



The New Path to Enrollment

Insights from EAB's 2026 First-Year Experience Survey

About the First-Year Experience Survey



Research Overview

- **9,516 students** surveyed from **Entering Class 2025**
- Data collected **February and March 2026**
- Topics explored: **college search, application behaviors, and first-year experience**

Participant Profile

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

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

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

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

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

Today's Discussion

Three Shifts Shaping College Search

- 1 Job Market Uncertainty Is Challenging Perceptions of College Value
- 2 Students Are Discovering Colleges and Assessing Fit in New Ways
- 3 Students Are Keeping Options Open Later in Senior Year





Job Market Uncertainty Is Challenging Perceptions of College Value

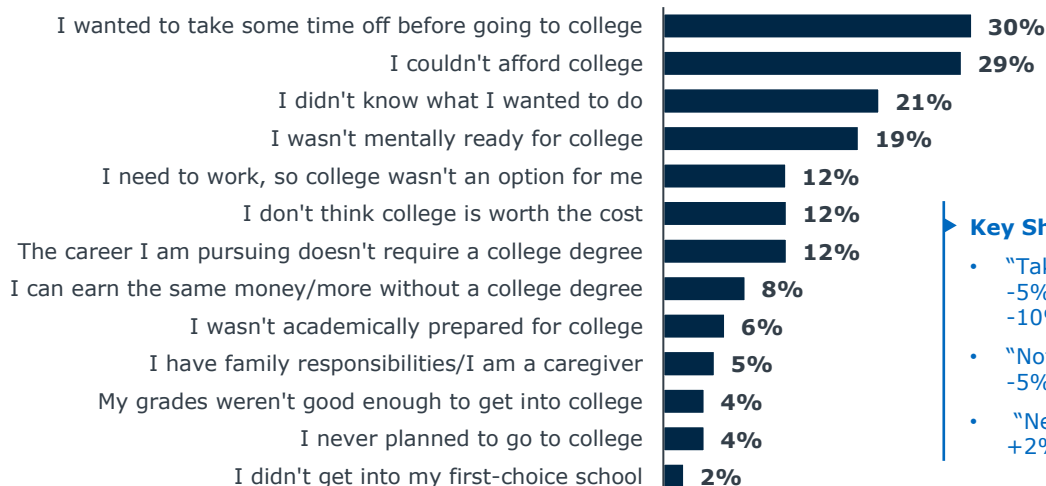
Nonconsumption Plateauing as Pandemic Effects Wane

College-Going Is Stabilizing

89% Of surveyed students enrolled in college in 2025, representing a three-year plateau after consistent declines from EC '17 to EC '23

Reasons for Opting Out of College Have Shifted

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



Key Shifts

- "Taking time off":
-5% vs. EC '24,
-10% vs. EC '23
- "Not mentally ready":
-5% vs. EC '24
- "Need to work":
+2% vs. EC '24

Uncertainty About AI-Driven Workforce Disruption

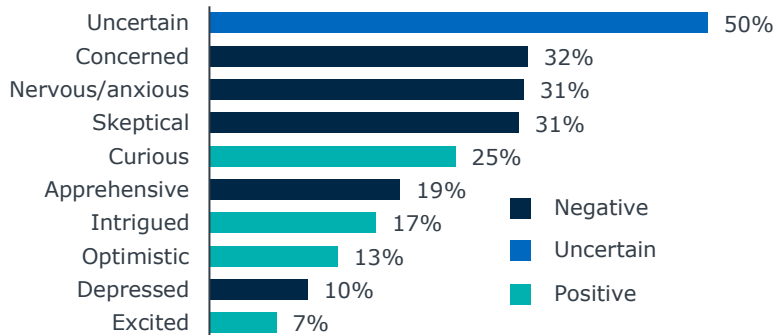
Students Are Split on How AI Will Impact the Necessity of a College Degree

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)



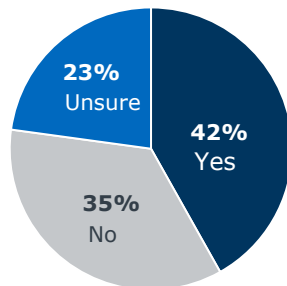
Feeling Unsure and Anxious

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)



Many Anticipating Personal Impacts

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



Doubts About Choice of Major



A Significant Share of Students Have Already Changed Majors Due to AI

10%

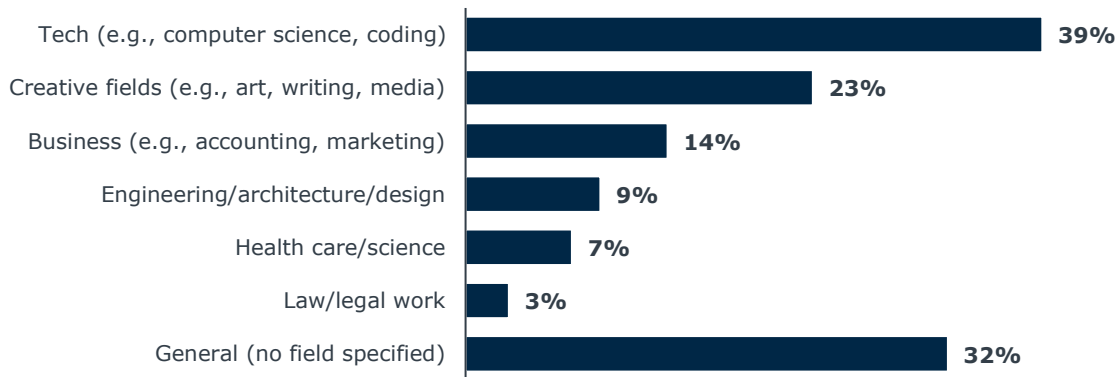
Of first-year college students have already changed their intended major due to AI



"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.**"

Top Categories of Majors Named in Verbatim Responses

AI Analysis of 670 verbatim responses.

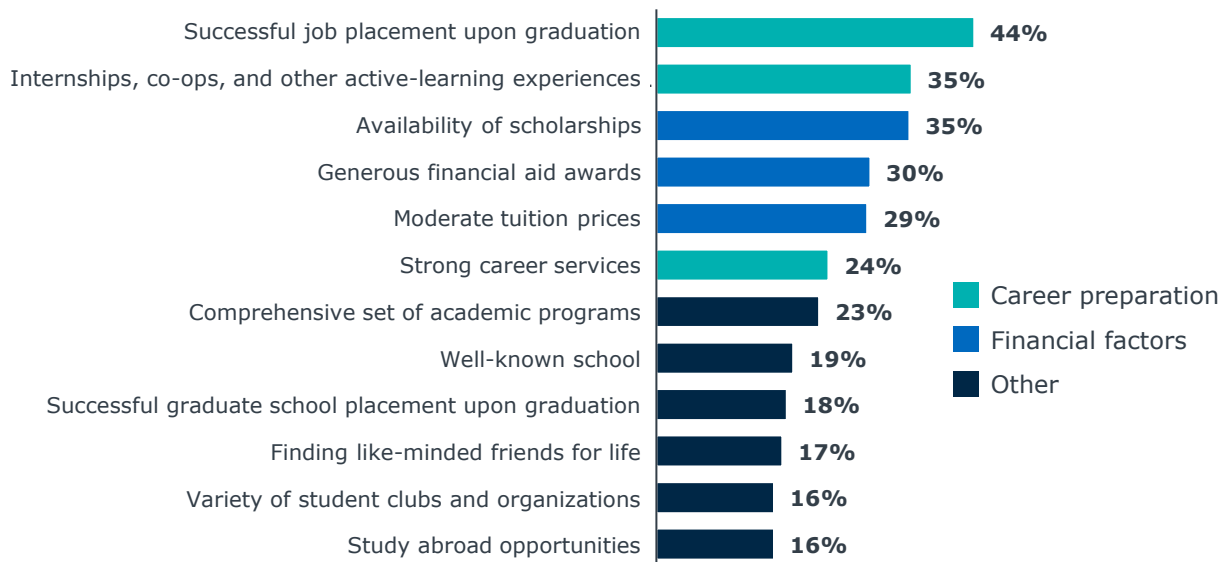


Career Preparation Remains Central to Value



Job Placement and Internships Outrank Financial Factors

Q: What characteristics would you say best represent the value of higher education? (Select up to five.)
Responses >15% shown. (n = 8,494)



What This Means for Enrollment Strategy



Key Takeaway

Value Is Harder to Prove and More Important Than Ever

Strategy Recommendations

► **Lead with outcomes, transferable skills, and clear entry-level career pathways**

Address AI-related career uncertainty by showing how students will build adaptable, workforce-ready skills.

► **Personalize value communication to student concerns**

Students have highly individualized questions about careers, ROI, and affordability that require responsive, tailored engagement.

► **Engage families early in conversations about value and cost**

Build affinity with students early in high school and communicate directly with parents about value, affordability, and career outcomes.



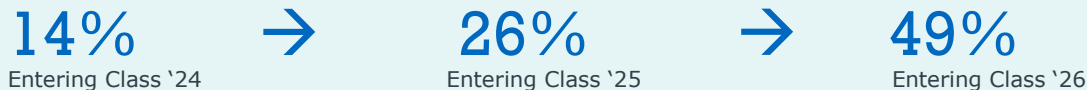
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Students Are Discovering Colleges and Assessing Fit in New Ways

AI Tools Are Quickly Changing College Search



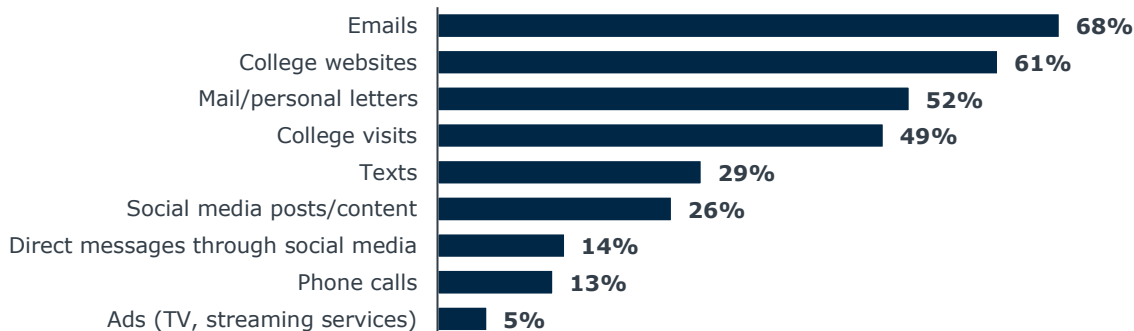
AI Use in College Search Has Surged in the Past Two Years...



Share of students using AI tools such as ChatGPT and Claude in college search

While Search Behaviors Are Changing, College Communications Remain Essential

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

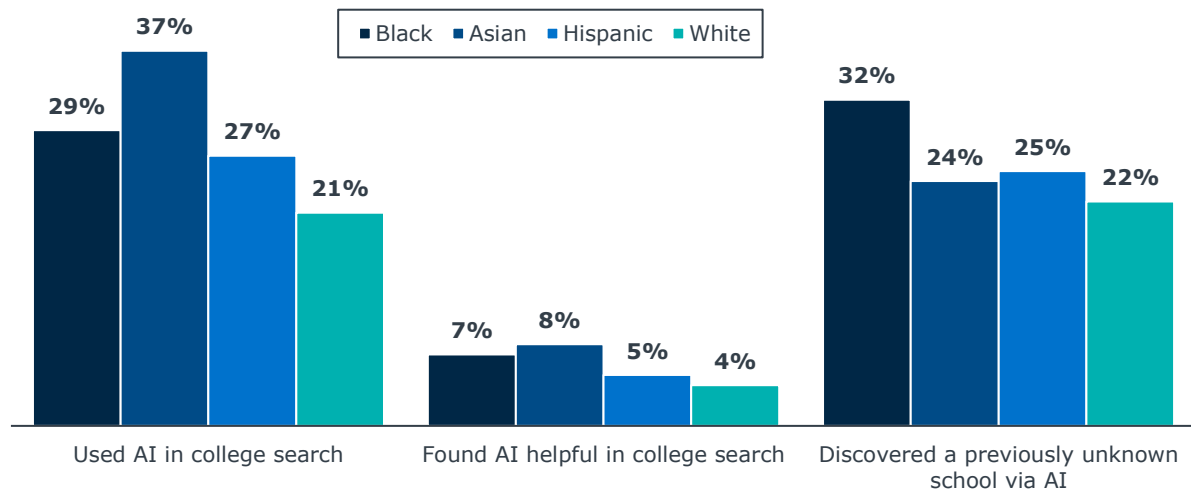


AI Tools Are Expanding Discovery



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

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



Virtual Tours Play an Important Role in Evaluating Fit

49

Virtual Tours Are Especially Helpful for Underserved Students

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

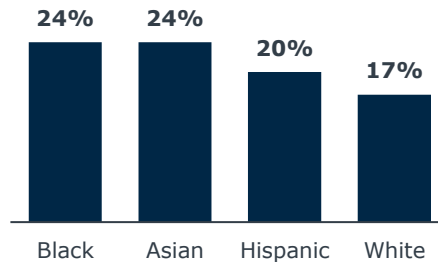
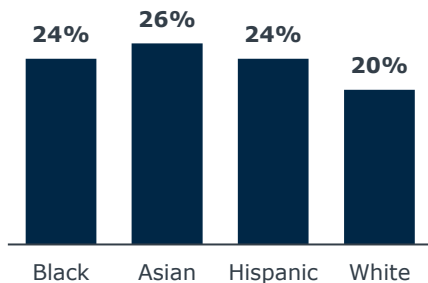
30%

use a virtual tour to compare a school to other schools

Share of Students Who Used a Virtual Tour ...

To help decide whether to apply

To help decide where to enroll



What This Means for Enrollment Strategy



Key Takeaway

Digital Tools Expand Discovery and Enable Personalized Fit Evaluation

Strategy Recommendations

► **Optimize for AI-mediated search and discovery**

Ensure institutional content is accurate, consistent, and easy for AI systems to interpret across platforms.

► **Invest in digital experiences that help students evaluate fit**

Use virtual tours and personalized experiences to support comparison and decision-making.

► **Ensure brand consistency across channels**

Actively manage how your institution is represented across search, social, and third-party platforms.



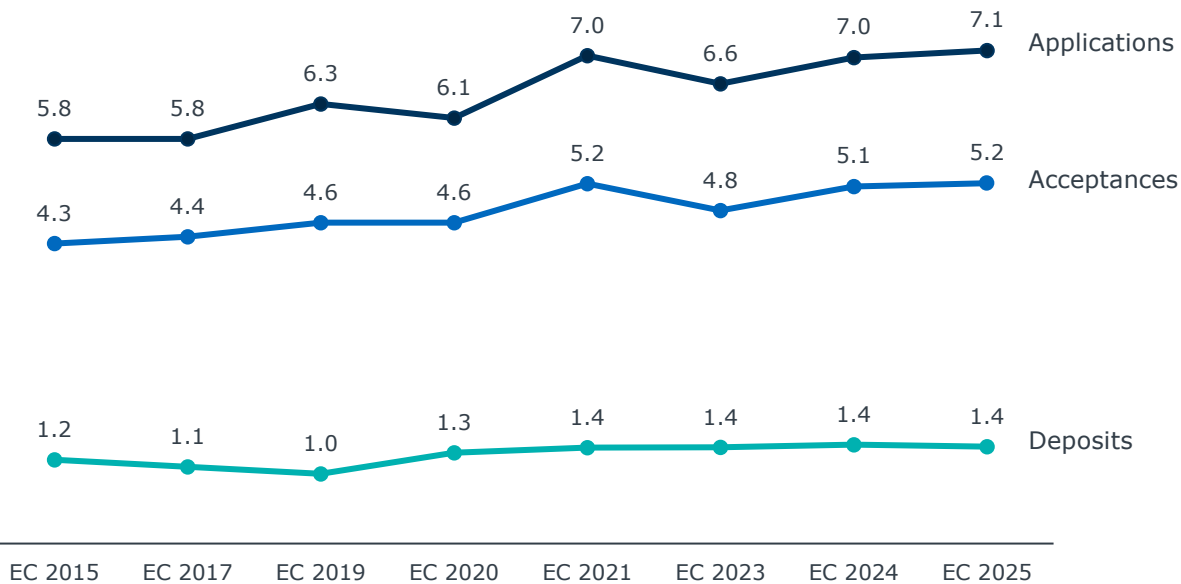
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Students Are Keeping Options Open Later in Senior Year

Competition Is Growing Later in the Cycle



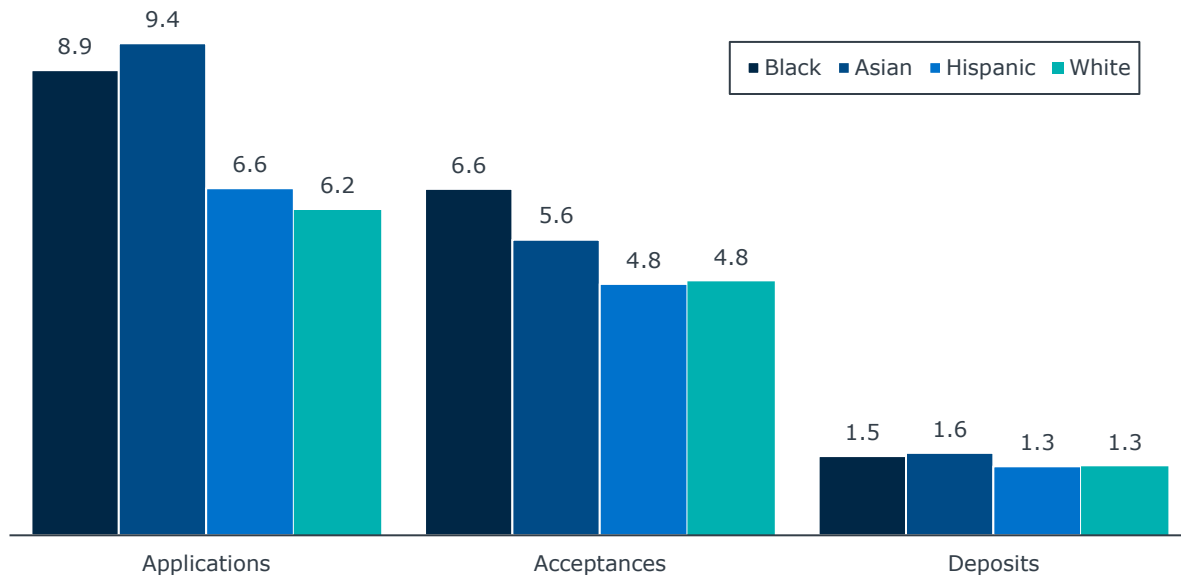
Average Applications, Acceptances, and Deposits per Student



Students of Color Have More Offers and More Options ⁵³

Students of Color Average More Apps, Admits, and Deposits

Average Applications, Acceptances, and Deposits per Student, by Race/Ethnicity

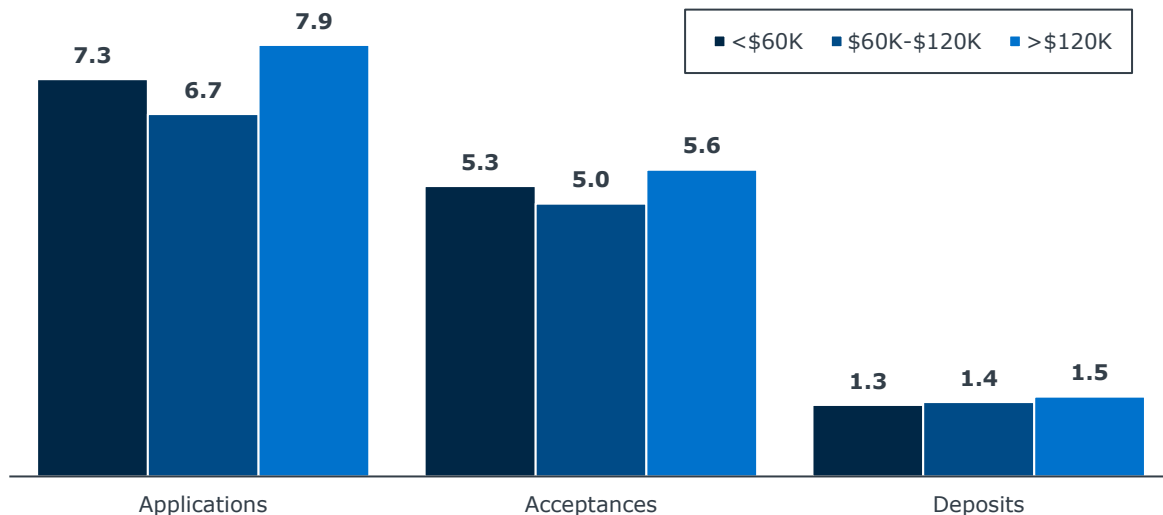


Students with More Resources Submit More Deposits

54

Students from Higher-Income Households Submit 1.5 Deposits, on Average

Average Applications, Acceptances, and Deposits per Student, by Household Income



What This Means for Enrollment Strategy



Key Takeaway

Winning Students Requires Earlier Outreach and Ongoing Engagement

Strategy Recommendations

► **Reach students earlier and sustain engagement throughout senior year**

Build affinity early in high school and continue nurturing students with comprehensive, multichannel engagement plans as they evaluate more options later in the cycle.

► **Keep engagement flexible and tailored to varied decision timelines**

Students are keeping options open longer and making enrollment decisions on their own timelines.

► **AI-enabled tools can help you personalize communication at scale**

Support students and families with responsive, ongoing guidance throughout the decision-making process.