

# studentPOLL

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MARKET INTELLIGENCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

## Students report high satisfaction with the quality of college counseling in their high schools, but counselors have little influence over final college choice.

In the tales spun out of questionable conventional wisdom, most high school college counselors are a beleaguered lot, with a propensity to dispense bad advice and provide little time to students. Legions of high school students, the conventional wisdom goes, are poorly served by their college counselors and are unhappy with the counsel they have been given.

One of the beauties of rigorous survey research is its power to subject conventional wisdom to empirical scrutiny. Having heard these views about high school counselors for many years, we decided to test them from the vantage point of the person who matters most—the college-bound high school senior.

Our sample was not just the students who attend the private and affluent public schools whose counselors frequent NACAC conventions, but a true cross section of the population of high school seniors who entered college this past fall (we surveyed them in April of their senior year, when their choices were being finalized). Every high school and student type was fairly represented in the sample. In fact, as far as we know, ours is the first truly

representative survey of college-bound high school students on this topic.

The findings make the conventional wisdom look utterly foolish. Not only are college-bound students overwhelmingly satisfied with the quality of the advice their high school counselors provide, but they told us that the time given them by their counselors was considerable, averaging five separate sessions, each nearly a half-hour long.

Ironically, those least satisfied with the quality of their high school counseling were the affluent, Caucasians, and those with the highest SAT I and ACT scores, precisely the group of students who are now best served and catered to by the whole college admissions process.

Most likely, this pattern reflects the higher educational socialization of affluent students, but we cannot be sure. Whatever the case, college-bound students appear to be contented consumers of high school counseling, something the counseling community should be happy about.

However, we should also note that while high school counselors appear to be a major source of information about

colleges, in the end, they don't seem to have much influence over the actual choices students make. The campus visit, parents, admissions officers, and a host of other people and information sources had a much greater influence over students' final choices, a finding consistent with those we have seen in studies for our clients over many years.

As a final aside, several of our admissions friends, who are concerned about the mounting pressures on families to use fee-for-service independent counselors, asked us to measure the percentage of college-bound students whose families employed these admissions guns-for-hire.

Although the national organization for this group claimed in a recent *Baltimore Sun* article that "11 percent of freshmen entering college a year ago used consulting services," that number falls flat under rigorous empirical scrutiny: Fewer than 1 percent of the students we interviewed (only 4 out of 500) reported that they or their families had employed an independent counselor.

In our research we also explored the extent and nature of students' preparation for the SAT I and ACT tests. These findings also are reported in this issue.



Richard A. Hesel  
Publisher

# 1 A majority of students reported seeking advice from a college counselor at their high school.

To start, we asked students whether they had met with a college counselor in their high school to discuss college planning and selection.

Seventy-four percent of the students we interviewed said they had. (Table 1) Those with family incomes below \$50,000 were more likely (83 percent) to have sought advice from a counselor than students from more affluent families (70 percent).

However, it is important to emphasize that one in four of the students we surveyed did not meet with a counselor at all. When we asked these students

why they hadn't met with a counselor, the most common reason given was that they did not need to (57 percent), followed by the conviction that they would not get good advice (21 percent), and that counselors were hard to schedule or not available in school (12 percent). (Table 2) Caucasian students who said they did not meet with a counselor were much more likely to indicate that they thought they would get bad advice (22 percent) than were minority students (6 percent) who did not meet with counselors.

## ADVISORY

Encourage counselors to recommend your web site to the students they advise by including key URLs for your site in communications with counselors. Provide them in a form that makes it easy for counselors to share the URLs with their advisees.

TABLE 1

Incidence of use of college counselor

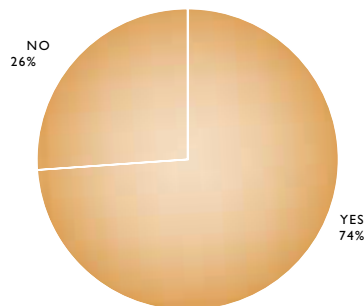
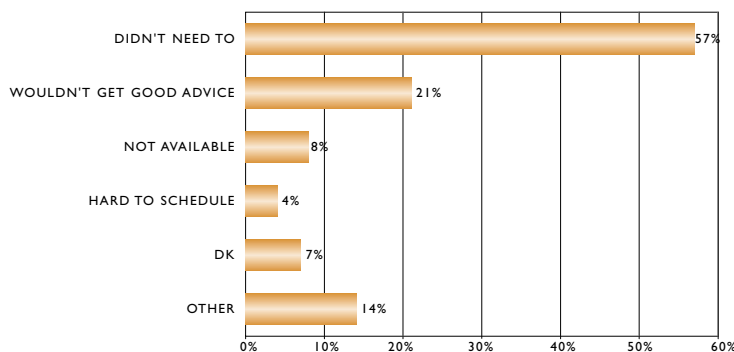


TABLE 2

Reasons for not using counselor



## 2 Students met with their counselor an average of more than five times totaling nearly two and one-half hours.

Next, we sought to measure the frequency and length of the meetings high school seniors had with their college counselor. We found that the accessibility of the college counselor does not appear to be a major problem: those respondents who had met with their counselor had done so an average of 5.45 times, with the meetings totaling over two hours and 20 minutes and each session averaging 26 minutes in length.

Among those who met with a counselor, the cumulative time of meetings fell into three strata, each almost equally represented. Thirty-seven percent met with a counselor for a total of less than one hour. Another 34 percent said they spent more than two hours in meetings with their counselor, with the remaining students reporting that their total meeting time fell within one to two hours. (Table 3)

To look at the findings another way, 30 percent of those who met with a counselor did so once or twice and an additional 27 percent met with the counselor three to four times. The remaining 42 percent met with a counselor 5 or more times. (Table 4) Caucasians were more likely to say that they had only met with a counselor one or two times (32 percent) than were minority students (18 percent).

To break these findings down even further, it is interesting to note that 10 percent of the respondents reported meeting with their counselor for a total of less than 15 minutes. Conversely, 19 percent said they met with a counselor for a total of more than three hours.

Another notable split occurred along racial lines: only 36 percent of Caucasian students logged more than one hour in total meeting time with a counselor, while 60 percent of minority students spent more than one hour. Also,

female students were more likely to report an average total meeting length of over one hour.

And what was the format of the meetings? The vast majority of respondents who met with a counselor indicated that at least one meeting was on an individual basis (88 percent). Twenty-four percent said a meeting occurred in a small group setting and 13 percent in a class. (Table 5) Caucasians (14 percent) were more likely to indicate that a meeting had occurred in class than were minorities (7 percent).

TABLE 3

Sum length of meetings

MEAN = 140 MINUTES

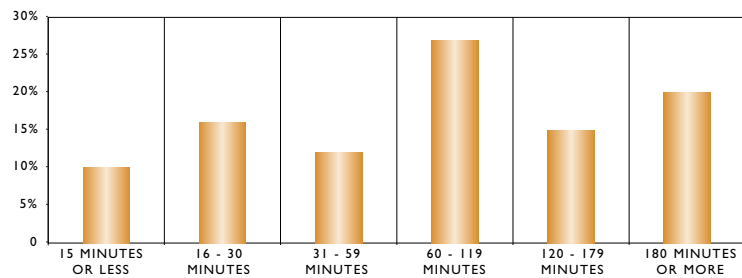


TABLE 4

Number of meetings with counselor

MEAN = 5.5

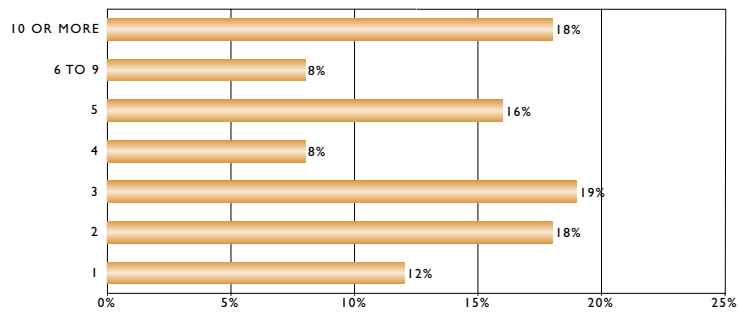
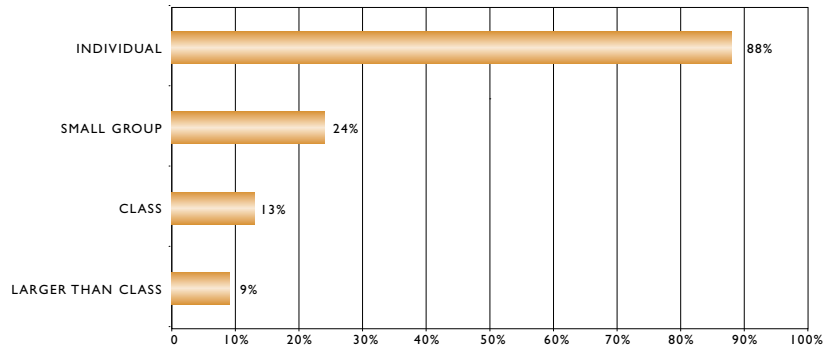


TABLE 5

Type of meeting with counselor



# 3 A majority of students report high satisfaction with the quality of the college counseling they received.

Having established the frequency, length, and type of counselor sessions, we next asked respondents to evaluate the quality of the counseling they received. We used three different measures. The results were mixed.

First, we asked respondents to rate the helpfulness of their counseling sessions. The responses were overwhelmingly positive: 40 percent said the meetings were very helpful, 44 percent somewhat helpful, and only 16 percent

said they were not helpful. (Table 6) Minority respondents and those with combined SAT I scores under 1100 or ACT scores under 24 were more likely to indicate that the meetings were very helpful. Females (89 percent) were more likely to say that the meetings were very or somewhat helpful than were males (80 percent).

Next, we asked those who had sought counseling to rate the quality of the advice they received. In all, 82 percent gave positive ratings: 59 percent rated the advice excellent or very good and 23 percent good. Conversely, only 18 percent rated the counseling they received as fair or poor. (Table 7) Minorities were more likely to rate the advice as excellent or very good (71 percent) than were Caucasians (57 percent).

The results of the third measure were less clear-cut. We presented respondents with four statements about the nature of their experience with the college counseling in their high school. We asked them to choose the statements that best represented their own experience (multiple responses were accepted). Fifty-seven percent of the students surveyed who had met with a counselor selected “The counseling is outstanding and I use it as much as possible.”

However, a high proportion (45 percent) of the students we surveyed selected statements that called into question the quality of the counseling they received. Thirty-one percent agreed with two explicitly negative statements: “The counseling is not very good and I tend to rely on other sources of information,” and “The counselors are so busy you can’t get their time and attention,” were cited by 16 and 15 percent, respectively. (Table 8)

It is also important to note that 14 percent of respondents did not feel a need to seek advice from a college counselor at all, selecting the statement “You can get the information you need on the Internet and from other sources so you don’t need to use the high school counselor.” Male students were more likely to choose this statement than females (18 percent versus 10 percent).

TABLE 6

Ratings of helpfulness of counseling sessions

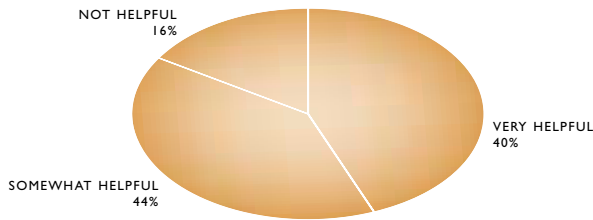


TABLE 7

Ratings of quality of advice given by counselor

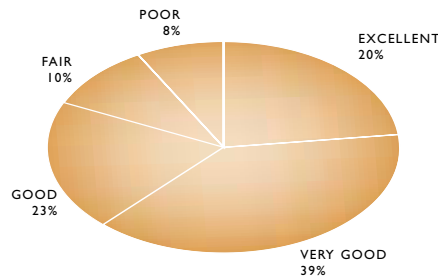
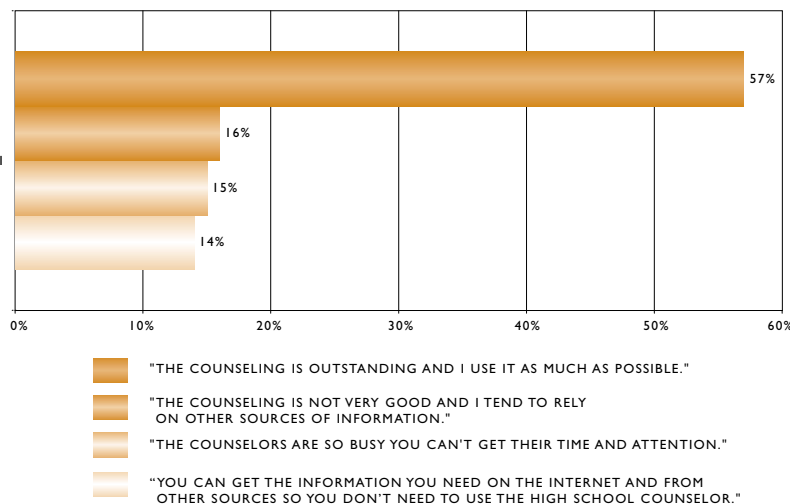


TABLE 8

Agreement with statement about quality of counseling



# 4 Counselors are strong advocates of the Internet in the college selection process.

Over two-thirds (68 percent) of the students who received advice from a college counselor reported that the counselor recommended the student use the Internet to get information about or apply to college electronically. (Table 9)

The most common counselor-recommended use of the Internet was to apply on line (25 percent), followed by developing a list of colleges to apply to (21 percent), getting general college information (20 percent), getting financial aid information (20 percent), scholarship information (17 percent), to get a feel for the campus and student life (15 percent), to develop a list of suitable colleges (15 percent) and to get course information (9 percent). (Table 10)

Apparently, either many counselors did not recommend specific Internet sites for these purposes or students couldn't remember the sites recommended. Fewer than half of our respondents (44 percent) said a specific site was recommended to them, and three-fifths of this group could not remember the site the counselor specified. Individual home pages or websites of individual colleges and universities ranked as the most frequently recommended sites by counselors (31 percent), followed by a number of commercial college information sites, none of which was named by more than 9 percent of respondents.

TABLE 9

Frequency of counselor recommendation to use Internet

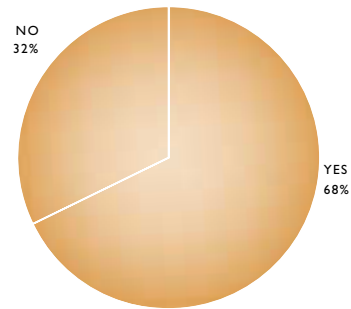
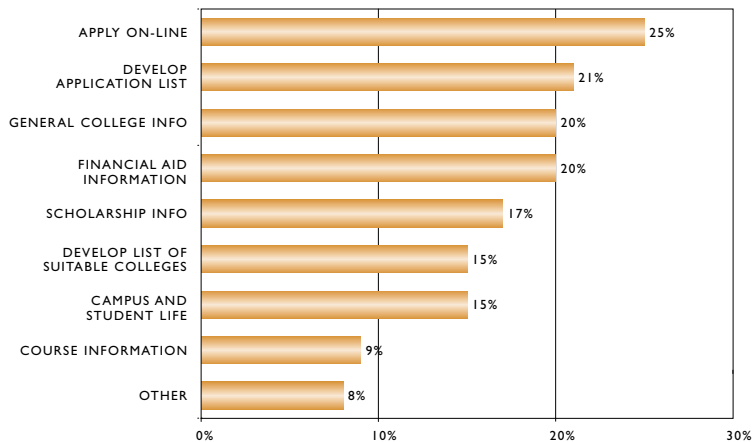


TABLE 10

Counselors' recommended use of the Internet

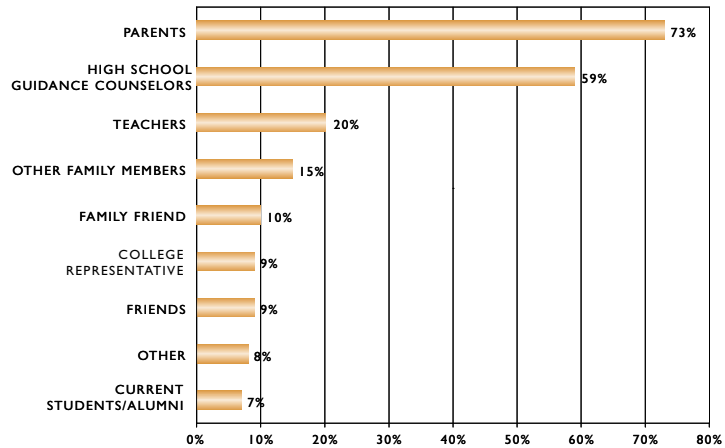


## 5 When discussing their application decisions, students most often turn to their parents.

When asked whom they talked to for advice about where to apply to college, nearly three quarters of the students we surveyed mentioned their parents. Nearly 60 percent said they sought advice from their high school counselor. All other groups were mentioned much less frequently, with teachers cited by 20 percent, and other family members by 10 percent. All other groups were mentioned by fewer than 10 percent of respondents. (Table 11)

TABLE 11

Sources of advice about application decisions



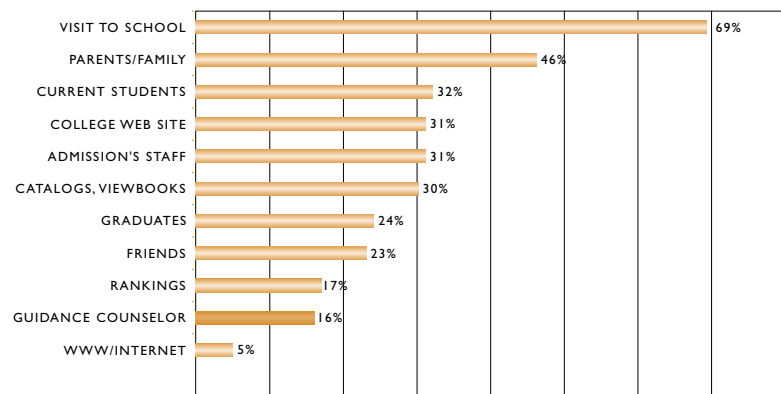
## 6 High school counselors have little influence over students' final college choices.

Given the role that high school counselors play as an important information source in the college admissions process, we were interested in knowing the extent of their influence over students' final choice of a college. The results were conclusive: it doesn't amount to much. We listed a number

of possible sources of influence over the final selection of a college and asked respondents to rate which were very important in their final choice. The campus visit (69 percent) and parents (46 percent) were the most influential by far. Counselors ranked near the bottom, at only 16 percent. (Table 12)

TABLE 12

Sources of influence over final college choice



### ADVISORY

Build an email database of high school counselors and use it to email hyperlinks to key parts of your web site that the counselors can forward to advisees who might be interested in your institution.

## 7 Satisfaction with counseling and frequency of meetings with counselors do not vary dramatically with high school size or type.

We fielded the survey with a hunch that we would find wide variations in student satisfaction with high school counseling and the frequency of counselor meetings based on the type

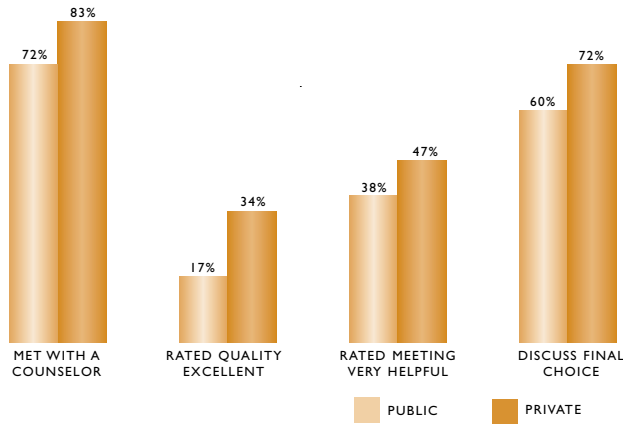
and size of the school. We found some differences, but they were not nearly as great as we had anticipated.

Compared to students in public high schools, those in private schools were

more likely to have met with a counselor (72 and 83 percent, respectively) and to have had more meetings (5.34 and 7.82, respectively). Likewise, private school students were more likely to be satisfied with the quality of the counseling, with 34 percent rating the counseling as excellent versus only 17 percent of their public school counterparts. (Table 13) Similar differences were found for students in high schools with enrollments under 1,000 and those with enrollments over 1,000.

TABLE 13

Counselor use and satisfaction: public vs. private schools



## 8 Very few students are paying for the help of independent counselors.

We concluded our questions about counseling with an open-ended question that explored respondents' use of independent counselors, that is, counselors who the students or their parents paid to provide assistance for the college application process. Given the overall levels of satisfaction with the

counseling provided in the high school, it was not surprising to find only a fraction of the students we interviewed said that they used such independent counselors: less than 1 percent, only 4 out of the 500 students surveyed.

### ADVISORY

Communicate with counselors early in students' considerations about college. Recognize that the influence of counselors will be greatest at the stage when students are determining which colleges to consider in the first place and least influential in their final choice of a college.

# 9 Most high school seniors prepare for the SAT I or ACT, devoting considerable time to test preparation.

Over three quarters (77 percent) of students we interviewed reported preparing in some way for the SAT I or ACT. Females, minorities, and those posting SAT I or ACT scores below 1100 or 24, respectively, were more likely to report preparing for these standardized tests than males, Caucasians, and those who earned higher SAT I/ACT scores.

Those who prepared for the tests reported devoting, on average, 15 hours to the task (a time allotment equivalent to that spent on two weeks of homework by the average high school student). Twenty percent said they spent less than two hours on test preparation. (Table 14)

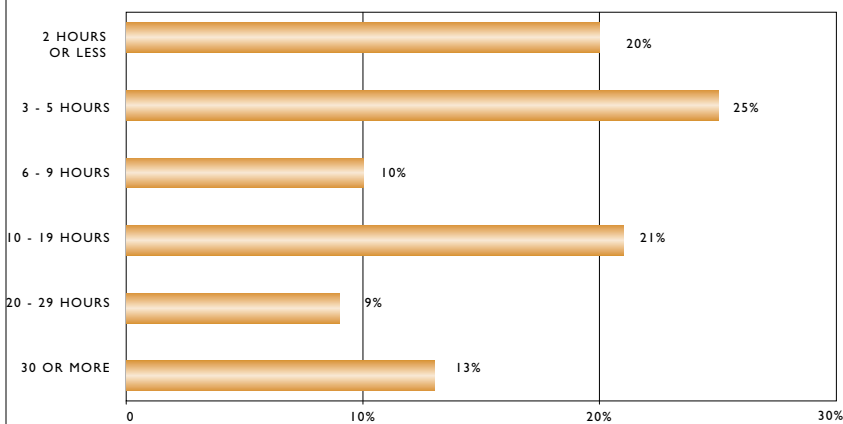
Caucasian and minority respondents reported a dramatic difference in time spent on test preparation. On average, Caucasians dedicated 13 hours to test prepping. Minority students reported spending twice as much time (26 hours on average) preparing for the SAT I or ACT. Males reported spending more time (18 hours) than did females (13 hours). Minorities (26 percent) were more likely to say they devoted 30 hours or more to test preparation than did Caucasians (12 percent). Caucasians were more likely than minorities to say that they spent less than 10 hours preparing (58 to 41 percent, respectively).

## ADVISORY

Do not compromise your efforts to communicate with high school counselors on the basis of the assumption that their influence has diminished as a consequence of the Internet's growing role as a source of college information.

TABLE 14

Time spent preparing for SAT I/ACT





# 10 Fewer than one in six students use commercial test preparation services.

Commercial services were used by only a small fraction of respondents, and more frequently by those with higher incomes.

One in four (25 percent) of respondents reported using test guidebooks or preparation books to prep for the SAT I or ACT. Women were more likely than men to use such tools. Nearly equal proportions (23 and 21 percent respectively) said they used practice tests or prep classes offered in their high schools. Only 16 percent reported using private classes or courses and 13 percent

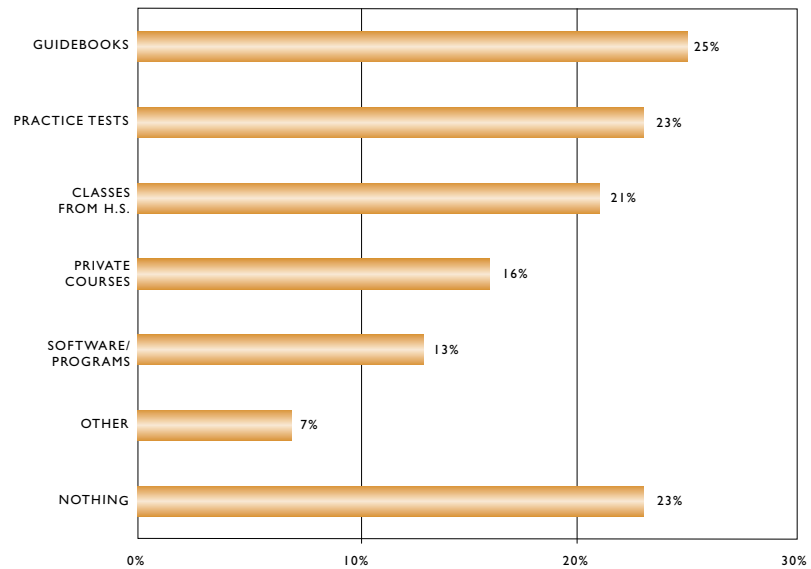
computer software programs. (Table 15) Not surprisingly, those with household incomes above \$50,000 (but not those who reported higher test scores) were more likely to have used fee-for-service private classes or courses offered by individual or commercial test prep vendors. Students with lower SAT I /ACT scores (below 1100/24) were more likely to say they had participated in some form of test preparation than those with higher scores (above 1100/24), 86 to 74 percent, respectively.

## ADVISORY

Develop systematic procedures for regularly checking and correcting the information provided about your institution on all major college-information web sites. Check all college-match search engines on these sites to be sure that your institution is listed in searches using criteria that should result in a match for you institution.

TABLE 15

Type of Test Preparation for SAT I/ACT



# 11 Students rate practice tests as the most helpful form of preparation.

Among students who said they prepared for the SAT I or ACT tests, by far the largest number (42 percent) of respondents indicated in our open-ended question that the most helpful form of test preparation was practice tests. The next most helpful option, cited by 14 percent, was classes or special courses offered by the high school. Another 12 percent said gaining information about test content was most helpful, and nine percent cited test-taking techniques or tricks that make it easier to figure out answers as most helpful. Computer software programs ranked next, garnering only eight percent of responses (only a small number used these programs in the first place).

Only four percent mentioned private test-preparation tutoring. (Table 16)

It is interesting to note, given all the promotion and advertising undertaken by commercial test-taking services, that a majority of the students could not name even one company that provides assistance with SAT I /ACT preparation. No single commercial test-preparation service could be identified by more than 22 percent of respondents on an unaided basis.

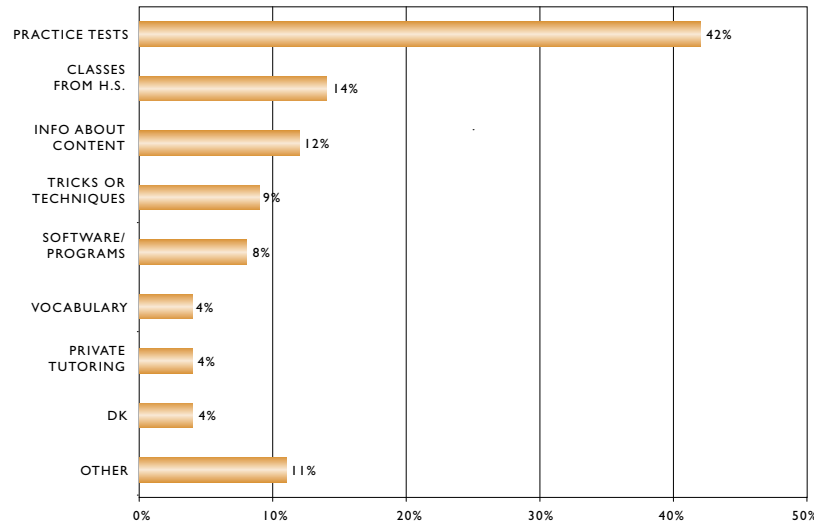
Minority respondents as well as those with SAT I or ACT scores over 1100 or 24, respectively, were more likely to be able to name a commercial test-preparation service.

## ADVISORY

Include in your on-campus events for high school counselors professional development workshops on the use of the Internet and email as counseling tools.

TABLE 16

Most helpful form of test preparation



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As a result of Embark's sponsorship, each quarterly issue of *studentPOLL™*, formerly available only by paid subscription, will be mailed free of charge to the senior administrative officers of all four-year colleges and universities nationwide. In addition, the research design has been enhanced so that survey results are a truly representative national sample of the college-bound high school population.

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Since its assessment of the influence of the *US News and World Report* rankings on college choice was published in the fall of 1995, *studentPOLL*™ has become the authoritative national source for market intelligence about critical issues in student recruitment and financial aid. It provides reliable answers to questions about student and parent attitudes and behavior that many college administrators could only answer with guesses, anecdotes, and hunches.

Published four times a year, *studentPOLL*™ provides in-depth market data, rigorously conducted and analyzed to inform the strategic and tactical decisions institutional leaders and managers make about student recruitment and financial aid.

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## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Findings reported in *studentPOLL*™ are based on in-depth telephone interviews with a random national sample of high school seniors who plan to enroll in four-year colleges the following fall. To qualify for an interview respondents must have achieved a combined SAT I score of 800 or higher and/or a composite ACT score of 17 or more. Previously, *studentPOLL*™ only surveyed high-ability high school seniors with a minimum SAT I score of 1050. The study sample is drawn and/or weighted to represent a national distribution of students with qualifying SAT I or ACT scores by geography, gender, intended major, and income. Surveys are conducted in the fall and/or spring of each year, with a sample size of 500 or more. The sampling margin-of-error is plus or minus 4 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.

Findings reported in this issue are based on research fielded in April, 2000. The table below provides an overview of the key demographic characteristics of the students interviewed.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE				
Income	<\$50,000	\$50,000 TO \$99,000	\$100,000+	DK
	22%	34%	18%	26%
Test Taken	JUST SAT I	JUST ACT	BOTH	
	30%	22%	48%	
Race	MINORITY	CAUCASIAN		
	14%	85%		
HS Type	PUBLIC	PRIVATE		
	83%	16%		
HS Size	<500	500 TO 999	1000 TO 1999	2000 TO 4999
	15%	27%	34%	22%
Gender	MALE	FEMALE		
	45%	55%		