



New Research from Young Invincibles Shows Importance of Online Search In College Search Process for Working Adults and First-Generation Students

November 2018

BACKGROUND

Picture a typical college student - you may think of a 19-year-old who is living in a dorm and attending college full time for the first time. This may be what some refer to as the “traditional” college student, but it is not representative of today’s students. In fact, so-called “traditional” students represent only one-third of the college-going population. Nearly 40 percent of today’s students are over the age of 25. A majority work full or part-time while they are enrolled in college, and 40 percent attend classes part-time. One-in-four students are juggling classes and childcare. They are also more racially and socioeconomically diverse than previous generations of college students. Despite this, too many college search tools are stuck in the past, still geared toward this outdated concept of the “traditional” students.

In an effort to better understand the college search process for today’s students, Young Invincibles used a mixed methods approach to learn about students’ search experience and the information they seek.

We conducted an online poll of nearly 300 working 22-44 year olds who were considering higher education, as well as those currently enrolled in a degree or certificate program. It came as no surprise that the vast majority (72 percent) of respondents used an online search engine, predominantly Google (88 percent), to learn more about colleges. We also conducted six focus groups with nearly 40 students ages 17 to 36 years old, including first-generation students, working-adult students, and students earning their GED who are considering post-secondary education.

STUDENTS ARE FOCUSED ON MAJORS AND PROGRAMS, BUT TOOLS ARE FOCUSED ON INSTITUTIONS

Working adults are more likely to search for a major or program than for a specific school. Nearly 90 percent of working adults search for information on majors and program offerings. Our focus group participants echoed this sentiment. Dory, 18, felt under-served by search tools because she knew exactly what program she wished to enroll in, yet had to dig through search results and college web pages for information on available programs and transferable credits. Some students narrow their potential college list based on the availability of specific programs:

“The first thing I looked for was to see if they had my major and what I wanted to study. That is what makes me decide if I want to go to that school or not.”

— Beatriz, 17, Los Angeles, California

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

Working students are typically more focused on finding the programs and degrees that will advance their career paths compared to any specific institutional experience, yet college search tools typically rely on the institution as their unit of analysis. This is a disconnect between what students need and what is available, but search engines and online tools have an opportunity to fix this by improving the information which appears when students search more broadly for programs and by putting program information front-and-center in search results.

STUDENTS WANT PERSONALIZED INFORMATION, DELIVERED DIRECTLY TO THEM, WITH MULTIPLE REMINDERS TO GET THEM ACROSS THE FINISH LINE

Personalization is an effective method to reach students in a way which encourages them to pay attention to and remember information. Research shows that personalized information on schools and financial aid increases college matriculation for low-income students. This information can come from text messages, emails, or through other online platforms. Cherish, 17, trusts information from current students and alumni from schools because they are not paid to entice students to attend and have had personal experience at the school. Students trust that these resources will give them the good and the bad about each school and program:

“[I got here by] not only researching on the internet but hearing word-of-mouth from someone in the same program, and they spoke highly of it.”

— Tim, 26, South Boston, Virginia

Apps, particularly social media apps, have an enormous opportunity to connect students directly to schools, alumni, or counselors through messaging features. Not only can apps connect students to important resources, but they can also encourage students to meet important deadlines, like for financial aid and applications.

MOST STUDENTS COMPARE SCHOOLS, BUT THEY ARE LIMITED BY GEOGRAPHY AND COST

Nearly 60 percent of respondents considered 2-3 colleges when they conducted their college search. These options, however, are often limited by geography and affordability. Some students only have one or two affordable options within driving distance from their home. Abdullah, 20, considered two schools which gave him the program he wanted, at the right price, but both were an hour's driving distance from his home. Other students want to stay near home to save money or be close to family:

“I knew this would probably be the best option to still live at home, work, and take classes so I can save money while still going to school.”

— Lydia, 19, South Boston, Virginia

Search engines and college search tools should incorporate geolocation functionality into their tools. Students should be able to easily identify schools near their physical location and find data on net cost, financial aid, and program outcomes.