EAB

Enrollment Signals

The New College Search Journey

How Student Behaviors and Signals of Intent Are Changing

Insights from EAB Survey Findings

2026 AI Survey	2026 First-Year Experience Survey	2026 National Parents Survey	2025 Student Comms Preferences Survey
N = 11,700 students	*N = 9,516 students*	*N = 2,515 parents*	*N = 19,299 students*

The college search journey is expanding, not shifting. Students and families are adding new tools and sources without abandoning established ones, creating more channels, more touchpoints, and more decision-makers. That complexity is making signals of intent harder for institutions to read. The following five findings from EAB research show how these shifts are reshaping college search and creating new challenges for enrollment teams.



1. College search is multichannel, fragmenting signals of intent across many touchpoints.

Today's students use a robust mix of channels in their college search. EAB's 2026 AI Survey found that students who have started searching report using search engines (79%), online resources (77%), college communications (70%), college apps (68%), in-person experiences (62%), social media (61%), and AI tools (50%). For enrollment teams, that makes any single interaction a less complete indicator of student interest or intent.

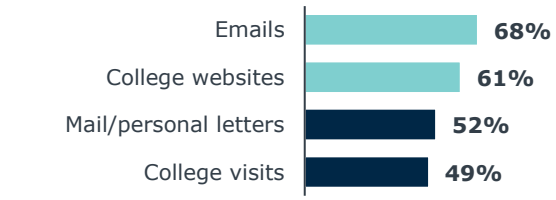
2. AI has quickly become a mainstream search tool.

Among high school seniors, AI use in college search has surged in the past two years. Findings from EAB's First-Year Experience and AI surveys show that what was an emerging search behavior just two cycles ago is quickly becoming part of the standard college-search toolkit. This acceleration is happening at a pace that many colleges are struggling to keep up with.

Share of students using AI tools in college search:

EC'24	EC '25	EC'26
14%	26%	49%

How would you like the school to share information with you at the start of your search?
(Check all that apply.)



3. AI adoption hasn't displaced college-controlled channels.

EAB's most recent Student Communication Preferences Survey found that students still want colleges to reach them through established channels. At the start of search, email leads at 68%, followed by college websites, mail, and visits. Even as new channels and touchpoints enter the journey, these direct connections with institutions continue to matter. Together, these preferences suggest that new tools are expanding the search experience rather than replacing it.

©2026 by EAB. All Rights Reserved. **eab.com**

4. The sources students use most aren't necessarily the sources they trust most.

Even as students adopt new search tools, trust remains concentrated in more established sources. In EAB's 2026 AI Survey, students were most likely to trust online resources (such as specific college websites and college search sites) and in-person events for accurate information, while AI and social media ranked near the bottom. The gap between use and trust is important: being present in a student's search is not the same as being trusted within it.

Most cited trusted sources for accurate information:

1. Online Resources
2. In-Person Events
3. Counselors/Coaches
4. Comms from Colleges
5. Family

43% of parents say they received either too much or too little contact from colleges

20% of parents did not receive any contact from colleges

69% of parents find information provided to them by colleges to be less than "very" or "extremely" helpful

5. Parents are running a parallel search of their own, and their needs are often unmet.

Parents are not simply influencing the final decision. In EAB's 2026 National Parent Survey, 84% of parents reported personally searching for college information on behalf of their student, using institutional websites, direct college communications, search engines, in-person events, discovery platforms, social media, and AI. As they research, they are forming their own views of fit, affordability, and value. Yet despite that level of engagement, many say the information they receive from colleges is not meeting their needs.

What This Means for Enrollment Leaders

Enrollment teams need to design for an expanded search ecosystem, not a single winning channel. That means showing up across the places students and families discover and evaluate schools, reading signals of intent across those interactions, reinforcing what they find through trusted sources, and engaging parents earlier in the journey.

How EAB Can Help

Enroll360 helps institutions connect the modern search journey through coordinated audience strategy, multichannel campaigns, personalized student and parent outreach, digital experiences, and behavioral data that helps teams adapt as students move through the funnel. To learn how Enroll360 can help your institution, visit eab.com/Enroll360 or email eabenrollmentcomm@eab.com.

AI-Powered Solutions
Drive results from brand to yield

Unique Recruitment Ecosystem
Orchestrated to meet your goals

Higher Ed's Largest Student Dataset
Inform what works—and doesn't

The Industry's Leading Experts
Guide confident strategy decisions

Proven Track Record of Results
Measured by partner enrollment outcomes