Search Influence Director Paula French Joins SearchStax Webinar to Address How AI Search Is Changing Student Program Discovery

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NEW ORLEANS, LA - June 12, 2026 -
Paula French, director of sales and marketing at Search Influence, appeared as a featured speaker in a SearchStax webinar on May 14 titled The Invisible Enrollment Funnel: How AI Search Is Reshaping the Student Journey. The session, now available on demand, examined how AI search in higher education is changing the way prospective students find and evaluate academic programs, and what enrollment marketers need to understand to keep pace.

French was joined by Ryan Dool, web director for marketing and brand development at the University of Arizona, and Jeff Dillon, digital strategist for higher education at SearchStax. The three speakers addressed a challenge becoming increasingly central to enrollment marketing: students are researching programs through a growing mix of channels ? Google, AI tools like ChatGPT and Perplexity, and institutional websites ? but most universities have limited visibility into the moments that most influence their decisions.

Enrollment marketers have long relied on form submissions, page views, paid ad conversions, and direct traffic to measure student interest. Those metrics remain relevant, but they capture a narrowing slice of the actual student journey. A growing share of program research now happens through AI-generated responses and conversational search tools that sit outside traditional tracking infrastructure. A student asking an AI assistant to compare graduate business programs may never click a paid ad or fill out a form on the first visit. The intent is real, but the institution has no record of it. That gap is what the webinar frames as the invisible enrollment funnel.

The session examined how AI search in higher education is creating discovery pathways that don't map onto existing analytics frameworks, and what marketers can do to build visibility in those spaces. Topics included how AI tools surface academic programs and what content structures influence whether an institution

appears in results, how search behavior analysis can surface content gaps and unanswered student questions, and how UX strategies can improve conversion once AI-referred visitors reach a program page.

French has spent her career helping higher education institutions align digital marketing strategy with how prospective students actually search, partnering with institutions including PON at Harvard Law School, Tulane SoPA, and Tufts University College. She has presented at UPCEA and the AMA Symposium for the Marketing of Higher Education on how institutions can adapt to changes in search behavior ? a conversation that has become more urgent as AI tools become a routine part of how students research programs.

"The way students research programs today looks nothing like it did five years ago," said French. "They're asking AI tools detailed, comparative questions and getting answers that shape their short list before they ever visit a school's website. Enrollment marketing strategies must address AI search visibility in order to be in the consideration set as well as be chosen by prospects."

The Invisible Enrollment Funnel: How AI Search Is Reshaping the Student Journey is available on demand. Learn more about AI SEO strategies for higher education.

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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