Half of Prospective Students Use AI Tools at Least Weekly, New UPCEA and Search Influence Study Finds

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NEW ORLEANS, LA - October 17, 2025 -
50 percent of prospective students now rely on AI-powered search tools at least weekly, signaling a significant shift in how they discover and evaluate content online. This finding comes from the 2025 AI Search in Higher Education Research Study, a joint report from UPCEA, the Online and Professional Education Association, and higher education SEO agency Search Influence. The study examines how artificial intelligence, traditional search engines, and university websites influence prospective students? research and decision-making behavior.

While AI use continues to rise, the report shows that institutional credibility remains a defining factor in the enrollment process. In total, 77 percent of respondents said they consider university websites to be the most dependable source of information. However, confidence in AI is quickly increasing. 79 percent reported reading Google?s AI-generated summaries, and more than half ? 56 percent ? said they are more likely to trust institutions cited within them.

The data also reinforces the continuing importance of visibility in search results. 82 percent of students said they are more likely to engage with programs appearing on the first page of results. Student discovery is

spreading across platforms as well, with 84 percent using search engines, 61 percent turning to YouTube, and half using AI tools in a manner similar to Google. Emerging platforms such as Reddit are gaining traction among younger audiences, further diversifying how students find and evaluate programs.

?These findings confirm what we are seeing every day. Without visibility in AI search, institutions risk being overlooked,? said Paula French, director at AI SEO agency Search Influence. ?Strong SEO and AI-focused optimization are now the connective tissue linking prospects from search results to trusted university websites and, ultimately, to enrollment decisions.?

?This research shows that AI-powered search is transforming how students discover programs and rewriting the enrollment playbook,? said Bruce Etter, senior director of research and consulting at UPCEA. ?Colleges and universities that adapt their visibility and messaging to this shift will be the ones that succeed in connecting with the next generation of learners, which is imperative as more institutions view online education as the avenue to balancing institutional books.?

The report frames this shift as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Institutions that adapt early to AI search behavior and strengthen their digital visibility across platforms will have a measurable advantage in recruitment. By optimizing content for both AI-driven and traditional engines, universities can ensure their programs are found, trusted, and considered by students who are increasingly influenced by AI results.

The 2025 AI Search in Higher Education Research Study is based on a March 2025 survey of 760 qualified adult learners between the ages of 18 and 60. At a minimum, participants had a high school diploma, with nearly one-third holding a bachelor?s degree and 18 percent holding a master?s degree. The survey methodology ensured that the findings reflect the behaviors of today?s prospective adult learners, a group that is often at the forefront of enrollment trends.

The full research study is now available to download. A companion webinar on October 23 and a series of AI Search Strategy Labs (October 28 and 30) will provide further analysis and practical guidance for institutions. Click here for registration details.

About Search Influence:

Search Influence is an AI SEO-focused higher education digital marketing agency that helps institutions drive prospects into and through the recruitment funnel with analytics-backed strategies, including organic and AI SEO and paid digital advertising. Founded in 2006, Search Influence?s core purpose is to optimize potential. The agency collaborates with institutions nationally and in its home city of New Orleans. Clients include: Tulane University, Tufts University College, LSU Online & Continuing Ed, and Maine College of Art & Design. Search Influence experts frequently speak at higher ed and industry conferences, and the

agency?s work has earned recognition from the US Search Awards, US Agency Awards, and Inc. 5000.

About UPCEA:

UPCEA is the online and professional education association. Its members continuously reinvent higher education, positively impacting millions of lives. The association proudly leads and supports them through cutting-edge research, professional development, networking and mentorship, conferences and seminars, and stakeholder advocacy. Its collaborative, entrepreneurial community brings together decision makers and influencers in education, industry, research, and policy interested in improving educational access and outcomes.

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Search Influence

Search Influence, a national SEO and digital advertising agency since 2006, delivers demonstrable ROI for clients. Specialties include SEO, Paid Advertising, and Analytics. In-house experts collaborate with clients for results. Also an informative blog.

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