

The Overlooked Customer in College Admissions—Parents and Their Rising Anxiety

Executive Summary

As college admissions become increasingly complex, costly, and competitive, one critical stakeholder has been largely overlooked by higher education institutions: the parent. Despite being the primary economic contributor—writing tuition checks, co-signing loans, and influencing decisions—parents remain peripheral in most college admissions strategies. This white paper draws on new research to illuminate the deep anxiety parents feel about the process, the economic stakes they shoulder, and the growing uncertainty surrounding their child’s career prospects in an AI-disrupted labor market. It concludes with clear recommendations for how colleges can better engage this vital audience to build trust, increase applications, and improve matriculation outcomes.

The Rising Tide of Parent Anxiety

Parents are not merely passive supporters in the college admissions process—they are planners, financiers, and, most importantly, decision influencers. A 2025 survey of 391 high school parents, weighted toward juniors and seniors, reveals stark concerns:

- 63% of parents report struggling with the admissions process, often missing important details or needing extensive guidance.
- Only 11% are “very confident” about navigating the journey successfully.
- 84% are involved in monthly—if not more frequent—planning discussions with their child about college.
- Many parents characterize the process as stressful, confusing, and overwhelming.

These numbers are not just data points; they signal a growing crisis of confidence. As tuition prices rise and return-on-investment (ROI) questions deepen, families are seeking clarity, structure, and partnership—not just from independent resources, but from colleges themselves.

Parents: The Undervalued Economic Buyer

Parents are the #1 influencer in a student's final college decision—and almost always the economic buyer:

- They pay tuition outright or through multi-year financing.
- They bear the burden of rising student loan balances, often by co-signing or taking on PLUS loans.
- They are increasingly ROI-driven, questioning the value proposition of a college degree in the modern economy.

Yet few colleges acknowledge this audience in a meaningful way. Admissions offices orient everything—tours, websites, communications—toward the student, even though students are often distracted, disengaged, or deferring to their parents on major decisions.

The New Worry: Will AI Undermine Entry-Level Jobs?

Adding urgency to the parent perspective is a new, widespread fear: the impact of artificial intelligence on career prospects. Parents are no longer just concerned about where their child will go to college—they're worried about what happens afterward.

As automation threatens to displace many traditional entry-level roles, families are left questioning whether the career services and post-graduation support offered by colleges are sufficient to justify the cost. Institutions that fail to address this fear risk losing credibility and enrollment.

A System Designed for Students, Ignoring Stakeholders

Despite these realities, few if any colleges have an articulated plan to engage, inform, and support parents through the admissions journey. The imbalance is glaring:

- Students receive marketing, outreach, personalized portals, and access to admissions counselors.
- Parents—who are funding the experience—receive minimal support, often limited to financial aid workshops or occasional newsletters.
- Most colleges lack a strategic parent engagement plan despite expecting families to make six-figure decisions.

This neglect comes at a time when confidence in higher education is eroding, and colleges are under pressure to justify their cost, outcomes, and transparency.

Recommendations: Toward a Parent-Centered Strategy

To regain trust and grow enrollment, colleges must reimagine the parent's role in the admissions process. Here are actionable steps institutions can take:

1. Develop a Parent Engagement Strategy

- Assign a staff lead for parent communication.
- Create parent-specific touchpoints during tours, application phases, and decision windows.

2. Offer Tools and Resources Tailored to Parents

- Provide planning guides, ROI calculators, and webinars on navigating admissions.
- Include information on career placement, graduate outcomes, and AI-related job market shifts.

3. Personalize the Journey

- Build a dedicated parent portal mirroring what students receive.
- Push timely, relevant information: deadlines, financial aid updates, visit invitations.

4. Highlight Career Readiness

- Communicate clearly how the college is preparing students for an AI-transformed economy.
- Showcase partnerships, internships, and alumni success stories.

5. Treat Parents as Long-Term Partners

- Go beyond admissions: provide programming that continues into the first year of enrollment and beyond.

Conclusion

In the high-stakes world of college admissions, parents are no longer silent partners. They are active, anxious, and essential. Colleges that recognize this—and respond with respect, resources, and a real strategy—will not only reduce friction in the admissions funnel but also gain loyal advocates and increase yield.

As one parent might put it: if I'm expected to fund the journey, I should be invited to navigate it. Colleges would do well to start extending that invitation.