Communicating with Parents of Prospective Students

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Who are today's parents?

Before you put together a communications plan for parents, it's important to know who they are. While parents differ by geographic region and socioeconomic factors, there are some generalizations and trends to keep in mind.

They're older than they were before

The average age for first-time moms increased from 21 years old to 25 between 1970 and 2006.[1] For today's incoming freshmen, that means mom is around 42 years old — and that's for the first kid. For later kids, mom (and, presumably, dad) are even older.

More women are also waiting until 35 or later to have their first child, which means you're seeing more and more parents in their 50s and even 60s.[2] It's not an exaggeration to say that yesterday's grandparents are today's parents.

While this trend of parents having kids later in life started to level off after 2010, it is still on the rise, which means you will likely continue to see these older parents for years to come.

"You can look at the IP addresses. We can actually see 10-15% of the applications were completed by the parent. This is going to increase. The parent is driving the college search process. You need to be recruiting the whole family because they're part of this as well."
– Joe Madigan – Director of Recruitment Outreach at Florida Southern University

They're (much) more involved

Hear that whirring sound? Those are the "helicopter" parents descending on your campus — always hovering and ready to swoop in at a moment's notice to take care of whatever their kid might need.

Unlike parents of incoming students from Gen X and earlier generations, many of today's parents are accustomed to handling every detail of their kid's life — a habit that often continues through high school and college. Parents are contacting colleges on behalf of their kids (90% admit to this) and are even completing applications for them (62% say they've done it).[3]

1   Mathews TJ, Hamilton BE. Delayed childbearing: More women are having their first child later in life. NCHS data brief, no 21. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2009.

2   Mathews and Hamilton, NCHS

3   Ruffalo Noel Levitz, NRCCUA, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive (2017). *2017 e-expectations trend report.* Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Available at www.RuffaloNL.com/Eexpectations

They're anxious, worried, and nervous

Even if a parent already has a child in college, the college search process is a very emotional time for everyone involved. Parents have spent the past 15 – 17 years doing everything for their kid, from driving carpool to "just helping" with their science fair project. Now, parents feel that it's time — finally — for all of the blood, sweat, and tears (and money!) they've invested to pay off.

The truth is that most students will still have a successful life even if they don't get into their first-choice college. But parents still feel that the "right" college can make or break everything they (and their kids) have worked for up to this point. It's a lot of pressure for kids and parents, not to mention the social pressure as neighbors, friends, and coworkers brag about where their kids are going to school.

How do you help alleviate this anxiety and make the process less intimidating? Start by telling parents what to expect and finding ways to help them gain some control over the process. For example, by communicating with parents of lower-income households (whether through email, text, or phone calls), you can help them navigate the controversial and often volatile verification process for federal aid.

> As you talk with parents, keep reminding yourself that their child is leaving them, often for the first time. While you see this happening every day as part of your job, these parents are living it firsthand, often over the course of a year (or more). It really is a gut-wrenching experience.
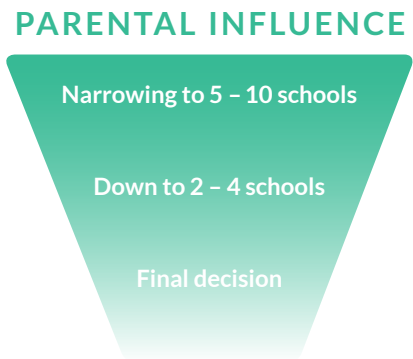
Why communicate with parents?

Due to their crucial influence over a family's decision-making process, parents can help you make your class. Here are a few things you may not know about parent involvement.

PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Narrowing to 5 – 10 schools

Down to 2 – 4 schools

Final decision

> **Parents are, by far, the most important influencers for prospective students** — more than current students at your school, your admissions counselors, or any other group.[4]

> **Parents are especially important influencers at the beginning of the process,** playing a major role in determining which schools a student should consider.[5] However, they start to lose influence at the end of the process.

> **You can improve your academic profile by communicating with parents,** since parents of good students are even more involved in choosing the right school. "As students' academic ability goes up, so does parental involvement in the college search."[6]

> **There is also a correlation between deposits and parent involvement.** "Students who provide their parents' email addresses when they inquire are 45% more likely to apply and persist through to deposit."[7]

Parents have more influence in the beginning of the process, but many schools don't collect their information until the application phase. Look for ways to get parent information as early as possible.

When we talk about "parents," that often includes grandparents, high school counselors, coaches, and other trusted adults in a student's life.

4   Influencing the Influencer: Connecting with the Parents of Prospective Students. Higher Education Marketing. Available at:
     http://www.higher-education-marketing.com/blog/influencing-influencer-connecting-prospective-student-parent

5   Ball J, Cheney L, Nelson J. Engaging Parents in the College Choice Process:
     Effective Parent Communication Strategies. IACAC conference 2014

6   Ball, Cheney and Nelson, Engaging Parents

7   Ball, Cheney and Nelson, Engaging Parents

What are the most effective strategies for communicating with parents?

To paraphrase Aretha Franklin, all parents are asking for is a little respect. By speaking directly to them — and giving them the information they need — you can show that you understand and respect them.

Give parents their own space

Parents want communications and events that are targeted directly to them. These can include:

> **Emails specifically for parents**

> **A parents' section of your website**

> **A letter from the president to the parent when their student is admitted**

> **Parent-specific events** (including financial aid appointments and parent sessions at experience days)

If you're not addressing parents directly, they may not feel like they're welcome in the admissions process (and presumably future processes) at your institution. Give parents an experience that's in line with the hands-on approach they've had raising their kids.

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Be open about the fact that you're talking directly to them

Most parents don't want to pretend they're a student, whether they're on your website or talking with you on the phone. As a parent, they see it as their job to help their child. If you make them feel like they're sneaking around to get information, you might make it seem like they're not meant to be part of the process in the first place. Don't try to hide the information you're sharing with parents, or the fact that you're communicating with them.

Remember that parents might also read everything sent directly to the student

"Always keep parents in mind, even for what you might presume to be student material."[8] While parents want their own emails, texts, and website pages, they may also want to know what you're telling their kid — and if the stories match up. It's perfectly fine (and often recommended) to have a different tone and style for your student versus parent communications, but make sure your messages are consistent across the board.

When should you communicate with parents?

Because parents are more influential early in the process, it's important to start engaging with them early.

TALK TO PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHEN THEY HAVE THE MOST INFLUENCE

SOPHOMORE

JUNIOR

SENIOR
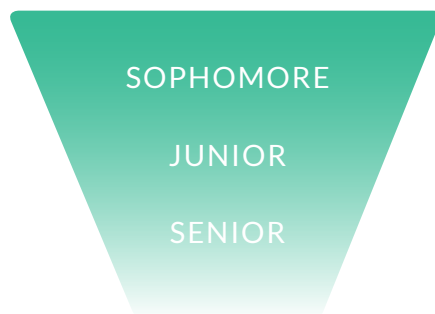
Even though sophomores and juniors may not be thinking about college, their parents are — and they have more influence early in the process.

Talking with parents sooner rather than later lets you:

> **Build connections** at a time when parents are typically most excited about the process

> **Gain the undivided attention of parents** at a time when there is less noise, which makes it a good time to share information about costs and other parent priorities[9]

There are still plenty of opportunities to talk with parents of seniors. For example, when it's deposit time, ask parents of admitted students if their child is likely to submit a deposit, and then help them take the next step. At Xavier University, if a parent said "yes" to depositing, they received instructions for submitting a deposit; if a parent said "maybe," Xavier asked them what additional information they needed to support their child.[10]

9   Ruffalo Noel Levitz, *2017 e-expectations*
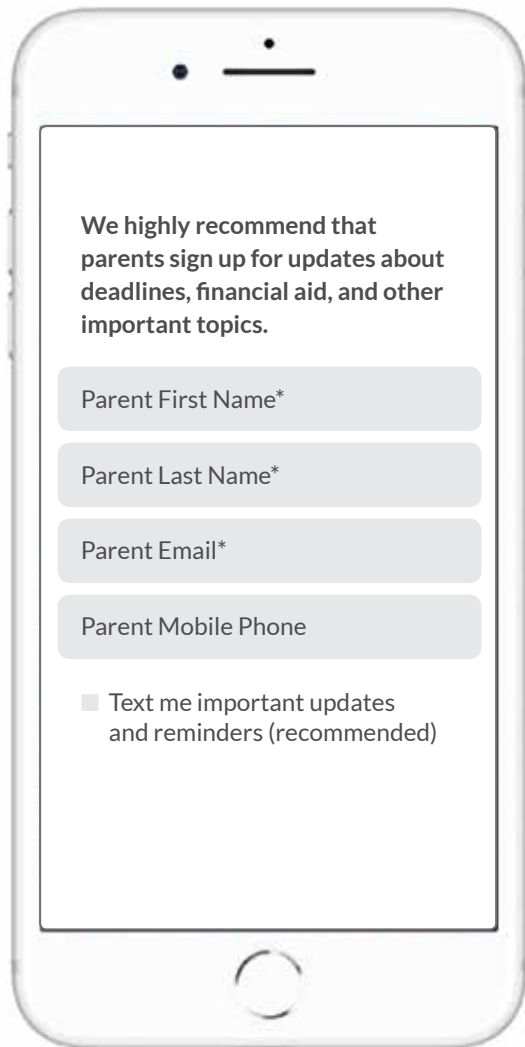10   Ball, Cheney and Nelson, Engaging Parents

How do you get contact information for parents?

In order to have an effective communications strategy for parents, you have to be able to differentiate between a student's information and their parents' information. Step 1? Make sure you're collecting parents' information separately.

We highly recommend that parents sign up for updates about deadlines, financial aid, and other important topics.

Parent First Name*

Parent Last Name*

Parent Email*

Parent Mobile Phone

☐ Text me important updates and reminders (recommended)

Make sure your RFI form is mobile-friendly

Parents may not be as tech-savvy as their kids, but many of them (up to one third) are still completing a Request For Information form on a mobile device.[11]

Train your staff to collect parent information at every touchpoint

You're probably already collecting parent information at campus visits. But what about if a parent calls your school or sends you an email? Look for every opportunity to capture their email address and phone number.

Don't rely on students to give out parent information

"If you're looking to get parent information, you need to ask the parents."[12] Students are often hesitant to give out their parents' personal email and phone number, so make sure you give them a good reason if you're asking for it. For example, tell students that you can share timely information about financial aid, which is something most students understand will be valuable to their parents.

11   Ruffalo Noel Levitz, *2017 e-expectations*
12   Ruffalo Noel Levitz, *2017 e-expectations*

What should you be saying to parents?

Parents want the facts about your school. But they're also looking for reassurance. Will their child fit in? Can they really afford it? Will their child succeed at your school — and in life?

Start with the facts

Most parents want information about these four topics:

> **Quality**
> Details about majors
> School and departmental rankings

> **Cost**
> Financial calculators
> Financial aid opportunities

> **Student experience**
> Student life
> Safety
> Housing

> **Logistics**
> Deadlines
> Updates

Keep in mind that parents' questions and concerns will change throughout the process.

> In the beginning, parents want to see if a school is a good fit academically and get general information about affordability

> As students get closer to making a decision, parents focus more on the exact costs as well as practical considerations, such as where their student would live

You want parents to be engaged, but ultimately you want students to lead the application process — especially since the student's influence is strongest at decision time. It's a fine balance, but look for ways to encourage parents to let their child take the lead, perhaps by telling parents where their child can find student-focused information.

This sample wireframe shows how the Parents & Family section of your website can include information about academics, upcoming deadlines, financial aid, and other topics that appeal to parents.

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Parent Information Page

LOGO

ABOUT | ADMISSION | ACADEMICS | CAMPUS LIFE | ALUMNI | ATHLETICS

HOME | FUTURE STUDENTS | FRESHMAN STUDENTS

IMAGE AREA

PARENTS & FAMILY INFORMATION
Parents and family members can play an important role.

ACADEMICS
The quality of the education your student receives.
- Majors & Programs of Study
- Study Abroad

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

FROM ONE PARENT TO ANOTHER

DATES & DEADLINES

First-Year Student Admission Plan	**Apply**	**Notification**	**Scholarships**	**Financial Award**
Early Choice (Nonbinding)	July 1 – October 14	August – November	Regular Scholarship Consideration	By November 15
Priority Admission	October 15 – November 30	October – December	Regular Scholarship Consideration	December – February
Regular Admission	December 1 – February 1	December – March	Regular Scholarship Consideration	January – March

FINANCIAL INFORMATION
Pursuing higher education is a significant investment. Bradley University is committed to offering support to help your family manage the financial assistance process.
- Apply for Financial Assistance
- Billing Procedures
- Cost Calculator — Early Estimator
- Housing & Meal Plans
- Insurance
- Online Payment
- Parent Loan for Undergraduate Students (PLUS Loans)
- Pay Enrollment Fee
- Payment Options
- Room & Board Rates
- Scholarships
- Tuition & Fees

HEALTH & SAFETY
Bradley University offers extensive services and resources for your student to stay safe and healthy.
- Food Services
- Health Center
- Health Forms
- Markin Recreation Center
- Public Safety & University Police
- Orientation

SUPPORT FOR YOUR STUDENT
Bradley University is committed to the success of your student and provides resources in all areas of academic and student life.
- Academic Support
- Career Services
- Computing Services
- Multicultural Services
- Disability Services
- Housing & Residential Life
- Learning Assistance
- Parking
- Registrar
- Student Activities

GET INVOLVED
Wherever you live, there are opportunities.
- On-campus Events for Parents
- Parent Association
- Family Weekends
- Orientation

Address cost directly, and let them know financial assistance is available

"Students and parents take a college's published tuition at face value," according to one study, which found that approximately 40% of students and parents "rejected colleges on the basis of their published sticker price alone."[13] Many parents simply do not know about the availability or magnitude of discounts available. Let parents know — repeatedly — about all of the financial aid options available to them.

> Most parents would likely reconsider a school that's too expensive if the school can "demonstrate greater value."[14] Lowering the cost of your school (through financial aid) is one way to raise the value. Another way — which doesn't cost you anything — is to demonstrate the higher quality of your education, career services, and other factors that provide a return on investment.

Show the real student experience

Parents can't take your school for a test drive. But they still want to know what day-to-day life is really like, especially given the trend toward greater transparency from companies and brands. You don't have to tell parents everything, but being open and honest — even if it doesn't always show the most flattering side of your school — can build trust with parents and make your school more approachable.

Use parents to get students excited

Students who are excited about your school are more likely to enroll (the correlation is twice as strong as the correlation between enrollment and cost).[15] Be enthusiastic when you're communicating with parents, and share content that will help them get their kid excited.

> Share your most popular content for prospective students with parents early in the process, and ask them to share it with their kid.

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13   Longmire and Company, Inc. Your Value Proposition: How prospective students and parents perceive value and select colleges. Available at: https://www.longmire-co.com/documents/studies/Value_Proposition_Study_Report.pdf

14   Longmire and Company

15   Longmire and Company

What mediums should you use?

When communicating with parents, it's important to have a multichannel approach that incorporates both active (texting, email, phone) and passive (web, print) communications. Use the chart on the following page as a reference for determining the most effective ways to use each medium.

		DO PARENTS REALLY USE IT?	WHAT PARENTS WANT FROM IT	HOW YOU CAN USE IT MORE EFFECTIVELY
MOST EFFECTIVE	**WEBSITE**	**Yes.** Up to 80% of parents visit websites in support of their students.[16] Parents also visit college planning sites, so make sure your information is consistent and up-to-date across the board.	Give parents a separate Parents & Family section with information just for them (see our sample wireframe on page 12).	If there is information that you want parents to see — but they might not be searching for (especially early in the process, when they have more influence) — add links to the content you want to promote on pages that they are going to look at.
	TEXTING	**Yes.** Texting isn't just for Gen Z; "68 – 74% of parents want texts"[17] after completing the RFI form.	Every text message should be timely and relevant. Before you send a text, ask yourself if it's worth interrupting that parent's day to share that information.	**Make sure you have a Campus Texting Policy** that covers legal issues, governance, and other common concerns. (You can download a sample policy at MongooseResearch.com/Blog).
	EMAIL	**Yes.** Parents use email more than students. Just remember that many parents are checking their email on their smartphone. Make sure your email blasts are responsive, so they look great even on a small screen.	Emails provide parents with a record of communications, which makes it a good tool for sending instructions and confirmations.	Don't assume that parents really want more email — they may just prefer email to phone calls and other mediums. Make sure you still have a purpose for every email you send.
	IN PERSON	**Yes.** Campus visits are still effective.	Before parents send in a check and drop off their kid, they want to make sure they can trust you and your school. Face-to-face meetings and conversations are great opportunities to build this trust with parents.	**Talk less and listen more.** Meeting with parents in person is the perfect opportunity to uncover their potentially false perceptions about your school's affordability, student outcomes, and other key areas of interest.
	PRINT	**Sometimes.** More than half of all parents still want a brochure mailed to them.[18]	While a viewbook offers opportunities for great photos, compelling stories, and teasers for your website, part of the goal is simply to have a printed viewbook. "At the end of the day," says one consultant, "there is still something special about holding a printed piece in your hand…"[19]	**Be different.** Today's high school students get "about three trash cans' worth of college materials every year."[20] Find ways for your material to stand out, whether it's choosing a distinct photo (or no photo at all) or finding a format that reflects a unique selling point about your school.
LEAST EFFECTIVE	**PHONE CALLS**	**Not really.** Most parents prefer email and print to phone calls.	Parents may call you if they can't find the information they need somewhere else, or if they would simply rather talk with a real, live person.	Despite the inefficient nature of phone calls, parents like having conversations. When your staff is on the phone, make sure they have quick access to the top questions parents ask each year, so they can **quickly and easily give parents the information they want.**
	SOCIAL MEDIA	**Not as much.** Parents typically rated social media far below other media, including email and print.[21]	Parents use social media (especially Facebook — the favorite channel with parents) to try and get a sense of what your school is really like.	**Let parents feel like they're getting a behind-the-scenes look at your school**, and make sure links to your social media channels are easy to find through your website — that's where parents are likely to go to find them.[22]

16   Ruffalo Noel Levitz, *2017 e-expectations*

17   Ruffalo Noel Levitz, *2017 e-expectations*

18   Ruffalo Noel Levitz, *2017 e-expectations*

19   Smith, A. Do You Still Need a Printed Viewbook? Available at: http://blog.twgplus.com/2012/05/01/do-you-still-need-a-printed-viewbook-10-rules-for-printed-viewbooks-part-i/

20   Four ways to rethink the viewbook. Available at: https://ologie.com/2016/04/four-ways-to-rethink-the-viewbook/

21   Ball, Cheney and Nelson, Engaging Parents

22   Ruffalo Noel Levitz, *2017 e-expectations*

Conclusion and next steps

Creating an effective parent communication strategy takes time, but it's an investment that can pay off with improved yield and deposit numbers. Here are some steps that you can take — starting today — to improve your metrics.

> **STEP 1** **Audit your past and current communications for parents.**

How are you communicating with parents?

Which mediums are most effective?

What content gets the best response?

> **STEP 2** **Determine which content you should be sharing with parents, and which mediums to invest in.**

What do parents want to know?

What do you want parents to know?

Which mediums get ignored?

Which mediums help parents get engaged and feel informed?

> **STEP 3** **Start with simple, small steps.**

Update your RFI form to capture parent information (page 10).

Talk with your staff about the top handful of questions you get from parents. Ensure you have consistent (and effective) ways to answer them in person and/or on your parents' website.

> **STEP 4** **Go deeper, and find ways to proactively help parents throughout the admissions process.**

Make sure your website has a separate, comprehensive section for parents (page 12).

Consider utilizing texting for communication with parents.

> **STEP 5** **Measure and re-evaluate.**

Your audience changes every year. Just because something worked in the past, doesn't mean it will work in the future. As parents get more tech-savvy, watch for changes in the effectiveness of your communications channels. For example, while most parents today aren't very receptive to getting messages through social media apps such as Facebook Messenger, that's likely to change in the future as social apps become more widespread and a new generation starts preparing to send their children off to your school.

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