Decoding Student Preferences: Effective College Communications and Website Strategies

Shauna Cox — Editor-In-Chief and Content Strategist, Modern Campus
Raquel Bermejo, Ed.D. — AVP for Market Research, Ruffalo Noel Levitz

Your Presenters

Shauna Cox
Editor-In-Chief and Content Strategist
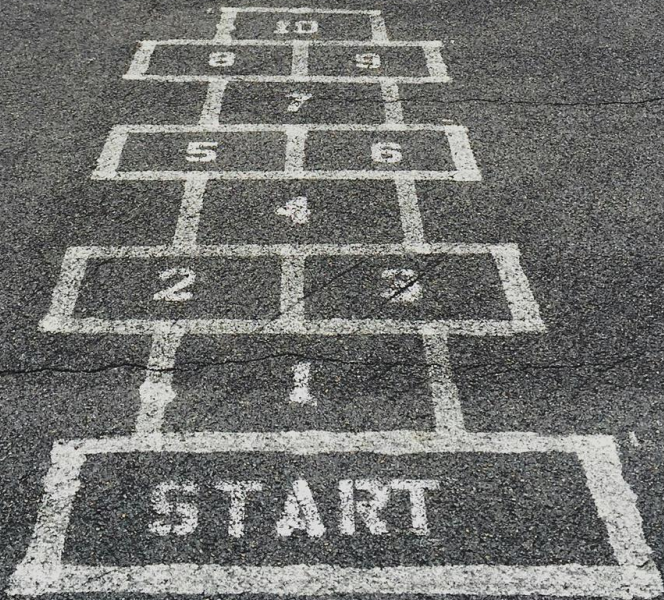Modern Campus
scox@evolllution.com

Raquel Bermejo, Ed.D.
AVP for Market Research
Ruffalo Noel Levitz
Raquel.Bermejo@Ruffalonl.com

Agenda

1. Study demographics & report access

2. Redefining "reaching out"

3. Preferred channels

4. College websites that work

5. Bringing campus to life

6. Connecting, engaging, enrolling: building the college experience students want

Demographics

Responses collected 1,582

Grade	
9th grade (class of 2028)*	8%
10th grade (class of 2027)	14%
11th grade (class of 2026)	31%
12th grade (class of 2025)	47%

First-Generation Status	
Continuing generation	66%
First generation	34%

US residents/International	
United States resident	89%
International resident	11%

US Region	
Southeast & Southwest	39%
Rocky Mountains & Far West	24%
Great Lakes & Plains	24%
New England & Middle Atlantic	13%

Ethnicity (multiple select)	
Alaska Native*	2%
American Indian*	3%
Asian	8%
Black	29%
Hispanic	17%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander*	2%
White	28%
Multi-racial*	4%
Don't know/ prefer not to respond*	2%
Middle Eastern or North African*	3%

Gender	
Female	53%
Male	39%

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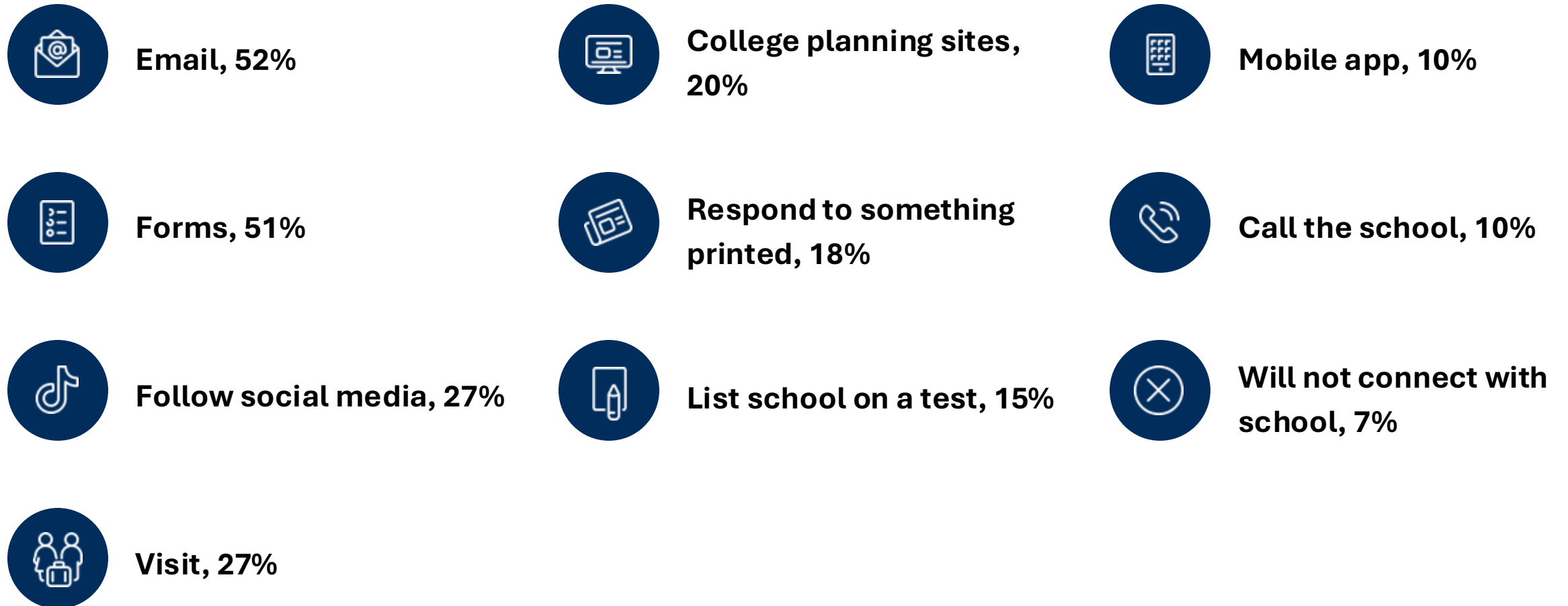RNL, Halda & Modern Campus (2025). *2025 E-Expectations* Trend *Report*. Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

Redefining "Reaching Out"
What Student Interest Looks Like Today

How Students Think They're Reaching Out

Are We Speaking the Same Language?

Email, 52%

Forms, 51%

Follow social media, 27%

Visit, 27%

College planning sites, 20%

Respond to something printed, 18%

List school on a test, 15%

Mobile app, 10%

Call the school, 10%

Will not connect with school, 7%

What Students Expect After They Reach Out

What Do They Want in Return?

68% Email

40% Text message

23% Phone call

22% Printed information

22% Confirmation screen with next steps

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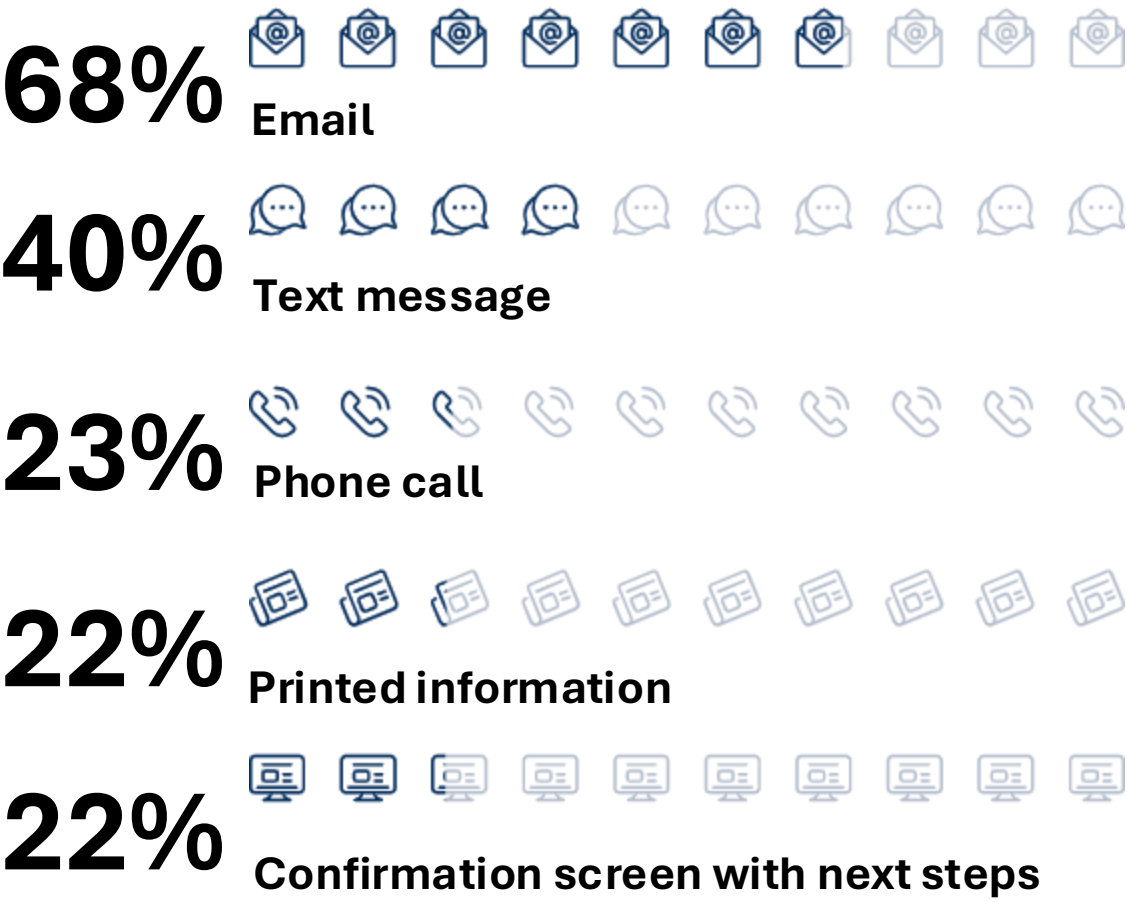
When Students Reach Out

What It Really Means—and What to Do About It?

Redefine "Interest"

Students don't just fill out forms—they follow your social accounts, click your ads, and visit your site. These actions are outreach in their minds.

Track and respond to all types of engagement—not just the obvious ones.

Why They Reach Out

Most students are looking for specific info: how to apply, what majors you offer, and how to connect with a real person.

Highlight application steps, program info, and easy contact paths in all your materials.

What They Expect Next

Students want fast, useful follow-up: confirmation emails, clear next steps, perhaps even a text or printed piece.

Automate with care—be timely, personal, and multi-channel in your response.

Preferred Channels

How Students Expect To Be Engaged

Get This Right

Students' Favorite Channels for College Information

Email, 74%

Printed materials, 33%

Text message, 33%

Telephone call, 22%

In person, 22%

Video, 16%

Email Works – And Students Prove It

How Email Powers Discovery

87%

Use email at least once a week

89%

Use emails from colleges in their college planning

88%

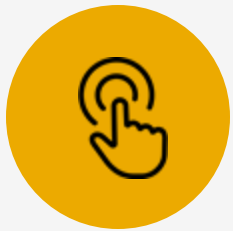Find emails from colleges "useful" in their college planning

52%

Find a college website in an email

68%

Prefer to receive an email as a followup to information request

34%

Will email the school after clicking on a digital ad

29%

Will email the school after interacting with an AI assistant

25%

Will email the school after watching a virtual tour

What Gets Students to Click

Why They Open College Emails

54%
Interest in school

50%
Curious about the school

32%
Interesting subject line

27%
Not the first email
from that school

22%
Name is used in
subject line

18%
Parents' influence

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AI & College Planning

71% AI-assisted recommendation engines

51% Search for college websites using voice assistants

68% AI-powered chatbots (chatbots in the college websites)

45% AI digital assistants on college websites

13% Search for college websites using AI chat tools like ChatGPT

From Connection to Commitment:

Action Steps for Enrollment Success

- **Redefine Engagement**

  Track more than just form fills—dig into prior engagement on apps and forms to understand the full student journey.

- **Connect the Clicks**

  Design every digital moment to offer a clear next step, whether that's a form, contact info, or application.

- **Refine Email Strategy**

  Segment, personalize, and spark curiosity in your email communications to cut through the noise.

- **Balance Channels**

  Combine email with other channels like print, text, and short-form video to deliver a full, immersive experience.

- **Empower Parents**

  Use print and email to provide families with practical guidance and support them through the process.

- **Make AI Useful**

  Make AI useful — Don't just install chatbots; train them to guide students toward concrete actions and next steps.

- **Unify the Journey**

  Sync your content across all channels so students feel a continuous, cohesive story as they engage.

College Websites That Work

What Students Really Want

What Prospective Students Look For on College Websites

Academic majors and course catalogs top the list, 57%

Admissions process and contact info, 38%

Location and city information, 29%

Scholarship and financial aid details are crucial, 49%

Insights into campus life and community, 33%

Student health resources, including mental health, 29%

Specific program details matter, 46%

Student support programs like tutoring, 33%

Campus photos and videos showcasing life, 28% & 23%

Cost and tuition, 39%

Housing options, 30%

Virtual tours, 26%

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Wanted: Clear Info. Found: Frustration

Top Website Frustrations

Hard to find info about specific majors or programs

Missing admission statistics

No search tool

Confusing admissions process

Hard-to-use navigation or broken links

Online forms request too much info

Lack of job opportunities info related to majors

Lack of personalized content

Hard to find contact info

Personalization: A Game-Changer

45% Enjoy filtering and personalizing content themselves

16% Expect websites to personalize automatically

18% Don't care about personalization either way

13% Haven't experienced anything like this

8% Dislike receiving personalized communications

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No More Dead Ends
Building a Student-Friendly College Website

- **Clear, easy-to-find academic programs**

  Detailed information about different majors and degree options

- **Transparent job opportunities**

  Data on career prospects, average salaries, and graduate outcomes

- **Simple, step-by-step admissions guidance**

  Clear instructions and easy contact information for applying

- **User-friendly navigation**

  Strong site search tool for finding relevant information quickly

- **Personalized content and filtering**

  Options to tailor the experience based on user interests and needs

- **Mobile-friendly, visually appealing design**

  Readable pages and engaging multimedia showcasing campus life

- **Student support and resource information**

  Details on housing, safety, health services, and other on-campus offerings

- **Admission stats and program rankings**

  Transparent data to help users evaluate and compare options

- **Online communities and social media**

  Opportunities to connect with the school and current students

- **Interactive elements**

  Virtual tours provide a feel for campus, deepening their connection

Bringing Campus to Life

Video & Social

Lights, Camera, College
The Videos Students Really Want

Current students sharing classroom and campus experiences

Personalized videos tailored to programs and interests

Campus life and extracurricular activity highlights

Tours showing campus buildings and classrooms

How-to tutorials on financial aid and paying for college

Residence hall video tours

Step-by-step guides on the application process
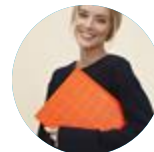
Recent grads talking job search, employment, and salaries

RNL, Halda & Modern Campus (2025). *2025 E-Expectations* Trend *Report*. Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

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How Virtual Tours, Ads, and AI Assistants Drive Social Media Engagement

24% Followed social pages after interacting with an AI assistant on a college website

20% Followed social pages after clicking on an ad's link

19% Followed college social pages after viewing a virtual tour or VR video

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Optimizing Video and Social Media to Reach Prospective Students

- ## Authentic student videos

  Feature current students' real experiences on campus life, clubs, and residence halls

- ## Tutorials on aid and applications

  Provide informative videos to guide prospective students through the application process

- ## Focus on Instagram and TikTok

  Leverage key discovery platforms for social media marketing

- ## Content for follows and engagement

  Share student life stories, application tips, and program highlights to drive follows and engagement

- ## Virtual tours, ads, and AI assistants

  Utilize immersive experiences and intelligent tools to boost social media engagement

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Connecting, Engaging, Enrolling Building the College Experience Students Want

Connecting, Engaging, Enrolling
Building the College Experience Students Want

- **Personalize communications**

  Tailor website content and outreach to individual student interests and needs

- **Leverage multiple channels**

  Combine email, text, print, video, and social media for richer engagement

- **Optimize website experience**

  Ensure mobile-friendly, easy navigation, and clear information on programs, costs, campus life, and career outcomes

- **Avoid website dead ends**

  Offer intuitive navigation, strong search tools, and personalized content filtering

- **Deepen digital engagement**

  Use AI tools, virtual tours, and authentic student videos to encourage student action

- **Sync messaging across channels**

  Create a seamless, cohesive student journey from initial interest to application

- **Empower families**

  Provide practical guidance through print and email communications

- **Use data-driven insights**

  Continuously refine outreach and engagement strategies for better enrollment outcomes

Thank you for attending our session!
Want to stay in touch?

Shauna Cox
scox@evolllution.com

Raquel Bermejo, Ed.D.
Raquel.Bermejo@Ruffalonl.com

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