2023 E-Expectations® Trend Report

Examining the online experiences, expectations, and behaviors of college-bound high school students

Table of Contents

E-Expectations 2023: 7 Key Findings

Today's high school students have been through profound changes and challenges in the last three years. The experiences of the pandemic, lockdowns, virtual classes, and economic and social disruptions have had tremendous—and possibly lasting—impacts on them. As they prepare to enroll in college, have those experiences changed how they search for colleges to attend?

RNL, Gigg, Modern Campus, PLEXUSS, and StudentBridge set out to examine those changes in this E-Expectations survey. We polled nearly 2,000 students from 10th to 12th grade about their online expectations, experiences, behaviors, and priorities. With the college search process now beginning early in high school for many students, this 2023 report breaks down many of the findings by grade level, showing how student behavior changes as they approach graduation.

Here are key takeaways from this year's study:

1 Students use a variety of resources, reinforcing the need for a balanced, omnichannel approach to marketing

Top sources used to learn about colleges and universities

1) The college's or university's website
2) Emails from a particular school
3) Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls
4) Printed brochures about the school
5) Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator

2 Students are willing to share contact information for their parents

Top items of personal information students will share

1) Email address
2) Name
3) Cell phone
4) Parent email
5) Parent phone

3 More students are watching videos and finding them helpful

Number of students who have watched videos from colleges and universities

2023   **82%**

2021   **70%**

83%
of students find videos helpful

(4) Students look for social interaction and communities online

78%
have used social media
in their college planning

74%
have used online communities where students can interact with other students who are interested in the same university

(5) "Virtual" is becoming a reality for college student search

73%
of students use virtual tours or virtual reality experiences in college planning

79%
find them helpful

(6) Students make contact through your site and through email

Top ways students contact a college

1) Form on school's website
2) Email
3) Schedule a campus visit

(7) Most students are clicking on digital ads

63% of students have clicked on a digital ad from a college

Why they click

- Didn't know about the school and wanted to learn more.
- Offer made in the ad was interesting.
- Thought they might find out something new about the school.
- Ad reminded student to do something related to their enrollment.

Let's talk about how you can meet the E-Expectations of students

Ask for a free consultation with our enrollment experts. We can talk about how you can align your digital and traditional marketing strategies more closely with your enrollment goals.

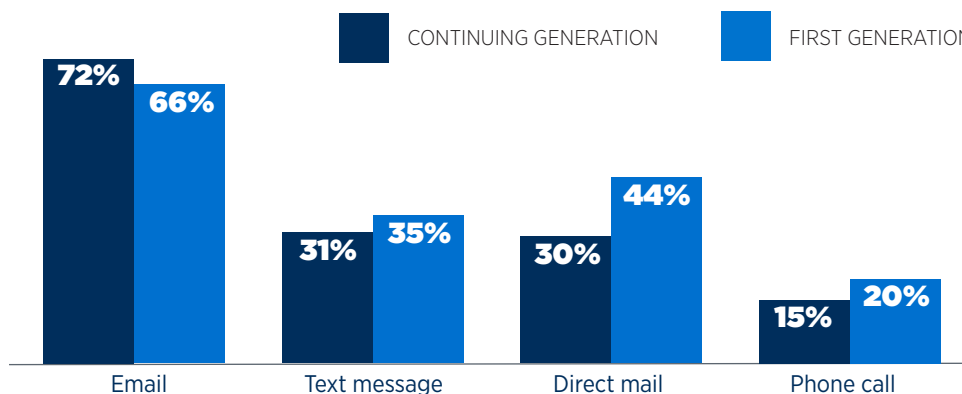## Visit **RuffaloNL.com/DigitalConsult**

Communication Channels
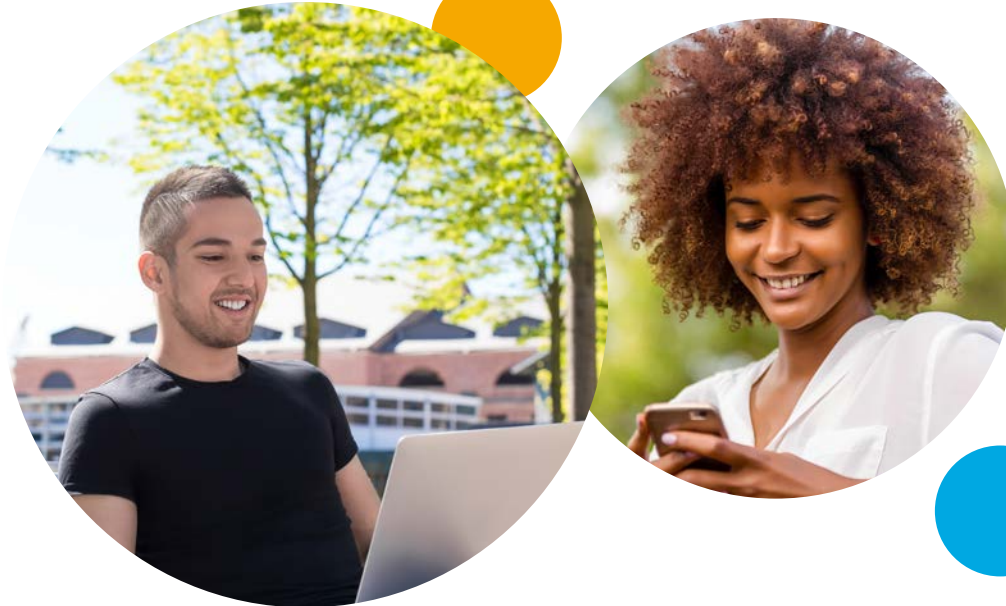
1) Preferred communication channels to receive information

Email is by far the most preferred channel for receiving information from a college, but these results show significant numbers of students also embrace other channels for receiving information—demonstrating the importance of a strategically balanced, omnichannel approach to engaging students. First-generation students also showed more receptiveness to direct mail, texting, and calls.

CHANNEL	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Email	72%	69%	66%
Text message	34%	28%	32%
Direct mail	31%	44%	40%
Phone call	18%	15%	14%

CONTINUING GENERATION ▪ **FIRST GENERATION**

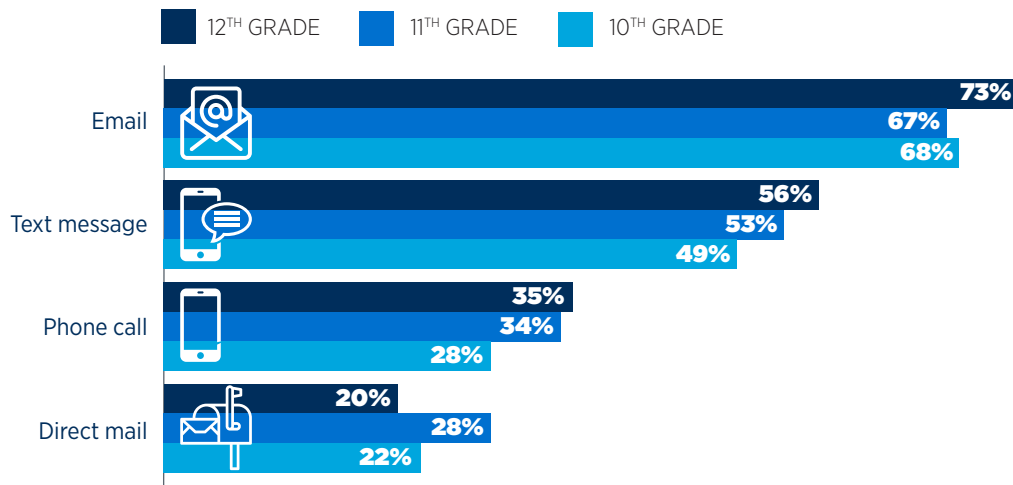|	Email	Text message	Direct mail	Phone call
Continuing Generation	72%	31%	30%	15%
First Generation	66%	35%	44%	20%

2) How students inquire with colleges

As high school students approach graduation, their methods of inquiring with colleges become more direct.

CONTACT METHOD	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Complete a form on the school's website to get more information	40%	29%	26%
Email the school	36%	25%	32%
Schedule a visit to the campus	36%	28%	22%
Use college planning sites	29%	27%	24%
List the school in PSAT, SAT, or ACT	24%	24%	22%
Call the school	22%	16%	14%
Respond to brochures or letters	25%	19%	19%
Follow the school's social pages	20%	14%	16%
Complete a cost or scholarship calculator	17%	10%	13%
Use school's mobile app	15%	7%	16%

CONTACT METHOD	CONTINUING GENERATION	FIRST GENERATION
Complete a form on the school's website to get more information	28%	40%
Email the school	35%	31%
Schedule a visit to the campus	28%	27%
Use college planning sites	18%	22%
List the school in PSAT, SAT, or ACT	18%	22%
Call the school	24%	20%
Respond to brochures or letters	35%	20%
Follow the school's social pages	18%	16%
Complete a cost or scholarship calculator	13%	11%
Use school's mobile app	15%	10%

3) Student preferences for receiving communications after their initial inquiry

12ᵀᴴ GRADE   **11ᵀᴴ GRADE**   **10ᵀᴴ GRADE**

Email
- 73%
- 67%
- 68%

Text message
- 56%
- 53%
- 49%

Phone call
- 35%
- 34%
- 28%

Direct mail
- 20%
- 28%
- 22%

CONTACT METHOD	CONTINUING GENERATION	FIRST GENERATION
Email	71%	69%
Text message	54%	53%
Phone call	30%	36%
Direct mail	19%	25%

4) Information students are willing to share on a form

INFORMATION	ALL RESPONDENTS
Email address	75%
Name	72%
Cell phone	66%
Parent email	63%
Parent phone	61%
Their high school	59%
Mailing address	50%
Programs they are considering	50%
Career aspirations	45%
How they learned about the school	37%
Preferences for future communication	33%
Opt-in for text messages	25%
Home phone	25%

Recommendation: **Encourage students to share contact information for parents and guardians.**
Parents and guardians are the top enrollment influencers for students, and nearly two-thirds of students are willing to share parental contact information. This gives you the opportunity to reach out to parents and guardians early, engage them about your institution, and excite them about their students enrolling.

5) Top actions students take after other key activities

Here were the top five things students did after virtual tours, clicking an ads, or chatting online. Most students do take action after these activities—fewer than 10 percent said they did nothing.

After viewing a virtual tour or virtual reality video

1) Schedule a visit

2) Fill out a form for more information

3) Follow the school's social pages

4) Continue examining the website

5) Start an application

After clicking on an ad's link

1) Look for information on school's website

2) Watch a video

3) Follow the school's social pages

4) Fill out a form for more information

5) Take a virtual tour

Top actions after an online chat

1) Start an application

2) Fill out a form for more information

3) Have a phone conversation with an enrollment team member

4) Follow the school's social pages

5) Look for information on the website

6) Email

Email remains the most used channel by students as they search for colleges. They use it frequently, rate it as one of the top resources for researching colleges, and prefer it as their top channel for receiving information from a college.

Number of students who open emails from colleges and universities

87%
12TH GRADE

88%
11TH GRADE

92%
10TH GRADE

Top four reasons students open emails from colleges or universities

1) Interested in enrolling at the school

2) Curious to learn more about this school

3) Subject of the email is interesting

4) The student's name is used in the subject line or the email

Students who use email at least once per week

91%
12th Grade

88%
11th Grade

86%
10th Grade

Email is also the second top resource to learn about colleges and universities. Nearly all students will read emails from a particular school, and more than 80 percent find them helpful.

Student attitudes toward emails from a particular school

88%
Use them

82%
Find them helpful

Email remains the top preferred communication channel to receive information from colleges and increases in preference as high school students approach 12th grade. Email is also the preferred channel for receiving information after filling out an online form. In fact, the preference for receiving email after filling out an online form jumped 20 points compared to the 2021 E-Expectations survey.

Students who prefer email as a channel for communication from campuses

72%
12th Grade

69%
11th Grade

66%
10th Grade

Students who prefer to receive an email after filling out a form

73%
12th Grade

67%
11th Grade

68%
10th Grade

51% 2021   **71%** 2023

Students frequently use email throughout the college search process

- **34%** request information from colleges and universities by emailing the school.

- **36%** will email the financial aid or the admissions offices after viewing a virtual tour or virtual reality video.

- Emails are the second-most-used source (**33%**) for students to find information about an institution's social pages.

- Links in emails are the third-most-used source (**30%**) for students to find information on a college website.

Only 20 percent of 12th grade students remembered at least one email from a college or university, but here is what they said made emails memorable:

It was from one of the schools they were interested in.

They used their name, and that made them feel special.

They were simple, and they could understand them.

They were positive messages.

They used humor (they were funny).

They had a link to a video.

The content was interesting in a way that left them wanting to know more.

They were honest and straightforward (no gimmicks).

They had a link to a virtual tour.

They invited them to visit (an easy way to schedule).

They invited them to meet with a rep who was going to be in their high school or in their area.

They invited them to ask a question from a live person (via chat).

7) Direct mail

81% use printed brochures to learn about an institution

80% find printed brochures helpful

After email, brochures are the **second preferred channel** to receive information from an institution. What's more, eight out of ten students use printed brochures to learn about colleges and universities.

Students who listed direct mail as a preferred channel for learning about an institution

31%
12th Grade

44%
11th Grade

40%
10th Grade

30%
Continuing generation

44%
First generation

Students who will respond to mailed brochures or letters as the *first* way to request initial information

25%
12th Grade

19%
11th Grade

19%
10th Grade

18%
Continuing generation

22%
First generation

Students who choose direct mail as a preferred communication channel to receive more information after completing an online form

20%
12th Grade

28%
11th Grade

22%
10th Grade

19%
Continuing generation

25%
First generation

Recommendation: **Use direct mail to nurture student engagement.** These findings show that direct mail should be used as a supplemental channel once the student has made contact. It helps nurture those students while they learn more about your institution and move toward applying. This approach also allows institutions to invest in direct mail with students who have already expressed an interest, saving money on printing and postage.

8) Texting

97% of all students are open to receiving text messages from institutions

Students are increasingly more open to receiving text messages from colleges and universities, even early in their college search process. Our respondents provided more details on when they want to receive text messages and the content they prefer.

When do students want to receive text messages?

TIMING	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Before submitting application	35%	37%	44%
After submitting application	60%	61%	55%
After being admitted	43%	38%	35%
After registering for the first semester	29%	27%	23%
After deciding to attend elsewhere	5%	9%	10%
Never	3%	3%	5%

Channels students prefer for information or follow-up

CHANNEL	TO RECEIVE INFORMATION	AS A FOLLOW-UP TO AN INQUIRY
Emails	70%	71%
Brochures, postcards, letters	36%	23%
Text messages	32%	54%
Telephone calls	16%	33%

Text messages are a great follow-up strategy for students who want to receive them. More than half said they were willing to receive a text message as a follow-up to an inquiry.

What content are students interested in receiving via text message?

CONTENT	ALL RESPONDENTS
Acceptance notification	66%
Details about their application, such as missing documents or status	56%
Deadline reminders	54%
Notifications about available scholarships	53%
Rejection notification	47%
Information about programs/majors	45%
Information about upcoming events	44%
Reminders about their application and status (missing documents, etc.)	41%
Information about financial aid and scholarships	41%
Information about the application process and upcoming deadlines	37%

What message formats do students want to receive?

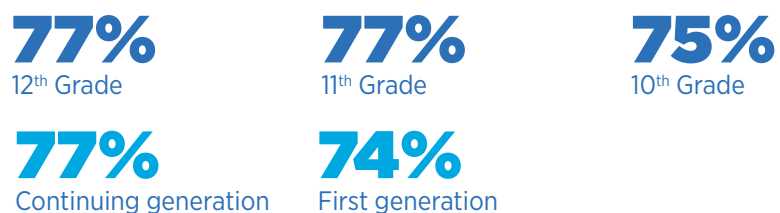| Format	Percentage
Both text (SMS) and messaging apps	45%
Only text (SMS) messages	42%
Only messaging apps	16%
DMs through social channels	14%
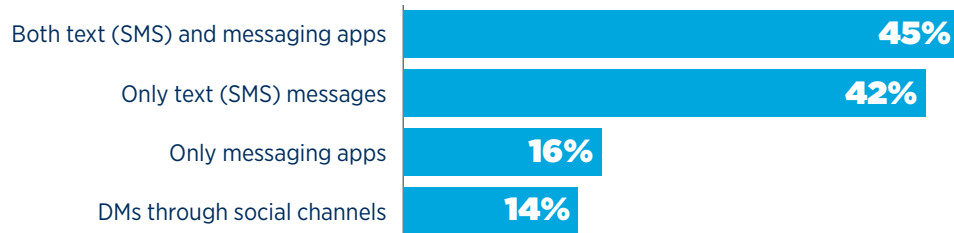
Recommendation: **Make it easy for students to opt-into texting early.** Students in 10th grade in particular expressed interest in receiving text messages before submitting an application, but more than one-third of 11th- and 12th-grade students are also open to pre-application texting. Use texting as a follow-up method after students have made an inquiry, as well as for notifications or deadlines to get students to take action.
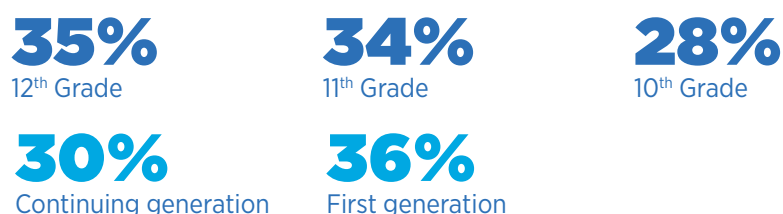
9) Phone calls

Calling remains a strong engagement opportunity with prospective students. No other channel allows the same level of one-on-one engagement as a call to a student. And many students are willing to take a call as a follow-up to an inquiry or to even reach out to an institution via phone.
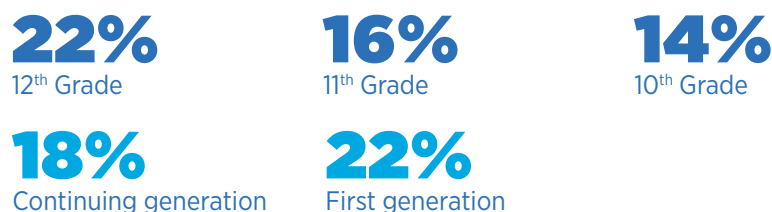
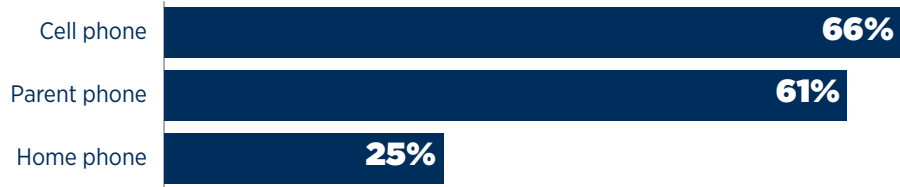**Students who said calls from admissions counselors were helpful in college planning**

77%
12th Grade

77%
11th Grade

75%
10th Grade

77%
Continuing generation

74%
First generation

Students who prefer a call as a follow-up to an inquiry

35%
12th Grade

34%
11th Grade

28%
10th Grade

30%
Continuing generation

36%
First generation

Students who would consider calling an institution to get more information

22%
12th Grade

16%
11th Grade

14%
10th Grade

18%
Continuing generation

22%
First generation

Phone numbers students are willing to share

Cell phone	66%
Parent phone	61%
Home phone	25%

☑ **Recommendation:** **Make calling part of a robust omnichannel engagement strategy.** Calling is an excellent outreach method to engage students in a truly personalized fashion. With one in three students interested in phone calls after inquiring and one in five willing to contact you directly, it's important to facilitate those engagement opportunities. Make sure you have phone information available, and don't forget to ask for the phone number of their parents or guardians.

Information Sources and Tools Students Use

10) Resources: Most used and most helpful

Students use a variety of resources and channels to research colleges and universities. The following show the five most used resources and the five most helpful resources. First, here are the results by grade level, showing how the resources students use change during their college search.

12th grade

MOST USED

College/university website

Emails from a particular school

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

Printed brochures

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator

MOST HELPFUL

College/university website

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator

College planning websites

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

Emails from a particular school

11th grade

MOST USED

College/university website

Emails from a particular school

Printed brochures

College planning websites

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

MOST HELPFUL

College/university website

College planning websites

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

Virtual tours or virtual reality experiences

10th grade

MOST USED

College/university website

Emails from a particular school

Printed brochures about the school

College planning websites

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

MOST HELPFUL

Emails from a particular school

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

College planning websites

An online community where students can interact with other students who are interested in the same university

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator

Next, here are how resource use and helpfulness varied by students who were continuing-generation or first-generation students, across all grade levels.

Continuing generation

MOST USED

College/university website

Emails from a particular school

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

Printed brochures about the school

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator

MOST HELPFUL

College/university website

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

College planning websites

An online community where students can interact with other students who are interested in the same university

First generation

MOST USED

College/university website

Emails from a particular school

Printed brochures about the school

Videos of campus, classrooms, students, and residence halls

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator

MOST HELPFUL

Printed brochures about the school

The college or university's website

Emails from a particular school

Results from financial aid or scholarship calculator
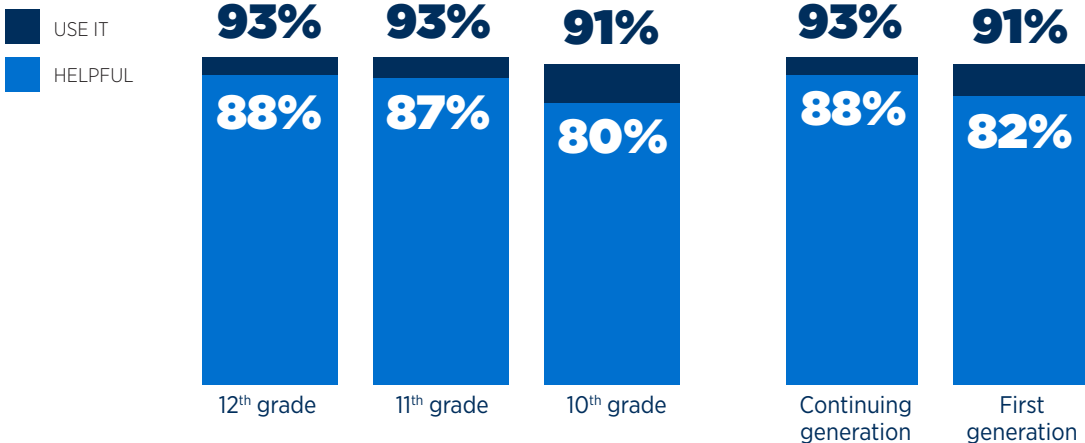
College planning websites

College Websites

58% of students use a search engine to find a college's website

Institution websites are the most used resource for all students and the most helpful resource for 12th- and 11th-grade students as well as continuing-generation students. For 10th-grade students and first-generation students, the helpfulness of the website is lower, but 80 percent still rate it as helpful.

11) Use and helpfulness of college websites

Students who use a college/university website and find it helpful

■ USE IT
■ HELPFUL

	12th grade	11th grade	10th grade	Continuing generation	First generation
Use it	93%	93%	91%	93%	91%
Helpful	88%	87%	80%	88%	82%

Recommendation: **Assess the usability of your website.** Although college websites get very high ratings for helpfulness, about one in five 10th-grade and first-generation students do not find them helpful. Examine your website for usability issues so that students who may not be as familiar with a college website or the college search process can quickly find what they need to start engaging with you.

12) Searching for college websites

More than half of prospective college students use a search engine to find a college's website, by far the most used method. For 10th-grade students and continuing generation students, more than 60 percent use a search engine.
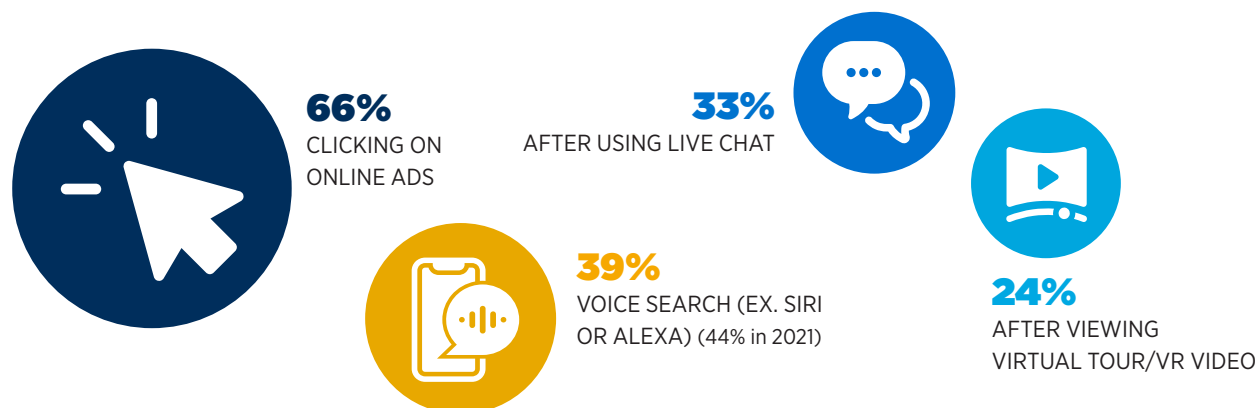
How do students find a college website?

METHOD	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Use a search engine	57%	57%	63%
Social media	36%	38%	25%
They know and use the URL address to visit the website	30%	24%	20%
Find the link in an email from the college	28%	23%	24%
College planning website	20%	23%	21%
Find the link in something printed	19%	17%	16%

METHOD	CONTINUING GENERATION	FIRST GENERATION
Use a search engine	60%	51%
Social media	35%	37%
They know and use the URL address to visit the website	27%	24%
Find the link in an email from the college	28%	23%
College planning website	13%	22%
Find the link in something printed	20%	22%

What do students use for their search queries?

TERMS/INFORMATION	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Name of school	73%	67%	65%
Name of a specific major or academic program	49%	48%	43%
Name of a career interest or general academic area	41%	40%	37%
The location where I want to attend a college or university	37%	34%	35%
College size (small, medium, large)	19%	17%	15%

What are other ways students find college websites?

66% CLICKING ON ONLINE ADS

33% AFTER USING LIVE CHAT

39% VOICE SEARCH (EX. SIRI OR ALEXA) (44% in 2021)

24% AFTER VIEWING VIRTUAL TOUR/VR VIDEO

Recommendation: **Evaluate and optimize your search rankings for your institution as well as key majors/academic programs.** Nearly half of 11th-grade and 12th-grade students will search for specific majors and programs, so it is very important that your institution ranks high in relevant search results. Consider bringing in SEO experts to conduct an SEO analysis so that you have actionable data you can use to start strengthening your rankings.

13) Information on college websites

What information do students want to see on college websites?

INFORMATION	ALL RESPONDENTS
Scholarship and financial aid information	50%
Cost/tuition information	49%
Campus location, city, and community information	48%
Housing information	44%
Campus and student life information	43%
Academic majors/programs list or course catalog	42%
General college or university overview	39%
Additional details about a specific major/program	38%
Campus visit information	36%
Graduate outcomes and statistics	36%
Admissions process or contact information	34%
Open house, preview day, or other event information	29%
Photos showcasing campus life	29%
Virtual tours	29%
Rankings for the institution of specific programs	25%
Videos showcasing campus life	24%
Athletic program(s) information	22%
Links to institution's social pages	21%

How do students find information on college websites?

METHOD	ALL RESPONDENTS
Look at links on the website to figure out the best path	57%
Search tool on the college website	46%
Links sent in email messages	30%
Links found on college planning websites	23%
Use a chatbot	9%

Top 5 things students find frustrating about college websites

Hard-to-find information about specific majors/programs

Lack of information about job opportunities related to each major

Confusing directions related to the admissions process

Lack of information about admission statistics—how many students like me were admitted to particular majors, etc.

Hard-to-use navigation or hard-to-use links

Recommendation: **Analyze the user experience on your website.** Given the importance of the website to college search, it is critical to make sure students and parents can find information quickly and take the actions you need them to take. As the top five frustrating experiences show, the top issues relate to having difficulty finding information that will help those audiences evaluate an institution. Working with experts in this area can help ensure you are providing an intuitive web experience that leads your audiences to the right content quickly.

Online Forms

14) Sharing information on online forms

Students willing to fill out a website form to make initial contact and request information

40%
12th Grade

29%
11th Grade

26%
10th Grade

Information students are willing to provide on forms

INFORMATION	ALL RESPONDENTS
Email address	75%
Name	72%
Cell phone	66%
Parent email	63%
Parent phone	61%
High school they attend	59%
Mailing address	50%
Programs they are considering	50%
Career aspirations	45%
How they learned about the school	37%
Preferences for future communication	33%
Opt-in for text messages	25%
Home phone	25%

Experiences that will prompt students to fill out forms

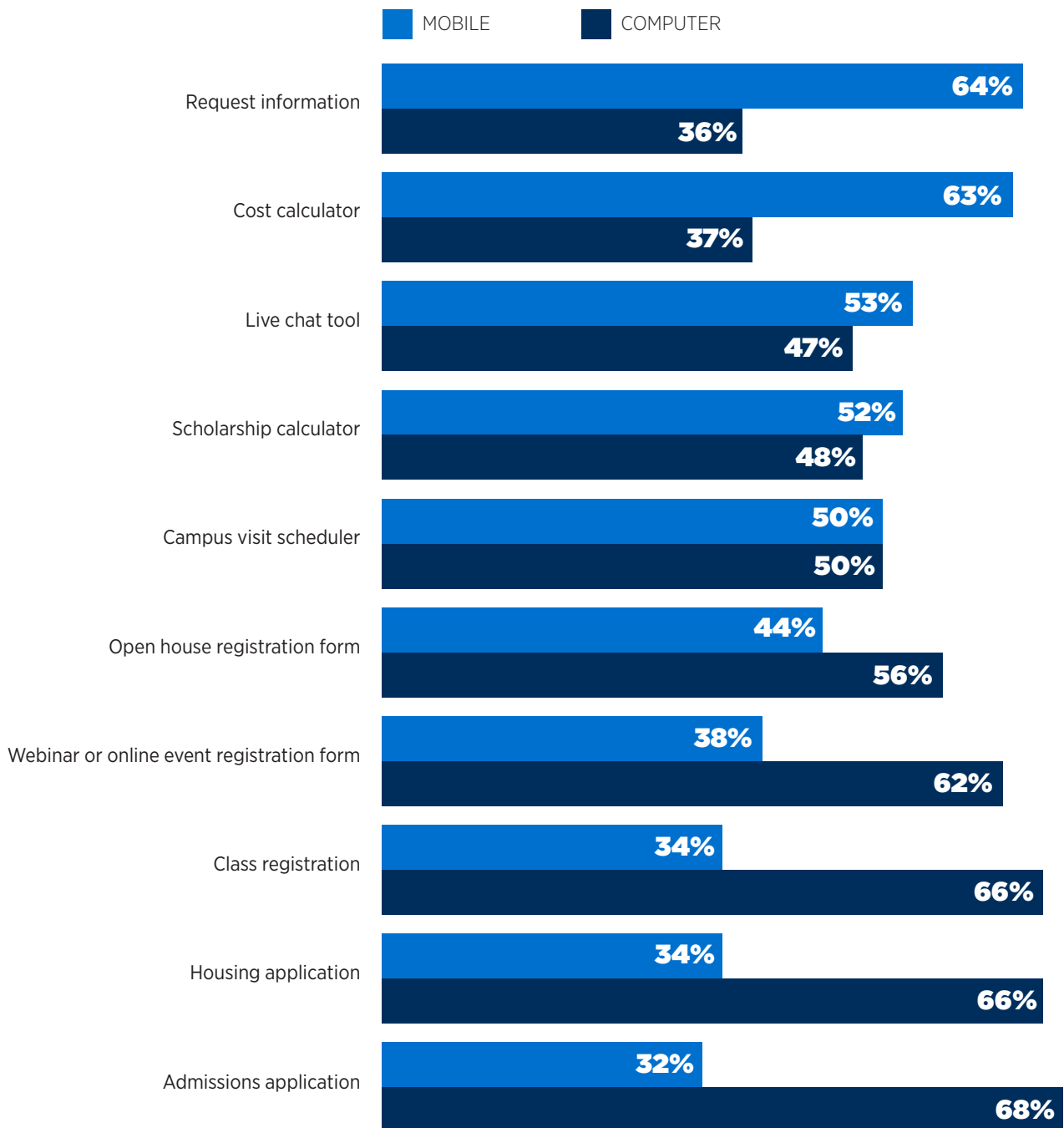**37%** after having an online chat

27% after viewing a virtual tour or virtual reality video

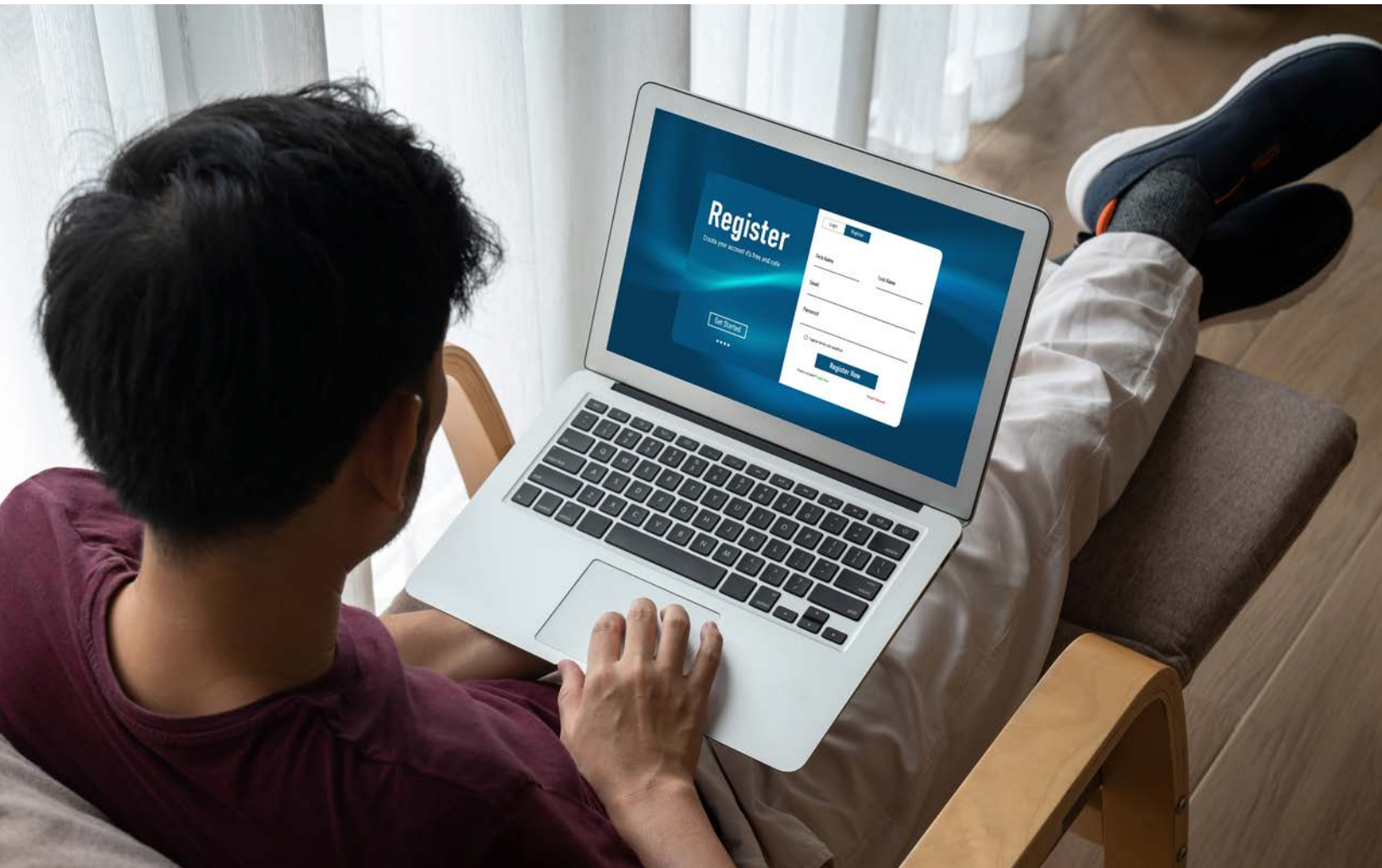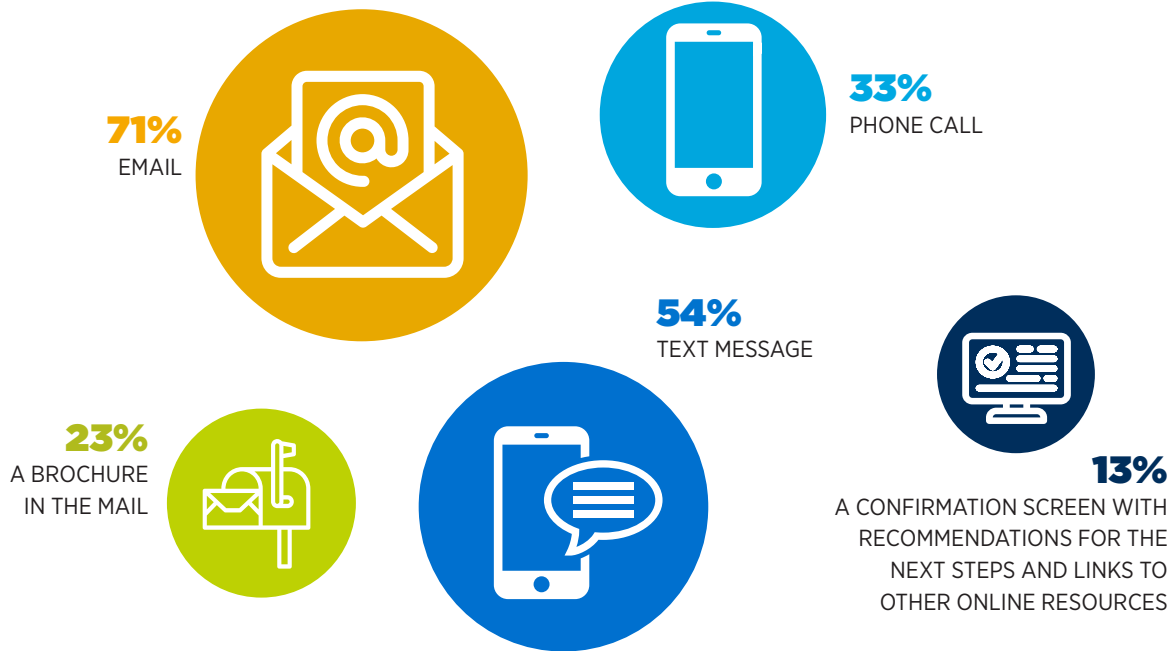**20%** after watching a video

☑ **Recommendation:** **Collect and use parent contact information.** With nearly two-thirds of students willing to provide parent contact information, make sure you are collecting that info and using it to set up communication campaigns with parents.

15) Completing forms on a mobile device or computer

MOBILE ■ **COMPUTER**

Form	Mobile	Computer
Request information	64%	36%
Cost calculator	63%	37%
Live chat tool	53%	47%
Scholarship calculator	52%	48%
Campus visit scheduler	50%	50%
Open house registration form	44%	56%
Webinar or online event registration form	38%	62%
Class registration	34%	66%
Housing application	34%	66%
Admissions application	32%	68%

☑ **Recommendation:** **Ensure your forms are mobile responsive and test them on both mobile and computer platforms.** Students and parents will likely use both their mobile devices and their computers during the search process, so be sure your content and online experiences are optimized for both.

16) Preferred method for receiving a response after filling out a form

71%
EMAIL

33%
PHONE CALL

54%
TEXT MESSAGE

23%
A BROCHURE
IN THE MAIL

13%
A CONFIRMATION SCREEN WITH
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE
NEXT STEPS AND LINKS TO
OTHER ONLINE RESOURCES

Digital Advertising

63% of students have clicked on an online ad

Digital advertising has become a major part of student recruitment, but it also requires considerable resources from campuses. These findings can help illuminate how colleges and universities can line up their digital advertising strategies with what students expect.
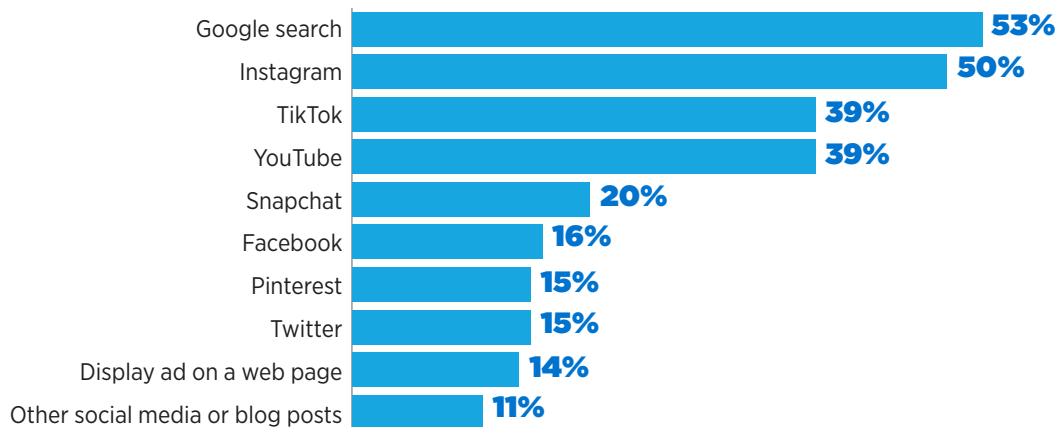
17) What do students do after clicking on a link in a digital ad?

ACTION	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Looked at information on a website	67%	67%	59%
Watched a video	26%	33%	28%
Followed their social pages	19%	25%	19%
Filled out a form to receive more information	19%	22%	21%
Registered to attend an event	14%	6%	6%
Looked at an interactive map of the campus	14%	9%	9%
Took a virtual tour	12%	15%	14%
Live chatted with a college representative	11%	10%	10%
Called a phone number offered in the ad	9%	6%	7%

☑ **Recommendation: Make calls to action relevant to your audience.** When setting up calls to action for your digital ads, account for the grade level and expectations of the student. A student who is a year or two away from graduation will have different priorities than a 12th-grade student.

18) Where are students clicking on college or university ads?

Google search — 53%
Instagram — 50%
TikTok — 39%
YouTube — 39%
Snapchat — 20%
Facebook — 16%
Pinterest — 15%
Twitter — 15%
Display ad on a web page — 14%
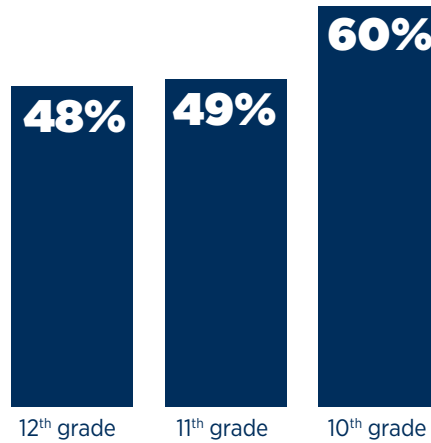Other social media or blog posts — 11%

☑ **Recommendation: Align your advertising locations with the behaviors of today's students.** Students are naturally clicking on ads on Google given their frequent use of the search engine. Clicking ads on Instagram has also increased significantly from our 2021 findings, while Facebook and Twitter have fallen by a considerable amount.

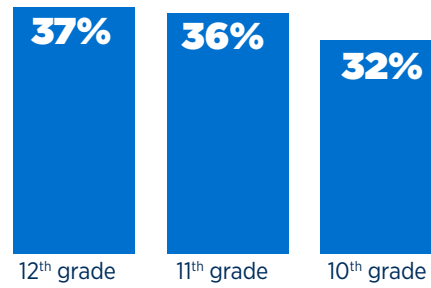## 19) Why do students click on an online ad for a college or university?
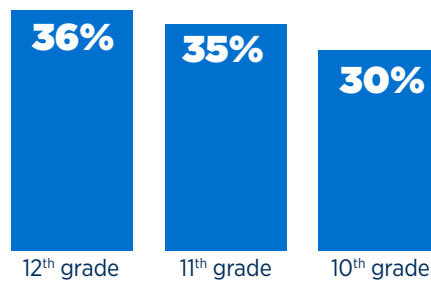
Reason for clicking

**Did not know about the institution and wanted to learn more**

48%	49%	60%
12th grade	11th grade	10th grade

The offer made in the ad was interesting

37%	36%	32%
12th grade	11th grade	10th grade

Might find out something new about the school

36%	35%	30%
12th grade	11th grade	10th grade

Reminded the student to research or do something related to their enrollment

29%	27%	34%
12th grade	11th grade	10th grade
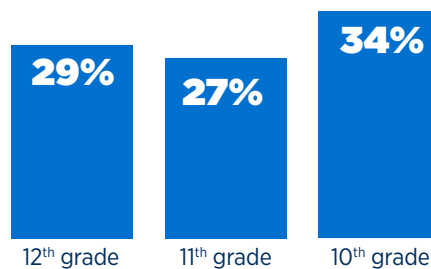
Recommendation: **Leverage your brand value in your ads.** It is interesting to note that digital advertising can be used as a brand-building opportunity, even with students at the beginning of their college search. Assess how your digital ads set your institution apart from those students and especially consider how you will further engage those students once they click.
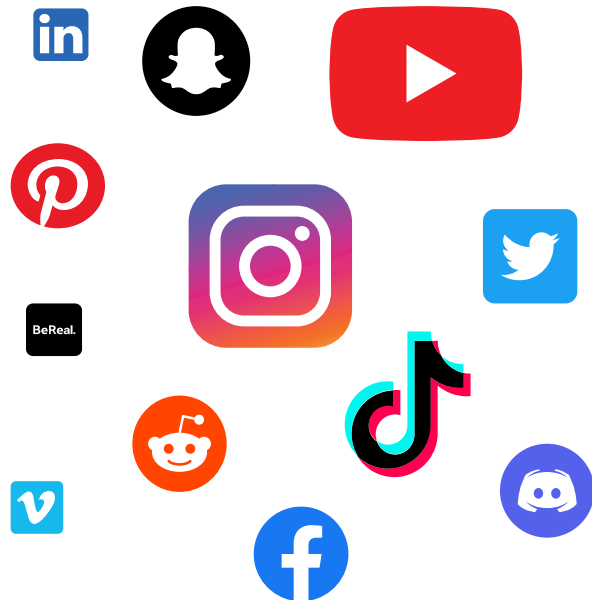
Social Media

74% of students find social media posts useful

Social media platforms and usage are constantly evolving, and it is important for institutions to keep up as much as possible with what college-bound high school students are using. As the following results show, students continue to use social media frequently in researching colleges and universities, especially video-driven platforms.

20) Social platforms students use daily

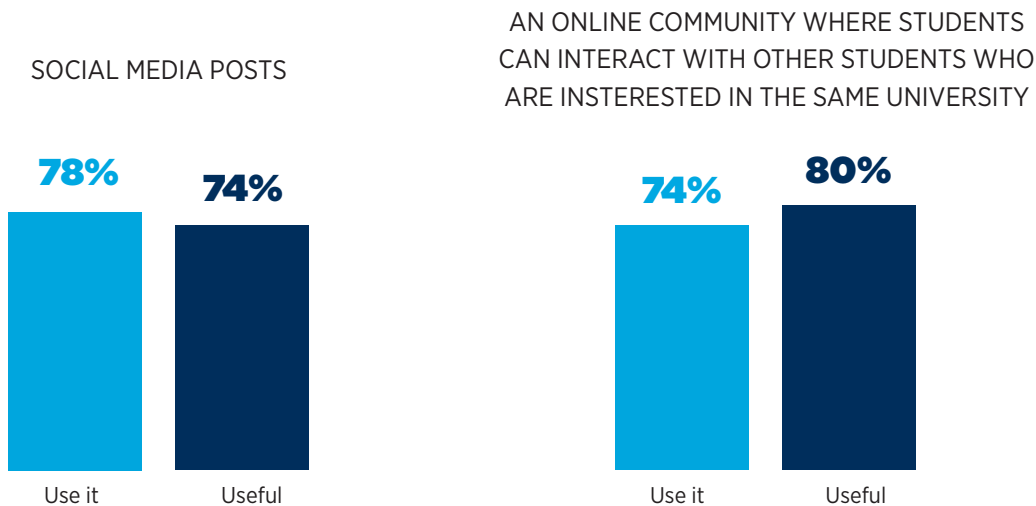| PLATFORM	2021	2023
Instagram	70%	81%
YouTube	62%	80%
TikTok	41%	74%
Snapchat	74%	65%
Twitter	27%	38%
Facebook	35%	37%
Pinterest	21%	34%
Discord	12%	33%
Reddit	10%	17%
BeReal	n/a	14%
LinkedIn	10%	4%
Vimeo	2%	2%

Social media usage has risen for most platforms since 2021, with 80 percent of students now using Instagram and YouTube daily. TikTok has also increased dramatically, but questions over its legality in the United States could change its availability. The drop off for the remaining platforms is steep after the top four, but many are still used by at least one-third of students in 2023.

☑ **Recommendation:** **Prioritize video engagement on social media.** Video is the dominant driver of social media in 2023. Institutions that want to engage students need to be on Instagram and YouTube at the very least. TikTok should also be strongly considered for now, but keep an eye on ongoing discussions over its availability. For other platforms like Twitter and Facebook, these are also still worth investing in (especially with content that may be appealing to parents and guardians), but it's important to optimize your social media spends to make the biggest impact on the platforms students use every day.

21) Social media content

Students not only use social media with greater frequency, the vast majority also use campus social media in their college search process. When asked about the type of content they use and find helpful, students rated social media posts and online communities very highly. They also listed what would convince them to follow a campus account.
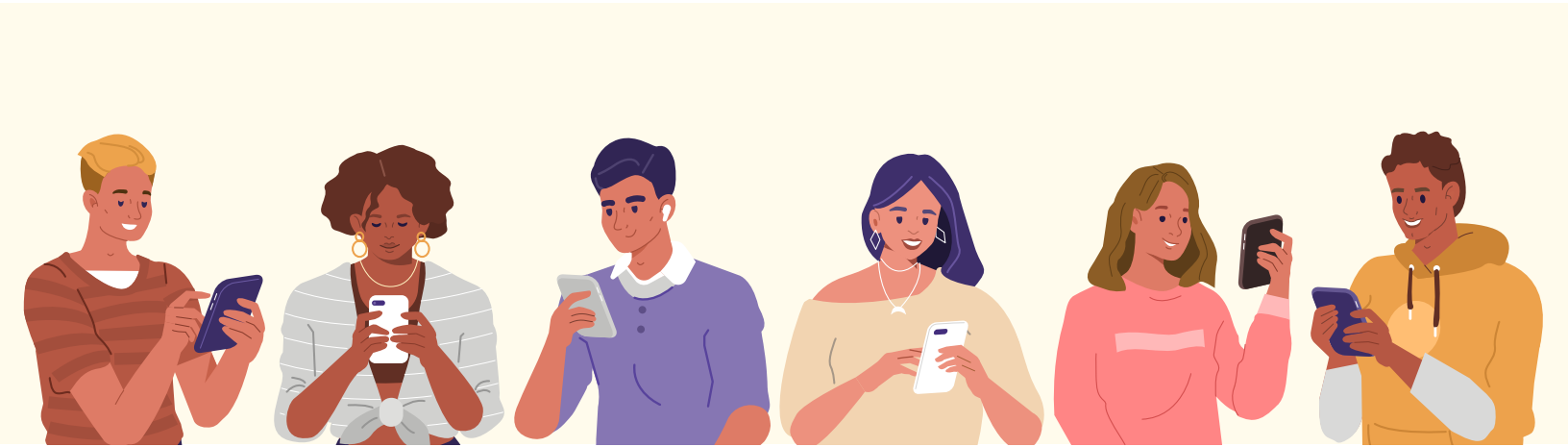
SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

AN ONLINE COMMUNITY WHERE STUDENTS CAN INTERACT WITH OTHER STUDENTS WHO ARE INSTERESTED IN THE SAME UNIVERSITY

78% Use it | **74%** Useful

74% Use it | **80%** Useful

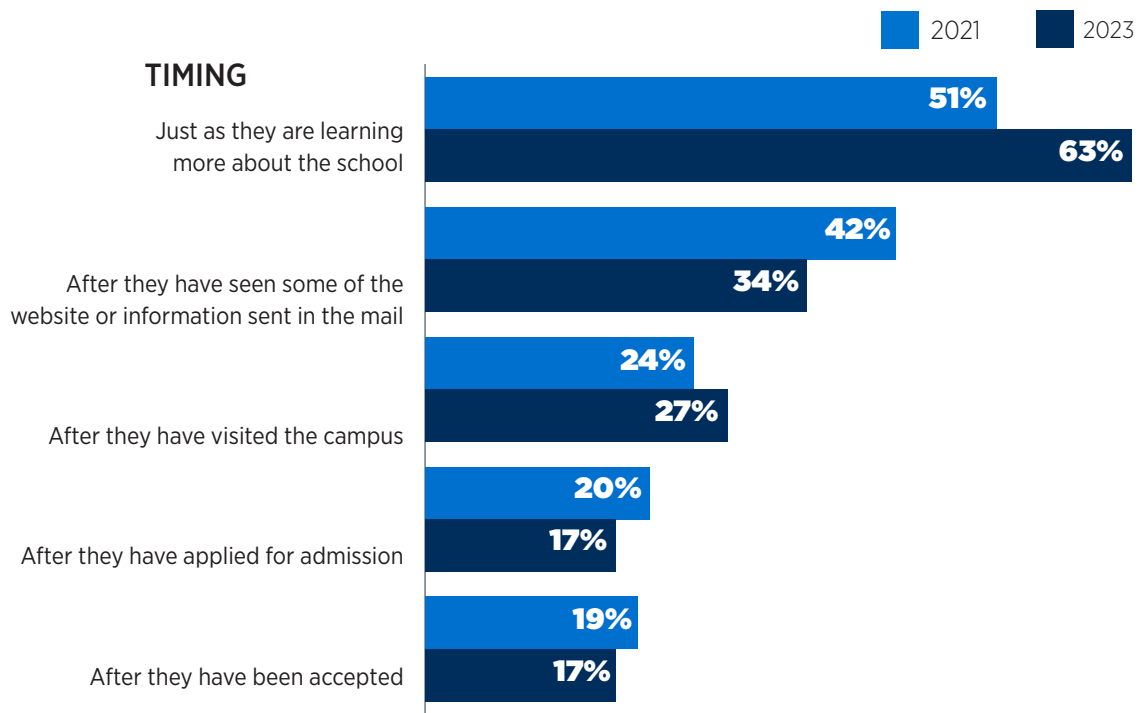## Social media content that would encourage students to follow a campus

60% Student life

41% Current experiences of students attending that university

35% Content around students in the specific major or program student is interested in

33% Photos of the campus

32% Activities and clubs for students

31% What do students need to do to apply?

30% Student support (like counseling, tutoring, etc.)

29% Qualifications needed to be accepted

29% What it's like to live on campus in the dorms

28% The athletic programs and teams

25% Options for food/ dining on campus

22% Learning more about potential professors and their background

21% Success stories of alumni going into their professional careers

Recommendation: Strengthen engagement through online communities for prospective students. With three-quarters of students saying they use these and 80 percent saying they are useful, these communities can harness the collective interest of prospective students to increase engagement as they progress toward enrollment. This is an experience RNL has built into its student search solutions—learn more at RNL.com/SSE.

22) When is social media most helpful for students during college planning?

2021 **2023**

TIMING

Just as they are learning more about the school
- 2021: 51%
- 2023: 63%

After they have seen some of the website or information sent in the mail
- 2021: 42%
- 2023: 34%

After they have visited the campus
- 2021: 24%
- 2023: 27%

After they have applied for admission
- 2021: 20%
- 2023: 17%

After they have been accepted
- 2021: 19%
- 2023: 17%

Compared to 2021, a larger percentage of students are engaging with social media earlier in their college searches. Students are also using social platforms to explore and filter out institutions that are not a good fit.

23) How do students find information about colleges and universities on social media platforms?

Search for it by the name of the college or university	**64%**
Things just come up on their feed	**29%**
Friends recommend it	**29%**
An email from the college mentions it	**26%**
The social media platform recommends it	**26%**
Student follows accounts of individual people who post about that college or university	**23%**
Advertisements appear on the feed	**18%**
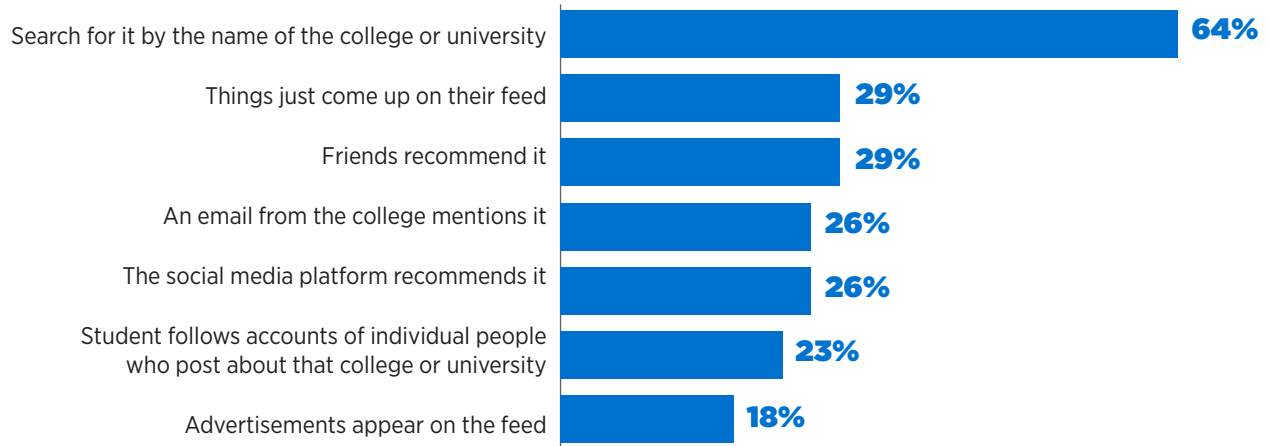
Recommendation: **Optimize your social media SEO and content for algorithms.** These results show that students find social media accounts for schools in a variety of ways. Be sure you analyze how your institutional social media accounts rank and display for search. Also consider the power of social media ambassadors/influencers who cannot attract the attention of prospective students but engage them throughout their enrollment journey.

24) Additional ways students start following campus social media accounts

26% after using a live chat tool

26% after taking a virtual tour or viewing a virtual reality video

19% after clicking on an online ad from a college

17% will follow an institution's social pages and message them to ask for more information

Videos

More students are watching videos from institutions

2021
70%

2023
82%
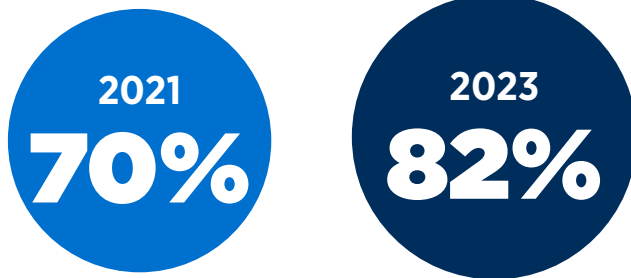
As the social media results show, video is the most consumed form of media by prospective students online —making it a critical part of the recruitment process. More than 80 percent of students have viewed videos, and that number has increased significantly in the last two years. The vast majority also find them helpful.

25) Students who have viewed videos and found them helpful

12TH GRADE

Viewed 82%	Helpful 82%

11TH GRADE

Viewed 80%	Helpful 83%

10TH GRADE

Viewed 81%	Helpful 87%

CONTINUING GENERATION

Viewed 82%	Helpful 86%

FIRST GENERATION

Viewed 81%	Helpful 73%

STUDENT-ATHLETE

Viewed 85%	Helpful 81%

NON STUDENT-ATHLETE

Viewed 79%	Helpful 85%
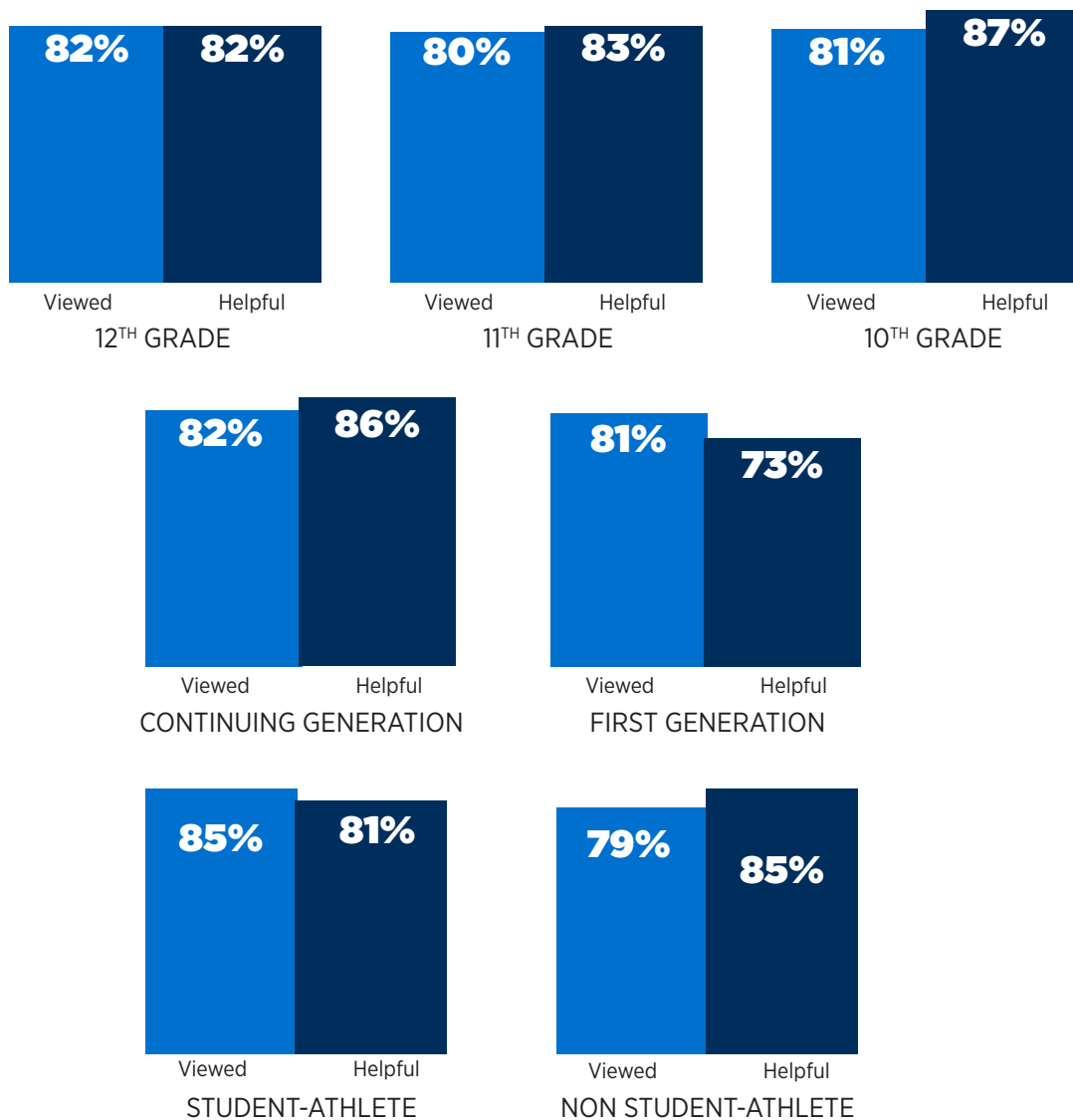
26) Video length and content

Nearly three-quarters of students look at the running length of a video before deciding to watch it. They also want to see content that relates to the student experience and outcomes for graduates.

Students who check video length before watching

2021	**69%**
2023	**74%**

Top 5 topics for video content students want to see

41% Current students talking about their experiences in the classroom and on campus

36% Recent graduates talking about their job search, where they found a job, and their salaries

34% Videos showcasing campus life and extracurricular activities

34% Videos showing the campus, buildings, and classrooms

31% Videos customized with content matching the programs and campus activities that interest students

☑ **Recommendation:** Keep videos focused in terms of length and content. Many students will shy away from watching longer videos, so keep them short, and use video content to relate to the student experience as well as the experiences and outcomes of your alumni.

27) Video connections to other college planning activities

Students who watch videos after clicking an online college ad

12th grade	26%
11th grade	33%
10th grade	28%
Student-athlete	34%
Non student-athlete	24%

Students open to receiving text messages with links to photos or videos

12th grade	20%
11th grade	26%
10th grade	27%

Students who will look for videos on a college website

Student-athlete	27%
Non student-athlete	20%

Personalization

56% of students are interested in personalized web content

Prospective college students expect personalization in their online experiences, and researching colleges and universities is no different. More than half of students (56 percent) prefer web content that they can personalize themselves or is personalized for them.

Preferences for website personalization

PERSONALIZATION	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Like websites that allow student to filter and personalize content to meet their interests	43%	40%	40%
Expect websites to personalize content for them based on interest and behavior	15%	13%	11%

Nearly all students would consider opening an email from a college or university, but in addition, a number of them would open an email if their names were in the subject line.

Students who would open an email because their name was in the subject line

17%
12th GRADE

17%
11th GRADE

13%
10th GRADE

28) Interest in personalized video

The expectation for personalization extends to other college planning activities beyond email and web experiences. For example, one in four expressed interest in personalized videos that customize content to their preferred academic programs and campus activities. Student-athletes in particular expressed interest in personalized video.

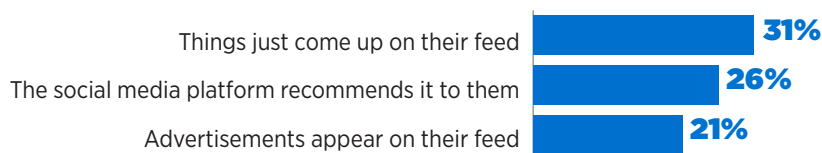### Videos customized with content matching the programs and campus activities that interest the student

24%
12th grade

26%
11th grade

22%
10th grade

36%
Student-athlete

26%
Non student-athlete
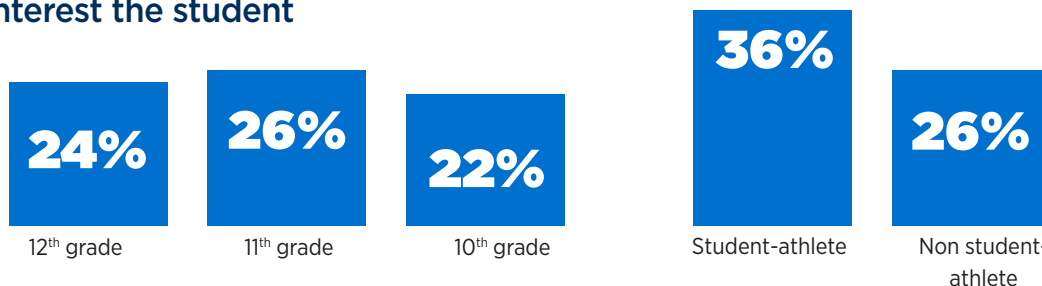
☑ **Recommendation:** **Ramp up engagement using personalized video.** Personalized video is a powerful tool for engaging students by speaking directly to their interests—from academics to activities to athletics. Personalized videos can also be used to tell students and families about their financial aid packages. They are also easier than ever to create and deliver at scale. Find out more at RNL.com/PersonalizedVideo.

29) Personalization with social media

In answering questions about their social media use, students also showed that they want personalization from their social media interactions with institutions. However, it's also clear that many students are not necessarily on social media looking for school information—instead, it shows up in their feeds or is recommended. Students are also more likely to follow a campus social media account if it has content about students in their specific major.

How do students find information about colleges and universities on social media platforms?

Things just come up on their feed	**31%**
The social media platform recommends it to them	**26%**
Advertisements appear on their feed	**21%**

Social media content that would encourage students to follow a campus

The student life	**63%**
Current experiences of students attending that university	**44%**
Content around students in the specific major or program the student is interested in	**40%**

Recommendation: **Optimize your content for social media algorithms.** Today's prospective students are accustomed to receiving and viewing content and suggestions based on their viewing history. Furthermore, remember that students on social media are looking for engagement and not a "hard sell" on your institution.

30) Providing information to receive personalized content

Willingness to share personal information

INFORMATION	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Programs student is considering	52%	51%	46%
Career aspirations	47%	43%	45%
Preferences for future communication	35%	29%	34%
Opt-in for text messages	28%	23%	24%

As students move further toward graduation, they are more willing to share personal information with campuses in order to receive more personalized communications from campuses. One interesting note on the text message answer is that students' interest in receiving text messages after they have submitted their applications goes up dramatically.

56% are interested in receiving text messages about their application, such as missing documents or application status

Recommendation: **Collect information that can power personalized outreach.** Information on programs of study, career/post-graduate plans, activities, and athletics can help you shape your communications and content to meet their interests. Tailoring your messaging this way will help them feel your institution is the right fit and excite them about enrolling.
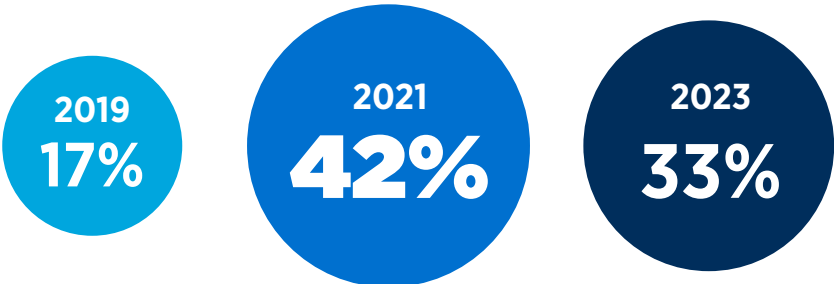
Live/Online Chat
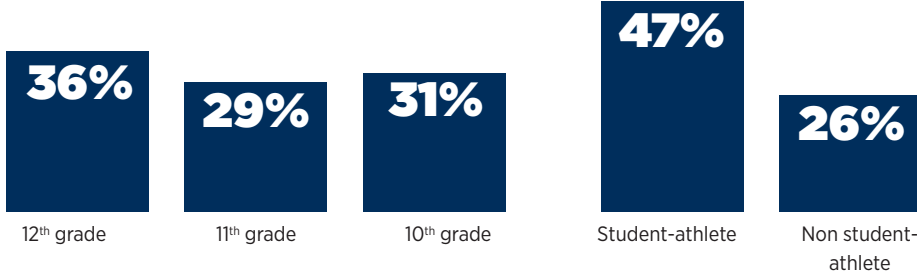
1 in 3 students use live chat with campuses

Although live chat use fell between 2021 and 2023, it is double what it was four years ago. One out of three students have used live chat and nearly half of prospective student-athletes have used it. It is also one of the most personalized communication methods that (like phone calls) can provide a true 1:1 personalized experience
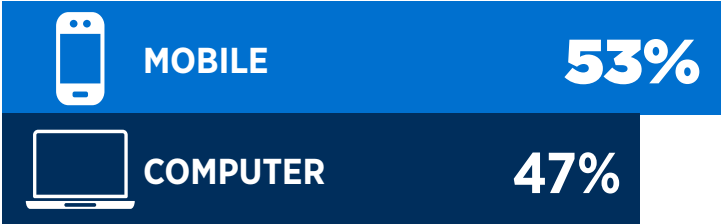
31) Live chat use

Live chat trends, 2019-2023

2019
17%

2021
42%

2023
33%

Live chat use, 2023

36%	29%	31%	47%	26%
12th grade	11th grade	10th grade	Student-athlete	Non student-athlete

Platform used for live chat

MOBILE **53%**

COMPUTER **47%**

32) Steps students take after a chat conversation

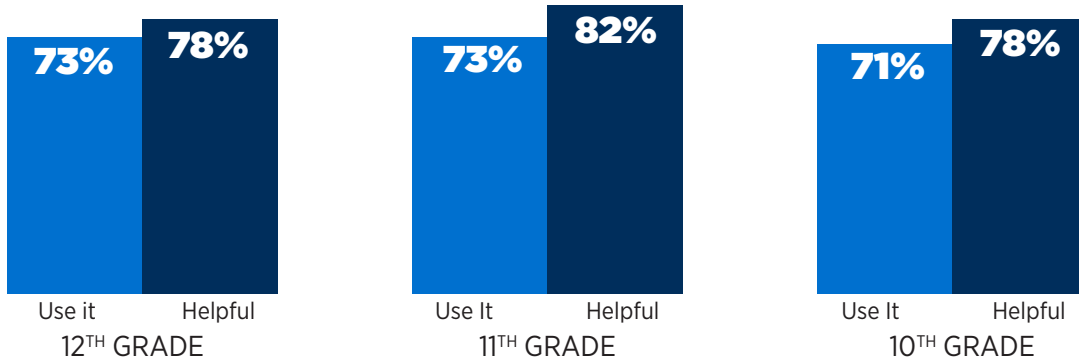| ACTION	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Applying to that school	48%	33%	33%
Filling out a form to get more information	37%	33%	46%
A phone conversation with an enrollment team member	32%	21%	38%
Look deeper into the college's website	29%	26%	29%
Follow college's social media pages	28%	29%	29%
Reach out to friends or family that may have attended that institution	21%	20%	35%

Recommendation: **Use chat to quickly identify a student's needs and connect them to an action.** As we see above, nearly half of 12th-grade students who have a chat conversation then apply to the school. By understanding where a student is in their journey and what their needs are, you can quickly keep them moving to the next stage or decision point.

Virtual Tours and Virtual Reality Videos

73% of students have used virtual tours or virtual reality experiences

Virtual tours and virtual reality videos have become a very popular college search activity for prospective students. Nearly 75 percent of all students have participated in these experiences, and eight out of ten have rated them helpful.

33) Students who have used a virtual tour or a virtual reality video

	12TH GRADE		11TH GRADE		10TH GRADE
Use it: 73%	Helpful: 78%	Use It: 73%	Helpful: 82%	Use It: 71%	Helpful: 78%

34) Use of virtual tours

2023 by grade level

12th grade	50%
11th grade	47%
10th grade	42%

All students, 2021-23

2021	64%
2023	46%

Students who say virtual tours are a helpful part of a college website

12th grade	30%
11th grade	28%
10th grade	22%

35) Influence of virtual tours

Virtual tours have a very positive influence with the vast majority of students who take them, and their influence has grown significantly since 2021.

### Likelihood of enrolling after taking a virtual tour

12TH GRADE
- 16%
- 10%
- 74%

11TH GRADE
- 72%
- 17%
- 11%

10TH GRADE
- 21%
- 10%
- 69%

2021
- 21%
- 17%
- 62%

2023
- 17%
- 10%
- 73%
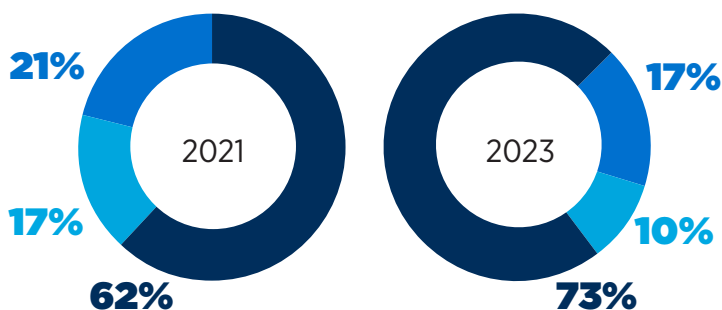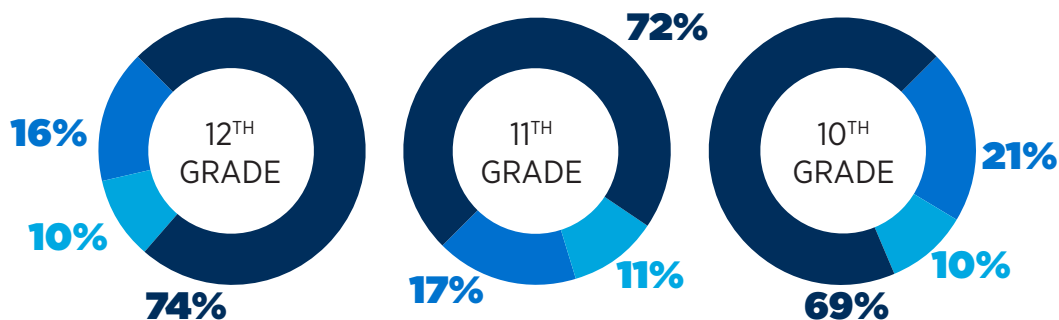
Legend:
- ■ More likely to enroll
- ■ It didn't make student more or less likely to enroll
- ■ Less likely to enroll

36) Actions taken after a virtual tour

ACTION	12TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	10TH GRADE
Fill out a form to get more information	29%	19%	30%
Schedule a visit	30%	24%	28%
Continue exploring the website	26%	21%	20%
Completed an application	24%	13%	22%
Follow the college's social pages	24%	28%	30%
Email the financial aid office	18%	19%	27%

37) Use of a virtual reality

More than half of students have seen a virtual reality video (the type viewed with a special headset, typically on a mobile device) presented by a college or university.

50% 2021
57% 2023
50% CONTINUING GENERATION
42% FIRST GENERATION
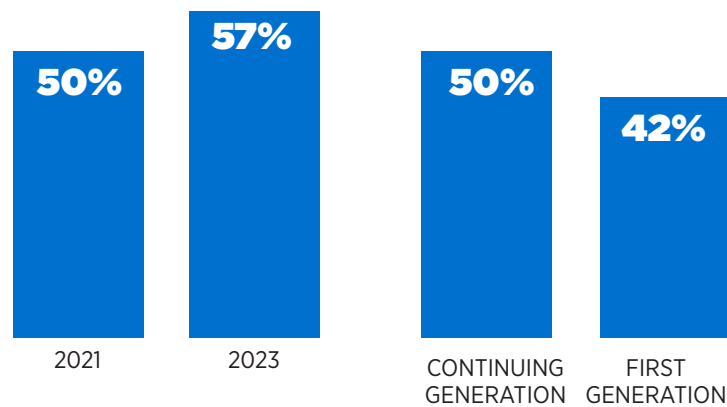
What are your best strategies for engaging prospective students?

Talk with our digital enrollment experts. We can discuss how you can maximize engagement with students by:

- Building better website experiences
- Engaging students and parents with the right messages in the right channels
- Personalizing communications at scale
- Optimizing your digital outreach to increase the impact on enrollment
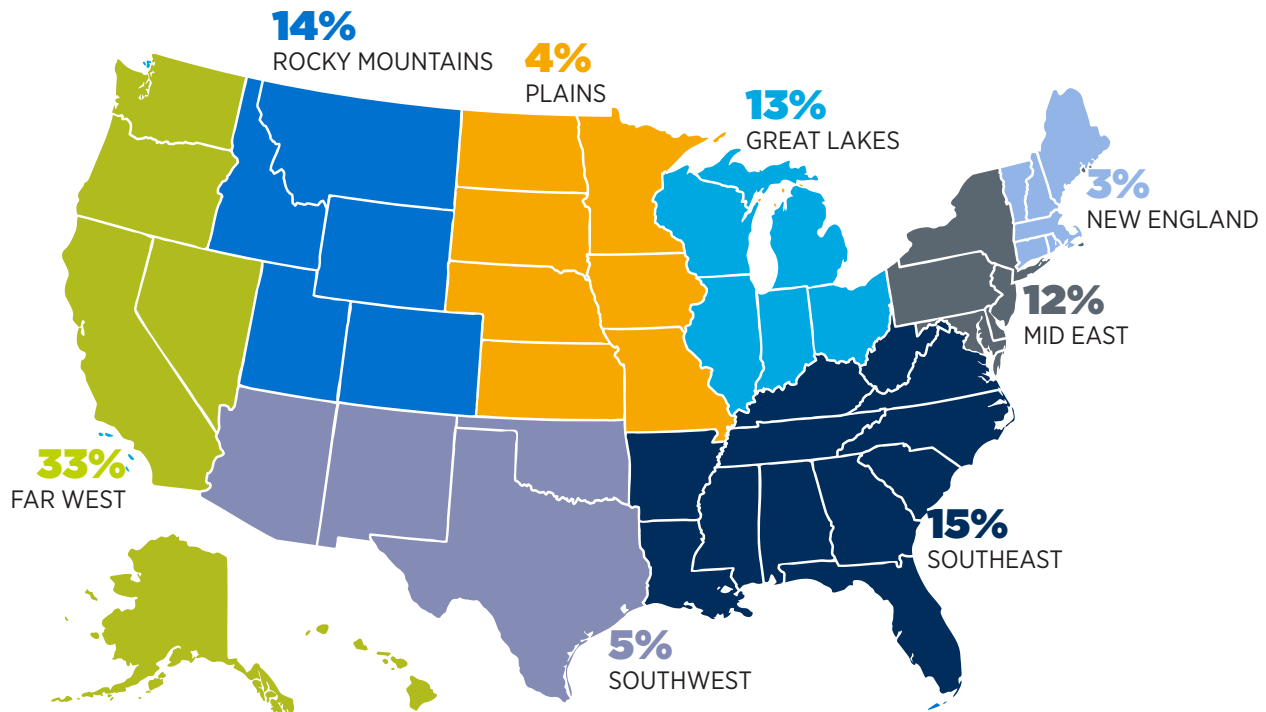- Aligning your marketing efforts with your enrollment goals

Visit **RNL.com/DigitalConsult**

About the Study

The survey took place online from January 16 to February 20, 2023. Students were invited to complete the survey online. No personally identifiable information was collected. Only the main researcher has access to the data.

1,987 responses

Map of US regions:
- **14%** ROCKY MOUNTAINS
- **4%** PLAINS
- **13%** GREAT LAKES
- **3%** NEW ENGLAND
- **12%** MID EAST
- **33%** FAR WEST
- **15%** SOUTHEAST
- **5%** SOUTHWEST

1% Alaska Native	**4%** American Indian	**5%** Asian	**38%** Black/African American
24% Hispanic or Latino/a/x (including Puerto Rican)	**1%** Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	**33%** White	**2%** Multiracial
2% Prefer to self-describe	**2%** Don't know/ prefer not to respond	**1%** Middle Eastern or North African	
73% Continuing generation	**27%** First generation	**49%** Student-athlete	**51%** Non student-athlete
54% 2023, 12th grade	**29%** 2024, 11th grade	**16%** 2025, 10th grade	
55% Female	**37%** Male	**0.56%** Transgender Female	**0.72%** Transgender Male
4% Non-binary/3rd gender/ Non-conforming	**0.46%** Prefer to self-describe	**2%** Prefer not to respond	

About RNL

RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,900 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

Visit RuffaloNL.com

Visit RuffaloNL.com/Enrollment
Email **ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com**
Call **800.876.1117**

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