



The New College Search Journey

What enrollment marketers need to understand before the click

Some of the biggest shifts include how students get answers today and the impact this has on the full user journey.

The Old School (Search) Journey

For years:

- We've thought about the **college search as a familiar path**: prospective students searched, clicked, browsed, compared, and made a decision.
- This still exists but it **no longer describes the full journey**.
- Website content helped answer questions like:
 - Can I afford this?
 - Can I get in?
 - Is this program strong?
 - Will I belong here?
 - Will this lead somewhere?



What's New?

The path to answers is changing

- Discovery, comparison, and validation are happening differently now
- Students are getting more help filtering, summarizing, and narrowing before they ever engage deeply with an institutional site.

Google

colleges in amherst ma

X | Voice Search | Image Search | Search

AI Overview

Amherst, MA, is a major higher education hub featuring the [University of Massachusetts Amherst](#) (public research), [Amherst College](#) (private liberal arts), and [Hampshire College](#) (innovative liberal arts). These institutions are part of the Five College Consortium, allowing students to cross-register at nearby Smith and Mount Holyoke Colleges. [Amherst College +5](#)

- **University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass):** A large, top-ranked public research university known for its extensive undergraduate and graduate programs.
- **Amherst College:** A highly selective private liberal arts college known for its open curriculum and, as of April 2026, consistent academic reputation.
- **Hampshire College:** A private institution known for self-directed studies, which will close permanently following the fall 2026 semester. [Amherst College +5](#)

Further Exploration

- Explore academic programs and student life at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- Learn about the academic approach and admissions at Amherst College.
- Read about the official announcement of [Hampshire College's](#) closure. [Amherst College +4](#)

These schools are part of the Five College Consortium, which also includes Smith College and Mount Holyoke College in neighboring towns. [Amherst College](#)

Amherst College: Home

Amherst College is a liberal arts college with an open curriculum. The college's approach to...



[Amherst College](#)

UMass Amherst

The University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass Amherst) is a public research universit...



[UMass Amherst](#)

Five College Programs & Information | Academics

The Five College Consortium is the official name of the result you get when you put four liberal...



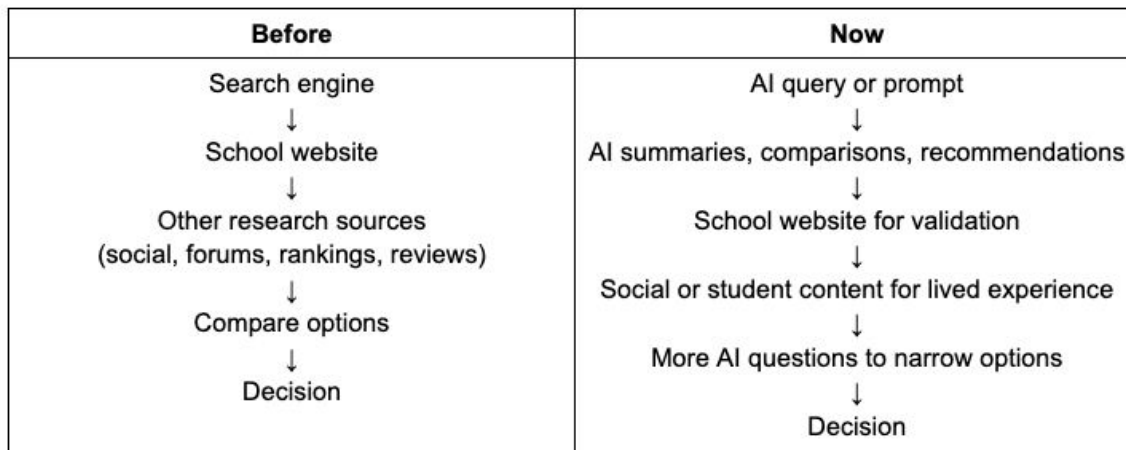
[Amherst College](#)

Show all

What's New?

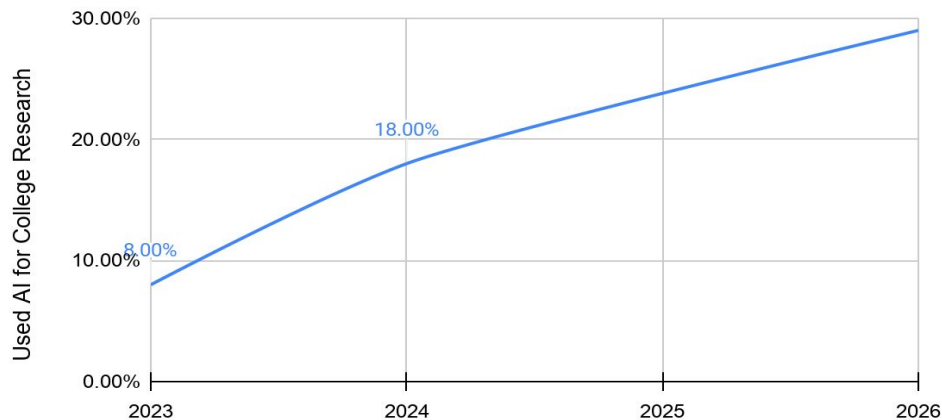
The journey is no longer linear-ish

- Many students today begin with an AI prompt.
 - They ask AI to help narrow their options, then use websites and other channels to validate and compare.
 - The journey is becoming more compressed, more iterative, and more mediated.



AI Use in College Research*

Used AI for Researching College



Key Insights: AI is not replacing traditional research sources — it is becoming part of a broader mix of tools students use to evaluate their college options.

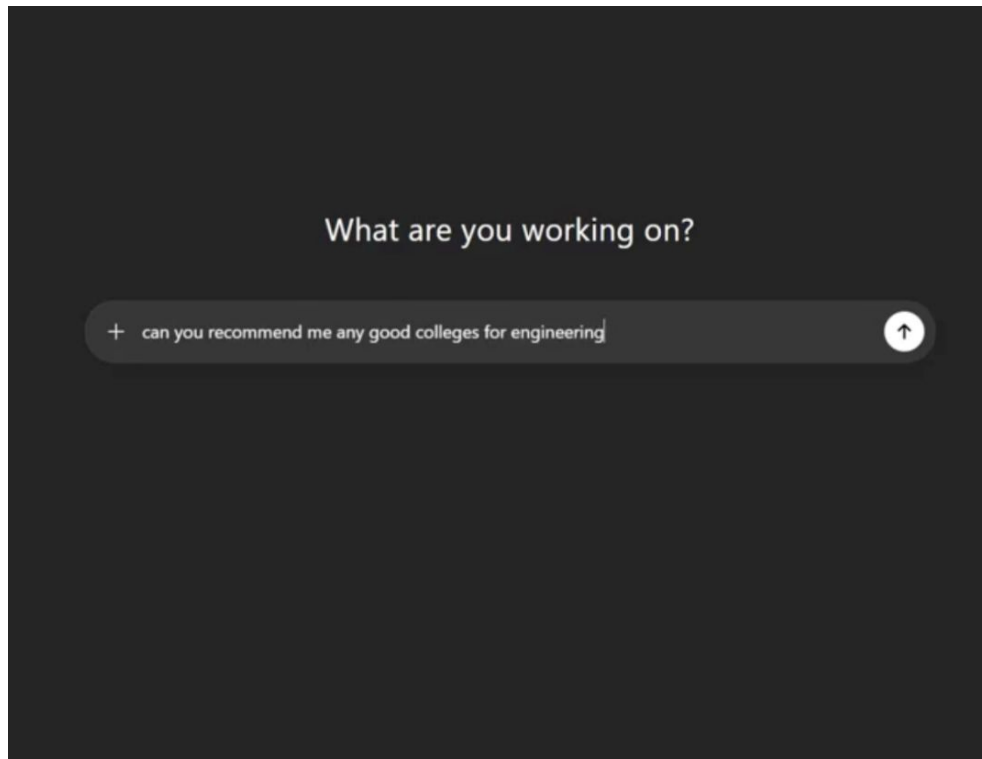
- In 2023, AI tools were still **relatively new** and were used by a small portion of students during the college search process.
- By 2024, many students began **experimenting** with AI as a research tool, leading to a noticeable spike in reported use.
- In 2026, the increased use of AI for college research appears to **continuing the upward trend** as students integrate AI into broader research habits alongside search engines, college websites, and social media.

What's changing now is where students go first and how they move through discovery, comparison and validation *before* they click.

AI is Reshaping Discovery and Comparison

In OHO's latest research*, we found that

- **40% of actively researching or recently enrolled 17 to 22-year-olds** in the sample said they **used AI for college research.**
- Among those students, **AI chatbots and search engines were nearly tied as the first source** they used.
- This tells us AI is fundamental to this journey.



Students are Asking AI Decision-shaping Questions

Students are not only using AI for light exploration

They're asking high-stakes questions like:

- How much will this cost?
- What are my chances of admission?
- Which schools fit what I want?
- What are the outcomes?

Those are list-making and list-breaking questions.

This means AI is increasingly shaping consideration, going beyond awareness.

A Real Life Example

Meet my Spouse

- Accomplished military career
- Recently completed education to pursue a career in medicine

Chat's guidance:

- “You may get in, but your experience makes you a stronger candidate for these other programs, especially as it relates to career outcomes and your values.”
- “Also, you didn’t consider these other schools with programs. While Yellow Ribbon (IYKYK) is not explicitly mentioned, this institution has great benefits for military students.”

The ChatGPT prompt

“Chat, here are my values, what I excel in, what I’m interested in (and also not) interested in, and my experience. Here are the graduate programs I’m interested in applying to and why, and other paths I’ve considered. What am I missing and what do you think about my likelihood of getting in?”

Your Website Still Matters

The Journey is Cumulative

It's rarely one visit, one action, or one source. And it's cross-device by default.

Example prospective student journey

School comes up in AI prompt



Sees school's social media content



Search for and visit site on mobile device



Return to site on desktop



Take a next step (down the funnel)

Your Website Matters Later

Today it matters later. This is where students go to verify what they think they already know.



Key Takeaway

This means your site needs to:

- **Build trust**
- **Provide clarity**
- **Support next actions**

Themes of the Day

We have a well rounded agenda today including deep dives into **SEO, paid search strategies, and newer channel opportunities**. Prepare to hear the following over and over:

- Search isn't linear
- Discovery is fragmented
- AI is shifting early stage behavior

Consider that while we're talking about "search" all day today, **this isn't about another search trend** to keep an eye on. This is all broader **shift in how schools are understood and surfaced**. And a lot of the **"marketing" happens before a prospective student ever gets to the website**.

What can we do?

What This Means for Marketers

The challenge is no longer *only* whether institutions can show up. It is also **whether schools can be represented clearly, accurately, and consistently** in the places where students are increasingly starting their search. **A few practical questions are worth bringing back to teams now:**

- Do we have clear source-of-truth content for the questions that matter most?
- Are we helping students validate and compare, or mostly asking them to convert?
- Where do we still have fragmentation across core pages, campaign pages, and supporting properties?

Look out for my upcoming blog post on AI Answer Readiness!

Tactical To Do List

It is your job to make your school understandable, trustworthy and easy to validate across anywhere a student can encounter you.

1. Content Readiness and Site Development

- Create content with plain-language, scannable answers to the questions students are actually asking
- Ensure consistency across core pages, campaign pages, catalogs, and other distributed digital properties
- Deploy “confirmation-layer” pages that make cost, requirements, fit, and outcomes easy to verify in one or two clicks

2. Governance

- Define clear ownership for high-stakes facts like cost, admissions requirements, and outcomes
- Align on one canonical source for each critical fact, so the institution is not publishing multiple conflicting versions of the same answer

Tactical To Do List

3. Performance Monitoring and Measurement

- Schedule recurring reviews of how AI systems are representing the institution and where corrections or content updates may be needed
- Connect your data and measurement systems. And get very intentional about data collection, the why behind what you collect, and keep taking next steps to track movement across the funnel is much as you can.

Quick Recap

1. **Students' core questions have not changed**
Cost, fit, outcomes, belonging, and likelihood of success
2. **The path to answers is changing**
Discovery, comparison, and validation are happening differently
3. **AI is reshaping discovery and comparison**
Students are using AI to narrow options before reaching your site
4. **Websites increasingly serve as validation layers**
Here institutions build trust, clarity, and support next actions
5. **The journey is cross-channel, cross-device, and cumulative**
Students move across sources, visits, and moments before taking action
6. **Institutions need better measurement, data use, and content readiness**
Your school needs to be easy to understand, not just easy to find



Thank you!