EAB

INSIGHT PAPER

College Search in the Age of AI

Four Scenarios for Future Planning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Preparing for a New Era of College Search and Enrollment Strategy

Artificial intelligence is reshaping nearly every aspect of modern life, and higher education is no exception. For students and institutions alike, the rise of generative and agentic AI marks a profound moment of transformation. Just as the Internet and social media revolutionized how students research and select colleges, AI will further redefine the college-search process.

To help enrollment leaders prepare for a future where AI is ubiquitous and continuously evolving, EAB conducted an extensive scenario-planning analysis to develop four potential futures for college search. Each of these scenarios illustrates a distinct, yet equally plausible, future, defined by a unique set of assumptions about key factors driving change, including technological progress, social trust, industry regulation, and the perceived value of higher education.

Our hope is that this scenario-based framework will enable you to:

- Better anticipate how AI could impact the future of college search, and by extension, your recruitment marketing practices.
- Discuss AI's emerging significance and implications with colleagues and key stakeholders at your institution.

We've also included **two strategic tools** that you can use to make this research more immediately actionable on your campus:

- AI Transformation Dashboard Template
- Team Retreat Guide

4 Potential Futures for College Search

1 AI-Everywhere College Search

AI assistants serve as the primary tool for researching, comparing, and applying to colleges, supplanting traditional websites and human intermediaries.

2 AI-Limited College Search

Safety concerns and regulatory actions lead to wide-scale limitations on AI, resulting in restricted access for teens as they conduct their college search.

3 AI-Accelerated College Opt-Out

As automation reshapes early-career jobs, skepticism about the value of higher education grows and students move toward college alternatives.

4 AI-Saturated Flight to Authenticity

Fatigued by synthetic content, students gravitate toward a more authentic college-search experience, opting for human-driven interactions wherever possible.

Cross-Scenario Imperatives for Enrollment Leaders

Whether AI remains a useful assistant or becomes the central driver of college exploration, its growing presence will likely redefine how students gather information, make choices, and interact with institutions.

Enrollment leaders will need to plan for a range of possibilities and prepare their teams to thrive no matter what the future holds. Several imperatives emerge across all potential scenarios:

Plan for Continuous Adaptation

Leaders should build agile, cross-functional teams capable of ongoing experimentation, rapid learning, and response to emerging technologies and regulations.

Optimize for AI as an Audience

Colleges must ensure their digital content is accurate, structured, and machine-readable so AI systems consistently present them clearly and correctly to students.

Strengthen Parent and Counselor Relationships

Colleges must deepen engagement with parents and counselors, who will play an even more influential role when student communication is mediated by AI.

Shore Up Data Integrity

Schools need to implement stronger governance to keep program, cost, and outcome information accurate, current, and consistent across all public channels.

Invest (More) in Brand Management

Enrollment leaders should actively monitor and shape how their institution is portrayed across the digital ecosystem—by AI agents as well as by human audiences.

Elevate Human Connection

Institutions should intentionally scale authentic, person-to-person interactions that build trust and affinity in an increasingly automated search environment.

Anticipate Workforce and Value Shifts

Institutions should align programs, messaging, and partnerships with evolving workforce demands and student expectations for clear return on investment.

Evolve Recruitment Marketing Campaigns

Enrollment teams must update campaign strategies for an AI-filtered world, emphasizing clarity, personalization, and channels that reliably reach students.

AI's Contribution to Today's Report

This report was entirely written by flesh-and-blood humans, with no use of generative AI to draft original content. The one exception is represented by the student narratives associated with each scenario, where generative AI tools helped bring to life initial drafts of persona-based vignettes.

Beyond that, generative AI tools were used to ideate and refine scenarios, augment research data collection, review and evaluate works in progress, and support team collaboration.

Responsible Use of AI

EAB uses AI responsibly to enhance, not replace, human expertise. Our AI follows enterprise-grade security, privacy, and fairness standards; and operates under consistent human oversight. Partners control their data, and all AI-influenced outputs are reviewed for accuracy, equity, and safety.

AI Transformation Meets College Search

A Moment of Inflection for Enrollment

In late October 2025, humorist A.J. Jacobs published an article in the *New York Times* in which he reported on a weekend-long experiment in trying to avoid AI in his daily life. Despite his extreme and sometimes comic efforts, he was entirely unsuccessful, because he encountered the direct impact as well as the indirect effects of AI everywhere he turned. Artificial intelligence powered aspects of life he anticipated, such as his smartphone, but it also proved to be inextricable from other parts of his existence that were less obvious, such as his clothing (via the supply chain that brought the outfits to the store and then to him) and even the New York City water system (monitored by AI-powered water quality sensors).

Jacobs's inability to escape the influence of AI should be hardly surprising, since generative AI and related technologies are on pace to achieve a more rapid adoption by the mainstream of society than even previously celebrated examples including the personal computer, the telephone, or the Internet. **The reality is, AI will affect each of us in our personal and professional lives tremendously, irrespective of our opinions and feelings about its effects.**

Like each of those past technological revolutions, AI will reshape countless aspects of our society and economy, including higher education. When the Internet revolution reached college admissions, the web gave students and families easy access to vast amounts of information about colleges. That shift fundamentally changed the recruitment landscape: Students could now explore programs, compare costs, and read reviews entirely on their own. This new independence gave rise to what enrollment leaders call "stealth shopping"—students researching and short-listing schools without ever contacting them directly. Today, EAB data shows that for many institutions, more than half of prospective students follow this stealth shopping behavior pattern, meaning institutions have no recorded interactions with them until after they apply.

The rise of social media had a similarly empowering and democratizing effect, since students' posts on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok quickly became a valuable source of peer-created information that enriches and influences students' exploration and decisions. According to EAB's biannual Student Communications Preferences Survey, more than three-quarters of students reported engaging with colleges on social media in 2025.

AI's Profound Impact on the Lives of Students

It stands to reason that generative AI technologies will have an equally, if not more, transformative impact on today's students as they make their postsecondary plans. Indeed, recent research into student and family behavior confirms that today's teens are already AI-fluent, if not yet AI-native.

Large-scale surveys reveal that as of the 2025–2026 school year, generative AI has found a place in the personal lives of American high school students, with AI companions, AI content creation, and AI-powered gaming now being regular features of their daily experiences. AI is also a regular feature of the educational setting for many American high school students, both as a common experiential enhancement within the classroom setting as well as a support for schoolwork outside of class.

Like many other areas of AI adoption, teen use of AI continues to grow as the technology becomes more advanced, new use cases emerge, and educators learn how to integrate it into their teaching. For teens, as with the rest of society, the AI genie is highly unlikely to find its way back into the bottle.

AI's Growing Role in Enrollment Operations and Strategy

Across EAB's partner network, enrollment teams are rapidly experimenting with AI to improve both efficiency and student engagement. Early applications include:

- Counselors using AI to draft better email responses
- Financial aid staff using AI to synthesize student data
- Schools deploying AI chatbots to provide after-hours support
- Institutions using AI to assist with transcript evaluation and transfer credit review

52%

of teens have used AI companions at least a few times a month[1]

33%

of teens choose AI companions over humans for serious conversations[2]

84%

of U.S. high school students report using generative AI tools for schoolwork[3]

51%

of high school teachers are incorporating AI-powered educational games into their curriculum[4]

Until recently, most of these innovations have emerged from the ground up, driven by motivated and enthusiastic staff members testing new tools rather than by formal institutional policy. Increasingly, however, enrollment leaders are taking a more structured approach, prompted by a surge in vendor offerings and growing interest from presidents and boards eager to define their AI strategies. Hype and external pressures aside, AI's real promise lies in augmenting and automating enrollment functions to increase speed, accuracy, and personalization, in the back office as well as in student-facing functions.

We expect continued innovation across key areas such as:

- Predictive analytics
- Application processing
- Staff training and support
- Scaled counselor engagement

To see our past work on the use of AI within the enrollment office, see this **Enroll360 Insight Paper:** AI for Enrollment Leaders.

AI's Evolving Impact on College Search

In higher education enrollment, there has been comparatively less attention paid to how students' own college-search behaviors will evolve because of AI adoption. While the general trend toward more AI use seems virtually inevitable, the specifics of how AI will shape students' research, evaluation, and decision-making processes remain more difficult to anticipate. Across the past several months, EAB has developed and refined a set of four future scenarios, each one depicting a different reality for how students (and families) conduct their college searches in the age of AI. These scenarios were developed in consultation with dozens of experts and enrollment leaders across the country.

This scenario-based research aims to help the enrollment community anticipate disruption and plan effectively. As detailed throughout this paper, our analysis suggests clear implications for institutions and enrollment leaders as AI reshapes how students engage with colleges.

We also believe there will be significant opportunity for forward-thinking schools to gain a competitive advantage as we move toward an ever more AI-enabled future. Some of those opportunities lie in how AI technologies are deployed within the confines of the enrollment suite, but many will come to life in how enrollment leaders meet the future norms and expectations of students and families in tomorrow's AI-driven search environment.

At EAB, we are also considering the implications of these scenarios as we continue to evolve our Enroll360 solution suite. We recognize that some institutions may lack the scale to independently deliver agentic, conversational experiences across pre-deposit touchpoints; to realize meaningful and differentiated hyper-personalization within and across communication channels; or to activate intelligent orchestration via dynamic timing, cadence, targeting, and channel selection. However, for most colleges, these capabilities will be essential to succeed in tomorrow's enrollment environment.

Although the full impact of AI on college search remains uncertain, its reach will most certainly extend across every dimension of enrollment strategy. Leaders should proactively engage their teams and leadership to consider how college search is changing and what that means for institutional and enrollment strategy.

For more on how to incorporate hyper-personalization into your marketing strategy and how to prepare your data infrastructure for a hyper-personal future, see these recent **EAB insight papers**:

A Data Readiness Guide for Hyper-Personalized Marketing

Hyper-Personalized Enrollment Marketing—What It Looks Like and How to Get There

A Structured Approach to Planning for Change

Why Scenario Planning?

When confronted with an uncertain future, strategic planners often turn to scenario analysis, a method for envisioning multiple plausible futures and evaluating their risks and opportunities. Scenario analysis was originally developed as a discipline to help military strategists predict the behavior of adversaries and determine how they should respond. In the late 20th century, corporations and other institutions began to adopt scenario-based planning frameworks as a tool for guiding strategic actions and investment decisions. Today, scenario planning is widely recognized as an effective tool for navigating complex, fast-changing environments.

Generative AI has made this process even more powerful as AI tools can now synthesize vast bodies of knowledge, propose alternative scenarios, and generate insights at unprecedented speed and scale. EAB researchers leveraged these capabilities to explore the growing influence of AI on the lives of teenagers, including how they use AI for college search.

Student adoption of AI is particularly well-suited to a scenario analysis since there is virtually no doubt as to whether AI will become more powerful and pervasive, but many unknowns remain about how those advances will shape student behavior and decision-making in the future.

To help enrollment leaders prepare for whatever future lies ahead, our EAB team used a multifactorial methodology to construct four different scenarios that capture key dimensions of how AI-powered college search might unfold.

Drivers of Change in College Search

To construct future scenarios for how AI might shape the college-search experience, EAB began with a broad examination of potential drivers of change. Drawing on our deep expertise across higher education, we considered economic, political, and social trends, as well as factors unique to AI's evolution, including its increasing autonomy and agentic capabilities.

As the analysis progressed, five variables emerged as most critical in shaping how these futures could diverge:

- **Primacy of AI in college search**
- **The level of human interaction**
- **The perceived value of a college education**
- **The level of trust in AI tools**
- **The degree of regulation governing AI use**

Primacy of AI in college search

One important way that college search could diverge is in the extent to which AI drives the college-search process. The future could unfold anywhere along a spectrum: from AI serving as a helpful but limited tool to AI becoming an animating force for the entire student journey.

AI provides minimal assistance ⟷ **AI serves as a primary driver**

Contributing Factors

- Persistent concerns about AI accuracy, bias, and reliability
- Regulatory or ethical limits on youth engagement with AI tools
- Institutional caution in adopting advanced or agentic AI tools for recruitment
- Continued preference among students and families for direct human interaction
- Significant investment in large-scale, agentic AI platforms
- The integration of AI assistants directly into mobile devices and operating systems
- Growing student comfort with AI as a personal productivity tool
- Demand for convenience, personalization, and immediacy in digital experiences

Level of human interaction

Another critical factor shaping the future of college search is the level of human interaction that students will experience throughout their college-search journey. The future could range from a world in which AI replaces most interpersonal exchanges to one where technology serves to enhance and expand meaningful human engagement.

Human interaction is limited ⟷ **Human connection remains central**

Contributing Factors

- Increasing digitization of students' daily lives and social interactions
- Growing preference for asynchronous, low-effort communication channels
- Institutional investment in AI chatbots and automation to scale outreach
- The efficiency and accessibility of AI tools for both students and staff
- Rise of low-quality, AI-generated "slop"
- Students' ongoing desire for authentic, personalized support and belonging
- Research showing higher trust in real human voices compared with AI systems
- Institutional commitment to relational recruitment and high-touch advising

Perceived value of college

Public perception of higher education continues to evolve. Rising costs, economic uncertainty, and rapid technological disruption are reshaping how students and families determine the ROI of a college degree. The future could diverge sharply between a world where the value of college is questioned and one where it is reaffirmed and strengthened.

Value of college is deeply questioned ← → **Value of college is strongly affirmed**

Contributing Factors

Value of college is deeply questioned	Value of college is strongly affirmed
› Rising tuition and affordability concerns	› Strong employer demand for college graduates in high-growth industries
› Public skepticism about job outcomes and debt-to-earnings ratios	› Institutional innovation linking academic programs to real-world skills
› Rapid automation of early-career work	› Increased transparency about outcomes and ROI
› Proliferation of credible non-degree and microcredential options	› Public investment in affordability and financial aid

Trust in AI tools

As AI becomes more embedded in daily life, the degree to which students trust AI as a source of information will profoundly influence how they use it in their college search. The future could range from widespread skepticism about AI reliability to strong confidence in AI as a trusted and indispensable advisor.

High levels of skepticism about AI tools ← → **Deep trust in AI tools**

Contributing Factors

High levels of skepticism about AI tools	Deep trust in AI tools
› High-profile instances of AI "hallucination" or misinformation	› Technological improvements in accuracy, transparency, and verification
› Rapid growth of low-quality, AI-generated online content	› Widespread AI literacy education for students and families
› Lack of transparency and tagging standards for AI authorship	› Institutional adoption of trustworthy, vetted AI platforms
› Student preference for human-authored, peer-verified sources	› Successful regulation or standardization of AI-generated content

Level of regulation

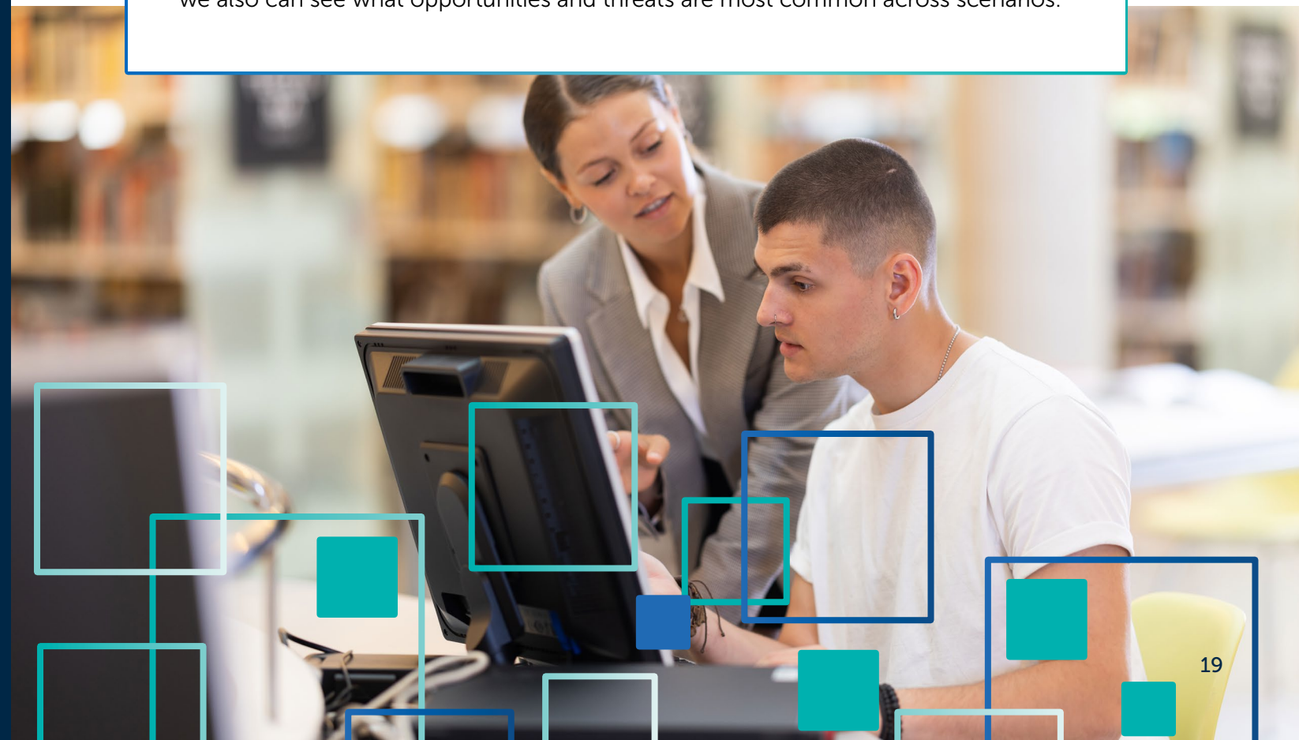
The degree to which governments and corporations regulate the use of AI, especially for minors, will significantly shape the future of college search. The world could evolve along two very different paths: one in which AI remains largely unregulated and open, and another where stricter safeguards and compliance standards reshape how students engage with digital tools.

Contributing Factors

Open access and unlimited use	Vetted tools and limited access
› Ongoing political resistance to federal regulation of emerging technologies	› Public concern about youth privacy, safety, and data exploitation
› Strong lobbying efforts from major tech companies promoting innovation over restriction	› State-level legislation restricting AI and social media use by minors
› Limited federal or state enforcement capacity for emerging AI use cases	› Corporate anticipation of stricter government oversight
› Market competition incentivizing rapid deployment of AI tools ahead of formal regulation	› International precedent for AI regulation in the EU and other regions

Introducing the **Four Scenarios**

The following pages detail four potential scenarios for the future of college search. It's important to remember that these scenarios are not intended to represent a precise prediction on how college search will evolve in the years ahead. Rather, the purpose of considering these hypothetical scenarios is to examine what actions we might take now to prepare for each future state. In investigating multiple scenarios, not only do we get to evaluate the diversity of potential futures and implications, but we also can see what opportunities and threats are most common across scenarios.



1

AI-Everywhere College Search

AI becomes the primary gateway for students to research and explore colleges

As we've seen, AI tools are already woven into the daily lives of teens and young adults, and their capabilities continue to advance at a dizzying pace. As AI experts like to say, "The version of generative AI you're using today is the worst one you will ever use," a reflection of how quickly companies such as OpenAI, Anthropic, and Google continue to evolve.

We can also anticipate that agentic AI, or tools capable of taking autonomous action, will accelerate this shift. With the ability to complete multistep tasks such as comparing programs, estimating affordability, or scheduling campus visits, these assistants could soon become students' default interface for exploring colleges.

In this future, AI shifts from being a helpful information source to acting as a full-fledged collaborator in students' college decision-making. In fact, early signs of this future are already visible. In EAB's Fall 2025 AI Student Survey, 46% of students reported using AI chatbots such as ChatGPT to search for college information—up from 26% earlier in the year. In many ways, the AI-everywhere college search has already begun.

Key Elements

In this future, students will...

- Use conversational AI assistants to research, compare, and apply to colleges seamlessly.
- Rely on AI to interpret their personal, financial, and academic data to get personalized college-search recommendations.
- Skip traditional websites, engaging primarily through their AI intermediaries.
- Rely on instant, accurate, and context-aware answers rather than self-driven research.

Drivers of Change

Role of AI in Search

AI provides minimal assistance — AI serves as a primary driver

Level of Human Interaction

Human interaction is limited — Human connection remains central

Perceived Value of College

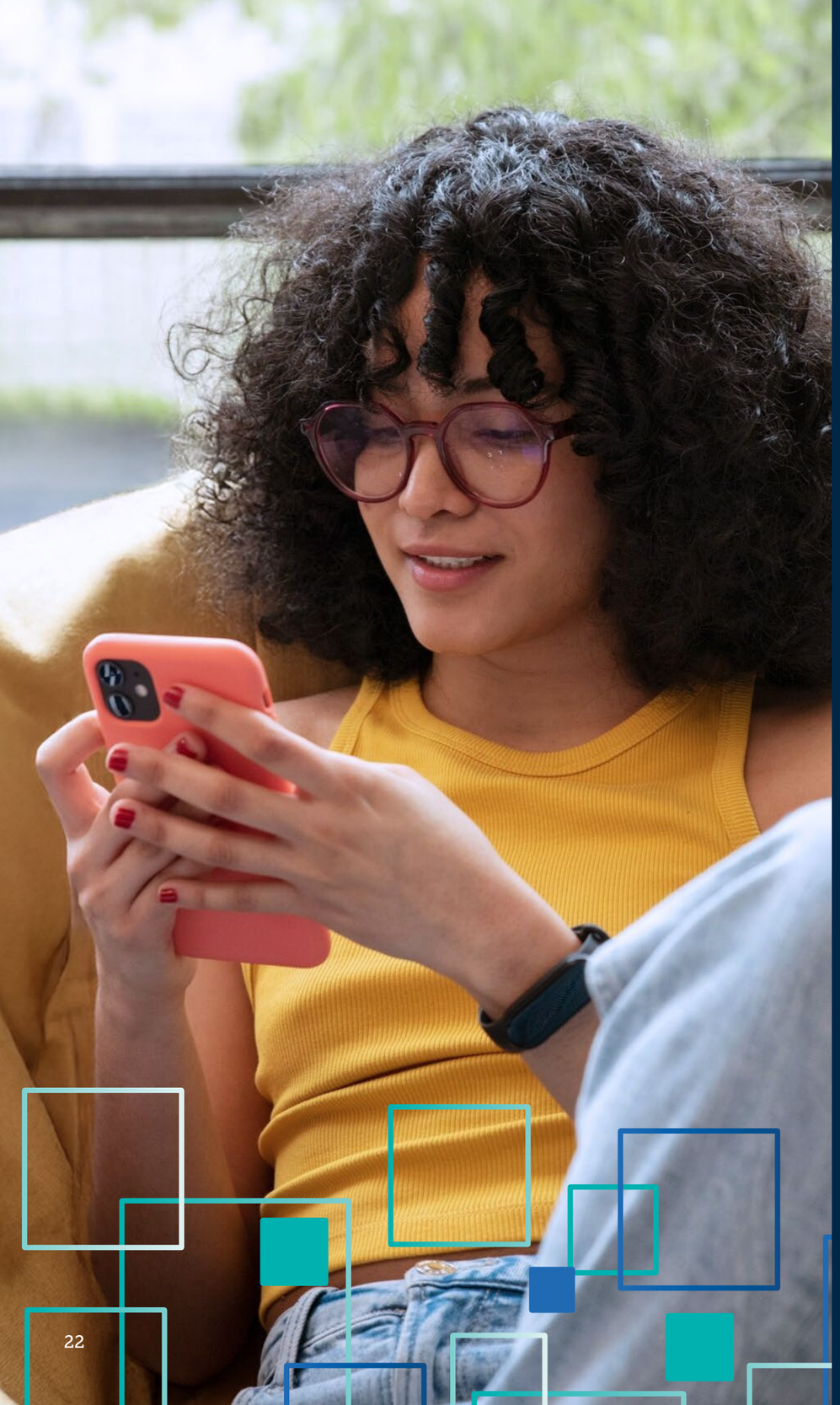
Value of college is deeply questioned — Value of college is strongly affirmed

Trust in AI Tools

High levels of skepticism about AI tools — Deep trust in AI tools

Level of Regulation

Open access and unlimited use — Vetted tools and limited access



AI-Everywhere Search

Student Vignette

Jada

It's a typical Tuesday night, and Jada, a high school senior, is lounging on her beanbag, scrolling social media on her iPhone 20, when she decides to ask her integrated AI assistant about potential colleges.

"Hey AppleGPT! My parents are bugging me about college again. Can you help me find colleges I might actually like? Not too far from home. They need to have good esports ...and they have to be affordable."

Within seconds, the AI assistant references net price calculators, cross-references commute times, reviews graduation outcomes, and builds a personalized college shortlist, all without Jada ever opening a browser or visiting a college website.

"What do you think, Jada?" asks the assistant.

"Looks pretty good to me," she says, glancing at the screen for a moment. "Now what? Can you get my parents off my back?"

"I got ya," says the machine warmly.

Now that Jada has confirmed she is happy with the results, the AI assistant proactively books a live virtual tour for each school and sends Jada's parents an email summarizing key information about each institution, including tuition, aid options, and admission deadlines.

2

AI-Limited College Search

Student access to AI is regulated and limited to specific platforms and use cases

Given the speed of AI adoption, it may seem counterintuitive to imagine a future where teen access to AI is significantly restricted. And yet, there are some indicators that point to this future state.

One such indicator lies in the fact that many schools are already restricting the use of unsupervised AI within their walls and computer networks, even as officially sanctioned uses of educational AI continue to proliferate. In fact, 45% of high school principals report some level of AI restriction. And while federal policy around AI does not seem imminent, it's worth noting that 12 states have enacted laws regulating minors' access to social media, which could foreshadow similar AI legislation.

In this future scenario, growing concerns over misinformation, data privacy, and bias lead school systems and policymakers to restrict students' access to AI. But this doesn't eliminate AI from the college-search process; it simply means that unrestricted access becomes harder for teens to obtain.

In the same way that many teachers now use approved AI-powered learning apps, in this future, districts deploy "trusted portals" where AI copilots operate within tightly controlled environments. College discovery becomes more controlled and mediated by institutional gatekeepers, and students use AI within environments designed to ensure accuracy, safety, and transparency.

In this world, AI augments traditional research methods rather than replacing them. Human interaction and institutional communication remain central to the college-search experience, and students continue to exercise personal agency in gathering and interpreting information. AI serves as a guide—not the driver—in a more structured, more supervised search experience.

Key Elements

In this future, students will...

- Explore colleges only through vetted portals provided by schools or governments.
- Interact with tested and reliable AI copilots that return only approved, citation-based results.
- Have limited access to social media and other Internet-based sites that use AI.

Drivers of Change

Role of AI in Search
AI provides minimal assistance — AI serves as a primary driver

Level of Human Interaction
Human interaction is limited — Human connection remains central

Perceived Value of College
Value of college is deeply questioned — Value of college is strongly affirmed

Trust in AI Tools
High levels of skepticism about AI tools — Deep trust in AI tools

Level of Regulation
Open access and unlimited use — Vetted tools and limited access

AI-Limited College Search

Student Vignette

Mason

Mason walks quietly into his study hall and finds his counselor setting up at the front of the room.

"Alright, everyone—laptops open," she says as the students take their seats. "Today we're going to be using CollegeBuddy, the district's approved college-search tool. It's one of the few AI tools you're actually allowed to use here, so take advantage of it!"

A few students laugh uncomfortably.

"Go ahead and log in with your fingerprint and your face scan. Once you're in, you can start exploring schools that match your interests. The assistant will ask you a few questions about what you're looking for."

Mason signs in and chats with the AI assistant when prompted. It asks about his favorite classes, his ideal campus size, and whether he wants to stay close to home. The questions feel straightforward, the tone friendly but formulaic. Still, it's faster than searching everything himself.

A clean blue screen appears with a list of schools. Mason clicks one randomly and the next screen reads: "Approved College Profile: Woodley College." Rows of data, graduation stats, and student quotes fill the page. There are no ads, no influencer videos, no Reddit threads, and TikTok is still blocked on the school Wi-Fi.

As the bell rings, a message box pops up: *"Would you like me to share your results with your parents?"*

Mason hesitates, then sighs and types back, "Sure."

3

AI-Accelerated College Opt-Out

Students become even more skeptical about the value and necessity of higher education in an AI-first world

If AI reshapes early-career work and teaching as dramatically as many expect it to, students' approach to evaluating their postsecondary options could shift just as significantly.

Early signs of disruption are already visible in the labor market. In the past year alone, employment for computer programmers fell by 27.5%, and recent graduates now have little employment advantage over peers who did not earn a degree. According to the Burning Glass Institute, more than half of college graduates are underemployed one year after completing their program—a trend some argue is only the beginning.

In this future, AI tools automate a growing share of entry-level tasks, and students increasingly gravitate toward alternatives that promise faster, cheaper, or more targeted paths into the workforce. These include short-term credentials, apprenticeships, employer-sponsored training programs, and hybrid pathways that blend online learning with hands-on experience.

While past predictions about the decline of the four-year degree have proven premature at best, the latest wave of education innovators—backed by AI-enabled learning tools and employer partnerships—is pushing certificates, micro-credentials, and experiential models toward mainstream acceptance. If these approaches continue to gain traction, students weighing the return on investment of traditional higher education may reassess which pathways feel "worth it," especially in fields where AI-based automation reshapes job demand.

Key Elements

In this future, students will...

- Use AI-generated ROI models to compare degrees, certifications, and apprenticeships.
- Base decisions on predicted career outcomes and skill demand rather than prestige.
- Choose stackable credentials or hybrid pathways over traditional four-year degrees.
- Expect personalized financial and job projections before applying.

Drivers of Change

Role of AI in Search

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Level of Regulation

Open access and unlimited use — Vetted tools and limited access

AI-Accelerated College Opt-Out

Student Vignette

Mia

At the kitchen table, Mia and her father lean over an iPad and review an AI-generated earnings report based on her intended field of study.

The AI assistant displays three side-by-side models: a traditional bachelor's degree, a community college transfer plan, and a non-degree option combining online credentials with a local apprenticeship. Each pathway shows projected cost, timeline, job openings, and five-year earning potential.

Career projections are updated weekly, drawing on labor data and AI forecasts that most families now use when comparing postsecondary options.

"So, a UX bootcamp plus an apprenticeship gets me to a six-figure salary much faster than a four-year degree?" she asks.

"I think so," her dad replies. "I just don't know if the other options are worth the cost."

Mia scrolls through the report, noticing testimonials from recent graduates and the AI's recommendation to "minimize debt exposure."

Mia feels torn; college still sounds meaningful, but the numbers make her question if it's a smart choice.

4

AI-Saturated Flight to Authenticity

Students are disillusioned by AI-generated content, placing increased value on authentic content and experiences

In a world where AI is everywhere, it's easy to imagine a future where teenagers push back against the constant stream of AI-generated content and place renewed value on genuine human connection. Many students already express discomfort with aspects of AI—from its high energy consumption to concerns about copyright exploitation—and the stigma of "AI cheating" in school has further colored their perceptions.

Many students also report encountering misleading or low-quality AI-generated content. In fact, in a recent EAB survey, only 7% of students identified generative AI as one of their most trusted sources for college information. And already, more than one-third of teens say generative AI will make it harder to trust the accuracy of information online.

In this future, AI still exists and students still use it, but they don't trust it, prefer it, or want it to mediate meaningful life decisions. They may even react negatively to colleges that appear to overuse AI-generated communications at the expense of authentic, human-driven touchpoints.

Ironically, the technologies that enable richer human connection at scale—such as virtual or augmented reality tours—may themselves rely heavily on AI behind the scenes. Yet teens are less likely to perceive these experiences as "AI" in the same way they experience AI-generated text or images.

What students crave in this future is clear: authenticity, transparency, and human presence in an increasingly artificial world. They turn to parents, counselors, and peers for credible guidance and emotional reassurance.

Key Elements

In this future, students will...

- Use AI for research but rely on human stories and interactions to make enrollment decisions.
- Prefer live, unscripted, and peer-led content over polished and potentially AI-supported campaigns.
- Evaluate authenticity through consistent, personal, and emotionally resonant experiences.
- Gravitate toward institutions that feel authentic and transparent.

Drivers of Change

Role of AI in Search

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Level of Regulation

Open access and unlimited use — Vetted tools and limited access

Student Vignette

Morgan

Sitting at her bedroom desk at home, Morgan slips on a Galaxy XR 28 virtual reality headset and joins a live campus tour of Woodley College, led by a current sophomore who works as a tour guide.

The guide, Selah, introduces herself to Morgan and the eight other prospective students who have joined the virtual reality tour. Selah is funny and personable. She shares an embarrassing story about her first experience on campus to put everyone at ease.

Selah then takes the virtual group to a popular maker space in the basement of the library, where a group of current Woodley students are clustered around a 3-D printer gesturing excitedly and talking in animated voices.

After the tour, Morgan sends a message to the school asking follow-up questions about her interest in foreign languages and robotics and whether study abroad is really a good idea for someone with her combination of interests.

Less than a week later, she receives a handwritten note in the mail from a French professor, answering her question and inviting her to stop by his office if she ever visits the campus in person.

Morgan feels very confident that this is the right place for her to pursue a college degree.

Imperatives for Enrollment Leaders

Moving from Ambiguity to Action

As different as these four scenarios are, each one of them suggests that higher education is in for significant, even transformative, change in its recruitment practices. But not knowing the specific details and pace of that change can be daunting, if not paralyzing.

However, in conversations with EAB experts, campus leaders, and AI practitioners, a consistent theme emerged: Despite the ambiguity ahead, there are a few near-certainties that can guide our strategic planning. One such near-certainty: The future will include more AI, not less. Colleges must anticipate what drives success in a technology-mediated world and take deliberate steps to adapt.

We can also anticipate that human connection will remain essential. Even in an AI-driven environment, authentic human engagement will continue to influence student decision-making. Institutions that find ways to personalize at scale will stand out.

Finally, we believe that AI will create many opportunities for reinvention. Beyond efficiency gains, AI can allow leaders to rethink processes and strategies from first principles—reimagining the student journey for a new era of enrollment.

These shared understandings point to a set of "no-regrets" actions institutions can take today, regardless of which future ultimately prevails.

8 Cross-Scenario Imperatives

Plan for Continuous Adaptation

Uncertainty about the pace and direction of AI-driven change can be paralyzing—but waiting for clarity is not a viable strategy. Enrollment leaders must assume that AI will continue to evolve and therefore build teams and systems that are capable of ongoing adaptation.

This requires shifting from onetime initiatives to continuous learning and experimentation. Institutions should establish cross-functional teams that regularly assess emerging technologies, regulatory changes, and student behavior—and adjust strategies accordingly. Flexibility, not perfection, will define success.

Planning for continuous adaptation means building organizational muscle: improving data governance, increasing AI literacy across teams, and creating feedback loops that connect insight to action. Institutions that treat AI transformation as an ongoing process—rather than a onetime response—will be best positioned to thrive, regardless of which future ultimately unfolds.

Optimize for AI as an Audience

AI is quickly becoming the primary gatekeeper between institutions and prospective students. Large Language Models (LLM) now summarize, interpret, and repackage college information long before students encounter it directly. As a result, colleges must optimize not only for human readers but also for the AI systems shaping discovery and perception.

This shift requires moving beyond traditional search engine optimization (SEO) toward Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)—ensuring institutional content is structured, accurate, and machine-readable. Colleges should treat their .edu websites as authoritative data sources for AI tools, not just marketing platforms. Program details, costs, outcomes, and policies must be current, clearly organized, and consistently formatted so AI systems can reliably interpret and present them.

Metadata, schema tags, and standardized content structures now matter as much as tone and design. Inaccurate or outdated information is no longer a passive risk; it can be amplified at scale by AI agents and spread across the digital ecosystem.

The audience for institutional content has been expanded. Colleges must communicate simultaneously to students, families, counselors, and the intelligent systems mediating their search. Institutions that adapt early—by improving data accuracy, governance, and AI readability—will gain a critical advantage in an increasingly algorithmic college-search environment.

Invest (More) in Brand Management

In an AI-mediated world, brand management is no longer just about logos, messaging frameworks, or visual identity—it's about actively shaping perception. The central question is simple but urgent: What do students, families, counselors, and AI systems believe about your institution?

AI tools increasingly draw from a wide range of digital sources, including websites, social platforms, forums, and media coverage. This means brand perception is formed not only by official messaging but also by how third-party content is interpreted and summarized by AI agents. EAB analysts have already identified cases where AI-generated summaries include outdated, misleading, or incorrect information about institutions—often without the institution's awareness.

Effective brand management now requires continuous monitoring of both source content and AI outputs. Colleges must routinely review how AI tools respond to common student and parent questions, identify inaccuracies, and correct them by strengthening owned content and influencing external narratives.

While institutional websites remain the most controllable lever, they are not sufficient on their own. Enrollment and marketing leaders must also leverage PR, social media, influencer content, and recruitment campaigns to reinforce accurate, differentiated brand signals—for human audiences and AI intermediaries alike.

Elevate Human Connection

Across every possible future of college search, one constant remains: Human connection matters. As AI increasingly handles transactional communication, authentic human interactions become more important in shaping student trust and decision-making.

Students consistently report that real conversations, personal outreach, and peer perspectives are their most trusted sources of information. In an environment saturated with automation and synthetic content, moments that feel genuine—conversations with counselors, handwritten notes from faculty, peer-led tours—stand out as powerful differentiators.

Elevating human connection does not mean rejecting AI. Instead, institutions should use AI strategically to enable more meaningful engagement: freeing staff time, identifying moments when human outreach has the greatest impact, and personalizing interactions at scale. The goal is not efficiency alone but emotional resonance.

Colleges should rethink high-impact engagement by pairing digital tools with live human presence, investing in relational recruitment, and highlighting the authentic personality of their campus. Human connection is the competitive advantage that will matter most as automation accelerates.

Strengthen Parent and Counselor Relationships

As AI increasingly mediates how students encounter college information, parents and counselors become even more influential in shaping awareness, trust, and final decisions. When students rely on AI tools to filter, summarize, or prioritize information, these human advisors often serve as validators, helping interpret recommendations, assess credibility, and guide next steps.

Enrollment leaders already recognize the importance of these audiences, yet many institutions under-invest in sustained, strategic engagement with parents and counselors.

In an AI-mediated search environment, this gap becomes more consequential. Colleges must proactively equip parents and counselors with clear, trustworthy, and easily accessible information about programs, costs, outcomes, and institutional values. This means developing content and outreach specifically designed for these audiences, not simply repurposing student-facing materials. It also requires including parents and counselors more intentionally in campaigns, events, and communications. Just as importantly, institutions should consider how AI tools might answer questions posed by parents and counselors and ensure institutional content supports accurate AI-generated responses.

Strengthening these relationships is not a workaround for AI disruption; it is a strategic necessity. Colleges that build credibility and trust with parents and counselors will be better positioned to influence student choice—even as discovery becomes increasingly mediated by intelligent systems.

Shore Up Data Integrity

In an AI-driven search environment, data accuracy is no longer just an operational concern—it is a reputational one.

Colleges must ensure that public information (everything from academic offerings to financial aid details) is accurate and accessible to the systems that now shape student discovery and drive hyper-personalized marketing.

This begins with data, content, and messaging governance. Disconnected databases, outdated content, and inconsistent reporting create not only internal inefficiencies but also external risk. When AI tools pull outdated or conflicting information from institutional websites, those inaccuracies can quickly spread across the digital ecosystem. Colleges should adopt explicit and well-understood standards for data accuracy, version control, and content verification across departments.

Also worth considering is how the quality of a college's information infrastructure can itself influence brand reputation. A modern, well-structured, and standards-compliant online presence signals credibility, not just to prospective students but to the AI systems interpreting that data on their behalf.

Anticipate Workforce and Value Shifts

As AI continues to transform the labor market, students are rethinking what they expect from college and what they are willing to pay for it. Institutions must adapt quickly, aligning academic offerings and messaging with new definitions of employability and return on investment.

EAB's research shows that skepticism about the value of higher education remains widespread, driven by cost, career uncertainty, and automation of early-career jobs. For many students and families, their most decisive question is shifting from "Can I get in?" to "Will this pay off?"

To stay relevant, colleges should strengthen partnerships with employers, embed work-based learning into programs, and highlight tangible outcomes: career placement rates, skill development, and alumni success stories. Academic leaders must also ensure curricula evolve alongside technological change, integrating digital literacy, AI fluency, and human-centered problem-solving.

These shifts are not purely economic; they're cultural. Institutions that connect learning to purpose and practical outcomes will be better positioned to demonstrate value and maintain trust in an era of rapid workforce transformation.

Evolve Recruitment Marketing Campaigns

Even as AI reshapes how students discover information, traditional recruitment marketing campaigns remain essential for driving awareness, engagement, and conversion. However, the nature of effective campaigns is changing.

Messages are increasingly filtered, summarized, or deprioritized by AI systems before reaching their intended audience, raising the stakes for clarity, relevance, and differentiation. Enrollment teams must design campaigns with both human and AI readers in mind. Subject lines, headlines, and key messages should be written to survive summarization without losing meaning or intent. Vague or overly complex messaging is more likely to be distorted—or ignored—by AI intermediaries.

At the same time, institutions should continue investing in channels that offer more direct influence, such as print mail, virtual tours, and live events. These touchpoints are harder for AI to compete with and often feel more authentic and memorable to students and families.

Campaign strategy must also evolve toward greater interactivity. As students grow accustomed to conversational AI, one-way outreach will feel increasingly insufficient. Successful campaigns will combine personalized recruitment messaging with opportunities for dialogue, exploration, and human connection—ensuring institutions remain visible and compelling in an AI-filtered recruitment landscape.

Review channel-specific strategy on **next page**.

Channel-Specific Strategy Questions

Paper Mailings

- Are we doing enough to make our mailings feel authentic to real students and families?
- Are we using printed materials to drive to (or coordinate with) differentiated AI-enriched virtual experiences?
- For print mailings, have we prioritized content that's most susceptible to AI filtering?

SMS

- Are our SMS messages signaling sufficiently believable urgency or tangible, immediate value to lead AI filters to prioritize our messages?
- How do we design SMS messages to be complementary to students' own AI agent reminders, not duplicative?
- Have we activated interactivity within SMS to establish the discrete value of engaging in the text channel?

Organic Social

- Are we using organic social channels to influence generative AI answer results?
- Have we invested in first-person student perspectives and influencer posts—especially video—to ensure we provide hard-to-summarize content as well as grist for the AI answer mill?
- Are our content guidelines up to date to account for likely AI adaptation of source content?

PR/Media

- Are we using PR and media placements to influence generative AI answer results?
- Have we formatted PR deliverables such as press releases or op-eds to maximize machine readability as well as human impact?
- Have we identified reputational or factual priorities for AI answers that would be best addressed through authoritative media sources?

Mass Emails

- Are our emails sufficiently personalized in messaging, tone, and timing to signal relevance to human recipients and to AI agents?
- Have we considered how AI tools will summarize or incorporate our communications?
- Are we taking advantage of the opportunity to provide trustworthy information directly to AI agents through emails?

Paid Social

- Are we leveraging AI and agentic capabilities within social media platforms to reach students and families?
- Have we structured our source content so that AI content delivery agents within Paid Social translate our messaging and differentiators correctly?
- Are we prioritizing the types of content least likely to be summarized, synthesized, or transformed by AI agent readers?

Websites

- Are we using AEO analyses, not just SEO, to prioritize content, technical implementation, and design choices on our .edu website?
- Have we identified most critical reference information from the .edu, such as majors, clubs, and scholarships, and developed a plan for timely updates?
- Are we offering truly unique content and immersive experiences that an AI agent would direct students to?

Third-Party Sources

- Is third-party information about our institutions as comprehensive and complete as possible?
- Do we regularly monitor third-party reviews for bias or inaccuracy?
- Are we using partnerships with third-party sites to support our presence, preference, and accuracy goals?

Scenario-Specific Imperatives

While many implications of these scenarios converge, there are aspects of each scenario that would lead institutions to pursue different actions to maximize the likelihood of their success.

1 AI-Everywhere College Search

If this future prevails, enrollment leaders will need to prepare for "machine-mediated" recruitment as messaging will increasingly pass through AI filters (Apple Intelligence, Google Gemini, ChatGPT) before reaching families.

Recommended Actions

- **Reengineer your digital presence for AI discoverability.** Traditional SEO is no longer enough—colleges must prepare for Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) to ensure AI agents interpret institutional data accurately.
- **Audit your content accuracy and structure.** Outdated or inconsistent website data can directly misinform AI tools; maintaining a clean, structured, and current data ecosystem becomes essential. AI platforms are also more likely to reference content that is structured and formatted in a particular way.
- **Design AI-friendly messaging.** Enrollment and marketing teams must craft communications that remain clear and compelling when paraphrased or summarized by AI intermediaries.

Reflection Questions

- How might our enrollment messages be transformed or distorted when summarized by AI tools?
- How confident are we that our website and digital assets are machine-readable and AI-ready?
- What systems or tools do we need to manage Answer Engine Optimization effectively?
- What data quality or governance investments are needed to build trust with AI intermediaries?
- How can we ensure that AI-enhanced student experiences still highlight our unique differentiators and authentic human connection?

2 AI-Limited College Search

In this future, enrollment leaders will need to plan for discoverability in closed ecosystems. When student access to AI is restricted, visibility depends on partnerships with approved educational platforms and compliance with evolving regulatory standards.

Recommended Actions

- **Build institutional trust through transparency.** Colleges that proactively demonstrate responsible AI use and data privacy will gain credibility with parents, counselors, and regulators.
- **Coordinate compliance and marketing functions.** Legal, data, and marketing teams must align early to ensure communications, chatbots, and recruitment tools meet emerging AI and youth-safety standards.
- **Develop AI-compliant tools.** Institutional AI applications should prioritize accessibility, explainability, and ethical use, particularly when they are created for minors.

Reflection Questions

- Are our AI-driven tools (chatbots, CRMs, analytics) compliant with youth and data protection laws?
- How well-prepared are we to adapt to stricter AI or data privacy regulations (e.g., COPPA 2.0, KOSA)?
- How do we communicate our responsible AI use to parents, counselors, and the public?
- What governance body or internal process should oversee AI compliance and ethics?
- Which vendors or platforms could we safely partner with to maintain visibility in a regulated environment?

3 AI-Accelerated College Opt-Out

In this future, enrollment teams will need to reframe the value proposition. Colleges must articulate outcomes in terms of employability, skills, and ROI, not just academic prestige.

Recommended Actions

- **Integrate workforce readiness into recruitment messaging.** Enrollment marketing should showcase pathways from degree to employability, emphasizing adaptability in an AI-driven economy.
- **Use data to demonstrate value.** Build accessible dashboards and storytelling tools that visualize student outcomes—career placement, salary data, graduate satisfaction—to strengthen trust with students, families, and policymakers.
- **Highlight (and strengthen) employer partnerships.** Collaboration with industry can yield stackable credentials, apprenticeships, and co-op experiences that appeal to ROI-conscious students.
- **Adapt academic offerings to emerging workforce trends.** Align program portfolios with workforce demand in areas such as data literacy, human-AI collaboration, and ethical technology use to ensure graduates remain competitive in an automated economy.

Reflection Questions

- Are we effectively communicating postgraduate outcomes and ROI to students and families? (by major and career path)
- How might automation trends affect demand for our most popular programs?
- What employer partnerships or credential pathways could we highlight or expand?
- How can we use AI to improve career advising and outcome transparency?
- Do our marketing and admission messages reflect the future of work?

4 AI-Saturated Flight to Authenticity

In this future, schools will need to invest in authenticity as a differentiator. Students will reward institutions that feel real, personal, and emotionally resonant.

Recommended Actions

- **Empower real voices.** Prioritize student ambassadors, faculty storytellers, and unscripted digital content over polished, overly automated campaigns.
- **Humanize at scale**. Use AI to enable more human interaction—by freeing staff time, customizing outreach, and deepening engagement.
- **Reimagine physical and virtual experiences.** Create opportunities for genuine connection through live, peer-led, or immersive formats.

Reflection Questions

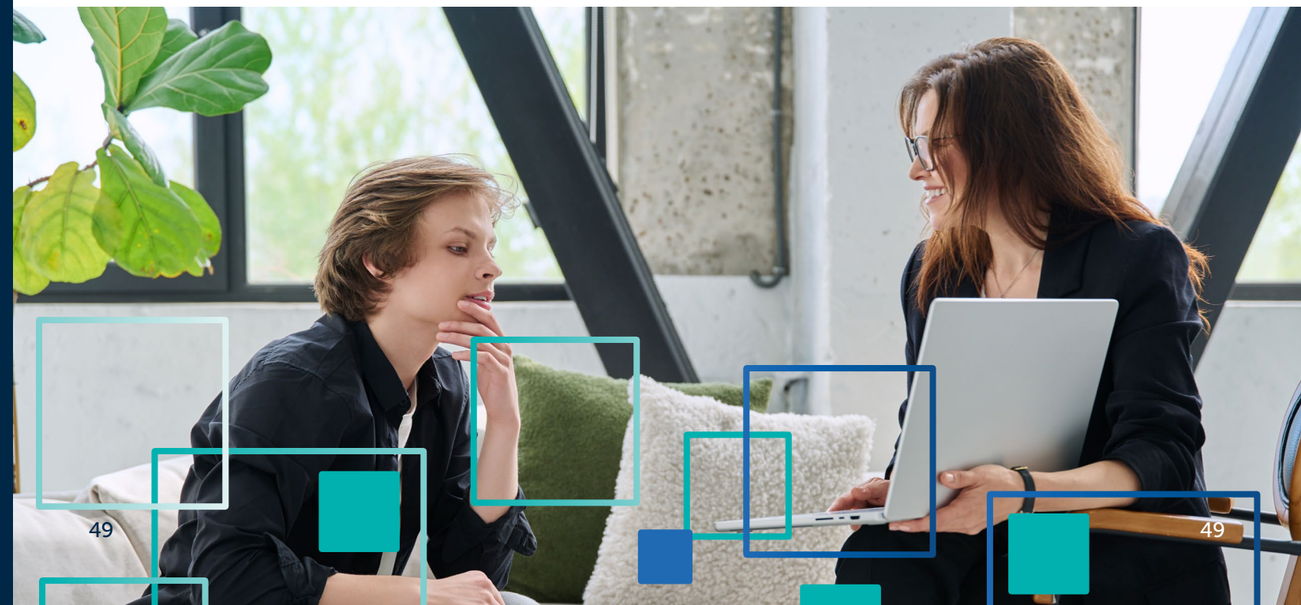
- How can we balance AI-driven efficiency with authentic, human-centered engagement?
- Are our communications overly polished—or do they feel relatable and trustworthy?
- How can we leverage students, alumni, and faculty as the most credible storytellers?
- What investments in virtual or in-person experiences best convey authenticity?
- How might we measure "authentic engagement" in our marketing and recruitment channels?

Tracking the Transformation

As the science fiction author William Gibson famously remarked, "The future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed." Evidence of AI transformation is readily available in many aspects of higher education marketing and enrollment, but reasonable people could disagree about how fast things are changing and how urgent the case for action is today.

That's why we recommend developing an internal dashboard as a tool for periodic discussions about how the environment is changing. In the appendix, we offer a prototype for one such dashboard, intended to be customized for each institution.

EAB is also creating a broader set of resources to support schools in managing this transformation. In November 2025, we launched our first dedicated Prospective Student AI Survey, to contribute to our collective understanding of how students are engaging with AI in the college-search process and beyond. Our vision is that this survey will become a regular resource that will allow higher education leaders to track the progress of AI transformation in the higher education domain. We plan to map survey results back to the four futures detailed in this volume, to support ongoing strategy and planning on campus. We are also developing an *Enrollment Transformation Index* to provide a singular and synthetic reference point for the pace and extent of change.



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Sample AI Transformation Executive Dashboard

		DATA SOURCE	THIS QUARTER	LAST QUARTER	LAST YEAR
Role of AI in Search	Percentage of students using AI in college search	National			
	Percentage of .edu traffic coming from AI agents	Institutional			
Level of Human Interaction	Yield rate differential from students who interacted with counselors vs. not	Institutional			
	Attendance at on-campus events	Institutional			
Perceived Value of College	Unemployment rate for recent college grads	National			
	“Cost” as a reason to go elsewhere in “No Survey”	Institutional			
Trust in AI Tools	Percentage of students citing AI tools as trustworthy	National			
	Unsubscribe rates to AI-generated outreach	Institutional			
Level of Regulation	New legal or policy restrictions on AI use by minors	National, state or local			
	Platform-level restrictions on AI use	National			

MAKING THIS RESEARCH ACTIONABLE

Team Retreat Guide

Facilitating Strategic Discussions and Planning for Enrollment Leaders

Objectives

- To envision how students' college-search experience could evolve in the age of AI
- To explore associated implications and opportunities for enrollment management

Prework: Ask attendees to review the Four Scenarios ahead of your retreat. (Pages 19–34)

Suggested Agenda:

- **Scenario Recap:** The retreat facilitator should provide a brief overview of each future state.
- **Scenario Examination:** In small groups, ask attendees to identify opportunities, threats, and actions for each scenario. (Pages 54–55)
- **Share-Out:** Have each group share their observations and key takeaways.
- **Next Steps:** Discuss both short- and long-term strategy implications. (Pages 58–59)

Step 1: Examine Each Future Scenario

For each scenario, explore the following questions:

Opportunities: What new opportunities does this future create for our institution and enrollment team?

Threats: How does this future state threaten or challenge our current enrollment management practices?

Actions: What actions should we take to prepare for this potential future?

1. AI-Everywhere Search

Opportunities:

Threats:

Actions:

2. AI-Limited Search

Opportunities:

Threats:

Actions:

3. AI-Accelerated College Opt-Out

Opportunities:

Threats:

Actions:

4. AI-Saturated Flight to Authenticity

Opportunities:

Threats:

Actions:

Additional questions to consider:

Which of these futures feels most relevant or risky for our institution?

What actions would prepare us for multiple future states?

Step 2: Map Short-Term Action Items

What actions can we realistically take over **the next 12 months** to prepare for one or more of these future states?

Examples

- *Conduct a digital audit for data accuracy and AI discoverability*
- *Pilot an AI-augmented communication review or student chatbot*
- *Create a cross-functional AI ethics and compliance working group*

Step 3: Define Long-Term Strategy

What actions should we take over **the next 1–3 years** to prepare for one or more of these future states?

Examples

- *Redesign programs to align with future-of-work trends*
- *Implement institution-wide data governance and privacy frameworks*
- *Build AI literacy and fluency across enrollment and marketing teams*

Additional questions to consider:

What did we learn about our readiness for an AI-driven future?

What will we do in the next quarter to move forward?

What must we continue exploring to stay adaptive and competitive?

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Endnotes

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ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with more than 2,800 institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and advancement. We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.