

Technology & Digital Strategy

Synthesized from 12 sources 40 findings · April 18, 2026

Why This Matters

The search environment that enrolled your last cohort no longer exists. Sixty percent of Google searches now end without a click (Kanahoma 2026), and nearly 70% of prospective students are already using AI tools — with 37% specifically using them to research schools (EducationDynamics 2025). For small and mid-sized institutions running lean marketing operations, this is not a gradual shift to monitor — it is a structural realignment happening right now, and most institutions are not positioned for it.

1. The Prospective Online Student Has Already Consulted an AI Before You Reach Them

The student at the center of this brief is a working adult — likely a Millennial or Gen Z learner — who begins their program search the same way they settle a dinner-table argument: by asking an AI. Nearly 70% of Modern Learners use generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, and 37% have used those tools specifically to gather information about schools they were considering (EducationDynamics 2025). What are they asking? Primarily tuition costs (57%), course offerings (51%), and admissions requirements (43%) (EducationDynamics 2025). When AI-generated search results surface, 49% of prospective students report those results affected which schools they considered — a figure that rises to 55% among graduate students (EducationDynamics 2025).

This is not a fringe behavior. Weekly-or-more AI platform use reaches roughly 50% among graduate students (RNL 2025), and 15–20% of users now begin their searches on an AI platform rather than Google at all (Kanahoma 2026). Yet only 6% of prospective learners in one survey reported using ChatGPT to search for programs (Risepoint 2025), which tells you something important: AI is shaping the consideration set before the explicit search begins. The operational implication is clear — if your program pages are not structured to be read, cited, and recommended by AI systems, you are losing ground in a decision process you cannot see.

2. Your Program Pages Are Not Built for How AI Reads Content

The dominant assumption in higher ed web strategy — write for a human skimming a page — no longer holds as the only target. AI systems crawl, extract, and synthesize content differently than human readers do, and most program pages are not structured for that behavior.

The format AI systems cite most frequently is the **citation magnet**: a 20–40 word, self-contained direct answer with no internal links. Ninety-one percent of AI-cited answers are link-free (Kanahoma 2026). That means the dense paragraph prose and hyperlink-heavy navigation that defines most program pages is exactly the wrong format for AI extraction. Every major section of a program page should open with a 40–60 word

direct answer — this is the content AI systems pull first when responding to prospective student queries (Kanahoma 2026). Page titles should stay under 60 characters and name the program entity directly, mirroring how users phrase queries to ChatGPT or Perplexity (Kanahoma 2026).

Structured data matters here in a concrete, technical way. At minimum, program pages need **EducationalOccupationalProgram** and **FAQPage JSON-LD schema markup**, with CollegeOrUniversity schema applied universally and Course schema added where appropriate (Kanahoma 2026). FAQ sections should use natural language phrasing — the way a prospective student would actually ask ChatGPT — and be marked up with FAQ schema for voice search and AI query matching (Kanahoma 2026). Faculty profiles with photos, short bios, and Person schema strengthen domain authority signals that AI crawlers weigh (Kanahoma 2026). Supporting blog content linked from program pages — career paths, "What is [field]?" explainers, reasons to pursue the degree — reinforces topical authority and increases the probability that AI recommends your program over a competitor's (Kanahoma 2026).

Action: Audit your top ten program pages against this structural checklist within the next 30 days. Assign schema markup implementation to your web team in the same sprint. Do not wait for a full site redesign — these are page-level changes that can move visibility within weeks.

3. Your Digital Ad Strategy Has a Attribution Problem You Cannot Ignore

Paid search is not dying, but the measurement infrastructure underneath it is eroding. Attribution is becoming structurally harder as prospect journeys span search, social, AI tools, content, and peer validation across weeks or months — and privacy regulations, platform restrictions, and walled gardens are stripping away the channel-level visibility institutions built enrollment models on (Kanahoma 2026). First-party data is no longer a "best practice" — it is the only durable asset in this environment.

The channel mix itself also deserves a reset. Among graduate students, 54% most often click organic results, while only 20% click paid ads (RNL 2025). Social media sites are the top ad recall channel for graduate students at 55%, followed by YouTube and video at 47% (RNL 2025). Approximately 70% of online college students use free ad-supported streaming services, and 75% use YouTube daily (EducationDynamics 2024) — making these high-frequency brand touchpoints that most small institutions treat as afterthoughts. The emerging AI ad products are not ready: ChatGPT's advertising unit requires a \$200,000 minimum spend with an estimated \$60 CPM, making it inaccessible and unproven for most institutions (Kanahoma 2026).

Metric	Benchmark	Source
Graduate students clicking organic results	54%	RNL 2025
Graduate students clicking paid ads	20%	RNL 2025
Graduate students clicking AI-driven summaries	11%	RNL 2025
Top ad recall channel (social media)	55% of grad students	RNL 2025
YouTube daily users among online students	75%	EducationDynamics 2024
Ad content most effective: clear cost breakdown	55%	RNL 2025
Ad content most effective: program rankings	54%	RNL 2025

Metric	Benchmark	Source
ChatGPT ad minimum spend	\$200,000	Kanahoma 2026

Action: By the start of your next fiscal year budget cycle, restructure your digital media plan to treat organic SEO and social as primary channels – not secondary – and build a first-party data capture strategy that does not depend on platform-level attribution. Cost transparency in ad creative is not optional: 55% of graduate students cite clear cost breakdowns as the most effective ad content type (RNL 2025).

4. AI Governance and Internal Readiness Are Not the Same Conversation

Most small institutions are running AI adoption without a governance framework, and that gap is measurable. Forty-three percent of small institutions have no formal AI decision-making process, compared to 15% of medium and 8% of large institutions (UPCEA 2025). That means nearly half of small institutions are making consequential decisions about AI tools – in classrooms, in student services, in enrollment – without defined authority, review criteria, or accountability. That is an institutional risk, not just an operational inefficiency.

The good news is that institutions that have built governance structures know what they're checking for. Seventy-three percent require compliance with institutional policies before adoption, 70% assess data privacy protections including FERPA and HIPAA, 63% involve IT or information security review, and 62% conduct a pedagogical review by instructional design staff (UPCEA 2025). These are not bureaucratic hurdles – they are the minimum viable review for a tool that touches student data and learning outcomes. On the faculty side, the most effective adoption supports are structured training or workshops (77%), communities of practice (70%), and sandbox environments (62%) (UPCEA 2025). Only 15% of institutions offer microgrants or stipends – a low-cost incentive that remains dramatically underused (UPCEA 2025).

The enrollment application of AI is where the gap between current state and planned investment is most stark. Currently, only 34% of institutions use AI in recruiting and enrollment – but 73% plan to within two to three years (Chronicle/P3•EDU 2025). Institutions that have not built governance infrastructure before that expansion will be making adoption decisions under pressure. Seventy-four percent of higher education leaders already believe they will need private-sector partners to implement AI (Chronicle/P3•EDU 2025), which means the build-versus-buy question is coming whether institutions are ready for it or not.

Action: Convene a cross-functional AI governance working group – including IT, academic affairs, enrollment, and legal or compliance – within the next 60 days. Use the four-criteria review framework above (policy compliance, data privacy, IT security, pedagogical review) as your baseline evaluation standard before any new AI tool is deployed institutionally.

5. Digital Infrastructure Audit: A 30–60–90 Day Operational Checklist

Week 1–2: Visibility and Technical Triage

- Pull your top 20 program pages and test each for mobile load speed, broken links, and RFI form functionality – including ability to select future start terms (UPCEA 2025)
- Verify that all RFI submissions route to a centralized CRM, not individual staff inboxes (UPCEA 2025)

- Confirm that JSON-LD schema (EducationalOccupationalProgram, FAQPage, CollegeOrUniversity) is present or flag its absence for immediate remediation (Kanahoma 2026)

Days 14–30: Content and Page Structure

- Rewrite the opening section of each top program page to lead with a 40–60 word direct answer to the core student question (Kanahoma 2026)
- Add or rewrite FAQ sections using natural-language student phrasing; implement FAQ schema markup (Kanahoma 2026)
- Audit page titles for length (under 60 characters) and program entity naming (Kanahoma 2026)
- Confirm that faculty profiles include photos, bios, and links to publications; add Person schema where missing (Kanahoma 2026)
- Identify content gaps: which programs lack supporting blog content addressing career paths, field explainers, and admissions context?

Days 30–45: Enrollment Technology and CRM

- Map your current RFI-to-enrollment data flow and identify where student-level data is lost or inaccessible (Collegis Education 2025)
- Review automated follow-up email sequences: if your RFI form lacks a question box, your system is likely sending 6+ automated emails in 30 days – test whether that volume is productive or damaging (UPCEA 2025)
- Evaluate your website chatbot: if you don't have one, note that 93% of students who use them find them helpful (EducationDynamics 2025) and that students specifically want chatbots to answer questions about tuition, financial aid, admissions requirements, and deadlines (RNL 2025)

Days 45–60: Channel Strategy and First-Party Data

- Audit your media plan for channel balance: is organic SEO receiving investment proportional to the 54% of graduate students who click organic results first? (RNL 2025)
- Confirm that ad creative includes clear cost information and, where applicable, program rankings (RNL 2025)
- Identify what first-party data you currently collect, where it lives, and whether it can be used to build lookalike audiences or retargeting segments independent of platform attribution (Kanahoma 2026)

Days 60–90: AI Governance

- Convene governance working group with IT, academic affairs, enrollment, and compliance representation
- Adopt a four-gate review standard for any new AI tool: institutional policy compliance, FERPA/HIPAA data privacy, IT/security review, instructional design review (UPCEA 2025)
- Inventory current AI tool use across departments – including tools adopted without formal review
- Build a faculty AI onboarding sequence anchored in structured workshops and a sandbox environment; identify two or three faculty champions before the next term (UPCEA 2025)

The single most important shift administrators at small and mid-sized institutions must make is this: stop treating digital strategy as a marketing department problem and start treating it as an enrollment infrastructure problem that requires institutional ownership. Your program pages are the first answer an AI

gives a prospective student. Your CRM is the backbone of every follow-up decision. Your attribution model determines whether you can tell the difference between what's working and what isn't. Each of these is a leadership decision, not a vendor decision. The institutions that will struggle most in the next three years are not those with the smallest budgets — they are those that wait for a vendor to hand them a strategy rather than building the internal capacity to own one.

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