

2011

Study of Parents: How They Evaluate Colleges and Influence Enrollment

A Co-Sponsored Study Conducted By



Enrollment Management
Product Solutions

Introduction

It is an established fact that parents are the strongest influences in their child's selection of the college. Now, more than ever before, one or more parents are actively engaging with colleges (secretly or otherwise) on behalf of their child as part of the college selection process.

This study was designed to explore the consumer behavior of parents as it relates to the selection of a college, and how their established behavior ultimately influences the child.

The study explored a host of issues, including: how parents research and absorb information about colleges; most effective channels of communication (i.e., print, electronic, personal contact); most effective marketing messages; household economic issues that will impact enrollment decisions; how, when and to what degree their influence on the child's decision is exerted; and more.

The resulting data will enable co-sponsoring institutions to understand and react to the unique needs, preferences and perceptions of parents. It will clearly define how parents process and act on the information they receive from and about colleges, and how much they influence the student's decisions.

A Co-Sponsored Study

Public and private institutions throughout the United States participated in this co-sponsored study. Collectively, the participating institutions contributed over 9,000 names of students. The combined list included students from all 50 states, and households from a full range of socio-economic and demographic strata.

Methodology

The survey instrument (attached at the conclusion of this report) contained 27 questions and captured 102 data points ranging from demographic and socioeconomic information to buying behavior and parenting styles.

In addition to quantitative data, several survey questions captured qualitative data relating to topics such as: Campus visits, what colleges do that adds or relieves stress, how parents guide children toward or away from colleges, and more.

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.

Customer service is key.

Parents are more experienced, discriminating, and demanding consumers than their children. They expect a high level of customer service and will reject a relationship with any vendor, supplier or service organization that does not provide it. This study reveals how true this fact is for higher education, as well.

Parents expect a high level of service from the first point of contact with a college and beyond. If they do not receive it, any interest they initially expressed in the institution will evaporate and they will actively persuade their child to look elsewhere.

Conversely, obtaining a high level of service throughout the selection process greatly strengthens their interest in the institution and they will actively lobby for that college with their child.

Too many institutions, unfortunately, are losing the interest of parents and their children simply because of poor performance in areas such as responsiveness from the admissions and financial aid offices, burdensome processes, disorganization, perceived lack of interest in the student and family, and so on.

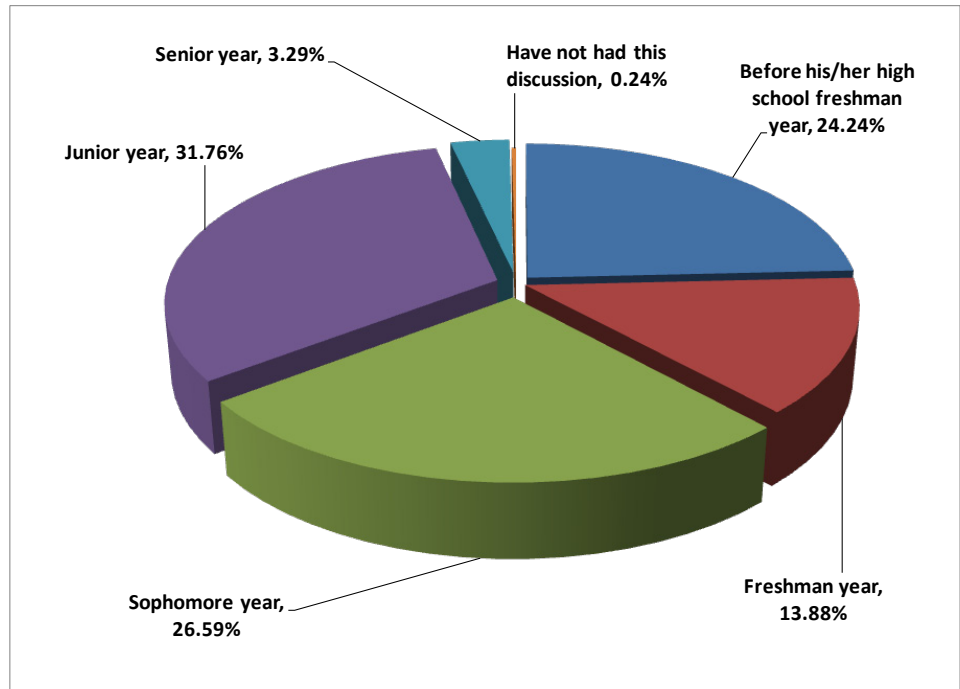
It's clear from the data revealed in this study that parents develop their own set of college selection criteria based on a wide array of factors that extend far beyond the most basic issues of cost, programs and academic quality.

Parents start talking about specific colleges early.

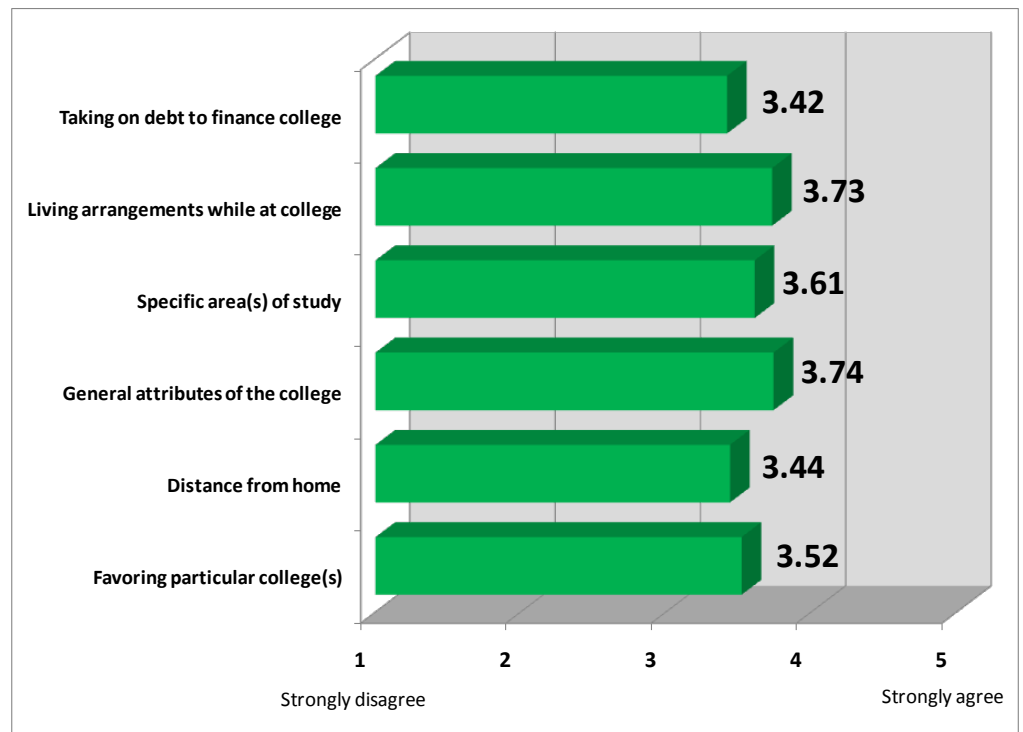
For nearly one quarter of the parents surveyed, discussions about attending specific colleges began prior to the child's freshman year in high school. By the end of their junior year, nearly all college bound students had this discussion with one or more parents.

Parents and their child are in moderate agreement on key issues relating to college. They agree most strongly on the general attributes of the desired institution and least strongly on issues related to taking on debt and distance of the college from home.

Timeline of initial parent/student discussion about college selection



Level of agreement between parent and child on key issues relating to college



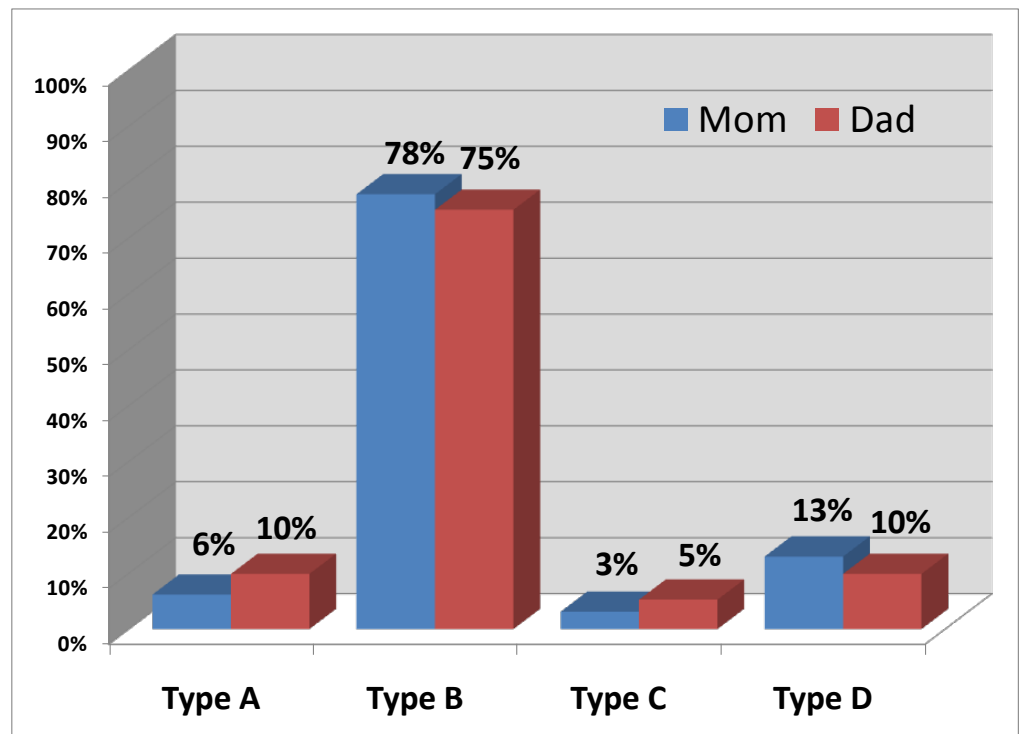
Parents are willing to modify their position.

Past research (based on the theories of Diana Baumrind, later expanded by Maccoby and Martin) suggests that parents typically fall into one of four parenting styles. It is our belief that the mix of styles exhibited by the parents correlates to the amount of flexibility the child is afforded in making the college selection decision.

For the purposes of this study, the Type A parent allows the child to make his or her own decisions with little or no interference, demands, or involvement from the parent. For Type B, the parent expects the child to follow rules and guidelines yet is willing to listen to the child's point of view and potentially modify the rules if the child's reasoning is sound. For Type C, the child is expected to follow rules and guidelines without questioning them. In Type D, the parent is more responsive to the child than commanding, and the relationship between them is more like a friendship than a parent/child relationship.

The data for this study reveals that most parents are willing to listen to the child's reasoning and accept it if it is deemed sound.

Prevailing parenting styles



Fathers tend to be less involved or interfering in their child's decision making as do mothers, but not by much. Mothers have a slightly stronger propensity to forge a less demanding relationship with their child, but not by much.

Parent(s) Most Influential On Key Issues

	Mother	Father	Equally	Neither
Curriculum choices at school	35%	13%	42%	10%
Sports and recreational choices	19%	16%	40%	25%
Meeting deadlines	50%	11%	33%	6%
Health and safety issues	44%	5%	48%	3%
Financial issues	24%	25%	48%	2%
Advice on personal growth	41%	9%	47%	3%
Selecting colleges to visit	40%	12%	40%	7%
Selecting a college to attend	23%	6%	59%	12%

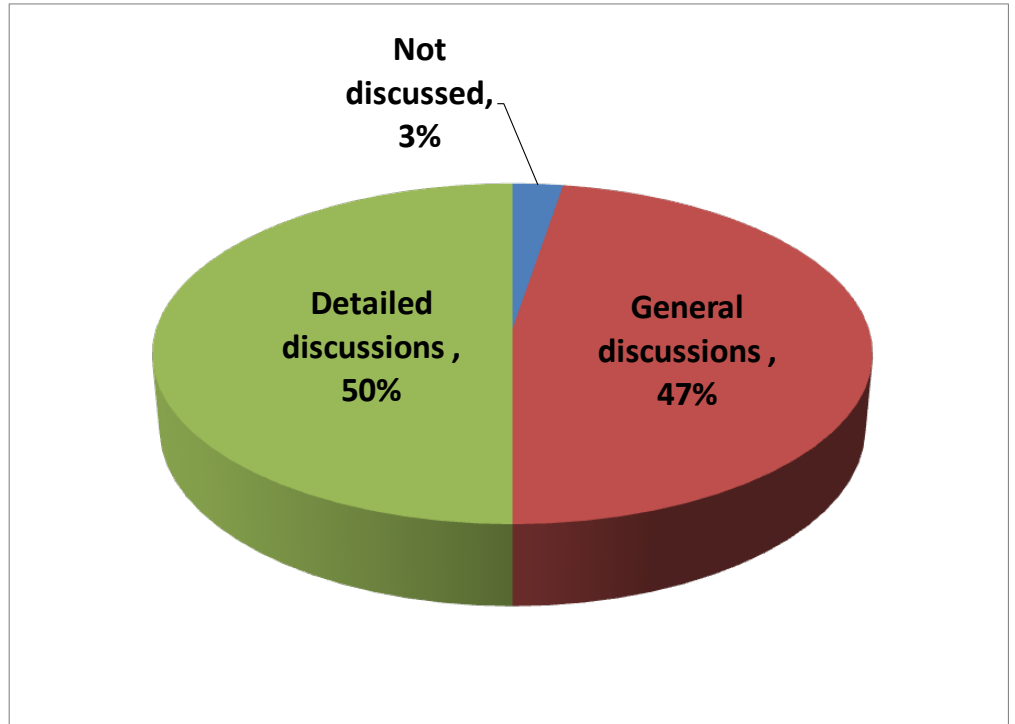
Mothers and fathers share equal influence on most issues.

For eight key issues of influence in their child's lives measured for this study, mothers and fathers are equally involved and influential in all but one area (meeting deadlines). Where one parent is dominant, it is the mother, except for issues related to finance.

Discussions of money happen late or not much at all.

Regarding the all-important issue of paying for college, only half of parents have discussed this issue in detail with their child prior to January of the year of enrollment. Nearly half have had only general discussions with their child on this topic.

Level of parent/child discussion about paying for college



Parent and child prefer similar channels of communication with colleges.

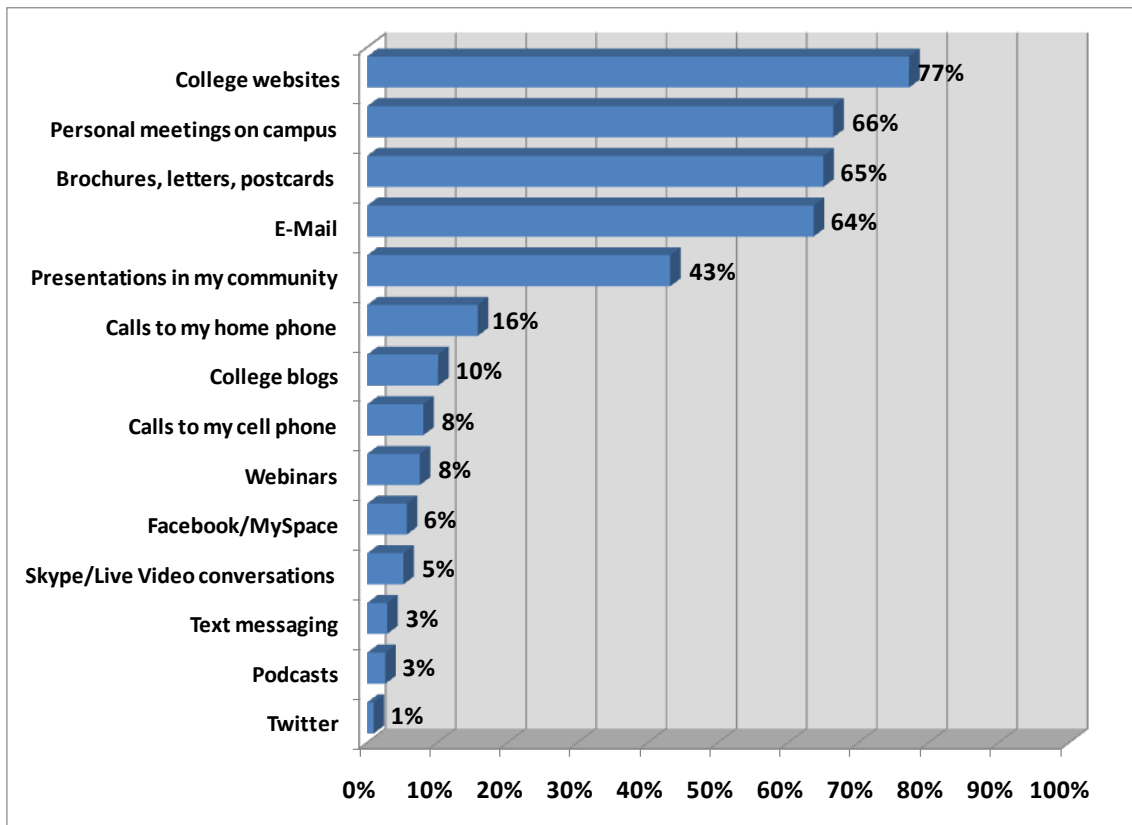
On the issue of how they prefer to obtain information and interact with colleges, parent and child share similar preferences with regard to channels of communication.

The four most preferred methods of communication include visiting college websites, scheduling personal meetings with

college representatives on campus, receiving brochures, letters and postcards in the mail, and communication via e-mail.

In Longmire and Company's 2009 study on the use of electronic communications and college recruiting, Fall 2009 enrolling students reflected preferences for the same top four channels.

Desired channels of communication between parent and college



Cost and funding.

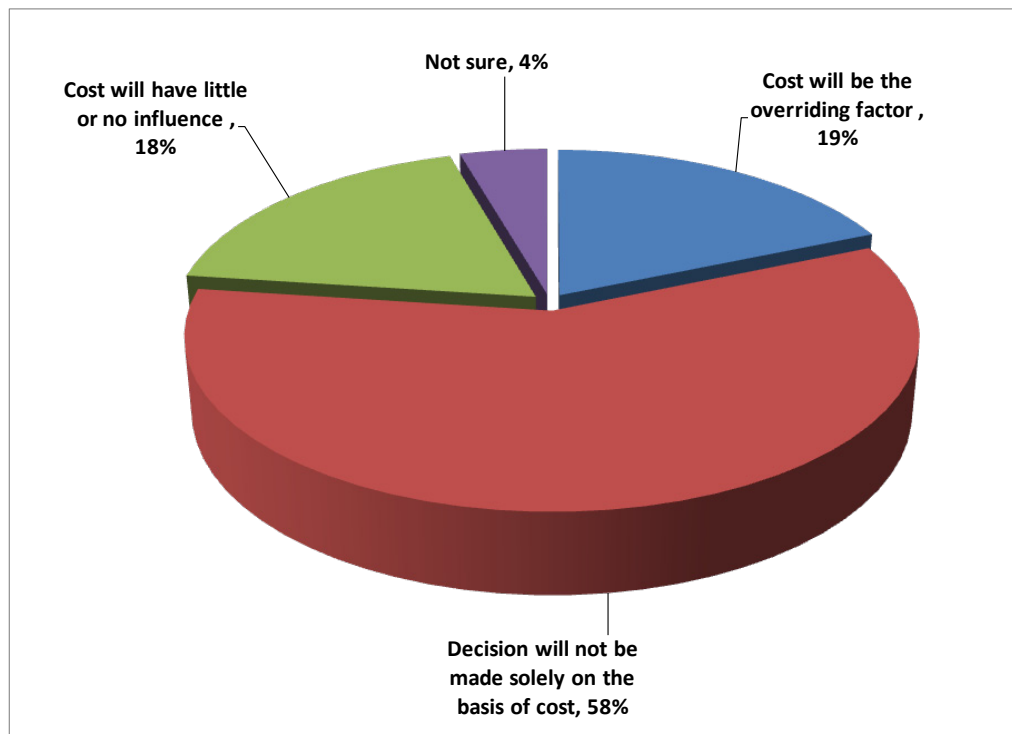
For nearly 60% of parents, the cost of attending a specific college will play a major role in their decision to enroll but the decision will not be made solely on the basis of cost.

For nearly 20% of families, cost will have little or no influence on their college selection decision.

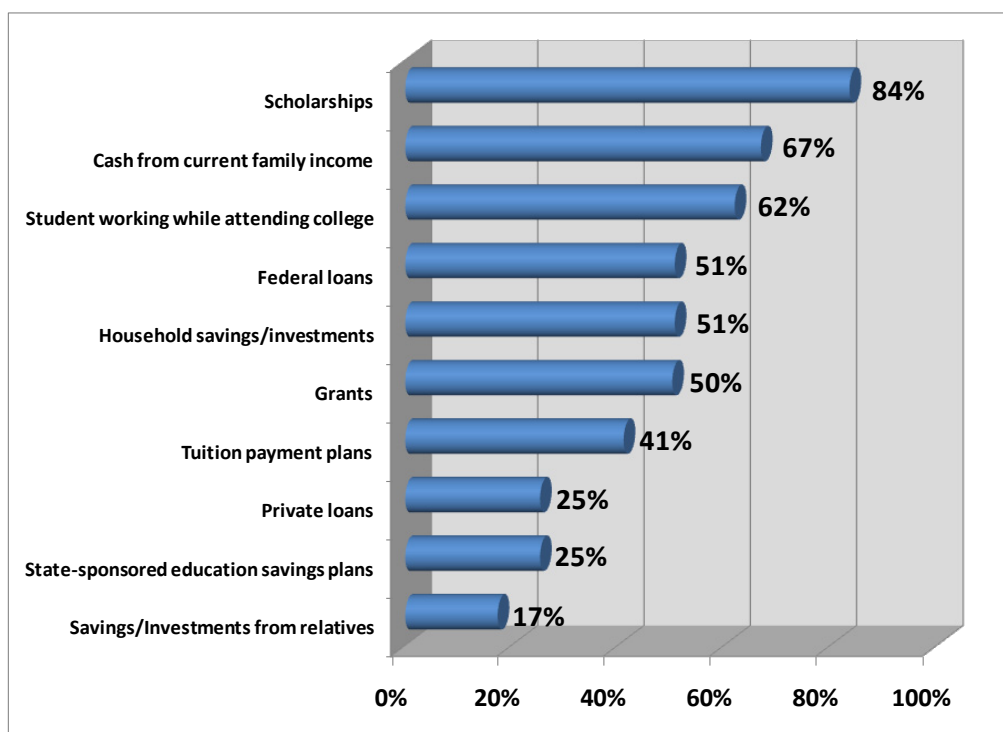
Over 8 in 10 families will seek scholarships to help pay for college. Nearly two thirds expect that their child will work while in school to help pay college expenses.

A little over one half will use savings or investments to pay for college.

Role of cost in college selection



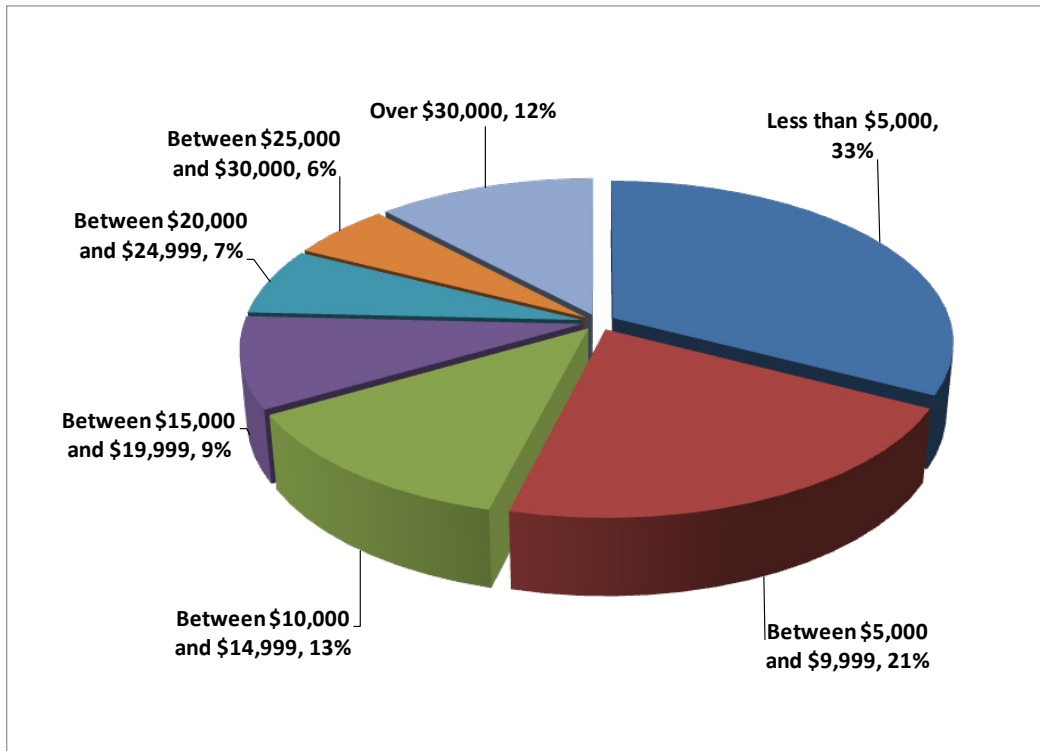
Sources of funding for college



Maximum affordable annual out-of-pocket expense for college

For one third of families, the maximum affordable annual out-of-pocket expense for college is less than \$5,000.

For less than one-quarter of families, the maximum affordable out-of-pocket expense is between \$5,000 and \$9,999.



Scholarship help.

In the survey, parents were given an opportunity to suggest ways in which colleges could help them plan and fund the cost of a college education. Over 75% of survey respondents took advantage of this opportunity by making one or more suggestions.

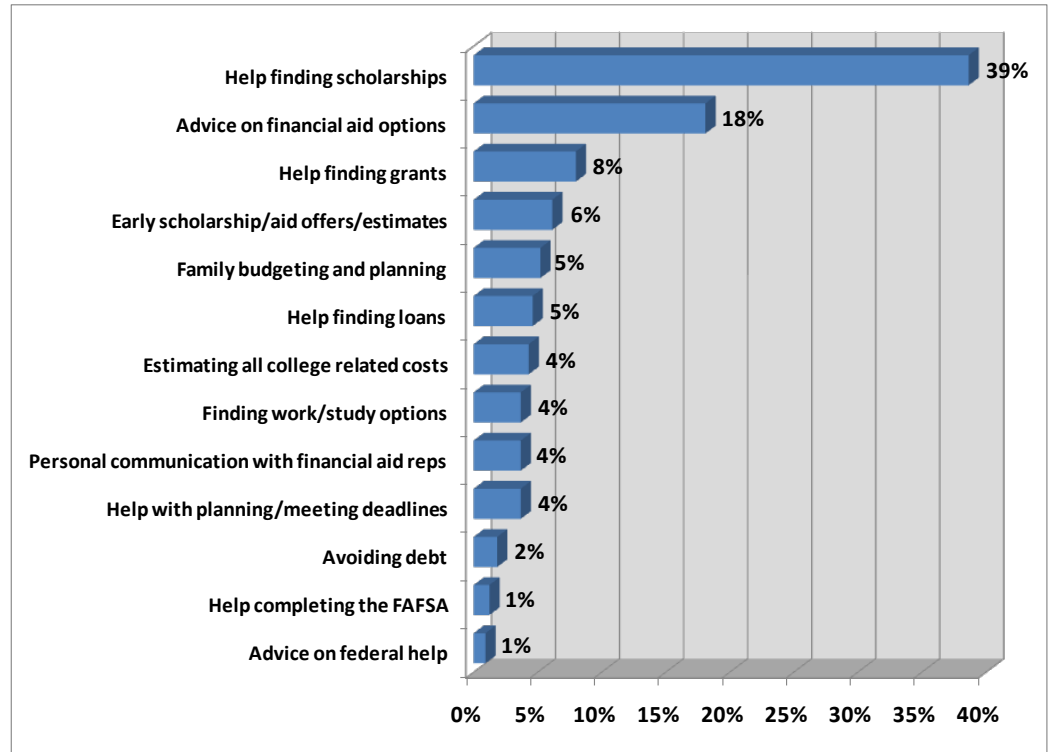
The most common suggestion involved scholarships.

In this study, as in Longmire and Company's 2009 study on the impact of the economy on enrollment, families are clearly asking for help from college financial aid offices in finding scholarships to help pay for college.

Parents believe that there are more scholarships available beyond what college financial aid offices routinely list.

They seek help in not only finding these scholarship opportunities but also obtaining help and guidance in applying for and acquiring these scholarships.

Advice and counsel desired by parents about paying for college



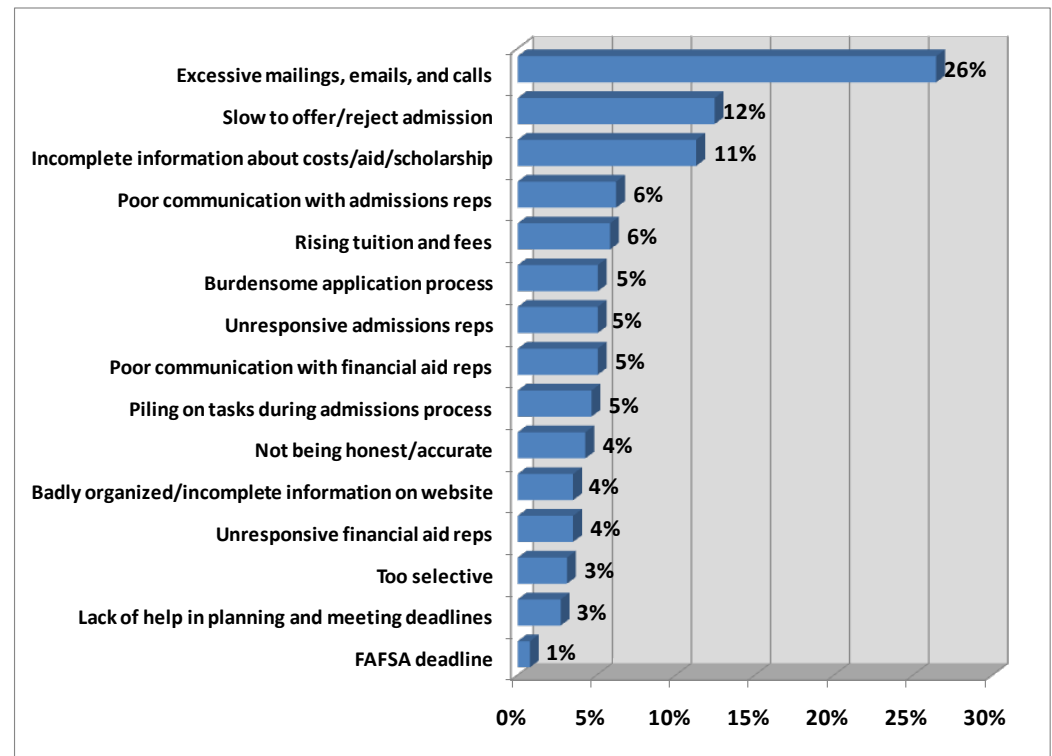
Customer service!

In the survey, parents were given an opportunity to indicate whether, and how, colleges add stress to the college selection process. Over 80% indicated that colleges indeed add stress to the process, most commonly by providing poor service.

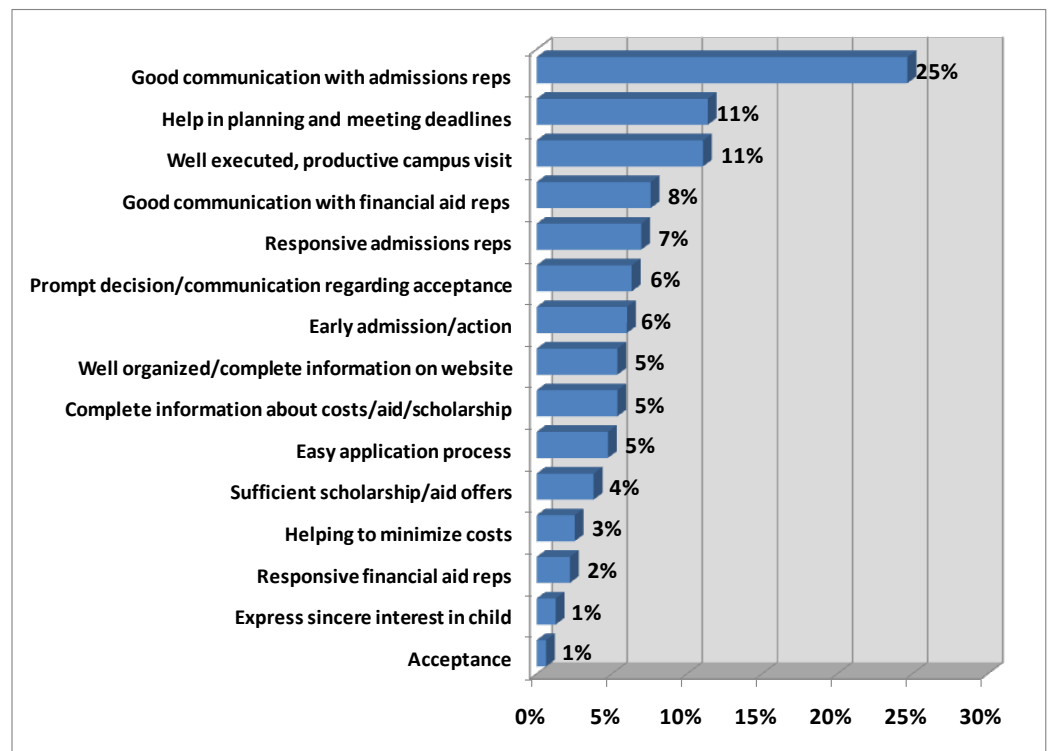
The highest incidence of poor service comes in the form of non-personalized mailings, e-mails and calls. Communications are targeted to students and families without regard to their individual needs and preferences.

Five of the top ten stress-adding complaints relate to poor communication and lack of responsiveness from admissions and financial aid personnel.

How colleges add stress to the college selection process



How colleges relieve stress from the college selection process

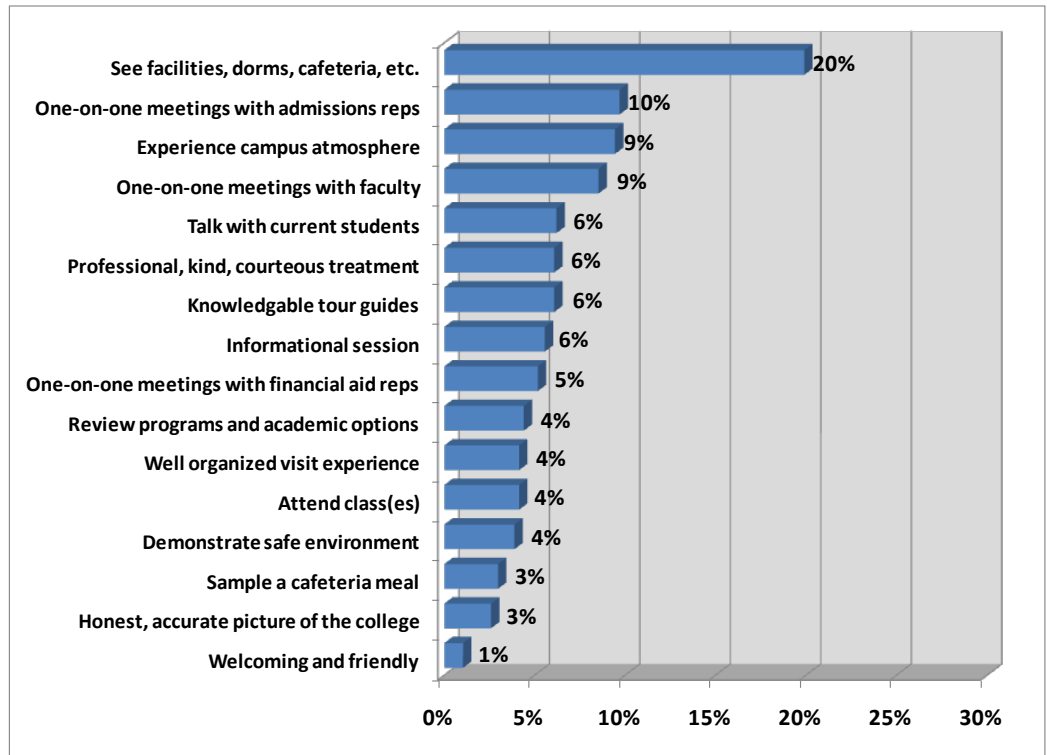


For a parent and prospective student, the level of customer service that can be anticipated after enrollment is on display during a campus visit.

The most common expectation of a visiting parent or student is to adequately examine buildings, facilities, housing, cafeterias, classrooms, and so on. Beyond that, however, visitor expectations relate directly to the personal interactions they have with members of the admissions staff, financial aid, faculty, current students, bookstore staff, tour guides, and all others with whom they have personal contact.

All of these interactions combine to provide the visitor with a picture of what they are investing their time and money in.

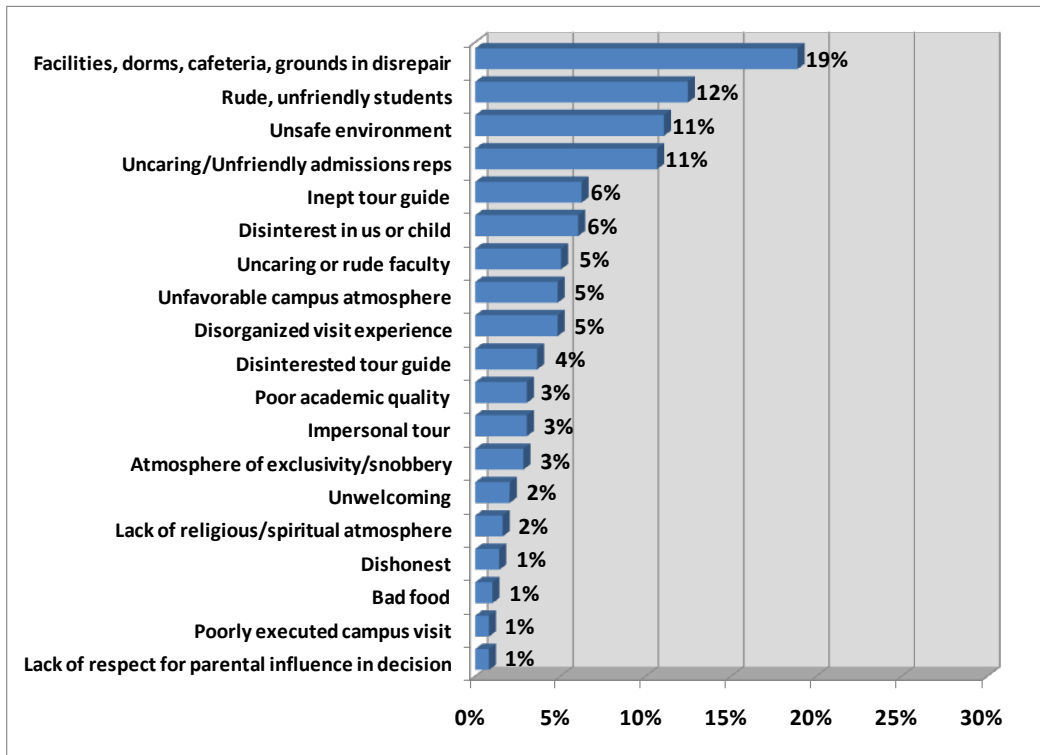
Expectations when visiting a campus



Can academic reputation and institutional prestige outweigh deficiencies in the human interaction that visitors may experience on a campus visit? According to other data collected in this study, probably not. Students, and especially parents, will immediately reject an institution on the basis of these interactions and observations.

In the survey, parents were given an opportunity to list anything that would cause them to immediately reject a college as a result of a campus visit experience. Over 85% of parents responded to this open ended question.

Factors that cause immediate rejection of a college



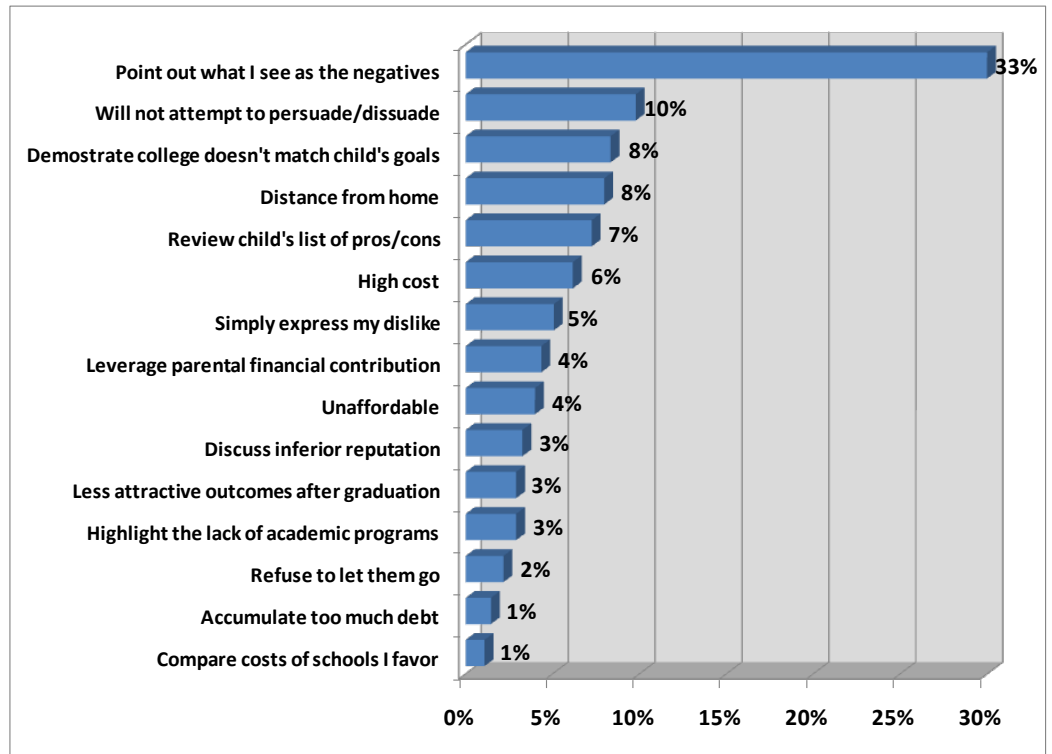
The most common answer, not surprisingly, related to disrepair of buildings, housing, grounds and eating facilities. However, 8 of the top 10 factors mentioned relate directly to "customer service" issues involving rude or uncaring admissions representatives, faculty, and students, inept or disinterested tour guides, disorganized or poorly executed campus visit, impersonal reception, and so on.

When provided with an opportunity in the survey to indicate whether, and how, the parent attempts to guide the child away from a disfavored college, over 75% of respondents indicated employing one or more tactics.

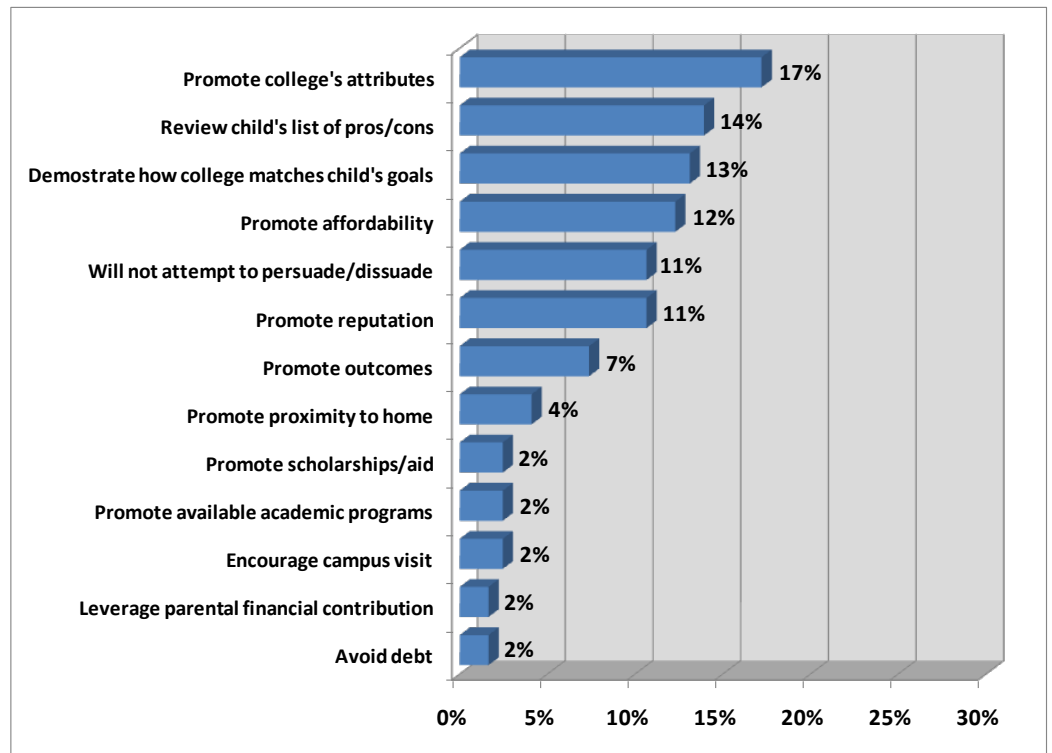
The most common tactic involves the parent simply pointing out what they perceive to be negative characteristics of the institution.

Only 10% of parents said that they would not attempt to persuade or dissuade their child in the process of selecting a college.

How parent guides child away from a disfavored college

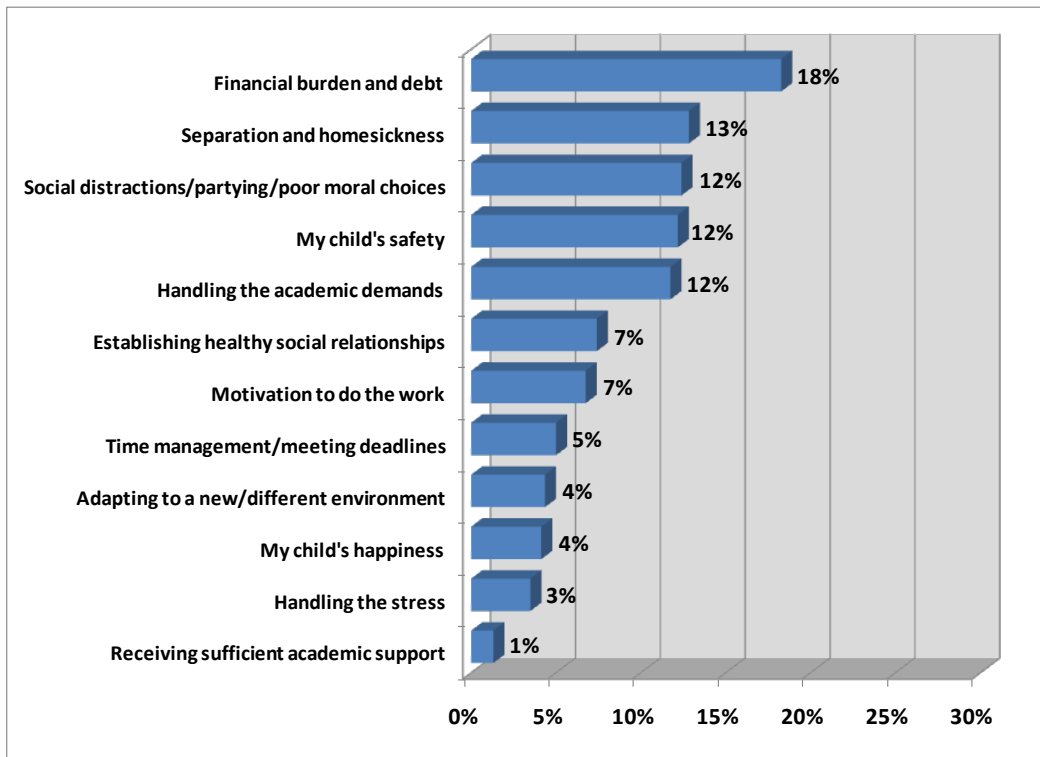


How parent guides child toward a favored college



When parents were asked to describe what is most worrisome as they send their child off to college, the most common answer involved the financial burden of paying for college and potential debt load after graduation.

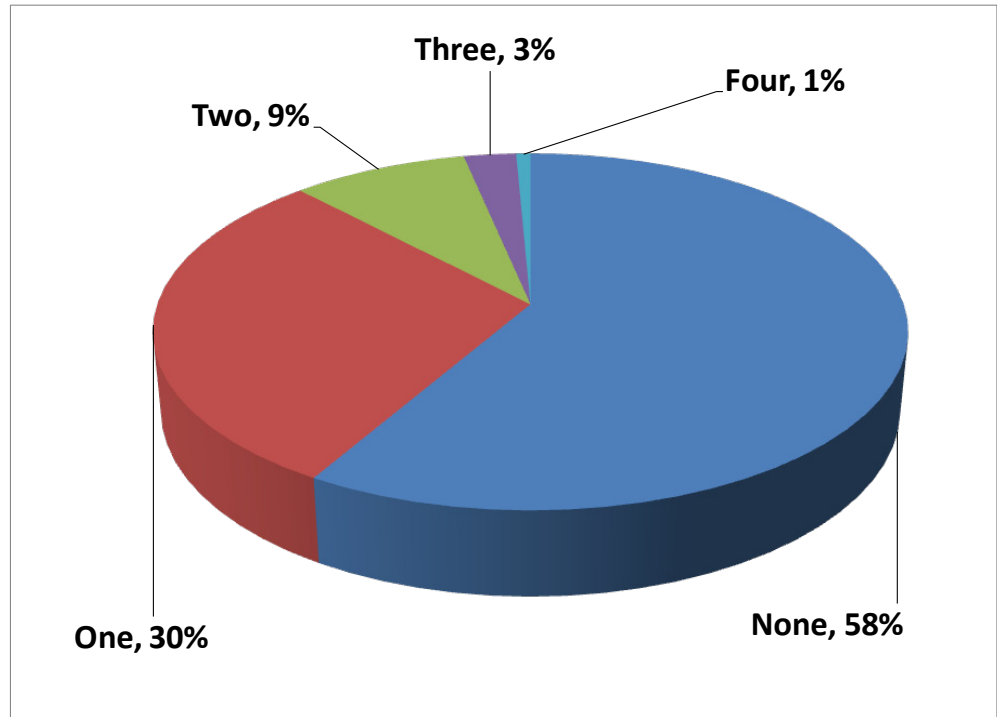
Most prominent worries about child at college



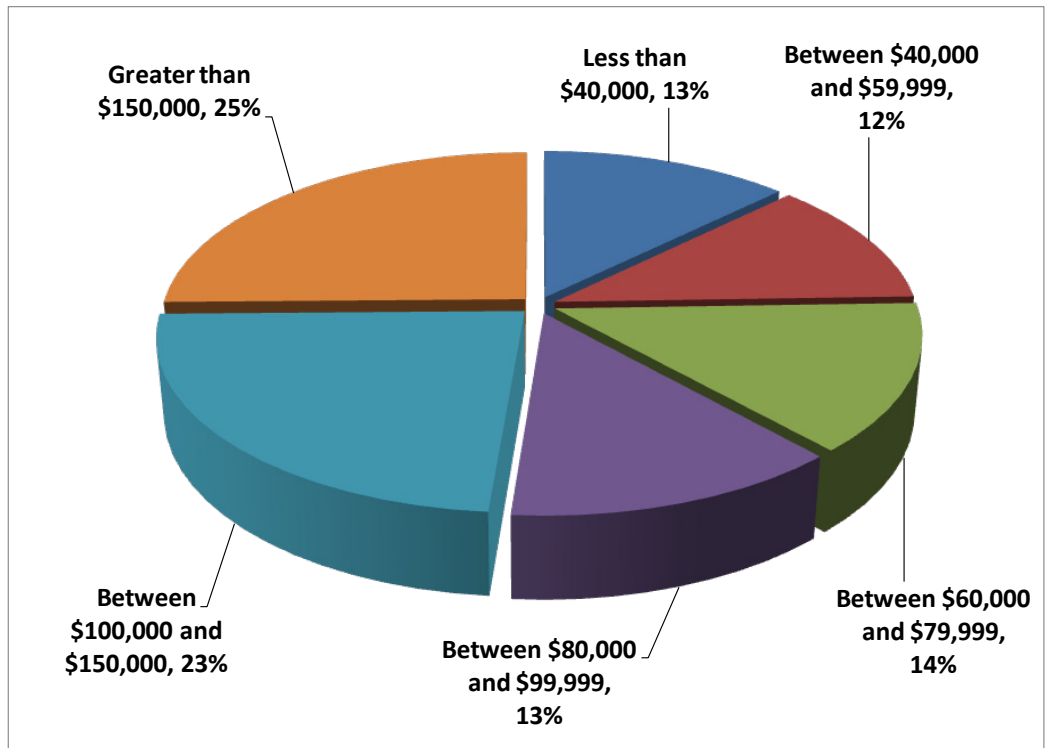
Beyond financial issues and general anxiety about the child's safety, this open ended question yielded responses that fell into one of two categories: Performing the academic work required, and enjoying a happy, responsible and fulfilling social life.

Demographics

Number of children currently enrolled in college



Annual household income





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