

Personal Connection:

How to Maximize Enrollment, Retention and Re-Engagement

Key Findings from the 2021 E-Expectations® Trend Report



Introduction

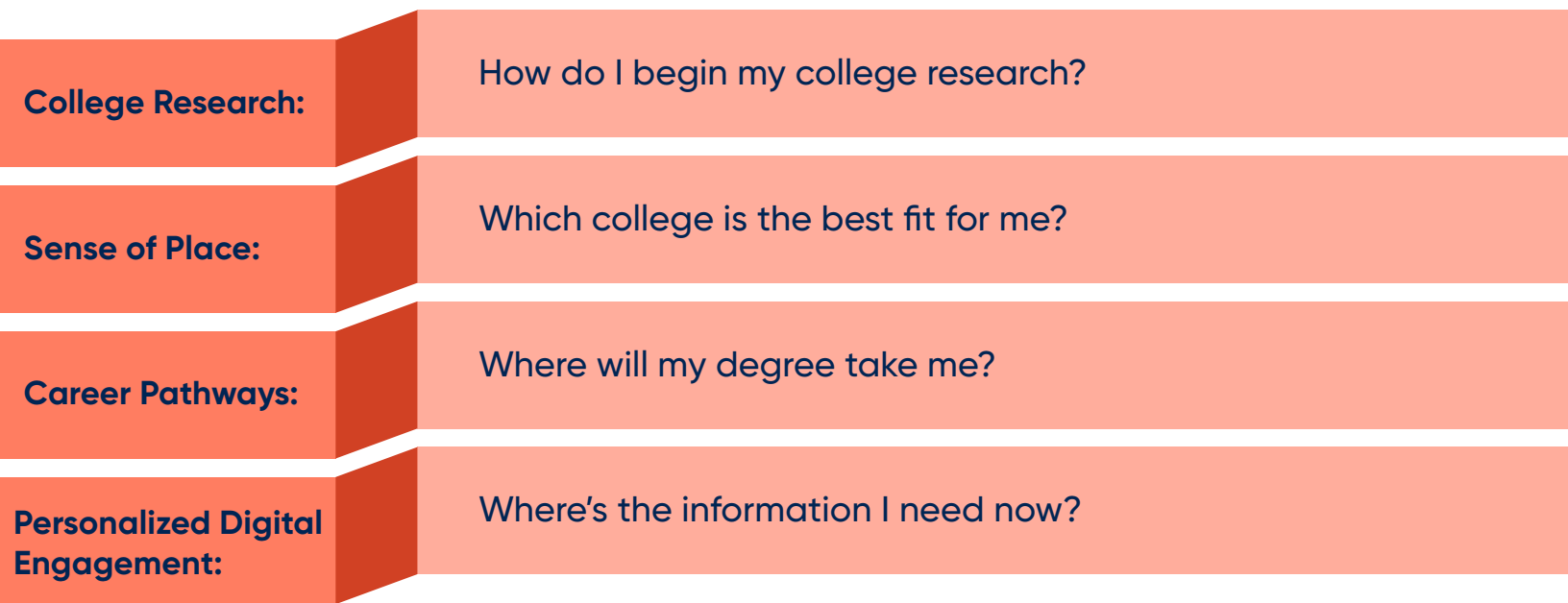
The college application process is complicated, confusing and stressful. In addition to juggling academics, sports, work and extracurricular and community activities, high schoolers must also find time to write essays, fill out admissions forms and compile resumes. It's no wonder **75% of high schoolers** describe themselves as "often or always" feeling stressed. They're also **wracked with fear**: fear of leaving home, fear of rejection, fear of finances, fear of making their first major life decision.

These prospective students are your customers, and if your college or university is going to win the admissions and recruitment game, you've got to put their considerations, needs and concerns front and center in all your outreach, application and enrollment efforts.

To do this, you must create meaningful connections that begin with the very hub of all marketing activity: your website. Your college or university website is the front door to your institution—the **first place** prospective students check to find out what you have to offer them.

What high school students see in the first few seconds is a make-or-break moment for your institution. Do they find a digital experience that's easy to navigate, friendly, customized and relevant? Or do they encounter a clunky online interaction that only adds to the mounting stress they feel? If your school's digital experience doesn't deliver, why should they expect anything more from other facets of your campus experience?

Data from the latest research from the [2021 E-Expectations Trend Report](#) underscores why personalization is critical to nurturing the digital student experience at each of these crucial stages:



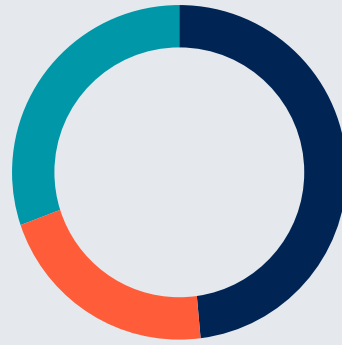
The report also outlines how your college or university website can capitalize on personalization to make meaningful connections that are relational, immediate, authentic and welcoming at each stage of the student journey.

Demographics

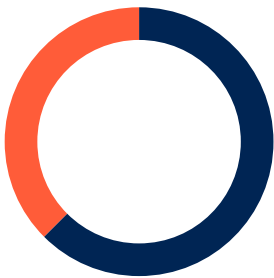
About the 2021 study

- 47% high school seniors
- 33% high school juniors
- 20% high school sophomores

Based on 2,087 participants



Academic ability



- **60%** with GPA of 3.6 or greater
- **40%** with GPA of 3.5 or less

Parent education



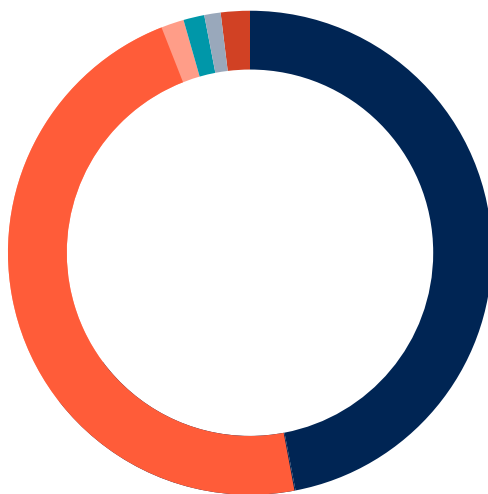
- **63%** Parent has college experience
- **37%** Parent has NO college experience

Class/Graduating year



- **47%** 2021 (Seniors)
- **33%** 2022 (Juniors)
- **20%** 2023 (Sophomores)

Gender



- **47%** Female
- **47%** Male
- **1.41%*** Transgender Female
- **1.37%*** Transgender Male
- **0.96%*** Non-binary/third gender/Non-conforming
- **1.84%*** Prefer to self describe

*Low confidence, not reported

1. College Research:

“How Do I Begin My College Research?”

Prospective students need virtual handholding as they explore your website. They're likely unfamiliar with academic terminology, unsure of how to investigate academic programs and uncertain of where those programs lead. The 2021 E-Expectations Trend Report demonstrates how prospective students research colleges and make intentional decisions along the way—sharing key data about consumer behavior that strengthens your digital marketing strategy, so you can give students what they want and need from their very first digital interaction.

KEY INSIGHT

42% of prospective students researching colleges and universities link to a website from an email message. After meeting with an admissions representative at their high school, 53% of prospective students go directly to the school's website for more information.

HOW PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS FIND A WEBSITE

I use a search engine like Google, Bing or Yahoo	57%
I link to the website from an email message	42%
I search social media	32%
I know and use the address to the website	32%
I find the website's address/URL on something printed that they've shared with me	24%
I go to a college planning website and find the link there	22%
I use a bookmark to the website I created in the past	17%
I use links that my parent(s) emailed or texted to me	9%

ACTIONS OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS AFTER MEETING WITH ADMISSIONS REPRESENTATIVES AT THEIR HIGH SCHOOL

Went to the website	53%
Filled out a form to get more information	45%
Looked at application requirements	45%

ACTION

A website personalization engine logs the pages visited and the number of times a student visits each one. This valuable data helps you understand what content you need to provide next as the student progresses from curiosity, to interest, to applying. Include targeted information on your website that narrows down as students self-select information about programs, job outlook, campus life and cost of tuition.

KEY INSIGHT

58% of students want easy-to-find details about programs and degrees. Visual appeal and easy-to-read web pages also matter. Virtual tours and determining fit are especially important to sophomores (47% as opposed to 29% for seniors) just beginning the college search process.

TOP THREE THINGS ABOUT A COLLEGE WEBSITE THAT ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Details about academic programs	27%	28%	27%	27%
Ability to find the website through a search engine	25%	27%	21%	25%
Easy to see which programs and degrees are offered	31%	27%	33%	35%
Overall visual appeal of the site	23%	24%	23%	16%
Easy-to-read pages	24%	23%	27%	22%
Link choices that make sense to me	18%	20%	18%	12%

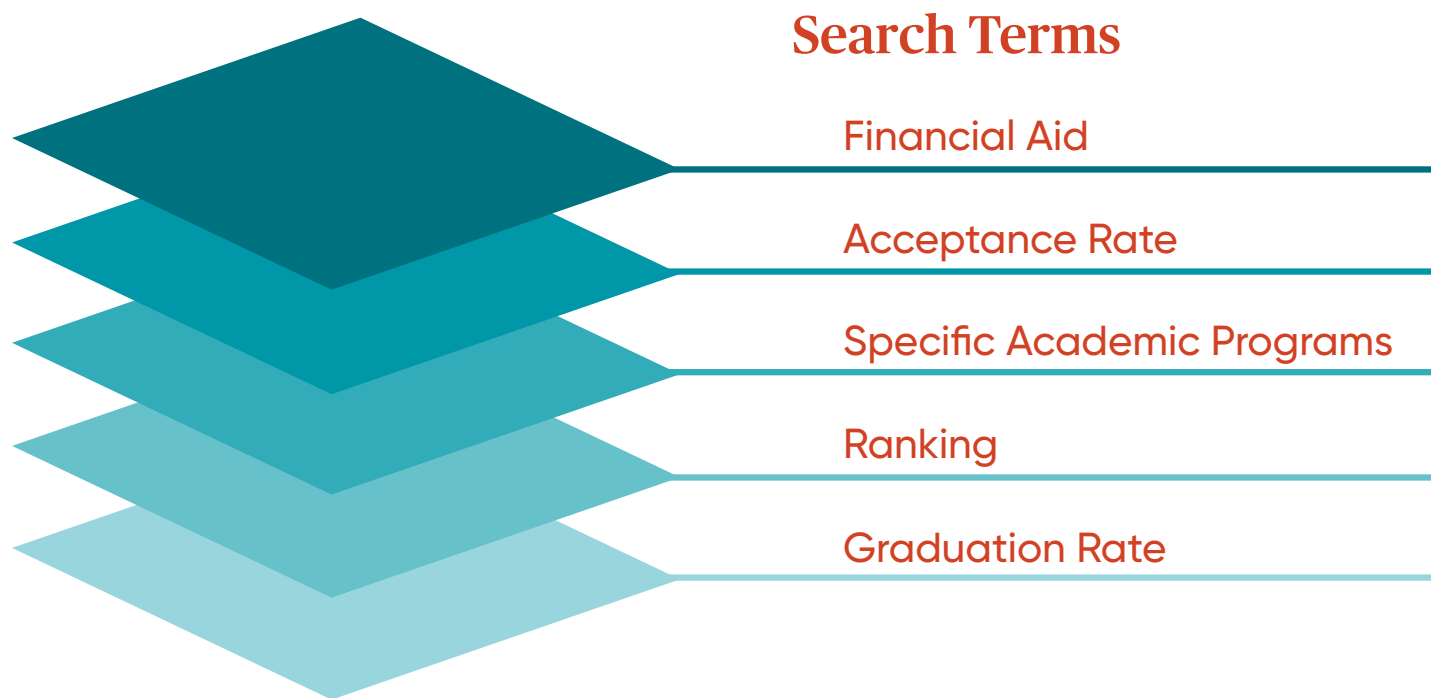
	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Works well on my mobile device	13%	14%	13%	7%
An overview of the school type, mission, programs and location	13%	13%	12%	15%
Virtual Tours	15%	13%	16%	21%
A feel for the school and how I would fit in	14%	12%	12%	26%
Clear directions for the application process	10%	10%	13%	5%
Photos of campus facilities, students and faculty	11%	10%	12%	12%
Statistics on recent graduates who land jobs	10%	10%	10%	11%
Contact information such as email addresses or phone numbers	11%	10%	12%	13%
Hard numbers on how much recent graduates make at their first jobs	9%	9%	9%	7%
Site-specific search tool that delivers information I'm seeking	8%	9%	10%	3%
Examples of alumni finding work after graduation	6%	8%	3%	5%
Video of current students, faculty and campus	7%	6%	6%	10%
Forms that let me ask for more information	7%	5%	7%	11%
Chatbot feature to help find information	4%	3%	3%	8%

ACTION

Search-optimized program pages and a rich course catalog is a powerful combination of resources to engage students. It's also important to embed career pathways with valuable job outlook data so that students can align interests with career outcomes—and don't underestimate the value of immersive online campus maps and virtual tours.

TRENDING

If you're not optimizing your website for search, you're losing valuable traffic. Build content around the most popular search terms prospective students are using: financial aid, acceptance rate, specific academic programs, ranking and graduation rate.



KEY INSIGHT

Today's prospective students have grown up online. If they aren't served the information they want and need quickly (**generally within eight seconds**), they'll simply look elsewhere. 40% will lose interest in an institution after a frustrating or disappointing web experience, and 1 in 10 will completely abandon your site and remove your college or university from their list.

PROSPECTIVE STUDENT RESPONSES TO A WEBSITE THAT'S DISAPPOINTING OR FRUSTRATING TO USE

I'll look on other websites	27%
I'll ask a parent or counselor to help me find the information I need	16%
I'll just keep trying to use the website	14%
I'll remove this school from my list	13%
I'll call the school to get what I need	12%
I'll look on the school's social media for answers	9%
Nothing	4%
I'll look for what I need in print materials	4%

ACTION

Engagement is the name of the college admissions game, and your website must be the go-to site for all things college. Build frictionless experiences into your website, such as landing pages that immediately address students' "How do I" questions:

How do I **fit on campus?**

How do I **apply?**

How do I **find an academic program that leads to a career?**

How do I **get involved?**

How do I **pay for college?**

How do I **stay connected after graduating?**

KEY INSIGHT

On a scale from 1 to 5 with 5 being the most influential, Information/Digital Content (3.71) and Campus Experience (3.68) are the biggest influences when prospective students are considering a college or university.

THE BIGGEST INFLUENCES ON SELECTING A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

More information (digital content) about the school or program you are considering	3.71
Experience during an on-campus visit (either self-guided or guided)	3.68
Visit from/with a school counselor	3.43
Phone call from a faculty member in the program you are considering	3.24
Experience during virtual visit	3.09
Phone call from a current student from the university	2.94

ACTION

Prospective students clearly want and need as much content as possible to make an informed decision and find their fit. PDFs of program information won't cut it. Offer personalized video content for web visitors and a dynamic course catalog that's easy to navigate, so that students can effortlessly research an academic path that's right for them.

KEY INSIGHT

85% of prospective students turn to Instagram and YouTube to learn more about a specific college or university. TikTok is also gaining traction as a credible communication channel.

SOCIAL MEDIA SITES STUDENTS USE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT A SPECIFIC COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Facebook	26%	27%	29%	18%
Instagram	47%	44%	47%	52%
LinkedIn	9%	10%	10%	4%
Pinterest	7%	5%	10%	8%
Snapchat	11%	10%	13%	9%
Twitter	20%	22%	21%	12%
Vimeo	5%	5%	7%	0%
YouTube	38%	37%	40%	39%
None	9%	9%	10%	10%
TikTok	16%	16%	13%	22%
Facebook Messenger	3%	3%	4%	2%
Discord	2%	2%	3%	3%
Reddit	8%	9%	8%	0%

ACTION

A multi-channel approach is required for personalization to be effective in reaching prospective students. Transform your website into an interactive hub that organizes and manages content from all social channels on one dashboard and displays feeds within the website.

KEY INSIGHT

Students are eager to engage and will initiate the next step, whether it is a visit to your campus website, completing a form, emailing an admissions counselor or even applying for admission.

ACTIONS TAKEN AFTER MEETING WITH A VISITING ADMISSIONS REPRESENTATIVE

I went to the website	53%
I filled out a form to get more information	45%
I looked at application requirements	45%
I told my parents about the school	28%
I applied for admission	28%
I registered for an open house or planned a visit	26%
I watched videos on the site	24%
I looked at their social media sites (Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube)	17%

ACTIONS TAKEN AFTER VIEWING A VIRTUAL TOUR OR REALITY VIDEO

Continued looking through the website	31%
Nothing at all	26%
Emailed an admissions counselor or office	21%
Filled out a form to get more information	20%
Emailed the financial aid office	19%
Live chatted with a college representative	14%
Scheduled a visit	12%
Completed an application	9%
Removed the school from my list	9%
Used an online chat tool to ask questions	4%

ACTION

Make it easy for students to take the next step with prominently displayed calls-to-action (CTAs) throughout your website that prompt them to self-select and move forward in the admissions process. CTAs also help your institution directly convert or generate leads to nurture through other communications, such as newsletters containing the latest campus news, videos and electronic documents. The ultimate goal is to convert a percentage of these leads to attending students.

TRENDING

Since 80% of prospective students apply to five colleges or fewer, your institution's website must provide personalized, relevant experiences that prompt them to visit, nurture their recruitment journey with "right for me" content, and then close the deal with information (costs, financial aid, etc.) that helps them make a final decision.

HOW MANY INSTITUTIONS PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS WILL APPLY TO OR HAVE APPLIED TO

Fewer than 5	80%
6-10	6%
More than 11	14%

	≤5	6-10	≥11
High academic ability	76%	17%	7%
Average academic ability	86%	9%	5%

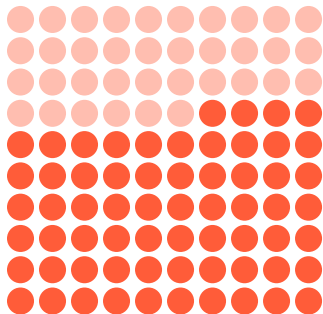
2. Sense of Place:

“Which College Is the Best Fit for Me?”

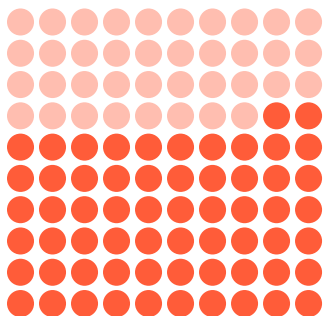
While in-person college and university tours continue to be the best way for prospective students to establish a sense of place, virtual tours, videos and compelling photography are becoming legitimate alternatives—especially in times of campus closures or with geographic limitations. Integrating these types of content into your website eases concerns and builds meaningful connection with students before they ever step foot on campus.

KEY INSIGHT

Almost two-thirds of prospective students (64%) watch campus virtual tours. Those same students not only say they are more likely to enroll in a college or university after viewing a virtual tour, but that doing so prompts them to act by emailing admissions and financial aid, completing forms and chatting with campus representatives.

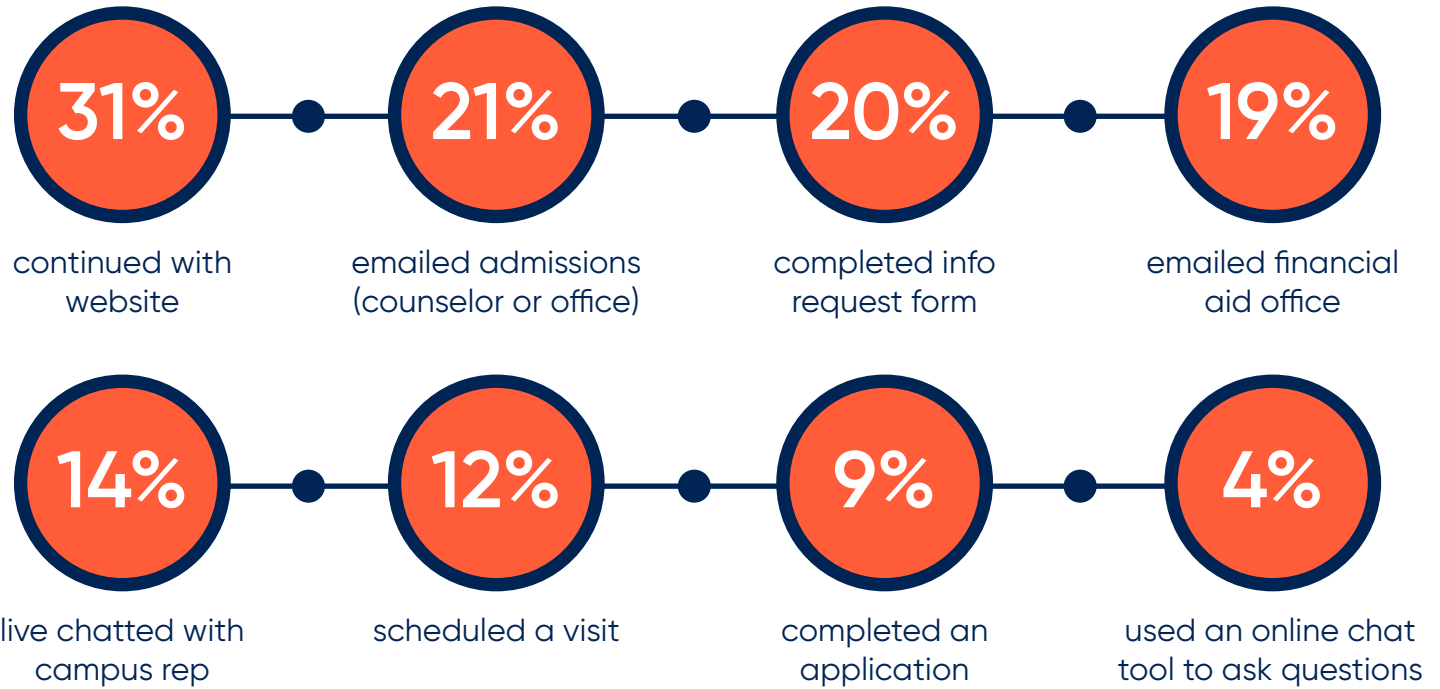


**64% OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS
HAVE LOOKED AT A VIRTUAL
TOUR ON A COLLEGE SITE**



**62% OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS SAID
THEY ARE SOMEWHAT MORE LIKELY
OR MUCH MORE LIKELY TO ENROLL
AFTER WATCHING A VIRTUAL TOUR**

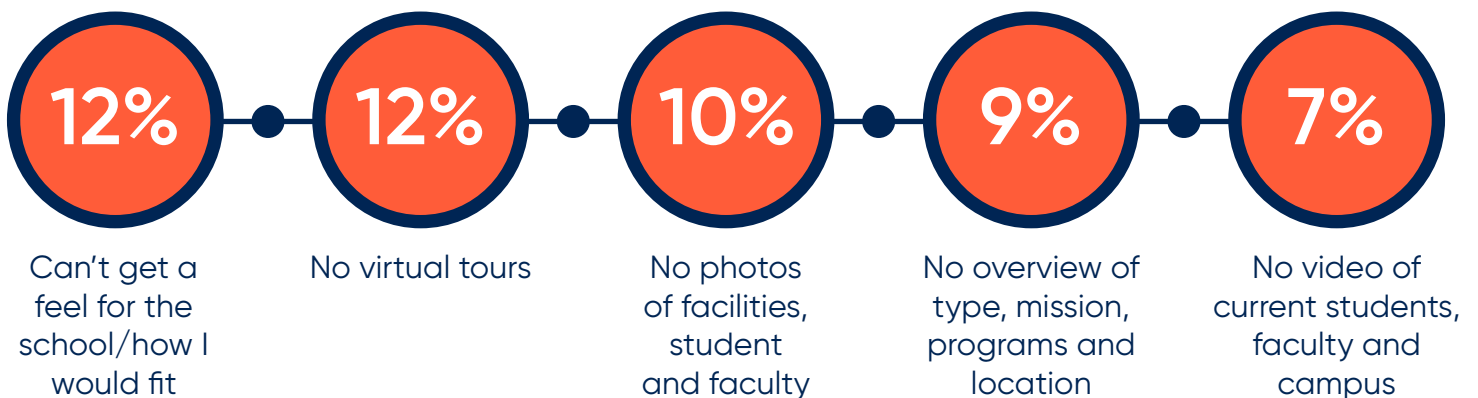
Actions Taken After Viewing a Virtual Tour



ACTION

Your college website must include a virtual campus tour with interactive campus maps, feature-rich videos and compelling photography. Prospective students want and deserve the same personalized interactions from their digital engagement experience with your website as they get from visiting campus.

What Frustrates Prospective Students About a College Website?



ACTION

Why do multimedia and image-rich stories matter? Because prospective students are looking to see how they fit on your campus. A sense of frustration builds when they can't relate to the content on your website—frustration that could be eased or even eliminated by providing next-step content based on their prior behavior.

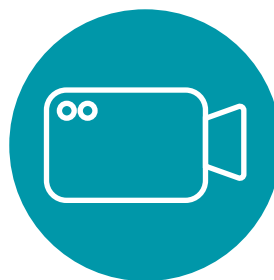
BEST PRACTICE

It's no surprise that video and photography posts on a college or university's social channels are the most popular for prospective students. A thoughtful, personalized marketing strategy will include backlinks to specific website pages to enhance engagement opportunities driven by student behavior.

Most Interesting Social Media Posts



53%
photos



51%
videos

KEY INSIGHT

Sophomores, juniors and seniors are highly persuaded by website video content as seen in the following influential resources ranked on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the most influential. Equally influential? Virtual tours, especially for sophomores just beginning their college research.

INFLUENTIAL RESOURCES	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Printed brochures at the school	3.39	3.45	3.41	3.58
The college's website	3.99	3.91	3.91	4.08
Rankings found in magazines	3.27	3.37	3.39	3.23
College planning website	3.63	3.49	3.78	3.68
Email from a particular school	3.75	3.7	3.79	3.9
Phone calls from admissions counselors	3.64	3.58	3.8	3.73
Texts or live messages from admissions counselors	3.62	3.54	3.59	3.66
Social media posts	3.36	3.51	3.46	3.28
Results from a financial aid or scholarship calculator	3.84	3.85	3.77	3.9
Virtual Tours	3.51	3.51	3.59	3.78
Videos of campus, classrooms, students, residence halls	3.75	3.73	3.7	3.86
Virtual Reality Tours	3.5	3.53	3.41	3.43
Live chat tools on the schools website	3.02	3.13	3.08	3.11
Calls, texts or emails from athletic coaches	3.35	3.47	3.22	3.47
Statistics on salaries of recent college graduates	3.69	3.79	3.74	3.65

ACTION

Realistic depictions of campus life provide a personalized student digital engagement experience that helps prospective students determine college fit. Make virtual tours as customizable and comprehensive as possible, with tour themes, layered map markers and 360° photos and videos. Also, keep videos short or divide longer videos into installments to hold students' short attention spans.

KEY INSIGHT

Prospective students are mindful of finances. Three of their top four searches on a college website concern cost.

WHAT PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS LOOK FOR WHEN SURFING A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY WEBSITE

Cost/tuition information	71%
A list of academic programs or degrees	61%
Scholarship listings	57%
Scholarship and financial aid info	50%
How to apply for admission	48%
A way to see how campus looks and the city where the school is located	40%
Details about living in the dorms	39%
Something that shows what student life is like	38%
Photos	36%
Specific academic program details	35%
Rankings for the college or specific programs	32%
Virtual tours	30%
How to contact admissions	27%
How to plan a visit to campus	26%
Course catalogs	25%
Anything to give me an overview of the campus, programs and students	23%

A way to get them to send more information	21%
Videos	17%
A calendar or way to see what kind of events are on campus	17%
Information about athletic programs	16%
Open house, preview day or other admissions events information	15%
Directions to campus	15%
Faculty and staff directories	10%

ACTION

Personalizing your website using geolocation automatically points prospective students to information relevant to them, such as tuition rates, depending on whether the visitor is in-state or out-of-state. You can also share context-relevant information, like possible career pathways, to help prospective students visualize the ROI of their education.

KEY INSIGHT

An important consideration for “campus fit” is whether your college or university offers a particular major or program. Prospective students across the board are thinking about their future and naturally curious about the academic and career opportunities available to them. This type of thinking is starting earlier than ever, with almost half of sophomores ranking academic programming as their primary reason for contacting a college or university.

PRIMARY REASONS FOR CONTACTING A SCHOOL	OVERALL	SENIORS	JUNIORS	SOPHOMORES
Plan a visit	12%	14%	11%	3%
Information about financial aid	15%	17%	12%	8%
Information about a major or program	35%	31%	37%	49%
Information about athletic programs	6%	5%	7%	7%
Information about a campus activity	2%	2%	2%	3%
Talk to an admissions counselor	9%	9%	9%	7%
Talk to a coach	3%	3%	1%	3%
Talk to someone from financial aid	5%	5%	4%	3%
Talk to a current student	4%	4%	6%	3%
Questions about how to apply	7%	5%	9%	12%
Questions about an application I had submitted	3%	5%	1%	1%

ACTION

It goes without saying that your website must provide of-the-moment, accurate academic program information—a static webpage or PDF listing is unacceptable. A personalized digital experience designed to help students find their fit requires an interactive, real-time course catalog featuring programs of study, degree planners, course portfolios and guided pathways information that align with job outlook and career goals.

3. Career Pathways:

“Where Will My Degree Take Me?”

Is college or university worth it? That’s the question on every student’s mind. Both prospects and parents are increasingly exploring career outcomes as an integral part of the college search process.

KEY INSIGHT

Prospective students want to know whether the cost of a chosen academic path will pay off later in their career. At the outset of college or university they want information on college costs and financial aid. But when they’re ready to graduate, they expect labor market data with both short- and long-term salary information.

What’s Important to Find On a College Website When Researching the Return-on-Investment of Higher Ed

- 1 Hard numbers on how much recent graduates make at their first jobs
- 2 Examples of alumni finding work after graduation
- 3 Information on how much I can expect to earn in first few years
- 4 Information on how much I can expect to earn over the course of my career

ACTION

Higher ed websites must provide a learner-to-earner pathway with features that combine academic programs with solid job statistics and marketing outlook data. Showing relevance in real time and prompting students with helpful calls to action makes the return-on-investment of higher education clear.

KEY INSIGHT

Prospective students enter college worrying about fit but as they progress through their academic programs, those worries evolve into concerns over landing a job.

EXPECTATIONS THAT A POTENTIAL PATHWAY TO A POST-GRADUATION JOB WILL BE PRESENTED THROUGHOUT A STUDENT'S TIME AT COLLEGE	To a very great extent	To a great extent	To some extent	To a little extent	Don't expect that at all
Seniors	9%	22%	28%	23%	18%
Juniors	11%	22%	20%	26%	21%
Sophomores	5%	18%	29%	23%	24%

EXPECTATIONS THAT A CURRICULUM IS RECOMMENDED BASED UPON A STUDENT'S POST-GRADUATION GOALS	To a very great extent	To a great extent	To some extent	To a little extent	Don't expect that at all
Seniors	21%	26%	22%	21%	10%
Juniors	27%	29%	19%	14%	11%
Sophomores	17%	30%	21%	21%	10%

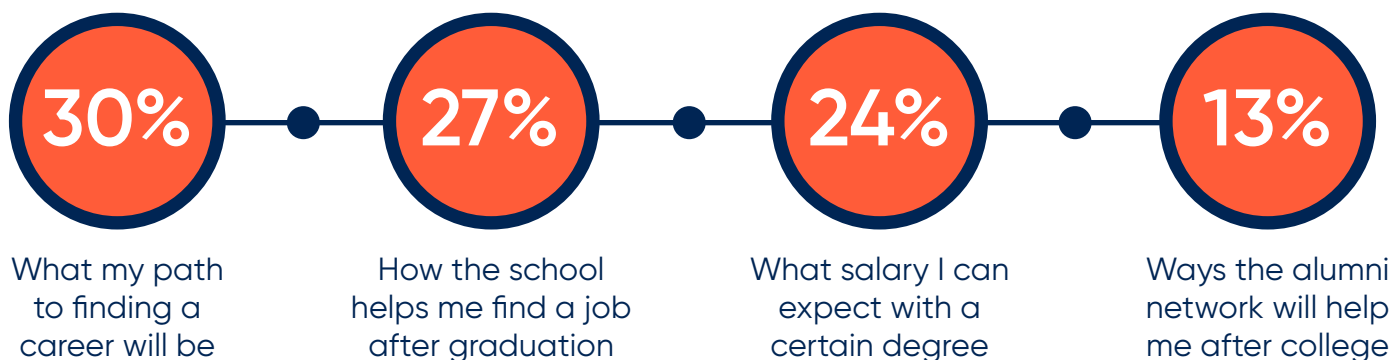
ACTION

Academic pathways should extend beyond graduation with support to students as they navigate the job market—and alumni as they move throughout their careers. Position your college or university website as an end-to-end engagement platform with relevant labor market data, a robust search feature to compare programs and careers, and certificate pages and continuing education options for lifelong learners. Doing so helps students launch and maintain successful careers but also builds trust and sets the groundwork for lifelong student/alumni-university relationships.

KEY INSIGHT

Social media channels have typically displayed campus lifestyle and event-specific content. In this year's survey students indicated interest in seeing more social content about finding a career path, getting a job after graduation and networking with alumni.

Topics of Most Interest From a College or University Social Media Channel



ACTION

Think of your digital marketing campaign as a spider web that stretches across all aspects of a prospective student's life with a unified message. To drive meaningful connection, content from your institution's social channels must align with and complement the content found on your website. For example, showcase successful alumni through social channels that link back to the school's alumni pages to build alumni engagement and to specific career pathways to prompt current students to explore career options. Opportunity and clarity result when your messaging is cohesive, personalized and integrated.

4. Personalized Digital Engagement: “Where’s the Information I Need Now?”

Website personalization for higher ed sparks the beginnings of a relationship between students and your college or university much like a conversation, not a one-sided transaction. It should deliver the right content to the right students at the right time. And it should be thoughtful, genuine and student-centric, a digital environment where students feel like more than a number or website visitor.

KEY INSIGHT

Everyone likes to see their name in lights and prospective students are no exception. 46% indicate that they appreciate seeing their name and interests reflected in marketing materials and 43% like having the control to self-select in a way that leads to personalized content about their specific interests.

PROSPECTIVE STUDENT FEEDBACK ON HOW COLLEGES USE PERSONALIZATION IN COMMUNICATIONS OR WEB EXPERIENCES

I like seeing my name and interests included in emails or brochures	46%
I like using websites that allow me to filter and personalize content to meet my interests	43%
I don't care whether or not a site is personalized	19%
I don't like it when schools personalize communications for me at all	6%
I haven't experienced anything like this	6%

ACTION

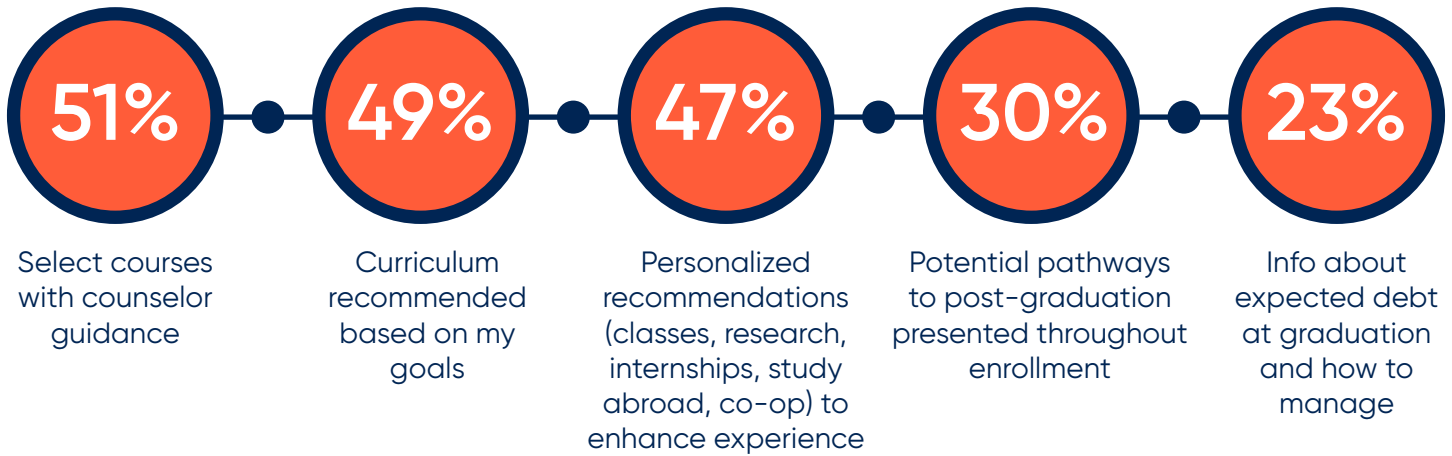
Even small steps, such as website navigation that begins with simple search, can carry prospective students incrementally deeper into the content they want and need. These provide effective mechanisms to personalize the student experience and spark a relationship that can last decades.

KEY INSIGHT

Prospective students want “right for me” content and they don’t care whether its source is from a website or a counselor. With no guidance, most students land on a website and struggle to navigate to useful information.

Prospective Student Expectations for a Personalized College Experience

What is your expectation for a personalized college experience?



HOW PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS FIND INFORMATION ON A SPECIFIC COLLEGE WEBSITE

I look at the links they offer on the website and figure out which one is the best path	56%
I use the search tool on the college website	48%
I use a general search engine like Google	40%
I use the links sent to me in email messages	32%
I use the links I find in college planning websites	21%
I use a bookmark from a previous visit	10%
I use a chatbot	5%

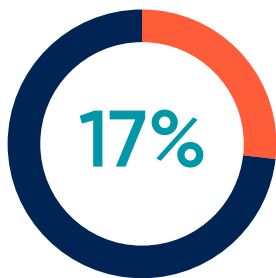
ACTION

Build out persona-based templates to help students find important content then have your website suggest curriculums, programs and educational experiences based on students' self-selection. Tailoring content from previous visits and displaying relevant calls-to-action help students see the programs and services they need.

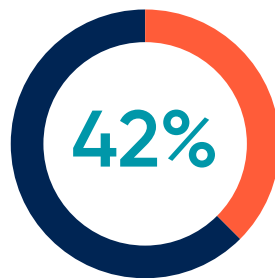
KEY INSIGHT

An increase in chatbot use indicates a deep cry for personalization. Prospective students are comfortable with technology as long as it delivers immediate personalized content that they've come to expect from other online experiences.

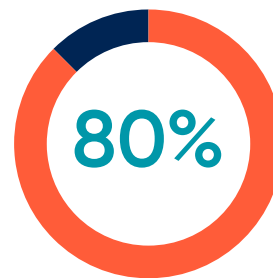
Have You Ever Used a Live Chat Tool As You Were Looking At a College Website?



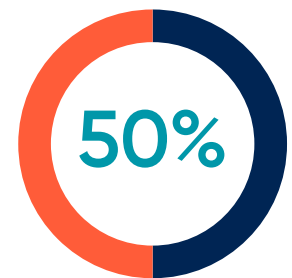
2019



2020



Found the experience helpful



Have used a chatbot to express interest in a school

ACTION

AI/chatbots address the question, "Where's the info I need right now?" by providing general information and quick answers. Additionally, use AI to prompt conversations, engage with targeted content and lead to more detailed information that students can explore. For example, a chatbot on your tuition page could prompt students to move to the next step by checking out the financial calculator.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Today's prospective students have grown up online, so they're savvy internet users. Even so, they want guidance from a trusted source that can virtually hold their hand through the particularly uncertain, uncomfortable time of college decision making.

To succeed, your institution must nurture the personalized digital student experience at each of these turns:

1

College Research: How do I begin my college research?

Understanding prospective student behavior strengthens your digital marketing strategy so that you can give students what they want and need from their very first digital interaction.

2

Sense of Place: Which college is the best fit for me?

Establishing a sense of place on your website with virtual tours, videos and compelling photography eases concerns and builds meaningful connection with students before they ever step foot on campus.

3

Career Pathways: Where will my degree take me?

Knowing what is expected from an academic program and where it leads after graduation gives both prospective students and parents peace of mind.

4

Personalized Digital Engagement: Where's the information I need now?

Implementing website personalization for higher ed sparks the beginnings of a relationship between students and your college or university much like a conversation, not a one-sided and short-term transaction.

Choose higher ed's first cloud-based,
end-to-end student engagement platform.

Because modern learners demand it.
And your enrollment growth depends on it.

**modern
campus** | Engagement
Evolved™

moderncampus.com

About Modern Campus

Modern Campus is obsessed with empowering its 1,200+ higher education customers to thrive when radical transformation is required to respond to lower student enrollments and revenue, rising costs, crushing student debt and even school closures.

Powered by [Omni CMS](#), [DIGARC](#), [Presence](#) and [Destiny One](#), the Modern Campus [modern learner engagement platform](#) enables innovative institutions to create a "learner to earner" lifecycle that engages modern learners for life.

Delivering massive personalization, AI-driven recommendations and a modern e-commerce engine, Modern Campus creates a student-first digital experience and removes silos across campus. Presidents and provosts, marketing and IT teams, admissions, registrars, student affairs and CE divisions can partner to attract, enroll, empower, retain, credential and re-engage students with pathways for lifelong learning.

Learn how Modern Campus is leading the modern learner engagement movement at moderncampus.com and follow us on [LinkedIn](#).