



RACHEL FISHMAN

2015 COLLEGE DECISIONS SURVEY: PART II

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

About the Author



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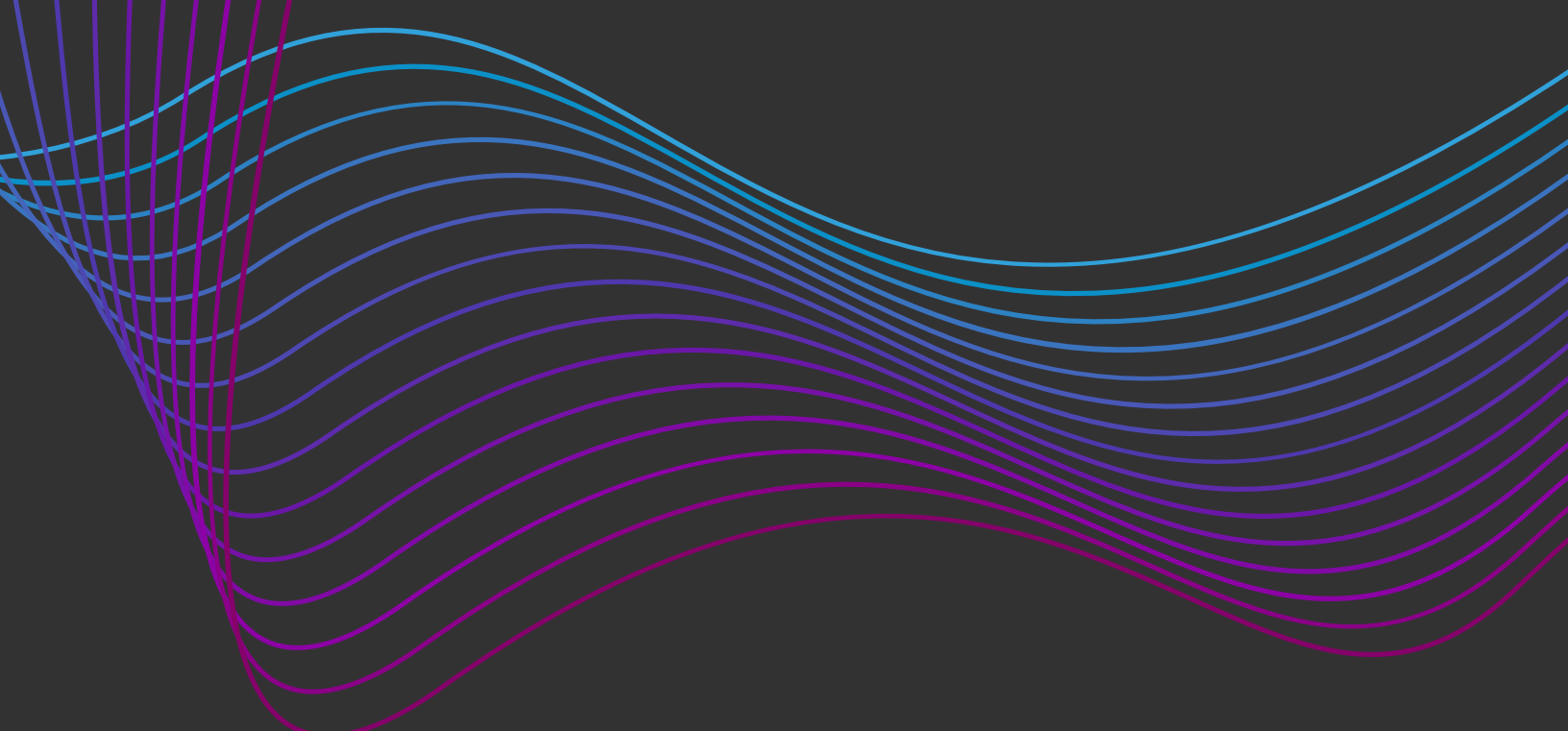
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The survey cited in this report was commissioned to [Harris Poll](#). Our focus group was administered by [FDR Group](#).

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BACKGROUND

How long do students take to research and apply to college? And how many colleges do they typically apply to? This policy brief attempts to answer those questions using new survey data. It looks at students' timelines for researching and applying to schools, the number of colleges they plan to apply to, and the types of colleges where they want to enroll.

This brief is the second in our **College Decisions Survey** series. In the fall of 2014, New America's Education Policy Program commissioned a survey that aims to refocus national attention on all students, regardless of whether they enroll right after high school or wait until their mid-thirties to attend for the first time. Over the next several months, we will publish a series of briefs that analyze the survey data, highlight specific findings, and address what students know about the college-going and financing process and how they decide where to go to college. These briefs will be released during the spring

and summer of 2015 and will cover important topics including:

- Financial concerns during the postsecondary decision-making process
- The application process for different types of students
- Students' familiarity with financial aid
- Students' ability to estimate their loan debt and monthly payments
- The college search process and helpfulness of various common resources

The survey data are designed to help researchers and policymakers better understand the concerns of today's students, and the factors they consider when choosing college. Additionally, this research will help policymakers and college-access advocates tailor their resources to have greater impact.

METHODOLOGY

New America commissioned Harris Poll to create and administer the survey. A national online survey was conducted between October 7th and November 3rd, 2014. The sample included 1,011 completed interviews and consisted of U.S. residents ages 16 to 40 who do not have college degrees and plan on enrolling in a two-year or four-year college within the next 12 months. The survey also included individuals who were in the first semester of their first year at a two-year or four-year college (n=264 for recently-enrolled students; n=747 for prospective students). We did this in part to ensure we had a large enough sample size to understand college-going behavior. Recently-enrolled students are not far removed from the college search process, and thus are able to reflect on the process. In our briefs, unless explicitly noted, both the prospective and recently-enrolled students are combined, and we refer to this group as “students.”

Data were weighted to ensure that it is balanced and accurately represents the population of interest for the study. Harris Poll’s weighting algorithm included a propensity score which allows Harris Poll to ensure that the results obtained online are projectable to the entire population of interest. A more detailed description of the weighting, methodology, and instrument for this survey can be accessed at www.edcentral.org/collegedecisions.

Notes about figures/tables: Percentages may not always add up to 100 percent because of computer rounding or the acceptance of multiple answers from respondents answering that question. Data were tested at the 95 percent confidence level. Superscript letters indicate statistically significant differences between the subgroups being analyzed.

New America also conducted one follow-up focus group to ask prospective students about how they decide where to go to college and how to finance their postsecondary education. This focus group was conducted by FDR Group in Baltimore, Maryland on February 12, 2015. The focus group included nine individuals, ages 18 to 36, of various ethnicities and household incomes. Since the focus group participants were not randomly selected, their experiences and comments are not generalizable to the population of study featured in the survey. Quotes from these focus groups are used for the sole purpose of introducing student voice into the briefs. The screener and transcript can be accessed at www.edcentral.org/collegedecisions.

THE SEARCH AND APPLICATION PROCESS

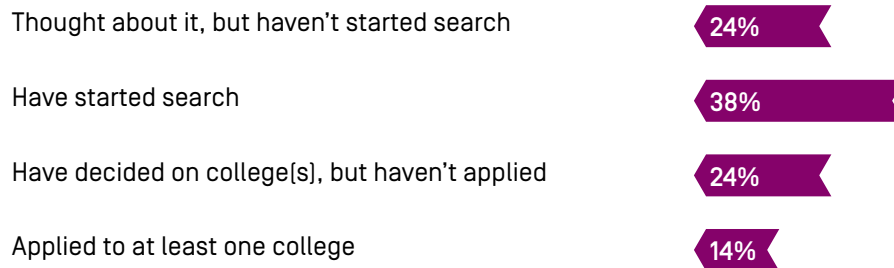
Just type “college search” into Google and you’ll be presented with lots of different tools and resources meant to help students compare colleges around the country, such as College Board’s Big Future or the *U.S. News and World Report*’s college rankings. But how likely is it that students are conducting a nationwide search, applying to multiple colleges and universities? The reality is that most students don’t attend college far from home, and thus it’s likely only a small share are applying nationwide. According to U.S. Department of Education survey data, 81 percent of undergraduates in 2012 were enrolled in institutions that are less than 100 miles from home. In fact, only 8 percent of undergraduates attended colleges and universities more than 500 miles away.¹

It’s true that most students don’t wander far from home for college. But with over 7,500 colleges and universities in America, students still have several local options from which to choose. According to New America’s survey, most students intend to apply to more than one school, and many of them start the search process months or years before enrollment.

The survey shows that a majority of *prospective students* had already started their college search process (76 percent [38 percent had started the search, 24 percent had decided on which colleges to apply to, and 14 percent applied to at least one college]). Nearly a quarter of students had already decided which college or colleges to apply to, but had not yet applied. Another quarter had not formally started the college search process. (See figure 1)

Figure 1

Prospective Student College Search Progress



BASE: Not Yet Enrolled (n=747)

Q800: You indicated that you are likely to enroll in a college within the next 12 months. Which of the following best describes where you are in the college search process?

Digging deeper, most prospective students who plan to enroll within the next year started the search process five months ago or less (57 percent). But a considerable proportion started their search process over a year ago (23 percent). In fact, approximately one in 10 prospective students began their search process more than two years ago. (See table 1)

When looking at *recently-enrolled students*, a majority began their college search process more than nine months ago (56 percent). Indeed, approximately 40 percent started their search more than a year ago. This makes sense given that these students had already made

their college choice and likely were looking at colleges the year or two before enrollment. What’s interesting is that 29 percent of enrolled students only began their search process five months ago or less, and of that group, 10 percent started their search less than three months ago. So there are quite a few students who start the process very shortly before enrollment or may even wait until the last minute to apply.

The fact that there are many students who consider college and start the search process shortly before enrollment is partly a function of age, parental education, and income. The younger the student, the more likely he

Table 1

When College Search Started

	A. Enrolled	B. Not Yet Enrolled
Base	264	552
Less than three months ago	10%	33% ^A
Three to five months ago	19%	24%
Six to eight months ago	15%	12%
Nine to eleven months ago	16% ^B	8%
One to two years ago	27% ^B	13%
More than two years ago	13%	10%

Data were tested at the 95% confidence level. Capital superscript letters (A, B, C, etc.) indicate statistically significant differences between the subgroups being analyzed.

BASE: Enrolled or Not enrolled, but Started Search (n=816)

Q805: Thinking about your college search process, how long ago did you start looking into information about colleges?

Table 2

When College Search Started, By Age

Age	A. 16-19	B. 20-23	C. 24-29	D. 30-40
Base	235	213	192	176
Less than three months ago	26%	21%	27%	37% ^B
Three to five months ago	16%	27% ^A	29% ^A	29% ^A
Six to eight months ago	12%	9%	19% ^B	12%
Nine to eleven months ago	13%	9%	8%	7%
One to two years ago	27% ^{BCD}	14% ^C	3%	7%
More than two years ago	7%	20% ^{AD}	16% ^A	8%

Data were tested at the 95% confidence level. Capital superscript letters (A, B, C, etc.) indicate statistically significant differences between the subgroups being analyzed.

BASE: Enrolled or Not enrolled, but Started Search (n=816)

Q805: Thinking about your college search process, how long ago did you start looking into information about colleges?

or she was to start his or her search more than one year ago. Approximately 34 percent of students between the ages of 16 and 23 started their search process at least one year ago. Meanwhile, older students are much less likely to have started the search process so early. In fact, a large majority—66 percent—of students between 30 and 40 years old started the college search process five months ago or less. (See table 2) Additionally, nearly half (45 percent) of those whose parents attended graduate school started their college search at least a year ago compared to 20 percent of those whose parents only attended high school or less.

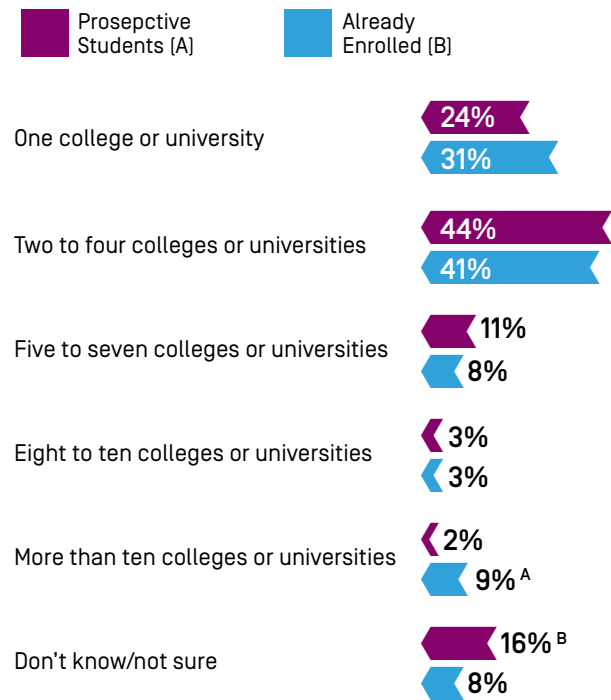
The differences among age groups make sense. High school students are more likely to do an expansive college search. Many see their peers going on to college after high school. Guidance and college counselors are available to help them apply to school, and it's probably the time when students will find the most college search and application help and information compared to any other age cohort. In contrast, older students are more likely to be working and caring for dependents than their younger peers. For them, the college search process is likely already targeted from the beginning. They've been in the labor force, they recognize the skills they need, and they are largely looking only locally at their options – all of which makes a shorter search process more likely.

In terms of the actual number of colleges students plan to apply to, nearly half of prospective students plan to apply to between two and four colleges. Very few plan on applying to more than eight colleges (5 percent). What's noteworthy is that the group of recently-enrolled students was more likely to have applied to one college or university than prospective students plan to do (31 percent versus 24 percent). This may indicate that a certain number of students believe they will be applying to more colleges than they actually do. Perhaps once students research their options, they decide to apply to only one institution or apply early decision. (See figure 2)

How many colleges a student applies to also seems to be a function of age and gender. Forty percent of females ages 20 or older plan to apply to only one institution compared to 13 percent of females 16 to 19, 17 percent of males ages 16 to 19, and 27 percent of males ages 20 or older.

Three in five students are enrolled—or plan to enroll—as a full-time student. Younger students (ages 16 to 19) are significantly more likely to attend full-time compared to their older peers (79 percent versus 52 percent of 20-23

Figure 2
Number of Schools to Apply to



BASE: All Qualified Respondents (n=1011)
Q815: How many colleges did you apply to?/ are you planning on applying to?
Data were tested at the 95% confidence level. Capital superscript letters (A, B) indicate statistically significant differences between the subgroups being analyzed.

year olds, 39 percent of 24-29 year olds, and 39 percent of 30-40 year olds).

A substantial proportion of students intend to enroll in on-campus programs (42 percent) as opposed to fully online programs (13 percent). Quite a few students intend to pursue hybrid courses of study that allow for both online and on-campus courses (34 percent). Unsurprisingly, the older the student, the more likely he or she plans to enroll online only (29 percent of those ages 30 to 40, significantly higher than all other age cohorts), or in hybrid programs (47 percent). Older students have lives outside the classroom that make them more likely to seek out options that give them the flexibility to meet their career and care-giving needs. Also, students who intend to enroll solely online are significantly more likely to apply to only one institution—44 percent of these students apply to one school compared with 25 percent who want hybrid programs and 21 percent who want to attend on campus only (See figure 3 and tables 3 and 4).

Table 3

Type of School or Program

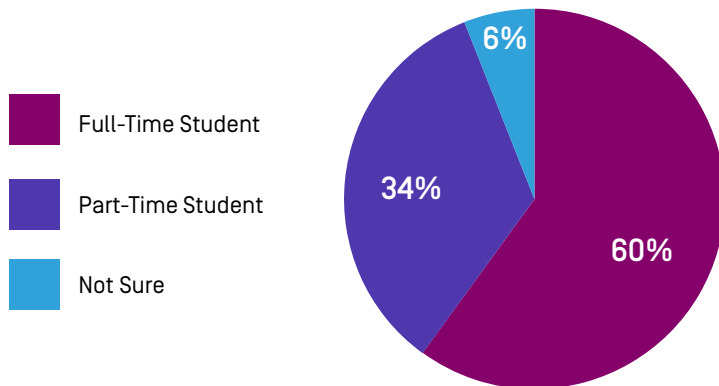
On-Location Only	42%
A traditional “bricks-and-mortar” college or university, taking all on-location classes	
Online Only	13%
An online college or university, taking only online courses	
A traditional “bricks-and-mortar” college or university, taking online courses only	
Hybrid (Both Online and On-Location)	34%
An online college or university, taking some online courses and some on-location courses	
A traditional “bricks-and-mortar” college or university, taking some online courses and some on-location courses	
Other	1%
Not Sure	9%

BASE: All Qualified Respondents (n=1011)

Q1010: Which of the following best describes the type of college and program in which you are currently enrolled/ plan to enroll?

Figure 3

Type of Enrollment



BASE: All Qualified Respondents (n=1011)

Q1005: Are you enrolled/ Are you planning on enrolling...?

Table 4

Type of School or Program, By Age

Age	A. 16-19	B. 20-23	C. 24-29	D. 30-40
Base	256	250	252	253
On-Location Only				
A traditional “bricks-and-mortar” college or university, taking all on-location classes	66% ^{BCD}	35% ^{CD}	23% ^D	9%
Online Only				
An online college or university, taking only online courses	2%	14% ^A	14% ^A	25% ^{ABC}
A traditional “bricks-and-mortar” college or university, taking only online courses	1%	1%	4% ^A	4% ^A
Hybrid (Both Online and On-location courses)				
An online college or university, taking some online courses and some on-location courses	8%	20% ^A	19% ^A	30% ^{AC}
A traditional “bricks-and-mortar” college or university, taking some online courses and some on-location courses	16%	20%	24%	17%
Other				
	0%	2%	1%	4% ^A
Not Sure				
	6%	8%	14% ^A	11%

Data were tested at the 95% confidence level. Capital superscript letters [A, B, C, etc.] indicate statistically significant differences between the subgroups being analyzed.

BASE: All Qualified Respondents

Q1010 Which of the following best describes the type of college and program in which you are currently enrolled/ plan to enroll?

DISCUSSION

Targeting the search process to different demographics

It's clear in the college search and application process that older students have different needs than younger prospective students. Younger students tend to apply to more schools and take more time to perform their search. Older students—especially those over 30—apply to fewer institutions and spend less time researching their options. However, both older and younger students are similar in that they plan on applying to more than one college or university. Since students need to have good information in order to compare colleges and make an informed decision, it's critical to consider how to meet the different needs of these demographics.

Arguably, it is easiest to reach high school students. In many schools, especially well-resourced high schools, guidance counselors and teachers can help students at crucial moments during the college application process, such as encouraging students to take the SAT and ACT, reminding students to get their applications in on time, and helping students fill out their financial aid applications. In addition, many of the resources that help students and parents compare higher education options are targeted to high school students. *U.S. News and World Report*, for example, focuses on four-year residential institutions that mainly enroll a direct-from-high-school population. And when high school students sign up to take the SAT, they automatically get access to Big Future, an online web resource from College Board that helps students compare different colleges based on a variety of factors. While there is room for improvement in reaching students in high school, they remain the easiest students to reach. Just helping younger students make an informed decision, however, won't help the millions of adult students who also need to understand their options.

Since adult prospective students are applying to fewer institutions and don't take as much time with their college search, there's only a small window to reach them. It may be that adult students prioritize flexibility—"Does the college have the specific program I need? And does it have a schedule that meets my needs?" They are likely to be looking at multiple local options such as a community college, a for-profit institution, and/or

a comprehensive public university. For them, it will be important to have resources that are easy to access and understand.

Revamping the U.S. Department of Education Scorecard might be one option. The Scorecard is a web resource that helps students compare colleges on five factors. Unfortunately, few students realize it exists, and a lot of the data points are not answering the pressing questions students have. The Education Department should test the Scorecard with consumers, especially adult students, in order to understand the exact data students need to know before they choose college. The revamped College Scorecard should not only be available to students online, but it should also be displayed on the main page of the college's admissions and financial aid offices and sent as a disclosure with any materials the college mails to students.

Promoting hybrid options for further flexibility

Even though there are a lot of online credential options for students, very few choose to enroll online only. In 2012, only 13 percent of students were enrolled solely in distance education programs, most likely online, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. An additional 13 percent took a mix of distance education and on-campus courses.²

New America's survey mimics this data in that only 13 percent of students intend to enroll solely online. But what's important to highlight is that an additional 34 percent of survey respondents want to enroll in hybrid programs that allow students the flexibility of taking courses online and on campus (not to be confused with hybrid courses which blend face-to-face sessions with online coursework). When given the option, students seem to prefer having the option to take classes online and on campus depending on the course and their schedule.

Most colleges and universities already offer online courses, and many offer fully online credentials. Because for-profit institutions heavily advertise their presence in the online space, many prospective students likely don't

realize that their local community college and public university also offer multiple online options in addition to face-to-face instruction.

Colleges must do a better job promoting their flexible options. This is especially true for those institutions that cater to adults who are more likely to have children and to be working. Right now, for-profit colleges use huge portions of their budgets to advertise to these students, even though they are often not the best option for students in this demographic, because they are much more expensive than community colleges or even regional public four-year universities. In the first quarter of 2014, for example, for-profits spent approximately

\$151.3 million on advertisements versus the \$151 million total spent by the non-profit and public sectors combined.³

Public colleges are unlikely to have the budget to make slick advertising campaigns about their flexible options. But they can make important inroads in targeting students locally through print campaigns on public transport, local radio ad campaigns, billboards, search engine optimization, local news coverage and through other relatively low-cost means. Thinking of ways to target students locally will help focus precious advertising dollars while still helping to ensure students know about all their options before applying.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to searching for college, students likely have at least a few options open to them. As New America's survey shows, instead of applying to one college it appears that a majority of students intend to apply to at least two-to-four colleges and universities. And while higher education operates in an imperfect market full of information asymmetry, policymakers and institutions can do better to make sure students are aware

of their options and make a college choice that makes sense for them academically and financially.

The next brief in this series will look at what prospective students know about the different methods to finance college. It will analyze the key differences among various subpopulations in what they know about paying for college and what types of financial aid they believe they will receive.

NOTES

1 New America analysis of NPSAS 2012 data. Table can be downloaded here: http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx?ps_x=dadbfne25.

2 U.S. Department of Education, Enrollment in Distance Education Course, by State: Fall 2012 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014023.pdf>, 1.

3 “For-profit Ad Spending Tanks, Non-profits Grow,” Educational Marketing Group, accessed May 28, 2015, <http://emgonline.com/blog/2014/07/for-profit-ad-spending-tanks-non-profits-grow/>.



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