

Will Scott Publishes Higher Education AI Search Research Findings in Search Engine Land

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NEW ORLEANS, LA - March 04, 2026 -
Will Scott, CEO and co-founder of Search Influence, has published a new article in Search Engine Land examining how AI-driven search is reshaping visibility for higher education institutions and other industries.

The article, titled ?What higher ed data shows about SEO visibility and AI search,? draws on findings from the 2025 AI Search in Higher Education Research Study, conducted by Search Influence in partnership with UPCEA, the online and professional education association.

The AI Search Research Study surveyed 760 prospective adult learners to better understand how AI tools, AI Overviews, and traditional search results influence early research and evaluation. The findings suggest that AI-generated summaries are playing a significant role in shaping initial trust and consideration.

According to the study, 79 percent of respondents reported reading Google?s AI Overviews when they appear, and 50 percent indicated they use AI tools at least weekly during research. In addition, 56 percent

said they are more likely to trust a brand cited by AI-generated answers.

Will?s article argues that organizations must now compete on two fronts: traditional rankings and AI citations.

?Search behavior has evolved,? Scott said. ?Organizations aren?t necessarily losing visibility because they moved a few positions in search results. In many cases, they?re losing visibility because they were never cited in the AI answer at all.?

The article also highlights a readiness gap among institutions. A companion UPCEA snap poll of 30 member institutions found that while most teams recognize the growing importance of AI search, only 30 percent report having a formal higher education AI search strategy in place. Respondents cited limited bandwidth, lack of in-house expertise, and unclear return on investment as primary barriers to implementation.

Will emphasizes that AI search builds on established SEO fundamentals rather than replacing them. Clear structure, crawlability, and intent alignment remain critical signals. However, the format of content increasingly influences whether it is cited in AI-generated responses.

Higher education provides a useful lens for examining these changes because universities traditionally possess the authority, content depth, and brand recognition that search engines reward. Yet the article notes that authority alone does not guarantee inclusion in AI summaries. Content structure and retrieval readiness are emerging as key differentiators.

Building on the themes explored in the article, Will will present a Generative Engine Optimization Master Class in partnership with Search Engine Land on April 14, 2026. The online session will examine how AI platforms such as Google?s AI Overviews, ChatGPT, and Perplexity evaluate and surface content differently from traditional search engines. Participants will explore content structure, entity optimization, competitive analysis, and measurement approaches designed to improve AI visibility while maintaining established SEO fundamentals.

Will founded Search Influence, a New Orleans-based SEO agency, in 2006 alongside his wife, Angie Scott. Since launching his first website in 1994, he has led teams responsible for building thousands of websites, creating hundreds of thousands of directory pages, and delivering millions of visits from search. He is widely recognized in the digital marketing industry for coining the phrase ?barnacle SEO? in 2008 and is a frequent speaker at marketing and industry conferences. Will continues to focus on the intersection of traditional search optimization and emerging AI-driven discovery models.

The full AI search article is available on Search Engine Land.

About Search Influence:

Search Influence is a woman-owned, ROI-focused 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 well-regarded brands and institutions both nationally and locally in New Orleans. Clients include the Tulane School of Professional Advancement, Tufts University College, Associated Hearing Professionals, New Orleans & Company, and Audubon Nature Institute.

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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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