



ADULT LEARNER RECRUITMENT

# The AI Search Readiness Scorecard for Higher Ed

Assess What Matters for Student  
Discovery and Enrollment



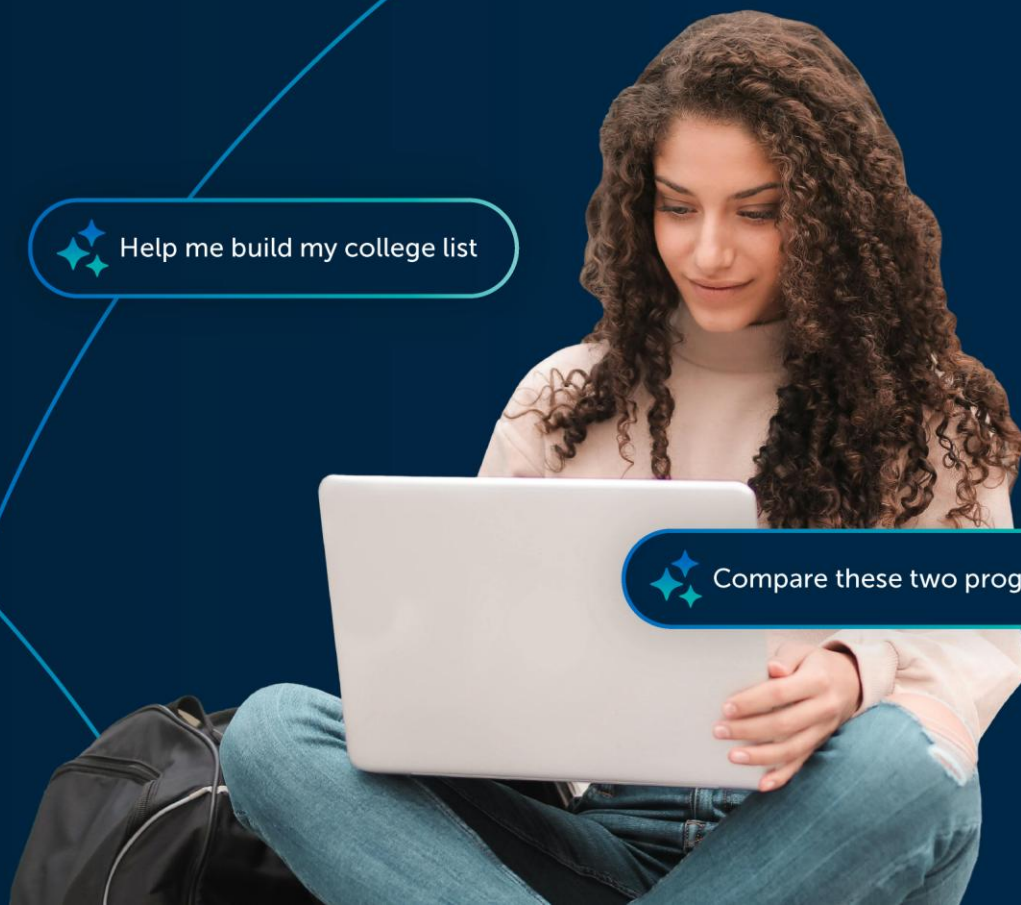
Which schools can I afford?



Help me build my college list



Compare these two programs



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# Executive Overview



## Why AI Search Readiness Requires a Scorecard

AI-based discovery is changing how students **find** institutions, **compare** programs, and **decide** where to take the next step. Prospective students now get answers about schools and programs before they ever reach an .edu, making AI search optimization, also referred to as [GEO](#), a growing part of brand, recruitment, and enrollment strategy.

For most marketing and enrollment teams, AI search is still an early discipline. Many leaders know visibility matters, but their teams often lack a consistent way to measure their presence and strengthen the signals shaping AI-generated answers.

That gives institutions a short window of opportunity to build an advantage while many teams are still developing their approach. Institutions that start tracking, benchmarking, and improving their presence now will be better positioned than competitors who wait.



## What Is “AI Search Readiness”?

AI search readiness is the ability to track and understand the metrics shaping AI search optimization, identify where to focus first, and improve the .edu content and signals influencing AI answers. The goal is to build a consistent system for measuring and benchmarking those metrics, then use what you learn to reinforce your institution’s presence in today’s AI-powered enrollment landscape.

**Use this brief to assess readiness across six key AI search metrics and identify gaps in how performance is measured, understood, and optimized for AI search.** Beyond assessment, the goal is stronger collaboration between marketing, enrollment, and web teams so that your institution remains discoverable and competitive as student search behavior changes.

## AI Search Is Disrupting Student Discovery

**6X**

as many graduate and adult learners used AI to search for programs in 2026 vs. 2024

**18%**

of graduate and adult learners removed a school from consideration based on an AI-generated answer

## Need Help Assessing Your AI Search Readiness?

*EAB’s Adult Learner Recruitment solution can help your team understand where you stand in AI search, identify priority improvements, and strengthen the .edu experiences shaping student discovery. [Connect with our team to learn more.](#)*

Sources: EAB 2026 AI Student Survey; EAB 2026 ALR Student Survey; EAB research and analysis.



# AI-Powered Search in the Student Journey

AI's Impact on Student Discovery, Your .edu, and Enrollment

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SECTION

1

# AI Usage Among Prospective Students Is on the Rise

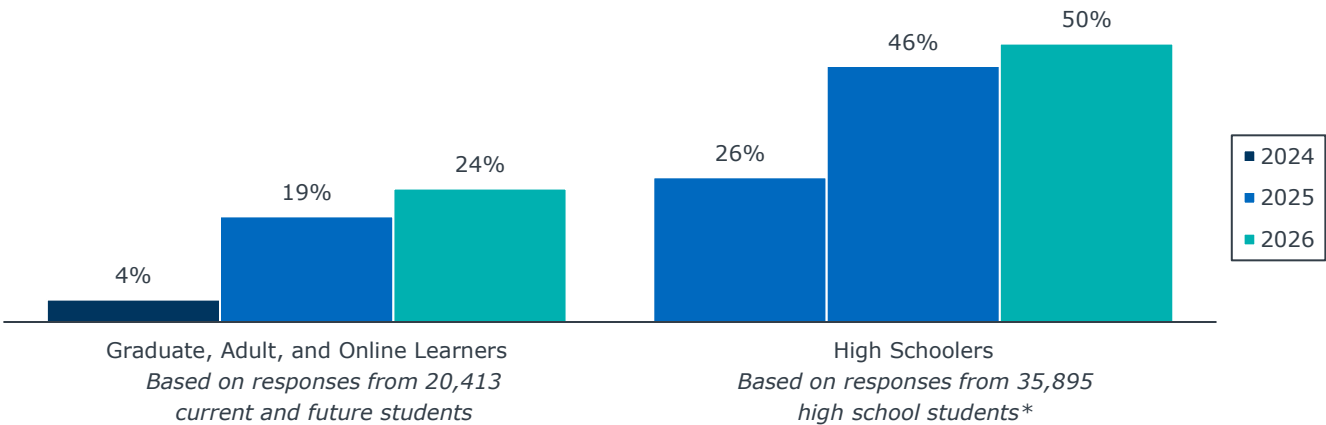
AI use in the college search process is no longer limited to early adopters. Only 15% of surveyed prospective undergraduate students have *not* used AI tools (e.g., Claude, ChatGPT, or Google AI Overviews). More than half describe themselves as intermediate AI users. Adult learners’ use of AI-powered search platforms has also grown sharply, from 4% in 2024 to 24% in 2026.

AI is already affecting whether an institution makes a student’s short list. Among graduate and adult learners who used AI in their college search, 41% became more interested in a school, 41% discovered a school they had not previously known, and 18% removed a school from consideration based on AI results.

Even as usage grows, students remain cautious. Concern and skepticism about AI have increased since last year, and trust in AI’s accuracy has declined. These trends make becoming AI search-ready a growing consideration, trust, and brand challenge.

## How and *How Much* Prospects Are Using AI During the College Search

Percentage of Prospects Using AI in the College Search, 2024 to 2026



## Common AI-Based Use Cases in the College Search:



Compare schools and programs



Gather information about cost to attend



Look for schools or programs that are a good fit



Learn about financial aid and scholarships



Build a list of schools for consideration



Find application requirements and manage deadlines

\*Two surveys of high school students were conducted in 2025.

Sources: EAB 2026 AI Student Survey; EAB 2024-2026 ALR Student Surveys; EAB 2025 Student Communication Preferences Survey; EAB 2025 AI Student Survey; EAB research and analysis.

# The New Role of Your .edu in AI-Powered Discovery

AI search has changed how students reach your website. In the traditional search journey, a prospective student searched for an institution or a keyword, clicked a link, landed on the website, and began exploring.

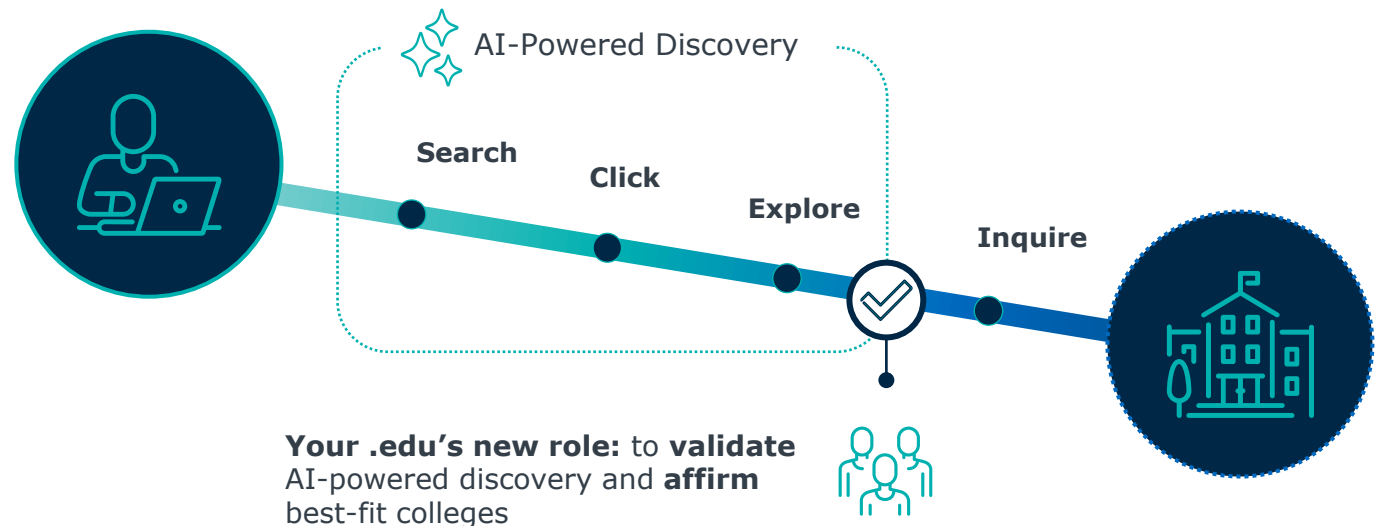
Today, students arrive on your site more informed and further along in the decision process. They've already asked AI tools which colleges or programs fit their goals, where they can get in, and what they can afford. Each prompt helps them refine their preferences, compare options, and narrow their list before clicking through to your .edu.

This evolution expands, rather than shrinks, [the .edu's role in recruitment](#). Prospective students still see institutional websites as a top source in the college search and trust them for accurate information. What has changed is what students expect from the visit: validation of what they have already learned and a clear next step.

That puts a higher premium on getting the web experience right. Your website must help students confirm fit and keep moving, while making clear to AI platforms what makes your institution distinctive.

## AI-Powered Discovery Reshapes How and Where Students Find You

### The Student Journey in the AI Era



### What a Shifting Student Journey Means for Your Web Strategy

- ▶ Your .edu must be clear enough for both students and AI platforms to understand.
- ▶ Your .edu should be designed for personalization and conversion.
- ▶ Key program and enrollment pages should answer the questions students are asking.
- ▶ Your .edu content must reflect your brand so that AI platforms don't fill in the gaps with outdated, generic, or third-party information.

**#1** Your .edu is the #1 driver of enrollment—just in a new way.

# How AI Visibility Influences the Entire Enrollment Funnel

Historically, marketing and enrollment teams have used organic website traffic, inquiry volume, and applications as early indicators of enrollment performance. However, as zero-click search becomes the norm—68% of Google searches now end without a click—those indicators become harder to read. In 2025, 53% of institutions saw web traffic decline compared with 2023, creating more pressure to convert every right-fit student who reaches your site.

AI-referred traffic may still represent a small share of total traffic, and it can still be difficult to track. But it is already showing outsized value: AI-referred visitors are 4.4X more likely to convert than traditional search visitors. It’s also expected to outpace traditional search in terms of visitors by 2028.

Identifying and accounting for AI’s influence across the funnel now can create a distinct enrollment advantage.

## AI Effects Can Be Seen at Every Funnel Stage

### Exploring AI’s Influence Across the Student Journey to Enrollment

| Student Journey Stage | What AI Search Visibility Can Influence                                                                                               | Potential Enrollment Consequence                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Awareness             | Whether prospective <b>students discover your institution</b> in AI answers                                                           |  Students may build initial college lists without you.                                     |
| Consideration         | Whether AI <b>accurately communicates</b> your strengths, differentiators, and priority programs                                      |  Competitors may shape the comparison before students reach your .edu.                     |
| Engagement            | Whether your <b>.edu content reinforces</b> what students learned through AI-related search and gives them a reason to keep exploring |  Students may leave before finding the proof points or next steps they’re looking for.    |
| Inquiry               | Whether <b>AI directs students</b> to pages with simple ways to request more information                                              |  Interested students may not convert to inquiries.                                       |
| Application           | Whether AI results <b>reinforce the fit, value, admission requirements, and urgency</b> needed to apply                               |  Students may delay or abandon application steps if key decision details remain unclear. |

Sources: Hybrid analysis of institutional websites; <https://sparktoro.com/blog/in-2026-less-than-one-third-of-google-searches-still-send-a-click/>; <https://www.semrush.com/blog/ai-search-seo-traffic-study/>; EAB research and analysis.



# The AI Search Metrics That Matter

Why They Matter, What to Track, and How to Assess Your Institution's Readiness

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SECTION

2

# How to Build Your Readiness Scorecard

The following pages introduce six core metrics for AI search readiness. Together, they help leaders understand whether prospective students and AI platforms can find, understand, and trust the institution’s most important enrollment content.

Each page explains what the metric measures, why it matters, and what to track. Use the self-audit statements to assess whether your team has the visibility, technical foundations, and processes needed to track and improve each metric.

Use your ratings to establish a baseline for AI search readiness and identify gaps in how you measure, understand, and optimize for AI search visibility. Then use Section 3 to identify and prioritize your next steps.

## Six Key Metrics for AI Search Readiness



# AI Visibility

*"Do AI Search Platforms Know We Exist?"*

## What It Measures

- ▶ AI visibility measures how often your institution appears in AI-generated responses when students ask questions related to your programs, reputation, location, affordability, or student experience.

## Why Marketing and Enrollment Leaders Should Care

- ▶ Students cannot consider your programs if you don't appear in the AI-generated answers shaping their early search. Low visibility gives competitors and third-party content more room to shape student perception.

## What to Track

- ▶ Track how often your institution appears in AI platforms across priority prompts, programs, and other enrollment topics. Monitor changes over time and compare where competitors appear but you do not.

## What "Good" Looks Like

- ▶ Your institution appears consistently across major AI platforms for high-value prompts tied to your brand, priority programs, and student decision criteria.



**Track and improve your institution's visibility across 12+ AI models in one dashboard.**

**[Request a customized visibility audit](#)**

## Self-Audit

- ☐ We know which AI platforms mention our institution most and least.
- ☐ We track prompts that reflect real student questions, not just the ones that include our institution's name.
- ☐ We monitor visibility for priority programs as well as the institution overall.
- ☐ We know which enrollment- or program-specific prompts return competitors but not us.
- ☐ We review changes in AI visibility over time instead of relying on one-time searches.

**Readiness rating: \_\_\_\_/5**

*(Count one point for each checked box.)*

# AI Brand Sentiment

*"When AI Mentions Us, What Does It Say?"*

## What It Measures

- ▶ AI brand sentiment measures how AI platforms describe your institution when they mention it, including whether the description is accurate, favorable, and distinctive. This is represented by positive, negative, and neutral responses.

## Why Marketing and Enrollment Leaders Should Care

- ▶ AI answers are shaping first impressions and can influence whether students decide to learn more about your institution. AI platforms may draw on your .edu or third-party sites, depending on which sources they judge most complete and authoritative.

## What to Track

- ▶ Monitor how descriptions change by platform, prompt type, and topic area. Look for patterns in which attributes AI platforms repeat, omit, overstate, or get wrong, especially for priority programs, student experience, affordability, outcomes, and institutional strengths.

## What "Good" Looks Like

- ▶ Prospective students consistently receive specific, brand-aligned answers about your institution across major AI platforms. Answers go beyond basic facts to reflect what makes your institution, programs, and student experience compelling.



### Try It Yourself

**1. In an incognito browser, open 2–3 AI platforms and ask:**

- "Is [institution] a good fit for a student interested in [program]?"
- "What is [institution] known for?"



**2. Then ask:**

- Did our institution appear?
- Was the answer accurate and distinctive?

## Self-Audit

- ☐ We know how our institution is described across the AI platforms students use most.
- ☐ We know whether those descriptions are generally positive, neutral, or negative.
- ☐ AI-based answers reflect a complete and current picture of our institution, not generic facts or outdated narratives.
- ☐ Our website supports key brand claims with proof points, student stories, outcomes, and program-specific examples.
- ☐ We have a process for identifying and correcting inaccurate, incomplete, or misleading AI descriptions.

**Readiness rating: \_\_\_\_/5**

*(Count one point for each checked box.)*

# Authority and Citations

*"Is Our Institution Perceived by AI as an Authority?"*

## What It Measures

- ▶ Authority measures how often AI platforms cite your .edu as a source when generating answers. This is different from being mentioned; a citation means the AI response references or links to your content as its source.

## Why Marketing and Enrollment Leaders Should Care

- ▶ If AI platforms are not citing your .edu, they may be relying on third-party sources, competitor pages, or outdated information to describe your institution. Citations help show whether your website is shaping the answer or not.

## What to Track

- ▶ Monitor which sources AI platforms cite most often when answering questions about your institution. Pay attention to whether your .edu, program pages, rankings pages, third-party profiles, news sources, or competitor sites are shaping the answer.

## What "Good" Looks Like

- ▶ AI platforms regularly cite your .edu and other trusted sources that accurately describe your brand, programs, and value to students.



**Regis University grew AI search visibility by 10X in six months.**  
**[Replicate the results](#)**

## Self-Audit

- ☐ We know which pages from our .edu are cited by AI platforms.
- ☐ Our priority enrollment and program pages use E-E-A-T principles and are structured for AI and human audiences.
- ☐ We structure and publish authoritative content that AI platforms can cite, such as FAQs, testimonials, outcomes data, and program details.
- ☐ We know which third-party sources AI platforms use when describing our institution.
- ☐ We have a plan to strengthen the page content and sources most likely to shape AI-generated answers.

**Readiness rating: \_\_\_\_/5**  
(Count one point for each checked box.)

# AI Content Readiness

*"How Can We Improve What AI Sees?"*

## What It Measures

- ▶ AI content readiness measures how well your website content is structured for students and AI platforms to understand. This includes readability, content depth, headings, metadata, schema, and other signals that help AI systems interpret and cite your pages.

## Why Marketing and Enrollment Leaders Should Care

- ▶ AI platforms are more likely to use content that is specific, current, and easy to interpret. If key pages are outdated, hard to scan, or missing important context, AI answers may overlook or misrepresent your institution.

## What to Track

- ▶ Review priority enrollment and program pages for the elements AI platforms need to interpret them clearly. Generic, outdated, or inaccurate responses are signs your content isn't AI-ready.

## What "Good" Looks Like

- ▶ Your key enrollment pages answer real student questions clearly and are well-interpreted by common AI platforms.



Learn four key tools to optimize your content for AI search.

[Get the toolkit](#)

## Self-Audit

- ☐ Our priority program pages clearly answer common student questions about cost, outcomes, fit, admissions, and experience.
- ☐ Our key pages use clear headings and page structure that make the content easy to scan.
- ☐ Our content is current and includes proof points where students need evidence.
- ☐ Important admissions, aid, program, and outcomes information is easy to find.
- ☐ Our site's information architecture (IA) and sitemap are easy for students and AI crawlers to access.

**Readiness rating: \_\_\_\_/5**

*(Count one point for each checked box.)*

# Competitive Positioning

"How Do We Stack Up to Our Peers?"

## What It Measures

- ▶ Competitive positioning shows how your institution's AI visibility compares with a defined set of peer or competitor institutions across the same tracked prompts.

## Why Marketing and Enrollment Leaders Should Care

- ▶ Prospective students are often evaluating more than one institution at a time. If your competitors appear more often, or are described more clearly, they may be replacing you on students' short lists.

## What to Track

- ▶ Review AI responses for prompts where students are likely comparing institutions, programs, cost, or fit. Track where competitors appear instead of you, are featured more prominently, or are described with stronger proof points. These gaps can show where your institution needs a stronger position in the comparison.

## What "Good" Looks Like

- ▶ Your institution appears consistently and owns a greater share of voice than the right competitors, especially for priority programs, student segments, and decision-driving prompts.



**Does AI understand what makes your institution distinctive?**  
**Enhance your position with four high-impact content strategies**

## Self-Audit

- ☐ We have a defined competitor set for AI search benchmarking.
- ☐ We know which competitors appear most often for our priority prompts.
- ☐ We compare visibility by program or topic, not only at the institutional level.
- ☐ We know where competitors are being described more clearly or favorably than our institution or programs.
- ☐ We use competitive insights to improve content for high-value programs and audiences.

**Readiness rating: \_\_\_\_/5**  
(Count one point for each checked box.)

# SEO Performance

*"Is Our Foundational Search Presence Healthy?"*

## What It Measures

- ▶ SEO performance reflects the health of your traditional search presence, including keyword rankings, technical SEO, structured data, and the quality of key pages in Google search.

## Why Marketing and Enrollment Leaders Should Care

- ▶ SEO is still the foundation of discoverability. If students and traditional search engines can't find, crawl, or understand your most important pages, AI platforms will struggle to find or interpret them as well.

## What to Track

- ▶ Review your .edu's traditional search performance to identify issues that may limit discovery. Watch for issues such as declining impressions, low rankings on non-branded queries, crawl or indexing issues, weak metadata, or slow page speed.

## What "Good" Looks Like

- ▶ Priority program and enrollment pages (e.g., Admissions, Academics, and Aid) are technically sound, easy to find, clearly labeled, and ranking for the search terms that matter most to recruitment.



**SEO performance is foundational to discoverability.**  
**[Get the SEO checklist for AI visibility](#)**

## Self-Audit

- ☐ We track rankings for priority program, admissions, aid, and outcomes keywords.
- ☐ Our enrollment pages have clear titles, meta descriptions, H1s, and heading structure.
- ☐ Our most important pages are crawlable, indexable, and easy to reach from the main website.
- ☐ We use structured data and schema to help search engines and AI platforms understand our content.
- ☐ We have addressed technical SEO on our key pages, including internal linking, page speed, and canonical (HTML code) tags.

**Readiness rating: \_\_\_\_/5**  
(Count one point for each checked box.)

# AI Search Readiness Scorecard

## Tally and Interpret Your Results

Use the scorecard below to rate your institution across the six areas covered in this section. For each area, count the number of self-audit statements you checked on the corresponding metric page. That number is your readiness rating. Use the interpretation guide to understand what your rating suggests.

### Step 1: Tally Your Results

| AI Search Metric                 | Readiness Rating (0–5) | Interpretation (see step 2) |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| AI Visibility (pg. 10)           |                        |                             |
| AI Brand Sentiment (pg. 11)      |                        |                             |
| Authority and Citations (pg. 12) |                        |                             |
| AI Content Readiness (pg. 13)    |                        |                             |
| Competitive Positioning (pg. 14) |                        |                             |
| SEO Performance (pg. 15)         |                        |                             |

### Step 2: Interpret Your Results

- 0 - No readiness – We have not begun work in this area.
- 1 - Limited readiness – Significant gaps exist in this area, and we lack clear visibility, structure, evidence, or ownership.
- 2 - Emerging readiness – Some data collection or analysis is underway, but performance is inconsistent or limited to a few pages, prompts, platforms, or programs.
- 3 - Developing readiness – We have a foundation in place for measuring this metric, but there are clear opportunities to improve quality or consistency.
- 4 - Strong readiness – We have clear visibility, strong foundations, and a process for monitoring and improving this metric over time.
- 5 - Advanced readiness – We have consistent monitoring, clear ownership, strong foundations, and a regular process for acting on what we learn.



# Prioritize AI Search Readiness for Enrollment Outcomes

Turning Your Results into Action

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SECTION

3

# Prioritization Framework for AI Search Readiness

Improving your AI search strategy can feel like a lot to tackle at once. Use the scorecard in the prior section to understand where readiness gaps could indicate limited student discovery, engagement, or action; then use this framework to decide where to start.

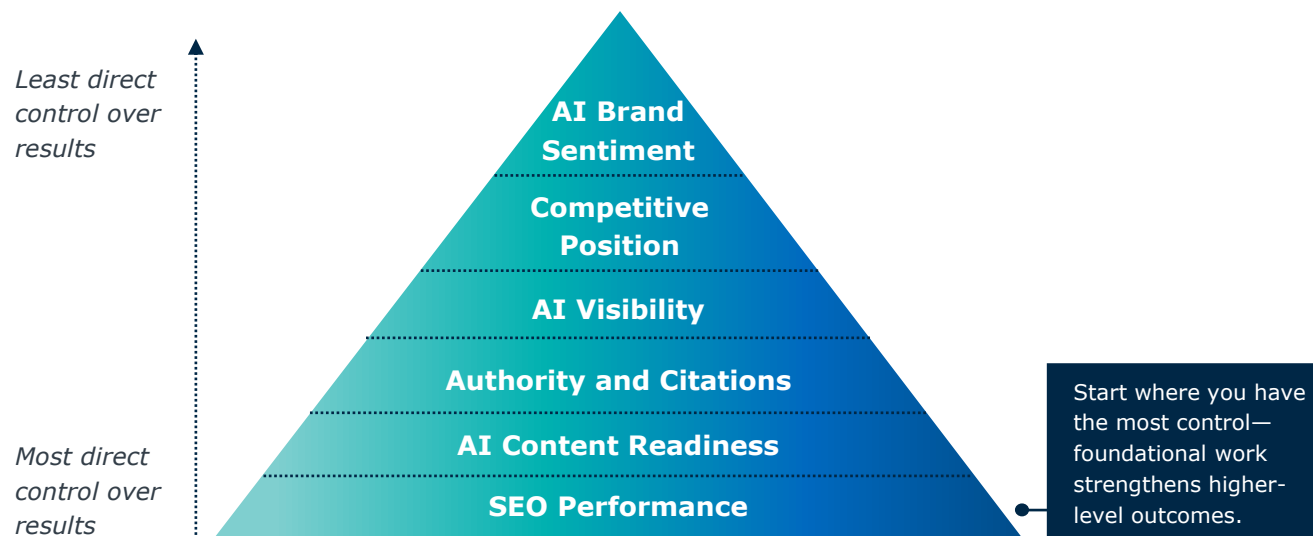
Focus first on the areas you can most directly improve. For example, if SEO performance or AI content readiness is lagging, address those foundations before tackling an area such as brand sentiment.

The higher you move on the graphic, the less direct control you have over the results. But those outcomes are still shaped by the content quality and technical foundations you manage.

▶ Your first move: identify the lowest-scoring area you can directly control, then use the related strategic action shown here to guide your next step.

## AI Search Readiness Focus Areas and Related Action Steps

### Start by Improving the Things You Can Control



### Strategic Actions Across Each Area

- ▶ **Poor SEO:** Start with foundations such as improving rankings, metadata, crawlability, and organic pathways to key pages.
- ▶ **Low Content Readiness:** Update key pages to answer student questions, add context, align to search intent, and improve site structure.
- ▶ **Weak Authority and Citations:** Reinforce trusted content and source quality across owned channels, including backlinks, cited proof points, and consistent institutional voice.
- ▶ **Low AI Visibility:** Add or optimize content for high-value prompts, programs, and topics where your institution is absent or underrepresented.
- ▶ **Weak Competitive Position:** Clarify what distinguishes your institution, such as outcomes, fit, value, and program comparison content.
- ▶ **Low Brand Sentiment:** Strengthen message consistency with a clear brand story, verifiable claims, and student-first perspectives that reflect your values.

# A Shared Conversation Guide for Marketing and Enrollment Leaders

As the student journey continues to shift, AI search strategy needs shared ownership across the right teams. Marketing may see the visibility, brand, and competitive signals first. Web and digital teams shape the site structure, technical performance, content, and analytics that influence how students and AI platforms understand the institution. Enrollment brings the recruitment priorities, audience context, and outcome data needed to meet headcount and revenue goals.

► After completing the scorecard, bring leaders from marketing, web, and enrollment together to interpret the results, identify where students may be getting stuck, and agree on what to address next.

## Bridging AI Search Readiness Across Teams

### Quick Conversation Guide

|                                                                                       |                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      | What patterns or gaps do we see across our scorecard results?                       |
|      | What do these gaps suggest about priority audiences, programs, or enrollment goals? |
|    | Which updates* can we realistically make this quarter? This year?                   |
|    | Where do we need more evidence before deciding what to change?                      |
|  | Who owns each next step, and where do teams need to work together?                  |

\*Consider content, technical fixes, source quality, messaging, and student pathways.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

# Translate AI Search Optimization Insights into a Prioritized Action Plan

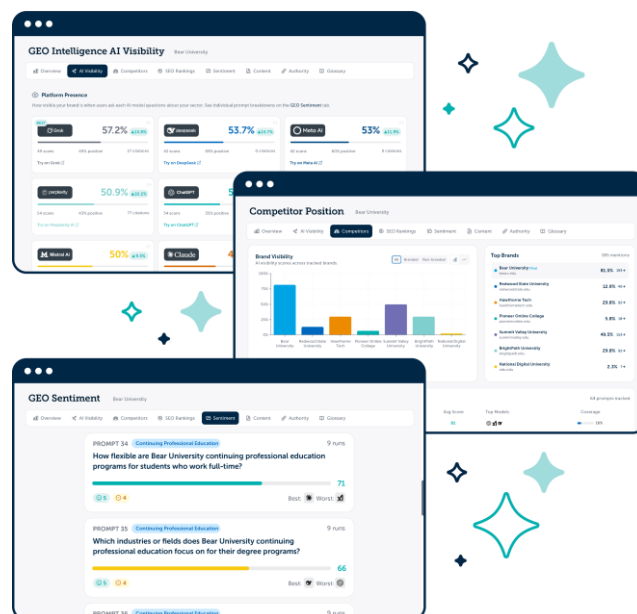
The scorecard and framework in this brief give leaders a practical way to identify readiness gaps and prioritize actions that support student discovery, engagement, and enrollment. But a onetime self-assessment can show only part of the picture. To get a comprehensive view, teams need a consistent way to measure AI search performance, benchmark changes over time, and use those findings to improve their .edu.

Some institutions may have the internal capacity to build that process themselves. Many need additional expertise, strategic guidance, or implementation support to keep pace as AI search evolves.

Whether your team needs an AI search performance assessment, targeted .edu enhancements, or hands-on execution support, [EAB's Web & Digital Solutions](#) can help.

## All-in-One Search Visibility Management

### The Largest AI Visibility Dashboard Purpose-Built for Higher Ed



- ▶ **12 AI models** monitored—and growing
- ▶ **500 keywords** and 250 prompts monitored per institution
- ▶ **10 competitors** benchmarked per institution
- ▶ **6.7M total AI responses** captured and analyzed

### A Clear, Prioritized Action Plan for Sustained Optimization



#### Structured GEO Playbook

Structured recommendations focused on the highest-impact visibility and conversion opportunities



#### Quarterly Strategy and Performance Reviews

Ongoing dashboard refinement and SEO/GEO strategy guidance



#### .edu Content Optimization

Targeted recommendations to improve enrollment-critical content and user experience



#### Conversion Pathway Enhancements (includes EAB lead forms)

Optimization strategy to improve inquiry pathways and lead capture experiences



#### AI Academy Access

On-demand GEO training resources

Connect with EAB's [Adult Learner Recruitment](#) team for a consultation.

# Adult Learner Recruitment

Outperform the Market at Every Stage of the Funnel

## Marketing Engine to Orchestrate Enrollment Growth

## A True Strategic Partnership



### Demand

*Expand and diversify your prospect audience pool*



### Digital

*Orchestrate organic and paid digital*



### Conversion

*Customized campaigns to drive action*



### Research

*Insights to help you place smarter bets*



### Strategy

*Expert guidance on your top challenges*



### Intelligence

*Prove and scale results at every stage*

## What Makes Us Different

**Unrivaled Mix** of Proprietary and Known Lead Sources

**Full-Funnel** Enrollment Ecosystem Built for the AI Era

**24/7, Transparent** Access to Campaign Data

**Strategic Support**—While Your Team Maintains Control

## Proven Impact in a Dynamic Landscape

**+12%**

Average **enrollment growth** in the **first year** of partnership

**6:1**

Average **ROI** for multiyear partnership

**200+**

**Institutions** partner with our Adult Learner Recruitment team

**90%**

of institutions **continue their work with us** year after year

# The Strategic Growth Partner for Higher Education

## The **EAB** Difference

- AI-powered solutions to drive results from brand to yield
- First-of-its-kind recruitment ecosystem orchestrated to meet your goals
- Higher education's largest student dataset to inform what works—and doesn't
- The industry's leading experts to help you make the right calls in a dynamic market



Comprehensive Solutions Expertly Orchestrated to Meet Your Marketing and Enrollment Goals

### Conversion

#### **Enroll360**

*Full-funnel undergraduate marketing solution*

#### **Adult Learner Recruitment**

*Full-funnel graduate marketing solution*

#### **Financial Aid Optimization**

#### **Advancement Marketing Solutions**

### Demand

Undergraduate Student Leads *by Appily*

Graduate Student Leads *by Appily*

Virtual Tours

Direct Admissions Platform

Naviance Awareness and Leads *by Intersect*

### Digital

AI Search Optimization and GEO

Paid Media Campaigns

Strategic Digital Partnerships

Website Design and Development

.edu AI Chat Agent

International Student Marketing *by Study International*

### Brand

Brand Research and Strategy

Brand Development and Activation

Out-of-Home

Video and Creative

**+ Strategy and Tech:** Market Research | Consulting | Enrollment CRM

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