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How Gen AI Is Changing the College Search

By Sarah Lindenfeld Hall

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- Find out what AI says about you
 - Control the AI narrative
 - Deploy AI tools across your website
 - Tackle your AI messaging
 - Make human interactions count
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When prospective students visit Forsyth Technical Community College's website and click on "Ask our AI Assistant," they encounter something that's likely familiar: a ChatGPT-style interface that answers questions about programs, suggests follow-up queries, and links directly to relevant pages on the college's website.

It's part of the college's broader strategy to incorporate generative artificial-intelligence tools and revamp its web presence, and it's paying off. The North Carolina community college's curriculum enrollment (students who are in a program and working toward an associate degree) has grown to its highest level in nearly 15 years — about 9,900 students, up by more than 2,100 from 2019.



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“We’ve had a lot of success with our student-success metrics and holistic support, and AI is one of the pieces of holistic support,” says Devin Purgason, Forsyth Tech’s associate vice president for student experience, marketing, and outreach.

For decades, institutions have poured resources into search-engine optimization and paid Google ads to drive applicants to their websites. But the surge in students’ use of generative AI, which creates content and answers questions based on user prompts, is making those recruitment strategies increasingly ineffective, experts say.

Today’s high schoolers are asking AI chatbots to compare financial-aid packages or relying solely on AI-powered search summaries to uncover the best direct-admit business program within 50 miles — and increasingly trusting the AI-generated answers without clicking through to college websites.

The tools are becoming a go-to source for teens. A spring 2025 Common Sense Media [survey](#) of 13- to 17-year-olds found that just more than half regularly use AI companions.

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And one big question on many of those teens’ minds is where to go to college. A [2024 survey](#) of prospective and current college students by the higher-education marketing agency OHO found that 30 percent of respondents were using AI in their college search, up from 17 percent in 2023, and 60 percent used it to compare multiple colleges.

Allison L. Turcio, assistant vice president for enrollment and marketing at Siena University, near Albany, N.Y, suspects those numbers are much higher now given how quickly AI use is growing.

“We have long thought of our .edu, our website, as our front door, but now it’s definitely not the front door,” says Turcio, who hosts a [podcast](#) called *The Application*. “And a student might never even click to the website to learn about our school.”

AI tools, not colleges, are increasingly crafting the narrative that students hear about campuses and academic programs. Amid all the challenges facing higher education, recruitment teams must adapt to students’ AI habits or risk falling behind, Turcio says. “The worst-case scenario is you’re adding an AI cliff onto your [enrollment cliff](#).”

Here’s what colleges can do to get students’ attention.

Find out what AI says about you

This fall, Elena D. Hicks, assistant vice provost and dean of admission at Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, gathered around a conference table with a consultant and colleagues to watch videos of how students glean information about SMU online. What she saw was eye-opening.

Students moved between SMU’s website, search engines, and gen-AI tools, often getting different answers — some accurate and some not. The results could vary based on the smallest differences in their prompt. One student might type in “fall term ’25,” while another searched “this semester.” “It was really interesting to see the different variations depending on what the prompt was,” Hicks says.

Hicks experienced the problem firsthand when she asked an AI chatbot a question about financial aid for SMU freshman while preparing a presentation. The response looked accurate until she reached the bottom.

“They had pulled something either for grad or transfers, but it looked like it was first-year information,” Hicks says. “These are the things that are going to get students confused.”

Those experiences are informing a website redesign that will help account for the shift to AI-powered search, Hicks says. “We need to spend more time in our systems and clarifying.”

To better serve students using gen AI in their searches, colleges need to understand what these tools are saying about them, experts say. Start by asking an AI tool a question or seeing how an AI-powered search engine summarizes information and what sources it uses.

Generative-AI tools are trained on vast amounts of public online data — from Reddit threads and social-media posts to campus websites, blogs, and articles. This means that narratives, opinions, and even misinformation circulating online directly shape what AI tools report about an institution.

“It’s important for us to remember that gen AI doesn’t actually think or synthesize knowledge,” says Liz Gross, founder and CEO of Campus Sonar, a social-listening and strategy firm. “It’s fancy auto-complete, putting things together in a pattern most similar to how it’s been put together before. If those patterns didn’t exist ... it’s not going to put it together. It might hallucinate.”

Control the AI narrative

Institutions can’t control what commercial AI tools say about them, but they can shape the online content that those tools draw from. Enrollment and marketing leaders suggest focusing on these two key areas.

Update and reframe content

Colleges must keep their websites updated with current information that’s structured around student questions, not institutional priorities,

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Turcio says. Instead of touting a nursing school’s rankings on a program page, a better approach is to answer the questions that students are likely typing into an AI platform: What’s the National Council Licensure Exam pass rate? What’s the total cost of the degree?

Updating content on third-party profiles on platforms like College Board, Niche, and *U.S. News & World Report*, which AI tools frequently pull from, is also important. “We have to be considering not what we want to say first, but what is the student going to be asking first,” Turcio says.

On the more technical side, Forsyth Tech recently added behind-the-scenes [code](#) on the college’s website, Purgason says. It includes key information about programs, such as application deadlines or prerequisites, to help AI tools more easily find and cite it.

Amplify social stories

Peer opinions still matter in the college-decision process, and students can easily find reviews of dining halls or academic programs on Reddit or YouTube. Reddit, in particular, is a popular spot for students, Gross notes. Some 46 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds use the platform, compared to just 15 percent of those aged 50 and up, [according to](#) the Pew Research Center.

Gen-AI tools amplify those conversations by drawing on Reddit threads and social posts to



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shape what prospective students see, says Gross, who recently published [research](#) on how to attract students in a peer-influenced market.

Colleges can't control the social-media narrative, but they can add to it by empowering student and alumni ambassadors to share their own stories across multiple platforms, Gross suggests. "Tell as many individual stories as possible, as many places as possible, by as many storytellers as possible."

Turcio recommends creating student-run social accounts, pointing to Purdue University's student-run Instagram [page](#) as a model. It might feel uncomfortable ceding control to students, but it creates content that feels authentic to prospective applicants, she says.

Deploy AI tools across your website

Students now expect college websites to work just like generative-AI tools, Turcio says — type in a

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question, get an instant answer. That's one reason why Siena recently deployed an AI-powered search tool. It asks students a few questions, serves up relevant results from Siena's website, and doesn't require them to search for answers themselves, Turcio says. "Your website has to be really, really solid from a student perspective."

At Forsyth Tech, the AI transformation has been comprehensive. Since Purgason joined in 2020, the college rebuilt its website and hired a part-time knowledge-base manager to keep it up to date.

That foundation now powers multiple internal AI tools — the AI Assistant search function; “Blaze Bot,” a 24/7 chatbot; and “Maya,” an AI phone system. Blaze Bot has handled nearly 6,000 conversations — 1,275 of them after hours. Eighty-five percent were resolved without needing to be escalated to a human. The coordinated approach, Purgason says, ensures students get consistent answers on their own schedule. “It’s helped us be able to serve students when they need help,” he says.

Strong, transparent AI messaging signals the college is forward-thinking.

Tackle your AI messaging

Students already are using AI, and they — and employers — expect them to graduate college with strong AI skills, according to new [research](#) from Campus Sonar. One Grammarly [survey](#) of 2,000 students found that 62 percent say learning how to use AI responsibly is critical for their future success.

Yet few colleges cover this in their recruitment materials or provide guidance on AI use in the application process, says Emily Pacheco, founder of [EdHub.ai](#), a special-interest group for the National Association for College Admission Counseling that provides ways to harness AI in college admissions. Many also don’t showcase how professors are researching it or teaching with AI.

That’s a missed opportunity, Pacheco says. Avoiding AI risks alienating applicants who expect to learn about it in college. Colleges should post clear guidance on their admissions websites about AI use, covering permitted and prohibited uses, guiding principles and the institution’s broader approach to AI, argues Pacheco, who has created a [policy guide](#) for institutions.

She points to Duke University as an example that went a step further. One of Duke’s short-answer [prompts](#) this year promotes a new campus AI [initiative](#) that brings together Duke experts who are advancing AI research, tackling related ethical challenges, and considering how to use it in education. The prompt asks applicants to share a situation when they would or would not choose to use AI (when possible and permitted).

Strong, transparent AI messaging signals the college is forward-thinking, Pacheco says. “I think a student is going to be like, ‘Well, if they’re thinking about it at this level, they’re much more likely to be thinking about it on the campus.’”

Make human interactions count

With all the AI tools Forsyth Tech has added to its toolbox, it’s also revived an old-fashioned recruitment tactic this summer — in-person college tours for the first time since Covid. Nearly 400 students attended.

“The way I’ve framed it for our leadership is, we are going to be AI-forward in a lot of ways; we’re the trailblazers,” says Purgason, referring to the school’s mascot. “But we’re going to be human always. ... We are going to use this automation to give people back time for care and for coaching of students.”

Even as students rely more on AI in their research, the college decision remains deeply emotional, Turcio says. Students and families still value connecting with admissions counselors,

faculty members, and current students during campus visits and college fairs. And she notes AI can enhance those in-person connections.

At college fairs, for example, Siena now hands out QR codes that scan to an AI form where students input their GPA and other information to generate instant merit-scholarship estimates. Admissions counselors then follow up with a one-on-one conversation.

“We like to believe that college is a very rational decision, but I think anyone who’s been through the process [knows] it’s emotionally driven,” Turcio says. “Where I go to school is very closely

“We are going to use this automation to give people back time for care and for coaching of students.”

linked to my identity. So it’s emotional, which means it’s very human. It can’t all be done in this AI, robotic way.”

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