



# COLLEGE ATTENDANCE MOTIVATIONS IN A POST-PANDEMIC ENVIRONMENT

*A Prospective Student Survey Report*

**CARNEGIE**

**CX** collegexpress



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# What motivates college prospects today?

## We asked 3,800 of them.

Considering the continued impact of a historic pandemic, rising economic and political unease, and a shifting of student demographics, now is the time to better understand why students are attending college. But deeper than the basic goals of a degree or a job, Carnegie wanted to explore intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, shifting choice indicators, the personal college journey, and how these factors culminate in college expectations so that marketers can create personalized and accurate stories that help students envision their experience.

With assistance from our CollegeXpress service, Carnegie surveyed thousands of students planning on entering college in the fall of 2022, 2023, or 2024. This document provides the major themes, trends, and outcomes from the research.

*Let's take a look.*



An abstract network diagram with various colored nodes (yellow, grey, pink) connected by thin lines, forming a complex web-like structure across the slide.

## Nearly two-thirds of our respondents were more intrinsically motivated to attend college than extrinsically motivated.

Intrinsic motivation describes a person being driven by personal satisfaction from a behavior as compared to an external reward. Both types of motivation are important to potential college marketing tactics, so let's take a closer look at specific motivational areas.

# Prospects are most motivated by learning outcomes and future career goals.

JUST DON'T FORGET THAT MOTIVATION IS BEST UNDERSTOOD INDIVIDUALLY.

Past student studies have found learning and career to be the main motivational frameworks for students. This finding was consistent in 2022 with our audience. However, as can be seen in the table of results, other motivational areas are selected as most important at high enough rates to consider the importance of segmented communication. For example, despite being last in overall score, "Society" has the third highest result of "most important" responses. In fact, "Learning" and "Career" make up less than half of the selections for "most important" despite being in the lead. It is critically important to identify which areas are most important to each prospective student to make content personalized to a specific goal.

MOTIVATION AREA	LEAST IMPORTANT	5TH	4TH	3RD	2ND	MOST IMPORTANT	SCORE
Learning	11%	13%	15%	17%	21%	23%	232
Career	15%	12%	15%	17%	17%	24%	210
Experience	9%	15%	23%	21%	19%	14%	166
Achievement	12%	20%	21%	21%	16%	11%	102
Social Life	19%	21%	17%	17%	15%	12%	57
Society	34%	20%	10%	8%	13%	16%	-15

# Learning and career motivations are personal, specific.

## THE OVERALL PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE MAY BE TOO ETHEREAL FOR MOST PROSPECTS.

Past work in student motivations have used “Learning” and “Career” as monolithic outcomes. However, added nuance in this study shows what students really want when considering these areas. Specifics were taken from past Carnegie work in student personality to offer categories to rank within the motivational areas. As seen in these tables, *personal interest in the topic being learned is more important than a broad-based education to a majority of students*. Similarly, career motivations have students mostly focused on obtaining a more specific set of skills compared to broad “employability” soft skills.

LEARNING MOTIVATION	LEAST MOTIVATING	2ND	MOST MOTIVATING	SCORE
Studying a topic about which I have a great deal of personal interest	18%	32%	50%	32
Expanding my overall knowledge for any and all intellectual pursuits	41%	31%	28%	-13
Mastering a specific skill or program to an advanced level	41%	37%	22%	-19

CAREER MOTIVATION	LEAST MOTIVATING	2ND	MOST MOTIVATING	SCORE
Obtaining a specific set of skills to start/advance in a job/industry	18%	36%	46%	28
Having the needed degree credentials for entry into an industry	38%	35%	27%	-11
Mastering the broad skills requisite to be a success in any career	44%	29%	27%	-17

# Motivations differ by demographics and institutional interest types.

## INSIGHTS

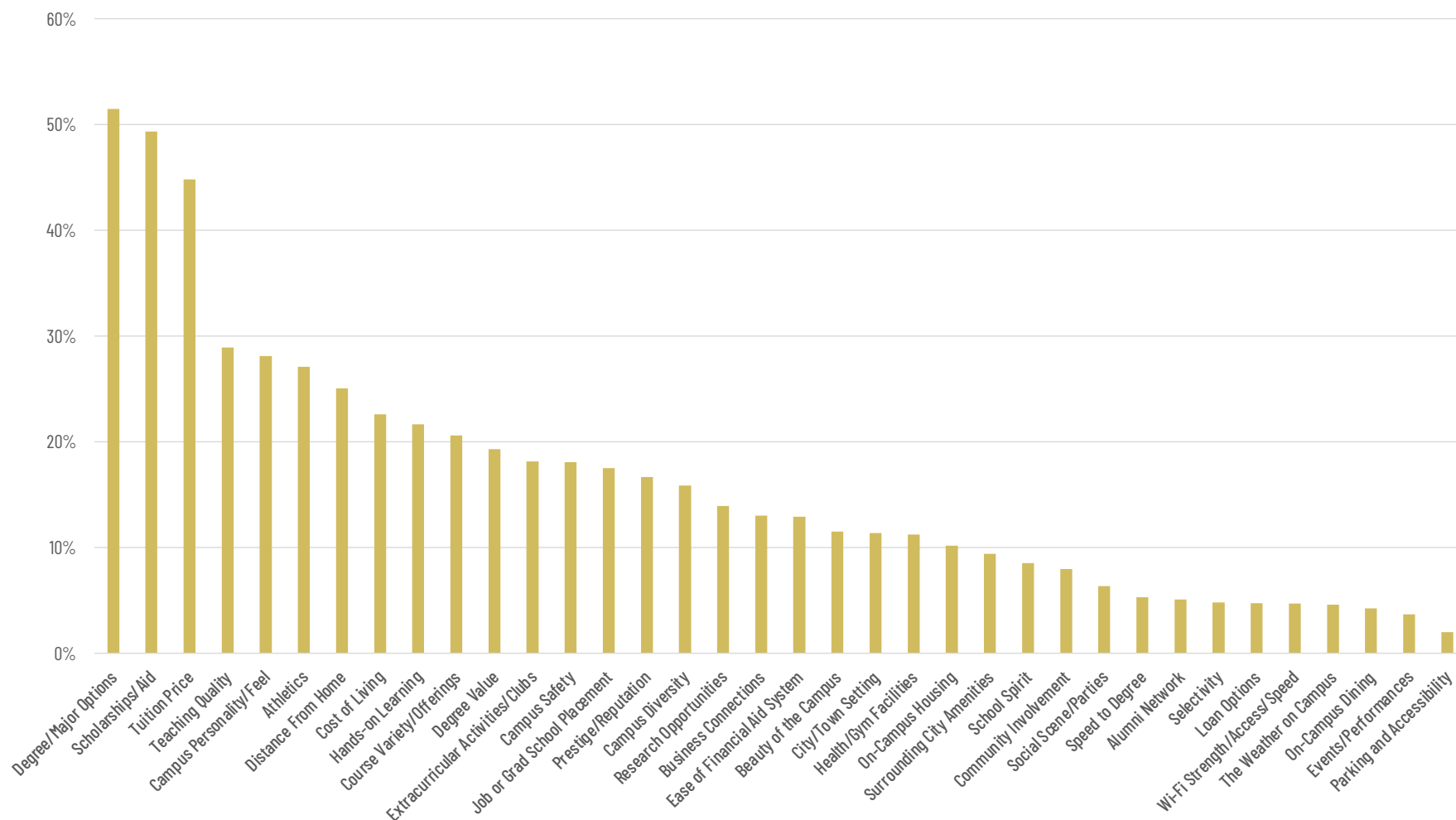
- + Female respondents were more intrinsically motivated for college attendance than males.
- + High-income respondents scored learning and experiences as more important than career and achievements.
- + LGBTQ+ respondents scored social life and society impact higher than other respondents.
- + Christian respondents had more interest in mastering a specific skill or program in their learning than other respondents.
- + Politically conservative students scored society as their lowest motivation, but that preparing to contribute as an adult to society is still a highly relevant part of college.



## A fifth of the prospects surveyed first began looking at college information before high school.

Although this sample came from an active information-seeking sample on CollegeXpress, the results to timing questions are undeniable: students start looking up colleges very early on. In fact, ***55% started actively seeking information before the end of their sophomore year.***

# College selection factors.



Respondents selected up to six factors from this list as most important to their college search criteria. Importantly, high scores indicate broad categories for marketing interest; however, lower scores may indicate factors critical to an individual. For example, parking and accessibility scores last in general selections. For a physically disabled student, however, it may be the most important consideration.





ENVISIONING THE SELF

*“I have to imagine what it would be like to be there.  
Putting myself in a student’s shoes.”*



BELONGING

*“As soon as you step on campus and see it,  
you just feel like you belong there.”*

# “Campus Feel” means...



SAFETY TO BE YOU

*“You know everyone has your back  
and you can be safe to be yourself.”*



HOME

*“It’s like being able to find that place  
you call your second home.”*



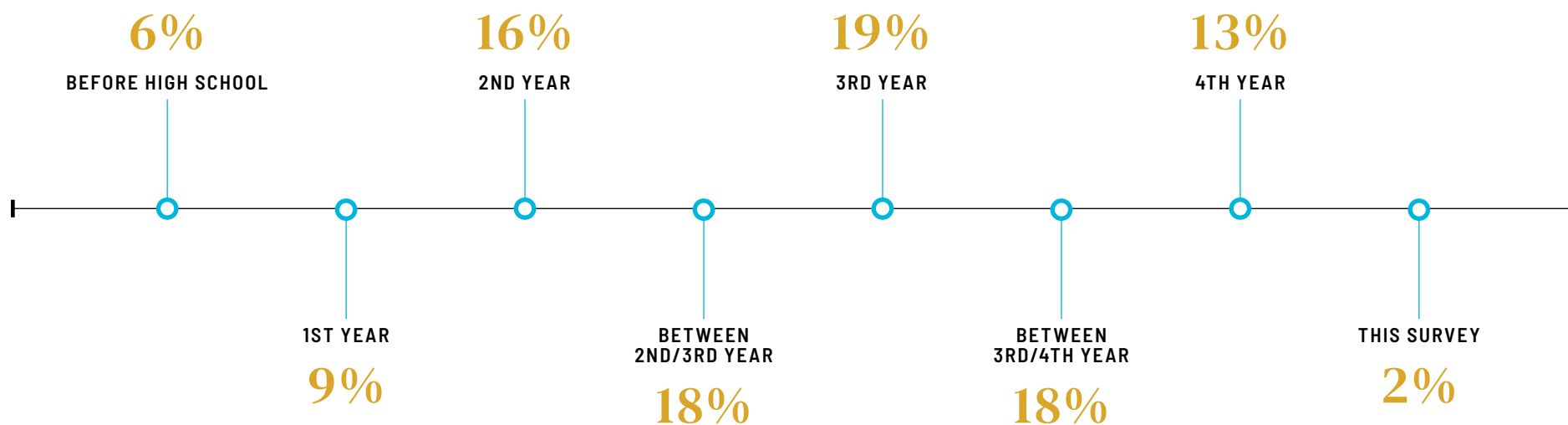
THE PEOPLE

*“I need to get to know the people there and  
they will reveal everything—good or bad.”*

# Students pick college selection factors later than their first searches.

HOWEVER, MANY STUDENTS ARE STILL MAKING DECISIONS EARLY ON.


Only half of the students that look at colleges before the end of their sophomore year actually put together a list of selection factors. The summer between sophomore and junior year, however, is pivotal, as by that point about half of students have some idea of what is important to them in a college. Early search behaviors often help to establish this list, as what students find in early searches influences later evaluations. Further, many students look to parents or guidance counselors for help in creating a list of attributes to look for, but peers also play a role. *Personal relationships have an outsized impact on which factors are selected.*



# The college selection journey often differs by group.

## INSIGHTS

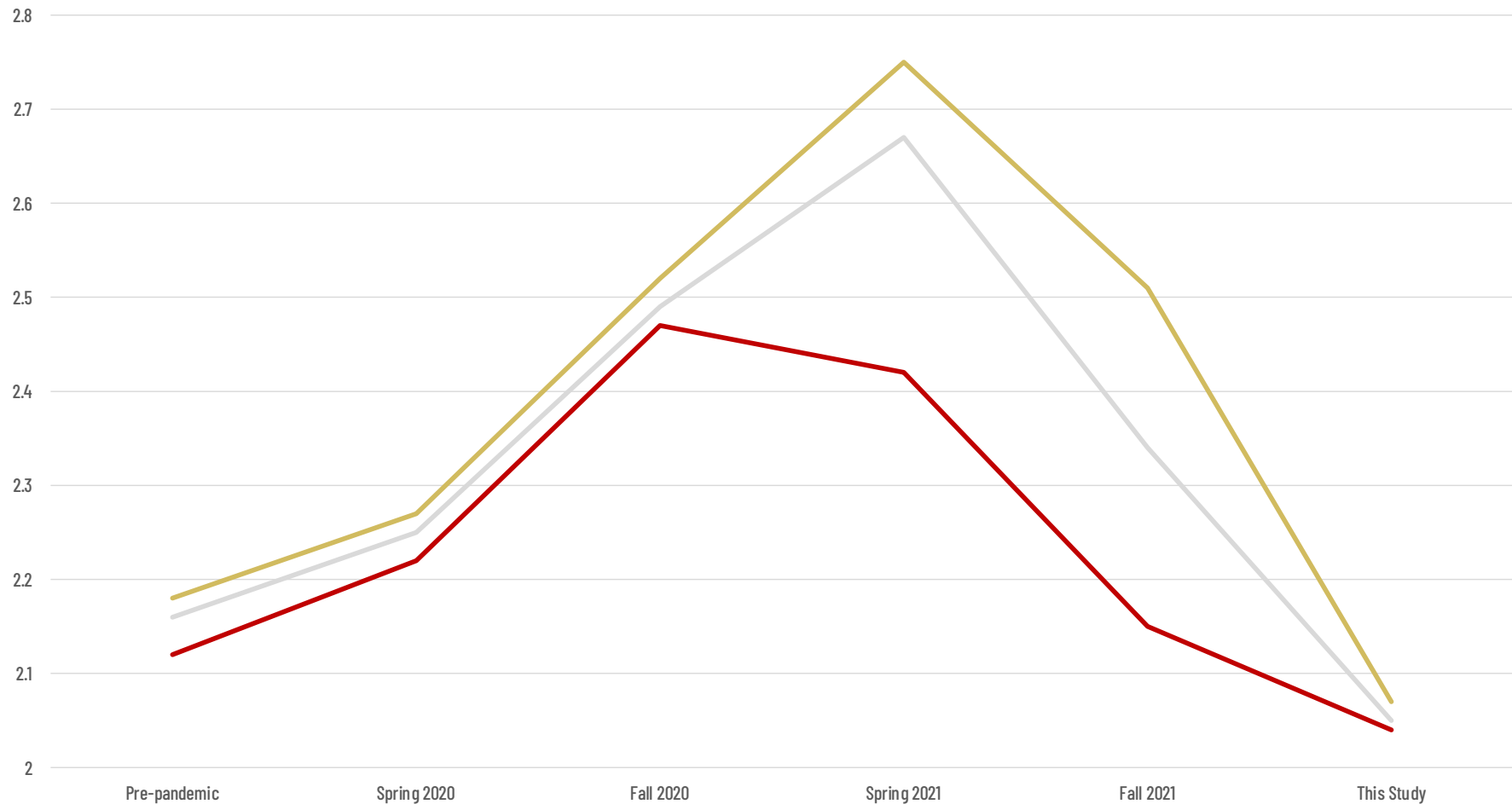
- + Campus safety is still more important to women than men, but the gap is closing as safety now often relates to health outcomes as well as traditional safety measures.
- + Scholarships and aid are not only more important to low-income students but also those who are high achieving by GPA.
- + Respondents interested in larger schools, especially private schools, started their search earlier, but few demographic factors influenced that same timeline.
- + Respondents interested in community college started their search later but are still concerned about similar choice factors.
- + Liberal respondents are more concerned with campus diversity and prestige, while conservative respondents noted athletics.

An abstract graphic featuring a network of interconnected dots in shades of blue, yellow, and pink, with thin grey lines connecting them. The dots are scattered across the page, with a higher concentration around the central text.

## The pandemic has shifted some perceptions and feelings of preparedness.

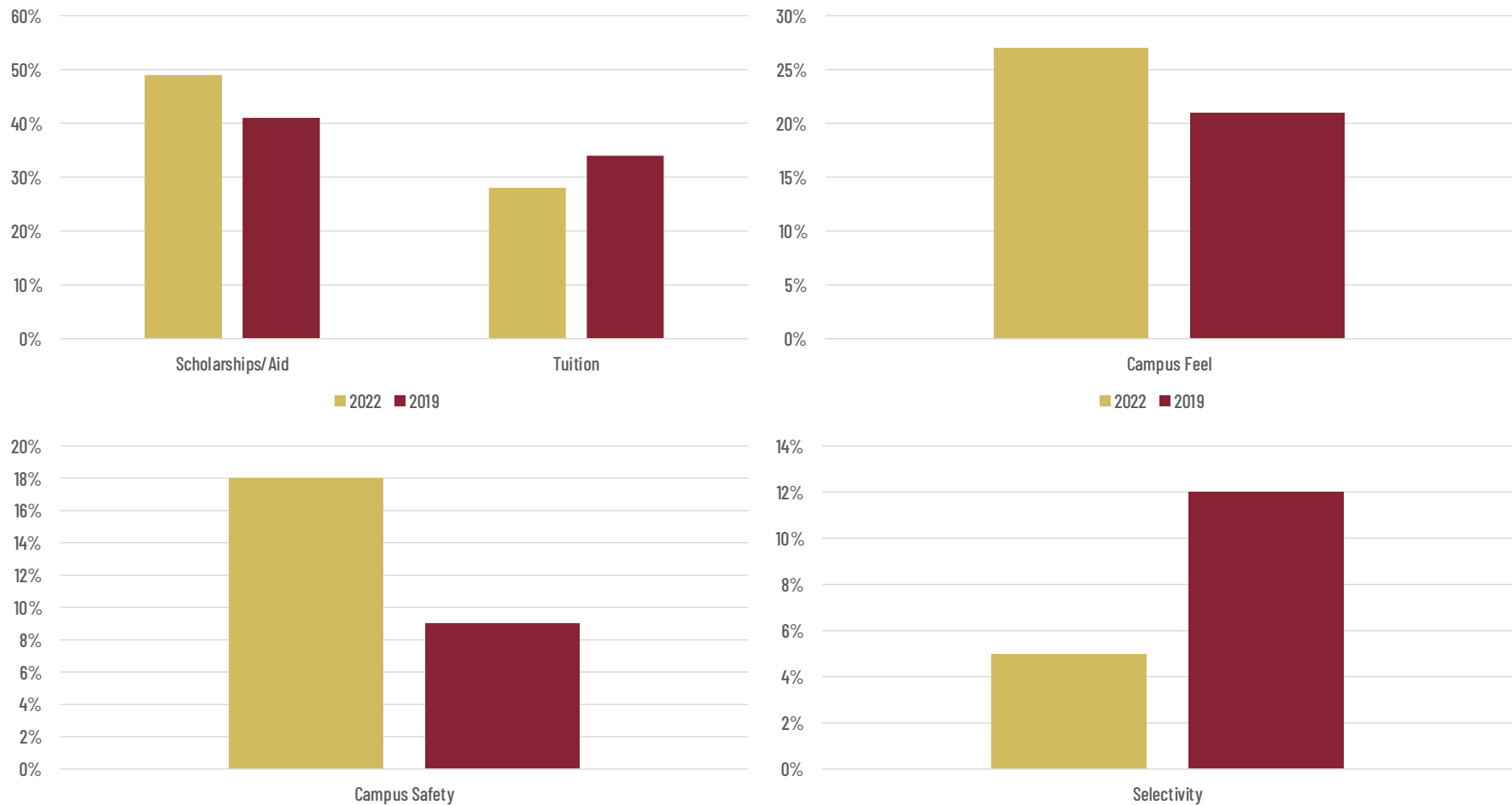
In our sample, two-thirds of students said the COVID-19 pandemic has made them feel less prepared for college, with *one in 10 saying they are “far less prepared” and highly considering postponing or interrupting their education.*

## Interest in online education. (5-point scale)



*Interest in online education has been influenced more heavily by the pandemic than almost any other factor Carnegie has tracked over time. Now that almost all institutions have returned to normal, in-person classes, interest in online versions has dipped below pre-pandemic levels. Importantly, Carnegie has seen different results for nontraditional respondents in other studies, so this information should be within the context of traditional undergraduate audiences.*

# Factor importance pre- and post-pandemic.



*This is a collection of a few of the differences in selection factors seen over time. Students are more focused on the scholarships side of net cost, and campus feel continues to climb in importance. The shift for campus safety has been seen throughout the pandemic, as many students are now including health outcomes like whether a campus would be safe during a pandemic as part of this factor, in addition to traditional safety perceptions like chance of theft or assault.*

# The students of fall 2022 were still looking for help.

ONLY 14% OF INCOMING STUDENTS IN 2022 FELT COMPLETELY PREPARED.

While a plurality (39%) of the high school class of 2022 said they were “somewhat prepared” for college, most felt they needed more information from their colleges of choice. Financial aid was particularly important, as many felt they still didn’t understand how it works, how their school would disburse funds, and some even said they didn’t know the amount to expect. Others asked for help in what to bring and how to prepare, especially with academic planning. Most interesting in our qualitative entry questions, though, was a conflicting viewpoint, with a large group of students saying they wanted reassurances about pandemics. Half of those comments were saying they wanted reassurance the school would stay open, no matter what, while the other half pushed for reassurance that there would be safety measures and closure plans in place if another pandemic were to occur.

AUDIENCE	NOT AT ALL	SLIGHTLY	SOMEWHAT	HIGHLY	COMPLETELY	AVERAGE
All Respondents	3%	10%	39%	34%	14%	3.45

# Key takeaways for college marketers.

## INSIGHTS

- + Motivations for attending college are highly personal, as should be the approaches to student marketing. Learning and career outcomes are safe generalized strategies, especially if understanding that the content within these areas still suggests a personal journey highlighting topics of interest and hard skills for careers. Savvy marketers, however, will look for ways to personalize with student segmentation profiles that focus not just on college selection factors but also motivation and personality.
- + Intrinsic motivation, while potentially more difficult to market to, is incredibly important to students and impacts college choice factors like “college feel” and “teaching quality.” Extrinsic motivators, such as career outcomes and financial aid, are still very important and will be easier to impart through facts and statistics. The story created around more concrete factors is where intrinsic motivation will be fostered and, ultimately, lead to more interest, less melt, and better retention.



## INSIGHTS CONTINUED

- + Demographics and the type of college a student is interested in play a major role in determining everything from motivations to choice factors to the student journey timeline. Importantly, more nuanced segmentation is becoming required with increased intersectionality within discussions of identity and rapidly changing demographics. For example, this study and recent Pew research shows one in five prospective college students now identify as LGBTQ+, a demographic factor that was highly influential across many question areas.
- + Major events, such as the pandemic, shape the discussions many students have about higher education. In the post-pandemic era, more students are turning to direct contacts at their high school, like counselors, than before, looking for more support in understanding college options. Many are feeling underprepared, and having confident personal contacts in the discussion will help. Consider how to create stronger ties and connections to influential audiences like these and parents so that factors important to your institution's success remain in the conversation
- + College students generally do not feel as prepared as they once did. Even those who felt the pandemic did not impact them or gave them more preparation are concerned about their understanding of complicated systems like financial aid. Further, the lingering cloud of the pandemic has some worried they may lose out on their college experience or be put in harm's way, depending on their outlook. Clarity of communication, and levels of reassurance, will go a long way toward helping students feel prepared. Importantly, factors of choice varied across race/ethnicity independently, so creating strategies for just "people of color" as a singular audience are likely to fail due to a lack of critical nuance.

An abstract network diagram with various colored nodes (blue, yellow, pink, grey) connected by thin grey lines, forming a complex web-like structure. The diagram is set against a white background with two vertical gold bars on the left and right sides.

## Interested in more information?

A supplemental document, with tables for all questions in our survey of prospective students, as well as breakouts for each demographic area, can be requested from Carnegie. You can also reach out to Carnegie's SVP of Research, Jared Brickman, at [jbrickman@carnegiehighered.com](mailto:jbrickman@carnegiehighered.com) for more information about the project.

# Background methodology.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE

How the data was collected and who was asked about student motivations.

### APPROACH

Data Source: Online Survey  
Distribution: Direct Email List  
Deployment Dates: 07/20/22–08/05/22

### SURVEY STATISTICAL DETAILS

Total List Sizes: 110,000  
Qualifying Student Estimate: ~92,500  
Total Surveys Started: 4,573  
Outside Parameters: 544  
Incomplete/Speeding: 213  
**Final Sample:** **3,816**  
Confidence Level: 99%  
Max Confidence Interval: 2.05

### SEX/GENDER

Female/Woman: 59%  
Female/Trans Man: 2%  
Genderqueer/Nonbinary: 3%  
Male/Man: 34%  
Male/Trans Woman: 1%  
Other: 1%

### RACE/ETHNICITY (ALL THAT APPLY)

American Indian/Alaska Native: 3%  
Asian: 15%  
Black or African American: 18%  
Hispanic or Latinx: 19%  
Middle Eastern/North African: 2%  
Pacific Islander: 2%  
White: 58%  
Other: 3%

### REGION\*

East North Central: 15%  
East South Central: 4%  
Middle Atlantic: 11%  
Mountain: 8%  
New England: 6%  
Pacific: 13%  
South Atlantic: 22%  
West North Central: 7%  
West South Central: 14%

### POLITICAL AFFILIATION

Strongly Liberal: 16%  
Slightly Liberal: 18%  
Moderate/Independent: 23%  
Slightly Conservative: 11%  
Strongly Conservative: 8%  
Unsure/Non-political: 24%

\* States included in each region: East North Central (WI, IL, IN, MI, OH); East South Central (KY, TN, MS, AL); Middle Atlantic (NY, NJ, PA); Mountain (MT, ID, NV, UT, AZ, WY, CO, NM); New England (CT, RI, MA, ME, NH, VT); Pacific (WA, OR, CA, AK, HI); South Atlantic (FL, GA, SC, NC, VA, WV, MD, DE, DC); West North Central (ND, SD, NE, KS, MN, IA, MO); West South Central (TX, OK, AR, LA)

# Background methodology.

## SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS, CONTINUED

Who was asked about student motivations.

### SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Low Income:	14%
Lower Middle-Income:	34%
Upper Middle-Income:	41%
High Income:	11%

### RELIGION

Agnostic/Atheist:	18%
Buddhist:	1%
Catholic:	23%
Christian:	39%
Hindu:	2%
Jewish:	2%
Muslim:	3%
Other Religion:	3%
Spiritual Non-religious:	9%

### LGBTQ+ IDENTITY

No:	80%
Yes:	20%

### CARNEGIE MOTIVATOR TYPE

Strength:	23%
Vitality:	30%
Creativity:	47%

### COLLEGE START YEAR

2022:	41%
2023:	33%
2024:	26%

### HIGH SCHOOL GPA

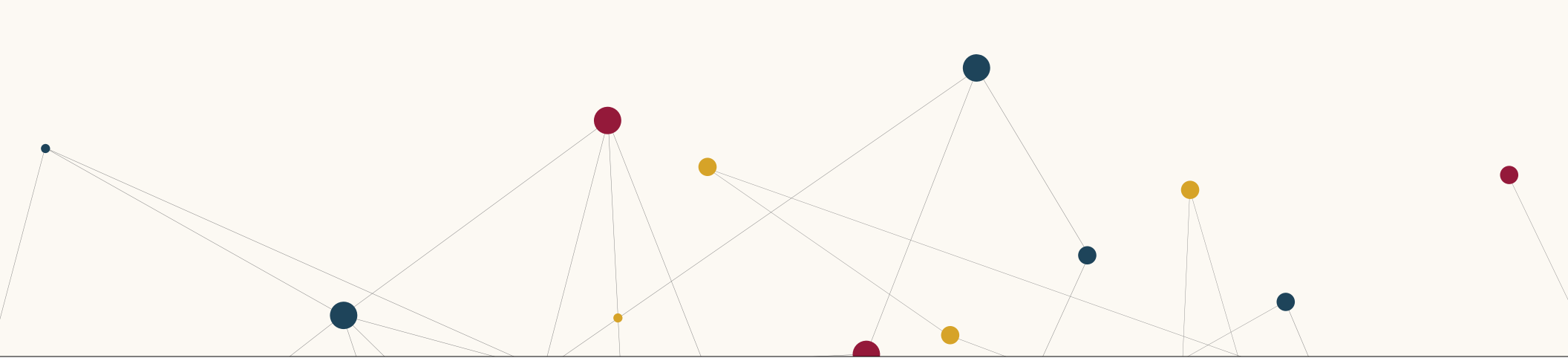
4.0+:	43%
3.5-3.9:	37%
3.0-3.4:	12%
2.9-:	8%

### COLLEGE TYPE (ALL THAT APPLY)

4-Year Public:	87%
Private (Non-religious):	60%
Private (Religious):	31%
Community College:	19%
Trade/Vocational:	6%

### COLLEGE SIZE (ALL THAT APPLY)

Very Small (<1,000):	14%
Small (1,000-5,000):	41%
Mid-size (5,000-15,000):	74%
Large (15,000-25,000):	54%
Very Large (>25,000):	30%



# CARNEGIE

210 LITTLETON ROAD, SUITE 100 WESTFORD, MA 01886  
978-692-5092 | [INFO@CARNEGIEHIGHERED.COM](mailto:INFO@CARNEGIEHIGHERED.COM)

