



THE EDUCATION CONSERVANCY

Information Matters

Addressing the information needs of
prospective college students



Research Report

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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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Introduction

“Information Matters: Improving the College Selection Process” is the Education Conservancy and Consumer Reports’ collaborative research and accountability project designed to understand and improve prospective college students’ college selection processes. Are the available resources sufficient for students to research institutions? Do they support a well-informed college search and robust comparison of options? Do current resources and the information available through them truly serve the needs of today’s students? What are the most important pieces of information students need? These are some of the questions at the heart of this ambitious and complex project, undertaken with the support of a grant awarded by Lumina Foundation.

Based on research findings, we have developed a series of suggestions directed toward policy-makers and other higher education stakeholders. Also, Consumer Reports produced consumer guidance that offers prospective students and their families explanations of the key information elements students and experts said were important, an assessment of more than two dozen print and online college guides, and structured guidance on the research process. That document, *Find the Best Colleges for You*, is available at consumerreports.org/college

We began this project by reviewing pertinent literature and research that has emerged within and beyond the field of college admissions over the last decade. We then conducted primary research to gain insight on the information experts, educators, and counselors believe students want and need in order to make well-informed higher education choices. Through quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, we also gained insight on the information students themselves reported they wanted and needed in order to understand, consider, and weigh their college options. Students’ reports were reconciled with professional perspectives in an effort to clarify the key types of information seen as most relevant and useful for prospective student decision making.

Recognizing the changing demographics of college students today, we sought to understand and address student needs associated with increasing diversification. Military Service Veterans and other adult college students have long been referred to as “nontraditional” students; however, a growing percentage of traditional-aged students share some of the characteristics typically associated with these adults, including part-time enrollment, full-time or part-time employment, financial independence and/or responsibility for others, family commitments, and so on. Many of today’s students also come from groups that have been historically underrepresented in college participation: first-generation college students from a wealth of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Because the majority of today’s college students may be considered “nontraditional” in some way, we have adopted Jamie Merisotis and Lumina Foundation’s nomenclature in referring to these students as “21st Century” students. It is this diverse audience—as well as the more typically-imagined “traditional” student—whose information needs we intend to serve through the “Information Matters” project.

Much college information and advice is typically geared to middle- or upper-class, fresh-from-high-school students from college-educated families. Admissions-based research, too, tends to focus on this “traditional” audience. We sought to understand whether there was sufficient

information available to guide 21st Century students in their pursuit of postsecondary education, which for them is often marked by part-time attendance, transfers, stopping-out, and pursuit of job-specific certification or professional degrees.

As noted by Pierre Bourdieu's frequently-invoked concept of habitus, students come to their college decisions with differing types and levels of cultural, social, and personal capital, which in turn shape the student's perspectives and choices. For 21st Century prospective students, the traditional college consideration stages may be shortened or conflated; for already-enrolled students, the decisions of whether, where, and how to persist in higher education may resurface over time. "Fit" between the student and institution is a shorthand way to describe how the many variables in the decision process interrelate. Fit can be seen as an inherently individualized concept that describes the relationship between a student's individual traits (academic qualifications and capabilities, predispositions, financial and social resources, and preferences) and an institution's characteristics (programs, services, costs, and environment). The ways in which fit is assessed vary in relation to student habitus. We intended, therefore, to examine whether students' information needs also vary accordingly.

In "Information Matters," we sought to understand how students—especially those whose habitus does not include significant "college knowledge"—undertake their college searches. What information do students look for? Where? What do they find, what does it tell them, and how do they apply it in their decision-making? What types and sources of information do students value? What drives their interest? We also sought the perspectives of college counselors and other higher-education experts on this topic. What information do these professionals believe students need? What do they consider to matter most? What kinds of information do they believe students tend to misunderstand, and why?

Literature suggests that students' expectations of what college will be like, as well as their college experiences, impact overall persistence and academic success. This project aims to illuminate the information needs of a wide range of student subgroups today, so that students will have greater access to (and ability to apply) the requisite information needed to effectively investigate and evaluate postsecondary options. When all students can find the information they need, and are able to properly contextualize and use the information, not only will their college searches be well-considered and well-informed—their eventual academic success may be in closer reach.

Methodology

To expand stakeholder involvement and gather multiple perspectives on the information that matters for today's range of students we conducted two forms of research with stakeholder-professionals: an online poll of college counselors, and interviews with higher education experts of various types, including organizational leaders, policy researchers, scholars, journalists, and others. (See Appendices for a list of professionals interviewed and examples of survey instruments.) We employed similar mixed-methods approaches with students, using a national survey and targeted focus groups. Greater detail on each form of data collection is noted below.

- *Online poll of college counselors affiliated with the National Association for College Admission Counseling*

Information about the survey was distributed via email to NACAC secondary and independent counselors on June 21, 2010. The survey was administered online and received 255 responses, with 198 fully-completed surveys. Of those, 25% of counselors worked in public high schools, 58% worked in private high schools (nearly 41% from secular schools, 18% from religious schools), and 17% were Independent counselors. The vast majority of respondents (72%) indicated that 90% or more of the student populations they serve plan to attend a four-year college.

- *Focused expert interviews*

An interview protocol was prepared and sent to solicited respondents; 21 interviews were conducted by telephone or in person June-August 2010. Potential interviewees were selected based on their professional expertise and familiarity with college admissions processes and/or 21st Century Student needs.

- *Survey of students currently attending two- and four-year institutions*

A syndicated research firm focused on the college student market, Student Monitor, was contracted to gather quantitative information on student values and behaviors as they considered, researched, applied to, and enrolled in higher education institutions. As a supplement to Student Monitor's Fall 2010 "Lifestyle and Media" market research, we provided 12 multi-part questions for inclusion with Student Monitor's standard survey. A representative and geographically diverse sample of 1126 full-time students was interviewed on 100 four-year campuses stratified by enrollment size, administrative control, and geographic location in October 2010. Student Monitor also interviewed 1187 students of two-year institutions through shopping-mall intercepts in 20 geographically representative markets in November 2010. Student Monitor retained all original data and reported out responses for the overall student sample and 18 subgroups of students. Of the total number of students surveyed (2313):

<i>Number</i>	<i>Were identified as (subgroup)</i>
526	“First generation” college students
106	Military Service Veteran students
354	Latino/Hispanic students
350	Black/African American students
2149	Students under age 25
163	Students 25 and older
200	Students with annual household income below \$35,000
911	Students with annual household income above \$35,000
1224	Students who are also employed
1089	Students who are not employed
1187	Students at two-year institutions
1126	Students at four-year institutions
1873	Students at public institutions
440	Students at private institutions
316	Full-time students
867	Part-time students
890	Beginning (first year) college students
633	Transfer-intending students

- *Focus groups of students currently attending two- and four-year institutions*

The 2007 “Deciding on Postsecondary Education” report produced by the research firm Westat for the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative provided an important backdrop for this project in its research into student, parent, and counselor perspectives on college information. We contracted with Westat and its team of investigators to develop protocols, conduct focus groups, and analyze findings in the context of the Information Matters research goals. (See Appendix H) Except in the “Traditional” group, participants were of low-moderate income (annual household income up to \$45,000). Except in the Adult groups, participants were within their first year as college students. Students in the two- and four-year Black/African American and Latino/Hispanic groups were first-generation college students. Due to recruiting challenges, some four-year groups included students attending two-year institutions. Altogether 52 students were interviewed in the following groups:

Group	Location	Number of Participants		University Type	Age	Income	First Generation
		M	F				
Adult ¹	Houston, TX	3	4	2-year 5 Public/2 Proprietary	24-48	Low-moderate	N/A
Adult ²	Philadelphia, PA	3	4	2 2-year; 5 4-year 3 Public/4 Private (1 Proprietary)	25-41	Low-moderate	N/A
Black/African American	Houston, TX	1	2	2-year All Public	18-21	Low-moderate	Yes
Black/African American	Philadelphia, PA	5	3	3 2-year; 5 4-year 7 Public/1 Proprietary	18-20	Low-moderate	Yes
Latino/Hispanic	Houston, TX	2	2	2-year All Public	19-23	Low-moderate	Yes
Latino/Hispanic	Rockville, MD	3	5	3 2-year; 5 4-year 6 Public/2 Private	18-23	Low-moderate	Yes
Traditional ³	Philadelphia, PA	5	3	1 2-year; 7 4-year 5 Public/3 Private (1 Proprietary)	18-19	Moderate-high	No
Veterans/Active Duty Military ⁴	Rockville, MD	5	2	2 2-year; 5 4-year 6 Public/1 Proprietary	N/A	N/A	N/A
Notes: 1: 1 Asian, 5 Black/African American, 1 Caucasian 2: 1 Asian, 4 Black/African American, 2 Caucasian 3: 5 Caucasian, 1 Latino/Hispanic, 1 Race/ethnicity unknown 4: 2 Asian, 3 Black/African American, 2 Caucasian							

Research Findings

Search Process

In brief:

- Most students report that they are equipped to research and apply information.
- Students narrow their searches based on perceptions of a variety of factors including affordability, convenience, quality, and value.
- Predisposition and access to information and guidance influence criteria used in the college search process as well as perceived options among institutions.
- “21st Century” students are more apt to limit their searches quite early in the process – often starting with schools they were already aware of or that were in their region as the broadest set.
- Students express concerns over their understanding of the multiple layers of the process – financial aid, applications, application support materials, etc – things outside of the student’s direct control.
- Those with education/training in college planning and research are more apt to conduct a comprehensive college search.
- Experts consistently voice the need for students to approach the process as iterative, learning about themselves as they learn about institutions.

Overview

To understand how students approach and undertake college consideration, we opened the focus group discussions by asking participants to describe their search experience. Students identified the fundamental factors driving their decisions when narrowing college options, submitting applications, and ultimately choosing to enroll. We asked both focus group participants and survey respondents to gauge their confidence in knowing what information to look for as they conducted research, finding what they needed to know, and applying the information to make an enrollment choice. This approach enabled us to discern students’ self-perceptions as well as their information perceptions during the search process.

In both forms of data collection, students reported more emphasis on the practical aspects of college (e.g., cost and location) than the personal and social dimensions of the experience. They frequently described attempts to discern institutions’ academic strength and the quality of a particular major; they clearly sought to envision their likely educational experience while undertaking the requisite research to identify college options. The ways in which students characterized their college searches, and the specific types of information they sought, corresponded to these dual emphases.

Focus Group Respondents

When asked to identify the first thing that comes to mind about the college search experience, students in the focus groups tended to respond with either descriptors of the affective dimensions of the process (stressful, confusing, daunting, tedious) or with the primary criteria that framed their initial choice set (cost, major, location, convenience). Regardless of whether they began the conversation with an affective response or a short list of criteria, participants typically initiated

their college searches with a firm sense of what they planned to study—indeed our research team was surprised to hear that the majority of students began their searches with a specific major or course of study already firmly in mind—coupled with a fairly narrow choice set.

Overall, participants tended to consider between three and ten colleges at the start of the search process. Supporting the standard view that “traditional” college-bound students typically consider a larger array of colleges than their “21st Century” counterparts, students under age 25 from middle-higher income households, studying at four-year institutions, typically applied to a minimum of three colleges. In contrast, focus groups of 21st Century students (at either two- or four-year institutions, from lower income households and differing in race, ethnicity, age, and military service history) contained many respondents who applied to only one college.

Choice sets were often circumscribed by familiarity; many students limited their searches quite early in the process, often starting with schools they were already aware of or that were in their region as the broadest consideration set. Many Adults, Military Service Veterans, and students attending two-year institutions were likely to focus primarily on nearby options due to affordability concerns or to work, family, and/or personal obligations.

It became clear during the focus group discussions that two factors, “location” and “affordability,” were often conceptually and effectively linked for many participants. During the focus groups, traditional-age Black/African American and Latino/Hispanic participants, like Adults and Military Service Veterans, often acknowledged a preference for colleges close to home, work, and family. These preferences were typically founded on practical concerns for both proximity and perceived affordability. Retrospectively, some of these traditional-age students reported they would prefer to have given some further consideration to more distant colleges, rather than constricting their options early in the process.

Although the majority of participants expressed satisfaction with their ability to navigate their college search, and satisfaction with the institution in which they enrolled, we heard some students throughout the groups express subsequent concern about how possibilities were presented to or conceived by them as they considered college options. As above, some students said they would think differently about the significance of location and published price if they were to redo the search. Some wondered if they might have been “better off” enrolling directly in a four-year college, or starting out at a less-expensive two year school, instead of the path they chose. Some simply wished they had considered colleges more broadly.

Overall, focus group students tended to express greater confusion and less confidence in the college consideration and search process—with its multiple, diffuse layers that were often outside one’s own control—than was seen later in the discussion regarding information attributes or individual data elements. Even in the financial areas that were especially unclear to students—cost, affordability, and aid—as much confusion seemed to stem from the generalized process (e.g., understanding how the financial aid system works) as from specific actions required (filling out the FAFSA) or pieces of information gathered (direct costs). Participants’ comments reflect two primary concerns:

- A complex and lengthy process with multiple deadlines and deliverables, some of which are not in the student’s direct control (transcripts, test scores, fee waivers, recommendation letters, forms parents or guardians must complete).
- A conceptually challenging system of financial aid (understanding how and where financial need is determined, and by whom; learning the differences between an institution’s stated tuition, fees, and net costs; navigating the relationship between eligibility and award of grants and scholarships; learning about financing options and preparing for unknowable fee and tuition increases; anticipating when and how forms should be completed to ensure optimal aid packages).

As was expected, students with positive counseling, education, or training in college planning and research, as well as those from college-educated families, were apt to engage in a more comprehensive search process than students who did not enjoy these advantages. One mechanism in particular emerged from the focus groups as a likely contributor to this differentiation: the strategic use of key information at different times. Westat’s summary report (included here as Appendix H) documents this correlation and explains:

Several differences were observed between the Traditional student group and other traditional-aged groups which tended to be lower income and first generation. Traditional students invoked a greater number of search criteria, collected information from and applied to a larger number of colleges, and expressed fewer challenges with respect to gathering information. Unlike other groups, Traditional students tended not to use cost information as a primary filtering criterion when conducting their searches. Instead, they applied information related to cost when making a final acceptance decision and after taking financial aid into consideration. Upon reflection, some non-traditional students expressed the inclination to consider cost in the same manner, thereby keeping a wider range of colleges in consideration.

Other differences were found between adult and traditional-aged students. Adults tended to use fewer search criteria, narrowed down their choice set faster, and were interested mainly in finding colleges that conveniently met their need for workplace credentials and skills at reasonable costs. Adults also cited unique challenges of managing their search while balancing work and family responsibilities, coping with psychological barriers of pursuing college later in life, and overcoming a perceived lack of resources in comparison to high school age students.

Most focus group students—including those in the middle-upper income Traditional group—rarely demonstrated the kind of iterative process often recommended by admissions experts and college counselors: to start with a consideration set, learn about/reflect on both the institutions within the set and oneself as a student, recast the consideration set, continue refining until arriving at an application set, and making an enrollment decision based on perceived fit with an institution from the acceptance set. The process as seen in our focus groups was instead typically described as “straightforward,” again reflecting the simplified and pragmatic approach to search based on institutions with which the students tended to be already familiar.

Like the focus group participants, respondents to our student survey largely affirmed that they knew what information to look for, found what they needed, and knew how to apply it. Although students were fairly confident in their knowledge of what to look for to help them decide where to go to college (70% overall), slightly lower levels of agreement were reported among subgroups of Black/African American students and students who were not employed (67%), as

well as students from households with annual incomes under \$35,000 (66%). (See Appendix F for further data.)

Survey Respondents

All groups of surveyed students reported slightly greater levels of confidence in knowing what information to look for to help them decide where to go, and finding what they needed to make a decision, than in knowing how to apply the information to help them select a college.

Black/African American students reported—somewhat less often than the average of all surveyed students—that they found the information they needed to make a decision (66% for this group; 70% overall). Military Service Veteran and Black/African American subgroups expressed the least agreement that they knew how to apply the information to help select a college (63% each; 67% overall), suggesting difficulty interpreting information and inadequate counseling or guidance.

Demographic Disparities

Taken together, the research suggests that of the student groups surveyed, Black/African American students were less confident in navigating the college search process than other demographic subgroups. The lack of confidence observed for these students may in part be understood by noting the lack of resources and support Black/African-American students reported. More so than in other traditional-age groups, Black/African American participants described inadequate school-based resources. For example, all of the Black/African-American focus group participants from two-year institutions told us that they generally had little help or guidance from their high schools. They described long lines to see their counselors—who were unlikely to know the students personally and whose time seemed overwhelmed by duties unrelated to college counseling. Nearly two-thirds of the students in the four-year Black/African American focus group reported similarly poor access to adequate counseling; only three participants described positive experiences and good resources. In both the two-year and four-year groups, college fairs, when available, often catalyzed Black/African American students' searches while they were in high school. Some students reported “banding together with friends” or relying on community organizations, family members and other trusted individuals for help navigating the search process. Although inadequate counseling for traditional-age students was observed most starkly in the Black/African American groups, this phenomenon was reported by participants throughout the focus groups.

Age played a significant role in guidance accessibility and the general college consideration and search process, as well. Adult participants often noted unique challenges as they seriously considered colleges, such as anxiety that “it’s too late to be going to school.” Adults also emphasized structural challenges such as the lack of personal supports targeted and typically (although clearly not uniformly) more available to younger students in the form of school counselors, parents, peers, guidance offices, and college fairs.

Veterans often reported inadequate transitional counseling for post-military career and college opportunities, too. However, service veterans consistently credited their military experience for its role in providing the maturity and personal strength necessary to undertake a challenging

search and to make decisions on their own, without the supports mentioned by traditional-age students.

Professional Perspectives

Although the online poll we fielded with counselor-members of the National Association for College Admission Counseling was tightly focused on specific information used in researching colleges, in open-ended comments counselors expressed a variety of perspectives on the process itself. Attention was paid to the importance of providing all students financial information about college which they, along with their families, can understand and use. Typically, counselors suggested that this awareness be inculcated in school curriculum starting as early as middle school.

Counselors also frequently voiced concern about students' narrow consideration sets and the familial pressure to attend nearby colleges. One summarized this best:

I think that many times students limit their thinking about colleges to what they hear directly from their parents and close friends. It is hard to convince them that they need to explore the possibilities that await them in the educational world. Many times parents also limit the exposure that their children have to the information that is available to help them discover the "best fit" for their college experiences. I find that "first generation" students are very fearful about the college experience and have preconceived notions of how or why they won't fit into a college environment. They need encouragement and support to investigate what is "out there" for them to discover.

Our expert interviews also revealed widespread concern that prospective students have little access to a realistic understanding of how well students similar to themselves (in socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, age, military veteran status, family composition and history in higher education, and other "background" factors) fare in postsecondary education. Too many students lack a generalized understanding of the college landscape and how they might "fit" within it, these professionals noted. A typical theme resounding through the interviews was that students should be encouraged to develop a more concrete understanding of how others such as themselves, given similar backgrounds and goals, fare at a particular institution.

A second theme that emerged from the interviews focused on the importance of comprehensive, quality guidance for students who are least likely to have access to it. Such guidance can help to encourage and shape the statistics-based peer approach to research suggested above. Respondents observed that advisors and points of contact who care and can relate to the students are crucial for the postsecondary success of 21st Century students, helping them successfully navigate both the world of higher education generally and the world within a particular institution. Many of these prospective students do not have a family, school, or social background that is steeped in the college-going culture. Lack of adequate college counseling and outreach—especially for "underserved" high school students and for adult students—thus creates a considerable obstacle for students' access and success at the postsecondary level. The information colleges typically offer is particularly inadequate for helping these students envision higher education as a realistic option for them.

Structural inequities across socioeconomic classes—ongoing racism and classism—also discourage students. Several interviewees emphasized that too many students get the message from both individuals and institutions that they are not “college material,” based on their background rather than their aptitude; factors such as time, money, technological tools, and general internet access complicate the college consideration process. We must also recognize that the “digital divide” persists, and that many students come from multilingual families. Clear, straightforward, and useful information provided in Spanish and other languages would help students and their families envision and discuss potential options. Institutions with goals to serve 21st Century students well, professionals observed, should focus on communicating effectively with all prospective student and family audiences.

Framing college as a journey and encouraging students to imagine their potential paths is seen as necessary for thoughtful student choices and eventual postsecondary success. In order to achieve this, more specific information on college options and what students can expect at various types of institutions—especially in their first year, in terms of courses, size of classes, amount of reading and writing, type of instructorship, and learning assessment—would be valuable. The key is to help students imagine their future as a college student: the programs and pathways that will be available to them, how they can grow and change, and the opportunities available to them upon successful degree completion and graduation. Echoing counselor comments, these professionals advocated that an understanding of how students learn and make decisions should lead to an integrated school district plan of gradually exposing students to college information, beginning in middle school.

Discussion

We found students generally to be doing an excellent job of satisficing—given the perspectives and the choice sets they start with, and the data they find, they made decisions that got them into school. They are likely to believe they had “enough information to make a good choice” or were able to become satisfied with their chosen institutions for a variety of reasons. Given the benefit of hindsight, most students reported that they would indeed conduct the search somewhat differently. No modifications reached unanimity or emerged in widespread agreement, however. Responses ranged from working harder in high school and starting the consideration process earlier to taking a broader view and incorporating a wider array of factors into the decision. In addition, few students suggested they would have chosen a different school to attend. With collegiate experience, several students noted that they would closely examine the availability of required courses or elevate the importance of aspects such as class size and organization or faculty-student interactions.

The differences between student and expert emphases regarding college search in part reflect the distinct questions posed to each audience. Yet the search experiences and process evaluations revealed in focus group comments may reflect a misalignment between the preparation, consideration, and application process as understood by professionals and as experienced by students. Such a misalignment may pave the way for excessive narrowing of the choice set early in the process. This is a caution to those who would encourage students to simply ask more and better questions: to approach students by insinuating that they need to do better research does not address the guidance, access and information challenges students face and, on the whole, may

not resonate with students' experience. Experience, however, does seem to often demonstrate the importance of a broader and more nuanced view of college opportunities.

Sources of Information

In brief:

- *Students approach researching a college much like familiar product/service purchases. They talk to friends, family, and “experts” and they use print and electronic sources to gather information.*
- *Students use few third-party information sites, instead leaning on search engines (e.g., Google) and institution websites for their research.*
- *Students express healthy skepticism about the reliability and credibility of sources.*
- *Students credit data that is found in multiple places (e.g., on a website and in a print brochure) with veracity it may not deserve.*
- *Students express a desire for personal/trustworthy guidance in the consideration/application process.*

Overview

To identify the sources of information used by students, we asked focus group participants about the individuals and tools they turned to and relied upon during their college searches. We also asked them to evaluate the trustworthiness of their sources and identify any gaps or barriers that hindered their access to information sources. In the survey, we presented a list of sources and asked students to report on those used. Respondents then highlighted the one source considered most useful in their college search. Finally, students were asked to characterize the accuracy and currency of the information they found and assess its ease of use, location, comprehensibility, and customizability.

Focus Group Respondents

Students described an approach to the college search that seemed consistent with other consumer choice matters—rely on friends, family, professionals, and print and electronic sources to the extent possible to understand their landscape of options; retrieve relevant information; reach a selection decision. However, they reported a marked degree of skepticism about the reliability and credibility of information sources and sought individuals not only to help guide and shape the process but also to locate and interpret information. Access to robust guidance relationships with individuals or entities who were personally trusted, yet also versed in the college search process and able to help them locate and use information, was reportedly valuable and beneficial to the students who experienced this type of hands-on attention. Those who did not experience this type of guidance valued it as well, as shown by their expressed desire for more and better counseling. Adult students (including Military Service Veterans) as well as traditional-age students from under-resourced high schools frequently expressed a strong desire to have had the opportunity for focused guidance to explain aspects of the college landscape, processes, necessary actions and important information.

During their college search, participants in all eight of the focus groups cited the Internet as the tool most commonly used for gathering information. They used this tool extensively, albeit in highly targeted ways: they primarily sought information from individual school websites, and searched for colleges according to location and major through search engines such as Google. Only a few participants reported using third-party information aggregator sites (e.g., College Board, College Prowler) or social networking (Facebook or campus-based web chat events). It

was unclear how students came to learn about third-party websites also consulted in their searches, although widespread use of the search engine itself is not surprising. Many 21st Century students—particularly in the Military Service Veterans, Four-year Adult, and Two-year Black/African-American groups—used the Internet to directly locate information about colleges already in their purview, rather than to identify prospective schools for a choice set.

Participants also relied on key people as sources of college information: primarily trusted family members, friends and colleagues, teachers, counselors, and college representatives. While students were often quick to note that “everyone has their own agenda,” participants in fully half of the focus groups singled out college admission representatives (e.g., those who visit high schools and hand out information at college fairs) as the least trustworthy. Students in the Traditional focus group spontaneously urged colleges to connect them directly to current students or alumni and to faculty, rather than simply forging connections to an admissions officer. Virtually all participants, when asked, agreed that colleges could “do a better job of connecting prospective students directly with current college students and/or faculty,” and that doing so would improve prospective students’ college planning and decision making.

Although college campus visits are often mentioned most in connection with Traditional students’ searches, participants in each of the 21st Century student focus groups also emphasized the importance of campus visits as a means of information gathering and testing the validity of their impression of a school from research. Visiting or touring a campus enabled students to observe and engage with the institution directly and experientially, which was reportedly a valuable opportunity to form an impression beyond what could be obtained by hearsay or more formal types of research; this technique was used as a means for some students to assess the balance of cost and value “on the ground.” Participants most commonly spoke of visiting libraries, computer centers, and advising or tutoring offices. Only a couple of students in the four-year Traditional focus group reported using virtual tours as part of their research.

Nearly all participants reported some degree of skepticism toward most information sources. Even though the majority of students relied on the Internet as the primary resource for information in their college search, for example, they were wary that much of what they found or read could be unreliable or untrustworthy. Students were especially skeptical of information that appeared on college-specific websites and information obtained from college-based admissions officers; some reported finding conflicting information on different sites about the same college. Therefore, respondents typically said it was more reliable to cross-check the information using multiple sources, and recognized the utility of a variety of source types rather than relying solely on website information, personal testimonials, or admission officers. Some students, however, seemed to consider printed institutional information more authoritative and “official,” and others sometimes naively considered data to be more credible and/or valuable simply because it appeared in multiple forms or locations.

Focus group participants were divided between Internet resources and Friends/Family when asked to identify the single most valuable source of information in their search process; no one source emerged as dominant, which may reflect the different and complementary roles played by tools, individuals, and experiences in each student’s own college search process. Furthermore, while at least some traditional-age students in most groups indicated that they received

substantial help and encouragement from counselors, teachers, family, or friends, for the most part neither Adults nor Military Service Veterans referenced significant assistance when taking their first steps. Students relied on advisors, when available, to help interpret information and provide context and direction in the search process.

Survey Respondents

For surveyed students, *Friends/Family* was clearly the source of information reportedly most used by all demographic subgroups—ranging from 65% of the students with annual household incomes over \$35,000 and those attending four-year institutions to 50% of students who are Military Service Veterans, with an overall average respondent use of 60%. By a wide margin, respondents across subgroups also unanimously cited Friends/Family as the single source of information which was most helpful, with response percentages ranging from 30% for Latino/Hispanic students and Military Service Veterans to 40% of beginning (first-year) college students.

Brochures and printed materials from specific schools was the second-most used source of information by respondents overall (37%), and regardless of age, employment, or current enrollment at a public or private institution. This source also claimed second-most use popularity by respondents who are Latino/Hispanic, Black/African American, Military Service Veterans, first-generation, at two-year colleges, full-time, or transfer-intending. The largest percentage of students to report use of brochures and school-specific print matter was in the private-college subgroup (44%); the lowest percentage of reported use (32%) was among Black/African American students, two-year students, and beginning (first year) students. Brochures and school-specific print materials were identified by 11-18% of respondents as the one most helpful source, with Military Service Veterans somewhat more likely than other subgroups to affirm the primary utility of such printed matter.

Websites of specific schools were used by 36% of respondents overall. This was the second-most used source of information to students regardless of income level and for subgroups including those at four-year institutions as well as those who are part-time, transfer-intending, or beginning students. This source was also second-most useful to the overall average of respondents and despite income or employment level, public/private enrollment, or full/part-time status, as well as the subgroups of students under 25, attending four-year institutions, and transfer-intending. Its relative utility was highest to students with household income above \$35,000 and those attending four-year institutions (18%). Its utility was lowest for Black/African American students, of whom just 11% reported this as the information source they had found most useful.

Teachers/counselors were used by 30% of survey respondents as a source of college information, with Military Service Veterans and Adults—as would be expected—least likely to tap this source. *Teachers/counselors* was the second-most useful source of college information to Latino/Hispanic students, as well as students at two-year colleges. Somewhat unexpectedly, one of the two subgroups with the lowest proportion to report *Teachers/counselors* as the most useful source (10%) was students at private institutions.

College directories that list colleges and their characteristics (such as Barron's, Peterson's, Princeton Review) were used by 23% of respondents overall. Students attending private

institutions and Military Service Veterans used directories more than other student groups; first-generation and adult students reported use of directories the least. This source was the single-most helpful to less than 10% of students overall. Black/African American students reported its utility more often (13%), while the subgroup of students from households with annual incomes under \$35,000 was least likely to find it the most useful source of information (6%).

Websites with detailed information about many colleges were used by 20% of surveyed students, with students from households with annual incomes above \$35,000 and students attending four-year institutions most likely to have used this source, and Black/African American students least likely to have used it. Private-college students were the subgroup most likely to report this as their one most helpful source (12%), while Military Service Veterans were least likely to have found it so (4%).

Student blogs were the relatively least used source of information—just 9% of students overall turned to this source. Somewhat surprisingly, however, its greatest use was among first-generation students and those from households with annual income under \$35,000 (13%); its greatest utility was to students in these subgroups as well (8% and 7%, respectively). This source was least frequently cited by adults and transfer-intending students as their most useful information source (2%).

In addition, we fielded a Likert scale during the survey to gauge students' agreement with statements that "*Information found during decision-making was: Accurate, Current, Easy to find, Easy to understand, Easy to use, Easy to customize.*" Just 51% of adults 25 and over said that the information they found in their college research was always easy to find and understand, while 53% of them agreed that the information was always accurate. Save these slight majorities, less than half of any other student subgroup reported the information found in their college research and decision-making process to have always been accurate, current, easy to find, easy to understand, easy to use, or easy to customize. Within the question set, students overall were most likely to report that information was easy to use (40%)—with Black/African American students and students at two-year institutions most likely to agree (44%) and students from households with annual income above \$35,000 least likely to agree (35%). Across subgroups, *Easy to Customize* was the characterization that yielded least agreement (30% overall).

Although surveyed students tended to report fairly high levels of satisfaction with the information they looked for, found, and applied when they were considering colleges, the discrepancy between students' levels of satisfaction with their own research process and with their evaluation of the quality of information found during the search process implies some degree of confusion; this confusion was affirmed by comments in student focus groups and from the counselor poll, as will be documented in the "Information Challenges" section of this report. One hypothesis is that when confronted with an amount of data they describe as "overwhelming," students are forced to prioritize their information needs—often without sufficient context and guidance. This may support the satisficing behavior observed in the general approach to college search.

Demographic Disparities

Access to guidance evidently played a significant role for students not only in framing the college search process, but also in widening the scope of their search. Adults in our focus groups typically relied on the Internet and suggested that students such as themselves should have greater resources and more targeted information and relevant guidance available. Yet in surveys, Adults reported much less use of website information (either of college generally or of specific institutions). The discrepancy observed between the qualitative and quantitative results for Adult groups suggests a need for additional research in this area.

Professional Perspectives

Professionals were clearly aware of the centrality of trusted individuals, reliable websites, and access to each of those in students' processes of researching college options: "All student segments rely more on people for information than any other source. Websites of schools are becoming increasingly important, though a significant number of low SES students do not have easy access to the internet."

One interviewee, whose work supports the collegiate access and success of military veterans, emphasized the importance of "people" in the process for everyone—noting the importance of engaging the families and spouses of veterans with useful information. This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews with regard to the wide array of 21st Century students: provide more information targeted not only to individual students, but also to their families, community organizations, and wider webs of support. Since social and familial relationships tend to define and contextualize students' preferences and can deeply influence students' decisions, students may be more likely to conceptualize college differently if presented with information or given advice and informed encouragement by trusted figures within their habitus.

A pervasive sentiment regarding the information sources used by students at two-year institutions was that students in this sector typically get their college information from friends and through local college advertisements. Students with greater resources and higher levels of social and cultural capital, from college-educated families, were described as "more likely to be influenced by: college talk at home, high school environment and culture, access to counselors, and college guidebooks, rankings, representatives, and visits." One person observed that students who *have* greater resources tend to *use* more resources.

Discussion

It is evident from this research that students currently attending both two- and four-year institutions depend on a similar array of sources—to the extent those sources are available and applicable. When little or limited guidance is accessible, students nonetheless rely on the sources they are aware of to gather requisite college information. One important source of information for all students, 21st Century and Traditional students alike, is the college visit.

Throughout the diverse focus groups, students emphasized the importance of visiting a school to understand and visualize what it might offer them, and to gauge its quality themselves. Perhaps,

then, students for whom location or affordability is paramount may be reluctant to consider or apply to a college too removed to visit comfortably, a place they may have no direct experience of and little structured opportunity to tap into. When encouraging students to widen the choice set, then, the higher-education community would do well to increase opportunities for students to visit and experience campuses early in (or prior to) the consideration process.

Professionals frequently urged that students frame the college search around the question, “How well does this school serve students like me?” In our focus groups, adult students and Military Service Veterans indeed seemed to approach their college search with a question similar to this in mind—although among participants overall there tended to be less initial interest in cohort groups and greater interest in individualized appraisals. The college visit emerged as one under-explored avenue students use to delve beyond the usual means of data-gathering and begin to indeed visualize themselves as a student of a particular college.

Information Priorities

In Brief:

- *The most relevant types of information agreed upon by students and professionals alike includes: Majors/fields of study and degrees offered, Cost and affordability, Academic quality and educational experience, and College characteristics.*
- *The information deemed important was fairly consistent across student groups, although some notable differences were observed in priority information needed.*
- *Location is sometimes conflated with cost.*
- *Accreditation and academic reputation are, in some cases, proxies for quality.*
- *When asked what information would be important to consider today, students slightly modified which data elements they would look for.*

Survey Respondents: Overview

Our project gauged students' information priorities along various dimensions in multiple ways. In the student survey, we asked respondents to rate the importance of 10 broad categories of institutional information (what we refer to as “institutional characteristics”) as well as 60 discrete information elements. First, we offered the list of institutional characteristics and a 1-5 Likert scale to identify the extent to which each characteristic was important to the student when s/he first started to think about which colleges to apply to. We then offered the same list and scale again, and asked students to rate how important each of the characteristics is to them “today” (i.e., at the time of response).

Later in the survey, students were handed a card that listed “information some prospective students consider when deciding which schools to apply to.” Students were asked to identify the elements that were important to them; as with the characteristics list, we repeated the question with a focus on the value of the information today. The second iteration here was “With the benefit of your college experience, please tell me which of these items you would look for today if you were considering which schools to apply to.”

This approach enabled us to evaluate how important each distinct characteristic or element reportedly was to the student and how the ascribed value may have shifted over time. Presenting each list separately also provided an opportunity to understand which information students used in order to learn about the characteristics that mattered most. Overall, we found that students tended to value the characteristics quite highly—the majority of students identified at least eight of the ten characteristics as “very” or “somewhat” important, and in every subgroup at least half of the respondents identified any given characteristic as important. Students' reported use of data, however, was minimal—the majority identified only four or fewer information elements within the list as important, with 22% of the overall average citing just one element as important at the time of search, and 25% listing just one today. The most frequently cited element, by far, was *Accreditation*. (See later discussion on information elements, as well as Appendices C and D for more detail).

One explanation for the stark discrepancy between response rates for characteristic importance and information value is that the 60-element list, freestanding and alphabetically arranged, may itself have been overwhelming to students. Another likely explanation reflects a phenomenon

revealed in the focus groups: students may care deeply about aspects of their postsecondary options such as academic quality or affordability, yet not know how to identify or locate appropriate data that conveys the information to them. Two characteristics, the availability of *Majors/fields of study* at a specific school and *Location/convenience*, did not have readily-corresponding information elements within the survey. Finally, the paucity of access to adequate, trustworthy, and personalized guidance during college consideration may discourage information-seeking if the prospective student is unable to interpret or contextualize the information based on the student's own goals and needs.

Survey Respondents: Institutional Characteristics

Surveyed students' top institutional characteristic priorities included *Majors/fields of study*, *Academic reputation*, *Affordability*, *Quality of Teaching and Learning*, and *Location/Convenience*. The alphabetical listing of characteristics used was:

- Academic reputation
- Affordability
- Diversity of students, faculty
- Flexible class scheduling
- Location/convenience
- Majors/fields of study
- Quality of teaching and learning
- Social life/extracurricular opportunities
- Student services
- Type of college

Diversity of students/faculty, *Flexible class scheduling*, and *Location/Convenience* showed the greatest divergence among the student groups, with 21st Century groups such as Latino/Hispanic students, Black/African American students, Students 25 and older, Part-time students, and Students at two-year institutions tending to value these characteristics in higher percentages than respondents overall.

Majors/fields of study was the most important of the 10 characteristics during search to respondents overall, and to 6 of 18 student groups identified in the survey (First generation students, Military Service Veterans, Students under age 25, Students who are also employed, Students at four-year institutions, and Full-time students). *Affordability* was the top priority at the time of search for 8 of the 18 groups (Latino/Hispanic students, Students 25 and older, Students with annual household income less than \$35,000, Students at two-year institutions, Students at public institutions, Part time students, Beginning (first-year) students, and Students intending to transfer).

For all eight of the groups to whom *Affordability* was of topmost importance, the significance of this characteristic remained stable through time; each of those groups cited *Affordability* most often as important today. Seven additional student groups joined them in identifying *Affordability* most often as important now (Military Service Veteran, Students under age 25,

Students who are also employed, Students who are not employed, Full-time students, Sophomores and above, Students intending to transfer, and Black/African American students). Thus *Affordability* became the topmost important characteristic to 15 of the 18 subgroups examined, and overtook *Majors/fields of study* from the time of search to the time of survey as the characteristic of most importance to the overall average of students surveyed, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Characteristics cited by the largest share of each student group as very/somewhat important

Student Group	Dominant Characteristic at Search	Dominant Characteristic Today
First generation students	Majors/Fields of Study	Academic Reputation
Military Service Veteran students	Majors/Fields of Study	Affordability
Latino/Hispanic students	Affordability	Affordability
Black/African-American students	Location/convenience	Affordability, Flexible Class Scheduling
Students under age 25	Majors/Fields of Study	Affordability
Students 25 and older	Affordability	Affordability
Students with annual household income below \$35,000	Affordability	Affordability
Students with annual household income above \$35,000	Academic Reputation	Academic Reputation
Students who are also employed	Majors/Fields of Study	Affordability
Students who are not employed	Academic Reputation	Affordability
Students at 2-year institutions	Affordability	Affordability
Students at 4-year institutions	Majors/Fields of Study	Academic Reputation
Students at public institutions	Affordability	Affordability
Students at private institutions	Academic Reputation	Quality of Teaching and Learning
Full time students	Majors/Fields of Study	Affordability
Part time students	Affordability	Affordability
Beginning (first year) students	Affordability	Affordability
Transfer-intending student s	Majors/Fields of Study	Affordability
Respondents Overall	Majors/Fields of Study	Affordability

Although *Affordability* became the characteristic of primary importance for several groups in the comparison of values over time, its importance increased only minimally to the overall average (from 75% to 78%). Most characteristics showed similar slight upticks in importance; the only characteristic whose value did not increase between search and today was *Type of college*. *Flexible class scheduling* and *Diversity of students/faculty* showed the largest gains overall.

Survey Respondents: Information Elements

Respondents consistently ranked specific information far lower in importance than general characteristics they said matter to them. For example, while roughly three-quarters of students overall rated the characteristics *Majors/Fields of Study*, *Academic Reputation*, *Affordability*, and *Quality of Teaching and Learning* important, the most-important element to all student groups,

Accreditation, was listed by 43% of students at the time of search, and 41% today. The second-highest element, *Average financial aid package*, was mentioned by just 30% of students as searched-for information; only 25% said they would look for it today.

Although the relative order of informational importance tended to shift slightly, the same general types of information remained important—many of the elements that surfaced as topmost priority were fairly consistent across groups and stable through time. To examine students’ information priorities, we established a “Top 10” Priority Information list based on response rates. This list shows that surveyed students as a whole swapped an interest in *Physical setting* during search for *Average student debt load at graduation* today, as seen in Table 2:

Table 2: Priority Information for Respondents Overall, in Descending Relative Order

Priority Information During Search	Priority Information Today
Accreditation of the school*	Accreditation of the school*
Average financial aid package*	Average financial aid package*
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)*	Direct costs*
Direct costs*	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)*
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)
Availability of academic advising and support programs	Availability of academic advising and support programs
Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	Average student debt load at graduation

***Consensus Priorities:** All four of the information elements of topmost importance overall (*Accreditation of the school*, *Average financial aid package*, *Campus facilities*, and *Direct costs*) were universally considered Priority Information by each of the student subgroups surveyed.

Some different elements were emphasized when we considered the survey results from the perspective of specific student groups and constructed Priority lists for each group, however. As shown below in Table 3, these additional elements included:

- Alumni involvement
- Amount of time students spend reading and writing
- Amount of time students spend working in groups/teams
- Availability of online/hybrid classes
- Availability of weekend or evening classes
- Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment
- Campus personality
- Rankings of colleges

Table 3: Relative Priority Information During Search and “Today” by Student Subgroups

Priority Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	
Accreditation of the school	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇
Alumni involvement		● ◇	◇	◇		◇					◇					◇		◇		
Amount of time spent working in groups/teams	◇	◇														● ◇				
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	● ◇	◇	●	● ◇		● ◇				◇	◇	●		◇			●			
Availability of academic advising and support	● ◇		● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇			● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇
Availability of online/hybrid classes						◇										● ◇				
Availability of weekend or evening classes	●	● ◇	● ◇	◇		● ◇			● ◇		● ◇		● ◇			● ◇	● ◇	● ◇		
Availability of work-study/on-campus employment				◇			● ◇													
Availability/record of competitive sports programs		●																		
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	● ◇	● ◇	●	●	● ◇	●	● ◇	● ◇	●	● ◇	●		● ◇	● ◇	● ◇		● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇
Average financial aid package	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇
Average student debt load at graduation	◇				◇			◇		◇		◇			◇					◇
Campus appearance and atmosphere	●	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	●	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇		● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇		● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇
Campus facilities	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇
Campus personality								●							◇					
Direct costs	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇
Direct costs + room and board								◇												
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)		●			●			●		●		●		● ◇	●	●				●
Rankings of colleges								● ◇		◇		● ◇								
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	●	● ◇		● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇			● ◇	● ◇	● ◇
Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)			◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇		● ◇	● ◇	● ◇		● ◇		● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇	● ◇

KEY: ●: At time of search ◇: At time of survey

Student subgroup

- A: First generation students
- B: Military Service Veteran students
- C: Latino/Hispanic students
- D: Black/African-American students
- E: Students under age 25
- F: Students 25 and older

- J: Students who are not employed
- K: Students at 2-year institutions
- L: Students at 4-year institutions
- M: Students at public institutions
- N: Students at private institutions
- O: Full time students
- P: Part time students

G: Students with annual household income below \$35,000
 H: Students with annual household income above \$35,000
 I: Students who are also employed

Q: Beginning (first year) students
 R: Transfer-intending student
 S: Respondents Overall

Among all elements considered, we found that *Campus personality* showed the most significant drop in relative importance to the overall average of students surveyed, from a rank of 12th in priority at the time of search to 22nd today. Alumni involvement showed the most significant positive positional change, and the biggest change overall—from 29th during search to 16th today.

In addition to examining the topmost priorities of students, we also identified those elements that were considered important, either during search or today, by at least 10% of students in each demographic group. When viewed this way, we found that *Average amount of money the school spends per student*, *Campus personality*, *Degree of selectivity*, *Frequency of class discussions*, *Number of students enrolled*, *Physical setting*, *Types and availability of dorms/residence halls*, and *Types/availability of extracurricular programs* lost ground as important information to many groups of students. Meanwhile, an institution’s *Emphasis on critical thinking skills* grew in importance for several student groups: Students who are first-generation college-goers, Students who are Latino/Hispanic, Students who are under age 25, and Students from households above \$35,000 annual income. This element was already important to 10% or more of the Students from households below \$35,000 annual income, Students at four-year institutions, and Students at private institutions. Also of greater importance at the time of survey than at the time of search were: *Availability of weekend or evening classes*, *Availability of academic advising and support programs*, *Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment*, and *Average student debt load upon graduation*.

Elements that were important to at least 10% of students surveyed in all demographic subgroups are shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Information sought by 10% or more of students in all survey subgroups

Element	Surfaced at search	Surfaced at survey
Accreditation of the school	✓	✓
Alumni involvement		✓
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	✓	✓
Availability of academic advising and support programs		✓
Availability of weekend or evening classes		✓
Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment		✓
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	✓	✓
Average financial aid package	✓	✓
Average student debt load at graduation		✓
Campus appearance/atmosphere	✓	✓
Campus facilities	✓	✓
Campus personality	✓	
Direct costs	✓	✓
Graduation requirements	✓	
Physical setting	✓	

Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	✓	✓
Types of learning opportunities	✓	✓

The moderate interest we observed in attributes such as physical setting or campus personality at the time of search was largely eclipsed by “practical” elements regarding affordability and academic life. This finding seemed to exemplify a larger general pattern and suggests that postsecondary experience (or maturity) may lead students toward greater awareness and understanding of the types of information that are especially relevant to their academic success.

Focus Group Respondents: College Characteristics and Information Elements

We saw from the survey that students thought several characteristics were important in deciding where to go to college; this held true for the participants in the focus groups as well. Focus group respondents primarily sought straightforward, pragmatic information: information about cost and affordability, program/major of interest, location, and academic quality were most important to students during their college search.

Information about cost was the single piece of information that the majority of respondents placed above all others, although the timing of its use varied among the subgroups. Although nearly all participants referenced the importance of cost and affordability, students researched and utilized the information they gathered differently—for some, overall costs (including tuition and fees, parking, commuting or room and board) mattered most, while for others financial aid was taken into consideration prior to judgments about an institution’s affordability. In retrospect, several students indicated they would downplay the emphasis they had placed on basic tuition and would be more diligent in obtaining information about actual—and sometimes “hidden”—costs. Students in the Black/African-American groups were the only participants to explicitly mention obtaining fee waivers as part of their college application process.

Most focus group participants expressed a seemingly well-established plan for their field of study, which enabled them to prioritize the intended major as a primary determinant of their consideration set. This was especially true for military veterans and other adults, who had fundamentally been interested in researching and selecting a nearby college with employment/career goals firmly in mind. None of the focus group participants reported simply wanting a “college experience” or intending to wait until later in their studies to declare a major.

A potential college’s location was one of the first and most critical elements of information that students from all groups took into consideration during their college searches. Location was predominantly associated with proximity to home and work, and held a variety of implications often inseparable from the cost component. For instance, students stated that location informed a wide range of decision criteria, including out-of-pocket expenses, distance from work and family, living arrangements and housing costs, safety, potential employment opportunities, access to public transportation, and the amount of time and money they would need to commit to their commute or travel between school and their families, homes, and jobs. That proximity implied both affordability and convenience was further evident in some students’ searches for information concerning the availability of on-campus child care or convenient parking (to minimize work-school commuting conflicts). Several participants—predominantly women—

considered location and institutional reputation in relation to factors such as campus safety and security or area crime reports.

Most students admittedly had not intentionally searched for indicators of an institution's quality of teaching and learning. However, students responded positively to probing questions in this area, believing these factors to be important, encouraging future students to investigate more deeply. Most focus group participants reported that indicators of interaction opportunities with faculty and types of learning opportunities available would be especially helpful to them for conceptualizing their likely educational experiences and for estimating the level of quality teaching and learning offered by an institution. For instance, Black/African American students at four-year institutions valued the opportunity to have small classes and hands-on learning experiences, while their two-year counterparts added that teachers who are flexible in their teaching style and encourage class discussion create a quality learning environment. Traditional students and Adults at two-year institutions tended to prioritize gathering information about college faculty more so than other groups of students. The majority of two-year Hispanic students believed that knowing where and how classes were taught (e.g., onsite, in the field, online, discussions, lectures, PowerPoint presentations) would help to gauge the educational experience and learning environment. Adult and Military Service Veteran students were also interested in learning more about the course formats offered, in addition to knowing if they might have the opportunity to receive credit for prior academic or career-related experiences. Presumably, this information provided insight into how flexible and accommodating colleges are toward nontraditional/21st Century students.

When students were prompted to discuss the concept of reputation on its own, they tended to use words like “credibility” and “prestige” and often associated reputation with graduation statistics and with job placement for graduates—although again, few reported seeking these types of information. Reputation was not generally interpreted strictly as an academic indicator, but also related to career goals and to “how a degree from the institution would be perceived.” Adult and Latino/Hispanic students at two-year institutions, for example, mentioned gathering alumni information during their college search process but sought this information more to learn about career success (i.e., place of current employment, history, and opportunities) than continued involvement with current students or college activities. A related indicator of school reputation that emerged was whether or not the school, or program, was accredited; however, although this was the most significant piece of information to survey respondents, most focus group students did not highlight this concern and few spontaneously mentioned it without specific prompting. The value of this information emerged most clearly when students responded positively to using accreditation status as an indicator of quality teaching and learning.

A little more than half of the student groups—four-year Black/African American, both Latino/Hispanic, and Military Service Veteran groups—indicated that they sought information about campus diversity. Within these groups, four-year African American students were the most likely to report that they specifically looked for schools that were racially diverse. For these students, schools with “diverse student populations” conveyed two different but complementary components of college life: a sense of fitting in with those similar to themselves and a sense of being stretched by those different from themselves. Students in other focus groups also reported that the presence of campus diversity signaled the likelihood of having what some referred to as

“a real-world experience” that may or may not reflect the environment with which they are familiar. Thus diversity was often referenced as an aspect of the college’s learning experience, rather than being simply social.

All students in the Traditional focus group reported having sought information about the social aspects of a considered college, including dorm quality and gender balance, gender ratio of the campus overall, social activities and organizations, sports, parties, and dining options on or around the campus. Interest in Greek life was not limited to Traditional students; two of the Black/African American students at four-year institutions had also sought information on fraternities/sororities based on their provision of support, networking, and community-service opportunities. At least half of the four-year African American participants also sought four-year colleges specifically in order to “be on campus,” increase their job prospects, enjoy the college experience, and make friends.

A couple of the four-year Latino/Hispanic students described gathering information on social opportunities or campus food options as well. Those Military Service Veterans who found veteran-specific supports or peer groups after enrolling at their institutions valued them, although none searched for social information during the college search. Likewise, social life was not reported as a significant factor in the search process for other Adults or for two-year students.

Demographic Disparities

The dominant difference in information use observed across the focus groups was in the area of affordability/cost/financial aid information—with striking differences observed in data collected (e.g. published price or net price) between students attending two- and four-year institutions, as well as timing of data use (to craft a consideration set or to choose among admission offers) between Traditional and 21st Century student groups. The primacy of location was a second significant difference between groups, with 21st Century participants more likely to use proximity information to frame the college search. Additional differences were observed in students’ appetites for information on diversity, faculty, reputation, and social life.

As seen in the expanded discussion of Priority Information, surveyed students from 21st Century groups were more likely than average to seek “practical” information on topics that reflect the academic quality and educational experiences of an institution: the ways student time is structured and spent, the flexibility of class availability, and the employment opportunities both during enrollment and following graduation. Surveyed students from Traditional groups were more likely than average to seek information on campus personality and rankings. Rankings made the Priority list of two subgroups (students at four-year institutions and those from households over \$35,000) who both reported they had looked for this information during searches and would still prioritize this element today. Students in the Under 25 and Full-time subgroups accorded with the average pattern of information priorities and shifts (losing interest in physical setting; gaining interest in debt load). The relative priorities of only two subgroups did not shift over time: students at private institutions and beginning students.

Professional Perspectives

There was a strong consensus among the experts interviewed that information matters, and that useful, accurate, targeted, accessible information leads to better college decision-making. Much of the information available today is inadequate, sometimes confusing, and often discouraging for prospective students—particularly information about costs, financial aid, transfer rates, graduation rates, what it takes to be successful in college, and what the benefits might be of attending a particular college. (Although it is notoriously difficult to establish measures of overall quality that could be gathered and presented clearly, educators need to continue to pursue that goal.) Some interviewees also recommended that information concerning students’ experiences and learning outcomes at an institution (including NSSE, CCSSE, CLA), and colleges’ educational objectives and learning assessments, should be presented more clearly and widely (e.g., in standardized and comparable formats).

In the online poll of school-based counselors affiliated with NACAC, we grouped information elements into five categories. Using a five-point Likert scale, respondents were asked to rate the importance of each element for college decision making. Respondents were not restricted in how they rated each data element; one could potentially rate every element within and throughout categories similarly. Isolating the top-two Likert responses (“Very High” or “High”) for each category yielded the following list of key information:

Academics and Learning Environment

1. Majors / degrees offered
2. Rate of student retention
3. Student / faculty ratio, class size
4. Rate of graduation within 4-6 years
5. Types of special study options (e.g., accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)

Cost and Financial Aid

1. Total cost to attend (direct costs as well as room and board)
2. Average gift aid (grant and scholarship portion)
3. Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)
4. Average self-help (loan and work-study portion)
5. Average debt load upon graduation (4 year)

Institutional Characteristics and Campus Life

1. Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)
2. Campus personality (e.g., competitiveness, political expression)
3. Physical setting (e.g., rural, urban)
4. Campus appearance / atmosphere
5. Types of extracurricular programs

Reputation

1. Graduate workforce outcomes, (e.g., employment and earnings)
2. Accreditation
3. Published measures of institutional student outcomes (e.g., civic service, advanced study)
4. Ranking of value and affordability (e.g., Forbes, Kiplingers)
5. Ranking of student experience based on student surveys (e.g., Princeton Review)

Student Characteristics

1. Size of Student population

2. Percentage who are attending full- or part-time
3. Enrollment by gender
4. Enrollment by racial/ethnic category
5. Enrollment by student socio-economic diversity

Using simply the percentage of top-two affirmative response, we also narrowed the counselors’ priorities into a single list (as done to construct the Priority Information of surveyed students, whose elements and categories were kept discrete). Table 5 displays the results when viewed through this lens:

Table 5: Counselors’ Most-Recommended Information

Counselor Priorities
Total cost to attend (direct costs as well as room and board)
Size of student population
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)
Campus personality (e.g., competitiveness, political expression)
Majors/degrees offered
Average gift aid (grant and scholarship) portion
Physical setting (e.g., rural, urban)
Campus appearance/atmosphere
Rate of student retention
Types of extracurricular programs

Discussion

The Recommended Information emerging from the poll of college counselors that corresponds with all students’ priorities includes information about *Majors/programs offered*, *Campus facilities*, *Financial aid*, and *Costs*—although counselors’ preferences for specific elements within these categories sometimes differed. Mirroring the overall average of students surveyed and some of the subgroups, counselors also recommended that students consider the *Appearance/atmosphere and Physical setting* of a campus. As seen above, some groups (Students whose annual household income is more than \$35,000 and Students at private institutions) also valued *Campus personality*, in accordance with the counselors polled. No student groups prioritized *Rate of student retention*, *Size of student population*, or *Types of extracurricular opportunities*.

Accreditation, *Student/faculty ratio and class sizes*, *Average student debt load at graduation*, and *Types of learning opportunities*, which were Priority Information to students overall, were observed as high in importance to college counselors when each category was considered distinctly, but did not fall within the narrower parameters of Most-Recommended Information. Surprisingly, the single information element that held value to students but was not preeminent to counselors in this poll was *Availability of academic advising and support*. The 21st Century

students' emphases on scheduling flexibility, educational experience, and potential employment information were also absent from the Recommended Information.

Based on the findings outlined above from the student survey, focus groups, counselor poll, and expert interviews, our synthesis list of suggested information for prospective college students includes:

Majors/degrees offered

Cost and Affordability

- Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
- Average financial aid package
- Average student debt load at graduation
- Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)
- Net price

Academic Quality and Educational Experience

- Accreditation
- Amount of time students spent reading/writing or working in groups
- Availability of academic advising and support programs
- Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)
- Rate of student retention and graduation
- Student/faculty ratio, class size
- Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs)

College Characteristics

- Availability of weekend/evening classes
- Availability of online or hybrid classes
- Campus appearance/atmosphere
- Campus personality (competitiveness, political expression)
- Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)
- Size of student population
- Types of extracurricular programs

Information Challenges

In Brief:

- *On the whole, students identify financial information as the type that is most confusing or challenging to locate and interpret.*
- *21st Century students express greater challenges in collecting and interpreting information.*
- *Students wanted data to support certain questions (e.g., concerning academic quality and educational experiences), but were unaware that relevant data would be available. As a result, they didn't look for it.*
- *The value of specific data elements is less clear to students (e.g., students wanted information on outcomes but didn't mention graduation rates).*
- *Students said that some of the elements that were the most important were also likely to be the most confusing to students generally.*
- *Students in traditional-age subgroups generally approach the process as individuals—rather than as members of demographic subgroups—and expect the colleges and information sources to treat them similarly. Military Service Veterans and other Adult groups recognize themselves as part of particular groups that have unique needs.*

Overview

To gain insight on what students find unclear or confusing, we asked participants in the focus groups to identify the information and elements of the search process with which they struggled. The conversation was also broadened to discuss the extent of students' understanding (e.g., what a piece of information “tells them” about an institution, what indicators they would use to address an information need) and the types of information they may have valued or sought but had not been able to pinpoint. In the survey, we asked respondents to indicate which items in the Information Elements list they thought “first-time college students have difficulty understanding.”

Focus Group Respondents

Participants in all focus groups frequently expressed fundamental challenges with sorting and utilizing the volume of information collected. The primary challenges identified in gathering information included:

- confusion about affordability and financial
- vague or absent knowledge concerning teaching and learning quality
- concerns over reliability and credibility of sources
- poor or absent guidance

Challenges within the process overall included sitting for placement exams, sending transcripts and standardized test results, tracking different submission dates, understanding the implications of early admission, and completing application and financial aid forms. Participants reported that they sometimes were unable to find a basic summary of total costs, details on financial aid, and deadline and due dates for some colleges.

Affordability was clearly the most pressing and challenging aspect of students' consideration and application process. How students understood this issue fundamentally influenced their search

and choice of colleges, as seen in earlier sections of this report. Across groups, participants did not always have a clear understanding of the difference between tuition costs and total costs. Students from two-year institutions were less likely to research total costs for attending college, tending to focus their cost research on tuition prices. After enrollment, several were surprised by “hidden fees” as well as the cost of necessities such as books, lab materials, and parking. Several observed that such detail—which can have significant implications for college affordability and student persistence—tends not to be presented or explained well by higher education institutions.

While most students were concerned about costs and all wanted to avoid loans, some (especially within the two-year groups) did not appear to take financial aid into account: they did not appear to have fully researched their eligibility for scholarship and grant aid, or considered the extent to which such aid could lessen the college’s financial burden. Other students, particularly in the four-year Traditional and Black/African-American groups, described having had more concern about the availability of financial aid than about tuition or total costs as they were researching potential colleges. The distinction between these approaches may reflect students’ access to the necessary resources that support a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of affordability.

Much more than the costs associated with college, students in all groups expressed confusion about financial aid and the process of obtaining it. Participants in the Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Adult groups observed that financial aid applications, forms, and information were not as clear as they could be, and many students struggled with error-free completion of such forms, especially the FAFSA.

Participants also expressed confusion about how individual colleges use FAFSA information and make decisions about financial aid packages. One was not sure, upon learning of Pell-eligibility, how the funds could be accessed. A few said they viewed the availability of scholarships and work-study as a demonstration that a particular college is aware of student needs, supportive, and trying to help their students. Many expressed interest in possible employment opportunities near campus, although structured work-study options were rarely mentioned. Most participants understood work-study might be available, but most adults, veterans, and two-year students often dismissed its relevance due to their preexisting employment.

Military Service Veterans tended to focus less than other participants on matters related to cost, affordability, or financial aid, but did emphasize the importance of GI benefits to cover college costs and the necessity of smooth communication between the college and the Veterans Administration to deliver these benefits. Some confusion was evident concerning the benefits and their eligibility and/or duration parameters. Several students emphasized the importance of a military-friendly campus whose administrators thoroughly understood the processes; others expressed the need for college-based VA representatives, who could help them better understand and access this type of financial aid.

While all students wanted to minimize reliance on student loans, few sought information about the debt load or default rate of students/alumni from the institutions they considered. For example, when average debt load at graduation was discussed, most participants affirmed that they understood the meaning and significance of this element. Subsequent discussion, however, did not confirm understanding; participants revealed difficulty relating this aggregated

information to themselves. When asked if they considered information about average debt load or the percentage of graduates defaulting on their student loans to be important, virtually all focus group students reported they had not sought this data out and doubted the relevance of such information for prospective students. They typically understood such matters as reflecting an “individual thing”: since a student’s debt load was perceived as reflecting his/her own circumstances, it was challenging for students to see how an institutional average of others’ circumstances would relate to one’s own personal decisions. Thus, while participants claimed to understand these terms, their comments demonstrated difficulty interpreting or applying statistical information generally (in addition to cohort-specific information) as they researched colleges.

The majority of participants also did not report searching for data indicators of quality of teaching and learning. Students reported they were not aware of relevant indicators or did not know how/where to find this type of information. Most seemed unfamiliar with factors beyond the broad catch-all of “reputation” that would enable them to gauge potential colleges on the basis of academic quality. The students who did search for information on quality, as discussed in the previous section, mentioned elements such as accreditation, admissions requirements, graduation rates, alumni success, class sizes and formats, educational experiences, faculty credentials, and faculty/staff accessibility in a supportive atmosphere.

In focus groups, accreditation did not appear to have the equivalently high level of importance as seen in the student survey, although most students apparently valued it. When discussed, accreditation tended to be perceived as an indicator of quality teaching and learning. Students in both the Military and two-year Latino/Hispanic groups, however, explicitly related accreditation to reputation—with several stating the belief that schools that were not accredited were not reputable. Some students throughout the groups described concern about the implications of accreditation for transfer and subsequent degree options, as well as employment opportunities. One Veteran was surprised and disappointed to learn after matriculation that although the institution he enrolled in was accredited, the program itself was not.

Admissions norms and requirements (e.g., SAT/ACT scores, extracurricular activities from high school, essays, recommendation letters, application expectations) and graduation rates were often described by students from four-year colleges as indicators of an institution’s quality. Some two-year adult students agreed that tough admission requirements could indicate a higher quality learning environment; along with military veterans and most other two-year students, however, overall they tended to find graduation rates an ambiguous indicator, one that contained meanings ranging from “teachers aren’t very good” to “students were lazy.”

Despite this ambivalence concerning graduation rates (and for reasons similar to those articulated in the discussion of debt loads and loan defaults), most students who found the information used it. For example, a participant in the two-year Black/African-American group learned that the attrition rate for students between the first and second year at a considered college was nearly half—and interpreted this information as an important warning signal. A student in the two-year Latino/Hispanic group, who doubted the salience of graduation rates, nonetheless applied only to those in the consideration set that had the highest graduation rates. Another student in that group

sought information on the alumni—particularly esteemed Latino alumni—of considered colleges.

Focus group students also expressed mixed views about using class sizes and faculty/student ratio to indicate a quality learning environment. Across groups, some participants insisted on the importance of small or “hands-on” classes, while others believed it was a student’s own motivation, rather than sizes or structures, that mattered most. The majority of students, though, did feel that knowing whether or not classes would be held in large lecture halls or in a smaller setting provided an important sense of the educational experience they could anticipate.

Although the utility of specific data elements often seemed unclear, generalized information about a considered college’s learning environment and its availability of student services was indeed sought by the majority of the participants. When asked to list the elements of learning environment that had mattered to them, students throughout the groups reported the following as important: resources (e.g., libraries, computer labs, tutoring and study centers, advising and mentorship, technology support); targeted programs (peer groups for military veterans, support services for first-generation students); internship opportunities and facilitation; appropriate placement exams; and norms and expectations of course format (online, hybrid, in-class lectures or discussions) as well as student time (reading, writing, and studying).

Students in the two-year Black/African-American group, however, insisted that the amount of time students spend reading and studying was a reflection of students’ individual study habits rather than institutional quality. Black/African-American students at both two- and four-year colleges—most of whom were the first in their families to attend college—notably did not search for colleges based on programs or services that focus on first-generation college students. The majority of students in these groups expressed surprise at the “first-generation” term. Typically participants were unaware that programs for first-generation students existed, or were unsure how to locate or connect with those resources.

Across groups, several participants emphasized the importance of faculty to an institution’s academic quality. Students in the four-year Traditional and two-year Adult groups were especially interested in knowing how “well-established” their instructors were in their respective fields and how accessible the faculty would be outside of class. Other desirable information students sought about faculty included degrees held, instructional style, and quality of student/faculty interactions. Participants on the whole, however, were unsure how these types of information could be best measured, communicated, or interpreted. Some had contacted faculty via email during the college consideration process; others wished the institutions themselves had facilitated such direct communication; still others expressed concern that faculty (like admissions representatives) might not be truthful when communicating with prospective applicants.

Knowing who or what to trust was a striking challenge for students in most of the focus groups. The majority of traditional-age participants singled out college representatives as the most untrustworthy, with typical concern that representatives (particularly those who visit high schools or staff booths at college fairs) would “say anything just to get students in their school.” Some Adults found their interactions with representatives “too aggressive.”

When asked about persons most likely to be perceived as providing reliable information during the consideration and application process, some students were cynical about the prospect of trusting anyone's advice or opinions "based on the different experiences that people could have." There was no consensus on this point, however. One two-year Latino student believed a college recruiter or representative from similar ethnic and socioeconomic background might be sufficiently reliable. A four-year Latino student favored college alumni. Skeptical of overly-enthusiastic alumni, one Traditional student was more likely to trust someone who was either angry or able to provide side-by-side positive and negative perspectives.

Comparative evaluations of the tools and information sources within or beyond students' high school contexts were mixed. For example, students in the Black/African American groups assessed their own high school resources on a continuum from "extremely limited" to "very good"; nearly half of them reported graduating from high schools that lacked the resources and capacity to meet their college planning needs. This situation creates challenges for the spectrum of prospective students—including Traditional students, who also reported difficulty cross-checking facts and reconciling differences in opinion from various sources. Participants throughout the groups frequently stated that they wanted more people to talk to about college, and trustworthy sources, to both broaden information collection and to confirm the accuracy of information received.

College review websites, used by a few students among the groups, were received with a fair amount of suspicion, as well. Although adult and military veteran students were seemingly more reliant on the internet for research than were traditional-age students, they tended to use search engine map locators and institution-specific sites most often; adults were generally more wary of trusting online social networking than were their younger counterparts and especially skeptical of nonspecific online "Want a Degree Now?"-type links. For the handful of traditional-age students that reported use of third-party sites, the College Board's was mentioned most frequently for its perceived objectivity and reliability.

Survey Respondents

We explored the topic of information challenges by surveying students as well as discussing the issue in focus groups. Using the list of information elements, we asked respondents to identify the information they consider unclear or confusing to first-time college students. The reasoning behind students' selections was ambiguous; we do not know if an element was considered "difficult to understand" due to its unclear meaning or significance, conceptual challenge or complexity, information-location difficulty, or something else. Further research on this issue is recommended.

Although students' response motivations were unclear, the question provided an additional dimension to students' information use and provided insight on students' own perspectives on misunderstood college information. Furthermore, the approach allowed us to not only gauge the element's perceived clarity, but also to map relationships between the top-ten lists of Most Confusing Information and Priority Information. As will be shown below, three-quarters of the data universally considered important by respondents (i.e., Consensus Priority Information) was also unanimously considered confusing.

Overall, the students we surveyed reported confusion in the largest percentages for the following items (listed in descending order):

Most Confusing Information: Respondents Overall

- Accreditation of the school
- Average financial aid package
- Alumni involvement
- Direct costs
- Amount of time students spend reading and writing
- Average student debt load at graduation
- Availability of academic advising and support programs
- Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
- Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
- Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)

(Data available in Appendix F.)

Students under 25, students who are employed, and students who attend full-time accorded with respondents overall in the elements cited most often as potentially unclear/confusing. The information that emerged as confusing tended to be remarkably similar for all student subgroups generally; all of the top-five elements were unanimous across student subgroups and most divergence pointed to elements other than *Average amount of grant and scholarship aid* or *Types of learning opportunities*. The Most Confusing Information identified by two or more subgroups beyond the general consensus outlined above included:

- Availability of special study options
- Availability of online/hybrid classes
- Average amount of money the school spends per student
- Direct costs plus room and board

Survey Respondents: Relationship between Topmost Confusing and Important Information Elements

Among respondents overall, 70% of the elements on the Highly Confusing list were also found on the Priority Information lists (inclusive of both Search and Today timeframes). The majority of information arising as both highly important and highly confusing to surveyed students overall related to Cost/Affordability: *Average amount of grant and scholarship aid*, *Average financial aid package*, *Average student debt load at graduation*, and *Direct costs*. The other elements with this confusing/important crossover concern Academic quality/Educational experience: *Accreditation*, *Availability of academic advising and support*, and *Types of learning opportunities*.

Interestingly, three of the four Consensus Priority information elements (*Accreditation of the school*, *Average financial aid package*, and *Direct costs*) also were identified by subgroup consensus as Most Confusing; the only element of fully-shared importance to the students

surveyed that did not emerge as on the list of topmost confusion was *Campus facilities*. Additional overlaps can be seen in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Highly Confusing Information which was also Priority, by student subgroup

Element	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Accreditation of the school	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Alumni involvement		+	+	+		+					+					+		+	
Amount of time spent working in groups/teams	+	+														+			
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	+	+	+	+		+			+		+		+			+			
Availability of academic advising and support	+		+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Availability of online/hybrid classes						+													
Availability of weekend or evening classes																+			
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid			+		+			+	+					+	+			+	+
Average financial aid package	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Average student debt load at graduation	+				+			+		+		+			+				+
Direct costs	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Direct costs plus room and board								+											
Types of learning opportunities				+	+	+			+		+		+		+		+		+

Student subgroup

- A: First generation students
- B: Military Service Veteran students
- C: Latino/Hispanic students
- D: Black/African-American students
- E: Students under age 25
- F: Students 25 and older
- G: Students with annual household income below \$35,000
- H: Students with annual household income above \$35,000
- I: Students who are also employed

- J: Students who are not employed
- K: Students at 2-year institutions
- L: Students at 4-year institutions
- M: Students at public institutions
- N: Students at private institutions
- O: Full time students
- P: Part time students
- Q: Beginning (first year) students
- R: Transfer-intending student
- S: Respondents Overall

Demographic Disparities

While surveyed students on average were more likely to list an element of Cost/Affordability as both confusing and important, subgroups of 21st Century students (except the Latino/Hispanic group) were more likely to demonstrate correspondence between importance and confusion for items of Academic quality/Educational experience. Adults and part-time students showed the highest level of overlap, with 8 of 10 elements on their Confusing list also considered Priority. Students with annual household incomes under \$35,000 showed the lowest correspondence rate, with only three elements in priority/confusion overlap.

Throughout the project, students expressed considerable interest in information about academic life at an institution and possible improvements to the provision of such information. While our research team expected to find significant attention on cost and affordability, confusion about financial aid, and frustration over inadequate information in this area, the centrality of academic matters—in addition to cost—was undeniable, as was the growth in its importance to students over time and with increasing collegiate exposure or experience.

Surprisingly, however, focus group participants did not respond as favorably as expected to the prospect of information presented on the basis of a demographic group (race/ethnicity cohort or SES peer affiliation) as a promising means for clarifying information challenges. Only Military Service Veterans and other adult students expressed widespread agreement that knowing more about the ways in which institutions serve their unique populations—segmented information—would be helpful. While traditional-age students across all subgroups did not typically believe that information needs differ based on race or ethnicity, 21st Century students did agree that greater awareness and increased guidance could help for prospective students who do not come from families with college backgrounds or for students from under-resourced high schools who may not have the skills and training necessary for postsecondary success.

Professional perspectives

Professionals at all levels shared widespread concern that most prospective college students lack access to adequate guidance as they prepare for, consider, and/or choose among postsecondary education options. Counselors and higher-education experts frequently stated that students misinterpret or misunderstand information, and often “don’t really know what questions to ask.” In other words, the information that may be most important *for* students is not always what is most important *to* them. Gathering, arranging, and presenting information so that it supports student understanding was observed as a significant challenge for higher education.

Professionals also described students’ challenges. Without exception, interviewees identified high-quality cost and financial aid information as egregiously lacking. Media messages about college costs seemed to them to abet the cost confusion; simply telling students, “financial aid is available” was described as inadequate for overcoming this barrier. Nearly all of the professionals interviewed spoke of students’ discouragement about postsecondary options based on published prices; perceived affordability was understood as crucial for students’ matriculation and success. In the professionals’ view, all students need clear, accurate, and actionable

information on their likely real costs, financial aid, time-to-degree, credit transferability, and debt burden. The complexity of the application process generally, and financial aid in particular, was noted as a potential barrier and source of discouragement for many students.

Most interviewees highlighted the current parameters used to calculate graduation rate information as problematic. Several respondents also pointed to the dearth of information about transfer processes, options, and indications of transfer students' successes. Students who look for information about learning outcomes are hard-pressed to find standardized or comparable data. Important information that could help students assess the success rates of similar students is often uncollected, too generalized, or withheld by institutions.

A few professionals mentioned students' need for a lens whereby they can see themselves as potentially successful in order to overcome the challenge of unhelpful or inaccurate self-perceptions of deficiency; others emphasized students' need for an accurate way to evaluate their own college-preparedness as well as ways to gauge the potential colleges that may be optimal academic matches. Some interviewees were concerned that too few students are able to spend meaningful time on campuses prior to decision-making. Additional emphasis was directed toward the need for making explicit both an institution's support systems, and the means through which students are able to tap them.

Several counselors and interviewees urged that students frame their college search criteria with a question like, "How well does this school serve students like me?" The expressed student interest in information about academic life supports the professional view that students today need additional guidance and information to help them envision themselves as a student at a particular college and foresee, to the extent possible, their potential college experiences.

Discussion

The focus group discussions made abundantly clear a generalized need for guidance improvements in the college consideration and application process. School-based counselors, knowledgeable family members, and other trustworthy advisors or mentors are often scarce for 21st Century students. What seems especially needed are resources—individuals, data, and instruments—that can familiarize students with college options and admissions processes, recommend information to consider, deliver relevant statistics, facilitate the necessary research, and assist students in interpreting, weighing, and using the data in their postsecondary decisions.

The kinds of questions that some groups (e.g., Adults) are likely to ask may well be relevant for their younger 21st Century counterparts—questions that help students determine the likely affordability of a particular institution, questions about the institution's academic offerings and expectations, questions about requirements and scheduling flexibility, questions whose answers might help to reassure students that their academic pursuits are indeed both possible and worth it. The "Students like me?" question, however, did not seem to resonate with the students we spoke to, except for Adults and Military Service Veterans; students largely identified themselves primarily as individuals rather than as members of a shared group. Thus, some types of information that could be collected and presented differently (such as graduation rates, typical academic workloads, or likely net prices and amounts of loans and other financial aid) should be

both disaggregated and carefully contextualized in order to be optimally useful in students' search processes.

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.

- 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 information sources or government or third-party stakeholders, 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 experience at institutions as alternatives to the use of proxies such as reputation or accreditation. 21st 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 students' 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..

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.***

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.

Appendix A: NACAC Counselor Poll Results

Counselor Response Rates on Information Elements

TOP 10 INFORMATION ELEMENTS – COUNSELORS	
Received most responses from counselors indicating “important” to the college search process	
Total cost to attend (direct costs as well as room and board)	94%
Size of student population	93%
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	93%
Campus personality (e.g., competitiveness, political expression)	93%
Majors/degrees offered	91%
Average gift aid (grant and scholarship) portion	89%
Physical setting (e.g., rural, urban)	88%
Campus appearance/atmosphere	87%
Rate of student retention	86%
Types of extracurricular programs	86%
Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	85%

Information elements by characteristics used in student survey

<i>Academic Reputation</i>	Counselors
Accreditation of the school	72%
Rankings of college (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ranking of value and affordability (e.g., Forbes, Kiplingers) – 47% • Ranking of academic performance or quality (e.g. Center for College Accountability and Performance, US News & World Report) – 36% • Ranking of public good (e.g., community service and research spending as measured by the Washington Monthly) – 25% 	47%*
Alumni involvement	40%

Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)	65%
Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college and university administrators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment by peer administrators/institutions (Reputation) – 24% • Peer assessment by administrators at peer institutions (Academics & Learning Environment) – 17% 	24%*
Number of Degrees awarded each year	26%
Number of awards won by faculty and/or students	14%
Faculty Salary	8%
<i>Affordability</i>	Counselors
Average financial aid package	81%
Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	85%
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	89%
Average student debt load at graduation	82%
Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)	94%
Average amount of loans and work study aid	84%
Number of students whose full need was met	81%
Number of students receiving Pell grants	28%
Percentage of students receiving non-need-based financial aid	68%
Number of students who received need-based aid	63%
Number of students determined to have financial need	46%
Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment	
Loan default rate	
Number of students who applied for need-based aid	33%
<i>Diversity of students, faculty</i>	Counselors
Enrollment by gender	62%
Enrollment by racial/ethnic category	55%
Enrollment by student socio-economic diversity	48%
Percentage who are attending full- or part-time	68%
Enrollment by students age 25 and older	31%
Enrollment of students with disability accommodations	24%

Percentage of students who are taking adult education or extension courses	18%
Enrollment of students who are military veterans	8%
<i>Flexible class scheduling</i>	Counselors
Availability of weekend or evening classes	4%
Availability of online/hybrid classes	11%
Percentage of students who take one or more remedial course	23%
Percentage of students who take one or more online classes	16%
Percentage of students who take one or more online classes	14%
<i>Quality of teaching and learning</i>	Counselors
Accreditation of the school	72%
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	93%
Student/faculty ratio, class size	84%
Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs	67%
Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students	82%
Availability of special study options	80%
Average amount of money the school spends per student	37%
Average number of hours spent studying per week	46%
Measurements of student learning as an institutional outcome	53%
Graduate workforce outcomes (e.g., employment and earnings)	78%
Awards and recognition received by graduates	38%
Number of faculty with the highest degrees in their field	57%
Number of faculty who are tenured/full-time	43%
Rate of student retention	86%
Published measures of institutional and student outcomes (e.g., civic service, advanced study)	64%
Ranking of student experience based on student surveys (e.g., Princeton Review)	46%
Results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)	37%
Measures of institutional resource use to demonstrate stewardship and efficiency	28%
Results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and/or aggregate scores on the Collegiate Assessment of Learning CAAP)	22%

Student evaluations of professors (e.g., RateMyprofessor.com)	18%
<i>Social life/extracurricular opportunities</i>	Counselors
Availability and record of competitive sports programs	76%
Types and availability of dorms/residence halls	81%
Types and availability of extracurricular activities	86%
<i>Student services</i>	Counselors
Availability of academic advising and support programs	77%
Student services	52%
Availability of campus child care	2%
<i>Type of college</i>	Counselors
Campus appearance/atmosphere	87%
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	88%
Campus personality (e.g., competitiveness, political expression)	93%
Number of students enrolled	93%
Percentage of students living on- and off-campus	76%
Institution type (e.g., research, liberal arts, public, or private)	65%

Appendix B: NACAC Counselor Poll Instrument

Welcome / Assessment of Available Information Types

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

To this end, Lumina Foundation for Education has funded "Information Matters: Improving the College Consideration Process," a joint project of the Education Conservancy and Consumers Union. The project's goal is to improve the experiences of prospective students as they consider and select colleges.

To guide this effort, we are asking experienced high school guidance counselors to share their views on the information used by students when they consider college: what information is most vital, what is missing, and what is most often misunderstood?

The questionnaire that follows presents the array of information categories and indicators currently available to students, as well as several that have been suggested by thought-leaders in the field. While recognizing that student backgrounds and needs differ, please answer these questions with your core service population in mind.

Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Elena Falcone, Consumers Union
Lloyd Thacker, Education Conservancy

II. Institution Represented

Please indicate which type of institution and population you currently serve.

1. School type

Public High School
Private High School

2. Setting

Urban
Suburban
Rural

3. Size of student population

4. College going behavior

% who go to college each year
% who graduate to attend a four-year college

% who graduate to attend a two-year college

III. Categories and Indicators – Academics and Learning Environment

Among current guidebooks, web sites, and literature in the field of educational guidance and assessment, there are five broad categories of information suggested to inform a prospective student's evaluation of schools:

Academics and Learning Environment
Costs and Financial Aid
Institutional Characteristics and Campus Life
Reputation
Student Characteristics

Within each category, a variety of indicators are available (or proposed) to help students assess institutions; accordingly, an indicator may have relevance to multiple categories.

Please note how representative of that category you consider each of these indicators to be, and suggest any other indicators that would best support decision-making.

5. Indicators currently used or proposed to describe ACADEMICS AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT are listed below.

How representative is each indicator of this category?
(Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low)

Availability of academic advising and support programs (e.g., cohort curricula, tutoring, writing and math centers)
Availability of evening classes
Average length of time to degree
Degree of selectivity (number of applicants/number of admitted)
Faculty salary
Institution type (e.g., research, liberal arts, public, or private)
Majors/programs offered
Measurements of student learning as an institutional outcome
Nature of curriculum requirements (e.g., interdisciplinary, structured, flexible)
Number of awards won by faculty
Number of awards won by students
Number of degrees awarded each year
Number of faculty who are tenured/full-time
Number of faculty with the highest degrees in their field
Peer assessment by administrators at peer institutions
Percentage of students who take one or more online classes
Percentage of students who take one or more remedial course
Rate of graduation within 4 to 6 years
Rate of student retention
Results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)

Results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Spending per student

Student/faculty ratio, class size

Types of special study options (e.g., accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)

Please note any other highly relevant indicators of ACADEMICS AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT not listed above:

6. Among the indicators in this category, are there any that in your experience are frequently misunderstood or misapplied by students in considering colleges? For example, are some low-relevance indicators given greater weight in consideration or are there some whose significance is not fully appreciated? Please state which ones and briefly describe your view. If none, please proceed to the next question.

IV. Categories and Indicators – Cost and Financial Aid, Institutional

7. Indicators currently used or proposed to describe COST AND FINANCIAL AID are listed below.

How representative is each indicator of this category?
(Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low)

Availability of scholarships

Availability of work-study

Average debt load upon graduation (four-year)

Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)

Number of students receiving Pell grants

Percentage of students receiving need-based financial aid

Percentage of students receiving non-need-based financial aid

Total cost to attend (direct costs as well as room and board)

Please note any other highly relevant indicators of COST AND FINANCIAL AID not listed above:

8. Among the indicators in this category, are there any that in your experience are frequently misunderstood or misapplied by students in considering colleges? For example, are some low-relevance indicators given greater weight in consideration or are there some whose significance is not fully appreciated? Please state which ones and briefly describe your view. If none, please proceed to the next question.

V. Categories and Indicators – Institutional Characteristics and Campus Life

9. Indicators currently used or proposed to describe INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CAMPUS LIFE are listed below.

How representative is each indicator of this category?
(Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low)

Availability of campus child care
 Average number of hours spent studying
 Campus appearance/atmosphere
 Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)
 Campus personality (e.g., competitiveness, political expression)
 Number of online/hybrid classes offered
 Percentage of students living on- and off-campus
 Percentage of students who take one or more online classes
 Physical setting (e.g., rural, urban)
 Student services, such as health and counseling services
 Type of dorms/residence halls
 Types of extracurricular programs
 Types of sports programs
 Please note any other highly relevant indicators of INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CAMPUS LIFE not listed above:

10. Among the indicators in this category, are there any that in your experience are frequently misunderstood or misapplied by students in considering colleges? For example, are some low-relevance indicators given greater weight in consideration or are there some whose significance is not fully appreciated? Please state which ones and briefly describe your view. If none, please proceed to the next question.

VI. Categories and Indicators – Reputation

11. Indicators currently used or proposed to describe REPUTATION are listed below.

How representative is each indicator of this category?
 (Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low)

Accreditation
 Alumni engagement and satisfaction (e.g., donation and participation)
 Assessment by peer administrators/institutions
 Awards and recognition received by graduates
 Graduate workforce outcomes (e.g., employment and earnings)
 Published measures of institutional and student outcomes (e.g., civic service, advanced study)
 Ranking of academic performance or quality (e.g., Center for College Accountability and Performance, US News & World Report)
 Ranking of public good (e.g., community service and research spending as measured by The Washington Monthly)
 Ranking of student experience based on student surveys (e.g., Princeton Review)
 Ranking of value and affordability (e.g., Forbes, Kiplingers)
 Student evaluations of professors (e.g., RateMyprofessor.com)
 Please note any other highly relevant indicators of REPUTATION not listed above:

12. Among the indicators in this category, are there any that in your experience are frequently misunderstood or misapplied by students in considering colleges? For example, are some low-relevance indicators given greater weight in consideration or are there some whose significance is not fully appreciated? Please state which ones and briefly describe your view. If none, please proceed to the next question.

VII. Categories and Indicators – Student Characteristics

13. Indicators currently used or proposed to describe STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS are listed below.

How representative is each indicator of this category?
(Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low)

Enrollment by gender

Enrollment by racial/ethnic category

Enrollment by student socio-economic diversity

Enrollment by students age 25 and older

Enrollment of students who are military veterans

Enrollment of students with disability accommodations

Percentage who are attending full- or part-time

Size of student population

Please note any other highly relevant indicators of STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS not listed above:

14. Among the indicators in this category, are there any that in your experience are frequently misunderstood or misapplied by students in considering colleges? For example, are some low-relevance indicators given greater weight in consideration or are there some whose significance is not fully appreciated? Please state which ones and briefly describe your view. If none, please proceed to the next question.

VIII. Information Needs of Other Students

15. Are there specific types of information that you think are more useful to students who may fall outside of your core service population? We are particularly interested in students currently under-represented among college-goers and those who may not have ready access to counseling services.

IX. Follow-Up

Thank you for your thoughtful responses and your time in completing this questionnaire.

If you would be willing to expand on the information provided here, please provide contact information as indicated below.

Appendix C: Summary Report of Expert Interviews

Background and methodology

In this aspect of the Education Conservancy/Consumers Union “Information Matters” research project, we sought insights from higher education policy experts—including organizational leaders, policy researchers, scholars, journalists, and others who are engaged in defining measures of success—to explore the information needs of prospective college students. We recognize that the college consideration process varies for students relative to their family backgrounds, socio-economic status, high school environment, access to guidance, age, and other factors. One group of prospective students, amounting to perhaps 20 percent of the total, benefit disproportionately from living in college-encouraging environments that include parents who have gone to college, college-prep high school programs and curricula, access to significant counseling and information about college, and so forth. While our study includes identifying the information needs of those students, most of our discussions tended to focus on the needs of the majority of prospective students, sometimes known as “21st Century” students. Many of our findings are relevant for students throughout various demographic spectra.

Interviews were conducted either in person or by telephone between June and August 2010. Potential interviewees were selected based on their professional expertise and familiarity with college admissions processes and student information needs. Interviews were scheduled through email exchanges, and interviewees were provided with a description of the overall project as well as the interview questionnaire. This document reports the findings and results of those interviews.

Key Findings

Information matters and should be available to meet students where they are in the process and help them move forward purposefully. “What are the potential benefits and real costs for me?” is a key student-level question that should guide the development, packaging and delivery of information to all student segments. Colleges can play a role in addressing students’ needs by improving the accuracy, transparency and quality of existing information, gathering and providing more relevant and meaningful information, and simplifying and targeting information to better serve student segments. Barriers to providing information include the non-uniform way in which important information is measured and reported, and the lack of a national reporting mechanism for outcome measurements. The ways in which important information is currently presented are seen as often confusing and discouraging for prospective students—particularly information about costs, financial aid, what it takes to be successful in college, and what the benefits might be of attending a particular college.

The primary deficiency identified repeatedly in our interviews was in students’ ability to consider the experiences of other students similar to themselves (in terms of socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, age, military veteran status, family composition and history in higher education, and other “background” factors) in setting expectations for their own success. Students often lack both a generalized understanding of the college landscape and how they might “fit” within it, as well as a more concrete understanding of how students such as

themselves, given their goals, fare at a particular institution. Information that addresses this deficiency would include more demographically-disaggregated data on costs, financial aid packages, retention/graduation rates, transfer in/out rates and successes, key services and supports, professional employment/further academic placement rates, graduate debt burdens, etc.

Long before students reach college-going age, however, much can be done to improve their “college knowledge” and their postsecondary prospects. The real opportunity to help future students, many believe, occurs at the middle-school level. For students whose family backgrounds do not include postsecondary education, this is a key time when students and their families can be engaged and encouraged to plan the student’s high school curricula and begin preparing for advanced education. Perhaps changes could be made at the middle school level that would increase postsecondary success.

Information that matters

All prospective college students would benefit from increased opportunities for self-assessment with regard to their own college readiness (both academic and social), their likelihood of admissibility to a particular institution, and their potential need for remedial (non degree-earning) courses. Students from non-college-going backgrounds, in particular, need a better understanding of the skills, habits, and knowledge that will enable them to succeed in earning their degrees. Improving opportunities for self-assessment and awareness can benefit students not only on a practical level, but on a personal one as well: by developing a better understanding of themselves as students, students are better poised to chart a successful educational path.

Nearly all interviewees spoke of students’ discouragement about their postsecondary options based on the college “price tag.” Students need clear, accurate, and actionable information on their likely real costs, financial aid, time-to-degree, transferability, and debt burden. The information that can best help to illustrate the likely affordability of an institution for a prospective student would highlight the experiences of students with whom they share demographic similarities.

Framing college as a journey and encouraging students to imagine their potential paths is seen as necessary for thoughtful student choices and eventual postsecondary success. In order to achieve this, more specific information on what students can expect, especially in their first year at an institution and their likely experiences of class size, instructorship, and learning assessment would be valuable. The key is to help students imagine their future as a college student: the programs and pathways that will be available to them, how they can grow and change, and the opportunities available to them upon successful degree completion and graduation. Students’ experiences and learning outcomes at an institution (including NSSE, CCSSE, CLA), and colleges’ educational objectives and learning assessments, can and should be made clearer.

Making explicit the college’s support systems, and how students tap into them, is also seen as vital. Interviewees posed questions about whether institutions have clearly-defined and accessible points of contact for 21st Century students, such as: Who is the veteran-certifying official on the campus? Is campus-based child care available? How flexible is course scheduling? What is the availability of required classes really like?

It was noted that counselors, students, and the higher education community-at-large would benefit from clear, demographically-disaggregated data on persistence rates, transfer in/out rates, graduation rates, and the relationship between expected rates/actual rates. Improving the collection and provision of information about transfer rates in/out of an institution and the successes/pathways of part-time and transfer students is important given the trends in student attendance patterns, also known as “swirling.” Disaggregated data is necessary so that prospective students can find answers to questions like “How does this college serve students like me?” and “Who are the people at this institution? What are their backgrounds?”

Barriers to providing and accessing quality information

Advisors and points of contact who care and can relate to the students are crucial for the postsecondary success of 21st Century students, helping them successfully navigate both the world of college generally and the world within a particular institution. Many of these prospective students do not have a family, school, or social background that is steeped in the college-going culture. Lack of adequate college counseling and outreach—especially for underserved high school students and for adult students—thus creates a considerable obstacle for students’ access and success at the postsecondary level. The information Colleges most often provide does very little to assist students in imagining what their experiences in college might be like.

Structural inequities across socioeconomic classes—ongoing racism and classism—discourages students. Far too many students get the message from both individuals and institutions that they are not “college material” based on their backgrounds rather than their aptitude. And factors like time, money, technological tools, and general internet access complicate the college consideration process. We must recognize that the “digital divide” persists, and that many students come from multi-lingual families. Clear, straightforward, and useful information provided in Spanish and other languages would help students and their families envision and discuss potential options. Institutions that want to serve 21st Century students well should focus on communicating more effectively with all prospective student and family audiences.

Several interviewees question the level of institutions’ political will to reach out to 21st Century students. Institutions’ habits, attitudes, and incentives regarding the collection and dissemination of useful and important information are significant barriers. The complexity of the application process generally, and the financial aid process in particular, can be significant deterrents to postsecondary education.

There is no objective measure of overall academic quality; much of the data collected is more limited and misleading than useful, relevant, or helpful to prospective students. IPEDS data, for example, does not capture a full picture of the student bodies, and value-added measures like NSSE and CLA are neither widely available nor well-contextualized. Institutions seem to suffer from inertia and resistance to change in the collection and reporting of information; students are left to make choices about their perceived options without the benefit of quality information that would help them choose wisely.

Information that is often misunderstood or misused

Without exception, interviewees emphatically identified high-quality cost and financial aid information as egregiously lacking; the absence of such fundamental information makes college consideration consequentially confusing. Because prospective students are not able to gain a real picture of their own likely net costs, or the costs and financial aid awards of students like them, they are often guided by the published “sticker” price and can be led to assume that postsecondary education is beyond their means. This is especially the case for students who do not come from college-going backgrounds and lack a basic familiarity with these institutional procedures and the ways in which student costs, and debt, can be managed. For military veterans, it is imperative that the veteran-certifying official on a college campus is knowledgeable and helpful with the bureaucratic hurdles these students face.

Media messages about the high cost of college abet the cost confusion; simply telling students that “financial aid is available” is not enough to overcome this barrier. The FAFSA itself can be intimidating and confusing to such an extent that students are deeply discouraged. At the same time, students often don’t understand the implications of student loans. Institutions’ enrollment management techniques and practices often exacerbate this problem, and some interviewees suggested that the realities and workings of Enrollment Management should be made clearer if we hope to educate students well about the college landscape-at-large and their own college options.

Nearly all interviewees also emphasized graduation rate information as problematic; students, families, and the general public misunderstand how these rates are calculated. Counseling and education about how and why graduation rates vary, which students are and are not counted (and why), and what the rates mean would go a long way in improving postsecondary access, persistence, and success. Simply put, we must improve the data collection to provide a clearer and more accurate picture of student and institutional success.

Additionally, several respondents highlighted the dearth of information about transfer processes, options, and indications of transfer students’ successes. Providing transfer rates in and out of an institution and demographically disaggregating this data is necessary to serve 21st Century students well.

Significant misperceptions/misunderstandings also occur in these areas:

- The meaning and results of tests such as SAT, ACT, and institutional placement tests
- The meaning and significance of how statistics such as student/faculty ratio, selectivity, SAT scores are calculated and often fudged
- Rankings—their relevance and their influence on colleges
- Reputations and stereotypes of colleges may be inaccurate, but are easily perpetuated
- College environments can be a form of culture shock for many students—prospective students need a better sense of what college will be like for them

How to engage more students, improve decision-making, and ensure good outcomes

The challenge here lies in how the information that experts think students should be able to access can be presented in ways that foster student understanding and use. As mentioned previously, several respondents believe that cultivating a deeper awareness of the U.S. system of higher education, starting in middle school, will help students to have better preparation and support for achieving postsecondary education. It is crucial, especially for first-generation students, that families can be engaged and involved. This emphasis on including families holds true for adult students as well—particularly military veterans, whose parents and/or spouses are often a fundamental support system.

Providing more and better counseling, advising, and individualized guidance would help tremendously for 21st Century students. Championing the norm that it is okay to ask for help, and ensuring each student has someone to rely on for such help, would advance students' access to valuable information and chances for academic success. Good examples of successful students who have come from similar backgrounds would enable prospective students to approach their college decisions with a "success lens." Another benefit of this approach is that students would be more encouraged and supported in recognizing their strengths, talents, and options. In addition, more opportunities for students to experience college/campus life before applying would help alleviate the possibility of culture shock.

On the whole, interviewees asserted that relevant data and meaningful information should be made more accessible and comprehensible. Some suggested that a national data-collection effort would be helpful, and that the Department of Education could require institutions to report better outcome data and disaggregated measures of value-added. Some respondents, though, emphasized that discussions about college should lead with talk about life values, such as diversity, science, literacy. While it may be possible to develop metrics for these and show how colleges serve such values, some believe that leading with language about metrics can be problematic since values are what matters in college, and in life.

Further information needs of non-traditional students

Fundamentally, it is crucial to employ cultural sensitivity and minimize use of education jargon that can be a turn-off for prospective 21st Century students and their families. Many prospective college students do not come from a college-going background, so a basic, standard primer, available in multiple languages, that is well-designed and helps students understand the postsecondary landscape and their own options would make a significant difference. How information is delivered matters. Presenting college preparation, application, and financial aid processes as long lists, or hoops to jump through, can make thinking about college overwhelming and discouraging.

We must be aware and attentive to the simple fact that not everyone has internet access, ample time, or the good support that helps a student to research college options. Providing examples, role models, and pathways to help students gain a comprehensible vision of themselves as college students would make a significant difference.

Overall, interviewees believe there should be greater attention paid to how students go to college, and who is counted as successful. It is clear that affordability is a major concern for most

students, both “traditional” and “non-traditional,” at present. Perceived affordability is crucial to both student matriculation and success. The lack of financial aid for part-time students, too, is a deterrent to student success. Adult students often turn to proprietary (for-profit) schools because they need flexibility in scheduling and support beyond what is typically offered on non-profit campuses. In order to advance our nation’s postsecondary attainment rate, and ensure that students have the opportunity to excel and achieve, we must provide better information and support for *all* prospective students.

Appendix D: List of Experts Interviewed

- Lauren Asher
President, The Institute for College Access and Success
- Tom Bailey
Director, Community College Research Center and National Center for Postsecondary Research at Teachers College, Columbia University
- Debbie Bial
Founder/President, The Posse Foundation Inc.
- George Boggs
President, American Association of Community Colleges
- Sarita Brown
Co-founder/President, Excelencia in Education
- Sean Callaway
Director of College Placement and Internships, Pace University
- Kevin Carey
Policy Director, Education Sector
- Arlene Wesley Cash
Vice President for Enrollment Management, Spelman College
- Jennifer Engle
Director of Higher Education Research and Policy, Education Trust
- Don Heller
Director, Center for the Study of Higher Education, Pennsylvania State University
- Roland King
Vice President for Public Affairs, National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
- Alice Kleeman
Career and College Center Director, Menlo-Atherton High School
- Jay Mathews
Education columnist, The Washington Post
- Kay McClenney
Director, Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)
- Marty O'Connell
Executive Director, Colleges that Change Lives
- Laura Perna
Professor, Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania
- JB Schramm
Founder and CEO, College Summit
- John Schupp
SERV (Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran) Program Director, Cleveland State University
- David Shulenburg
Vice President for Academic Affairs, Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities
- Ben Wildavsky
Senior scholar in Research and Policy, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
- Robert Zemsky
Chair, the Learning Alliance for Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania

Appendix E: Expert Interview Questionnaire

The Education Conservancy and Consumers Union are engaged in a promising collaborative project called Information Matters: Improving the College Consideration Process. Supported by Lumina Foundation for Education, our effort is aimed at getting the right information to prospective students to optimize decision-making.

We are guided by several assumptions: (1) information matters – students who use better information will make better decisions; (2) student and educator perspectives may differ on which information is most relevant; and, (3) current information can be improved, which will become apparent through an examination of the different perspectives.

WILL YOU HELP US?

As we begin our research, we are reaching out to a range of experts to better understand their views on the use and quality of information. I would like to arrange a time to talk with you for 30-45 minutes about the following questions.

1. **WHAT INFORMATION MATTERS?** Thinking about what information is available to students and what could be made available, what kinds of information do you think prospective college students should be considering? What would be the best indicators? For example, if the academic and learning environments of the school are important, how could students best assess this?

2. **ARE THERE BARRIERS?** Are there barriers to providing or accessing any of this information? Do you have concerns about the quality of the information?

3. **WHAT HAS BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD?** Are there any types of information that you've seen repeatedly misunderstood or misused by students in the college consideration process?

4. **HOW CAN DECISION MAKING BE MADE BETTER?** What could be done to engage more students and to ensure the best possible outcomes?

5. **WHAT ABOUT NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS?** Do these students have information needs that were not addressed above?

Any other insights you might have are also welcome.

Many thanks. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Lloyd Thacker, Executive Director, The Education Conservancy

Appendix F: Student Survey Results

Student subgroups

- A:** First generation students
B: Military service veteran students
C: Latino/Hispanic students
D: Black/African-American students
E: Students under age 25
F: Students 25 and older
G: Students with annual household income below \$35,000
H: Students with annual household income above \$35,000
I: Students who are also employed

- J:** Students who are not employed
K: Students at 2-year institutions
L: Students at 4-year institutions
M: Students at public institutions
N: Students at private institutions
O: Full time students
P: Part time students
Q: Beginning (first year) students
R: Transfer-intending student
S: Respondents Overall

Percentage of Student Subgroup in Agreement with Statements about Information Availability and Utility

Statement	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
"I knew what information to look for to help me decide where to go to college."	68	70	70	67	69	70	66	69	71	67	70	68	69	70	69	71	70	70	69
"I found what I needed to make a decision."	68	69	71	66	70	72	71	70	71	69	70	70	70	71	70	71	71	73	70
"I knew how to apply the information to help me select a college."	65	63	67	63	67	69	66	67	68	65	67	67	67	67	66	70	65	69	67

Information Sources Used by Percentage of Student Subgroup

Source	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Friends/family	53	50	55	55	61	52	63	65	57	64	56	65	61	57	62	54	62	60	60
Brochures/printed materials from specific schools	35	35	35	32	37	36	37	42	36	37	32	41	35	44	38	28	32	37	37
Websites of specific school	31	25	31	23	36	25	39	45	35	36	28	43	34	41	36	32	33	32	36
Teachers/Counselors	29	23	32	26	31	22	32	33	29	31	28	33	30	32	31	27	28	30	30
College directories	18	27	20	25	23	19	21	26	23	22	20	25	21	28	23	23	21	22	23
Websites with detailed information	15	15	18	12	21	15	19	25	20	21	17	24	20	23	21	18	19	20	20
Student blogs	13	9	10	11	9	8	13	7	10	9	10	8	10	8	9	12	9	9	9

Single-most useful information source

Source	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Friends/family	33	30	30	35	36	36	33	37	33	38	35	36	36	32	36	34	40	35	36
Brochures/printed materials from specific schools	15	18	12	15	12	16	15	11	13	11	13	11	12	14	12	11	11	14	12
Websites of specific school	14	12	13	11	15	12	16	18	15	15	13	18	15	16	15	14	14	14	15
Teachers/Counselors	14	11	18	13	14	10	14	12	14	13	15	12	14	10	13	13	14		13
College directories	8	17	9	13	9	10	6	9	10	8	10	9	8	13	9	10	9	9	9
Websites with detailed information	6	4	6	9		10	9	10	8	8		10	8	12	9	7	7		9
Student blogs	8	6	5	4	7	3	4	4	5	4	4	3	4	6	4	4			4

Characterization of Information: Percentage of Subgroup Agreement

Information found during decision-making was always...	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Easy to use	43	42	42	44	39	48	38	35	40	39	44	36	41	34	40	41	40	42	40
Easy to find	41	42	39	44	38	51	38	35	40	39	43	35	40	35	38	43	41	38	39
Accurate	41	37	41	45	37	53	33	32	41	36	44	32	39	33	37	45	42	37	38
Easy to understand	39	36	38	44	37	51	38	33	39	37	42	34	39	33	38	41	40	38	38
Current	39	32	36	41	35	46	35	32	37	34	39	32	37	31	36	36	37	35	36
Easy to customize	33	32	32	36	29	41	27	24	32	27	35	24	31	25	29	34	32	29	30

Types of Information: Percentage of Subgroup to Whom Characteristic was Important During Search

Source	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Majors/field of study	71	75	73	72	75	80	79	76	76	75	75	77	75	76	76	72	75	78	76
Academic Reputation	69	73	73	73	75	75	74	77	75	76	74	76	75	77	76	73	75	75	75
Affordability	71	70	75	73	75	82	80	72	75	75	77	73	77	67	75	75	76	81	75
Quality of Teaching and Learning	69	72	70	73	73	80	73	73	74	73	74	73	73	75	74	72	73	77	74
Location/Convenience	67	67	68	74	70	79	70	66	72	69	74	67	72	66	70	74	72	79	71
Flexible Class Scheduling	65	58	69	70	66	77	67	59	68	65	73	61	68	60	66	72	69	77	67
Type of College	65	65	64	68	67	71	66	64	68	65	70	64	68	64	67	68	68	72	67
Student Services	60	56	62	65	61	68	62	56	64	60	66	57	62	61	61	66	62	68	62

Types of Information: Percentage of Subgroup to Whom Characteristic Would Be Important Today

Source	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Majors/field of study	70	69	76	75	76	84	76	76	76	77	77	76	77	75	77	74	76	80	77
Academic Reputation	73	71	75	74	76	79	75	78	77	77	76	77	77	76	77	73	76	78	77
Affordability	72	75	77	75	77	85	76	77	78	78	80	76	79	75	78	77	78	84	78
Quality of Teaching and Learning	70	69	75	73	75	82	76	76	75	76	76	76	75	78	76	73	75	82	76
Location/Convenience	68	65	74	73	71	85	68	67	73	70	76	67	74	65	72	73	73	80	72
Flexible Class Scheduling	70	67	74	75	73	82	70	69	75	72	78	69	75	68	74	74	73	82	74
Type of College	67	66	67	66	67	74	62	64	70	64	71	63	68	63	66	71	67	73	67
Student Services	62	58	65	68	65	68	68	61	66	64	68	62	65	61	65	66	67	71	65

Information Elements: Percentage of Subgroup to Whom Item was Important During Search

*: less than 10% of subgroup affirmed this element

Information Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	
Accreditation of the school	43	43	41	40	43	47	50	47	43	43	38	48	42	46	44	37	40	39	43	
Alumni involvement	14	22	13	15	11	11	*	*	12	11	14	*	12	*	11	13	12	14	11	
Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects	14	12	13	14	11	17	*	*	13	11	15	*	13	*	11	18	14	14	12	
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	19	10	17	18	15	18	14	13	16	14	17	13	16	12	14	19	15	15	15	
Availability of academic advising and support programs (tutoring, writing and math centers, cultural centers, peer networks)	17	*	19	19	19	25	28	21	19	20	17	22	19	24	20	19	17	18	20	
Availability of campus-based child care	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Availability of online/hybrid classes	10	*	12	*	10	16	*	*	12	*	14	17	11	*	*	16	10	13	10	
Availability of special study options (research, accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)	12	*	12	13	14	13	18	15	14	13	12	15	13	15	14	11	12	12	14	
Availability of volunteering/community service opportunities	*	*	12	**	*		10	**	**	*	*	*	*	11	*	11	**		*	
Availability of weekend or evening classes	18	14	19	15	16	33	11	11	19	15	23	11	19	9	15	28	18	24	17	
Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment	13	*	17	17	16	12	22	18	16	15	13	18	14	22	16	14	15	13	16	
Availability/record of competitive sports programs	12	13	12	13	13	*	12	14	13	12	13	13	12	16	12	15	11	13	13	

Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	18	14	21	15	20	20	28	23	19	21	16	24	18	26	21	15	18	17	20
Average amount of loans and work study aid	12	*	*	12	11	13	15	15	11	12	11	12	11	14	12	10	11	11	11
Average amount of money the school spends per student	13	*	16	11	14	16	11	16	14	13	13	15	13	15	14	12	11	14	14
Average financial aid package	29	18	33	25	31	27	42	32	30	31	27	34	29	35	31	25	29	30	30
Average number of hours spent studying per week	13	*	11	10	11	13	14	14	11	12	11	12	12	10	11	12	11	12	11
Average student debt load at graduation	16	*	12	13	16	13	14	19	15	16	13	19	15	17	16	13	13	15	15
Awards and recognition received by graduates	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	10	*	*	*	*	*
Campus appearance and atmosphere	20	16	19	20	24	20	32	33	22	27	15	33	23	30	26	13	22	17	24
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	22	16	25	18	28	21	34	38	24	31	18	37	25	35	29	16	24	21	27
Campus personality (religious or political orientation, activism, athletics, competitiveness, etc.)	13	12	11	12	16	17	16	23	15	17	11	21	14	23	17	11	15	13	16
Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)	10	*	10	*	11	*	13	13	10	12	*	13	10	14	11	10	10	10	11
Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	24	16	25	19	27	28	30	31	26	28	24	30	27	27	28	24	24	27	27
Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)	12	*	11	11	15	10	19	22	12	18	*	21	14	19	16	*	12	*	15
Emphasis on developing career skills	14	*	14	12	14	13	18	16	15	14	12	16	14	17	15	10	13	13	14
Emphasis on developing critical thinking skills	*	*	*	*	*	*	10	*	*	*	*	10	*	11	*	*	*	*	*
Enrollment by gender	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Enrollment by racial/ethnic category	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Enrollment by student socio-economic category	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Environmental practices and sustainability programs of the school	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college/university administrators	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Evaluations and opinions of the school by students/alumni	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	10	*	*	*	*	*	*
Frequency of class discussions	*	*	*	10	*	12	*	*	*	*	10	*	*	*	*	12	10	10	*
Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs (credits, required courses)	12	11	14	11	14	16	18	17	14	15	12	17	14	15	15	11	11	14	14
Loan default rate of graduates	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Measurements of student learning	*	*	*	10	*	12	*	*	*	*	10	*	*	*	*	12	10	10	*
Measures of student-faculty interactions (availability outside of class, collaborating on research, etc.)	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Number of students enrolled	11	*	14	*	15	*	14	21	14	16	10	19	13	21	15	11	12	11	14	
Number/percent of faculty who are tenured/full-time	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of faculty with the highest degrees in their field	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students determined to have financial need	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students living on- or off-campus	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students receiving non-need-based financial aid	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students receiving Pell grants	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students who go on to graduate school	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students who have transferred (in or out)	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students who received need-based aid	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students whose full need was met	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students who are attending full- or part-time	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	13	14	10	11	19	13	18	27	16	21	11	25	16	25	20	11	16	15	18	
Rankings of colleges (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major)	12	*	12	*	16	12	16	23	14	17	10	22	14	22	17	*	13	*	16	
Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students	12	*	13	12	14	*	16	18	13	15	11	17	13	17	15	*	12	11	14	
Student services (health and counseling services, accessibility services, etc.)	12	*	11	11	12	*	14	14	12	12	10	14	12	13	12	*	11	11	12	
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	19	13	21	15	21	16	26	24	21	21	18	24	20	25	22	16	19	20	21	
Success of alumni as measured by employment and income	*	**	**	**	*			11	**	*		10	*	10	**	**	*		*	
Types and availability of dorms/residence halls	*	*	*	11	11	*	14	14	*	12	*	15	*	15	11	*	10	*	11	
Types and availability of extracurricular programs including intramural and club sports	10	*	*	10	10	*	12	12	*	11	*	12	*	14	10	*	11	*	10	
Types of exams and assessments commonly used (multiple choice, essay, portfolio, etc.)	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*

Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)	17	11	17	17	18	20	20	17	18	18	19	18	19	17	18	21	19	19	18
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Information Elements: Percentage of Subgroup to Whom Item Would Be Important Today

*: less than 10% of subgroup affirmed this element

Information Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Accreditation of the school	40	39	37	37	41	42	47	45	39	42	37	45	40	42	42	36	38	42	41
Alumni involvement	12	16	18	16	13	18	10	11	13	13	15	10	13	14	12	17	13	15	13
Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects	16	13	12	14	12	12	*	*	13	11	15	*	12	11	11	17	14	14	12
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	17	11	12	17	15	16	14	13	15	14	16	13	16	11	14	16	13	15	15
Availability of academic advising and support programs (tutoring, writing and math centers, cultural centers, peer networks)	17	10	18	14	17	14	19	18	17	17	15	19	16	20	17	18	15	16	17
Availability of campus-based child care	*	***	***	***	***	***	***	***											*
Availability of online/hybrid classes	10	*	12	*	11	16	*	*	13	*	15	*	12	*	10	18	10	15	11
Availability of special study options (research, accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)	11	10	10	*	13	*	15	13	12	13	11	14	12	14	12	13	*	12	12
Availability of volunteering/community service opportunities	*	***	***				11	***	***	*				10	***	***			*
Availability of weekend or evening classes	15	14	19	15	15	25	11	11	17	14	19	11	16	11	14	21	16	21	15
Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment	13	10	13	11	13	12	17	13	12	14	12	14	12	15	13	12	13	11	13
Availability/record of competitive sports programs	11	*	12	14	11	*	11	10	12	*	11	10	10	14	10	11	10	11	11
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	16	14	15	12	20	14	20	19	15	17	13	19	15	19	17	12	14	15	16
Average amount of loans and work study aid	10	*	*	10	10	12	11	10	*	10	*	10	10	10	10	10	*	*	10
Average amount of money the school spends per student	11	*	12	10	10	*	*	11	*	11	*	11	10	11	10	*	*	10	10
Average financial aid package	26	14	25	22	25	20	33	26	24	26	23	27	25	26	25	22	25	26	25
Average number of hours spent studying per week	11	*	10	*	11	11	*	12	11	11	11	11	11	10	11	12	*	12	11
Average student debt load at graduation	16	10	14	12	16	10	16	19	15	16	13	19	15	17	16	14	13	14	16
Awards and recognition received by graduates	*	***	***	***	***	***	***	***											*
Campus appearance and atmosphere	13	11	17	15	20	12	26	26	18	22	14	26	19	25	21	15	18	18	20
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	18	11	19	18	23	17	21	30	22	24	18	28	21	29	24	17	21	22	23
Campus personality (religious or political)	*	*	11	12	12	*	14	16	11	12	*	16	10	18	13	*	*	10	12

Information Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
orientation, activism, athletics, competitiveness, etc.)																			
Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)	*	*	10	**	*		10	10	**	**	**	**							*
Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	23	14	24	17	24	21	22	28	24	24	21	26	24	23	25	18	20	25	24
Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)	13	*	*	11	14	*	11	20	13	14	*	18	13	16	14	10	10	10	14
Emphasis on developing career skills	12	*	15	13	13	12	13	16	13	13	11	15	13	15	13	12	12	12	13
Emphasis on developing critical thinking skills	10	*	10	*	10	*	10	10	**	*		10	*	12	**	**			*
Enrollment by gender	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Enrollment by racial/ethnic category	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Enrollment by student socio-economic category	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Environmental practices and sustainability programs of the school	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college/university administrators	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Evaluations and opinions of the school by students/alumni	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Frequency of class discussions	*	**	**	*		11	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs (credits, required courses)	11	*	11	*	12	*	14	15	11	13	*	15	12	10	12	*	*	*	12
Loan default rate of graduates	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Measurements of student learning	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Measures of student-faculty interactions (availability outside of class, collaborating on research, etc.)	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number of students enrolled	10	*	*	*	11	*	*	14	10	12	*	13	11	10	11	*	10	*	11
Number/percent of faculty who are tenured/full-time	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Number/Percent of faculty with the highest degrees in their field	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students determined to have financial need	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students living on- or off-campus	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Number/Percent of students receiving non-need-based financial aid	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*

Information Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	
Number/Percent of students receiving Pell grants	*	**	***	****	*****	*****	*****												*	
Number/Percent of students who go on to graduate school	*	**	***	****	*****	*****	*****												*	
Number/Percent of students who have transferred (in or out)	*	**	***	****	*****	*****	*****												*	
Number/Percent of students who received need-based aid	*	**	***	****	*****	*****	*****												*	
Number/Percent of students whose full need was met	*	**	***	****	*****	*****	*****												*	
Number/Percent of students who are attending full- or part-time	*	**	***	****	*****	*****	*****												*	
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	10	*	13	10	14	11	13	13	12	16	10	18	13	18	15	*	12	11	14	
Rankings of colleges (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major)	12	10	13	10	15	*	14	21	12	16	*	20	14	17	15	*	11	*	14	
Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students	12	10	12	*	14	*	13	19	11	16	*	18	13	15	14	*	12	10	13	
Student services (health and counseling services, accessibility services, etc.)	11	*	11	*	11	*	11	14	10		12	*	13	11	11		*	*	10	11
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	17	15	18	13	19	12	19	21	17	19	15	21	18	21	19	14	16	19	18	
Success of alumni as measured by employment and income																			*	
Types and availability of dorms/residence halls	*	**	*		10	**		13	*	11	*	13	*	14	10	**	**		*	
Types and availability of extracurricular programs including intramural and club sports	*	**	***	*				10	*	10	*	10	*	10	**		10	*	*	
Types of exams and assessments commonly used (multiple choice, essay, portfolio, etc.)	*	**	***	****	*****	*****	*****												*	
Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)	16	10	17	18	18	16	17	18	18	18	17	18	18	17	17	20	18	18	18	

**Information Elements: Percentage of Subgroup Who Believes First-Time College Students Find Item
Unclear or Difficult to Understand**

*: less than 10% of subgroup affirmed this element

Information Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Accreditation of the school	29	33	28	29	27	31	26	27	26	28	27	27	27	27	27	28	26	27	27
Alumni involvement	16	16	18	16	17	15	20	17	17	16	16	17	17	17	16	21	15	15	17
Amount of time spent working in groups or on	16	16	13	14	12	16	13	12	12	13	13	12	13	11	12	15	12	12	13

Information Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
team projects																			
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	17	15	16	14	15	13	12	15	16	14	16	15	16	13	14	21	15	16	15
Availability of academic advising and support programs (tutoring, writing and math centers, cultural centers, peer networks)	13	10	12	12	13	13	10	15	14	13	12	14	13	14	13	17	11	11	13
Availability of campus-based child care	*	***	***	***	***	***	***												*
Availability of online/hybrid classes	11	*	10	*	11	13	*	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	10	13	10	12	11
Availability of special study options (research, accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)	12	*	11	10	11	13	13	11	11	11	10	12	11	10	10	14	10	11	11
Availability of volunteering/community service opportunities	*	***	***	***	***	***	***												*
Availability of weekend or evening classes	*	*	10	**	***				11	11	10	***				14	*	10	*
Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment	10	***			10	**		11	***			10	*	10	*	12	**		10
Availability/record of competitive sports programs	*	***	***	***	***	***										12	**		*
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	10	*	13	10	11	*	*	12	12	10	11	12	11	12	11	14	10	11	11
Average amount of loans and work study aid	10	***	***	***	***	***										11	*	10	*
Average amount of money the school spends per student	*	10	**	**				11	10	10	10	*	10	*	12	***		10	*
Average financial aid package	18	15	18	16	18	16	18	19	19	17	17	19	17	21	18	18	16	20	18
Average number of hours spent studying per week	10	***	***					10	10	***			10	10	*	10	***		*
Average student debt load at graduation	14	11	14	13	16	10	15	19	15	16	12	19	15	18	15	14	13	14	15
Awards and recognition received by graduates	*	***	***	***	***	***	***												*
Campus appearance and atmosphere	*	***	***	***	***	***	***												*
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	*	***	***	***	***	***	***												*
Campus personality (religious or political orientation, activism, athletics, competitiveness, etc.)	*	***	***	***	***	***	***												*
Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)	*	***	***				10	**	***	***	***								*
Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	19	10	17	12	15	16	17	17	15	16	14	17	16	14	16	14	14	15	15
Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)	*	*	*	*	10	11	12	12	10	10	*	12	10	*	11	*	*	*	10

Information Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
Emphasis on developing career skills	*	**	**	*				11	**	*		10	**	**	*				*
Emphasis on developing critical thinking skills	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Enrollment by gender	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Enrollment by racial/ethnic category	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Enrollment by student socio-economic category	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Environmental practices and sustainability programs of the school	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college/university administrators	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Evaluations and opinions of the school by students/alumni	*	**	**	**	**	**	*							10	**	**			*
Frequency of class discussions	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs (credits, required courses)	*	**	**	*				11	**	*		11	*	10	**	**			*
Loan default rate of graduates	*	*	*	*	10	*	10	11	*	*	*	11	10	11	10	12	10	10	10
Measurements of student learning	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Measures of student-faculty interactions (availability outside of class, collaborating on research, etc.)	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number of students enrolled	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/percent of faculty who are tenured/full-time	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/Percent of faculty with the highest degrees in their field	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/Percent of students determined to have financial need	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/Percent of students living on- or off-campus	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/Percent of students receiving non-need-based financial aid	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/Percent of students receiving Pell grants	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/Percent of students who go on to graduate school	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/Percent of students who have transferred (in or out)	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*
Number/Percent of students who received need-	*	**	**	**	**	**	**												*

Information Elements	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
based aid																			
Number/Percent of students whose full need was met	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Number/Percent of students who are attending full- or part-time	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Rankings of colleges (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major)	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students	*	**	***				12	10	***			11	****	*					*
Student services (health and counseling services, accessibility services, etc.)	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	11	*	*	*	10	10	*	*	10	10	10	10	10	*	*	13	10	*	10
Success of alumni as measured by employment and income	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Types and availability of dorms/residence halls	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Types and availability of extracurricular programs including intramural and club sports	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Types of exams and assessments commonly used (multiple choice, essay, portfolio, etc.)	*	**	***	***	***	***	***												*
Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)	10		10	10	11	14	10	10	12	10	12	11	11	10	11	13	11	11	11

STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS: SUBGROUP PRIORITY TABLES

Priority Information and Highly Confusing Information According to Response Rates for Each Student Subgroup

Italics used to indicate ties

First Generation Students

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Direct costs
Direct costs	Direct costs	Average financial aid package
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Alumni involvement
<i>Amount of time students spend reading and writing</i>	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
<i>Student/faculty ratio, class sizes</i>	Availability of academic advising/support programs	Average student debt load at graduation
Availability of weekend or evening classes	Average student debt load at graduation	Availability of academic advising/support programs
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Availability of special study options
Availability of academic advising/support programs	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams	Availability of online/hybrid classes

Military Service Veterans

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Alumni involvement	Alumni involvement	Alumni involvement
Average financial aid package	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
<i>Campus appearance/atmosphere</i>	<i>Availability of weekend or evening classes</i>	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
<i>Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)</i>	<i>Average amount of grant and scholarship aid</i>	Average financial aid package
<i>Direct costs</i>	<i>Average financial aid package</i>	Average student debt load at graduation
<i>Availability of weekend or evening classes</i>	<i>Direct costs</i>	Direct costs

<i>Average amount of grant and scholarship aid</i>	<i>Amount of time spent working in groups/teams</i>	Availability of academic advising/support programs
<i>Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)</i>	Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Average amount of money the school spends per student
<i>Availability/record of competitive sports programs</i>	<i>Campus appearance/atmosphere</i>	Availability of special study options
<i>Student/faculty ratio, class sizes</i>	<i>Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)</i>	Direct costs plus room and board

Students who are Latino/Hispanic

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Alumni involvement
Direct costs	Direct costs	Average financial aid package
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	<i>Availability of weekend or evening classes</i>	Direct costs
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	<i>Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)</i>	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	<i>Alumni involvement</i>	Average student debt load at graduation
<i>Availability of academic advising/support programs</i>	<i>Availability of academic advising/support programs</i>	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
<i>Availability of weekend or evening classes</i>	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
<i>Campus appearance/atmosphere</i>	Types of learning opportunities	Availability of academic advising/support programs
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Availability of special study options

Students who are Black/African-American

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Alumni involvement
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Average financial aid package
Availability of academic advising/support programs	Types of learning opportunities	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Direct costs	Direct costs	Amount of time students spend reading and writing

Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Average student debt load at graduation
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Alumni involvement	Availability of academic advising/support programs
<i>Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment</i>	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Direct costs
<i>Types of learning opportunities</i>	Availability of weekend or evening classes	Types of learning opportunities
<i>Average amount of grant and scholarship aid</i>	Availability of academic advising/support programs	Availability of special study options
<i>Student/faculty ratio, class sizes</i>		

Students Under Age 25

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Direct costs	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Average student debt load at graduation
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Direct costs
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Availability of academic advising/support programs
Availability of academic advising/support programs	Types of learning opportunities	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	Availability of academic advising/support programs	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
Types of learning opportunities	Average student debt load at graduation	Types of learning opportunities

Students 25 and Older

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Availability of weekend or evening classes	Availability of weekend or evening classes	Average financial aid package
Direct costs	Direct costs	Direct costs
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams

Availability of academic advising/support programs	Alumni involvement	Alumni involvement
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Types of learning opportunities
Campus appearance/atmosphere	<i>Types of learning opportunities</i>	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
<i>Average amount of grant and scholarship aid</i>	<i>Amount of time students spend reading and writing</i>	Availability of academic advising/support programs
<i>Types of learning opportunities</i>	<i>Availability of online/hybrid classes</i>	Availability of special study options
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Availability of academic advising/support programs	Availability of online/hybrid classes

Students from Households Below \$35,000 Annual Income: During Search

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Alumni involvement
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Average financial aid package
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Direct costs	Direct costs
Direct costs	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Average student debt load at graduation
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Availability of academic advising/support programs	<i>Student/faculty ratio, class sizes</i>	Availability of special study options
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	<i>Availability of academic advising/support programs</i>	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment	<i>Types of learning opportunities</i>	Rate of graduation (4-6 years, first/full time)
Types of learning opportunities	<i>Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment</i>	Direct costs plus room and board

Students from Households Above \$35,000 Annual Income

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Average student debt load at graduation
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Direct costs	Average financial aid package
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Alumni involvement

Direct costs	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Direct costs
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Rankings of colleges	Availability of academic advising/support programs
<i>Average amount of grant and scholarship aid</i>	Direct costs plus room and board	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
<i>Rankings of colleges</i>	Average student debt load at graduation	Direct costs plus room and board
Campus personality	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams

Students who are Also Employed

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Direct costs	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Direct costs
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Types of learning opportunities	Average student debt load at graduation
Availability of academic advising/support programs	Availability of weekend or evening classes	Availability of academic advising/support programs
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	<i>Availability of academic advising/ support programs</i>	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Availability of weekend or evening classes	<i>Student/faculty ratio, class sizes</i>	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
Types of learning opportunities	Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Types of learning opportunities

Students who are Not Employed

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs
Direct costs	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Average student debt load at graduation

Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Types of learning opportunities	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	<i>Average amount of grant and scholarship aid</i>	Availability of academic advising/support programs
Availability of academic advising/ support programs	<i>Availability of academic advising/ support programs</i>	Loan default rate of graduates
Types of learning opportunities	<i>Average student debt load at graduation</i>	Direct costs plus room and board
	<i>Rankings of colleges</i>	

Students at 2-year Institutions

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Direct costs	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Availability of weekend or evening classes	Availability of weekend or evening classes	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Types of learning opportunities	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Types of learning opportunities	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Availability of academic advising/ support programs
Availability of academic advising/ support programs	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Average student debt load at graduation
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	<i>Availability of academic advising/ support programs</i>	Types of learning opportunities
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	<i>Alumni involvement</i>	Availability of online/hybrid classes

Students at 4-year Institutions

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Average financial aid package
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average student debt load at graduation
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Direct costs	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Direct costs

Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Rankings of colleges	Availability of academic advising/ support programs
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Availability of academic advising/support programs	<i>Availability of academic advising/support programs</i>	Direct costs plus room and board
Rankings of colleges	<i>Average student debt load at graduation</i>	Availability of special study options

Students at Public Institutions

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Direct costs	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Types of learning opportunities	Average student debt load at graduation
Availability of weekend or evening classes	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Availability of academic advising/support programs
<i>Availability of academic advising/support programs</i>	Availability of weekend or evening classes	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
<i>Types of learning opportunities</i>	Availability of academic advising/support programs	Types of learning opportunities
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Availability of special study options

Students at Private Institutions

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
<i>Average financial aid package</i>	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Average financial aid package
<i>Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)</i>	Average financial aid package	Average student debt load at graduation
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Alumni involvement
Direct costs	Direct costs	Availability of academic advising/ support programs

Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Direct costs
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	Availability of academic advising and support programs	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Average amount of money the school spends per student
Availability of academic advising/ support programs	<i>Campus personality</i>	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
Campus personality	<i>Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)</i>	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams

Full-time students

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Direct costs	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Average student debt load at graduation
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Types of learning opportunities	Availability of academic advising/ support programs
Availability of academic advising/ support programs	<i>Availability of academic advising/support programs</i>	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	<i>Average amount of grant and scholarship aid</i>	Types of learning opportunities
Types of learning opportunities	Average student debt load at graduation	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid

Part-time students

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Availability of weekend or evening classes	Average financial aid package	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Average financial aid package	Availability of weekend or evening classes	Alumni involvement
Direct costs	Types of learning opportunities	Average financial aid package

Types of learning opportunities	Direct costs	Availability of academic advising/ support programs
Amount of time students spend reading and writing	Availability of online/hybrid classes	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Availability of academic advising/ support programs	Availability of academic advising/support programs	Availability of weekend or evening classes
Amount of time spent working in groups/teams	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams	Average student debt load at graduation
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs
<i>Availability of online/hybrid classes</i>	Alumni involvement	Availability of special study options
<i>Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)</i>		

Beginning Students

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Direct costs	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Direct costs
Types of learning opportunities	Types of learning opportunities	Average student debt load at graduation
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	<i>Availability of weekend or evening classes</i>	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Availability of weekend or evening classes	<i>Student/faculty ratio, class sizes</i>	Availability of academic advising/ support programs
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Availability of academic advising/ support programs	Types of learning opportunities
Availability of academic advising/ support programs	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Availability of online/hybrid classes

Students who Intend to Transfer

<i>Looked for During Search</i>	<i>Would Look for Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Direct costs	Direct costs	Amount of time students spend reading and writing

Availability of weekend or evening classes	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Alumni involvement
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Availability of weekend or evening classes	Direct costs
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Average student debt load at graduation
Types of learning opportunities	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Availability of academic advising/ support programs	Types of learning opportunities	Availability of online/hybrid classes
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Availability of academic advising and support programs	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Alumni involvement	Availability of academic advising/ support programs

Respondents Overall

<i>Priority During Search</i>	<i>Priority Now</i>	<i>Most Unclear/Confusing</i>
Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school	Accreditation of the school
Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package	Average financial aid package
Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs	Alumni involvement
Direct costs	Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	Direct costs
Campus appearance/atmosphere	Campus appearance/atmosphere	Amount of time students spend reading and writing
Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Student/faculty ratio, class sizes	Average student debt load at graduation
Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Types of learning opportunities	Availability of academic advising/support programs
Availability of academic advising/support programs	Availability of academic advising/ support programs	Amount of time spent working in groups/teams
Types of learning opportunities	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	Average student debt load at graduation	Types of learning opportunities

Appendix G: Student Survey Instrument

1. (HAND RESPONDENT CARD) Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the research and decision-making process you followed when deciding to which colleges to apply to and where to attend. Let's use a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 represents "Strongly agree" and 5 represents "Do not agree at all".

	1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Somewhat disagree	5 Do not agree at all
I knew what information to look for to help me decide where to go to college.					
I found what I needed to make a decision.					
I knew how to apply the information to help me select a college.					

2. (HAND RESPONDENT CARD) Please tell me how important each of these characteristics were when you first started to think about which colleges to apply to. Let's use a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 represents "Very Important" and 5 represents "Not at all important" (READ EACH CHARACTERISTIC).

	1 Very Important	2 Somewhat important	3 Neither important nor unimportant	4 Somewhat unimportant	5 Very unimportant
Academic reputation					
Affordability					
Diversity of students, faculty					
Flexible class scheduling					
Location/convenience					
Majors/fields of study					
Quality of teaching and learning					
Social life/extracurricular opportunities					
Student services					
Type of college (public/private, 2-year/4-year, non-profit/for-profit, online/campus-based, etc.)					

3. (USE SAME CARD) With the benefit of the experience you have as a college student, please tell me how important these characteristics are to you today. Again, let's use a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 represents "Very Important" and 5 represents "Not at all important" (READ EACH CHARACTERISTIC).

	1 Very Important	2 Somewhat important	3 Neither important nor unimportant	4 Somewhat unimportant	5 Very unimportant
Academic reputation					
Affordability					

Diversity of students, faculty					
Flexible class scheduling					
Location/convenience					
Majors/fields of study					
Quality of teaching and learning					
Social life/extracurricular opportunities					
Student services					
Type of college (public/private, 2-year/4-year, non-profit/for-profit, online/campus-based, etc.)					

4. (HAND RESPONDENT CARD) Here's a list of sources of information some students tell us they used when deciding which colleges to apply to. Please tell me which of these sources of information YOU USED when deciding which colleges to apply to.

	Source of Information USED
1. Brochures and printed materials from specific schools	
2. Friends/Family	
3. College directories that list colleges and their characteristics (such as Barrons, Petersons, Princeton Review)	
4. Student blogs	
5. Teachers/Counselors	
6. Websites of specific school	
7. Websites with detailed information about many colleges	
8. Other (Specify)	

5. I'm going to read to you EACH OF THE SOURCES OF INFORMATION YOU TOLD ME YOU USED when deciding which schools to apply to. As I read each source you used back to you, please tell me which source of information you found most useful? (READ EACH SOURCE OF INFORMATION MENTIONED IN Q.10 ABOVE).

	Source of Information found most useful
1. Brochures and printed materials from specific schools	
2. Friends/Family	
3. College directories that list colleges and their characteristics	
4. Student blogs	
5. Teachers/Counselors	
6. Websites of specific school	
7. Websites with detailed information about many colleges	
8. Other (Specify)	

6. (HAND RESPONDENT CARD) Characterize the information that you found when making your college decision. Use a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 represents "Always" and 4 represents "Never". The information you found was... (READ EACH CHARACTERISTIC).

	1	2	3	4	
	Always	Often	Rarely	Never	
Accurate					

Current					
Easy to find					
Easy to customize (personalize)					
Easy to understand					
Easy to use					

7. (HAND RESPONDENT CARD) Here is a list of information some prospective students consider when deciding which schools to apply to. Please tell me which items on this list were important to you when you were deciding which schools to apply to. Please tell me the number appearing to left of EACH ITEM YOU CONSIDERED IMPORTANT.

	Considered important
1. Accreditation of the school	
2. Alumni involvement	
3. Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects	
4. Amount of time students spend reading and writing	
5. Availability and record of competitive sports programs	
6. Availability of academic advising and support programs (tutoring, writing and math centers, cultural centers, peer networks)	
7. Availability of campus-based child care	
8. Availability of online/hybrid classes	
9. Availability of special study options (research, accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)	
10. Availability of volunteering/community service opportunities	
11. Availability of weekend or evening classes	
12. Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment	
13. Average amount of money the school spends per student	
14. Average student debt load at graduation	
15. Average financial aid package	
16. Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	
17. Average number of hours spent studying per week	
18. Average amount of loans and work study aid	
19. Awards and recognition received by graduates	
20. Campus appearance/atmosphere	
21. Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	
22. Campus personality (religious or political orientation, activism, athletics, competitiveness, etc.)	
23. Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)	
24. Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	
25. Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)	
26. Emphasis on developing career skills	
27. Emphasis on developing critical thinking skills	
28. Enrollment by gender	
29. Enrollment by racial/ethnic category	
30. Enrollment by student socio-economic category	
31. Environmental practices and sustainability programs of the school	
32. Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college and university administrators	
33. Evaluations and opinions of the school by students/alumni	
34. Frequency of class discussions	
35. Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs (credits, required courses)	
36. Loan default rate of graduates	
37. Measurements of student learning	
38. Measures of student-faculty interactions (availability outside of class, collaborating on research, etc.)	

39. Number of students enrolled	
40. Number/Percent of faculty who are tenured/full-time	
41. Number/Percent of faculty with the highest degrees in their field	
42. Number/Percent of students determined to have financial need	
43. Number/Percent of students living on- or off-campus	
44. Number/Percent of students receiving non-need-based financial aid	
45. Number/Percent of students receiving Pell grants	
46. Number/Percent of students who go on to graduate school	
47. Number/Percent of students who have transferred (in or out)	
48. Number/Percent of students who received need-based aid	
49. Number/Percent of students whose full need was met	
50. Number/Percent of students who are attending full- or part-time	
51. Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	
52. Rankings of colleges (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major)	
53. Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students	
54. Student services (health and counseling services, accessibility services, etc.)	
55. Student/faculty ratio, class size	
56. Success of alumni as measured by employment and income	
57. Types and availability of dorms/residence halls	
58. Types and availability of extracurricular programs including intramural and club sports	
59. Types of exams and assessments commonly used (multiple choice, essay, portfolio, etc.)	
60. Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)	

8. I am going to read to you EACH OF THE ITEMS YOU TOLD ME YOU CONSIDERED IMPORTANT when deciding which schools to apply to. As I read each item back to you, please tell me HOW IMPORTANT that item was to you on a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 represents “Extremely Important” and 4 represents “Slightly Important” First . . . (READ EACH ITEM MENTION IN Q. ABOVE).

	1 Extremely Important	2 Highly important	3 Moderately important	4 Slightly important	
1. Accreditation of the school					
2. Alumni involvement					
3. Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects					
4. Amount of time students spend reading and writing					
5. Availability and record of competitive sports programs					
6. Availability of academic advising and support programs (tutoring, writing and math centers, cultural centers, peer networks)					
7. Availability of campus-based child care					
8. Availability of online/hybrid classes					
9. Availability of special study options (research, accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)					
10. Availability of volunteering/community service opportunities					
11. Availability of weekend or evening classes					
12. Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment					
13. Average amount of money the school spends per student					
14. Average student debt load at graduation					
15. Average financial aid package					
16. Average amount of grant and scholarship aid					
17. Average number of hours spent studying per week					
18. Average amount of loans and work study aid					

19. Awards and recognition received by graduates					
20. Campus appearance/atmosphere					
21. Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)					
22. Campus personality (religious or political orientation, activism, athletics, competitiveness, etc.)					
23. Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)					
24. Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)					
25. Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)					
26. Emphasis on developing career skills					
27. Emphasis on developing critical thinking skills					
28. Enrollment by gender					
29. Enrollment by racial/ethnic category					
30. Enrollment by student socio-economic category					
31. Environmental practices and sustainability programs of the school					
32. Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college and university administrators					
33. Evaluations and opinions of the school by students/alumni					
34. Frequency of class discussions					
35. Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs (credits, required courses)					
36. Loan default rate of graduates					
37. Measurements of student learning					
38. Measures of student-faculty interactions (availability outside of class, collaborating on research, etc.)					
39. Number of students enrolled					
40. Number/Percent of faculty who are tenured/full-time					
41. Number/Percent of faculty with the highest degrees in their field					
42. Number/Percent of students determined to have financial need					
43. Number/Percent of students living on- or off-campus					
44. Number/Percent of students receiving non-need-based financial aid					
45. Number/Percent of students receiving Pell grants					
46. Number/Percent of students who go on to graduate school					
47. Number/Percent of students who have transferred (in or out)					
48. Number/Percent of students who received need-based aid					
49. Number/Percent of students whose full need was met					
50. Number/Percent of students who are attending full- or part-time					
51. Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)					
52. Rankings of colleges (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major)					
53. Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students					
54. Student services (health and counseling services, accessibility services, etc.)					
55. Student/faculty ratio, class size					
56. Success of alumni as measured by employment and income					
57. Types and availability of dorms/residence halls					
58. Types and availability of extracurricular programs including intramural and club sports					
59. Types of exams and assessments commonly used (multiple choice, essay, portfolio, etc.)					

60. Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)					
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9. (HAND RESPONDENT CARD) Now that you're in college, let's look at the first list I showed you. With the benefit of your college experience, please tell me which of these items you would look for today if you were considering which schools to apply to. Please tell me the number appearing to left of each item you WOULD LOOK FOR TODAY if you were considering which schools to apply to.

	Would look for today
1. Accreditation of the school	
2. Alumni involvement	
3. Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects	
4. Amount of time students spend reading and writing	
5. Availability and record of competitive sports programs	
6. Availability of academic advising and support programs (tutoring, writing and math centers, cultural centers, peer networks)	
7. Availability of campus-based child care	
8. Availability of online/hybrid classes	
9. Availability of special study options (research, accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)	
10. Availability of volunteering/community service opportunities	
11. Availability of weekend or evening classes	
12. Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment	
13. Average amount of money the school spends per student	
14. Average student debt load at graduation	
15. Average financial aid package	
16. Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	
17. Average number of hours spent studying per week	
18. Average amount of loans and work study aid	
19. Awards and recognition received by graduates	
20. Campus appearance/atmosphere	
21. Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	
22. Campus personality (religious or political orientation, activism, athletics, competitiveness, etc.)	
23. Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)	
24. Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	
25. Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)	
26. Emphasis on developing career skills	
27. Emphasis on developing critical thinking skills	
28. Enrollment by gender	
29. Enrollment by racial/ethnic category	
30. Enrollment by student socio-economic category	
31. Environmental practices and sustainability programs of the school	
32. Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college and university administrators	
33. Evaluations and opinions of the school by students/alumni	
34. Frequency of class discussions	
35. Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs (credits, required courses)	
36. Loan default rate of graduates	

37. Measurements of student learning	
38. Measures of student-faculty interactions (availability outside of class, collaborating on research, etc.)	
39. Number of students enrolled	
40. Number/Percent of faculty who are tenured/full-time	
41. Number/Percent of faculty with the highest degrees in their field	
42. Number/Percent of students determined to have financial need	
43. Number/Percent of students living on- or off-campus	
44. Number/Percent of students receiving non-need-based financial aid	
45. Number/Percent of students receiving Pell grants	
46. Number/Percent of students who go on to graduate school	
47. Number/Percent of students who have transferred (in or out)	
48. Number/Percent of students who received need-based aid	
49. Number/Percent of students whose full need was met	
50. Number/Percent of students who are attending full- or part-time	
51. Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	
52. Rankings of colleges (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major)	
53. Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students	
54. Student services (health and counseling services, accessibility services, etc.)	
55. Student/faculty ratio, class size	
56. Success of alumni as measured by employment and income	
57. Types and availability of dorms/residence halls	
58. Types and availability of extracurricular programs including intramural and club sports	
59. Types of exams and assessments commonly used (multiple choice, essay, portfolio, etc.)	
60. Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)	

10. I'm going to read to you EACH OF THE ITEMS YOU TOLD ME WERE IMPORTANT TO YOU IF TODAY YOU WERE deciding which schools to apply to. As I read each item back to you, please tell me HOW IMPORTANT that item is to you on a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 represents "Extremely Important" and 4 represents "Slightly important" First . . . (READ EACH ITEM MENTION IN Q. ABOVE).

	1 Extremely Important	2 Highly important	3 Moderately important	4 Slightly important	
1. Accreditation of the school					
2. Alumni involvement					
3. Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects					
4. Amount of time students spend reading and writing					
5. Availability and record of competitive sports programs					
6. Availability of academic advising and support programs (tutoring, writing and math centers, cultural centers, peer networks)					
7. Availability of campus-based child care					
8. Availability of online/hybrid classes					
9. Availability of special study options (research, accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)					
10. Availability of volunteering/community service opportunities					
11. Availability of weekend or evening classes					
12. Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment					
13. Average amount of money the school spends per student					
14. Average student debt load at graduation					

15. Average financial aid package					
16. Average amount of grant and scholarship aid					
17. Average number of hours spent studying per week					
18. Average amount of loans and work study aid					
19. Awards and recognition received by graduates					
20. Campus appearance/atmosphere					
21. Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)					
22. Campus personality (religious or political orientation, activism, athletics, competitiveness, etc.)					
23. Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)					
24. Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)					
25. Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)					
26. Emphasis on developing career skills					
27. Emphasis on developing critical thinking skills					
28. Enrollment by gender					
29. Enrollment by racial/ethnic category					
30. Enrollment by student socio-economic category					
31. Environmental practices and sustainability programs of the school					
32. Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college and university administrators					
33. Evaluations and opinions of the school by students/alumni					
34. Frequency of class discussions					
35. Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs (credits, required courses)					
36. Loan default rate of graduates					
37. Measurements of student learning					
38. Measures of student-faculty interactions (availability outside of class, collaborating on research, etc.)					
39. Number of students enrolled					
40. Number/Percent of faculty who are tenured/full-time					
41. Number/Percent of faculty with the highest degrees in their field					
42. Number/Percent of students determined to have financial need					
43. Number/Percent of students living on- or off-campus					
44. Number/Percent of students receiving non-need-based financial aid					
45. Number/Percent of students receiving Pell grants					
46. Number/Percent of students who go on to graduate school					
47. Number/Percent of students who have transferred (in or out)					
48. Number/Percent of students who received need-based aid					
49. Number/Percent of students whose full need was met					
50. Number/Percent of students who are attending full- or part-time					
51. Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)					
52. Rankings of colleges (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major)					
53. Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students					
54. Student services (health and counseling services, accessibility services, etc.)					
55. Student/faculty ratio, class size					
56. Success of alumni as measured by employment and income					
57. Types and availability of dorms/residence halls					

58. Types and availability of extracurricular programs including intramural and club sports					
59. Types of exams and assessments commonly used (multiple choice, essay, portfolio, etc.)					
60. Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)					

11. (HAND RESPONDENT CARD) Before we move on, please tell me the number appearing to the left of the items you think first-time college students have difficulty understanding.

	Meaning of term unclear
1. Accreditation of the school	
2. Alumni involvement	
3. Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects	
4. Amount of time students spend reading and writing	
5. Availability and record of competitive sports programs	
6. Availability of academic advising and support programs (tutoring, writing and math centers, cultural centers, peer networks)	
7. Availability of campus-based child care	
8. Availability of online/hybrid classes	
9. Availability of special study options (research, accelerated study, internships, international study, multi-disciplinary degrees)	
10. Availability of volunteering/community service opportunities	
11. Availability of weekend or evening classes	
12. Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment	
13. Average amount of money the school spends per student	
14. Average student debt load at graduation	
15. Average financial aid package	
16. Average amount of grant and scholarship aid	
17. Average number of hours spent studying per week	
18. Average amount of loans and work study aid	
19. Awards and recognition received by graduates	
20. Campus appearance/atmosphere	
21. Campus facilities (libraries, labs, arts centers)	
22. Campus personality (religious or political orientation, activism, athletics, competitiveness, etc.)	
23. Degree of selectivity (% of applicants offered admission)	
24. Direct costs (tuition, fees, books, supplies)	
25. Direct costs plus room and board (total cost to attend)	
26. Emphasis on developing career skills	
27. Emphasis on developing critical thinking skills	
28. Enrollment by gender	
29. Enrollment by racial/ethnic category	
30. Enrollment by student socio-economic category	
31. Environmental practices and sustainability programs of the school	
32. Evaluations and opinions about the school by other college and university administrators	
33. Evaluations and opinions of the school by students/alumni	
34. Frequency of class discussions	
35. Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs (credits, required courses)	
36. Loan default rate of graduates	

37. Measurements of student learning	
38. Measures of student-faculty interactions (availability outside of class, collaborating on research, etc.)	
39. Number of students enrolled	
40. Number/Percent of faculty who are tenured/full-time	
41. Number/Percent of faculty with the highest degrees in their field	
42. Number/Percent of students determined to have financial need	
43. Number/Percent of students living on- or off-campus	
44. Number/Percent of students receiving non-need-based financial aid	
45. Number/Percent of students receiving Pell grants	
46. Number/Percent of students who go on to graduate school	
47. Number/Percent of students who have transferred (in or out)	
48. Number/Percent of students who received need-based aid	
49. Number/Percent of students whose full need was met	
50. Number/Percent of students who are attending full- or part-time	
51. Physical setting (rural, suburban, urban)	
52. Rankings of colleges (such as best college lists, top 10 lists by major)	
53. Rate of graduation within 4-6 years for first-time, full-time students	
54. Student services (health and counseling services, accessibility services, etc.)	
55. Student/faculty ratio, class size	
56. Success of alumni as measured by employment and income	
57. Types and availability of dorms/residence halls	
58. Types and availability of extracurricular programs including intramural and club sports	
59. Types of exams and assessments commonly used (multiple choice, essay, portfolio, etc.)	
60. Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)	

12. Is there any information that was/would be important to you in deciding on a college that hasn't been addressed in this survey? (Open response)

13. (Asked of two-year students only) Please provide some other facts about your college attendance:

- a. Are you the first person in your family to attend college? (Yes/No)
- b. Are you a military veteran or a member of the Guard or Reserves? (Yes/No)
- c. Have you ever transferred between colleges? (Yes/No)
- d. Do you expect to transfer? (Yes/No)
- e. Do you expect to seek an additional degree beyond the one you are currently pursuing? (Yes/No)
- f. At what age did you start your college education? _____
- g. Did you participate in a Pre-College Program (academic enrichment and/or skills development) before beginning college? (Yes/No)
- h. Please indicate whether your current school is public or private, online-only, for-profit

Appendix H: Student Focus Groups Report

**Summary Report for the
Education Conservancy
Information Matters Focus Groups**

Authors

Keith MacAllum
Holly Bozeman
Denise Glover

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**Prepared for:
The Education Conservancy
805 SW Broadway, Suite 1600 Portland, OR 97205**

**Prepared by:
Westat
1600 Research Boulevard
Rockville, Maryland 20850-3129
(301) 251-1500**

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Summary Report for the Education Conservancy Information Matters Focus Groups

1. Background

The Education Conservancy (EC) and Consumers Union (CU) received financial support from the Lumina Foundation to design and implement a research project to explore the types of information used by a wide variety of college students throughout the college search and decision-making process. The project, “Information Matters,” provides a deeper understanding of the experiences of students in obtaining, evaluating, and applying information throughout this process and clarifies the role of specific information resources and tools used by 21st Century students.

To facilitate the collection of the relevant data elements from students, the EC and CU administered a survey to 2,400 two- and four-year college students in October 2010. Eight focus groups were used to complement the survey and provide an interpretive understanding of the quantitative data collected. The focus groups attend to the many facets of the search process, from beginning to end, and provide a comprehensive summary of students’ experiences.

The purpose of the focus groups was to further explore the rationale behind the decision-making process used by enrolled students, the information sought and used by these students, and the priority given to this information at the time they made their choices. As with the surveys, the focus groups also captured students’ reflections on the information, sources, tools, and priorities from the vantage point of having already been enrolled.

EC contracted with Westat to help draft the focus group questions, prepare focus group screeners, coordinate focus group logistics, conduct the focus groups, analyze and code qualitative data, and prepare a report documenting the key findings. The Westat team had previously conducted similar work for the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.¹ Eight focus groups were conducted in February and March 2011. Question wording and sequencing were modified following the initial focus groups in consultation with the client.

2. Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Focus group participants were recruited from postsecondary education institutions in the Houston, Texas; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Washington, DC, metropolitan areas. The latter group met in Rockville, Maryland, a DC suburb. The characteristics of the student groups, shown in Table 1, were as follows:

- A total of 52 students (26 males; 26 females) participated in eight focus groups.
- All students were within their first year and a half of attending college.

¹ MacAllum, K., Glover, D., Queen, B., and Riggs, A. (2007). *Deciding on postsecondary education* (prepared for the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

- Twenty-six students were enrolled in a two-year institution and 25 students were enrolled in a four-year institution. One student was enrolled in an institution with both two- and four-year components.
- The majority (39 of 52) of students were enrolled in a public institution. Of the remaining 13, eight were enrolled in a private institution and five attended a proprietary institution.
- The Traditional Group was comprised of students identified using socio-economic status (SES) coming from moderate to high income households, and with at least one parent who had attended college
- With the exception of the African American and Hispanic groups, all groups were open to mixed ethnicity and racial backgrounds, and at least one member of the Adult focus group was known to be a Military Veteran.

Table 1. Characteristics of the eight focus groups

Group	Location	Number of participants	Institutional type	Age	Income	First generation
2-year Adult	Houston, TX	7	2-year (five public, two proprietary)	24-48	Low-moderate	NA
4-year Adult	Philadelphia, PA	7	2- and 4-year (three public, three private, one proprietary)	25-41	Low-moderate	NA
2-year African American	Houston, TX	3	2-year (all public)	18-21	Low-moderate	Yes
4-year African American	Philadelphia, PA	8	Predominantly 4-year (seven public, one proprietary)	18-20	Low-moderate	Yes
2-year Hispanic	Houston, TX	4	2-year (all public)	19-23	Low-moderate	Yes
4-year Hispanic	Rockville, MD	8	Predominantly 4-year (six public, two private)	18-23	Low-moderate	Yes
Traditional	Philadelphia, PA	8	Predominantly 4-year (five public, three private)	18-19	Moderate-high	No
Veteran/Active Duty	Rockville, MD	7	2- and 4-year (six public, one proprietary)	NA	NA	NA

NA: Not ascertained; information was not collected.

See Appendix A for more detail.

3. Data Analysis

Each focus group, which lasted about two hours, was held in a standard focus group facility and staffed with a Westat focus group moderator and research assistant. During the focus groups, the research assistant took detailed notes on the focus group discussion; immediately following the group, she prepared a five- to seven-page topline summary report to capture the responses to the key research questions. The focus group facilities also audiorecorded each session, which were used as a back-up to check notes for accuracy and to glean participant quotes. The research assistant used the audiotapes or audio CDs to clarify, add, or correct any questions or discrepancies noted by the moderators. Topline

summaries were then discussed among the research teams to draw out salient themes. Themes were then applied during the coding and analysis of the focus group summaries.

Coding and analysis process began when the first focus group summary was completed. Then all other summaries, as they were completed, were compared to these themes to further develop or refine the coding process. This process is called the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Ideally, this process is discontinued when a saturation point of information (i.e., no new codes or themes emerge) is reached. However, since there were only eight focus groups conducted and eight summaries to compare, all focus group summaries underwent this level of coding and analysis. After the last report was completed and reviewed, one research analyst compiled all data for the key questions to continue the coding process and to aggregate the data across the eight focus groups.

Although the focus group participants shared valuable perspectives, readers should be cautious about generalizing the findings of this report to broader populations. Due to the nature of focus group data collection, findings may be subjected to self-selection bias and can be influenced by the small number of participants (less than 10 per specialized group), that is, not every participant offered a response to every question, and not every question was asked during the focus group time period. Moreover, given the length of the protocol, moderators did not always have time to follow-up on details with all respondents, and questions following false close of session (see Appendix B for protocols), if asked, tended to be unique to each group.

Additional caveats should be noted. First, we do our best to distinguish between information that was spontaneously offered in response to a question versus information that was derived through additional prompting or probing. For example, much of the data on indicators of teaching and learning quality were generated through the use of handouts to which respondents reacted. While both forms of data are important, it is worth noting that moderators sometimes needed to work harder to extract the information of interest. In addition, despite constant reminders, some focus group participants responded to questions from the perspective of being currently enrolled in college rather than the perspective of being a college applicant (citing, for example, confusion as to how GPA is calculated and how classes can be changed or dropped). Thus, we recognize that responses were colored by the experience and knowledge they have now rather than what they had prior to enrolling. While current college students were deliberately recruited for this project to gain this reflective perspective, we limit our findings to those associated with the search process except where explicitly noted.

When presenting a summary of findings, it is not entirely possible to separate out the perspectives of two-year and four-year college attendees since, in some cases, the groups were mixed. Yet, for analytical purposes, general statements are possible given the fact that the “four-year” groups were indeed predominantly made up of four-year college students. Throughout the report, references are made to “African American students,” “Hispanic students,” “Traditional students,” “Adults,” and “Veterans.” Unless otherwise noted, these terms refer only to the corresponding individuals that participated in the focus groups and are not meant to construe generalizations to larger groups. Finally, because Veterans and Active Duty Military are also considered Adults, responses from Veterans and Adults were sometimes aggregated during analysis. Where appropriate, Veterans data were analyzed separately from others, including Adults. For ease of presentation in this report, the term Veterans is used to categorize both Active Duty and Discharged Military personnel.

4. Organization of the Report

In section 5, the report presents a brief overview and interpretation of main findings. These are limited to overarching themes and general impressions. The analytical sections that follow examine the findings in greater detail, beginning with a summary of responses to key contextual questions in section 6. The main body of the report, section 7, is organized by the five core research questions posed by the Education Conservancy and the Consumers Union at the outset of the project:

- RQ1. What information elements do students look for and use to choose the colleges they apply to and attend?
- RQ2. Do students understand different information elements and their implications?
- RQ3. What tools and sources of information about postsecondary institutions do students use?
- RQ4. What challenges did students encounter when collecting information?
- RQ5. What are the relative information needs and processes of 21st century audiences pursuing college?

Each of the five research question sections are further organized under two to three subquestions. All data are derived from responses to the questions posed in the focus group protocol. Focus groups were conducted in three cities over a period of two months, and slight modifications to the protocol were made in response to lessons learned in the field. Appendix A presents the major demographic characteristics of all focus group participants, Appendix B presents a copy of the final version of the moderator's guide (protocol) and Appendix C contains copies of the handouts used during the focus groups.

5. Main Findings: Impressions and Interpretations

To preface the detailed analytical findings, we share general impressions and interpretations of the focus group data and the cross-cutting themes that emerged. The intent is to highlight prominent themes that either echoed throughout the majority of focus group discussions or were surprisingly absent. In addition, we highlight notable differences between focus group respondent types, the major challenges encountered during the college search and decision making process, and the implications for potential intervention.

Prominent Cross-Cutting Themes

The themes of college cost and location permeate the focus group data. These two information elements, along with program of study and a variety of elements dealing with diverse aspects of student life, were the most commonly sought information elements. They also were among the most common criteria students used when narrowing down their choice set of colleges. Location generally meant proximity to home or work but occasionally was shorthand for convenience, urban/rural setting, safety, likely opportunity for internships and recreation, cost, and other environmental factors.

Virtually all respondents referenced the importance of cost and affordability, yet only a few mentioned information on actual cost after financial aid was taken into consideration. In retrospect, several

respondents indicated they would downplay the emphasis they had placed on basic tuition and would be more diligent in obtaining information about actual, sometimes hidden, costs.

All students sought information with which to make an informed decision concerning the right institution that would suit their needs. However, the depth and breadth of information sought did not always rise to the traditional concept of finding the right “institutional fit”—that is, a more sophisticated approach toward gathering and interpreting qualitative and subjective information elements often associated with the decision making process of middle class and affluent students and strongly advocated by professional guidance counselors. Some of the more obvious dimensions often associated with the concept of fit such as college size, student/faculty ratio, public and private affiliation, diversity (both racial and programmatic), and certain aspects of social life were spontaneously mentioned by some respondents. These and others were acknowledged as important by many more respondents in response to direct probes.

However, respondents seemed unaware or ill-informed of factors beyond “reputation” that would enable them to compare and contrast colleges with respect to quality of teaching and learning. Graduation rates, admissions requirements, and faculty credentials were cited as indicators of reputation. Several mentioned that they considered the reputation of the specific program of study they were interested in pursuing. Explicit probing brought out numerous additional measures of quality that respondents acknowledged, in retrospect, would be beneficial.

Virtually all respondents appeared to have fairly well established career plans that enabled them to use program of study as a search criterion. This was especially true of Adults and Veterans who exclusively searched and selected college for employment/career reasons. Yet all respondents more often emphasized the pragmatic aspects of college than the personal and social dimensions of the experience, and the information they sought corresponded to this focus.

Discussions revealed pervasive use of the Internet by all respondent groups but limited use of social networking. Some of the more sophisticated students exploited the advantages of social media to connect with current college students and gain an insider’s perspective.

Despite what may be characterized as straightforward or even rudimentary searches, respondents reported a relatively high degree of satisfaction with their personal decision. The vast majority indicate that they would make the same decision again if given the opportunity. As freshmen and sophomores, only time will tell if these students would have benefited from more sophisticated information gathering and decision making.

Differences Between Respondent Types

Several differences were observed between the Traditional student group and other traditional-aged groups which tended to be lower income and first generation. Traditional students invoked a greater number of search criteria, collected information from and applied to a larger number of colleges, and expressed fewer challenges with respect to gathering information. Unlike other groups, Traditional students tended not to use cost information as a primary filtering criterion when conducting their searches. Instead, they applied information related to cost when making a final acceptance decision and after taking financial aid into consideration. Upon reflection, some non-traditional students expressed the inclination to consider cost in the same manner, thereby keeping a wider range of colleges in consideration.

Other differences were found between adult and traditional-aged students. Adults tended to use fewer search criteria, narrowed down their choice set faster, and were interested mainly in finding colleges that conveniently met their need for workplace credentials and skills at reasonable costs. Adults also cited unique challenges of managing their search while balancing work and family responsibilities, coping with psychological barriers of pursuing college later in life, and overcoming a perceived lack of resources in comparison to high school age students. These issues were less relevant to Veterans, however, who demonstrated greater self-motivation, resilience, and somewhat diminished concern over cost due to benefits available through the GI Bill and applicable at most colleges of interest.

Major Challenges

Major challenges in gathering information were identified as poor or absent guidance, confusion concerning affordability and financial aid (specifically how to search for financial aid and complete financial aid forms including the FASFA), inadequate direct interaction with current college students and faculty, vague or absent knowledge concerning teaching and learning quality, and concerns over reliability and credibility of sources. The limited use of objective web-based college aggregator sites seems curious in light of the latter concern.

Taken together, these challenges highlight the importance of having an informed and interested individual (e.g. parent, sibling, teacher, counselor, etc.) who can help students navigate the process and guide them in considering criteria important to institutional fit. Adults especially noted their lack of such a connection or social network. The responses of non-traditional college going students revealed a clear need to augment the typical resources of guidance counselors, knowledgeable parents, and other mentors—less to help students find specific information but more to point to categories of information that students may not consider and to assist them with interpretation to make the most successful decisions.

6. Responses to Key Contextual Questions

Prior to asking specific questions about information, students were asked a series of three background contextual questions. The purpose of these questions was twofold: first to gain a better appreciation of how these respondents approached and experienced their college search, and second to provide respondents with the opportunity to answer some easy warm-up questions before delving into the primary topics of the evening. These questions were (1) What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about your college search experience? (2) When did you first start thinking about going to college? and (3) How did you first get started in your college search process?

Basic Impressions of the College Search Experience

When asked to recount the first thing that comes to mind about their college search experience, respondents' answers fell into two very different patterns. These patterns may be due to how the first respondent framed his/her answer, with subsequent respondents following suit. Our intention was to elicit descriptions characterizing the emotional and psychological dimensions of the experience. Three groups largely responded in this manner (i.e., Traditional students, African Americans, and Adults) along with several individuals in other groups. Specifically, they used the following descriptors that clearly convey a high degree of stress and anxiety: stressful, confusing, daunting, tedious, competitive, overwhelming,

frustrating, and long. Some respondents, including one of the Traditional students, emphasized the demanding nature of the process and the sense of having to figure it out on their own. On the other hand, several mentioned the excitement that accompanied the process and the anticipation of college admission. In addition, they included words and phrases that alluded to the remarkably “expensive” dimension of college.

It was a hassle for me, I was looking at a lot of schools and I got overwhelmed and I got really discouraged, just out of high school to go to college, every application and process, it looked like more of a hassle and a lot of loopholes, it was discouraging when I first started applying. Two-year Hispanic

It was rewarding because I felt like I was doing something. Two-year Hispanic

I was nervous and excited. I'm a mother with kids so sometimes I'd go to my son for help since it's been a while since I've done something like this. Two-year Adult

My experience or my feelings about going to college was a little excitement but a little uncertainty. Being in the Army for almost 21 years, you become accustomed to certain ways, but I also know I have discipline. Veteran

In my family, I was one of the first ones to go through the college application process. I did most of it on my own, so it was hard to figure out how to do it at first. Traditional

Typically, all other groups responded to this question by citing specific search criteria that they took into consideration when considering their initial choice sets.² Specifically, these groups responded by citing “cost,” “money” and “location” most frequently and consistently. Houston Adults and Veterans added “convenience” to this list mainly as a dimension of location, that is to say, convenient to work or home. For Adults, convenience also referred to colleges that offered evening classes and online courses. Cost and money referred mainly to tuition but included financial aid, debt, loans, travel costs, and application fees.

At the same time, recognition of the economic benefits of a college education was often embedded in respondents’ statements. This was especially true of Adults and Veterans, who indicated that interest in pursuing college at this stage of their lives was primarily motivated by a desire to advance professionally and economically. But such a view was held by students in other groups as well.

It really didn't hit me until junior year that you can't make money with a high school diploma, you need a college degree. Two-year African American

I was always against college and the whole thing of putting so much work into doing something for four years and then you graduate and you owe all these thousands of dollars. I took a year off and thought about going to trade school

² “Choice set” refers to that set of colleges the student considers and from which students make their final selection. As described in Hossler’s three-stage model comprising predisposition, search, and choice, the choice set is initially established and subsequently narrowed down during the search stage, enabling students to concentrate more and more on fewer and fewer potential choices. The final choice set comprises all the colleges to which the student ultimately applies. The final choice is made from those colleges offering acceptance.

for something, and then I was like, 'yeah, there's really nothing out here,' so that's how I decided to go to college. Four-year African American

In my community, a lot of people don't go to college, and seeing how they live, that was enough to encourage me to go to college. African American

Timing of the College Search Process

When asked when they first started thinking about college, virtually all of the respondents in the Traditional group indicated that they started seriously thinking about college during their sophomore or junior year of high school, with some starting as early as middle school. By and large, this held true for all other groups as well, although many reported junior and senior years of high school as their serious starting point. Starting to think about college in high school was true for the Adult groups, although only a few actually enrolled after graduating. It was also common for Adults to reconsider college seriously many years after high school, while working, or after their children grew up. Likewise, the Veterans tended to indicate that they thought about college while in high school and a couple enrolled in college following graduation but most chose instead to pursue military service, to gain maturity, experience, and access to benefits. Thus, many Veterans reconsidered college seriously while on active duty. For some, the military was chosen as a strategic pathway to college, as one Veteran explained:

When I signed my enlistment papers, that's when I started thinking about college. That's one of the reasons why I decided to join the military because I wanted to go to school. Veteran

While answering the question about when they first thought about college, respondents often referenced individuals who prompted them to think about college. Family members, especially parents, were frequently mentioned by respondents in the Traditional, African American, and Hispanic groups and, to a significant degree, by Adults as well. Within the first three of these groups, a small number of respondents recalled expectations placed on them from an early age by family, both nuclear and extended, that they would go to college. Interestingly, this was expressed to some degree in most groups, including two-year college attendees and Adults, reflecting how widespread the expectation of college education has become beyond the traditional college-going population. Teachers, counselors, and other school staff were mentioned more by the Hispanic and African American groups.

It was my coaches; they would ask me about it. Two-year African American

My high school pushed it. They would bring us to the auditorium with representatives from colleges. That was freshman year. But I did not really start my search until junior year. Two-year Hispanic

Mostly my parents. There was a lot of pressure from my family, expecting me to move on and make something better for myself. Traditional

My parents always stressed education as key. Four-year African American

For me, it was my mom. She pushed me even when I didn't want to go, all the way to where I actually made it! My parents were pretty involved. Hispanic

People in my community got me started. Elderly people, even now, were always like, 'Are you in school?' In my neighborhood, they always stressed that you need that education that they didn't have. African American

The College Search Process

Respondents provided a wide variety of answers to the question of how they first got started in the college search process. Traditional students reported that their start was prompted by a relative, peer, or counselor at school. Talking with older friends, family members, teachers, or school counselors was referenced by the African American and Hispanic groups. At least two Hispanic students mentioned that participation in a special college preparation program (e.g. Hispanic Youth Symposium and Capitol Importance for Education) constituted their first step. Conducting Internet searches or visiting specific college websites were common first steps mentioned by most groups, as were attending college fairs. Also mentioned as first steps were conducting an assigned research project on colleges, completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, taking the SATs or ACTs, creating a College Board online account, as well as attending a field trip, symposia, and tours of colleges.

Yet many of these responses suggest some unmentioned preceding step, for example, an event, series of events or conversations that prompted creation of the College Board account, taking college admission tests, or compiling information for the FAFSA. In contrast, the first step for Adults and Veterans tended to be online searches of specific colleges or direct contact with college representatives. Adult students tended to know which colleges they thought were the most likely in which they would enroll and jumped straight to information gathering, a theme reiterated in response to questions concerning source of information. But surprisingly, a number of young respondents had also narrowed down their colleges of interest, seemingly even before conducting their searches.

I didn't have to search too much. I knew where I was going. I knew it was a good school because the counselor from my high school recommended that college. Hispanic

I knew I wanted to do law, so I searched for schools in law. Hispanic

My counselor made up a list of schools she thought would be right for me, based on GPA and test scores. African American

Both Adults and Veterans pursued college enrollment as a purely economic or employment decision, that is, to advance in their careers or to obtain a better job, either for personal or familial reasons. They therefore began by exploring colleges that offered the specific program they were looking for and, in the case of Veterans, details on GI Bill benefits and credit transfer. While most groups indicated that they received substantial help and encouragement from counselors, teachers, family, and friends, by and large, neither Adults nor Veterans cited receiving such assistance from others when taking these first steps. However, one Veteran commented on the advantage that military discipline and training provides:

*I think if you've been in the military, and you can't do your own thing and take care of yourself, then you're probably going to be in a world of trouble.
Veteran*

7. Analysis of Research Questions

RQ1. What information elements do students look for and use to choose the colleges they apply to and attend?

The goal of this initial research question was to establish the primary information elements that respondents identified without additional prompting. In so doing, the research team sought to map the college information landscape as seen and experienced by recent college applicants. To gather these data, the moderators asked students to think about the general types of information that were important to them as they conducted their search of potential postsecondary institutions to attend.

When students were asked to *spontaneously* generate a list of the types of information that were important for them during their college search, they identified a wide range of information elements. Data were classified into seven dimensions of college information: general school characteristics; cost and affordability; learning opportunities; student life; alumni outcomes; and faculty. Analyses revealed that respondents tend to focus most on information relating to three of these areas (Table 2).

Table 2. Information that was important to students during their college search process

Information type	Focus groups of students exclusively at two-year institutions			Focus groups of students predominantly at four-year institutions				
	African American	Hispanic	Adult	African American	Hispanic	Traditional	Adult	Veteran
General school characteristics ³	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cost and affordability	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student learning opportunities and services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student life	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Alumni		✓	✓		✓			
Faculty			✓			✓		

✓ = Resource was mentioned by one or more participant in a group.

The general school characteristics category was a catch-all for information ranging from university location and size to basic statistics on specific postsecondary institutions (e.g., average GPA, college ranking, and acceptance rate). Within this category, respondents across all eight groups mentioned the importance of school location. Respondents in five of the eight groups (all except African American and Veteran) sought information on the academic reputation of their schools of interest. Respondents in all four-year student groups (except Veteran) cited information about the school size (i.e., population and class size) as important to them during their search process. African American students and four-year Hispanic students sought descriptive information about the diversity of students and faculty. However, only two groups (Veteran and two-year Adult) expressed interest in collecting information about the expected or average time for degree completion, perhaps reflecting their understanding of how this information affects college costs and future career plans.

Following closely behind these general college characteristics in frequency were information elements relating to cost and affordability and student-learning opportunities available on campus. Both of these types of information were mentioned in all but one of the student groups. Although concerns about cost

³ This category includes general school characteristics such as: location, academic programs/majors offered, school reputation, and diversity.

were mentioned by the two-year African American group during the initial contextual questions, this concern was not reiterated when asked directly about the types of information used during their search process. . Those students who did mention issues of cost and affordability brought up concerns about tuition, total cost, financial aid, scholarships, and room and board. Information relating to aspects of student-learning opportunities (e.g., quality of education, program availability, course format, etc.) was mentioned by at least one student in the rest of the student groups.

All of the traditional-aged student groups (both from two- and four-year institutions) mentioned searching for indicators of the student life at their school of interest. Specifically, these respondents looked for information about the night life on or around schools, social activities (e.g., clubs, sports, and dance teams), availability of music (either to participate in or to enjoy), housing options, transportation, and food selection on and around campus. Adult respondents did not mention these concerns, which understandably were more relevant to full-time 18- to 21-year-old students. However, students in the Adult, Philadelphia African American and both Hispanic groups brought up concerns related to safety, sometimes searching for information about campus or neighborhood transportation as a related indicator.

Information relating to alumni, faculty, and other elements were only mentioned by a few of the respondents. For instance, the Hispanic and the two-year Adult groups mentioned the importance of learning about the experience of students who have graduated from their school of interest (preferably from the same major or program) and their post-graduation opportunities. Only Traditional and two-year Adult students mentioned the importance of gathering faculty information during their college search process. Specifically, Traditional students wanted to know if the faculty members were well established in their fields of study, and two-year Adults searched for information pertaining to teacher availability and professional experience and credentials. More personal or unique information elements sought were child care options by a two-year Adult student, while Veterans were interested in collecting information about the “military-friendliness” of the schools.

References to Quality of Teaching and Learning

Interestingly, very few respondents mentioned information elements that referred to the quality of teaching and learning of the colleges. However, this was anticipated and the focus group protocol included a guided discussion about possible indicators of quality teaching and learning for which respondents may or may not have looked. In most focus groups, the moderator first asked the respondents to generate a list of things that came to mind when they specifically thought about quality of the teaching and learning environment. After discussing the items that were generated by the students, the moderator provided each respondent a handout containing a written list of possible indicators that they could have included in their search. As time permitted, the moderator discussed items on the list, asked if the students used any of the indicators, and then discussed what respondents thought each indicator conveyed about teaching and learning quality. If time was short, the moderator simply handed the list to each respondent to physically identify, as in a survey, the items they used during their search. This list can be found in Appendix C.

The data revealed that the majority of students did not intentionally search for indicators of quality of teaching and learning. According to several respondents, information on quality of teaching and learning was not searched because they were not aware of them nor had an idea of where to find such information. However, subsequent discussions identified their assessments of the specific items they considered to be “good” indicators of quality (e.g., types of learning opportunities). It is important to note that during the course of the more general conversation about the information elements sought, some students mentioned types of information related to aspects of quality teaching and learning (i.e., admissions requirements,

class size, class format, faculty accessibility, success of alumni, reputation, and graduation rates), but the majority of these students did not. A further discussion of what respondents understood these elements and indicators to mean is embedded in the findings for Research Question 2.

RQ2. Do students understand different information elements and their implications?

If so, what is their level of understanding?

To gauge the students' level of understanding of the different information elements and their implications, they were asked to describe what each of the elements told them about the colleges they researched. This discussion occurred at two places in the focus groups: 1) when students listed the information elements that were important to them; and 2) when students assessed the usefulness of potential indicators of quality teaching and learning. Due to some overlap in these two areas, descriptions of general information elements were combined with students' reactions to the quality indicators. The discussion is organized around the categories of information introduced in Research Question 1.

Information Relating to General School Characteristics

This catch-all category of general school characteristics includes a variety of information respondents looked for and used when searching for the schools to which they considered applying. This category describes respondents' understanding of what the following six characteristics⁴ tells them about the schools they are researching:

- Location
- Majors and academic programs
- Reputation
- Diversity
- Class size
- Type of college
-

An additional conversation of miscellaneous characteristics is also included.

Location. School location was one of the first and most critical elements of information that students from all groups took into consideration when conducting their college search. Location was predominantly associated with proximity to home (and work for adults) but for many, location was also linked to overall cost and the college experience itself. For instance, students stated that location informed a wide range of decision criteria, including out-of-pocket expenses, distance from work and family,

⁴ Characteristics were derived from both volunteered responses and responses that were retrieved through predetermined prompts detailed in the Moderator's Guide. Therefore, although all characteristics were eventually probed for further understanding, not all characteristics (e.g., Type of College) were volunteered by respondents without additional probing.

possible living arrangements, safety, potential employment opportunities, access to public transportation, and the amount of time and money they will spend on travel to and from home and work.

The implications of location and how students made use of this information was as varied as the students themselves. One two-year Hispanic student looked for a college that would allow him to be far away from his family, while another wanted to attend school as close to family as possible. Both inclinations have personal as well as financial overtones. Another two-year Hispanic student felt attending a college farther from home would increase the temptation to emphasize social life over academic work. Another felt staying close to home would offer more distractions. Most students understood the implications of in-state versus out-of-state on tuition. However, one four-year Adult respondent believed that schools were priced according to their location, suggesting that urban schools tended to be more expensive than schools located in a more rural environment. Location was truly perceived from a multitude of angles.

I wanted a totally different environment, a city, diversity. I wanted to be away from home, be independent. Four-year African American

Location connects to cost, because of living arrangements. Two-year Hispanic

I like being home. If I were to take this trip somewhere, to the west coast or way up north or something like that, I had to think about now I have to build a whole new base somewhere else. And still, if I want to go home I have to travel and account for that and how often I can do that. Four-year African American

In addition, one two-year Hispanic student indicated that the availability of parking on campus was very important. This concern can also be related to the concept of location. As the student explains, campuses with abundant, affordable, and convenient parking save students money and time, especially those who are also working while attending school.

Major/Program. As would be expected, all students indicated that they wanted to know if the school had their major of interest. However, this seemingly straightforward information element provided different insight to different student groups. And sometimes, the range of programs offered was taken into consideration as well.

The most important piece of information that program or major conveyed was whether or not the college offered the course of study the student was interested in pursuing. The proportion of students that reported knowing what they wanted to study in college was high. No students reported they simply wanted a college experience or planned to decide on their major as an upperclassman. For example, two-year college students typically had a specific major or program of interest in mind, and they very deliberately selected their community college based on the compatibility with their intended major. Others, who anticipated transferring, focused on the compatibility of courses provided there and the courses they will need for the four-year program to which they will eventually transfer.

Similarly, Adults and Veterans pursued college and a specific type of major mainly for economic reasons. They searched for schools that offered their program or major of interest so that they could advance in their career. For other students (e.g., Traditional and Hispanic), the academic program and majors a school offered were seen as indicator of the institution's reputation. Thus, beyond the overall reputation of the college, students were more attracted to a college well known or respected in their specific field of interest.

Finally, when asked what this information element tells students about a school, one Traditional student believed that a school with a variety of majors conveyed diversity—among people, interests, and

expertise. Curiously, however, a wide range of majors offered by large universities, for example, were not highlighted as advantageous if the student were to change his/her major. Instead, discussions concerning major and program reflected rather well-formed notions of future careers following a linear trajectory.

The school that I currently attend is very big; it has a very good reputation on the major I'm taking, so that kind of made me want to go there. Four-year Hispanic

Certain schools are better for certain majors. Hispanic

My major [film] is kind of specific, so it has to be good for what I'm going for or else I probably won't make it anywhere. Traditional

How strong the nursing program is because I wanted to go somewhere where I could get the most for my money. Traditional

Looked for a good culinary program, and looked into the program, if it was hands-on. Two-year Hispanic

I always like to be around different types of people, so variety of majors was a big deal. Traditional

Reputation. As previously discussed, the idea of school reputation can be linked to several other college-search variables, e.g., cost and programs offered. Yet, when respondents were prompted to discuss the concept of reputation on its own, they tended to use words like “credibility” and “prestige,” and often associated reputation with graduation statistics and with job placement for graduates.

A related indicator of school reputation that emerged was whether or not the school was accredited. While some students spontaneously referenced the concept of accreditation, most did not without specific prompting. The value of this information emerged most clearly when students were asked about the use of school accreditation status as an indicator of quality teaching and learning. This was generally agreed upon, but both Veterans and two-year Hispanic students explicitly related accreditation to reputation, stating that schools that were not accredited were not reputable. One Veteran mentioned surprise and disappointment upon learning, after enrollment, that although the institution was accredited, his program of study was not. This story reveals how students may possess partial knowledge of certain elements of information, even when deliberately sought out.

I checked that [accreditation]. There are websites for that. You can also check graduation rates. Two-year Adult

Some respondents referenced graduation statistics when they reflected on reputation. For instance, one two-year African American student found that half the freshman class dropped out of a prospective school. It was a red flag for the student that indicated the college's academic reputation was in question. For one Hispanic student, reputation, credibility, and prestige of a particular school could also be inferred by the type of alumni who attended the school. For this student, famous--especially famous Latino--alumni influenced how she perceived the school.

Yet, reputation was not interpreted strictly as an academic indicator. For example, when two-year Hispanic students conducted their college search, they looked for schools that provoked a sense of credibility within the job market, believing that certain employers “look down on certain schools.” In addition, they believed that job applications from students who graduated from “Internet-based schools go

to the bottom of the stack.” A parallel perspective was referenced by the Traditional students who emphasized rankings and “how well known” institutions were among potential employers and other stakeholders.

For others, the reputation of a school was associated with the relatively safety and security of the campus environment. For example, one student looked into the history of the school (essentially conducting a background check) to make sure that nothing negative was associated with the school and that “nobody died there.”

Some students also used words like “liberal” and “conservative” to describe a certain type of reputation some schools possess with respect to social life. For instance, one two-year Hispanic student perceived schools associated with the term “liberal” as party schools and “conservative” schools as more serious.

Finally, some students linked college graduation rates and admissions requirements (e.g., cost to submit application, SAT/ACT scores, and extracurricular activities from high school) to perceived reputation. Some two-year Adult students agreed that admission requirements, particularly more stringent ones, could indicate a higher quality learning environment and a sense of prestige. However, most other two-year students, and Veterans, were uncertain about using graduation rates as an indicator of quality or reputation.

It [graduation rates] could go both ways. It could just mean that the teachers aren't very good. Two-year Hispanic

You can't really gauge any particular information from that [graduation rates], but generally when I applied to schools I wanted ones with a higher graduation rate. Two-year Hispanic

Diversity. A little more than half of the student groups—four-year African American, Hispanic, and Veteran—indicated that they sought information about campus diversity. Within these groups, four-year African American students were the most likely to report that they specifically looked for schools that were racially diverse. For these students, schools with “diverse student populations” conveyed two different but complementary components of college life: a sense of fitting in with those similar to themselves and a sense of being stretched by those different from themselves. Sometimes, these conceptions were held by the same individual.

I came from a high school that was mainly African American students, so I wanted to expand being with different races.... I was looking for something that was a nice mix of everybody, but also [had] a good amount of African Americans who I could mingle with and wouldn't feel outside. Also, financial diversity was a crucial thing for me. I didn't want to be in school looking like I had no money when everybody else was just pulling up in cars and I'm riding SEPTA [public transportation]. African American

I just like to be around all types of races. African American

The presence of campus diversity also signaled the likelihood of having what some students referred to as “a real-world experience” that may or may not reflect the environment with which they are familiar. This was expressed as part of the college learning experience as opposed to a strictly social dimension. Furthermore, two of the four-year Adult students indicated they sought information about diversity because it would provide opportunities to interact with different types of people.

Diversity is everywhere. It's beneficial to be around so that you can learn about other cultures and ways of life. African American

I wanted a totally different environment. A city, diversity. I wanted to be away from home. Be independent. Hispanic

There are so many different kinds of people in society that I think college opens that up and gives people a chance to connect with people of different backgrounds, religions, and stuff like that. African American

Overall, two-year Hispanic students did not offer much on the topic of diversity, and none reported seeking information on this topic during their college search process. In general, the group was lukewarm in their response to this topic.

I considered diversity a little, but it didn't matter too much. It didn't seem that important. Two-year Hispanic

For students in other groups, including the two-year African American (which consisted of three respondents) and Traditional, diversity was a not an important issue, although both groups stated they valued it. Another dimension of college diversity refers to faculty. Four-year Hispanic and Veteran students looked for diversity among faculty, while Veterans (themselves a rather diverse demographic group) did not mention diversity among students as an important factor.

Class Size. Respondents had mixed assessments about using class sizes and the faculty-to-student ratio as an indicator of a school's quality of teaching and learning. The majority of students in the Adult, Hispanic, and Traditional groups and a few Veterans believed that knowing whether or not classes would be held in large lecture halls or in a smaller setting was a good indicator of the type of teaching they could anticipate. Some felt that this information informs a prospective student more about the level of effort required from a student in class than the actual quality of the learning experience. Other students held different perspectives:

Classroom size doesn't tell you too much, size tells you how much is going to be at your own pace, with a large class, you're on your own at their pace. Two-year Hispanic

It's easier if [classes are] smaller, more hands-on and focused. Two-year Hispanic

If they had a bad student/teacher ratio, then there's no guarantee that you're going to be able to get all the attention you need. African American

You sink or swim on your own, nobody's going to help you. Two-year Hispanic

Type of College. The majority of respondents indicated they did not explicitly look for information about type of college; however, this information may have been implicitly used during their college search process. For instance, throughout the discussion about information elements and indicators of quality teaching and learning, many respondents indicated that they searched for information about campus

diversity, class size, and public vs. private schools⁵. Four-year Adults, Veterans, and four-year African Americans students were among the few respondents who did share their thoughts on this topic. A few of the Adult students indicated that they did not consider proprietary schools during their search. Veteran students seemed to have only considered attending schools where tuition was fully covered by the GI Bill (e.g., most public schools). One four-year Hispanic student was particularly concerned with applying only to colleges that would accept credits obtained in high school. She was uncertain if private schools would do so.

In addition, at least half of the four-year African American respondents sought four-year colleges in order to “be on campus,” increase their job prospects, enjoy the college experience, and make friends. Some were also wary of attending community colleges or trade schools for fear of limited job opportunities and an increase exposure to distractions.

I was told to stay away from 2-year universities and trade universities [by my counselor].... [She said] At a 2-year some of those courses might not carry over to a 4-year and a lot of these trade schools are not accredited.... Also, jobs [employers] don't really value trade schools as much as a 4-year university. Four-year African American

A 2-year can kind of be distracting if you're a commuter or if you're at a 2-year that's in your home city... cause you still got bills to pay, you still got responsibilities. With a 4-year you can be up in campus essentially living... all you have to worry about is academics.... [With a 2-year] it's essentially high school. You've got to wake up in the morning, then go to work, then come home and do homework. Four-year African American

Information Relating to Affordability and Cost

When asked to list information that was important for the college search process, respondents (other than Veterans⁶) explicitly reported that affordability was a serious consideration. Indeed, cost ranked with location and program availability as one of the most commonly cited information elements. Although many students took a more comprehensive view of affordability (e.g., tuition, fees, travel, room and board), most respondents tended to simply equate cost to tuition. Because cost was such an important piece of information, respondents reported “jumping immediately to the tuition page” as one explained. When tuition was hard to locate, respondents expressed frustration. Not surprisingly, other aspects of cost were not as well understood or as aggressively sought.

Most students understood the implications of in-state versus out-of-state status on tuition. Only a few students acknowledged confusion with terms such as room and board, proprietary school, or total debt incurred. Others, who decided to attend schools away from home, confessed that they did not adequately take travel costs for return trips home into consideration. Adults especially expressed surprise concerning the costs of books.

⁵ Eight of the 52 focus group participants were enrolled in private colleges, five were enrolled in proprietary schools and the remaining students were enrolled in public institutions.

⁶ The discussion of cost and affordability did not present itself without prompting among the Veteran respondents. This is not to say that the information was not a concern for these individuals, it just was not the first thing that came to mind when this question was asked.

When the concept of average debt load at graduation was probed, most respondents claimed understanding, but subsequent discussion did not appear to confirm this. Moreover, most respondents did not seek this information during the search process. One respondent naively (or self-confidently) said debt was of little importance:

I know I have to get from point A to point B. Regardless of what that average is, it's not going to make a difference because it's going to be a number. Adult

Interestingly, when asked if information concerning average debt load or the percentage of students defaulting on their loan would be of importance, most thought it would not matter because they understood this to be an “individual thing.” That is, they interpreted loan default as indicative of a personal shortcoming rather than a structural mismatch. Only a couple of Adult respondents said they would be concerned if the college had “a lot of students who were defaulting on their loans because it indicated they couldn’t find employment.”

Unlike the four-year groups, the two-year respondents tended not to seek information on total cost to attend college (perhaps due to relatively similar and typically lower costs among community colleges as compared to four-year colleges), but in retrospect, they expressed regret for not having done so. Specifically, they discussed additional “hidden” fees (e.g., registration, lab fees, parking, etc.) and the surprisingly high price of books. They noted that this level of detail about costs is not well explained by colleges. Discussions such as these revealed that respondents across groups did not always have a clear understanding of the difference between tuition costs and total costs. Most were unaware of fees beyond tuition and did not seek information about them.⁷

They just say tuition, they just tell you in-state and out-of-state, but there were a lot more fees. Two-year African American

Respondents often discussed college affordability as a family matter, affecting not only their personal options and choice but also those of their parents and siblings. This is reflected in the later section on decision making where respondents indicate that the final decision on which college to attend was not theirs alone. As the oldest child in her family, one African American student had to consider leaving enough money for her siblings to attend college, explaining:

I didn't want to put my family in debt because I wanted a certain career.
African American

All Traditional and African American students indicated that they were well aware of each college’s affordability and cost, the average amount of aid, and the approximate debt load that they would incur. Traditional students were particularly critical during their campus visits, making mental assessments of cost versus value. Students in the African American groups, like their Traditional counterparts, sometimes expressed more concern about the availability of financial aid than actual tuition or even the total cost of attending college, which could reflect a more sophisticated understanding of affordability and their need to obtain such aid. They also expressed the belief that cost did not always equate to quality, but is rather more closely related to reputation. When specifically probed on it, only half of the African American respondents thought there was a relationship between price and prestige. Other groups shared the belief that cost was only loosely related to quality.

⁷ Additional concerns related to a variety of fees were voiced in response to a subsequent question that asked students to reflect on their final decision, indicating that, as the term suggests, “hidden fees” do not come to one’s attention until after the enrollment decision is made.

When you look at how much you're paying, for me, I started to look at the college and everything that I saw around the college. I was wondering where all the money is going. Seeing broken chairs and stuff, it kind of makes me wonder if this is where I want to go. Traditional

The schools that cost the most are usually the ones that are able to give you more money at the end of the day. African American

Usually the schools that cost more are more on the radar [well known]. African American

Sometimes the more money the school has, the more they have to spend on other things, such as extracurricular activities. African American

Price sort of does [relate to quality]. Harvard law school is going to be a lot better than some other law school. They have more of a reputation, they're going to have better professors, they're going to get paid more. Adult

I don't agree. For online courses which I prefer and love, professors get paid a whole lot less.... It takes the price of education down a lot. The price might be lower, but it's just because the resources are changed. Adult

There are some schools that are overpriced for the quality of education. Adult

African American respondents currently in two-year programs also sought information about grants and scholarships. However, unlike their four-year counterparts, none inquired about work-study or other campus employment, probably because they were already working when applying to college. These respondents also did not seek information about student debt load, but, when probed, they noted that incurring a high debt load would indicate to them that a school was too expensive.

Much more than the costs associated with college (i.e., tuition, fees, travel, housing), respondents expressed confusion about financial aid and the process of obtaining it. This was generally true of all groups including Adult respondents. As a few Adults noted, "financial aid forms and information was not as clear as it could be." Respondents were the most confused by financial aid forms and applications, particularly the FAFSA, and many struggled to complete the forms. Respondents also expressed confusion about how individual colleges use FAFSA information and make decisions about financial aid packages. A few respondents reported that the availability of scholarships and work-study demonstrates that a college is trying to help students. Clearly, how students understood financial aid influenced their choice of colleges:

Some schools who have college degree programs don't offer federal financial aid. Sometimes when they can't offer that program it means they haven't met some accreditation requirements. So I tend to prefer schools with my program that did have a financial aid package because I could trust that when I go to graduate school, the school I'm going to is going to accept my bachelor's degree. Adult

Tuition is a big thing of course, but ultimately it's how much financial aid you receive, and how much you can afford, how much do you need out of your own pocket to go to that school, that was the big thing tuition wise... I don't think

you should pay too much for it; you should just go for it because you never know how much financial aid you will get. Hispanic

To me, the better their financial aid package was, the better their school was.
Adult

Remarkably, given the priority placed on cost, not all students sought information about financial aid. Those that did understood that scholarships and grants were preferable over loans. All students wanted to avoid loans. Many students expressed interest in exploring employment opportunities near campus, although structured “work-study options” were not referenced very often by traditional aged students in four year programs. Most two-year and Adult respondents understood this concept but, when probed, were uninterested in work-study options given that many had existing employment.

Veterans, who relied on GI benefits to cover or defray the cost of college, tended not to focus on matters related to cost, affordability, or financial aid. None, for example, researched the average financial aid package or debt load. One respondent considered the difference between direct and total costs. Impressions were mixed with respect to understanding the GI benefits for which they were eligible. A number expressed the need for college-based VA representatives, who could help them better understand and access these benefits.

Information Relating to Student Learning Opportunities and Services

Information elements relating specifically to student learning opportunities and services were deemed important during the college search process for the majority of the focus group respondents. When students were asked to list the elements they looked for, many students across the eight groups reported the following learning opportunities as important to them: available resources (e.g., technology and study groups), course format (online vs. in-class), and whether or not the school offered a “Study Center” or tutoring help. As for student services, child care services were important to one two-year Adult student. However, few of these students discussed what they thought these elements told them about the colleges they researched.

As a follow-up, respondents were asked to provide feedback regarding specific information elements and indicators of quality teaching and learning relating to student learning opportunities. These specific elements included student services (e.g., academic advising or tutoring, mentorship programs, peer groups for Veterans), special programs (e.g., for students who are the first in their families to attend a college or university, or Veteran/Active Duty Yellow Ribbon program), and other types of learning opportunities (e.g., lectures, seminars, labs, online or hybrid classes, etc.) that may be used as potential indicators for the quality of the teaching and learning opportunities offered by colleges and universities.

In response to these probes, many of the respondents admitted not researching these specific elements during their college search process but believed them to be important for other students to investigate. The majority of the African American respondents, who were the first in their families to attend college, did not search for colleges with special programs or services geared toward the first generation college student population. The majority of these students interpreted special programs for first-generation students to pertain to special scholarships or grants the school offered for that population. One student stated, “most of the scholarships and grants that I’ve actually seen were for students with good grades or good test scores [not first-generation college students]” and others expressed that they did not know that programs like that existed for them or even where to find them.

I had a counselor but they didn't know anything. As far as my community, nobody I knew about any of this. This is the first time I've really heard about this. I didn't know something like this existed. African American

I wouldn't have even known where to look for information like that [opportunities for first-generation students]. African American

I think that's why it's important to have counselors that are really involved. They're the ones that should give you information about scholarships. African American

Upon probing about other student services, Hispanic respondents noted the importance of academic advising and counseling as well as orientation programs to help high school students understand the demands of college. Although these services were not identified during their college search process, these students felt that such services conveyed that the school is invested in helping their students succeed.

As a potential indicator of quality teaching and learning, students were asked to share their thoughts about other types of learning opportunities (e.g., lectures, seminars, labs, online or hybrid classes, etc.). The majority of the respondents reported that these indicators were, in fact, adequate to use as an estimate of the level of quality teaching and learning offered by an institution. For instance, four-year African American students valued the opportunity to have hands-on learning experiences, while their two-year counterparts added that teachers who are flexible in their teaching style and encourage class discussion create a quality learning environment. The majority of two-year Hispanic students believed that knowing where and how classes were taught (e.g., onsite, in the field, online, using PowerPoint) was also a valid gauge of learning environment quality. Adult and Veteran students were also interested in learning more about the course formats offered, in addition to having an opportunity to receive credit for prior academic or job-related experiences. Presumably, this information provided insight into how flexible and accommodating colleges are toward nontraditional students. Furthermore, the significance of labs and equipment is likely to vary in importance depending upon one's course of study, as this quote from one Traditional respondent indicates:

As a nursing major, I wanted to know how good the labs were and all their equipment. The more up-to-date technology that the school had, the more interested I was. Traditional

Students were also asked to share their thoughts regarding other potential indicators of quality teaching and learning relating to student learning opportunities. These indicators included amount of time reading, writing, and studying; communication with other students; internship opportunities; measurements of student learning; and placement exams. At least one participant in most of the student groups reported that these indicators could be used to estimate quality. However, Hispanic and two-year African American students reported they were not aware of any formal measurements of student learning and were not sure if these measures were related to quality of learning. Respondents in the two-year African American group were the only ones to definitively state that the amount of time students spend reading and studying was, in their opinion, not a gauge of the quality of teaching and learning of a college or university. These students felt this characteristic provided more information about individual students' study habits than the quality of teaching and learning offered by the institution.

Information Relating to Student Life

When asked about the most important types of information to search for, all of the four-year Traditional students reported that social aspects of school were important. This information included the food available around the campus, dorm quality, gender ratio, if dorms are coed, social activities around the campus, and sports at the school. Students also researched the types and frequency of parties and other activities that the school provides to bring the students together. Two African American respondents placed emphasis on Greek life during their search. Both highlighted how fraternities and sororities can provide support and networking opportunities. In addition, a few of the African American students also believed that colleges with a good social life would also indicate that the campus population was diverse. As for Veteran students, the majority agreed that a military friendly campus is one that is more understanding of veterans' needs and provides social outlets and support for them; however, they generally did not search for this information. It is possible that this characteristic was revealed through the search process, rather than something that was intentionally sought out. Information about social life was also not seen as an important factor or indicator of quality for Adult students and two-year Hispanic students.

The sisterhood [sorority] was helping me to succeed in life. That actually plugs into your priorities in life because they are there to help you succeed and do what you need to do.... [You can't have low grades and] you had to do community service. These are things that keep you well-grounded while you're in school and it actually motivates you while you're in school. Four-year African American

[My] community college has a veteran's association.... They do semi-weekly get-togethers... to meet other veterans on the campus. They also offer free gym time to all veterans. Veteran

I don't think I have time for a social life. Veteran

Information Relating to Alumni

Of the eight focus groups, only two-year Adult and Hispanic students mentioned the importance of gathering alumni information during their college search process. These students were more interested in learning about alumni success (i.e., job place, history, and opportunities) than their involvement with current students or college activities. However, when asked whether or not information about alumni involvement and success was a good indicator of quality teaching and learning, the response was positive. Although alumni involvement was not important to most four-year Adult students, two stated that an alumni network could be influential and may be considered as an indicator of a quality school. On the other hand, alumni success was seen as a valuable indicator of the quality of teaching and learning by most two-year African American, four-year Adult, Veteran, and two-year Hispanic students.

[Alumni involvement] would tell me that they enjoyed their experience. Two-year Adult

The overall involvement in the school wouldn't make a difference at all [in my decision], but alumni networking is something that would be huge. Two-year Hispanic

If alumni are going to be involved in their school, then they most probably thought they had to have received a quality education. Two-year Hispanic

Only one respondent (Veteran) indicated that alumni and students' evaluations of the college could be a potential indicator of quality teaching and learning. The rest of these respondents were more skeptical. For instance, some felt that student opinions could provide valuable information about quality teaching and learning, while others felt student opinions could be biased.

Information Relating to Faculty

During initial discussions about important information elements, Traditional students and 2-year Adult students tended to convey the importance of gathering information about college faculty more so than respondents in other groups. These students wanted to know two main aspects of faculty: how well established they were and the degree to which they were available for additional help when needed. A few other characteristics about faculty members were introduced to the discussion as potential indicators of quality teaching and learning (e.g., highest degree in their fields, instructional style, part time vs. full time, percent tenured).

Not many, but at least one student in most of the groups thought that faculty-centered characteristics were good indicators of quality teaching and learning. These included highest degree held, instructional style, scientific involvement in their field, and teacher/student interactions. However, respondents were less able to concretely articulate how these would be measured or communicated to potential applicants, or even how they would be interpreted. For example, when probed, two students equated having faculty with the highest degree in their field as an indicator of "getting your money's worth" from the institution, while another student disagreed, arguing that real world experience was much more important. There were also mixed feelings among the Traditional students about using the number of faculty with the highest degree in their field as an indicator of quality teaching and learning.

Opportunities to interact with faculty outside of class tended to be interpreted as an indication that the teachers make time for students and place high value on student needs. Other than one Traditional student, who suggested that tenured faculty may become "lazy and can't get fired," the general consensus was that the tenure itself is not a good indicator of quality teaching and learning. No respondents saw the percentage of faculty serving part time, full time, or tenured as a reliable indicator of quality teaching and learning. One participant from the two-year African American group correctly pointed out that the majority of teachers in community colleges are part time, and from their perspective, that is not a measure of quality.

Most of them do part time in community colleges, you get the same quality out of a full time as opposed to a part time. They have the same amount of students, and they give you their office hours and e-mail. I don't think it's any different.
Two-year African American

What Value Do They Place Upon Each of Them?

To characterize the value respondents place upon each of the information elements they sought, students were asked to recall which of these items were the most important to them at the time they conducted their search. The most prevalent answers were cost and affordability, location, and the program/major of

interest. Furthermore, information about cost was ranked as the single piece of information that the majority of respondents placed above all others. For some respondents, overall cost of attendance (including tuition and fees, parking, commuting or room and board) was most important, while other students were more concerned with the financial aid aspect of affordability. Many Traditional students acknowledged that they did not make financial decisions independently, but rather their families significantly influenced the financial parameters of their college search process. For instance, one student from the African American group clarified that, “[Cost] wasn’t really what was important to me. It was what was important to my parents because they are the ones that had to pay.” Therefore, this respondent ranked desired major or program second to cost considerations.

Although cost considerations, location, and programs/majors of interest topped respondents’ lists of most important information elements, upon further reflection, individual respondents also mentioned other elements they considered as most important. These included the school’s ranking, admissions requirements, reputation, size, diversity, and extent of military-friendliness. Among the Veteran group, this last element was of utmost importance to some but not all. That is, one Veteran disagreed with placing too much importance on these factors. In fact, he stated:

I’ve spent a lot of time in both the financial office and the VA office at [my college] just getting things straight... But for me, the VA thing wasn’t that important because I know that, no matter what, I can pull up the reins and call them, and I can be the liaison, if necessary, to make sure everybody was getting their stuff done. It’s more about me going where I want to go and doing what I want to do. Veteran

As for the remaining types of information, very few students indicated that student life and learning elements (including indicators of quality teaching and learning) were the most important to them during their college search. Students within the African American and Hispanic American groups were the only groups to include student life issues (i.e., gender ratio, transportation, and social environment) among the most important information elements. The Adult respondents regarded student learning elements as fairly important. Such learning elements included searching information on class delivery methods (online vs. traditional), class hours and schedules, quality of professors, availability of internship opportunities, and the portability of transfer credits. Among Traditional respondents, a few commented that there were other elements that they would consider as very important (e.g., student services, job placement), but clarified that none of these were priorities in the search process.

RQ3. What tools and sources of information about postsecondary institutions do students use?

College Search Tools and Sources and How They Were Used

During this portion of the discussion, students were first asked to list the sources and tools used to find information about college and to describe how they ranked their reliability or trustworthiness. Responses from this discussion fell into four different categories of tools and information sources prospective students used to learn about colleges and universities:

- Internet and media,
- High schools (both people and print or other materials),

- Postsecondary institutions, and
- Other people.

One or more respondents from all of the student groups mentioned using or trying to use at least one of the tools or information sources from these four categories. However, the Internet was the most commonly cited tool for gathering college information and was used extensively by respondents across all of the eight focus groups.

Internet and Media Sources

Students in all the groups reported relying heavily on the Internet by using search engines and going to specific websites (Table 3). Only one student reported using other media, i.e., television commercials, as a tool or information source. Traditional-aged students mentioned using the Internet in a more varied way, citing four of the six Internet-related sources of information.

Table 3. Types of Internet and media resources used and the focus group participants who used them

Internet and media resource	Focus groups of students exclusively at two-year institutions			Focus groups of students predominantly at four-year institutions				
	African American	Hispanic	Adult	African American	Hispanic	Traditional	Adult	Veteran
Search engines.....	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Specific websites ..	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social networking sites		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Virtual tours.....						✓		
Blog			✓					
TV commercials	✓							

✓ = Resource was mentioned by one or more participants in a group.

Search Engines. Google and Yahoo were the most popular search engines used and the only ones mentioned by students across all the groups. Students typically searched for prospective schools by location or a specific school characteristic (e.g., an academic program or cost). The keyword searches varied slightly for each group. The four-year African American students searched by specific majors, location (i.e., specific cities or type of geographic area such as urban or suburban), or by special interest colleges such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or those focusing on a specific program (e.g., arts schools). Students in the two-year Adult group Googled the top 20 accredited schools or looked up their specific courses for their degree or program of interest. The four-year Hispanic students searched for information about tuition, majors, and more general information on private universities to supplement the information about local schools that they received from other sources. When Veterans were queried about their Internet search process, they described various similar methods, with one student saying she just searched for colleges in one state.

Specific Websites. Many students, particularly in the four-year Adult, two-year African American, and Veteran groups, did not spend much time using Internet search engines to identify prospective schools but instead used the Internet to obtain information about specific schools. In fact, these students already had a particular school, or set of schools, in mind and went straight to the schools' websites for information. A two-year African American student described his web search as follows:

I went directly to the website of the school I was interested in, gathered the necessary information, and then I was done with my search. Two-year African American

In addition, almost all students (except for Veterans) mentioned using the College Board website.⁸ Most students found this site extremely helpful, not only because it provided the information they sought, but because it also allowed them to enter and organize information. However, one student expressed concern that the site could be confusing at times. Overall, she found the College Board website to be helpful, but being prompted by the site to “answer too many questions” was perceived as too time-consuming. One Hispanic student used a site called College Prowler, which he found helpful:

[I found] underground quotes or unquoted information. It’s really the students that go to the school that are voting and giving you genuine opinions about every subject that the school has, not academic subjects but the things we have talked about. Hispanic

Below, in no particular order, is a list of additional websites mentioned by one or more students:

- US News.com
- PrincetonReview.com
- Petersons.com
- Stateuniversity.com
- CollegeConfidential.com
- Collegesearch.com
- Collegebound.com
- Myeduconnect.com
- Collegeprowler.com

Not surprisingly, Veteran students used more military-oriented sites, such as military.com, to find a list of military-friendly colleges and Army.edu, GIJobs.com, and VetBenefits.com to conduct their college search. Another Veteran student used the Google Maps site to look up schools in a defined location.

Social Networking Sites. Despite the rapid growth in recent years and current prevalence of social networking sites, these were mentioned as a viable source to gather college information by only a few traditional-aged students and even less so by Adults and Veterans. One student from each of the Traditional, four-year African American, and four-year Hispanic groups used social networking sites to conduct their college search. They used Facebook to inquire about room and board, classrooms, social life, and to talk to former/current students about their experiences. While Facebook was suggested to some students by their college of interest, others “friended” random people who attended their school of interest or people they met from a school visit or orientation. Only one student in the two-year Adult group used social networking, primarily because the Adult students thought sites such as Facebook were

⁸ Veterans were the only students who did not use the College Board website, presumably because they did not have to take the SATs and relied on more military-oriented websites.

more relevant for college students. Similarly, most students from two-year colleges and Adult (Veterans included) groups did not use social networking sites to search for information about colleges.

Sources of Information in High Schools

College search tools and information sources that were provided by high schools or school districts included people such as guidance counselors or invited college/university guests, such as representatives or alumni, in addition to organized events (e.g., college fairs/nights), college preparation programs, and services (e.g., a career center). Table 4 details the types of high school tools and resources mentioned by students in five of the eight groups. Adult and Veteran students did not provide consistent information relating to this category.

Table 4. Types of high school resources and focus group participants who used them

High school tool or resource	Focus groups of students exclusively at two-year Institutions (traditional age)		Focus groups of students predominantly at four-year Institutions, (traditional age)		
	African American	Hispanic	African American	Hispanic	Traditional
High school guidance counselors.....	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
College fairs/college night	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Visits from college representatives.....	✓	✓	✓		✓
Computer programs (i.e., Naviance*).....					✓
Career centers			✓	✓	
College prep programs.....	✓	✓			
Class assignments.....	✓				

✓ = Resource was mentioned by one or more participants in a group.

* Naviance is a college and career readiness assessment program that is used in conjunction with guidance from a school based counselor. See <http://www.naviance.com/>.

When asked to compare the quality of the tools and information sources found both outside and within the high school environment, opinions were mixed within and across the student groups. For example, among the African American students, personal assessments of their own high school resources ranged from “extremely limited” to “very good.” Nearly half of these participants reported that their schools lacked the resources and capacity to meet their needs to gather college-specific information. Several of these students reported that given the low ratio of counselors to students, counseling resources were stretched too thin, forcing students to wait for weeks to make appointments, obtain assistance elsewhere, or seek out such information on their own. This is even more problematic for lower income first-generation students than for students who have at least one parent who attended college and could provide them with additional resources. One such student described the situation in his/her school:

That’s just one of the problems throughout the whole school district: the lack of teachers, the lack of counselors. And that has an effect on the resources we have.... I couldn’t really speak directly to a counselor because there was only one per grade. African American

To compensate for limited access to college-related information and assistance, one African American student said that he “banded together with friends” to help each other through the college search and application process. Another student, who had a three-week wait to see his/her high school counselor, found support from a youth group outside of school. On the other hand, a third of the African American

students said that their high school resources were great and did not really feel the need to look for information elsewhere. Even with access to guidance counselors, college fairs, and a high school organized trip to visit colleges, the two-year African American students felt they could find just as much information about attending college outside of high school, particularly because representatives from many of the local colleges had visited their high school.

The majority of Hispanic students found that their high school resources, (i.e., career center, programs in school, and counselors) were helpful. One student described her college preparatory high school as very resourceful:

I wouldn't trade it [the college advisors] for anything, I know most of my friends did not have college advisors, and they were lost. [With] me being the first one to go to college, I felt lost and I had help. I can imagine how overwhelming that would be for them. That was definitely the number one resource, and the support I had at that school. Hispanic

Interestingly, the resources available to Traditional, higher income non-first-generation students during high school also varied. For instance, only a few Traditional students mentioned they attended a high school with access to the Naviance program.⁹ Another student said that in his school, college representatives came during students' lunch period, giving the impression that one college representative or another was available for students almost every other day. However, not all Traditional students benefited from such an abundance of resources. A Traditional student described how resources in her school were once high quality but then were scaled back due to budget cuts.

At my high school we had four counselors for over 3,000 kids.... We had a lot of schools come through. Every week we would have a different college or university. We had an office that helped with college process and scholarship, but our funding got cut, so my junior year it disappeared. I didn't really have that much support from my high school, just colleges that set up appointments to come in and have optional talks with the students before or after school.
Traditional

In addition, it seems as if the availability of guidance counselors was also hit or miss for the Traditional students; however, these students presumably had more resources available to them outside the schools and were less dependent on them than students from lower income backgrounds whose parents had not attended colleges. Some students recalled excellent support from their school's guidance department, but only if students sought the support on their own. Another Traditional student was discouraged by the guidance department because their counselors were not perceived to be helpful to students. Furthermore, the experience of the only Traditional student from a rural high school was also less positive.¹⁰ This student felt that those who had aspirations outside of the agricultural industry were left to search for postsecondary information on their own.

⁹Naviance is a college and career readiness assessment program that is used in conjunction with guidance from a school-based counselor.

¹⁰ Lack of adequate support by guidance counselors was cited as a challenge in RQ4 and mentioned again as a shortcoming in RQ5. However, these concerns are likely due to a combination of low counselor to student ratios and hesitancy by students to proactively access their counselor.

Postsecondary Institutions

College campus visits were the most commonly mentioned postsecondary school tool/information source by respondents in all eight groups (Table 5). According to one adult student, “You have to [visit a college]. [Relying on] online [information] is like buying an item you haven’t tried yet.” Print materials, typically in the form of college brochures, were cited by respondents in all but two of the groups. Surprisingly, campus-based admissions counselors, perhaps considered the prototypical college gatekeepers, were rarely mentioned as a source of information, except by Adults. In a subsequent section, campus-based counselors are also cited as being a potentially biased and unreliable source. Indeed, a majority of the four-year Adult students indicated that if needed, they could receive help from a college counselor. It is uncertain if any of these students actually used this information source, but they acknowledged that it was available to them. Further, adults may rely more on college counselors due to being so far removed from the resources (e.g., parents, peers, high school guidance counselors) available to younger students. As discussed earlier, the majority of Veterans seemed to favor using Internet resources to research prospective schools rather than the postsecondary sources discussed here, but one mentioned that he requested materials specifically from the college and another used a Barron’s college guide to look at school profiles.

Table 5. Postsecondary school resources and the focus group participants who used them

Postsecondary school tool or resource	Focus groups of students exclusively at two-year Institutions			Focus groups of students predominantly at four-year Institutions				
	African American	Hispanic	Adult	African American	Hispanic	Traditional	Adult	Veteran
Campus tours/visits	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Admissions counselors	✓		✓	✓			✓*	
Brochures and other print literature.....	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Instant message night/chat forum**				✓			✓	
University faculty				✓				
College e-mails.....	✓							

✓ = Resource was mentioned by one or more participants in a group.

* = Uncertain if students actually used or just aware of the information source.

** = Offered by a specific college and therefore not a resource available to all respondents.

Of the student groups, African American students in general mentioned more postsecondary tools and information sources (five out of six) than the other student groups. One of these students received advice and information from a family friend who was a university faculty member. Another four-year African American student mentioned participating in an “Instant Message Night” sponsored by a university. The desire to connect with current students and faculty is clearly articulated in response to RQ5. The student added that this online chat forum took place concurrently with the application process, presumably to answer any lingering questions about the school and the application process. Finally, a two-year African American student recalled receiving e-mails from colleges, either because the student contacted the schools or because some schools “just contacted me [the student].” All groups except for two-year Adult and four-year Hispanic students mentioned requesting informational brochures or packets from a university. These students thought it was best to have both, information directly from the school and information found on their own, to cover all their bases.

Other People as Sources of Information

All of the student groups relied on the advice of friends and peers who were currently attending college (Table 6). All three two-year student groups and the four-year Hispanic, Traditional, and Veteran groups conveyed that they also relied on family members to help them in their college search process. A Veteran student reported that the majority of the advice she received was from her husband, who was presumably a college graduate or attending college. Both of the adult groups relied on co-workers as a source of college information and one Traditional student learned about several prospective universities by word of mouth while working in his particular industry. The only four-year African American student who used the alumni network to gather college information said that he talked to and received letters from alumni to help inform his search process. Finally, Veterans mentioned turning to their military base education counselor when they needed assistance in the college search process.

Table 6. Types of other people used as resources and the focus group participants who used them

Other people as tool or resource	Focus groups of students exclusively at two-year institutions			Focus groups of students predominantly at four-year institutions				Active Duty/Veteran
	African American	Hispanic	Adult	African American	Hispanic	Traditional	Adult	
Peers, friends, and/or current students	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Family.....	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Co-workers.....			✓			✓	✓	
Alumni			✓	✓				
Military base education counselor *								✓

✓ = Resource was mentioned by one or more participants in a group.

* = Resource only available to Active Duty Military.

NOTE: Information about high school counselors and college representatives can be found in Table 4.

How Students Learn About College Search Resources and Tools

In general, respondents were unable to describe how they learned about college search tools and resources. With respect to people, students appeared to intuitively seek advice from their school counselors (when available), military education counselors, friends, and family—basically, any human resource that was available to them. Similarly, college-based resources such as campus tours, brochures, and admission counselors were referenced in an obvious, nonchalant manner. As with human resources, respondents mention accessing these resources in the same self-obvious way. The limited use of other media, such as college e-mail, social networking, and virtual tours, suggests these strategies are not yet commonplace and future college searchers may be well advised to explore them.

It is also uncertain how students came to learn about the various websites they used to conduct their search. Again, the pervasiveness of search engines such as Google may make their utility self-evident. Many students referenced the College Board website and indicated they became aware of it as a function of taking the SATs. However, it is not possible to determine if the other types of sites were suggested to them or if students came across them on their own. It is worth noting that respondents did not indicate

that college counselors directed them to use these technologies, which may suggest opportunities to educate school-based personnel on the use and credibility of these resources.

Whether and How Students Rank the Reliability and Importance of Different Information Sources

In ranking the reliability and importance of different sources of information (e.g., print, people, and the Internet), no one single source emerged as a clear frontrunner. Virtually all respondents reported a healthy level of skepticism with respect to nearly all sources. For instance, even though the majority of students used the Internet heavily as the primary resource in their college search, students cautioned that much of what they found or read was perceived as unreliable or untrustworthy. Students were especially skeptical of information that appeared on college-specific websites and information obtained from college-based admissions officers. In addition, students reported finding conflicting information on different sites about the same college. Therefore, respondents thought it was more reliable to actually visit the school firsthand rather than to rely solely on the Internet. The need to cross-check information, using multiple sources, is again highlighted in the RQ5 question below dealing with challenges.

As for other media, Adult students, in general, were more wary about using social networking sites to gather information than Traditional students. Even college review sites were cited as cause for caution, due to a perceived amount of bias when these sites are sponsored by unknown or noncredible organizations. In addition, Veterans were particularly nontrusting of sponsored ads that popped up during Internet searches. For example, one Veteran scoffed at any link that asked, “Want a College Degree Now?” As for reliable sites, only one two-year Hispanic student stated that the College Board site was the most reliable. However, other discussions that referenced the College Board site suggested relatively high confidence in the objectivity and reliability of its information.

When it comes to tapping people as a source of information, respondents in four of the eight focus groups singled out college admission representatives (specifically those who visit high schools and hand out information at college fairs) as the most untrustworthy. One two-year African American student felt that college representatives would say anything just to get students in their school, and some four-year Adult students believed some representatives were too aggressive. However, a two-year Hispanic student thought that a college recruiter or representative who shared a similar background to him personally (e.g., first-generation Hispanic student) might be perceived as more reliable. A two-year Adult student said that he did not trust people’s opinions in general (no matter who they were) based on the different experiences that people could have.”

As for specific individuals who were perceived as reliable, one four-year Hispanic student voted for college alumni because they have already gone through the college experience. Still, skeptical of alumni as bearers only of good news, one Traditional student stated that she was more likely to trust someone who was either angry or had a more balanced perspective about a college, as opposed to individuals who were overly positive. Curiously, friends, parents, and other family were not mentioned during this discussion. However, family, especially parents, was referenced in other questions as important sources of information.

Few students commented on the reliability or importance of print materials. Those who did (a two-year Hispanic student, a two-year African American student, a four-year Adult student) considered them to be the most reliable source of information because it was “official” and because it came directly from the college, while one Traditional student thought that college brochures looked “too ideal” and therefore less trustworthy. As for other sources of information, two-year Adult students did not find information about

the total cost to be “100 percent honest,” citing the existence of “hidden fees.” Also a four-year Adult student reported that students should be cautious of schools “advertising brand new programs,” which she regarded as potentially undeveloped and underresourced; little more than a marketing ploy.

In looking back over all of the information gathered and the tools and sources used, almost all students in six of the seven focus groups in which the question was asked believed that the information they based their college-going decisions on was generally reliable. Due to time limitations, this question was not asked during the four-year African American group. Hispanic students in Philadelphia expressed mixed feelings about the reliability of the information—some thought the information they gathered was, in fact, reliable, while others did not. One Hispanic student summarized it best:

I think it was reliable, but at the same time, it's your experience, it's your perspective on it. It could be true, but you can feel that in some way... well [for example] I know that I felt iffy about classrooms that are huge, but once I got in there, it wasn't that bad. Hispanic

RQ4. What challenges did students encounter when collecting information?

Typical challenges that students may encounter when collecting information were anticipated to be a) understanding complex or confusing information; b) dealing with the inability to obtain certain information; and c) interpreting information to be used for decisionmaking. Accordingly, this section is organized around these three subquestions.

In general, very few respondents indicated they encountered information that was confusing or difficult to understand. Nor did they report significant difficulties finding the information they sought. The major exception concerned information on cost and financial aid. Indeed, across several groups, the most challenging information to locate and interpret tended to be financial in nature.

a. Was there any information that was particularly confusing or difficult to understand? (Q7)

Very few respondents were able to identify specific information gathered during the college search that was confusing or difficult to understand. The exception to this tended to pertain to cost and financial aid. For example, a respondent was uncertain of what was exactly included in the term “room and board,” while others were unclear how financial need and the amount of financial aid were determined.

In contrast, more respondents reported confusion with respect to the financial aid process, application, and enrollment, rather than information on colleges per se. Respondents reported varying levels of confusion with respect to sending transcripts and standardized test results, tracking different submission dates, understanding the implications of early admission, sitting for placement exams, and completing application and financial aid forms including the FAFSA. Respondents in the African American and Hispanic groups often reported being “confused by financial aid forms and applications, particularly the FAFSA,” and many struggled with completing these forms. This confusion extended even after financial aid decisions were made by the colleges.

I think they weren't very clear with financial aid. I never understood how they determine how much money you get. African American

Counselors didn't help me at all. They would just give me a bunch of papers. I feel like I had to figure things out myself by researching and asking around.
Hispanic

In addition, and as discussed above, student responses sometimes revealed that they had difficulty relating aggregated information on average debt load or graduation rate, for example, to their own particular, individual circumstances. Thus, while claiming understanding of the term, their comments belied difficulty with interpretation or application of statistical information.

Adults and Veterans were least likely to cite information that they found confusing or difficult to understand. As other groups indicated some confusion with respect to applying for and accessing financial aid, the Veterans acknowledged some difficulty navigating the systems and processes associated with accessing their GI benefits.

b. Was there information that was hard to find or never found? How do they perceive and manage issues of missing or unavailable information? (Q12)

By and large, the respondents did not report significant difficulties finding the information they sought. The theme concerning mystery surrounding the financial aspects of college, however, continued through this question. Respondents stated that they sometimes were unable to find a basic summary of total costs for some colleges, details on financial aid, and deadline and due dates.

Other items that were particularly hard to find for a small number of respondents included objective student testimonies (on school, social life, and neighborhood), data on teacher quality, acceptance rates, and degree requirements. "You just see all the good testimonials on the college websites," observed one Traditional student. As with some other questions, respondents sometimes referenced needed information that was hard to find once enrolled in the college, such as prerequisites for majors and graduation requirements.

c. What was most challenging about finding, locating and interpreting the information they used? (Q16)

Once again, and across several groups, the most challenging information to locate and interpret tended to be financial in nature. Respondents would have appreciated more details about cost, financial aid, and completing FAFSA forms.

It was more common for respondents to report that their greatest source of confusion stemmed not from specific terms or pieces of information, but rather the difficulty of sorting through the sheer volume of information collected. "Overwhelming" was an adjective used to describe this, although the Veterans group did not report a problem with respect to too much information.

Adults, who tended to be employed while going through the college search process, identified time management and the lack of available staff outside of normal business hours at the colleges they

considered attending as challenges. At least one respondent thought colleges should have adult-student-specific information posted on their websites.

As mentioned in response to questions concerning reliability of information, Traditional students reported difficulty cross-checking facts and reconciling differences in opinion from various sources. Traditional students also stated that they wanted more people to talk to about college, particularly trustworthy sources, to both broaden information collection and to confirm the accuracy of information received. But these concerns were not unique to Traditional students.

More so than other groups, traditional-aged African American respondents reported instances of inadequate support from their guidance counselors, stemming mainly from unmanageably low ratio of counselors to students. Specifically, they cited problems obtaining letters of recommendation, information about standardized tests, and admission requirements.

I rarely saw my counselor. They had like 500 students in their office, so there were lost transcripts and everything. African American

The information my counselor was supposed to give me, she couldn't give me—pamphlets about the ACT, requirements for each college—the counselor didn't have any answers. Two-year African American

Our counselor wasn't doing her job, but I knew about college fairs. African American

We had a small school, but she wasn't the most dedicated counselor. So a lot of the process we had to learn was through trial and error. African American

RQ5. What are the relative information needs and processes of 21st century audiences pursuing college?

Although focus group participants used dramatic language at the outset of the focus groups to describe their college search experience (challenging, overwhelming, scary), they rarely returned to these themes during the course of the discussions. Even when the conversation turned to the decision-making process itself and how they narrowed their choice set down to the few schools to which they would apply, responses tended to reflect a fairly straightforward and rational process. One possible explanation to this apparent tension might be a visceral reaction to the length and complexity of the process overall, followed by a more straightforward reaction when the process is discussed step by step.

The themes of location and cost as the primary dimensions of college information informing the decision process dominated these discussions. To a lesser degree, available programs and school quality were mentioned as selection factors. Another issue revolved around the challenge of reconciling (and sometimes simply obtaining) multiple sources of information. Respondents typically recognized the value of utilizing a variety of resources rather than relying solely on website information, personal testimonials, or admission counselor statements. The issue of “fit” (aligning qualitative characteristics of colleges with one’s personal characteristics) was rarely mentioned, although students did consider aspects of fit such as diversity. Other comments revealed the multi-faceted dimensions of location and how this seemingly static element can influence one’s college experience in a complex number of ways. Further, students alluded to fit when underscoring the importance of using reliable information in final decisions.

Adult students commented that they faced a unique challenge as they seriously considered colleges, namely internal anxiety that “it’s too late to be going to school.” They also cited the lack of personal supports that they perceive as being commonly available to younger students in the form of school counselors, parents, peers, guidance offices, and college fairs (although in practice many of the younger respondents reported mixed access to these perceived resources). One Adult student pointed out the critical role a college-based counselor can play:

Sometimes you just think it’s too late. I had an admissions counselor aggressively reach out to me and that person was able to help me make decisions. Adult

Veterans, however, prided themselves on their military experience to provide the personal strength they needed to undertake a challenging search and make decisions on their own without the supports mentioned by other groups.

To gain a deeper insight into the multi-faceted process of pursuing college, the focus group protocol asked a number of specific questions, which are addressed in turn. These are organized under three sub-questions of Research Question 5:

- How do students apply information to the decision-making process?
- Looking back from the perspective of college enrollment, what if anything would students do differently if they could conduct the search process again?
- What could be done to make the college search process easier?

a. How do students apply information to the decision-making process?

Narrowing the Number of Colleges Considered, Explored, and Applied To

A major aspect of the decision-making process is the winnowing down of colleges over time from all those available (typically nationally but theoretically worldwide) to all those considered, seriously explored, and to which the student ultimately applies. When examining this process, researchers typically refer to the number of colleges in play at any phase of this process as the student’s choice set. In Table 7, we present numerical data on how respondents in the various focus groups moved through three of these phases. Because the numbers varied so widely, we present both the full range of responses as well as the modal responses that more accurately represent the number of colleges in play.

With only a few exceptions, respondents tended to consider approximately 3 to 10 colleges at the start of the college search process. Some respondents indicated a much higher number of “considered” colleges (i.e., 20 to 100) reflecting that a much larger pool of potential colleges were considered when first starting (e.g., all schools within the state, or all schools that offered their program of interest). However, follow-up discussions suggested that this number tended to be reduced to a much more manageable number of 10 or fewer rather quickly. Although both African American groups cited higher ranges that included more colleges in contrast to the other groups, it was the Traditional group that had a much higher bottom threshold of considered schools (i.e., at least eight). Given their answers to previous questions concerning limited guidance, we suspect that the African American groups perceived a need to do more searching and exploring on their own and therefore were inclined to start with relatively larger choice sets.

Table 7. Number of colleges considered, explored, applied to, and accepted at

Group	Number considered		Number seriously explored	Number applied to
	Modal	Full range		
Traditional (4-year).....	8-10	8-20	NA	3-10
African American Houston (2-year).....	1-20		NA	1-10
African American Philadelphia (4-year)	4-7	4-100	4-15	1-7
Hispanic Houston (2-year)	3-7		3-4	1-3
Hispanic Rockville (4-year)	3-8		2-8	1-8
Adults Houston (2-year)().....	2-5	1-10	1-4	1-4*
Adults Rockville (2 year and 4 year)	3-5		2-4	1-3
Veterans (2-year and 4-year).....	2-5	2-20	2-4	1-3

*Three applied to only one school.
NA = not ascertained.

As Table 7 further depicts, Traditional students also applied to a minimum of three colleges while all other groups contained many respondents who applied to only one college. This supports the common assumption that Traditional college-bound students consider a larger option/array of colleges than their non-Traditional counterparts. As discussed later, Traditional students tend not to reject colleges based on cost until final decision making, which may help explain this pattern. Adult students and Veterans, on the other hand, tended to narrow down the number of colleges that they “seriously explored” rather quickly and applied to far fewer (1–3) than all other groups with the exception of the two-year college Hispanic group. Given that Adults place considerable value on convenience and proximity, this significantly delimited the number of colleges they placed into their choice set.

In describing how they narrowed down the list of colleges from all those considered to those to which they ultimately applied, the dual themes of location and cost came to the fore (Table 8). Location was mentioned by most respondents in all focus groups. When asked how they came up with their initial list of colleges in their choice set, one Traditional student responded “location, location, location.”

Table 8. The primary information respondents used to narrow down colleges

Internet and media resource	Focus groups of students exclusively at two-year institutions			Focus groups of students predominantly at four-year institutions				
	African American	Hispanic	Adult	African American	Hispanic	Traditional	Adult	Veteran
Location	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cost	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Available program.....	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Reputation/quality.....						✓	✓	✓
Parental preference.....						✓		
Qualitative Criteria/"Fit"		✓				✓		

✓ = Resource was mentioned by most participants in a group.

More often than not, location was equivalent to proximity such that most respondents tended to remove more distant colleges from their choice set as their college search progressed. Preference was given to colleges that were closer to home. This was especially true for Adults and Veterans due to family, employment, or military service obligation. During the discussion the preference for colleges close to home and family was also referenced by African American and Hispanic respondents. (Note: in subsequent “looking back” discussion about doing things differently, a few of these respondents

mentioned they would give more distant colleges greater consideration.) However, for some, location referred to a particular type of location, often in or near a city. This was true of traditional students and of African American students, who tended to add the caveat of having family in those more distant cities.

Location, closer to my home, put it at the top of the list. Two-year Adult

I looked at specific cities. I just looked for schools around there with my major.
Traditional

Costs were also cited as one of the most salient selection variables for all groups except Veterans. Affordability of college is a common concern among individuals considering college and their families.

I didn't want to put my family in debt just because I wanted a certain career.
African American

Cost wasn't really what was most important to me, but it was important to my parents because they are the ones that had to pay. African American

Location [was important] because my mom wanted me to be safe.... [She] wanted people [relatives] around me that she could depend on. And then the money. For me, it was the money just because I didn't want to be a burden to my mom. African American

The relative lack of concern given affordability among Veterans is predominantly accounted for by guaranteed financial support available through the Veterans Administration (GI Bill). Although Veterans indicated that their benefits were not without certain limits, by and large, access to these resources enabled them to consider a broad range of colleges without the same level of cost concerns mentioned by other groups. Indeed, the revised post-9/11 GI Bill provides even greater benefits to veterans than the previous version.¹¹

An interesting nuance with respect to cost was observed with the Traditional students. Actual costs and financial aid packages were used to make the final decision rather than narrow down the choice set during earlier phases of the college search. Thus, Traditional students and their families were cognizant and concerned about affordability but tended not to allow high tuition costs alone to remove a college from further consideration. Instead, Traditional students relied more heavily on other criteria to narrow down their choice sets, namely strength of program, college reputation, family preference, and, in some cases, “fit” determined by alignment with other qualitative characteristics of the college and personal visits. This tendency may also help explain why Traditional students considered and applied to a larger number colleges than their counterparts, that is, by retaining as options colleges other groups would have excluded based on overall cost.

As referenced by a couple of students themselves when discussing location as one of their primary information elements, it is worth highlighting that location clearly contains a cost component. More distant colleges will inevitably cost more due to travel, room and board, family visits, and so on, as one Hispanic respondent noted:

¹¹ The post-9/11 GI Bill pays tuition based upon the highest in-state tuition charged by a public educational institution in the state where the school is located. The amount of support that individuals may qualify for depends on where they live and what type of degree they are pursuing.

Location has a lot to do with cost. The further you travel, the more expensive it is. How me and my family were going to pay was a major issue. Two-year Hispanic

However, these additional but less obvious costs associated with location were not always taken into consideration during the search process, as exemplified by one respondent who regretted her choice of an out-of-state school as it now prevents her from returning home as often as she had anticipated. Sometimes, the focus on tuition may overshadow other costs.

With these caveats, location and cost were used as the primary narrowing criteria by all groups at all phases of the search and decision-making process. Like their Traditional counterparts, the value of the colleges' offered financial aid packages was a major consideration when making the *final* decision of which college to attend. The dual themes of cost and location overshadowed other criteria mentioned such as quality (reputation) and fit, although personal visits were mentioned by one Traditional student.

There were a couple of schools that I went to that I just didn't like at all. I just crossed them off my list. Traditional

Were there any colleges that students wanted to apply to but did not? What stopped them?

In five out of the six groups that were asked this question, at least two respondents indicated that there were colleges they had considered but to which they did not apply. Two of these groups (Traditional and four-year Hispanic) cited admission criteria that they thought made certain colleges out of reach for them. , On the other hand, some students who enrolled in two-year colleges now held out the possibility of transferring to a more selective four year college. Adult respondents and Veterans both cited location (i.e., distance from home or work) as a reason for not applying, while the Adults added cost as another. A financial factor also dissuaded African Americans from applying, namely, the application fee itself. African Americans were also the only group to explicitly cite attempts to obtain application fee waivers from college, suggesting the possibility that receipt of application fee waivers enabled the African American respondents (who were also lower income) to apply to a relatively higher number of colleges than would have otherwise been possible. In practice, we note that African Americans reported applying to more schools on average than all other groups besides Traditional students and those in the four-year Hispanic group.

Yes, I would have [applied] but I didn't because the requirements were so high. I didn't see myself realistically following along and graduating. Two-year Hispanic

Yes, same for me. It was too much the requirements. I still want to. But I couldn't see it at the time. Two-year Hispanic

How students feel about the choice they made to attend current institution? Did students have enough information to make good choice?

The vast majority of respondents indicated that they are satisfied with their final decision and feel good about their choice of college. The group with the highest dissatisfaction was the Houston Adults at 2-year institutions, several of whom reported they would not choose the same college again and one who reported only lukewarm confidence in his/her decision. Beyond that, only one or two respondents in the other groups expressed dissatisfaction with their decision.

This pattern suggests that most respondents had enough information on which to base their decision or they became satisfied with the colleges they are attending for other reasons. In response to questions about source of information, respondents indicated that with rare exceptions, they also believed the information they used to be reliable. To explore this further, the respondents were directly asked if they felt they “had enough information to make a good choice.” Across the board, all respondents reported having had enough information and the right kind of information except for the Houston Adults mentioned above. (Note: in response to another question asking about the amount of information gathered, Veterans reported that one “could never have too much”; however, this was not interpreted as indicating a shortage of information interfering with decision making.)

If students had their decision to do over again, would they choose the same college?

In keeping with their responses concerning relatively high satisfaction with their choice of college, only a very few individuals reported that they would not choose the same college if they had the decision to do over again. The group with the highest proportion that would choose another college was the Houston Adults. A couple of respondents in the Traditional group also reported they would choose a different college. Cost figured into the thinking of at least one of these students when indicating that he/she “would have chosen a less expensive college.”

How many students intend to transfer?

Data on intent to transfer was gathered from half of the groups. Several of the respondents currently enrolled in two-year programs entered these programs with the intent to complete their associate’s degree at the two-year college and then transfer to a four-year college to complete their bachelor’s degree. This forward-thinking transfer option is a fairly common and justifiable pattern (again, often influenced by a desire to contain costs). However, the intent of the question was to follow-up specifically on the decision-making questions discussed above and determine the proportion of college enrollees who have, since their enrollment, decided that the best course of action is to transfer.

As expected, there was significant alignment in response between those indicating that they would choose a different college if they could make their decision over again and those indicating that they plan to transfer. However, the percentage of respondents in this category was small and all were in either the Traditional or two-year group. .

The responses of the Adults who said they “would look for more advanced programs” suggest the students may have underestimated their ability or overestimated the rigor of the college and had enrolled in colleges and programs that did not challenge them enough. However, they acknowledged that this can only be discovered post-decision by stating they “know more now” by virtue of being enrolled.

b. Looking back from the perspective of college enrollment, what if anything would students do differently if they could conduct the search process again?

Given the benefit of hindsight, the majority of respondents reported that they would conduct their search differently if they were to do it again, although not in dramatically different ways. No common theme was observed across the focus groups with responses ranging from starting earlier to taking a larger number of selection criteria into consideration.¹² Given the fact that almost half of the Houston Adults indicated earlier that they would not choose their college again, it is surprising that more strategies on how they would have altered their college search were not mentioned, with only a couple of respondents suggesting looking at more schools and more carefully investigating college costs.

I would have started way earlier, so that by the time I was in high school I would have already known what I needed to get into a college. African American

I'd do deeper research. My mind was already made up where I wanted to go. I'd see what other schools Houston has to offer. Two-year Adult

I would try to get more money by researching how to get more financial aid. Two-year Adult

Two interesting perspectives were raised by African American respondents with respect to gathering information on college costs. On the one hand, all members of the two-year college group in Houston reported that they would investigate college costs and fees more carefully, while a few members of the four-year group in Philadelphia stated that they would downplay cost as a primary search criterion. These statements are intriguing in light of the pattern observed in the Traditional group, where cost informed the final decision but tended not to exclude potential colleges from the choice set. This philosophy may reflect a more sophisticated multi-stage decision-making process that recognizes that the actual cost to attend a given college will likely be less than the full listed cost after taking the offered financial aid package into consideration.

In some groups, respondents offered suggestions for those going through the college search process. For example, Philadelphia Adults advised others to use multiple sources of college information as a check on data quality (i.e., written literature in addition to online information). This admonition apparently arose from a lack of confidence concerning information that was found online. Relatedly, they would also counsel others to speak to current students and faculty. This was in keeping with the unfilled desire of other groups to obtain current student testimonials about their college experience and interactions, both academic and social.

¹² It may be worth noting a potential “contagion effect” taking place. While a lot of diversity was observed across groups, there was much less diversity within groups (i.e., all Houston African American said more research on cost and fees and all Houston Hispanics would consider quality of teaching).

With benefit of hindsight, do students think the types of information they thought were most important during their search are still the most important now?

Nearly all respondents indicated that they still consider the information they rated as most important when they were conducting their searches (i.e., location, cost, major, admission criteria, etc.) to be the most important now. None would change their criteria, but a few added some interesting caveats. For example, a couple of Traditional students indicated that they would be more willing now to consider community college for their first two years of study before transferring to a four-year college to achieve their bachelor's degree.

I was really focused on going to a well-known school. Sometimes I think I could have saved money and gone to a not-so-reputable school and gotten the same degree. Traditional

I hear often of graduates saying it's not so much about the reputation of the school... but basically what you make of your education. You can get all the same benefits from an Ivy League potentially as you get from a community college. Traditional

As discussed in the section immediately above, some African American students commented that they would downplay the cost of college as their primary criteria. Having experienced college courses, they added that they would now raise interaction between faculty and students as a more important criterion (this is perhaps indicative of the lack of awareness concerning factors related to teaching and learning quality during the search process but recognition of their importance once enrolled). African American students in two-year colleges indicated that they would want to look more carefully at the availability of classes/courses needed for their major. These students may be experiencing the implications associated with the growing enrollments on two-year college campuses; an implication that they may not have anticipated prior to enrollment.

c. What could be done to make the college search process easier?

This question yielded a wide range of suggestions. One common theme echoed by all groups was a desire for more and better college counseling. For first-generation students, adults and veterans, there were often challenges in not having a trusted parent, mentor, or counselor to help them. For those in high school, informed and proactive guidance and college counselors were highlighted as well as trustworthy individuals outside of high school except for Traditional students who tended to voice preferences for the latter, thereby expanding their support network. For Adults, these requests centered around college-based counselors. Adults often commented that their search was complicated by lack of access to college-based staff outside of regular business hours.

Veterans augmented these themes by calling for access to increased human and informational resources on base that would be accessible to them while on active duty. There was broad consensus that more information gathering should take place prior to discharge with an emphasis on career guidance. Veterans also had specific requests for college-based Veterans Administration liaisons which specialize in the needs of returning veterans, especially with respect to accessing and managing their VA benefits.

Career counselors or guidance counselors [would help us]. When you're in the military you're only focused on your specific career field. I was a medic, so that's all I knew. I didn't know what's going on in the world, what are some hot topics, what is a college major that's going to be around and going to give me a job in the next 15–20 years. Veteran

Every college has a VA office, but they're understaffed. Maybe have vets who are students at that college link up with applicants. Someone that's actually there, so they can let them know their experience. Veteran

Other suggestions made by multiple groups dealt with the structure of college websites. In particular, respondents yearned for clear and specific details concerning tuition, fees, and other costs. Other suggestions included pages containing consolidated statistics or fact sheets that would provide common information on what respondents called “concrete numbers,” such as graduation rates, alumni placement rates, transfer rates, and student/faculty ratios. Clearly presented information on where to ask for help, who to contact, and contact information (i.e., phone numbers and e-mail addresses) were also identified as being advantageous. When calling for similar modifications to websites, Adults suggested that tabs with all of this information customized for adult students would be ideal. (Emphasis on websites reflects the information-gathering process and currently observed preference to utilize online sources of information.)

Traditional students anticipated the follow-up question on colleges doing a better job connecting them directly with students and faculty (discussed immediately below) when they expressed the desire for colleges to connect them to students and faculty, not just to an admissions officer. Traditional students also mentioned that colleges could provide prospective students a better sense of what academic life is like on their campus by “allowing students to audit” or more realistically sit in on a class. (Believing that most colleges would allow this, we suspect the response should be interpreted to mean colleges should encourage more students to take advantage of this option.)

Lastly, African American and Hispanic respondents used this question as an opportunity to express their general concern about the entire college search process. As in the opening ice-breaker question, respondents reported that they often felt overwhelmed during the process and information was often confusing and hard to interpret. Students wanted greater “guidance on what to search for,” and “instruction on how to research and apply for financial aid”. One respondent summed up the desire for easy-to-find and useful information by proposing colleges offer “a student tab on their website with all information you need from start to finish...from how to apply to the school to how to apply for financial aid, how to pay for school, graduation requirements, everything.”

Do students think colleges could do a better job connecting them directly with current students and/or faculty? Would this be considered helpful?

Virtually every respondent in all focus groups agreed that colleges could do a better job connecting prospective students directly with current college students and/or faculty and that doing so would be beneficial in college planning and decision making. A plethora of strategies on how these connections could be made were offered ranging from face-to-face access to use of technology and new social media to simple phone calls. Open houses, videos of actual classes, alumni who serve as guest speakers, 24-hour chat lines, online Q&A sessions, student blogs, and Facebook pages were all offered as options for connecting with other students. A number of potential additions to college websites were also mentioned;

these included student ratings of college services, faculty, academic programs, and social life that provided prospective students with indirect access to the college student experience.

Some of the schools have students working in the admissions office. Students would actually give me a call so I could talk to them. That was kind of nice.
Traditional

Adult students suggested these and some unique variations of particular interest to them that would probably be of greater benefit once they were enrolled in the college. These suggestions included connections to employers and job search counselors, access to personal tutors who could also help them transition to college life, and a seminar at the start of the year explaining to new students what to expect. The latter sounds like students were referring to orientation programs that are common among freshmen in four- and two-year colleges, but perhaps overlooked when dealing with adult and/or part-time students who may not attend college during traditional hours.

“How are your needs, in terms of college information and decision making, different from students of other ethnic or racial backgrounds?”

Previous research has found that students of different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds evidence both common and distinct patterns when progressing through the college search and decision-making processes (Broekemier, 2002; Butner et al., 2001; Freeman, 2005; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999; Kim, 2004; Kurlaender, 2006; Santiago, 2007; Teranishi et al., 2004). These relationships are complex and go beyond the commonly identified demographic characteristics mentioned to include status such as first-generation, adult or returning student, and returning veterans. The focus groups conducted for this project deliberately recruited for representation of these diverse populations. Knowing that these groups can face unique circumstances associated with their background and, in turn, be differentially motivated by certain college criteria, the focus group protocol contained a question that asked students to identify if and how they perceived their needs differed from those of students of other backgrounds. Interestingly, most respondents indicated that they did not perceive their needs, in terms of college information and decision making, to be different. And when students interpreted the question to mean colleges should differentially reach out to students, the question was met with skepticism.

However, special interest support groups were acknowledged as potentially very helpful once students were enrolled. These were specifically mentioned by African Americans and Veterans, for example. And, it is perhaps worth noting that in response to how they got started in their college search, a couple of Hispanic students noted that targeted pre-collegiate programs were responsible for putting them on the path to college.

It's bigger than just African American. It's more like minorities as a whole. But then again first-generation students might need additional support. Like people coming from urban school districts might not have study habits because I sure didn't. African American

Adults and Veterans on the other hand readily acknowledged that their information needs were different from those of their traditional-aged counterparts. In particular, they noted that they did not have access to the same social support network of guidance counselors, teachers, parents, and peers that Traditional students often have. As a result, they cited the need for alternative sources of encouragement and moral support. This was especially true for adults working full time who needed time management supports in

trying to juggle work, family, and college search responsibilities simultaneously. They also cited the need for greater access to college staff in the evenings or via online and more work-study options.

The thing is, sometimes as an adult, you need to give up things. You have bills or children. School should be a priority, but as an adult it's more of a part time thing. You are more likely to let go of that and think of school as something you'll do in the future. You have more tendency to stick with the now than the future. Two-year Adult

You need encouragement. If you need to work the next eight hours because you have bills to pay, it helps to have that encouragement to do your college search after work. Two-year Adult

Veterans added that by virtue of being enlisted, narrowly focused on a highly specialized role or mission, and often being deployed overseas, they often were out of touch with current trends in employment, careers, and future job opportunities. As a result, they identified the need for greater career guidance (preferably while still on active duty) and matching career goals with educational opportunities. They also reiterated the need for assistance in navigating the very specialized world of VA benefits rather than the traditional sources of financial aid sought by other populations.

In sum, it would appear that a broad cross-section of students, represented here in a diverse set of focus groups, would benefit from enhanced college search and decision making. Responses identified challenges encountered and revealed a certain lack of sophistication about the types of information needed to make informed decisions. Focus group data suggest non-traditional college going students especially share a need to augment the typical resources of guidance counselors, knowledgeable parents, and other mentors to help them navigate the college search process and assist them with information interpretation to make the most successful decisions.

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Appendix A.

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Table A-1. Summary characteristics of student focus group participants

Characteristic	Traditional	African American	Hispanic	Adult	Veteran	Total
Total.....	8	11	12	14	7	52
Gender						
Male.....	5	5	5	6	5	26
Female	3	6	7	8	2	26
Race/ethnicity						
White	6	0	7	2	2	17
African American	0	11	0	9	3	23
Hispanic.....	2	0	4	1	0	7
Asian.....	0	0	1	2	2	5
Other.....	0	0	1	0	0	1
Employment status						
Full time	0	1	3	5	1	10
Part time	5	3	4	4	2	18
Unemployed	3	7	5	5	4	24
First-generation status	0	11	12	NA	NA	23
Income level¹						
Low	1	10	7	10	NA	28
Low/moderate.....	3	1	3	2	NA	9
Moderate/high	4	0	2	2	NA	8
Institution type						
Two-year	1	6	7	9	3	26
Four-year.....	7	4 ²	5	5	4	25
Location of classes						
Classroom	7	10	10	10	6	43
Online	0	0	0	2	0	2
Both	1	1	2	2	1	7

NA = not ascertained.

¹ Income level was based on a formula using household income, number of people in household, and geographic location.

² One student not shown was enrolled in a program with both two- and four-year components. Thus, detail does not add to total.

NOTE: Because respondents could note more than one race/ethnicity, details may add to more than totals. Income level totals do not add to total number of respondents because of non-ascertained data.

Table A-2. Summary characteristics for veteran/active duty military focus group participants

Characteristic	Veterans
Total	7
Currently serving in military	4
Eligible for GI Bill	7
Receiving federal tuition assistance not under GI bill	0

Appendix B

Focus Group Protocols

WESTAT MODERATOR'S GUIDE

EDUCATION CONSERVANCY

(Revised January 19, 2010)

Thanks so much for participating in this afternoon's focus group. My name is _____. I work for Westat, a social science research company. We are currently working on a project with the Education Conservancy, a nonprofit organization committed to understanding information needed by students in the college search and admissions process. The Education Conservancy's partner in this project is the Consumers Union.

For this project, we are conducting several focus groups like this one to explore the information that college students like you used in the college search process and in making decisions about which colleges to apply to and attend. We want to learn about your experiences in conducting your college search since you have already completed the process and are currently enrolled in college. Based on your comments, we hope to make suggestions about improving the quality and usefulness of college selection information.

Before we begin, allow me to review some general guidelines to help our discussion go smoothly.

- Please don't hesitate to speak up; you don't have to wait for me to call on you. However, we have a lot to talk about tonight, so I apologize now if I need to interrupt you to move us on to new topics so that we cover everything we need to discuss.
- Please speak one at a time so that I can hear what each of you has to say. If your voice gets too low, I will give you the following gesture [*show gesture*], which means please speak in a voice at least as loud as mine.
- There are no right or wrong answers; what you have to say is important, and all opinions matter.
- Everything that you tell us today will be kept confidential. Neither your name nor the name of the school you attend will appear in any notes or reports we write about this discussion.
- To help protect your privacy, please use **only** your **first name** during the discussion and do **not** state the name of the school you attend.
- Please respect each other's privacy and do not share what is said in this room once the discussion is over.
- This discussion is being audio recorded for accuracy. The discussion is also being observed by Westat staff taking notes and by staff from the Education Conservancy and the Consumers Union who have tasked us to work on this project.
- We will prepare a report summarizing what is said in this discussion as well as the other focus groups being held. The report will not contain your name or any information that could identify you.
- Please set your cell phones to vibrate.

Warm-Up and Opening Questions

OK, let's get started by going around the table and introducing ourselves. Please give your first name only and tell me your favorite academic subject thus far and what you like about it [*or some other equally easy question to get the group warmed up and give everyone a chance to share*].

1. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about your college search experience? [*Ask them what makes them say this or tell me more about this.*]

Thanks. Now, let's talk a little about when and how you started your college search.

2. When did you first start thinking about going to college?

Probe:

- Do you recall how the topic was first raised and by whom?

Probe for Active Duty/Veterans:

- *Pre-service, While in Service, After discharge?*

3. How did you first get started in your college search process?

Probes:

- What was the first step you took?
- Did anyone help you in this process? [parents, siblings, guidance counselors, friends, etc.]
- [*Probe for Active Duty/Veterans: Education counselor on base, VA Certifying Official, veterans coordinator in colleges, fellow servicemen/women, family members, supervisor, spouse, others?*]

[Types of Info Sought]

OK, now we'll talk about the types of information you looked for when you conducted your college search.

4. What types of information were important for you in your search?

*For **bolded** items, probe if not mentioned: What specific information did you look for? (examples appear in italics)*

Then ask: What does this information tell you about a college?

- **Major/field of study** (*e.g., does school have major; is school strong in major*)

- **Affordability** (*cost; scholarships available; tuition; room & board; fees; financial aid; financial aid package*)
- **Location/convenience** (*proximity to home; rural, urban, suburban environment; flexible class scheduling*)
- **Admissions requirements** (*application process, application costs, interviews, essays, cut-off dates*)
- **Academic reputation** (*accreditation, prestige and/or ranking, degree of selectivity*)
- **Quality of teaching/learning** (*student/faculty interaction, types of learning opportunities, evaluations by students, amount of reading & writing required, etc.*)
- **Type of college** (*2-year, 4-year; public, private, or for-profit; size of school; ethnic/racial diversity of students and faculty/staff; HBCU; Hispanic-serving institution; single sex*)
- **Student services** (*availability of academic advising and tutoring; mentors to help make transition to college environment; job placement services; support services such as child care*)
- **Special programs or services** (*to help students who are minorities, returning veterans, first in their families to attend college, etc.*)
- **Diversity of students and faculty** (*enrollment by race/ethnicity; gender; number who are part time/full time*)
- **Social life/extracurricular opportunities** (*culture; sports; recreation facilities*)

[Value Placed on Information]

Thanks.

5. You mentioned quite a few types of information you looked for. Which ones do you recall were **most important** to you **at the time** you conducted your search? *[Ideally, we'd like each respondent to mention 2-3 types of information. Probe on how the bolded items in question 4 figures into their priorities, if not mentioned.]*

5a. Was there **one** piece or type of information that you valued above all others? What makes you say that? *[Allow each participant to reply.]*

5b. As you look back on your search, do you think the types of information you thought were most important to you then are still the most important now?

If not, what's most important now? What makes you say that?

Next we'd like to know more about the importance of a college's learning environment in your search process.

6. When you conducted your search, did you look for information about the quality of teaching and learning?

6a. How important would you say it is for students to consider the quality of teaching and learning when selecting a college? (Use this scale: very important, somewhat, or not important.)

6b. When you think about good quality teaching and learning, what would you look for?
[Probe on items not raised by respondents]

(INPUTS)

- Number/percent of faculty who are tenured/full time (be sure to discuss that a lower percentage of full time implies a higher percentage of part time)
- Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs
- Admissions requirements

(ACTIVITIES)

- Amount of time students spend reading, writing, studying
- Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)
- Frequency of opportunities to interact with professors outside the classroom

(OUTCOMES)

- Measurements of student learning (e.g., results of assessments of student learning such as the College Learning Assessment and the National Survey of Student Engagement)
- Success of alumni as measured by employment, income, and advanced education
- Evaluations/opinions of the school by students/alumni

[Level of understanding of information collected/used]

7. As you collected information as part of your search, did you run across some types of information or terms that were confusing, unclear, or hard to understand?

7a. If so, what were they?

7b. Can you explain what you didn't understand or found confusing about them? *{These may be unique or overlap with the list below.}*

8. I'm going to list some specific types of information you might have collected or heard about when you conducted your search. Please tell me:

- if you used or were aware of this information, and
- what you think it tells you about the institution.

[Use handout to discuss these items. First discuss any items not touched on earlier in the discussion, then, as time allows, revisit the earlier ones using the above two bulleted questions.]

AFFORDABILITY AND COST

- Availability of work-study or other on-campus employment
- Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
- Average financial aid package
- Average student debt load at graduation
- Direct costs
- Total cost to attend

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

- Availability of online classes, or classes that use online and traditional instruction
- Type of college
- Graduation rates (*FOR MODERATOR INFO ONLY: graduation rates are based on percentage of first-time, full-time students that graduate from 4-year colleges in 6 years or from 2-year colleges in 4 years*)

SCHOOL REPUTATION

- Accreditation
- Alumni involvement
- Rankings of colleges

QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Access to faculty and academic support
- Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects
- Amount of time students spend reading and writing
- Student/faculty ratio, class size
- Types of learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, labs, etc.)

[Tools/sources of information students used]

Next, let's discuss the sources you used in searching for colleges.

9. What sources of information or tools did you use to learn about colleges?

9a. Were there other places you looked for this information?

9b. How did you learn about these sources?

Probes:

- *How would you describe the resources that were available to you within your high school (or 2-year college) in the guidance office, in the classroom, college rep visits (were reps students or administrators?), college fairs?*
- *How would you say these compare to resources you found outside of school (e.g., college websites, college guides, college fairs held outside of school, informational materials directly from college, peers and family members, friends of family members)?*

Probes for Active Duty/Veterans if not mentioned:

- *Education counselor on base*
- *Department of Veterans Affairs*
- *State Department of Veterans Affairs*
- *National Veterans Foundation*
- *ARMY ED*
- *GI Jobs Education Issue (published since 2007)*

10. How heavily did you rely on the Internet?

10a. How did you generally search for information on the Internet?

10b. How did you conduct your Internet search?

Probe if not mentioned: Did you use a specific search engine, go to specific websites, or both?

10c. Which specific websites did you use: individual college websites or sites where you could look up information on several different colleges at once?

Probe: If not mentioned, ask specifically about these aggregator sites:

- My EDUconnect.com
- Stateuniversity.com
- College Board site
- College Confidential
- U.S. News
- Princeton Review On-Line
- Peterson's

Additional probes for Active Duty/Veterans:

- VeteransBenefitsGIBill.com
- GIBbill.va.gov
- www.finaid.org/military/veterans.phtml (or other financial aid sites for vets)
- www.militaryfamily.org

10d. Did you use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, forums, or student blogs?

- *Probe: if used: How did you use them (e.g., what search terms did you use in Google searches) and what information did you find/use?*

11. What source of information (1) print, (2) Internet, or (3) people, did you trust the most?

- *Probe if they cite a print or Internet source: What was the name of the source (Internet website, college site, type of college brochure, etc.)? What was it about this source that made you trust it the most?*
- *Probe if they say person, ask: What type of person (e.g., college rep, college student, friend, parent, sibling, other relative), did you trust the most and why did you trust them the most?*

11a. Were there any sources of information you did not trust? If so, which ones?

- *What was it about these sources that you did not trust? Probe specifically on college websites and social networking sites, info from colleges and college reps or counselors.*

11b. In looking back, would you say the information you based your decision on was reliable or not? What makes you say that?

12. Was there any information that was particularly hard to find?
If so what information?

12a. Did you eventually locate it? Where?

- *Probe: Was there anything you wanted to know about a college that you could not find out?*

Thank you. Our final set of questions focus on how you made decisions about colleges to apply to and attend.

[How information is applied in decision-making process]

13. How did you narrow down the list of colleges you **applied** to?

13a. How many colleges did you end up applying to?

13b. Were there any colleges that you wanted to apply to but did not?

Probe: What stopped you from applying?

14. So far, how do you feel about the choice you made to attend your current institution?

14a. Do you feel that you had enough information to make a good choice?
Did you feel you had the “right” kind of information to make a good choice?

14b. If you had to make a decision over again, do you think you would you choose the college you are currently attending? Why or why not?

15. Would you do anything differently if you had to conduct a college search again? [*Probe on: search process and lack of information about placement tests/remediation, transferability, costs*]

This conversation has been very informative. I only want to ask one or two final questions to wrap-up.

16. What do you think are some of their biggest information challenges students experience gathering and interpreting information in the college search process?

Probe if not mentioned: Too much information, not enough information, too many sources of information; what information can they trust; how to apply the information, etc.

17. Given your experience, what would you say could make the college search process easier for students like you?

17a. Do you think colleges could do a better job of communicating useful information to prospective students? How?

Probes:

- *What, if anything, could colleges do to help you learn about their institution?*
- *What, if anything, could colleges do to help you in the decision-making process?*

If no answers are forthcoming, ask: For example, would it be useful if colleges could help you determine how students like you would do at that college? Or sharing more comments, opinions, and perspectives from current students like yourself?

17b. Do you think colleges could do a better job connecting you directly with current students and/or faculty? How? Would this be helpful to you?

False Close

Thank you so much for being here tonight. Before we conclude, I need to step out for a few minutes to make sure we have everything ready for you.

Moderator checks with observers for up to two additional questions to pose, time permitting.

Final Close

Upon return, moderator will pose questions from observers, if any.

Well, that concludes our discussion for tonight. Again, thank you so much for taking time out of your very busy lives to be here with us tonight. The facility has your envelope ready for you. Please enjoy the rest of your evening and travel home safely.

Appendix C

Focus Group Handouts

INFORMATION MATTERS FOCUS GROUP

Types of Information Sought and Used

MAJOR / FIELD OF STUDY

AFFORDABILITY AND COST

- Availability of work study or other on-campus employment
- Average amount of grant and scholarship aid
- Average financial aid package
- Average student debt load at graduation
- Direct costs
- Total cost to attend

LOCATION

ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

ACADEMIC REPUTATION

- Accreditation
- Alumni involvement
- Rankings of colleges

QUALITY OF TEACHING / LEARNING

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

- Availability of online classes, or classes that use online and traditional instruction
- Type of college
- Graduation rates

STUDENT SERVICES

SPECIAL PROGRAMS

DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS AND FACULTY

SOCIAL LIFE / EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITY

INFORMATION MATTERS FOCUS GROUPS

Potential Quality Indicators: Teaching and Learning Environment

- Admissions requirements, placement tests
- Accreditation
- Number/percent of faculty who are tenured/full time
- Number/percent of faculty with highest degree in their fields
- Student/faculty ratio, class size
- Graduation requirements overall and for specific programs

- Amount of time students spend reading, writing, studying
- Types of learning opportunities
(e.g., lectures, seminars, labs, online or hybrid classes, etc.)
- Frequency of opportunities to interact with professors outside the classroom
- Amount of time spent working in groups or on team projects
- Access to faculty and academic support
- Evaluations/opinions of faculty by students

- Measurements of student learning
(e.g., results of assessments of student learning such as the College Learning Assessment and the National Survey of Student Engagement)
- Success of alumni as measured by employment, income, and advanced education
- Evaluations/opinions of the school by students/alumni
- Graduation Rate

