

# Parents and the College Search: Navigating Perceptions and Expectations

A 2023-2024 Research Study By CCA | [ccanewyork.com](http://ccanewyork.com)



Do today's parents of high school students believe that the value of college justifies its cost? What do they believe would make a college degree more valuable today? What do they worry most about as their student prepares to attend college? And at what point do they rule out prospective schools from consideration?






These pressing questions are undoubtedly at the forefront of concerns for colleges and universities nationwide. CCA went straight to the source and for a second year we conducted a nationwide survey of parents with college-bound high school students. This survey of over 1,700 parents and guardians – a large sample that can be considered broadly representative of parents nationwide – explored crucial decision factors influencing college selection, the weight of college rankings, the dynamic between student and parent influences in the college search, preferences for different college experiences, and financial concerns including affordability..

Read on for the results, direct quotes, and our own advice for institutions.

Similar to our findings from 2022, our 2023 study reaffirms that *safety on campus* and *the cost of tuition and fees* remain the top two priorities for parents when assisting their students in assessing colleges.

Three additional factors emerged as highly significant: **the availability of specific programs or majors**, **the sense of belonging and comfort** for the student at the institution, and the overall **reputation** of the school for quality education. **Employability of graduates** ranked closely behind these factors, alongside the **importance of relationships with professors**.

## The 5 most important qualities of a college or university, according to parents:

- #1**  Safety on campus
- #2**  The specific programs or majors available
- #3**  The cost of tuition and fees
- #4**  The school's overall reputation for quality
- #5**  The feeling that their student "fits" and is at home at the school

### PARENTS TOLD US

*"Parents are concerned with safety, because it doesn't matter how great a school is, or how much money you're spending, you want your kid to come home at the end of the day."*

### THE STUDENT POV

According to a recent study by SimpsonScarborough, students pay most attention to the price, majors/academic programs, quality of the campus and facilities, safety, and student outcomes data.

---

### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

On your website and in marketing collateral, highlight how your school takes safety seriously. Share relevant rankings and stats, testimonials from parents and students, and the features and benefits of the safety programs and protocols set up on campus.

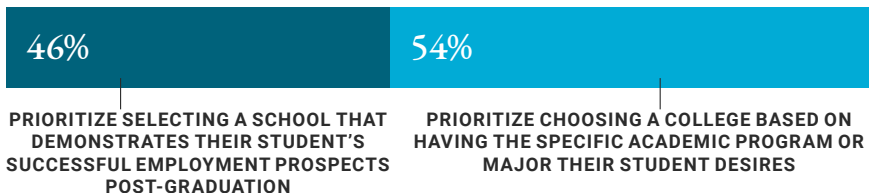
## When it comes to school selection, who decides?

The survey explored the parents' point of view on who has more influence on where the student will attend college: the parent or the student. A majority of parents said their students had more influence over where to attend school.



## What matters most to parents when choosing a college: the academic program students want or employability after graduation?

When asked to choose between academics and employability, survey findings revealed that parents were almost evenly split in their preferences.

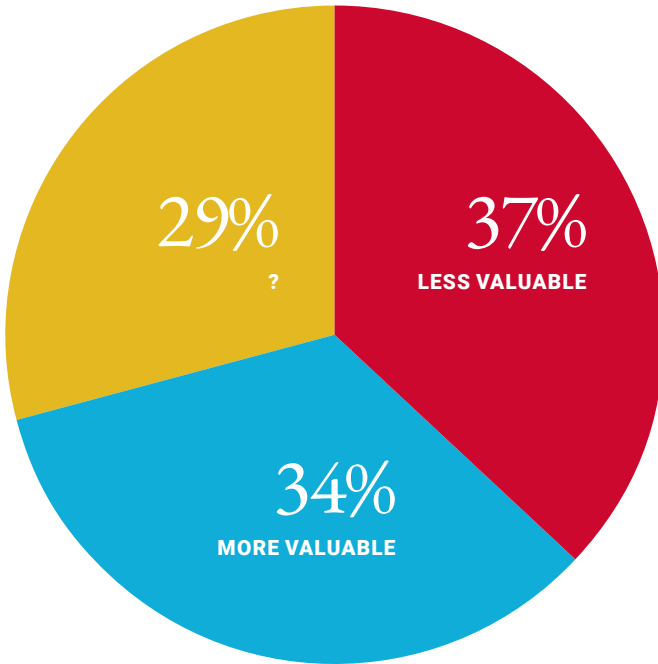


### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Consider focusing on program diversity and showcasing a range of academic programs, emphasizing the breadth and depth of offerings across various disciplines. Craft tailored messaging to align with these offerings that resonate with students' career aspirations, highlighting how specific programs align with their interests, goals, and future success – and leverage digital platforms such as social media, websites, and media campaigns to share these narratives and promote academic programs.

## How valuable is a college degree today compared to 5 years ago?

Nearly a third of parents believe that a college degree today is somewhat less or much less valuable than just 5 years ago.



## When we asked what they'd do to improve the value of the college experience, they ranked the following:

- #1** Make college less expensive so students graduate with low or no debt
- #2** Focus more on ensuring that students get good jobs after graduation
- #3** Provide more direct, hands-on experiences while in college

## Only 39%

of respondents believe college today is worth the cost.

### PARENTS TOLD US

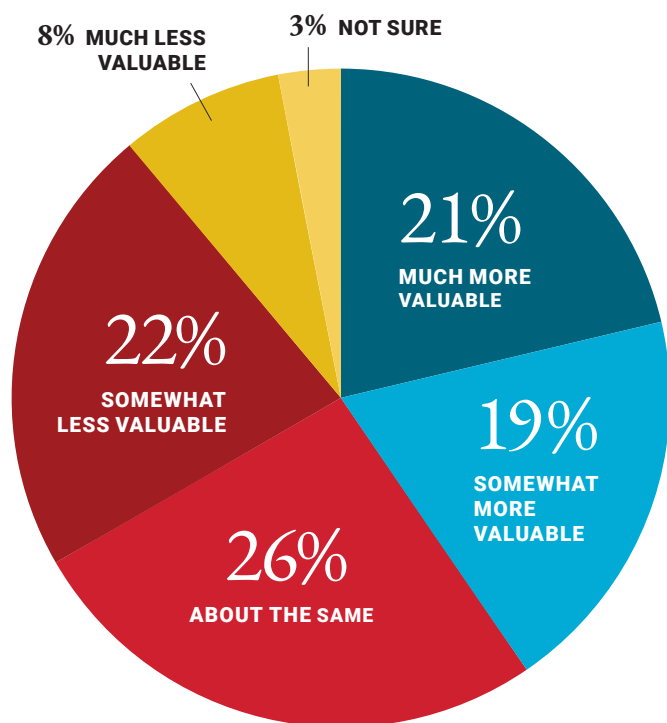
*"I come from a cultural background where we've always understood that education is the key to not just help yourself, but your family, and your community. So, from that perspective, definitely, education has always been worth it."*

### WHAT ABOUT MODALITY?

Over half of parents said that including options for online learning and in-person learning would make their student's undergraduate education more valuable.

## How valuable is a college degree today compared to 5 years ago?

Nearly a third of parents believe that a college degree today is somewhat less or much less valuable than just 5 years ago.



When we asked what they'd do to improve the value of the college experience, they ranked the following:

- #1** Make college less expensive so students graduate with low or no debt
- #2** Focus more on ensuring that students get good jobs after graduation
- #3** Provide more direct, hands-on experiences while in college

## Only 39%

of respondents believe college today is worth the cost.

### PARENTS TOLD US

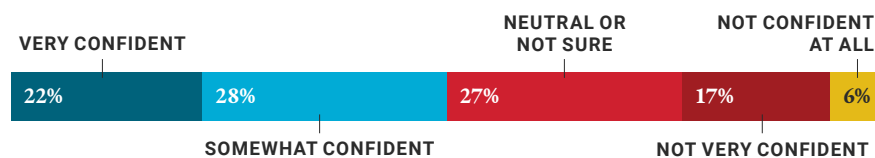
*"I come from a cultural background where we've always understood that education is the key to not just help yourself, but your family, and your community. So, from that perspective, definitely, education has always been worth it."*

### WHAT ABOUT MODALITY?

Over half of parents said that including options for online learning and in-person learning would make their student's undergraduate education more valuable.

## How confident are parents about their ability to pay for college?

More than one quarter of parents suggest they aren't sure about their (or their student's) ability to pay for college.



### PARENTS TOLD US

*“What I don’t appreciate is if [pricing] information is not in the public domain. If I have to jump through hoops to get that information, then I have a problem with that. But if there’s transparency, you can always find where you fall in that spectrum of offerings.”*

## When do parents rule out a college or university because it’s too expensive?



### THE STUDENT POV

According to a Niche.com survey, 97% of students reported that they had fears about the college search process. The most common fears: not being able to afford the school they want, making the wrong decision, and not being admitted.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Nearly 20 percent of parents say they'd rule out a college or university just by seeing the published price! On your website—and in any relevant materials—immediately tell visitors that families often end up paying considerably less than the sticker price after you factor in scholarships and aid.



## How many schools their students will apply to:

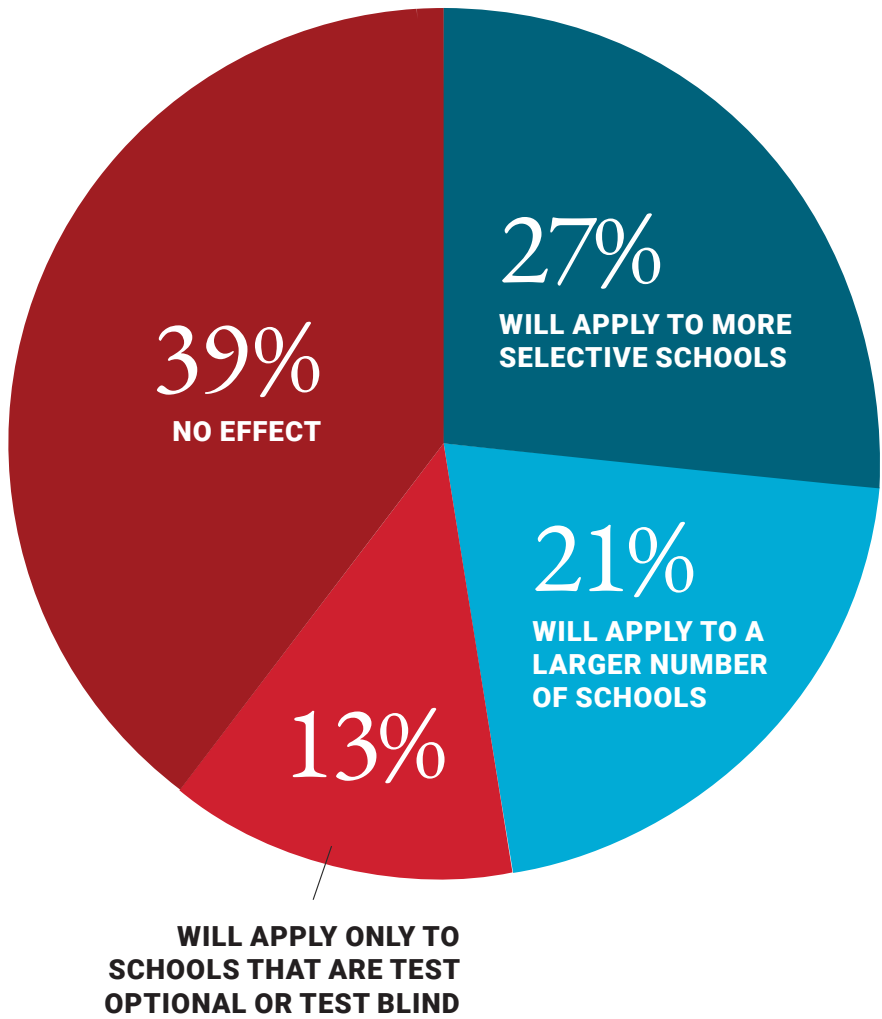
Between 2-5

## How will the test-optional trend affect which schools your student applies to?

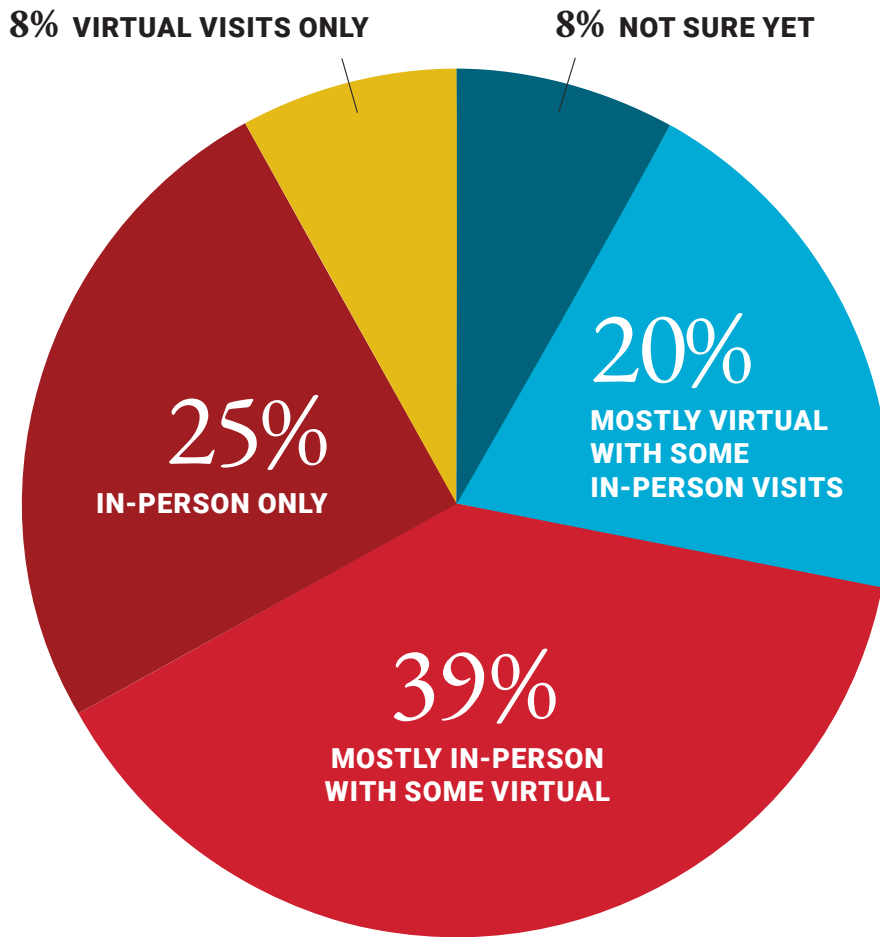
Nearly half of parents said their student would apply to either more or more selective schools.

### THE STUDENT POV

According to a 2022 EAB report, 15% of students reported that they applied to a college specifically because it was test-optional.



## With the height of the pandemic behind us, how do parents plan to visit schools?



### PARENTS TOLD US

*“It’s been really helpful being able to have Zoom meetings with universities. It’s a fast, economical way to look inside of a school without actually making the trip. I have found that those have been some of the best meetings.”*

### WHAT YOU CAN DO:

We know that in-person visits are a huge conversion opportunity because it’s all about the experience, but visit options are a must! Do everything you can to make virtual visits just as exciting. Incorporate interactive elements, swag, and other components that make in-person events memorable.

# Key Takeaways for Colleges and Universities:

## **Safety remains a critical factor.**

When compared with data from our 2022 survey, our most recent findings have found that safety continues to be a crucial factor. Continue to make an effort to showcase your institution's safety measures—including campus security, a focus on drills and emergency protocols, and transparent communication channels for connecting the community and reporting concerns.

## **Concerns about rising costs.**

Being proactive by providing clear communication, transparent financial information and supportive resources will help families navigate the complexities of funding a college education. Many parents are concerned about the long-term impact of college expenses on their financial stability; transparency about the overall expenses, including those outside of tuition, can help parents to understand the expectations more clearly and help them see the costs as less of a burden.

## **Emphasis on job readiness & employability.**

Strengthen and showcase your career services, highlight robust internship and co-curricular programs, and provide information for other opportunities that provide practical work experience relevant to students' fields of study. Continuing to foster partnerships with industry and community leaders to ensure that your curriculum is closely aligned with current job market demands - and don't hesitate to share openly success stories of graduates!

## **Value remains in question.**

Continue to clearly illustrate how the educational experience your institution provides students can translate into fulfilling careers and lives. Your marketing can turn concerns into confidence by incorporating the critical skills students develop and emphasize concrete career and life outcomes.

The majority of respondents (34%) were parents of a freshman in high school, with the balance fairly evenly distributed across 10th-12th grades.

27%

of parents reported that their student would be a first-generation college student

24%

reported that their college-bound student has one or more siblings who are attending or who have attended college

25%

reported that one parent had attended college

37%

reported that both parents had attended college

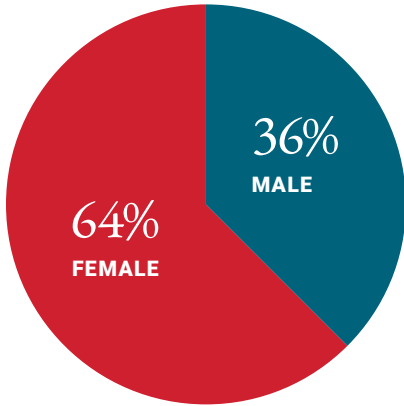
25%

reported that they had completed a bachelor's degree

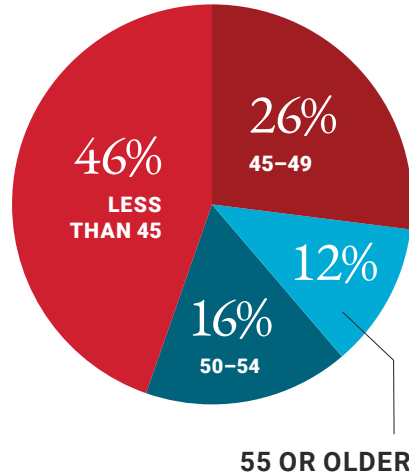
22%

reported that they had completed a post-graduate degree

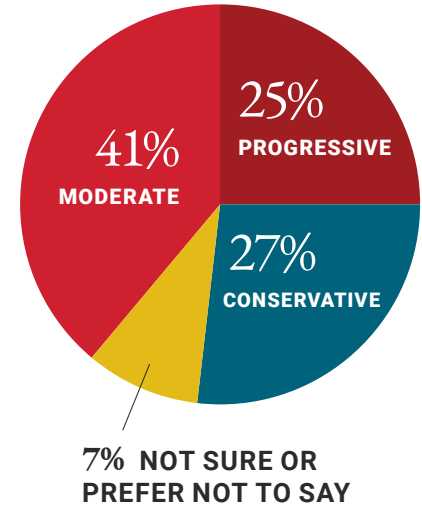
## Gender



## Age



## Political Affiliation



## Ethnicity

**12%** AFRICAN-AMERICAN/BLACK

**3%** ASIAN

**77%** WHITE

**10%** HISPANIC/LATINO

**1%** MIDDLE EASTERN OR NORTH AFRICAN

**2%** NATIVE AMERICAN OR ALASKA NATIVE

**1%** SOMETHING ELSE

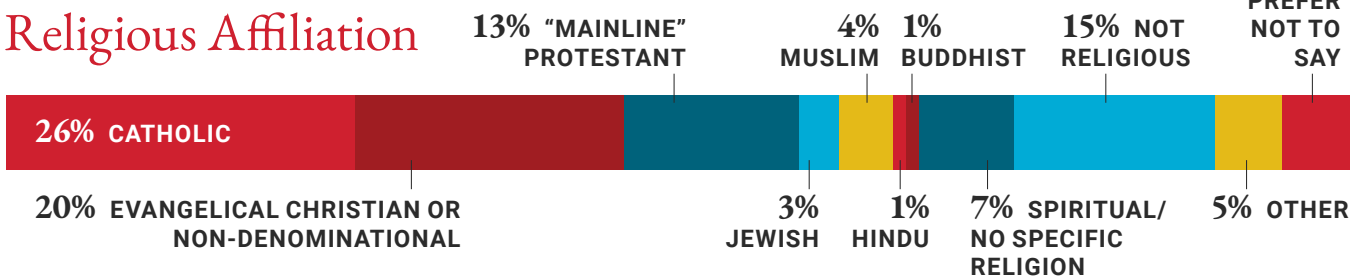
**1%** NOT SURE OR PREFER NOT TO SAY

NOTE: PERCENTAGES DO NOT ADD UP TO 100% DUE TO MULTIPLE CHOICES.

## Household Income



## Religious Affiliation



# Get in touch.

**Clare Hall**

*Director of Business Development*






504.722.7105

[chall@ccanewyork.com](mailto:chall@ccanewyork.com)

[ccanewyork.com](http://ccanewyork.com)



# The 5 most important qualities of a college or university, according to parents:

- #1  Safety on campus
- #2  The specific programs or majors available
- #3  The cost of tuition and fees
- #4  The school's overall reputation for quality
- #5  The feeling that their student “fits” and is at home at the school

---

For the second consecutive year, safety on campus has remained the foremost concern for parents in the college choice process.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Considering that safety and cost rank as the top concerns for parents when evaluating college options, higher education institutions can implement various strategies in their marketing efforts to alleviate these concerns.

## SAFETY

### Emphasize Campus Safety

**Measures:** On your website and in marketing collateral, highlight how your school takes safety seriously. Share relevant rankings and stats, testimonials from parents and students, and the features and benefits of the safety programs and protocols set up on campus. These can include emergency response systems, campus police presence, and safety initiatives to assure parents and students of a secure environment.

## COST

### Provide a Transparent Cost Breakdown, Emphasize Financial Planning Resources, & Showcase Value and ROI:

Provide clear and detailed information about tuition, fees, housing, and other expenses. Offer transparent financial aid packages and scholarship opportunities and provide workshops or online tools to help families navigate the financial aspect of college. Demonstrate the value of education at your institution by showcasing successful alumni stories, career outcomes, and job placement rates. Highlight programs that lead to high-demand careers.