

Survey of 3,000+ students reveals:

**Traditional
marketing efforts
aren't cutting it
for the modern-
day student 🗑️**

Traditional marketing efforts aren't cutting it for the modern-day student

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Published June 2024 by CollegeVine
Canopy Education, Inc., DBA CollegeVine,
www.collegevine.com

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For further inquiries, please contact CollegeVine at:
support@collegevine.com | Tel. (877) 789-8463
68 Harrison Ave, Ste 605, Boston, MA 02111

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Introduction

Each year, colleges and universities pour billions of dollars into marketing and recruitment efforts.

Much of that investment is funneled toward the development of drip email and mailer campaigns that harken back decades, facilitated by large-scale enrollment management consulting firms.

Thirty years ago, before the rise of the Internet and increased accessibility of higher education, these campaigns may have worked. However, students are now applying to an increasing number of schools per year while prospect funnels have also bloated to hundreds of thousands of students per school.

Do the old methods resonate with the modern-day student?

We surveyed 3,000 current high school students to find out. This report explores our survey results in detail and examines new paradigms for recruiting, including the promising role of artificial intelligence (AI) in enabling universities to bring back relationship-oriented recruiting.

1.

High-volume
generic
marketing
efforts fail
to impact
prospect
behavior.

Metric, email or mailings received (12 months)	Quantity
Average emails received	7,800
Average physical mail received	1,092
Median emails received	1,040
Median physical mail received	260

The median student surveyed received **a combined 1,300 emails and print mail pieces** from colleges in the last 12 months.

● Despite this volume of outreach, **just 13.6% of students** reported that the outreach they receive from colleges is a strong motivator to submit an application.

In total, surveyed students received 463,310 emails and 66,159 mailings each week, a staggering volume for this pool of students.

"Feels Like Spam"

With student names being sold for 50 cents a pop, they are now bearing the brunt of a barrage of undifferentiated outreach. Many surveyed students said that the communications they receive are generic and fail to address their individual interests and needs.

Surveyed students frequently received email and mail from universities that they said they had never expressed interest in or even heard of.





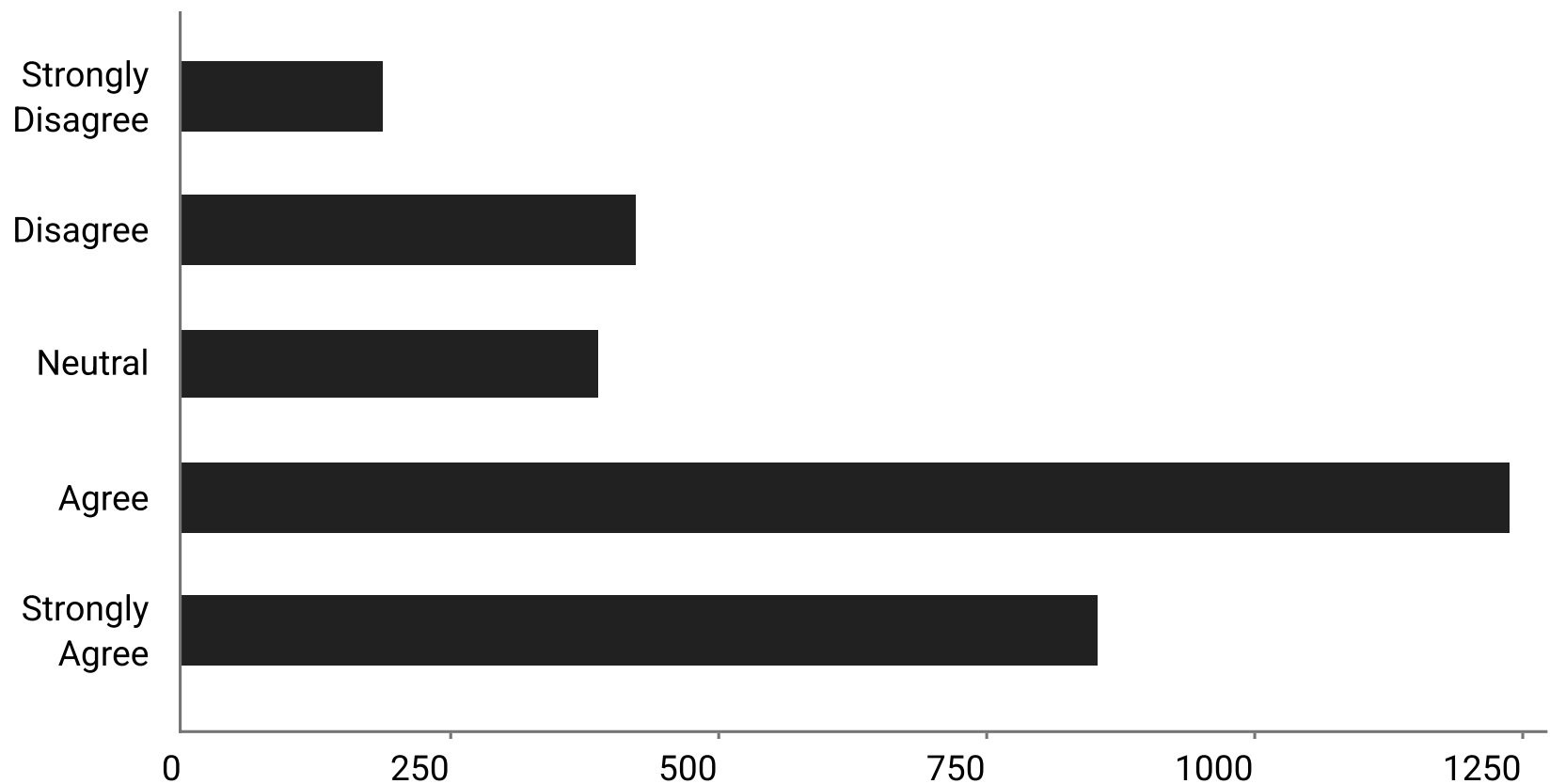
The overwhelming quantity of communications can be counterproductive, leading students to say that they ignore or delete messages without reading them.

Furthermore, surveyed students noted that much of the material they receive from different universities looks and reads the same. This homogeneity, often a result of boilerplate outputs from enrollment marketing consulting firms, makes it difficult for any single institution to stand out and capture the students' attention.



Email was more maligned than mail in the report, with **68% of students agreeing that emails feel like spam** (as compared to 43% agreement for the same question on mail).

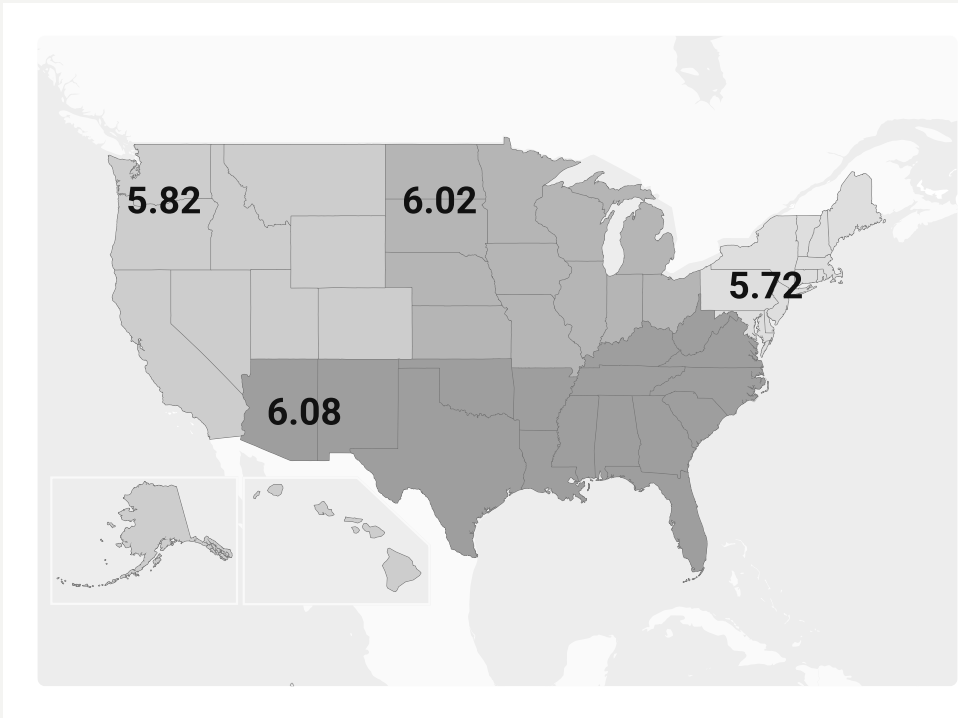
Distribution of responses to:
"The college emails I've received feel like spam"



Additionally, just 13.6% of students reported that the outreach they receive from colleges is a strong motivator to submit an application. This aligns with past peer-reviewed research: in 2022, TICAS analyzed the 2021 Smith, Howell, and Hurwitz study and found² that the effective change in the probability of a student to apply to a school that bought their name was just 0.1% — that is, purchasing a name and running them through a traditional marketing journey barely moves the needle for a student's likelihood to apply.

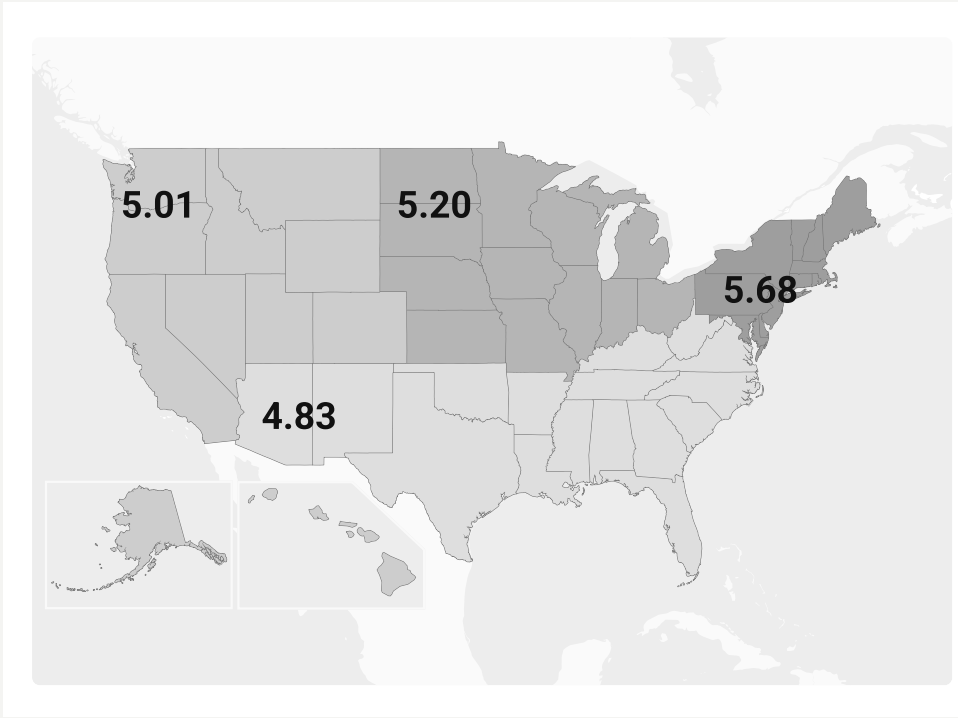
Student opinion varied slightly across geographic regions, with students in the Northeast presenting the most negative sentiment both on usefulness of college mailings and perception of college outreach as spam.

Students’ rating of the value of college mailings
(0: no value, 10: highest value)



Region	Value rating	
South	6.08	
Midwest	6.02	
West	5.82	
Northeast	5.72	

Students’ rating of their perception of spam
(0: disagree, 10: agree)

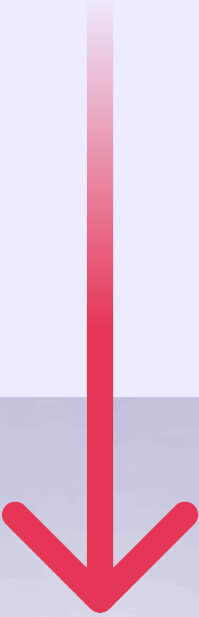


Region	Value rating	
Northeast	5.68	
Midwest	5.20	
West	5.01	
South	4.83	

2.

Your brand
with students
suffers when
deploying
generic
marketing
efforts

Ineffective marketing may have become standard, but continuing these practices may pose long-term brand risk for universities. Surveyed students were asked to provide freeform commentary on their experience with university recruiting.



A sentiment analysis conducted on responses revealed that over 90% of students expressed negative sentiment toward their university recruiting experience.

The primary reasons for this dissatisfaction include the lack of personalization, overwhelming volume of communications, and a feeling of repetitive, static content in response to student attempts to engage.



Here is an anonymized representative selection of student responses we've received.

Make sure you know what the student likes before bombarding them with emails for a school they won't exactly go to.

Student from Michigan, Male

Directly say scholarship/affordable options. I'm not interested until I know if I can pay for it in some aspect.

Student from Louisiana, Transgender

I would say that while spamming may seem like a good thing, it's just annoying to be the receiver of them. It makes sense to send emails if the student signed up for a search or visited the college. But constantly sending emails isn't going to get students to be attracted but rather turned off.

Student from North Carolina, Female

I very much dislike cold emails I like a more friendly and welcoming approach to even consider apply or thinking about that college

Student from North Carolina, Female

Please expand on certain programs and display more college achievements! Please send major specific emails rather than the college in general to target a more interested audience.

Student from New Jersey, Female



Emails with lots of links immediately feel like spam. Non person and non engaging content also feels like spam

Student from Illinois, Female

Perhaps to not send so many emails in a week. I get multiple from the same colleges whose past emails I haven't even read.

Student from Colorado, Female

Colleges should send emails or mail that include more information about the student population or campus life, instead of the usual facts that they usually include - some of which you could easily find online. Adding more specific fun facts about a school could make it more appealing to students and make them more motivated to apply to that school, instead of reading the same things repeatedly.

Student from Massachusetts, Female

Be more specific about programs that entice me to apply (certain majors or advertising online opportunities) rather than just "apply to us" "we are great" or trying to trick me into clicking an email. Keep the information in the emails relevant and switch it up so it isn't all the same. Maybe grow the relationship gradually with the student by switching up the topic of the email so that the student learns more and more each week about the school.

Student from Texas, Female

Mailing feel a bit more personal compared to email. While some mailings/emails include names most feel generic.

Student from Illinois, Male



Unless it is really unique it feels like spam. It decreases my opinion of colleges when they send emails every 2 days that have very similar information. I look at emails about events or surveys more. The emails with "get your free guide" feel the most like spam.

Student from Texas, Female

Give options for major-specific info. You get a lot of information on the school itself, but I feel it's harder to find out about specific programs.

Student from Ohio, Female



I preferred the letters than the emails. I liked to see all the different colleges that sent me mail and read a little about them. But it did get to the point where I would get them then just throw them away instantly. It just became too much and I wasn't interested in most of the schools that sent me mail.

All of the emails sent were annoying I'd say. There was just so much and it was overwhelming. There were 406 emails I received from colleges. And that was just from close to a year ago.

Ever since I completed the ACT it seemed like I would get spammed ten more emails from colleges everyday. I would only really be interested in the emails from the one college I want to go to. All the other emails were just spam and basically talked about the same thing. They all tried to tell me this certain college is where I should be and convince me they were the best.

They were all very similar. The one piece of mail I got that really stood out to me was a piece of mail that folded out to become a poster. It was unique and caught my attention rather than repeating what everyone else was already saying.

I think my opinion on these emails is just to not send as much. It overwhelmed me and just was annoying in my opinion. I don't think the emails helped me with my college search. I think the most it did was fill up my inbox.

Student from Kentucky, Female

While the fact that you are trying to reach out is appreciated, it's not very effective when all the mail is clearly identical for everyone except for the "insert name here" box where you put my name they you received from college board.

Student from Pennsylvania, Female

Thank you for providing me information about your college, but I wish it was more personalized.

Student from Texas, Female



Why me?

Student from South Carolina, Female

Emails/mail need to be personal. Each letter or mail seems like a formatted email that just auto-inserts a recipient's name instead of an actual unique letter sent to me for the sake of me. If I received a personal, unique letter, I would be more inclined to research the school and consider applying.

Student from Illinois, Male

Make mail more personalized, not just including name.

Student from Illinois, Male

It would be appreciated if the emails provided specific information about the college rather than just claiming that they would be a good fit for me.

Student from Virginia, Female

Some packages or emails aren't very original. They just repeat the same stuff. What makes you different from other colleges?

Student from Texas, Female

Send them in a more personalized way, not just mentioning my name at the beginning and formatting the email in such a way that it's obvious it was "copy-and-paste". While I understand it's easier to just send the same email to thousands of students, making the email seem more personal would definitely increase my attention span and make me more interested.

Student from Colorado, Female



Stick to your word; there is always a statement which says "We hate spam so we won't send many emails" but that never happens.

Student from Illinois, Female

Be more specific about why you're sending me the emails. Most do not relate to me at all

Student from California, Female



Find a way to engage me. Otherwise I just skim over and won't read anything.

Student from Virginia, Male

Mailing feel a bit more personal compared to email. While some mailings/emails include names most feel generic.

Student from Illinois, Male

Make the email more informative instead of being shallow with the information. Especially on the actual Mail because sometimes there are just a with random stats on there.

Student from North Carolina, Male

I would request that they do more research into who they are sending out to so they can better display and tailor their college's opportunities to the specific needs of students.

Student from Texas, Female

I think that the emails/mail could be tailored more to students interests. An email about a fantastic engineering program doesn't interest me but an interview with a political science student would. The first email I probably wouldn't even open. Also, I wish more schools were open about their financial aid in their emails/mail. I decided to apply to one school specifically because they sent me mail that detailed their extensive need-based aid program.

Additionally, I hate to see repetitive emails reminding me that it's almost application time and I tend to look at schools that send out those emails with disfavor.

Lastly, I like it when I receive an email that tells me a lot about a school's character. Shortly after the Supreme Court's affirmative action decision, one or two colleges sent out an email on their opinion of this decision and how they were adjusting the upcoming application season. This made me look favorably upon the schools because I learned we shared similar values.

Student from South Carolina, Female

On what basis are you actually reaching out for me for? I would like to know if this school is actually a good fit for me according to my preferences. And if it's just based on stats from high school, I would prefer to be more specific in what areas you are interested in.

Student from California, Male

I know it's hard and that you can't absolutely cater to everyone and personalize every single thing but sometimes it feels blatantly obvious that an email saying "You're Perfect For Our College!" or "We're a Good Match For You!" was sent to hundreds if not thousands. I once received an email from a College that said something about their diversity rate and the way it came across was more of "You will give us diversity!" making me feel like colleges only want me because I identify as Hispanic.

Student from Illinois, Female



There's little to no difference between them. You could replace the name of the college and it could fit in perfectly.

Student from Louisiana, Male

All of the mail/emails I've received felt vague. My priorities in a school when choosing whether or not it's a good fit for me are, in order: 1) Strength of academics/program I want to pursue; 2) Student body and highlighted extracurriculars; 3) Location; 4) Campus information. Cold emails/mail usually start their emails at steps 3 and 4, which doesn't make me want to do research on their school.

Student from Texas, Male



At least add my name and since most of these letters come from information my school had me fill out to be eligible for these emails/letters, tailor them to my interested degree. I don't care for information about sciences and engineering when I'm looking for a history degree.

Student from West Virginia, Female

Make it more personable and less like your trying to persuade that person. also be more specific and talk about programs at the school has to offer and how you can make me successful.

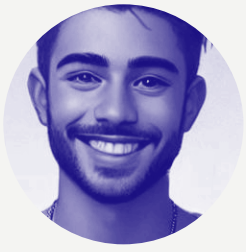
Student from Ohio, Male

I feel like most emails from colleges have the same format, so at times I feel less inclined to open them. I think that if colleges generated more attention grabbing newsletters and emails, they would stand out more in students' inboxes. And in turn, students would gravitate more towards learning about their colleges.

Student from Georgia, Female

Make the emails more helpful on admissions and make them less like advertisements - make them more personal and/or less spam-like.

Student from Virginia, Male



some emails seem incredibly impersonal, some schools send too many emails to the point where it becomes spam and I am less motivated to apply to their school.

Student from Texas, Male

I would tell colleges to make their emails/mail more specific to the student that receives the email. For example, a future engineering major will not want to receive emails/mail regarding the pre-medicine major.

Student from Arizona, Female

Since my interests were given through CollegeBoard's Student Search Service, at minimum please check that study in those interests are offered at your school.

Student from Pennsylvania, Male

I would say to add more things that make the mail seem personal. For example, I received mail written like a letter, and I think that touch made it much more interesting to look through.

Student from Louisiana, Female

If they were more personal, I believe that I would apply more attention to them instead of brushing the emails off and ignoring them.

Student from North Carolina, Female

I would say to make the emails more eye catching so they stand out from the rest- they all seem to have the same messages which make it not as interesting.

Student from California, Female

If colleges were to send emails to me that were valuable and contained information about how to apply or woffer events or webinars that would be helpful. However, most emails from colleges are all in the same format and all sound the same. They simply take up space in my mailbox.

Student from Texas, Female



My main problem with the emails and mail is that the topics are rarely important to me.

I love the first email that I get from a college since it lets me explore whether I'm interested in applying there, but they'll email me 20+ more times about the same scholarships that they're always emailing me about, campus news (which doesn't matter to me as I don't go there), or worse - the ones with subjects such as, "Are we reaching you, [name]?" As though they think I accidentally didn't see their first email. At that point, I feel the need to unsubscribe so that university leaves me alone.

(I've unsubscribed from about 20+ universities because I was getting up to 60 insignificant emails per day.)

Student from Texas, Female

I think the format of most emails/ mails are executed well; however, the colleges that are being sent to me are generally not in my criteria. I enjoy simple checklists when information is important, but pictures are also engaging to highlight other aspects such as the campus and student life. I think a mix of the two would be great.

Student from Georgia, Female

I would allow for a more personal feel to emails versus the standard "enter name here" model of emails that so many are accustomed to getting. Maybe reaching out to students who are interested in a certain field of study and target them with more information pertaining to that study.

Student from Tennessee, Female

I would rather have them research if I personally reached out and showed interest in the school.

Student from Illinois, Female



Some of the emails are the repeat of the same thing. If the college thinks that the student is a good fit then the email should be personalized

Student from New Jersey, Female

3.

Where do we
go from here?

A new
paradigm
for student
recruitment.

Given the ineffectiveness and potential harm of traditional marketing efforts, it is crucial to explore new strategies for student recruitment. Many students expressed frustration with superficial methods of personalization, requesting that colleges focus their efforts on providing relevant guidance on specific programs applicable to the student in question.

Those in higher education enrollment prior to the Internet can relate: personalization at the human level was possible with manageable prospect funnels.

Nowadays, with universities juggling hundreds of thousands of prospects at the top of their funnel, efforts to truly personalize are stymied by bandwidth issues and burnout. University brands are further harmed by the undifferentiated campaigns put together by enrollment marketing consulting firms that also direct the campaigns of their peer institutions.

Universities therefore have two choices:

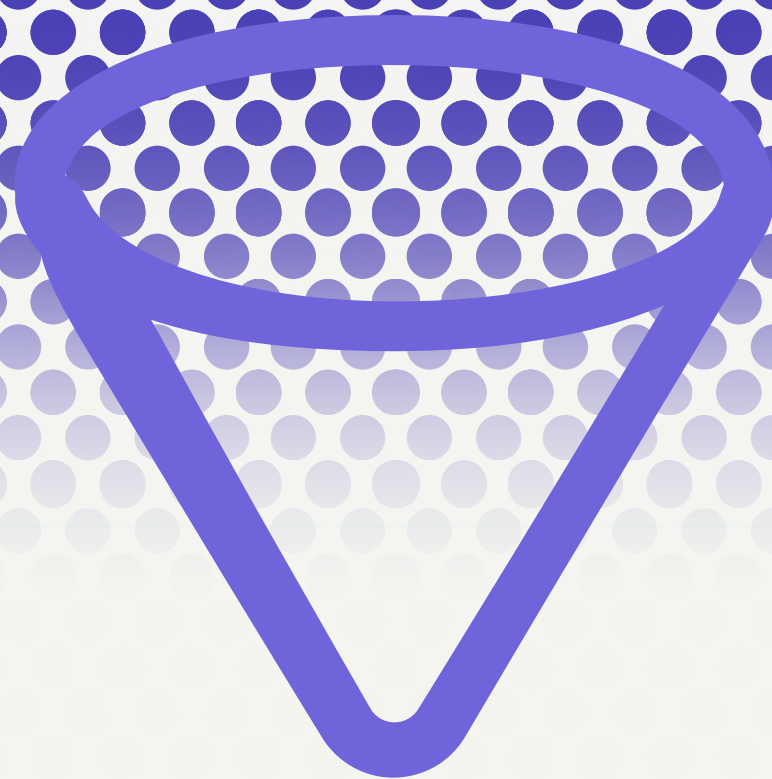
1. **Significantly reduce top of funnel volume to a manageable caseload for personalization**
2. **Find new ways to provide that truly white-glove personalization, at scale.**

When presented with these options, **many universities will see Choice 1 as a non-starter.**

Years of declining enrollment and unpredictable externalities like the disastrous FAFSA roll-out means most universities need the security of a very large top of funnel (hundreds of thousands of names). Whether or not these names truly provide security is another question, but Choice 1 is a hard sell.

Choice 2 is appealing in that it allows universities to maintain their large funnels, at least until they feel their enrollment and yield numbers are more predictable.

The challenge with Choice 2 is resourcing, both in human time as well as money. Hiring and training an additional five admissions officers to work top of funnel is a pipe dream for most schools who are struggling with high turnover rates, a dwindling supply of new employees, and repeated budget cuts.



Agentic artificial intelligence introduces novel opportunities for admissions offices to take advantage of — all for the benefit of the student.

By deploying AI agents that can digest vast amounts of data and retain long-tail memory about each student, universities can begin to return to their roots of truly personalized outreach to students.



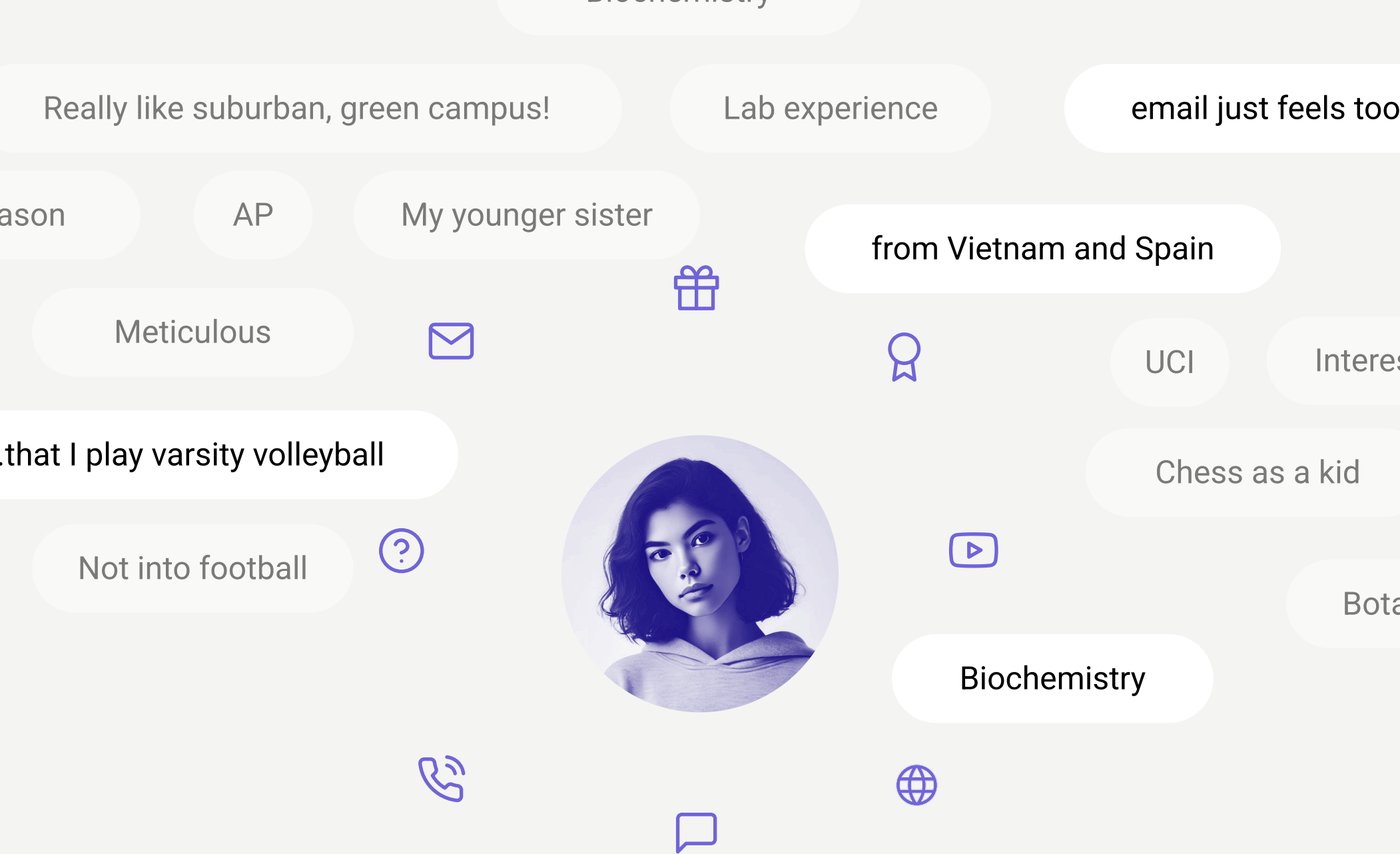
For example, AI can create dynamic and contextually relevant content tailored to each student's interests and academic goals, moving beyond generic email blasts to interactive, engaging communications. These AI systems can also adapt in real-time to students' interactions, providing a more responsive and tailored experience. Moreover,

AI can assist in identifying patterns and predicting student needs, enabling proactive engagement.

This means that instead of reacting to student inquiries, universities can anticipate questions and concerns, addressing them preemptively. Agentic, multimodal AI recruiters can offer 24/7 omni-channel support, providing immediate assistance and information, thus ensuring that students feel supported throughout their decision-making process.

In the near future, AI will revolutionize recruitment by shifting one-to-many marketing campaigns to one-to-one hyper-personalized activity. AI recruiters can handle end-to-end recruiting tasks such as live A/B testing campaign strategies, deploying winners, and iterating content based on performance. These recruiters can also integrate performance data and content creation tools, using their judgment to experiment with new content variations to drive better results.

Mild se



Ultimately, AI creates an opportunity to finally bring personalized marketing back in-house:

through an autonomous marketing team powered by AI recruiters. These recruiters can manage everything from prospect identification to individualized campaigns, optimizing each step of the recruitment process.

Imagine a world where universities define their ideal affinity events and recruiting spend against the top of their funnel, and the AI team handles the rest: from generating content to analyzing performance metrics across channels.

This level of automation and integration will enable universities to scale their personalized outreach efforts significantly, making it possible to maintain a high level of engagement with each prospective student and allowing the human admissions team to do what they do best: engaging students who have applied and are hoping to enroll.

Universities must embrace new strategies that prioritize personalization and meaningful engagement. By leveraging AI and digital technologies, institutions can transform their recruitment efforts and in turn, win back the trust of the students they're trying to recruit.



Appendix:

Report Methodology

The data for this report was collected through an anonymous survey of 3,009 high school students with CollegeVine accounts.

The survey included questions about the volume and nature of communications received from colleges, students' perceptions of these communications, and their impact on students' decision-making processes.

Sentiment Categorization

Keyword Identification

Positive Sentiment: Comments containing expressions of gratitude, appreciation, or positive feedback (e.g., "thank you", "appreciate").

Example: "Thank you for providing the information necessary to make decisions for my future."

Negative Sentiment: Comments containing complaints, requests for changes, or negative feedback (e.g., "don't", "stop", "spam", "annoying", "unnecessary").

Example: "I very much dislike cold emails. I like a more friendly and welcoming approach to even consider applying or thinking about that college."

Neutral Sentiment: Non-substantive or non-opinionated comments (e.g., "n/a", "none").

Example: "N/A"

Sentiment Classification

Each comment was evaluated to determine if it contained any of the predefined keywords for positive, negative, or neutral sentiments.

Comments with positive keywords were classified as Positive Sentiment.

Comments with negative keywords or suggestions for change were classified as Negative Sentiment.

Comments with neutral indicators were classified as Neutral Sentiment.

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Image use

We care about preserving the privacy of students who have participated in our survey. All images of students used in this report have been generated using AI, and do not represent real students.



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