



RESEARCH BRIEF

Untapped Insights: The State of Site Search in Higher Education

How college websites are missing critical opportunities to attract, engage, and retain students

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Executive Summary

With shifting public perceptions around the value of a college education and an enrollment cliff predicted to impact colleges over the next decade, student recruitment and retention have never been more important for higher-education institutions.

From the university president to the staffers in student services or admissions, most folks in higher ed are driven by a shared commitment to supporting students throughout their entire journey – starting from when they show initial interest as prospective students and ending when they successfully complete their academic programs. Throughout that student lifecycle, one resource remains essential: the college website.

A college's or university's website provides crucial information around admissions and financial aid. It guides students to various academic departments and student services. It navigates them to the information they need. Or, at least, that's the hope.

For site users, navigating a website can often involve clicking through complex menus and digging through multiple web pages across different domains to find the exact information they want. Site search can offer them a shortcut to that content – ideally, with just a little typing and a single click. Exposed to smartphones at an early age and growing alongside the evolution of Google, Gen Z has developed a higher affinity for mobile experiences and for efficient discovery. On campus websites, optimizing site search can help colleges better meet the needs of both prospective and current students.

But are colleges doing enough to optimize the web experience for their site visitors? More importantly, are they equipped with the right insights on their audiences – how they navigate their websites to find information and what their search behavior looks like – to make impactful changes that better meet the needs of students?

225+ higher-ed marketing and web leaders – including executive leadership, faculty, marketing, IT, admissions, and research – shared in a January 2025 Chronicle Studio survey how their institutions approach site search and digital experience on campus websites.




To get a better understanding of how colleges prioritize site search to support their institutions' goals, the Chronicle Studio conducted an online survey of employees at U.S. higher-ed institutions from January 2 to January 24, 2025. Respondents needed to have experience working with their institution's visitor-facing website. (These respondents held roles across executive leadership, administration, faculty, marketing, student services, IT, admissions, and research). In addition, the Chronicle Studio conducted several follow-up interviews for this report.

Higher-education professionals realize that site-search analytics can help them understand what website visitors are looking for when they come to their sites. The most astute marketing directors also realize that search data gives them insights, from what is known in the trade as "first-party data," about their visitors far more comprehensive than what they might glean from more indirect measures. But an enormous gap exists between site-search potential and the way it is provided and analyzed at colleges today, the survey found.


Respondents to the Chronicle Studio survey overwhelmingly reported a lack of confidence in the

overall website experience that their institutions deliver. Moreover, when it comes to site search, many higher-education institutions are flying blind – with nearly half of respondents admitting that they don't use search data or don't have access to it. Respondents recognized that while staff members at their institution are often churning out content, marketing directors can't always respond nimbly to make sure onsite search points to the most recent or relevant material. When it comes to artificial intelligence, colleges express strong interest in AI's potential to improve their websites and search capabilities, but are still in the early stages of applying it. Most importantly, site-search analytics can steer decisions about content strategy – particularly where new content is needed.

This report explores higher ed's sentiments on site search and its potential impact on key institutional metrics such as enrollment and student success, gaps between what colleges provide and what their marketing and digital teams need to keep up with the demands of current and prospective students, and expectations around artificial intelligence's potential to improve an institution's overall digital experience.



Higher-education professionals realize that site-search analytics can help them understand what website visitors are looking for when they come to their sites.



Within Higher Ed, a Case for Search

For many prospective students, the college website is the first point of interaction with a higher-education institution – the entrée into their postsecondary planning.

A 2023 trends report on attracting, engaging, and enrolling high-school students that was produced in partnership by Ruffalo Noel Levitz and Modern Campus, both tech companies that work with higher-ed institutions, found that [93 percent of high-school students](#) use a college's or university's website during their decision-making journey. The same report notes that among surveyed students, difficulty in finding information, lack of information outright, and hard-to-use navigation are top frustrations they encounter when visiting campus websites.



93 percent of high-school students use a college's or university's website during their decision-making journey.

The number of respondents who believe that improvements to their overall site experience will impact key student-success metrics.

93%

19%

Believe they're delivering a great website experience today.

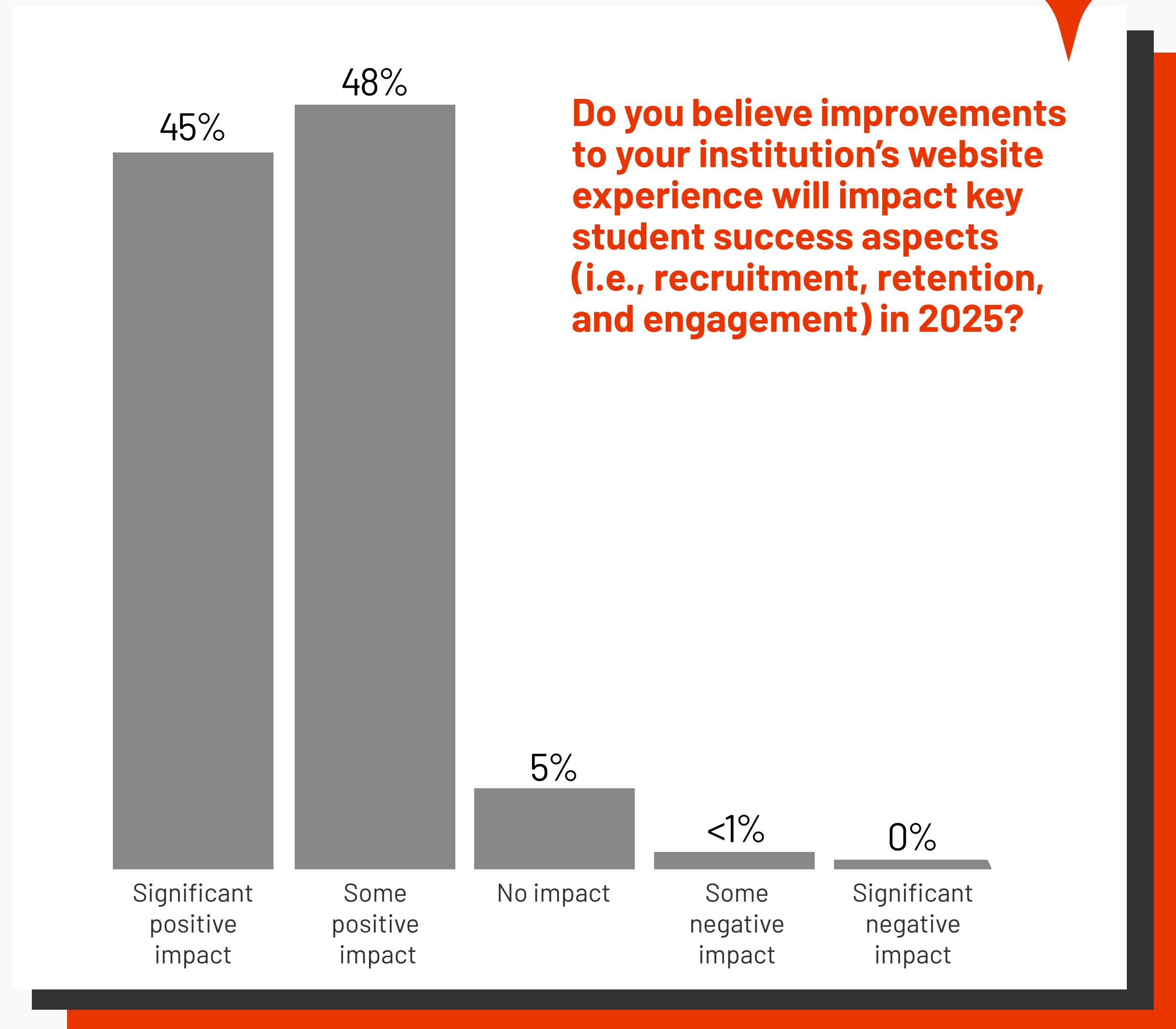
Throughout higher ed, enrollment numbers have remained stagnant. The shift in public ethos around the value of a bachelor's degree coupled with an enrollment cliff has put academe in a precarious position. Colleges face an uphill battle, navigating pathways for attracting prospective students while dealing with budget shortfalls. [Changes to the College Board's Student Search Service](#), a primary lead source for student recruitment, will make it even tougher for those working in higher-ed admissions and marketing teams to keep up with enrollment objectives as less student names become available for recruitment outreach.

Aside from serving as an entry point for prospective students, an institution's website also serves as the hub for accessing academic resources and student services, playing an essential role in the everyday lives of current college students. Immediate access to the correct and most current information online on services like on-campus tutoring, academic advising, mental-health counseling, and career development are essential to their college success.

Yet, higher-education professionals surveyed lack confidence in their institution's overall website experience, with only 19 percent saying that their websites deliver a great experience "very well."

At the same time, they understand the importance of enhancing that website experience, with 45 percent saying website improvements could have a significant positive impact on student recruitment, retention, and other aspects of student success.

Aside from serving as an entry point for prospective students, an institution's website also serves as the hub for accessing academic resources and student services, playing an essential role in the everyday lives of current college students.



74%

Of respondents said that content updates are made either weekly or ad hoc.

Responded that making new content findable via onsite search adjustments takes one week or more.

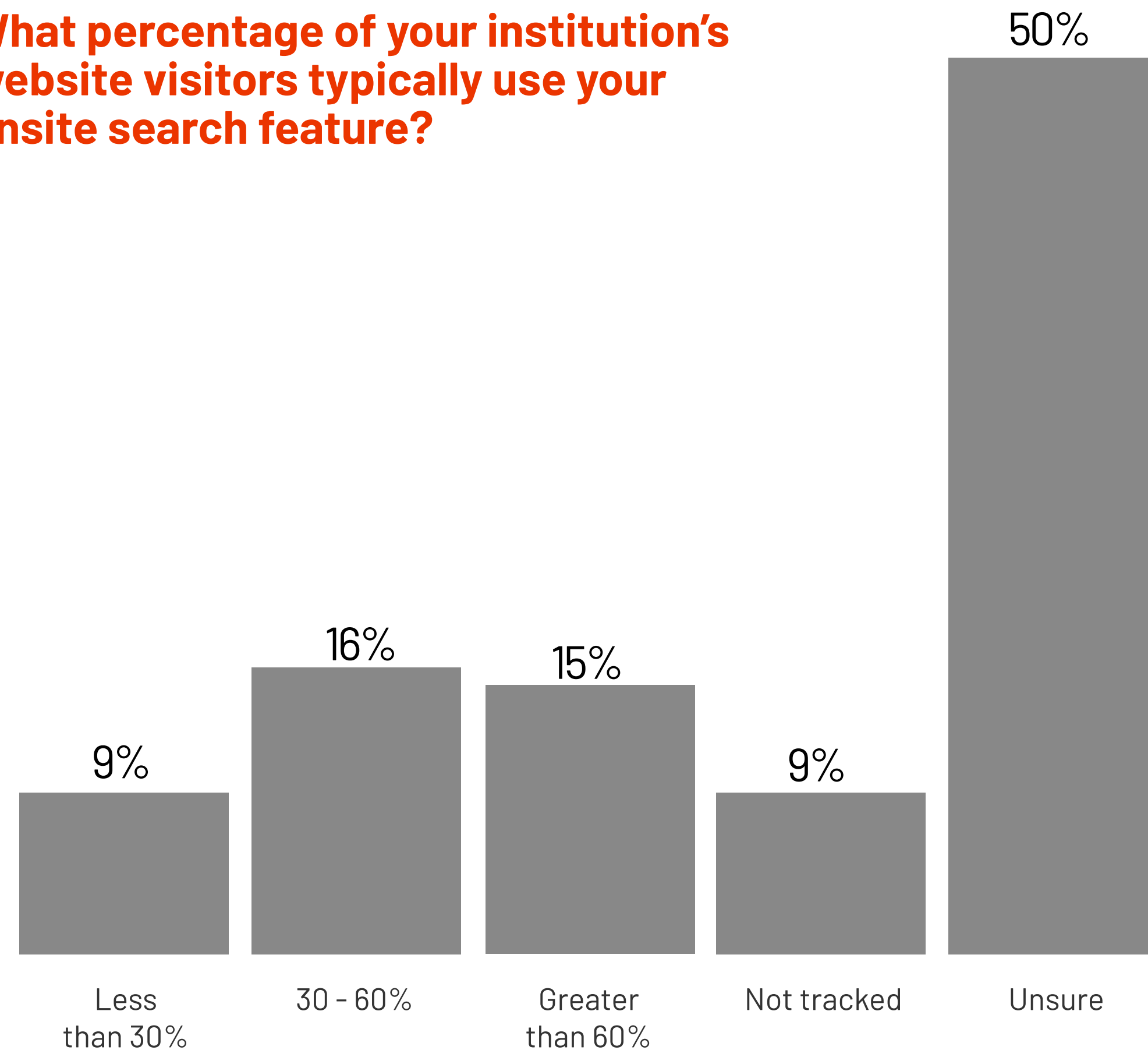
43%

The Chronicle Studio survey found that among higher-ed employees, those working most directly with students (faculty and academic affairs, student services and support, and enrollment and admissions) updated their institution's website content most irregularly, reporting "ad hoc and sporadic content updates." Most, however — especially among faculty and student services — believe that there's an extended delay (longer than one week) between when that essential content is first updated and when it surfaces for students in onsite search.

In part, these kinds of delays can be attributed to the sheer complexity of colleges' digital ecosystems. At many higher-education institutions, the website isn't one website but a collection of websites – an assembly of web pages and subdomains that can be broken down into different categories and functions. And, within an institution, each website is run by a different school, department, office, division, or some other staff group. This amounts to terabytes of data that colleges must manage.

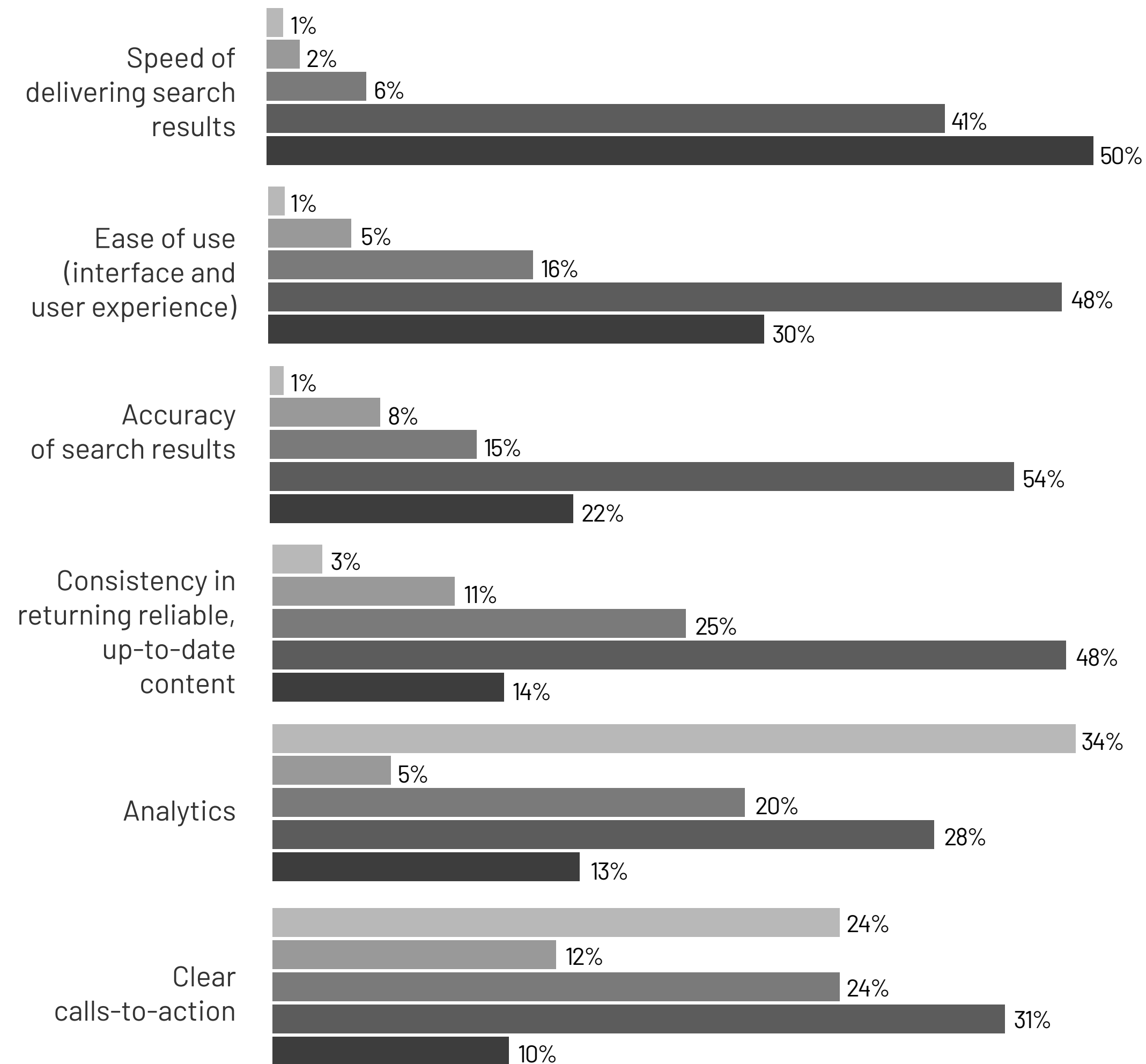
The dream of many higher-education web developers used to be to weld together the jumble of smaller sites in an effort to simplify their own work and the user experience. But the difficulty of that goal is now acknowledged. "It's not going to happen," says one savvy strategist in the field. But onsite search can be a unifying force for websites, digital experts say, cutting through the information tangle.

What percentage of your institution's website visitors typically use your onsite search feature?



How would you evaluate the effectiveness of your website's onsite search engine in the following areas?

■ Unsure ■ Very Ineffective ■ Somewhat Ineffective ■ Somewhat Effective ■ Very Effective



Currently, there's a big opportunity at colleges to use site search and make it an enticing digital front door to their websites. That means improving site-search functionality and using site-visitor search analytics to inform website improvements that can close the gaps in students' content-discovery behaviors. Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed are either unsure what proportion of their institution's website visitors use site search or acknowledge they don't track that number. This may be due to reliance on free, basic search-engine tools that provide a bare minimum of analytics and ability to make onsite search adjustments.

Only 30 percent of those surveyed regard their institution's site search as very effective in ease of use, while an even lower 14 percent regarded their site search as being very effective in consistently pointing to reliable, up-to-date content.

Models to Emulate



“I can’t stress how important we think site search is for our users, and our users would echo.”

Randall Williams
Division Manager, Web-Based Services
Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County

The struggles that many higher-education web developers have with site search stand in contrast to how a handful of leading academic institutions and those in other sectors, including government, have made high-quality site search a focus of website improvements. Those who have had success in such improvements often have a single person or team in charge of a website’s user experience, experts say.

Take the city government of Nashville. Randall Williams, a division manager for the city, oversees Nashville.gov, where city residents come looking for services. The city’s sprawling website grows every day and holds more than 20,000 pages of content and more than 10,000 documents, such as PDFs, PowerPoint presentations, and spreadsheets, Williams says.

City residents often have no idea which of the city’s 60 departments provide what service. About 30 to 40

percent of website users jump to the search box. “I can’t stress how important that we think site search is for our users, and our users would echo that,” says Williams.

The site’s search engine uses machine learning to track what users click on compared to what terms initiated the search. Results that receive a higher frequency of clicks get moved up by the site search engine. This enables subsequent site visitors to arrive at the most relevant results with ease. To make search more comprehensive, Williams and his team have even indexed five other metropolitan-area websites outside of Nashville.gov, so users who might be searching for information not on Nashville.gov would get referred to the appropriate external sites. For example, a site visitor searching for information on property tax exemptions might surface results that will take them to padctn.org, the website for the property assessor’s office for the Nashville metro region.


Williams's team can monitor when search users reach "no results" dead ends. If the site has the relevant content, web experience teams can adjust search to point to that content. The developers can also make seasonal adjustments to search, knowing, for instance, that when elections come around, website users will be asking where they can vote. For these situations, the web teams can push up desired results higher, much as "sponsored results" in global search engines can make some results more prominent.

Such seasonal adjustments and timely responses to new events are also relevant to higher education, says Jeff Dillon, a former college web director and now the higher ed digital strategist at SearchStax. "Search is a great place to find out what the pulse of your institution is right now," says Dillon. "What are people searching for?"

At Texas Christian University, in Fort Worth, one of the difficulties that the director of website

management, Corey Reed, faces is that TCU, like many colleges, is a content-production machine. In an effort to make it easier for site users to better navigate through all that content, Reed has also undergone an effort to improve the university's site search.

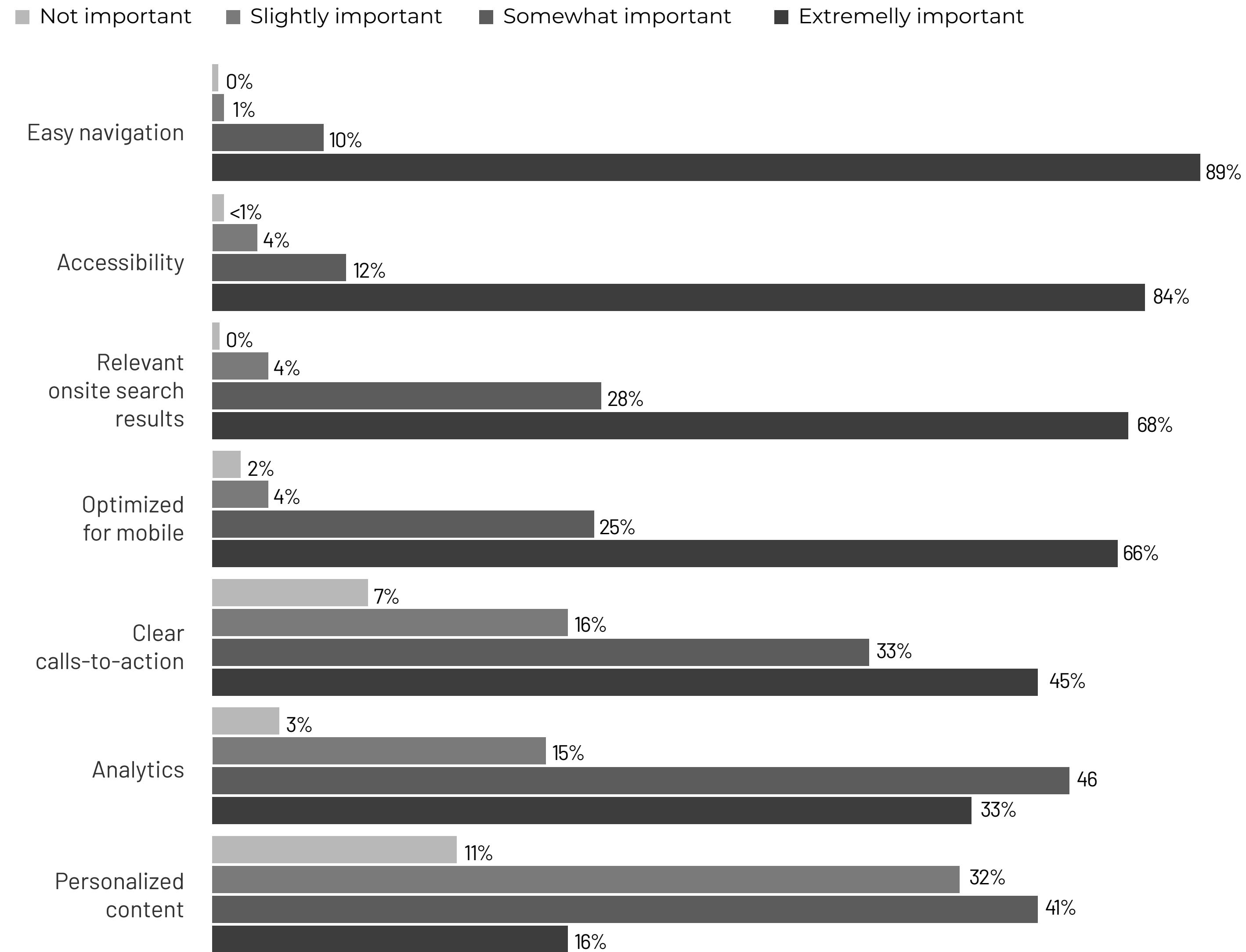
"The university has been publishing content for decades," says Reed. "Often we answer the same question dozens of times, and some of those answers aren't as up to date as others." Deadlines for student applications and tuition change every year, for instance, and while official web pages can be quickly adjusted, blog posts and other sources could mention older, incorrect deadlines or tuition numbers. He and his team are now using their newfound ability to closely monitor site visitor search behavior and adjust TCU's site search to point users to the most authoritative, up-to-date answers to their questions.



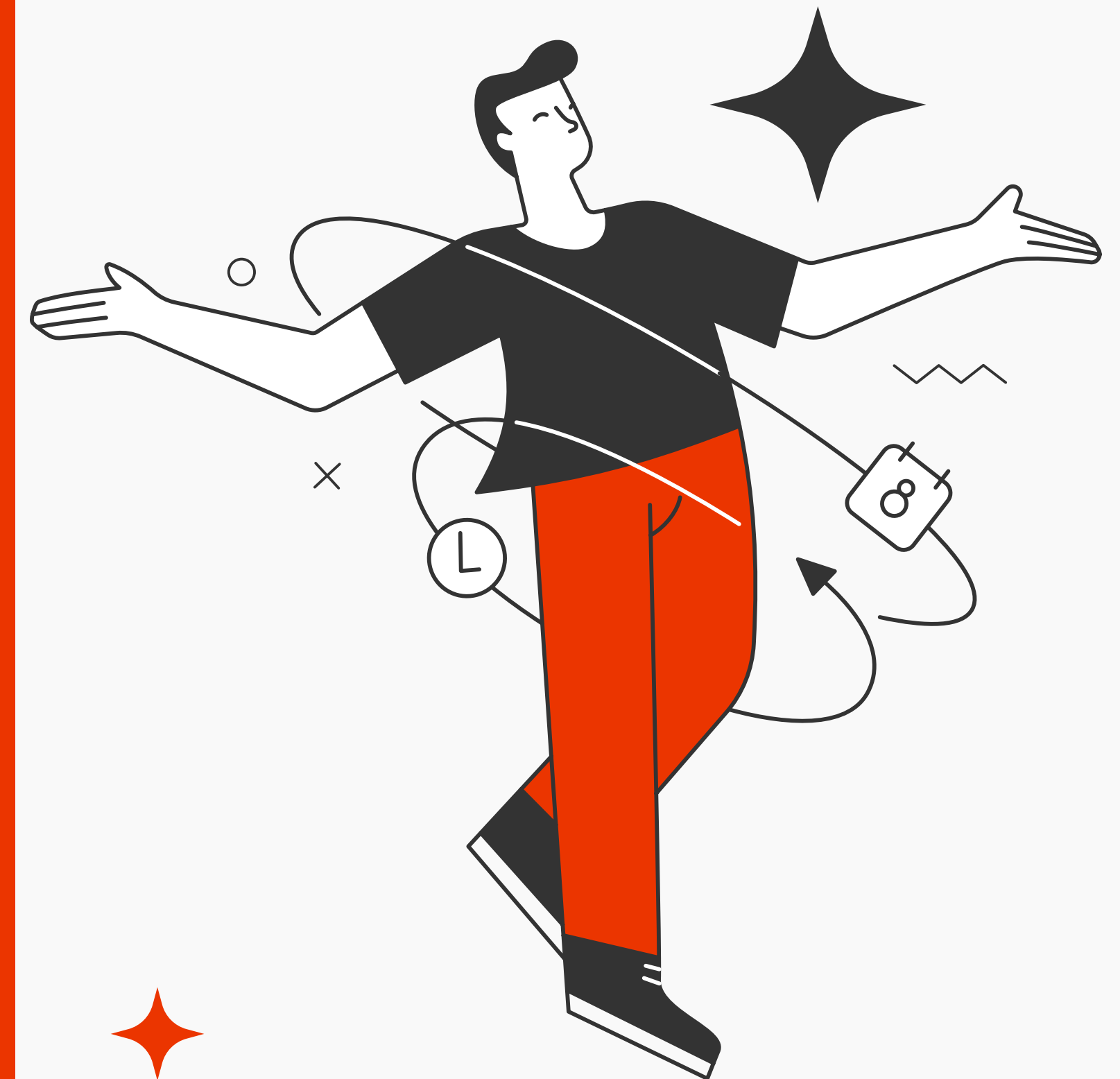
"Search is a great place to find out what the pulse of your institution is right now, what are people searching for?"

Jeff Dillon
Digital Strategist, Higher Education SearchStax

How important are the following features for your institution's website experience?



Reed's emphasis on site search reflects the priorities of higher-education professionals that the Chronicle Studio survey found. Respondents ranked relevant onsite search results as highly desirable, putting it in the top three features alongside easy navigation and accessibility in delivering a positive website experience – with 68 percent of respondents considering relevant results “extremely important.”



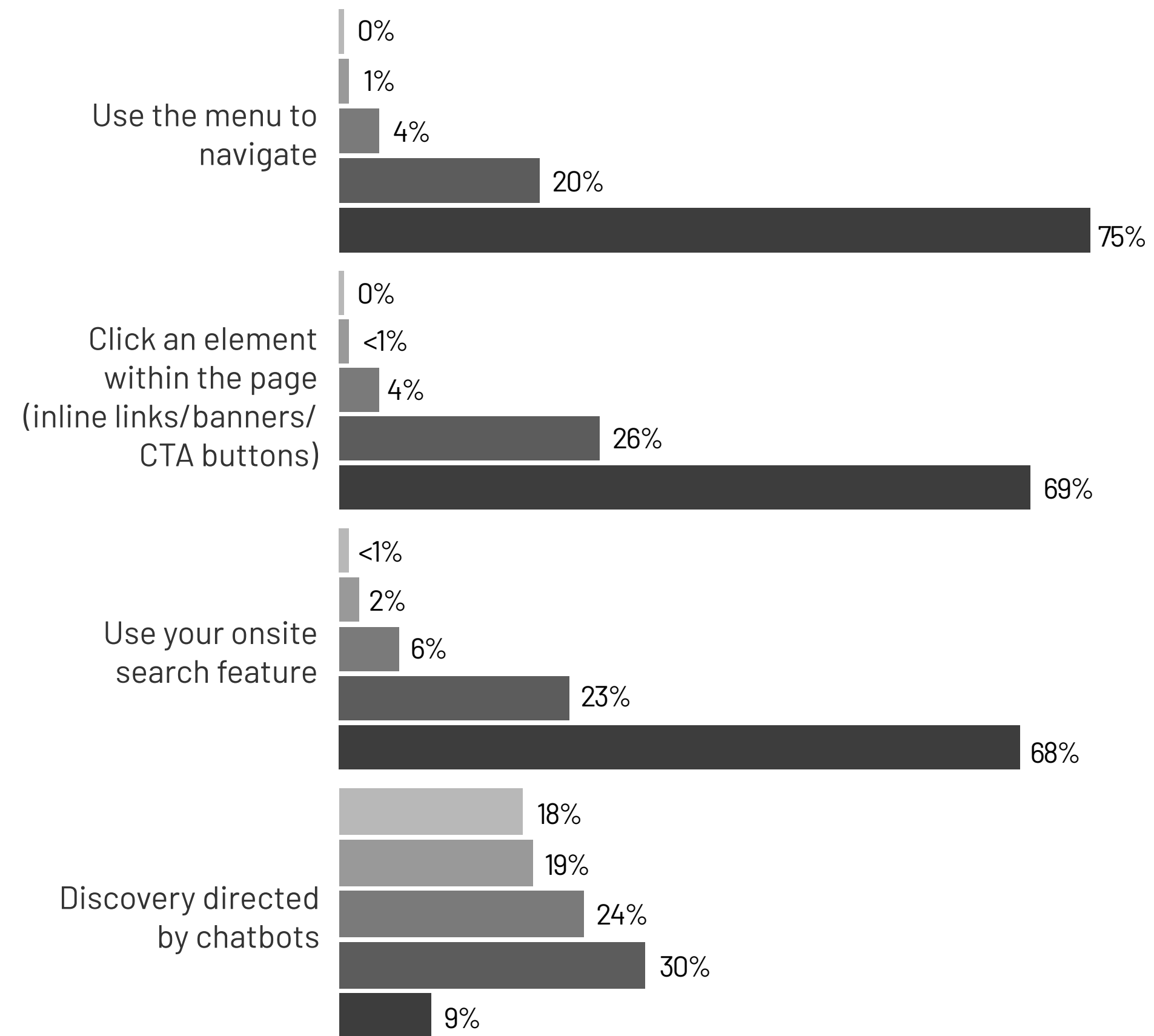


Likewise, onsite search was one of a trio of methods for discovering content that survey respondents ranked as “somewhat important” or “extremely important” to users, at a 90 percent or above level. Along with onsite search, respondents flagged menus and clicking on page elements (such as banners or call-to-action buttons) as being at a high level of importance.

The Chronicle Studio asked those surveyed what their institution’s website users found frustrating about site search. Half believed their website users might get search results that aren’t relevant. Forty-nine percent expected users to find outdated content. Thirty-one percent worried that users might find inconsistent content that contradicts itself. On important content, such as costs or course requirements for a major, students can wind up feeling misled, alienated or even drop out if they are pointed to inaccurate content.

How important to you is each method for discovering content once a visitor lands on your institution’s website?

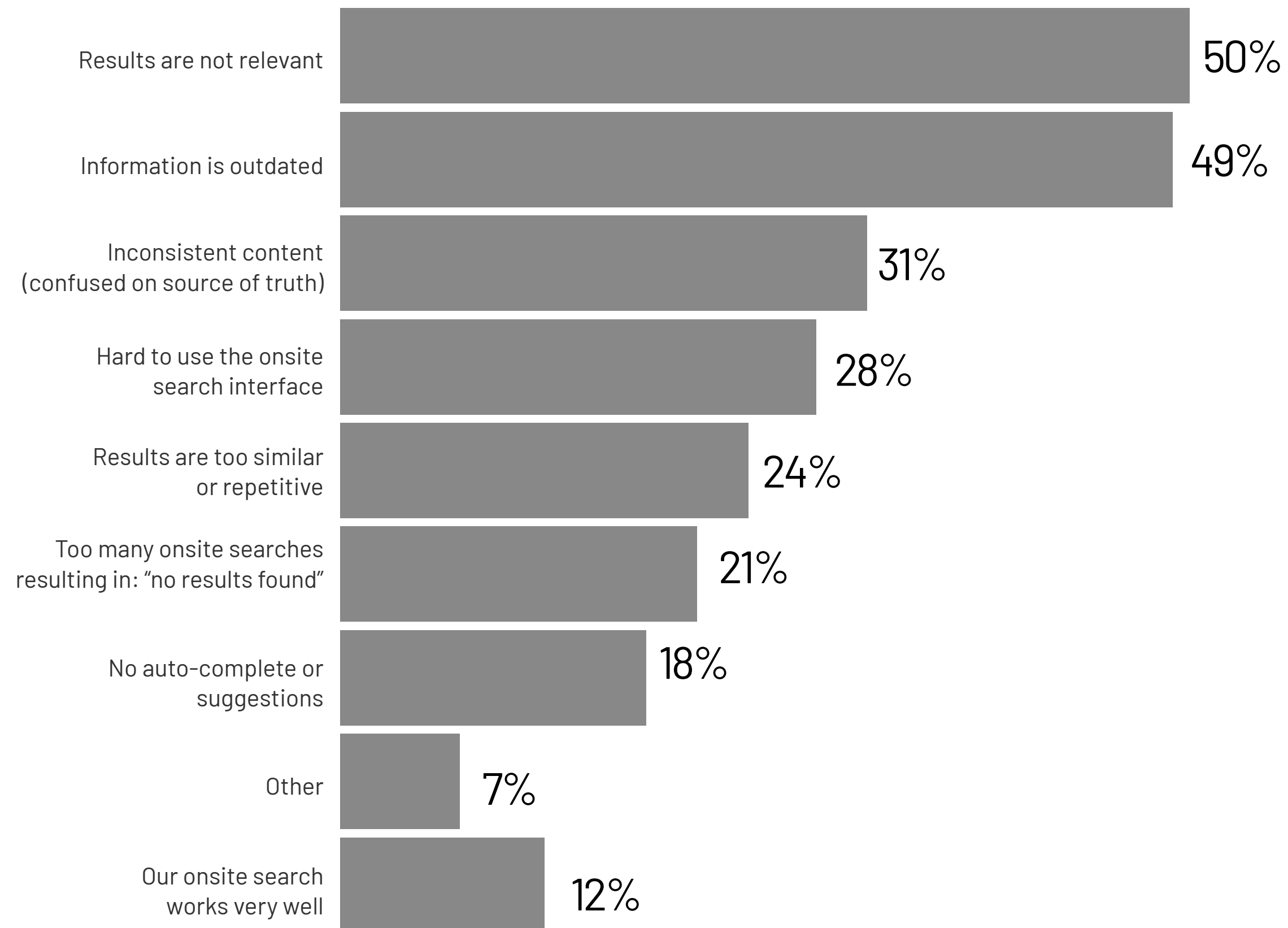
■ Unsure/not tracked ■ Not important ■ Slightly important ■ Somewhat important ■ Extremely important





What do you believe are the most common frustrations your institution's website visitors experience when using onsite search?

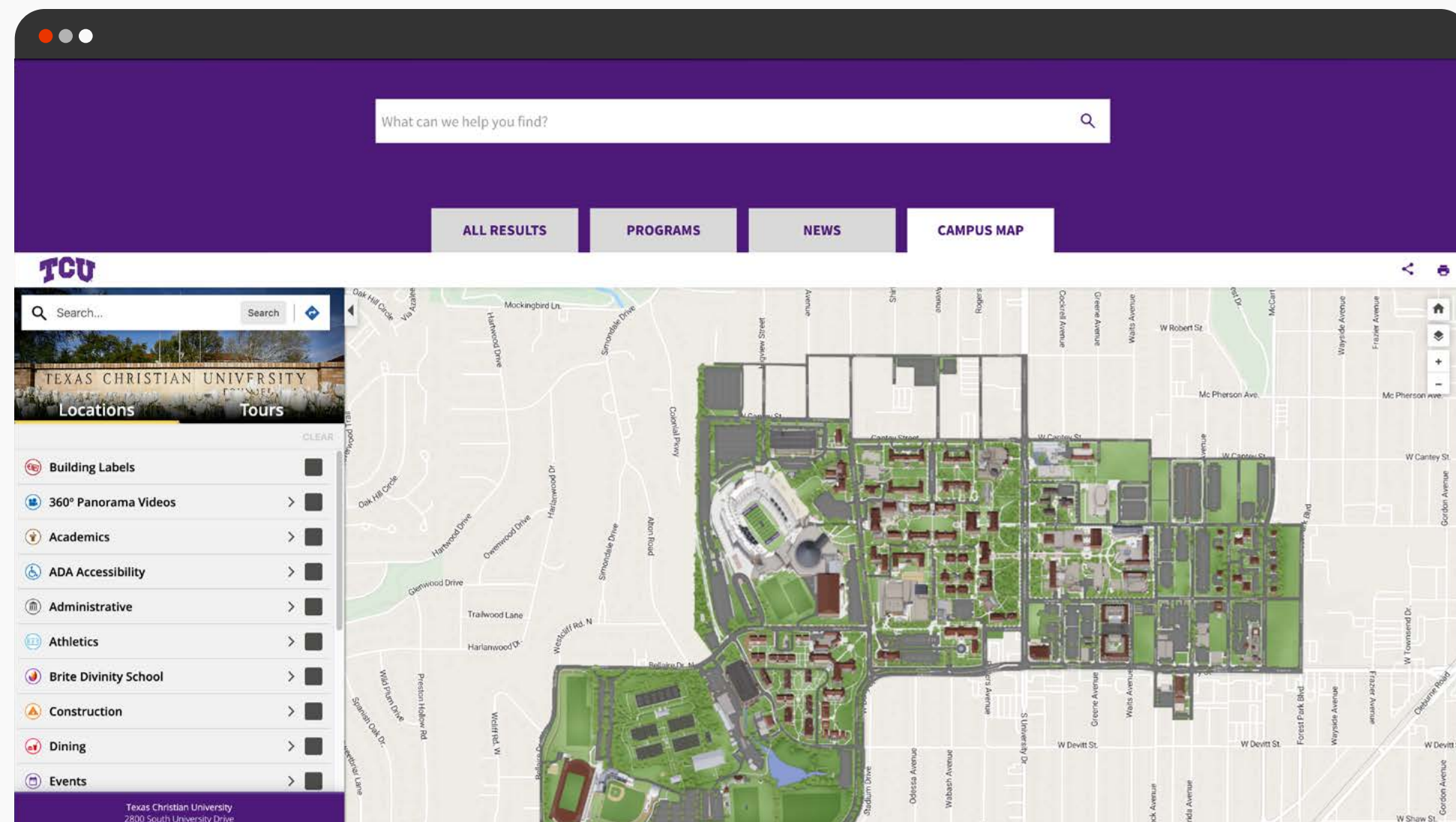
(Select all that apply)



Onsite search ranks among the **TOP 3 MOST IMPORTANT FEATURES** for higher-ed website experiences.

50%

Of respondents recognize that their search frustrates users with irrelevant or outdated results.



On TCU's website, a campus map is encoded into the search experience.

“But don't you want to make sure students can find what they need and not leave that up to an unmanaged algorithm?”

Jeff Dillon



At TCU, the website improvements Reed and his colleagues seek are based not just on search analytics but also on the desire to help students find content they need for their personal wellbeing. Reed's team has focused on student safety, physical health, and mental health and sought to help students looking for counseling and other support services. An interactive campus map is encoded into the search experience so students can find it easily, and the map prominently displays the locations of support offices.

At SearchStax, Dillon calls that approach “search for good” and says improving site search is not just about the quest for high click rates, but about institutions reflecting their values. “If someone is searching to report abuse or an assault, it's probably not going to be at the top of your search results,” he says.

TCU's Reed says that at a recent meeting with representatives of an academic department, he could share search analytics to show them that users coming from outside the university are looking for details about majors, minors, and other facts about areas of study. It's natural for departments to think of the website as an intranet for current students, he says, but search analytics can be used to revise department website menus to also help prospective students.

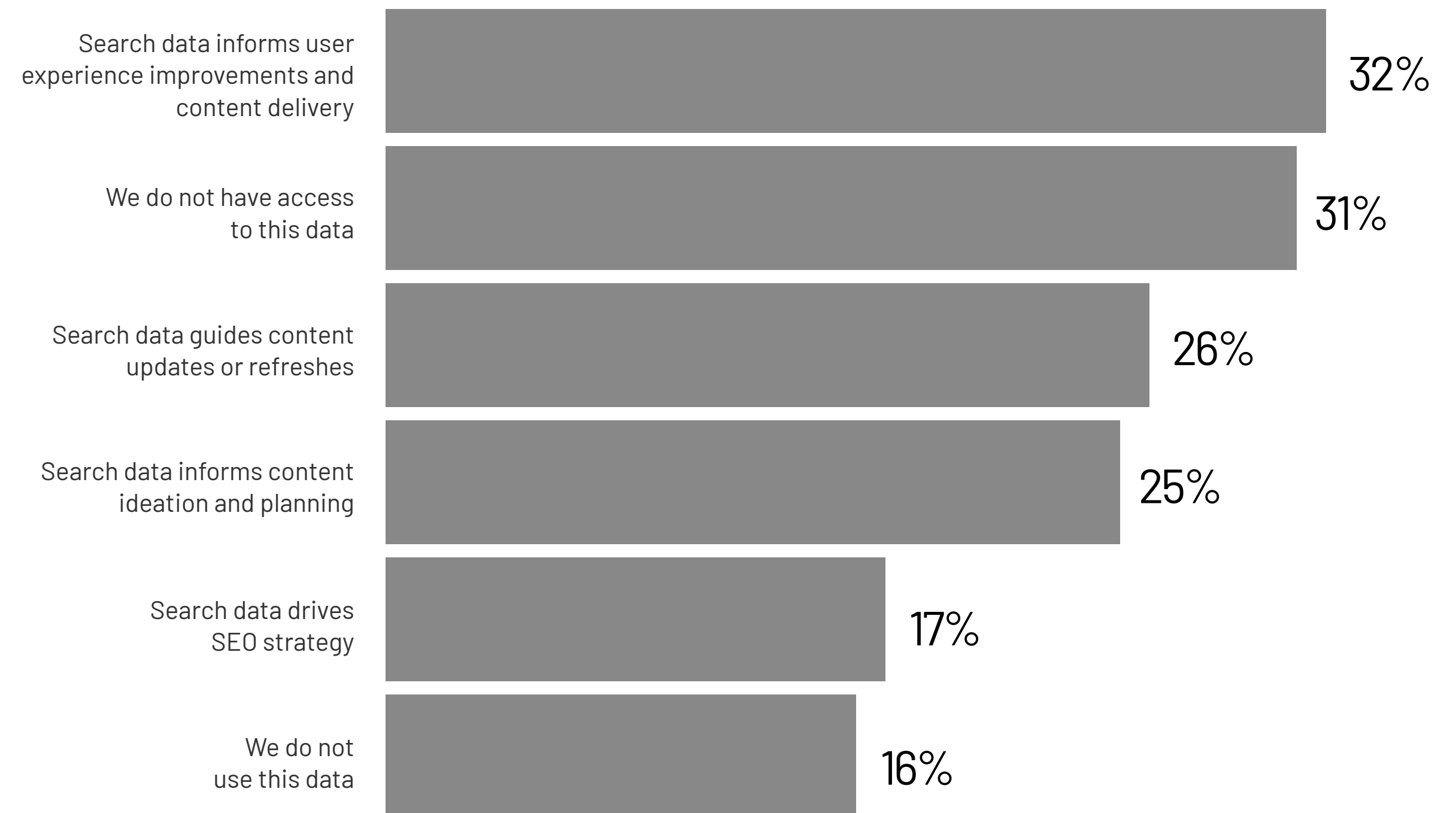
Prospective graduate students in particular, he believes, may want to study under a certain faculty member. He thinks a university-wide faculty directory, instead of college-by-college directories, would be a good addition to the TCU website, to make it easier for prospective students – and many other people – to find faculty members.

Gaps Between Access, Opportunity, and Action



Analytics-informed marketing decisions have become the norm at TCU, but the Chronicle Studio survey made it clear, in a blizzard of responses, that search data is vastly underutilized at many colleges. Forty-seven percent of survey respondents said they either don't use onsite search data or don't have access to it. Less than one-third of respondents currently use onsite search data to inform their content strategies.

How are you using your institution's onsite search data? (Select all that apply)

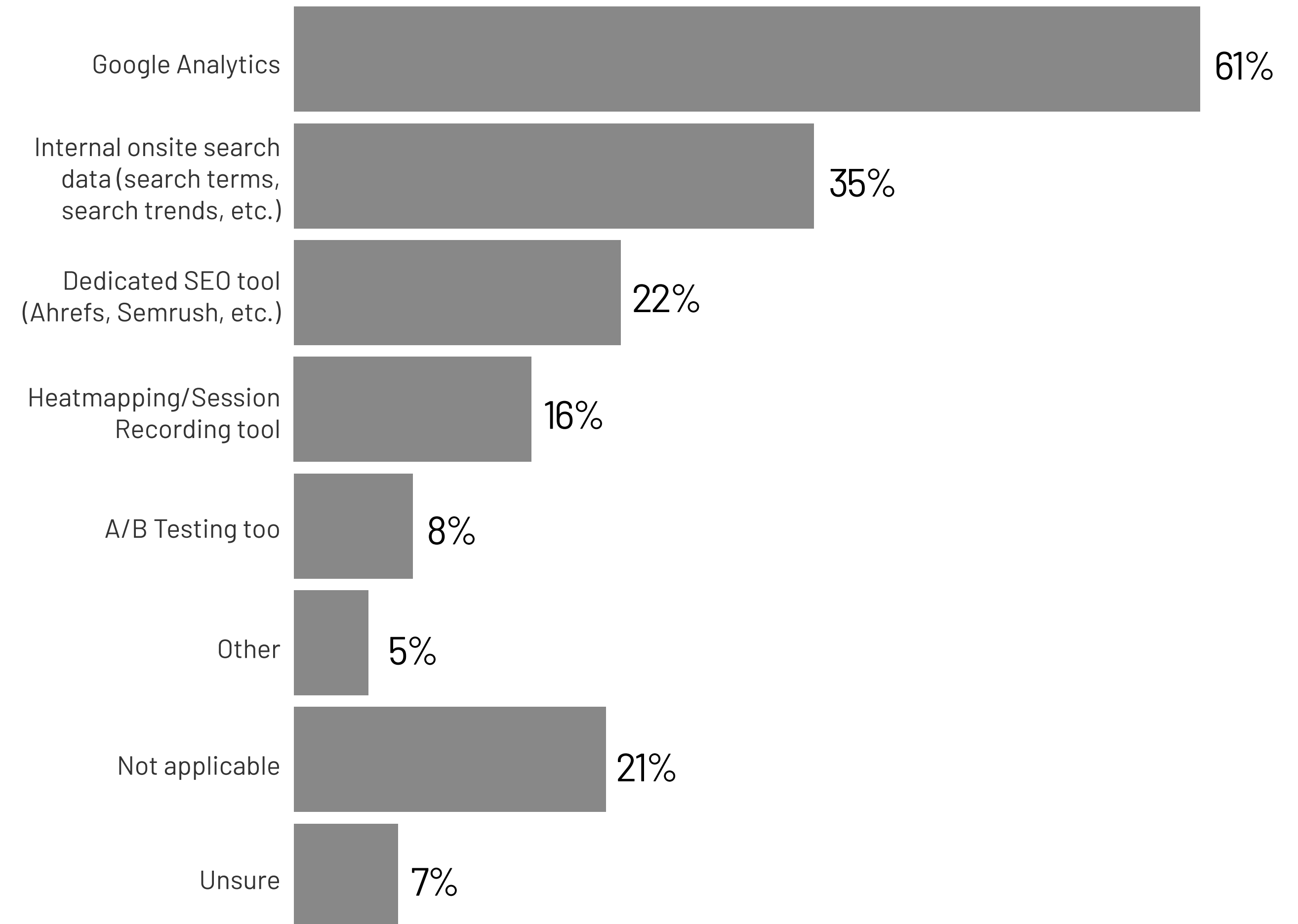


Institutions are almost twice as likely to use an external tool, Google Analytics, than they are to use internal search data to inform their website content strategy.



What data solutions do you use to inform your institution's website content strategy?

(Select all that apply)

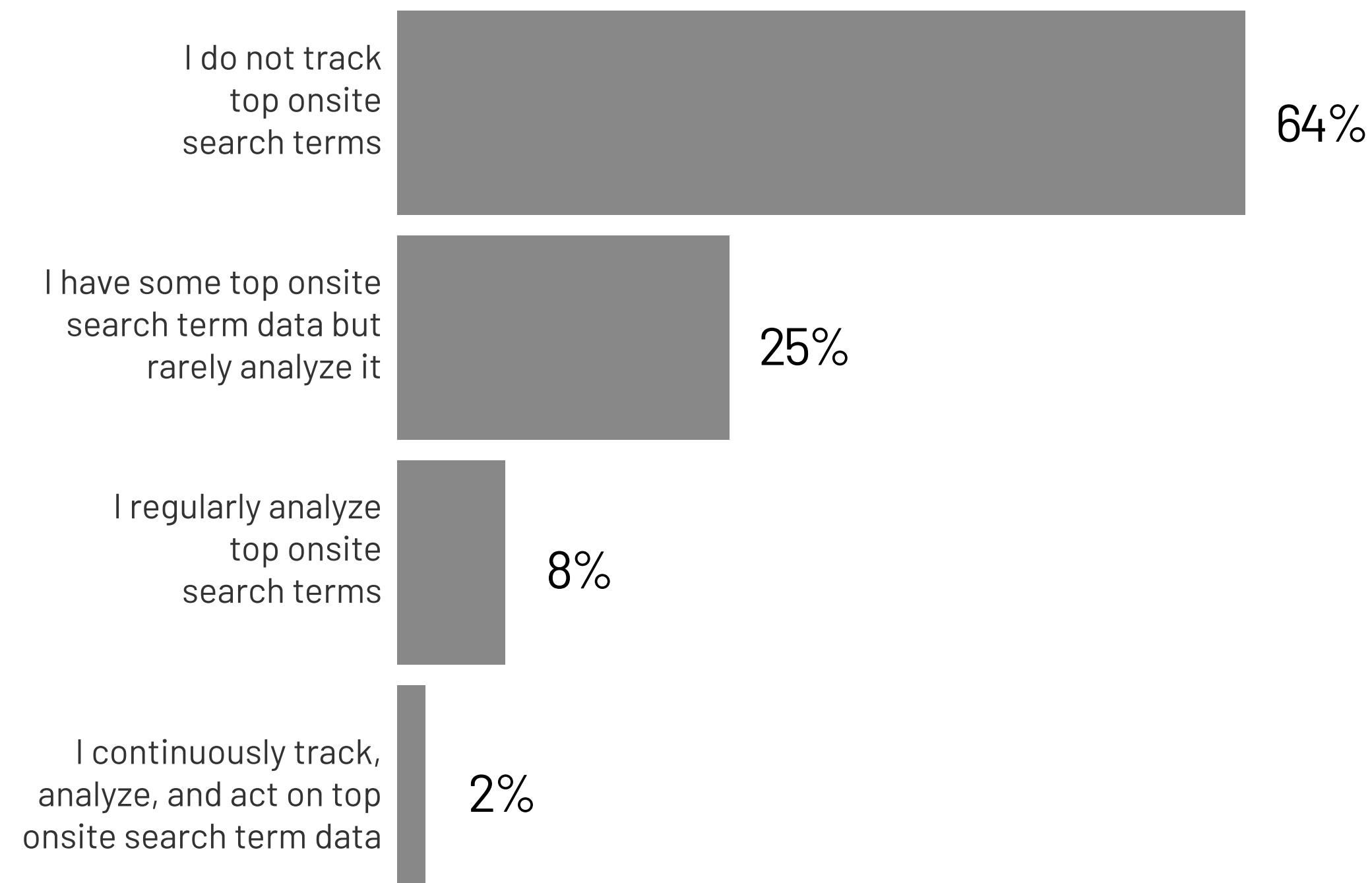


Sixty-four percent of survey respondents said they don't track top onsite search terms, while 72 percent said they don't track "no results" search terms. This leaves them missing out on opportunities to create

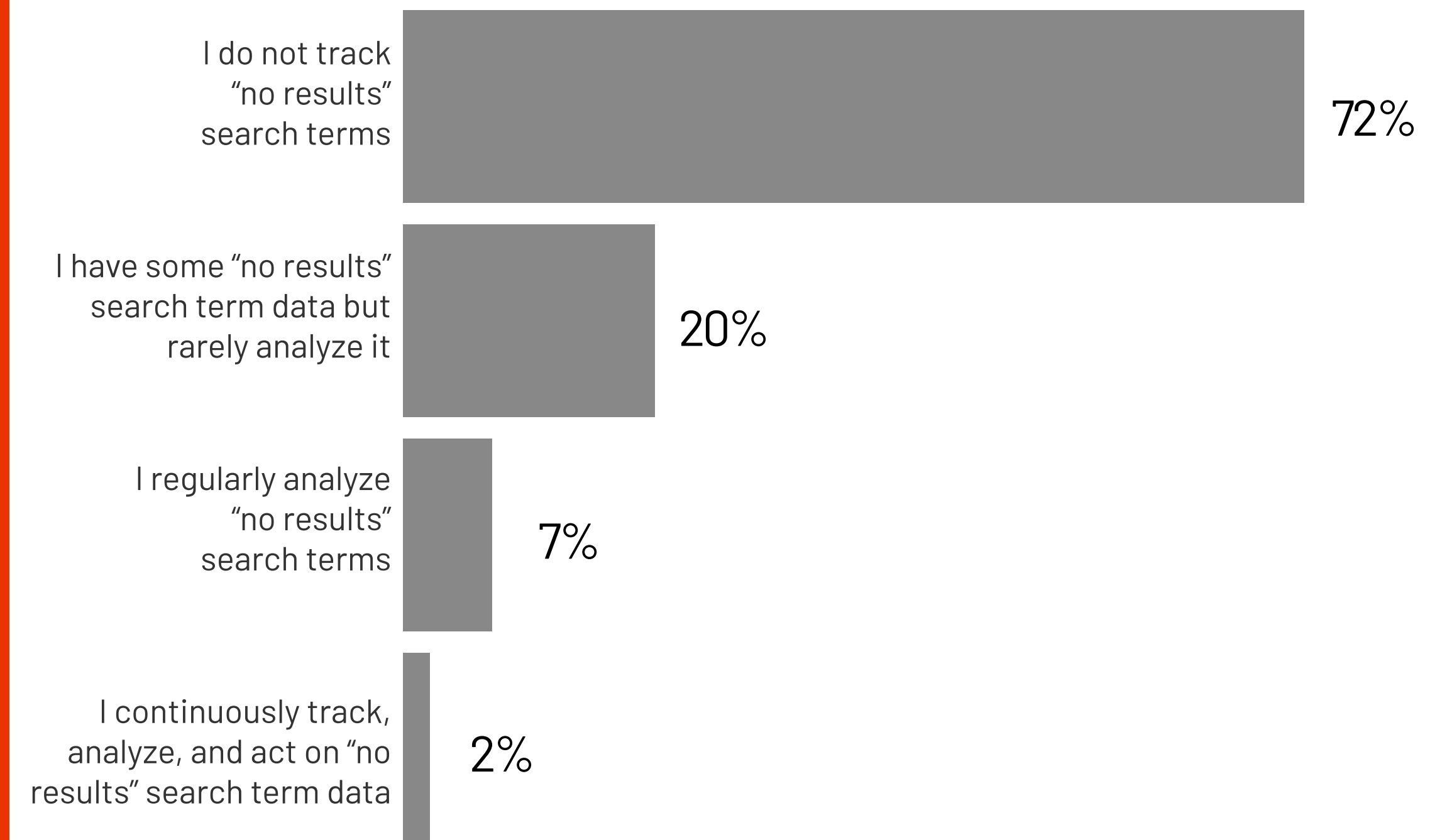
content that adds further value for site visitors and to boost the most relevant results, while also being unequipped to add content or adjust search terms to fill content gaps.

64% of institutions don't know what students are searching for. 72% don't know what leads to a dead end. This denotes a massive gap in content strategy.

Which best describes your understanding of top onsite search terms?



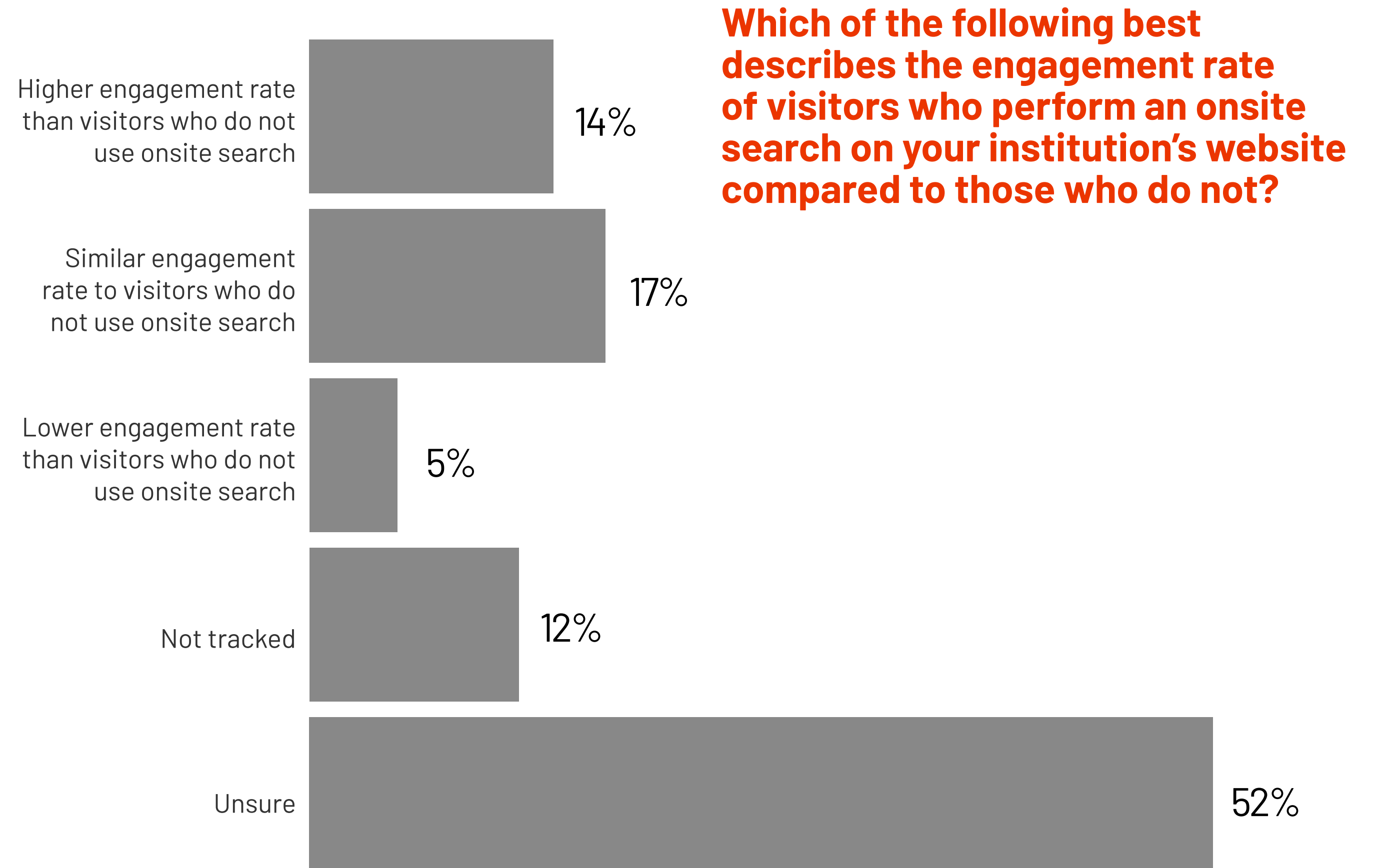
Which best describes your understanding of onsite search terms that return no results?



Fifty-two percent were unsure what the engagement is of website users who use onsite search.

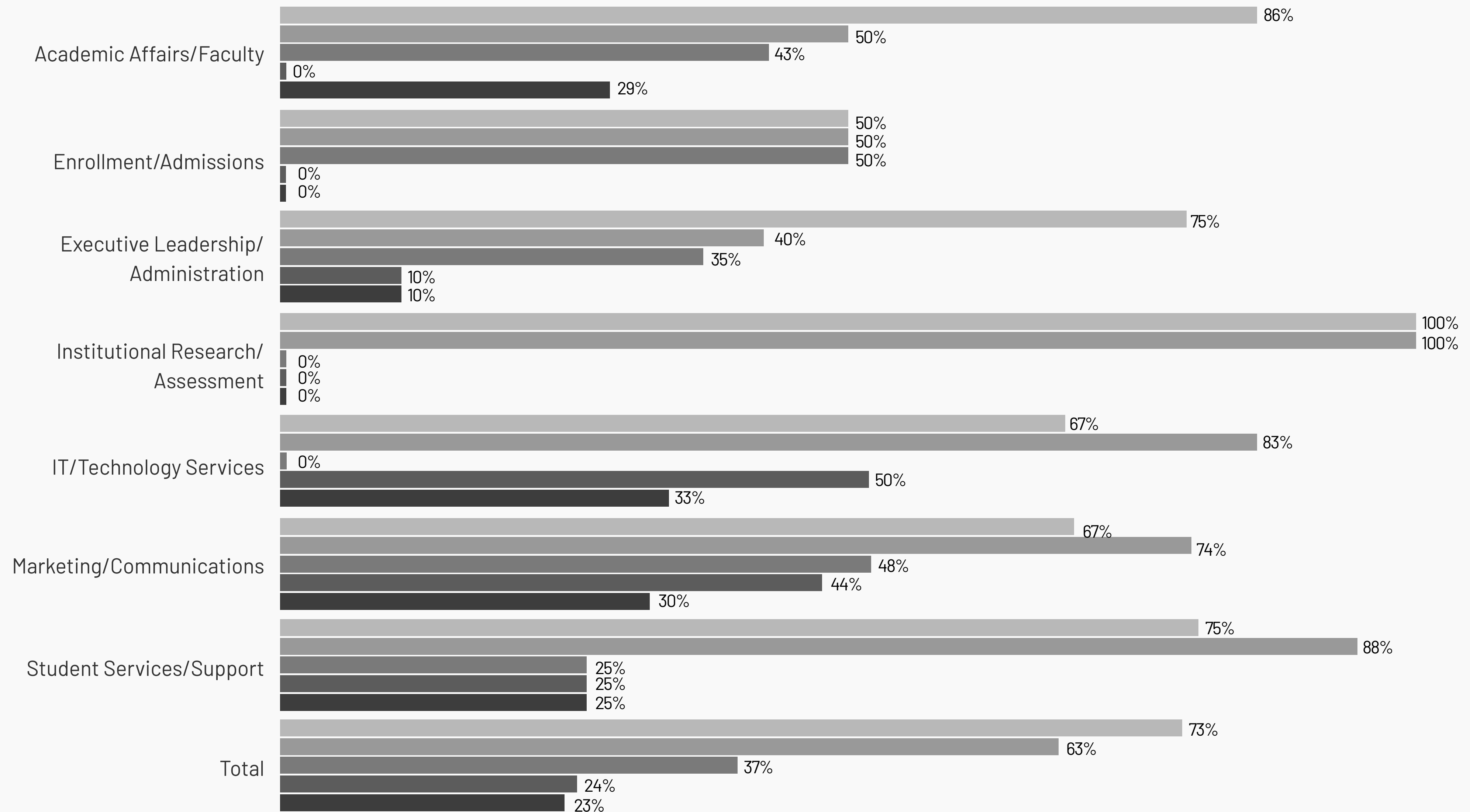
When it came to being able to track “no results” searches, fine-grained analysis of survey results indicated that not having data about dead-end searches was a problem felt acutely by two of the most important offices on campuses: the admissions and enrollment offices working with prospective students and the student-services offices working with current students. Both offices need to provide timely, accurate information to students. The inability to know when students aren’t getting appropriate search results prevents them from doing that.

On the flip side of that equation, those working in student-services offices were most apt to want to know what the most popular search terms were on the college website, but 85 percent of them said they didn’t track those terms, suggesting they do not have the right tools to do so.



What type of internal onsite search data is most valuable to your institution's website content strategy?

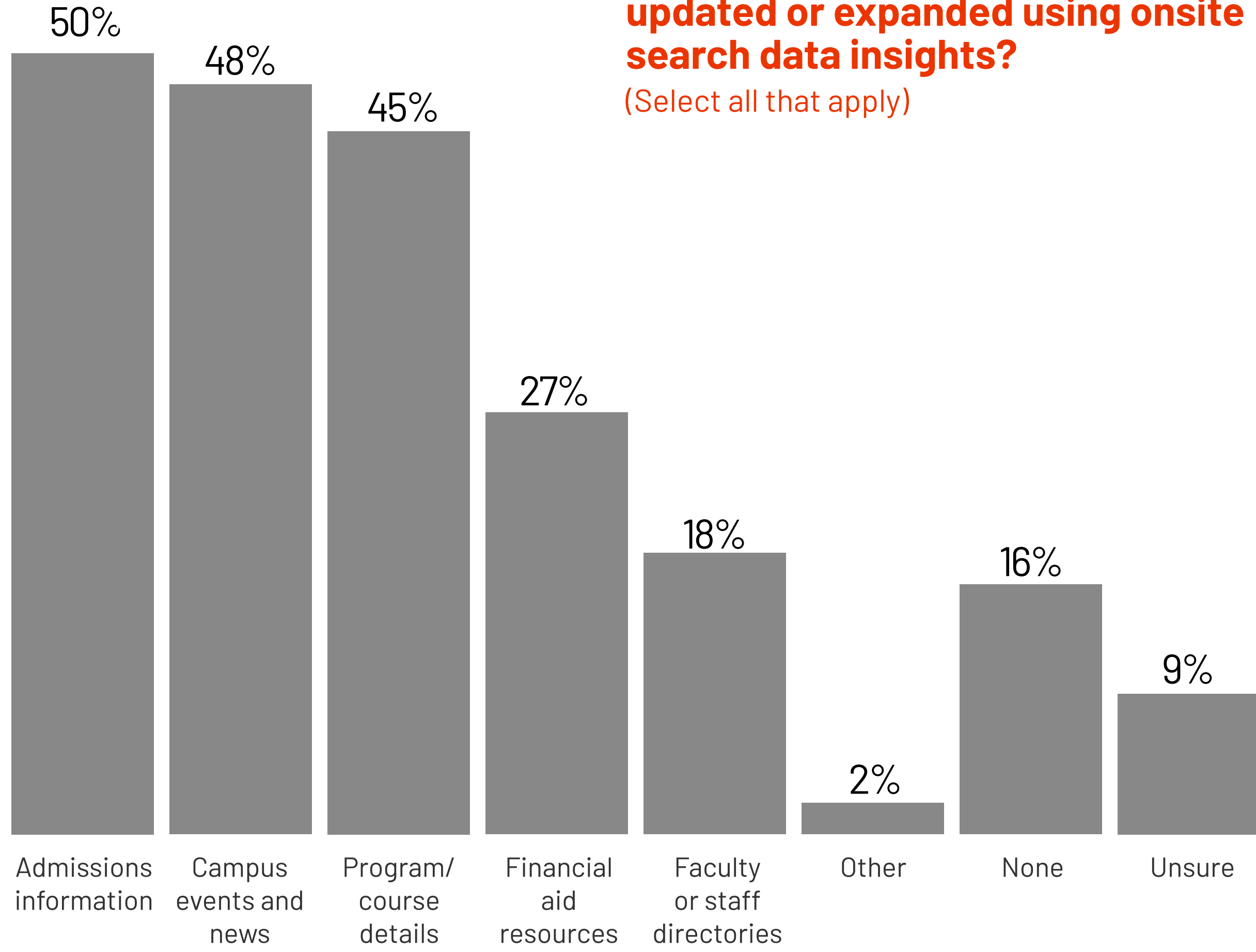
■ Keywords with high click-through rates
■ Popular search terms
■ Search term results position (click position)
■ Seasonal or trending search topics
■ No-results searches





Which areas of your institution's website are most frequently updated or expanded using onsite search data insights?

(Select all that apply)

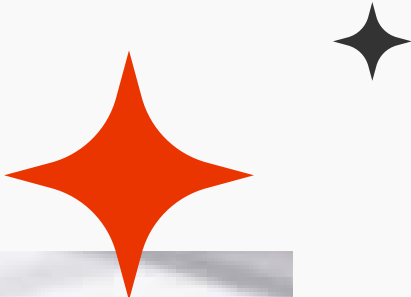


TCU's Reed says that knowing the search results can help him understand students' needs. "I'm not a current undergraduate student or prospective undergraduate student," he says. "Some of these student topics and the seasonality of some of the content needs are not top of mind for me." Examining search queries and results, he says, means he "can prioritize the search results based on what people are looking for in that moment."

Search analysis should, ideally, result in timely content updates that become easily available for site visitors. As noted earlier, though, survey respondents whose roles directly interact with students (faculty and academic affairs, as well as student services) reported bottlenecks between the time content is updated online and how soon that content can be surfaced by users through site search.

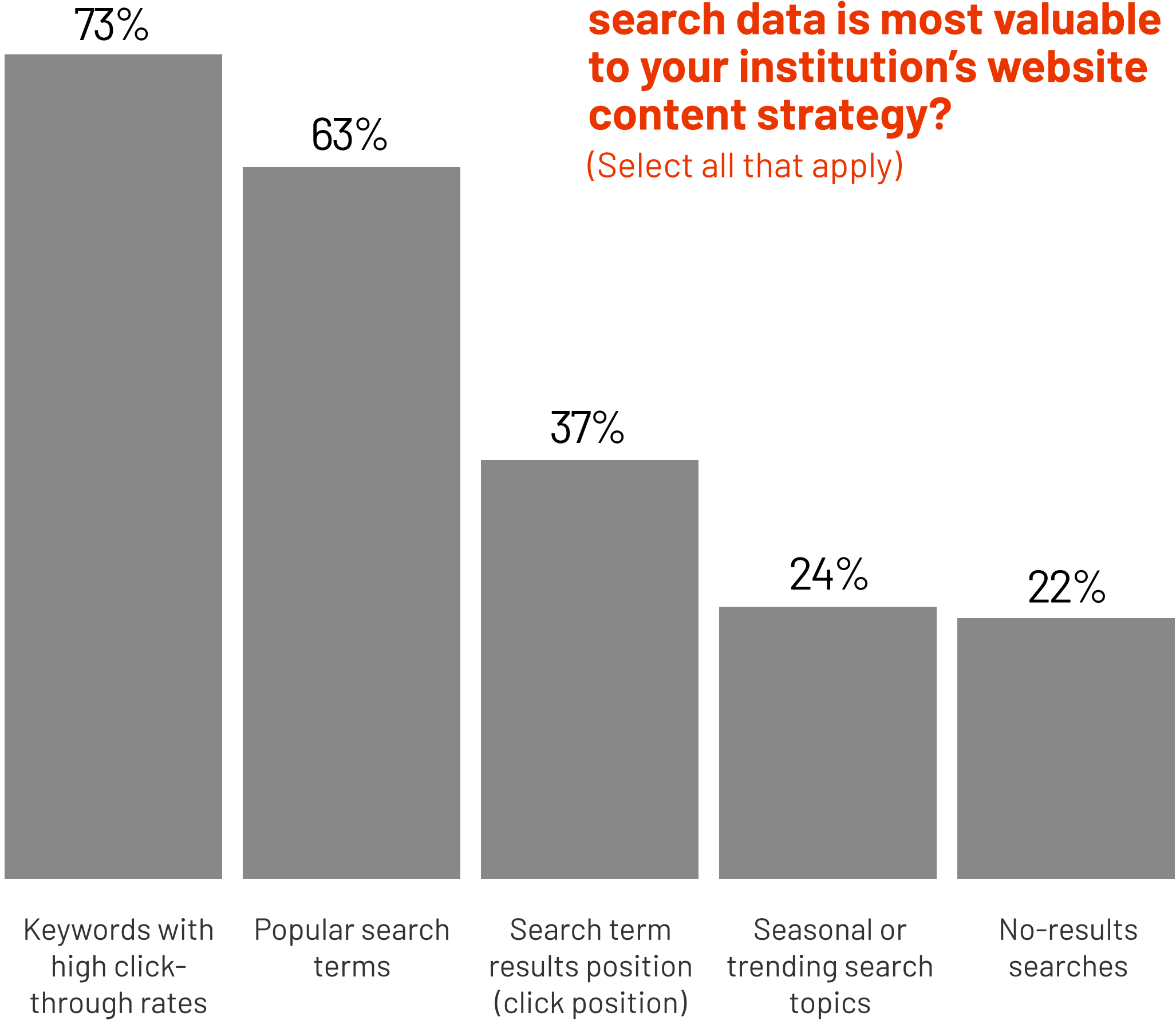
When search data does guide content updates, the survey found that the most common area of websites to get updated was information on admissions, followed by campus events and news, and program or course details.

Those who can use search data to inform content strategy say they find keywords with high click-through rates, popular search terms, and the position of search term results the most valuable in guiding content strategy.



What type of internal onsite search data is most valuable to your institution's website content strategy?

(Select all that apply)

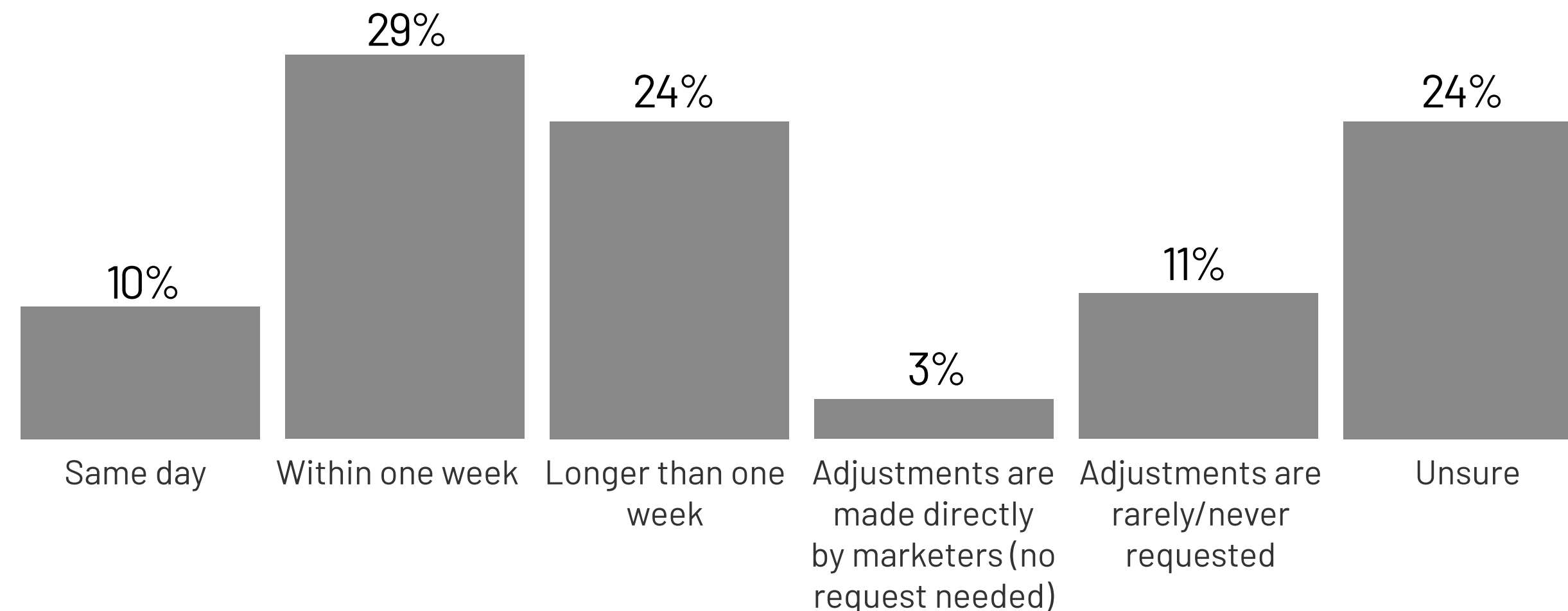


Marketing Agility That Builds on Search

TCU has developed what some experts might call marketing agility. After spotting trends in analytics, Reed or his marketing colleagues can make same-day changes to search.

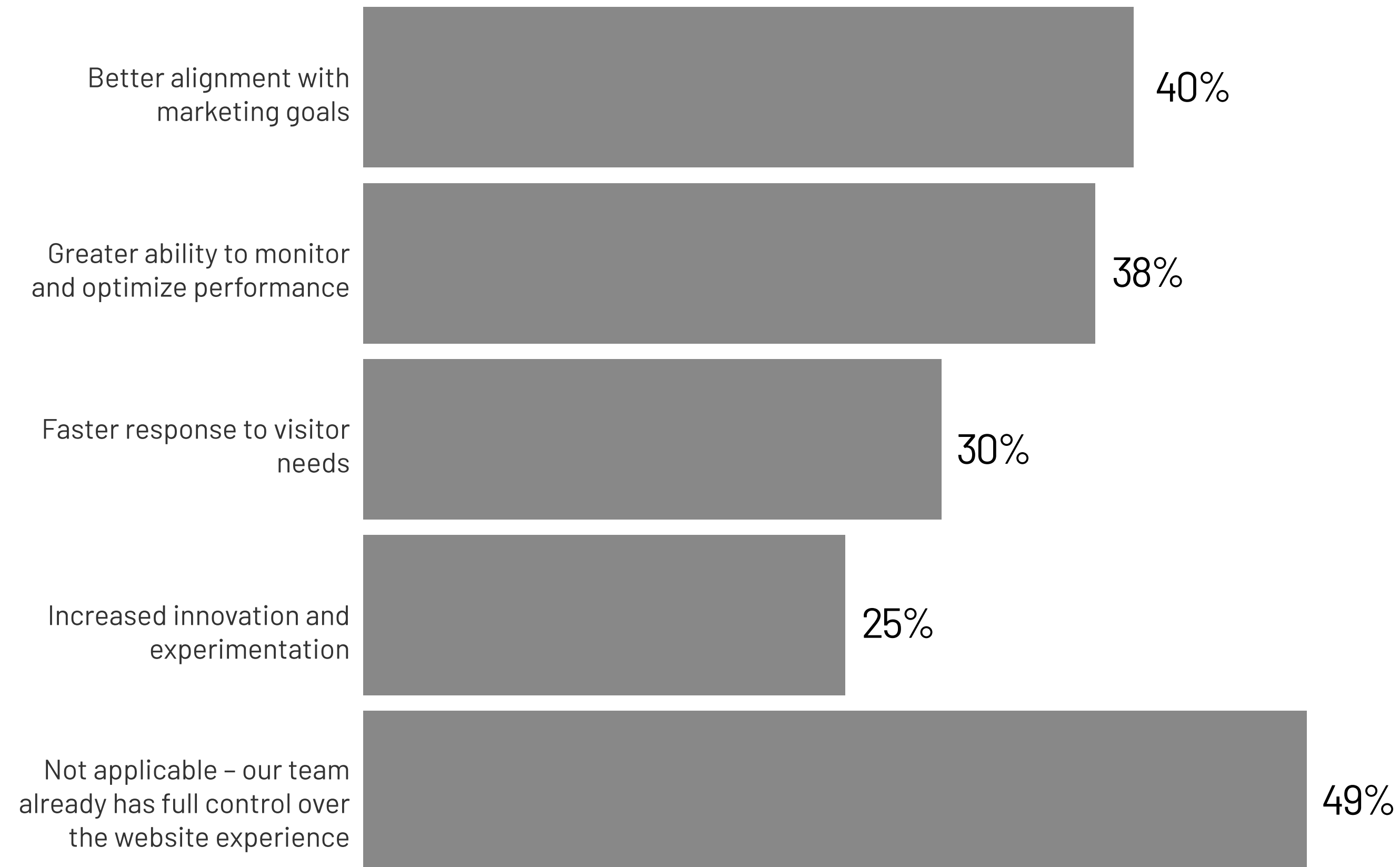
In the Chronicle Studio survey, a quarter of those responding said that adjustments to site search could take longer than a week or more, and only three percent said that adjustments could be made directly by marketers. Only 31 percent of respondents said that at their institution, marketing, not an IT department, had full control over optimizing search.

How quickly are adjustments to your institution's onsite search typically made after a request?



Only 3% of respondents said that marketing had full control over making adjustments to their onsite search, showing a need for more agility.

What would be the biggest benefit to your Marketing team if it had more control over the institution's website experience without needing IT assistance? (Select all that apply)



"Historically, marketing has been held hostage by IT," says SearchStax's Dillon.

Those who filled out the survey saw the advantages of marketing control over search optimization: 30 percent thought it could speed responses to visitor needs and 25 percent thought it would boost innovation and experimentation. [Research done for commercial websites](#) found that those who use site search are more likely to buy products and return to a website. Overall, effective site search can drive customer retention and loyalty, research has found.

At many institutions, the strategic addition of content in response to analysis of search results is missing: 55 percent of those surveyed felt that content updates were “ad hoc and sporadic.”

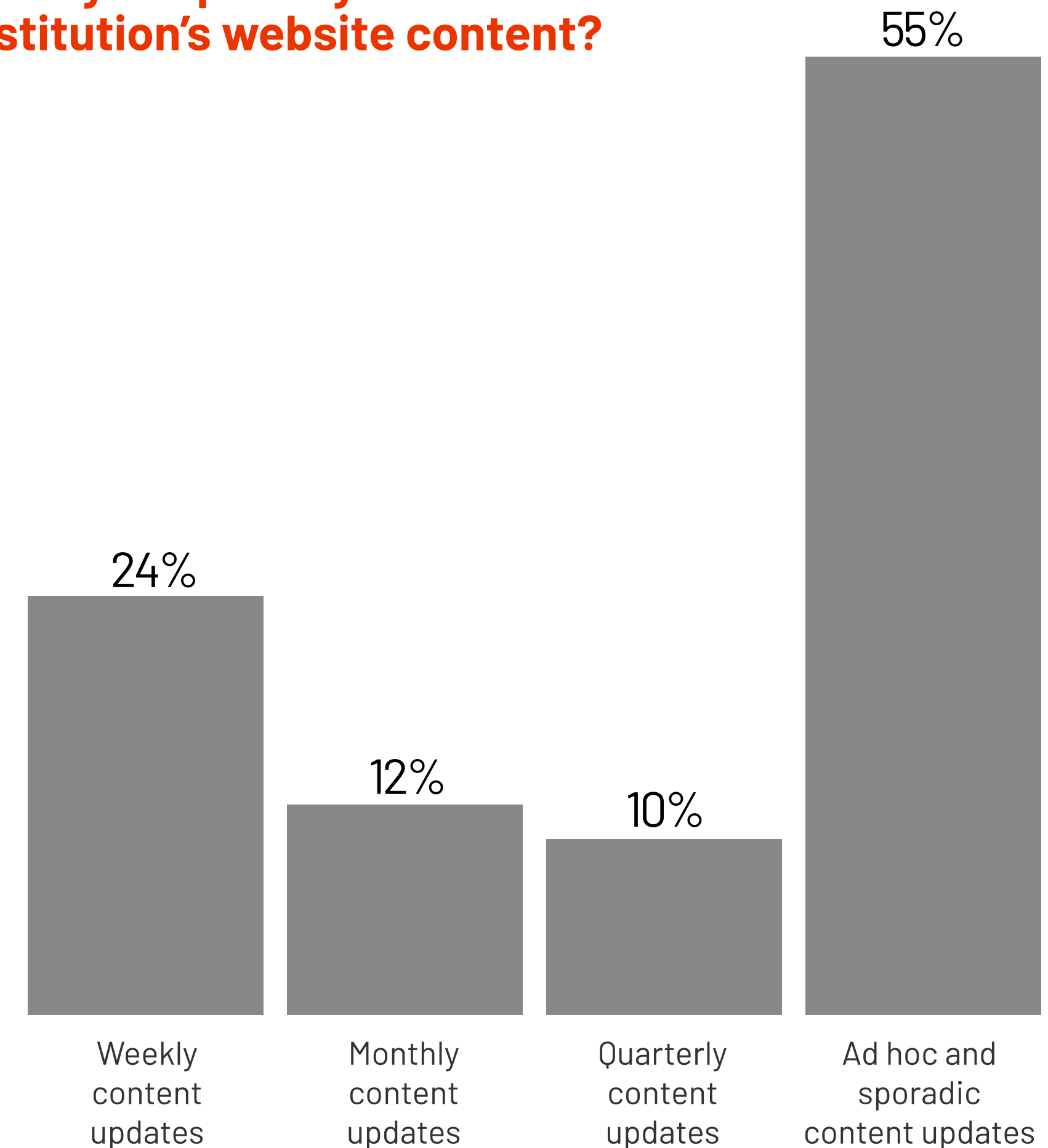
At the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, Brian Clark, senior director of digital experience, has begun the journey toward improving site search and thinks that pitting marketing against IT departments creates unhealthy tensions. “You create bad experiences for users by having these kinds of territorial separations,” he says. He reports to both the chief marketing officer and the chief information officer and says, despite the usual belief that it is a bad idea to have two bosses, the arrangement works well. He takes a relationship-based approach to the workplace, he says, and works with IT and marketing so they function in unison. “It’s really helped us over the years,” he says, “to strategize and execute on those strategies in a way that has been without any dysfunction.”



“You create bad experiences for users by having these kinds of territorial separations.”

Brian Clark
Senior Director, Digital Experience
Rhode Island School of Design

Which best describes how often you update your institution’s website content?



Strategic Use of AI in Site Search

The Chronicle Studio survey revealed that higher-education institutions are in the early stages of applying artificial intelligence to onsite search, but have a long-term interest in it.



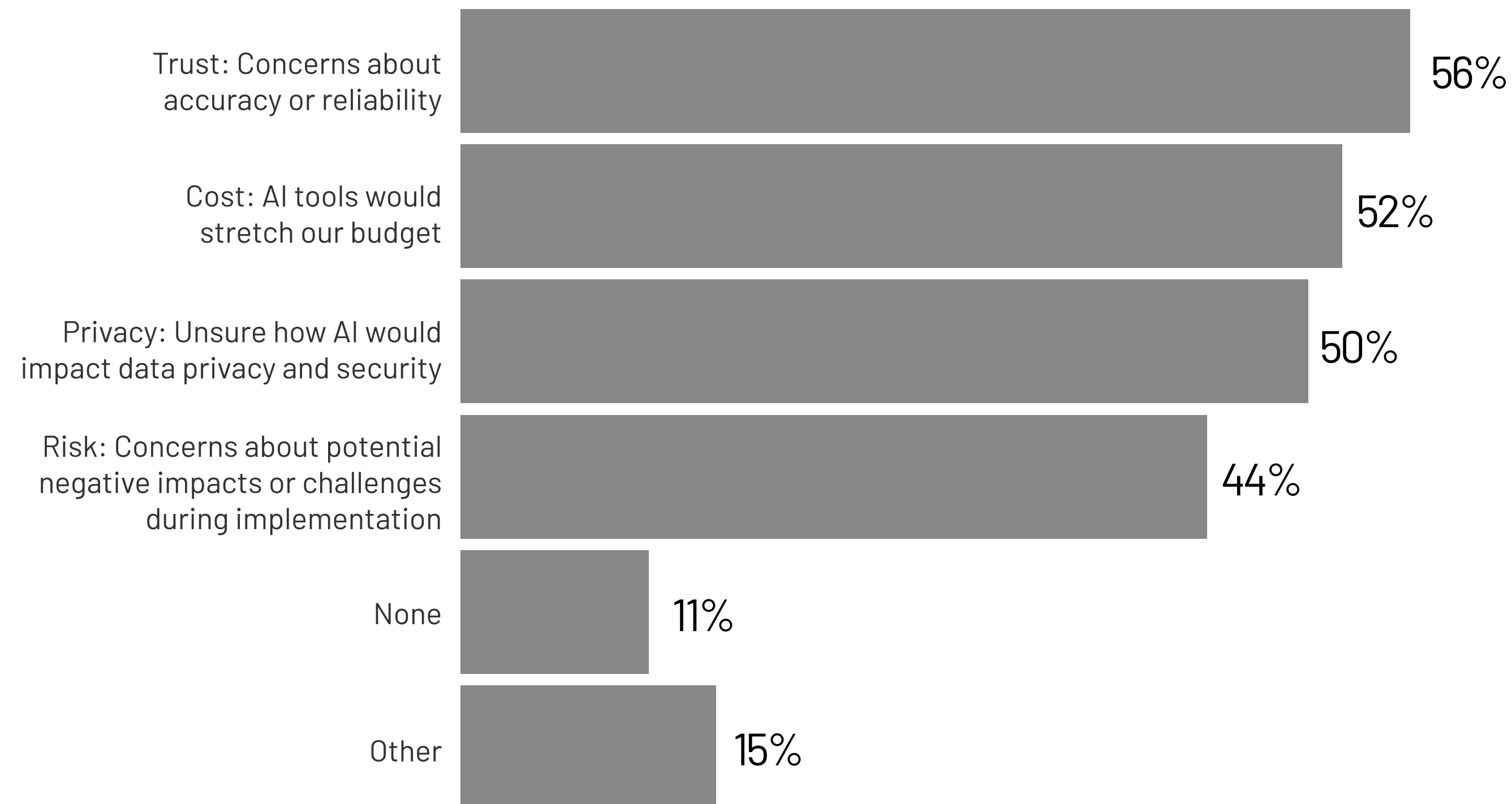
72%

Despite a lack of AI maturity across higher-ed institutions, **72% of respondents plan to advocate for more AI tools** to improve their website experiences in the next two years.



What barriers, if any, does your institution face when implementing AI to its website?

(Select all that apply)



Eighty-four percent of respondents said they either do not use AI at all or only use early-stage AI in limited areas in site search.

Across campuses, the barriers to implementing AI are common ones: A lack of trust in AI, privacy concerns, fear of high costs, and worry about potential risks.

In higher education, expectations for AI are elevated. Institutions are thoughtful adopters, prioritizing trust, transparency, and proven outcomes over hype.

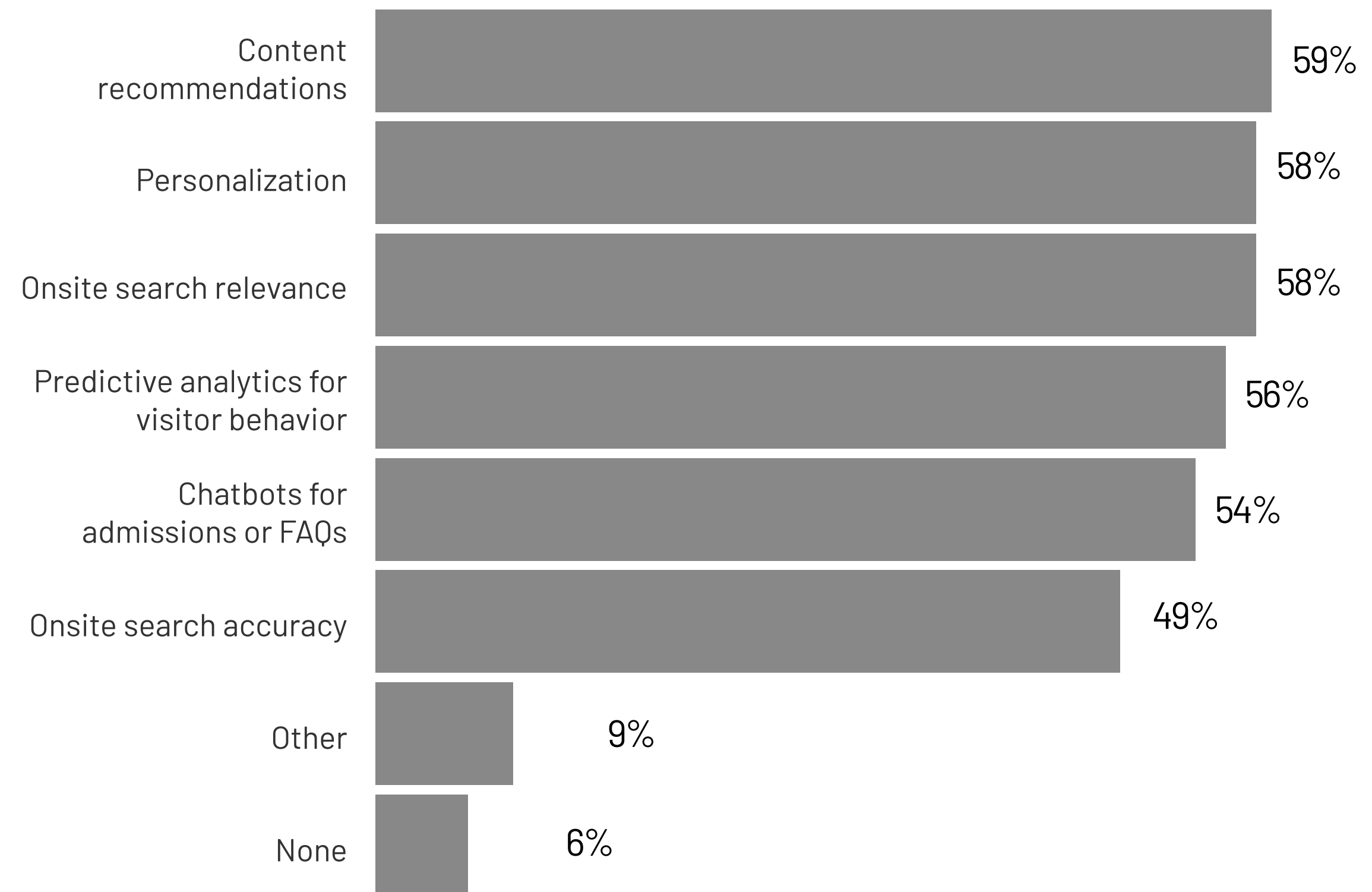
In the survey, higher-education administrators highlighted areas where they are comfortable leaning into AI. The survey found they would like AI's help with content recommendations, personalization, providing relevance in onsite search, developing predictive analytics, and creating chatbots.

Content, personalization, and relevance are top focus areas for applying AI.



In which areas of your institution's website experience do you believe AI can provide significant value?

(Select all that apply)

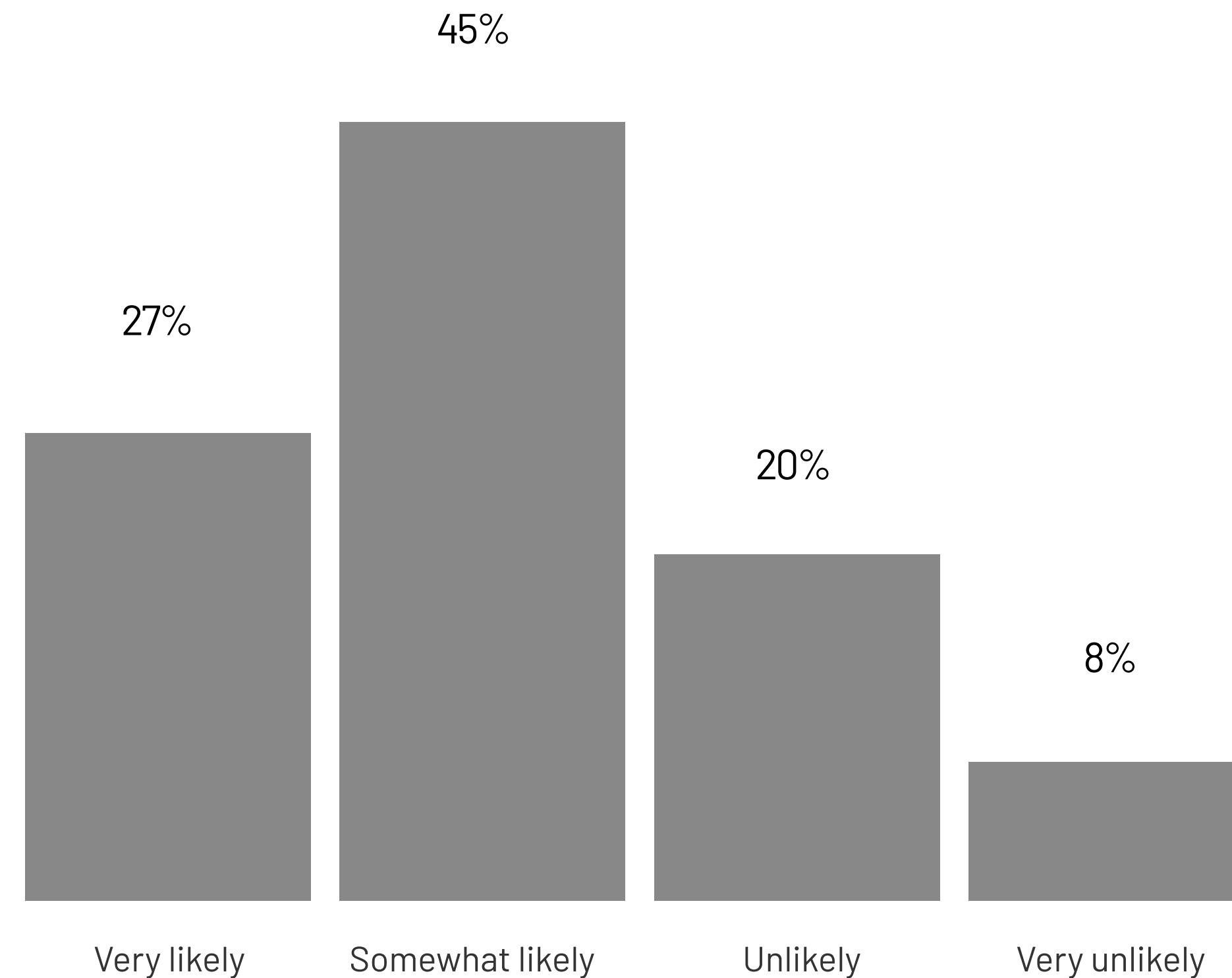


Seventy-two percent of those responding to the survey said it is either “very likely” or “somewhat likely” they will advocate for investment in AI in the next two years. Overall, the results point to colleges wanting to use AI to deliver more tailored, relevant content to search users.

Strong appetite for a practical application of AI in service of the website experience.



How likely is your team to advocate for increased investment in AI to enhance the institution’s website experience over the next two years?



The broader conclusion from the survey's questions on AI is that despite the hurdles of using AI, many institutions are still eager to give it a try, mirroring higher-ed sentiments noted in [EDUCAUSE's wider AI landscape study](#). "Higher ed sees this nice, shiny thing off in the distance," says SearchStax's Dillon, "But they're not always ready for a huge leap."

Some institutions are already engaging productively with AI. At Grand Valley State University, in Ottawa County, Michigan, Josh Isaak, associate vice president of web development and content strategy, is using AI in some novel ways to improve search. The university creates an average of 200 new web pages a week. Web-page creators are supposed to write meta descriptions summarizing each page's content that appear as snippets of text in external search engines and improve the proportion of users who click through to websites. But few creators ever write the meta descriptions.

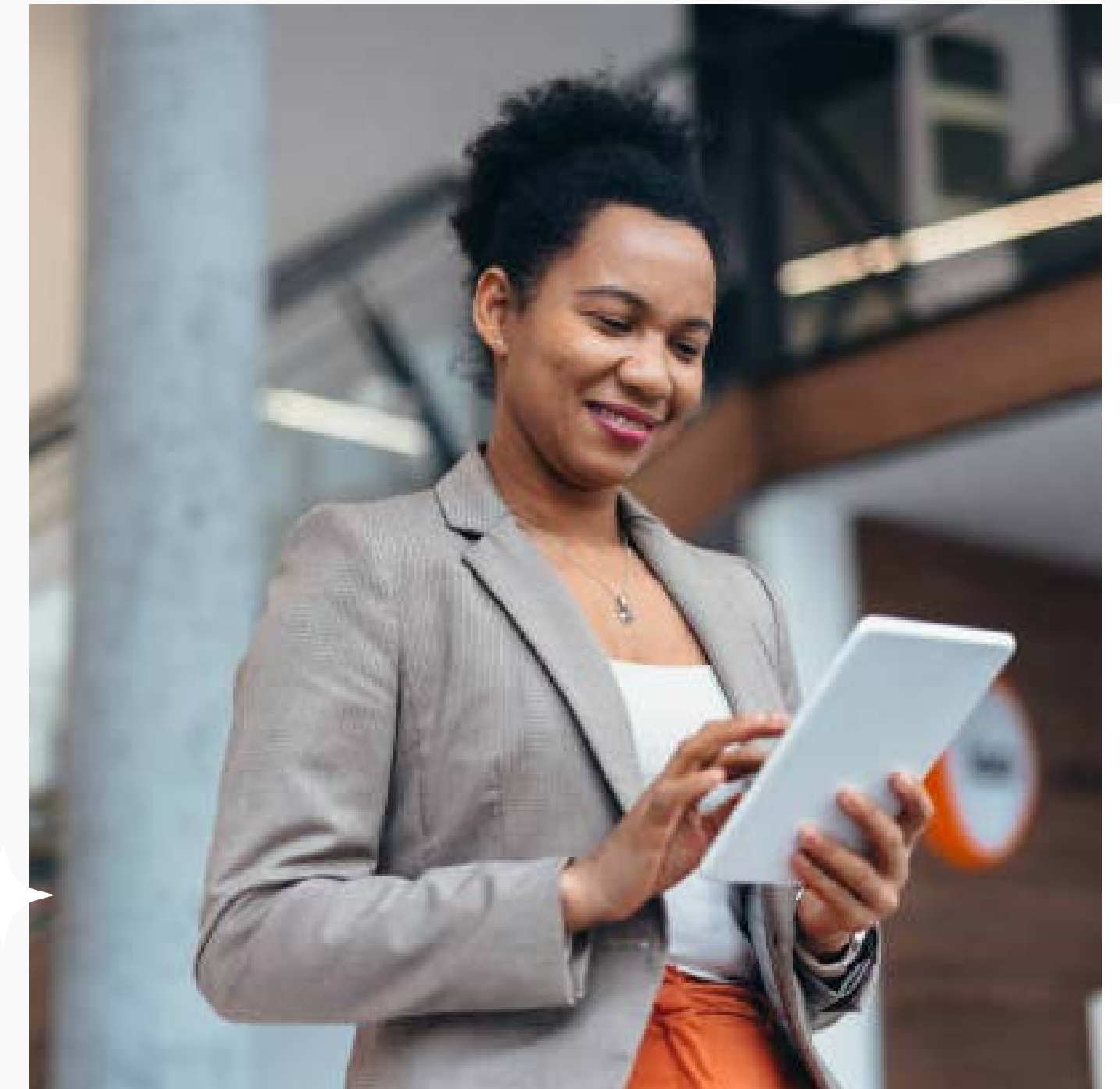
Isaak and his team now use an AI tool to scan newly-created website pages and write a content summary, which human creators can adopt, edit, or reject. That tool, he says, was "wildly successful."

"Higher ed values brand reputation; AI needs to support that cause."

Jeff Dillon
Digital Strategist, Higher Education SearchStax

SearchStax uses a similar model of having AI develop suggestions that are then curated by humans. So, for instance, AI can use language processing and deep knowledge of a website's content to make suggestions for what the answers should be to avoid "no results" searches.

"I like their approach," says TCU's Reed, talking about the AI recommendations SearchStax tools serve up to marketers and web developers. "It presents them to you, and you can kind of quickly go yes or no and either apply them or ignore them. I think that level of AI integration is very helpful." After turning on AI-assisted features, TCU has seen a 37-percent improvement in the position of the most relevant results and 16-percent increase in the proportion of users who click through to results.



The tool has spotted some associations he might miss, he says, such as when users seem to accidentally search using Spanish words, when they want content in English.

At Nashville.gov, Williams is using AI in a way that could also apply in higher education. His team is using AI to crawl the websites the team maintains to find content that might need updating or that might not meet requirements coming [next year under the Americans With Disabilities Act](#).

Clark at RISD hopes to use AI to anticipate users' needs, without being intrusive. He would like to see users guided through a website more intuitively, without a linear click-by-click march through pages. That would mean anticipating where users want to go. But he doesn't want to turn off users with heavy-handed marketing. "We hope to cultivate a thoughtful balance," he says.

Adjustments to onsite search can add up to make a strong improvement in the user experience. At Grand Valley State, the proportion of people using onsite search who clicked through to a search result used to be in the 38 to 40 percent range, says Isaak. Now it ranges from 50 to 56 percent. "That's a huge improvement," he says.

College administrators aren't always aware of how site search and content updates can improve how their institutions are viewed. Survey results indicated that college leaders believe content updates are happening faster than they actually are. That could reduce the administrative incentive to budget for the appropriate technology.

Many colleges think of site search as being like an old car that sometimes needs repair. Others realize it can be a modern vehicle that drives content strategy.



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Methodology

Two-hundred and twenty-five people responded to the online survey from the Chronicle Studio, which was conducted between January 2 and January 24, 2025. The respondents included people who work at a higher-education institution based in the U.S. and have experience with their institution's visitor-facing website. Among the respondents, 28 percent had roles in marketing and communications and eight percent worked in IT and technology services. Twenty-five percent was made up of faculty, while 20 percent was made up of executive leaders and administrators. Other respondents included 12 percent holding roles in student services, five percent in admissions and enrollment, and two percent in research and assessment.



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