



Slipping Through the Cracks

*Understanding
PCO Unit
SEO Capabilities*



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SEARCH  NFLUENCE

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PREFACE BY



**Jim
Fong**

Chief Research Officer
UPCEA

PREFACE BY JIM FONG

Higher education is at a crossroads. Will it thrive, fail, or just survive in the future? Colleges and universities will certainly see fewer 18-to-22-year-old students as a result of the impending demographic cliff. They can choose to cut costs and increase tuition, as they have historically done to offset dips in the economy or cuts in funding, but this might not be an option moving forward as their grip on workforce preparation has certainly weakened over the past decade.

More innovative practices, models, programs, and credentials will have to be introduced for previously underleveraged nontraditional and professional audiences. Those with some credit and no degree, but often still with college loan debt, are just one audience for colleges and universities.

They are the low-hanging fruit.



PREFACE BY JIM FONG

To cast the net further, colleges and universities are going to need to create a more stackable degree or expand non-credit programs or pathways for non-credit-to-credit transfer, prior learning, and micro-credentialing, among others.

Reaching this new adult learner just got more complex.

New programs and credentials can help colleges and universities offset projected deficits created by unfavorable demographics. However, reaching the new adult learner can be complicated and requires greater precision and planning. Institutions that create better prospect and student interfaces, processes, and systems centered around the new adult learner are likely to have a competitive advantage in an evolving and complex economy.

The new adult learner is more savvy than previous generations, gathering information from many sources including an institution's website, social media, search engines and from friends and family. They, in turn, share the results of their outcomes with others thus completing a loop of influence.

PREFACE BY JIM FONG

One opportunity in the inquirer-to-student conversion process is the “storefront,” the institution’s website.

UPCEA, in partnership with Search Influence, has researched the professional, continuing, and online (PCO) education segment of higher education. Based on these findings, we can clearly say that PCO units have a long way to go to optimize and create better experiences in their virtual storefronts. Younger adult learners pose a problem for PCO units in that they have more complex communication and relational needs.

This groundbreaking research has established some clear actions and observations, including:



PCO units need to abandon legacy and focus more on the new adult learner in the design of their websites.



More emphasis needs to be placed on search engine optimization, as opposed to locked-in institutional templates and over-design and creativity.



Metrics should play a bigger part in the continuous improvement and planning process.



Institutions need to have a clear strategy for their websites and how the needs of the adult learner are integrated into the process.

PREFACE BY JIM FONG

While I am hesitant to sound the alarm whistles too early and cause panic, it is my belief that a greater sense of urgency is needed to get ahead of what clearly looks like a major problem with a short runway.

The PCO unit that addresses new market needs around new credentials, stackability, a new adult-based relational enrollment process, and the development of websites that create a stickiness for young adults will have an advantage in what looks to be a more highly competitive marketplace in the future.



Jim Fong

Chief Research Officer

UPCEA

SUMMARY

and key findings

The background of the slide is composed of several large, overlapping, curved shapes in various colors. The top half is a solid light blue. The bottom half is divided into several sections: a large orange shape on the left, a dark teal shape in the center, a green shape on the right, and a small purple shape in the bottom right corner. The text 'SUMMARY' is in a large, bold, white sans-serif font, and 'and key findings' is in a smaller, white, italicized sans-serif font, both positioned in the upper half of the slide.

SUMMARY

UPCEA and Search Influence conducted a research study comprised of three distinct components to better understand the perceptions and use of search engine optimization (SEO) for institutions' webpages and how marketing leaders leverage SEO in their professional, continuing, and online (PCO) units.

With the advancement of digital advertising, search engine optimization has become a top priority for many businesses and companies wanting to draw more attention to their web pages and attract potential consumers.

Colleges and universities should follow this lead and invest more attention and resources into SEO to attract potential students and highlight information about their best programs and offerings.

This research highlights how institutional and marketing leaders perceive and understand SEO and how this may affect the SEO readiness of member institutions. Overall key findings are listed on the following page.

KEY FINDINGS

1

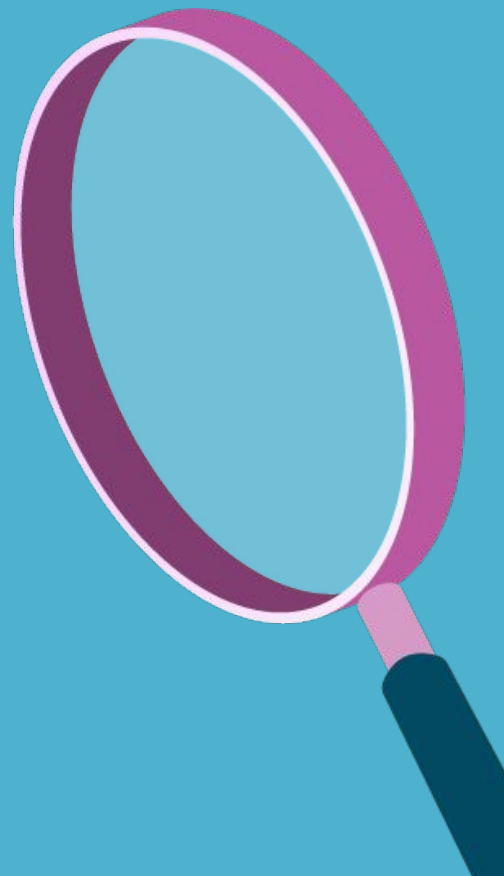
Marketing and institutional leaders alike see SEO as foundational, but admit their PCO units lack an SEO strategy

2

Institutional leadership often lacks reporting

3

UPCEA members performed poorly in an SEO audit



1

Marketing and institutional leaders alike see SEO as foundational, but admit their PCO units lack an SEO strategy:

Marketing and institutional leaders alike placed considerable value on the importance of SEO. Among marketing leaders, 84% either strongly agree (39%) or agree (45%) that their marketing department sees SEO as a core part of their marketing strategy, while 69% of institutional leaders strongly agree (27%) or agree (42%). Even with this agreed-upon value, half of all marketing leaders (51%) surveyed said their unit does not have an established SEO plan or strategy.

**84% of
marketing
departments**

see SEO

as a core part

of their

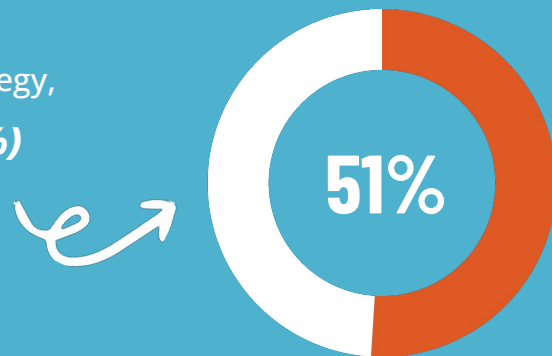
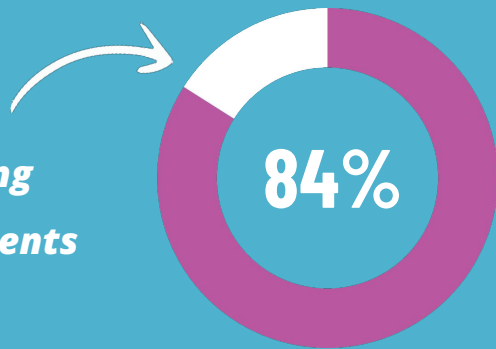
marketing strategy,

but half (51%)

do not have

an established

SEO strategy.



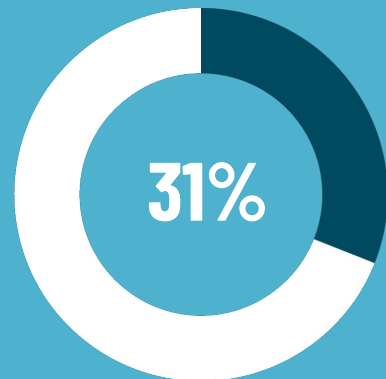
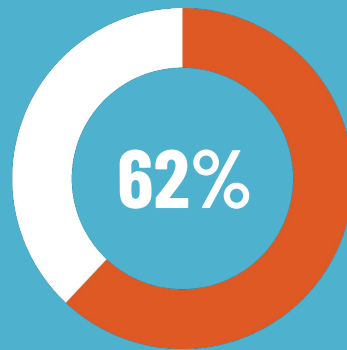
2

Institutional leadership often lacks reporting:

Institutional leaders clearly desire reporting around SEO metrics to help inform strategy. Although 62% of institutional leaders strongly agree (29%) or agree (33%) in the importance of receiving regular reporting on SEO-related metrics, only 31% strongly agree (4%) or agree (27%) that unit leadership regularly gets these updates.

62%
***of institutional
leaders***

want reporting
on SEO metrics,
but just 31%
receive regular
updates.



3

UPCEA members performed poorly in an SEO audit:

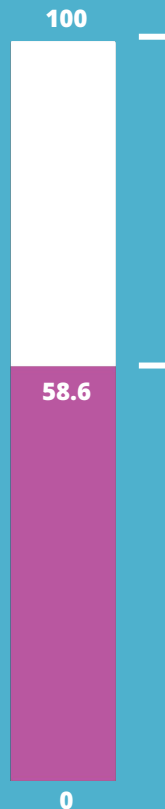
UPCEA and Search Influence performed an SEO readiness audit of 100 random UPCEA member institutions. The average score was 58.6 out of 100, which indicates considerable room for improvement.

As the PCO marketplace becomes increasingly competitive, it will be **critical for PCO units to establish SEO plans to remain visible.**

58.6

Average
SEO
Readiness
Score

100 Member
Institutions



Considerable
Room for
Improvement



the

IMPACT

By Search Influence

THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

Search engine optimization (SEO) is a vital component of the recruitment funnel.

When executed well, Google rewards websites with higher rankings in search results, which draws in prospects and increases quality inquiries.

However, a poor foundation for an SEO strategy creates cracks in the larger infrastructure of your website. And just like the potholes in an old city make the roads challenging to navigate, when SEO doesn't receive the attention it deserves, websites become difficult to navigate and can slip through the cracks — overlooked by search engines and prospects.

THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

We often hear from higher education institutions that they are “doing SEO.” But we wonder — is it being done strategically?

That’s why in this research, we set out to understand institutional and marketing leaders’ perspectives on SEO and evaluate the SEO readiness of professional continuing education (PCO) units.

The results demonstrate that SEO is an area of opportunity for many universities.

THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

Although marketing and institutional leaders value SEO as a tactic, **only 47% report that their unit has an established SEO plan or strategy.**

Figure 7: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=55)

Institutional leaders: Search engine optimization (SEO) is an important part of my PCO unit's web strategy.



Figure 19: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=49)

Marketing leaders: My marketing department sees search engine optimization (SEO) as a core part of our marketing strategy.



Strongly Agree
 Agree
 Neither agree nor disagree
 Disagree
 Strongly Disagree
 Not Sure/Don't Know

Figure 20: **Marketing leaders: Does your unit have an established search engine optimization (SEO) plan or strategy?**



THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

This disconnect suggests that, while marketers are aware of SEO's critical role, they may not have the skills, staff, or resources to develop a strategy.

The good news is that marketing departments challenged with capturing the new adult learner can focus on SEO to make a significant impact on their enrollment.

A majority of web traffic comes through organic search, i.e., utilizing popular search engines such as Google. This means, regardless of where prospects are in their student journey, they expect a search engine to answer their questions about the availability of programs, applying, and even enrollment.

THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE



When prospects search these questions and find your university right away, you are more likely to be part of their consideration set.

Inquiries from these prospects often result in higher-quality leads because they are actively searching for and considering educational offerings.

THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

Institutional leaders are 15% less likely than marketing leaders to view SEO as a core part of their PCO unit's marketing strategy. This gap in perception could be due to a lack of SEO reporting visibility.

Figure 7: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=55)

Institutional leaders: My PCO unit sees search engine optimization (SEO) as a core part of our marketing strategy.

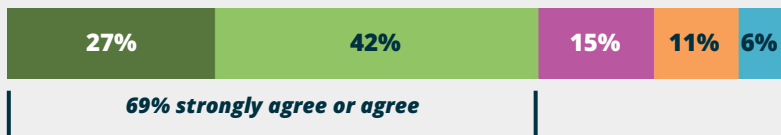


Figure 19: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=49)

Marketing leaders: My marketing department sees search engine optimization (SEO) as a core part of our marketing strategy.



THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

Although 62% of institutional leaders agree on the importance of regularly receiving SEO-related metrics to inform strategy, half of unit leadership disagrees that they regularly receive updates. **This infrequent reporting might lead to improperly resourcing SEO.** As a result, SEO suffers.

Figure 7: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=55)

Institutional leaders: It is important for institutional leadership to receive regular reporting on SEO-related metrics to help inform overall strategy.

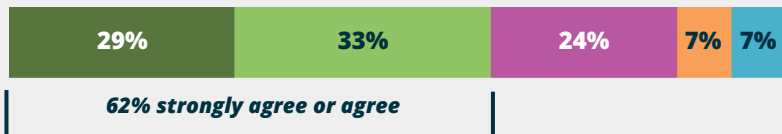
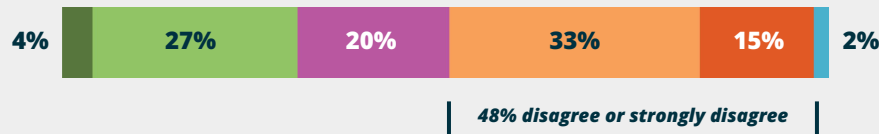


Figure 7: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=55)

Institutional leaders: Unit leadership regularly receives updates on important SEO metrics that help inform strategy.

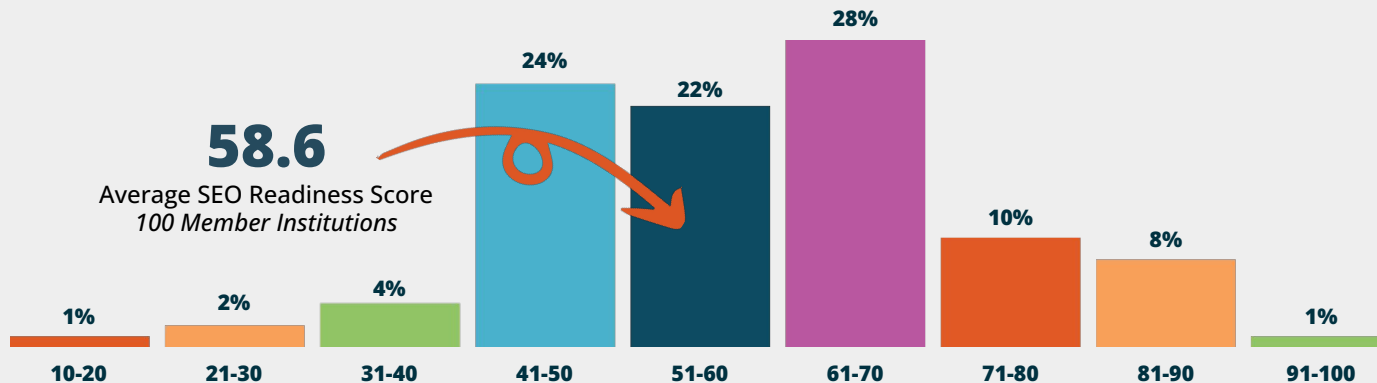


THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

Marketing departments must make a concerted effort to regularly keep institutional leadership informed of critical data points to advocate for additional resources and emphasize the importance of SEO to long-term program viability.

The analysis of the SEO readiness of PCO units indicates an **urgent need for SEO improvement**. Among the 100 UPCEA institutions profiled in the member SEO readiness exercise, the average score was 58.6. Only 19% had an excelling score.

Figure 29: **Overall Score** (n=100)



THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

We asked institutional leaders to rate how strongly they agreed with the statement below:

Figure 5: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=70)

I am satisfied with my PCO unit's web strategy.



Poor outcomes may also lead to institutional leader dissatisfaction, which has a snowball effect. If institutional leaders don't see the positive impact of SEO, they won't allocate additional resources to it.

THE IMPACT BY SEARCH INFLUENCE

We see several self-perpetuating patterns in the survey and assessment data that result in internal dissatisfaction and a lack of ROI.



Institutional leaders don't hear regular reporting updates about marketing's SEO efforts and outcomes



PCOs don't devote enough resources to SEO



PCOs don't see results from their SEO efforts



Marketing departments don't make the recruitment gains



Institutional leaders aren't satisfied

Don't let these patterns trip up your university's potential for success. This study's data shows that it's time for professional continuing education (PCO) units to invest in the skills, staff, or resources to caulk those cracks in their plans and give SEO the attention it deserves.

about SEO

The bottom of the image features a series of overlapping geometric shapes in various colors: a purple trapezoid on the left, followed by a green trapezoid, a light blue trapezoid, and an orange trapezoid on the right. These shapes are positioned below the main text, creating a modern, abstract footer design.

What is Search Engine Optimization (SEO)?

Search engines prioritize displaying the results that are most likely to answer a user's query in the most digestible format. Search engine optimization (SEO) is the improvements made to a website that increase its visibility when prospects search for the company, products, or services in search engines.

A strong SEO strategy has two goals, relevance and authority.

- Relevance: **Do you provide information that will answer a searcher's question?**
- Authority: **Are you a trusted source of information?**

SEO is performed through a combination of updates both on and off your website to help Google better understand your institution, certifications, or programs, what they do, and why searchers should see you at the top of search results.

Factors that strengthen a webpage's SEO include content creation, technical improvements, accessibility, and link building.

Organic Search

Organic search results refer to the unpaid results a search engine provides after a user makes a query.

Organic search brings in the majority of website traffic. A 2020 study revealed that “90.63% of webpages get no organic search traffic from Google,”¹ which implies that:

If websites don't have an SEO strategy behind them, they only have a small chance of discovery through popular search engines.

¹ <https://ahrefs.com/blog/search-traffic-study/>

Content

To meet your prospects in search engines organically, your site must host content specific to the topics they search the most.


A robust higher education SEO strategy includes a full-funnel approach to content that speaks to prospects in each stage of their decision-making process. The content must be highly informative, promote your key selling propositions, and be keyword-optimized.

Technical SEO

Technical SEO ensures the technology of your site is optimized for search engines.

The complex content management platforms needed to support multiple departments and users can have a negative impact on your SEO.

This makes technical SEO critical for higher ed.



SEO Readiness

*Institutional
Leader Survey*

PART 1 OF 3-PART STUDY

& METHODOLOGY

PURPOSE

Institutional Leaders Study Purpose

UPCEA and Search Influence developed a survey to better understand **institutional leaders'** perspectives toward search engine optimization (SEO).

Institutional Leaders Survey Methodology

UPCEA and Search Influence partnered to identify institutional leaders' perspectives toward search engine optimization (SEO) and what tools their professional, continuing, and online (PCO) units use for website design. The results of this study focus on institutional leaders' awareness around their SEO strategies and whether they feel satisfied and confident with these approaches. An invitation to participate was sent to 405 UPCEA members, of which 70 individuals participated and completed the entire survey. The survey took place from November 4 to 9, 2022. The research was underwritten by Search Influence, a national search engine optimization and digital advertising agency.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Over a third (36%) of respondents are directors or executive directors, 33% are deans, 9% associate or assistant provosts, 6% vice presidents, 4% vice provosts, and 1% associate or assistant deans.

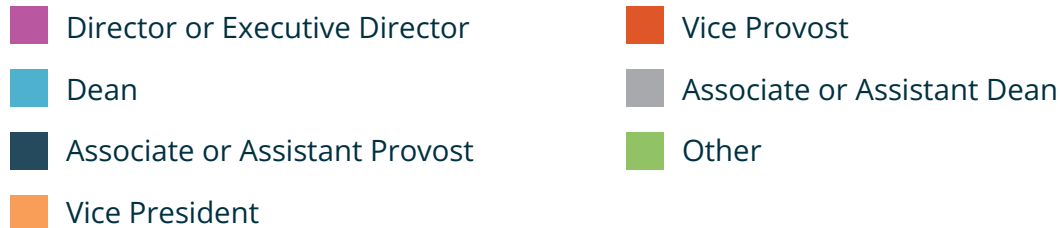
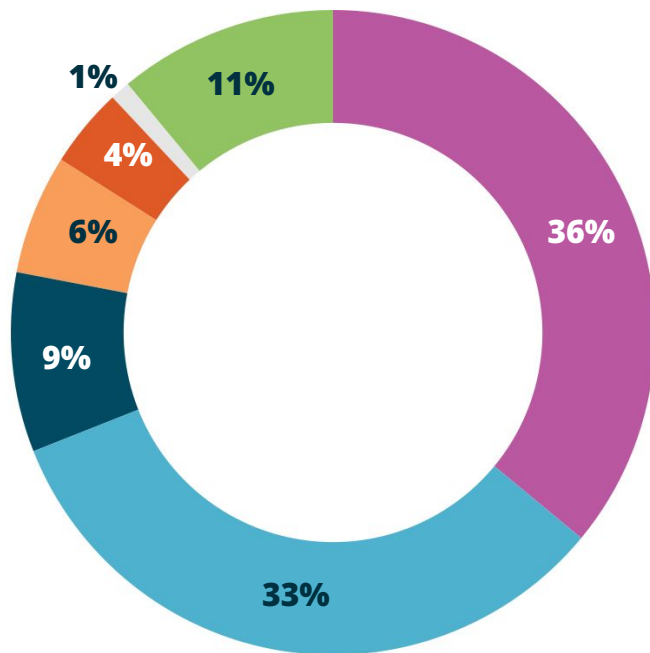


Figure 1: Respondent Title (n=70)



INSTITUTIONAL LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Slightly over half (51%) of respondents are from public research institutions, 20% from master's comprehensive institutions, and 13% from private research institutions.

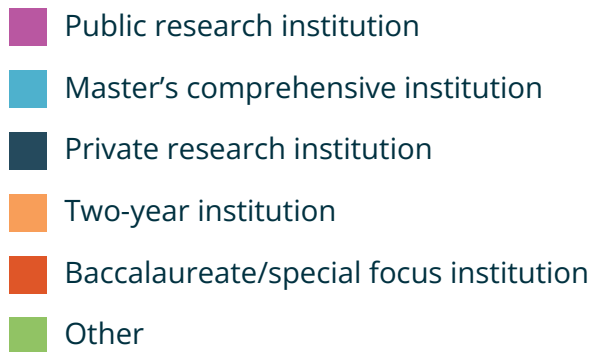
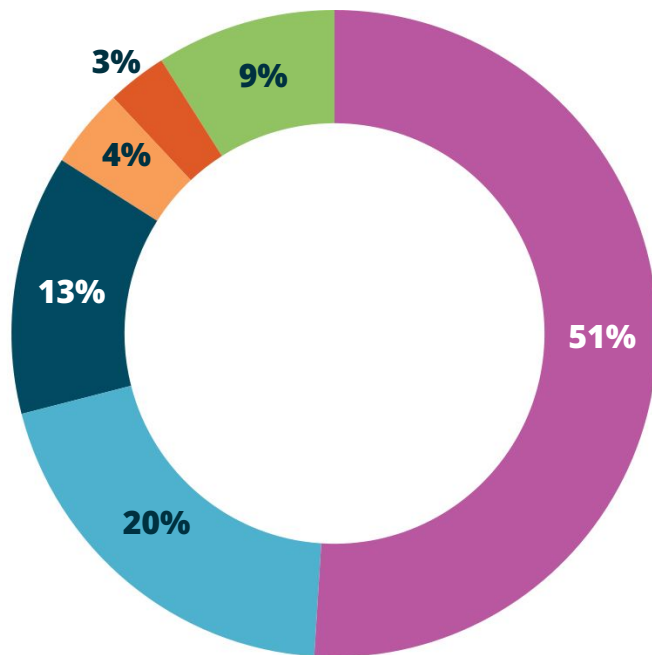


Figure 2: Type of Institution (n=70)

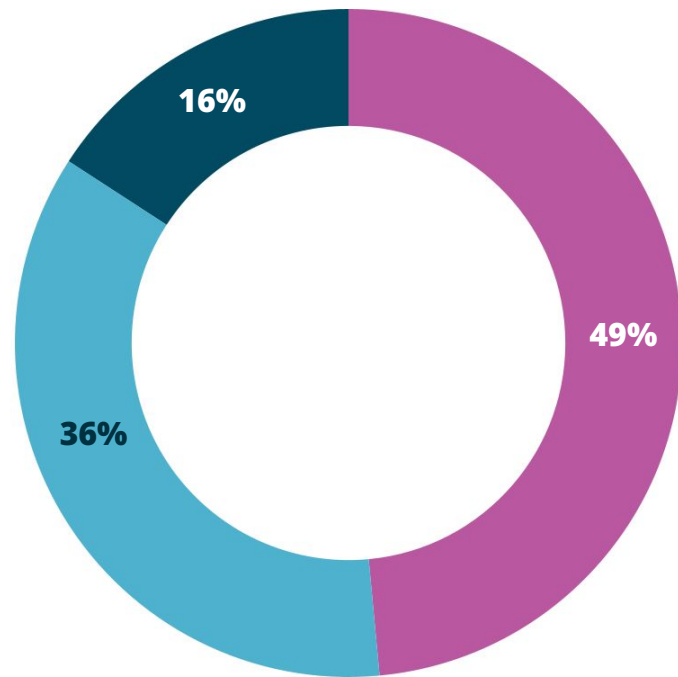


INSTITUTIONAL LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Nearly half (49%) of respondents are from large institutions, 36% from medium institutions, and 16% from small institutions.

- Large (more than 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students)
- Medium (5,000 to 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students)
- Small (fewer than 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students)

Figure 3: Institution Size (n=70)

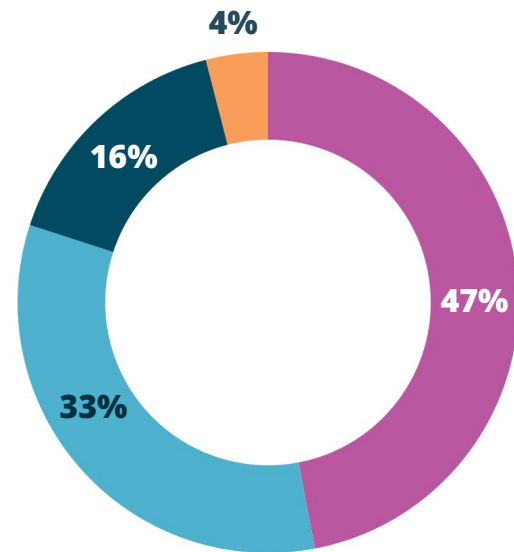


INSTITUTIONAL LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

47% of respondents are from institutions that have centralized PCO units, with programming and support coming primarily from one professional, continuing, and/or online education unit. 33% are decentralized, with programming coming out of other academic colleges or units but supported centrally by a continuing education unit, and 16% are decentralized, with programming and support coming from academic colleges/schools with different support units.

- Centralized with programming and support coming primarily from one professional, continuing, and/or online education unit
- Decentralized with programming coming out of other academic colleges or units, but supported centrally by a continuing education unit
- Decentralized with programming and support coming from academic colleges/schools with different support units
- Other

Figure 4: Which of the following statements best describes your professional, continuing, or online (PCO) unit? (n=70)



INSTITUTIONAL LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Only 38% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their PCO unit has an established and well-defined web strategy to attract the modern learner, and 40% disagree or strongly disagree. Only 27% agree or strongly agree that they are satisfied with their PCO unit's web strategy, while 54% disagree or strongly disagree.

Figure 5: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=70)

My professional, continuing, or online (PCO) unit has an established and well-defined web strategy to attract the modern learner



I am satisfied with my PCO unit's web strategy



Only 27% of institutional leaders expressed satisfaction with their PCO unit's web strategy.

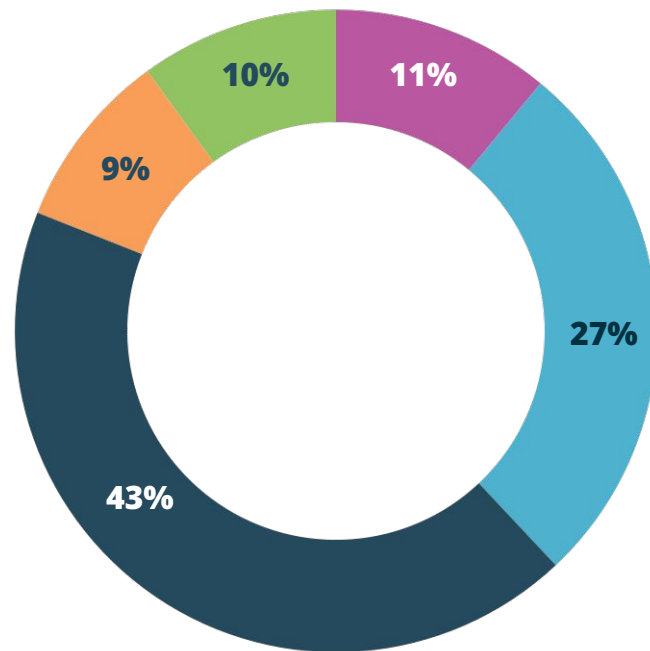


INSTITUTIONAL LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

43% of respondents are somewhat aware of their PCO unit's search engine optimization strategy, while 27% are very aware, and 11% are extremely aware. 10% are not at all aware, and 9% are not very aware.



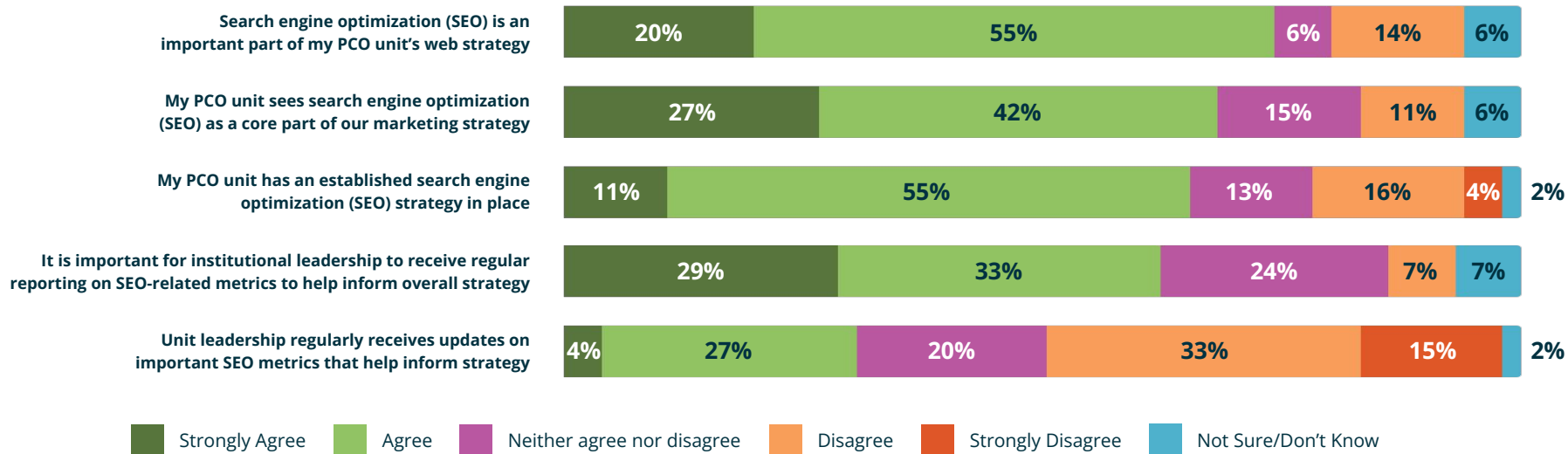
Figure 6: How aware are you of your PCO units search engine optimization strategy? (n=70)



INSTITUTIONAL LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Three-quarters (75%) of respondents agree or strongly agree that search engine optimization is an important part of their PCO unit's web strategy, while 69% agree or strongly agree that their unit sees search engine optimization as a core part of their marketing strategy. However, nearly half (48%) disagree or strongly disagree that their unit leadership regularly receives updates on important SEO metrics that help inform strategy.

Figure 7: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=55)





SEO Readiness

*Marketing
Leader Survey*

PART 2 OF 3-PART STUDY

PURPOSE & **METHODOLOGY**

Marketing Leader Study Purpose

UPCEA and Search Influence partnered to develop an in-depth survey to better understand marketing leaders' perspectives toward search engine optimization (SEO).

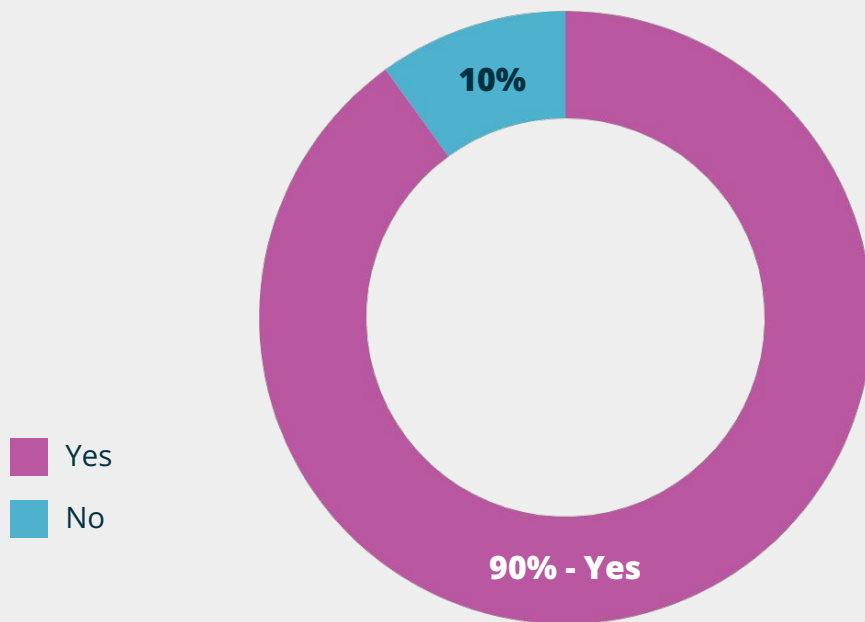
Marketing Leader Survey Methodology

UPCEA and Search Influence developed an in-depth survey to better understand marketing leaders' perspectives toward search engine optimization and what tools their professional, continuing, and online units use for website design. The results of this study focus on the tools used by marketing departments for their web strategies, their perspectives toward their marketing strategies, and SEO tactics. 68 individuals participated in the study, while 49 completed the entire survey, which took place from September 26 to November 4, 2022. The research was underwritten by Search Influence, a national search engine optimization and digital advertising agency.

QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

The majority (90%) of respondents are in charge of or responsible for marketing at their institution's PCO unit or for marketing PCO programs. The remaining 10% who were not were terminated from the study.

Figure 8: Are you in charge of or responsible for marketing at your institution's professional, continuing, or online (PCO) unit, or for marketing its PCO programs? (n=68)

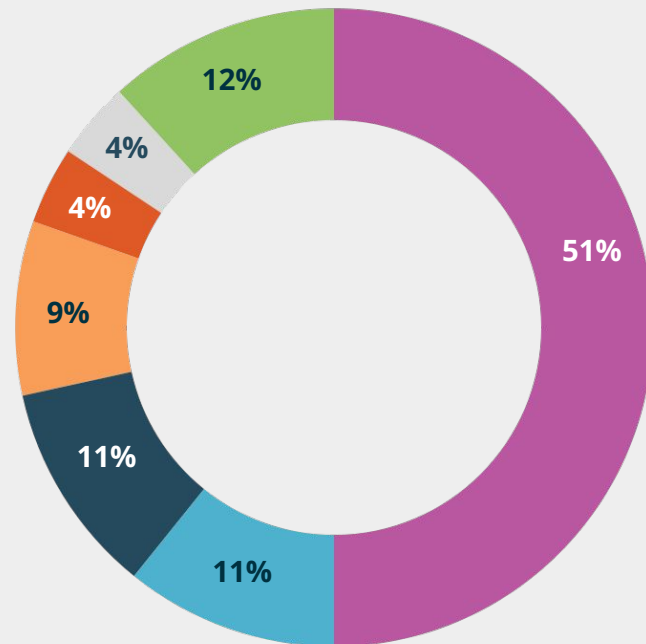


MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Of the qualified respondents, 51% are senior directors or directors of marketing/communications, 11% are directors of other areas, 11% are marketing managers, and 9% are assistant/associate directors. Job titles listed only once were included in the “Other” category and include marketing specialist, social media specialist, and vice provost, among others.



Figure 9: Respondent Title (n=57)

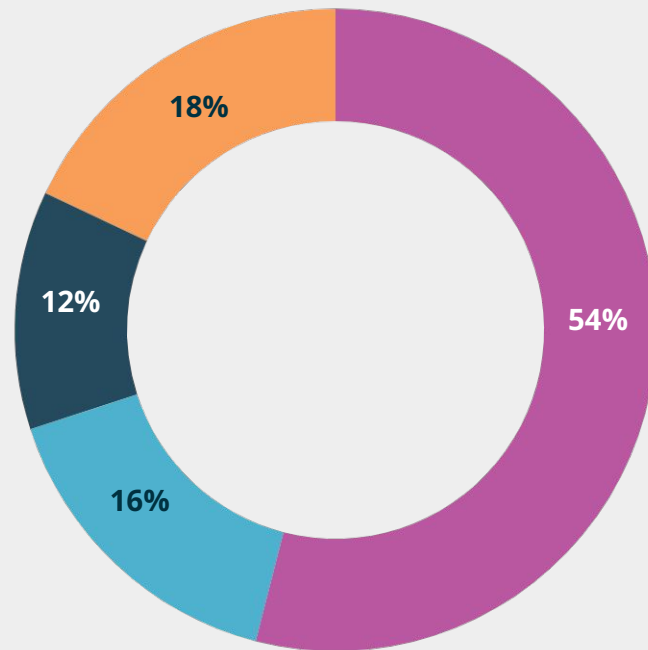


MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Over half (54%) of respondents are from public research institutions, 16% from master's comprehensive institutions, and 12% from private research institutions.



Figure 10: Type of Institution (n=57)

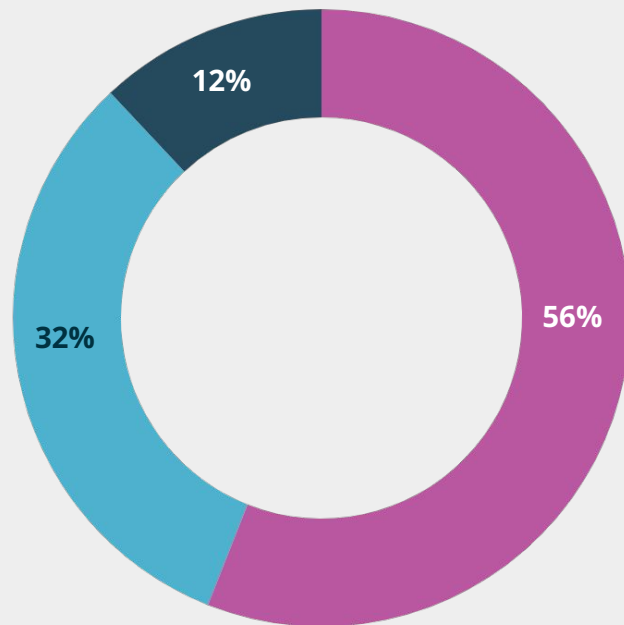


MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

56% are from large institutions, 32% from medium institutions, and 12% from small institutions.

- Large (more than 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students)
- Medium (5,000 to 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students)
- Small (fewer than 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students)

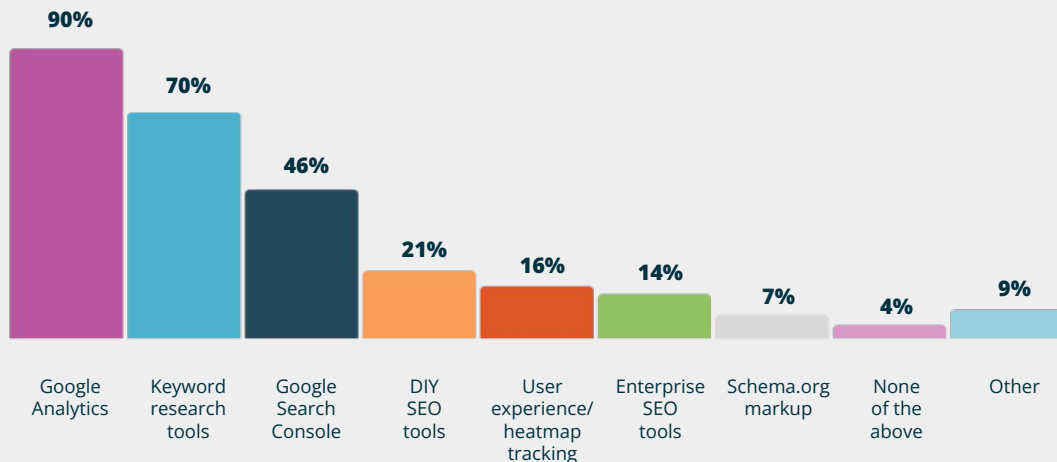
Figure 11: Institution Size (n=57)



MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

The most common website/SEO tool used by PCO units is Google Analytics (90%), followed by keyword research tools (70%), Google Search Console (46%), and DIY SEO tools (21%).

Figure 12: Which of the following website/SEO tools does your PCO unit use?
Please select all that apply. (n=57)



TAKE ACTION NOW

Use Schema-structured data to help your content be featured in search results.

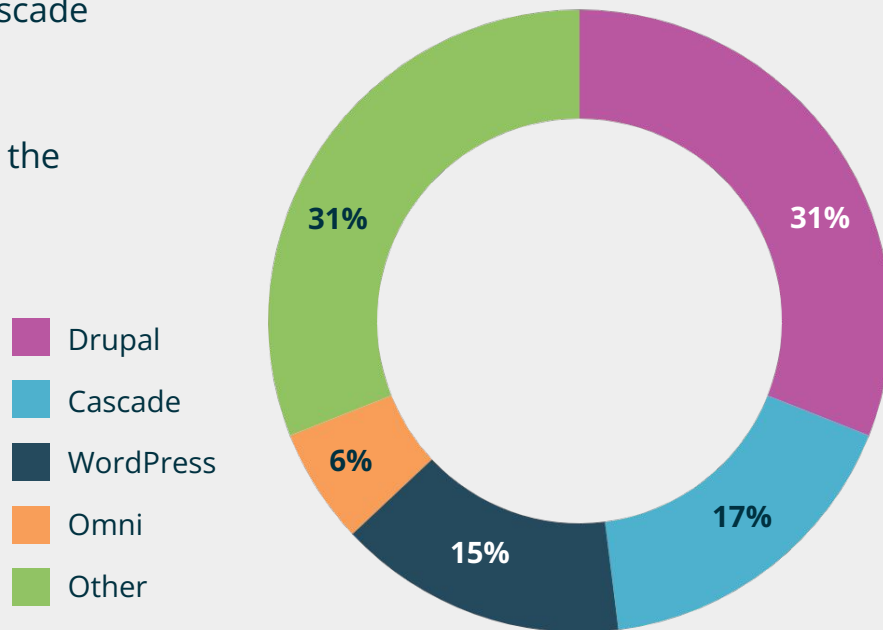
Schema.org is a set of data markup types you can add to your website that lets you clarify what is on your pages.

There are even education-specific Schema options.

MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Nearly a third (31%) of PCO units use Drupal for their content management system (CMS), followed by Cascade (17%), WordPress (15%), and Omni (6%). Platforms mentioned fewer than three times were included in the “Other” category, which included Blackboard, Slate, Adobe Experience Manager, and Terminal 4, among others.

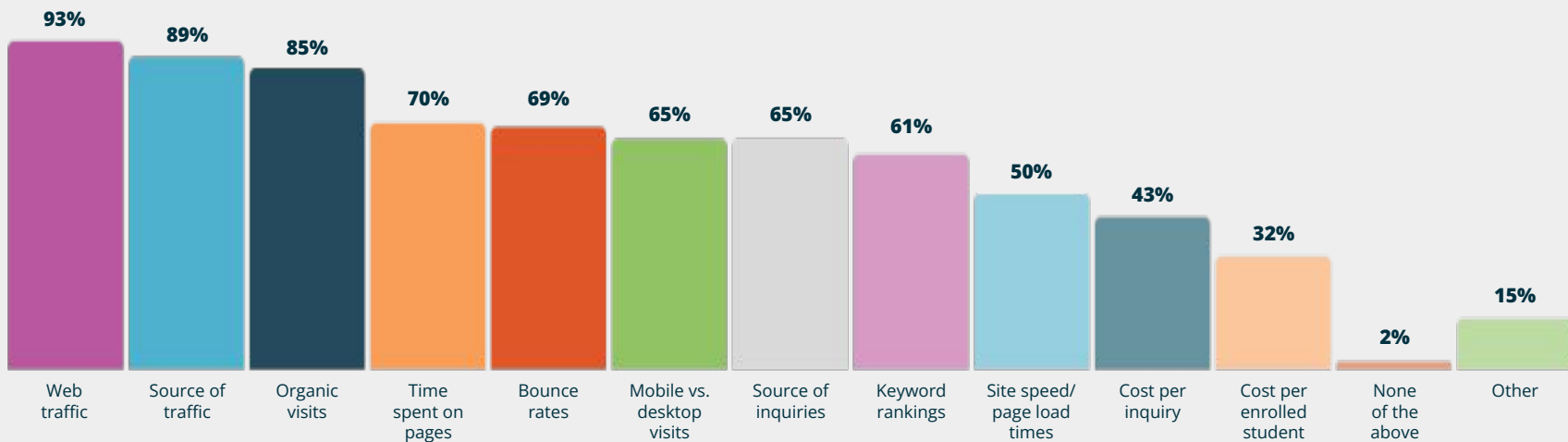
Figure 13: On what content management system (CMS) or platform is your website built upon? (n=54)



MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

PCO marketing units most commonly track web traffic (93%) for their PCO programs, followed by source of traffic (89%), organic visits (85%), time spent on pages (70%), and bounce rates (69%). Those whose units track cost per inquiry or cost per enrolled student were asked to provide their costs for the 2021-2022 academic year. The majority that responded to the question indicated that the costs vary by program..

Figure 14: Which of the following metrics does your marketing unit track for PCO programs? Please select all that apply. (n=54)



MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

A third (33%) of respondents' teams report on metrics once a month, 24% once a quarter, 8% once every six months, and 10% once a year. Among the 20% in the "Other" category, responses included reporting daily/weekly, informal reports monthly followed by formal reports quarterly, and reporting by request only, among others.

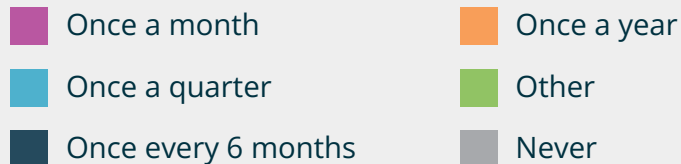
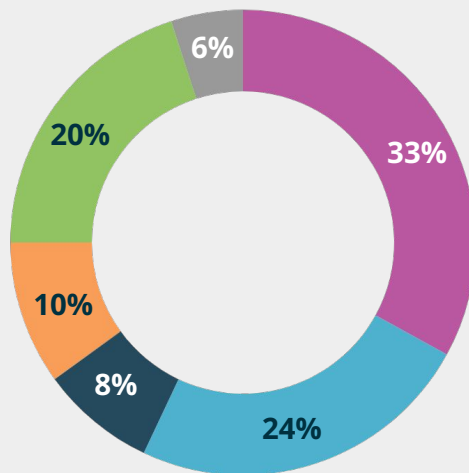


Figure 15: On average, how frequently do you or your team report on these metrics? (n=51)



TAKE ACTION NOW

Increase report frequency to once a month.

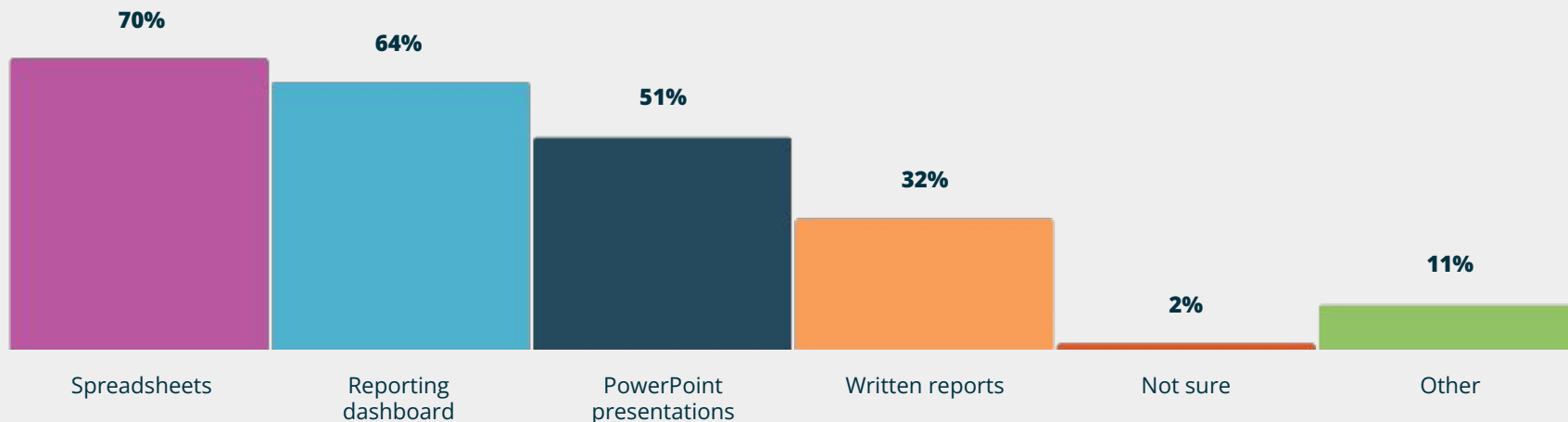
Monthly reports signal the health of your SEO strategy and can lead to impactful optimizations to improve ROI.

Raise awareness with institutional stakeholders on the impacts of SEO outcomes.

MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

The most common method used by teams to report their marketing metrics is the use of spreadsheets (70%), followed by a reporting dashboard (64%), PowerPoint presentations (51%), and written reports (32%).

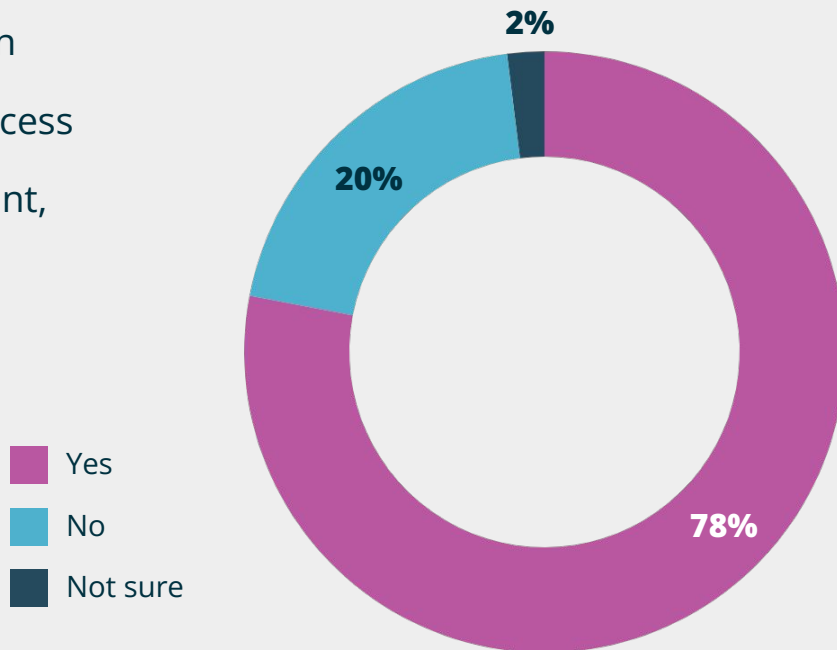
*Figure 16: Which of the following method(s) do you or your team use to report on the marketing metrics your unit tracks?
Please select all that apply. (n=47)*



MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Figure 17: Does your marketing unit have an established plan or process for updating web content? (n=50)

78% of respondents' marketing units have an established plan or process for updating web content, and 20% do not.

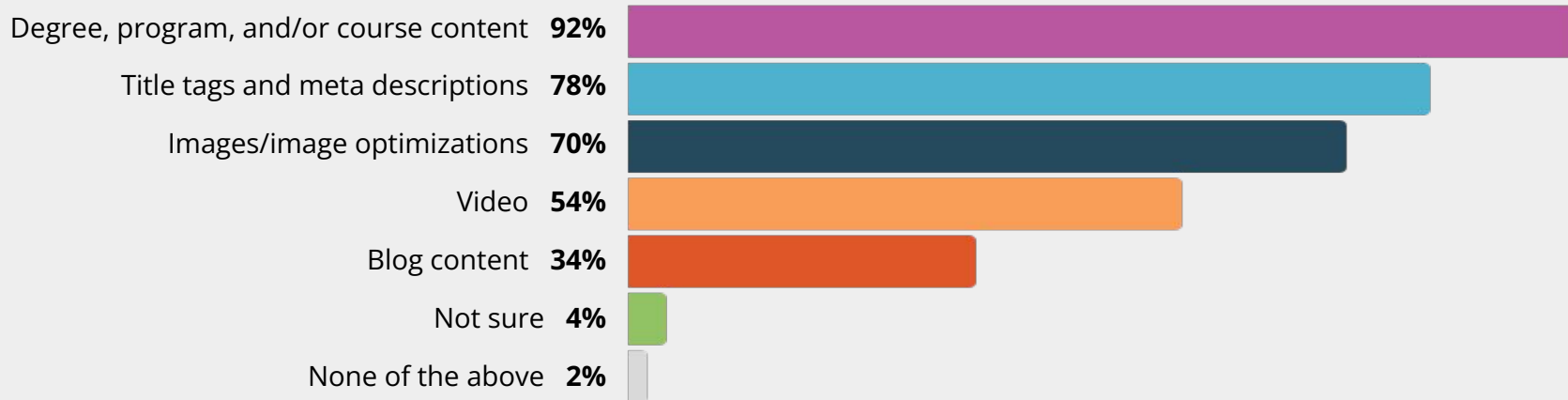


20% of PCO marketers don't have a plan for developing and updating web content.

MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

The most common types of content strategically leveraged on website designs include degree, program, and/or course content (92%), title tags and meta descriptions (78%), and images/image optimizations (70%).

Figure 18: Which of the following content types do you strategically leverage in your website design? Please select all that apply. (n=50)



MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

82% of respondents strongly agree that their marketing department sees digital marketing — in its entirety — as a core part of their marketing strategy, 57% strongly agree that it gives due consideration to the mobile experience of their website, and 59% strongly agree that it gives due consideration to ADA compliance of their website.

Figure 19: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=49)

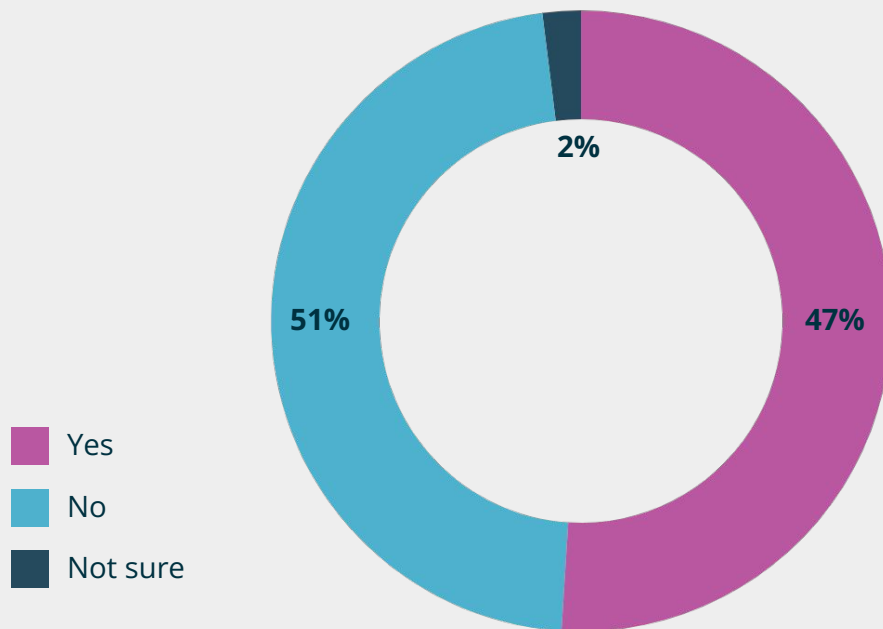


84% of PCO marketers see SEO as a core part of their marketing strategy

MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

51% of respondents said that their unit does not have an established search engine optimization plan or strategy, and 47% said it does.

Figure 20: Does your unit have an established search engine optimization (SEO) plan or strategy? (n=49)



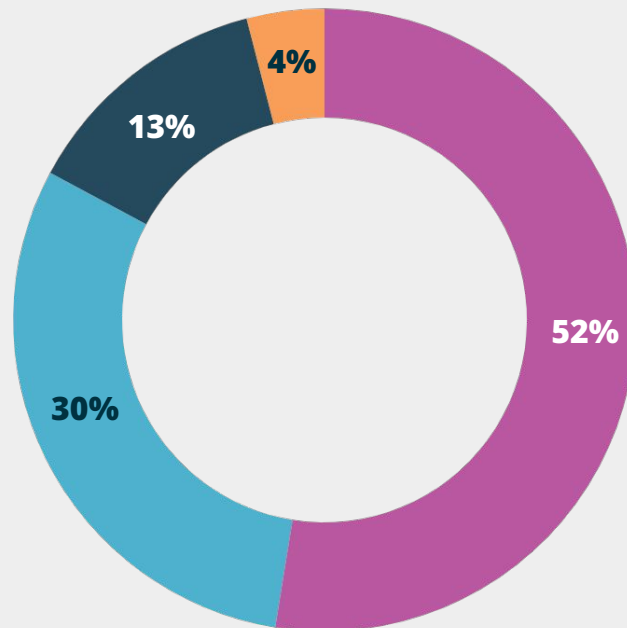
MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

52% of respondents are very aware of their unit's search engine optimization capabilities, processes, and strategies, while 30% are extremely aware, 13% somewhat aware, and 4% are not very aware.

*Only respondents with an established SEO plan or strategy (those who answered yes in Figure 20) were asked this question.



Figure 21: How aware are you of your unit's search engine optimization (SEO) capabilities, processes, and strategies? (n=23*)

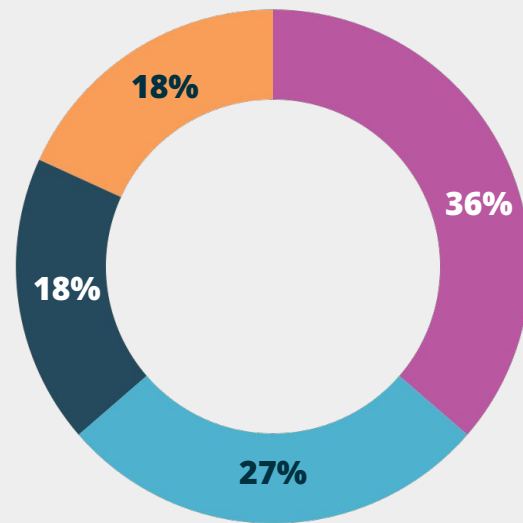


MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

36% of respondents said that their PCO unit's established SEO plan or strategy is mostly driven by the unit with some input from the college or university, 27% said it is driven exclusively by the unit, 18% said it is mostly driven by the college or university with some PCO unit input, and 18% said it is evenly driven by the college or university and the PCO unit.

- Mostly driven by the PCO unit with some input from the college or university
- Driven exclusively by the PCO unit
- Mostly driven by the college or university with some input from the PCO unit
- Evenly driven by the college or university and the PCO unit

Figure 22: Which of the following best describes how your PCO unit's established SEO plan or strategy is driven? (n=22)*



*Only respondents with an established SEO plan or strategy (those who answered yes in Figure 20) were asked this question.

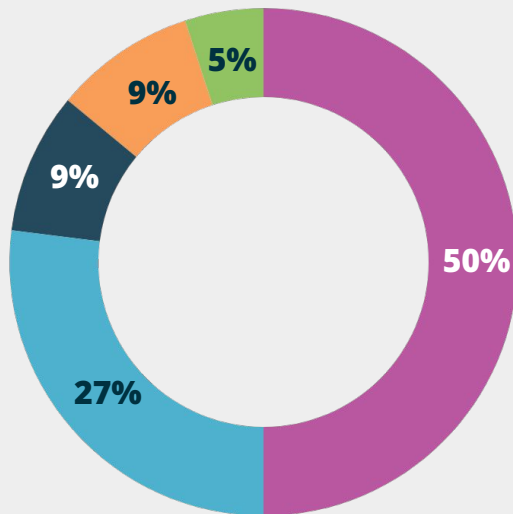
MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Participants were asked to rate the SEO capabilities of their PCO unit on a scale of 1 to 5, where a 1 is not very capable, and 5 is extremely capable.

The average score was 3.5.



Figure 23: How would you rate the SEO capabilities of your PCO unit on a scale of 1 to 5, where a 1 is not very capable and a 5 is extremely capable? (n=22)*



TAKE ACTION NOW

Figure out how to raise your SEO capability to “extremely capable”

*Does your team have the time and resources to develop these skills?
Or do you need outside help?*

*Only respondents with an established SEO plan or strategy (those who answered yes in Figure 20) were asked this question.

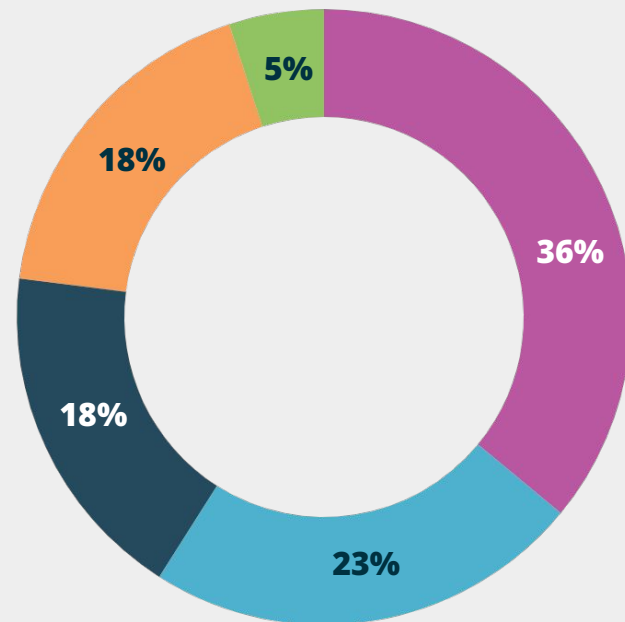
MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

36% of respondents said the SEO functions for their PCO programs are performed exclusively within the marketing or PCO unit, 23% said they're evenly mixed within the marketing or PCO unit and outsourcing, 18% said mostly within the marketing or PCO unit with some outsourcing, and 18% said mostly outsourcing, with some marketing or PCO unit assistance.

- Exclusively within the marketing or PCO unit
- Even mix of within the marketing or PCO unit and outsourcing
- Mostly within the marketing or PCO unit, with some outsourcing
- Mostly outsourcing, with some marketing or PCO unit assistance
- Exclusively outsourced

*Only respondents with an established SEO plan or strategy (those who answered yes in Figure 20) were asked this question.

Figure 24: Which of the following best describes how SEO functions for your PCO programs are performed? (n=22*)



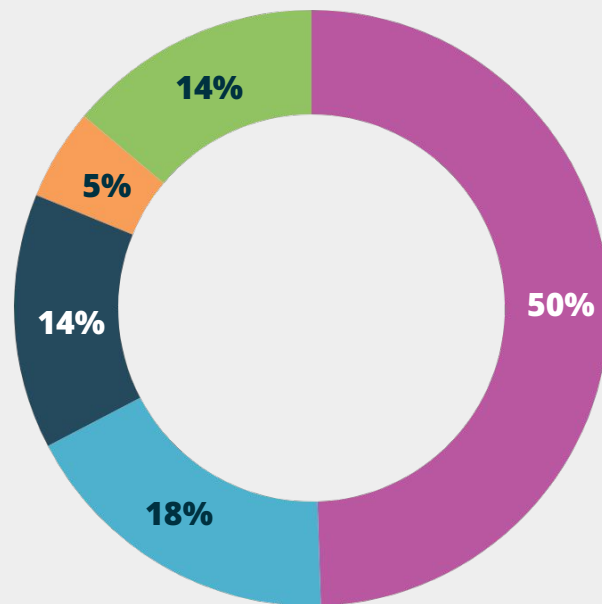
MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Half (50%) of respondents said their unit assesses SEO strategy and execution for PCO programs once a quarter, 18% once every six months, 14% once a year, and 5% once every few years.

*Only respondents with an established SEO plan or strategy (those who answered yes in Figure 20) were asked this question.



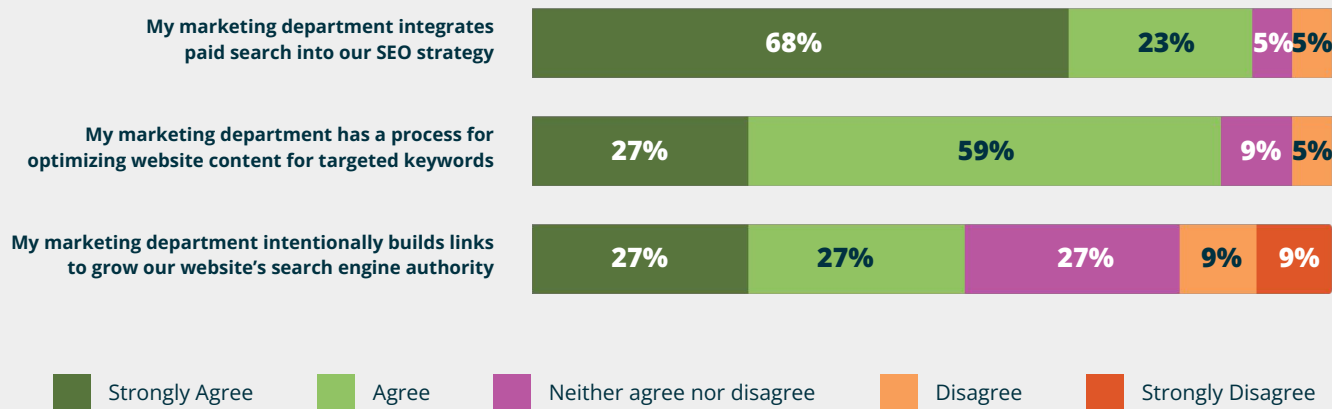
Figure 25: Which of the following best describes how often your unit assesses SEO strategy and execution for PCO programs? (n=22*)



MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

91% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their marketing department integrates paid search into their SEO strategy, and 86% agree or strongly agree that their marketing department has a process for optimizing website content for targeted keywords.

Figure 26a: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=22*)



TAKE ACTION NOW

Build links to the pages you want to rank on Google.

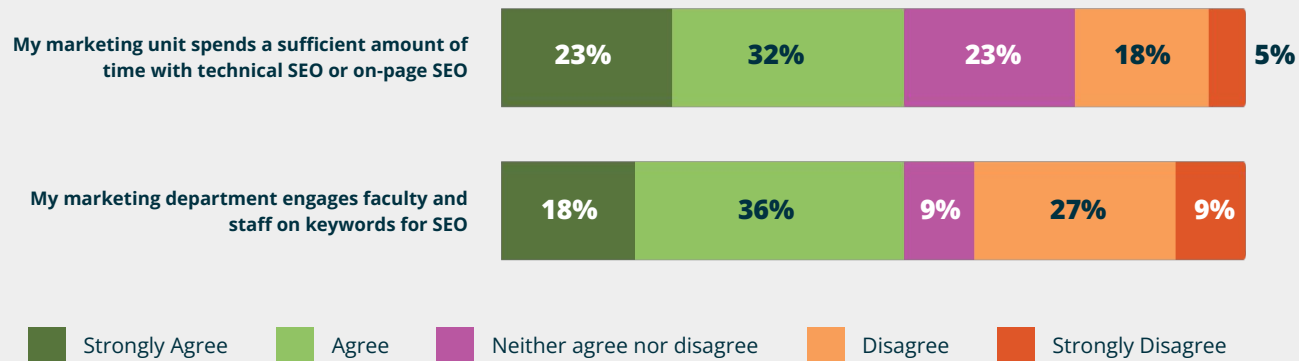
Links to deeper pages on the site (such as program, degree, or certificate pages) increase authority and your ability to rank for specific searches related to your offerings.

*Only respondents with an established SEO plan or strategy (those who answered yes in Figure 20) were asked this question.

MARKETING LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Over a third (36%) of respondents disagree or strongly disagree that their marketing department engages faculty and staff on keywords for SEO.

Figure 26b: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. (n=22*)



TAKE ACTION NOW

Optimize technical elements to make it easier for Google to access and understand content.

Technical and on-page SEO can increase the likelihood your important content will rank.

*Only respondents with an established SEO plan or strategy (those who answered yes in Figure 20) were asked this question.

Analytical Review

*of 100 UPCEA Member
Websites' SEO Readiness*

PART 3 OF 3-PART STUDY

PURPOSE OF REVIEW

To better understand the existing SEO capabilities of PCO units in UPCEA member institutions, UPCEA and Search Influence developed a scorecard assessment to measure the levels of SEO readiness. The research team then randomly selected 100 member institutions to perform the analysis on. An outline of the variable definitions, methodology, and measurement can be seen below.

Figure 27: Variable Definitions, Methodology, and Measurement

Variable	Methodology and Measurement
Site Health Score	The site health score gives a score out of 100 utilizing Semrush to measure the technical elements of a member's website.
Authority Score	The authority score gives a score out of 100 utilizing Semrush to grade the overall quality of a website or webpage. The higher the score, the more assumed weight a domain's webpage backlinks could have.
Backlinks	The backlinks score is measured using Semrush and gives the number of backlinks (also known as inbound links or external links) which refer to links on one website pointing to another website. Search engines view backlinks as indicators of quality content that has the support of other websites.

Number of Title Pages

The number of title pages score gives each institution's webpage a score of how many title pages it has on its website.

Percentage of Unique Title Tags

The percentage of unique title tags score measures whether an institution's webpages have unique title tags, which means it has given consideration to content optimization. Therefore, a higher percentage of unique title tags is considered favorable.

Percentage of Title Tags With Meta Description

The percentage of title tags with meta description score measures whether an institution has given due consideration to its meta descriptions and content optimization. Therefore, a higher percentage is considered favorable.

Percentage of Unique Meta Descriptions

The percentage of unique meta description score measures whether an institution has given due consideration to its unique meta descriptions and content optimization. Therefore, a higher percentage is considered favorable.

Accessibility

The accessibility score uses accessiBe and accessScan to measure whether a webpage is non-compliant, semi-compliant, or compliant with the WCAG 2.1 level AA accessibility.

OVERALL SCORE METHODOLOGY

An SEO readiness overall score was calculated for each institution using its individual scores for the eight variables of SEO readiness listed below. Each variable score was computed on a 10-point scale, and these were added together to create the overall variable score. The overall scores were then inflated to range from 0 to 100.

Figure 28: Overall Score Methodology and Measurement

Variable	Methodology and Measurement
Site Health Score	Z-scores were calculated for the site health score variable and were adjusted to range from 0 to 10. The average was 5.1, and the median was 5.5.
Authority Score	Z-scores were calculated for the authority score variable and were adjusted to range from 0 to 10. The average was 5.2, and the median was 5.6.
Backlinks	For the backlinks variable, the 4th root was taken for each individual score to deflate the numbers, and then the z-score was calculated and adjusted to range from 0 to 10. The average was 4.8, and the median was 4.6.

Number of Title Pages

Z-scores were calculated for the number of title pages score and were adjusted to range from 0 to 10. The average was 4.8, and the median was 4.1.

Percentage of Unique Title Tags

For the percentage of unique title tags, individual scores were scaled from 0 to 10 based on the overall minimum and maximum values. The average was 8.8, and the median was 9.7.

Percentage of Title Tags with Meta Description

For the percentage of title tags with meta descriptions, individual scores were scaled from 0 to 10 based on the overall minimum and maximum values. The average was 5.8, and the median was 6.5.

Percentage of Unique Meta Descriptions

For the percentage of unique meta descriptions, individual scores were scaled from 0 to 10 based on the overall minimum and maximum values. The average was 7.2, and the median was 9.5.

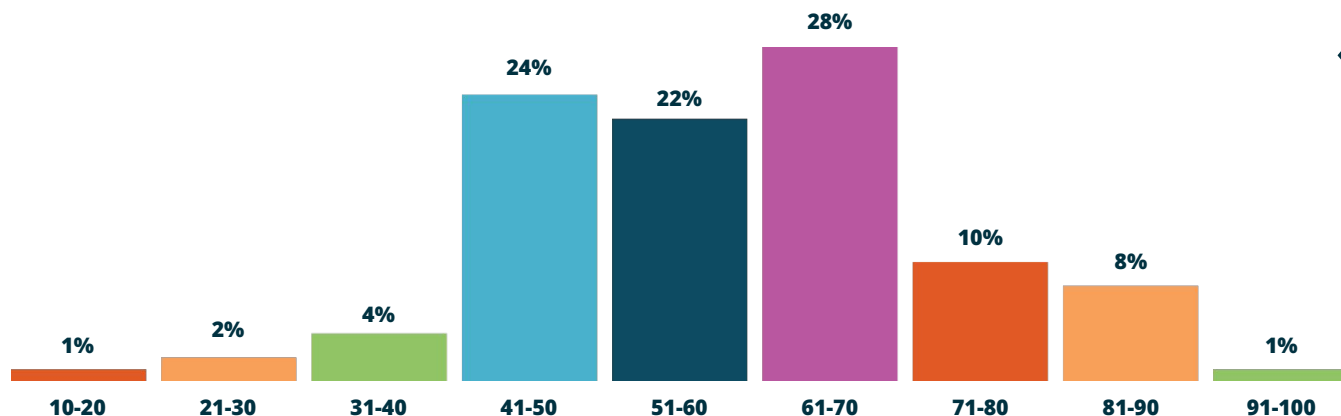
Accessibility

For accessibility, individual scores were scaled from 0 to 10. An individual score of 0 was marked as 0 points, a score of 1 was marked as 5 points, and a score of 2 was marked as 10 points.

SEO READINESS RESULTS

An **overall score** was calculated for each institution using its individual scores for the eight variables of SEO readiness. 28% earned an overall score from 61 to 70, nearly a quarter (24%) had a score from 41 to 50, and 22% earned a score from 51 to 60. Institutions had an average SEO readiness overall score of 58.6, with a median of 59.6. Institutions scoring below 40 need SEO readiness improvement, while those scoring from 40 to 70 are near average, and those scoring above 70 are excelling in their webpage SEO readiness.

Figure 29: Overall Score (n=100)

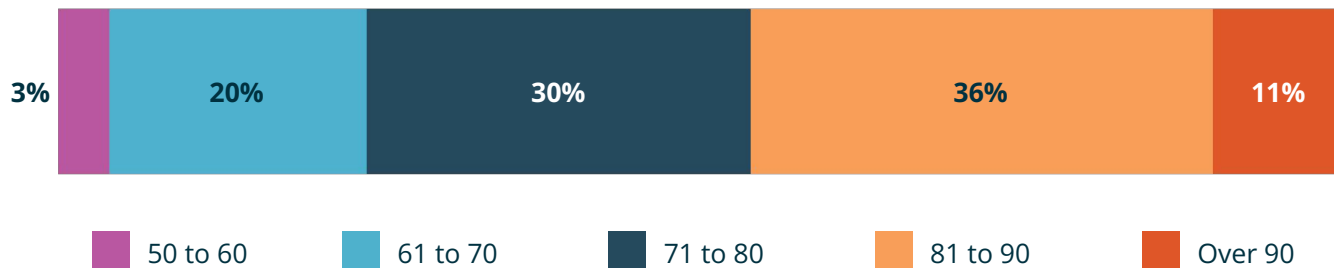


Among the 100 UPCEA institutions profiled in the member SEO readiness exercise, only 19% had an excelling score.

SEO READINESS RESULTS

The **site health score** gives a score out of 100 utilizing Semrush to measure the technical elements of members' websites. Over one-third (36%) received a score from 81 to 90, 30% a score from 71 to 80, and 20% a score from 61 to 70. On average, members earned a site health score of 79, with a median of 80. Therefore, on average, institutions have a score of C+, which is relatively low and calls for room for improvement.

Figure 30: Site Health Score (n=100)

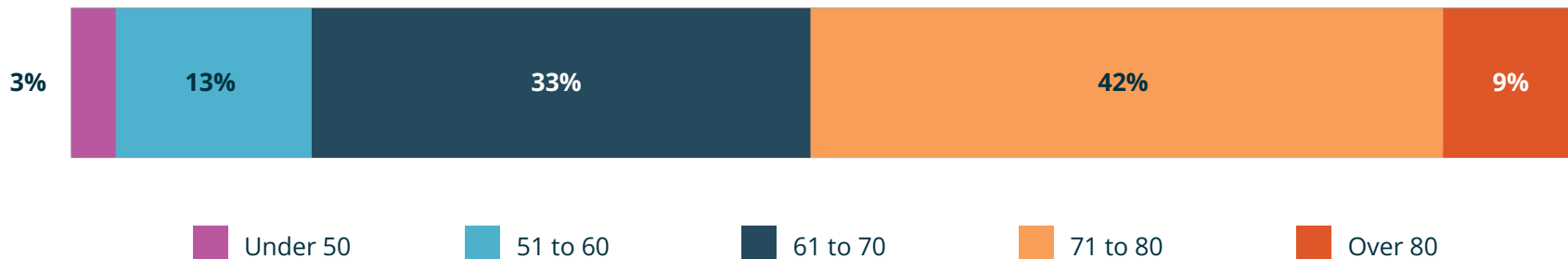


Among the 100 UPCEA institutions profiled in the member SEO readiness exercise, on average, members earned a site health score of 79.

SEO READINESS RESULTS

The **authority score** gives a score out of 100 utilizing Semrush to grade the overall quality of a website or webpage. The higher the score, the more assumed weight a domain's webpage backlinks could have. 42% scored from 71 to 80, a third (33%) earned a score from 61 to 70, and 13% a score from 51 to 60. On average, members earned an authority score of 69, with a median of 71. Therefore, on average, institutions have a score of D+, which is not passing and calls for immediate improvement.

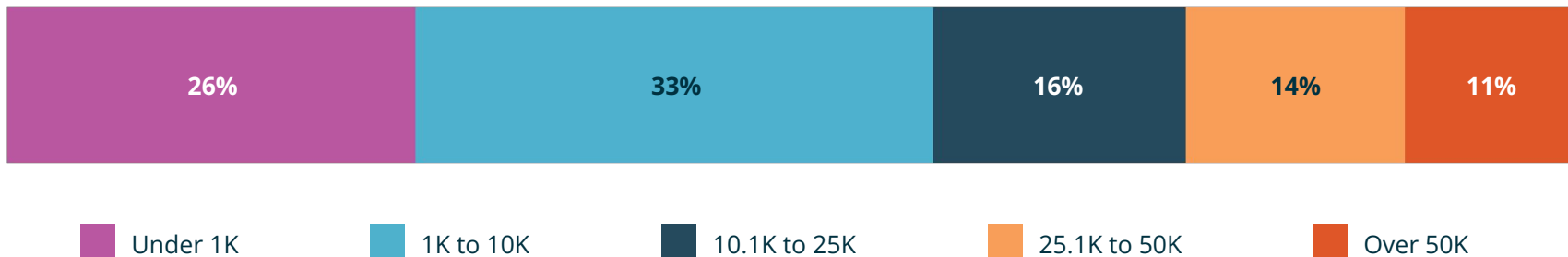
Figure 31: Authority Score (n=100)



SEO READINESS RESULTS

The **backlinks** score is measured using Semrush and gives the number of backlinks (also known as inbound links or external links), which refer to links on one website pointing to another website. Search engines view backlinks as indicators of quality content that has the support of other websites. A third (33%) of webpages have 1K to 10K backlinks, 26% have under 1K backlinks, and 16% have 10.1K to 25K backlinks. On average, institutions have 45,730 backlinks on their webpages, with a median of 6,050. The large disparity between the mean and median values is due to a significant outlier.

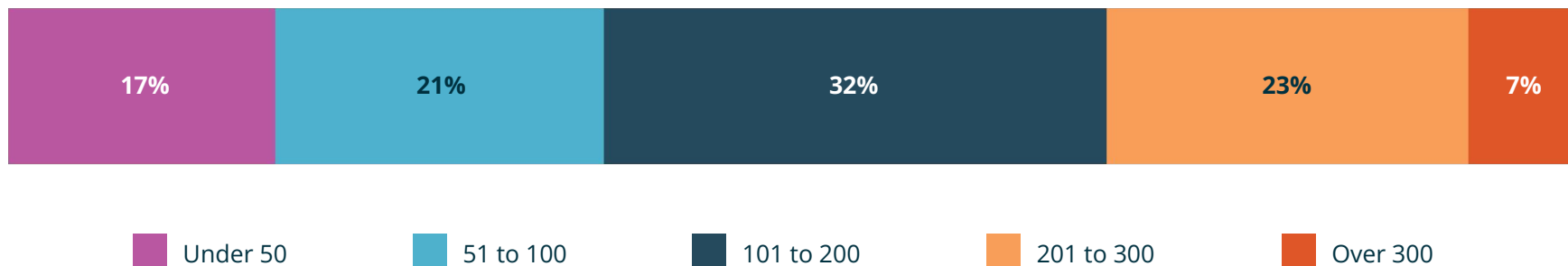
Figure 32: Backlinks (n=100)



SEO READINESS RESULTS

The number of title pages score gives each institution's webpage a score of how many title pages it has on its website. (This metric indicates the size of websites.) Nearly a third (32%) of webpages have 101 to 200 title pages, 23% have 201 to 300, and 21% have 51 to 100. On average, institutions have 144 title pages, with a median of 120.

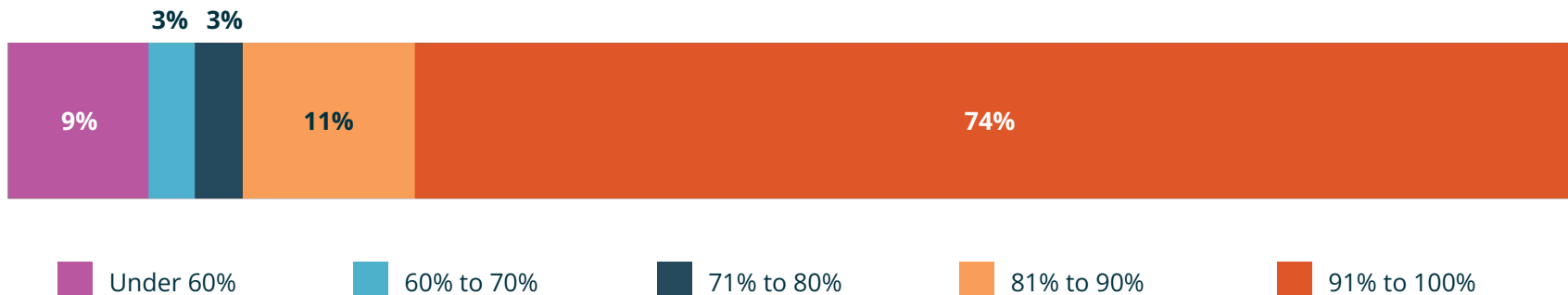
Figure 33: Number of Title Pages (n=99)



SEO READINESS RESULTS

The percentage of unique title tags score measures whether an institution's webpages have unique title tags, which means they have given consideration to their content optimization. A higher percentage of unique title tags is considered favorable. A majority (74%) of institutions have 91% to 100% unique title tags on their webpages, 11% have 81% to 90%, and 9% have under 60%. On average, members have 90% unique title tags, with a median of 98%. Therefore, institutions are doing well in content optimization, as they have a high average percentage of unique title tags.

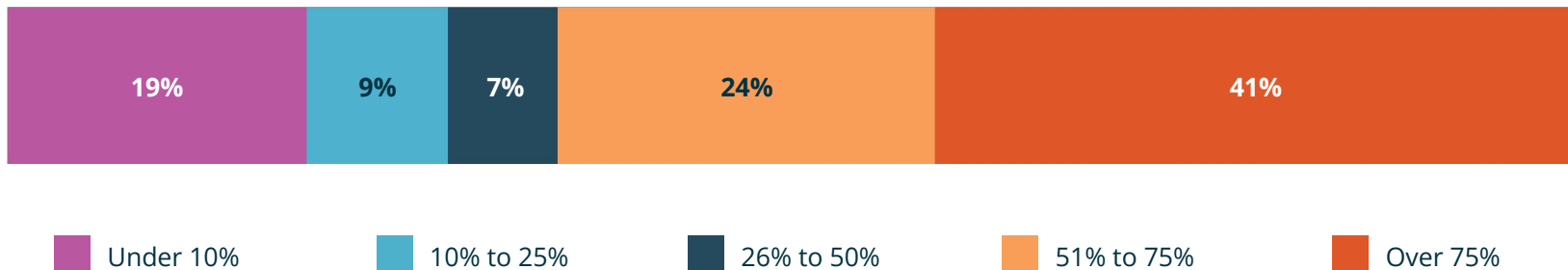
Figure 34: Percentage of Unique Title Tags (n=99)



SEO READINESS RESULTS

The percentage of title tags with meta descriptions score measures whether an institution has given due consideration to its meta descriptions and content optimization. A higher percentage is considered favorable. 41% of institutions have over 75% of their webpage title tags with meta descriptions, 24% have 51% to 75%, and 19% have under 10%. On average, institutions have 59% of their title tags with meta descriptions, with a median of 67%. Therefore, overall, institutions are not doing well in content optimization when it comes to title tags with meta descriptions. With an average score of 59%, this puts them at an F on a traditional grading system.

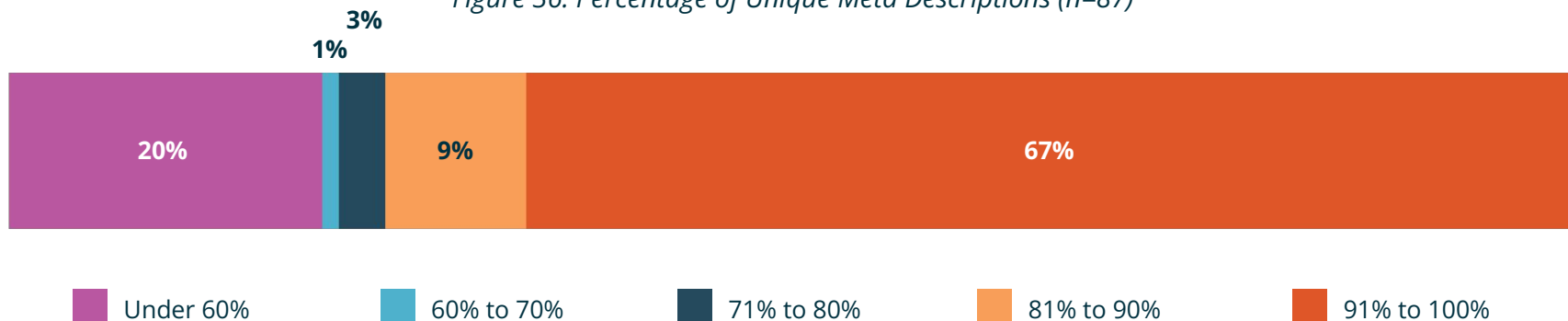
Figure 35: Percentage of Title Tags with Meta Description (n=99)



SEO READINESS RESULTS

The percentage of unique meta description score measures whether an institution has given due consideration to its meta descriptions and content optimization. A higher percentage is considered favorable. Two-thirds (67%) of institutions have 91% to 100% unique meta descriptions, 20% have under 60%, and 9% have from 81% and 90%. On average, members have 84% unique meta descriptions with a median of 97%. Therefore, overall, institutions are doing well in their percentage of unique meta descriptions, as they have an average of 84%, which is considered a B on a traditional grading system.

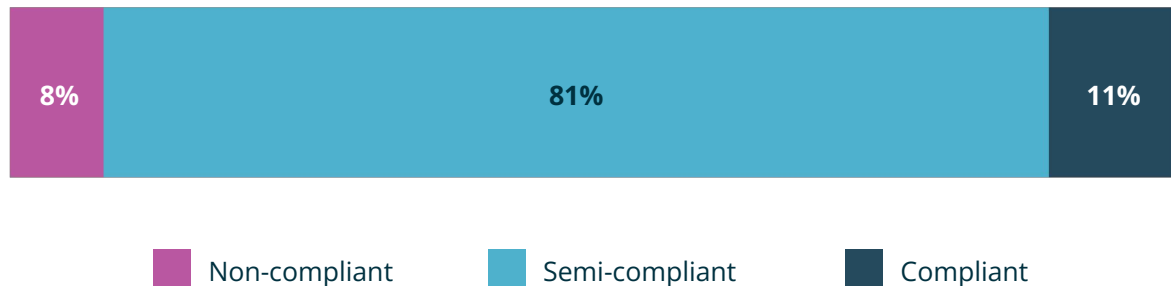
Figure 36: Percentage of Unique Meta Descriptions (n=87)



SEO READINESS RESULTS

The accessibility score uses accessiBe and accessScan to measure whether webpages are non-compliant, semi-compliant, or compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 level AA accessibility. The majority of institutions (81%) have an accessibility score of 1 (semi-compliant), 11% a score of 2 (compliant), and 8% a score of 0 (non-compliant). On average, institutions' webpages have an accessibility score of 1.03, with a median of 1.00. Therefore, on average, most institutions' webpages are semi-compliant, which leaves room for improvement. Institutions with an accessibility score of "N/A" were assigned the average accessibility score for the overall calculations.

Figure 37: Accessibility (n=100)



TAKE ACTION NOW

Update your website to full WCAG 2.1 level AA accessibility.

An accessible website ensures people with disabilities can seamlessly use it.

Accessibility contributes to SEO rankings.

CONCLUSION

1

SEO is an area of opportunity for many universities. When SEO doesn't receive the attention it deserves, websites become difficult to navigate and can slip through the cracks.

2

The good news is that marketing departments challenged with capturing the new adult learner can invest more attention and resources into SEO to make a significant impact on their enrollment.

3

Marketing departments must make a concerted effort to regularly keep institutional leadership informed of critical data points to advocate for additional resources and emphasize the importance of SEO to long-term program viability.

ABOUT



Search Influence is a women-owned, ROI-focused digital marketing agency that helps institutions drive prospects into and through the recruitment funnel with analytics-backed strategies that include search engine optimization and paid digital advertising.

Founded in 2006, Search Influence's core purpose is to optimize potential. We collaborate with well-regarded institutions both nationally and locally in New Orleans. Clients include Tulane University School of Professional Advancement, Tulane University School of Medicine, University of Maryland School of Public Policy, and Palo Alto University.



UPCEA is the leading association for professional, continuing, and online education. For more than 100 years, UPCEA has served most of the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America. Founded in 1915, the association serves its members with innovative conferences and specialty

seminars, research and benchmarking information, professional networking opportunities, and timely publications. Based in Washington, D.C., UPCEA also builds greater awareness of the vital link between contemporary learners and public policy issues.

ABOUT