anthology

Student Feedback Informs Admissions and Enrollment Strategies

Author: Lisa Hansen, Director of Strategic Consulting and Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D., Senior Director of Engagement Strategy
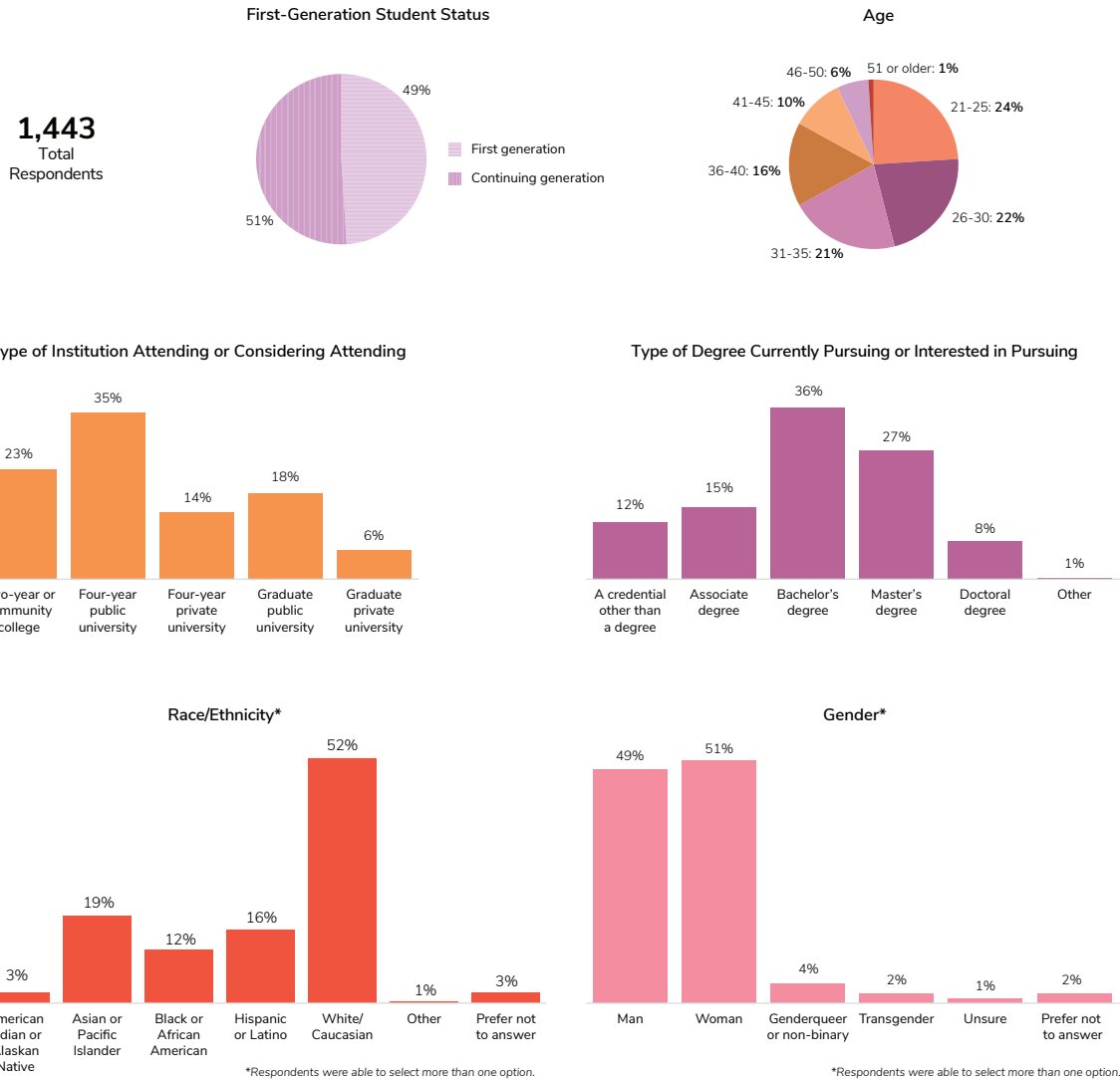
Given shifts in enrollment over the last several years, a deeper focus on applicants through more personalized attention and support is necessary for institutions to reach recruitment goals. Fewer new high school graduates in large parts of the country, increases in nontraditional students looking to return to college, the impact of the pandemic on course modality and competition, and a challenging economic climate require institutions to refine recruitment and enrollment strategies.

Goal of This Study

The goal of this study was to provide additional context around the experience of prospective college students to help inform admissions and enrollment strategies in the context of declining enrollments nationwide.

About the Respondents

1,443
Total Respondents

First-Generation Student Status

49%
51%

First generation
Continuing generation

Age

46-50: **6%**   51 or older: **1%**
41-45: **10%**   21-25: **24%**
36-40: **16%**
26-30: **22%**
31-35: **21%**

Type of Institution Attending or Considering Attending

23% — Two-year or community college
35% — Four-year public university
14% — Four-year private university
18% — Graduate public university
6% — Graduate private university

Type of Degree Currently Pursuing or Interested in Pursuing

12% — A credential other than a degree
15% — Associate degree
36% — Bachelor's degree
27% — Master's degree
8% — Doctoral degree
1% — Other

Race/Ethnicity*

3% — American Indian or Alaskan Native
19% — Asian or Pacific Islander
12% — Black or African American
16% — Hispanic or Latino
52% — White/Caucasian
1% — Other
3% — Prefer not to answer

Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Gender*

49% — Man
51% — Woman
4% — Genderqueer or non-binary
2% — Transgender
1% — Unsure
2% — Prefer not to answer

Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Opportunities to Enhance the Application and Enrollment Process to Attract More Applicants and Increase Yield

In the current environment, increasing the number of applicants is critical to bringing in the expected number of students. In order to increase the number of applications, one of the first questions focused on how students source information for universities they are interested in attending.
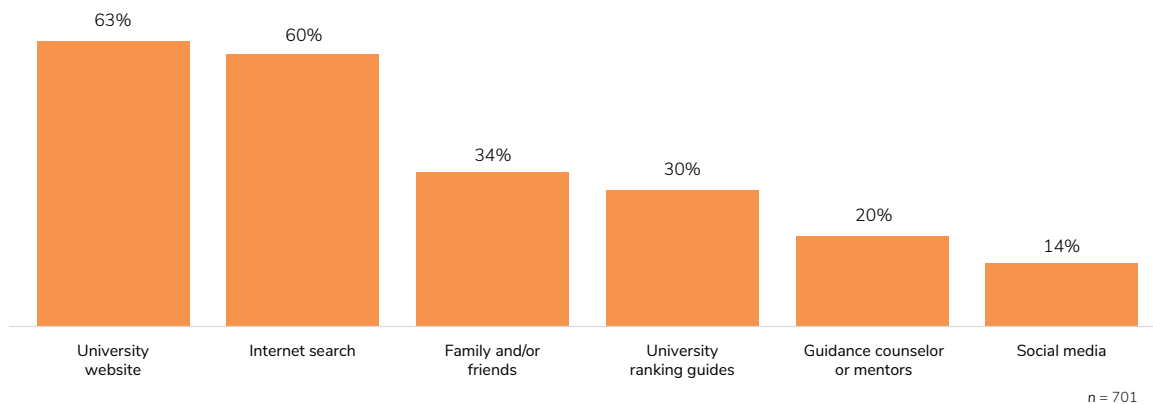
Sources of Information about Universities

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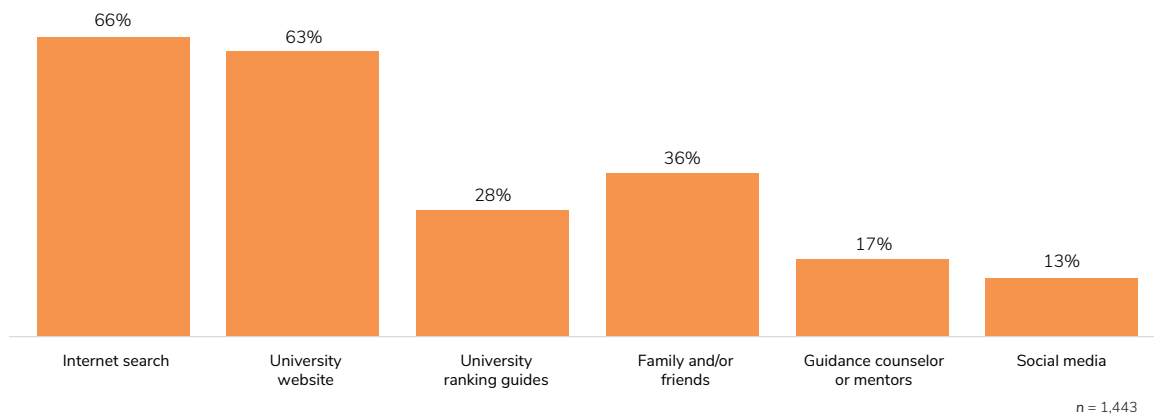
Potential students rely primarily on internet searches (66%) and university websites (63%) to find out more about an institution, its academic programs, and more. While there is much talk about university ranking guides, these seem to have among the least influence in helping potential students learn about universities — only about one in four respondents referenced these, while friends and family are a source of information for just over one in three respondents. Guidance counselors are generally not a source for the majority of students (17%).

The overall trends remain similar regardless of the type of degree students are applying for, although among those exploring master's or doctoral degrees, university ranking guides become more important with 34% considering them as a source of information, and the university website surpasses internet searches as the most often used resource for finding more information.

Sources of Information about Universities for First-Generation Students

University website	63%
Internet search	60%
Family and/or friends	34%
University ranking guides	30%
Guidance counselor or mentors	20%
Social media	14%

n = 701

For this analysis, first-generation students — defined as the first in their immediate family to attend a two-year or four-year institution — had slight differences in sources they use to learn more about universities. University websites are the primary way to learn more, followed by internet searches. The order of the other sources remained the same as for continuing-generation students; however, university ranking guides and guidance counselors were mentioned by a higher percentage of first-generation students, while family and friends had a lower impact. This highlights that first-generation students approach their college search a little differently and universities have an opportunity to provide additional support and information to these potential students.

There is a similar shift among respondents who identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, or Black or African American. For these individuals, responses were similar across identified ethnicities with university websites being the primary reference mentioned, followed by internet search. The key difference was in university ranking guides and family and/or friends, as for each of these groups these two ways to learn more about universities were mentioned about equally (at over 30%).

Given this data, regardless of the degree program of interest, university websites must be engaging and make it easy to find information of interest to applicants. In addition, while university ranking guides are not used to nearly the same extent, these guides seem to be referenced more often by first-generation students and those who identify as part of underrepresented populations.

Importance of the Cost of Attendance

In addition, respondents indicated that when researching potential universities, the cost of attendance was the most important factor, followed by location. The availability of online courses and the availability of their intended major were next in order of importance, followed by job placement support, with the university's reputation or ranking being the least important. This again indicates the importance of the cost of attendance among potential applicants when researching programs — this was also the factor that was ranked highest in potentially deterring prospective students from applying to a university. Therefore, it is critical for universities
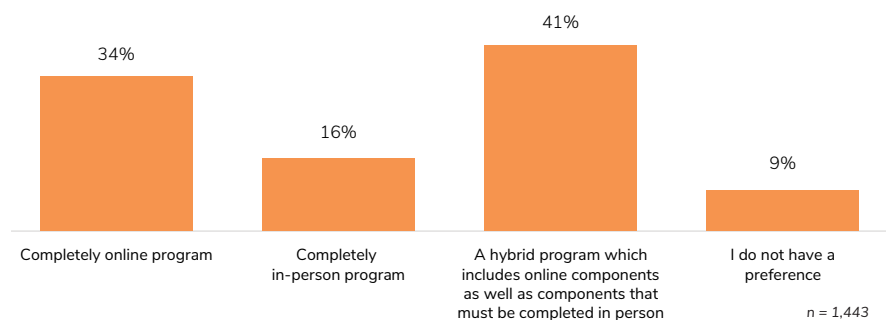
to highlight not only tuition but the actual cost of attendance for most students. If the perception is that a university is too expensive, it may dissuade students from applying — even if the university has a higher discount rate than other universities with lower tuition. When asked about whether three possible options that impact the cost of attendance would influence their decision to apply (tuition discount; tuition freeze; and tuition reset), the majority of respondents indicated a preference for a tuition discount — i.e., a guaranteed reduction in the cost of tuition (52% ranked it as having the highest impact on their likelihood to apply). While this may be challenging to put in place and has financial impacts on an institution, the responses highlight the impact that it may have on potential applicants. This should be considered as universities evaluate various options. Of the three, a tuition reset seems to have the lowest impact on a respondent's likelihood to apply.

Cost of attendance was the most important factor

Impact of Course Modalities

Are you more inclined to select a completely online, in-person, or hybrid program of study?

34%	16%	41%	9%
Completely online program	Completely in-person program	A hybrid program which includes online components as well as components that must be completed in person	I do not have a preference

n = 1,443

Thirty-two percent of respondents rated the availability of online courses as either the most important or second most important element when researching potential universities. Only 16% of respondents indicated that they would be most likely to select a fully in-person program, while 41% would be more likely to select a hybrid program including both online and in-person components. One in three respondents indicated a preference for a completely online program. The trends were similar regardless of the type of degree being pursued. First-generation students indicated a slightly higher preference for in-person instruction, at 21%, with slightly lower interest in both a completely online program and a hybrid program. Overall, this continues to highlight the importance of online offerings for prospective students. Universities offering online options should clearly indicate that on the website given the high level of interest among students.

Reviewing the Application and Enrollment Process

Some respondents also indicated that the difficulty of the application process can impact their likelihood to apply, with 66% of students expecting an application to take no more than one hour to complete. This is important to keep in mind in reviewing the application process — lengthy applications may lead to a higher number of incomplete applications or a negative sentiment on the part of the applicant, potentially impacting their likelihood to attend. While most students plan to complete their admission application on a laptop or desktop computer, 28% of respondents prefer to complete the application on a tablet or a mobile device. Therefore, it is also important that an application is mobile-friendly and easy to complete on any device.

66% of students expect an application to take no more than one hour to complete

What is your preferred way to complete the application for admission?

On my mobile device	On a laptop or desktop computer	On a tablet	Other
23%	71%	6%	0%

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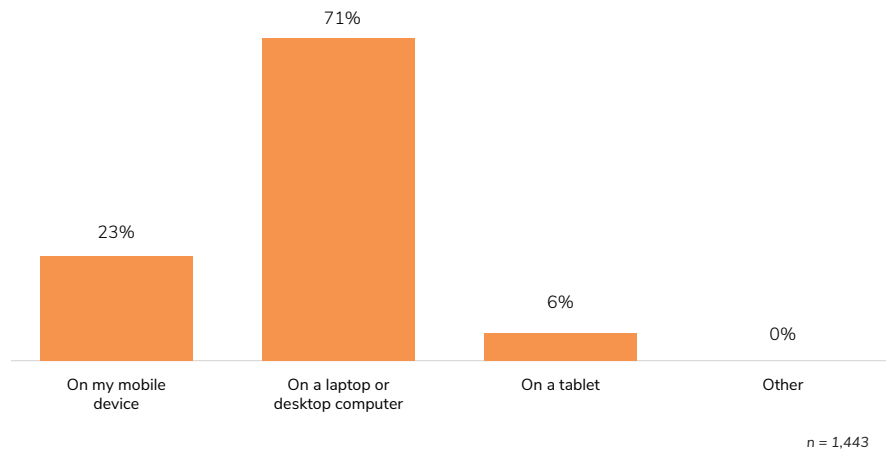
When it comes to the enrollment process, there was similar feedback from respondents. Nearly one-half of respondents indicated that enrollment would have been easier if they had been able to complete the entire process online. Nearly as many (45%) indicated that there were too many hoops to jump through (such as requiring official transcripts and personal statements), while nearly 40% indicated that the enrollment process would have been easier if there was an advisor to speak with to help answer questions. Moreover, 30% of respondents also would like more communications throughout the enrollment process, with nearly as many indicating that it would be helpful to have a better idea of the steps required to enroll.

40% indicated that the enrollment process would have been easier if there was an advisor to speak with to help answer questions

This highlights opportunities as institutions review each part of the enrollment funnel to bring them more in line with the applicant and accepted student expectations — and also identify whether there are opportunities for added support or communications during specific parts of the enrollment funnel to improve conversion and overall yield.

Engagement and Support During the Application and Enrollment Process

In recent years, many discussions have surrounded the best way to engage with students during the application and enrollment process. Of the respondents questioned, the more traditional forms of communication, like phone and email, were at the top of the list, with email ranking first at 65%, followed by phone at 52%. A preference for email increased among students considering master's or doctoral programs (70%) while students considering an associate degree noted using email less (60%) than the average of the larger group. Across all respondents, when asked about their preferred methods of engagement, text messaging was an overall mid-range preference (30%). Institutions should continue to assess communication strategies for prospective students, keeping these preferences in mind. While this may require additional resources to meet student expectations, the more student preferences are met during the process, the more likely they are to complete the process and enroll.

Email and phone were the most preferred ways to hear from universities

What is your preferred way to interact during the admissions and enrollment process?

Email	Phone	SMS text	Website	Chat	Office visit	Open house/ visit day	Virtual meetings	University fair	Social media
59%	40%	30%	21%	20%	19%	11%	11%	6%	4%

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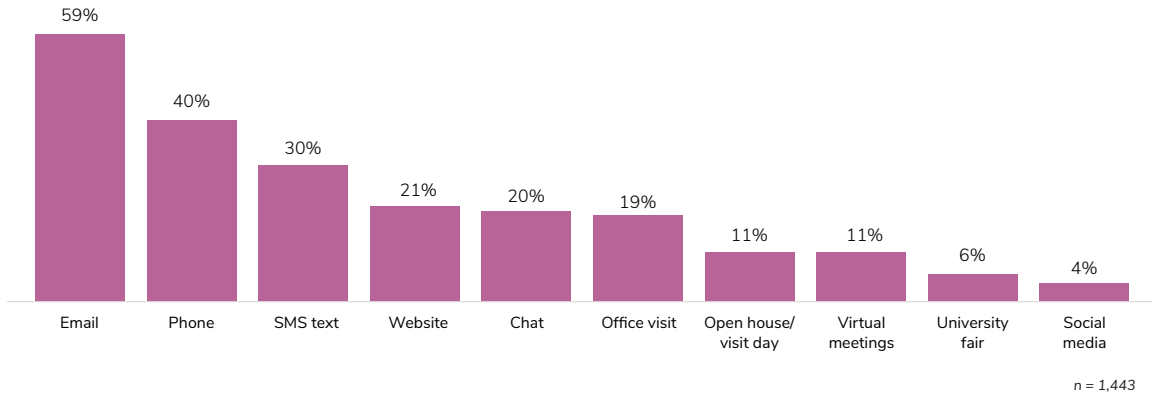
When asked about support during the application process, the top choice of all respondents was that providing clear steps and requirements for admission is especially important (68%). Regarding support after the application process, students noted overall that a clear timeline for admission was most important (63%). Being able to have access to information for the next steps after admission as well as the financial aid process were also noted as important. An effective way to ensure an institution can address these types of needs is to have clear information on websites and proactive communication plans that include step-by-step instructions.

Understandably, students noted the admissions office is the office with which they interacted most during the application process. All respondents also noted that the financial aid office was another office with which they interacted or would interact during the application process. Through this response and others, these two offices are the most important to students in the application and enrollment process. These responses also show a critical need for these two offices to offer clear and consistent messaging to students regarding next steps and processes for enrollment.

## Career Prospects Impact Decision to Enroll

Sixty-nine percent of respondents indicated that their career outlook and career options are very important or fairly important in determining which university to attend. This was slightly higher for those considering master's or doctoral programs (72%) but remained high for undergraduate students or prospective students. In addition, 38% are concerned about finding a job after graduation as they consider enrolling at a university and choosing a program of study. Institutions should therefore seek to place more emphasis on outcomes, career options, and prospects on the university website, as well as during open houses and other opportunities to interact with prospective students. It's important that institutions consider ways to make career services part of their value proposition and how to leverage modern and integrated AI-powered career service tools.

Students Are Looking for Additional Support and Guidance

As in other parts of their college experience, responses indicate an interest in more support during and throughout the process. This can be achieved through relatively easy adjustments, such as a frequently asked questions page or a clear outline of next steps in the application or enrollment process, as well as information on how to best position an application for acceptance (mentioned by 50% of respondents). This indicates that students are facing uncertainty about the application process and how to approach it to be seen as strong candidates.

What concerns do or did you have about enrolling at a university and choosing a program of study?

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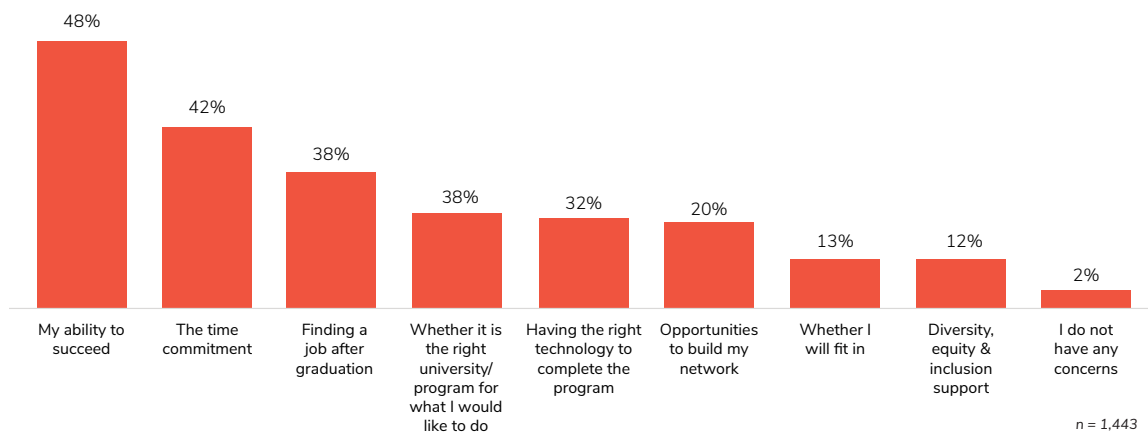
In addition, when asked about concerns regarding enrolling at a university or choosing a program of study, 48% of respondents mentioned concerns about their ability to succeed. This indicates a degree of uncertainty on the part of applicants, and universities should consider ways to reassure applicants about the likelihood of success. Additional concerns referenced by high percentages of respondents included the time commitment required, and whether they are selecting the right program for what they would like to do. Taken together, these indicate an opportunity for more support during the evaluation, application, and decision process, as all of these could be addressed through interaction with university representatives. Institutions should think about not only expanding the applicant pool but also about proactively meeting students where they are in the enrollment process and once they are a student, as they are likely to see gains in both yield and persistence. By doing so, universities will be able to quell fears of incoming students and deepen their connection to the institution earlier in the process — while standing out from other institutions that are not offering similar support throughout the admissions cycle.

Higher Education Continues to Be Seen as Important for Current and Future Students, but Cost Is a Critical Factor

The value of higher education has been a regular topic over the past several years. And, among respondents to the survey, the value of higher education appears evident. Over 70% indicated agreement that a degree or credential will be valued by their future employer. Nearly the same percentage of respondents felt that a degree/credential will help prepare them for their future careers. In addition, for 76% of respondents, getting a degree/credential was important to them. Furthermore, only 20% indicated that their perception of post-secondary education has decreased in the last year. Overall, this seems to indicate that among individuals who are enrolled at a university or considering enrolling, there is a clear belief in the value of receiving a degree. In fact, among first-generation respondents, over 50% indicated that their perception of the value has improved in the last year (compared to 30% of continuing-generation students; 45% of this group indicated the perception stayed the same). However, 79% of respondents also indicated that they believe that attending a university is too expensive, with 61% indicating that the current economic situation is causing them to consider not attending or continuing at a university. Therefore, while the understanding of the value of higher education is there, universities must show that the value received is greater than the cost of attendance. As seen in other parts of the results, the cost of higher education is a key theme related to enrollment, and anything that institutions can do to highlight the return on investment is going to be beneficial in recruiting new students.

Opportunities for Institutions

There are some areas that institutions should focus on or continue to make a key part of their admissions and enrollment cycle based on the results of the survey.

- Ensure that the institution's website is engaging, easy to use, and geared toward prospective students in how information is presented.

- Review how certain information is displayed, including:

  – Cost of attendance — be as clear as possible given the concern about the cost of higher education — highlighting actual cost to students in addition to or in lieu of sticker price.

  – Available online course options.

- Continue to promote the value of the degree, especially in the current economic climate.

- Ensure that the admissions and financial aid offices have a clear path and direction for students to follow to get information.

- Identify additional ways to support applicants throughout the application and enrollment process.

- Continue to find ways to clarify and reduce the steps needed for application and enrollment.

- Identify the preferred communication method of applicants and offer multi- or omni-channel communications.

- Highlight career opportunities and career prospects on the university website and include them in communications and events for prospective students and applicants.

- Continue to communicate with students after they apply, while reviewing their application to build the connection and keep them informed of progress.

About the Authors

Lisa Hansen is a director of strategic consulting at Anthology, specializing in student services and retention. She has a strong passion for simplifying processes and improving the student experience. Before her current position, she served 12 years at Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas. She began her career in admissions and moved to One Stop as they were implementing the service in 2014. She served as the director of their One Stop and First-Year Advising Office for six years before joining the team at Anthology.

Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D., is senior director of engagement strategy at Anthology. Widenhorn joined the Anthology team in 2013, bringing over 11 years of higher education experience. Prior to Anthology, he was the director of alumni relations and annual giving at Wilkes University. In his role at Anthology, he works closely with clients on alumni engagement scoring projects while also focusing on thought leadership for higher education. Widenhorn is a Drew University graduate and completed his Ed.D. in higher education administration at Wilkes University, focusing on whether giving differs based on participation in different types of alumni programming.

Methodology

Data was collected through a nationwide survey conducted in November 2022 utilizing a national survey platform. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to indicate that they were currently enrolled in, or considering enrolling in a college or university at the undergraduate or graduate level, and individuals who were 22 and older were targeted to complete the survey. A total of 1,443 responses were considered valid and used for the analysis. For each data point referenced above, null values were excluded.

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