Paula French of Search Influence Joins "The Signal" to Discuss AI Search in Higher Education

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Paula French, director of sales and marketing at Search Influence, was featured as a guest on "The Signal," a podcast produced by EdTech Connect that covers technology and strategy in higher education. The episode, titled "From Clicks to Conversions: A Practical Playbook for AI Search," is hosted by Jeff Dillon, founder of EdTech Connect and a digital strategist working at the intersection of enrollment marketing and emerging technology. French joined Dillon to discuss how AI tools are changing the way prospective students find and evaluate academic programs, and what institutions need to do to maintain visibility in that environment.

The episode reflects a shift that enrollment marketers are navigating across the board. Research that Search Influence co-authored with UPCEA, "AI Search in Higher Education: How Prospects Search in 2025," found that half of prospective students now use AI tools as part of their research process, 79% read Google's AI Overviews, and 56% are more likely to trust institutions that appear as AI-cited sources. Traditional search engines remain the most common starting point, but AI tools have taken on a specific and consequential role in the student journey. They are where students narrow their options and build short lists, often before visiting an institutional website. For enrollment marketers, not appearing in those AI-generated responses can mean

not being in the consideration set at all.

The episode examines what institutions can do to address that gap. French and Dillon discuss the relationship between organic search and AI search performance, the content structures that align most closely with how students are prompting AI tools, and practical steps institutions can take regardless of budget or team size. A central point French raises is that organic search and AI search are not separate problems requiring separate strategies. Tools like Google AI Overviews and Gemini pull from Google's organic results, while ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot ground their answers in Bing. Institutions that invest in improving organic search rankings are also laying the foundation for AI search visibility. Content structured around how students actually search delivers returns across both channels.

For institutions with limited resources, French outlines a focused starting point: deeply optimizing a single high-priority program page with a clear program description, outcome-focused content, and program-specific FAQs drawn from the questions prospective students are actually asking. That structure aligns directly with how students prompt AI tools and gives those tools substantive content to draw from when generating responses. French also addresses the broader signals that shape AI visibility. What institutions publish across their websites, social channels, profiles, and media mentions are what AI tools draw on to understand and represent a program or school, and those are all channels institutions can actively manage.

"Prospects are making their short list through AI answers, and AI has the power to move them to a decision," said French. "Universities have more control over their AI visibility than they realize, and working on this does not have to be daunting."

French has spent more than sixteen years helping higher education institutions align their digital marketing strategy with how prospective students actually search. She has presented at national conferences, including AMA Higher Ed and the UPCEA Marketing, Enrollment Management, and Student Success conference. Earlier this year, she joined Dillon as a featured speaker in a SearchStax webinar on how AI search in higher education is creating student discovery pathways that fall outside traditional enrollment analytics frameworks.

"The Signal" is available on major podcast platforms. Learn more about Search Influence's work in higher education at searchinfluence.com.

About Search Influence

Search Influence is a woman-owned, ROI-focused digital marketing agency that helps institutions drive prospects into and through the recruitment funnel with analytics-backed strategies, including organic and AI SEO and paid digital advertising. Founded in 2006, Search Influence's core purpose is to optimize potential. The agency collaborates with well-regarded brands and institutions both nationally and locally in New Orleans. Clients include the Tulane School of Professional Advancement, Tufts University College, Associated Hearing Professionals, New Orleans & Company, and Audubon Nature Institute.

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Search Influence

Search Influence, a national SEO and digital advertising agency since 2006, delivers demonstrable ROI for clients. Specialties include SEO, Paid Advertising, and Analytics. In-house experts collaborate with clients for results. Also an informative blog.

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