

2014

The Excitement Factor!

**Your ability to create
student excitement
about your institution
will drive enrollment
more than anything else.**

A Co-Sponsored Study Conducted By



Enrollment Management
Product Solutions

Introduction

This study is an outgrowth of what was learned in our large 2013 higher education co-sponsored study, “Your Value Proposition: How students and parents perceive value and select colleges.” ***In that project, we learned that a student’s excitement about attending a college is more highly correlated to likelihood of enrollment (by a factor of two) than either cost or the perceived quality of the institution.***

In light of this discovery, colleges were asking, “How can we know which recruiting methods and messages will be most successful in generating the kind of student excitement that will lead to enrollment?”

Subsequent focus groups conducted by Longmire and Company on college campuses uncovered a number of factors and student experiences that provide insight into how excitement is cultivated. Further, students say that some of the things that colleges do in an attempt to generate excitement has the opposite effect.

This groundbreaking study explored the environments in which excitement is created, the people who create it, points in the recruiting cycle where it is most frequently created, and specific methods and messages that are most and least effective.

The findings provide colleges with actionable data that can help them better understand how to generate excitement and emotional commitment from prospective students.

A Co-Sponsored Study

Joining in this nationally co-sponsored study were four-year public and private not-for-profit institutions, as well as community colleges.

Forty institutions throughout the United States joined in the study by providing names

of students to be surveyed from their Fall 2014 pool of inquiries, applicants, and admits. A complete list of co-sponsoring institutions can be found at the end of this report.

Methodology

Email invitations to complete an online survey were sent to targeted students in the months of June, July and August of 2014. The project yielded over 12,000 survey responses.

Responses from public institution pools accounted for over 6,100 (51%) of the total. Over 5,600 (46%) came from private institution pools and over 300 (3%) originated from community colleges. The margin of error on the total sample is +/- 1% at the 95% confidence level.

The survey instrument contained 27 questions and captured 150 data points.

In addition to quantitative data, the survey captured qualitative data relating to topics such as what makes a campus visit experience exciting (or not), when and how colleges exhibited a personal interest in the prospective student, experiences with colleges that generated student excitement and those that turned students off.

Longmire and Company

At Longmire and Company, we believe that the conversations between prospective students and the colleges they are considering can be much richer and more fruitful for both.

Everything we do for our 450-plus public and private college clients centers on providing the tools, information and products they need to better understand and communicate with prospective students. From yield enhancement programs to counselor training workshops, we help colleges grow and control enrollment.

The relevance of excitement

Prior to launching this study, we conducted a series of focus groups on college campuses with students who had recently completed the college selection process and were now enrolled in college. While we were exploring their individual experiences, one student wearing a t-shirt with the college's logo raised his hand and said, "I remember the EXACT moment I knew this college was the right one for me." Intrigued, we asked him to explain.

He went on to describe how he had whittled his short list down to three colleges but was still uncertain. They all had what he wanted and all were going to be affordable for his family, he said. On a whim, he decided to visit one of the campuses again. "I was alone," he said. "I didn't tell anyone. I just wanted to walk around."

He described how he was walking through one of the academic buildings. The halls were empty because students were in class. "Then," he said, "class let out and I was in a sea of college students flowing down the hallway."

He continued. "I flowed right with them. I looked around, saw all these people, and felt like I belonged here. Right then I made my decision. I can't even explain it. I just knew right then."

Other students in the focus group had been listening intently. We asked if anyone else had a similar experience. Hands started raising.

Other students were able to tell us the stories of their "AHA" moment. They didn't explain it in rational terms. They described it as an emotional epiphany. They remembered the moment in great detail. They remembered where they were. Who was with them. The time of day. What the weather was like. What they were wearing.

Most of all, they remembered the wave of excitement they felt at that instant. They had found their college.

This study explores how students arrive at that point. And what colleges do to cultivate it.

Statistical differences in groups

Data and charts in this report are segmented by whether the student is bound for a four-year public, private or community college. In addition, a thorough statistical analysis was performed to uncover possible differences in subgroups such as males and females, GPA, standardized test scores, geography, and other segments that were available in the record level data provided by co-sponsoring institutions.

While statistical differences in groups were found, in most cases they did not signal a difference that would be meaningful. Where meaningful, they are noted in this report.

Definition

Some charts and graphs contain a reference to respondents in the “Deep Funnel.” This refers to students who matriculated beyond the inquiry stage and, therefore, had a more extensive interaction with a college.

Major Findings

The “AHA!” moment



Over one-third of students remember the precise moment, place or circumstance when they experienced a rush of emotion and realization that a specific college was the right choice for them.

In most cases, the student’s epiphany happens when they are on campus but the people, places and circumstances involved are widely varying, highly personal and unpredictable.

The job of any college, as it relates to recruiting students, is to put the student in a place or frame of mind where this epiphany can happen. To enable the student to envision what their life will be like.

A new chapter



Students see college as the beginning of a new chapter in their life. With all of the transitions associated with going to college (moving away from home, meeting new people, leaving the comfort and familiarity of high school, and new educational challenges) students are both anxious and excited.

They need information from the colleges they are considering. But they will be most attracted to the college where they *feel* the promise of a comfortable, engaging, opportunity-rich environment.

The importance of current students



Other than seeing the campus, prospective students say that interacting with current students is the single most influential factor in generating their excitement about a college.

The form of the interaction is highly important. Prospective students want the interaction to be natural and genuine. As opposed to being arranged by the college as part of a structured “meet and greet” in which it is presumed that current students will deliver scripted messages about the college.



The importance of surroundings

Third on the list of most impactful things that generate student excitement is seeing the city and community. This makes sense in the context of students feeling that college is an exciting new chapter in their lives.

Students want to see where they will be living and to discover the exciting new things they can experience. Colleges will be more successful in recruiting if they take a hands-on approach to introducing prospective students to the excitement and opportunities offered by the city and community.



The similarity of campus tours

Approximately 60% of students say that college campus tours are about the same in terms of generating excitement. Most don't generate any more or less excitement than all of the others they experienced.

In part, the reason for not generating excitement, students say, is the focus that the college places on itself rather than the student. This is especially so in group tours.

In contrast, students who receive one-on-one tours where the focus is on them and what they want, tend to see the campus visit experience as a demonstration of the college's personal interest in them.



Personal interest generates excitement

Taking a personal interest in the student is a gateway to cultivating a level of excitement that will lead to enrollment.

Unfortunately, the majority of students (54% in the four-year marketplace) do not feel that the colleges they most seriously considered ever exhibited a personal interest in them.

Four-in-ten students say that the college's personal interest in them, or lack of it, influenced their college selection decision.



Excitement at its peak

At the point at which they arrive at their college selection decision, over 40% of students say they are at the highest state of excitement (9 or 10 on a 10-high scale) about the college of choice.

Their excitement level builds over time and is the accumulation of all singular experiences and communications they have had with the college up to that point.

Every interaction that a college has with a prospective student – regardless of form – should be designed and measured against the objective of generating excitement.



Segments of decision-makers

There are three distinct segments of prospective students with regard to college selection: Those who make their decision based primarily on facts; those whose decisions are driven by their excitement about attending; and those who will make their college selection decision with an equal measure of facts and excitement.

Colleges should ascertain, through profiling or conversation, which segment a student falls into and present its value proposition (factual, experiential, or an equal mix) in the context of what the student is most likely to absorb and find valuable.

Volatility of first choice college

Many students enter the college selection process with, at a minimum, one or two colleges that are at the top of their list of preferred schools. It's inevitable that some students will replace their initial first choice college with another institution they find more attractive during the course of their selection process. But how often does this happen?

Roughly 40% of students from the pools of public and private colleges swap out their former first choice school with another

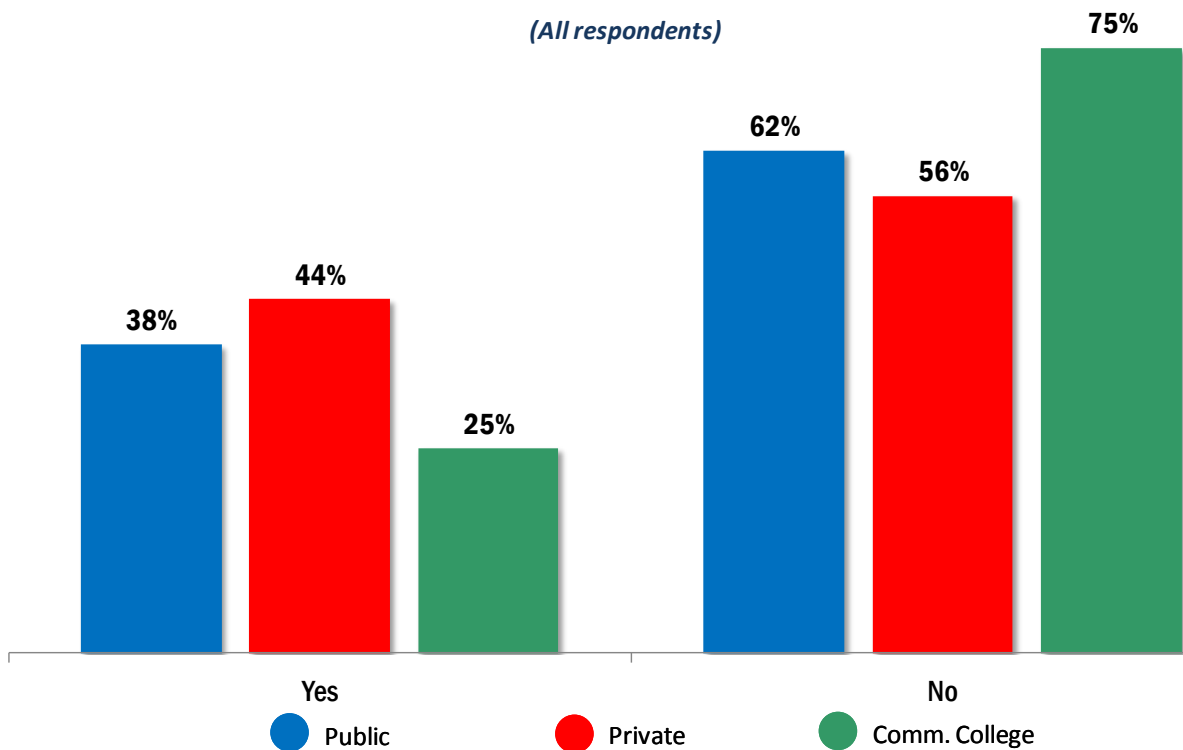
institution during their college selection process. This happens in about 25% of cases for prospective community college students.

Among those students bound for four-year institutions, approximately half replace their first choice college on the basis of a lower cost.

However, about one-quarter of students are attracted elsewhere solely on the basis of greater excitement about attending. An equal percentage is attracted because they perceive better quality.

At any time over the course of evaluating colleges did you replace your first-choice college with another college that you found more attractive?

(All respondents)



Influence of family members on college attractiveness

Are students more attracted to an institution because mom, dad, brother or sister attended? For about 4 in 10 students, the answer is yes.

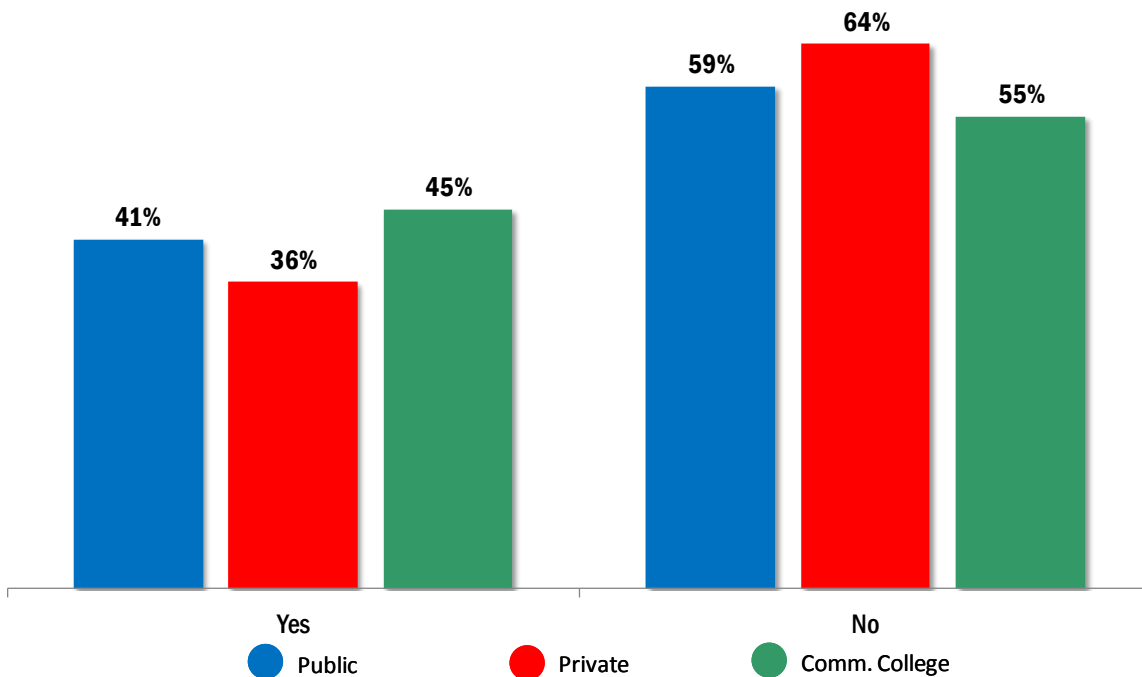
This finding suggests that admission counselors should always weave this topic into the conversations they have with prospective students to test possible pre-existing affinity with their institution or another. If an affinity exists, its influence on college selection should be directly addressed in the conversation.

It could be assumed that a college stands a better chance of enrolling a student if an affinity exists. In fact, affinity and likelihood of enrollment **are** positively correlated but the correlation is weak.

And, given the aforementioned finding of volatility and frequency of change in the mix of a student's front-running schools, it cannot be assumed that the student's affinity (or lack of) will weigh heavily into their college selection.

Were you more attracted to the college because family members attended there?

(All respondents)



Excitement level when the decision is reached

Why did so many people camp out for two days in the rain in front of an Apple store in 2007 waiting to get their hands on a new phone they'd never seen? The answer: All of the anticipation and excitement that had been created before that day.

So it goes with college-bound students.

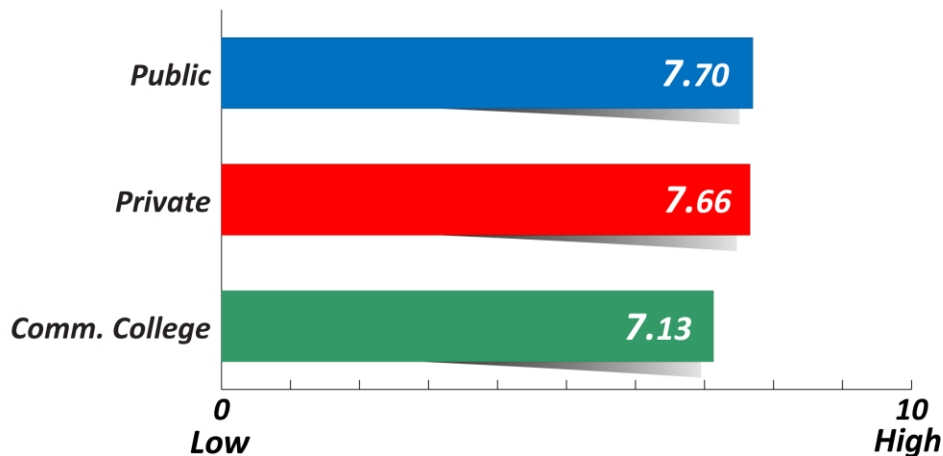
When asked to register their level of excitement about attending the college of their choice the mean score in the four year

marketplace is approximately 7.7 on a 10-high scale. For community colleges, it's a little over 7. Even more interesting is the 40% of students who are at the highest state of excitement – a 9 or 10 on the scale.

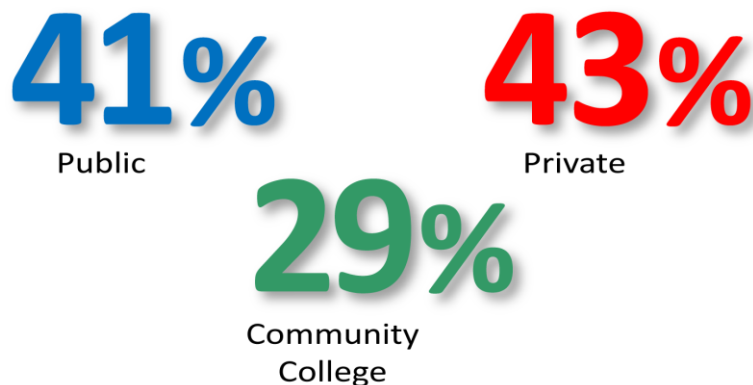
The higher their excitement about a college, the more likely they are to enroll. Every single interaction they have with the college, from looking at a view book to the campus visit experience, helps to build their excitement leading up to making their college selection decision.

Every single interaction is critical.

Excitement level at point of college selection decision.



Percentage of students at the highest level of excitement (9 or 10).



What excites students the most

Students were asked what got them most excited about the college of their choice. This open-ended question yields a fascinating array of responses that coalesce around a common theme. It reveals the first clues in the story of how students reach a level of excitement that causes them to choose one college over another.

The word cloud below illustrates the frequency of words and phrases that are used by students as they describe what excites them most about the college at which they will enroll. The larger the word, the more times it is used in the description.

Intriguing is the frequency with which the word “NEW” is used.

A thorough reading of the verbatim responses illustrates how students see college as a new chapter in their lives. They see new challenges and opportunities. New adventures. Living in a new city.

Most prominent is their excitement about meeting new people and establishing new friendships. Prospective students have a very strong desire to connect with current students on the campuses they visit. They favor interactions that are spontaneous rather than highly structured by the college.

“I loved the campus and was really excited about starting a new chapter in my life and meeting new people.”



Communication methods that generate excitement

Brochures, letters, postcards, e-mail and the college’s website rank as the primary communication methods that generate student excitement.

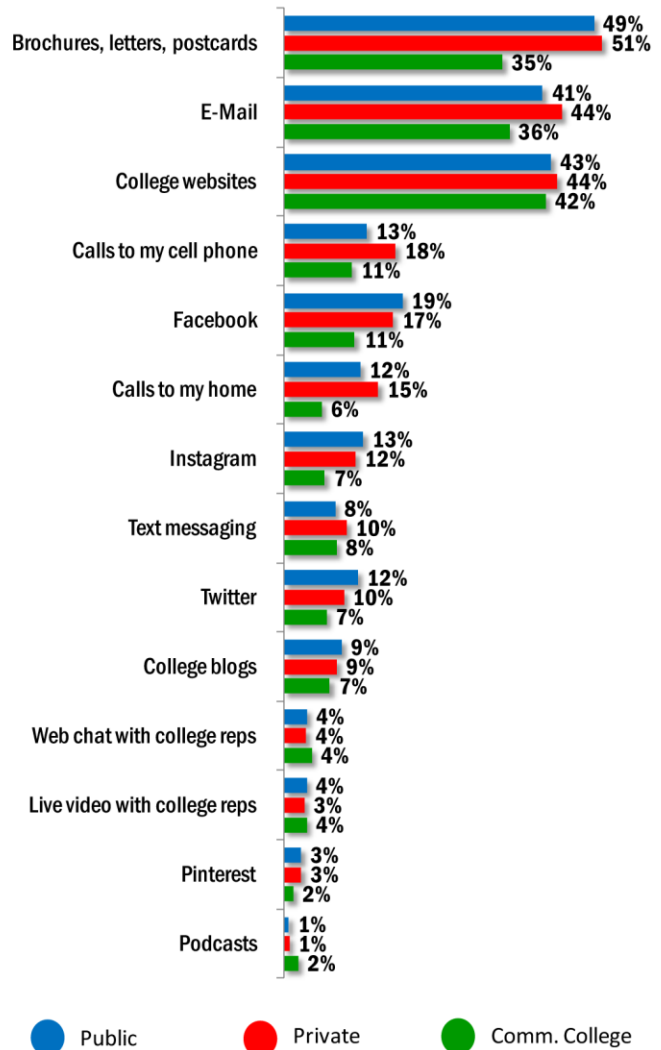
Interestingly, prospective students have a love/hate relationship with e-mail. In an open-ended question in which students are asked to describe ways in which colleges turn them off when attempting to recruit them, the number one complaint (by far) is what students refer to as a constant barrage of e-mails.

However, when those same students are asked to rank the effectiveness of various communication methods in generating their excitement about college, e-mail ranks second only behind brochures, letters and postcards.

These dichotomous sentiments about e-mail most likely hinge on issues of relevance and personalization. Students are disdainful of colleges that continue to send non-personalized e-mail to them long after they have crossed the college off their list.

Methods generating excitement

Which communications methods got you most excited about attending a college?



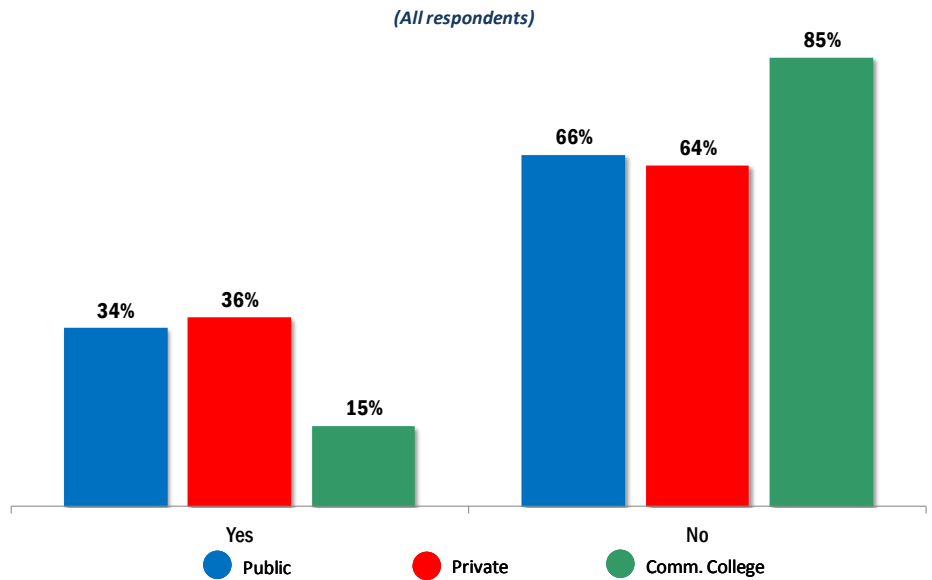
The “AHA!” moment

Over one-third of students bound for four-year colleges and universities remember a precise moment when they experienced a rush of emotion and realization that a specific college was the right one for them.

Their individual stories vary widely with regard to when it happened, where they were, who they were with, and what they were doing. There are many commonalities, however.

In most cases, the epiphany is happening on campus. Prospective students are connecting with current students in relaxed, unstructured environments. Prospective students sense sincere interest in their conversations with faculty. They feel a “vibe” on campus. A specific

Remember the moment, place and/or circumstance when you realized that a specific college was the right choice for you?



event or interaction makes them “feel wanted.” They feel a sense of community. They fall in love with the town. A personalized tour makes them feel important.

Prospective students describe the circumstances of their “AHA” moment.



Comparison of campus tours

There is a widespread perception among students that campus tours lack differentiation in terms of generating excitement about attending.

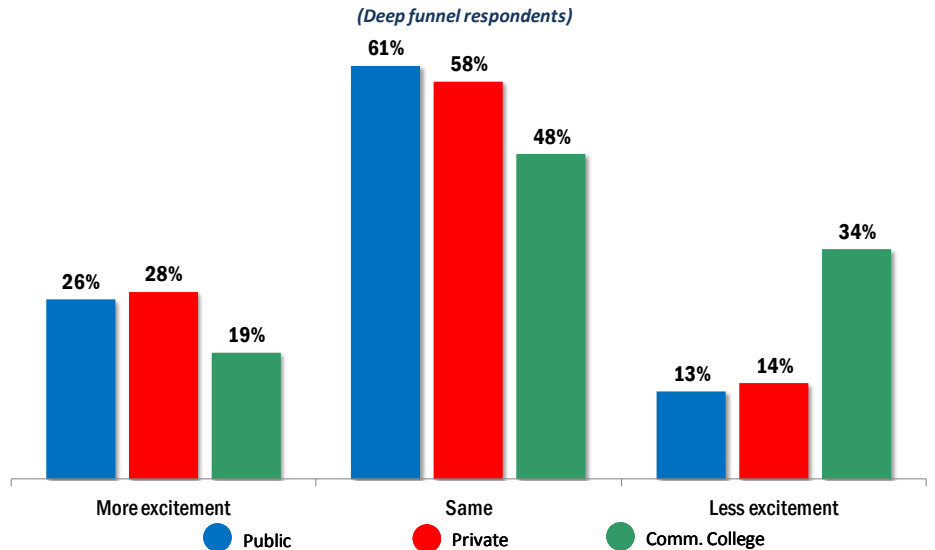
The qualitative data collected in the open-ended questions on this topic reflect this. One student said, *“The tour was about the same as most other college tours.”*

Nationally, approximately 60% of students say that college tours are about the same in terms of generating excitement.

In describing the characteristics of tours that generate more excitement, the most frequently mentioned reasons involve the attractiveness of the campus itself, enabling prospective students to engage with current students, tour personalization, and tour guides who exhibit enthusiasm and passion without being overwhelming.

Students say that the most excitement-generating tours are those that focus first on their needs and interests and then the college and campus is presented to them in that context.

How do you compare the college’s tour to those you took at other colleges in terms of generating excitement about attending?



What about the college’s tour generated more excitement for you?



Relative impact on excitement generation

When asked to rank order which factors are most influential in generating their excitement about a college, students rank “seeing the campus” as most influential.

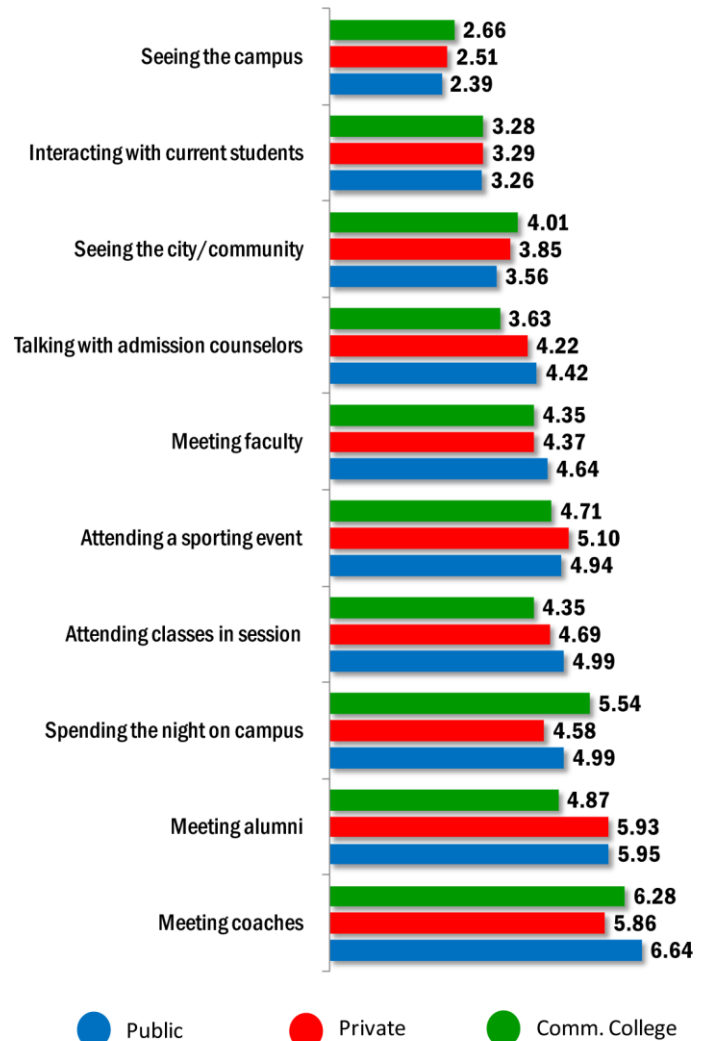
The importance of interacting with current students places second. This is a continuing refrain, as evidenced in other data presented in this report, about the power of current students as a draw for prospective students.

The city and community in which they will live is also highly influential to prospective students. It’s an important element in the total set of elements that will make up the new chapter of their lives.

The relative influence of the city/community suggests that colleges will be well served in their recruiting efforts by taking a hands-on approach to enabling students and parents to see and experience all that the city and community has to offer them, in much the same way as a campus tour is planned, organized and executed.

Relative impact on excitement

Relative impact on generating excitement about the college of choice.
(Lower score = Higher impact)



Three segments of decision makers

We know from previous research and practical experience that students make their college selection decisions based on a mixture of facts that are known to them and the emotional appeal of attending (i.e. excitement).

This study revealed three distinct segments of students: those who are more fact-based decision makers; those who are more excitement-based decision makers; and those who make their decision with an equal measure of facts and excitement.

Within the facts and excitement segments there are students who are just *slightly* more inclined to make their decision on facts or

excitement. And there are students who make their decision *exclusively* on facts or excitement.

In conversations with a prospective student, an admission counselor can ascertain which of the three categories the student falls into by asking a few simple questions. Once this is known, the counselor can present information (factual, experiential, or an equal mix) in the context that the student is most likely to absorb and find valuable.

A similar process of segmentation and messaging is possible on a mass marketing scale and can be useful in the earliest stages of the recruiting cycle for the purpose of classifying message recipients and delivering the most effective messages.

Indicate which factor (facts or excitement about attending) had more influence over why you chose the college that you did.

Also, indicate the magnitude of the influence.

Facts or Excitement

39%
39%
39%

32%
32%
23%

	Public	Private	Community College
Facts - 5	9.26%	9.43%	9.60%
Facts - 4	8.66%	9.05%	11.62%
Facts - 3	10.95%	10.58%	8.59%
Facts - 2	6.09%	5.69%	7.58%
Facts - 1	3.93%	3.93%	1.52%
Equal 0	29.20%	29.22%	37.88%
Excitement - 1	4.93%	4.80%	3.03%
Excitement - 2	6.83%	7.32%	3.03%
Excitement - 3	8.78%	7.70%	7.07%
Excitement - 4	5.26%	6.04%	5.05%
Excitement - 5	6.11%	6.25%	5.05%

Taking a personal interest in the prospective student

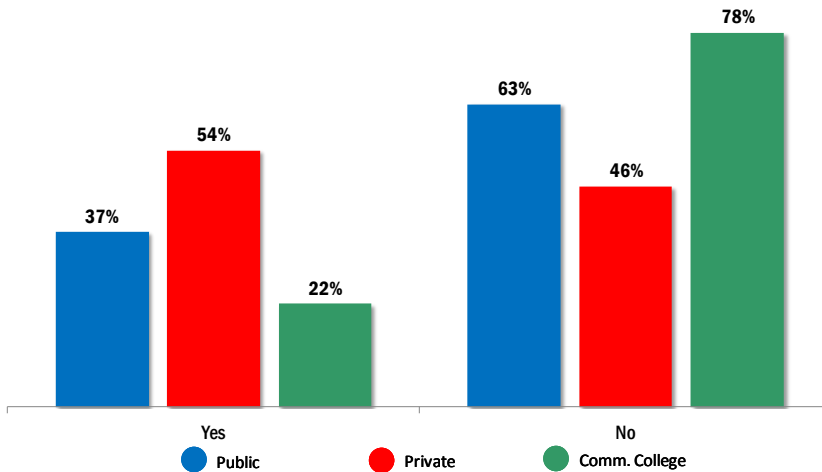
Student excitement about a college is enhanced when they perceive that the college has taken a personal interest in them. For a significant percentage of students who reached the application/admit stage of the funnel, the college's personal interest in them, or lack of it, was influential in their college selection decision.

Among students in the pools of public schools, nearly two-thirds say that the college never exhibited a personal interest in them. For privates, it was nearly half.

With 36% to 42% of students in the public and private pools, respectively, saying that this was influential in their college selection, it underscores the necessity and opportunity for colleges to demonstrate a personal interest in students through every brand touch point of the institution.

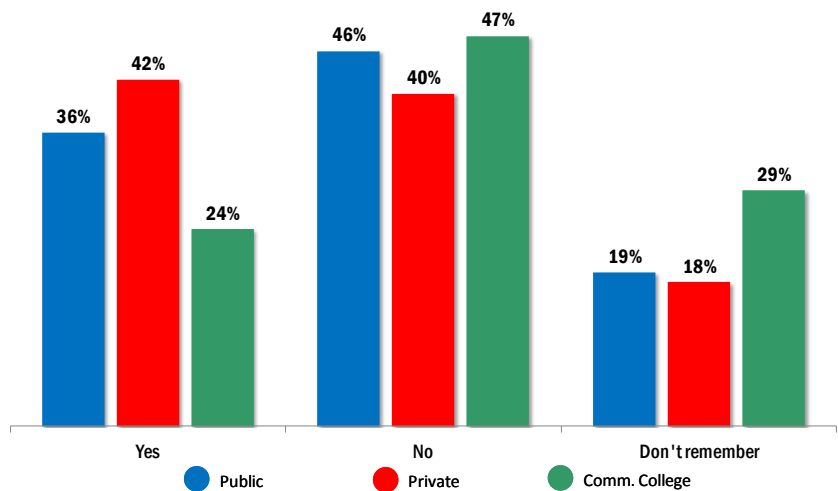
Was there a point in your college selection process where you felt that the college had taken a personal interest in you?

(Deep funnel respondents)



Did the college's personal interest in you, or lack of it, influence your college selection decision?

(Deep funnel respondents)



Website features that generate excitement

Facts and information about the college, and photos of the college, rank as the top two features of college websites that generate the highest student excitement.

In addition to seeking information about admissions, academics and financial aid, students are looking for clues about what their life will be like if they enroll.

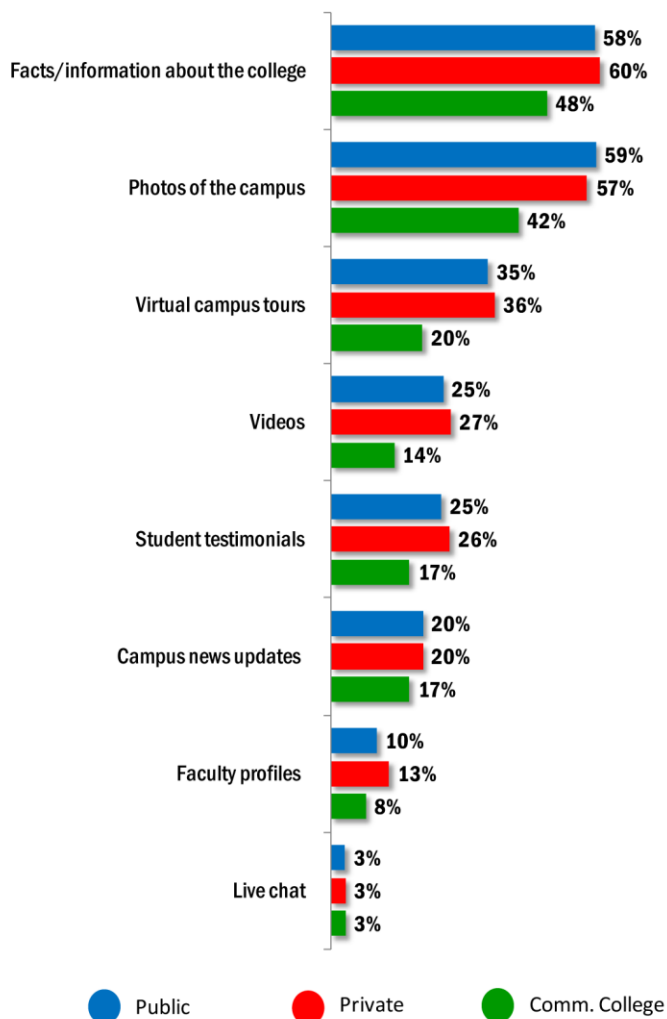
This includes everything from living accommodations and interactions with other students to the varying opportunities to work with faculty, study abroad, and get involved in clubs and organizations.

Prospective students appreciate photos and videos that “genuinely” reflect life as a student. If the photos and videos on the website appear staged or purchased from a stock photo house students interpret them as marketing and discount the message intended by the college.

To promote authenticity, one college routinely gives current students video cameras and microphones with the simple direction to, “Go anywhere and tell prospective students what you like and why they should enroll here.”

Website excitement generators

Which features of college websites got you most excited about attending?



The resulting videos are posted on the college’s website and YouTube. They serve as a powerful tool to communicate genuine messages about what student life is like on the campus and in the community.

Interactions that generated the most excitement

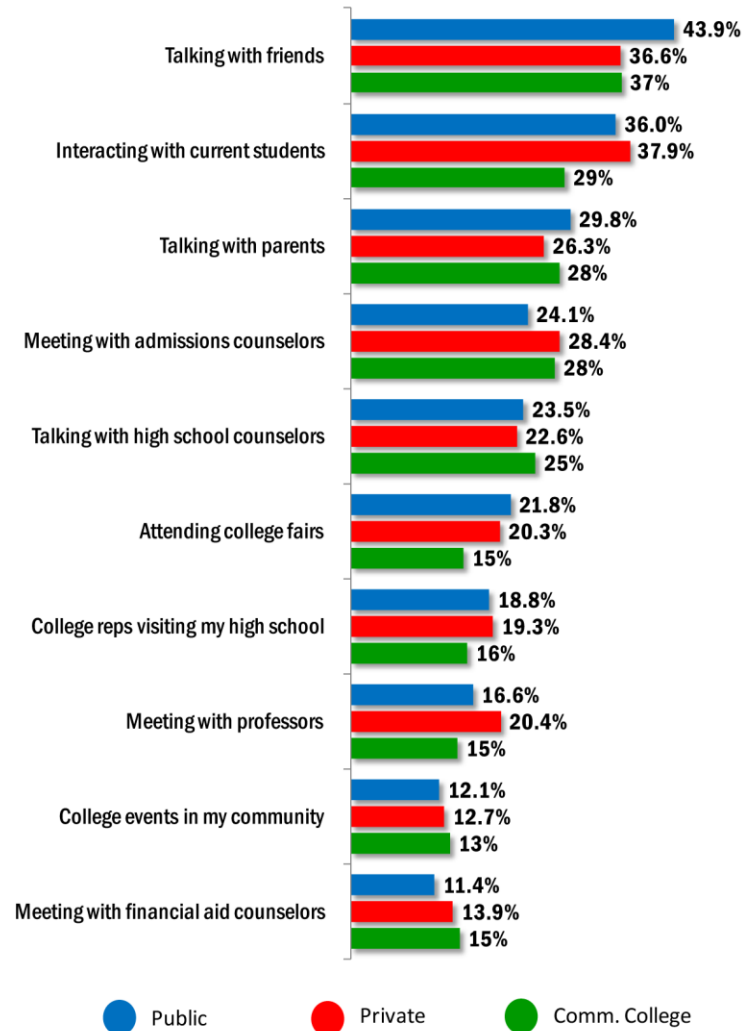
Further evidence of the power of the interaction between current and prospective students as a driver of enrollment is revealed when prospective students are asked to identify which interactions most excited them about attending a specific college.

To receive the full benefit of their interactions with current students, prospective students say that these interactions must feel real. They want to ask current students what it is really like to be a student on campus.

They want to know what current students like and don't like about their experiences with the college. Only by having this unfiltered input can prospective students form a true sense that the college is the right one for them.

Exciting interactions

Which interactions got you most excited about attending a specific college?



Notes on the Data

List of Co-Sponsors

Abilene Christian University
Albion College
Augustana College (Illinois)
Calvin College
College of Charleston
East Stroudsburg University
Eastern Kentucky University
Eastern Michigan University
Franciscan University of Steubenville
Hollins University
Holy Cross College
Illinois Central College
Illinois State University
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania
Lake Superior State University
Landmark College
Marian University (Indiana)
Normandale Community College
Northern Arizona University
Northern State University
Nova Southeastern University
Purdue University
Roanoke College
Robert Morris University
St. Lawrence University
Stetson University
Susquehanna University
Texas Christian University
The University of Findlay
University of Denver
University of Great Falls
University of Iowa
University of Mary Washington
University of Pittsburgh
University of Rhode Island
University of San Francisco
Valparaiso University
Westminster College
Wisconsin Lutheran College
Wittenberg University

Co-Sponsor Category:

4-Year Publics	(15)
4-Year Privates	(23)
Community Colleges	(2)

Volume of survey respondents by college type:

Total	(12,029)
4-Year Publics	(6,168, 51%)
4-Year Privates	(5,592, 46%)
Community Colleges	(269, 2%)

Volume of survey respondents by gender

(the data presented in this report is weighted):

Females	(7,728, 64%)
Males	(4,301, 36%)

Origin and volume of respondents by US region:

Middle States	(2,016, 18%)
Midwest	(4,048, 36%)
New England	(538, 5%)
South	(1,746, 15%)
Southwest	(1,623, 4%)
West	(1,363, 12%)

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