

studentPOLL

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The US News rankings are not a decisive factor for parents in college choice. Other sources of information have a greater impact.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

In September 1995, the premier issue of *studentPOLL* stirred more vigorously the ongoing maelstrom of debate over *US News & World Report* and other newsmagazine college rankings. Why? Because our findings defied the conventional anecdotally derived wisdom, documenting that the rankings are not a critical factor in college choice. Since then, a number of other studies, most notably one on CIRP data by McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez of the Graduate School of Education at UCLA, have confirmed our basic conclusions, albeit with a number of refinements. The UCLA study found, for example, that while higher ability students and those from more affluent families tend to pay more attention to the rankings than those with lower academic and income credentials, the rankings are not a determining factor in college selection. Nonetheless, in spite of persuasive evidence to the contrary, many institutions continue to behave as if *US News* has their fate in its hands.

When we published those results over two years ago, a number of inquisitive college presidents and admissions directors called us to ask about parents. They said, "Okay, we accept the conclusion that the

rankings don't make a decisive difference with students, but experience tells us that they have a much greater impact on parents."

Our findings at that stage, which were limited to students, didn't enable us to validate that assumption, but we put the question on our research agenda for this year. As our findings in this issue confirm, our inquisitors' assumption was correct, but only to a point. True, parents do pay considerably greater attention to the rankings than their children. But, for them as for their children, the rankings are not among the most influential sources of information in college choice.

While we believe the evidence we have gathered about this topic is persuasive, demonstrating that the importance given the rankings by many college and university policy makers is overblown, we will continue to track the influence of the rankings over time to measure any changes that may occur.

Like it or not, these corporate cash machines, which the publishers defensively and often laughably like to masquerade as a "public service," are here to stay, at least as long as they continue to stoke our national obsession with pecking orders.

Richard A. Hesel
Publisher

1. The value of national newsmagazine rankings in college choice is far greater to parents than to students. However, parents, like students, place a higher value on other information sources over rankings.

In the premiere issue of *studentPOLL* published in the fall of 1995, we reported that among various information sources used by high school students in selecting a college, students rated the value of *US News* and other national published rankings very low; in fact almost dead last among all information sources tested. In the study fielded this past year, we polled 400 parents of high-ability students, asking the same series of questions to compare the value they placed on different information sources versus students.

In this study, we calculated value by the same formula used with students in the first generation of research fielded two years ago. Specifically, we asked parents to indicate whether an information source was extremely valuable, somewhat valuable, or not valuable at all. We then created a *Net Value Index* based on the following formula:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Proportion citing as} \\ & \text{extremely valuable} \\ & + \\ & \text{Proportion citing as} \\ & \text{somewhat valuable} / 2 \\ & - \\ & \text{Proportion citing as} \\ & \text{not valuable at all} \end{aligned}$$

The index and comparative results are displayed in the accompanying table. The findings reveal some striking differences between parents and students. For example, parents place far greater value on national

rankings in the college selection process than do students. Thirty-six percent of parents who had used college rankings such as those published in *US News* and *Money Magazine*, found them extremely valuable compared to 22 percent of students. The *Net Value Index* displays an even wider margin of difference between these two respondent groups, with the value of newsmagazine rankings rated .59 among parents on a scale of 0 to 1 compared to .33 for students. (Table 1)

For parents, the value of newsmagazine rankings is on a par with advice provided by teachers, counselors, alumni, and information communicated in college viewbooks. Parents placed far greater value on discussions with admissions representatives and catalogs. Conversely, both parents and students placed less value on college videos, CD-ROMs, on-line services such as

ADVISORY

BUILD DISCUSSIONS AND CONVERSATIONS WITH CURRENT STUDENTS INTO YOUR RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS. These kinds of contacts have a very high value for parents but occur less frequently than other types of in-person communications.

America Online, and the Internet (this may indeed reflect the importance students and parents place on personal contact with institutions during the admissions process).

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

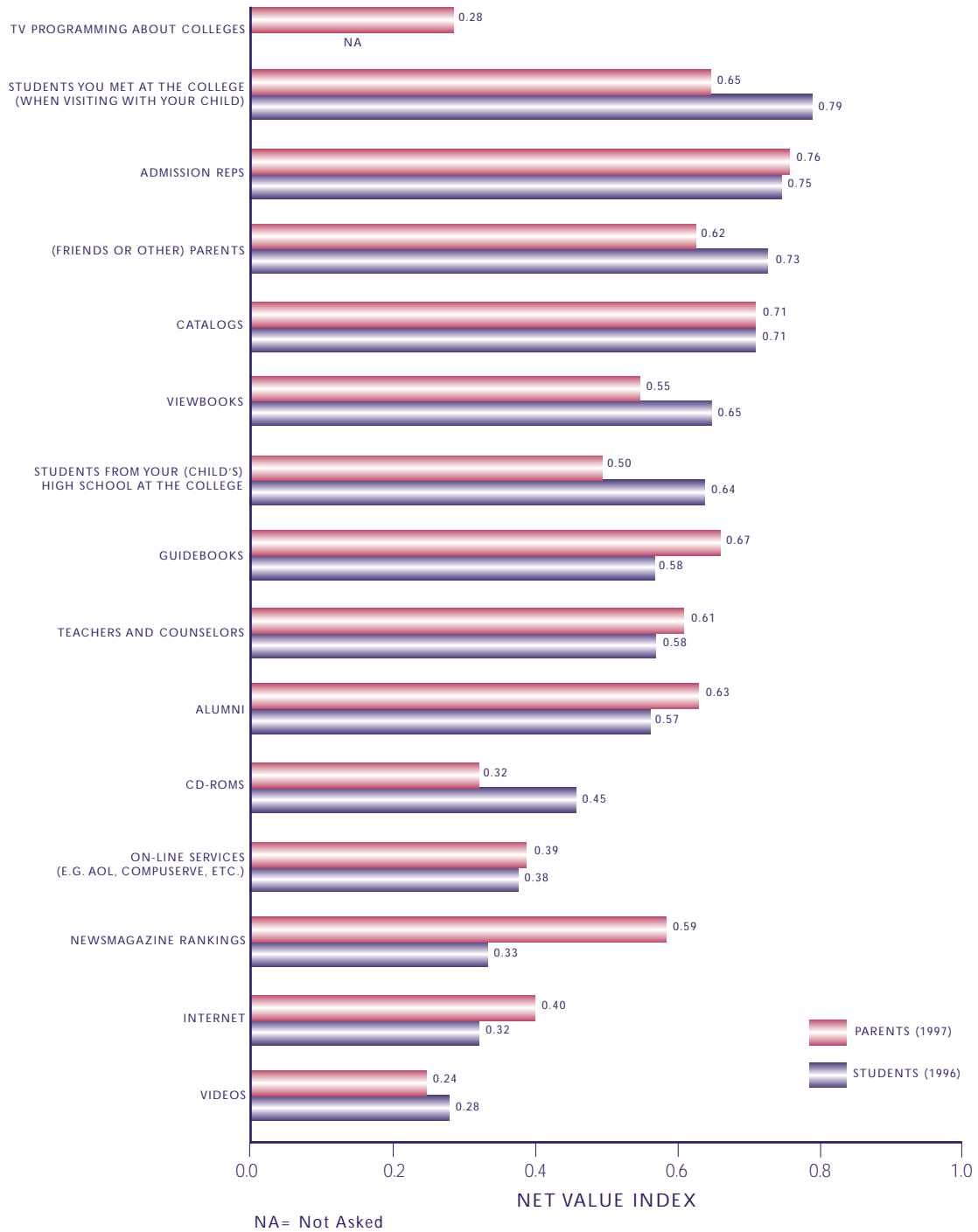
The findings reported in this issue of *studentPOLL* are based on in-depth telephone interviews with a random national sample of the parents of 400 high school seniors who were enrolled in four-year colleges in the fall of 1997. To qualify for an interview, respondent's child must have achieved a combined, re-centered SAT score of 1050 or higher. The study sample was drawn to represent the national distribution

of students with qualifying SAT scores by geography, gender, intended major, and income. Questions about survey methods, findings, and other matters should be addressed to Art & Science Group, Inc.



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Table 1.
Value of information sources in college application and selection



2. Parents use magazine rankings to the same extent as students, but less frequently than other major sources of information that influence college choice.

To gauge the impact different sources of information and advice have in college evaluation and choice, we asked parents to what extent they utilized newsmagazine rankings and other information sources. In our previous study, slightly more than half (54 percent) of students surveyed told us they had referred to these rankings in deciding where to apply and enroll. Similarly, 55 percent of parents reported utilizing rankings in advising their children about these choices.

When compared to parent usage of other information sources, this frequency is strikingly low. For example, 87 percent of parents report using catalogs; 83 percent viewbooks; and 82 percent admissions representatives to obtain college information and advice. The proportion of parents using various

information sources tracks closely with student usage as is evident in Table 2.

While the data indicate that a higher proportion of parents compared to students report utilizing the Internet (26 percent versus 7 percent) and commercial on-line services (20 percent versus 7 percent), this difference appears to be explained by the one-year lag time between the two studies. More recent data from our Winter 1997 technology issue shows that student use of the Internet and other on-line services to gather information about colleges has risen dramatically. Fifty-eight percent, for example, now use individual college home pages. Parent use of these technologies, while lower, is indicative of their mounting importance to this group as well.

Given the proliferation of individual college Web sites and

growing access to faster, more powerful communications technologies among college-bound students (documented in our recent technology issue) the high proportion of parents utilizing information technology in college choice is a finding that is especially striking.

ADVISORY

MAKE YOUR WEB SITE

PARENT-FRIENDLY.

Given the frequency with which parents are using the Web to gather information about colleges, be sure that your Web site has a section with dedicated information for parents.

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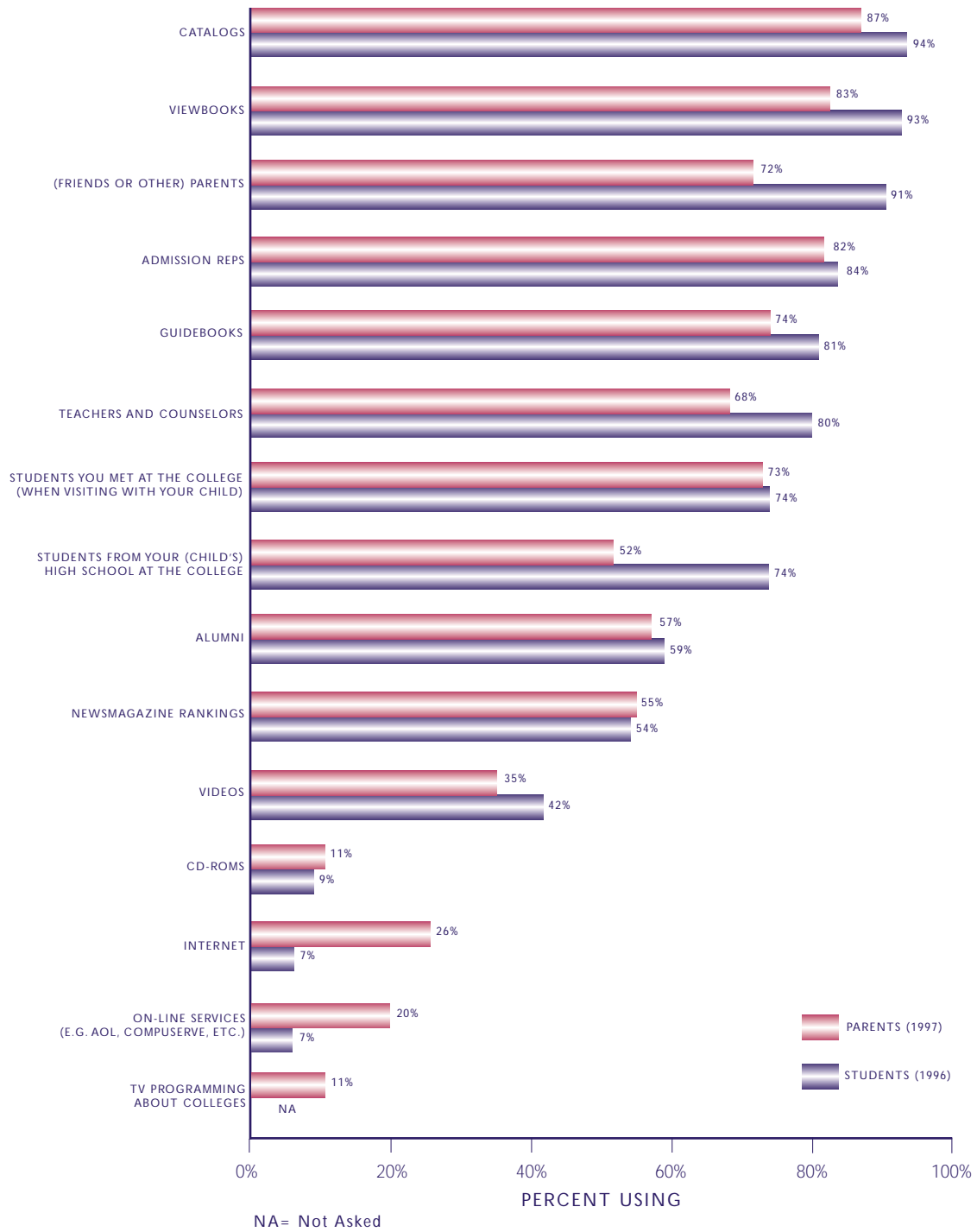
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Table 2.
Frequency of use of information sources



3. Among parents, the impact of newsmagazine rankings on college choice is higher than for students. Nevertheless, it is still among the least influential major sources of information and advice in college selection.

Combining the measurements of frequency of use with the rating of value to users enables us to measure the overall impact or “market power” of each major source of information. The formula we used to calculate the impact rating is as follows:

$$(\text{Frequency of use}) \times (\text{Net Value Index})$$

For example, catalogs are used by 87 percent of parents and have a Net Value Index of .71 among these respondents, resulting in an impact rating of .61 – one of the highest impact ratings of all the information sources we tested. (Table 3) When we rank the various information sources and advice using the overall impact formula and compare these findings with those reported for students, there are important similarities. For both students and parents, newsmagazine rankings are not among the top-ranked factors impacting decisions about where to apply and enroll. Only videos, CD-ROMs, on-line services, and the Internet had lower impact ratings than newsmagazine rankings. Published guidebooks (e.g., *Barrons* and *Peterson's Guide*) were ranked in the mid-range in terms of their impact on college choice, higher than newsmagazine rankings, but much lower than catalogs and admissions representatives. Among both parents and students, catalogs factor prominently in college consideration and choice while viewbooks have a greater impact with students than parents (.60 compared to .45).

The two dimensional grids in Tables 4 and 5 plot the market impact of various communications on parents' and students' decisions about where to apply and attend college. In each graph, the x axis represents the frequency of use and the y axis the value to users. Information sources located in the upper right quadrant of these graphs are those with the greatest market impact.

From Tables 4 and 5, which chart the overall impact of various information sources on decisions about college, it is clear that admissions representatives, catalogs, guidebooks, and other parents and friends have the greatest impact on parents. These data also confirm that newsmagazine rankings have a stronger overall impact on parents than students. The data further reveal that meetings and discussions with current students have the potential to have greater impact on parents' and students' decisions about where to apply and enroll. In addition, while a significant proportion of parents are using the Internet and other communications technologies, these tools have (at least for the present time) a very low overall effect in college consideration and choice. Given the dramatic change in the use of information technology by prospective students documented in the winter issue of *studentPOLL*, this pattern may change as Web sites are increasingly developed to replace traditional printed admissions materials as the main recruitment communications for many colleges and universities.

A D V I S O R Y

PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO COMMUNICATIONS WITH PARENTS.

Communications with parents of prospective students are vitally important, but many institutions treat them superficially or limit them to information about financial aid or student life concerns. The importance to parents of catalogs and discussions with admissions counselors indicates clearly the purposefulness of their interest.

Table 3.
Impact of information sources on decisions about where to apply and enroll

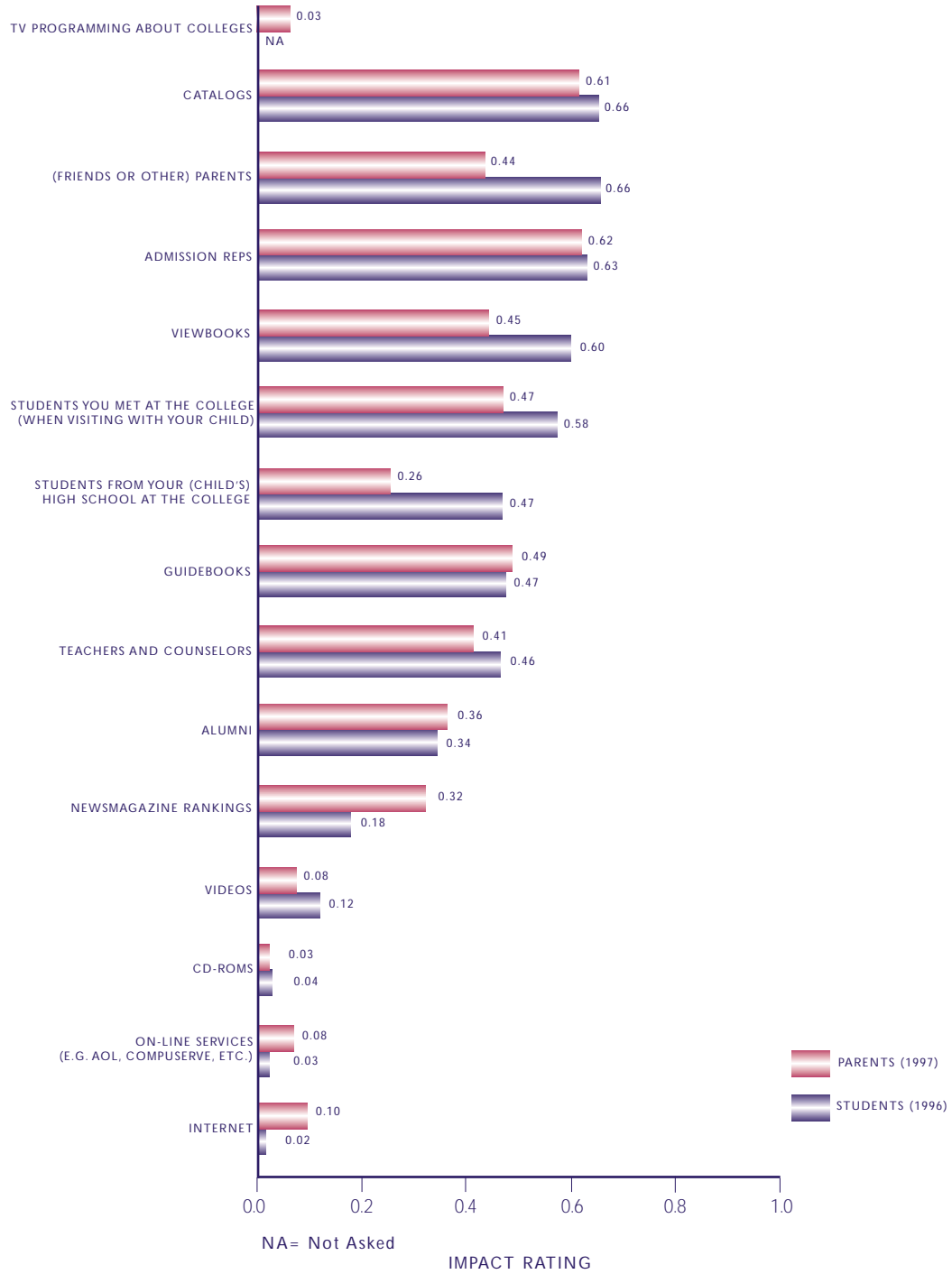


Table 4.
Value and frequency of use of various information sources in college choice (parents)

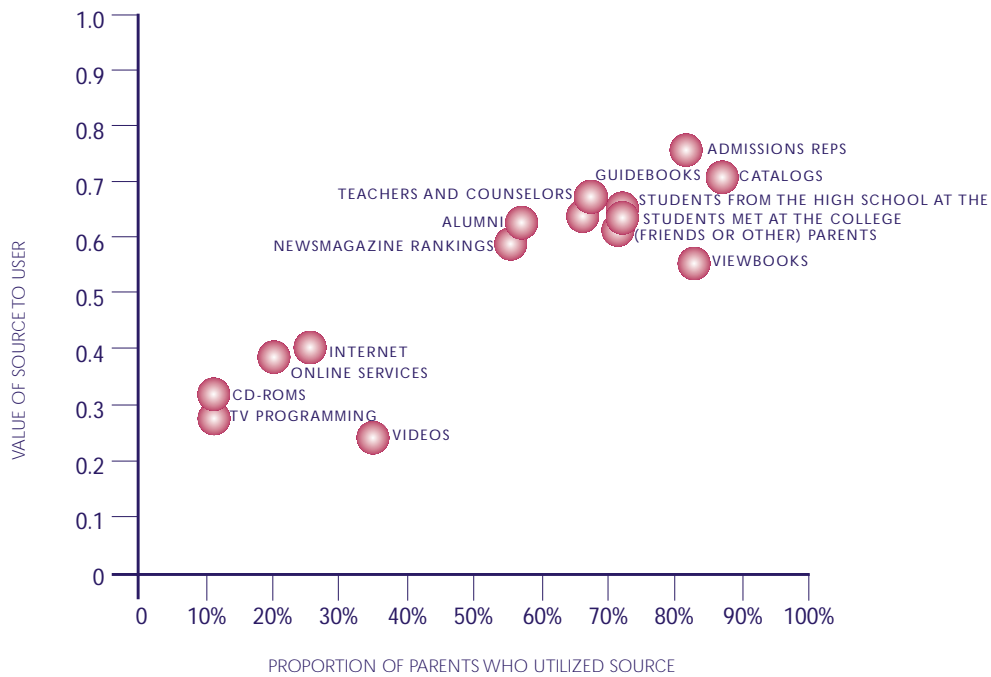
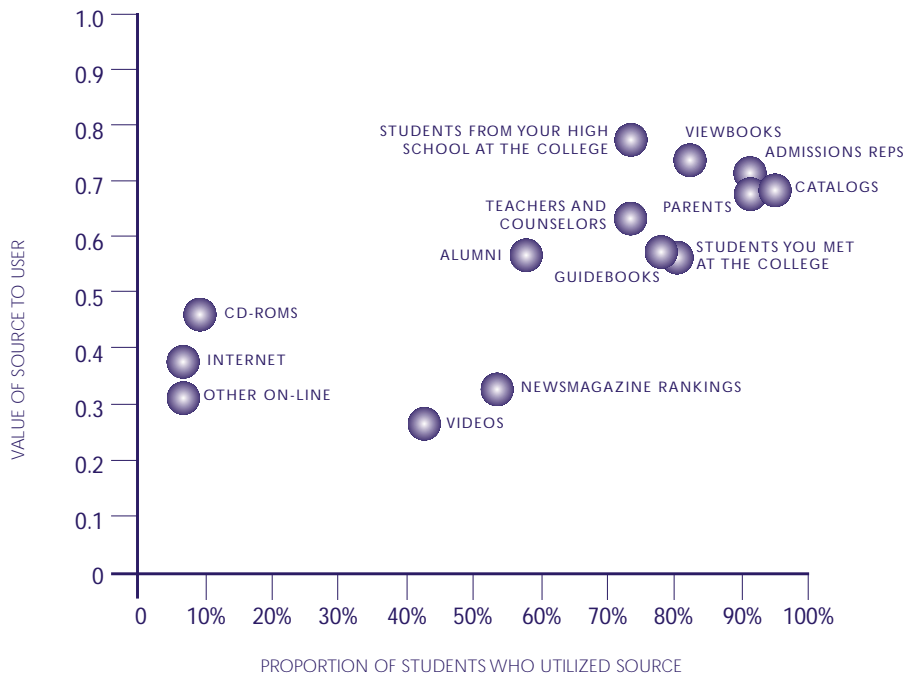


Table 5.
Value and frequency of use of various information sources in college choice (students)



4. Parents are far more familiar with the US News rankings than any other major source of information tested, and far more so than students.

Forty-two percent of parents interviewed indicate that they are very familiar with the *US News* rankings, compared to only 27 percent of students. With a 25 percent “very familiar” rating among parents, the *Money* magazine rankings were a distant second, and the more traditional guidebooks such as *Barron’s*, the *College Board Handbook*, and *Peterson’s* lagged even further behind. As indicated in Table 6, students were more familiar with the rankings than with the guidebooks tested, but not to the same degree as parents.

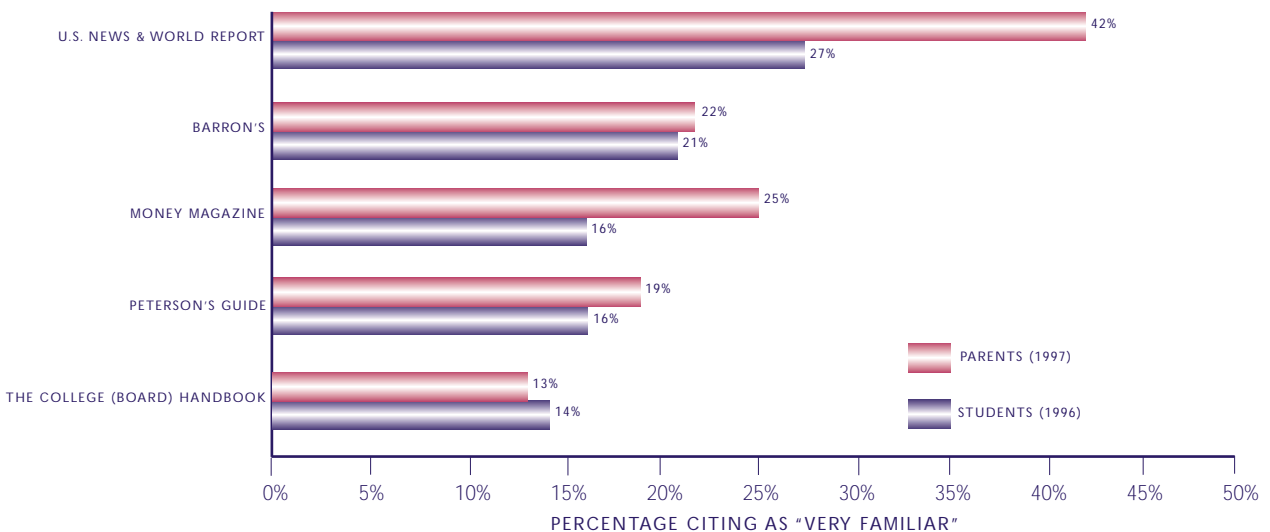
A D V I S O R Y

MAKE MORE EFFECTIVE USE

OF THE CATALOG AS A RECRUITMENT COMMUNICATIONS TOOL
IN PLACE OF OR AS A SUPPLEMENT TO THE VIEWBOOK.

At many institutions, catalogs have been relegated to a minor role in recruitment communications in favor of a greater role for slick (and often superficial) viewbooks. Our findings indicate clearly that catalogs have impact equal to or greater than viewbooks. Send prospective parents and students a catalog earlier in the admissions process.

Table 6.
Familiarity with newsmagazine rankings and major guides



5. Parents tend to have more faith than students in the reliability of the US News rankings.

ADVISORY

USE RANKINGS INFORMATION JUDICIOUSLY IN RECRUITMENT COMMUNICATIONS, EVEN WHEN IT IS HIGHLY FAVORABLE TO YOUR INSTITUTION.

Anything but a top ranking is likely to have little or no value and, given how the ranking criteria change from year to year, this year's prize may be next year's booby prize.

Although the differences are not substantial (and in some cases, statistically insignificant), parents tend to see the *US News* rankings more favorably than students, especially in comparison to the other guidebooks and rankings publications tested. For example, 36 percent of parents cited *US News* as very reliable, placing it in a virtual dead heat with *Barron's* and *Peterson's Guide*. For both groups, *Money* magazine was the least reliable. (Table 7) Moreover, two-thirds of parents consider the rankings and other information provided by *US News* as very helpful in evaluating the quality of a college. (Table 8)

Table 7. Reliability of key college guide/rating sources

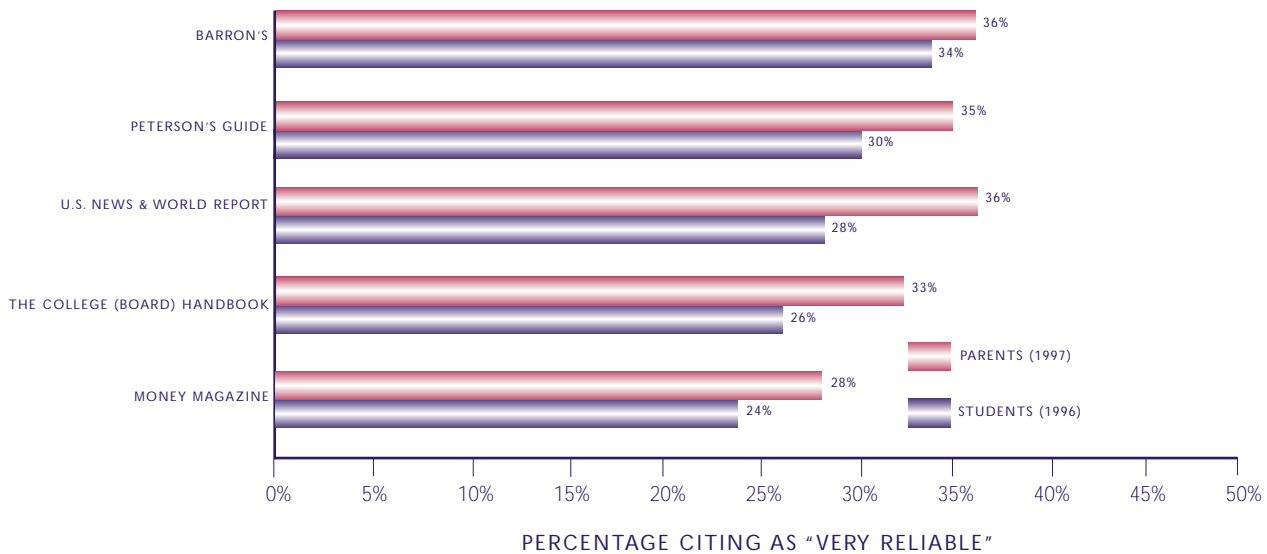
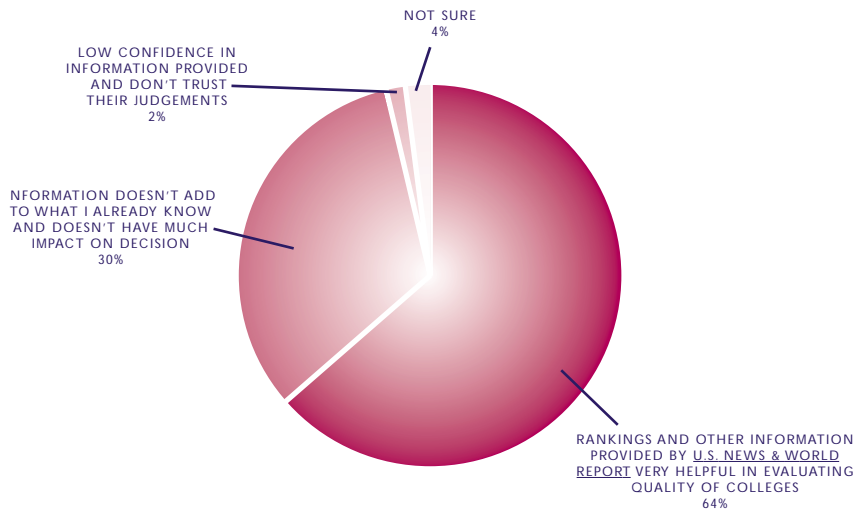


Table 8.
**Attitude toward information provided by newsmagazines
 (parents)**



NOTE: Only asked of parents

ABOUT *student*POLL

*student*POLL is an authoritative national survey that measures the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of high-ability, college-bound high school students and their parents. Available only by subscription, it is

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