How Mastering SEO and Paid Search Can Make You Google's Best Friend

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Session Goals

1. Understand how and why prospective students use search.

2. Review SEO and paid search fundamentals.

3. Discover how to integrate both for maximum impact.

Why Search Matters in the Student Journey

Over 90% of students use search engines during the college research phase. But *how* do students use it?

- First impressions often come from search result pages.

- Even when a search engine isn't a student's first step, it's almost always their second.

- **Visibility = credibility = conversions.**

+90%

of students use search engines during the college research phase

Graduate Student Recruitment Report, 2023

When a prospective student searches for your programs, what do you think shows up first? Your website, a competitor, or something else?
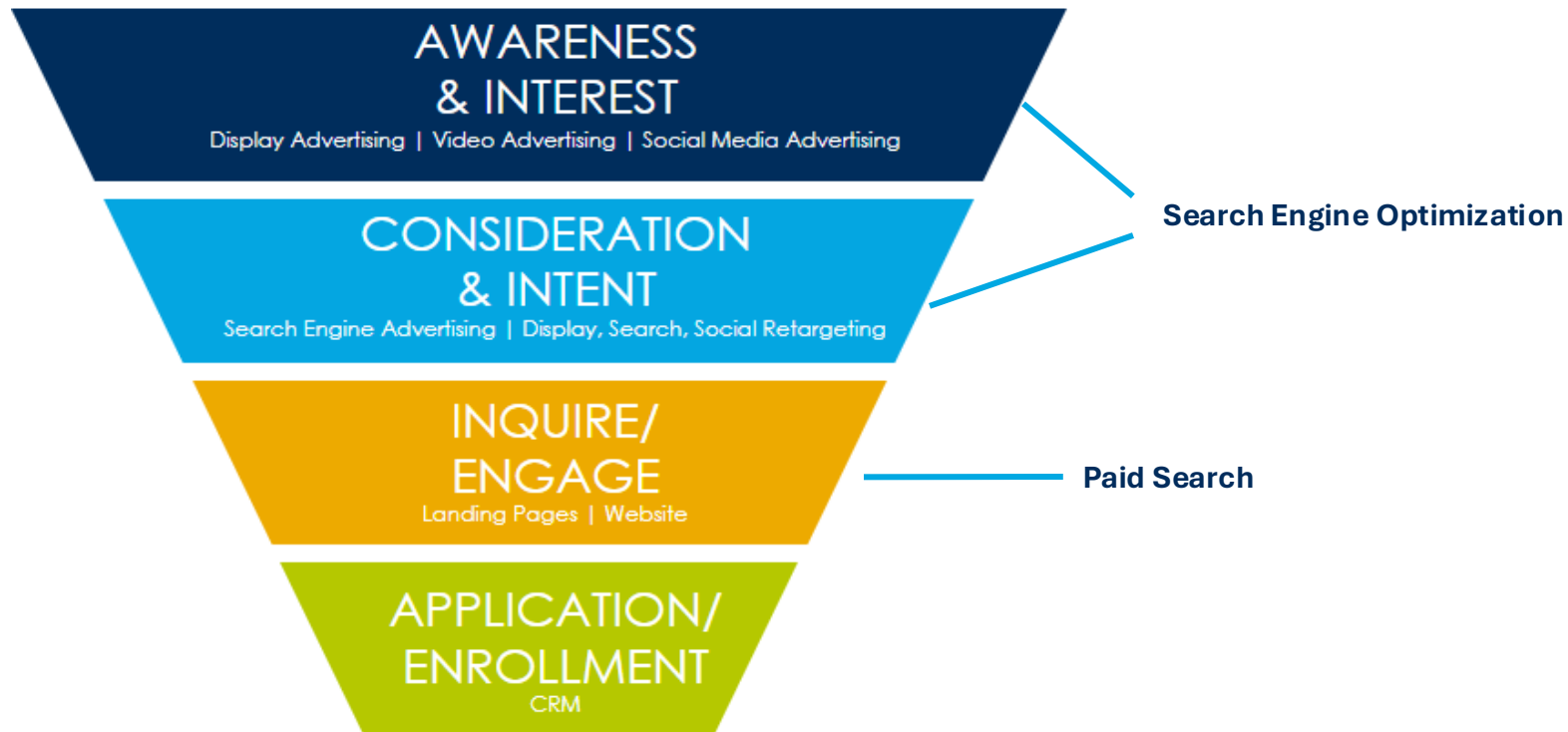
SEO vs. Paid Search: What's the Difference?

- **SEO:** Organic search results

  - Long-term investment.

  - Building up credibility and visibility.

  - Less expensive in the long-term .

- **Paid Search (PPC),** which may be part of your larger digital lead generation (DLG) strategy: Paid ad placements

  - Yields more "immediate" results.

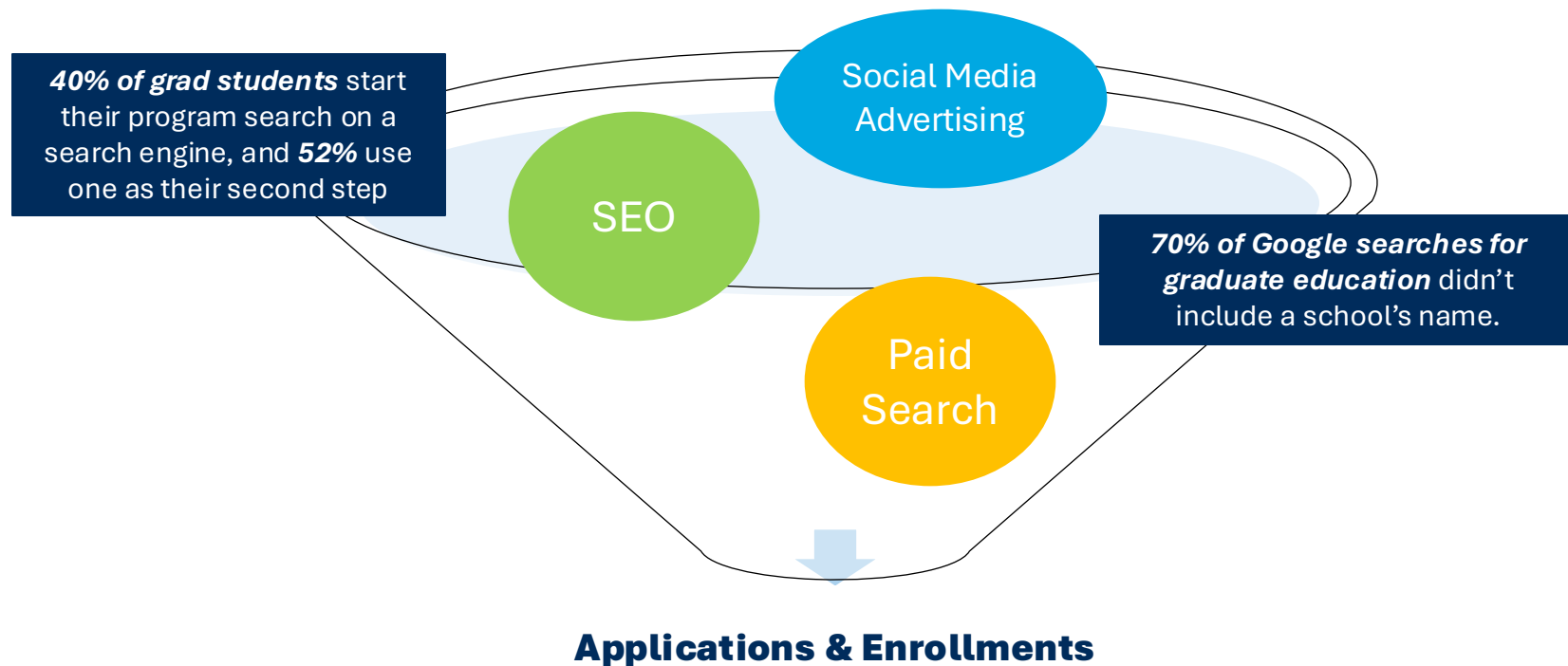 - Highly targeted.

  - More expensive (ad spend).

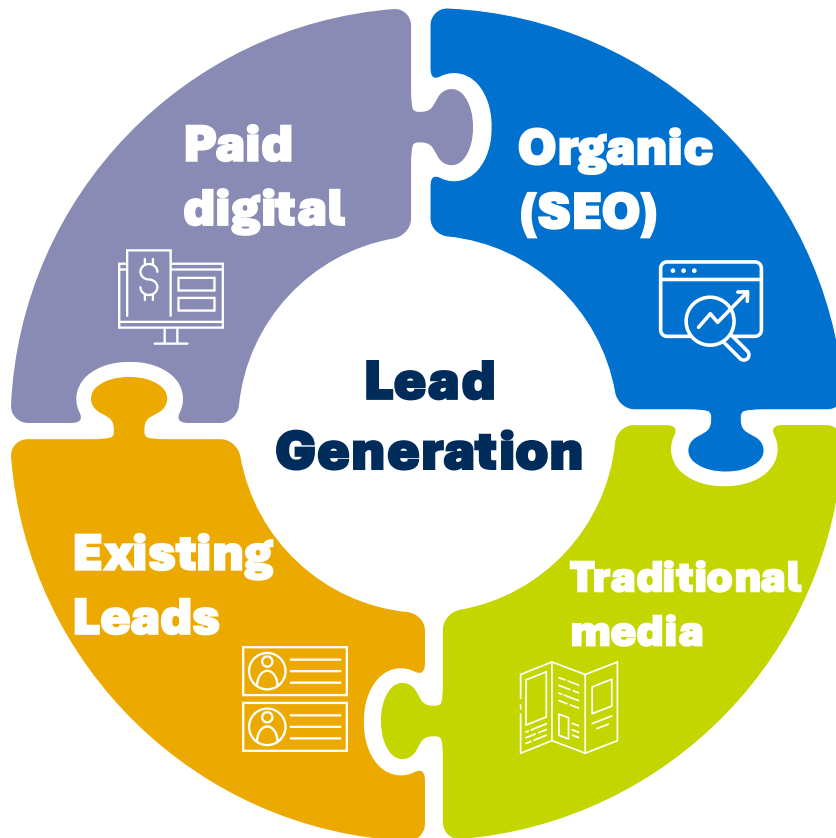# The Digital Lead Generation Funnel
How great strategy begins

AWARENESS & INTEREST
Display Advertising | Video Advertising | Social Media Advertising

CONSIDERATION & INTENT
Search Engine Advertising | Display, Search, Social Retargeting

INQUIRE/ ENGAGE
Landing Pages | Website

APPLICATION/ ENROLLMENT
CRM

Search Engine Optimization

Paid Search

The Digital Lead Generation Funnel

Building your top of funnel

40% of grad students start their program search on a search engine, and **52%** use one as their second step

Social Media Advertising

SEO

70% of Google searches for graduate education didn't include a school's name.

Paid Search

Applications & Enrollments

Integrated Media Strategy

Paid digital

Organic (SEO)

Lead Generation

Existing Leads

Traditional media

SEO + Paid Search = Stronger Together

The Search Ecosystem

1

How Students Use Google

Search behavior across the journey. How does this align with our vision of the funnel?

Awareness ➡️ Consideration / Intent ➡️ Inquire / Engage

Students are using **long-tail keywords** rooted in **conversational intent** to find answers about programs and institution.

"best universities for psychology in the state of California"

"how do I apply for financial aid at 'your institution'"

"medical assisting programs near me"

What Does Google Reward?

1. **Quality & Uniqueness:** Google rewards unique content!

2. **Relevance:** does this page answer the initial search query?

3. **Trust & Authority:** do students and others trust this content?

4. **Usability:** Is it fast, mobile-friendly, & accessible? Overall, is it user friendly?

How is Google Changing?

How is AI changing search?

AI-generated summaries that appear at the top of search results, providing answers to user queries. The overviews are designed to help users quickly understand a topic by summarizing information from multiple sources.

Google's AI Overviews

What can we do about it?

Getting your content featured in Google's AI Overviews isn't something you can directly control. However, your content **can** be included if it meets certain criteria.

Here's how to **maximize your chances** of appearing in AI Overviews:

- Maintain high-quality content.

- Use clear formatting for AI to recognize.

- Build credible content that AI will choose to include in the overviews.

SEO 101

2

Your SEO Basics

Expertise is needed to obtain your SEO goals!

✓ Keyword research and strategy.

✓ Optimized titles, metadata, and descriptions.

✓ High-quality, student-centered content.

✓ Internal linking and clear navigation above the fold, user friendly, linking to blogs/program pages.

Meta Title (Tag)

Meta description

Cleveland University-Kansas City
https://www.cleveland.edu

Cleveland University-Kansas City
Offering affordable **chiropractic** and wellness care to the community. ... Cleveland **University-Kansas City** believes in the principle and practice of equal ...
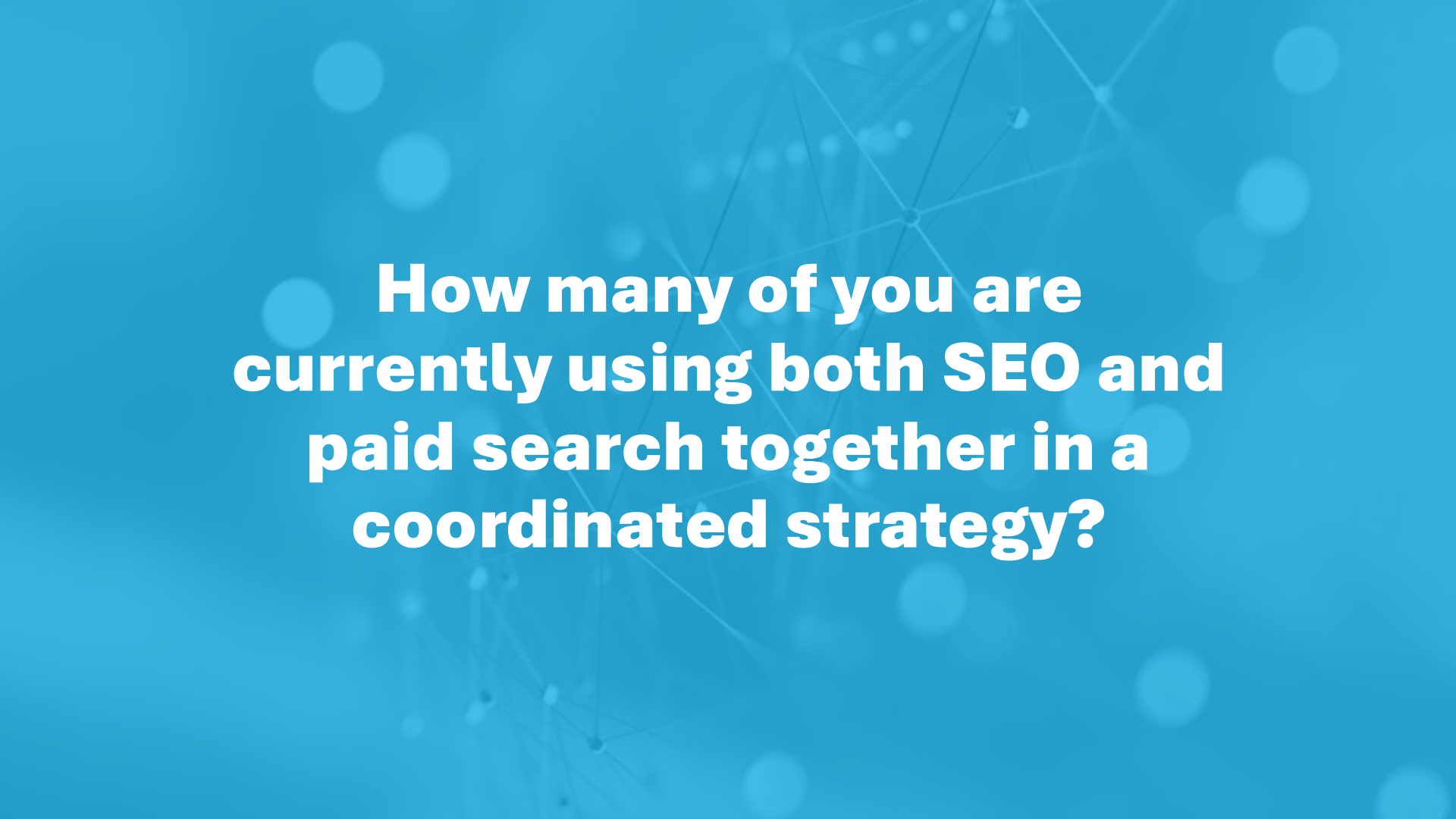
College of Chiropractic
We have been educating doctors of chiropractic for more than 100 ...

Doctor of Chiropractic
Doctor of Chiropractic Degree Program – Personalized ...

More results from cleveland.edu »

Technical SEO Essentials

Consider a site audit to determine the health of your site

✓ Fast load times — 3 seconds or less.

✓ Mobile friendly — responsive design for every corner of your site!

✓ Structured data — considering giving time and resources to schema markup.

✓ No broken links.

✓ Proper redirects (and not too many).

✓ Crawlable site structure overall.

How many of you are currently using both SEO and paid search together in a coordinated strategy?

Paid Search Essentials

3

Why Use Paid Search in Higher Ed?

Strategic retargeting tool that boosts presence and visibility

- Immediate visibility for priority programs/colleges.
- Controlled messaging and clear campaign goals.
- Advertise application deadlines and key events.
- **The longer you are in market, the more efficient the results.**

The Digital Lead Generation Funnel
How great strategy begins

AWARENESS & INTEREST
Display Advertising | Video Advertising | Social Media Advertising

Demographic Targeting
Website Placement Targeting
Contextual Targeting
Location Targeting
Purchased List Targeting
Publication Targeting
Behavioral Targeting

CONSIDERATION & INTENT
Search Engine Advertising | Display, Search, Social Retargeting

Keyword Targeting
Website and Landing Page
Visitor Targeting
Prospect List Targeting

INQUIRE/ ENGAGE
Landing Pages | Website

Forms & CTA's
Content Offers, Events, Webinars, Text, Chat

APPLICATION/ ENROLLMENT
CRM

Communication Workflow
Emails, Phone, Calls, Events

Contents of a High-Performing Ad

Messaging that resonates with prospective students

- Clear, relevant headlines.

- Strong CTA: "Apply Now," "Visit."

- Align ad copy and creative assets with landing page content.

Optimizing for your Quality Score

- Relevance of keyword, ad copy, and landing page.

- Higher scores = better ad rank + lower cost per click.

- Improving landing page experience.

Your Road Map to Implementation

4

Before You Start: Myth-Busting

"Paid search makes SEO unnecessary"

Paid search and SEO are not interchangeable, they're **complementary**.

"AI is going to kill search and organic"

AI is changing how we search, but it's not killing paid or organic. It's evolving them.

"SEO is a DIY strategy"

Measurable growth takes a strategy, a skilled team, and continuous optimization.

Getting Started

Perform a content audit of your site.

Conduct a technical audit of your site.

Dive into a quality analysis: how are your program pages setup, and how are they performing?

Audit all DLG campaigns and efforts for keyword overlap.

Define goals (inquiries, enrollments, site visits). What will you be measuring and when will you reassess?

Recognize that PPC and SEO work takes expertise and constant monitoring for optimization.

KPIs & Measurement

Which metrics matter?

- SEO: Track rankings, clicks, impressions, and traffic.

- DLG: It's okay to start small. Key metrics to focus on include cost per lead (CPL) and conversion rate (CVR).

- Align metrics to enrollment funnel.

Improving organic content with PPC insights

Use A/B testing for headlines and CTAs in ads, then apply to your site if applicable.

KPIs for Cleveland University

Month-over-month **increase in clicks** for key program pages and blogs
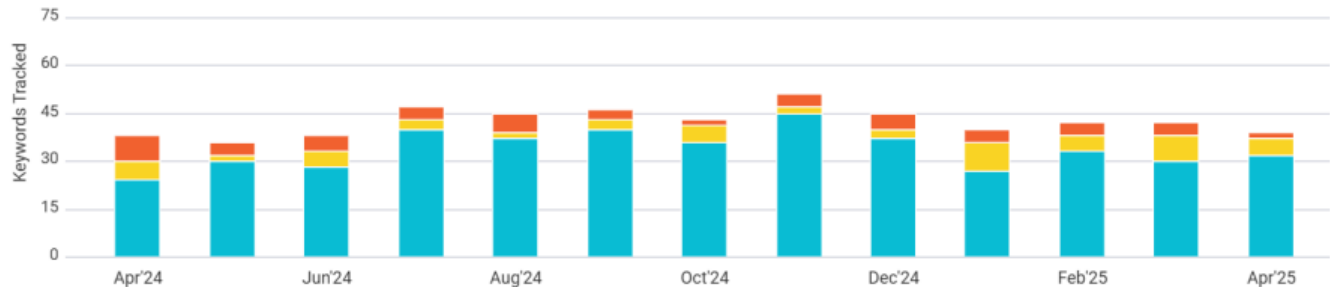
Date	Apr'24	May'24	Jun'24	Jul'24	Aug'24	Sep'24	Oct'24	Nov'24	Dec'24	Jan'25	Feb'25	Mar'25	Apr'25
Blended Ranked on Page 1	24	30	28	40	37	40	36	45	37	27	33	30	32
Blended Ranked on Page 2	6	2	5										
Blended Ranked on Page 3	8	4	5										

Page	Apr 2025	Change ↓
☰ https://www.cleveland.edu/	2K	↑ 355
☰ https://www.cleveland.edu/academics/college-of-health-sciences/radiologic-technology-degree/	456	↑ 223
☰ https://www.cleveland.edu/a-review-of-topical-products-for-pain-relief/	107	↑ 87
☰ https://www.cleveland.edu/admissions/tuition-costs/	200	↑ 57
☰ https://www.cleveland.edu/academics/college-of-chiropractic/	217	↑ 50

YoY **increase in ranked keywords** on the first page of the Google Search Results Page (SERP)
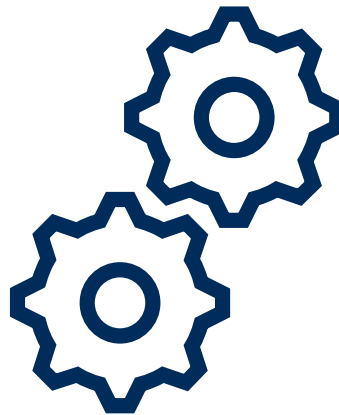
Recommended Tools

Experienced, data-driven strategists will be your greatest tool.

Other tools and resources available to you:

SEO: AI for SEO content – AI should be a starting point, not your sole strategy, SEMRush, free keyword resources from Google.

PPC: Google ads, GA4, Keyword planner, Google Search Query Report, Lookerstudio.

Key Takeaways

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Key Takeaways

1. SEO and paid search work best when aligned.

2. Focus on the student experience and journey, not just rankings.

3. Start small, track results, and focus on sustainability
   (SEO work doesn't have an expiration date).

Thank you!

STRATEGY

IMPACT

CONNECTION

INNOVATION

RNL NC
ALTERING the
LANDSCAPE

JULY 22-24, 2025
Atlanta, GA

RNL

The 39th Annual National Higher Education Conference