



Parent & Student College Admissions Survey

Key Insights • Winter 2023-2024

College Admissions Survey

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At a time of significant change in the higher education landscape, gaining insight into the mindset, attitudes and perspectives of today's and tomorrow's college applicants is crucial. How are they approaching the admissions process? What matters to them (and their parents)? What are their priorities, concerns and opinions – and how is that shaping their college decisions?

The Parent & Student College Admissions Survey, conducted in December 2023 by AcceptU, a leading college consulting firm, provides insights into these questions – and more. With more than 400 high school parents and students participating, the survey captures a diverse range of viewpoints on key issues such as affordability, diversity, mental health and college choice.

Our findings reveal a complex and multifaceted picture of the current college admissions playing field, offering a glimpse into the trends that may redefine the future of higher education – for both students and universities. We have distilled responses into ten key takeaways, each offering unique insights and implications for applicants, parents and academic institutions.

- 1. Half of applicants want to ban legacy admission; one-third support affirmative action**
- 2. Families are divided on the impact of political and social issues on college choice**
- 3. COVID-19 is no longer having an impact on college planning for the majority of families**
- 4. Eighty percent of students cite cost as the dominant factor influencing their college decisions**
- 5. Students are stressed about the college process and the majority say their parents are the cause**
- 6. Parents are deeply involved – and many say it's because schools are falling short**
- 7. College rankings still matter a lot and one-third of applicants will apply to 20+ colleges**
- 8. Applicants are taking a pragmatic approach, prioritizing academics, cost and career**
- 9. Career prospects drive major choice and indicate a paradox for non-STEM majors**
- 10. Twenty-five percent of students are opting for the test-optional route; many are skeptical of testing efficacy**

These insights underscore the complexity of the college admissions landscape, highlighting a need for holistic support and adaptability in responding to the varied concerns and priorities of students and their families. As the process continues to evolve, it will become increasingly important to provide transparent guidance and resources that cater to the diverse needs of applicants.

1. Half of applicants want to ban legacy admission; one-third support affirmative action

On questions of diversity and inclusivity in college admissions, distinct perspectives emerged, revealing areas of consensus as well as differences between students and parents.

Both students and parents demonstrated a strong agreement on the importance of a diverse college community, with 80% of students and 70% of parents acknowledging its significance. **This consensus underscores a shared value placed on diversity in the higher education environment, albeit with slightly more enthusiasm from students.**

When it came to diversity as a factor in college selection, students (63%) showed a greater tendency to consider it important compared to parents (49%). Opinions on affirmative action revealed more marked disparities. **Students were moderately supportive, with 35% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were in favor of the SCOTUS policy to end affirmative action in admissions consideration, even if it hurt their chances of admission.** However, nearly half of student respondents (48%) were neutral – indicating an ambivalent view and/or a preference for not taking a definitive stance on this contentious topic.

Parents, on the other hand, exhibited a slightly more conservative stance. **The survey indicated that 33% (those who agreed or strongly agreed) support affirmative action, even if it potentially disadvantaged their children in the process.** The neutrality was also significant among parents, with 40% not expressing a clear opinion. This may reflect the complexities and varying implications of affirmative action in college admissions, which can be a more

immediate concern for parents considering the future prospects of their children.

On legacy admissions, both groups showed mixed feelings. **Among students, 45% expressed support for banning legacy admissions, viewing legacy admissions as potentially unfair or misaligned with meritocratic principles.** However, a significant portion, 43%, remained neutral, pointing to ambivalence or uncertainty about the implications of such a policy. Only a small fraction, 12%, opposed the ban.

Parents mirrored this divided sentiment, with 50% favoring a ban on legacy admissions, underscoring a shared concern about the fairness of the admissions process. Parents exhibited a slightly higher tendency than students, however, to oppose the ban, with 17% against legacy consideration in admissions. Like the students, a considerable number of parents, 34%, chose a neutral stance, reflecting the complexity and controversial nature of the issue.

Lastly, when it comes to incorporating diversity into college applications and essays, students were more proactive, with 64% indicating they had, or planned to, include aspects of diversity. **This reflects a growing awareness and value placed on diversity among college applicants.** Parents, however, were less inclined towards this approach, with a lower percentage (40%) endorsing this practice for their children, which may suggest differing perceptions on the importance of diversity in the college application process.

Overall, the survey highlights a consensus on the value of diversity in higher education, but reveals generational differences in how diversity influences college selection, opinions on affirmative action, attitudes towards legacy admissions and the incorporation of diversity into college applications. **These insights reflect the evolving nature of diversity considerations within the college admissions landscape, with students often showing more progressive attitudes compared to parents.**

2. Families are divided on the impact of political and social issues on college choice

In an open-ended question, students and parents provided varied insights into the role that politics, like the Israel-Hamas conflict, and social issues, like abortion, play in their college planning process, indicating a spectrum of perspectives.

Among students, a notable segment, 30-40%, reported that politics and social issues significantly influence their college decisions. This group prioritizes colleges that align with their political beliefs, with particular emphasis on free speech, diversity and political ideologies. An additional 10-20% of students highlighted specific social issues, such as feminism and racial inclusivity, as key factors in their choice of college. **However, more than half of student respondents indicated that politics and social issues have little to no impact on their college planning, suggesting emphasis on other factors in selecting universities.**

Parents' responses echoed a similar diversity of opinion. Around 30-40% expressed that the political and social climate is a major factor in their child's college selection process, with concerns ranging from state-specific political atmospheres to issues like campus safety and affirmative action. Additionally, 20-30% of parents emphasized the importance of finding a college that aligns with their family's values, whether they be conservative or liberal. **Like the students, however, around half of parent respondents stated that political and social issues play no significant role in the college planning process, perhaps as a result of a deliberate avoidance of these issues or because they prioritize other factors more highly.**

Overall, responses highlight a complex landscape where the importance of political

and social issues in college planning varies widely among individuals. While some students and parents consider these factors crucial, a significant proportion place less emphasis on them, focusing instead on other priorities. **This variation highlights the highly personal nature of college decision-making and what matters most to applicants and their families.**

3. COVID-19 is no longer having an impact on college planning for the majority of families

In an open-ended question assessing the continued impact of COVID-19 on college planning, responses showcased varied perspectives, with a mix of concerns and resilience.

Among students, a minority indicated a direct impact of COVID-19 on their college planning. This group (20-30%) mentioned specific changes such as altered academic goals, shifts in priorities post-quarantine and impacts on standardized testing like the SAT. **However, a significant majority, upwards of 60-70%, reported minimal to no impact. This was particularly true for younger students, who were in middle school during the peak of the pandemic, suggesting that the timing of COVID-19 played a crucial role in its impact.** Additionally, there was a notable portion of students, 10-20%, who mentioned indirect effects, such as a new preference for colleges closer to home and changes in extracurriculars.

Parents' responses were similarly varied but tended to show a bit more concern about the pandemic's impact. A considerable segment of parents (30-40%) expressed concerns, highlighting the pandemic's effect on social and emotional development, academic preparedness and the disruption of normal schooling and extracurricular activities. Despite these concerns, a large number of parents, 50-60%, believe that COVID-19 had not drastically affected their

child's college planning. This suggests a degree of adaptability and resilience among families in navigating the pandemic's challenges in the context of college planning.

Overall, the survey indicates a spectrum of experiences with COVID-19's previous and continued impact on college planning. **While a portion of both students and parents acknowledged the pandemic's challenges (including changes to extracurricular activities, academic readiness and mental health), a majority appear to have adapted to the situation with minimal perceived impact on their future educational trajectories.**

4. Eighty percent of students cite cost as the dominant factor influencing their college decisions

In analyzing responses on the cost of college, both students and parents expressed significant concerns, but with some notable differences in their perspectives.

For students, the cost of college was the dominant factor influencing their application decisions, with a striking 81% (those who agreed or strongly agreed) acknowledging its impact. This concern was also echoed by parents, although slightly less pronounced, with 72% agreeing or strongly agreeing that cost influences their child's choice of college. **Clearly, affordability and the cost of college are top of mind for today's applicants and their families.**

When considering the cost of college, 67% of students stated they would not consider certain colleges because of their high costs, a sentiment shared by 56% of parents. **However, the willingness to sacrifice enhanced campus amenities for lower tuition revealed mixed responses.** Among students, 51% agreed or

strongly agreed with this trade-off, compared to 40% of parents. **Interestingly, students were more open to compromising on-campus amenities than their parents.**

A slight divergence in opinion was observed regarding a willingness to incur debt to attend an Ivy League or other prestigious institution instead of a lower-cost, public flagship university. Forty percent of students disagreed or strongly disagreed about incurring such debt; parents were even more cautious, with 58% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing about incurring debt. **Incurring debt to attend an Ivy League or similar university (versus attending a public flagship at in-state cost) was not worth it to most students or their parents.**

Finally, despite citing concerns about costs, both groups strongly agreed that attending college continues to be a good investment, providing a positive return. Among students, 79% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement; 74% of parents agreed or strongly agreed. **There was a clear conviction that despite the rising costs associated with higher education, the overall benefits – be they economic, personal or social – are worth the investment.**

5. Students are stressed about the college process and the majority say their parents are the cause

On perceptions of mental health surrounding the college admissions process, there was a clear consensus among students and parents regarding high levels of stress.

Among students, an overwhelming 70% acknowledged the college admissions process as the most stressful period of high school. Peer influence on stress was also a concern for students, with 35% agreeing that

stress is driven by their peer group; additionally, 55% of students expressed concerns about parental expectations contributing to their anxiety.

Parents' responses mirrored these concerns, though with some variations in emphasis. A majority of parents, 73%, agreed that the college admissions process is, or will be, the most stressful period of high school for their child. Regarding the influence of peer groups, parents also recognized this as a significant stressor, with 52% agreeing. **On the topic of parental expectations, parents were more likely than students to acknowledge their role in adding to the stress, with 65% agreeing that their expectations could cause anxiety.**

Both students and parents identified societal and external pressures as significant stress factors in the college admissions process. Among the students, a notable 70% (sum of those who agree and strongly agree) acknowledged these pressures as key contributors to stress. Similarly, parents shared this view, with 68% (sum of those who agree and strongly agree) recognizing the impact of societal and external factors.

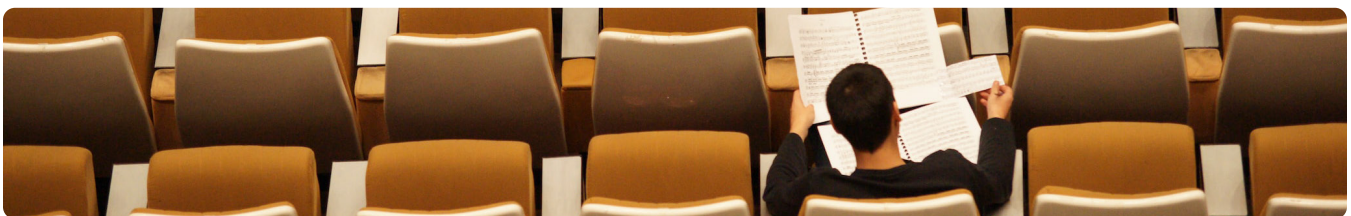
Responses demonstrated a shared understanding between students and parents about the high stress levels associated with the college admissions process, influenced by a combination of peer pressure, parental expectations and societal factors. While both groups recognize these various sources of stress, the nuances in their responses reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of this challenging process for students.

6. Parents are deeply involved – and many say it's because schools are falling short

It is not new, nor revelatory, that many parents are deeply involved in their children's college planning. However, survey responses reveal an apparent correlation between parental involvement and the perceived adequacy of high school preparation for college.

Responses indicate a significant trend of high parental involvement. **Many parents, 40-50%, indicate complete involvement in the process (i.e., "100%" or "Fully involved").** Another notable group of parents, about 30-40%, indicate more moderate involvement, playing a "Supportive role" and being "Helpful but up to the child to decide." A smaller segment, around 10-20%, prefer a hands-off approach, allowing for greater student autonomy.

Why are they involved? Many students and parents, 30-40%, emphasize the need for more robust and personalized counseling services, advocating for an earlier start in guidance, ideally from freshman year, and calling for more individualized support. Around 20-30% of participants point to a lack of a dedicated college readiness program, emphasizing the need for essay writing assistance, application workshops and integrated SAT/ACT preparation. About 25-35% of responses highlight the necessity for resources that aid in early career and major exploration, including greater exposure to diverse career fields.



Survey data illuminate a distinct correlation between parental involvement in college admissions and the quality of high school college readiness programs. This link is underscored by the trend of heightened parental involvement – reported by about 40-50% of respondents – often being a response to perceived gaps in high school preparation. In contrast, where high schools are viewed as providing comprehensive preparation, including effective counseling and SAT/ACT preparation, parental involvement tends to be more moderate, as indicated by 30-40% of the responses. **This pattern suggests parents often step in more assertively when they feel high schools are not fully equipping their children for college, making involvement a key indicator of the perceived efficacy of a high school’s college readiness efforts.**

7. College rankings still matter a lot and one-third of applicants will apply to 20+ colleges

When it comes to determining which colleges to apply to, college rankings emerge as a significant factor in students’ decision-making, with 57% saying they are an important factor in determining where they are applying. College visits also play a key role in the process, with 68% of students (those who agree and strongly agree) stating that they are important in deciding which colleges they apply to.

With the college application process itself, an overwhelming majority (72%) of students either already have applied, or will be applying, in an early round (Early Decision, Early Action or Restrictive Early Action). And in an increasingly competitive environment, 29% of students indicated it would be, or was, challenging finding safety or likely schools while 35% of students stated that they applied to, or intend to apply to, 20 or more colleges.

What do students perceive to be the most important factors in the college admissions process? Grades and the rigor of curriculum emerge as the most critical factors, with 59% of students ranking it as their top priority. This was followed, in order of importance, by extracurricular activities, standardized test scores, essays, academic awards/accomplishments, letters of recommendation and developing a “passion project.”

Responses highlight a high-pressure environment where students prioritize prestige, as evidenced by their reliance on rankings, while also showing a tendency to apply early, and if unsuccessful, to numerous colleges, reflecting anxiety about securing admission.

8. Applicants are taking a pragmatic approach, prioritizing academics, cost and career

The survey shed light on the priorities of both students and parents with how they select which colleges to apply to. **Academics emerges as the top priority for both groups, with 69% of students and 70% of parents placing it first among 11 factors.** Financial considerations are also prominent, especially for students, with 13% ranking cost as their foremost concern; 10% of parents indicated the same. This was followed by career services and job placement, which is indicated as the most impact factor by 6% of students and 4% of parents.



One of the eight other factors - athletics, prestige/rank, distance from home, diversity/inclusivity, campus architecture/beauty, setting (urban vs. rural), social life, facilities - was indicated as the top priority by only 12% of students and 16% of parents. None of these factors was indicated as the top priority by more than 5% of respondents (athletics was indicated as top priority by 3% of students and 5% of parents and prestige/rank was indicated as top priority by 4% of both students and parents); no respondents (0%) indicated social life or facilities as their top priority.

The survey reveals a significant shift towards pragmatism in college selection, emphasizing academics, cost, and career outcomes over traditional factors like campus life. This trend highlights an increasing focus on the long-term value of education, influenced by economic realities and job market changes. It highlights a growing preference for tangible benefits in higher education, signaling a crucial change for institutions to adapt to the evolving needs and expectations of students and their families.

9. Career prospects drive major choice and indicate a paradox for non-STEM majors

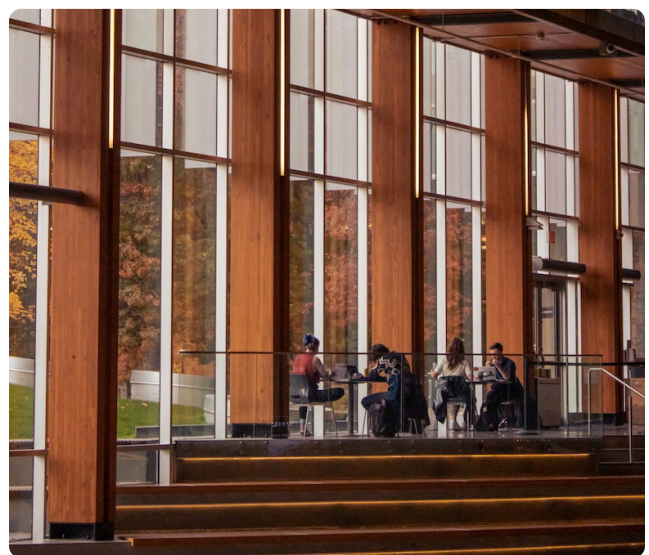
In terms of the influence of future job prospects on chosen majors, a majority of students (77%) agree that their intended major is significantly influenced by career opportunities. This pragmatic approach is echoed by parents, with 65% affirming that future job prospects play a crucial role in their child's choice of major. Additionally, the cost of college emerges as a notable factor for students, with nearly half (49%) agreeing that it will have an impact on their choice of major, a sentiment echoed by 35% of parent respondents.

Despite declining interest in humanities and social sciences, the majority of students and

parents (60%) disagree that these fields are irrelevant in today's economy. Furthermore, a significant number of students and parents (63%) agree that there are exciting opportunities outside of STEM fields. The survey thus reveals a complex interplay between students' and parents' recognition of the value of humanities and social sciences and their pragmatic focus on majors with clear job prospects and financial stability.

This paradox is further complicated by financial considerations, with respondents demonstrating that cost can play an important role in their major decision. **This situation indicates the need for more comprehensive career guidance, emphasizing the diverse opportunities and skills across various fields, including those outside of STEM, balancing immediate economic returns with long-term professional and personal development.**

Lastly, parental influence on major selection is another area where student and parent perspectives converge, albeit with a difference in degree. **While 39% of students acknowledge parental influence, a much higher percentage of parents (58%) believe they have a significant influence on their child's decision.** This discrepancy might indicate a gap in perception between what students and parents feel.



10. Twenty-five percent of students are opting for the test-optional route; many are skeptical of testing efficacy

The survey results from both students and parents provide a multifaceted view of the role and perception of standardized testing in the college admissions process.

A majority of both students (83%) and parents (88%) reported that they or their children have taken, or plan to take, either the SAT or ACT, illustrating the continued prominence of exams. However, while a substantial number of students (47%) and a majority of parents (64%) agree that these tests are important for college admissions, there's notable skepticism about their efficacy. Only 18% of students and 33% of parents consider standardized test scores an accurate measure of college readiness.

This skepticism is further evident with a considerable proportion of students (58%) and parents (28%) advocating for the removal of standardized testing from the college admissions process entirely. **Additionally, a quarter of students (25%) and 12% of parents are opting for a test-optional route, reflecting the continued trend of colleges shifting away from mandatory submission of standardized test scores.**

The approach to preparing for these tests also varies. The majority of students (64%) use free online resources like Khan Academy, indicating a trend towards accessible and cost-effective study methods. Traditional methods like using books and taking test prep classes at school (each 44% of students) are still popular. However, fewer students (28%) opt for test prep centers, and even fewer students (14%) use 1-on-1 tutoring.

Interestingly, a notable number of students (12%) reported not studying for standardized tests at all.

The survey reflects a growing skepticism about the role of standardized tests in college admissions, with a significant interest in test-optional policies and a questioning of these tests' effectiveness in measuring college readiness. This trend, coupled with the preference for accessible online study resources, indicates a broader reevaluation of traditional admissions criteria and a potential shift towards more holistic and student-centric evaluation methods.

Survey Methodology

AcceptU's Parent & Student College Admissions Survey, conducted nationally via email from December 5-19, 2023, generated responses from 94 students and 407 parents.

For student respondents, the class year breakdown revealed a higher concentration among upperclassmen. The distribution was as follows: 47% in the 12th grade (Class of 2024), 37% in the 11th grade (Class of 2025), 13% in the 10th grade (Class of 2026) and 3% in the 9th grade (Class of 2027). The gender distribution showed a majority of female students (72%); the students identified as Asian and White (30% each), followed by Hispanic (20%), Black or African-American (16%) and American Indian or Alaskan Native (3%).

Parent respondents were more evenly distributed across different high school years. The breakdown was: 33% for parents of 12th graders (Class of 2024), 40% for 11th graders (Class of 2025), 15% for 10th graders (Class of 2026) and 13% for 9th graders (Class of 2027). Like the student survey, there was a higher percentage of female respondents (68%). The racial composition was predominantly White (40%) and Asian (36%), followed by Black or African-American (12%), Hispanic (11%) and American Indian or Alaskan Native (1%).

