Five great colleges want her.
How will she decide?

High-achieving high school seniors have the appearance of being in an enviable position when it comes to making a college decision. Considering what we know about their academic performance alone, these students are likely to be sought after by very good colleges and universities. But do these top students really have all the information they should have when making that all-important enrollment decision? Have colleges and universities done enough to address students' concerns about academic programs, student life options, the realities of financial aid, and other aspects of the college experience driving their decisions? Have colleges and universities spoken to them about the possibilities for intellectual growth and stimulation?

Lipman Hearne designed and conducted this study in order to better understand the values and decision-making processes guiding high-achieving students—particularly when it comes to enrollment. We (and the colleges and universities with whom we work) want to know how students are choosing from among various offers. Accordingly, we designed the 2009 study to emphasize the enrollment decision-making process rather than the application process.

It is our hope that college and university managers and marketers, as well as high school counselors, will find this report useful in shaping communication strategies and staffing levels that truly anticipate the information needs of students and families, and the motivations that lead them to choose one college over another. We welcome further inquiries about the study and underlying data beyond what is reported here. Please note margin flags indicate topics on which more information is available. Do not hesitate to contact us if you would like to discuss these items further.

MORE INFO AVAILABLE

About Lipman Hearne

Lipman Hearne is the nation's leading marketing and communications firm serving nonprofit organizations. The firm's clients include many of the nation's most respected universities, foundations, associations, health care and cultural institutions.

With offices in Chicago and Washington, D.C., Lipman Hearne is led by marketing specialists whose backgrounds include tenures in nonprofit management, advertising and branding, market research, fundraising, and public affairs. For further information about Lipman Hearne, please visit www.lipmanhearne.com or call (312) 356-8000. For media inquiries, please contact Brian Wachur, bwachur@lipmanhearne.com or Alyssa Oliveri, aoliveri@lipmanhearne.com.

About the survey

Building on knowledge gained from its inaugural 2006 study of high-achieving high school seniors,[1] Lipman Hearne conducted a new survey of college-bound high school seniors in 2009. The 2009 survey was conducted in May, immediately after college decisions are typically made.

All 1,264 students surveyed had combined SAT I scores of 1150 or higher (on a 1600 scale) and/or ACT composite scores of 25 or higher, placing them in the 70th percentile and higher among all high school seniors in the United States. All students surveyed had also applied to and been admitted by at least three institutions—they had choices to make. Lipman Hearne's objective in surveying these students was to discover what factors influence this most critical of decisions in a young person's life.

At Lipman Hearne's request, the National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA: www.NRCCUA.org) generously sent email invitations to participate in the online survey to qualifying students in its database. To provide incentive for students to participate, three different sweepstakes were offered. Figure 1 provides a demographic profile of the key characteristics of the survey participants.

We asked the students questions to help us understand how they make their enrollment decisions—what sources of information they use, what was most important to them in their decision-making process, and what trade-offs they were willing to make. We also included questions about their academic values and how they envision themselves as college-level students. Some of our questions were "aided"—in other words, we supplied the language (reasons or factors for their choices) and asked students to rate them (responses shown in italics throughout the report). Other questions were "unaided," asking students to use their own words (responses cited in quotation marks throughout the report). The 2009 study included additional, timely questions that probed the effects of the economy and social media on the college decision. This makes comparisons to the 2006 study impossible in some topic areas, but gives us valuable new insights.

The first chapter provides an overview of the results, including an analysis of students' values and goals. The second chapter

[1] *High-Achieving Seniors and the College Decision* was conducted in spring and summer of 2005 and released in April 2006. For a free download, go to www.lipmanhearne.com/keyinsights.

focuses on cost—how important cost and scholarships are to students and how these factors influenced their decision. Chapter 3 looks more closely at the concept of "optimal fit" and how students go about discovering that good fit—including whether they even aim for a perfect fit in all cases. Throughout the report, we differentiate between "Academic Superstars" (those who had SAT I scores or equivalents of 1300 or higher) and "Solid Performers" (SAT scores or equivalents of 1150 to 1290) wherever there are statistically valid and interesting differences between the two subsets. Please note that relevant data are presented in figures following each chapter.

FIGURE 1

Profile of the participants
Source: NRCCUA database

Hometown location	
Northeast 24%	
South 32%	
Midwest 21%	
West 22%	

Hometown type	
Suburb 38%	
Town/rural 32%	
Second city* 14%	
Urban 11%	
Unknown 5%	

High school type	
Public 64%	
Private/Religious 9%	
Unknown 27%	

Ethnicity**	
White 64%	
Asian 15%	
Hispanic 6%	
African American 3%	
Other 9%	
Unknown 9%	

Gender	
Female 65%	
Male 35%	

*Nielsen Claritas term for small cities
**Multiple ethnic groups allowed

High-Achieving Seniors:
What They Want, How They Decide

In 2009, admissions and enrollment officers at colleges and universities across the United States—each striving to assemble an ideal mix of incoming students—voiced real concern that the troubled economy might be radically changing the decision-making framework of the typical college senior. Would families feel that their changing financial circumstances meant crossing certain schools off the list at the outset? Would students themselves favor preparation for a lucrative career over developing the life of the mind?

Among high-achieving seniors, Lipman Hearne found that when they describe their *values,* the primary factors that influence them have not changed from those that were true before the economic downturn: students want to choose a college that best prepares them for a career, helps them develop as independent persons, and positions them for personal and social success. But when they describe their *actions,* it is clear that economic considerations are significant. Students stop short of saying that it's best to attend the college that offers you the most money—but this does not mean money is a non-issue.

This chapter of our report addresses student values, the factors they consider important in choosing a college, the information sources on which they rely, and their ultimate enrollment decisions.

Values: Why are students going to college in the first place?

Students' motivations and aspirations when it comes to college are complex and multifaceted. They value intellectual growth as well as career preparation. They want to develop as independent persons, and are not particularly concerned about joining new and unfamiliar communities, nor are they preoccupied with being at the top of the class. In short, nothing we discovered about student values is that surprising—which is great news.

In our study, three in four students agreed that *where you go to college will play a big role in your social and professional success later in life* (Figure 2). High regard for the role of college in creating a well-rounded life—meaning a personal and professional balance—was also seen in students' strong agreement with a statement related to professional success *(you want to go to the college that will best prepare you for a career)* and statements related to personal success *(you want to go to college so you can learn to be an independent person* and *your college friends will be among the best you will ever make).*

When we look more closely at subsets of the population (Figure 3), differences in priorities begin to emerge. Solid Performers were significantly more inclined to choose "preparing for a specific career" over "broadening intellectual capabilities" than were Academic Superstars, who were essentially evenly split between the two options.

It is also significant that, as shown in Figures 4 and 5, Solid Performers were more concerned about their post-college career while Academic Superstars placed a greater value on graduate school. Intended areas of study also played a role (Figure 6). Students seeking career training were most often planning to study pre-medicine or engineering while those seeking to broaden their capabilities were planning to study social sciences or humanities. According to Donna Van De Water, study co-author, principal investigator, and managing director at Lipman Hearne, "Colleges and universities often collect information about intended majors so they can personalize communications or connect prospective students with current students who share that major. These data show that there is also an opportunity to talk more effectively to prospective students about their motivations, which can create a true connection."

Spotlight: The value of diverse vs. homogeneous points of view

We were interested in exploring the type of environment students hoped to find in a college. We posed certain questions designed to measure students' tolerance for having their views challenged.

Students were asked how much they valued shared points of view as compared to different points of view. Both Academic Superstars and Solid Performers were more inclined to say they value "different points of view," though many *also* said they value "similar points of view." Solid Performers were slightly more likely than Academic Superstars to say they value "similar points of view." When posed as an either/or question, a full 61 percent of Academic Superstars sought viewpoints different from their own (Figure 7).

Important Factors: What mattered most at decision time?

Each and every student participating in this study experienced that fabled moment of decision-making—signing a form, making a call, dropping a check in the mail. Whether the experience was a breeze or a torment, every student ultimately was faced with choosing from among several options. All had applied to and been admitted by multiple institutions—three at the very minimum. On average, they applied to seven institutions and were admitted by six.

And for every student choosing from among five or six institutions, there were five or six enrollment managers anxiously awaiting that decision. Yield—the percentage of a college's admitted students who enroll—is a key metric in some rankings methodologies. More generally speaking, yield is also seen as a measure of how good a job the college has done in communicating its value to the right set of prospective students. Consequently, understanding what helps "seal the deal" for students is of great interest to enrollment managers.

"The challenge of an enrollment manager at the decision stage," says Tom Abrahamson, study co-author and Lipman Hearne managing director, "is to make sure that you lead with the most important message to the student at that point in time, the one that will be most likely to break through. The difficulty lies in choosing the messages that best answer the questions and concerns an admitted student has *now*—a different set of questions and concerns than they had at the application stage. Your admitted student already knows all about the category attributes from the application process, the characteristics shared by most large or small institutions, for example. The challenge at the decision stage is figuring out what is still unknown and the potential difference maker—and that's where your focus needs to be."

So what factors were most important to students at decision time? We asked students to rate 29 separate factors that typically play a role in the final enrollment decision (Figures 8.1–8.3). The single most important wasn't prestige, and it wasn't money—it was that *[students] felt like a good fit at the college.* Because we also asked students about whether they gravitate toward a place where people think like them, we know that "a good fit" isn't the same thing as "a place where everyone is like me." Factors like variety and depth of academic program options, reputation, faculty mentorship, residential life, student life, and facilities were all viewed as important.

According to Donna Van De Water, "These students are savvy enough to realize that the enrollment decision has to be based on more than just an institution's statistics, such as faculty-to-student ratio—it has to feel right. Lipman Hearne's experience assessing effective communications has shown that our most successful clients don't just talk about their characteristics, such as having small classes, but how their institution delivers that characteristic in a unique way—how they use the opportunity for personal experience to create better outcomes for their graduates."

Spotlight: Academic offerings

Nine out of ten students indicated they knew what area they planned to study.[2] The opportunity to pursue that specific major was confirmed as an important factor in their decision—but so was the availability of a wide variety of majors and courses at the institution. We read this finding as further evidence that students of this caliber are seeking a varied and well-rounded college experience rather than a narrowly focused accumulation of credentials. Some students also feel that if they don't state a major on their application, colleges will look less favorably on them. They identify a major other than "undecided" knowing that they will explore multiple interests during the first year or two of college. Though breadth and depth were important to all subsets of students, we did see that students planning to study engineering or pre-medicine place more value on the offer of a specific area of study, while those planning to study social sciences or humanities were more concerned about having a variety of options (Figure 9).

Spotlight: Reputation

We probed whether students placed more weight on the overall institutional reputation or a program's reputation (Figure 10.1). For example, students primarily seeking career preparation were more concerned about program reputation, while those primarily seeking to build their capabilities were more concerned about an institution's overall reputation. Students planning to study engineering indicated that program reputation was more important, while those planning to study social sciences or humanities felt that overall reputation was more important. In addition, Solid Performers were more influenced by program reputation than were Academic Superstars (Figure 10.2).

[2] Certainty about an intended major has not changed significantly since 2006, but it is a factor worth following.

Spotlight: Do applicants care about alumni accomplishments?

Students are attuned to what alumni have experienced as a result of their investment in the institution. *How well the college's graduates do getting a good job immediately after graduating* was important to students studying the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math), social sciences, business, and pre-professional fields (e.g., pre-med). Students studying business and pre-professional fields also told us they placed importance on *how well the college's graduates do getting into prestigious graduate schools.* In our 2006 study, we asked students more broadly whether they were interested in long-term alumni accomplishments, and this factor ranked near the bottom of the list. The 2009 study was modified. This time, students' interest in alumni outcomes was probed in a way that focused more on common steps taken immediately after college—employment and graduate school.

Spotlight: What gender difference?

Males and females are virtually identical in their responses when ranking the most important factors in choosing a college. The prevailing wisdom in the field has held that the genders approach the college application and selection process differently. Our finding, however, suggests that males are considering and emphasizing the same variety of factors and priorities as their female peers. This finding comes at a time when many colleges (particularly liberal arts colleges) are struggling to attract male students—some of them creating male-specific marketing campaigns.

Information Sources: What do students look at, and what do they trust?

Colleges and universities that hope to compete for the attention of high-achieving high school seniors make significant investments of time and resources in communications initiatives and materials. Some of these vehicles have extraordinary potential to influence students—but which ones? And, in particular, which information sources assist students in making an enrollment decision?

These high-achieving high school students used many different types of information sources to aid in their enrollment decision (including, on average, nine of the 30 sources included in the survey). As shown in Figures 11.1 and 11.2, conversations with their parents, institutional websites, a letter from the institution, the campus tour, high school friends, and emails from the institution were sources most frequently used at the point of the enrollment decision.

Our interest was especially drawn to two critical categories of information sources: those we call breakthrough opportunities (sources that students say are highly influential but that were not reported to be in widespread use), and others we call optimization opportunities, (sources that are reported to be in widespread use but not described by students as influential).

The breakthrough opportunities, as seen in Figure 11.3, included open houses, conversations with college friends, conversations with alumni, and admitted-student programs. "These findings underscore the importance of facilitating authentic conversations," says Lipman Hearne's Tom Abrahamson. "Third-party endorsements are extremely persuasive and institutions must help connect these groups. And, by the way, students have finely tuned ears for what's authentic and what's planted."

The optimization opportunities, as seen in Figure 11.4, included letters and emails from the institution, conversations with high school teachers and counselors, department brochures, and college search sites. Because the focus of this study is the enrollment decision rather than the initial stages of the college application process, we were not surprised to see that students are not focusing their attention as much on materials like the viewbook and financial aid brochure. Other research Lipman Hearne has conducted on the earlier stages of the admission process shows that mass market and more general communications have greater value at that earlier stage.

One final element, seen in Figure 11.5, surprised us. A full 26 percent of students surveyed used a paid consultant or service in the college decision process.

Spotlight: Influence of parents

Simply stated, parents are "all-in" when it comes to their high-achieving children's college application and decision-making process. As shown in Figure 11.2, parents were the most frequently used information source for students when making the final enrollment decision. Figure 12 shows that they were frequently involved throughout the various stages of the enrollment process, even helping their children manage their applications.

Lipman Hearne's Tom Abrahamson noted, "A lot has been written about 'helicopter parents'—highly involved parents who hover over their child's every activity—and these findings validate some of those stereotypes. These parents want to be involved at every stage in the process, and it is important that enrollment managers provide them with parent-centric information. Yet most colleges have barely scratched the surface when it comes to treating parents as co-decision-makers."

The Enrollment Choice: Where did they land?

These high-achieving seniors considered a diverse set of colleges and universities. There is no one profile of a college or university that appeals to this sought-after group; indeed, they have enrolled at urban, rural, and suburban institutions small and large, some close to home, others hundreds of miles away, some with extensive graduate research programs, others with an exclusively undergraduate liberal arts focus. Most are on the more selective end of the scale, as would be expected, but some part-time/2-year and open admissions institutions are among the chosen. These findings alone pique our interest about why students enroll where they do—and why some *don't* enroll where they might have.

Most students enrolled at an institution fitting into the "national universities" category—those that offer a wide range of undergraduate majors as well as master's and doctoral degrees and compete for students nationwide (Figure 13). Large institutions, with 10,000 students or more, are getting the lion's share of both Solid Performers and Academic Superstars. This is true even after accounting for the sheer size of the institutions: Solid Performers and Academic Superstars were more likely than the national college-bound population at large to enroll at these types of institutions. Also, more than two in three enrolled at a highly selective institution, including three in four Academic Superstars.

The appeal of large, long-established, selective institutions is no great surprise. As Tom Abrahamson explains, the size, age, selectivity, and strength of graduate and professional schools are powerful workhorses in the battle to advance reputation. "Size gets at the number of students and parents spreading the word about their college. Age matters because the college has been at it for a while and is good at what it does (and has more years and generations of alumni and their personal networks spreading the word). Being selective is taken as proof that you must offer a good product, not to mention the heavy bias that rankers and raters have toward low admit rates and high test scores. And professional schools produce graduates who become leaders in all areas of our society—business, government, philanthropy." For smaller, undergraduate-focused colleges—even those with stellar offerings and brand personalities—the task of converting an admitted student to an enrolled student requires more effort and personalization.

MORE INFO AVAILABLE

More detailed analysis and information about students enrolling at various types of institutions (e.g., liberal arts colleges, single-sex institutions, faith-based institutions) can be prepared using data from this study. Those with an interest in exploring the motivations of specially defined groups of students should contact us directly.

Did they enroll at their first-choice college?

In the end, two in three students surveyed chose to enroll at their top choice. Ironically, Solid Performers were actually more likely to be attending their top choice (73 percent) than were Academic Superstars (65 percent). Donna Van De Water noted, "We suspect that this is because higher-scoring students aim extremely high, seeking entrance into top-tier institutions or well-respected academic programs. These options are highly competitive and see a huge number of applications. These institutions typically have the luxury of shaping their incoming first-year classes more so than others."

Interestingly, there were no differences between Academic Superstars and Solid Performers in terms of enrolling at a "reach" or "safety" school. For both groups, about half of the students enrolled at a "match" college—one that they were *pretty likely* to get into because their test scores, class rank, and/or high school grades fall right into the middle range of the school's profile. And for both groups, the remaining students were split roughly equally between "reach" and "safety" schools.

FIGURE 2

What motivates High-Ability Students?

Source: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the statements.

NOTE: Reflects top-2-box agreement ratings

Statement	
You want to go to the college that will best prepare you for a career	
You want to go to college so you can learn to be an independent person	
Where you go to college will play a big role in your social and professional success later in life	
Your college friends will be among the best you will ever make	
It's best to go to a college where there are many people who have different backgrounds and points of view from yours	
You want to go to college to make your family proud	
Where you earn your undergraduate degree is not nearly as important as where you earn your graduate degree	
It's best to go to a college where most people share your views and interests	
You should go to the college that offers you the most money, even if it's less prestigious than others that accepted you	
It's best to go to a college where you know you will be one of the very best students	
You'll be happier if you go to a college where you know people from your hometown	

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

FIGURE 3

Is intellectual growth or career preparation more important?

Source: If you had to choose, which of the following **better** describes why you are going to college?

☐ Preparing for a specific career   ▦ Broadening intellectual capabilities

Academic Superstars

0% 20% 40% 60% 80%

Solid Performers

0% 20% 40% 60% 80%

FIGURE 4
What motivates Academic Superstars?
Source: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the statements.
NOTE: Reflects top-2-box agreement ratings

Statement	Value
You want to go to the college that will best prepare you for a career	~89%
You want to go to college so you can learn to be an independent person	~82%
Where you go to college will play a big role in your social and professional success later in life	~74%
Your college friends will be among the best you will ever make	~70%
It's best to go to a college where there are many people who have different backgrounds and points of view from yours	~66%
You want to go to college to make your family proud	~50%
Where you earn your undergraduate degree is not nearly as important as where you earn your graduate degree	~49%
It's best to go to a college where most people share your views and interests	~30%
You should go to the college that offers you the most money, even if it's less prestigious than others that accepted you	~18%
It's best to go to a college where you know you will be one of the very best students	~17%
You'll be happier if you go to a college where you know people from your hometown	~15%

FIGURE 5

What motivates Solid Performers?

Source: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the statements.
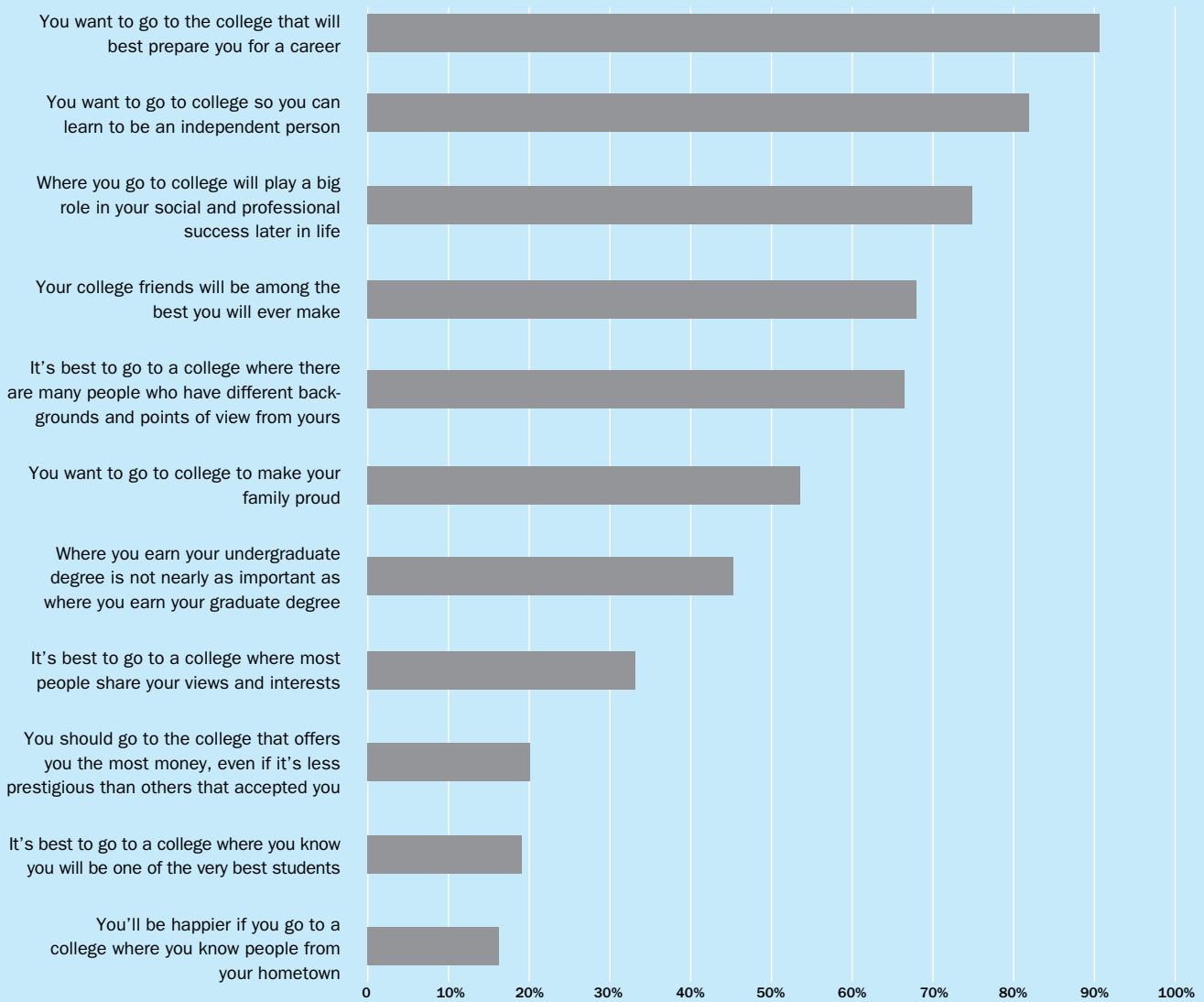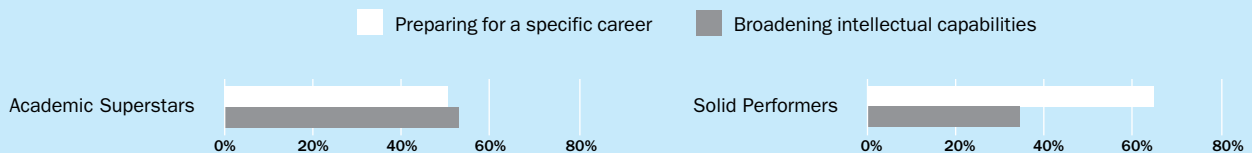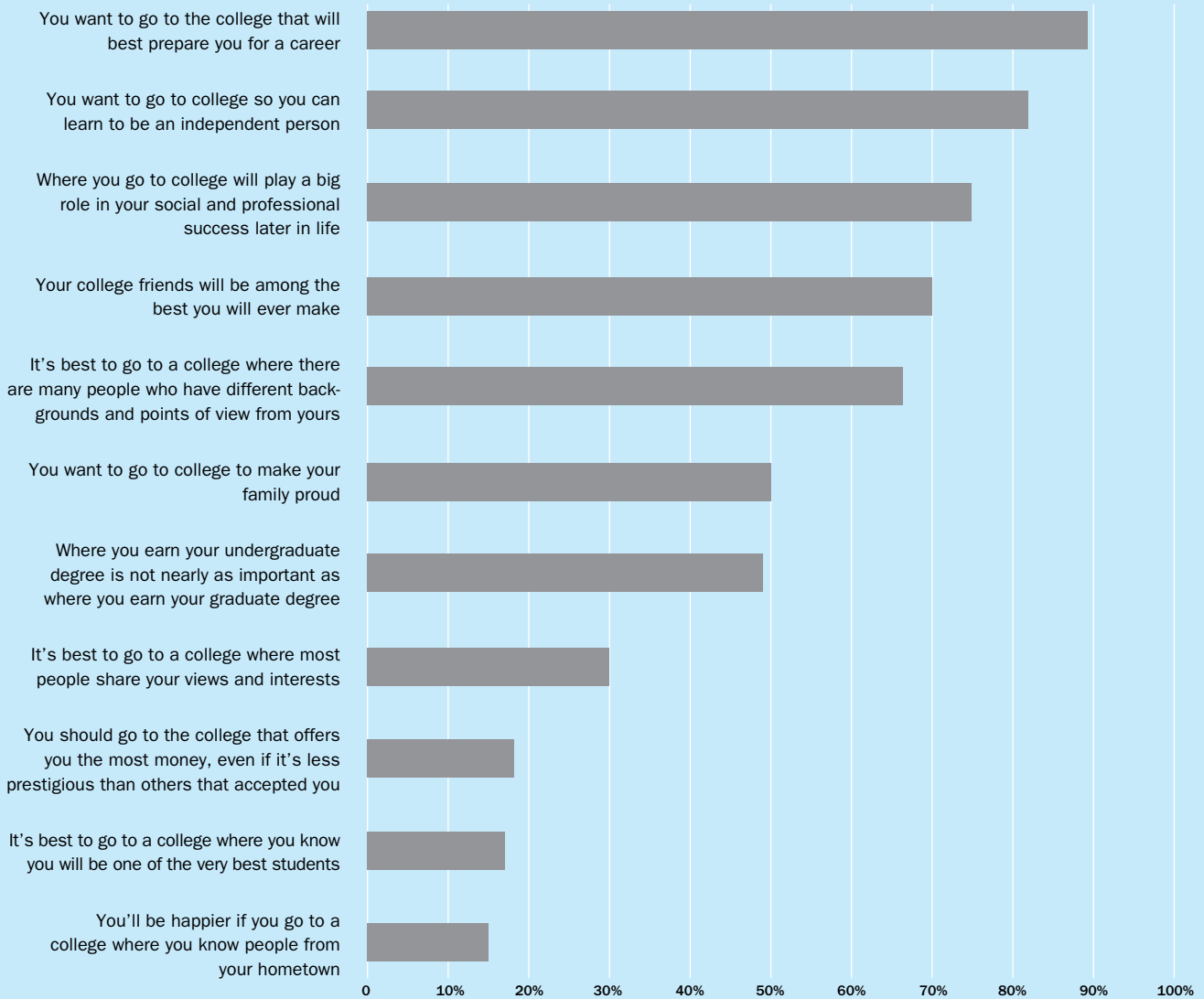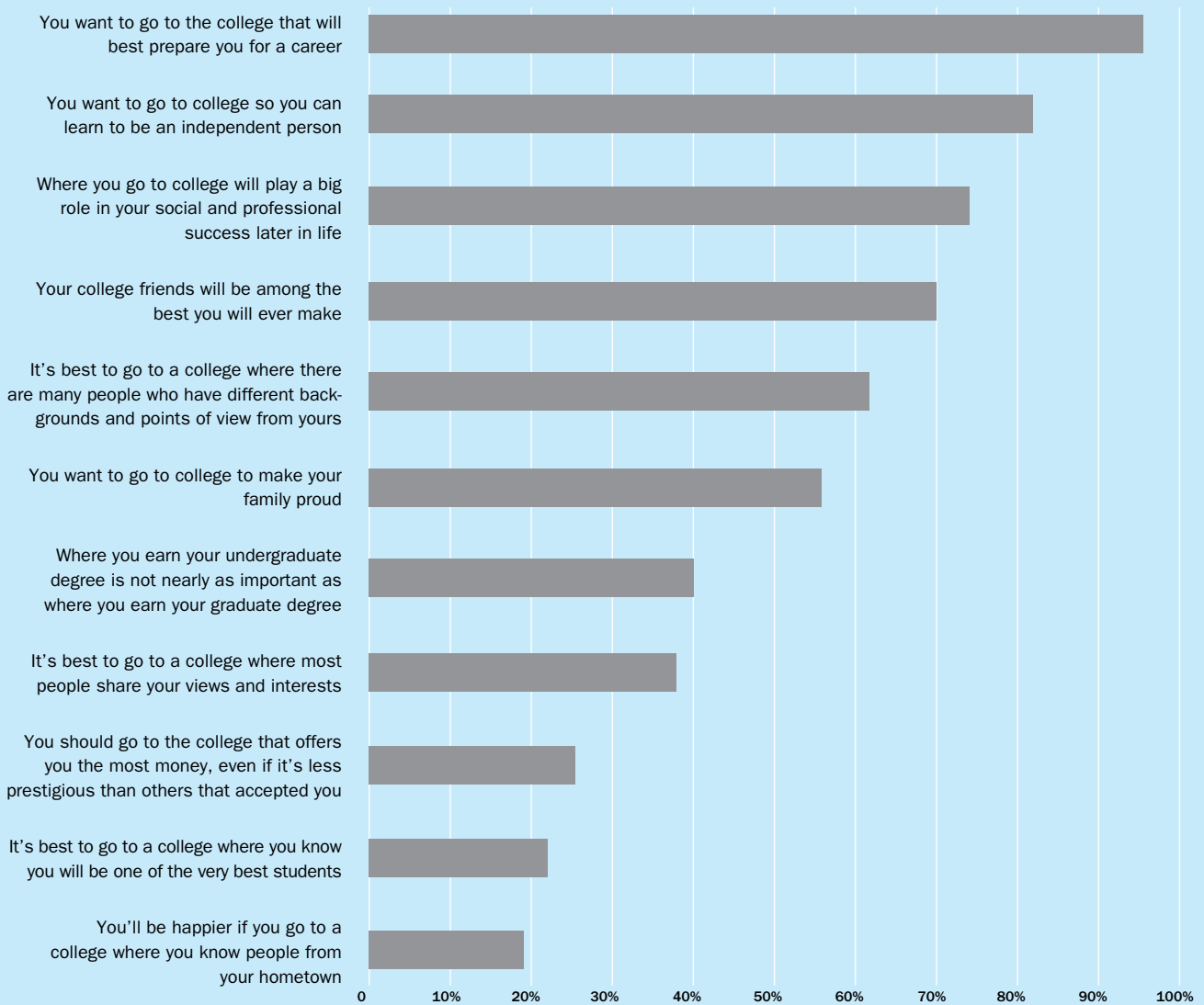NOTE: Reflects top-2-box agreement ratings

Statement	
You want to go to the college that will best prepare you for a career	~96%
You want to go to college so you can learn to be an independent person	~82%
Where you go to college will play a big role in your social and professional success later in life	~74%
Your college friends will be among the best you will ever make	~70%
It's best to go to a college where there are many people who have different backgrounds and points of view from yours	~62%
You want to go to college to make your family proud	~56%
Where you earn your undergraduate degree is not nearly as important as where you earn your graduate degree	~40%
It's best to go to a college where most people share your views and interests	~38%
You should go to the college that offers you the most money, even if it's less prestigious than others that accepted you	~26%
It's best to go to a college where you know you will be one of the very best students	~22%
You'll be happier if you go to a college where you know people from your hometown	~20%

0   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

FIGURE 6

Which career? Which capabilities?

Source: If you had to choose, which of the following **better** describes why you are going to college?

Students who favored "preparing for a specific career" most often planned to study …	Students who favored "broadening intellectual capabilities" most often planned to study…
Pre-Medicine	Social Sciences
Engineering	Humanities

FIGURE 7

Face-off: Shared vs. different point of view

Source: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree that *it's best to go to a college where most people share your views and interests.*
Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree that *it's best to go to a college there are many people who have different backgrounds and points of view from yours.*
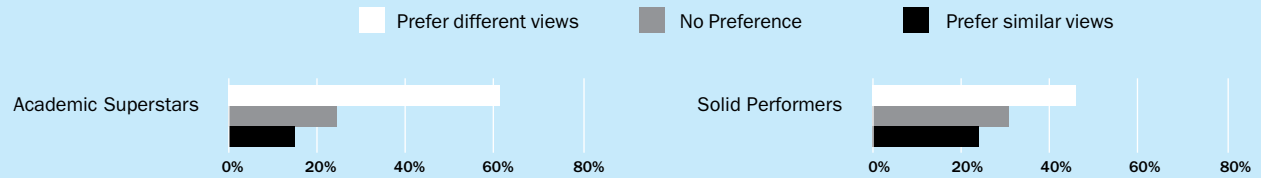
☐ Prefer different views   ▨ No Preference   ■ Prefer similar views

Academic Superstars

Solid Performers

FIGURE 8.1

What's most important to students when they make the enrollment decision?

Source: Please rate how important each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.
NOTE: Reflects mean ratings

- You felt like you were a good fit at the college
- Knowing that you would be able to pursue a specific area of study
- A wide variety of majors and courses
- Knowing that you can live on campus
- Knowing that their faculty truly advise/mentor students
- Your scholarship award
- How well the college's graduates do getting a good job immediately after graduating
- Prestigious reputation of the college/university

1 — not at all important   5 — very important

FIGURE 8.2

What else played a role in the enrollment decision?

Source: Please rate how important each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.
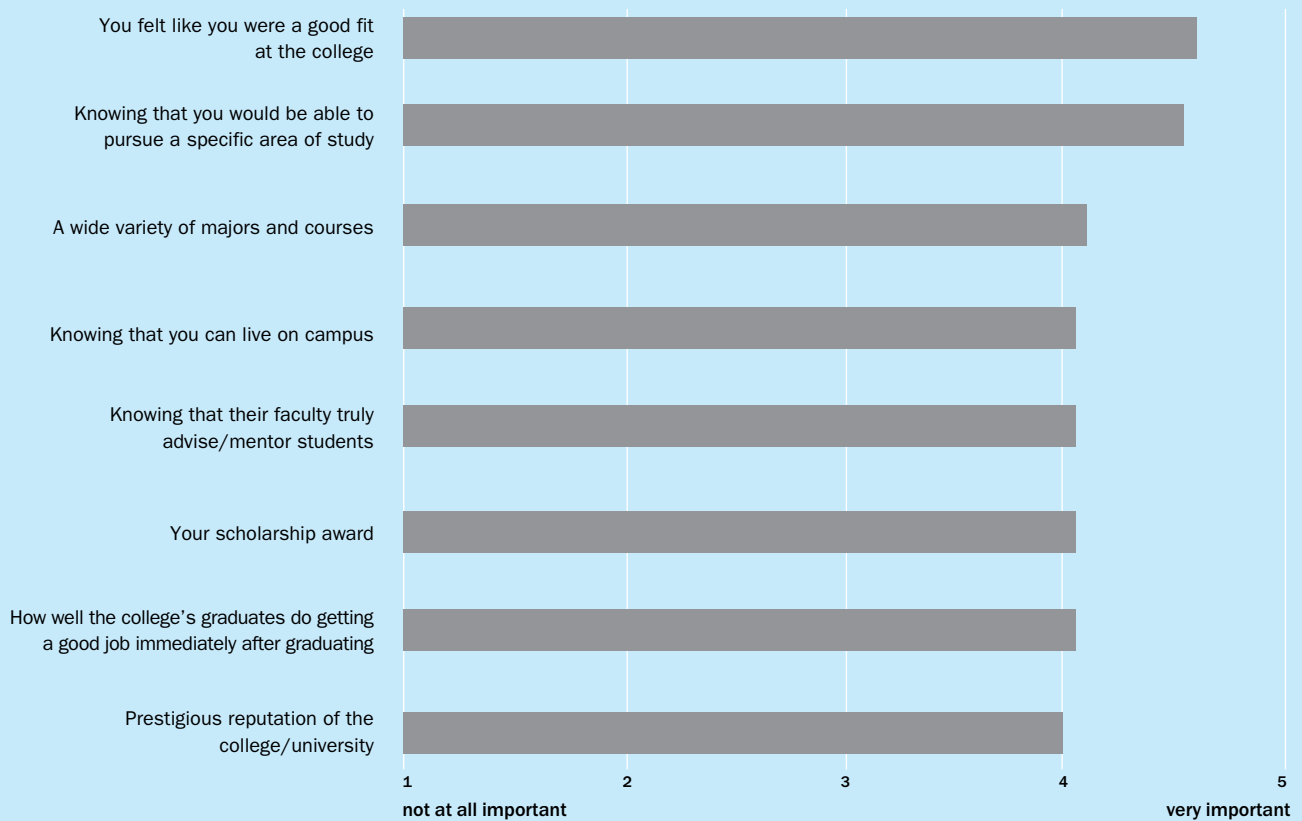
NOTE: Reflects mean ratings

FIGURE 8.3
What wasn't so important in the enrollment decision?
Source: Please rate how important each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.
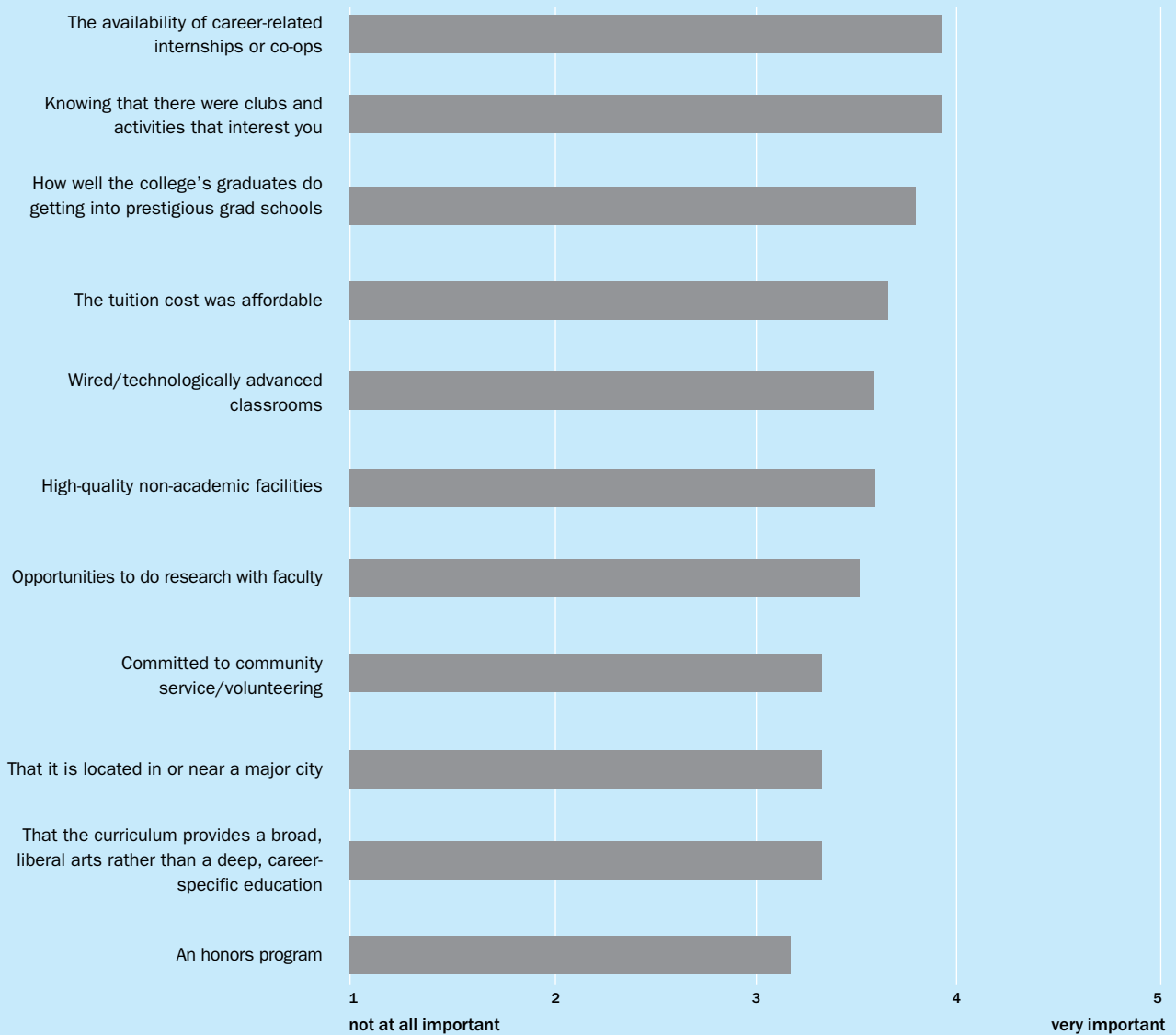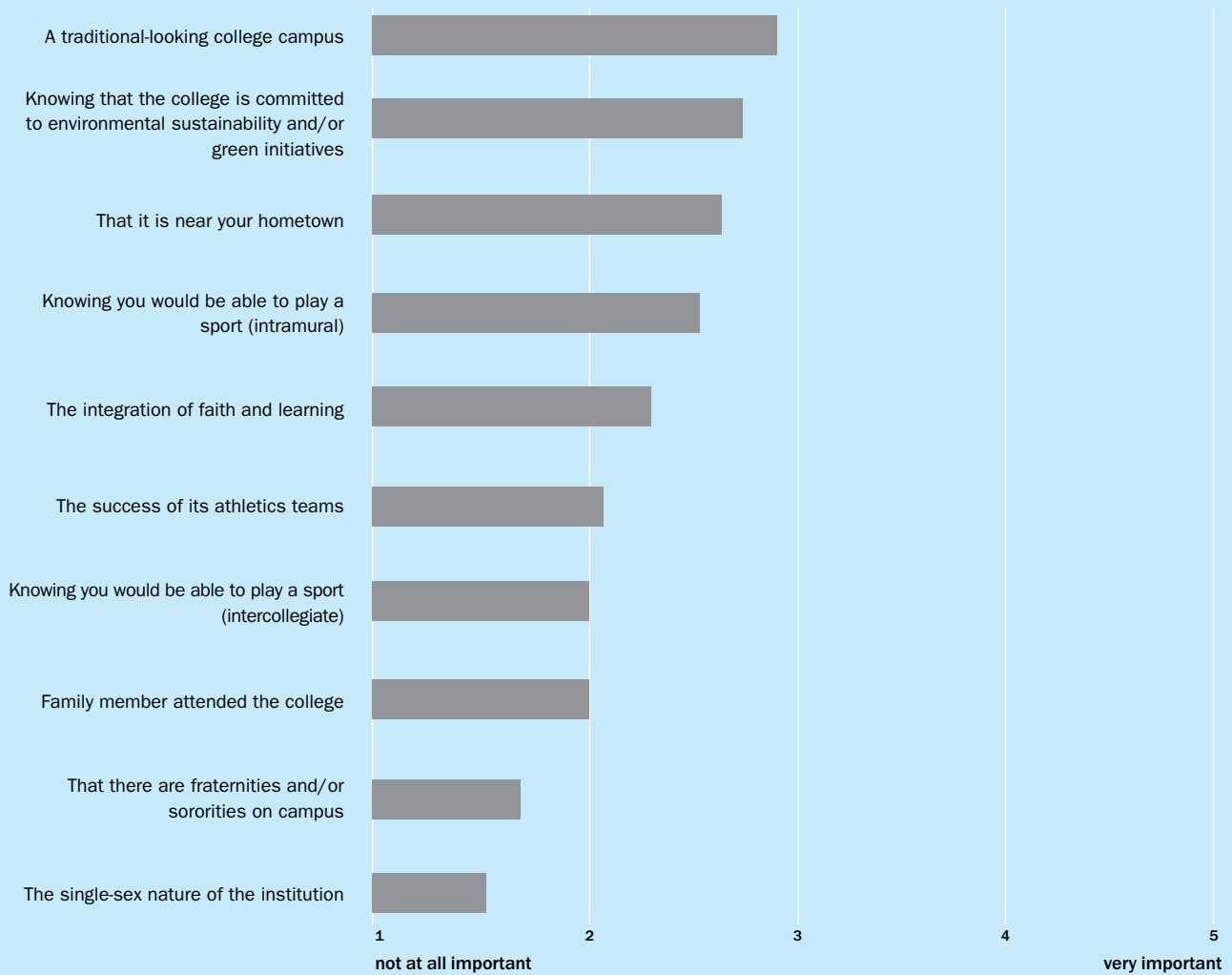NOTE: Reflects mean ratings

A traditional-looking college campus	
Knowing that the college is committed to environmental sustainability and/or green initiatives	
That it is near your hometown	
Knowing you would be able to play a sport (intramural)	
The integration of faith and learning	
The success of its athletics teams	
Knowing you would be able to play a sport (intercollegiate)	
Family member attended the college	
That there are fraternities and/or sororities on campus	
The single-sex nature of the institution	

1   2   3   4   5
not at all important   very important

FIGURE 9
Do students value variety, or do they care most about just one specific area of study?
Source: Please rate how important *knowing that you would be able to pursue a specific area of study* was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.
Please rate how important *a wide variety of majors and courses* was in your decision to enroll at [COLLEGE] instead of another college or university.
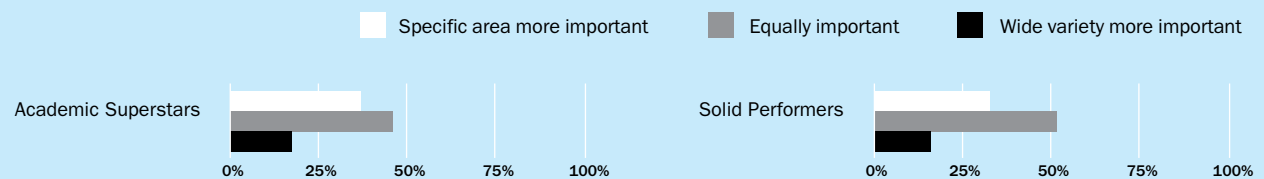
☐ Specific area more important   � Equally important   ■ Wide variety more important

Academic Superstars   Solid Performers

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%   0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

FIGURE 10.1

Do students care more about the reputation of their school or of their major?

Source: If you have to pick one characteristic, which of the two played a greater role in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]**: *Its overall reputation/Its reputation in my major or program of interest?*

☐ Overall institution's reputation ▨ Reputation within major

FIGURE 10.2

Face-off: Overall reputation vs. program reputation?

Source: If you have to pick one characteristic, which of the two played a greater role in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]**: *Its overall reputation/Its reputation in my major or program of interest?*
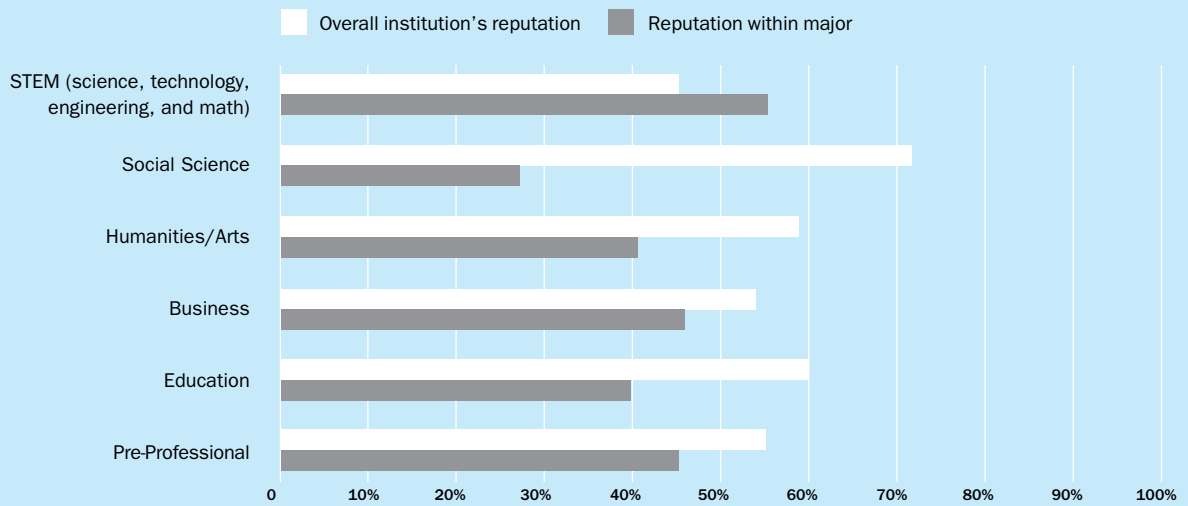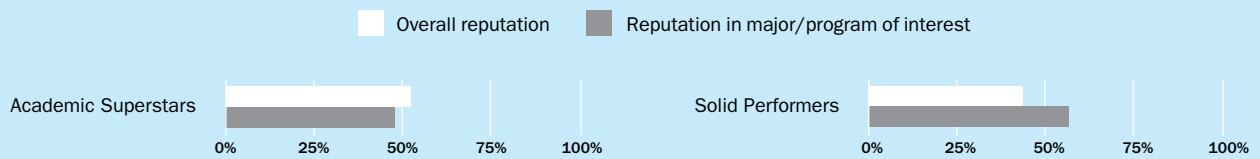
☐ Overall reputation ▨ Reputation in major/program of interest

FIGURE 11.1
Which information sources influenced the enrollment decision?

Source: Please rate how influential each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.
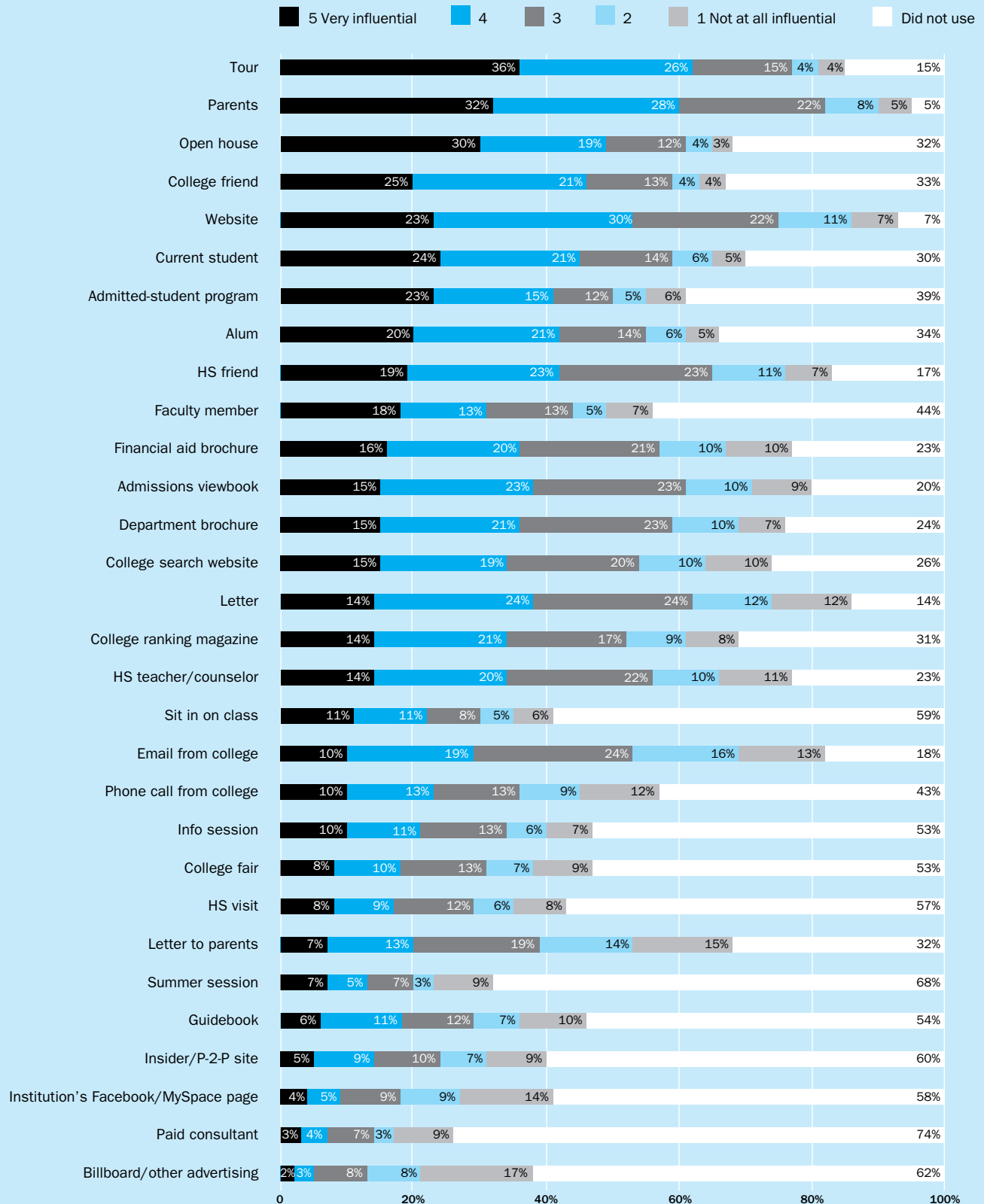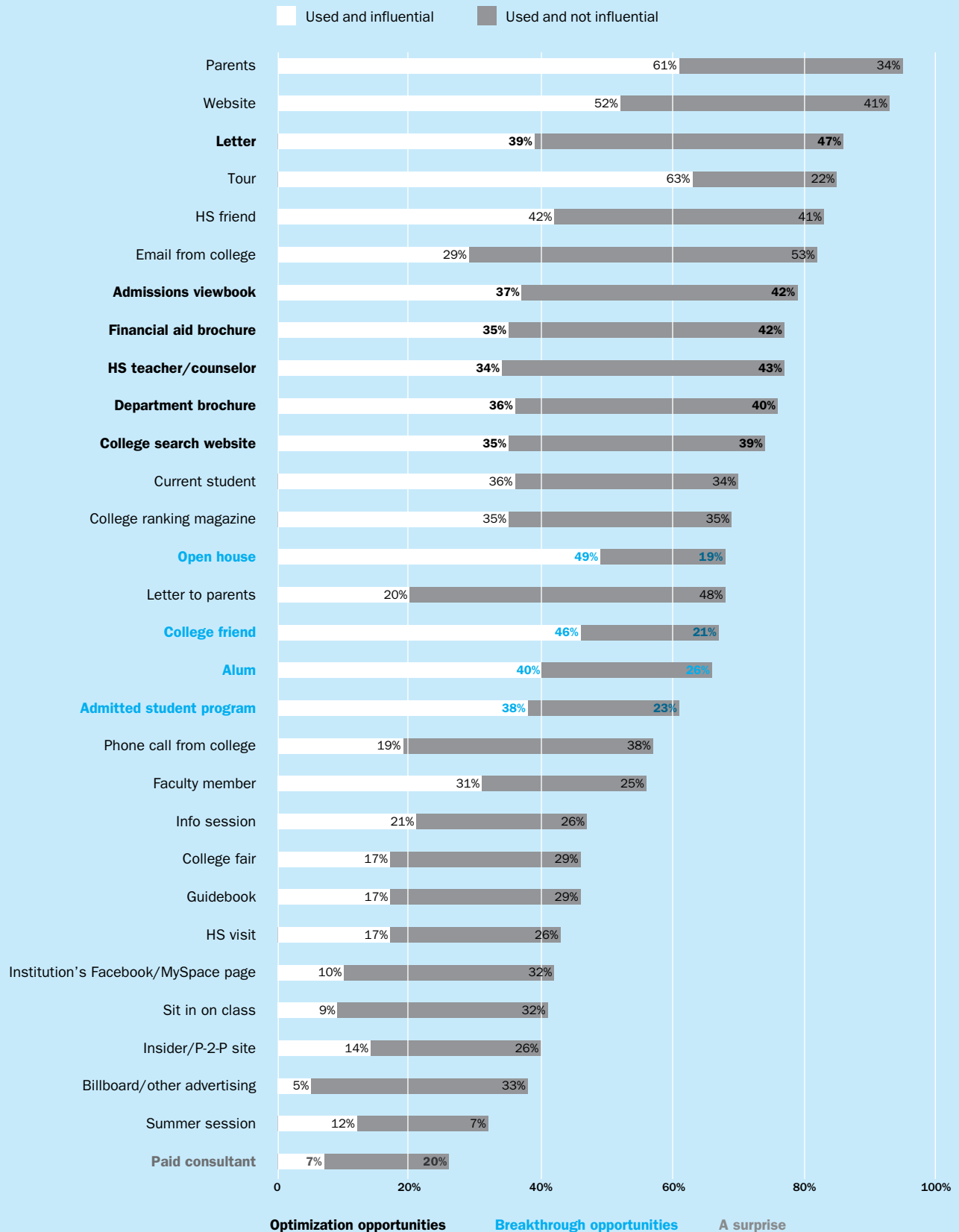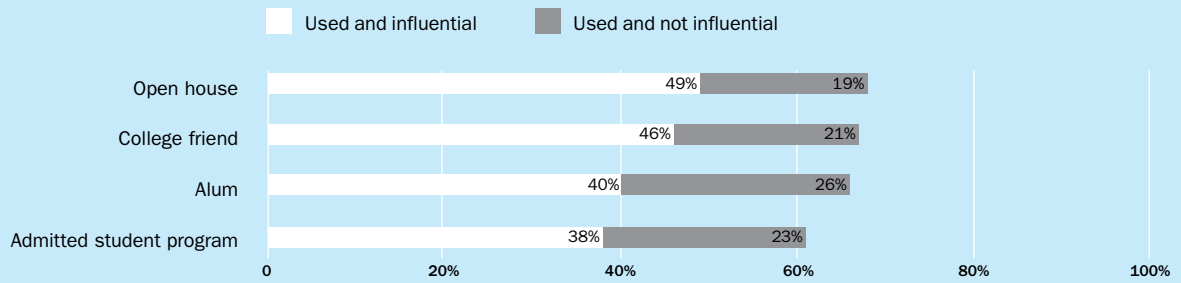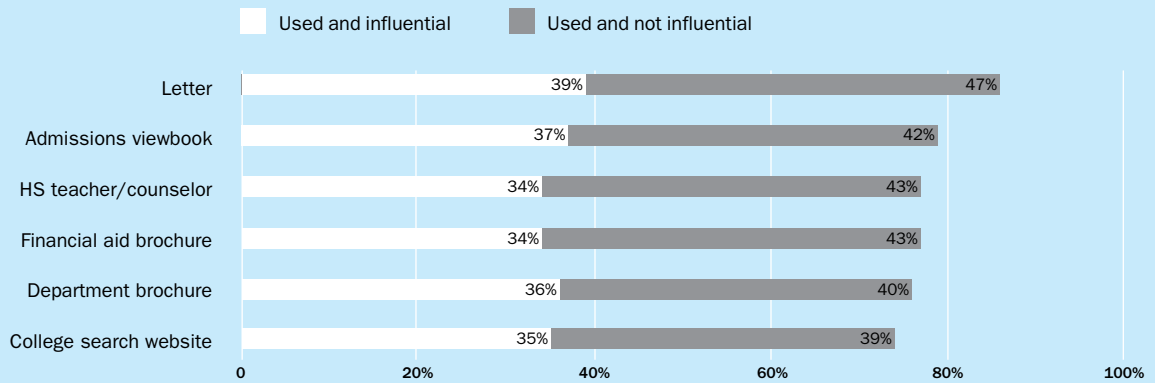
Legend:
- 5 Very influential
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1 Not at all influential
- Did not use

Source	5 Very influential	4	3	2	1 Not at all influential	Did not use
Tour	36%	26%	15%	4%	4%	15%
Parents	32%	28%	22%	8%	5%	5%
Open house	30%	19%	12%	4%	3%	32%
College friend	25%	21%	13%	4%	4%	33%
Website	23%	30%	22%	11%	7%	7%
Current student	24%	21%	14%	6%	5%	30%
Admitted-student program	23%	15%	12%	5%	6%	39%
Alum	20%	21%	14%	6%	5%	34%
HS friend	19%	23%	23%	11%	7%	17%
Faculty member	18%	13%	13%	5%	7%	44%
Financial aid brochure	16%	20%	21%	10%	10%	23%
Admissions viewbook	15%	23%	23%	10%	9%	20%
Department brochure	15%	21%	23%	10%	7%	24%
College search website	15%	19%	20%	10%	10%	26%
Letter	14%	24%	24%	12%	12%	14%
College ranking magazine	14%	21%	17%	9%	8%	31%
HS teacher/counselor	14%	20%	22%	10%	11%	23%
Sit in on class	11%	11%	8%	5%	6%	59%
Email from college	10%	19%	24%	16%	13%	18%
Phone call from college	10%	13%	13%	9%	12%	43%
Info session	10%	11%	13%	6%	7%	53%
College fair	8%	10%	13%	7%	9%	53%
HS visit	8%	9%	12%	6%	8%	57%
Letter to parents	7%	13%	19%	14%	15%	32%
Summer session	7%	5%	7%	3%	9%	68%
Guidebook	6%	11%	12%	7%	10%	54%
Insider/P-2-P site	5%	9%	10%	7%	9%	60%
Institution's Facebook/MySpace page	4%	5%	9%	9%	14%	58%
Paid consultant	3%	4%	7%	3%	9%	74%
Billboard/other advertising	2%	3%	8%	8%	17%	62%

FIGURE 11.2

What sources do students use when making an enrollment decision—and what makes a difference?

Used and influential   Used and not influential

Source	Used and influential	Used and not influential
Parents	61%	34%
Website	52%	41%
Letter	**39%**	**47%**
Tour	63%	22%
HS friend	42%	41%
Email from college	29%	53%
Admissions viewbook	**37%**	**42%**
Financial aid brochure	**35%**	**42%**
HS teacher/counselor	**34%**	**43%**
Department brochure	**36%**	**40%**
College search website	**35%**	**39%**
Current student	36%	34%
College ranking magazine	35%	35%
Open house	**49%**	**19%**
Letter to parents	20%	48%
College friend	**46%**	**21%**
Alum	**40%**	**26%**
Admitted student program	**38%**	**23%**
Phone call from college	19%	38%
Faculty member	31%	25%
Info session	21%	26%
College fair	17%	29%
Guidebook	17%	29%
HS visit	17%	26%
Institution's Facebook/MySpace page	10%	32%
Sit in on class	9%	32%
Insider/P-2-P site	14%	26%
Billboard/other advertising	5%	33%
Summer session	12%	7%
Paid consultant	**7%**	**20%**

0   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Optimization opportunities   **Breakthrough opportunities**   A surprise

FIGURE 11.3
Breakthrough opportunities

Source: Please rate how influential each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.
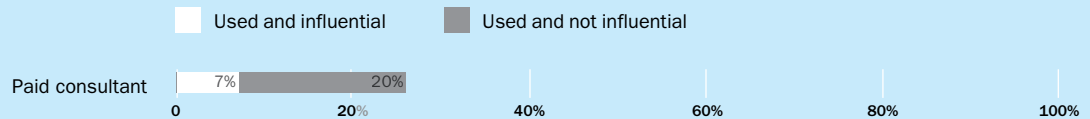
- Used and influential
- Used and not influential

	Used and influential	Used and not influential
Open house	49%	19%
College friend	46%	21%
Alum	40%	26%
Admitted student program	38%	23%

FIGURE 11.4
Optimization opportunities

Source: Please rate how influential each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.

- Used and influential
- Used and not influential

	Used and influential	Used and not influential
Letter	39%	47%
Admissions viewbook	37%	42%
HS teacher/counselor	34%	43%
Financial aid brochure	34%	43%
Department brochure	36%	40%
College search website	35%	39%

FIGURE 11.5
A surprise

Source: Please rate how influential each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.

- Used and influential
- Used and not influential

	Used and influential	Used and not influential
Paid consultant	7%	20%

FIGURE 12
Parents involved at stage in enrollment process

Source: Which stage, if any, were family members involved during your college decision?

	Selected mother, father, or both
Identifying where to learn more about	75%
Identifying where to apply	75%
Managing applications	62%
Deciding where to visit	75%
Deciding where to enroll	69%

FIGURE 13

When all was said and done, where did they enroll?

Source: Where do you plan to go to school in the fall?

NOTE: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to missing or unclear responses

	Total (N=1,261)	Academic Superstars (N=828)	Solid Performers (N=433)	First-time undergrads, recent HS grads* (N=2,272,255)
Preference				
Top choice	68%	65%	73%	n/a
Very interested	22%	23%	19%	n/a
Back-up	6%	6%	6%	n/a
Match				
Reach	19%	18%	20%	n/a
Match	54%	55%	54%	n/a
Safety	26%	27%	26%	n/a
Distance from home				
Less than 40 miles	21%	19%	24%	n/a
40 to 99 miles	20%	19%	22%	n/a
100 to 199 miles	18%	17%	19%	n/a
200 to 399 miles	17%	18%	15%	n/a
400 miles or more	23%	21%	20%	n/a
State				
In-state	48%	44%	53%	n/a
Out-of-state	52%	56%	47%	n/a
Location				
Large/mid-size city	68%	70%	67%	56%
Urban fringe	17%	18%	17%	24%
Town/rural	10%	9%	11%	20%
Size				
Under 1,000 students	2%	2%	2%	4%
1,000 to 2,999 students	12%	13%	12%	17%
3,000 to 9,999 students	20%	20%	21%	31%
10,000 students or more	61%	61%	60%	48%
Selectivity				
Inclusive	2%	1%	3%	10%
Selective	23%	19%	32%	30%
More selective	69%	75%	56%	22%
N/A (part-time/2-year)	7%	5%	10%	38%
Category				
National: Land-grant	22%	23%	20%	18%
National: Metro research	20%	23%	15%	8%
National: Other public	13%	11%	19%	16%
National: Other private	13%	16%	7%	5%
Liberal arts	9%	10%	7%	7%
Regional public	8%	7%	11%	24%
Regional private	8%	7%	10%	12%
Bachelor's	3%	3%	4%	10%

* SOURCE: IPEDS

Price, Cost, Value, and the College Decision

The prospect of funding a college education is a source of anxiety for many families. Professionals in the field know that the published cost of tuition, room and board, and fees is often very different from the amount a family ultimately pays—but how savvy are high-achieving teens about need-based aid, merit scholarships, and loans? How much does the tuition "sticker price" matter to them? And how do students and their families define value?

Sticker Shock: When does it matter, and to whom?

We asked students how much of their college education costs will be paid by them and their family. Because we conducted the survey at a time when students would have had their financial aid package offers in hand, responses to this question should reflect actual financial scenarios rather than the intentions or hopes of families. One in four indicated that they or their family were paying for all of their education. Of these, 64 percent were attending a public university (where the reported average annual cost is $12,127) while 36 percent were attending a private college (where the average annual cost is $29,026). Half of the respondents indicated that they were paying for at least 75 percent of the cost, and among these students, 48 percent were attending a public institution and 52 percent were attending private institutions. Contact Lipman Hearne to discuss more specialized analyses of "full pay" families and their decision-making priorities.

MORE INFO AVAILABLE

We found that students enrolling at public institutions were more concerned about tuition costs and less concerned about scholarship money (Figure 14). Those enrolling at private institutions were concerned more about scholarships than tuition costs. Because students told us—this year and in previous years—that cost is a major consideration in deciding where to *apply,* we theorize that students who presumed they would be ineligible for scholarships gravitated toward public institutions, while those who believed scholarships would be an option were comfortable applying to private institutions. This may help explain why those who will pay

three-fourths or more of the cost tell us they are enrolling in their first-choice college at a significantly higher rate than those who will rely more heavily on aid. "Perhaps these students are setting their sights on the more affordable schools early in the process. What this study does not tell us is whether students had a correct understanding of their family's eligibility for aid," says Donna Van De Water.

When it comes time to enroll, students acknowledge that cost is important, but ranks well behind factors like "fit," courses of study, and access to faculty, reinforcing the notion that students are shaping their lists based on perceived costs early in the process. Later in the process, it does not appear that students are sacrificing their top-choice school in favor of affordability. As mentioned earlier, some of these colleges may have been eliminated from consideration earlier on in the process because of cost and stated policies or resources related to financial aid and scholarships.

Shifting Priorities: What's changed since 2006?

We were interested to see that the 2009 Academic Superstars are actually less concerned about tuition costs today than those in 2006—and more concerned about financial aid (see Figure 15). It's possible that these very high-achieving teens are becoming more savvy about the aid available to them. Lipman Hearne's Donna Van De Water noted, "Really high-achieving students don't seem to pay as much attention to an institution's sticker price. Through their research and conversations, they are hearing that the discount rate for students of their ability can be significant."

Heartbreak Kids: Reality or myth?

A theoretical scenario haunts enrollment managers: highly qualified students finding a perfect fit at their dream college, then walking away heartbroken because the financial aid isn't enough. Does it happen?

If anything, the results of this survey suggest that cost is a consideration—increasingly so—when deciding where to apply. When asked, without any prompting, what was most important when deciding where to apply, students were significantly more likely to cite "cost" in 2009 compared with 2006. In fact, to Solid Performers, the importance of cost more than doubled between 2006 and 2009, from 11 percent of students calling this factor "most important" in 2006 to 23 percent in 2009 (Figure 16).

When we asked students in 2006 whether *it's best to enroll at the college that gives you the most amount of money,* there was a low level of agreement. In 2009, agreement was still low, but it did increase by 54 percent (Figure 17).

We believe there is more going on with this variable than we can describe using the current data. The increasing availability of no-loan aid packages for students with financial need, for example, may be influencing students' eagerness to apply to certain schools. The number of schools offering no-loan aid packages to low-income students is essentially doubling every two years, and now includes such places as Emory, Washington University, Tufts, Rice, and Vanderbilt. This phenomenon may also be siphoning off some highly sought-after students from schools that do not make this offer. For more information about no-loan aid packages, visit the article posted on Lipman Hearne Commons about this subject, www.lipmanhearnecommons.com.

Trade-offs: Cost, reputation, and location

While asking students to rate the importance of attributes is helpful, we also wanted to get a sense of "where the rubber meets the road" at the point of choosing between one college and another. We asked students to make direct comparisons and indicate whether *costs* were more important than attributes like o*verall reputation, program reputation,* and *location.* For students enrolling at private institutions, *reputation* trumps *costs* by a healthy margin, while *costs* trump *location* by a few percentage points (Figure 18). For students attending a public institution, *reputation* trumps *costs*—just barely—and *costs* trumps *location* by almost a two-to-one factor.

Cost Perceptions: How high is high?

So, how much do students feel is a reasonable price to pay? Students were asked to specify what they regard as a "low-priced college" and a "high-priced college." The average definition of a low-priced college, according to students, was one whose total cost (tuition, room and board, and fees) was $15,000 per year. Students defined a high-priced college, on average, as one whose total cost was $35,000 per year (see Figures 19.1 and 19.2).

This suggests a $20,000 annual price difference between a low-priced college and a high-priced college—a surprisingly large differential. Furthermore, the average cost of attending a public university, at $12,127, is well below the threshold for what 63 percent of students regard as a low-priced college. And the average cost of attending a private university, at $29,026, is well below what 77 percent of students regard as a high-priced college. We calculated the average actual annual cost of attendance at the colleges and universities at which respondents told us they had enrolled, and that figure is $36,787.[3]

Spotlight: Are private institutions losing to publics?

Many education researchers hypothesize that during economic downturns public institutions gain at the expense of their private counterparts. To understand if these top students were turning to public institutions more during these down times, we compared the results to our 2006 findings. We found that some students—the Solid Performer segment—were, in fact, more likely to enroll at a public institution in 2009 than they were in 2006 (Figure 20). However, the majority of students in this group were already enrolling at public institutions in better economic times.

[3] Figures for "cost" do not reflect financial aid. "Cost" is defined as the projected cost of tuition, room and board, and fees before factoring in financial aid.

FIGURE 14

Is the promise of lower tuition driving students to favor public schools?

SOURCE: Please rate how important each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.
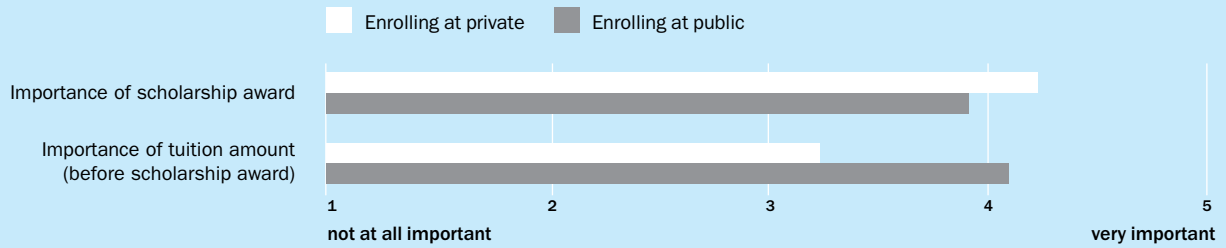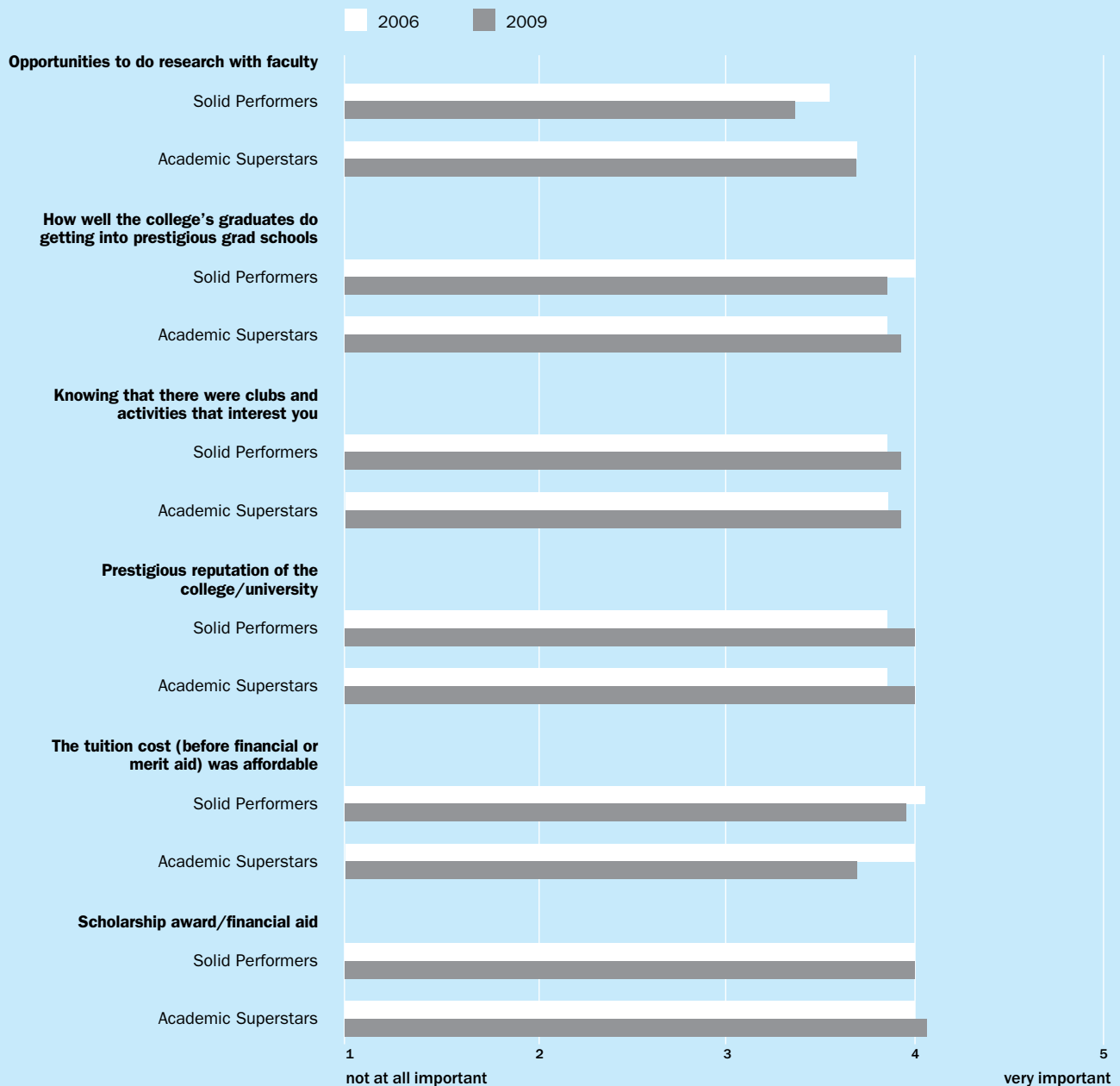
NOTE: Reflects top-2-box agreement ratings

Enrolling at private   Enrolling at public

- Importance of scholarship award
- Importance of tuition amount (before scholarship award)

1 not at all important   2   3   4   5 very important

FIGURE 15

Importance of factors when deciding where to enroll: 2006–2009 comparisons

SOURCE: Please rate how important each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.

NOTE: Reflects top-2-box agreement ratings

2006   2009

Opportunities to do research with faculty
Solid Performers
Academic Superstars

How well the college's graduates do getting into prestigious grad schools
Solid Performers
Academic Superstars

Knowing that there were clubs and activities that interest you
Solid Performers
Academic Superstars

Prestigious reputation of the college/university
Solid Performers
Academic Superstars

The tuition cost (before financial or merit aid) was affordable
Solid Performers
Academic Superstars

Scholarship award/financial aid
Solid Performers
Academic Superstars

1 not at all important   2   3   4   5 very important

FIGURE 16

What ultimately drove the application decision?
Same top 6 in 2006 and 2009, though rank order changes
SOURCE: What was most important to you in deciding where to apply?

	Academic Superstars		Solid Performers	
	2006*	2009	2006*	2009
Academic program(s)	58%	55%	57%	55%
Location	26%	30%	39%	35%
Reputation	16%	15%	12%	8%
Cost	12%	14%	**11%**	**23%**
Scholarship/financial aid	9%	9%	9%	5%
Campus	7%	5%	7%	4%

* 2006 values adjusted to account for change in methodology (telephone to online)

FIGURE 17

Agreement with "You should go to the college that offers you the most money even if it's less prestigious than the others that accepted you"
SOURCE: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree that *You should go to the college that offers you the most money, even if it's less prestigious than others that accepted you.*
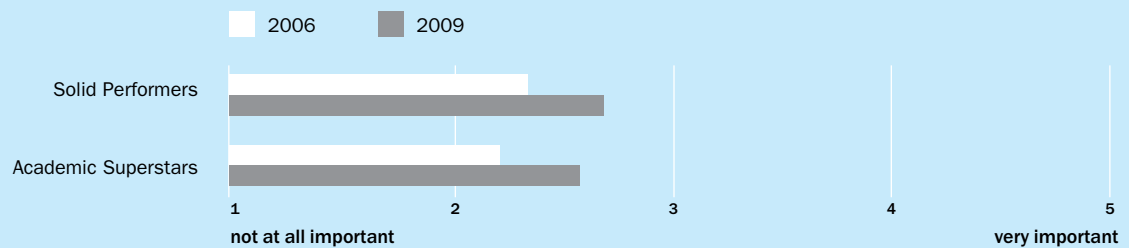
FIGURE 18

Trade-off analysis: Cost
SOURCE: If you have to pick one characteristic, which of the two played a greater role in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]**?

	Percentage of students attending a PUBLIC institution who selected overall costs over…	Percentage of students attending a PRIVATE institution who selected overall costs over…
Overall reputation	39%	37%
Program reputation	43%	37%
Location	65%	53%

A low-priced college costs less than … per year

SOURCE: How would you define the following terms?

NOTE: Costs include tuition, room and board, and fees
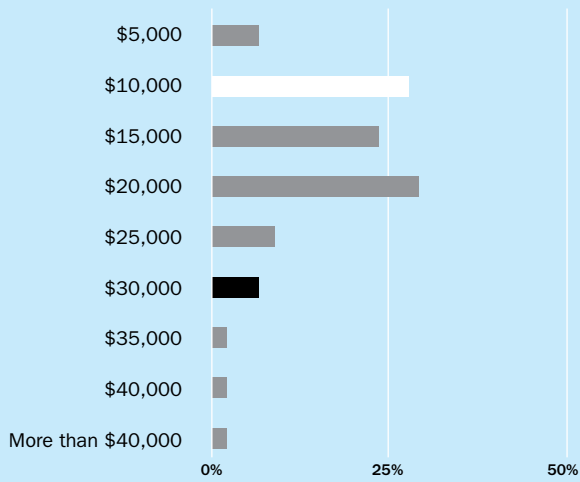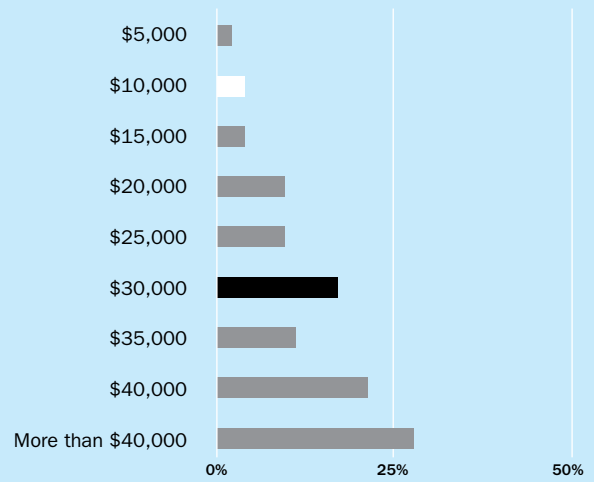

Median: $15,000, mode: $20,000

☐ Average annual cost of attending a public institution ($12, 127)

■ Average annual cost of attending a private institution ($29, 026)

A high-priced college costs more than … per year

SOURCE: How would you define the following terms?

NOTE: Costs include tuition, room and board, and fees

Median: $35,000, mode: $40,000

☐ Average annual cost of attending a public institution ($12, 127)

■ Average annual cost of attending a private institution ($29, 026)

Type of institution selected

SOURCE: Where do you plan to go to school in the fall?

	Academic Superstars		Solid Performers	
	2006 N=300	2009 N=828	2006 N=300	2009 N=433
Public	46%	47%	57%	63%
Private	52%	51%	37%	35%
Indeterminate	2%	2%	6%	0%

The Search for the Perfect Fit

We asked our survey participants what was most important to them when they considered where to apply. One Academic Superstar, enrolling at a flagship institution in her state, put it this way:

> *"The overall match with the school had to fit, it was not just one thing. Everything had to come together; from the atmosphere to the academics to the price."*

Indeed, this notion of fit was an important consideration for many students. It was the most important consideration, on average, out of all of those included in our survey. This chapter seeks to shed some light on what students mean by the perfect fit, and how they search for it.

Seeking—and Finding: Just how common is a perfect fit?

In addition to asking students to tell us how important a "good fit" was among various other considerations, we also asked them to reflect on the place they had chosen and tell us how good a fit they felt they had found in the end.

Even though two in three students told us they were enrolling at their top choice, only one in three reported finding the perfect fit—a school they would rate a 10 out of 10. This is interesting—for many students, a school doesn't need to be a perfect fit to be a top choice. This suggests students are making compromises before they even take aim at a top choice school. Moreover, fewer than two in three reported they had found a very good fit. More than one-third of students told us they were enrolling at a school they regarded as a less-good fit.

Constructing "Fit": What do students want?

It's difficult to reconstruct just what students were looking for. Presumably, the idea of a perfect fit is so customized to the individual that an analysis of aggregate responses would not be helpful. There is one piece of interesting information common to students who had found a very good fit: they were more forthright about their preferences. They were less likely to register neutrality when asked about their preferences, and more likely to express strong interest or strong disinterest in a given factor.

Lipman Hearne's Donna Van De Water notes, "Some characteristics are what I call 'cost of entry' characteristics. For example, if you're competing for top students, you have to offer the academic breadth, star faculty, great facilities, and so on, that they are seeking. These aren't the characteristics that are going to set you apart from your competitors at the time of enrollment, so you need to focus more attention on those true points of distinction that matter to students such as outcomes of study in their major, particular extracurricular activities, leadership opportunities, etc. But you still need to be able to prove you excel at those other factors."

Other characteristics, such as a strong commitment to sustainability initiatives, single-sex education, or integration of faith into the learning experience are more likely to be powerful selling points for some students while holding no interest for others—and these degrees of influence would be masked by the aggregate data (see Figure 21). More data is available on types of institutions, fit, and the importance of specific attributes. Please contact Lipman Hearne with inquiries.

MORE INFO AVAILABLE

Considering the Source: Did certain information sources help students find a good fit?

Just as we found enrollment factors that correlated with a good fit, we also found information sources that did the same. The *institutional website* was more influential to students reporting a good fit, as were several print vehicles—*viewbooks* and *academic department brochures.* This did not surprise Lipman Hearne's Tom Abrahamson: "The website and print communications, when done well, can be truly effective ways to transmit your institution's brand and personality. They allow you to tell the world who you are and what makes you special. Websites, in particular, are playing an increasingly critical role. As with other consumer decisions, college shoppers are doing intensive research online. This is evidenced by the relatively new phenomenon of "stealth applicants" (those whose very first contact with a college is the submission of the application itself), which are estimated to be among 30–50 percent of total applicants today. The onus, then, is on colleges to create and maintain a first-rate website that will hold the interest of its visitors, anticipate needs, facilitate interactions with students, staff, faculty, and others associated with the college—essentially be surrogates for reality—all the while being true to the brand of the institution."

Spotlight: The campus tour—so influential, and so rogue

Students told us that the campus tour was more influential in their enrollment decisions than any other information source, followed closely by the open house. It seems that students do the hard work of judiciously narrowing down options—and getting in—all so they can savor the luxury of making a final choice based on how right the place feels. The campus tour is all about envisioning one's self in a place: eating at *those* tables, gazing out of *that* library window, stopping by *this* office door to chat with a professor.

So, does the tour deliver? Members of the Lipman Hearne team make a practice of observing tours in any engagement that brings us to a college campus—amounting to dozens of examples per year. Our anecdotal observations, and the insight of one current bona fide student tour guide who interns at Lipman Hearne, tell us that campus tours miss many opportunities to seize marketing "moments of truth."

How to strike the right balance of candor and message discipline? Can the tour really incorporate intentional brand impressions without coming across as forced? What about augmenting the on-campus experience with immersive web 2.0 experiences? Visit www.lipmanhearnecommons.com for an insider's recommendations on 10 ways colleges can improve their campus tours.

Students who "test-drove" the academic experience, either through *conversation with a faculty member* or by *sitting in on a college class,* reported a better fit. On the social side of the equation, students who indicated that *high school friends/classmates* were influential were also the ones more likely to be reporting a good fit.

It's Not You, It's Me: Why didn't students find a better fit?

There were several factors contributing to why some students enrolled at an institution offering a less-than-ideal fit. The first was cost (see Figure 22). Students needing or receiving financial assistance were less likely to report a very good fit. It may be that they felt compelled to enroll at a place for purely financial considerations. It may also be that these students were influenced by finances when initially selecting the colleges to which they would apply.

Another factor was distance from home (see Figure 23)—students enrolling farther from home reported a better fit. It may be that those who limited their options to institutions close to home were making a trade-off that precluded them from finding the perfect fit. Students open to enrolling farther from home would have had more options from which to choose.

And finally, we believe planning may be a factor. On average, students applied to five or six institutions—one "reach" school, two "match" schools, and two "safety" schools (see Figure 24). In the end, one in four students enrolled at a safety school, and a disproportionate percentage of these students reported a less-good fit (see Figure 25). Those students enrolling at a safety school applied to fewer institutions in general and fewer reach or match schools specifically. The majority were not admitted to any reach/match schools (55 percent). Ultimately, these students had fewer options from which to choose.

FIGURE 21
How do good-fit and less-good-fit students compare in their decision factors?

SOURCE: Please rate how important each of the following was in your decision to **enroll at [COLLEGE]** instead of another college or university.
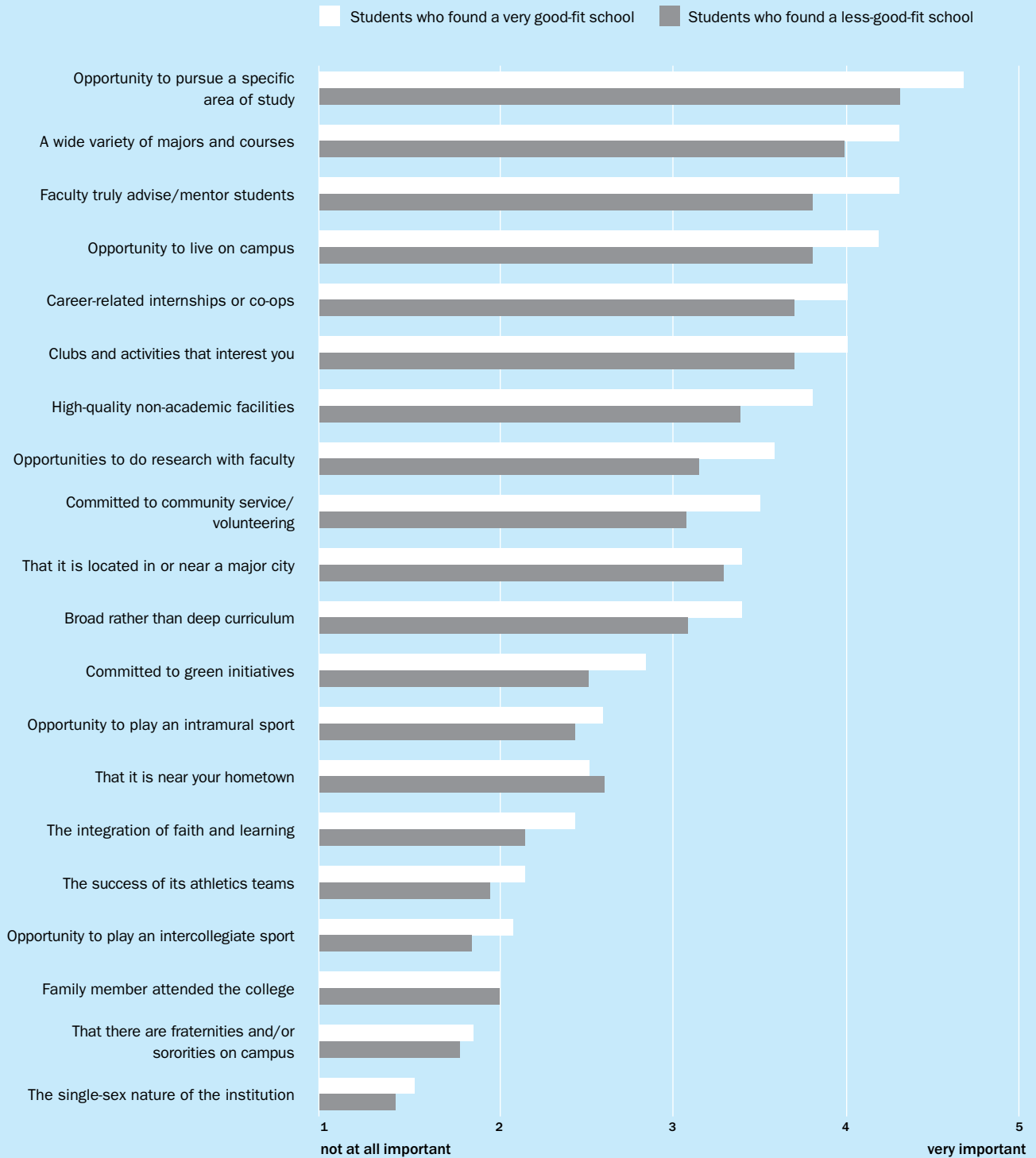
☐ Students who found a very good-fit school ⬛ Students who found a less-good-fit school

	1	2	3	4	5
	not at all important				very important

FIGURE 22
Does ability to pay correlate with finding a good fit?

SOURCE: Approximately how much of your college education will you or your family be paying for (please consider who will eventually pay back loans)?

	Students saying they had found a "perfect" or "very good" fit would eventually pay…	Students saying they had found a "less-good" fit would eventually pay…
All of the costs	29%	26%
More than half but not all	44%	41%
Less than half	27%	32%

FIGURE 23
Does distance from home correlate with finding a good fit?

SOURCE: Where do you plan to go to school in the fall?

	Students saying they had found a "perfect" or "very good" fit were traveling…	Students saying they had found a "less-good" fit were traveling…
Under 40 miles	29%	26%
40 to 99 miles	44%	41%
100 to 199 miles	27%	32%
200 to 399 miles	17%	16%
400 miles +	25%	20%

FIGURE 24
Can "reach" and "safety" schools also be a good fit?

SOURCE: Please classify each of the colleges and universities based on how likely you thought your application was to be accepted.

	Students saying they had found a "perfect" or "very good" fit were enrolling at…	Students saying they had found a "less-good" fit were enrolling at…
A reach college	20%	16%
A match college	57%	51%
A safety college	22%	33%

FIGURE 25
Must a "perfect fit" always be a "top choice" college?

SOURCE: Setting aside cost of or financial assistance, please classify your interest in attending each of the colleges and universities to which you applied.

	Of the 30% of students saying they had found a "perfect" fit, they were enrolling at…	Of the 30% of students saying they had found a "very good" fit, they were enrolling at…
Their top-choice college	80%	69%
A college very interesting to them	12%	23%
A back-up college	2%	3%

Conclusion

Finding the exact-fit, perfect-10 college may not be a realistic goal for the vast majority of students. But as high-achievers weigh the factors that influence their final decision, they can get much closer to perfection in their final choice if colleges and universities provide them with targeted information that speaks to their needs and concerns.

At this crucial juncture in high-achieving students' lives, they already regard their choices as respectable institutions. Many are eyeing their financial aid packages and wondering if some of their more expensive options are going to be worth the accompanying price tag.

Yet the most important factor for these high-achievers is connecting on that gut level with a college that gives them that "right fit" feeling. While that conclusion may seem unsurprising, it merits repeating, especially because it has retained its importance among this group of students even in uncertain economic times.

Based on our findings, we believe this exemplifies the ongoing need for colleges to get to know their prospective students and their parents as much as possible. Surveys of currently enrolled students and efforts to engage young alumni networks in recruiting admitted students are two of a myriad of ways colleges can make sure they are answering students' questions—and giving them an honest and thorough sense of their institution.

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Donna Van De Water has more than 20 years of marketing research expertise in support of product development, advertising, and marketing efforts for many of America's best-known colleges, universities, corporations, and institutions. Donna has a Ph.D. in psychology from Loyola University of Chicago. She also holds an M.B.A. from Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, where she served as a faculty member teaching research methods in marketing.

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