

**Undervalued**



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**and**

**Underinvested**

**The 2020 Higher Education  
Site Search Report**

# Introduction

**Colleges and universities are under enormous pressure to do more with less.** As college enrollment rates continue to slide across the United States, due in part to reduced birth rates and negative public perception of higher education, many higher education marketers are struggling to adapt. Add to this the fact that Generation Z users have extremely high expectations of digital experiences set by retail and social media giants like Amazon and Netflix, and it becomes clear why schools are falling behind in delivering personalized experiences that offer immediate value to the user. Higher education marketers simply can't afford to overlook opportunities to improve upon their existing investments. This is especially true for smaller schools with smaller marketing budgets in which everyone is clamoring for the marketing team's time and attention.

**One of the most critical interactions prospective students have on a school's website is searching for programs, majors, and courses of interest.** So much of what happens next depends on whether or not a prospective student finds what they are searching for during this initial visit. With this in mind, we wondered whether most colleges and universities are invested enough in the quality of the search experience. In order to find out, we surveyed

higher education marketing professionals about their school's search technology. We asked them about their perceptions with regard to the quality of search results, the search experience overall, the degree to which they had invested in improving search, and the extent to which search insights were being disseminated throughout their organizations.

**Based on our research, we have found that there is a significant opportunity to increase conversion rates by improving prospective students' initial search experience.** Throughout this white paper, we will discuss the pros and cons of various approaches to site search and provide examples of best practices. Keep reading to learn more about the benefits of a personalized site search experience, how to implement these changes, and what metrics to track in order to measure success.

## In this report, you will learn:

- The aspects of search that most impact the user experience
- The benefits of a personalized search experience
- What metrics to watch to assess the effectiveness of site search
- The value of analyzing and disseminating search data analytics across your organization

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# The Changing Higher Education Landscape

**There's no doubt that higher education is going through a period of radical change.** Declining enrollment, leadership changes, closures, and the challenges of marketing to Gen Z combine to put enormous pressure on higher education institutions. Not to mention, less than half of American adults have confidence in higher education today, according to Gallup. Here, we do a deeper dive into each of these issues in order to paint a clearer picture of the changing landscape in higher ed and how marketers can respond.

## Declining Enrollment

According to a [recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#), college enrollment in the U.S. has decreased for the eighth consecutive year. The overall decline this year was roughly 300,000 students, or 1.7%. States with the largest declines in student enrollment numbers included Florida, California, Illinois, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

The falling birthrates that began in 2008 are also likely to have a major impact on higher education enrollment in the near future. This is evidenced by the number of children in public kindergartens, which began falling in 2014 and is [projected](#) to continue declining in the coming years. Colleges and universities will likely begin feeling the impact of these changes by 2025.

## Gen Z Expectations of Technology

Today's prospective students have extremely high expectations of technology, and higher education institutions are not rising to the challenge. A [recent report by ContentSquare](#) noted that, "If you can't

reach Gen Z in five seconds, you can't reach them at all." Young people's expectations of technology have evolved from the use of sites and apps from social media (Facebook), video (Netflix), and ecommerce (Amazon) giants. They've grown up accustomed to this level of user experience, and they simply won't engage with technology that doesn't provide immediate value. The pressure is on for higher education institutions that seek to effectively reach and communicate with the first generation of "digital natives."

## The Need to Do More With Less

In today's digital landscape, many colleges and universities have already invested heavily in their websites and social media presence. In order for that investment to pay off, the information on these sites needs to be easily accessible. Higher education websites tend to be very content-heavy and are oftentimes more difficult to navigate than other websites. By improving the search experience, colleges and universities have an unparalleled opportunity to improve conversion rates, and ultimately, win over more students at a lower cost.

**The pressure is on for higher education institutions that seek to effectively reach and communicate with the first generation of "digital natives."**

# The Importance of Site Search

**“I don’t want to have to navigate this site the way they want me to. I just want to find the thing I’m looking for.”**

— Every Frustrated User

As users, we’ve become accustomed to performing a Google search for anything and everything. Online search has become our default choice for finding answers. Similarly, visitors to your college or university’s website — whether they are prospective students, active students, alumni, faculty, staff, or parents — often have something specific in mind when they visit.

**Behavioral studies by the Nielsen Norman Group** show that more than 50% of people visiting a start page on a website go straight to the internal search box, and search is frequently used by 59% of website visitors to navigate. It’s also important to recognize that when browsing doesn’t yield the desired results, users will quickly turn to search as a last resort — or a first alternative to leaving the site and looking

elsewhere. These figures demonstrate that a good search user experience is essential to compliment the user experience of any website, and in particular, any site that has a high volume of content.

Especially in a mobile context, users are more likely to search than to browse because of the limited screen real estate. Given the dramatic increase in mobile device use—**81% of Americans now own a smartphone** and **40% of Gen Z consider themselves a digital device addict**—improving the quality of the search experience has become imperative.

According to a **recent study by Extractable**, “when properly designed and executed, site search can decrease bounce rates by an average of 95% and increase engagement rates by as much as 300%.”

Clearly, site search is a critical interaction on any higher education institution’s website. However, we suspected that higher education institutions were severely underinvested in the quality of the search experience overall. In order to test this hypothesis, we decided to ask and find out.

## CASE STUDY

### The British Columbia Institute of Technology

Our goal for internal search is to help site visitors find the content they need, quickly, without having to make multiple refinements to their search terms. Within a month of going live with Funnelback, we saw a clear pattern where search refinements dropped by 15% overall. Search refinements—when someone does a second search immediately after the first search, in most cases because they couldn’t find the information they wanted—is a key metric we use from Google Analytics.

One feature Funnelback provides that we didn’t have with our previous tool is the ability to promote results and have them appear with the same styling as standard results. Looking at our most searched terms over the previous year, we checked their search rankings and promoted approximately 50 to the top of the results. The search refinements for many of these terms dropped by up to 60%.

Using Google Analytics data to segment new and returning visitors to our site, we now see an overall 19% drop in search refinements for our new visitors. This is important to us because we want to encourage visitors to use our internal site search as much as possible. The thinking is if new users have a good experience with our internal search, they’ll continue to use it, and we know that folks who use site search are more valuable to our business.

We also see that search refinements for mobile users—a growing percent of our site traffic—decreased by 22%.

**Within a month of going live with Funnelback, we saw a clear pattern where search refinements dropped by 15% overall.**

Another metric we use in Google Analytics is goal values. We’ve monetized key conversions on our site and are able to calculate a rough measure of value for different behaviors, including the use of site search. From this data, we see that over the past six months site search users have a per user goal value of approximately \$114, compared to our site average of \$23.

We’re using two primary indicators to gauge the overall impact of our investment in site search: 1) an increase in the number of people using search, and 2) an increase in the per user goal value of people who use search.

**Alan Etkin**

Senior Analyst, Web Analytics at the British Columbia Institute of Technology

# Research Methodology and Findings

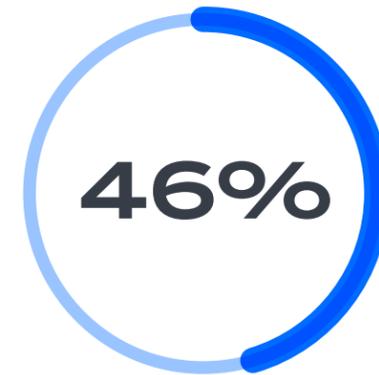
We surveyed higher education marketers and admissions professionals to discover their impressions with regard to their institution's website search capabilities.

We received 60 complete survey responses, half of which came from private, four-year institutions. The majority of respondents identified as Marketing/Communications Managers or Directors.



## FINDING NO. 1

66% of survey respondents said that attempts to improve site search had been made during their tenure. These changes included: an increased focus on SEO and analytics, investing in new search technologies, and complete website overhauls including improvements in search.



## FINDING NO. 2

However, 46% of respondents felt that the quality of their site's search results was average or below average, with 22% responding "Poor" or "Very Poor." Unsurprisingly, the most common reasons cited for not investing in search had to do with a lack of budget, resources, and technical understanding of how to address the problem.



## FINDING NO. 3

Perhaps most telling was that the vast majority of respondents were not adequately learning from their site search data or disseminating analytics throughout their organization, with less than 12% saying they do this well. This presents an enormous opportunity for teams to learn from their users' search behavior to improve site performance.

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# Justifying the Investment in Site Search Improvements

**If you've made it this far, hopefully it has become clear how a superior site search experience can have a big impact on your KPIs as a higher education marketer.**

Search users are already some of your most engaged website visitors. They know what they are interested in and are counting on your website experience to help them make an educated decision. The data is clear: when searchers find what they are looking for, **there is an over 200% increase in conversation rate**, according to a study by WebLinc.

Site search is a critical element of the online user experience and one that schools can't afford to ignore. However, our survey found that most higher ed marketers know very little about the actual quality of the search experience on their sites, or the most basic metrics to assess it (such as the percent of exits from the search results page or the search bounce rate). In the following sections, we will explain how to improve the search experience and measure success.

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# Elements of a Superior Search Experience

Use these UX best practices and recommendations to create a superior search experience that delights users and increases the ROI of your website.

## THE BASICS

### Search Inputs

- 01 **Don't make your users hunt for the search box.** Search inputs should not be difficult to find, particularly for content-heavy sites like those of most higher education institutions. Users expect search inputs to be located at the top of the page, and most commonly, on the right side.
- 02 **Use a magnifying glass icon.** This common convention communicates clearly what the purpose of the input is and makes it unique from any other inputs that may appear on the page.
- 03 **Don't erase the user's search text after they submit.** Users often reformulate their searches to refine the results. Don't force them to re-enter what they've already typed.
- 04 **Use prompt text in the field.** Prompt text should communicate the scope and context of the search — whether it is site-wide or a sub context such as news or events.
- 05 **Provide a button to submit search queries.** Note that often the magnifying glass icon will be positioned inside the search input, aligned to the right, and will function as the submit button.
- 06 **Base the field's width on the average length of search strings.** Make sure the field is wide enough to comfortably accommodate the average search string length.

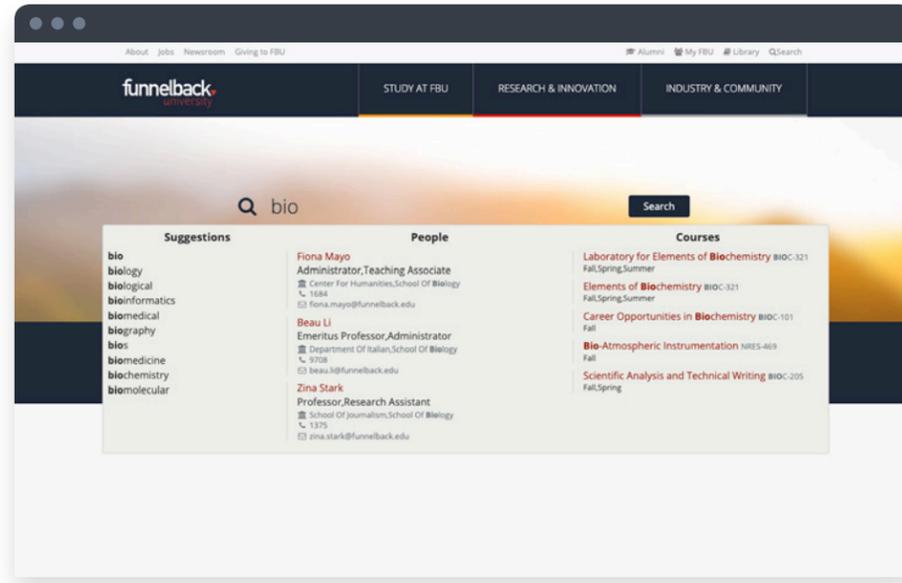
## THE BASICS

### Search Results Pages

- 01 **Include a count of results.** Users should be able to easily see how many results were returned. If results are paginated, format the count as "Showing 1-# of 432 results."
- 02 **Don't return "No Results" and an empty page.** Show results that are a match to some of the search terms if possible or show the most popular pages on the site with an explanation such as "We're sorry, we couldn't find any matches to your search. Showing results of some of your search terms" or "Showing the # most popular search results for the site."
- 03 **Correct for typos.** If the user makes a typo and the search returns no results and you can detect this, show them results for the corrected search term instead.
- 04 **Provide a history of the user's searches.** Cap the list at a manageable number but show a reverse chronological listing of most recent searches adjacent to the search field.
- 05 **Provide both list and card views of results.** Some users prefer a tabular list of items, others prefer a grid of cards. Give them the option to choose the results page layout they prefer.

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# Search Functionality

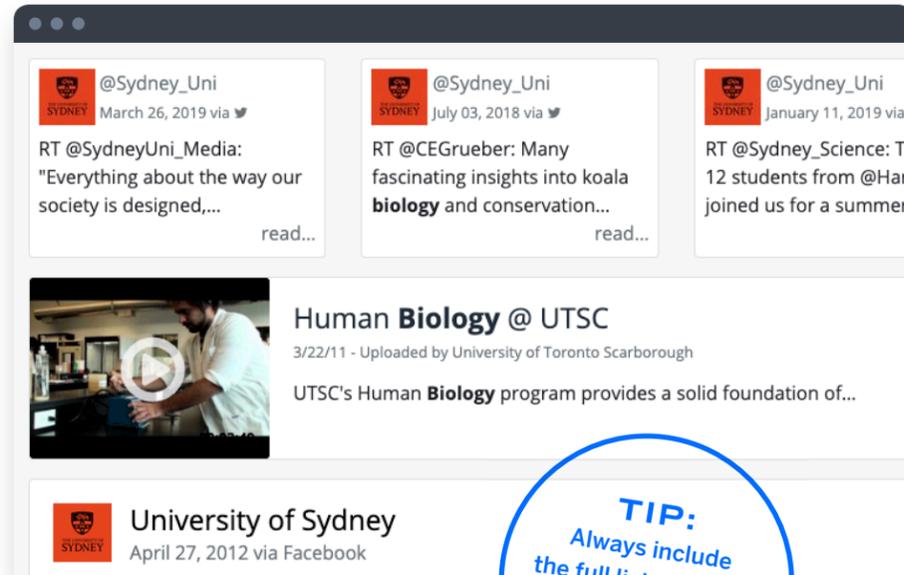


01

**Include autocomplete functionality.** Autocomplete helps users to quickly find what they are looking for using only a few keystrokes, and it reduces typos and the resulting errors.

02

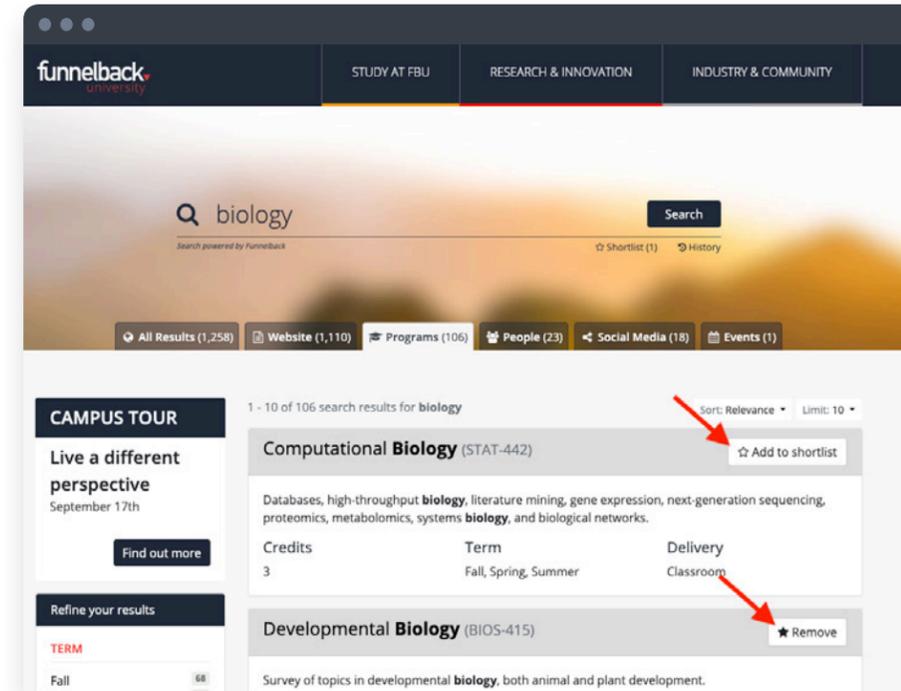
**Segment results.** Grouping results by content type provides an extremely useful experience in that the results are “chunked” by logical type. For example, searching for a particular major or course could return related results such as events or social media content related to the keywords used. Presenting this content in a tabbed or accordion container allows the user to review the content types they are interested in with a single click.



**TIP:**  
Always include the full list of results as an alternative display method.

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# Search Functionality

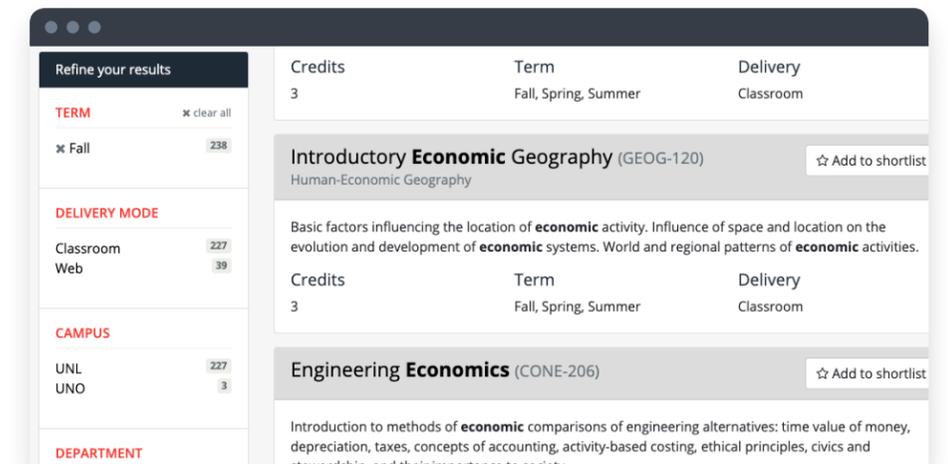


03

**Create shortlists and favorites.** When searching for degrees, programs, majors, or courses, having the ability to create a shortlist of favorites is extremely useful to users and will provide a significant return on investment by driving enrollment.

04

**Provide filtering capabilities.** Don't overwhelm the searcher with a large amount of results. Provide filters that let the user analyze the results by isolating results based on meaningful criteria.



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## Search Analytics and Tuning

As important as the recommendations above are for the quality of the search user experience, what matters most is the quality of the results. Analysis of your search data can provide insights that can help you to fine tune the results your site users receive. For example:

01

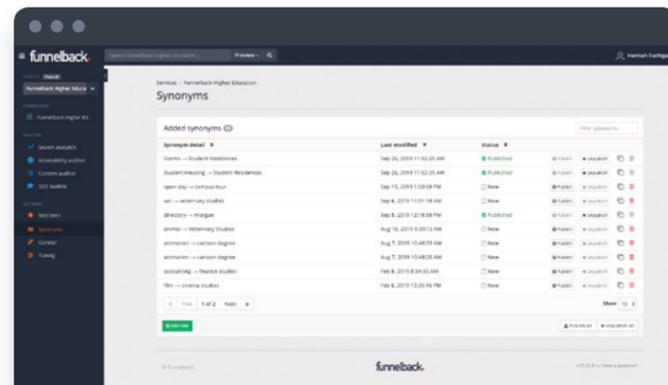
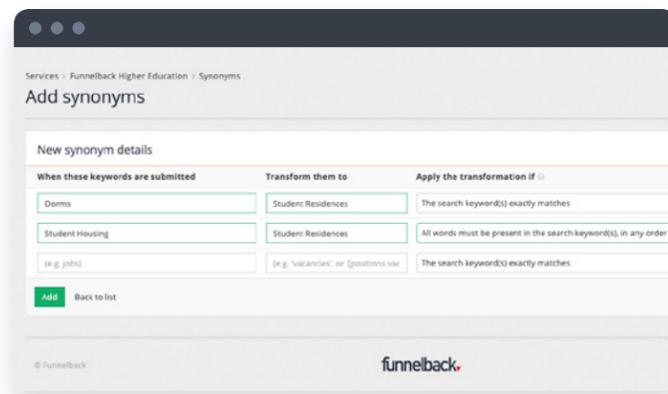
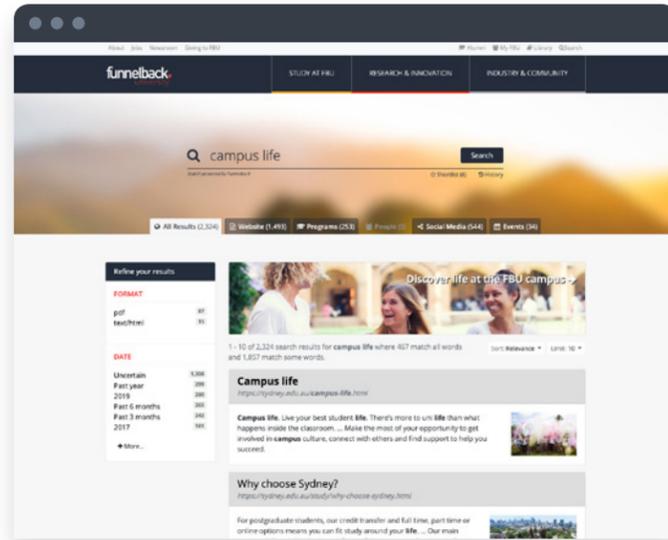
Having the ability to bump up or always include certain content in search results can help you to promote or feature certain content of particular importance. Removing specific results based on a keyword is also a powerful tuning capability.

02

Displaying content based on a user's geography can be extremely helpful to International students.

03

The ability to create synonyms can greatly improve the quality of search results. For example, your page may be titled "Student Residences," but users commonly search for "Dorms" or "Student Housing." Creating synonyms would ensure that users get to the information they require without having to use your specific verbiage.



Site search is a **critical element** of the online user experience and one that schools can't afford to ignore.

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## Search Analytics and Tuning

Knowing what metrics to capture to evaluate the effectiveness of your site's search is also important. The following metrics provide good visibility to your site's overall search performance:

### Percentage of Sessions Using Internal Search

**TIP** When search is performing well, this number will **increase**, indicating that search is a useful method of navigation.

### Percentage of Search Exits

**TIP** When search is performing well, this number will **decrease**, indicating that users are finding what they searched for and staying on the site to inspect it.

### Percentage Search Refinements

**TIP** This number will **decrease** when search is performing well. If users don't have to search more than once, it's a good indication that the results are relevant.

### Time after Search

**TIP** An **increase** in this number indicates that search has been effective and users are spending more time on the site engaging with the content of interest to them.

# Conclusion

**Site search represents a largely underutilized opportunity for higher education marketers to better understand, serve, and convert users online. By making incremental improvements to the search experience, you have the ability to gain insight into the needs of your institution's various audiences and make more informed business decisions moving forward. For a relatively small investment, site search has the ability to impact your bottom line in a big way.**

## About eCity Interactive

eCity Interactive is an award-winning digital design and marketing agency using proven methods to create experiences that inspire action. Our talented group of problem-solvers has the technical chops to make ideas happen and to look at things from every perspective. We believe that building strong relationships between our clients and their audiences leads to enduring success, and we love coming to work every day to achieve their desired results.

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## About Funnelback

Funnelback is a website search solution built for college and university websites. Born from a university project in the early days of the internet, Funnelback's technology improves UX and supercharges site navigation with a smart search bar. Funnelback for Higher Education is an out-of-the-box search platform that gives your team the ability to promote results, customize the look and feel of your search, harvest insights from search data and unite separate content systems into a single search.

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