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.
Lesson 1

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.

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**School Characteristics Influencing College Choice**

*Percentage of Parents Citing Factor as Important to Them and Percentage of Parents Citing Factor as Important to Their Student*

- **Diverging interests, potential for segmented communications**
- **Converging interests, potential for joint communications**

Source: EAB research and analysis.
## Lesson 2

### 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Percentage of Responding Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College costs</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College fit</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of debt incurred</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship availability</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus safety</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job prospects</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness/ability to adapt</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success in college</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifying for financial aid</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission to first-choice school</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Three of parents’ top four concerns are cost-related
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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Mean Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total we will spend</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of debt incurred</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools where my child applies</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of applications my child submits</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What my child studies</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Band</th>
<th>&lt;$15K</th>
<th>$15K–$30K</th>
<th>&gt;$30K</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher-Income Families</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-Income Families</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-Income Families</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Wide variation within and across income bands*

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.*
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.
Lesson 4

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.)

### What Types of Institutions Are Parents Considering?

*Percentage of Responding Parents, 2012 Versus 2018*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>2012 Percentage</th>
<th>2018 Percentage</th>
<th>Change, 2012–2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public 4-year</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private 4-year</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community colleges</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>+12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online schools</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>+200%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: EAB research and analysis.
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

60% of parents begin considering college options before student’s junior year

Earlier Student Engagement Drives Improved Enrollment Outcomes

1.9x Higher enrollment rate for students first engaged as high school sophomores
66-point Higher average enrolled SAT score for students first engaged as high school sophomores
1.4x Higher young-alumni giving rate for students cultivated from their junior or sophomore year in high school

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 sophomores.
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

Parents consider the broadest range of potential locations earlier in their student’s high school career.

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.

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

Source: EAB research and analysis.
Learn more about engaging parents of prospective students

Maximizing Your Parent Audience
What strategies can enrollment leaders use to achieve earlier and more complete capture of parent contact information?

Understanding What Matters Most to Parents
What topics can enrollment leaders address in their communications with parents to ensure maximum interest and engagement?

Honoring Parent Communication Preferences
What channel mix should enrollment leaders use to ensure they’re reaching as much of their intended parent audience as possible?

Key questions addressed

Sources
Findings from an EAB survey of parents from more than 1,500 households nationwide
Findings from pilot testing of “parent-first” search with EAB partner institutions