



Listen, Optimize, Repeat:

A Student-Centric Approach to Higher Ed Marketing

Insights from Higher Ed Marketing Leaders
and How Strategies Resonate With Students



Contents

Introduction	3	Section 3: Innovation and Execution	20
Our Analysis.....	4	Developing User Journeys	21
Our Expert Interviewees.....	5	Gathering Quantitative Behavior.....	26
Section 1: Where We Are	6	Mixing Quantitative Data with Qualitative Context..	30
Declining Enrollments.....	7	Investing in the Right Marketing Technologies — and the Right People	31
Demand for New Delivery Formats	8	Moving the Needle with Human-Powered Insights ...	33
Hot Debate: The Value of a College Education	8	Creating Iterative Process for Continuous Optimization.....	34
Talent Poaching	9	Section 4: To Begin, Begin	35
The Bottom Line	9	Works Cited	37
Section 2: Marketing Sets the Table	10	Appendix	39
Creating an Authentic Brand.....	11		
Speaking Authentically	13		
Creating a Unified Communication Strategy.....	15		
Increasing Enrollment Without Compromising Fit	16		
Breaking Down Silos	17		
Prepare to Launch	19		

Introduction





Our Analysis

This is, without a doubt, one of the most trying times to work in higher education marketing. The future is anything but certain, but there is also an exhilarating promise that those institutions willing and able to adapt can define what tomorrow's higher education experience will be. Adaptability and nimbleness have, of course, long evaded higher ed – but today these traits are critically essential – and vital to success.

To put higher education marketing on the right path, teams will need to be well-staffed with savvy pros who can maximize their tech resources.

To provide actionable best practices for today's higher ed marcomm teams, we went directly to the source – well, two sources, actually.

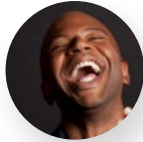
First, we interviewed four leaders at the forefront of higher education marketing to get their ideas on what works, what doesn't, and what it takes to fill the gaps in between.

Second, we stress-tested those insights against the very audiences higher ed marketers strive to reach by surveying **107 recently enrolled freshmen** about the marketing tactics they felt worked and those that came up short. Because it's one thing to theorize, but it's another to get direct feedback straight from the horse's mouth.

Our goal with this approach? To glean insight and introspection from various marketers on how they do what they do, what's working, where they are failing, and then stack those assessments against students' perceptions.

Together, these sources paint a vivid picture of opportunity for institutions to better define their brands, strategically identify their prospective students, and effectively use technology to connect with them.

Our Expert Interviewees



Kevin Tyler

Account Director, SimpsonScarborough
*formerly Director of Communications,
UCLA School of Nursing*



Kate Ledger

Assistant Vice Chancellor of Marketing,
University of Pittsburgh



Eric Greenberg

Senior Director of Marketing Strategy
and Operations, The Wharton School



Mark Mashaw

Vice President of Growth and Marketing,
Campuswire

Section 1

Where We Are

The Present Landscape



If it's not a crisis, it'll do until the crisis gets here¹. The pandemic only accelerated the ramifications of not one, but two looming enrollment cliffs²; and now debates about the very value of a higher education are amplified by greater demand for online options, micro-credentials, and a generation of students that is more savvy and choice-conscious than ever before – and not at all limited to being the stereotypical pimply high school senior.

Declining Enrollments

New data released from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center³ showed a 3.5% decline in overall enrollment over spring of 2020, a marked drop even from the downward trend that began in 2011 and is expected to continue beyond 2030. Traditional-aged student enrollment was most affected, and adult learners now make up more of the pie. One big silver lining is that today's student bodies are increasingly diverse; the Association of American Colleges and Universities shows that students of color made up 45.2% of total enrollees in 2016⁴, compared to only 29.6% in 1996. Though racial and ethnic inequities must still be bridged, data suggests the gap is narrowing.

1. ([No Country for Old Men, 2007](#))

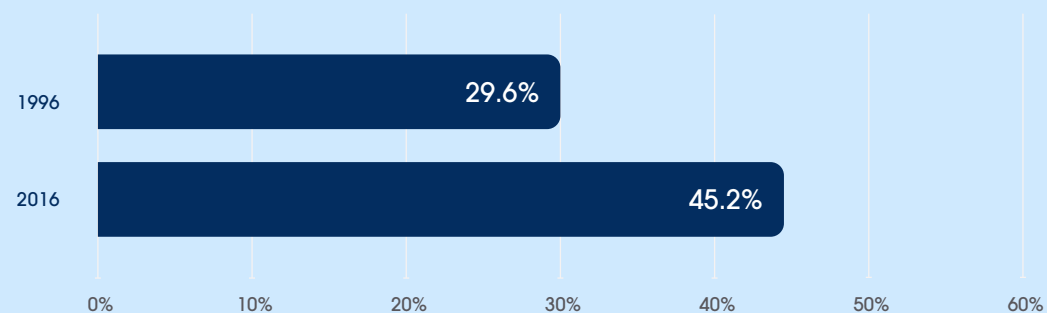
2. ([Schroeder, 2021](#))

3. ([National, 2021](#))

4. ([Association, 2019](#))

↓ **3.5%** decline in overall enrollment
in spring of 2020

Student Body Diversity



↓ 19%

decline in adults who
felt a college education
was “very important”

\$36,140

average amount of
student debt after
graduating in 2021

Demand for New Delivery Formats

On top of all this, traditional brick-and-mortar schools continue facing strong competition from early-adopter institutions who pivoted to include more flexible learning solutions throughout the last decade, as well as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on platforms such Coursera, Kadenz, and Udemy that exclusively offer online instruction at a fraction of the cost of traditional schools. Though data shows⁵ that employers still prefer traditional postsecondary degrees over MOOC certifications, these platforms nonetheless offer students the alluring ability to stitch together more personalized curriculums.

Hot Debate: The Value of a College Education

The very value of a college degree is a hot topic of debate. According to Gallup⁶, the percentage of American adults who felt a college education was “very important” dropped 19% between 2013 and 2019, with the largest decrease (-33%) among those ages 18-29. Coupled with polarizing public debate over debilitating levels of student debt – on average, graduates now walk off the commencement stage with \$36,140 in student debt⁷ – universities are having to more clearly articulate their value proposition (it is not a coincidence that, according to The College Board⁸, average undergraduate tuition increases in 2020-2021 were among the smallest recorded since 1990-1991). Plus, market demands⁹ for more vocation-skilled tradespeople are also complicating perceptions of higher education as a whole.

5. ([Baker, 2020](#))

6. ([Marken, 2019](#))

7. ([Hanson, 2021](#))

8. ([College Board, 2020](#))

9. ([PeopleReady Skilled Trades, 2021](#))

Talent Poaching

With all of this at play, institutions are facing increasing pressure from talent turnover¹⁰. People across industries are leaving their jobs at unprecedented rates, searching for more flexible and fulfilling opportunities, not to mention increased salaries. Higher ed is no exception. LinkedIn lists digital marketing professionals, digital content creators, user experience specialists, and data science specialists among the fifteen most in-demand professions in their 2021 Jobs on the Rise report¹¹. As such, top-tier talent now has a plethora of opportunities outside of higher ed that pay more and are more flexible than the rigid, in-office, low-paying ones at colleges and universities.

The Bottom Line

Higher education is facing an urgent call to action. Institutions that haven't begun to adapt to this new paradigm are woefully behind, but there is still time to catch up. There is a clear opportunity for smaller institutions to nimbly redefine themselves and strip market share from larger competitors.

Whatever happens, those who have been eager for higher ed to move beyond its stereotypical role of slow-to-react, ivory tower existence, we have good news: strap in and get ready for a thrilling ride, because change is here.

10. ([Higher Education Publications, Inc., 2021](#))

11. ([LinkedIn, 2021](#))



Section 2

Marketing Sets the Table

Creating the Vision and Getting the Buy-In



“One of the best ways you can influence people is the brand piece. If you do it right, if it’s rooted in truth, everyone buys into it, and everybody wants to be part of that telling of the story. That, to me, has been one of the most powerful tools for transforming a decentralized organization.”

Kate Ledger, University of Pittsburgh

Creating an Authentic Brand

There is no single solution to the litany of challenges facing higher ed, but they fall under a single umbrella: re-evaluating the very identity of any given institution, right down to its instructional opportunities. And what is an organization’s identity? **A brand.**

To chart a path forward, higher ed institutions have to know where they’re going and why, and that requires having a clear idea of the institution’s core offering and its values. Those core elements can underpin the development of a college or university’s brand, a process that we won’t cover here, but is essential to developing any coherent strategic vision.

Getting there requires piercing introspection and the questioning of long-held norms – you know, the very things colleges ask their students to do. What motivates us as an academic institution? What motivates students? What do they expect from us? How can we better serve those we’d like to attract? Why are we still delivering this content this way?

“If we aren’t asking the kinds of questions in our professional lives on a university campus that we encourage and require students to ask in the classes that are on that same campus, we are never going to evolve,” says Kevin Tyler, formerly the Director of Communications at UCLA’s School of Nursing and now an account director at the higher ed marketing agency SimpsonScarborough. “The critical thinking that we teach in college and that we apply to our higher ed experience as employees seems to have different value.”

“One of the best ways you can influence people is the brand piece,” says Kate Ledger, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Marketing at University of Pittsburgh. “If you do it right, if it’s rooted in truth, everyone buys into it, and everybody wants to be part of that telling of the story. That, to me, has been one of the most powerful tools for transforming a decentralized organization.”

Ledger recalls how background research to inform Pitt’s brand overhaul uncovered just how disparate and varied stakeholder perceptions of the institution were at the time – the result of an incohesive brand narrative.

“We started to see how you don’t even know that these respondents are at the same university when you look at all of the feedback,” she said.

Of course, higher ed institutions will naturally share some of the same long-held aspects in their brand identities – enthusiasm for curiosity and advancing humanity, etc. – as well as others that are more contemporary in their popularity. A study published in August by BestColleges.com¹² of currently enrolled undergraduates found that more than two-thirds of students are interested in social justice topics and 51% reported that those interests impacted their coursework choices. Students see the world burning, both figuratively and literally, and want to be part of the altruistic solutions that are paving the way toward a better tomorrow. The brands that share those values will attract more attention and resonance.

Tip: Email friends or colleagues and ask them to describe your institution in one word.

12. ([BestColleges Staff Writers, 2021](#))



2 in 3

students are interested
in social justice topics



51%

students reported that
their interest in social
justice topics impacted
their coursework choices

Speaking Authentically

Once the brand is established, the team best suited to administer it is, naturally, the marketing team, who can shape and drive a clear mission and strategic vision – especially in today’s digital environment.

“Everything is marketing, every single thing,” Tyler says. He points to the ongoing dialogue around social justice as just one example of this.

“The way a school responds to George Floyd or to the removal of confederate statues, someone is using that as a decision point for whether or not they want to be part of your community,” he says.

And the linchpin in cohesive and successful brand communications is authenticity: no more blanket messaging, and no more lofty hyperbole. Instead, it’s vital to marry aspiration with the reality of stakeholder experiences, especially students’.

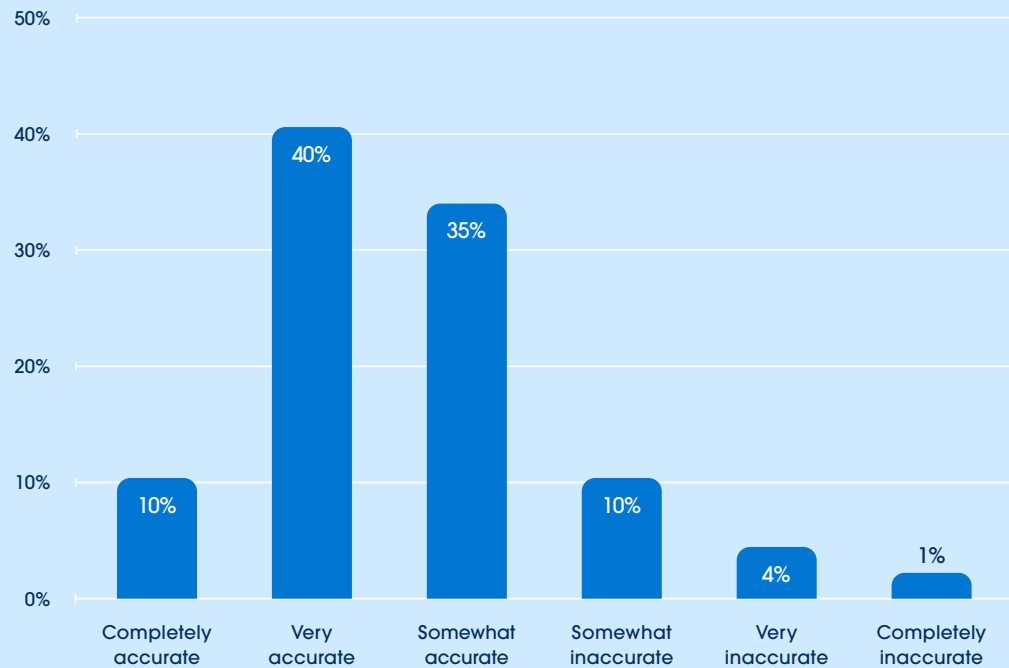
“Marketing is as much about the message and branding, as much about the message that you’re putting out into the world, as how you’re operating on the inside,” Tyler

says. “If [students] aren’t being served and supported in the ways that you promised that they would, then the marketing that you’re putting into the world is a lie.”

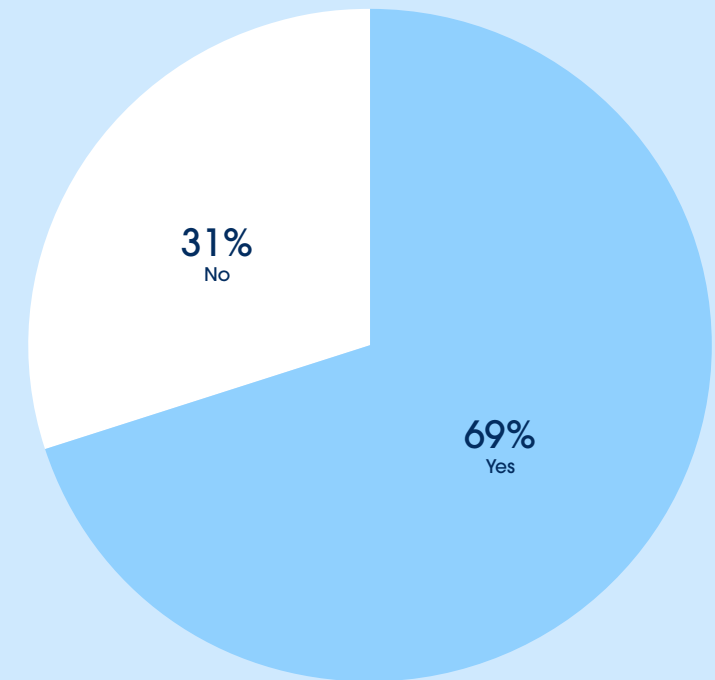
Our research found that for many new students, there is a gap between the message and the actual lived experience. Most strikingly, 15% of respondents indicated that as enrolled students, they felt the marketing messages they had received during recruitment inaccurately portrayed the reality of offerings, while another 35% felt it was only “somewhat” accurate. What’s more, nearly 30% indicated that the way their chosen college communicated with them after enrollment did not make them feel as valued as the communication they’d received prior, during recruitment. Taken together, these insights suggest that not only are a significant number of students being given misleading messaging during recruitment, but also that the communications environment transition that occurs between admissions and student affairs is subsequently underwhelming for many, and leaves students feeling like they got hoodwinked.



Q: Now that you attend this college or university, how accurately do the materials and messages that you received from them during the recruiting process reflect the actual experience of that college?



Q: Now that you attend the college or university of your choice, does the way they communicate with you continue to make you feel as valued as it did when they were encouraging you to apply and enroll?



“That executive leadership, ideally, can put their weight behind endeavors like aligning along common tool sets, technology stacks, and data requirements. Ultimately, the marketing team can’t do that. They can’t force anybody; they can’t tell anybody what to do. It really has to be an organization-wide initiative that does that.”

Eric Greenberg, The Wharton School

Creating a Unified Communication Strategy

The key to portraying a vibrant and accurate reality to prospective students, and continuing to message to enrolled students as though they are as valued as when they were prospectives, is a **unified marketing and communications strategy**. The marketing department can drive the strategy, says Eric Greenberg¹³, Senior Director of Marketing Strategy and Operations at The Wharton School, but ultimately there needs to be full buy-in at the leadership level to make it work.

“That executive leadership, can put their weight behind endeavors like aligning along common tool sets, technology stacks, and data requirements,” says Eric Greenberg¹³, Senior Director of Marketing Strategy and Operations at The Wharton School. “Ultimately, the marketing team can’t do that. They can’t force anybody; they can’t tell anybody what to do. It really has to be an organization-wide initiative that does that.”

Notably, all of the experts we interviewed hit on the importance of adopting an unapologetically critical lens when building the strategic vision and securing this buy-in. Sugar coating the dire reality of the current market demands or the lack of preparedness an institution is facing can be tempting, but doesn’t serve the goal.

“It can be a really hard pill to swallow,” says Greenberg, “You really need to step back and look at your end goal, where you are now, and what your staff and budget are currently able to do.”

Referencing Bryan Stevenson’s¹⁴ concept of “getting proximate,” Tyler lauds university presidents and chancellors who are willing to cut through bureaucratic layers to more intimately understand and respond to the real student experience.

With all this in mind, the strategic vision should address and educate on the value of:

- **Creating a cohesive brand that embodies the fundamental curiosity of education**
- **Increasing enrollment without compromising on culture fit**
- **Overcoming operational and informational silos**

Once this vision is created and leadership has bought into it, the marketing team will be empowered to lead the way with a creative, data-driven approach that will create a virtuous enrollment cycle.

13. ([Greenberg, 2021](#))

14. ([Stevenson, 2018](#))

Increasing Enrollment Without Compromising Fit

Recruiting goals can no longer be about attracting the attention of the most students, **but about attracting the attention of the right students.** That happens by identifying subsets of the student population, through persona construction (which we'll discuss shortly), who will positively contribute to a dynamic learning environment and thrive in the distinct setting that an institution offers.

"I can't say that marketing across the board is missing the mark, but I do feel confident in saying that there are lots of opportunities to shift the way we talk about higher ed in a way that attracts the people who are best fit for an institution and not just try to get as many people in," Tyler says.

"At the end of the day, everyone's competing for the same group of people, but what is being offered and how it's being offered can differ. And going for everyone is not a strategy, at least not anymore."

Who your institution's right student is depends on the identity of your institution, which, if you've properly defined your identity in the brand-creation process, is clear to all stakeholders. This is rooted in an institution's attributes and offerings, and a clear idea of the students who will thrive in that environment.

"People forget how impactful marketing can be because we can work backwards and say, 'Yes, we can do X, Y, and Z, to attract whatever population we're trying to attract.' But are we really serving that population as best we can?," Tyler says. He points to the growing sector of nontraditional students as an example. This demographic is often at a totally different point in their life than their traditional-aged counterparts; they're likely caregivers, often of children but possibly also mature parents, and working part- or even full-time. Understanding how the institution can authentically meet those distinct needs, and then – and only then – tell that story, is pivotal for institutional success.

Additionally, roughly one third of all students transfer schools during their undergraduate career, according to National Student Clearinghouse¹⁵, and among the many reasons is simply a poor environmental fit. With the right marketing technologies, teams can develop robust feedback loops that benchmark those who move through the admissions process seamlessly and later excel – as defined by a variety of parameters – to more efficiently ensure persistence and long-term compatibility.

"At the end of the day, everyone's competing for the same group of people, but what is being offered and how it's being offered can differ. And going for everyone is not a strategy, at least not anymore."

Kevin Tyler, SimpsonScarborough

15. ([Shapiro, 2015](#))



Breaking Down Silos

Finally, a singular strategic vision charts the pathway out of decentralization. “Higher education is very, very decentralized,” reminds Greenberg, “And this is especially true of older institutions that have had a lot of time for different departments to evolve in different ways. The problem is that higher ed now needs to have the results of centralized marketing¹⁶ where people are coordinating with one another.”

When different departments rely on their own platforms, practices, or data taxonomies, chasms of missed opportunities and miscommunication open. Like most human people, prospective students want to communicate with friendly, knowledgeable representatives who can efficiently and effectively address their questions, and have a sense of their previous interactions with the institution.

“When someone on our staff has a conversation with a prospective student and their family, understanding exactly who knows what going into that meeting is really important,” emphasizes Ledger. How important? Respondents to our survey ranked **admissions counselors far more influential than a college’s social media** and only slightly less influential than their friends and classmates.

At the very least, a strategic, centralized marketing department creates that more cohesive informational playing field which

facilitates more seamless communication, among other incremental business gains. In turn, that centralized department also has the capacity to then leverage those same insights to feed success elsewhere within the institution, and such additive value cannot be understated.

Greenberg explains how this has been critical at The Wharton School, “We’ve done a whole bunch of groundwork with one or two of some of the biggest departments, and now we can replicate that for the next department or the next product that is being offered. We can replicate and obviously do so pretty quickly, so it’s not seven to ten years for each new thing because we’re not building each system from scratch.”

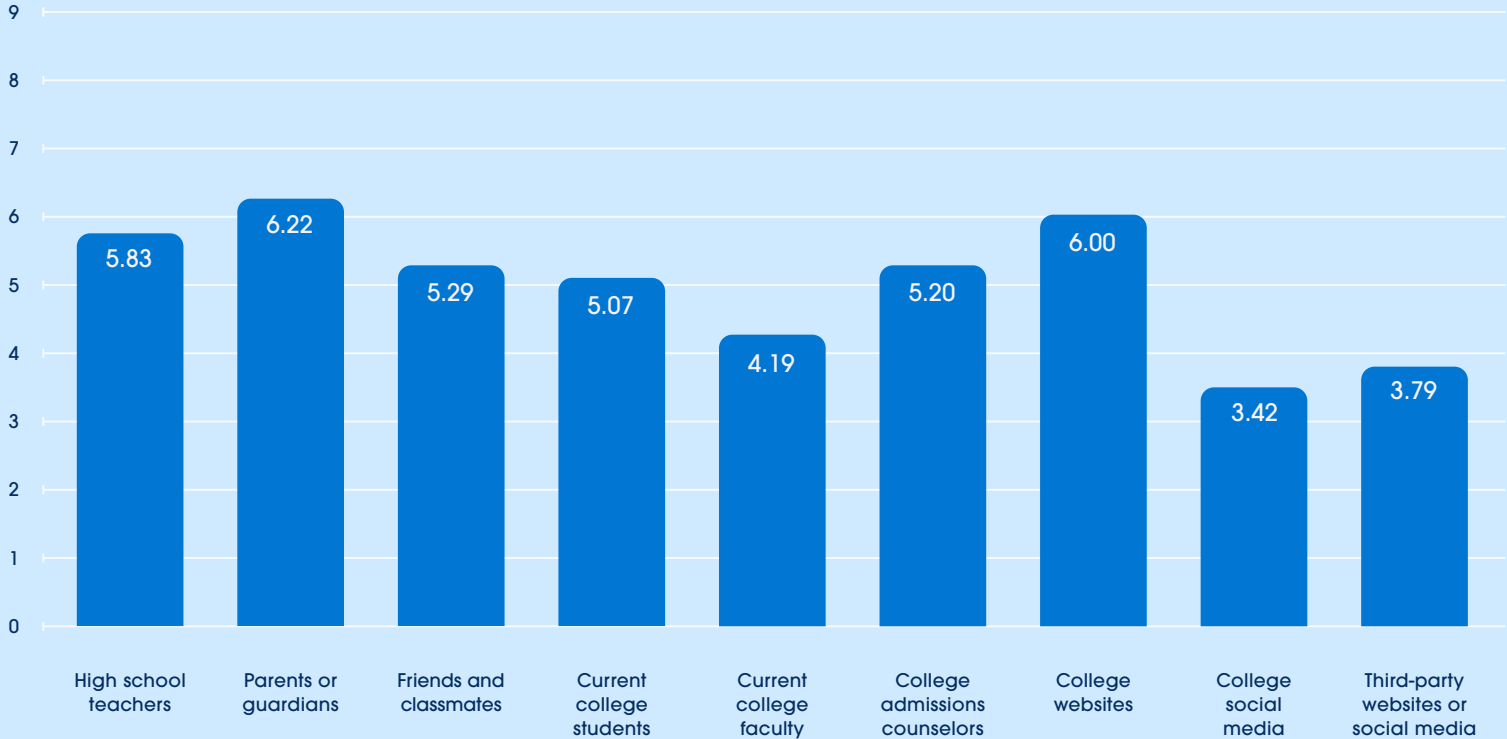
He points to early website development and how successes with one department served as clear proof points for similar development work with others, saving both time and money. What’s more, the resulting Google Analytics environment was so comprehensive that it allowed them to discover that 50% of one department’s enrollees were being funneled to that offering from other Wharton program websites rather than going directly to it.

Clearly, the theme of breaking down barriers toward centralization is another essential leg in the strategic vision not only to secure campus-wide buy-in, but to truly drive campus-wide change.

16. ([Higher Voltage, 2021](#))

Q: Rank each of the following sources of information by how useful each was to you when deciding which colleges to apply to:

Responses rated against each other to create a relative rating scale of 1 to 9, with 1 being the least useful and 9 being the most useful.



Prepare to Launch

Once these pieces are in place, it's critical to remember that the timeline of this strategic vision needs to be painfully realistic as well. Higher ed moves slowly. You know. We know it. The guy in front of you at Starbucks knows it. Embedding the full scope of platforms and practices that we'll explore in more detail below is going to require at least four to five years, in part because, as Greenberg reminds us, there can be a lot of foundational, yet time-consuming education and influencing work that must be done with it.

That said, incremental gains can be realized in weeks to months, and that truth is pivotal because it's not just about scaring leadership with the "worst case" scenario

of continued inaction or status quo subsistence. It's also about helping them understand the wonderland of opportunity that exists and getting them excited – really excited – about it.

"If folks know what you're testing for, why you're testing for, how you're measuring it, and seeing the results," says Mark Mashaw¹⁷, Vice President of Growth and Marketing at Campuswire, "then you tend to secure buy-in for future changes."

"If folks know what you're testing for, why you're testing for, how you're measuring it, and seeing the result, then you tend to secure buy-in for future changes."

Mark Mashaw, Campuswire

17. ([Markshaw, 2021](#))

Section 3

Innovation and Execution

Knowing Your Audience
and Refining Your Approach



Once you've developed your clear-eyed, student-centric marketing strategy, the question becomes: What are the actionable steps you can take to activate it? Our interviews, survey data, and third-party research point to three things:

- Developing a user experience roadmap rooted in real-time data
- Investing in the right martech stack and human resources
- Creating iterative processes for continued optimization

Are these meaty tasks? **Absolutely.** Can you make them happen overnight? **Definitely not.** But understanding their structure, respective value, and how they fit together is essential to create a process that can propel your institution toward the virtuous cycle you want. And while dramatic results won't be immediate, you can very much start to see some gains in the near term.



Developing User Journeys and Audience Personas

To get student-centric, you have to know who you're talking about, and how they behave. The best way to do this is to create audience personas that personify the specific segments of the total student population you want to target. Once done, you then want to project those personas' key motivators critical decision-making moments. These two exercises will then inform the personalized tactical execution that, as explored above, students have so clearly come to expect.

Audience Personas

Audience personas are fictional characters, with defined traits and behaviors, that represent one of your key target audiences – again, you can't target the entire student population, so you need to know who those key subsets of that larger group are that are good fits for your school.

As a simple example, let us consider Marcus, a wholly fictitious 17-year-old high school senior from Chicago, and Jody, an equally non-real 36-year-old mother of two from upstate New York. Neither Marcus nor Jody are

living, breathing humans, but they represent groups of characteristics of your target audience that are very real: In this case, that is traditional-aged students from urban areas and nontraditional-aged students from rural areas, respectively.

In addition to basic demographics, the persona should also identify personal background, psychographics – including key pain points and motivators – and pertinent end goals. For instance, Marcus may be a social-media super-user with entrepreneurial goals while Jody may be an adult-learner looking for flexible learning solutions.

These models can't be created out of thin air; rather, they have to be **built out of data-based insights** about your audience, for which surveys and focus groups can yield useful perspectives.

“Deep one-on-one interviews – or what some call ethnographies – can work where you're talking to someone who's going through, about to go through, or has recently gone through the decision-making process,” Mashaw says.

Audience Personas Example



Marcus McCollege

Gender: Male

Location: Chicago, urban

Age: 17

Life-stage: High school senior

Goals: To study human behavior, business, entrepreneurship

Needs: Proof of outcomes, support network for family, institutional values



Jody Job-Seeker

Gender: Female

Location: Upstate New York, rural

Age: 36

Life-stage: Working mom

Goals: To obtain bachelor's degree and attend law school while providing for family

Needs: Flexible schedule, affordability, close to home or remote

User Journeys

Audience personas must then be activated through comprehensive user journeys that map the timeline and key points of decision for prospective students. At each of those decision-making points, you must also identify the messaging points and vehicles that can inform and convince these personas. These visual representations show how each persona progresses from awareness to decision or, just as importantly, when and why they're exiting.

Marcus may be highly motivated by interactive and responsive messages like SMS, live chats, or DMs on social platforms that confirm for him the outstanding alumni mentoring program and student leadership opportunities. Jody, on the other hand, may be more apt to respond to messages emphasizing workforce readiness via slower digital mediums like email.



Audience personas and user journeys clarify abstract conceptualizations of specific audience segments, and they are highly interdependent – **either one without the other doesn't provide actionable direction.**

But with these tools in hand, you can create clear roadmaps of your student-centric marketing tactics, including the optimal messaging, channels, mediums, and the right frequency of touchpoints.

Importantly, audience personas and user journeys are compilations, not guesstimates. They are best informed by intensive user research conducted in a structured process, but can also be supplemented through more passive data collection like user surveys of incoming students. But surprisingly – and disappointingly – our survey found that 4 out of 5 recently enrolled students felt their selected college was either “not at all” or only “a little” interested in learning about their recruiting experience for the purposes of improvement.

The user journey map doesn't have to be a gargantuan atlas or showy attestation of marketing's creativity. Segmenting based on a few key commonalities and mapping a handful of critical moments is a strong starting point that can yield significant improvements in outcomes.

User Journeys Example

	Exploration	Qualification	Application	Attendance
 <p>Marcus McCollege</p>	<p>Discovers through social media, learns more on website, follows social media accounts</p> <p>I have room for 1-2 more applications.</p> <p>What sets this school apart?</p> <p>This school's grads go on to do great things.</p>	<p>Wants to know more about student outcome, student experience, financial aid availability and accessibility</p> <p>I like it, but can I afford it?</p> <p>What should I write my essay about?</p> <p>Okay, I'm feeling good about this.</p>	<p>Needs to know how to apply with clear process directions and to see the campus but can't travel</p> <p>Do I have what I need to apply?</p> <p>I got in, but I need more financial aid.</p>	<p>Worried about good fit, financial aid</p> <p>Okay, let's do this!</p>
 <p>Jody Jobseeker</p>	<p>Discovers specific need with search engine, learns more on website, signs up for email</p> <p>Can I really do this?</p> <p>Where would I actually go? How would it work?</p> <p>This school seems like a realistic and good option.</p>	<p>Wants to know more about cost, schedule and timeline of obtaining degree</p> <p>But can I actually afford this and make the time?</p> <p>Okay, I'm ready to apply. But how?</p> <p>What should I write my essay about? Do I have everything I need?</p>	<p>Ready to apply but needs clear direction and specific support to complete</p> <p>Okay, I'm applying!</p> <p>I'm in, but still worried about time and cost.</p>	<p>Worried about logistics, commitment, financial aid</p> <p>Okay, let's do this!</p>



Gathering Quantitative Behavioral Data

Audience personas and user journeys are mere exercises that inform goals and actions. They are core to developing a marketing and content strategy, but to target and acquire actual students, real-world data must be obtained and contextualized, constantly and continually.

That means taking data from these real journeys, analyzing it, and updating both your tactical plans but also those original user journey maps.

“When you start to add in the ability to see that they opened this email or they didn’t,’ then you can decide to try ping them with a text or to send them this message by print instead of email,” says Ledger. “With all those dimensions and visibility, you can get really robust journeys.”

Greenberg has helped The Wharton School transition to a quantitative approach that at first was based on lead scoring, where individual actions garnered points with thresholds that mapped to a certain phase of the funnel, and has more recently transitioned to engagement scoring.

“We might say stage-one engagement is that they fill out this short form, and second-stage engagement is [that] they fill out this longer form which gives us more information and shows a bit more of commitment,” he says. “Then maybe they get involved on a more personal level, attending a webinar or in-person event where they’re showing an extra commitment. What we’re trying to do with our engagement tracking strategy is move people along those chunks of activities.”

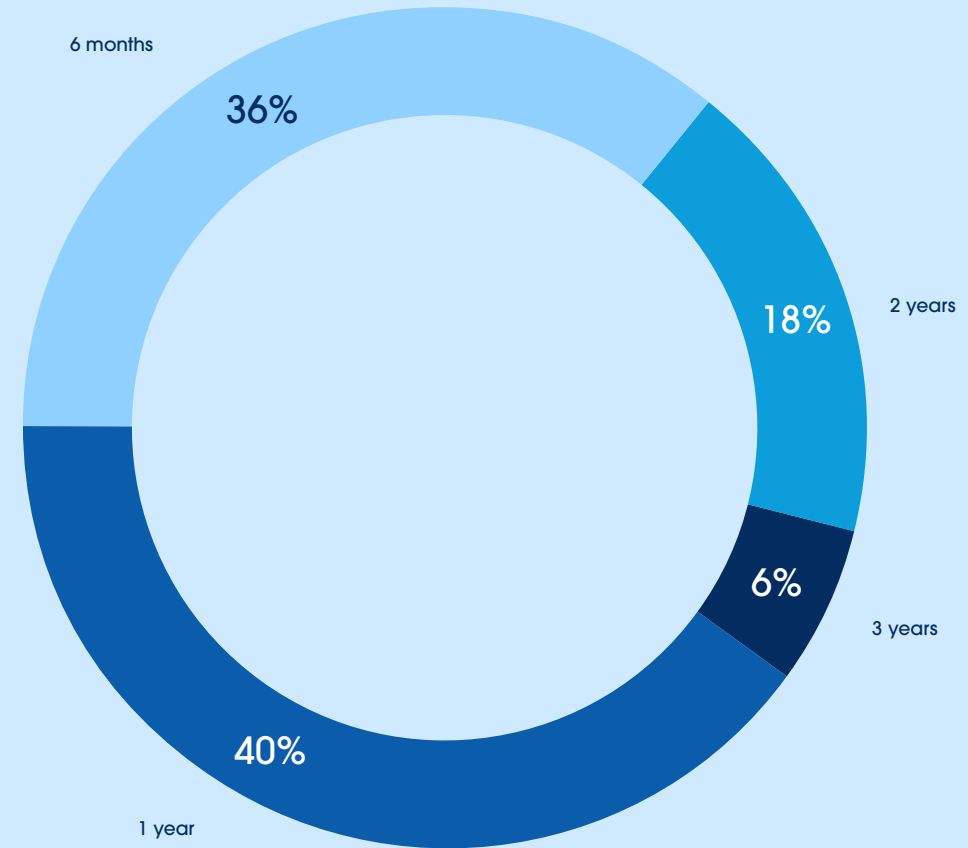
To center this in real world data, 39% of our survey respondents said they began their college search between 8th and 10th grade. That's earlier than what we've seen traditionally, and the persona of a student who starts exploration that likely differs greatly from that of the 22% who reported starting their search as high school seniors. With just this single data point – start date of journey – you can continue benchmarking and building out journeys based on additional data gathered.

Luckily, this process isn't as daunting a task as it would have been even just two decades ago. That wonderland we mentioned earlier? Much of the information needed to get there is already all around us, just waiting to be tapped, or rather, listened to.

That's because the day-to-day experience of college students and prospective college students (like most of the rest of the world) can now be measured in clicks, likes, and views. According to a study¹⁸ of 1,600 adolescents conducted in 2019 by Common Sense Media, teens spend, on average, seven and a half hours a day on tech – and that doesn't include time spent for homework. What's more, the largest chunk of that time is spent on social media. That's what social listening is so important, says Tyler.

18. ([Rideout, 2019](#))

Q: How long was it between the time you started your college search and when you narrowed down your top choices for applying?





“Ask **‘What are people saying? What do their comments look like?’** You can and should have social listening data which is all-encompassing, but it’s also valuable to get the perspective from the people having those conversations in direct messages,” he says.

Interestingly, however, more than twice as many respondents to our survey indicated that email was a more influential source for them than social media during their college search journeys. This suggests that social media is a factor, but an early-stage awareness play, while websites should be considered mid-to lower-funnel messaging platforms. The plot on preferred channels thickens even further when we explore short message service (SMS). Fewer than 9% of our respondents ranked mobile texting as their most influential medium, while 37% found it to be the least influential, ranking behind websites, email, social media, and pre-recorded video like webinars.

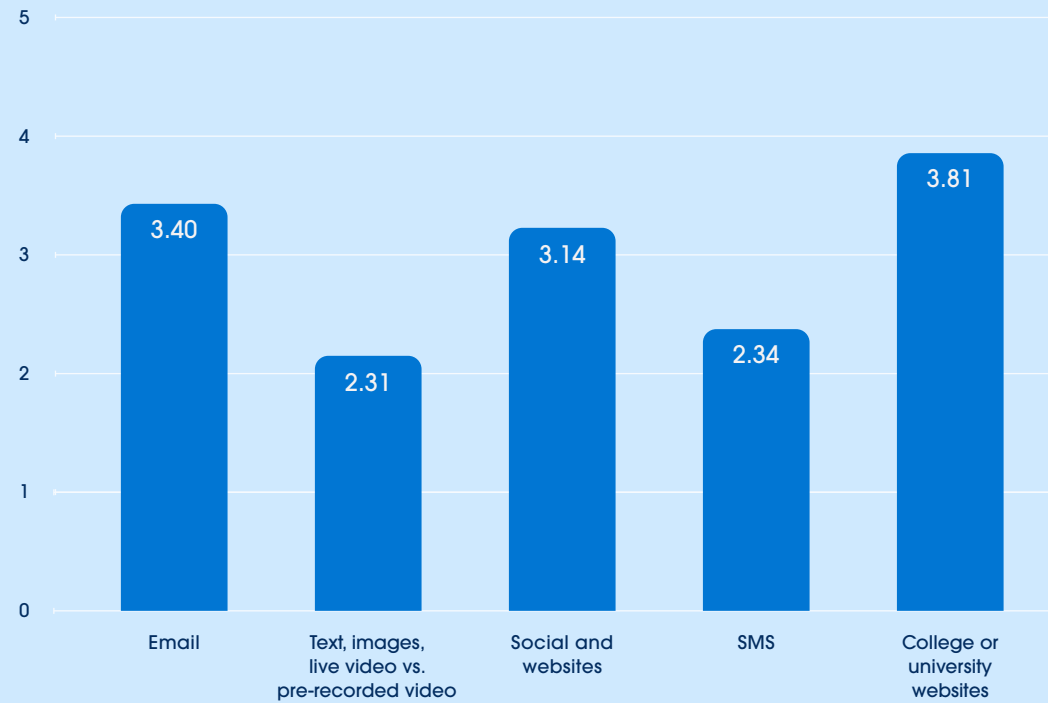
But our higher ed leaders see SMS as a highly effective tool for driving action around deadlines and other specific actions. Both Ledger and Mashaw point to mobile messaging as a highly effective yet often overlooked solution.

“A very solid use of SMS messaging with students as a way to communicate is imperative,” Mashaw says. “I know lots of folks do it, but I’m also continually surprised that some of what I think are really strong, higher-ed marketing teams who aren’t doing it.”

This cloudy look into the preferred communication channels of students highlights the exact reason for defining your audience and creating user personas – because different people react to different messages and delivery formats at different phases of their user journeys.

Q: Rank these methods of communication and marketing to how useful they were for you during your college search:

Responses rated against each other to create a relative rating scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the least useful and 5 being the most useful.



Mixing Quantitative Data with Qualitative Context

There's no better source of analytical information than how your current target audiences are behaving. There are rich minefields of such data that can be further enhanced by qualitative observations of enrollment staffers tracking individual prospects on their real-world user journeys. That's why The Wharton School blends user data with qualitative analysis and contextualization to create a smarter, more authentic funnel.

"Our process is a combination of looking at what people who have applied and enrolled were doing in analytics and what the commonalities were," Greenberg says. "And then also working in conjunction with the admissions teams who have a lot of qualifiable insights from how they're working directly with people and knowing what questions are being asked at different points in their journey."

Mashaw agrees that getting that information from the front lines is key.

"Frontline staff may be able to confirm what you're seeing from a student's digital behavior," Mashaw adds. "'Yeah, I've talked to a student and we're their top choice,' or 'Yeah, I know they've done six things on the website, but I've talked to them a few times and I don't think they're interested at all. They're just going through the motions.' Capturing both the behavior that you can track and quantify with **the insight you get from your frontline folks is pretty critical.**"

What all of this means is that the information you need to effectively understand real users is already largely out there waiting to be mined. That's both a blessing and a curse – there's so much of it, but how do you analyze and digest all of it?





Investing in the Right Marketing Technologies — and the Right People

With a sea of potential data to drown in, you need a mix of the right tech and the right people to gather and activate the insights that matter to you, so you can know what messages matter to your audience.

The Right Tools

The right tech tools offer exponential returns by improving efficiency through automation, behavioral tracking, and synthesizing data, while also reducing human error.

In addition to managing always-on assets for websites and paid media, you have an array of key messages for numerous target personas that are then delivered through multiple channels – email, social media, print, SMS, 1:1 communications, and more – at just the right time for each identified user journey, which may or may not occur on a rolling schedule.

If your head is swimming, you're hardly alone. It's a lot to manage, let alone manage well.

But the right technology can help you develop a robust system that automates many of these tasks and tracks even more of them to set the stage for truly data-driven decision-making.

“Ideally you have a CRM and a marketing management system that are connected so that if a user – a prospective student – [fills] out a form on a landing page or a site, obviously you want that information to make it into your CRM,” Mashaw says. “You also want those actions to trigger communications, potentially both automated communications as well as human-driven communications, like a phone call or a personalized email. At the same time, you’re capturing conversations with staff in both qualitative form and through more quantitative indicators – boxes to check, forms, drop downs to answer, more quantitative data that can be recorded in someone’s lead record.”

Ledger has specific platforms she finds very useful at Pitt. “Tableau and Google Analytics are really important,” she says. “We also use Social Studio or Sprout for social media monitoring. Then we get a lot of that other important information - email and SMS data – through Salesforce Marketing Cloud. We’re really trying to get most of it into Salesforce.”

In fact, Ledger says the Vice Provost of Graduate Studies has a custom dashboard that allows her to see, for the first time, across the institution and “identify more easily where we need to inject some extra fuel to help out these schools and colleges.”

The key takeaway here is that there must be a mechanism that clearly ties as much of the data together at both the individual level and in the aggregate. For institutions that are taking a best-of-breed approach, selectively piecing together top vendors from their respective service areas, this is especially paramount. Having the best data from each application without the ability to then put those pieces of the puzzle together is futile. If, alternatively, you’re opting for a platform approach, you need to ensure the platform has the ability to pull together data from all the different sources within your institution’s data ecosystem.

Data aggregation is crucial because with robust visibility, marketing teams aren’t just able to better track and benchmark messaging success or student populations, they can also **more accurately account for every dollar spent**. This allows them to make their budgets work even harder.

“Now we know where every dollar is spent,” Greenberg says. “We know what the result of that action was and how much it cost for a lead, an applicant, an enrollee.” Such a defined cost-per-acquisition is common (mandatory, really) in consumer industries, but the sooner higher ed can adopt it in this increasingly competitive environment, the better.



“Executives always ask for dashboards, but really what they want are insights.”

Eric Greenberg, The Wharton School

Moving the Needle with Human-Powered Insights

In order to fully embrace a holistic, data-centered approach, marketing teams need to ensure they also have the human power to first define the metrics that matter and then, later, draw out actionable insights and continuously assess the veracity of their approach, persistently asking ‘How can we improve?’

“Executives always ask for dashboards, but really what they want are insights,” Greenberg says. “A dashboard doesn’t really matter because it’s one step better than the spreadsheet. It doesn’t tell you anything.” The solution isn’t a dashboard, isn’t a single platform – **it’s a combination of people, platforms, and processes**, Greenberg says.

At the outset, humans need to identify what information is going to be most valuable, which KPIs really matter.

“You’ve got to really think through all of the things based on what you used to do while also trying to understand what you could be able to do [with these technologies],” Ledger explains. “You’re having to think of things like, ‘Well, wait, what about this field? Or this piece of data? Or where am I going to get this.’”

Once you’re up and running, capturing and aggregating data in a cohesive way, the human component is still just as vital.

Understanding what numbers mean or why a trend is occurring is still a uniquely human analysis because algorithms can’t (yet) delineate comprehensive causality or contextualize occurrences within the broader lived experience. This means that teams need to invest in talent adept in both the pertinent technological skills and critical thinking.

Greenberg points to an extension of this challenge, noting that even when a trend has been identified by analysts, it often takes additional staffing resources to actually engage the creative changes they’ve identified as necessary.

“We’re capturing a lot of data and we have a lot of technology, but we don’t necessarily have the digital marketers to take that data and actually do digital marketing with it, to do all the A/B testing based on the data, for example,” he says. That’s the next area we’re beginning to move into: How do we now make use of all data? What we’re trying to do is match the staff so that we can actually utilize the data to drive even better results.”

His point is well taken: Data, as we’ve already seen, is everywhere. But leveraging that data to draw real insights, and to act on those insights, is wholly different.

Creating Iterative Processes for Continuous Optimization

Once these many activities are completed or initiated, accordingly – securing leadership buy-in, mapping the user journey, adopting the right platforms, and staffing all of these efforts appropriately – the digital ecosystem will continue to blossom and students will continue to cycle through. With every related click, an opportunity for improvement awaits.

For every data point you receive along the way, work to interpret it and input those learnings right back into the system so that the next student who journeys through has an even better, more seamless experience.

“From a testing perspective, **institutions should have very simple and iterative A/B tests running all the time**, certainly from a site or landing page content perspective,” Mashaw says. “Task, iterate, pick winners, move on, and do so in a very specific, methodical way with a calendar of what you want to learn and how you want to get there and be very diligent about implementing that.”

And though your mind may first focus on content in the context of marketing iteration, all of our experts affirmed its value when it comes to the academic offerings themselves.

“In my experience, marketing has been a critical function in analyzing and deciding what academic offerings to present,” Mashaw says. “If you are an online program manager working with partner schools, for instance, and you’re helping bring those programs online, there are incentives for both sides to create programs that will attract students. So, that can very much be a marketing function from a product research perspective, analyzing both the current market situations but also using good forecasting data analytic techniques to predict where the market may go.”

Tyler, too, speaks to leveraging the optimization happening on a smaller timescale to look further into the future and plan for it.

“The world will change whether higher ed does or not,” he says, “So if a school wants to remain relevant, it will have to come up with new programmatic offers. Not too long ago, no one had ever heard of cybersecurity, and then once everything got hacked, people started saying, ‘Oh, we need a cybersecurity major.’ Higher ed’s duty is to meet the needs of the world means staying ahead enough to be prepared for what people will need when they get there, and that comes with paying attention and listening.”



Section 4

To Begin, Begin





Since 2016, more than half of the states across the U.S. have seen at least one college closing or merger¹⁹, and this new competitive reality is likely here with us for the next decade, if not in perpetuity. The stakes are high, and meeting the expectations of today's discerning, mobile, non-homogenous students is no easy task.

But this urgency is also an opportunity, and one that can drive you toward progress. And, again, you don't have to turn the battleship in one fell swoop – you can start iterating today and quickly see results. To get started, plan for checking off each of these boxes:

- **Become intimately familiar with the market's present challenges and opportunities.**
- **Invest in a strategic vision that acknowledges the ubiquity of marketing and addresses branding, culture fit, and centralization.**
- **Emulate aspirants by embracing digital transformation through user journeys, investments in martech, and iterative processes that drive continued optimization.**

In doing so, you'll transform not only marketing's role and effectiveness, but also the institution's performance.

Remember: This is about so much more than just marketing. It's about redefining the promise of education itself and the world it opens up for the students, young and old, venturing into any program on any campus.

"The Harvards of the world will always get the students they need," Tyler says. "But will the small college in Rhode Island? I don't know. Maybe not. Yet they are the perfect school for someone, and they should exist for that person to get there."

Education is integral for our collective success. To embrace this reality amid the multifaceted challenges of the current market requires higher education institutions of all sizes to innovate, in some cases drastically, and though it won't be an easy trek or one that happens overnight, it will be rewarding – and it is imperative.

19. ([Higher Ed Dive Team, 2021](#))

Works Cited

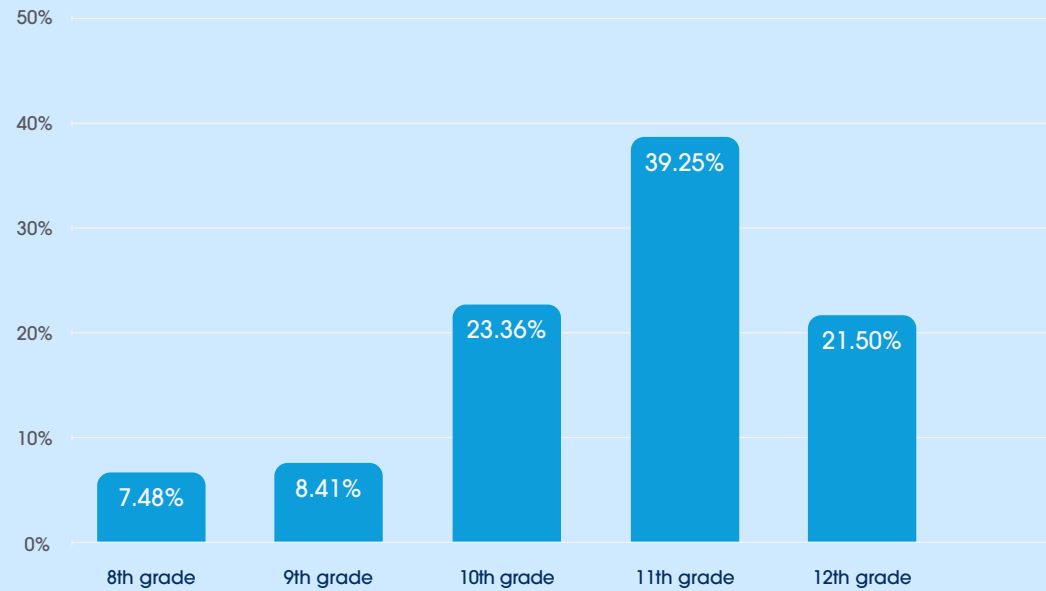
1. “No Country for Old Men 2007.” <https://clip.cafe/no-country-old-men-2007/its-a-mess/>
2. Schroeder, Ray. 2021. *A Second Demographic Cliff Adds to Urgency for Change*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/online-trending-now/second-demographic-cliff-adds-urgency-change>
3. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. 2021. *Current Term Enrollment Estimates*. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>
4. Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2019. *College Students Are More Diverse Than Ever. Faculty and Administrators Are Not*. <https://www.aacu.org/aacu-news/newsletter/2019/march/facts-figures>
5. Baker, Rachel B., Evans, Brent J., Rivas, Mariela J. 2020. *Do MOOCs Make You More Marketable? An Experimental Analysis of the Value of MOOCs Relative to Traditional Credentials and Experience*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858420973577>
6. Marken, Stephanie. 2019. *Half in U.S. Now Consider College Education Very Important*. <https://www.gallup.com/education/272228/half-consider-college-education-important.aspx>
7. Hanson, Melanie. 2021. *Average Student Loan Debt*. <https://educationdata.org/average-student-loan-debt>
8. College Board. 2020. *Historically Low Increases in Average Published Tuition Prices Amid the Pandemic*. <https://newsroom.collegeboard.org/report-historically-low-increases-average-published-tuition-prices-amid-pandemic>
9. PeopleReady Skilled Trades. 2021. *U.S. Skilled Trades Labor Shortage Heightens as In-Demand Jobs Remain Unfilled the Longest*. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20210318005265/en/U.S.-Skilled-Trades-Labor-Shortage-Heightens-as-In-Demand-Jobs-Remain-Unfilled-the-Longest>
10. Higher Education Publications, Inc. 2021. *College Administrator Data/Turnover Rates: 2018–Present*. <https://hepinc.com/newsroom/college-administrator-data-turnover-rates-2018-present/>
11. LinkedIn. 2021. *Jobs on the Rise in 2021*. <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/resources/talent-acquisition/jobs-on-the-rise-us>
12. BestColleges Staff Writers. 2021. *Students Believe Supporting Social Justice Drives Change*. <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/students-believe-social-justice-drives-change/>
13. Greenberg, Eric. 2021. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/emgreenberg/>
14. Stevenson, Bryan. 2018. *The Power of Proximity*. Fortune Magazine. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RyAwZlHo4Y>

Works Cited

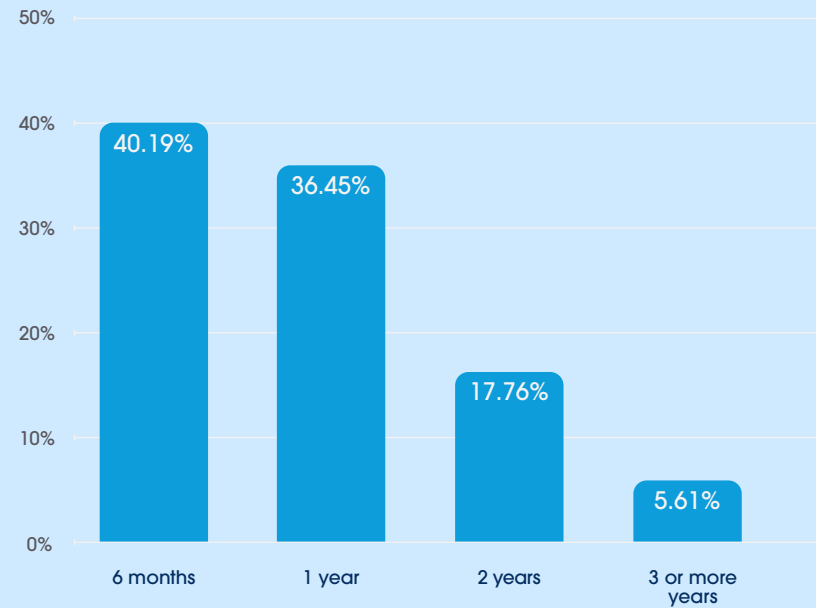
15. Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P.K, Yuan, X., & Harrell, A. 2015. *Transfer & Mobility: A National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2008 Cohort*. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SignatureReport9.pdf>
16. Higher Voltage. 2021. *Stories First: Inside UCLA's Revamped Marcomm Team*. <https://voltedu.com/marketing-branding/ucla-rebuilt-marketing-team/>
17. Marshaw, Mark. 2021. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/mark-mashaw-4a8ab76/>
18. Rideout, Victoria and Robb, Michael B. 2019. *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*. <https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/2019-census-8-to-18-full-report-updated.pdf>
19. Higher Ed Dive Team. 2021. *The A look at trends in college consolidation since 2016*. <https://www.highereddive.com/news/how-many-colleges-and-universities-have-closed-since-2016/539379/>

Appendix

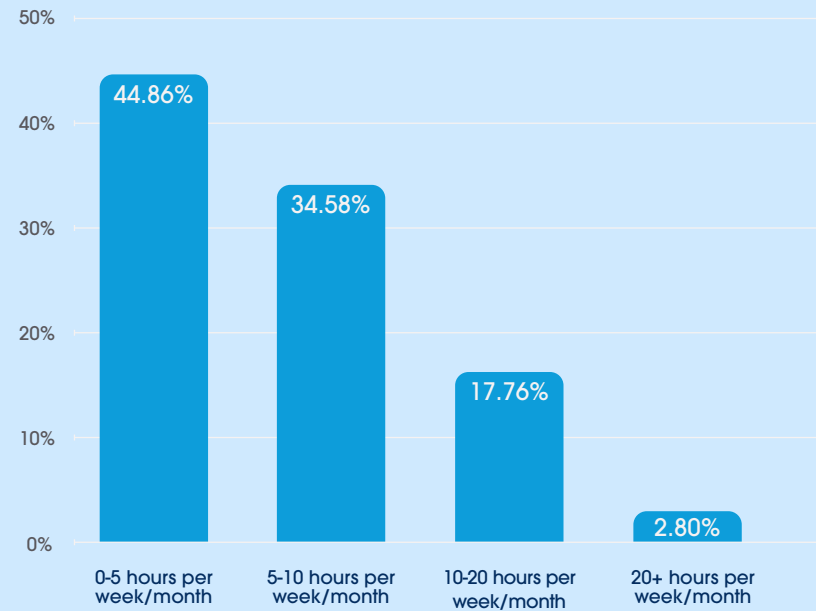
Q1: When did you begin your college search?



Q2: How long was it between the time you started your college search and when you narrowed down your top choices for applying?

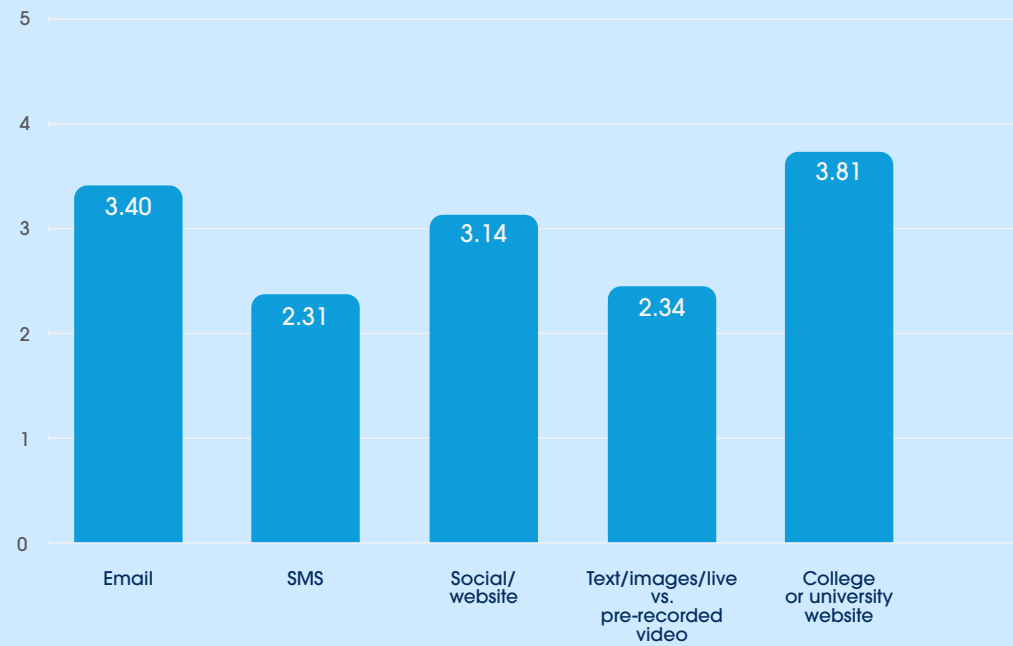


Q3: At the peak of your college search, how much time did you spend a week exploring college options either online (social media, websites, etc.) or offline (reading letters, attending fairs, etc.)?

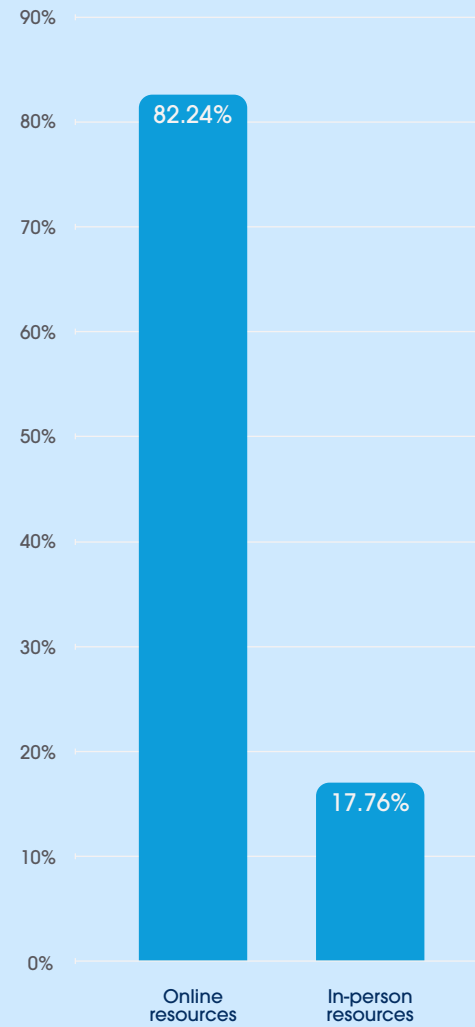


Q4: Rank these methods of communication and marketing to how useful they were for you during your college search:

Responses rated against each other to create a relative rating scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the least useful and 5 being the most useful.

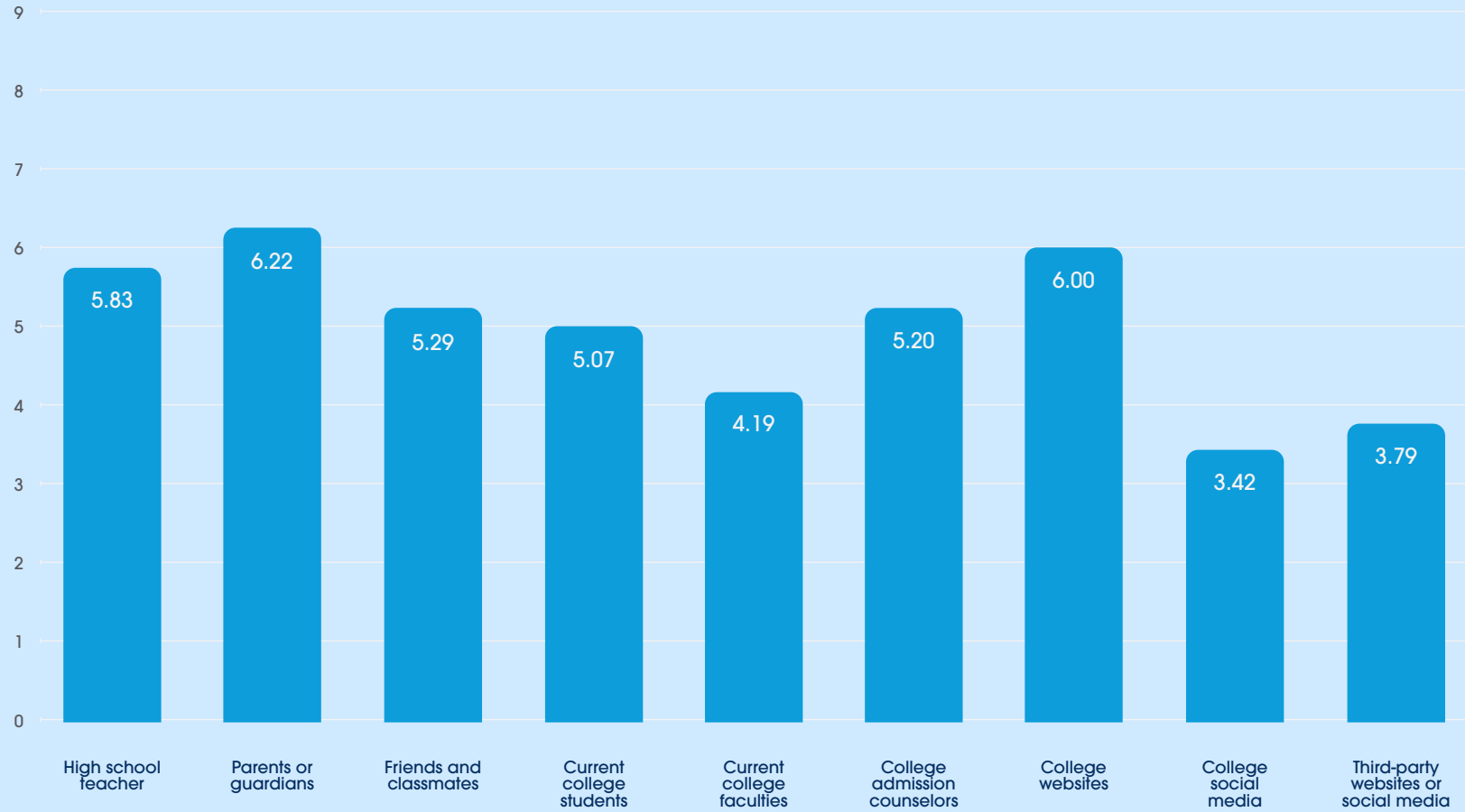


Q5: At the beginning of your college search, which resource did you use the most?

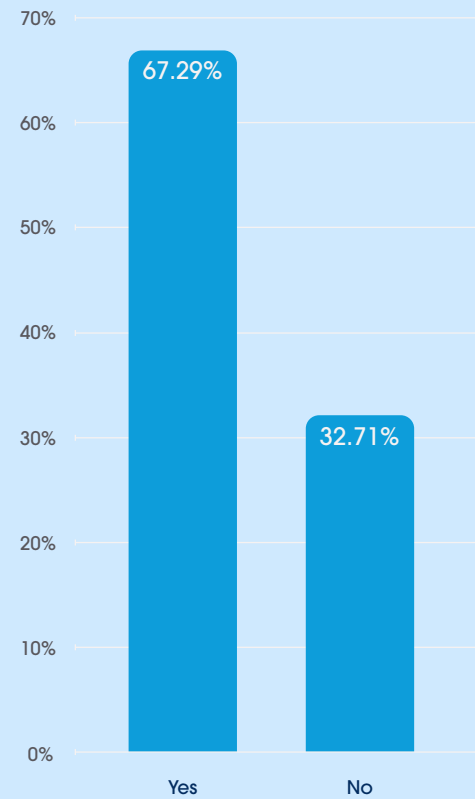


Q6: Rank each of the following sources of information by how useful each was to you when deciding which colleges to apply to:

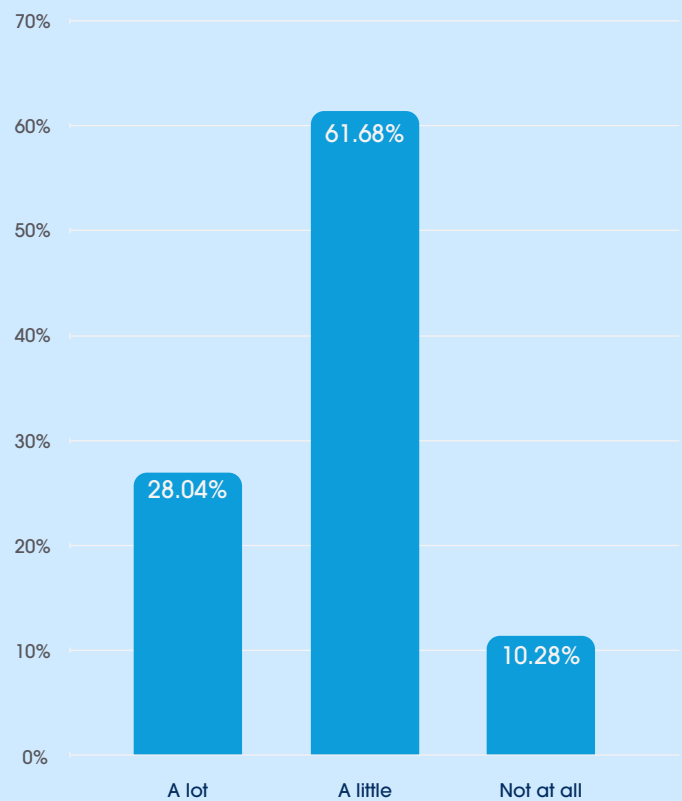
Responses rated against each other to create a relative rating scale of 1 to 9, with 1 being the least useful and 9 being the most useful.



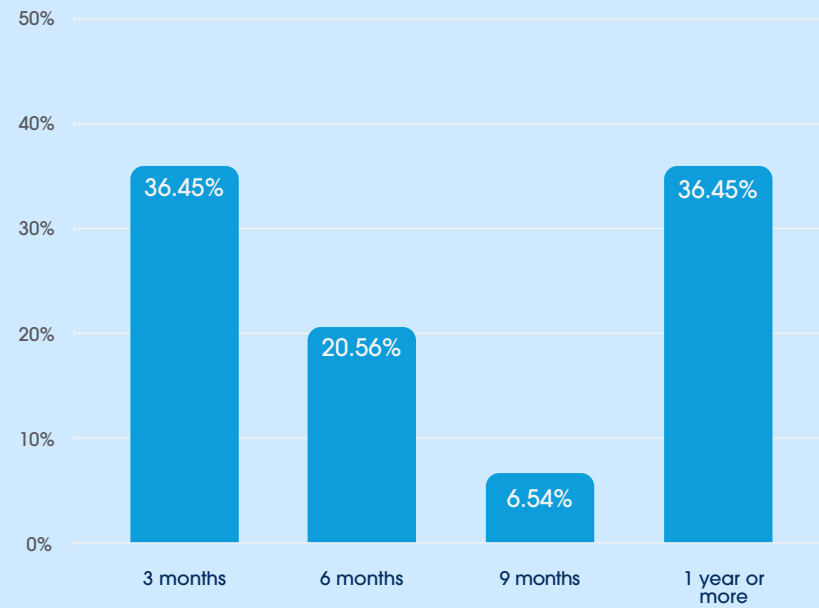
Q7: Do you expect a college or university's digital marketing materials (emails, social media, text messages, etc.) to be personalized specifically to you in a way that shows they know who you are, at least on some level, as an individual?



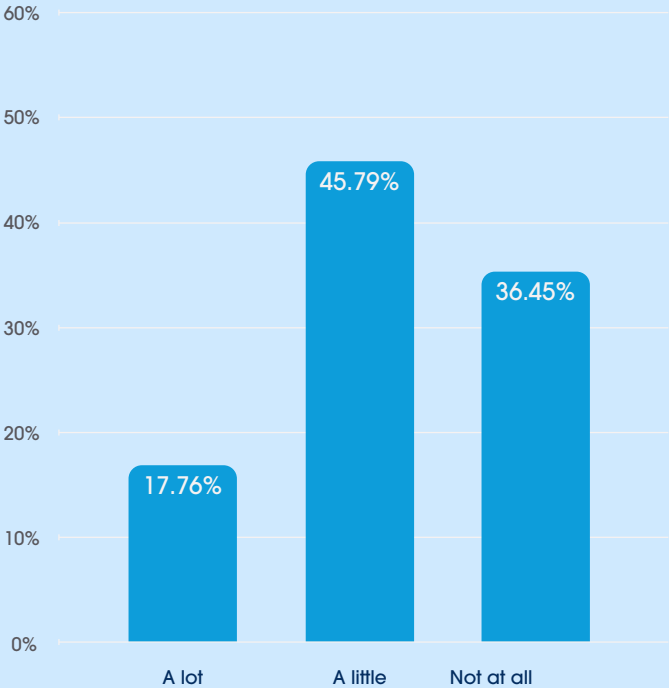
Q8: To what extent are they successfully doing so?



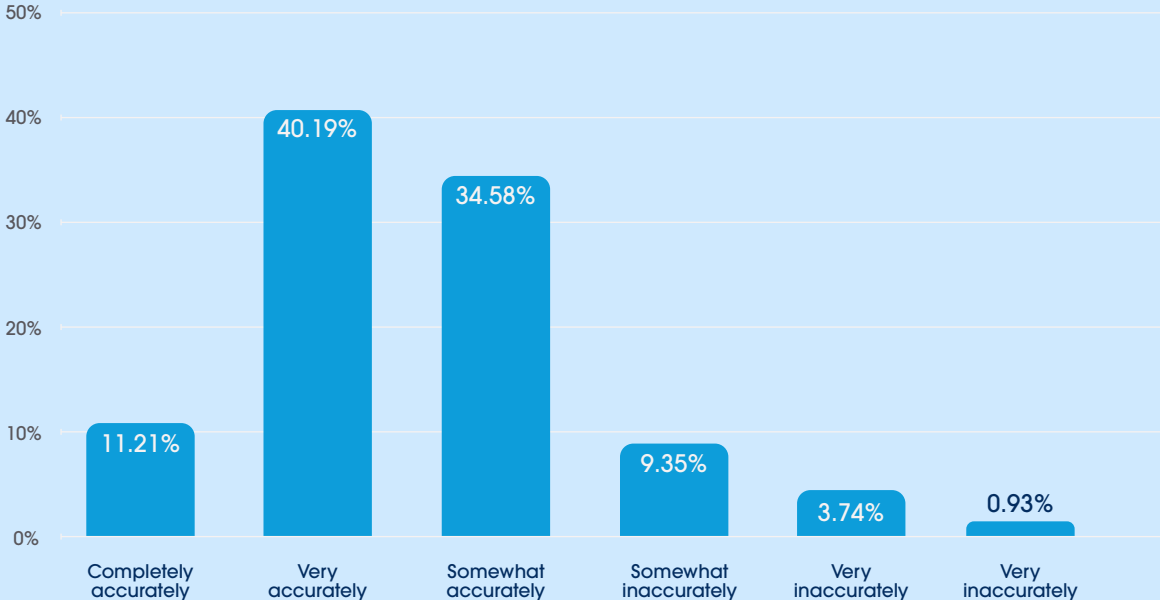
Q9: Approximately how long after deciding that a university was not one you planned to apply to did you still receive marketing materials from them?



Q10: To what extent do you feel the university was interested in learning from your unique recruiting experience for their continued improvement?



Q11: Now that you attend this college or university, how accurately do the materials and messages that you received from them during the recruiting process reflect the actual experience of that college?



Q12: Now that you attend the college or university of your choice, does the way they communicate with you continue to make you feel as valued as it did when they were encouraging you to apply and enroll?

