



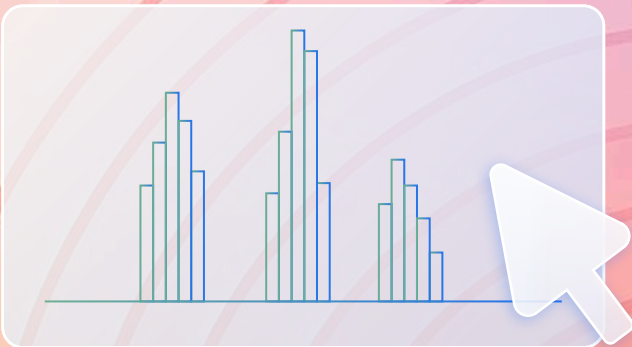
2026 AI Overview Visibility Report

Higher Education Programs in
New England


◆ AI Overview







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Gen Z is rapidly adopting AI as a major research tool as part of their college search. One survey of 5,000 high school students in the US concluded that 46% of students use AI during their college search, up from just 26% in the spring of 2025.

Unfortunately, most New England colleges and universities miss the mark on visibility in AI search experience. Our May 2026 analysis of the higher education industry in New England found that 81% of higher education institutions in the region own less than 10% of available AI Overview visibility for their flagship programs.

- Only 3 of the 113 institutions included in our report owned more than 25% of available visibility in Google's AI Overviews (AIOs).
- This means that most New England colleges and universities are effectively invisible to the Gen Z market in one of the most high-impact stages of their college search.
- Unless these institutions adopt aggressive AI search strategies soon, they're likely to fall further behind.
- This report is for marketers at colleges and universities in New England who want to learn how the transition to AI search is impacting their audience's college decisions, where they stand against other schools in the region, and how to improve their AI visibility.

01

Why AI Search Matters for Higher Education Institutions

According to a [Brightedge study](#) from March 2026, “the education sector experienced the strongest expansion in the number of [search] queries triggering AI search results, from 18% of queries in May 2025 to 83% of queries triggering AI search results by December 2025.”

Our suggests that AI Overview prevalence has continued to grow

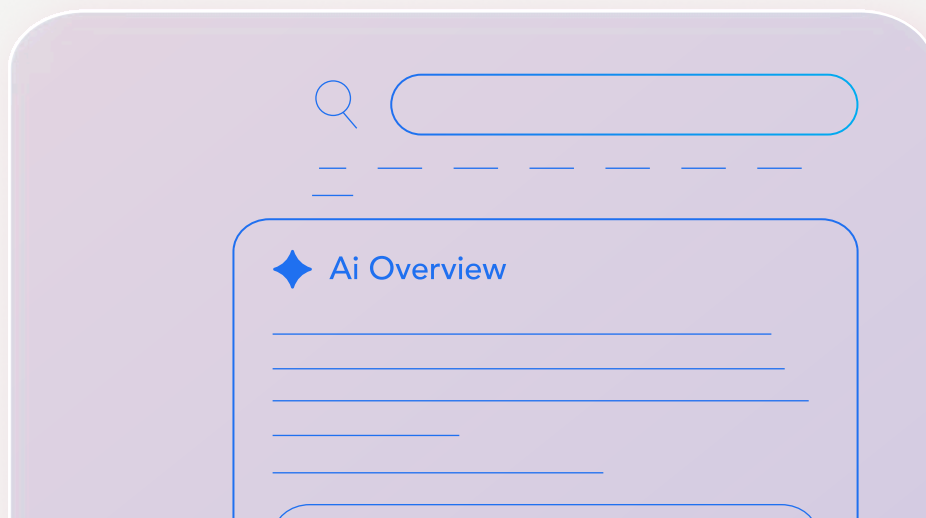
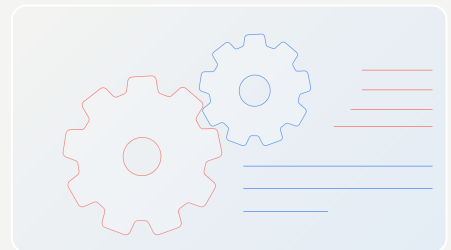
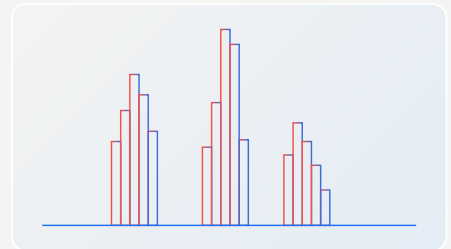


Across high-volume keywords for popular degree programs, 88% of our 4,655 analyzed keywords triggered AI Overviews in Google search results as of May 2026.

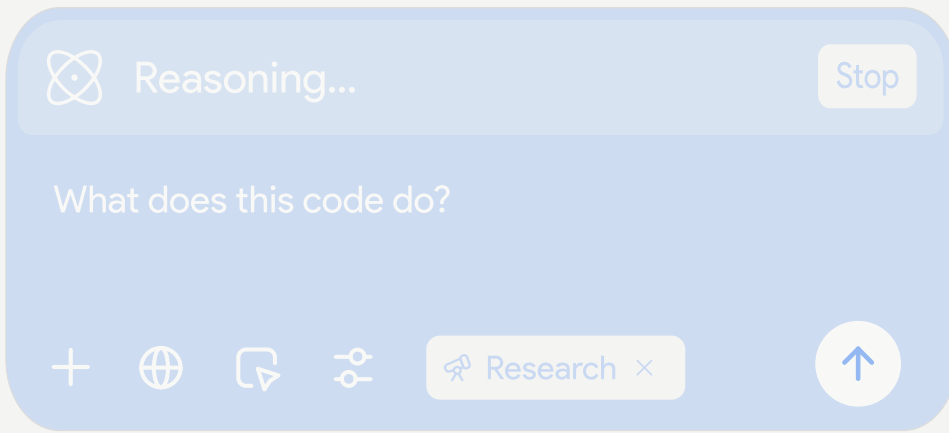
That the AI Overview trigger rate for higher education search queries has reached over 80% underscores the value of visibility for colleges and universities in the AI search experience.

And given that almost half of high school students report using AI in their college research, visibility in these AI search experiences is doubly critical for educational institutions.

To be included in AI search responses is to make the student’s shortlist. To be left out is to be ignored.



5 Findings That Show How Google's AI Overviews Are Shaping Public Sentiment of New England's Colleges and Universities



Before we share our report's key findings, it's important to have a clear understanding of what this data shows and how it was collected.

Methodology

To collect this AI Overview data, Synapse search marketing analysts built representative sample keyword lists for 58 popular higher education programs offered by colleges and universities in New England and adjacent states.

Keywords were selected for their relevance to the target audience (ex. "best nursing colleges in new england", "top engineering schools near boston", etc.) as well as their relative search demand.

Our custom-built AI Overview analytics tool was used to collect AIO data for each of the 4,655 keywords identified across six weeks in April and May of 2026. Values were averaged across 3 data collection cycles.

Schools included in this report were those mentioned in at least 20 AI Overviews or added based on the alignment between programs included and programs the schools offered.

Report Glossary

Mention Rate: The number of AI Overviews mentioning a given school divided by the number of AI Overviews triggered for the keyword list. This is the central metric of a school's AIO visibility: how often is the school being recommended to prospective students.

Citation Rate: The number of AI Overviews citing content from a given school's website divided by the number of AI Overviews triggered. A measure of the school's website content's quality and SEO value, and how directly the school is influencing AIO responses about themselves.

Sentiment Score: A value (1 to 100) representing the overall sentiment of a given school in the AI Overview responses in which that school is mentioned, calculated by NLP models. In other words, how favorably is this school being recommended to prospective students?

01

Boston University, Northeastern Lead New England Educational Institutions in AI Overview Visibility

School	Mention Rate	Citation Rate	Sentiment Score
1. Boston University	47.0%	37.1%	32
2. Northeastern University	38.1%	28.6%	32
3. Boston College	32.6%	23.5%	31
4. University of Massachusetts Lowell	24.6%	25.6%	27
5. UMass Boston	21.9%	14.1%	24
6. Southern New Hampshire University	20.7%	19.6%	24
7. Massachusetts Institute of Technology	19.3%	5.5%	46
8. Dartmouth College	18.9%	1.5%	30
9. Harvard University	18.8%	8.2%	40
10. MGH Institute of Health Professions	17.8%	16.3%	27

Across the 113 schools included in our report, only 3 earned AIO Mention Rates higher than 25%. Boston University, Northeastern University, and Boston College lead the pack of schools, with BU's 47% Mention Rate driven in part by the industry-leading Citation Rate (37%).

Boston University's robust website content, 537 unique URLs primarily made up of robust Academic Program content with dense requirements information, is frequently cited as an authoritative source of information on the programs they offer.

◆ AI Overview

New England offers world-class Biomedical Engineering (BME) programs. Leading institutions like [Massachusetts Institute of Technology \(MIT\)](#) and [Boston University](#) anchor the region, providing premier undergraduate, graduate, and research opportunities right in the Boston area's thriving medical and biotech hubs.

Top Biomedical Engineering Programs in New England

Massachusetts

- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) — Cambridge: Offers highly competitive undergraduate (SB) and graduate (PhD) programs. Their department focuses on quantitative molecular, cellular, and systems-level approaches to BME.
- Boston University (BU) — Boston: Features robust BS, MS, and PhD tracks. BU's program offers excellent co-op and clinical research opportunities via affiliations with major medical centers like Boston Medical Center and Massachusetts General Hospital.

Biomedical Engineering » Academics - Boston University

Affiliations. The Department of Biomedical Engineering's affiliates include a number of medical institutions in addition to our ow...

Boston University

Biomedical Engineering Undergraduate Degree in Boston

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Formulatrix. X-Chem. SPF Technologies. Average hourly co-op pay for...

Wentworth Institute of Technology

2025 Best Bioengineering & Biomedical Engineering Schools in the ...

10 Top New England Region Schools in Bioengineering * Massachusetts Institute of...

As Google's AI Overview algorithm searches for high-quality, robust web content about the program a searcher is researching, it often references BU's site which gives the school the opportunity to influence the AI Overview in question and earn a mention/recommendation.

Physician Assistant, Physical Therapy, and Civil Engineering Programs Trigger AI Overviews Most Likely to Recommend Schools

Program	Mention Rate
1. Physician Assistant	14%
2. Physical Therapy (DPT)	12%
3. Civil Engineering	12%
4. Law (JD)	11%
5. Biomedical Engineering	11%
6. Nurse Practitioner	11%
7. Executive MBA	10%
8. Electrical engineering	9%
9. Computer Engineering	9%
10. Social Work (MSW)	9%



The keywords that prospective students use note varied AIO Trigger Rates depending on the program being researched. AI Overviews shown for queries related to Physician Assistant, Physical Therapy, and Civil Engineering programs are the most likely to mention specific colleges or universities.

This means that schools offering these programs, or other programs with high relative Mention Rates, are even more likely to experience the impact of AI Overviews.

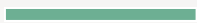


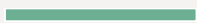





Programs with the lowest relative Mention Rates include Online MBA (1%), Online Data Science (2%), Online Nursing Programs (3%), Business (4%), and Education (4%). This isn't to say that these programs are not impacted by the rise of AI Overviews, only that they're slightly more insulated and likely offer less opportunity for growth in AI search.

TIP

Prioritise strong, program-specific content for degrees with high AI Overview mention rates.

These are the areas where schools have the greatest opportunity to be recommended directly in AI search results.


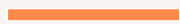
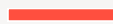

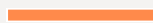




AI Visibility for 3 Major Schools is Owned by Third-Party Sites

School	Mention Rate	Citation Rate	Sentiment Score
1. Dartmouth College	19% 	2% 	17 
2. Massachusetts Institute of Technology	19% 	6% 	14 
3. Harvard University	19% 	8% 	11 

Three of the most widely recognized schools included in this analysis show the most significant gaps in Mention and Citation Rates, a sign that their owned site content is not being used by Google's AIO algorithm to populate relevant responses.

In other words, third parties are determining the context in which these schools are included in AI Overview responses. Their content is not being cited nearly as often as they're mentioned, meaning that other websites control their narrative in AI Overview responses.

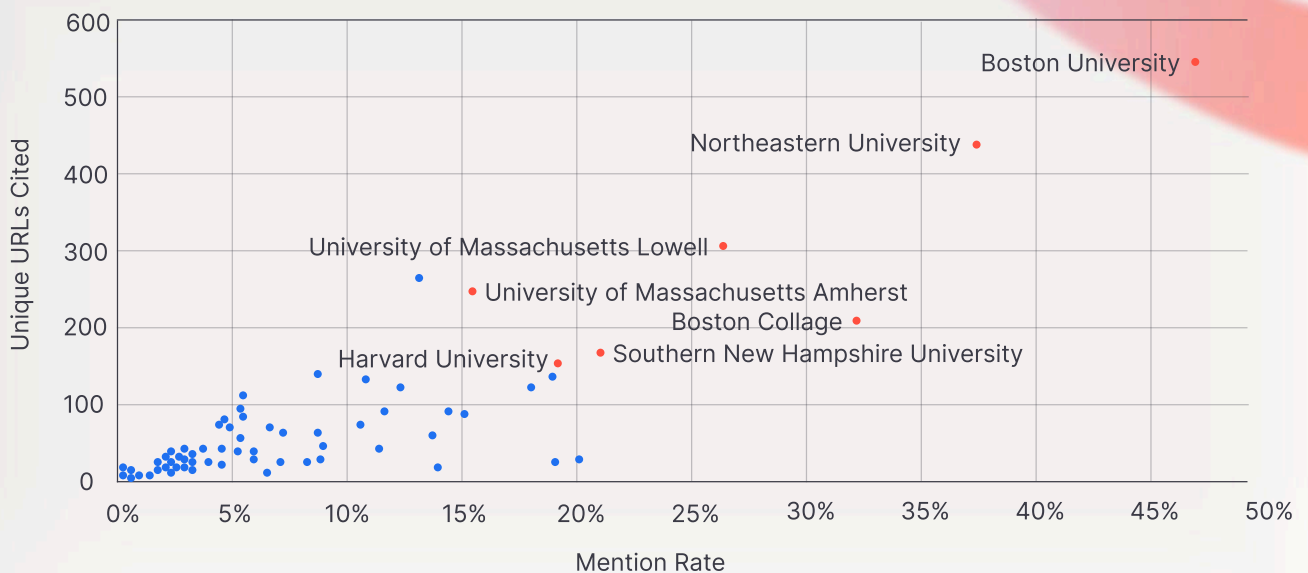
Technical & Specialty Program Schools Earn Strongest AI Sentiment Scores

School	Mention Rate	Citation Rate	Sentiment Score
1. Massachusetts Institute of Technology	19% 	6% 	46 
2. Harvard Business School	9% 	4% 	44 
3. Worcester Polytechnic Institute	6% 	2% 	44 

Educational institutions with a focus on specialty programs and technical degrees enjoy some of the highest AIO Sentiment Scores of all schools in our analysis. MIT, Harvard Business School, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute make up the top three schools by Sentiment Score (when considering schools with Mention Rates 6% or higher).

Recommendations for these schools in AI Overviews tend to be more favorable, likely due to the more granular search intent of the user paired with the niche program offerings.

UMass Lowell Earns #4 Mention Rate with Huge Catalog of Optimized Content



Institutions with large, nationally recognized brands tend to earn higher Mention Rates (Boston University, Boston College, Harvard, MIT, and Dartmouth make up half of the top 10), but smaller schools can break through with targeted, AI-optimized content.

- This is shown in the strong correlation between the number of unique URLs cited on each school's website and their Mention Rate.
- UMass Lowell appears to have done so, earning the 4th highest Mention Rate, higher than national brands like Harvard and MIT. Across AI Overviews triggered for their programs' keywords, almost 300 unique pages are being cited and synthesized by Google's AI Overview algorithm.

03

The Earned + Owned Framework for AI Search

AI engines and Google's AI Overviews algorithm analyze web content to determine which brands are most strongly associated with the queries users submit. When a prospective student asks "what are the best universities for environmental science," the algorithm doesn't simply rank relevant pages, it identifies which institutions the web has most consistently associated with that topic.

- This determination is built on the cumulative weight of every mention of your brand across the open web.
- Both first-party content (what you publish on your own properties) and third-party content (what others publish about you) feed into this calculation.
- The institutions that win in AI search are those with the highest volume and density of mentions associating their brand with the topics, programs, and outcomes they want to be known for.
- In other words, AI search operates as a mention economy: the more frequently and credibly your institution is connected to a subject across the web, the more likely AI engines are to surface you when users ask about it.



Earned

Third-party mentions carry significant weight because they represent independent validation of your brand's relevance. Building this third-party footprint requires the fundamentals of good PR, a strong institutional reputation, and strategic partnerships with media outlets, research bodies, and industry organizations.

Earned coverage in publications, citations in academic and trade press, and mentions across affiliated organizations all contribute to the signal AI engines pick up.

Owned

First-party content supplements this earned foundation by giving the algorithm direct material to interpret. Strategic content on your own site helps AI models understand exactly how your institution relates to the topics you want to be associated with.

For higher ed institutions, this means investing in core site content and blog articles that clearly reinforce your association with the academic programs you are actively promoting. Program pages, faculty research summaries, student outcome stories, and topical thought leadership each serve as anchors that the algorithm can connect to broader web signals.

The institutions that treat owned content and earned mentions as a single integrated system, rather than two separate marketing functions, will be the ones AI search experiences consistently recommend.



AI search visibility is built through both earned and owned content.

The more consistently an institution is mentioned, cited, and clearly associated with key programmes across the web, the more likely AI engines are to recognise and recommend it.

How Higher Ed Institutions Can Improve Their AIO Visibility

→ Content Strategy

Owned content on a school's website will influence AI mentions. Quantity is key, but not at the expense of quality. AI engines are great at detecting "AI slop", and will ignore any content flagged as such.

Developing a high-volume of high-quality content that proves a depth of commitment to the topics at hand can drive significant AI visibility improvements.

Additionally, there are some "tricks" that can help improve the effect.

- **Schema Markup:** A structured data system that AI crawlers can parse more easily than traditional web copy.
- **FAQ Formats:** Clearly defined questions and answers, especially those commonly asked by your audience, are often cited by AI engines.
- **Tables of Content:** AI engines move fast. A brief list of topics covered at the top of a page can help them understand your page better.
- **Page Summaries:** Similarly, a brief paragraph or bulleted list of key insights at the top of webpages can help earn AI visibility.
- **Comparisons and Reviews:** Your audience is asking AI to compare your school against others. Control the narrative by publishing honest articles that compare and review each.
- **Prioritize Data:** AI loves to cite specific data points. The more statistics and data points on your school and its programs you expose to AI, the clearer picture it can paint for your audience.

➔ Brand Authority Signals

AI wants to understand how authoritative your school is. Help it understand your credibility by incorporating real reviews of your programs into your content. Feature statistics and studies about your school on your site.

Additionally, boost your off-page Brand Authority by ensuring that your school is frequently mentioned by credible sources across the web.

If Niche is publishing an article about popular environmental science programs in the Northeast, consider reaching out to their PR team to see if your school can be mentioned.

Building Brand Authority requires a coordinated off-page strategy to drive impact and prove out your school's credibility.

➔ Technical Optimizations

AI engines operate differently from traditional search engines, and tend to be picky when deciding which sites to crawl and cite.

In order to maximize your site's AI visibility, prioritize webpage load speeds and ease of information retrieval. If your webpages take several seconds to load, the AI engines will find somewhere else to find the information they're looking for. If your admissions statistics are buried in a dense report, AI engines may never surface them.

To improve your school's visibility in AI search, it takes more than a few technical tips and optimizations. A comprehensive, sitewide technical audit is needed to flag issues that may be invisible to humans but are preventing AI engines from accessing your site content.

→ See the Data for Yourself

Our 2026 New England Higher Education AI Overview Visibility dashboard includes so much more data and insight than is possible to include in a short eBook. Therefore, we've made the dashboard public, enabling you to explore the data for yourself and get clarity on your school's performance.

The dashboard can be found at synapsesem.com/2026-higher-ed-dashboard. The passkey is

About Synapse

Synapse is an AI-first performance marketing agency based in Boston, supporting clients across SEO and AI search, paid search, and social media marketing.

Over the past 15 years, we've helped universities, private high schools, and colleges across the country connect with prospective students and fill classrooms.

If you'd like to learn more about our team and services, reach out to us at sales@synapsesem.com today to schedule a strategy session with our team of AI search experts.

