

AI engines: The invisible influence on the college consideration list

8,000 college-bound students told us how they use AI engines (ChatGPT, Gemini, etc) to search for colleges

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In May, we asked students how they felt about colleges using AI throughout the college search and admissions process.

We found they had some very clear boundaries. Students were comfortable with AI providing utility, but overwhelmingly preferred people as decisions became more personal.



This month:

While colleges debate how they should use AI to recruit students, **how are students using AI engines to evaluate colleges?**

TLDR;

Students are asking AI engines about colleges whether institutions participate in those conversations or not.

They're discovering schools, comparing them, checking costs and requirements - and sometimes adding or eliminating institutions based on what they learn.

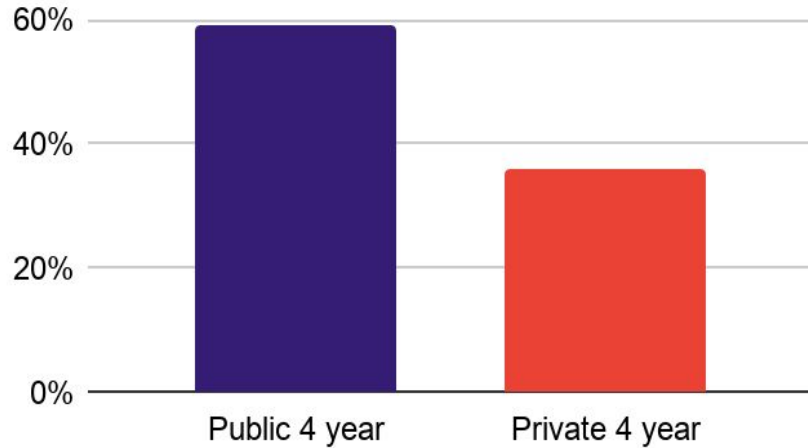
The new challenge for colleges is being accurately represented in a conversation they can't see.

In summary, our polled students have:

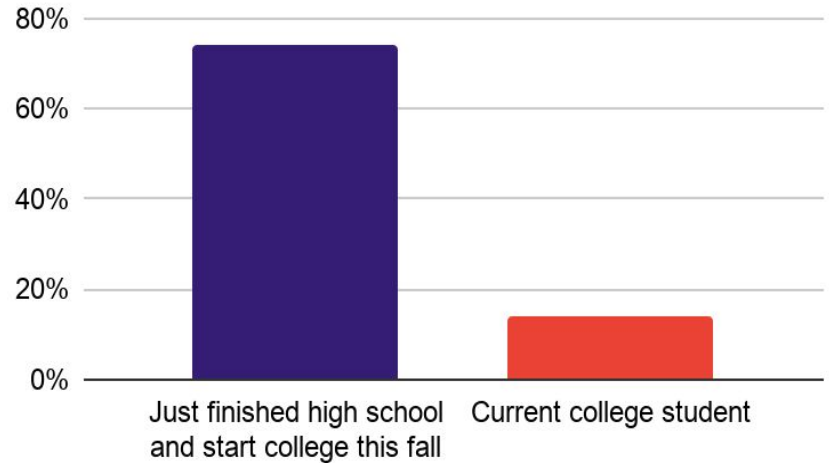
- ✓ Discovered a college they didn't previously know through AI engines
- ✓ Caught AI engine answers being wrong, misleading or outdated about a college
- ✓ Told us AI engine content changed their interest, behavior or college list

Of our 8,000 students:

What type of institution are you headed to?



Student status



Of our 8,000 students:

79%

Attend or attended
public high school

28%

Household income
under \$50k

44%

First-gen
(neither parent has
a 4-year degree)



Takeaway #1

AI engines have entered the search

Using AI engines isn't an emerging behavior anymore. It is already embedded in how students research colleges.

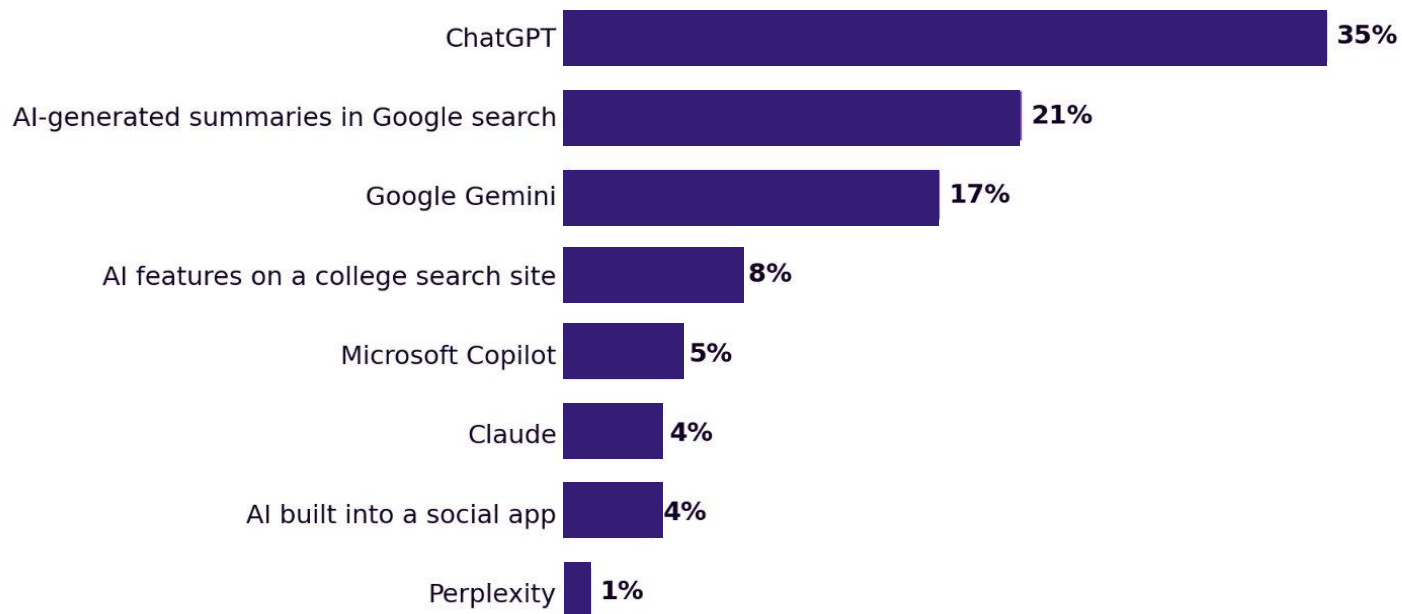
82.6% intentionally used AI engines in the past month.

43% use AI engines at least weekly.

55% of students have already used AI engines for college research.

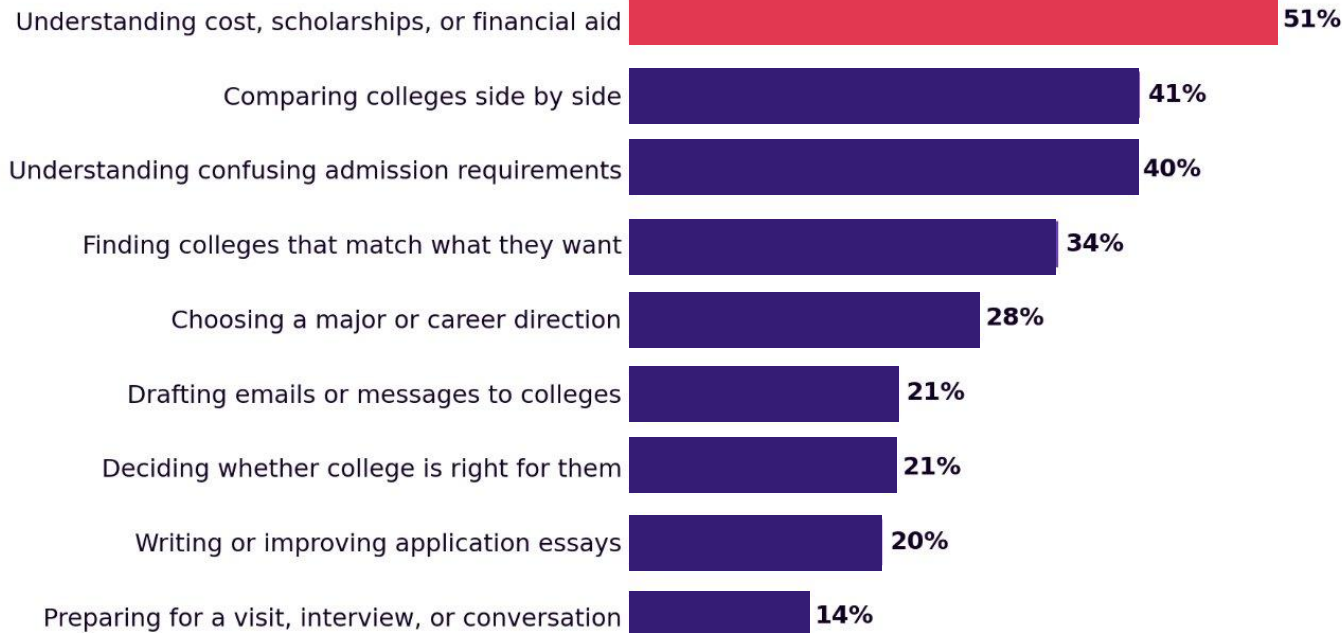


What AI engines have you used for college research?



* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process

Financial aid is the topic most students ask AI engines about



* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process



Takeaway #2

AI engines have real influence on what colleges get added to the list

The key finding isn't simply that students use AI engines. It's that the answers they receive influence what they do next.

70.8% say information from AI engines changed something real about their college search.

It increased or decreased interest, prompted an action, or resulted in a college being added to or removed from their list.

* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process





Takeaway #2

**It has real
influence on
what colleges
get added to
the list**

48.5% of AI engine-using students discovered colleges through AI results that they hadn't previously heard of, and 27.7% went on to seriously consider one.

22.1% added a previously unknown college to their list after an AI engine surfaced it.
19% removed a college from their list.

42% became more interested in a college they were already considering.

40% took an action such as visiting a website, requesting information or applying.

* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process

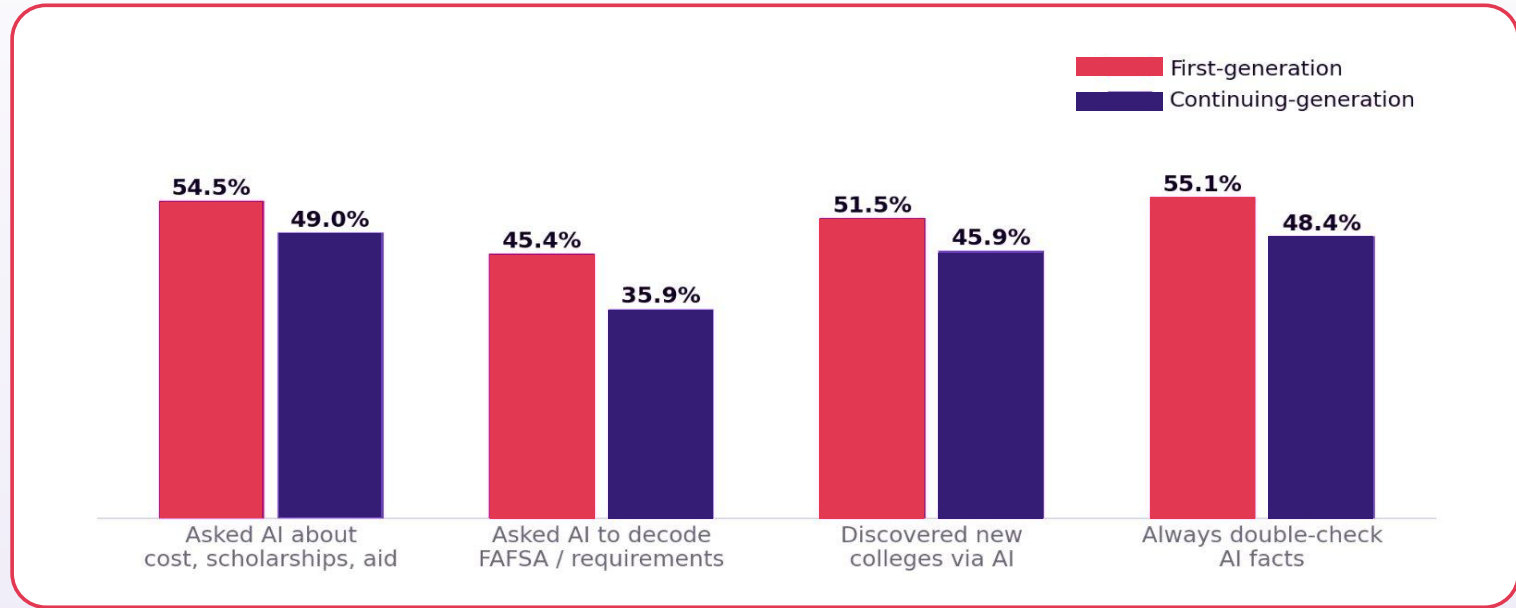


After interacting with an AI engine, students went on to:



* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process

First-generation students are using AI engines as an additional source of guidance throughout the college search



* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process



Takeaway #3

**Influence does
not equal
authority**

Colleges don't necessarily know what students are asking, or what AI engines are telling them.

And it's not always correct.

41.6% have encountered AI engine answers that gave them incorrect, misleading, or outdated college information.

* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process





Takeaway #3

Influence does not equal authority

80% always or usually double-check AI engine generated facts against an official source.

Only **4.9%** name AI engines as one of their top-two most helpful college research sources, despite **55%** having used it.

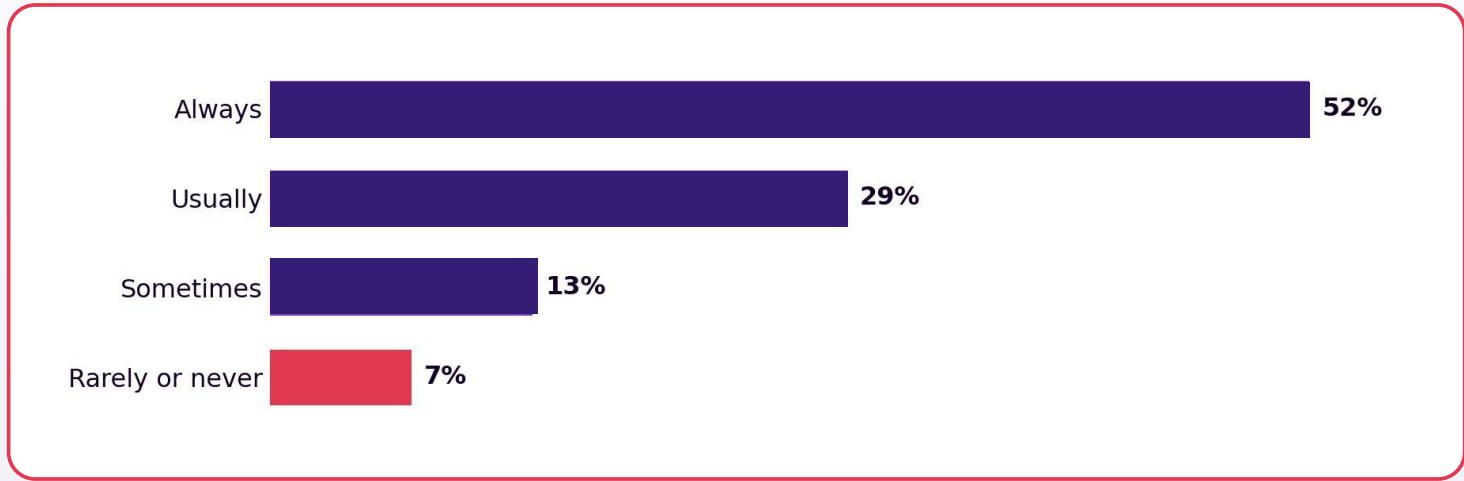
AI's average helpfulness rating is only **3.25/5**.

7.3% say incorrect/misleading AI engine information actually affected a college decision.

* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process



How often students fact check AI engine results:



* Representing 55% of students who used AI in their search process



Takeaway #4

AI still doesn't replace human connection

AI may influence discovery and consideration, but students become much more protective of authenticity and human judgment as things become personal.

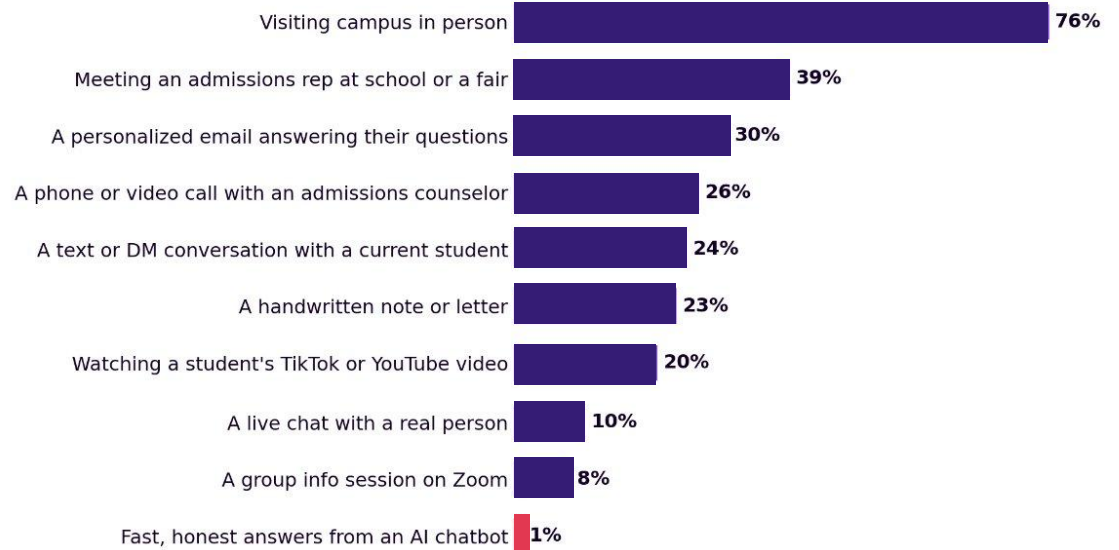
72.1% still say human connection is very/extremely important before deciding to attend.

42% say human connection could **make or break their decision.**

Only **1.2%** consider fast, honest answers from an AI chatbot to be a "real connection."



What students feel creates a real, personal connection with a college



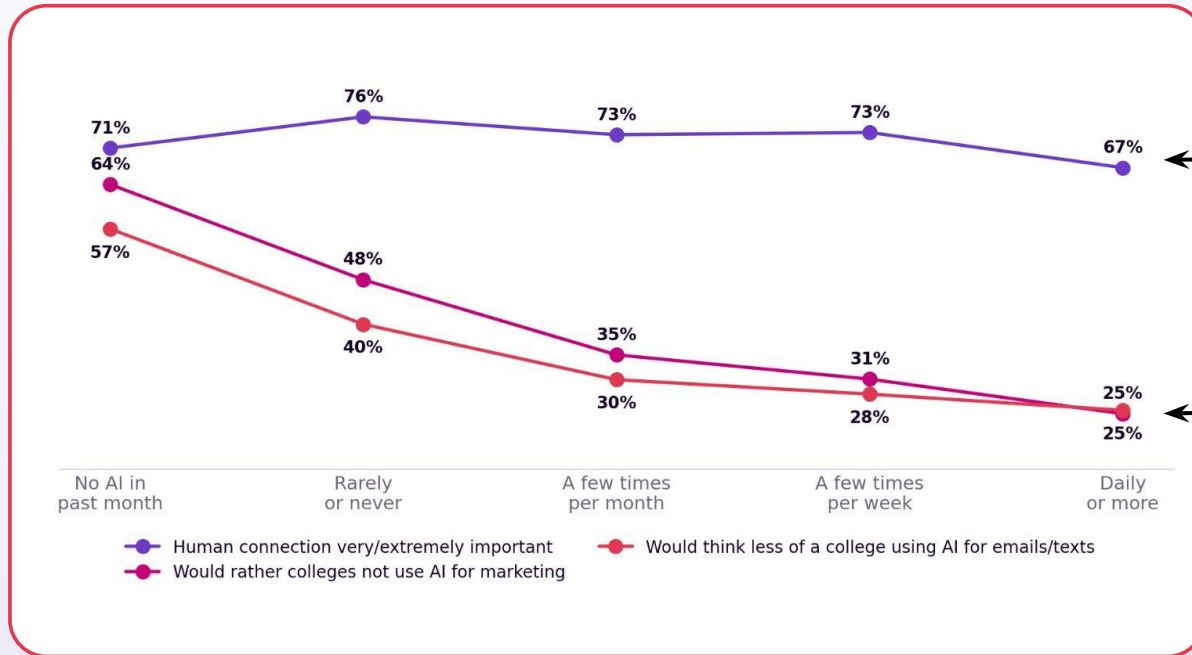
Quotes from our polled students on their most meaningful interactions with admissions teams

"My admissions counselor gave me his phone number so I was able to contact him at any time with any questions I had, and he was very good about answering questions quickly and with precise detail"

"I got a handwritten note from the college that congratulated me on being accepted."



As students use AI engines more frequently, their attitudes toward colleges using AI tools change dramatically, but their desire for human connection barely moves



Human connection stays highly important across every AI engine usage segment

But opinion on colleges using AI changes, as student adoption rises



Our May research showed students wanted
people at the moments that matter.

Now we know something else: even as students
use AI engines themselves, the need for human
connection remains.





Students are comfortable using AI engines themselves, but they're also watching how colleges use it, and judging them for getting it wrong.

57.9% believe colleges have already sent them AI-written messages.

The things that give it away include:

- Inhuman tone (27%)
- Being too formal/perfect (25%)
- Generic content (14%)
- Formatting habits such as em dashes (13%)

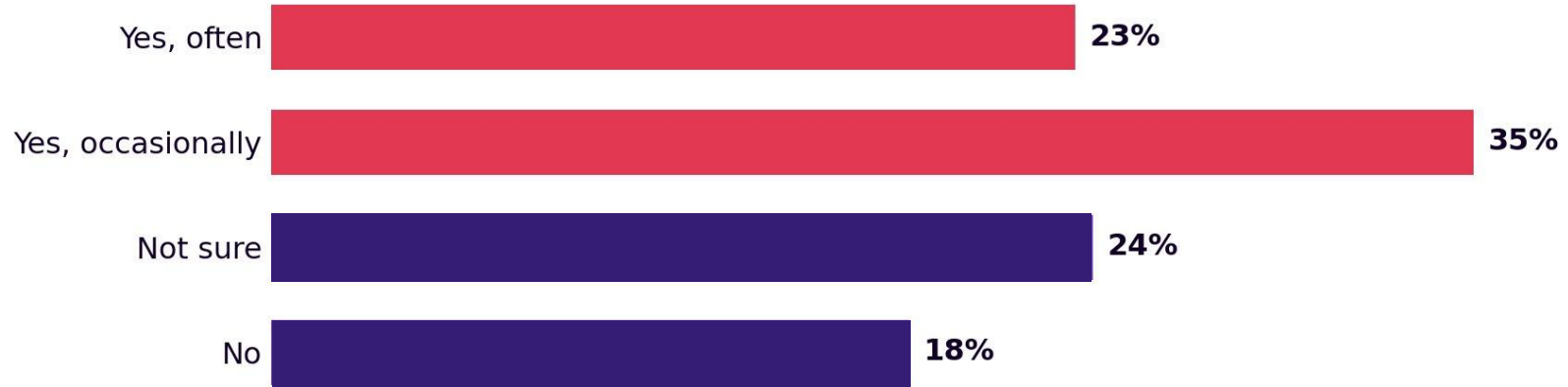


Takeaway #5

Scrutiny works both ways



Students who believe they have received AI-generated messages from their prospective colleges





Takeaway #5

Scrutiny works both ways

35% would think **less of a college** if they discovered it used AI to write emails/texts.

35% state their opinion of a college would be shaped depending **if they were upfront** about using AI

28% of our surveyed students do not care if a college used AI to market to them

Only **2%** would think more of the college - roughly a **17:1 downside ratio**.

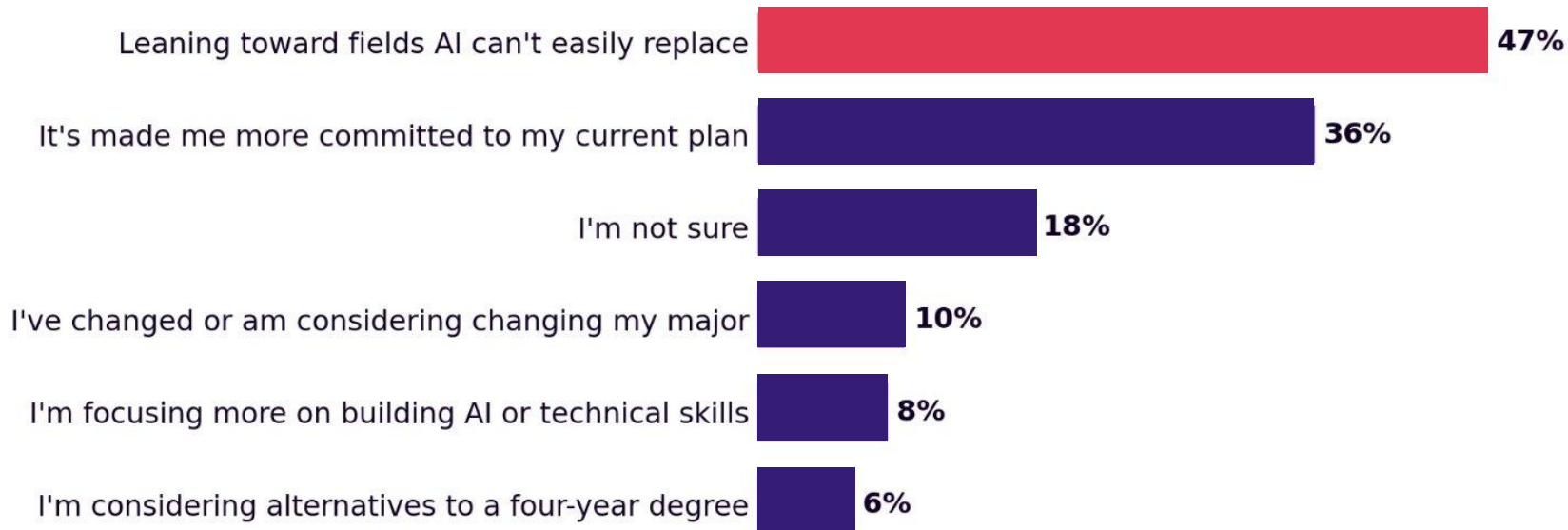




And beyond the search, the AI boom is
changing what students want for their
careers



The rapid growth of AI is changing students perception of the future job market





89% of polled students remain very or somewhat confident that college will prepare them for a successful career in an AI economy.

47% are leaning toward fields they believe AI can't easily replace

6% are considering alternatives to a four-year degree





Strategic recommendations



Recommendation #1

Use AI to create more time for human connection

Use AI behind the scenes to identify questions, surface changing interests, and help teams prioritize outreach.

Keep people at the center of the moments that shape fit, belonging, trust, and confidence. Every automated experience should provide a clear and easy path to a real person.

Automate the logistics, not the milestone moments.

Recommendation #2

Audit what AI says about you, in particular, affordability related content

Affordability is the most common college topic students ask AI engines, and many students have encountered inaccurate, misleading, or outdated college information.

Test the questions students are likely to ask. Then make official cost, scholarship, and financial-aid pages clear, current, and easy to verify.

The goal is not simply to convert students while they are fact-checking. It is to **earn their trust** when they are looking for certainty.

Recommendation #3

Treat AI engines as a discovery channel

Students are discovering colleges through AI engines that they had not previously considered.

Ensure your information is **easy to understand and accurately represented** on your website across academics, affordability, campus life, student support, and community.

Strengthen the official sources AI engines and students are likely to rely on.

Recommendation #4

Create communication that feels relevant, specific, and human

Students notice generic, overly polished, or impersonal messaging.

Use the interests, questions, and preferences students choose to share to make outreach more useful and supportive, not more intrusive.

Be transparent about where AI supports the work. AI should help a person communicate better, not pretend to be one.

Recommendation #5

Help students feel confident navigating an AI-shaped future.

Students are considering how AI may affect their majors, careers, and the value of their education.

Show how your programs prepare students to work alongside emerging technology. Share insight and resources from faculty, current students, alumni, and career teams so students can connect academic choices to real possibilities.



Our methodology:

The survey was fielded August 3–10, 2026, through the ZeeMee platform and received 7,948 completed responses; 98.4% of respondents were U.S.-based.

The survey was a follow-up to the May 2026 ZeeMee Student Pulse Survey of 12,000 students on AI in admissions. Respondents were engaged, college-bound students; 73.8% had just completed high school and planned to enter college in fall 2026.

Follow-up questions were tailored based on students' reported AI use. College-search AI questions were asked only of the 4,363 students who used AI for college research; essay questions of the 875 who used AI for essays; chatbot ratings of the 1,715 who used a chatbot; and AI-generated messaging questions of the 4,604 who believed they had received AI-written messages.

Usage segments are based on self-reported frequency of intentional AI use. Open-ended responses were coded by keyword; themes are not mutually exclusive.





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