



# Recruiting the Digital Native

Actionable Insights from Our 2019 Student Communication Preferences Survey

Enrollment Services





# Recruiting the Digital Native

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Actionable Insights from Our 2019  
Student Communication Preferences Survey

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# Executive Overview

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## The Complexity of Engaging Generation Z

For enrollment professionals, crafting an effective communications strategy that engages prospective students is becoming an increasingly complex task. Today's high school students, the first generation of true digital natives, have multifaceted and shifting preferences. They are online almost constantly, yet they still value traditional forms of communication. They are quick to adopt new communication platforms, and quick to leave them. Furthermore, this generation can be difficult to engage: having grown up surrounded by social and digital media, they are masters at filtering out information that they deem irrelevant.

To help our partner colleges and universities better understand this complicated landscape, EAB recently surveyed over 9,000 high school students about their communication preferences and behaviors. As we will elaborate in the following pages, their responses reveal clear trends and opportunities for improving student engagement as a means toward reaching enrollment goals.

## Research Methodology

The findings in this report are backed by a large data sample, consisting of responses from 9,476 high school students representing a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic regions across the country. In addition to boosting the accuracy of the findings, this large sample size also supported higher-resolution statistical analyses, allowing us to highlight subtle differences across segments with statistical significance. This report also draws from results generated in the more than 350 field marketing tests that EAB conducts annually and from our previous student communication surveys.

## Topics Explored in This Report

On the following pages you'll discover:

- How students' social media preferences have changed within the past two years
- Which channels matter most in students' search for information about colleges and universities
- Whether students are receptive to website-based chat
- How communication preferences vary across student demographics
- When colleges should begin contacting students

# Summary of Key Findings

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## **Students are increasingly willing to engage with colleges on social media, especially on Instagram.**

The extent of student interactions with schools on social media has grown substantially in the past two years. Students are now much more likely to discover and interact with colleges on social media. Increased engagement on Instagram appears to be the main driver of growth.



## **Social media continues to offer significant opportunities to reach underrepresented and first-generation students.**

Consistent with our 2017 communications preferences survey, this research revealed that underrepresented and first-generation students are much more likely to discover colleges on social media than their counterparts. As social media usage has increased among all students during the past two years, it has also grown among these segments. These findings suggest that the potential reach and impact of social media in efforts to engage underrepresented and first-generation groups is even greater than it was two years ago.



## **Students have very positive perceptions of website-based chat.**

While most students have not yet used website-based chat, those who have used it overwhelmingly characterize their interactions as positive. Of that group, one in two students indicated that they found chat features “very useful” or “extremely useful.”



## **Email remains students’ preferred channel for communicating with schools.**

Students indicate that email is their preferred channel for receiving communications from colleges throughout their search. They also rate it as the second-most helpful channel for gathering information about schools, behind colleges’ websites. While students indicate a clear preference for email, they also continue to demonstrate an affinity for paper mail throughout their search process.

To learn more about effective recruitment strategies and take our digital capabilities diagnostic, visit [eab.com/enrollment](https://eab.com/enrollment).



# Emerging Trends **by Channel**

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SECTION

1

# Social Media Is More Relevant Than Ever in Students' College Research

Students Are Increasingly Likely to Discover and Engage with Colleges on Social Media

## Gen Z is embracing social media as a tool to learn about colleges

With Pew Research finding that nearly twice as many teens reported to be online "almost constantly" in 2018 as in 2015, it comes as no surprise that social media is taking on a larger role than ever in students' college search process. Our research found that students' willingness to interact with schools on social media has increased substantially since 2017, as shown in the chart at right.

## Social media serves awareness and affinity-building functions

Students indicated that they were more likely than ever to interact with colleges in a number of ways on social media. Their responses illustrate that social media can serve multiple functions in recruitment marketing. For example, it can help students discover schools (as reported by one in four students) or it can help them learn more about schools they're already familiar with by connecting them to the college's website (as reported by almost one in three students). Social media is both a means of creating awareness among new audiences and a way to foster affinity and engagement with existing audiences.

### How Do Students Use Social Media When Researching Schools?

Percentage of Survey Respondents, 2017 Versus 2019

Student interest in particular schools is increasingly reflected in their interaction with those schools on social media

	2017	2019	Change
Every college and university should have a social media presence	79.6%	86.1%	+6.5%
The more interested I am, the more I interact with a school on social media	55.2%	74.6%	+19.4%
I discovered a particular college or university on social media	19.2%	25.8%	+6.6%
I used a school's social media site to link to the school's website	22.7%	29.6%	+6.9%
I follow schools that I am not interested in applying to	13.0%	17.8%	+4.8%

Percentage points

Source: <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>.

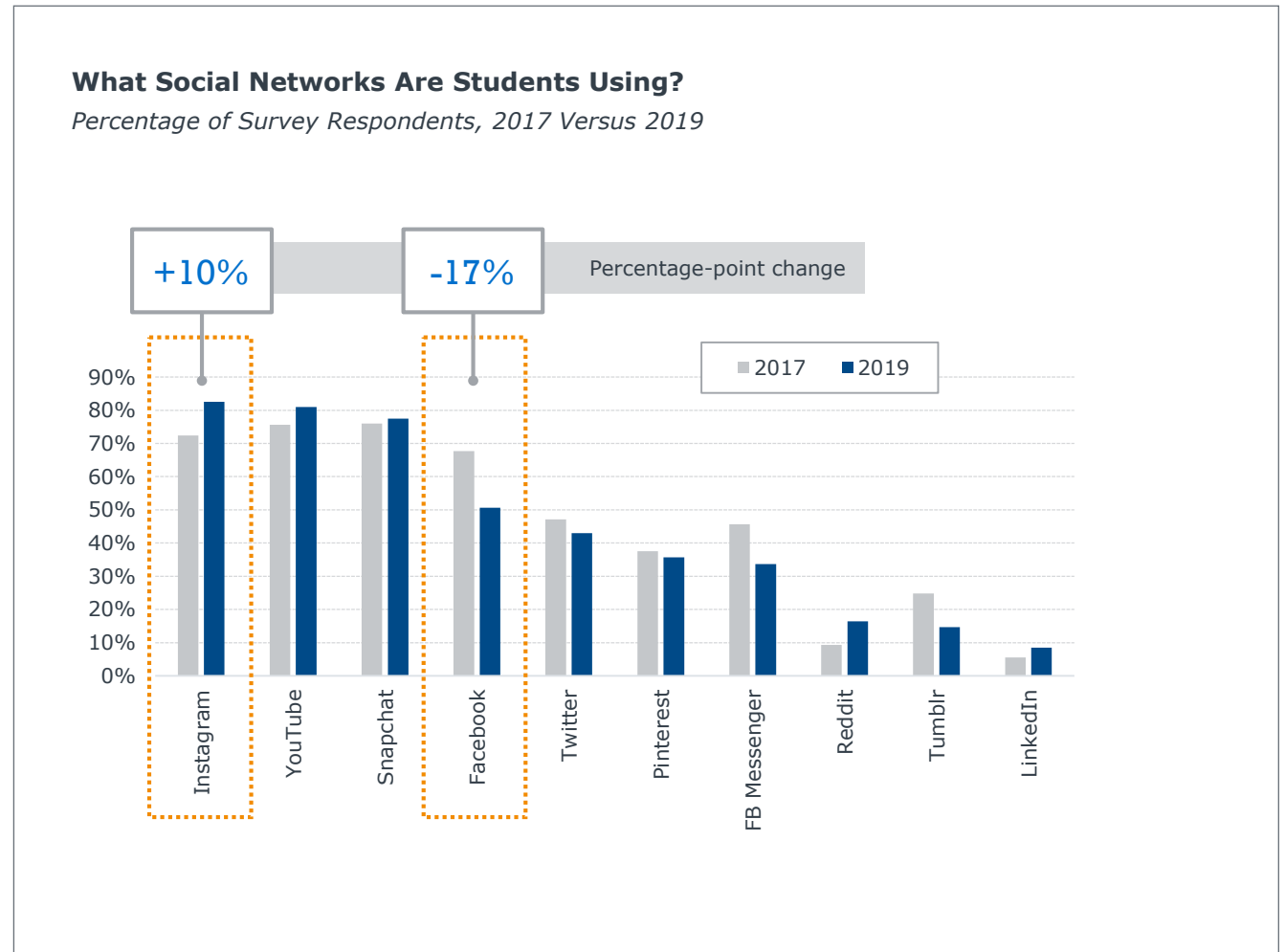
# Instagram's Popularity Among Students Has Grown Since 2017, While Facebook's Has Declined

## Instagram is replacing Facebook

Instagram is now students' most-used social media platform, with 82.5% of respondents reporting that they use the platform, a 10% increase since 2017. In contrast, Facebook usage has fallen by almost 20%. Students' shifting preferences since 2017 represent somewhat of a double-edged sword for colleges; on one hand, prospects are more willing than ever to interact with colleges on social media. On the other, keeping pace with students' quickly changing platform preferences represents a challenge.

## A multiplatform mix is still essential

While fewer students are on Facebook, it's important to note that one in two students still uses the platform and that EAB testing has found it to be effective in engaging parents. The popularity of YouTube and Snapchat among students also indicates the need for schools to have a balanced mix of social media initiatives across several platforms.



EAB Testing Insight

**Parents are more likely to engage on Facebook than students are.**

*Parent click rates for Facebook ads measured up to 1.5x higher than those of students.*



## Instagram Is an Increasingly Effective Tool for Engaging Students and Promoting Your Brand

### High-quality imagery and video are more important than ever

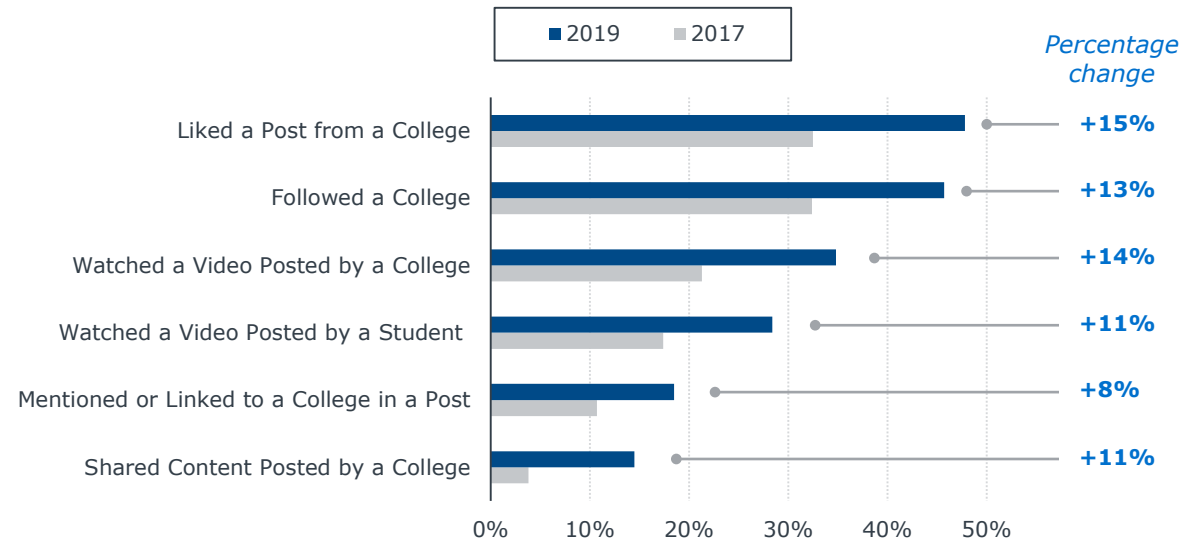
We found that students are increasingly engaging with schools on Instagram in a variety of ways, including liking posts, following college accounts, and viewing videos. While this uptick in willingness to engage with colleges on social media represents an opportunity for recruitment communications, it's important to remember that on social media, schools face stiff competition for student mindshare, both from fellow college accounts and otherwise. To leverage Instagram effectively, be sure to invest in high-quality imagery and video content to engage students and burnish your brand.

#### Key takeaways

- ✓ **Tell your story visually.** As Instagram takes center stage in social media, ensure imagery and video content are compelling and high-quality.
- ✓ **Don't write off "older" platforms just yet.** Facebook is still used by half of students and remains an effective way to engage parents.

### Students Interacting with Schools on Instagram

Percentage of Survey Respondents, 2017 Versus 2019



# Web-Based Chat Is a Promising, Yet Largely Unproven, Channel

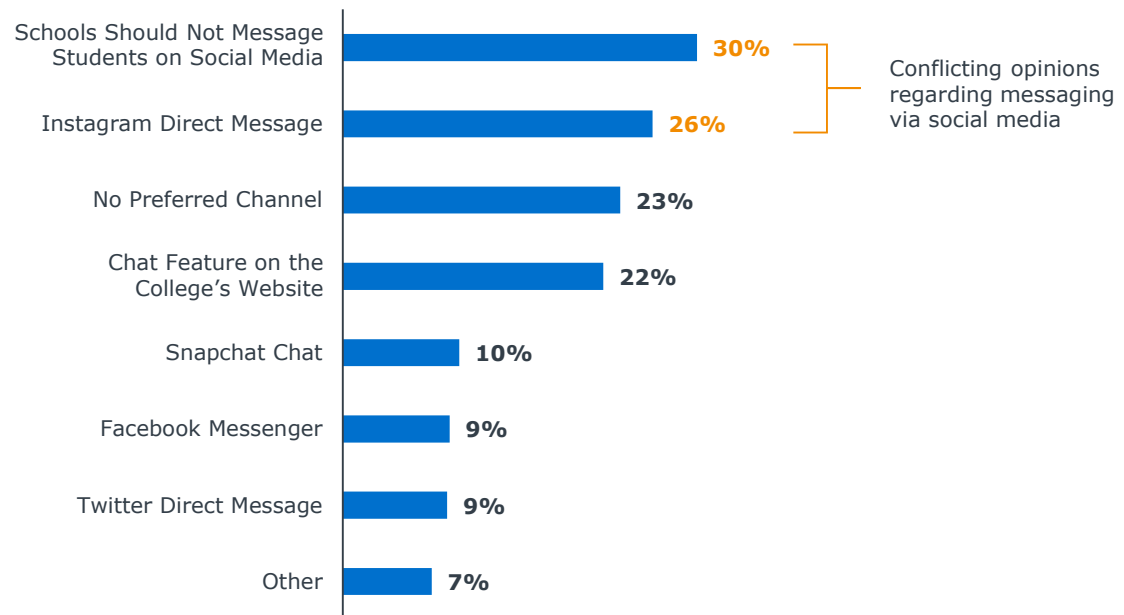
## Mixed Signals on Social Media Direct Messaging

### No clear-cut answer on social media messaging

Given students' enthusiasm for social media generally, it follows that they might be interested in communicating with colleges through social media direct messaging. However, we found that their opinions were mixed; while 30% of students indicated that schools should not message students on social media, almost as many students indicated that schools should communicate with them via Instagram direct message. Risk-averse schools may want to avoid messaging students via social media, for fear of potentially alienating them.

Enrollment teams who decide to develop this channel as part of their recruitment outreach would do well to favor Instagram; this platform would presumably be acceptable for the one in two students who either said explicitly that they favored Instagram as a channel for direct messages or had no stated preference as to network.

### Which Messaging Applications Should Schools Use When Communicating with Prospective Students?



## Students Like Using Website-Based Chat

### Web-based chat has potential

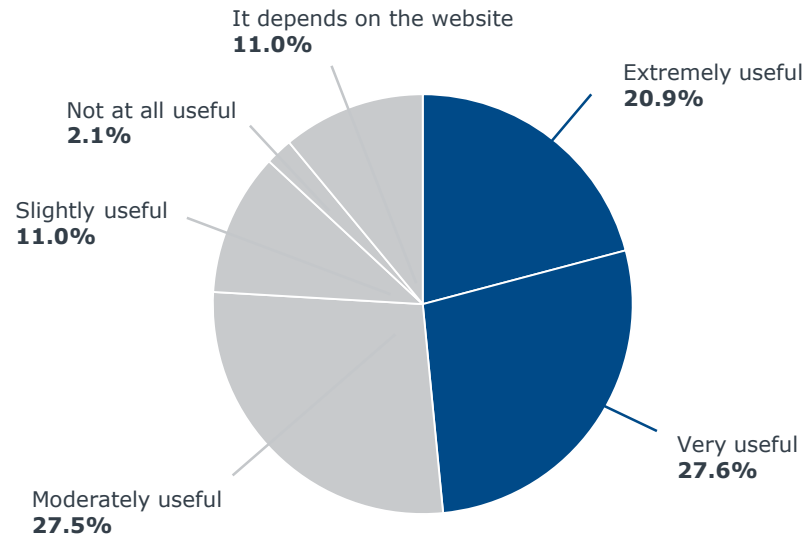
The rise of web-based chat, especially AI-based chat used by online retailers, has changed the way that consumers interact with brands online. But is this method of communication applicable to recruitment as well? While we found that relatively few students (9.1%) had used chat features on websites, their reactions indicated promise in the channel. Students had very positive perceptions of chat, with one in two indicating they found it “extremely useful” or “very useful.” Students’ affinity for chat aligns with the success of the platform elsewhere in enrollment management, such as Georgia State University’s use of chatbots to reduce summer melt, which has been discussed in other EAB research.

#### Key takeaways

- ✓ **Proceed with caution on social media messaging.** Direct messaging has the potential to alienate a large share of students.
- ✓ **Students view web-based chat very positively.** However, it is not yet widely utilized.

### “In general, how useful do you find chat features on websites?”

Percentage of Students



**1 in 2**

students find chat either “extremely useful” or “very useful”

# Digital Ads Have Firmly Established Their Place in Recruitment

A Large Majority of Students Report Seeing Online Ads from College and Universities

## Digital ads are more prevalent than ever in college search

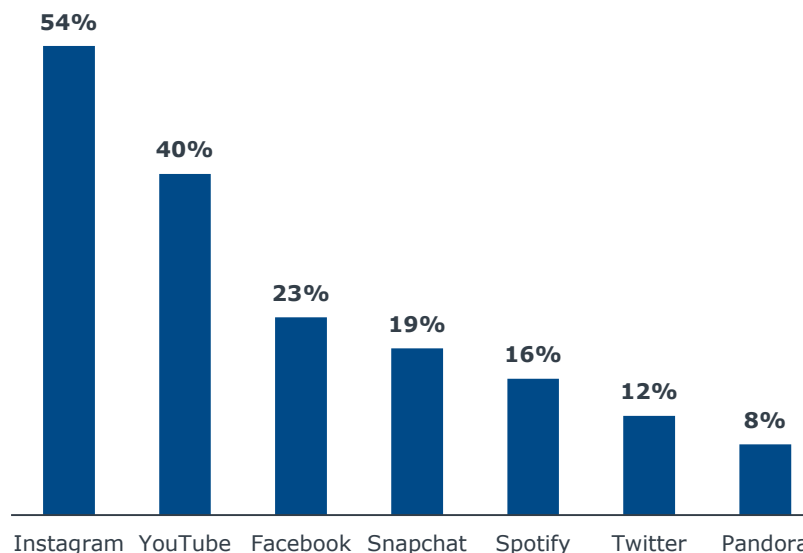
Whereas in 2017 only 48% of students indicated that they had seen a digital ad from a college, two years later, that share of students has grown to 74%. Our research shows that students were most likely to have seen ads from colleges on Instagram and YouTube, which, as discussed earlier in this report, were also students' most-used platforms overall.

## A/B testing can help drive ad performance as competition rises

As advertising efforts ramp up across recruitment, ad expenses are likely to rise due to increased competition for students' attention. A/B testing can help colleges optimize for ad performance and cost in this environment. Testing can enable colleges to consistently and quickly identify the parameters that work best for their audience with respect to a variety of factors, including timing, content, and budget.

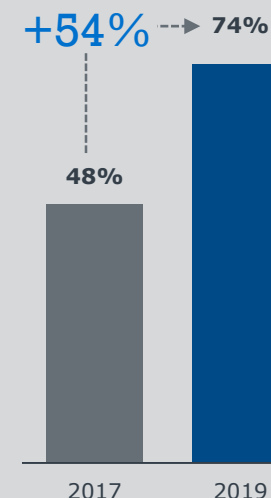
### "Have you seen online/digital ads for any college/university on social media or services during your college search?"

Percentage of Survey Respondents by Social Network



### A Strong Upward Trend

Share of Students Who Had Seen Any Digital Ads for Colleges or Universities



## While Students Find General Information Most Helpful in Ads, a Range of Other Topics Piques Their Interest

### Ads with general information will meet most students' needs

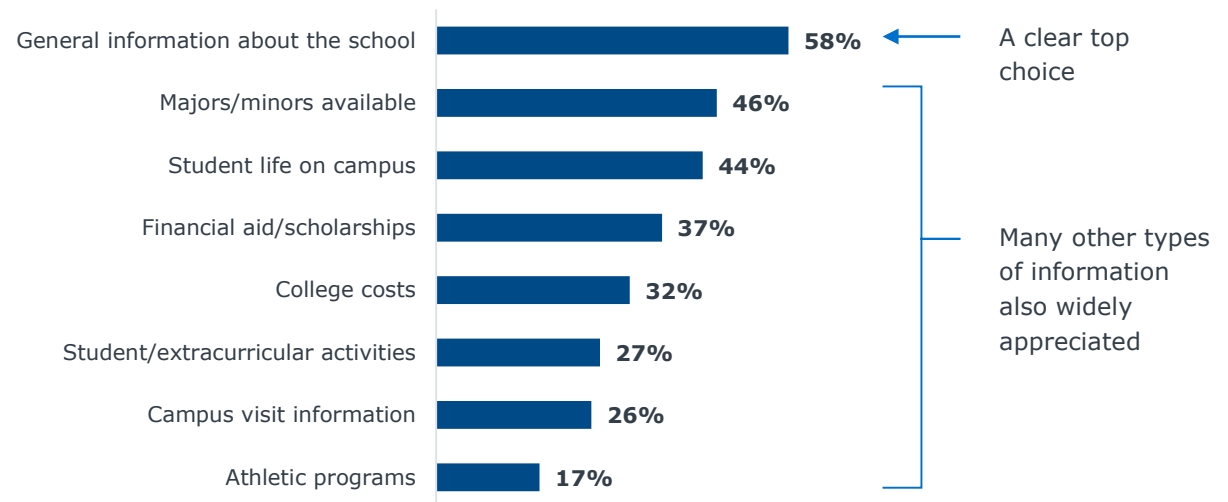
While a majority of students (58%) indicated that they found general information about a school to be the most helpful ad topic, interests were fairly spread out over a variety of topics, including majors/minors, student life, and finances. This finding suggests that for schools with sufficient resources, segmenting ad content can be an effective way to respond to many different students' needs and drive up ad engagement overall. It also suggests that, for schools with limited resources to create multiple streams of content, providing general information about the school can be an efficient way to appeal to most students.

#### Key takeaways

- ✓ **A/B testing is more important than ever.** Testing can help you continue to win mindshare and engage students as recruitment ads become more widely used.
- ✓ **Adapt ad content strategy to your resources.** Opt for general ads, unless you have capacity for a more segmented approach to content.

### "What information did you find most useful in the online/digital ads you saw for a college or university?"

Percentage of Survey Respondents



# Use Content About Majors as a Gateway for Website Engagement

## Students' Interest in Fields of Study Overshadows Other Interests

### Major-focused content can offer a compelling entry point to your site

Our research reinforced past EAB findings that information about majors is the most sought-after content on college websites. It's also important to note that previous EAB testing indicates prospects' major of interest is likely to change during their college search. Considering these findings, schools should use information about majors as a tool for initially drawing students to their website. Major-focused content can serve as an entry point from which students are directed to other content designed to build affinity with the institution more generally.



EAB Testing Insight

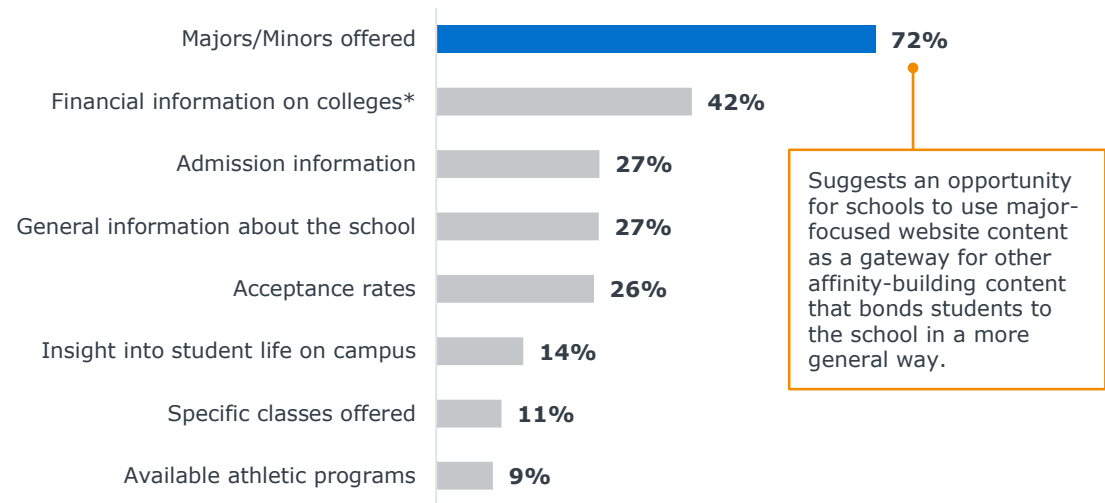
#### Major of interest is likely to change.

*Between junior year and point of application, 51% of high school students change majors of interest.*

#### Key takeaway

- ✓ **Create robust pathways from major-specific pages to other engaging content.** Include content or links that support broader affinity-building aims.

### "When you searched specific college websites, what information were you most often trying to find?" (Select 3)



Suggests an opportunity for schools to use major-focused website content as a gateway for other affinity-building content that bonds students to the school in a more general way.

\*Includes information on scholarships, financial aid, and college cost

# Don't Underestimate the Continued Value of Email in Recruitment

Despite What You May Think, Students Do Check Their Email Frequently

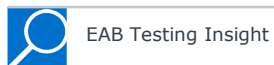
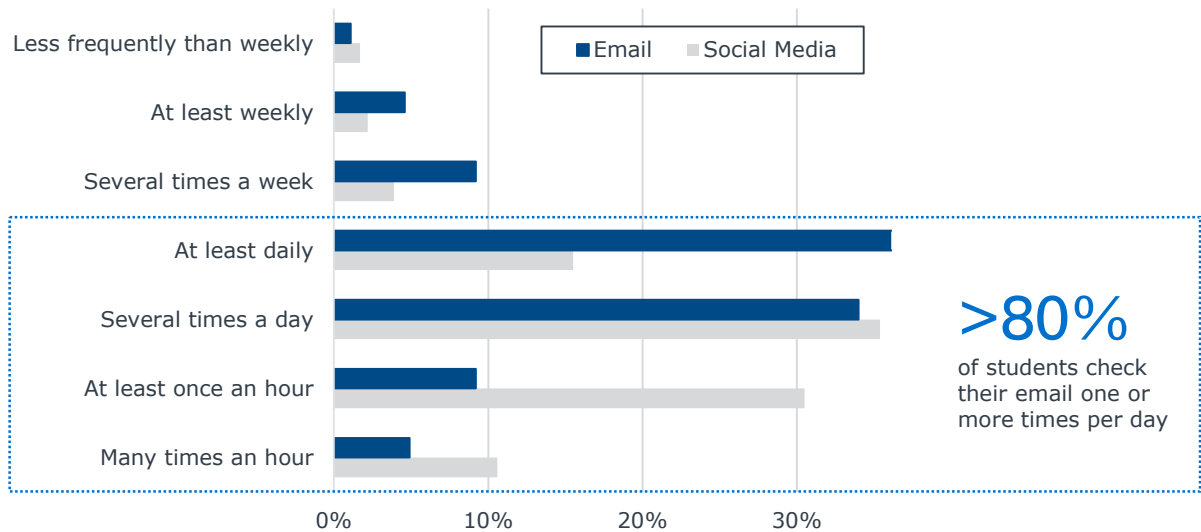
## Dispelling a common myth that students don't read email

There's a common perception in recruitment that students no longer read emails, preferring instead to communicate exclusively through social media and texting. However, our research indicates that email still factors into the daily routines of most students. As the chart at right shows, while students do not check email as frequently as they check social media, more than 80% still check email daily.

## Email remains the "official" channel for college communications

Our research suggests that students still value email highly in college search. As we discuss elsewhere in this study, students named email as their second-most helpful resource overall when learning about schools and their preferred channel for getting answers to specific questions. Students' reliance on email is likely due to the fact that it remains the most convenient form of written communication with colleges.

Percentage of Students by Frequency of Checking Email and Social Media



### Mix up your email copy strategy.

*When very short emails were interspersed with longer messages in a campaign, response rates rose by 10%.*

## By Sophomore Year, a Majority of Students Have Multiple Email Addresses

### Ensuring email delivery is increasingly important

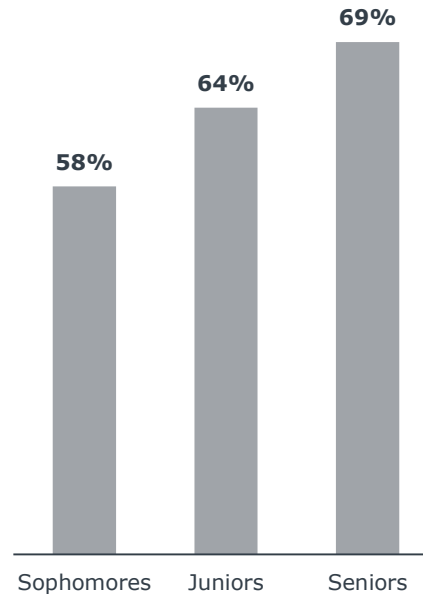
We also explored the extent to which students are managing multiple email addresses. We found that by sophomore year, most students have more than one email address, with the percentage rising in junior and senior years. Given the prevalence of multiple addresses, it's more important than ever for schools to ensure that they are consistently capturing up-to-date student emails and optimizing deliverability.

#### Key takeaways

- ✓ **Email is still the "official" channel for recruitment.** When developing your multichannel strategy, ensure emails are included to convey all critical messages.
- ✓ **Optimize email capture and deliverability.** Periodically confirm email addresses and employ deliverability best practices, including domain warming, thoughtful audience selection, and a deliverability-informed messaging strategy.

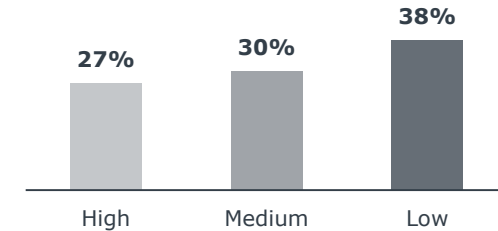
#### Students with Multiple Email Addresses

By High School Year

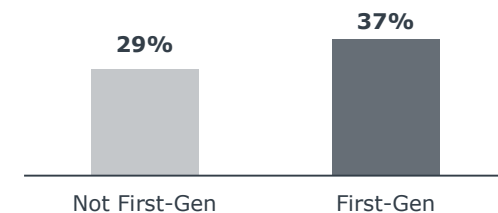


#### Students with Dedicated Email Addresses for College Communications

By Family Income



By Not-First-Gen/First-Gen Status







# Actionable Answers to Critical Questions in Communications Strategy

Which channels matter most in recruitment? . . . . .17  
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SECTION

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# Which Channels Matter Most in Recruitment?

Focus Your Primary Efforts on Email and Your Website, and Leverage Content Across Other Channels

## Assessing your multichannel strategy

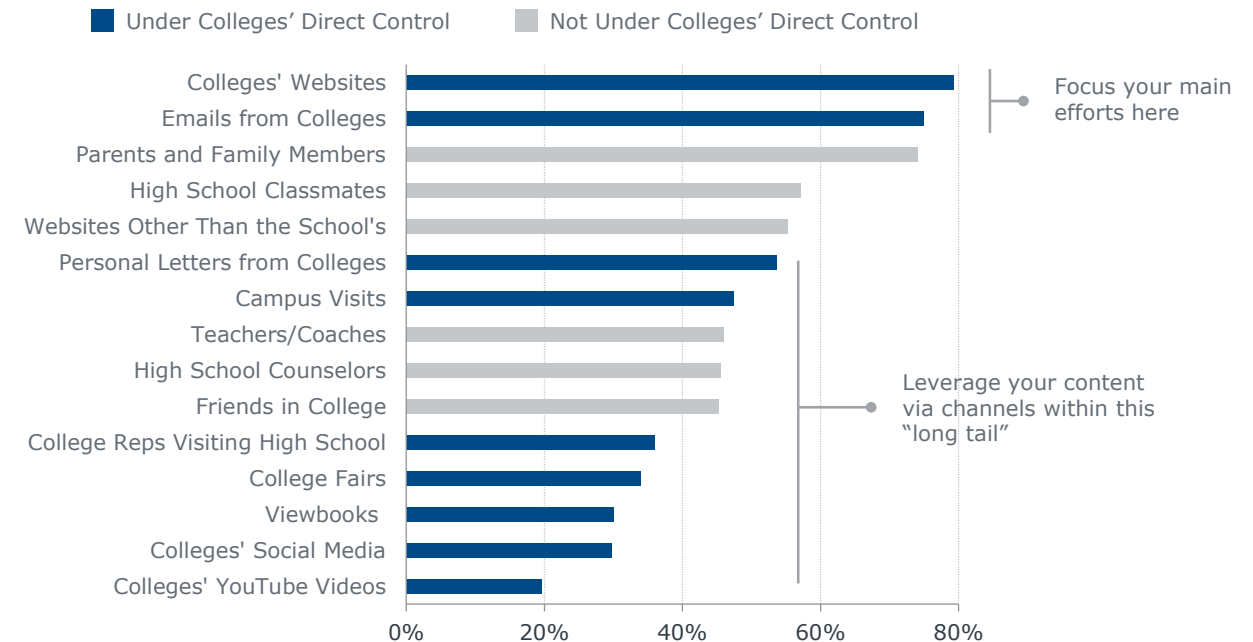
Our research indicates that while multichannel communications are expected and appreciated, students have clear preferences with respect to the channels they find most helpful. At the top of the list, 79% of students named colleges' websites as most helpful, and 75% of students found emails from colleges to be most helpful. While word-of-mouth channels, including parents, other family, and classmates, followed closely behind, we recommend that colleges focus their main efforts on the top two channels, while leveraging content elsewhere. College websites and email are not only clearly preferred by students, but also directly under your control, meaning your efforts in these channels are likely to yield the greatest impact.

### Key takeaways

- ✓ **Prioritize website and email.** Efforts in these channels are likely to be most impactful.
- ✓ **Leverage content across your multichannel efforts.** Comprehensive, multichannel outreach remains essential.

## Information Sources Students Found Most Helpful

Percentage of Students, Fifteen Most Frequently Cited Sources



# How Do Communication Trends Vary by Student Demographics?

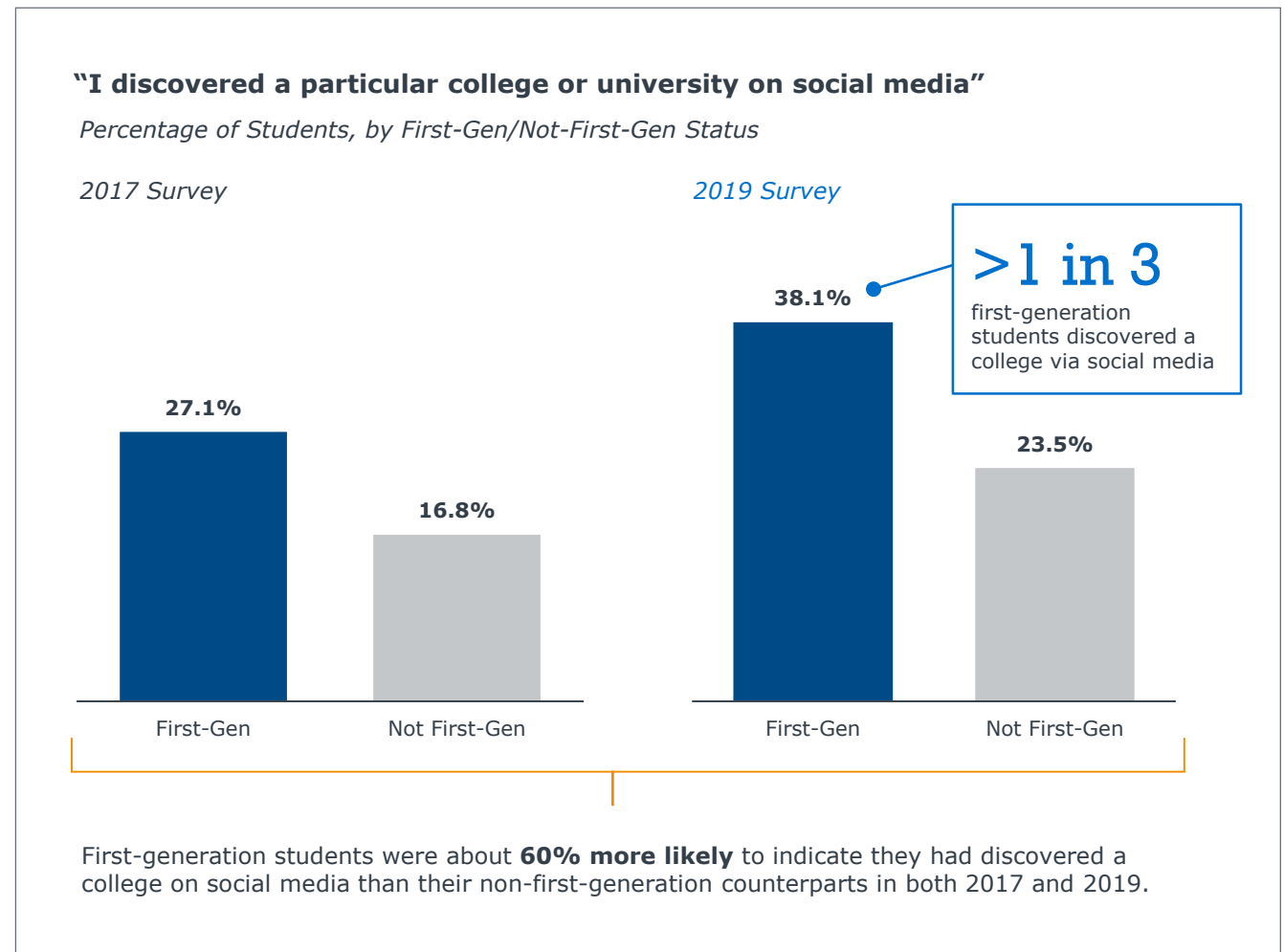
## Underrepresented Students Are More Likely Than Their Counterparts to Discover Colleges via Social Media

### Confirming an existing trend

Consistent with findings from our 2017 survey, our research showed that students who are first-generation, come from lower-income families, or identify as African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino were significantly more likely to have discovered a college on social media than their counterparts.

### A larger opportunity for social media outreach

The proportionate differences between these groups mirror those of our 2017 results. For example, first-generation students were about 60% more likely than non-first-generation students to have discovered a school on social media in 2017 and 2019. However, it's important to note that social media usage in college search has grown among all students since 2017. Given this increase in usage, the potential reach and impact of social media engagement with underrepresented and first-generation students is greater than ever.



## Now More Than Ever, Social Media Offers an Opportunity to Reach Underrepresented Students

### Multiple explanations for this trend

While it's difficult to determine exactly why underrepresented, lower-income, and first-generation groups are more likely to discover colleges on social media than other students are, there are several likely possibilities. Our research revealed that students from lower-income households and students of color spend more time online than their higher-income and Caucasian counterparts, which makes them more likely to discover schools online. In addition, first-generation and lower-income students may be less likely to have a wide variety of robust resources to consult during their college search process. Social media may help supplement certain gaps in knowledge that are experienced by these groups more acutely than by other students.

#### Key takeaway

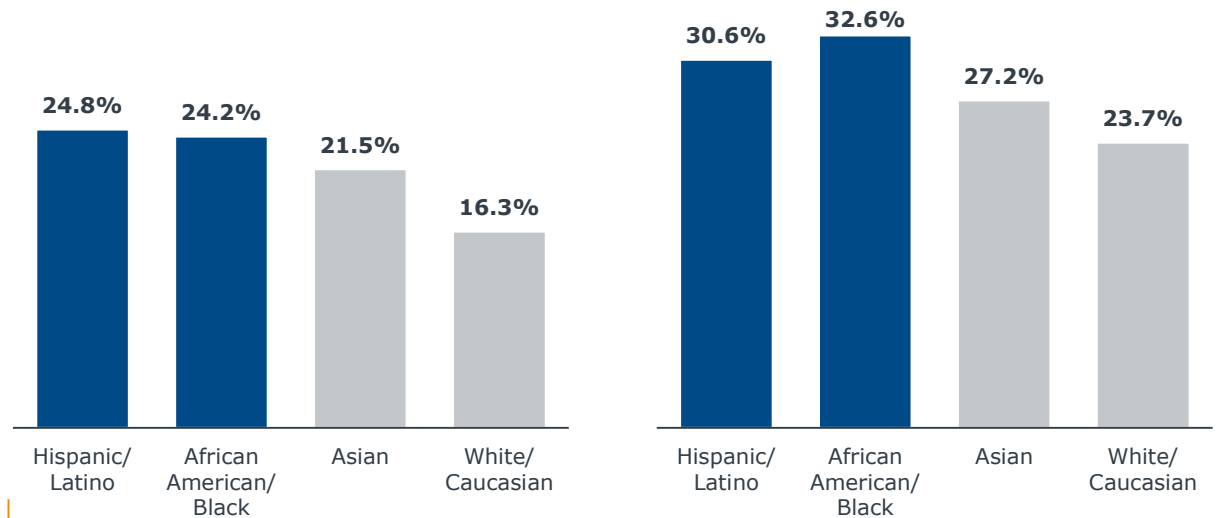
- ✓ **Consider leveraging social media to reach first-generation and underrepresented students.** Among platforms, Instagram offers opportunities for greatest reach.

### "I discovered a particular college or university on social media"

Percentage of Students, by Race/Ethnicity

2017 Survey

2019 Survey



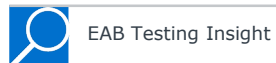
Underrepresented minorities were much likelier to have discovered a school on social media than their counterparts.

# When Should Institutions Start Engaging Students?

Enable Self-Directed Research on Your Website and Consider Early Contact

## One in three students starts researching by freshman year

Our research reinforced previous findings that most students start to explore their college options in the early years of high school or before. EAB testing has found positive results from contacting students as early as sophomore year, and there's reason to believe that even earlier contact could be beneficial. For schools who do not choose to invest in early outreach campaigns, building out high-quality website content can be a way to cater to students who are eager to start exploring their college options through self-directed research in freshman year or before.



EAB Testing Insight

### Early outreach pays off.

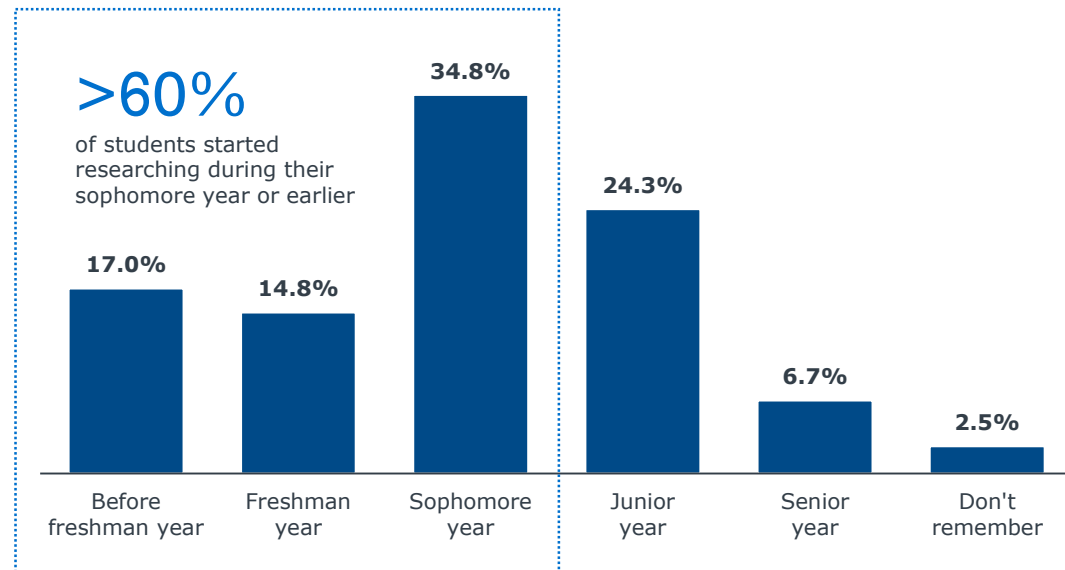
*Students are two times as likely to enroll when first engaged during sophomore year versus senior year.*

### Key takeaway

- ✓ **Meet early researchers' needs with web content.** Ensure that inbound interest from early researchers is rewarded with robust web content.

## When Are Students Starting to Research Colleges?

Percentage of Survey Respondents



# How Do Preferences Change During College Search?

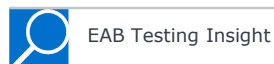
## Email and Mail Are Preferred Most Consistently Throughout Students' Search Process

### Email and mail are preferred during both early and late stages of search

While they are avid users of newer digital channels, including texting and direct messaging apps, in their personal lives, Gen Z still values some of the more "conventional" channels when communicating with schools. When asked which channels they preferred to use both at the start of search and once schools were short-listed, email and mail were clear winners in both phases of search.

### More intrusive channels are preferable later in recruitment

Our research indicates that students are more open to direct contact with schools the further along they are in search. For example, they strongly prefer to use college websites, a more self-service channel, earlier in search. In contrast, they indicated a clear preference for texting, a more intrusive channel, later in the process.



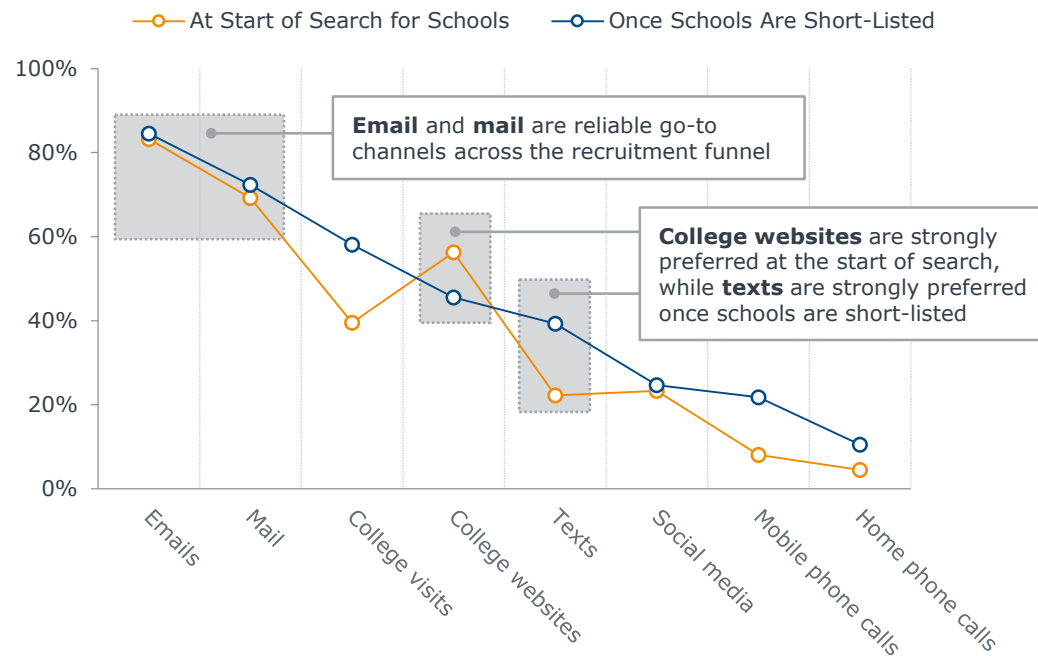
EAB Testing Insight

**Texts can provide an effective nudge during later stages of recruitment, including yield.**

*Admits who received SMS reminders about deposit deadlines were 1.3x more likely to deposit.*

### "How would you like schools to share information with you?"

Percentage of Survey Respondents by Stage of School Selection



## Students Prefer Channels That Facilitate One-to-One Interaction When Seeking Out Specific Information

### The value of highly personalized interactions

The findings on the previous page are reinforced by students' responses with respect to the channels they prefer to use for specific versus general questions. Not surprisingly, the only channel that students preferred to use more at the start of search than at the end of search, college websites, was also highly preferred for general questions.

The findings on this page also illustrate a strong preference for channels that enable highly personalized interactions when students are seeking answers to specific questions.

#### Key takeaways

- ✓ **Email and mail are appreciated throughout college search.** Over 70% of students found these channels helpful both early on and later in their research.
- ✓ **Leverage 1:1 channels later in recruitment.** Students find them more helpful as they narrow down their options.

### Channel Preferences by Question Type

*Q: If you had a question about a college or university—general or specific—what channel(s) would you prefer to use?*

Channel	Specific Question	General Question
Email to the college	78.3%	36.4%
Phone call to the college	75.0%	14.0%
Video chat with the college	67.2%	12.8%
Text message to the college	66.6%	20.9%
Chat/instant message with the college	65.9%	21.6%
Search the college's website	36.5%	76.3%
Google search	29.5%	81.2%
Search a third-party website	20.4%	75.7%
No preference	2.5%	3.9%
Other	0.7%	0.8%

Less preferred  More preferred



# Key Implications for Enrollment Strategy

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SECTION

3



# Key Implications for Enrollment Strategy

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Our research suggests that the following strategies can help schools better engage students throughout their college search.

1

## Deploy the right channels, at the right time.

While we found that students view college websites and emails as the most helpful channels overall, we also discovered that students find significant value in a “long tail” of other channels. As our research has shown, students’ preference in channels depends on their specific intentions at that point in time. To win student mindshare in today’s highly competitive and noisy communications environment, ensure that your channel choices match students’ context-specific needs.

- ▶ *To learn more about building an effective multichannel strategy, watch our on-demand webinar on engaging Gen Z at [pages.eab.com/GenZWebinar](https://pages.eab.com/GenZWebinar).*

2

## Take advantage of increased opportunities to reach students on social media.

Our research indicates that students are more willing than ever to interact with colleges on social media. Leverage this trend by promoting your college brand through digital ads and organic content on top platforms such as Instagram. Furthermore, consider using social media as a way to increase exposure of your school among underrepresented, lower-income, and first-generation students.

- ▶ *Looking for ideas for engaging students on Instagram? Read our blog post at [eab.com/InstagramBlog](https://eab.com/InstagramBlog).*

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## Ensure that your website effectively attracts and engages students.

Students named college websites as the most helpful resource overall and indicated that websites were especially useful earlier in their search process. Ensure that your website meets early researchers’ needs by building out robust content on majors and by adhering to SEO best practices. In addition to ensuring that your site effectively attracts students, make sure that it encourages further engagement and affinity through compelling brand-building content.

- ▶ *For tips on how to drive website traffic through search engine marketing, read our blog post on paid search at [eab.com/PaidSearchBlog](https://eab.com/PaidSearchBlog).*

**Learn more** about how EAB can help you achieve your enrollment goals with multichannel marketing at [eab.com/enrollment](https://eab.com/enrollment).

# About the Study

## Overview of the Survey

EAB's Enrollment Services division surveyed college-bound high school students in the spring of 2019. The survey, which investigated a variety of topics relevant to students, including the resources they use to gather information about college, their preferred communication channels, the social media they use, and the timing of their college search, included responses from 9,476 students.

## Participant Profile

Gender	Percentage
Female	67.1%
Male	31.5%
Other	1.4%

Student's Class Year	Percentage
Senior	30.1%
Junior	25.9%
Sophomore	43.9%

First-Generation Status	Percentage
First-Generation	18.3%
Non-First-Generation	81.7%

Ethnicity	Percentage
African/African American/Black	11.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	14.1%
Hispanic	18.6%
Native American	2.4%
White/Caucasian	64.7%
Other	0.4%

Estimated Household Income	Percentage
\$60,000 or less	20.9%
\$60,001-\$120,000	20.3%
\$120,001 or more	17.5%
I don't know	41.4%

Region of Residence	Percentage
Northeast	19.4%
South	32.2%
Midwest	17.5%
West	25.6%
Outside the United States	5.4%



**We help schools support students** from enrollment to graduation and beyond

> Find and enroll your right-fit students

> Support and graduate more students



> **ROOTED IN RESEARCH**

**7,500+** Peer-tested best practices

**500+** Enrollment innovations tested annually

> **ADVANTAGE OF SCALE**

**1,500+** Institutions served

**3.7 M+** Students supported by our SSMS

> **WE DELIVER RESULTS**

**95%** Of our partners continue with us year after year, reflecting the goals we **achieve together**

> Prepare your institution for the future



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