

2012

Pre-Enrollment Service Study: How customer service delivery during the recruiting cycle influences enrollment

A Co-Sponsored Study Conducted By



Enrollment Management
Product Solutions

Introduction

For many parents and students, service delivery during the recruiting process is predictive of how the student will be served after enrollment.

Breakdowns in early service delivery will outweigh perceptions of strength in areas such as academic quality, reputation of faculty, program offerings, and even scholarships and financial aid.

Conversely, high levels of service often make an institution more attractive because of the perceived likelihood of favorable outcomes brought about through greater attention to the student's individual needs.

This study examined all forms of interaction that prospective students and parents had with colleges during the "college shopping" process.

Certainly, the admission and financial aid offices were central to pre-enrollment service delivery. However, service delivery across all brand touch points of the institution is critical to enrollment growth and control.

The sole focus of this project was to measure how well students and parents are served by colleges across all brand touch points, and how that service influences their final selection.

A Co-Sponsored Study

Public and private institutions throughout the United States joined in this co-sponsored study. Over 4,750 prospective students and parents participated.

Methodology

The survey instrument contained 56 questions and captured 98 data points ranging from frequency and type of contact with the college to ratings of service delivery across key brand touch points.

In addition to quantitative data, survey questions captured qualitative data relating to topics such as: Perceptions of the college's brand and reputation, feelings on when or whether the college exhibited a personal interest in the student, feelings from parents on how they were treated, and suggestions from students and parents about how they could have been better served during the college selection process.

About Longmire and Company

Longmire and Company, formed in 1986, has worked with over 300 public and private four-year institutions throughout the United States.

Our work centers on conversion by providing enrollment managers with the tools, information and products they need to grow and control enrollment.

If you need additional information or have questions, please contact Bob Longmire, President, Longmire and Company, Inc. at (913) 492-1265.

Major findings

Influence OF Service

Prospective students and parents view the pre-enrollment customer service they receive from a college as predictive of what the student will receive after enrolling. If that service does not meet their expectation, they will reject the college from consideration on that basis alone.

INDUSTRY COMPARISON

Hospitals, banks, department stores, utilities, and the United States Postal Service rank higher in overall customer satisfaction scores than do colleges in providing service to prospective students and parents.

the Lasting Impression

One in ten prospective students and parents report that their most recent experience with a college was negative. Nearly one-third said that their last impression influenced their college selection decision.

Your Customer's View of you

Prospective students and parents do not believe that colleges generally place a priority on providing a high level of customer service. Almost 10% believe that providing customer service is "probably not" or "definitely not" a priority for colleges.

BRAND breakdowns

A prospective student or parent will lock in a perception about a college based on a seemingly insignificant encounter with someone or something that is contrary to the explicit or implicit promise of the institution. Any person, department, policy, or process that does not deliver the brand promise and service expectation jeopardizes the college's ability to win their trust and ultimately their enrollment.

Getting Personal

Prospective students and parents do not believe that colleges attempt to get to know them as individuals. They believe that during the recruiting cycle, prospective students are "processed." Only one-third felt as though the college had taken a personal interest in them.

SOLVING PROBLEMS

Colleges lack channels through which prospective students and parents can lodge concerns or problems during the recruiting cycle. Even if channels exist, there is rarely a formalized method to track the steps toward resolving the complaint or concern. Lastly, the student or parent is rarely contacted to ensure that their problems or concerns were resolved to their satisfaction.



Colleges that scored highest in pre-enrollment service were those that viewed prospective students and parents as customers. Policies, procedures, and people were replaced or enhanced as necessary to meet the needs of the customer rather than the needs of the institution.



What is most promising from this study is the realization that so many institutions have an immediate opportunity to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive marketplace by providing a level of pre-enrollment customer service that rises above the expectation of prospective students and parents. The first step involves measuring current performance.

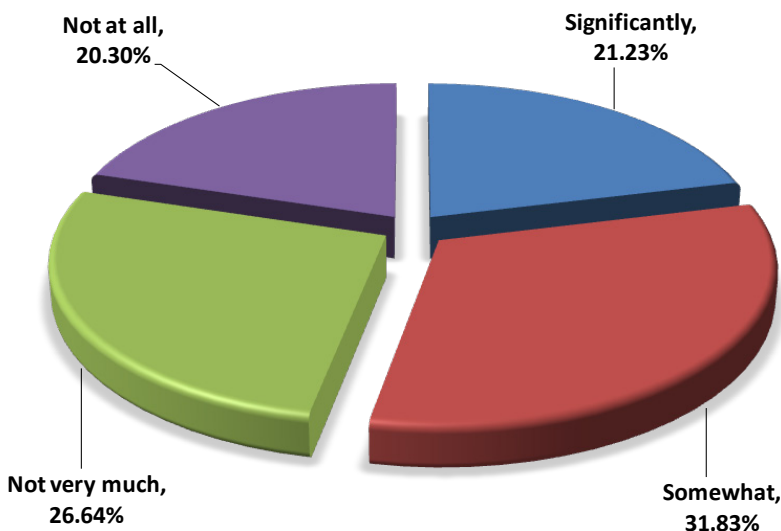
Influence of pre-enrollment service delivery on college selection.

Over one-half of students and parents said that the pre-enrollment customer service they received influenced their college selection decision. For nearly one-quarter, the influence was significant.

Compliments and complaints centered around many of the same issues, such as feeling welcomed or not, cumbersome or efficient processes, ease or difficulty in obtaining information, organized and disorganized back office systems, and so on.

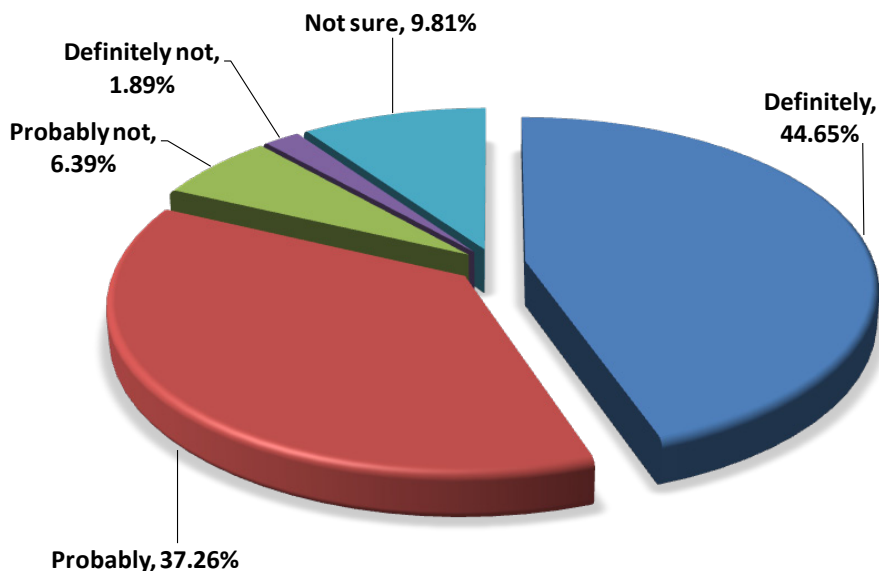
Less than half of those surveyed from the deep funnel perceived that the college “definitely” places a priority on customer service delivery.

To what degree did the service you received from the college influence your college selection decision?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

Do you believe that the college places a priority on providing a high level of service to prospective students and parents?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

Overall service rating.

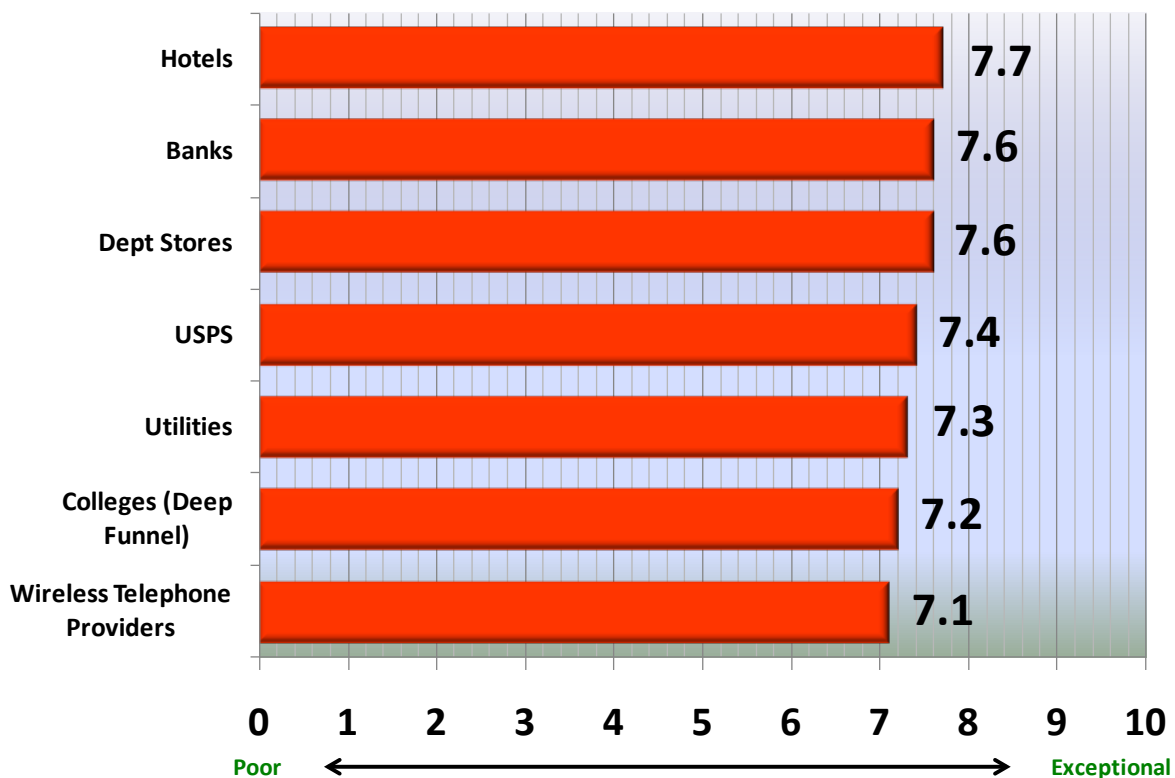
Nationally, prospective students and parents who reached the deep funnel stage of the recruiting process gave the industry an overall pre-enrollment customer service satisfaction score of 7.2 on a 10 point high scale.

For the purposes of industry comparison, the American Customer Satisfaction Index (a national organization that produces customer satisfaction indexes for 10 economic sectors, 47 industries and over 200 federal or local government services) reports that the United States

Postal Service receives an average rating of 7.4. Banks earn a rating of 7.6, hospitals 7.7, wireless telephone providers 7.1, department and discount stores 7.6, and hotels 7.7.

Within each industry that ASCI measures there are organizations that stand out well above and well below the norm. The same held true for the colleges measured in this study. The college that provided the highest level of pre-enrollment customer service received a rating of 8.6. The low was 6.7.

College pre-enrollment customer service rating compared to the service ratings of other industries.



Source of non-college data: American Customer Satisfaction Index, Ann Arbor, MI. ASCI data has been adjusted by a multiple of 10 to conform to the rating scale used in the Longmire and Company study.

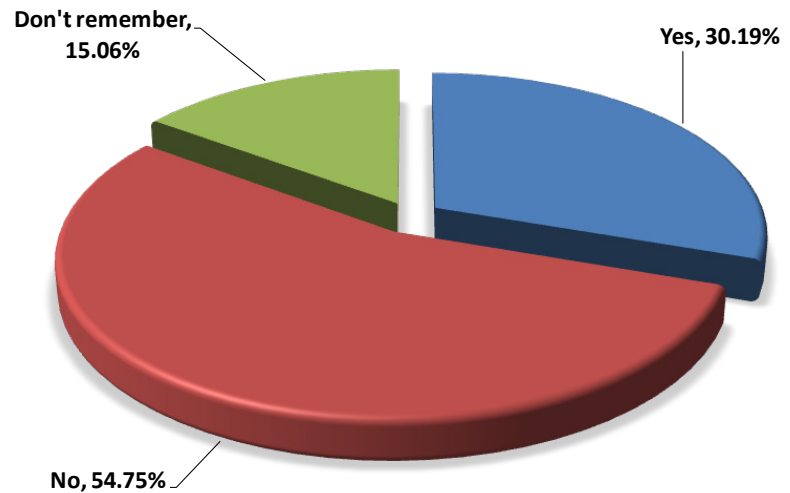
The last impression is the lasting impression.

The qualitative data collected through many of the open-end survey questions points out the importance of the most recent interaction that the prospective student or parent had with the college, regardless of the origin of that interaction.

Nearly one-third of respondents indicated that their most recent experience with the college influenced their enthusiasm for attending. Nearly one in ten deep funnel prospective students and parents indicated that their most recent experience was a negative one.

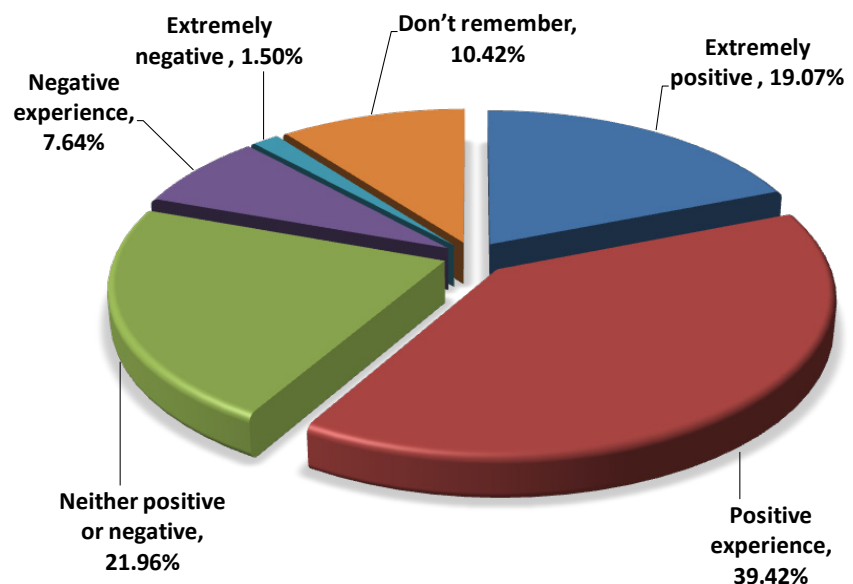
One can only speculate as to how enrollment volume would be influenced if some portion of those who reported a negative experience, or even a neutral experience, had instead been left with the lasting impression of a very positive one.

Did your most recent experience have any influence over your enthusiasm for attending?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

How would you characterize your most recent experience with the college?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

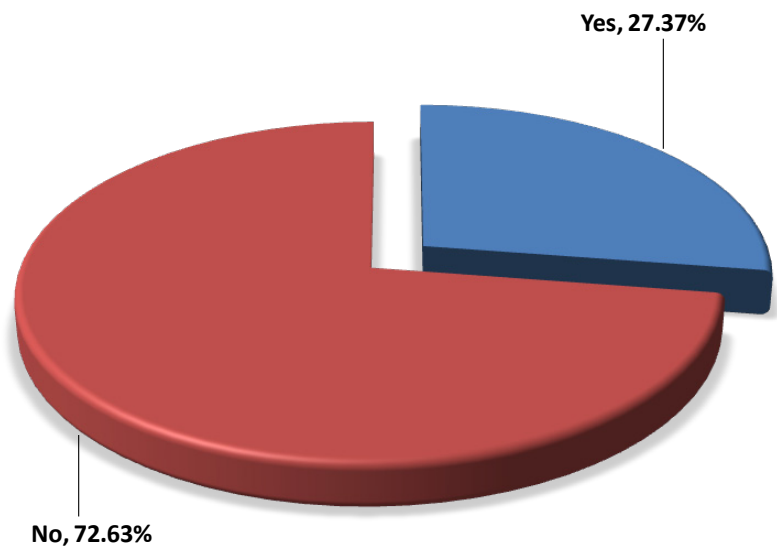
The pivotal experience.

Over one-quarter of respondents can identify a specific experience that was pivotal in their college selection decision. Over 26% of this group classify that experience as a negative one.

Negative experiences cited as being pivotal related to issues such as seeing buildings and facilities in disrepair, unflattering media coverage, encounters with students who attend the college, back office processing mistakes, rudeness of staff, campus grounds that appeared to be inadequately maintained, and so on.

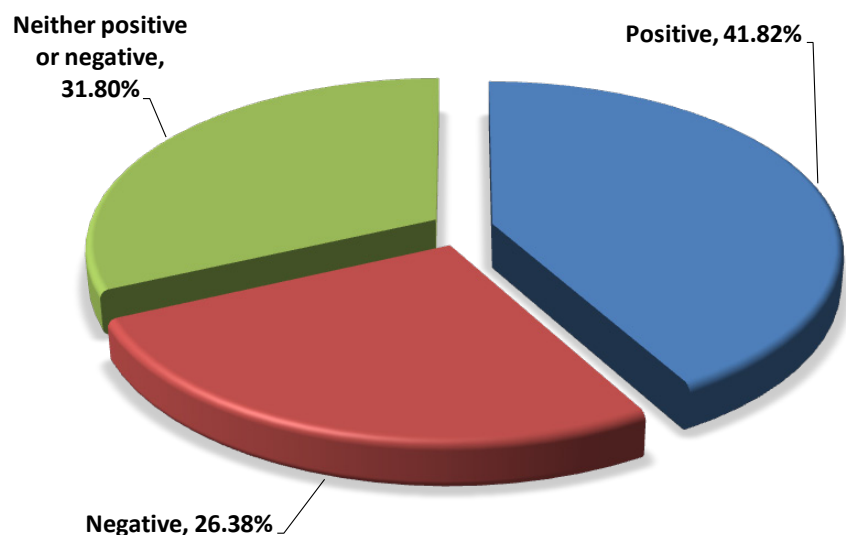
Pivotal positive experiences cited were the exact opposite of those issues mentioned as negatives: The favorable impression made by well-maintained campus grounds, a welcoming gesture by a staff member, a current student who offered help and guidance, a back-office process executed with impressive speed.

Was there a specific, isolated experience with the college that was pivotal in your decision to attend or not attend?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

How would you characterize that experience?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

Rating service delivery by brand touch point.

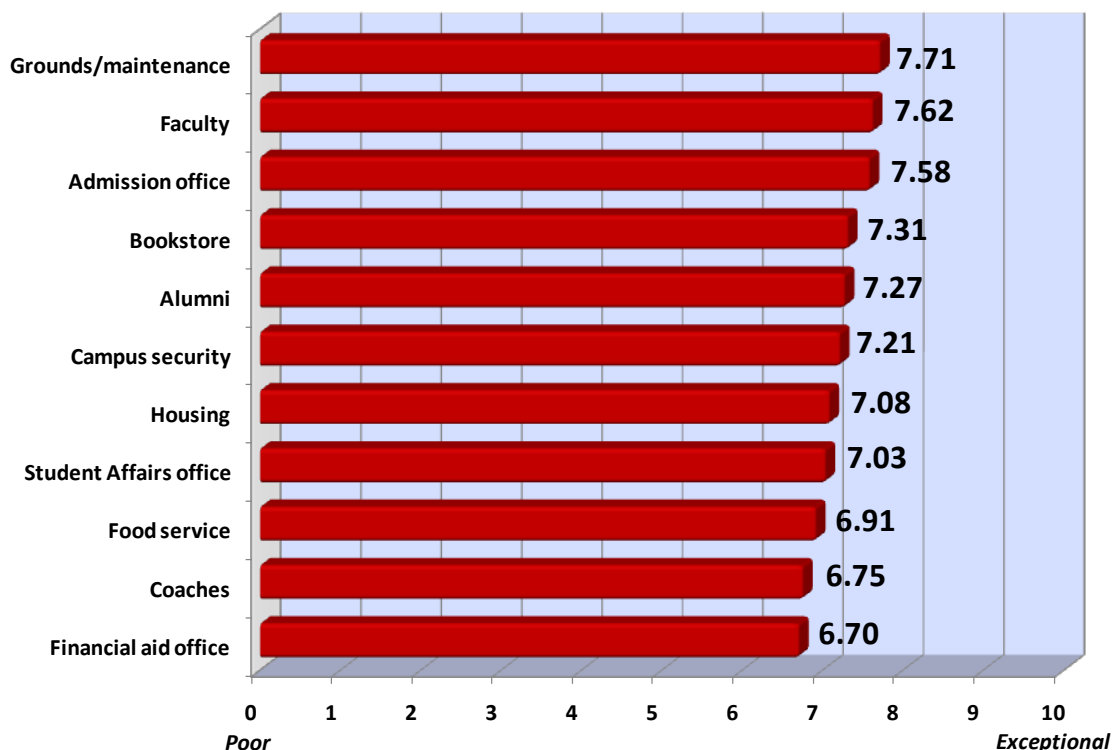
When students are asked why they selected a specific college, a frequently cited reason is, “The look and feel of the campus.” In this study, grounds and maintenance received the highest service rating of the 11 brand touch points measured. Faculty and the admission office ranked second and third, respectively.

Coaches and the financial aid office were given the lowest ratings. Student and parent dismay with coaches often correlates with playing time promised.

The ratings for the financial aid office are due in part to students and parents not receiving the desired scholarship or financial aid package.

However, our previous studies have shown the degree to which students and parents rely on financial aid offices to provide help and guidance with all issues related to paying for college. They have expressed frustration that financial aid counselors frequently do not provide the breadth and depth of guidance and advising they desire.

Pre-enrollment service ratings given to people and departments of the college.



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

Serving the person.

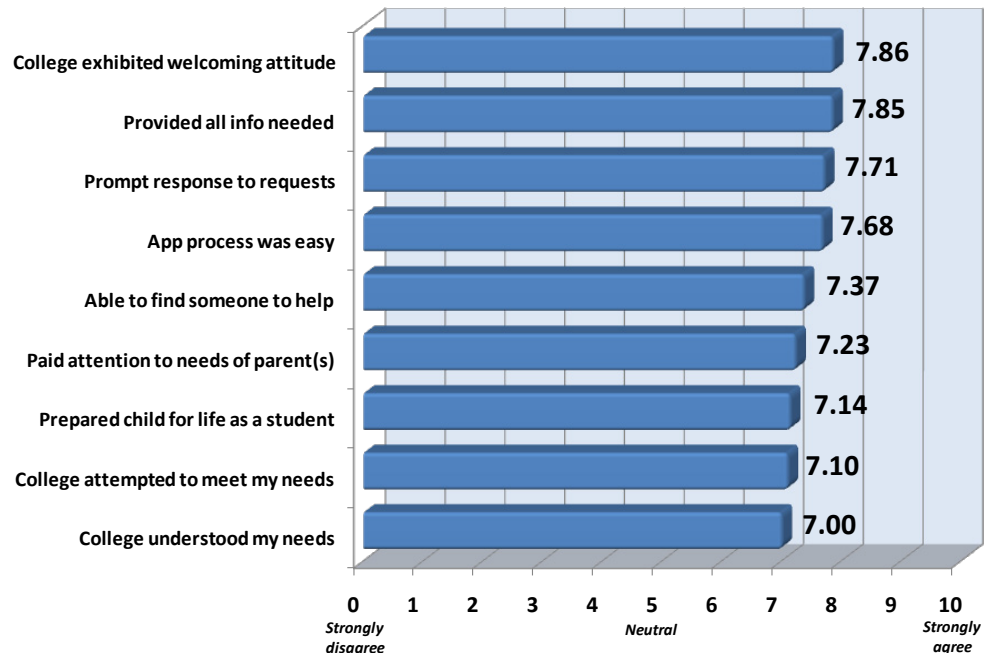
There is no doubt that colleges exhibit a welcoming attitude toward prospective students and parents. That single attribute rated highest among the nine items measured relating to personal service delivery.

It is also clear that colleges have a complete warehouse of information available to prospective students and that processes exist to efficiently deliver that information as needed.

Where there seems to be room for improvement is delivering information with a deeper understanding of the unique needs and preferences of each student. The three items that received the lowest ratings relate to the college's efforts to understand the uniquenesses of each student and parent.

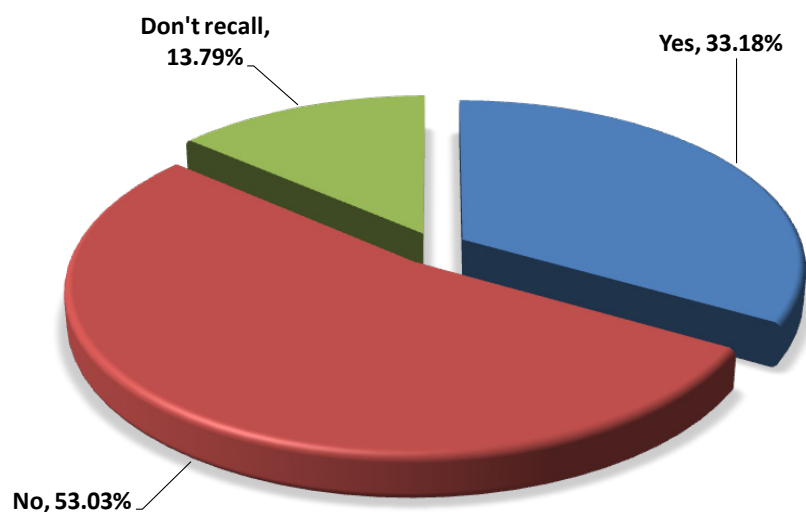
Only one-third of students in the deep funnel felt as though the college had taken a "personal interest" in them.

Agreement/Disagreement with statements about service delivery.



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

Was there a point when you felt that the college had taken a personal interest in you?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

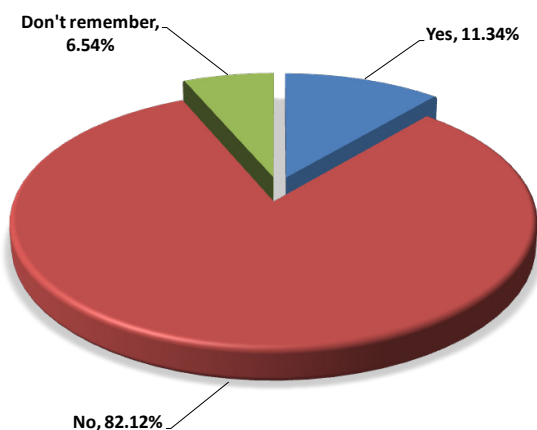
Problem identification and resolution

Approximately one in ten students and parents indicated that they experienced a problem or difficulty with the college during the selection process. Approximately 41% made the college aware of it. However, only 29% from that group said that the college attempted to resolve the issue. Among those who said a resolution was attempted,

only 25% said that it was resolved to their satisfaction.

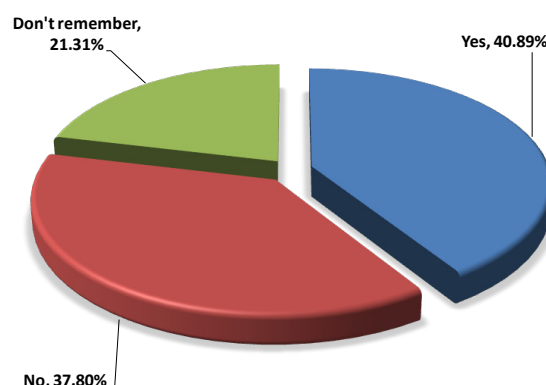
These findings strongly suggest that colleges must make it easy for prospective students and parents to register their problems and concerns. Once registered, some form of tracking system should be engaged to attempt a resolution and track the outcome.

Did you experience any problems with the service you received from the college?



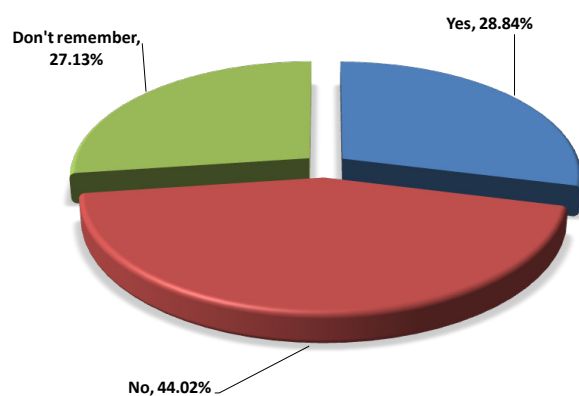
National sample: All students and parents full funnel

Was someone at the college made aware of your problem or difficulty?



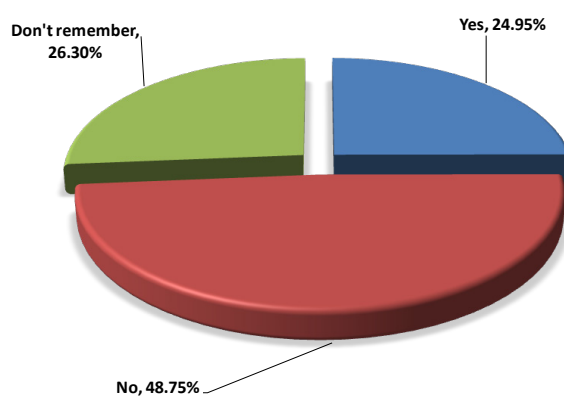
National sample: All students and parents full funnel

Did he or she attempt to resolve it?



National sample: All students and parents full funnel

Was it resolved to your satisfaction?



National sample: All students and parents full funnel

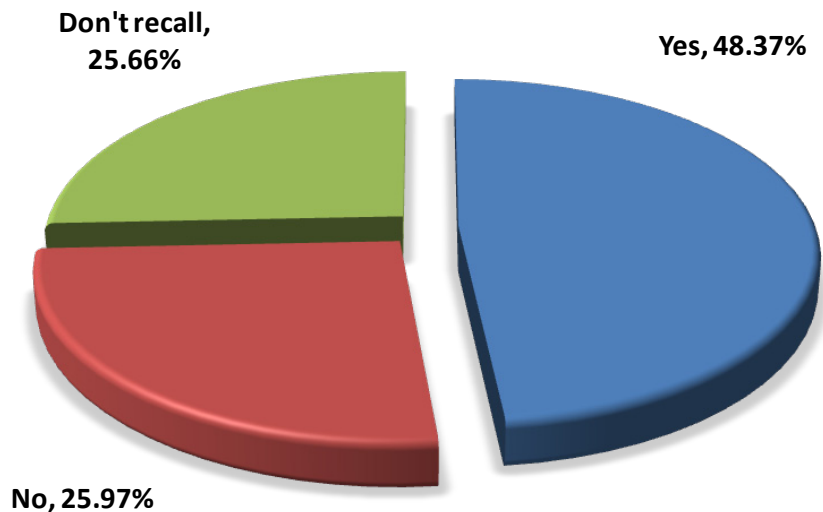
Brand identity.

This study sought to measure the change in brand perception before and after the student and parent experienced the pre-enrollment customer service delivered by the college.

At the outset of the college selection process, less than one-half of respondents viewed the college as having a unique reputation or brand identity. When asked to describe their perception of the brand, the vast majority of respondents provided a general description that would describe any college in the same peer group.

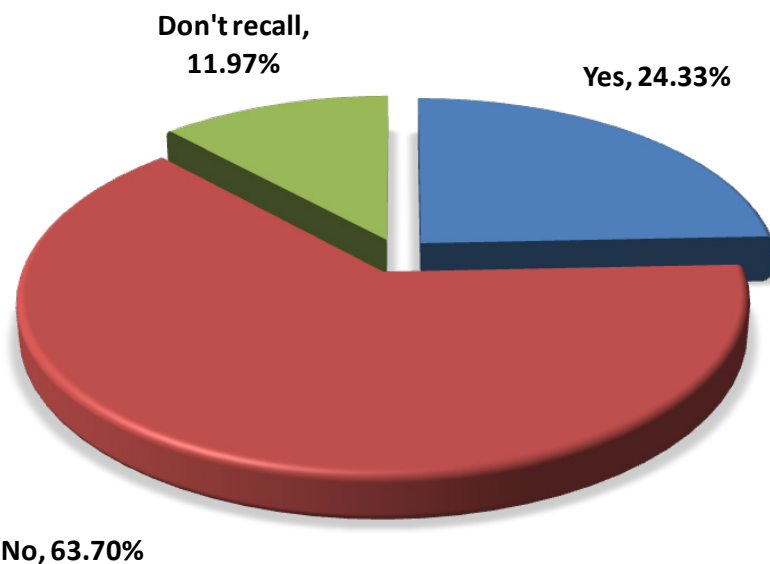
Brand perception changed for only one-quarter of respondents after experiencing the college's pre-enrollment customer service delivery.

At the beginning of your college selection experience, did you view the college as having a unique reputation or brand identity?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel

Did your view of the college's reputation or brand identity change as a result of the interactions you had with them during the college selection process?



National sample: All students and parents deep funnel



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