How Digital Engagement Shapes the Way High School Juniors and Seniors Choose a College
INTRODUCTION

There’s a high school student who is a great fit for your institution. She’s interested in one of your strongest academic offerings, would mesh with your campus culture, and is a good student who will qualify for scholarships. As she conducts her college search—on her phone and her laptop—she visits web pages, reads emails from your campus, and checks out your social media accounts.

Yet she never really engages with your institution and enrolls elsewhere. Why? Because your digital presence didn’t meet her expectations.

Here is the reality for colleges and universities: students can find out about any campus at any time with a few words in a search box. They have multiple paths to learn about an institution. They have growing expectations of personalization and gathering information on their own terms in whichever sequence they choose. This means campuses have to be prepared to meet these expectations regardless of how or when students gather information. It requires a robust digital presence where all of those pieces are aligned and focused on delivering a dynamic, engaging experience to students.

The 2018 E-Expectations Trend Report provides you with insights from high school juniors and seniors so you can engage and inform them wherever they interact with your institution online. This report answers key questions such as:

1. How do students rank admissions resources you provide, from most valuable to least?
2. What keeps students engaged with your website, and what will undermine their experience?
3. How do students want to connect with your campus?
4. Which social media platforms matter, and how do preferences differ for juniors and seniors?
5. What do students look for first when they visit your website?

The findings are also categorized by juniors and seniors to show how their needs and expectations evolve during the search process. These key insights align with recommended action steps colleges must take to attract students who are the best fit.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

These results come from a survey of 529 high school juniors and seniors conducted in spring 2018. The survey has a confidence level of 95 percent with a +/- margin of error of 4 percent.
SUPPORTING THEIR RESEARCH

INFORMATION RESOURCES

Which resources matter most to prospective students?

“I want easy-to-find campus tour dates and program information.”

Throughout this report, we share additional comments from student respondents.

When students conduct their college searches, which resources do they find the most useful? Students were asked to rank the importance of information resources from most valuable to least.

MOST INFLUENTIAL INFORMATION RESOURCES (Scale of 1–5, with 5 being the most influential)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Juniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WEBSITE FOR SCHOOL</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALCULATOR RESULTS</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMAIL FROM A SCHOOL</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRINTED BROCHURES ABOUT THE SCHOOL</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHONE CALLS FROM ADMISSIONS COUNSELORS</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLEGE PLANNING WEBSITE ENTRIES FOR SPECIFIC SCHOOLS</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEXTS FROM ADMISSIONS COUNSELORS</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIDEOS</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIRTUAL REALITY (VR) VIDEOS</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIRTUAL TOURS</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAGAZINE RANKINGS</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 KEY FACTS:

• Both juniors and seniors still value traditional email, print, and phone resources.
• College planning websites are more important to juniors than seniors.
• Cost calculators are critical tools that students use to estimate aid and expense.
• Virtual tours ranked ahead of virtual reality (VR) videos.
• Video has pulled ahead of print for seniors compared to the 2017 E-Expectations study.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

THE COLLEGE WEBSITE IS EVERYTHING
College websites continue to be the top focal point of student search, which makes content and the user experience more important than ever.

CALCULATORS ARE KEY
Students said a cost calculator is a highly valuable resource, especially for seniors. Make yours easy to find and use, and provide dynamic responsive messaging to students and their parents that addresses their eligibility for aid and scholarships.

MIX IT UP
Multiple channels and a varied mix of engagement strategies are key to reach the widest possible number of students.
COST CALCULATORS

Crunching the numbers matters more than ever

“I like seeing the net price calculator, but a lot of them are ranges and never include scholarships like the more prestigious President’s or related scholarships.”

FACT: Calculator results were the most influential resource for seniors, ranking even above websites.

The cost of college is a hot-button issue that gets more intense with each annual increase. Tuition information is the first thing prospective students look for on college websites. Our study shows that juniors and seniors rank cost calculators as essential to their search. In fact, 33 percent of seniors and 35 percent of juniors have completed the cost calculator on their mobile device.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

MAKE IT QUICK AND EASY

Your cost calculator needs to get students and parents to an estimate as efficiently as possible. Pare your requests for information to the minimum needed to provide an accurate estimate. Start to show eligible aid as they enter information instead of saving the complete estimate for the end.

PERSONALIZE IT

This is a golden opportunity to build a relationship by showing students all the possible aid and scholarships they could receive. Make sure your calculator can segment by potential major, academic ability, and other student data that could expand their aid eligibility.

MAKE IT MOBILE FRIENDLY

Mobile responsiveness is a must for calculators, but it’s also important to include features like texting where students and parents can receive text messages with links to their results.
CAMPUS VISITS, VIRTUAL TOURS, AND VR VIDEOS
Real vs. virtual—which wins?

I want video tours of specific buildings in fields of interest such as science, English, or art.

FACT: 66 percent of seniors and 44 percent of juniors made campus visits with parents. Less than half of those viewed VR tours.

Virtual reality (VR) is getting a lot of buzz, but most students and their parents still prefer on-campus visits. Your website should encourage students to schedule a tour and make it easy to do so.

Virtual tours and VR received a thumbs up from nearly two-thirds of students who looked at them. Virtual reality is still new, but no matter how you do it, video content is a powerful influencer, prompting an actual visit or enticing an applicant to take the next step.

**Virtual tours show promise**

Though still rated behind campus visits, video tours and VR are strong motivators and can influence the decision to enroll.

### VIRTUAL TOUR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Looked at</th>
<th>Enhanced likelihood of enrolling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>54% Seniors</td>
<td>59% Seniors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41% Juniors</td>
<td>63% Juniors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### VR VIDEO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Looked at</th>
<th>Enhanced likelihood of enrolling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23% Seniors</td>
<td>56% Seniors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23% Juniors</td>
<td>60% Juniors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

**MAKE IT EASY TO FIND CAMPUS VISIT REQUESTS**

As with other important calls to action, go beyond links and use visuals to get students to sign up for campus visits. Target parents with messages about visiting campus as well.

**CONSIDER THE ROI ON VR**

Virtual tours and VR videos were rated on the lower end of the usefulness scale by students, but the majority of those who viewed them found them influential. If it is challenging to get many students to campus for a tour, investing in a virtual one may make sense.
PAID ADS
Click rates are on the rise, spurring interest in programs and offers

“ The best banner ads are creative, colorful, and interactive.”

FACT: 67 percent of seniors and 68 percent of juniors saw paid ads for colleges and universities, while 41 percent of seniors and 45 percent of juniors CLICKED on paid ads.

We’ve seen a proliferation of Google search, banners, and retargeting. This activity is creating a more level playing field for colleges and universities. Our research indicates that digital advertising can drive awareness, allow schools to feature offers, and deliver more concise messaging.

WHAT ARE THE TOP 5 SITES WHERE STUDENTS HAVE CLICKED ON COLLEGE ADS?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITE</th>
<th>SENIORS</th>
<th>JUNIORS</th>
<th>TRENDS SINCE 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google search</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>Seniors: down from 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Juniors: down from 76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other social media or blog posts</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>Seniors: up from 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>Seniors: up from 44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Juniors: down from 37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display ad on a web page</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Take an integrated approach with digital ads

Looking further into the data, students revealed additional details about the paid ads they saw:

- **40 percent of seniors and 34 percent of juniors** had visited the website for the school before seeing an ad.
- **33 percent of seniors and 36 percent of juniors** were aware of the school but had not visited the website.
- **12 percent of seniors and 26 percent of juniors** had never heard of the school before.
- **13 percent of seniors and 4 percent of juniors** planned on enrolling at the school.

These results show the importance of getting your institution in front of students in other mediums as well so that your ads will have a better chance of resonating with them.

### WHY STUDENTS CLICKED ON A PAID AD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REASON FOR CLICKING</th>
<th>SENIORS</th>
<th>JUNIORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t know about the school and I wanted to learn more</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The offer made in the ad was interesting to me</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ad reminded me that I needed to research or do something related to my enrollment</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought I might find out something new about the school</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought it might lead to a better website than I have previously experienced for the school</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### WHAT STUDENTS DID AFTER CLICKING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>SENIORS</th>
<th>JUNIORS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looked at information on a website</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filled out a form to have information sent by postal mail</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watched a video</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filled out a form to receive a PDF brochure</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered to attend an event</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Called a phone number offered in the ad</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What does this tell us?

Engagement seems to be about the same, with the notable exceptions of completing inquiry forms (down from 29 percent to 12 percent among seniors) and watching videos, which dropped from 28 percent for seniors and 31 percent for juniors in 2017.

Juniors want ads to help them find new information or provide a better website experience. Thirty percent of seniors and 44 percent of juniors would visit the main website for a school they saw in an ad, even if they didn’t click on the ad. Another 60 percent of seniors and 54 percent of juniors would do so, but only if they were already interested in the school.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

**ADS ENGAGE AND BUILD YOUR BRAND**

With 4 out of 10 students clicking on paid ads, they are an important opportunity to engage with prospects and build your pool. In addition, 30 percent of seniors and 44 percent of juniors would visit a campus website if they saw an ad but didn’t click on it, showing ads are also important for building brand awareness.

**ADJUST AS STUDENTS ADVANCE**

As students move through the enrollment process, have your ads adjust with them. Seniors and juniors will have different objectives and will respond better to messages addressed to where they are.

**MULTICHANNEL MATTERS**

Only 12 percent of seniors and 26 percent of juniors clicked on ads for institutions they didn’t know. Digital is an effective, trackable medium, but it works best in conjunction with a strategically aligned multichannel approach.

**IMPROVING ENGAGEMENT REQUEST-FOR-INFORMATION (RFI) FORMS**

Keep forms short and your responses engaging

“Getting back to me quickly is important.”

Nothing turns off a potential student faster than a hard-to-navigate site or forms that take forever to fill out. The admissions process continues to become more complex each year as millions of students compete for entry into colleges around the globe. Colleges may love the brand attention, but can lose great applicants when students find the process frustrating.
What are the best practices for RFI forms?

**SHORTER IS SWEETER**

50% of seniors and 41% of juniors have abandoned a form because of how much information was required.

**GET SMART ABOUT SMARTPHONES**

75% of juniors and seniors said they would provide cell phone numbers.

**BE MOBILE FRIENDLY**

37% of seniors and 33% of juniors completed RFIs on mobile devices.

**RFI follow-up**

The top 3 ways students prefer RFI responses are:

1. EMAIL
2. MAIL/PRINT
3. TEXT

Note: One-third of juniors and seniors preferred to stay on the site and be directed through the admissions process.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

**SHOW IT**

Make your RFI forms visible throughout the site—a link is not enough. Remember that this is the opportunity to start a relationship with a prospective student.

**DON’T JUST RESPOND. ENGAGE.**

When a student visits and completes an RFI form, move beyond a response or communications flow to dynamic engagement that opens up multiple pathways guiding students on their journey to enrollment. Their response is your opportunity to begin a one-on-one dialogue and deliver content that shows your campus has what they need and is their best choice for college.

**AVOID TMI**

Students say they are turned off if you ask for too much information. Don’t ask for any information you really do not need to keep communicating with them.
COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

Illuminate the path

“Give me very detailed instructions on how to apply and all the follow-up steps to enrollment so that I know exactly what to do next.”

FACT: Nearly half of seniors expected a “how to apply” guide to accompany online applications. The number was even higher for juniors.

The Common Application dramatically changed how students apply to college, making it easier than ever for them to apply to multiple colleges. In addition, nearly one-quarter of seniors completed applications on mobile devices, which raises further questions about mobile responsiveness, readability on smaller screens, and application length.

When and how do seniors submit applications for college?

98% of seniors have completed applications for enrollment.

20% of seniors say parents fill out their application forms.

23% of seniors apply via mobile device.

8% of seniors report they are required to submit a video.

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Notify me

HERE IS WHAT STUDENTS TOLD US ABOUT THE KIND OF TEXT OR SOCIAL APP MESSAGES THEY’D LIKE TO SEE REGARDING APPLICATIONS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACCEPTANCE NOTIFICATION</th>
<th>APPLICATION DETAILS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEADLINE REMINDERS</th>
<th>REJECTION NOTIFICATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Seniors           | 41%                    |
| Juniors           | 50%                    |
KEY TAKEAWAYS

START WITH “HOW-TO” INFORMATION
Applicants prefer to see guidelines for the application process before filling them out.

HAVE APPROPRIATE NEXT STEPS
Juniors may not be ready for a massive amount of information early in their search process, while most seniors will want to move toward applying and enrolling.

ACCOMMODATE TEXTERS
Include the option for text notices in the application process, especially for upcoming deadlines.

ENGAGE PARENTS, TOO
Not only did 1 in 5 seniors say their parents complete their applications, but 70 percent of seniors and 52 percent of juniors said their parents supported their college research process through activities such as:

- Looking at college websites
- Attending campus visit programs
- Talking with family and friends
- Reading brochures and mail from colleges

SOCIAL MEDIA

Students turn to visual platforms to learn about #StudentLife

“Social media is a good place to find out about a college’s culture and how to adapt to it.”

Gen Z students have grown up in a social media culture. Pew Research has found that younger Americans embrace a variety of platforms that they visit multiple times on a daily basis.1

However, when it comes to college research, students do not view social media as a top resource the way they do websites or email. Instead, students value social media as a way to see what it will be like to be a student at a campus. They therefore gravitate toward more visual social media channels to tap into those student experiences and campus life.

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**WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR INFORMATION ON COLLEGES?**

- **Instagram**
  - 36% of seniors
  - 42% of juniors
  - Trend: ↑ from 29% among seniors and 28% among juniors

- **Twitter**
  - 19% of seniors
  - 19% of juniors
  - Trend: ↔

- **YouTube**
  - 39% of seniors
  - 37% of juniors
  - Trend: ↔

- **Facebook**
  - 32% of seniors
  - 31% of juniors
  - Trend: ↓ 46% of seniors and 39% of juniors said Facebook was best for college research last year

- **Snapchat**
  - 16% of seniors
  - 14% of juniors
  - Trend: ↓ Down from 12% among seniors in 2017

- **No social media**
  - 7% of seniors
  - 12% of juniors
  - Trend: ↔

**Follow a college Twitter feed:**
56% seniors (up from 49% in 2017), 28% juniors (down from 45%)

**Visited a college Facebook page:**
67% seniors, 49% juniors

**Liked a college Facebook page:**
67% seniors, 61% juniors
TOP 7 TOPICS STUDENTS LOOK FOR ON SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

1. What social life is like on campus (64% seniors, 66% juniors)
2. What it’s like to live in the dorms (60% seniors, 64% juniors)
3. What it will be like to be in classes (57% seniors, 64% juniors)
4. What qualifications I need to have to be accepted (45% seniors, 62% juniors)
5. What internships might be a part of my academic program (49% seniors, 58% juniors)
6. How I’ll pay for college (54% seniors, 58% juniors)
7. What I need to do to apply (45% seniors, 57% juniors)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

FACEBOOK STUMBELED IN 2018
The number of students using Facebook declined significantly—20 percent between 2017 and 2018. It also continues an existing downward trend. Given that two-thirds of students said they visited a college Facebook page, the channel is still important. But it is more important than ever to use Facebook as a way to engage students and cultivate their interest in your institution. Go beyond simple “likes” to present information they will value and trust.

A PICTURE SAYS A THOUSAND WORDS
Communication among Gen Z is increasingly visual, and presenting information on campus life and culture should be done visually. Instagram and YouTube are ideally suited for this, but you can also use Facebook and Twitter to deliver images and video as well. Don’t forget parents when coming up with visual content, as they are highly likely to be viewing your social media, too.
EMAIL

The inbox remains a tried and true way to get their attention

"I look for the humanistic features in the email text. Not a carbon copy of a message every time, but where the dean may have shared a small personal story about his life or something that feels humanistic."

Social media may be “cooler,” but email still rules when it comes time to connect with a student. Despite many predictions of its demise, the 2018 E-Expectations study shows email continues to thrive in student search.

Make sure your emails look great on any screen

Nearly three-quarters of seniors and two-thirds of juniors checked email daily on their mobile devices. Emails need to be responsive for computer screens, smartphones, and tablets.

Email insights

- Email is the third most influential way to communicate for both seniors and juniors.
- Nearly all students use email at least once a week.
- Almost half of juniors and seniors said they get to college websites via email links.

Why will students open an email from an institution?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Juniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curious to learn more about the school</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in enrolling at the school</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A great subject line</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opened messages from school before and found them useful</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s name appeared in subject line</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents encouraged student to open email from the school</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY TAKEAWAYS

YOU’VE (STILL) GOT MAIL

Email has consistently remained a trusted medium that most students will open.

PLAY TO THE SEARCHER

Juniors are in pioneer mode and are open to email from a wide range of schools.

TEST SUBJECT LINES

Half of respondents noted the importance of subject lines in opening an email, so test different messages to find the right subjects for your audience.

TRANSFORM EMAIL INTO A PERSONALIZED JOURNEY

Email is one of the best ways to get a student’s attention and guide them on their journey toward enrollment—if the emails feel personal and relevant to what the student has already revealed to an institution. When combined with advanced techniques, such as engagement scoring or behavior analytics, an email flow can become a relevant, dynamic experience for that student.
TEXTING

Best uses of this popular channel

“I think sending out text messages is more efficient since people are always on their phone and they are more likely to see it.”

All young people text. True for the most part, but what’s the best way for a college or university to use it? Here’s what juniors and seniors had to say.

The topline on texting

- More than three-quarters of seniors and juniors were open to some form of text communication with colleges and universities.
- Nearly half of seniors and 44 percent of juniors said they would welcome text messages from a school of interest on their mobile device. One-quarter of seniors and one-third of juniors were comfortable receiving messages on apps such as Snapchat or Facebook Messenger.

WHAT TYPES OF TEXT MESSAGES DO STUDENTS FIND INTERESTING?

- Acceptance notification (68% seniors, 83% juniors)
- Deadline reminders (73% seniors, 75% juniors)
- Details about my application, such as missing documents or status (69% seniors, 74% juniors)
- Rejection notification (46% seniors, 62% juniors)
- General information about academic programs/majors (38% seniors, 49% juniors)
- Check-ins from my admissions representative (41% seniors, 42% juniors)
- Photos or videos showing campus life (22% seniors, 29% juniors)
- Links to website content (18% seniors, 23% juniors)
- Links to social media posts (46% seniors, 62% juniors)
- Webinar or live chat invitations (11% seniors, 15% juniors)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

CLOSE THE GAP

More students said they are open to receiving text messages (nearly 80 percent) than are actually getting them (41 percent of seniors and 66 percent of juniors). Colleges need to catch up and use texting more frequently.

MAKE IT PERSONAL, MAKE IT RELEVANT

Address the candidate by name and send reminders, confirmations, deadlines, and check-ins with admissions counselors.
ENGAGING YOUR WEBSITE

SEARCH AND CONTENT

How students find you and what they look for on your site

On a college website, I want to understand why the majority of people go there to study, the financial aid they offer, and what kind of success students have after graduating.

In an increasingly competitive educational environment, and with the sheer cost of a good education, students are increasingly discerning and savvy as they hunt for more information about colleges. They want to know differentiating points: special programs, internship opportunities, and most importantly, the availability of funding and scholarships. The more your website features these hot buttons, the more you’ll engage your audience.

FACT: Nearly 9 out of 10 juniors and seniors found colleges through web search. Other sources included:

- URL (48% seniors, 33% juniors)
- Link from email (48% both)
- From print (22% both)
- Social media site (nearly 20% combined)

Juniors in this study showed more interest in major-related searches and location than seniors in 2018 or juniors from the 2017 study.

SEARCH TERMS STUDENTS USE TO FIND YOUR WEBSITE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the School</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Juniors</th>
<th>Name of a Specific Major or Academic Program and Location</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Juniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td></td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of the School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Name of the School and a Major or Academic Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of a Specific Major or Academic Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School Location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TOP 10 REASONS CANDIDATES SEARCH YOUR WEBSITE

1. Cost/tuition information (88% seniors, 82% juniors)
2. Scholarship opportunities (72% seniors, 77% juniors)
3. Academic programs/degrees (67% seniors, 77% juniors)
4. Financial aid (59% seniors, 55% juniors)
5. How to apply (47% seniors, 57% juniors)
6. Student life (42% seniors, 53% juniors)
7. Dorm accommodations (44% seniors, 47% juniors)
8. Overview of campus life (38% seniors, 49% juniors)
9. Unique academic programs (37% seniors, 47% juniors)
10. School environment (35% seniors, 39% juniors)

TOP 10 ELEMENTS THAT APPEAL TO STUDENTS ON YOUR SITE

1. Easy-to-see programs/degrees (42% seniors, 49% juniors)
2. Academic program details (32% seniors, 40% juniors)
3. School type, mission, environs (26% seniors, 30% juniors)
4. Visual appeal of site (23% seniors, 22% juniors)
5. Search ranking (24% seniors, 21% juniors)
6. Reader-friendly page (27% seniors, 19% juniors)
7. Site navigation tools (16% seniors, 18% juniors)
8. Photos of faculty, students, campus (16% seniors, 14% juniors)
9. Clear application directions (24% seniors, 13% juniors)
10. Virtual tours (15% seniors, 13% juniors)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

JUNIOR VS. SENIOR—KNOW THE NUANCES

While both focus on cost, aid, and scholarships, juniors are more likely to focus on majors and campus life.

SEO LEADS THE WAY

Be search savvy so that applicants can easily find their way to academic programs, key faculty, athletics, on- and off-campus living, and important pages such as:

- Admissions
- Financial aid, scholarship, and tuition
- Application form and guide
- Contact info for admissions counselors

ENCOURAGE ACTION

Use value propositions, calls to action, live links, RFI forms, and contact information for admissions counselors.
WEBSITE USABILITY

Make your website navigation smooth sailing

“If their user interface was easy to access and use, I may consider doing more exploring.”

If your website is too hard to use, you lose—students’ interest, their time, your credibility, and their enrollment. Our research uncovered key areas of frustration as well as things students prefer, such as limited text, easy links, lots of enticing imagery, and searchability.

HOW DO STUDENTS NAVIGATE AROUND A COLLEGE WEBSITE?

- Website links (40% seniors, 44% juniors)
- Google (28% seniors, 27% juniors)
- Search tool on website (20% seniors, 14% juniors)
- Links from college planning sites (2% seniors, 6% juniors)
- Links from emails (9% seniors, 10% juniors)
- Google (28% seniors, 27% juniors)

FACTS:

- Compared to 2017, use of website links doubled from 20 percent for seniors and 22 percent for juniors
- Students prefer onsite navigation tools over general search
- More than a third of students are frustrated when the links don’t make sense

What makes for a frustrating college website?

- Not enough information
  - Seniors 68%
  - Juniors 65%
- Too much content
  - Seniors 34%
  - Juniors 41%
- Link options confusing
  - Seniors 44%
  - Juniors 36%
- Photos not unique
  - Seniors 36%
  - Juniors 32%
- Too few photos
  - Seniors 24%
  - Juniors 31%
- Site not mobile friendly
  - Seniors 38%
  - Juniors 35%
- Doesn’t communicate people or place
  - Seniors 29%
  - Juniors 30%
- Over-designed
  - Seniors 27%
  - Juniors 27%
- Forms don’t work
  - Seniors 28%
  - Juniors 24%
- Videos too long/boring
  - Seniors 17%
  - Juniors 17%
What action do students take when frustrated by a college website?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Juniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look on other sites</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remove school from consideration</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep trying</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask a parent/counselor</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call the school</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY TAKEAWAYS

USABILITY OR LOSEABILITY
Make the user experience a priority: a bad experience will cause 1 in 3 students to go elsewhere and 1 in 10 to drop a campus from consideration.

STUDY THE NUMBERS
Question your assumptions: look at your site’s analytics and talk to your users.

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF
Set small improvement goals based on study findings. Then implement, measure, repeat.

MOBILE DEVICES
Nearly half of today’s college-bound students prefer mobile

“Schools should make sure their websites are compatible with mobile—and that all the links work on mobile devices.”

FACTS:

- 83 percent of seniors and juniors have a smartphone
- Seniors: 41 percent do “nearly all web browsing” on a mobile device
- Juniors: 47 percent do “nearly all web browsing” on a mobile device
WHAT FORMS DO STUDENTS COMPLETE ON A MOBILE DEVICE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Juniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost calculator</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship calculator</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request information</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter mailing list</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus visit scheduler</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open house registration</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live chat tool</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class registration</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions application</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinar or online event registration</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not complete forms on mobile device</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WHEN DO STUDENTS PREFER DESKTOP/LAPTOP OVER MOBILE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
<th>Juniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To search the website for specific information</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To compare majors/programs</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To compare college websites</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To complete a form for more information</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To bookmark specific pages</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To complete admissions application</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To use cost calculator</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To view site with parents</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To compare residence halls</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To register for open house/visit</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To watch videos</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To view site with friends</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KEY TAKEAWAYS

CREATE CONTENT WITH DIFFERENT SCREENS IN MIND

All digital content needs to be mobile responsive, including any forms you post. However, keep in mind that even with the trend toward mobile, students prefer some content on larger laptop or desktop screens, especially when exploring detailed content like descriptions of major programs. The bottom line is to make sure your web pages and forms display well on all possible screen formats students use.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

Make your forms engaging. Have cues such as “Thank you” and “Next page” to get the student across the finish line. Use what you’re learning about applicants to spark their interest in other content about your school.
CHOOSING VIDEOS AND IMAGES

WEBSITE VIDEOS

Bring your campus to life...quickly

Show me a day in the life of a student.

Our research shows that students are drawn to video content, but there are a few caveats. Videos should be concise and engaging. Students talking about their experiences in class and content on campus life got the highest marks. By contrast, “how-to” video content on applying for admission or financial aid was not as interesting to students.

FACTS: What are students saying about college website videos?

76 percent of seniors and 57 percent of juniors watched a video.

Of those who didn’t watch:
- 72 percent of seniors and 60 percent of juniors found no value in content
- 30 percent of juniors said they aren’t that far into their college search

Most (nearly 70 percent of seniors and juniors) said they sometimes watch college videos on mobile.

How long is too long?

Here’s what juniors and seniors said:

- 6% of seniors and juniors prefer a video that is 30 seconds long.
- 6% of seniors and juniors prefer a video that is 1 minute long.
- 60% of seniors and 66% of juniors prefer a video that is 3 minutes long.
- 30% of seniors and 22% of juniors prefer a video that is 2 minutes long.

AREAS OF YOUR SITE WHERE STUDENTS LOOK FOR VIDEO CONTENT

- **Campus/student life** (58% seniors, 66% juniors)
- **Academics** (30% seniors, 44% juniors)
- **Admissions** (35% seniors, 32% juniors)
- **About** (24% seniors, 31% juniors)
- **Residence halls** (33% seniors, 29% juniors)
- **Financial aid** (25% seniors, 27% juniors)
- **Athletics** (18% seniors, 19% juniors)
- **Social media** (12% seniors, 12% juniors)
- **Alumni** (5% seniors, 3% juniors)

WHAT STUDENTS WANT TO WATCH

- **Current students’ experience** (59% seniors, 59% juniors)
- **Campus sights, sounds, environs** (55% seniors, 58% juniors)
- **Campus activities** (54% seniors, 57% juniors)
- **Residence halls** (48% seniors, 41% juniors)
- **Tour of classrooms** (39% seniors, 41% juniors)
- **Faculty on their classes** (25% seniors, 28% juniors)
- **Financial aid tutorials** (21% seniors, 28% juniors)
- **Alumni on value of their degrees** (27% seniors, 32% juniors)
- **How to apply tutorial** (14% seniors, 22% juniors)
KEY TAKEAWAYS

**KISS! (KEEP IT SHORT, SIMPLE)**
Stay under two minutes and consider front-loading the video with key information as students may stop watching within 30–60 seconds.

**STUDENT POWER**
Content featuring students speaking about campus life or engaged in activities pulls best. Also popular are views of the campus environs, classrooms, and residence halls. Faculty, alumni, and tutorials are less appealing, but should be included to round out the picture.

**SPOTLIGHT: FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**
Study insights reveal that first-generation students have less support from parents and welcome any and all communication channels available. They want more engagement. They’re willing to share their contact information, and they value what your website and Facebook pages can provide as long as it is relevant and targeted to their specific needs.

**FACT: There are key differences between first-generation (FG) and non-first-generation (NFG) students.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FG</th>
<th>NFG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents help them look at their college options</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable receiving messages from a college via text or app</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okay with filling out RFI forms</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to share cell phone number when they want information</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After completing a form, prefer to be reached by:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
KEY TAKEAWAYS

INDEPENDENT THINKERS
First-generation students have to learn more about the college process because this is new territory to their families.

RELATE TO THEIR EXPERIENCE
Make your communications easy for first-generation students to follow, but also make them relevant to their interest. Generic information flows will not engage them and push them to enroll.

YAY TEAM!
First-generation students find college-sponsored materials most helpful—this is your chance to shine!

5 BIG TAKEAWAYS FOR 2018

Taking in all of these findings, what are the bigger strategies for creating a digital presence that truly engages prospective college students and drives them toward enrollment?

1 Create layers of engagement. Multiple channels to deliver key positioning messages and encourage engagement are essential. Relying on a print piece, a web page, or an email message to get your point across is ineffective.

2 Connect all of your channels. Use integrated analytics to assess the impact of your individual campaigns on user engagement across your website and digital channels.

3 Show...and tell. Develop a content strategy that includes video and image concepts along with positioning themes. Provide high-level benefits for specific programs along with images that give users a sense of your campus, facilities, students, and faculty. Inspire students to visit with compelling videos that are less than two minutes so students remain engaged while watching them.

4 Continue to experiment with new strategies while optimizing your existing resources. If you haven’t tried paid lead generation through digital advertising or developed a communications flow that includes text messaging, develop some pilots to try out these (now) standard recruitment marketing practices.

5 Bring it all back to your website (and then drive them into your CRM). Remember that users want, need, and expect easy self-service resources from your website. Make sure that it is organized in a way that connects with these users and not your campus org chart. Infuse the site with engagement opportunities that initiate or continue engagement with users through email, social, text, and other interactive channels. Measure, adjust, repeat!
ABOUT THE SURVEY SPONSORS

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