



INSIGHT PAPER

Supporting Gen P: Understanding the Next Generation of Community College Learners

*Explore Six Insights into How the Pandemic Altered College Search Behavior
from EAB's Survey of 2,700+ Prospective Community College Students*



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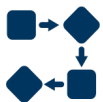
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Executive Overview

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. Students who aspire to attend community colleges may come from backgrounds that make them especially vulnerable to the long-term impacts of the pandemic. Those students are the focus of this report.

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

This report offers guidance for community college 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. The survey included responses from more than 20,000 current high school students and allows us to explore three types of students in this report: (1) those considering only two-year colleges, (2) those considering only four-year colleges, and (3) students who are considering both. Of the 20,000 students surveyed, some are considering options outside of two-year and four-year colleges and are not included in this report.

| Respondent Type | N= |
|------------------------------------|--------|
| Considering Two-Year Only | 418 |
| Considering Two-Year and Four-Year | 2,320 |
| Considering Four-Year Only | 13,643 |

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



Flexible options are increasingly important



Students are eager for personalized attention



Affordability persists as a top concern



Career-motivated but academically unprepared



Students need a FAFSA support system



Less engaged with college search resources



Flexible Options Are Increasingly Important

INSIGHT

1

Online Options Gaining Importance

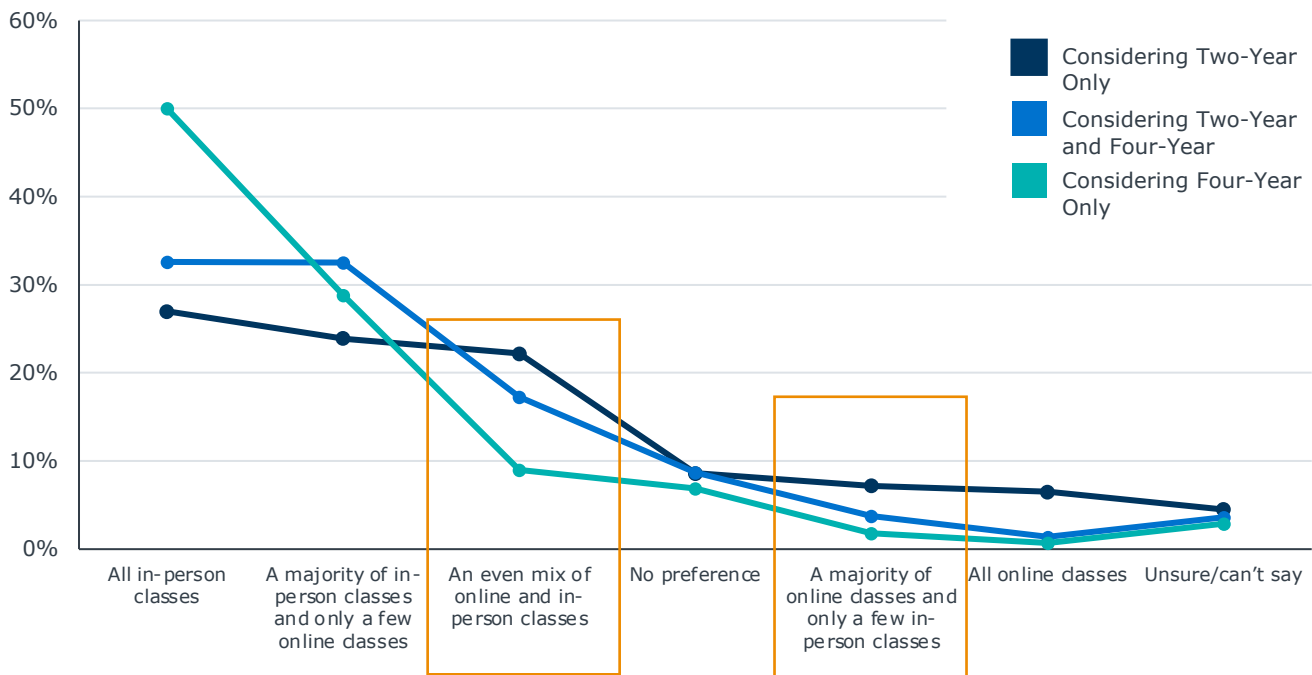
Aspiring Community College Students Are More Likely to Want Online Courses

Students considering attending two-year colleges are much more likely to indicate that they would prefer online course offerings, and only 27% of students who are considering only two-year colleges want all in-person classes. Students considering both two-year and four-year colleges also have a strong preference for at least some online courses; this could be a consideration for community colleges that are looking for ways to distinguish themselves from four-year competitors. Of students considering both two-year and four-year colleges, 56% want at least a portion of their courses to be online, and of students who are considering only two-year colleges, that preference jumps to 60%.

It's also important to note that students who are considering only two-year schools are the most likely to want all (or the majority of) their courses to be offered online. These preferences toward online offerings point to an appetite for flexibility and likely relate back to becoming more comfortable with online education during the pandemic.

“For your college classes, which of the following formats would you prefer?”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey



Aspiring Community College Students More Likely to Seek Online Options

14%

of students considering only two-year colleges want **most or all their courses offered online** compared to 3% of four-year-only aspiring students and 7% of students considering both options.

56%

of all students considering two-year colleges want **at least some of their courses offered online** compared to 40% of four-year-only aspiring students

Flexibility Is a Top Consideration

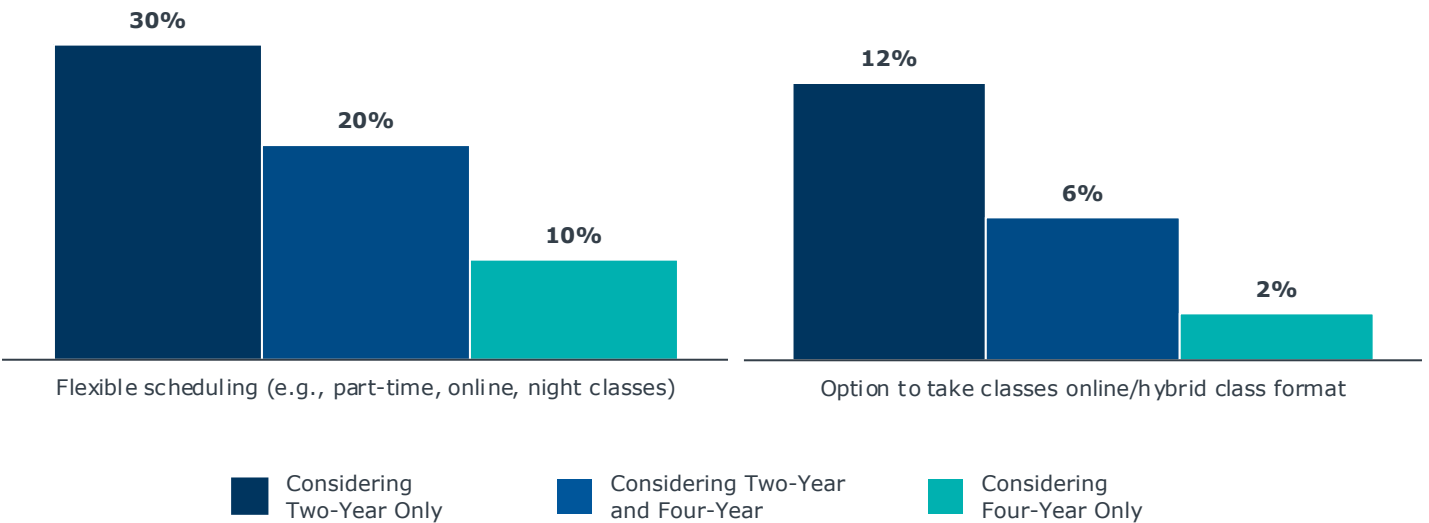
Community College Hopefuls Overwhelmingly Value Flexible Formats

When participants were asked to report what they value in a future college experience, prospective community college students were more likely to report that flexible scheduling and remote formats were important to them. This might mean that two-year aspiring students associate community colleges with flexible options, such as evening classes, part-time options, and online courses. **Students who are considering only two-year colleges were three times as likely to prioritize flexibility** as were students who were considering only four-year colleges. When specifically looking at how students value the option to take online courses, students considering only two-year schools were **six times as likely** to report this quality as important compared to those considering only four-year colleges.

There is an opportunity for community colleges to connect with students who are open to both two-year and four-year options by emphasizing flexibility, online options, and part-time pathways. This emphasis taps into the demographic of students who could be “on the fence” between a two-year and four-year college experience by showing a commitment to priorities that drive their decision-making.

“Consider the following attributes and select up to three that best reflect what you are looking for in your college experience.”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Could Select up to Three Responses



Key Takeaways for Community College Leaders



- ✓ **Prioritize creating online and hybrid pathways**
Work with faculty and department chairs to create degree pathways that allow students to move between online and in-person courses.
- ✓ **Center flexibility in your market positioning**
Partner with your marketing team to create messaging that highlights flexible pathways that help learners balance work, family, and education. Emphasize online and remote options for student services, tutoring, and social interactions.
- ✓ **Create a remote student success infrastructure**
Flexibility extends beyond the classroom. Offering remote advising, tutoring, career services, and additional student supports can help meet students’ flexibility needs. Using tech like [Navigate360](#) can make scheduling remote appointments easy and accessible, while also gathering data on how students are interacting with online resources.



Students Are Eager for Personalized Attention

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Students Are Seeking Personal Connections

Small Classes and Events Are Preferred

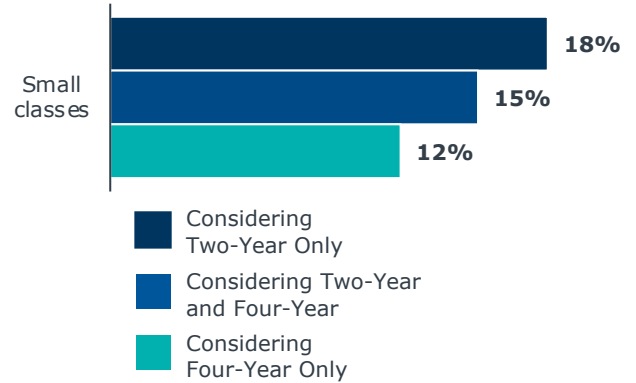
Prospective community college students were more likely to value small class sizes than their four-year aspiring peers, which is good news for community colleges, which often have small class sizes as a core value proposition.

When asked what types of recruitment events are most appealing, students considering only two-year colleges preferred events with under 100 attendees and events close to home. Small, on-campus events with 25-50 people were also preferred by 25% of students. This desire for small to medium-sized events, versus those with hundreds of guests, may speak to students' desire to make personal connections with college staff while also having the opportunity to build connections with their peers.

Last, reflecting their preferences for flexibility, 22% of students indicated that hybrid recruitment events were appealing. This may indicate that students are balancing home, work, and personal obligations that could create difficulties in coming to campus.

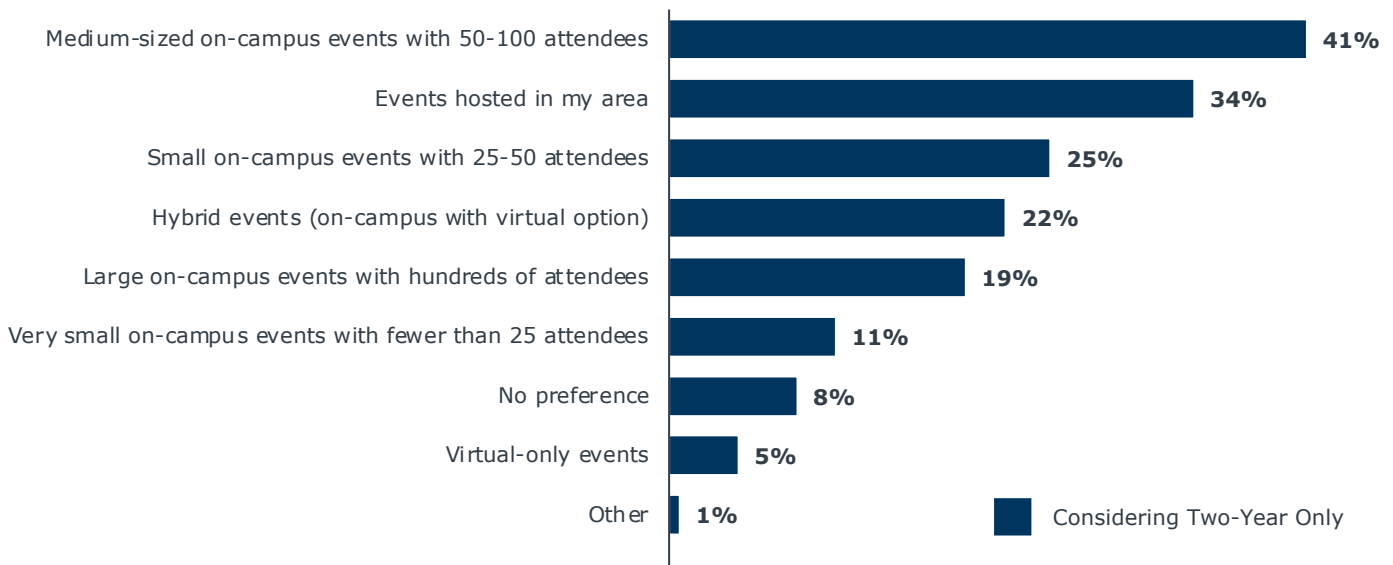
“When you think about college costs and what you get for the price you pay, what characteristics would you say best represent the value of education?”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Could Select up to Five Responses



“Many colleges and universities host student recruitment events for prospective students and families. Please indicate which of the following types of events appeal most to you.”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Could Select up to Two Responses

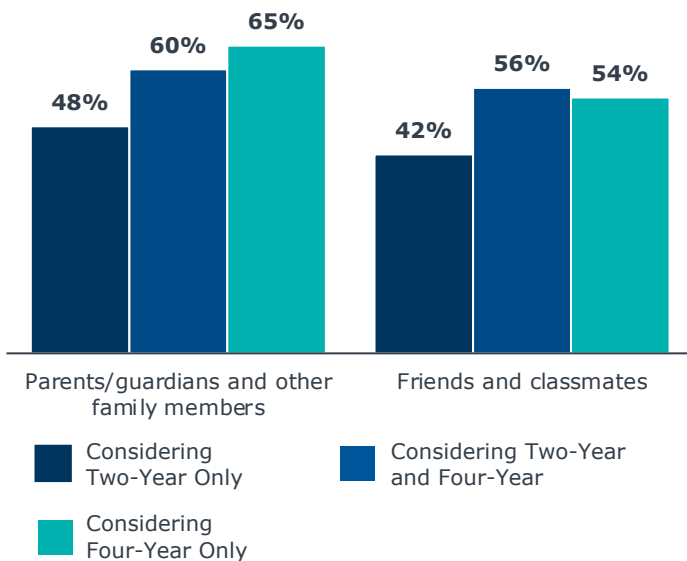
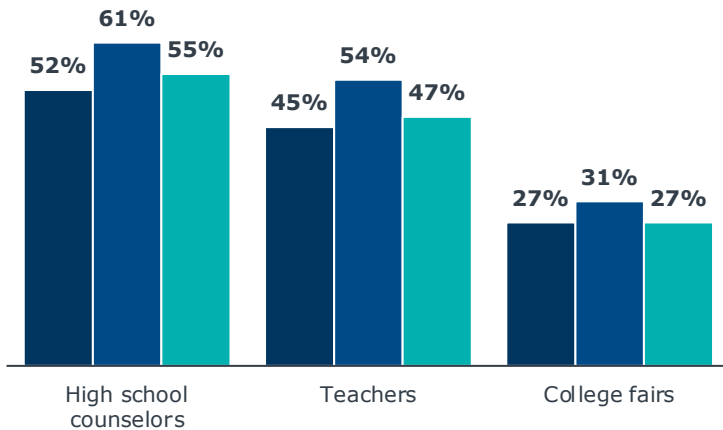


▶ Learn how Central Virginia Community College is [using Navigate360's recruitment and onboarding functionality](#) to connect with interested students before they set foot on campus.

Personalization Could Close Connection Gaps

“Consider the list below and select each source you have used during your college search.”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Could Select All That Apply



Relying on Institutional Support vs. Family Support

Across the board, students are relying on teachers and their high school counselors during their college search process. Over half of all students are utilizing high school counselors, which points to a desire for personal conversations.

However, students who are interested in only community colleges are the **least engaged with these external supports, which means prospective students may enter the admissions process underprepared.** This potential gap means that community colleges should prepare to provide personalized service to students who haven't had this type of guidance during their college search process.

Potential of Limited Social Capital

Aspiring two-year students, including those considering only two-year schools and those who were open to four-year options, **were less likely to rely on parents, family, and friends during their college search process.** Students considering only a two-year college were much less likely to rely on family, with only 48% using them as a resource compared to 60% of students considering both two-year and four-year schools and 65% of students considering only four-year schools. For community colleges, this means students may rely on educators to answer critical questions and that colleges need to prioritize proactive communications with prospects.

Key Takeaways for Community College Leaders

- ✓ Use technology to create bandwidth for 1:1 and small group interactions**
 Your team can use technology to manage scalable interactions, like automatic messaging, to free up more time for personal relationships. Technology can also help identify students who are stalled in the inquiry and admissions pipeline.
- ✓ Track student interactions during the inquiry and exploration process**
 Tracking which touchpoints students are having with the college allows you to craft more personalized and intentional outreach. It also allows campus staff to have deeper 1:1 conversations by providing better context to who the student is, what their goals are, and where they may need support.



Affordability Persists as a Top Concern

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Two-Year Prospects Are Cost-Conscious

A Higher Value on Cost, Tuition, and Financial Aid

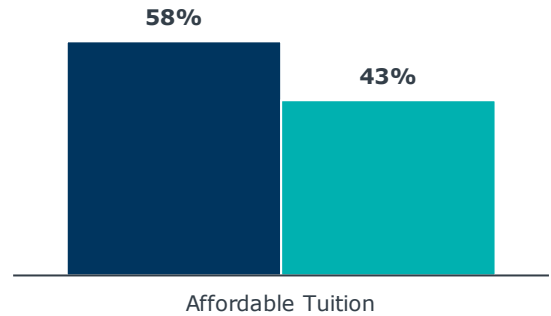
Prospective community college students were more likely to elevate tuition, college costs, and financial aid as considerations during their college search. Community college prospects were 15% more likely to indicate affordable tuition as something they were looking for in their college experience.

When asked what they are searching for on college websites, prospective two-year students were 12% more likely to search for financial aid information and 8% more likely to research costs compared to students who aren't considering two-year colleges. These trends may point to both an overall cost consciousness as well as concerns about paying for college.

Making tuition, cost, and aid information easy to find and understand will help prospective students feel more confident that community college is an affordable option for their education.

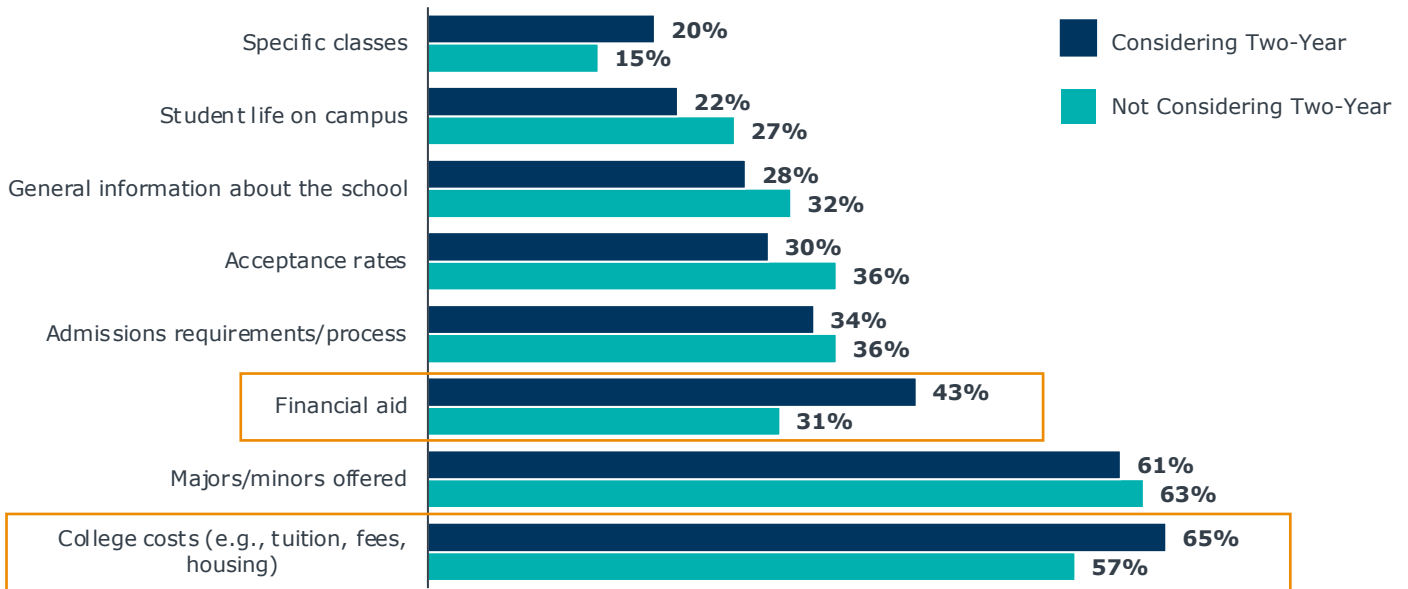
“Consider the following attributes and select up to three that best reflect what you are looking for in your college experience.”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Could Select up to Three Responses



“When you searched specific college websites, what information were you most often trying to find?”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Could Select up to Three Responses



Perceptions of affordability are shifting post-pandemic

52%

of community college prospects are explicitly considering a two-year college to **make their education more affordable**

48%

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

Perceptions of Educational “Value” Tied to Costs

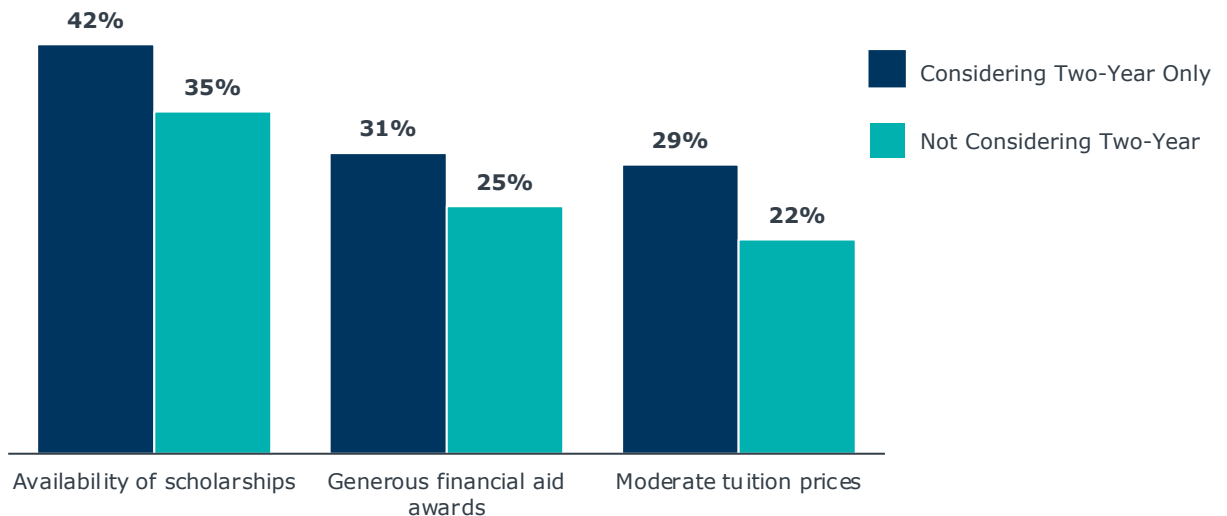
Increase Your Value Proposition with Scholarships and Transparent Financial Aid

As public perceptions of the “value” of education shift, it’s important that community colleges understand what constitutes strong value to prospective students. When asked what would make education a good value for them, prospective community college students were likely to point to cost control measures such as scholarships, financial aid awards, and moderate tuition prices. Compared to students considering four-year options, prospective community college students were 7% more likely to name scholarships as a value driver, 6% more likely to cite generous financial aid, and 7% more likely to name moderate tuition prices.

Community colleges may have modest price points compared to competitors, but that doesn’t mean they are in the price range that all students feel they can afford. By signaling the availability of scholarships, grants, and aid options early and in language students can understand, community colleges stand a better chance of conveying their value to prospective students.

“When you think about college costs and what you get for the price you pay, what characteristics would you say best represent the value of education?”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Could Select up to Five Responses



Key Takeaways for Community College Leaders

- ✓ **Broadcast your cost of attendance compared to competitor options**
Show transparency in your total costs, including tuition, fees, and supplies, and how those compare to more costly alternatives.
- ✓ **Share scholarship information early and often**
Students may not have the confidence to think they could earn scholarships and thus may not think it’s worth applying for them. Scalable communications plans offered in [Navigate360](#) can help share scholarship information widely with students.
- ✓ **Package aid as soon as possible to compete with offers from other colleges**
Students may not understand that financial aid could potentially cover their entire cost of attendance, and they could be comparing packages from multiple schools at once. By showing the out-of-pocket cost of attendance (if any) earlier, institutions can remain competitive.



Students Need a FAFSA Support System

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Prospects Have Gaps in Their FAFSA Support System

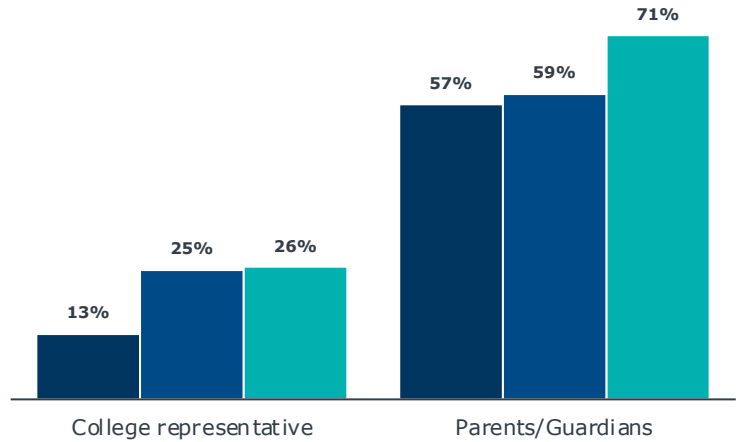
Filling in FAFSA Support Gaps

Community college prospects are less likely to report parental support and encouragement during their FAFSA submission process. This could mean that students rely more on external supports, such as counselors and college representatives. Surprisingly, **only 13% of students considering only two-year colleges report receiving encouragement from a college representative**, which is half of what students considering four-year colleges reported.

This lack of engagement with community college representatives regarding FAFSA completion is concerning and represents an opportunity for community colleges to more proactively encourage and support students as they complete their FAFSA.

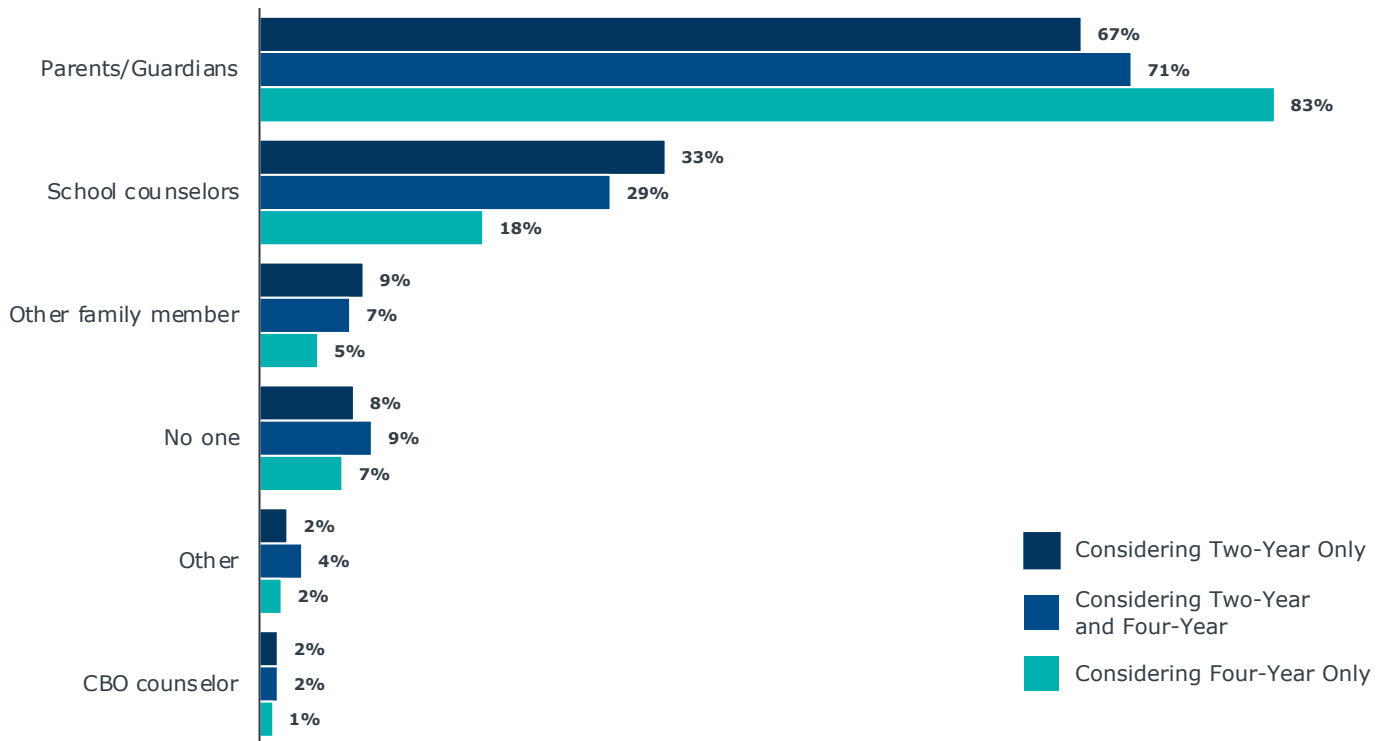
“Who encouraged you to complete the FAFSA?”

EAB 2023 Communications Preference Survey



“Who helped you to complete the FAFSA?”

EAB 2023 Communications Preferences Survey



Learn more about how community colleges are [breaking down silos between financial aid and student success](#)

Students May Think They Don't Qualify for Aid

Confusion About Aid Eligibility

While most prospective community college students had applied for aid by their senior year of high school, some students opted out of the process. Those who opted out are less likely than four-year aspiring students to indicate "I don't need financial aid to pay for college" but are more likely to think they would not be eligible.

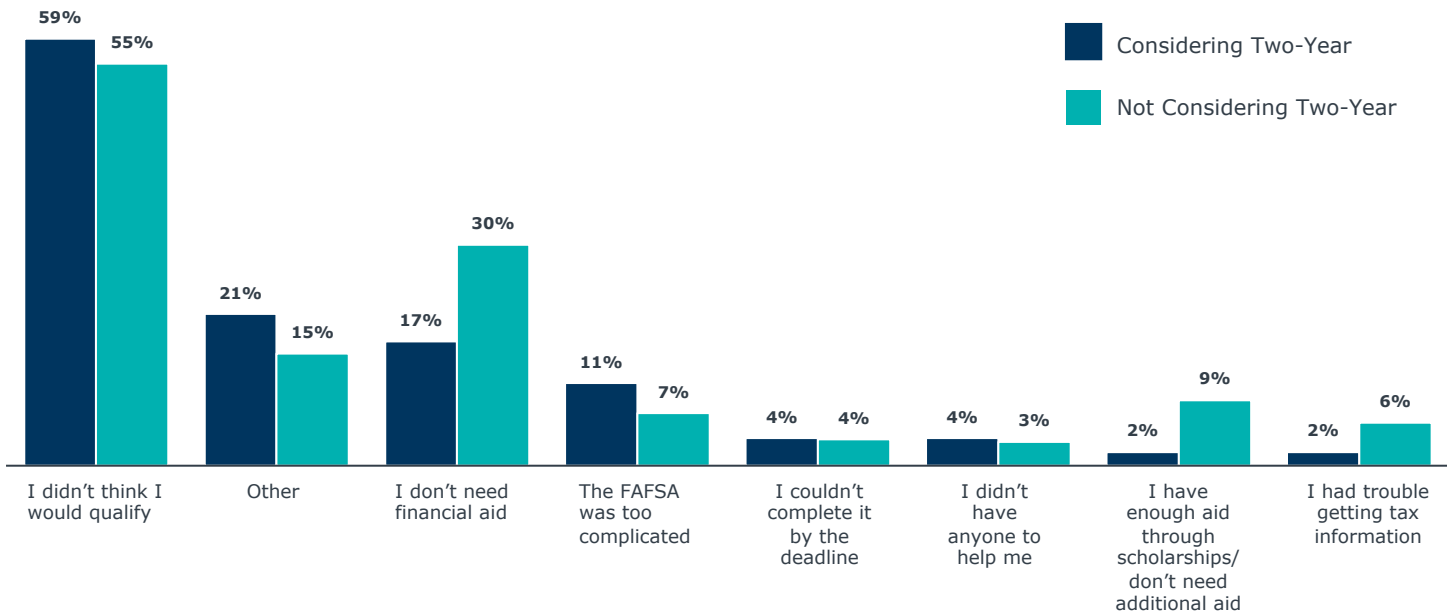
As guidelines around need-based aid change in the 2024-25 aid year, many experts estimate [more students will become eligible for Pell grants](#). To better connect with prospective students who think they may not qualify for aid or students who are cost-conscious overall, community colleges need to offer early FAFSA assistance and reiterate that new changes to the FAFSA will make it shorter and easier to complete.

10%
of seniors considering a community college had not completed their FAFSA by spring but still intended to, compared to 5% of students considering only four-year colleges

85%
of prospective community college students had completed their FAFSA by spring of their senior year

"Why aren't you completing the FAFSA?"

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Asked of Students Who Are Not Completing the FAFSA



Key Takeaways for Community College Leaders

- ✓ **College teams can use tech to encourage FAFSA completion early**
Community colleges may be missing opportunities to front-load conversations about the importance of FAFSA completion and the resources available. Tools, like [Navigate360](#), can build FAFSA "journeys" that show students each step of the submission process.
- ✓ **Students may lack family support when completing the FAFSA**
Community college prospects may be more likely to rely on educators for support. Or, in the absence of family support, they may not be able to complete the process easily. Using early alerts to identify students who are missing FAFSA documents can help students access the 1:1 guidance they need.



Career-Motivated but Feeling Unprepared for College

INSIGHT

5

College-to-Career Journey Is an Emerging Stressor

Preparing Students for the Workforce

One of students' top motivations for considering a two-year college is to academically prepare for a four-year college. This hints that students may be feeling academically unprepared, and 36% of students who are interested only in two-year colleges report concern about being successful in college.

These students are also more career-minded than students who are considering only four-year colleges. A quarter of two-year prospects feel nervous about finding a job, and nearly one in three rates strong career services as a value driver. To help students meet their career aspirations, community colleges should prepare to strengthen services for academically unprepared students and to draw strong connections to the workforce.

"Why are you considering a community college?"

44%

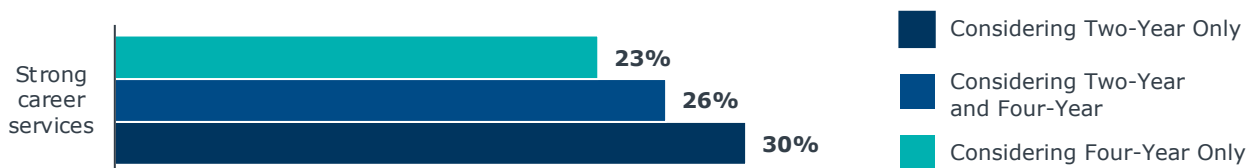
To help them prepare academically for a four-year college

72%

Plan to earn a bachelor's degree or higher

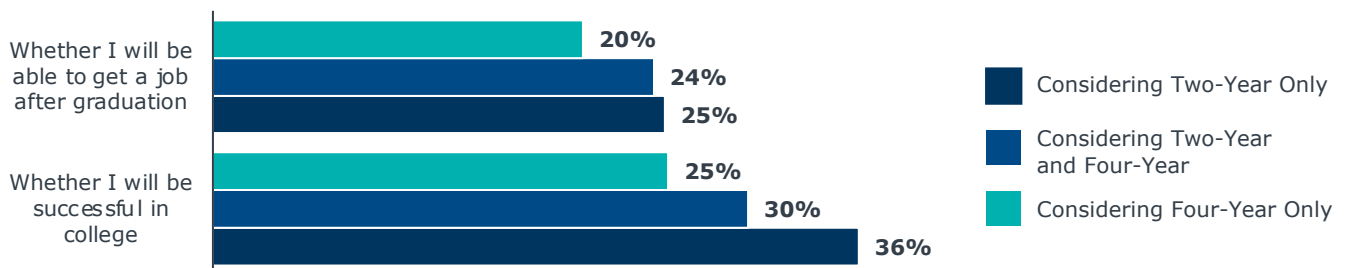
"When you think about college costs and what you get for the price you pay, what characteristics would you say best represent the value of education?"

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Can Select up to Five



"As you consider your future college experience, what makes you most concerned or nervous?"

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Participants Can Select up to Three



Key Takeaways for Community College Leaders

✓ Discuss career preparation early and persistently

Leverage Navigate360's technology to connect students with career resources and employment opportunities. Navigate360's AI-powered campaign tools allow institutions to scale your communication strategy and emphasize job placement rates, internships, and campus career services in messaging.

✓ Highlight academic supports and transfer pathways

Ensure that your value messaging strategy includes tutoring, supplemental instruction, and transfer success stories.



Students Less Engaged with College Search Resources

INSIGHT

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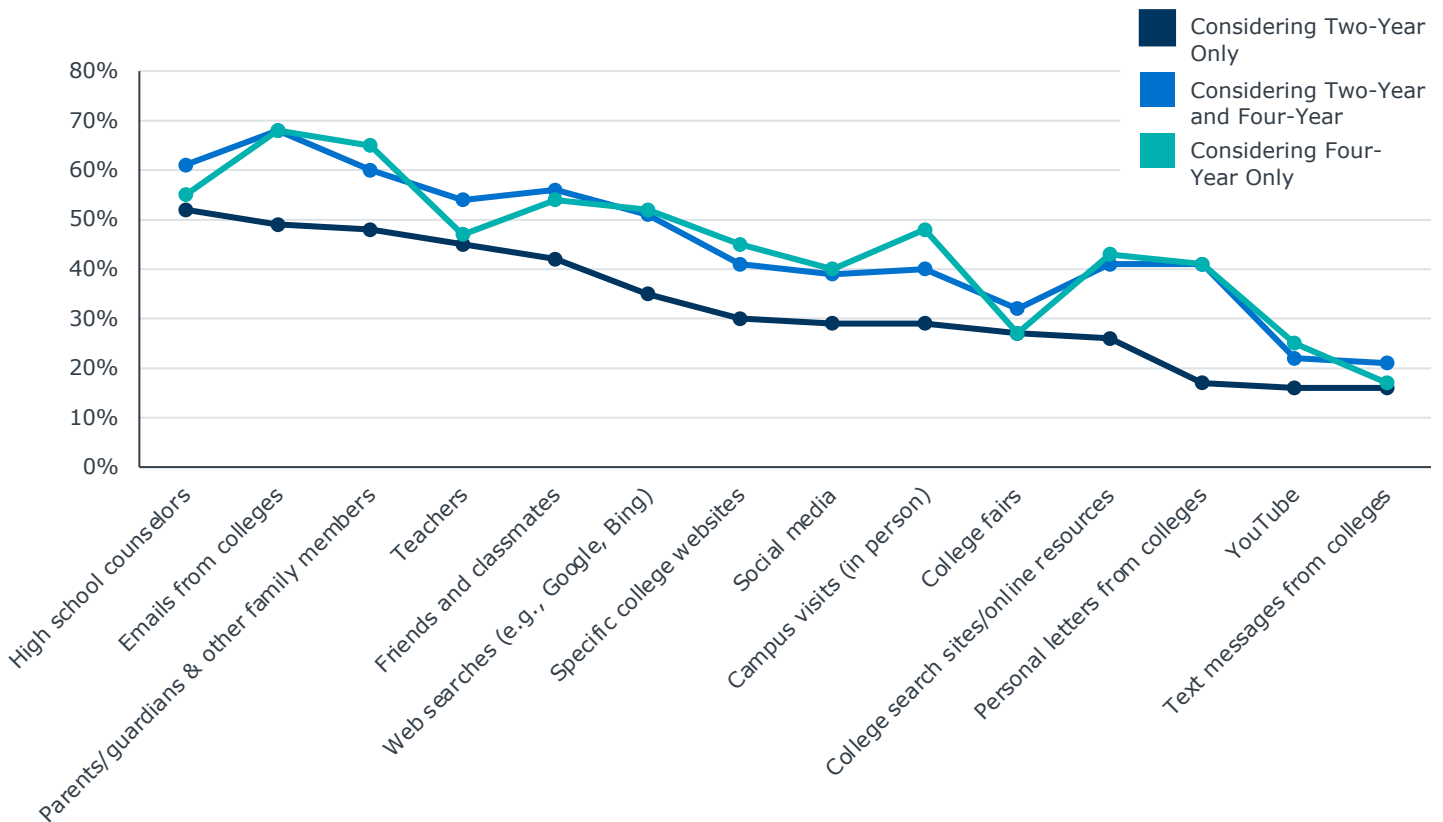
Underutilizing College Search Resources

Students Considering Only Two-Year Schools Using Fewer College Search Resources

Students who are two-year-only-minded are using fewer resources and engaging with fewer adults while preparing for college than students who are interested in four-year colleges. This means that community colleges may need to reach out to students versus waiting for them to reach in. Only 50% of two-year-only-focused students are using emails from colleges in their search, compared to 68% of students who are researching four-year schools, which represents an opportunity for community colleges to send more proactive messaging to inquiries and current [dual enrollment students](#).

“Consider the list below and select each source you have used during your college search.”

EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, Students May Select All That Apply

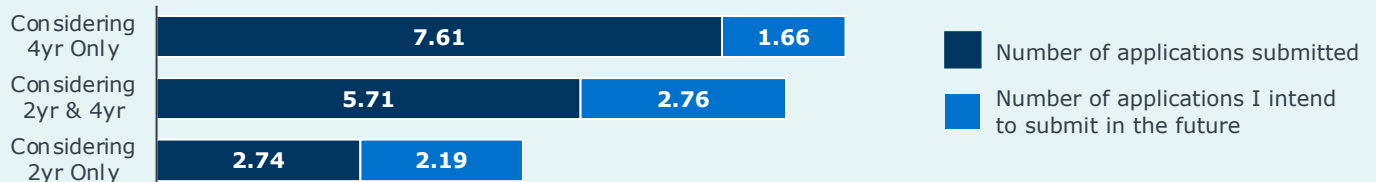


Less Engaged-but Some Students Are Still Shopping Around

Students who are considering only community college are applying to half as many colleges as their four-year aspiring peers, which could mean they've likely already narrowed their choices. Of interest to community college recruiters should be the fact that students who are considering either a two-year or four-year college are applying to 5.71 schools on average, with the potential for even more applications in the future.

“How many applications have you submitted as of today? How many more, if any, do you plan to submit?”

EAB Communication Preferences Survey, Mean Scores



Key Search Steps Are Occurring Later

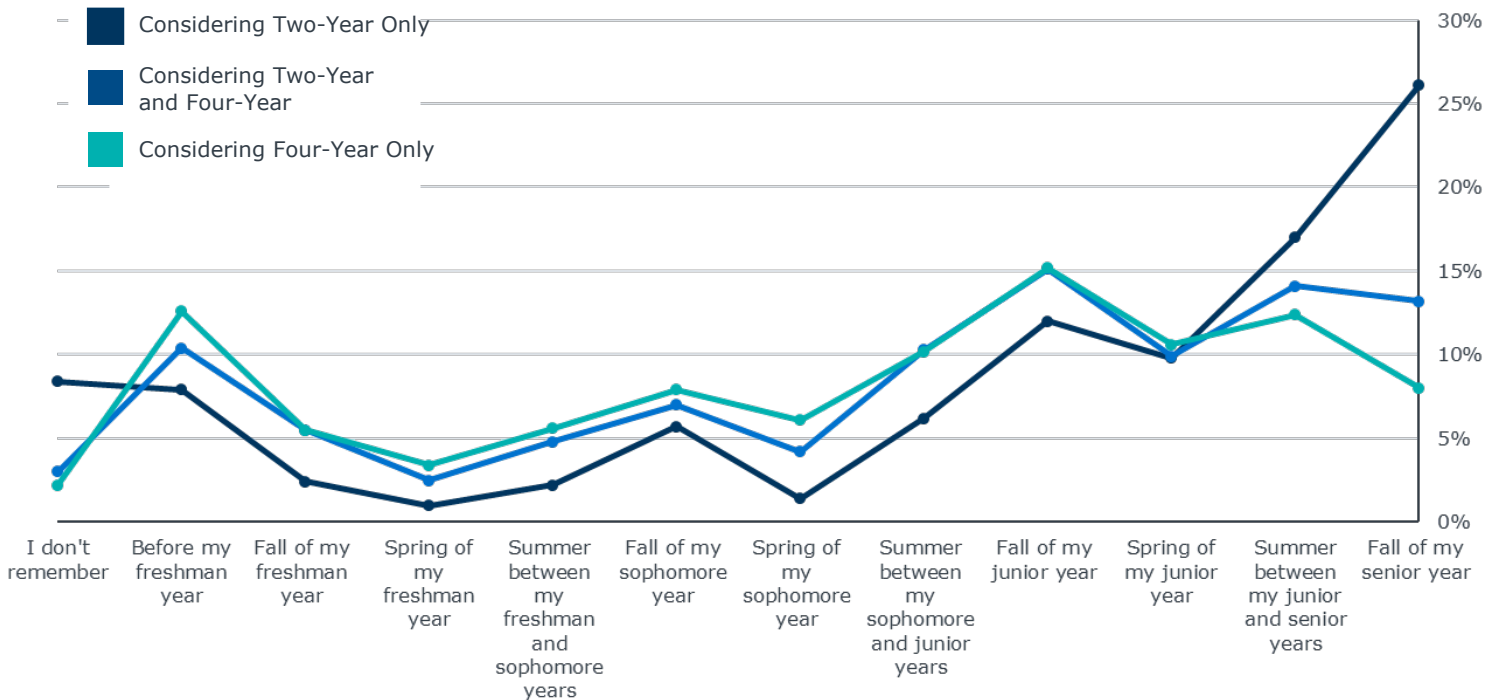
Community College Prospects Research Schools Later

Prospective community college students are starting their college research process much later than students who are committed to attending a four-year college. More than 25% of students considering only community colleges didn't start their search until fall of their senior year, and this group largely shows disengagement with the search process up until fall of their junior year.

Interestingly, students who are open to both community colleges and four-year colleges start their college search earlier, representing a significant opportunity to build earlier connections. By fall of their junior year, more than 70% of students considering both options had started their search, compared to 49% of students considering only community colleges. This means community colleges need to proactively connect with students as their search is starting, especially if students are considering either college option.

"When did you first start researching colleges?"

Cumulative Percentage of Students Who Had Started Researching by Time Period, EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey



Key Takeaways for Community College Leaders

- ✓ **Start recruitment earlier to capture early researchers**
Students who are comparing two-year and four-year colleges start their research earlier, which means enrollment teams need to prioritize connecting with students as early as freshman year.
- ✓ **Reduce the time between enrollment steps**
Some students are waiting until much later to begin their search process may have a shorter on-ramp when working with admissions teams. Consider how you can reduce the time it takes to complete each enrollment step, so students have a fast yet thoughtful experience

Read how [Germann Community College](#) shortened their onboarding process by using Navigate360 to guide students through key steps.



Key Takeaways and Additional Resources

Key Takeaways



Prioritize messaging that highlights flexibility while doubling down on remote student services.

Students who are considering two-year colleges are likely to want at least some, if not most, of their courses to be offered online. Centering flexible options, including part-time pathways that allow students to balance work and family, can meet this growing student demand. This flexibility extends to student services, like advising and career services, who can leverage technology, like [Navigate 360](#), to communicate with students, schedule appointments, and create targeted interventions for part-time and online learners.



Students need proactive institutional help to understand costs and financial aid options.

Students are growing more cost-conscious and rate affordability as a top concern and way to determine the value of an institution. Knowing that two-year aspiring students are relying less on their families for support when completing the FAFSA compared to four-year aspiring students means that community colleges need to be a strong voice in promoting FAFSA completion, scholarship options, and ways to offset college costs. Lastly, packaging aid as early as possible will give students ample time to understand what their financial options are.



Pathways to transfer and the job market are critical issues to students. Focus on conveying a long-term return on investment.

Students are future-focused. Many are still motivated by the opportunity to transfer to a four-year college and by their ability to connect with career options that justify their investment in higher education. Highlighting both transfer and employer partners and showing how alumni have improved their economic position will help convey your value proposition. Additionally, technology can be used to track students' career aspirations, setup career planning milestones, and to communicate internship opportunities.



Develop tech enabled outreach strategies for high school freshmen and sophomores to address the "movable middle."

Students who are interested in either a two-year or four-year college represent a "movable middle" that starts their college search earlier than students who are interested only in two-year schools. These students, who are using more college search resources, might be making their college decision *before your college connects with them*. Building earlier relationships can help your college become a contender during their search and decision process, and tools like [Navigate360](#) can help coordinate your efforts with prospective students.

To request a [Navigate360](#) demonstration visit eab.com or email eab2yrcommunications@eab.com

Research Overview

About This Research

EAB's Survey Research division conducted a Student Communication Preferences Survey in March and April of 2023. They collected responses from current high school students to learn about several topics, including their preferred communication sources, research behaviors, and priorities when choosing a college.

2023 Student Communication Preferences Survey

Considering Community College Participant Profile, N=2,738

Not Considering Community College Participant Profile, N=13,643

| High School Graduation Year | 2-Year Percentage | 4-Year Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 2023 (Senior) | 64% | 61% |
| 2024 (Junior) | 25% | 24% |
| 2025 (Sophomore) | 11% | 15% |

| First-Generation Status | 2-Year Percentage | 4-Year Percentage |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| First-Generation | 31% | 22% |
| Non-First-Generation | 69% | 78% |

| Race/Ethnicity | 2-Year Percentage | 4-Year Percentage |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| African/African American/Black | 14% | 15% |
| Asian (Central/South/East/Southeast) | 12% | 14% |
| Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander | 1% | 1% |
| Hispanic or Latine | 33% | 19% |
| Middle Eastern or West Asian | 2% | 2% |
| Native American or Alaskan Native | 2% | 2% |
| White/Caucasian | 43% | 53% |
| Other | 1% | 1% |

| Region | 2-Year Percentage | 4-Year Percentage |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Northeast | 12% | 20% |
| Southeast | 19% | 23% |
| Midwest | 20% | 23% |
| Southwest | 15% | 13% |
| West | 34% | 21% |

| Gender | 2-Year Percentage | 4-Year Percentage |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Female | 60% | 60% |
| Male | 34% | 36% |
| Nonbinary | 4% | 3% |
| Other | 3% | 1% |

| Household Income | 2-Year Percentage | 4-Year Percentage |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| \$90,000 or less | 70% | 52% |
| \$90,001-\$200,000 | 26% | 36% |
| More than \$200,000 | 4% | 12% |

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Best-in-Class Support and Expertise to Solve Challenges Across Your Institution

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|--|--|---|---|---|
| NAVIGATE360 Higher ed's leading student CRM to recruit, retain, and empower students in college and beyond | | | | |
| EDIFY A higher ed-specific and vendor-agnostic data warehouse, infrastructure, and analytics hub | | | | |
| STRATEGIC ADVISORY SERVICES Consultative access to EAB's best practice research, toolkits, diagnostics, and expert direction on community colleges' most pressing challenges | | | | |
| RAPID INSIGHT Access, prepare, and explore your data in a code-free, drag-and-drop workspace | | | | |
| MOON SHOT FOR EQUITY A comprehensive initiative to eliminate equity gaps at your institution by the year 2030 | | | | |
| ENROLL360 VIRTUAL TOURS Immersive virtual tour platform creating a digital experience that generates higher inquiries and activates your recruitment team | | | | |
| APPLY An expansive college search network that connects colleges with right-fit students | | | | |
| INTERSECT A recruitment solution powered by Naviance, the leading college and career readiness platform used by 40% of US high school students | | | | |

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ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.