

Parents and the College Search: Navigating Perceptions and Expectations

A Research Study by CCA | ccanewyork.com



Do today's parents of high school students believe that the value of a college education 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 who makes the final decision when it comes to college selection?

As a follow-up to our 2022 study, CCA returned to the source and conducted another nationwide survey of parents of 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, including the weight of college rankings, the dynamic between student and parent influence 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 first study, in 2022, this new 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 the college selection process.

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
- The overall reputation of the school for quality education

Employability of graduates ranked closely behind these factors, as did 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

WHAT COLLEGES 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.

IMPORTANCE OF SAFETY

Echoing our 2022 study, safety on campus has remained the foremost concern for parents in the college choice process.

SAFETY

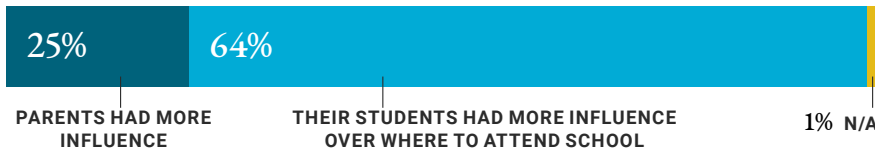
Emphasize Campus Safety Measures. On your website and in marketing collateral, highlight how your school takes safety seriously. Share relevant rankings and stats, testimonials from parents and students, and the features and benefits of the safety programs and protocols set up on campus. These can include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

COST

Provide a Transparent Cost Breakdown, Emphasize Financial Planning Resources, and 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 realities of college. Demonstrate the value of education at your institution by showcasing stories about successful alumni, career outcomes, and job placement rates. Highlight programs that lead to careers that are in high demand.

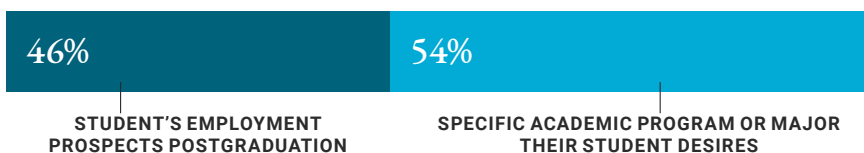
When it comes to college selection, who decides?

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 than they did over where to attend school.



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

Slightly more than half prioritize choosing a college based on having the specific academic program or major their student desires, while nearly as many prioritize selecting a school that demonstrates their student's employment prospects postgraduation.

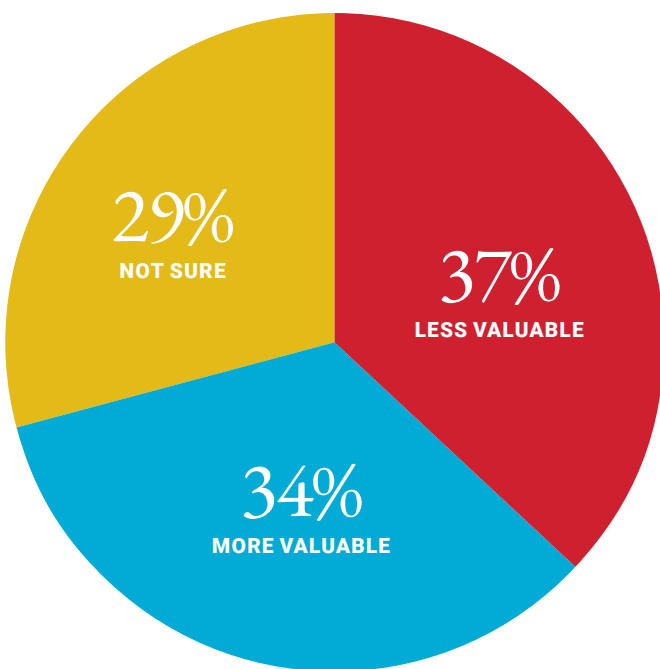


WHAT COLLEGES CAN DO

Consider focusing on program diversity and by showcasing a range of academic programs. Highlight how those programs align with certain interests, goals, and outcomes—and promote this information on all your owned channels, as well as through media campaigns.

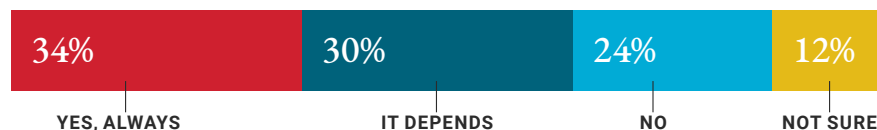
How valuable is a college degree today compared with 5 years ago?

Parents are equally split when it comes to their beliefs on whether a college degree is more or less valuable today as compared with five years ago. Nearly a third of parents believe that a college degree today is less valuable, while slightly less believe it is more valuable.



Is college today worth the cost?

There's much debate surrounding the value of attending college in relation to its cost. Approximately a third of the parents we sampled expressed a yes that college was always worth the cost. Approximately another third of parents sampled indicated that "it depends."



What would make a degree more valuable?

The question of the value of a college degree is central to the decision whether to attend college. Parents participating in the survey were asked, “In a few words, what would make a college degree more valuable today?” Their responses demonstrated a very practical orientation, with three factors rising to the top as most important: preparation and/or training for career, job opportunities postgraduation, and, of course, a good salary.

Most critical factors driving value:

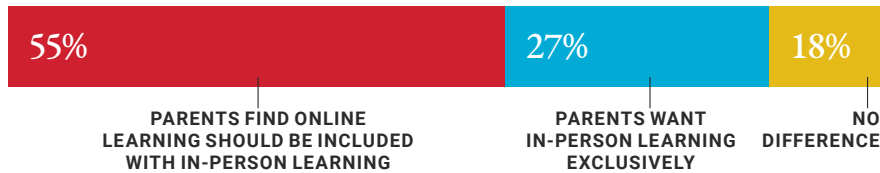
- #1 Career preparation and training
 - #2 Job opportunities (quantity and quality)
 - #3 Financial & earning potential
-

WHAT COLLEGES CAN DO

Six out of ten parents believe that a greater emphasis on career preparation, job opportunities, and pay could make a college degree more valuable today. Colleges and universities can showcase the robustness of their professional development opportunities across academic program offerings and also highlight strong career placement rates, success stories of alumni in lucrative positions, and partnerships with industry and employers for internship and job placement programs. By emphasizing these aspects across marketing collateral, institutions can effectively communicate the value proposition of their degrees in terms of future career prospects, thus appealing to both parents and students who prioritize career outcomes.

Would students' education be more valuable with online learning or a more traditional in-person format?

Post-pandemic, online learning has become widely embraced. Online learning appears to have become a core part of many parents' expectations for college, as our findings underscored in both of our research studies.



This finding is consistent with a recent study by Barnes & Noble Education, which found that post-pandemic, 76% of parents are now more accepting of online education for their children. It's a shift that highlights how experiences during COVID have reshaped perceptions of distance learning, making it a more viable and accepted option for college students today.

WHAT COLLEGES CAN DO

Highlight the opportunities and benefits associated with virtual, online, and hybrid learning options. This can involve showcasing the flexibility and convenience of virtual and online courses, highlighting the accessibility of education from anywhere, promoting interactive and engaging online platforms, and showcasing faculty expertise in delivering effective virtual instruction. Colleges can also emphasize the diverse range of programs available through virtual and hybrid formats, catering to various learning preferences and accommodating students' busy schedules.

What are the main worries parents have as their students prepare for college?

Once again, the most practical factors of cost/affordability and safety rise to the top for parents in terms of their chief worries, followed closely behind by the desire for their student to assimilate into the college experience and find their fit.

- #1 Safety
- #2 Affordability of degree and ability to pay and/or avoid debt
- #3 Students' ability to "deal with" the college experience and fit in

What are the most impactful methods that a college or university can use to reach out to prospective students and their families?

In a noisy and crowded market, competing for the attention of prospective students and parents has never been more challenging, so understanding preferences around where and how parents want to receive information is critical.

Preferred Channels: Parents favor email (14%), with printed or mailed materials (5%), and digital or social media content (5%) ranking just behind.

Personal and Frequent: Parents prefer direct, personal, and frequent contact from institutions in the form of phone calls or texts.

Clear and Specific: Parents want materials that are simple, clear, and forthright and are looking for specific offerings of a school – including majors, clubs, and athletics.

Key Takeaways for Colleges and Universities

Safety measures

As was the case with our 2022 survey, our most recent study findings have shown 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 clear communication channels for connecting the community and reporting concerns.

Concerns about rising costs

Being proactive by providing straightforward 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 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 and employability

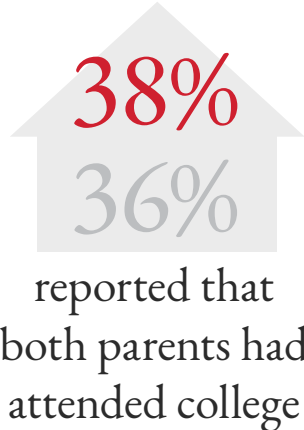
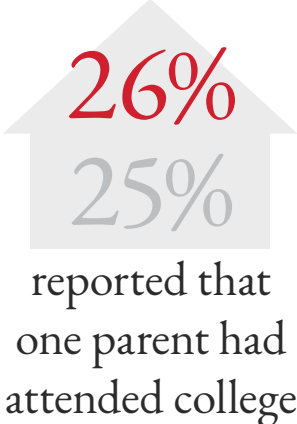
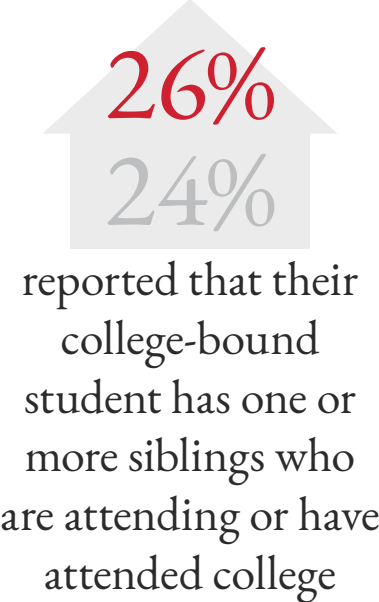
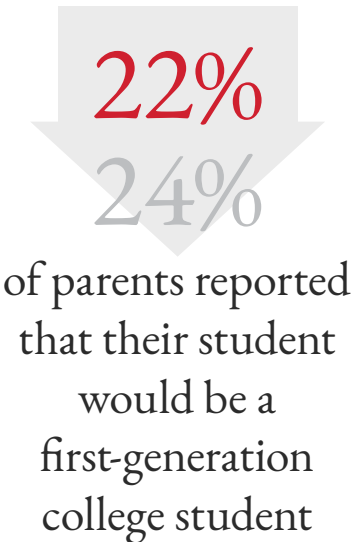
Strengthen and showcase your career services, highlight robust internship and cocurricular programs, and provide information about other opportunities that provide practical work experience relevant to students' fields of study. Continue to foster partnerships with industry and employers to ensure that your curriculum is closely aligned with current job market demands — and don't hesitate to share openly and often success stories of graduates!

Value remains in question

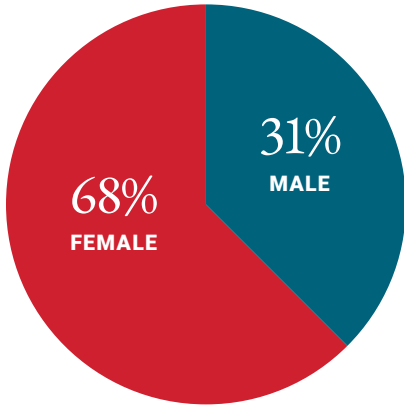
Continue to clearly illustrate how the educational experience your institution provides students can translate into fulfilling careers and lives. Your marketing can transform concerns into confidence by demonstrating the critical skills students develop and emphasizing concrete career and life outcomes.

There were many similarities between the parents we surveyed in our most recent study and those who responded in 2022.

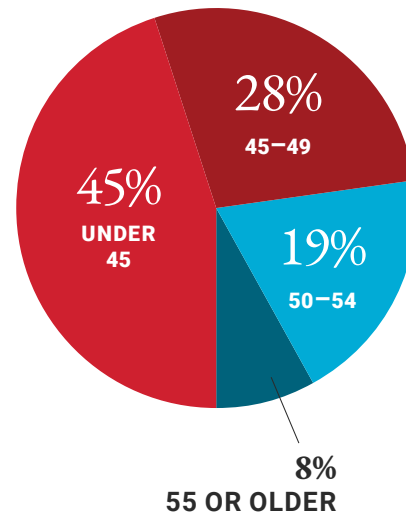
■ THIS STUDY
■ 2022



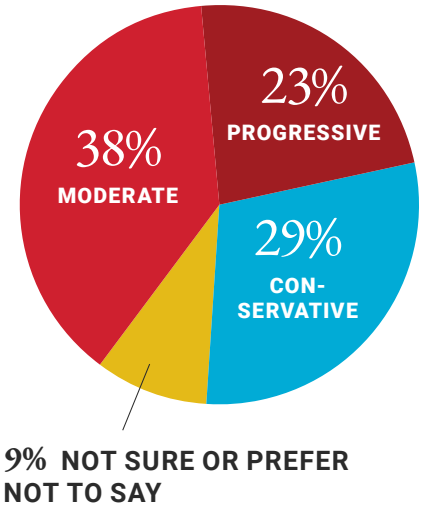
Gender



Age



Political Affiliation



Ethnicity

15% AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK

5% ASIAN

74% WHITE

9% HISPANIC/LATINX

1% MIDDLE EASTERN OR NORTH AFRICAN

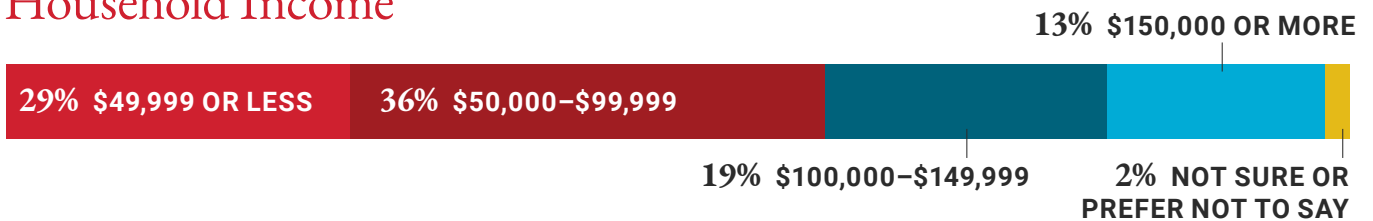
2% NATIVE AMERICAN OR ALASKA NATIVE

1% SOMETHING ELSE

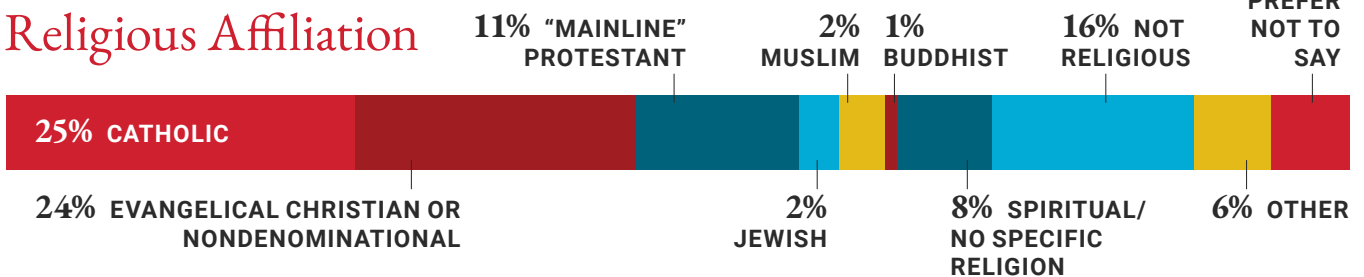
1% NOT SURE OR PREFER NOT TO SAY

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

Household Income



Religious Affiliation



Get in touch.

Reach out. We'd love to hear from you.

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