

2011 E-Expectations Report

The Online Expectations of Prospective College Students and Their Parents

To recruit prospective students today, you have to look beyond your Web site. The rise of social networking and the growing use of mobile Web access have fundamentally expanded how students access information and interact online. You also have to look beyond students to their parents, who often play a key role in the college decision process. How can you meet what may be two very different yet equally important sets of online expectations?

This report examines responses from a national survey of college-bound high school students and their parents, looking at their behavior and expectations regarding college Web sites, social media, and other key topics in e-recruitment. Among the findings:

- The majority of respondents said the college search and enrollment decision process is a collaborative effort between students and parents.
- One in five students said they removed a school from consideration because of a bad experience on an institution's Web site.
- When first coming to a school's Web site, more students and parents tend to click on links related to academics and programs of study.
- Among students who had Facebook accounts, 27 percent said that they had visited a college's Facebook page, compared to just 12 percent of parents with Facebook accounts.
- Only 9 percent of students and 5 percent of parents said they had Twitter accounts.
- More than 75 percent of both parents and students said they never or only rarely read blogs on college sites.
- Of the 86 percent of students who said they use e-mail, 93 percent stated that they provided schools with an e-mail address, with nearly all adding that they submitted an e-mail address they check at least once per week.



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Prospective students and their parents: How do they differ?

	Students	Parents	
	59% say they are researching colleges with their parents	66% say they are researching colleges with their students	
	38% will click on academic program information first	42% will click on academic program information first	
	80% have a Facebook account; 27% of those have viewed a college's Facebook page	48% have a Facebook account; 12% of those have viewed a college's Facebook page	
	9% have Twitter accounts	5% have Twitter accounts	
	55% watch videos on college Web sites	43% watch videos on college Web sites	
	14% of students with cell phones have browsed a college Web site on their mobile devices	5% of parents with cell phones had looked at a college Web site on their mobile devices	
	86% use e-mail	80% use e-mail	
	93% of those who use e-mail provide an address to a college, almost always one they check at least once per week	24% of parents say they provide e-mail addresses posing as a student	

About the study

The 2011 E-Expectations study polled 1,089 high school seniors and 517 of their parents from across the United States. The parents were paired with half of the students who were surveyed. The survey was conducted over the phone in February 2011. For demographic information, please see page 14.

The E-Expectations research project is a joint research effort from Noel-Levitz, NRCCUA® (the National Center for College & University Admissions), and OmniUpdate. Any questions about the study should be directed to Noel-Levitz, by e-mail at ContactUs@noellevitz.com or by phone at 1-800-876-1117.

Engagement in the enrollment process: How involved are parents compared to students?

Before understanding what parents and students expect from the online college recruitment experience, it is important to understand how decisions are being made. The table below shows responses from students and their parents when asked how involved they were in the college research process and the final decision. For comparison, parental responses from the 2008 E-Expectations report on helicopter parents are also included.

Student/Parental involvement in the college research process	According to students	According to parents	2008 parent responses
Student doing all the research	37%	27%	30%
Student and parents researching together	59%	66%	56%
Parents doing all the research	4%	8%	15%

Student/Parental involvement in the final enrollment decision	According to students	According to parents	2008 parent responses
Student will make the decision	49%	35%	17%
Student and parents will decide together	49%	61%	82%
Parents will make the decision	2%	4%	1%

Going mobile: How many students and parents are browsing college sites on smart phones?

Rapid advances in cell phone technology have given users the ability to browse the Internet from nearly anywhere. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010), 27 percent of teenage cell phone owners have gone online with their devices. However, among the E-Expectations participants, only a minority of students and a fraction of parents looked at college Web sites using a mobile device.

Cell phone usage	Students	Parents
Own a cell phone	82%	86%
Have looked at a college site on your mobile device	14%	5%

One additional item to note from the Pew study (Lenhart, 2010) is that online cell phone usage is greatest among students from the lowest income group. In Pew's study, 41 percent of teenage cell phone owners who came from households with less than \$30,000 annual income used their cell phones to go online, compared to 23-27 percent of teenage users in other economic brackets. If your campus serves many low-income students, you may want to make mobile content a higher priority.

Students who do look at college sites on mobile devices also provided their top content and tasks they would like to see on their smart phones.

Desired content and tasks for students browsing via mobile device			
Content		Tasks	
Enrollment/admissions information	31%	Calculate college costs	77%
Academic information	28%	Calculate scholarships	75%
Cost information	13%	Schedule a visit	65%
Student life information	7%	Watch videos	64%
Scholarship information	6%	Access social media assets	62%
Campus visit details	2%	Instant message admissions reps	53%
Housing details	1%	Complete application form	44%

Students browsing via mobile devices want to access more interactive content—apps, video, social media—and their content interests and priorities are similar to those seen in previous versions of this study related to Web site resource priorities. It also appears that colleges are doing a good job with the mobile experience so far, as 93 percent of students who had browsed college sites on a mobile device said they had a good experience.

In a recent benchmark report on marketing and student recruitment practices (Noel-Levitz, 2011), mobile applications were also one of the least used recruitment methods cited by colleges and universities. Only 25 percent of public four-year campuses, 17 percent of four-year privates, and 9 percent of two-year public colleges used them. However, more than 60 percent of four-year campuses rated them “very effective” or “somewhat effective” for recruitment.

Mobile use may still be a niche for now, but these numbers will almost certainly increase in the coming years and could swing upward dramatically. It's likely a good idea for colleges to stay ahead of the curve and allocate at least some resources to mobile development, particularly for applications and interactive content that are well suited for smart phones.

Text messaging: Will students respond?

The majority of students who use cell phones also use text messaging—81 percent said they send and receive text messages. But only 8 percent said they have exchanged text messages with an admissions representative. The 2010 E-Expectations study did not find great enthusiasm for recruitment texting, with 67 percent of respondents last year saying they did not want college representatives contacting them via text and only 15 percent saying they would text college representatives they had been working with. It is still a good idea to offer the option to receive text messages, but there does not appear to be any impulse among students to make it a major form of communication with prospective colleges.

Web content: Can a negative experience drop a school from consideration?

Imagine if a prospective student or their parents come to your Web site. They try to find some information on admissions, majors, or applying, but have a negative experience. How much will that impact their decision to keep pursuing your campus? Here's what our respondents said:

Value of Web site content in the college search process	Students	Parents
If I don't find what I need on the school's Web site, I'll probably drop it from my list	17%	16%
A bad experience on a school's site may have some negative effect on my perception of the school	47%	57%
The school's Web site isn't really an important resource for me	36%	25%

Two other related questions looked at the enrollment impact of positive and negative content experiences.

Can you recall any occasion when you liked what you saw so much that you became more interested in attending? (Respondents who answered yes)

Students: 57%

Parents: 45%

Can you recall any occasion when you disliked a school's site so much that you took it off your list? (Respondents who answered yes)

Students: 20%

Parents: 13%

Note that one in five of our student respondents said a negative site experience had caused them to drop a school from consideration. This illustrates just how important the Web has become in recruitment. Your site is the first destination for many prospective students, so it is vital that the site look appealing, be easy to navigate, and have the information students need most.

Web content: First things first, what can they study?

When students and parents come to your site, most look for information on academics or enrollment first.

What is the first link you'll look for on a school's Web site?			
Students		Parents	
Academic programs	38%	Academic programs	42%
Enrollment and admissions information	24%	Enrollment and admissions information	21%
Cost	8%	Cost	13%
Scholarships	7%	Financial aid	10%
Other information	7%	Student life information	6%
Student life information	7%	Other information	5%
Financial aid	5%		
Campus visit details	3%		
Housing details	1%		

These results show that what to study and how to apply were by far the two biggest *initial* areas of interest. It's not that other information is not important—cost is most certainly a big concern—but when first arriving, many parents and students want to learn about your academic offerings. Make that information clearly accessible right from your home page, and be sure that students and parents can navigate that information easily.

Have you analyzed your academic program demand recently?

Navigation and design are important parts of the Web site experience, but content is king for many Web visitors. According to our 2011 findings, academic program information is the most sought-after content for first-time Web visitors.

While you should make sure that information is clearly displayed, easily accessible, and thorough, none of that will help much if your campus is not offering the most competitive academic offerings it can.

If you haven't recently conducted an academic program demand analysis, you should strongly consider it. The rapid economic, technological, social, and demographic changes sweeping through society directly impact the programs students want to study in college. It's vital to make sure your academic programs are keeping pace with the demands of students (and their parents). Even if you have conducted an academic program demand analysis, it is a smart practice to conduct such studies periodically so you can stay ahead of the trends instead of trying to catch up to them.

Cost calculators: How much will it *really* cost to attend your campus?

While students and parents may seek out academic and admissions information first, information on cost, financial aid, and scholarships are next on their list. Furthermore, starting in fall of 2011, federal regulations will require all campuses to display online cost calculators, so soon all visitors will at least have the option to use an online calculator. We asked respondents about their attitudes and experiences with these calculators.

Use of cost and scholarship calculators	Students	Parents
Have used a cost calculator	36%	26%
If you did use a cost calculator, how did it influence your perception of the school?		
Mostly positive	21%	24%
Both positive and negative	22%	15%
Mostly negative	8%	7%
No influence	50%	54%
Have used a scholarship calculator	28%	20%
If you did use a scholarship calculator, how did it influence your perception of the school?		
Mostly positive	47%	49%
Both positive and negative	0%	20%
Mostly negative	3%	3%
No influence	51%	28%
If you have not used a cost or scholarship calculator, why not?		
Have not seen one	50%	67%
Not interested	46%	30%
Parents doing it	5%	N/A

Perhaps the most surprising statistic here is that half of students and two-thirds of the parents who had not used a calculator said it was because they had not seen one on a college Web site. With the looming federal mandate on the horizon, it's possible that many campuses have yet to implement a cost calculator, or perhaps the calculators were not easy to find.

Either way, campuses are doing themselves a disservice by not posting an easy-to-find cost or scholarship calculator. One in five students and one in four parents found such calculators helpful, but those numbers jumped to nearly half when looking at scholarship calculators. Campuses would be well advised to make the ability to calculate scholarships and the net cost of attending easy to find and ideally would have one calculator to estimate scholarships and costs.

Interactive maps: How can they explore your campus?

While students and parents put a premium on academic, admissions, and cost content, many students also showed a desire to virtually explore campuses by way of interactive maps.

Interactive map usage	Students	Parents
Have used an interactive map on a college Web site	40%	22%
Why did you use it?		
Explore campus	54%	34%
Campus navigation	17%	17%
General layout	8%	9%
Alternative to visit	7%	8%
To find location	7%	10%
Other	3%	N/A
Dorm exploration	2%	10%
How did using a map influence the way you felt about a school?		
Better	30%	39%
Worse	0%	4%
Some better, some worse	11%	N/A
No effect	59%	57%

Much like cost calculators, it makes sense to include an interactive map on your site. It's a quick, visual way to give visitors a feel for your campus.

Social media: Will they friend/follow you?

Social media has become a growing part of e-recruitment as students look beyond Web sites and e-mail for ways to learn about and interact with prospective colleges. The 2010 E-Expectations study revealed that 74 percent of students think that schools should have a presence on social media sites and that one-third of prospective students had searched for schools on social media sites. In addition, 76 percent of respondents last year said campuses should create their own private social networks.

The 2011 study dug deeper into these attitudes and also compared student responses to those of parents. The study focused on three major social media avenues: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Facebook usage by students and parents	Students	Parents
Have a Facebook account	80%	48%
How often do you access your account?		
Many times per day	30%	17%
Once per day	33%	37%
A few times to once per week	22%	30%
Have viewed a college Facebook page	27%	12%
Have posted comments or asked questions	15%	26%
Influence of visit:		
Mostly positive	29%	39%
Mostly negative	0%	7%
Positive and negative	6%	0%
No influence	65%	36%

In terms of Facebook content, 53 percent of students said that comments from current students about what was happening were most appealing, and 20 percent said they valued general announcements about news, events, and programs.

Twitter usage by students and parents	Students	Parents
Have a Twitter account	9%	5%
Follow tweets from a campus	19%	12%

In terms of use by prospective students and their parents, Twitter does not appear to have caught on very much. The activity by students is in line with data from the 2010 E-Expectations report, where just 8 percent said they used Twitter.

YouTube and video usage by students and parents	Students	Parents
Have visited YouTube or other video sites to look at schools on your list	27%	17%
Have watched videos on the sites of schools you are considering	55%	43%
Most interesting video subjects:		
Student life	48%	31%
Academic programs, classes, or faculty	31%	43%
Area around campus	15%	17%
Dorms	6%	7%

Regarding the second item about looking at videos on the sites of schools, students with an A or B average were more likely to look at those videos than students with lower grade averages. These results reiterate how important it is for campuses to have engaging video content on their sites and to strongly consider having a YouTube account as well.

Blogging is another commonly used social media outlet for e-recruitment. But how much do students and parents read college-related blogs?

Do you look at any blog postings from students or faculty on a college Web site?	Students	Parents
Never	68%	65%
Rarely	9%	11%
Sometimes	21%	19%
Often	2%	4%
Always	1%	1%

It is interesting how closely the behavior of students parallels that of their parents regarding blogs. At first glance, it may also appear that blogging may not be worth the time and effort, as three-quarters of students and parents never or rarely look at blogs. However, one in four do review blogs, and blogs still remain a good source of supplemental contact and an additional way to connect with students.

E-mail: Is the inbox dead for e-recruitment?

As far as e-recruitment goes, newer methods of communication such as text messaging and Twitter have not been embraced as much for recruitment communications by students and parents. However, e-mail is still a very viable and reliable method for getting in touch with prospective students.

E-mail usage by students and parents	Students	Parents
Use e-mail	86%	80%
Will give schools an e-mail address	93%	81%
Provide that e-mail address:		
When first learning about a school	26%	31%
When the school asks	26%	21%
After completing the application	44%	46%
After accepted	3%	5%
Most helpful messages:		
General information	36%	32%
Deadline reminders	32%	36%
Details about student's status	22%	24%
Campus life/student activities	9%	10%

Among those students who provided an e-mail address, 96 percent said they used an e-mail account they check at least once per week.

When parents provided an e-mail address, 31 percent always identified themselves as a parent, while 44 percent also did so if that categorization was included on an online form. However, 24 percent of parents said that they provided an e-mail address as if they were the student. This is consistent with findings from the 2008 E-Expectations report on helicopter parents, where 27 percent of parents said they either would or had posed as their student when filling out online forms.

Conclusions and recommendations

1) Keep parents in your e-recruitment sights

In most cases, parents appear to be helping their children research colleges as well as make a final enrollment decision. Target them as well as prospective students through parent-oriented content on your site, e-mail, and other communications. Winning them over could go a long way toward convincing their children to enroll.

2) Test your site from a user's perspective

One out of five student participants said they had removed a school from consideration because of a bad experience on that school's Web site. Approximately half of students and parents also said that a bad Web experience negatively impacts their perception of a campus. This highlights the need for usability testing, a step far too many campuses overlook, because usability testing will often uncover those potentially negative experiences. Testing is also not just for new sites. Regular testing provides valuable data to make the improvements that lead to positive Web experiences.

When should you test? Conduct usability testing when you are about to embark on a major redevelopment effort, or at least once a year if you are sustaining your site or only making minor changes.¹

3) Put academic program information front and center on your site

Throughout the search process, students and parents look for lots of different information. However, when starting out, they usually want to know what students can study at your campus. Make that information easy to find on the home page, and also make the content detailed enough to answer questions and put your academic programs in a valuable, distinctive light.

4) Make friends on Facebook and on your own social networks

Facebook is by far the most used social network for most students and many parents. It is the logical place to focus most of your social media efforts. Post content that invites students and parents to interact with you and draws them into your communications. Keep that content less formal and marketing-oriented so that it sounds more like a conversation than a sales pitch.

Even better, consider creating your own social network where prospective students and parents can interact with current students, faculty, and admissions personnel. Three-quarters of students polled said they would join private social networks for campuses, so take advantage of that eagerness to network online.

5) Keep the e-mail flowing, especially for key reminders

Far from being obsolete, students and parents still use e-mail in large numbers, and students appear willing to provide e-mail addresses to accounts they actually use. E-mail seems especially useful for content such as deadline reminders, status updates, and important information about enrolling. Make your e-mail messages focused and use subject lines that make it clear what the e-mail is about.

¹ Some usability experts do recommend ongoing usability testing. Steve Krug, author of *Don't Make Me Think*, suggests testing once a month using just a handful of users. See www.netmagazine.com/interviews/in-depth/steve-krug-diy-usability-testing

6) Use video to sell your campus and collegiate experience

The majority of students and a fair number of parents will watch videos on college sites they are considering. Much like social networking, they turn to these videos to help flesh out their impressions of a campus and to learn more about student life as well as academics. In addition to posting videos on your site, consider adding them to YouTube. Once you already have videos, uploading them to YouTube requires a relatively small amount of effort.

7) Put cost calculators in logical places and try to add scholarship information to them

Of the students and parents who had not used cost calculators, most said it was because they had not seen them. Either campuses have not added them—which will have to change to comply with the new federal mandate this fall—or they are not making them easy to find. Add your calculators to important sections of your site such as admissions, financial aid, and perhaps even your home page.

If you can, it is also a good idea to add scholarship calculations to your online cost calculators. Nearly half of parents and students who used scholarship calculators reported that those calculators had a positive influence on their perception of a school.

Conduct your own E-Expectations study

While this E-Expectations study offers a great deal of data on the online behavior of college-bound high school students, the students you hope to enroll certainly have their own set of expectations. Conducting your own research on your target audiences can provide even more useful data, information that can help you craft an e-recruitment plan that engages students and convinces them to enroll.

To learn more about how you can conduct your own customized E-Expectations study, contact Stephanie Geyer, associate vice president for e-communications and Web strategy at Noel-Levitz. Call 1-800-876-1117 or e-mail stephanie-geyer@noellevitz.com.

Who participated in the 2011 E-Expectations study?

Students

524 males; 521 females

Parents

517 parents of participants

Student ethnicity:

- American Indian: 1%
- Asian: 6%
- African American: 10%
- Hispanic: 8%
- Caucasian: 48%
- Other: 13%
- Declined: 9%

Parent ethnicity:

- American Indian: 1%
- Asian: 4%
- African American: 10%
- Hispanic: 8%
- Caucasian: 52%
- Other: 13%
- Declined: 8%

Household income level:

- Lower income: 29%
- Middle income: 52%
- Upper income: 19%

Region:

- Midwest: 23%
- Northeast: 23%
- South: 28%
- West: 27%

GPA:

- A-average: 44%
- B-average: 45%
- C-average: 10%
- Less than C: 1%

Program:

- Advanced high school courses: 22%
- General college prep: 65%
- Vocational tech courses: 13%

Type of campus students are interested in (multiple responses):

- Private schools: 38%
- Public/state schools: 89%
- Community colleges: 16%
- Technical colleges: 12%
- Vocational colleges 8%

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Questions about this paper

If you have any questions or comments about the E-Expectations study, please contact Stephanie Geyer, associate vice president at Noel-Levitz. Call 1-800-876-1117, or e-mail stephanie-geyer@noellevitz.com.

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