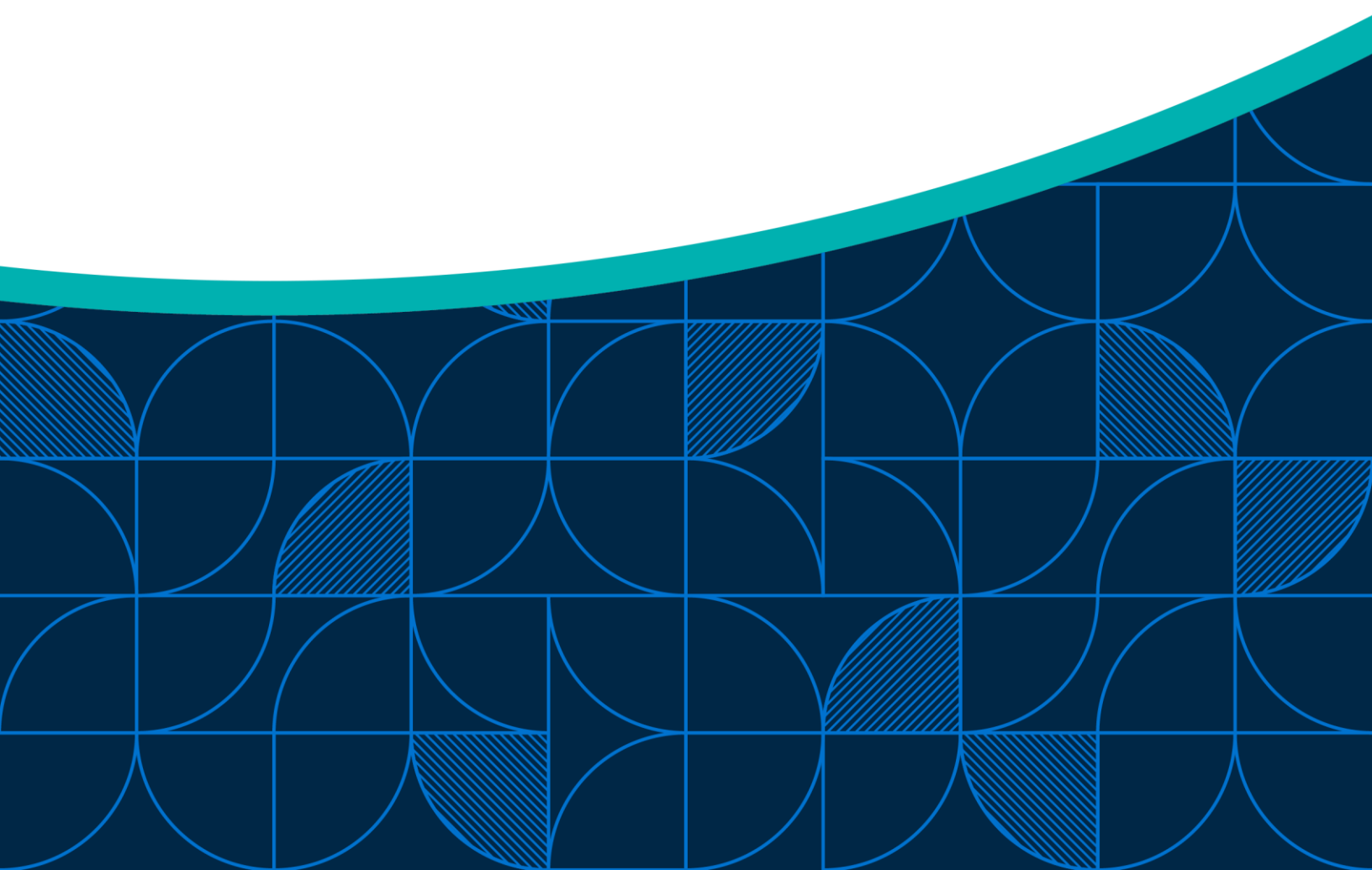




INSIGHT BRIEF

Personalization in College Recruitment Marketing: The Student's Perspective

Based on EAB's survey of 1,600+ Apply student users



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Exploring How Students Respond to Personalization

Students today don't just tolerate personalized communication from colleges—they expect it. Our 2024 Appily Student Personalization Survey of 1,655 Appily.com users reveals that **students overwhelmingly prefer outreach that reflects their interests, goals, and needs**. Personalization isn't just a nice-to-have; it plays a crucial role in building trust, increasing engagement, and making students feel understood.

These findings challenge the assumption that students are wary of colleges using their data. Instead, they welcome relevant, tailored messaging—especially when it provides value, such as program recommendations, financial aid information, or content aligned with their career aspirations.

However, not all students experience or respond to personalization in the same way. Preferences and expectations vary across demographics, with differences by gender, race, first-generation status, income level, and US region. Some student groups place greater importance on feeling “desired” by colleges, while others are more concerned about being misunderstood by colleges based on old or outdated data points. Understanding these nuances can help colleges refine their outreach strategies and build trust with different segments of their audience.

In this brief, we'll break down key findings by student demographics, providing insights into how different groups engage with personalized communications. As colleges refine their messaging, the next step is moving beyond basic personalization toward deeper, more dynamic connections. By leveraging data to create messages that feel both personal and meaningful, institutions can foster stronger relationships and stand out in an increasingly competitive landscape.

A Preview of the Insights

- Most students are not only comfortable with personalization but also many actively expect colleges to use their personal information to create relevant and engaging communications.
- Personalized communications that feel authentic, relevant, and emotionally engaging are a key differentiator in attracting and retaining prospective students.
- Concerns around privacy, accuracy, and misinterpretation need to be addressed to ensure trust and credibility in personalized outreach.

MORE ABOUT



Appily empowers enrollment leaders with data-driven tools designed to connect institutions with high-caliber prospective students. This innovative reverse admissions approach transforms traditional recruitment by inviting students to engage directly with campuses. Through immersive virtual tours and personalized scholarship matching, Appily helps institutions showcase their unique culture and boost enrollment yield.

Students Expect Personalized College Outreach

Students engage daily with technology that predicts their preferences, delivers tailored content, and seamlessly integrates personalization into their experiences. From streaming platforms to online shopping, they have come to expect messaging that aligns with their interests and behaviors.

Colleges are no exception—students want outreach that feels relevant, timely, and intentional. Institutions that fail to meet these expectations risk feeling out of touch, while those that embrace personalized communication can build stronger connections and trust with prospective students.

Ninety-three percent of students said that receiving a personalized message from a college would encourage them to explore a school further.

but

Sixty-six percent of students said that they've received college communications that felt personalized to them.

Why Students Value Personalization



73%

Of students say personalized communications make them feel desired as prospective students.



63%

of students report feeling more connected to a college through tailored outreach.



57%

Of students note that personalized communications make messages from colleges more relevant.

A Name Matters, but Details Make It Meaningful

Students reported a wide range of experiences in the communications they received from colleges. Some reported feeling their outreach was personalized while others did not. Interestingly, regardless of their personal experiences, a few key elements stand out for students who want personalization.



Students who reported their college communications **felt personalized** most appreciated when colleges

1. Knew about student's interests/activities
2. Addressed student by name
3. Knew student's planned major/minor
4. Felt personal/tailored to student
5. Shared scholarship/financial aid information

In their own words:

"They knew my name and specific things about me or gave me a call, **it wasn't just a prewritten email** that had a fill in the blank where my name was."

"They used my **name** and talked about how I was ahead if my peers in someway."

"They **don't feel AI generated**, they say my name, tell me I seem fit for the college, and are written by real people."



Students who reported their college communications **did not feel personalized** would appreciate if colleges

1. Included student's interests and preferences
2. Included information about preferred major/minor
3. Received scholarship/financial aid information
4. Received messages that are not general/cookie cutter
5. Used student's name

In their own words:

"Using the recipient's name and **referencing specific details about them**, such as their high school or extracurricular activities, adds a personal touch."

"I think communications would feel more personalized if they highlighted my **academic achievements** and how I align with the college's values or goals."

"A college that understands my **financial needs** and recommends scholarships that I qualify for would feel more personalized."

Key Takeaways

Use Their Names

Messages using the student's name still resonate strongly, though you shouldn't stop there.

Topic Matters

Students value messages addressing specific academic interests and career aspirations most.

Talk Finances

Financial aid and scholarship information were recurring themes in open-ended responses.

Personalization Preferences Vary by Demographics

Most students have similar comfort levels and expectations toward personalization, valuing relevance, authenticity, and personalized outreach that aligns with their goals. However, certain subsets of students have statistically significant responses that highlight unique needs and concerns. These insights reveal opportunities for colleges to refine their strategies and more effectively engage with key student segments.

Sample sizes for each demographic group can be found on page 10.

By Income

- Lower-Income Students (<\$60K): More worried about colleges misinterpreting data, but finds personalized messages most authentic and helpful.
- Middle-Income Students (\$60k-\$120K): Report receiving the most personalized communications by income.
- Higher-Income Students (>\$120K): Feel most negative about current college communications, citing basic information and uninteresting content. Prefers content to be more personalized.

Key Takeaway: Address lower-income students' data concerns, sustain middle-income engagement, and improve relevance for higher-income students.

By Race

- Black Students: Appreciate that personalized communications make them feel desired by and connected to colleges.
- Hispanic Students: Align with the majority in all areas, though more neutral on colleges using personal information than others.
- Asian Students: Show heightened concern about data accuracy and outdated information, in addition to feeling like "just another name/email address."
- White Students: Tend to align with the majority in prioritizing relevance and connection but show highest concerns about privacy.

Key Takeaway: Emphasize connection for Black students, maintain relevance for Hispanic and White students while addressing privacy concerns, and ensure accuracy for Asian students who feel overlooked.

Personalization Preferences Vary by Demographics

Continued from page 7

By First-Gen Status

- **First-Generation Students:** Place higher importance on feeling “desired” and “connected.” Messaging should focus on helping them navigate college culture and emphasize resources such as mentorship programs or academic support.
- **Non-First-Generation Students:** Show slightly higher concern about colleges misunderstanding their interests, highlighting the need for clear and accurate communications.

Key Takeaway: Focus on belonging and support for first-generation students while ensuring clarity and accuracy for non-first-generation students.

By Region

- **Southeast Students:** Prioritize feeling “desired” by colleges, with a greater sensitivity to being misunderstood, highlighting the need for messaging that emphasizes belonging and personal connection.
- **Midwest Students:** Value feeling desired, authenticity, and relevance, requiring communications that feel genuine and reflect their interests.
- **Students Across All Regions:** Share privacy concerns and want more transparency on how their data is used and protected.

Key Takeaway: Emphasize belonging in the Southeast, authenticity in the Midwest, and address privacy concerns across all regions.

By Sex

- **Female Students:** Express greater concerns about privacy and data misinterpretation. Colleges should prioritize transparency and thoughtful messaging tailored to their interests and aspirations.
- **Male Students:** Show slightly lower concerns overall but still value personalization that aligns with their academic and career goals.

Key Takeaway: Prioritize transparency for female students and align personalization with academic and career goals for male students.

How Colleges Can Improve Personalized Outreach



Prioritize Meaningful Personalization

Tailoring outreach to student interests strengthens engagement, making communications feel more relevant and increasing the likelihood of meaningful interactions.

- Use student data to tailor outreach by topics they prefer, such as academic goals, career interests, and financial concerns.
- Move beyond generic messaging by incorporating details such as intended major, extracurricular activities, and location-based opportunities.
- Update messages based on how students interact with your school, making sure communications stay relevant and engaging.



Build Trust Through Transparency and Accuracy

Students value relevant and reliable communication but also want clarity on how their data is used. Colleges can build trust by ensuring outreach remains accurate, meaningful, and aligned with student expectations.

- Clearly communicate how student data is used by explaining the benefits of personalized outreach and reinforcing privacy protections to build confidence.
- Keep messaging accurate and up to date by regularly updating outreach to prevent outdated or irrelevant information from eroding trust.
- Use AI to scale personalization effectively by tailoring messages, automating responses, and providing recruitment teams with insights to improve outreach without adding manual work.



Adapt Messaging to Regional and Demographic Preferences

Students have different expectations for personalized outreach based on their backgrounds, making it essential for colleges to tailor messaging strategies to reflect demographic and regional nuances.

- Segment outreach strategies based on income level, race, first-generation status, and regional preferences.
- Adjust messaging tone and content to reflect the unique needs and expectations of different student groups.
- Use real-time engagement data to refine communication approaches and improve connection.

Research Overview

About the 2024 Apply Student Personalization Survey

EAB's Enrollment Marketing team collected responses from high school students across the country in August of 2024. The goal of this research was to learn more about how students react to colleges that personalize outreach communications. The results include responses from 1,655 participants.

Participant Profile

Gender Identity	Count	Percentage
Female	1248	75.9%
Male	356	21.7%
Nonbinary	34	2.1%
Prefer to self-describe	6	0.4%

Race/Ethnicity	Count	Percentage
African/African American/Black	344	21.0%
Asian (Central/South/East/Southeast)	256	15.6%
Hawaiian Native or Pacific Islander	16	1.0%
Hispanic or Latine	321	19.6%
Middle Eastern or West Asian	28	1.7%
Native American or Alaska Native	48	2.9%
White/Caucasian	878	53.5%
Other	8	0.5%

First-Generation Status	Count	Percentage
First-Generation	376	22.8%
Non-First-Generation	1273	77.2%

Household Income Bands	Count	Percentage
<\$60K	336	33.2%
\$60k-\$120K	390	38.5%
>\$120K	287	28.3%

Region of Residence	Count	Percentage
Northeast	293	19.1%
Southeast	372	24.3%
Midwest	297	19.4%
Southwest	261	17.0%
West	309	20.2%

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