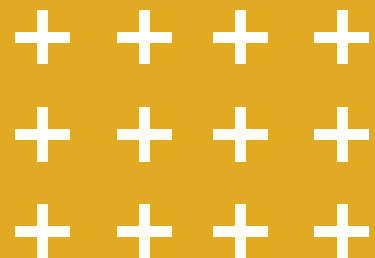
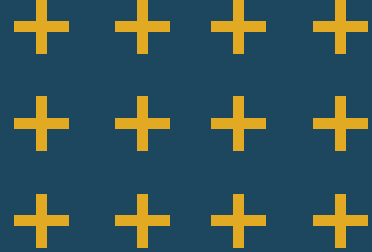


Higher Ed SEO Benchmarks 2024

NOVEMBER 2024

CARNEGIE





Contents

- ① Executive Summary
- ② Report Highlights
- ③ Process & Procedures
- ④ SEO Benchmarks & Analysis
- ⑤ AI Overviews
- ⑥ Conclusion

1

Executive Summary

+ The Motivation

How do you know if your website is truly performing well? What does “good” organic traffic look like for a university or college? These questions have long gone unanswered, leaving higher ed marketers navigating search engine optimization (SEO) without a reliable compass.

Understanding the unique challenges and opportunities this dilemma presents, Carnegie took on the task of establishing industry-specific benchmarks for organic search in 2024.

Our mission? To help colleges and universities better evaluate the effectiveness of their SEO efforts and learn how to adapt in an ever-changing digital environment.

+ The Challenge

Higher education websites receive traffic from various channels: organic, direct, paid, referral, social, and so on. When it comes to connecting your audience—prospective students with the right search intent at the right stage of their journey—to your site, organic search remains one of the most effective methods.

Yet, identifying organic KPIs and evaluating organic traffic performance has always been a challenge. Industry-wide organic benchmarks for higher education have been virtually nonexistent, leaving institutions in the dark about their site’s performance.

+ The Solution

Carnegie collected Google Search Console and Google Analytics 4 data from higher education domains. We analyzed this data to identify traffic trends and insights at a granular level, specific to the higher education sector.

2

Report Highlights

+ The Key Findings

Our analysis revealed significant opportunities for institutions to improve organic traffic by targeting non-branded keywords in their content strategies.

As we look to the future, it will be fascinating to see how emerging technologies like AI impact organic traffic and visibility. But for now, higher education institutions have a powerful new tool at their disposal—data-backed benchmarks to guide their SEO strategies and drive meaningful results in the digital realm.

+ The Impact

Our industry-specific benchmark insights provide essential context for evaluating efforts, identifying accurate KPIs, and implementing the right strategies to drive results.

For higher education marketers, this means:

- **A clear understanding of what “good” organic traffic performance looks like in their sector.**
- **The ability to set realistic, data-driven SEO goals.**
- **Improved strategies for content creation and keyword targeting.**
- **Better measurement and demonstration of SEO return on investment (ROI).**

3

Process & Procedures

+ Data Extraction

Utilizing raw data pulled from Google Search Console, we collected click, impression, CTR, and position data for over 200 higher ed domains and subdomains.

We also collected data segmented by branded and non-branded keywords by using custom regex filters.

Our team compiled the data and performed an analysis to find the median CTR, median position, and the 25th and 75th percentile data for CTR and position.

We collected Google Analytics data for over 50 websites accessed via BigQuery. Specific metrics are pulled into a Looker Studio Dashboard that is updated on a monthly basis.

+ Timeframe

Google Search Console:

We looked at data over the time period of 8/31/2022 to 8/31/2023.*

**Some GSC properties did not have visibility as far back as 8/31/2022. In those cases, we selected the date farthest from 8/31/2023.*

Google Analytics 4:

We looked at data over the time period of 07/01/2023 to 06/30/2024.

Higher Ed Website Organic Traffic Analysis

Where Your Users Come From

+ Do You Know Your Website's Users?

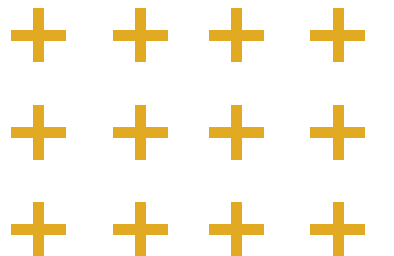
Your college or university's website serves as your virtual campus. It's often the first point of contact for prospective students, parents, and other stakeholders. Understanding the composition of your institution's website traffic is not just a matter of analytics—it's a window into the effectiveness of your digital outreach and a roadmap for future marketing strategies.

To illustrate the landscape of website traffic in the higher ed industry, we've leveraged GA4 data to break down typical traffic sources, highlighting not just overall traffic but also new user acquisition. This data provides invaluable insights into how prospective students are discovering and engaging with institutions online, offering a foundation for strategic decision-making in digital marketing and recruitment efforts.

+ Our Findings

Organic search is the powerhouse of higher education website traffic, driving both overall visits and new user acquisition.

Between July 2023 and June 2024, **organic search brought in the most traffic to the higher ed websites in our dataset—generating 46% of total users—followed by direct traffic, paid search, and referral traffic.**



Organic Search-High Quality Traffic

+ Users From Organic Search Are On Your Site, But Are They Engaged?

The short answer to this question is a resounding yes, and the story behind it is a compelling one.

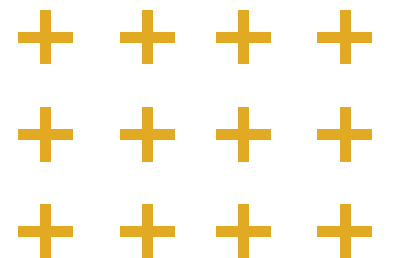
While attracting visitors to your institution’s website is crucial, the true measure of success lies in how these visitors interact with your content. In higher education, where decisions are often carefully considered over time, user engagement metrics become particularly significant. These metrics offer insights into the quality of your organic traffic and the effectiveness of your content in meeting prospective students’ needs.

+ Our Findings

Users from organic search are the most engaged audiences. Over the same year long period, we found that organic search traffic makes up an average of 53% of the engaged sessions across higher ed websites. Moreover, **these users boast the highest engagement rate at an average of 61%.**

Users who engage deeply with your content are more likely to take desired actions, such as requesting information, scheduling campus visits, or submitting applications. Understanding engagement helps you optimize for these crucial conversions.

channel_grouping	Engagement Rate
direct	44.26%
search organic	61.06%
search paid	45.06%
referral	44.27%
display	11.23%
social organic	40.82%
other paid	11.51%



Overall Website Organic Traffic Benchmarks

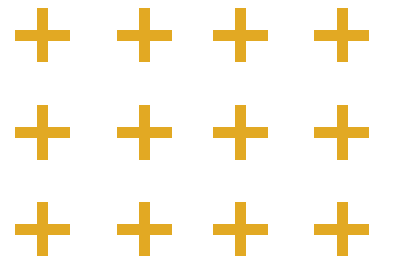
CARNEGIE

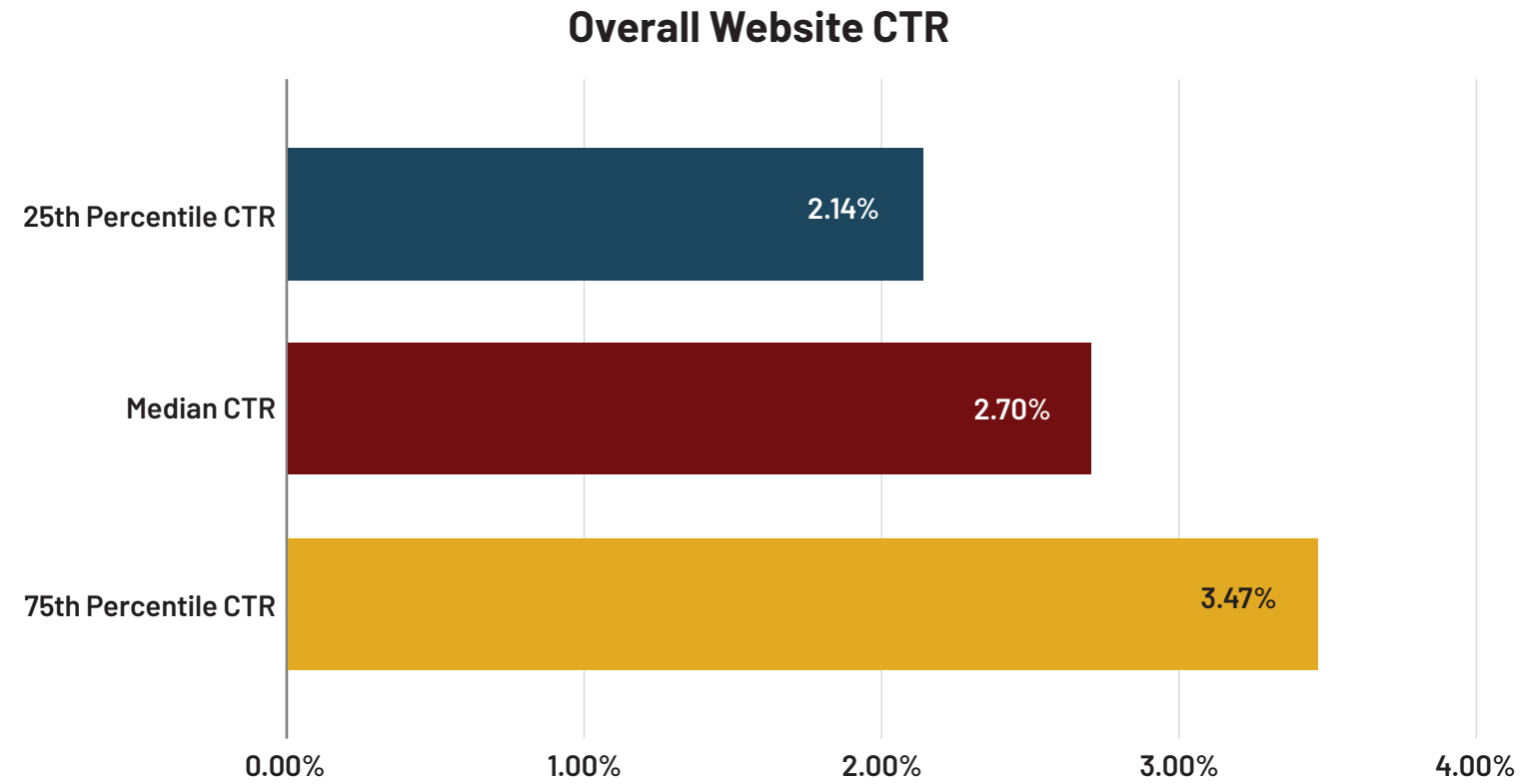
Organic Traffic Benchmarks for Higher Education Websites

	Median CTR	Median Ranking Position	Percentage of Total Traffic (Clicks)	Percentage of Visibility (Impressions)
Overall Website Traffic	2.70%	28	100%	100%
Branded Traffic	13%	5	57%	13%
Non-branded Traffic	0.90%	33	43%	87%

+ Data that Helps You Improve Your Website

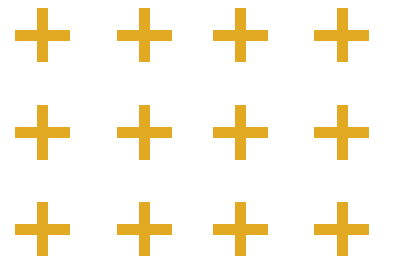
These are the most fundamental distillation of higher education SEO benchmarks and can provide colleges and universities with a baseline understanding of how to gauge their site's performance with minimal filtering. **When evaluating overall organic traffic, institutions can aim for a click-through rate (CTR) of 2.7%.** CTRs that exceed this metric are above average, meanwhile, those that do not quite reach this metric have an automatic goal set in place. Additionally, understanding the percentage breakdown of branded versus non-branded traffic sheds light on the reach of an institution's brand awareness. Equipped with this knowledge, institutions can direct digital marketing efforts to expand brand recognition or create more robust content that targets non-branded queries.



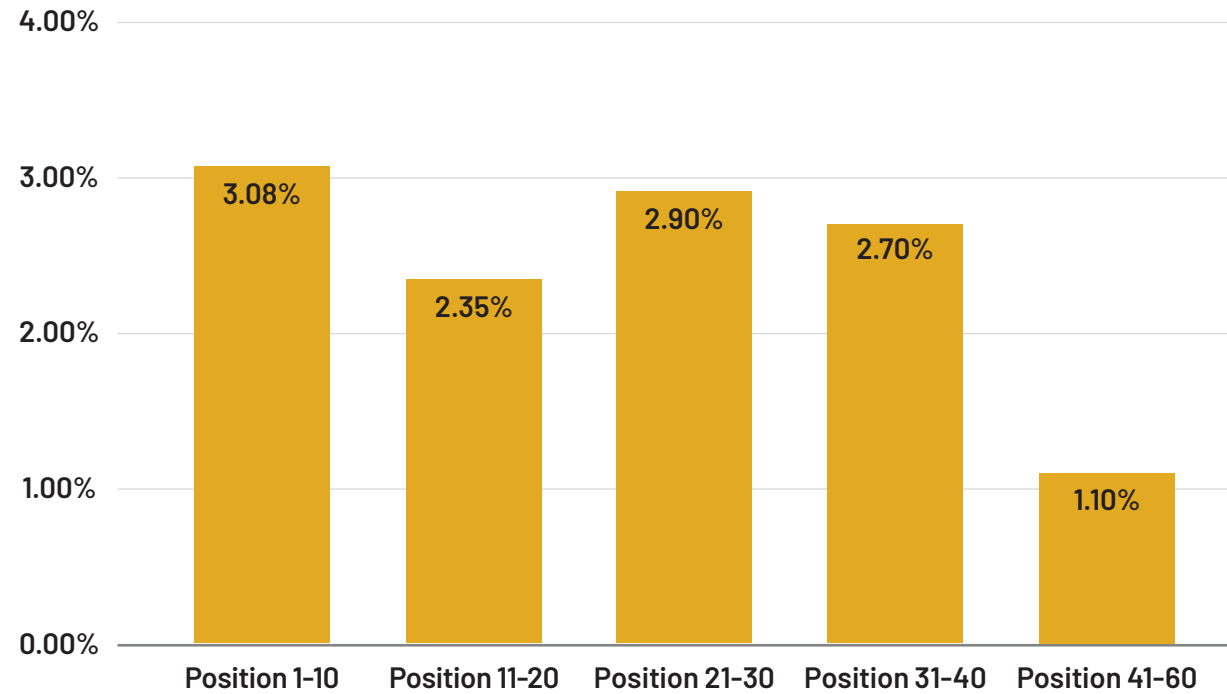


+ Learn From Pages that Perform Well, Apply Your Knowledge to Pages that Don't

Pages in the 25th Percentile are underperforming, according to our industry benchmark of 2.7%. These pages are ideal candidates for metadata and header tag optimizations to boost traffic. Conversely, assessing pages consistently within the 75th Percentile to determine what makes them successful is another method by which you can make meaningful changes that benefit both users and your institution's overall website traffic.



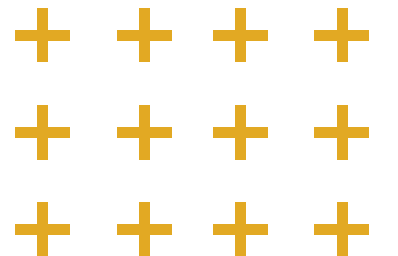
Median Click-Through Rate by Position



+ Don't Overlook Lower Ranking Positions

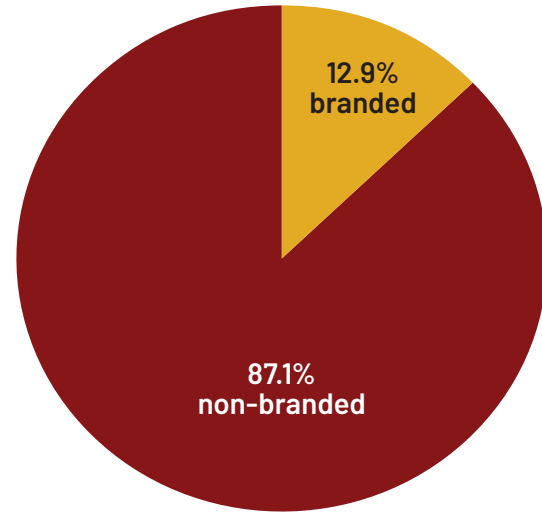
Content in positions 1 through 10 receive the highest click-through rate (CTR) at 3.8%. While this insight isn't initially surprising, our findings indicate significant potential to gain traffic in lower positions. The steep drop-off in CTR seen after position 40 indicates that content ranking between positions 11 and 39 can still expect a strong CTR.*

**This data was collected during a period in which Google used Continuous Scroll on their search engine results pages (SERPs). As of June 2024, Google no longer uses Continuous Scroll, and instead uses paginated results.*

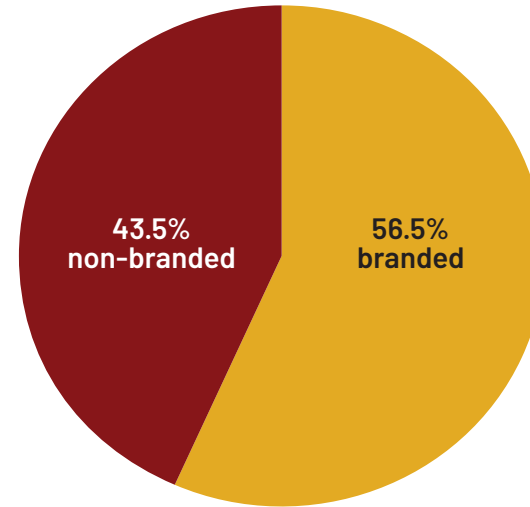


Branded vs. Non-Branded Keyword Visibility & Traffic

Percentage of Visibility for Branded vs. Non-Branded Keywords



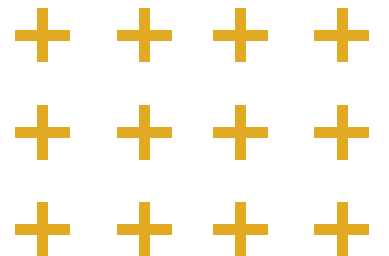
Percentage of Organic Traffic from Branded vs. Non-Branded Keywords



+ Balancing Branded and Non-Branded Traffic

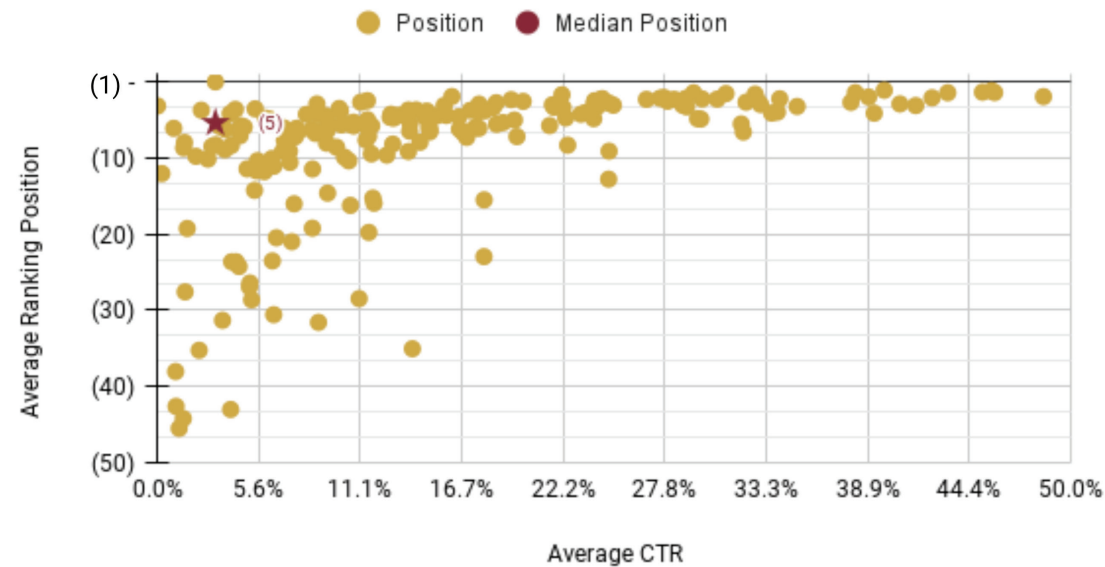
Non-branded keywords garner many more impressions (87.09%) compared to branded keywords (12.91%). Despite this, branded keywords make up 56% of organic traffic (clicks). This suggests that higher education websites are highly visible for a wide range of generic search queries. **It also indicates that there is great potential for schools to build awareness with new prospective students through content that targets non-branded queries**—especially as these students are likely brand agnostic and are at a critical stage in their journey as they compare options and build familiarity with multiple institutions through Google Search.

On the other hand, this data also suggests that although the pool of students searching for branded keywords is smaller, those students are more likely to click through to the site. **This implies a strong opportunity to capture and convert these users through the strategic use of branded queries throughout content.**

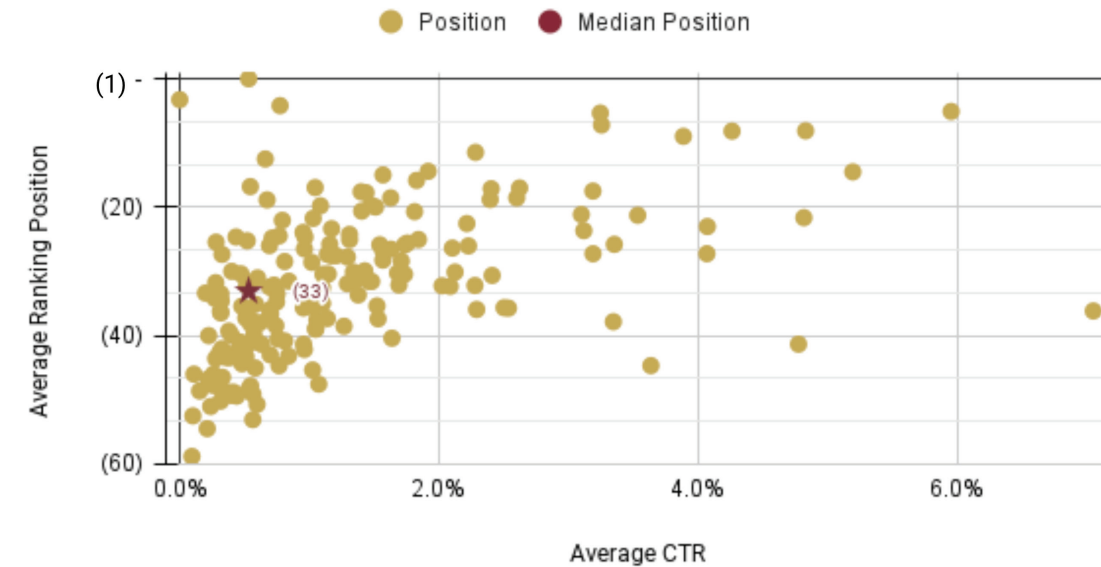


Branded vs. Non-Branded Keyword Ranking Position vs. CTR

Branded Keyword Ranking Position vs. CTR



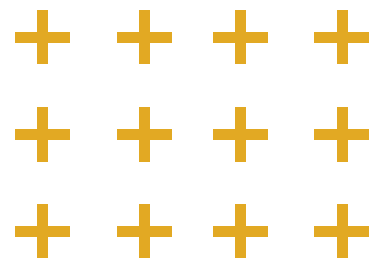
Non-Branded Keyword Ranking Position vs. CTR



+ Better Ranking Position Supports a Stronger CTR

These scatter plots illustrate the relationship between ranking position and click-through rate (CTR) for branded and non-branded terms. Branded queries tend to rank higher in the SERP (within the first page), whereas non-branded queries tend to rank lower in the SERP (within pages 3-5). This is also evident when comparing the average position ranking for branded and non-branded queries, which is represented by the maroon star on each graph. The average ranking for a higher education institution’s branded keyword is 5, whereas the average position ranking for non-branded keywords is 33.

Additionally, branded terms have the potential for higher overall CTR, while non-branded terms tend to have a CTR of between 1-2%. **The data suggests that although branded terms yield a higher CTR, higher education institutions have increased mobility in improving ranking position for non-branded terms.**



Branded vs. Non-Branded Keyword Impressions, Clicks, and CTR by Position

Putting Data Into Perspective

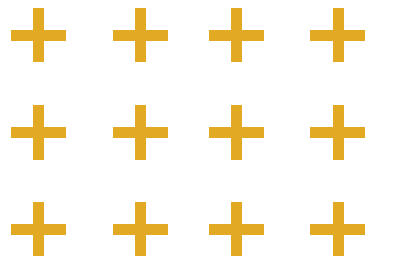
+ Median versus Average

To offer context for the following graphs and analysis, here is a brief overview of the difference between median and average.

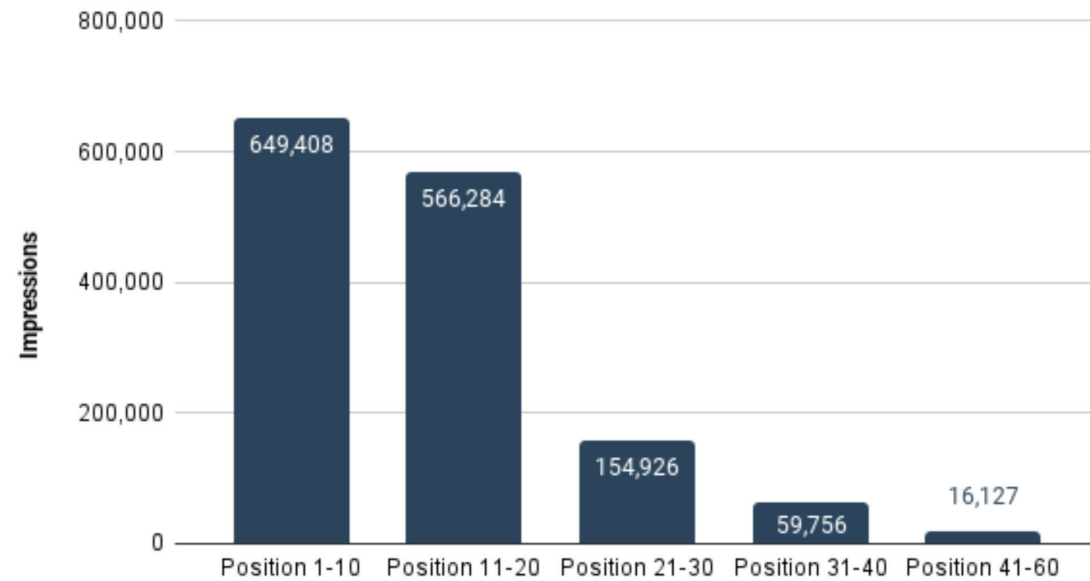
The median represents the middle value in a sorted dataset. It can be useful when dealing with skewed distributions or data containing outliers since it's less influenced by extreme values, providing a more accurate and insightful depiction.

The average takes into account every data point and is ideal for symmetrically distributed data.

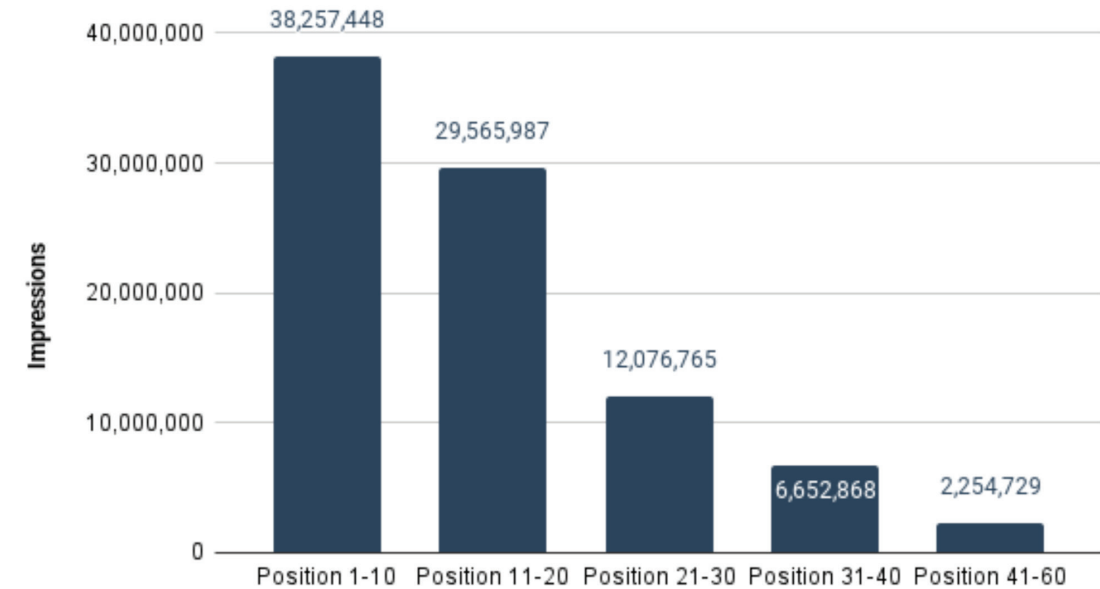
For our purposes, we relied on the median to most accurately represent our data, specifically impressions, clicks, and CTR by position.



Branded Keywords: Median Impressions by Position



Non-Branded Keywords: Median Impressions by Position

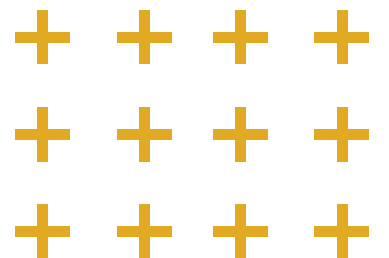


As a reminder, these graphs do not represent the total amount of impressions generated within each positional range, rather they depict the statistical median impressions for all queries ranking within that position.

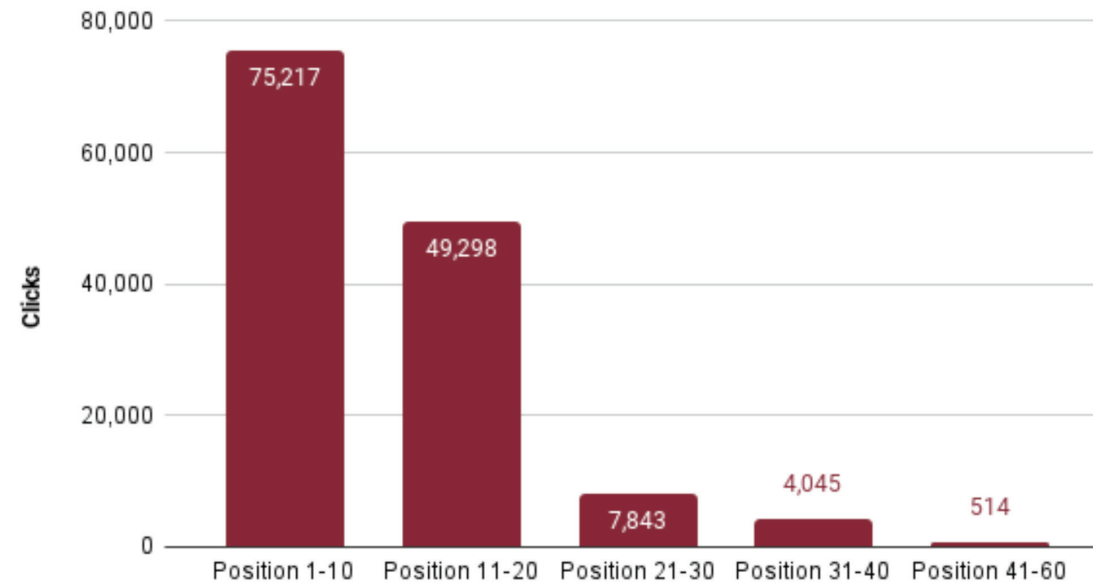
+ Non-Branded Keywords Build Institutional Awareness

Non-branded keywords have significantly higher impressions across all positions compared to branded keywords. This insight indicates that prospective students commonly search with broad, non-branded queries along their college search journey. **Institutions ranking highly for non-branded queries have the potential to build brand awareness and affinity with a larger audience of prospective students.**

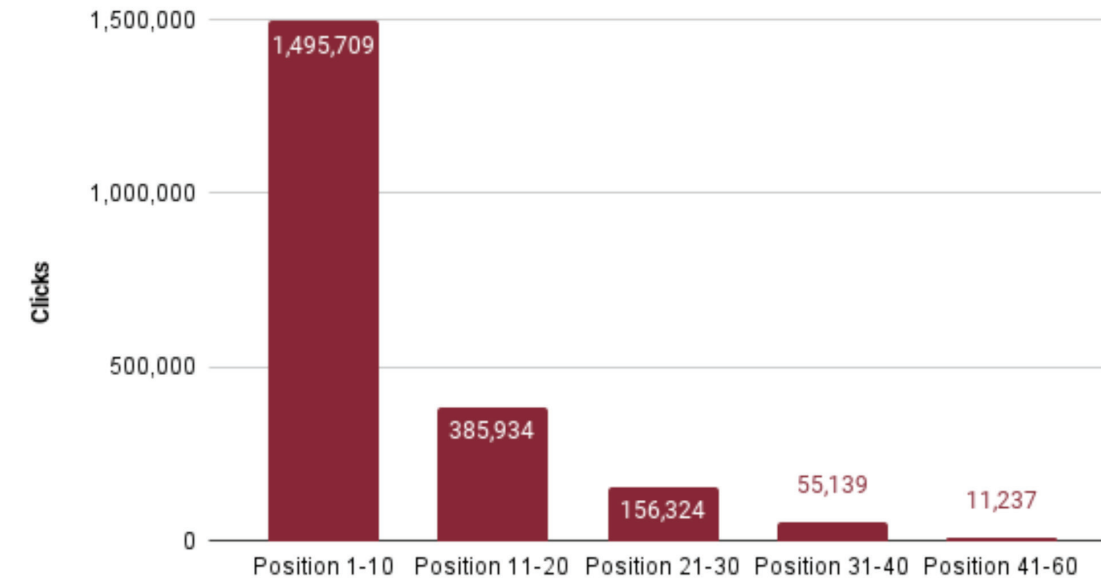
While branded keywords have fewer overall impressions, the distribution of impressions is predominantly in positions 1 through 20. Though branded queries may not garner as much visibility in organic search results, we hypothesize that the quality of traffic and potential to convert is high, as prospective students using branded search queries likely have stronger brand recognition and interest.



Branded Keywords: Median Clicks by Position



Non-Branded Keywords: Median Clicks by Position



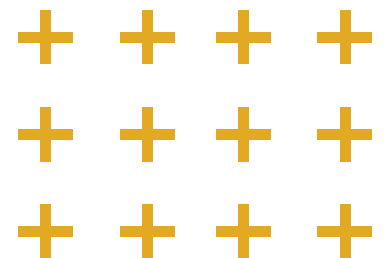
As a reminder, these graphs do not represent the total amount of impressions generated within each positional range, rather they depict the statistical median impressions for all queries ranking within that position.

+ Higher Rankings, More Clicks

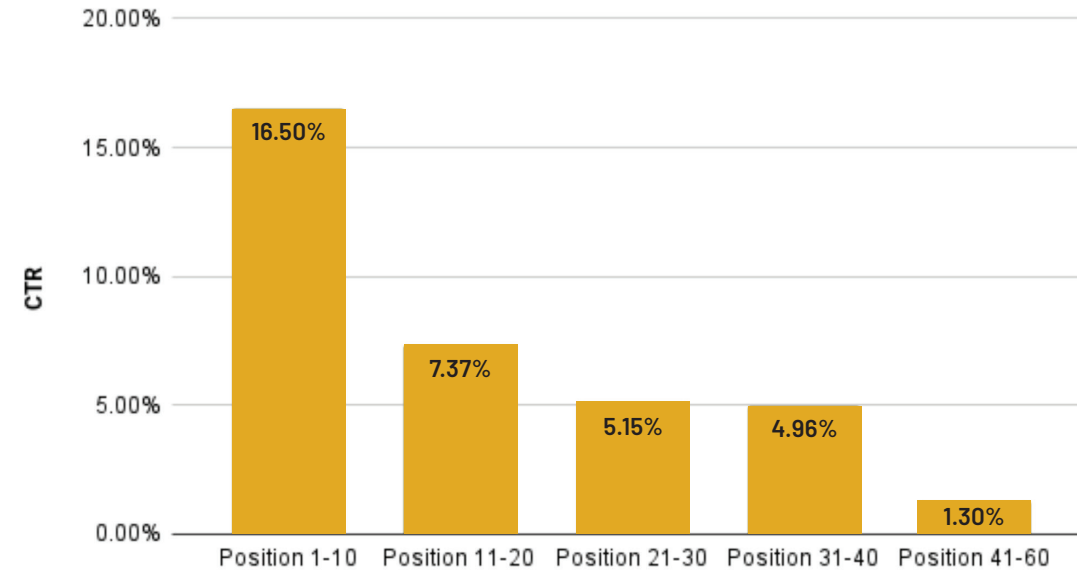
When comparing a higher education institution’s branded and non-branded clicks, it is evident that non-branded keywords receive significantly more clicks in the top positions than branded keywords. This is unsurprising since non-branded keywords typically have a much higher monthly search volume. However, non-branded clicks have a more drastic drop-off in clicks as the position decreases.

This indicates the importance of ranking higher for non-branded keywords to capture user interest and organic traffic.

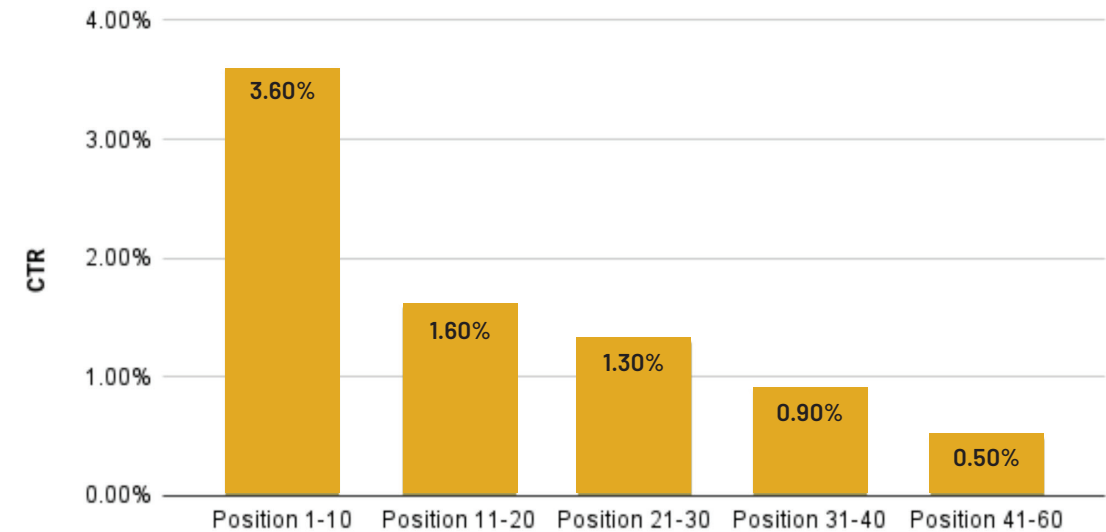
Alternatively, the more gradual decline in clicks for branded keywords suggests that **prospective students searching branded queries are more intentional and more likely to dig deeper into the SERP to find what they need.**



Branded Keywords: Median Click-Through Rate by Position



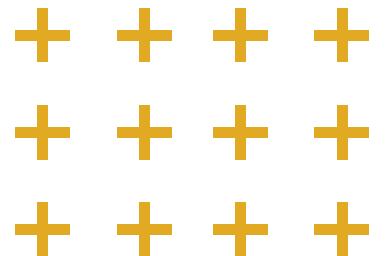
Non-Branded Keywords: Median Click-Through Rate by Position



+ Branded Keywords Drive Higher CTRs

Branded keywords have a much higher CTR across all positions compared to non-branded keywords, especially in the top 10 positions. On average, these top-ranking branded keywords garner a CTR of 16.5%. **This suggests that users searching for branded keywords are more likely to click on the results, indicating strong brand awareness and higher level of intentionality.**

For non-branded keywords, the CTR is relatively low, remaining at 3.6% for queries in the top 10 positions. This drastic difference between branded and non-branded CTRs emphasizes that the SERP landscape for non-branded queries is increasingly more competitive than branded keywords. **It also reaffirms the idea that colleges and universities that want to improve their non-branded CTR need to rank higher.**



Use Cases

1

Problem: The CTR for content targeting branded keywords is below the industry benchmark.

+ Solution

If your content targeting branded keywords has a CTR below the industry benchmark of 13%, the first place you should look to diagnose the issue is ranking position.

We know that the average ranking position for content targeting branded keywords is position 5. Review the content's ranking position to determine where it falls compared to the average. If the content ranks lower than position 5, you may need to work on boosting ranking position to see meaningful changes in traffic and CTR.

Alternatively, if your content ranks in position 5 or higher, the culprit for your low CTR may be hiding elsewhere. The next place to check is your content's title tag and meta description. Since these are often a student's first impression of your content, optimize these elements with relevant keywords, enticing language, and a clear call to action.

Be mindful of keyword cannibalization, a common issue for content targeting branded keywords. This occurs when multiple pages on your site rank for the same keywords. To avoid this situation, ensure that the content on each page is specific and helpful and that information isn't unnecessarily spread across multiple disparate pages.

2

Problem: The CTR for content targeting non-branded keywords is below the industry benchmark.

+ Solution

If you are writing a webpage targeting non-branded queries, but the page's CTR falls below the 0.9% benchmark, it's time to reconsider your keyword strategy. Chances are your current content does not incorporate proper search queries, resulting in a low ranking position and CTR for those target keywords.

Your first step is to perform keyword research, which allows you to scout out the existing SERP landscape and discover the search language of prospective students. Choose keywords that both closely align with the purpose of your page and have a healthy search volume and strategically incorporate them into header tags, body copy, and the metadata that appears on the SERP. However, non-branded keywords are a double-edged sword. While they have higher search volumes than branded queries, they are competitive and increasingly difficult to rank within the top 10 or even 20. This presents the opportunity to explore what competitors are ranking above your site, evaluate their content and keyword strategy, and then create something better.

In SEO, there are certain variables that are beyond your institution's control, such as what terms students are searching and what your competitors are producing. But by taking a highly strategic approach, you can strengthen your website's content to both provide prospective students with essential information and to outperform competitors.

Use Cases

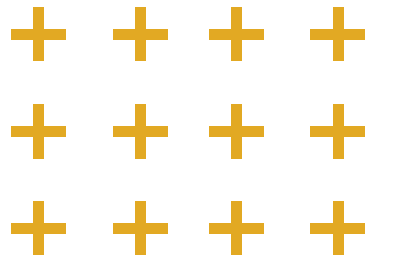
3

Problem: The CTR for a page is significantly higher than the established benchmark.

+ Solution

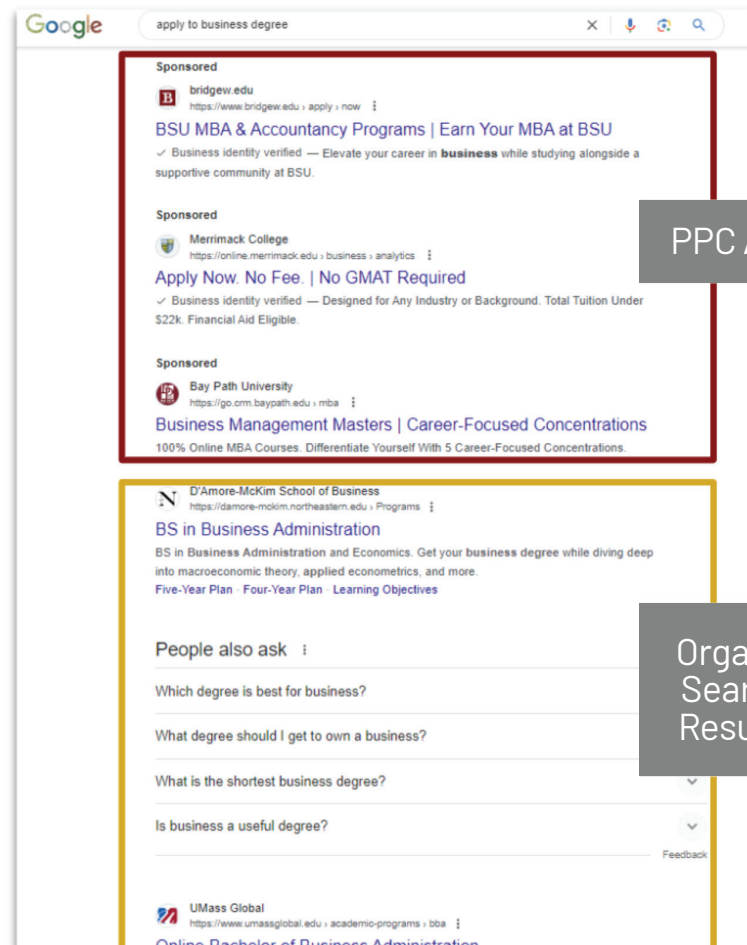
If the CTR for a web page is trending far above the 2.7% benchmark, this can signal a need to investigate the page's performance. A high CTR, though it may appear to be promising, can suggest that your content only ranks for branded keywords. Since branded queries typically only reach prospective students who already know your institution, this can stunt the expansion of your brand awareness and student reach.

To balance out your approach, we recommend performing keyword research to find the non-branded keywords that best fit your page's purpose and audience and incorporating them into the content. This will support the growth of your organic visibility and help introduce your school to a new generation of prospective students.



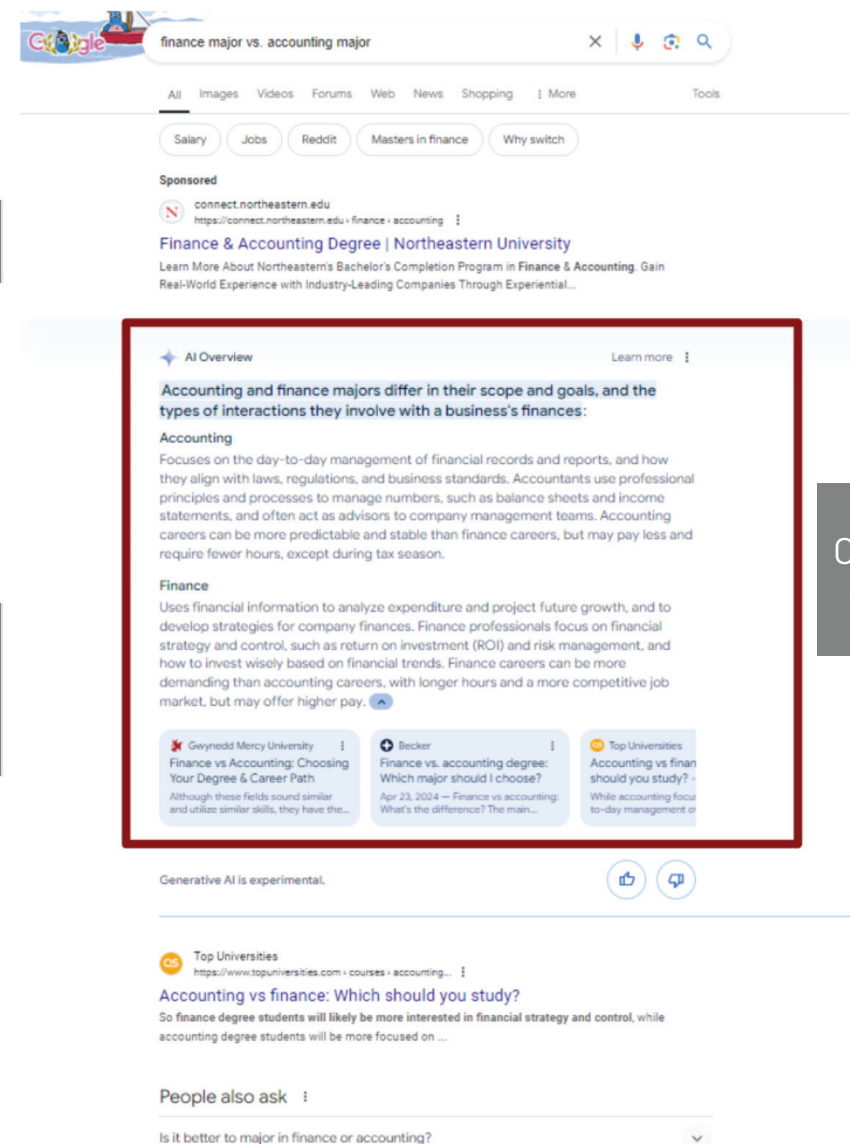
The Impact of AI Overviews

How AI Overviews Affect Organic Traffic



PPC Ads

Organic Search Results



AI Overviews and Link Cards

Organic Search Results

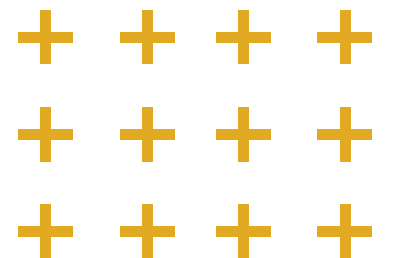
These images show how the SERP changed after [the rollout of AI Overviews in May](#). AI Overviews typically appear after paid search ads, pushing regular organic search results further down on the SERP.

The data of this benchmark report was collected before the rollout of AI Overviews. Currently, there is limited data available to accurately measure AI Overviews' impact on organic traffic.

Therefore, it's difficult to set benchmarks for these new AI features in organic search. However, Carnegie is working on ways to measure and analyze them.

Will AI Overviews increase or decrease organic traffic to higher education websites? What types of keywords might trigger AI features?

Please look forward to our 2025 report!



Conclusion

+ So What?

Now that we've equipped you with these benchmarks, you can tackle optimizing your content and make informed decisions about your marketing efforts.

This is just the beginning. How you use these benchmarks is up to you. We hope they help you measure where you're at and guide the way toward where you're headed.

Remember, though they are helpful baselines that facilitate thoughtful analysis of your content, these benchmarks don't cap your site's potential performance in organic search results. SEO is a long-term strategy that requires consistent attention.

[Explore Carnegie's SEO services](#) and receive personalized support as you optimize your institution's website.

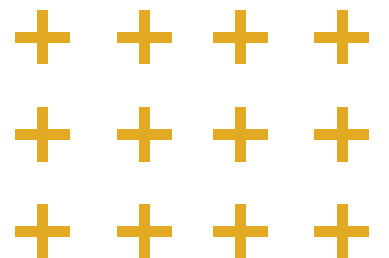
+ Other SEO Resources

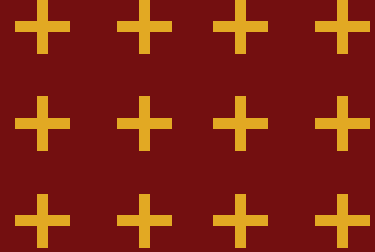
Our experts actively contribute to the higher ed SEO and content marketing industry. Read their blogs, including:

- [Measuring SEO Performance 101: Metrics](#)
- [How to Create High-Performing Academic Program Pages on Your Higher Education Website](#)
- [How to Optimize Higher Education Websites for Google's AI-Powered Search Generative Experience](#)
- [A Higher-ed Marketers Guide To SEO Keyword Research and Strategy](#)

In 2022, we surveyed over 6,000 prospective undergraduate students and 2,000 prospective graduate students about the way they use search engines and college and university websites in their search journey. Learn more about our findings:

- [SEO + Website Impact on Prospective Undergraduate Students' College Search](#)
- [SEO + Website Impact on Prospective Graduate Students' College Search](#)





Thank You!



carnegiehighered.com

CARNEGIE

