

# CLIQUE

HIGHER ED MARKETING

# Where Did All the Students Go?

# Everything Is Different.

When looking at the current state of higher education, you'll hear:

Fears of a "demographic cliff."

# #9

The United States has fallen to ninth in the proportion of its 25-to-64-year-old population with any postsecondary degree.

Source: NCES.ED.Gov

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**But you'll also hear how enrollment is actually rising.**

**5.5%**

Among the incoming freshman class in the fall of 2024, enrollment increased 5.5 percent, or 130,000 students, the data shows.

Source: [NCES.ED.Gov](https://nces.ed.gov)

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# Here's what we know

after speaking with higher education  
professionals and students.

We found key insights to help navigate this changing landscape.



# The Role of the Website Has Changed.

Students now rate websites about equally at all stages (search, application, decision) instead of overwhelmingly using them first.

# 75%

of prospective students rated a college's website as important or very important in their decision-making process.

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz

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# The Role of the Website Has Changed.

63%

of students said they eliminated a college from consideration based on the quality of its website.

Source: Acuity

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# The Role of the Website Has Changed.

# 100%

Your website is also the only place where you can own 100% of the conversation.

**Convenience > Loyalty**

If key details aren't easily found on a college's site, students will quickly bounce to another source.

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# Authentic Connections Are Everything.

## Future students want to hear from current students

— and trust user-generated content over polished marketing.

## Organic “micro-influencers”

— are already shaping opinions when teens search college hashtags on TikTok or YouTube.

## Colleges that empower student ambassadors

— showcasing real student stories, takeovers, and Q&As – tap into this authenticity at low cost.

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# E-Mail Is Awfully Stubborn.

**80%**

of high school students check their email daily.

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz

**87%**

of 12th graders open college emails.

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz



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# Text Messaging Is Increasingly Effective.

# 15%

growth in text messaging as an early info source for discovery.

Source: Encoura

## Texts Still Prevail

**Two-thirds** of Gen Z favor text over email for important info.

They are **3×** more likely to respond to a text.

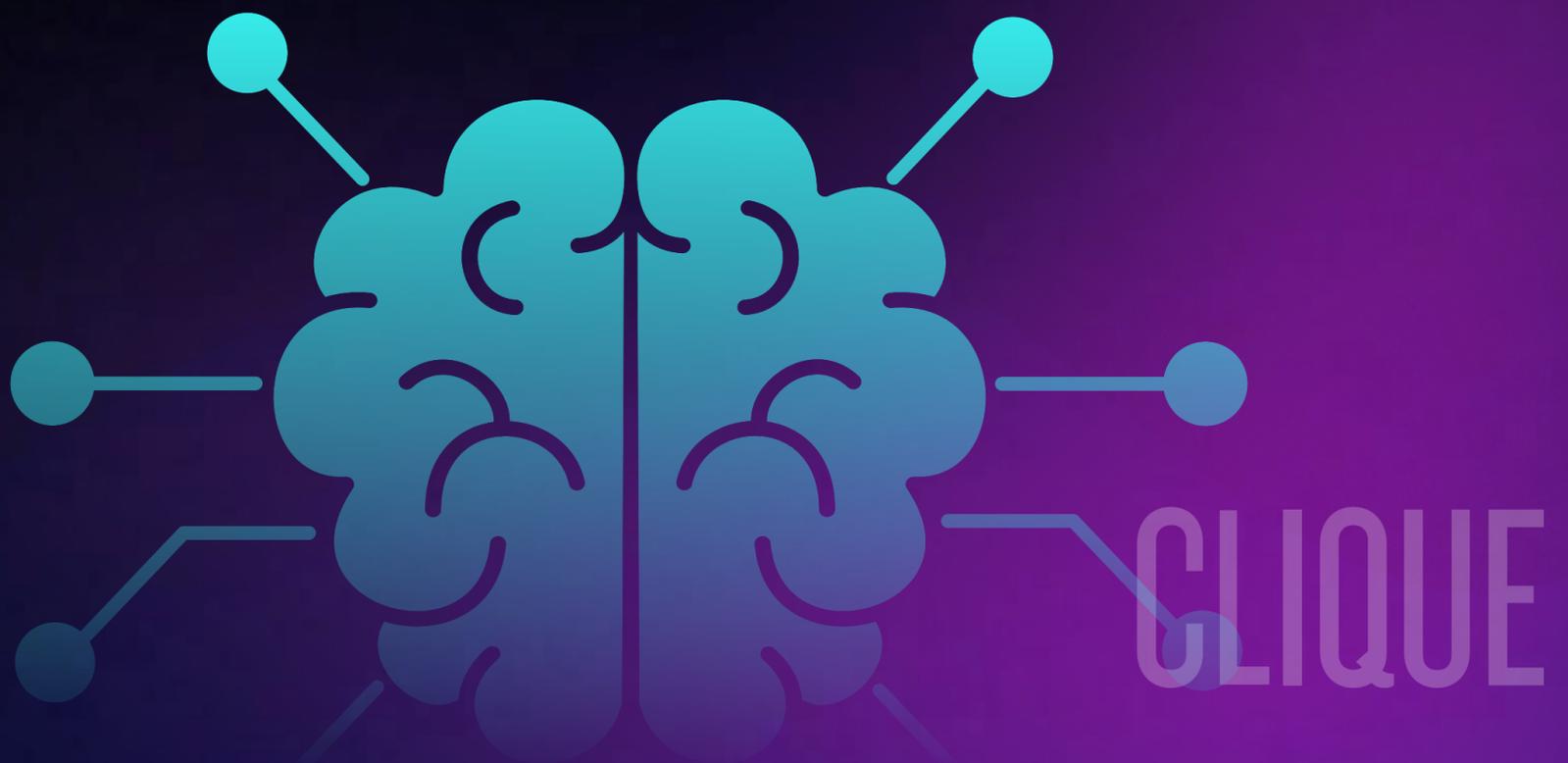


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# AI Is Rewriting How Students Get Answers.

The explosion of AI tools like ChatGPT has changed how students discover information.

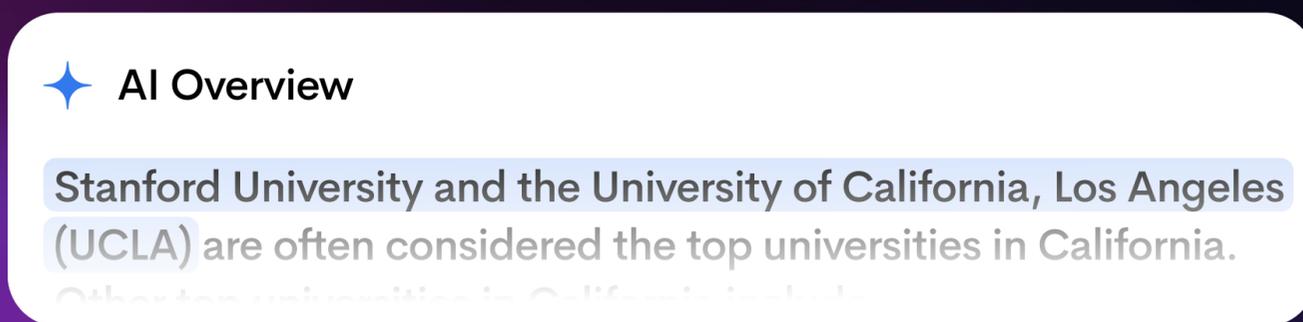
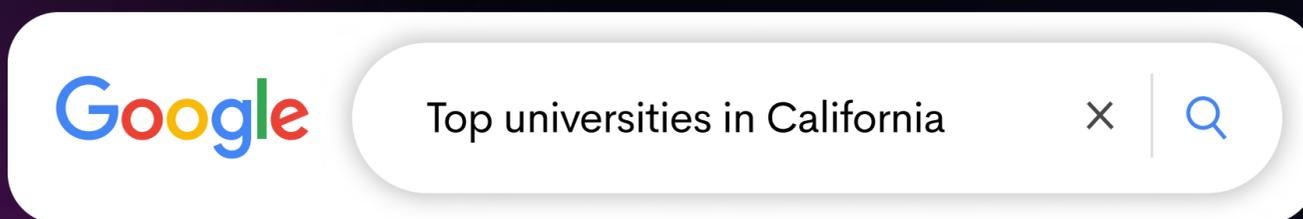
AI is effectively "pre-qualifying" prospective students in the search stage.



# The Takeaway:

Those who do visit are more intent-driven, which is positive, but overall traffic may decline.

Casual information-seekers get their answers from AI summaries...



...while truly interested students click through to college sites.



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# Social's Growing Influence.

TikTok has rapidly emerged as a college search tool.

**3 in 4**

Gen Z students use TikTok for discovery.

**51%**

favor it over Google for searches.

#CollegeLife alone had over **30.5 billion views** as of late 2024.

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# Social's Growing Influence.

The organic reach on TikTok means even micro-influencers can shape perceptions.

**80%**

of students use Instagram daily. They're often using it early in the process to gauge the college's vibe.

**27%**

of teens say YouTube videos significantly influenced where they applied or enrolled.

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# Social as Search.

Reliance on social and peer content is rising.

**40%**

of Gen Z is now turning to TikTok or Instagram instead of Google.

**74%**

use social media in their college planning.

Source: Encoura

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# Social as Search.

YouTube is the #1 external platform for early college search.

(Followed by Instagram and TikTok)

Source: Encoura

2019 → 2024

Social media, texting, and virtual events saw **double-digit** percentage jumps as preferred early-info sources.

Source: Encoura

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# The Google You Knew Is Long Gone.

## The Shift

- Featured snippets
- Knowledge panels
- The new Search Generative Experience

## The Result

- "Zero-click" searches
- More indirect interactions with your university
- Less voluminous but more qualified traffic

In 2024, Google put even more weight on Experience, Expertise, Authority, and Trustworthiness (E-E-A-T).

**This is good for universities!**

Regular content audits and updates are more essential than ever.

Stale or thin content may be ignored by both Google and AI.

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# SEO Strategy Is Shifting from Pure Keywords to Answer Optimization.

Anticipate the questions students ask and provide rich, credible answers.

## Broad Queries

Best Colleges  
For X Major



LIKELY PULLED FROM  
AGGREGATOR LIST

VS

## Branded Queries

Mizzou  
Application Fee



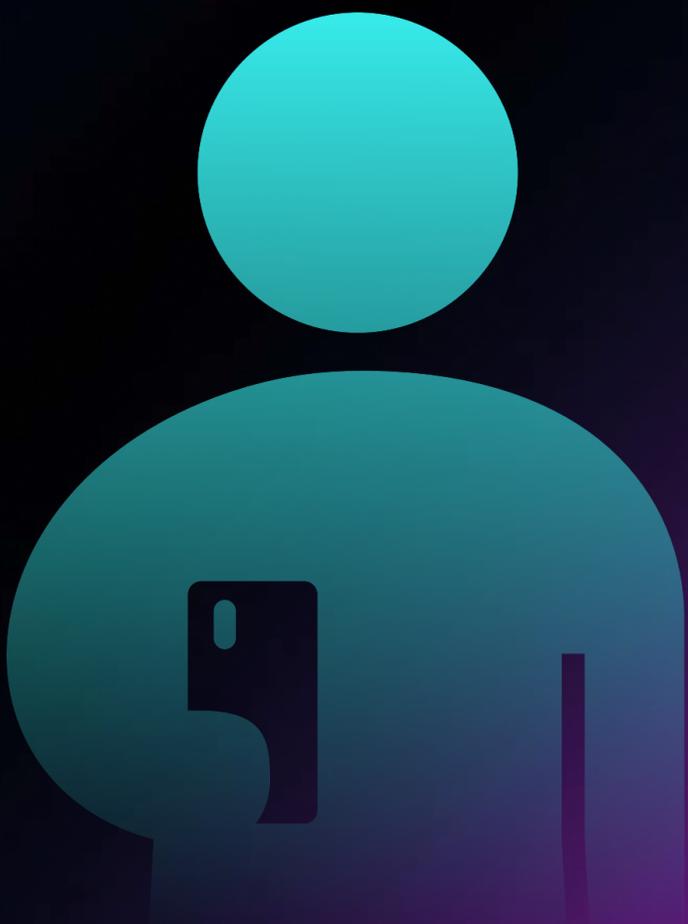
LIKELY PULLED FROM  
YOUR SITE

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# The Rise of Private Communities.

**These spaces let students ask candid questions** (about dorms, professors, social life) and get unfiltered answers from current students or fellow applicants.

Colleges can facilitate this by promoting official groups or partnering with **platforms that connect prospects.**



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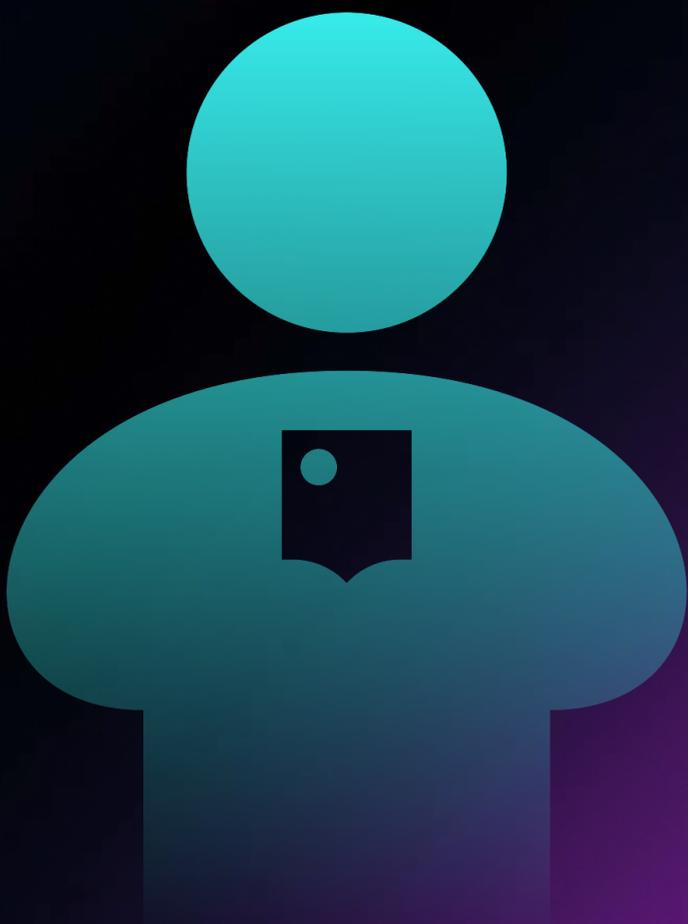
# The Rise of Private Communities.

## Other platforms.

**"X":** Less a discovery space for high schoolers

**Snapchat:** Quick and fun, but not factoring into decisions in a major way

**LinkedIn:** Increasingly important for soon-to-be grads, graduate students, and continuing education



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# The Takeaway:

Your website, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, texts, email, and AI are where it's at.

## What works?

- Student Takeovers & "Day in the Life"
- Short Tips or Myth-busting
- Interactive Q&As



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# The Other Channels.

The search expectation has been raised.

- AI qualities
- Type-ahead
- Auto-complete
- Synonyms, personalization, more

Explore websites, people, and locations



What are you looking for?



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# The Other Channels.

Chatbots work.

90%

found websites chats helpful.

Landing pages must be more focused.

- Stories straight from students
- Third-party validators
- Cost transparency
- Content tailored to the search term

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# Insights from Real Students and Industry Experts

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(On content reuse across platforms)

**Any type of existing content you already have; Recycling, repurposing, and making your life easier is really key.**

**Carly Kramer, Marketing & Community Manager at The Garage, Northwestern**

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(On platform prioritization)

**You want to stay at the top, but how do you do it? Data. We have to figure out what is working and what isn't working.**

*Abe, Web Manager at McMurry University*

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(On relatable student content)

**Finding that comfortability  
through relating to certain  
things, through seeing other  
students' perspectives...  
always resonated with me.**

Melanie, Student at Loyola University

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(On digital communication growth)

**We tell human stories.  
It's students seeing  
what students have  
done, and that's the best  
marketing you can get.**

Carly Kramer, Marketing & Community Manager at The  
Garage, Northwestern

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(On student empowerment)

**If someone is able to give you  
a microphone, give you a  
place to speak and be heard, I  
think that's everything.**

Melanie, Student at Loyola University

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# What Do We Make of All This?

It's about human connection.



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