2016

MYTHBUSTING WEBSITES

What Professionals Believe Teens Think
About Higher Ed Websites
— And What Teens *Really* Think

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TABLE *of* CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

"A college's website is its most important marketing tool." In 2016, who would dispute that statement? It's accepted as fact among university marketers, web developers, and admission officers across the world.

And why not? It makes intuitive sense: Websites are always available to prospective students (or anyone else) in a couple of swipes across a smartphone screen, instantly gratifying their desire to learn whether a college they've just heard about is a potential match for them. And, the importance of websites to prospective students, especially teens, has been confirmed through focus groups and survey research.

However, it's been several years since anyone has conducted in-depth research with prospective students — specifically high school juniors and seniors — to find out how they use college websites in their college search and choice process; what they like and don't like about what they find there; and what changes might improve these websites.

Good reasons exist for the lack of recent research, of course. By 2010, the importance of college websites to teens during their college search and choice was well established. At about that time, the research focus on the use of .edu websites shifted to how teen college search and choice were affected by the swift and widespread adoption of social media and devices such as tablets and, especially, smartphones.

So, we wondered, how do teens view college websites now, in 2016?

Some of the most intriguing findings from the "Mythbusting Admissions" research we conducted last year was that college professionals often misunderstood what teens actually did in their college search and choice. As we noted then, we attempted to illuminate

and address some of the myths we encounter in conversations, blog posts, tweets, and the well-meaning advice offered based on a limited view of data mismatched with actual behavior.

Our goal this year was to understand how well college marketers, admission officers, and web professionals know how teens use websites — and where they misunderstand prospective students' needs, interests, or experiences.

To conduct our research, we developed a survey in collaboration with Mike Hanus from Constituent Research, LLC. We developed a questionnaire for teens first, we then used nearly identical questions to construct a survey for marketers, web professionals, and admission officers at colleges and universities. For more detail on the surveys and demographic profiles of the respondents, see Appendix 1.

And, as we pointed out in our "Mythbusting Admissions" white paper last year, with contemporary teens, it's complicated.

MYTHS, BUSTED

Overall, we believe, this research underscores the fact that for teens, college search and choice is a complicated process. If you talk to teenagers who are in the midst of looking at colleges, you know that they are considering many factors. And, as a result, they use many different sources of information. We continue to be impressed by how discerning teens can be. As some of our findings show, they're willing to dig for information, and some of the ways they interact with university websites may seem counterintuitive, at least from the perspective of college web managers, admission officers, and marketers. Here are seven myths that teens help us put to rest.

MYTH 1:

Your website is effective with teens if it isn't responsive.

It's no secret that teens are huge users of smartphones, as anyone with a teenager knows — or, indeed, anyone who reads any research about teens quickly learns. Last year, we looked at how teens use their mobiles in various aspects of college search and choice and how they preferred colleges to communicate with them. And like many others, we noted how teens prefer to use their phones as an always-there source for finding information (and for many other things, such as communicating with their friends). This year, we were surprised to learn that two out of three teens (66 percent) used a smartphone to respond to our survey. In contrast, nearly all (92 percent) of the higher education professionals who responded used a desktop or laptop computer.

What does this mean? Quite simply it's highly likely that teens' first visit to your website will be on a mobile device as may subsequent visits — maybe even all of them. Under these circumstances, your website must be responsive.

MYTH 2:

Teens will think poorly of your college if you have a bad website.

While teens have told other researchers that they equate the quality of a website with the quality of an institution, our respondents don't seem to share that perspective. Fewer than half of prospects (43 percent) told us that they believed a college's website influences their opinion of that college (rating it a four or five on a five-point scale where five = "A great deal"). Similarly, only 43 percent said a poorly designed college website would negatively impact their opinion of that college. To say the least, we were surprised: We would have responded with our colleagues on campus who overwhelmingly (77 percent) said that teens would think poorly of a college with a poor website.

But let's be clear: In a competitive market such as higher education, you cannot ignore your most important marketing vehicle, when 43 percent of your potential customers say their opinions will be influenced by it. Just imagine that conversation with your admission director, "I'm sorry your applications dropped 43 percent this year, but our website hasn't seen

MYTHS, BUSTED
(CONTINUED)

a significant refresh since 2011. That negatively affected the opinions of our university with two out of five of our prospective student visitors."

MYTH 3:

Your website is the most important influence in a teen's decision to apply.

College websites are influential to teens, that's undeniable. But professionals overemphasize the website's importance as a top influencer in a teen's decision on whether to apply. Eighty percent of professionals said they believed that teens would rank the website as a highly important decision-maker. But only 37 percent of teens did so in our survey.

We took a deeper dive into this issue, asking teens to share the most important elements of college websites during search and choice. Not surprisingly, teens use websites to learn more about institutions during the research phase. At this stage, they're also being influenced by their friends and family, guidance counselors and teachers, interactions with admission staff, information on college search sites, and so much more. No matter how beautiful or effective your site, it rarely will trump the influence of a parent, guardian, or counselor.

Research showed that websites become more transactional tools as teens near the application stage. They ranked how to apply, how to contact college employees with questions, and locating financial aid information as their primary reasons for visiting a college website when applying to colleges. At this stage, the opportunity for the college website to influence the decision to apply has passed.

The findings of other surveys, and, in particular, the Chegg/Stamats "2016 TeensTALK® Survey," support how persistently important college websites are for teens throughout their college search and choice. That, more than

anything, underscores the enduring value of the website to teen applicants.

MYTH 4:

Teens overwhelming prefer video and images to text on college websites.

We all know that teens love video — and 76 percent of college professionals we surveyed said they believed that teens preferred videos over text on college websites. And because teens are so visual, 74 percent of college professionals said they believed that photos were their second choice of media.

When we asked teens what media they preferred on college websites, 64 percent said that text and articles were most important to them. Photographs (60 percent) were a close second in importance. Videos came in fifth (40 percent). To us, this indicates that students value clear, concise, and relevant information on what they expect be an information-rich platform on which they can find detailed answers to their questions about a specific institution. A great headline and compelling and informative copy boost the relevance of video and images.

MYTH 5:

Teens move freely back and forth between social media and websites.

Because teens use social media to inform their decisions about college, it must be true that they go back and forth between various social sites and websites, right? That's one reason that college websites feature social media icons and links so prominently and provide excerpts from their official social media sites.

But while we know that teens *do* use social media to determine fit, they don't use it to the extent that college professionals think they do. And, what's more, they don't click through to social media *from* college websites, or to college websites from social sites to any great

degree at any stage of their college search and choice process. Social media continues to be a way for people to connect with each other — and less so for people to connect to institutions or brands.

That said, teens (as well as many others, such as parents and alumni) do follow college social media channels. So social media is very important — just don't expect teens to click through from your Facebook page to your website and vice versa.

MYTH 6:

Teens are eager to engage with a college through a smartphone app.

Why not make an app to allow institutions to spur engagement from prospective students? While relatively few professionals (12 percent) thought that students would download an app and use it when researching colleges, 22 percent of students said that they actually used an app in researching colleges. But a decisive majority — 72 percent — said that they never used an app at all; 54 percent of professionals thought teens were open to doing so, after they had decided where they were going to attend college.

MYTH 7:

Virtual tours are way more important to teens than campus maps.

A majority of college professionals — 78 percent — said they believed that teens used virtual tours when researching colleges, and 39 percent believed they used campus maps. Surprisingly, 67 percent of teens said they used campus maps; 64 percent said they used virtual tours. Both tools have importance, especially in the earliest stages of teens' college search, but it's clearly easy for professionals to over-value virtual tours and, perhaps, neglect the less-sexy but very valuable campus map.

KEY FINDINGS

How important are college websites in teens' college search and choice process?

The short answer to this question may surprise a lot of higher education professionals who fund, develop, design, and maintain institutional websites, because 79 percent of professionals said they believed that teens think a college website ranks as a six or seven on a seven-point importance scale. This is consistent with findings reported in NACAC's "2015 State of College Admission," in which 84.4 percent of respondents to the NACAC survey attached "considerable importance" to websites as a recruitment strategy for prospective undergraduates. It ranked first on a list of 17 strategies, higher than email (83 percent) or hosted campus visits (77 percent).

In contrast, the teens who responded to our survey did not rank websites nearly that highly: Only 37 percent of prospects rated the importance of the college website a six or seven. (See Figure 1.)

This contrasts with findings of other researchers. The "2016 Social Admissions Report" by Chegg and TargetX asked respondents to rank four kinds of online sources as to how useful they were in college research using a four-point scale. In this survey, 84 percent of respondents said college and university sites were extremely or very useful; 69 percent ranked college review and scholarship sites (such as Chegg, Niche, etc.) as extremely or very useful; and 41 percent said social media sites were extremely or very useful.

The question we asked teens was, "When you evaluate a particular college prior to deciding whether to apply, how important is the college's website in your decision whether to apply?" Consider that the average teen researching colleges uses myriad sources of

information, including: recommendations from people they know personally, such as teachers, guidance counselors, friends, and family; college search sites such as Naviance and the College Board; college ranking sites such as U.S. News and World Report; conversations at college fairs; mailings from colleges; posts on social media, ranging from Facebook comments to Instagram images and Snaps or Stories on Snapchat; online resources and search sites such as Niche, U.S. News and World Report, and others; and many other sources of information. Not to mention campus visits, where the all-important gut-check occurs, answering with more finality the big question of "Will I fit in here?"

Because their decisions include so many online and offline sources of information, it makes sense that teens may have assigned a lower importance to college websites when they answered our question.

However, several major differences exist between a college website and the other sources teens use. For one, a college site is official. And then again, none of the other sources offers such a range of information nor is available 24/7 on-demand. In short, the website is the perfect information source in an

age of instant gratification, where consumers are trained to search for and find the information they need to inform their purchase decisions. Sixty-three percent of college juniors responding to the Ruffalo Noel-Levitz "E-Expectations" survey said that they used websites to "get the answers themselves."
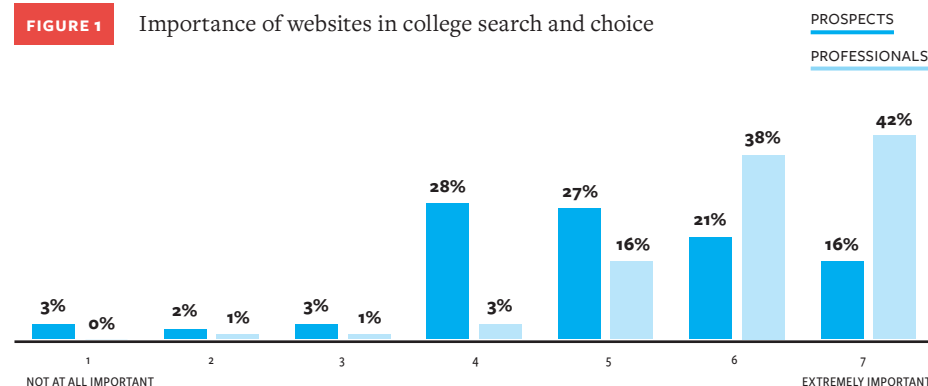
It's indisputable that prospective students use college websites through their college search and choice process far more than they use any other sources, including social media. It's not surprising: They need different kinds of information at different stages of the process, and the place they can find it is on the websites of the colleges they are considering.

Why do teens visit a college website — and when?

Closely related to the question of just how important the college website is, is the fact that teens rely on college websites throughout their search and choice process — far more than they do any other college-provided or commercial source of information.

Other research conducted with teens supports this statement. For example, more than 70 percent of teens told the "2016 TeensTALK® Survey" researchers that they used a college's

FIGURE 1   Importance of websites in college search and choice

PROSPECTS
PROFESSIONALS

	Prospects	Professionals
1 — NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT	3%	0%
2	2%	1%
3	3%	1%
4	28%	3%
5	27%	16%
6	21%	38%
7 — EXTREMELY IMPORTANT	16%	42%

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 2248   PROFESSIONALS: 586

KEY FINDINGS

website through the four phases of their college application process (research, apply, accept/decide, commit). The only other resource used as persistently throughout the process was college-affiliated social media accounts — and those were used to a much lesser degree than websites. (See Figure 2.)

That's because what teens look for depends on where they are in their decision-making process. For example, when they are first researching colleges, their top three information needs are academic programs (selected by 93 percent of respondents), location (90 percent), and cost (89 percent). When they've been accepted and are deciding where to go, their top choices are information about professors (39 percent), financial aid (37 percent), and asking questions or contacting someone at the institution (34 percent).
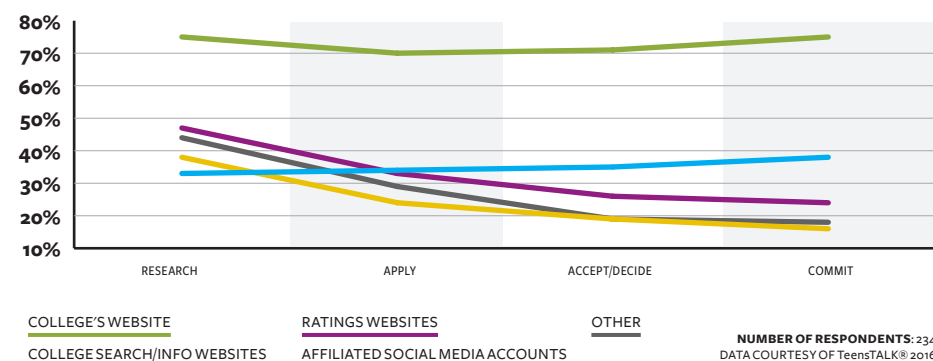
Figure 3 compares teens' actual responses to why they visit a college website during any stage in the process with what campus professionals think that prospects look for when they visit their sites.

One takeaway from this set of charts is that higher education professionals have a fairly good sense of what teens are looking for at different stages in their college search and choice process. It also illustrates how diffuse teens' needs for information become the further along they are in the process — and how, in the last stages, they really are looking beyond the website to fulfill their information needs.

That's when information sources such as campus maps and tours, social media, and campus visits and virtual tours become extremely important, as do conversations with friends, parents, and other influencers.

We'll take a look at these later on. For the

FIGURE 2 Resources of information used by teens during college search and choice

COLLEGE'S WEBSITE

COLLEGE SEARCH/INFO WEBSITES

RATINGS WEBSITES

AFFILIATED SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

OTHER

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS: 234
DATA COURTESY OF TeensTALK® 2016

moment, though, let's continue to focus on what teens say about higher education websites.

What makes a great college website?

What are the attributes of a great college website?

If you're reading this, you're probably a college professional, so it won't surprise you that large percentages of your peers believe that finding information (98 percent) and navigation (94 percent) were most important to prospects — and, in fact, teens agreed, in fairly large percentages. (See Figure 4.)

But some differences are noteworthy.

One of them is that professionals said they believed that an "updated and modern" look is more important than teens did (82 percent compared to 68 percent)[2].

More significantly, though, teens were much more interested in "compelling text" than professionals thought they were (54 percent for teens, 37 percent for professionals). And,

they were much less interested in photographs and images than professionals said they believed, rating their importance about the same as text (53 percent for teens, 83 percent for professionals).

In a separate question, we also asked teens how they prefer to consume content on a college website. Again, text and articles ranks highest (at 64 percent), although photography is close (at 60 percent). Videos rank fifth (at 40 percent), though professionals said they believed that teens prefer it to any other form of media (76 percent believed this to be the case). (See Figure 5.)

So how can it be that prospects said they value text more than video, when so many national surveys assure us that teens love video and consume a seemingly endless array of Snaps and streaming content?

Our hypothesis overall is that when teens are researching colleges, they're trying to be as efficient as possible, especially when building a list of prospective institutions for themselves.

[2] We recognize, of course, that a college or university website must serve a number of audiences. To others, such as alumni who want their institution to stand out or trustees who believe that the institution must look different from others, an "updated and modern" look may be paramount.

At this stage, it's much more time-efficient to scan text and headlines for information, which takes seconds, than it is to consume video content. It can take a minute or more to watch a video, only to learn that it doesn't contain the information you need. Now imagine that you're doing that research on an iPhone with poor reception. Which option seems preferable to you?

Perhaps this example illustrates how we believe teens operate at this stage in their process. Suppose you're about to go to the market and are compiling a shopping list of ingredients you
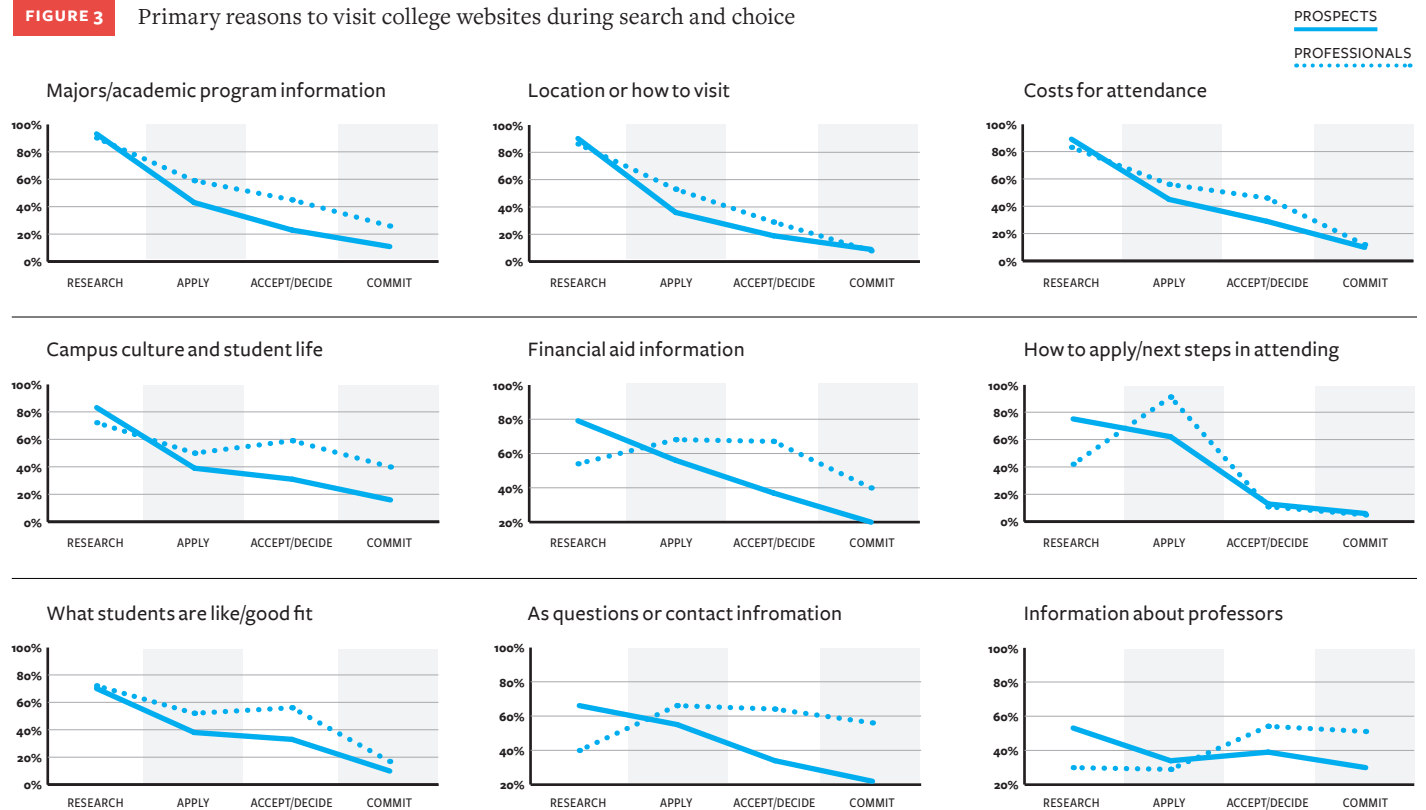
need to prepare the main course for dinner. You'll look for a written recipe for the dish you want to make so you can scan it and make sure you have everything you need. That takes seconds. When you're ready to prepare the meal, you may watch a video to learn a new technique you'll need in order to complete the recipe. But that's only because you've already made a commitment to preparing that particular dish.

In Figure 6, you can see how the specific content needs of teens change during the course of their search and choice process.

When researching colleges, they are primarily looking for facts. And images that help them picture a specific campus, its setting, and its buildings essentially are facts. This is why the top-rated images in "E-Expectations 2016" surveys were "location shots without people," or "images that delivered a sense of place."

If teens are truly interested in an institution, they'll go deeper and learn more. And, in fact, after they decide where they will attend, campus news and events become important — though, at this point, they may well be engaged with their future institution, current students there,

FIGURE 3   Primary reasons to visit college websites during search and choice

PROSPECTS
PROFESSIONALS

Majors/academic program information

Location or how to visit

Costs for attendance

Campus culture and student life

Financial aid information

How to apply/next steps in attending

What students are like/good fit

As questions or contact infromation

Information about professors

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 1933   PROFESSIONALS: 552

FIGURE 4 Attributes of a great college website

PROSPECTS   PROFESSIONALS

[I/They] can find what [I'm/they're] looking for quickly and easily.
88%
98%

The website is easy to navigate.
85%
94%

[I/They] get an immediate sense of what the college is about and what it represents.
79%
89%

The overall look is updated and modern.
68%
82%

The website has compelling text (articles, information, etc.).
54%
37%

The website has interesting photographs and images.
53%
83%
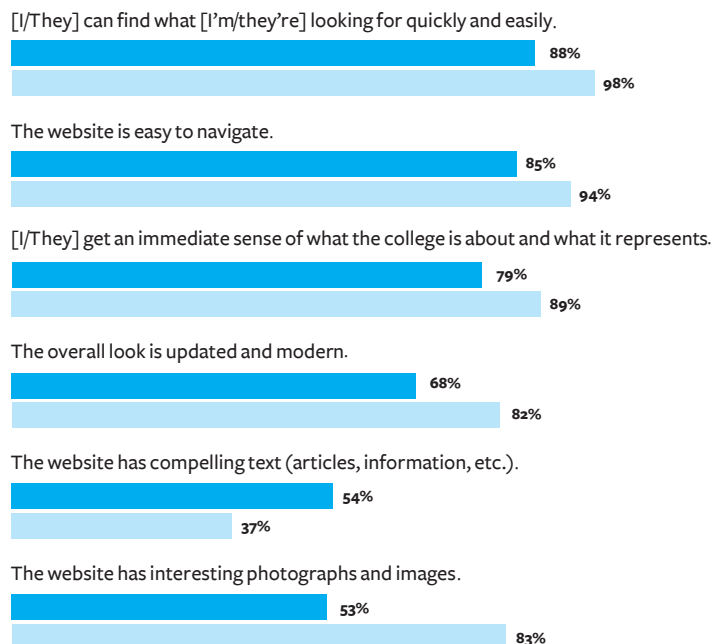
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 2154-58   PROFESSIONALS: 562-67

FIGURE 5 Media preferences on college websites

PROSPECTS   PROFESSIONALS

Text and articles
64%
17%

Photography
60%
74%

Charts and infographics
47%
55%

Headlines and subject lines
47%
55%

Videos
40%
76%

Other images besides photography
8%
6%

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 1902   PROFESSIONALS: 520

and their future classmates through Facebook, Instagram, and other social channels.

And teens *do* watch videos: 81 percent of respondents to the "2016 Social Admissions Report" by Chegg and TargetX said they watched college videos — that's four in five of them.

But they told us that certain kinds of videos are valuable to them. About three out of four (73 percent) told us that "videos about academic programs" were valuable whe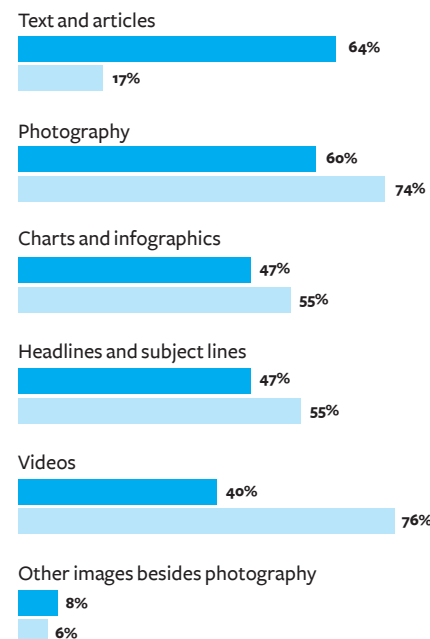n researching colleges. This makes sense: At this stage in their process, information about academics and majors is important. Once they have gathered

the facts by skimming headlines and text about these offerings, they may choose to learn more and go deeper, viewing videos about their potential major. By the time they're engaging with these videos, they already have some idea that their time investment may be worthwhile.

As for the assertion that because teens love videos, they'll expect loads of them on a college's site, we'll note as we did in last year's "Mythbusting Admissions" report: "What teens do when they are communicating with friends or entertaining themselves is very different from what they do when they essentially are shopping for what they know is a big purchase and a major decision in their lives."

We'll note with some interest that Michael Poock and Dennis Lefond found that 75 percent of prospective students considered "content" to be very important on college websites, while another 22 percent ranked it as important. In contrast, 11 percent considered [a major emphasis on] graphics to be very important, and distinctiveness [of the site] to be very important.

These findings were published in 2002 in one of the earliest studies on how prospective students used college websites. Poock and Lefond noted, "Participants felt strongly that pictures should assist the prospective student in determining what the campus looks

KEY FINDINGS
(CONTINUED)

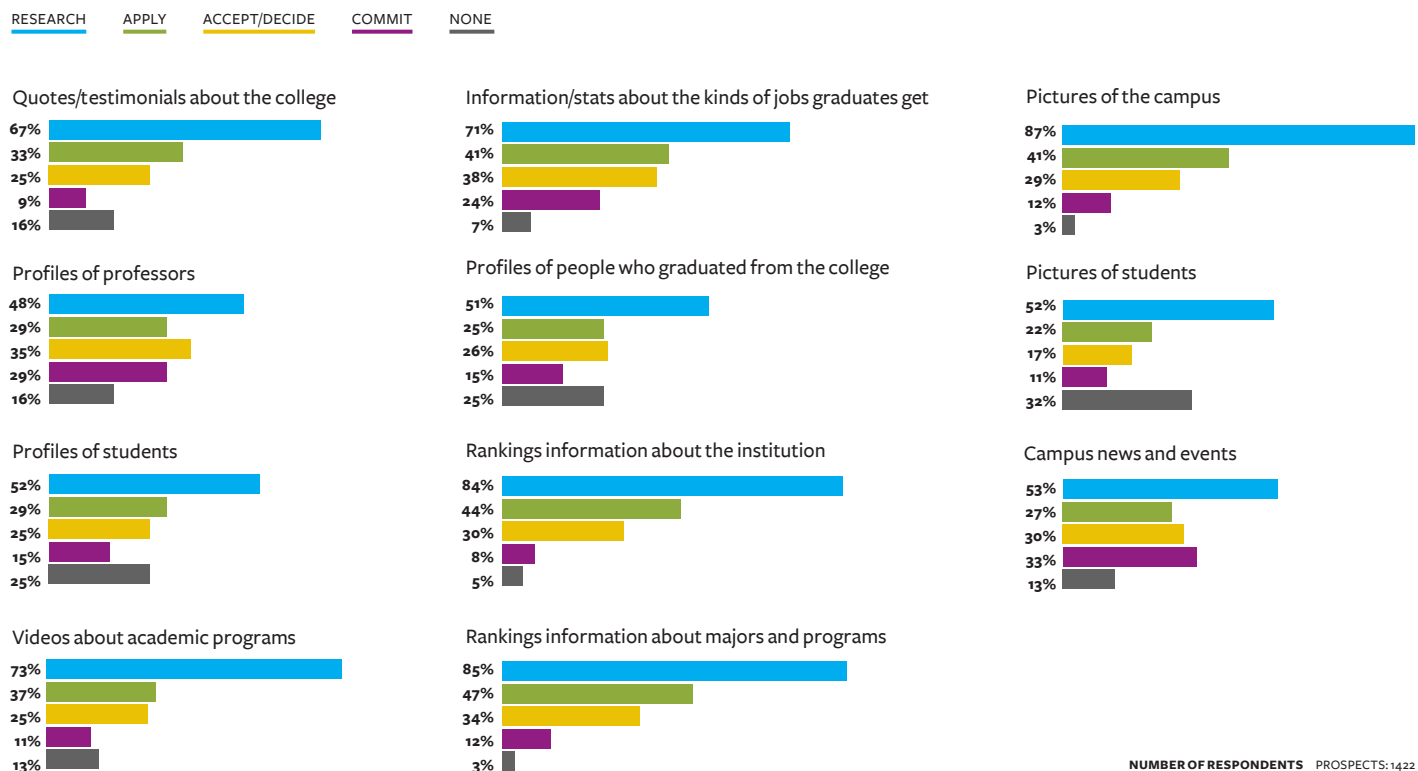**FIGURE 6**   Most valuable areas of websites for teens at different stages of the college search and choice process

RESEARCH   APPLY   ACCEPT/DECIDE   COMMIT   NONE

Quotes/testimonials about the college
- 67%
- 33%
- 25%
- 9%
- 16%

Information/stats about the kinds of jobs graduates get
- 71%
- 41%
- 38%
- 24%
- 7%

Pictures of the campus
- 87%
- 41%
- 29%
- 12%
- 3%

Profiles of professors
- 48%
- 29%
- 35%
- 29%
- 16%

Profiles of people who graduated from the college
- 51%
- 25%
- 26%
- 15%
- 25%

Pictures of students
- 52%
- 22%
- 17%
- 11%
- 32%

Profiles of students
- 52%
- 29%
- 25%
- 15%
- 25%

Rankings information about the institution
- 84%
- 44%
- 30%
- 8%
- 5%

Campus news and events
- 53%
- 27%
- 30%
- 33%
- 13%

Videos about academic programs
- 73%
- 37%
- 25%
- 11%
- 13%

Rankings information about majors and programs
- 85%
- 47%
- 34%
- 12%
- 3%

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 1422

FIGURE 7

Degree to which a website influences
a prospect's view of a college

PROSPECTS

PROFESSIONALS

	1	2	3	4	5
PROSPECTS	5%	15%	37%	28%	15%
PROFESSIONALS	0%	2%	16%	48%	34%

NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT   EXTREMELY IMPORTANT

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 2142   PROFESSIONALS: 565
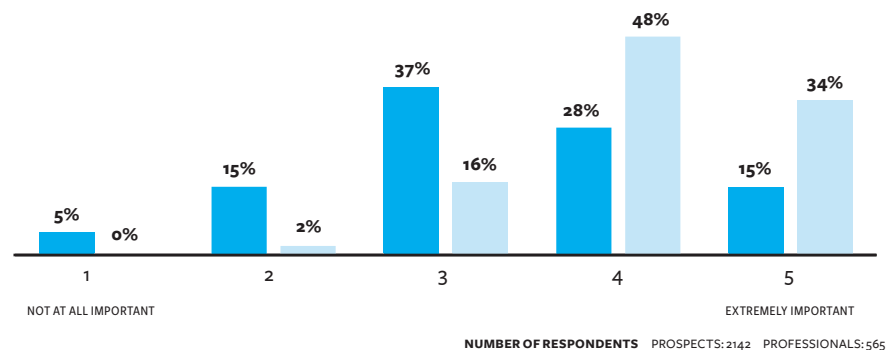
like, what the students are like. That is, they should help the prospective student answer the question, "Will I fit in?" Pictures that didn't address this point were viewed as gratuitous at best or detrimental at worst by creating unnecessary downloads and wasted time."

Even in those early days, students could be ruthless when they believed that their time was being wasted.

How do websites affect a prospect's opinion of a college?

A large majority of higher education professionals (82 percent) told us that they believed that the quality of a university's website affects how teens view the institution itself.

This view also makes sense in light of research with consumers that generally supports the view that if visitors find what they need on a website and are able to conduct their transactions efficiently and quickly, they not only praise the website but think more highly of the associated business or organization. And given the fact that the average respondent to our survey visited about 14 college websites in the course of the college search, teens have a lot of opportunity to form impressions of institutions based on their websites.

Other research conducted with teen college applicants, notably "E-Expectations," supports the idea that their perceived quality of a website affected their views of the institution: In 2016, 74 percent of juniors and 75 percent of seniors agreed that "College websites make a difference in my perceptions of the school."

Our findings differ, as Figure 7 indicates. Fewer than half of prospects (43 percent) told us that they believed a college's website influences their opinion of that college (rating it a four or five on a five-point scale where five = "A great deal"). Similarly, only 43 percent said a poorly

designed college website would negatively impact their opinion of that college.

How do we account for this difference?

Figure 8 offers some support for our hypothesis that teens may well be more forgiving of certain website shortcomings than adults are.

Because teens spend so much time online — on the web, on social media, and interacting with each other through an array of games and apps — they see a lot of poorly developed and executed websites. And just possibly they're forgiving of a mediocre user interface or experience, *as long as the website has significant redeeming qualities that make it invaluable*. If this is true, then perhaps teens are less likely to react negatively to a website's shortcomings if they can find the information they need easily when they need it.
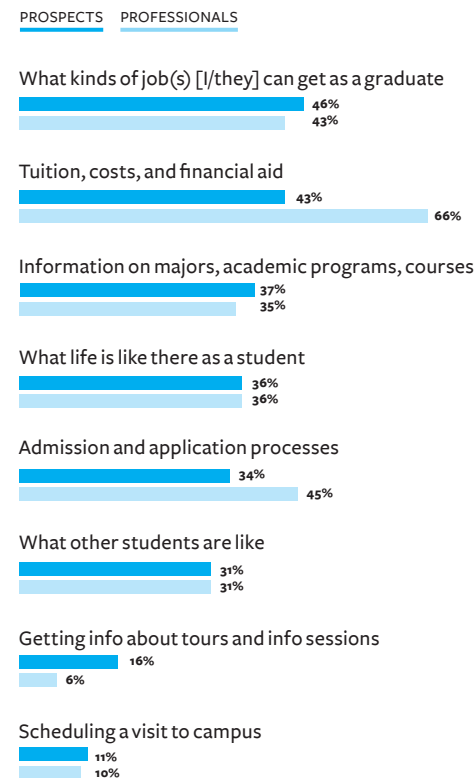
When asked what were the most serious weaknesses of higher education websites, more than two-thirds of prospects (69 percent) said that it was "difficult to get around the site to find the information I need." (See Figure 9.)

The most important information to them seems to be easy enough to find and use, especially in the early stages of their research, when they've visited relatively few sites.

The information teens need at this stage of the process (as shown in Figure 4) seems to be relatively easy to find, and those areas of the website are easy to use, because only about one in three said that academic information (37 percent) and admission and application processes (34 percent) are hard to use. In fact, prospects reported that the hardest areas of the site to use were those sections related to outcomes — "what kinds of job(s) I can get as a graduate" (selected by 46 percent of respondents) and tuition and financial aid (43

Areas of a college website that are hardest to use

PROSPECTS   PROFESSIONALS

What kinds of job(s) [I/they] can get as a graduate
46%
43%

Tuition, costs, and financial aid
43%
66%

Information on majors, academic programs, courses
37%
35%

What life is like there as a student
36%
36%

Admission and application processes
34%
45%

What other students are like
31%
31%

Getting info about tours and info sessions
16%
6%

Scheduling a visit to campus
11%
10%

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 1370   PROFESSIONALS: 442

percent). And we'll observe that these topics are complicated by their very nature, so it makes sense that they take more time and attention than do other areas of the site that present less nuanced information.

This isn't an argument against improving higher education websites! But if this hypothesis is correct, it suggests that adopting certain conventions among higher education websites, such as relatively standardized navigation sets and labelling for "academics"

KEY FINDINGS
(CONTINUED)

or "academic programs," may be beneficial.

In short, because these conventions make information more findable, they may mute criticism of other deficits. Visitors to any website appreciate labels that are understandable and straightforward rather than obscured with special terms: Steve Krug made this point in his classic book on web usability, "Don't Make Me Think."

What are the weaknesses of college websites?

We suggested that teens might not be as harsh in their judgments of the quality of higher education websites as the professionals who create and manage them are. But that doesn't mean that they're completely satisfied with what websites offer.

Let's take a look at some of the shortcomings that students identified. They share with higher education professionals the observation that college websites are disorganized. When asked to select up to three weaknesses of higher education websites, 69 percent of teens selected "difficult to get around the site to find ... information ....," as did 81 percent of professionals.

Other shortcomings included content that didn't meet the needs of visitors (56 percent of teens and 50 percent of professionals) and concerns about site searches that did not work well (30 percent of teens and 44 percent of professionals. (See Figure 9.)

When asked what sections were the most difficult to use (Figure 8), teens identified a lack of clarity about what kinds of jobs they could get after graduation (46 percent) — indicating a need for alignment between recruitment marketing messages and real outcomes — and tuition, costs, and financial aid (43 percent).

As we look at the responses from teens, we see continued opportunities to improve information and messaging around some of the important information needs: admission and application processes, developing a sense of what students and student life are like, academic information, and tuition costs and financial aid information and processes. And it's not surprising to us that teens are concerned about jobs and outcomes, because that's a question that's sure to be on the minds of their parents, if not foremost in their own consciousnesses. In essence, admission marketing messages should be tied to career services and outcomes just as much as they are tied to financial aid and affordability.

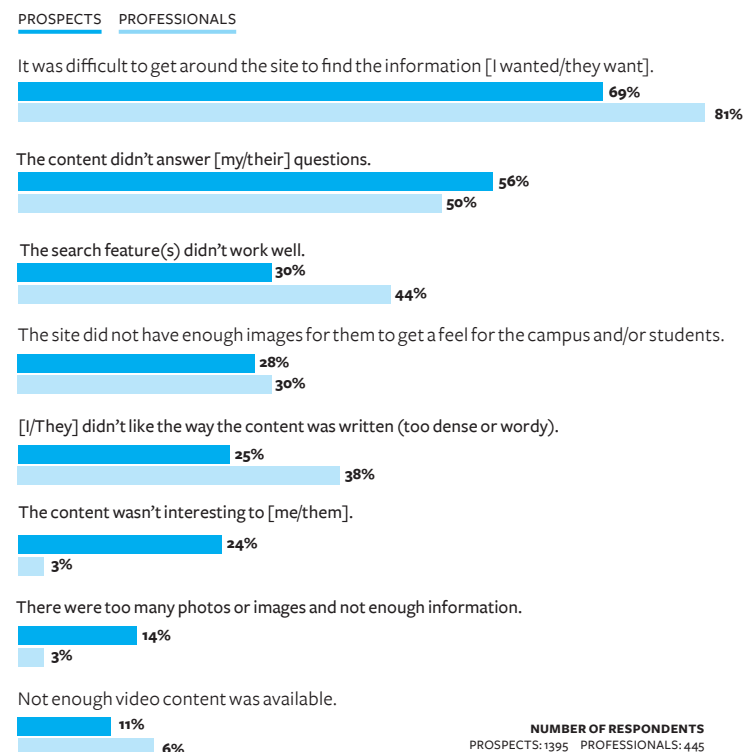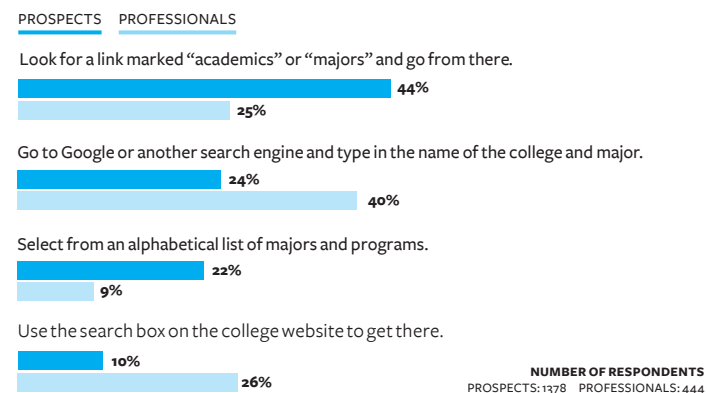**FIGURE 9** The biggest weaknesses of college websites

PROSPECTS   PROFESSIONALS

It was difficult to get around the site to find the information [I wanted/they want].
- 69%
- 81%

The content didn't answer [my/their] questions.
- 56%
- 50%

The search feature(s) didn't work well.
- 30%
- 44%

The site did not have enough images for them to get a feel for the campus and/or students.
- 28%
- 30%

[I/They] didn't like the way the content was written (too dense or wordy).
- 25%
- 38%

The content wasn't interesting to [me/them].
- 24%
- 3%

There were too many photos or images and not enough information.
- 14%
- 3%

Not enough video content was available.
- 11%
- 6%

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
PROSPECTS: 1395   PROFESSIONALS: 445

FIGURE 10 The quickest way to find info about academics/majors

PROSPECTS   PROFESSIONALS

Look for a link marked "academics" or "majors" and go from there.
- 44%
- 25%

Go to Google or another search engine and type in the name of the college and major.
- 24%
- 40%

Select from an alphabetical list of majors and programs.
- 22%
- 9%

Use the search box on the college website to get there.
- 10%
- 26%

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
PROSPECTS: 1378   PROFESSIONALS: 444

FIGURE 11 Click-throughs *from* social media and college search sites *to* a .edu site

PROSPECTS ——— PROFESSIONALS ·········

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

LinkedIn

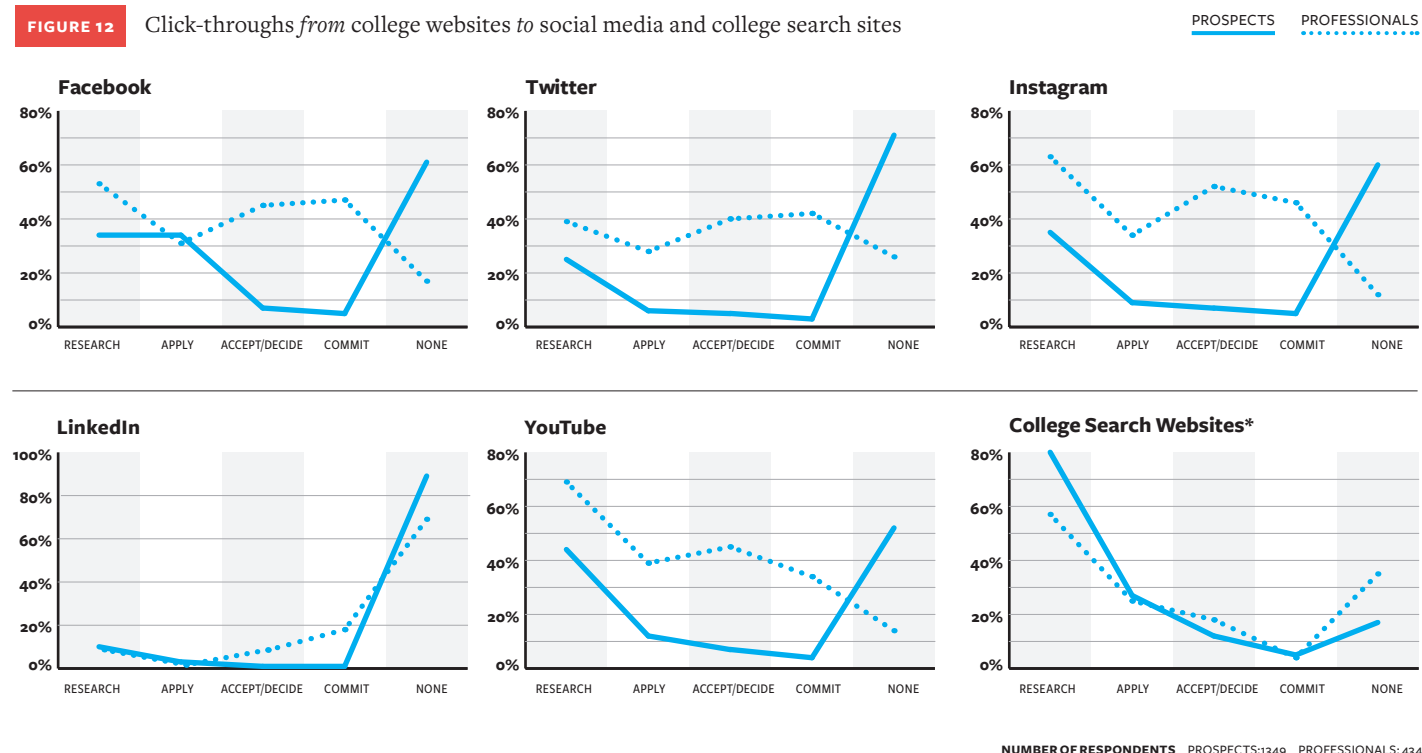### YouTube

Snapchat

YikYak

College Search Websites*
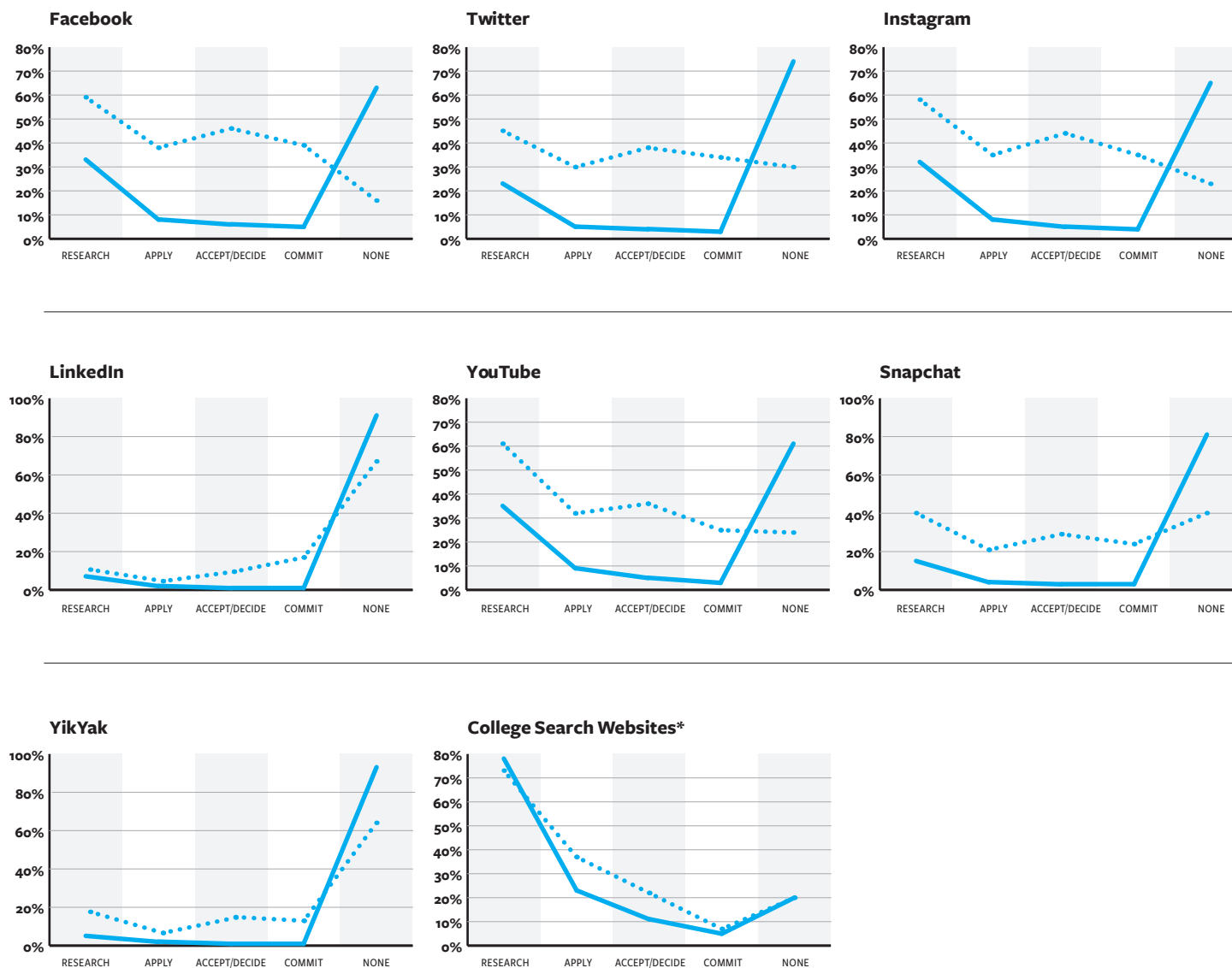
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS PROSPECTS: 1341 PROFESSIONALS: 430

*Niche, U.S. News and World Report, Princeton Review

FIGURE 12 Click-throughs *from* college websites *to* social media and college search sites

PROSPECTS   PROFESSIONALS

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, College Search Websites*

RESEARCH   APPLY   ACCEPT/DECIDE   COMMIT   NONE

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS PROSPECTS:1349 PROFESSIONALS: 434

It's interesting here to look at another question we asked teens. We wanted to know what they found to be the fastest way to find academic majors and programs on the websites they visited. Part of our motivation for asking this question was to determine the effectiveness of the now-standard practice of using labels such as "academic programs" and "majors." We also wanted to determine other ways they might have found this information. Interestingly, a substantial number (44 percent) did indeed use the "academics" or "majors" links on higher education websites — over Google or another search engine (24 percent) or internal site search (10 percent).

How do teens use social media and external websites?

Anyone who visits college websites regularly can't help but notice that these sites feature logos (and ultimately free advertising) for the major social media platforms, most notably Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. By clicking on these links, one can visit institutionally sponsored content on these sites. For example, many colleges upload videos to a sponsored channel on YouTube.

Similarly, many colleges feature rankings from prominent college search or help sites, such as U.S. News and World Report or College Factual, and link to reviews on these sites as a way of showcasing a third-party endorsement.

Based on the responses to our survey, teens aren't often motivated to click through from higher education websites to social media

platforms, nor do they click through from posts on social media sites to higher education websites.

On the other hand, we know that college search and help sites such as Niche, U.S. News and World Report, and Princeton Review play a prominent role in helping students identify colleges. Teens essentially "search" these sites for colleges they might be interested in. Not surprisingly, 78 percent said they click through to a college website from these sites "when researching colleges," and 23 percent click through to them when applying. (See Figure 11.) In fact, 61 percent say they never click through from a college site to Facebook. (See Figure 12.)

Note that, by fairly large margins, professionals overestimated the number of click-throughs

from social channels, though they were close on guessing how much traffic to their own sites resulted from college search and help websites.

It turns out that, in the case of the college search sites, this is a great strategy — 80 percent of prospects said they clicked through from a college site to a college search site, when they were researching colleges — perhaps to determine what the search site listed about the particular college they were just exploring. And 44 percent clicked through to YouTube. Other social media sites didn't rate nearly as well, and prospects said they clicked through less and less over the course of the college decision-making process. This is likely driven by the fact they are actively connecting with their peers the further they are down the funnel and therefore closer to making a decision.

Again, it's interesting to note how often college professionals overestimated the number of click-throughs from their sites to social media and college search sites during the process.

Of course, this doesn't mean that prospects don't use these sites: It's just that they are not getting to them from college websites. In the same vein, teens don't necessarily visit college websites after spending time on an institution's Facebook page or Instagram feed.

As many other researchers have noted, teens do use social media in various ways during their college search and, most notably, choice. While teens use other sources of information to a greater degree, Figure 2 shows that teens use social media persistently.

In the "2016 Social Admissions Report" from Chegg and TargetX, the authors called social media a "decision engine," noting that one in two respondents reported using it when deciding where to enroll. Our respondents said that social media helped them to see how they'd fit at a college: most notably Instagram (39 percent), Facebook (36 percent), and

YouTube (35 percent). (See Figure 13.) And note how professionals vastly overestimated the use that teens made of these channels.

Do prospects use apps from colleges?

While 54 percent of college professionals reported they believed prospects use apps after they've applied, we wondered whether prospects use apps during college search and choice. This makes sense when you consider that downloading and configuring an app is a commitment that implies a fairly high degree of interest. But the majority of prospects said they don't download and use apps at all: 72 percent said they did not download any college apps. A few (22 percent) said they used apps when researching colleges.
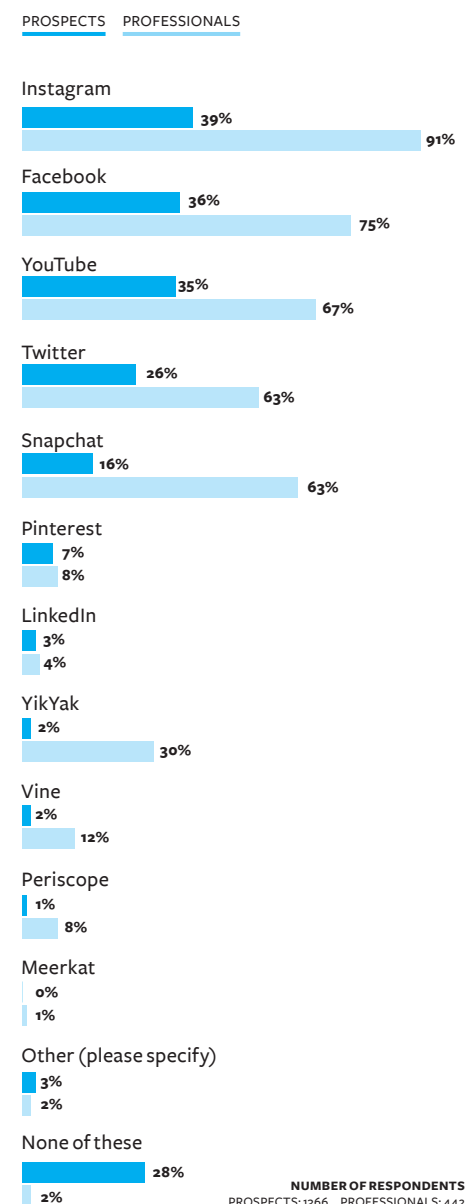
It is important to note context with respect to activities students perform on mobile devices. As noted previously, activities and resources students find value in while performing research to add schools to their lists are distinct from those resources they value when making enrollment decisions.

In the "2016 Social Admissions Report" from Chegg and TargetX, four in five students indicated visiting a college website on a mobile device, while only one in five said they would download an app when researching schools. However, when they were asked if they were to download an app from a college, what would they do, half of students said they would download an app to communicate with other students or admission officers. This finding clearly indicates that building a mobile app for your prospects is not as important as ensuring your website is responsive.

If you plan to build an app, focus on supporting the activities of admitted students making enrollment decisions.
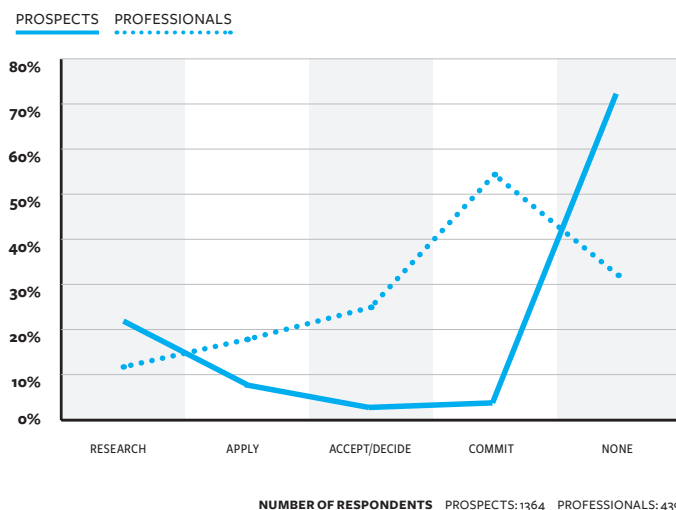
FIGURE 13

Social media used to determine fit

PROSPECTS   PROFESSIONALS

Instagram
39%
91%

Facebook
36%
75%

YouTube
35%
67%

Twitter
26%
63%

Snapchat
16%
63%

Pinterest
7%
8%

LinkedIn
3%
4%

YikYak
2%
30%

Vine
2%
12%

Periscope
1%
8%

Meerkat
0%
1%

Other (please specify)
3%
2%

None of these
28%
2%

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
PROSPECTS: 1366   PROFESSIONALS: 442

KEY FINDINGS

FIGURE 14   Download and use of apps in college search

FIGURE 15   Use of campus maps and virtual tours

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 1364   PROFESSIONALS: 439

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS   PROSPECTS: 1355   PROFESSIONALS: 439

How do prospects use campus maps and virtual tours?

Nearly all college websites feature a campus map. Most also offer virtual tours that range from fairly simple to elaborate. Prospects said they used these tools to "get a sense of the size of the campus" (82 percent of our respondents), "to see where the campus is in relation to the surrounding area" (64 percent), and to see the dorms and other buildings (59 percent).

What is surprising, though, is when prospects use these tools — and the fact that 27 percent of them said they didn't use virtual tours at all. That's a decided contrast to what college professionals believe: They consistently overestimated how much students use virtual tours, in particular, throughout their college decision process. What surprised us most is that teens used campus maps as much as they said they do throughout the process. (See Figure 15.)
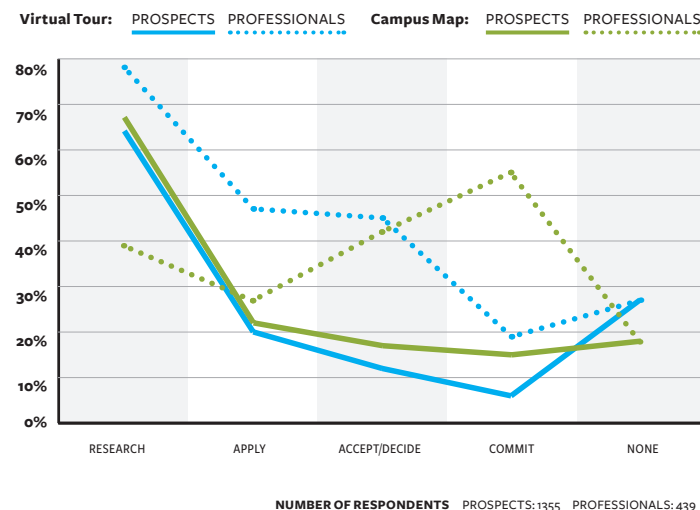
We were also surprised that teens used both maps and tours as heavily during their research phase — and less so when deciding where to apply and where to attend.

RESOURCES

Chegg, Inc., and TargetX, "Optimizing Mobile for Your Future Students: 2016 Social Admissions Report." Source: mstnr.me/ SocAdm16

Melissa Clinedinst, Anna-Maria Koranteng, and Tara Nicola, "2015 State of College Admission," National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), 2016. Source: mstnr.me/ NACAC15

Stephanie Geyer, Lance Merker, Clint Chapman, and Sumant Mauskar, "E-Expectations 2016: What Do College-Bound High School Students Expect From Your Website and Digital Communications?" Source: mstnr.me/E-Expect16

Michael C. Poock, Ph.D, and Dennis Lefond, Ph.D. "How College-Bound Students Perceive University Web Sites: Findings, Implications, and Turning Browsers into Applicants," C&U Journal, Summer 2001: 15-21.

Gil Rogers and Eric Sickler, "2016 TeensTalk® Study," conducted by Stamats Market Research and Chegg, Inc. Source: www.stamats.com/ teenstalk

Gil Rogers and Michael Stoner, *Mythbusting Admissions: Where Prospects and Professionals Agree and Disagree on Enrollment Marketing, Messages, and Channels,* 2015. Source: mstnr.me/AdmissionsMyths

APPENDIX

By Mike Hanus

Mike, director of partner firm Constituent Research, managed the research for this project.

Fielding dates: Survey of higher education professionals conducted from May 19 through June 28, 2016. Survey of prospective college students ("prospects") conducted from May 26 through June 28, 2016.

Number of responses: Of a total of 664 responses from higher education professionals, 596 were included in the final report. We removed incomplete and duplicate responses.

Survey of prospects: Of a total of 2,487 responses, we included 2,346 in the final report. We removed incomplete and duplicate responses.

Demographics Higher Education Professionals

Device used to complete the survey

Smartphone or mobile phone	7%
Desktop or laptop computer	92
Tablet or other large handheld device	2

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 596

Age

Under 25	3%
25 - 34	24
35 - 44	31
45 - 54	25
55 or older	15
Prefer not to answer	2

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 592

Institution type

Public university	40%
Private university	27
Liberal arts college	16
Community college	8
Professional school	3
Other (*please specify*)	6

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 596

Gender

Female	67%
Male	33
Other	<1

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 596

Current role (multiple choices allowed)

Marketing	60%
Communications	51
Digital – Web	51
Digital – Social Media	35
PR	18
Admissions	12
Advancement	6
Other (*please specify*)	11

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 596

Number of years working in college admission, marketing, or communications

Fewer than 5 years	23%
5 - 10 years	34
11 - 15 years	20
16 - 20 years	12
21 - 25 years	5
More than 25 years	6

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 589

Amount of communication with prospects

No direct contact	40%
Some direct contact, but it is not a primary part of my role	53
A great deal of direct contact	5
All the time — my primary role is direct contact with prospective students	2

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 589

APPENDIX

Device used to complete the survey

Smartphone or mobile phone	66%
Desktop or laptop computer	28
Tablet or other large handheld device	5

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 2,345

Year in high school

Freshman	<1%
Sophomore	2
Junior	35
Senior	62

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 2,346

Types of institutions considering
(multiple choices allowed)

Public university	86%
Private university	61
Liberal arts college	28
Community college	20
Professional school	11
Other (*please specify*)	3

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 2,327

Stage in college search & decision process

I have not started researching colleges	2%
I am researching colleges but have not decided where to apply	39
I am deciding where to apply to college	48
I have applied to college(s) but have not received a decision yet	2
I have been accepted to college(s) and am deciding where to go	1
I have decided what college I will attend	9

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 2,286

Ethnic category /categories
(multiple choices allowed)

Caucasian or White	47%
Hispanic or Latino	24
African American or Black	23
Asian	11
American Indian or Alaska Native	3
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1
Other (*please specify*)	3
Prefer not to answer	3

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 2,277

Number of websites visited during college search and choice

I did not look at any college websites	2%
1 - 5 websites	25
6 - 10 websites	27
11 - 20 websites	24
21 - 30 websites	12
31 - 50 websites	6
More than 50 websites	5

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 2,231

Gender

Female	83%
Male	17
Other	<1

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS : 2281

We ran some additional cuts in the data in order to assess whether any trends, findings, or stories would be of interest or affect the findings. Some findings of interest include:

Timing of prospects in the application and decision process: Prospects say they are most likely to engage with websites (or social media) during the *early stages* of the college application process (primarily when researching colleges and/or applying), while professionals are more likely to think that prospects engage in these activities *throughout* the application process.

We considered whether the timing of our prospect research would affect our results — if prospects aren't yet hearing back from colleges or already deciding where they will enroll, they may be underestimating their behavior with .edu sites and other online activity, and, therefore, their answers will diverge from professionals' hypotheses.

While it is possible this may be the case to some extent, it does not look like a systematic issue. To verify, we divided prospects into the two larger groups we had — those who are researching colleges (39 percent) and those who are deciding where to go (48 percent).

While these applicants are very close to each other in the application timeline, we assumed we might see marked differences in their answers to the grid questions. This was not the case. In fact, there were very few significant differences, which suggests that prospects (at least in these phases of the application process) behave similarly, and/or predict their future behavior similarly.

Gender: We checked for gender-based differences among the prospects. There are very, very few. Females are more likely to be interested/apply to liberal arts colleges (29 percent vs. 22 percent), less interested in consuming text and articles (63 percent vs. 70 percent), more likely to say a weakness of college websites was difficulty in getting around the site to find info (71 percent vs. 59 percent), and that it's difficult to find info on majors and programs (38 percent vs. 31 percent). Along with a few differences in social media usage, this is the extent of differences in gender among prospects.

Number of websites visited: We analyzed whether the number of college websites prospects visited had any influence on their behavior. We divided prospects into those who looked at 0-10 college websites vs. those who looked at 11 or more. We found some differences in types of colleges they planned to apply to, as well as some differences in where they were in the application process (not surprising, because prospects further along in the process would have looked at more websites). Those who visited 11 or more websites were more likely to be completing the survey on a desktop or laptop (46 percent vs. 37 percent), and those who have looked at more college websites placed more importance on the website in their evaluation of the college. However, few differences existed in how they used websites, what they found difficult on college websites, etc.

Professionals' level of contact with prospects: We found virtually no differences at all between professionals who have no contact with prospects vs. those who have some contact. Differences were difficult to assess because of the lack of respondents who interacted with prospects.

Professionals' age and tenure in higher education: Neither age nor length of time in a higher education role had an impact on professionals' responses.