



The State of AI Search in Higher Ed

Seven findings that should change how
you think about AI visibility.

Faton Sopa · Co-founder & CEO, Manaferra



College search behavior continues to change

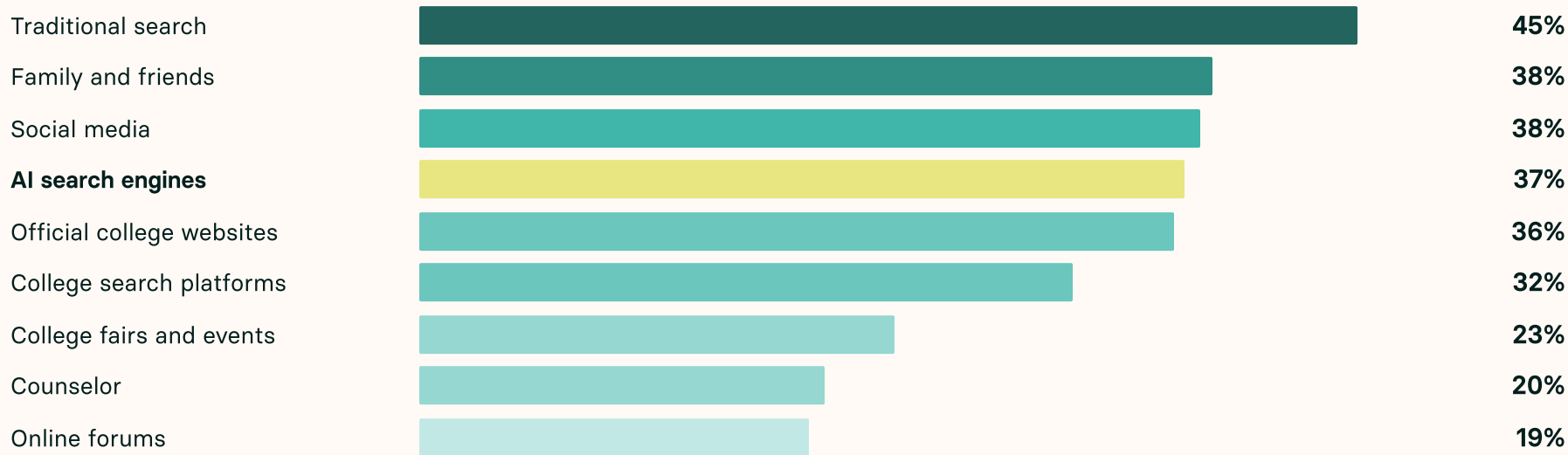
87%

of undergraduates use more than
one platform before they decide.



What channels are undergraduates using to discover college?

Share of undergraduates using each channel, 2026 · average across discovery, shortlist and decide



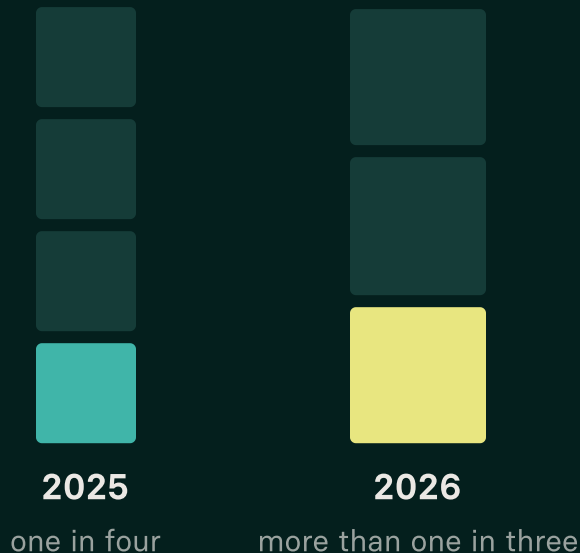
The use of AI Search by undergraduates



37%

of undergraduates now use AI in their college search.

In a single year, AI use in college search climbed from one in four undergraduates to more than one in three.



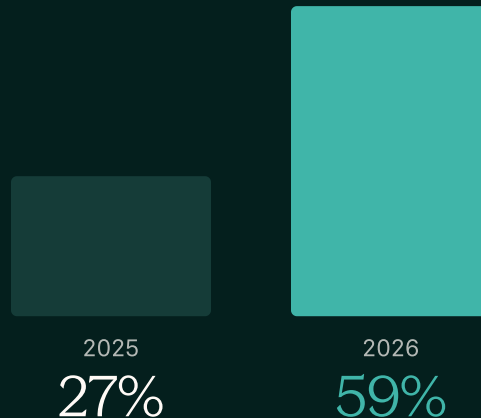
How AI is shaping college decision?



59%

of students considered a school less when it did not show up in their AI search.

MORE THAN DOUBLED IN A YEAR



AI is the most decisive channel at the shortlist

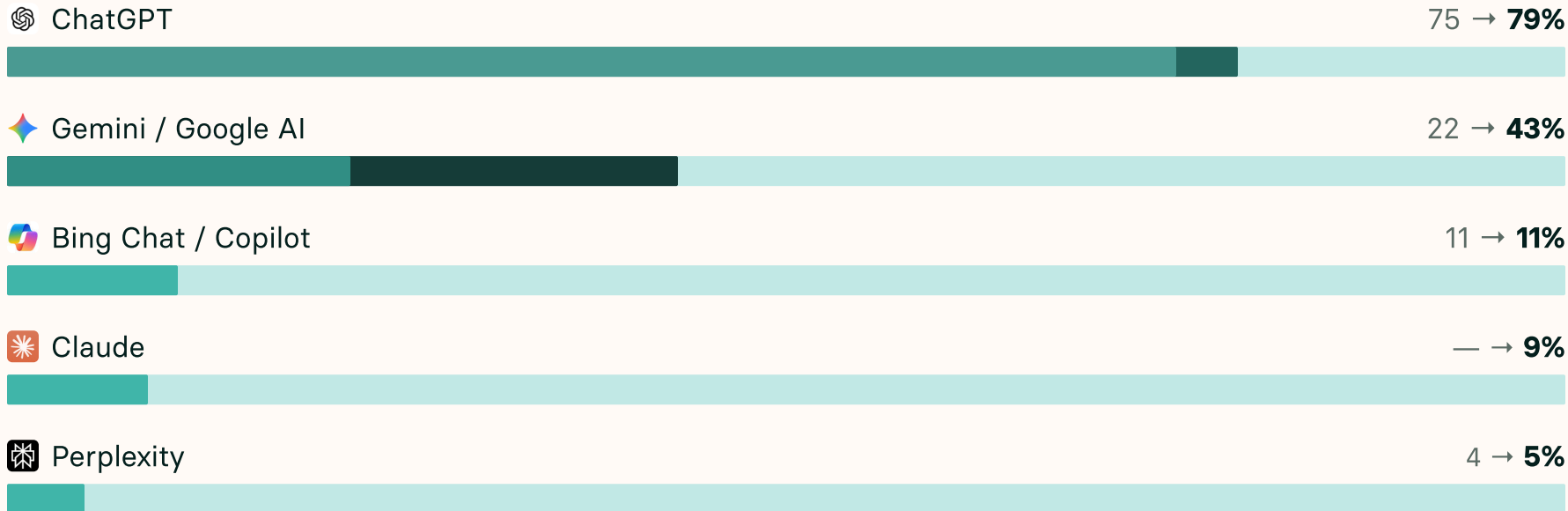


Did AI search engines influence which colleges you kept on or removed from your shortlist?



Which AI search engine did they use the most?

■ 2026 ■ 2025



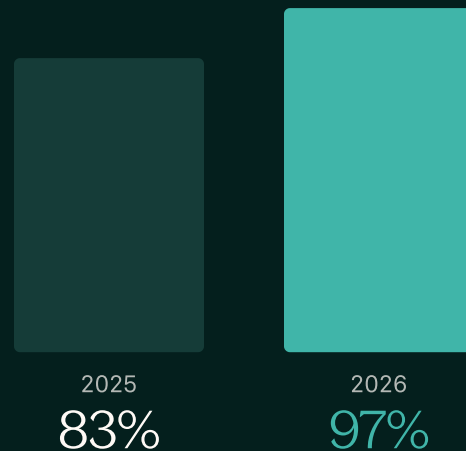
Are prospective students trusting AI responses?



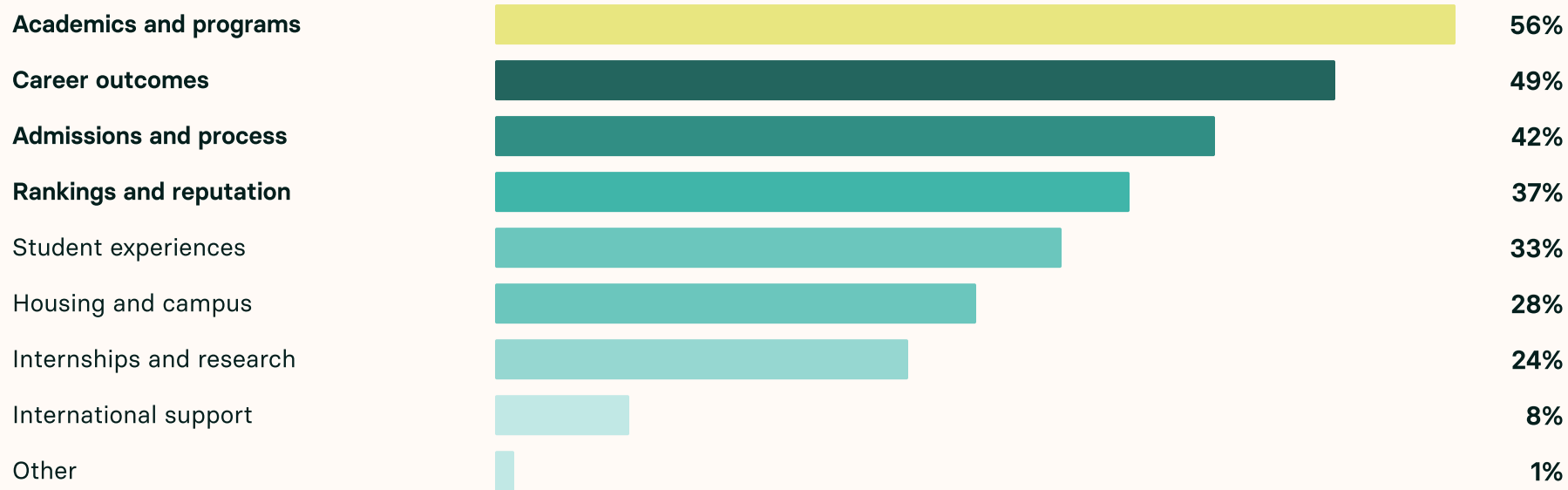
97%

of students who used AI found it
somewhat helpful or very helpful

TRUST IN AI SEARCH IS CLIMBING



What are students asking AI?



What is AI saying about your school & programs?



TRADITIONAL SEARCH

ahrefs

SEMRUSH



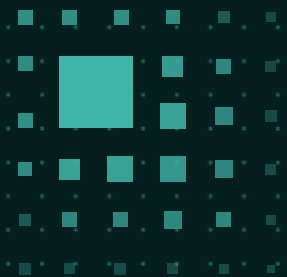
AI SEARCH IN HIGHER ED

Not measured at scale.



Until now.

INTRODUCING



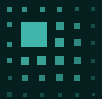
AI Index

by Manaferra



THE HIGHER ED AI SEARCH BENCHMARK

WE MADE IT
FREE



AI Index
by Manaferra

200K

student prompts

100+

programs, undergrad &
grad

50

states, live AI

ChatGPT today · Gemini, Claude,
Perplexity, Copilot next

BUILT FROM FOUR SOURCES

ahrefs

Ahrefs



Reddit



AI Overview

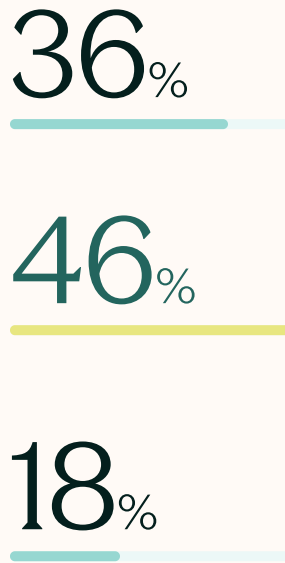
Google AI Overview



State of
College
Search

Prompts were grouped into three tiers

36%



Tier 1 · High volume

e.g. "best universities for a bachelor's in computer science"

46%

Tier 2 · Decision factor

e.g. "most affordable computer science programs"

18%

Tier 3 · Niche

e.g. "which computer science programs get you hired at a company like Google or Amazon"

What we measured?



0–100

The AI Index Score (AIS)

- how often a school is recommended
- how prominently it appears
- where in the answer, and how

Programs

Which academic programs AI recommends a school for.



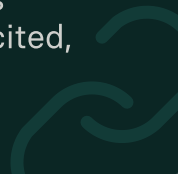
Topics

What AI talks about when it talks about schools.



Sources & Citations

Where AI sources answers, who is cited, how often.



Mentions

Attributed to the right school across every naming variation.



#1 National vs State performance

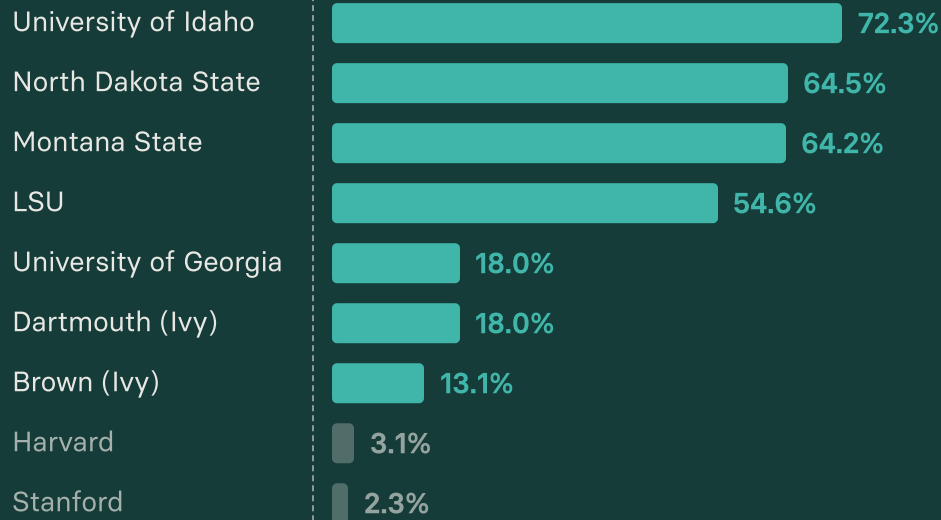


When a student asks AI about colleges, it recommends schools from that student's own state

5x

more often than in other states

Share of each school's mentions that come from its home state.



Top universities
dominating AI
search results
nationally.

#	INSTITUTION	AI INDEX SCORE
1	 Massachusetts Institute of Technology	100
2	 Stanford University	98
3	 University of Michigan	96
4	 Harvard University	96
5	 Carnegie Mellon University	96

Top universities leading AI search in New York.

#	INSTITUTION	AI INDEX SCORE
1	 Columbia University	91
2	 New York University	91
3	 Cornell University	90
4	 Syracuse University	84
5	 City University of New York	82

Top universities leading AI search in Texas.

#	INSTITUTION	AI INDEX SCORE
1	 University of Texas at Austin	92
2	 Texas A&M University	83
3	 University of Houston	78
4	 University of North Texas	77
5	 Rice University	76

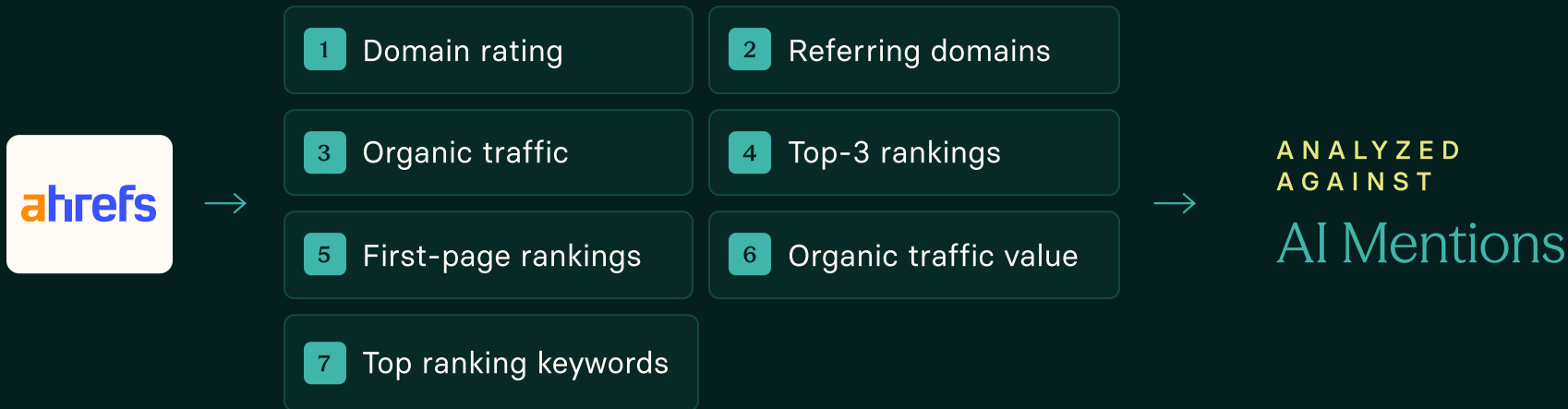
Top universities leading AI search in Florida.

#	INSTITUTION	AI INDEX SCORE
1	 University of Florida	87
2	 University of Central Florida	83
3	 Florida International University	80
4	 Florida State University	79
5	 University of South Florida	76

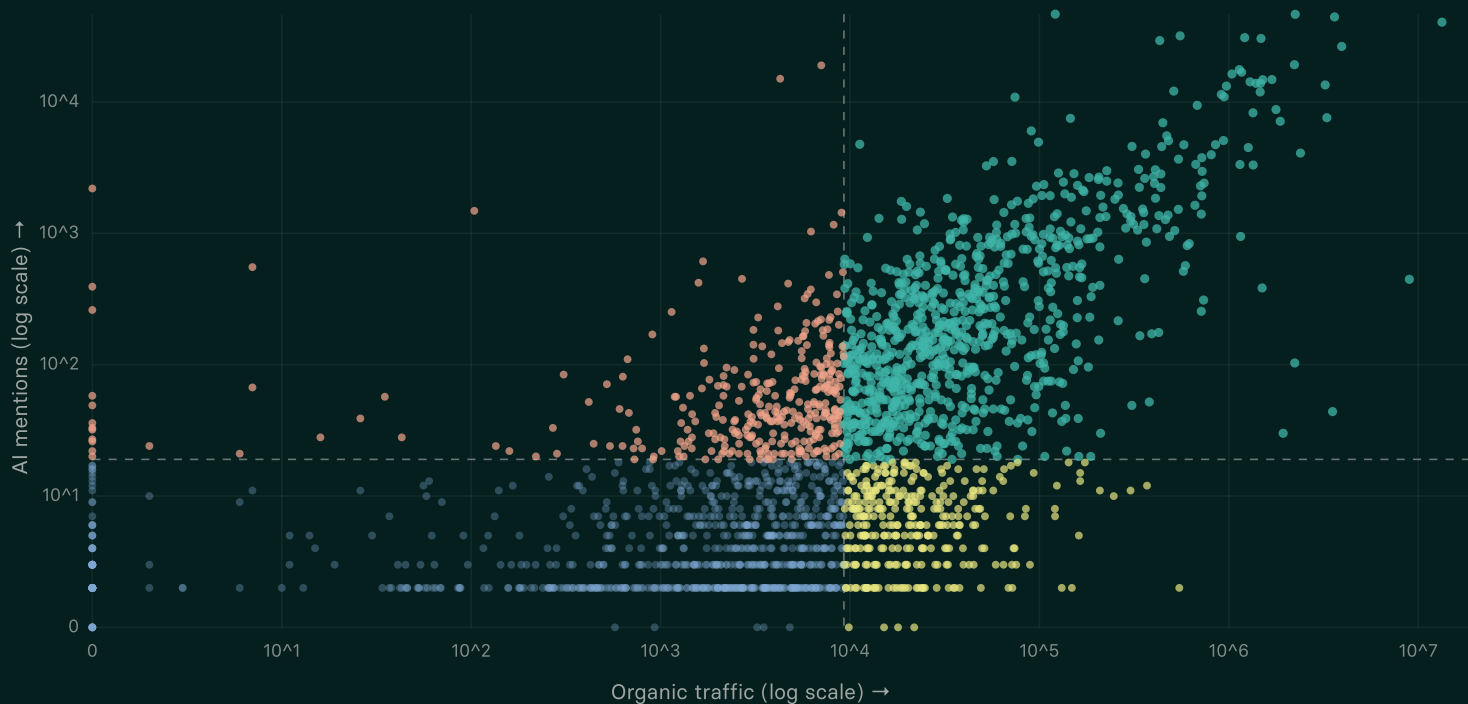
#2 Does organic search influence AI performance?



We analyzed **3,000** colleges and universities to get the answer



#2 Does organic search influence AI performance?



● Leaders in both ● Typical ● Ranks in Google, quiet in AI ● Loud in AI, quiet in Google

Source: Ahrefs × Manaferra AI Index, June 2026 Edition

SEO factors impacting AI Search performance

The correlation between SEO metrics and AI search performance in higher education



- While it helps, you don't have to have a high Domain Rating (DR) to perform high on AI search

What this means for higher-ed marketers

01

Treat SEO and GEO as the same investment

The fundamentals that make you win on traditional search are the same ones that get you mentioned by AI.

02

Build website and brand authority

Backlink authority and strong content are still the strongest predictors of AI visibility.

03

Check your Google rankings

Ranking on the first page independently improves your odds of being found and recommended by AI

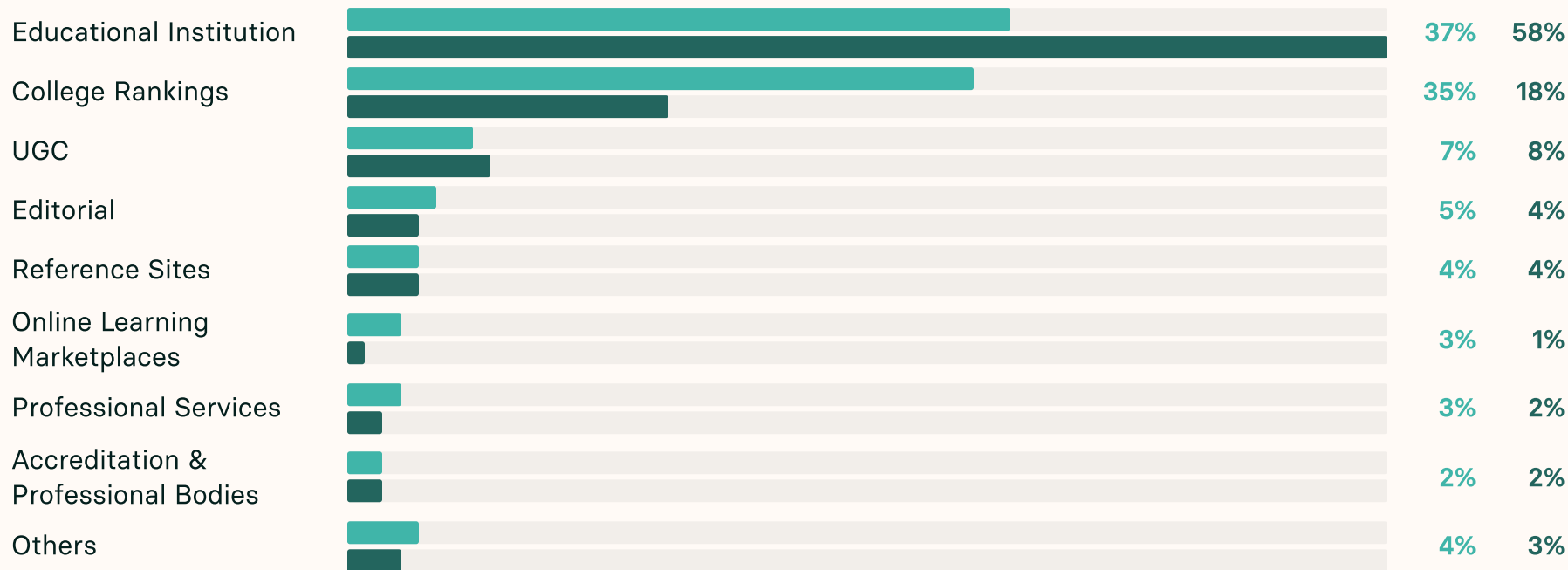
04

Check your SEO vs AI performance

If you are strong in Google but nowhere in AI It usually points to either a real niche exception or a tracking or indexing problem on your end.

#3: Which sites are influencing AI's answers in higher ed?

■ **Sources consulted** (what AI reads) ■ **Citations** (what AI quotes)





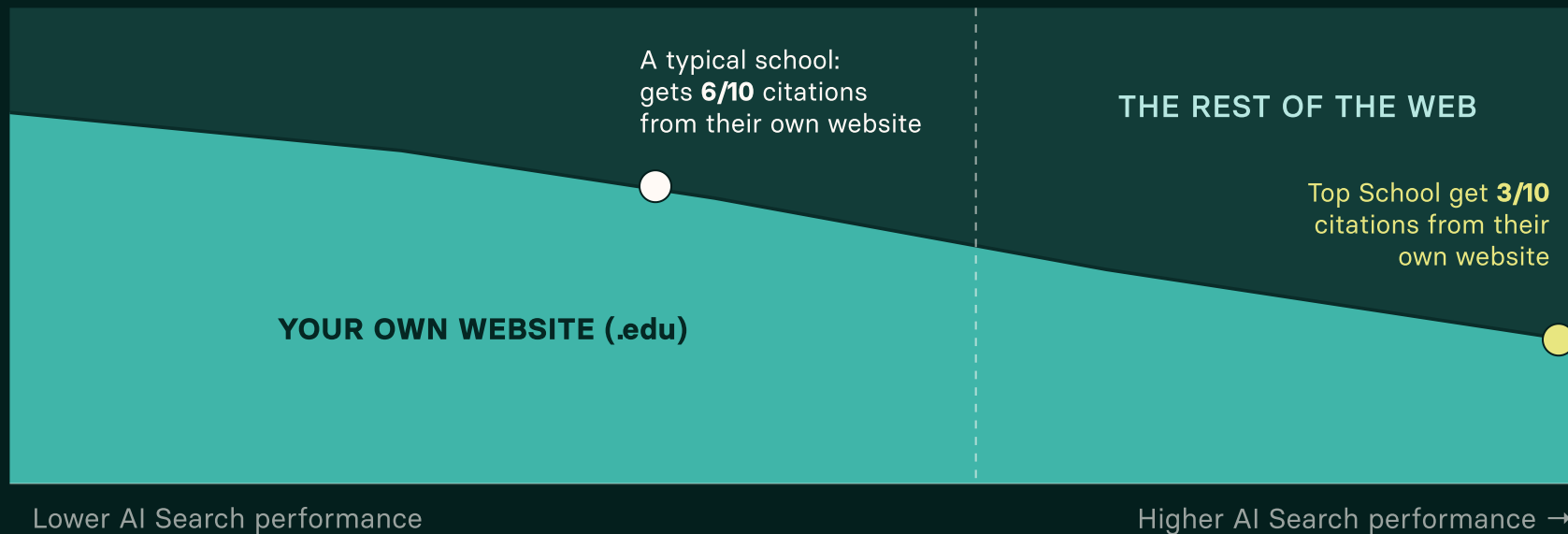
Third-party websites have the greatest impact on whether you will be included in AI answers, while your website and community sites shape how AI talks about you.

#3 The role of your .edu as you grow in AI search



The schools at the very top earn around **30 times** more citations to their own site than the schools at the bottom, but the citations from other websites grow even faster.

■ Your own website (.edu) ■ The rest of the web



What can you do about it?

M

1

Optimize your own pages

Find the pages on your site AI pulls from and optimize them for AI machines (and humans).



2

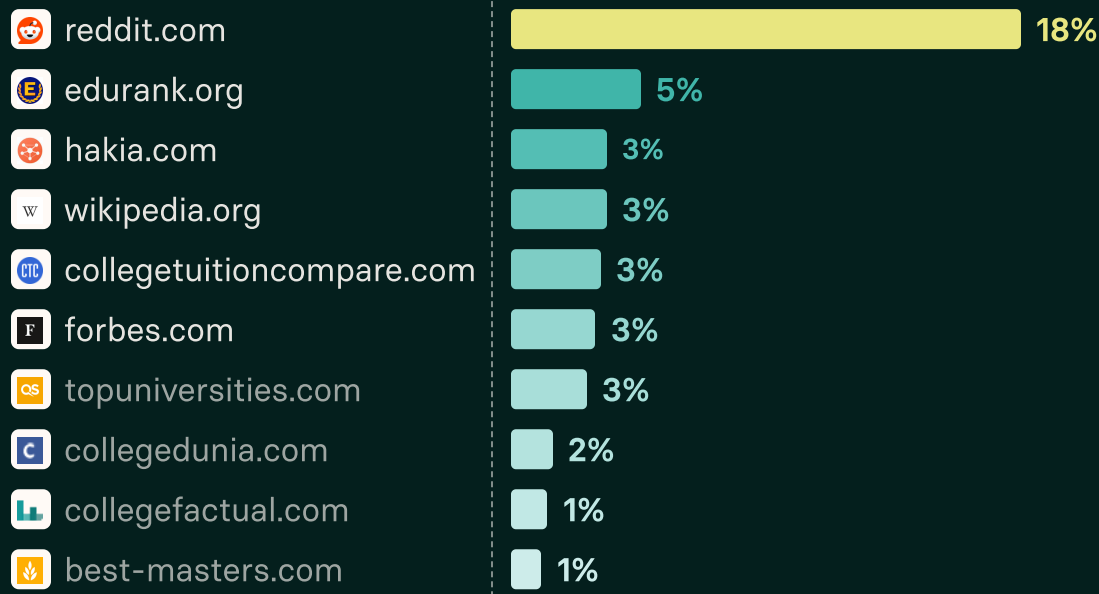
Get mentioned in external sites

Identify the external sites AI trusts, and build a presence on them.

#4 Top non .edu websites influencing ChatGPT answers



Which external websites does ChatGPT use to talk about schools?



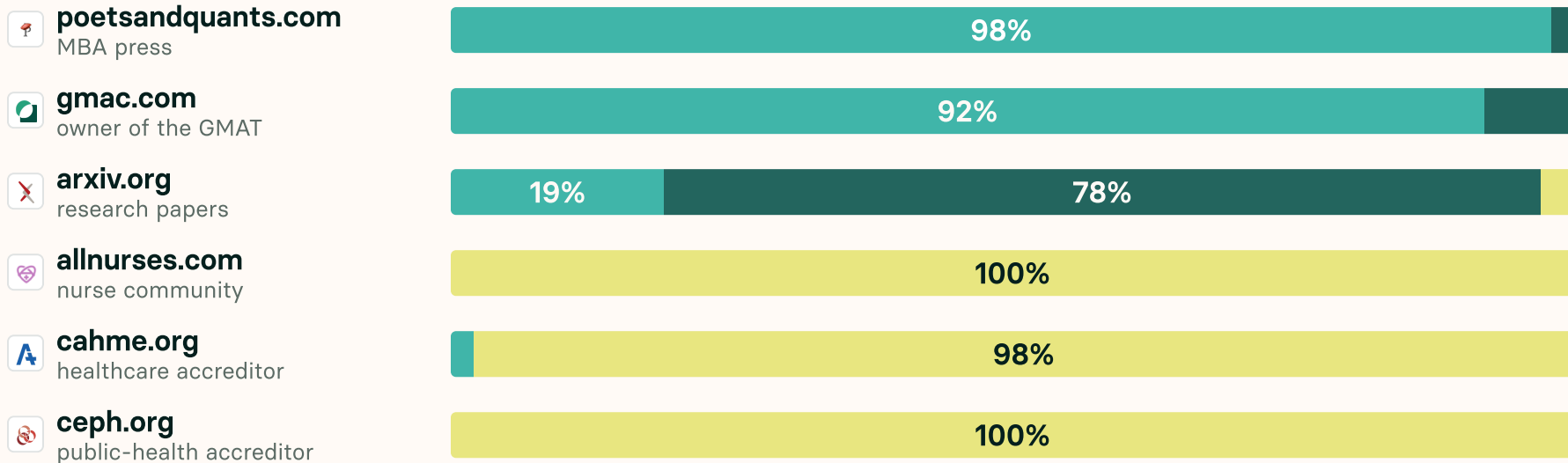
1 in 5

of all non .edu citations
comes from Reddit

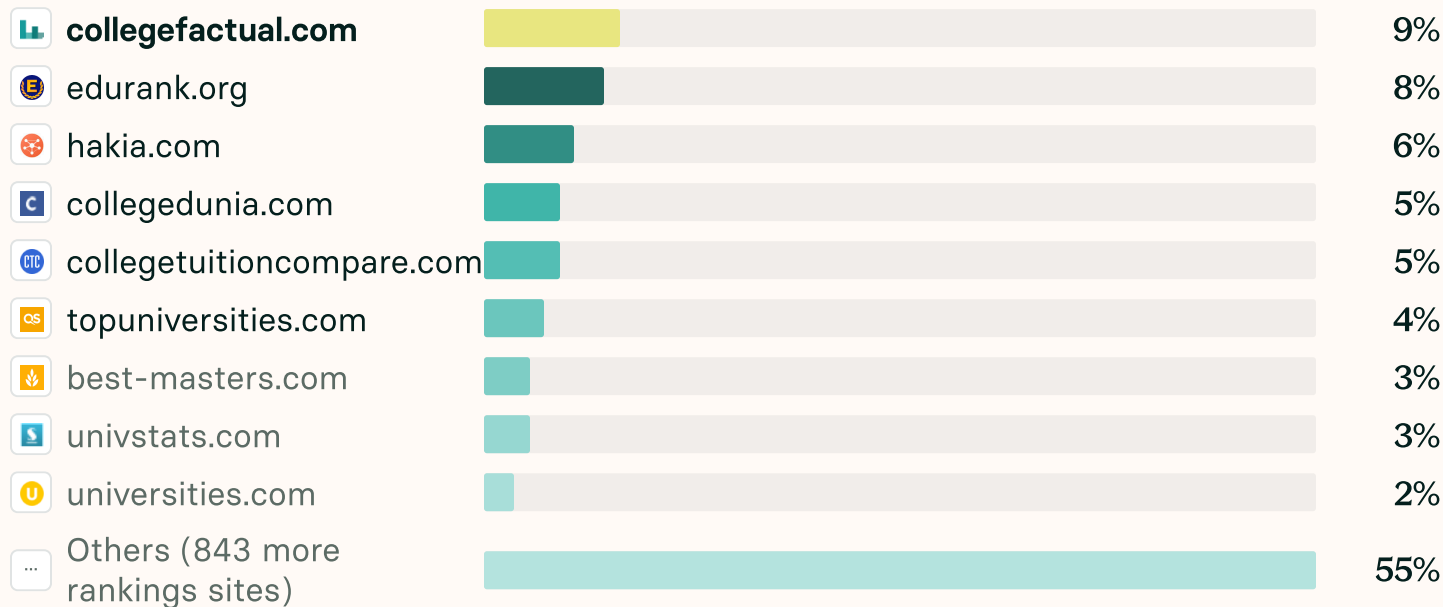
Most cited domains in business, tech & health

AI is **10x more likely** to pull its citations from specialized sites that match the intent behind a specific program

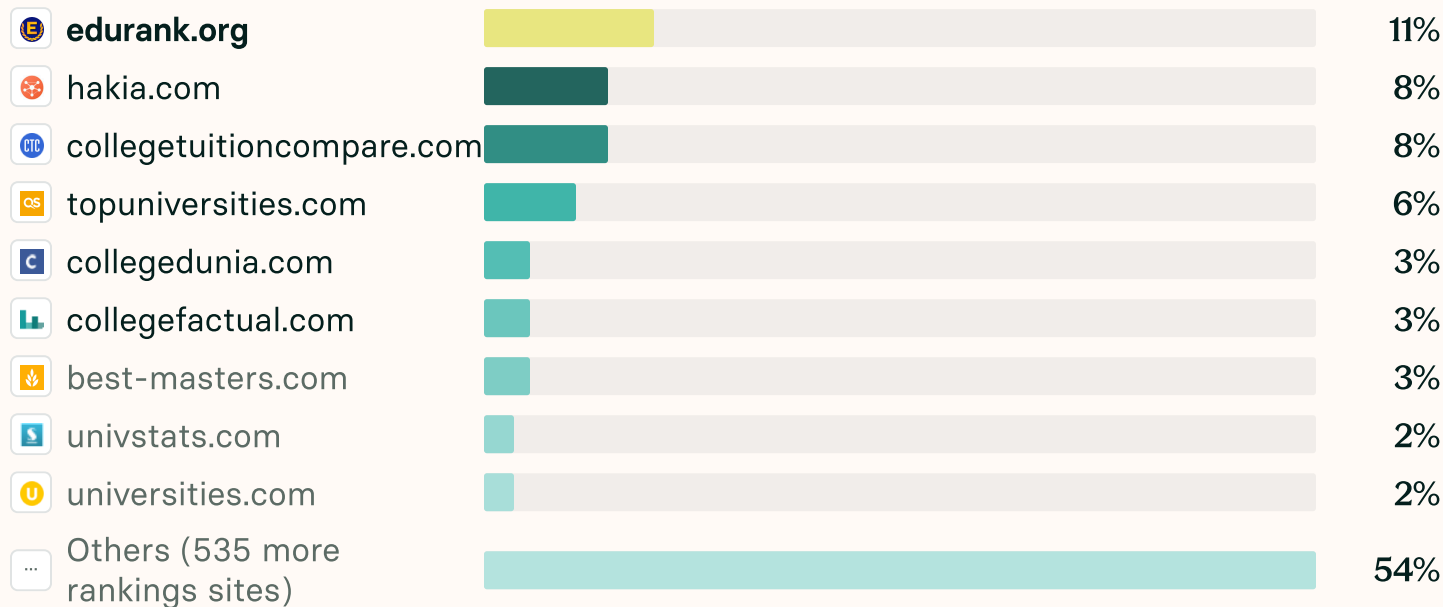
■ Business ■ Tech ■ Health



#5 Top college ranking websites influencing ChatGPT mentions (sources)



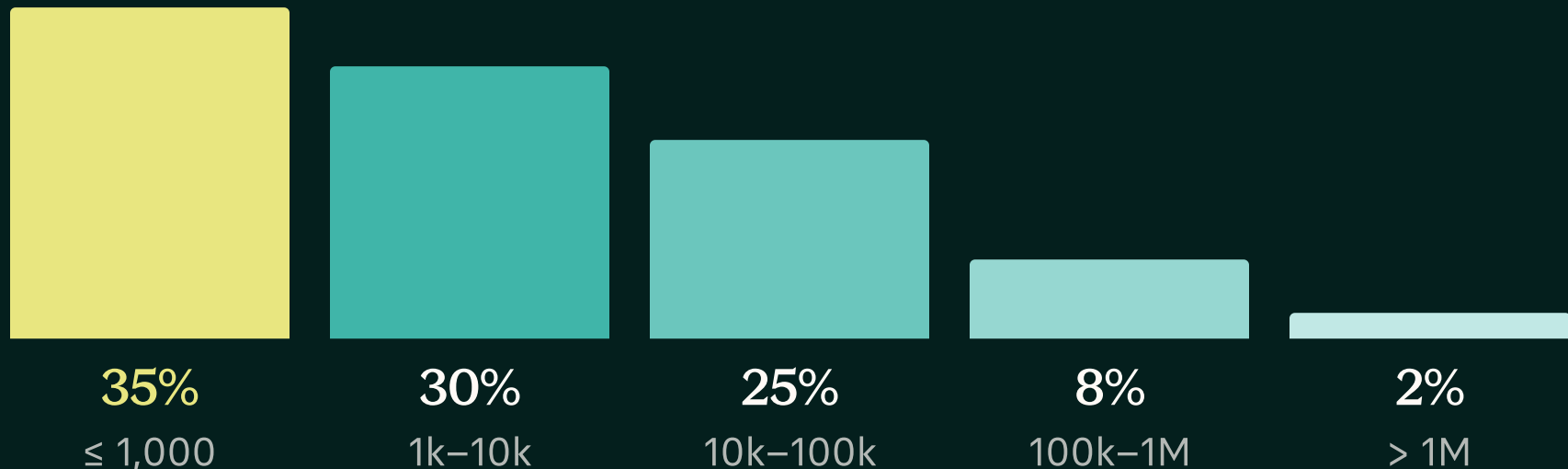
#5 Top college ranking websites influencing how ChatGPT talks about you (citations)



#6 Does Organic Traffic Influence Citations?



We analyzed the Google traffic of the top 10,000 most-cited pages -> 3,000 source domains and found that



#6 Does Organic Traffic Influence Citations?



1/10

of non .edu cited
websites are low quality
(DR <30)

They receive only

14

monthly visitors
in average

What this means for GEO and higher-ed marketing

01

Fix your content

Ensure your pages match the format and structure that AI is prioritizing in its answers.

02

Increase your off-site visibility

Identify influencing external sites and outreach to them to include you in their lists.

03

Collaborate with credible sources

Establish official collaboration with credible sites so you have more control over your brand narrative and reputation

04

Sieze the opportunity

The more credible citations you get, the strengthen your AI visibility is and the hardest for your competition to catch up.

#7 Are students seeing ads when they discover colleges?

Out of 200,000 answers we analyzed, only 6% of answers carried an ad, whether from a school or a company.

6%

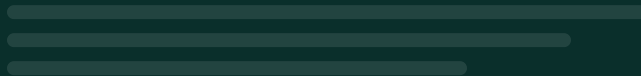
of AI answers
carry an ad

<1%

of schools
advertise



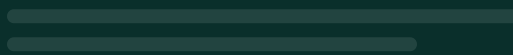
"best associate in science programs"



SPONSORED

AS Teaching in Nashville

Associate of Science in Teaching
program.



Who is advertising on ChatGPT?

Out of 12,000 of ads we identified only **4 out of 10 were from colleges and universities**. The rest come from affiliates and other companies outside higher ed.

41%

Universities & colleges

59%

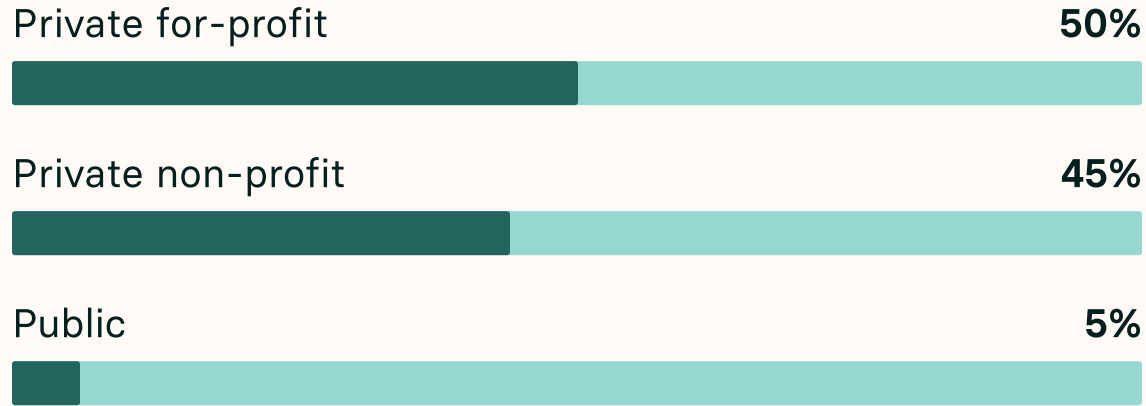
Affiliates & other companies

30%

Top10.com: an affiliate site

The single biggest advertiser in the whole dataset runs 3 of every 10 ads

What types of schools are advertising on ChatGPT?

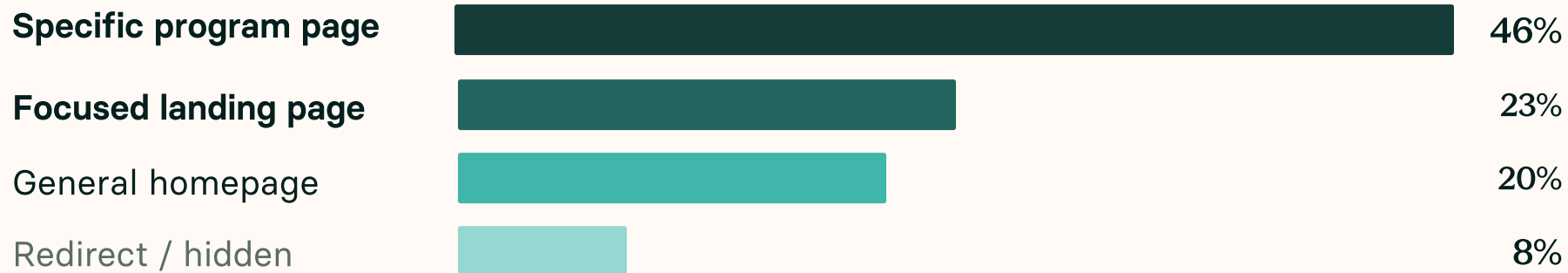


Top higher-ed advertisers on ChatGPT

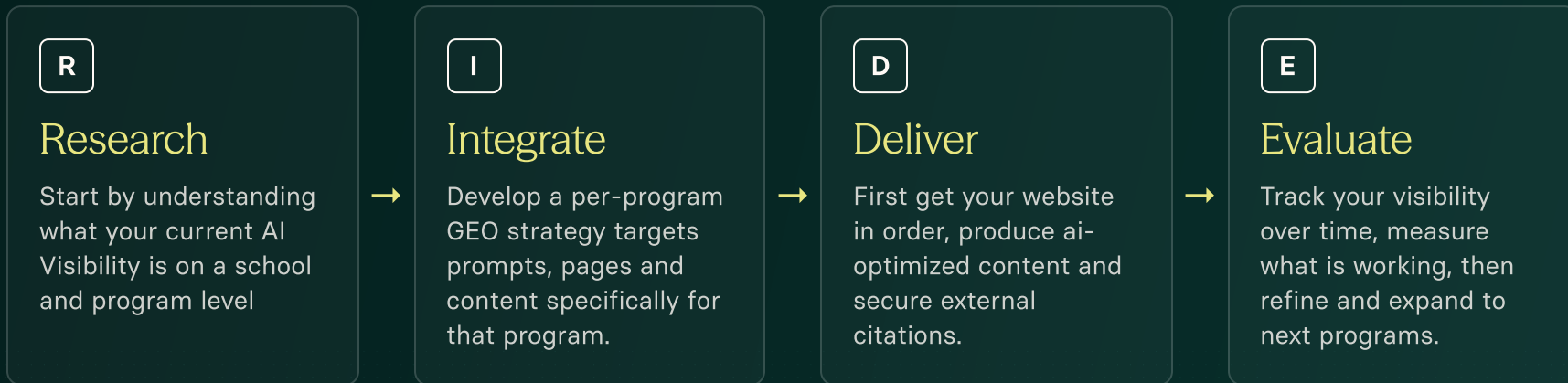
70% of all school ads come from just five advertisers, mostly online and adult-serving schools.



Where are ads sending students?



How to start optimizing for AI search



Find your school
in the **AI Index**

ai.manaferra.com

Manaferra

