



# 2015 E-Expectations Report

## What 10 Years of Research Has Told Us About College E-Recruitment

In 2005, the first E-Expectations study examined the online expectations of 1,000 college-bound juniors. At that time, the college e-recruitment landscape looked very different than today. YouTube was just beginning. Facebook had just gone public, and Twitter had not yet launched. The iPhone did not exist, and students who browsed college websites did so almost exclusively on desktop and laptop computers.

During the 10 years since that initial study, technological innovations have radically altered the college search process and how students interact with campuses. Students are now constantly connected to the Internet, and many of them are browsing via mobile devices. Social media has further changed their entire concept of communication in addition to giving campuses more communication channels to manage.

This 2015 E-Expectations report from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive, and NRCCUA examines the current expectations of college-bound high school students as well as how their expectations have changed over the last decade. Among the findings:

- 70 percent of students have looked at a college website on a mobile device.
- Search engines have become the dominant method for finding college websites.
- Students are much more receptive to receiving text messages from campuses.
- Prospective students are much more drawn to images of a campus than to photos of current students.
- Nearly 80 percent say that a campus website affects their perception of an institution.

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## About the participants

The 2015 E-Expectations study polled more than 3,000 high school juniors and seniors, with a 50 percent representation from each class level as well as a 50 percent split between male and female participants. For more details, see the Appendix on page 23.

## *E-Expectations rewind*

### Only half of students went online every day in 2005

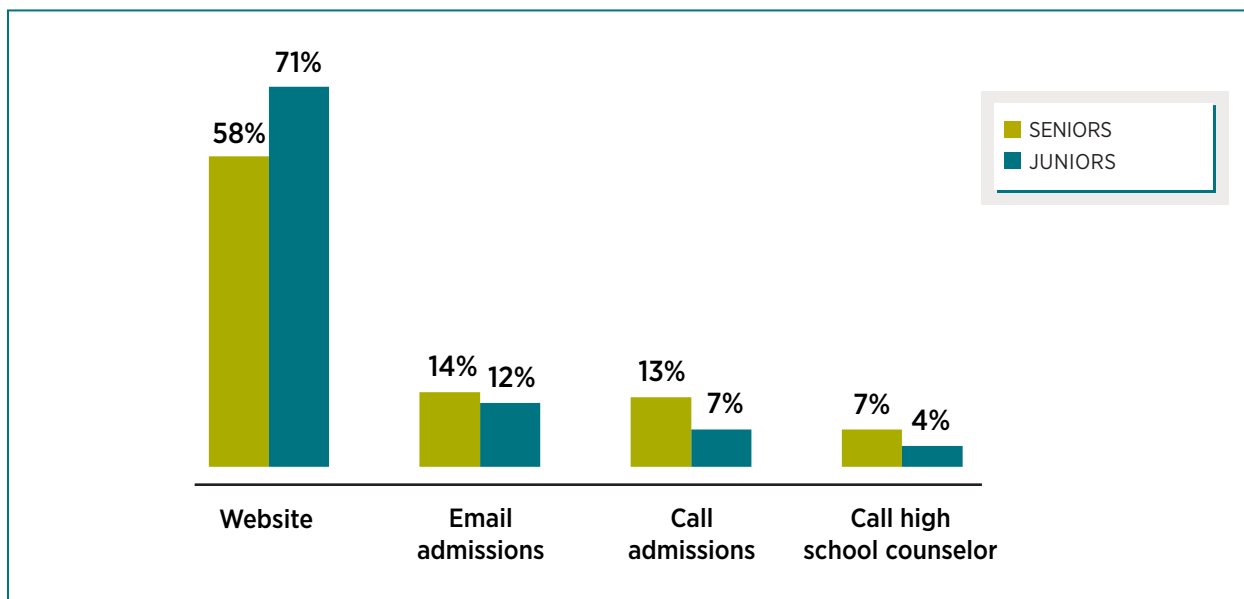
When the E-Expectations survey began 10 years ago, only 49 percent of high school students said they went online on a daily basis. One in five said they went online less than once per week.

Throughout the report, we will spotlight other interesting changes and trends that have happened during the last decade of E-Expectations research.

## Attitudes toward college websites and digital resources

Over the years, the E-Expectations study has shown the increasing prominence of college websites in the college search process. In 2015, prospective students rely heavily on college websites as their main source for information on an institution.

**Figure 1: How do students find answers to questions when researching colleges?**

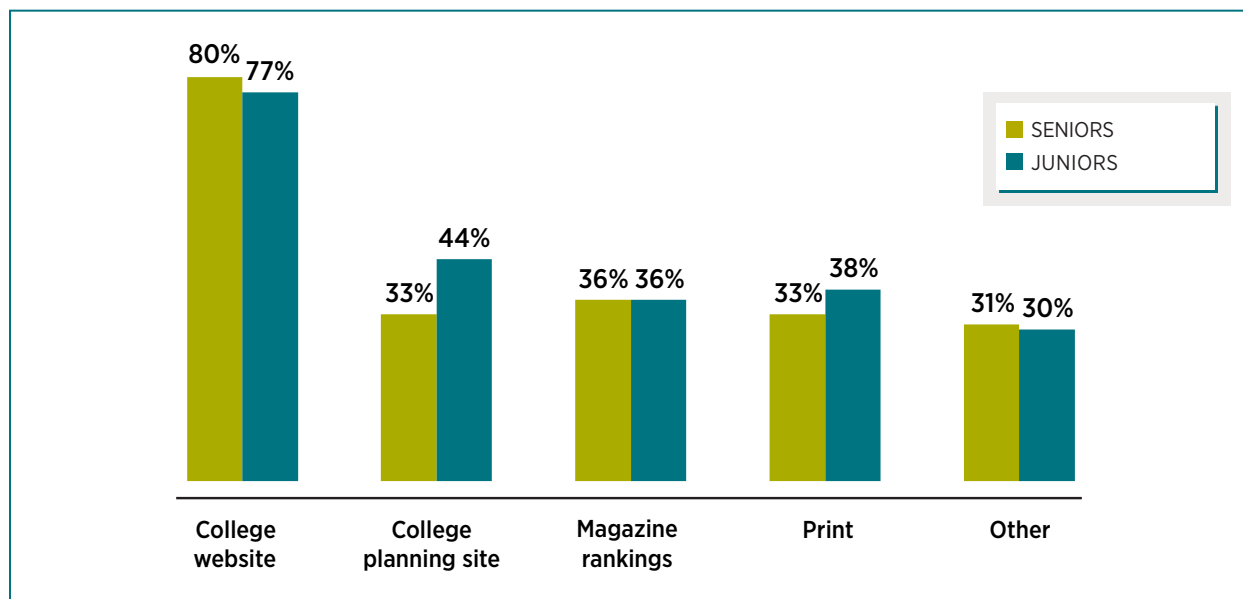


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In addition, college websites are by far the most influential resource for students when they are researching colleges. For juniors, online college planning sites were the second-most influential resource, showing the importance of going online to research institutions for today's students.

**Figure 2: Most influential resources when researching colleges**

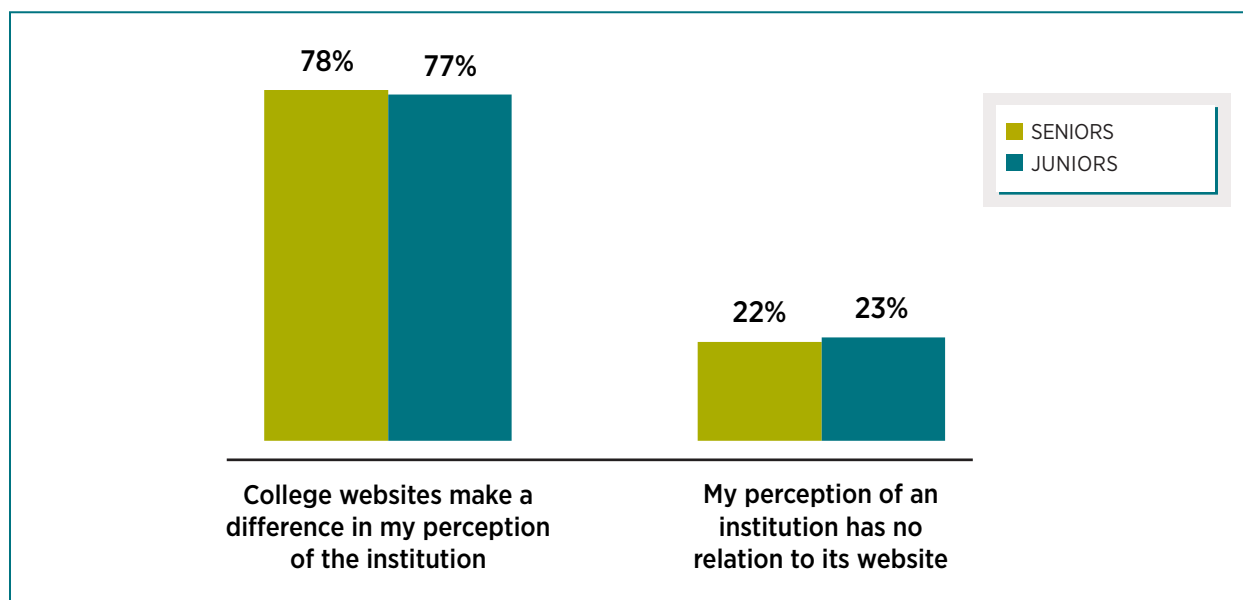
(1-5 scale; percentage of times a resource was ranked in the top two)



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Nearly eight out of 10 respondents also said that a college website affects how they perceive an institution. This figure rose 11 percentage points from the 2014 E-Expectations study.

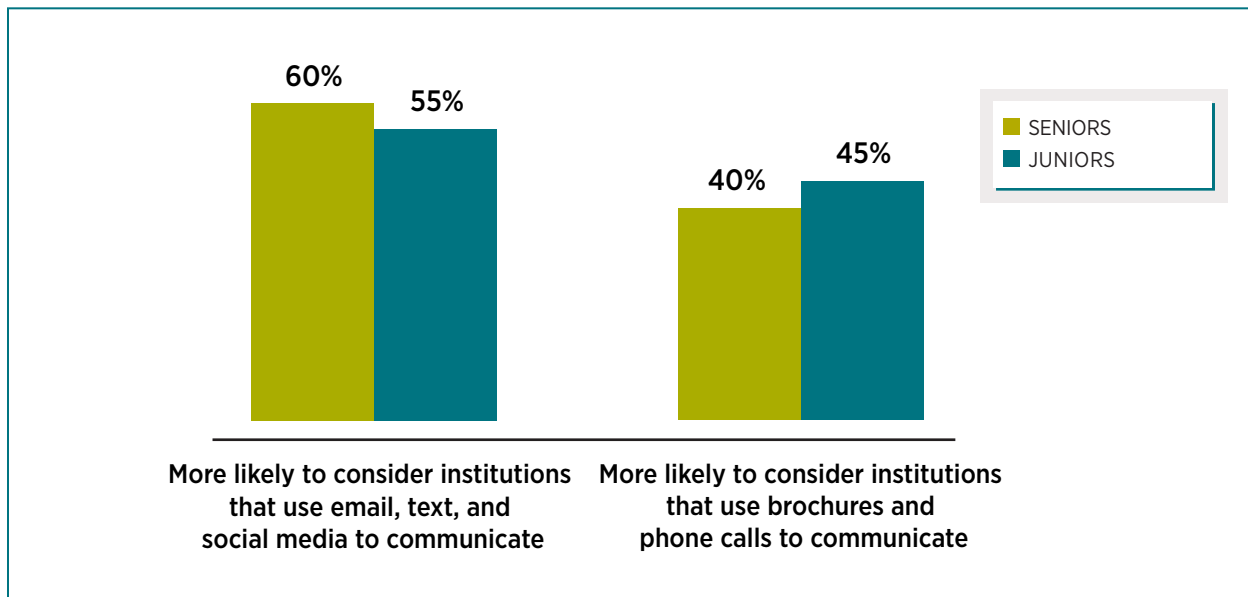
**Figure 3: Website impact on students' perception of an institution**



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With the ascension of college websites as the most used and most influential resource, it is not surprising that students tend to prefer electronic communications from campuses rather than printed pieces or phone calls.

**Figure 4: Preference for digital or print/phone for campus communications**



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However, it is notable that 40 percent of seniors and 45 percent of juniors said they were more likely to consider campuses that use print and phone communications. These channels are still vital parts of the college communication stream, and this split in preferences has remained fairly consistent over the years.

### ***E-Expectations rewind***

#### **A significant number of students have expressed interest in print and phone calls throughout the E-Expectations study**

In 2005 and 2007, we asked students to choose between two answers. In both years, the results were the same:

- I would rather look at a website than read brochures in the mail—56%
- I would rather read brochures to get details instead of reading them online—44%

In 2013 and 2014, we asked if they preferred to use web-based resources to learn about colleges, or print materials and phone calls:

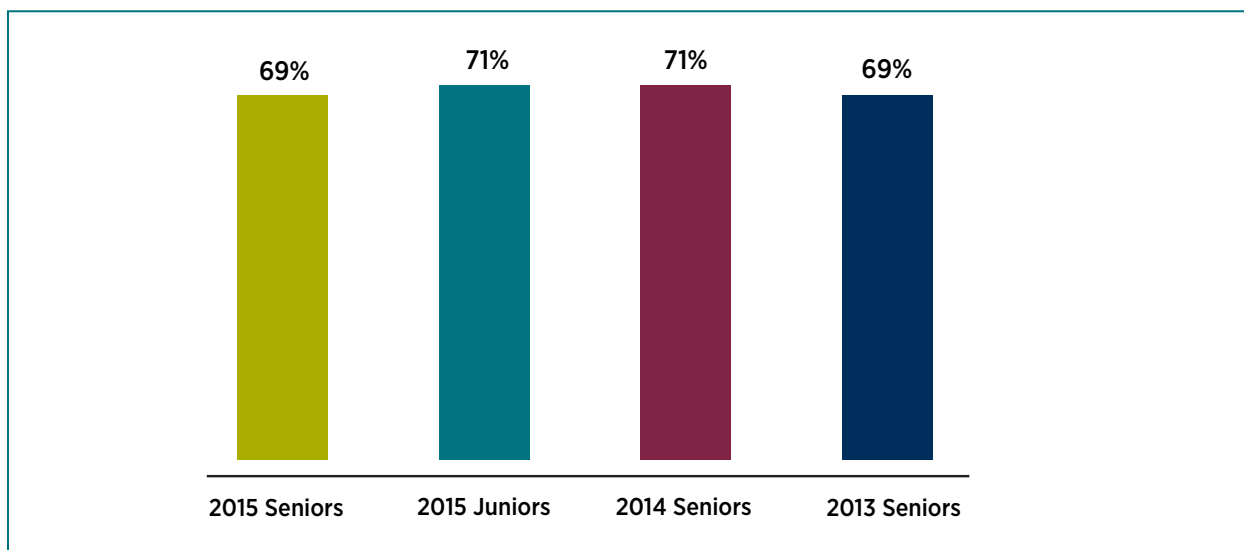
| Preference                      | 2013 | 2014 |
|---------------------------------|------|------|
| Web-based materials             | 58%  | 62%  |
| Print materials and phone calls | 42%  | 38%  |

While web-based materials and electronic communications have become the preferred channel for many students, a very significant number still want to receive print communications and phone calls from campuses.

## Mobile usage

The proliferation of web-enabled mobile devices is arguably the most significant change in e-recruitment in the last 10 years. Smartphones and tablets allow students to be constantly connected to the web, and many now use their mobile devices to browse college websites during their college searches.

**Figure 5: Percentage of students who have viewed a college site on a mobile device**

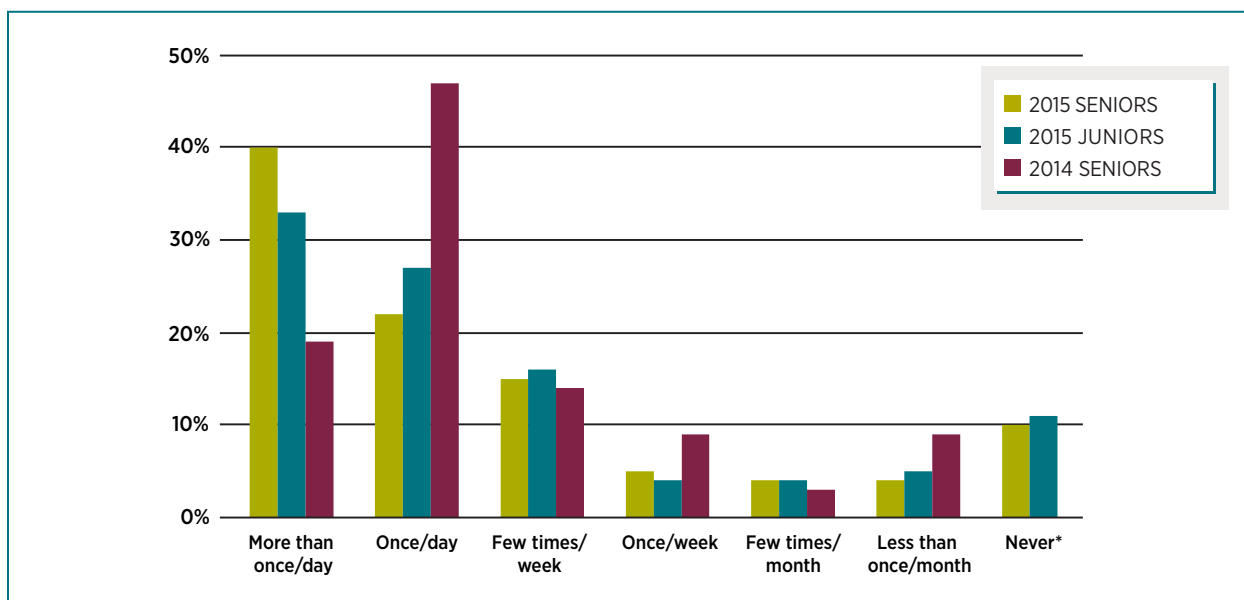


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Since the E-Expectations survey started tracking mobile use in 2013, about 40 percent of respondents have said they use their mobile devices for all of their online browsing. For campuses, that means a large segment of prospective students are always looking at college websites on smaller mobile screens.

More and more students are also reading emails and submitting forms on mobile devices. Nearly two-thirds of all respondents said they checked email on a mobile device at least once a day, up from 47 percent in 2013.

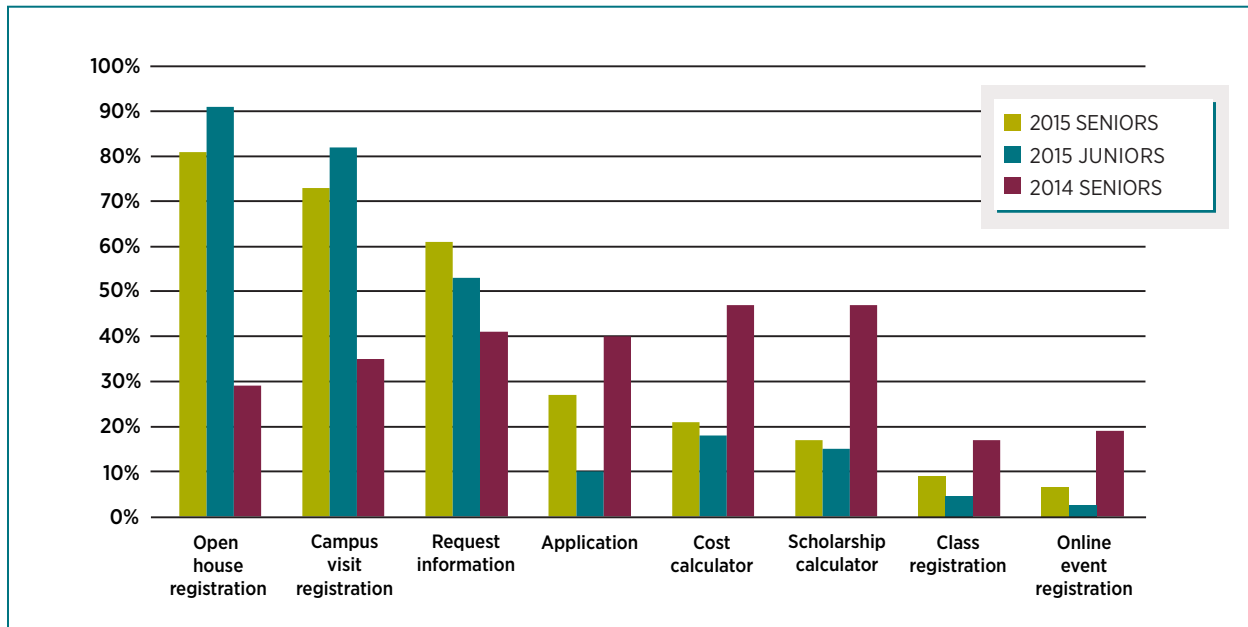
**Figure 6: Frequency of checking email on a smartphone**



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\*Note: "Never" was not listed as an answer option on the 2014 survey.

**Figure 7: Number who have completed forms and applications on mobile devices**



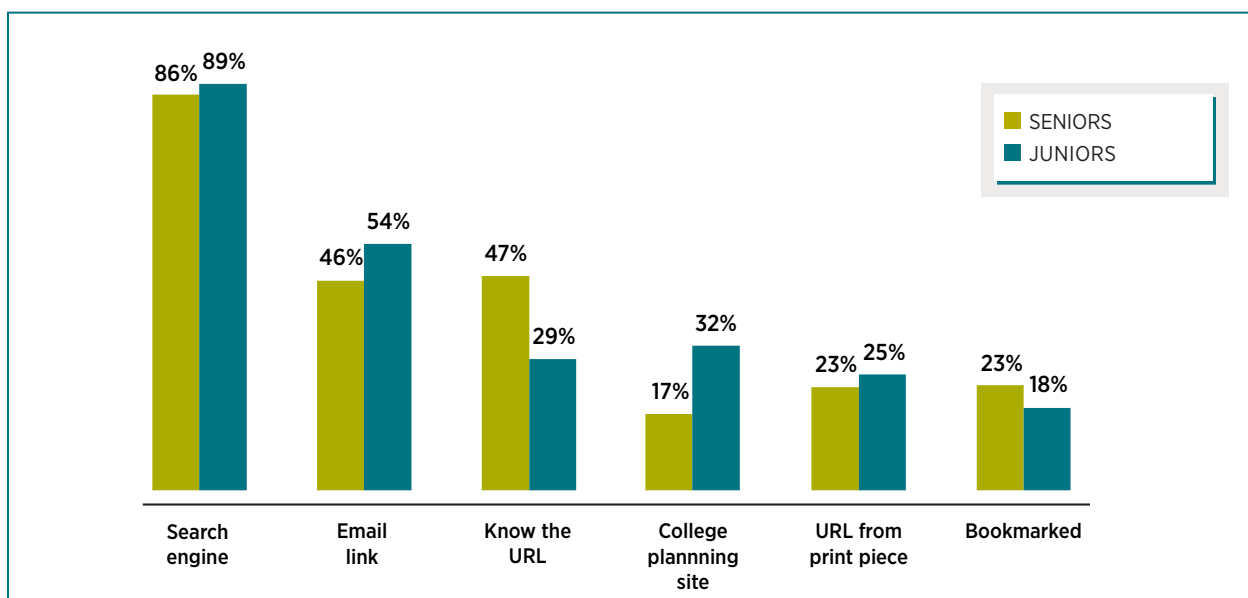
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These results reinforce the importance of optimizing digital content for mobile devices. This applies to the entire communication flow, from the website to email to landing pages to forms.

## Search engine use

The integration of search into the web experience has also had a profound impact on e-recruitment since the first E-Expectations study. Most students today use search engines to find college websites rather than entering URLs directly.

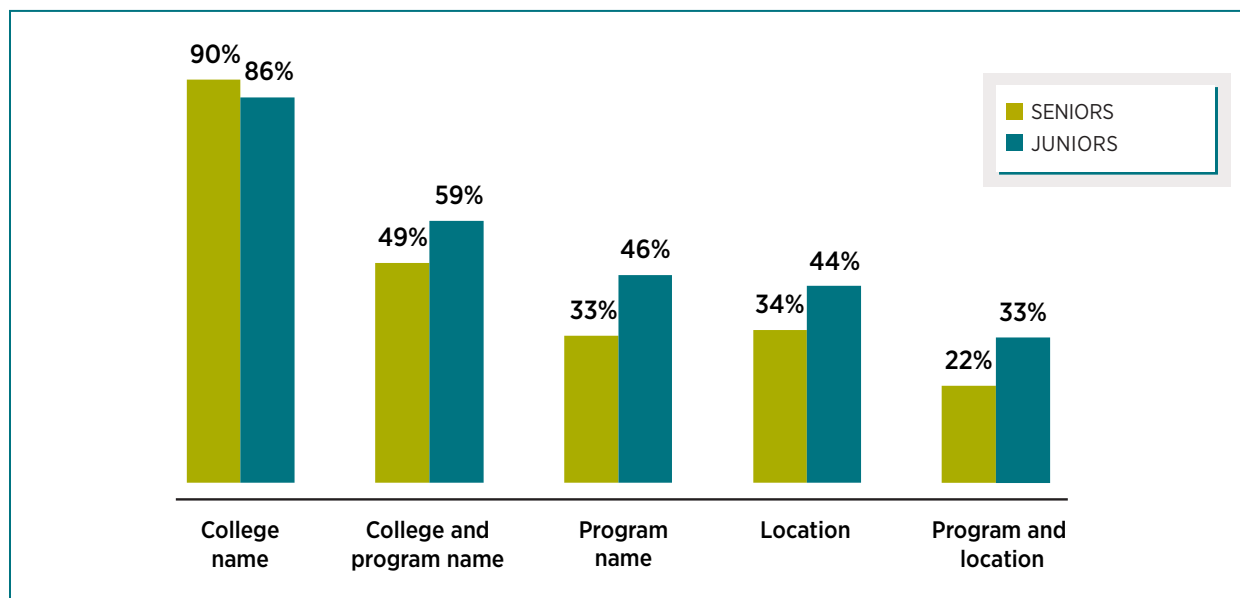
**Figure 8: Methods used to find a college website**



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Nearly 90 percent of juniors and seniors also use the name of the institution as their way to search for a campus. However, significant numbers also enter program and/or location info into their searches.

**Figure 9: Search parameters students use to find college websites**



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The reliance on search and the searches for programs and locations show that campuses need to be ready for prospective students to arrive on a variety of web pages instead of landing on the homepage first. Academic program pages in particular are increasingly becoming the “home” page for students researching colleges.

### ***E-Expectations rewind***

#### **Searching by college name has increased tremendously in the last six years**

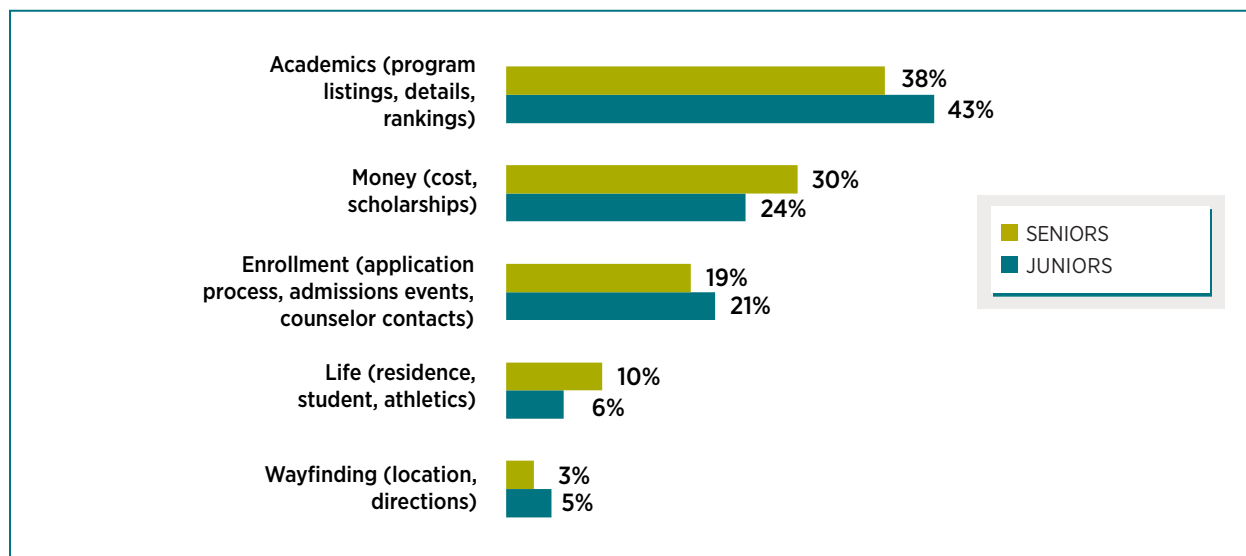
In 2009, 41 percent of E-Expectations respondents said they searched for colleges by entering the institution’s name in a search engine; 35 percent said they used other keywords to search for an institution. Compare that to Figure 9, where nearly 90 percent of all students said their searches include the institution’s name.

## Website content

When students arrive at a college website, what content do they want to find? How do they navigate around pages? What grabs their attention?

Respondents said they are drawn to information about academics, followed by pages on cost/financial aid, and then enrollment-related content.

**Figure 10: Top content students look for on a college website**



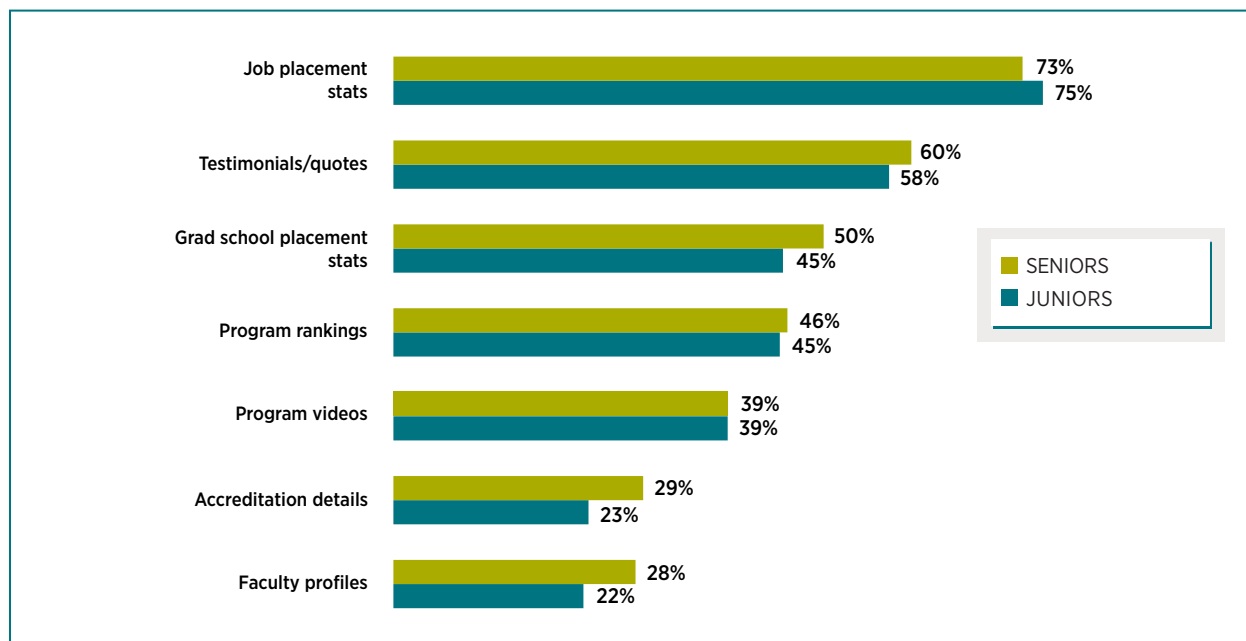
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The lower numbers for campus life and wayfinding do not mean these pages are not useful, but students are mostly focused on finding out what they can study, how much an education will cost, and how to apply and enroll.



The value of a college education has become a hot topic in recent years as well, as rising costs, increased borrowing, and job prospects for college graduates have become important concerns for prospective students and their families. What kinds of web content demonstrate value to students?

**Figure 11: Website content that demonstrates the value of an education from an institution**



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Students clearly place a premium on job outcomes, but a large number also want to read or see testimonials. Given the increasing number of undergraduates who are continuing to graduate programs, graduate/professional school placement information is also key.

This year, the E-Expectations survey also assessed what students click on when they arrive at an academic program page. Which links and labels are they drawn to? Respondents were shown a page for the biology program at Centennial University, a website for a fictitious campus. They then ranked their 10 most interesting links:

**Figure 12: Most interesting links for students to click**

- 1. Admissions & aid**  
**SENIORS: 30% JUNIORS: 33%**
- 2. Degree details**  
**SENIORS: 28% JUNIORS: 29%**
- 3. Academics**  
**SENIORS: 24% JUNIORS: 33%**
- 4. Application requirements**  
**SENIORS: 21% JUNIORS: 26%**
- 5. Campus & community**  
**SENIORS: 17% JUNIORS: 18%**
- 6. Program requirements**  
**SENIORS: 15% JUNIORS: 21%**
- 7. Logo**  
**SENIORS: 12% JUNIORS: 13%**
- 8. About**  
**SENIORS: 12% JUNIORS: 12%**
- 9. Students**  
**SENIORS: 11% JUNIORS: 12%**
- 10. Athletics**  
**SENIORS: 9% JUNIORS: 14%**



There was a pretty wide distribution of interest in these links, but again, information about academics, aid, and admission were distributed toward the top. This sample page also illustrates how an academic page can serve as a kind of homepage, with links to information outside of the degree or program itself.

### See a tutorial on search engine optimization for Centennial University

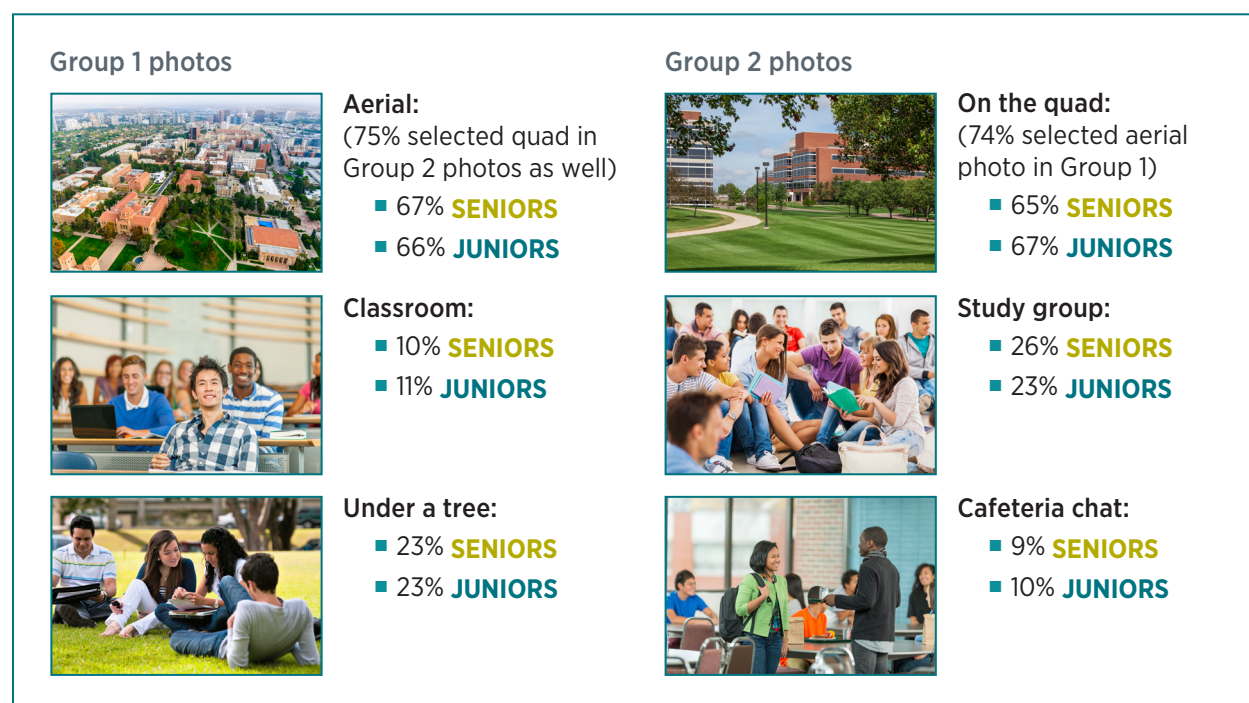
Visit [www.RuffaloNL.com/SEO](http://www.RuffaloNL.com/SEO) to see how to make college program pages more engaging to students and optimized for search.

## Web page photos

Photography is a key element of any campus website. Images draw the eye of students and can lead them toward important content and support the message of the page (such as the student in the lab on the biology page in Figure 12).

But which photos are students drawn to? For the first time, the E-Expectations survey asked students to review the kinds of photos they might see on a campus website. They were shown two sets of photos, both of which had a campus/architectural image and two that were more focused on students or campus interactions, and asked to pick which of the three photos they found most appealing.

**Figure 13: Most appealing types of photos on a campus website**

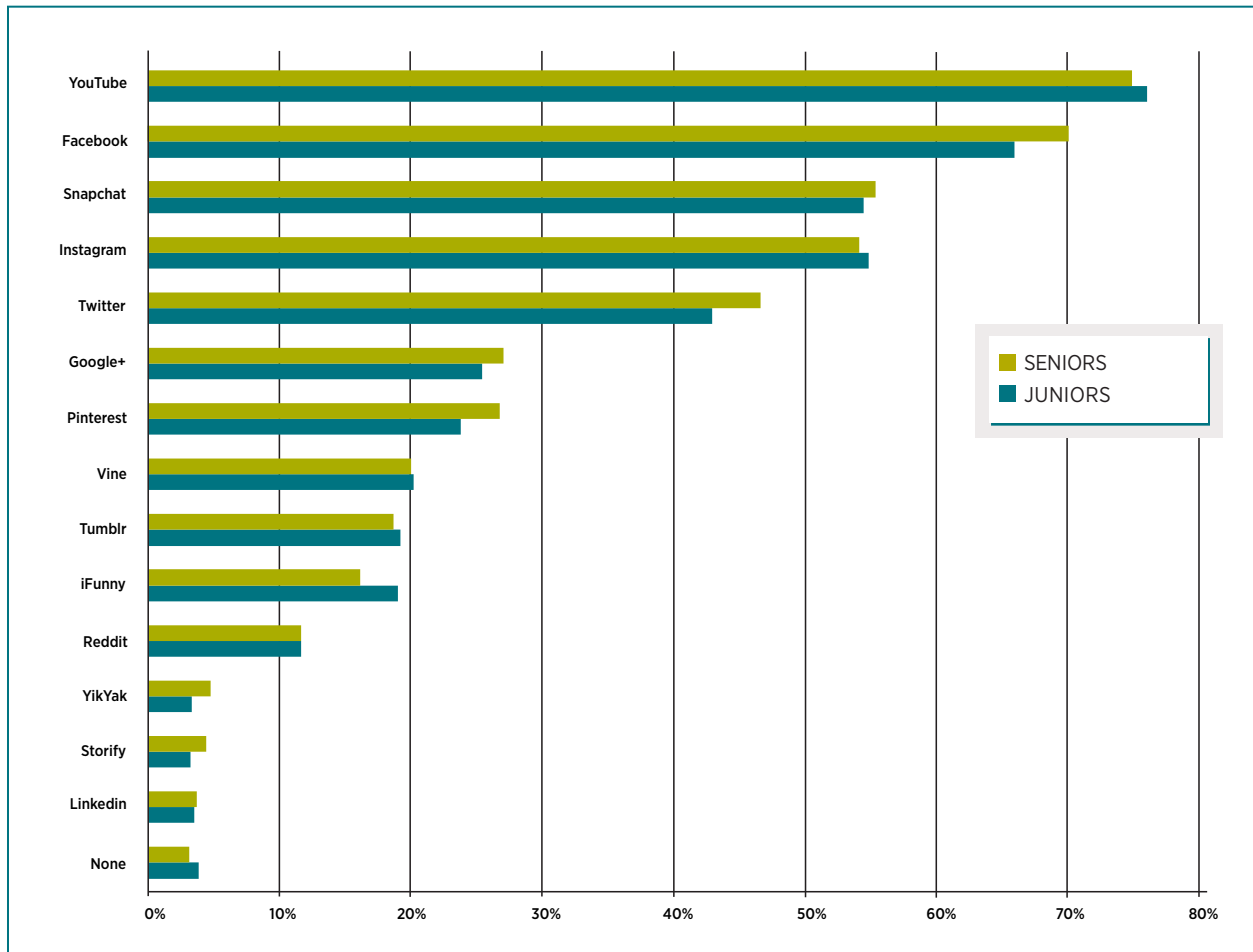


In both instances, two-thirds of students chose the campus/location image. Students did not provide the reasons why they chose the photos they did, but it is possible that they do not strongly identify with campus photos that resemble stock photography. The images of the campus may give them a sense of place and allow them to picture themselves at an institution.

## Social media

YouTube and Facebook continue to lead the way as social media channels used by high school juniors and seniors, but Snapchat has leapt into third, while Instagram is right behind it. More than 40 percent of students also use Twitter, but there is a significant drop between that channel and the ones that come after.

**Figure 14: Social media channels used at least once per week by students**

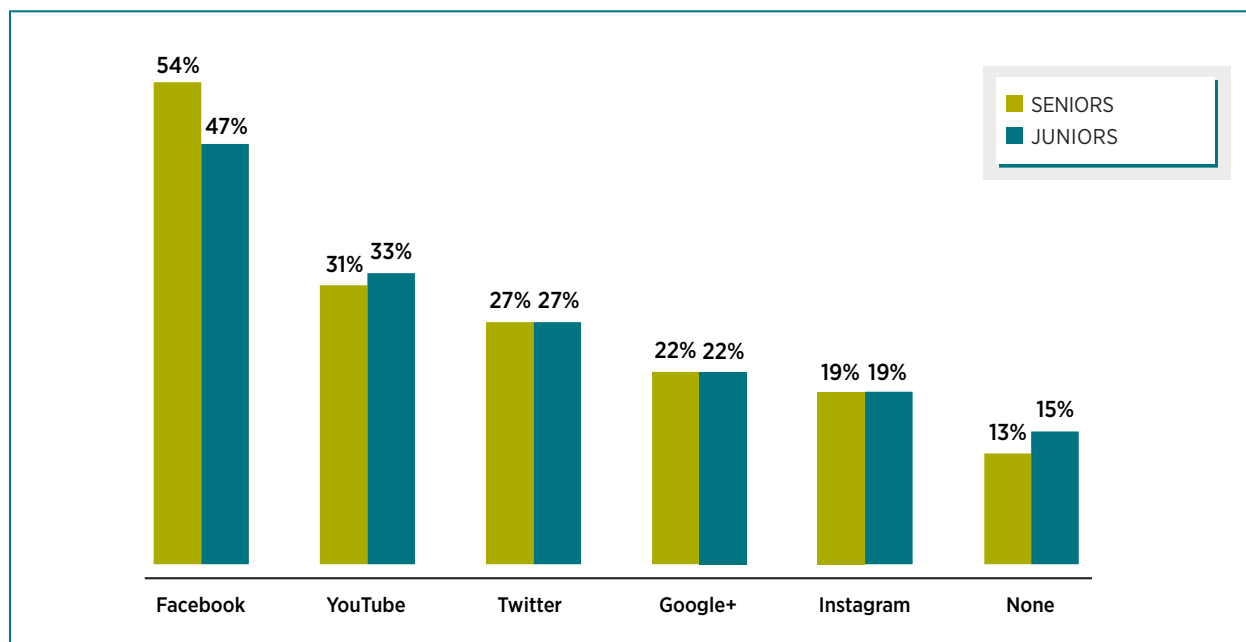


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These results were not remarkably different from the 2014 E-Expectations study. Snapchat had the largest increase of 16 percent, while Pinterest rose 8 percent and Twitter 6 percent. On the decline, Vine and Google+ dropped by 5 percent, while Facebook fell by 4 percent, although two-thirds of students still use it.

As shown in Figure 15, respondents ranked Facebook as the best social media site for researching colleges by a large margin.

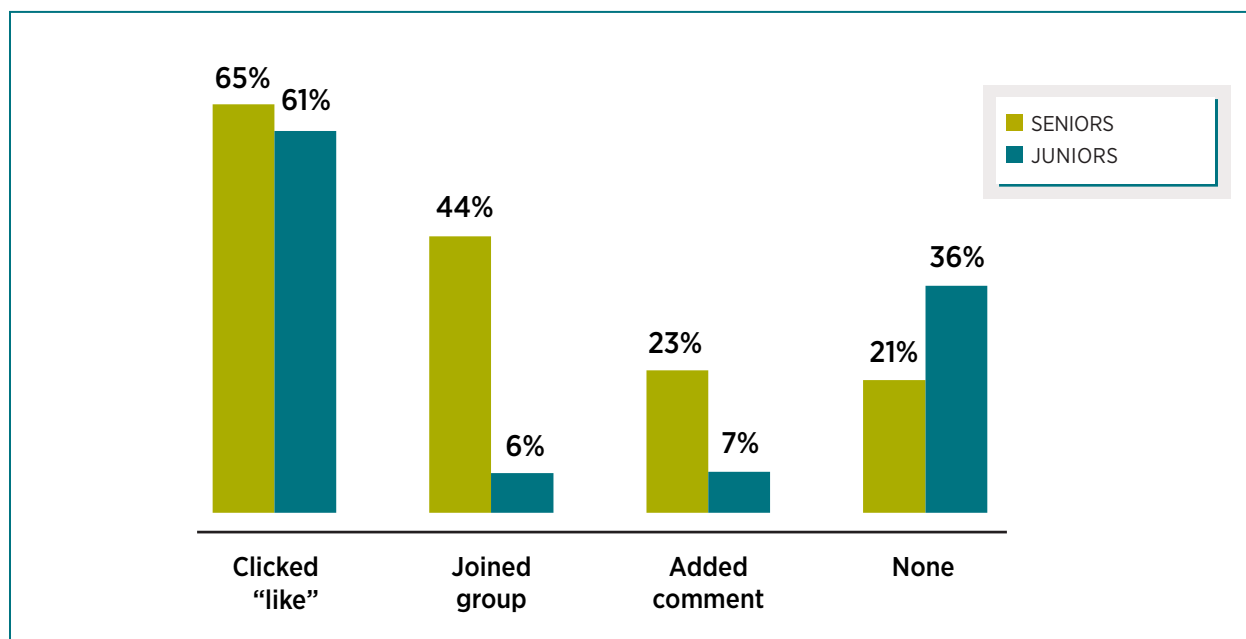
**Figure 15: Social media sites that are best for researching colleges**



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Sixty-five percent of seniors and 44 percent of juniors have looked at an institution's Facebook page, and this year, more than 60 percent clicked "like" compared to 36 percent in 2014.

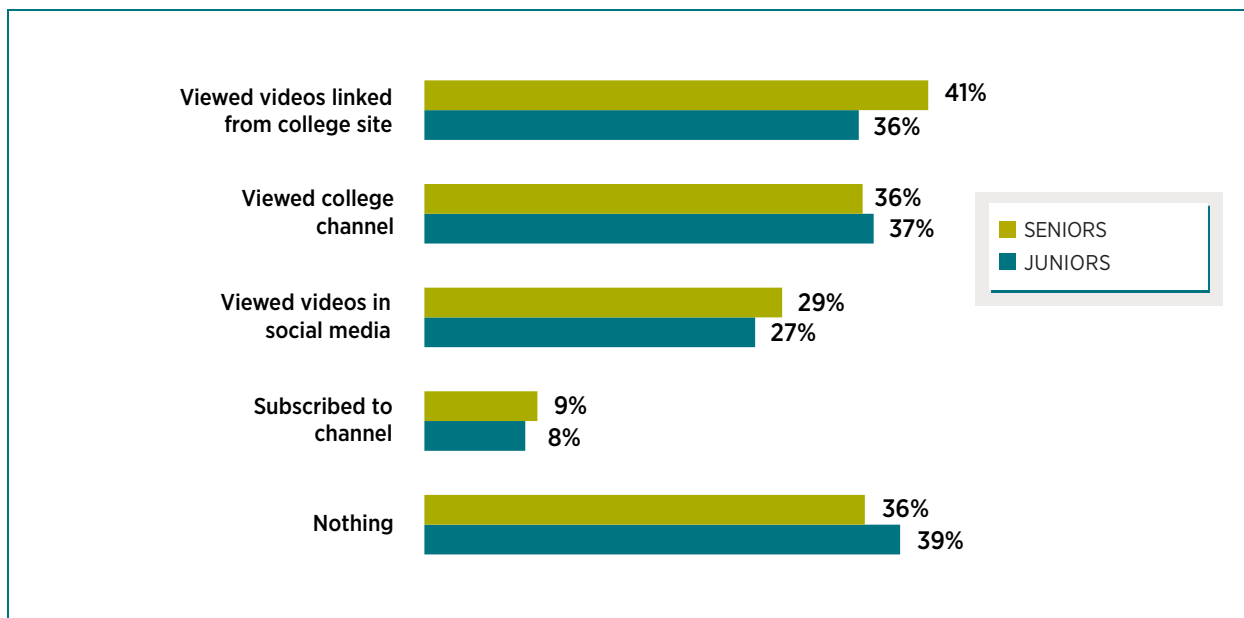
**Figure 16: Actions students have taken after looking at an institution's Facebook page**



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YouTube is also very popular among high school students, with nearly 75 percent of seniors and juniors saying they used YouTube at least once per week. About 30-40 percent reported viewing a college's YouTube page or related videos.

**Figure 17: YouTube use during the college search process**



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Twitter use also rose this year, with 45 percent of seniors and 42 percent of juniors saying they use Twitter at least once per week. However, only 30 percent of seniors said they followed feeds from campuses—down from 37 percent in 2014. For juniors, just 22 percent followed a Twitter feed from a college or university.

### ***E-Expectations rewind***

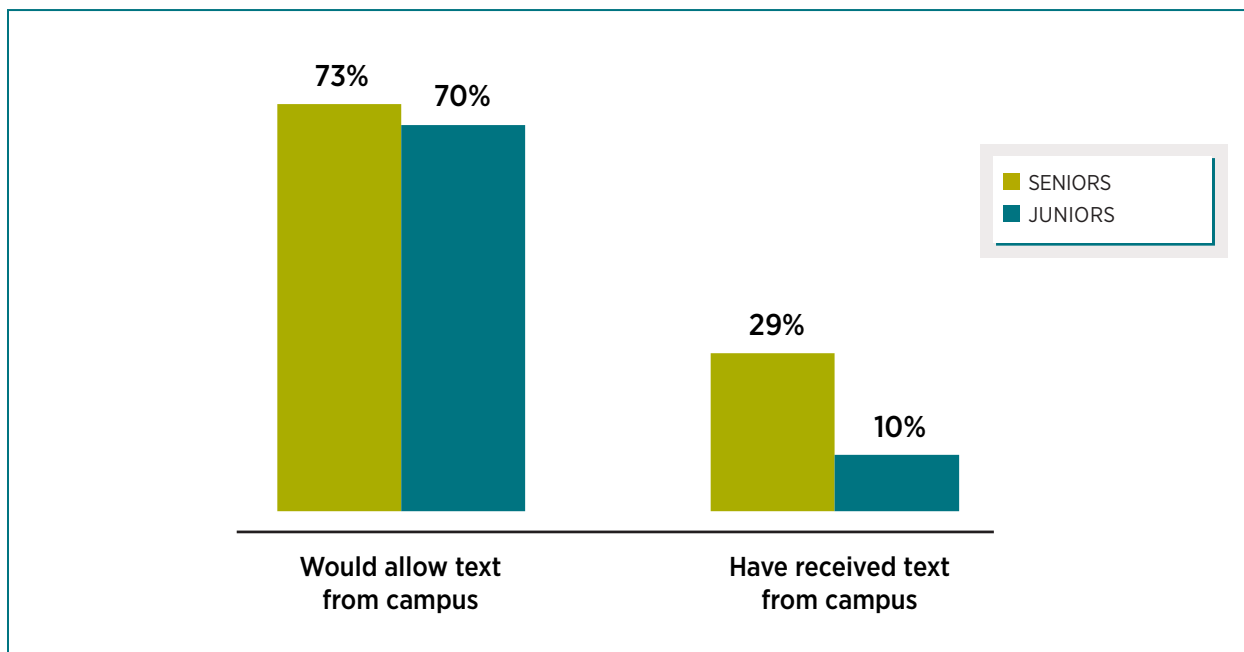
#### **The social media explosion illustrates the need to stay ahead of communication trends**

The 2007 E-Expectations study was the first to look at social media. That year, only 20 percent of students said they had used Facebook or Myspace to look at a college-specific page. One-third had used those channels to connect with current students at a campus. As Figures 14-17 show, social media has not only become an integral part of the online experience for students, but an important part of the college search process for many. The rapid growth and integration of social media into the college search process shows why it is important for campuses to be aware of emerging e-communication trends so they increase their opportunities to engage students.

## Text messages

The willingness to receive text messages from a campus is one of the more significant changes in this year's study.

**Figure 18: Text messaging from campuses**



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Nearly 75 percent of seniors said they were willing to receive text messages, a jump from 53 percent in 2014, while 69 percent of juniors were also willing to receive text messages from colleges. This willingness has not translated into action among institutions, however, as only 30 percent of seniors and 10 percent of juniors said they had received text messages.

## ***E-Expectations rewind***

### **Students have become much more open to text messages in the last 10 years**

When the first E-Expectations report was published in 2005, there was a growing belief that texting was the new email for high school students. Yet in that first study, 56 percent of participants said campuses could *not* text them. Now, more than 70 percent have expressed willingness to receive those texts from institutions.

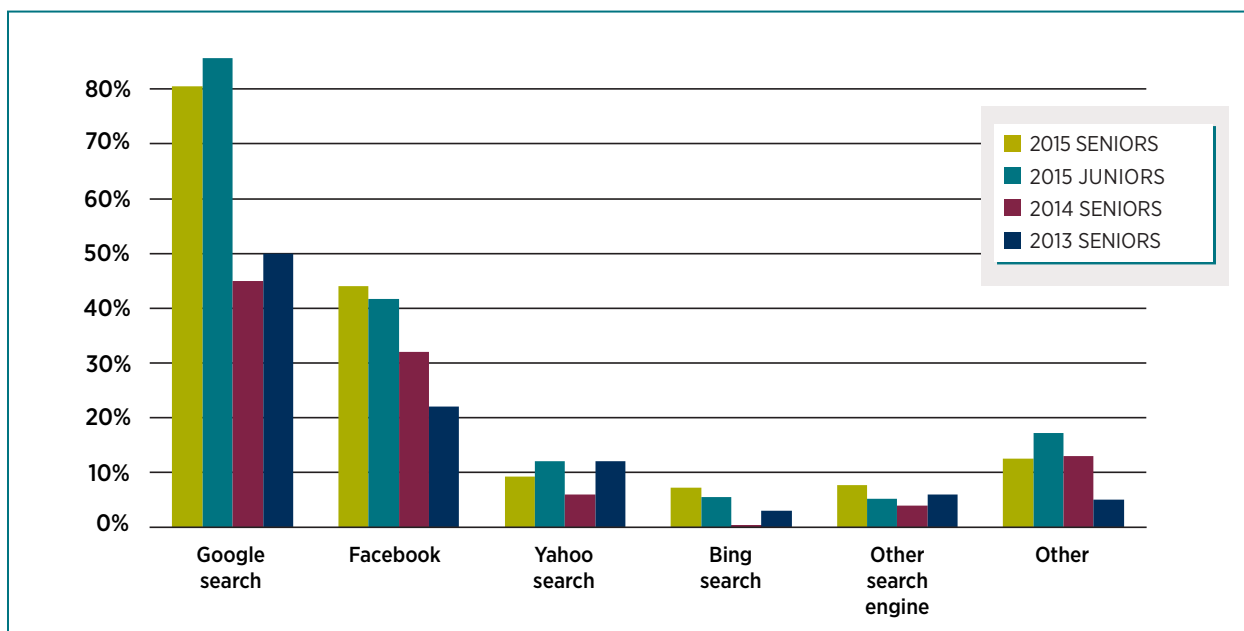
## Paid interactive marketing

Paid interactive marketing presents new opportunities to engage prospective students, and more than one-third of students have clicked on a paid interactive ad from a college.

- Seniors: 34 percent have clicked on an ad.
- Juniors: 43 percent have clicked on an ad.

Most students have clicked on these ads from Google search results, although 40 percent of students said they had also clicked on a paid interactive ad on Facebook.

**Figure 19: Where students click on paid interactive ads**



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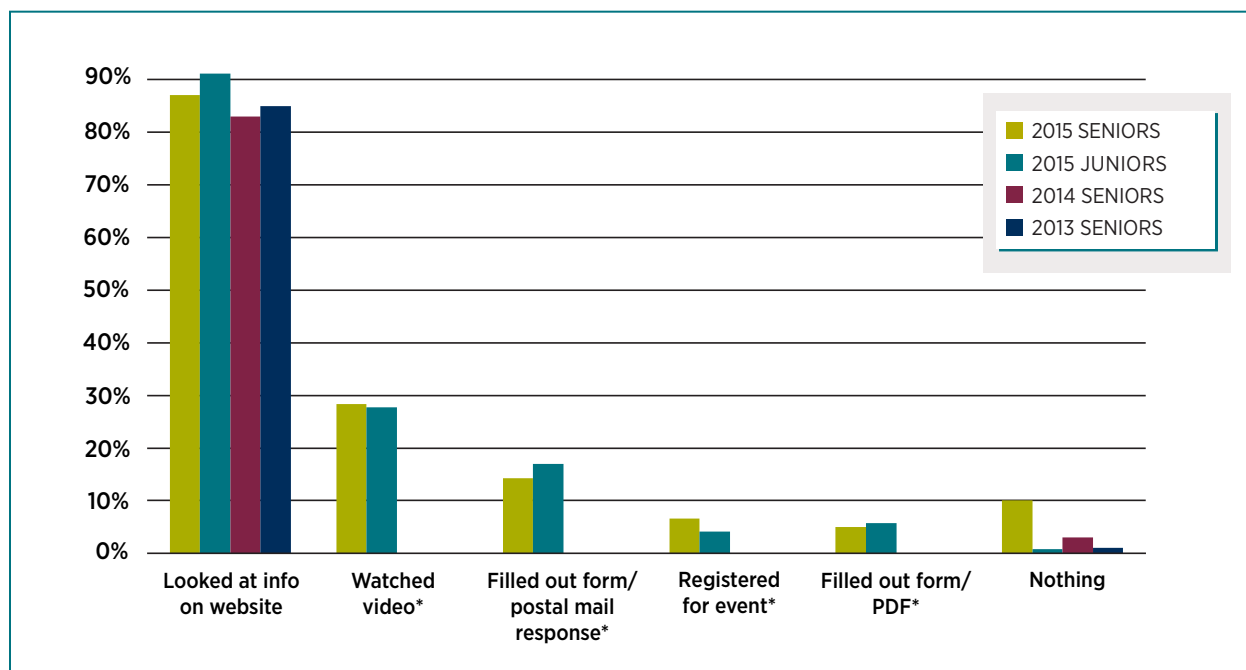
Students who clicked on these ads were also more likely to have engaged in other key e-communications, including:

- 10 percent more likely to have visited a college Facebook page.
- 10 percent more likely to have viewed a college website on a mobile device.
- 10 percent more likely to use online chat.
- 10 percent more likely to give an email address.
- 17 percent more likely to open an email from an unknown institution.

Eight out of 10 students who clicked on an ad also said they looked at the information on the resulting web page, but few took any additional actions.



**Figure 20: Actions taken by students after clicking on a paid interactive ad**



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\*Note: These answer options were not included on the 2014 and 2013 surveys.

Given the number of students who will click on a paid interactive ad and look at a web page, campuses should look for ways to incentivize interaction on their landing pages.

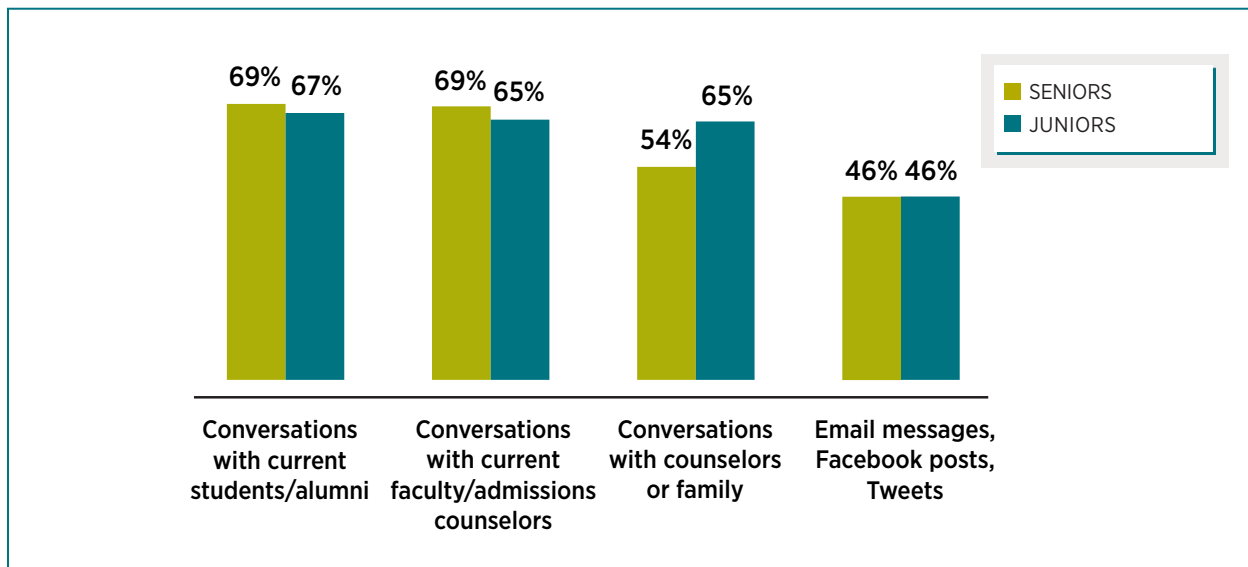
## Online conversations

Since the E-Expectations research project began, there has been a change from talking at prospective students online through static web copy to engaging them in online conversations. Social media, chat, instant messaging, and webcasts all facilitate those conversations.

As Figure 21 shows, conversations with students, alumni, faculty, and counselors all have a strong influence on student behavior.

**Figure 21: Influence of conversations on the enrollment decision**

*(1-5 scale, 5= most influential; percentage of times answers were in the top two)*

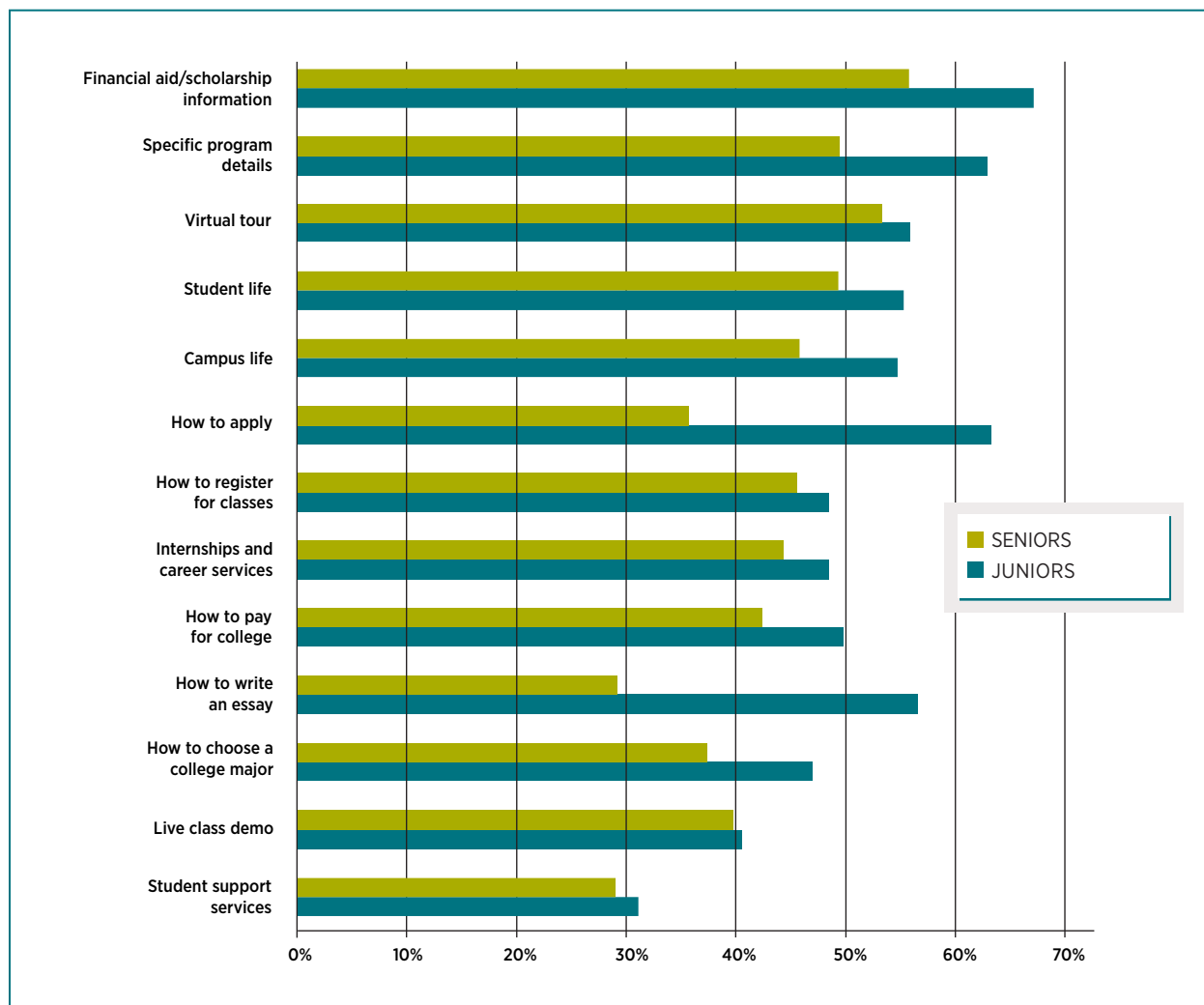


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Most prospective students have not attended a webcast—16 percent of seniors, 9 percent of juniors—but half of all seniors and 70 percent of juniors said they would. This suggests that campuses are underutilizing this method for facilitating conversations with multiple students.

Respondents also showed interest in a wide variety of webcast topics, with more than 50 percent of juniors expressing interest in multiple webcast subjects.

**Figure 22: Interest in topics for webcasts**



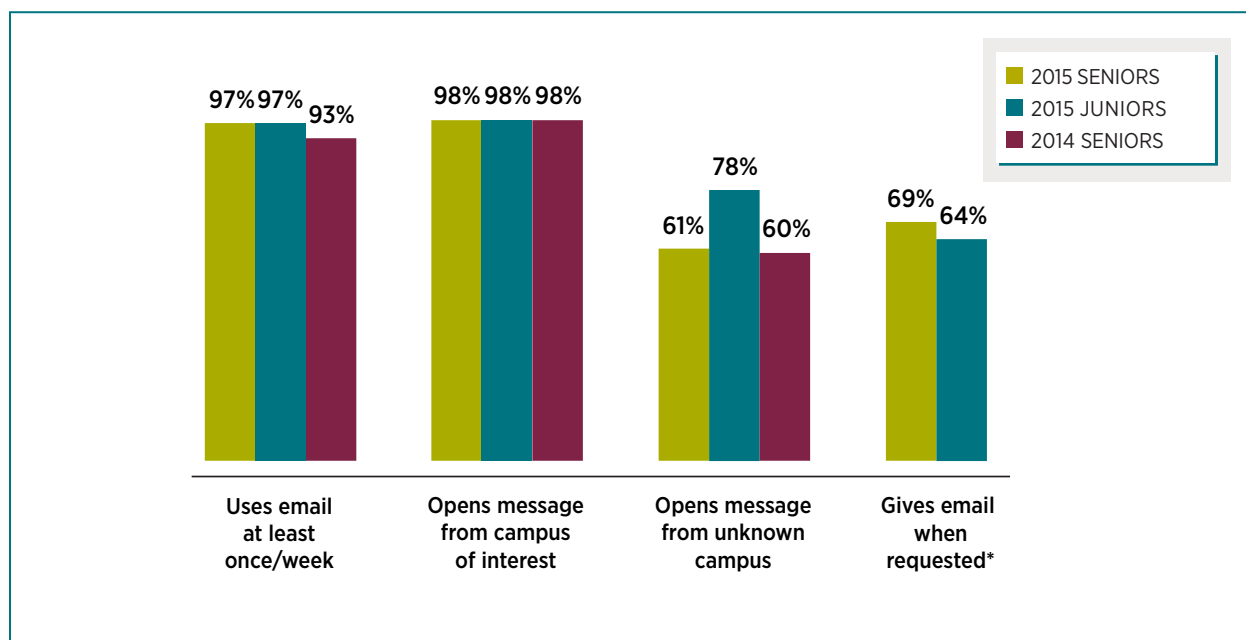
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One interesting result is that half of seniors and juniors expressed an interest in virtual tours through webcasts. This is one campuses should consider exploring, especially if they tend to enroll significant numbers of students who are from more distant markets.

## Email usage

For years, the E-Expectations project has surveyed attitudes toward email, in part to see if email usage and attitudes changed in the wake of text messaging and social media. However, students still use email frequently when researching colleges and are extremely receptive to opening emails from campuses, even those they do not know.

**Figure 23: Email usage and attitudes**



\*Note: the 2014 study did not ask respondents if they would provide an email when requested.

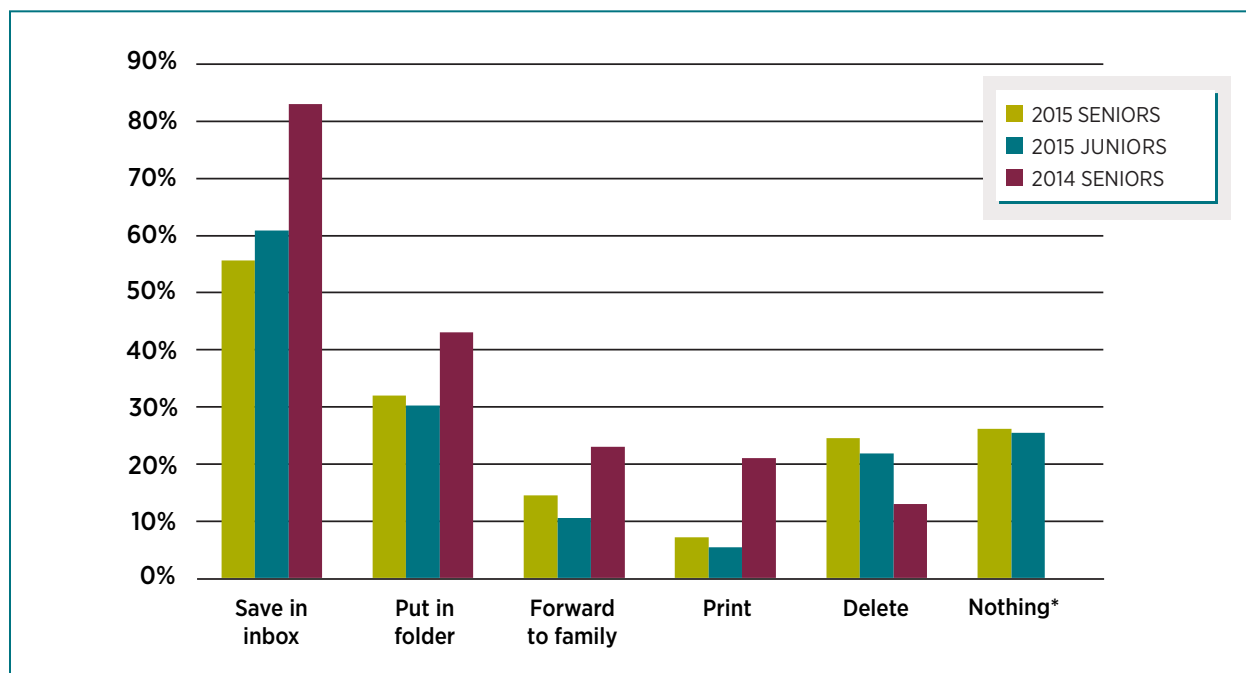
## *E-Expectations rewind*

### Students more likely to use email once per week now than a few years ago

In 2011, 86 percent of students said that they used email once per week—a number that dipped to 82 percent in 2012. Likewise, 97 percent of students in 2012 said they would open email from a campus they were interested in, a figure that has remained above 95 percent every year since. In 2012, 68 percent also said they would open an email from an unknown institution, another figure that has stayed consistent and actually risen substantially among juniors in 2015.

Students also tend to hang onto emails. As the next figure shows, only about one in five students said they deleted the emails they received.

**Figure 24: Actions students take after receiving an email**



\*Note: The 2014 study did not have “nothing” as an answer to this item.

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As Figure 6 showed earlier in this report, two-thirds of students are also checking their email on smartphones on a daily basis. So email use by students during the college search process may be happening more frequently on smaller screens, but it has not subsided in the last 10 years.

## 10 recommendations for connecting with prospective students online

1. **Your website impacts the perception of your institution**—As the college search process has become more and more digital in the last decade, the quality of a college website has had increasing influence on a student's opinion of an institution. When your website provides a quality experience—including design, content, navigation, and engagement—you will help convey the quality of your institution.
2. **Your entire digital communication flow needs to be optimized for mobile devices**—Mobile optimization and responsive design have been hot topics for college website design for several years now, but the 2015 results make it clear that all college e-communications need to be optimized for mobile. Whether students visit a web page, read an email, fill out a form, or view a video, that experience needs to read and function well on a smartphone.
3. **Optimize your search rankings**—For many students today, the college search process begins with a query into a search engine. While they often look for campuses by name, they may also search for academic programs, locations, or other keywords that are not branded for your campus. It is imperative that your institution rank high for any relevant searches, especially for programs of study.
4. **Provide many pathways to information from every page**—The results shown from the web page test for Figure 12 reveal students may click on a whole host of links from any given page. Be prepared for this decentralized flow and accommodate quick access to key information—academics, financial aid, admissions, outcomes, campus life—from any page.
5. **Photos of your campus may be more appealing than “stock” photos of your students**—In the photo test for Figure 13, two-thirds of students preferred the campus images to ones of students or campus life. While this test does not reveal why, it shows the importance of reviewing photos. Offering a blend of images that allow students to see how they might fit in with the current student body should be the goal, as well as providing a clear sense of your campus layout and setting.
6. **Text them**—Students are more open to receiving texts than ever, and text messaging is a great, efficient method for continuing engagement, alerting students to key deadlines, and prompting actions they need to take to move toward enrollment.
7. **Put the interactive in paid interactive marketing**—There are enough students clicking on paid interactive ads on Google and Facebook that campuses should use these cost-effective advertising methods. However, make sure that students have more to do than read after they click. Create content like e-brochures with eye-catching topics that students can receive if they provide their contact information.
8. **Get them in touch with faculty, students, and alumni through online conversations**—Your faculty, current students, and alumni have strong sway over prospective students. Create online opportunities to connect with them, whether it's through webcasts, online chats, or other methods. These conversations are a great way to keep them engaged and get individualized answers to their questions.
9. **Measure what works and use data to guide decisions**—How might your students be different? What is happening with your population in terms of mobile adoption? How are your social media channels supporting engagement goals? Make sure you capture key data through web analytics, email open and click rates, SEO rankings, and other data points that help you measure the success of your efforts.
10. **Maintain a healthy, multichannel communications program**—While E-Expectations has primarily focused on the attitudes and expectations for electronic communication, the survey has repeatedly shown that print and phone communications remain a solid part of a robust communications campaign. Even in an era of digital communication, 40 percent of students said they prefer campuses that mail communications to them or contact them by phone. Successful institutions will continue to provide a plethora of methods for communicating with and contacting students, so they can meet students where *they* want to connect.

## Appendix: About the participants

| Class of 2015 ( <b>SENIORS</b> )<br>27.0% first generation | Class of 2016 ( <b>JUNIORS</b> )<br>24.8% first generation |
|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| GPA                                                        | GPA                                                        |
| A+ to A-: 45.4%                                            | A+ to A-: 56.1%                                            |
| B+ to B-: 52.1%                                            | B+ to B-: 40.1%                                            |
| C+ to C-: 2.01%                                            | C+ to C-: 3.5%                                             |
| Lower than C-: .4%                                         | Lower than C-: .3%                                         |
| Race/Ethnicity                                             | Race/Ethnicity                                             |
| Native American: 2.1%                                      | Native American: 3.7%                                      |
| Asian: 6.9%                                                | Asian: 7.9%                                                |
| African American: 8.6%                                     | African American: 10.7%                                    |
| Hispanic: 13.0%                                            | Hispanic: 17.2%                                            |
| Middle Eastern: .6%                                        | Middle Eastern: 1.3%                                       |
| Caucasian: 42.8%                                           | Caucasian: 55.5%                                           |
| College type                                               | College type                                               |
| Private: 33.5%                                             | Private: 51.0%                                             |
| State/Public: 94.2%                                        | State/Public: 90.5%                                        |
| Community/Junior: 8.2%                                     | Community/Junior: 12.3%                                    |
| Vo-Tech: 6.3%                                              | Vo-Tech: 8.3%                                              |
| Will participate in sports                                 | Will participate in sports                                 |
| 50.0%                                                      | 66.0%                                                      |
| Location of student                                        | Location of student                                        |
| Rural: 21.5%                                               | Rural: 18.9%                                               |
| Urban: 28.1%                                               | Urban: 28.7%                                               |
| Town: 16.3%                                                | Town: 15.9%                                                |
| Suburban: 34.1%                                            | Suburban: 36.4%                                            |
| Enrollment stage                                           | Enrollment stage                                           |
| Inactive: 1.3%                                             | Inactive: 3.8%                                             |
| Prospect: 3.5%                                             | Prospect: 48.8%                                            |
| Inquiry: 5.9%                                              | Inquiry: 49.6%                                             |
| Applied: 3.7%                                              | Applied: 1.1%                                              |
| Accepted: 85.5%                                            | Accepted: 1.7%                                             |

## Questions about this report or optimal strategies for your web communications?

We welcome your questions and comments about the E-Expectations study. We are also available to discuss your specific goals and challenges for your online communication initiatives.

Send an email to [ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com](mailto:ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com) or call 800.876.1117, and we will be happy to answer your questions.

## About the survey sponsors



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**NRCCUA (National Research Center for College & University Admissions)** conducts the nation's largest educational planning survey among high school students. This valuable program facilitates a key link between the individual educational goals and preferences of students and the vast offerings of colleges and universities.

### How to cite this report

Ruffalo Noel Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive, & NRCCUA. *2015 e-expectations report*. Cedar Rapids: Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015. Available at [www.RuffaloNL.com](http://www.RuffaloNL.com).

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