

Social Networking Sites

Social Networking Sites and College-Bound Students

Publishers' note

In only a few short years, the popularity of social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and MySpace has skyrocketed, with tens of millions of teenagers and twenty-somethings using these sites as their social communications vehicle of choice.

Of late, colleges and universities have begun to experiment with these social media networks, hoping to find ways to use them as a recruitment marketing tool. But little serious or reliable research existed to indicate whether these networks were an appropriate or effective tool for colleges to communicate with prospective students. So we decided to devote an entire *Student Poll* study to this question.

This issue of *Student Poll* reports the results of that study. Our findings are based on a national, online survey that explores the influence, use, and importance of social networking sites to high school seniors who registered for the SAT this fall and are planning to attend college in the fall of 2009. Specifically we explored: how and why students use social networking sites; how much time they spend visiting these sites; what if any concerns they have about privacy issues and the possibility of parents and others having access to their site profile or page; and what effect these sites have had on their college search. Our national sample included 960 students from a representative cross-section of students of different racial and economic backgrounds and academic abilities. The survey was fielded October 2008.

For those who see SNS as a powerful marketing tool, we have bad news. While use of SNS by college-bound high school students is almost universal, students primarily use social networking sites for, as the name appropriately suggests, socializing — communicating with friends, making new friends, and learning about a variety of social events. SNS appear to have little value as a recruitment marketing tool, especially in comparison to the many other communications tools that figure prominently in college choice. Relative to other sources of information and influence such as personal visits to a college campus and websites, in the pre-application stage of the college consideration process, SNS rank near the bottom as factors students consider very important in their college search.

Among other salient findings of the study:

- All but a few college-bound high school seniors use SNS on a regular basis, and Facebook is, by far, the social networking site of choice among this population.
- On average, students visit social networking sites one or more times a day and spend 32 minutes per visit.
- A relatively small segment of students reported using social networking sites for their college search (about one-fifth). Those that do are using these sites to look at student pages, blogs, photos, and other information that will help them

determine, not surprisingly, the social “fit” of the campuses under consideration.

- Students are increasingly concerned about the privacy of the information they post about themselves on a social networking site. Three-quarters of students indicated that they are careful about what they put on their profile or page on a social networking site because they are concerned that their parents or other adults might see it.

We remind our readers that our survey was conducted with students just beginning their senior year, before decisions about applications had been made. Recognizing that behavior regarding SNS in college choice might change dramatically when application decisions have been made, admission notices received, and final matriculation decisions made, we will launch a follow-up study in late spring 2009 to take additional measures that will provide a longitudinal perspective.

Recent articles on technical blogs suggest that “user engagement” on many of these social networking sites is, in fact, on the decline and that social networking sites could be the technology du jour, a passing phenomenon that gives way to another communications fad or trend in the future. Certainly, as a new technology, it remains to be seen whether these sites will play an increasingly important role in college choice. For now, the jury is out, and our evidence suggests that institutions should be prudent about the time and resources they invest in using SNS as a recruitment tool.

It also could be reasonably inferred from our findings that aggressive use of SNS for college marketing could backfire. Social networking sites and the profiles and other information students post on them represent a highly personal space in their lives, one largely intended for friends and family. The violation of that space by the forces of college marketing might well be seen as an unwelcome intrusion.

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Study Findings

1 Use of social networking sites among college-bound high school students is nearly universal, and especially high among African Americans.

We explored the degree to which high school seniors who will be attending college in the fall of 2009 are using social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, MySpace, Xanga, Friendster or other such sites in their college search and for other purposes.

In our online survey completed this fall, 89 percent of the 960 students who completed the survey indicated that they had visited social networking sites recently. Among the nearly 90 percent who use SNS, 84 percent of those students reported having a personal page or profile on one or more of these sites.

Of the very small percentage of students reporting that they did not recently use social networking sites, the primary reasons given included:

- I have no interest in using these sites (66 percent)
- I don't know why I would want to use them or what I would get out of using them (49 percent)
- I don't have time to use these sites (46 percent)

- My parents don't allow me to use these sites (28 percent)

Among the significant subgroup findings by race:

- African Americans are more likely (97 percent) than Hispanics (86 percent) and Whites (88 percent) to visit social networking sites.
- African Americans also were more likely (93 percent) than Whites (84 percent) to have a profile page on a social networking site.

2 Facebook and MySpace dominate the world of social networking sites.

Of the nearly universal number of students who indicated they visited social networking sites, four out of five also indicated that they had a personal page or profile. We asked students with profile pages to indicate the sites on which they posted their own page or profile, checking all that applied. Facebook and MySpace are, by far, the social networking sites of choice, with 79 percent of students who use SNS indicating that they had a personal page or profile on Facebook and 69 percent on MySpace, compared to 9 percent on Xanga, 7 percent on Hi5, and 1 percent on Friendster.

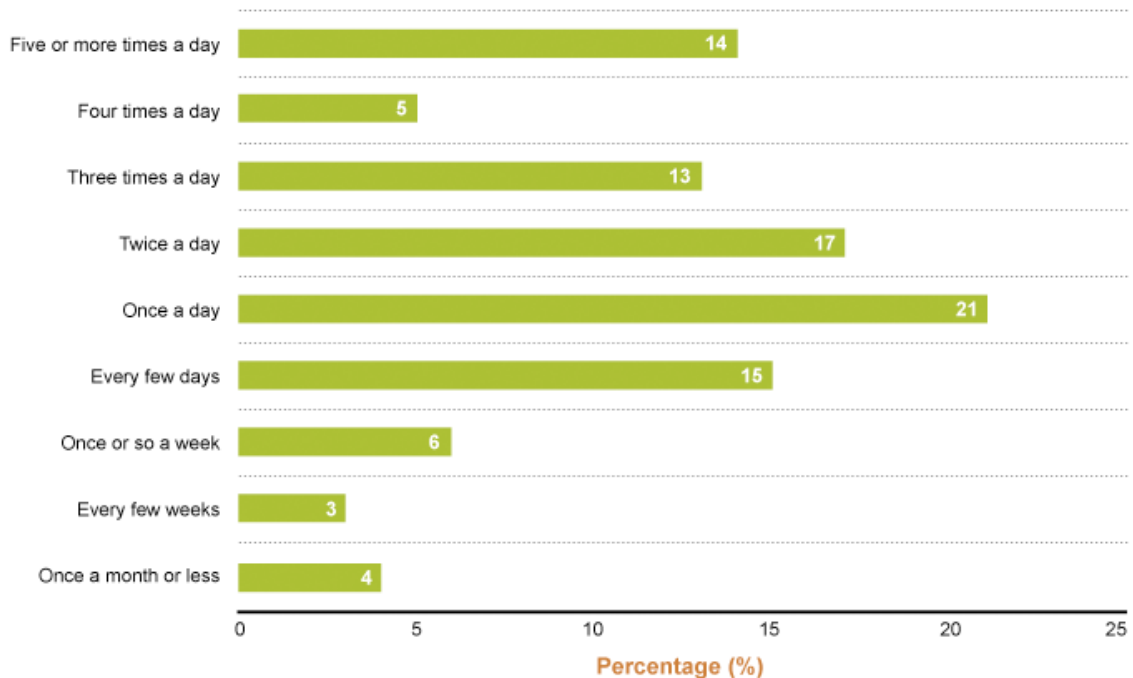
When we asked students to reveal which social networking site they visited most often, 60 percent of students indicated Facebook and 38 percent MySpace. By racial subgroups, Asians (69 percent) and Whites (69 percent) were more likely than African Americans (46 percent) and Hispanics (31 percent) to visit Facebook. On the flip side, Hispanics (68 percent) and African Americans (52 percent) were more likely than Asians (24 percent) and Whites (29 percent) to visit MySpace.

3 Students frequently visit and spend considerable time on social networking sites.

We also explored how often these college-bound students visit social networking sites and how much time they spend on these sites. We first asked students how often they typically visit SNS, giving them a range of responses from less frequently (once a month or less) to more frequently (five or more times a day). Some 70 percent of students who reported using SNS visit one or more of these sites at least once a day and 32 percent visit SNS three or more times a day.

CHART 1

Frequency of student visits to social networking sites



Following up on that question, we asked these social networking site users to indicate on average, for each single visit, how long they typically spend on the site. The average time was 62 minutes and 50 percent reported that they spend about 30 minutes on each site visit. We should add that in survey research time estimates of this kind are usually exaggerated, so the average minutes students reported may overrepresent the actual time spent. Whatever the number, it is substantial.

4 Socializing and staying in touch with friends, not surprisingly, drives interest and use of SNS.

We asked students about the reasons they visit and use social networking sites; we provided an extensive checklist of possible uses and asked respondents to mark off all the reasons that apply to their own use of these sites.

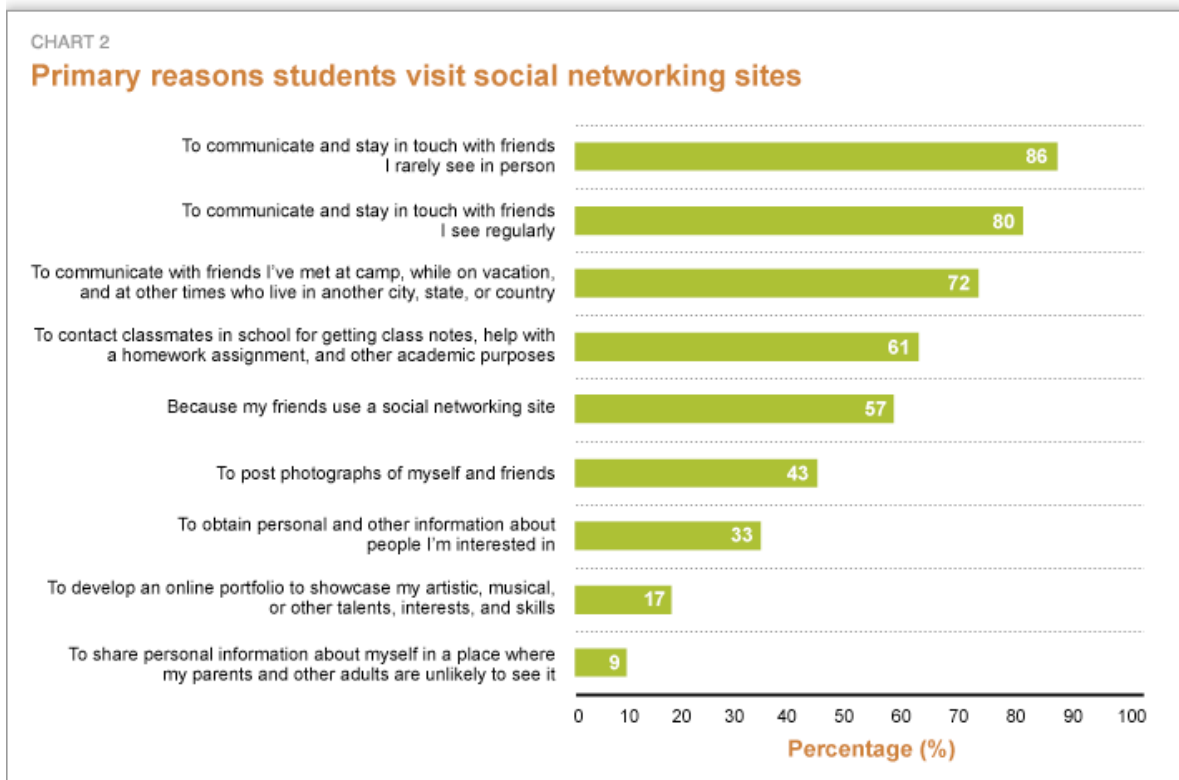
The most frequently cited uses of SNS included:

- Communicating and staying in touch with friends they rarely see in person (86 percent)
- Communicating and staying in touch with friends they see on a regular basis (80 percent)
- Communicating with friends they've met at camp, on vacation, and other places (72 percent)
- Contacting classmates in school to get class notes, help with homework assignments, and other academic purposes (61 percent)
- Because their friends use these sites (57 percent)

Racial and ethnic subgroup findings especially noteworthy:

- Hispanics (49 percent) and African Americans (56 percent) were more likely than Whites (33 percent) to have met friends for the very first time on social networking sites.

- Asians (30 percent), African Americans (26 percent), and Hispanics (21 percent) were more likely to say they have close friends they made on a social networking site compared to Whites (11 percent).



5 A relatively small segment of students is using social networking sites for their college search. Those that are use sites to determine their ability to fit in and feel comfortable at a particular college.

We wanted to gauge the extent to which social networking sites factor into and influence students' college search and selection. So we asked all students whether they had used social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or other sites to gather information or impressions about colleges they were considering. Only 18 percent reported they had.

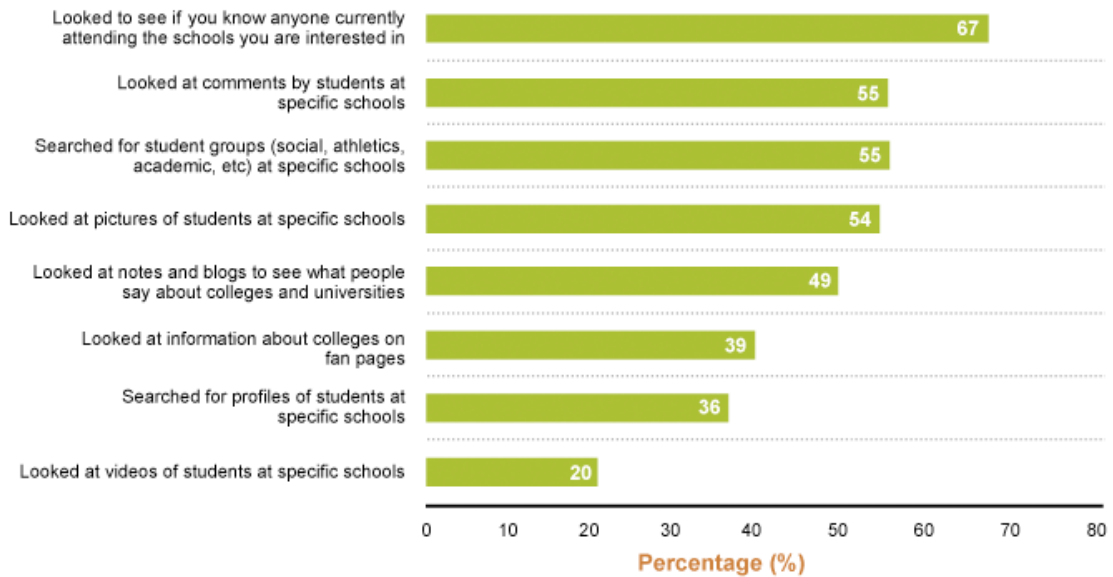
Taking the small segment that answered affirmatively, we then asked them to indicate how they had used SNS to explore colleges. Again, the answers were overwhelmingly focused on social dimensions relating to understanding the kinds of students who attend an institution of interest and the extent to which the institution would provide a good social fit. More than half of these students (remember, only 18 percent of the students surveyed, a small number) used SNS to:

- Look to see if they knew anyone attending the colleges they were interested in (67 percent)
- Look at comments by students at specific schools (55 percent)
- Search for student groups (social, athletic, academic) at specific schools (55 percent)
- Look at pictures of students at specific schools (54 percent)

Similarly, about one-fifth of the students surveyed looked to see if a college they were interested in had a Facebook, MySpace, or other social network site page.

CHART 3

Student use of social networking sites in college consideration



6 Students are concerned about protecting their privacy on social networking sites.

Given media reports about the possible access of employers, higher education institutions, parents, and others to the profiles students post on social networking sites, we decided to ask students a number of questions related to the privacy of information on their own page or profile.

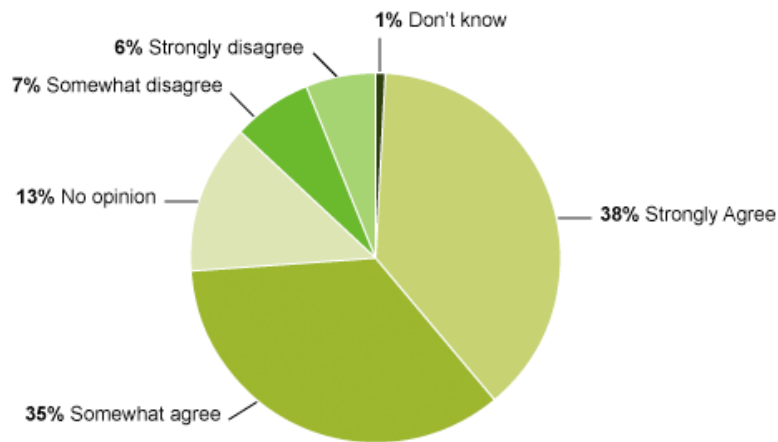
First, we asked students whether they kept their profile public or private. Nearly half (48 percent) indicated that everything on their profile is private, 32 percent reported that some things are private, only 16 percent revealed that everything on their profile is public, and 4 percent didn't know. Then we asked whether students had ever changed the default privacy setting of their profile — and more than two-thirds answered yes. While we did not determine whether the settings were changed to provide higher privacy levels, it is quite clear that privacy concerns are important.

To gauge the level of concern students had about information on their profile and public access to it, we asked them to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "I'm careful about what I put on my profile because I know it's possible that my parents or other adults might have access to it."

Nearly three-quarters of students surveyed strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, while only 13 percent somewhat or strongly disagreed.

CHART 4

I am careful about what I put on my profile because parents may see it



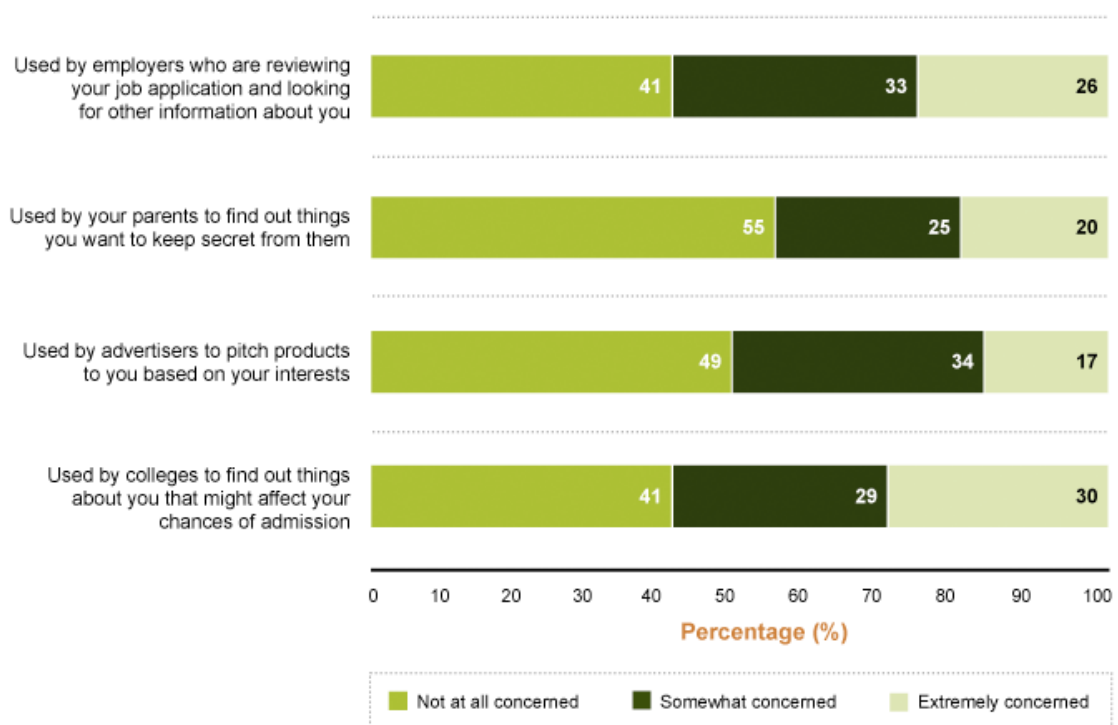
Finally, we asked students their level of concern about possible ways parents, colleges, and others might use information from their profile or page on a social networking site with the possible responses scaled “extremely concerned,” “somewhat concerned,” and “not at all concerned.” Almost one-third of students indicated that they were extremely concerned that colleges might use their profile to find out things about them that might affect their chances of admission.

More than one-quarter reported that they were extremely concerned that employers reviewing a job application might look for other information about them on their profile.

And one-fifth indicated that they were extremely concerned that the information on their social networking site profile might be used by their parents to discover things about them they don't want their parents to know.

CHART 5

Level of concern about possible uses of private information on social networking site



Several interesting subgroup findings by race and income are worth noting:

- Middle-income students are more likely to keep everything on their site profile private compared to students of higher and lower incomes.
- Students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to make everything on their site profile public.
- African Americans (51 percent) are more likely than Whites (36 percent) to be careful about the private information they post on their site profile.

7 Compared to most other sources of information affecting college consideration and choice, social networking sites rank at the very bottom, with very little apparent impact in the inquiry and application stages of the process.

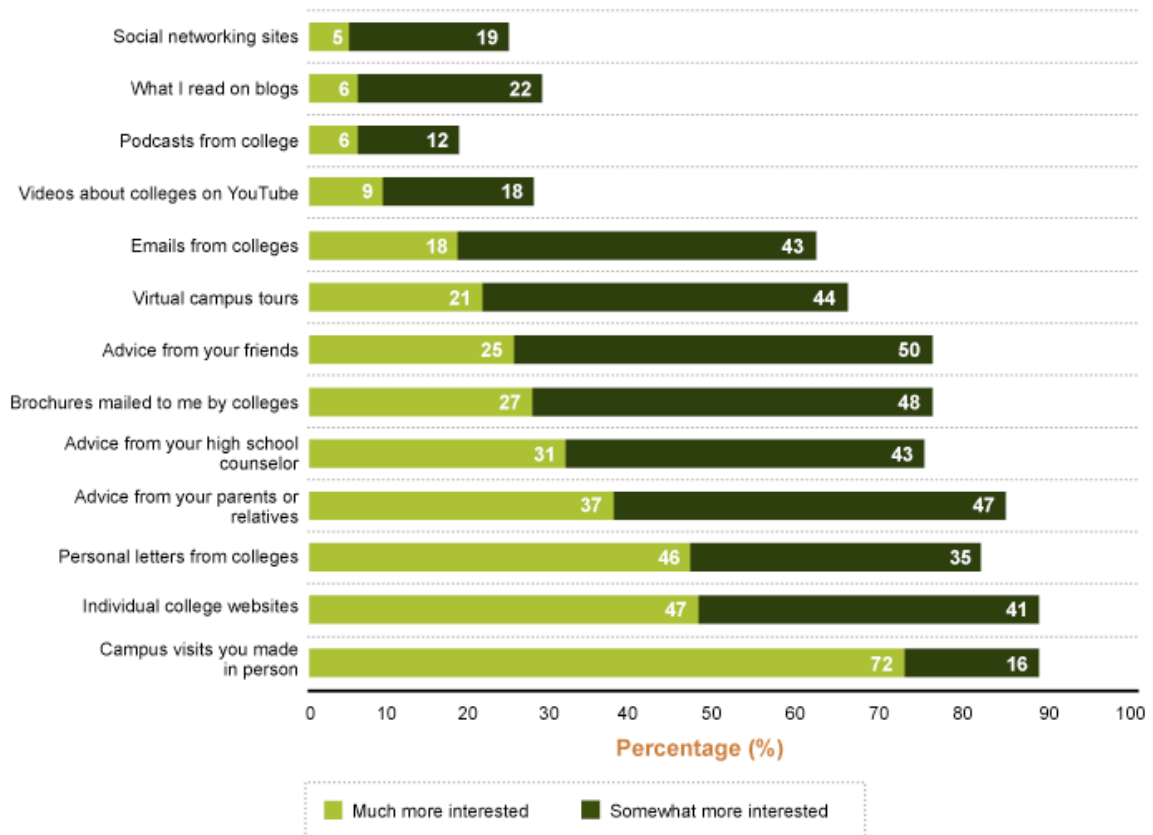
Given that SNS are relatively new technologies, it may be that their influence on college choice in the early stages of the process will grow. For now, SNS appear to have a minimal impact.

When we asked students to rate the extent to which a number of various information sources influenced interest in various colleges they were considering, SNS ranked last.

Nearly three-quarters of the students reported that a personal visit to a college, 47 percent individual college websites, and 46 percent personal letters from colleges made them much more interested in a school they were considering. By comparison, only 5 percent of students surveyed reported that social networking sites made them much more interested in a college. SNS ranked at the bottom of the list of factors, along with podcasts from colleges (6 percent) or blogs about colleges (6 percent).

CHART 6

Effects of different information sources on interest in colleges



One subgroup finding was especially noteworthy: African Americans (12 percent) were more likely to say that SNS made them much more interested in colleges they were considering compared to Hispanics (3 percent) and Whites (3 percent).

Study methodology

The findings reported in this *Student Poll* are based on 960 responses from a random national sample of 34,000 high school seniors who registered for the SAT and who completed an optional Web survey between October 20 and October 27, 2008. The margin of error for this survey is plus or minus 3 percent. The findings are weighted to represent this population of students' gender, race, and the region of the United States where they reside.

For more information about this issue of *Student Poll* or to discuss the potential impact of the economy on your institution, please contact Rick Hesel, Principal, Art & Science Group by phone at 410-377-7880 x12 or via email at hesel@artsci.com.

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