



Attracting Students in a Peer-Influenced Market

Drivers of College Choice and Value Perception

Foreword

For years, I've written about how students and their families navigate the college search, often feeling as if the process is a black box sealed by rankings, marketing, and myth. What's been missing is the unfiltered voice of students themselves. This research brief helps fill that gap.

Over the past decade, peer-to-peer online conversations about admissions have exploded, growing more than tenfold. On Reddit threads, YouTube channels, TikTok feeds, and forums like College Confidential, students and parents share advice, vent frustrations, and crowdsource solutions. They do so not through polished institutional channels but in authentic, often anonymous exchanges with peers. The result is a living, evolving portrait of what families really value in higher ed.

What emerges from this analysis mirrors much of what I uncovered while writing *Dream School*. Families are recalibrating their definition of a "good" college. Prestige matters less than outcomes. Students want affordability, transparency, belonging, and—above all—a clear return on investment. They want to know that a degree will lead to opportunity and that they'll be supported along the way. In short, they are making choices like savvy consumers, weighing cost against benefit, and turning to those who've been through the journey before them to decide where they belong.

For campus leaders, these conversations are both a warning and a roadmap. A warning because they show how quickly trust can erode when institutions fail to listen or communicate clearly. A roadmap because they offer candid insight into what students actually want and need.



If colleges are willing to listen, by tuning into the authentic voices of their future students, they'll not only rebuild trust but also reimagine higher education around the people it was designed to serve.

Jeffrey Selingo, September 2025

Prospective students and their families are resourceful, searching out the information, emotional support, and advice they need to make the college admissions decision. The information they seek isn't from institutional or formal sources, rather it's from their peers, people who live and look like them.

In the last ten years, peer-to-peer online conversation about admissions has increased more than 10x. What students and parents share with peers drives their decision-making, for better or worse. The conversations on these public online spaces (e.g., forums like Reddit, social media like X, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok) provide a unique window into student and family behavior, revealing shifts far faster than surveys or institutional data.

The most notable shift comes from students and families using the spaces to gather information and make decisions. These are the conversations Campus Sonar is analyzing and that drive consumer behavior. Students make it clear they're basing decisions on **ROI and job outcomes; they want a clear financial aid process; and they seek support, community, and access to services and faculty.**

We've lost track of students' needs and voices. Not only are there generational differences in expectations, but the [demographics of a student](#) have changed drastically in the last few decades. Social listening not only gathers insight at scale, it elevates the stories of people and their experiences. These voices need to be heard for higher ed to rebuild public trust.

What We Set Out to Uncover ~~~~

Campus Sonar explored college admissions conversation in partnership with Jeff Selingo and in support of his book, *Dream School: Finding The College That's Right For You*.

The insights and themes we uncovered prompted us to step back for a comprehensive view of online conversation trends and insights about the college decision-making journey over the past ten years. The conversations reveal the core drivers of college choice and the evolving perception of institutional value.

Social Intelligence Data

We analyzed more than 630,000 conversations involving nearly 192,000 unique individuals talking about college admissions for the last decade.

Prospective students and families use spaces like Reddit, College Confidential, Student Doctor, and The Student Room to share unfiltered, personal insights about their college decision.

In the last 10 years, we've conducted research from a variety of data sources, methods, and thematic lenses, not all of which were admissions-specific. We conducted a deep exploration of college admissions conversation [from 2016–2019](#) and revisited admissions with a more focused look a few years later (2021–2025). Earlier analyses also expanded to broader themes related to student experience in the context of reputation, cost, and institutional outcomes.

THIS REPORT WILL REFERENCE TWO OF OUR MOST RECENT RESEARCH DATASETS



DATASET 1

May 2023 – May 2024 conversations

More than 600,000 conversations about college admissions on online forums conducted in partnership with Jeff Selingo and **published here in full for the first time**. Referenced as 2024 college admissions conversation.

Previously published in part in the research brief [The Importance of Transferable Skills and Work Experience in College Decision Making](#) (April 2025).



DATASET 2

July – December 2023 conversations

More than 13,000 online mentions about trust and value in higher ed, published in [Rebuilding Public Trust in Higher Education](#) (March 2024).

The Pandemic Shifted College Admissions Conversation

The way students talk about **if and where to go to college** has changed drastically in the last 10 years.

Peer-to-peer online conversation about admissions significantly increased, sentiment shifted, and discussions increasingly focused on outcomes.

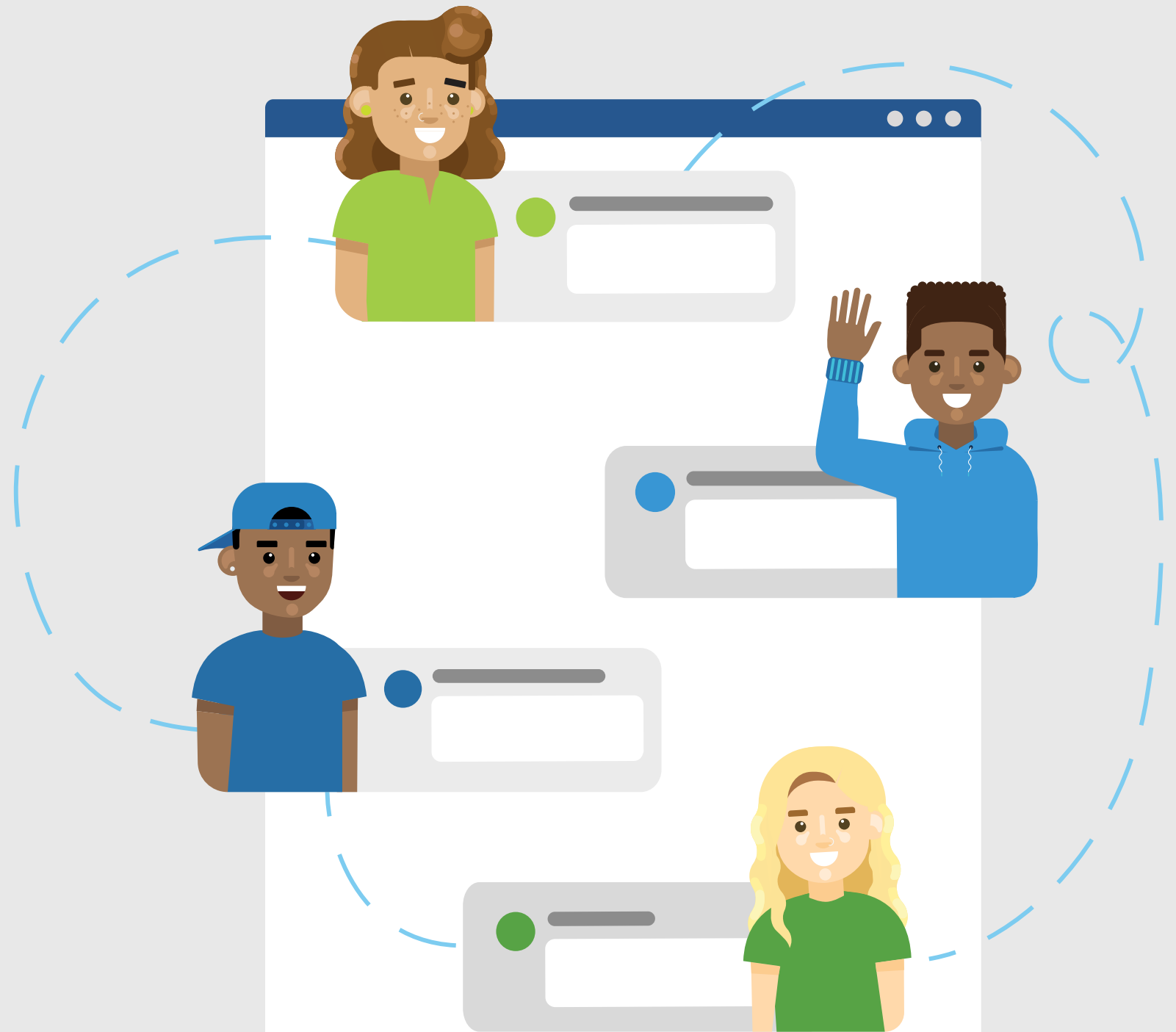
Pre-2020, conversations were exploratory and hopeful. Prospective student discussions centered on application strategy, school comparisons, and decision anticipation. Negative conversation drivers were about financial aid and loans, grades, and mental health. Positively, students talked about applications, campus tours, and athletics offers.

But the pandemic shifted everything, including how students talk about their college decision. **From 2020 to 2024 we saw skepticism increase**, with discussions revolving around students' transactional and emotional needs, questions, and concerns. **Common themes included cost, ROI, and institutional transparency.** Positive conversation was about financial wins and accepted offers, and negative conversation focused on aid denial and rejection.

Another important change post-pandemic was the channel where these conversations took place. Pre-pandemic, the majority were on Twitter (renamed "X") and often driven by student-athletes. The pandemic's social isolation and need for connection drove many students to forums like Reddit, where they sought advice and emotional support. It continues to be the internet's conversation hub with hundreds of thousands of conversations about colleges every year.

The Influence of Forums and Peer Advice is Growing

Since Reddit started showing up in our online conversation analysis in 2017, it's been a [critical space for students](#) to go to learn and seek advice. **Reddit is increasingly important because it's often the first place students crowdsource information—46% of people between ages 18–29 use it as an immediate and authentic source of information.** Over the last decade, hundreds of thousands of students asked their peers (not admissions officers or guidance counselors) how likely they were to get into their top choice schools—a phenomenon called "[Chance Me.](#)"





In 2024 college admissions conversation, **Reddit alone generated 467,706 mentions.**

Overall sentiment across forums like Reddit is predominantly neutral (75%).

In a subreddit like [r/Applying toCollege](#), each post or comment is likely seen by 1,300–71,500 people. That's several billion impressions—likely more than university advertising or PSA.

Reddit posts are increasingly accessible to people who don't use the platform.

Thanks to a [2024 partnership with Google](#) that “facilitates more content-forward displays,” Reddit is now showing up at the top of many Google search results.

Trust in authenticity and anonymity.

The authentic, often anonymous conversations happening on Reddit can inform how you build an environment that attracts students and engenders their trust.

The University of Montana (UM) used forum insights to build trust with student veterans.

Working with UM from 2021–2023 we identified **several forum threads from prospective and admitted student veterans inquiring about the campus’s student veteran experience.**

Social intelligence research found an admitted student veteran requesting feedback from students like them about their experience at UM. Comments on the thread from other student veterans highlighted how they sought and found resources to support their transition to campus, including the Military and Veteran Services Office.

In April 2025, the University of Montana was named the number one “Military Friendly” college in the United States for Tier 1 research institutions.

Differentiators in the veteran student experience at UM:

- Class size
- President Seth Bodnar’s military background
- Access to the local VFW
- The student veteran organization on campus



What Students and Families Value

Clear
outcomes
and ROI

Cost of
attendance

Evolving view
of prestige

Career
readiness

Belonging,
safety, and
community

Clear Outcomes and ROI

Degree outcomes was the most dominant theme throughout all ten years of conversation. Across multiple Campus Sonar social intelligence datasets, students questioned the utility of their degree in relation to job placement and real-world skills.

Over ten years, 62% of all tracked admissions conversations (over 390,450) focused on the post-graduation path.

Cautionary advice for prospective students includes considering their major's ROI and prioritizing the potential for career experience in nearly half (45%) of the conversations identified in our [Rebuilding Public Trust in Higher Ed research](#) (2024). This aligns with [Pew Research findings](#) that **roughly half of adults (49%) say it's less important to have a four-year college degree today in order to get a well-paying job than it was 20 years ago.**

Students increasingly question whether college is worth the cost. Many internalize that a degree is not a guarantee of their success and are recalibrating their priorities based on job readiness, skills, and the perceived ROI (e.g., financial stability, joy/meaning). This leads to an increased preference for institutions with strong internship programs and career placement rates.



Utah Valley University

From insight to action

Part of Utah Valley University's (UVU) **Vision 2030 strategic plan is sustaining their commitment to affordability, value, and return on investment.** They use [social intelligence](#) to support consistent and cohesive messaging for their three institutional strategies and assess alignment in real-time.



They emphasize the strategies in their messaging across all platforms and channels, and [graduates reflect back positively](#) on their experience and success.



Messaging directly addresses common critiques of higher education by showcasing the personal and professional benefits of earning a UVU degree.



The university was recognized as a top "Opportunity College" by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education in 2025.

Cost of Attendance

Cost-related concerns and financial aid discussions are consistent, with some years showing a spike. **The highest number (40,029) of admissions mentions driven by decision-making stress and financial aid concerns was in March 2024**—reflecting the FAFSA processing delays.

Prospective students use forums for real-time crowdsourcing on completing the FAFSA and navigating financial aid strategies. The most common source of negative sentiment stems from financial aid rejection, stress of paying for college, job market concerns, and whether a degree is worth the investment.

Students often discussed more affordable options that don't require student loans, like community college or trade schools. Forthcoming research for a national education philanthropy on learners pursuing non-degree workforce credentials found learners are motivated by high-paying jobs with minimal educational requirements, have uncertainty about selecting the right credentials to prepare them for real-world jobs, and value stability, mobility, and purpose. **Only 22% of Americans say the cost of getting a degree is worth it, even if you have to take out loans.**



North Carolina State University

From insight to action

Much of North Carolina State University's positive conversation centers around transfer pathways. Their audience has a high awareness of community colleges as a credible stepping stone to NC State, and sees them as a practical and financially savvy way to reach academic goals.



Some students deliberate between applying as a first-year student or as a transfer student and seek advice on the impact this would have on their academic journey. The decision-making process involves considering factors like career choices, credits, majors, and campus life.



By continuing to share transfer success stories, NC State helps prospects see potential in their own options and builds confidence and enthusiasm for successfully completing the process.

Evolving View of Prestige

Prestige is a consistent factor mentioned across four key themes in the 2024 college admissions conversation—outcomes, belonging, resources, good/bad colleges. It made up 4% of the total conversation, but was mentioned almost half (46%) of the time in discussions about what makes a “good” college.

Students deliberated over choosing “less prestigious schools,” such as state schools, and if the “prestige” of an Ivy League was worth the price. For many, the reputation of specific programs (e.g., engineering, medicine, law) mattered more than institutional reputation.

With cost top of mind, students and families are prioritizing outcomes and career prep over prestige—because that’s what delivers a degree’s return on investment.

Jeff Selingo’s findings align with what students share online. In examining the new admissions landscape, including the interplay of value over prestige, he found students and families considered experiential learning and job placement the top two factors of a “good” college, with prestige fourth. This held true with enrollment decisions, where outcomes almost always outranked prestige.



Duquesne University

From insight to action

Duquesne University and the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) are often in the same competitive set, especially for students considering law or medical school. Students debate name recognition and reputation, as well as the cost of private vs. public.



Duquesne uses social intelligence research to determine how they compare to peers like Pitt and understand their brand equity. They use the insights to inform strategies to best position Duquesne as a desirable institution.



Emphasizing the small class size, more catered learning experience, and positive regional reputation provides brand-aligned reasons for students to choose Duquesne.

Career Readiness

Prospective students seek institutions with a clear path to experiential learning opportunities like internships. They want experiences that build skills and clarify career direction before graduating—**nearly 20% of the 2024 college admissions conversation was about the skills needed for jobs.** (Get the [research](#) brief on this topic.)

Students use forums to ask about internship pipelines, alumni networks, and other experiential learning opportunities to prioritize the institutions or programs they're considering. They also want career and professional development opportunities to help them select a major. While students [prioritize internships in the decision process](#), they need to hear real-world stories from current or recent interns to help them understand what the experience will be like.

For individuals pursuing careers in more competitive or marketable fields, online advocates stress the importance of attending colleges with a strong brand awareness and reputation in the chosen field. Some students even select schools based on the prestige of particular programs to ensure they receive the “best internship and job opportunities.”



University of Arkansas-Fort Smith

From insight to action

The [University of Arkansas-Fort Smith \(UAFS\)](#) empowers students to find the right academic approach for their career choice with a range of credentials that include certificates, associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees.



Students can take advantage of internships, networking opportunities, and support services to match their career needs.



As part of their strategic plan, UAFS developed the [five Centers for Excellence](#) to address regional industry goals and workforce needs. Each center offers programs and spaces for students to gain knowledge and skills from subject matter experts and industry leaders in art and design, advanced manufacturing, economic development, computer and data science, and health sciences.

Belonging, Safety, and Community

An emerging theme in admissions conversation centers on “belonging.” It’s grown consistently year after year, particularly in the context of mental health, cultural fit, and support services. In 2024, we saw about 55,000 mentions related to belonging (driven primarily by Reddit and The Student Room).

Prospective students contemplate if they’ll be treated considerately, if there are resources to support their mental health, and if they’ll be welcomed and belong when deciding on a school. The location of each institution in regards to access to healthcare and mental health services, and the laws surrounding each in a given state, is also an important factor.

Campus safety is another developing concern for prospective students and families. In a [recent survey by Ologie](#), students prioritized physical safety features, such as locked buildings, a well-lit campus, and security cameras, as their number one reason for selecting a particular location. These concerns recently [surfaced](#) for Duquesne University. To meet students’ needs, they’re including physical safety features of the campus and the surrounding area in the enrollment process.



From insight to action

Campus Sonar worked with a medium-sized, highly ranked public university known for its “small feel” and close community.



They’re recognized for their student support and opportunities to connect with peers, aligning with their campus values of belonging and flourishing. The university leverages these attributes as a differentiator with prospective audiences seeking a public research university with opportunities for personal connection.



Although campus leaders believe the university is historically seen as “too rigorous,” our social intelligence findings revealed conversations where individuals talk about rigor alongside the level of community support and resources available to help students’ academic efforts.

What Students and Families Value



Clear outcomes and ROI

Students increasingly question whether college is worth the cost, preferring institutions with strong internship programs and career placement rates.

Over ten years, 62% of all tracked admissions conversations (over 390,450) focused on the post-graduation path.

Utah Valley University uses social intelligence to support consistent and cohesive messaging for their three institutional strategies (include, engage, achieve), assessing alignment in real-time.



Cost of Attendance

Prospective students use real-time crowdsourcing to get advice on cost-related concerns, financial aid, the job market, and whether or not a degree is worth the investment.

Only 22% of Americans say the cost of getting a degree is worth it, even if you have to take out loans.

North Carolina State University shares transfer success stories so prospects can see their own potential and build confidence and enthusiasm for completing the process.



Evolving view of prestige

Prestige is a consistent factor in choosing a college, but students and families rank experiential learning and job placement higher than prestige in enrollment decisions.

With cost top of mind, students and families prioritize outcomes and career prep over prestige—because that's what delivers a degree's return on investment.

Duquesne uses social intelligence research to determine how they compare to peers like Pitt and understand their brand equity. They use the insights to inform strategies to best position Duquesne as a desirable institution.



Career readiness

Prospective students seek institutions with a clear path to experiential learning opportunities like internships. They want experiences that build skills and clarify career direction before graduating.

Nearly 20% of the 2024 college admissions conversation was about the skills needed for jobs.

The University of Arkansas–Fort Smith empowers students to find the right academic approach for their career choice with a range of credentials: certificates, associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees.



Belonging, safety, and community

An emerging theme in admissions conversation centers on “belonging.” It's grown consistently year after year, particularly in the context of mental health, cultural fit, and student support services.

Prospective students contemplate if they'll be treated considerately, if there are resources to support their mental health, and if they'll be welcomed and belong when deciding on a school.

Social intelligence findings for a medium-sized, highly ranked public university we partnered with revealed the importance of personal connection to support their rigorous academic culture.

Actionable Strategies to Increase Enrollment

Based on what we've learned from the last decade of research, **Campus Sonar offers higher ed leaders the following recommendations to connect with and appeal to right-fit students.** They should be implemented across marketing, enrollment, operations, student services, institutional research, alumni affairs, advancement, and community relations.

In *Dream School* (written for students and their families), Jeff Selingo identified seven measurable dimensions of a “good school” that aren’t captured by most rankings. Four happen to overlap with our recommendations. We encourage you to read the book’s “New” Dream Schools appendix to learn more about your institutional data that may support our recommendations.

An overarching theme for every recommendation is to tell as many individual stories as you can, so students can identify someone like themselves and feel like they belong.

Recognizing the resources are finite and stories from “someone like me” are nearly always more influential than marketing content, social listening bridges the gap to identify and amplify stories students and alumni already share.

Highlight the ROI of Your Degree

New Dream School Dimension: Outcomes that “punch above the school’s weight”

Give students and families the clear outcomes they’re looking for by setting them up for post-college success. For the New Dream School list, Jeff Selingo looked at graduation rates and earnings after graduation for campuses doing the best job of helping undergraduates succeed.



- ➔ **Promote your outcomes** with precision by highlighting job placement rates, graduate school admissions, and alumni salary data.
- ➔ **Partner with employers and organizations** to create clear pipelines from your campus’s education to employment. Integrate employability skill-building (e.g., experiential learning) opportunities wherever possible.

Explain Costs Transparently

With rising tuition and the existing perception of the expense of college, cost and financial aid are some of the most pressing pain points for your audience.

Make sure students and families clearly understand what they're paying and the value they receive.

- **Actively address pain points, weaknesses, and barriers** to the financial aid and enrollment processes.
- **Clearly communicate cost and value early and often**, differentiating your campus offerings with realism and transparency.
- **Treat financial aid communication as a brand experience** and use your brand voice to tell your story. Know that the tone and clarity of rejection letters affect word-of-mouth.
- **Offer transparent net price calculators and early cost estimates** to alleviate prospective students' stress or fear over cost and paying for college.

Demonstrate Your Institution's Value

New Dream School Dimension: Delivery of value to undergraduates

Students want to know what's in it for them—and that it's possible for someone who looks or lives like them. Understand what your campus does to drive outcomes and give prospective students specifics on what they can expect with a degree from your campus.

Delivery of value, including economic mobility and opportunity through skills, is an integral aspect of a New Dream School.



- ➔ **Reposition your brand narrative around program-level excellence** rather than your campus as a whole.
- ➔ **Use data to support marketing** to combat outdated reputational bias.
- ➔ **Promote students' ability to thrive regardless of brand** (e.g., highlight successful students and alumni from lesser-known programs)..

Emphasize Career Pathways

New Dream School Dimension: Job prospects for graduates

The insight into what students want—clear outcomes, career exploration and preparation, and hands-on learning—is an opportunity to showcase degree outcomes from education to career pathways.

New Dream Schools produce talent for a broad range of employers.



- ➔ **Be proactive by integrating employer partnerships** into your admissions marketing.
- ➔ **Emphasize support for students by highlighting the availability of career services** early and often in the student experience.
- ➔ **Highlight success stories of students finding direction and success** through experiential learning opportunities (e.g., internships, on-campus research).

Improve Your Sense of Community

Strengthen your relationships with key stakeholders like students, alumni, faculty, and the wider community.

Engage with them to increase awareness and affinity, and build a culture of trust.

- ➔ **Market the human experience**, including relationships, mentorship, and connection on campus.
- ➔ **Foster campus engagement** by creating space for meaningful interactions.
- ➔ **Use social listening** to monitor gaps in perceived versus actual student support.

Prioritize the Value of Peer-to-Peer Connections

New Dream School Dimension: Student engagement

Peers are your students' most trusted source. Even when people have a sense of grievance about an institution (i.e., feel a strong sense of resentment or injustice), [two-thirds say legitimate influence](#) will be earned if you "understand what people like me need and want." Leverage peer connections to provide value for your students' educational and personal growth.



- **Use targeted listening** to address melt risks, application confusion, and brand misconceptions.
- **Leverage forum narratives** to build student-centered marketing campaigns, and develop internal strategies around what students actually say, not just survey data.
- **Identify opportunities to pair prospective and new students with experienced students or recent alumni** for information sharing and relationship building.

Actionable Strategies to Increase Enrollment

- ★ **Highlight the ROI of your degree**

Give students and families the clear outcomes they're looking for by setting them up for post-college success.

 - **Promote your outcomes** by highlighting job placement rates, graduate school admissions, and alumni salaries.
 - **Partner with employers and organizations** to create clear pipelines from your education to employment.
- ★ **Explain costs transparently**

With rising tuition and the perception of the expense of college, clearly communicate what students and families are paying and the value they receive.

 - **Actively address pain points, weaknesses, and barriers** to the financial aid and enrollment processes.
 - **Treat financial aid communication as a brand experience** and use your brand voice to tell your story.
 - **Clearly communicate cost and value early and often**, offering realism and transparency.
 - **Offer transparent net price calculators** and early cost estimates to alleviate stress or fear over cost.
- ★ **Demonstrate your institution's value**

Students want to know what's in it for them—and that it's possible for someone who looks or lives like them.

 - **Reposition your brand narrative** around program-level excellence rather than your campus as a whole.
 - **Promote students' ability to thrive regardless of brand**, such as by highlighting students or alumni from lesser-known programs.
 - **Use data to support marketing** to combat outdated bias.
- ★ **Emphasize career pathways**

The insight into what students want—clear outcomes, career exploration and preparation, and hands-on learning—is an opportunity to showcase degree outcomes.

 - **Integrate employer partnerships** into admissions marketing.
 - **Highlight success stories** of students finding direction through experiential learning.
 - **Emphasize student support**, highlighting career services.
- ★ **Improve your sense of community**

Strengthen your relationships with key stakeholders like students, alumni, faculty, and the wider community.

 - **Market the human experience** on campus.
 - **Use social listening** to monitor perceived versus actual student support.
 - **Foster campus engagement** by creating space for meaningful interactions.
- ★ **Prioritize the value of peer-to-peer connections**

Leverage peer connections to provide value for your students' educational and personal growth.

 - **Use targeted listening** to address melt risks, application confusion, and brand misconceptions.
 - **Identify opportunities to pair prospective students with experienced students or recent alumni** for information sharing and relationship building.
 - **Leverage forums** to build marketing campaigns and strategies.

What this Means for Higher Ed

Innovative expertise with crucial industry context to navigate today's digital communications landscape is critical for campuses today. You need to listen to your audiences online and make changes on campus to rebuild the public's trust, strengthen authentic relationships, and grow enrollment. More importantly, you need to be equipped to connect the dots between what you learn, what you want to achieve, and what's happening around your campus and in the industry.

Campus Sonar's mission is to empower colleges and universities to find and analyze conversations that matter, seize engagement opportunities, and identify insights to make data-driven decisions. Despite all the challenges in the industry, we believe in the public good higher education provides. Empowering your campus with social intelligence data and insights enables you to build a stronger future that meets the needs of the next generation of learners.



To find out more about using social intelligence to unlock unique insight and institutional capability, visit campussonar.com or [contact us](#).

Appendix: Methodological Context

Over the course of the previous ten years, our research has drawn from a variety of data sources, methods, and thematic lenses, not all of which were admissions-specific. While our more recent research (2021–2025) has taken a more focused look at admissions conversations, earlier analyses included broader themes related to student experience in the context of reputation, cost, and institutional outcomes. These differences in scope should be kept in mind when evaluating longitudinal insights.

Some years had a broader research focus, while research in other years focused on specific forums, such as Reddit, College Confidential, and The Student Room. Over time, sentiment tracking methods and source prioritization evolved, with increased specificity in later years (e.g., parsing subreddits and thread-specific conversations). The volume of data varied due to differences in platform activity, research goals, and institutional focus. However, despite these differences, several core themes emerged consistently across the years.

While not all findings across this ten-year window are directly comparable from a quantitative lens, they do reflect how students and their families navigate the college decision and admissions process.