EAB

APPILY TOURS

How a Virtual Tour Helps Colleges Differentiate in the Age of AI Search

Stand Out To Students With High-Impact Virtual Tours

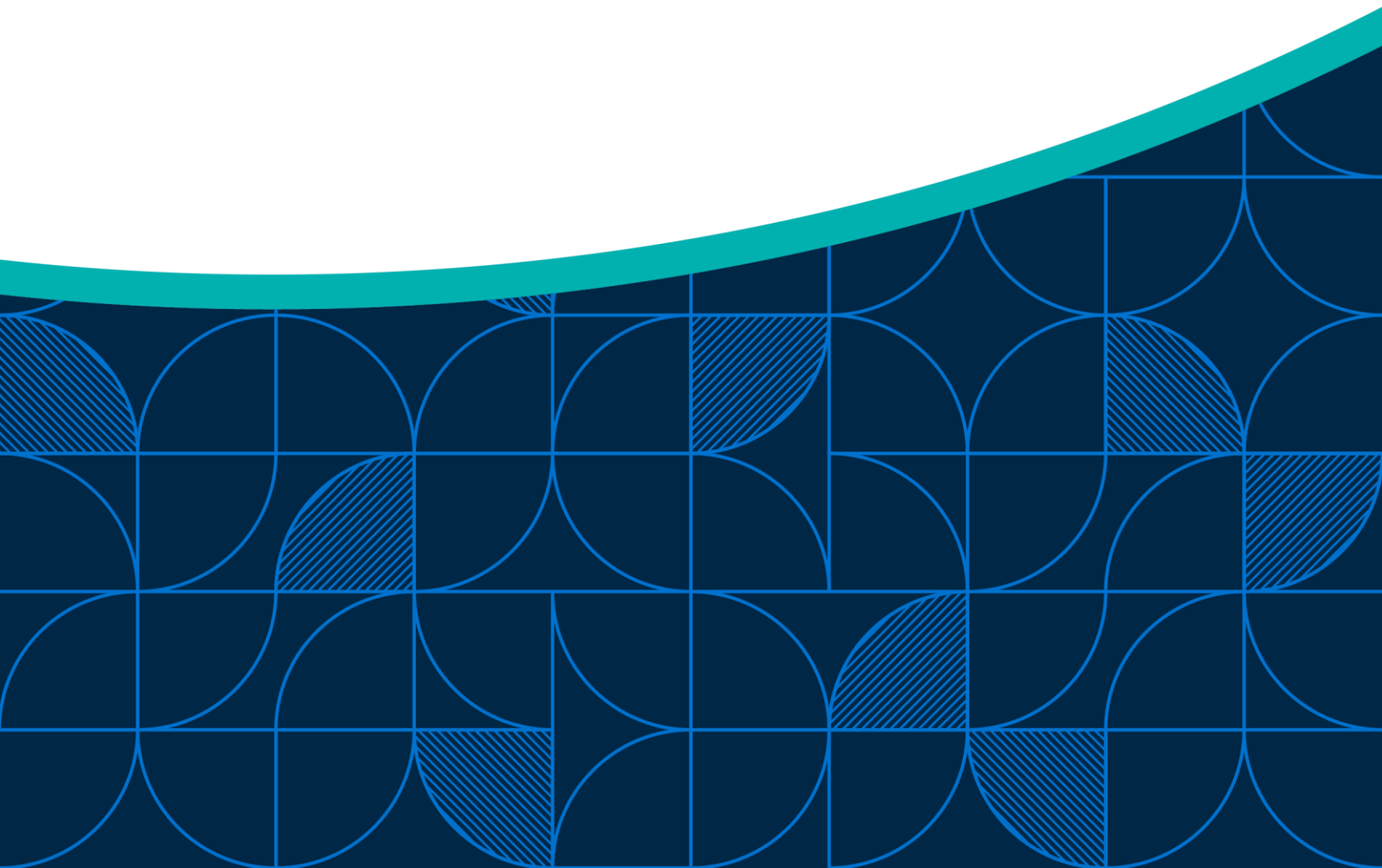




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Differentiation Is at Risk in College Search

Artificial intelligence is now shaping students' earliest impressions of colleges—often before enrollment teams know a student exists. Nearly half of prospective students report using AI tools to compare institutions, research requirements, and narrow their lists. AI has effectively become a new front door to the enrollment funnel, influencing consideration before a website visit, inquiry, or campus tour.

This shift amplifies a familiar challenge: stealth behavior. But now, instead of students doing independent research on your .edu, they may turn to an AI tool like ChatGPT or Gemini. While these tools can make college search easier, they can also compress distinct institutional value propositions into simplified summaries that don't fully or accurately portray your institution.

At the same time, despite its widespread use, many students approach AI with a high level of caution and skepticism. Most students only somewhat trust AI-generated information, especially when it feels generic or overly polished. When they want reassurance and depth, they still turn to school websites and institutionally controlled digital experiences.

All of these factors taken together have created a critical inflection point for higher ed leaders, especially within enrollment. How teams respond to these challenges will shape the future trajectory of their institutions.



"It's nice how [AI] ***synthesizes results into one cohesive answer*** *instead of Googling something and searching for a while through different websites."*

-Anonymous student response

Why Virtual Tours Are Vital in the Age of AI

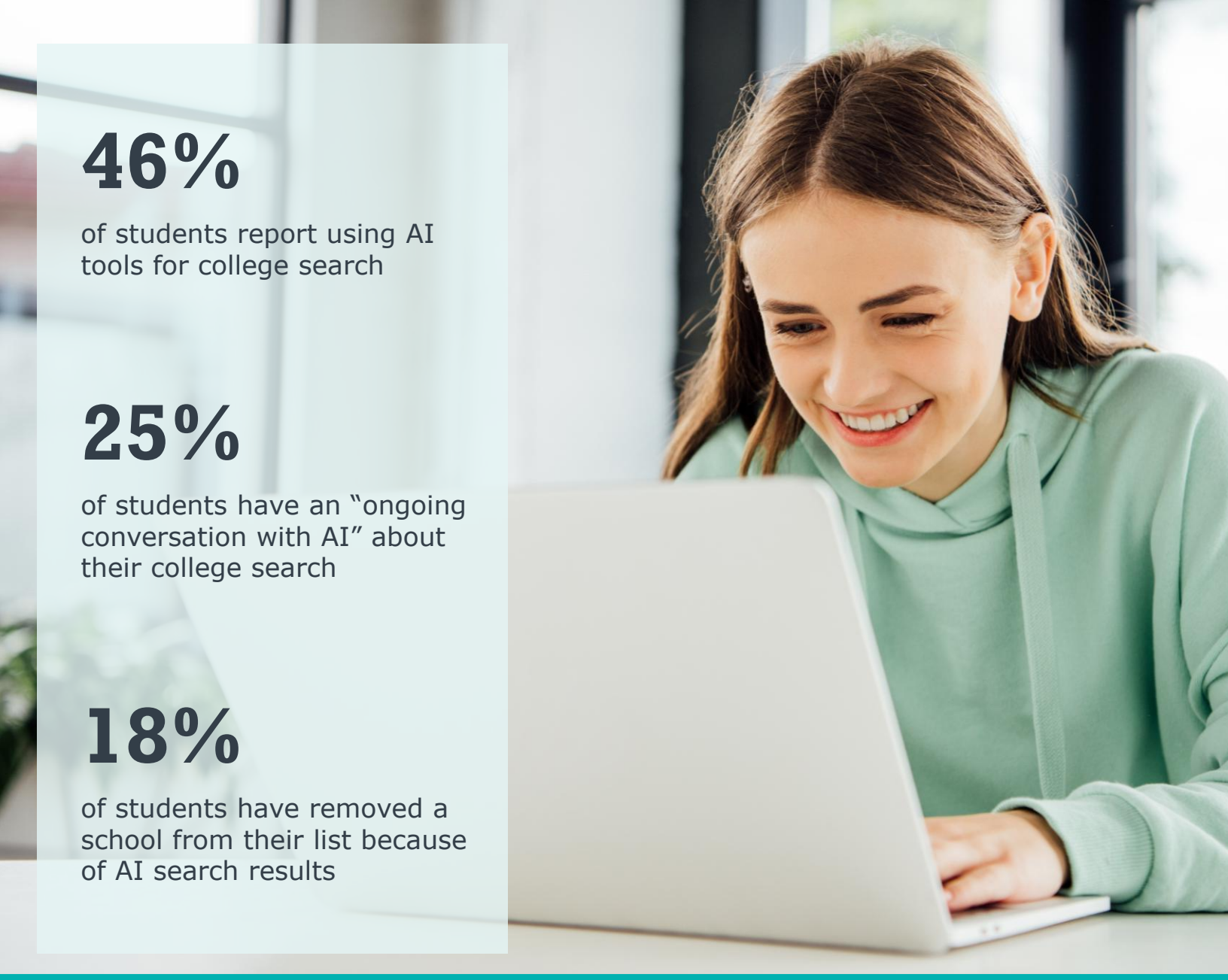
In an environment where AI often compresses institutional differences into brief summaries, colleges must find new ways to communicate what makes their campus experience distinctive.

Unlike AI summaries, a well-designed virtual tour can highlight program-level differentiation, elevate authentic student voices, bring culture to life, and reinforce outcomes in a way that is just not possible with text-based content.

Virtual tours allow institutions to control how their stories unfold and facilitate deep engagement at a critical point in the college-search journey.

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Source: How Students View and Use AI in College Search, EAB.



46%

of students report using AI tools for college search

25%

of students have an "ongoing conversation with AI" about their college search

18%

of students have removed a school from their list because of AI search results

Inside This Insight Brief

This insight brief shows how enrollment leaders can design immersive, personalized, data-informed virtual tours that stand out in an AI-mediated search environment. It will help you:

- Capture attention earlier in the search process
- Differentiate your institution beyond AI-generated summaries
- Drive stronger engagement, conversion, and yield outcomes

Use the Virtual Tour AI Readiness Checklist on page 13 for 20+ actions you can take to make your tour AI-ready today.

How AI Is Impacting College Search and How Enrollment Leaders Can Respond



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AI Is Reshaping College Search

What Our Survey Data Reveals About the New College-Search Journey

AI Influences First Impressions

For decades, colleges and universities have invested heavily in marketing to reach prospective students. Mailers, billboards, and traditional advertising once played a central role in building awareness and shaping first impressions.

Over the past decade, that landscape has shifted toward digital channels. Email, paid search, social media, and college websites now anchor enrollment strategy and remain essential today.

Now, a new layer is reshaping that digital ecosystem. AI-generated search overviews, large-language models such as ChatGPT, and aggregator sites increasingly influence how students discover and evaluate institutions, often shaping first impressions prior to any direct interaction.

34%

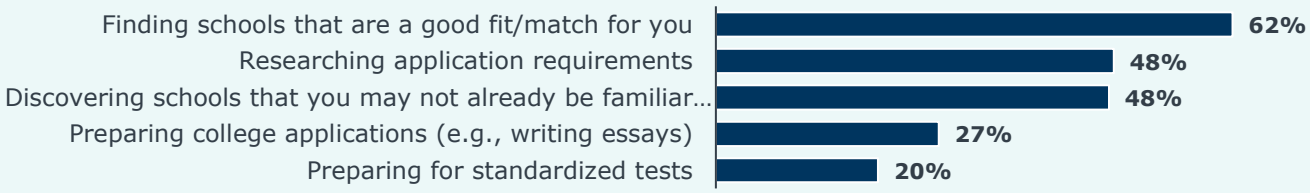
of students say their **interest in a school has grown** because of AI research

25%

of students have an "**ongoing conversation with AI**" about their college search

Students Use AI Tools for a Variety of Tasks in Search

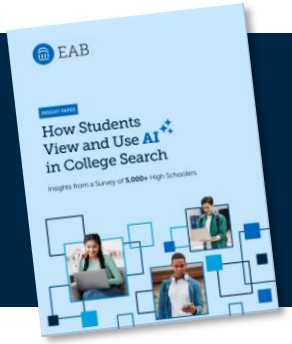
Q: In what ways, if any, have you used AI for your college search? (Select all that apply.) Asked of students who use AI in college search. (n = 1,677)



Students Use AI Strategically…But Cautiously

While more than 60% of students report having positive experiences with AI tools, many still approach their outputs with skepticism. Students are especially wary of content that feels overly polished, inaccurate, or inauthentic. In an AI-saturated world, authenticity matters.

For institutions, this tension creates both risk and opportunity. Careless use of AI in marketing can erode credibility. However, colleges that pair clear, transparent, well-structured content with institutionally controlled AI tools can better guide students' search—offering more accurate, trustworthy information while reinforcing confidence in their brand.



Access More Insights About Students and AI

Read the full insight paper to see how AI is influencing their decisions and what enrollment leaders must do to adapt their recruitment strategy for an AI-mediated environment.

To download the paper, visit **eab.com/AI-Survey**.

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How Enrollment Leaders Should Respond

Your Trusted Position with Students

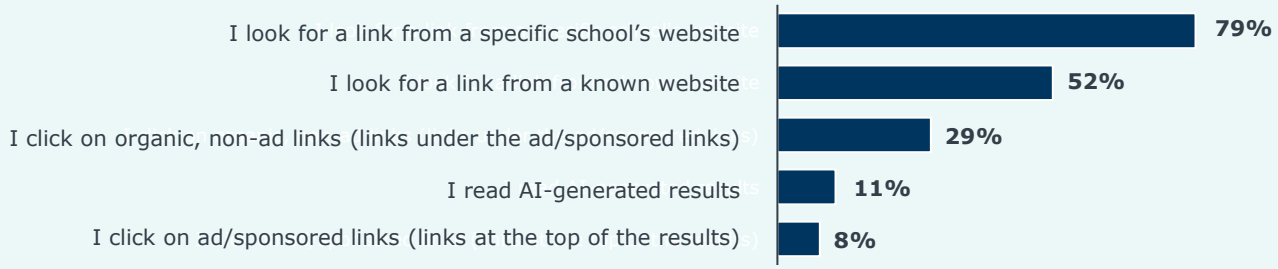
Colleges may be seeing a rise in AI-mediated college search, but they still control one of the most trusted assets for college research and decision-making: their own website, including a virtual tour. Most students rank online sources as their top resource when researching colleges and overwhelmingly rely on links from institutional websites when gathering information.

That trust creates a clear opportunity for enrollment teams. A well-designed virtual tour can shape first impressions, convey authenticity, and guide students toward deeper engagement. In an AI-filtered search environment, institutions that strengthen and strategically structure their virtual tour experience can directly influence how students perceive and engage with their school.

How Students Search for Info Online

Q: When searching for information about colleges online, which of the following scenarios reflect how you gather information? (Select all that apply.)

Student Communication Preferences Survey (n=19,199)



Preparing Now for an AI-Influenced Future

To help enrollment leaders plan for this shift to an AI-influenced landscape, EAB experts have outlined four possible futures based on how students are already using AI in their college search today. Across these scenarios, a consistent set of priorities emerges.

This insight brief highlights those eight focus areas to help institutions compete in an AI-mediated search environment, with a focus on how virtual tours can strengthen trust, differentiation, and engagement. For more detailed, tour-specific guidance within each focus area, refer to the audit tool on page 13.



Access More Insights on the Future of AI in College Search

Explore EAB's full analysis of four possible AI futures and the key strategies enrollment leaders should focus on to stay competitive in a rapidly evolving landscape.

To download the paper, visit **eab.com/AI-4-Futures**.

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Virtual Tour Best Practices for an AI-Enabled World



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Craft an Immersive Experience

Through visual storytelling, immersive tours create a highly engaging, interactive experience that goes beyond what AI summaries can deliver.

How Tours Compete for—and Win—Student Attention

In an AI-filtered search landscape, attention is even harder to earn. AI tools can summarize program information and surface key statistics instantly. That means a virtual tour should not simply restate information already available elsewhere. Instead, it must deliver something AI cannot replicate: depth, context, and emotional resonance.

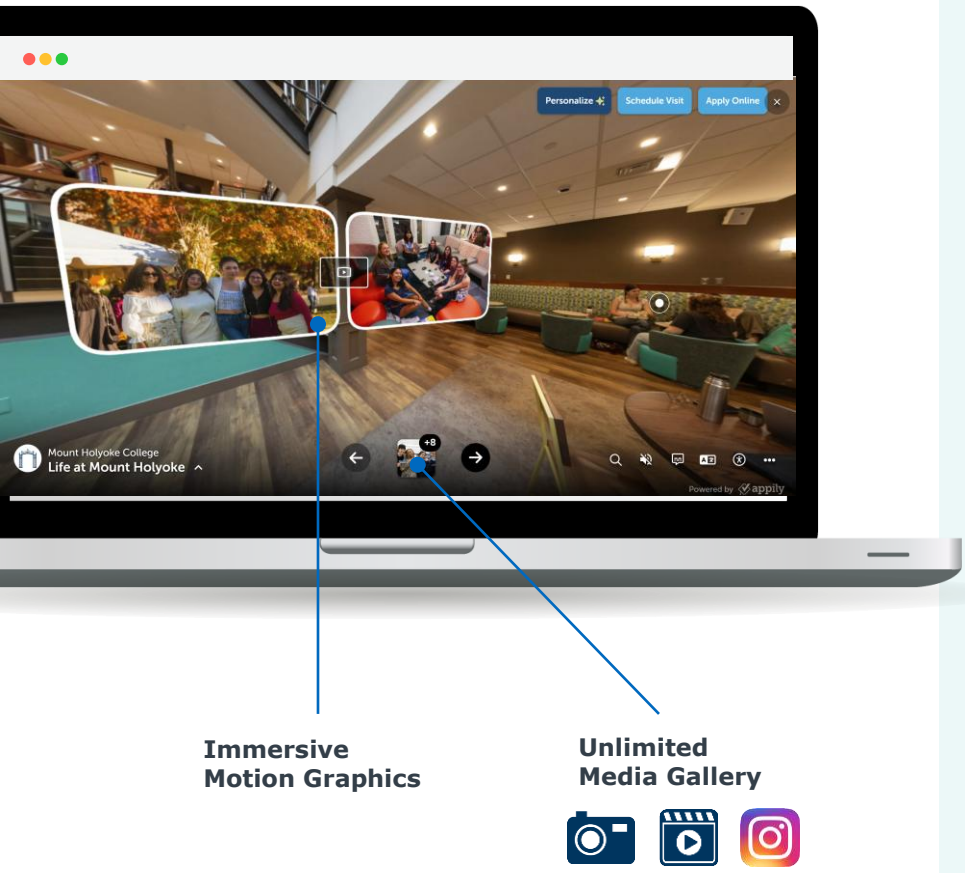
When executed well, virtual tours significantly increase engagement time among prospective students. EAB data shows that virtual tour visitors spend an average of 7:09 minutes exploring per session, compared to spending just over 2 minutes on school webpages.

Immersive Experiences Convey What AI Summaries Cannot Convey

High-impact tours use engaging visuals, short-form video, and layered content to mirror how students already consume content online. Rather than functioning as a digital brochure, the tour becomes a dynamic experience where students can control their own exploration and choose their own adventure. This level of control allows students to focus on what matters most to them, making the experience more relevant, memorable, and personally meaningful.

Effective Tours Boost Self-Directed Exploration

Sample Virtual Tour Showing Campus Life and Traditions



EAB findings show that students don't respond to:

- **Passive, click-through experiences with no interaction**
- **Linear tours that don't allow for exploration or choice**
- **Flat visuals that *tell* instead of *show* the student experience**

…but they frequently engage with tour stops that feature:

Layered multimedia that encourages exploration and lets students choose their own paths

An authentic narrative that brings your institution's differentiators to life

Real stories about campus life provided by current and former students

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Sources: EAB research and analysis, Recruiting the Anxious Generation.

Leverage Personalization Capabilities

Personalized tours deliver the right content, at the right time, to the right student.

Today's Teens Have a Strong Preference for Personalization

In addition to video and interactive elements, students also expect a certain level of personalization when they interact with digital content. In terms of their college search, 63% of students report feeling more connected to a school when they receive personalized outreach, and 73% report that personalized communications make them feel desired as a potential student.

63%

of students report feeling more connected to a college through tailored outreach

73%

of students say personalized communications make them feel desired as prospective students

How AI Can Enhance Personalization

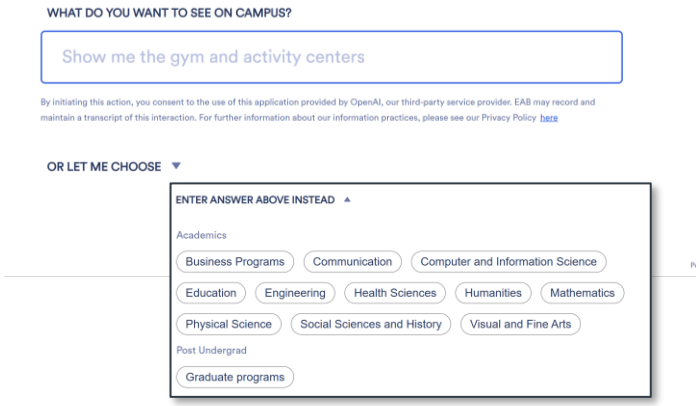
While the time required to create personalized content at scale has historically been unmanageable for many enrollment teams, advances in AI offer new, more attainable ways to accomplish the work of personalization. The goal is to deliver the right content, to the right person, at the right time.

For example, EAB's Appily Tours leverages AI to surface the most relevant and engaging content for each virtual tour visitor. Appily Tours automatically generates a list of "for you" tour stops based on visitor inputs, either in the form of free text or selections from a predefined picklist. Enrollment teams can also leverage AI to generate content descriptions, making their content more easily discoverable by prospective students.

AI Personalization Within Appily Tours

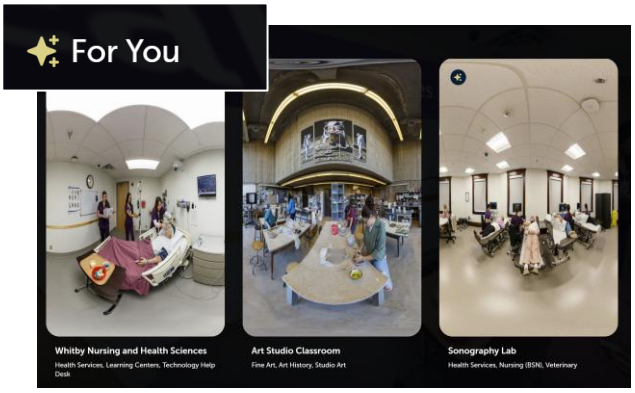
Students Prompted to Share What They Want to Learn More About

Interests can be indicated using a free-form text box or a picklist of prepopulated topics



Students Get a Personalized Experience Based on Expressed Interests

Relevant tour stops are brought to the top of the virtual tour destination picklist



This spring, Appily is taking personalization to the next level with the **AI Tour Companion**. Acting as a dynamic guide, it will anticipate questions, surface relevant information from .edu websites, and collect valuable visitor data—making each tour experience more personalized and engaging. Learn more at EAB.com.

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Source: *Personalization in College Recruitment Marketing: The Student's Perspective,* EAB, 2024.

Ensure Content Is Relevant to Student Interests

Relevant tours provide up-to-date content on topics that matter most to students.

The Importance of Timely and Fresh Virtual Tour Content

Based on their work across hundreds of institutions, the EAB Studios Production Team has found that colleges can differentiate themselves and enhance virtual tour impact through regular and strategic content refreshes. Schools can do this in a variety of ways, including incorporating photos or videos of recent events, discussing new construction underway on campus, or building new tour stops that address emerging student concerns and interests.

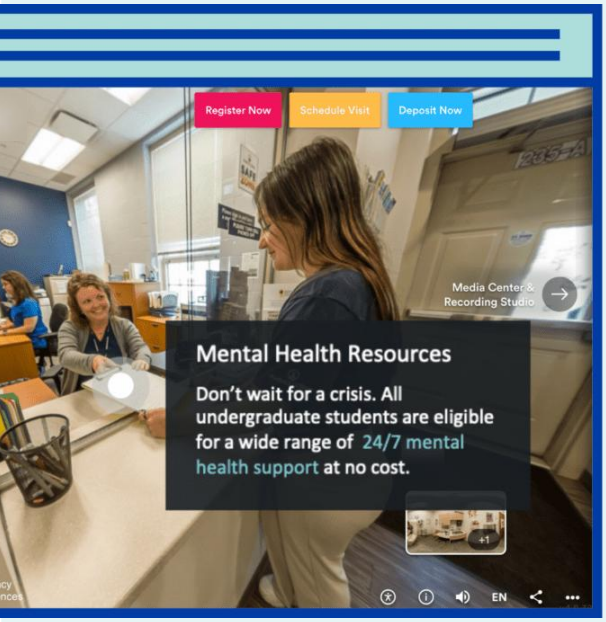
For Appily Tours partners, there are multiple ways to keep virtual tour content up to date. Through the Content Management System, schools can make a variety of updates, including adding a new logo, updating Media Galleries, or integrating Instagram content. Partners also have the option to work with our Studios Production Team at any time to craft a new narrative or reshoot tour content.

A High Burden for Relevant Content

Relevance now refers to two audiences: students and AI. Today's high school students expect digital experiences with brands—including college brands—to be informative, seamless, and delightful, which involves anticipating students' interests and needs.

With the addition of AI as a college-search tool, content must be not only relevant to students but also legible to the systems analyzing, summarizing, and comparing your institution.

While this data refers specifically to expectations of college websites, it reflects the generally high barrier that colleges must clear in their marketing to capture and hold student interest. One major aspect of an intuitive and seamless user experience involves providing content that anticipates students' key questions and concerns throughout their college research. Sixty-seven percent of high school students report that they will abandon college websites that are not user-friendly, and 81% report that poorly designed websites negatively affect their opinion of a college.



Example: Addressing Student Concerns Through Your Virtual Tour

High-impact virtual tours not only will convey the campus experience but also will assuage students' concerns about college. EAB's research on *The Anxious Generation* shows that students are seeking safety in a campus environment, which includes support for mental health and wellness.

67% of students say a "safe" campus includes support for mental health and wellness

To improve the data that AI recommends to students, use clear, structured headers (e.g., "Mental Health Resources," "Campus Safety," "Career Outcomes") that AI tools can easily extract and summarize.

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Source: EAB. Recruiting the Anxious Generation: Insights from EAB's 2025 Student Surveys to Help You Adapt to the Radically Altered Mindset of Today's Potential College-Goers.

Respond to Student Behavior Signals

Responsive tours adapt to shifting student behavior and interests based on timely data and insights.

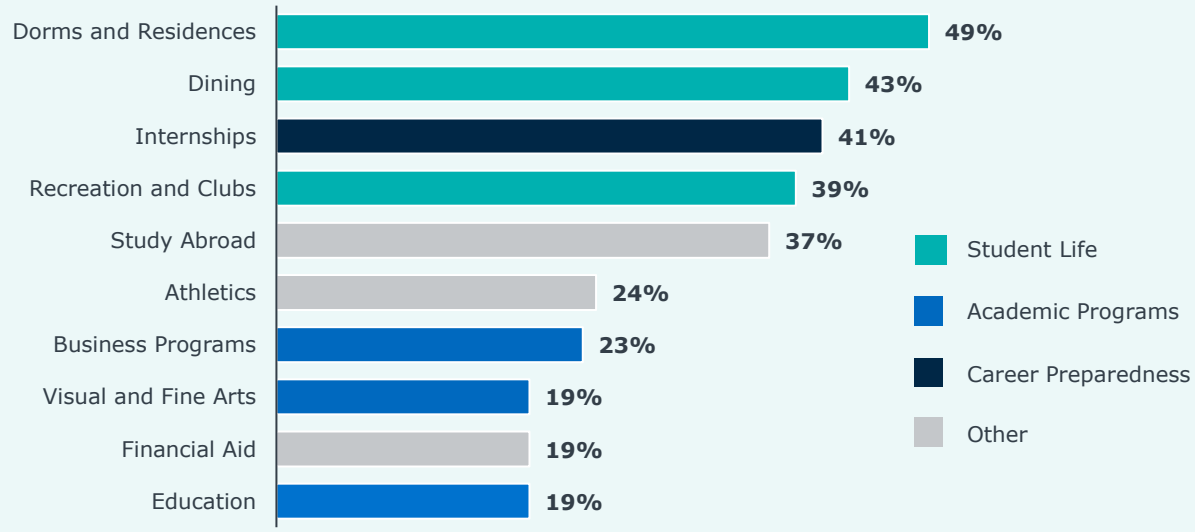
Using Engagement Data to Stay Relevant

Effective enrollment teams leverage rich data about student behavior and preferences to shape their recruitment strategy. Given prospective students' high levels of engagement with virtual tours and their ability to capture student data at scale, virtual tours offer a wealth of data-driven insights into student preferences compared to other channels. These insights can then be used to surface differentiators, refine your virtual tour content, and inform content across all other marketing channels.

With Appily Tours, the AI Personalization feature provides a unique window into the top-of-mind topics that students are focused on at different points in time. The chart below shows the most popular personalization topics over the past year.

Most Popular Categories in Personalized Stops

Appily Tours AI Personalization Data, Top 5 Topics per User, Topics Named by 15% or More of Students

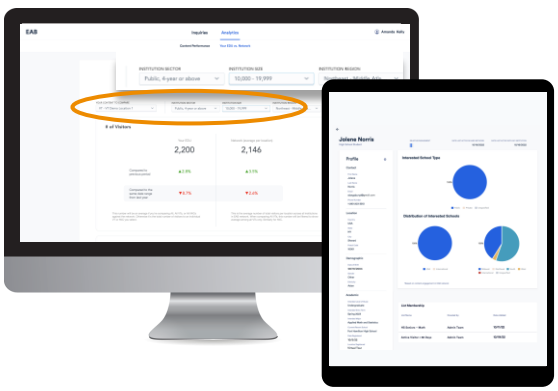


Student-Level Tour Analytics and Insights Can Inform Follow-Up Strategy

Virtual tours should also offer actionable insights about individual prospective students, which can be used to segment outreach and personalize follow-up communication.

For Appily Tours partners, this type of student-level data is plentiful and includes:

- Expressed areas of interest
- Other school types a student is researching
- The date when a student was last active on your tour
- A user engagement score



Source: EAB research and analysis.

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Virtual Tour AI Readiness Checklist

Best Practices for an AI-Mediated College-Search Environment

Focus Area	Strategic Actions
Optimize for AI as an audience	❑ Align tour copy with language used on your .edu site to avoid the creation of conflicting AI summaries ❑ Audit tour content quarterly for inconsistent claims, outdated messaging, or references to discontinued programs ❑ Promote your tours' built-in AI capabilities to encourage utilization ❑ Review AI search results about your institution, and determine how your virtual tour is contributing to results
Invest (more) in brand management	❑ Feature two-to-three clearly differentiated strengths in your tour experience ❑ Include testimonials that reinforce brand pillars (career outcomes, community, research) ❑ Incorporate your brand colors, logo, and other recognizable imagery within your virtual tour
Elevate human connection	❑ Prominently feature current students talking about their lived experience within your virtual tour ❑ Showcase faculty accessibility and mentorship opportunities ❑ Highlight places where students can access support and build personal connections (e.g., counseling center, student services, etc.) ❑ Link in-person visit opportunities within your virtual tour
Address parent and counselor concerns	❑ Create a clearly labeled section on cost, affordability, and financial aid services ❑ Prominently feature data and stories about postgraduate outcomes ❑ Include links to your virtual tour within your parent communication stream
Shore up data integrity	❑ Ensure that virtual tour data feeds directly into your CRM and can be utilized to drive future marketing efforts
Anticipate workforce and value shifts	❑ Add content on emerging skills, AI literacy, or workforce readiness ❑ Highlight experiential learning spaces (labs, clinics, maker spaces) ❑ Ensure at least one stop connects academics to real-world application
Evolve outbound marketing campaigns	❑ Embed tour imagery and links within email, SMS, and digital campaigns ❑ Direct students to specific tour stops that align with your editorial calendar and outbound messages ❑ Reference specific stops in email subject lines or copy
Plan for continuous adaptation	❑ Review aggregate engagement data at least quarterly ❑ Refresh content or pilot new stops tied to emerging student trends and interest areas

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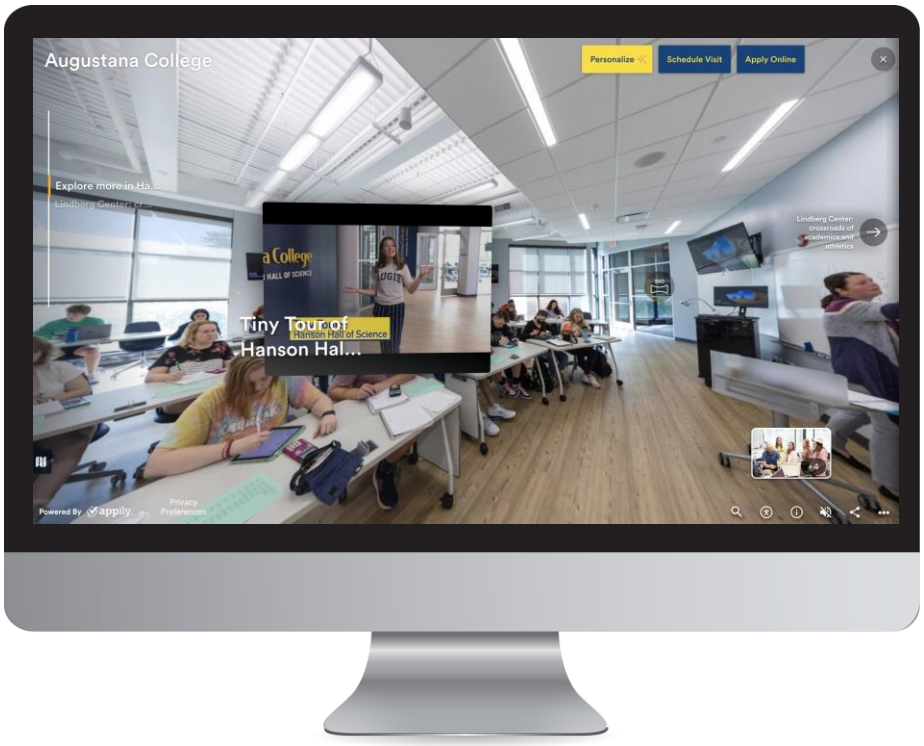
appily Tours

A Captivating Digital Experience Designed for Impact

Students rely on virtual tours to inform their college decision-making—but not all tours are created equal.

By combining immersive visuals, personalized journeys, and intuitive calls to action, Appily Tours transforms exploration into meaningful engagement—and engagement into measurable enrollment impact.

The results speak for themselves:



Deep Student Engagement

12K
Average annual visits per tour

7:09
Average number of minutes on tour

3.9X
Higher campus visit rate

Strong Conversion Across the Funnel

16%
Average inquiry rate

49%
Average inquiry-to-application rate

14%
Average inquiry-to-deposit rate

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appily Tours

PERSONALIZATION THAT DRIVES ACTION

When students personalize their tour, they stay longer—and move forward with more confidence.

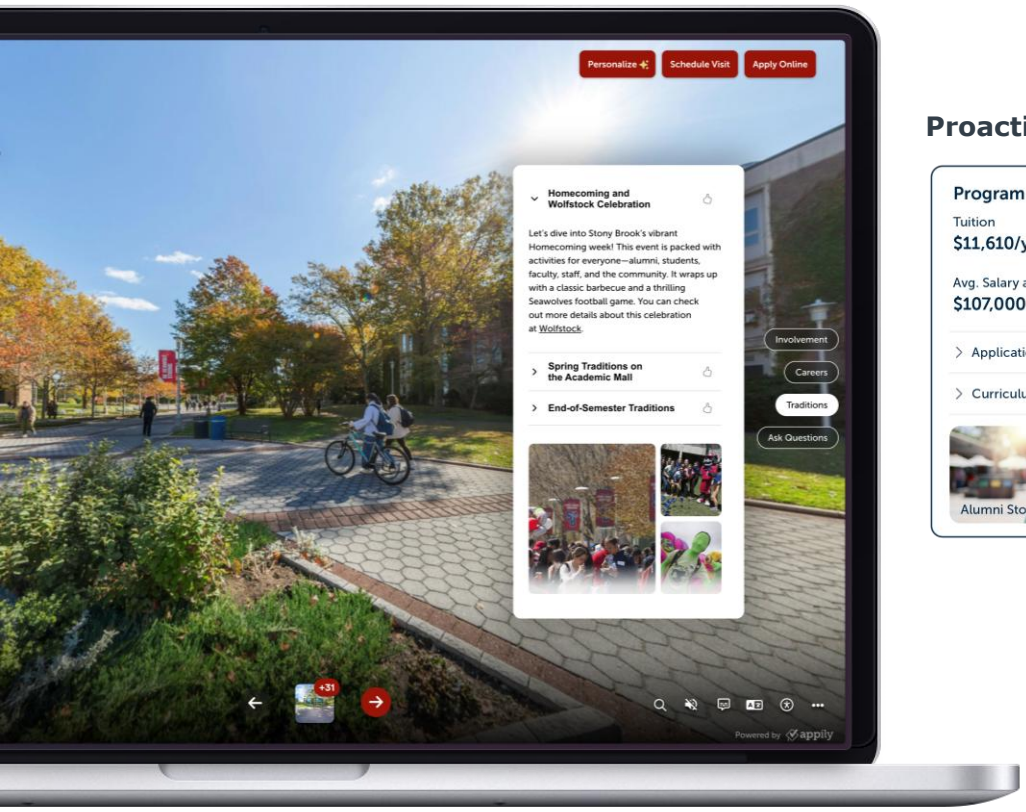
+49%
More time on tour

+12%
Higher application rate

+30%
Higher deposit rate

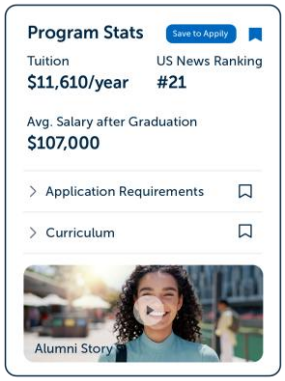
COMING SOON: AI TOUR COMPANION

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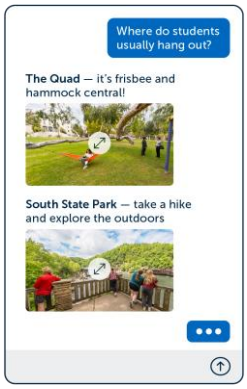


3 ENGAGEMENT MODES

Proactive Guidance



On-Demand Answers



Contextual Questions



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