Aligning Digital Marketing Strategy with Graduate and Adult Enrollment Growth

Insights from Our Survey of 120+ Marketing Leaders—and
What They Mean for Your Enrollment Growth

Adult Learner Recruitment

Connecting to Audio

Asking a Question

Brief Exit Survey

Type your question here

We'd appreciate your **feedback** on today's presentation.

Today's Presenters

Val Fox

Consultant and Principal,
Marketing and Enrollment Solutions
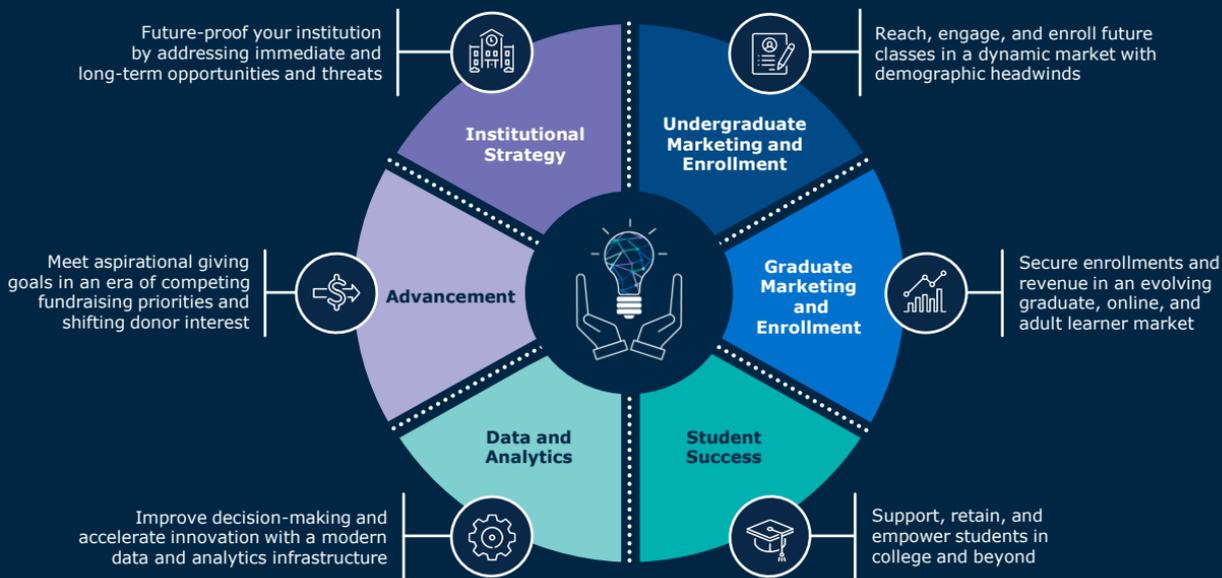ValFox@eab.com

Lex Ruby-Howe

Vice President,
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Insight-Powered Solutions for Your Top Priorities and Toughest Challenges

Future-proof your institution by addressing immediate and long-term opportunities and threats

Institutional Strategy

Reach, engage, and enroll future classes in a dynamic market with demographic headwinds

Undergraduate Marketing and Enrollment

Meet aspirational giving goals in an era of competing fundraising priorities and shifting donor interest

Advancement

Graduate Marketing and Enrollment

Secure enrollments and revenue in an evolving graduate, online, and adult learner market

Data and Analytics

Improve decision-making and accelerate innovation with a modern data and analytics infrastructure

Student Success

Support, retain, and empower students in college and beyond

We partner with 2,800+ institutions to accelerate progress, deliver results, and enable lasting change.

95%+ of our partners return to us year after year because of results we achieve, together.

EAB Adult Learner Recruitment

Outperform the Market at Every Stage of the Funnel

Curate
Expand and diversify your pool of right-fit students

Cultivate
Customized campaigns to drive students to application

Convert
Improve yield and retention to maximize enrollment potential

Strategize
Identify and build market-ready programs for competitive advantage

What Makes Us Different

Unrivaled Mix of Proprietary and Known Lead Sources

Turnkey, Full-Funnel Conversion Engine

24/7, Transparent Access to Campaign Data and Full Attribution

Rigorous Testing to Stay Ahead in a Dynamic Market

Proven Impact in a Dynamic Landscape

200+
Partner institutions

40+
Years of higher education expertise

6:1
Average ROI across multiyear partnership

18%
Average graduate enrollment growth

Request a Copy in the Post-Webinar Survey

120+

Heads of Higher Ed Marketing surveyed

31

Questions asked about:

➢ Strategic priorities

➢ Budget allocations

➢ Planned investments

➢ Channel strategies

➢ AI adoption

Survey Conducted Across August and September 2025

About the Respondents

Marketing Role	
Vice President	**55%**
Chief Marketing Officer	**16%**
Executive Director	**16%**
Assistant Vice President	**14%**

2–5 Years
Most common response to
time in current role **(44%)**

10+ Years
Most common response to years
worked in higher education **(79%)**

About Their Institutions

Institution Structure	
Private	57%
Public	43%

Institution Type	
Large Public and Private	40%
Selective	26%
Regional Private	25%
Regional Public	9%

School Size (Number of Undergraduate Students)	
Small (<3,000)	38%
Medium (3,000–9,999)	24%
Large (10,000+)	38%

Who They Support

91% Support recruitment,
admissions, and enrollment

Student Audiences Supported

Audience	
Undergraduate	**92%**
Transfer	**84%**
Graduate	**77%**
International	**76%**
Online	**64%**
Degree completion	**51%**
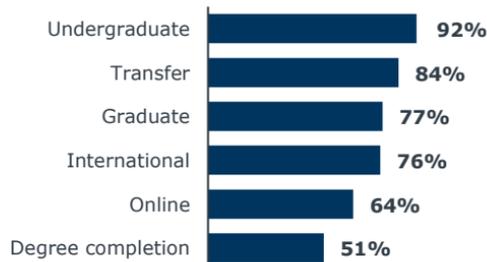
.edus and Search Engines Guide Grad and Adult Learners' Exploration

Q: What sources of information [did you use/have you used] in your search?

Source	Percentage
.edu's, college search sites, etc.	66.4%
Search engines	57.6%
Communications from schools (e.g. mail, email, text)	40.3%
College faculty/staff	37.6%
Friends/significant others/colleagues	30.4%
Social media	26.7%

Digital Sources
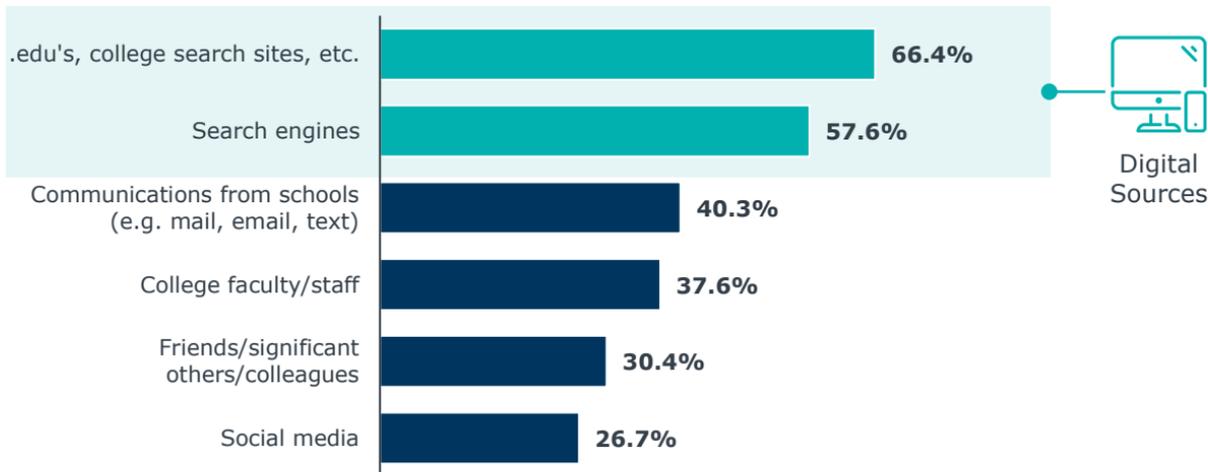
And Your Future Adult Learners Will, Too

75% of surveyed high schoolers used **search engines** in their exploration phase

74% of surveyed high schoolers used **.edus and/or college search sites** in their exploration phase

Sources: EAB 2025 Adult Learner Survey; 2025 EAB AI Student Survey; 2025 EAB Student Communications Preferences Survey.

But AI Has Moved the Goalposts for Search

AI Engines Are the New Front Door to Discovery

- **46%** of Gen Z use AI to search for college (up from 26% in spring 2025)
- **15 percentage-point increase** in adult learners using AI in their search

Traditional Search Engines Are Adapting to AI

- AI Overviews have increased by **115%** since March 2025
- They appear on **~55%** of Google searches

~60%
of Google searches now **end without a click**

Top SEO Rankings No Longer Guarantee Clicks

- Positions 1-3 in Google are getting buried or completely overlooked by AI
- When the AI Overview is present, CTR drops by **61%**

Paid Search ROI Is Getting Costlier and Less Effective

- Emerging data shows CTRs dropping by **68%** when AI summaries are present
- The cost-per-click for higher ed terms is up **45%** over last year

Sources: EAB 2025 Adult Learner Survey; 2025 EAB AI Student Survey; https://sparktoro.com/blog/2024-zero-click-search-study-for-every-1000-us-google-searches-only-374-clicks-go-to-the-open-web-in-the-eu-its-360/; https://www.wordstream.com/blog/google-ai-overviews-statistics; https://www.seerinteractive.com/insights/aio-impact-on-google-ctr-september-2025-update; https://www.dataslayer.ai/blog/google-ai-overviews-the-end-of-traditional-ctr-and-how-to-adapt-in-2025.

Your Content Now Competes and Contributes Inside AI Answers

Google

what can i do with a msw

All · Images · Forums · Videos · Shopping · News · Web · ⋮ More

✦ AI Overview

With a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, you can pursue a variety of careers in social work, including clinical social work, school social work, medical social work, child welfare worker, community organizer, advocate, researcher, policy analyst, working in hospitals, schools, government agencies, and private practice, utilizing your skills in empathy, communication, and problem-solving to help individuals and communities facing challenges.

Specific career paths with an MSW:

Clinical Social Worker:
Provide individual and group therapy to clients dealing with mental health issues, substance abuse, or trauma.

School Social Worker:
Support students, teachers, and families by addressing behavioral issues, academic challenges, and family concerns within a school setting.

Medical Social Worker:
Assist patients and their families in navigating healthcare systems, coping with medical diagnoses, and accessing necessary support services within hospitals or clinics.

AI Overview pulls from relevant sites it deems credible and trustworthy

What Can I Do with an MSW Degree? MSW Career Paths
Geriatric Social Worker: Using their expertise in legislation, policies and social programs that impact older patients, these...
Social Work License Map

What Can I Do With an MSW Besides Social Work? Alternative ...
With an MSW, you can explore careers in human resources, policy analysis, grant writing, education, and healthcare...
Social Work Guide

What Can You Do with a Degree in Social Work?
Mar 17, 2023 — Child Welfare Practitioner. Child welfare practitioners specialize in safeguarding children from harm by...
University of Kentucky College of Social Work

Show all

National University

University of North Dakota

University of Kentucky

Immediate, Outsized Gains in AI Search Visibility

AI-Ready Content and Technical Fixes Paid Off Quickly for Regis University

Key Strategies to Improve Regis' AI Discoverability

- Completed search visibility audit

- Addressed technical SEO foundations

- Targeted intent-driven keywords

- Strengthened key pages with clear, student-first content

- Improved content credibility signals like expertise and trust
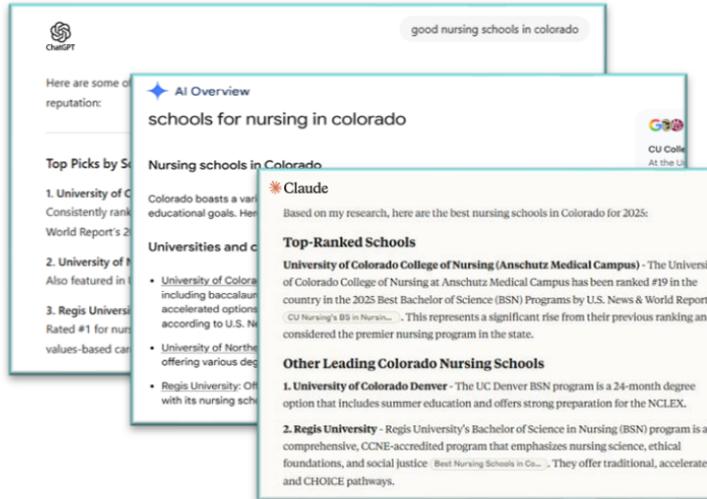
IMPACT

909%
Increase in presence on Google's AI Overview[1]

123%
Increase in organic search impressions sitewide[2]

57%
Increase in organic search clicks sitewide[2]

1) Within 6 months of implementation
2) From year 1 to year 2

Let's Take a Quick Poll

Please rate your confidence in how your .edu appears in *traditional search*.

- Very confident
- Somewhat confident
- A little confident
- Not confident
- Unsure

Please rate your confidence in how your .edu appears in *AI search*.

- Very confident
- Somewhat confident
- A little confident
- Not confident
- Unsure

4 Insights

1 # The Strongest Enrollment Driver Isn't the Top Priority

2 Teams Are Building Capacity Despite Constraints

3 Strategic Channel Shifts Strengthen Visibility and Paid Efficiency

4 AI Adoption Accelerates—But Implementation Gaps Remain

The Overlooked Priority: Digital Experience

Strategic Priorities Uncover Disconnect Between Top Goal and What Drives It

Which of the following are top priorities for your enrollment marketing strategy this year?
Top three priorities selected

Priority	Value
Driving undergraduate enrollment growth	59%
Brand amplification (awareness strategy and execution)	45%
Driving graduate/adult learner enrollment	38%
Scaling marketing efforts with limited resources	33%
Improving lead generation	32%
Improving web experience/performance	27%
Measuring marketing effectiveness/ROI	26%
Evolving our brand (e.g., brand strategy, research, rebrand)	21%
Increasing search visibility (e.g., SEO, AI search)	16%
Brand risk management	3%

Legend:
- Enrollment
- Brand
- Digital experience

#1 Source of information for undergraduate and graduate students during their college search*

#6 Yet ranks only #6 among marketing leaders' strategic priorities

*tied with college search platforms

Which of the following are the main barriers to achieving your enrollment marketing goals?
(Top three barriers selected)

Barrier	Percentage
Limited budget	**80%**
Insufficient staffing	**47%**
Siloed operations	**38%**
Outdated website or infrastructure	**24%**
Difficulty measuring/demonstrating ROI	**24%**
Unclear or shifting institutional priorities	**20%**
Misaligned goals across departments	**17%**
Lack of internal expertise	**12%**
Uncertainty around AI and/or other emerging tech	**11%**
Other	**10%**

Budget limitations cited as top barrier across **every segment, title, and institution size**

Outdated websites were a **top-five barrier** for all institutional segments *except* **large public and private institutions**

AI uncertainty was disproportionately higher among **Executive Directors of Marketing**

An AI-Ready Content Strategy Boosts Visibility and Enrollment Results

Search- and Answer-Engine Optimized copy and header tags

Primary Calls to Action integrated into on-page content strategy

Social proof to strengthen E-E-A-T signals and increase user engagement

Audience-specific content to improve alignment with search intent

Simple navigation to guide students and AI engines to enrollment answers

Skimmable answers to help prospects *and* AI engines find and feature your content

OU Online's Impressive Results

+31%

Increase in enrollments influenced by organic search (Y2 over Y1)
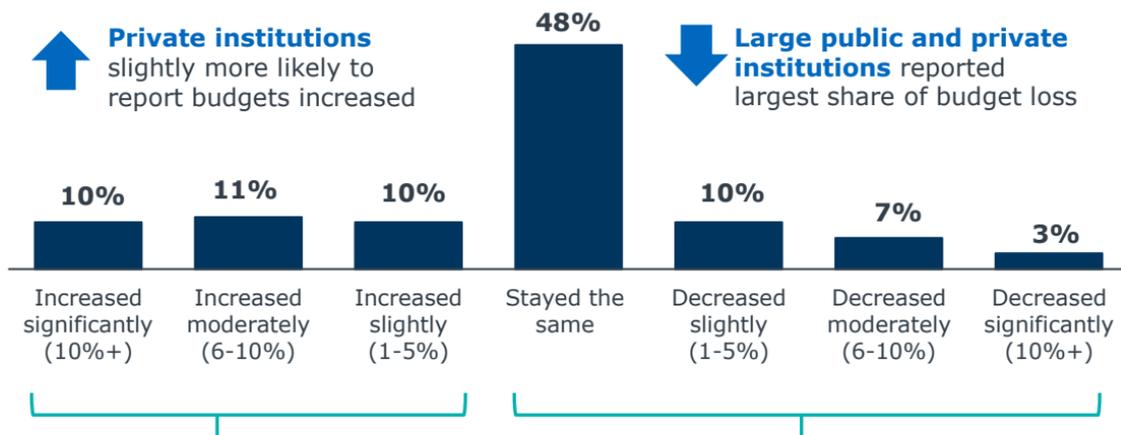
Teams Are Building Capacity Despite Constraints

2

Budget Stability Masks Growing Pressure

How has your digital enrollment marketing budget changed since last year (AY 2024–2025)?

Private institutions slightly more likely to report budgets increased

Large public and private institutions reported largest share of budget loss

Category	Percentage
Increased significantly (10%+)	10%
Increased moderately (6-10%)	11%
Increased slightly (1-5%)	10%
Stayed the same	48%
Decreased slightly (1-5%)	10%
Decreased moderately (6-10%)	7%
Decreased significantly (10%+)	3%

31% of enrollment marketing budgets **increased** YOY

69% of enrollment marketing budgets **remained flat or decreased** YOY
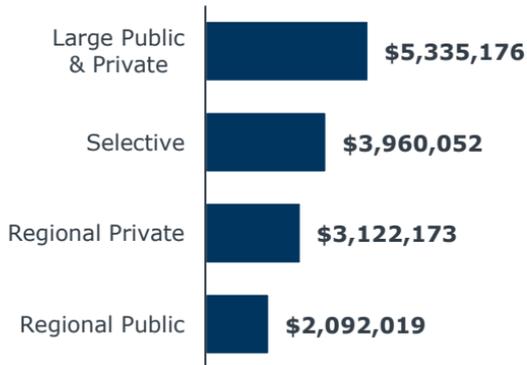
Stable Allocations amid Uncertain Budgets

Total Budget

$4.15M
Average **overall marketing budget**

Average Overall Marketing Budget by Segment

| Segment	Budget
Large Public & Private	$5,335,176
Selective	$3,960,052
Regional Private	$3,122,173
Regional Public	$2,092,019

Enrollment Marketing Allocations

72% of marketing dollars are **allocated for enrollment**

61% of enrollment marketing dollars are **allocated for digital marketing on average**
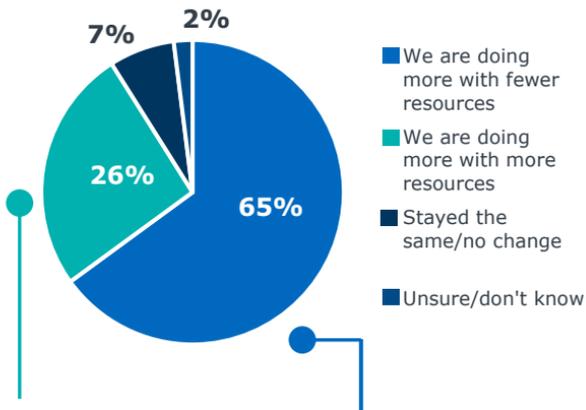
Staff vs. Non-staff Allocations

49.6 | 50.3

■ Staffing Budget
■ Non-Staffing Budget

Source: 2025 EAB Marketing Leaders Survey.
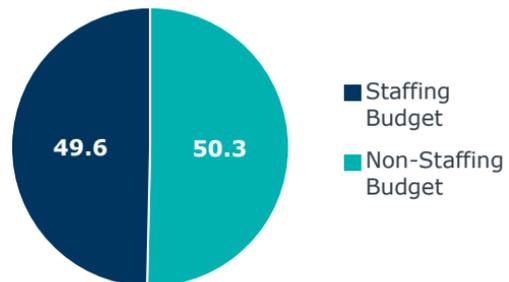
Teams are Lean, Under-Resourced

Over the past three years (since 2022), how has the scope of your team's workload changed relative to your resources (e.g., staff, budget, technology)?

- 7%
- 2%
- 26%
- 65%

- ■ We are doing more with fewer resources
- ■ We are doing more with more resources
- ■ Stayed the same/no change
- ■ Unsure/don't know

22.1 Full-time employees (FTEs) in average marketing division

FTEs by Marketing Area

Web marketing	2.7
Email marketing	2.1
Paid Search/advertising	1.6
Social media	1.7
Lead generation	2.2

Those doing more with *more* resources are more likely:

- VPs (compared to CMOs, AVPs, and EDs)
- Large public and private institutions
- Selective institutions

Those doing more with *fewer* resources are more likely:

- CMOs (compared to VPs, AVPs, and EDs)
- Regional public and private institutions
- Medium-sized institutions

New Models for Capacity Building

How High-Impact Work Gets Done

Most Respondents *Currently* Own…

- ▶ Brand marketing
- ▶ Content strategy
- ▶ Website experience
- • Creative design and services
- • Analytics
- • Email marketing

Respondents Most Commonly Split Responsibility of…

- • Paid media
- • Search visibility
- • Artificial Intelligence
- • Market research

▶ *Execution support may become more flexible as leaders rebalance digital strategy*

What Capacity—and Gaps—Looks Like Today

93%
Use vendor support

53%
Need (and don't have) AI support
to meet enrollment goals

Source: 2025 EAB Marketing Leaders Survey.

Recommendations for Your Strategy

Rebuild budgets around ROI, not tactics.
Prioritize investments that tie directly to applications, yield, and net-tuition outcomes each cycle.

Adopt an elastic team model.
Pair in-house brand expertise with external specialists to scale technical execution and analytics without expanding staff.

Quick Poll

I'd like to speak with an EAB expert about…

1   **Generating leads** for graduate and/or adult education programs

2   **Developing marketing campaigns** to reach and recruit graduate and adult students

3   **Updating our enrollment marketing strategy** as AI usage grows

EAB

Strategic Channel Shifts Strengthen Visibility and Paid Efficiency
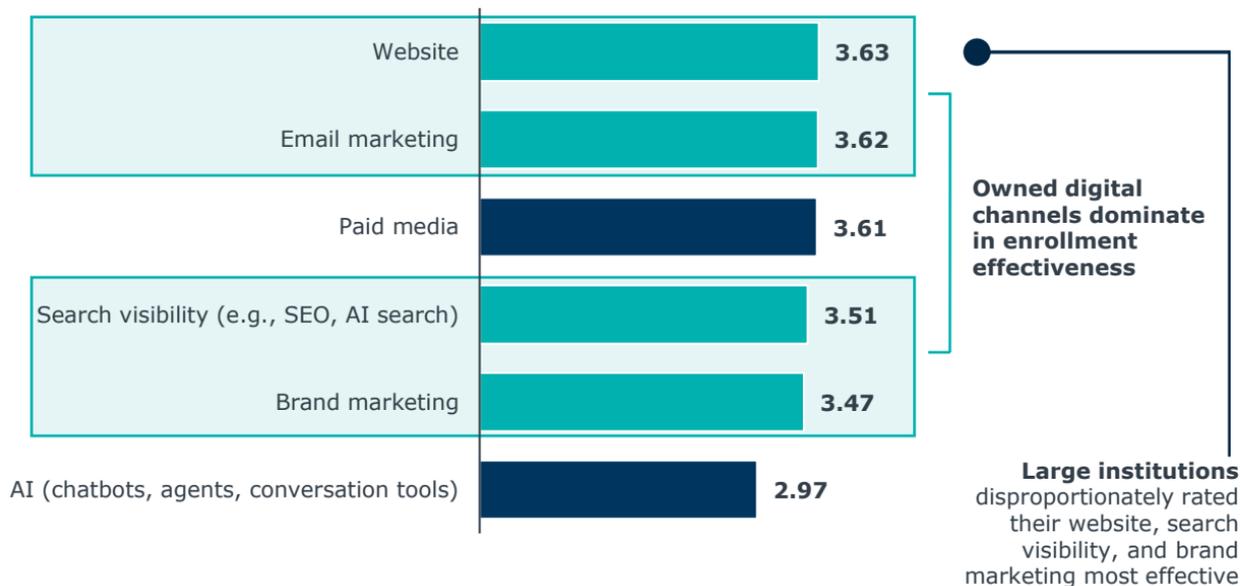
INSIGHT

3

Hint: It's Mostly Assets You "Own"

How effective are the following aspects of your digital marketing strategy in contributing to your enrollment goals?

Scale of 1-5, with 1=not effective and 5=extremely effective

Category	Score
Website	3.63
Email marketing	3.62
Paid media	3.61
Search visibility (e.g., SEO, AI search)	3.51
Brand marketing	3.47
AI (chatbots, agents, conversation tools)	2.97

Owned digital channels dominate in enrollment effectiveness

Large institutions disproportionately rated their website, search visibility, and brand marketing most effective

Source: 2025 EAB Marketing Leaders Survey.

Diversified Strategies Improve Funnel Efficiency, Counteract AI Effects

Use and Effectiveness of Lead Sources

Scale of 1-5, with 1=not effective and 5=extremely effective

	Use	Efficacy	
In-person events/outreach	93%	3.81	
.edu site	93%	3.61	.edu site ranked most effective digital lead gen channel
Paid digital media (e.g., Paid Search, Paid Social)	90%	3.59	Paid media still a powerhouse—don't neglect, diversify
Organic SEO	88%	3.38	
Purchased test-taker lists	84%	3.33	
Pay-per-lead platforms (e.g., Niche, Appily, *U.S. News*)	70%	3.04	High-intent, pre-validated lead sources AI-resilient, cost-effective
Chatbots or AI assistants	34%	2.59	

Over the next 12–18 months, how will the amount you are spending in the following areas of your digital enrollment marketing budget change?

Leaders shifting focus to owned sources and decreasing market research

Search visibility and AI tools the only areas where plans to **"increase spend" outpaced "stay the same"**

23% of leaders unsure how their AI-related spend will change in the next year

Share of Marketing Leaders Planning to Adjust Spend* (%)				
	Increase	Stay the same	Decrease	Unsure
Paid media	36%	45%	11%	8%
Brand marketing	37%	45%	9%	5%
Content strategy and creation	29%	59%	5%	6%
Website experience	42%	43%	8%	5%
Search visibility (e.g., SEO, AI search)	46%	42%	6%	5%
Artificial intelligence (e.g., chatbots, agents, conversation tools)	37%	32%	0%	23%
Creative design and services	20%	64%	11%	2%
Analytics and performance measurement	30%	61%	2%	6%
Email marketing	19%	68%	7%	2%
Market research	31%	35%	19%	7%

Greater share ▬▬▬ Lower share

*White cells represent "stay the same" and "unsure" responses.

Recommendations for Your Strategy

Strengthen the owned foundation first.
Focus investment on the .edu, search visibility, and content that drives measurable enrollment outcomes.

Use Paid Search and Paid Social to amplify, not anchor.
Let paid campaigns extend your owned reach while directing audiences back to the .edu for conversion.

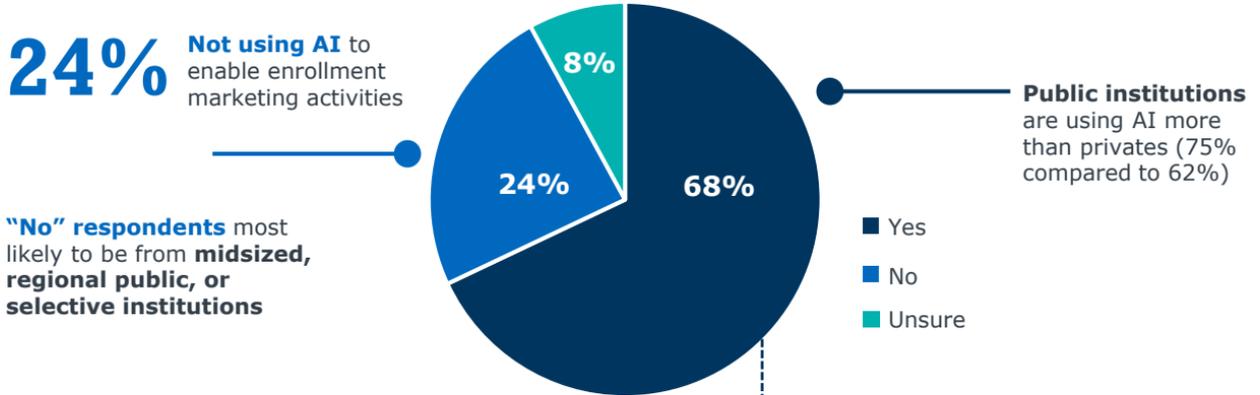**EAB**

AI Adoption Accelerates—But Implementation Gaps Remain

4

Nearly 1 in 4 Not Using AI to Enable Enrollment Marketing Activities

Is your team currently using AI for any of your enrollment marketing efforts?

24% **Not using AI** to enable enrollment marketing activities

"No" respondents most likely to be from **midsized, regional public, or selective institutions**

8%

24%

68%

Public institutions are using AI more than privates (75% compared to 62%)
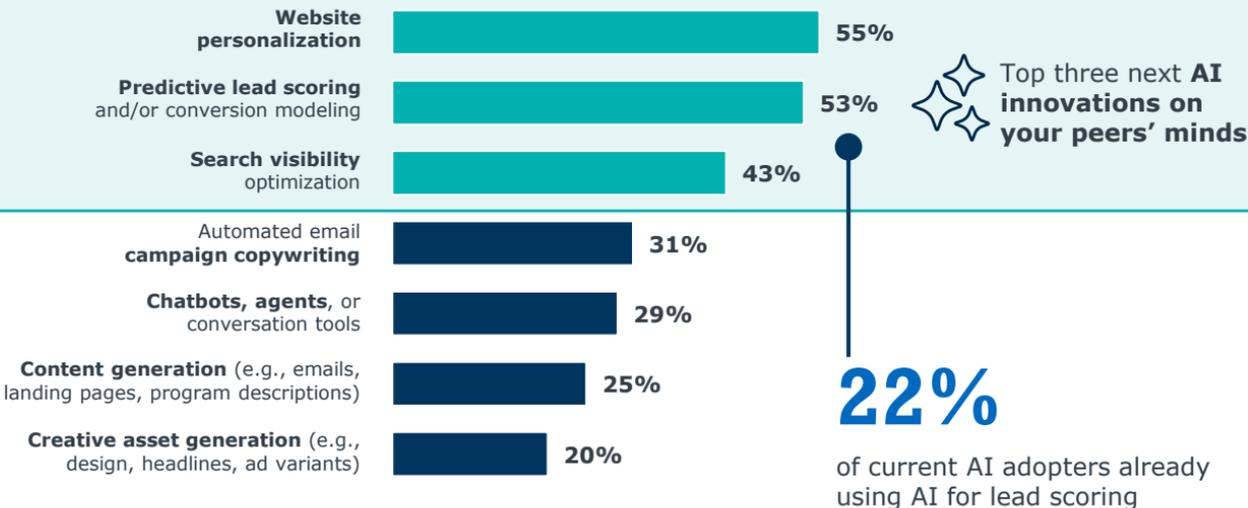
- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Most Common Use Cases:

- Chatbots, agents, or conversation tools (70%)
- Content strategy and creation (54%)
- Website experience (42%)
- Analytics and reporting (32%)

AI Moves from Automation to Personalization and Prediction

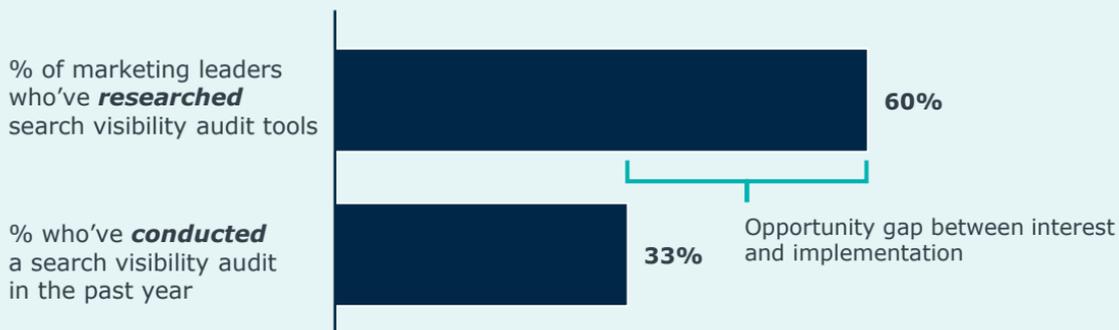**What AI-driven tools or capabilities are you most interested in exploring in the next year?**
(Select up to three.)

Website personalization — 55%

Predictive lead scoring and/or conversion modeling — 53%

Search visibility optimization — 43%

Top three next **AI innovations on your peers' minds**

Automated email **campaign copywriting** — 31%

Chatbots, agents, or conversation tools — 29%

Content generation (e.g., emails, landing pages, program descriptions) — 25%

Creative asset generation (e.g., design, headlines, ad variants) — 20%

22%

of current AI adopters already using AI for lead scoring

High Interest in AI Audit Tools, Low Rates of Implementation

% of marketing leaders who've *researched* search visibility audit tools

60%

% who've *conducted* a search visibility audit in the past year
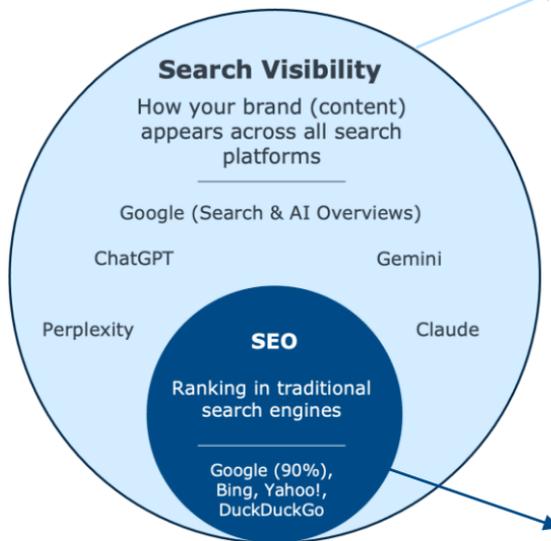
33%

Opportunity gap between interest and implementation

Implication: *Those who invest early will gain ground quickly while others fall behind.*

Built on SEO, Expanded for AI-Driven Discovery

Search Visibility

How your brand (content) appears across all search platforms

Google (Search & AI Overviews)

ChatGPT   Gemini

Perplexity   **SEO**   Claude

Ranking in traditional search engines

Google (90%), Bing, Yahoo!, DuckDuckGo

AI Engine Audit

VISIBILITY

AI Share of Voice

Mentions

Average Position

Enrollment-Related Searches

Competitor Benchmarking

AUDIENCE & CONTENT

Real Student Questions

BRAND PERCEPTION

Brand Sentiment

Key Attributes

Competitive Perception

STRATEGY & ACTIONS

Prioritization

Benchmarking & Trends

Reports

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Audit

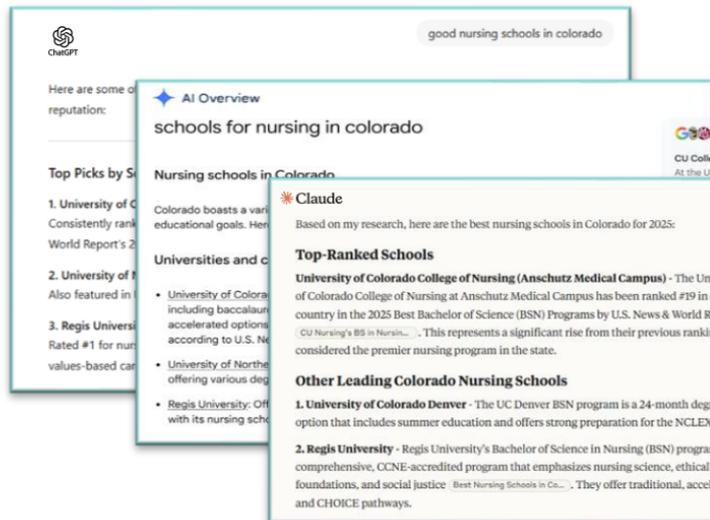| Visibility & Ranking	Traffic Engagement	Technical SEO Health
Keyword Rankings	Total Traffic	Technical Errors/404s
SERP Features Presence	New Users	Duplicate content
Impressions	Click-Through Rate	Hygiene
	Engagement Rate	Missing Titles

AI-Ready Content and Technical Fixes Paid Off Quickly

Regis + EAB: Key Strategies for AI Discoverability

- Completed search visibility audit

- Addressed technical SEO foundations

- Targeted intent-driven keywords

- Strengthened key pages with clear, student-first content

- Improved content credibility signals like expertise and trust

909%
Increase in presence on Google's AI Overview[1]

123%
Increase in organic search impressions sitewide[2]

57%
Increase in organic search clicks sitewide[2]

1) Within 6 months of implementation
2) From year 1 to year 2

What We've Learned About Agents…

Knowledge base matters
There is a "Goldilocks" zone: too little context limits usefulness, too much reduces consistency.

Clear goals drive better performance
Agents work best when designed for a specific moment (e.g., exploration vs. application

Channel matters
Agent responses, links, and CTAs should differ across web, SMS, etc.

Human handoff is essential
Not every interaction should stay with an agent

…And How Students Use Them

Most engagement happens after hours (roughly 6 p.m. to 1 a.m.).

Some students *prefer* agents for low-pressure, judgment-free conversations.

Agents provide real service by answering questions, reducing anxiety, and providing real-time nudges.

We're Working with Partners to Embed Chat Agents on…

Landing Pages   *SMS Text*   *The .edu*

Recommendations for Your Strategy

Invest in AI that personalizes and drives enrollment impact.

AI visibility is table stakes—prioritize tools that strengthen the .edu and support measurable conversion.

Audit and align content for AI search.

Conduct regular visibility and content audits to ensure your site is optimized for AI-driven discovery and measurable enrollment performance.

The .edu opportunity gap persists

Advance your enrollment strategy by anchoring your marketing efforts in your .edu—the most powerful driver of visibility, engagement, and conversion.

Capacity models are evolving

Build flexible teams and partnerships that expand technical expertise and capacity without increasing permanent headcount.

Owned channels are central

Focus investment on refining these owned assets for stronger visibility, lead capture, and attribution across the funnel.

AI visibility and personalization define the next competitive edge

Audit your .edu for AI search visibility, then invest in tools that personalize the site experience and drive enrollment impact across the funnel.

Quick Poll

I'd like to speak with an EAB expert about…

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2 **Developing marketing campaigns** to reach and recruit graduate and adult students

3 **Updating our enrollment marketing strategy** as AI usage grows

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1

Receive a copy of today's **presentation slides**

2

Receive our marketing leaders survey **insight paper**

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DIGITAL AGENCY

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How **120+** Marketing Leaders Are Advancing **Digital Strategy** for Visibility and Enrollment Growth

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3

Join our next webinar for more information about **finding and articulating your graduate programs' differentiators**

4

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Thank You!

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Consider Our Team a Resource

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions.