

What happens when students search for outcomes, not brand names?

AI search has changed how students find colleges, and brand recognition is no longer enough.

2026 AI SEARCH TRENDS: BRAND (IN)VISIBILITY BRIEF



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What got you known won't get you found.

For decades, higher education relied on brand awareness to drive discovery, consideration, and enrollment. That model is breaking.

Students are no longer starting their search with institution names. They are starting with questions about what they want to study, where it can lead, what it costs, and which options fit their career goals. AI is answering those questions before they ever reach a university site.

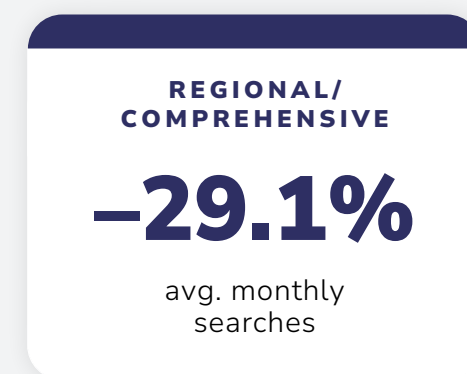
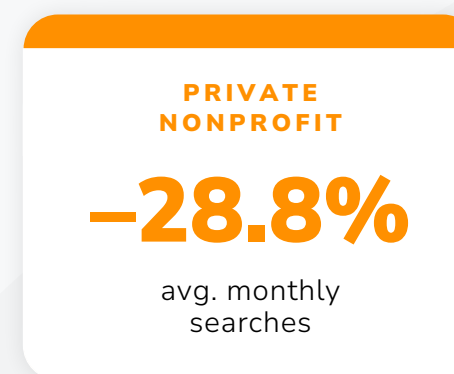
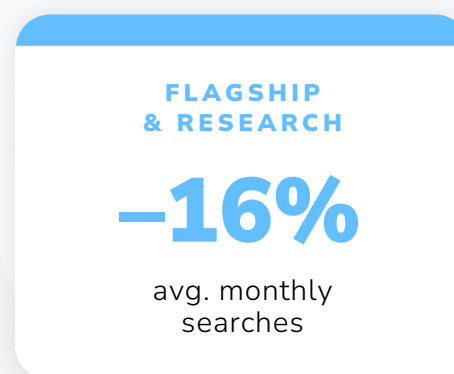
If AI cannot clearly extract and summarize your value, your institution will be easier to overlook.

Brand search is down 22% for universities across the board.

Everspring tracked monthly search volume for branded terms—searches that use an institution’s full name or a well-known variation, like “University of Mississippi” or “Ole Miss”—across 120+ institutions from March 2024 through February 2026.

Branded search volume fell by an average of 22% across all institution types. Flagship and research universities saw a -16% decline, while private nonprofit and regional/comprehensive institutions saw steeper declines, nearing 30%.

This isn’t a blip. Students are arriving at your institution’s name later in their search journey—or not arriving there through search at all. AI is answering their early questions before a branded search ever happens.



METHODOLOGY: We anchored to each institution’s top branded Google query and ran programmatic AI Overview scans focused on academic and brand-adjacent terms, capturing citation rates, cited URLs, and brand mention counts. We then analyzed the highest and lowest-performing schools in each segment at the keyword level to compare content type, URL diversity, and brand versus non-brand mix.

DIG INTO THE DATA: Average monthly branded search volume declined from 42,326 to 32,884 across all institutions analyzed, confirming a sustained downward trend across segments.

Students are searching for outcomes **over reputation.**

Students are searching more for what they want—and less for who you are. They're starting with questions like:

What can I do with a psychology degree?



What should I major in to become a nurse?



How much does a bachelor's degree cost?



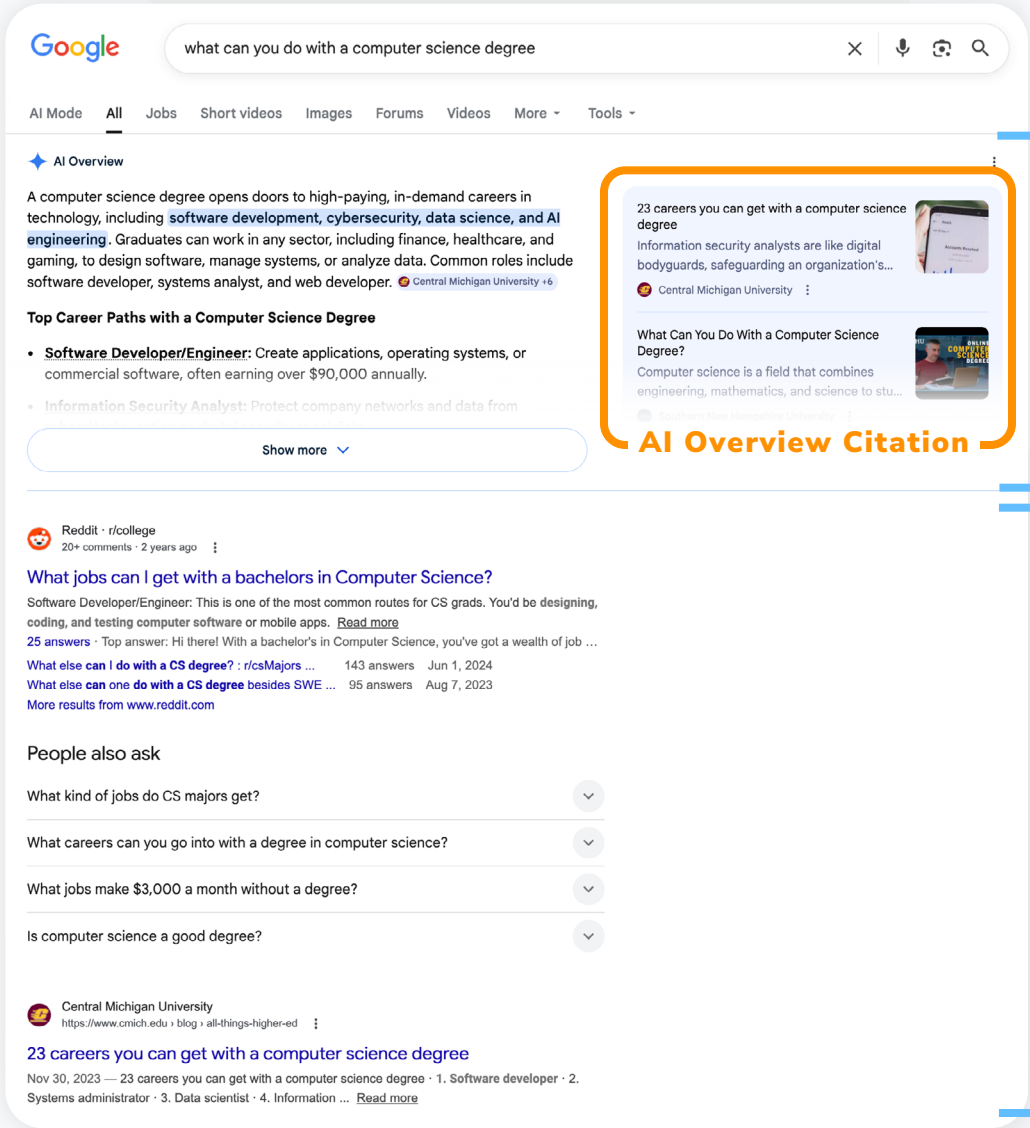
Google's AI Overviews answer those questions in one clean summary, shaping students' shortlists before they visit your site.

Being cited in Google's AI Overview is an enrollment imperative.

Roughly 1 in 4 inquiries from organic search move forward to start an application, the highest conversion rate of any major channel. These are high-intent students who are actively researching schools and are closer to making a decision.

The AI Overview is now the most valuable position on the search results page. Ranking on page one no longer guarantees visibility. To reach the students most likely to apply, institutions need to be cited in the Overview itself.

SOURCES: 2025 Everspring AI Search Trends: Enrollment Impact Brief, 2025 Everspring AI Search Trends Report



Top of page AI Overview:
Instead of ten blue links, students see one response.

Buried below the fold:
Even top-ranked pages can lose up to ~90% of traffic when AI Overviews appear.

If you're not in the AI Overview, you're invisible in the moment that matters.

Big brands. Big keyword footprints. Lower AI visibility.

Large, flagship universities rank heavily for **brand keywords** about their own name, including topics related to academics, student services, and location. They average approximately 2.6x more ranking keywords vs. private nonprofit and regional schools, assisted by more brand mentions in content like news articles, “best colleges” lists, and university press releases.

The problem: Flagship universities are over-indexed on brand keywords, while student search is shifting toward non-brand questions—and that’s where AI visibility is won.

BRAND KEYWORDS:

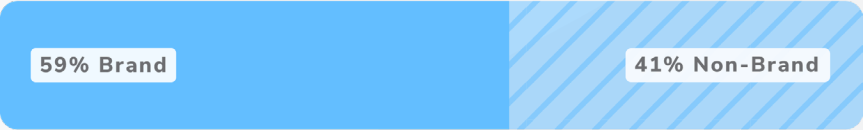
Terms that include the institution’s name or a well-known variation, like “Pennsylvania State University” or “Penn State”

FLAGSHIP A | Public Research



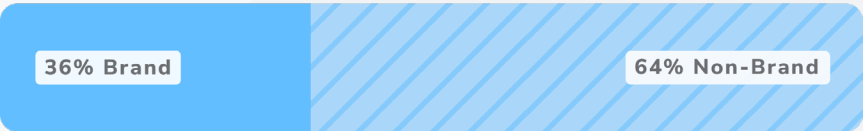
1%
AIO Citation Rate
(non-branded searches)

FLAGSHIP B | Public Research



9%
AIO Citation Rate
(non-branded searches)

FLAGSHIP C | Public Research



1.3%
AIO Citation Rate
(non-branded searches)

Flagship schools with more brand keywords are cited less often in AI answers when students search for broader, non-brand topics.

Smaller schools. Smaller keyword footprints. Higher AI visibility.

Private nonprofit and regional schools rank for fewer keywords overall, but 80 to 90 percent of private institutions’ are **non-brand keywords**, from content like informational blogs, career guides, and academic explainers—exactly what AI pulls into its answers.

The solution: Schools with broad topic coverage, specific, useful information, and diverse content types allow them to show up in AI more often, regardless of size.

NON-BRAND KEYWORDS:

Terms for programs, college questions, or enrollment-related topics that do not include an institution’s name, like “how long is a semester in college,” “marketing degree career path,” or “colleges in Florida”

PRIVATE A | Liberal Arts



16.3%
AIO Citation Rate
(non-branded searches)

PRIVATE B | Comprehensive



17.2%
AIO Citation Rate
(non-branded searches)

PRIVATE C | Liberal Arts



23.9%
AIO Citation Rate
(non-branded searches)

Private institutions with mostly non-brand terms are cited in AI answers 10 to 20 times more often than flagship schools with brand-heavy keyword mixes.

The content strategy that wins in AI works regardless of brand size.

Slogans don't surface in AI results; answers do. Look at what happens when you shift from brand-heavy to question-driven content.

PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS SCHOOL

The Blog-First Playbook

87% of AI appearances came from blog content answering questions students actually ask: “What’s the difference between college and university?” (11K searches/month). Not a program page. A blog post.

AI Visibility Impact: 966 AI appearances from 67 different pages

PRIVATE COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITY

The Career Content Edge

A career center page answering “What is business casual” (399K searches/month) drove significant AI inclusion. The institution showing up isn’t the one with the best business school. It’s the one with the most useful page.

AI Visibility Impact: 469 AI appearances from 101 different pages

PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

The Single-Page Explainer

A single academic explainer on faculty titles—assistant vs. associate professor—drove nearly 50 AI appearances. Evergreen, specific, and written to answer a real question. That’s what high AI visibility looks like in practice.

AI Visibility Impact: ~50 AI appearances from one explainer page

UNDERGRADUATE TAKEAWAY: This type of informational content is especially critical in the long undergraduate search journey. It helps institutions earn visibility in key early discovery moments, when students are still asking broad questions about college, majors, and future careers.

DIG INTO THE DATA: Top-performing private institutions generate hundreds of AI citations from dozens of unique URLs, while flagship schools often rely on just a handful of pages.

NOTE: AI Overview results can vary over time and by device, location, or search context, so examples may not appear exactly the same in every search.

AI disruption is real. So are our results.

We don't just track this shift. We've built the strategy that wins in it.

Across Everspring's partner portfolio, institutions that restructure their content for AI discovery see results that compound:

8x increase in AI Overview visibility

From aligning content to the questions students are actually asking

44% increase in leads

From shifting marketing copy to clear, direct answers for informed prospects

Doubled enrollment in 12 months

From increasing visibility in AI answers and converting higher-intent students

Visibility drives consideration. Strategy drives enrollment. We do both.

[SEE OUR IMPACT](#)



everspringpartners.com

info@everspringpartners.com