



2019

# Niche College Applicant Survey of Student Confidence and Concerns

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# SUMMARY

*Student confidence in their choice and opportunities for success were high, but there were concerning signs about their perceived ability to afford the opportunity.*

This was the fourth year that Niche has surveyed students between May 16 and June 30 to learn more about their search and decisions. This year’s survey was responded to by 16,981 students who had made their enrollment decision before June 30, 2019. Interestingly, 60.3% of respondents were domestic students of color, which differs from the Fall 2017 IPEDS data showing 49.7% of enrolled college students were domestic students of color.

Most press tends to focus on headlines about the increasing number of institutions that students apply to, but that’s being driven by a small group of students applying to an increasing number of schools. What should be more concerning for colleges was the trend of students visiting fewer institutions, with the largest 2019 change being an increase in the number of students not taking any visits. Student confidence in their choice and opportunities for success was high, but there were concerning signs about their perceived ability to afford the opportunity.

The type and location of a student’s high school made quite a difference in the way they responded. Students attending rural high schools were more confident, more likely to be accepted to their first choice, and less likely to take on loans. They also appeared the most focused in their college choice, applying to the fewest number of institutions while not visiting any fewer colleges than their suburban and urban peers.

## Are You the First in Your Immediate Family to Go to College?

	African American	Asian	Hispanic	Multiracial	Native American	Other	White	Total
Yes	1,208	585	2,004	237	47	136	1,566	5,783
No	2,294	1,295	1,489	587	92	220	5,164	11,141
Null	14	11	11	3	1	2	15	57
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,516</b>	<b>1,891</b>	<b>3,504</b>	<b>827</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>6,745</b>	<b>16,981</b>



## "THE MODAL STUDENT"

### Her Profile

- White, female
- Suburban public school student
- 3.5-3.9 GPA
- College-educated family
- Comes from a \$75k-\$149k household
- Not considering a community college
- Filed FAFSA and received awards/grants
- Plans to work part-time while enrolled
- Taking less than \$10k in student loans in first year, less than \$25k over four years

### Her College Search Challenges

- Managing deadlines
- Managing application materials
- Cost to apply and visit
- Deciding where to apply

The modal student is the student that you're most likely to run in to, not an amalgamation of averages that might not actually exist. To uncover the modal student we looked at the most common collection of demographic options: race, gender, type of school, parental education, and household income.

Her biggest challenge in her college search was managing the deadlines and application materials, followed closely by the cost to apply and visit, and deciding which institutions to apply to. Ultimately, she visited two institutions and applied to and was accepted to one. As expected, she reported being accepted to her first choice institution. She was looking for an institution with a small, quiet campus.

The most important factor when figuring out where to apply was the college's net price calculator, followed by student reviews and college rankings. The most important factor in deciding where to enroll was the place she felt would most prepare her for a career, followed by whether or not she felt she would be happy there, and then whether the college had her major. She feels most confident that her chosen college will help her be successful, but least confident that she will be able to afford the college she chose.

She ruled out some institutions based solely on the published tuition cost, but interestingly did not consider a community college. She filed a FAFSA and was awarded scholarships and grants from her institution. She plans to work part-time while enrolled and take on less than \$10,000 in student loans her first year and plans to borrow less than \$25,000 over four years.

# SURVEY RESULTS

## Visits, Applications and Acceptances

The number of students visiting a college decreased, a concerning sign for colleges because getting students on campus and seeing it for themselves is the best way to enroll and retain students. The number of students visiting a college campus fell 1.7% to 93% compared to the previous three years. Students visiting five or more campuses fell 1.6%. However, the mean, median and mode of visits remained unchanged.

- Mean number of visits — 4
- Median number of visits — 3
- Mode number of visits — 2
- Range of visits — 0-137

In spite of the decrease in campus visits, applications did increase slightly. The percentage of students applying to fewer than five colleges fell 3.6%, while the percentage applying to more than ten institutions increased by 2.2%. The most common number of applications per student (one) remained the same— but fell to 13.5% of respondents from 13.9% over the past three years. The median number of applications per respondent increased from four to five this year as well.

- Mean number of applications — 6
- Median number of applications — 5
- Mode number of applications — 1
- Range of applications — 0-102

With the increased number of applications, there was also a slight increase in the number of institutions that respondents were accepted to, though not enough to affect the mean, median, or mode. The percentage of students accepted to fewer than five institutions fell 4.4% and the percentage accepted to more than ten institutions increased 1.7%. Those accepted to more than 20 increased by 0.2%. While this isn't a large increase, if you factor in the cost of recruiting and working with a student through acceptance, an increase in the number of students that a campus has less than a 5% chance of enrolling can be costly.

- Mean number of acceptances — 4
- Median number of acceptances — 3
- Mode number of acceptances — 1
- Range of acceptances — 0-50



*The percentage of students applying to fewer than 5 colleges fell 3.6%, while the percentage applying to more than 10 institutions increased by 2.2%.*

Percentage of Respondents Falling Into Each Category by Survey Year:

Visits	2019	2016–2018	Change
0	7.0%	5.3%	1.7%
1	15.2	14.9	0.3
2	20.3	19.5	0.8
3	19.2	19.5	-0.3
4	11.4	12.3	-0.9
5+	26.9	28.5	-1.6

Applications	2019	2016–2018	Change
1	13.5%	13.9%	-0.4
2	11.5	12.4	-0.9
3	12.4	13.2	-0.8
4	10.7	11.5	-0.8
5	10.2	11.0	-0.8
6	7.4	7.5	-0.1
7	5.8	5.3	0.5
8	6.4	5.7	0.7
9	3.3	3.0	0.3
10+	18.8	16.6	2.2

Acceptances	2019	2016–2018	Change
0	0.6%	0.9%	-0.3%
1	17.5	19.0	-1.5
2	15.3	17.0	-1.7
3	14.2	15.6	-1.4
4	11.4	11.8	-0.4
5	9.4	9.5	-0.1
6	6.6	5.9	0.7
7	4.8	4.2	0.6
8	3.8	3.1	0.7
9	2.2	2.0	0.2
10+	7.0	5.5	1.5

**Students attending rural high schools** appear the most focused in their college search, applying to the least number of colleges and with the median applications being equal to the number of acceptances. Private high school students had the highest median applications, even though they did not visit more colleges than other segments.



	Rural Students	Suburban Students	Urban Students	Public Students	Private Students
Median Colleges Visited	3	3	3	3	3
Median Colleges Applied To	3	5	5	5	6
Median College Acceptances	3	3	4	3	4

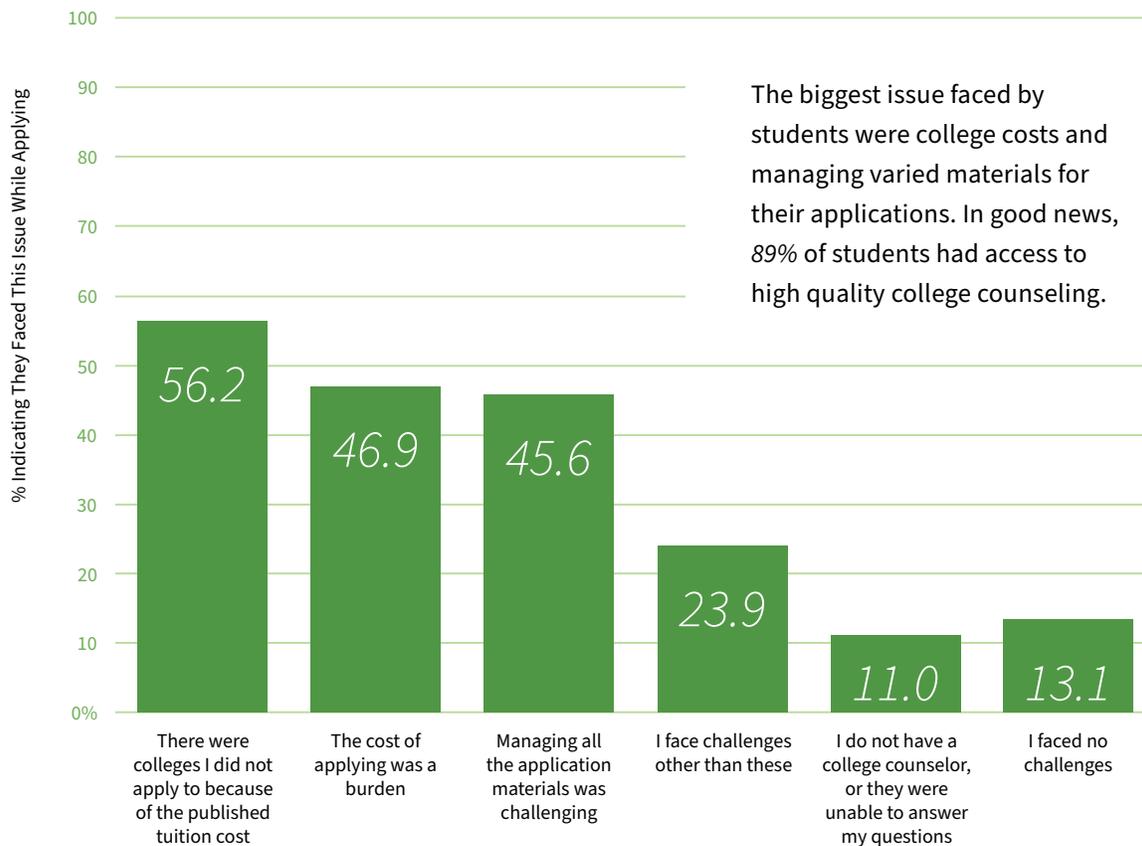
*...more public school students had a counselor supporting their college search than their private school peers.*

### *What Were the Issues Faced by Applicants?*

Overall, the biggest issue for students was the cost to apply and visit. In every category, except students with GPAs below 2.0 or household incomes above \$150,000, the majority of students ruled out some institutions because of the published tuition price. Managing the essays, references, and materials needed for applications was a burden primarily for students with a 4.0 GPA, those from high income families, and suburban students.

Fortunately, the percentage of students without access to college counseling was very low. One opportunity for increasing support is at rural private high schools, where 21.7% of students didn't have access to college counseling. This is in stark contrast to their rural public school peers at 12.9% and all respondents at 11.0%. In the 2019 NACAC State of College Admissions report 29% of public schools stated having at least one full-time college counselor and 48% of private schools did. Student survey responses differed, indicating that more public school students had a counselor supporting their college search than their private school peers.

Overall, the biggest issue for students was the cost to apply and visit.

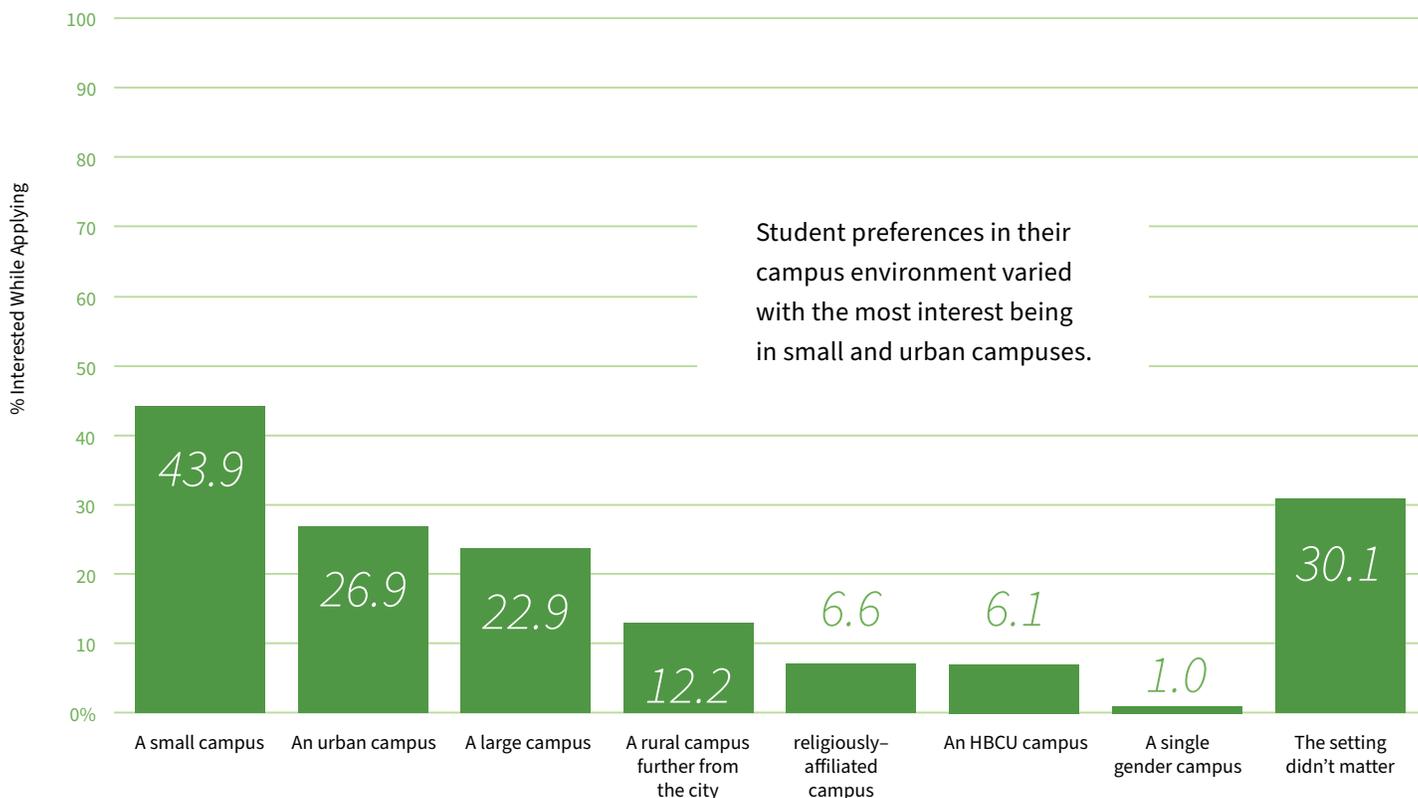


	Rural Students	Suburban Students	Urban Students	Public Students	Private Students
Did not apply because of published tuition cost	56.6%	56.6%	56.0%	56.9%	51.5%
Cost was a burden	46.0	44.7	50.1	47.6	41.5
Managing materials was a burden	39.4	47.8	45.9	46.2	42.3
No college counselor	13.8	10.5	10.4	10.7	13.6
Other challenges	23.5	24.3	23.6	24.0	23.0
No issues	16.7	13.2	11.4	12.6	17.0



### What Campus Setting Are Students Looking For?

Students were asked what type of campuses they were considering during their college search and while deciding where to apply. They could select multiple options, so numbers don't add up to 100%. The most common setting students are looking for is a small campus followed by an urban campus.

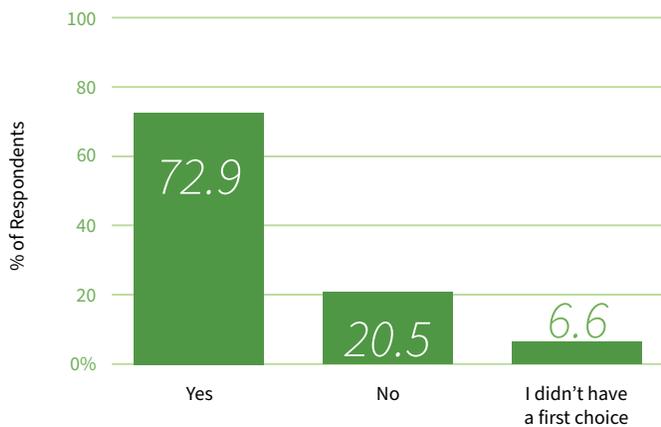


## Preferred Campus Setting

	Rural Students	Suburban Students	Urban Students	Public Students	Private Students
A small campus	52.0%	44.0%	40.5%	43.4%	48.3%
A large campus	16.3	24.4	24.0	23.3	20.2
An urban campus	20.2	26.3	31.0	27.0	28.1
A rural campus	12.2	12.4	12.0	12.5	9.5
A religiously affiliated campus	8.6	7.0	5.1	5.4	16.3
An HBCU	3.9	4.6	9.0	6.4	4.2
A single gender campus	0.8	0.8	1.2	0.9	1.2
The setting didn't matter	31.4	29.2	32.3	31.3	25.9

In spite of the anxiety around applying to college 78.1% of students who had a first choice college were accepted to it.

### Were You Accepted to Your First Choice?



### First Choice Acceptances

Overall, 72.9% of students were accepted into their first choice and 78.1% of students who had a first choice college were accepted to it. The students least likely to be accepted to their first choice were unsurprisingly those reporting GPAs less than a 2.0, with only 60% earning acceptance to their first choice. Students at rural high schools were the most likely to be accepted to their first choice at 86.1%.

	Rural Students	Suburban Students	Urban Students	Public Students	Private Students
Accepted to first choice (if there was a first choice)	86.1%	77.3%	75.6%	78.2%	76.8%

*Financial aid offers were much less satisfying. Only 17.2% of students responded that they strongly agreed and 8.9% strongly disagreed that they were satisfied.*



### *Student Satisfaction at the End of the Funnel*

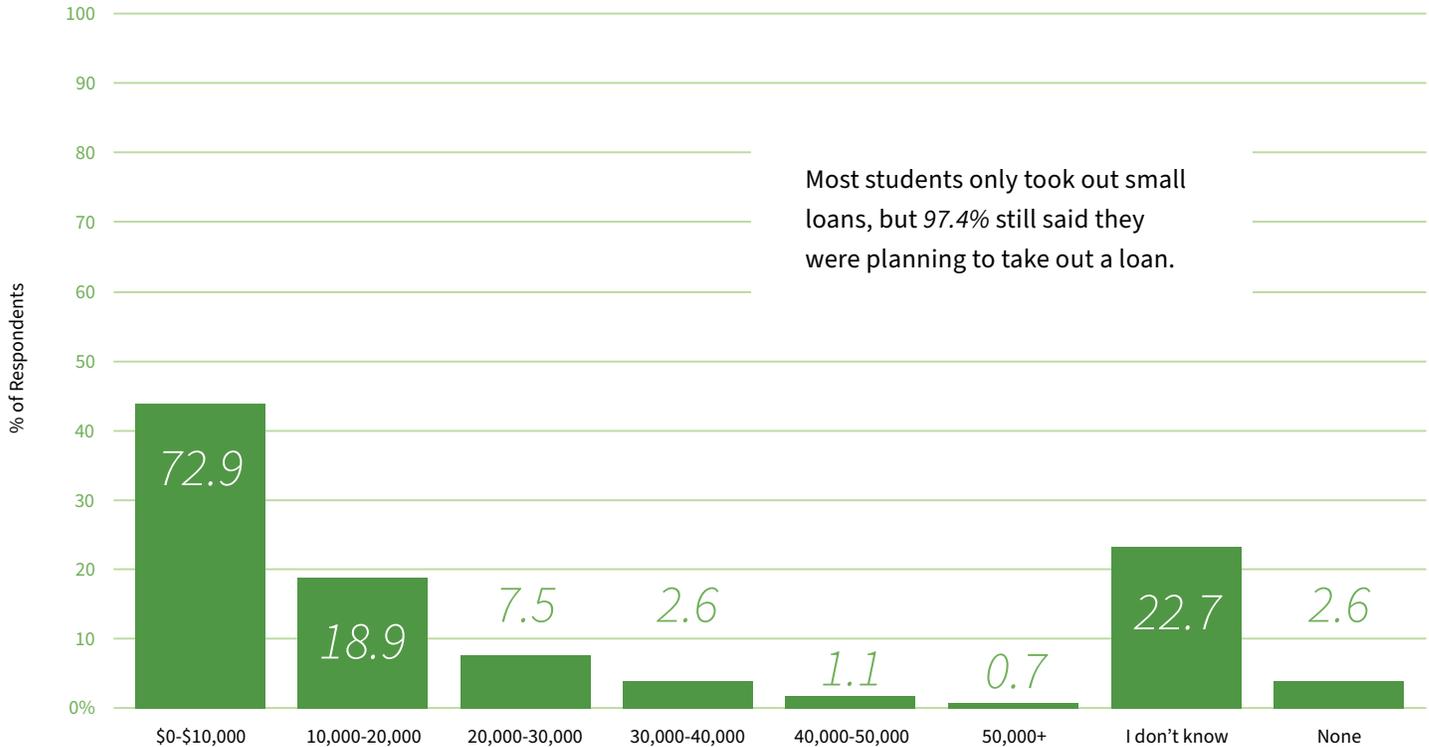
We surveyed students on their satisfaction with three middle-to-end of funnel dimensions. Students were asked if they were satisfied with the financial aid offers that they received, the institutions at which they were accepted, and the institution in which they decided to enroll. Overall, students were happy with where they were accepted and decided to enroll; only 2.1% disagreed that they were satisfied with their choice. Rural students were more satisfied than their suburban and urban peers, and students at private high schools were more satisfied than their public-school peers.

Financial aid offers were much less satisfying. Only 17.2% of students responded that they strongly agreed and 8.9% strongly disagreed that they were satisfied.

The students most satisfied (responding Agree or Strongly Agree) with their financial aid were rural students at 46.3% and those from households earning less than \$25,000 at 50.0%. A student's reported GPA had no significant change in their satisfaction with financial aid until they reported a 4. GPA or higher at 49.2%. These students had a satisfaction rate of 44.2%. Students least satisfied with their financial aid came from families earning over \$150,000 with only 33.4% responding positively. Interestingly, this same group was one of the least satisfied with the institutions they were accepted to (81.3%), but had one of the most positive satisfaction scores with their enrolled institution (90.2%).

	Rural Students	Suburban Students	Urban Students	Public Students	Private Students
Satisfied with financial aid offers	46.3%	42.7%	42.8%	42.9%	46.2%
Satisfied with the college(s) accepted to	87.4	83.3	80.8	82.8	84.1
Satisfied with the college chosen to attend	90.4	88.2	85.5	87.3	89.6

### How Much Money Are You Taking out in Loans for the First Year?



Most students only took out small loans, but 97.4% still said they were planning to take out a loan.

*When asked if they felt that college was a good investment, 80.5% responded that it was very or extremely good while only 0.4% felt it was not a good investment.*

#### First-Year Loans

Most students did indicate they were planning to take out loans for their education. Since the survey was done in May and June, not every respondent knew yet if they were going to take out loans. When asked if they felt that college was a good investment, 80.5% responded that it was very or extremely good while only 0.4% felt it was not a good investment.

At the time of the survey, suburban students were the least likely to take out loans, but the most likely to take out large loans in their first year. They were significantly less likely to take out small loans and 2x-5.5x more likely to take out loans of over \$50,000 in their first year. Students at private high schools were also slightly more likely to take out loans, perhaps indicating a propensity to choose institutions with a higher net cost.

	Rural Students	Suburban Students	Urban Students	Public Students	Private Students
\$0-\$10,000	46.4%	39.1%	50.5%	43.8%	45.6%
10,000-20,000	21.4	19.8	16.1	19.0	17.9
20,000-30,000	6.0	8.9	6.1	7.5	7.5
30,000-40,000	2.2	2.7	2.6	2.5	3.2
40,000-50,000	0.5	1.4	1.1	1.1	1.3
50,000+	0.2	1.1	0.5	0.7	1.0
No loans	2.9	2.7	2.4	2.7	2.4
I don't know	20.3	24.2	21.3	22.8	21.1

### Student Confidence

Student confidence was high for most of the five questions that were asked, such as—"Are you confident that you will graduate on time?," or "Are you confident that you are prepared for college?"

The most concerning was their confidence that they were prepared for the college they had chosen and that they would be able to afford the college they were choosing. What is interesting about these questions is that they are merely the students' perceptions and may not reflect reality. However, a student's perception can become reality.

Just under half of students (45.3%) said that they strongly agreed that they were

academically prepared for college and only 16.6% said that they strongly agreed that they could afford their college. Students attending private high schools were the most confident in their ability to afford college, and in all the other questions. Rural students were the most confident overall when compared to their suburban and urban peers.

Students responded on a Likert scale indicating their level of confidence from strongly disagree to strongly agree. All questions produced Cronbach's Alpha scores of 0.83-0.84, indicating strong consistency. The score indicates that the questions were not randomly answered.

	Rural Students	Suburban Students	Urban Students	Public Students	Private Students
I will graduate on time	61.9%	61.6%	60.5%	60.7%	65.2%
I'm prepared for college	47.4	45.8	44.0	44.5	52.2
I will be able to afford college	16.3	16.8	16.3	16.3	18.5
College will prepare me for success	68.0	63.6	63.6	64.7	69.8
I will get a job after college	59.8	55.4	55.4	55.7	60.5

34.4% of students thought less of the colleges involved in the “Varsity Blues” scandal.

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### Effect of the “Varsity Blues” Scandal

Students were asked how the scandal involving parents allegedly violating laws to get their children into colleges affected their decisions. This scandal was evolving at the time of the survey, and it is likely that opinions are continuing to evolve.

#### Percentage of Students Reporting How They Felt about the “Varsity Blues” Scandal

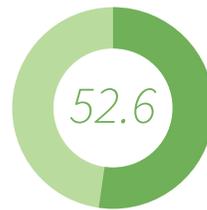
Thought less of the colleges involved



Thought more of the colleges involved



Did not affect their opinion



Unaware of the scandal



Opinions were largely consistent across segments, with students reporting less than a 2.0 GPA being the only significant outlier.

#### Percentage of Students with less than a 2.0 GPA Reporting How They Felt about the “Varsity Blues” Scandal

Thought less of the colleges involved



Thought more of the colleges involved



Did not affect their opinion

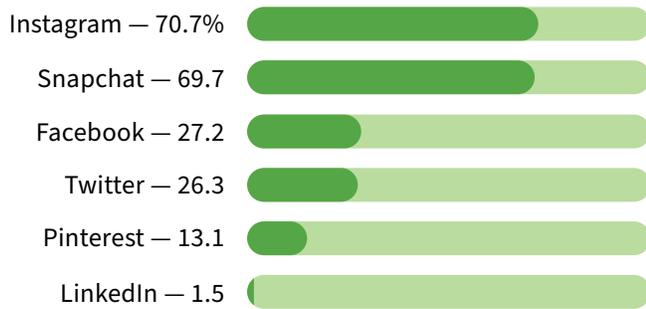


Unaware of the scandal





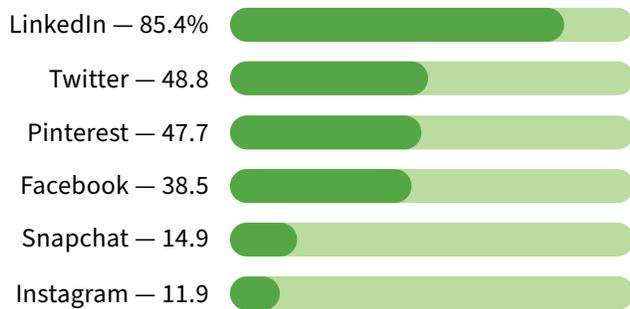
### Daily Usage by Network:



### Social Media Usage

Social networks of choice shouldn't be a surprise to admissions offices, but the dropoff in daily usage between the top two networks and the third is very significant. While there are also minor differences in usage by the type of school a student attends, overall public school students are more likely to use social media.

### Percentage of Students Reporting That They Don't Use Each Network:



### Percentage of Students Reporting Usage:

	Rural Students	Suburban Students	Urban Students	Public Students	Private Students
Facebook	69.8%	58.9%	61.2%	61.7%	59.4%
Instagram	88.2	88.2	88.3	88.4	87.0
LinkedIn	11.3	14.2	16.7	14.8	13.6
Pinterest	56.8	53.4	49.1	52.3	52.9
Snapchat	88.1	84.6	84.8	85.8	80.8
Twitter	49.6	53.7	49.7	52.0	47.0

# ACTIONABLE NEXT STEPS

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## The Overview

- Win students over with an exciting and relatable visit
- Engage students and tell their story— virtual tours, virtual visits, great video content, student gathered content, and social media
- Address the students needs and fears
- Ask the critical questions internally.

## The Questions

- If a student visits their sophomore or junior year will your visit be impressive enough to keep them interested in applying and listing you on their FAFSA?
- Are your applicant and accepted student communications personalized and speaking to the student needs and fears or on your own internal deadlines?
- Are you sharing opportunities and stories that are relevant to students, or just the latest piece of news?
- After a student submits a form, what is their experience?

You can explore the results more fully online ([niche.bz/2019CollegeAppSurvey](https://niche.bz/2019CollegeAppSurvey)) to find insights relevant to your student body. On the front end of the student search process it's becoming very apparent that there needs to be a two-pronged strategy in enrollment management: Maximizing the impact of your visit and creating positive experiences for those students who will never visit.

Visits need to stand out and win a student over, they need to address their fears as well as what excites them. A generic, templated visit will become less and less effective. While some campuses make underclass visits a broad overview, with so few visits being taken, it's even more important to impress them and be specific. If a student visits their sophomore or junior year, will your visit be impressive enough to keep them interested in applying and listing you on their FAFSA?

The median number of visits was three and the median number of applications was five. Even without considering the number of students who visit and do not apply, you can quickly see that many applicants will never visit campus. With the number of visits taken decreasing, enrollment leaders cannot make their objective to just keep calling, emailing, texting, and mailing students to encourage them to visit. You cannot ask your way out of the problem. Leaders need to engage students where they are; with virtual tours, virtual visits, great video content, student generated content, and really telling the story of what the real student experience will be like. Social media and websites are crucial, and not just those under your direct control.

Students are applying to, and earning acceptance at, more schools than in the past. There has been a focus on the prospect and inquiry communication flows, but institutions should also take a critical look at their applicant and accepted student communications. Are they personalized and speaking to the student needs and fears or on your own internal deadlines? Are you sharing opportunities and stories that are relevant to them, or just the latest piece of news? After a student submits

*Leaders need to engage students where they are; with virtual tours, virtual visits, great video content, student generated content, and really telling the story of what the real student experience will be like.*



a form, what is their experience? Is it a dead end, or does it speak to the next steps and opportunities? These are the types of critical questions that you should be asking internally to increase your yields and decrease your cost to enroll.

The responses to the issues faced by students should be a call to action on campuses. With the majority of students saying that they ruled institutions out based on the published sticker price, there should be more conversations about discounting and tuition vs. net revenue. Families are shifting from looking for the highest discount to looking for the lowest price. You can't win over a student with your generous scholarships donated by successful alumni if they opt not to apply. Is your net price placed everywhere that the tuition is? How easy to find is your net price calculator? The cost is important to families, especially with the amount of misinformation about college debt that families are bombarded by.

The second biggest challenge that students reported was the cost to apply and visit. The cost to visit for students who have to fly isn't something colleges typically have any control over. There are programs to reimburse students for these, perhaps an alumnus would underwrite these. The cost to apply is completely under the control of a college, however. An application fee is nothing more than a barrier for students, and a revenue source for the institution. Rather than making students request a fee waiver, which they may be embarrassed to do or unaware that they are able to, why not just remove the application fee?

Almost half of the students also report that managing deadlines and all the application materials was a challenge. This is an opportunity for institutions to stand out by either simplifying what is needed or making a simple management solution for students to check what they still need and receive updates about deadlines or materials. Students want support, but will often not ask for it. It may be that they think they know what is needed, or that they just don't know how to ask. Admissions offices exist to help answer questions before the students need to ask, and that's the magic of the career. 

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