

# White Paper No. 3



STAMATS COMMUNICATIONS

## What Students Say

*Results of two national surveys on how students choose a college*

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### SUBJECT HIGHLIGHTS:

A precise understanding of how students choose a college and the recruiting and marketing strategies students responded to most are essential steps in the creation of an effective recruiting strategy. This White Paper will present the findings of two Stamats studies that explore these issues. These studies also examined how much money students and families have saved for college and investigated the role that the Internet and other multimedia strategies had in their college-choice process.

### ***Methodology and reporting of the data***

The two mail surveys, conducted during the springs of 1995 and 1996, were completed by 3,000 college-bound students (89.6 percent were juniors, 6.1 percent were seniors, and 4.3 percent were sophomores). The studies focused on three key areas:

- ✓ Who helped these students decide which college to attend
- ✓ The college-choice variables of most interest to these students
- ✓ The recruiting and marketing strategies that students find most interesting and effective

As part of these surveys, we asked students to indicate which type of college they were most interested in attending. We also asked students to indicate their ethnic background and their household income. Where

helpful, we sorted the data according to these broad discriminates. Note, however, that the brevity of this White Paper precludes our following the pathway of every variable. Our goal is to provide general insight and direction.

This White Paper will present a review of some of the major findings. It will also include a number of sidebars — thoughts and comments — that will add perspective and insight into these findings.

### ***A national perspective***

Keep in mind that this study is national in scope. By no means is it designed to stand in the place of research that is reflective of your institution, your recruiting geography, and your students.

## TOP TEN COLLEGE-CHOICE CHARACTERISTICS

STUDENTS BOUND FOR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS					STUDENTS BOUND FOR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS				
Not Important = 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 = Extremely Important									
Quality of faculty	7.89				Safety	8.06			
Availability of specific majors	7.86				Availability of scholarships	8.02			
Safety	7.80				Cost after financial aid	7.88			
Quality of academic facilities	7.73				Availability of specific majors	7.85			
Availability of scholarships	7.69				Cost before financial aid	7.81			
Quality of residence life	7.66				Quality of faculty	7.74			
Cost after financial aid	7.55				Opportunity to hold job while attending	7.72			
Friendliness	7.52				Friendliness	7.60			
Teaching emphasis	7.52				Teaching emphasis	7.56			
Academic reputation	7.43				Quality of academic facilities	7.54			

### *Influence of key college-choice characteristics*

#### Top Ten

We began this study by asking students to rate the significance of 39 college-choice characteristics. The top ten characteristics for students interested in attending private and public colleges are listed in the table above.

## **T&C** THOUGHTS AND COMMENTARY

While the responses from these two groups of students are quite similar, some interesting differences should be noted. While all students, for example, are interested in safety, students interested in public institutions are slightly more so. Over the past three years, based on our data and data from CIRP and other sources, safety has emerged as a critically important issue.

Students interested in public institutions are also attracted to the opportunity to hold a job while attending. This is due, in part, to two variables: the amount of indebtedness — credit card, car, clothing — that students have when they arrive on campus and their cost-sensitivity about college. To survive as young adults first and students second, more and more students must work, and they must work more hours. The ability to work while attending college is paramount.

Both groups of students are very interested in the quality of faculty and in specific majors. However, based on extensive interviews, we know that students define quality differently than do administrators and faculty. While academia may focus on terminal degrees and facilities such as computer labs and libraries, students stress their access to these facilities — particularly as first-year students — and opportunities to meet with and talk to faculty. In their minds, and in the minds of an increasing number of parents, well-credentialed faculty and great facilities are only important if students have access to them.

It is worth noting that students are keenly interested in the availability of specific majors. In fact, in many cases they are more interested in majors than in the general reputation of the institution. This has long been the trend among graduate students and has only in the last four or five years begun to appear at the undergraduate level. This interest in specific programs has tremendous implications for recruiting and alumni strategies as well. Colleges and universities would do well to organize at least some of their recruiting strategies at the program, rather than the institutional, level. In addition, alumni programs organized by academic major, rather than year of graduation, might prove particularly fruitful.

All students are interested in how friendly the campus is. Students want, sometimes desperately so, to know that they will fit in, that they are among students like themselves, and that they will be accepted. Three strategies — the campus visit, the type of photographs used in the recruiting funnel, and how the student is generally treated as she or he moves through the funnel — are primary avenues through which friendliness must be projected.

Students are also interested in the college's or university's academic reputation. In particular, our discussions with students have revealed that they seek outcomes information that will validate the institution's cost. Students and parents want to know that for the money paid, the college or university will deliver the degree — and by extension the opportunity — that it says it will. Colleges and universities must continue to stress the four key indicators of academic quality — faculty, facilities, curriculum, and students — and they must add another dimension: outcomes. Your prospective students and their parents have a strong interest in knowing what your graduates are doing. What jobs and careers do they have? What graduate schools do they attend? What opportunities are they realizing? These are elements of academic quality that students can appreciate.

## BOTTOM TEN COLLEGE-CHOICE CHARACTERISTICS

STUDENTS BOUND FOR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS		STUDENTS BOUND FOR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	
Not Important = 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 = Extremely Important			
Academic support	6.18	Beauty of the campus	6.23
Location	6.12	Leadership opportunities on campus	6.19
Leadership opportunities on campus	6.14	Opportunity to study abroad	6.13
Guidebook recommendation	5.47	Opportunity for three-year BA	5.86
Proximity to large city	5.45	Location	5.84
Magazine recommendation	5.29	College guide recommendation	5.38
Ethnic diversity of students	5.20	Proximity to large city	5.21
Opportunity for three-year BA	5.00	Someone I know attends	5.08
Someone I know attends	4.53	Magazine recommendation	4.89
Religious reputation	4.06	Religious reputation	3.55

### Bottom Ten

Just as with the top ten for each group, it is perhaps useful to take a look at the college-choice characteristics that students value least, listed in the table above.

## *T&C* THOUGHTS AND COMMENTARY

As you develop your communication flow, make sure you are emphasizing the college-choice characteristics that students value most. The above data (from both tables) offer preliminary insight. Note, however, that different students interested in different kinds of colleges may well order this information in varying ways.

Two other items are worth noting. First, take a look at how students rate leadership opportunities. For the most part, students are not particularly interested in this item, though it receives a disproportionate amount of attention in recruiting materials.

And second, consider ethnic diversity. On the aggregate, most students are not particularly interested in the ethnic diversity of students. However, Asian, Black, and Hispanic students are more interested than White students. Interestingly, Biracial and Multiracial students are less interested than White students.

### *Who helped them decide*

Who helps students choose which college to attend? For students of all types, the answer is parents. This is more true for students planning to attend a Christian college and slightly less true for students planning to attend a two-year public.

Aside from parents, students interested in attending the following institutions are most likely to rely on:

### TOP TWO STUDENT INFLUENCERS

TYPE OF INSTITUTION INTERESTED IN ATTENDING	MOST INFLUENTIAL	MEAN	SECOND MOST INFLUENTIAL	MEAN
4-year private independent	Parents	7.25	HS Guidance counselor	6.59
4-year private church related	Parents	8.07	HS Guidance counselor	6.39
4-year public	Parents	7.47	HS guidance counselor	6.77
2-year public community	Parents	7.30	HS guidance counselor	6.64
2-year public technical	Parents	7.70	HS career counselor	6.97

## *T&C* THOUGHTS AND COMMENTARY

Some colleges and universities justify their decision to visit fewer high schools because recent studies have suggested that students seem to rely less on the influence of high school guidance counselors. Our data contradict this notion and suggest that, after parents, high school guidance counselors, or in the case of students interested in two-year technical colleges, high school career counselors, are major influencers.

What strategies are suggested by these data? First, an aggressive communication strategy aimed at parents. In studies of parents, Stamats has learned that they are particularly interested in knowing more about the following:

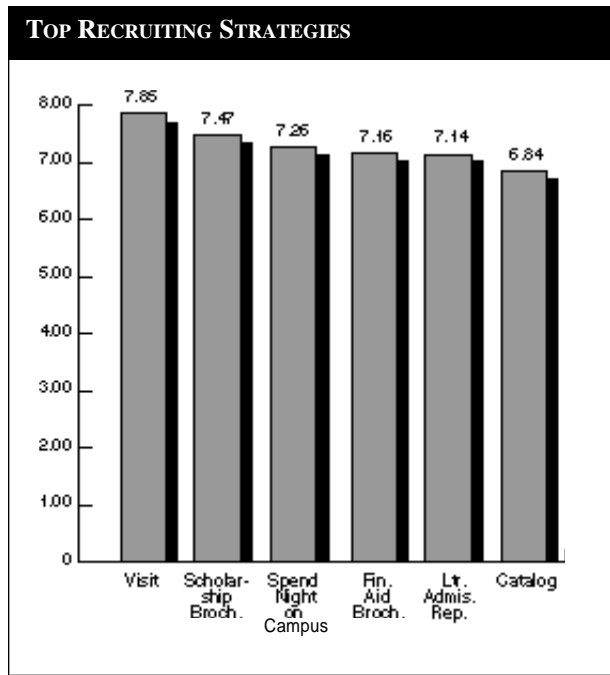
- ✓ Campus safety
- ✓ Financial aid
- ✓ Who will be teaching their son or daughter
- ✓ Curriculum
- ✓ Academic advising
- ✓ Student counseling services
- ✓ Residence life
- ✓ Career development
- ✓ Student social activities
- ✓ Job placement
- ✓ Internship opportunities
- ✓ Sports schedules
- ✓ Comments from other parents

Second, we strongly suggest that you query your prospective students and first-year students to determine the role they ascribe to high school guidance counselors. There is every indication that you will find that high school guidance counselors are more influential than previously thought. Of course, this should cause you to evaluate your high school-relations strategies.

***Evaluation of college-recruiting strategies***

Colleges and universities use an ever-increasing array of messages and mediums to communicate to and recruit students. As part of this study, students were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of 33 of the most widely used recruiting strategies.

Like the other variables in this study, each of the 33 strategies was rated on a nine-point scale. Of the 33 strategies outlined above, the students had the most interest in the following:



**Publications, correspondence, telemarketing, and multimedia**

Because colleges and universities spend a significant portion of their recruiting budget on publications, we decided to treat students' responses to publications as a subset. We also developed subsets for letters and correspondence, telemarketing, and multimedia.

The students' interest in publications ranged, again on a nine-point scale, from:

RECRUITING STRATEGY	MEAN
Scholarship brochure	7.47
Financial aid brochure	7.16
Catalog	6.84
Academic viewbook	6.76
Viewbook	6.67
Brochure on academic quality	6.42
Recruiting newsletter	6.36
Departmental or divisional brochure	6.31
Brochure on student/faculty research	6.17
Outcomes brochure	6.09
Internship brochure	6.08
Search or introductory piece	5.79
Athletic brochure	4.97
Poster	4.39

Students' interest in correspondence and letters from the institution had the following range:

RECRUITING STRATEGY	MEAN
Letter:	
From an admissions representative	7.14
From the president	6.80
From a faculty member	5.96
From an alumnus or alumna	5.87

Students' interest in telephone calls had the following responses:

RECRUITING STRATEGY	MEAN
Telephone call:	
From an admissions representative	6.58
From a faculty member	6.09
From a student	5.57
From a coach	5.09

Students' interest in multimedia had the following responses:

RECRUITING STRATEGY	MEAN
Video	6.51
CD-ROM	5.70
Web page	5.55
Floppy disk	5.20

These data offer significant insight into how your recruiting and communication strategies might be refined. First, note the importance that students place on publications that discuss cost and financial aid, academics, and outcomes. Students rate the scholarship brochure, the financial aid brochure, the catalog, the academic viewbook, the viewbook, and brochures on academic quality as important. Over the past few years, we have seen the catalog move up into the top tier of most effective recruiting publications, especially for better students. We have also seen students place more value on the academic viewbook — a sort of hybrid viewbook and catalog that stresses faculty, facilities, opportunities for student research, internships, and outcomes.

When asked to choose between receiving a letter and a telephone call, students choose letters, and their preferred contact is the admissions representative from the college or university.

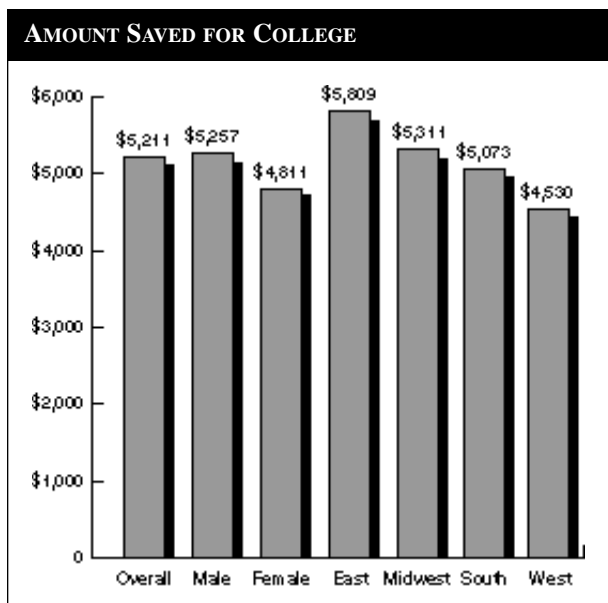
Students have a growing interest in multimedia, and, somewhat surprisingly, they still value video — no doubt because of the ease of viewing — as their favorite medium. Video still has tremendous possibilities.

Some, after viewing these data, may feel that the overall impact of electronic mediums such as the Web and CD-ROM are rather minimal. It is true that these mediums are not as widely used as more traditional mediums such as publications. However, a review of the longitudinal data reveals that while the relative influence of multimedia may be small at the present, its influence is increasing dramatically each year.

There are several reasons for considering a strong multimedia strategy. First, as stated above, its influence is gaining. Second, almost all colleges and universities in the U.S. have Web pages, and institutions that do not will fall behind the curve. And third, multimedia will quickly take advantage of new technology that will deliver messages, including live-action video, over cable rather than telephone lines. That, plus a wider use of high-definition television and the “merging” of televisions, telephones, and computers in the home, will likely lead to electronic media emerging as a major recruiting medium. This is especially true for colleges and universities interested in recruiting academically talented, technologically sophisticated, and more affluent students.

## Money

One of the most significant questions we asked students was how much money they or their family had saved for their college education. To be most helpful, we organized these data in a number of ways. First, as indicated by the table below, consider the amount saved by various audiences.



As you can see, students and families in the West saved the least amount of money. Fifty-five percent of the respondents from the West region are from California, where 87.4 percent of the college students attend public institutions costing an average of \$1,975 for a four-year institution and \$209 for a two-year institution, based on *Chronicle* data. Given these low costs, it is easy to understand the lower amount saved in the West as compared to other regions.

## More than national average of \$5,211

Surprisingly, only 21.1 percent of the respondents actually save more than the national average of \$5,211. However, this subset saved a great deal — an average of \$21,031. The following chart highlights the ethnicity and income levels of this subset.

**ABOVE-AVERAGE SAVERS**

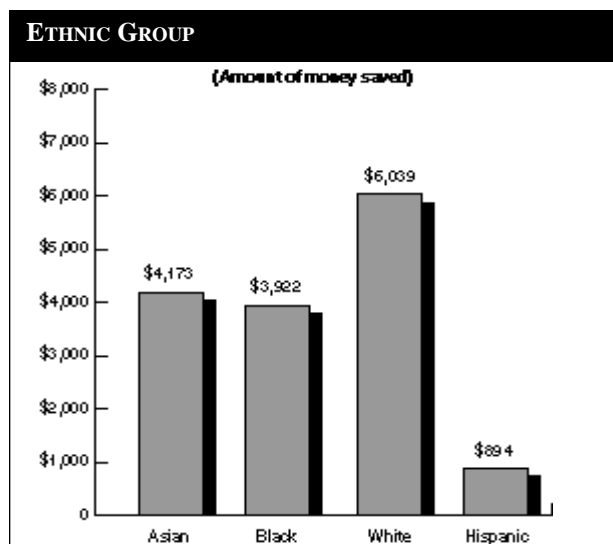
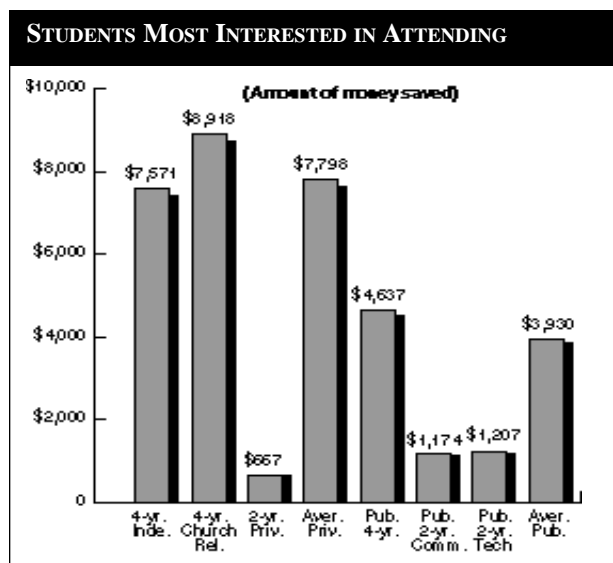
BY ETHNICITY	PERCENT	BY INCOME	PERCENT
Caucasian	82.1	Less than \$10,000	1.2
Black/African American	7.3	\$10,001 to \$20,000	4.6
Asian	4.4	\$20,001 to \$35,000	15.1
Biracial	2.1	\$35,001 to \$50,000	20.9
Hispanic/Latino	1.8	\$50,001 to \$75,000	28.8
Native American or Alaskan American	0.5	\$75,001 to \$100,000	16.9
Multiracial	0.5	\$100,001 to \$125,000	7.2
Filipino/Pacific Islander	0.0	More than \$125,000	5.3

## Less than national average of \$5,211

Unfortunately, 78.9 percent of the respondents have saved less than the national average. Of particular concern is the relatively small amount saved by this group — only \$988! The following chart depicts the profile of those who have saved below the national average.

BELOW-AVERAGE SAVERS			
BY ETHNICITY	PERCENT	BY INCOME	PERCENT
Caucasian	70.1	Less than \$10,000	9.5
Black/African American	10.6	\$10,001 to \$20,000	14.3
Hispanic/Latino	8.0	\$20,001 to \$35,000	26.1
Asian	3.8	\$35,001 to \$50,000	24.0
Native American or Alaskan American	2.5	\$50,001 to \$75,000	17.3
Biracial	1.6	\$75,001 to \$100,000	6.0
Multiracial	1.4	\$100,001 to \$125,000	1.5
Filipino/Pacific Islander	0.2	More than \$125,000	1.3

Finally, we organized these data on amount saved by the type of college the student anticipates attending and by ethnic group.



# T&C

THOUGHTS AND COMMENTARY

Families are saving less for college than ever before. Currently, they save between 1/8th and 1/10th of four years' worth of tuition by the time the son or daughter is a high school senior.

There is a great deal of irony here. When families don't save, they often feel that colleges and universities are too expensive. They view college cost, not their minimal savings, as the culprit. The difference between what they save and the cost of attending must be made up — usually in the form of financial aid.

One of the greatest challenges facing private higher education is the tuition gap — the cost difference between attending a public college or university and attending a private. In most areas of the country, this is an order of magnitude or more. The impact of the tuition gap is compounded when families don't save. And the fact is, they are not saving at a significant level, and that level is declining. We can expect financial aid to be even more important to the college-choice process in the future than it has been in the past.

## Computers and multimedia

The survey also asked some specific questions about computers and multimedia. We discovered, for example, that:

- ✓ 79.5 percent of the students who responded own or regularly use a computer
- ✓ 63.6 percent of all respondents are most likely to use it at home
- ✓ 81.5 percent use a PC rather than a Mac
- ✓ 61.0 of those who have a computer have a CD-ROM
- ✓ 26 percent have home Internet access, and 27 percent have access at their high school
- ✓ 10.8 percent of students spend more than two hours per day on the Internet

When we evaluated this same data by ethnicity and household income, we discovered the following general trends:

- ✓ There is a direct correlation between the likelihood of having a computer and household income
- ✓ As income rises, students are less likely to use high school computers and more likely to use computers in the home
- ✓ PC rather than Mac usage increases slightly with income
- ✓ More affluent students are much more likely to have a CD-ROM than less affluent students
- ✓ Students predisposed to private colleges or universities are somewhat more likely to have or have access to computer resources than students predisposed to public institutions
- ✓ Male students are more likely to use computers and have access to computer resources than female students

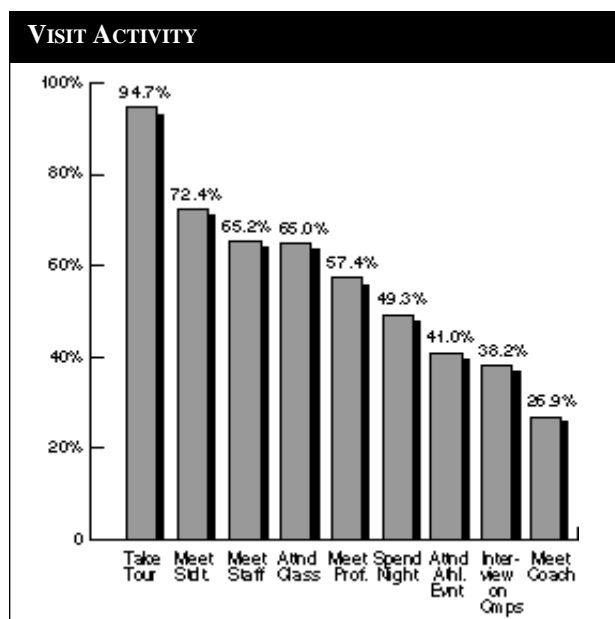
# T&C THOUGHTS AND COMMENTARY

There is no doubt that today's students are among the most technologically sophisticated of any generation. They have access to and use technology in ever larger numbers. One interesting note: When asked to list the characteristics of a technologically advanced college or university, most students focused on two items: computers on their desk (in the classroom and residence hall) and e-mail. Students were much less interested in how technology might enhance the learning or classroom experience.

From a marketing perspective, colleges and universities must quickly learn to use technology in two ways. First, to help them recruit. There is every indication that Web sites and the Internet are here to stay, and while their use may not offer significant advantages in the marketplace, not using them will be disadvantageous. And second, colleges and universities must use technology to help differentiate themselves from less technologically sophisticated rivals.

## The campus visit

An astounding 96.9 percent of the students who responded to the survey had visited or plan to visit a college. And when they visit, they want to:



# T&C THOUGHTS AND COMMENTARY

In many respects, the job of the admissions office is to get students to visit, knowing that if students have a great visit, they will enroll. The campus visit, in most cases, is the most important contact in the funnel. The visit must be promoted extensively, the visit itself must balance education and entertainment, and student and parent reaction to the visit must be continually monitored.

## How students describe themselves

It is often useful for colleges and universities to know how students describe themselves. This information can be used to guide the creation of your communication flow and campus visit program. The students who participated in this study were most likely to describe themselves (items rating 7.0 or higher on a nine-point scale) as:

- ✓ Friendly 8.13
- ✓ Caring 8.03
- ✓ Fun-loving 7.83
- ✓ Hard-working 7.70
- ✓ Independent 7.63
- ✓ Outgoing 7.53
- ✓ Intelligent 7.41
- ✓ Free-spirited 7.33
- ✓ Motivated 7.24
- ✓ Social 7.19
- ✓ Competitive 7.14
- ✓ Secure 7.10
- ✓ Academic 7.09

At the same time, these students were much less likely to describe themselves as:

- ✓ Liberal 5.64
- ✓ Religious 5.46
- ✓ Musical 5.30
- ✓ Uncertain 4.29
- ✓ Follower 4.22

For further insight, we tallied the top five words or phrases that students of different ethnic groups used to describe themselves. Because of low response rates for Filipino, Native American or Alaskan American, Biracial and Multiracial students, we were not able to determine their top five with any degree of confidence.

ETHNIC GROUP	MOST LIKELY TO DESCRIBE THEMSELVES AS...
<b>ASIAN</b>	
Caring	8.08
Fun-loving	7.97
Friendly	7.85
Hard-working	7.82
Competitive	7.56
<b>BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN</b>	
Friendly	8.07
Caring	7.96
Independent	7.93
Career-oriented	7.91
Intelligent	7.89
<b>WHITE</b>	
Friendly	8.12
Caring	8.02
Fun-loving	7.82
Hard-working	7.65
Independent	7.62
<b>HISPANIC/LATINO</b>	
Caring	8.34
Friendly	8.33
Free-spirited	7.77
Outgoing	7.75
Motivated	7.62

The words students use to describe themselves are significant. These words reveal personalities, motivations, and concerns. One student noted that the words she uses are her “wordrobe.” Her words, she says, describe and reflect who she is and to some degree what she believes in.

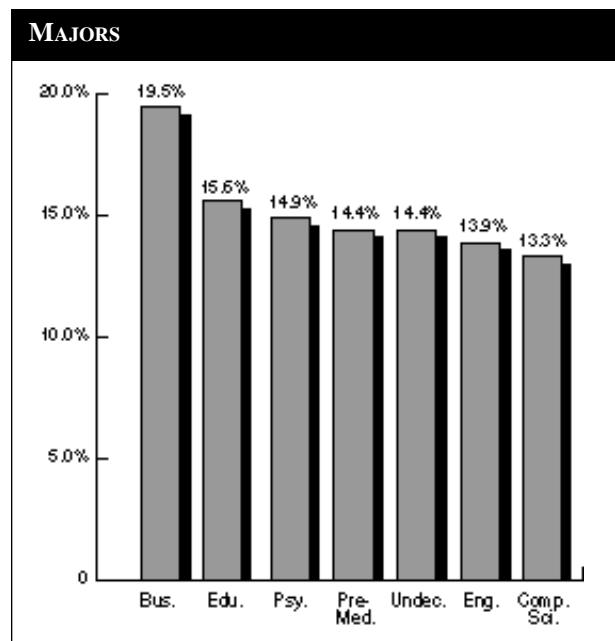
The words these students use to describe themselves reveal students who are extraordinarily social. Friends and fun are extremely important to them. At the same time, we see a sense of competitiveness, the willingness to work hard, and a streak of independence.

It is very important that your recruiting messages and strategies be consistent with the words that students use to describe themselves. Your verbal and visual vocabulary — the words, photographs, and other design elements you use — must emphasize and support the feelings that these students have about themselves.

### *Minutiae and miscellany*

Our survey asked, and students answered, a great number of other questions dealing with values, attitudes, and lifestyles.

They are most interested in the following seven academic programs:



We also learned the following about these students:

ITEMS	
Average ACT score	22.8
Average SAT score	1089.8
3 or more advanced placement courses taken	20.3%
Plan to live on campus	67.3%
Plan to work while attending college	85.3%
Wish to attend single-sex institution	1.3%
Plan to earn a bachelor's degree only	27.9%
Plan to earn a master's degree	39.9%
Plan to earn doctorate	20.0%

### *A final word*

We hope you find the above data and commentary to be useful. However, please remember that these were national studies, and the data were reported in the aggregate. In all likelihood, you will find differences, some major and some minor, between these findings and your own. Use these data to help you lay the foundation for your own institution-specific research.



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