



EAB



Enroll360

Recruiting the **Anxious** Generation

Insights from EAB's 2025 Student Surveys to Help You Adapt to the Radically Altered Mindset of Today's Potential College-Goers





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Executive Overview

Who Is the “Anxious Generation”?

In his 2024 book *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt explores how today’s teens have undergone what he calls a “great rewiring”—a profound shift in development shaped by the rise of smartphones, social media, and changing parenting norms. Haidt argues that years of growing up with constant digital connection and limited real-world interaction have significantly changed the way Gen Z and Gen Alpha perceive themselves and navigate the world compared to previous generations.

IN THIS REPORT

Understanding the Anxious Generation in Recruitment

The traits of the “Anxious Generation” align with patterns enrollment leaders have noted for years, including shifts in student behavior, communication preferences, and decision-making, that have only intensified in recent cohorts. While EAB has previously explored these dynamics under the label “Gen P” or “Generation Pandemic,” this report broadens the lens, examining long-term cultural and technological influences that extend well beyond the pandemic. Drawing from our three national student surveys conducted during the 2024–2025 academic year, this report highlights the defining characteristics of this generation as they relate to college search and decision-making. It then presents survey insights related to students’ “always online” behavior and shares recommendations for breaking through to today’s digital-native prospects.



Overview of This Research

Findings from EAB’s Three National 2024–2025 Student Surveys

2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey

19,299 current high school students

Topics covered include:

- Preferred communication channels in college search
- Social media, email, and phone habits
- Perceptions of communications from colleges

2025 First-Year Experience Survey

11,500 prospective first-year college students from Entering Class 2024

Topics covered include:

- College search and application behaviors
- Perceptions of colleges and selection criteria for enrollment decision
- Satisfaction with college experience thus far

2024 Mental Health Survey

7,720 high school and first-year college students

Topics covered include:

- Experiences with mental health challenges
- Effects of mental health on the college search process
- Anxieties about applying to and enrolling in college

For participant profiles and additional survey details, see page 30.



PART ONE

Key Traits of the Anxious Generation in College Search



1 Always Online and Highly Distractible



Today's Teens Live Online

Today's teens are constantly checking their phones or being distracted by online content. According to a 2024 Pew survey, 45% say they're online "almost constantly," and 33% say the same about social media. Even when not actively scrolling, they're being pulled back: Haidt estimates the average teen receives 11 push notifications per waking hour, or about one every five minutes.

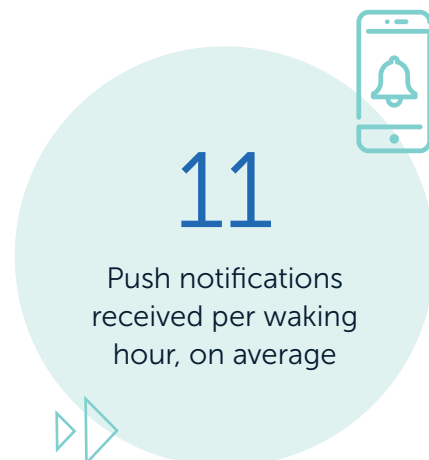
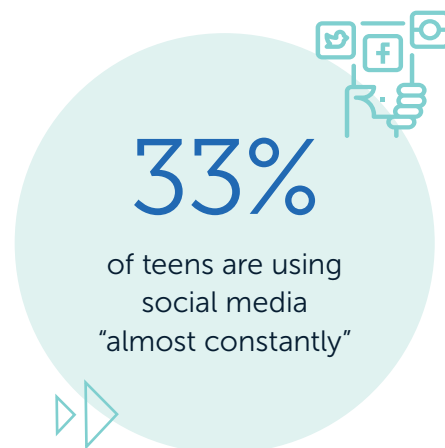


Even when members of Gen Z are not on their devices and appear to be doing something in the real world, such as sitting in class, eating a meal, or talking with you, a substantial portion of their attention is **monitoring or worrying (being anxious) about events in the social metaverse.**

Jonathan Haidt
The Anxious Generation

Teens Are Constantly Plugged In

Pew Research and The Anxious Generation

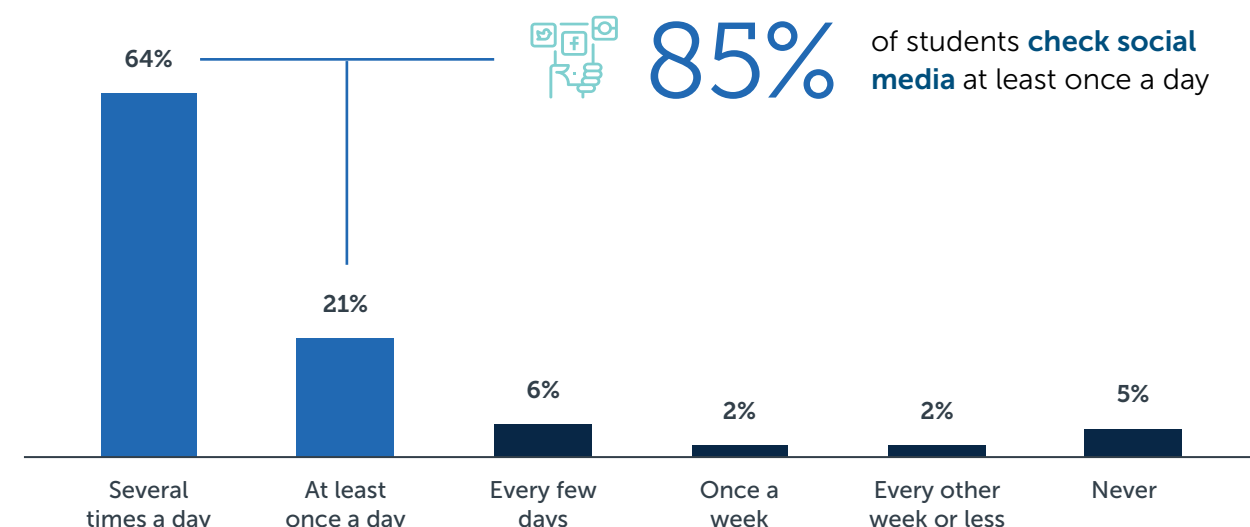
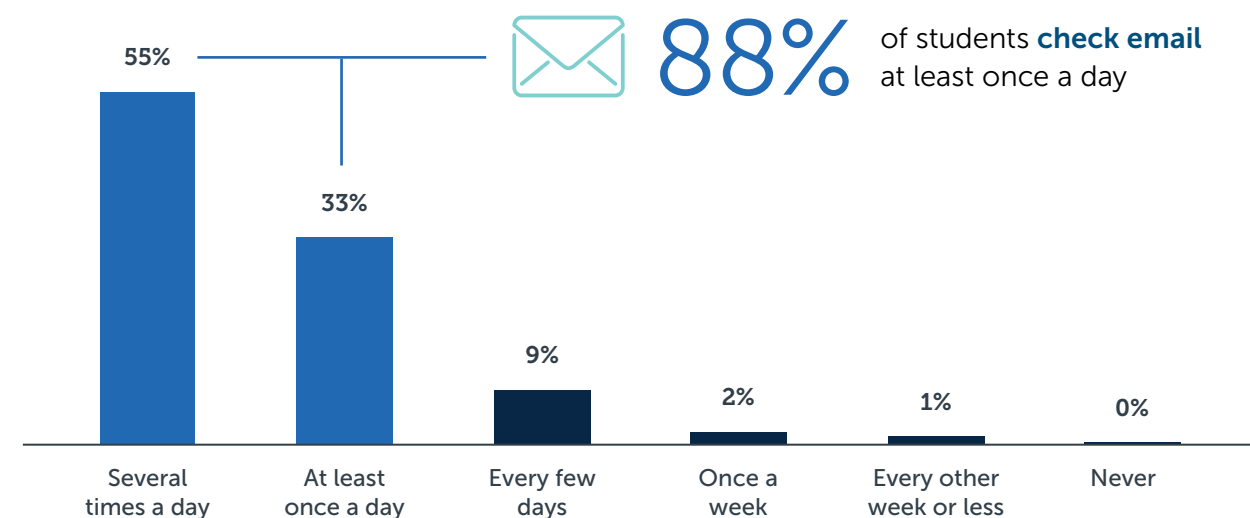


A Double-Edged Sword for Recruitment Marketers

This always-online behavior presents both a challenge and an opportunity for colleges. On one hand, it gives institutions a direct line to students through channels such as search, email, and social media. As the EAB data below illustrates, students report checking email and social media daily. On the other hand, recruitment marketers face stiff competition for students' attention online from the many other, highly engaging types of content, from TikTok trends to video games, and more. Part 2 of this insight paper shares our top survey insights to better understand students' digital habits in college search and win their attention.

How Often Do You Check the Following Platforms?

2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



2 Often Struggle with Mental Health Challenges

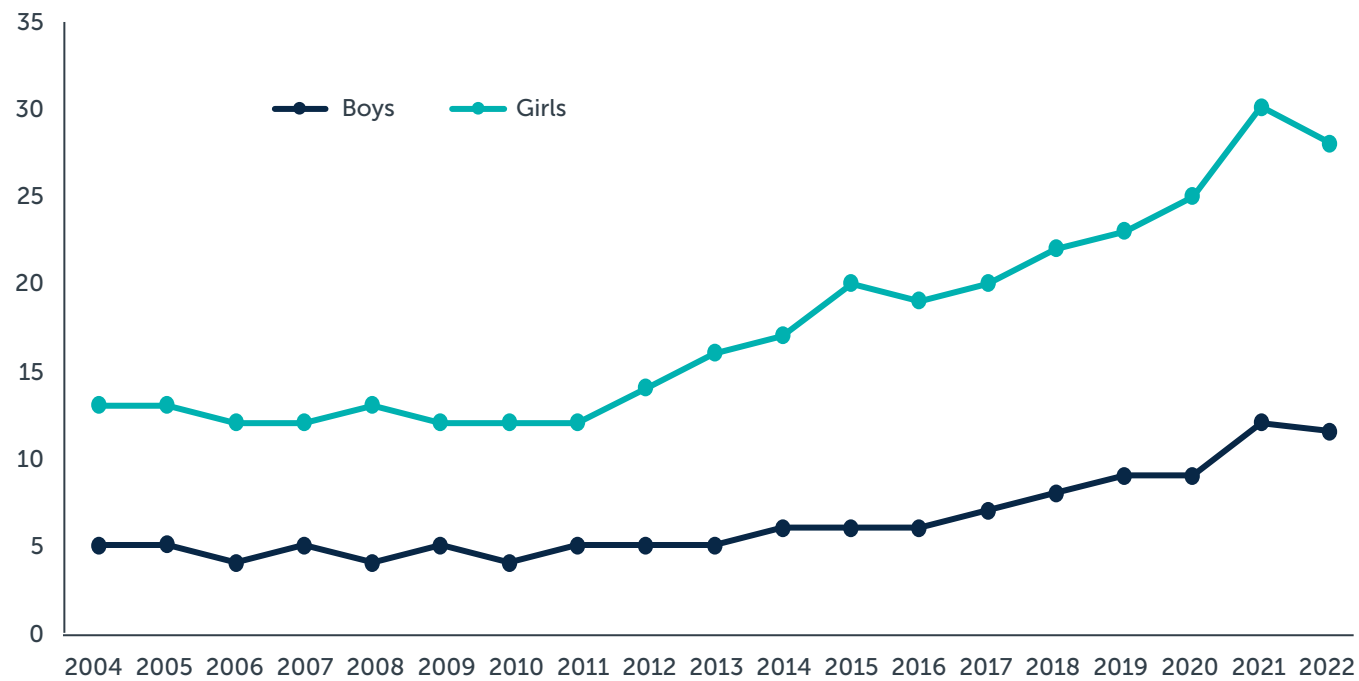


A Rise in Teen Mental Health Challenges

Over the past 10 to 15 years, mental health issues—especially anxiety and depression—have risen sharply among teens, while remaining relatively stable among adults over 30. In *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt attributes this trend to the rise of tech use among children and teens. Over the past several years, EAB has been tracking how this mental health crisis affects education, from college decision-making to student readiness and success.

Percentage of US Teens Who Reported a Major Depressive Episode in the Last Year

12–17-Year-Olds, National Survey on Drug Use and Health



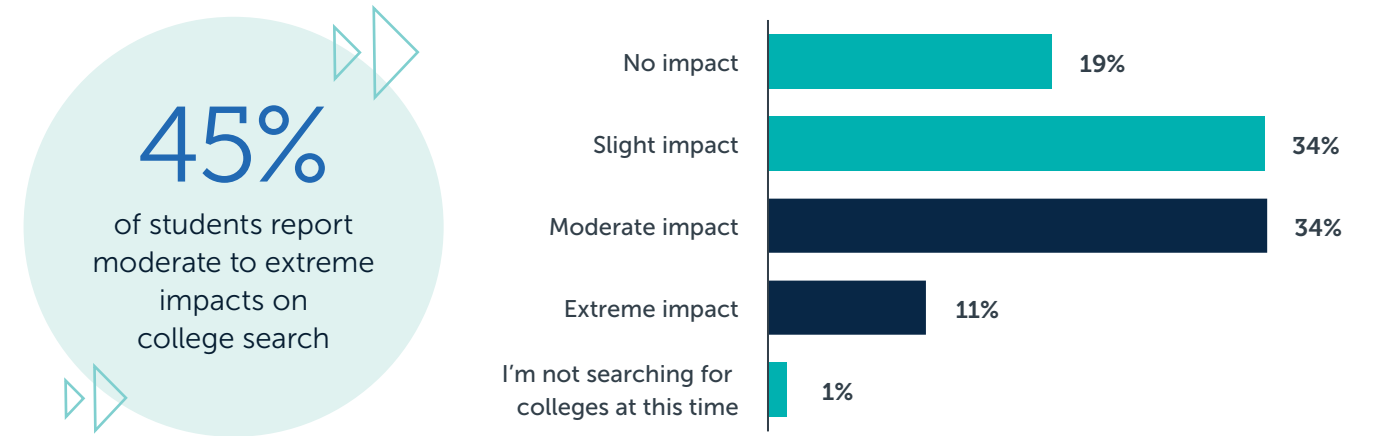
Impacts on the College Search Process

In our 2024 Mental Health Survey, 94% of students reported feeling nervous, anxious, lonely, or isolated. Of that group, 79% said that these feelings impact their college search process, with 45% reporting moderate to extreme effects.

Unsurprisingly, students overwhelmingly reported college costs as their top stressor. Other anxieties included making the right choices of college, choosing what to study, and fears about writing essays and taking standardized tests as part of the application process. As in our 2023 version of the same survey, non-male, lower-income, and first-generation students were more likely than their peers to report that mental health challenges impacted their college search.

How much do your feelings of nervousness, anxiety, loneliness, and/or isolation impact your college search process?

Asked of students who felt nervousness, anxiety, loneliness, and/or isolation, 2024 Mental Health Survey (n=6,398)



Mental Health as a Factor in College Enrollment

Mental health concerns also manifest in how and whether students choose a college. Across our 2024–2025 student studies, the percentage of students not enrolling or indicating they are unsure about college has either remained flat or decreased slightly compared with the previous year, a positive indicator after years of increase. Still, the share of students opting out of college remains higher than it was five and ten years ago, with 11% of our First-Year Experience Survey participants now reporting that they are not currently enrolled in college. Among that group, mental health concerns are a major factor for nonconsumption, with 21% of students who opted out of college saying they did so for mental health reasons, behind only cost concerns and wanting to take time off.

Support for mental health is both a concern and priority among students who decide to enroll in college as well. When we asked first-year students what a “safe” campus meant to them, 67% said that it included support for mental health and wellness.





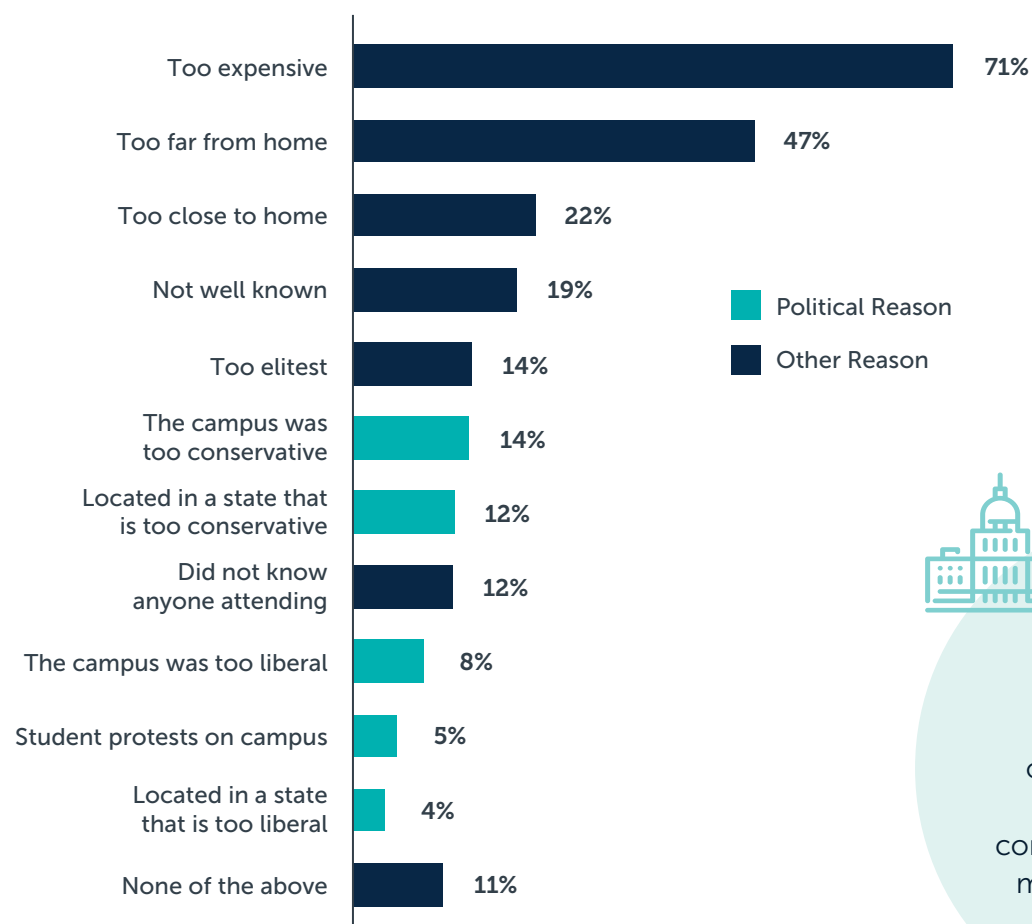
The Anxious Generation Seeks a Values-Aligned College

Gen Z is values-driven. As Roberta Katz of Stanford’s Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences puts it, they “deeply care about others and strive for a diverse community.” Our survey data reveals that politics influence college choices for a significant share of students, with 29% reporting they had removed a college from their consideration set for a political reason. More students dropped schools for being “too conservative” than “too liberal,” and higher-income students were more likely than their peers to remove colleges across all political reasons.

Almost a Third of Students Removed a College from Their Consideration Set for Political Reasons

Why students removed schools from their consideration set; students could select multiple responses

2025 First-Year Experience Survey (n=10,271)



29%

of students removed a school from their considerations for one or more political reasons



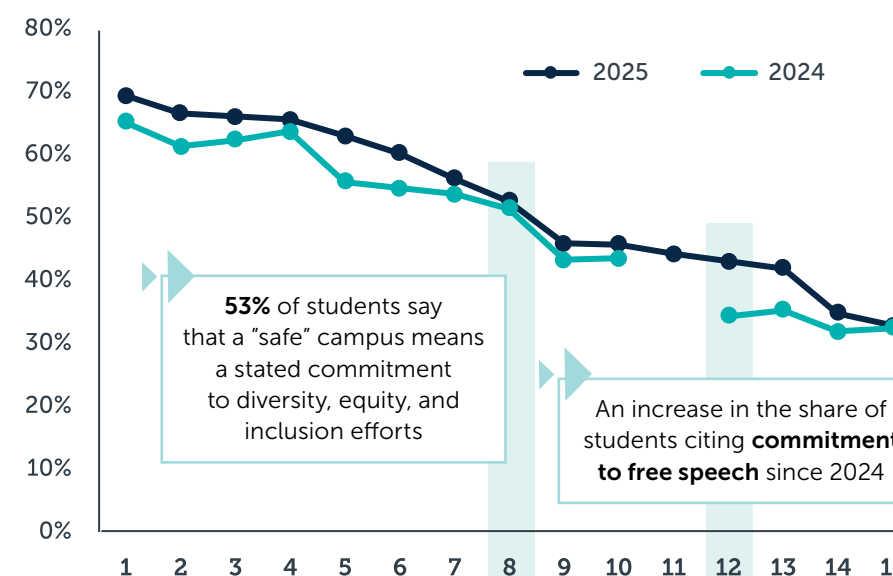
Many Students Perceive Free Speech and DEI Support on Campus as Safety Issues

Our data sheds light on students’ perceptions of hot-button political issues such as free speech and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. When asked what defines a “safe” campus, 60% of students surveyed in 2025 said it includes “freedom to express my thoughts and values without harassment”—an increase from 55% in 2024 that is likely a reflection of the campus protests related to Palestine in 2023 and 2024. In addition, 53% said that a school’s stated commitment to DEI contributes to a safe campus, a view that was especially strong among low-income students.

As DEI efforts are being rolled back across the country, creating a true sense of belonging—especially for historically underrepresented students—is more important than ever. For enrollment marketers, this highlights the importance of authenticity and prioritizing messages of inclusion. Showcasing diverse student voices isn’t optional; it’s essential to connect with Gen Z.

Q: What does a safe campus environment mean to you?

Students could select multiple responses, 2025 First-Year Experience Survey (n=3,228)



1. Campus police who are helpful and approachable
2. Support for mental health and wellness
3. Low or no instances of sexual assault
4. Low or no property crime
5. Support for physical health and wellness
6. Freedom to express my thoughts and values without harassment
7. No history of gun violence
- 8. School has stated commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion**
9. Students like me on campus
10. Freedom to express my cultural identity without harassment
11. No violence when students protest
- 12. School has stated commitment to free speech**
13. Faculty and staff like me on campus
14. School has stated commitment to social justice
15. Freedom to express my gender identity without harassment





PART TWO

Survey Insights to Break Through to Today's Always-Online Students



1 College Search Starts in Students' Digital Comfort Zone



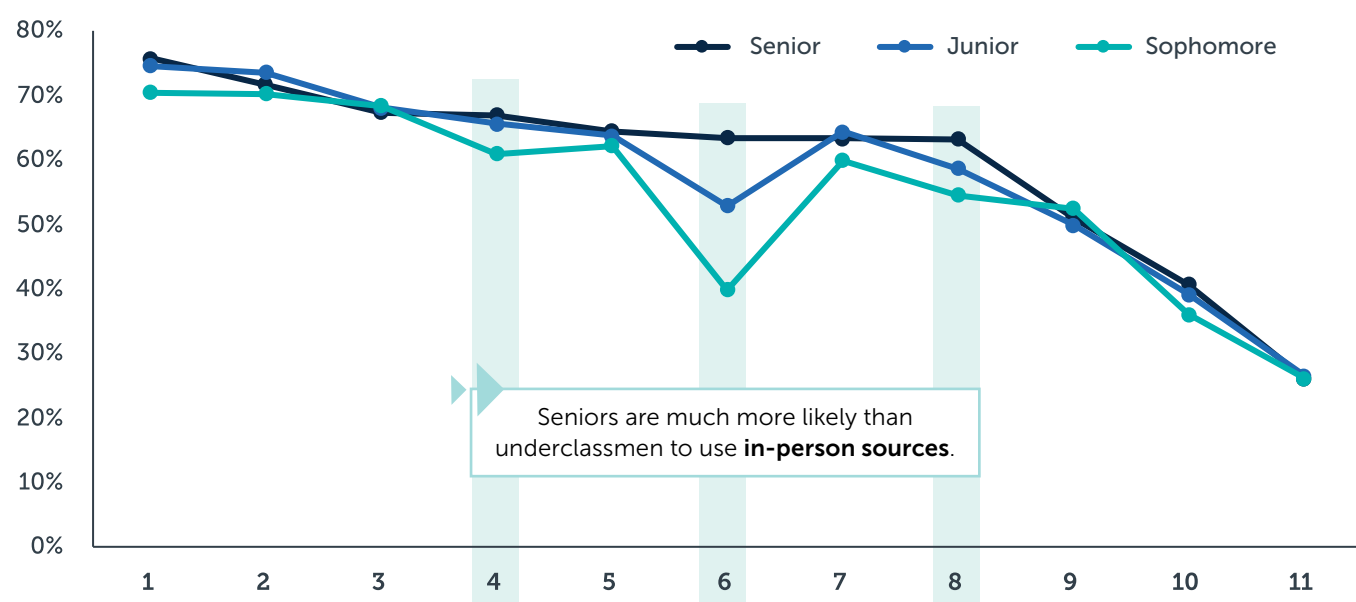
Online Search Is Students' Top Channel, Especially Early On

College search starts online, which makes sense for a generation raised in the digital world. Students are most comfortable gathering information in familiar digital spaces, making online search their go-to resource across all high school grades. As shown in the chart below, in-person resources, by contrast, are used more often by juniors and seniors, who are further along in the process and more likely to expand their search to include "real-world" touchpoints such as counselors and campus events.

Comfort levels with online search vary according to demographics. In our First-Year Experience Survey, higher-income students were more likely than middle- and lower-income students to name online resources among their two most helpful sources in college search, while middle- and lower-income students were more likely to name communications directly from colleges.

Q: Select all the resources you have used to gather information about colleges

By high school year, 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



Seniors are much more likely than underclassmen to use **in-person sources**.

- Online resources (e.g., specific college websites, college search sites)
- Search engines (e.g., Google, Bing)
- Communications from colleges (e.g., email, mail, text messages, virtual tours)
- High school resources (e.g., teachers, coaches, counselors)
- Family (e.g., parents, guardians, siblings)
- In-person events (e.g., campus tours, college fairs, information sessions)
- College apps (e.g., Big Future, Niche, Scior)
- Friends/significant others/classmates
- Social media
- Adult advisors (e.g., CBO counselors, independent counselors, religious advisors)
- AI chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, on college websites)



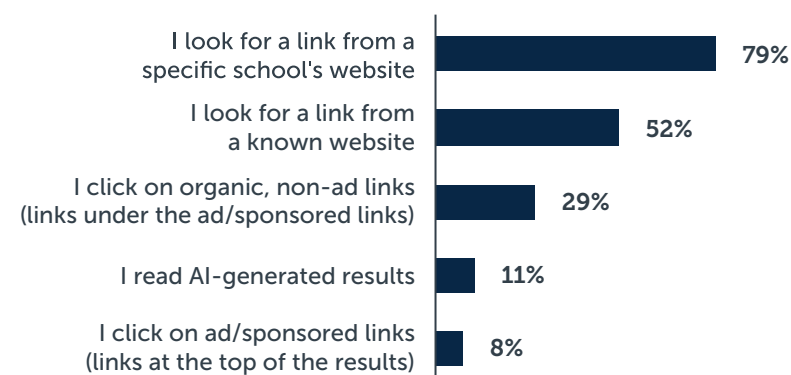
Your Website Remains the Center of Students' Online Search

When asked what resources they prefer when searching for college info online, students overwhelmingly said they start by looking for a link to a specific school's website, followed by links from other trusted sources. This web-savvy generation tends to begin its search with familiar, credible sites. Even so, significant numbers of students also reported clicking on less familiar sources, with 29% clicking on organic search results and 11% exploring AI-generated answers—a share that is likely to grow as AI-based search results become more sophisticated. As in previous years, students most often turn to school websites to find information about academics and cost.

How Students Search for Info Online

Q: When searching for information about colleges online, which of the following scenarios reflect how you gather information? (Select all that apply.)

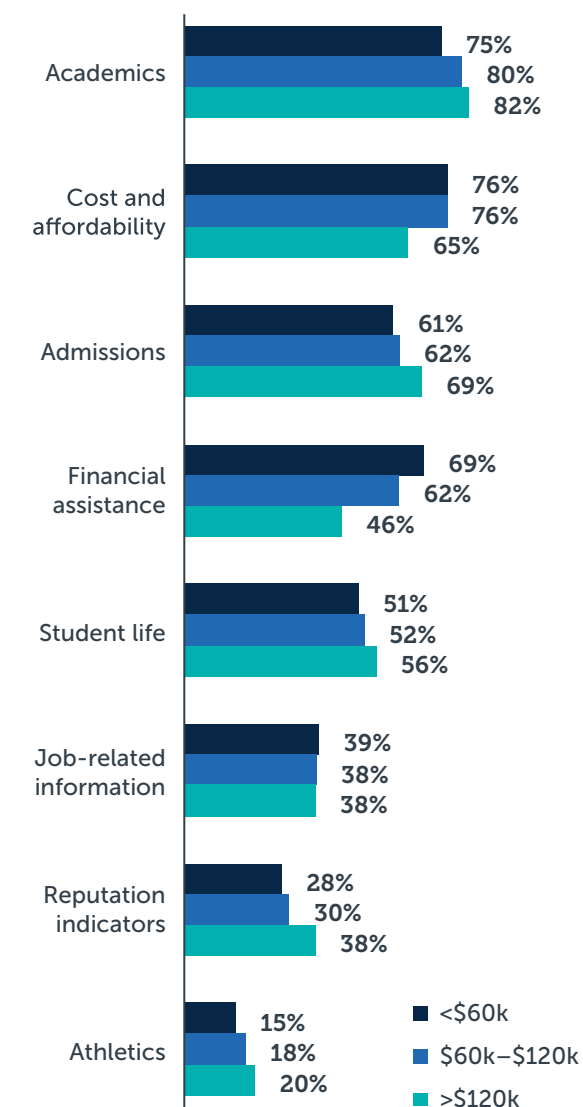
Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



Key Info Students Look For: Academics and Cost

Q: When visiting specific college websites, what information are you most often trying to find? (Select all that apply.)

Responses by household income, 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



Strategy Recommendations



Your Website Remains Critical

Ensure your website is search engine-optimized both for traditional and zero-click (AI-based) search results. For more, visit eab.com/optimized-edu.



Provide Academic Information About Programs and Support Services

Given the Anxious Generation's concerns about success in college, it's important for academic information on your site to not only include resources on programs and majors but also the support services that can help students feel confident they will succeed.

2 Social Media Is Both a Key Research Tool and a Major Distraction



How Colleges Factor into Students' Social Media Habits

Social media plays a central role in students' lives and influences their college search. Ninety-seven percent of students use at least one social platform, with the most popular being Instagram and YouTube (77% each), followed by Spotify (55%), TikTok (54%), and Snapchat (49%). Eighty percent have searched for colleges on social media, with Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Reddit being the top platforms. Nearly three-quarters (72%) also reported interacting with colleges by following, liking, watching, or sharing content, with Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube being the most popular platforms.

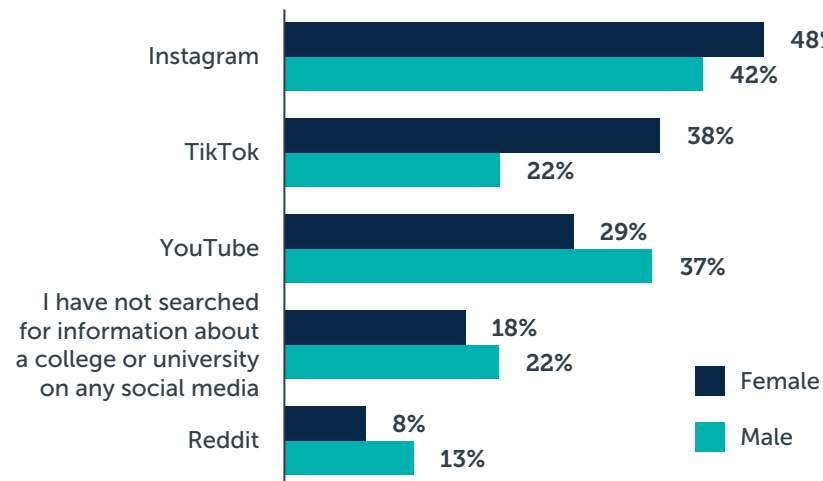


Social Media Behaviors Differ by Gender

The Anxious Generation highlights gendered online behaviors: Girls spend more time on social media, while boys favor video games. Our data reflects gendered trends in college research, too: Eighty-two percent of girls use social media to research colleges, compared to 78% of boys. Platform preferences diverge further: Girls are more likely to use TikTok and Instagram to research colleges, while boys favor YouTube and Reddit. Given that TikTok and Instagram are top recruitment channels, this imbalance may exacerbate ongoing disparities in college interest and engagement between male and female students.

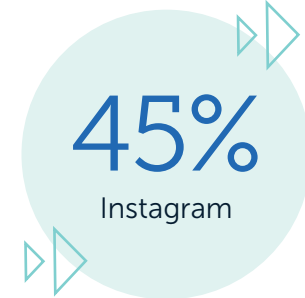
Q: On which social media have you searched for information about a college or university?

Asked of students who use social media (n=16,886), female vs. male students, responses with >10% only, 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey



Top Social Media Platforms in College Search

Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



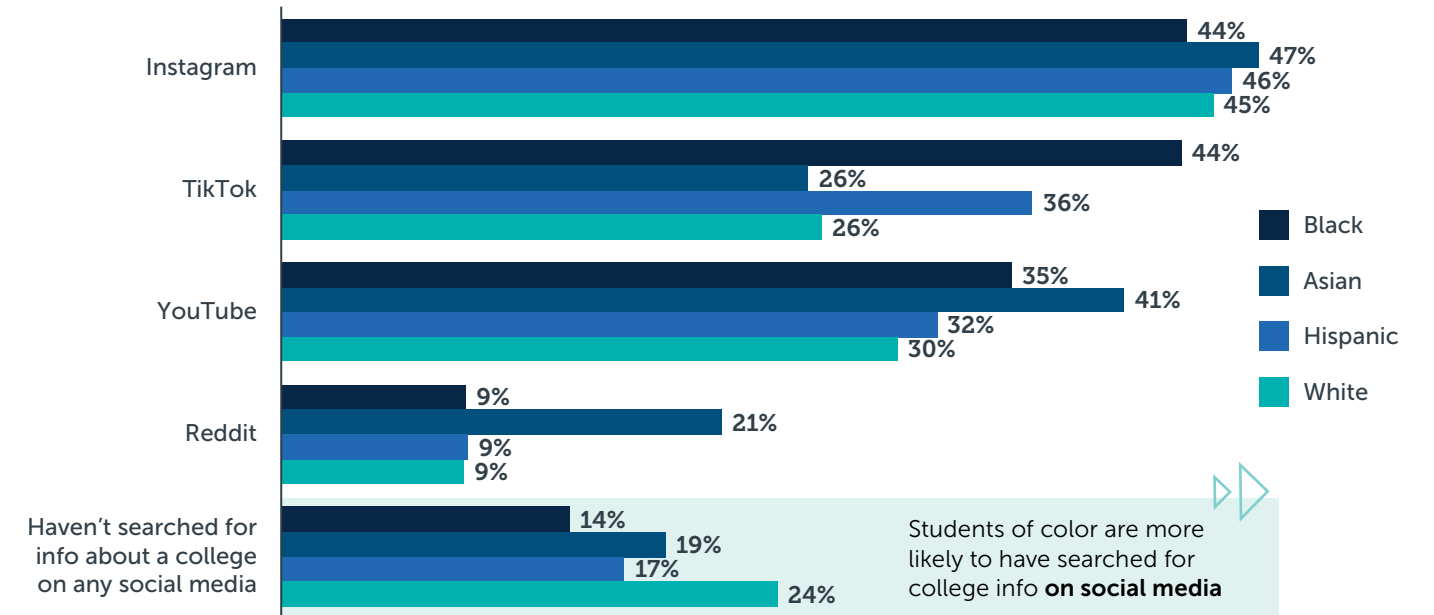
Historically Underserved Populations Are More Likely to Turn to Social Media in College Search

We also found notable differences in social media use by race, income, and first-generation status. Students of color are more likely than White students to use social media both overall and to research colleges. Lower-income students are also more likely than higher-income students to research colleges on social media.

First-generation students also show greater openness to college outreach on these platforms: Seventy-six percent have interacted with colleges via social media (vs. 72% of non-first-generation), and 16% are open to messages early in their search (vs. 13% of non-first-generation). These trends suggest social media can be a particularly effective channel for reaching certain historically underrepresented students.

Q: On which social media have you searched for information about a college or university?

Students could select multiple responses, asked of students who use social media (n = 16,886), responses with 10% or more, by race/ethnicity, 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey



Strategy Recommendations



Create Highly Engaging Content

Since students actively research colleges on social media, it's essential to create content that stands out amid competing entertainment. Use tactics such as student influencers and trending audio to capture their attention.



Prioritize Instagram

Instagram remains the most widely used platform across demographics. TikTok and YouTube are also important, but be mindful of engagement differences by student gender and race.



Reach Historically Underrepresented Students

Social media is a particularly strong tool for reaching certain underrepresented student populations, meaning it's especially important to showcase authentic, diverse student voices and stories to foster a sense of belonging.

3 Students Are Open to Digital Ads, Especially Early in Their Search



Students Remain Open to Social Media Ads

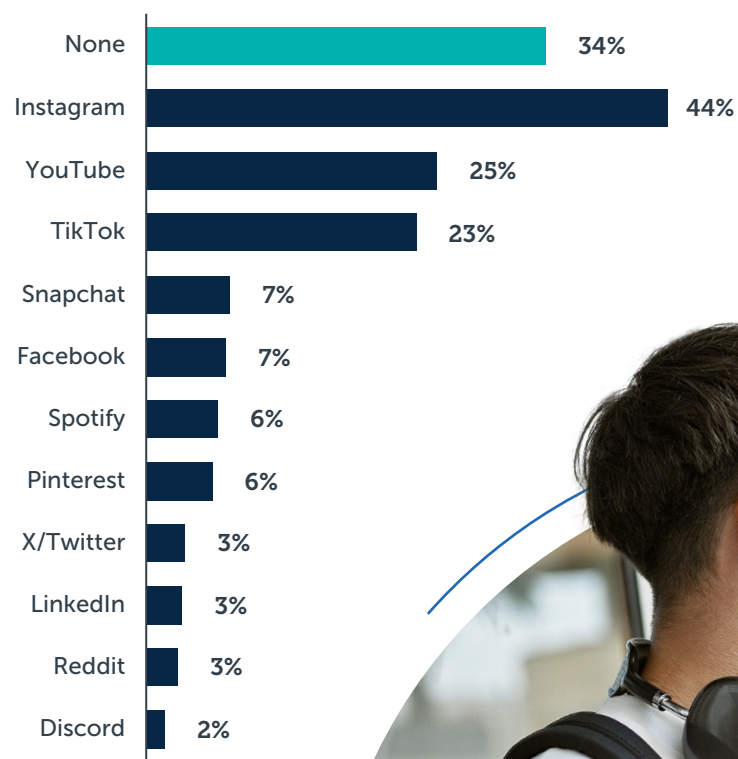
While Gen Z and Gen Alpha are savvy, discerning social media users who favor authentic content, 66% remain open to receiving ads from colleges. The platforms students are most receptive to (Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok) are also their most-used and preferred.

Consistent with their openness to researching colleges on social media, first-generation college students are more likely to be amenable to receiving ads on social media than the average of all students. Seventy-five percent of first-generation students are open to receiving social media ads from colleges, suggesting this channel may be especially effective in reaching this population.

66% of Students Are Open to Receiving Ads via Social Media

Q: On which of the following social media would you be open to receiving ads from colleges? (Select all that apply.)

2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n= 16,886)



66% of students are open to receiving ads via social media

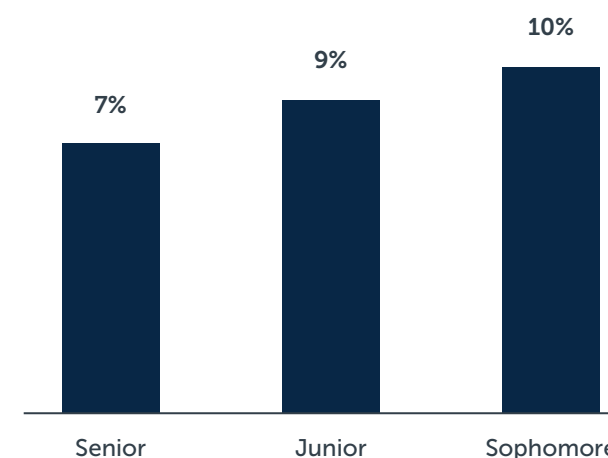


Ads Drive Awareness More than Engagement

Although students are open to digital ads, they don't often engage with them. Just 8% of students say they click on sponsored results when searching for college information. Sophomores are more likely to engage with ads than juniors or seniors, which supports the idea that digital advertising is best used as a brand-awareness tool early in the college search process. For students who are further along, channels such as email and in-person events are more effective for driving actions such as filling out inquiry forms or starting applications.

Ad Click Rates Are Highest Among Younger Students but Relatively Low Overall

Percentage of Students Who Say They Click on Ads/Sponsored Links When Searching for Info on Colleges, 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



8% of students click on sponsored results when searching for college information

Strategy Recommendations



Pursue Digital Ads as an Awareness Channel

Today's social media-savvy teens remain open to social media ads from colleges, especially on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Use paid ads as a tool for building awareness about your brand, especially with students who are early in their college search.



Shift to Direct Channels Later in College Search

As students move closer to making decisions, use more targeted and direct approaches such as email and in-person events to prompt them to take concrete next steps.

4 Email Remains Students' Top Source for Hearing Directly from Colleges



Email Is Students' Preferred Channel

Despite rising use of social media and digital platforms, email remains the most trusted and preferred channel for students to receive information from colleges—both early in their search and after short-listing schools. As shown below, it ranks above college websites, mail, and college visits. While, as previously discussed, 88% of students check email at least daily, even among the remaining 12% of students, email is still a top channel, as indicated by the royal blue and teal lines below.



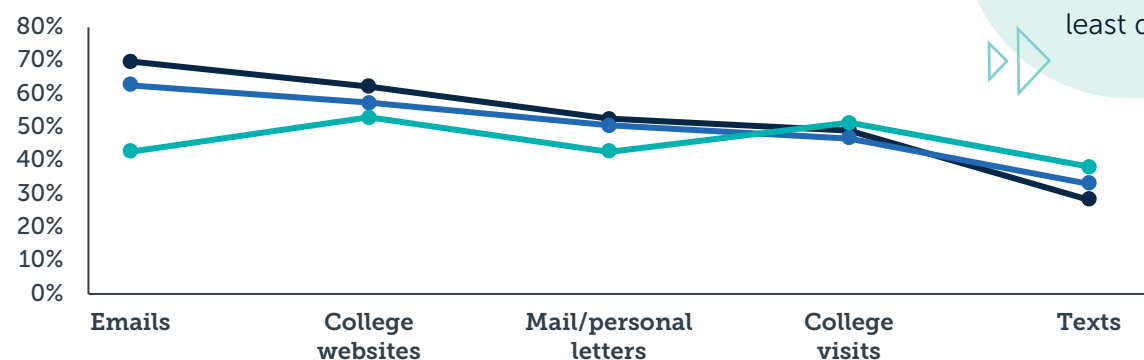
High Email Usage Even Among Survey Participants Who Did Not Respond via Email

Email use was high even among students who did not access the survey via email. While most responded via email invitations, others came through social media or other channels. Even among the non-email-based respondents, 83% check their inbox daily, compared to 88% of email respondents. Notably, this regular engagement persists despite school phone restrictions: Most students cannot use their phones during the day, with 8% banned entirely, 9% having phones locked up, and 48% allowed to carry but not use them.

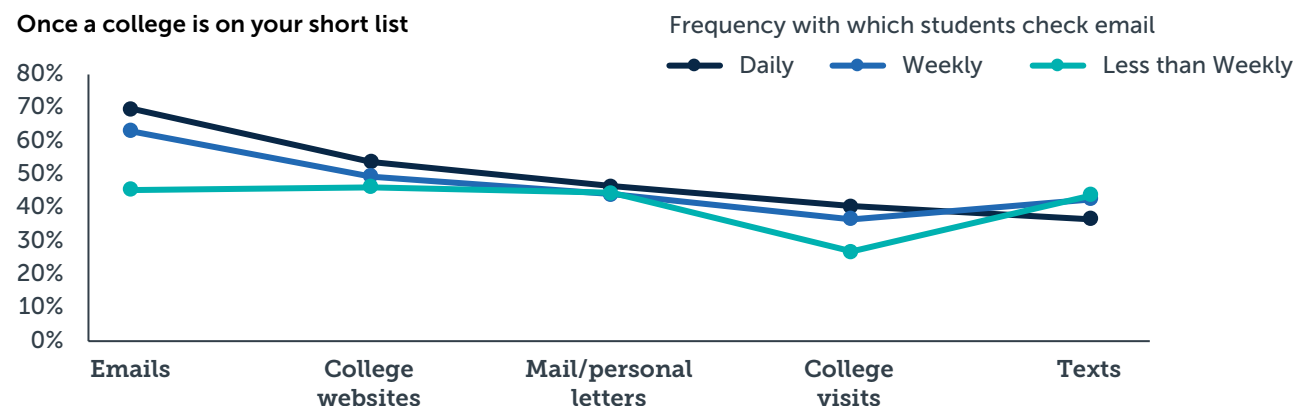
How would you like a school to share information with you?

Students could check all that apply, top 5 sources shown, 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)

At the beginning of your search



Once a college is on your short list



88% of students check email at least daily

The Power of Personalized Emails



When I say email, I mean **less automated and more personal emails** with information that actually will engage me into the school and not just statistics that reflect the school positively."

Current high school student



Strategy Recommendations



Prioritize Responsive Email Campaigns

These findings reinforce the continued importance of well-executed email campaigns. By acting quickly to respond to signals of intent and communicating consistently and persistently in the email channel, you can gain an edge over competitors that are slower or more sporadic with their communications.



Stay Vigilant About Deliverability

With email providers using machine learning to tighten their controls on inbox management, a deliberate strategy is essential to ensure your emails are not getting marked as spam. Monitor your email metrics vigilantly and tailor your campaign structure to audience engagement to mitigate deliverability issues.



A Growing Role for AI in College Search

Given the rapid uptake of AI tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini over the past several years, we explored the extent to which today's always-online students are using these new tools in their college search. Students report using them in significant numbers, with 26% saying they have used an AI chatbot—such as ChatGPT or Gemini—on a college website to learn more about the school.

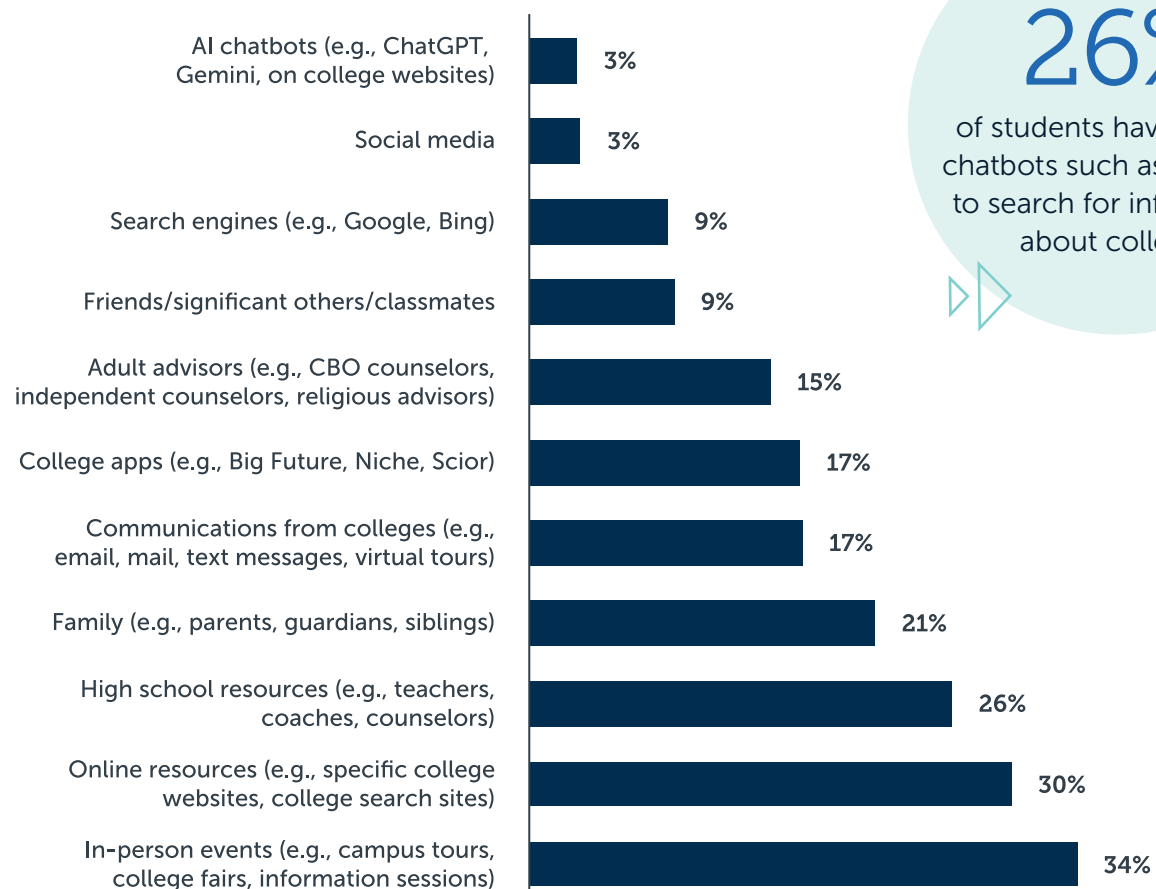
We observed differences in AI usage in college search by gender. Male students are more likely than female students to use AI chatbots, at 29% and 25%, respectively. Eleven percent of students report having used AI-generated results in their college search (i.e., AI-generated results from a Google search), with male students being 1.6 times more likely to do so than female students.

While significant numbers of students are using tools such as ChatGPT, these sources rank among the lowest in terms of student trust. Only 3% of students listed AI chatbots as the one or two resources they trust most to provide accurate school information, as shown in the chart below.

AI Chat Ranks Low in Terms of Trust

Q: Select the one or two resource(s) that you trust most to provide accurate information about a school.

2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



26%
of students have used AI chatbots such as ChatGPT to search for information about colleges



Students Use ChatGPT to Access Trusted Sites

Even as AI-generated content ranks low in trust, EAB user data indicates that students use tools such as ChatGPT as an entryway to more trusted destinations. Appily.com experienced a 377% increase in visitors from large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT in January through March 2025 compared to the same time last year. While the total number of these visits is relatively small (367 in 2024 compared to 1,750 in 2025), they point to a clear upward trend.



+377%
increase in visitors to Appily.com from ChatGPT and similar sources in 2025

Strategy Recommendations



Be Prepared for AI Search

A significant number of students are using AI-based search to learn about colleges, and this behavior is likely to grow as AI tools become more sophisticated. Make sure that your website is optimized for AI-based search engine results (i.e., "zero-click search") through intentional organization and presentation of key content.



Maintain a Robust Presence on Trusted Sites

Ensure you have a strong presence on top college search platforms such as Appily.com. These remain key destinations for students throughout their research process.

6 Students Trust and Appreciate “Real-World” Interactions



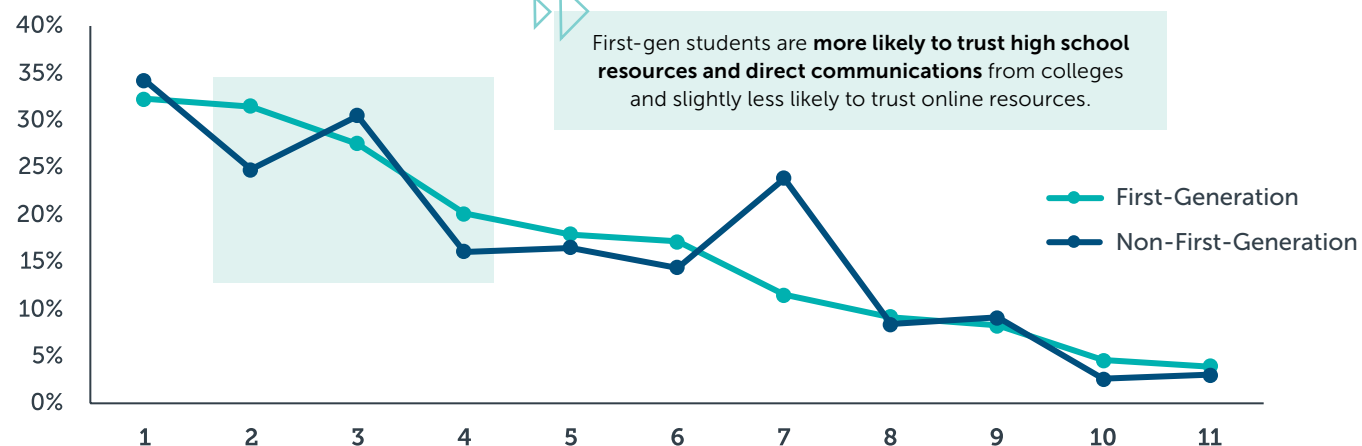
In-Person Events Are Students’ Most Trusted and Most Helpful Channel

Despite being digital natives, students still find in-person experiences central to their college search. In our Communication Preferences Survey of high school students, in-person events, including campus tours, college fairs, and info sessions, ranked highest among all channels in terms of trust. Similarly, students in our First-Year Experience Survey identified in-person events as the most helpful resource in their search.

These “real-world” interactions are especially valuable for first-generation students, who are more likely than their peers to trust teachers, counselors, and CBO advisors—and less likely to rely on family or online sources—highlighting the importance of personalized, in-person outreach.

“Real-World” Interactions and Direct Communications from Colleges Are Especially Trusted by First-Gen Students

Q: Select the one or two resource(s) that you trust most to provide accurate information about a school
2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



1. In-person events
2. High school resources
3. Online resources
4. Communications from colleges
5. College apps (e.g., Big Future, Niche, Scior)
6. Adult advisors
7. Family
8. Search engines
9. Friends/significant others/classmates
10. AI chatbots
11. Social media

#1
High school students name in-person events as the source they **most trust** to provide accurate information

#1
First-year college students name in-person events as the **most helpful** channel in their search

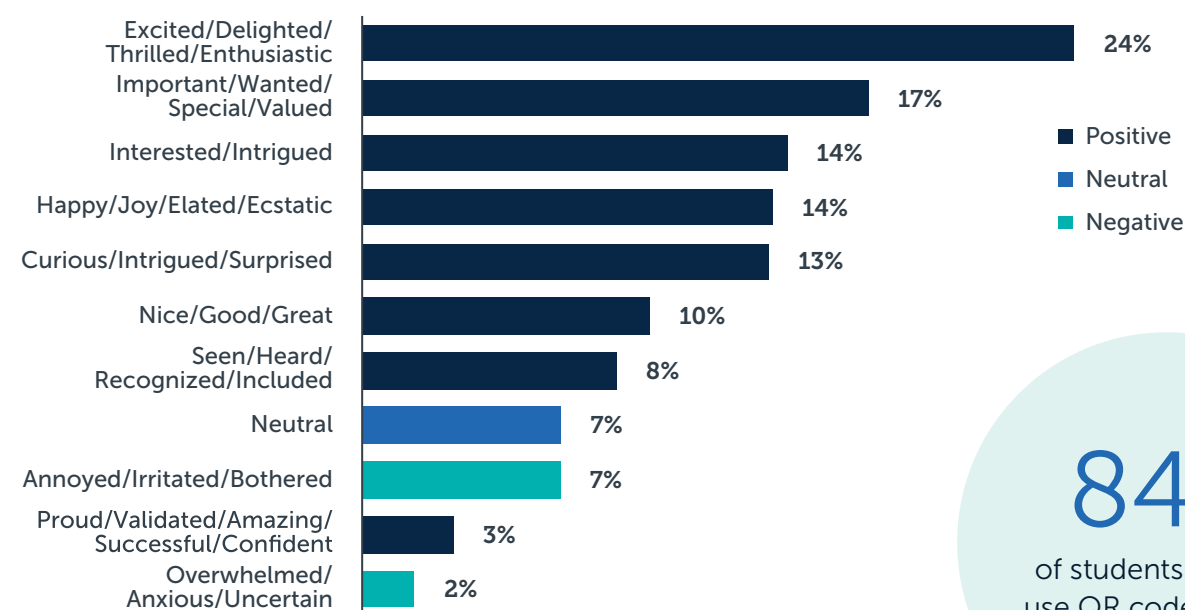


Students Respond Positively to Mail from Colleges—Even Though They Receive a Lot of It

Mail remains another valued “analog” channel. Students report college-related correspondence as their most received type of mail, and 42% receive a piece of mail at least every few days. Despite the frequency, students still associate college mail with positive emotions. We asked students an open-ended question about how mail from colleges made them feel, with responses revealing largely favorable associations, such as feeling excited, wanted, intrigued, or happy.

Q: When you receive a physical piece of mail from a college, how does that make you feel?

Students Asked to Use One or Two Words to Describe Their Reaction. Results From a Content Analysis of 13,296 Verbatim Comments, Responses with >2%, 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey



84%
of students say they use QR codes at least sometimes



QR Codes Bridge the Gap Between Offline and Online

QR codes can help you effectively bridge in-person and digital experiences. Eighty-four percent of students use them at least occasionally, and 27% use them often or always. Colleges should continue placing QR codes on mailers, brochures, and at events to nurture engagement online and share dynamic content such as virtual tours and social media.

Strategy Recommendations



Don’t Underestimate the Power of “Real-World” Interactions

In-person interactions and “traditional” channels such as mail remain powerful and appreciated tools for connecting with students in college search, especially among first-generation students.



Leverage QR Codes as a Part of Multichannel Campaigns

Use QR codes on printed materials and at events to create a cohesive, cross-platform experience that blends physical and digital touchpoints.



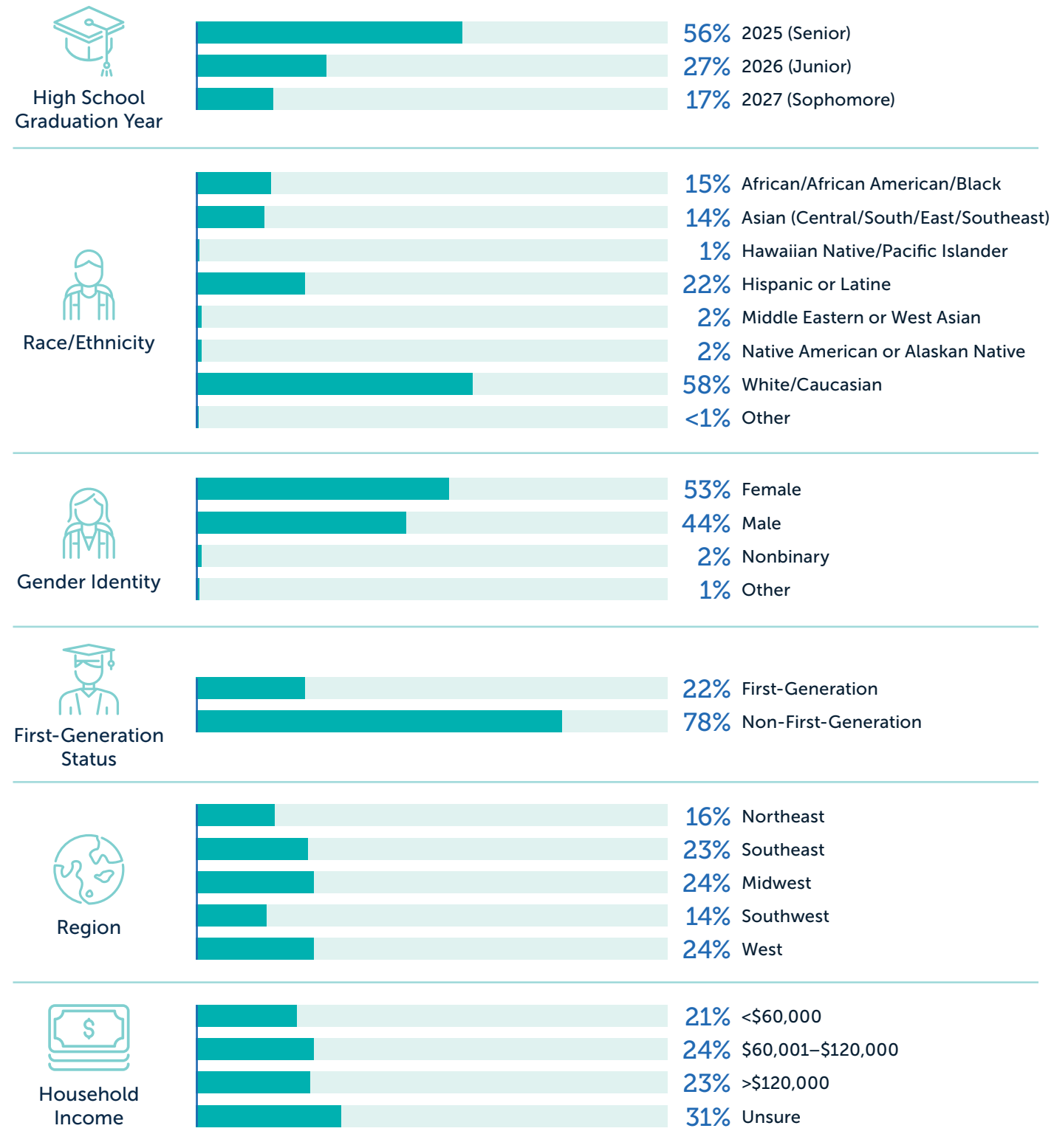
Research Overview



About the 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey

EAB's University Research Partners collected responses from current high school students in February and March of 2025 to learn about a variety of topics, including their preferred communication sources, search behaviors, and priorities when choosing a college. The reported results include responses from 19,299 high school students.

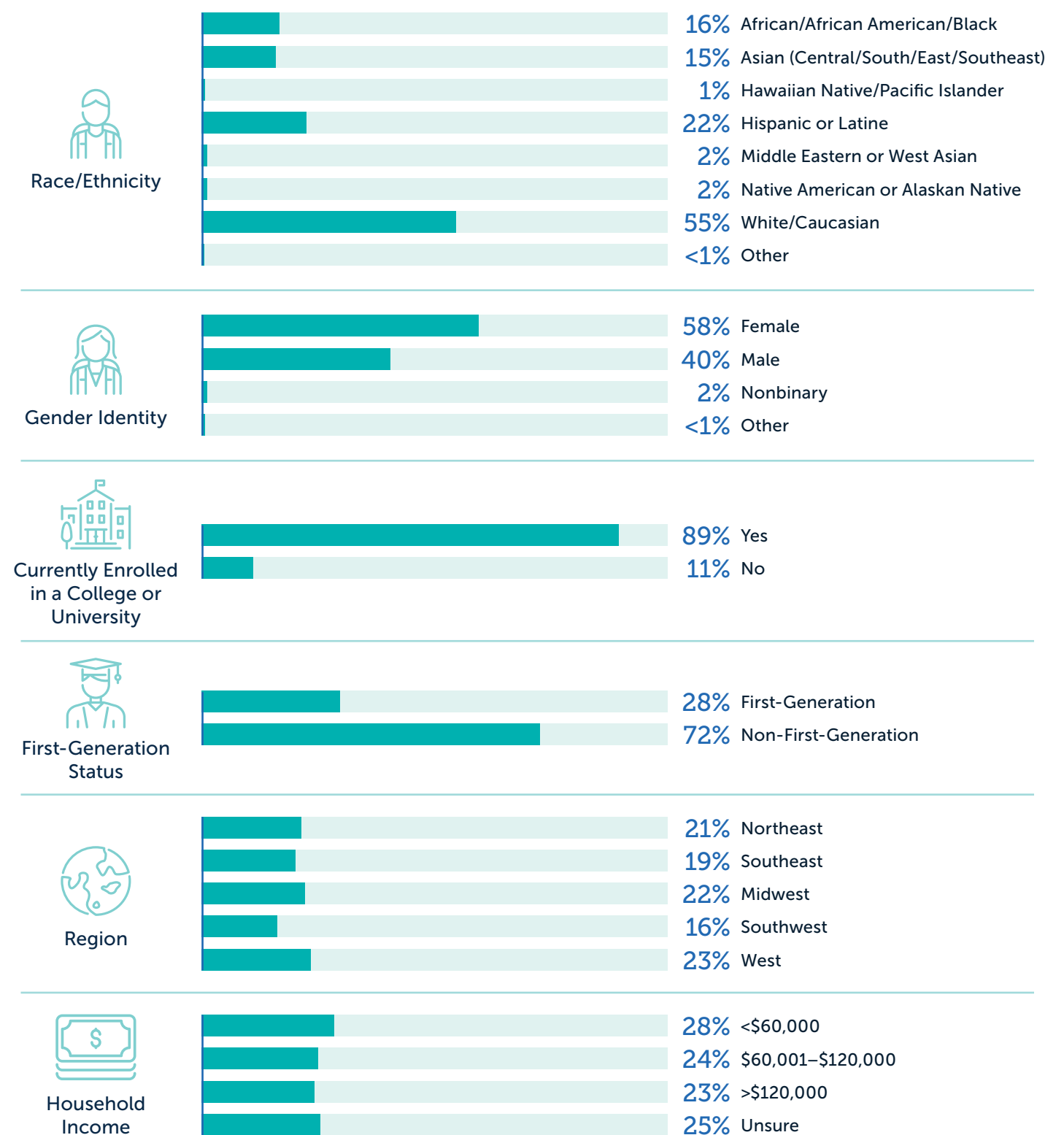
Participant Profile



About the 2025 First-Year Experience Survey

In January and February 2025, EAB's University Research Partners conducted a survey of students who had been prospects for Entering Class 2024. The survey asked students about their college search, application process, and their college experience thus far. The reported results include responses from 11,500 students.

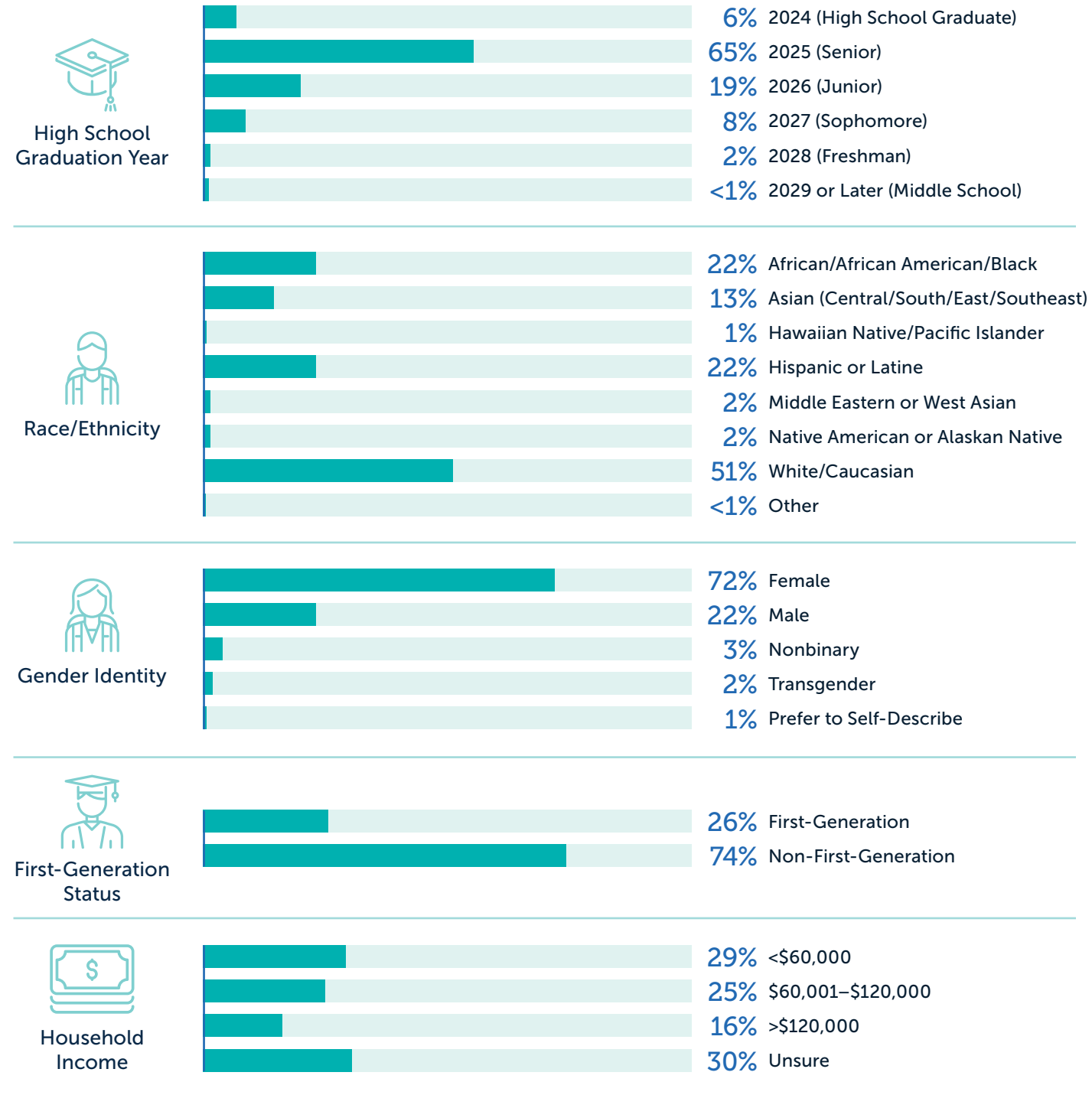
Participant Profile



About the 2024 Mental Health Survey

EAB's University Research Partners conducted a survey of high school students in October 2024. The survey asked students about their college plans; experiences of nervousness, anxiety, loneliness and/or isolation; and concerns about the college search and enrollment processes. The findings in this report are based on responses from 7,720 students.

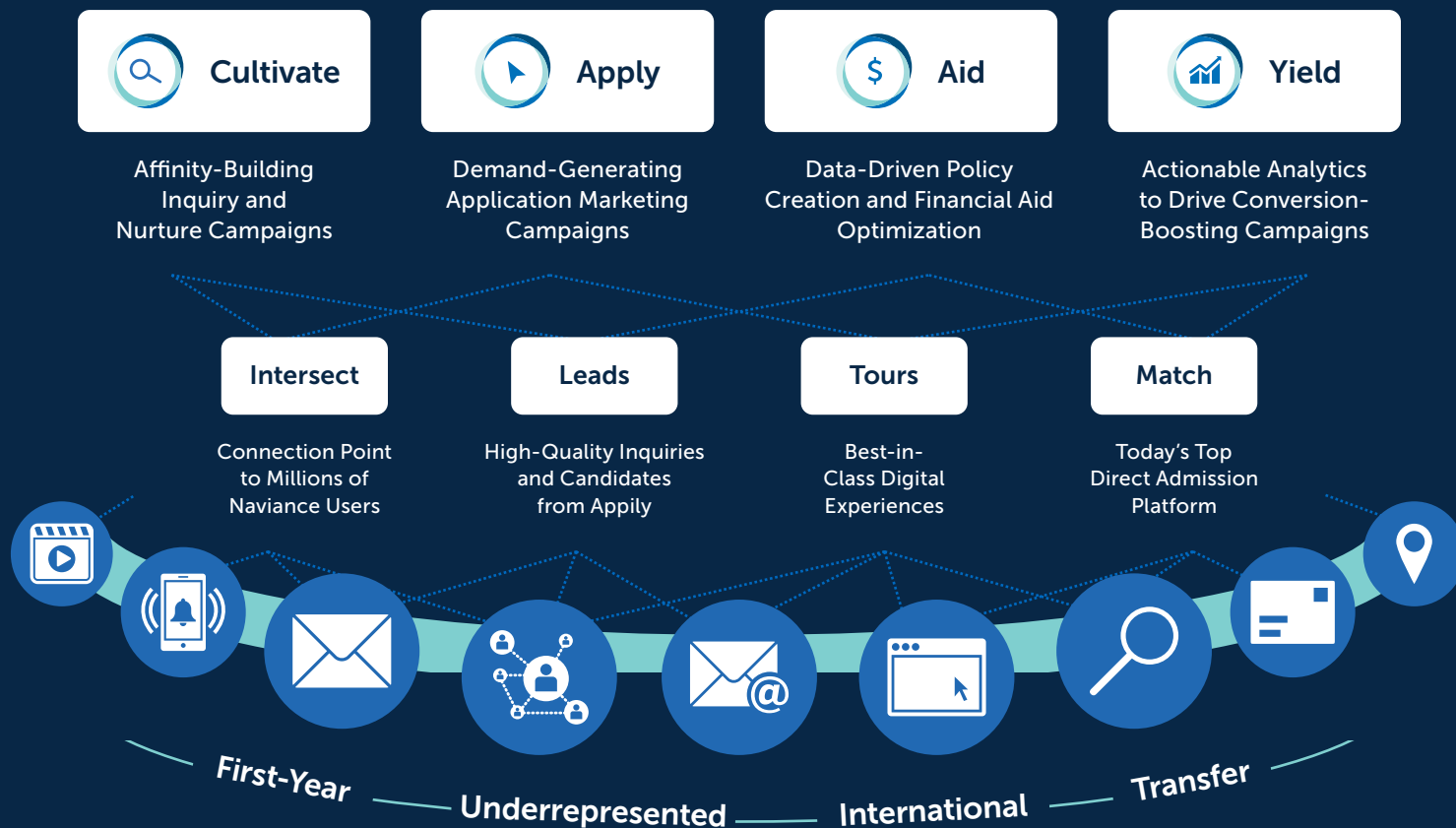
Participant Profile



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