E26
AI ENGAGE FALL SUMMIT
ONLINE EVENT

The Invisible Applicant

Winning Students in the Age of the AI Answer Layer

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Meet Marc, 2036

Operations manager, 41

15 years at a regional distribution company. One level below where he wants to be.

Data Analytics Certificate

Starts Monday. Online, 6 months, half paid by his employer.

His agent did the research

It spotted the skill gap 18 months ago and started working on it.



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What his AI Agent considered



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18 MONTHS OF RESEARCH
3 APPLICATIONS
0 INQUIRIES

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Meet Maya, 2036

High school senior, 17

Lives 3 hours from the nearest big city. First in her family to go to college.

Environmental science major

Committed in April to a school she's never visited.

Her agent started in 9th grade

She asked it what she could do with a love of the ocean.



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What her AI Agent considered



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Same technology. Completely different definition of fit.

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Meet Jen, 2026

Server, 26

Picks up doubles 5 nights a week at Applebee's. Has done her friends' hair since high school.

Dreams of Cosmetology School

There was never a good time to look.

2 a.m. after a bad shift

Her manager cut her best section. She gets home and opens her phone.



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Jen's 2 a.m. search



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2 A.M.: SHE STARTS

3 A.M.: THREE FORMS

→ONE SCHOOL TEXTS QUICKLY

→ONE CALLS TOMORROW

→ONE EMAILS IN 2 WEEKS

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Two days later, her manager apologizes and the urgency is gone.

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First signal or final answer?

Marc, 2036

- 18 months of research
- His agent did the work
- First signal: his application, after he decided

Maya, 2036

- 4 years, starting in ninth grade
- Her agent did the work
- First signal: her application, after she decided

Jen, 2026

- Years of dreaming, 1 night of searching
- She did the work herself, on her phone
- First signal: her 3 a.m. form, before she decided

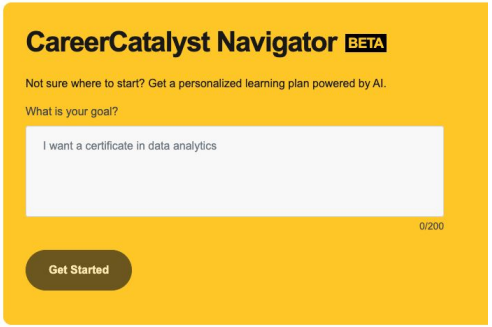
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This future is already being assembled



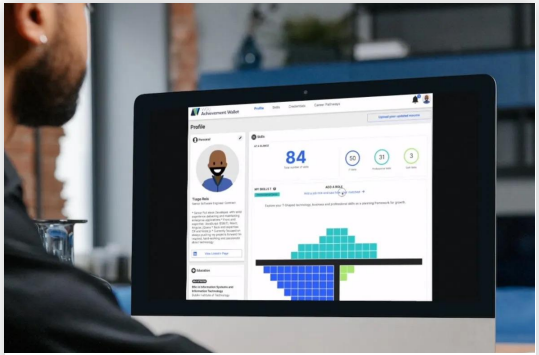
An agent that searches for you

Google information agents, launched in Search this summer



A path built from your job

ASU CareerCatalyst Navigator



A skills record that travels

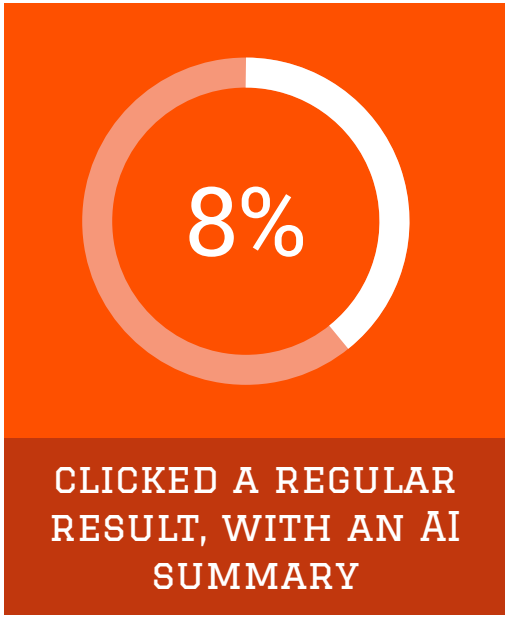
WGU Achievement Wallet, 140,000+ learners

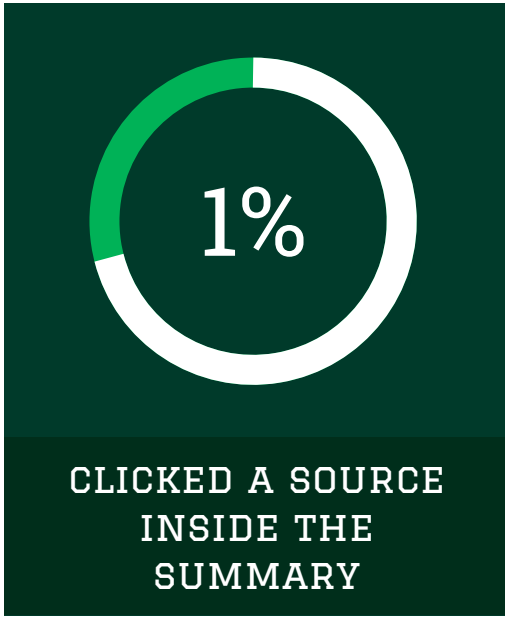
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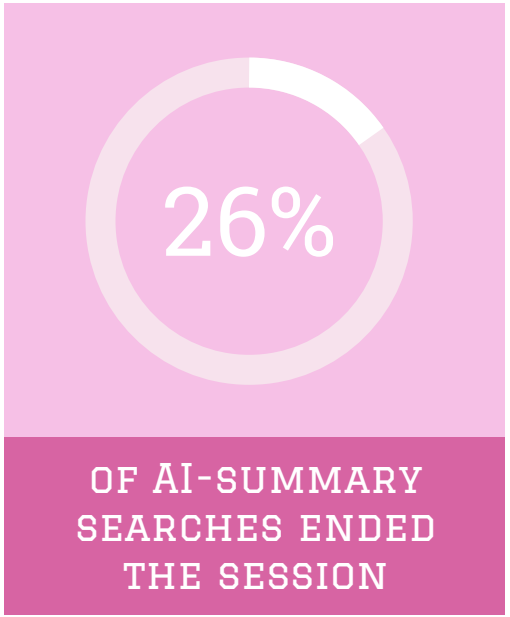
Where the answer forms

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The Google click that never happens

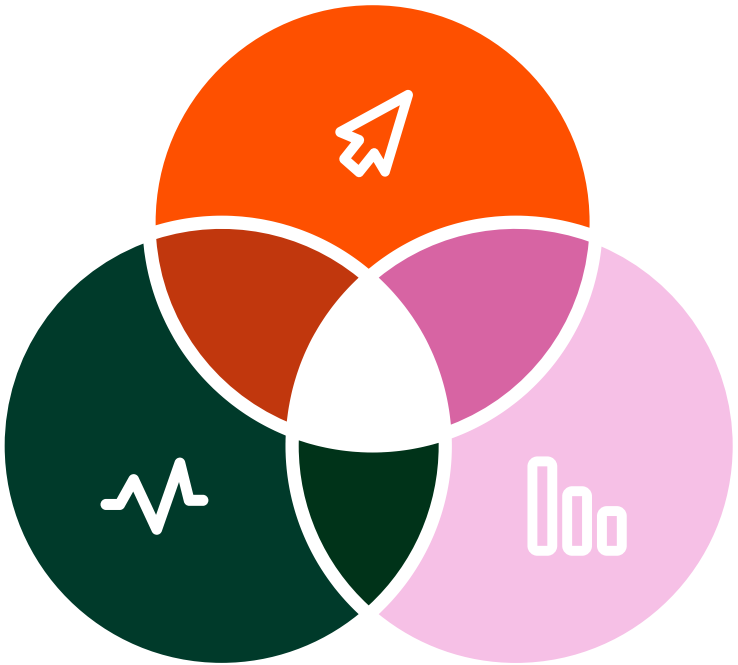






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Discovery moved into the answer



PEW – Behavior

47% fewer clicks when AI answers appear

EVERSPRING – Demand

Branded search down 22% across 120+ institutions

MANAFERRA – Adults

Google as a starting point fell from 73% to 62% in one year

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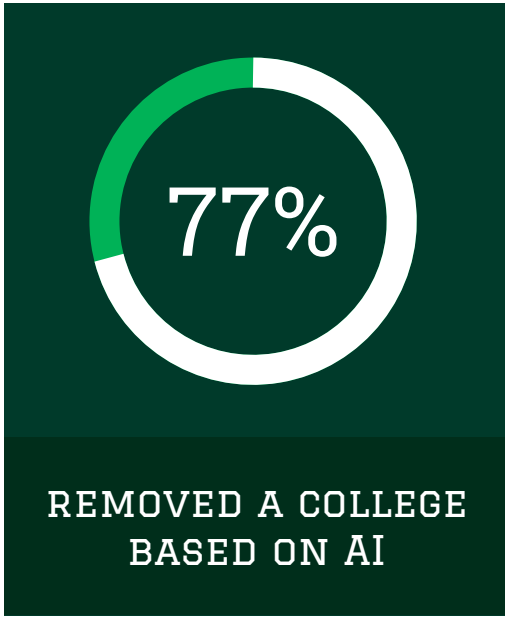
39%

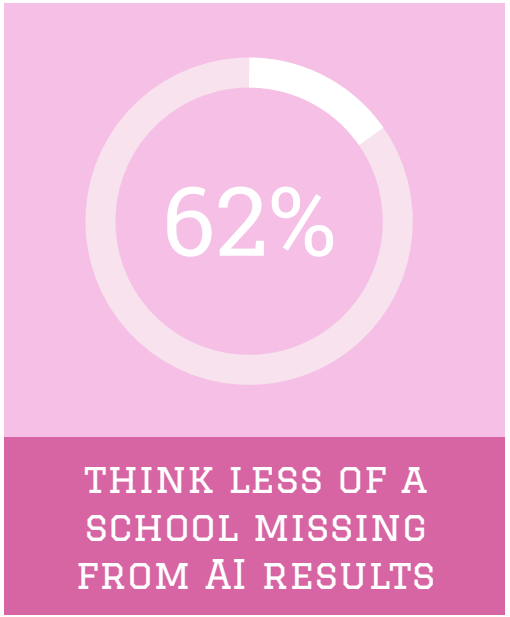
Adults considering continuing and online education who use AI search daily

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AI IS BOTH A RECRUITER AND A GATEKEEPER







MANAFERRA, ADULT LEARNER REPORT

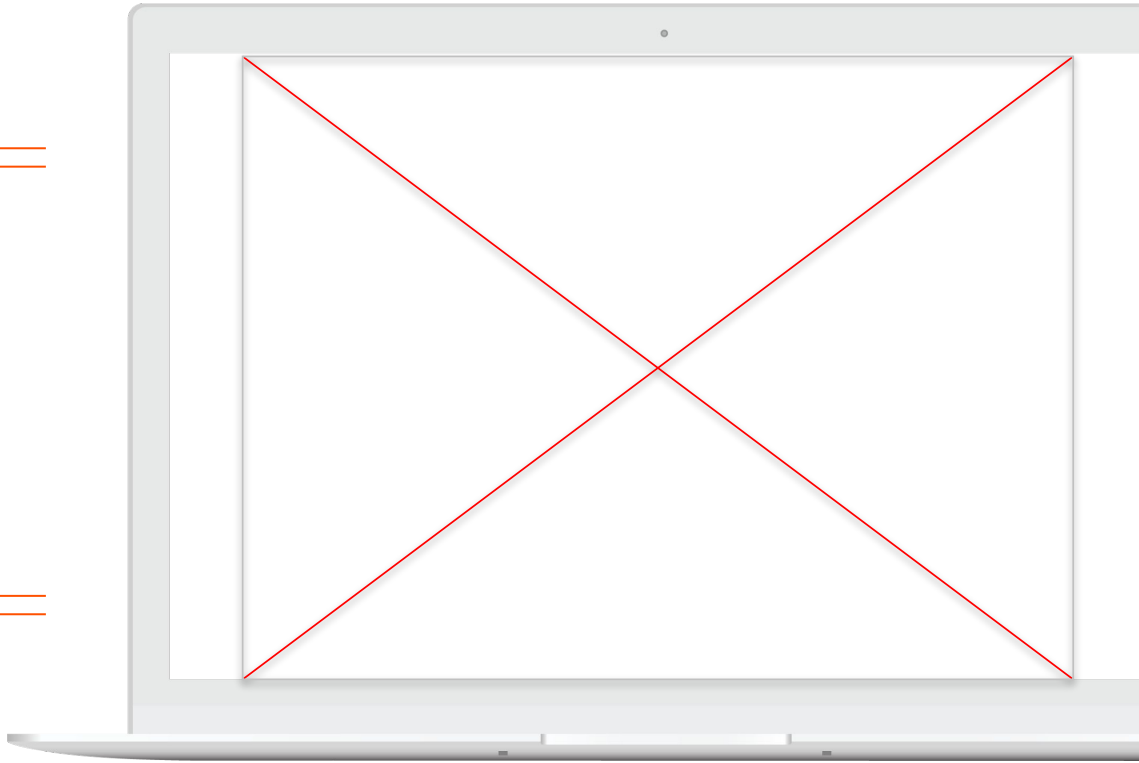
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Your website is one voice

3 in 10

citations that come from a school's own website, for top-performing schools

Manaferra's AI Index



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When the decision happens

CRISIS OFTEN STARTS THE SEARCH



Strada; Community College Research Center

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The 3-week window

Years of thinking

the career problem builds

The trigger

a bad shift, a layoff, a new boss

Under 3 weeks

55% reach out

(EducationDynamics)

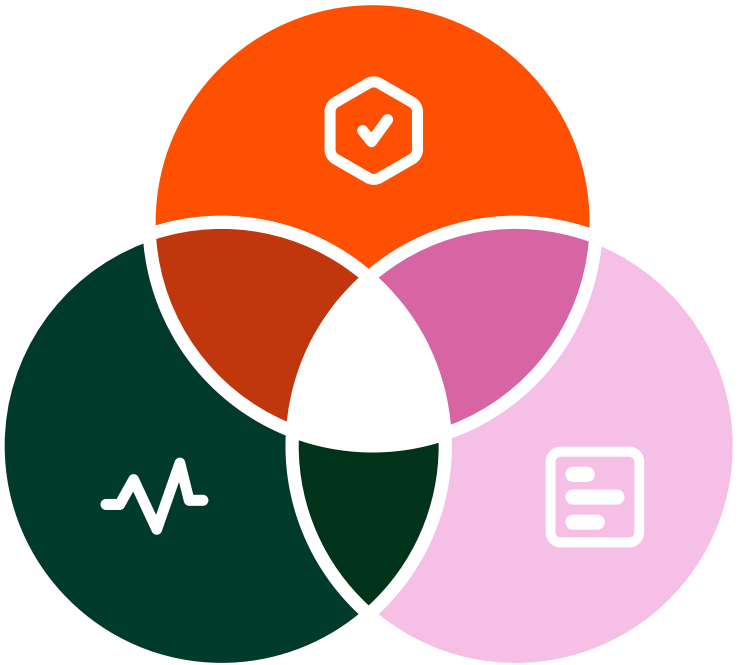
First to admit wins

72% enroll there

(EducationDynamics)

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The decision forms before you see them



Eduventures

Half decide before senior year

RNL

1 in 3 applicants are stealth

MANAFERRA

76% start their search with schools in mind

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Who learners want on the other end

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Working adults want a person for the hard part

WGU Labs

- 545 working adult students
- 76% want a person when something gets complicated
- 89% can tell a bot from a person

Tyton Partners

- AI is welcome for routine tasks
- People matter when the stakes go up

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A text at 2 a.m.? Great.

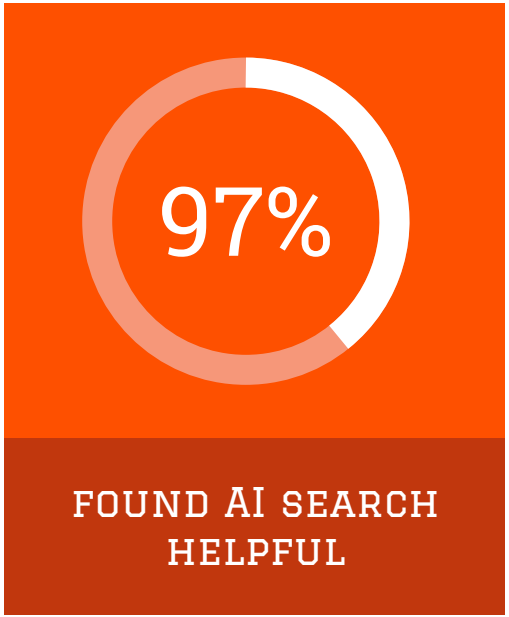
Whether I can pay for this and still work? I need to ask a person that.

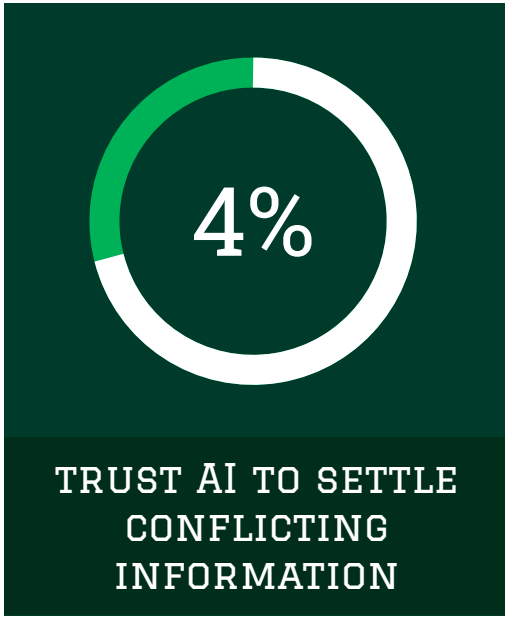
JEN, 26 · SERVER, FUTURE COSMETOLOGY STUDENT

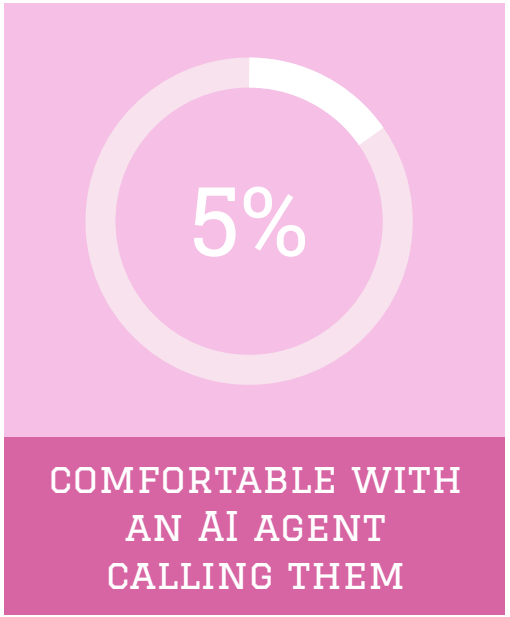


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Students use AI and trust people







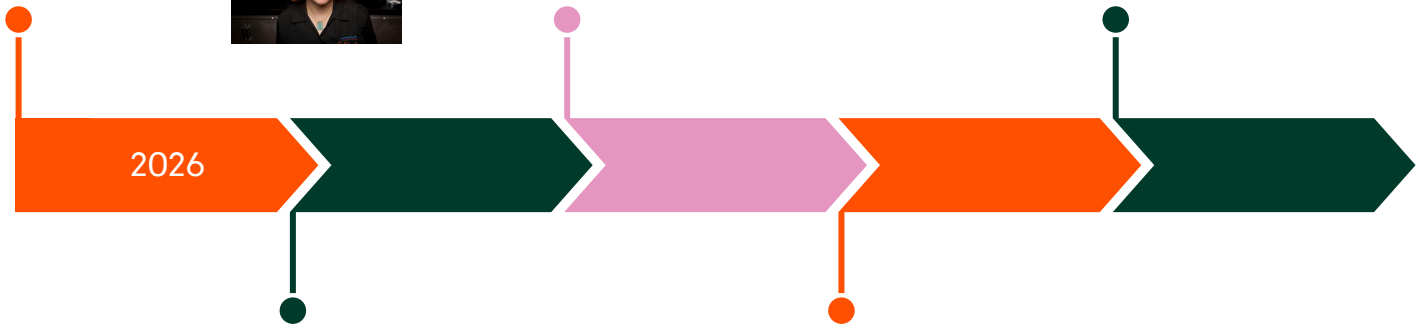
Manaferra; ZeeMee Student Pulse

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Where this is headed (projected)

Learners search for themselves.



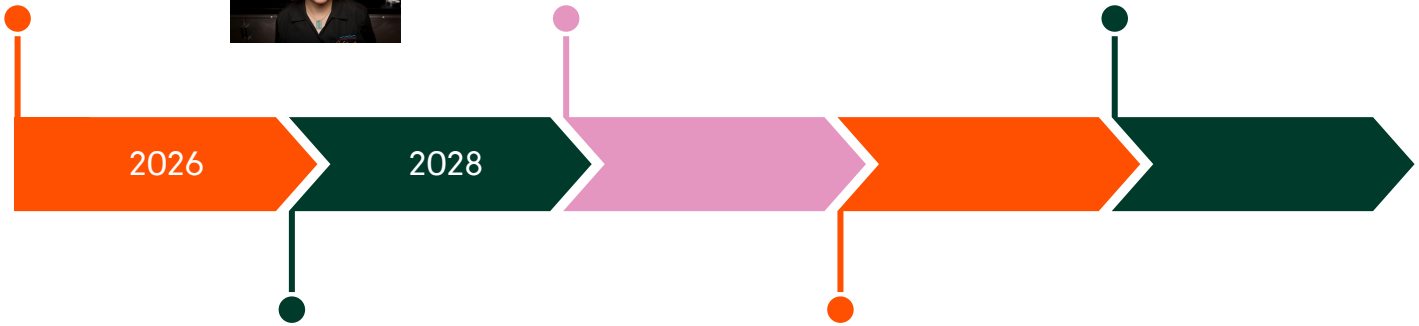


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Where this is headed (projected)

Learners search for themselves.

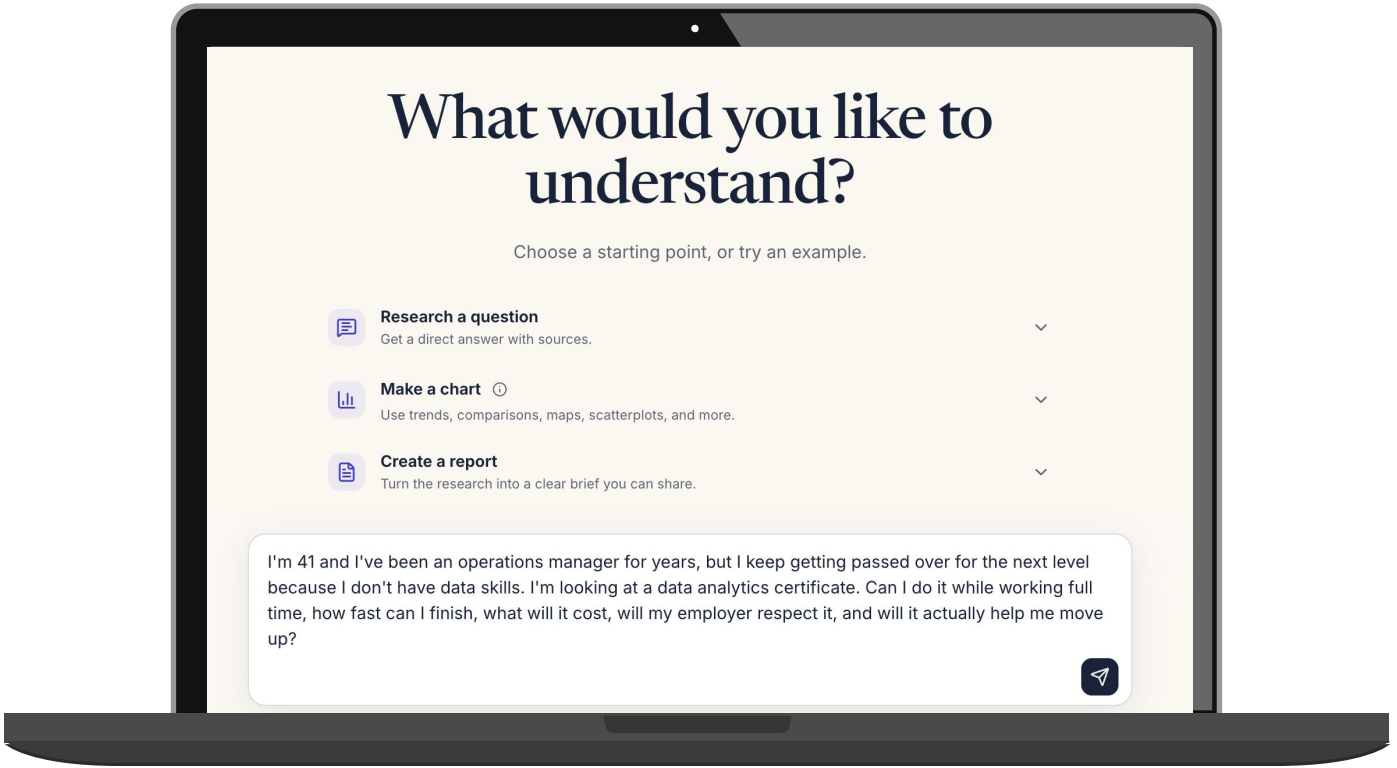




Agents do the first pass.

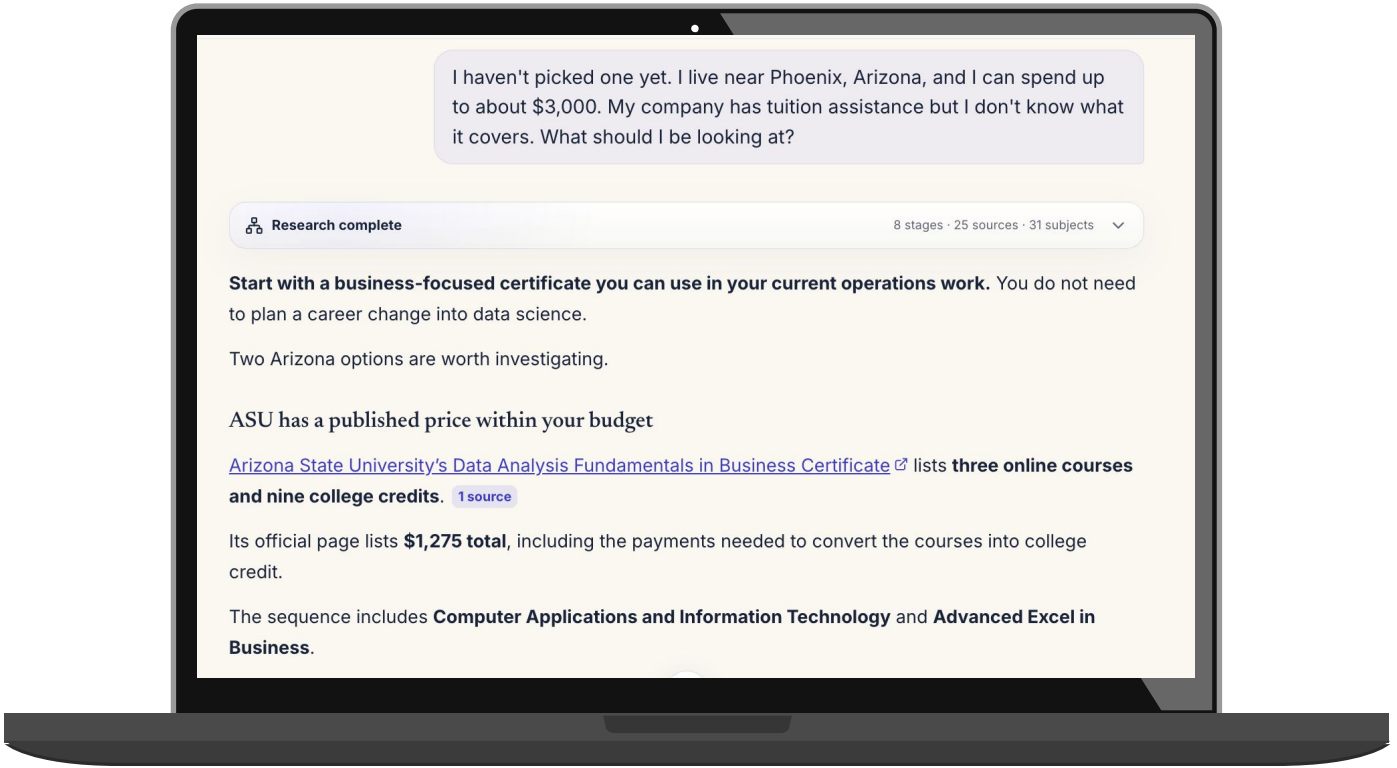
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Agents do the first pass



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Agents do the first pass



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Where this is headed (projected)

Learners search for themselves.



Campuses run agents too.

2026 | 2028 | 2030 | 2033 | 2036

Agents do the first pass.

Agents talk to agents.

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Where this is headed (projected)

Learners search for themselves.



Agents do the first pass.

Campuses run agents too.

Agents talk to agents.

Information is everywhere. A person is scarce.





2026 | 2028 | 2030 | 2033 | 2036

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The proactive playbook

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"Proactive"

Our Definition
Acting before the learner is visible

Maricopa Quick Start
10 days, 40 hours, built with Intel and TSMC

Your New Metric
Time from workforce signal to a program someone can start



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Follow the Learner

Before they search

Show up in the answer

Before you can measure it

Defend your brand

When they check you out

One source of truth

When it gets hard

Put a person there

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Step 1: Show up in the answer



Ask Marc's questions

Answer them on your website

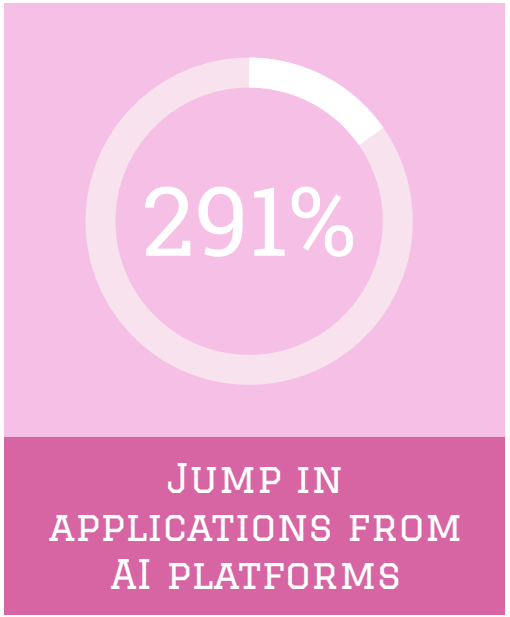
Earn mentions off your site

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University of Kansas School of Business showed up







Everspring

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Imagine an agent trying to book a visit at your number one school, and the school blocks it.

The agent says, 'Let's try your second choice.'

Nick DeNardis, Senior Director of Digital Experience and Innovation, Wayne State University



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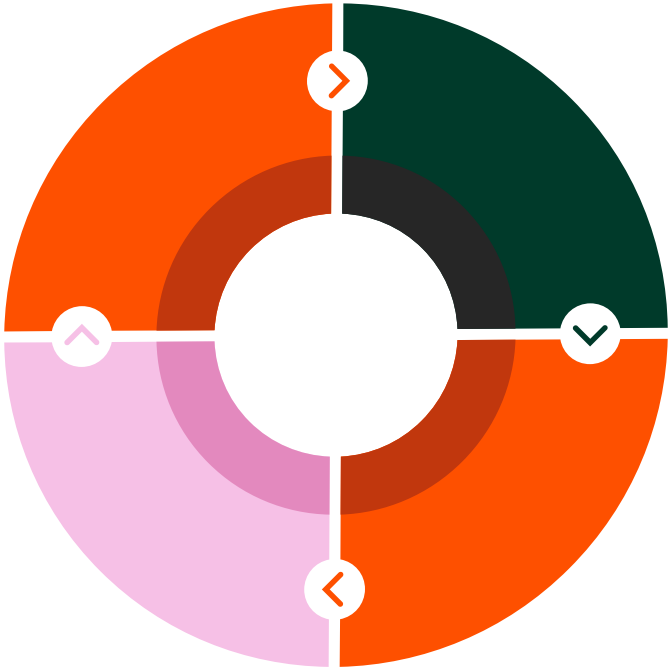
Step 1: Action Items

Write 25 questions

With admissions,
in learners' words

Follow the citations

List the sites AI cites, then fix
what's there



Get a baseline

Your school's
AI visibility score

Let agents in

Can an agent read your pages
and book a tour?

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Step 1: Action Items

What can you verify about Spa Tech Institute's massage therapy program



I can verify reported massage-therapy certificates and several current program details for Spa Tech Institute. Details vary by campus.

Westborough lists two massage programs

The official Westborough page lists **650-hour Therapeutic Massage** and **770-hour Holistic Massage** programs. 1 source

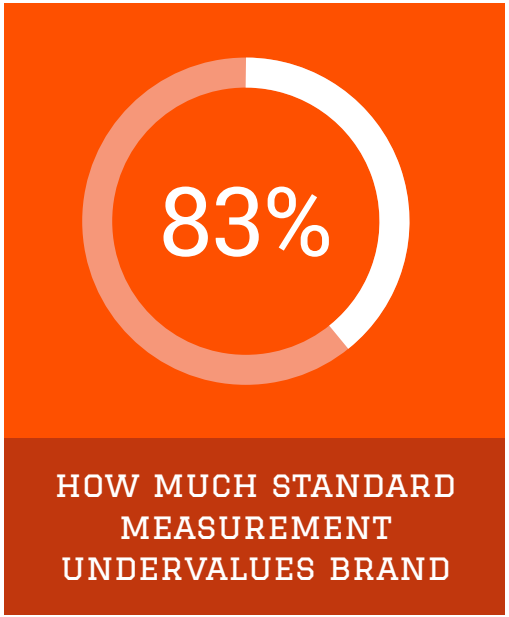
It lists full-time, "mothers hours," and part-time evening schedules, taking approximately **7–16 months**. 1 source

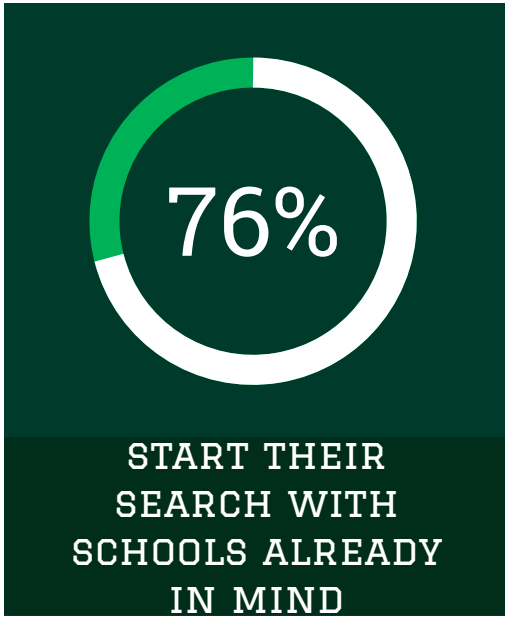
I checked that page on **October 9, 2026**. These details should not automatically be applied to the other campuses. 1 source

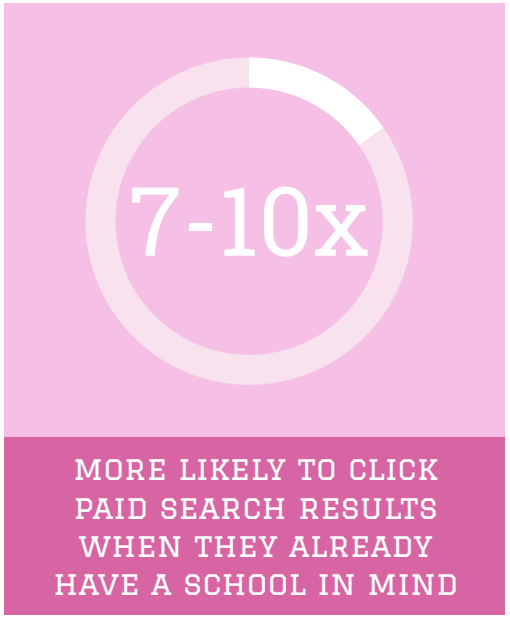
All four campuses reported massage certificates

For **July 1, 2024–June 30, 2025**, the campuses reported these certificates in Massage

Step 2: Defend the brand your dashboard misses







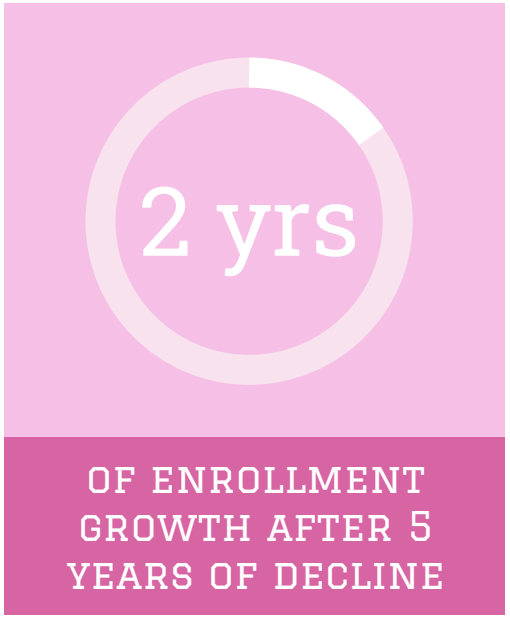
MMA Global and TransUnion, Manaferra;

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Chico State measured its brand







SimpsonScarborough

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Step 2: Action Items

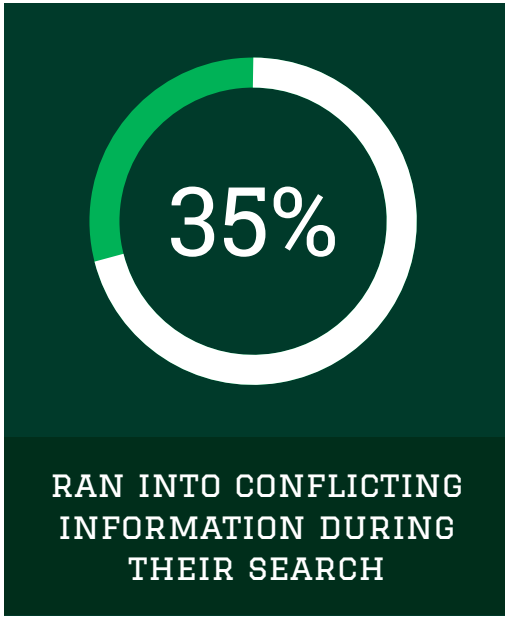
What share of our market will consider us when an agent builds a shortlist?

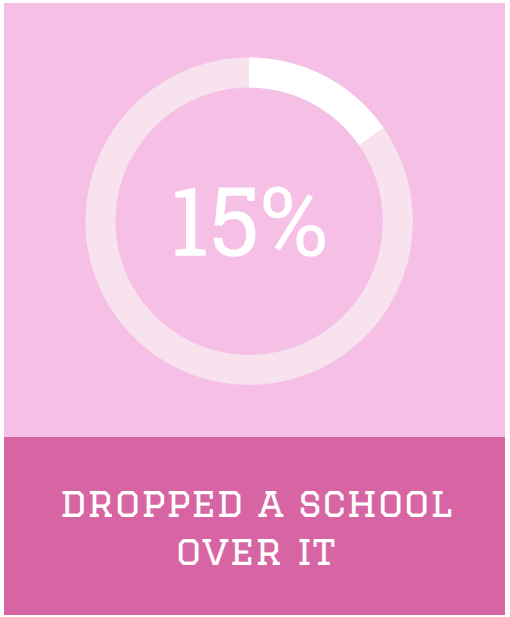
- Report your Step 1 AI visibility score
- Track branded search and direct traffic
- Run a matched-market test
- Report consideration next to leads

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Step 3: One source of truth







Manaferra

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Step 3: Action Items

One complete Program Page Includes

- Total price
- Weekly hours
- Next start date
- What it stacks into
- What graduates do next
- A named contact

Every Month, one owner checks

- Your site
- Third-party listings
- What AI says your price and dates are
- Combine thin pages
- Old pages to delete

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The university bulletin is the number one entrance source that these AI assistants use, because it is so data rich.

The information overhead of that would be far too much for a human, but is perfect for an AI agent.

Nick DeNardis, Senior Director of Digital Experience and Innovation, Wayne State University



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Step 4: Humans

44%

of prospective student requests to continuing and professional education units got no response

UPCEA secret-shopper study

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Thompson Career College answered







Thompson Career College

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Step 4: Humans

2x

WGU students using its AI assistant were nearly twice as likely to connect with an instructor

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Step 4: Action Items
Who owns which moment?

The learner asks	AI handles	A person handles
1) "Did you get my form?"	An instant text, any hour	
2) "Which program fits me?"	Matches programs to her goals	Talks through her career plans
3) "Can I afford this?"	Runs the cost calculator	Works through the hard money cases
4) "Will my experience count?"	Checks transfer credit	Handles the exceptions
5) "My schedule won't work."	Shows other start dates	Finds a way to make it work

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The playbook

Act	before they're visible
Show up	in the answer
Defend	your brand
Keep	one source of truth
Put a person	where it gets complicated or hard

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Marc, 2036, again

Found
in his agent's answers for years

Trusted
every fact on the page matched

Chosen
a real person called that night



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Somebody will answer Jen first.

Make it you.



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Mallory Willsea

Higher Ed Consultant
Host of Higher Ed Pulse and
Higher Ed Icons

mallorywillsea.com



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Thank You

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Resources and Research

- State of College Search 2026: The Undergraduate Report (Manaferra)
- State of College Search 2026: The Adult Learner Report (Manaferra, forthcoming)
- A New Era for AI Search (Google)
- Do People Click on Links in Google AI Summaries? (Pew Research Center)
- 2026 AI Search Trends: Brand (In)Visibility Brief (Everspring)
- Manaferra AI Index (Manaferra)
- AI Answers Decide Which Schools Prospects Choose (UPCEA and Search Influence)
- May Student Pulse Survey: What Students Think of Colleges Using AI (ZeeMee)
- Nearly Half of High School Students Now Use AI in College Search (EAB)
- Inside the AI Search Strategy That Drove 8X Visibility at the University of Kansas (Everspring)
- Higher Ed Pulse podcast (Enrollify)

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