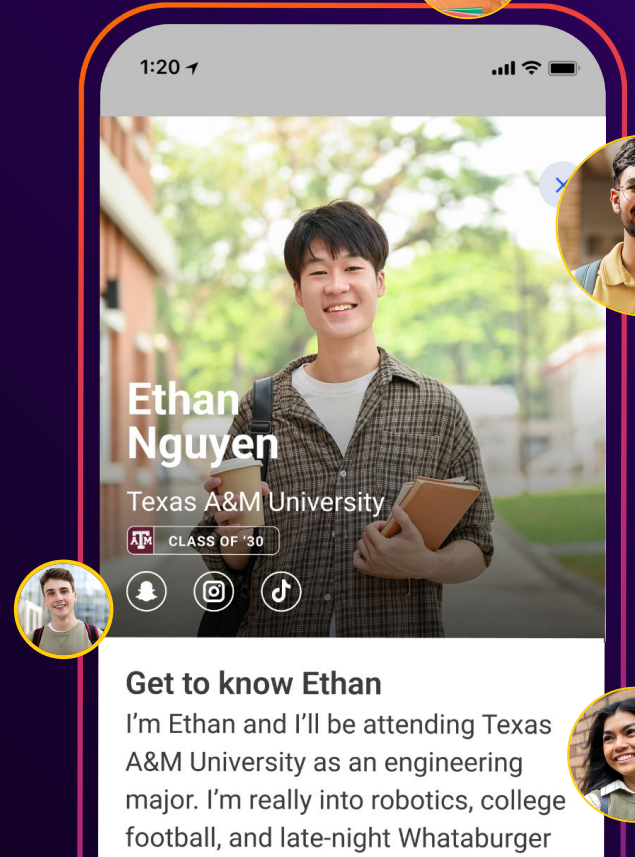




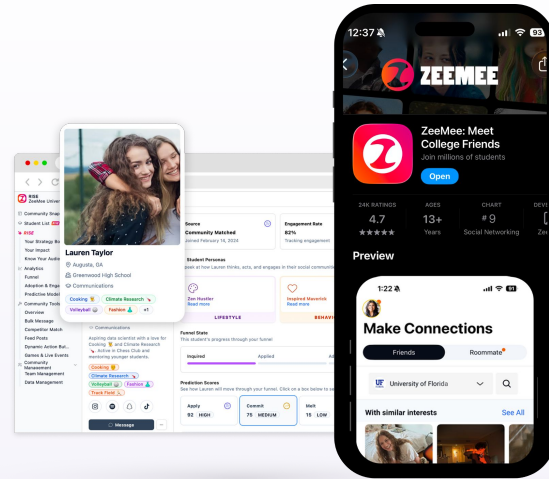
12,000 students told us exactly what they think of colleges using AI in the admissions process



About



We help millions of students navigate their college selection journey and choose the place that is right for them, as well as giving access to the most unique data and interactive tools, to help colleges drive students through the enrollment funnel.



300+ college partners | **2.6M** students
Top 10 social app | **4.7★** App Store rating

Backed by a team with a combined 200+
years of enrollment experience



Our Student Pulse Surveys

Every month we ask students some of the most important and burning questions related to their college admissions process.



This month:

When are students comfortable with AI during their college admissions process, and where do they prefer humans?

TLDR;

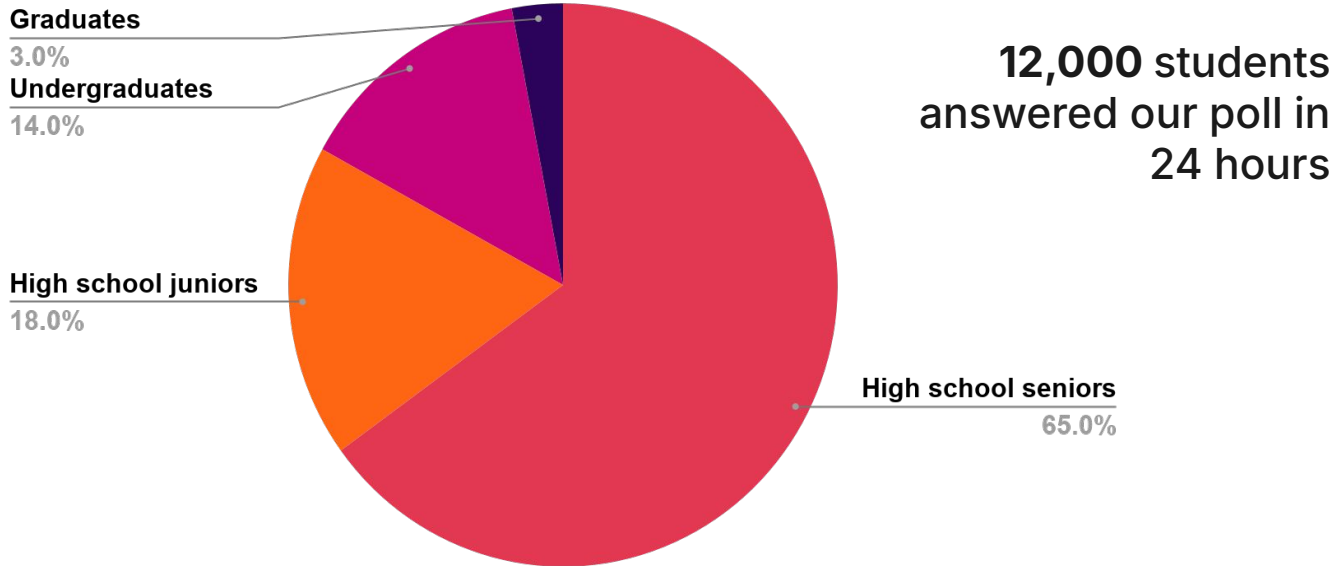
Students prefer admissions experiences where AI enhances, rather than replaces, human relationships; they are AI-native, but not fully AI-trusting.

To them, nothing can replace the human connection, **especially** as they get closer to the final decision and it becomes much more high stakes and emotional.

In summary, our polled students have:

- ✓ An overwhelming preference for human interaction over AI agent tools - at all stages of enrollment funnel
- ✓ An openness to AI powered reminders and texting
- ✓ A general acceptance of AI assisted personalization in marketing
- ✓ A strong resistance to AI at emotional/high-stakes decision making moments
- ✓ Different opinions on AI as they get younger, and depending on the type of institution they are applying to
- ✓ Strong preference for ChatGPT over other AI tools

Who we polled





Takeaway #1

Students have strong preferences about which channels AI-Agents should engage with them through

Most students are comfortable with AI agents **texting** them (52.2%)

Some students are comfortable with AI agents **emailing** them (37.9%)

Hardly any students are comfortable with an AI agent **calling** them (5%)

And many reject AI agents altogether:

A third of students said they were not comfortable with **any AI agent communication methods** (37.5%)





Takeaway #2

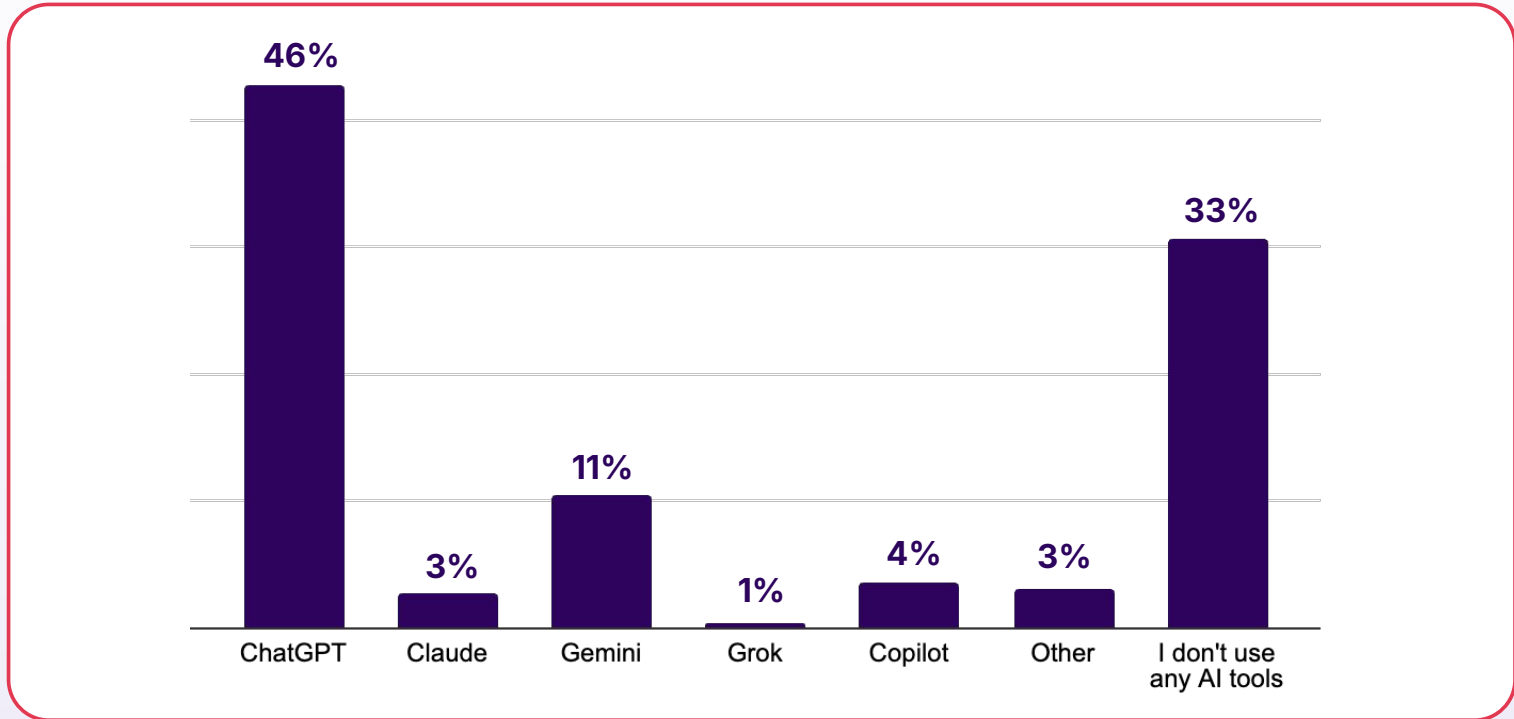
Students are embracing AI tools casually, with adoption driven by convenience and exploration, rather than deep reliance



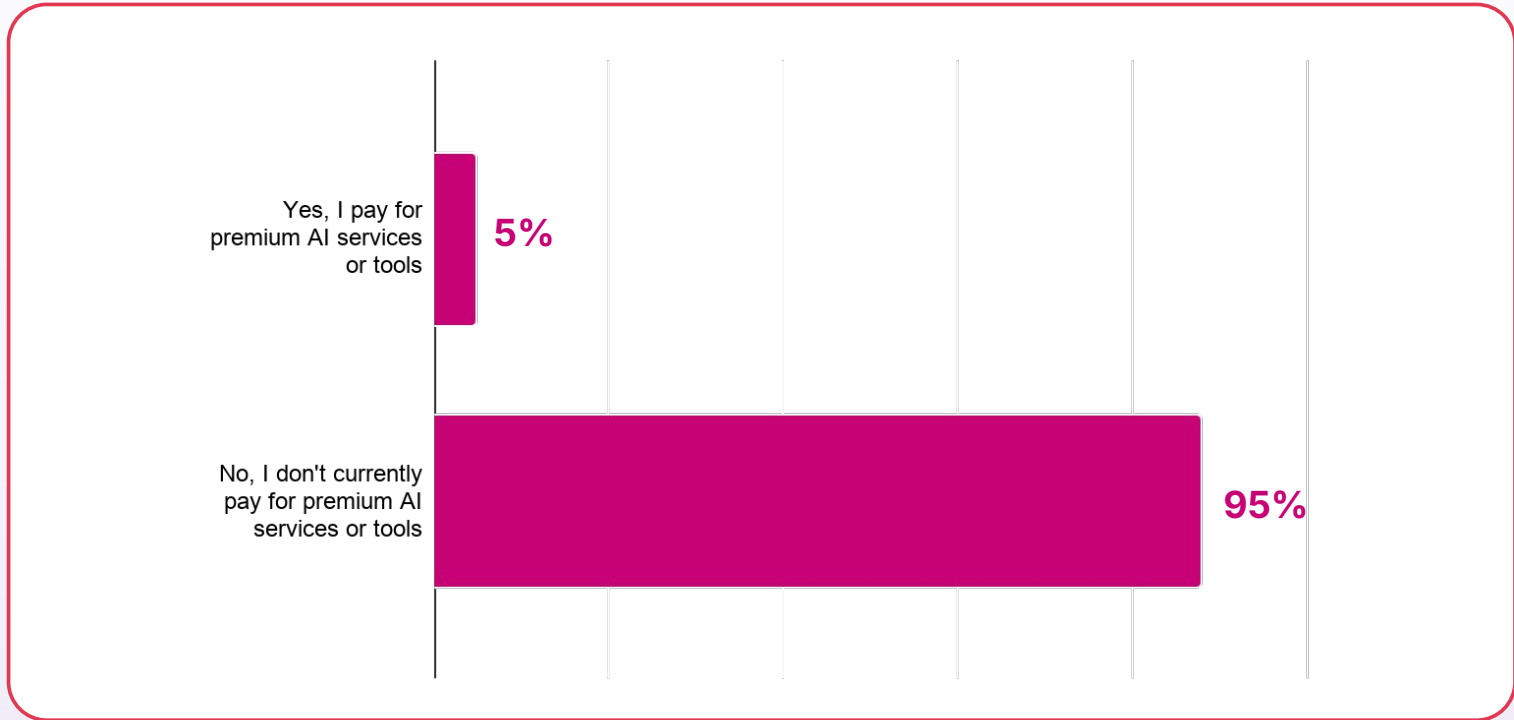
Students are utilizing AI, but most have not yet developed behaviors strong enough to justify financial investment

- **66%** of polled students use some sort of AI tool, the most popular being ChatGPT and Gemini
 - **33%** of students report not using any AI tools at all
- **95%** of students polled report **not** paying for premium AI services

Which AI tool do you use most frequently?



Do you currently pay for any premium AI tools?



Takeaway #3

Students are especially cautious about AI during the admissions evaluation process, particularly where their personality, experiences, and uniqueness are being analyzed

- **62%** of students **are uncomfortable** with colleges using AI to review essays
- Students are split down the middle in their opinion of AI reading their transcripts - **half are okay with it, half are not**

Note: While AI powered transcript review can help admissions teams manage volume more efficiently, be aware that students may still have a general mistrust of AI, in particular the maturity or effectiveness of the technology.

AI can support admissions work, but it's important to continue to drive trust with students through transparency on usage of these tools.

Takeaway #4

Students are AI literate, but remain highly protective of the human element at every stage of the enrollment funnel

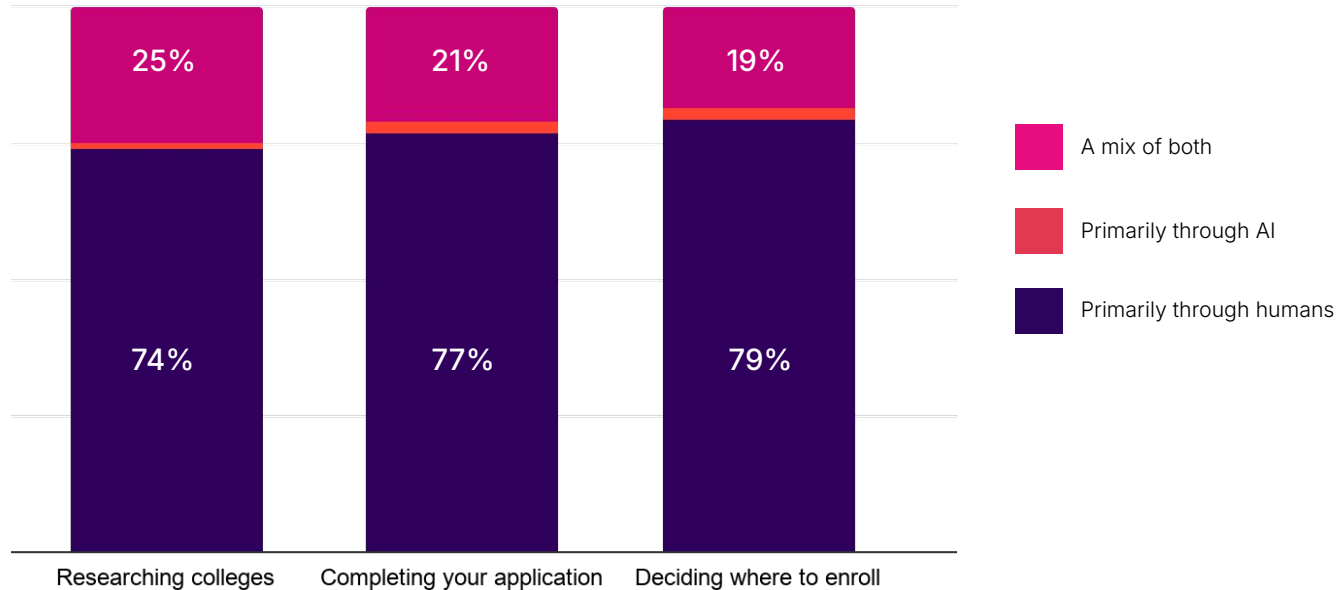
When students were asked who they trust most while deciding where to **enroll**, **79%** chose primarily **human support**

Students consistently showed the strongest preference for humans to answer questions in emotionally-driven categories like when wanting to:

- find their "campus fit"
- feel confident in their decisions
- understand belonging and culture
- receive personalized reassurance



How students want their questions answered, at each stage of the enrollment process





Takeaway #5

Students applying to small colleges are even less likely to approve of the use of AI during the admissions process

Versus students applying to large institutions, small college students are:

- **Even more** likely to prefer human support during the enrollment decision process
- **Even less** interested in engaging with AI agents during the research phase of selecting colleges
- Showing the lowest level of openness to hybrid AI/human experiences





Takeaway #6

Students applying to large universities still value human support, but they appear more willing to use AI as part of the enrollment journey if it improves responsiveness, accessibility, and efficiency

Versus small college students, large college students are:

- **30% more likely** to want a hybrid AI + human experience while getting their questions answered during the college research phase of their search
- **Slightly less** dependent solely on humans when getting answers to questions during the **research** stage
- Are more comfortable with technology-enabled support models that improve responsiveness and accessibility



Preferences on who answers their questions - small vs large college applicants

	Small college applicants	Large college applicants
Only want to speak to humans when getting their questions answered whilst researching colleges	73.9%	67.9%
Only want to speak to humans when getting questions answered whilst deciding where to enroll	79.5%	74.3%
Want to speak to both AI agents and humans throughout the application process	20.4%	26.4%





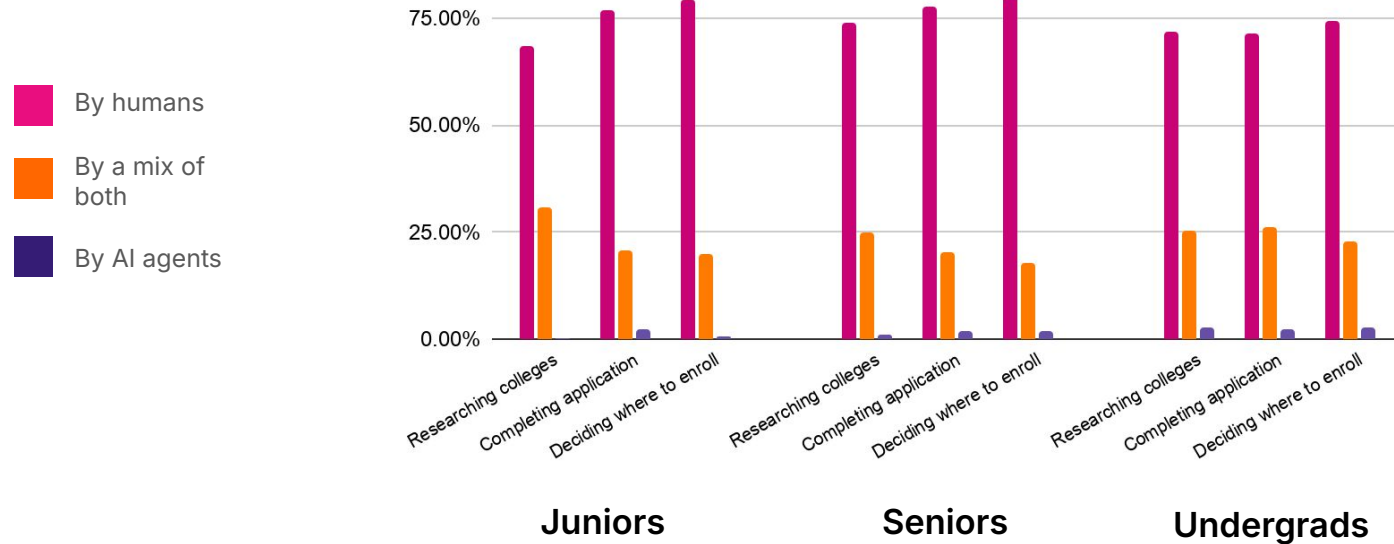
Takeaway #7

While AI remains a very low priority for juniors, there is a slight shift in this group accepting it for personalization, reminders and utility

	Juniors	Seniors	Undergrads
Okay with AI powered marketing personalization	75.5%	64.7%	60%
Okay with colleges using AI tools for their essay review	46.3%	37.3%	39.7%



How students want their questions answered, at each stage of the enrollment process, split by age





Takeaway #8

As students get closer to the enrollment decision stage of their journey, the acceptance of AI reduces

- High school juniors showed higher openness to AI powered marketing personalization and the most acceptance of colleges using AI for essay reviews
- High school seniors show more skepticism towards having their questions answered by AI than younger students, perhaps pointing to a generational trend where comfort with AI is decreasing with age or suggesting concerns about fairness and human judgment increase as application stakes become more immediate





Takeaway #9

As students move closer to enrollment, they want **even more** human reassurance, and less AI involvement



High school seniors showed the strongest preference for human led support when getting their questions answered at enrollment decision time:

- **80.2%** want primarily human support when deciding where to enroll

The closer students get to commitment:

- The more emotional the process becomes
- The more reassurance matters
- The less students want AI





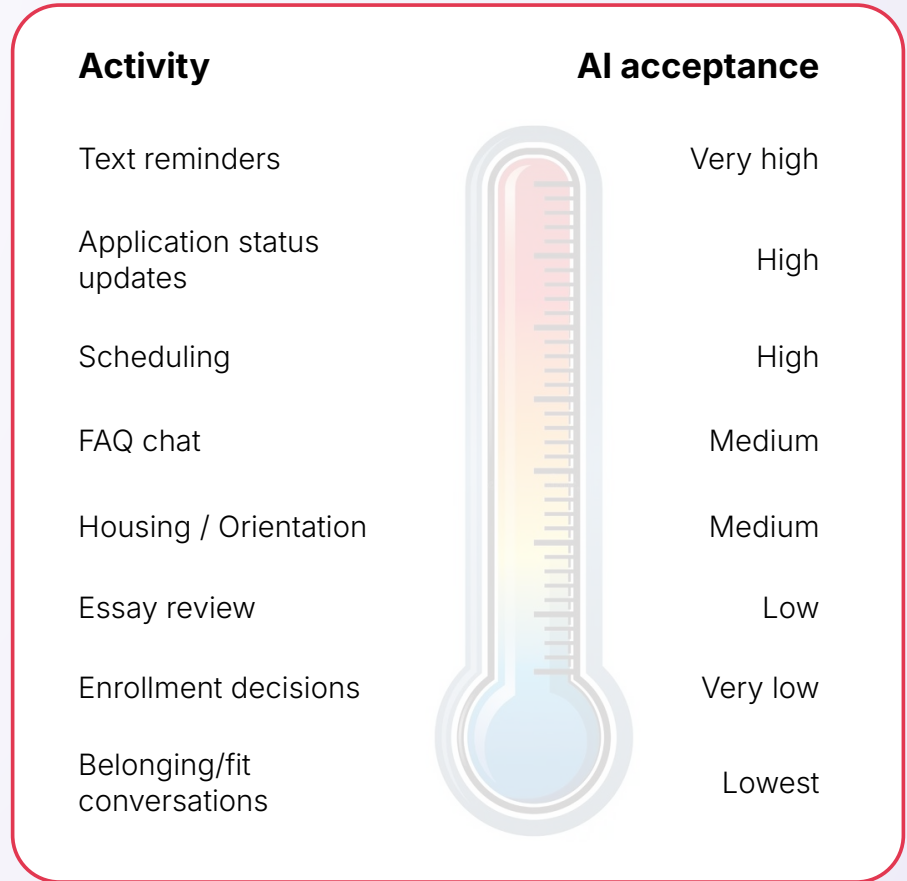
Strategic recommendations



Recommendation #1

Align AI usage with activity type and student acceptance

Students are most comfortable with AI in routine, informational activities and less comfortable as activities become more personal, emotional, or high stakes.



Recommendation #2

Lead with "human-first" marketing

Students are anxious about being "processed" by machines. Use AI tools to help with department efficiency and to nudge students along the funnel, but lean on human relationships to support the key decision making moments.

In particular:

- Use AI tools that augments counselors, rather than replacing them
- Utilize AI driven tools for marketing personalization
- Avoid using AI agents to call prospective students
- Create profiles of your counselors online - headshots and bios in emails and on your website
- Ensure website chatbots give students the option to connect to real people

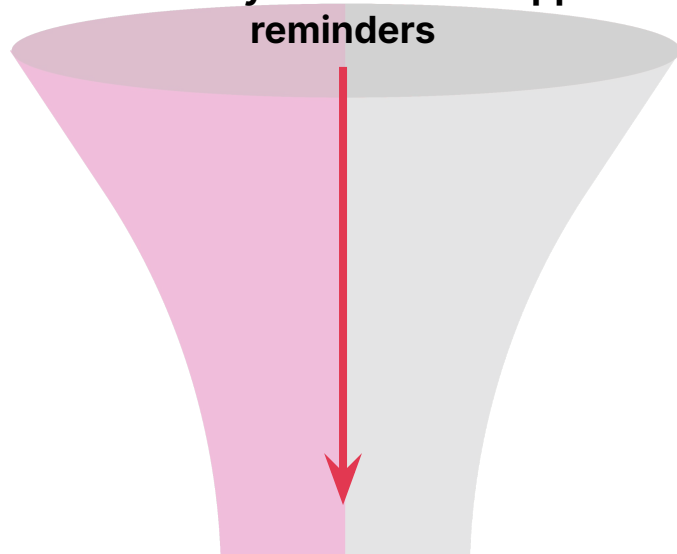
Recommendation #3

Adjust AI usage as students move through the funnel

Align AI use to where students are in the funnel.

Use AI for scalable support and quick answers early on, but increase human interaction as students move closer to enrollment and higher-stakes decisions.

Use AI carefully as scalable support and reminders

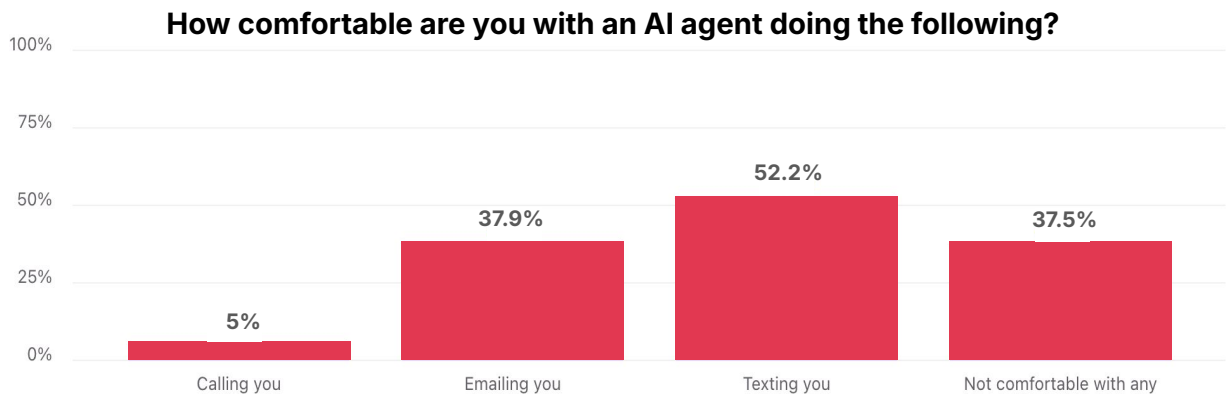


Increase levels of human 1:1 interactions at these critical decision making moments

Recommendation #4

Align AI agent channels with student comfort levels

Students are most comfortable receiving application reminders, status updates, and general information from AI agents via text, followed by email, while phone calls are the least preferred channel.



Recommendation #5

Utilize personas to help shape your communications outreach

Using student responses and reported data, we created student personas split by school size and population to help teams tailor messaging to student preferences.

E.g.

- The “human seeking senior” wants reassurance and more human connection, and rejects AI-led decision support. Also higher index among small-college applicants
- The “seen and supported junior” loves personalization and also is a little more open hybrid-communication when it comes to use of AI and human relationships
- The “efficiency-focused large university applicant” is more open to AI-enabled workflows, more accepting of blended experiences but still values human relationships towards the end of their enrollment journey

AI vs Humans - framework based on student persona's

Student segment	What students want most	Where AI works well	Where humans matter most	Recommended enrollment strategy
High school juniors	Exploration, discovery, fast answers	AI-powered discovery, personalized content recommendations, reminders, chatbot Q&A, major/career exploration	Emotional reassurance at the early stages of college search	Use AI strategically for early engagement and personalization to scale early relationship building
High school seniors	Reassurance, confidence, decision support	Status updates, deadline reminders, application tracking, text nudges	Enrollment decisions, fit conversations, financial aid concerns, belonging	Blend AI efficiency with highly visible human counselor access during key decision moments
Current undergraduates / Transfers	Transparency, specificity, efficiency	Transfer credit support, scheduling, operational FAQs	Trust-building, nuanced advising, institutional credibility	Use AI as a utility layer, but ensure access to informed humans for complex questions

AI vs Humans - framework based on school size

School size	What students want most	Where AI works well	Where humans matter most	Recommended enrollment strategy
Students applying to small colleges	Community, belonging, personal relationships	Administrative support, reminders, light-touch FAQs	Nearly all high-emotion touchpoints, enrollment choice, "fit" conversations	Lead with people-first recruitment supported quietly by AI behind the scenes
Students applying to medium colleges	Balance of personalization + efficiency	AI-supported communications, segmented outreach, chatbot assistance	Decision support and major financial / emotional conversations	Hybrid approach works best: scalable AI plus accessible counselors
Students applying to large universities	Speed, personalization, and personal relationships	AI chat, automated workflows, triggered reminders and personalized AI communications	Enrollment reassurance, belonging and escalation moments	Lean into AI-supported scale early while preserving strategic human touch points towards the end of enrollment funnel

Recommendation #6

Optimize communications for AEO discovery

Students are using ChatGPT as a discovery aid, so lean into that from a AEO perspective:

- Make your website content clear, direct, and easy to summarize. Use consistent language around outcomes, costs, deadlines, and programs
- Create highly searchable, easy-to-understand FAQ content
- Encourage counselors to become strategic advisors rather than only information providers. Students can find information anywhere. The counselor's value is interpretation, guidance, reassurance, and personalization

Find out how you can use AI to improve team efficiency, and allow more human-led relationships with RISE

sales@zeemee.com





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| Student Pulse Surveys