

2018



MYTHBUSTING ENROLLMENT MARKETING

By Gil Rogers and Michael Stoner

Whatever you call them — the iGen, Gen Z, or some other catchy sobriquet — today’s teens are discriminating shoppers and skeptics. Remember that they are the first generation to have grown up with smartphones, so they’re mobile-first. To them, the phone is not just a communication device, but also a multipurpose tool that connects them to entertainment, online shopping, sports, and the all-important friend network. It’s a treasured and highly personal device.

Though education has become unbundled — there are more choices available for how to pursue education than ever before — many teens still want to attend a four-year institution and graduate with a BA or BS. In other words, they’re seeking a “traditional” college experience. And for many reasons, shopping for colleges is a particularly fraught experience for this generation of teens. They’re under pressure to select the *right* college at the *right* price (whether discounted or not) that will put them in the *right* position to get the *right* job upon graduation.

For the third study in our “Mythbusting” series, we focused on how these savvy, anxious technophiles viewed various tactics enrollment marketers from colleges and universities use to attract their attention and to reach out to them while they are researching and selecting colleges.

As before, we asked similar questions of college and university enrollment and marketing professionals, seeking to discover where there were overlaps and gaps in

what they understood about teen behavior during college search and choice.

Interestingly enough, in our two previous studies, we noticed some significant gaps in what campus admissions and marketing professionals understood about the interests and behavior of prospective teens. This year, we observed fewer gaps. As a result, our narrative focuses primarily on teen responses and highlights only the responses of professionals in which there appear to be significant gaps in understanding.

One place in which there *is* a gap is in the use of college and university rankings. Visions of families sitting around the coffee table reviewing the latest edition of *U.S. News and World Report* enter the minds of college admission and marketing professionals as they work diligently to ensure that their institution may rise in the rankings — and even 1 percentage point is considered an achievement. As recently as 2014, *Inside Higher Ed* reported that while most institutions don’t admit to cheating (2 percent of private college admissions

directors and zero percent of publics) more than nine in 10 admissions directors believe that *other* colleges submit false reports to give them an edge in the rankings process. “And only 7 percent believe that entities that produce rankings have effective systems in place to prevent such fabrication,”¹ the report said.

Touting rankings, like investing in billboards, may impress others. Faculty and alumni, for example, may take pride in their institution’s rank. However, our research indicates that teens may feel quite differently.

For the purposes of this study, we focus on *U.S. News and World Report*. This is not meant to single out one ranking positively or negatively. It is simply due to the fact that out of all of the rankings out there (including, but not limited to, Forbes, Princeton Review, Niche.com, etc.), *U.S. News* is the most well-known and is therefore the one that college professionals focus on.

In campus marketing and admissions offices, 78 percent of campus professionals believe teens use *U.S. News* rankings when researching colleges; 38 percent of teens say they used it. And when given an exhaustive list of ranking programs (the ones outlined above and others), 28 percent of students indicated either they did not use rankings — or at least did not use any of the ones we asked about. This means that while eight out of 10 professionals believe teens use rankings, the reality is that seven out of 10 teens do not.

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Link to this paper:
mstnr.me/EnrollmentMyths

¹ “More Pressure Than Ever: The 2014 Survey of College and University Admissions Directors,” *Inside Higher Ed*, insidehighered.com/news/survey/more-pressure-ever-2014-survey-college-and-university-admissions-directors

HOW TEENS VIEW DIFFERENT COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS AND HOW THOSE CHANNELS SHAPE THEIR VIEWS OF AN INSTITUTION

It's important to remember how much teens use and value their smartphones: Two-thirds of the teens who responded to our survey did so on a smartphone.

So does this mean that, given their embrace of smartphones, they are influenced *primarily* by online, digital channels and sources of information? Or is the “real,” in-person world still important to them, especially when making the all-important choice about which college to attend?

We asked teens how different channels influence their opinion of colleges during

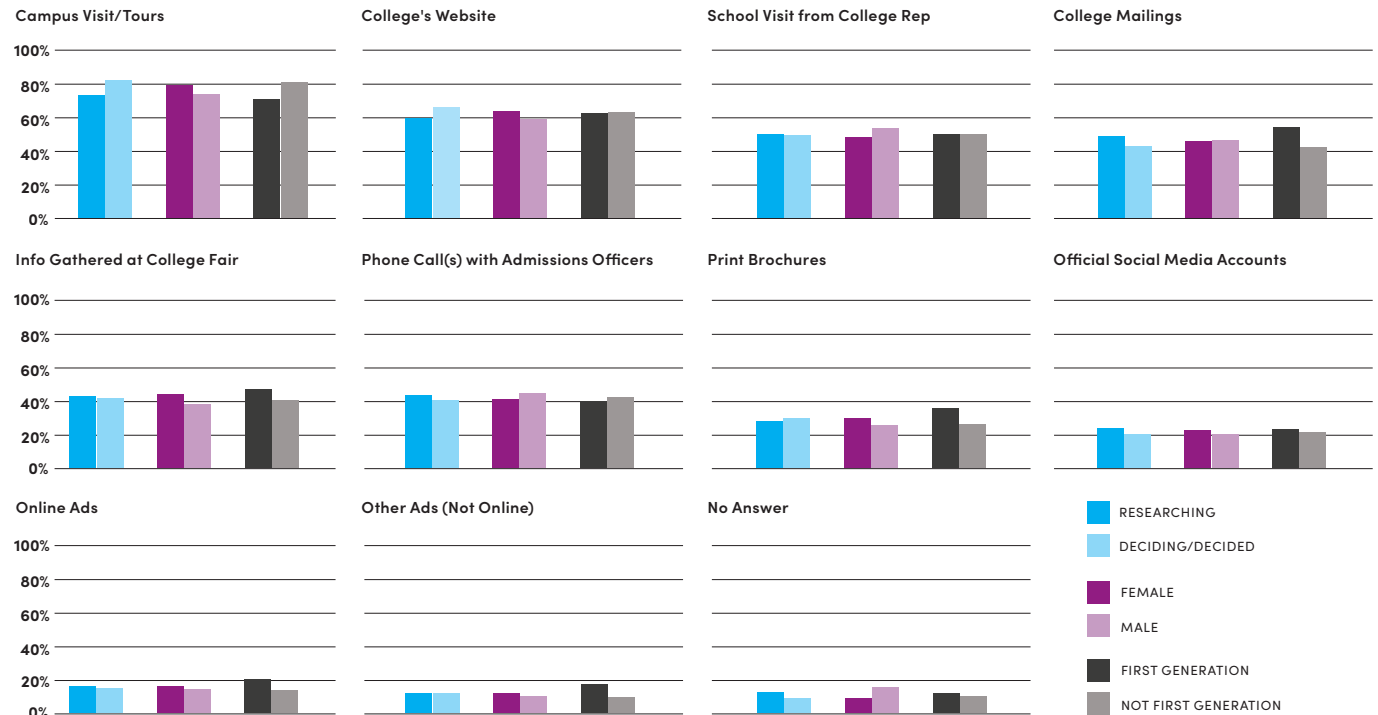
their college search and choice. (The actual question was: “To what degree does each of the following influence your opinions of a college?”) Interestingly enough, a campus visit or tour had the *most* influence on their opinion of a college (according to 78 percent), with the college’s website second at 62 percent. (The campus visit is more influential for students who are not first-generation college students and slightly more influential for females than males.)

Professionals also believe that teens value these two channels most highly of the vari-

ous sources of information we offered in our question, though they think the channels are more influential among teens than they actually are: Ninety-four percent of professionals ranked a college visit/tour first and 81 percent ranked the website as influential.

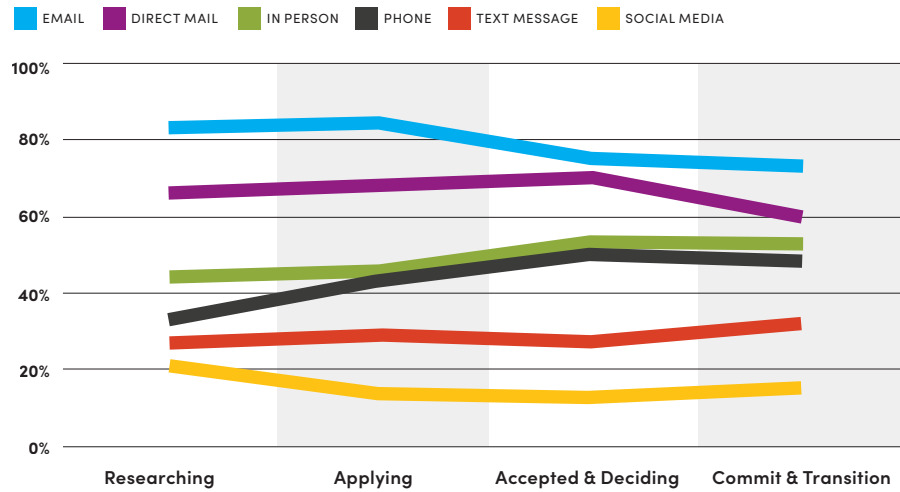
Interestingly, if you look at Figure 1, “Channels and their influence on teens’ opinion of a college,” and see how influential various channels are on shaping the opinions of college-bound teens, you’ll notice that only one of the top five is an online source (the website). Others involve either in-person

Figure 1. Channels and their influence on teens’ opinion of a college



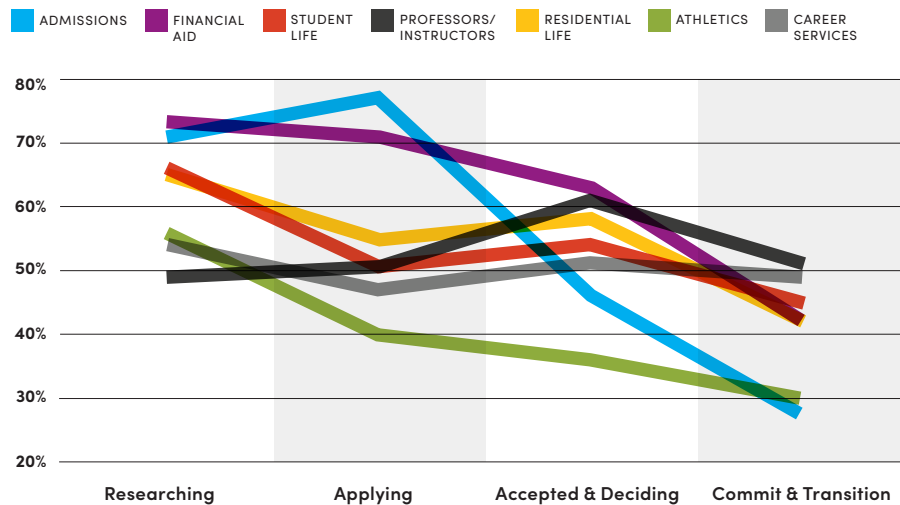
Top two responses on a 5-point scale; n = 1,028-1,459

Figure 2. How teens want to be contacted by colleges



In response to the question: "How would you prefer to hear from the colleges to which you are considering applying, during each phase of the application process? Select as many as apply." n = 1,255

Figure 3. Campus offices that teens want to communicate with — and when — during their admissions journey



In response to the question: "When considering a particular college, which offices/departments do you feel are the most important to communicate with at each phase of the college admissions process? Please select as many options as apply to you personally. Select at least one per row." n = 1,106

We also asked teens how they would prefer to hear from the colleges to which they were considering applying. Email is preferred at every stage.

exchanges or various (print) mailings. A phone call — a form of in-person communication — ranks sixth, and even print brochures top official college social media accounts and online ads.

We also asked teens how they would prefer to hear from the colleges to which they were considering applying. Email is preferred at every stage, from when they are researching colleges to after they've decided where they'll go; surprisingly, direct mail is second. See Figure 2, "How teens want to be contacted by colleges."

The 2017 E-Expectations research by NRC-CUA® and Ruffalo Noel Levitz confirms the value of email: Both parents (68-74 percent) and students (76-77 percent) said they prefer an email as a response to a Request for Information (RFI)².

Notice, also, that print brochures are more important to first-generation college students, as are college mailings. In contrast, campus visits/tours are less important to this group. Of course, those students may lack the resources or guidance needed to schedule a visit and travel to campus.

We also asked about *other* ways teens would like to be contacted by colleges.

(Specifically, "If there are *other* ways you would prefer to hear from colleges to which you are considering applying, please tell us about them here.") The open-ended responses to this question also indicated strong interest in email, direct mail, and phone calls.

Aside from *how* they would like to be contacted, we were interested in *who* they wanted to communicate with at each stage of the process.

First, we asked about the departments they wanted to communicate with at each stage of their admission journey. The responses are summarized in Figure 3, "Campus offices that teens want to communicate with — and when — during their admissions journey."

We found a number of surprises in these responses. For example, there is a significant decline in interest in hearing from the athletics department after the student has decided where they'll attend; when they're researching colleges, it's 36 percent, but after their decision, it's 30 percent.

We also found that institutions that want to increase yield should recruit professors to be in touch with students they really want to accept offers of admission.

2 NRC-CUA®, Ruffalo Noel Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive (2017). Eduventures Survey of 4,174 high school students from the MyCollegeOptions College Planning Program™, encoura.org/resources/enrollment-resource-library

Teens want contact with their *peers* through their favorite social channels, but they don't want to interact with *college officials* on these social channels.

Then we asked teens who they would like to contact them, and how. Their responses appear in Figure 4, “Who teens would like to contact them — and how.”

There are some notable takeaways from their responses:

- We'll say more about social media below, but here we'll note that teens want contact with their *peers* through their favorite social channels (Instagram and Snapchat), but they don't want to interact with *college officials* on these social channels.
- They aren't interested in having contact on Facebook, either. (In research that NRCCUA® and Chegg conducted in early 2017 with teens, 50 percent said they did not want to be contacted by colleges on social channels, while 50 percent said it was OK to contact them there. Of these respondents, 31 percent said it was acceptable to contact them on Facebook, 21 percent on Instagram, and 12 percent on Snapchat.)³
- They'd prefer to communicate with college officials through email, letters, or phone calls. We again cite the high

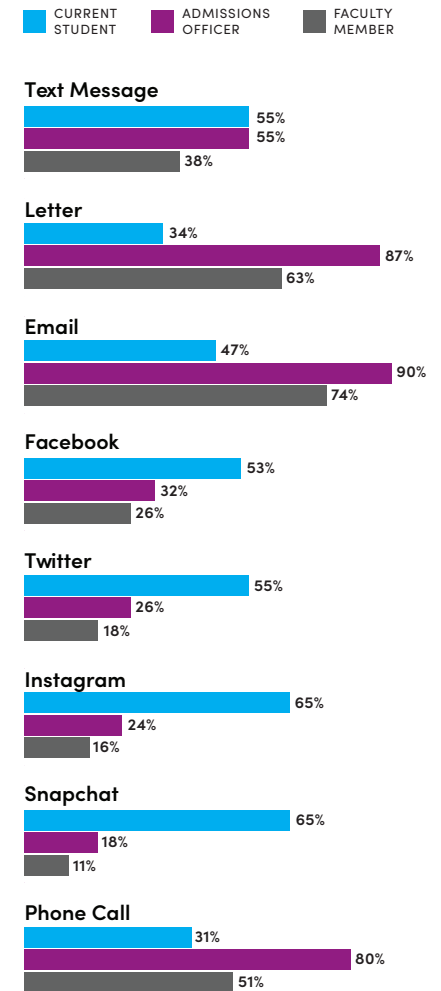
interest in email communications. In our “Mythbusting Admissions” research in 2015, we found a similarly high interest in email, saying, “Teens’ preference for email is easier to understand when one considers that their smartphones make email easier to use and accessible wherever they are. It also makes information that they receive searchable and retrievable, which is why teens prefer it for ‘transactional’ communications. In fact, 92 percent say that they would prefer to receive notices about an admission decision, financial aid, or application confirmation by email.”⁴

- And in this response, at least, teens evince as much interest in texting with admissions officers as with current students — who we might regard essentially as peers. This doesn't mean that they want admission officers to spam them; it does mean that if they text you, you can text them back.

CAMPUS VISITS

So let's return to the campus visit, which teens say is significant and campus professionals know is a make-or-break event for

Figure 4. Who teens would like to contact them — and how

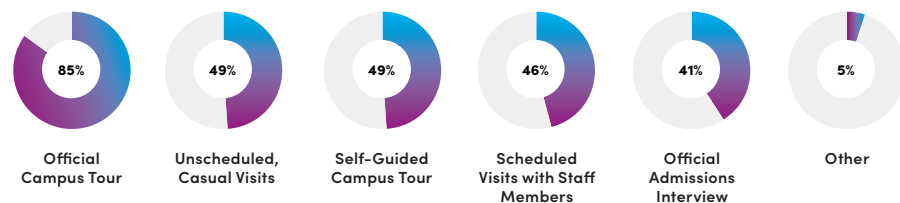


In response to the question: “Think about a college that really interests you — one where you may apply. In what way(s) would you like to hear from that college, and who would you like to communicate with you? Please select as many as apply.” n = 1,082

³ “Hacking the College Admissions Process,” NRCCUA® and Chegg, encoura.org/project/hacking-college-admissions-process

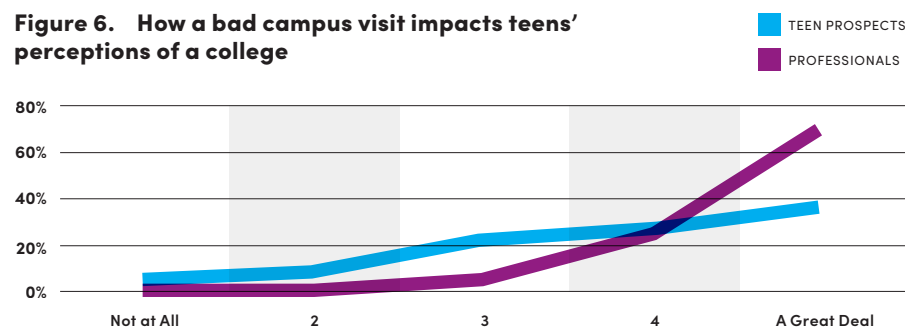
⁴ “Mythbusting Admissions: Where Prospects and Professionals Agree—and Disagree—on Enrollment Marketing, Messages, and Channels,” mstr.me/AdmissionMythbusting

Figure 5. Teens' interest in campus visit activities



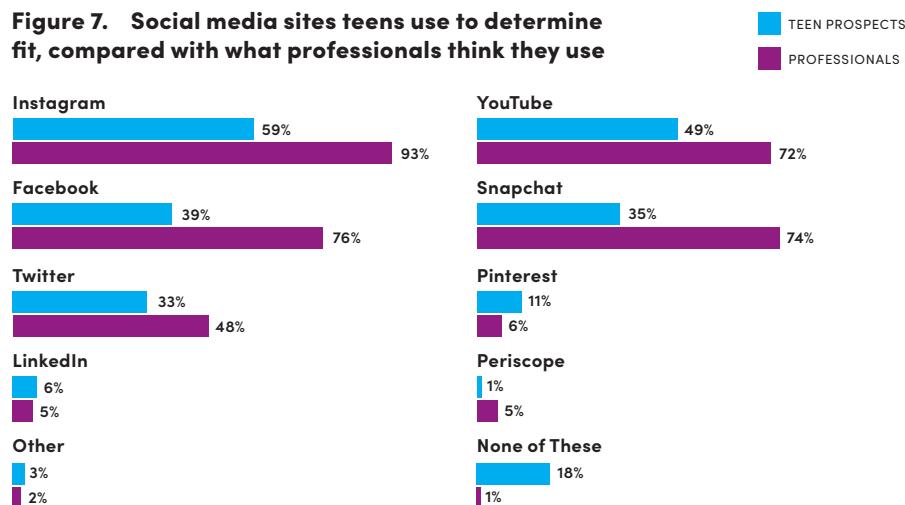
In response to the question: "Which types of campus visits have you participated in, or would be interested in participating? Please select as many as apply," asked of teen prospects who have or will likely visit at least one campus; n = 1384

Figure 6. How a bad campus visit impacts teens' perceptions of a college



In response to the question: "To what extent does a bad campus visit negatively influence [your/a teen prospect's] perceptions of a college [you are/he/she is] really interested in?"; teens, n = 1,357; professionals, n = 725

Figure 7. Social media sites teens use to determine fit, compared with what professionals think they use



In response to the question: "What social media [did you (or would you)/do teen prospects] visit to find out whether you'd/they'd fit in at a college? Please select as many as apply." n = 1,068 teens; 620, professionals

prospective students. Overall, 60 percent of teens will visit five institutions or fewer; 23 percent will visit 10 or more campuses. When teens get to campus, the activity they're most interested in is the official campus tour: Eighty-five percent say that's what they'll do. (See Figure 5, "Teens' interest in campus visit activities.")

And both teens and college professionals expect that tour to be influential: Sixty-seven percent of teens indicated it ranked 4 or 5 on a five-point scale ranging from "1 — Not at all" to "5 — A great deal." And 38 percent said a casual tour was similarly influential. Slightly more than a third (34 percent) reported that a self-guided tour was influential.

Would a bad campus experience negatively impact their perception of a college they were really interested in? It would influence them, but not as much as campus professionals seem to think. Among teens, 37 percent said it would influence them "a great deal," but 70 percent of professionals thought it would have that kind of impact. (See Figure 6, "How a bad campus visit impacts teens' perceptions of a college.")

SOCIAL MEDIA

In last year's research, we learned that teens don't often click through from college websites to social media platforms, nor do they click through from social media sites to college websites.⁵ But we know that teens do use social media sites to determine how they'll fit at a college or university; they peruse the official institutional social media accounts on Facebook,

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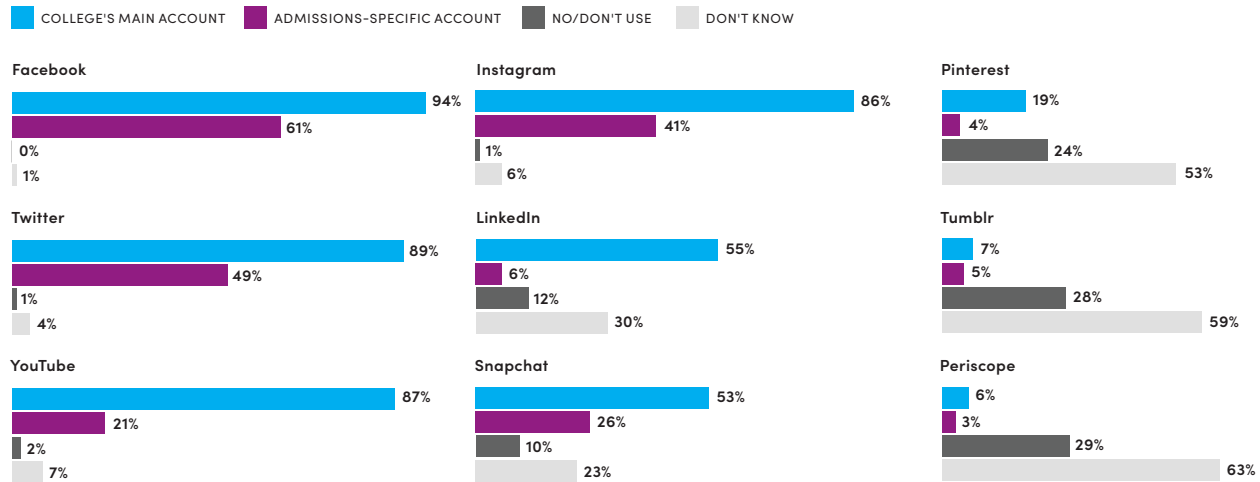
Instagram, and YouTube, and they search for student postings and comments on these platforms. This year, we asked what sites they used to determine fit. (See Figure 7, "Social media sites teens use to determine fit, compared with what professionals think they use.")

Instagram tops the list: Fifty-nine percent of respondents say they use it. Campus professionals have gotten the message that teens use Instagram: Ninety-three percent of them say teens visit the site to check out colleges there. (Teens may know that many colleges have made a significant play for their attention on Instagram.) Teens say they use Snapchat nearly as much as Facebook (35 percent for Snapchat and 39 percent for Facebook). Finally, campus professionals believe that teens use nearly all social platforms *more* than they say they actually do.⁶

5 See "Mythbusting Websites," p. 12, for a discussion of this topic. Available at mstr.me/WebsiteMyths.

6 According to the findings in the "2017 E-Expectations Trend Report," Facebook is the No. 1 social channel teens use to learn about a college. Ruffalo Noel Levitz, NRCCUA@, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive (2017). Eduventures Survey of 4,174 high school students from the MyCollegeOptions College Planning Program™, encoura.org/resources/enrollment-resource-library.

Figure 8. Social media accounts that campuses use to reach prospective students



In response to the question: "Which social media accounts does your institution use to reach prospective students? Please consider any admissions-specific accounts and your college's main accounts. Please select all that apply." n = 618

Given that, it's instructive to look at what campus professionals know about the official social media accounts their campuses maintain. See Figure 8, "Social media accounts that campuses use to reach prospective students."

In research that NRCCUA® and Chegg conducted in early 2017 with teens, 50 percent said they did not want to be contacted by colleges on social channels, while 50 percent said it was OK to contact them there.⁷

We'll point out again that the responses to our question about how teens wanted to be contacted by various people on campus indicated that they were open to being

[Teens] were open to being contacted on social channels by current students but not by admission officers or faculty.

contacted on social channels by current students — again, essentially peers — but not by admission officers or faculty. (See Figure 2, "How teens want to be contacted by colleges.")

ADVERTISING

In October 2017, the Educational Marketing Group reported on its Brand Bounce blog, "Paid advertising by U.S. colleges

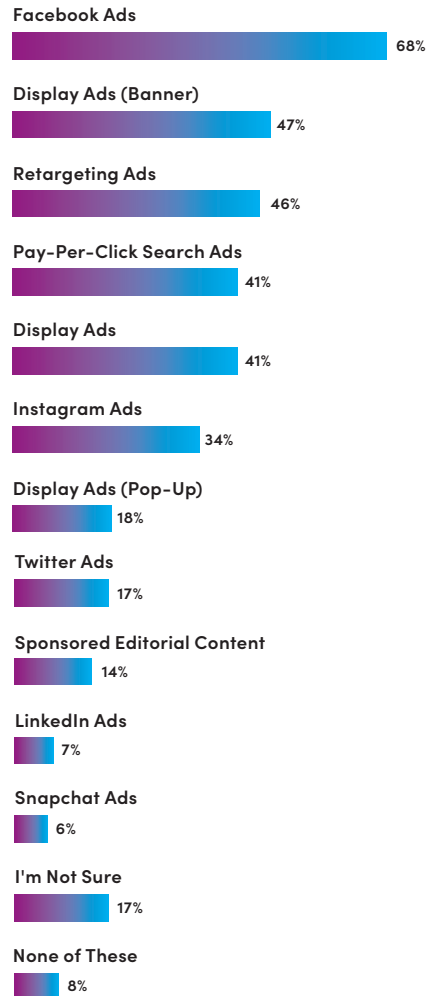
and universities reached an all-time high of \$1.65 billion in 2016. This represents a surge of 18.5 percent over 2015 expenditures and an increase of 22 percent since 2013, despite declines in advertising by the troubled-for-profit educational sector."⁸ Because we're primarily interested in exploring the digital space — and because we know that many colleges are using various kinds of online ads to specifically target

⁷ According to the findings in the NRCCUA®, Ruffalo Noel Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive (2017). Eduventures Survey of 4,174 high school students from the MyCollegeOptions College Planning Program™, encoura.org/resources/enrollment-resource-library

⁸ "College Advertising at All-Time High," blog post, emgonline.com/2017/10/college-advertising-at-all-time-high

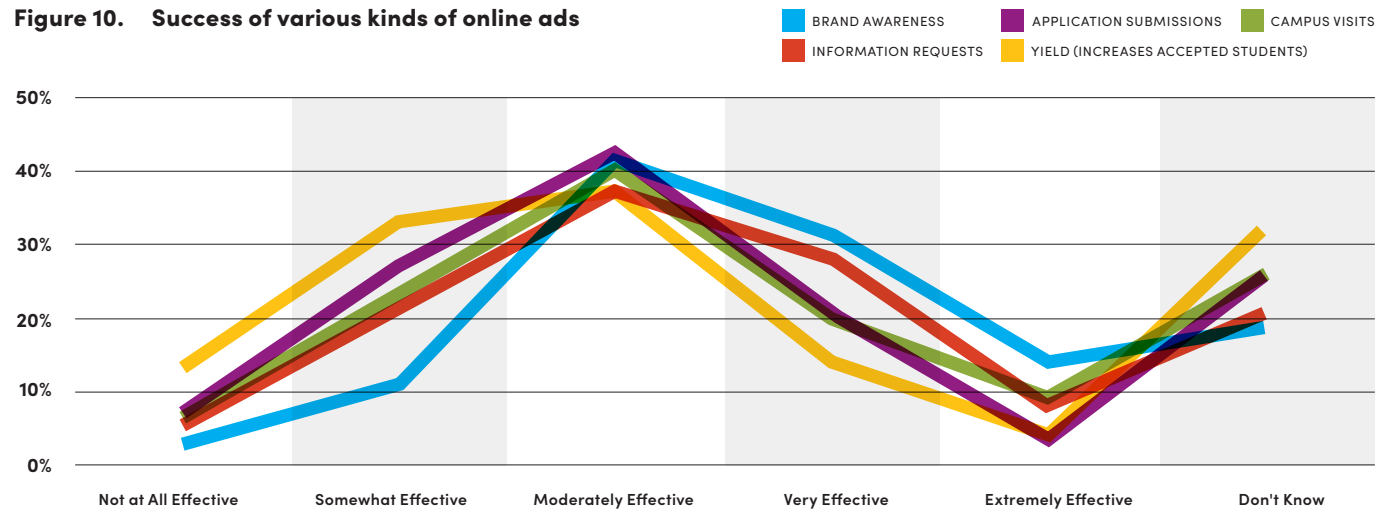
Figure 9.

Online ads institutions use to target prospective students



In response to the question: "What types of online ads does your institution use to target teen prospects? Please select all that apply." n = 598

Figure 10. Success of various kinds of online ads



In response to the question: "In general, how effective are your college's use of online ads to increase the following objectives among teen prospects?" The question was asked of professionals who responded that their institution placed online ads targeting prospective students. "Don't know" was not included in percentages above. n=429-432

prospective students⁹ — we included a number of questions in our survey to find out what types of online advertising the campus professionals who responded to our survey were using. (See Figure 9, "Online ads institutions use to target prospective students.")

A majority of respondents (68 percent) said their institutions were using Facebook ads. (Facebook offers a number of ways to reach a target audience; we didn't specify the kind of ads, but in October, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that colleges were using Facebook's Custom Audiences tool to target ads to prospects in their databases.¹⁰) And 46 percent said

their institution was using retargeting¹¹, in which previous visits to the institution's site triggered advertising on other sites a prospective student visited. (Because retargeting can seem creepy — and can be annoying — we were interested in seeing whether students noticed retargeting occurring and how they responded to it. We'll discuss that shortly.) Only 8 percent said their institutions were not using any of these types of ads.

It's interesting to compare this figure with Figure 7. While 68 percent of institutions are using Facebook's (excellent) advertising tools to reach teens, more teens are actually using Instagram (which is owned

by Facebook) to explore how they'd fit in on campus. And only 6 percent of institutions are using Snapchat ads to reach teens, yet 35 percent of teens are using it to explore colleges.

Other research, including data from Piper Jaffray, published in its fall 2017 Taking Stock With Teens™ research survey, indicates that Snapchat is now the preferred social media platform for teens, with 47 percent of teens using the platform — up 12 percent year over year.¹²

We wonder if teens aren't relying much on Snapchat for college exploration because they don't see many colleges being active on

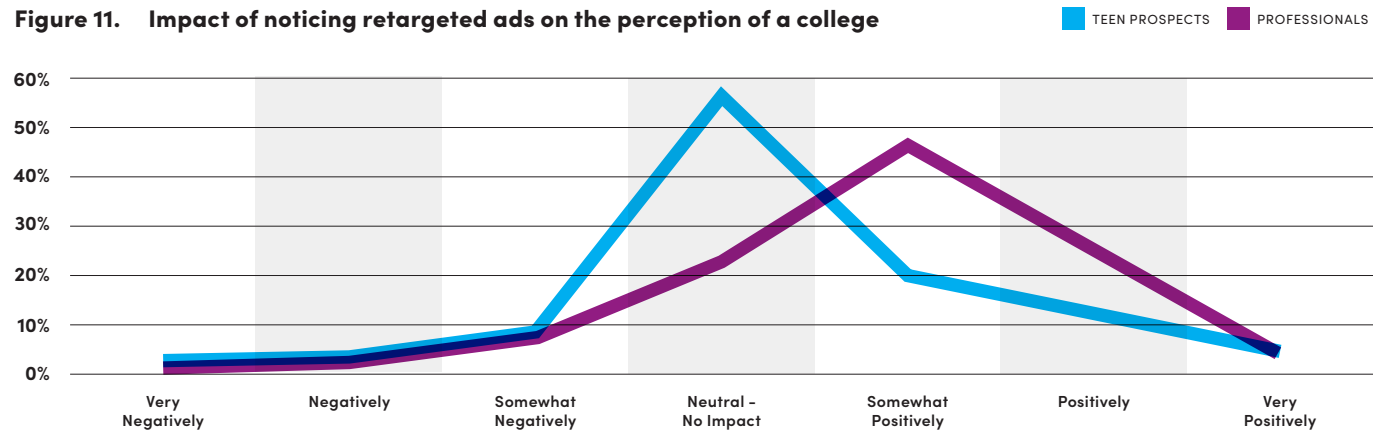
9 In "College Advertising at All-Time High," The Educational Marketing Group said, "Online channels continued to grow as the preferred platform for college and university media advertising, garnering 44 percent of the overall ad investments in 2016, up from 42 percent a year earlier."

10 "Colleges Use Facebook Ads to Target Applicants, Parents, and Lawmakers," chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Use-Facebook-Ads-to/241476

11 For a definition, see "Behavioral retargeting," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behavioral_retargeting

12 "Survey Says Teens Prefer Food over Clothing, Nike is Losing Its Heat and Streetwear is on the Rise," news release, businesswire.com/news/home/2017101005804/en

Figure 11. Impact of noticing retargeted ads on the perception of a college



In response to the question: (Professionals and teen prospects who have noticed ads) "How does it impact [your/a teen prospect's] perception[s] of a college when [you/he/she] notice[s] a/that college's ads after visiting their website?"; teens, n=492 (who have seen an ad); professionals, n=580

the platform — as compared to Facebook, for instance, where colleges have long and actively managed an official presence.

It's very difficult to measure the impact of some kinds of advertising. For example, while billboards may appeal to some audiences — members of the board of trustees, for example — it's nearly impossible to determine what kind of response someone seeing the billboard has to it. (We asked teens if seeing a billboard for a college ever inspired them to research it; among those who recalled seeing a billboard for a college or university, 68 percent said it didn't.)

It is possible to see what people do in response to online ads, though. So we asked campus professionals — those whose campus was using online ads — how effective those ads *actually are*. While a significant number say they don't know how various

types of ads perform, it looks as if online advertising is at least moderately effective for the institutions that are using it, though none of the techniques we asked about were perceived as very or extremely effective for a majority of respondents' institutions. (See Figure 10, "Success of various kinds of online ads.")

And while 45 percent claim that online ads are very or extremely successful "in creating brand awareness," we didn't ask them whether they could substantiate that claim — or how.

How do teens respond to these ads? We asked teens if they had ever noticed an ad from a college or university on their computer or mobile device. In all, 67 percent said they had; 16 percent said they had not; and 17 percent weren't sure whether they had seen an ad or not.

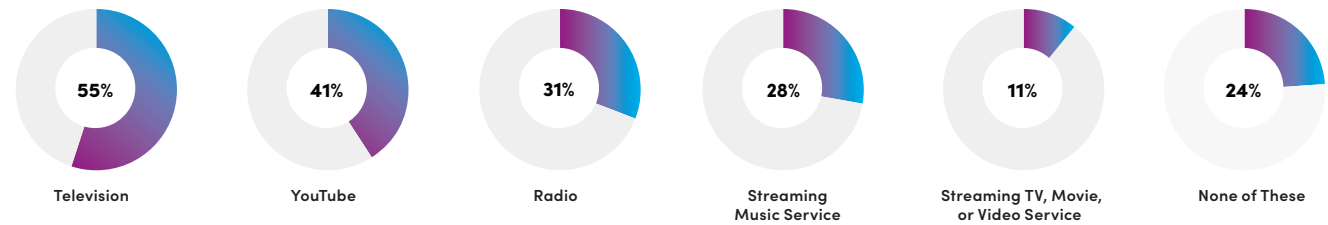
Of those who noticed the ads, more than half (54 percent) said they had not clicked on an ad; 36 percent said they had.¹³

We were particularly curious to find out how teens responded to retargeting, the ad technique that tracks site visits and serves ads to someone who has visited the website of the organization buying the ads. So we asked whether teens noticed ads for a particular college on websites or social media *after* they had visited that college's site. Of the respondents, 48 percent said they had, 30 percent had not, and 22 percent weren't sure.

The key question for us, though, was what impact noticing the ad had on their perception of the institution. If they thought retargeting was creepy, we believed they were likely to have a negative opinion of the institution. The results, shown in Fi-

¹³ According to the findings in the "2017 E-Expectations Trend Report," most teens and parents said they clicked on ads for institutions whose websites they had already visited or institutions they had already heard of, suggesting that paid digital ads are not very effective at reaching those who have never heard of or engaged with an institution. Ruffalo Noel Levitz, NRCCUA®, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive (2017). Eduventures Survey of 4,174 high school students from the MyCollegeOptions College Planning Program™, encoura.org/resources/enrollment-resource-library.

Figure 12. Where teens recall seeing or hearing college advertisements



In response to the question: "Have you seen or heard a college's advertisement on any of the following?" n=1,009

Figure 11, "Impact of noticing retargeted ads on the perception of a college," illustrate that for a majority of teens, ad retargeting does not have a negative impact on their perception of an institution. In fact, two out of three teens indicate that retargeting has no impact on their perception of a university at all.

In NRCCUA® and Chegg's research with teens, 37 percent of respondents said that it was "creepy" that a college was following them; 27 percent of respondents said they liked that the college was trying to reach out to them; and 23 percent said the ad encouraged them to learn more about the institution.¹⁴

According to our research, teens recalled seeing college ads on other online channels, but a majority (55 percent) remembered seeing ads on television. Forty-one percent recalled seeing college ads on YouTube, but 24 percent said they have not seen or heard an ad from a college on the options

we offered them (TV and radio, plus online channels including streaming music and video services). See Figure 12, "Where teens recall seeing or hearing college advertisements." Of those who saw these ads, the most common action was to visit the college's website (41 percent), but the majority did nothing (57 percent). In contrast, 82 percent of professionals thought teens visited the website.

TEXTING

When we asked teens in our "Mythbusting Admission" research in 2015 about how they wanted to be contacted by college admission officers, we offered a range of choices, including email, texting, and phone calls. At that time, 9 percent of teens said they wanted to be texted (but 65 percent preferred email contact)¹⁵. We also asked *how often* they would prefer to be contacted through various channels (email, in person, mail, text messages, messages via a messaging app, and their cellphones).

In responding to this question, teens appeared to be more open to texting, though 31 percent indicated that they wanted "None" — i.e., no text messages.¹⁶ In 2017, only 43 percent of the campus professionals who responded to our survey said their institutions used text messaging to communicate with teens; a third (33 percent) said their campus did not. So, perhaps not surprisingly, 82 percent of teens told us they had not received a text message from a college.

Yet when we asked those who had what impact it had on their perception of that college, 56 percent said it had a *positive* impact and a third (33 percent) said it had no impact. And a majority (55 percent) of teens, when asked how they'd like to be contacted by current students or by admissions officers, said they'd like to be texted (see Figure 4).

So not only do teens in 2017 appear to be more interested in receiving text messages,

¹⁴ According to the findings in the "2017 E-Expectations Trend Report," most teens and parents said they clicked on ads for institutions whose websites they had already visited or institutions they had already heard of, suggesting that paid digital ads are not very effective at reaching those who have never heard of or engaged with an institution. NRCCUA®, Ruffalo Noel Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive (2017). Eduventures Survey of 4,174 high school students from the MyCollegeOptions College Planning Program™, encoura.org/resources/enrollment-resource-library

¹⁵ Figure 12, "Mythbusting Admissions: Where Prospects and Professionals Agree—and Disagree—on Enrollment Marketing, Messages, and Channels," mstnr.me/AdmissionMythbusting

¹⁶ Figure 13, "Mythbusting Admissions: Where Prospects and Professionals Agree—and Disagree—on Enrollment Marketing, Messages, and Channels," mstnr.me/AdmissionMythbusting

but other research also indicates that those who opt in are more likely to enroll and that ongoing engagement with admission officers via texts is a predictor of yield.

Opting in to receive text messages is a highly predictive indicator of likeliness to enroll, according to research conducted by Mongoose, which provides an enterprise SMS (text messaging) platform widely used in higher ed. For example, one Mongoose client (University of Mary) found that 80 percent of applicants opted in for texting

counselor. This indicates that the most predictive behavior of highly interested students was a willingness to engage in two-way text conversations.¹⁸

These may be indications that today's teens are more open to texting than those of a few years ago. Interestingly, they may welcome certain kinds of text messages. Asked what kinds of information they would like to receive from a college via a text message, 79 percent wanted application reminders and 71 percent responded that they would

It's a good thing that colleges are cautious about texting teen prospects and applicants rather than just texting away.

and 83 percent of accepted applicants opted in. Eighty-seven percent of confirmed students had engaged in two-way texting conversations with admissions staff, and 63 percent of these students sent three or more texts to their admissions rep.¹⁷

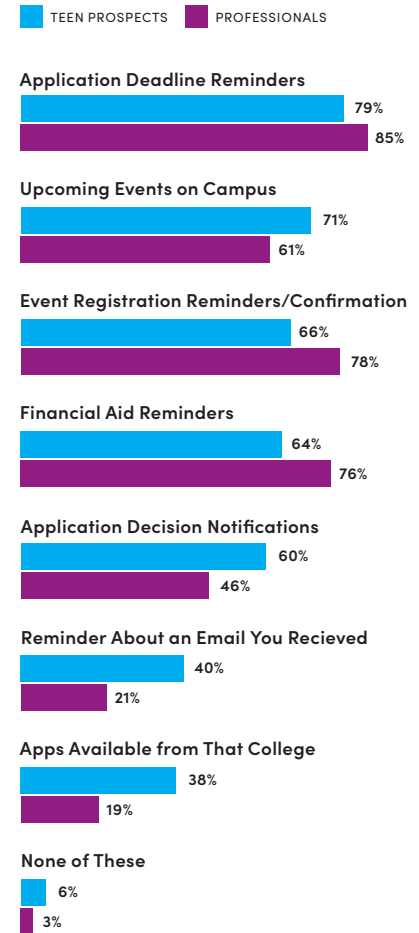
Overall, Mongoose says, opting in correlates with interest, but results indicate the most predictive behavior by far is with teens who text with counselors. When they explored the number of texts being sent from students to admissions counselors, 80 percent of confirmed students had two-way text conversations with the institution and about 54 percent of confirms had sent four or more texts to their admissions

appreciate info about upcoming events on campus. Other responses are shown in Figure 13.

As we noted previously, the 2017 E-Expectations research confirms the value of email: both parents and students prefer it as a response to an RFI.¹⁹

This doesn't mean that admission officers or marketers should start texting teens at will. Consider how teens use text messages and apps in their communications: They use them to keep in touch with individual friends and with their extended friend network. And one of the most important attributes of texting (and messaging apps

Figure 13.
Information teens would like to receive from colleges by text (and what campus professionals think teens want)



In response to the question: "What type of information would [you/teen prospects] be most interested in hearing about via text message from a college? Please select as many as apply." n=1,017 and professionals=577

17 "Impact of Texting on Enrollment," blog post, mongooseresearch.com/2017/05/07/impact-of-texting-on-enrollment

18 "Texting: Why Finesse and Respect Rule the Medium," slides 26-28, mongooseresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/AMA-17-Texting-Why-Finesse-and-Respect-Rule-the-Medium.pdf

19 "2017 E-Expectations Trend Report," NRCCUA®, Ruffalo Noel Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive (2017). Eduventures Survey of 4,174 high school students from the MyCollegeOptions College Planning Program™, encoura.org/resources/enrollment-resource-library

such as WhatsApp and KiK) is that teens can curate exactly who is involved in these conversations and exclude people who don't belong. While they do text with adults, it's usually with adults with whom they have a relationship. They rarely text people they don't know.

“Even though I know they probably send out thousands of those emails, it feels somewhat personalized.”

Given this context, it's a good thing that colleges are cautious about texting teen prospects and applicants rather than just texting away. And it's still a good idea to follow the advice we offered in our “Mythbusting Admissions” white paper: “So if they reach out to you, follow their lead — if they text you, you can text them back; if they contact you on instant messaging, you can IM them back.”

APPS

Last year, we asked teens about their experience with and interest in college apps designed for their smartphone. We found “the majority of prospects said they don't download and use apps at all: Seventy-two percent said they did not download any college apps. A few (22 percent) said they used apps when researching colleges.”²⁰ This year, we wanted to probe more deeply into whether colleges offered apps and

what teens thought about apps, along with whether they'd download or use an app, and what they wanted in an app from colleges.

First, 44 percent of the professionals who responded to our survey said their colleges offered a mobile app to teens; 45 percent did not; and 10 percent didn't know if their colleges had an app.

Among teens, half (50 percent) said they'd be somewhat likely to download an app from a college that they were interested in, and 39 percent said they'd be very or extremely likely to do so.

Then we asked teens what might entice them to download an app from a college. This was an open-ended question, so we received many different responses. The most common responses, though, indicate teens are more motivated to download and use an app if they are very interested in a college or if they've been accepted there; if the app enabled some kind of personal contact with people at the college; and if there was some sort of incentive for downloading the app.

We also asked what kind of features teens would like to see in an app. Their responses clearly indicated that they were interested in special information that could be accessed only through the app and that was practical and tailored to their needs. They expect apps to be well-produced and interactive, intuitive and easy to use. And they want an app to include features and information that are not available on the institution's website. A surprising number of comments indicate interest in connecting with faculty through an app.

Typical responses include:

“Admissions information, events, registra-

tion for tours and open houses, pictures of campus and dorms, faculty information. Basically everything that would be on a website but more interactive.”

“Chat availability with admissions, campus life.”

“Chat with current students about what they like/dislike about the school.”

“Virtual tour and interactive activities to learn about the school.”

“You can speak directly to your professor.”

HOW DO COLLEGES STAND OUT TO TEENS?

To close out our survey, we asked teens which college's marketing stood out the most — and what made it stand out. Not surprisingly, teens are impressed by brand-name institutions: Harvard and Princeton stand out by virtue of their reputations. Other institutions may have to work harder to be noticed, but it's possible for their marketing to be memorable to teens.

Here are some characteristics of memorable communications that teens cited:

1. Email still matters. Many of the comments from teens emphasize the value of email to them, confirming the responses to survey questions (and the findings from 2017 E-Expectations).
2. Personalized communications work. Many of the comments about stand-out institutions or marketing in general indicate the strong impact of personalized communications. One respondent remarked how an email or letter sent directly to the respondent stood out: “Even though I know they probably send out thousands of those emails, it feels somewhat personalized.” Another

- remarked, “Anything personalized. For example: handwritten letter or phone call.” A third cited Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s communications: “The personalization of their emails and ability to connect with students [really stood out].” One respondent said the University of Arkansas sent “birthday and holiday cards. Made me feel wanted.” And another summed it up, saying, “Marketing has a greater effect on students when it feels personal.”
3. There’s value in repetition. A theme among respondents is that persistence may pay off in that it gets an institution noticed: A respondent said Rice University emailed “at least 20 times.” Another said about Tulane University, “They were very personalized and sent a large number of emails, letters, and pamphlets.”
 4. They appreciate in-person contact. While teens value email, college websites, and YouTube, they also hanker for personal contact. Many cited high school visits specifically: One respondent remarked that Yale stood out because the university sent a representative to speak at their high school. Another respondent pointed out the value of “contact with me in person,” because “I can understand more about the college and be able to ask questions about it as well.” Another observed, “The college marketing that stood out the most was when the college came and spoke in person.” A number of respondents also said how much they appreciated college fairs where they can visit the representatives of many institutions.
 5. Whatever you do, make sure it’s well-designed. Today’s teens are very sensitive to format and packaging, so make sure your materials are consistent in look and feel and messaging. This includes your website. One respondent remarked about how impressed he was with “bold type, pictures, fun” in the brochures he received. Another cited Clemson’s “ad design and colors.”
 6. Uniqueness gets noticed. For example, Augustana College was noticed because it sent out a flying disk. Swarthmore College was cited (twice!) for sending engaging letters that were “funny and inviting, instead of giving a huge list of statistics” and “witty and amusing” letters. A number of students cited the University of Chicago’s marketing: “It asked interesting and fun questions ... not so serious.” “Lots of mail and it’s designed really nicely.” Another said how impressive letters are, distinguishing the institution that uses them from others who rely primarily on email.
 7. While marketing is important, offline reputation is still vital. Teens remarked on this in a number of ways. For example, one said about Princeton that “just the name makes it stand out.” In response to the question of which college’s marketing stood out the most, another said, “Harvard is known for being great, [and] so is the UC system.”

APPENDIX

FIELDING DATES

Survey of higher education professionals conducted from July 25 to Aug. 27, 2017.
Survey of prospective college students (“prospects”) conducted from July 11 to Aug. 20, 2017.

SURVEY OF PROFESSIONALS

Professionals in admissions, marketing, enrollment management, and web communications were contacted by email and social media and invited to fill out the survey. A total of 801 responses were included in the final report.

SURVEY OF PROSPECTS

Active users of Chegg.com were invited by email to respond to the survey. A total of 1,700 responses were included in the final report.

Teens: Device used to complete the survey

Desktop or laptop computer	29%
Tablet or other large handheld device	4%
Smartphone or mobile phone	67%

Number of respondents: 1,695

Teens: Year of high school graduation

2017	2%
2018	53%
2019	30%
2020	15%
2021	--*

Number of respondents: 1,700; * less than 1% selected 2021; they were excluded from the survey.

Teens: Stage in college search and decision process

I have not started researching colleges yet	--*
I am researching colleges but have not decided where to apply yet	52%
I am deciding where to apply to college	38%
I have applied to college(s) but have not received a decision yet	3%
I have been accepted to college(s) and am deciding where to go	1%
I have decided what college I will attend	6%

Number of respondents: 1,700; *9% of teens selected this option; they were excluded from the survey.

Teens: Gender

Female	72%
Male	27%
Nonbinary/third gender	1%

Number of respondents: 1,698

Teens: One or both parents who are college graduates

Yes	69%
No	31%

Number of respondents: 1,695

Professionals: Current role at institution (multiple choices allowed)

Marketing	49%
Communications	34%
Digital – web	29%
Admissions	25%
Digital – social media	21%
PR	12%
Advancement	3%
Other (please specify)	11%

Number of respondents: 798

Professionals: Amount of direct contact with teen prospects

No direct contact	34%
Some direct contact, but it is not a primary part of my role	50%
A great deal of direct contact	11%
All the time – my primary role is direct contact with teen prospects	5%

Number of respondents: 793

Professionals: Institution type

Public university	43%
Private university	30%
Liberal arts college	16%
Community college	7%
Professional school	1%
Other	3%

Number of respondents: 795

Professionals: Number of years working in higher education

Fewer than 5 years	27%
5–10 years	25%
11–15 years	18%
16–20 years	15%
21–25 years	7%
More than 25 years	8%

Number of respondents: 792

Professionals: Age

Under 25	3%
25–34	29%
35–44	31%
45–54	22%
55 or older	14%
Prefer not to answer	1%

Number of respondents: 792