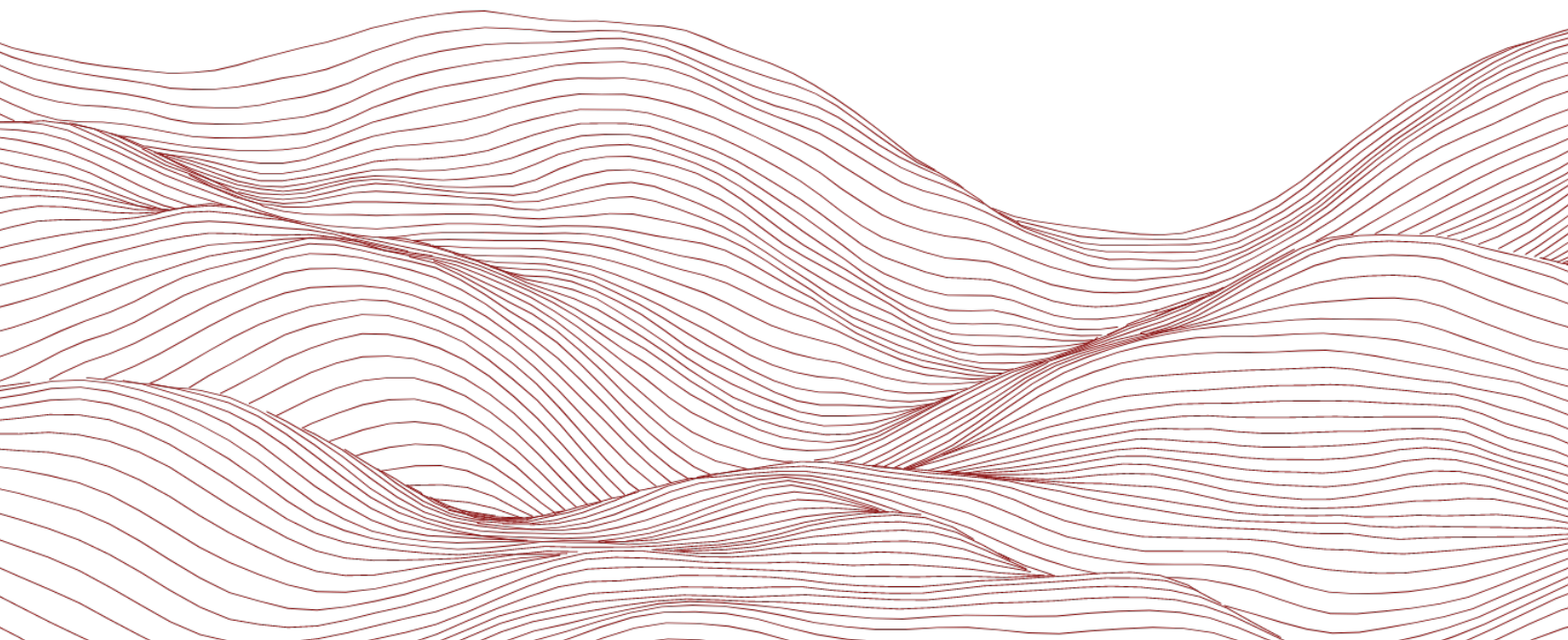# CARNEGIE

How Search Engines and College
and University Websites Impact

Prospective Undergraduate
Students' College Search

AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SURVEY
BROUGHT TO YOU BY **CARNEGIE** AND CX collegexpress

DECEMBER 2022 / CarnegieHigherEd.com

The Survey Sample

In the spring of 2022, Carnegie asked 6,590 prospective undergraduate students who were CollegeXpress website users questions about how search engines and college and university websites affect their decisions about where to apply and ultimately enroll for undergraduate study. The audience was made up of the following high school graduation years:

+ **53% 2022**
+ **21% 2023**
+ **10% 2024**
+ **5% 2025**
+ **10% "other"**

How do search engines influence your college search process?

As it related to Search Engine Optimization strategy, we were interested to hear how prospective undergraduate students interact with search engines and how impactful search results are in their college search process. Below, you will see how our audience responded to each question, along with our analysis of these findings.

On average, how many pages deep into the search engine results do you click through to find the information you need?

+ **49% said pages 2–3**
+ **33% said they only look at the first page**
+ **13% said pages 4–5**
+ **6% said more than 6 pages deep**

The fact that the majority of respondents noted that they click two to three pages deep into search engine results is promising. Often-times, institutions may have their SEO strategy set on appearing on page one of search results, which can be especially tough for highly competitive programs such as a BSN. While appearing on page one of organic search results is a good goal, knowing that you'll still get in front of students if you are on pages two or three can be motivation to continue on with a solid SEO strategy (versus giving up when you can't get on page one for everything). As a rough guideline, there are generally 10 search results per page. So, for example, if you are ranking at position #15 for a keyword, then you are on the second page of search results. This can be helpful when comparing rankings to page placement. On mobile, Google has a continuous scroll, which means that the pages blend together. In this case, users may not know that they have scrolled on to, say, page two or three, further illustrating the advantage of showing up in positions beyond page one.

Do you use Google to search for information about a degree without a school already in mind?

+ **82% said yes**
+ **18% said no**

The fact that the majority of respondents begin searching for schools via Google without a particular institution in mind presents an enormous SEO opportunity for colleges and universities. Without any kind of brand affinity, these students are performing non-branded searches, such as "english majors," "bachelors degree in accounting," and "best schools in new hampshire." By optimizing your website for non-branded keywords, you have the opportunity to get in front of students when they are top-of-funnel and start to build that brand awareness and connection with them.

What search engines do you use besides Google?

+ **86% said just Google**
+ **10% said Bing**
+ **8% said Yahoo!**
+ **6 % said DuckDuckGo**
+ **Less than 1% said Yandex**

With Google undoubtedly being the most popular search engine, the results of this question were not surprising. From an SEO perspective, Bing and Yahoo, the second most popular search engines in the response, have algorithms that very closely follow Google's. All this to say that continuing to optimize your website in line with Google's best practices is a good idea.

How does a college or university's website impact your decision-making process?

Our next set of questions moved beyond search engines and into prospective students' user experience on college and university websites. Showing up in search results can be quickly made useless if students don't like what they see when they actually click through to your site. We wanted to glean insights into how institutions could better meet student needs and provide the type of content that will make them stay engaged on the site and build real connection and a sense of belonging at that institution.

Does the design of a website impact your impression of the university?

+ **33% said a moderate amount**
+ **27% said a lot**
+ **20% said a great deal**
+ **14% said a little**
+ **5% said none at all**

Web design is certainly a hot topic in higher education right now, with many institutions going through entire site redesigns to better meet the needs of prospective students who are relying more heavily on online resources to make their college decision in an increasingly virtual world. The majority of our respondents said that the design of a website impacts their impressions of an institution to varying degrees. When it comes to web design, you want to be sure you are speaking your institution's own unique story. Don't get sucked into the generic style of students smiling with backpacks. Undergoing a full research project to understand your college or university's distinct personality and then translating that personality into design is more powerful than you might imagine. Ask yourself: what feelings does your web design elicit? Boldness? Innovation? Fun? Support? Every image, module, and font choice should be working together to tell an authentic story about your institution.

When you get to a college or university's website for the first time, what do you look for first?

+ **51% said list of majors/information about a specific major**
+ **20% said admissions requirements**
+ **19% said financial aid and scholarship information**
+ **8% said student life information**
+ **2% said "Other"**

Moving beyond the feeling that good web design can elicit, it's important not only that the website aesthetically matches the institution's personality but is also easy to navigate and contains the content that prospective students need to make their college decision. More than half of respondents said that the first thing they look for is a list of majors and specific information about a degree, again illustrating the importance of optimizing your website's program pages. With the next two categories being admissions requirements and financial aid and scholarship information, you want to ensure that these pages are in spectacular shape and easy to navigate to from the main menu. Only 8% of respondents said they seek out student life information, which is especially enlightening. However, it became clear in our next question that student life was definitely a topic prospects were interested in, even if it wasn't the first piece of information they sought out.

Do you enjoy when web content is tailored to your interests or browsing behavior?
+ **58% said yes**
+ **33% said it doesn't matter**
+ **9% said no**

The majority of respondents agree that they prefer web content to be tailored to their interests. You can approach this in multiple ways to varying degrees of specificity. First, the most basic step is to ensure that when you are creating content for the website, you are looking at your website data (Google Analytics and Google Search Console) and performing keyword research to gain a broad understanding of what exactly users are looking for. For example, if a popular keyword is "accounting careers," then make sure you have a section on your accounting major page—or even an entire separate page devoted to what kind of careers a person can pursue once they obtain their accounting degree. Second, utilize advanced data tools, such as a Customer Data Platform (CDP), to understand what matters to each user on your website and serve up personalized content throughout the site based on their unique browsing behavior.

Do you expect content to be personalized on return visits?
+ **44% said no**
+ **32% said yes**
+ **24% said they don't know**

While 44% of respondents said that they did not expect content to be personalized on return visits to the site, nearly a quarter of respondents said that they didn't know, which means that many prospective students might not even realize when content is tailored to them—which is actually a good thing! The best kind of personalized content is perhaps that which is seamless with the user's journey on the website.

For example, a user might come to your website and look specifically at the business program page, business curriculum page, and business faculty page. With this data, on their next visit to your site, you can serve up images and information on the homepage tailored specifically to a business student. That user might not know that they are seeing anything different from another user, but instead, they see that the school has a heavy emphasis on the BBA program. This, in turn, builds trust, awareness, and authority with your audience. So, while the majority of respondents said that they did not expect content to be personalized on return visits, that is not to say there is no value in implementing such a strategy.

Is there any information you look for on a college website but frequently don't find (admission requirements, program information, etc.)? Describe what type of information that is.

We received over 3,400 freeform responses to this question. Respondents noted wanting more information about various topics, which we have bucketed below into the following categories: student life, program information, career outcomes, admission, tuition, and website navigation issues.

Student Life

A significant number of respondents said they wanted more information relating to student life, which we have broken down below into the following subcategories: housing; diversity, equity, inclusion, and safety; and student organizations. In addition to wanting more detailed information, respondents stated that they want to hear how current students feel about these areas, whether that be through testimonials on the website or opportunities to reach out to talk to current students one-on-one.

> I like lots of specifics—pictures of dorms, pictures of food, special random traditions that take place, a link to the student handbook, etc.! The more information and the easier it is to find, the better, and if I don't see all the information I want on a website of some place I don't know about, I'm likely to just close the page and forget about it."

> The type of information that I typically don't find on a college website is usually the student life information. There are some instances where a college has all necessary information you need to know about a college but they forget the student experience."

> The websites mention school life and community very vaguely. It also seems biased in the sense where I'm only seeing one side."

All quotes are taken directly from the survey without correction to preserve the integrity of the response.

Housing

Prospective undergraduate students care a lot about what their day-to-day life would look like on your campus. Housing and meals are two of our most basic human needs, so it makes sense that prospective students want more information on these topics. Dozens of respondents said they wanted to see interior photos, videos, and layouts of dorms. They want to know how close the residence halls are to classroom buildings and if they can bring pets. They also want to know how diverse the dormitories are and how inclusive, especially as it relates to gender—how does the school approach housing for transgender students? Are there co-ed dorms? How expensive is it to live in each dorm? How would current students rate the dorms? More logistically, what is provided in the dorm? Fridge? Microwave? What are the bathrooms like? How many people do you share them with? Is laundry free? Additionally, they want more information about what they will be eating on campus. What are the meal plan options? Can they accommodate dietary restrictions and allergies? What's the cost of a meal plan?

> It would be nice to see the pictures of dorm rooms themselves rather than just the outside of the building when looking at housing options."

> I like to look at pictures of the dorm and areas around campus that students would spend the most time but I don't usually find a lot of pictures."

> Often from college websites I look at the student housing options and it is often disappointing that there aren't better ways that the colleges show housing options for all students. I think websites should include more visual depictions, average costs, and aid options for students who are looking at their options for student housing."

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Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Safety

Respondents noted how lacking many college and university websites are when it comes to details about diversity, equity, inclusion, and safety. Prospects want to know what the demographics of the student body and faculty look like. They also want to know how

welcoming the institution is to LGBTQ+ students and what accommodations are in place for those with disabilities. Furthermore, they want to know what mental health resources are available on campus and the school's stance on sustainability and the environment.

> "Me personally I try to look for ethnicity because as a black woman you don't want to go to a school where it's mostly one race you want to feel comfortable with other ethnicities and understand them and their cultures."

> "Information such as diversity is very important to a minority like me, I feel like showing a pie chart of diversity would be attractive to all sorts of people who are looking to synergize with peers of all types."

> "Some information that I look for in a college is if it cares for the environment and takes care of the people that are in it."

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Student Organizations

It's clear that prospective undergraduate students are not just looking for academic information. When they are exploring college options, they are trying to envision themselves on campus. They want to know what kind of life they can build outside of the class-room, and they're concerned with making social connections. For this reason, many respondents noted wanting more information about student organizations, clubs, extracurriculars, sports, recreation centers, and events.

This goes beyond just a list; students want to hear what exactly each organization does—it's not enough to say that you have an English Club. Instead, describe the annual trip the club takes to see a Shakespeare play, the fundraiser the group runs each fall to support literacy, and the monthly meet ups to chat about books and movies. Describe the different recreation centers on campus and the classes offered through them. Elaborate on the types of campus events that happen throughout the year—the annual movie screening on the quad each spring, the homecoming concert every fall. Prospective students also want to hear more about campus cultural centers and study abroad opportunities, plus information about on-campus work opportunities.

> "I can never find any school clubs. I like to be involved everywhere I go and would love to find them. I usually have to resort to social media to find some."

> "Frequently, it is very difficult to find information about the various school activities. I have to spend quite a bit browsing through menus to find say a specific area of clubs or to browse the advisors for said clubs to ask questions."

> "I often cannot easily find the activities available within different colleges on their website. It would be nice to have more pictures (and even possibly people sharing their experiences) on the campus's extracurricular groups and school activities. I believe this is important because it reflects what sort of community a college has—allowing the one searching to determine whether this is the type of school they are looking for."

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Off-Campus Community

Finally, prospective students want to know what they can do outside of the bounds of campus. Where is the school located? In a city? In a rural area? What is there to do in the larger community? What do students do on the weekend? Go hiking in the nearby mountains? Go to concerts in the nearest city? Go swimming at the beach? Furthermore, what does transportation look like? Are there buses or trains that take students off campus?

Program Information

After student life-related responses, the second most popular category of comments related to a lack of information about programs. First, respondents requested that schools have a page that clearly lists all of the different majors and minors. Within this list, think about how you are referring to programs. Are you using the same terminology as prospects? Or are the program names obscure? As one respondent said, "I search 'speech pathology,' but don't find anything because some schools call it 'communicative disorders.' Searching on one term should bring up both." What's more, some noted that schools don't make clear if a program page is for an undergraduate or graduate degree. Be sure to have clear header tags that indicate the degree type (BA, MA, etc.). Plus, if an institution has multiple campuses, they should clearly delineate which campuses offer which programs.

Once they have navigated to a specific major page, many respondents want to see a sample schedule of what classes need to be taken within that major and in what order for all four years. They also want the program pages to be more in-depth, providing more detailed information about the program, including available dual degree options and concentrations. They also want to know what options are available for customizing their experience. If there are specific prerequisites to getting accepted into a specific major, those should be clearly stated. Furthermore, they are interested in learning what differentiates your program from other schools (i.e., What's unique about your engineering major?).

They're very concerned with career readiness and want to learn about the labs and hands-on research opportunities for specific majors, as well as internship opportunities. Additionally, they're interested in learning more about professors' research areas and what classes they teach. They also want to see student success stories to illustrate outcomes from that major/degree.

Finally, multiple respondents noted the frustration of having to request information or speak with someone on the phone to obtain key information about a program. Withholding information on your website is not a lead generation tactic. More often than not, prospective students will simply move on to looking at competitor websites instead of requesting information.

> **An easy and understandable layout of the classes I'd need to take for my major. For example, if I'm interested in nursing, I want to know what classes I'd need to take and for how long. This is usually hidden on a college website or not there at all."**

> **Specifics about a certain degree. I have to dig really deep to find program specific things such as the number of students freshman to senior year, how big the program is, what are the outcomes, etc."**

> **It would be program information because when I try to find the concentrations, courses, and total credits of a major, it is very difficult to find the info I am looking for."**

> **A lot of time there is non specific program information, and you have to request more information from the school to get tht information. It's a little inconvenient."**

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Career Outcomes

Generation Z watched Millennials before them go deep in debt for their college education. As such, they are much more conscious of the ROI of attending college. Many respondents noted specific questions they'd like answered on college websites relating to career outcomes. What makes your school's programs different from other schools' that could help them in their future careers? Toward what careers will the degree they are interested in be most applicable? What's the average salary for those careers? They also want to see information for a variety of possible career paths, not just the most obvious ones (e.g., an Accountant with an Accounting degree).

Students would also like the option to search by career on the website. Some noted that they might know the field they want to go into but not the majors that would prepare them for that line of work. And, while the monetary aspect of career outcomes is certainly top-of-mind, some respondents also noted wanting to hear about how fulfilling or satisfying those careers are outside of pay and would like to hear firsthand from graduates who have pursued different paths.

> **I like seeing what percentage of students get employed in a field pertaining to their major, but I have run into some college websites that do not have this information and it really frustrates me."**

> **I never find careers that aren't somewhat 'mainstream'. Majority of the majors portrayed are popular career choices. There aren't any classes either about finding careers, colleges just expect you to know exactly what you want to do before you get there. There should be better major/career guidance."**

> **The information on how good a program is is always related to pay, but there is never information on the style of teaching and how the program has affected graduates outside of their pay."**

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Admissions

When it comes to the admissions process, many prospective undergraduate students find it difficult to locate the information they need on college and university websites. First, before applying, prospective students want to know how competitive it is to get accepted and what types of students the school is looking for. They want to know—what's the ratio of applicants vs. admitted students from the previous year? What's the average GPA and SAT/ACT scores of those admitted? They want to measure their chances of acceptance before they decide if they want to apply or not. Respondents also said that deadlines were often scattered throughout the website or outdated, making it difficult to know when they needed to submit their application and supporting documents.

Several respondents noted a lack of resources for international students. These respondents wanted more information about admissions requirements specific to non-US students ("Can they even apply!?"). Plus, they want to know if host families are available and how international students can assimilate into US culture while attending school.

A lot of respondents also noted wanting to begin preparing for college while still in high school. They want college websites to specify what classes they can take in high school that will transfer as college credits or simply what classes they should take to be prepared for a certain major.

Lastly, many respondents said they were confused about what they were supposed to do once they were accepted to a school. How do they pick a dorm? Find a roommate? Register for classes? They want a step-by-step guide of what to do. This would help tremendously with tempering melt!

> "I look for information regarding admission requirements on some websites and it's so hard to navigate. For example, I wanted to look at if there was a specific prompt for my personal statement but it doesn't give much information on that."

> "Many times the dates are inaccurate or I can't find a direct contact for certain issues. There is also specific information I needed for applying to a specific school within a university that I could not find, which really stressed me out."

> "I wish there was a calendar of dates as well as a more accessible way for first-year students to navigate the right resources and not get confused with other dates and deadlines."

All quotes are taken directly from the survey without correction to preserve the integrity of the response.

Tuition

First and foremost, dozens of respondents noted that they simply have a difficult time figuring out the actual cost of attendance. They'd like to see not just tuition but also all the other associated fees, such as room and board, meal plans, books, fees, etc. Many students need to know the full cost before applying to see if they can even afford your institution. They also want to know if dual enrollment or transfer credits are accepted to lessen the cost.

Next, they want to know what financial aid options are available. Some noted that they find it difficult to find specific financial aid steps and deadlines, as well as figuring out when admitted students can expect to receive their financial aid package. They also find that schools are vague about available scholarships. In particular, they want more information on scholarships for specific populations or student groups, such as scholarships for international students, sports, and specific majors.

> "I would like to find tuition and room and board costs easier on college/university websites. Most don't have such costs listed, or I have to look very hard to find it. This is somewhat annoying when I have to plan for paying for a college/university that I would like to attend."

> "Ironically, despite it being among the first things I look for, I struggle to find information on pricing breakdowns (room/board, fees, books, +tuition, total cost) for many schools."

> "Fees! For some reason it is very difficult to find the fees! I can check every page for some universities and it's like they just refuse to list it."

> "I usually look for financial aid, but it's so hard to find with the way the website is laid out. I also struggle finding the information I need from the financial aid section which makes me lose interest in the university."

All quotes are taken directly from the survey without correction to preserve the integrity of the response.

Website Navigation Issues

Finally, many respondents expressed a general frustration with user experience on higher education websites. Dozens of prospects said that it takes them a long time to find the information they are looking for. They find it difficult to navigate through the website and learn the site architecture. They noted that the main menu is not always intuitive. Some of the language used is also not accessible for first-generation students who may not understand the higher education lingo (e.g., "registrar"). They noted that a well-functioning search bar would also be helpful—check to make sure your internal site search actually brings up the most relevant pages for a variety of popular searches. Others noted that they often can't locate the option to request more information or get on a school's mailing list. Lastly, once they have started their application or are admitted, prospects find it difficult to locate and navigate through the student portal.

> "Many websites are difficult to navigate. It takes to much effort to find basic information like list of majors, net price calculator, admission deadlines, scholarships, housing with dorm layouts. Additionally, many websites seem to hide the admission portals."

> "Many college pages are difficult to navigate to even open an application. It is also hard to filter programs and find information on the way the programs work (What school they belong to, what they are looking for in an applicant to the program) on most college websites."

> "Oftentimes I do not see how to get into the school's student portals on the college website. If already admitted or have put in an application there is usually a student portal but I find it often difficult to get into them to look for checklist and things of that nature."

All quotes are taken directly from the survey without correction to preserve the integrity of the response.

How does video content impact your college search process?

With video content on the rise and YouTube being the second largest search engine after Google, we wanted to hear from prospective students about how video has impacted their college search.

How important is video content in your application decision?
+ **41% said somewhat important**
+ **29% said not so important**
+ **19% said very important**
+ **9% said not at all important**
+ **8% said extremely important**

Where do you look for video content to get a feel for a school?
+ **71% said the school's website**
+ **56% said YouTube**
+ **36% said Instagram**
+ **24% said TikTok**
+ **9% said Facebook**

With the majority of respondents saying that video is somewhat important in their college search process, an additional 19% saying

it's very important, and 8% saying it's extremely important, higher education institutions want to ensure that they have a solid video strategy. Video content can and should span many topics and formats.

The top two places respondents look for video content about a college or university are the school's website and YouTube. For SEO purposes, it's best to embed your YouTube videos on your website rather than directly uploading them to your CMS or using another third-party video provider. This is because Google owns YouTube, and the majority of video content that appears in Google search results is YouTube videos. Plus, YouTube itself is the second largest search engine after Google. So, first, you want to ensure your video content lives on YouTube. Second, you want to embed your YouTube videos on your website to increase the number of views and the engagement on the YouTube videos, which in turn leads to better rankings. On your YouTube channel, do you have campus tour videos? Alumni features? Student profiles? Overviews of specific programs?

Not to be ignored is your video presence on social media, especially Instagram and TikTok. Focus on creating authentic, organic video content on these mediums and consider letting students do takeovers.