AI Search Research Update Tracks How Prospects Search for Higher Education Programs in 2026

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UPCEA and Search Influence released AI Search in Higher Education: How Prospects Search in 2026, the second annual installment of their ongoing AI search in higher education research examining how prospective students discover, evaluate, and choose academic programs. The year-over-year data show search behavior continues to diversify rapidly, even as the list of programs prospects seriously weigh before applying remains remarkably small.

The AI search research update finds that 80% of prospective students are extremely or very likely to use traditional search engines when researching programs, keeping search engines the dominant starting point for program research. At the same time, 54% report being likely to turn to AI-powered tools during that same research process, and 58% now say they use AI tools the way they would a traditional search engine, up from 50% a year earlier. Daily use of AI-powered search has climbed even faster: 39% of respondents now use AI tools daily, up from 24% in 2025, while the share who never use AI for search fell from 17% to 12%.

Within that shift, AI-generated search overviews are emerging as a meaningful trust signal for higher education marketers. Eighty-three percent of respondents said they read AI-generated overviews when they appear in results, and 59% of that group go on to click through to a cited source. Sixty-four percent of respondents said being cited as a source in an AI Overview makes them trust that institution more, up from 56% in last year's report, pointing to a growing payoff for institutions whose content gets surfaced and cited by AI tools.

"Search behavior keeps diversifying, while institutional consideration sets continue to shrink," said Bruce Etter, senior director of research and consulting at UPCEA. "Over half of respondents considered three schools or fewer. With the growing influence of AI in the prospective student search journey, a citation in an AI answer can truly be the deciding factor for an institution to make a learner's increasingly small shortlist."

That shrinking shortlist is one of the report's central findings: 56% of prospective students say they seriously consider three or fewer continuing and online education programs before applying. The research update also found that prospects are growing more discerning as they grow more reliant on AI, with 86% of respondents citing at least one specific concern about AI search tools, such as accuracy or bias, up from 68% in 2025.

"We're still in the window of opportunity for institutions, who have more influence in AI answers than they might think," said Paula French, director of sales and marketing at Search Influence. "Prospective students use and trust AI in their research. Institutions should prioritize accurate, authoritative content that AI can confidently cite, and make sure that content shows up in both organic and AI search results. With a consideration set this small, there's no room to miss out."

The AI search in higher education research draws on survey responses from 1,057 qualified adults ages 18 to 60 who expressed interest in continuing and online education, fielded May 5 through May 14, 2026. It builds on UPCEA and Search Influence's inaugural report released in 2025, continuing an annual measurement of prospective student search behavior across search engines, AI tools, and other platforms. UPCEA and Search Influence will host a companion webinar reviewing the full findings on October 20, 2026. The complete report is available for download.

About Search Influence

Search Influence is a digital marketing agency specializing in AI and organic search engine optimization, digital advertising, and analytics for higher education, hospitality, and healthcare. Founded in 2006, Search

Influence's core purpose is to optimize potential. The agency collaborates with well-regarded brands and institutions both nationally and locally in New Orleans. Clients include: Harvard University, New Orleans & Company, and Audubon Nature Institute.

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Search Influence

Search Influence, a national SEO and digital advertising agency since 2006, delivers demonstrable ROI for clients. Specialties include SEO, Paid Advertising, and Analytics. In-house experts collaborate with clients for results. Also an informative blog.

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