

FROM REPUTATION TO RECOGNITION

# Leveraging Admissions Audience Insights for Stronger Branding

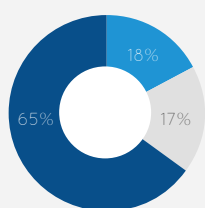
In our recent [industry trends research](#), we explored forums to surface the most pressing issues and themes in the minds of admissions audiences. While nothing replaces institutional-specific social listening and brand analysis, the emerging themes provide a wide lens into admissions decision-making.

The themes we found in over 14,000 forum conversations from admissions audiences revealed key areas where your institution could step up, focus on, provide clarity, and further differentiate your brand from competitors. At the same time, you'll meet the audience-specific needs intrinsically linked to your institution's future success and brand health.

# Admissions Forums at a Glance

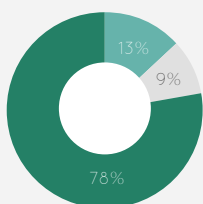
**Reddit is the most popular forum for admissions audiences by mention volume, followed by College Confidential and Student Doctor.** Within Reddit, r/ApplyingToCollege is the top subreddit across all institution types and sizes, second to “grad admissions” or program-specific communities where students shift from general research focus on their specific areas of academic interests and career exploration.

## Top Forums By Volume



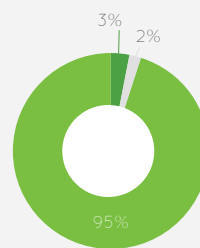
**Reddit**  
Volume: 5,717

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral



**College Confidential**  
Volume: 2,989

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral



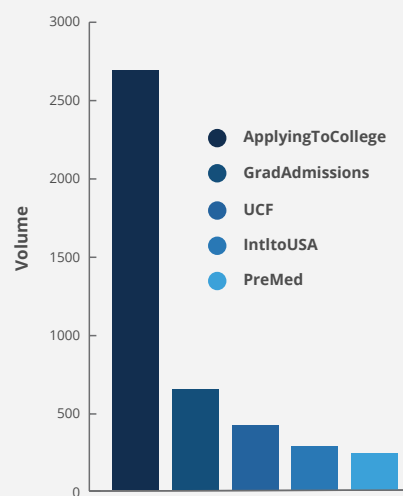
**Student Doctor**  
Volume: 2,800

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral

**While smaller in volume, the non-athletic nature of forum conversation themes provides a direct line to understanding audience relationship to brand pillars and institutional perception.** Brand-weary admissions audiences turn to forums for what they perceive as a more authentic crowd-sourced opinion of an institution, examples of post-graduation experiences, and influential advice for their admissions journey and decision-making.

Forum conversation offers a golden opportunity to understand the psychographics and perceptions of admissions audiences on a deeper level, with findings that directly impact your ongoing institutional and enrollment strategies.

## Top Subreddits by Conversation Size



**To make the most of forum findings, our research identified the themes most present and closest to the minds of admissions audiences.**



## The Admissions Journey

The primary driver of forum conversation for admissions audiences is to seek guidance, validation, and information related to their specific and step-by-step admissions journey. For marketers, this means audience-generated insight and feedback are available to access and enhance brand and communication efforts for every stage of the enrollment funnel.

For example, conversations discussing early action represented 8% of all mentions and uncovered that prospective students closely track [when colleges release early decisions](#). Proactive users even [created early decision/early action guides](#) and dashboards to navigate early action/decision dates. Likewise, terms such as *direct admit* or *early action* emerged when [discussing the pros and cons of how to apply](#).



Another pressing theme focused on the [difficulty of gaining admittance into exclusive institutions, rigorous programs](#), and the impact of culture on [students' mental health](#). This underscores the importance of listening to your audience, how much is at stake, and the direct impact your institution's communication, actions, and accessibility can have on students' well-being as they move through the application process.



## TAKE STRATEGIC ACTION

1

**Use forum conversations as a lens to audit the admissions process at your institution.** Browse r/ApplyingToCollege and other top forums focusing on each stage of the admissions process to identify common pain points, areas of inquiry, confusion, and excitement.

2

**Apply general and institutional-specific social listening insights around the admissions journey to determine how prospective students perceive your brand.** In what ways does earned perception reinforce or undermine your internal perceptions of institutional identity and values? Then consider where attention is needed to bridge the gap between your brand aspiration and current perception.

3

**Activate a start/stop/continue framework to troubleshoot and increase clarity to meet your admissions audiences' emotional and tactical needs.** Use earned forum conversation findings to determine what your team needs to:

- Start to bridge gaps in understanding and address pain points.
- Assess current efforts that aren't relevant to your audience so they can be stopped or deprioritized.
- Identify where your institution shines to continue these efforts while recalibrating and re-focusing others.

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## Cost of Attendance

Financial aid, scholarships, and perceived prestige are the top concerns and considerations for prospective students and their families. Similar to crowd-sourced efforts around early decision, our research revealed that parents and students [shared financial aid advice from the trenches and built lists of liberal arts colleges with merit-based aid](#). These types of conversations accounted for 5% of all forum mentions. Forum users also [shared negative experiences with institutions that rejected them for need-based aid reasons](#). These shared experiences can [deter potential students](#) who have high financial needs.





## TAKE STRATEGIC ACTION

- 1** **Clearly articulate your institution's key financial aid dates, informational events, and milestones.** Students and parents make frequent use of deadlines and hard financial aid amounts as a reference to factor into their decision-making process. Institutions with clear dates and transparent financial aid options are more likely to be mentioned in these conversations and perceived favorably.
- 2** **Reflect and connect with your enrollment and financial aid teams to understand the accessibility and transparency of your financial aid communication.** Put yourself in your audience's shoes to determine their financial aid user experience across your website, enrollment communication flow/timeline, and available in-person or virtual resources. Pay attention to the number of clicks it takes to understand the process and gain essential information, as well as where the highest volume of questions arises.
- 3** **Prioritize personalized support throughout the process.** Time spent creating new and improved systems for support and transparency around the emotionally fraught financial aid journey goes a long way in building trust and generating feelings of authentic connection with your admissions audiences.

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# Determining the ROI of a College Education

Perceived prestige and value are top of mind for admissions audiences as they determine if an institution is worth the financial investment. Prospective students want to know if reputable programs and institutions are worth the cost compared to more affordable options. For each individual, the process of discerning return on investment is subjective, with top variables including name recognition, distinguished academic programs, student experience, and career, social, and financial outcomes.



Notice that return on investment can be communicated in many different ways. Rankings might help you gain visibility, but equally important and deeply emotional factors are at play in determining value. An environment of belonging that supports opportunities for human connection and physical and emotional safety is also a cornerstone of future success and learning.

As students determine if the [price tag of an institution is worth it](#), they often ask questions about the overall experience and the institution's ability to prepare students for future careers and educational endeavors (e.g., [medical school](#), law school, and other graduate programs). Students debate between the [pedigree of the institution and the cost](#) and need help determining which route to take when their perception of the institution is at odds with the cost of attendance.



## TAKE STRATEGIC ACTION

- 1 Develop a holistic brand promise with pillars uniquely tied to your institution while including value beyond rankings or external prestige.** Today's prospective students are savvy shoppers when it comes to tuition costs and loans. When communicating value, external perception can help gain awareness, but demonstrating the holistic benefit of the full student experience keeps their attention and influences decisions. Provide tangible examples of what it means to be a part of your campus and alumni community for greater emotional impact than prestige alone.
- 2 Beware of generalizations when communicating value.** If your institution's value is tied to your location or experiential learning, other institutions are boasting the same. Articulate what is special about your institution and bring it to life with stories highlighting traditions, essence, community, and experiences students won't find elsewhere.
- 3 Create brand flexibility for greater connection and authenticity.** As you work to articulate the future benefits your institution can provide, ensure your brand has the flexibility to communicate these ideas in a way that resonates with your audiences in the digital spaces they occupy. Institutional brand values and identity lose meaning if they fail to connect with the communities and audiences they exist to serve.
- 4 As forums demonstrate, your admissions audiences pay attention to your campus brand identity beyond traditional sources like your website.** They search for and judge your brand based on what they find across social media and word of mouth within their trusted networks. Take the time to develop clear and flexible brand guidelines inclusive of voice, tone, and formality. Finding and defining your brand voice makes your identity stronger, more cohesive, sustainable, and supports your goals and audiences.





## MAIN IDEA

### What's the key takeaway?

Few environments outside deliberate research allow and encourage candid, authentic, anonymous, and real-time audience opinions about your institutional brand. There are even fewer places, particularly within a digital landscape, where our key audiences find comfort, engagement, and community while expressing their unique challenges and needs. We've seen Reddit emerge as a champion, checking all of the boxes and establishing itself as the preferred platform for audience-generated sharing around the admissions journey.

Reddit is a gathering place for admissions audiences to share questions, advice, triumphs, and uncertainty around key milestones while revealing deep insights into their decision-making. Targeted social listening around forum conversation is essential for understanding our audiences and creating powerful and precise brand positioning that meets their needs.

### At-a-glance Summary

- **Your brand is only as strong as your audience perceives it to be.** Forums are an impactful research foundation for understanding how your audience discerns brand messaging and value at every step of their admissions journey.
- **Forum feedback reveals opportunities to enhance audience trust.** Admissions forum conversations offer real-time opportunities to understand and adapt your brand and resources to improve your audience's user experience, accessibility, and transparency when communicating your brand value.
- **Prioritizing what your admissions audience cares about amplifies your brand promises.** Understanding your audience's step-by-step admissions needs is the best context for positioning and highlighting your strengths, reputation, and outcomes. Listening to your audience makes them feel seen and more likely to pay attention to what makes you unique.

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do and how we can help you.