

A photograph of four diverse adult prospective students standing in a library. From left to right: a woman with dark curly hair wearing a yellow and blue plaid shirt, an older man with grey hair wearing a teal sweater, a woman with blonde hair wearing a blue patterned top, and a man with dark hair wearing a blue plaid shirt and holding a purple folder. They are all smiling at the camera. Bookshelves filled with books are visible in the background.

Study of Adult Prospective Students

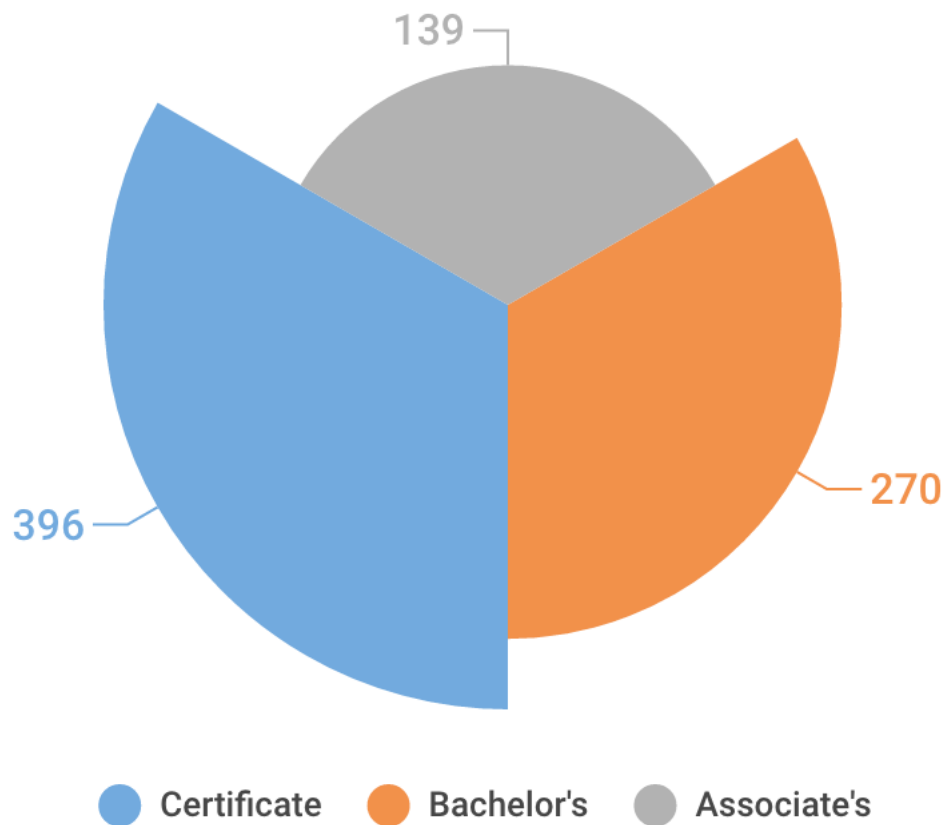
Ruffalo Noel Levitz and **Campus Explorer** conducted a web-based survey of adult prospective students in April 2016 to develop a better understanding of how they research and prefer to communicate with colleges and universities. Specific areas of inquiry examine:

- ✓ Social media usage in the college search and selection processes
- ✓ Views on text messages
- ✓ Email habits and preferences
- ✓ How websites and search engines factor into the college selection process
- ✓ The extent to which online advertisements are clicked upon and where
- ✓ Preferences and trends regarding viewing college websites on mobile devices

This study adds to the higher education marketing literature in that there had not previously been a large study of adult prospective students actively engaged in the college selection process.

Study Participants

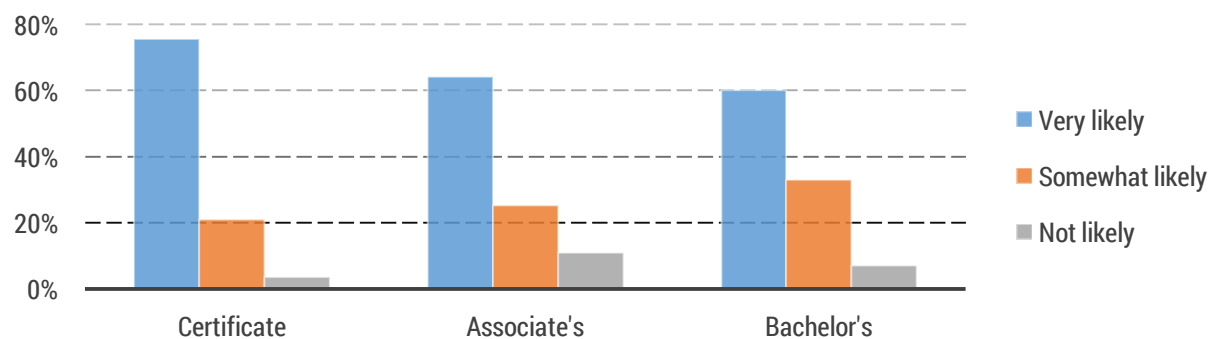
The study respondents had all been active across Campus Explorer's network of approximately 500 websites that are dedicated to college research and planning since March 2016. This report provides analysis of the 805 respondents seeking certificate-level offerings in addition to associate's and bachelor's degrees. All of the analyses are segmented by the intended degree levels indicated by the study participants.



Demographics

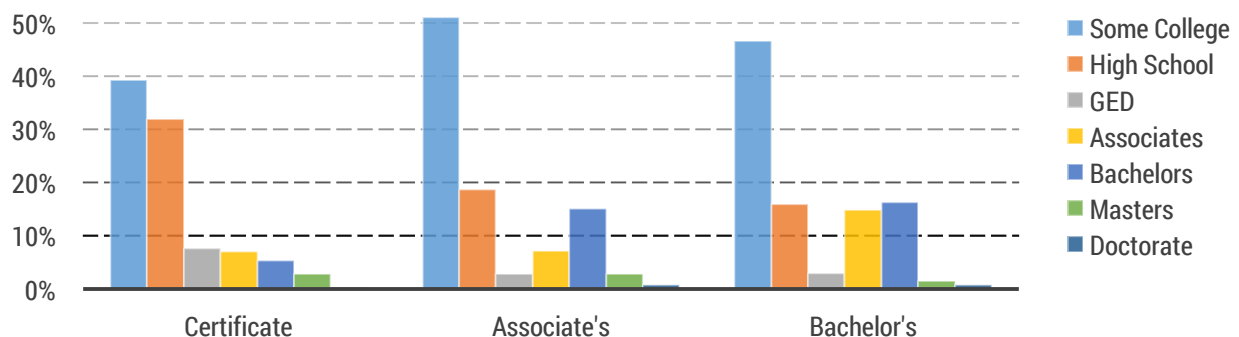
How Likely to Enroll Within Six Months?

The survey respondents were very high-intent in terms of likelihood to pursue higher education soon. Respondents seeking certificates, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees all overwhelmingly indicated being somewhat or very likely to enroll at a college or university within six months.



Highest Education Level

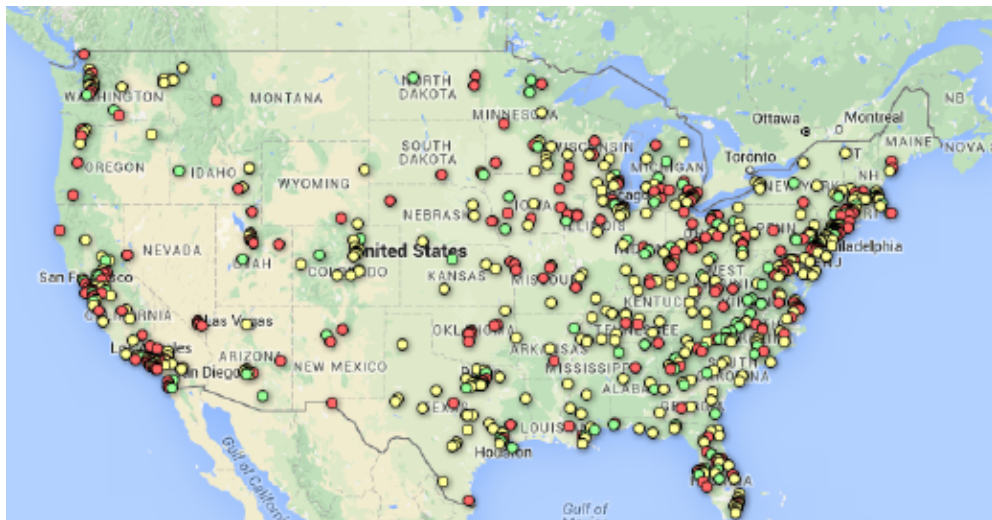
Some college was the predominant highest level of education among respondents seeking certificates, associate's and bachelor's degrees.



Respondents on the Map

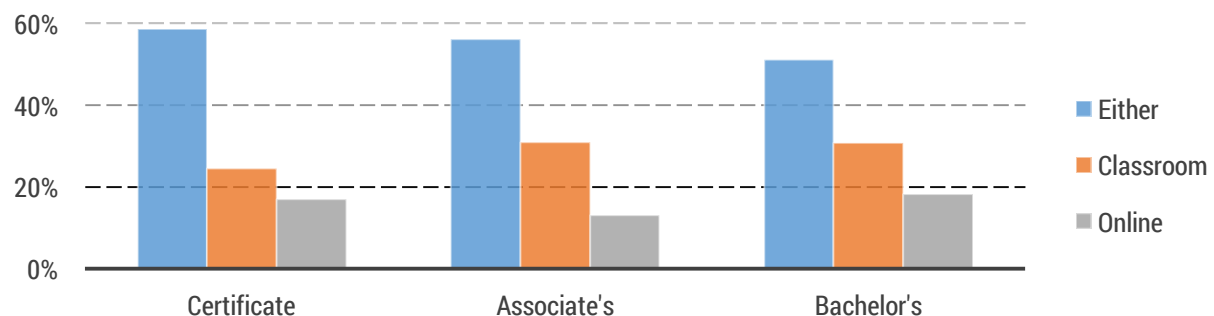
The map below shows the location of the respondents by intended degree level:

- The yellow icons: adult prospective students looking for certificate-level offerings.
- The green icons: adult prospective students interested in associate's degrees.
- The red icons: adult prospective students seeking bachelor's degrees.



Education Delivery Preference

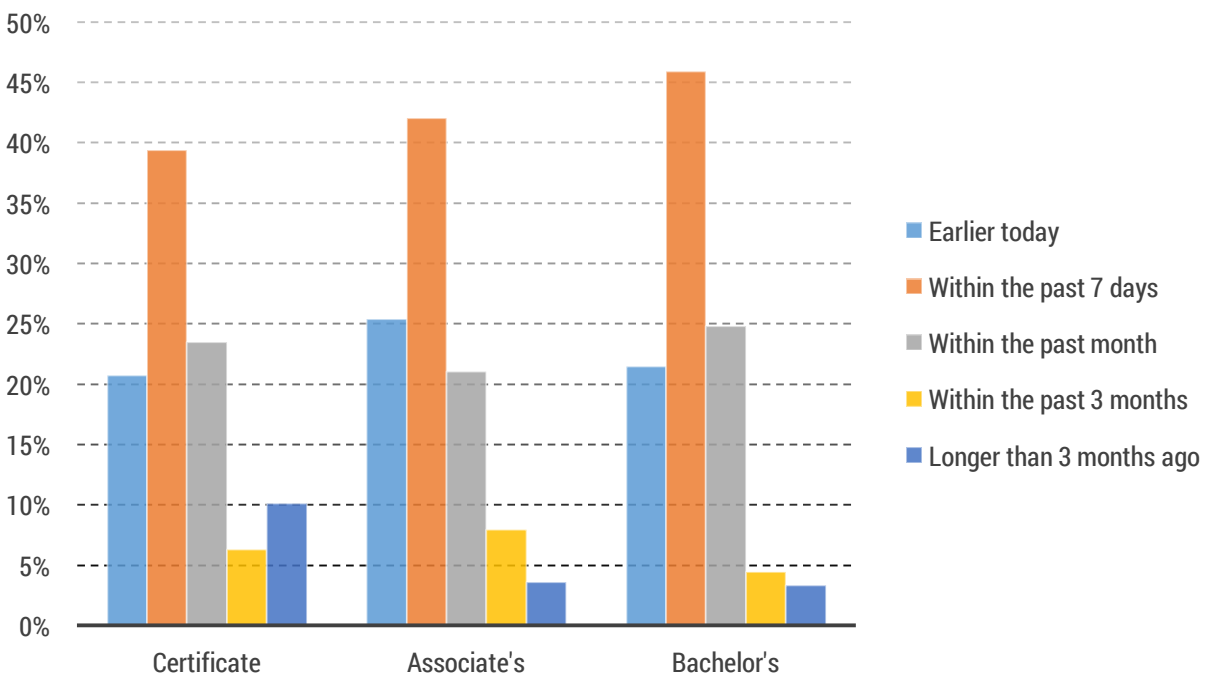
More than half of all respondents regardless of intended degree level indicated that they would consider online or classroom-based delivery.



Survey Responses

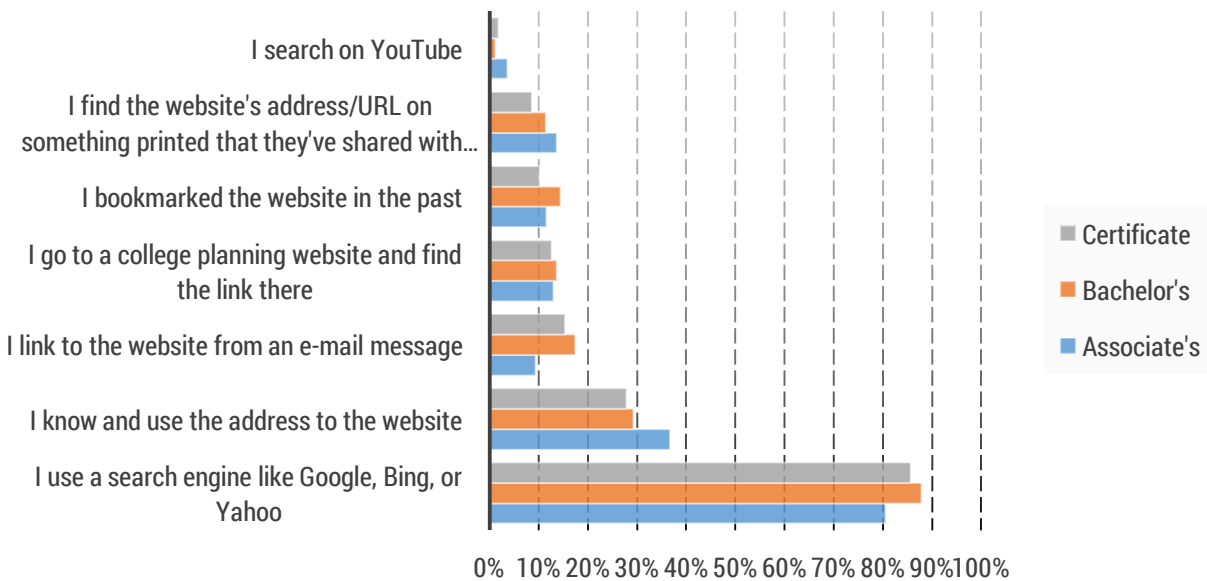
When was the last time you looked at a website for any college or university?

At least 60% of all respondents across categories of intended degree level had looked at a college website within a week of participating in this study.



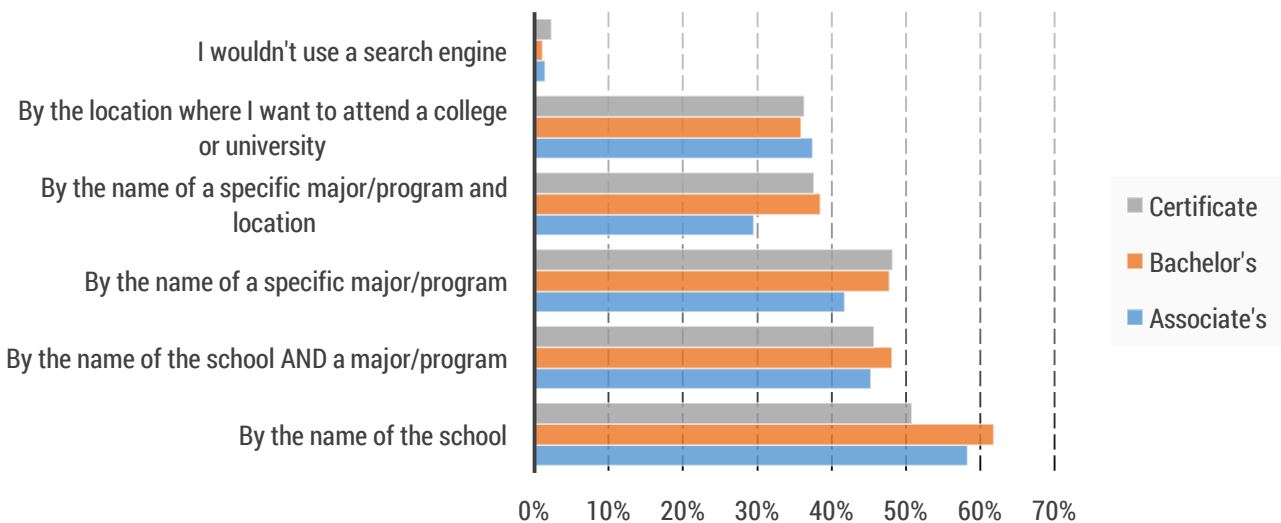
How do you find a college website?

- ✓ More than four in five respondents seeking certificates, associate's, and bachelor's degrees use search engines like Google, Yahoo, and Bing when finding college websites.
- ✓ Statistically significant differences at the .05 level were observed in terms of linking to websites from email between associate's and bachelor's as well as between associate's and certificate.



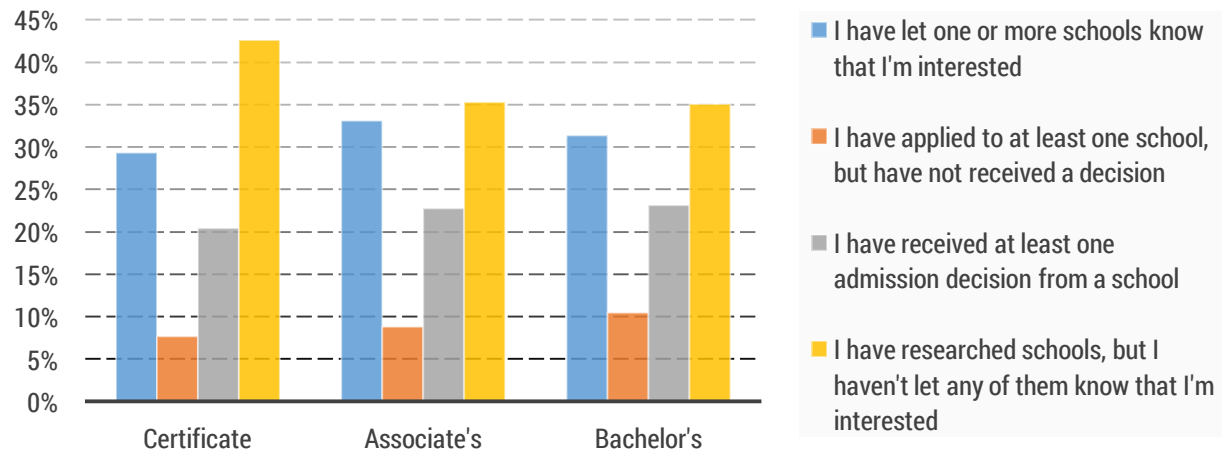
Which of these options reflects the ways you would use a search engine to find college websites?

- ✓ Half or more of the respondents across intended degree level search for institutions by name when using search engines to find college websites.
- ✓ The difference between bachelor's and certificate use of the name of the school when using a search engine to find college websites was significant at the .01 level.



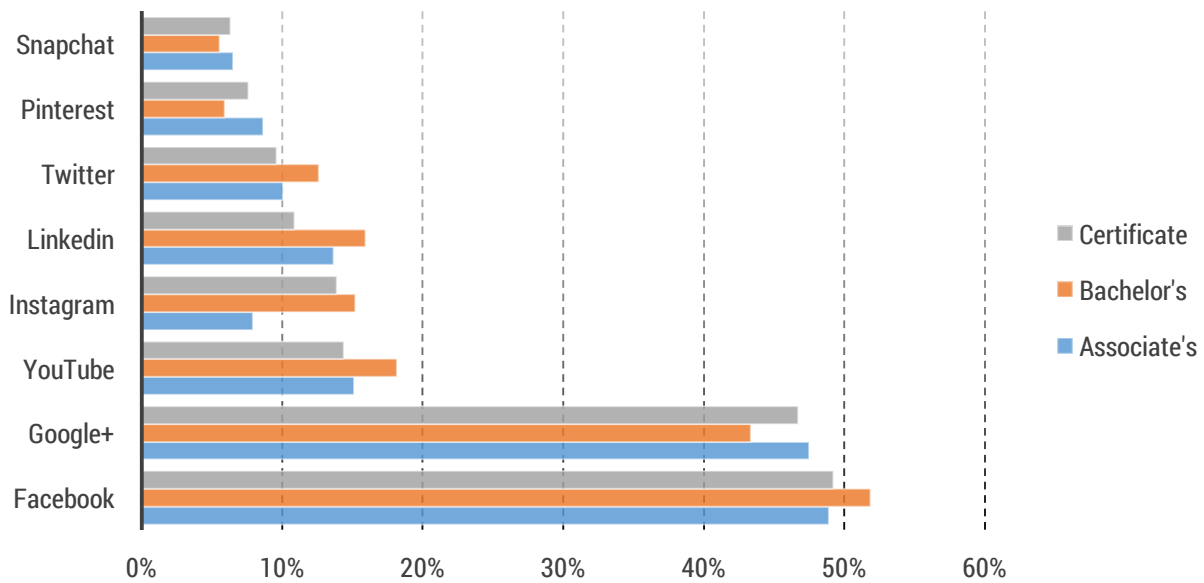
Where are you in your college research today?

More than one-third of all respondents in each category of intended degree level had researched schools but had not let any of the institutions know that they were interested yet.



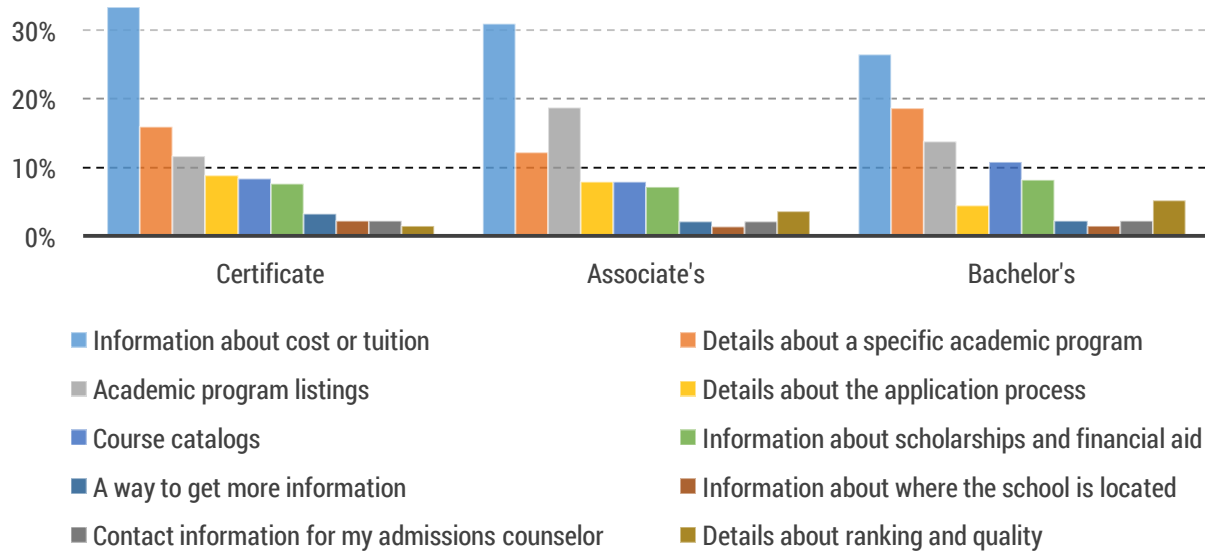
Which social media assets are best for learning more about a specific college or university?

- ✓ **Facebook** was deemed the best social network to use to learn more about colleges by respondents in each category of intended degree level.
- ✓ **Google+** was a close second while **Youtube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, and Snapchat** were also seen as useful by many study participants.
- ✓ The perceptual differences regarding Instagram's utility were significant at the .05 level between associate's and bachelor's as well as between associate's and certificate.



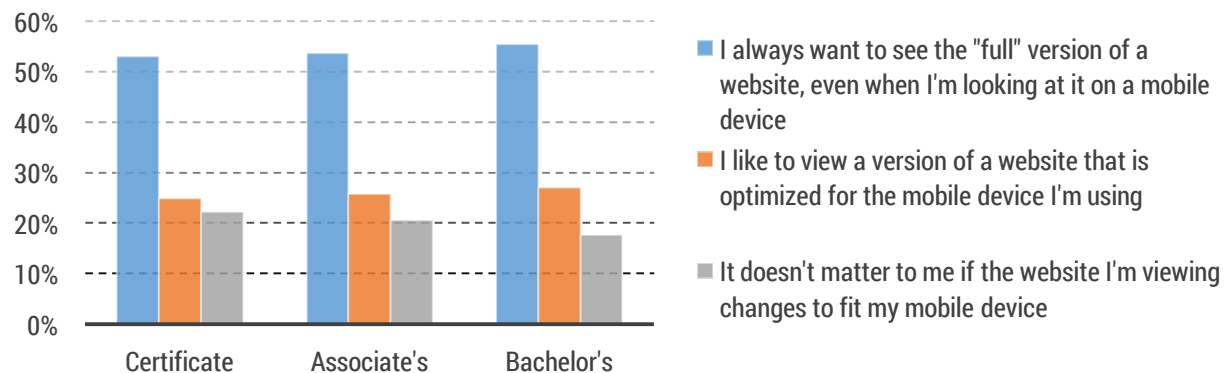
If you were to look at a specific college or university website right now, what would you look for first?

Information about cost or tuition was selected by at least a quarter of all respondents regardless of what type of degree they intend to pursue.



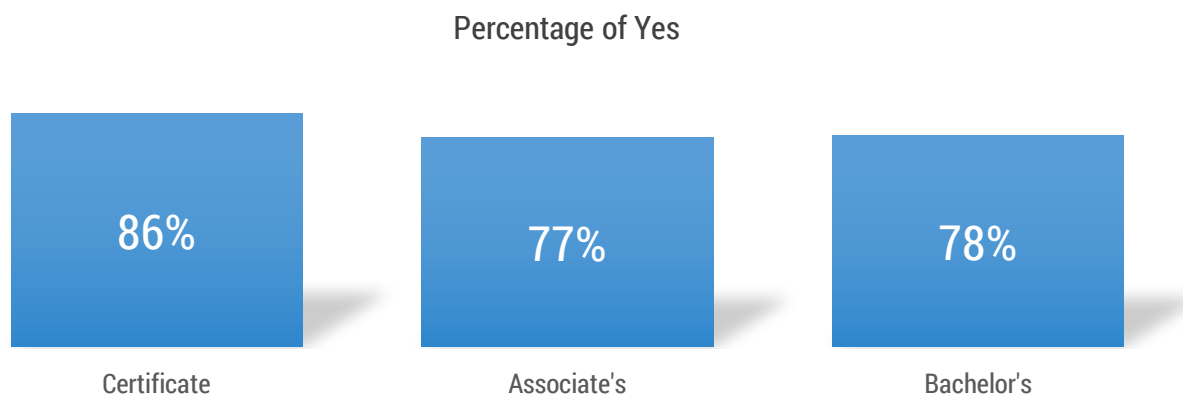
Which of these statements matches your opinion about the way websites work on mobile devices?

More than half of all respondents (regardless of type of intended degree level) prefer to see the full version of a website, even when viewing the site on a mobile device.



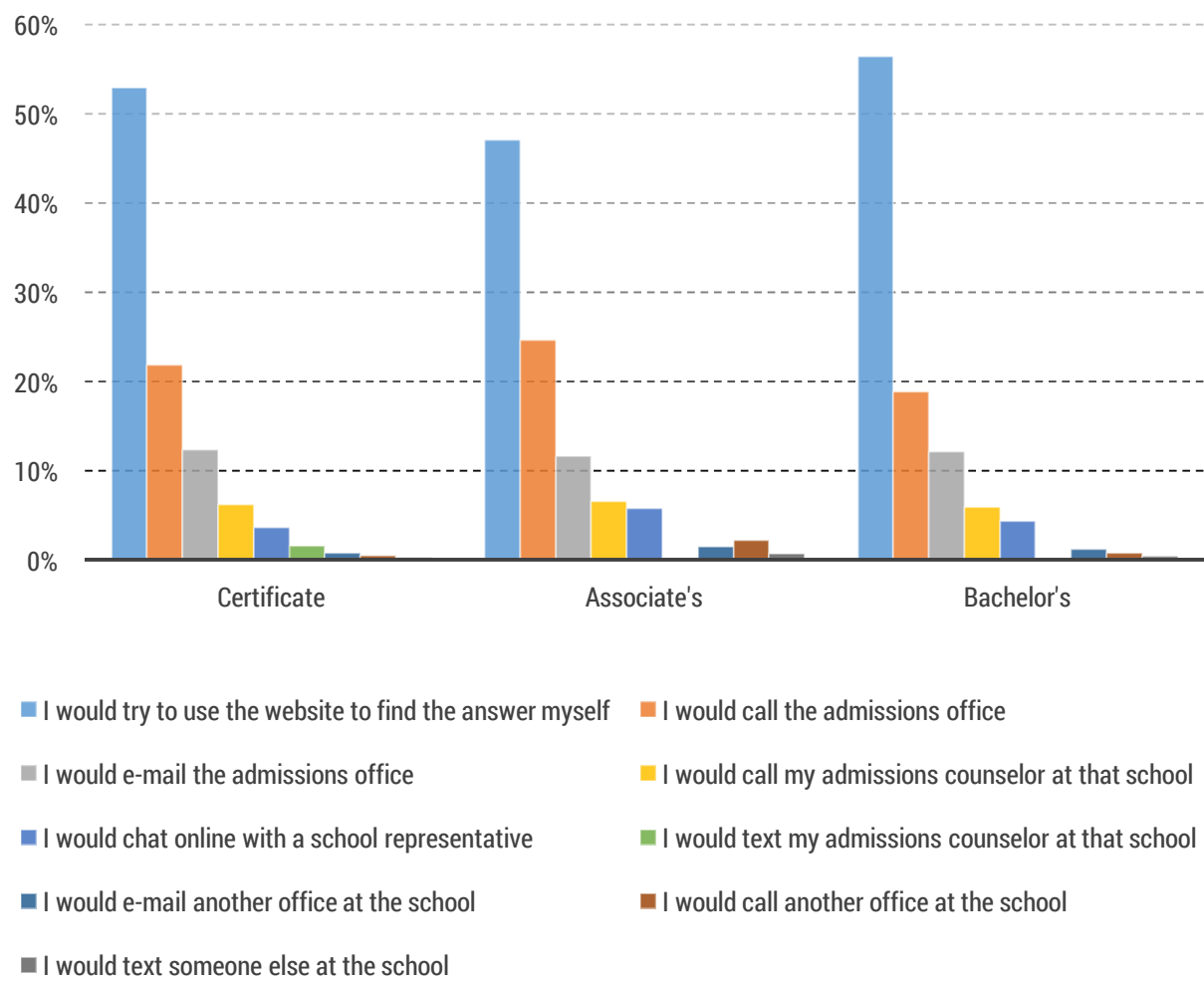
Do you look at college or university websites on a mobile device?

More than three-quarters of respondents across categories view college websites on mobile devices. Differences in the extent to which respondents viewed college websites on mobile was significant between associate's and certificate at the .05 level as well as between bachelor's and certificate at the .01 level.



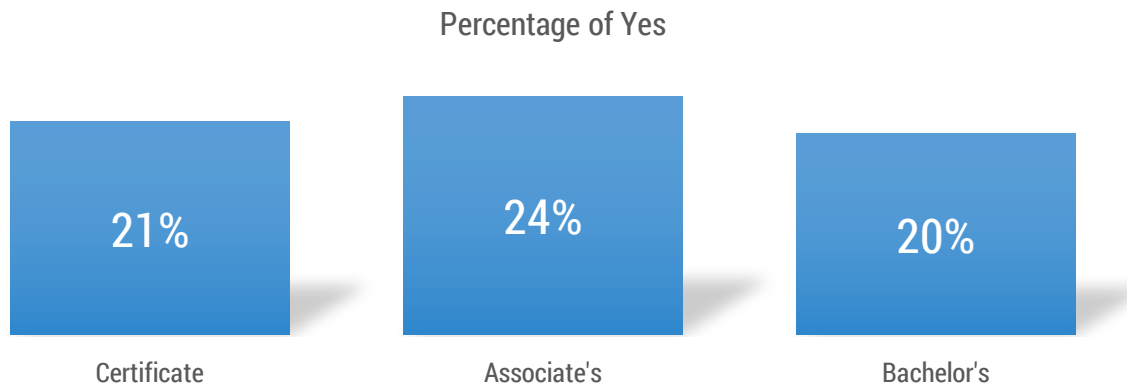
If you had a question about a particular school or program right now, which is the choice that best reflects the way you would go about finding that answer?

The most popular response among respondents across all intended degree levels indicated that they would try to use the website to find any answers pertaining to the schools that they are researching. The second most frequent response in each respondent category would be to call the admissions office.



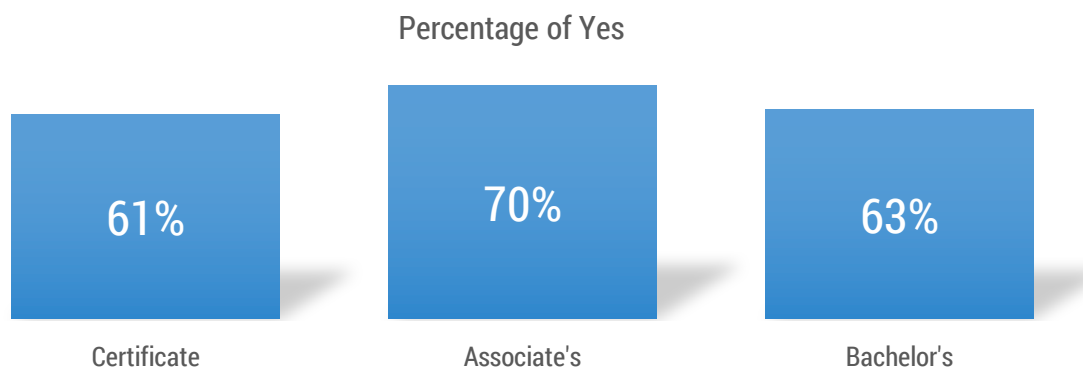
Have you ever used an online chat such as Skype, Google Hangouts, or some live chat resource on a college website, to connect with a representative?

Less than one in four in each category of respondents had ever used an online chat to connect with an institutional representative.



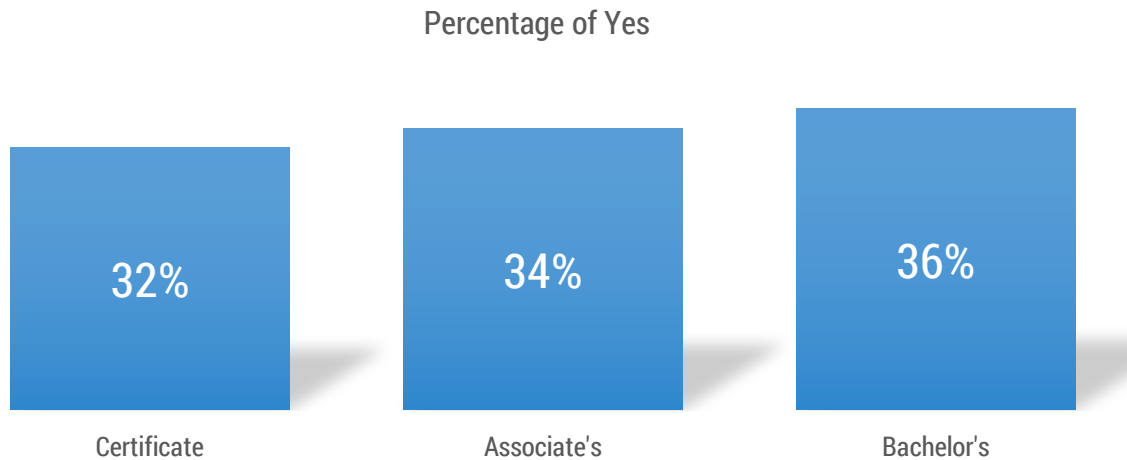
Would you be willing to allow a college or university to send you text messages?

- ✓ At least 60% of study participants in each category of intended degree pursuit would allow a college or university to send him/her text messages.
- ✓ Willingness to receive text messages from a college or university differed at a statistically significant level (.05) between associate's and certificate.



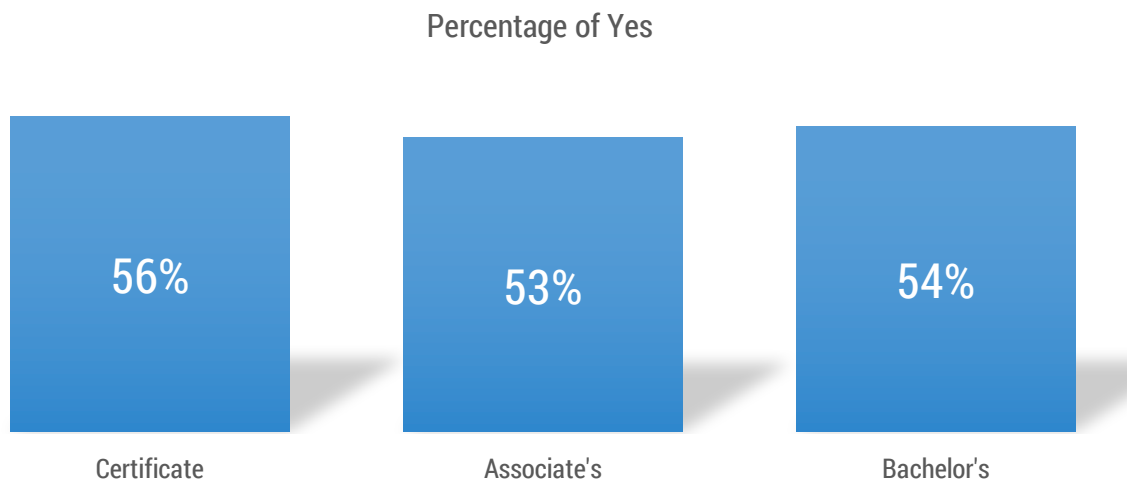
Have you ever received any text messages from a college or university?

Less than two in five respondents across categories had ever received a text message from a college or university.



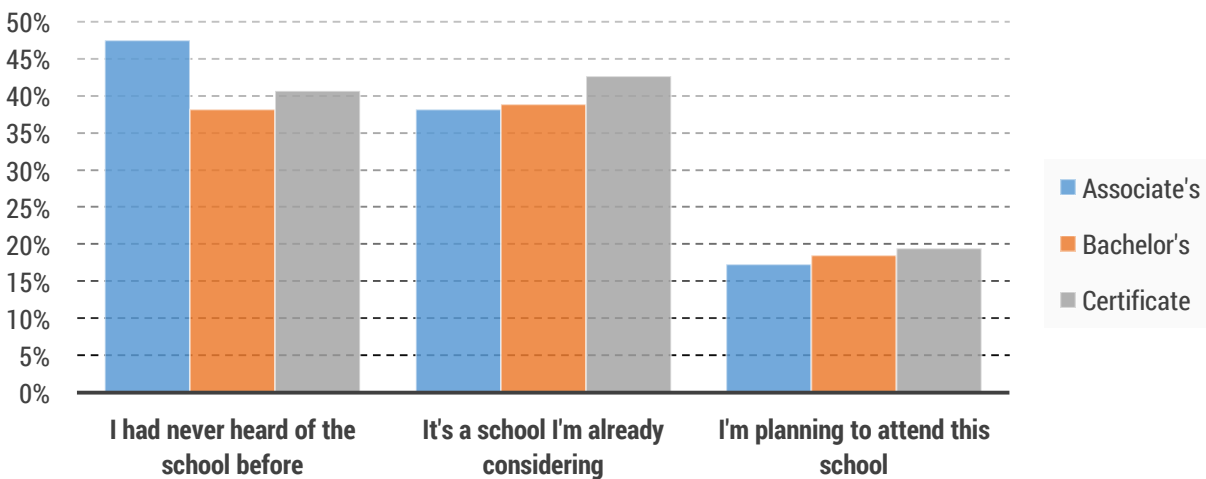
Have you ever clicked on an advertisement for a college or university that you might have seen online?

More than half of all respondents intending to pursue certificates, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees have clicked on an online ad for a college or university.



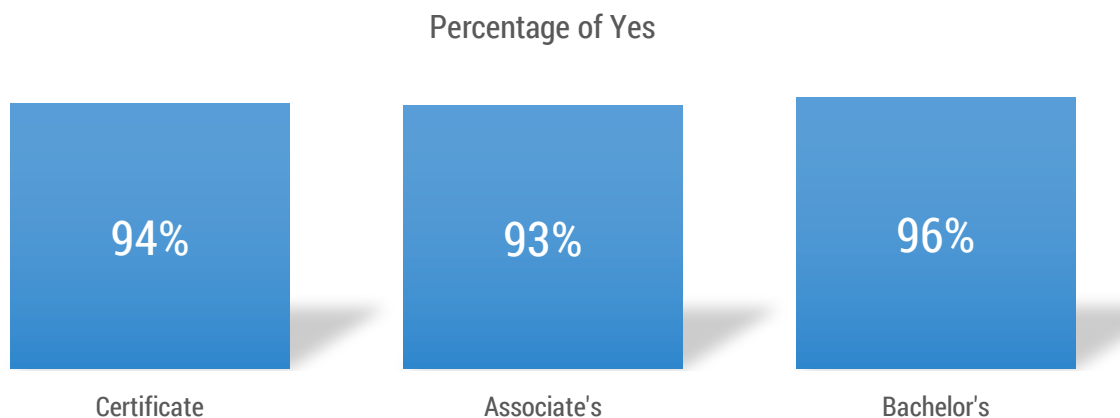
Which option best describes the ads you have clicked?

A significant portion of all respondents indicated clicking on ads for schools that they had never heard of and for schools which they are already considering.



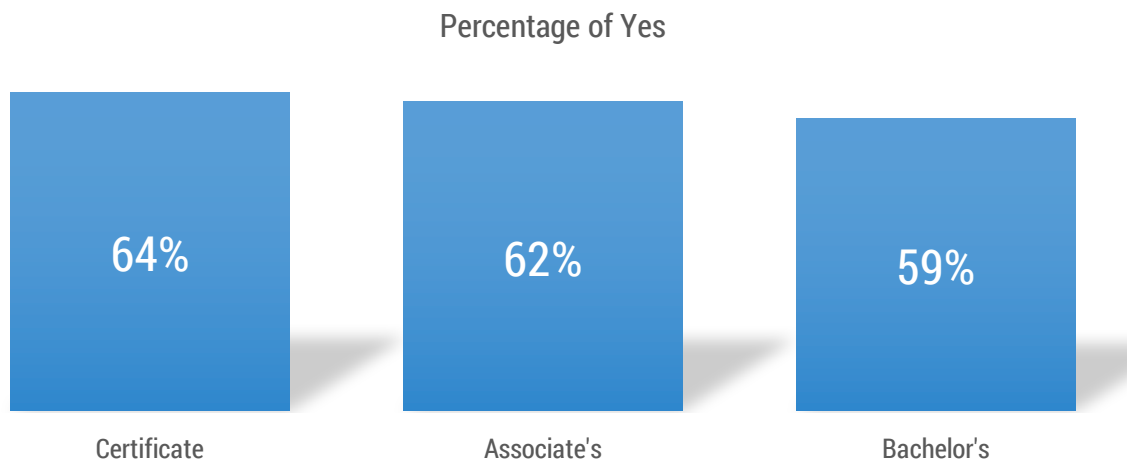
Will you open an email message from a college or university you are interested in attending?

Nearly all of the study participants indicated that they would open an email from an institution which they were interested in attending.



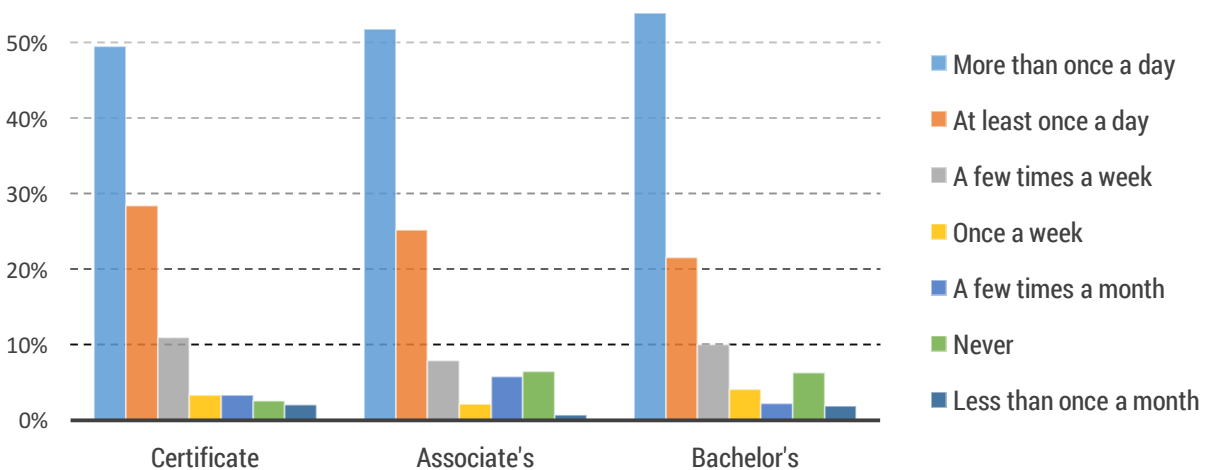
Will you open an email message from a college or university you don't know anything about?

Far more than half of all respondents would open an email from a college or university that they don't know anything about.



How often do you check your email using a smart phone?

More than three-quarters of all respondents intending to pursue certificates, associate's, and bachelor's degrees reported checking their email at least once per day.



Key Findings & Recommendations

The importance of institutional websites cannot be overstated in the context of the recruitment marketing channel mix. The adult prospective students in this study were actively looking at college websites as part of their selection process. Furthermore, a very high percentage indicated that they would search the websites for answers to specific questions about their schools of interest as a first attempt to gather necessary information. The vast majority of these adult prospective students indicated viewing college websites on mobile devices. Their preference for seeing the full version of a website on their device suggests that college websites should be designed from a mobile-first perspective across all devices in that key drivers of the selection process should be emphasized and easy to find. For these adult prospective students, information about costs is critical. They also want to see academic program listings as well as details about those programs when navigating institutional sites.

Search engines, including Google, were cited as the primary way by which the adult prospects in this study found college websites. The study respondents also indicated that they would use the names of the colleges in addition to specific program names and occasionally locations when using search engines as part of the college selection process. Respondents also click upon online advertisements on Google more than on any other channel. In combination, these findings suggest that websites should be optimized with a primary focus on Google and make sure that terms used in the optimization process account for school name as well as specific programs and the locations of the institution. The findings also highlight the importance of Google in paid online advertising efforts.

Facebook was the most popular social media channel for learning about colleges and universities. Additionally, Facebook was the second most-frequently cited channel where study respondents had clicked upon online advertisement for institutions. These findings suggest that colleges and universities should ensure that their Facebook accounts are providing up-to-date, relevant information to adult prospective students

and that their posts should often link to landing pages and/or other key marketing pages where prospective students can learn more and/or take enrollment-related action. Facebook should also be a cornerstone of paid online advertising efforts.

Don't believe the hype about email being dead. These adult prospective students were checking email daily and indicated being very open to receiving emails from schools of interest as well as from schools with which they were not familiar. These findings suggest that well-crafted and timed email marketing could be a very powerful recruitment method for these adult prospects.

Although a small percentage of study respondents had ever received text messages from colleges and universities, a high percentage indicated that they would be willing to receive text messages. This combination of findings suggests that text messaging is an underutilized form of digital marketing to adult prospective students that could be an effective channel.

In conclusion, the study findings highlight the importance of having a robust digital presence to market institutions to adult prospective students. College websites should be viewed as the hub of marketing efforts in that emails, social posts, paid online advertisements, text messages, and offline forms of marketing should route prospective adult students to landing pages and other pages on websites where they can find pertinent information related to costs and other program-related details that are important in the college selection process. Websites can be found and accessed via organic search, paid online advertising efforts, and linked to from emails, text messages, and other channels. We recommend a strong and balanced mix of paid and organic methods on the web in addition to using email and other channels to ensure that these adult prospective students ultimately land on college websites where they can easily find the information that helps them make informed choices about the best ways to further their educations.

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Ruffalo Noel Levitz is a trusted partner to higher education, helping systems and campuses reach and exceed their goals for enrollment, marketing, and student success. Our technology-enabled solutions and consulting for enrollment management provide campuses with data and strategies to optimize their decision making.

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Since 2007, Campus Explorer, Inc., has helped higher education institutions recruit and enroll more than 100,000 students. A four-time recipient of the Deloitte Fast 500 (2012-2015), Campus Explorer continues to grow and bring innovative products and services to the higher education industry.