

Publisher's Note

Who's Feelin' It? The Real Faces of College Admissions Anxiety

Deciding where to apply is an exciting experience, but also, judging from anecdotal evidence, a stressful one. In fact, new data from *student**POLL*** suggest that levels of anxiety may be even higher than you might think. And no wonder. It's undoubtedly one of the most consequential decisions young college hopefuls will make up to this point in their lives, with significant intellectual, professional, financial, and social implications. Reading the press, you'd think that anxiety about college search, admission, and selection would be at its peak among high-performing students from high-income families in ambitious communities feeling severe pressure from parental and peer expectations. Not so much. Anxiety levels over the course of this process are actually lowest in such populations—and highest among those less well-positioned to succeed in the college search and application sweepstakes.

These are among the findings featured in the current issue of *student**POLL***, which explores the level and nature of the anxiety associated with the college search and application process. Findings are drawn from a study we conducted of traditional high school seniors who planned to attend a 4-year school full-time in fall 2025. Surveys were fielded in February–March of this year, at a time when the vast majority of students had made decisions about where to apply, and many were waiting to learn where they'd been offered admission.

What's the full story? Overall, high school seniors in the college search and admissions process report substantial levels of anxieties about the process: Over two-fifths of respondents rated their anxiety between 8 and 10, in the “top box” of a 10-point scale. Lack of social and financial capital

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appears to be a significant factor in how anxious a college hopeful is about identifying, being admitted to, and selecting a school of their choice. Students with lower levels of income and educational socialization (e.g., first-gen students) report higher levels of anxiety than their peers with greater socioeconomic and education advantages. Higher-income students are less likely to experience high levels of anxiety and more likely to feel very confident about their application choices.

Given the increasing needs of the current generation of students, we were interested to find that emotional and mental well-being do not appear to be a decisive feature overall across the population surveyed. However, for some cohorts of students—primarily those more likely to have lower levels of social and educational capital (First-generation, Black, those with the least confidence in their college choices, and Town/Rural locale)—whether or not they believe a college to be a place that promotes well-being was a significant consideration in the application process.

So, who's feelin' it? Despite the media attention paid to the drama of the relatively elite as they navigate the college search and admissions process, it's those who are less well-placed to navigate that process that seem to experience the most anxiety and who care most about the extent to which the college they eventually choose will promote their mental health and well-being.



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This issue of *student***POLL** will answer **four** key questions:

1. How anxious are prospective students about college search & admissions?
2. Which students experience the highest levels of college-selection anxiety?
3. What are the primary causes of students' college search and admissions-related anxiety?
4. What features and programs of colleges and universities might have potential to ameliorate these anxieties?

Key Findings

89% of all students report *moderate to high levels* of anxiety about the college search process

43% report specifically *high levels* of anxiety about the process

and notably

62% of students from *households earning less than \$60K* report *high levels* of anxiety about the process

Q1: How anxious are prospective students about college search & admissions?

The vast majority of high school seniors looking to go to college report experiencing significant levels of anxiety about the college-selection process, those with lower educational capital more frequently and at higher levels.

The mean level of anxiety related directly to the college-selection process was 6.7 on a 10-point scale, with 10 being the highest level of anxiety. Nine out of 10 respondents reported mid- to high-levels (≥ 4); over 4/10 of them (43%) rated their anxiety between 8 and 10.

It appears that these feelings do not occur at a single point in the process but are experienced throughout for most students, and with relatively high frequency for many. Two-fifths of respondents reported experiencing feelings of anxiety at least weekly, over three-fifths at least monthly. Less than a tenth said they experienced no anxiety during the process (alternatively, somewhat more than a quarter rarely or never).

Chart 1: Self-reported rating of anxiety about the college search & admissions process

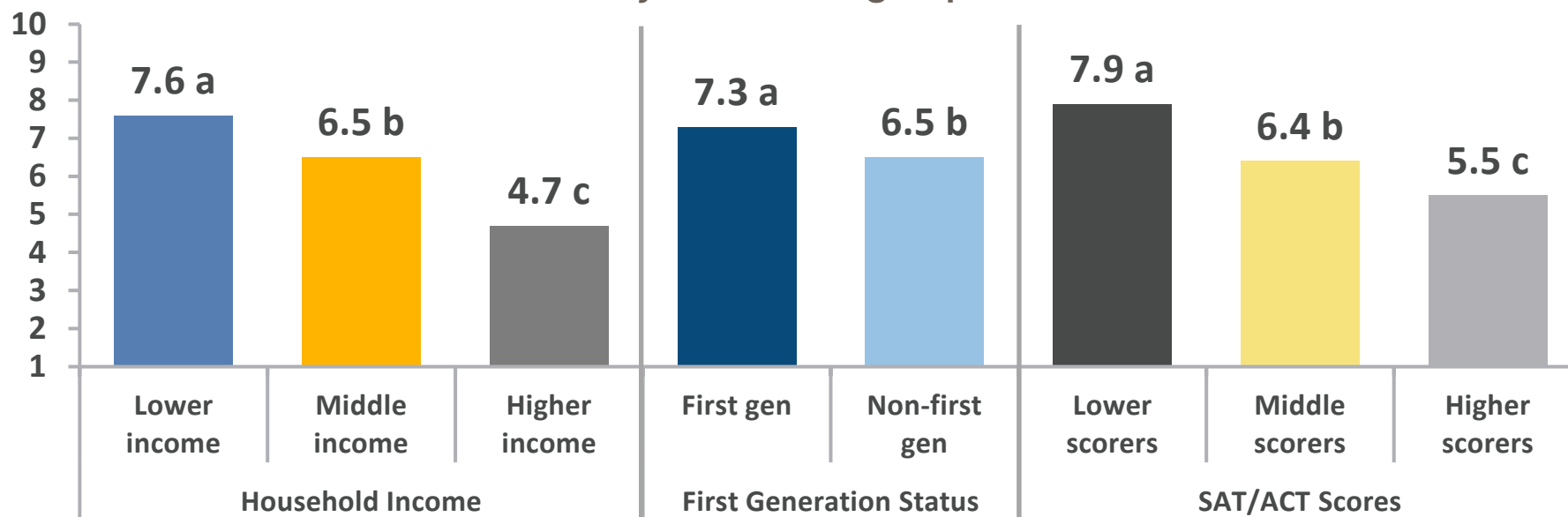


Note: Ratings where 1 = "No amount of anxiety" and 10 = "High amount of anxiety".

Q2: Which students experience the highest levels of college-selection anxiety?

As noted at the outset, feelings of anxiety related to the college search and application process align with key socio-demographic markers of wealth and status—just not in the way most often seen through the green-colored glasses of the national media. Most strikingly, self-reported levels of college search and application anxiety are inversely related to income, with the lowest income level reporting the highest anxiety levels (7.6), the mid income level the next highest (6.5, just under the mean for the overall group), and the highest income level the lowest anxiety levels (4.7). Other populations disproportionately stressed about the process include: First gen, lower scorers, students living outside cities and suburbs, in other words, those less likely to be well positioned to go to a college of their choice. Likewise, it's also not those students who are competing to get into the top schools who are feeling it most. Those considering National Universities and Colleges outside the Top 50 and Regional U's and Colleges (of all ranks) have higher anxiety about college search and application than those considering a school in the National Top 50.

Chart 2: Self-reported anxiety about the college search & admissions process, by notable subgroups



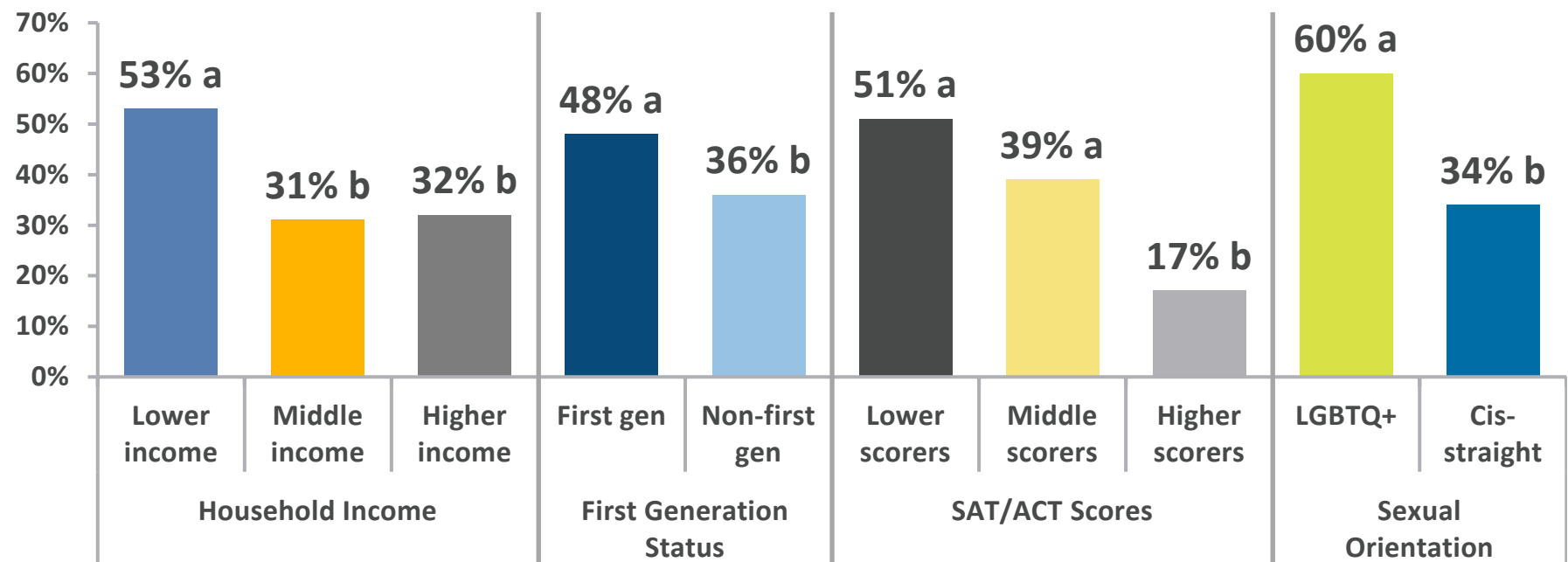
Notes: Ratings where 1 = “No amount of anxiety” and 10 = “High amount of anxiety”. Values that share letters within a subgroup are statistically similar. Household income and test scores are defined in the footnote in the Study Methodology section of this report.

Q2: Which students experience the highest levels of college-selection anxiety? (cont.)

Similarly, frequency of anxious feelings about the college-selection process is higher among historically marginalized populations and those with lower academic qualifications or educational capital. The lowest-income group is far more likely than mid and higher income groups to feel anxious about the process at least weekly (53% vs 31% & 32%). We see similar patterns by SAT/ACT score, level of parental education, sexuality, and gender, with lower scorers, first gen, and LGBTQ+ groups experiencing more frequent bouts of anxiety, at similarly high levels, stemming from the college-selection process.

Given these findings it is not surprising that the more money and the higher SAT/ACT score you have, the higher the level of confidence you feel in the choices you make throughout the college-selection process.

Chart 3: Percentage who report feeling anxious about the college search & admissions process at least weekly, by notable subgroups



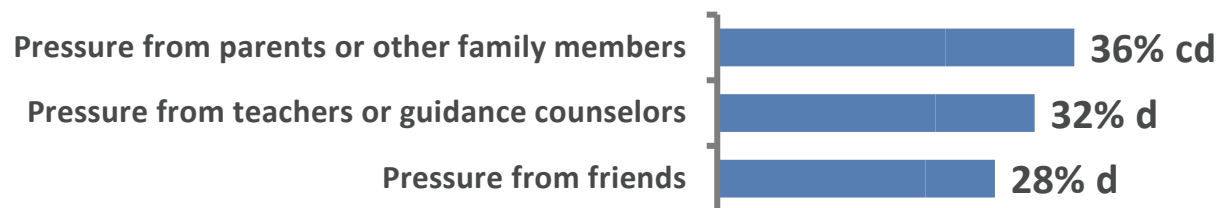
Notes: Values that share letters within a subgroup are statistically similar. Household income and test scores are defined in the footnote in the Study Methodology section of this report.

Q3: What are the primary causes of students' college search & admissions-related anxiety?

Understanding the causes of students' college search and admissions anxiety also works to dispel any sense that the drama around the process is particularly inflected by interpersonal pressures among high school seniors competing to get into top schools.

We asked respondents to think broadly about sources of anxiety throughout the college-selection process and then, selecting from a list of particular aspects of the process, identify those that caused the most anxiety. Remarkably, we find that, across populations, pressure from family, friends, and counselors appears to be minimal, being among the least-cited sources of anxiety (never reaching much above about a third of respondents).

Chart 4a: “Pressure” factors that contribute to anxieties about the process



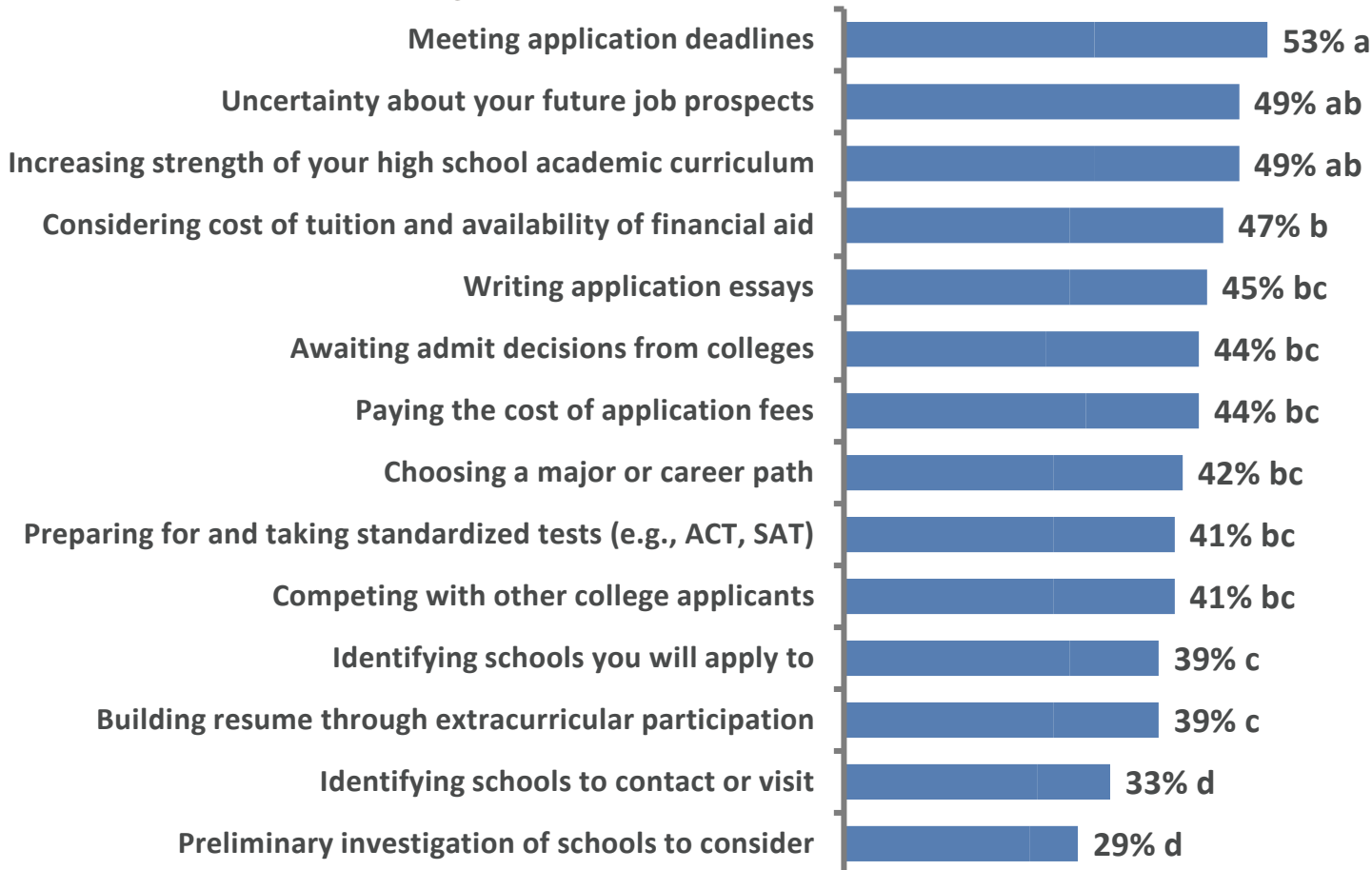
Note: Percentages that share a letter are statistically similar.

Anxiety seems to be tied more closely to where students are in the process. With little significant variation across subgroups, there are clear signs that pressure builds as choices narrow.

Q3: What are the primary causes of students' college search and admissions-related anxiety? (cont.)

At the time they were surveyed, respondents were far less likely to associate early steps in the process with high levels of stress—a low proportion indicated that the preliminary investigation of schools has a “very” or “extremely” big impact on the overall stressfulness of the process, ditto identifying schools to contact or visit. On the other hand, meeting deadlines, writing application essays, paying cost of application fees, and competing with other applicants appear to have a significantly greater impact on stress levels. Such is the concern about application essays and interviews and standardized test scores that well over half of respondents (58% for each) reported that, because of the anxiety these cause, they would look for colleges that did not have these requirements (see *chart 5*).

Chart 4b: Array of factors that contribute to anxieties about the process



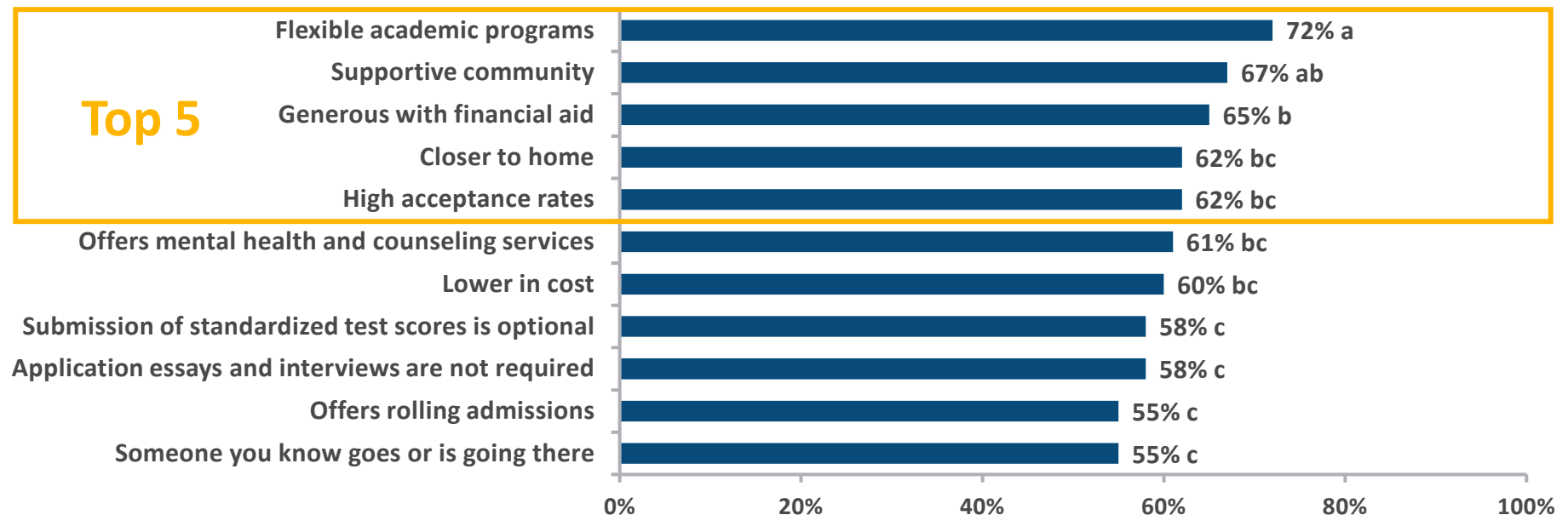
Note: Percentages that share a letter are statistically similar.

Q4: What features and programs of colleges & universities might have the potential to ameliorate these anxieties?

Things that students think would most make them less anxious up to this point in the process actually are not related to the process at all, but are things that will help them in college.

We asked students to select from a list of characteristics that might affect their application decisions. Findings suggest that college-selection stress may indeed inflect their selection criteria, making them more likely to lean toward schools with pertinent characteristics or features. Interestingly, as the chart below shows, of the top 5 most frequently cited college features, only one has to do with the application process—“high acceptance rates.” The others are primarily concerned with the fundamentals of the college experience: academics, community and support, affordability, and proximity to home. It would appear that what college-selection anxiety makes most important to students is having the resources to navigate the new terrain of college—access to social and financial support and not getting locked into an academic path that’s not right for them.

Chart 5: College characteristics most sought due to anxieties about the process



Notes: Percentages that share a letter are statistically similar. Characteristics with 50% or more representation shown here.

Q4: What features and programs of colleges & universities might have the potential to ameliorate these anxieties? (cont.)

Given the increasing needs of today's students—who have keenly experienced the fragmentation of society accelerated by social media and the COVID crisis—we were particularly interested in how prospective students might see a college or university with respect to their own mental and emotional well-being.

This issue is clearly on students' minds—in addition to citing “supportive community,” respondents also frequently reported that their college-selection anxiety would make schools offering extensive mental health and counseling services more appealing (cited by three-fifths). But how do such factors figure into students' choices about where to apply? And how important is it for colleges and universities to address these issues directly?

Students for whom mental & emotional well-being were of substantial importance

- Town/Rural locale
- Liberal arts college as first-choice school
- Pre-professional majors
- First-generation
- Somewhat/No confidence in college choices
- Moderate political leaning
- Black
- Middle income



As it turns out, the importance of mental and emotional well-being in the application decision process depends on level of social and educational capital. Whether or not a school “promotes positive mental and emotional well-being” apparently is not a decisive factor for the overall cohort of respondents. By contrast, findings suggest this aspect of a school's culture is among several significant application decision factors for First-generation and Black students, students from Town/Rural locales, and students in our middle-income cohort, as well as students with the least confidence in their college choices.

Conclusion

Findings strongly suggest that, yes, students find the process of searching for and applying to a college to be pretty stressful. And, most important from our perspective, the findings help us identify those students who are feeling it the most. The most intense stress is not that portrayed in the media melodrama of wealthy high-performing students facing the high expectations of family, community, and peer groups, but lived by those, often marginalized, students who face the greatest social and socio-economic challenges in their pursuit of the betterment promised by a college education.

What colleges and universities might do to ameliorate stress is far less clear. For the most part, high school seniors seem to be more focused on the college experience itself rather than on particular aspects of the search and application process. One thing is clear, however: Students more likely to have lower levels of social and educational capital (First-generation, Black, those with the least confidence in their college choices, and those in a town or rural locale) do, at least to some degree, appear to be

looking for a school that promotes mental and emotional well-being. In addition to providing greater opportunities for success for such students, providing a supportive environment of this kind may actually help a school become more appealing to these students.

Of course, it is difficult to say with any authority how these findings may translate for any individual institution. Every college or university has its own market strengths and challenges, and each must contend with idiosyncrasies particular to its markets and competitors. That said, these findings may provide a mechanism for institutions to consider the perceptions and motivations extant within their own pools of prospective students and the need to position themselves to better attract, retain, and graduate students who are on the margins of attending college.

At the broader level of strategy, however, what remains true for all institutions is this: Careful and continued attention to the overall value proposition—the nature and appeal of the

Conclusion (*cont.*)

substantive student experience—will never be time wasted. Institutional leaders would be wise to invest in deep, empirical understandings of their particular markets, and how their institutions are perceived to stack up against competing options available to students on factors that are most important to them as they differentiate among those options. Most critically, institutional leaders should identify the ways in which they might improve their competitive position by building and effectively articulating a more compelling value proposition centered squarely on evolving the substance of the experience they provide. That will be true of all institutions, from the most ambitious to those that will need to rely in part on attracting students now on the margins of attending a 4-year college or university.

Study Methodology

The findings in this issue of *student**POLL*** are based on survey research fielded in February–March 2025. The survey was completed by 604 domestic high school seniors; all of whom intended at the point of data collection to attend a 4-year institution as a full-time student in fall 2025.

Across this fielding, respondents were 46% AAPI/BIPOC and 54% White with 65% of total respondents identifying as female and 34% identifying as male. Responses are weighted by income, race, region, and gender so that findings represent the larger domestic college-going population. The overall margin of error was plus or minus 4%.

Footnotes: For the purpose of assessing differences across student populations, our analysis divided students into various subgroups. Among those discussed in this report, students self-identified as “Black” which included Black, African American, African, or Caribbean and as “White” which included White, Caucasian, or European. For broad racial subgroup populations, AAPI refers to Asian American and Pacific Islander, and BIPOC refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

Students also self-reported other demographic characteristics such as sexual orientation, first-generation status, and income.

The study is designed to provide a broad perspective on the market challenges facing institutions. Findings, therefore, do not reflect the circumstances, challenges, and opportunities of any individual institution, which tend to be highly idiosyncratic. Rather, they are intended to contribute to the national conversation around access to higher education, inform policy makers, and prompt each individual institution to consider what its own particular situation might be with regard to this *student**POLL*** topic and how it can determine its own best solutions.

Income and SAT score ranges can be found in the table below. In the case of only ACT scores being available, the ACT scores were converted to SAT scores by concordance tables. In cases where both SAT and ACT scores were provided, the converted ACT score was compared to the SAT score, with the higher of the two used in the analysis.

	SAT Score Ranges		Income Ranges
	AAPI/White	BIPOC	
Higher	1500+	1500+	\$150,000+
Middle	1350<1500	1200<1500	\$60,000<\$150,000
Lower	<1350	<1200	<\$60,000

About *student***POLL**

The publication by Art & Science Group, LLC, *student**POLL***, presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions and behaviors of high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers, as well as secondary school college counselors, *student**POLL*** seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, *student**POLL*** has become a trusted and widely cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. *student**POLL*** findings and analysis are provided free on the [Art & Science Group website](#).

About Art & Science Group

Art & Science Group offers market-informed institutional strategy to higher education, independent schools and the non-profit sector. Since our founding in 1994, we have provided our clients with strategic market research and recommendations, built on a foundation of both creative thinking and empirical rigor — art and science. We work in a variety of arenas, leveraging a foundation of market data, analysis and inventive ideas, to guide and advance our institution's strategic interests and critical investments. Our firm is dedicated to helping each institution position itself in ways that positively affect the decisions of its key constituents — whether to apply, matriculate, give and so on — in an institution's favor. We provide a customized and collaborative approach for each client, with recommendations rooted in sophisticated research and thorough analysis. Our experienced consultants and researchers produce the highest quality findings and recommendations on the market.