



A 2014 E-Expectations Trend Report

Meeting the Expectations of International Undergraduate and Graduate Students

International student enrollment continues to grow at a rapid pace in the United States. There were 819,644 international students enrolled at American campuses in the 2012/13 academic year, a 7.2 percent increase over the previous year and a 22 percent increase during a five-year period. International undergraduate enrollment in particular jumped significantly, rising 9.9 percent between 2011/12 and 2012/13, while graduate student enrollment rose 3.6 percent.¹

Given these increases, what can campuses do to engage international students and encourage them to enroll? What are the needs, concerns, and preferences of international students, and do they vary from undergraduate to graduate students?

To answer those questions, Noel-Levitz and CollegeWeekLive conducted a survey of prospective international undergraduate and graduate students in early 2014. Among the findings:

- 60 percent of international students said an interest in a particular campus is their main motivation for studying abroad.
- 58 percent of prospective undergraduates and 49 percent of prospective graduate students acknowledged that their parents were involved in their decision to study abroad.
- More than 65 percent of all international students listed funding as a concern about studying abroad, which was by far the largest area of concern.
- International students rated campus websites, college rankings, and conversations with campus representatives and current students as the most influential factors on their enrollment decision.
- When ranking website content, international students ranked academic, admissions, and cost/financial aid information as the most important.
- Nearly 30 percent of international students said they use a mobile device as their primary means of accessing the web.
- 45 percent of students reported that they had no plans to visit a campus before applying; 22 percent said they would not visit even after being accepted.

¹ Institute of International Education, *Fast Facts: 2013 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* (Washington DC, 2013), available at <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors>.

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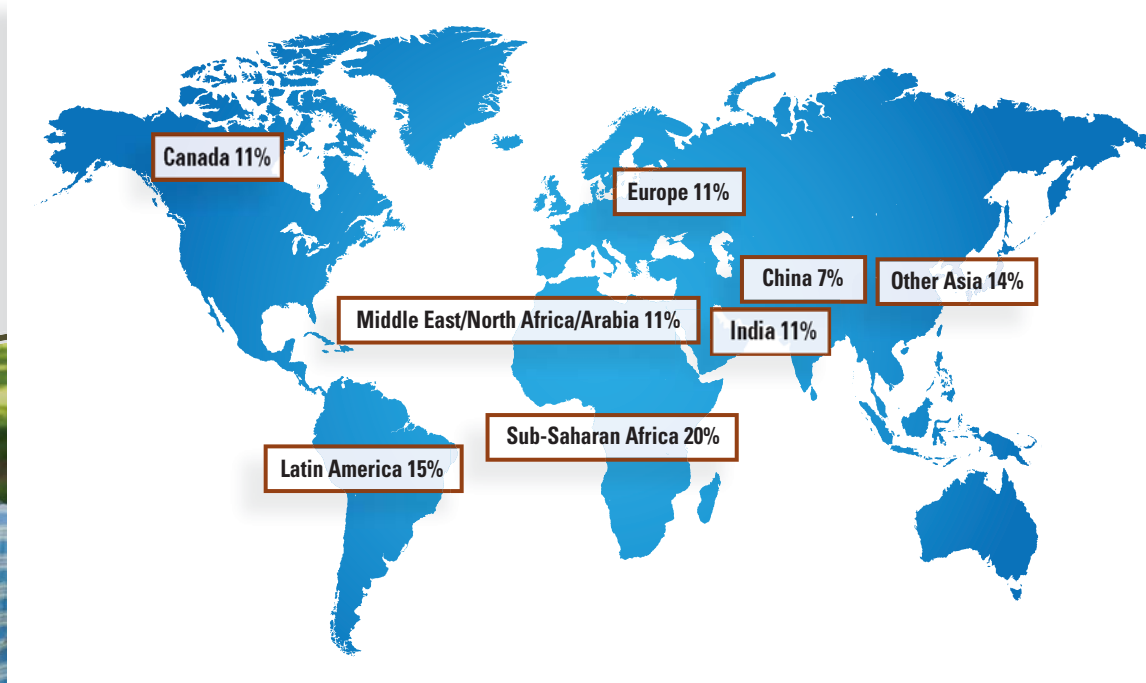
Noel-Levitz[®]

CollegeWeek **Live**

Survey results compiled from more than 2,400 respondents in 164 countries

Noel-Levitz and CollegeWeekLive received 2,451 completed surveys from prospective students. The respondents came from 164 countries in the following regions:

Noel-Levitz and CollegeWeekLive surveyed prospective undergraduate and graduate international students.



In a change from the 2013 study of international students,² which focused just on those interested in undergraduate study, this study looked at prospective undergraduate and graduate students.

Current education level and interest	
Prospective undergraduate students	
High school senior	31%
High school junior	7%
High school sophomore	3%
High school freshman	2%
In college, transferring	15%
Prospective graduate students	
In college, looking for graduate school	17%
Not in college, looking for graduate school	23%
Other	
Parent	2%

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On the ensuing pages, responses are grouped in the following fashion

Undergraduate students

Undergraduate students: College-bound high school students and undergraduates planning to transfer.

Graduate students

Graduate students: Current college students interested in graduate study and college graduates looking to return to graduate school.

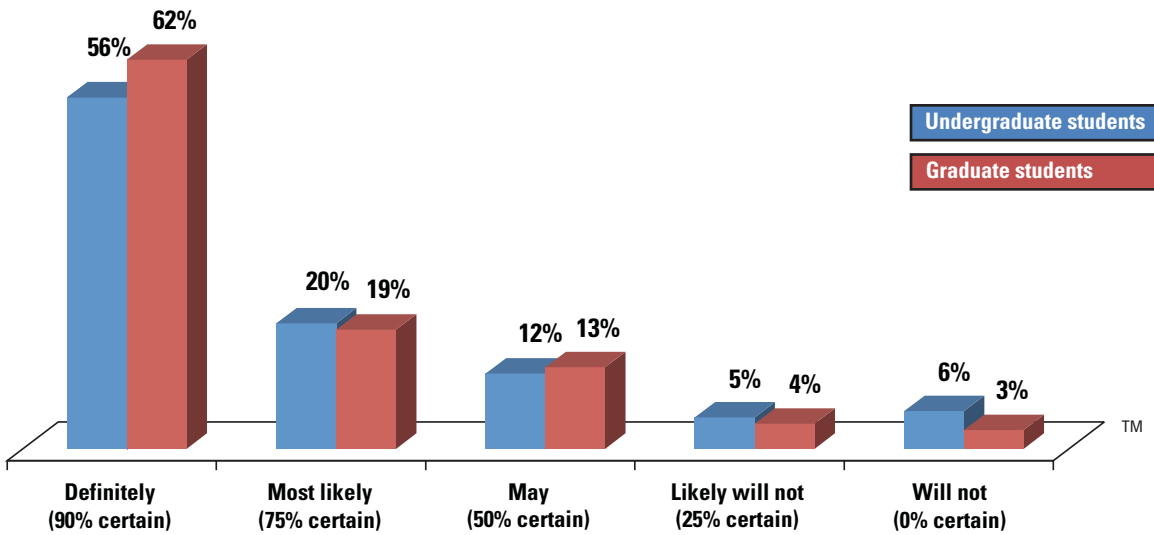
All students

All students: Undergraduate and graduate responses combined.

² Noel-Levitz and CollegeWeekLive, *Recruiting Abroad: Understanding the Expectations and Behaviors of Prospective International Students* (Coralville, IA: Noel-Levitz, 2013).

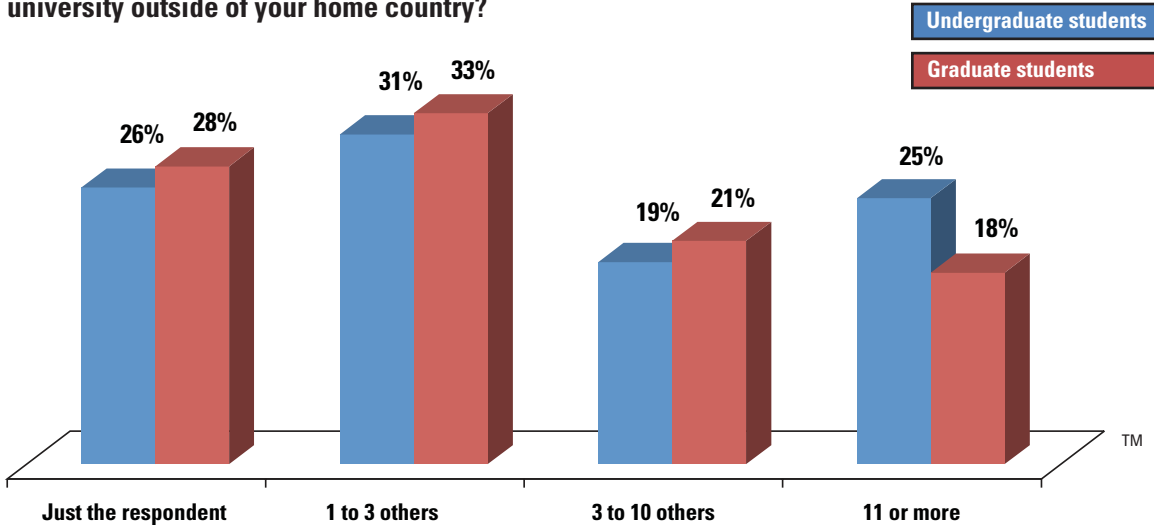
Respondents stated their likelihood for studying abroad. More than half said they would definitely study abroad, while more than three-quarters felt they were likely to study abroad.

Figure 1: How likely are students to study abroad?



More than one-quarter of respondents also said they were the only person they knew who planned to study abroad.

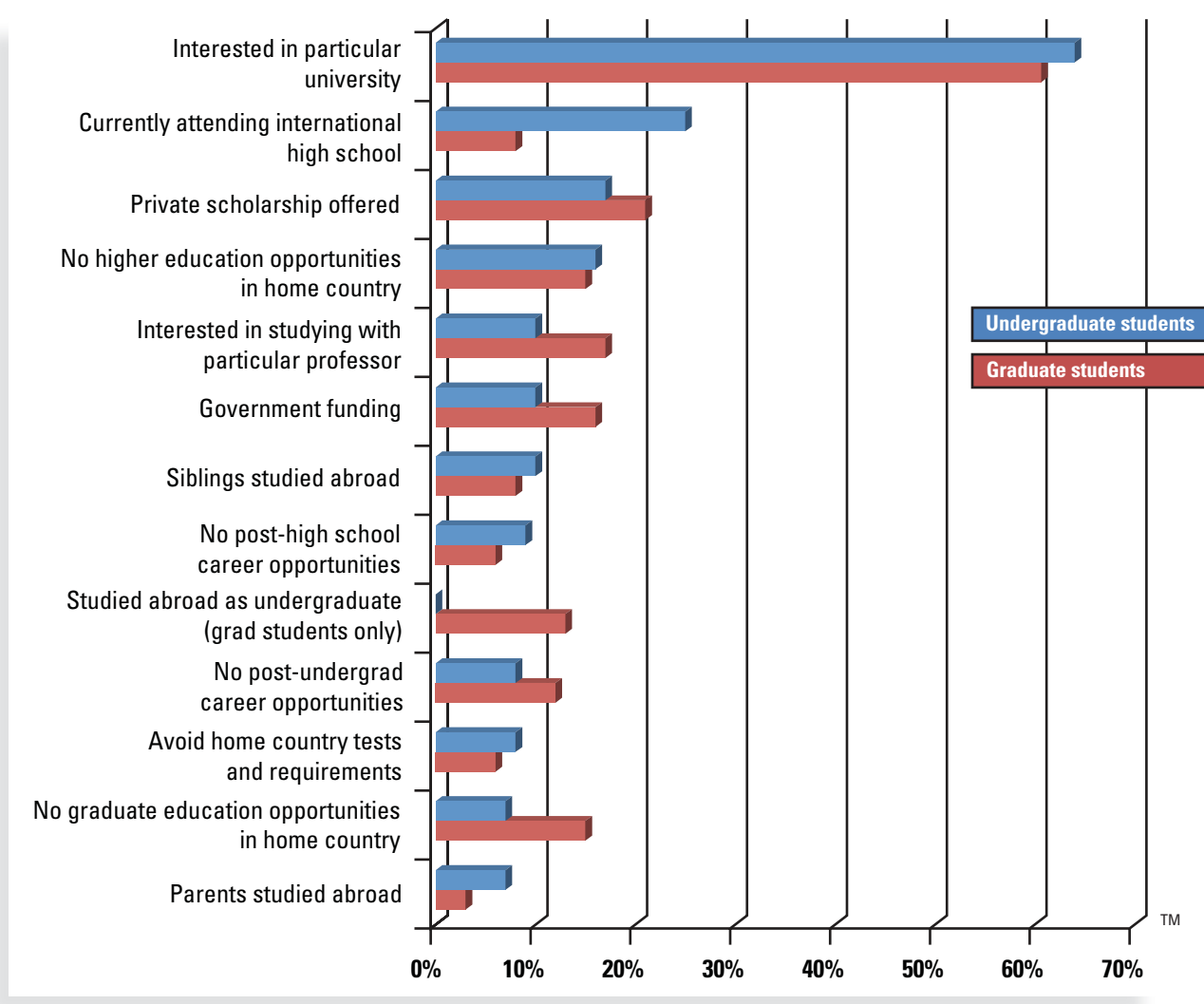
Figure 2: How many of your classmates are planning to attend a college/ university outside of your home country?



The remainder of this report will focus on the behaviors and attitudes of students who reported at least a 50 percent likelihood of studying abroad.

Finding 1: Institutional brand dominates the reason to study abroad

Figure 3: What factors influence the decision to attend university outside of the home country?

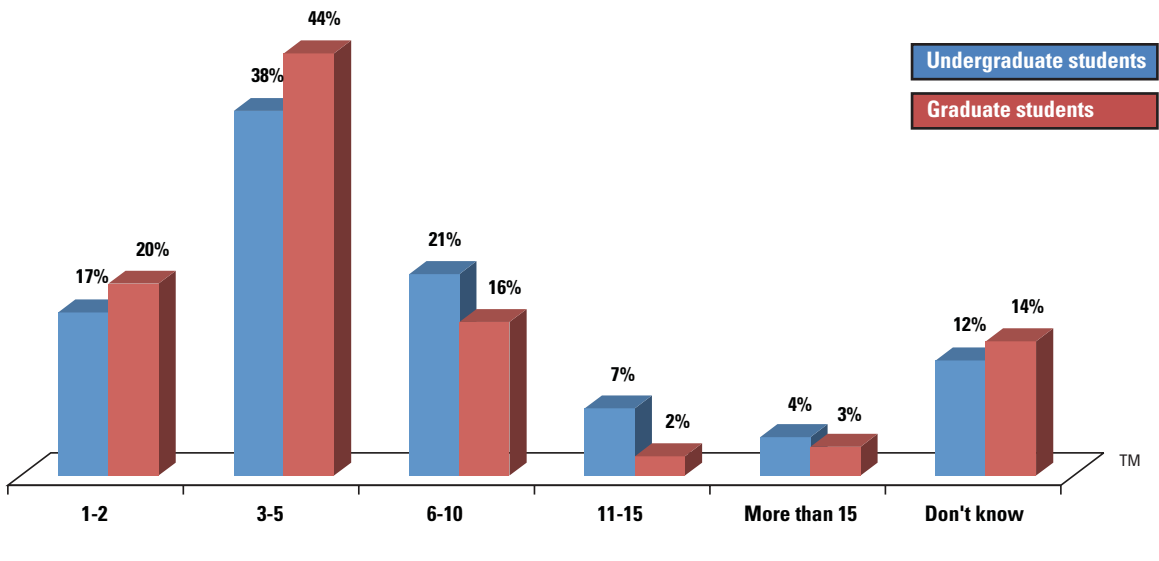


Both prospective undergraduates (64 percent) and graduate students (60 percent) listed interest in a specific university as the top reason for studying abroad. Only two other factors had responses higher than 20 percent. One-quarter of the undergraduate group listed their attendance of an international high school as a reason for studying abroad for college, while 21 percent of the graduate group cited private scholarships as a factor.

This finding illustrates the importance of campus brand in international student recruitment. Campuses looking to recruit successfully abroad will need to make sure they have strong campus awareness and reputation in their target markets.

At the same time, most international students do not appear to be locked into one institution. Only one in five said they would apply to just one or two colleges, while 30 percent of undergraduates and 20 percent of graduates planned to apply to six or more.

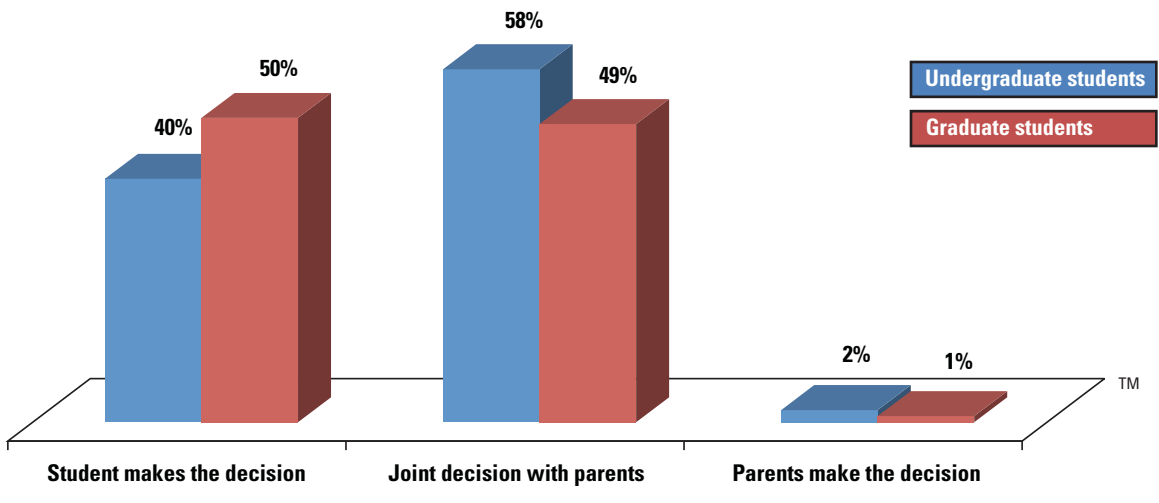
Figure 4: How many colleges do students intend to apply to?



Finding 2: More than half of all international students involve their parents in the decision to study abroad

While it may not be surprising that parents have an influence on prospective undergraduates studying abroad, half of prospective graduate students also said that their parents were involved in the decision process as well.

Figure 5: Who makes the decision on which campus to attend?

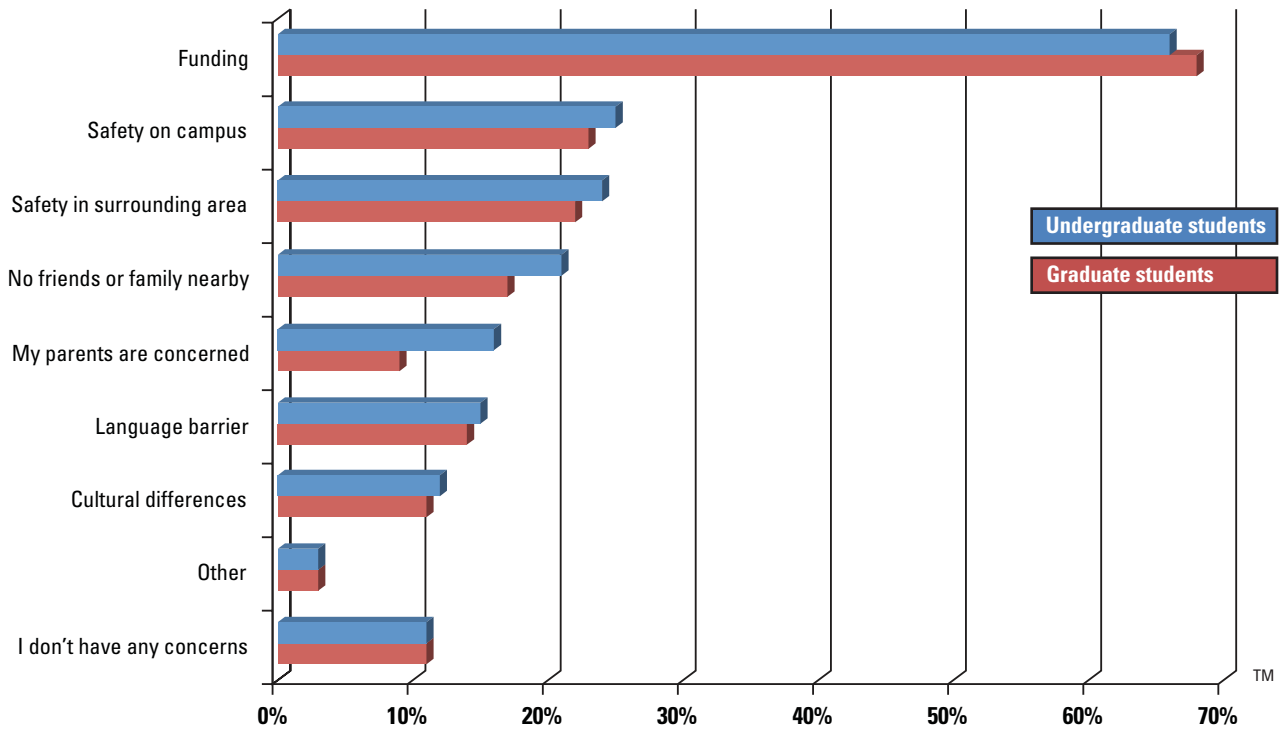


Campuses interested in recruiting international students should find ways to engage the parents of prospective students and use their influence with their children.

Finding 3: Funding and financial assistance are by far the top concerns for international students

Responses to several survey items stressed just how much funding and financial assistance are top-of-mind issues for prospective international students. When asked to list their concerns about studying abroad, funding dominated the other responses.

Figure 6: What are students' concerns about studying abroad?

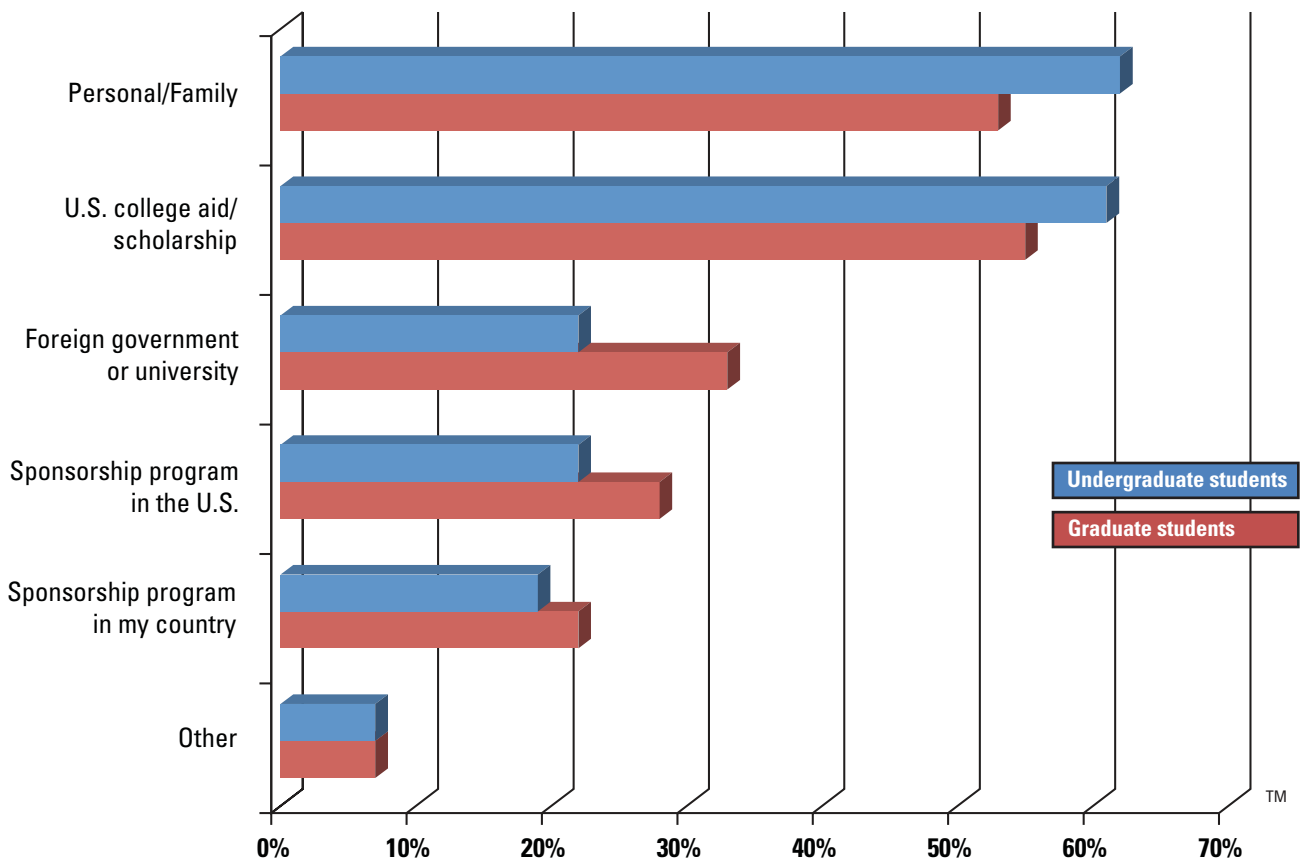


Make prospective students feel safe in coming to your campus

Safety was the second-greatest area of concern for respondents, with more than one-fifth expressing concern about campus safety as well as the surrounding area. A fair number of undergraduates expressed worry about not having friends or family nearby, or that their families were concerned. Be sure to communicate that international students will be welcome, safe, and supported when trying to recruit them.

The strong concern over funding could stem from the majority of students relying on personal finances and U.S. scholarships to pay for their educations, with only a minority reporting that they would receive aid from their home governments or funding from sponsorships.

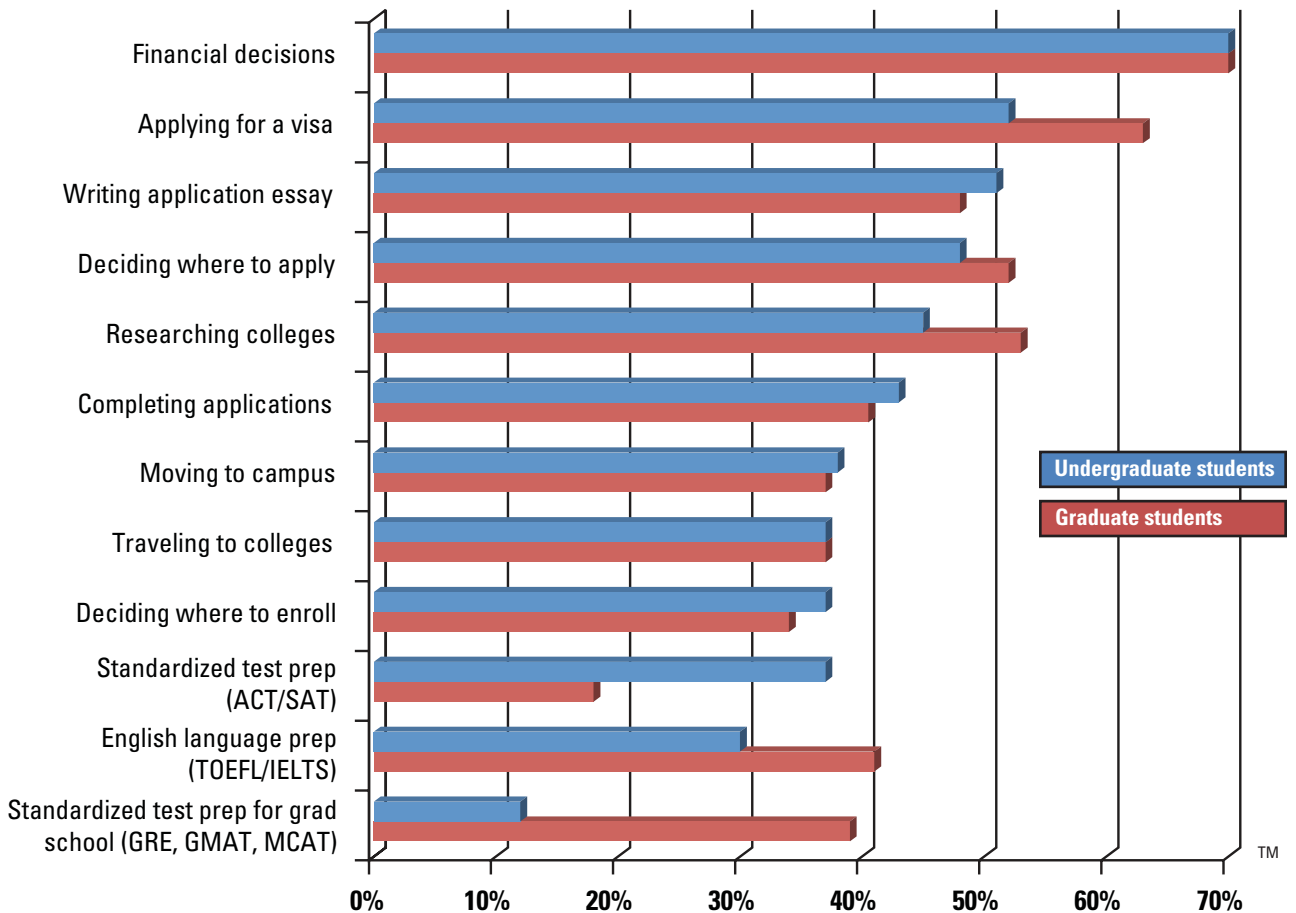
Figure 7: How do students plan to fund their educations?



Undergraduate students in particular said they were not likely to have any kind of sponsorship or government funding. Furthermore, those expecting to receive U.S. aid or scholarships were down from the 2013 Noel-Levitz international study, which reported that 70 percent of international undergraduates said they expected to have U.S. aid as part of their college funding.

Finally, both groups of prospective students listed “financial decisions” as the enrollment issue they needed the most help with.

Figure 8: Which aspects of the enrollment process do students need help with?



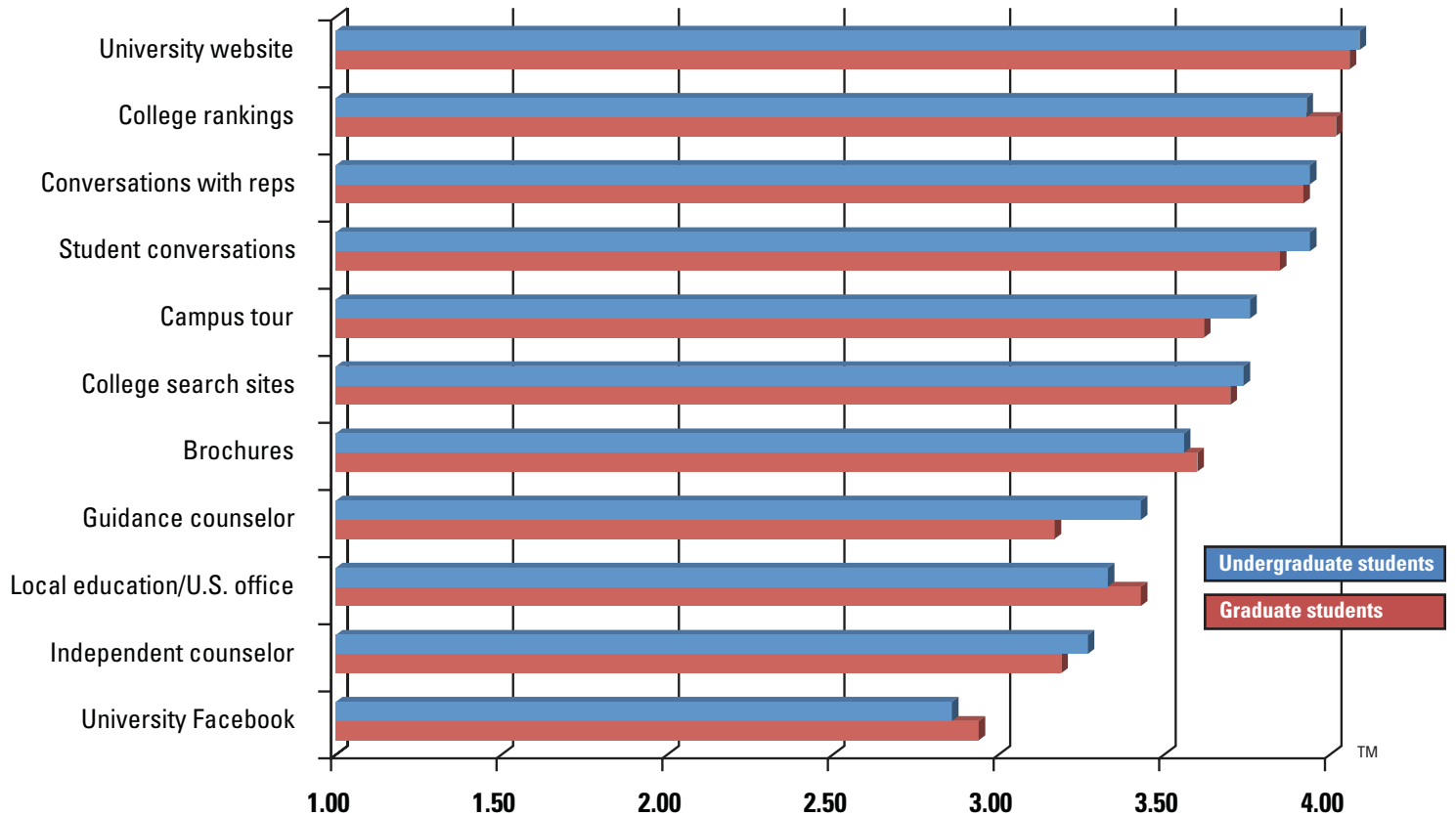
A significant number of graduate students also indicated they needed help with the visa process (63 percent), a fair number more than undergraduates (52 percent). Many more graduate students (41 percent) said they also needed assistance with English language preparation than undergraduate students did (30 percent).

Overall, these results show that campuses have to address financial concerns with prospective international students as soon as possible. They also suggest that being able to alleviate those concerns will play a key role in where a student decides to enroll or to study abroad at all.

Finding 4: Prospective students value conversations with campus representatives and current students very highly during the recruitment process

Respondents rated the following resources or activities for their influence on their decision to apply.

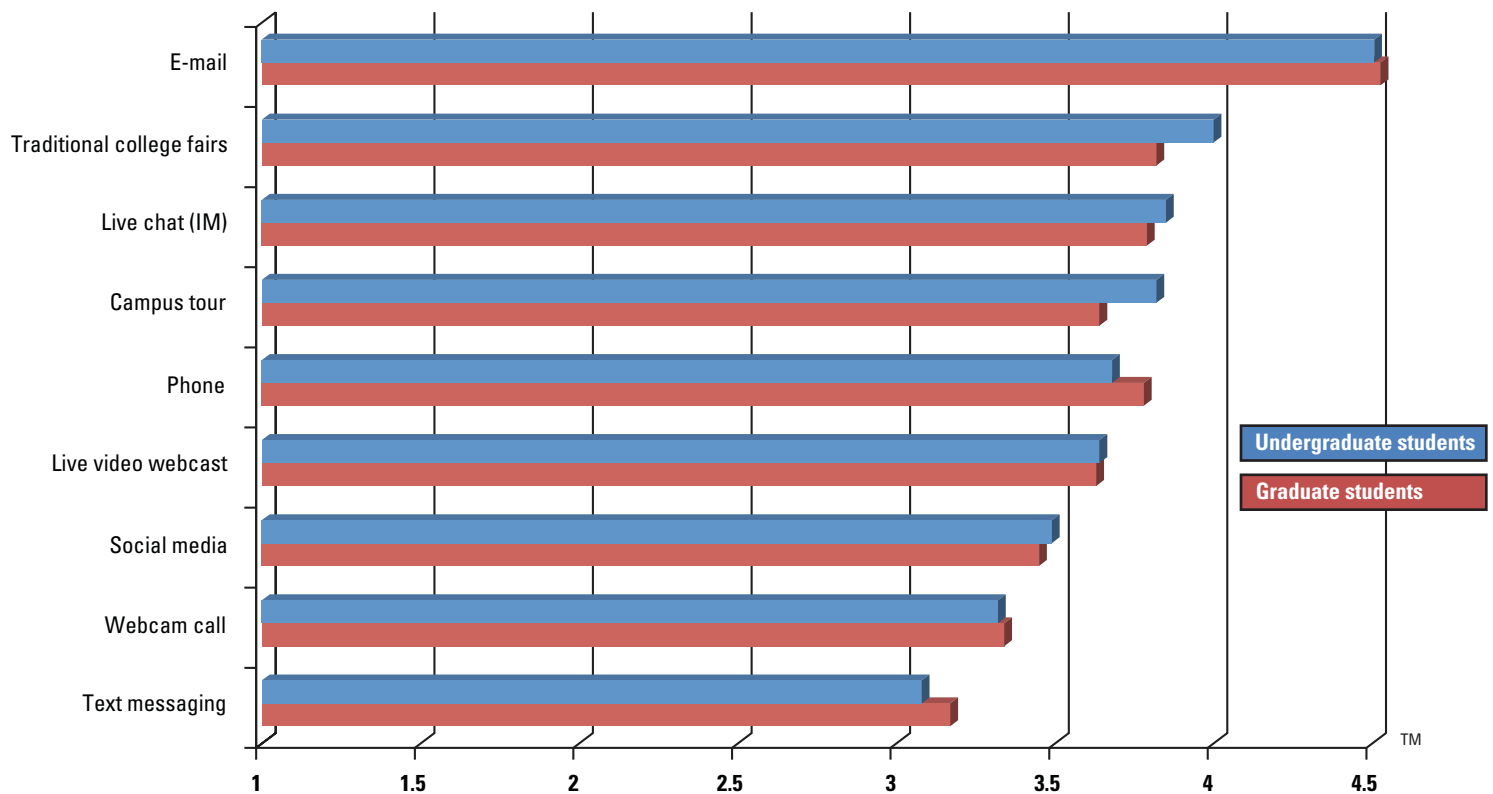
Figure 9: How influential are the following experiences in the application decision? (1-5 scale, 5= most influential)



The results above show the importance of connecting prospective international students with campus personnel and current students. In fact, those in the undergraduate group rated conversations with reps and students as highly as a college’s ranking. Prospective undergraduates also valued campus tours—although nearly half of prospective students will not visit a campus before they apply (see Finding 7 on page 14).

When it comes to communicating with those campus reps and current students, the respondents showed interest in a wide variety of communication methods.

Figure 10: Interest in using the following resources to communicate with college representatives (1-5 scale, 5=highest interest)



While email was the highest rated communication method, the high ratings for college fairs, live chats, campus tours, phone calls, and live video webcasts reiterate a keen interest in personal interactions with campus personnel and current students. Also, with students rating all of these methods above a three on a five-point scale, campuses should consider including all of these options in their communication flow if possible.

More than 80 percent of students want to communicate with campuses throughout the enrollment process

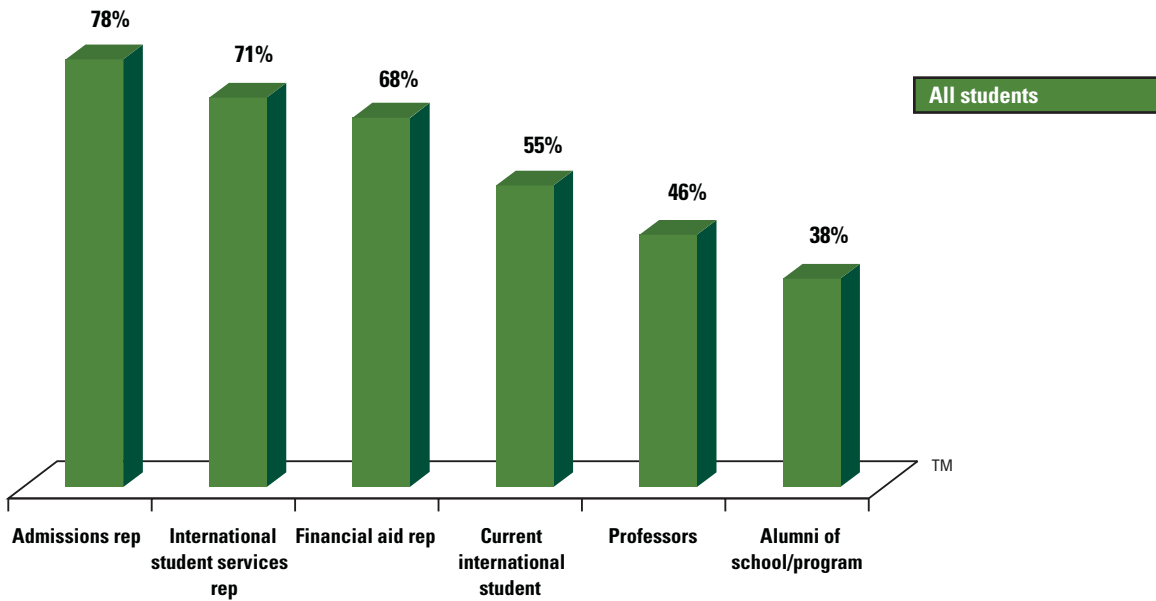
When asked to rank when they wanted to communicate with university representatives, at least four out of every five students said communication with college reps was “important” at each of these stages:

- Before applying: 81 percent
- After acceptance: 89 percent
- After deciding to enroll: 85 percent

Their responses reinforce the importance of crafting a communication plan that reaches students at every stage of their research and enrollment process.

When asked about live, online video presentations, international students preferred speaking with campus representatives more than current students or faculty.

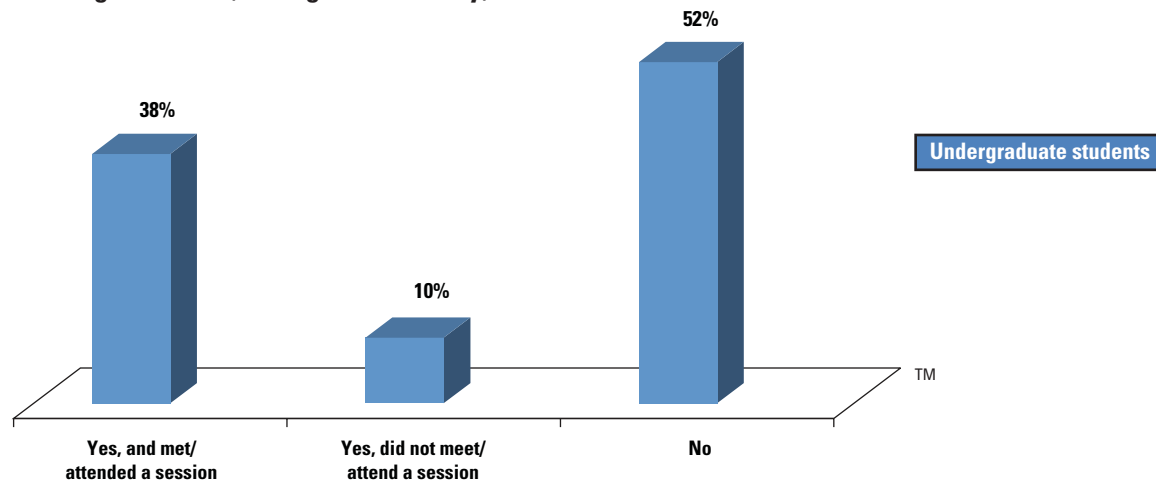
Figure 11: If attending a live, online video presentation, which campus representative would you be interested in speaking with? (all students)



Undergraduate and graduate responses were nearly identical for this item. Students in the 2014 study expressed less interest in speaking with current students and professors during live video presentations than those in the 2013 study, in which 61 percent of respondents wanted to speak to current students and 52 percent wanted to speak to professors. Interestingly, graduate students in the 2014 study were not more inclined to want to speak to professors during live video presentations, with only 49 percent expressing interest (compared to 44 percent of undergraduates).

Visits by college reps may be an untapped opportunity, as half of all prospective undergraduate respondents said that campus representatives did not visit their high school.

Figure 12: Have college/university representatives from schools in other countries visited their high school? (undergraduates only)

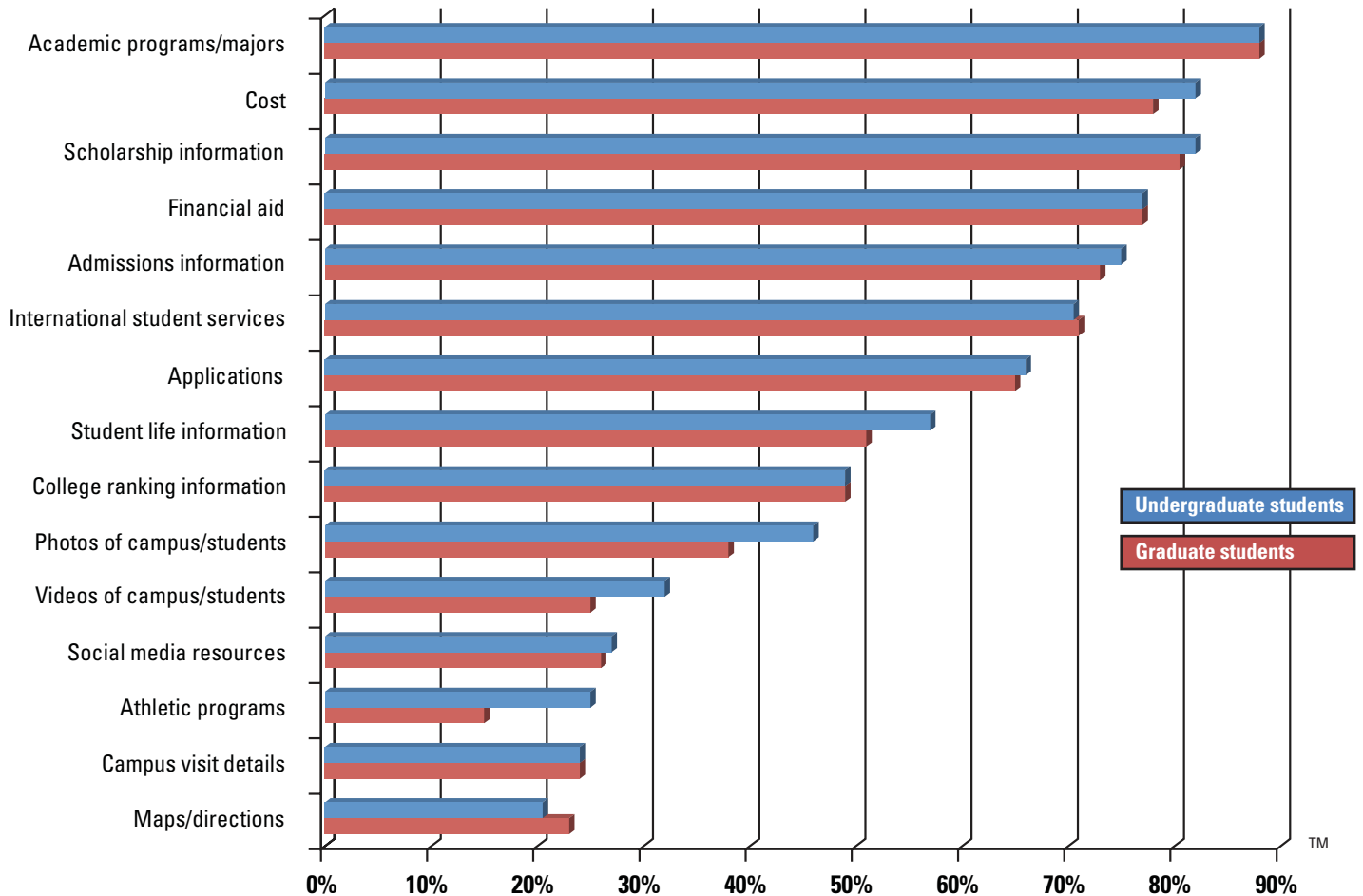


While this may not be feasible for some campuses, those that are aggressively targeting certain markets may want to make it a priority to establish high school visits if they have not already.

Finding 5: International students look for academic and financial topics on college websites

The results in Figure 9 show that international students consider an institution’s website the most influential resource for applying to that campus. What content do students value the most when they come to a college website?

Figure 13: What do students look for on a college website?



Funding and cost again rose toward the top as three of the top five web content items related to cost, scholarships, and financial aid—bookended by academic programs and admissions information.

Undergraduates also expressed strong interest in student life information and photos of the campus and students. They did not express much interest in campus visits, but as shown in the Finding 7 section, many will be unable to visit a campus before applying, if at all.

Finding 6: One in four international students use a mobile device as their primary means of accessing the web

Figure 14: How do students access the Internet most often? (all students)

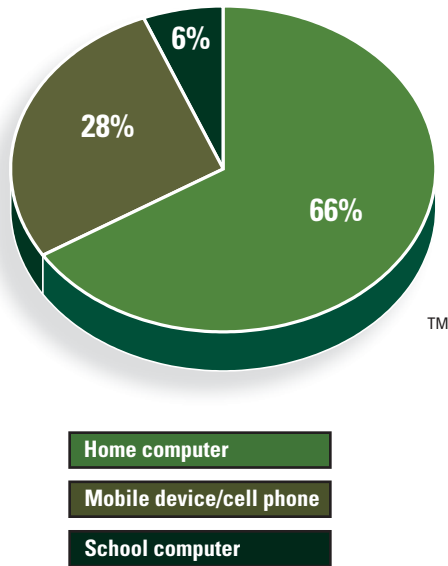
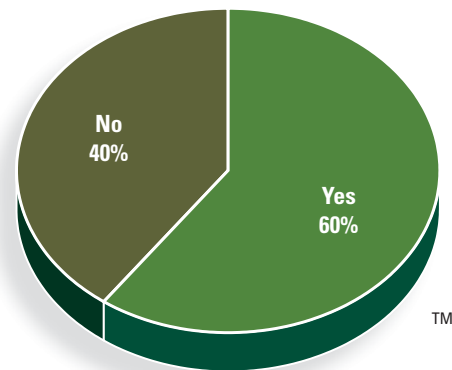


Figure 14 shows that 28 percent of international students used a mobile device as their primary method for accessing the Internet. This is a significant increase from last year, when 17 percent of international students said they used a mobile device to access the Internet most often, although it is still behind the 43 percent of college-bound American high school students in the 2013 E-Expectations study who reported using their mobile devices “all the time” to go online.³

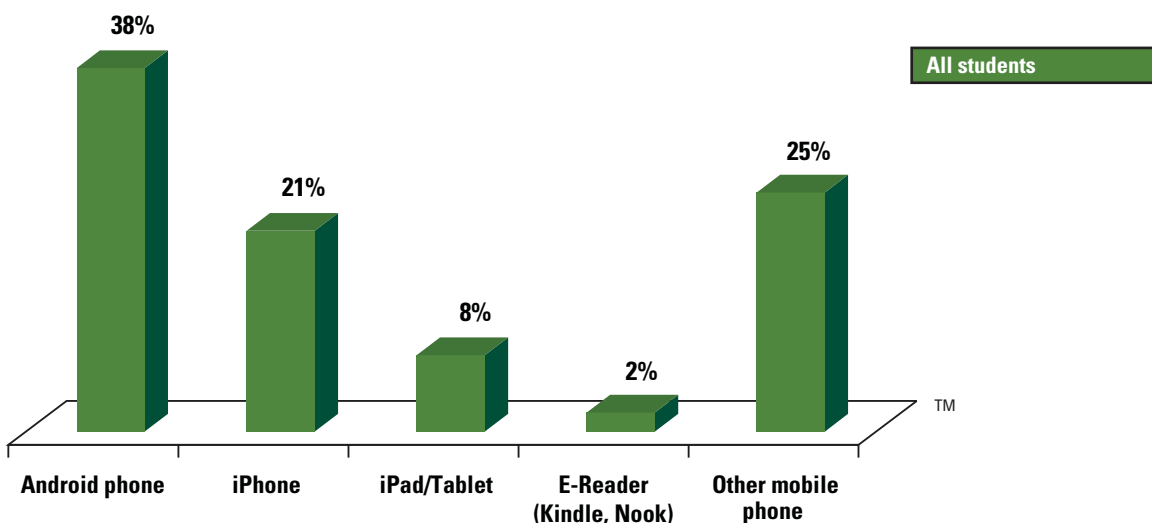
Furthermore, six out of every ten international respondents said they had looked at a university website using a mobile device.

Figure 15: Have students looked at a university website on a mobile device? (all students)



International students in this year’s study used Android phones most frequently to access college sites, a significant change from the 2013 results in which 29 percent said they used an iPhone and 22 percent reported an Android device.

Figure 16: What mobile devices do students who have visited college websites use? (all students)

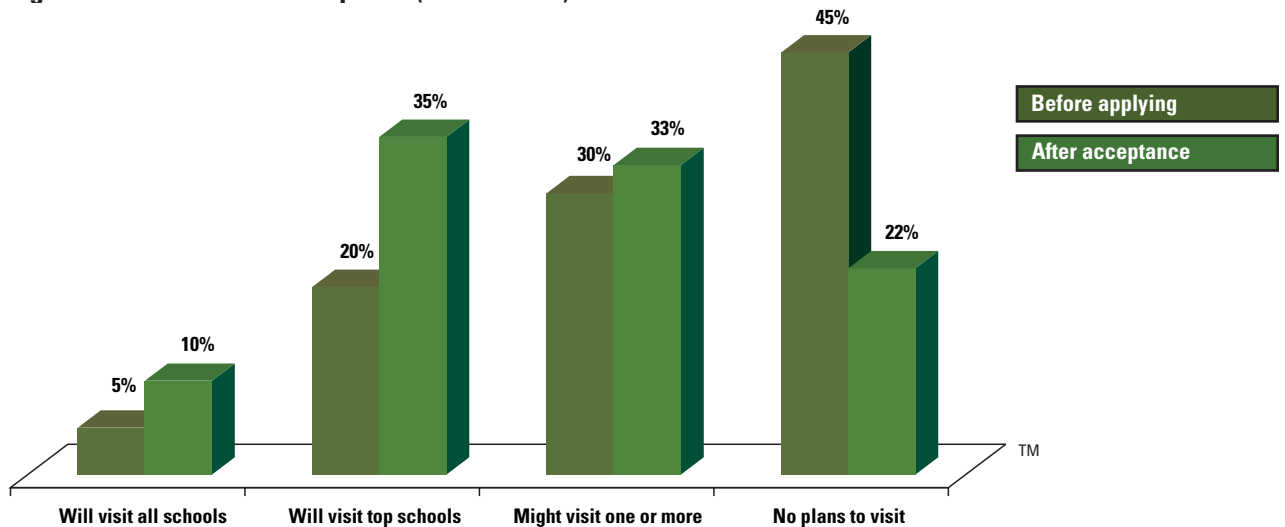


³ Noel-Levitz, OmniUpdate, NRCCUA, and CollegeWeekLive, *The Impact of Mobile Browsing on the College Search Process* (Coralville, IA: Noel-Levitz, 2013).

Both the 2013 and 2014 results showed that, according to respondents, not many international students report using tablets to visit college websites. Given that, campuses should make sure they are using adaptive display technology or mobile sites to accommodate the smaller screens of smartphone users.

Finding 7: Half of all international students will not visit a campus before enrolling; one in five will not visit a campus at all

Figure 17: Plans to visit campuses (all students)



Only one-quarter of international students said they definitely planned to visit a campus before applying, with undergraduate and graduate students responding very similarly. While nearly half said they would visit at least their top campuses after acceptance, one-fifth of all students said they would not do so—an increase from the 14 percent in the 2013 study who said they would not visit any campuses.

Give international students a way to experience your campus virtually

With so many international students unable to come to campus before applying, it's important for colleges and universities to give students ways to research and experience the campus online. As Figure 13 shows above, many undergraduate international students in particular look for information and images of student life when they look at an institution's website. Consider adding virtual tours, interactive maps, student stories, or other content that can provide insight into campus facilities, living, and culture.

Seven strategies for recruiting international students based on these findings

1. Build your brand in target markets abroad if you want to compete for international students

International students study in the United States because they want to attend a specific institution. They also place high value on college rankings in making their enrollment decisions, especially graduate students. You need to establish your institution's presence in key overseas markets and tout academic offerings, facilities, research rankings, faculty achievements, and any international student outcomes to make a convincing case for enrollment.

2. Employ a wide variety of communication methods

As shown by the results in Figure 10, international students are eager to use a number of ways to communicate with campuses. Use email as your foundation for communication, but give students access to live conversations via instant messaging, video presentations, webcam calls, and even text and phone calls. Ask students for their preferences so that you use methods they are comfortable with and that they consent to using (in case there are issues such as communication costs or time differences).

3. Involve parents in the communication flow

Nearly 60 percent of undergraduates said their parents would have some say in their enrollment decision, and even 49 percent of graduate students reported that their decision would be a joint one with their parents. Collect contact information for parents if possible and set up specific communication flows for them.

4. Make funding information easily available

Respondents made it abundantly clear that funding an education abroad was their top concern. Make it easy for international students to find this information on your website and address it early in your communications with them. A net price calculator on your website that's tailored for international students could be very helpful, and get them connected with international services personnel who can answer their funding questions.

5. Make sure your website and e-communications can adapt to small screens

Almost 30 percent of respondents reported that they use mobile devices as their primary web browsers, and 60 percent said that they have viewed college websites on a mobile device. These numbers have been and will certainly continue to grow, so it's important to make sure that your valuable web content and email messages are readable and fully functioning on smartphone displays.

6. Consider offering assistance for campus visits for top prospects

Nearly half of international students are unable or unlikely to visit campuses before they apply, depriving admissions representatives of an important opportunity to engage students and strengthen the recruiting relationship. It may be worth investing in a visit assistance program so that key prospects can make the journey to your campus, especially considering that respondents rated campus tours as influential (see Figure 9).

7. Build strong relationships early with key international prospects

International students tend to be drawn to specific campuses, but they are also often interested in more than one or two—sometimes even more than a half dozen. There is a strong chance that a prospective international student is interested in other campuses in addition to yours. Cultivate your inquiries quickly and use frequent, multichannel communications to convey information about your academic programs, funding options, campus facilities, and student life.

Questions about this report or about strategies for international student enrollment?

Contact Noel-Levitz at **1-800-876-1117** or email **ContactUs@noellevitz.com**. We can answer any questions you have about this report and also discuss how you can recruit international students more strategically. Contact us to start a discussion about how you can increase your institutional brand abroad, build a stronger international student funnel, and engage international students in your communications.

About the survey sponsors



Noel-Levitz is a recognized leader in higher education consulting and research. For nearly 40 years, they have partnered with more than 2,800 campuses to optimize enrollment management and student success through experienced consultation, advanced analytic tools, and campus assessments.



CollegeWeekLive provides our higher education clients a modern and far more effective way of engaging with the right types of students throughout the entire enrollment process—from awareness to enrollment.

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