



EAB

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


5 Insights About Changing Student Preferences

What We Learned From 2,800 Prospective Community College Students

For many high school students, the journey to college is filled with big questions and even bigger decisions. Factors such as cost, career goals, and confidence in the value of a degree all play a major role in determining where students ultimately enroll. Community colleges are a strong fit for a wide range of students, especially those seeking an affordable education, flexible learning options, and a clear path to a career or four-year institution.

By gaining a deeper understanding of prospective students' needs, motivations, and behaviors, enrollment teams can more effectively communicate how their institution supports students in reaching their goals.

To better understand what drives college choice, EAB surveyed more than 2,800 high school students who are considering attending a community college. (For more on our methodology, see page 12.) Their responses offer valuable insight into what today's students are seeking, their concerns about college, and how they are researching prospective colleges. **This summary highlights five key findings from the survey and explores how community college leaders can respond.**



Here are five key findings
from the prospect survey,
exploring how community
college leaders can improve
the recruitment experience.

Community College Prospects **Start Their College Search Earlier** Than You Might Expect

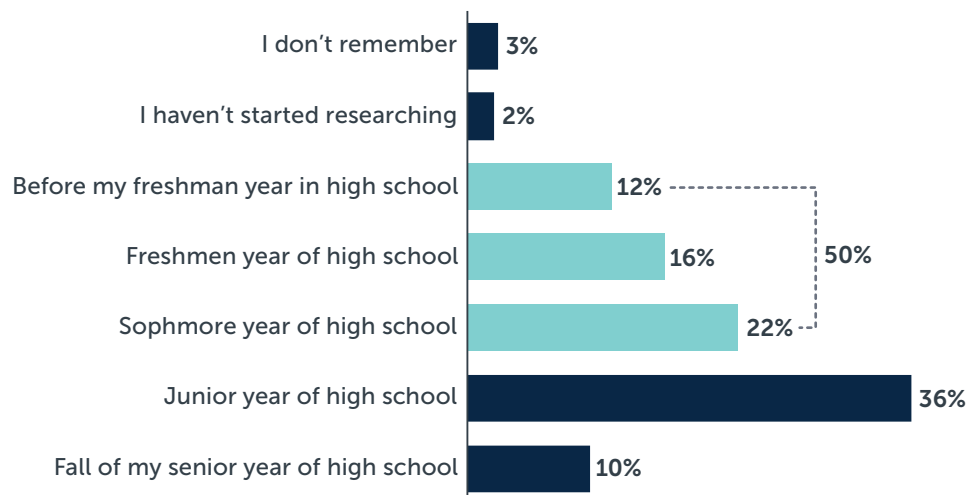
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Admission teams typically spend most of their time with high school juniors and seniors, especially students who have already applied and are starting college within a semester or two. That focus makes sense for boosting short-term enrollment numbers, but putting younger students on the back burner could mean missing the chance to build relationships that pay off later.

According to our survey, **half of prospective community college students begin exploring their options before junior year.** To stay on students' radars, community colleges need to find ways to connect with them earlier, which can be challenging for admission teams that are spread thin.

When did you start researching college options?

(n=2,815)



How colleges should respond: Shift outreach strategies to engage students as early as freshman or sophomore year—this can include being more intentional about engaging dual enrollment students. Colleges should make sure students who submit information requests and applications for future semesters are in “warming” campaigns that provide consistent outreach, event invitations, and ways for students to engage with the college.

How EAB can help: EAB's Navigate360 CRM simplifies communications campaigns, event tracking, and automated messages for prospective and current students. Navigate360's [AI content creator](#) allows admission staff to quickly create emails that are focused on downstream prospects, freeing up teams to spend more time working directly with students.

A screenshot of the EAB Navigate360 CRM 'Compose Message' interface. It shows a 'Prompt' box with the text 'Write a message inviting students to a career fair |'. Below the prompt is a 'Message Length' input field. To the right of the input field is an 'Enhance' button. To the right of the 'Enhance' button is a preview of the 'Enhanced Message'.

Compose Message

Prompt

Write a message inviting students to a career fair |

Message Length

Enhance

Enhanced Message

Hey (\$student_first_name),

Don't miss out on the Career Fair on March 3 from 9am to 2pm! It's a great chance to network, explore career paths, and find jobs or internships.

Here's what you can do:

- Chat with top employers
- Join workshops and panels
- Get your resume checked by the pros

Bring plenty of resumes and dress sharp. Can't wait to see you there!

[\(\\$schedule_link\)](#)

Students Are Focused on Returns, Not Just Price

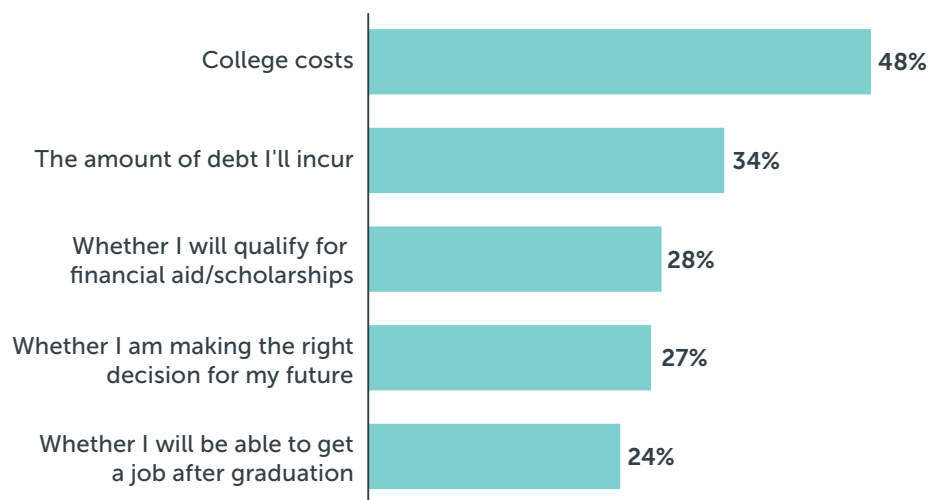
2

Students are prioritizing practical factors as they weigh their college options, especially keeping costs down and finding a good job after graduation. While it's no surprise that the majority of students rank college costs, debt, and access to financial aid as their top concerns, colleges should also take note of rising anxiety around job outcomes and making the right choices for their future.

When given nineteen options to choose from, students placed making the right decisions about their future and future job prospects in their top five concerns. Twenty-seven percent of students say they are unsure whether they are making the right decisions for their future, which suggests they are thinking carefully about their options. Additionally, one in four prospective community college students is specifically concerned about finding a job after graduation. This focus on long-term stability highlights the need for colleges to demonstrate how enrolling at their institution can lead to strong career outcomes at an affordable price.

As you consider your future college experience, what makes you most concerned or nervous? You can select up to three.

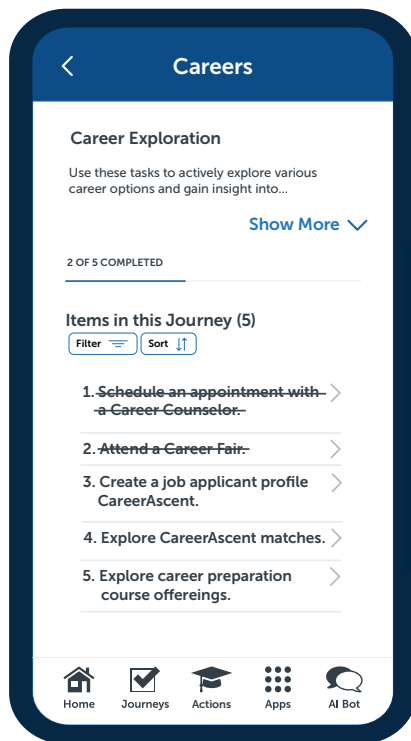
(Top five responses, n=2,815)





How colleges should respond: Highlight ROI in messaging by emphasizing career pathways, academic support services, and successful alumni outcomes alongside affordability. Offer clear connections between programs, internships, career services, and eventual job placement.

How EAB can help: Navigate360's Student Journeys feature makes it easy to establish and track career readiness milestones, so advisors can see how students are progressing and whether they're on path to build the skills they need.



[Read more](#) about how community colleges are using Navigate360 to improve career outcomes.

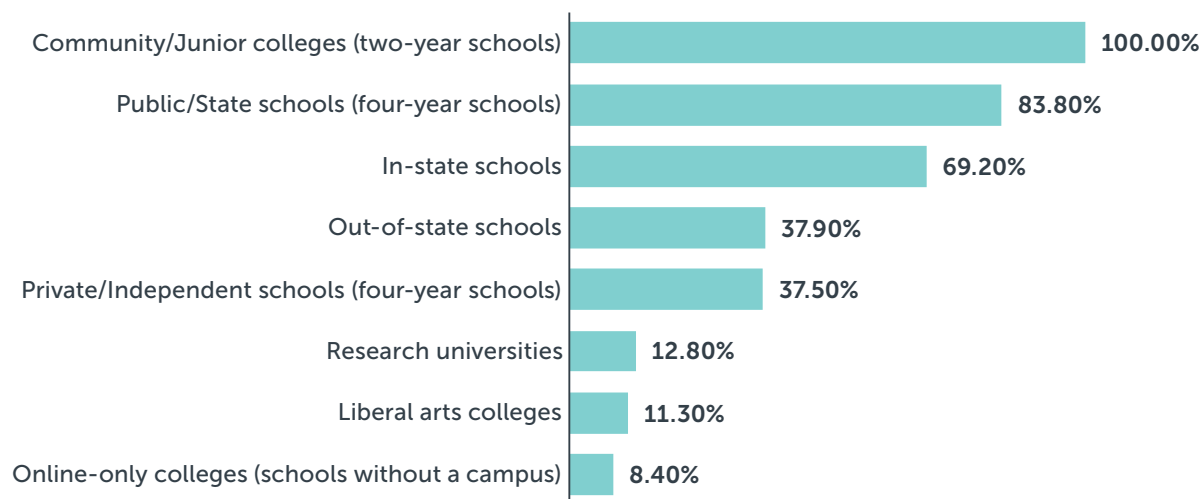
Four-Year Colleges Are **Serious Competitors** of Community Colleges

3

Although every student in the survey is considering a community college, **84% are also looking at public four-year schools and 38% at private four-year schools**, so you're competing head-to-head across the entire search. Students keeping their options open and "shopping around" speaks to their desire to make sure they are getting the most affordable choice that will yield the best outcomes.

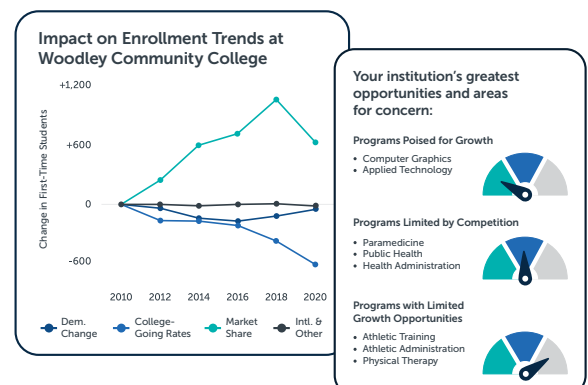
What types of schools are you considering at this time?

(Select all that apply, n=2,815)



How colleges should respond: Differentiate your community college by emphasizing flexibility, affordability, and strong transfer pathways. For students aiming to earn a four-year degree, highlighting transfer partnerships, 2+2 programs, and co-enrollment options can help them see the full range of pathways available.

How EAB can help: [Navigate360 Advantage](#) can help your college distinguish itself among its competitors by providing your institution with a dedicated Strategic Leader and a team of experts who offer tailored research, implementation support, and advisory services to address challenges such as financial pressures and staff burnout. With custom reports and guidance designed specifically for your college, region, and students, you'll stay agile amid rapid change while accelerating long-term enrollment growth.



Email Isn't Dead—It's Leading the Way

4

Email remains the number one way students want to hear from colleges. **Despite assumptions that younger students have moved on from their inboxes, 71% of prospective community college students say they prefer email as a communication channel, and 84% open their email at least once a day.**

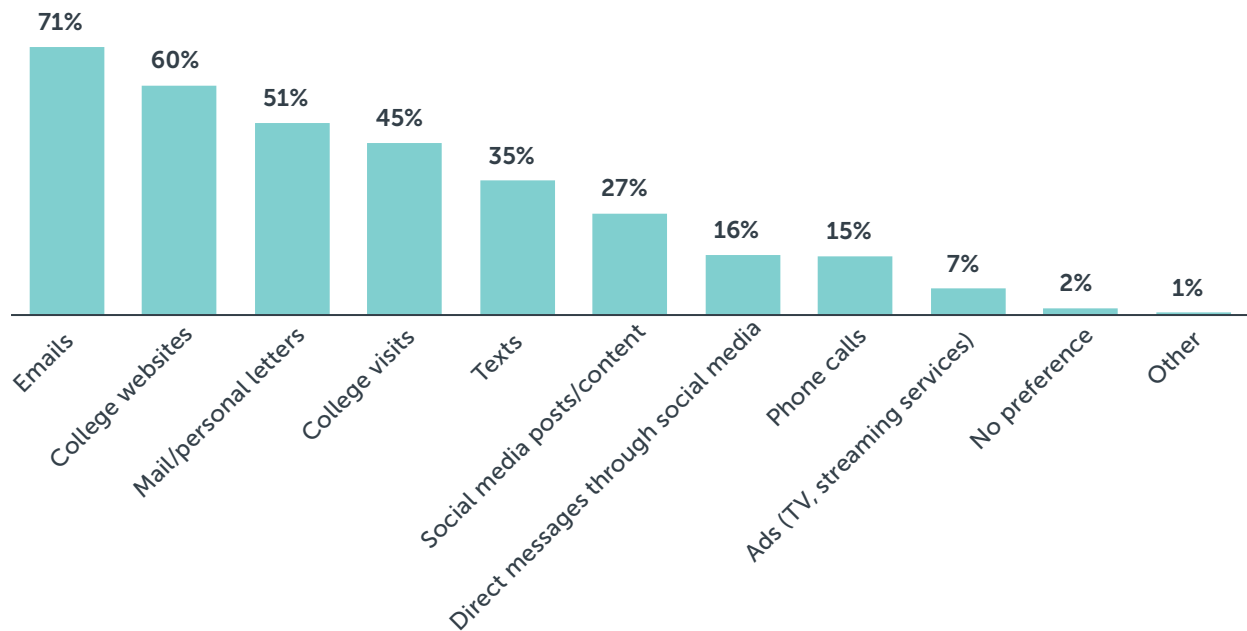
College websites are also a key resource, with 60% of students turning to them for information. Mailed personal letters follow at 51%, showing that traditional outreach still holds value when it feels personal. Texting rounds out the top four at 35%, signaling that students welcome quick, direct messages on their phones, especially when the information is timely and relevant.

For enrollment teams, the takeaway is clear: Email remains essential, but it works best as part of a thoughtful mix that includes personalized mail and mobile-friendly communication.

Seventy-one percent of prospective students want to receive emails from colleges they are interested in, and **84%** check their email at least once a day.

At the beginning of your college search—when you’re first interested in learning about a specific college or university—how would you like the school to share information with you?

(Check all that apply, n=2,518)



How colleges should respond: Prioritize email as a core communication channel, but integrate it into a broader, multichannel strategy that includes personalized letters, robust web content, and timely text outreach.

How EAB can help: Navigate360 supports multichannel outreach with tools such as email campaigns, two-way texting, and personalized content based on student behavior. Your team can track open rates to see what’s resonating with students and which messaging might need to be adjusted.

High-Interest Webpages Deserve Smarter Engagement Strategies

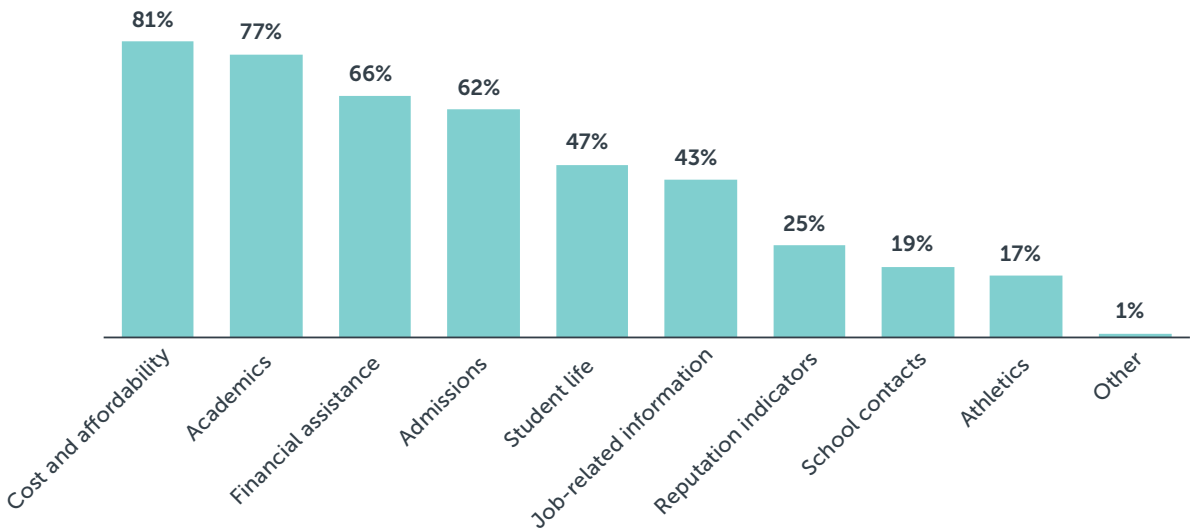
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When students visit your website, they are exploring a wide range of topics across multiple pages, with academic programs, tuition, financial aid, and admissions at the top of the list. More than 80% of students are researching cost and affordability, 77% are looking into academics, and 66% are focused on financial assistance. These numbers highlight where students have the most interest—and likely the most questions.

Community colleges should pay close attention to which pages are drawing the most traffic to ensure lead-capture strategies, such as a request for information forms, are in place. It's also worth considering how tools such as AI chatbots can help answer common questions, so students can get the information they need without having to jump from page to page.

When visiting specific college websites, what information are you most often trying to find?

(Select all that apply, n=2,815)



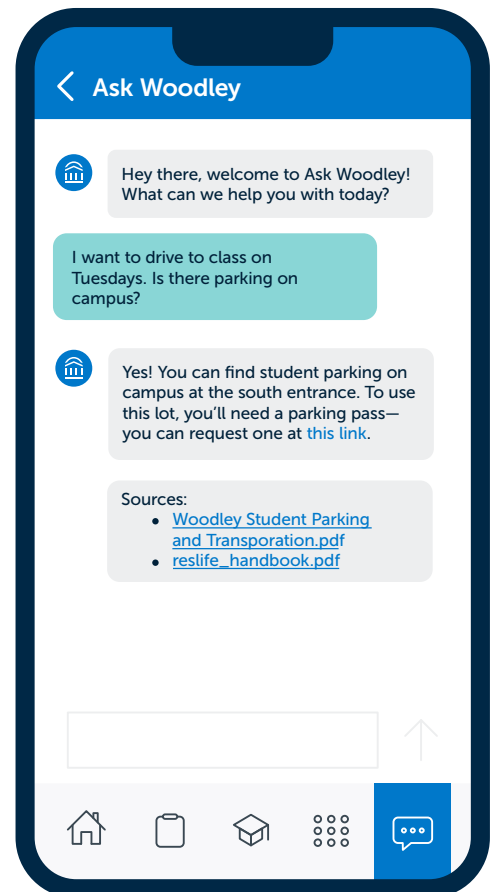


How colleges should respond: Optimize lead capture on high-traffic pages focused on tuition, academics, and financial aid, and use engagement tools such as AI chatbots to provide quick answers to student questions.

How EAB can help: [Navigate360's AI student knowledge agent](#) helps colleges engage students in real time by answering common questions, guiding them through key processes, and improving response times. The agent can respond in multiple languages, assuring all prospective students receive the answers they need. It is included in the Navigate360 student app and can also be embedded on your institution's .edu website.

EAB partners with hundreds of community colleges to tackle the real challenges prospective students face by equipping staff with better communication tools and helping ensure students get faster, more accurate answers. Navigate360 helps staff proactively engage students, personalize outreach, and connect them with the resources they need to succeed.

To learn how EAB's Navigate360 can help your community college engage more meaningfully with students, visit eab.com/solutions/navigate360-advantage-for-community-colleges/.



Navigate360 Advantage for Community Colleges

The Only CRM with Built-In Research, Insights, and Leads

Navigate360 Advantage for Community Colleges is a **comprehensive enrollment growth solution** built on a decade of best-practice research and **trusted by more than 450 community and technical colleges nationwide**. It integrates the leading higher education CRM, Navigate360, with expert guidance, access to a collaborative network of peer institutions, and high-intent student leads on day one.

More than a CRM: A Partnership Designed Specifically for Community Colleges



Navigate360 CRM: Recruit, Retain, and Engage Students and Alumni

- A suite of built-in AI agents saves your staff time and supports students 24/7
- Automated workflows as well as templated and custom reports
- Communication tools and mobile apps to engage students



Ready-for-Outreach Prospects

- Navigate360 Advantage comes equipped with Apply Leads specific to your institution and region
- Backed by predictive AI, making them more likely to convert from inquiry to enrolled
- Robust information about students' goals and interests, helping you tailor communications



Enrollment Insights

- Strategic enrollment planning, guided by your EAB team
- "Secret Shopper" audit to understand barriers in the enrollment process
- Gain clarity on market forces shaping enrollment with the EAB Enrollment Outlook report and peer benchmarks



Expert Guidance and Research

- Dedicated EAB team to guide you through your biggest challenges
- Best-practice templates, campaigns, surveys, and more



Nationwide Collaborative

- Learn and share best practices, research insights, and actionable strategies
- Annual CONNECTED conference and ongoing community forums

\$728K

Additional tuition revenue generated from a Navigate360 reenrollment campaign

PORTLAND
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

14.5%

Increase in applicant-to-enrollee conversion rate after launching Navigate360

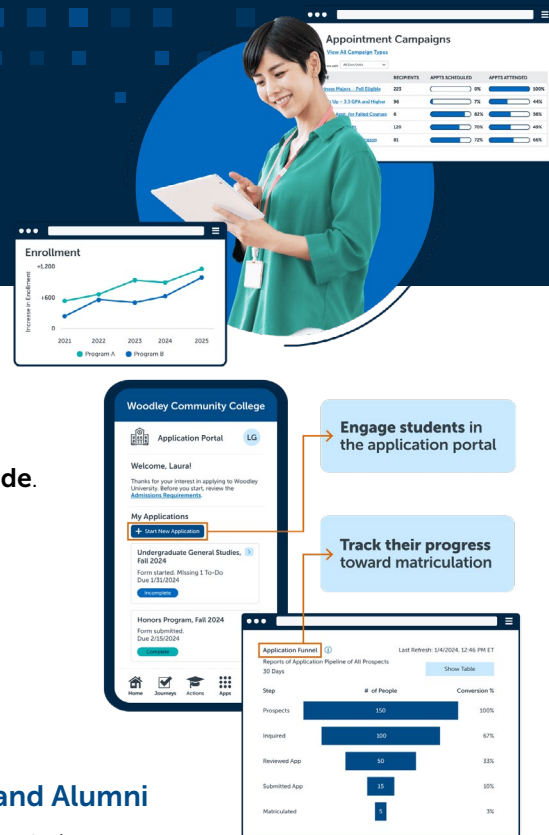
GERMANNA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

\$8.8M

Tuition revenue from 1,680 students enrolled via Navigate360 in two years

CENTRAL VIRGINIA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

To learn more about Navigate360 for Community Colleges and [request a demo](#), visit our website.





Methodology note:

EAB's University Research Partners collected responses from current high school students in February and March of 2025 to learn about a variety of topics, including their preferred communication sources, search behaviors, and priorities when choosing a college. The reported results include responses from 19,299 high school students, including 2,518 who are considering a community college after graduation. The full report, "Recruiting the Anxious Generation," is available at eab.com/resources/insight-paper/recruiting-the-anxious-generation/.