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Better Communication. Better Partnerships. Better Outcomes.

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Before many students trust a college, they trust a counselor. The 2026 College Planning Report found that **50% of students turn to their school counselor when they have questions about college, 58% of seniors rely on them, and 48% say their counselor will influence where they apply or enroll.**

Counselors are translators, coaches, myth busters, financial aid explainers, and sometimes therapists. They help students untangle an increasingly complicated college planning process while supporting families navigating it for the first time.

At the same time, counselors receive hundreds of emails, invitations, updates, and promotional messages from colleges every year. So, we asked more than 1,600 high school counselors a simple question: **How do you want colleges to communicate with you?** The answer wasn't surprising, but it was revealing.

RELATIONSHIPS STILL MATTER

Despite the rise of social media, AI, and new digital communication tools, counselors continue to value communication that is personal, practical, and easy to use.

When asked about their preferred communication channels, counselors ranked:

- **83%** – Personalized emails
- **70%** – In-person college fairs
- **63%** – Virtual representative visits and webinars
- **51%** – Counselor-specific newsletters
- **31%** – Print materials
- **18%** – Social media
- **14%** – Text messages
- **12%** – Videos

The rankings tell an important story. Counselors aren't rejecting digital communication; they're prioritizing communication that is timely, relevant, and immediately useful to students and families.

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The Best Communication Isn't About Marketing

Throughout the study, counselors repeatedly described the colleges they value most. They aren't necessarily the institutions with the biggest travel budgets or the flashiest marketing campaigns.
They're the colleges that:

- Respond quickly.
- Explain things clearly.
- Give counselors resources they can immediately share with students and families.
- Respect counselors' limited time.
- Build relationships throughout the year, not just during recruitment season.

Counselors also told us exactly what would improve communication with colleges:

- More student-focused resources
- Earlier notice of policy changes
- Dedicated counselor contacts
- Clearer financial aid communication

Notice the pattern? Every recommendation reduces complexity. None of them increases marketing.

COMMUNICATION IS AN EQUITY STRATEGY

For many students, especially those who are first-generation, from rural communities, or navigating financial barriers, counselors are the bridge between higher education and opportunity.

Communication isn't just about keeping counselors informed; it's about expanding opportunity. The 2026 College Planning Report found that first-generation students are less likely to rely on parents or other adults to navigate the college search, making school counselors one of their most important sources of guidance. When colleges equip counselors with clear, practical information, they strengthen one of the most important support systems these students have.

When colleges send confusing emails, unclear financial aid information, or last-minute updates, counselors spend valuable time translating, interpreting, and answering questions instead of advising students. Every confusing message creates another obstacle. Every clear message removes one.

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That's why communication isn't just a marketing strategy. It's an access strategy.

WHAT COLLEGES SHOULD DO

Do

- Personalize emails with information counselors can use.
- Share resources that can be forwarded directly to students and families.
- Provide clear, jargon-free financial aid information.
- Communicate policy changes early.
- Design communications that answer, "*What does a counselor need to help a student move forward?*"
- Invest in relationships through school visits, counselor events, and responsive support.

The good news? None of these changes requires a new CRM, a larger travel budget, or a complete communication overhaul. **They require a shift in mindset, from broadcasting information to building partnerships.**

Don't

- Rely on mass emails that say little and require counselors to search for the important details.
- Assume families understand admissions terminology or financial aid language.
- Replace relationships with automation.
- Send promotional messages when counselors need practical information.
- Create communications that require counselors to interpret or clarify them before they can be used.

One Question to Take Back to Campus. Before sending your next counselor email, ask one simple question: **Will this make a counselor's job easier, or harder?** The answer may determine whether your message is opened, forwarded, or forgotten.

Counselors don't remember the colleges that send the most emails. They remember the colleges that make their jobs easier. And when counselors can spend less time interpreting information, they can spend more time doing what matters most: helping students see college as possible!

Sources:

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Encoura, ModernCampus, & NextGrad. (2026). *2026 College Planning Report*. Encoura.
Encoura, High School Counselor Marketing, & NextGrad. (2026). *2026 High School Counselor Study.* Encoura. To be released in August, 2026.

Click Here For A Copy of The Complete Encoura High School Counselor Survey Report

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