

Optimizing Program Pages for Search and Student Needs

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Presenters



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Agenda

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- 2 SEO Considerations**

- 3 UX Data**

- 4 What Students Are Saying**

- 5 SEO + UX**

- 6 Key Takeaways**



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Why Program Page Content Matters



Why Program Page Content Matters

When prospective students research academic programs, they aren't casually browsing – they're making one of the most important decisions of their lives that will shape their future career.

- Longer, thoughtfully structured pages consistently deliver better results across search engine optimization (SEO), user experience (UX), and student engagement.
- Let's explore SEO best practices, UX behavior data, and real student feedback that showcase how a comprehensive academic program content strategy can strengthen digital marketing efforts and convert prospective students into confident applicants.



Image generated by Gemini

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SEO Considerations



1. Short Pages Fail to Rank

Without enough depth, context, or supporting elements, it's difficult for search engines to accurately assess a page's value or to match it with students searching for specific, high-intent information.

- Program pages should include essential details like curriculum information, career outcomes, and admissions requirements.
- Short program pages are unlikely to perform well for broad queries like "*MBA program*" or more specific long-tail searches like "*best online BSN programs for working nurses.*"
- To rank effectively, program pages need to demonstrate expertise, relevance, and a full understanding of what students are hoping to find.

2. Longer Pages Build Search Authority

When you create a program page with structured, in-depth content, you can naturally include more keywords that align with how students search.

- Comprehensive pages allow for the integration of both short-tail keywords and long-tail queries.
 - Short-tail: *"accounting major"*
 - Long-tail: *"what can I do with an accounting degree"*
- Longer pages also create more opportunities for strategic internal linking to related resources, such as blogs or career outcome data, which improves site architecture, keeps prospective students engaged longer, and positions your site as a trusted source.

3. AI Models & LLMs Pull From Detailed, Structured Pages

In the era of AI-powered search features like Google's AI Overviews and AI Mode, having clear and robust content becomes even more critical for gaining visibility in these results.

- Students are increasingly using Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity to ask complex, conversational questions about college and academic programs of interest
- If your program pages don't provide the depth of content these models prioritize, they're less likely to be cited or used in AI and LLM responses. **And if AI can't find you, prospective students most likely won't either.**

4. Google Rewards Comprehensive Content

Google prioritizes content that demonstrates Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness, known as the E-E-A-T framework.

Well-developed academic program pages align with E-E-A-T principles by:

- **Experience:** Providing real-world perspectives through student testimonials, internship opportunities, and career pathways.
- **Expertise:** Offering clear, accurate information about curriculum, course offerings, and academic expectations.
- **Authoritativeness:** Showcasing faculty credentials and accreditation details.
- **Trustworthiness:** Presenting content that is up-to-date and easy to navigate.

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What the Data Tells Us



Let's Look at the Numbers

It's a common misconception that students – both current and prospective – skim everything on college websites and that every page should be as brief as possible. While that may be true for some areas of a site, the same doesn't hold true for program pages.

- Across the average college website, **we typically find that users scroll about 50–55% of a page.** They usually get past the hero space, get through the first half of the content, and begin to hop to other pages or websites.
- **However, on program pages, that number jumps to 60–65%.** That's a significant increase, and it tells us that students are invested in what they find on these pages.

Let's Look at the Numbers

Even more compelling is what this means for user engagement. Using Google Analytics 4, we can take a closer look at how engaged site visitors are as they explore college sites.

- On optimized program pages, **we have seen engagement rates as high as 73% over a 12-month period (compared to 45-55% sitewide).**

This high level of engagement is particularly significant when you consider that, for most universities, the majority of their engaged website traffic comes from organic search.

- Our internal research, detailed in the Higher Ed SEO Benchmarks Report, reveals that **organic search drives an average of 53% of engaged sessions, with an average engagement rate of 61%.**

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What Students Say About Program Pages



Student #1

"The program page is definitely long, but we can't say it's not informative. I love how informative this is."

Takeaway: A longer program page isn't a problem when it's well-organized and is packed with relevant details.

Student #2

“So I was talking about this earlier, where I wasn't able to find the details about specific classes that I need, the program page has exactly what I was looking for. It's pretty descriptive, and all the staples of the program are included.”

Takeaway: Include key details like course topics, in-classroom opportunities, and program takeaways. This information helps students compare programs and picture themselves in the classroom.

Student #3

“I like to know all the information a college can provide and more about the program. It just needs to be really well organized. Maybe add subtopics and ways to open and close details on the same page.”

Takeaway: A long program page doesn't have to result in it being cluttered. Use interaction design to let students choose their own path through content.

Student #4

“Honestly, the program pages are pretty in-depth, and I wasn't expecting that. When I first joined the University, it was pretty hard to find everything I needed for my degree, and having it all in one place makes it easy to find and understand.”

Takeaway: A strong program page isn't just content – it's a complete, student-centered experience.

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We're Better Together: SEO + UX



SEO + UX

It is important to keep in mind that finding the program page is only step one. Site visitors may find you by using search engines, but that doesn't guarantee that they will choose who they found. This is where SEO and UX come together to create a truly effective digital strategy.

- When program pages are optimized for keywords and structured thoughtfully, students not only land on them but also engage, scroll, and explore, leading them to take the next step to apply, visit, or request more information.
- It's not just about rankings or readability – it's about the harmony of both. When SEO and UX work hand-in-hand, your content does more than attract traffic. It builds trust, supports action, and drives results.

Bottom Line:

When it comes to academic program pages on higher education websites, *less isn't more.*

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Key Takeaways



Key Takeaways

- **Students want more detail, not less.** When making a major life decision, students value comprehensive information. The data shows they are more invested in these pages, scrolling further (up to 65%) and engaging at higher rates (up to 73%) compared to the rest of a university website.
- **Long-form content is critical for SEO.** Longer pages naturally include more keywords that align with student searches, which helps build search authority. This comprehensive approach is rewarded by Google's E-E-A-T framework and is essential for appearing in new AI-powered search results.
- **Organization is just as important as length.** Students want detailed information, but it must be well-organized and easy to navigate. A strong page isn't just a wall of text; it's a complete, student-centered experience that uses design to make content digestible.
- **SEO and UX must work together.** SEO is what gets a student to your program page, but a strong user experience is what convinces them to stay, explore, and ultimately apply. The harmony of both is what builds trust and drives results.

Resources

Dive Deeper

[Search Experience Optimization](#)

[Google AI Mode](#)

[Higher Ed SEO Benchmarks Report](#)

[How to Create High-Performing Program Pages](#)

Learn More

[Website Design + Development](#)

Explore

[Partner with Carnegie](#)



Thank You!

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