student's college choice.

Family income:

Families with lower incomes place significantly greater value on LRAPs in the college decision process. Those earning less than \$59,999 express the highest agreement, 75%, respectively, that LRAPs would influence their student's enrollment decisions. Conversely, as family income increases, the appeal of LRAPs diminishes, with only 30% of families earning \$250,000 or more agreeing that LRAPs would impact where their student decides to enroll.

Families who agree being offered an LRAP would impact their student’s enrollment



Impact of LRAP

66%

interested in receiving such a program as part of my student’s financial aid package

63%

all other things being equal, we would favor an institution that offered our family this program (an LRAP)

Key Findings

Two-thirds of prospective college families express significant interest in Loan Repayment Assistance Programs (LRAPs) as part of their student’s financial aid package.

The appeal of LRAPs extends to the college decision process itself, with 63% of families agreeing that with all other things being equal, they would favor an institution offering an LRAP.

Variations in the Impact of LRAP

Grade level:

While 60% of 9th-grade families express interest in LRAPs, this increases to 68% among 12th-grade families. This suggests that as the reality of college costs and financing becomes more imminent, the appeal of post-graduation loan support grows.

The influence of LRAPs on the college decision process also evolves across the high school years. Interest in institutions offering an LRAP peak in 10th grade, with 64% agreeing they would favor an institution offering an LRAP, compared to 57% of 9th-grade families and 63% of 12th-grade families.

First-generation status:

First-generation college families are even more interested in LRAPs than continuing-generation families. A full 75% of first-generation families agree they would be interested in receiving an LRAP as part of their student’s financial aid package, versus 63% of continuing-generation families.

Ethnicity:

Prospective Hispanic families (68%) and Black families (63%) express the highest levels of interest in LRAPs compared to 66% of White families and 61% of Asian families. This suggests that the promise of post-graduation loan support holds appeal for Hispanic and Black students, who indicate higher anxiety levels regarding educational debt.

GRADE LEVEL	AGREE
I would be interested in receiving such a program as part of my student’s financial aid package	
9th grade	60%
10th grade	62%
11th grade	63%
12th grade	68%
All other things being equal, we would favor an institution that offered our family this program (an LRAP)	
9th grade	57%
10th grade	64%
11th grade	62%
12th grade	63%

FIRST-GENERATION STATUS	AGREE
I would be interested in receiving such a program as part of my student’s financial aid package	
First generation	75%
Continuing generation	63%
All other things being equal, we would favor an institution that offered our family this program (an LRAP)	
First generation	71%
Continuing generation	60%

ETHNICITY	AGREE
I would be interested in receiving such a program as part of my student's financial aid package	
Black	63%
Asian	61%
Hispanic	68%
White	66%
All other things being equal, we would favor an institution that offered our family this program (an LRAP)	
Black	67%
Asian	60%
Hispanic	69%
White	61%

FAMILY INCOME	AGREE
I would be interested in receiving such a program as part of my student's financial aid package	
Less than \$30,000	83%
\$30,000 to \$59,999	77%
\$60,000 to \$99,999	73%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	70%
\$150,000 to 199,999	64%
\$200,000 to \$249,000	62%
\$250,000 or more	46%
All other things being equal, we would favor an institution that offered our family this program (an LRAP)	
Less than \$30,000	82%
\$30,000 to \$59,999	76%
\$60,000 to \$99,999	70%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	65%
\$150,000 to 199,999	59%
\$200,000 to \$249,000	54%
\$250,000 or more	44%

Implications

Lead with the value proposition. Highlight graduates' earning power and career development as well as metrics regarding social mobility and graduate stories of how their degree changed the trajectory of their family's generational wealth.

Provide tuition calculators and examples of financial aid awards to clarify actual costs. Help families understand exactly how much they will pay. Rather than breaking costs down by institutional line-items, help families understand what the likely semester or annual costs will be so they can understand costs in the context of their regular family expenses.

Equip parents and students with clear knowledge about the dynamics of debt. The data shows that although parents are wary of assuming parental loans, many—particularly BIPOC, first-generation, and low-income parents—do plan to assume parental debt alongside student loans. Offer personalized counseling to these families to help everyone in the family understand their accountability for the loans they undertake.

Explore innovative models of helping families make financing decisions. A significant majority of all prospective families—particularly Black, Hispanic, first-generation, and lower-income families are intrigued by models like the Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) as it lowers the threshold of fear at the prospect repaying back loans if the graduate's income isn't enough.

Continue to present evidence of the value proposition beyond matriculation. Although it's tempting to think families are comfortable with their college decision, institutions should take every opportunity with parents of current students and alumni to illustrate the value of the educational experience and versatility and prestige of the degree. This will not only continue to reassure nervous families but also build brand equity as you convert them to brand ambassadors.

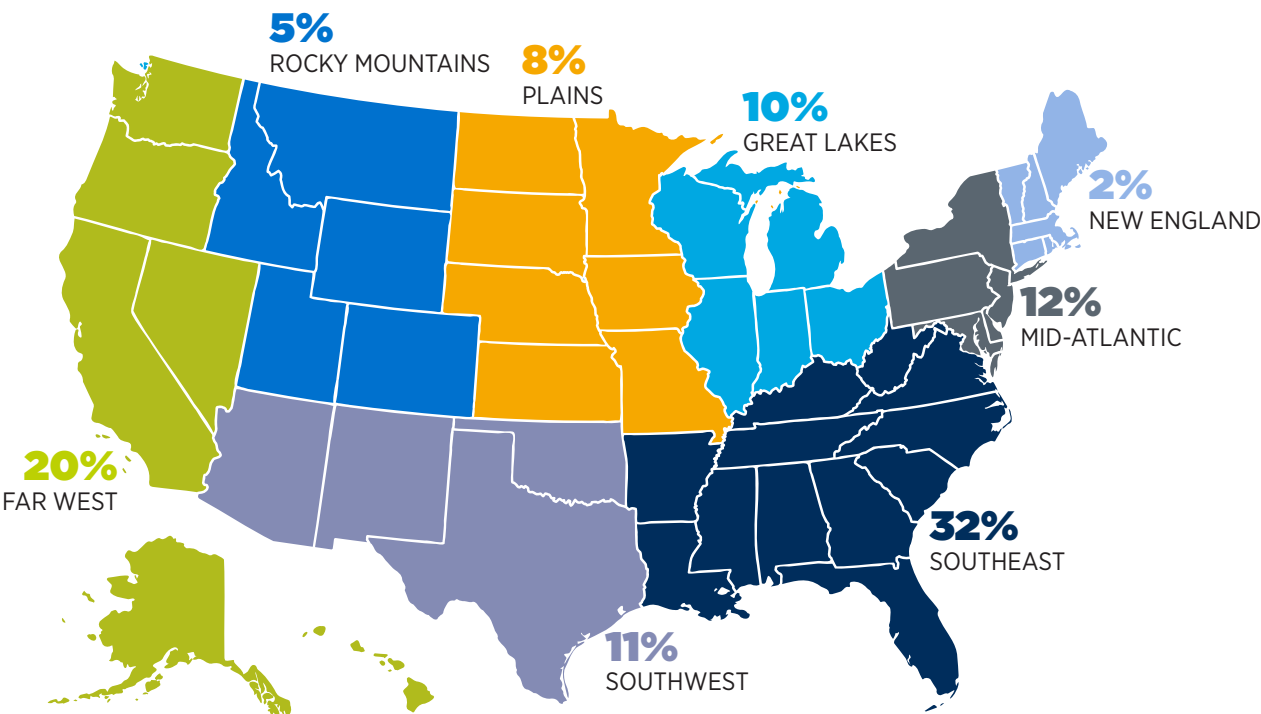


About Our Study

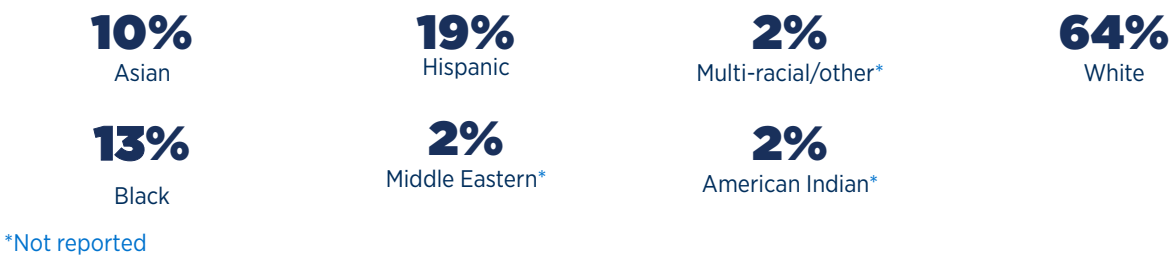
11,309 completed responses

Participating institutions demographics

83 participating institutions. Percent indicates the percent of all responses.



Family demographics



Family income



Students' high school graduation year

3%

9th (graduating
class of 2027)

5%

10th (graduating
class of 2026)

11%

11th (graduating
class of 2025)

81%

12th (graduating
class of 2024)

First-generation status

66%

Continuing generation

32%

First generation

Type of institution

35%

Private institutions

50%

Public institutions

15%

Two-year institutions

Size of institution (from IPEDS, total undergraduate size)

34%

<5,000

28%

5,001-9,999

10%

10,000-19,999

28%

>20,000

Participation in this study is free and open to all institutions, regardless of their client status with any of its sponsors. Participating institutions receive a summary of their results if they receive a minimum of 150 completed responses.

If you are interested in participating in the 2025 study, scan this QR code by December 1, 2024, or contact Raquel.Bermejo@RuffaloNL.com



About the Study Sponsors



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