EAB

Northern State University
2022 Market Perception Study

Executive Summary of Findings

Northern State University
2022 Market Perception Study

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Research Overview

Research Design and Execution

Northern State University contracted with EAB to survey high school students regarding their college search and perceptions of Northern State University. The survey was sent to high school sophomores and juniors in NSU's inquiry pool and senior inquiries who did not apply to NSU.

The survey was designed to identify:

1. Importance of selection criteria when making an application decision
2. Sources used for gathering information about colleges
3. Aided and unaided perceptions of NSU
4. Perceived characteristics of NSU and a set of peer institutions
5. Schools students are considering for application and why
6. Assessment of NSU on criteria of importance to students

Survey responses were collected between March 29, 2022, and May 17, 2022.

Research Overview

Delivery and Response Results

NSU provided the list of student inquiries for the study. The audience included high school sophomores and juniors in NSU's inquiry pool and senior inquiries who did not apply to NSU.

Records sent survey invitation by email	40,584
Undeliverable email messages	615
Deliverable email messages	39,969
Responders*	739

* The minimum sample size needed to attain a 95% confidence level is 381.

Potential survey participants were sent a personal email message from University Research Partners inviting them to participate in the study. NSU was identified as the sponsor of the study in the email, which included a link to the online survey. Nonresponders were sent email reminders. The email schedule is presented below.

Initial email invitation sent	March 29, 2022
First reminder sent to incompletes and nonresponders	April 3, 2022
Second reminder sent to incompletes and nonresponders	April 7, 2022
Third reminder sent to incompletes and nonresponders	April 12, 2022
Fourth reminder sent to incompletes and nonresponders	April 20, 2022
Fifth reminder sent to incompletes and nonresponders	April 25, 2022
Sixth reminder sent to incompletes and nonresponders	May 5, 2022
Final reminder sent to incompletes and nonresponders	May 11, 2022

Study Participants

Sample size = 739

- 54% seniors, 32% juniors, 15% sophomores

- 62% female, 34% male, 4% other

- 81% are Caucasian

  13% are Asian

  6% are African American

  6% are Native American

  3% are Hispanic/Latinx/o/a

- 13% will be first-generation college students

- 13% from lower-income households ($60,000 or less)

  24% from middle-income households ($60,001–$120,00)

  24% from high-income households ($120,001 or more)

  39% did not know their household income

- 26% are South Dakota residents

- 70% have earned college credit while in high school

- 13% have taken an E-Learning course from NSU

Study Participants

Map of Survey Participants

Northern State Market Perception Study - Responders

Frequency
22

1

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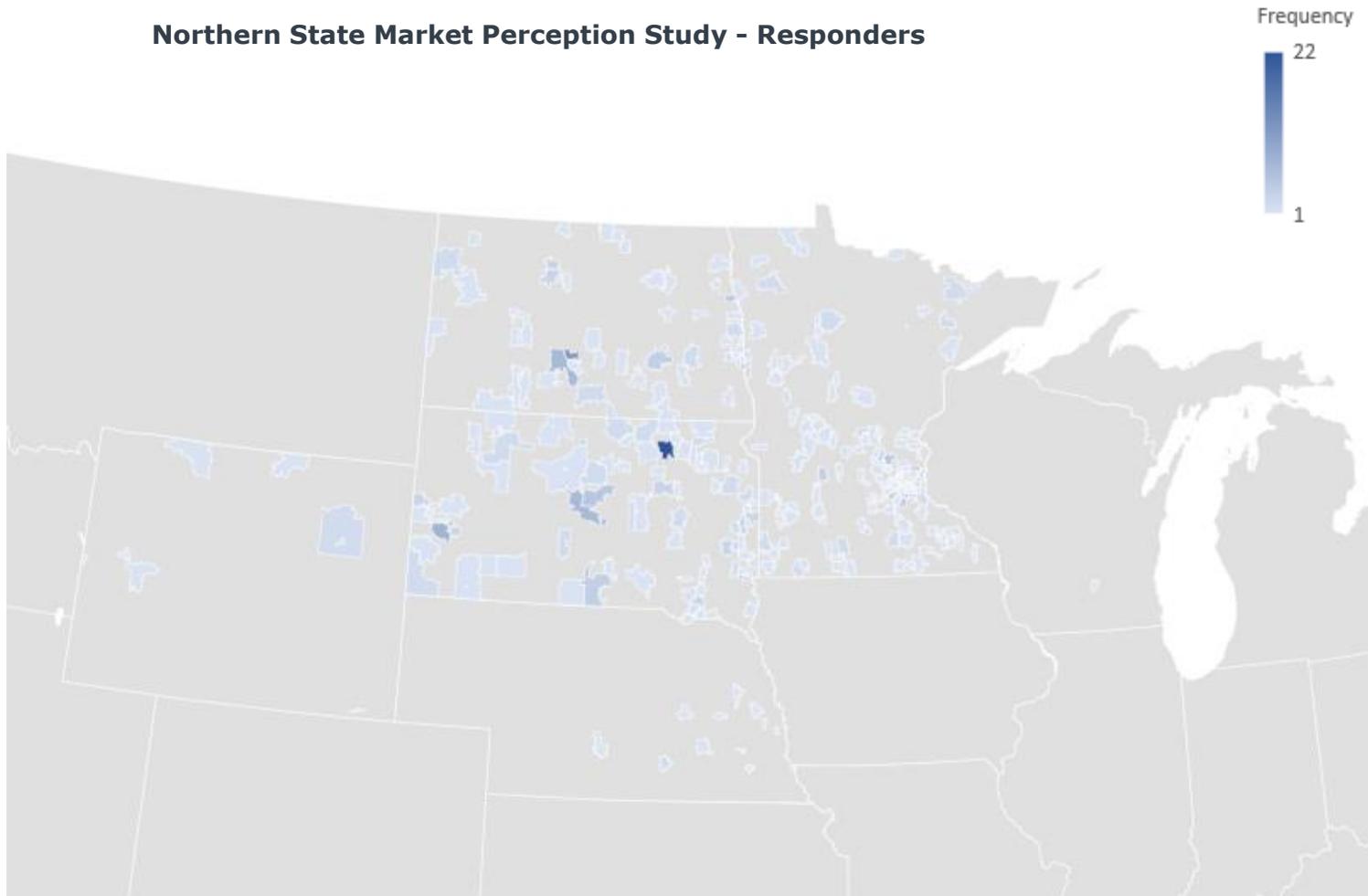
Key Findings

Perceptions of NSU

Participants were asked to select 5 characteristics (from a list of 38) that best represent NSU. The table on the right displays the 10 most frequently selected characteristics by high school class.

Highlights in the table indicate that, across all class years, students associate affordable, small, friendly, welcoming, safe, and athletics with NSU. There is some overlap in perceptions between seniors and juniors (practical and fun), seniors and sophomores (supportive and career-oriented), and juniors and sophomores (well-known and fun).

The line graph displays differences by state of residence. Students from South Dakota were more likely to think NSU is small and well-known. While we examined differences by the geographic markets identified by NSU officials, the sub-sample sizes were too small to highlight significant differences. These results, however, are included in the Appendix of findings.

Recommendation: Note which characteristics resonate most with each student group. Is this how the institution wants to be perceived? Are results consistent with current messaging? Are there misperceptions that need to be addressed by University communications?

Characteristics Used to Describe NSU

Seniors	Juniors	Sophomores
Affordable	Affordable	Affordable
Small	Small	Welcoming
Friendly	Friendly	Friendly
Welcoming	Athletics	Well-known
Safe	Welcoming	Athletics
Athletics	Safe	Small
Practical	Well-known	Supportive
Supportive	Fun	Career-oriented
Career-oriented	Rural	Diverse
Fun	Practical	Safe
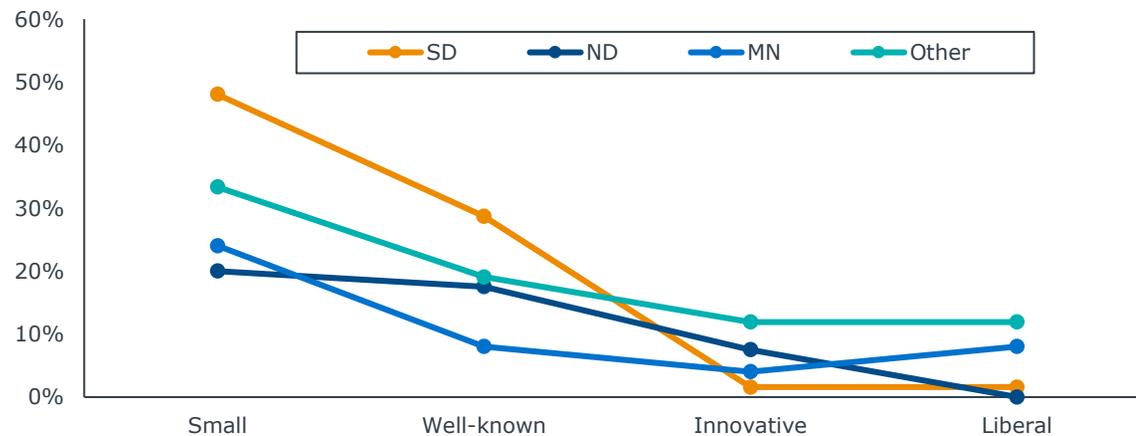
Perceptions of NSU on Importance Criteria

Participants were asked to indicate the relative importance of key characteristics when making their enrollment decision. For each characteristic, students were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree each characteristic describes NSU. The matrix on the right includes sophomore and junior inquiries but excludes senior non-applicants.

The characteristics outlined in blue are those factors participants also believe represent value.

Recommendation: Focus on the characteristics in the bottom right quadrant and determine areas where NSU may want/need to strengthen perceptions. Think in terms of messaging for both prospective first-time freshmen and those who influence them and can help promote NSU. Use proof points to help strengthen communications, for example, alumni stories that highlight successful job placement and internships.

Scales
Importance:

1 = not at all important, 2 = slightly important,
3 = moderately important,
4 = very important, 5 = extremely important

Rating:

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree,
3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat agree,
5 = strongly agree

Lower Importance/Higher Ranking   **Higher Importance/Higher Ranking**

Sophomore and Juniors

Students "strongly agree" these characteristics represent NSU

Dual credits

Play sports

Timely completion

Welcoming   Safe

Close to home   Online option   Faculty attention   Affordable

Clubs/activities   Financial assistance

Support svcs   Availability courses

Academic rep   Respected by employers

Variety majors

Internships   Job placement

Students "somewhat agree" these characteristics represent NSU

Lower Importance/Lower Ranking   **Higher Importance/Lower Ranking**

Perceptions of NSU on Importance Criteria

Participants rated NSU similarly on most characteristics presented. The graphs to the right display the significant differences by key demographics.

Juniors rated NSU higher for being close to home, the availability of online courses, and the ability to earn dual/college credits in high school than did seniors or sophomores.

Students taking E-Learning courses from NSU rated NSU higher for being close to home, the availability of online courses, and the ability to earn dual/college credits in high school than did students not taking E-Learning courses at NSU.

Students who have earned college credit while attending high school rated NSU higher for being close to home; however, students who have not earned dual credits rated NSU higher for internship opportunities, academic reputation, support services, being respected by employers, and availability of clubs/activities.

Rating Scale:

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree,
3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat agree,
5 = strongly agree

Chart 1 — Seniors / Juniors / Sophomores

Criteria	Seniors	Juniors	Sophomores
Close to home	3.09	3.88	3.45
Online courses	3.46	3.85	3.59
Dual credits in HS	3.59	4.23	3.75

Chart 2 — E-Learning / Non-E-Learning

Criteria	E-Learning	Non-E-Learning
Close to home	3.92	3.41
Online courses	4.03	3.51
Dual credits in HS	4.43	3.70

Chart 3 — Dual Credit / No Dual Credit

Criteria	Dual Credit	No Dual Credit
Internships	3.37	3.75
Academic reputation	3.41	3.72
Support services	3.50	3.80
Respected by employers	3.50	3.82
Clubs/activities	3.56	3.88
Close to home	3.72	3.29

College Choice: Types of Schools

Students were asked what types of schools they are considering at this time. They were asked about both geographic location and institution type. Most students indicated they want to stay within their home state or near their home state. Students from South Dakota were more likely to want to stay closer to home than students from other states.

The majority of students are considering public institutions. Sophomores, juniors, and non-first-generation students were more likely to be considering public institutions, like NSU, than were their counterparts.

Sophomores, juniors, and students who have not received dual credits were more likely to consider online options than seniors or students who have earned dual credits.

Sophomores and juniors, students from South Dakota and North Dakota, and students from lower-income households were more likely to consider two-year schools than their counterparts.

Geographic Location of Schools Considering

Location	Percentage
Commuting distance	32%
Beyond commuting but within 200 miles	39%
Home state	52%
Near home state	48%
Far from home	29%
Outside the country	13%
Online programs	11%
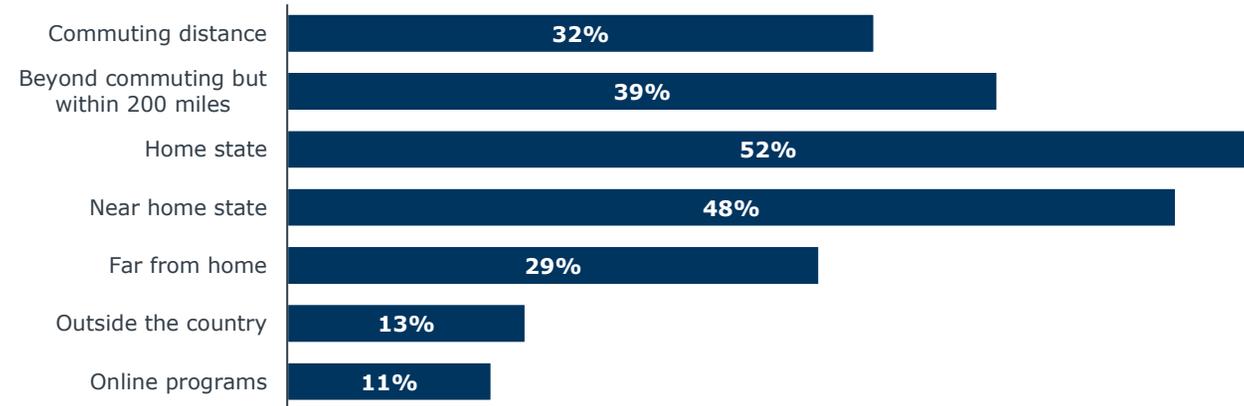
Institution Type Considering

Type	Percentage
Public	86%
Private	53%
In-state	51%
Out-of-state	51%
Large research	32%
Small liberal arts	19%
Two-year schools	17%
Religiously affiliated	15%
Online	7%

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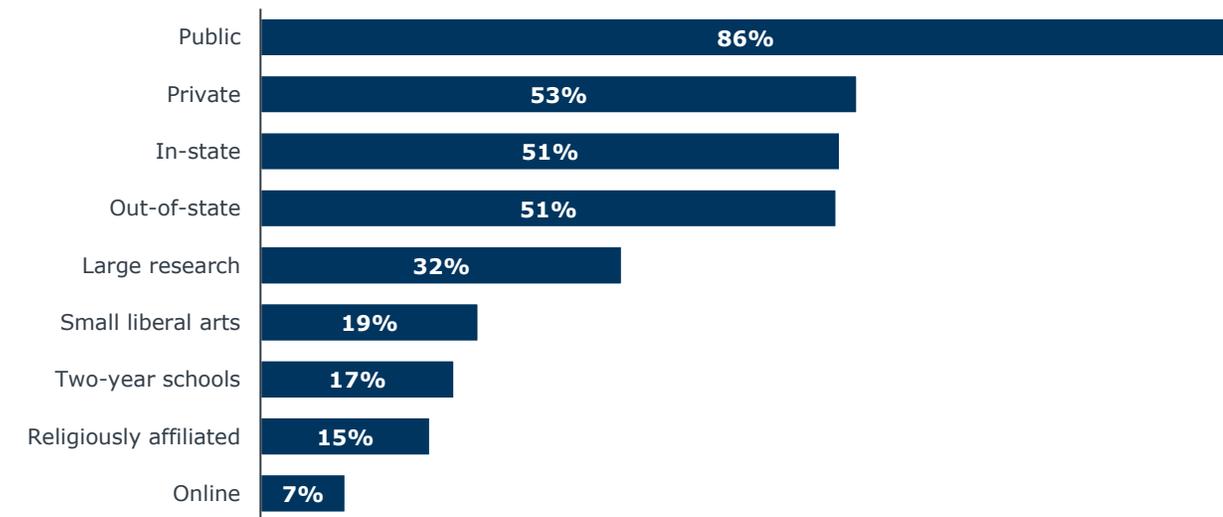
Familiarity with NSU and Peers/Competitors

Students were asked to indicate their familiarity with a set of seven schools—NSU and six peers/competitors identified by NSU officials. Among all schools in this competitive set, South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota were selected by the greatest number of students as the institutions with which they had a medium or high familiarity.

Overall, just over one-third of students indicated a medium or high familiarity with NSU. However, if you look at juniors and sophomores, more than half of the students are familiar with NSU. Students from South Dakota and students taking an E-Learning course from NSU have the highest levels of familiarity with NSU.

Recommendation: NSU ranked third overall in terms of students' familiarity. These findings show opportunity for NSU to strengthen its outreach with prospective students to increase awareness of the institution. When compared with other perception studies we have done over the past five years involving schools' inquiry pools, the percentage of students who indicated familiarity with NSU is on the low side. Typically, we see results in the range of 56%–65% with medium or high familiarity for mid-sized schools, public institutions, and schools located in the Midwest.

Familiarity with NSU and Selected Peers
Percentages denote participants with a medium or high familiarity with the school

MN State Moorhead: Seniors 40%, Juniors 37%, Sophomores 32%
South Dakota State: Seniors 39%, Juniors 70%, Sophomores 67%
U of South Dakota: Seniors 30%, Juniors 56%, Sophomores 51%
Northern State: Seniors 20%, Juniors 62%, Sophomores 50%
U of Sioux Falls: Seniors 19%, Juniors 32%, Sophomores 29%
Black Hills State: Seniors 11%, Juniors 32%, Sophomores 26%
Lake Area Technical: Seniors 8%, Juniors 30%, Sophomores 26%

Legend: Seniors | Juniors | Sophomores

NSU: E-Learning 89%, Non-E-Learning 31%
SDSU: E-Learning 82%, Non-E-Learning 50%
USD: E-Learning 70%, Non-E-Learning 39%
Lake Area: E-Learning 55%, Non-E-Learning 12%
BHSU: E-Learning 39%, Non-E-Learning 17%
USF: E-Learning 31%, Non-E-Learning 24%
MN State: E-Learning 14%, Non-E-Learning 43%

Legend: E-Learning | Non-E-Learning

SDSU: SD 86%, ND 44%, MN 45%, Other 31%
USD: SD 75%, ND 30%, MN 31%, Other 25%
NSU: SD 72%, ND 37%, MN 17%, Other 34%
BHSU: SD 50%, ND 16%, MN 2%, Other 21%
Lake Area: SD 46%, ND 12%, MN 6%, Other 9%
USF: SD 40%, ND 9%, MN 25%, Other 14%
MN State: SD 19%, ND 60%, MN 55%, Other 6%

Legend: SD | ND | MN | Other

Reputation of NSU and Peers/Competitors

Students were asked to indicate the school they thought was "the best" in four categories. Students selected South Dakota State as having the best academic reputation, best value, best student/campus life, and best career preparation.

Recommendation: These findings show opportunities for NSU to focus messaging to ensure that prospective students see proof points of reputation, value, a vibrant campus life, and career preparation for enrolled students. Prospective students need to be able to envision themselves on campus, and this can be done by asking current students to share their student/campus experiences in personal narratives of interest to prospective students.

It is important to note the high percentage of students who indicated they didn't know which school was the best for each characteristic. This highlights a gap in communication for all institutions and one that NSU could capitalize on with a strong messaging campaign.

Schools Identified as Best Representing Key Characteristics

	Best Academic Reputation		Best Value		Best Student/ Campus Life		Best Career Preparation	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
South Dakota State University	91	22.4%	57	14.1%	90	22.2%	63	15.6%
University of South Dakota	47	11.6%	29	7.2%	49	12.1%	40	9.9%
Minnesota State University Moorhead	44	10.8%	38	9.4%	31	7.7%	20	4.9%
Northern State University	33	8.1%	30	7.4%	27	6.7%	20	4.9%
Black Hills State University	12	3.0%	20	4.9%	18	4.4%	7	1.7%
Lake Area Technical College	6	1.5%	34	8.4%	7	1.7%	27	6.7%
University of Sioux Falls	6	1.5%	7	1.7%	8	2.0%	5	1.2%
Don't know/Can't say	167	41.1%	190	46.9%	175	43.2%	223	55.1%

Top-Choice Schools

Students were asked what institutions they are considering at this time. The top table on this page displays the schools selected by 28 or more students.

Several of the institutions included in this list—SDSU, USD, Black Hills State, and Lake Area Technical—were identified by NSU officials as peer/competitor institutions.

The top-choice schools selected by students from South Dakota were more closely aligned with NSU's self-identified peer set.

*Schools included in the peer set selected by NSU officials.

Schools Students Are Considering

Full Sample	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice	Total
University of Minnesota Twin Cities	53	35	26	114
South Dakota State University*	43	24	17	84
North Dakota State University - Fargo	34	16	8	58
Northern State University	21	21	16	58
University of South Dakota*	21	18	19	58
University of North Dakota	22	17	15	54
Black Hills State University*	12	17	9	38
University of Minnesota Duluth	16	11	7	34
Minnesota State University Mankato	8	11	9	28
Lake Area Technical College*	13	8	7	28

Seniors	Juniors	Sophomores
U of M Twin Cities	SDSU*	SDSU*
NDSU - Fargo	NSU	UND
U of M Duluth	USD*	NSU
UND	Black Hills State*	NDSU – Fargo
SDSU*	U of M Twin Cities	USD*

| Students from South Dakota |
|---|
| SDSU* |
| USD* |
| NSU |
| Black Hills State* |
| Lake Area Technical* |

Application and Enrollment Decision Criteria

Students were asked why they selected a school as their first choice. Findings illuminate what is important to students when selecting a college for application and/or enrollment.

The characteristics students selected most frequently are similar to what we have seen in other studies; location, availability of major, and fit are frequently selected as top reasons for enrolling at a specific institution. The top three reasons are the same reasons selected by students who choose NSU as a first choice.

Recommendation: These findings highlight more communication opportunities for NSU. It is important to ensure that available majors are easily found on your website. They need to be displayed in a way that is intuitive for both students and parents. Highlight any opportunities available to students due to NSU's location in Aberdeen. Get as many students as possible to visit campus so they can picture themselves as part of the campus community. For students who may be unable to visit, an interactive virtual tour can be a great alternative to an in-person campus visit.

What makes XXX your first-choice school?
(Select all that apply.)

Criteria	Percentage
Location	68.7%
Availability of major	68.5%
Fit and feel	63.5%
Academic	59.5%
Size	54.5%
Job placement	44.3%
Affordability	41.2%
Scholarships	38.5%
Reputation of faculty	37.3%
Prestige	35.6%
Internships	33.0%
Research opps	32.7%
Financial aid	31.0%
Friends attended	30.1%
Students like me	28.5%
Timely completion	28.4%
Family members…	25.3%
Diversity	24.6%
Athletics	19.1%
Dual credits	13.9%
Recruited by coach	4.7%

Assessment of Value

Participants were asked to share their assessment of the value of education. Students were presented with a list of 22 characteristics and asked to think about college costs and what they get for the price they pay. They had the opportunity to select up to 5 characteristics that best represented the value of education for them. The table on the right displays the characteristics selected by 15% or more of students surveyed.

Outcomes—jobs, experiential learning, career services, and grad school placement—were selected most frequently. The choice was followed by affordability (financial aid and moderate tuition prices), fit (safety, finding friends, faculty, and clubs/ activities), and academics (comprehensive programs, name recognition, study abroad, accreditation, and academic facilities).

Recommendation: Be as specific as possible when communicating value. Rather than speaking in broad terms (e.g., NSU is a great value), use concrete and specific proof points that address the characteristics most students value.

What Students Value by Student Type

Successful job placement upon graduation	53.5%
Safe campus and surrounding area	40.2%
Moderate tuition prices	30.9%
Internships, co-ops, and other active-learning experiences	30.5%
Generous financial aid awards	28.2%
Finding friends for life	27.2%
Strong career services	26.9%
Comprehensive set of academic programs	22.5%
Successful graduate school placement upon graduation	22.2%
Strong name recognition	18.8%
Completing a program in a timely manner	18.8%
Opportunities to study abroad	18.3%
Accredited programs	17.4%
Modern, state-of-the-art academic facilities	17.0%
Developing strong relationships with faculty/mentors	16.5%
Variety of student clubs and organizations	16.1%

Focused Messaging

1. Outcomes
2. Affordability
3. Fit
4. Academics

Communication Opportunities

Students were asked what sources of information they had used during their college search. Web-related sources were indicated most frequently by all students, regardless of demographics.

The table on the right displays the sources selected by 15% or more of the students surveyed.

Recommendation: Sources that can be controlled by NSU—its website, email, mail, and campus visits—are sources that are being used by the majority of students. NSU can influence other frequently used sources—college search sites and web searches—by ensuring accurate information is shared with the search sites and that the institution has a strong SEO/SEM program. NSU can also influence parents/family members by having a robust parent communication stream that starts early in a student's high school career. Our research has consistently shown that a robust, user-friendly website is critically important to recruitment and enrollment efforts. Both students and parents have reported they will remove a school from their consideration set if the institution does not have a good website—their go-to source of information.

What sources of information have you used in your college search?
(Select all that apply.)

Source	Percentage
College websites	70.8%
Email	59.4%
Family	57.8%
Friends/classmates	57.4%
Web searches	56.7%
Mail	54.6%
College search sites	52.1%
Campus visits	51.3%
Counselors	45.2%
Social media	43.0%
Teachers/coaches	43.0%
College fair	36.3%
Info session	30.3%
Alumni	26.9%
Rankings	21.5%
Text messages	15.1%
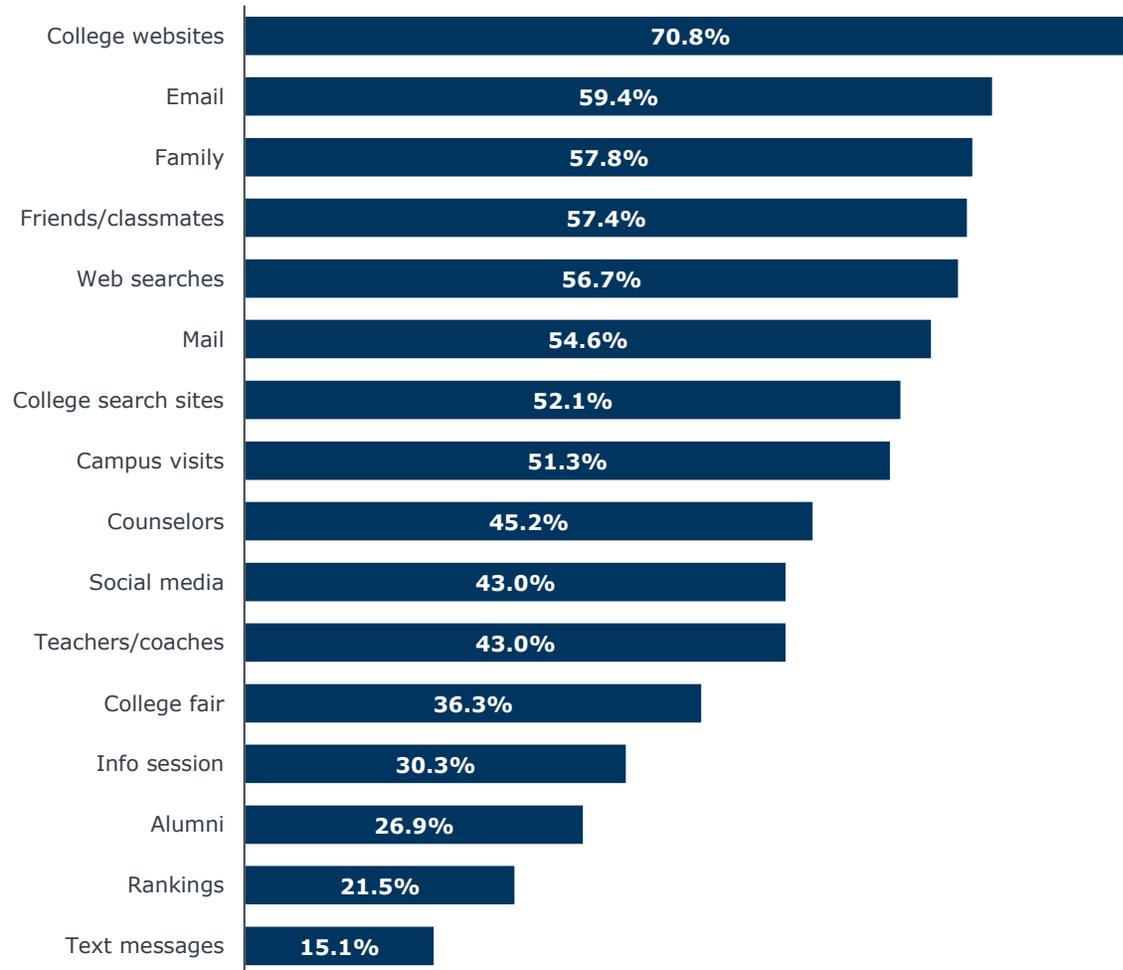
Recommendations

Recommendations for Messaging

Findings from the study should be used to help inform the communications efforts with prospective students and the audiences that influence them.

1. **Identify the current perceptions students have of NSU.** Which of the characteristics that students used to describe NSU are ones you want to highlight? Are there any misperceptions that need to be addressed? Are there perceptions that are accurate that shouldn't be highlighted? Use these findings to help audit your communications with students, parents, and counselors.

2. **Identify areas for improvement.** Use the matrix on page 9 to help identify areas where you may need to strengthen messaging. Put energy and resources into the areas that are important to students and where NSU may not be rated as highly as you would like.

3. **Help define value for students and their families.** Use the findings on page 16 to consider what students find valuable. Use proof points from student experiences to highlight the value metrics of greatest importance to your prospects. Consider using current students or young alumni to highlight career success or unique internship opportunities. Keep the content fresh and representative of students with different profiles so more students can make a connection with NSU.

Recommendations for Messaging

4. **Help students envision their matriculation to NSU.** Students crave (and respond positively to) authentic content. Consider using personal stories/experiences from current students and young alumni regarding their experiences at NSU. Encourage campus visits early and provide alternatives for students who cannot travel to Aberdeen to visit campus.

5. **Communicate with students and parents via their preferred communication channels.** Gen Z is used to having information at their fingertips and available when they want it. Being proactive about sharing the information they have indicated is important to them is imperative for getting that first inquiry, but you also need to keep them engaged and have information easily accessible. Recent website user testing research we have conducted showed students will get frustrated if they can't easily find the information they are seeking. They may abandon your website and Google their question and take the first response they see as the truth, or they could abandon searching for information about the institution altogether. Consider conducting usability testing of your website by enlisting the help of high school students (children of staff members perhaps?) and ask them to perform simple functions on your website. Can they accomplish them easily? Are you able to use testing to see what communications are resonating with students? Testing key search terms can also help direct your efforts. Consistently audit your content in all communication channels to make sure your message is resonating with its intended audiences.

The following slides include findings from national surveys we have done with students, parents, and high school counselors and can be used as a guide for your communications along with the findings from your Market Perception Study.

Recommendations

Communication Tactics

Prospective Students

EAB has conducted research on students' communication preferences since 2010. The following bullet points highlight the latest findings from 15,291 high school students surveyed in February/March 2021.

- Sources that more than half of the students are using when gathering information about a school: emails, parents/family members, web searches, friends, college websites, college search sites, and letters from colleges

- Sources that are most helpful to students: parents/family members, emails, web searches, websites, and college search sites

- Content that students prefer: personalized content, infographics with details about costs and outcomes, and videos about campus life

- Information sought during searches on institutional websites: majors/minors offered, information about costs and admission requirements, and general information about your institution

- General web search strategies students use: academic programs, a school name, the "best" (e.g., the best school in NE), and geographic location

- Social media most students use: YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Spotify, and TikTok. However, they are most likely to interact with a school on Instagram.

- Students are becoming more receptive to receiving text messages from schools, especially if the text is deadline-driven or in response to a question the student asked.

- When they receive information from schools, students are most interested in hearing from the admission office, current students, or a financial aid representative.

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Communication Tactics

Parents of Prospective Students

EAB has conducted research on parents' communication preferences since 2010. The following bullet points highlight the latest findings from 2,530 parents of high school students surveyed in March/April 2020. A report from EAB's 2022 national study of parents will be available this summer (July 2022).

- Top concerns for parents: costs, debt, and enrolling their child at a school that is a good fit

- Sources that are most helpful to parents: websites, web searches, and campus visits

- Information sought during searches on institutional websites: majors/minors offered, information about costs and admission requirements, and general information about your institution

- More than half of parents have discovered a school they had not previously considered for their child through web or voice search

- General web search strategies parents use: academic programs, geographic region, and a school name

- Social media most parents use: Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube; they are most likely to interact with a school on Facebook

- Most parents think colleges and universities should communicate directly with parents.

- Information parents want most from colleges: costs, scholarships, admission requirements, and majors/minors

Communication Tactics

High School Counselors

EAB conducts an annual study of high school counselors. The following bullet points highlight the latest findings from 810 high school counselors surveyed in November 2021.

Counselors want to be your allies, so make sure they have clear and timely information. Counselors from EAB's latest study suggested:

- Summarizing information about application deadlines, financial aid/scholarship deadlines, and your notification timeline (and perhaps providing early notice about admission decisions, particularly if none of the applicants from a school are being offered a place in the class)

- Repurposing internal communications and sharing them with counselors, especially when unfortunate things happen on campus

- Maintaining virtual opportunities that were created when students and families could not visit campus

- Providing additional clarity around your testing policy, especially when students are applying to a particular program and/or scholarship (if applicable)

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ABOUT EAB

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