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**NACAC**  
National Association for  
College Admission Counseling



# The Counselor Perspective

Insights from EAB's 2023 Survey of High School Counselors

*Created in Partnership with NACAC*

# Enroll360

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# Executive Summary

High school counselors play an outsized role in the college-search journey of many students across the country. This role also gives them a front-row seat to the rapidly evolving search behaviors and priorities of today's teens. To help you benefit from the unique perspective of counselors, EAB regularly surveys this audience on a wide range of topics.

This report is based on a 2023 survey of more than 2,800 counselors at a diverse mix of high schools nationwide. Many of the questions in the survey concerned students' college-search behaviors and attitudes toward college-going, as perceived by their counselors. The survey thus reflects a blend of student and counselor attitudes and beliefs.

The insights shared in this report are meant to inform college and university enrollment teams as they craft recruitment-marketing outreach to counselors, students, and families."

## Questions Explored in This Report

- What factors prevent students from considering college?
- What are the top challenges faced by students when applying to college?
- What changes have counselors observed in their students since the pandemic?
- What information is most helpful to counselors as they guide students through the college-search process?
- What are the important similarities or differences between school types and how should they inform your communication strategy?
- How can you better support and engage counselors from all school types?

## About the Survey

17

Questions

2,800

Survey Respondents

Data was collected between December 8, 2022, and January 17, 2023.

For more information about our research methodology, please see page 29.

A note about the structure of this report: You will see three icons repeated throughout this document. Each icon aligns with information based on a different cut of the survey data.



**By School Type**

*(Public vs. Private)*



**By School Setting**

*(Rural vs. Suburban vs. Urban)*



**By School Location**

*(Northeast vs. Southeast vs. Midwest vs. Southwest vs. West)*

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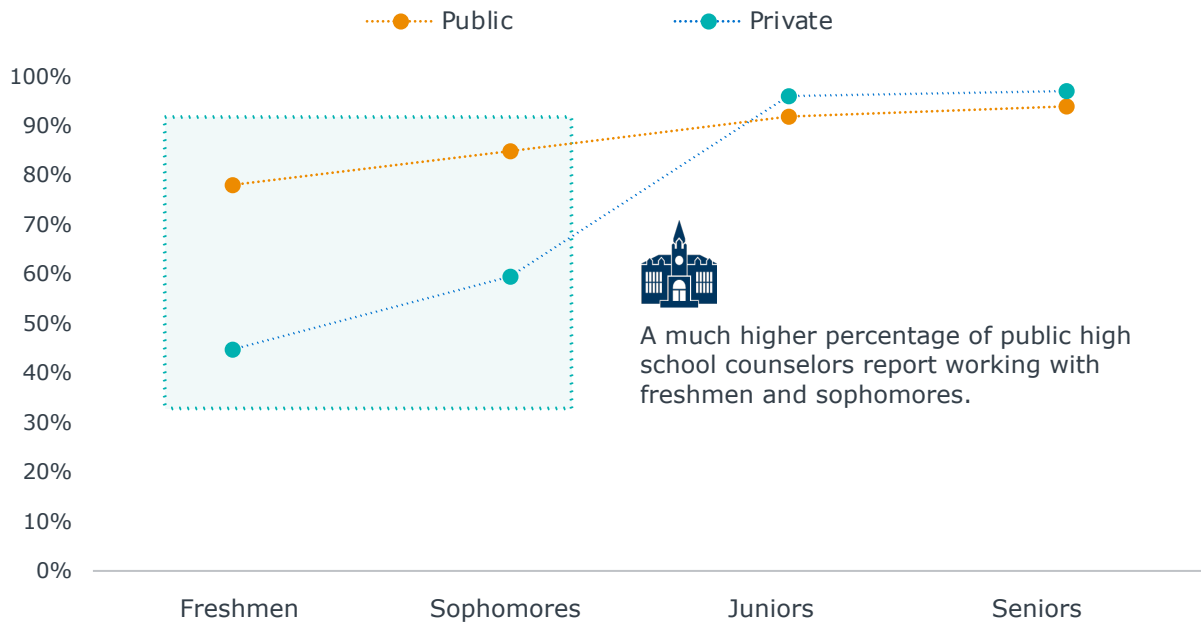
# Counseling Staff and Workload Characteristics

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# High School Years COUNSELED

## Q1: "What classes of students are included in your counseling load?"

Percentage of Counselors, by School Segment



And **counselors at rural schools** were more likely than their suburban and urban peers to report having freshmen and sophomores in their counseling load.

	Rural	Urban	Suburban
Freshmen	80%	54%	67%
Sophomores	85%	66%	78%



When looking at responses by region, **counselors in the Midwest** were most likely to report having freshmen and sophomores in their counseling load.

	Midwest	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	West
Freshmen	77%	60%	68%	70%	65%
Sophomores	83%	72%	78%	82%	74%

### TAKEAWAYS

While this data may reflect some variation in staffing models between public and private high schools, it is worth noting the settings where counselors may be more engaged with underclassmen.

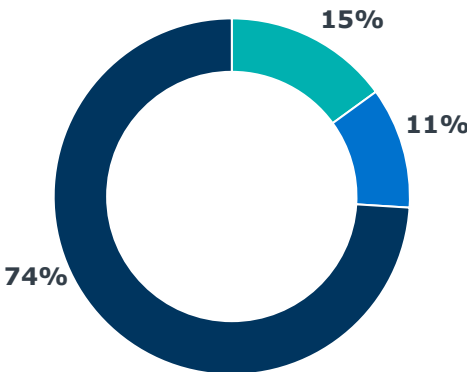
This is an important finding given the fact that earlier college search is associated with improved enrollment outcomes. Admissions teams may benefit from piggybacking on the efforts of high school counselors who are engaging freshmen and sophomores in college-search conversations.

# Counselor Staffing Mix

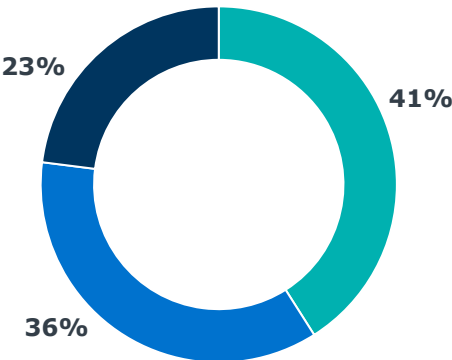
**Q2: "Please indicate the number of counselors at your school in each of the following categories."**

*Each Counselor Counted in Only One Category*

**Public Schools**



**Private Schools**



In this year's survey, public school counselors reported that 74% of their school's counseling staff are responsible for both college counseling *and* other services. This data suggests that public school counselors typically "wear more hats" than their private school counterparts.

- College Counseling Only
- No College Counseling
- College Counseling + Other Services



**Counselors at rural schools** also cited a higher percentage of staff who do a combination of counseling activities.

Percentage of counselors who do college counseling as well as other services:

Rural	Urban	Suburban
<b>74%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>51%</b>

## TAKEAWAYS

This data makes it clear that counselors at public schools are more often dividing their time and mental energy between very different tasks. Overall, high school counselors are working harder and with smaller staffs than ever before, and in many cases, their jobs have been expanded.

Given this reality, there is a heavy burden on colleges and universities to be exceptionally clear and concise with their counselor communication. When counselors are juggling multiple responsibilities, they are much more likely to be supportive of an institution that makes their workload more manageable.

# Counselor Responsibilities

**Q3: “Consider the counseling staff’s workload over the course of the academic year and estimate the percentage of time spent on the following activities.”**

*Responses Add Up to 100%*

	Public	Private
Personal needs counseling <i>(Disciplinary, social, and psychological counseling)</i>	<b>29%</b>	12%
Helping students choose and schedule high school courses	<b>24%</b>	14%
Postsecondary admission counseling	22%	<b>51%</b>
Academic testing <i>(Proctoring, administrations, and interpretation)</i>	9%	9%
Occupational counseling and job placement	6%	3%
Other non-counseling activities <i>(Hall/lunch duty, substitute teaching, bus duty, etc.)</i>	6%	5%
Teaching	4%	6%



Given the growing mental health crisis among teens and young adults, it may be no surprise that public school counselors are spending 2.3X more time on counseling related to students’ personal needs than their private school peers.

Although this translates into less time spent on official college counseling, personal counseling may in fact contribute to higher college-going rates since students are less likely to enroll and persist if they are experiencing mental health challenges.



**Rural counselors** reported spending the least amount of time on postsecondary admission counseling.



Percentage of time spent on college counseling:

Rural	Urban	Suburban
<b>22%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>38%</b>

## TAKEAWAYS

This data suggests that students in greatest need of college counseling—those attending public and rural institutions, who are disproportionately lower-income and first-generation—are least likely to get it.

Admissions teams can help fill this gap with high-quality recruitment marketing, which can be an effective way to share college resources and encourage students to pursue higher education. A recent EAB analysis also found that underrepresented students are particularly impacted by recruitment marketing, enrolling at a rate 1.4x higher than their peers who received the same outreach.



# 2

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## Barriers to College-Going

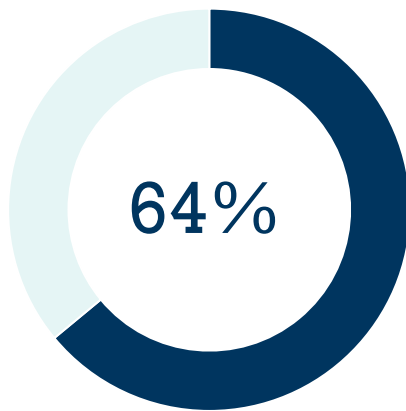
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# Population of College-Bound Students

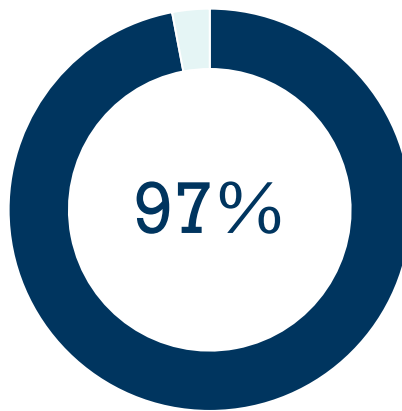
Q4: "Approximately what percentage of the students at your school are college-bound?"

Percentage of Students, by School Segment

Public Schools



Private Schools



Private school counselors reported a much higher percentage of college-bound students in their counseling load.

■ College-Bound    ■ Not College-Bound



When comparing schools based on setting, **rural counselors** reported a considerably lower percentage of college-bound students.



Percentage of college-bound students in their counseling load:

Rural	Urban	Suburban
60%	77%	81%

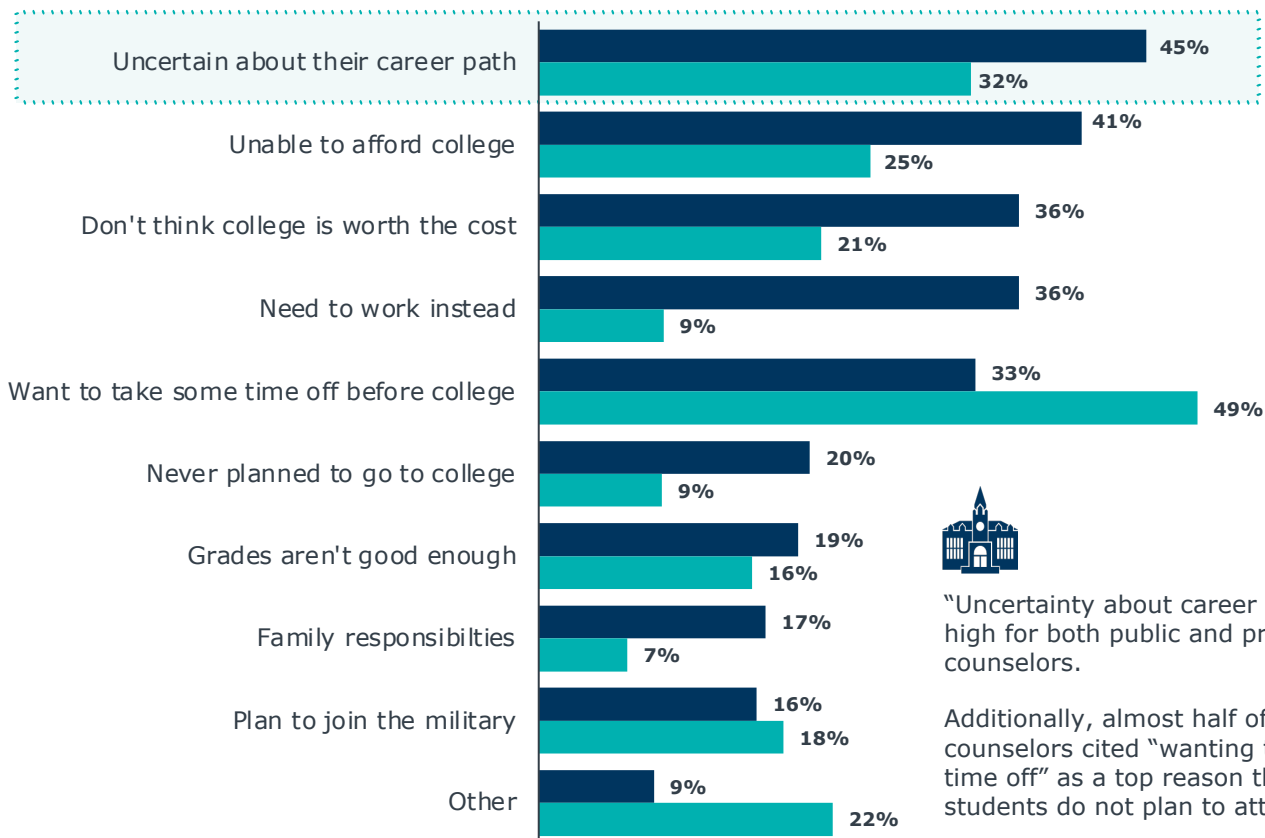


# Top Reasons for Not Attending College

## Q5: "What are the primary reasons students do not plan to attend college after high school?"

Top 10 Responses, Counselors Could Select Up to 3

Public Private



"Uncertainty about career path" ranked high for both public and private school counselors.

Additionally, almost half of private school counselors cited "wanting to take some time off" as a top reason that their students do not plan to attend college.



**Rural counselors** were much more likely to report that their students "don't think college is worth the cost."

Percentage of counselors citing perceived value as a top reason for forgoing college:

Rural  
41%

Urban  
28%

Suburban  
27%

### TAKEAWAYS

Although a large portion of counselors still cited lack of affordability as a top reason that their students do not plan to attend college, it is notable that students' uncertainty about their career path ranked even higher than affordability for both public and private school counselors.

This presents a clear opportunity for colleges and universities to help students learn about potential career paths and demonstrate how their institution is uniquely positioned to support specific career goals. It may also be beneficial to share this information earlier in the college-search process.

# Most Common Factors That Dissuade Students from Attending College

**Q6: "Indicate the most common factors that dissuade your students from considering college after high school."**

*Top 10 Responses, Counselors Could Select Up to 5*



## TAKEAWAYS

Nonconsumption is a growing trend among high school graduates, and these responses shed light on why more and more students are choosing alternatives to college.

Given the high level of concern that students have around cost and debt, it is more important than ever for colleges and universities to demonstrate the ROI of a degree from their institution. Students may also benefit from hearing alumni stories, especially from students with backgrounds similar to their own.

For more guidance on understanding nonconsumption and other key strategic priorities for enrollment teams, read our insight paper, "[Mapping the Enrollment Landscape](#)."

# Challenges Students Face When Applying to College

## Q7: “What are the challenges your students face when applying to colleges and universities?”

Top 8 Responses, Counselors Could Select Up to 5

	Public	Private
Limited encouragement or support from family	52%	11%
Completing the FAFSA	49%	29%
Awareness of school/knowning the school exists	43%	45%
Preparing essays	35%	45%
Visiting campus	32%	33%
Completing the application form	30%	17%
Knowing how to get answers from the institution	28%	22%
Taking standardized tests	26%	30%



The two most frequently cited challenges for students at public high schools—lack of family support and filling out the FAFSA—were among the least frequently cited for students at private high schools.

Interestingly, limited awareness of colleges and visiting campus were top-rated barriers cited by both public and private school counselors.



**Rural counselors** were much more likely to report limited encouragement or support from family.



Percentage of counselors citing limited support from family as a top factor:

Rural  
**55%**

Urban  
**38%**

Suburban  
**31%**

### TAKEAWAYS

Family attitudes and beliefs about college have a strong influence on enrollment outcomes. Given the large number of counselors who cited “limited family support” as a top challenge, it is critical for colleges and universities to engage families as early as possible. In a 2022 EAB survey, over 75% of parents and guardians reported wanting to hear directly from schools. This is encouraging, and admissions teams should prioritize outreach to this critical audience.

For more actionable insights on parent engagement, please read our insight paper, “[Engaging Students’ #1 Influencer in Recruitment.](#)”

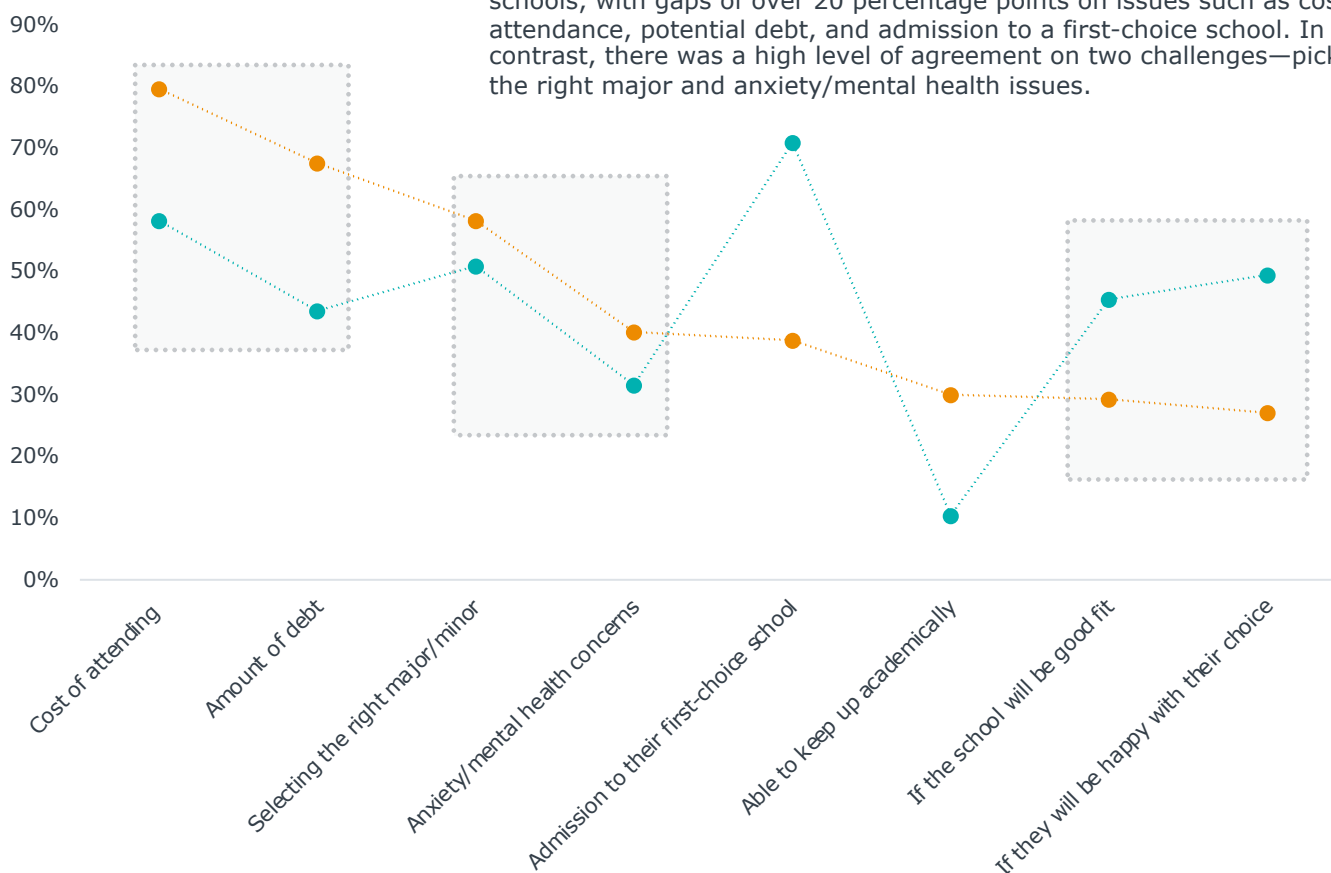
# Most Frequently Voiced Student Concerns

## Q8: "As you counsel students about college, what are their most frequently voiced concerns?"

Top 8 Responses, Counselors Could Select All That Apply



Public Private



Top student concerns varied considerably between public and private schools, with gaps of over 20 percentage points on issues such as cost of attendance, potential debt, and admission to a first-choice school. In contrast, there was a high level of agreement on two challenges—picking the right major and anxiety/mental health issues.

### TAKEAWAYS

Based on these findings, admissions teams should consider highlighting different information in their counselor communications based on school segment. For example, you may want to feature financial aid and cost information with public school counselors and feature campus culture information with private school counselors. This does *not* mean that information should be exclusive to any one segment, but tailored messaging may help garner more engagement among counselors.

It is also clear from these responses that all students would benefit from information about majors and mental health supports on campus. For more information about the role of mental health in college decision-making, please access our latest insight paper, "[Recruiting Gen P.](#)"

# 3

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## The Role of Test Scores

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# Counselor Advice for Test-Optional Schools

**Q9: “Generally, how do you advise students regarding submission of test scores when applying to schools that are test-optional?”**

	Public	Private
Only submit scores if they strengthen their application	60%	<b>88%</b>
Submit all test scores	<b>13%</b>	3%
Only submit scores if scholarship eligibility is contingent upon test scores	<b>13%</b>	3%
I do not advise students on this/let them decide	8%	1%
Other	6%	5%
Withhold all test scores	1%	0%



Overall, private school counselors were considerably more likely to suggest that students should only submit scores if they strengthen their application.



Counselors in the Northeast were most likely to suggest only submitting scores if they strengthen an application.



Northeast	Southeast	Midwest	Southwest	West
<b>84%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>68%</b>

## TAKEAWAYS

Based on counselor comments, it seems some high schools may have a formal or informal standard for test score utilization, but in many instances, counselors are advising students on a case-by-case basis.

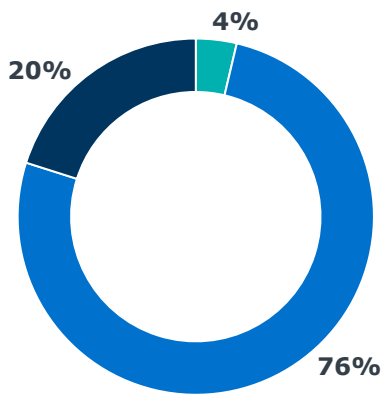
To best support counselors and students, admissions teams should ensure that their school’s test-optional policy is clear and easy to find. It should also be well communicated if the policy varies based on program or scholarship opportunity as well as anytime the policy is changed.



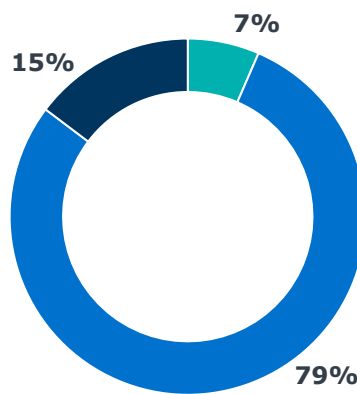
# Student Opinions About the Importance of Testing

**Q10: "Have you seen a change in students' perceptions of the necessity of test scores to apply for college admission compared with before the pandemic?"**

**Public Schools**



**Private Schools**

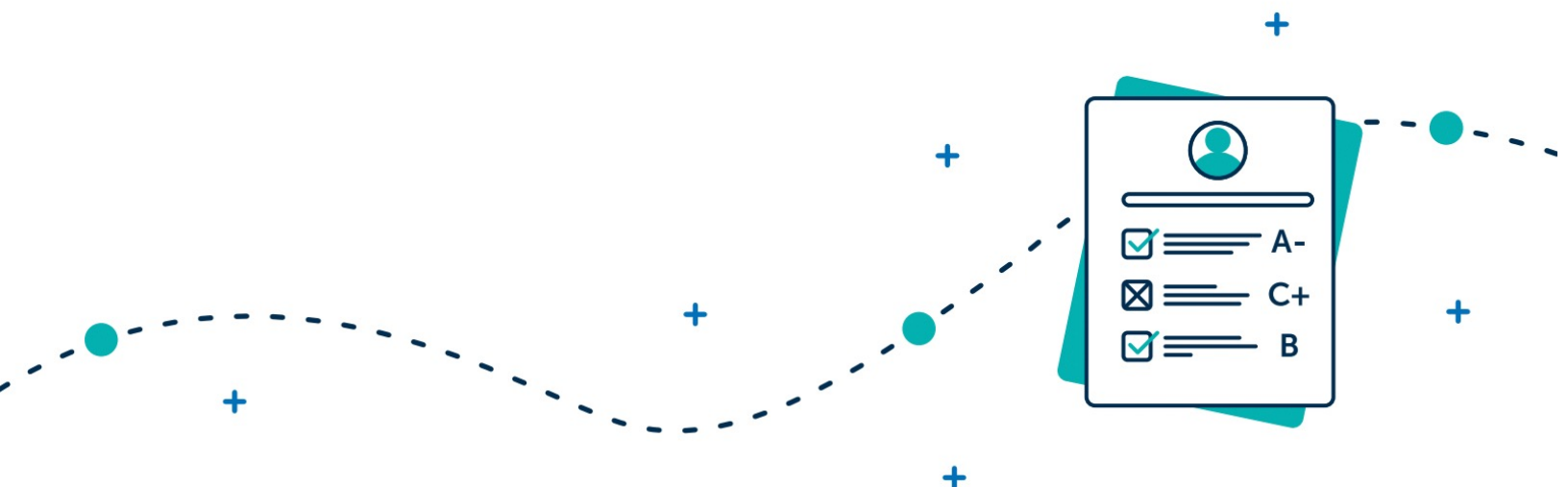


Public and private school counselors reported similar student attitudes toward testing in the wake of test-optional policies, with most reporting that fewer students think test scores are necessary.

More students think scores are necessary

Fewer students think scores are necessary

No noticeable change in student perceptions





# 4

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## Student Attitudes Pre- vs. Post-pandemic

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# Change in College-Going Intent and Perceptions of Affordability

**Q11: “Have you seen a change in the percentage of students planning to attend college compared with before the pandemic?”**

	Public	Private
More students are planning to attend now	9%	4%
Fewer students are planning to attend now	<b>46%</b>	14%
I have not noticed a difference	45%	<b>81%</b>



Public school counselors were much more likely to report that fewer of their students are planning to attend college post-pandemic.

**Q12: “Have you seen a change in the percentage of students who view college as affordable compared with before the pandemic?”**

	Public	Private
More students view college as affordable now	3%	1%
Fewer students view college as affordable now	<b>51%</b>	<b>43%</b>
No noticeable change in the number of students	46%	56%



Both public and private school counselors reported that fewer of their students view college as affordable post-pandemic.

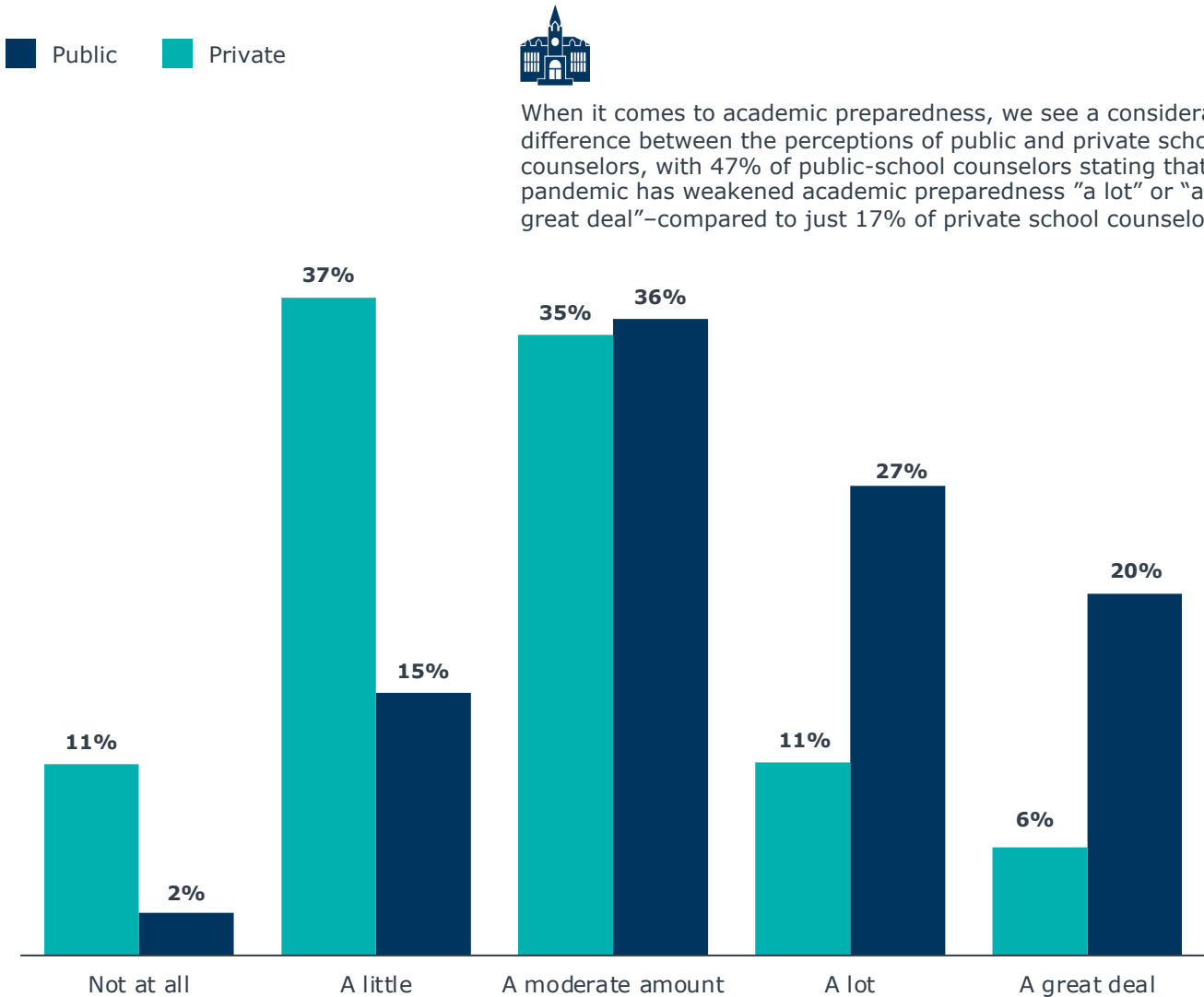
## TAKEAWAYS

Before the pandemic, students were already concerned about affordability, but that concern has skyrocketed over the last four years. In our 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, 20% of students said that “college isn’t worth the cost”—up from only 8% in 2019.

Recruitment outreach should help students understand the real cost of a college degree and the mechanisms that exist to help them pay for that degree. Admissions teams should also craft strong value messaging that demonstrates the ROI of a college degree, especially for students enrolled at public high schools.

# Change in Academic Preparedness

**Q13: “To what degree has the pandemic weakened your students’ academic preparation for college?”**



When it comes to academic preparedness, we see a considerable difference between the perceptions of public and private school counselors, with 47% of public-school counselors stating that the pandemic has weakened academic preparedness “a lot” or “a great deal”—compared to just 17% of private school counselors.

**TAKEAWAYS**

Not only are today’s students less socially and emotionally well-equipped because of the pandemic, but they’re also less academically prepared. 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.

While admissions teams cannot fix the academic preparedness problem, they can address families’ worries about learning loss and highlight any supports that may be available. Schools can also work with CBOs to recruit students who have received extra support in high school, setting them up for success in college.



# 5

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## Counselor Considerations When Advising Students

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# Factors That Influence Counselor Guidance

## Q14: "For most students you advise, what institutional factor(s) do you consider/evaluate before recommending a college?"

Top 10 Responses, Counselors Could Select Up to 3

	Public	Private
Curriculum in student's area of interest	74%	72%
Net price	<b>42%</b>	24%
Need-based or merit-based aid policies	30%	27%
Distance from home	27%	14%
Campus culture	20%	<b>48%</b>
Student support programs	18%	10%
Career services/job placement	13%	6%
Academic rigor of coursework	13%	19%
Former students' experience with the school	12%	15%
Academic reputation/institutional prestige	12%	<b>30%</b>



Over 70% of both public and private school counselors cited "curriculum in student's area of interest" as a factor they evaluate before recommending a college.

In terms of differences between counselors by school type, more public school counselors focus on evaluating net price while more private school counselors consider campus culture and academic reputation.



**Rural counselors** were considerably less likely to cite campus culture and more likely to cite career services.



	Rural	Urban	Suburban
<b>Campus Culture</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>Career Services</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>8%</b>

### TAKEAWAYS

Counselors are in strong agreement that any school they recommend should, first and foremost, have a curriculum in the student's area of interest. Given this finding, enrollment teams should ensure that information about their academic programs is easy to find and as compelling as possible.

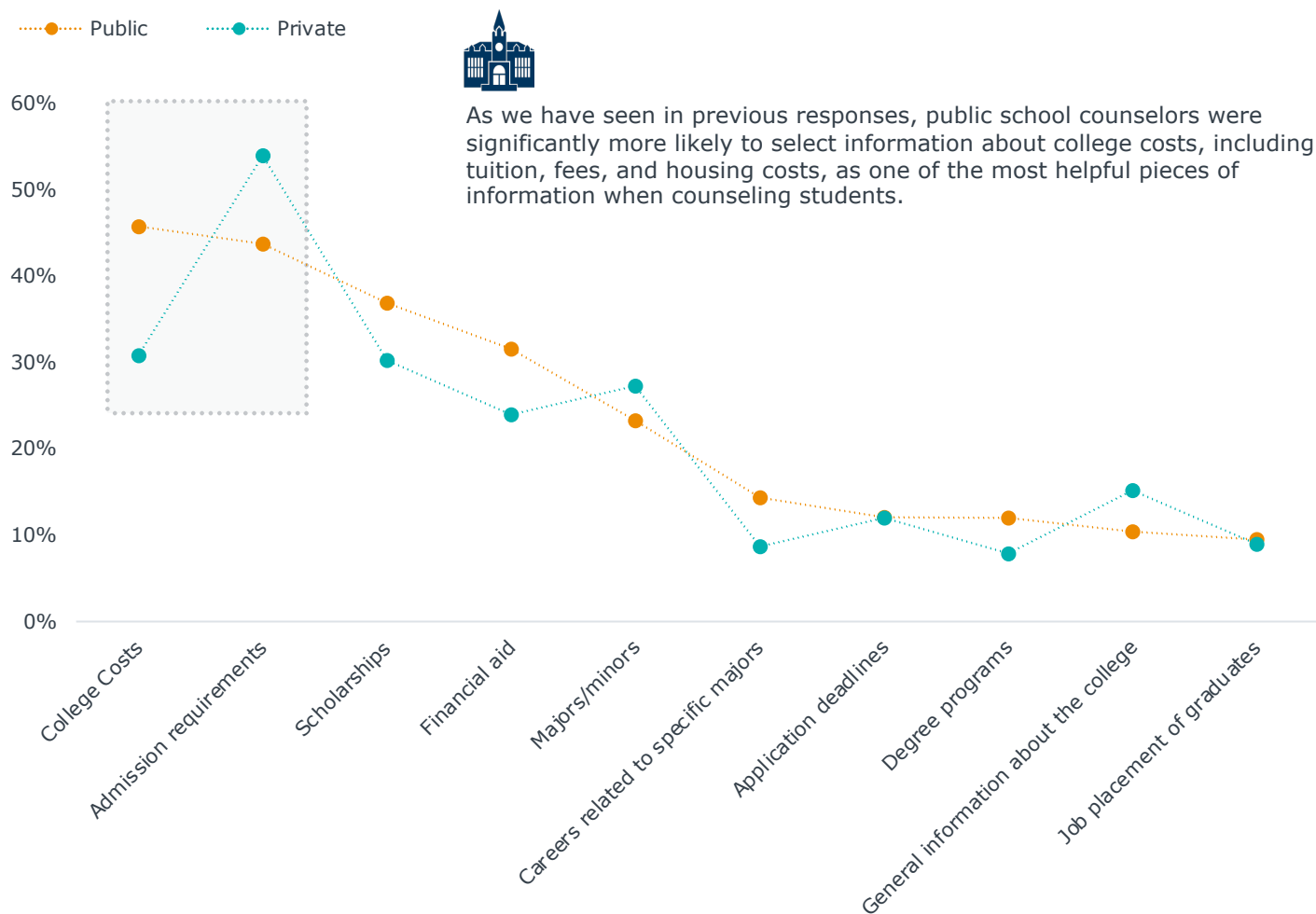
If you would like more information about improving your virtual presence, please access our insight paper, "[The Future of Institutional Digital Ecosystems.](#)"



# Most Helpful Information When Advising Students

**Q15: “Among the information that you would like colleges and universities to provide, which topics are most important/helpful when counseling students on their college choice?”**

*Top 10 Responses, Counselors Could Select Up to 3*



## TAKEAWAYS

Although there was more variation between the top two responses from public and private school counselors, there was a fair amount of consistency between the other response options. Counselors put a high value on information about scholarships, financial aid, and the majors/minors available at a given school.

While these responses are not surprising, they serve as a reminder to proactively provide key information to high school counselors who are eager to share information with their students. And once again, enrollment teams can consider emphasizing different information based on school type.



# 6

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## Counselor Communication Preferences

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# Channel Preferences

## Q16: "How do you prefer to receive information from colleges?"

Top 10 Responses, Counselors Could Select All That Apply

	Public	Private
High school visits by college representatives	63%	<b>81%</b>
Email messages	60%	<b>68%</b>
Face-to-face counselor events	45%	<b>66%</b>
College Websites	44%	<b>53%</b>
Events with college reps hosted in your city/region	41%	<b>56%</b>
College Fairs	<b>38%</b>	24%
Virtual counselor events	32%	37%
Mail	20%	15%
Phone calls from the college	5%	13%
Text messages	3%	2%



At one end of the spectrum, counselors indicated a strong preference for college rep visits, emails, face-to-face events, and college websites; at the other, they showed less enthusiasm for mail, phone calls, and text messages.

While counselors' most preferred channels were largely consistent between segments, more private school counselors had a preference for the top five channels.



More **counselors at rural high schools** preferred virtual counselor events.



Percentage of counselors selecting virtual events as a preferred channel:

Rural  
**25%**

Urban  
**37%**

Suburban  
**37%**

### TAKEAWAYS

Many channels were cited by a high percentage of counselors, an indication that colleges have a lot of strong options for connecting and engaging with counselors.

It is also worth noting that some counselors are more amenable to virtual events, while other counselors prefer in-person interactions. Enrollment teams want to consider this when planning travel and scheduling virtual engagements.

# Topics of Greatest Interest

## Q17: "Please indicate the information you would like colleges and universities to provide you/your counseling team."

Participants Who Selected 4 or More Channels in Q16, Counselors Could Select All That Apply

	Public	Private	Gap
Costs (e.g., tuition, fees, housing)	46%	31%	<b>15%</b>
Admission requirements	44%	54%	<b>10%</b>
Scholarships	37%	30%	7%
Financial aid	32%	24%	8%
Majors/minors	23%	27%	4%
Careers related to specific majors	14%	9%	5%
Application deadlines	12%	12%	0%
Degree programs (e.g., BA, BS, BFA)	12%	8%	4%
General information about the college	10%	15%	5%
Job placement of graduates	10%	9%	1%
Mental health and counseling services	9%	8%	1%
Funded visit opportunities	7%	5%	2%
Location and what's available in the area	4%	14%	<b>10%</b>



"Cost" tops the list for public school counselors while "admission requirements" was the response most frequently cited by private school counselors.

### TAKEAWAYS

Overall, we see that counselors want to receive information from colleges on a wide variety of topics. Counselors' levels of interest in particular topics are fairly consistent across school segments, with a few notable exceptions.

In addition to the differences in the top two responses, we see that private school counselors were more than twice as likely to want information about location and what is available in the area.



# Recommendations

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## **Address Universal Student Concerns**

- 1** While some things matter more to counselors and students at specific types of schools, some concerns are universal. For example, counselors in all school segments cited “limited awareness of colleges” as a major barrier that prevents students from applying. These shared concerns constitute a prime area of focus for your recruitment outreach.
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## **Tailor Your Messaging Based on School Type**

- 2** There are topics on which the opinions of counselors and students differ markedly across school types—for example, “lack of family support” is a much bigger issue for students at rural schools than it is for their peers at suburban and urban institutions. When possible, you should take these insights into account in your recruitment outreach.
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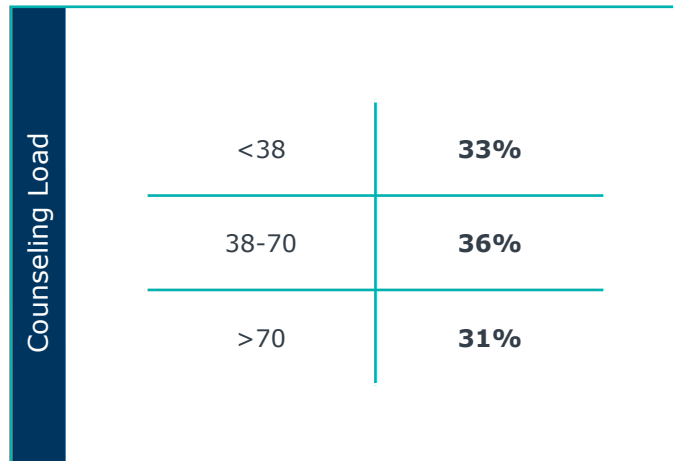
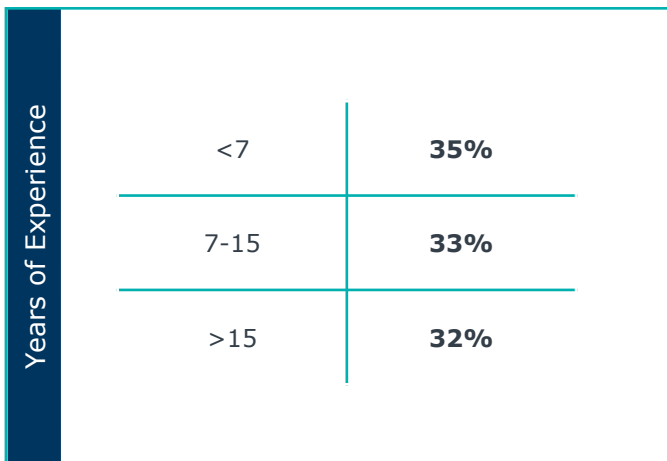
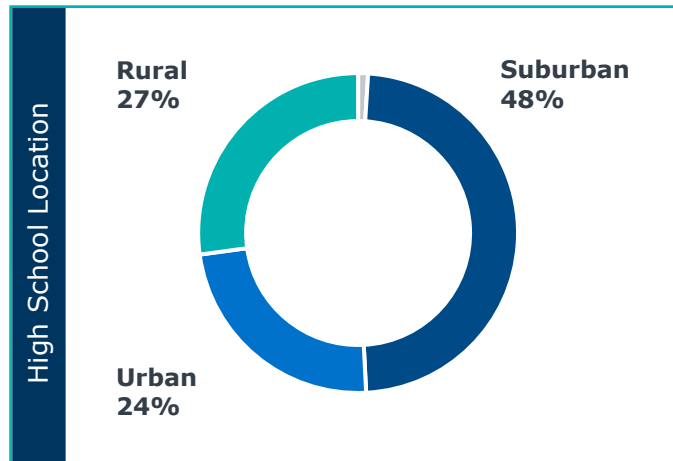
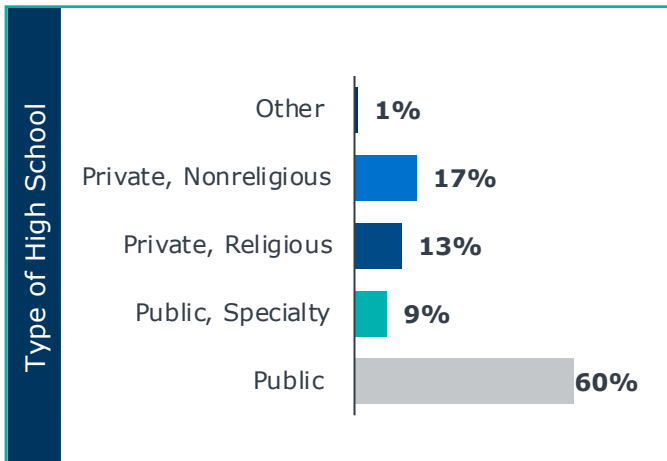
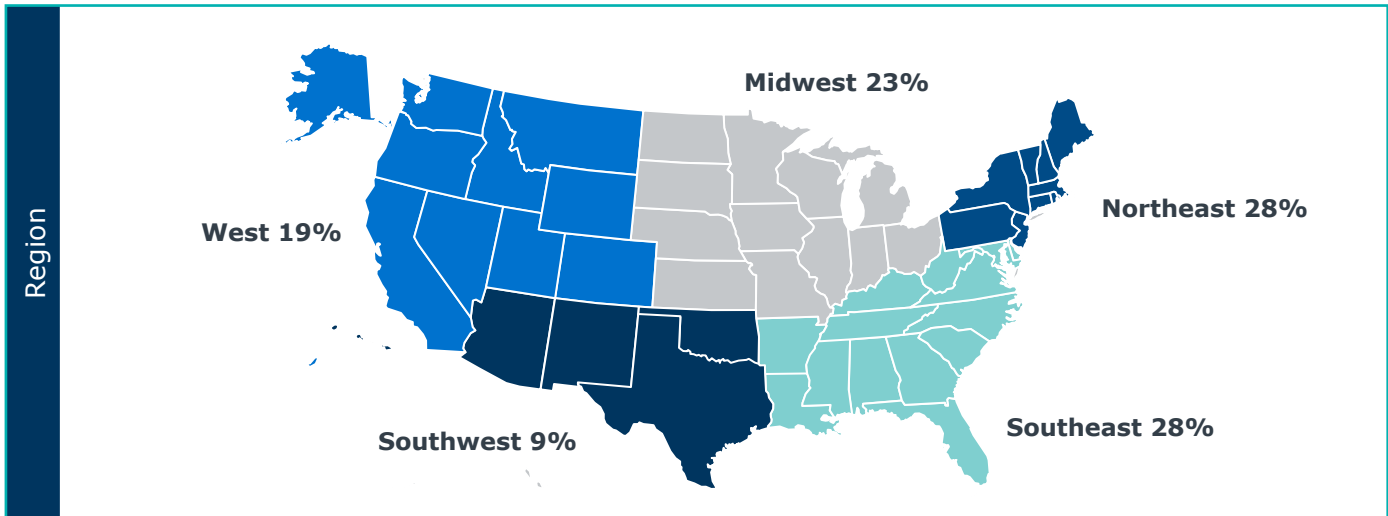
## **Help Fill the College-Support Gaps**

- 3** Findings from our survey underscore the degree to which students at public institutions face more barriers to college-going than their peers at private schools. Ironically, if unsurprisingly, public school students also receive the least intensive counseling. Your recruitment outreach can help fill the gap here.
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## **Make the Most of Counselors’ Eagerness to Hear from You**

- 4** Practically all counselors want to receive information from colleges, and they want information on a broad range of topics. Furthermore, counselors are open to hearing from colleges through a variety of channels. Ensure that the intensity of your outreach matches counselors’ appetite for contact with you.

# Participant Profile





# About EAB and NACAC



EAB utilizes an ecosystem of best-in-class enrollment capabilities to help colleges and universities expand their reach and engage more right-fit students. Our partners rely on our research-backed approach to realize their institutional goals, reduce wasteful spending, and future-proof their enrollment strategy.

**40+**

Years of experience in recruitment marketing

**7:1**

Average ROI for first-year Enroll360 partners

**95%**

Partner renewal rate year-over-year

To speak with an expert or schedule a diagnostic conversation, email [eabenrollmentcomm@eab.com](mailto:eabenrollmentcomm@eab.com). Or learn more at [eab.com/Enroll360](http://eab.com/Enroll360).



The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), founded in 1937, is an organization of more than 26,000 college counseling and admission professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education.

**86**

Years serving the college admission counseling profession

**23**

State, regional, and international affiliate organizations

**6,500+**

Attendees at NACAC's annual conference

For information about membership, [complete an interest form](#), contact [membership@nacacnet.org](mailto:membership@nacacnet.org), or call [+1 \(703\) 836-2222](tel:+1(703)836-2222).







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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](https://eab.com).