

Noel-Levitz Research Report

Institutional Brand and Parental Influence on College Choice

A Noel-Levitz Benchmark Psychographic Study

Can we measure the influence of brand on college choice?

The concept of brand has crept into many areas of the American economic landscape, and college has been no exception. The ascension of *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, the widespread visibility of collegiate athletic brands, the power of traditional college brands such as the Ivy League or flagship state universities...these are just some of the many factors that influence college brand. But how much does that brand influence students? Noel-Levitz conducted a study of high school juniors and seniors to explore how brand influences their choice of college.

As institutions of higher education report increasing involvement of parents guiding the college choice process, we set out to also understand more about parental roles and behaviors. This report details the characteristics that differentiate brand-influenced students from students who are not as influenced by brand, as well as students who are more highly influenced by their parents versus those who have less parental influence over their college choice. These findings can help colleges understand which student segments are more likely to be influenced by brand or by parents and tailor their messages accordingly.

The logo for Noel-Levitz, featuring the company name in a serif font with a red swoosh above the 'i' in 'Levitz'.

Noel-Levitz®



Psychographics is the study of personality, values, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles.

The value of psychographic analysis in understanding college choice

Demographic data are the foundation for understanding consumer behavior, and while valuable, demographic data alone certainly cannot illuminate the college decision process. That process is highly personalized, and students with similar geographic, economic, ethnic, or other demographic similarities may choose completely different institutions for higher education. Their decisions may be influenced by a range of factors, many of which are emotional.

Because of these emotional influences, a psychographic analysis is more useful for understanding how students are influenced by institutional brand and parental involvement. Psychographics is the study of personality, values, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles.¹ This approach looks at the activities, interests, and opinions of people to analyze how they spend their time and resources, uncover what they find important, and assess their impression of the world around them.² In other words, psychographic analysis captures how people live their lives and what they believe—factors which are very relevant to the college choice process.

About the survey

For this study, 509 high school juniors and seniors who planned to go to college completed an online survey. The demographics of the respondent sample mirrored those of high school graduates who directly enrolled at college based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The survey covered a number of areas designed to capture their psychographic data, including:

- Family and friend relationships
- Values and benefits
- Leisure activities
- Ties to community
- Cell phone communication
- Strong major/program
- Athletics

¹ Jairo Senise, “Who Is Your Next Customer?” *Strategy+Business*, 28 September 2007, <http://www.strategy-business.com/enews/enewsarticle/enews092807?pg=0>

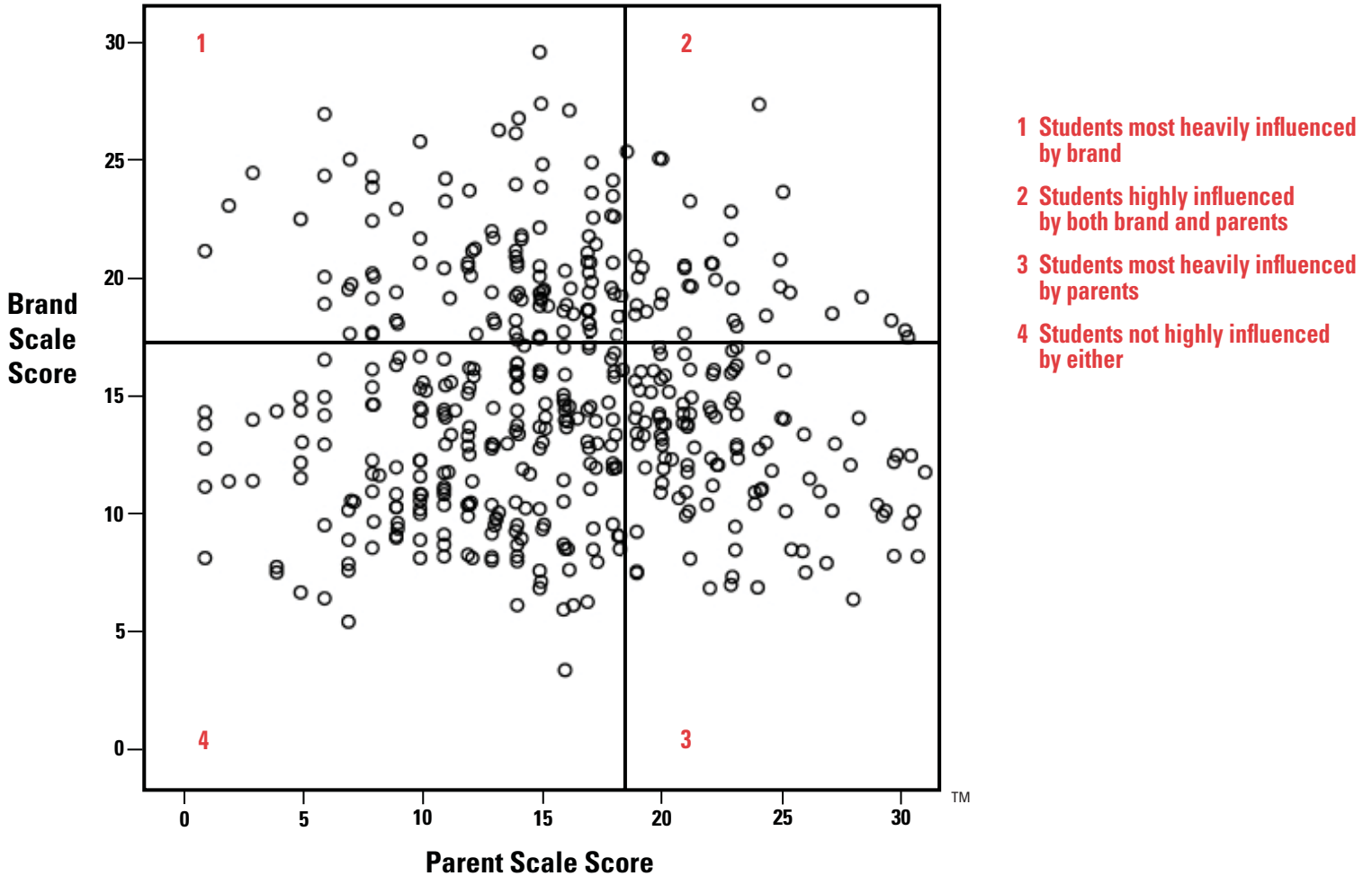
² Roger Kerin, et al, *Marketing: The Core*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill/Irwin, 2008), 110.

The influence of college brand versus parental involvement

The survey confirmed that institutional brand sensitivity and parental influence have a measurable, co-occurring effect on the college choice process. Data from the respondents allowed us to create two scales: a Brand Scale and a Parent Scale.³

The Brand Scale rates how much a student is influenced by the brand of an institution. The Parent Scale shows how much a student is influenced by their parents regarding college choice. The respondents to this study were grouped as follows:

Brand/Parent Scale Grouping of Respondents



What did it mean for students to be ranked highly on one scale? The following sections discuss the characteristics of students and their parents that factor into these two scales. These characteristics allow us to create a profile of the types of students who are more likely to be influenced by college brand or by the involvement of their parents.

³ Both of these scales showed high reliability, with Chronbach's alpha scores of 0.724 for the Brand Scale and 0.765 for the Parent Scale.

Characteristics of students who are more influenced by college brand

Students who were higher on the Brand Scale tended to share a number of characteristics. First, they had three fundamental beliefs about the benefits of a college's brand.

Students higher on the Brand Scale believe

- Employers are more likely to hire students from certain institutions than others.
- Graduates from those schools will make more money than graduates from other institutions.
- A degree from one school is not equivalent to a degree from another, even when those degrees carry the same accreditation.

While these results are not that surprising—students more inclined to be influenced by collegiate brand would be the very sort looking for distinct differences between institutional brands—they start to form a profile of the kinds of students who are more susceptible to institutional brand. A number of other characteristics emerged as well.

Students higher on the Brand Scale

- Show a greater desire for independence by planning to not continue dating the person they dated in high school, keep their current job, or live at home.
- Plan to work somewhere other than their home town after graduating.
- Perceive that their first choice for college is the best in technology, program of study, teaching, research, social life, location, sports, and/or value.
- Wear apparel with a collegiate logo or branding.
- Have higher grade averages and take honors or AP courses.
- Plan to enter doctoral programs after completing their undergraduate educations.

Furthermore, students who were more susceptible to brand influence had additional characteristics in common.

Additional characteristics of brand-influenced students

- Their parents completed higher levels of education, but their siblings did not attend college.
- They have higher levels of family income.
- Female students appear more influenced by brand than males.
- Asian students scored higher on the Brand Scale than African American or Hispanic students.

Among the survey items, there were a number of questions that would have been expected to affect brand influence, but when analyzed, they had no significant bearing on a student's brand receptivity.

Notable characteristics that did not affect brand influence

- Friends were going to the student's first-choice campus.
- Parents were saving for college.
- The student's family followed a favorite college team.
- The student planned to live in a dorm.
- The student planned to get involved in clubs and support a college's athletic teams.

Characteristics of students heavily influenced by their parents

Parental involvement can certainly play a large role in the college decisions of prospective students—especially in an era of growing “helicopter parents” who are very hands on with their children’s educational careers. What types of parental characteristics signaled high levels of parental involvement?

Parental characteristics that increase a student’s Parent Scale ranking

- Chose high school classes for the student and/or rearranged classes so the student could have a different teacher.
- Volunteered at the school or were room parents.
- Applied pressure toward choosing a specific college.
- Talked about grades with students.
- Had a savings account for college.
- Assisted with SAT/ACT tests, such as signing up students for the test, enrolling the student in a prep course, or purchasing test preparation materials.
- Helped to obtain and complete applications and financial aid forms.
- Read letters, brochures, and viewbooks from the college.
- Visited the Web site of a college to gather information for their children, or made direct phone or e-mail contact with a campus for that information.
- Reviewed college ranking guides.
- Visited the campus.
- Are legacy parents who want their children to carry on the family tradition of attending the school they attended.
- Have been active in alumni clubs or attend campus-related events.

The increasing level of parental involvement has been fueled in part by a surge in parental use of e-communications tools such as the Web, text messaging, and social networking.

Cell phone usage also has allowed parents to increase their level of communication with their children. Accordingly, students with more e-savvy parents tended to be more influenced by them.

Parental e-communications characteristics that lead to higher Parent Scale rankings

- Communicate with their children by text.
- Have become friends with their children on Facebook.
- Make phone calls to their children throughout the day.

Family activity levels played a significant role as well. Students who were more involved with their families tended to be more influenced by them when it came to choosing a college.

Family activities that increase a student’s Parent Scale ranking

- The student’s family eats dinner together.
- The student’s friends hang out at the family’s home.
- Parents encourage the student to join clubs, band, or play sports.
- The family attends sports events together or has a favorite college team.

Finally, several other characteristics indicated an increase in parental involvement and therefore led to a higher ranking on the Parent Scale for students.

Additional parental involvement characteristics that increase the Parent Scale ranking

- Parental involvement rises with household income.
- Parents of white students tended to be more involved than parents of Hispanic students.
- Parents of seniors were more involved in the college process than juniors.
- Male students reported greater parental involvement than female students.
- Parents who wished for their children to attend a religious-affiliated school were more involved.

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Conclusions: Five ways campuses can apply these findings

1) Assess prospective students for brand influence, parental influence, or both

Is a prospective student highly influenced by your brand? Will his or her parents play a role in choosing a college? Making these qualifications can help you understand not just what communications will push a prospective student to enroll, but also whether you should be targeting the student's parents with those communications.

For instance, if you learned that a prospective female Asian honors student was interested in doctoral study, she would probably be more receptive to messages emphasizing the institution's brand. A white male student who is Facebook friends with his mother, and whose mother was very active at his high school, is likely to be heavily influenced by his parents.

2) Provide specific outcomes data to brand-influenced students

Nearly all prospective students look for program quality and outcomes information, but if students have characteristics that place them higher on the Brand Scale, those students will want to see specific, credible statistics and examples of the benefits your campus offers over others. Communicate job placement and earning potential of graduates when possible, along with benefits in programs of study, teaching, research, and technology. Brand influenced students will look for third-party endorsements, rankings, and awards. Students interested in graduate study will want to know what your campus offers or how well graduates from your campus place into highly regarded graduate or professional programs.

Benefits beyond the economic can be very persuasive with brand-oriented students as well. Location, athletic offerings, and campus life can sway brand-oriented students. If a student seems more influenced by brand, try to learn their interests in these areas and communicate your distinctive benefits along with the outcomes of an education from your campus.

3) Employ different strategies according to the level of parental influence

When a prospective student has highly involved parents, you will need to engage his or her parents as well as the student as "co-purchasers." Winning over the parents of these students can have a significant impact on the student's decision. Consider strategies such as providing a Facebook parent site where prospective parents can connect with each other and current student parents, including messages about campus life opportunities, and providing parallel programs for parents during campus visits and orientation. Surveying parents of your prospective students about what they expect for their children's college experiences can also uncover valuable information for engaging both prospective students and their parents.

For students with less parental involvement, it will be important to begin student outreach earlier. Work with counselors and teachers to offer programs and workshops to assist students in preparing for college and navigating the college selection and financial aid processes. If students are of the first generation to attend college, you may offer summer bridge programs, peer advising, and faculty mentors.

4) Cultivate your pool of legacy prospects

According to the research, legacy parents tend to exert considerable influence over the college choice of their children. Find out if your alumni have children of college age and build a communication stream with them. Creating admissions advocates out of your alumni can be a very simple, cost-effective way to recruit their children.

5) Start building your influence early in high school

This survey included juniors and senior, and among brand-influenced students, there were no significant differences in their responses. With students who were higher on the Parent Scale, seniors did have more conversations per month about college with their parents (10 per month), but juniors still had six college conversations per month with their parents.

Regardless of the type of student, beginning your communication flow early—with students and parents—is a sound strategy.

How can you assess and qualify your current prospects for brand or parental influence?

While the characteristics presented in this study identify general characteristics of brand- and parental-influenced students, every prospect pool is unique. Conducting additional research into your prospects can help you identify characteristics that will focus your communications more strategically, leading to more tailored messages that will have a greater impact on enrollment.

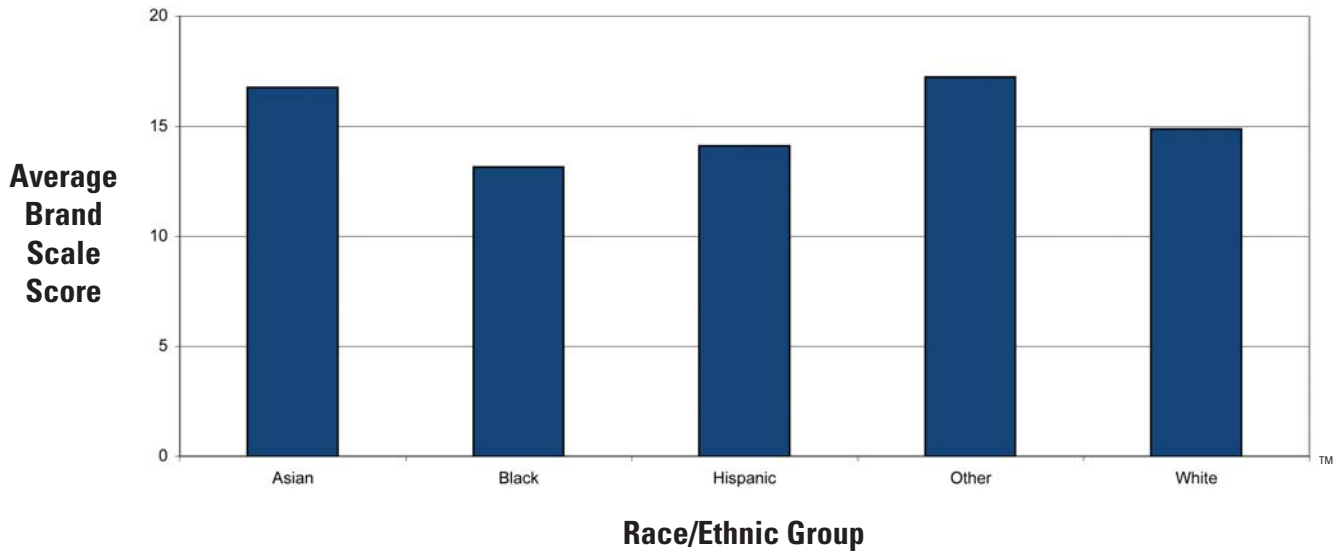
To learn more about how you can do this, contact Noel-Levitz today. Call 1-800-876-1117 and ask to speak with a Market Research consultant, or e-mail ContactUs@noellevitz.com.

Additional findings: differences by ethnicity and family income

Ethnic differences in the scale rankings

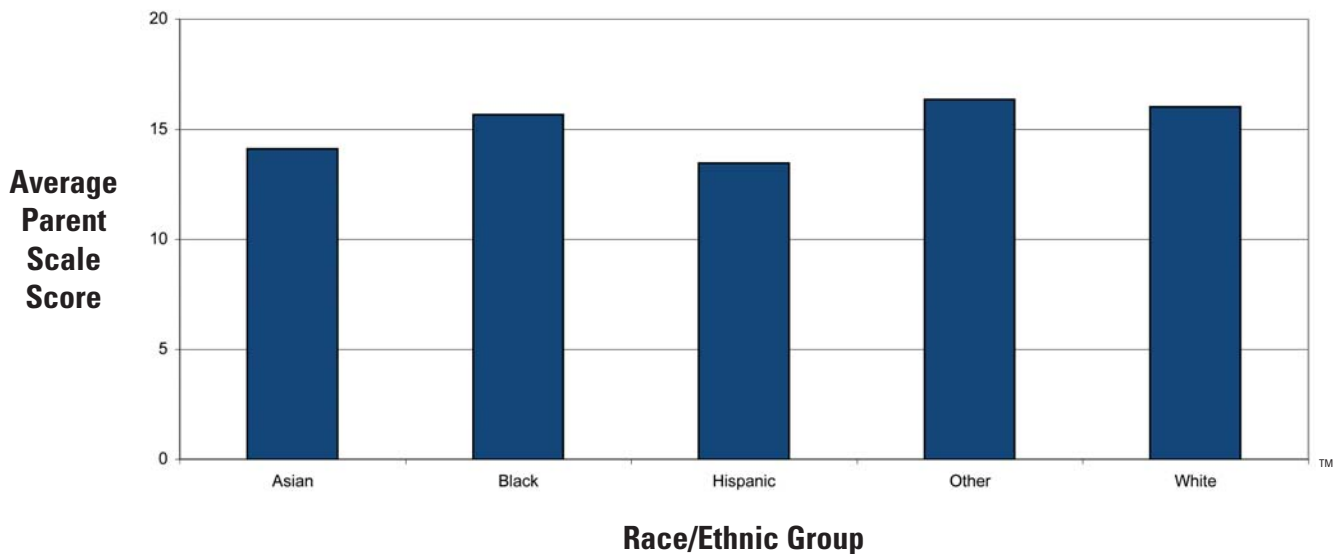
When examining the data by ethnicity, brand had a greater influence on Asian students than on other ethnic groups, followed by white students. Hispanic and black students were less likely to be influenced by brand.

Brand Scale by Race/Ethnicity



With regard to parental influence, white and black students scored slightly higher on the parental scale, but the results were closer between the different ethnic groups than the brand scale.

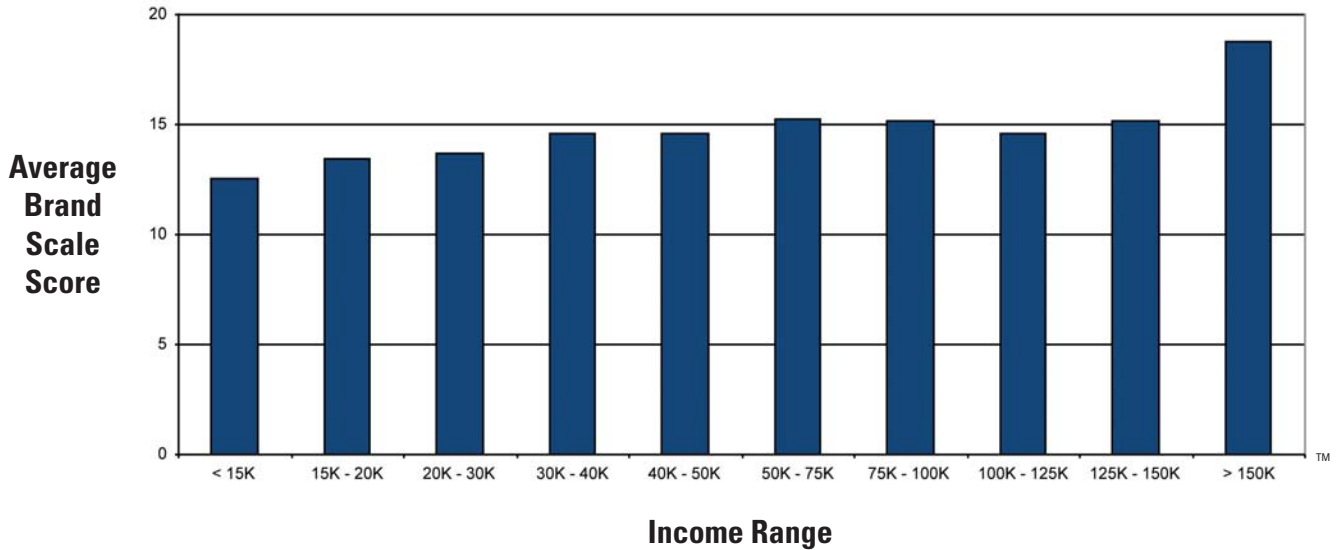
Parent Scale by Race/Ethnicity



Income differences in the rankings

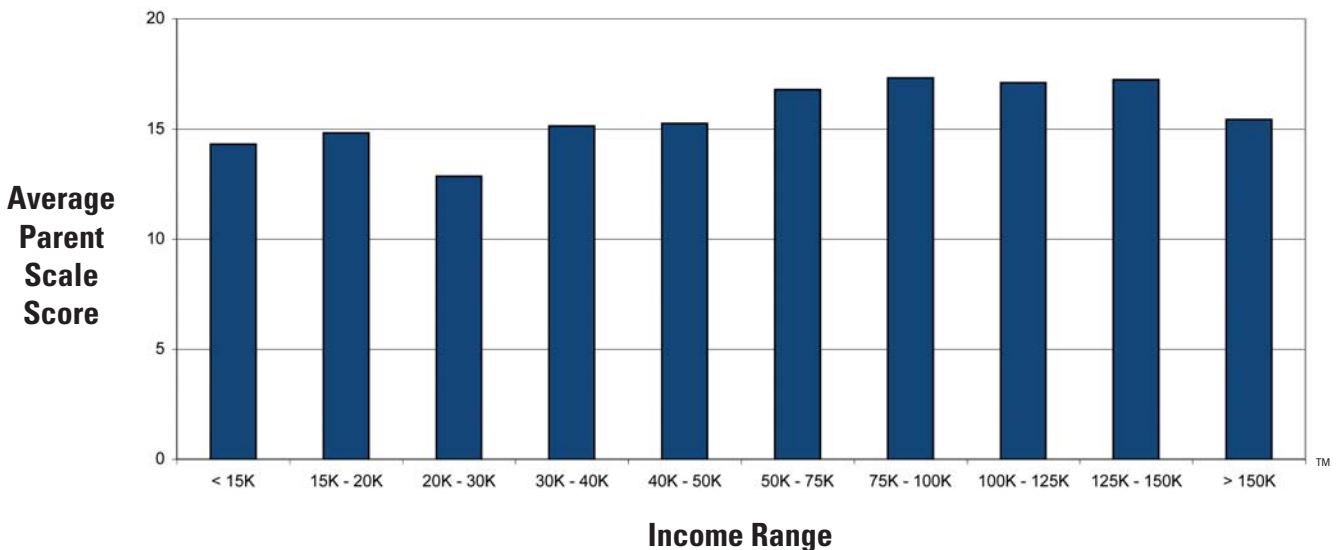
Looking at the data by family income level, brand influence rose somewhat with income, but did not really leap out until reaching the highest family income level.

Brand Scale by Income Range



Parental influence was fairly high across all income levels, showing the strongest influence on students from households making \$50,000-\$150,000 per year.

Parent Scale by Income Range

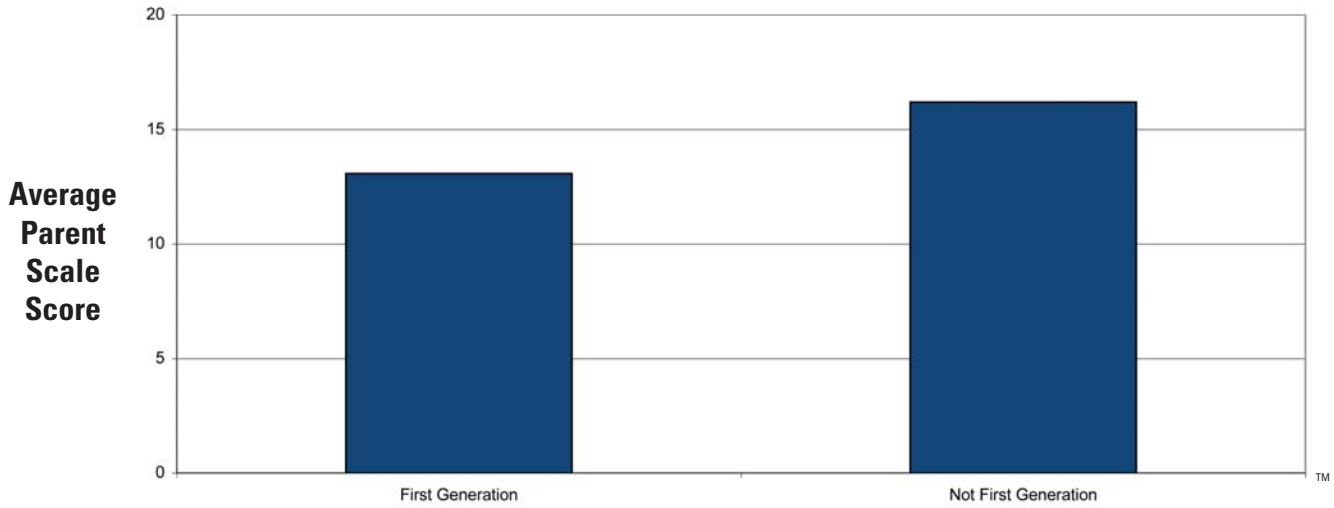


Note that students can show equal influence on the brand and parent scales. In the case of students from the \$50,000-\$100,000 family income levels, they showed close scores on both scales. This means campuses would be advised to promote their brand to students from this income level while also attempting to win the support of their parents as well.

Differences in parent scale by first-generation status

There was also a difference in scores on the Parent Scale between first-generation students and non-first-generation students:

Parent Scale by First Generation Status



These results show that children of parents who matriculated to college are more likely to be influenced by them than students who are the first in their families to attend college.



Iowa
Colorado

Contact us at:
2350 Oakdale Boulevard
Coralville, Iowa 52241-9702

Phone:
800-876-1117
319-626-8380

E-mail:
ContactUs@noellevitz.com

Web:
www.noellevitz.com

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Questions about this study?

Please contact us if you have any questions about *Institutional Brand and Parental Influence on College Choice*. Call Kathryn Karford of Noel-Levitz at 1-800-876-1117 or e-mail kathryn-karford@noellevitz.com.

About Noel-Levitz

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Since 1973, Noel-Levitz has partnered with nearly 2,000 colleges and universities throughout North America. The firm offers consulting, custom research, benchmark data, innovative tools and technologies, side-by-side plan development and execution, and resources for professional development. For more information, visit www.noellevitz.com.

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