

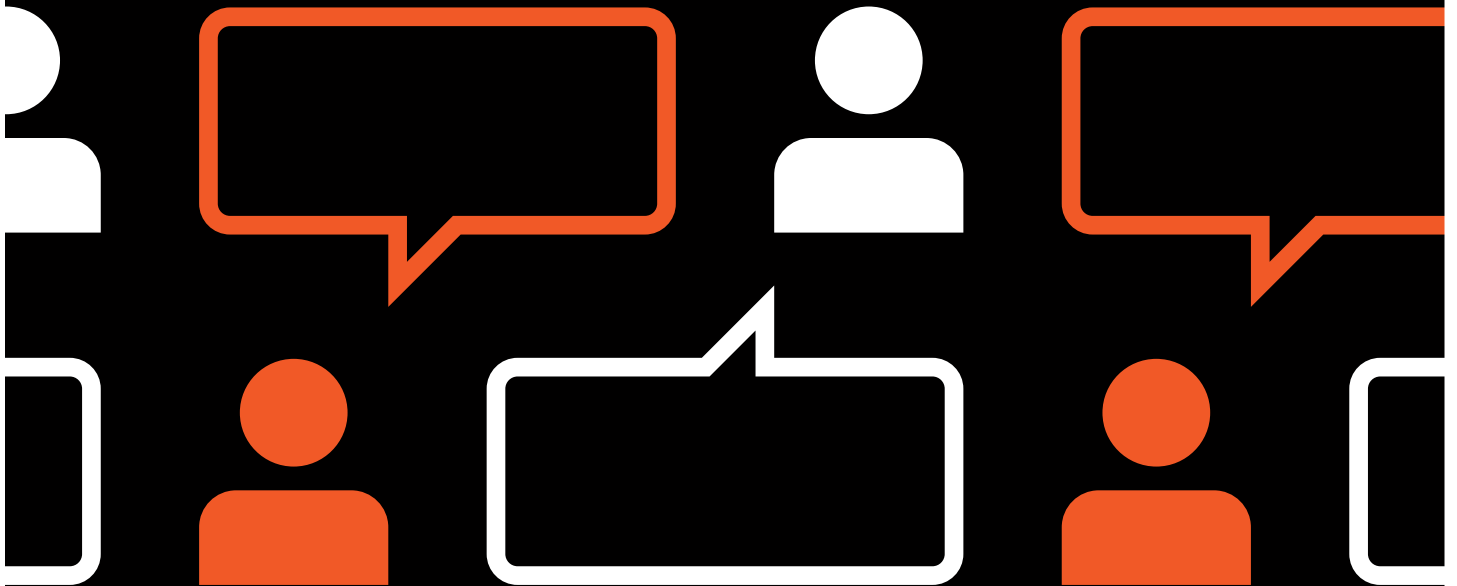
# Student Feedback Informs Admissions and Enrollment Strategies

## AUTHORS

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Given shifts in enrollment seen over the last several years, a deeper focus on applicants through more personalized attention and data-focused strategies is necessary for institutions to reach their recruitment goals. Fewer new high school graduates in large parts of the country, increases in nontraditional students looking to return to college, and increasing competition require institutions to refine their recruitment strategies.

## Goal of This Study

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The goal of this study was to provide additional context around the experience of prospective college students to help inform admissions and enrollment strategies for future students.

## About the Respondents

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### Total respondents: 1,027

Two-year or community college: **34%**

Four-year public university: **51%**

Four-year private university: **15%**

### Transfer status

**41%** did not transfer to their current institution

**27%** transferred from a two-year institution

**24%** transferred from a four-year institution

**9%** transferred from a different type of institution

### First-generation student status

First-generation: **48%**

Continuing generation: **52%**

### Race/Ethnicity\*

American Indian or Alaskan Native: **4%**

Asian or Pacific Islander: **13%**

Black or African-American: **19%**

Hispanic or Latino: **20%**

White/Caucasian: **54%**

Other: **2%**

Prefer not to answer: **2%**

\*Respondents were able to select more than one option.

### Age

22-25: **46%**

26-35: **31%**

36-45: **15%**

46-55: **6%**

56 or older: **2%**

## Communications Preferences

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Communications preferences are changing, and there are more vehicles available to communicate with prospective—and current—students. However, based on the respondent feedback, the primary approach during the admissions process continues to be email and phone communications. Only one in ten respondents indicated that texting had been used, while slightly fewer than one in five respondents indicated having used chat, and slightly over one in ten indicated the use of social media to communicate with staff members at the institution. For nontraditional students, phone communications were more prevalent, although still second to email, with texting being slightly more prevalent and less use of chat and social media than among traditional students.

### Preferred Communication Method

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**Email: over 3 in 4**

**Text message: over 4 in 10**

**Phone call: fewer than 1 in 4**

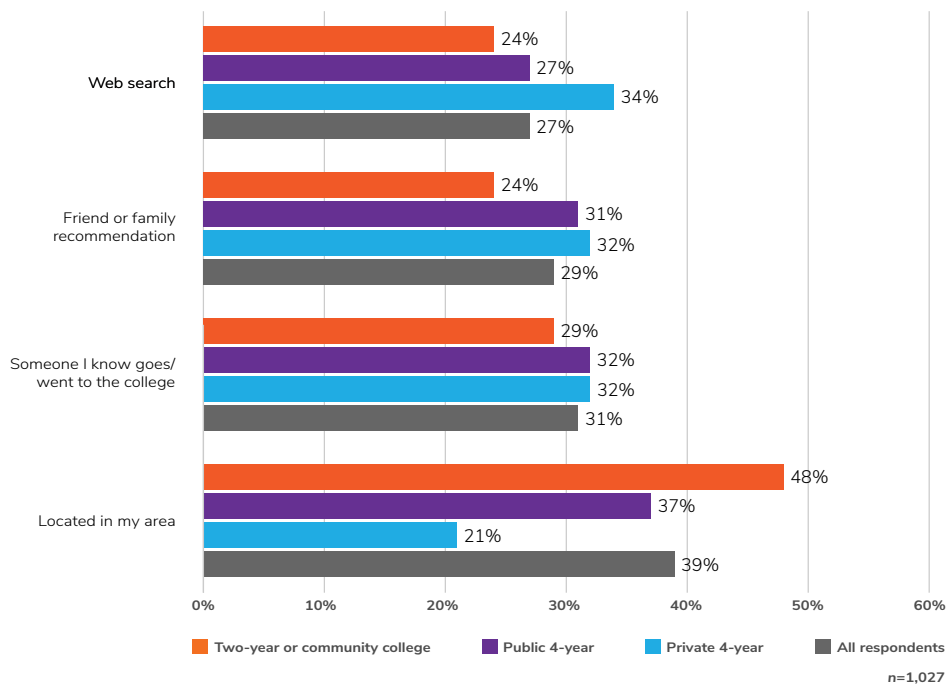
When asked about how they would like to receive communications (selecting among email, text message, and phone call), nearly eight in ten respondents identified email as a preferred method of communication, while nearly one-half of respondents also selected text messaging as a preferred method. Phone calls are clearly not preferred, as this was only selected by slightly over one in five respondents. This highlights a dichotomy between how students were communicated with during the enrollment process and their preferences. Institutions should seek platforms that allow them to communicate in the preferred way(s) of prospective and current students—that is, infusing more text messaging in communication plans and continuing to focus on email communications. There was some variation in preferences by type of student, with first-generation students indicating a higher preference for text messaging, while among nontraditional students, the percentage selecting phone communications was higher than for any other group.

Therefore, not only should institutions vary their communications approaches for prospective students but should seek to adjust communications to meet the preferences of each applicant. Rather than asking an applicant for their preference, admissions and enrollment offices should be able to discern an applicant’s preference based on where they are most responsive—this will serve as an additional indication to applicants that institutions know them. By capturing how and with what students are engaging, institutions can deliver more targeted communications to deepen the relationship between the applicant and the institution.

## Factors in Identifying an Institution

Clearly, building a large admissions funnel is critical to ensuring that an institution meets its enrollment targets. While perhaps not surprising, survey results continue to show the importance of a connection to the institution, whether that is being in their vicinity (nearly four in ten had heard about the institution this way), knowing someone who attended or is attending the institution (nearly one in three respondents), or through a recommendation by a friend or family member (nearly three in ten respondents indicated this was one of the ways they had first heard about the institution). These were the top three ways that prospective students heard about the institution they are currently attending.

**How did you hear about the college you’re currently attending?**



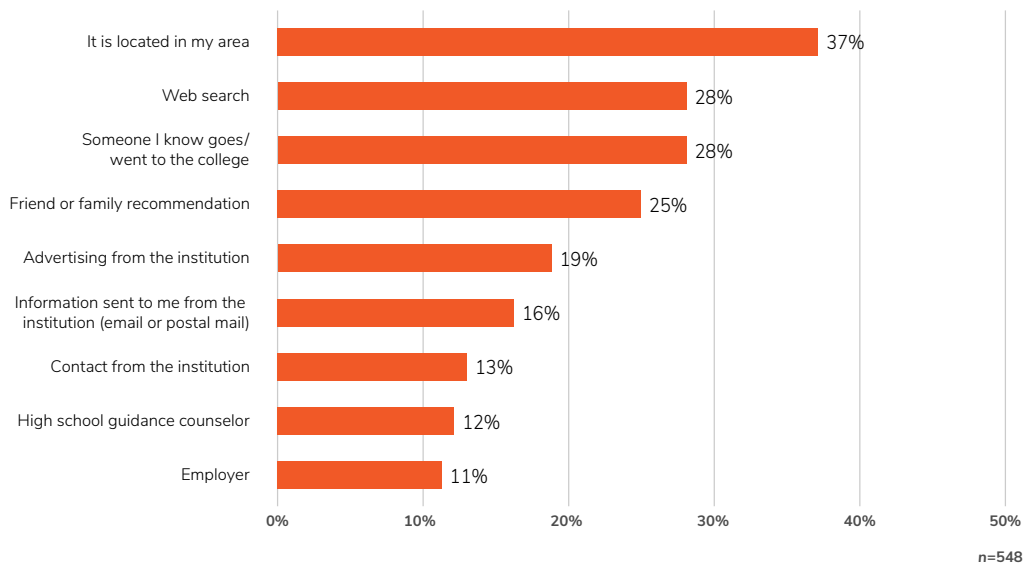
There were some differences by type of institution. Based on the survey results, four-year private institutions are even more dependent on web searches as over one in three respondents indicated that they heard about their current institution through a web search. Word-of-mouth recommendations were identified by over three in ten respondents, with the same percentage identifying that they know someone who attends or attended the institution as one of the ways they heard about the institution.

For community college respondents, location continues to be the key element, with nearly one in two pointing to that, followed by nearly one in three knowing someone attending the institution. The largest difference was in the third-highest response, with nearly one in four stating that they heard about the institution through a web search, with the same percentage identifying the reason as a recommendation from a friend or family member. This is an indication that community colleges—even though generally in the area where students live—are potentially more dependent on a strong web presence than four-year public institutions. The highest percentage of respondents at four-year public institutions heard about the institution due to being located in the area, followed by knowing someone who attends or attended the institution.

While contact from the institution and information sent to the respondent from the institution were not key factors influencing how they heard about the institution, the impact of these actions was higher for private institutions compared to community colleges and four-year public institutions.

There were similarities to the overall population when only considering nontraditional students (in this case identified as respondents who are 26 years of age or older); being located in the area was mentioned by the most respondents, followed by a web search, knowing someone at the institution, and a friend or family recommendation.

### How did you hear about the institution?



Even given some of these distinctions by type of institution, it is clear that institutions that the prospective student has a personal connection with—either based on location or a friend who has attended, have an inherent advantage over those that are located farther away. Additionally, these results continue to highlight how impactful word-of-mouth is for students first hearing about the institution where they later enroll. Institutions should therefore identify ways to encourage word-of-mouth communication, whether by developing deeper partnerships with alumni engagement officers or in other ways. While advertising, information received from the institution, and hearing about an institution from guidance counselors all contributed to respondents learning about an institution, these were much less prevalent factors than being located in the area, knowing someone who attends or attended the institution, recommendations from family or friends, and a web search. These results seem to indicate the interest among prospective students in having a solid understanding of their potential experience at an institution because someone like them was successful. Institutions must find more ways of highlighting that information for prospective students in various ways throughout the admissions and enrollment process.

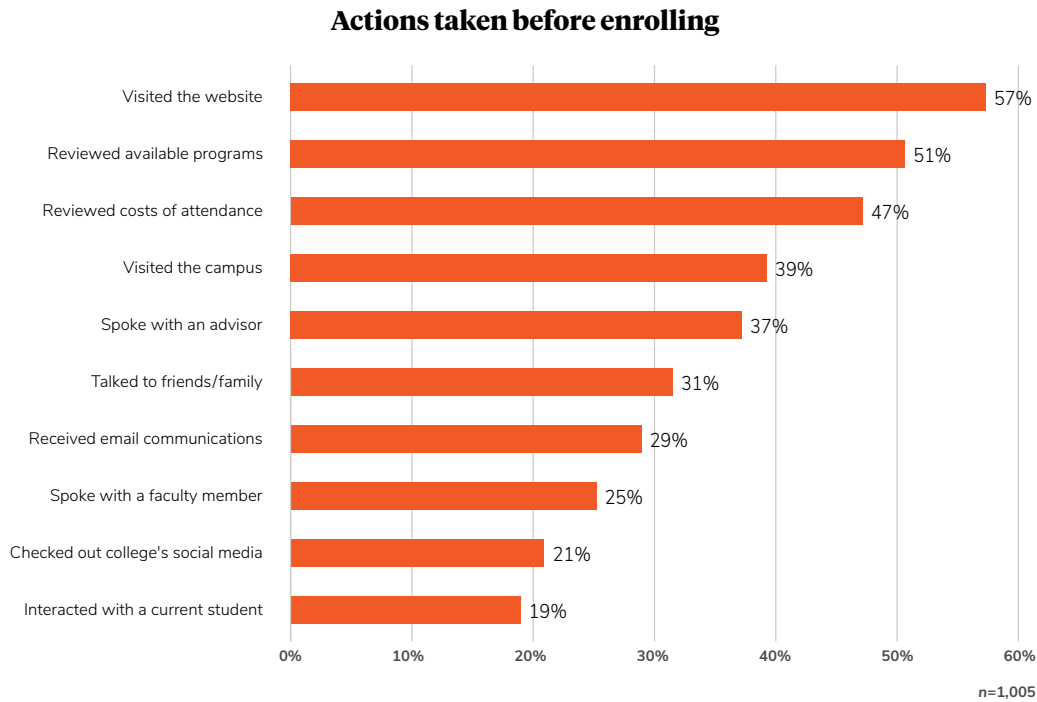
## **Pre-Enrollment Interaction**

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Not surprisingly, more than one in two respondents indicated that they interacted with the admissions office before enrolling. In contrast, more than four in ten mentioned interacting with financial aid, and four in ten interacted with advisors at the institution as they were considering enrolling. This was generally similar across institution types. Of note is that career services was the area with the lowest indicated interaction, which given the societal focus on career outcomes, may present an opportunity for institutions. An indication that this could indeed serve an institution well is the higher percentage of nontraditional students who indicated that they interacted with career services (difference of seven percent). This was the largest difference demographically. Institutions have an opportunity to incorporate career services into prospective student events and also into the enrollment decision process in ways that are meaningful to incoming students—especially among older prospective students.

Prior to enrolling, more than half of students reviewed the institutional website, with one in two looking at available programs and nearly the same number reviewing the cost of attendance. At the same time, nearly four in ten visited the campus. Somewhat surprising is that only one in five respondents reported looking at the institution's social media. Therefore, institutions should continue to focus on maintaining and enhancing their web presence. Comparatively few respondents (one in five) reported interacting with current students (this was slightly higher among students at four-year private institutions). This compares to one in three who talked with family or friends to learn more about the institution and a slightly higher percentage who spoke with a counselor or advisor at the institution. Given that prospective students indicate a strong

influence of family and friends in decision-making, institutions should consider additional ways to connect more prospective students with current students as another avenue for insights. While not the same as someone who is known to prospective students, information gleaned will likely be considered more authentic than what is on the institutional website. Overall though, the impact of family and friends in the decision-making process and in providing information—or perceptions—about the institution continues to be critical in decision-making.



## Application and Enrollment Processes

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While three in ten respondents indicated that nothing could have made the enrollment process easier for them, that means that seven in ten respondents would have preferred changes in the enrollment process. Nearly three in ten felt that there were too many hoops to jump through, with nearly the same number of respondents indicating that they would have liked a better idea of the steps to enroll. This indicates that applicants are seeking more detailed information—especially when considering that a similar number of respondents indicated that they would have liked to receive more communication throughout the application and enrollment process. One in four respondents also indicated that it would have been helpful to have an advisor to speak with to help answer questions.

This sends a pretty clear message to institutions—there is a desire among applicants for an easier process. While this may not affect enrollment in the end, as it is seen as part of the process, institutions that simplify the process are going to have a leg up on other institutions. Institutions should continue to refine their enrollment process to make it clearer for prospective students. Messaging should focus on steps needed throughout the process, and communication should continue even after the application is received, with updates or additional information. Making some adjustments in this process could result in a better experience for applicants throughout the process resulting in a higher number of incoming students.



**7 in 10 respondents  
would have preferred changes  
in the enrollment process**

## Selecting an Institution

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Many factors drive enrollment decisions among students at institutions across the country, with location, cost, and availability of intended major or area of interest continuing to be the top reasons students select the institution in which they enroll. In addition, the availability of classes and the reputation of the institution also impacted the decision. For those students selecting a two-year or community college or four-year public university, four in ten respondents indicated that location was a key factor in their selection—similar to how they heard about the institution. For those attending four-year private institutions, almost half indicated that the availability of specific majors or areas of interest as the driving factor with reputation and location as other driving factors. These factors were more important in the overall decision-making process than cost and amount of financial aid received among those attending private institutions. These institutions should continue to highlight their reputation in communications and encourage campus visits among interested students. Identifying other ways to show the feel of the campus will likely also resonate with prospective students.



With changes in recruitment practices due to changes in NACAC regulations, as well as the effects of the pandemic, over half of the respondents attending a four-year institution indicated that they transferred to their current school. This was higher for those respondents identifying as first-generation students, as one in three transferred from a four-year institution to another compared to one in five who were not first-generation students.

As institutions across the country face enrollment challenges, it is more important than ever that institutions continue to provide differentiating features as it relates to program availability, perceived overall value, and reputation when recruiting prospective students. Student mobility post-enrollment, due to the current state of higher education and our world, continues to threaten overall enrollment. Institutions must constantly be working to retain students with a special focus on first-generation students. Given the higher mobility of students today, institutions should also make it easy for prospective transfer students to find information relevant to them on the website.

## Career Preparation

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More than eight in ten respondents expressed agreement across demographic categories and institution types that it would be beneficial to be provided with a list of courses and when to take them. This was even higher at community colleges, with nearly nine in ten indicating that such information would be helpful. In addition, more than one in three respondents indicated that if such information had been available from other colleges they considered, they would have been more likely to enroll at those institutions.



**Over 8 in 10 agreed that receiving information on what courses to take and when to take them is helpful.**

**1 in 3 indicated they would have enrolled elsewhere if that information had been available there.**

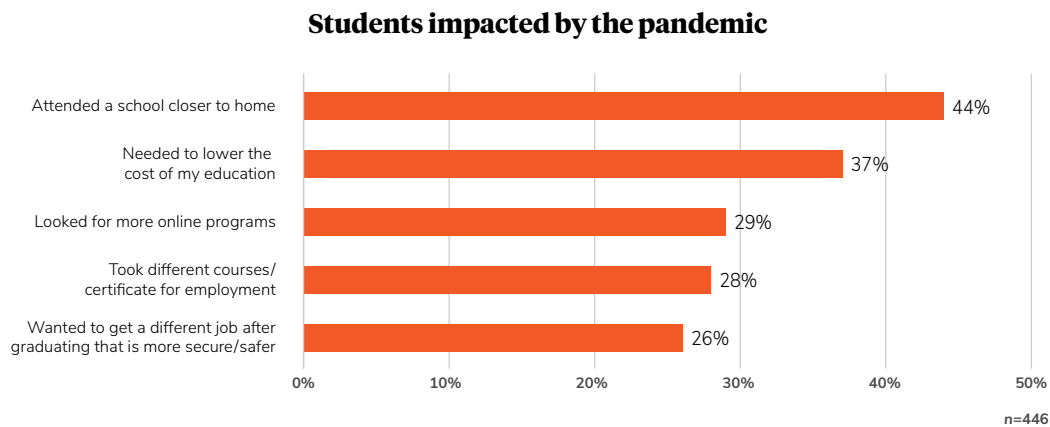
While many respondents were confident about their career choice, interest in this type of information remained high. Institutions have the opportunity to be more proactive in sharing information about paths to graduation with prospective students, as well as throughout the student experience.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic and Enrollment

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The pandemic has impacted multiple enrollment cycles, and many respondents were likely part of the group of students that started their academic experience during the pandemic. More than four in ten indicated that the decision to attend their current institution was impacted by the pandemic. Of these, over four in ten indicated that they wanted to attend an institution closer to home, while over one in three needed to lower the cost of their education, and nearly three in ten decided to take different courses in preparation for employment. Roughly the same number were looking for programs that could be completed online due to the impact of the pandemic.

While the situation remains fluid, and there continues to be uncertainty about the potential long-term impact of the pandemic, it has clearly influenced how respondents select institutions.



## Opportunities for Institutions

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There are a 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.

- Expand opportunities for alumni to assist with recruitment given the impact of friend and family recommendations
- Continue to find ways to clarify the steps needed for application and enrollment and seek to reduce steps
- Determine if there are additional opportunities to connect applicants with current students and with career services
- Identify preferred communication method of applicants and offer multi- or omni-channel communications
- Recruitment of students has traditionally received most of the attention as it relates to institutional enrollment, but student mobility creates an increased need for effective retention strategies
- Provide information about courses to take during the admissions process, as well as information on how programs prepare students for success
- Continue to be mindful of the pandemic and the impact it has had on students' choice of institutions and degree programs

## About the Authors

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**Jennifer Beyer, Ed.D.**, serves as vice president, product management at Anthology, where she leads the product team in helping customers solve problems in new ways and enables them to meet their enrollment, retention, and advancement goals. She came to the organization in 2017 as part of the acquisition of Hobson's Admissions products, where she spent the previous five years in roles of progressive responsibility. Prior to that, Dr. Beyer served as assistant director, enrollment management at the University of South Florida. She received a B.A. from the University of South Florida and earned an MBA in marketing and Ed.D. in higher education from Nova Southeastern University.

**Adam Hopkins** is a strategic consultant at Anthology working alongside and supporting new and existing customers. Prior to joining Anthology in 2019, Adam spent 17 years in higher education. A majority of this time was spent in admissions but also included collaboration with departments across campus, implementing and training of various solutions. Currently, much of Adam's focus centers around enablement and support of both CRM and workforce analytics solutions. Adam's primary areas of interest include enhancing operational efficiencies, data management, and solution optimization. Adam holds a bachelor's degree from Hope College in business administration.

**Mirko Widenhorn, Ed.D.**, is senior director of engagement strategy at Anthology. Mirko joined the Anthology team in 2013, bringing over 11 years of higher education experience. Most recently, he was the director of alumni relations and annual giving at Wilkes University. In his role at Anthology, he works closely with customers on alumni engagement scoring projects while also focusing on thought leadership for higher education. Mirko 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

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Data was collected through a nationwide survey conducted in November 2021 utilizing a national survey platform. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to indicate that they were currently enrolled in a college or university, and students 22 and older were targeted to complete the survey. A total of 1,027 responses were considered valid and used for the analysis. For each data point referenced above, null values were excluded.

## About Anthology

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Anthology exists to help higher education advance and thrive using modern cloud technology and services that keep the learner at the forefront. Drawing on a fully connected data experience, Anthology solutions create operational efficiencies, provide intelligence for staff and administrators, and empower institutional leaders to support and guide students on a path to success.

The full suite covers admission and enrollment management; student success and retention; institutional and learning effectiveness; alumni and advancement; and enterprise applications and infrastructure, offering solutions to the challenges facing campuses today. Working with more than 2,000 colleges and institutions in over 30 countries, Anthology is constantly discovering new ways to revolutionize higher education. Learn more about our mission at [www.anthology.com](http://www.anthology.com).