



Search Still Wins

Why Paid Search Remains the Highest-Intent Channel for Enrollment

Your School Is Not Being **Discovered** in Search



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Your School Is Being **Validated** in Search



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Spoiler:

This Does Mean Your Paid Search Strategy Needs to Change



What Does This Mean for Search?

- More **research is happening before turning to search** (ChatGPT, LLMs, conversational AI experiences), prequalifies the users
- AI Overviews filter out low-intent users, **window shoppers don't click through** to your site
- Less clicks **does not mean lower value**
- The people who do turn to search have a **higher intent because they know what they're looking for**

"I know what I'm looking for and I'm trying to make my decision by gathering more information"

What We're Seeing in Platform



Impression Share

- AI results take up more real estate on the SERP
- Fewer ad slots leads to less visibility



Clicks

- Less available, but higher quality
- Higher intent, closer to conversion



Cost-Per-Click

- Fewer available clicks means more competition
- More competition means rising costs



Click-Through Rate

- Particularly for non-brand
- AI results reduce the need to click
- Ads are pushed further down the SERP



Lead Volume

- Less clicks leads to less people on your site, leads to less leads converting

Should we continue to invest in search then?



What We're Seeing with Enrollment

Institution A

Business school promoting MBA programs on the west coast

Part-Time MBA:

- -17% clicks
 - +16% lead to applicant conversion
 - Application start to submitted flat
-

Institution B

Nursing school at a large public university in the north

- -15% clicks
 - +34% lead to applicant conversion
 - +40% application start to submitted application conversion
-

Institution C

Ivy League school promoting a health care related master's program

- -7% clicks
- +23% lead to applicant conversion
- *Application submission numbers pending deadline*

Where Search Still Dominates

1. High intent queries

- Non-brand, specific keywords (not just “college degrees”)
- Program or program area-specific, terms that have high market demand or search volume (“computer science master’s”)
- Queries that meet common searches for your audience, best paired with landing pages that address these keywords specifically
 - “Part-time mba cost”
 - “PharmD requirements”

Where Search Still Dominates

2. Branded queries

- Branded search = keywords that incorporate your school/institution
- Brand defense is becoming increasingly critical
- With AI replacing exploration and comparison, users turn to search to validate what they've learned, looking for your school
- Reduce friction of the search, we do this on our website with conversion rate optimization, why would we not do it in search

“Brand demand is softening” – Jordan

“But the role it plays is becoming more important” – Tess

But don't we get that traffic for free?



Let's make a case for branded search, or CCASE that is

Competitors

Control

Atribution

SEO

Efficiency

Competitors

- If you're not showing up for your own brand, your competitors will
- This can be intentional or unintentional depending on the match type they use
- This redirects high-intent prospects at an even more critical decision point than ever before

Control

- Paid ads can show up at the top or near the top of the SERP
- You control the messaging and ensure prospects are driven to landing pages optimized for conversion (vs. whatever page ranks #1 organically)
- Paid search ads can be updated quickly to include timely messaging and offerings
- You set the assets, including sitelinks, callouts, images, etc.

Attribution

- Branded clicks are crucial for connecting digital ad platforms to CRMs, such as Slate, allowing institutions to track the effectiveness of marketing efforts with precision
- Branded search is often the first point of measurable interaction for stealth applicants (students don't submit an RFI but ultimately apply)

SEO

- *Includes AEO, GEO, and LLMO*
- Most institutions aren't investing in dedicated search engine optimization strategy
- If you aren't investing in SEO strategy with an AI discovery lens, you can't control what results will be triggered by a user's search
- AI-generated content also push traditional organic listings further down the page, whereas paid ads show above or near AI content

Efficiency

- Higher ad relevance (your ad matches the query, easier to win the bid and in a higher position)
- Stronger click-through rates (users are intentionally searching for you)
- Cheaper traffic (lower cost-per-click means less investment needed)
- Reinforced account authority, increasing your chances of winning and paying less for future auctions, whether branded or not

Branded Search: A Case Study

Cool University (anonymized) is a large, private 4-year institution in the northeastern U.S.

A recent analysis of student records in Slate matched to digital ad activity revealed the following about branded vs. non-branded search clicks

- Branded search drove nearly 3x more conversions (Conversion = Slate Lead), proving to be a powerful tool for keeping students engaged between awareness and application
- Cost per conversion was 13x lower for branded campaigns
- 61% of students who clicked branded ads did so before submitting an application, and more than one-third of those not already in the funnel went on to apply

These results reinforce that branded search is not a “redundant spend,” but rather a cost-efficient tool for moving high-intent prospects to action



Where We Go From Here



What about my FY27 strategy?

- **You don't have to start fresh, build from what you know**
 - Review keyword performance and refine what didn't perform or convert
 - Not one size fits all
 - Invest in brand
 - Identify high-intent keywords
- **Review your copy**
 - Searchers are now more informed and less patient heading into search
 - Ensure alignment with intent stage, strong differentiation, clear value propositions, immediate relevance
- **Explore emerging channels and platform capabilities**
 - Search is not just on Google anymore, other channels are adopting keyword-based advertising offerings
 - Google will continue adopting new features (like AI Max)
- **Keep a pulse on search and market changes**
 - We know that these trends will continue to evolve
 - We can help you stay ready

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You've Got This and We're Right There With You



Questions?