



EAB

Post-Pandemic Enrollment Strategy

*Actionable Lessons and Tools
for Enrollment Teams*

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Executive Summary

What We Learned About Enrollment Strategy During the Pandemic

A Stress Test for Enrollment Practices

The pandemic confronted enrollment leaders with the most turbulent and trying recruitment cycles in recent memory. However, this period also offers valuable insights for institutions moving forward. The challenging circumstances of the pandemic served as an inadvertent stress test for enrollment practices, shedding new light on certain vulnerabilities and the tools needed to address them.

Top Stressors

Lessons and Outcomes

Virtual-First Recruitment



The biggest single shift in pandemic-era strategy was the pivot to a virtual-first environment, facilitated by digital platforms.



Digitization Accelerated

The pandemic spotlighted shortcomings in digital recruitment strategy, helping schools identify new techniques and technologies that will help them better engage students virtually at each stage of their journey.

Lack of Test Scores



With access to standardized testing severely limited, many institutions had to reenvision their policies for determining admissions decisions and merit aid awards without a score.



New Urgency in Tackling Tough Testing Questions

For many institutions, the pandemic finally created the institutional focus and urgency required to push through complex and politically sensitive test-optional policies. Schools can capitalize on this momentum to set deliberate testing policies for 2022 and beyond.

Financial Hardship



Amid the economic downturn and continued doubts about the value of college, institutions faced new challenges in communicating with families about affordability.



Clear Need for Comprehensive Communications

While there's no silver bullet in college affordability discussions, the pandemic validated the need for a comprehensive, multipronged plan that addresses families' affordability concerns throughout the recruitment process.

Looking Forward: A Shift in the Student Journey

The pandemic not only offers lessons for enrollment leaders—it has also fundamentally altered the recruitment landscape by realigning the balance between inbound and outbound marketing. More than ever, students are initiating and continuing their path to enrollment based on their own preferences, interests, and perceptions of value. While this trend started well before 2020, it was drastically accelerated by the conditions of the pandemic. And whereas much of higher education had historically lagged behind consumer marketing, during the pandemic, the most sophisticated institutions were able to use unique circumstances to make large leaps forward in innovation and capabilities.

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Hybrid Approaches to Campus Visits

SECTION

1

A Year of Innovation for Campus Visits

Creativity and Innovation in Tours

Faced with constraints on public gatherings during the pandemic, many institutions devised creative, alternative ways to host families safely while adhering to social distancing guidelines. While some schools ramped up the use of existing technologies such as QR codes to enable self-guided tours, others invented novel ways to showcase their institutions, including a school that rented out a fleet of golf carts for visit days and one that reserved a drive-in movie theater to host a mass, socially distanced admit day. And in addition to innovations in official in-person recruitment events, one public institution in the South even reported the emergence of an unauthorized, current-student-led tour business that filled the campus tour vacuum during shutdowns.

Alternative In-Person Events During the Pandemic: A Small Selection



Golf Cart
Campus Visit



QR Code-Assisted
Audio Tour



Drive-Through
Swag Stops



Drive-In
Theater Rental



Unsanctioned Student
Tour Guide Business



Outdoor-Only
Single-Family Tour

Insights from Pandemic-Era Innovations

These examples help underscore and elucidate the unique value of the campus visit. Despite the obstacles associated with in-person campus visits, schools and families found a way to make them possible. Given the new restrictions, enrollment leaders had to distill the in-person visit down to its most high-value components, an exercise that offers insights into ways to improve campus visits moving forward. The practices of the pandemic also shed light on the ways that virtual recruitment events can complement or—in certain cases—replace aspects of the traditional campus visit.



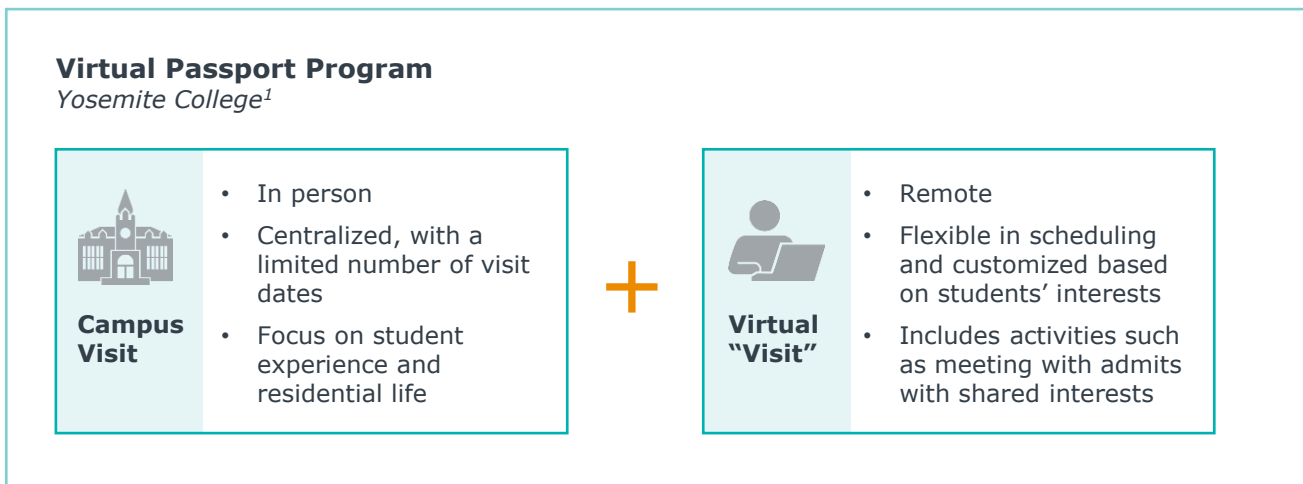
Lesson

A multimodal approach to campus visits optimizes channel to experience.

Designing a Successful Hybrid Visit Experience

Pairing In-Person and Virtual Visits

To ensure they were adhering to social distancing guidelines, Yosemite College¹ pivoted their visit strategy to a hybrid on-campus and virtual format. They offered a condensed in-person visit day that showcased the aspects of student life that were best experienced on campus, including the tour and discussions of residential life. As a part of the “visit” experience, admitted students could also sign up for a virtual passport program, which offered experiences such as speaking with a professor, meeting fellow admits from their hometown or identity background, and attending a virtual class. Yosemite found that this program enabled them to offer a more customized, flexible way to learn about their student experience. Attendance in the program was also highly predictive of yield, with participating admits yielding at a 5x higher rate than the general admit pool.



Streamlining the In-Person Visit

Offering a hybrid visit experience can help pare down the costs and logistical preparations associated with in-person visits, such as providing food and ensuring that faculty members are on campus on evenings or weekends. Some colleges, especially larger ones, may benefit from running large-scale, in-person events that focus on the most engaging parts of the visit while expending fewer resources. Smaller institutions may choose to leverage streamlined visits as a way to meet with smaller groups of families at one time. With each approach, institutions will need to weigh the benefits against their own resource constraints.

Improving Customer Service

“This year, we saw that we could offer **better customer service** during visits when we scaled back the number of families per group.”

*-Vice President of Enrollment,
Medium-Sized Private University in
the West*

Virtual Experiences Offer Additional Opportunity for Flexibility and Customization

Moving some aspects of the visit to a virtual setting can also offer more flexibility to accommodate students' schedules and enable schools to customize content based on student interest. For guidance on how to design successful virtual events, see pages 17 and 18.

1) A pseudonym

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Guide to Evaluating Your Campus Visit Experience

Which Parts of Your Campus Visit Events Should You Keep In Person?

After shifting to virtual-first, socially distanced recruitment during the pandemic, many institutions are assessing ways to streamline their on-campus visit experiences by moving certain components online. **Use the questions below to help guide your institution's approach to on-campus recruitment events moving forward.**

Questions to Ask When Assessing Your On-Campus Events

Resources Required

- How much counselor time will be involved in planning and hosting the in-person event? If we moved components of the event online, would that save substantial counselor time?
- What food and other costs are associated with the in-person event? Could we shorten the event or move elements to a virtual setting to bring down food costs?
- Will faculty or student guest speakers be involved at the on-campus event? If so, can we ensure adequate attendance at all breakout groups?

Student Experience

- Which components of the event are broadly appealing? Are there more narrowly appealing components of the event that we could host virtually instead?
- How does being on campus contribute to the student experience? Are there elements of the event that would work as well in a virtual setting?
- Could we offer a more customized version of certain programming via a virtual setting?
- Could we expand access to certain programming by offering it virtually and running it more frequently or at different times of the day and week?

Eight Ideas for Virtual Recruitment Programming



By offering some events virtually, you can connect prospects with programming that's more tailored to their specific interests and more accessible than in-person events. Explore the list below for ways to create engaging virtual events:

- Watch a science professor conduct a live experiment
- Learn what on-campus life is really like at a "Students Tell All" Q&A panel
- Attend a mock class from a professor in your area of academic interest
- Meet fellow admitted students from your hometown
- Meet fellow admitted students with shared demographic background or interests
- Attend a safety on campus AMA with senior university administrators (for parents and students)
- Learn about the local culture and things to do near campus
- Attend a virtual board game night, championship game watch party, or trivia night



Maximizing Your Virtual Tour

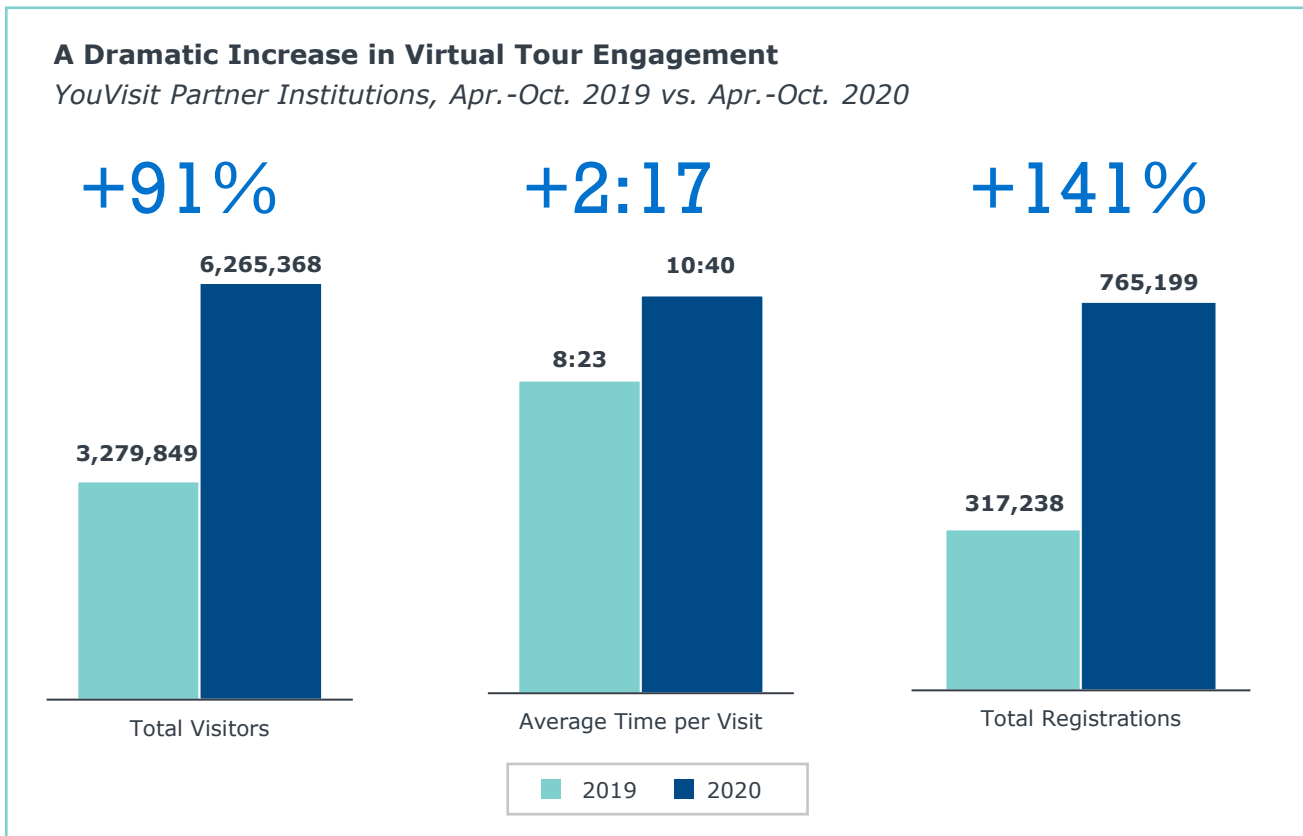
SECTION

2

Newfound Value in Virtual Tours

Virtual Tours in the Spotlight

While in-person events factored into many campuses' recruitment activities during the pandemic, virtual tours played an unprecedentedly large role in strategy due to social distancing and travel restrictions. Statistics from across the YouVisit partner cohort give a sense of the massive uptick in virtual tour usage, with total virtual tour visitors almost doubling from April to October 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, and average time per visit increasing by 27%. At the same time, many institutions faced tight recruitment budgets, meaning that they were forced to closely examine their existing recruitment investments, including virtual tours, to ensure they were maximizing value. During the pandemic, the increased pressure on and usage of virtual tours revealed ways to make better use of tours, including through improved promotion, use of analytics, and tour content.



Lesson

The virtual-first environment of the pandemic revealed clear opportunities to increase the impact of virtual tours.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Optimizing Virtual Tour Visibility

Improving Tour Promotion

One major lesson from the pandemic was the need to make tours easier for students to find and access. EAB recommends ensuring that tours are included in key central navigation areas of your website, including the top or bottom navigation links.

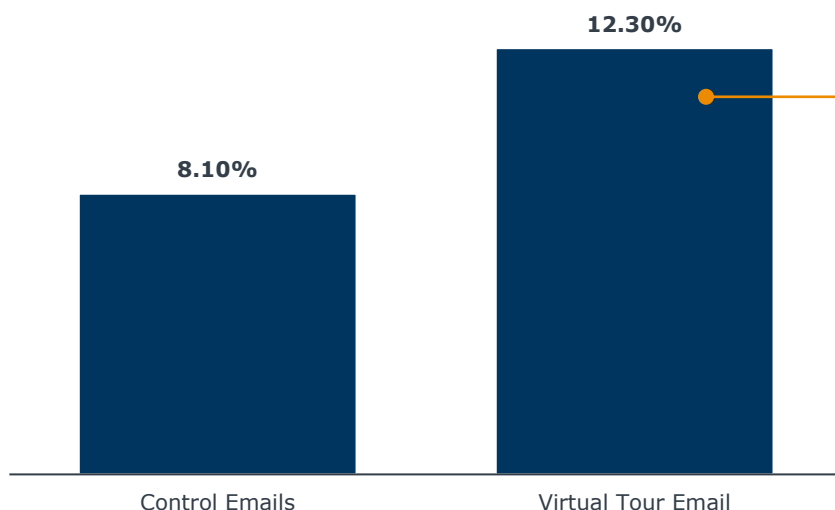
Virtual tours should also be integrated into content-specific pages of your website, such as those focusing on residence halls, financial aid, and athletics. In addition, when linking to your tour from these pages, ensure that students are taken directly to relevant content, rather than being asked to navigate to it on their own. That way, tours can better support self-shopping and directly answer students' questions as they browse your website.

A Highly Effective Engagement Lever in Outreach

Promoting your tour effectively doesn't just facilitate self-directed research; it also amplifies engagement across channels. For example, EAB research has found that prospects are 5x more likely to take an action if they come through the virtual tour experience vs. the .edu site alone, and virtual tour content boosts email open rates.

Virtual Tours Can Help Cut Through the Noise in Emails

Email Open Rates for Arches College,¹ EAB Testing



52%

Higher open rate, proportionately, observed for virtual tour email than for standard recruitment emails

Impact of Proper Tour Placement

30%

of traffic results from placing your virtual tour in your navigation bar, making it accessible from every part of your website

45%

of visits come from placing the tour on your home page

5x

prospects are 5x more likely to take an action if they come through the virtual tour experience vs. the .edu site alone

1) A pseudonym

Maximizing the Value of Virtual Tour Data and Content

Using Tour Data to Inform Recruitment Strategy

Many institutions stand to benefit not just from promoting their virtual tour better but also from leveraging data in the back-end of their tour. For example, upon reviewing visit data by geography, one college in the Northeast discovered unexpectedly high levels of activity from states in the South, including Georgia and Texas. Based on this intel, the college then expanded their name-buy strategy within those areas.

How Virtual Tours Informed List Buys

Yellowstone College¹



Students view virtual tour



Admissions office discovers higher-than-expected tour visits in Georgia and Texas



Yellowstone increases test-taker list buys in those regions

Prospects Seek Student Voices and Authentic, Immersive Content

The massive uptick in virtual tour usage also gives us a wealth of additional data on what resonates most with students. EAB research and interviews with enrollment leaders both indicate that prospects seek content that can help them envision themselves on campus, including in-depth building tours and material presented by student ambassadors. A recent EAB survey underscores the importance of authentic content, with 33% of students responding that they were “most turned off” by manufactured or fake imagery or videos in communications from colleges. Content elements such as navigable 360-degree panoramas and multimedia student testimonials can help create a more immersive environment to help students imagine themselves on your campus.

What Students Want from Virtual Tours

Prospective Student Quotes, EAB 2021 Student Communications Survey



Authenticity

“I enjoyed viewing the **realistic aspects** of the college. **Most colleges put up some sort of a fake or desirable video** that makes the college seem nice. I am aiming to **go out-of-state, which is already scary**. I want to know exactly what I am getting myself into.”



Local Ambiance

“I liked the virtual tours that introduced more about **campus life and the local culture**, instead of the rankings or statistics that I can find online on my own.”



Student Voices

“**Listening to current students** has been my favorite part of virtual tours because hearing them talk about their school is more exciting and more informative than listening to admissions people talk about the school.”

1) A pseudonym

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Virtual Tour Promotion Checklist

Are You Missing Out on Opportunities to Share Your Virtual Tour?

Use the checklist below to identify gaps in your virtual tour promotion strategy.

Website			
Prominent Pages: We include links to our virtual tour on our home page, our admissions page, and our visit page.	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Partially <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>
Central Navigation: We link to our virtual tour via our navigation pages, including those along the top or bottom of our website.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Topic-Specific Pages: We use links or banners to promote the tour on all of the following pages: academics, admissions, about, residence halls, financial aid, athletics, and alumni.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Direct Content Links: In links on topic-specific residential pages, we ensure that the tour starts up at related content (e.g., the tour link from our residential life page links directly to the dorm section of our tour).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email			
Imagery: We promote our virtual tour in email using screenshots of the tour.	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Partially <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>
Customized Content: We link to customized tour destinations by department, where applicable.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email Signature: We promote virtual tours in our admissions staff's email signatures.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other Channels			
Texts: We promote our virtual tour via texts to prospective students and their parents.	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Partially <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>
Social Media: We promote our virtual tour across all of our social platforms.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collateral: We include direct links to virtual tours on all relevant flyers and brochures.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recruitment Events and Visits			
Guided Virtual Visits: We host live walk-throughs of our virtual tours for students who can't visit campus.	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Partially <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>
QR Codes: We post QR codes on signage around campus to help visitors learn more about physical locations via the virtual tour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self-Guided Tour: We enable on-campus visitors to access routes and audio guides through a GPS-enabled mobile experience.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recruitment Fairs and Events: We auto-play our virtual tour at events or on campus, including at recruitment events, college fairs, and in the admissions office.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Related Resource: [Conduct an Audit of Your Virtual Tour Solution](#)

Does your virtual tour meet today's digital expectations? **Assess your current virtual tour capabilities** at <https://eab.com/services/survey/enrollment/conduct-audit-virtual-tour-solution/>



Best Practices for Engaging Prospects Virtually

SECTION

3

A High Standard for Virtual Engagement

Most Virtual Engagement Isn't Meeting Students' High Expectations

The shift to a virtual-first recruitment strategy was perhaps the biggest challenge that enrollment leaders faced at the start of the pandemic. And while Zoom, social media, virtual tour platforms, and other technologies enabled fully remote engagement, enrollment teams saw firsthand that capturing and holding students' attention in a virtual setting is not easy. Even before 2020, Gen Z already had high expectations for personalization formed by a digital environment where algorithm-driven, highly tailored online experiences were the norm. In addition, students' Zoom fatigue and the decreased level of commitment associated with attending events remotely also posed challenges for recruitment.

Challenges of Engaging Students in a Virtual Setting



High Expectations of Personalization



Zoom Fatigue



Decreased Parent Involvement



"It's **been easier for students to disengage with us** in a virtual world. If students take the time to travel to campus for a program, they're committed, and they're probably committed to stay the whole time. But that's **not the case in a virtual setting.**"

-Director of Admissions, Large Public University in the East

Insights from Pandemic-Era Innovations

Many institutions interviewed for this research reported high levels of attendance for webinars in spring 2020, followed by substantial drop-offs in attendance in later 2020 and in 2021, indicating decreasing student interest in certain virtual recruitment activities as the pandemic wore on. However, clear strategies have emerged that have helped institutions buck that trend, both in virtual events and across other channels.



Lesson

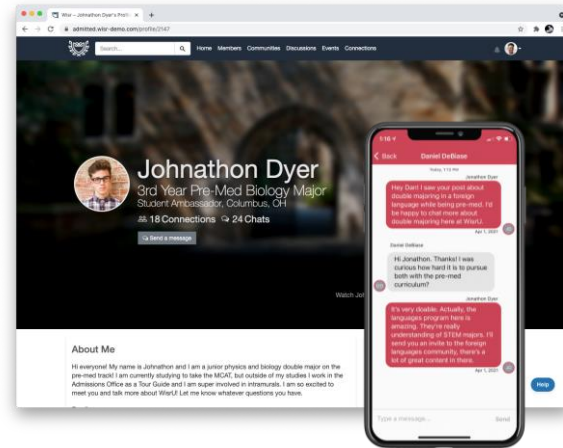
To successfully engage students in a virtual setting, institutions must accommodate students' preferences and expectations for digital communication.

Authentic Personalization at Scale

Social Platforms Can Help Foster Authentic Connections with Prospects

Social platforms have offered one approach for helping institutions engage students remotely while catering to their preference for personalized, authentic online content. For example, Wisr's yield platform enables admitted students to learn more about a school's community via discussion boards centered in common interests and one-to-one chats and phone calls with a school's student ambassadors and admissions counselors.

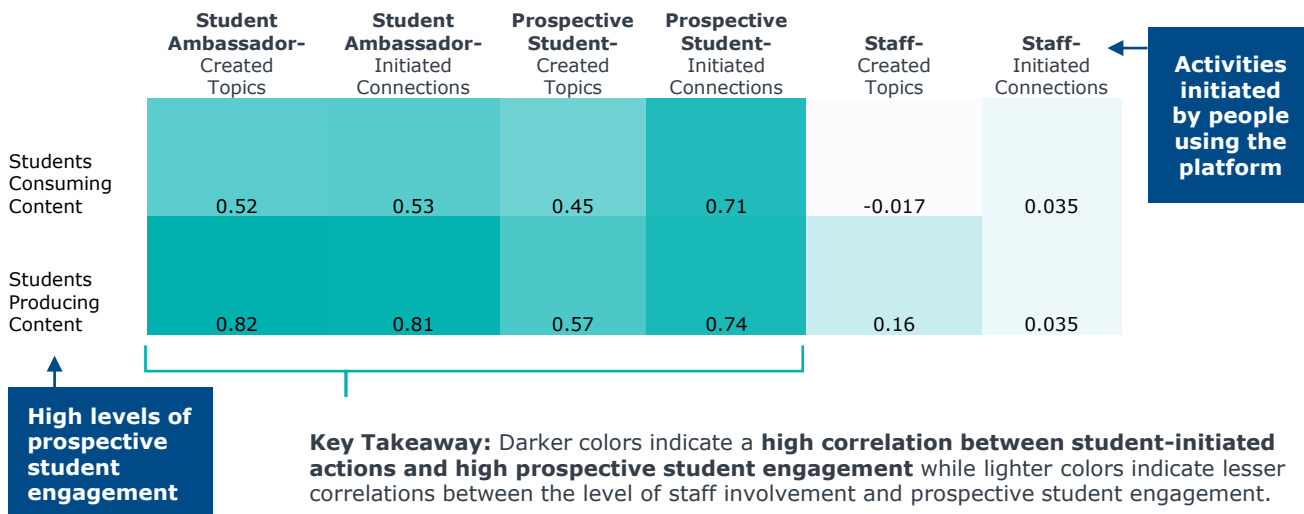
Wisr's Student Ambassador-Based Platform



Student-Led Interactions Count Much More Than Staff-Led Interactions

At the end of the 2020 yield season, Wisr analyzed various interactions on the platform, including the creation of discussion topics and initiation of person-to-person connections. They then compared this data with measures of admitted student engagement to determine which factors were most correlated. Their analyses showed that while student-ambassador-led and admitted-student-led activities were highly correlated with admitted student engagement on the platform, staff-initiated activities had much less connection with admitted students' platform usage. Wisr research also found that students were 3.5x as likely to yield if they had interacted with a student ambassador on the platform. Their analyses underscore just how much more impactful student voices are compared to staff voices. In addition, their findings also show that trained student ambassadors can help create and foster a highly engaging virtual environment for students.

Correlation Between Admitted Student Engagement and Student- or Staff-Led Activities, Wisr Analysis of Platform Usage Across 18 Partner Institutions¹



1) Value of 1 represents a perfect correlation, and value of -1 represents a perfect inverse correlation.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Maximizing Virtual Events

Offering Tailored Content in Webinars

Even with more “traditional” virtual recruitment events like webinars, students prefer content that’s tailored to their specific interests. Recent EAB research in partnership with the Center for Generational Kinetics offers insight into the topics that students are most interested in, with more than 50% of students responding that they’d most like to receive personalized information on programs, majors, clubs, and specific areas of interest, ranking above personal tour invites, specific financial information, and swag.

Designing Topic-Specific Webinars







“Adding specificity and niche content is really important. Once we started doing that, we saw webinar registration numbers go through the roof.”

-Director of Admissions, Private University in the East

Persistent Invite and Follow-Up Strategies Are Critical with Virtual Events

Virtual events are, in many ways, lower-commitment for students and families than on-campus events, since they don’t require arranging for transportation. While this can enable increased flexibility, it also means that parents are less likely to be involved in coordinating a student’s attendance. For that reason, colleges need to be more persistent about virtual event invitations and follow-up than they would otherwise be with in-person events. Bryce University,¹ a public institution in the South, adopted a more robust event reminder strategy for their virtual events, outlined below.

Virtual Event Reminder Strategy *Bryce University¹*

	Students	Parents
1 week out	 text + email	 email
1 day out	 text + email	 email
Day of event	 text + email	 email

1) A pseudonym

Virtual Events Checklist

Are You Maximizing the Impact of Your Virtual Events?

Use the checklist below to help ensure you're designing successful, effective virtual events.

Content			
	No	Partially	Yes
We've incorporated student voices where possible, such as through a student presenter.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've built in ways for event attendees to interact (e.g., through polls, quizzes, or invitations to ask questions via chat or verbally).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've tested out specific content of various types to determine what resonates most with our prospects.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Format and Timing			
	No	Partially	Yes
We've shortened run time as much as possible, ideally below 45 to 30 minutes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've tested various days and times to find the event schedule that works best for our audience.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've assessed whether any other major academic or social events might interfere with students' ability to attend.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Promotion			
	No	Partially	Yes
We've designed a multichannel promotion plan for the event, including channels such as email, social media, the admissions website, and/or outreach to high schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've determined whether the event will be promoted to prospects at specific stages of the funnel or to all prospects.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've ensured that all invitations include a registration link where students and families are asked to enter their contact information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've designed a multichannel reminder strategy for registrants, including communications to students and parents.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've determined whether we will cap registration at a certain number to maintain an intimate atmosphere.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Technical Considerations			
	No	Partially	Yes
We've identified the channel or platform that best fits our needs (e.g., Zoom, WebEx, Facebook Live, etc.).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've trained admissions staff and any student or faculty co-presenters on the platform.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've scheduled a dress rehearsal for the event to go over logistical questions and practice content.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've identified and made any necessary accessibility considerations, such as closed captioning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Event Success Metrics			
	No	Partially	Yes
We've identified success metrics for the event, such as registration volume, no-show rates, post-event surveys, and yield rates of attending students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've analyzed success metrics from past virtual recruitment events to help inform the design of this event.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Source: EAB research and analysis.



Lessons on Operationalizing Test-Optional Admissions

SECTION

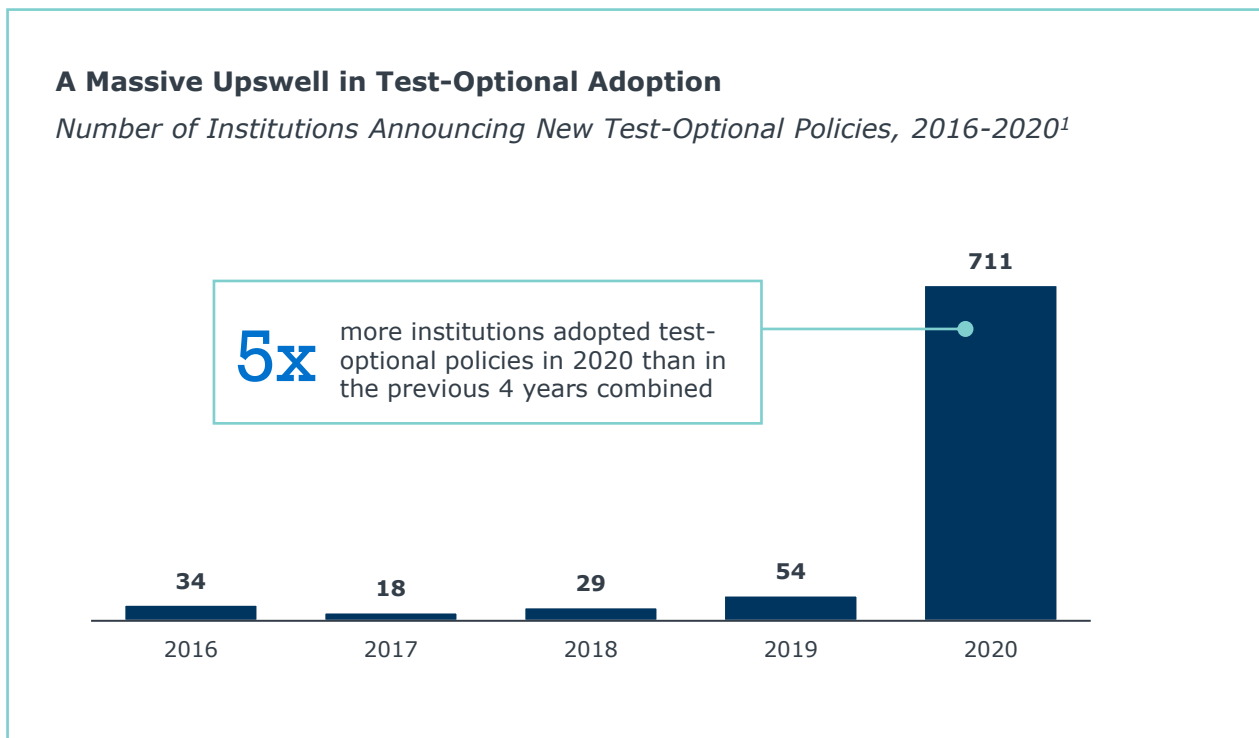
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A Sudden, Massive Shift to Test-Optional

Swift Adoption of Test-Optional

The 2020 and 2021 cycles saw a dramatic, rapid shift toward test-optional admissions among colleges across the country. It's important to note that the circumstances of pandemic-era test-optional policies were extraordinary in several ways. First, while test-optional adoption before 2020 had been driven mostly by equity and access concerns, test-optional in 2020 was propelled by a lack of access to testing. EAB survey research indicates just how limited testing was, with 39% of respondents saying that they hadn't had access to standardized tests since the start of the pandemic. Another unique characteristic of pandemic-era test-optional adoption was the speed at which it occurred. Instead of taking multiple cycles to deliberate a change in policy and perform careful analyses, many institutions made profound changes to their testing policies in a matter of months or weeks.

Despite the anomalies associated with test-optional in 2020 and 2021, pandemic-era admissions practices can teach institutions valuable lessons about how to operationalize test-optional policies moving forward.



Lesson

The dramatic industry-wide pivot to test-optional admissions offers new insight into approaches to making admissions decisions and merit aid awards without test scores.

1) Data is based on the year the policy was announced, not the cycle in which it went into effect. New test-optional policies that were listed as a winter period spanning multiple years were included in the later year. For example, schools that announced test-optional policies in winter 2019-2020 were included in 2020.

Sources: <https://www.fairtest.org/university/optional>, EAB research and analysis.

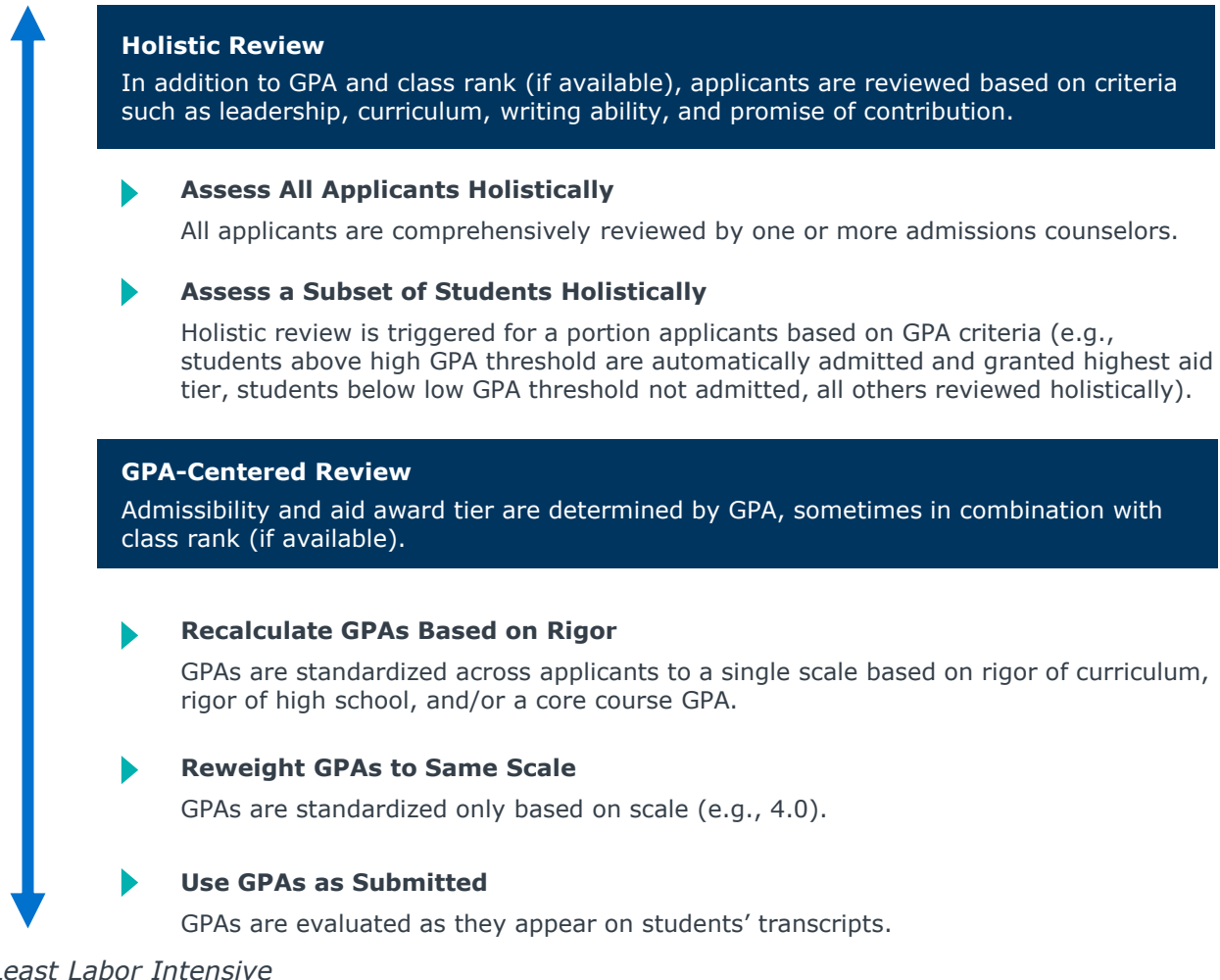
Approaches to Evaluation Without a Test Score

The Problem of Differentiating Between Applicants Without a Test Score

In addition to serving as a potential predictor of student success, test scores have functioned as a means of creating useful differentiations in an applicant pool to determine admissibility and merit aid award values. Traditionally, many schools made admissions decisions and determined aid awards based on a matrix incorporating both a student's GPA and test score. Without the additional data point of test scores, it became harder for many institutions to differentiate between students with the same GPA. The graphic below lists out the most common approaches that schools used in 2020 and 2021 to help them add additional granularity to student evaluation without a test score, organized from most labor-intensive to least labor-intensive for the admissions team.

Strategies for Determining Admissibility and Merit Aid Tiers Without a Test Score

Most Labor Intensive



Related Resource: For more guidance on implementing a holistic admissions policy, visit <https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/enrollment/navigate-holistic-admissions-without-test-scores/>

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Considerations for Your Test-Optional Policy

Strategies for Scaling GPA Recalculation

There were two main approaches that institutions took to recalculate GPAs during the pandemic: recalculating GPAs based on the rigor of high schools and/or based on a core set of courses. Either approach can be labor-intensive, depending on the level of automation that a school is able to achieve, which will depend on their existing policies and technological setup. To make the process less labor intensive, institutions can ask students to self-report their grades, which can eliminate the need to manually review all transcripts to make an admissions decision. (With self-reporting, transcripts are typically reviewed and grades are validated only after the deposit stage, lowering the overall volume of transcripts to be reviewed.) However, EAB recommends that institutions not require students to type in grades for individual courses, as that may create application-completion obstacles. Another way to make GPA review more scalable is to implement an assembly-line-type approach where each admissions officer specializes in one element of the application, such as identifying specific courses in a transcript.

Loss of Standardization

“Standardized tests provided a national yardstick, and we didn’t have that anymore. Instead, we needed deeper knowledge of individual schools and school districts.”

-Vice President of Enrollment, Large Public University in the South

More Labor-Intensive Isn’t Necessarily Better

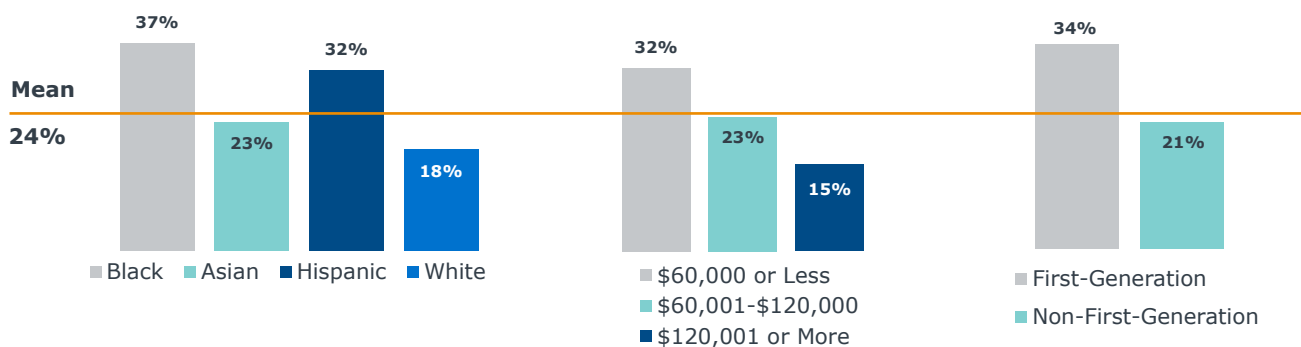
While more labor-intensive approaches can help institutions differentiate among their application pool, the increase in level of input is not necessarily proportionate to the outcome. EAB analyses have shown that, depending on a school’s specific applicant pool, even changes associated with large increases in manpower can have minimal effects on the enrollment metrics that enrollment leaders care about most, such as net tuition revenue, yield among specific populations, and measures of student success.

Equity and Access

It’s important to note that the shift to a test-optional policy can have major equity and access implications. For example, many institutions opted not to recalculate GPAs based on high school rigor in the 2021 cycle because of concerns that doing so would disproportionately advantage students from wealthier high schools. At the same time, moving to any test-optional policy will diminish any inequities associated with standardized testing use in admissions. Furthermore, EAB survey data shows that Black and Hispanic students, low-income students, and first-generation students are more likely than average to apply to a school specifically because it’s test-optional.

Percentage of Students Who Applied to a School Specifically Because It Was Test-Optional

EAB 2021 Application Survey



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Determining Your Future Strategy

Creating a Unified Policy

In addition to considering how to handle the evaluation of students without test scores, institutions switching to test-optional also needed to determine whether they'd have a separate policy for students who chose to submit test scores. One important consideration is how difficult the policy will be to promote. If it's simple to explain and obviously favorable to applicants, a school can use those factors to its advantage in recruitment communications. If, on the other hand, the policy is opaque, complicated, or may appear to disadvantage students, it can create challenges. For example, some institutions faced criticism in the 2021 cycle for adopting a "no scores, no merit" policy.

Will You Have Different Policies for Test-Score Submitters and Non-Submitters?

Strategies for Operationalizing Test-Optional Policies Across Your Admit Pool

Easier to Promote

Test-Blind

- One policy for all students
- No scores used in merit aid

"Do No Harm"

- One policy for all students
- Absence of scores adds weight to other factors
- Student with scores is evaluated twice: once with scores factored in, once without scores
- Student is awarded best amount for which they qualify (not penalized for submitting test scores)

Harder to Promote

Student Decides

- One policy for all students
- Absence of scores adds weight to other factors
- Student chooses whether to be considered test-optional, meaning that aid awards are not necessarily maximized to full potential value

Dual Policies

- One policy for students with scores
- Separate policy for test-optional students (e.g., higher GPA threshold, lower merit \$ amounts)

No Scores, No Merit

- Admission may be test-optional
- One policy for merit: student must submit scores to be considered

Balancing Considerations with Quantitative Modeling

As the discussion on the preceding pages demonstrates, there are many factors that an institution must consider when determining the policy that's right for them. In addition, it can be difficult to guess how a change in policy will influence an institution's ability to meet revenue and class-shaping goals. As schools determine how they might tweak or overhaul their admissions testing policies for upcoming cycles, a thorough assessment of past years' outcomes and predictive modeling can help them better understand the implications of those changes.

Test-Optional Policy Worksheet

How Can You Improve Your Test-Optional Practices for Next Year?

Use the questions below to identify potential changes to make to your test-optional admissions and merit aid practices for next year.

Understanding Your Market

- Do our competitors require a test score? How do their application requirements compare to ours?
- How quickly and easily can our competitors' applications be completed? (Factors that may impact time to complete the application include accepting self-reported grades and/or asking students to manually type in many fields in the application.)
- How are our competitors' application and merit aid awards policies explained on their websites? Are there opportunities to make our policy clearer in comparison?
- How did competitors' aid awards compare to ours last year?

Communicating Your Policy

- How easy is it to explain our test-optional policy to students, both in terms of admissibility and merit aid awards?
- Is our test-optional policy clearly explained on our website in a way that's easily accessible from our application page?
- Do we explain how test scores will or won't be used on our website? (For example, if we employ a "do no harm policy," do we explain that on our site?)
- If we require scores for certain programs or scholarship considerations, is that explained on our site?
- Are all pages that describe our test-optional policy on our website up to date?

Assessing Enrollment Outcomes

- How many students ultimately submitted a test score?
- How did yield compare between students who submitted a test score and those who didn't?
- How did students yield at various scholarship levels this year versus last year?
- How did students yield across different demographic groups this year versus last year?
- How will we be tracking retention and success of students who were admitted without test scores?

Evaluating Your Approach and Capabilities

- Are there ways to automate our approach to make it more efficient?
- If we chose a less labor-intensive approach, what would the impact be on our aid awards?
- If we chose a more labor-intensive approach, what would the impact be on our aid awards?
- Can we model impacts of various changes to our policy easily and quickly?
- Are we able to study yield in different populations by academic achievement and ability to pay?



Communicating About Aid and Affordability

SECTION

5

Greater Challenges in College Affordability

College Finances Presented a Larger Obstacle to Families During the Pandemic

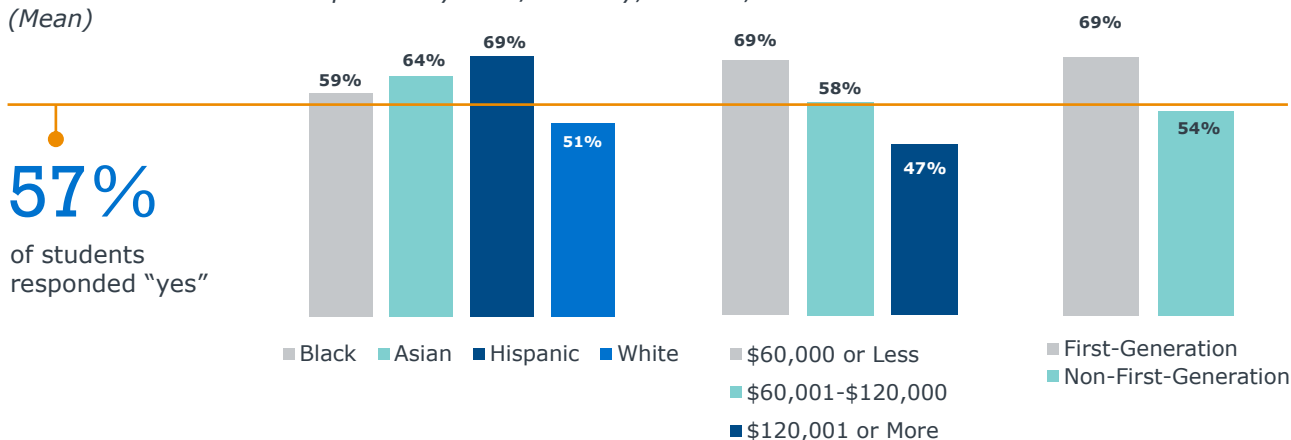
The unique circumstances of the pandemic exacerbated challenges associated with college affordability. One primary factor was the economic downturn, which put new financial strain on many families. At the same time, with the shift to a remote-first environment, many students had less access to support from their high schools or other organizations in navigating the topic of college finances, a reality that disproportionately impacted students of color and lower-income and first-generation students. In addition, the widespread pivot to remote instruction within colleges further fueled pre-pandemic doubts about whether college is worth it. Taken together, these factors meant that during the pandemic, colleges faced new or increased challenges in communicating about the value of a college education and the resources available to families to finance it.

Has the COVID-19 pandemic increased your concerns about college costs?

EAB 2021 Student Application Survey

All Students
(Mean)

Responses by Race/Ethnicity, Income, and First-Generation Status



Building a Robust Communications Strategy

Given these trends, it became even more important than in previous years for colleges to ensure that they were communicating with students effectively about college finances. And while some of the specific factors that contributed to pandemic-era affordability concerns will subside, the issue of affordability will remain pressing for colleges for foreseeable future. Even though there appears to be no silver bullet in addressing affordability concerns, building a comprehensive communications strategy can help colleges better reach their enrollment goals and maximize access among underrepresented student groups.



Lesson

A multipronged strategy for communicating about aid and affordability can help institutions better support financially stressed families and meet their enrollment goals.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Maximizing FAFSA Filing

The Need for Improved Support and Education

One widely reported trend during the pandemic has been the decline in FAFSA filing, especially among first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color, with FAFSA submission volumes down 9.2% proportionately in high-minority high schools and 2.4% in low-minority high schools as of May 2021. These drops were likely driven by decreased access to support services including in-person FAFSA filing sessions. This loss most impacted first-generation and low-income students, who according to EAB survey research, were substantially more likely than their peers to complete the FAFSA without any outside help. In addition, our survey found that of the low-income students who did not plan to file a FAFSA, almost one in three said that they didn't think they'd qualify for financial aid. This data suggests that there's substantial potential to improve FAFSA submission rates, especially among first-generation and lower-income students, through better communication about the process.

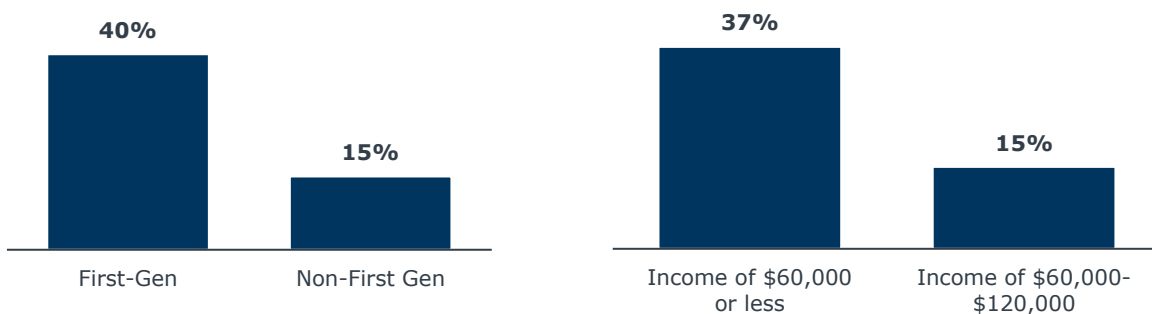
Confusion About FAFSA Eligibility

28%

of low-income students who did not plan to file a FAFSA said they did not think they would qualify for financial aid.

First-Generation and Low-Income Students Are More Likely to Complete the FAFSA Unassisted

Students Who Reported They'd Completed the FAFSA on Their Own, EAB 2021 Application Survey



Strategies for Facilitating and Encouraging FAFSA Filing

Strategies for increasing FAFSA submission rates fall into two main categories: making the process easier to navigate and creating urgency around submitting. To make the filing process simpler, colleges should aim to create concise, accessible resources that explain the process. When assessing materials, institutions should ask themselves, "Does a student have all the information they need to understand how and when to complete a FAFSA, without any additional guidance?" To create urgency around FAFSA filing, institutions should aim to communicate with students and their parents and counselors frequently and promote early submission through priority deadlines. If possible, in-person FAFSA filing sessions can also be an effective way to ensure students complete the FAFSA early in the application process.

► For more FAFSA resources and strategies, visit EAB's **Toolkit on FAFSA Submission Support** at <https://eab.com/services/toolkit/enrollment/fafsa-submission-toolkit/>

Clearly Communicating About Price and Value

Demystify Communications About Price

In addition to proactively addressing questions and concerns about FAFSA filing, institutions should aim to minimize confusion across all communications on cost and aid. This process should include thoroughly vetting your pricing and aid webpages and your aid letters for jargon and long sentences. In aid letters, schools should also aim to break out cost of attendance before and after aid to create a clear distinction between sticker price and net price. In addition, it can be helpful to build distinct communications for parents and students to address the specific concerns and questions of each audience.

3 Keys to Building an Effective Aid Letter



Present Clear Numbers

Clearly break out total cost of attendance, followed by scholarships and grants, and how much students can expect to pay.



Use Accessible Language

Aim to reduce jargon and err on the side of over-explaining. Write actively and simplify your syntax to make your language as clear as possible.



Make the Layout Inviting

Typical aid letters are crowded, monochromatic, and difficult to skim. Use bold colors and white space to help draw attention to key points and figures.

▶ For sample aid letter layouts and other guidance on discussing college finances, visit our **Resource Center on Clearly Communicating Price and Aid** at <https://eab.com/research/enrollment/roadmaps/clearly-communicate-price-and-financial-aid/>

Articulating Value: The Intersection of Benefit and Cost

The topic of communicating value is by no means new to enrollment leaders, and institutions often discuss student outcomes, such as career placement and alumni income data in an effort to articulate value. However, to truly communicate value, institutions need to ensure they're consistently pairing discussions of benefits with cost. They should also be framing their cost in terms of differentiated value compared to other institutions.

▶ For 9 lessons on communicating your value proposition, read our **white paper** titled **"Why You're Worth It."** <https://eab.com/services/whitepaper/enrollment/communicating-the-value-proposition-of-your-college/>

Aid and Affordability Communications Audit

Use the checklist below to identify gaps in your strategy for communicating about aid and affordability. Explore the linked resources on the following page for actionable tactics to improve your practices.

Support FAFSA Filing			
	No	Partially	Yes
We outline the FAFSA filing process for students in a clear, easy-to-understand format.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our materials clearly explain to students why they need to file the FAFSA.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We clearly list all upcoming FAFSA filing deadlines.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We provide all prospective students with a checklist of materials they'll need to complete the FAFSA.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
All of our FAFSA communications and webpages direct students to the resources above.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We communicate about FAFSA filing across all relevant channels (including email, mail, text reminders, website, and webinars or other live events).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've established a FAFSA communications plan that includes outreach to students, parents, and counselors throughout the year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our FAFSA support materials clearly explain all potential points of confusion in the FAFSA-filing process, including verification and request for professional judgment.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've made FAFSA support materials available in Spanish (or other relevant language), if needed, based on our student demographics.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We solicit feedback from high school guidance counselors on the FAFSA-related resources that would be most helpful to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We attend FAFSA filing nights at our key feeder high schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We've explored strategies to create urgency to file a FAFSA, such as by creating in-person FAFSA filing sessions or establishing priority deadlines.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Clearly Communicate About Price			
	No	Partially	Yes
We've audited all aid content, including on our website and aid letters, to eliminate or explain all jargon.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We differentiate aid communications by audience, with separate materials for parents and students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We identify a person for parents or students to contact with additional questions on all affordability and aid material.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
In addition to a net price calculator, we've provided simplified materials to help students compare our institution to other institutions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We award scholarships as early as possible in the admissions cycle.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We cross-train staff across units to discuss financial aid basics to help students answer questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Aid and Affordability Communications Audit

Continued

Connect Cost to Value			
	No	Partially	Yes
We frame cost of attendance within the context of affordability in all communications where price is discussed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When we discuss student outcomes such as graduation rates and career placement, we talk about them within the context of cost and affordability.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We discuss cost in the context of differentiated value compared to other schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We have a real-time conversation with every admitted student/family about cost and value.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We have a multichannel communications plan for discussing college affordability, including emails, text reminders, webinars, and mailers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Resources to Improve Affordability Communications



Support FAFSA Filing

To download ready-made FAFSA explainer resources and explore tactics to increase FAFSA filing, visit EAB's **Toolkit on FAFSA Submission Support**:

▶ <https://eab.com/services/toolkit/enrollment/fafsa-submission-toolkit/>

Clearly Communicate About Price

For tips on writing transparent aid award letters, guidance on training staff to discuss finances, and more, visit our **Resource Center on Clearly Communicating Price and Aid**:

▶ <https://eab.com/research/enrollment/roadmaps/clearly-communicate-price-and-financial-aid/>

Connect Cost to Value

Read our white paper titled "**Why You're Worth It**" to learn about nine lessons on communicating the value proposition of your college to increasingly price-sensitive families:

▶ <https://eab.com/services/whitepaper/enrollment/communicating-the-value-proposition-of-your-college/>



Key Takeaways and Additional Resources

SECTION

6

Key Takeaways

1

Authentic digital experiences play a larger role than ever in students' consideration of your school.

The pivot to virtual-first recruitment put digital platforms and technologies at the center of recruitment strategy. However, the pandemic showed that virtual interactions must meet students' high expectations for authenticity and personalization to capture and hold their attention. During the transition to a hybrid recruitment environment, institutions will need to ensure that their digital recruitment strategies engage students accordingly.

2

The student journey to enrollment is increasingly multidimensional.

To meet students' high expectations for digital engagement, recruitment teams will need to ensure they're orchestrating marketing efforts across all channels and platforms. Coordinated, responsive marketing can enable institutions to collect data across many different types of student interactions and facilitate student journeys that cater to students' specific preferences and interests.

3

With the rise of test-optional admissions, institutions will need innovative audience generation strategies.

As institutions look toward future enrollment cycles, they'll need to ensure that they're adequately supplementing traditional list buys with newer name generation sources. In addition to helping institutions reach a large enough share of students amid shrinking demographics, these sources can also offer additional student data inputs that can enhance marketing strategy.

4

In an era of growing recruitment complexity and uncertainty, actionable, data-informed insights are increasingly critical.

Given the many questions associated with determining a merit aid policy in a test-optional question, advanced modeling can help institutions understand the implications of potential approaches and decisions. In the uncertain post-pandemic era, intelligent analytics can offer insights that enable prompt and deliberate decision-making about enrollment strategy.

About Enroll360



► Tailored Partnerships powered by
EAB's Next-Generation Recruitment Ecosystem

What Makes Enroll360 Different

Marketing Orchestration

Intelligent Analytics

Unrivaled Reach

Digital Immersion

*Student behaviors and
journeys to college have
shifted—forever.*

*But you still have
funnel-shaped goals.*

Enroll360 Premier Solutions

Comprehensive partnerships
tailored to your goals through
EAB's unique service model

Enroll360 Products

Helping you solve discrete, critical
marketing and enrollment
challenges



Cultivate

Engage prospective students and strengthen funnel performance with responsive, next-gen search marketing



Apply

Funnel inquiries into admissible, likely-to-yield applicants



Aid

Optimize financial aid strategy to meet enrollment goals



Yield

Engage your admitted students and secure enrollments

- To learn about how Enroll360 can help you meet your enrollment goals, email madeleinerhyneer@eab.com.

We help schools support students
from enrollment to graduation and beyond

› Find and enroll your
right-fit students

› Support and graduate
more students



› Prepare your institution
for the future

➤ **ROOTED IN RESEARCH**

8,000+ Peer-tested
best practices

500+ Enrollment innovations
tested annually

➤ **ADVANTAGE OF SCALE**

2,100+ Institutions
served

9.5 M+ Students supported
by our SSMS

➤ **WE DELIVER RESULTS**

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



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