



Understanding What **Matters Most** to Parents

Five Lessons for Enrollment Leaders from Recent EAB Survey Research

This report shares highlights from EAB's most recent parent survey

Findings from a large national survey of parents

The material in this report is based on a large-scale survey of parents of college-bound students.

National in scope, the survey included participants from all regions of the United States. It also included parents of students in different high school years and covered a demographically diverse set of households.

Noteworthy features of the survey

The features of the survey mentioned above offer several valuable perspectives on how parent audiences might be better engaged via recruitment marketing.

Since it included parents of students in various high school years, the survey illuminates how parent concerns change as their student progresses through high school.

Furthermore, because the survey included a demographically diverse set of parents, it offers a granular understanding of how parent concerns vary by income level, ethnicity, and other factors.

EAB's Parent Survey in Brief

Total Respondents

1,566

households participated

Parents' Education Level

78%

of respondents have a bachelor's degree or higher

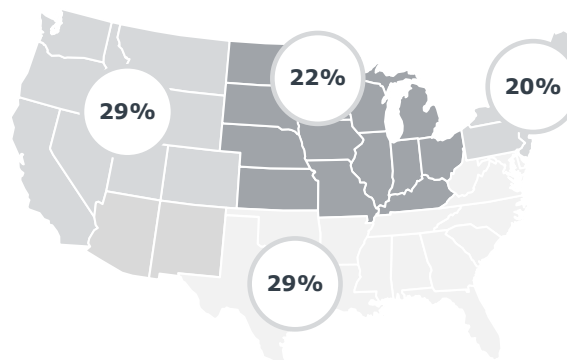
Student's Current Class Year

18% Freshman

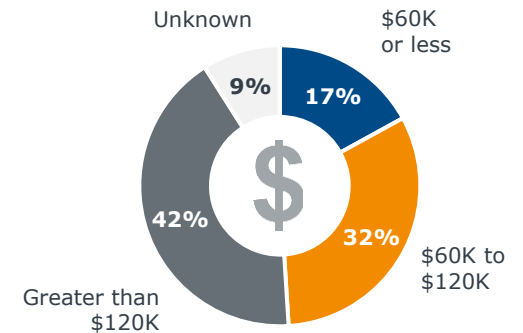
40% Sophomore

40% Junior

Location



Income



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Cross-calibrate parent and student concerns

Your key audiences converge on some topics and diverge on others

Getting a direct read on families' most pressing concerns

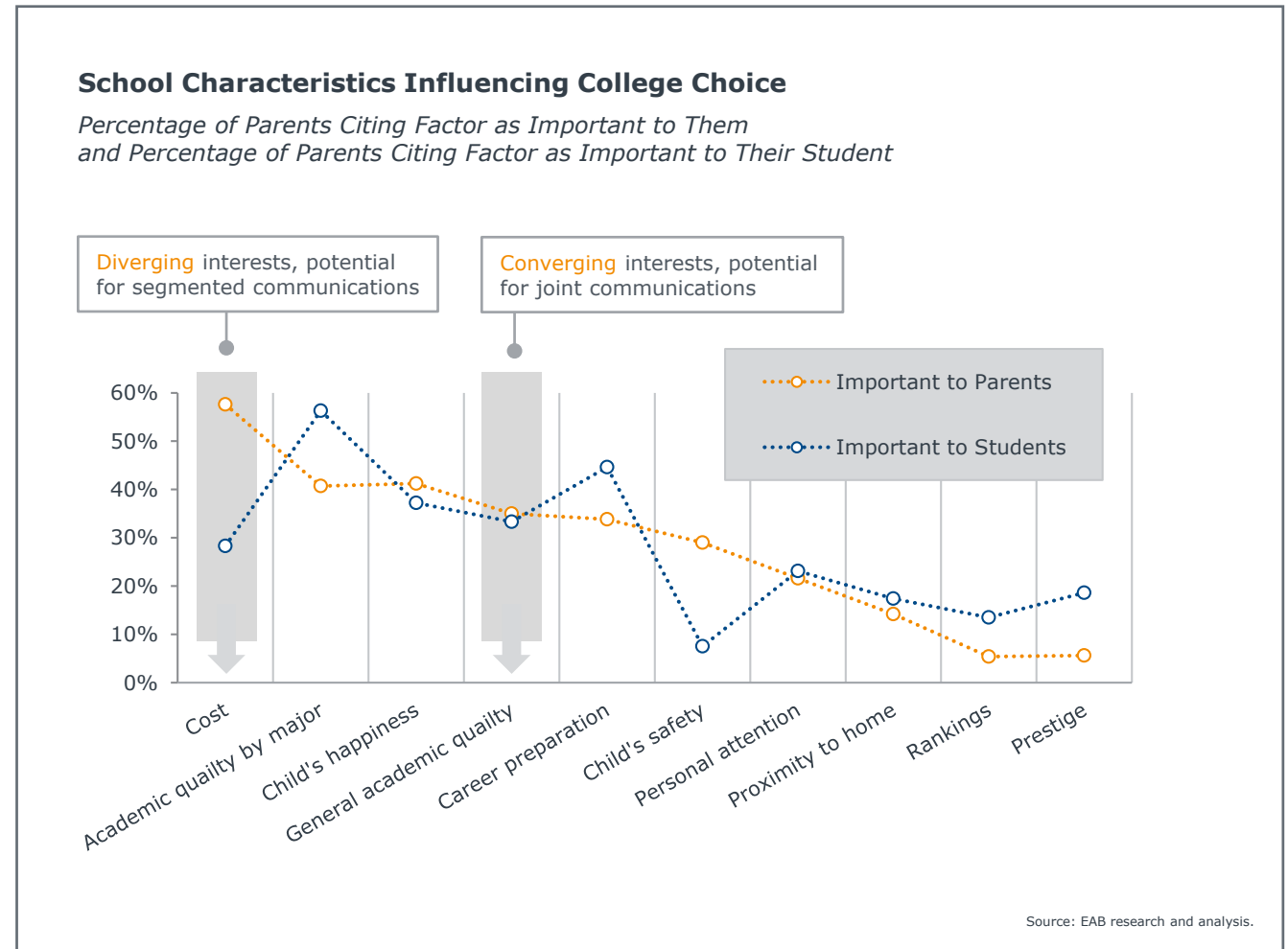
Lacking a direct read on parent interests and concerns, many enrollment leaders are forced to rely on guesswork when deciding what messages to underscore in their recruitment-marketing outreach.

In order to shed some light on this question, our survey asked parents how important various school characteristics are to them and to their student. You can see the compiled data at right.

Account for overlap between parent and student concerns

An important consideration highlighted by the data is the extent to which parent and student interests overlap on any given topic. As shown at right, the two audiences diverge on some topics (e.g., cost) and converge on others (e.g., general academic quality).

This has important implications for recruitment marketing, insofar as some topics are better suited to customized, audience-specific communications while others provide a strong basis for joint outreach.



Own the cost conversation

Cost dominates all other parent concerns

Cost is a clear preoccupation for parents

It goes without saying that parents worry about how to pay for college. But it's helpful to understand just how dominant a concern it is for them relative to other important considerations.

As shown at right, three of the four most commonly cited top concerns for parents have to do with paying for college. Even such important questions as their student's happiness lag far behind.

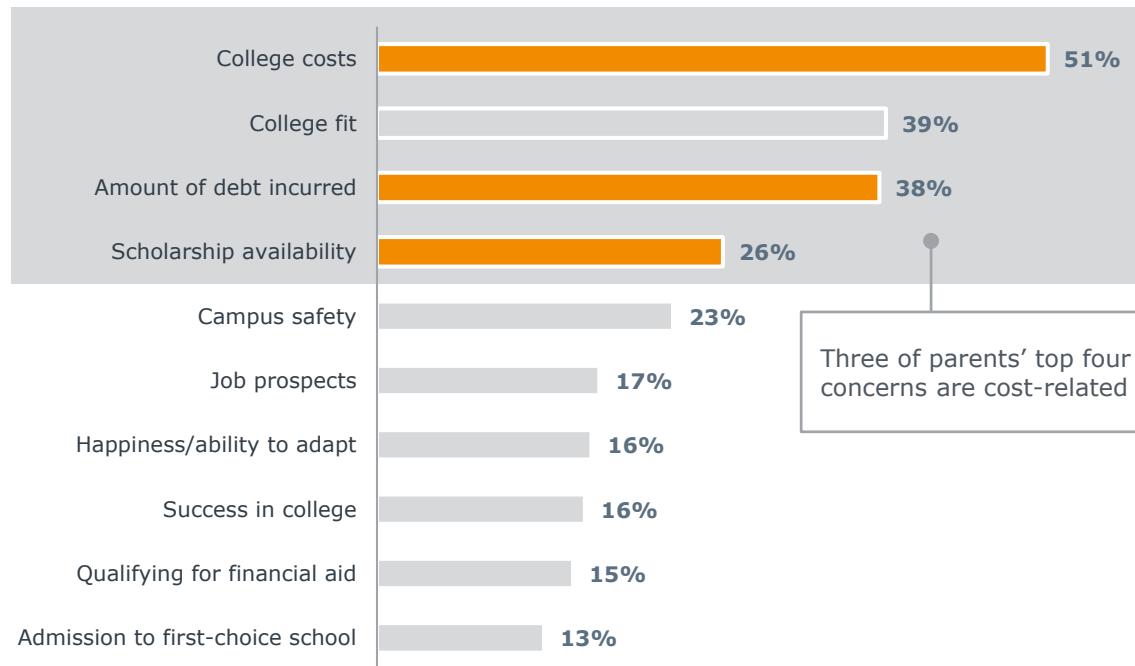
Take a broad view of "cost" when engaging parents

In addition to being concerned about cost in a general way, parents are very interested in associated issues that have a more specific dimension to them—the amount of debt that they and their student will incur, for example, and scholarship availability.

Recruitment-marketing outreach to parents should, accordingly, target both aspects of parents' interest in cost—the general and the particular.

Regarding Their Student's Future, What Concerns Parents Most ?

Percentage of Responding Parents



Three of parents' top four concerns are cost-related

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Parents' cost focus is reflected in the scope of their influence

Parent purview versus student purview

While parents see an important role for themselves in guiding their student's choice of school, data from our survey suggests that they consider some aspects of the related decision-making to be more appropriately within their purview than others.

Cost is a special case

As indicated in the chart at right, parents exert more influence over cost-related decisions than over other considerations, including which particular schools a student applies to.

The numbers suggest a scenario where parents are effectively setting a price range but are guided more by student preference when it comes to selecting schools within any given cost band.

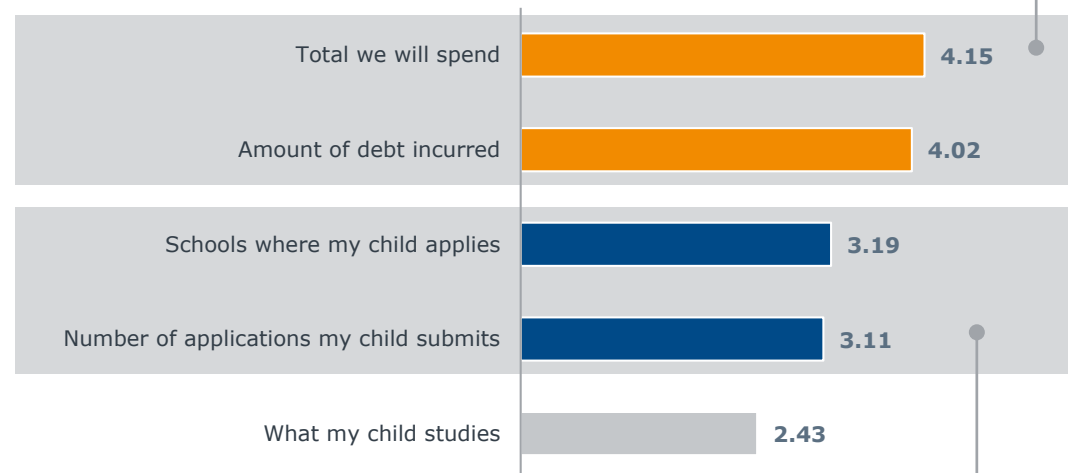
The data mirrors anecdotal findings from our conversations with parents—namely, that they consider it important that their student's school choice is truly theirs (the student's) and that parents are accordingly selective about which aspects of the decision they seek to influence.

How Much Influence Do Parents Have on College-Related Decisions?

Mean Ranking Assigned by Parents

1 = least influence, 5 = most influence

Parents exert more influence on price...



...and less on other particulars of school choice

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Profound parent uncertainty on cost suggests an opportunity to educate

Attitude toward price varies across and within income bands

While it's helpful to understand parents' general preoccupation with cost, a more detailed perspective on their thinking about affordability is also important.

As shown in the chart at right, how much parents are willing to pay for college varies by family income. That is to be expected. But there's also considerable variation within income bands. So, for example, while most lower-income families are unwilling to pay more than \$15K per year, many (26%) are willing to pay up to twice that amount.

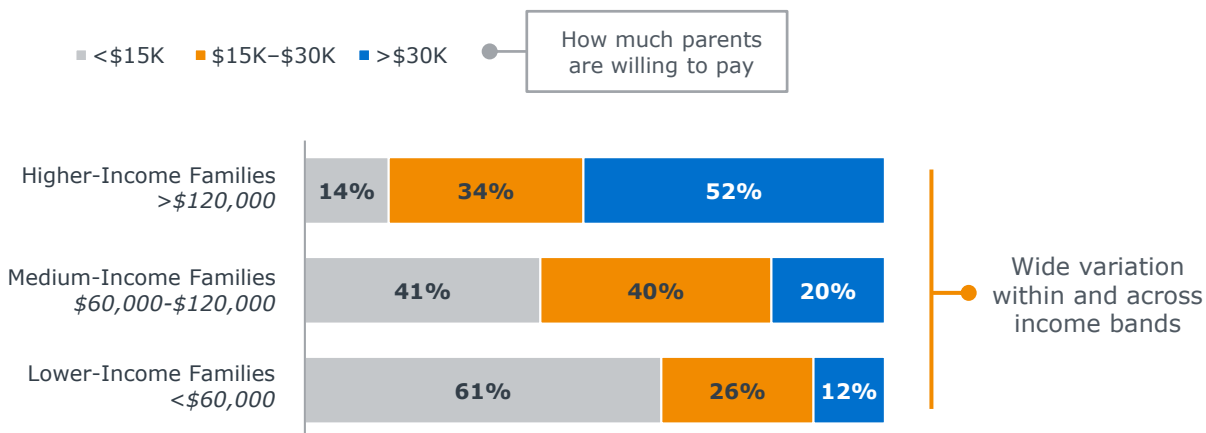
Many parents don't know how much they should be willing to pay

Some of the variability likely stems from the breadth of the income bands—each covers a large span, so some variation within each is natural.

That said, other data suggests that parents' imperfect knowledge may be a factor—more than a third said they are unsure how much they would be willing to spend. This indicates an opportunity for schools to educate parents on college finances (and, not incidentally, to define the terms in which the value question is framed).

How Much Are Parents Willing to Pay per Year?

Percentage of Responding Parents, by Household Income and Annual-Expenditure Band



34%
of parents are unsure how much they would be willing to spend

43%
of parents are concerned about being able to afford *any* college

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Highlight your outcomes

Parents think of the value of college mostly in terms of practical impact

Parents want to see results for their college spend

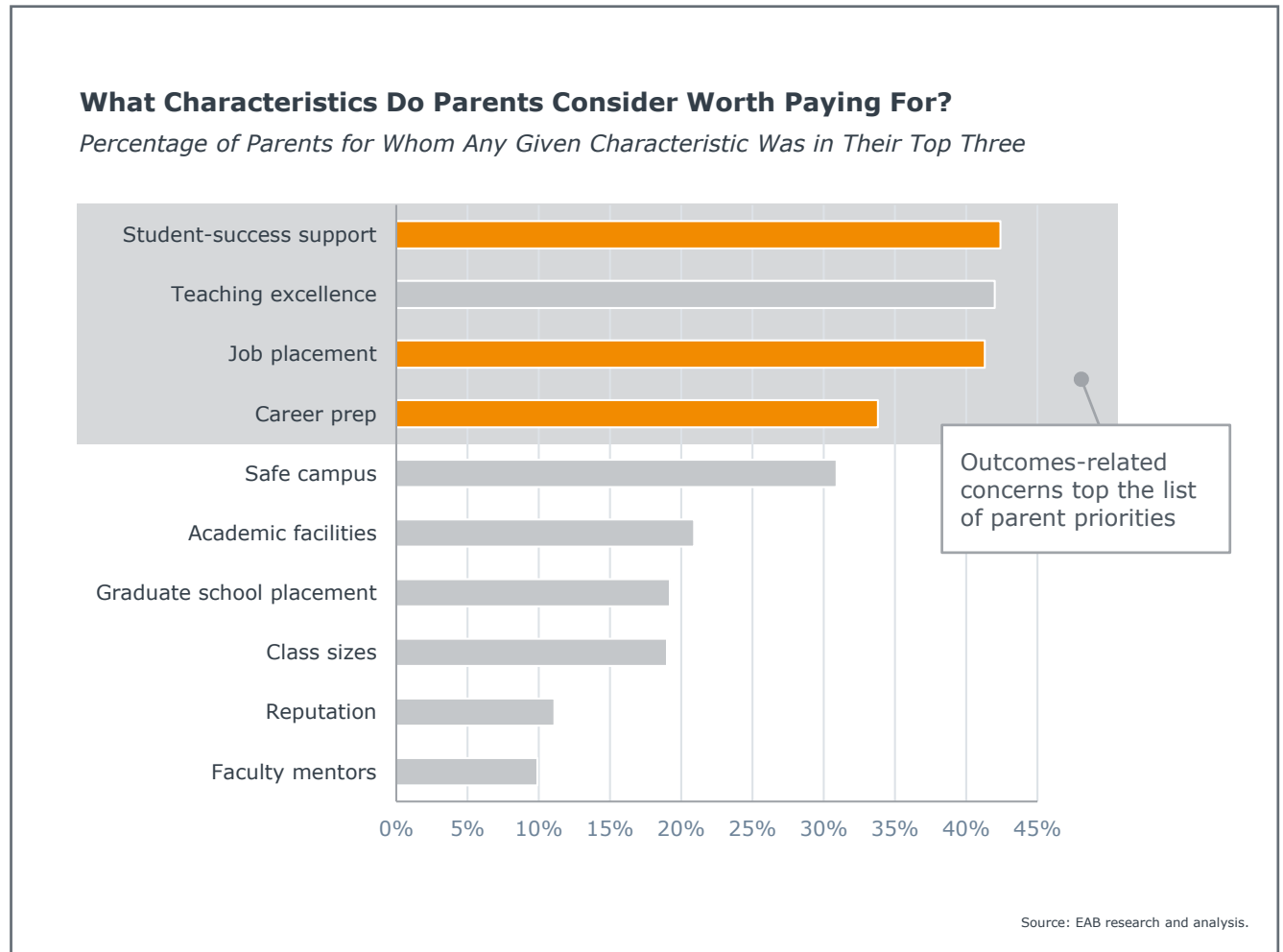
Your value proposition to parents has two elements to it: cost and benefit. While key points on cost were covered on the preceding pages, Lesson 3, shown here, addresses the benefit side of the equation—what parents consider worth paying for.

As indicated in the chart at right, factors that parents rank highest are those most closely tied to outcomes—student-success support, job placement, and career prep.

Outcomes are a top issue for both parents and students

It’s worth noting as well that parents’ focus on outcomes mirrors strong student interest on this point.

Take the case of career prep, for example. As shown earlier, on page 3, both students and parents assigned high scores to this topic relative to other concerns. This suggests that career prep and other outcomes-related topics might provide a sound basis for communications that have wide appeal across both audiences.



Think across school segments

Most families consider both public and private colleges

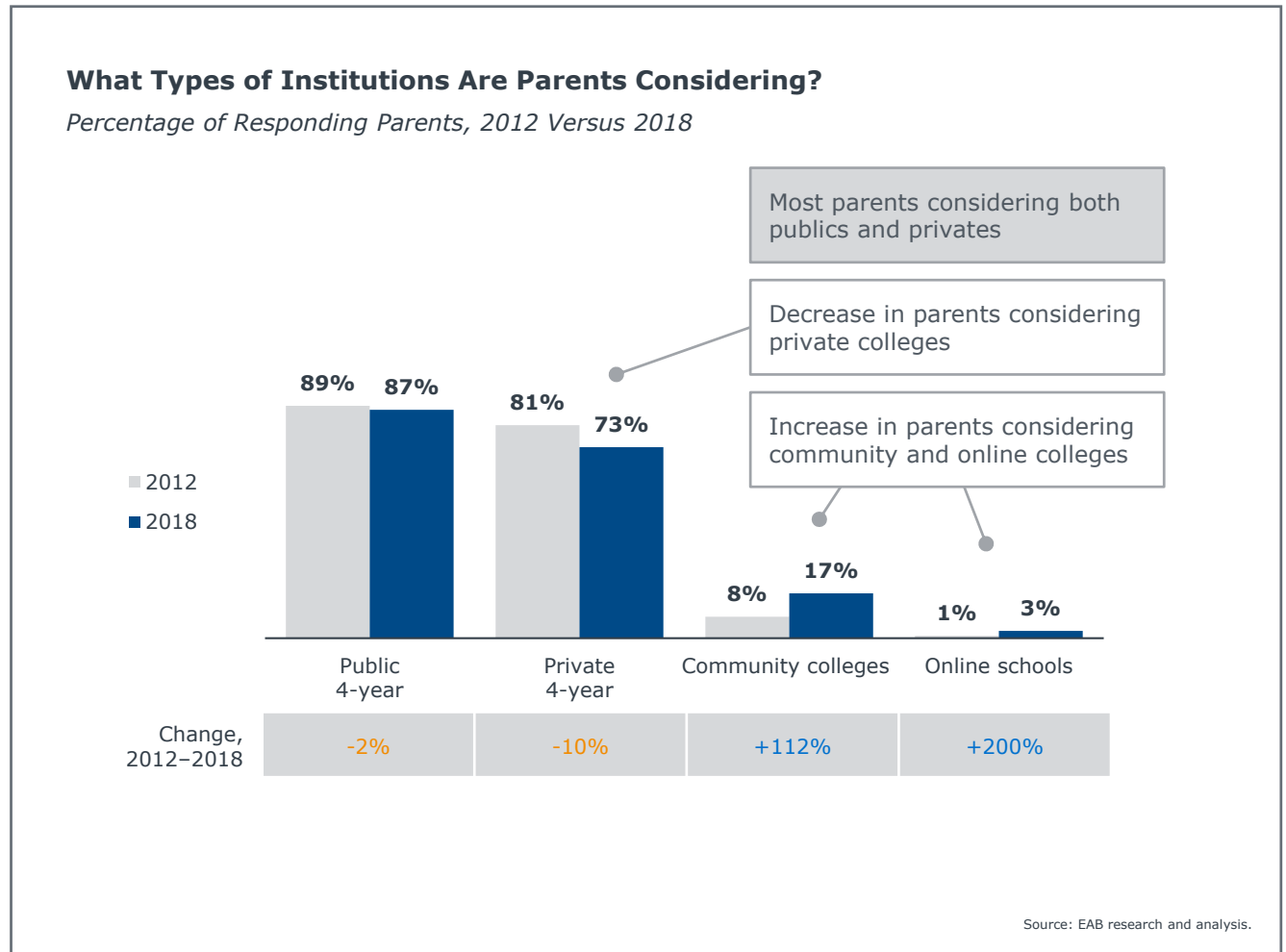
Few families limit their search to any one school segment

Similarly large proportions of surveyed parents reported considering public and private schools (87% and 73% respectively). This implies that most families (60% or more, by extrapolation) are open to both types of institutions. It also confirms the widespread assumption that most colleges compete across school segments.

Furthermore, a longitudinal perspective suggests that the balance of power between different school types may be changing. As shown at right, the percentage of parents considering privates has dropped much more than the percentage considering publics.

An argument for early engagement

While this point is not illustrated on the page, it's important to note that parents are open to the broadest range of possible school types earlier in their student's high school years. For this reason, early outreach to parents can serve as a means of "getting a foot in the door." (See page 10 of this report for some related observations on parents' early openness.)



Engage parents early

Most families start researching colleges before junior year of high school

Early outreach to families is feasible

As shown in the chart at right, data from our parent survey indicates that most families begin considering college options before a student’s junior year in high school.

Other EAB research has demonstrated the important related point that it’s entirely feasible to identify—and therefore reach out directly to—many students’ parents well in advance of a student’s senior year.

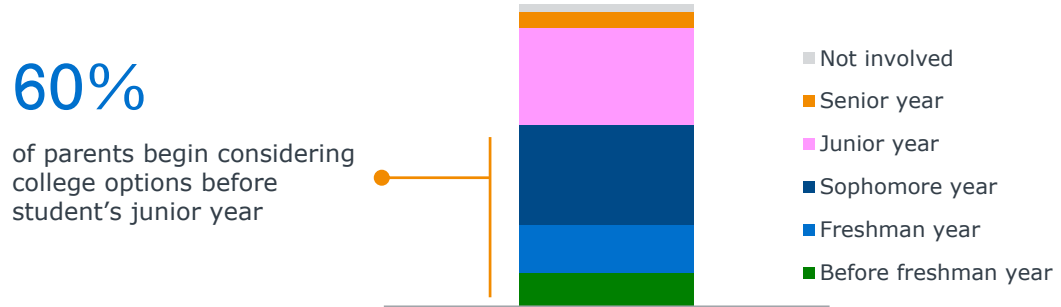
This opens up the possibility of an additional back channel of influence with students, via their parents, early in the decision-making process.

Early engagement of students is impactful

The strongest argument for reaching out to high school students early is that doing so correlates strongly with improved enrollment outcomes. As shown at right, students first engaged through recruitment marketing before their junior year in high school enroll at higher rates, have stronger academic profiles, and give more generously as young alumni.

When Do Parents Start Considering College Options for Their Students?

Percentage of Responding Parents, by Student’s High School Year



Earlier Student Engagement Drives Improved Enrollment Outcomes¹

1.9x

Higher enrollment rate for students first engaged as high school sophomores²

66-point

Higher average enrolled SAT score for students first engaged as high school sophomores²

1.4x

Higher young-alumni giving rate for students cultivated from their junior or sophomore year in high school³

1) The figures cited below are from other EAB research (i.e., not from the parent survey on which other material in this report is based).
 2) Relative to students first engaged as high school seniors.
 3) Relative to all other inquiry sources.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Parents consider a broader range of college options earlier on

Parents' scope narrows as senior year approaches

As described on the preceding page, enrollment outcomes tend to be stronger, across multiple measures, for students engaged earlier in their high school career.

Another argument in favor of early contact is that parents winnow down the range of options they're open to evaluating as their student approaches senior year.

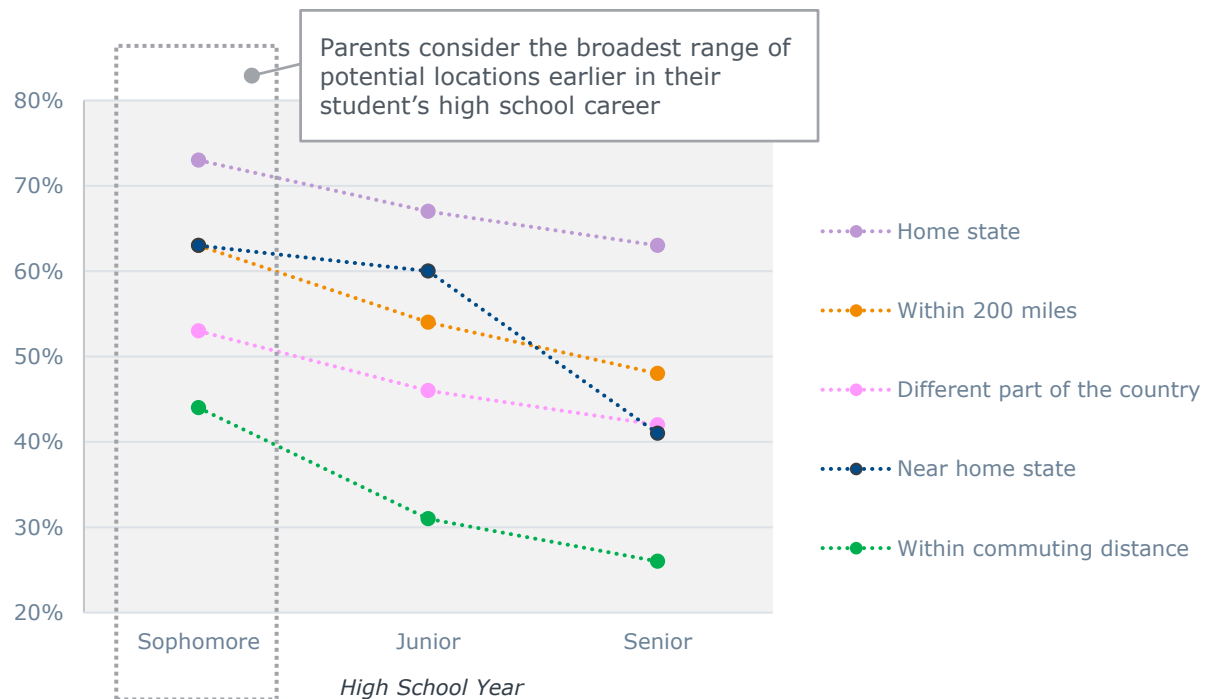
A case in point is shown at right. As illustrated, the proportion of parents considering schools at various distances from their homes steadily decreases as their student progresses through high school.

Early openness applies to considerations beyond location

The example at right is just one of several ways that parent attitudes change during their student's high school years. Parents are, for example, also more open to considering both private and public institutions earlier on.

Case in Point: Range of Locations Parents Are Open to Considering

Percentage of Responding Parents, by Student's High School Year



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Parents' main topics of interest change across the funnel

Parents' information needs evolve as students approach graduation

As described on the preceding page, parents' attitudes toward different school options evolve as their student progresses through high school.

Parents' information needs also change during this time. As shown at right, topics of greatest interest to them vary markedly from freshman to senior year.

Patterns in parents' interest should inform comm flow strategy

Two specific trends are worth noting.

The first is that some topics are of interest to parents no matter what stage their student is in—these topics being, without exception, cost-related. This suggests that investment in focused content is money well spent, insofar as it has broad appeal across the entire recruitment funnel.

A second trend is that the range of topics parents are interested in changes from year to year—note, for example, that junior year represents a maximum in terms of the number of different topics that parents want information on.

Which Topics Are Parents Interested In at Which Times?

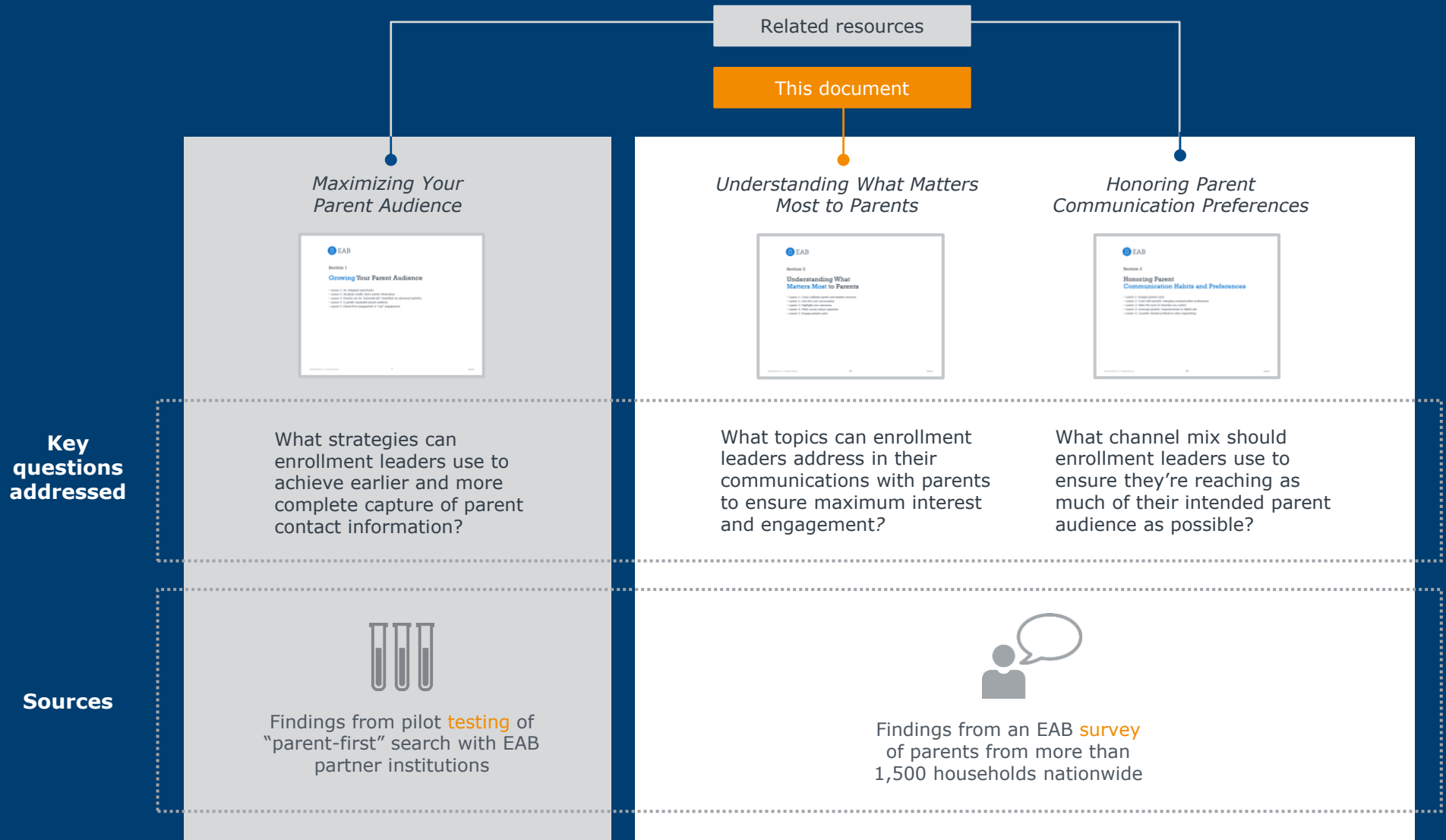
Topics Most Frequently Selected by Parents, by Student's High School Year

Most Frequently Selected Topics	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Costs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scholarships	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sources of funds to pay	✓	✓	✓	✓
Admission requirements	✓	✓	✓	
Majors/minors	✓	✓	✓	
Degree programs	✓	✓	✓	
General information	✓	✓	✓	
Location	✓	✓	✓	
Financial aid		✓	✓	✓
Careers for major		✓	✓	✓
Application deadlines			✓	✓
Student housing options			✓	✓
Jobs for graduates			✓	✓
Campus safety			✓	✓

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Related resources

Learn more about engaging parents of prospective students





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