INSIGHT PAPER

Recruiting 'Gen P'

6 Insights into How the Pandemic Has Altered College Search Behavior from EAB's Survey of 20,000+ Students

Enroll360

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Executive Overview

Exploring the Pandemic's Lasting Impacts on Student Behavior

During the most intense phases of the pandemic, student search behaviors changed dramatically in response to high school and college closures, fears about health and safety, and increased financial hardships on families. With a full cycle of in-person recruitment now complete, we are getting glimpses into which changes in student behavior were pandemic-era blips and which are likely to be long-lasting.

Understanding the Student Mindset Based on New Survey Data and Additional Sources

This report offers guidance for enrollment leaders on the mindset of "Gen P," or the students whose college-going behaviors have been influenced by their experiences during the pandemic. The insights in this report draw on a variety of sources, including the findings from EAB's 2023 Student Communication Preferences Survey, which included responses from more than 20,000 current high school students. Additional sources consulted include recent EAB surveys of high school counselors and parents, data analyses from across EAB's 1,100+ Enroll360 partners, and interviews with college enrollment teams.

This report explores six insights into how the pandemic has changed students' college search behaviors and mindset:

Mental health concerns are shaping Gen P's college search.

Students have high standards for digital experiences.

Students are academically underprepared.

Students are questioning the value of a college education.

Students are eager for in-person events and experiences.

Timing of student search behaviors is shifting.

Mental Health Concerns Are Shaping Gen P's College Search.

1

Growing Mental Health Challenges From the Pandemic

A Concerning Trend, Intensified by the Pandemic

One major and worrisome trend that was exacerbated by the pandemic is the prevalence of mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression, among others. While rates of anxiety and depression had been steadily ticking up among teenagers across the decade preceding the pandemic, they worsened in 2020 and 2021, when teenagers were largely cut off from seeing friends, attending school, and participating in extracurricular activities in person, with social media and other screen time often filling the void. Data from a University of Michigan survey, shown below, illustrates this trend, with more than 30 percent of parents of teen girls and around 20 percent of parents of teen boys reporting their child showed new or worsening symptoms of anxiety or depression in 2021. While the data indicates that the pandemic had a marked impact on mental health, it's important to note that trends that pre-date the pandemic are likely also at play, as research from Stanford's Sapien Labs suggests. Those factors include decreased in-person interaction with the rise of digital media and an ascendant culture of individualism and performance orientation.

Percentage of parents reporting their child showing new or worsening symptoms of mental health concerns, 2020–21
U Michigan National Survey (2021)
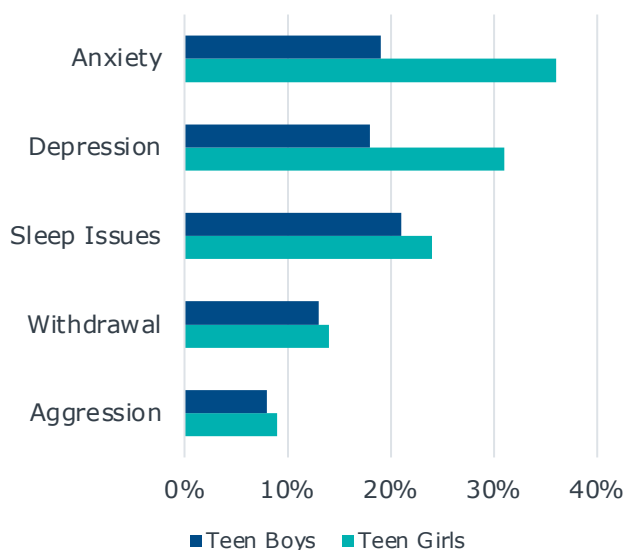
A Troubling Picture of Mental Health

17%
Increase in **diagnosis of anxiety disorders** in young people[1] in the last 10 years

32%
of adolescents will meet criteria for an **anxiety disorder by the age of 18**

3,000+
Suicide attempts are made on average each day by students in grades 9–12

Students Are Under-Socialized

In addition to increasing rates of anxiety and depression, the pandemic also took a toll on students' social and emotional development. Eight out of ten public K-12 schools report that the pandemic negatively impacted students' socio-emotional and behavioral development.

Within the admission process, under-socialization has implications for interactions with college staff. Anecdotal reports from admissions counselors indicate shifts in how students interact with college representatives, including increased delay in responses and decreased engagement with admission officers.

Emotional and Behavioral Impacts of the Pandemic

87%
of public schools[2] reported that the pandemic negatively impacted students' socio-emotional development during the 2021–22 school year.

84%
of public schools[2] agreed or strongly agreed that students' behavioral development was negatively impacted by the pandemic.

1) Aged 6 to 17.
2) Including elementary, middle, and high schools.

Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital (2021), National Poll on Children's Mental Health; CDC (2020), Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During COVID-19 Pandemic; https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp, "The Mental State of the World in 2022," The Mental Health Million Project; EAB research and analysis.

Mental Health Is Increasingly Guiding College Choices

A Growing Reason for Forgoing College

For college enrollment leaders, it's important to understand how increasing mental health concerns are influencing students' college-going decisions. EAB's latest survey data indicates that mental health plays a growing role in a student's decision not to pursue college immediately after high school. Of those who are not planning to attend college, "I'm not mentally ready" has consistently been a top reason for opting out, behind affordability and value. However, the percentage of students saying "I'm not mentally ready" sharply increased in 2023, potentially reflecting the high mental health toll from the pandemic.

Share of Students Naming "Not Mentally Ready" as Their Reason for Opting Out of College
EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Year	Percentage
2019	14%
2021	14%
2023	22%
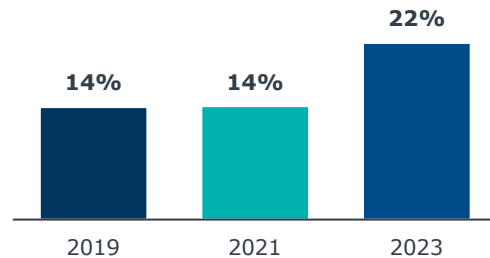
Concerns Are Highest Among First-Generation and Lower-Income Students

EAB also asked students who planned to attend college immediately after high school about their top concerns about college. "Mental health and well-being" was one of their top three concerns, behind "affordability" and "overall college success." It's important to note that mental health concerns related to college were much more prevalent among first-generation students and low-income students than their counterparts.

"I'm Not Mentally Ready" for College, by First-Generation Status
EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Median: 22%

Category	Percentage
First-Generation	28%
Non-First-Generation	20%
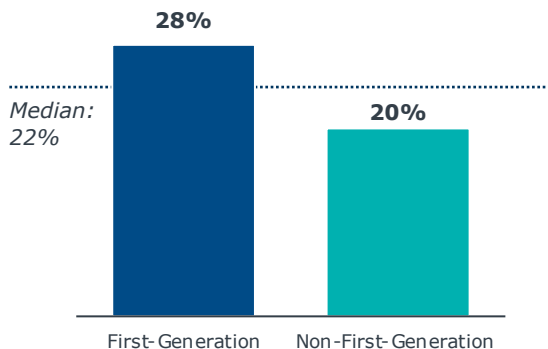
Students Listing Mental Health and Well-Being as a Top College Concern, by Income
EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Median: 20%

Income	Percentage
<$90K	21%
$90K-$200K	19%
>$200K	18%
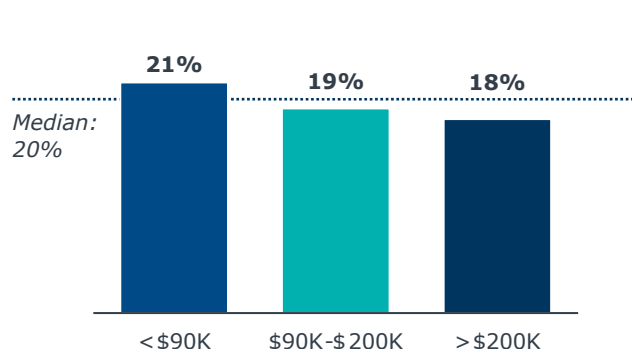
Key Takeaways for Enrollment Leaders

✓ **Prioritize Mental Health Messaging to Families**
Ensure that your marketing communications include messaging to reassure students and their parents about mental health support on your campus.

✓ **Early Outreach Remains Important**
Contacting students and parents earlier in high school can help your institution build trust and affinity, which is especially important given families' growing concerns about college.

✓ **Build Strong Relationships with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)**
CBOs can be an especially important connecting point between colleges and high-potential under-served students.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Students Are Academically Underprepared.

2

The Pandemic's Effects on Learning Loss

Declines in Academic Achievement Exacerbated by the Pandemic

Not only are today's students less socially and emotionally well-equipped because of the pandemic, but they're also academically underprepared. While academic proficiency levels in the United States have been low for many years, pandemic disruptions in classroom learning had a major impact. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a large-scale assessment of K-12 student progress, found a five-point drop in average scores during the pandemic—the largest ever recorded.

Proficiency Levels Have Been Consistently Low for a Decade
Percentage of Students Scoring at Each Achievement Level on NAEP Assessments

Year	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019
Advanced	7%		8%		9%	9%
Proficient	24%		26%		27%	26%
Basic	34%		33%		31%	31%
Below Basic	34%		33%		33%	34%

■ Below Basic ■ Basic ■ Proficient ■ Advanced
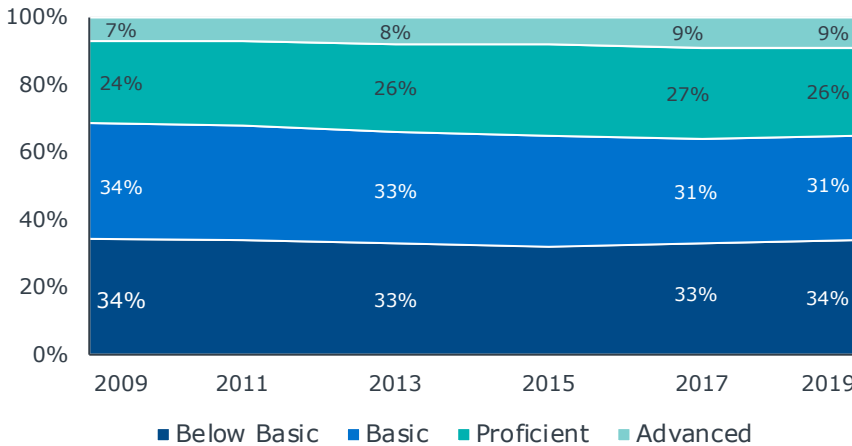
Pandemic Disruptions Place Yet More Students Behind

5-point drop

In average assessment scores from 2020 to 2022, **the largest drop ever recorded** by the NAEP Long Term Trend Assessment

Equity Gaps Exacerbated Access to and Trust in In-Person Learning During COVID

While students lost ground academically across demographic groups, historically underserved students were less likely to receive in-person instruction during the pandemic, which contributed to greater losses in academic achievement. The chart below shows the 20-point gap between White and Hispanic or Black students receiving remote instruction in 2020. EAB's K-12 Research division has found two factors that contributed to this gap: parents of Hispanic and Black students were both less likely to have in-person learning options available to them and less likely to opt in to in-person learning due to perceived lack of safety during COVID.

Students Receiving Each Type of Instruction

September 2020

Hispanic
Black
White
Average

0%   50%   100%

■ Remote ■ Hybrid ■ In Person
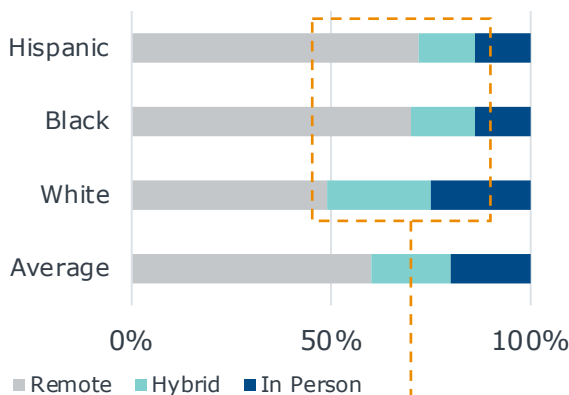
20-point gap between White and Black or Hispanic students receiving remote instruction

K-Shaped Educational Recovery

"Students who performed well previously primarily performed slightly better than expected during Q1 of this year. In contrast, **students who were previously not performing well, performed considerably less well**."

-Study on Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Fairfax County Public Schools

Source: Shapiro, E. (2021), *Missing in School Reopening Plans: Black Families' Trust*; Dorn, Hancock, et al., *COVID-19 and Learning Loss – Disparities Grow*, December 2020; Fairfax County ORSI, *Study of Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic*; EAB research and analysis.

Students Are Nervous About Success in College

Students Are Concerned About Success as They Make College Choices

As students consider their college education, many are understandably nervous about their academic preparedness. Twenty-six percent of students surveyed by EAB selected "whether I'll be successful in college" as a top concern about college, behind only affordability and cost considerations. It's important to note that diminished access to in-person instruction during the pandemic not only created gaps in academic achievement, but also restricted opportunities for social development through classroom interactions with peers and teachers. EAB survey research of parents and students has found that sense of belonging is a top concern related to college success. The interrelated issues of mental health, socio-emotional development, and academic preparation may make it harder for students to find a sense of belonging once on campus, creating increased retention risks.

School Counselors Report Under-Preparation

"To what degree has the pandemic weakened your students' academic preparation for college?", EAB Counselor Survey

73%

of high school counselors report the pandemic has at least moderately weakened their students' academic preparation

- **5%** *Not at all*
- **16%** *A great deal*
- **22%** *A little*
- **22%** *A lot*
- **36%** *A moderate amount*
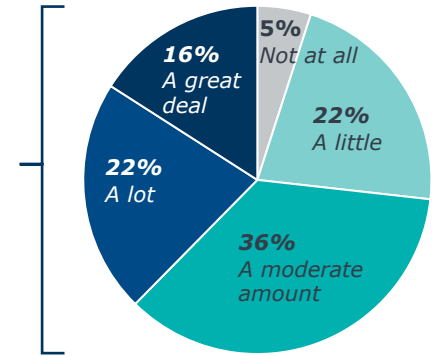
Pandemic Learning Loss Likely to Have Long-Term Effects

While college enrollment leaders are seeing the immediate effects of pandemic learning loss now, we're likely to experience the pandemic's continued and evolving effects among high school students for years to come. As illustrated by the data points below, learning loss as early as third grade can have a profound impact on likelihood to graduate from high school and enroll in college.

Students not reading proficiently by third grade are significantly less likely to…	Catch up **75%** Never reach reading proficiency in future grades	Graduate on time **4x** More likely not to graduate from high school on time	Go to college **54%** Less likely to enroll at a college or university after high school

Key Takeaways for Enrollment Leaders

✓ **Address Families' Academic Preparedness Concerns in Marketing**
Similar to messages about mental health, ensure your communications address families' worries about learning loss and academic preparedness.

✓ **Prioritize Building a Sense of Belonging**
Ensure that your messaging and programming throughout the funnel help foster a sense of belonging for students who may be apprehensive about college.

✓ **Leverage CBO Relationships**
CBOs can help your college recruit and enroll students who've received extra support in high school, setting them up for success in college.

Source: Curriculum Associates (2021), *Understanding Student Learning: Insights from Fall 2021*; EAB research and analysis.

EAB

Students Are Eager for In-Person Events and Experiences.

In-Person Events Are Back

Campus Visits and College Fairs Have Rebounded

Despite questions about the future of in-person recruitment events mid-pandemic, it's clear that students are now eager for in-person activities. As shown in the chart at right, campus visits have rebounded to their pre-pandemic levels. While college fairs have also bounced back up, their influence appears to have waned somewhat compared to 2019.

An EAB events poll of enrollment teams also found that on-campus events were gaining traction, while the opposite was true of virtual events. In addition to hosting more in-person recruitment events in 2022 than in 2021, institutions reported that virtual event show rates were flat (37%) or down (58%), while in-person events seemed to be garnering better show rates; in-person events were flat (51%) or up (38%). Virtual event frequency also decreased by 40% in 2022, suggesting that colleges are responding to students' eagerness to return to in-person events by reallocating resources from virtual activities.

Percentage of Students Participating in Campus Visits and College Fairs
EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Campus Visits: 47% — 37% — 46%
College Fairs: 34% — 20% — 28%

2019   2021   2023
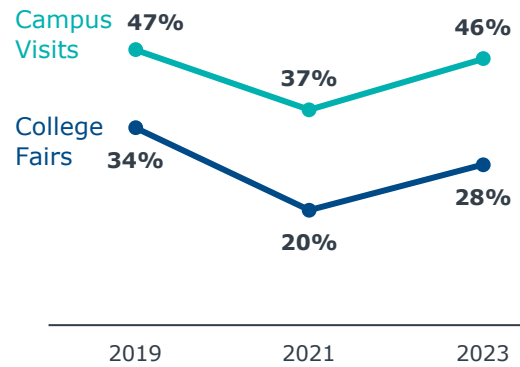
Change in Number of Recruitment Events Colleges Hosted
EAB 2022 Enrollment Events Poll

Event Type	Change
On-campus events with 500+ attendees	119%
On-campus events with 100-499 attendees	124%
On-campus events with 50-99 attendees	51%
On-campus events with 25-49 attendees	58%
On-campus events with 24 or fewer attendees	112%
Hybrid events (on-campus and virtual)	17%
Regional events (off campus)	144%
Virtual	-40%
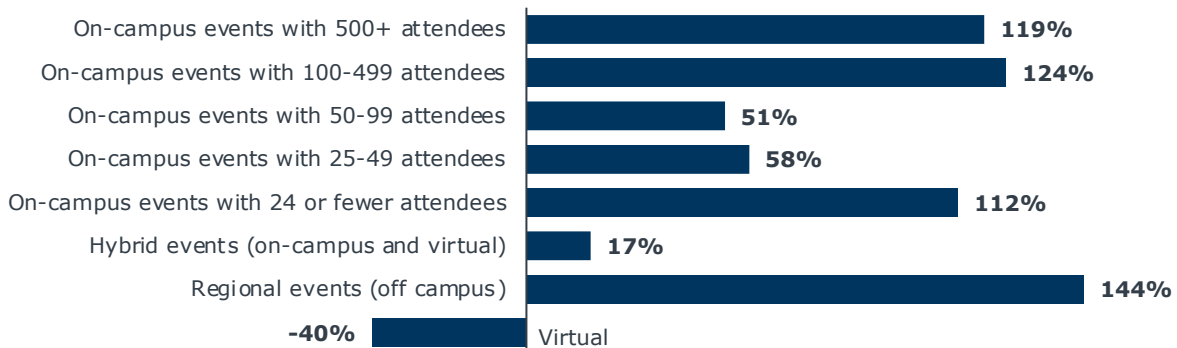
No-Show Rates Also Reflecting Popularity of In-Person Events

58% of institutions report **virtual** event show rates were **down** in 2022, with another 37% reporting they were flat

38% of institutions report **in-person** show rates were **up**, with another 51% reporting they were flat

Influence of High School Counselors and Teachers Has Also Rebounded

The impact of students' return to in-school instruction is also evident in the influence of high school counselors and teachers. While teacher influence dipped slightly in 2021 and counselor influence stayed flat, both are now up compared to 2019 levels, with counselor influence now significantly surpassing pre-pandemic levels, as shown in the chart at right. Parent influence, while still central to students' choices, appears to have reset somewhat to pre-pandemic levels with students returning to school.

Percentage of Students Consulting High School Counselors During Their Search
EAB Communication Preferences Survey

2019	2021	2023
46%	47%	56%
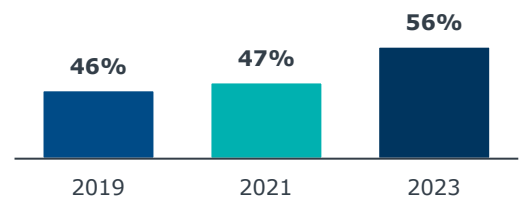
Source: EAB research and analysis.

Key Considerations for In-Person Event Strategy

Students Are Eager for On-Campus Events, but They Appreciate a Variety of Options

Our survey data indicates that while students favor the return to on-campus events, there's still significant variation in the types of events that students prefer, as shown in the chart below. While the most popular event type was medium-sized, on-campus events with 50-100 attendees, only 41% of student participants selected that option, with local events; small, on-campus events; and large, on-campus events also proving popular.

Recruitment Event Types That Most Appeal to Students

EAB Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Could Select up to Two Responses

Event Type	Percentage
Medium-sized, on-campus events with 50-100 attendees	41%
Events hosted in my area	32%
Small, on-campus events with 25-50 attendees	25%
Large, on-campus events with hundreds of attendees	25%
Hybrid events (on-campus with virtual option)	17%
Very small, on-campus events with fewer than 25 attendees	12%
No preference	7%
Virtual-only events	6%

Legend:
- On-Campus
- Local to Student
- Virtual or Hybrid

Hybrid and Virtual Events Can Improve Access and Equity

While virtual-only events were less popular, it's important to note that about one in five students picked a hybrid option as one of their top two event types. Furthermore, lower-income students, for whom travel to campus likely presents a greater financial strain, were more likely to favor hybrid events than their higher-income counterparts. In addition to presenting equity advantages, virtual events and experiences can also play other important parts within enrollment strategy, as discussed in the following section of this report.

Key Takeaways for Enrollment Leaders

✓ **In-Person Is Back, but Don't Write Off Virtual Events**
While students are eager for in-person programming, virtual events offer several distinct benefits, including improving access and equity.

✓ **A Varied Event Strategy Appeals to Students**
Given the range of student event preferences, scheduling a variety of programming can help you maximize engagement across your prospect pool.

✓ **Encourage Families to Attend Events and Visit Earlier in Their Search**
Inviting students and parents to visit earlier in high school can help you build relationships with families and potentially alleviate families' stress about the college process.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Students Have High Standards for Digital Experiences.

4

The Role of Digital Engagement Post-pandemic

Strong Virtual and Digital Experiences Are Now Table Stakes

Despite the resurgence of in-person events, student engagement has not reverted to the pre-pandemic "normal." Remote recruitment during the pandemic accelerated the adoption and sophistication of virtual and digital engagement tactics, which we expect to have a lasting effect on recruitment in the future. Students now expect schools to offer a strong digital recruitment experience.

Virtual tours, for instance, exploded in popularity during lockdowns and travel restrictions. Even with the return of in-person campus visits, our latest survey data indicates that students were about as likely to name virtual tours as a top source in 2023 as they were in 2021.

Students as Likely to Use Virtual Tours in 2023 as in 2021

Percentage of Students Naming Virtual Tours as a Top Source, EAB Communication Preferences Survey

2021	2023
25%	24%

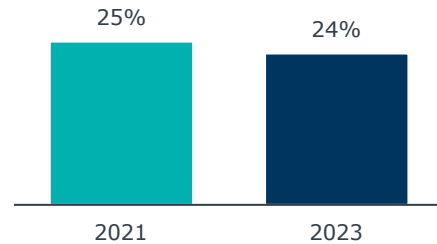### Key Functions of Virtual Events and Experiences Post-pandemic

Virtual events and experiences can play several key roles in recruitment strategy.

Facilitate Self-Service Research
Virtual tours and other experiences offer students a highly engaging way to research schools independently, especially early in their search.

Improve Access and Equity
Virtual and hybrid options provide families with a less costly, more flexible way to attend events.

Provide Predictive Data
Interactions such as virtual tour usage and event attendance can serve as key indicators of student interest.

Web Design and Experience Play a Major Role in Student and Parent Perceptions

In addition to virtual events and experiences, enrollment leaders should be paying special attention to their web experience for online visitors, since it has significant influence on students' perceptions of a school. Nine in ten students say that they make a point of visiting the websites of all colleges they're considering. In addition, according to recent EAB survey research, the vast majority of parents and students report that a well-designed website will improve their opinion of a college and that a poorly designed website will hurt it, as shown in the table below.

Usage and Perception of College Websites

Participants responding "I agree" to statements below, EAB Student and Parent Communication Preferences Surveys

	Students	Parents
A well-designed website will improve my opinion of a college.	89%	86%
I make a point of visiting websites of all the schools I am/my child is considering.	89%	93%
A poorly designed website will negatively affect my opinion of a college.	81%	81%
A college's website helps me decide whether the school is right for me/my child.	73%	60%
In general, it is easy to find the information I need on college websites.	70%	74%
I will abandon college websites that are not user-friendly.	67%	65%
A college's website is more important than other information sources when deciding if a school is right for me/my child.	32%	30%
All college websites are basically the same.	31%	23%

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Social and Email Remain Important

Student Interactions with Colleges on Social Media Have Increased

Social media remains an important area of a college's digital presence. Student social media interactions with colleges have increased since 2021, with 74% of students now saying they've engaged with a college on social media by following a college, liking their post, watching a video, or sharing their content. Students are also relatively amenable to paid social outreach from colleges, with 70% saying they're open to receiving an ad on social media from a college.

Percentage of Students Who Have Interacted with a College on Social Media

EAB Communication Preferences Survey

- 2021: 63%
- 2023: 74%
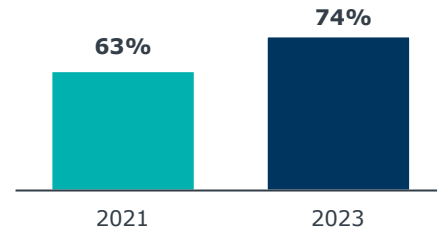
Email Is Still Students' Preferred Channel for College Communications

Despite the growth of other forms of multichannel communication and reports of student email fatigue, email remains students' top channel for communications from colleges. As shown in the chart below, more than three-quarters of students say they want to hear from colleges via email, both early in their college search and once they've determined a short list of colleges.

"How would you prefer for a school to share information with you?"

EAB Communication Preferences Survey[1]

Legend: At Start of Search — Once College Is on Short List

Categories (x-axis): Emails, Mail/personal letters, College websites, College visits, Texts, Social media, Phone calls, DMs, No preference, Other

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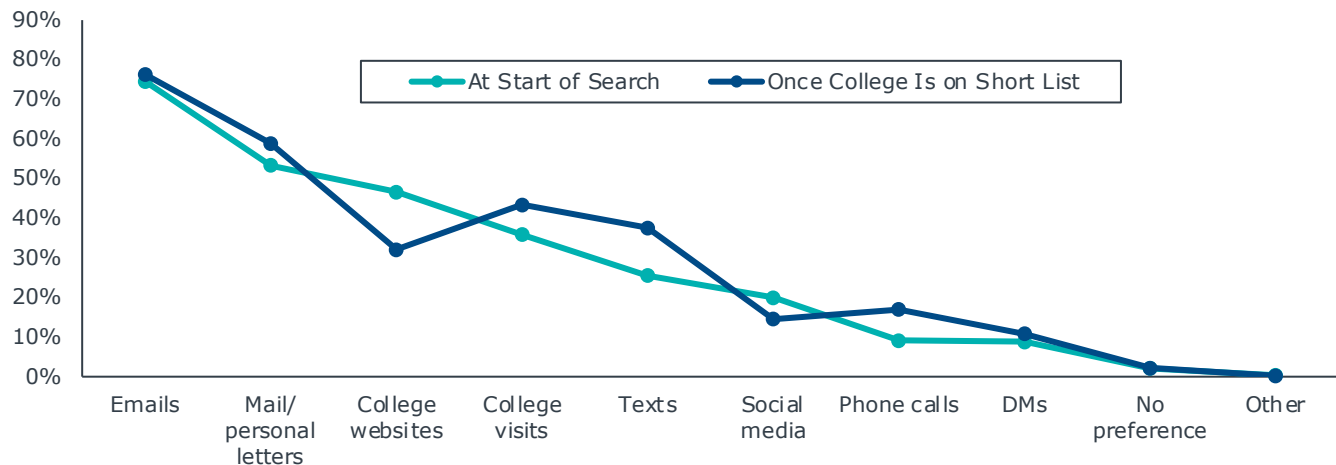
Key Takeaways for Enrollment Leaders

✓ **Virtual Tours Support Research Throughout the Funnel**
Virtual tour popularity remains high. Virtual tours offer an engaging way for students to research schools, especially early in their search.

✓ **Virtual Engagement and Multichannel Engagement Are Key Indicators of Student Interest**
Virtual engagement can shed light on student interest, especially when paired with other data points on multichannel engagement.

✓ **Website Design Is Important**
A poorly designed website lowers students' and parents' opinions of your school, while a well-designed website can have the opposite effect.

✓ **Email Remains a Primary Channel for Communications**
While multichannel outreach is essential, email remains students' preferred channel.

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1) DMs: Direct messages sent on social media platforms.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Students Are Questioning the Value of a College Education.

5

Value Concerns Contribute to Nonconsumption

Despite a Post-pandemic Recovery, Enrollment Has Declined over the Past 5 Years

One particular area of concern for enrollment leaders is whether the pandemic might have long-term negative effects on college-going behavior. While we saw steep drops in enrollment at the height of the pandemic in 2020, 2021 and 2022 saw a slight rebound, as illustrated in the chart below. However, despite the recent enrollment increases, five-year trends paint a less encouraging picture: enrollment has declined by 2.9% overall across public four-year schools and 1.8% overall at private four-year schools since 2017.

Freshman Enrollment by School Segment, United States
By Entering-Class Year, Students Aged 24 Years or Younger
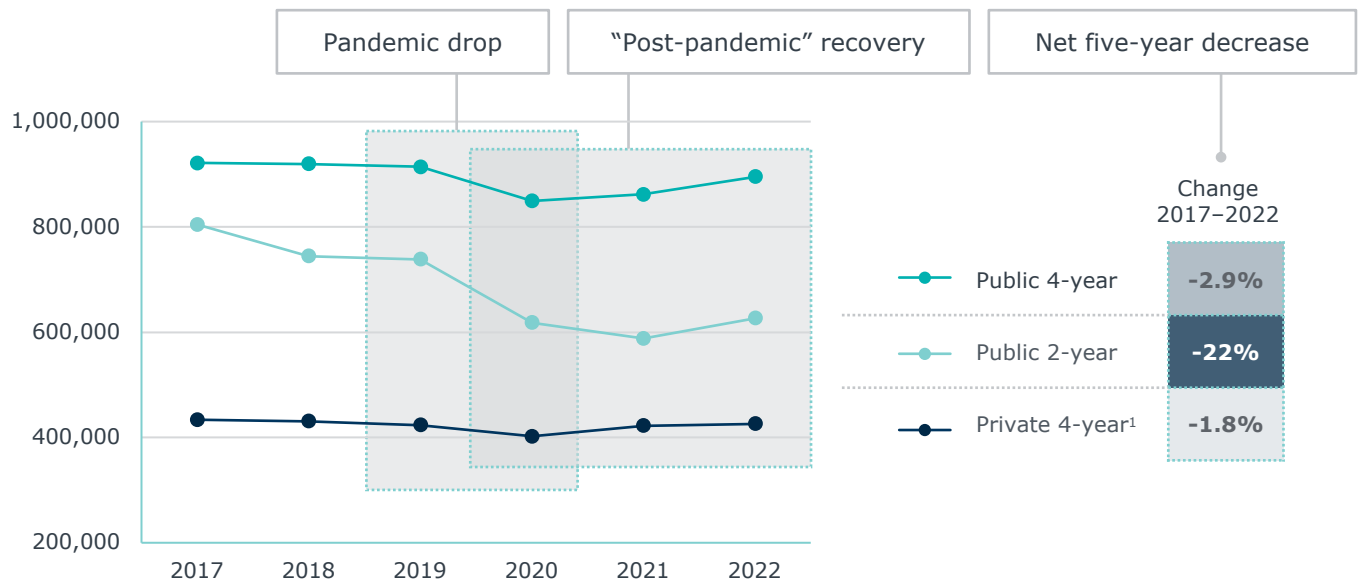
Value Concerns Are One of Multiple Reasons for Declines in College-Going Rate

While demographic change is one reason for diminishing college enrollment, it's also important to note the impact of long-term declines in college-going rate among college-aged students. From 2016 to 2020, there was a 10% decrease in college-going rate nationally. EAB research suggests several causes, some of which are likely to have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Key contributors related to financial factors include concerns about affordability, perception of poor return on investment from attending college, the recent strength of the job market, and the rise of alternative and less expensive non-degree credentials.

It's important to note that other factors are also at play, including increased cultural backlash against higher ed, easing of bachelor's degree requirements across certain areas of the labor market, and other factors discussed elsewhere in this report, including concerns about academic preparedness and mental health.

Change in College-Going Rate for Recent High School Graduates

-10%

Drop in college-going rate across the United States from 2016 to 2020

Related Resource:

For more guidance on understanding nonconsumption and other key strategic priorities for enrollment teams, read our white paper, "Mapping the Enrollment Landscape," at eab.com/mapping.

Students Increasingly Saying 'It's Not Worth It'

Students Indicate That Affordability and Value Are Top Reasons They Opt Out of College

EAB's latest high school student and counselor survey data further support the fact that perceptions of affordability and value are increasingly deterring students from enrolling. In our 2019 student survey, 8% of students who weren't planning to enroll in college right after high school said their primary reason for opting out of college was that it wasn't worth the cost. We saw a significant jump in our 2021 survey, mid-pandemic, when 17% of students said the same. That number continued to increase in our latest survey, up to 20% in 2023. In addition, 70% of high school counselors named cost and debt as a primary reason for their students not enrolling in college, while 34% named alternative, more attractive earning opportunities.

More Students Saying "It's Not Worth It"
Students Responding "College isn't worth the cost,"[1] EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Year	Percentage
2019	8%
2021	17%
2023	20%
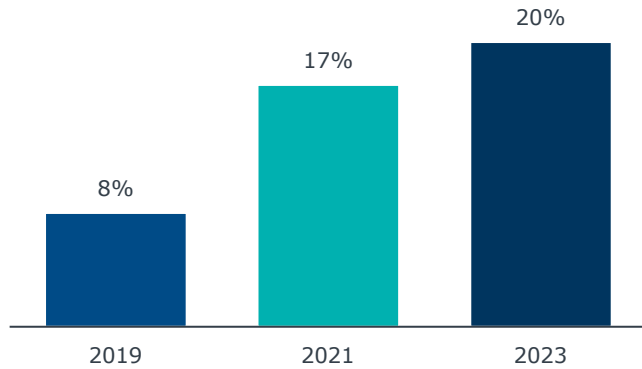
Most Common Factors That Deter Students from Attending College
EAB High School Counselor Survey, Responses with 20% or More

Factor	Percentage
Concerns about the cost of attending/student debt	70%
Earning opportunities/jobs more attractive given cost of college	34%
Academic readiness	33%
Cost of living expenses while attending college	31%
Concerns about admissibility	29%
Lack of awareness/insufficient information about colleges	25%
Lower or no college-going culture in their community	25%
Distance from home	22%

Legend:
- Affordability or Value
- Other

High School Counselors Reporting Shifts in College-Going Behavior Because of the Pandemic

35%
of counselors say fewer of their students are **planning to attend college** now compared to prior to the pandemic

48%
of counselors say fewer of their students **view college as affordable** compared to before the pandemic

1) Of survey participants who indicated they would not enroll in college immediately after high school.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Students Compare Colleges Based on Career Outcomes

Students Value Career Preparation Highly When Choosing a School

Perceptions of value are also changing in terms of how students compare colleges. Before the pandemic, students were already shifting away from liberal arts degrees to those with more direct ties to specific careers. However, that change may have been accelerated during the pandemic as college value was increasingly under attack during periods of remote instruction.

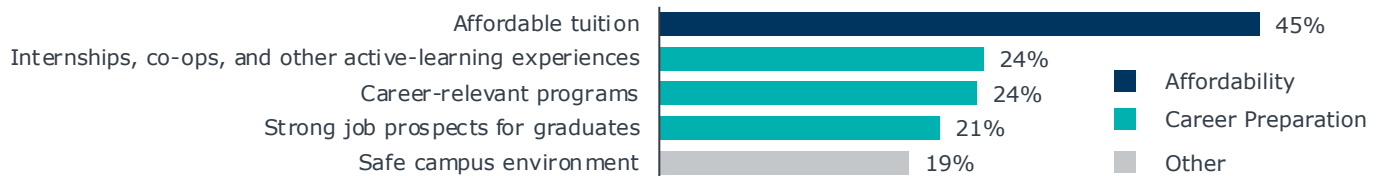Data from across EAB's enrollment ecosystem reflects students' strong preference for clear career preparation from their college, with students especially interested in high-paying fields. When we asked students about their top priorities when choosing a college, affordability was, unsurprisingly, the top concern. It was followed by features related to career preparation, including internships or practical experience, career-relevant programs, and expected career prospects. Furthermore, when students are comparing schools, their perceptions of value are strongly informed by many of those same factors, as shown in the second chart below. In addition, a 2022 survey of students on the Naviance platform found students were most likely to be interested in STEM, health sciences, and business, all high-paying career paths.

Affordability and Value Remain Top Priorities in College Choice

"What are you are looking for in your college experience?", Participants Could Select up to Three, Top Five Responses Shown, EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Response	Percentage
Affordable tuition	45%
Internships, co-ops, and other active-learning experiences	24%
Career-relevant programs	24%
Strong job prospects for graduates	21%
Safe campus environment	19%

Legend: Affordability, Career Preparation, Other

Students View Career Preparation as the Primary Driver of Value

"What Best Represents Value?" Participants Could Select Up to Five, EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Response	Percentage
Successful job placement upon graduation	42%
Availability of scholarships	36%
Internships, co-ops, and other active-learning experiences	33%
Generous financial aid awards	26%
Strong career services	24%
Moderate tuition prices	23%
Comprehensive set of academic programs	21%
Study abroad opportunities	18%
Successful graduate school placement upon graduation	18%
Finding like-minded friends for life	17%

Legend: Affordability, Career Preparation, Other

Key Takeaways for Enrollment Leaders

✓ **Discuss Career Preparation Early and Persistently in Marketing**
While value messaging has long been a central area of focus for colleges, it's now more important than ever to ensure that you have a strong, multichannel communication strategy for both students and parents. Be sure to highlight features that most interest families, including information on job placement, internships, and career services.

✓ **Activate Your Young Alumni as Proof Points**
Ensure that your value messaging strategy includes success stories from young alumni from a variety of backgrounds.

Source: EAB research and analysis.
eab.com

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Timing of Student Search Behaviors Is Shifting.

Key Search Steps Are Occurring Later

Students Are Starting to Research Schools Later

Our research indicates that timing of important steps within the recruitment process has shifted since before the pandemic. For example, our latest survey data shows that today's students are starting to research colleges later than their predecessors did. As illustrated in the chart below, 67% of participants in our 2019 survey had started researching colleges by the end of their sophomore year. In 2023, only 40% of students had started researching by that point. It's logical that the pandemic played a role in this trend: high school counselors reported that many of their students were less engaged with college research during the pandemic, as they had less access to school resources and deprioritized college planning amid the stressors of the pandemic. While this trend is evident among students who were in high school during the pandemic, it remains to be seen whether it will continue among students who were in middle school during the pandemic.

"When did you first start researching colleges?"
Cumulative Percentage of Students Who Had Started Researching by Time Period,
EAB Communication Preferences Survey
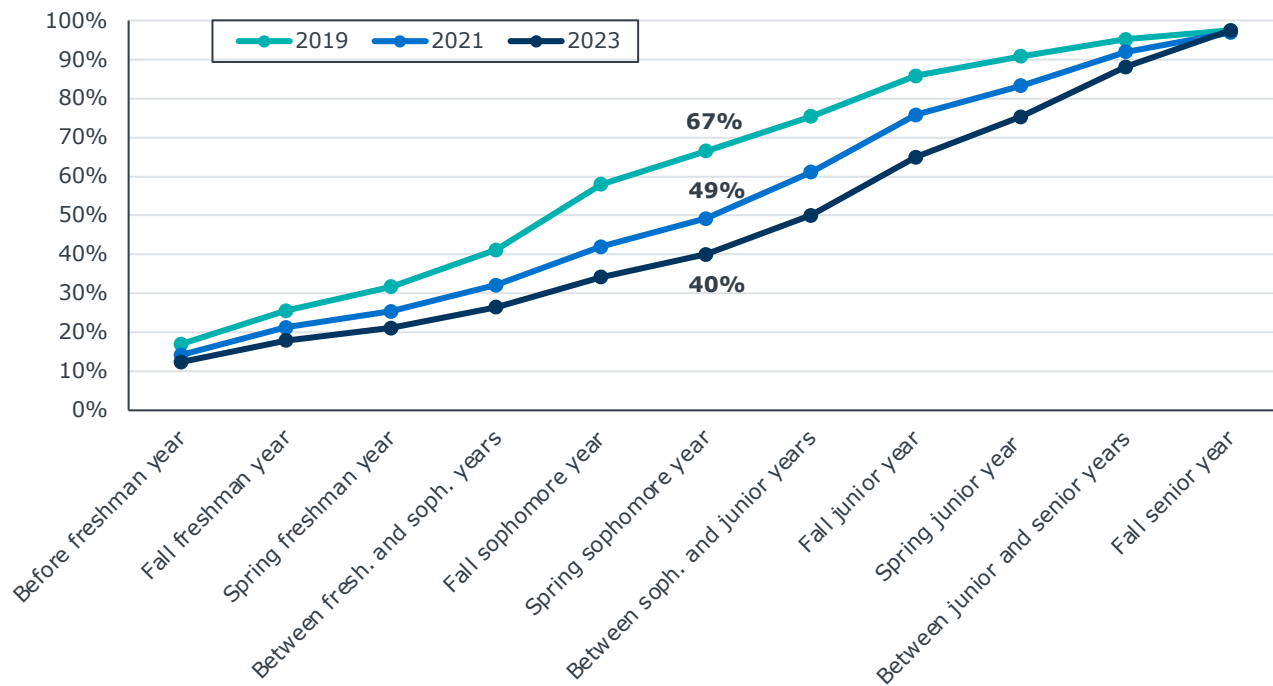
Visits Delayed to Post-admit Stage

Schools have also reported an increasing number of students delaying visits from the traditional spring of junior year or fall senior year timing to spring of senior year, after students have been admitted. One enrollment leader theorized that, with students applying to a large number of schools, they're waiting to see where they're admitted and what their aid awards are before committing to visiting schools. This is consistent with EAB data from Naviance showing a high average number of applications per student.

> "Visit patterns seem to be changing, with more interest in the spring than the fall."
>
> *-Vice President of Enrollment Management*
>
> "We're seeing a demand to push visit events to the post-admit stage. I think this is a result of students applying to more schools, thus using the admit as an interest filter. In other words, there are too many schools to visit before one knows if they are admitted."
>
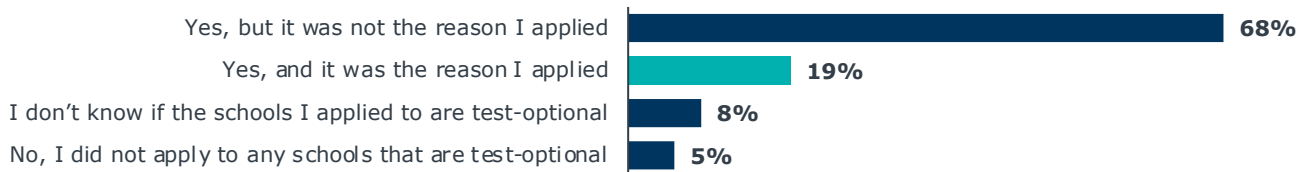> *-Vice President of Enrollment Management*

Students Often Considering More Options For Longer

Test-Optional as a Possible Contributor to Delayed Decision-Making

One factor that's likely contributing to the high number of applications per student is the popularity of test-optional admissions. In our 2023 student survey, about one in five students said that they'd applied to a school specifically because it was test-optional. It's also important to note the equity benefits of a test-optional policy: our 2023 research reinforced previous EAB survey findings showing that students of color were more likely to have applied to schools because they were test-optional.

"Did you apply to any schools that are test-optional?"
EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Yes, but it was not the reason I applied	**68%**
Yes, and it was the reason I applied	**19%**
I don't know if the schools I applied to are test-optional	**8%**
No, I did not apply to any schools that are test-optional	**5%**

Students Who Applied to a College Specifically Because It Was Test-Optional
Responses by Race/Ethnicity

Median: 19%

Black	Asian	Hispanic/Latinx	White
26%	19%	25%	13%
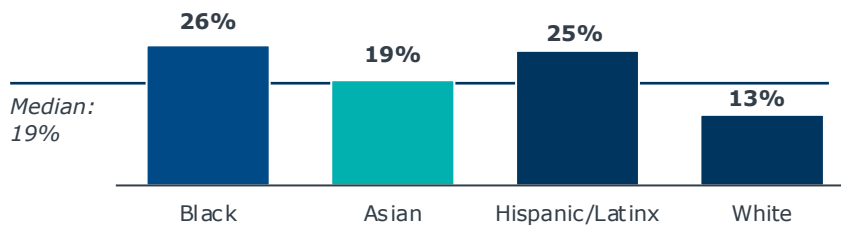
Comparing Competing Financial Aid Awards

Since, as discussed in the previous section, students are becoming increasingly focused on value, it follows that they'd be more likely to compare aid awards. While students have always compared offers, several enrollment leaders reported an uptick in students comparing aid awards later and depositing at multiple institutions post-pandemic.

> "We're seeing more families who feel like **they're in a better position to compare aid packages and shop around for the best offer**, even compared to a few years ago."
>
> *-Vice President of Enrollment Management, Private College in the Northeast*

Key Takeaways for Enrollment Leaders

✓ **Use a Flexible, Responsive Approach to Marketing**
As the timing of students' search processes becomes less predictable, responsive and multichannel marketing can help you ensure that your outreach content, timing, and channels engage students, even as preferences vary or shift.

✓ **Test-Optional Remains Highly Appealing to Students**
Our data indicates that requiring test scores is likely to deter a significant portion of students from applying and is likely to be counterproductive to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Key Takeaways and Additional Resources

Key Takeaways

Prioritize messaging to families that eases anxiety about mental health and academic preparation concerns.

The pandemic has increased families' concerns about whether students will be successful once they enroll in college. Ensure that your marketing communications include messaging to reassure students and their parents about support available to ease the transition.

While in-person programming is back, virtual engagement and digital engagement play important roles in recruitment.

While students are eager for in-person events, virtual experiences offer several distinct benefits, including improving access and equity, supporting self-service research, and offering data points that can serve as indicators of student interest.

Discuss affordability and career preparation early and persistently in your marketing.

It's more important than ever to ensure that you have a strong, multichannel communication strategy for both students and parents. Be sure to highlight features that most interest families, including information on job placement, internships, and career services.

Responsive, multichannel marketing is more important than ever.

As the timing of students' search processes shifts, responsive, multichannel marketing can help ensure that your outreach content, timing, and channels engage students, even as preferences become less predictable.

Research Overview

About This Research

This report includes data from EAB's University Research Partners, analyses from across EAB institutional partners, findings from EAB's K-12 Research division, and insights from EAB interviews and analyses.

For the Student Communication Preferences Survey, EAB's survey research division collected responses from current high school students in March and April of 2023 to learn about several topics, including their preferred communication sources, research behaviors, and priorities when choosing a college. The reported results include responses from 20,324 high school students.

2023 Student Communication Preferences Survey
Participant Profile

High School Graduation Year	Percentage
2023 (Senior)	58%
2024 (Junior)	25%
2025 (Sophomore)	17%

First-Generation Status	Percentage
First-Generation	24%
Non-First-Generation	76%

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
African/African American/Black	15%
Asian (Central/South/East/Southeast)	13%
Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander	1%
Hispanic or Latinx/o/a	22%
Middle Eastern or West Asian	2%
Native American or Alaskan Native	2%
White/Caucasian	52%
Other	1%

Region	Percentage
Northeast	18%
Southeast	23%
Midwest	22%
Southwest	14%
West	23%

Household Income	Percentage
$90,000 or less	56%
$90,001-$200,000	33%
More than $200,000	10%

Gender	Percentage
Female	58%
Male	38%
Nonbinary	3%
Other	1%

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- ▶ Wisr Virtual Communities

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ABOUT EAB

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