



## 2015 E-Expectations Trend Report

# How to Engage International Undergraduate and Graduate Students in the Admissions Process

International student enrollment continues to grow at a rapid pace in the United States. There were 886,052 international students enrolled at American campuses in the 2013-14 academic year, an 8.1 percent increase over the year before. Both undergraduate and graduate international student enrollment made significant leaps this past year. Undergraduate international students increased 9 percent (after a 10 percent increase in 2012-13), while graduate international students climbed 6 percent. This growth has been occurring for more than a decade, as total international enrollment has increased by 300,000 students since 2002-03 (Institute of International Education 2014).

Given this interest in matriculating in the United States, what can campuses do to engage international students in the recruitment process?

To answer this question, Ruffalo Noel Levitz and CollegeWeekLive surveyed prospective international undergraduate and graduate students in early 2015. The survey gauged their behaviors and expectations when researching and interacting with campus. Among the findings:

- Approximately 60 percent of international students said an interest in a particular campus is their main motivation for studying abroad.
- Three out of every four international students cited financial requirements as their top concern for studying abroad.
- Nearly 40 percent use mobile devices as their primary method for going online, and that figure has more than doubled among undergraduates since 2013.
- Parents influence the enrollment decisions of more than 60 percent of prospective international undergraduates and nearly 50 percent of prospective graduate students.
- Both undergraduate and graduate students listed college websites as the most influential enrollment resource.
- Eight out of 10 international students expressed an interest in having virtual meetings with campuses online.

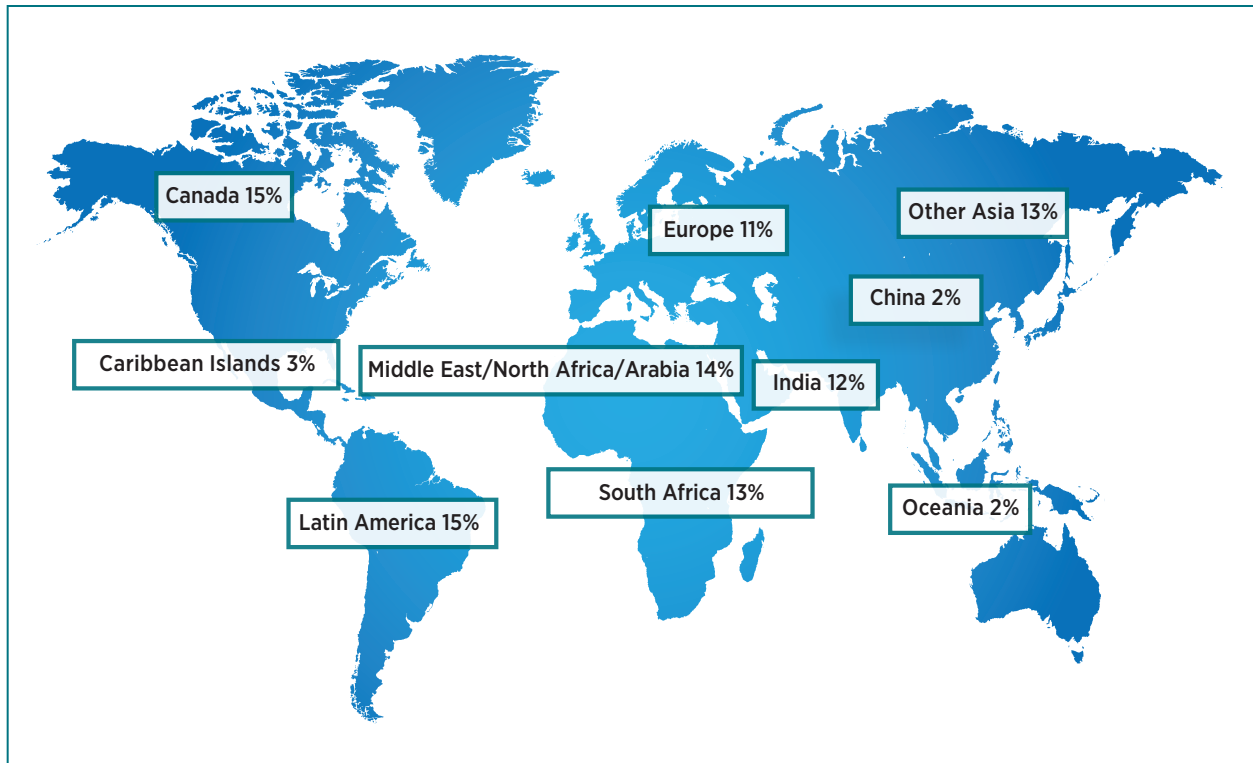
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CollegeWeek **Live**

**Survey results compiled from more than 2,700 respondents in 160 countries**

Ruffalo Noel Levitz and CollegeWeekLive received 2,714 completed surveys from prospective students. The respondents came from 160 countries in the following regions:



**Current education level and interest**

**UNDERGRADUATE**

Senior	31%
Junior	7%
Sophomore	3%
Freshman	2%
In college, transferring	15%

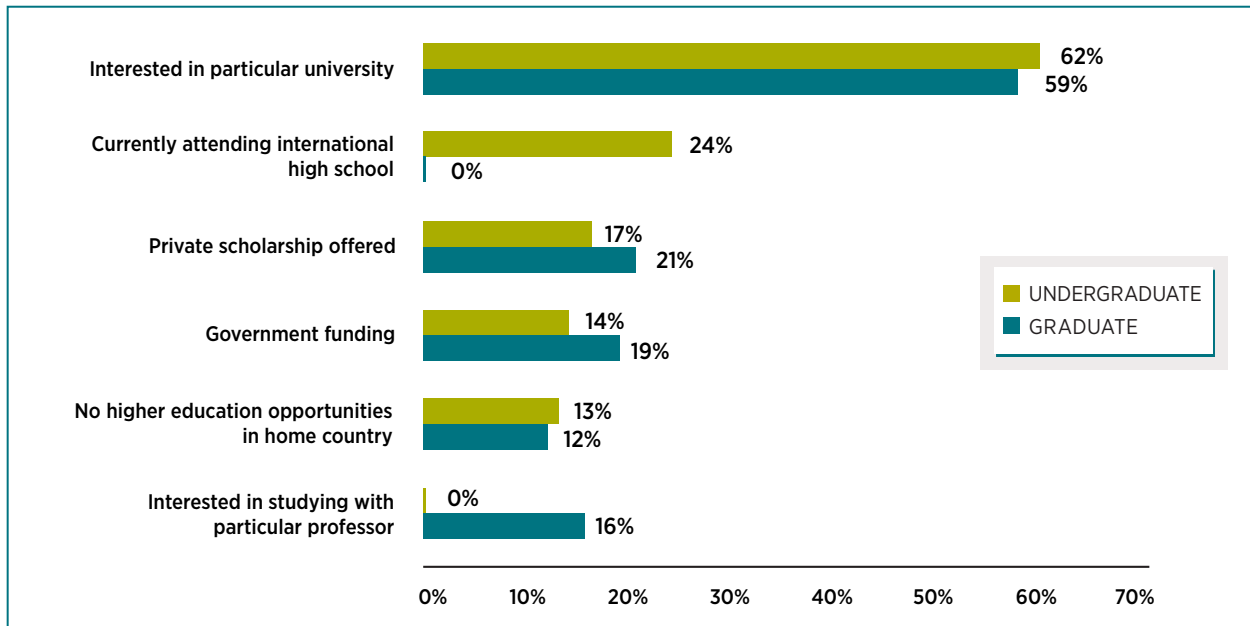
**GRADUATE**

In college, looking for graduate school	17%
Not in college, looking for graduate school	23%

More than 80 percent of prospective graduate students and 56 percent of undergraduate students said they were *most likely* or *definitely likely* to study abroad; only 7 percent of graduate students and 29 percent of undergraduates said they were not likely to study outside their home country.

## Institutional brand remains the dominant reason to study overseas

Figure 1: What motivates international students to study abroad?

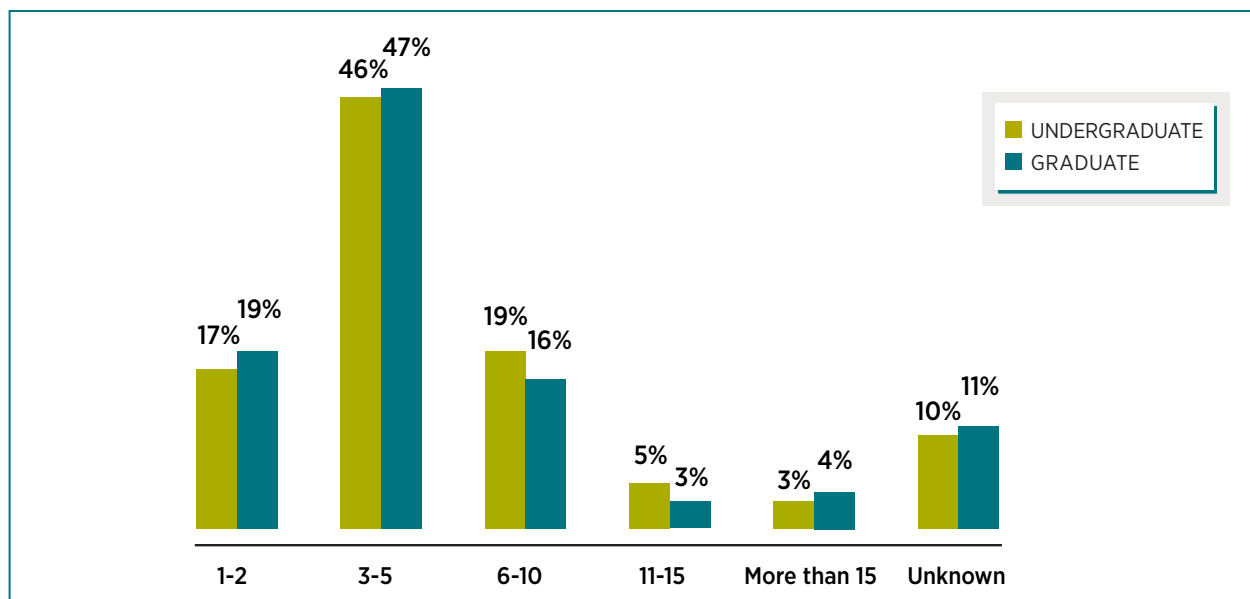


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These results remain very similar to those in the *2014 International E-Expectations* study, with the pull of a particular campus driving interest in studying abroad. Campuses looking to recruit successfully abroad will need to make sure they have strong campus awareness and reputation in their target markets.

However, most international students are not locked into one or two institutions, and instead intend to apply to at least three campuses.

Figure 2: How many colleges do students intend to apply to?



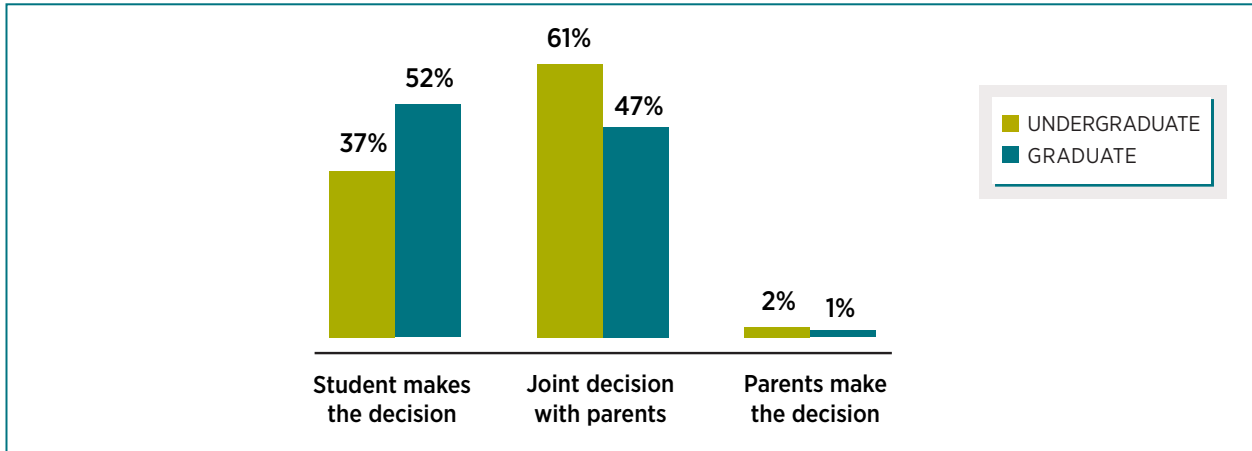
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Notice that approximately one-quarter of international students plan to apply to at least six institutions.

### Parents are involved in the enrollment decision

For undergraduate international students in particular, parents have at least some influence on the enrollment decision about two-thirds of the time. Even for graduate students, parents are involved nearly half the time.

**Figure 3: Who makes the decision on which campus to attend?**

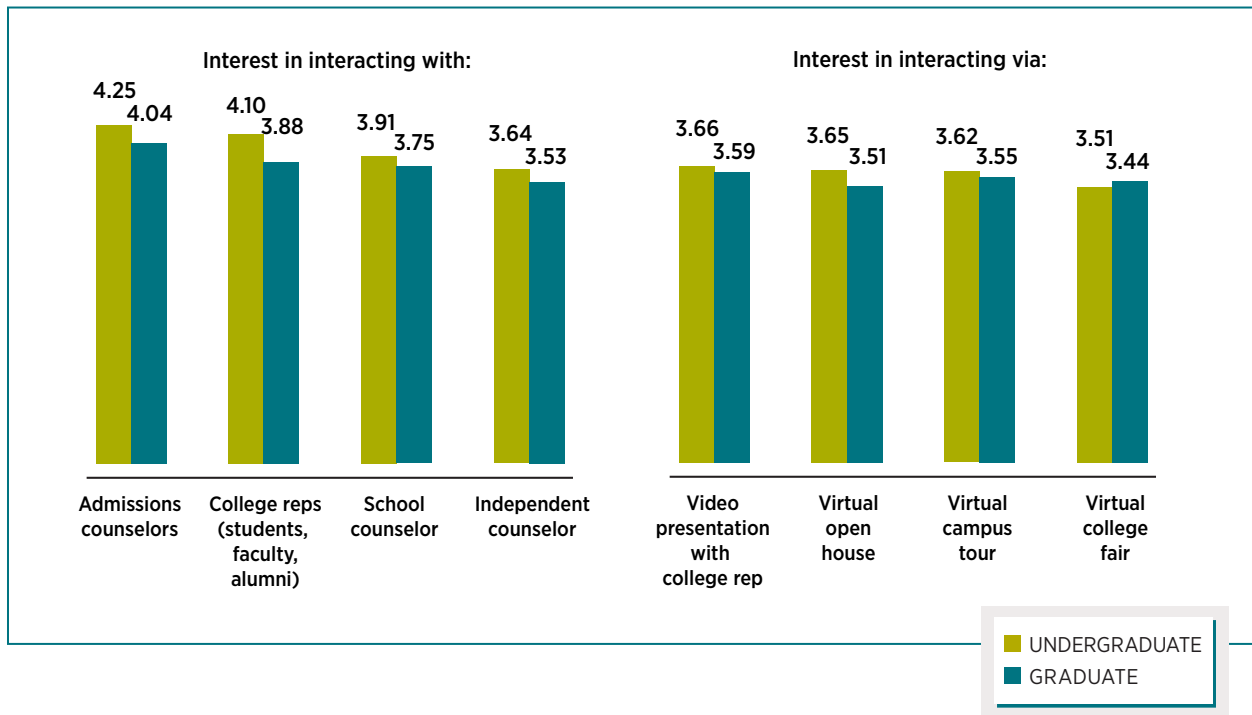


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In the three years of this study, the influence of parents has crept up for undergraduate students as well. In 2013, 42 percent of respondents said that the student made the decision, while 56 percent said parents were jointly involved. In 2014, 58 percent said that their parents were jointly involved.

Students were also asked to rank how interested their parents would be in interacting with key people during the recruitment process, and also their interest in virtual interactions with a campus.

**Figure 4: How students said their parents would like to interact during recruitment process (1-5 scale, 5=most interested)**

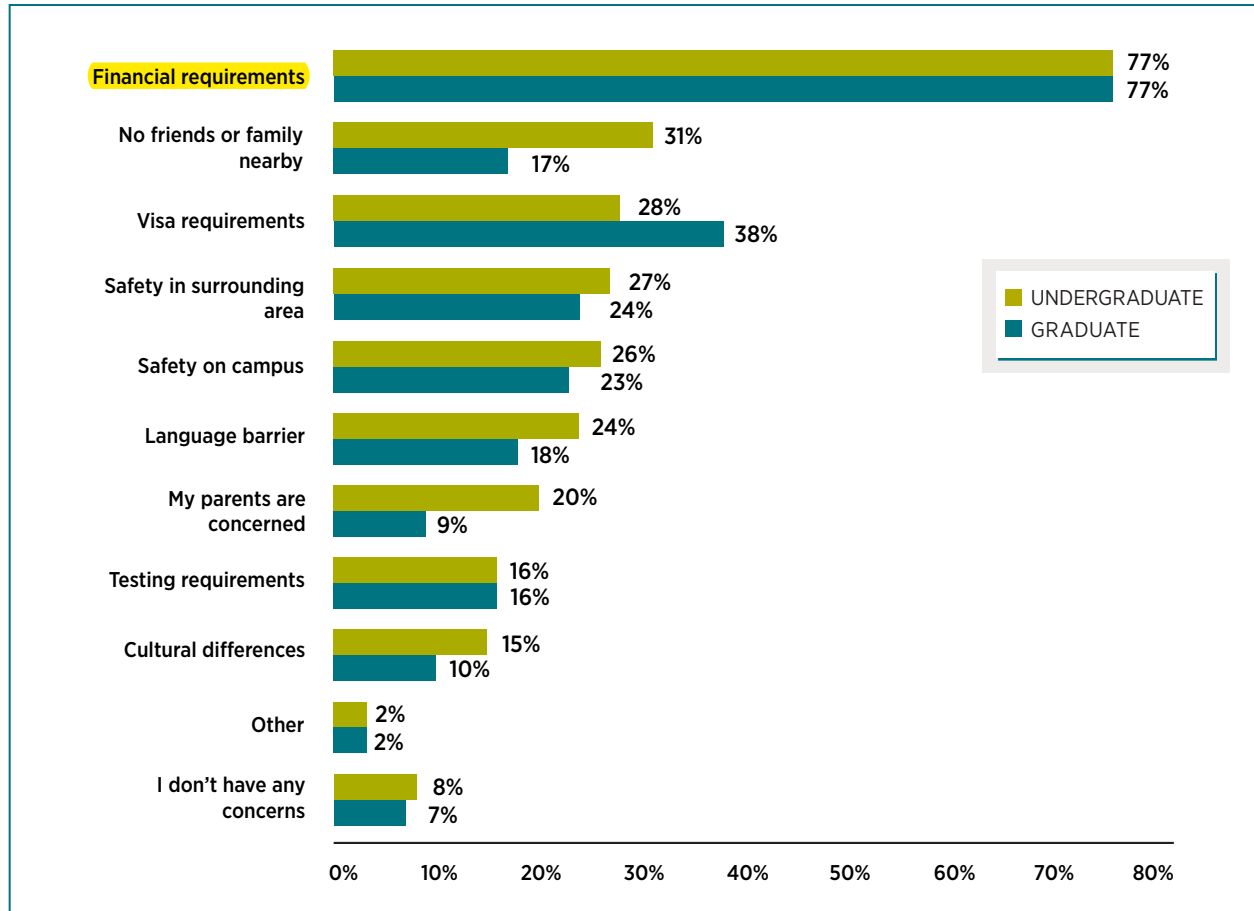


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## Financial issues are by far the most common concern

In three key questions, both prospective undergraduate and graduate international students showed that issues that relate to finances and funding are at the top of their minds while searching for colleges abroad. For instance, three out of four international students listed financial requirements as one of their concerns for studying overseas.

Figure 5: What are students' concerns about studying abroad?



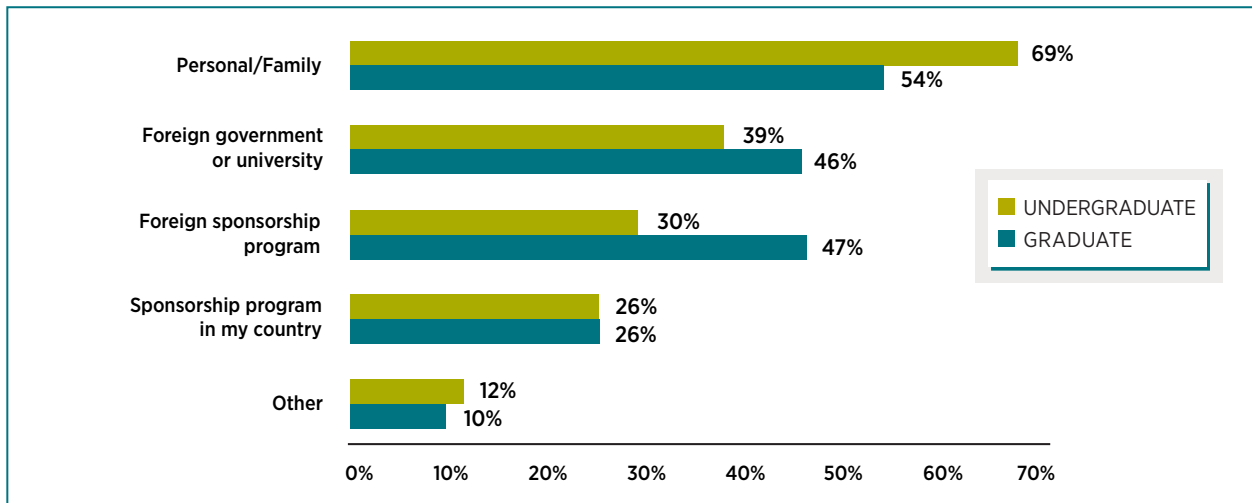
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Note that the 77 percent figure was 10 points higher than the 2014 study.

After financial requirements, nearly 40 percent of graduate students cited visa requirements as a concern, while 31 percent of undergraduates said they were concerned about a lack of family or friends nearby (an increase of 10 points over the 2014 *International E-Expectations* study).

The strong concern over financial requirements could stem from the 69 percent of undergraduate students and 54 percent of graduate students stating they would be funding their education with personal/family contributions. Many undergraduate students said they do not have additional sources of funding, with only 39 percent listing support from foreign governments/universities or foreign sponsors as potential funding sources.

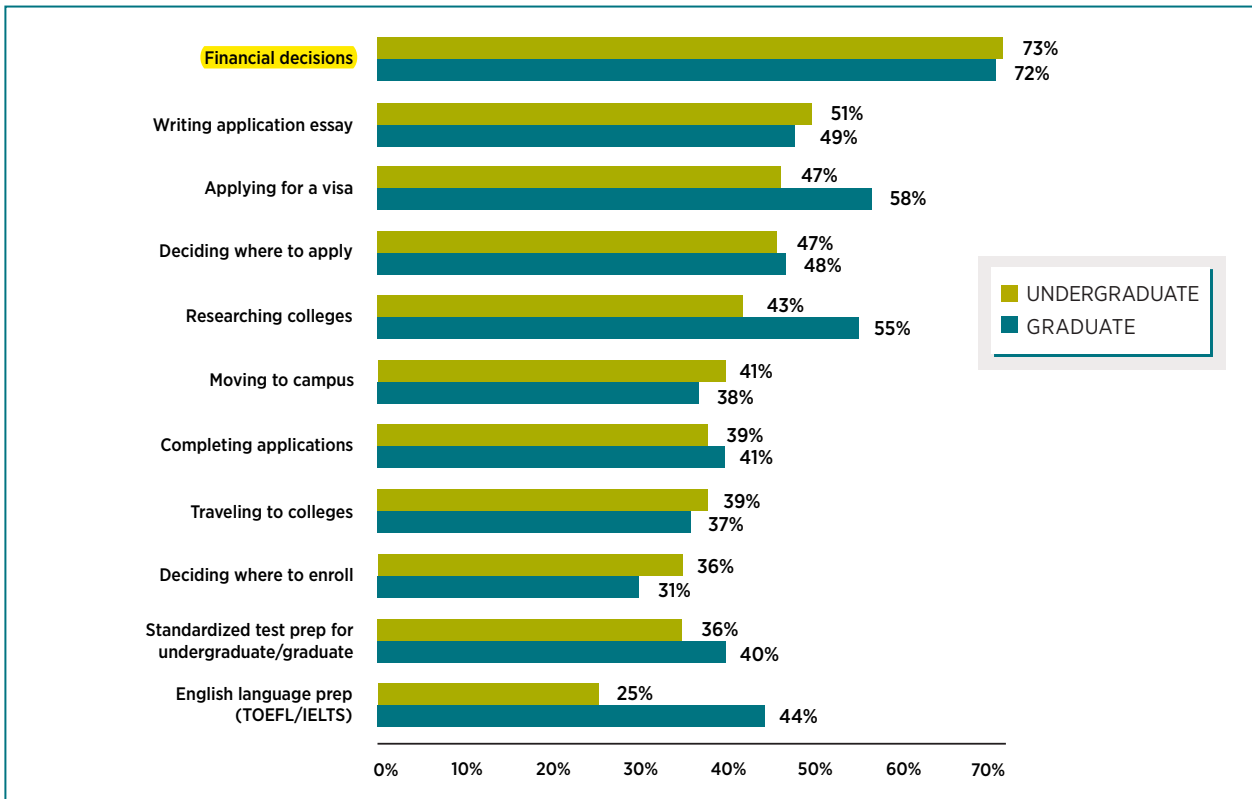
**Figure 6: How do students plan to fund their education?**



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Finally, both groups of prospective students listed financial decisions as the enrollment issue they needed the most help with.

**Figure 7: Which aspects of the enrollment process do students need help with?**



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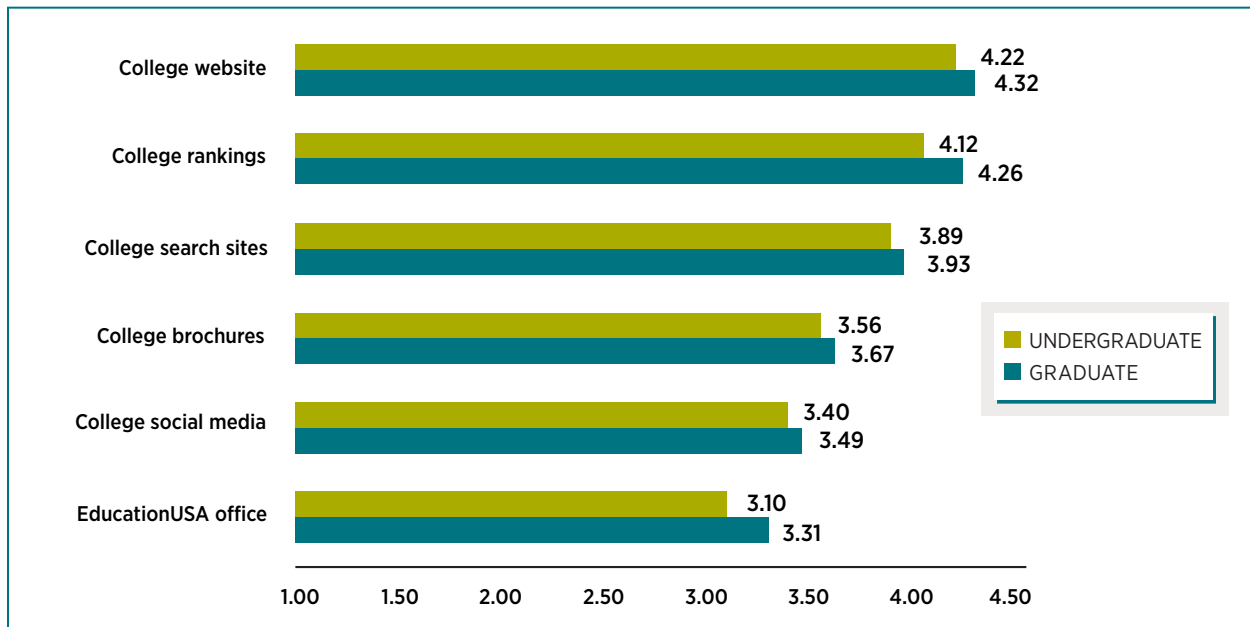
More than 50 percent of graduate students listed two other areas they needed help with: applying for a visa (58 percent) and researching colleges (55 percent). Writing an application essay was the only item aside from financial decisions that more than 50 percent of undergraduates listed as a help topic.

Overall, the results from Figures 5, 6, and 7 show that campuses need to address financial concerns with prospective international students as soon as possible, as these financial factors certainly play a key role in which campus they will choose.

### International students rely on a variety of resources for researching campuses

Respondents were asked to rate various resources for researching colleges, and students rated six resources a three or higher on a five-point scale.

**Figure 8: Most influential resources for international students (1-5 scale, 5= most influential)**

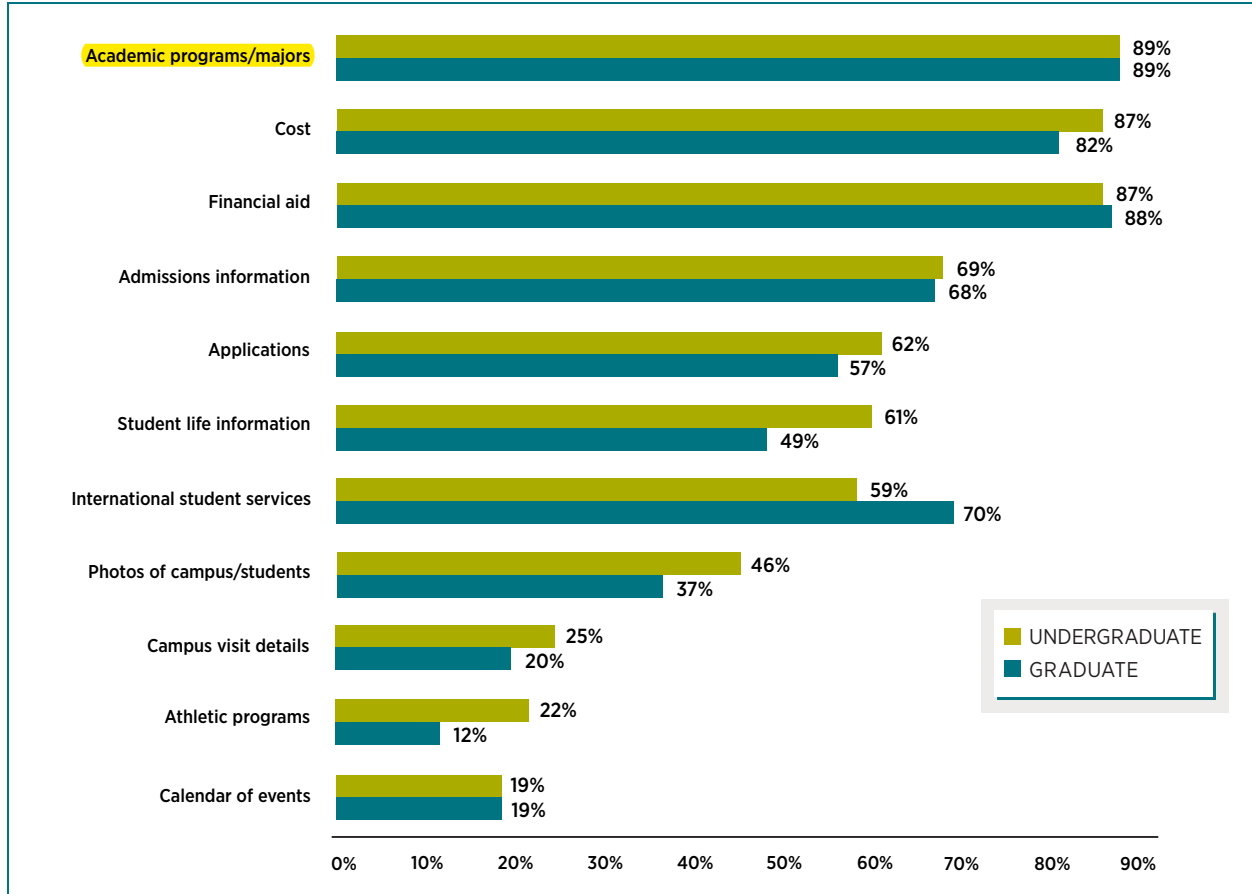


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College websites did remain the top resource again this year, which shows that campuses wishing to increase their enrollment of international students should make sure their websites are inviting and engaging to these students.

When international students arrive at a college website, what pages do they look for?

**Figure 9: Top viewed content areas on college websites**



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The top content areas are not that different from the ones that domestic students examine—academic programs and cost/financial aid pages. International students first want to know what they can study and how much they will have to pay to attend a campus.

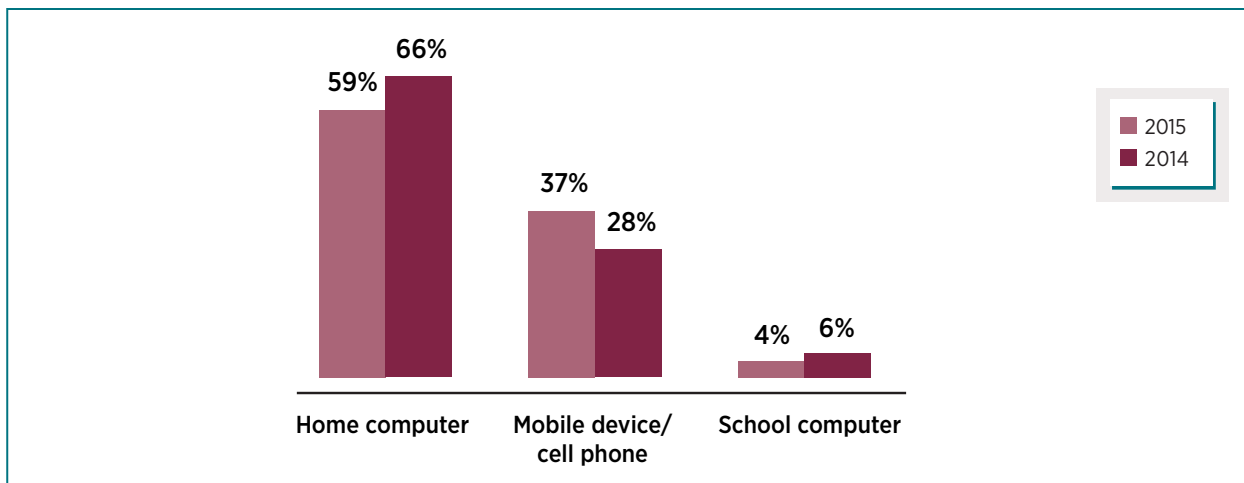
As with the results from Figure 8, the answers in Figure 9 show that a variety of pages can interest and potentially influence international students. Seven categories were deemed top content by at least half of undergraduates, with 50 percent or more of graduate students citing six content areas as important. Campuses therefore need to make sure that their websites can address a variety of concerns and questions that international students may have.



### Mobile web browsing is increasing rapidly among international students

Figure 10 shows that nearly 40 percent of undergraduate and graduate international students now use a mobile device as their primary way to go online.

**Figure 10: How do students access the Internet most often? (all students)**

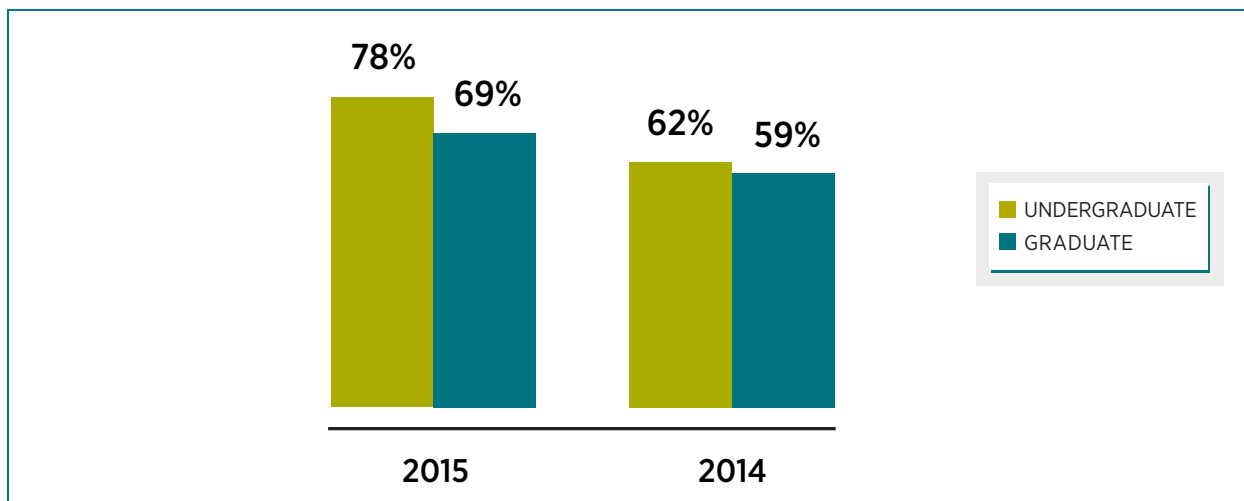


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This figure has risen quickly, jumping 9 points since last year and 20 points since the *2013 International E-Expectations* study, in which 17 percent said they used a mobile device most often to access the Internet. (Note: the 2013 study only polled potential undergraduates.) There was not a large difference between the undergraduate (38 percent) and graduate (35 percent) responses.

The majority of students have also looked at college websites on a mobile device, and the figure rose by double-digits in the last year for both groups of students.

**Figure 11: How many have looked at a college website on a mobile device?**



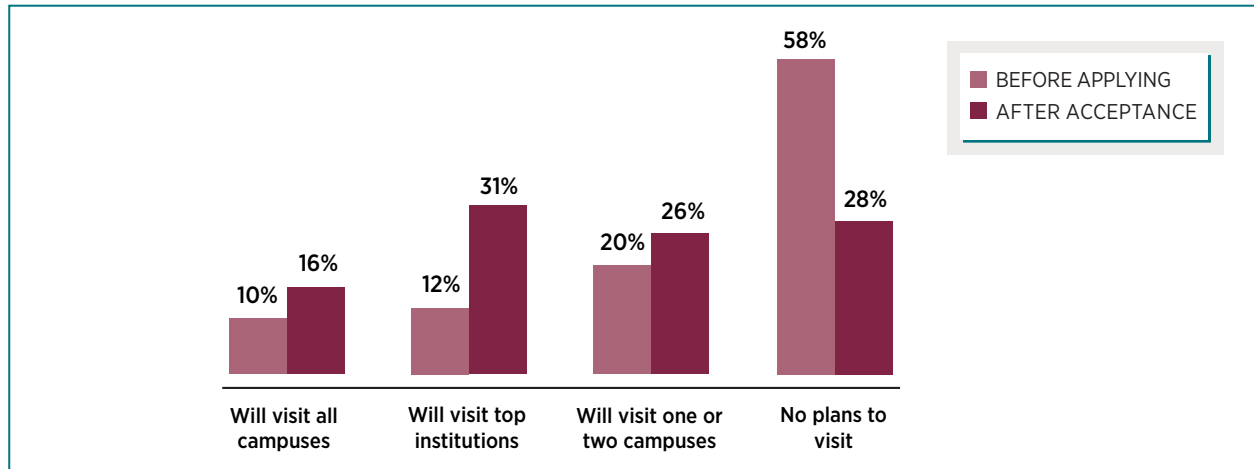
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The vast majority (77 percent) of respondents who have looked on a college site with a mobile device use either iPhones or Android-based smartphones. Only 7 percent said they used iPads or other tablets to browse college sites. This emphasizes the importance of using responsive design with college websites, so they render optimally on smaller devices.

## Students value online interactions with campuses, especially because many students have no in-person contacts before applying

For many international students, when they apply to a campus in the United States, they are doing so without having visited a single campus or having met any campus representatives in person. This makes online interactions during the recruitment and application process that much more crucial.

**Figure 12: Plans to visit campuses (all students)**

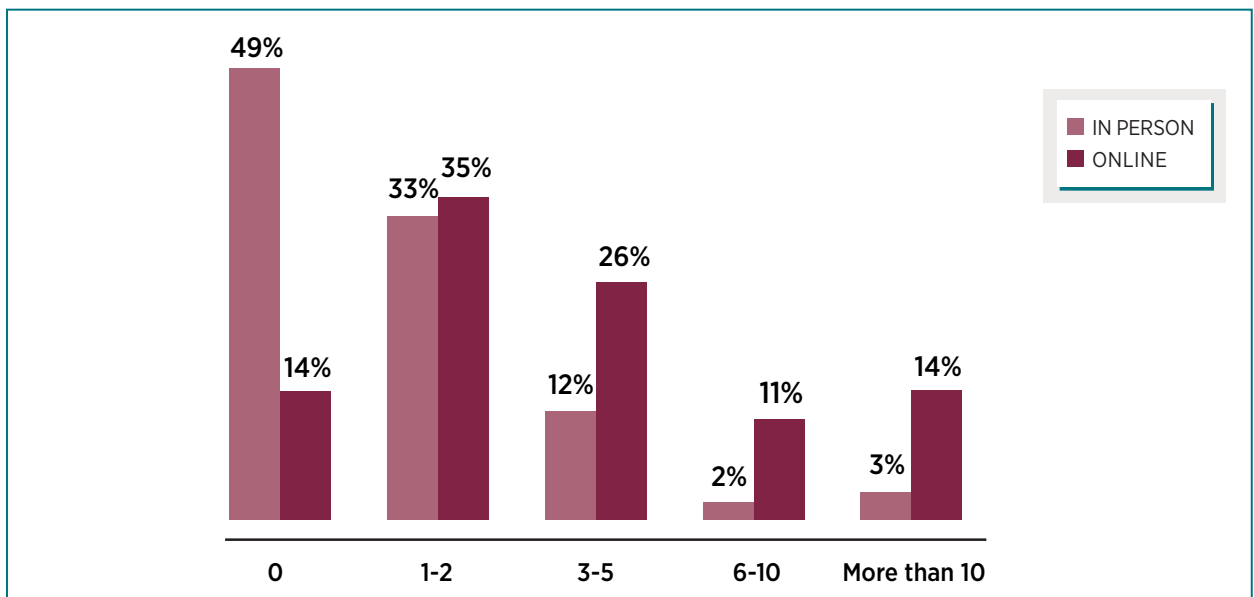


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Nearly 60 percent of prospective international students will not visit a campus before applying, and nearly 30 percent will not visit even after being accepted. (Note: there was very little difference in undergraduate and graduate responses.) What's more, the number of students who said they would not visit a single campus before applying jumped from 45 percent last year to 58 percent this year.

In a related finding, nearly half of all students said they had no in-person contact with their top college choice.

**Figure 13: How many in-person and online interactions have they had with their top college choice? (all students)**

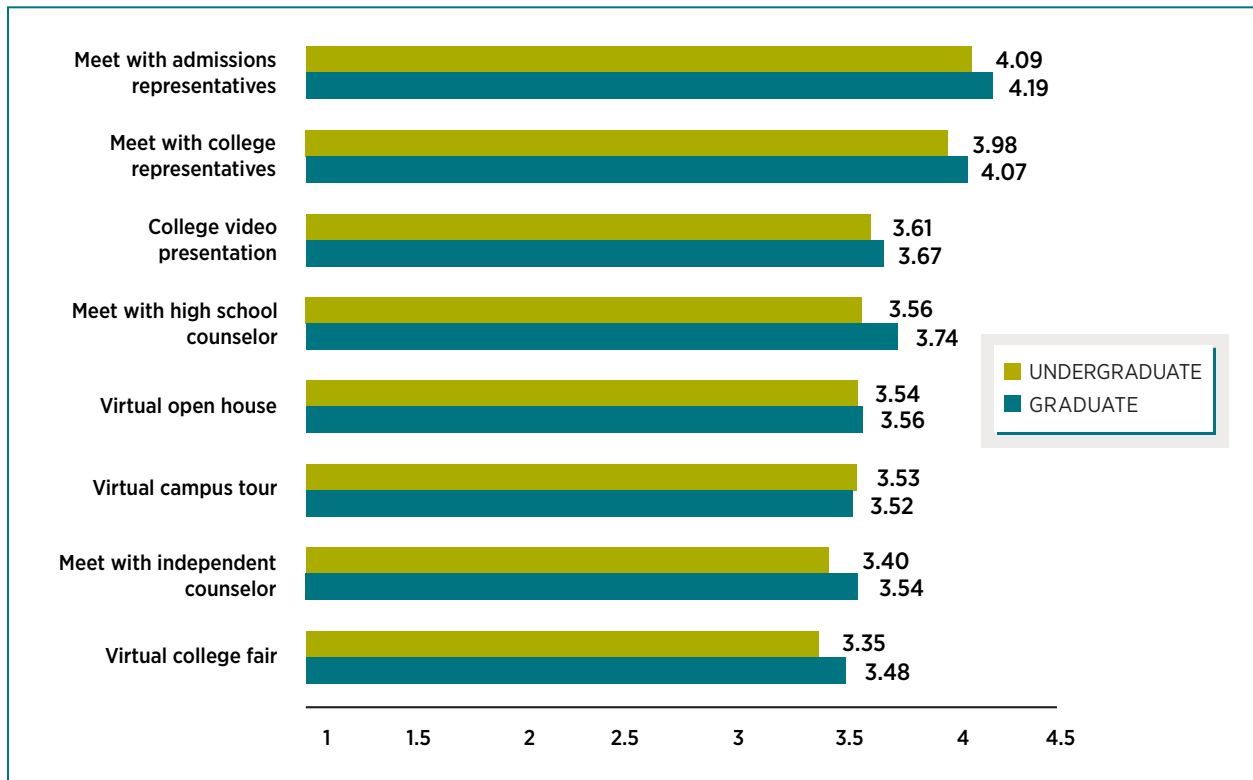


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More than half (54 percent) of graduate students said that they had no in-person contact with their top college choice, compared to 44 percent of undergraduates; the remaining responses were very similar between the two groups.

The lack of opportunities to interact with campus representatives in person makes online interactions that much more important, and students listed online meetings with admissions and college representatives as their most influential online interaction.

**Figure 14: Which online interactions influence where students apply? (1-5 scale, 5=most influential)**

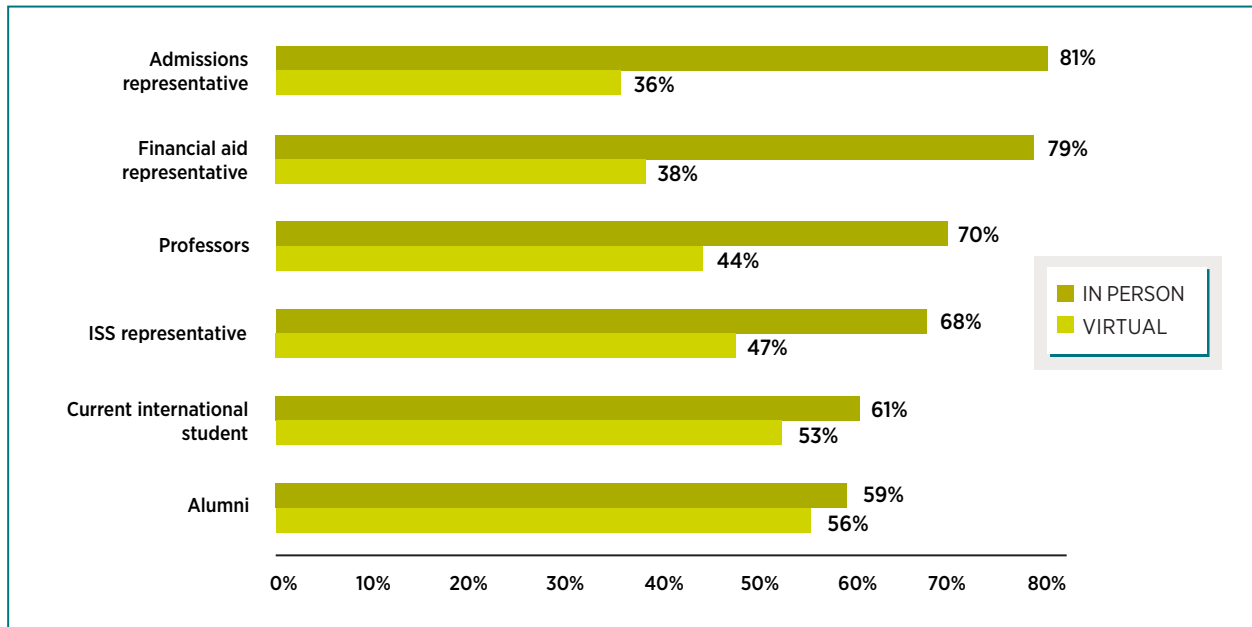


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Students were also asked who they wanted to interact with from a campus, and how they wanted to interact with them (in person or online).

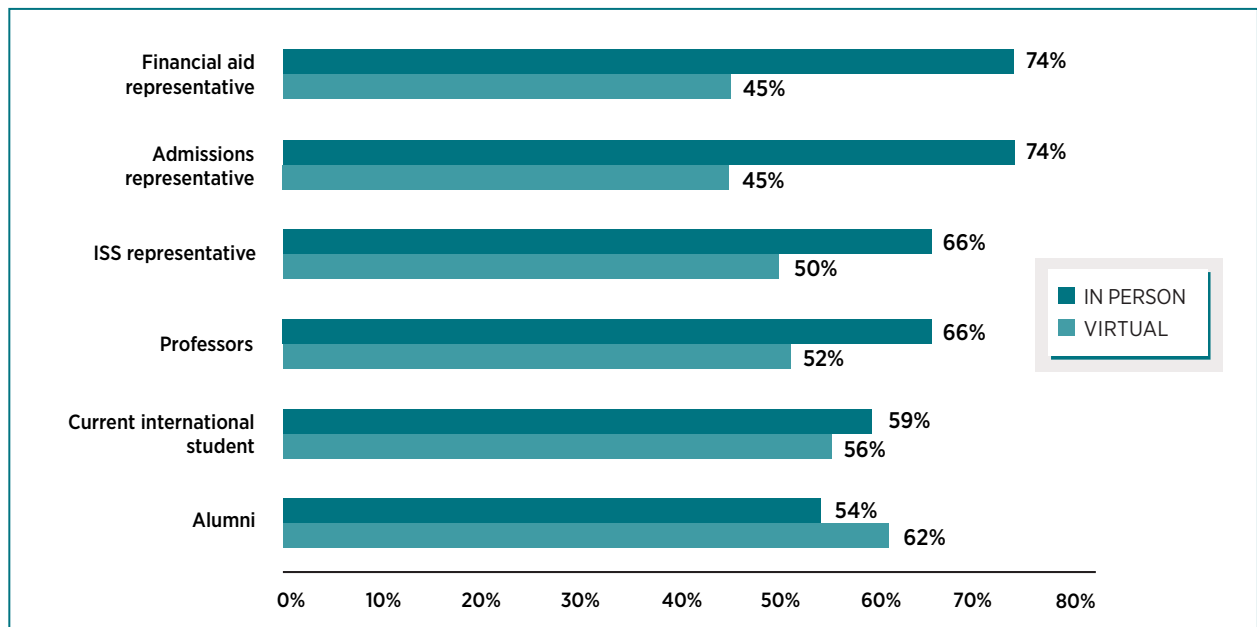
**Figure 15: Who do students want to interact with most?**

**Undergraduate international students**



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**Graduate international students**

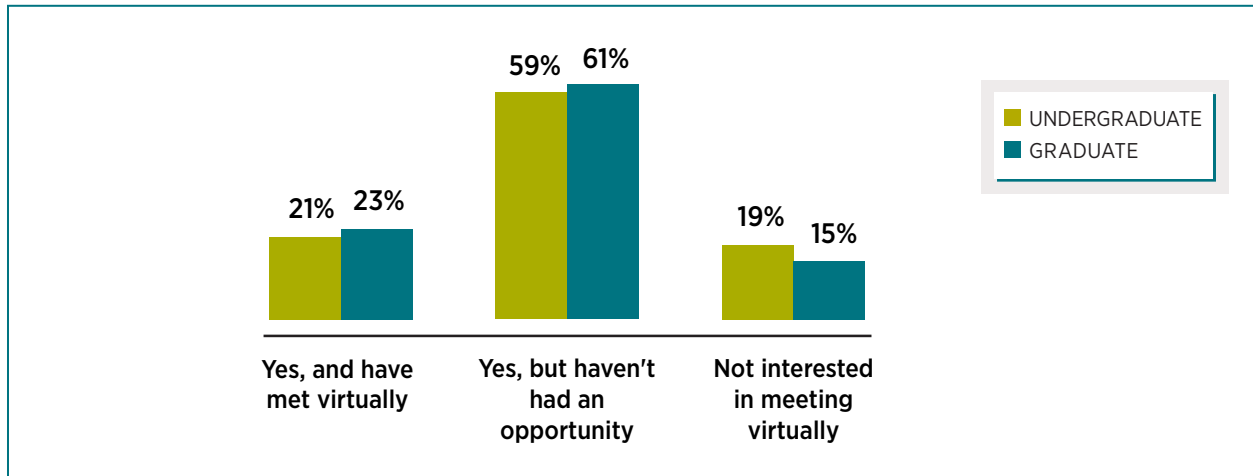


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Notice that students have a strong desire to meet many key campus representatives in person, although more than half of both undergraduate and graduate students said they would be interested in interacting with current international students and alumni online. This does seem to pose a dilemma for campuses—how can colleges and universities facilitate those in-person meetings when distance and cost may make such meetings prohibitive?

The good news is that students are very receptive to virtual meetings as well. More than 80 percent of undergraduate and graduate students have said they are interested in having virtual meetings with campuses.

**Figure 16: Are students interested in virtual meetings with campuses?**



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These results underscore a major opportunity for colleges, as most prospective international students have shown interest in virtual meetings, but have not been able to have such meetings yet.

**Give international students a way to experience your campus virtually**

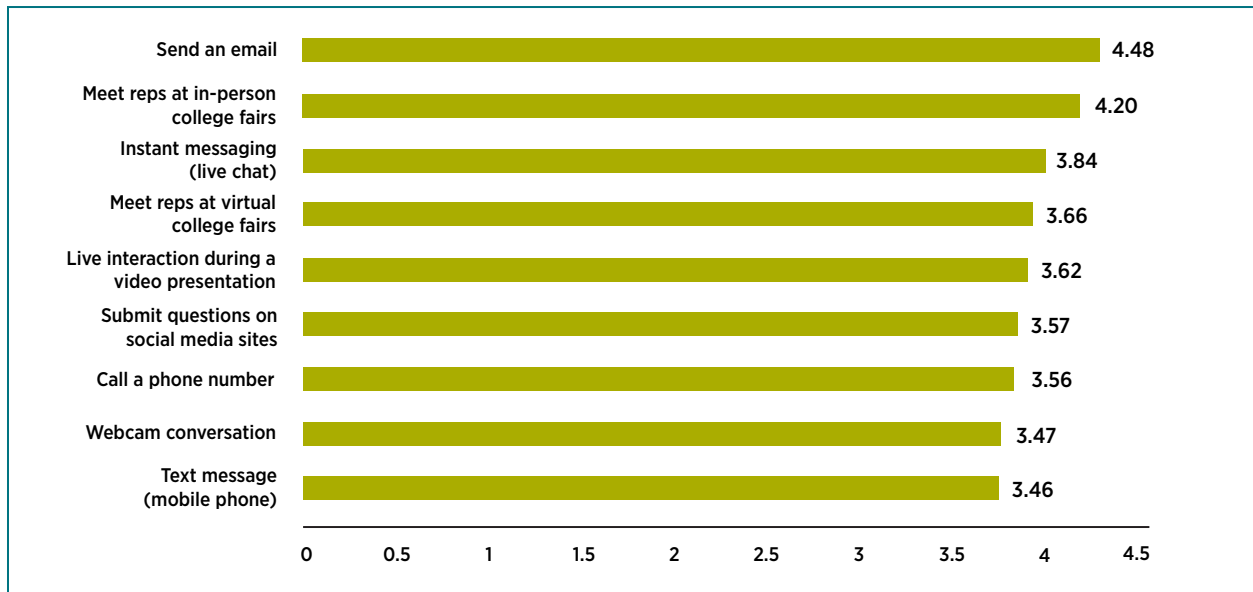
With so many international students unable to come to campus before applying, it's important for colleges and universities to give students ways to research and experience the campus online. Provide ways for students and their parents to take virtual tours, have virtual meetings, and interact online with your campus, so that they can be better engaged with your institution even if they cannot visit it in person.

## International students value a variety of communication methods, both online and in person

Prospective international students rated email and in-person college fairs the highest among communication methods, ranking them above a four on a five-point scale of preference. Graduate students also rated instant messaging above a four as well.

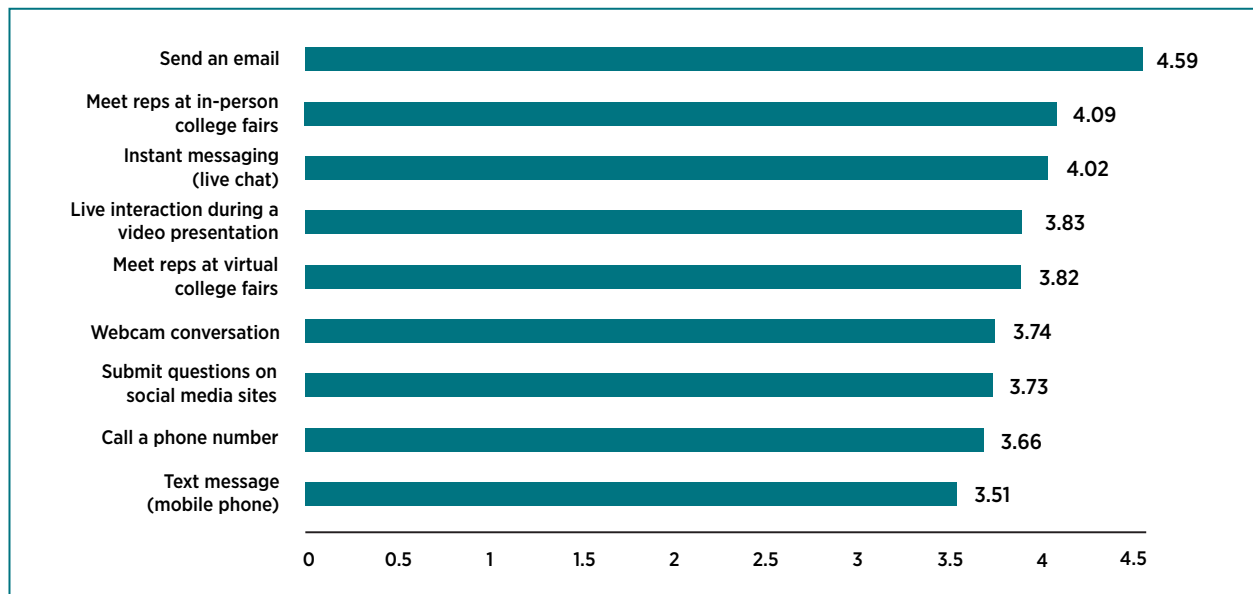
**Figure 17: Preferred communication channels (1-5 scale, 5=most preferred)**

### Undergraduate international students



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### Graduate international students



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While those three methods were the highest overall, students showed at least some preference for a wide variety of options, with all of the remaining methods rated a 3.5 or higher. Despite being the lowest-rated communication method, text messaging has risen significantly, from 3.12 to 3.48 this year.

## How can you apply these findings to engage prospective international students during the recruitment process?

1. **Make sure your digital content adapts to small screens**—With nearly 40 percent of international students using mobile devices as their primary means for going online, and 60-80 percent looking at college websites on mobile devices, your content needs to adapt to today’s smartphone screens. Employ responsive design not only on your web pages, but also for web forms that international students would submit and emails they would receive. This way, you’ll provide a smooth, seamless digital content experience regardless of the platform students use.
2. **Provide ample opportunities for international students to connect with campus representatives—in person or online**—As Figure 15 shows, international students prefer in-person communication with many key campus staff members. When possible, your campus should facilitate those meetings. But for many students and campuses, in-person meetings are too expensive or difficult to arrange. In that case, make sure students can interact one-on-one virtually. The results displayed in Figure 16 show that 80 percent of students are open to these virtual meetings, yet only one in five students report having had one already.
3. **Connect students quickly to their top content priorities and address their most pressing concerns immediately**—In answering questions about their concerns and website content, students have a clear set of pressing questions they need answered before they will consider applying:
  - How will they pay for their education at your campus?
  - What can they study?
  - Who can they contact for questions on applying, visas, and other key matters?

Given that most international students apply to a fairly large number of institutions, answering these questions quickly and thoroughly should help establish a stronger bond with your campus.
4. **Employ a wide variety of communication methods**—As shown by the results in Figure 17, international students are eager to use a number of ways to communicate with campuses. Use email as your foundation for communication, but give students access to live conversations via instant messaging, video presentations, webcam calls, and even text and phone calls. Ask students for their preferences so that you use methods they are comfortable with and that they consent to using (in case there are issues such as communication costs or time differences).
5. **Involve parents in the communication flow**—More than 60 percent of undergraduates said their parents would have some say in their enrollment decision, and even half of graduate students reported that their decision would be a joint one with their parents. Collect contact information for parents if possible and set up specific communication flows for them.
6. **Build your brand in target markets by connecting early with prospective students**—Figure 1 shows that interest in a particular institution is what drives the application decision for most international students. They also place high value on college rankings in making their enrollment decisions, especially graduate students. You need to establish your institution’s presence in key overseas markets and tout academic offerings, facilities, research rankings, faculty achievements, and any international student outcomes to make a convincing case for enrollment.

This reiterates the importance of establishing an early rapport with international students as well. Because they often apply to multiple institutions, it is crucial to engage them as early as possible, even if you are already one of their preferred institutions. Cultivate your inquiries quickly and use frequent, multichannel communications to convey information about your academic programs, funding options, campus facilities, and student life for international students.

### Questions about this report or about strategies for international student enrollment?

Contact Ruffalo Noel Levitz at 800.876.1117 or email [ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com](mailto:ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com). We can answer any questions you have about this report and also discuss how you can recruit international students more strategically. Contact us to start a discussion about how you can increase your institutional brand abroad, build a stronger international student funnel, and engage international students in your communications.

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### REFERENCES

Institute of International Education. (2014). Open doors 2014 fast facts. <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors>

Noel-Levitz and College Week Live. (2014). Meeting the expectations of international undergraduate and graduate students. Coralville, IA: Noel-Levitz. <https://www.noellevitz.com/papers-research-higher-education/2014/2014-international-e-expectations-report>

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