



The Evolving Role of Parents in the Enrollment Journey

Findings from EAB's 2026 National Parent Survey

An Insight Paper on Today's Topic

This Session Consists of Highlights from a More Extensive Resource



INSIGHT PAPER

Findings from EAB's 2026 Parent Survey

New Insights on Your
Most Important Recruitment Allies

What Worries Parents About Their Students' College-Going

Takeaways

Well-being front and center

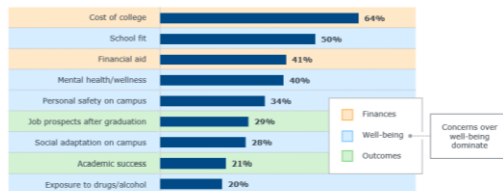
Cost of attendance tops the list of concerns parents have about their students' college going—a finding entirely consistent with the many other indications the survey gave of their preoccupation with college finances.

That said, if you take a broader view of their top concerns, a different pattern emerges—namely a very parental interest in their students' well-being when on campus.

Your communications with parents should, consequently, underscore things your institution is doing to ensure that your students are comfortable, thriving, and well cared for.

What Worries Parents About Their Students' College-Going

Percentage of Respondents, Factors cited by 20% or More of Respondents



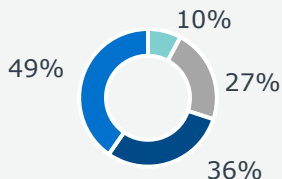
Factors cited by fewer than 20% of Respondents

Getting into top-choice school (17%)	Student's academic preparedness (13%)
Application challenges (15%)	Implications of AI for choice of major (12%)
DEI issues (13%)	Ability to get into graduate school (7%)
Impact of AI on job prospects after graduation (13%)	Other (3%)

Profile of Participating Parents

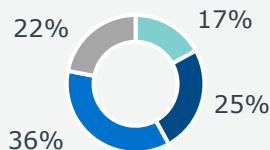
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By Student's High School Class Year



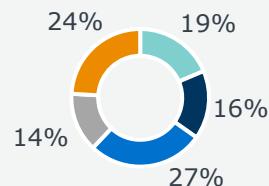
■ Freshman
■ Sophomore
■ Junior
■ Senior

By Household Income



■ \$60K or less
■ \$60K to \$120K
■ \$120K to \$250K
■ >\$250K

By Region of Residence



■ Midwest
■ Northeast
■ Southeast
■ Southwest
■ West



2,515

Parents participated

Key Insights



Ten Survey Findings

1

Parents are **very involved** in their students' college search

2

Affordability continues to dominate parent concerns

3

Aid awards are increasingly central to parents' conception of college value

4

More parents are equating college value with **career outcomes**

5

Student **well-being** is a major parent concern

Key Insights



Ten Survey Findings

6

Parents worry about their students' **ability to thrive**

7

Many schools are not meeting parents' **information needs**

8

Parents want information from you **early** in their students' college search

9

Household income is a key factor influencing parents' concerns

10

Parents' **school-type preferences** vary by region

A Note on Trends Over Time

What Has Changed in the Last Four Years?

Percentage of Survey Respondents

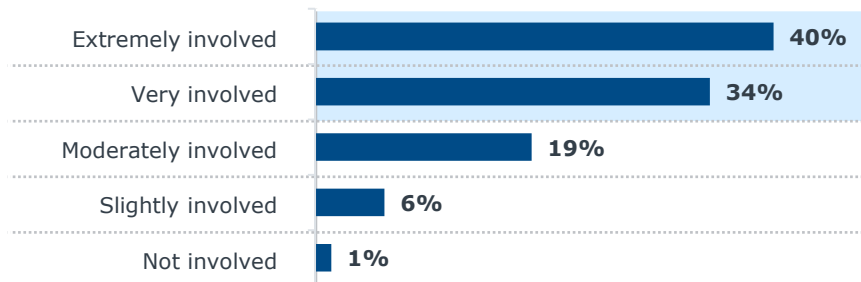
Proportional Change Between 2022 and 2026

	Survey year		Proportional change
	2022	2026	
Parents reporting students' mental health as a major concern	34%	40%	+18%
Parents citing students' career prospects after graduation as a major concern	21%	29%	+38%
Parents citing the financial aid award as a key determinant of college value	26%	32%	+23%

Parents Are Very Engaged

Most Parents Are Very Involved in Their Students' College Search

Around three quarters of parents report being **"very"** or **"extremely"** involved



Parents from all income bands report being highly engaged with their students' college search. Parents' engagement is selective with respect to areas of interest, with financial planning and campus visits being clear standouts. Parents exert less influence on students' choice of school than on other search-related decisions.

Highest Income Households Saw the Most Involvement

How involved are you in your student's college search at this time?

Percentage of Respondents by Household Income

	<\$90K	\$90K to \$150K	>\$150K
Extremely involved	35%	36%	43%
Very involved	34%	35%	36%
Moderately involved	20%	24%	16%
Slightly involved	8%	4%	4%
Not involved	2%	1%	1%

While highest income households saw the highest levels of parental involvement comparatively, there was similar participation across all income groups.

Parents Are Most Involved in Financial Planning



In which areas are you (or will you be) most actively involved in your student's college search?

Respondents could select up to two, Percentage of Respondents by Household Income

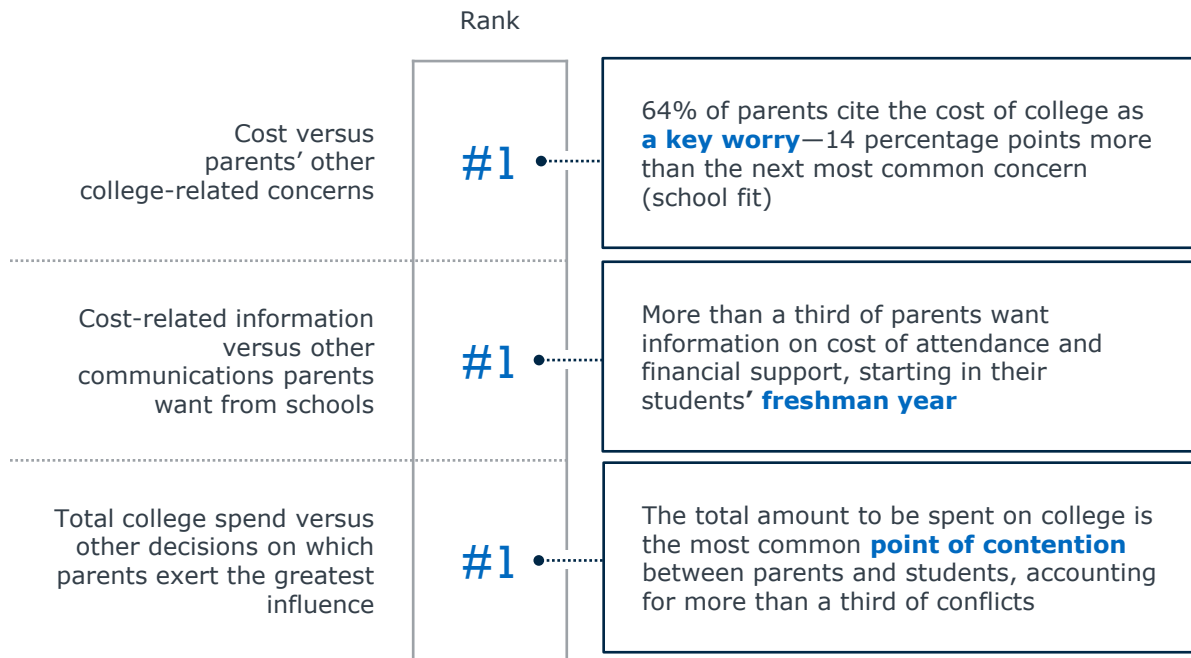
	<\$90K	\$90K to \$150K	>\$150K
Financial planning	58%	57%	50%
Campus visits	41%	52%	59%
Application process	19%	23%	21%
Final school selection	29%	23%	23%
Shortlisting schools	14%	19%	24%
Early exploration of options	15%	15%	16%
Other	5%	3%	2%
No involvement	1%	0%	0%

Financial planning was among the highest area of involvement regardless of income, although more heavily concentrated in lower income households.

Parents from lower income households saw higher levels of involvement in final school selection.

Finances Dominate Parents' College Concerns

No Other Single Consideration Comes Close

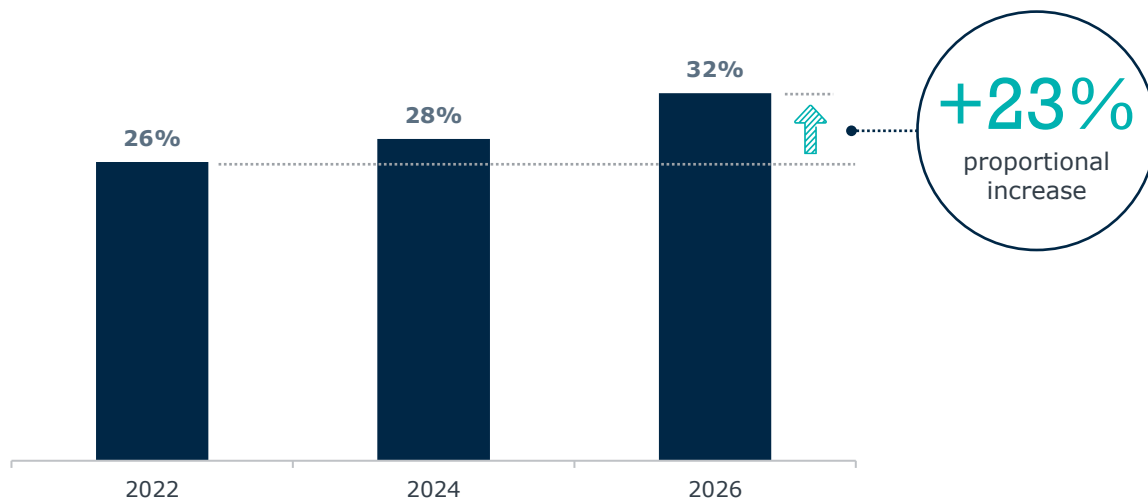


Parents Are Increasingly Focused on Financial Aid

It Is Becoming More Central to Your Value Proposition

Parents Citing Financial Aid Award as a Key Element of College Value

Percentage of Respondents, by Survey Year

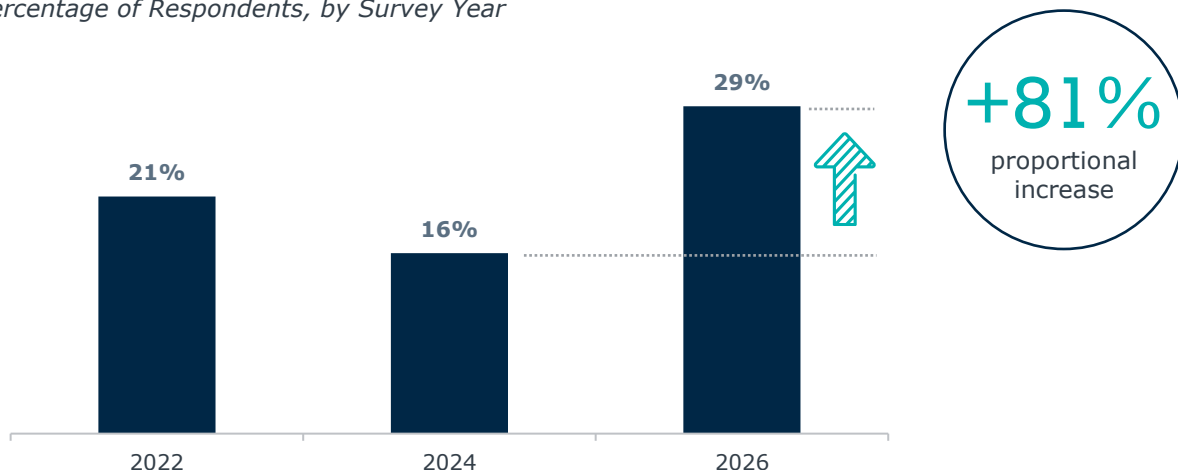


Job Prospects Are a Growing Concern for Parents

Increasing Worry Over Students' Post-Graduation Career Outcomes

Parents Citing Students' Employability as a Top Concern

Percentage of Respondents, by Survey Year



The top four non-financial factors that parents cite when asked what makes a school “worth the cost” are all related to their students’ post-graduation careers: active-learning opportunities (e.g., co-ops), successful job placement after graduation, good career prospects, and earning potential.

Some Nuances in Non-Cost Related Value



Select up to five characteristics you think make a college or university worth the cost of your student attending.

Graph of non-financial characteristics.

	<\$90K	\$90K to \$150K	>\$150K
Successful job placement after graduation	34%	40%	38%
Internships/co-ops/active-learning	35%	39%	42%
Career prospects: fulfilling work	28%	36%	37%
Career prospects: earning potential	30%	30%	29%
Comprehensive set of academic programs	18%	23%	21%
Courses taught by professors (not TAs)	13%	22%	23%
Strong relationships with professors/mentors	18%	19%	29%

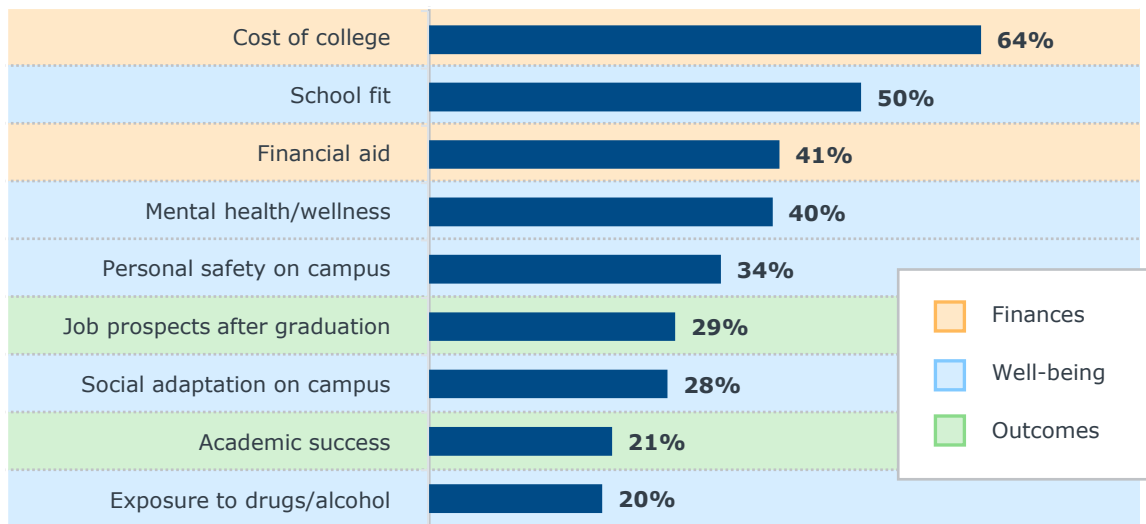
Parents across all household income levels focused on successful job placement after graduation and internships/co-ops. Parents from higher income households were most likely to also focus on careers with fulfilling work and strong relationships with professors and mentors.

Student Well-Being is a Major Issue for Parents

While it Lags Cost, it Otherwise Dominates Parent Concerns

What Worries Parents About Their Students' College-Going

Percentage of Respondents, Factors Cited by 20% or More of Parents



Concerns Around “School Fit” Vary By Income



As you consider college for your student, what makes you most concerned or anxious?

Respondents could Select up to five.

	<\$90K	\$90K to \$150K	>\$150K
Cost of college	68%	74%	57%
School fit	36%	48%	60%
Financial aid	57%	48%	27%
Mental health/wellness	42%	41%	41%
Campus safety	43%	33%	27%
Job prospects after graduation	23%	29%	31%
Social adaptation on campus	23%	23%	34%
Academic success	19%	22%	21%
Exposure to drugs/alcohol	25%	22%	17%
Acceptance at top-choice school	12%	15%	20%
Application challenges	21%	14%	11%

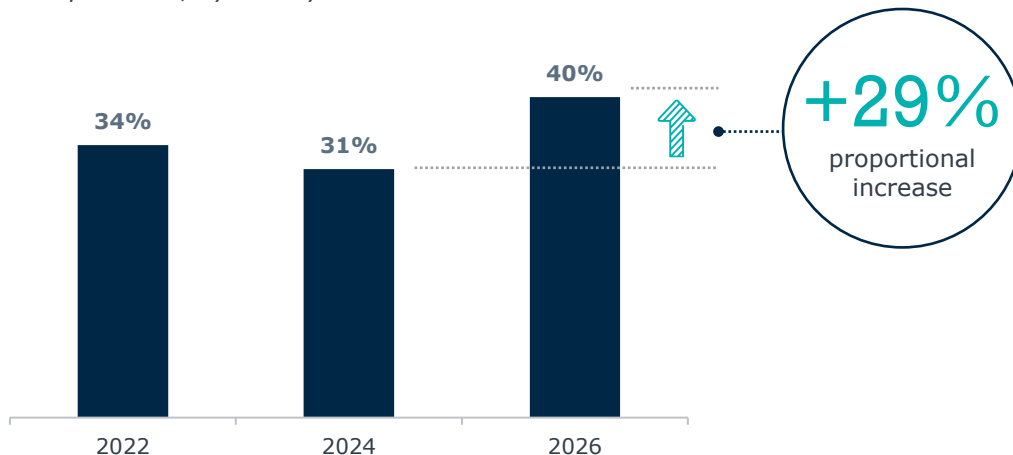
School fit was a particularly salient worry among the highest income households (coming in even above the cost of college). Among lower income households, parents were more likely to worry about mental health/wellness and campus safety than school fit.

Increasing Worry Over Students' Ability to Thrive

Mental Health and Related Concerns Are Top of Mind for Parents

Parents Citing Students' Mental Health and Wellness as a Top Concern

Percentage of Respondents, by Survey Year



Parent concern over their students' well-being is on the increase. This appears to be due, in part, to their perception that students themselves are increasingly worried; many parents report that their students are concerned about their **ability to succeed** after enrolling and their ability to **integrate socially** on campus.

Parents Have Unmet Information Needs

Parents Want to Hear from You But Often Don't Get What They Need

Most parents want to hear directly from recruiting colleges:



71%

of parents say that recruiting colleges should communicate directly with them

But many report being over- or under-contacted...

43%

of parents say they received either too much or too little contact from colleges

20%

of parents did not receive any contact from colleges¹

...and many don't find the information they get to be especially helpful



69%

of parents find information provided to them by colleges to be less than "very" or "extremely" helpful

¹ Includes parents who say they do not recall having heard from colleges.

Parent Interests Evolve Over Time

Evergreen Topics Versus Ones Specific to Different Search Phases

Topics of Interest to Parents, By Student's High School Year

Percentage of Respondents

High School Grade of Student

	9th	10th	11th	12th
Costs of attendance	38%	37%	52%	47%
Financial support offered	35%	33%	47%	45%
Residential life	7%	18%	22%	26%
Admissions process	12%	35%	33%	26%
Academics	28%	35%	38%	25%
Job readiness	12%	15%	22%	24%
Student-support services	13%	13%	20%	24%
Campus visit	13%	27%	32%	24%
Student success	14%	17%	25%	22%

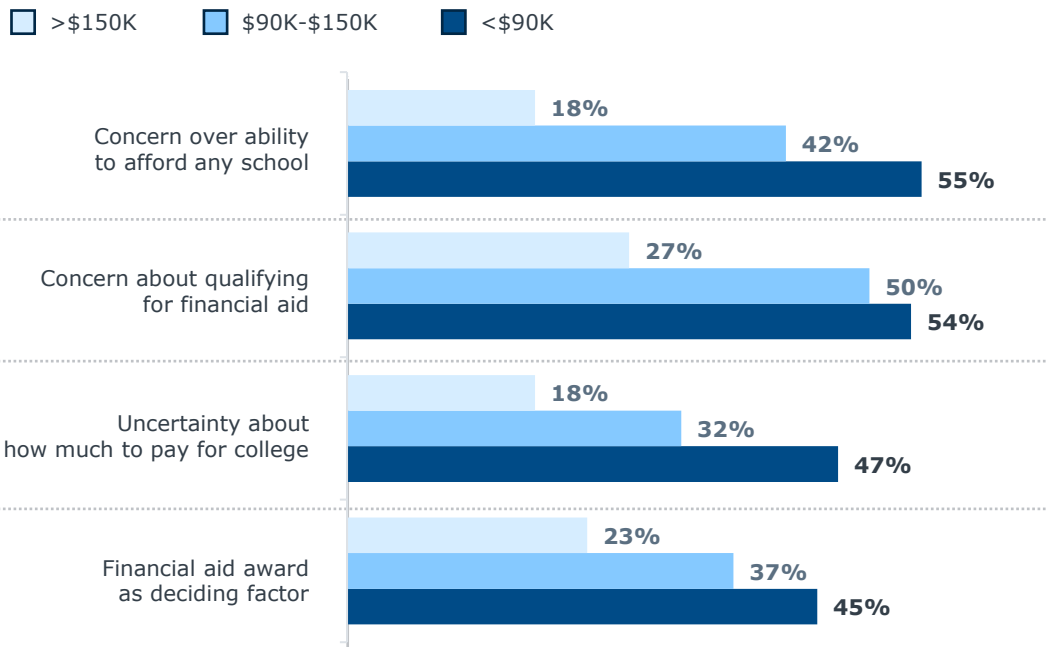
Perennial interest
in financial topics

Parent information needs peak in students' junior year

Income Influences Parents' Cost Concerns

Key Concerns Reported by Parents

Percentage of Respondents, By Household Income



School-Type Preferences Vary by Region

Differences Within and Beyond the Four-Year Space

Types of Schools Being Considered by Parents for their Students

Percentage of Respondents, By Region

	Northeast	Southeast	Midwest	Southwest	West
Public four-year schools	88%	91%	89%	91%	91%
Private four-year schools	85%	59%	73%	55%	64%
Two-year schools	8%	17%	14%	22%	24%
Vocational/technical schools	2%	7%	5%	5%	5%
Online college options	1%	5%	2%	5%	3%
Schools in other countries	9%	7%	8%	9%	11%

Advice for Enrollment Leaders

Focus your communications with parents on their top concerns

- 1 Truly making good on this seemingly obvious piece of advice is not easy; ensure you're investing the right degree of effort in related work. That includes understanding and acknowledging parents' rising priorities.
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Identify and reach parents early

- 2 A rapidly expanding range of options for reaching parents digitally and parents' increasing inclination to engage early with recruiting schools are opportunities you cannot afford to miss out on.
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Encourage families to have open conversations about cost

- 3 Cost is, by a wide margin, parents' top concern. It is also the single most common flashpoint between parents and students. Equip both parties to understand the key issues involved and to resolve differences.
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Treat parents as key recruitment allies

- 4 Today's parents show a very high level of direct involvement in their students' college search and that they are very open to hearing from you. Both facts make them a powerful party to have in your corner.