THE EDUCATION CONSERVANCY

Information Matters

Addressing the information needs of prospective college students

Executive Summary

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors of this report are Lloyd Thacker and Lisa Reynolds of the Education Conservancy, and Elena Falcone and Sambhavi Cheemalapati of Consumers Union.

Education Conservancy (EC) is a nonprofit organization committed to reforming college admissions in the public interest. By affirming educational values, EC works to reestablish educational authority, equity, access, and success as college admissions precepts. It strives to unite educational principles with admission practices and enhance college admissions as an educationally beneficial experience. It returns control of college admissions to those who are directly involved in education: students, colleges, parents and high schools.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many of our nation's students are facing increasing complexity and confusion as they struggle to decide whether, where, and how to go to college. Some are bombarded with information while others receive too little information. All could certainly benefit from the right information. Amid the growing national movement to expand college access and improve student success, the high-stakes college-consideration process can and must be improved.

To this end, Lumina Foundation funded *Information Matters*, a joint project of the Education Conservancy and Consumers Union. The study builds on the research and insights that have emerged over the last decade and includes new consumer research to understand students' experiences with college selection information.

Based on the findings of the study, which are presented in this summary, the Education Conservancy has developed specific recommendations for improving information and its impact, and Consumers Union has produced a guide for students to help them identify and use information. The detailed report on which this summary is based indicates what colleges' clients need to know in order to make the best college-selection decisions. It identifies strategies to increase the availability of useful information and provide appropriate tools to help students use information to improve college selection. The report envisions a transformed college-admissions process that moves from a system designed as a series of consumer investigations and transactions to a resource-rich, student-centered, educational endeavor. Optimally, admissions should be a learning experience in which students actively investigate their own aspirations,

goals, readiness, interests, and aptitudes as they examine essential characteristics of institutions that best match their needs. The process should develop relationships not just between students and available information but also among students and their institutions and communities.

> **"**At its best, the college selection process is an iterative learning process: students learn about themselves as they learn about colleges, trying to identify and match personal needs with college characteristics.**"**

The methods used in this research included surveys of 2,313 students, a series of eight student focus groups, as well as an online poll of 198 college counselors, and 21 interviews with higher education experts, including organizational leaders, policy researchers, scholars, journalists, and others. Special effort was made to include the widest possible range of students, including those who may be considered "nontraditional" in some way.

KEY FINDINGS

• **Students conduct their college searches based primarily on their field of potential interest and perceptions of an institution's affordability, convenience, quality, and value.** In fact, as Table 1 indicates, all of these factors were rated highly by

Surveys and focus groups also underscored the fact that many prospective college applicants—particularly adult, African-American, and low-income students—lack access to counselors, adequate school resources, adequate counseling or support, and do not have the benefit of

TABLE 1: What Students Look for When They Choose Colleges

Percentage of Survey Respondents to Whom Characteristic Was Important During Search

- Majors/field of study
- Academic Reputation
- Affordability
- Quality of Teaching and Learning
- Location/Convenience
- Flexible Class Scheduling
- Type of College
- Student Services
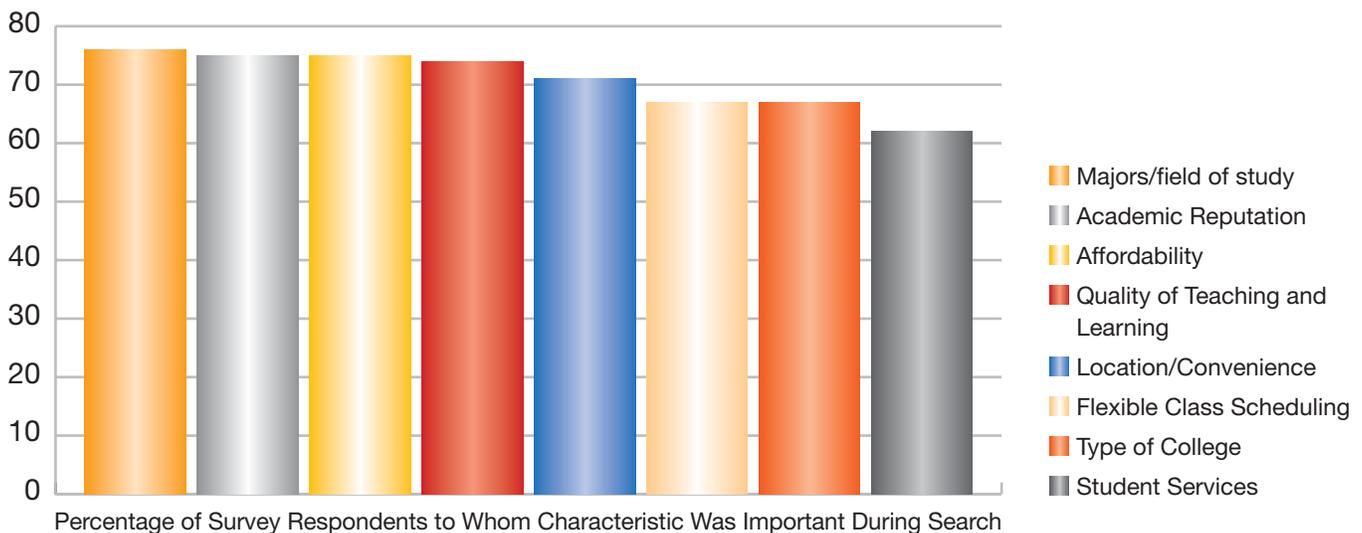
a vast majority of students. Twenty-first century students often narrow their searches quite early in the process. Students with education or guidance in college planning and research are more apt to conduct comprehensive college searches.

> ❝I would say to friends, people I trust: 'What are the goods? What are the bads?' and they would give me their honest opinion.❞
>
> *– Traditional college student from four-year institution.*

strong networks to guide them in finding and using college information. Seven in ten students (70 percent) say they are somewhat confident in their knowledge of what to look for to help them decide where to go to college. But surveys and focus groups also reveal that students recognize that they lack adequate information about crucial aspects of the search, particularly financial aid and key factors that set colleges apart, and they are confused by the overwhelming amount of information they must sift through. In focus groups, African-American students at two- and four-year institutions, in particular, described the college search process as stressful, overly competitive, overwhelming, and confusing. One expert observer noted that the K-20 information, counseling and support system is dysfunctional across multiple transition points that those involved in admissions "fail to recognize or help navigate." In fact, the observer noted: "We are not doing choice architecture to ensure college readiness, access, and success... We set people up so that if they don't ask, we don't tell."

- **Students commonly approach their search in ways similar to familiar product/service purchases: they talk to friends, family, and "experts" and use print and electronic sources to gather information. They prefer information from trusted sources (particularly friends and family) and are most skeptical of information supplied by colleges and their representatives.** Students and experts interviewed said that colleges that sent out too much information not only confused students but also made the institutions appear desperate. Table 2 presents data comparing the popularity of various sources. It indicates that students were about twice as likely to consult family members than teachers or counselors, institutional websites, and general websites; three times more likely than college directories or other websites, and six times more likely than student blogs. Table 3 conveys students' selections as the single most useful source of information. Integrating these two tables reveals that the popularity of a source coincided with its relative usefulness except in the area of printed materials from colleges. While nearly four in ten students (38 percent) consulted this source, only about one in ten (12 percent) found it most useful.

TABLE 2: Popularity of Information Sources

Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Used Source for College Information

Legend:
- Friends/family
- Brochures/printed materials from specific schools
- Websites of specific schools
- Teachers/Counselors
- College directories
- Websites with detailed information
- Student blogs
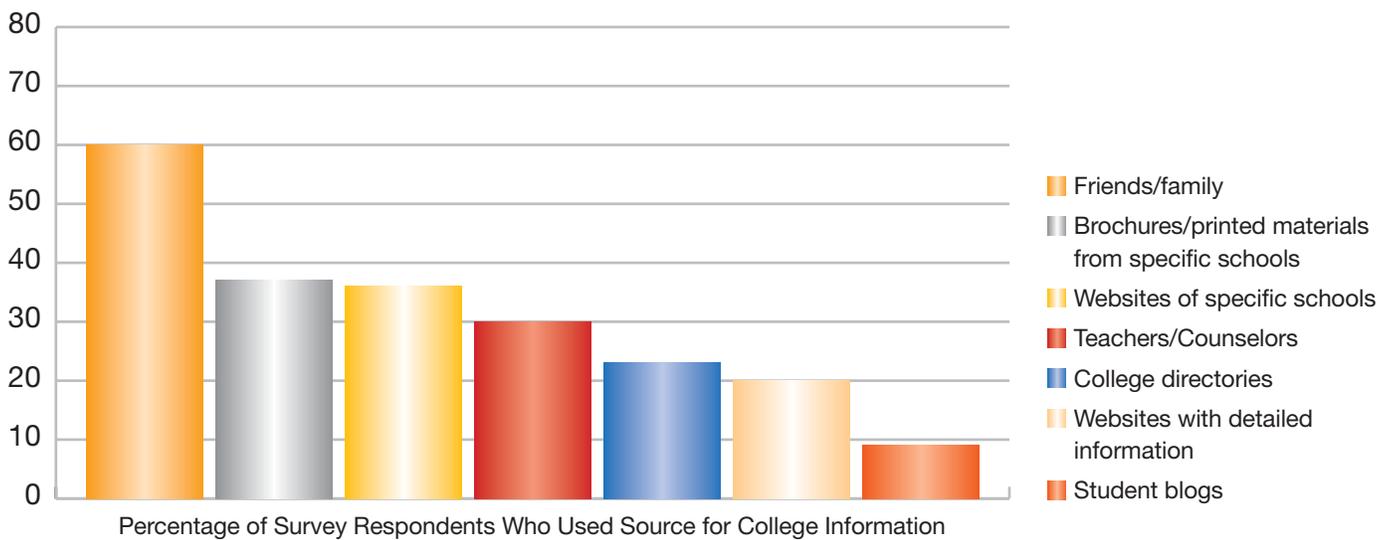
TABLE 3: Usefulness of Information Services
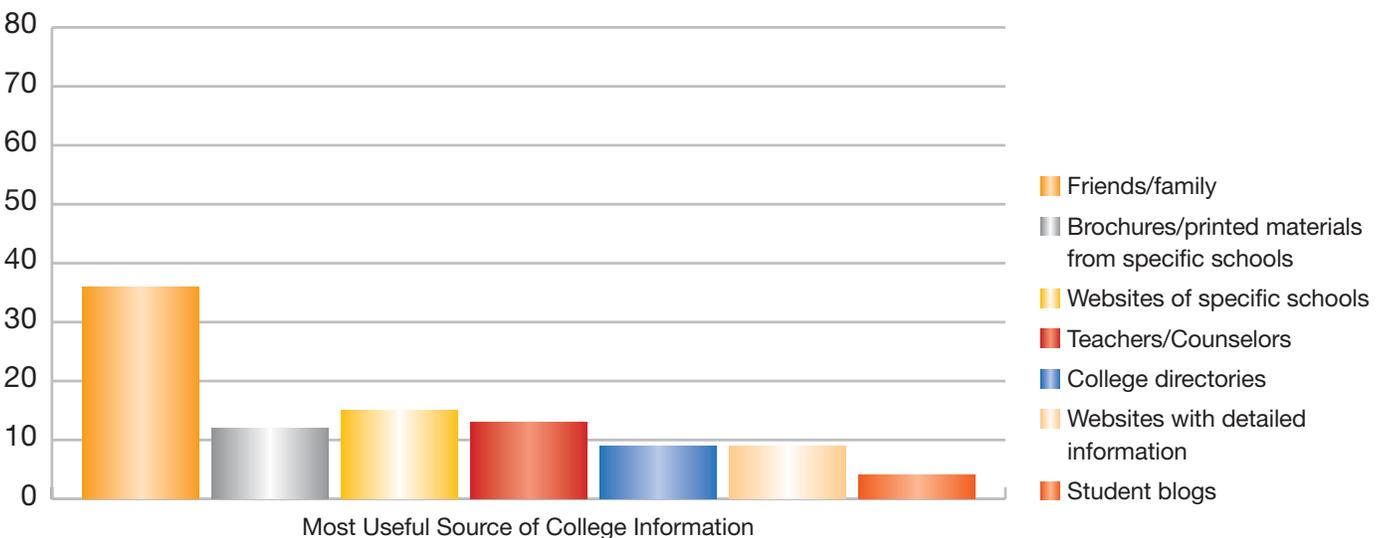
Most Useful Source of College Information

Legend:
- Friends/family
- Brochures/printed materials from specific schools
- Websites of specific schools
- Teachers/Counselors
- College directories
- Websites with detailed information
- Student blogs

- **Personal and trustworthy guidance during the consideration/application process is highly valued by students from all demographic backgrounds.** Those who do not experience it desire it, while those who experience it say they benefit—as it helps them identify their own goals and needs and match these with specific institutional characteristics and offerings.

- * **Students and professionals largely agree on the general types of information relevant to the college search. These include academic majors/fields of study and degrees offered, cost and** affordability, academic quality and educational experience, and college characteristics. The data elements prioritized within these categories sometimes vary, with 21st century students more likely to desire information on the educational experiences offered by an institution (e.g., how students' time is structured and how flexible course availability may be) and traditional students more likely to seek information on college characteristics (e.g., campus personality and college rankings) in order to gauge "fit."

Surveyed Students' Priorities	Surveyed Counselors' Priorities
Accreditation of the school*	Total cost to attend
Average financial aid package*	Size of student population
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)*	Campus facilities
Direct costs*	Campus personality
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Majors/degrees offered
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Average gift aid
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Physical setting
Availability of academic advising and support programs	Campus appearance/atmosphere
Types of learning opportunities	Rate of student retention
Physical setting	Types of extracurricular programs

*Note: All four of the information elements of topmost importance to student survey respondents were prioritized by each of the demographic subgroups examined.

- **Students find that the information of highest priority to help them make a decision is also likely to be unclear or difficult to understand.** For example, students identify financial information as the type they find most confusing or challenging to interpret. Students also want data to support questions concerning academic quality and educational experiences, but are unaware that relevant data are available and are unsure of what to look for.

- **In the recruitment process, some students (veterans and adults) typically prefer to be treated as members of subgroups with unique characteristics, while others (traditional-age college students regardless of race or ethnicity) prefer to be treated as individuals.**

Information Elements Considered Both Priority and Confusing to Student Survey Respondents Overall
Accreditation of the school
Availability of academic advising and support
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
Average financial aid package
Average student debt load at graduation
Direct costs
Types of learning opportunities

> "Students also want data to support questions concerning academic quality and educational experiences, but are unaware that relevant data are available and are unsure of what to look for."

- **College students think they generally do a good job of "satisficing"—making good decisions given the perspectives, tools, and information they have—while experts believe students would benefit by using better resources, approaches and information.** Such a comparison helps illuminate a very important yet little addressed distinction: that education belongs more in the category of what economists describe as an "experience good" as opposed to an "inspection good." Accordingly, if students are to make the best choices, they need guidance and information to help them understand how college selection is different from product selections. Experts and students interviewed said that students need to pay greater attention to such things as faculty, learning, and support systems. Students from all backgrounds told interviewers that if they had to do it over again they would have started earlier and/or included more of the crucial academic and student-success data that is not readily available. All respondents agreed that colleges could do a better job connecting prospective students directly with current students and/or faculty.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research with students and professionals and an in-depth exploration of the literature, *Information Matters* identified several areas where stakeholder action could improve the quality of information available to prospective students as well as those students' decision-making processes.

Our findings revealed one overarching recommendation, which encompasses all of the others and applies to all stakeholders. This recommendation calls for envisioning college admissions as a formative learning process—one that is governed by the needs of students and evaluated by how well those needs are met. Such a process is necessarily interactional in that it is iterative and educational for students and the institutions that recruit and educate them. This approach emphasizes students' learning relationships with institutions and communities, rather than simply fee-for-service transactions. It is consistent with recent research and provides a framework for more educational needs-focused investments by all parties.

The report identifies five crucial steps to make the admissions process more helpful to students and to ensure that students learn what they most need to know to make good decisions. The recommendations below also provide examples of how specific stakeholder groups could make an even greater impact.

> **"** Educational institutions should consider how they might coordinate and standardize deadlines and processes for all college admissions. **"**

1. **Simplify the research and admissions process for students.** The most common complaint about the college selection process has to do with complexity and confusion. Educational institutions should consider how they might coordinate and standardize deadlines and processes for all college admissions to make the process more manageable for students. For example: financial aid processes and procedures, forms, and due dates; admission requirements and application due dates; etc.

   - Policymakers and philanthropic organizations should provide opportunities and incentives for appropriate institutional collaboration as indicated.

   - Third-party organizations should consider how application support materials might be aggregated into a portfolio so students can send support materials to schools without having to contact individual providers multiple times (e.g., College-Board for SAT scores, high school for transcripts).

2. **Minimize information overload by highlighting just the most important data elements.** Considering the amount of information they receive from colleges, students pay relatively little attention to it. We need to simplify how we share useful information, in much the same way that the Food and Drug Administration seeks to provide consumers with simple, standardized, nutritional data on the foods they eat.

   - Policymakers, third-party organizations, and institutions should develop a standardized framework for displaying those key pieces of information.

   - Financial aid award letters should be structured to facilitate comprehension and comparability.

3. **Improve availability, applicability, and quality of information.** Information elements that are gathered by institutions, government, and third-party providers need to be granular and specific enough to better reflect the multiplicity of contemporary student subgroups and particular student needs and interests (e.g., reporting on success rates that includes part-time, returning, and transfer student graduation rates). Third-party data providers should develop tools to compare and customize information available from government or third-party stakeholders or other information sources, based on student needs (e.g., side-by-side comparison in which students select the specific items for display and comparison and can weight data based on their preferences).

   - Policymakers and educational institutions should work together to develop and provide relevant information about the academic quality and expe-

rience at institutions as alternatives to the use of proxies such as reputation or accreditation. Twenty-first century students—particularly first-generation college students—often seek information that would help to illuminate the academic life they are likely to find and experience at an institution.

- Educational institutions and information providers alike should contextualize and explain both the information element and its importance to prospective students (e.g., providing answers to questions such as: What is a graduation rate? How is it calculated? What does a particular graduation rate mean? How can I apply that number in my decision process? How can I learn more about graduation rates for students outside of the first-time/full-time framework?).

- Institutions should facilitate "test drives" — developing and enhancing both on- and off-site campus visit tools, enlist and encourage all current students and faculty to engage with prospective students during visits, and provide prospective students with faculty quality information and improve information on the quality and nature of the curriculum, by major.

4. Recognize and address the need for trustworthy guidance. Personal and trustworthy guidance during the consideration/application process is highly valued by students across the demographic spectrum. Those who do not experience it desire it, while those who experience it say they benefit—as it helps them identify their own goals and needs and match these with specific institutional characteristics and offerings.

- Colleges should take a system-wide view of college admissions, recognize how their individual and collective practices and messages affect student success, and collaborate to improve the quality of the college selection process.

- Institutions should view college selection as an educational process and apply their expertise to enhancing student learning and success during that process. For example: remember to regard clients as students when considering their needs and decision-making capacities; commit to reframing college brochures and marketing practices to emphasize distinct points of difference about educational experience and engagement, then commit to presenting this information to students in a way that encourages introspection about students' own goals and interests distinct from the consideration of marketing claims. (Campus visits may be foremost opportunities to demonstrate how learning happens on campus.)

- Institutions should address the disconnect between student skepticism about college-produced information and institutional representatives and stu-

dents' needs for guidance. Admissions representatives should be trained and evaluated to address the guidance needs of students. They should be able to explain the financial aid process, discuss what quality education means and the various types of colleges available, and lead discussions and answer questions about college search in general. They need to realize that student recruitment goals may be best achieved through education, not sales.

> **"**I really felt connected to the school because my questions were answered almost instantaneously [in the online chat].**"**
> *– Adult student attending four-year institution*

5. Improve early education and planning. Families and schools should begin the conversation with young people about academic planning and college in middle school to ensure that students are positioned to apply to and enroll in the college of their choice. The entire admissions and counseling system should identify which information is most appropriate at which time to nurture student preparation for college. To support this:

- Policymakers should develop standardized requirements for college-search education for students (e.g., augment state curriculum standards).

- Policymakers should ensure that there are opportunities for students to receive high-quality guidance and counseling.

- Counseling programs should ensure that students enter the college research process knowing the value they add to the institution. In particular, students should know that they:
  – Represent more than tuition dollars. Schools are vying for student attention because of the unique contribution each student makes to the institution.
  – Have power in this process, and should be clear on how to emphasize their strengths and capabilities.
  – Need to understand the economics of admissions and its impact on education and the educational environment.
  – Have a broad landscape of schools and opportunities available to them, which affords a meaningful choice among distinct characteristics, programs, and benefits of each institution.
  – Are participating in a research and selection process that is meant to be iterative and educational.
  – Need to gather and evaluate information from multiple sources.

> **"**Colleges should take a system-wide view of admissions, recognize how their practices and messages affect student success, and collaborate to improve the quality of the college selection process.**"**

OPPORTUNITY FOR EDUCATION

The goal of improving student access to and success in college can be served by improving the process by which students consider and select colleges. The Education Conservancy working with Consumers Union has identified some notable deficiencies in the college selection process and offered concrete suggestions for improvement. Will these suggestions lead to better results, such as fewer college dropouts and more college graduates? The complete answer to that question can come only after diligent implementation of the suggestions in this report and others that will emerge along the way. Key concerns are stakeholder recognition of the college selection process as a strategic education arena in need of improvement and willingness to act on behalf of students by enhancing the process.

At its best, the college selection process is an iterative learning process: students learn about themselves as they learn about colleges, trying to identify and match personal needs with college characteristics. Those involved in the admissions enterprise—counselors, students, parents, and admissions officers—indicate that students can be better served as learners and decision-makers as a result of educators' concerted involvement in improving the process.

THE EDUCATION CONSERVANCY