



College Planning Support

The role of counselors and parents
in the wake of COVID-19



ENROLLMENT



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What resources do students rely on when they learn about college costs and financing? Nearly all of them list college websites and communications as the first source of information in their college planning. They then list parents and high school counselors as their next most important sources of knowledge. (RNL, 2018).

This paper will look at the ways high school counselors and parents provide support and information to students, and how COVID-19 has impacted their perceptions and behavior. This information will highlight better ways for colleges and universities to communicate with these two essential support groups.

High school counselors

RNL surveys show that more than 80 percent of high school students count on their high school counselors for help in researching colleges (RNL, 2018), and that they play a significant role in helping students, and their parents, navigate the college admissions process. College counseling, balanced with numerous other responsibilities such as academic advising, personal and mental health counseling, and facilitating access to educational support services, has become even more challenging because of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Seniors in high school are particularly dependent on counselors, and what might normally be a stressful final year of high school is all the more so with missing key milestones—that final game or performance, prom, and graduation. Students are also concerned with how they will continue to learn, earn grades or AP credit, and for many the continuation of their educational journey into the next phase of college.

High school counselors are adapting by using digital tools to stay connected with their students, though one key challenge in many districts is the lack of reliable internet access for students at home. Additionally, without the ability to note nonverbal language, tone, or appearance, virtual interaction poses additional challenges compared to face-to-face meetings with students. Counselors often gain meaningful insight through casual conversations in the hallways during the school day, which is lost in the online setting. However, for the moment making phone calls, joining Zoom meetings, and sending email have taken the place of one-on-one interactions in person.

As high school counselors adjust to their new routine, they have also had to adapt how to advise students in the college search process. They are trying to stay up-to-date with the numerous changes colleges are making with the admissions process—from virtual visits and tours to waiving testing requirements or pushing back deposit deadlines.

How can institutions help high school counselors support their students right now?

COUNSELORS NEED HONEST, TRANSPARENT, AND TIMELY COMMUNICATIONS. Counselors prefer information they can share easily with students and parents via email, so craft messages that connect them with up to date, centralized COVID-19 information on your website (RNL & High School Counselor Connect, 2020). They are looking for process updates and next steps for students, so information shared in checklist form can be particularly helpful. While many counselors use the NACAC website as their primary resource, campuses should consider offering dedicated webpages to help counselors—both professionally and with their students’ future college plans. (See American University’s Center for Postsecondary Readiness and Success as one model.)

BE FLEXIBLE, REDUCE BARRIERS, AND COMMUNICATE OPTIONS IN A PERSONAL WAY. Counselors want to learn about changes to admissions criteria, campus visits, deadlines, financial aid, online learning, and your institutional plan for the upcoming academic year. Review student communication plans for the next three to six months and adjust your messaging accordingly. Processes that in previous years were a standard next step, such as requesting a final high school transcript, may no longer be straightforward. School staff are also working remotely, so there may be significant delays. Additionally, schools may not yet know what transcripts will look like for students graduating this spring.



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COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS. According to our research (RNL, CampusESP, Cappex, & NAIA, 2020), 75 percent of parents of high school juniors and seniors have been affected personally or financially by COVID-19. Parents are concerned and need reassurance. They want to know that you are planning ahead and working compassionately with families. Knowing that they are not alone and are being provided with the most up-to-date information will build trust with your campus.



75% OF PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL JUNIORS AND SENIORS HAVE BEEN AFFECTED PERSONALLY OR FINANCIALLY BY COVID-19



INVITE PARENTS OF CURRENT STUDENTS TO ASSIST YOU IN AN OUTREACH CAMPAIGN. Authentic communication from a trusted source, like another parent, helps to reaffirm your relationship and alleviate concerns.

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE INFLUENCE OF WORD-OF-MOUTH MESSAGING—POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE. Current students are expressing concern over issues such as remote learning and campus housing, and how they are being treated is getting back to their peers. The flexibility of your admissions and enrollment processes will have an impact on the confidence students have about their choice in you. Counselors are attentively watching how colleges and universities are responding to this crisis and evaluating how you are working with current and prospective students to inform how they might advise students in the future.

ADDRESSING VALUE AND DIFFERENTIATION IS CRITICAL RIGHT NOW. Be clear and specific about unique opportunities and student outcomes. In our podcast with counselors, this point was driven home over and over again (RNL, 2020). It is important to build on the connections you already have with students, parents, and counselors. Remind them why your school is a fit and how it will add value to this particular student. Demonstrate how your institutional mission and values have directed your response to COVID and how you will continue to provide an exceptional experience moving forward.



Read more about our research about high school counselors and COVID-19 at RuffaloNL.com/Counselors.

Parents of high school students

For most high school students, the college choice is a co-purchasing decision. Nearly all parents (99 percent) say they are involved in their students' college planning, with 77 percent being very involved. Ninety-six percent believe higher education is the most important thing their children should do after high school, and even more (98 percent) are dedicated to making sure their children go to college. Parents are involved in most aspects of the college search, and they engage in college planning early, with over half of parents starting the process prior to sophomore year (RNL, CampusESP, & TeenLife, 2019).

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PARENTS



55%

want their children closer to home



37%

want their children to live at home and commute

With the current COVID-19 crisis, parents' influence in college planning may even increase as families spend more time together and students interact with other influencers (high school counselors, teachers, and friends) less frequently. There is no doubt that COVID-19 has changed parents' perspectives. In a recent RNL survey, three-fourths of parents said the pandemic had personally or financially impacted them, and just over one-third of senior parents (34 percent) responded that the situation impacted their student's college decision. Parents expressed greater levels of concern for their ability to pay for college, the health of their children, a college's ability to handle emergency situations, and safety generally. Over half of parents (55 percent) were more likely to want their children to enroll closer to home, with over one-third (37 percent) more likely to want their children to live at home and commute (RNL, CampusESP, Cappex, & NAIA, 2020).

While we are quick to focus on current high school seniors, as the pandemic continues, there is an increasing number of implications for high school juniors, sophomores, and their parents. We all hope for some return to business as usual, but that reality may be months away. Many students will likely proceed with their college planning, and institutions must be prepared to meet the evolving needs of students and their parents as they navigate that process.

How can institutions engage parents right now?

COMMUNICATE DIRECTLY WITH PARENTS. In a 2019 survey, only half (54 percent) of parents reported that they had received communications from colleges directed specifically to them (RNL, CampusESP, & TeenLife, 2019, 2019). This is a missed opportunity. If you do not have a multichannel parent communication flow, make plans to develop one, but don't wait until you have a fully formed plan to start reaching out. Start now.

ENGAGE PARENTS EARLY AND OFTEN. Eighty-eight percent of parents say they help their children research specific colleges and universities, and 90 percent say they are involved in helping their children select colleges to consider (RNL, CampusESP, & TeenLife, 2019, 2019). These activities occur early in the admissions cycle. Don't miss an opportunity to influence those conversations.

ALIGN PARENT MESSAGING WITH WHAT YOU SEND STUDENTS. Keeping parents informed is important, but do not underestimate the role parents play in nudging their children to respond to your calls to action and to important deadlines.

MAKE MESSAGING AROUND ACADEMIC PROGRAMS A PRIORITY. Both parents and students cite the availability of a desired academic program as the top reason to enroll at a college (RNL, 2018; RNL, CampusESP, & TeenLife, 2019, 2019). Incorporate academic program-specific messages into your student and parent communication flows and ask faculty to engage students. Along with current students, faculty members are your best ambassadors, and in these unusual times, a connection with another on-campus "grown-up" in a position of authority brings parents comfort.

KEEP MESSAGING HONEST BUT FORWARD-LOOKING. In the current COVID-19 crisis, parents are concerned and need reassurance from institutions. They want to see that colleges are working compassionately with families and that they are not alone. Messaging should be honest and candid but also optimistic and forward-looking.



ADDRESS CONCERNS ABOUT COST EARLY AND OFTEN. PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL JUNIORS AND SENIORS ARE EQUALLY CONCERNED ABOUT COLLEGE COST.

Parents of juniors (96 percent) and parents of seniors (91 percent) believe it will be difficult to pay for college; more than half of the parents of juniors think college will cost more because of COVID-19 (RNL, CampusESP, Cappex, & NAIA, 2020). Don't wait until the senior year to begin conversations with parents about scholarships and financial aid. Start those discussions early.



9 out of 10 parents believe it will be difficult to pay for their child's college education.

ASK PARENTS OF CURRENT STUDENTS TO ASSIST YOU IN COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS. Before COVID-19, over half of prospective students' parents (53 percent) indicated that they wanted to hear from the parents of current students (RNL, CampusESP, & TeenLife, 2019). Authentic communication from a trusted source, like a current parent, helps to reaffirm your relationship and alleviate concerns, especially in difficult times.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE AND INVITE PARENTS TO PARTICIPATE. Increase telephone engagement (students and parents alike are home more often now) and make it easy for students and parents to schedule virtual meetings with admissions counselors, financial aid counselors, and academic advisors. Ask parents what they need to know and what concerns them as the current situation evolves. Use that information to shape your institution's COVID-19 response and modifications to processes and procedures. Equip your staff to address these questions and concerns.

INVITE PARENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN VIRTUAL EVENTS WITH THEIR CHILDREN. Most colleges are offering virtual events for students during the COVID crisis, but many are not inviting parents to participate in those events. Slightly fewer than half of parents of juniors (47 percent) and 60 percent of parents of seniors in a recent survey said they did not attend virtual events because they were not invited by the institution (RNL, CampusESP, Cappex, & NAIA, 2020). Parents and especially their teenage children want clarity about who is welcome to participate and how. Be specific in your invitation materials and use inclusive language during the events to make parents feel welcome and to lessen students' anxiety that their parents are interlopers.



47% of parents of juniors and **60%** of parents of seniors said they were not invited to virtual events for their students.

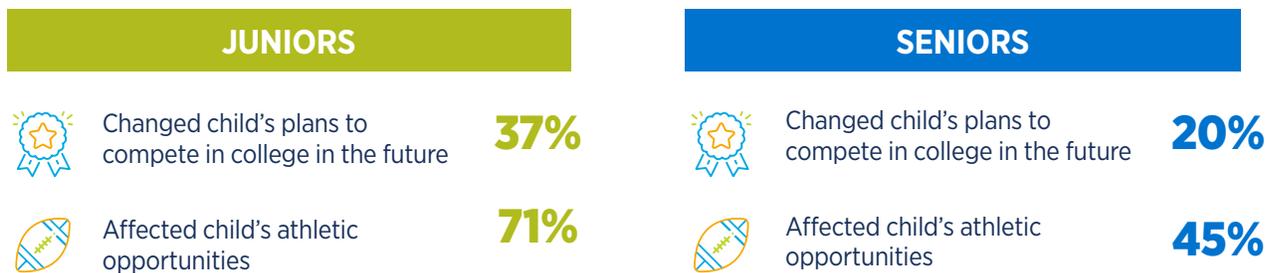
HOST PARENT-SPECIFIC SESSIONS AND/OR DEVELOP PARENT CONTENT FOR VIRTUAL EVENTS. Many institutions split up parents and students during on-campus events. Doing the same in virtual environments allows you to speak directly to the questions and concerns of parents.

BE MINDFUL OF PARENTS’ ROLE IN THE CAMPUS VISIT. Nine out of 10 parents note their involvement in scheduling and attending campus visits (RNL, CampusESP, & TeenLife, 2019), and in the wake of COVID-19, 44 percent of senior parents and 63 percent of junior parents are concerned about the inability to visit campus. Nonetheless, if campus visits are available in some form next year, 58 percent of junior parents prefer that their students take a virtual campus tour instead of traveling to campus (RNL, CampusESP, Cappex, & NAIA, 2020). Make sure your virtual campus visit experience considers and addresses the needs of parents as well as their students.

Student-athletes and the effects of COVID-19

Given the disruption of athletics caused by COVID-19, how has this affected the attitudes and plans of student athletes and their families. RNL, CampusESP, Cappex, and NAIA (2020) examined this issue in their study of parents.

ACCORDING TO PARENTS, COVID-19 HAS



Nearly two thirds (63 percent) of parents of junior student-athletes responded that COVID-19 had not changed their children’s plans to compete in college athletics in the future. However, nearly three-quarters believed COVID-19 had affected their children’s athletic opportunities. The majority of athletes have not changed their plans to compete at the college level, and campuses that provide opportunities for interaction and have a strong presence via various channels will have an advantage in recruiting these student-athletes.

The impact of COVID-19 on athletic opportunity weighed more substantially on the parents of junior athletes across the board. Junior year is when athletes can begin to interact with coaches, and the college coaches scout both high school and external club sports. However, there were significant disruptions for juniors, with 75 percent of spring high school sports cancelled and 70 percent of campus visits cancelled, according to parents. There is also the impact of the cancelation of club team sport and showcases. This potentially can change college plans for athletes or delay the decision process. Juniors that would have become recruited athletes as a result of their junior year performance need to find other opportunities to interact with college coaches and demonstrate their interest and athletic ability. Colleges and universities that create opportunities for interaction and communicating with athletes, while following NACAC and NAIA guidelines, could position an institution to recruit prospective 2021 graduates better.



Almost half of all parents of juniors listed the limited ability to connect with college coaches as an impact from COVID-19. Campuses should be looking at new ways to interact with student-athletes and video is the perfect medium to engage high school age students.

Among parents of senior student-athletes, 80 percent responded that COVID-19 had not changed their children's plans to compete in college athletics in the future, although 45 percent thought COVID-19 had affected their children's athletic opportunities. This could be an opportunity to drastically reduce summer melt, engage these families, reach out to them to understand what their plans are, what has (if anything changed) and determine their level of commitment to your athletic program and ultimately your institution. It may be your last chance to engage them and retain them.

SOURCES

THESE ARE ALL AVAILABLE AT RUFFALONL.COM/PAPERS

RNL. (2018). *High school seniors' perceptions of college financing*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

RNL, CampusESP, & TeenLife. (2019) *Parents' role in college planning*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

RNL & High School Counselor Connect. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on high school counselors and the college search process: A national survey*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

RNL, CampusESP, Cappex, & NAIA. (2020). *College planning and the perceptions of parents after COVID-19*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

ENGAGE COUNSELORS, PARENTS, AND STUDENTS THROUGH DIGITAL AND ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS WITH RNL

RNL can help you increase engagement with students and their key influencers through:

- **Online engagement such as livestreaming and webcasting**
- **Remote campus visits that channel the energy and excitement of an in-person visit**
- **Personalized video that also includes qualifying surveys to assess students' enrollment intentions**
- **Parent engagement to turn parents into enrollment champions**



Schedule a time to talk with our experts at
RuffaloNL.com/DigitalEngagement

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LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR SOLUTIONS FOR ENROLLMENT

RNL offers a full suite of solutions for student marketing, recruitment, and financial aid, including:

- Digital marketing and online engagement
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- Application cultivation
- Financial aid management
- Increasing yield and reducing melt
- Strategic enrollment planning

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