
*student*POLL

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The Influence of Social Media Sites on the College Search Process

Growth in the Use of Social Media in the College Search Process has Increased Substantially in the Last Four Years, But It Is Far From Universal

Publisher's Note

Since *studentPOLL* conducted a comprehensive national study on the use of social media among college-bound high school students in the fall of 2008, the social media landscape has changed dramatically. Four years ago, for example, Facebook and MySpace dominated the world of social media and Twitter was in its infancy. When we asked students in our most recent study to indicate what social media sites they visit or follow on a regular basis (daily or several times a week) more than three quarters reported that Facebook is the social media site they visit or follow on a regular basis, followed by YouTube (60%) Twitter (32%) and Tumblr (19%). Less than 1 percent of students reported using MySpace with any frequency. And just as students of color were more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to use MySpace back when we conducted our first study, today they also appear more likely to use alternative social media platforms such as Google+.

In 2008, only 18 percent of students indicated that they had used social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or other sites to gather information or impressions about colleges they were considering. In *studentPOLL*'s most recent online study (conducted late last year), 44 percent of the students surveyed reported using social networking sites to gather impressions and information about colleges — more than double the figure we reported four years ago. At the same time, more than half (52%) indicated that they did not use social networking sites to gather information or impressions about colleges they were considering. So while growth in the use of social networking sites in the college search process has grown, it is far from universal.

Other key findings in this issue of *studentPOLL*:

- Even among students who indicated they had relied on a particular social media site to gather impressions and information about colleges (319 students), only 50 percent indicated that the site they named had any effect on their decisions about where to apply to college.
- Students whose college search was influenced by social media reported that the nature of this influence resulted from reading blogs and notes to see what students were saying about specific schools, looking at pictures of students and the campus, and seeing if they knew anyone attending schools of interest to them.
- Students with the highest SAT scores (1300+) were more likely to look at notes or blogs to find out what people are saying about a college or university and search the profiles of students at specific schools compared to students with the lowest SAT scores (less than 1100).

While the findings of this issue of *studentPOLL* reinforce the steady growth and influence of social media in the college search process, these findings do not suggest that social media has become more valuable to students compared to other more traditional communications tools. For example, when we asked students to rate the value of different sources of information in their college search process, they gave the highest ratings to “the web site of individual colleges or universities,” followed by “a visit to your high school by a college admissions counselor.” Rated significantly lower were the “individual college’s profiles or pages on social networking sites.”

These findings suggest that while social media does have an increasing role to play in college consideration and choice, resources and time invested in social media should not be at the expense of other more important marketing and communications tools such as the web and campus visit. Clearly, student blogs and other social media that provide students a greater sense of the social environment, student body, and the culture of the campus are important in helping students determine whether a school is the right fit or choice for them. Given the explosive growth of social media over the last five years, it’s difficult to predict how much influence social media platforms are likely to have on college consideration and choice in the future.



Richard A. Hesel

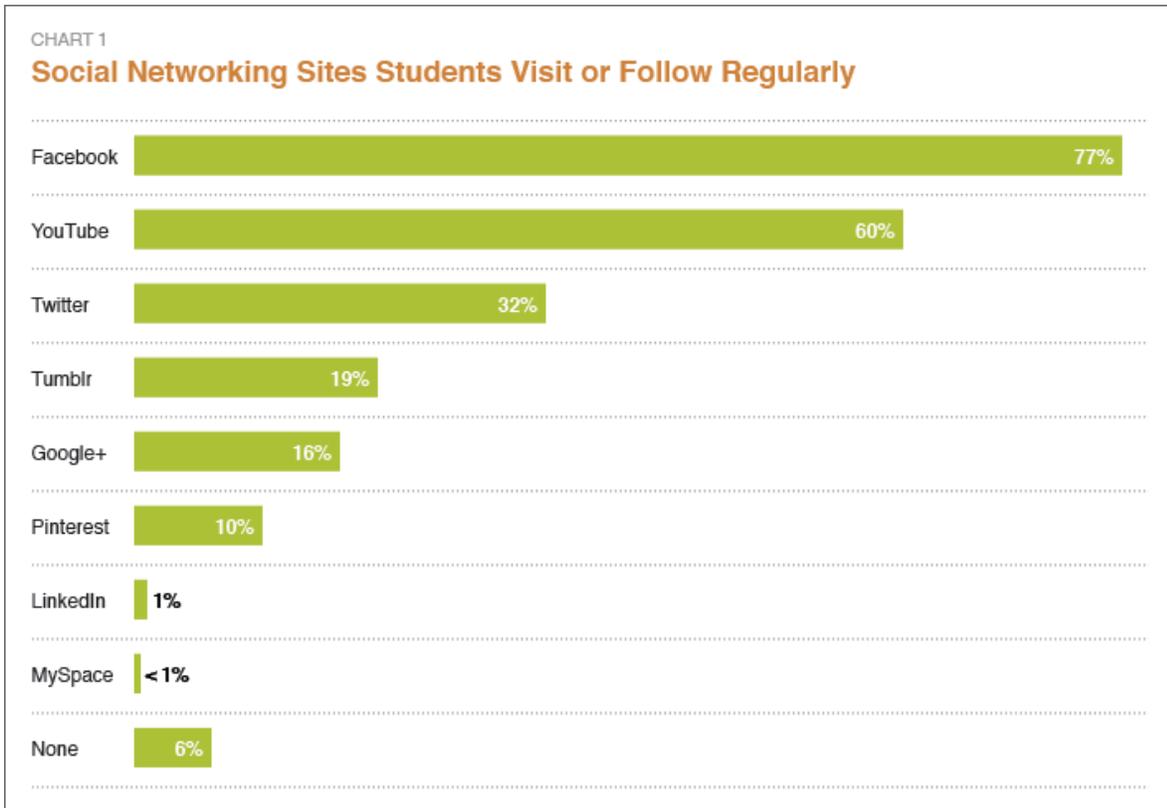
Principal

Art & Science Group, LLC

Study Findings

1. Facebook is the predominant social media site used by college-bound high school students.

To understand the extent to which college-bound high school students are using social networking sites, we asked students to indicate what sites they visit or follow on a regular basis (daily or several times a week) and accepted multiple responses. Seventy-seven percent of respondents (out of a total of 900 students) indicated that they visit Facebook on a regular basis, followed by YouTube (60%), Twitter (32%), Tumblr (19%), and Google+(16%).



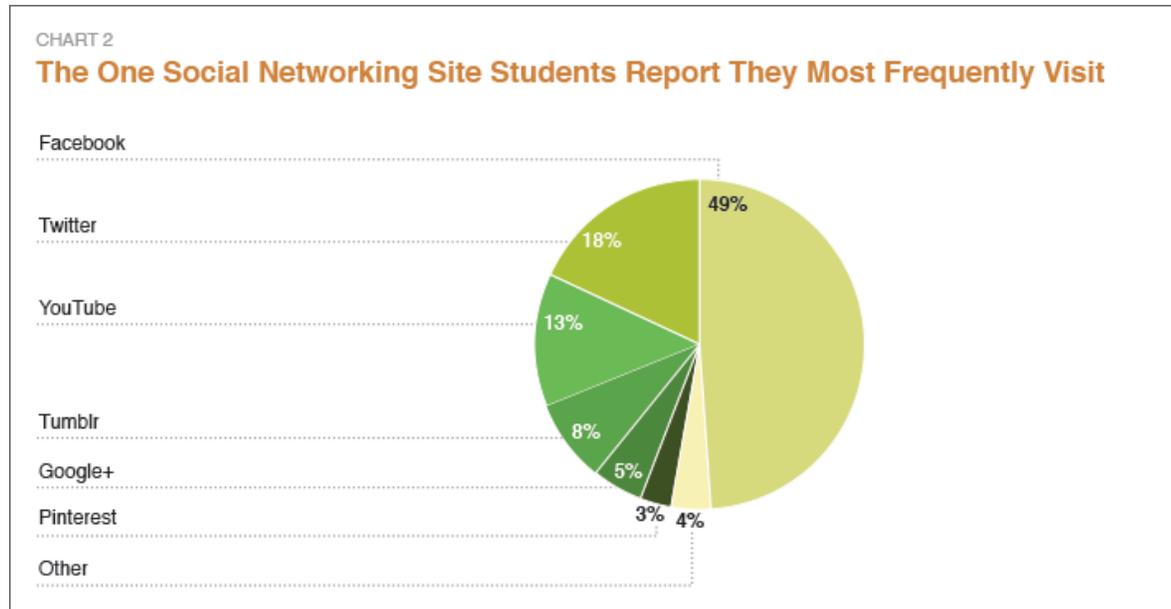
Among the interesting subgroup findings:

- Students from high-income families (39%) — those with family incomes of greater than \$100K — are more likely to visit Twitter than students from lower-income families (28%) — those with family incomes of less than \$60K.
- African American (26%), Hispanic (21%), and Asian students (19%) are more likely to use Google+ compared to Caucasian students (10%).
- Students with the highest SAT scores (84%) — those with SAT scores of 1300 or above — are more likely to report they use Facebook than students with the lowest SAT scores (73%) — those with SAT scores less than 1100.

2. Facebook is the leading site most frequently visited by nearly half of those students who reported visiting social networking sites.

As a follow-up question, *studentPOLL* asked students to indicate which social networking site they visited most frequently, accepting only one response. Of those who reported using social networking

sites (669 students out of 900), almost half (49%) reported using Facebook, followed by Twitter — a distant second with only 18% of students reporting the most frequent use of this site.



Interesting findings by subgroup include:

- Caucasian (24%), African American (20%) and Hispanic students (17%) are more likely to indicate that they visit Twitter the most frequently compared to Asian students (5%).
- Sixty-four percent of students with the highest SAT scores (1300 and above) report that they use Facebook most frequently compared to 46 percent of students with mid-range SAT scores (1100 to less than 1300) and 43 percent of students with the lowest SAT scores (less than 1100).

3. A majority of students reported not using social networking sites to gather information or impressions about colleges they were considering.

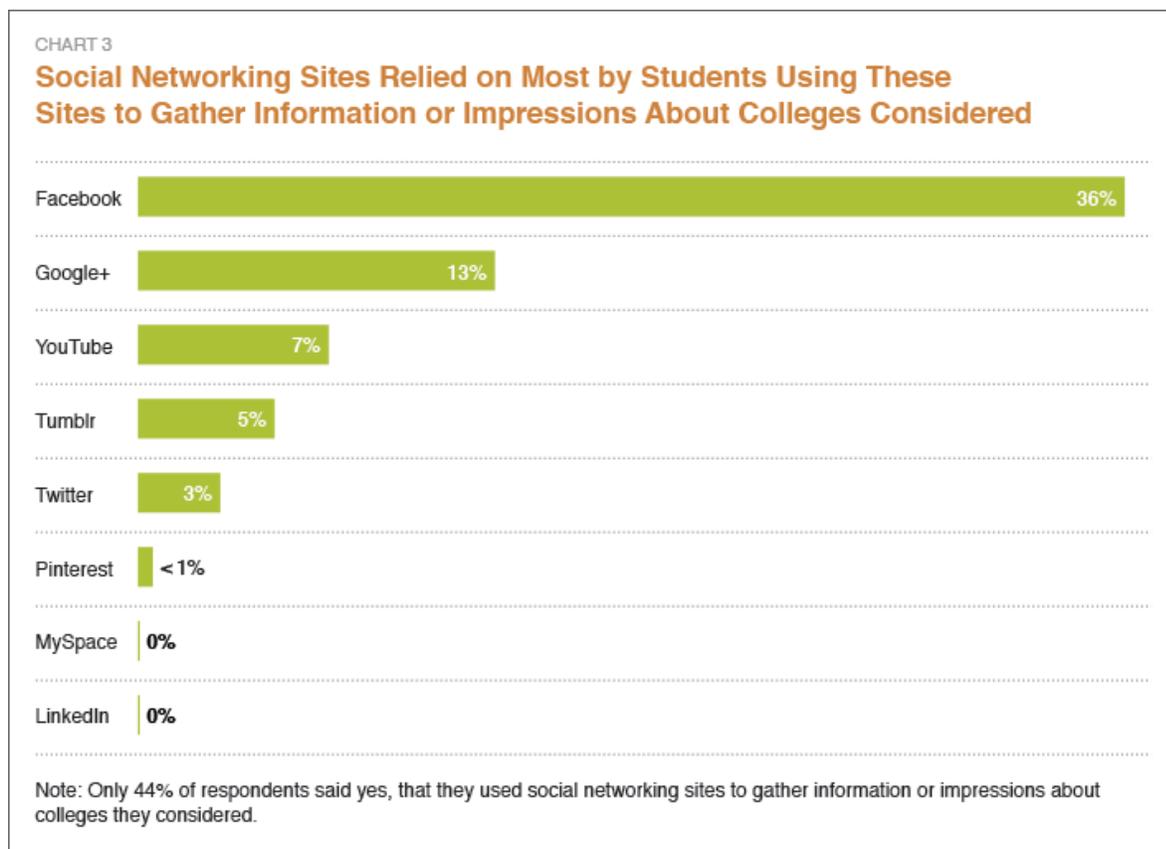
While this figure may have changed as students moved closer to the time of their actual college decision, when we surveyed students in November and early December 2012, *studentPOLL* found that a majority of students reported not using social networking sites to gather information or impressions about colleges they were considering. In fact, 52 percent indicated “no” while 44 percent reported “yes” that they had used these sites to obtain information or impressions about colleges they were considering applying to. However, the proportion of students using social media sites to get a better sense of a college has grown substantially since *studentPOLL*’s 2008 study when less than one-fifth of students reported using social media sites to gather information or impressions about college.

Of the 44 percent who reported that they relied on social networking sites to obtain either information or impressions about different colleges, 36 percent of these students report using Facebook, 13 percent Google+, and 7 percent YouTube. Another 12 percent did not use any of the major social media sites offered among the list of sites randomized in this online study.

Subgroup findings of interest:

- Fifty percent of students from high-income families (incomes greater than \$100K) compared to 26 percent of students from lower-income families (incomes less than \$60K) reported relying on Facebook the most to gather impressions or information about colleges.

- African-American (20%) and Hispanic students (22%) were more likely to report using Google+ the most to gather impressions and information about colleges compared to Caucasian students (6%).



4. Among students who reported using social media sites to gather information or impressions about college, half indicated these sites influenced their college application decisions.

Of the 44 percent of students indicating that they used social networking sites to gather information or impressions about colleges, 50 percent reported that these social media tools did, in fact, influence their decisions about where to apply to college, 42 percent indicated that social media sites did not affect their application decisions, and 8 percent reported don't know or don't want to respond.

studentPOLL asked this same segment of students to indicate the type of information or impressions they gathered from different social media tools and accepted multiple responses. Sixty-percent of these students indicated they “read the comments by students at specific schools,” 57 percent “looked at notes or blogs to see what people are saying about the college or university,” 49 percent “looked at pictures of students at specific schools,” and 47 percent “looked to see if I knew anyone currently attending the schools I’m interested in.”

Among the interesting subgroup findings:

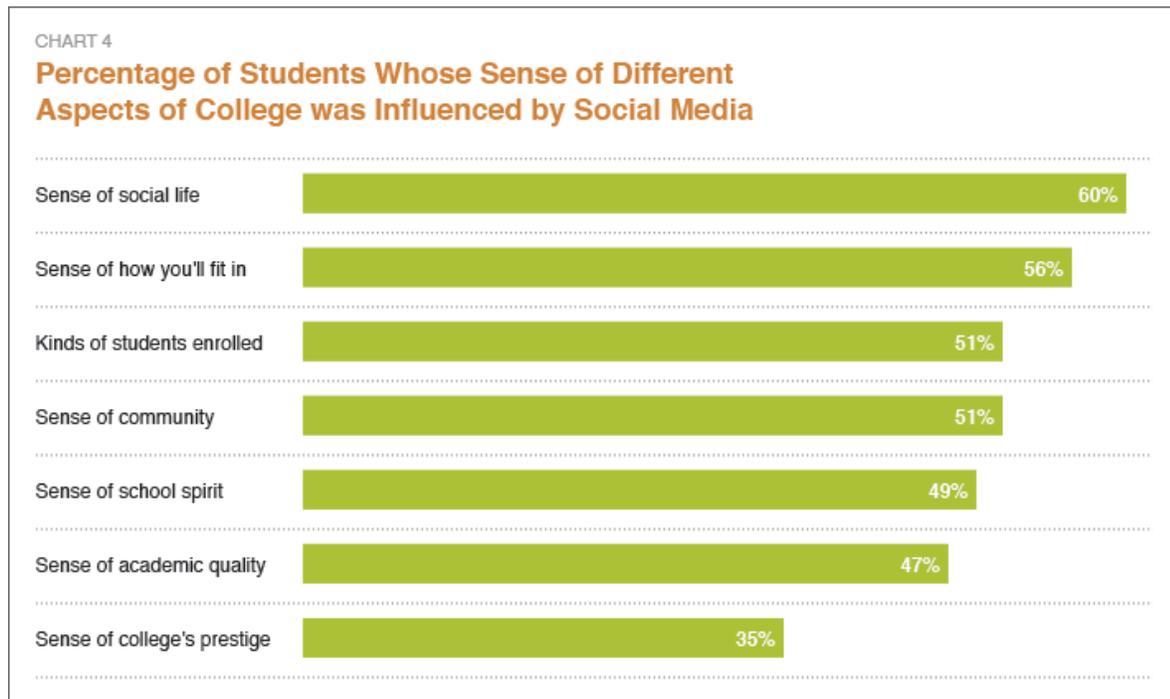
- High-income students (61%) with family incomes greater than \$100K are more likely to say they “Looked to see if I knew anyone currently attending the schools I’m interested in” than students from lower-income families (42%), those with family incomes less than \$60K.
- Students with the highest SAT scores (66%) — 1300 or above — were more likely to say they “Looked at notes or blogs to see what people are saying about a college or

university” than students with the lowest SAT scores (49%) — less than 1100. Similarly, high SAT test-takers (38%) were more likely to report they “Searched profiles of students at specific schools” compared to students with the lowest SAT scores (18%).

5. Students rely more heavily on social media to gather impressions about the social environment and kinds of students who attend a college rather than the academic quality or prestige of an institution.

We wanted to further explore the extent to which different types of content on social media sites influenced students’ college search process. Among the 413 students who indicated that they used social media to gather information and impressions about colleges, we gave them a list of different aspects of a college’s campus and community and asked them how their opinion of each was influenced by social media.

For example, 60 percent of these students indicated that social networking sites influenced their “sense of the social life” at a particular college, 56 percent indicated that social media influenced their “sense of how you’ll fit in” at a particular college, and 51 percent respectively indicated that their “knowledge about the kinds of students enrolled” and “sense of the community” at a particular college was influenced by social media sites.



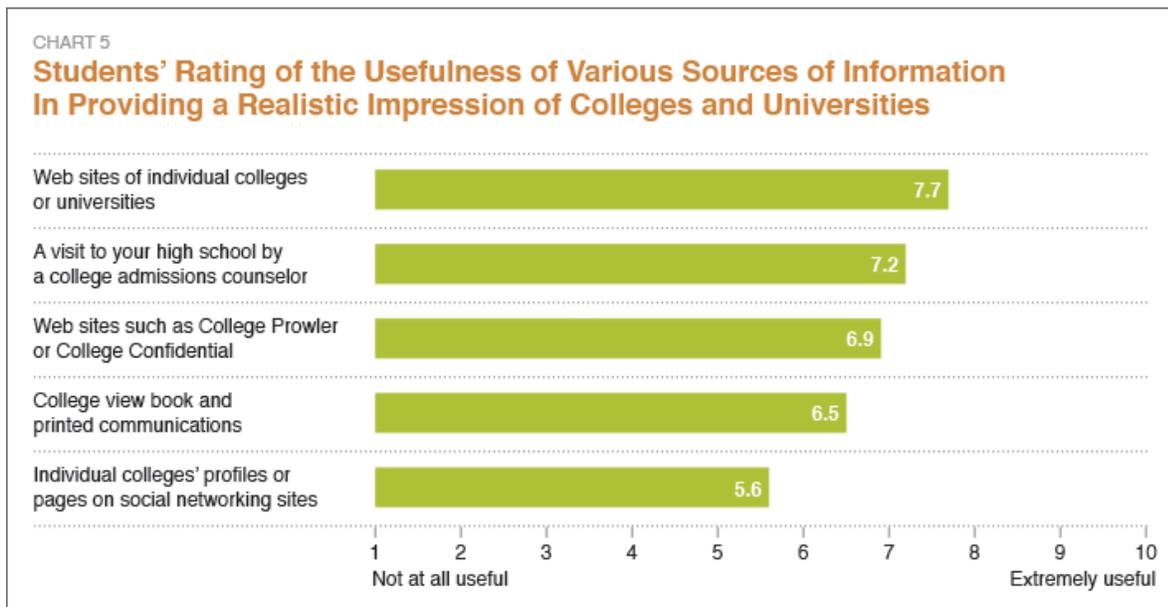
Subgroup findings of note:

- Sixty-one percent of SAT test-takers with the highest scores (1300 or above) and 60 percent of those with mid-range SAT scores were more likely to say their social media influenced their “knowledge about the kinds of students enrolled at a particular college” compared to 40 percent of students with the lowest SAT scores (less than 1100).
- Sixty-four percent of students with the highest SAT scores (1300 or above) were also more likely to say that their “sense of the community” at a particular college was influenced by social media compared to students with the lowest SAT scores (42%).

6. Students viewed the web site of individual colleges and visits by a college admissions officer to their high school as more useful than college profiles or pages on social networking sites in providing them a realistic impression of colleges.

studentPOLL asked high school seniors to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how useful various sources of information and contact with a college were in giving them a realistic impression of the schools to which they considered applying with 10 being “extremely useful” and 1 being “not at all useful.”

Students gave the “web site of individual colleges or universities” the highest mean rating (7.7), followed by “a visit to your high school by a college admissions counselor” (7.2). Rated lowest among the information sources provided was the “individual colleges’ profiles or pages on social networking sites” (5.6).



By subgroup:

- Students from lower income families (less than \$60K) are more likely to rate the “web site of individual colleges and universities” higher (8.1) compared to students from higher income families (7.5) — those making greater than \$100K.
- Students with lower SAT scores (less than 1100) were more likely to rate “college viewbook and printed communications” higher (7.4) compared to students with the highest SAT scores (1300 and above) whose mean rating was 6.8. Similarly, students with the lowest SAT scores gave the “web sites of individual colleges and universities” a mean rating of 8.1 compared to 7.4 for students with the highest SAT scores.

Advisories

- Clearly, social media sites are increasingly influencing students' college considerations. Yet it is also apparent that their role in the college decision-making process may, in fact, be greatly over estimated by some admissions offices. Make sure resources devoted to social media are not at the expense of investments in more traditional and higher yield recruitment tools such as high school visits, campus visits, and personal engagement on the part of admissions officers with students and parents.
- When it comes to social media, devote resources to create and maintain student blogs and other content on your web site that gives prospective students and their parents authentic, candid impressions of your campus culture and community, social life, and the kinds of activities and interests in which students are engaged. Above all, students want to know whether they will “fit in” and feel comfortable on your campus.
- The findings of *studentPOLL* reflect general trends across the broad college-going population in the U.S. and should not be interpreted as representative of the behavior of any one institution's prospect pool. Each institution is unique, and only a careful examination of its own prospect pool can reveal how an institution can best maximize its net tuition revenue given its value proposition, its market position, the demographic makeup of its prospect pool, and many other factors.

Study Methodology

The findings of this issue of *studentPOLL* were based on a random national sample of SAT test takers. More than 39,000 students were sent an email inviting them to participate in the survey. Fielding of the survey took place from November 14 to December 10, 2012 with 1,237 respondents beginning the survey and 1,138 students meeting the requirements to participate in the survey. All respondents are four-year, college-bound students. Responses are weighted by gender, region, and race data provided by the College Board with the exception of responses from the Southwest which were weighted solely on region due to small numbers in the sample. The margin of sampling error for this population of students is plus or minus 2.79 percent.

Specific demographic information about these respondents is provided in the table below:

Subgroup Splits

SAT Score Distribution (Mean 1170)

Low (< 1100): 46%
Mid (1110 - 1290): 30%
High (1300+): 25%

N=1136

Annual Family Income (Mean \$84,700)

< \$60K: 47%
\$60K - \$100K: 25%
> \$100K: 28%

N=653

Ethnicity

Caucasian: 42%
African American: 20%
Latino / Hispanic: 18%
Asian: 20%

N=1066

About *studentPoll*

Art & Science Group, LLC, the publisher of *studentPOLL*, presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of college-bound high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers as well as secondary school college counselors, *studentPOLL* seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, a leading national source of market intelligence for higher education, *studentPOLL* has become a trusted and widely-cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice.

studentPOLL findings and analysis are provided free on Art & Science Group's web site (<http://www.artsci.com/>).

About Art & Science Group

Art & Science Group (<http://www.artsci.com/>) is one of the nation's most influential consulting firms providing market-informed strategy to higher education, independent schools, and the nonprofit sector. The firm's work synthesizes imagination and empirical rigor — art and science. Its research is considered the most rigorous and innovative in higher education today. Art & Science works in every arena that depends on market data, analysis, and inventive ideas to guide and advance an institution's strategic investments and interests in these areas including market-informed: strategic planning; student recruitment and enrollment management; institutional branding; tuition pricing and financial aid; and development and alumni relations. The firm has extensive experience working with a large variety of public and private institutions of higher learning, ranging from comprehensive private and public research universities to small liberal arts colleges and specialty schools.

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