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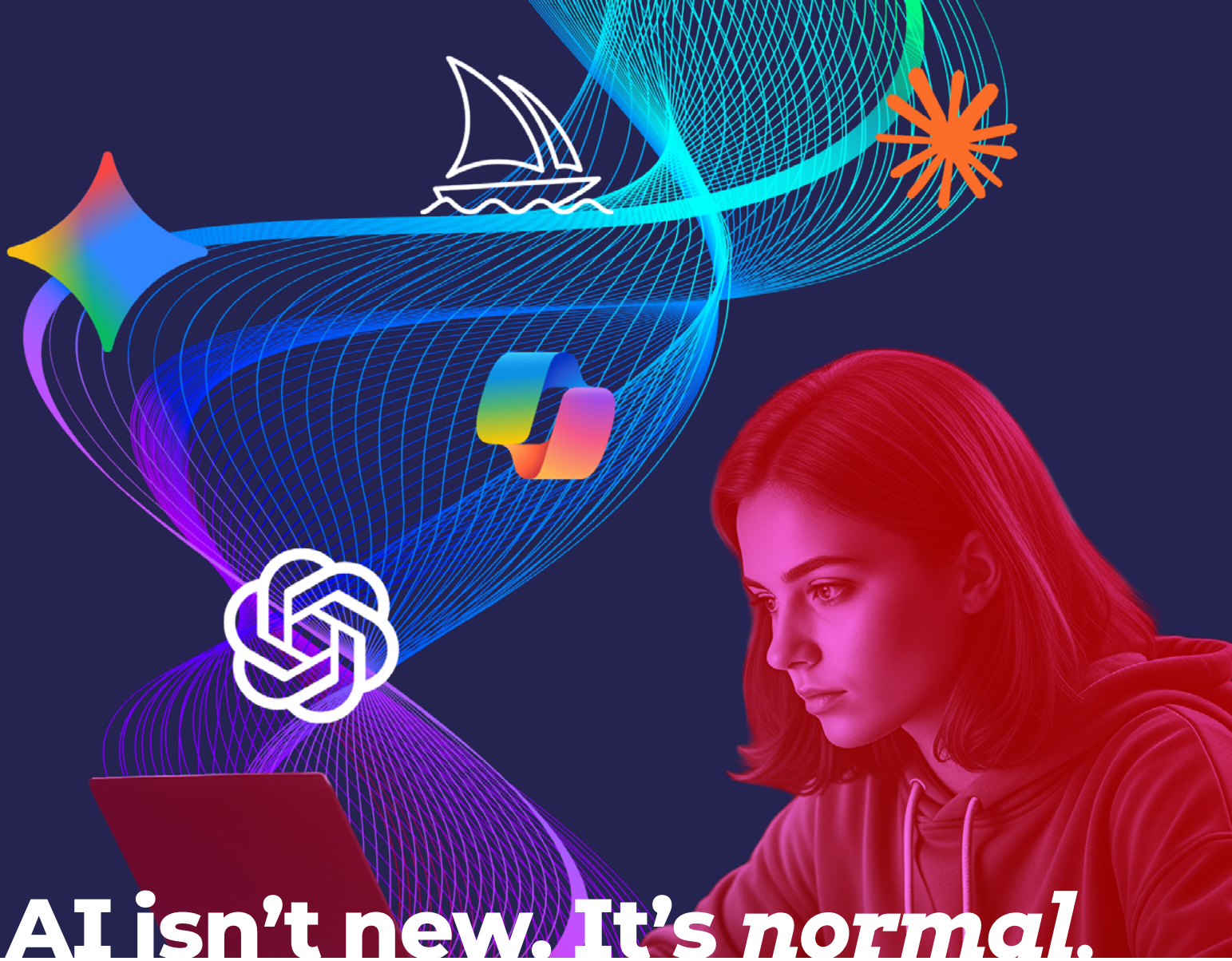
PARENT & student
SURVEY

**THE NEW RULES OF
HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETING:**

How AI and
Shifting
Family Priorities
are Reshaping
Student Recruitment

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AI isn't new. *It's normal.*

Students now weave AI into schoolwork and pair ChatGPT with TikTok/YouTube for first-pass college research. Parents use large language models to unpack the education equation: what a program costs net, what outcomes look like, and where their child will belong. AI hasn't replaced counselors or campus visits; it's the front door and, increasingly, the tie-breaker.

If families already use AI to choose, the question is: how is your institution meeting them there? That means publishing AI-readable answers (cost, outcomes, deadlines, support), operating a cite-the-source chatbot with guardrails, and stating clear norms for applicant use. Make your value legible to humans and machines and you'll land on more shortlists and earn trust faster.

Methodology

Higher education stands at an inflection point. A convergence of demographic decline, affordability pressures, and the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence has significantly altered the way families research and select colleges. Based on a national survey of 1,000 parents and 1,000 student, this whitepaper examines how institutions must respond to remain competitive in 2026 and beyond.

Families are embedding AI into every stage of their decision-making journey. Parents use large language models to model financial outcomes and clarify net costs. Students combine ChatGPT with TikTok or YouTube as a first step in building their school lists. These behaviors, layered on top of long-standing concerns around cost and value, have created a new decision environment that is sharper, more skeptical, and more data-driven than ever before.

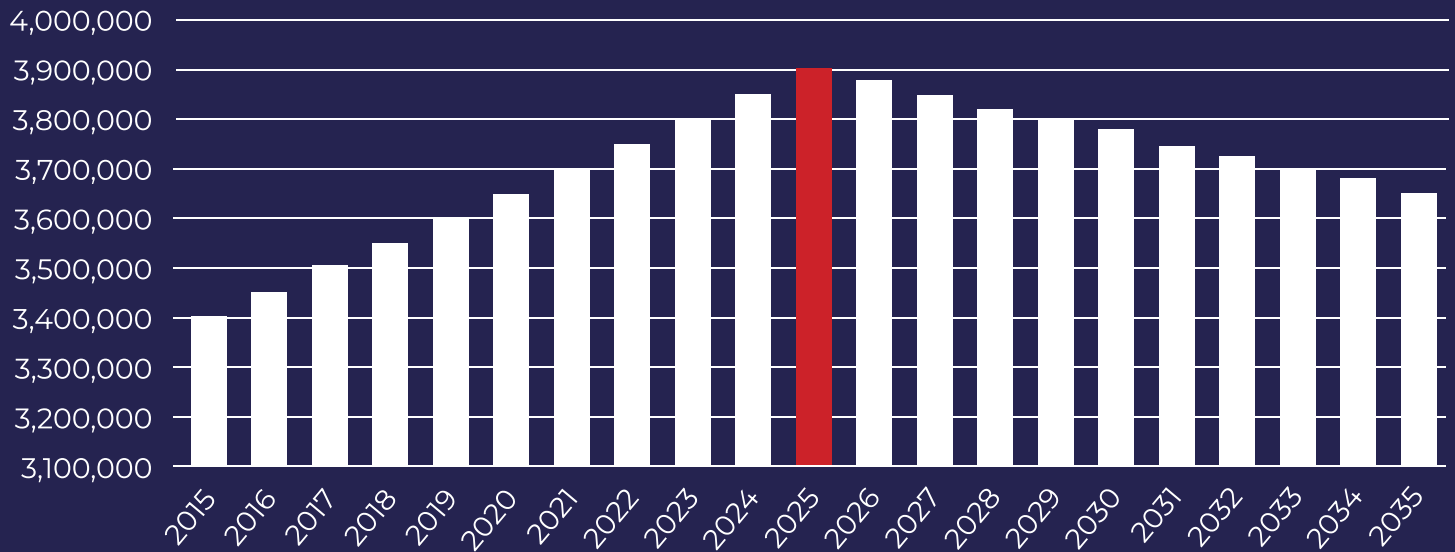
The strategic imperative for institutions is equally clear.




Colleges and universities that design content to serve both human decision-makers and AI discovery systems and address the distinct needs of parents and students will establish trust earlier in the process, attract more qualified prospects, and adapt more effectively to a shrinking pool of prospective students.

The Perfect Storm Reshaping Higher Education

High School Graduates 2025-2035 (estimated)



 **12%**
drop in high school graduates by 2037

 **25.6K**
cost of four-year public institution

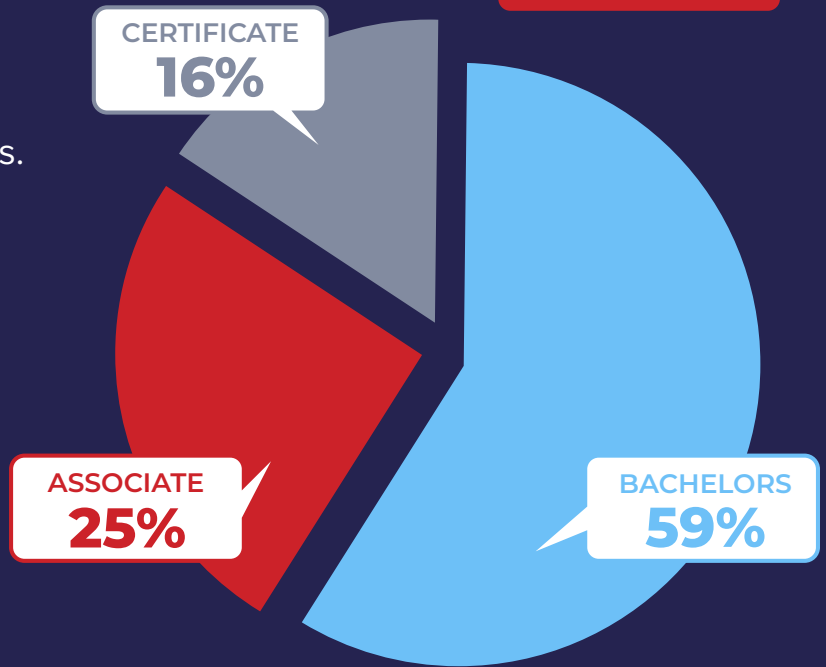
 **60K**
cost of four-year private institution

The first wave of change is demographic. By 2037, the number of high school graduates will decline by 12 percent. This is not a temporary dip in enrollment but a structural shift that ends decades of expansion and ushers in an era of fierce competition for a smaller number of students.

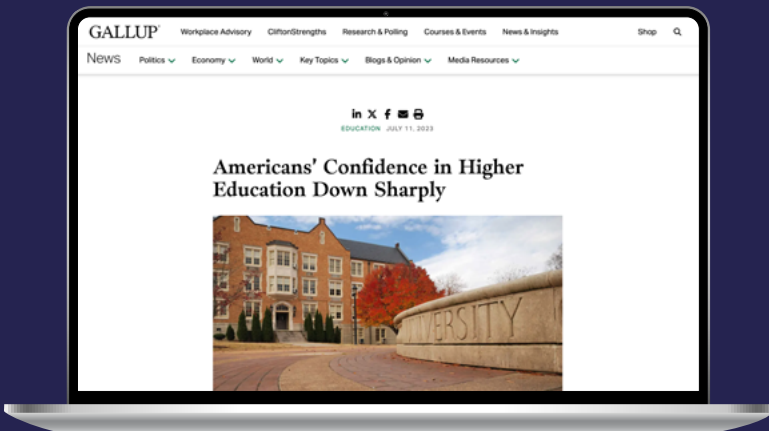
At the same time, affordability pressures are intensifying. A four-year degree at a public university now averages \$25,600 annually, while private institutions approach \$60,000 a year. For Gen X parents, many still managing their own student debt, this creates a heightened sense of caution and skepticism. Families are not only asking what college costs, but also demanding to see a clear “cost-to-complete” plan and evidence that degrees translate into strong career outcomes.

These pressures are compounded by the rapid growth of alternative pathways. Certificate and associate degree programs grew 11 percent year over year, reflecting the increasing appeal of practical, skills-based education. Parents are more likely than students to explore vocational training, while students are more open to the idea of bypassing college altogether and moving directly into the workforce.

2024 Graduates



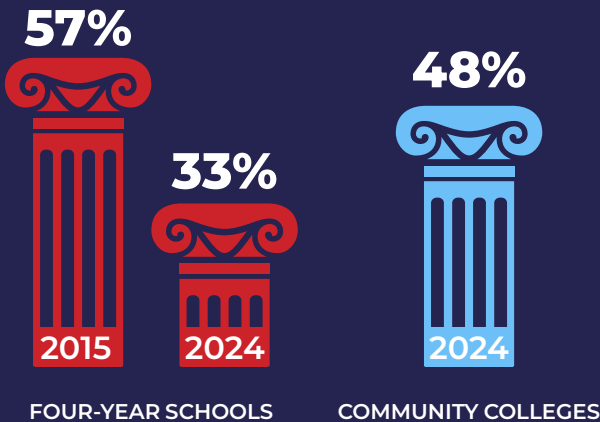
↑ ASSOCIATE DEGREES UP 11% YOY



Finally, there is a crisis of confidence. Public trust in four-year institutions has collapsed from 57 percent in 2015 to just 33 percent in 2024. Community colleges, by contrast, maintain a stronger baseline at 48 percent.

This signals that families still believe in education as a path forward, but they are gravitating toward models that feel more affordable, flexible, and outcome-driven.

Confidence in Schools



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How AI Has Transformed the College Search

Artificial intelligence has not replaced human decision-making in the college selection process, but it has become the front door. Families increasingly rely on tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Gemini to generate school lists, compare aid packages, and model long-term return on investment. Students often begin their search by pairing AI with social platforms, using the technology to identify options before validating them through TikTok or YouTube reviews. Parents use AI differently, focusing on financial planning, outcome comparisons, and even generating questions to ask during admissions conversations.

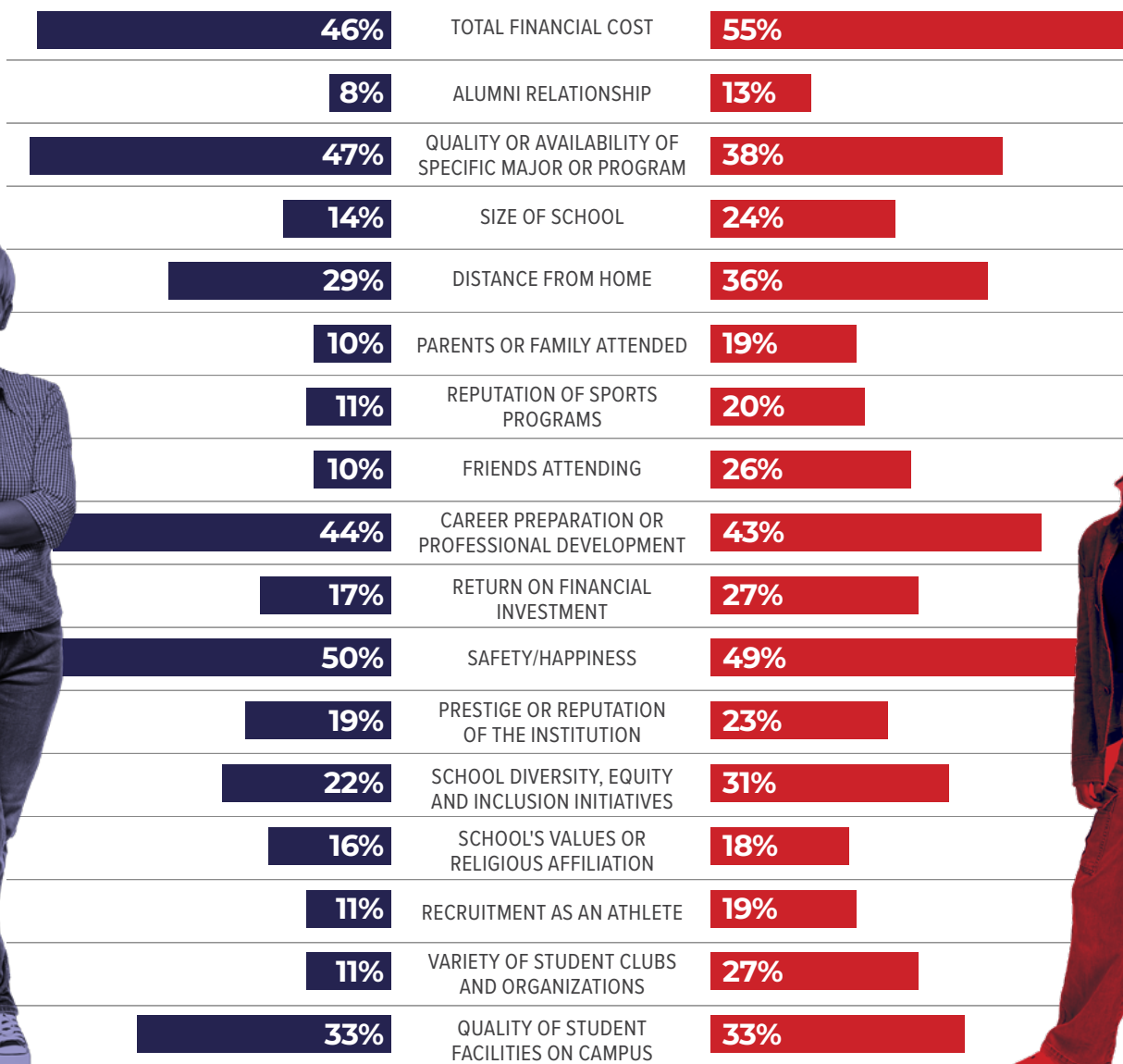
This shift has profound implications for enrollment marketing. Institutions can no longer design content solely for human readers. They must ensure that their information is accessible, scannable, and structured so that AI systems can ingest, cite, and redistribute it accurately. Pages that lack clear “answer blocks” summarizing costs, outcomes, scholarships, and deadlines risk being excluded from the results that families see first. Content freshness is equally important. Families now expect to see “last updated” stamps on high-value pages, signaling accuracy and trustworthiness.

The Parent-Student Divide

The data reveals a strong starting point of alignment between parents and students: both care most about total cost and personal safety. Families want transparency around price, value, and well-being before anything else. That shared foundation, however, begins to diverge once the conversation turns toward academics and experience.

Top Motivators: Parents and Students

When choosing an educational institution, what's the most important to you? Select the top five.



Students focus on fit and fulfillment. They emphasize the quality of their chosen major or program, access to career preparation and internships, and a sense of belonging on campus. Distance from home and diversity initiatives also factor in as they picture where they'll feel supported and comfortable.

Parents remain grounded in outcomes. After cost and safety, they look for clear indicators of return on investment career preparation, graduation timelines, and institutional reputation. They want assurance that the experience will translate into stability and opportunity.

This balance of shared priorities and subtle divergence creates complexity. Cost and safety unite families, but major choice divides them. Institutions that can address both sides—financial transparency and personal belonging, outcome and experience—are best positioned to move families from hesitation to confident commitment.

Students, by contrast, focus on personal fit and belonging. They are drawn to programs that align with their passions, faculty who inspire them, and a campus culture that feels supportive. They place strong emphasis on location and independence, and they want opportunities for internships and career preparation—but these considerations are layered on top of practical concerns about affordability.

While parents tend to lead on financial decisions, students still rank cost as a top factor when narrowing their options. However, students place greater weight on day-to-day experience and connection—elements that influence whether they will ultimately apply and enroll.

The overlap between these two perspectives creates complexity. Parents wield outsized influence over cost, major, and debt decisions, while students are increasingly anxious and hesitant about making life-defining choices. This combination often results in decision paralysis. Institutions that can successfully speak to both groups acknowledging parental concerns while affirming student identity and belonging stand to gain a competitive advantage.

Timing also matters. More than half of families believe that schools should begin communicating about postsecondary options much earlier in the high school journey, signaling that institutions must move up their engagement strategies. The data also shows that parents are the drivers of that desire which indicates a need to have a better understanding of the process, giving them peace of mind.

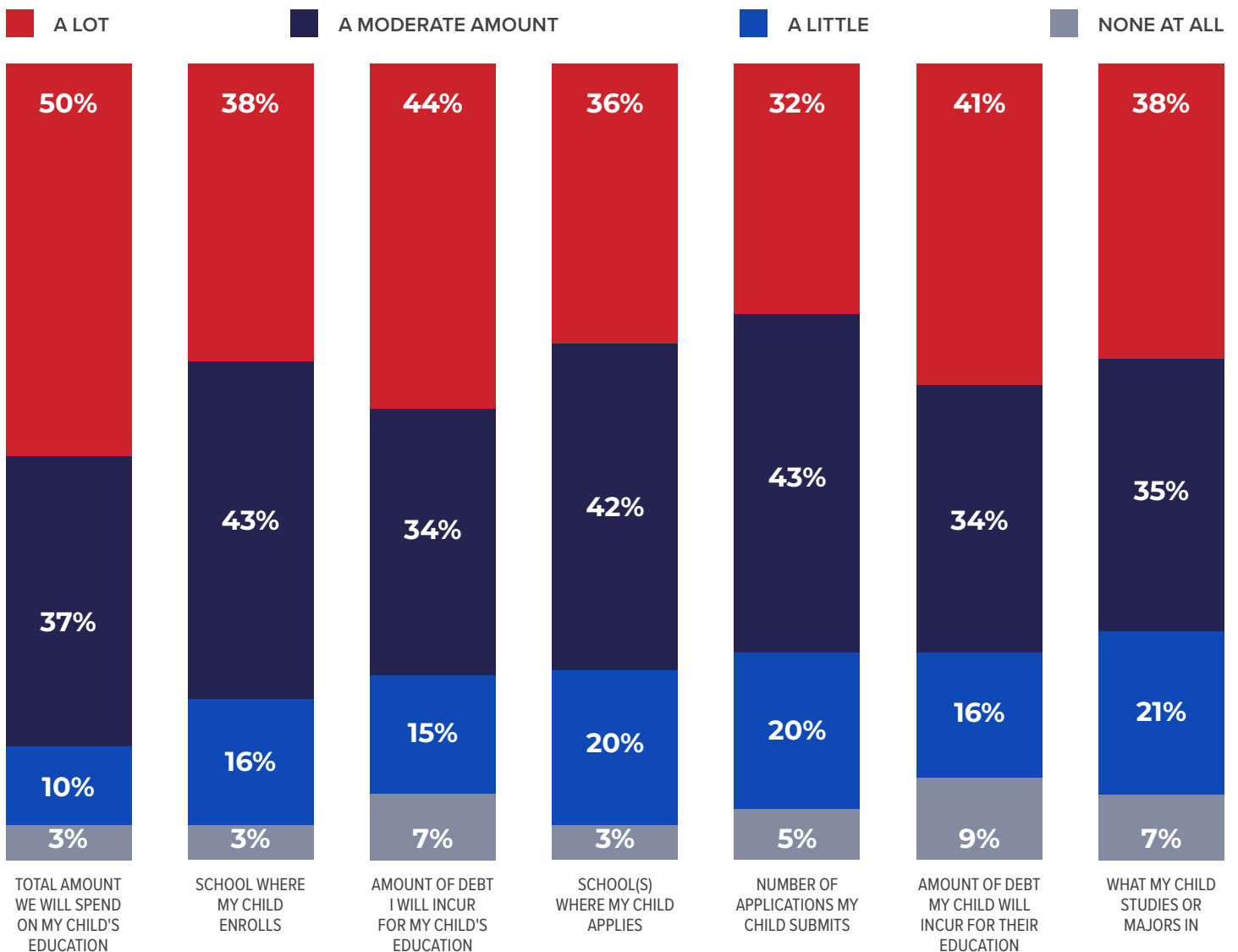
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Parental Influence and Its Consequences

Parents exert extraordinary influence over nearly every aspect of the college decision. Eighty-seven percent report controlling total education spending, 81 percent help determine where their child enrolls, and nearly three-quarters shape the choice of major. Even decisions traditionally thought to be student-driven—such as the number of applications submitted—are often shared or led by parents.


Parent Influence on Student Decisions

Consider the topics below and indicate how much influence you have on your child's post-high school related decisions in each area:



This heavy involvement intersects with growing rates of teen anxiety and uncertainty. Many students report feeling unprepared to leave home or to make independent decisions about their futures. The result is a dynamic where parental influence can sometimes stunt student confidence and create decision paralysis.

For institutions, this means marketing cannot focus solely on the student. Colleges must position themselves as trusted partners to both audiences, addressing the parental need for safety, ROI, and financial stability while also affirming student autonomy, belonging, and exploration.



By addressing parents' concerns about safety and financial stability, while affirming student autonomy, belonging, and exploration, schools position themselves as trusted partners to both students and their parents

WORKBOOK IDEAS: 4-Year Colleges & Universities

- Host **joint webinars** on decision-making, major selection, financial planning.
- Offer **transparent ROI calculators** for families to assess the long-term value of degrees.
- Create **mental health transition guides** for parents and students: “Helping Your Teen Thrive in Their First Year.”
- Equip admissions teams with **family FAQs** covering topics like dorm life, academic support, and career placement.

WORKBOOK IDEAS: Community Colleges

- Launch campaigns about the **“Two-Year Reset”** — a guided, supportive option for emotionally unready teens.
- Promote guided pathways, **dual-advising** (student and parent), and major exploration frameworks that offer structure without locking students in.
- Build trust by publishing data on transfer success, local job placement, and student support services (including mental health and career planning).

WORKBOOK IDEAS: Vocational & Career Training

- Emphasize **shorter program durations**, clear employment outcomes, and certification ROI to reassure both parties.
- Provide parent resources that **explain what skilled trades** and certifications offer in terms of career growth and earnings.
- **Highlight alumni stories** that show confident, independent decision-making and strong outcomes—this helps teens see a model of self-efficacy.
- Add **career coaching and mental wellness** support as program perks—this speaks directly to concerns about post-pandemic anxiety and decision paralysis.

WORKBOOK IDEAS: All Schools

Most importantly speak directly to the needs of parents and students separately, in their own language.

Target parents and students through their own marketing channels, with their own voices, with the information they need in their role.

CHALLENGE

RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

Teen anxiety/ fear of failure

Normalize uncertainty. Offer program exploration content and stories of successful transfers or career changes.

Parental over-involvement

Create segmented communications: "What parents need to know" vs. "What students should explore."
Use these to foster shared but balanced decision-making.

Social media-induced comparison

Share real, diverse student stories – not overly polished influencers. Use authentic, relatable journeys to ground expectations.

Low confidence in planning future

Provide tools like interactive career path quizzes, interest-to-major match tools, and shadowing opportunities. Frame them as discovery aids, not commitments.

Mental health concerns

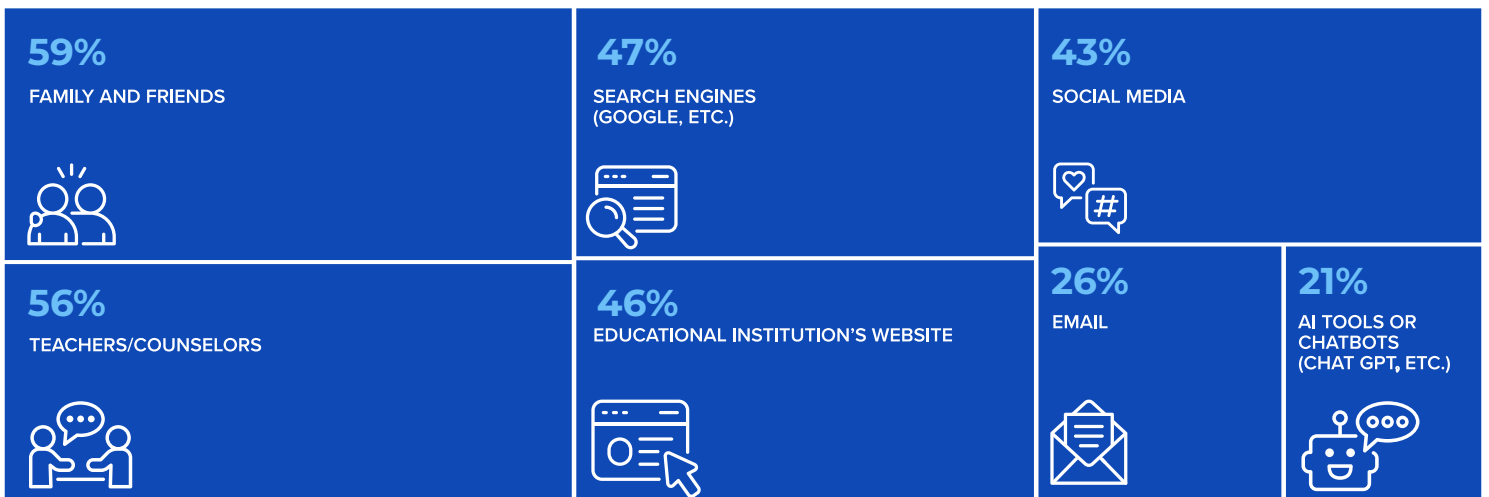
Make student well-being a central part of your marketing – showcase therapist on staff, peer groups, mindfulness programming and transition workshops.

How Students and Parents Engage Differently

Parents and students not only value different things, but they also search and engage differently. Parents lean on official digital sources and trusted data platforms institutional websites, college search tools, and government scorecards to guide their research. Students, by contrast, begin less digitally with personal networks. They turn first to family, friends, and teachers or counselors, then expand their search through web engines, school websites, and social media.

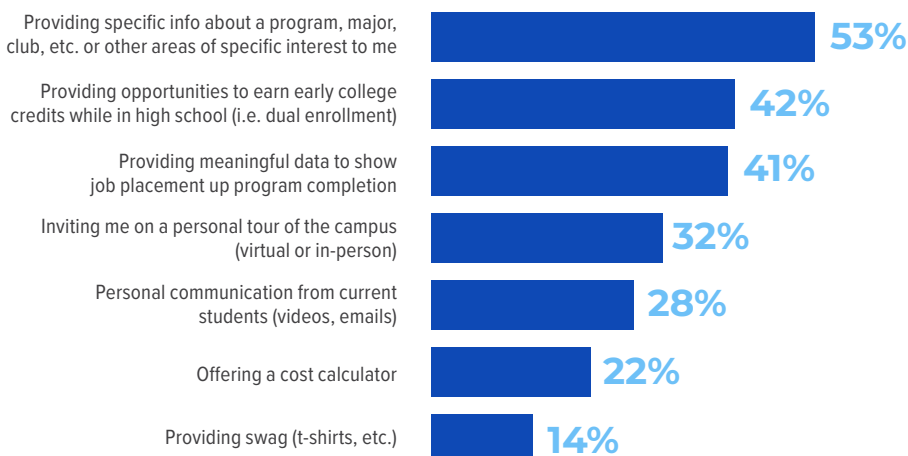
Where Students Start Their Search for Post-Secondary Options

When researching info about furthering your education after high school, where do you (or did you) start? Select the top three.



Why Students Add a School to the List

What would lead or cause you to consider a school? Select all that apply.

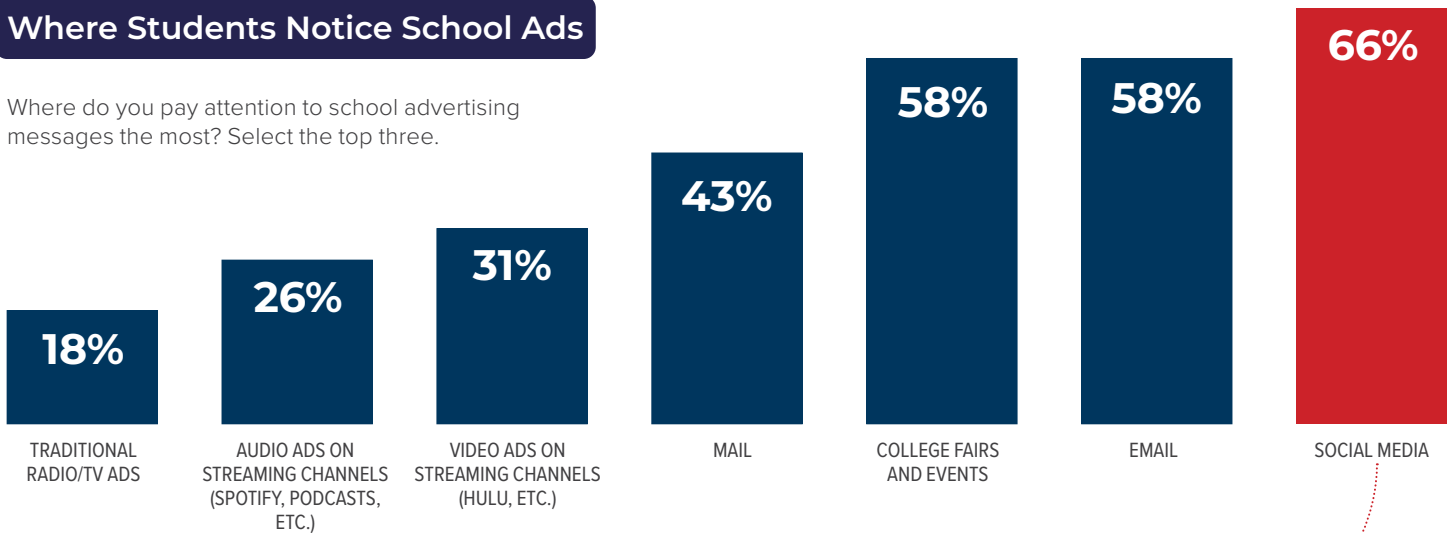


Their decision to add a school to their list is influenced by program relevance, authenticity, and cultural fit whether the institution feels like a place where they belong and can thrive.

When it comes to advertising, students notice messages most on social media, email, and at college fairs or events.

Where Students Notice School Ads

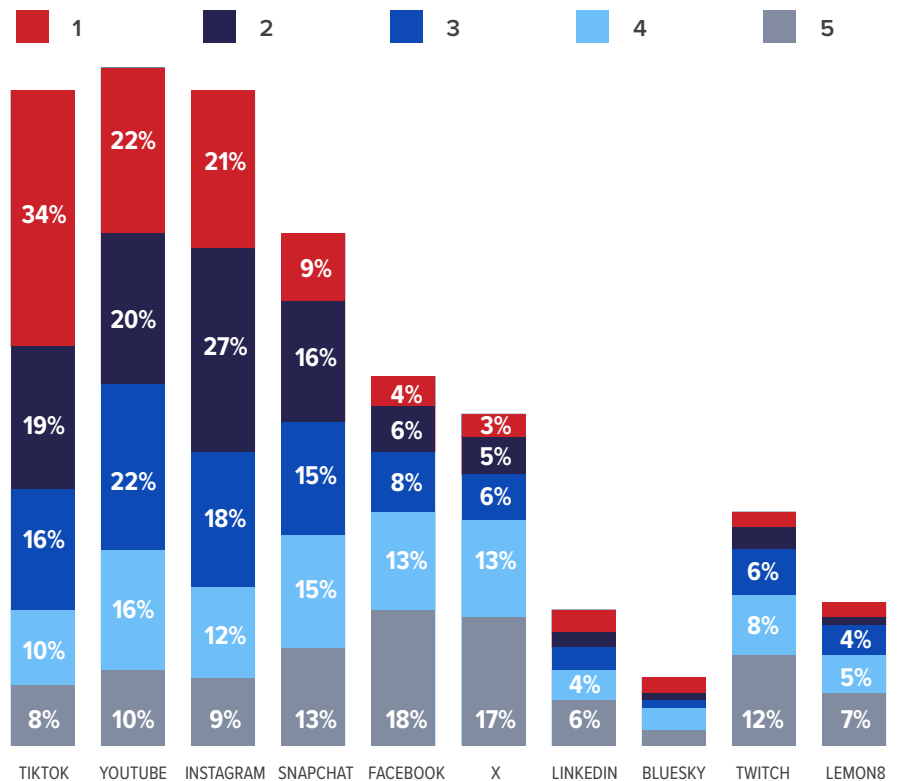
Where do you pay attention to school advertising messages the most? Select the top three.



Student Social Channels Ranked

Rank your top five most used social channels from most to least used.

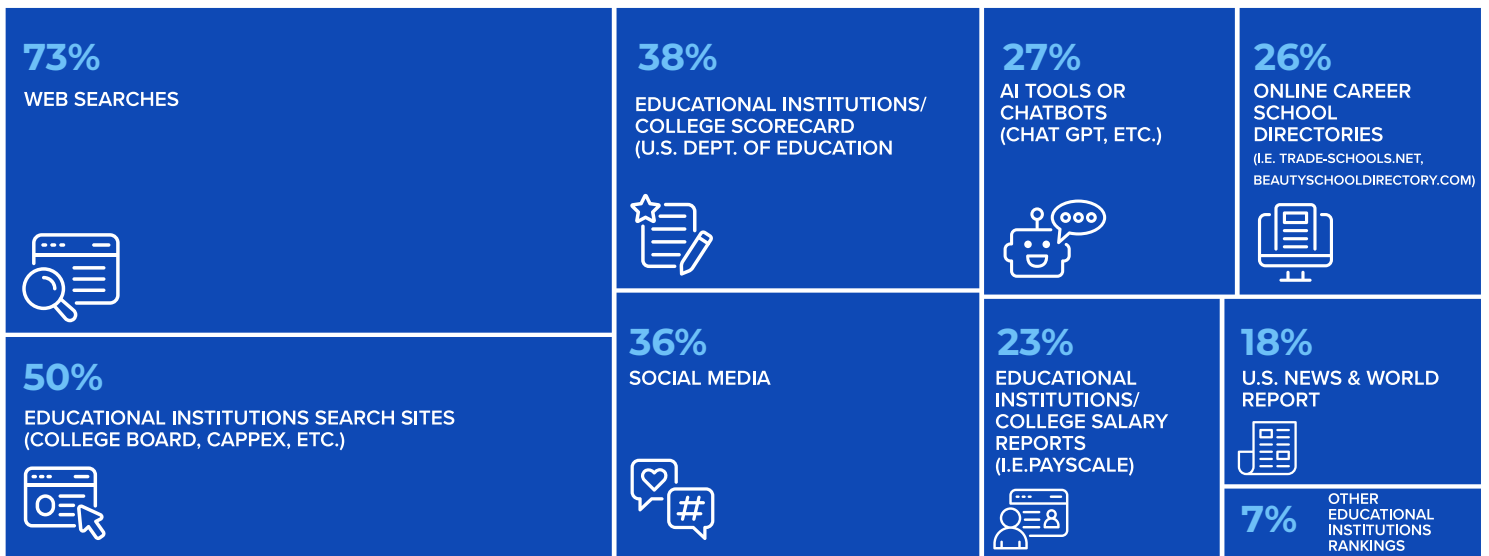
They pay close attention to short-form video and social platforms, with TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram ranking highest in daily use. If your team is not an expert in understanding the short-form space and the art of the hook you might not be connecting with the student audience as deeply as you would like to.



Parents, meanwhile, begin their journey with search 73% start with a web query before ever visiting an institutional site. From there, they gravitate toward official resources like college search sites, aid calculators, and trusted rankings. If your institution isn't discoverable at that first click, you're invisible when it matters most.

Digital Information Sources for Parents

Which of the following online/digital sources have you used during your search for information about post-high school education for your child? Please select all that apply.



Parents respond more to institutional websites, aid calculators, and community-based information channels.

Strategic Pathways for Higher Education Leaders

Institutions must now build dual pathways that serve parents and students simultaneously.

A parent-focused portal should forecast ROI, cost calculators, aid timelines, and safety information.

A student-facing portal should highlight program quality, day-in-the-life content, authentic student testimonials, and opportunities for belonging.

Optimizing for AI discovery is no longer optional.

Colleges must publish structured content that AI can read and cite, including FAQ schema, scannable answer blocks, and clearly dated updates. The presence of a “cite-the-source” chatbot that escalates complex queries to a human reinforces transparency, and builds trust.

Content must also be tailored to the platforms each audience uses. Parents respond to ROI-driven messaging on Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as webinars and email nurture campaigns.



PRO TIP:

Even though parents are looking for ROI... they don't say “ROI,” so in the age of AI, teams need to eliminate as much jargon from their marketing messaging as possible.



PRO TIP:

Short form video can be a drain on smaller teams, so create workflows that produce long form content pieces that can be served to the parent path and cut that up into multiple pieces and re-edit for context for the student path.

Students are more likely to engage through TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Stories, especially when the content feels authentic and peer-driven.

Finally, institutions should embrace stackable pathway messaging.

Families are increasingly attracted to flexible educational routes that allow progression from certificate to associate degree to bachelor's. Highlighting transfer partnerships, employer collaborations, and local placement outcomes can de-risk the choice for both parents and students.

Applying the Findings

Our survey results underscore that while all institutions face common challenges, the application of insights differs by sector. Each type of institution must tailor its strategies to align with the distinct expectations of parents and students.

Four-Year Colleges and Universities

For traditional four-year institutions, the central challenge is overcoming skepticism about value. Parents are asking whether high tuition translates into strong outcomes, while students worry about whether they will belong and thrive. Transparency is paramount. Families want access to **ROI calculators**, clear four-year graduation plans, and verifiable placement statistics. Schools should also address emotional readiness, acknowledging the anxiety many teens report and providing transition resources.

Practical tactics include hosting joint parent-student webinars on topics such as financial planning and career pathways, publishing “cost-to-complete” roadmaps rather than headline tuition prices, and embedding mental health transition guides into admissions materials. At the content level, admissions teams should be equipped with family FAQs covering not just academics, but dorm life, career services, and student support networks.

Community Colleges

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to provide families with confidence in affordability, adaptability, and outcomes. Parents see them as a smart starting point that makes higher education more financially sustainable while students can view them as supportive environments to mature both academically and emotionally before transferring. The messaging opportunity lies in reframing community college as an intentional choice rather than a fallback. Campaigns built around the idea of a “Two-Year Reset,” a guided and supportive step for teens who are not yet ready for independence, can resonate strongly. Transparency about transfer partnerships, local job placement rates, and student support services (including mental health resources) builds further trust.

Tactically, institutions can implement dual-advising systems that engage both parents and students in the planning process, while promoting guided pathways that balance flexibility with structure. Data on transfer success and career outcomes should be consistently published and updated to counter lingering perceptions of limited opportunity.

Vocational and Career Training Programs

Vocational and technical programs stand at the intersection of urgency and clarity. Students are drawn to the promise of speed-to-career, while parents appreciate the financial stability and job security such programs can provide. The messaging must reinforce that vocational training is not a compromise, but a direct route to independence and income.

Effective tactics include emphasizing **short program durations**, industry-aligned certifications, and clear employment outcomes. Providing parents with resources that explain wage growth, demand for skilled trades, and career progression opportunities helps address skepticism. Alumni stories are especially powerful here testimonials that highlight graduates who transitioned quickly into confident, independent professionals can speak to both student aspirations and parental concerns.

To address the emotional dimension, vocational programs can also integrate career coaching and wellness support into their offerings, signaling that they care not just about technical skill development but also about student resilience and long-term growth.

Shared Imperatives Across Sectors

Across all institution types, one truth is consistent: **parents and students require different communications, in different languages, on different channels and both need to be addressed simultaneously.**

This means institutions must build parallel marketing tracks, not a one-size-fits-all funnel. Parents need targeted communication through their trusted channels webinars, LinkedIn, Facebook, and ROI-focused email sequences while students respond better to TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts, and peer-to-peer storytelling.

Ultimately, the schools that succeed will be those that treat segmentation as a core strategy rather than a side project, delivering content that is empathetic to the unique priorities of both audiences while still connecting them into a cohesive family decision-making process.

Our research makes it clear that higher education marketing cannot afford to operate on autopilot. Families are moving faster, asking sharper questions, and relying on new tools to form their opinions. Institutions that respond with vague promises or outdated information risk being left off the shortlist entirely. What's required now is not a five-year vision, but a 90-day execution plan a set of immediate, measurable steps that build trust with families and ensure schools remain discoverable both to humans and to AI.

A 90-Day Framework for Implementation

The roadmap for adapting to these shifts is practical and urgent. In the first 30 days, institutions should audit their web content for AI readability, launch dedicated landing pages for parents and students, and add trigger tiles—scholarships, outcomes, visit scheduling, and chat—on high-traffic program pages. Deploying a chatbot with citation functionality and human escalation ensures families receive quick, reliable answers.

WORKBOOK PROMPTS:

- Which of our top five program pages still lack clear cost and outcomes data?
- Do our parent/student entry points exist, or are we forcing both groups through the same funnel?
- If a family asked our chatbot today, “What does this program cost?” would the answer be complete, cited, and current?

Between days 31 and 60, institutions can expand their library of student-focused video content, create parent-oriented ROI and financial planning guides, and begin integrating answer blocks into top program pages. Establishing listening loops by monitoring subreddit discussions and chatbot logs will help identify and address emerging content gaps.

WORKBOOK PROMPTS:

- Which three programs would make the strongest “90-second story” for social video?
- What ROI proof point (placement percentage, median salary, time-to-degree) is most compelling for parents?
- Where are families already asking questions we don’t answer today and how fast can we fix that gap?

By days 61 to 90, the focus should shift to optimization and scale. Institutions should measure conversion lift from chatbot interactions and trigger tiles, track how quickly families can find answers to their top questions, and launch segmented nurture campaigns for parents and students. Monthly content refresh cycles will ensure accuracy, while coordinated cross-channel campaigns will align messaging across social, email, and paid media.

WORKBOOK PROMPTS:

- What’s our current “time-to-answer” for cost, aid, and deadlines? Can we get it under 10 seconds?
- Which metrics should we track weekly versus monthly, and who owns them?
- How are we personalizing nurture emails so parents see ROI data while students see culture and fit?
- Where are we duplicating effort across channels, and how can we unify campaigns for efficiency?

Measuring Success

The effectiveness of these strategies can be evaluated using a new set of key performance indicators. Institutions should monitor their share of citations in large language model answers, the conversion rate of chatbot-assisted inquiries, and the lift in inquiries from pages with trigger tiles compared to control pages.

Time-to-answer metrics should be tracked, with a target of providing families with responses to their top 20 questions in under ten seconds.

Finally, success will be evident in the freshness of content, the performance of parent versus student segments, and the yield of stackable or transfer pathways.

Conclusion: Publish, Prove, Personalize

The future of higher education marketing rests on three imperatives. Institutions must publish the facts families seek in formats both humans and AI can process. They must prove their value with verified data, authentic evidence, and transparent updates. And they must personalize their outreach to reflect the distinct yet overlapping needs of parents and students.

Those that embrace this framework will not simply survive the enrollment cliff or the affordability crisis. They will thrive by building deeper trust with families and positioning themselves as indispensable partners in students' futures. The transformation is already underway. The only question is whether your institution will lead or follow.

Advance Education is a digital marketing agency specializing in enrollment marketing for higher education, community colleges, and vocational schools. With partnerships with traditional four-year universities, community colleges, and technical and career schools, we help institutions level up marketing strategies for student recruitment as well as alumni outreach.

What makes us unique? We focus on student success while empowering post-secondary education institutions to meet their enrollment goals. We craft customized, adaptable marketing campaigns, propelling institutions toward their enrollment goals, all while accounting for the human element.

Connections matter to students, and we excel in facilitating these crucial links for you. We can help you nurture lasting, meaningful relationships that support student success through data-driven insights and bespoke campaigns.

We also understand that no two organizations are alike – that’s why we personalize our campaigns to each individual institution. Whether you’re a 2-year college, a vocational school, or a graduate degree program, we can help you build meaningful connections with prospective students.

Learn more about [our approach](#) or [contact us](#) today to see how we can transform your marketing campaigns.

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