

2016

Hidden Influences:

**Revealing the
unspoken
perceptions that
prospective students
have about your college
and why it matters in
your ability to
grow and control
enrollment.**

A Co-Sponsored Study Conducted By



Enrollment Management
Product Solutions

Introduction

We know that prospective students don't always tell us what they really think. Sometimes they don't want to be completely honest about their REAL first-choice college because they think they'll hurt our feelings. They may tell us they had a great campus visit and then tell their parents on the way home that they'll never enroll. They often say one thing and do another.

Unfortunately, when students don't reveal their true opinions and perceptions it hinders our ability to fully understand and effectively communicate with them.

This study examines the hidden opinions and perceptions students have about colleges and how it influences college selection.

The findings provide you with actionable data you can use to uncover and manage the perceptions and opinions that prospective students have about your college and the other colleges they have considered.

The insight gained from the study will not only guide your future conversations with prospective students, it may well cause you to make changes to your digital and print communications.

A Co-Sponsored Study

Joining in this nationally co-sponsored study were four-year public and private not-for-profit colleges and universities across the United States.

Thirty-six institutions joined in the study by providing lists of students from their fall 2016 pools of inquiries, applicants, admits and enrolled students.

Methodology

Invitations to complete an online survey were emailed to students in the summer and early fall of 2016. The project yielded over 18,000 survey responses.

Responses from public institution pools accounted for 58% of the sample while 42% originated from private institution pools.

The margin of error on the total sample is +/- 0.73 at the 95% confidence level.

The survey instrument contained 28 questions and captured 160 data points ranging from how likely students are to reveal their negative impressions to someone at a college, to the effectiveness of specific strategies colleges can use to uncover perceptions and impressions that students are naturally reluctant to disclose.

In addition to quantitative data, the survey captured qualitative data relating to topics such as how counselors are most and least helpful to prospective students during the recruiting process, suggestions students have for counselors to uncover negative impressions that students may be forming about their college, and how colleges can improve their campus visit experiences.

About Longmire and Company

Longmire and Company, formed in 1986, has worked with over 500 public and private four-year institutions throughout the United States.

The company's work centers on yield and conversion by providing enrollment managers and higher education marketing professionals with the tools, information and products they need to grow and control enrollment.

A little foundation ...

Longmire and Company's work in higher education is founded on our belief that the conversations (and communications in any form) between prospective students and the colleges that they are considering can be much richer. When that happens it is more fruitful for both the college and prospective student. The college better understands the student's needs, preferences, motivations and fears. And with that understanding, the college can present its value propositions based upon what the student perceives as being valuable.

One of the ways Longmire and Company helps colleges have richer conversations is by gathering market data (through co-sponsored studies such as this) to better understand how prospective students think, feel and behave during the process of making their college selection decision.

As is typical when we conduct a co-sponsored study, we learn something that demands further exploration. Such was the case with this Hidden Influences study. In fact, this study is the outgrowth findings from our three most recent co-sponsored studies.

In the 2013 study "Your Value Proposition" we learned that a student's excitement about attending a college is a more powerful driver of college selection than cost or perceived quality of the college. This led to the 2014 "Excitement Factor" study from which we learn that a student's excitement about a college is generated, in large part, from the relationships they generate with people and things associated with the college (i.e. current students, other prospective students, counselors, faculty, and even a college as an institution). This finding prompted the 2015 "Relationship Dynamic" study in which we examined all of the factors that go into relationship building. In the process, we learned just how much students are naturally willing to tell you and how much they withhold about their thoughts, perceptions and plans.

This is the purpose of the "Hidden Influences" study: To better understand the unspoken perceptions that prospective students have about your college and why it matters in your ability to grow in control and enrollment.

In this report you will learn what students withhold from you, why they withhold it, and strategies you can use for uncovering and dealing with hidden influences.

Major findings

What students see and what they say



During a campus visit about one-half of prospective students see and experience things about the college that they find unappealing. This finding may be expected since all students are not going to like everything they see at all of the campuses they visit. However, only 13% of students say that an admission counselor ever inquired if they had seen or experienced anything the student found unappealing or concerning about their campus.

They'll tell you if you ask



Prospective students will happily talk about their positive impressions of your college, if asked for their general impressions. They are much less likely to offer up things they find objectionable or concerning. However, the majority of students say they would be very or somewhat comfortable talking about their negative impressions if specifically asked to do so.

Effective strategies to uncover what students really think



There are many strategies that prove effective in getting students to open up and share with a counselor what they like and dislike the counselor's college. Among the most effective, according to prospective students, is for the counselor to "simply and sincerely encourage me to be open, honest, and forthcoming."

When the student's interest fades



Approximately 20% of prospective students tell counselors that they are no longer interested in the college due to its higher cost and/or lower financial aid package when, in fact, the true reason is something else.

Where the college places its focus



Most prospective students feel as though colleges are more focused on presenting information about their institution than attempting to understand the individual needs and preferences of students. This is true for students bound for both public and private colleges and universities.

Detailed findings

The question we are not asking.

Most students visit multiple campuses. It's not at all surprising that they will see and experience things they don't find appealing on the campuses they visit.

Nationally, 52% of students say they visited campuses where they saw and experienced things they found unappealing. Are admission counselors probing to uncover what, if anything, a student may not have liked or had concerns about? No.

On average, only 13% of students say that a counselor specifically asked them about things they may have found unappealing.

"Just took a tour? How was it?"

One of the most common questions asked of students by members of the admission team after a student completes a campus tour is, "So, how was it?"

About 70% of students are "very likely" to answer this question by offering their positive impressions of the college and campus. Will students share their negative impressions in response to a general question like this? No. Only 10% are very likely to do so.

However, if an admission counselor specifically asks them to identify things they saw or experienced that they did not like or had concerns about 72% of students will feel somewhat or very comfortable identifying those things.

Did you visit any college campuses where you saw or experienced things you found unappealing?



Say "Yes"

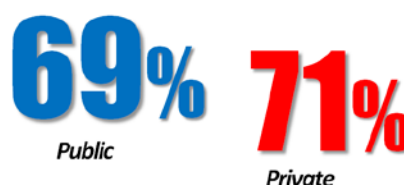
Did any admission counselor ask if you had seen or experienced anything you did not like about their college?



Say "Yes"

If an admission counselor asked to you to talk about your impressions of their school after a visit, how likely would you be to ...

... mention your positive impressions?



... mention your negative impressions?



Why students don't reveal.

In a series of focus groups conducted during the development of this study, college bound students identified eight common reasons why they would be hesitant to tell a counselor about things they found unappealing about the counselor's college.

These reasons were then measured in the quantitative study to determine the degree to which they apply to students nationwide.

Among all eight reasons (in the table below) there is notable variance in how students answered the question depending on

whether they were bound for a private or public institution.

Geographic variances were found in the data as well. For example, a higher percentage of students in the Midwest say they would not tell a counselor about things they found on appealing because, "I would not want to hurt the counselor's feelings."

Alternatively, a higher percentage of students in the Northeast say they would not tell a counselor because, "I might not care enough about the college."

Why would you NOT tell a counselor about the things you found unappealing?

	Ordered by frequency of mentions	
	Private	Public
I would not want to hurt my chances of being accepted later	1	6
I would not want to get into a debate with a counselor	2	3
I would not want my opinion to be judged	3	4
I might not care enough about their college	4	2
I doubt my opinion would matter	5	1
I would not want to hurt the counselor's feelings	6	5
It would be embarrassing to talk about	7	8
My mind might be made up so why bother	8	7

What helps students reveal.

In the previously referenced focus group college bound students identified six things counselors can say or assure them that would make them feel comfortable revealing the negative impressions they had formed about the counselor's college.

These six approaches were presented to students in the national sample to determine the degree to which each would be successful in making students feel comfortable revealing negative impressions.

The single most effective statement (as identified by 6 in 10 students nationwide) in

making them most comfortable involved, "The counselor simply and sincerely encouraging me to be open, honest, and forthcoming."

The second most effective statement or assurance (as identified by 50% of students) involved, "The counselor saying he/she will respect my decision to attend elsewhere without trying to convince me otherwise."

Of the six statements/assurances presented to students (shown below) all are effective with at least one-third of prospective students.

What would make you feel comfortable telling an admission counselor about negative impressions you had about their college? The counselor ...

	Percent of mentions	
	Private	Public
... encouraged me to be open, honest and forthcoming.	61%	57%
... said that my candor will help the college better serve future students.	46%	42%
... assured me that his or her feelings would not be hurt.	37%	36%
... expressed a desire to correct something that may have given me the wrong impression about the college.	50%	49%
... said that my insight would help him or her do their job better.	50%	47%
... would respect my decision to attend elsewhere without trying to convince me otherwise.	53%	51%

Change your focus for greater impact.

This story illustrates the problem: Two people meet on a first date. For the first hour one person does all the talking, almost exclusively about him or herself. The other person patiently listens with mild interest, sometimes being able to squeeze in a question or two. So goes the entire evening.

What is the likelihood of a second date between these two? Not likely. Why? Because the conversation is lopsided. It's not engaging. No mutual interests are established.

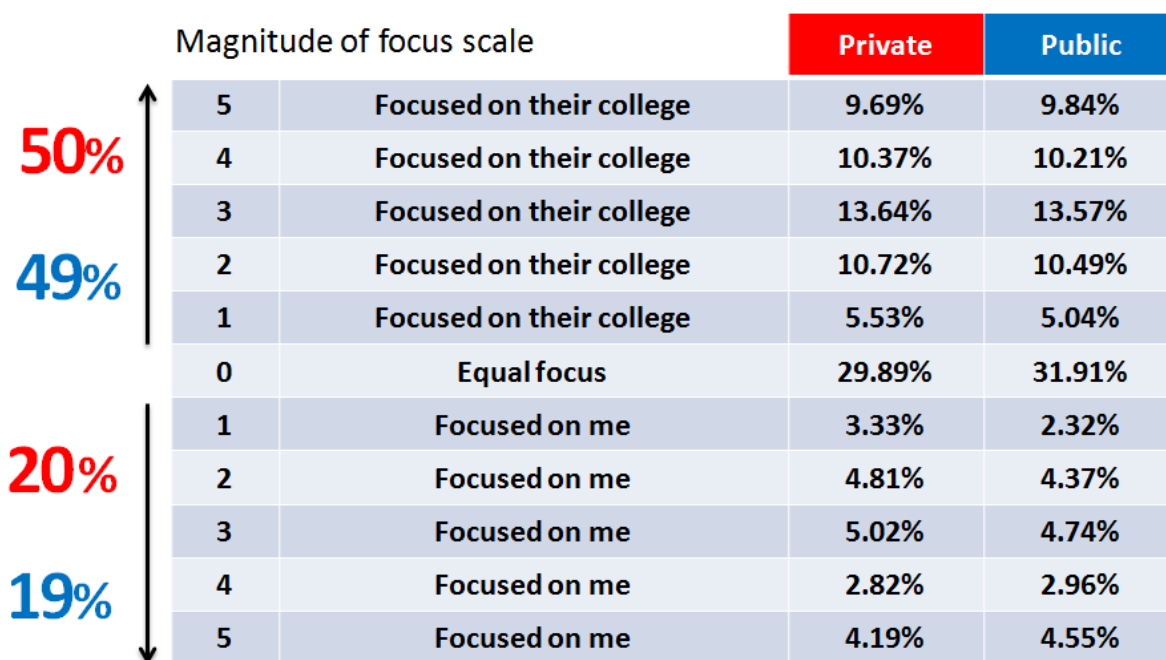
Unfortunately, this scenario happens all too often between colleges and the students they are trying to recruit, whether in a personal meeting, email exchange, phone conversation or any of the other ways students and counselors connect. In most cases, colleges are doing almost all of the talking.

Often overlooked are the student's individual needs, preferences, fears and aspirations. Does it make a difference to students whether the college focuses more on them than itself? Yes.

There is a positive correlation between likelihood of enrollment and the level of focus a college puts on a student. This is true for both public and private colleges (although the strength of the correlation for privates is twice that of publics).

Only 2 in 10 students feel as though they are the primary focus of the college's attention?

Colleges and college-bound students share information and insights about themselves so that each can better understand the other. Thinking about all of the colleges you visited, how much did colleges focus on understanding your needs and preferences versus presenting information about their college?



Are you still interested in us?

"Are you still interested in us?" It's one of the most commonly asked questions admission counselors pose to prospective students. It is asked so often that prospective students have developed conditioned responses to the question.

One of the most common of these conditioned responses is to attach their diminished interest to issues of cost and/or financial aid when, in fact, the true reason is something entirely different.

Two in ten students nationally confess to using cost and financial aid as an objection because they find that it is a highly effective method for ending a conversation and stopping future calls and contacts from counselors.

I promise I'll be there and do that!

Whether it's completing an application, sending in transcripts, attending an open house or taking a campus visit, students frequently make promises to colleges that they don't keep. In fact, 30% of students say they will make a promise that they know they are unlikely to keep.

The most common reason students make promises they may not keep is because they want to "keep my options open." 79% of students attribute their broken promises to this reason. Another common reason, shared by 61% of students nationwide, is that they "thought there might be a possibility of keeping the commitment."

The Cost/Aid Excuse



2 in 10 use it

Why did you make a commitment that you didn't keep?

"I wanted to keep my options open."

"I thought I might be able to keep the commitment."

"I felt uncomfortable saying 'No.'"

"It was easier than explaining why I didn't want to commit."

"I wanted to end a conversation so I just said 'Yes.'"

Rank ordered by frequency of mentions

When asked to identify the things that made their chosen college stand out above all other colleges they considered students provided an amazingly wide assortment of responses. The variety reflects the highly personal nature of an individual's perceptions, preferences, and sensitivities.

Students most commonly cited issues relating to academic programs, feel and features of the campus, proximity to home, and cost.

[illegible]

“Academic program”
“Best program for my major”
“Excellent program”
“Accepted into the honors program”
“Prestige of academic programs”
“Wide variety of programs”

“Away from home”
“Close to home”
“Felt like home”

"Beautiful campus"
"Campus culture"
"Campus feel"
"Great campus"
"Fell in love with the campus"

Campus visits: What attracts students.

When prospective students were asked what they remembered seeing or experiencing on a campus visit that made a college especially attractive to them, two primary themes emerged.

Students were enamored with the campus itself (which they described in many different ways) and the students (both prospective and current) they observed and interacted with on their visit.

Students most frequently express their appreciation for the campus less in terms of physical attributes and more in emotional attributes such as the campus “feel”, “atmosphere” and “vibe”.

Getting a feel for the current students on a campus plays a critical role in their college

What do you remember seeing or experiencing on a campus visit that made you feel that a college could be a possible final-choice school for you?



selection decision. It gives them a feel for what their life will be like if they enrolled.

Prospective students respond very favorably to current students who are friendly, enthusiastic, happy and welcoming.

CAMPUS

"A campus that seemed united"

"Clean campus"

"Campus layout"

"Campus life"

"Campus size"

"I liked seeing diversity on a campus"

"The architecture on campus"

STUDENTS

"Friendliness of current students"

“Attitude of students”

“Enthusiastic students”

"Felt welcomed by students"

“Happy students”

"Met students on campus"

"Watching how students interacted with one another"

Campus visits: What repels students.

When prospective students were asked what they remembered seeing or experiencing on a campus visit that made a college especially unattractive to them, the same two primary themes emerged: the campus and students/people.

Interestingly, though, their comments about things they find unattractive are notably more visceral in comparison to their comments about things they find attractive.

They describe campuses as “gloomy”, “dreary”, “dirty”, “run down”, “desolate” and “empty”. They describe students as “snooty”, “unhappy”, “unfriendly”, “mean-spirited” and “rude”.

As we have learned in previous co-sponsored studies, a student’s feelings and excitement about a college is a more powerful

What do you remember seeing or experiencing that made you feel that a college would not get your further consideration?



driver of enrollment than cost or perceived quality. It’s hard to imagine that any student would ultimately enroll in an institution at which they had such negative emotional responses as described above.

CAMPUS

- “A campus that seemed gloomy”
- “A campus that is too small”
- “A campus that was too large/spread out”
- “A dirty campus”
- “Campus atmosphere”
- “Campus was unkempt”
- “Empty campus”
- “Outdated buildings and facilities”

STUDENTS

- “Students who seemed tired or unhappy”
- “Students were rude”
- “Arrogance of students”
- “Attitude/snootiness of students”
- “Lack of diversity in student body”
- “Stressed out students”
- “Students smoking/vaping in the public places”

PEOPLE

- “Unfriendly people”
- “People without passion”
- “When people didn’t care”

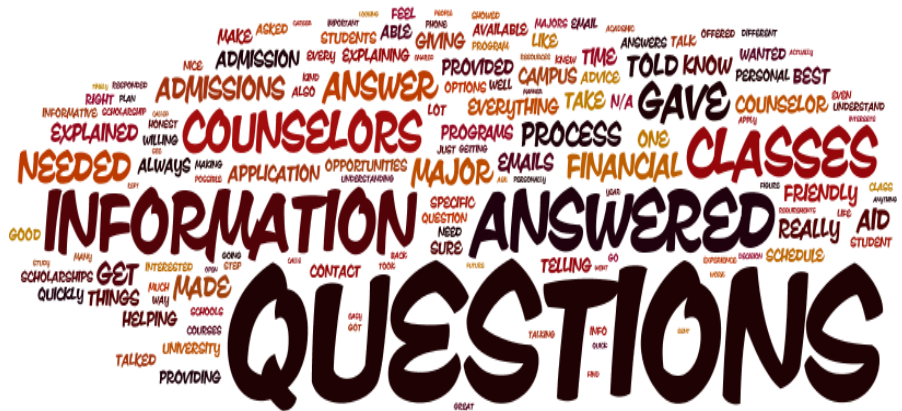
How counselors are most helpful.

For any counselor wishing to understand how he or she can be most helpful to a prospective student the answer is clear: Answer their questions. ALL of their questions, completely!

While this may be impossible in a practical sense, students have a very high expectation that counselors have an answer for their every question. They expect counselors to be knowledgeable about issues relating to cost, financial aid, history of the institution, outcomes, deadlines, classes required for specific majors and so on.

If the counselor cannot answer a specific question they expect the counselor to find the answer and get back to them in a timely manner.

Thinking about your interactions with admission counselors at all the colleges you considered, how were they most helpful to you?



Students say they develop a strong affinity for a counselor who is well-informed and responsive. It is a key ingredient in their formation of a relationship with the college as a whole and it is influential in college selection.

QUESTIONS

"Answered all my questions"

"Answered any questions that were asked"

"Answered questions candidly"

"Answered questions quickly"

"Answered questions thoroughly"

INFORMATION

"Gave a lot of information"

"Giving information on specific programs"

"Giving me information about financial aid"

"Providing information about deadlines"

How counselors are least helpful.

While counselors are most helpful to prospective students by answering questions and providing all of the information a student needs, they are least helpful by doing neither.

Many students complain that counselors are not only unable to answer questions but they actually avoid questions and requests for information that fall outside the most basic.

When pressed, many counselors attempt to answer questions and provide information that the student later discovers is “wrong” and “inaccurate”. Students are often dismayed that counselors respond to specific questions with “vague” answers and information.

Thinking about your interactions with admission counselors at all the colleges you considered, how were least helpful to you.



QUESTIONS

“Avoided questions”

"Not answering questions"

"Couldn't answer questions"

"Answered questions but with attitude"

"Vague answers to specific questions"

INFORMATION

“Not providing much information”

"Emailing me vague information"

"Didn't give all of the information"

"Vague information"

"Irrelevant information"

"Referring me to their website to get information."

How students prefer to deliver bad news.

Students confess that they don't like delivering bad news (as in "I'm not going enroll") to the counselors with whom they have developed a relationship. When they must do so, students overwhelmingly prefer using e-mail as the communication method. 90% of students prefer this method.

31% are comfortable having a telephone conversation to break the news and 16% are comfortable doing so with a text or a face-to-face conversation.

The role of cost in college selection.

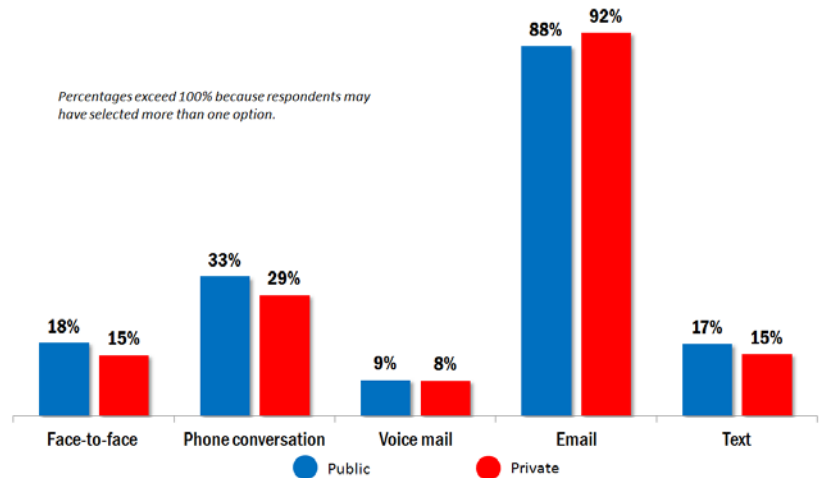
Is cost important in college selection? Of course. Is it the primary driver of selection? No.

When asked about the role cost played in their ultimate college selection decision, 60% of students said that cost was important but "my decision was not made solely on the basis of cost." This was true for students bound for either a public or private university.

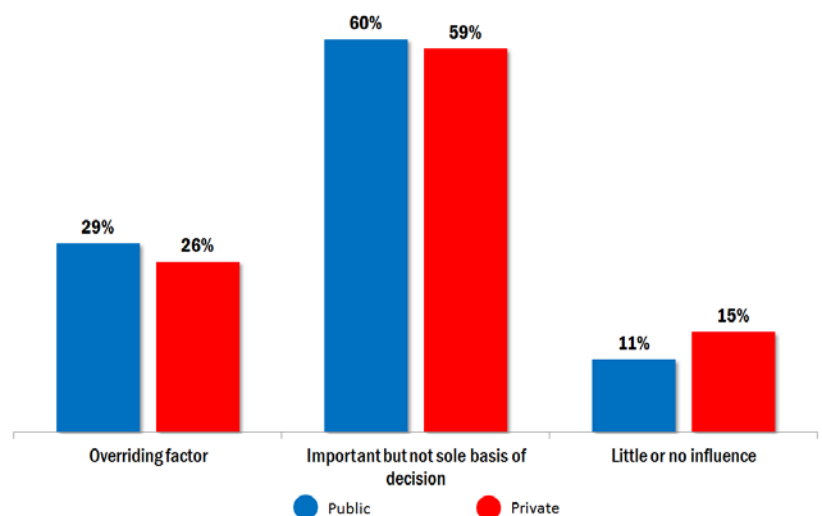
Approximately 30% of students said that cost was "the overriding factor in my decision and I chose the college that cost the least" while about 13% of students indicated that cost had "little or no influence over which college I selected."

Longmire and Company has been asking this same question in our annual co-sponsored studies dating back eight years. The results have not fluctuated year-to-year.

If you need to tell a college that you are no longer interested in enrolling at their school which methods are you most comfortable using to do so?



What role did cost play in your ultimate college selection decision?



Applications, visits and deposits.

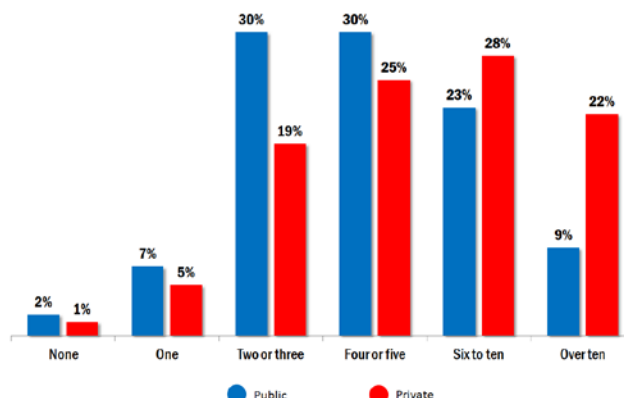
The volume of applications that students submit remains high. Among students bound for public institutions 23% submitted 6 to 10 applications. Among students bound for private colleges and universities 28% submitted 6 to 10 applications and 22% submitted over 10.

The volume of campus visits remains high as well. 18% of public bound students and 26% of private bound students visited more than six colleges.

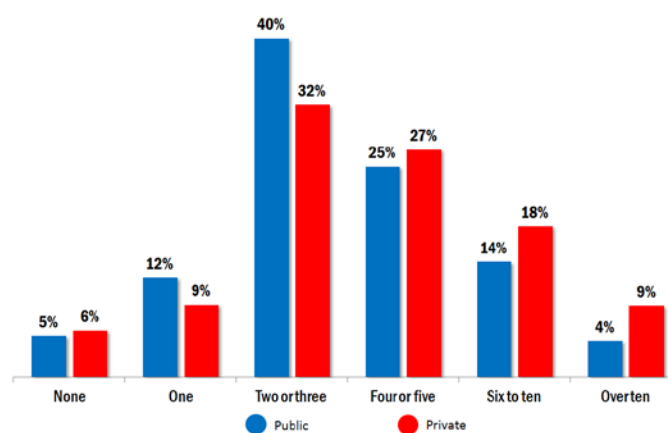
The largest share of public and private bound students (69% and 72%, respectively) paid just one deposit. Approximately one in 10 public and private bound students paid two or three deposits.

About 83% of students nationally did not pay a deposit that exceeded \$400. Approximately 16% of students nationally paid a deposit between \$401 and \$600. Approximately 6% of students paid a deposit over \$600. *(The total percentage exceeds 100% because some students made more than one deposit.)*

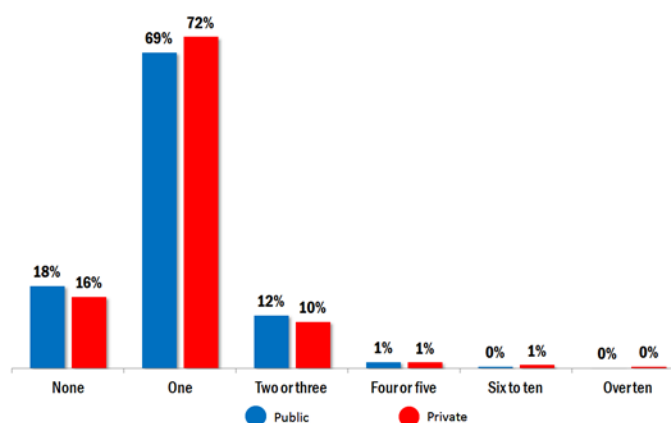
Applications



Campus visits



Deposits paid



Recommendations

Action!



All colleges can safely assume that a sizable percentage of students visiting campus will see and experience things they find unappealing or concerning. Uncovering and addressing those issues with the prospective student may be the difference between an enrollment won or lost. The first step in the process is simply to ask the student if they exist.

Action!



Prospective students are much more likely to open up and share their thoughts and concerns if they receive assurances that their opinion matters, it won't be judged, and it won't hurt their chances of getting accepted.

Action!



Prospective students identified six strategies (presented earlier in this report) that are effective in getting them to share negative impressions they may have formed about a college. Any one or all of these strategies may be effective with a particular student so it's important for counselors to have all of them in their "toolbox" when talking with prospective students.

Action!



Most students feel that colleges focus more on themselves than the students they are trying to recruit. This is unfortunate from the perspective of students, of course, but also for colleges since there is a positive correlation between likelihood of enrollment and the degree to which a student feels that the college attempted to know and understand him or her.

Action!



Students have a very high expectation that counselors (and others at the college) should be fully informed and able to answer any and all of their questions or, at the very least, be able to provide those answers later in a timely manner. Colleges should make this a priority not only as a matter of providing exemplary customer service to prospective students but also in service to itself. Probing for why a question is asked yields insight into the issues that will be important in the student's college selection decision.

Notes on the Data

List of Co-Sponsors

Albion College	Providence Christian College
Ave Maria University	Purdue University
Bemidji State University	Roanoke College
Duke University	Saint Mary's College
Earlham College	Southern Illinois University-Carbondale
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania	Southwestern Adventist University
East Tennessee State University	Stockton University
Eastern Kentucky University	SUNY Oneonta
Eastern Michigan University	Susquehanna University
Franciscan University of Steubenville	The University of Findlay
Guilford College	Truman State University
Hood College	University of Houston
Illinois State University	University of Mary Washington
James Madison University	University of Rhode Island
Kutztown University	University of Tulsa
Marshall University	Westminster College (PA)
Northern State University	Westminster College - Fulton
Ohio Northern University	Wittenberg University

Co-Sponsor Category:

4-Year Publics	(18)
4-Year Privates	(18)

Statistical differences in groups

Data and charts in this report are segmented by whether the student is bound for a four-year public or private college or university. A thorough statistical analysis was performed to uncover statistical differences in subgroups such as males and females, geography, public vs. private-bound students, 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 practical difference. Where meaningful, they are noted in this report.

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.

Everything we do is predicated on that belief:

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.

Customized 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.

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