



EAB

INSIGHT BRIEF

Break Through the Enrollment Bottleneck

Six Challenges Community College Students Say They Face in Admissions and Onboarding—and How AI Can Fix Them

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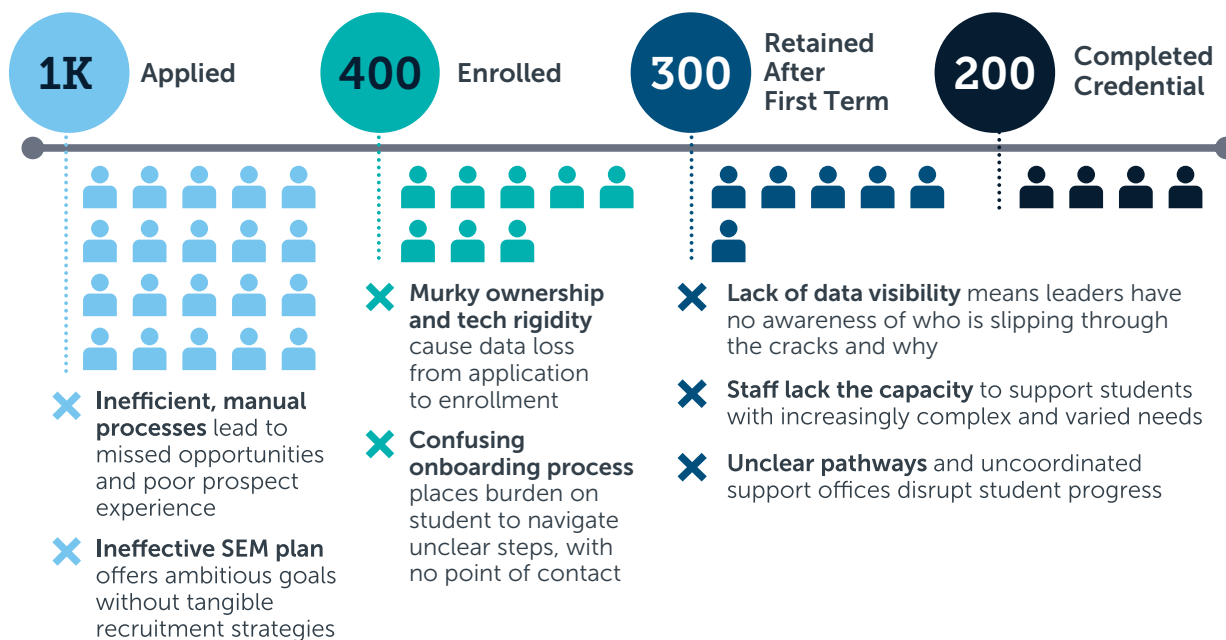
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Overview

Community colleges help students build better futures, but the recruitment and onboarding process is often too complicated, creating barriers before students even arrive on campus. Prospective students may find themselves wondering what to do next, waiting for responses that never come, or overwhelmed by what it takes to start their college journey. These problems persist because staff are stretched too thin, juggling manual tasks and fragmented workflows that leave little time for the personal engagement many students need.

As a result, prospective students can easily fall through the cracks during admissions and onboarding, despite the time and energy staff invest in recruiting them. More importantly, **these missed connections can derail students from reaching their personal and career goals**. When that happens, both colleges and students may not see the results they worked so hard to achieve.

Disconnected Recruitment and Retention Efforts Leave Students Behind



Students are lost at each stage of the funnel, **dragging down key outcomes** from enrollment to retention to completion

This challenge of fixing leaks in the onboarding pipeline is more urgent than ever as community colleges face both immediate and long-term pressures on enrollment. In the near term, **fewer high school graduates are choosing to attend college**. Only 63%¹ of recent graduates enrolled in college, down from 66% in 2019, signaling growing disengagement with higher education and a shrinking pool of prospective students.

Looking further ahead, the future student base is narrowing even more. Most U.S. counties are seeing declines in young children,² raising concerns about the future college-going population. Fifty-eight percent of counties have experienced a drop in their under-five population in 2023, and since 2020, two-thirds of all counties in the United States have seen similar declines.

Complicating that thinning enrollment pipeline is competition with other higher education providers. Prospective community college students now submit applications to as many as five colleges,³ which means they are actively shopping around for the right fit, best value, and strongest overall student experience. Many are also questioning whether college is worth the cost at all,⁴ making the work of admissions teams even more important. This growing competition and declining trust means that **community colleges must work harder to demonstrate their value** and ensure that once students show interest, the path to starting and staying enrolled is clear and supportive.

It might be easy to look at this problem and think the solution is simply to hire more recruitment and admissions staff. But for many community colleges, **that's not realistic**—and it doesn't fully address the root issue.

It's clear that staff are leaving. Voluntary turnover in higher education reached its highest level during the 2022–23 academic year.⁵ And too often it's because they are exhausted by manual, repetitive tasks such as sending emails, answering phone calls, and pulling reports, which takes time away from what they want to do most: Build relationships with students. **To improve the student experience, we also need to focus on the staff experience.** That starts with giving them the tools they need to succeed.

At EAB, we often ask the community colleges that we work with: If your recruitment and admissions teams had more time, where would you invest it? To best answer that question, we first need to understand what students are experiencing, what they expect from their college, and what challenges are most likely to throw them off track.

To better understand the student perspective on the admissions and onboarding process, EAB surveyed 1,000 community college students. Students were asked to share their expectations of college staff, the barriers they faced when enrolling, and which of those barriers threatened to throw them off track. Community colleges can use this data to think about where they can invest more human capital and where they can use technology and AI to build more capacity.

What is holding admissions teams back?

Community colleges today face a challenging combination of rising staff strain, changing student expectations, and shrinking recruitment pools. Today's learners expect more personalized support and faster responses than many colleges are equipped to deliver. What makes this moment unique is the scale of these pressures, with applicant-to-admissions staff ratios sometimes exceeding 1,000:1, making it urgent for colleges to rethink how they manage and support the enrollment process.

Here's what's draining staff capacity and taking time away from building student relationships:



Application and Inquiry Volume

Despite a national decline in overall interest in college, many community colleges are receiving more applications and inquiries than they can manage, especially in states with free college programs or other initiatives driving up demand. Even at colleges where prospective student interest has remained flat or declined, the volume still exceeds what small admissions teams can realistically respond to. Limited staff are often managing hundreds or even thousands of incoming prospects.



Increased Expectations for Personalization and Speed

Students expect fast, relevant communication. Gen Z, with an average attention span of eight seconds,⁶ has grown up with tailored digital content and is less likely to engage with generic or delayed outreach.



Institutional Uncertainty

Concerns about the future of higher education, shrinking state funding resources, and high turnover of executive leadership⁷ can slow down institutional responsiveness to enrollment challenges.



Widespread Staff Fatigue

Admissions and recruitment teams are overextended and burdened by off-campus events in addition to their administrative responsibilities. Many institutions are seeing increased turnover, particularly among part-time staff, who decreased by 8% nationally in 2024 according to CUPA-HR.⁸ At community colleges, cost-saving efforts often rely on part-time roles, but high turnover means remaining staff are left to absorb the extra workload.



Students Are Struggling with Readiness

Academically and socially underprepared students may feel overwhelmed by the enrollment process. In one recent survey, 48%⁹ of respondents reported heightened anxiety, nervousness, or stress about planning for college. This puts increased stress on admissions teams, who need capacity to work with nervous students.

Why do prospective students fall through the cracks?

Even students who are eager to enroll in college often face a series of avoidable roadblocks, some of which stem from lack of staff capacity. From delayed communication to unclear next steps, these friction points create confusion and frustration, leading some students to abandon the process altogether. By identifying the common breakdowns, colleges can better understand where intervention or automation is most needed.

Here are common **prospective student friction points** that community colleges and students report:



Students cannot reach staff during off-hours

Many prospective students are working, parenting, or attending high school during business hours. If they need help in the evening or on weekends, they often hit a wall, which delays decision-making and derails their enrollment momentum.



Students are bounced from office to office

Without coordinated systems, students are frequently passed between admissions, advising, and financial aid with little continuity or context. Each handoff increases the chance that a student gets lost in the shuffle or receives conflicting guidance.



Students must repeat their stories

As students connect with new staff members, they often have to re-explain their backgrounds, goals, and challenges. This necessary repetition of information can be exhausting for students and can make them feel like they are wasting time instead of making progress.



It is unclear which steps to take and in what order

Students are often left guessing about how to move forward—what form to submit, when to register, or which office to contact next. Without a clear, step-by-step roadmap, many stall out before they ever step on campus.



Students face long wait times to access help

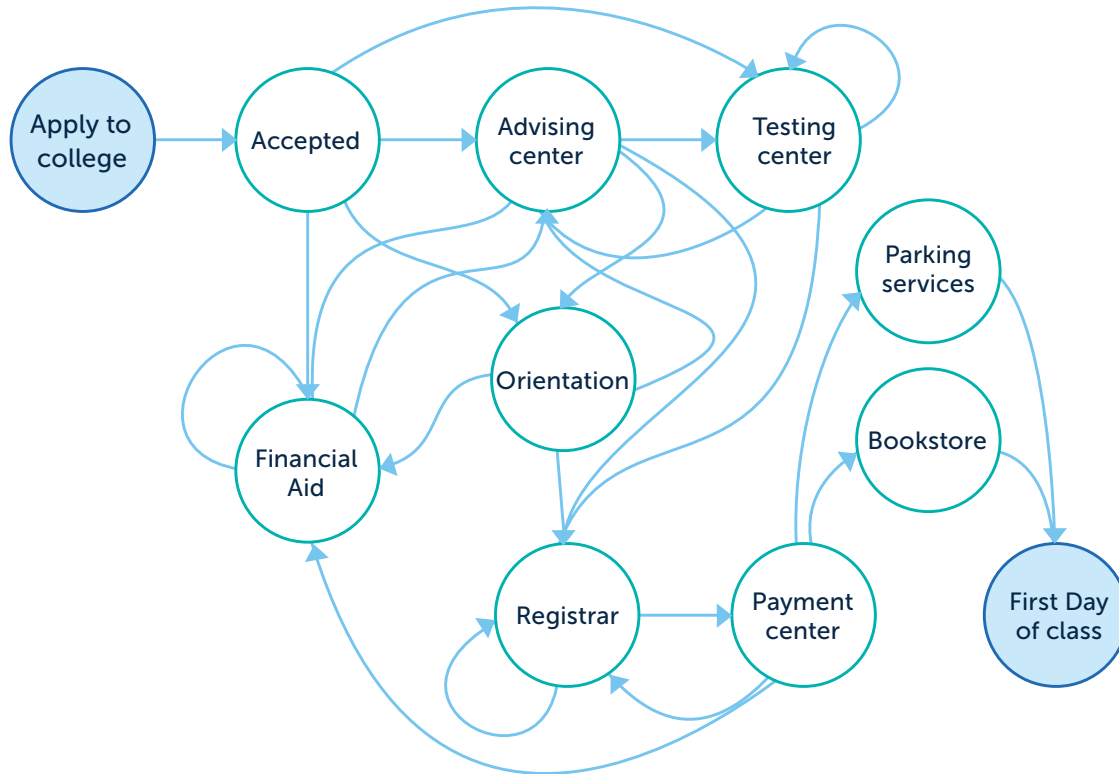
Whether trying to speak with an advisor or get a question answered about financial aid, wait times for appointments can stretch into days or weeks. These delays can lead students to make the wrong decisions or simply give up.



Multiple student types face different hurdles

Returning students, transfer students, and first time in college (FTIC) students all enter through different pathways but encounter similar confusion. Without systems that recognize and support their unique needs, they may end up on the wrong onboarding pathway.

Community college students become tangled in a web of enrollment steps that are rarely linear:



These examples highlight just a few of the reasons why students often feel frustrated during the enrollment process. This paper outlines six key challenges identified by 1,000 community college students based on their admissions and onboarding experiences. It also explores how technology and AI can help make the process more personalized, more human, and more efficient for both students and staff.

Ready to address gaps in your
recruitment and onboarding process?

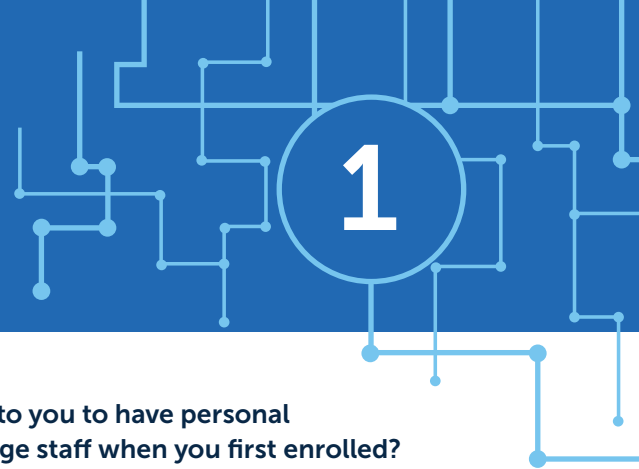


Explore EAB's new **Navigate360 Advantage**
for Community Colleges

Six challenges students face during admissions and onboarding:

- 1 Students want **more personal interactions** while enrolling at community colleges
- 2 Students are requesting help through **labor-intensive means**
- 3 Students **want answers faster** than colleges provide them
- 4 Many community college students are one obstacle away from **opting out entirely**
- 5 Many new students feel **uncertain about choosing a major** and how it connects to future careers
- 6 Onboarding efforts **overserve some students** and under-serve others

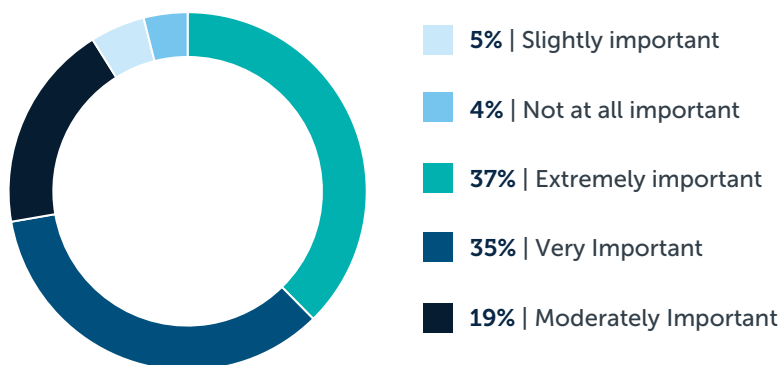
Students want **more personal interactions** while enrolling at community college



Across the onboarding process, students are clear about one thing: They want meaningful, personal interactions with admissions and enrollment staff. **When asked directly, nearly three-quarters (73%) of students said having personal interaction while navigating enrollment was either extremely important (38%) or very important (35%).**

How important was it to you to have personal interactions with college staff when you first enrolled?

N= 1,001



Which of the following did you do before applying to your college? (Select all that apply.)

N= 1,001



This expectation shows up not just in what students say but also in what they do. Many choose human-centered ways to get the help they need. Before applying to their college, 23% attended an on-campus information session, 27% toured the college, and 21% attended an information session at their high school.

The preference for face-to-face connection stands out. For example, more than half (55%) said the level of interaction at open houses felt just right, while nearly one in five (19%) wished they'd had more opportunities to connect with staff on campus.

Taken together, these insights show that **community colleges need to create more time for personal connections**, which likely means reducing the time spent on time-consuming and repetitive tasks that keep staff behind a desk instead of engaging directly with students.

Students are requesting help through **labor-intensive means**

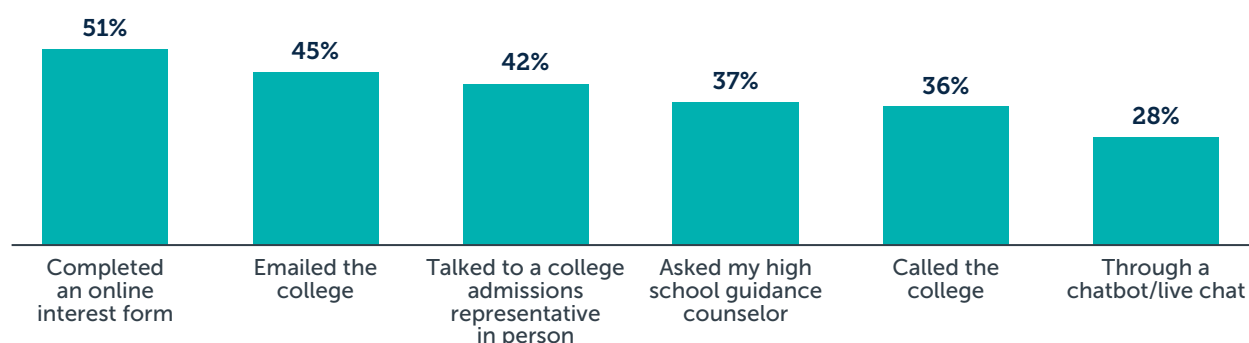
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One reason staff may be stuck behind their desks is that, in addition to engaging with students at events, they often must respond to information requests through time-consuming methods such as email and phone calls, mainly because these are the primary options students are given.

Of students who said they requested information before applying, **half of students (51%) said they completed an online interest form, 45% emailed the college, and 36% called the college.** All of these intake methods can take significant bandwidth for staff to manage, especially emails and phone calls.

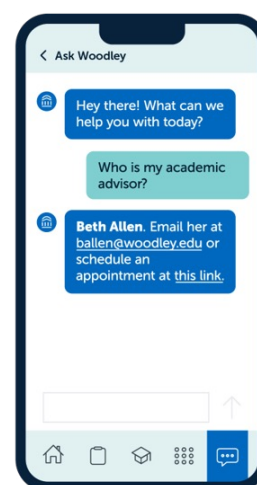
How did you request information from your college before applying? (Select all that apply.)

N= 247



In contrast, only 28% used a chatbot or live chat option, indicating that many colleges either don't offer robust self-service tools or students aren't aware they exist. This reliance on manual channels places strain on already overextended enrollment staff, who must manage overflowing inboxes, phone calls, and one-on-one conversations to answer questions that could often be resolved more efficiently through AI-powered tools.

As an example, **EAB's AI Knowledge Agent** offers students 24/7, multilingual support through a conversational interface that mimics a live chat experience. It not only answers frequently asked questions about topics such as admissions, financial aid, and registration but also takes action, helping students schedule appointments, look up their advisor, access key forms, or even receive personalized next steps based on where they are in the enrollment process. The tool is designed to recognize intent, respond in a student-friendly tone, and escalate more complex issues to a human when needed, ensuring students feel supported any time they reach out.



Students **want answers faster** than colleges provide them

3

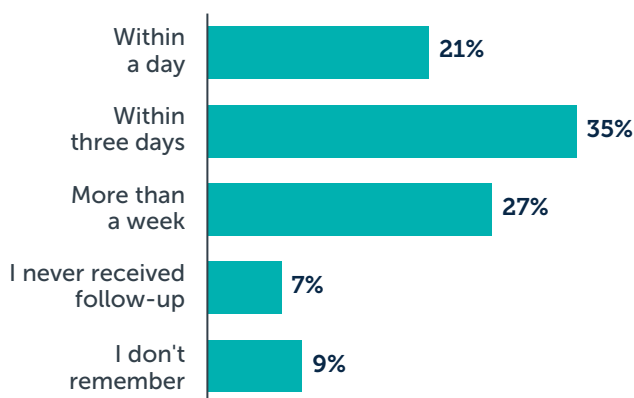
When we look at the ways in which students are communicating with colleges, it's easy to understand how admissions and recruitment staff could experience backlogs in their duties. Our survey shows that response times to questions don't meet expectations for many students, and that gap can weaken trust and slow momentum during onboarding.

When asked how long it took to hear back when they first requested information, more than a third of students (35%) said they received a response within three days, but 27% waited over a week, and 7% said they never heard back at all. Yet when asked how quickly they expected a college to reply if they had a question about the enrollment process, the expectations were clear and far more immediate: 17% said they expected a response immediately, 27% wanted one within a few hours, and 29% expected an answer within 24 hours.

Altogether, nearly three-quarters of students (73%) expected a response within a day—far faster than what many colleges are delivering.

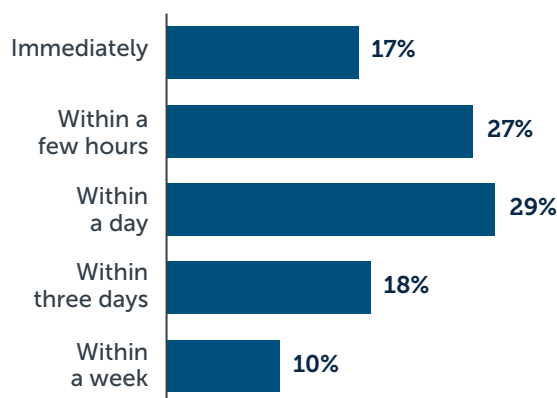
How long after the first time you requested information from your college did you receive a response?

N= 1,001



If you have a question about the enrollment process, how quickly do you expect your college to respond?

N= 1,001



73% of prospective students expect follow-up within a day, but only **21%** are receiving it

When students do not receive timely responses, especially during key decision-making moments, they can feel ignored or anxious at a time when they need clarity to move forward. Colleges can close this response gap by using AI-driven tools to deliver faster and more consistent communication. For example, [**Navigate360's Content Creation Agent**](#) can generate personalized emails in seconds, helping staff respond quickly and effectively.

CASE STUDY

Coordinating Student Engagement Across Recruitment and Retention at Central Virginia Community College

Central Virginia Community College uses Navigate360 to transform how they track prospects and current students, conduct outreach, manage onboarding, and support progress toward completion. By moving from a manual, makeshift system to an integrated, automated workflow, CVCC staff dramatically expanded their reach—managing up to 1,000 prospects in the time it once took to handle just 5. **Thanks to Navigate360's automation, the manual processing time for advisor assignments was also cut in half.**

As a result, CVCC achieved a 56% yield from inquiry to application and a 30% yield from inquiry to enrollment and generated \$8.8 million in tuition revenue from 1,680 enrolled students in the first two years. They also saw a 25% increase in likelihood to enroll when an inquiry was submitted through the new system and improved student retention, responsiveness, and advisor efficiency through proactive messaging and automation.

56%

yield from inquiry
to application

30%

yield from inquiry
to enrollment

\$8.8M

generated in
tuition revenue

25%

increase in
likelihood to enroll



Many community college students are one obstacle away from **opting out entirely**

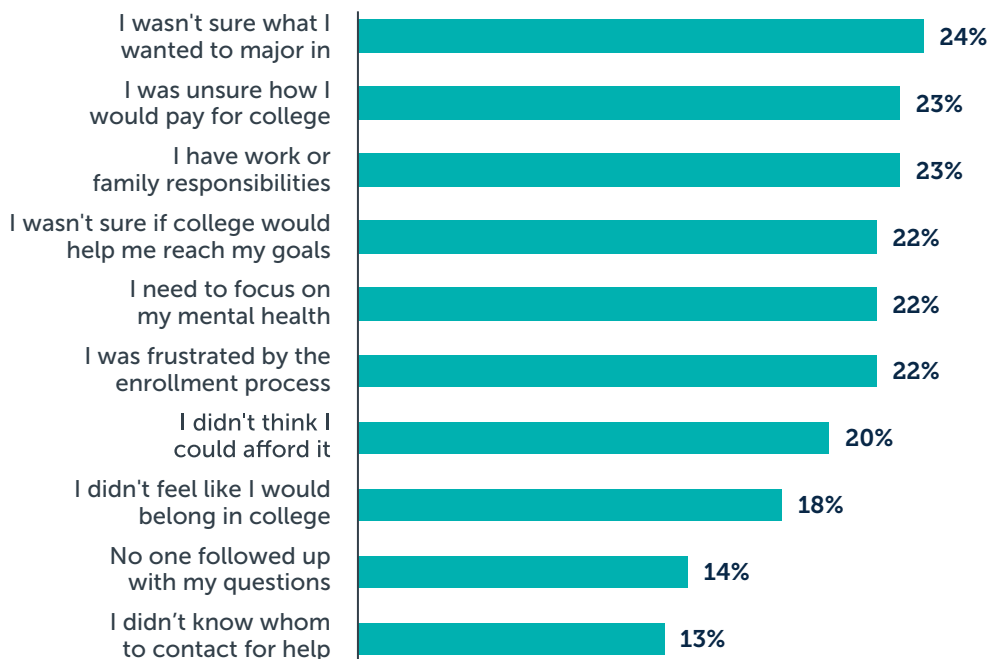
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Many community college prospects are on the edge of opting out of community college entirely—and the reasons they hesitate reveal how fragile the enrollment process can feel for them. **More than half of students surveyed (56%) said they considered not attending community college at all.**

When asked why, their reasons highlight a mix of financial strain, confusion, and a lack of personal connection that together can push students away before they even begin. About one in four (24%) said they were frustrated by the enrollment process itself, while 14% said no one followed up with their questions, and 13% didn't know whom to contact for help. Uncertainty about choosing a major (24%) and concerns about how to pay for college (19%) were also significant barriers, alongside personal responsibilities: 23% cited work or family obligations and 21% needed to focus on their mental health. Also of concern is the fact that nearly 18% said they simply didn't feel like they would belong in college at all.

Why did you consider not attending? (Select all that apply.)

N= 562



These numbers make it clear that every step of the onboarding journey must be as simple, supportive, and responsive as possible. If colleges want to keep students from slipping away, they must address these stress points with clear guidance, proactive outreach, and tools that make help feel immediate and personal.

CASE STUDY

Eliminating Barriers to Onboarding at **Germanna Community College**

Germanna Community College improved its onboarding and academic planning process by implementing EAB's Navigate360. Previously, students were confused by a disjointed onboarding experience and lacked long-term academic guidance. **Now, all applicants receive an onboarding checklist through Navigate360, and academic planning is embedded in the freshman orientation course.**

As a result, the college saw a 14.5% increase in applicant-to-enrollee conversion. Students with academic plans in Navigate360 enroll in 3.4 more credit hours per semester on average and are 12.7 percentage points more likely to persist.

14.5%

increase in applicant-to-enrollee conversion

3.4

more credit hours per semester per student

12.7

percentage points more likely to persist

GERMANNA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

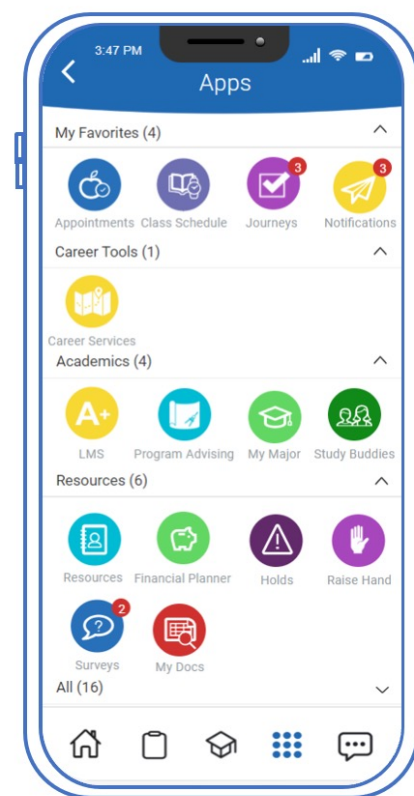
Many new students feel **uncertain about choosing a major** and how it connects to future careers

5

Many community college students arrive unsure about what to study or how it connects to their career goals, and they want more help figuring it out during onboarding. Nearly one in four students (24%) who considered not enrolling said they didn't know what they wanted to major in, and 23% named choosing a program or major as one of the most confusing parts of the enrollment process. About one in five students (21%) also felt they didn't get enough support when selecting a major or talking through their career goals.

Students who feel like they are in the right major and that it connects to their long-term goals are more likely to persist.¹⁰ In today's social and political climate, where there are growing doubts about the value of college, it's unsurprising that students want to "get it right" when it comes to their major.

AI tools can help bridge this gap by guiding students through interest and skills assessments, suggesting career pathways, and matching those pathways to the programs the college offers. **Smart, self-service tools like those available in the Navigate360 student app** can recommend courses and programs that align with a student's goals—freeing advisors to spend more time on deeper, one-on-one conversations that help students feel confident they're on the right track.



Onboarding efforts overserve some students and under-serve others

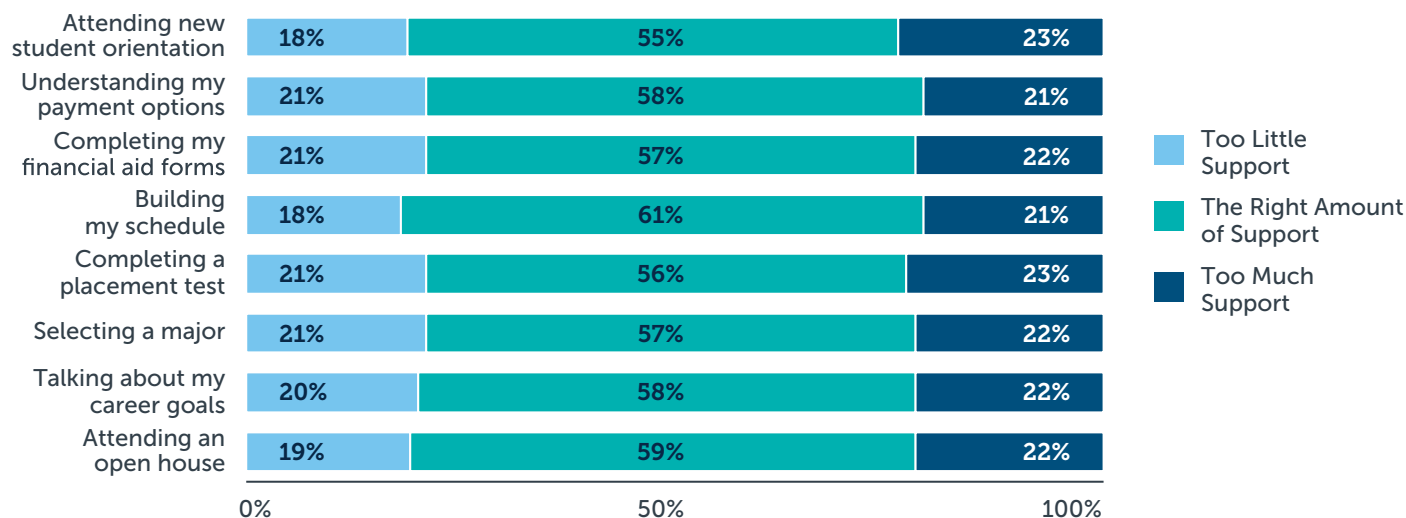
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Every student is different and needs a different level of guidance during the onboarding process. Some students can navigate the process on their own, while others may need step-by-step support. When we treat all students the same way, providing identical communications, instructions, and nudges, we miss opportunities to engage more deeply with students who need extra help and end up misallocating time to those who are managing well with minimal support.

Our research shows that one in five students felt they needed more support during key enrollment milestones such as advising, placement testing, and completing the FAFSA, while another roughly one in five felt they received too much help with these tasks.

How would you rank the amount of personalized support you received during each one of these interactions when you first enrolled at the college?

N= 1,001



The challenge, then, is [how we can strike a better balance between students who need more from us and students who need less](#). Some students may feel overwhelmed by excessive outreach, while others are falling through the cracks because they need more help than they're getting. For example, one student might need only a quick text message or brief check-in, while another might benefit from a longer, in-depth conversation.

By offering self-service options such as AI-enabled chat agents and automated messaging for students who need minimal guidance, colleges can free up staff time to focus on students who require more personal assistance. In this way, support can be reallocated to reach students who need it most.

How can a recruitment CRM with built-in AI increase the capacity of recruiting and admissions staff?

A purpose-built CRM powered by AI can increase the capacity of community college admissions staff by automating repetitive tasks such as sending reminders, helping to draft communications, and answering frequently asked questions through chat agents. The hours saved by using AI and enrollment management support tools not only can help meet students' expectations for speed and personalization but also can free up time for what they value most: personal interactions.



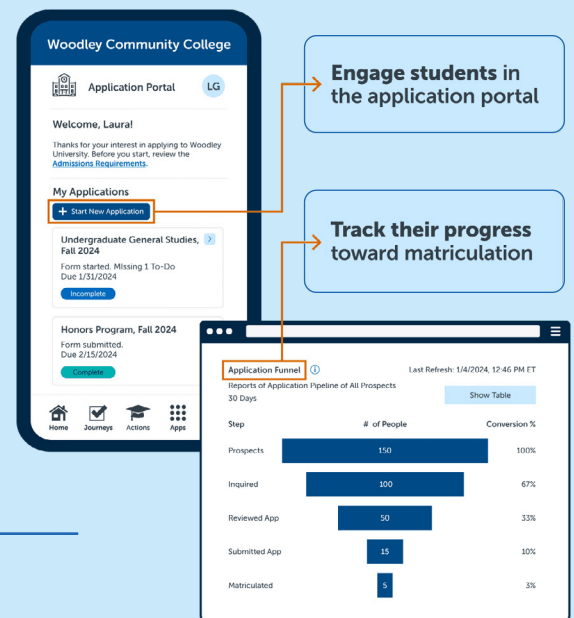
Navigate360 Recruitment Success, part of EAB's comprehensive recruitment and retention CRM, helps colleges manage every step of the student recruitment journey in one integrated system. It tracks prospects from inquiry through enrollment, automates targeted communications, and coordinates campus events and appointments.

Navigate360's Student-Centric AI tools also help move students from interested to enrolled by streamlining processes for both staff and students. By unifying recruitment and retention workflows, the platform reduces manual tasks and gives staff more time to build meaningful connections with students. Community colleges using Navigate360 see higher enrollment yields and a smoother handoff from applicant to enrolled student.

AI Assistant for Staff

- ▶ **Content Creation Agent:** Instantly generate and personalize outreach to prospective or enrolled students.
- ▶ **Student Insights Agent:** Understand holistic student performance with one click.
- ▶ **Report Agent:** Find and create robust data reports instantly.
- ▶ **Course Planning Agent:** Generate best-fit course plans for students.

- ▶ **Task Agent:** Conquer your to-do list by prompting actions like alerts, notes, and more.
- ▶ **Staff Knowledge Agent:** Quickly access your activity history, resources, and templates.
- ▶ **Campaign Agent:** Launch smart enrollment and advising campaigns in a fraction of the time.





How Navigate360's Student-Centric AI Saves Staff Time to Focus on the Work That Matters

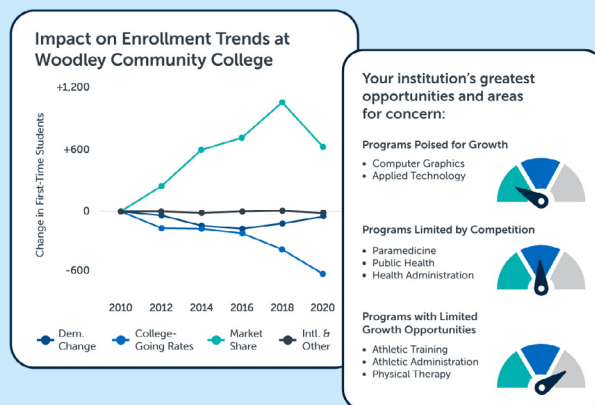
Reduced Manual Activities

- ▶ Setting up communications workflows
- ▶ Drafting emails and communication campaigns
- ▶ Sending emails and text nudges
- ▶ Scheduling appointments
- ▶ Manually tracking and following up on event attendance
- ▶ Responding to student emails and phone calls
- ▶ Tracking where students are in the enrollment funnel
- ▶ Submitting data requests
- ▶ Keeping track of outstanding tasks and "to-dos"
- ▶ Manually inviting prospective students to events, such as tours and open houses
- ▶ Staffing live chats
- ▶ Building student knowledge bases
- ▶ Translating messages into multiple languages



AI Navigator for Students

- ▶ **Student and Prospect Knowledge Agent:** Support students 24/7 without any extra staff time. Guide prospective students through the enrollment process and answer their questions around the clock. Provide instant responses—about applications, course offerings, financial holds, parking, and more—on students' phones and laptops in 90+ languages. Ensure trustworthy and vetted answers, beginning as early as recruitment and orientation, with the option to escalate to human support.
- ▶ **Course Planning Agent:** Give students the ability to generate course plans and access 24/7 course planning guidance.



Staff Has More Time For

- ▶ 1:1 student appointments
- ▶ Campus tours
- ▶ Open houses
- ▶ Hosting and attending college fairs
- ▶ Parent and family events
- ▶ Small group workshops on financial aid, financial planning, and paying for college
- ▶ Major and career exploration initiatives
- ▶ High school and guidance counselor partnerships
- ▶ Dual enrollment partnerships
- ▶ Community partnerships, i.e., nonprofits
- ▶ Identifying students who need financial and basic needs supports
- ▶ Student belongingness initiatives
- ▶ Student mentoring
- ▶ Supporting mental health initiatives
- ▶ Strategic planning
- ▶ Faculty collaboration
- ▶ Professional development

Key Takeaways

Community colleges have an opportunity to rethink how they recruit and onboard students by using AI to remove friction and free up staff to do what they do best: Build relationships. By automating routine work such as responding to common questions, generating reports, and sending personalized reminders, AI gives staff the breathing room they need to focus on higher-value tasks, such as helping students choose the right major, navigate financial barriers, or feel a sense of belonging on campus.

1 Enrollment competition will increase over the next several decades, but your staff size is unlikely to increase.

2 Admissions and enrollment teams spend too much time on administrative tasks that take time away from working directly with students, strategic planning, and building partnerships outside of the college.

3 Students' expectations of personalization, timeliness, relationship building, and onboarding guidance exceed what teams can offer. Sometimes, this can contribute to students opting out of community college altogether.

4 Using technology like an AI-powered prospect and student CRM can create easier, time-saving workflows for both students and staff.

Learn how EAB's Navigate360 can help your community college engage more meaningfully with students.

eab.com/solutions/navigate360-advantage-for-community-colleges



Navigate360 Advantage for Community Colleges

The Only CRM with Built-In Research, Insights, and Leads

Navigate360 Advantage for Community Colleges is a **comprehensive enrollment growth solution** built on a decade of best-practice research and **trusted by over 450 community and technical colleges nationwide**. It integrates the leading higher education CRM, Navigate360, with expert guidance, access to a collaborative network of peer institutions, and high-intent student leads on day one.

More than a CRM: A Partnership Designed Specifically for Community Colleges



Navigate360 CRM: Recruit, Retain, and Engage Students and Alumni

- A suite of built-in AI agents saves your staff time and supports students 24/7
- Automated workflows as well as templated and custom reports
- Communication tools and mobile apps to engage students



Ready-for-Outreach Prospects

- Navigate360 Advantage comes equipped with Appily Leads, specific to your institution and region
- Backed by predictive AI, making them more likely to convert from inquiry to enrolled
- Robust information about students' goals and interests, helping you tailor communications



Enrollment Insights

- Strategic enrollment planning, guided by your EAB team
- "Secret Shopper" audit to understand barriers in the enrollment process
- Gain clarity on market forces shaping enrollment with the EAB Enrollment Outlook report and peer benchmarks



Expert Guidance & Research

- Dedicated EAB team to guide you through your biggest challenges
- Best-practice templates, campaigns, surveys, and more



Nationwide Collaborative

- Learn and share best practices, research insights, and actionable strategies
- Annual CONNECTED conference and ongoing community forums

\$728K

Additional tuition revenue generated from a Navigate360 reenrollment campaign

PORTLAND
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

14.5%

Increase in applicant-to-enrollee conversion rate after launching Navigate360

GERMANNA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

\$8.8M

Tuition revenue from 1,680 students enrolled via Navigate360 in two years

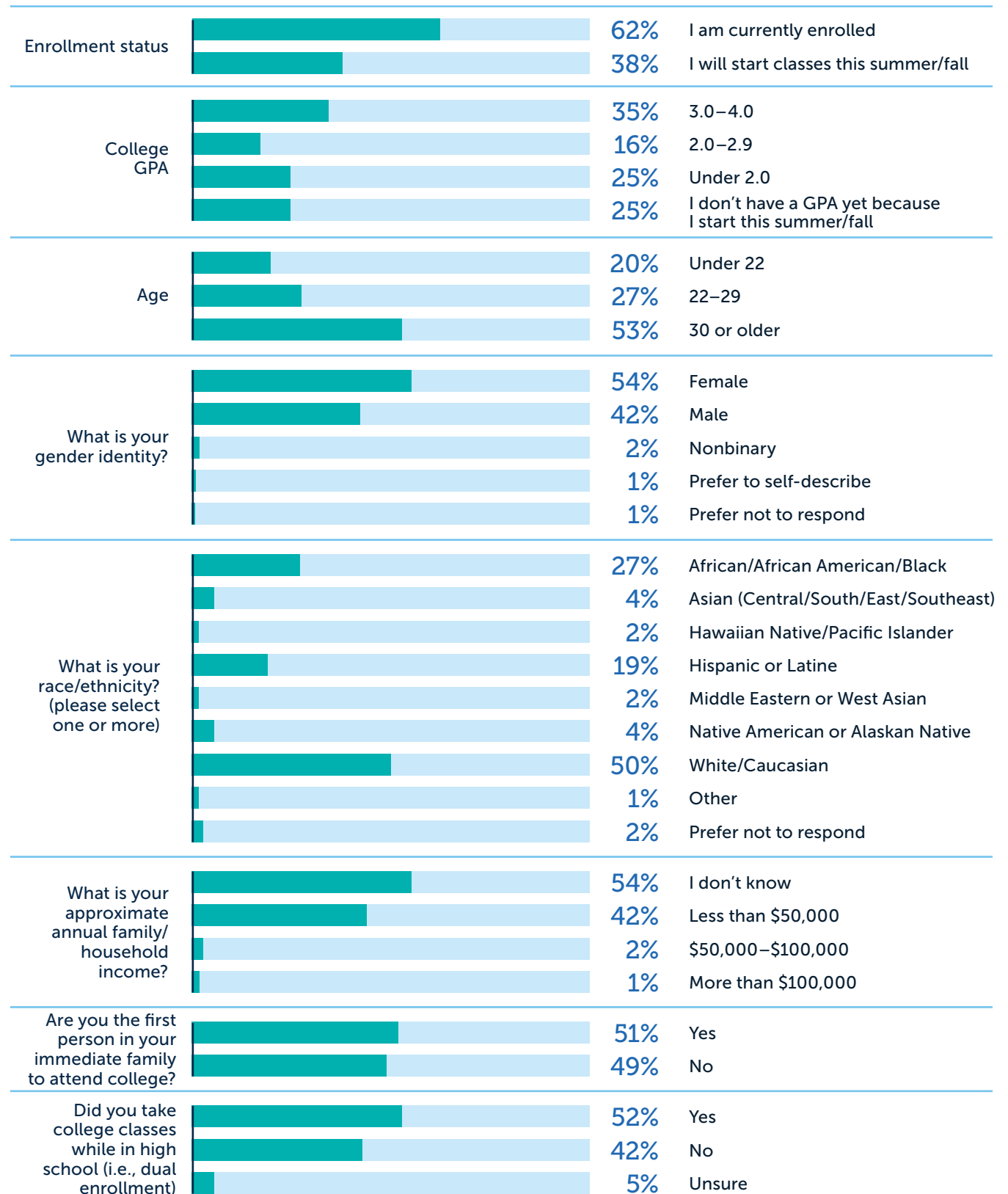
CENTRAL VIRGINIA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

To learn more about Navigate360 for Community Colleges and request a demo, [visit our website](#).

Research Overview

This report includes survey responses from EAB's Community College Recruitment & Onboarding survey. In June 2025 EAB collected responses from 1,001 community college students about their experiences during the admissions process, what types of interactions they had with staff members, and what their expectations were when being onboarded to the college.

Participant Profile



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At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with more than 2,800 institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and advancement. We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.