

**2015**

# **The Relationship Dynamic:**

**How prospective students  
form a relationship with your  
college and why it matters in  
your ability to grow and  
control enrollment.**

A Co-Sponsored Study Conducted By



Enrollment Management  
Product Solutions

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## Introduction

This study is an outgrowth of what we learned in two previous studies. In our 2013 study, "Your Value Proposition" we learned that a student's excitement about attending a college is more strongly correlated to enrollment (by a factor of two) than either cost or the perceived quality of the institution.

Our 2014 study, "The Excitement Factor!" focused on how student excitement is created. The findings revealed that a student's excitement about a college is tied closely to the strength of the relationship he or she builds with the college over time. Contributing to the overall relationship are interactions he or she has with current students, professors, admission counselors, and even people across campus and beyond that are unknown to the admission office.

Building relationships is a complex, nuanced and powerful part of student recruitment. In light of the findings of the 2013 and 2014 studies, colleges were asking what they can do to influence relationship building with prospective students in all aspects of their recruiting efforts, from social media to personal contact. They wanted to better understand when, how and with whom students build relationships with their chosen colleges.

The findings from this study provide colleges with new market intelligence and actionable data that can be leveraged to build strong bonds with prospective students that will lead to enrollment.

## A Co-Sponsored Study

Joining in this nationally co-sponsored study were 26 four-year public and private not-for-profit institutions (14 privates and 12 publics). Each provided names of students to be surveyed from their Fall 2015 pool of inquiries, applicants, and admits.

Co-sponsoring institutions received comprehensive customized reporting that compared their data to the national data.

A complete list of co-sponsors 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 July, August and September of 2015. The project yielded over 12,000 completed surveys.

Responses from public institution pools accounted for over 7,200 (59%) of the total. Over 5,000 (41%) came from private institution pools. The margin of error on the total sample is +/- 1% at the 95% confidence level.

The survey instrument contained 33 questions and captured 132 data points.

In addition to quantitative data, the survey captured qualitative data relating to the advice students would give colleges for building stronger relationships.

## 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, communicate with and enroll prospective students.

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# Relationship defined

You know it when you feel it. It's that single point in time, or that span of time, when you realize you've transitioned from the transactional to the emotional. You have a sense – often hard to describe - that your interactions with someone, some thing, some organization, or some brand have become more important, meaningful, and lasting.

In this study, we asked college-bound students if and how they formed connections and bonds (relationships) with the colleges they considered attending. The study also explored the influence of relationships in driving college choice.

For the purposes of the study “relationship” was defined as a connection to, affinity with, or excitement about attending a specific college. We explored a variety of ways in which relationships are developed, ranging from direct contact with the college to indirect contact, such as through friends, social media, or anything else.

## Statistical differences in groups

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 statistically significant differences in groups were found none was deemed to represent practical differences.

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# Major Findings



## Influence on college selection

Relationships are important. 8 in 10 students say the relationship they formed with their chosen college was influential in their decision to enroll. Nearly half of this group says it was "significant" in their decision.

When asked to rate the strength of the relationship they formed with their chosen college (on a 10 high scale) leading up to their final decision 45% rated it 8 or higher.



## It's a small world

Students form relationships with a small number of colleges. 63% said they formed relationships with two or three colleges over the course of the college selection process.



## The finish line

The race isn't lost by an inch. It's lost by a mile. The separation between the chosen college and the second choice is wide with regard to six key factors that influence relationship building.

For example, 61% of students indicated that the statement, "Admission reps were sincere and cared" applied to their chosen college but only 25% said it applied to their second choice college.

With reference to the statement, "The college understood me" 59% said it applied to their first choice school vs. 22% to their second choice.



## Parents facilitate the relationship

Parents are not only influential in college selection, they act as facilitators. When asked which people played a significant role in helping them form a relationship with a college, 57% of students say it was their parents.

This was followed by current students at the college (45%) and high school counselors/teachers (44%).



## The birth of the relationship

Students can clearly recall the *circumstances and interactions* that led to their feeling of having formed a relationship with their chosen college. "The first time I met my admissions counselor," one student said.

Another said, "There was a part of the campus tour when we played games as a group and I felt like I was part of a family." Yet another said, "I began receiving e-mails that were directed to my interests and not just in general for all students being accepted."



## The timeline

Students can identify the specific *point in time* when they felt they had formed a relationship with their chosen college.

Among the students involved in this study (all of whom would enroll in Fall 2015) 30% felt they had formed a relationship with their chosen college by December 2014.

By March 2015, 57% felt they had formed a relationship. By the end of May 2014 79% had done so. For 21%, the relationship was formed over the summer months leading up to enrollment.



## Expectations of the counselor

Among the traits and qualities that an admission counselor must possess to successfully build relationships, students say that answering questions about costs, loans, scholarships and grants is most important, followed closely by the counselor demonstrating "a sincere interest in me" and "finding out what is most important to me."

It is therefore imperative for counselors to be fully knowledgeable and highly empathetic in every interaction with the prospective student.



## Communication channels

College websites, e-mail and brochures/letters/postcards rank as the most effective forms of communication to enable a student to form a relationship with a college.

Students say these forms of communication played a far more significant role in helping them form a relationship with the college than other common forms, such as Facebook, text messaging, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and others.

## Influence of relationship on college selection

Two-thirds of students in this study applied to four or more colleges. Almost 11% applied to more than 10! 80% visited multiple college campuses. Yet with all of that activity the majority of students developed relationships with just two or three colleges.

For any college that is both good news and bad news. The good news is that if you are one of the two or three colleges in the running then you are on the student's short list. The bad news is that one or both of the colleges with which you are competing may have developed a stronger relationship with the student.

Relationships matter. 80% of students bound for public and private colleges and universities say that the relationship they

formed with their chosen college was influential in their decision to enroll there. For nearly half of the students the influence was "significant."

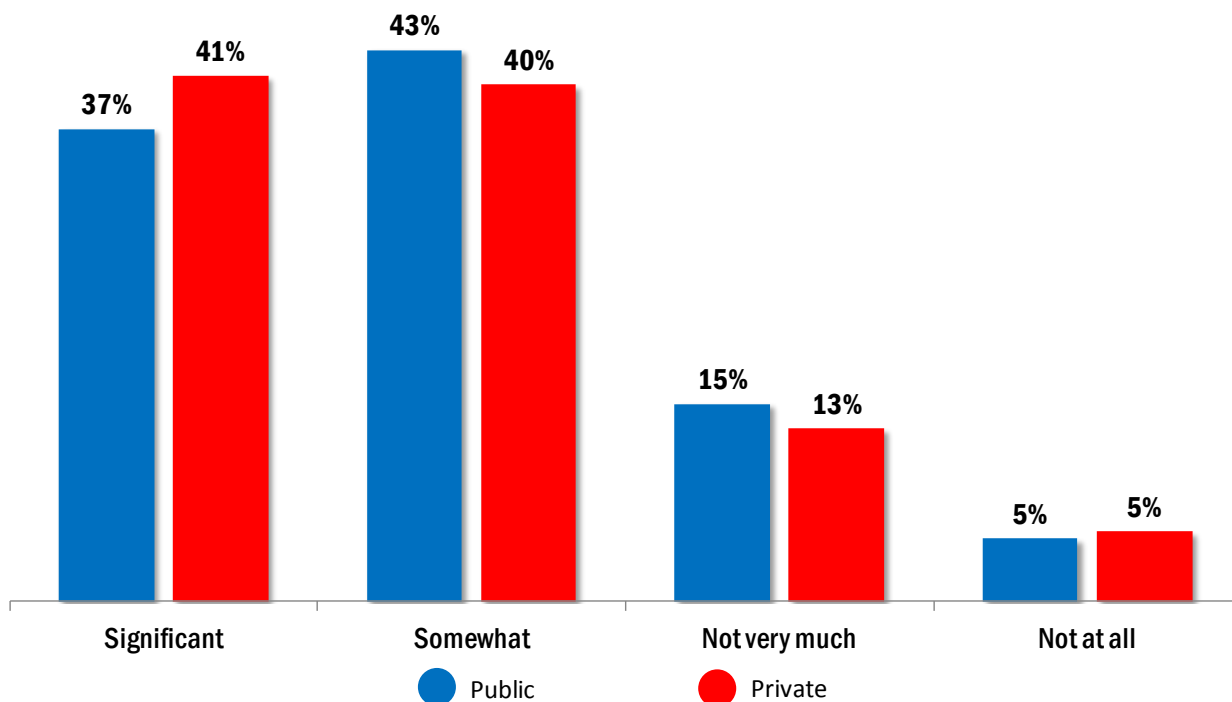
The strength of the relationship with their chosen college was high. Almost half rated the strength of their relationship as being an 8, 9 or 10 on a 10-high scale.

# 63%

Develop relationships  
with 2 or 3 colleges

## To what degree did the relationship you formed with your chosen college influence your decision to enroll there?

*(All respondents)*



## Comparing the chosen and second choice college on key relationship attributes

Meaningful relationships are built on shared beliefs and mutual reward. This is true whether the relationship involves two people, a person and a company or brand, or a prospective student and a college.

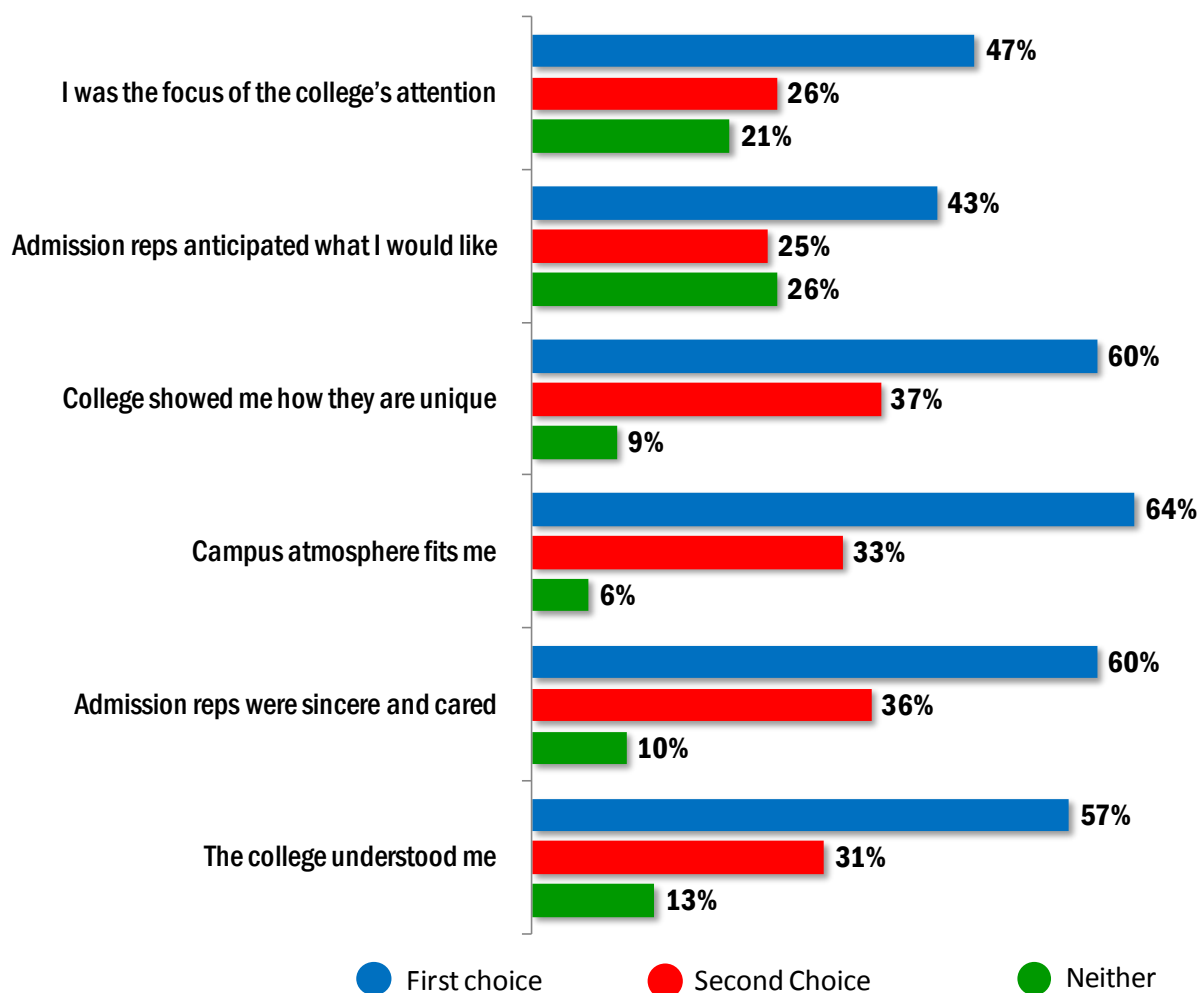
For a relationship to begin and remain long-lasting both sides must see mutual benefit and feel as though the other side understands them and is sincerely committed to making a contribution to the relationship.

Students select and reject colleges on this

basis. This is evident in how students rated their chosen college and their second choice college with regard to six factors that are fundamental to the building of the student/college relationship.

Students were presented with six statements and asked to indicate whether each statement applies to their chosen college, their second choice college or neither. The differential between the first choice and second choice college is significant.

**Indicate if the following statements apply to your chosen college, your second choice college, or neither.**



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## Parents not only influence, they facilitate relationships

It's a fact that parents influence college selection. In our recent study, "Your Value Proposition" we measured the *relative* influence of parents and students. Both parents and students agreed: the student has the most influence.

In our "Study of Parents" we uncovered numerous examples of mothers and fathers hiding or disposing of college marketing material before their child would see it. Conversely, the same parents advocated for specific colleges even though the student had not expressed an initial interest in the school.

The results of this current study make it clear that parents are not just influencers. They are an active force in leading their child to or away from colleges.

In light of this, more colleges are building a separate but equal marketing and "recruiting" track aimed at parents. It's an acknowledgement that parents can and should be served during the college selection process, and that they facilitate the relationship between their child and the college.

### Which people played a significant role in helping you form a relationship with a college?

People who played a significant role	Percent
My parents	57%
Current students at the college	45%
HS counselors/teachers	44%
Other college-bound students	38%
College admission counselors	38%
College faculty	25%
Graduates/Alumni	21%
College financial aid counselors	20%
College coaches	10%



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## Relationship-building channels of communications

In today's recruiting environment there are many different ways that colleges and students communicate. When asked which forms of communications played a significant role in helping to build a relationship with a college, students responded by identifying college websites, e-mail, brochures, letters, and postcards.

Students say that college websites and brochures enable them to see what their life will be like if they enroll. They see most value in genuine depictions of college life as opposed to contrived images and videos so commonly used in the higher education industry.

E-mail, letters, and postcards are especially powerful in building relationships when they are personalized. Students recall finding handwritten postcards in the mail from an admission counselor wishing them a happy birthday or congratulating them on graduating high school.

Highly relevant and personalized e-mails from counselors are extremely effective relationship builders, especially when they are additive to the ongoing conversation between the student and college.

### Which of the following forms of communication would you say played a significant role in helping you form a relationship with a college?

Channels that played a significant role	Percent
College websites	68%
E-Mail	64%
Brochures, letters, postcards	57%
Instagram	30%
Facebook	29%
Twitter	15%
Text messaging	13%
College blogs	13%
YouTube	12%
Snapchat	9%

## When the relationship is established

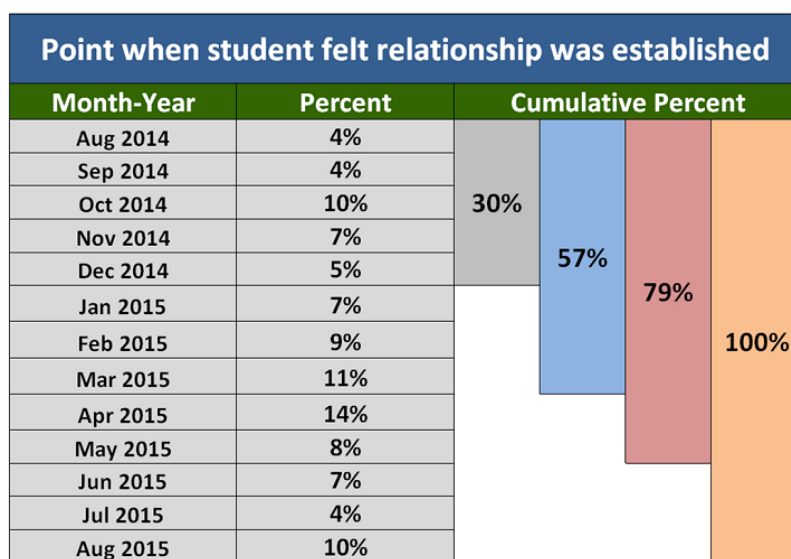
A meaningful relationship between a prospective student and a college can form in a single encounter or over a period of time.

When students are asked to describe the point at which they sensed that they had established a relationship with their chosen college their description typically involves the use of the word "felt." They felt wanted. They felt recognized. They felt at home. They felt comfortable. They felt connected. They felt important. They felt proud.

At what point do they feel these things? Typically, colleges began communicating with prospective students 18 months (or even sooner) before they will ultimately enroll. However, by December of the year preceding their enrollment only 30% of students felt as though they had established a relationship with a college.

By the end of March of the year of their enrollment 57% had established a relationship. By the end of May it had risen to 79% but that left a sizable group of 21% who would not feel as though they had established a relationship until the end of summer.

This timeline confirms the importance of building relationships two to three years prior to enrollment and fully maintaining the effort until students enroll in the Fall.



## When did you feel you had formed a relationship with your chosen college?

***“The first time I met my admissions counselor.”***

***“I began receiving emails that were directed to my interests and not just in general for all students being accepted.”***

***“I met some upperclassmen who I felt I could talk to.”***

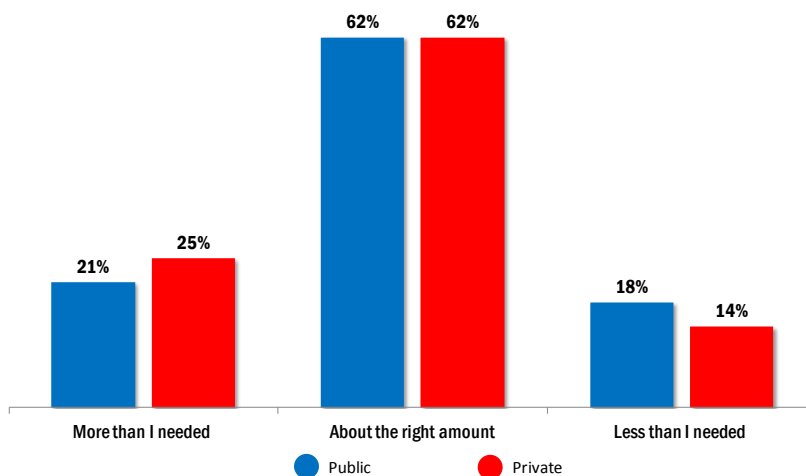
***“A professor I’d met at a previous visit came up to me and remembered my name.”***

## Volume of contacts

Approximately one quarter of students indicated that the volume of contacts they received from their **chosen** college was more than would have been necessary to build a relationship.

The volume and frequency of contacts has little influence in building relationships with prospective students. Only 11% of students say it made a difference in their college selection decision. In fact, some indicated that receiving high volumes of contacts from a college was counterproductive. Students are much more responsive to "quality" contacts.

Thinking about the total volume of contacts you had with your chosen college prior to enrolling (i.e. emails, phone calls, letters, texts, etc.) would you say you had...



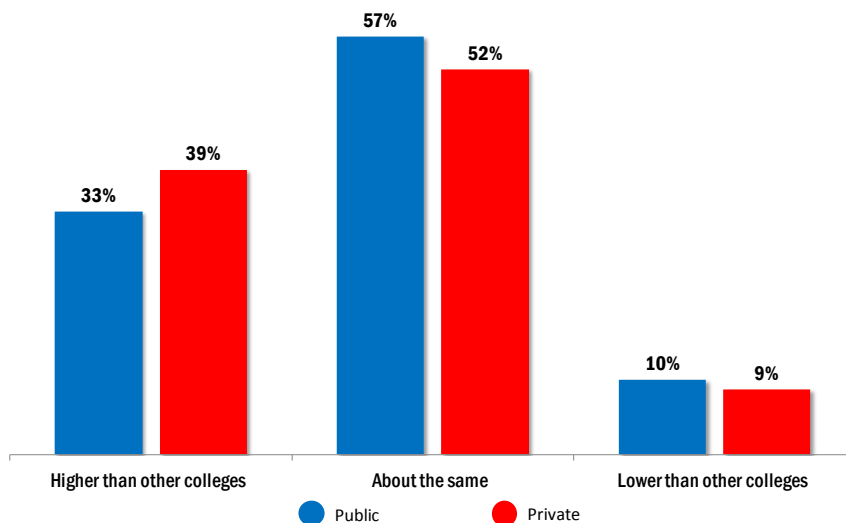
## Quality of contacts

Over one-third of students say that the quality of the contacts they received from their chosen college was higher than those from other colleges they considered.

They equated quality to relevance. If the contact was relevant, in that it presented information of specific interest to them or was a continuation of the dialogue they were having with the college, then it served to establish an even stronger relationship.

50% of students say that the relevance of the contacts from a college plays an extremely influential role in their selection. One relevant and memorable contact will outweigh a stream impersonal contacts.

Thinking about the quality of contacts you had with your chosen college prior to enrolling would you say the quality was ...



## Expectations of the admission counselor

Students expect counselors to be knowledgeable and responsive. Foremost, they want counselors to be able to answer their questions about paying for college. And, if they ask a question which the counselor cannot immediately answer, they want the counselor to make an effort to find out and get back to them promptly.

They expect the counselor to demonstrate a sincere interest in them. They want the counselor to get to know them as an individual and understand their particular needs, preferences and motivations.

Most prospective students **want** to get excited about the colleges they visit and consider. They see counselors as a catalyst for enabling that by connecting them with the people, places and activities that will create excitement about the college.

## Relationship with one equals relationship with all

Some students need to know, see and experience a wide variety of things in order to develop a meaningful relationship with a college. But that is not true of all students.

Many students can develop a strong relationship from a single connection or experience. They may have accompanied a friend to campus once. They may have attended a football game. They may have visited an older friend from high school at a fraternity or sorority function.

These singular connections and experiences instill an affinity strong enough for them to enroll. Two-thirds of students believe that their relationship with a single person or thing can make them feel like they have a relationship with the college as a whole.

## Which traits and qualities must an admission counselor possess to successfully build a relationship with a student like you?

	Percent
Answer cost, loans, scholarships questions	72%
Sincere interest in me	68%
Find what is important to me	59%
Get me excited about the college	58%
Stay in contact with me	58%
Knowing all aspects of the college	57%
Listen more than talk	34%
Understand how often to contact me	32%

My relationship with a single person or thing associated with my college makes me feel as though I have a relationship with the college as a whole.

**69%**  
**Agree**

## Personal communications that contribute to relationship building

Prospective students communicate with many groups of people over the course of their college selection process. Some groups have a greater influence than others in contributing to the building of relationships.

As evidenced in previous sections of this report, parents, acting as facilitators, are the most significant contributors. This is followed closely by friends and other students who will enroll at the college, as well as other students who are currently enrolled.

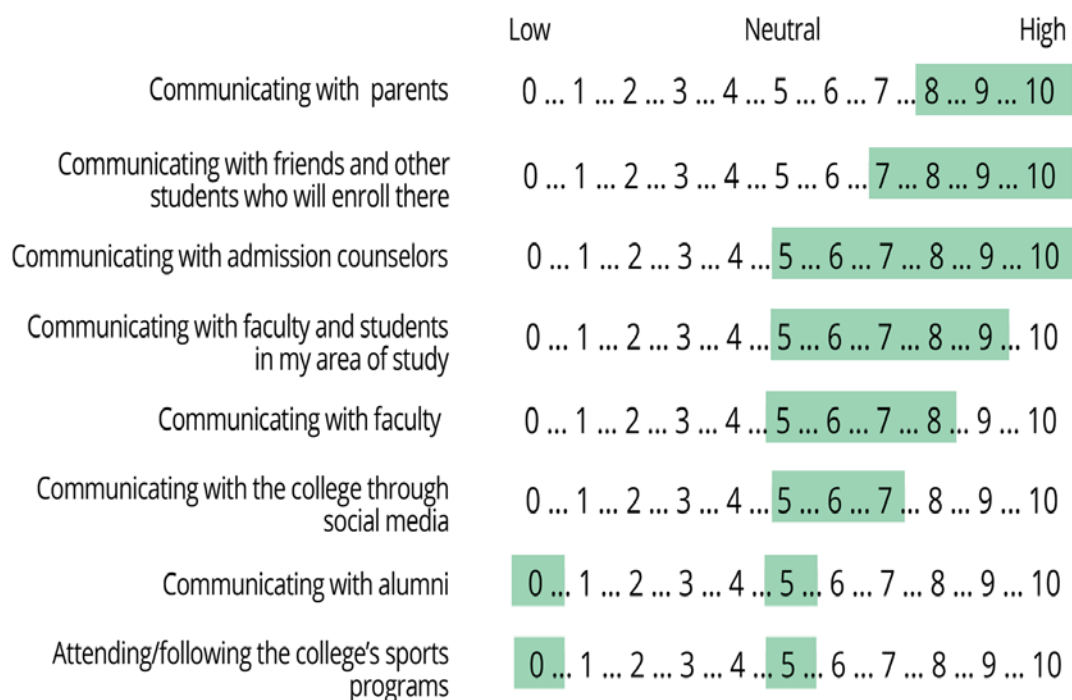
The contribution of admission counselors falls on the neutral to high side of the scale below. That is positive but the dispersion of the scores suggests that many counselors are

having a neutral or mild influence on the building of relationships with prospective students. There is very little difference in the data associated with public and private colleges on this issue. Private colleges do, however, show a slightly higher concentration of scores in the 9 to 10 range.

Ratings for social media and college sports programs are heavily clustered in the low and neutral segments of the scale.

The fact that social media did not show up as a strong contributor to the building of the relationship is not necessarily an indictment on the utility of social media as a communications channel. It may have more to do with the way in which social media is being used by colleges.

### On a 10-high scale, how significant were each of the following in contributing to the building of your relationship with your chosen college?



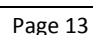
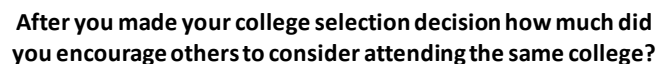
Highest concentration of responses

An open-ended question in the survey invited students to offer advice to colleges on how to build strong relationships with prospective students. A common theme emerged in their responses.

Personalization pervaded the comments, as reflected in one student's suggestion, "Personalized visits helped me the most. Show you care about a student as an individual."

Once students make an emotional commitment to a college they often turn into advocates and promoters of their chosen college.

## What advice would you give colleges in how to build a strong relationship with a prospective student?



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## Segmentation of prospective students by personality type

Students were presented with a series of 20 words and phrases commonly used to describe personality traits. Statistical analysis produced four personality segments (see below) which were then used to measure association with other variables captured in the survey.

An examination of each personality segment and the influence of relationship formation in college selection revealed that, for three of the four segments, the development of a relationship is tied closely to college choice. These segments include “warm and trusting,” “assertive extrovert,” and “analytical perfectionist.” Students in the “skeptical introvert” segment showed no connection between relationship development and college choice.

### *Personality segments*

**Students often choose a college that provides an environment  
(both academically and socially) that matches their personality traits.  
Please check the words or phrases that describe you. (Check all that apply.)**

#### ***Segment 1 (25% of respondents): “Warm and trusting”***

- |   |  |   |   |  |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Analytical       | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Single-minded | 9 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Emotional</b> | 13 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Caring</b>   | 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Introverted        |
| 2 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Warm</b>      | 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Assertive     | 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Social          | 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Extroverted     | 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Perfectionist      |
| 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneous      | 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Risk-taker    | 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Proud           | 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Skeptical       | 19 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Imaginative</b> |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Easygoing</b> | 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Ordered       | 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Involved        | 16 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Trusting</b> | 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Private            |

#### ***Segment 2 (39%): “Assertive extrovert”***

- |   |  |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Analytical         | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Single-minded     | 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional      | 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Caring             | 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Introverted   |
| 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Warm               | 6 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assertive</b>  | 10 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Social</b> | 14 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Extroverted</b> | 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Perfectionist |
| 3 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Spontaneous</b> | 7 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Risk-taker</b> | 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Proud         | 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Skeptical          | 19 <input type="checkbox"/> Imaginative   |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Easygoing          | 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Ordered           | 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Involved      | 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Trusting           | 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Private       |

#### ***Segment 3 (18%): “Skeptical introvert”***

- |  |   |                                      |  |  |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Analytical  | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Single-minded</b> | 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional | 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Caring           | 17 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Introverted</b> |
| 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Warm        | 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Assertive            | 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Social   | 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Extroverted      | 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Perfectionist      |
| 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneous | 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Risk-taker           | 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Proud    | 15 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Skeptical</b> | 19 <input type="checkbox"/> Imaginative        |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Easygoing   | 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Ordered              | 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Involved | 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Trusting         | 20 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Private</b>     |

#### ***Segment 4 (19%): “Analytical perfectionist”***

- |  |   |                                      |   |  |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Analytical</b> | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Single-minded  | 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional | 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Caring      | 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Introverted          |
| 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Warm              | 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Assertive      | 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Social   | 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Extroverted | 18 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Perfectionist</b> |
| 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneous       | 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Risk-taker     | 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Proud    | 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Skeptical   | 19 <input type="checkbox"/> Imaginative          |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Easygoing         | 8 <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Ordered</b> | 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Involved | 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Trusting    | 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Private              |



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## Key recommendations

### Action!



It's common for colleges and admission counselors to think of recruiting students as a progression of steps. Has the student completed this action or that action? Are they progressing down through the funnel? In many cases students are being pulled through the process. It's difficult.

Focusing on relationship building rather than process can make it easier. Students will willingly take the necessary steps. Every interaction with a student, in any form, should be measured on the basis of, "Does it make our relationship stronger?"

### Action!



Every student has a unique combination of needs, preferences, perceptions, and motivations. Identifying and dealing with all of them enables the college to have a deeper and stronger relationship with the prospective student. Uncovering them requires that the college focus on the student rather than the institution.

### Action!



With every student interaction find out if you have changed or enhanced the student's perception of your institution. At the end of a campus visit, for example, ask, "Did we show you how we are different from other colleges? If so, tell me how you see us as being different. Does it make us any more or less attractive to you?"

### Action!



Parents are not just influencing the college selection process, they are facilitating it. Help them. Establish a separate but equal relationship with them, provided the student and parent are comfortable doing so.

A strong relationship with a parent can provide the guidance and help you need to better understand the value propositions that will be attractive to the prospective student.

### Action!



Do everything you can to understand what is important to the prospective student and how they can be best served through their college selection process. After learning what is important to them be prepared to provide any and all information they need.



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## Notes on the Data

### ***List of Co-Sponsors***

Abilene Christian University  
Bemidji State University  
Clarke University  
College of Charleston  
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania  
Eastern Kentucky University  
Eastern Michigan University  
Guilford College  
Hofstra University  
Hood College  
Illinois State University  
Marian University  
Marshall University  
Northern State University  
Northwest Missouri State University  
Purdue University  
Roanoke College  
St. Lawrence University  
Stetson University  
Susquehanna University  
Texas Christian University  
The University of Findlay  
University of Denver  
University of Houston  
University of Rhode Island  
Westminster College

### ***Co-Sponsor Category:***

4-Year Publics (12)  
4-Year Privates (14)

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## About 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. Our products and services include:

### Interactive Counselor Training Workshops

Our on-campus Interactive Training Workshops dramatically improve the performance of counselors and staff in areas such as effective communication with students and parents, applying creative entrepreneurship to their jobs, validating past and planned actions against outcomes, and discovering and leveraging the motivations of students (and themselves).

### Yield Enhancement System (YES)

The Yield Enhancement System gathers critical information from students at a crucial point in their college selection process - after they have applied. YES is a tool to understand how individual students will make their college selection decision - and how you can best present the value propositions of your institution.

### Non-Matric Studies

Our Admitted Student Research product is a cost-effective, customized and turn-key solution for any institution wanting to understand why their admitted students did or did not enroll.

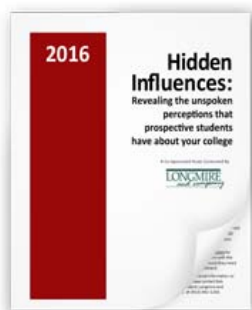
### Service Quality Management (SQM)

If you don't measure it, you can't manage it. Our service quality assessments are industry-fresh and reflect the current customer service demands and expectations of students and parents both pre- and post-enrollment.

### Co-Sponsored Studies

Higher education marketing professionals and enrollment managers are continually faced with new and changing market conditions about which they need data fast. Data that's not available elsewhere. Fast, as in immediately. Longmire and Company co-sponsored studies fill the need.

## Get on board our next study



Prospective students don't always tell you what they're thinking. Or they don't want to be completely honest about their REAL first-choice college because they think they'll hurt your feelings. Or they say one thing and then do another.

Their hidden perceptions and motivations impact your ability to effectively communicate with and ultimately recruit them. This new study is going to do a deep dive on the hidden perceptions that influence students in choosing a college.

Colleges get involved in our co-sponsored studies because they capture fascinating and actionable data specific to their pool of prospective students. As a co-sponsoring institution you will receive comprehensive and customized reporting that compares your data with national data. In addition, Longmire and Company will create and deliver a customized webinar for you and your staff to make specific recommendations for acting on the findings.

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Twitter: @LongmireCo



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