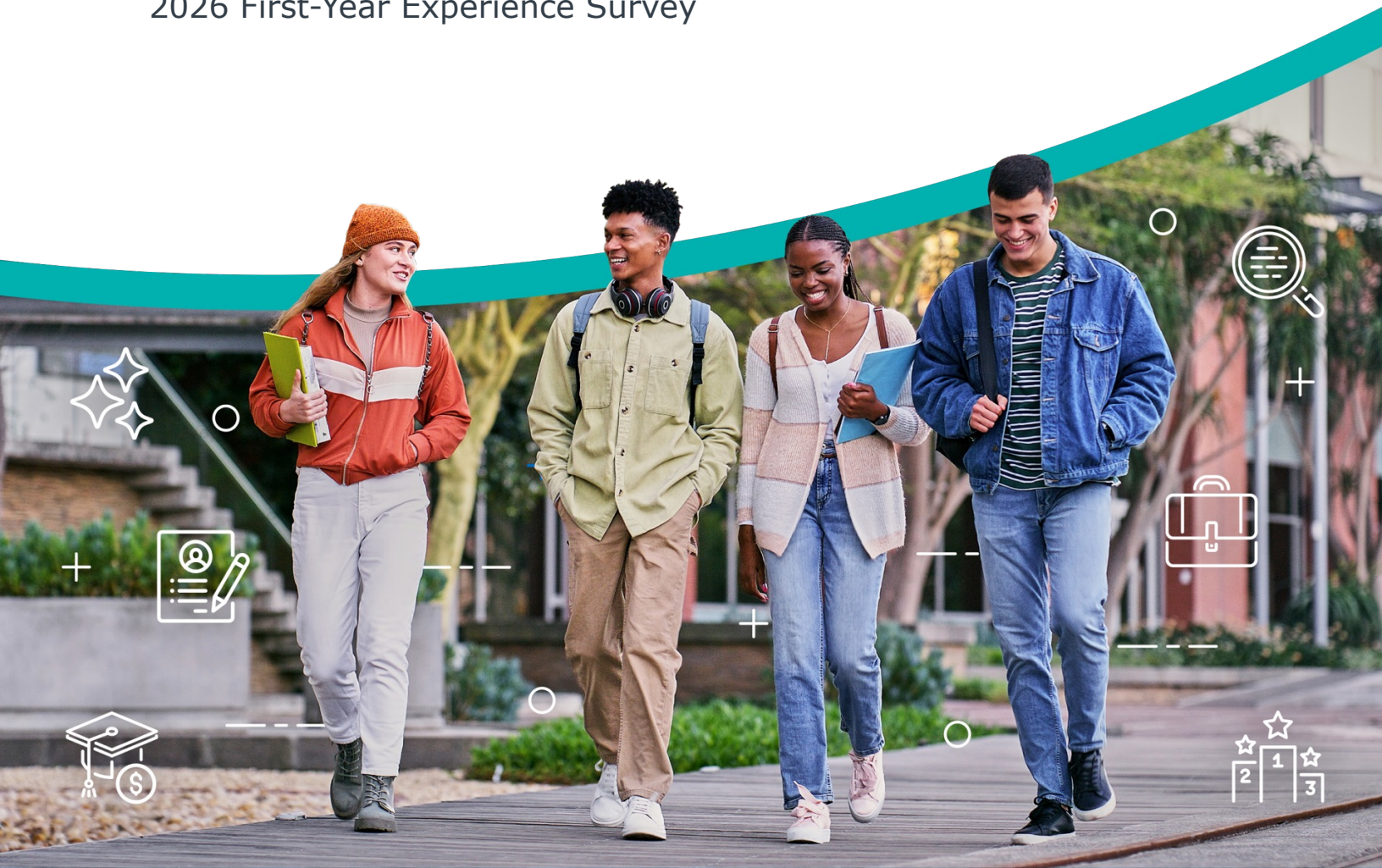




INSIGHT PAPER

The New Path to Enrollment: Three Shifts Shaping College Choice

2026 First-Year Experience Survey



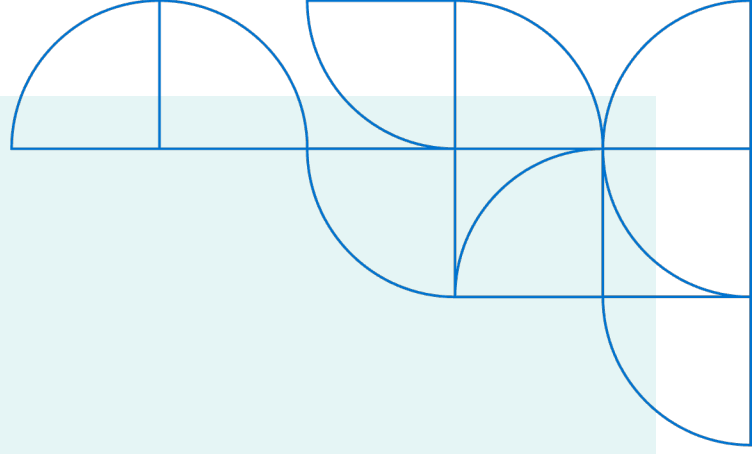


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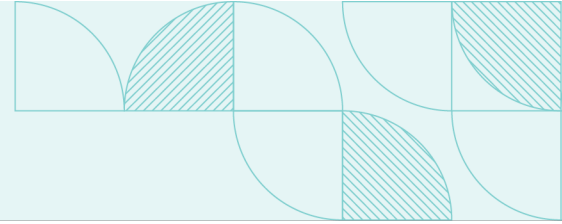
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Executive Overview



Understanding What Drives Enrollment Decisions Today

From initial search through final decision, students make a series of choices that ultimately determine where they enroll. This report draws on responses from more than 9,500 students who completed that process, offering a view into what influenced their choices along the way.

Our findings show that students are navigating growing uncertainty about cost and career outcomes in light of AI, using new tools to explore and compare options, and applying to more schools than ever. These shifts create three key challenges for institutions: communicating value in a more uncertain environment, adapting to new tools that are reshaping how students discover and evaluate colleges, and competing more effectively as students keep options open later in the enrollment process. This report explores each of these challenges, offering insights and practical recommendations to help enrollment leaders respond to changing student behavior.

About the Research

This analysis is based on **EAB's 2026 First-Year Experience Survey**, which captured responses from 9,516 students from Entering Class 2025. The survey examines how students searched for colleges, navigated the application process, and decided where to enroll.

9,516

Student Responses



Key Questions Explored

- What resources did you find most helpful in your college search?
- To how many schools did you submit an application, receive an acceptance, and submit a deposit?
- What factors best represent the value of a college education?
- Do you think AI will influence the major and career you pursue?



Job Market Uncertainty Is Challenging Perceptions of College Value

SECTION

1

Nonconsumption Plateauing as Pandemic Effects Wane

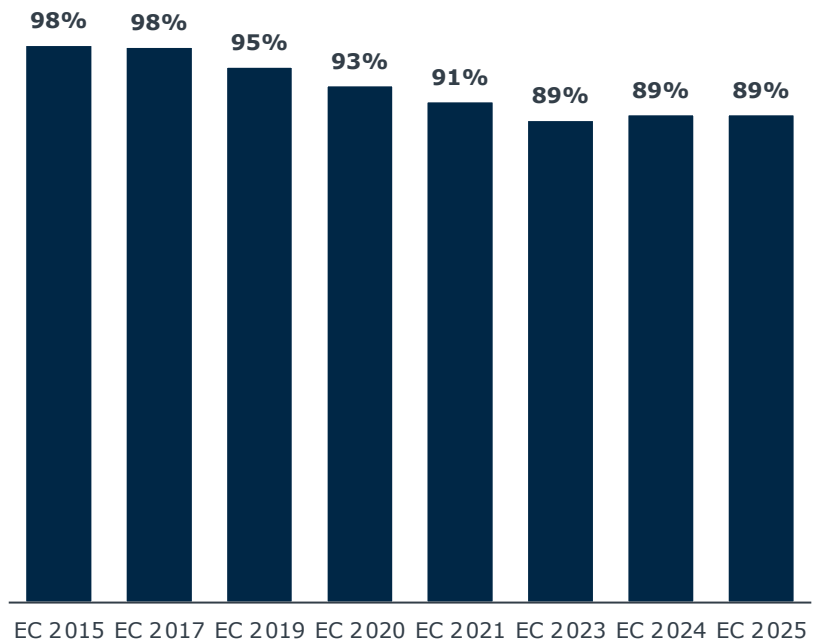
While College-Going Is Stabilizing, Opt-Out Reasons Are Changing

After several years of decline, college-going among First-Year Experience Survey participants has reached a plateau. The share of students planning to attend college fell steadily from 2017 to 2023, but it has now leveled off, sitting at 89% for the third consecutive year.

While the share of students attending college has stabilized, the reasons students cite for opting out are shifting. Data from Entering Class 2025 indicates that post-pandemic factors such as feeling “not mentally ready” have declined, while practical financial concerns have grown more prominent. In particular, the share of students citing cost of living as a primary financial concern rose from 51% in 2025 to 67% in 2026. In addition, fewer participants report taking gap years, while more are entering the workforce directly, suggesting a growing emphasis on immediate economic needs.

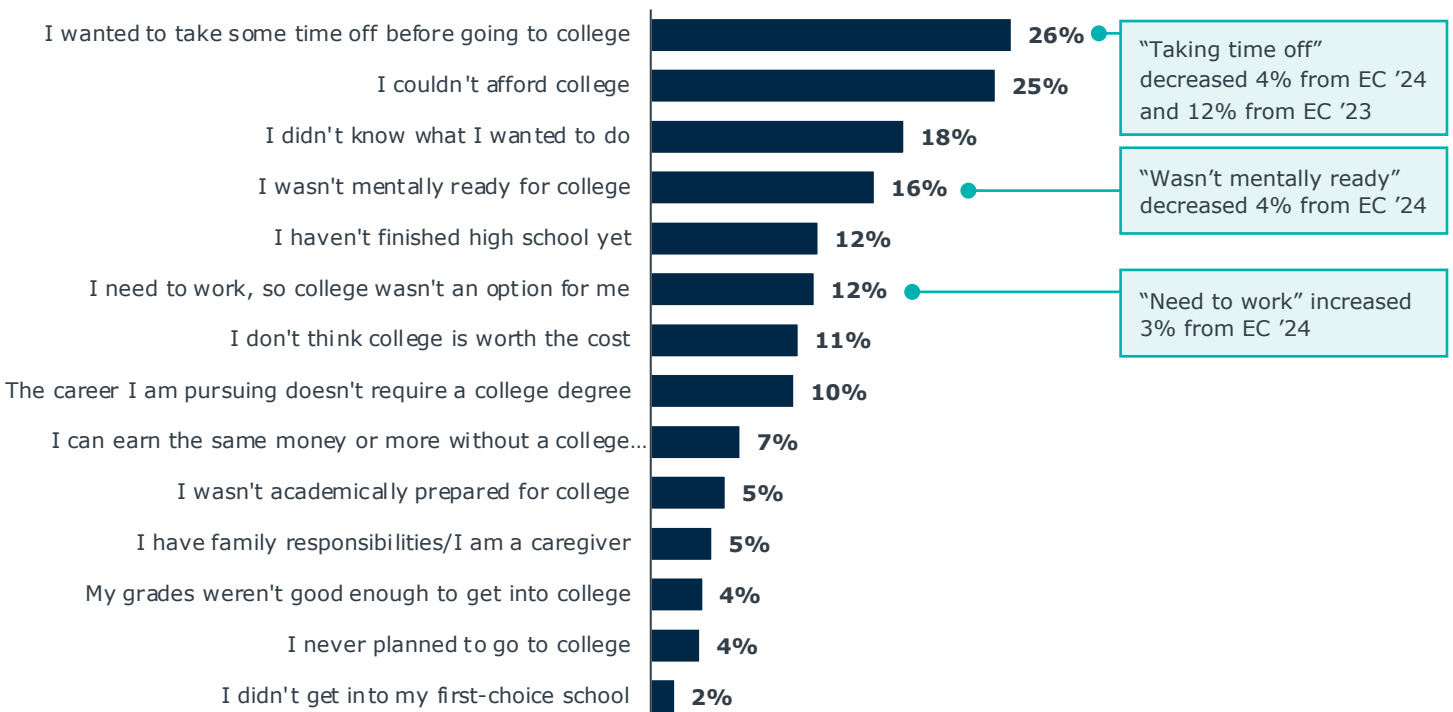
Percentage of Survey Participants Attending College

By Entering Class (n = 9,516)



Small but Significant Shifts in Reasons for Opting Out of College

Q: Why did you decide not to enroll at a college or university? Select all that apply. (n = 1,022)



Uncertainty About AI-Driven Workforce Disruption

Anticipated Impact of AI on Demand for Jobs

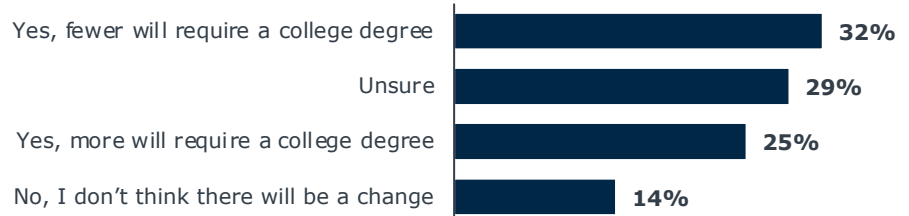
As concerns tied most directly to the post-pandemic era begin to recede, perceptions of value are increasingly centered on AI. Consistent with findings from our AI Survey in late 2025, most students believe AI will affect the number of jobs that require a college degree. However, students are divided on the nature of that impact: 32% believe fewer jobs will require a degree, 25% believe more jobs will require one, and 29% are unsure.

Implications for Individual Career Paths

Unsurprisingly, students are also split on whether AI-driven changes to the workforce will influence them personally. Nearly half of students (42%) anticipate that AI-based changes will influence the career or job they pursue, while another 23% remain uncertain. Students' emotions about how AI will influence their career reflect this ambiguity. Uncertainty is the most commonly reported feeling, named by 50% of students, followed by negative emotions, including concern, anxiety, and skepticism.

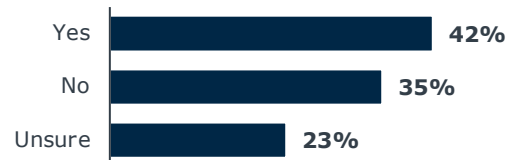
Students Are Split on How AI Will Impact the Necessity of a College Degree

Q: Do you think the number of jobs/careers that require a college degree will change because of advances in AI technology? (n = 8,494)



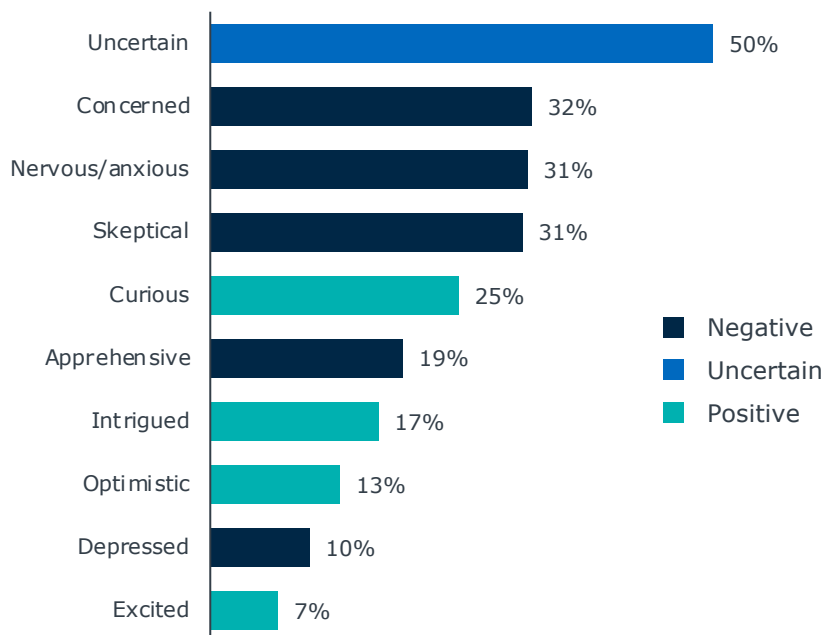
Many Students Expect AI to Influence Their Career Path

Q: Do you think AI will influence the job/career you pursue? (n = 8,494)



Uncertainty and Concern Dominate Feelings About AI's Impact

Which of the following words best describe how you feel about the impact of AI on your future career? (Select all that apply.) (n = 8,494)



Views of AI Are Shaping Academic Choices

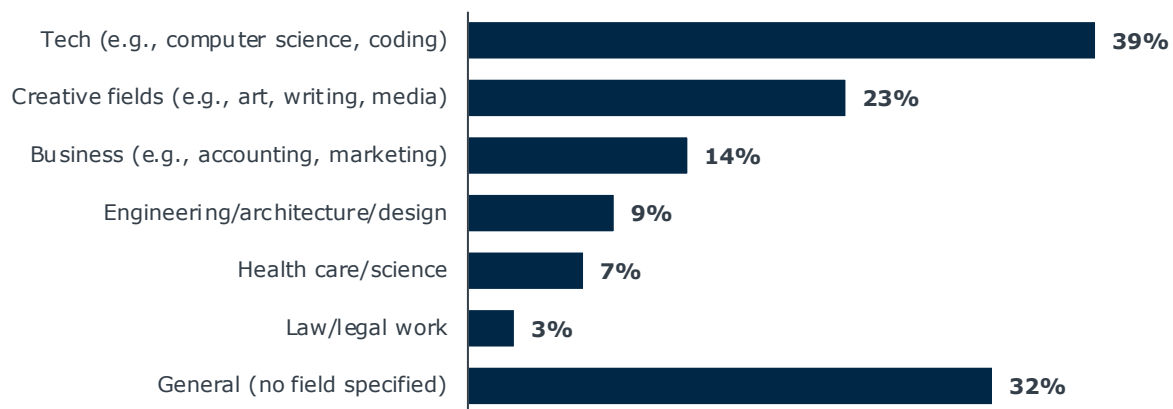
AI Is Causing Some Students to Reconsider Choice of Major

Concerns about AI are also influencing how students approach their choice of major. About 10% of students report they have already changed their intended major due to AI. While this share is lower than in our recent AI Survey, where 42% reported the same, the difference likely reflects that the First-Year Experience Survey captures only changes made after enrollment, while the AI Survey includes changes considered at any point in college search.

Among students who have changed their intended major, concerns about job security are the primary driver. Many reported worries that AI will replace core tasks in fields such as coding, content creation, data analysis, and accounting, leading them to question whether certain degrees are still worth pursuing. Technology and computer science, as well as creative fields, are most often mentioned, with particular concern about fewer entry-level opportunities and long-term job stability.

Top Categories of Majors Named in Verbatim Responses

Q: What about advances in AI technologies made you reconsider your major? AI Analysis of 670 verbatim responses.



Helping Students Navigate AI-Era Career Uncertainty

For colleges seeking to recruit students in this moment of uncertainty, it's critical to acknowledge their concerns about AI-driven change and to clearly communicate how your institution is preparing students for a rapidly evolving workforce. This includes showing how AI is integrated into coursework, emphasizing skills that are less likely to be automated, and providing clearer insight into career paths, especially for entry-level roles.

How AI Has Impacted Students' Choice of Major and Career

"I planned to be a **therapist**, but the way the world is going, **by the time I obtain my degree, AI will have my job.**"

"I'm unsure if my job opportunities will still be there, **but there's no way to know fully.**"

"Initially I chose computer science and after seeing **AI replacing entry-level jobs**, I switched to electrical and computer engineering."

Career Preparation Remains Central to Value

Career Outcomes Remain the Top Measure of Value

Despite the uncertainty AI is introducing into students' decisions about careers and majors, the core indicators of value have remained largely consistent with last year's findings. Successful job placement after graduation continues to rank as the top driver of perceived value, followed by access to internships and the availability of scholarships.

Perceptions of value differ across student segments, with first-generation college students being more likely than their non-first-generation peers to prioritize financial aid, and students from higher-income households placing greater emphasis on job preparation and career outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of colleges clearly demonstrating strong career outcomes and experiential learning opportunities, particularly when seeking to attract students with greater ability to pay.

Including Parents Is Essential

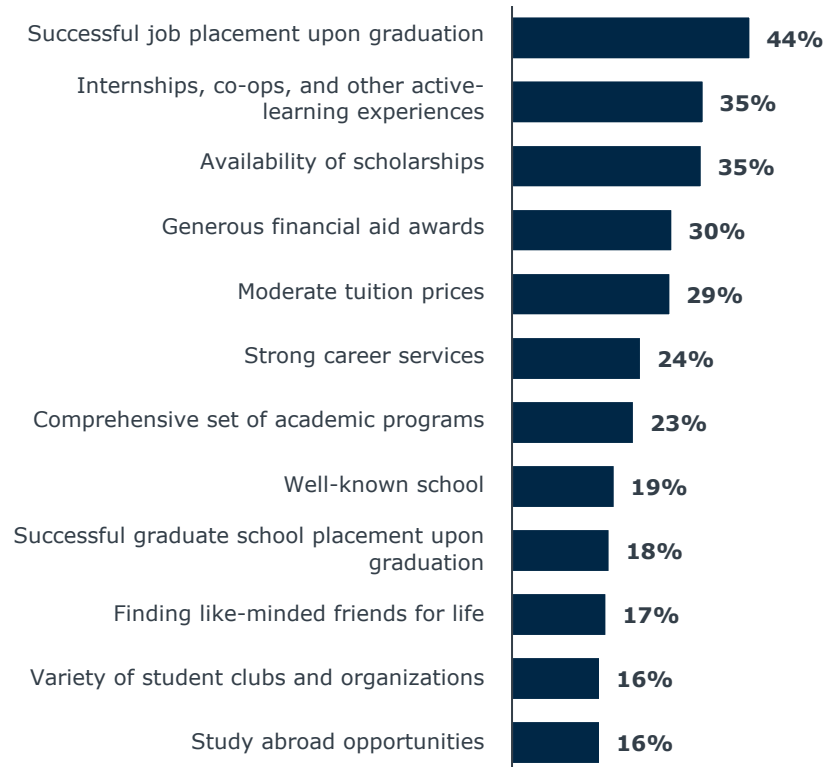
While parents influence many aspects of college search, their impact is strongest when it comes to value and affordability considerations, particularly decisions about total budget and anticipated student debt, as shown at right. To strengthen affinity with the whole family, institutions should prioritize clear, compelling communication with parents, beginning as early as possible in a student's search process.

AI Chat Tools Can Address Individual Value Concerns

As discussed in the preceding pages, students have highly individualized and sometimes conflicting concerns about how AI might influence the value of their degree. In this context, highly responsive and personalized communication methods, including AI-enabled chat tools, can help institutions better surface and address individual student and family concerns about cost and affordability in real time.

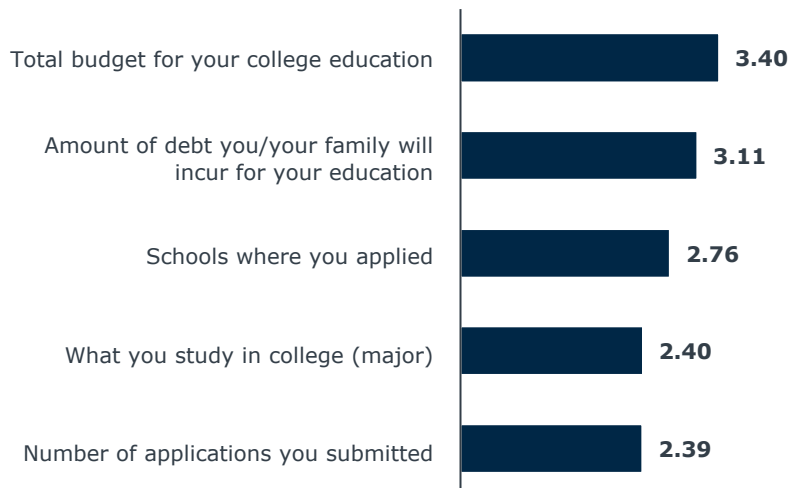
Job Placement and Internships Outrank Financial Aid

Q: What characteristics would you say best represent the value of higher education? (Select up to five.) Responses >20% shown. (n = 8,494)



Parent Influence Is Strongest in Areas of Cost and Finance

Q: How much influence did your parents/guardians have on the following? Scale: 1 = none at all, 2 = a little, 3 = a moderate amount, 4 = a lot, 5 = a great deal. (n = 8,494)





Students Discover Colleges and Assess Fit in New Ways

SECTION

2

AI Is Changing Search and Raising Student Expectations

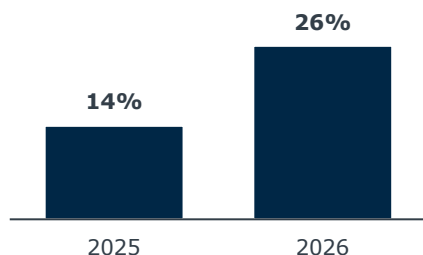
AI Is Becoming More Widely Used and More Helpful

Consistent with findings from our late 2025 AI Survey, results from the First-Year Experience Survey show that AI is becoming an increasingly common part of students’ daily lives and college search processes. Sixty-seven percent of students report using AI tools at least a few times per week.

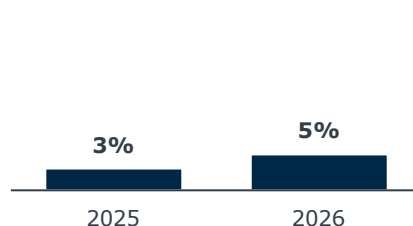
Within college search specifically, AI use is rising quickly: The share of students using AI tools increased from 14% to 26%, while the percentage identifying AI as one of the most helpful tools grew from 3% to 5% between 2025 and 2026. While these figures are lower than those reported in our AI Survey, differences in timing likely explain the gap. Year-over-year trends within the First-Year Experience Survey point to a clear takeaway: AI use in college search is accelerating rapidly, underscoring the need for institutions to adapt quickly to changing student behaviors and expectations.

Jumps in AI Usage and Helpfulness in College Search

Share of Students **Using AI Tools**



Share of Students Reporting AI Tools as Their Top 1 or 2 **Most Helpful Resources**



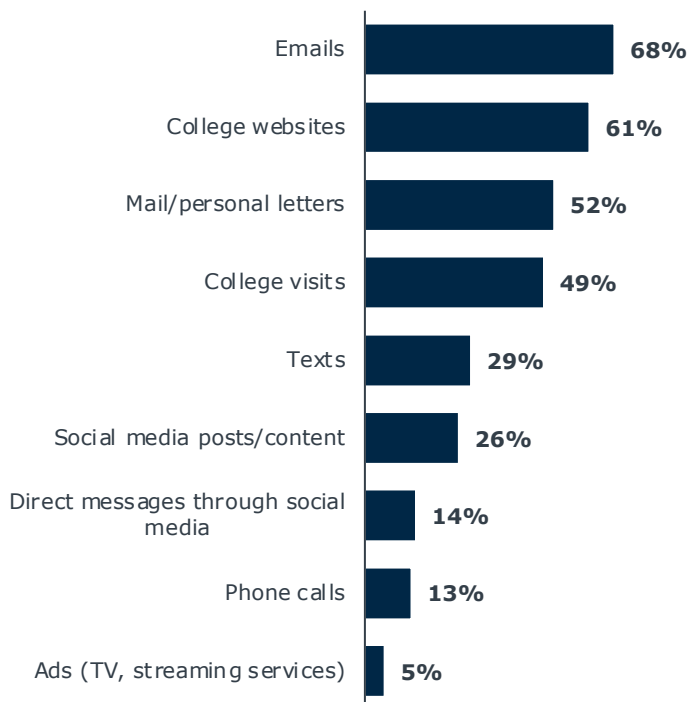
College Communications Remain Essential—but Expectations Are Rising

Fewer students now identify college communications as among the most helpful resources in their search. Among Entering Class 2025, 10% named communications from colleges as one of the most helpful resources, down from 13% the previous year. One likely explanation is that student expectations are evolving. As they integrate AI tools into search, students are growing accustomed to faster, more personalized, and more direct answers, raising the bar for what they consider “helpful.”

College communications remain a critical part of the search process but must evolve to meet these changing expectations. Data from the 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey shows that students still prefer to hear from colleges through channels such as email and institutional websites. The decline in perceived helpfulness may also understate colleges’ efforts, particularly in areas including SEO and AEO (Answer Engine Optimization), which influence search but are less visible to students. Institutions that pair strong direct communication with more responsive, personalized experiences will be best positioned to stand out in an increasingly AI-mediated search environment.

Students Still Appreciate Direct College Communications

Q: How would you like the school to share information with you at the start of your search? (Check all that apply.)
2025 Communication Preferences Survey



AI Expands Discovery, Especially for Students of Color

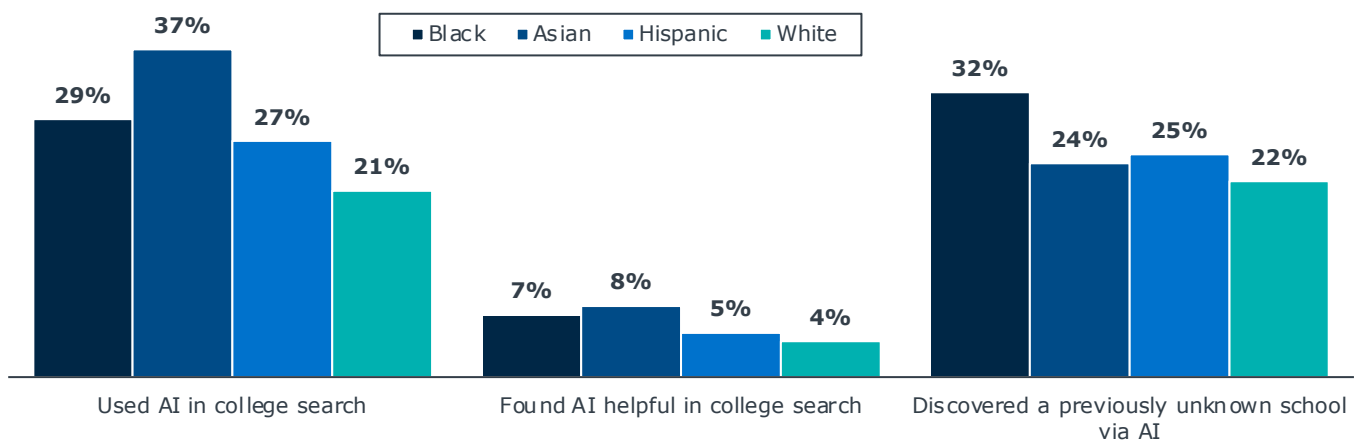
AI Is a More Widely Used and Influential Tool for Students of Color

While AI tools are becoming more widely used by all students, patterns of use differ across student demographics. Students of color are more likely to use AI as part of their search, to find AI tools helpful, and to report discovering institutions through AI. Notably, this difference is specific to AI tools: Students of color are not more likely than their White peers to use online tools overall in college search, but they are more likely to rely on AI in particular.

Our AI Survey findings demonstrated that one of the distinct advantages of AI tools is that they enable students to generate highly customized, school-by-school comparisons. Together, these findings suggest that AI is not just another search tool, but one that uniquely expands access to personalized, comparative information, potentially helping students of color navigate college search more efficiently, discover new schools, and assess fit more effectively.

AI Is Expanding College Discovery for Students of Color

AI Use in College Search by Race/Ethnicity (n = 8,494)



Differences in AI Use by Income

AI use varies meaningfully by household income, with higher-income students reporting greater familiarity and frequency of use. Compared to students from households earning less than \$60,000, those from households earning more than \$120,000 are more likely to use AI multiple times per day, to describe themselves as expert or advanced users, and to have been using AI for more than a year, as described in the graphic at right. Despite these differences in experience and confidence, the only statistically significant difference in how students use AI by income in college search is that higher-income students are more likely to use it for application preparation, such as writing essays.

AI Power-Users Are Higher Income

Compared to students with household income <\$60, students with household income >\$120K are:

1.7x as likely to use AI multiple times a day (7.4% vs. 12.6%)

1.4x as likely to rate themselves as expert or advanced AI users (22% vs. 31%)

1.4x as likely to have used AI for more than a year (41% vs. 57%)

Virtual Tours Play an Important Role in Evaluating Fit

Virtual Tours Help Students Assess Campus Experience

Like AI chat tools, virtual tours are another important technology shaping college search, with 40% of students reporting that they took a virtual tour at some point in their college search journey. Our data also shows that virtual tour engagement is not a onetime activity. In fact, among students who use virtual tours, 40% visited the same school's virtual tour multiple times.

While virtual experiences are not a complete substitute for in-person visits, they serve multiple valuable purposes: 18% of students use them in place of a campus visit, 30% rely on them to compare institutions, 39% use them to prepare for an in-person visit, and 24% use them to show a school to their family. Together, these patterns suggest that virtual tours help students assess key elements of fit, particularly campus environment and location, which were top factors students named in their enrollment decision. Virtual tours give students a way to visualize campus life and surroundings, helping them determine whether they can see themselves at a particular institution.

How Students Use Virtual Tours to Evaluate Colleges

Responses from Students Who Have Taken a Virtual Tour (n = 2,843)

40%

of students take a virtual tour of the same school more than once

18%

use a virtual tour to replace an in-person visit

30%

use a virtual tour to compare a school to other schools

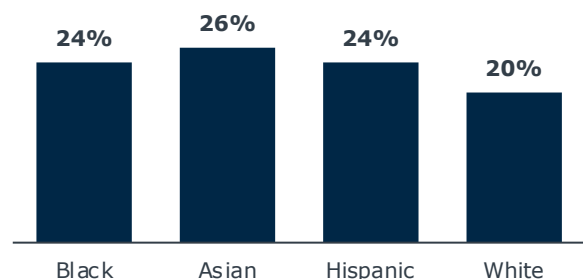
Virtual Tours Are Especially Helpful in Decision-Making for Underserved Students

Virtual tours play an important role in helping students from historically underserved backgrounds evaluate fit. First-generation students are more likely than their peers to take virtual tours (44% vs. 39%). Use is even higher among students of color—49% of Black students and 45% of both Asian and Hispanic students take virtual tours, compared to 36% of White students. Students from households earning less than \$60,000 are also among the most likely to use these tools.

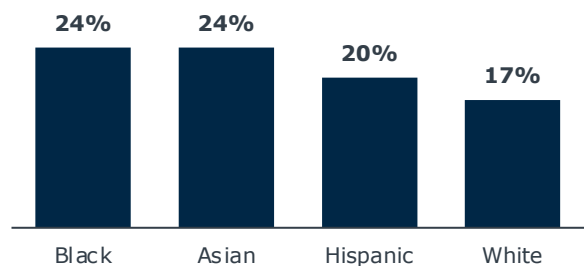
Engagement is not only broader but also more impactful in many cases: Students of color were more likely to report that these experiences influenced their decisions, both in terms of where to apply and where to enroll. These findings highlight the role virtual tours play in expanding access and helping students assess fit and make more informed choices.

Share of Students Who Used a Virtual Tour ...

To help decide whether to apply



To help decide whether to enroll





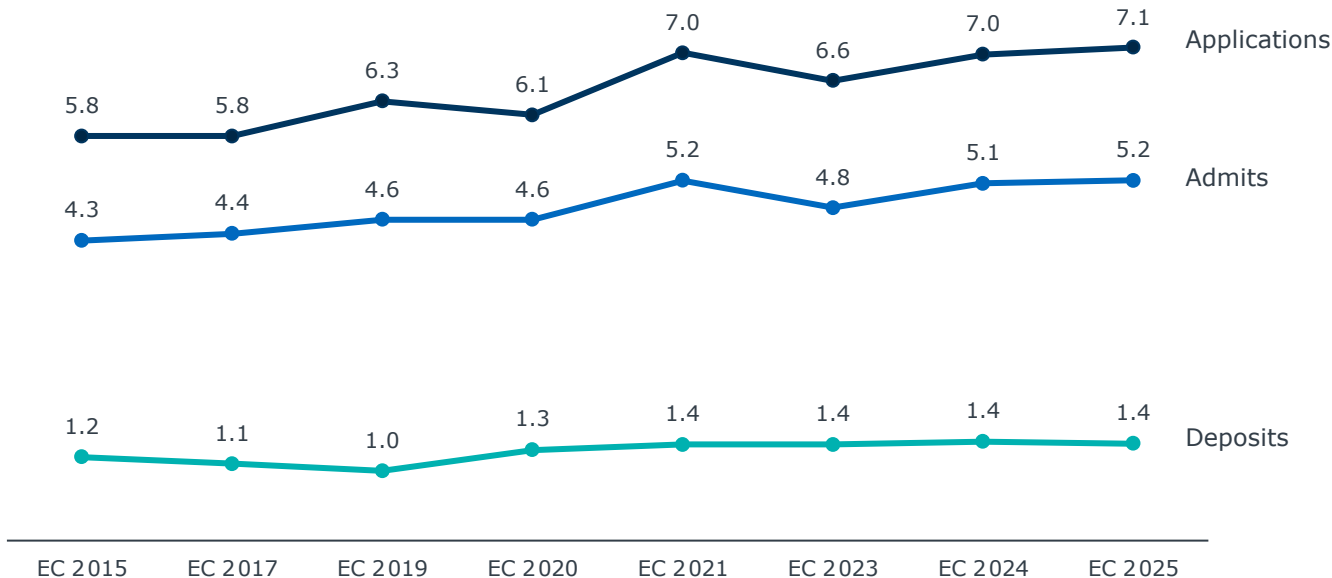
Students Are Keeping Options Open Later in Senior Year

SECTION

3

Growing Competition Later in the Cycle

Average Applications, Acceptances, and Deposits per Student



Continued Growth in Competition for Students at Application Stage and Beyond

Applications and admits per student rose again this year. Students now submit an average of 7.1 applications each, up slightly from 7.0 for Entering Class 2024 and from 6.1 five years ago. The number of admits per student has increased to 5.2, compared to 5.1 last year. Meanwhile, deposits held steady at 1.4 per student for the fourth consecutive year. For colleges, these trends point to intensifying competition throughout senior year. As students apply to more institutions and accumulate more offers, an application or an admit alone is no longer a strong signal of intent.

Engaging Students During Senior Year

As competition for students intensifies later in the enrollment process, success increasingly depends on engaging students earlier and sustaining that engagement over time. Early engagement helps build familiarity and trust, while ongoing communication helps students navigate their options as they receive more offers.

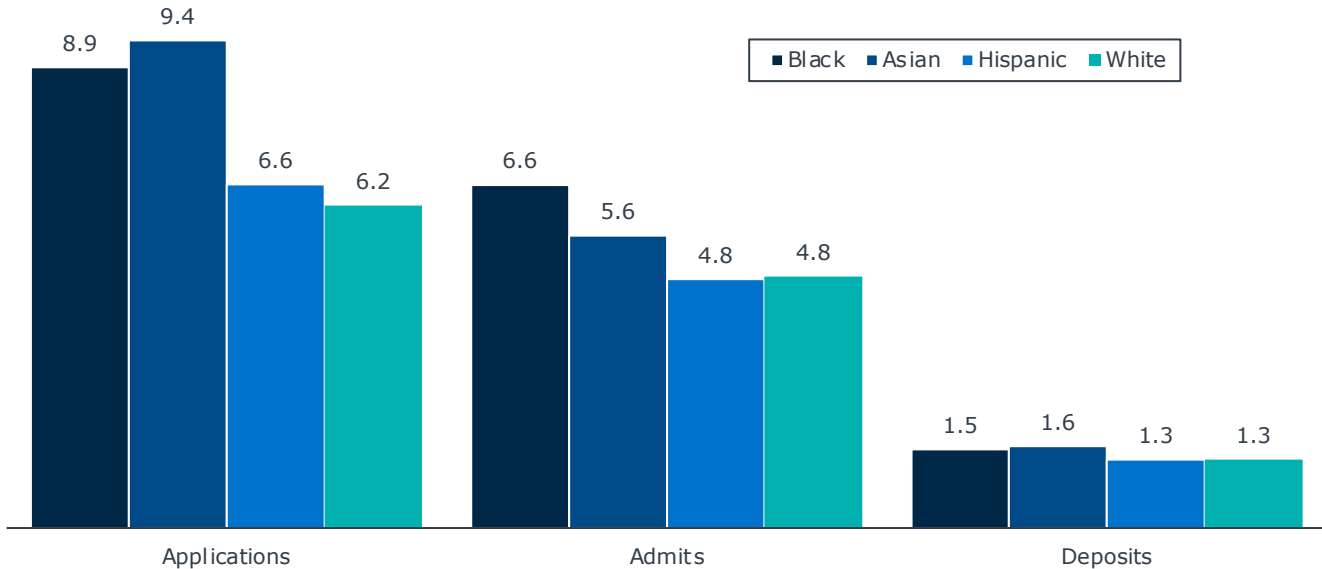
Rather than relying on one-off outreach, institutions should focus on consistent, timely communication that supports students at key moments, whether that means driving action, building affinity, or supporting decision-making. Tools like AI-powered chat can also help by providing quick answers to common questions, especially as students look for clear information about cost, academics, and next steps.

Enroll360 Helps Institutions Strengthen Senior Year Marketing

Increasing competition in senior year requires a shift in marketing strategy. Enroll360 helps colleges adapt with hyper-personalized, agentic student experiences that build affinity early and sustain engagement through final decisions. **To learn more, email eabenrollmentcomm@eab.com.**

Application Differences by Demographics

Average Applications, Admits, and Deposits by Race/Ethnicity



Application Behavior Varies by Student Demographics

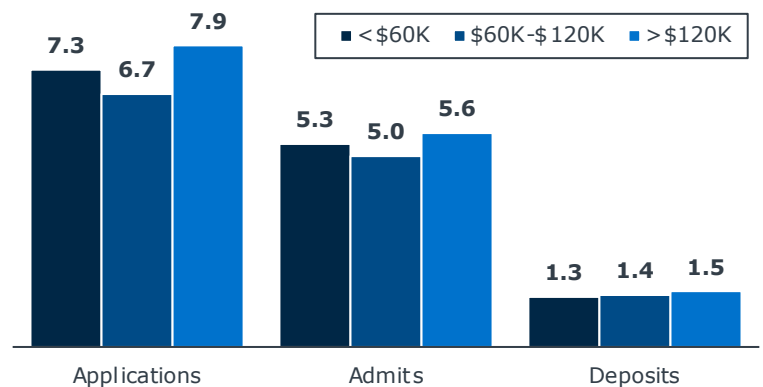
Our data showed several important differences in application behavior across student groups. Students of color are applying to more colleges than their White peers, with Black and Asian students submitting the highest number of applications on average. They also receive more acceptances and submit slightly more deposits.

This pattern likely reflects efforts to keep more options open. Applying to more schools can increase access to financial aid offers and expand the range of choices available to students. Direct admissions programs likely also play a part. Involvement in direct admissions increased modestly from 32% for Entering Class 2024 to 34% for Entering Class 2025, with both participation and growth concentrated among students of color.

Higher-Income Students Most Likely to Submit Multiple Deposits

Students from higher-income households are more likely to submit multiple deposits, with those earning over \$120K averaging 1.5 deposits compared to the overall average of 1.4. This suggests that many students, particularly those with greater financial flexibility, are keeping options open later into the enrollment process. For colleges, this dynamic means there is more competition for students with the greatest ability to pay. Strengthening late-stage communication and differentiating on value will be critical to converting these admits into enrollments.

Average Applications, Admits, and Deposits by Income





Strategy Implications and Additional Resources

Key Takeaways and Recommendations



Career Uncertainty Is Raising the Stakes on Demonstrating Value

As AI disrupts the early-career workforce, students are asking new questions about the value of a degree in a rapidly changing job market.

Recommendations

- Clearly communicate how your programs prepare students for evolving careers by **highlighting outcomes, transferable skills, and realistic paths to entry-level jobs**.
- Given that concerns vary from family to family, **use personalized content, including via AI-powered tools**, to deliver timely and tailored information on cost, outcomes, and career pathways.
- **Communicate directly with parents, starting early** in college search, to address value concerns and build affinity.

How EAB Can Help

Fuel a more personalized college search experience at scale with EAB's Conversation Agent, which is embedded across outbound emails, SMS conversations, and landing pages as part of Enroll360 campaigns. **Learn more at eab.com/enroll360.**

Learn more about how families are weighing the cost of college in our recent report, "Student and Family Perceptions of College Cost and Value."

Download the insight paper at eab.com/cost-value.



Competition Is Intensifying Later in the Cycle

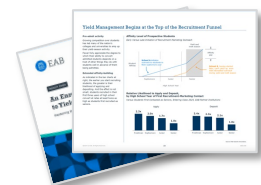
As students apply to more institutions and receive more offers, competition now extends later into senior year, and an application alone is no longer a strong signal of intent.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen multichannel communications plans for senior year**, ensuring you foster affinity early and sustain engagement over time.
- Ensure your **engagement strategy is flexible**, adapting to varied student timelines and prioritizing tailored communication over one-size-fits-all approaches
- Use **AI-enabled tools to support ongoing, personalized communication** with students.

For more guidance on yield and melt, read our insight paper, "An Enrollment Leader's Guide to Yield and Melt Management."

Download the insight paper at eab.com/yield-management.



Key Takeaways and Recommendations



AI Is Reshaping Digital Visibility and Brand Perception

As AI increasingly mediates how students discover and evaluate colleges, institutions are no longer communicating only to students but also to the AI systems that influence the information students see.

Recommendations

- Ensure **institutional content is accurate, consistent, and easy for AI systems to interpret** across websites and third-party platforms.
- **Strengthen digital visibility across channels**, recognizing that AI tools aggregate information from multiple sources.
- Actively **manage how your institution is represented online**, addressing gaps or inconsistencies that may shape perceptions before direct engagement.

Dive deeper into AI's impact on the student recruitment journey with our report, "How Students View and Use AI in College Search: Insights from a Survey of 5,000+ High School Students."

Download the insight paper at eab.com/AIsurvey.



▶ How EAB Can Help Improve AI Search Visibility

If your institution is not cited, referenced, or surfaced in AI answers, you risk being invisible in the fastest-growing college search channels. EAB can help identify visibility gaps, optimize content, and monitor how your brand appears across AI-driven platforms.

To discuss how EAB's AI Search Visibility solutions can help your institution, email eabenrollmentcomm@eab.com.



Research Overview

About the 2026 First-Year Experience Survey

In February and March 2026, EAB’s University Research Partners conducted a survey of students who had been prospects for Entering Class 2025. The survey asked students about their college search, application process, and their college experience thus far. The reported results include responses from 9,516 students.

Participant Profile

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage ¹
White/Caucasian	56%
Hispanic or Latine	23%
African American/Black	15%
Asian (Central/South/East/Southeast)	15%
Other ²	5%

First-Generation College Status	Percentage
First-Generation	26%
Non-First-Generation	74%

Gender Identity	Percentage
Female	55%
Male	42%
Nonbinary	2%
Other	1%

Currently Enrolled in a College or University	Percentage
Yes	89%
No	11%

Region	Percentage
Northeast	20%
Southeast	22%
Midwest	20%
Southwest	14%
West	24%

Household Income	Percentage
\$60,000 or less	26%
\$60,001-\$120,000	23%
More than \$120,000	26%
Unsure	26%

1) Participants could select multiple options.

2) Includes Middle Eastern or West Asian, Native American or Alaskan Native, Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander, and other.

The Leading AI Innovator in Higher Education



EAB's AI Approach Is Research-Backed, Responsible, and Built for What's Next

Our Approach to Enroll360 AI

Research-Driven Design



Building on **35+ years** of enrollment research and **40K+** students surveyed on AI

Rigorous Testing at Scale



200+ AI-driven hyper-personalization tests last cycle, prioritizing lift/impact

The Highest Standards of Trust/Supervision



1,200+ institutions live with EAB chat agents since 2024, meeting SOC 2 standards

Our AI Capabilities Supporting Enrollment

AI-Driven Campaign Optimization

Conversation Agents

Hyper-Personalization at Scale

AI-Enabled Virtual Tours

Transformational Results from AI Innovation

15K+

Student queries answered by EAB's AI agents in fall 2025

68%

Lift in engagement from AI-driven personalization in EAB campaigns

25%+

Average capacity increase for staff using EAB AI

The Future of Student-Centric Recruitment

enroll **360**
by EAB

Cultivate

Affinity-Building Inquiry and Nurture Campaigns

Apply

Demand-Generating Application Marketing Campaigns

Aid

Data-Driven Policy Creation and Financial Aid Optimization

Yield

Actionable Analytics to Drive Conversion-Boosting Campaigns

AI Search Visibility

Solutions to Boost SEO, AEO, and GEO

Intersect

Connection Point to Millions of Naviance Users

Appily Leads

High-Quality Inquiries and Prospects

Appily Tours


Best-in-Class AI-Powered Digital Experiences

Appily Match

Today's Top Direct Admission Platform

Enrollment CRM

Higher Ed's Most Trusted CRM, Powered by Responsible AI

Powered by  **appily** The leading college-search site



The Enroll360 Difference:

Real Enrollment Results



A Unique, Proven Method of Partnership



The Leader in High-Impact AI Innovation



A Trusted Execution Machine

To speak with an expert or schedule a diagnostic conversation, email eabenrollmentcomm@eab.com.

Learn more at eab.com/Enroll360.

Contributors

Project Director

Lizzy Donaher

Survey Research Consultants

Pamela Kiecker Royall, PhD
Anne Dodson

Strategy Consultant

Michael Koppenheffer

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