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*Advancing  
Higher Education  
Through Insight  
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# Students' College Preferences and Plans in the 2011 Admissions Cycle

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## Results from the *2011 College Decision Impact Survey*

**March 2011**

*Our Partner:*



## Introduction

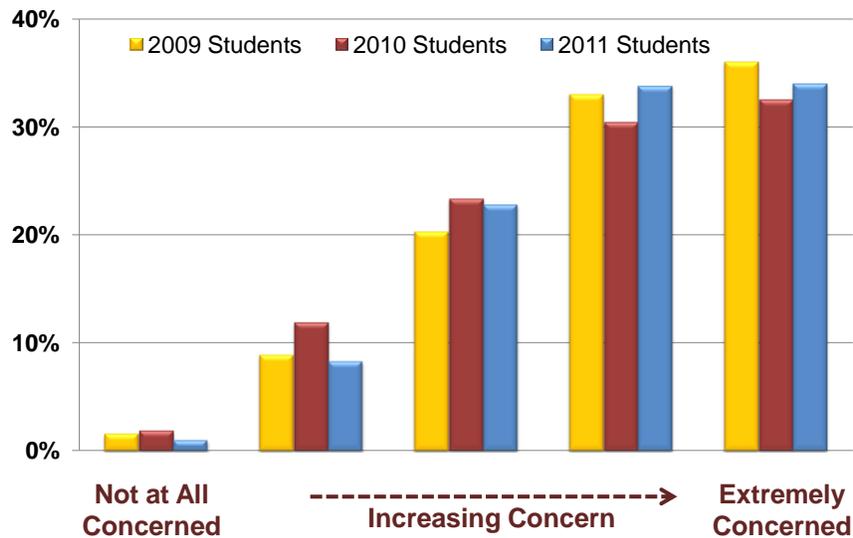
In January 2011, surveys were collected from 21,339 high school seniors to learn their college plans and priorities and whether any continued concerns about economic uncertainty had influenced their planning.<sup>1</sup> This document summarizes highlights of that research and compares responses to those of samples of seniors collected in 2009 and 2010.

## Research Highlights

### ***Finding 1: Families still exhibit high concern about the economy.***

Despite some early signs of improvement in the economy, college-bound high school students still report high levels of concern about the U.S. economy (**Figure 1**).

**Figure 1**  
Concern About Current U.S. Economy



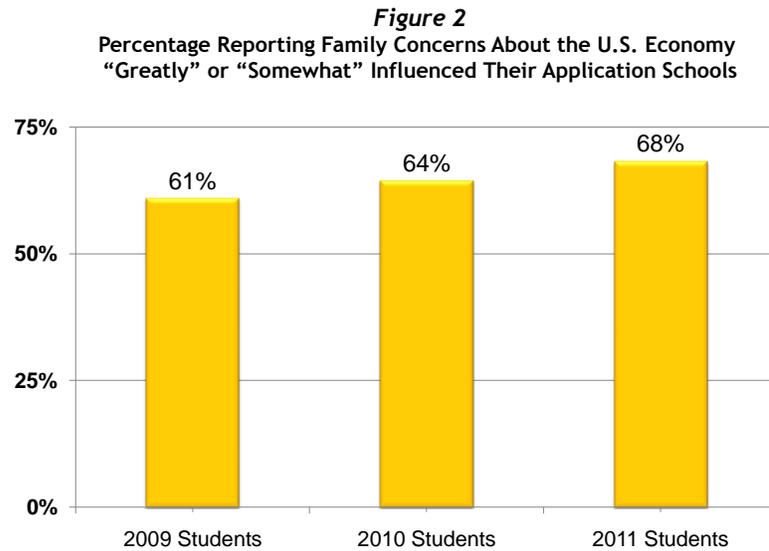
### <sup>1</sup> **About the Research Sponsors**

**Maguire Associates**, based in Concord, Massachusetts, has been a leading provider of higher education consulting and market research for 28 years, having served nearly 400 colleges and universities in that time. Maguire Associates assesses enrollment operations, models pricing and financial aid options, advises on strategic plans, and conducts many forms of market research.

**Fastweb** is the nation's recognized leader in helping students pay for school by providing scholarship and financial aid information, as well as jobs and internships. One out of three college-bound seniors use the site, and more than 50 million\* members have benefitted from Fastweb's information and services. As the oldest and most popular free online scholarship matching service, the database has more than 1.5 million scholarships totaling over \$3.4 billion. (\*9 million are active users of the site.)

**Finding 2: The majority of students report that economic concerns influence their application strategies.**

The 2011 College Decision Impact Survey reveals that concerns about the economy continue to affect the application choices of this year's graduates. In the 2011 survey, 68% of the high school seniors surveyed reported that their application choices were "somewhat" or "greatly" influenced by economic concerns. This percentage is up slightly compared to the last two years (**Figure 2**).



**Finding 3: Students' college priorities have remained stable despite any concerns about the economy.**

High school seniors continue to place the greatest importance on "value of education" as well as:

- Quality of major and students,
- Career-oriented coursework/majors and future employment opportunities,
- Total costs and the availability of merit- or need-based financial aid,
- Academic facilities,
- Campus atmosphere,
- Personal attention, and
- Preparation for graduate/professional school.

**Finding 4: Enrollment preferences are not significantly related to economic concerns.**

The 2011 College Decision Impact Survey reveals that students' college type preference is not significantly related to their level of economic concern. Students continue to be most interested in attending a public college (61%), followed by a private non-religious school (17%), and private religious school (11%). Twelve percent are unsure of their college type preference.

Students' willingness to consider alternative arrangements for college is also not significantly correlated with their concerns about the state of the U.S. economy. Among various non-traditional

options, this year's seniors are most willing to consider working part-time or attending a public rather than a private college or university (**Table 1**).

Relatively few seniors are likely to consider an on-line or distance program, taking a year off to work, or working full-time and attending college as a part-time student.

<b>Table 1</b>			
<b>Likelihood of Considering Different Educational Options Among Seniors</b>			
	<b>% Likely to Consider</b>		
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>
Working part-time while attending college	84%	78%	79%
Attending a public rather than a private college or university	65%	58%	58%
Attending a college or university out of state	27%	32%	33%
Changing to a major that will be in greater demand or have a higher income potential	39%	33%	32%
Taking more than four years to finish my degree	34%	31%	32%
Living at home and commuting to school rather than living on campus to keep costs down	33%	26%	27%
Quitting my job so I can focus full time on my college studies	N/A	18%	21%
Beginning my studies at a community or two-year college and later transferring to a four-year institution	27%	18%	19%
Working full-time and attending college as a part-time student	10%	7%	8%
Taking a year off before starting school to work and earn money for college	8%	5%	5%
Enrolling in an on-line or distance learning program as an alternative to more traditional college study	7%	5%	5%

Scale: 1 = Unlikely to 5 = Very likely

### **Finding 5: Students say they are focused on net cost in their college decision.**

As we often find with our research on prospective college students, the vast majority expect to apply for need- and merit-based aid regardless of whether they prefer to attend a public or private college or university. They are also increasingly sophisticated about net cost and less focused on the listed tuition in making their application choices. Indeed, the *2011 College Decision Impact Survey* confirms that approximately two-thirds of students who preferred a private education (**Table 2**):

- Will weigh heavily the makeup of financial aid offers from institutions, particularly in terms of the amount of grant awards relative to loans and work study assistance in making their enrollment decision; and
- Are more concerned with the net cost of an institution after financial assistance from all sources has been determined.

Only one third of those who prefer a private college reported that the listed tuition had a big impact on whether or not they would apply.

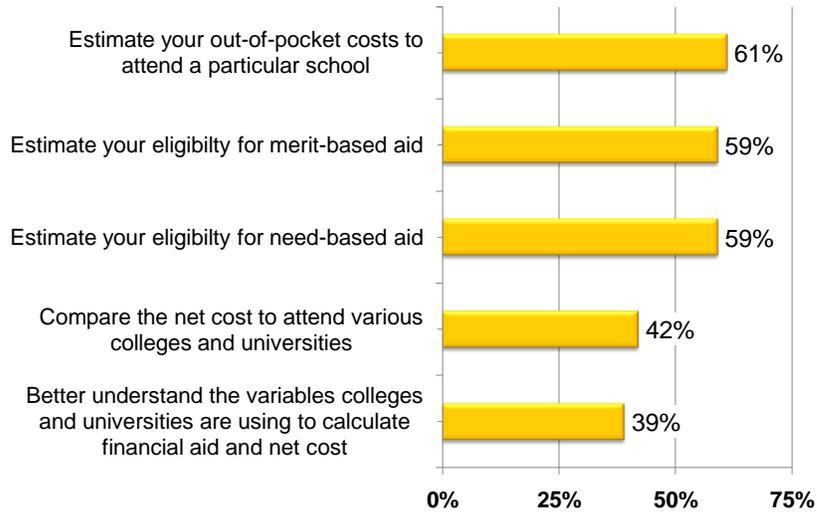
<i>Table 2</i>			
<b>Students' Agreement with Financial Statements Among Seniors Who Prefer to Attend a Private College or University</b>			
	Percentage '4' or '5'		
	2009	2010	2011
In making my enrollment decision, I will weigh heavily the makeup of financial aid offers from institutions, particularly in terms of the amount of grant awards relative to loans and work study assistance.	69%	65%	70%
I am more concerned with the net cost of an institution after financial assistance from all sources has been determined. I am not as concerned about the listed price of tuition.	59%	62%	60%
I am willing to assume debt, or deepen my financial commitment, for a higher quality education.	56%	53%	49%
Among private colleges and universities, tuition usually reflects quality; higher priced schools generally offer stronger academic and extracurricular programs.	40%	39%	42%
The listed tuition of a college or university has (or had) a big impact on whether or not I will (or would) apply there.	42%	33%	38%
I am unlikely to be able to afford a private college education.	34%	29%	33%

*Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree*

College-bound students express a high interest in a net cost calculator/estimator. Over a quarter of the seniors (28%) reported that they had already used a calculator on a college website, and another 57% had not used one yet but would be interested in doing so. Notably, there is a significant interaction between calculator usage and college type preference. A higher proportion of students who were most interested in attending a private college reported that they had already used a cost calculator during their search (36%, compared to 24% of those who prefer to attend a public institution). Most students completed the calculator(s) either by themselves (43%) or with their parents (44%). However, another 12% reported that their parents actually completed the calculator without their help.

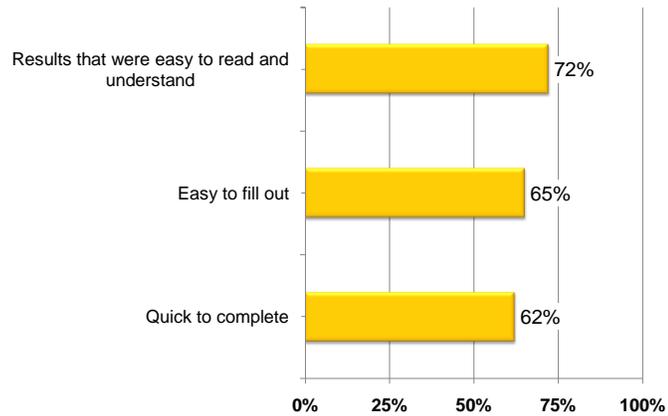
When asked how interested they would be in using an online net cost calculator, students are most interested in its ability to estimate their eligibility for merit and/or need based aid and their out-of-pocket costs to attend a particular school (**Figure 3**).

**Figure 3**  
Proportion of Students Who Are Extremely Interested  
in Using a Net Cost Calculator to Achieve Outcomes



In the minds of students, however, there is room for improvement in the existing calculators. Calculators are given positive, but not particularly high, ratings for providing results that are easy to read and understand, easy to fill out, and quick to complete (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
Evaluation of Existing Net Cost Calculators

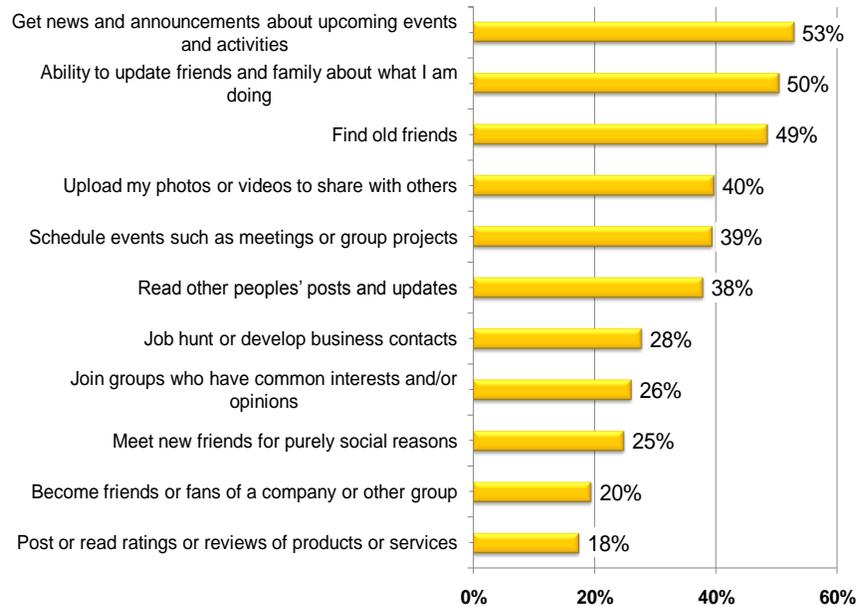


Note: % shown is top two box on 5-point scale where 1 = Not at all and 5 = Extremely.

**Finding 6: Social media is increasingly an important tool for students and colleges and universities in the college search process.**

The findings indicate that, for colleges and universities seeking to reach students “where they live and breathe,” a compelling social media presence is a necessity. Students most often visit Facebook and YouTube. Twitter, MySpace, and other sites tested are much less often visited by high school seniors.

**Figure 5**  
**Proportion of Students Who Consider Particular Functions**  
**on Social Media or Networking Sites Moderately or Extremely Important**



Students consider social media or networking sites most important for getting news and announcements about upcoming events and activities, followed by the ability to update others about what they are doing and finding old friends (**Figure 5**).

There does not appear to be a downside for colleges or universities if they have an effective presence on a social media or networking site, and it can be an effective recruitment tool for reaching out to some students. When asked how such a presence affects their interest in applying for admission, twenty-two percent of the students reported that it makes them more interested in applying, while 76% report that it has no influence. Only 2% report a negative impact on their application interest.

Indeed, many of the students report interacting with a college or university through a social network or other online resource. Over half recall:

- Using a web service to explore their “fit” with colleges and universities (59%),
- Watching a YouTube video created by a school (57%),
- Searching for scholarships using social media or networking sites (56%),
- Reading posts about a school on a social networking site (53%), and
- Reading student blogs or other posts on a college or university website (51%).

Lower, but still high, proportions of the students have become a fan or friend of a college or university on a social networking site (44%) or chatted online with students enrolled at a school (39%).

Notably, nearly a quarter of the seniors (22%) admit that they more strongly considered applying to a college because of a recommendation read on a social media site.

	College Type Preference		
	Public	Private	Unsure
Contacted a professional or admission counselor through a social network	15%	17%	15%
Became a friend or fan of a college or university on a social networking site	43%	49%	37%
Watched a YouTube video created by a school	54%	62%	56%
Read student blog or other posts about a school on a college or university website	47%	58%	50%
Read posts about a school on a social networking site	52%	55%	50%
Chatted online with students enrolled at a school	40%	37%	34%
Chatted online with faculty or an administrator at a school	17%	20%	18%
Subscribed to a school's news feed (RSS)	19%	21%	17%
Followed a school on Twitter	5%	6%	4%
Received a text message from a school	18%	19%	19%
Posted negative feedback about a school on their Facebook wall	3%	3%	2%
Used a web service to explore your "fit" with colleges and universities	56%	62%	62%
Done a campus tour narrated via a mobile phone application	7%	6%	6%
More strongly considered applying to a college because of a recommendation read on a social media site	22%	21%	22%
Searched for scholarships using social media or networking sites	59%	52%	52%

The students who participated in the research are least likely to recall:

- Subscribing to a school's news feed (RSS) (19%),
- Chatting online with faculty or a college administrator (18%),
- Receiving a text message from a school (18%),
- Contacting a professional or admission counselor through a social network (15%),
- Doing a campus tour narrated via a mobile phone application (7%),
- Following a school on Twitter (5%), and
- Posting negative feedback about a school on their FB wall (3%).

There are some notable differences by college type preference in students' interactions with schools via social media/networking. Students who prefer to attend a private college or university are more likely to report having had these types of contacts with schools (**Table 3**). These insights provide valuable guidance for strategies to engage students via social media and networking outreach efforts.

## Concluding Comments

The *2011 College Decision Impact Survey* documents that concerns about the U.S. economy remain high among seniors. They indicate that their application selections are influenced by such concerns, yet their educational priorities and the type of school they would *prefer* to attend remain unaffected.

They are increasingly using social media and networking resources in their college search and net price calculators are providing them with new opportunities to understand and anticipate real net costs in

their selection process. The research confirms that students continue to focus on net cost and high value in making their college selection, and there is strong interest in using net cost calculators or estimators to estimate their eligibility for merit and/or need-based aid and their out-of-pocket costs to attend a particular school.

The next phase of the research, which takes place in May 2011, will follow up with this same group of seniors to learn where they actually enroll and what factors most contributed to this decision. A report available in early summer will compare students' priorities and intentions at the application stage to those at their final enrollment decision to learn about the relationship between stated intentions and eventual actions during this year's enrollment cycle.