RNL NC
ALTERING the
LANDSCAPE

The Long Game: Investing in Web and SEO for Visibility and Growth

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Presenters

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Today's Agenda

- Students' Expectations of Websites and Search
    - What Students Are Telling Us
    - How Organic Search Behaviors are Changing
    - How to Adapt
- Case Study: Oakland University's Long Game
    - The Challenge
    - The Solution
    - The Results
    - What's Next

E-Expectations: What Students Tell Us

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E-Expectations Trend Report

1,582 responses collected electronically in January 2025

2025 E-Expectations Trend Report

Examining the online experiences, expectations, and behaviors of college-bound high school students

Co-sponsored by: HALDA modern campus

- Study of 9-12th grade student behaviors and preferences at every stage of their college search

- Portrait of a generation generation that's both digitally native and refreshingly thoughtful about their digital world

- Data reveals that there is no singular approach to connecting with prospective students

- Suggests need for a fundamental shift in how institutions approach student engagement.

- Demands a thoughtful, integrated experiences that evolve with students throughout their college search journey.

- The imperative is meeting students where they are

Demographics

1,582 completed responses

Grade	
9th grade (class of 2028)	8%
10th grade (class of 2027)	14%
11th grade (class of 2026)	31%
12th grade (class of 2025)	47%

Gender	
Female	53%
Male	39%
Transgender Female*	1%
Transgender Male*	3%
Non-binary/third gender*	2%
Prefer to self-describe*	1%
Prefer not to respond*	1%

First-Generation Status	
Continuing generation	66%
First generation	34%

Ethnicity (multiple select)	
Alaska Native*	2%
American Indian*	3%
Asian	8%
Black	29%
Hispanic	17%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander*	2%
White	28%
Multi-racial*	4%
Middle Eastern or North African*	3%

US Region	
Southeast & Southwest	39%
West & Rocky Mountains	24%
Mid Atlantic & New England	13%
Great Lakes & Plains	24%

US residents/International	
United States resident	89%
International resident	11%

*Not reported

RNL, Halda, & Modern Campus. (2025). 2025 E-Expectations. Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

How Students Discover College Websites
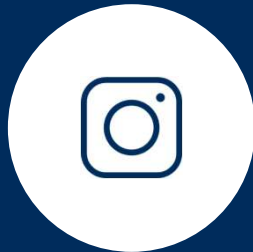
Email

54%

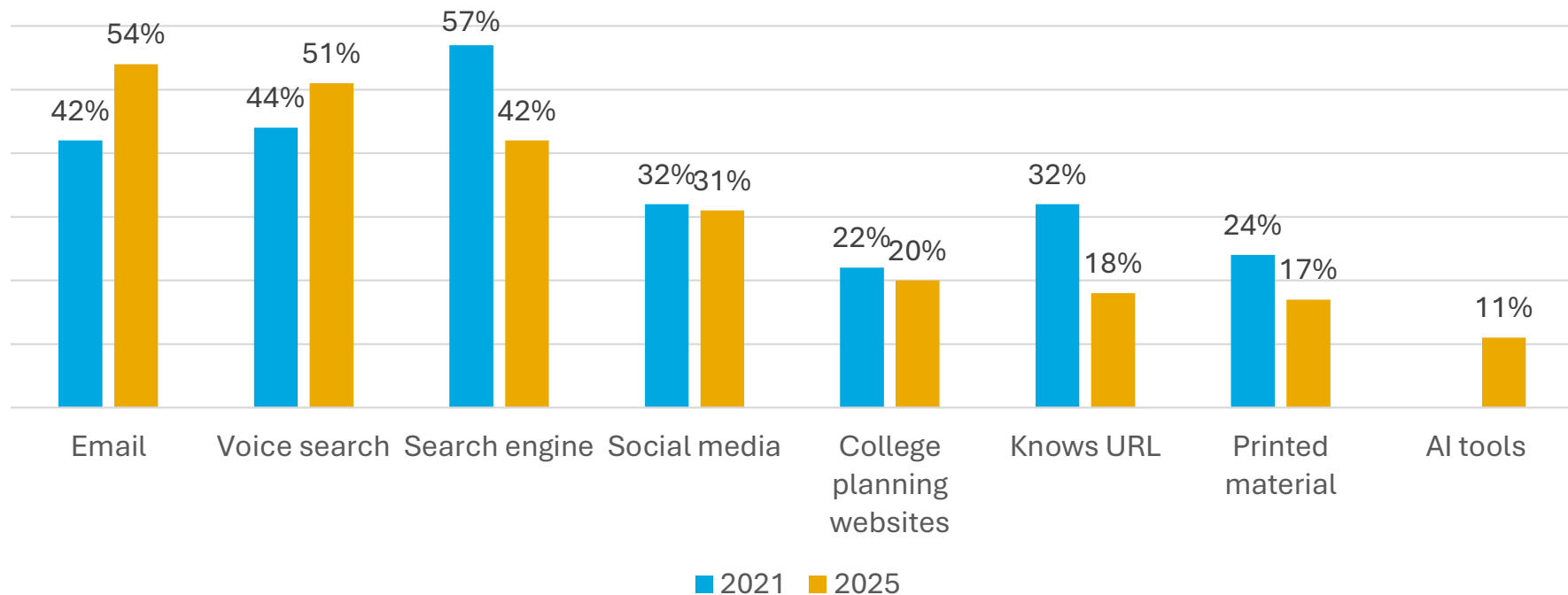**Voice Search**

51%

Search Engine

42%

Social Media

31%

College Planning Websites

20%

How Students Find College Websites, 2021-2025

Search Engine Use is Declining, but Organic Strategies Remain Essential

Category	2021	2025
Email	42%	54%
Voice search	44%	51%
Search engine	57%	42%
Social media	32%	31%
College planning websites	22%	20%
Knows URL	32%	18%
Printed material	24%	17%
AI tools		11%

RNL, Halda, & Modern Campus. (2025). 2025 E-Expectations. Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

How Are Students Using Online Search?

Name of the school

49%

By the name of a specific major or academic program
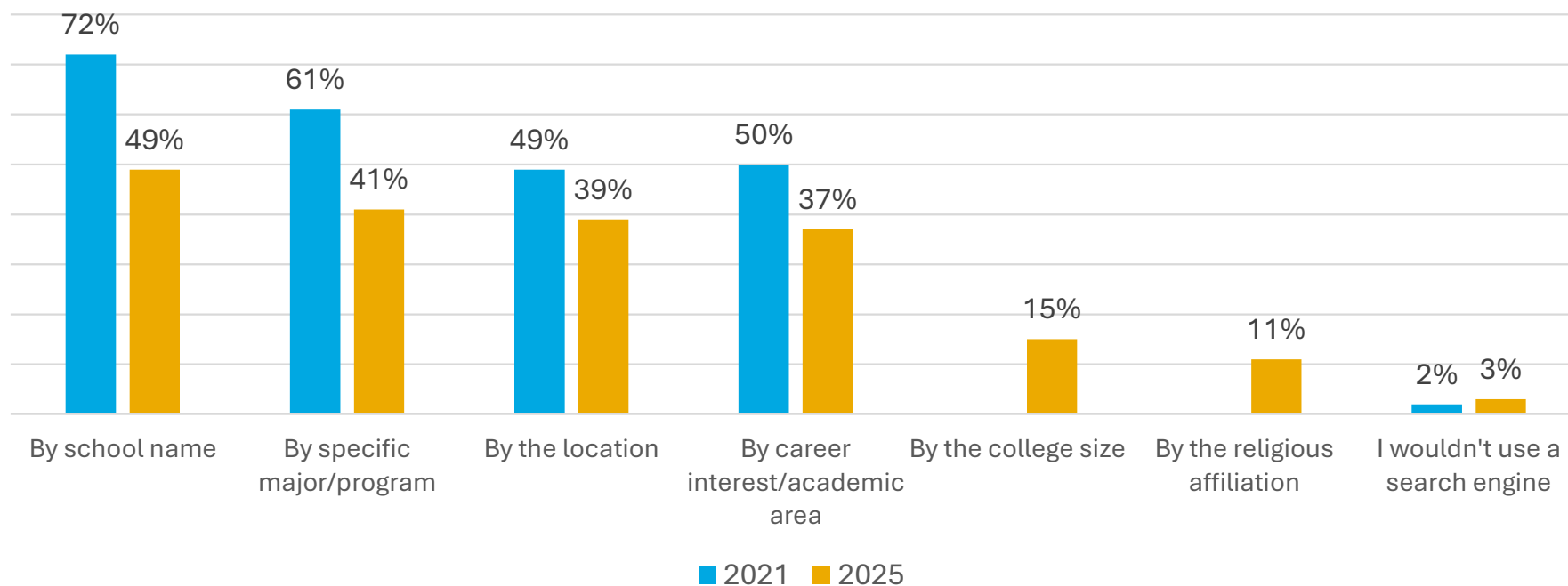
41%

By the location

39%

By the name of a career interest or general academic area

37%

By the college size (small, medium, large)

15%

RNL, Halda, & Modern Campus. (2025). 2025 E-Expectations. Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

How Search Strategies Have Changed, 2021-2025

Traditional college search behavior sees sharp decline: name-based searches drop

	2021	2025
By school name	72%	49%
By specific major/program	61%	41%
By the location	49%	39%
By career interest/academic area	50%	37%
By the college size		15%
By the religious affiliation		11%
I wouldn't use a search engine	2%	3%

Top Ten Helpful Information Topics on a College Website

1 Academic programs

2 Scholarships and financial aid

3 Cost

4 Admissions process

5 Campus and student life information
Student support programs

6 An online community for students where they can interact

7 Housing information

8 Campus location, city, and community information

9 Student health resources (including mental health counseling)

10 Photos showcasing campus life
Safety information

Top Ten Frustrations with College Websites

1 Difficult to find program Information

2 Confusing admissions process

3 Lack of job opportunity details

4 Unclear admission statistics (such as admit rate, student profile, etc.)

5 Hard-to-use navigation or hard-to-use links

6 Lack of personalized content aimed at students' interests

7 No website search tool to search for more specific information

8 Online forms that request too much information

9 Hard to find contact information (email addresses, phone numbers)

10 Hard to read website pages

RNL, Halda, & Modern Campus. (2025). 2025 E-Expectations. Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

Student College Website Priorities: A Four-Year Evolution

Key Findings

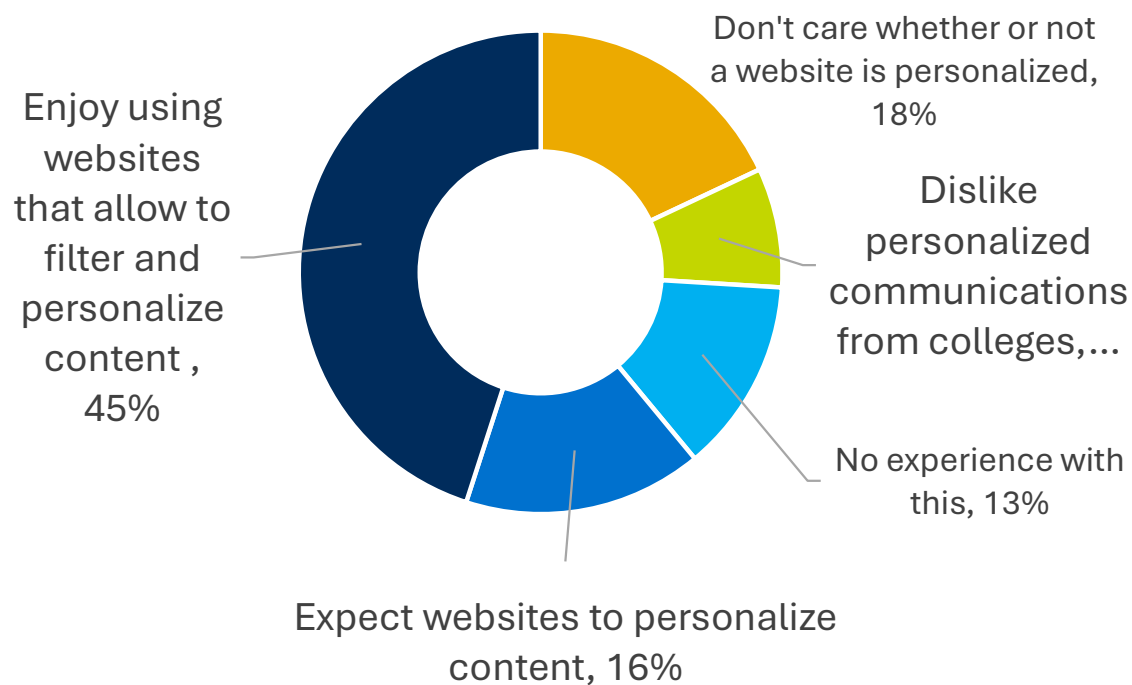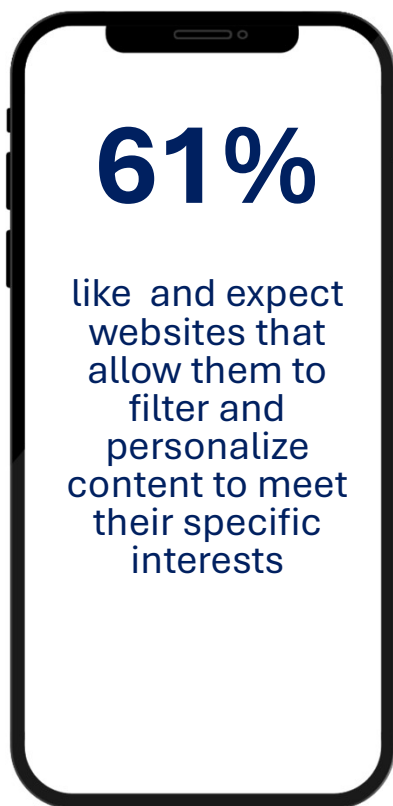| 9th grade	10th grade	11th grade	12th grade
• Strong community focus (#3) • Less emphasis on specific costs • Virtual tours in top 10 • Basic location information priority (#10)	• Increased cost awareness (#4) • Student support emerges (#6) • Health resources appear (#10) • Balance of practical and social info	• Consistent with 10th-grade priorities • Maintained focus on support services • Health resources remain important • Strong process orientation	• Most practical/immediate needs focused • Housing enters top priorities (#8) • Community aspect is of less priority (#10) • Strong emphasis on campus life (#6)

Personalization in College Websites

61%

like and expect websites that allow them to filter and personalize content to meet their specific interests

Enjoy using websites that allow to filter and personalize content , 45%

Don't care whether or not a website is personalized, 18%

Dislike personalized communications from colleges,...

No experience with this, 13%

Expect websites to personalize content, 16%

What to Prioritize to Drive Website Traffic

| Comprehensive Digital Strategy	Grade-Tailored Tactics	Content Strategy
• Prioritize SEO to ensure top search rankings for school names, programs, and careers • Optimize content for voice search and AI-driven queries • Keep social media channels active and engaging • Launch targeted, grade-specific email campaigns • Integrate AI-powered search tools on your site	• 9th Grade: Emphasize social media and voice search • 10th Grade: Build AI-friendly, voice-optimized content • 11th Grade: Strengthen SEO and maintain a broad channel presence • 12th Grade: Focus on direct search and personalized email outreach	• Offer exploratory content for younger students • Provide in-depth program info for upper grades • Boost location-specific content to support decision-making

RNL, Halda, & Modern Campus. (2025). 2025 E-Expectations. Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

Adapting for AI Search

- Own your online brand

- Publish authoritative long-tail content

- Ensure your site is technically optimized

- Structure content

- Differentiate your content based on your strengths

- Keep content fresh
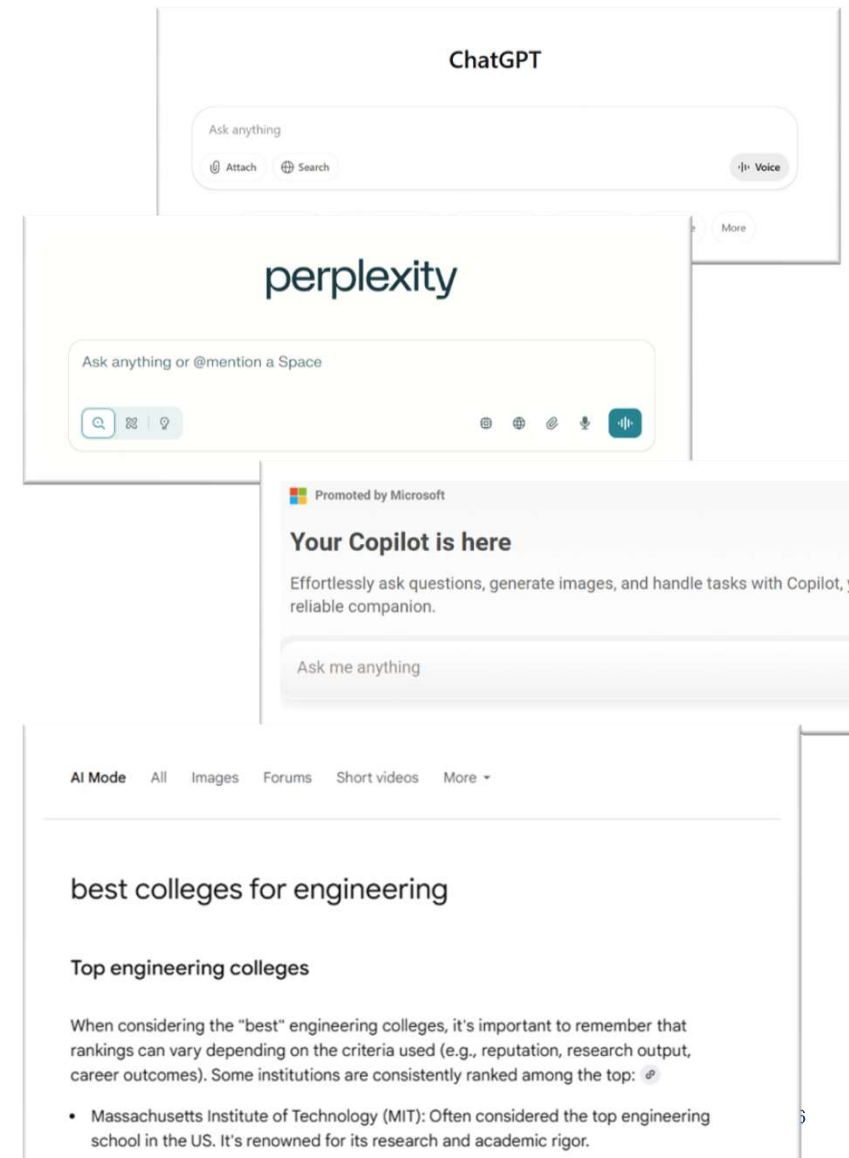
The Long Game: Prioritizing SEO at Oakland University

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About Oakland University

Oakland County, Michigan

- 1,443-acre suburban campus in Rochester Hills and Auburn Hills, about 30 miles northwest of Detroit.

- More than 16,000 students

- 130 undergraduate and 130+ graduate and professional programs

- Recognized as an R2: Doctoral Universities – High research activity"

- Strong commitment to career readiness, connecting students to hundreds of corporate employers annually

Oakland's Goals

Increasing undergraduate and graduate program applications

- Focus on organic web traffic

- Reduce dependency on paid campaigns and third-party platforms

- Optimize owned digital infrastructure and content

- Address and overcome systemic and structural barriers

The Context: Getting Started

Challenges and Opportunities
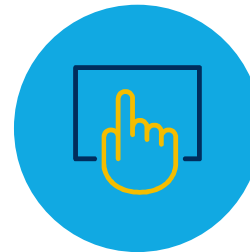
No Additional Resources

Cumbersome Approval Process

Account Management Limitations

Decentralized Academic Units

Ineffective Lead Form

First Steps

Getting Underway

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY™

Strategic Partnership (RNL)

Engagement-Focused Page Template

Discover Doc Framework

Content Creation and Approval

Developing search optimized, user-focused content

Secured Program Buy-In
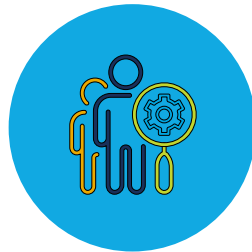
Utilized Account Managers

Implemented Keyword Strategy

Published Approved Content

Transformational Outcomes

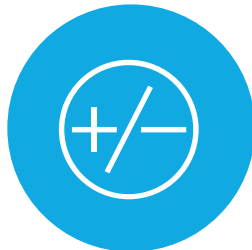**Reshaping our content infrastructure**

OAKLAND
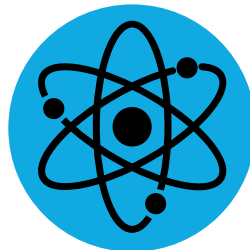UNIVERSITY™

**96% Discovery Doc
Return Rate**

**Some
Pushback**

**100% Undergrad
Pages Complete**

**Most Grad Pages
Live**

**Cross-Site
Consistency**

**New Program
Search Tool**

Enrollment Results

Increase in Graduate Application Volume and Conversion Rates

- **Grad Apps Submitted**:
  - Organic - 10,356
  - CPC - 2,503
- **Grad Apps Conversion Rate:**
  - Organic = 21.01%
  - CPC = 13.7%
- **Graduate Application Conversions:**
  - FY2024 (18%) - FY2025 (21%) = Up 17%
  - FY2023 (22.5%) - FY2024 (18%) = Down 20%

17%

Graduate application conversion increase from
FY24 to FY25 to 21%

What's Next?

Scaling our Impact

- **AI-Generated Content**
  We're piloting the use of AI tools to assist with content creation, especially for programs still lacking detailed information. This will help reduce time-to-launch and fill remaining content gaps.

- **Content Marketing via Blogs**
  Blog content tied to program keywords will help drive traffic organically and support SEO rankings across relevant topics.

- **Revamp Undergraduate Lead Gen Form**
  We're reevaluating and shortening the UG inquiry form to increase conversions and reduce friction, especially for mobile users.

Thank You!

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JULY 22-24, 2025
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The 39th Annual National Higher Education Conference