



TikTok's Influence on Student Search

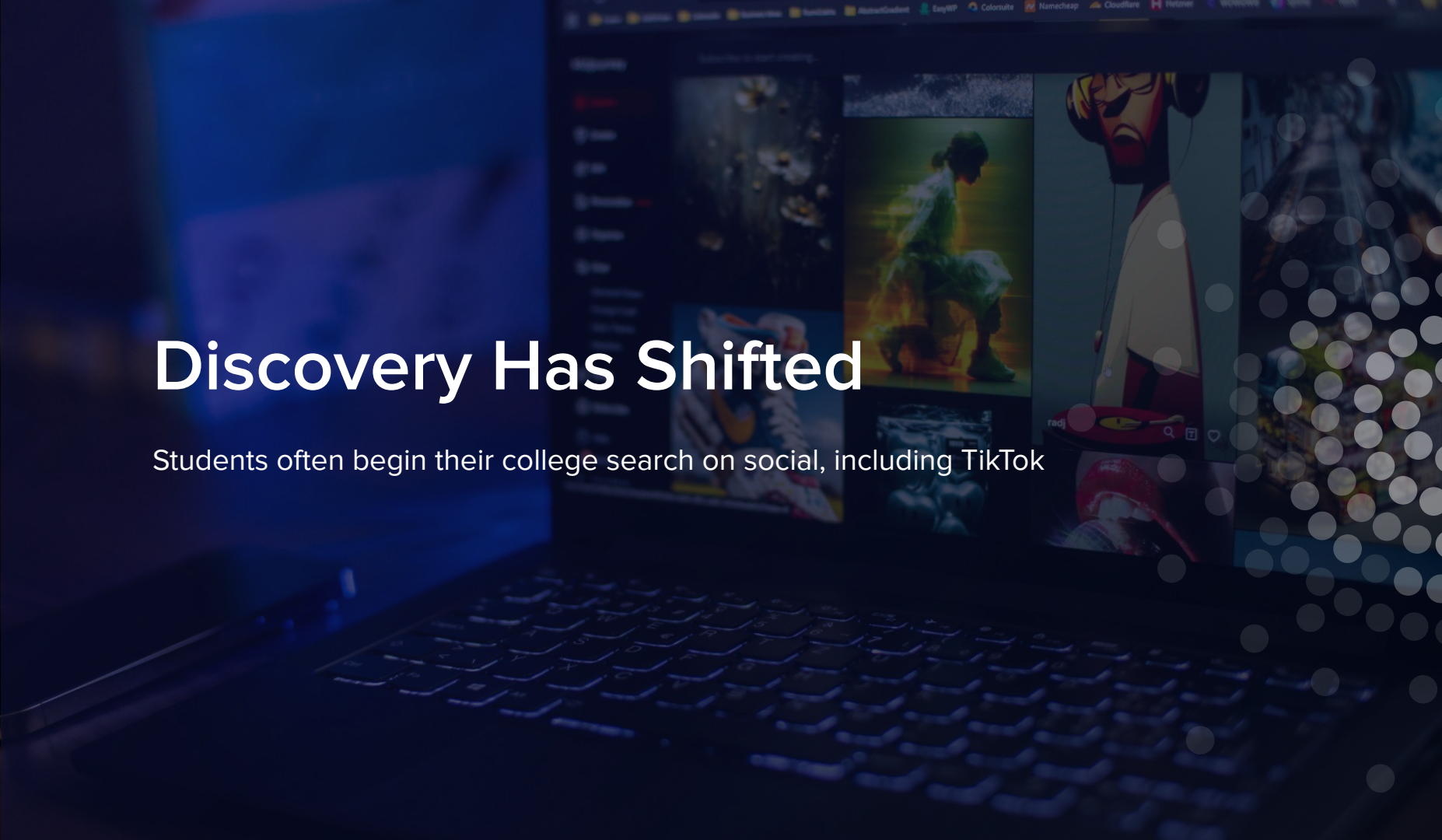
What this means for search, content, and paid strategy

What We Know

1. **Discovery Has Shifted** → Social is one of the primary entry points for college research
2. **TikTok is a Search Platform** → Search happens through content, not just keywords
3. **Prospective Students are Searching for Validation** → Gen Z relies on student voices and lived experiences over institutional messaging
4. **Content That Feels Real Wins** → Authenticity outperforms polished content
5. **Strategies Must Align** → SEO, paid, and organic content must work together to reflect this shift

Discovery Has Shifted

Students often begin their college search on social, including TikTok



The College Search on Social

Social Media Research Usage



Instagram **70.8%**



TikTok **64.6%**



YouTube **49.2%**

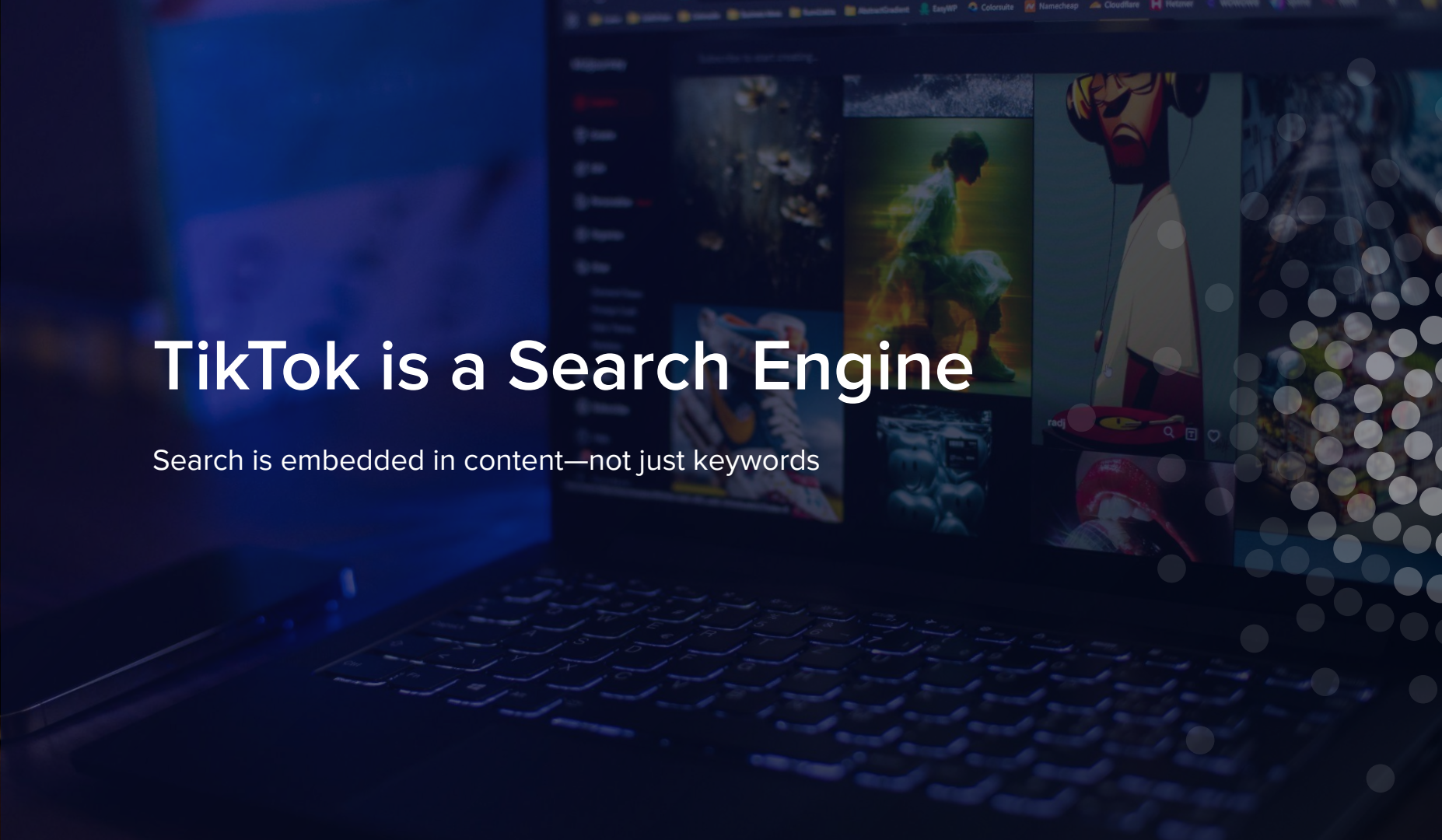
Students are using social to:

- ✓ Explore college options
- ✓ Understand student experiences
- ✓ Evaluate fit

Social platforms are now a primary entry point into the search journey

TikTok is a Search Engine

Search is embedded in content—not just keywords



Search is Built into the Experience

Integrated Search Platform

TikTok has evolved into a key search destination:

- **74%** of U.S. college students use TikTok for daily searches.
- **1 in 4** search within seconds of opening

Multiple Surfaces

Search happens across various touchpoints:

- Search bar + autocomplete
- Search carousels
- Suggested queries in videos
- Comment thread questions

Continuous Discovery

A loop where users refine their understanding:

- Content leads to multiple related searches
- Refinement happens in real time

TikTok creates an ecosystem where search and discovery are inseparable

Brand Perception Evolves in Real Time

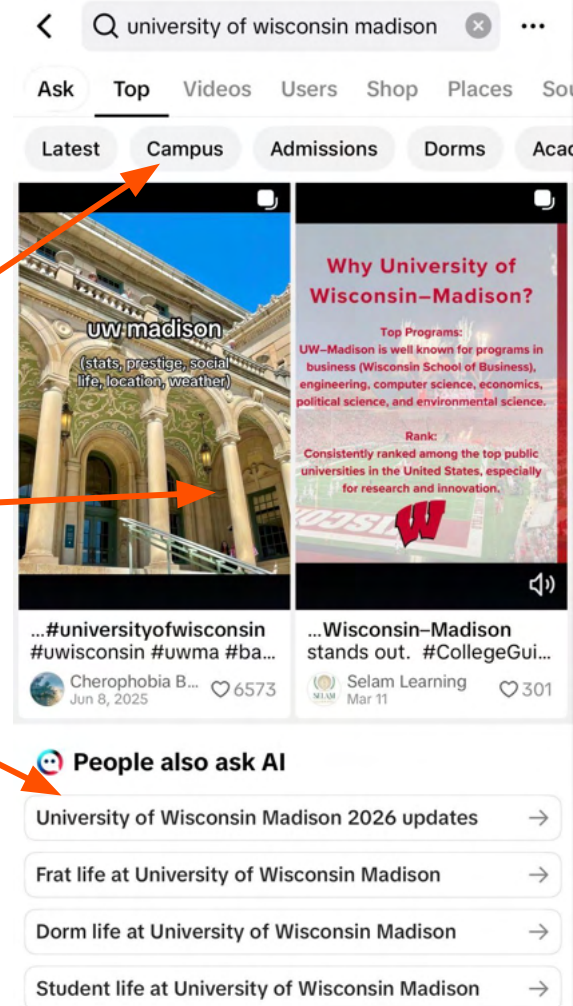
Structured Discovery: Filter by content type (Campus, Admissions, Dorms, etc.)

Content-Led Results: Videos and carousels answer questions directly; not just links

Guided Exploration: “People also ask” surfaces next questions

Brands/Universities need to:

- Show up in the questions students are asking
- Understand how your brand is being experienced
- Create both paid and organic content to show up in that environment



Students Are Searching for Validation

Decisions are shaped by real experiences and peer perspectives.



Perspective Matters

Student search behavior has shifted from informational to emotional

They are asking:


- “Is [university name/degree] worth it?”
- “Will I fit in?”
- “Do people regret this decision?”

TikTok's Appeal:

- Multiple perspectives
- Real-time experiences
- Honest, unfiltered opinions

TikTok provides the emotional validation students crave during their decision-making process.



 carebrosee
Organic content

Things to know about community college
#communitycollege #nyu #transferstudent #collegeti...

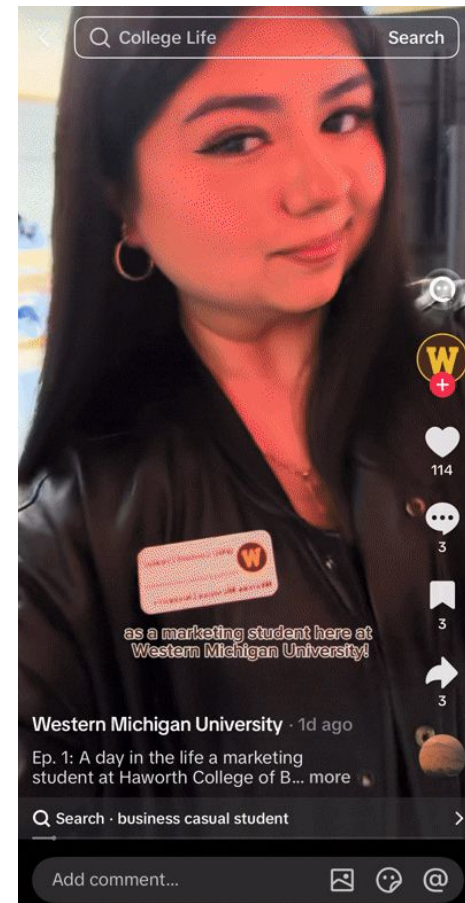
Content That Feels Real Wins

Authenticity and relatability outperform polished content



What is Drives Performance

- **Activate current students** and/or **alumni** as content creators
- **Short, real, unscripted moments** outperform polished ads
- **Show process.** In the age of AI, students want to see real people doing real things
- Hook users within the **first 3 seconds**
- Turn common **student questions** into content
- Prioritize **authenticity** over perfection



What This Means for Your TikTok Strategy



Content Must Be Searchable

To show up on TikTok (and beyond):

- Use **real, natural language in captions**
- Say keywords **out loud in the video**
- Add **on-screen text** that matches search queries
- Create content around **real student questions**

This applies to both organic *and* paid:

- Paid TikTok campaigns rely on the same signals (captions, voice, text)
- Creative must match how users search and speak
- Strong organic content should inform paid strategy



Video is Reshaping Search

Short-form video is showing up across:

- Google results
- AI-generated answers
- Social search environments

Especially for:

- Student life
- Campus experience
- “Is it worth it?” type queries



What college has the best campus life? ✕

www.instagram.com · reel

Guessing the top 5 best colleges and universities based on ...



UCLA. No. Uh University of Texas. University of Texas is number one. Austin. Wow. Nice. Wow. I'm crushing. I got one ...

Instagram · MARK JIGARJIAN · Nov 1, 2025

www.tiktok.com · video

Best College Campuses: Top Picks from 200+ Visits



University of Richmond is the most beautiful small campus in America. Have you guys visited before? 2025-12-1Reply.

TikTok · spiveyconsulting · Nov 29, 2025

Your content isn't just competing on TikTok—it's competing everywhere

Scale What Works

High-performing organic content can also be amplified through paid efforts

Start with what resonates: Student tours, day-in-the-life, and real experiences

Amplify with Spark Ads: Turn organic posts—including *creator content*—into paid placements

Drive stronger outcomes: Authenticity + scale improves performance

 Spark Ads can increase conversion rates by up to 40%+

What This Looks Like in Practice



Use **real students and alumni** as content creators



Create content that answers **real student questions**



Prioritize **authentic, high-volume content** over polished campaigns



Structure content to be **searchable on TikTok** (and beyond!)



Use TikTok to **shape consideration early**; pay attention to branded and non-branded visibility.



Use paid search to **capture high-intent interest** and Spark Ads to **amplify performance**.

Questions?