

WHITE PAPER · 2026 EDITION

The invisible applicant

Traffic to college websites has never cost this much.

Most of the prospective students behind it
leave without a trace.

This white paper documents, with sourced figures,
what changes when the website answers.

10:48 p.m.

A Tuesday in November. Maya, 17, a high school senior.

She has just found your college: a story, a friend, a search. She is going through the program pages on her phone.

Two programs interest her. She hesitates. She has one question, only one: *"Is the co-op paid, and does it start sophomore year or only junior year?"*

The answer exists, somewhere in a forty-page viewbook. The request-info form asks for twelve fields. The office opens in eleven hours.

Maya closes the tab. Tomorrow she will look at the college across town, and your team will never know she came.

Maya is a character. The visitors who do exactly what she does, every evening, are not: *this document counts them.*

It all starts with one number

75%

of the questions prospective students ask institutions arrive **outside business hours**.¹¹

While the admissions office is closed, your future students compare, hesitate and decide. Everything else in this document follows from that gap.

AND THE REST FOLLOWS

\$90

the average cost of an education lead, **up 26% in one year**: the steepest rise of any industry.¹

44%

of the inquiries sent to institutions **never receive a reply**, ever.⁵

21x

more likely to qualify a lead contacted **within 5 minutes rather than 30**.³

20%

of engaged conversations become **qualified leads** on a live European deployment.¹⁵

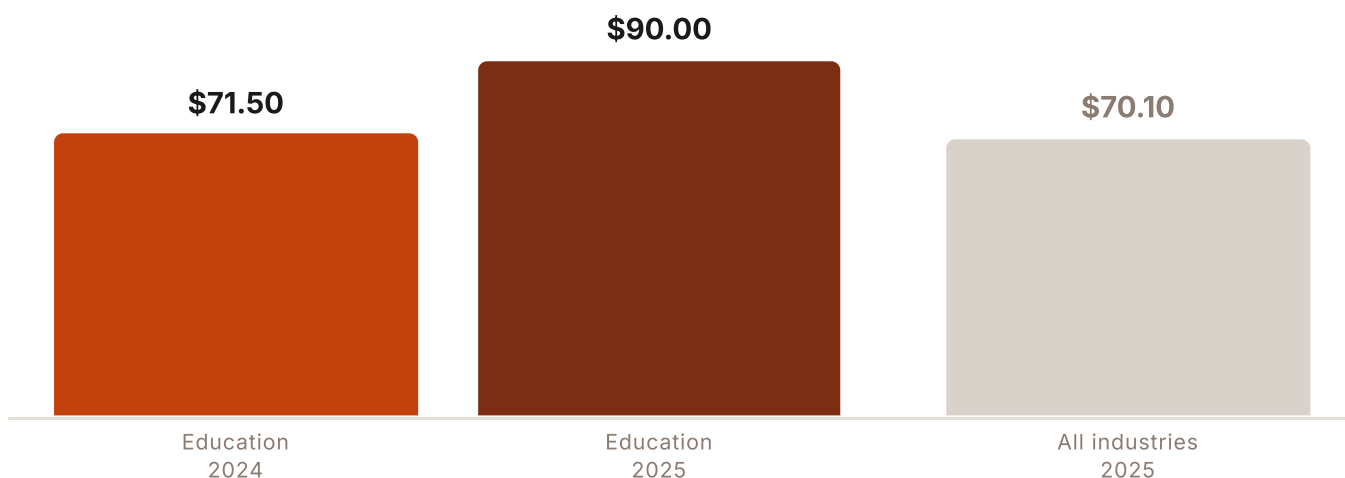
THE ARGUMENT OF THIS DOCUMENT

Traffic is no longer the problem. **The silence of your website is.**
Every visitor you lose is a visitor
you have already paid for.

Acquisition has never cost this much

Colleges have never spent more to bring visitors in. Higher education invested **more than \$2.4 billion** in advertising in the first half of 2025 alone.² And every click bought returns less: in 2025, the cost of an education lead rose faster than in any other industry.¹

AVERAGE COST OF A GOOGLE ADS LEAD, EDUCATION SECTOR (IN DOLLARS)¹



+42%

The rise in the education cost per click over 2025 alone (\$4.39 → \$6.23).¹

+26%

The rise in the education cost per lead in 2025, the highest of any industry.¹

+28%

How much more an education lead costs than the all-industry average in 2025.¹

So every visitor costs more than last year, and a click on its own does not enroll: between the paid visit and the completed form, everything happens on the website. That is exactly where the loss is least measured, and the most expensive.

**Every visitor to your website has been paid for.
The question is no longer how to bring in more:
it is how to stop letting them leave without asking.**

The response window lasts five minutes

Research on lead conversion has been unambiguous for fifteen years: **response speed is the first factor in qualification**, far ahead of what the response actually says.

21x

more likely to qualify a lead contacted within 5 minutes rather than within 30. And **100x more likely to reach them**. Foundational study on 15,000 leads and 100,000 calls.³

WHAT THE STUDENT EXPECTS

≤ 10 min

82% of consumers expect an immediate answer to a sales question.⁶

≤ 3 hrs

The longest delay prospective students will accept, across every generation.⁸

7x

Replying within the hour multiplies the odds of qualifying the lead by 7.⁴

WHAT INSTITUTIONS DELIVER

9h 33m

The average time to answer an inquiry (20h 27m for an email).⁵

44%

of inquiries get no answer at all, ever. Up from 40% in 2023.⁵

62%

of emails sent to a named staff member go unanswered.⁵

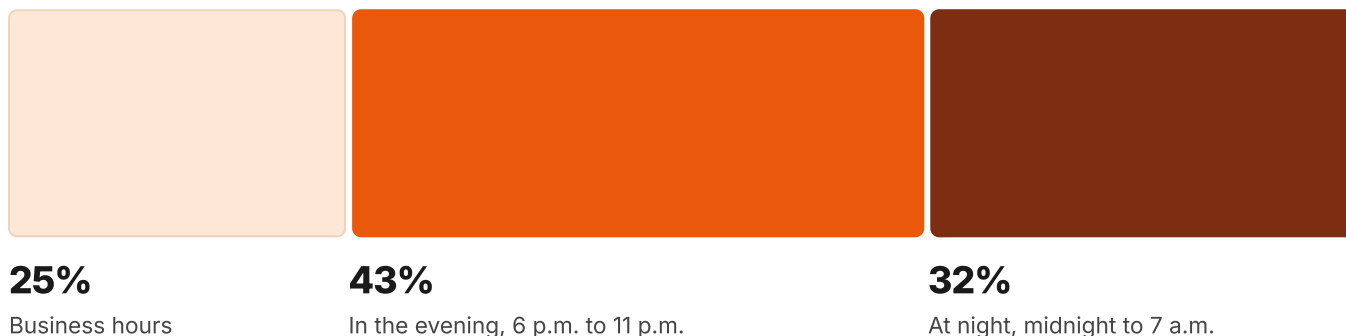
The problem is not specific to education (across all sectors, the average response time to a web lead is 42 hours and 23% of companies never reply⁴), but education pays for it more dearly than anyone, at the lead price seen in chapter 01. Nobody will hold a five-minute window on a Sunday at 11 p.m. An assistant will: it holds the first minute, and your team takes over the next morning on a lead that is still warm.

Between what the student expects and what institutions deliver, the gap is measured in hours. Conversion is decided in minutes.

Your applicants write to you after the office closes

Across more than 25,000 interactions analyzed in 350 institutions, **three quarters of the questions put to university assistants arrive outside business hours.**¹¹

WHEN DO THE QUESTIONS ARRIVE? · SHARE OF INTERACTIONS¹¹



53%

of prospective students request information or apply **without ever having spoken to the institution:** the "stealth applicants".¹⁰

x2

in four years: from 17% to 33%, **one high schooler in three** has already used the chat on a college website.⁷

90%

of students who used an institution's chatbot found it useful.⁹

The stealth applicant changes what a website is: for one prospective student in two, it is now **the only point of contact with your college before the application.**¹⁰ They compare, research and decide without ever calling or writing. If the website does not answer their questions at the moment they ask them (in the evening, at night, from another time zone), nobody will.

**The admissions team's day ends at 5 p.m.
The student's begins after class, after work,
or on the other side of the world.**

What changes when an assistant actually answers

The effect of a conversation on conversion is one of the best documented results in digital marketing. What has changed: the assistant holding it has nothing in common with yesterday's scripted chatbots.

+82%

more likely to convert for a visitor who **starts a conversation** on the website.¹²

37%

of high school students name chat as the **first trigger** for filling in a form, ahead of the virtual tour (27%) and video (20%).⁷

48%

of high school seniors who chatted with an institution **go on to apply** to it.⁷

Those three figures measure the same mechanism: a conversation lowers the cost of entry. Asking a question in a chat commits you to less than a twelve-field form, and once the answer is there, the form follows naturally. Chat does not replace the form: **it triggers it**. That is the exact opposite of a brochure website, where the form is the only door, and every unanswered question is a reason to close it. The next chapter shows this mechanism measured in real conditions, on private college websites in Europe, with a current-generation AI assistant.

WHY NOW

The scripted chatbots of the last decade frustrated more than they helped, and many institutions still remember them that way. Today's AI assistants **understand the question and answer from your own content**. And the shift goes well beyond education:

80%

of common customer service inquiries resolved autonomously by AI by 2029 (Gartner forecast).¹³

×2.6

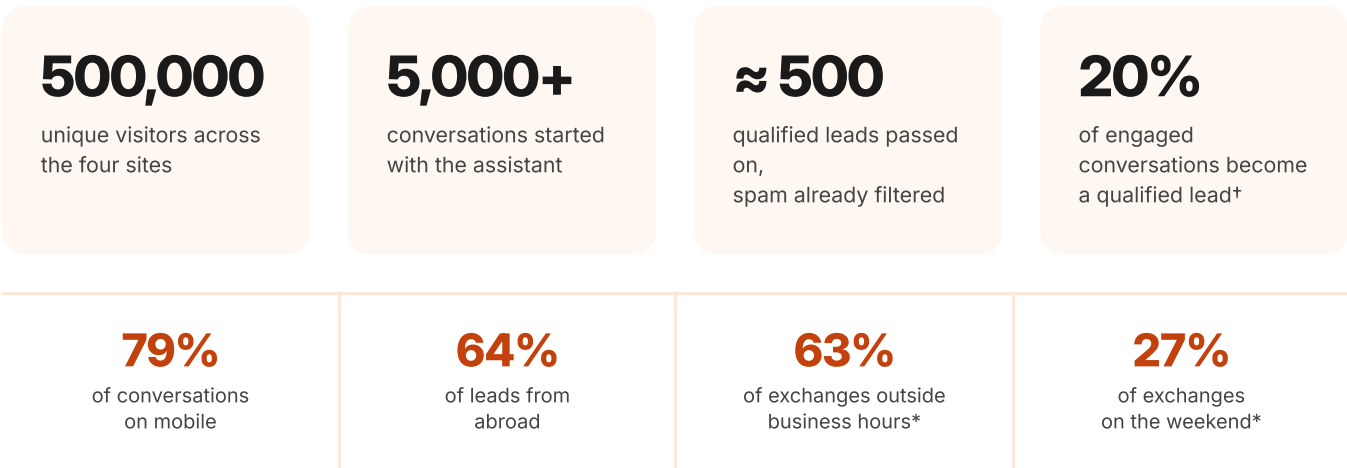
the growth of the AI in education market by 2030 (\$2.2 → \$5.8 bn).¹⁴

350+

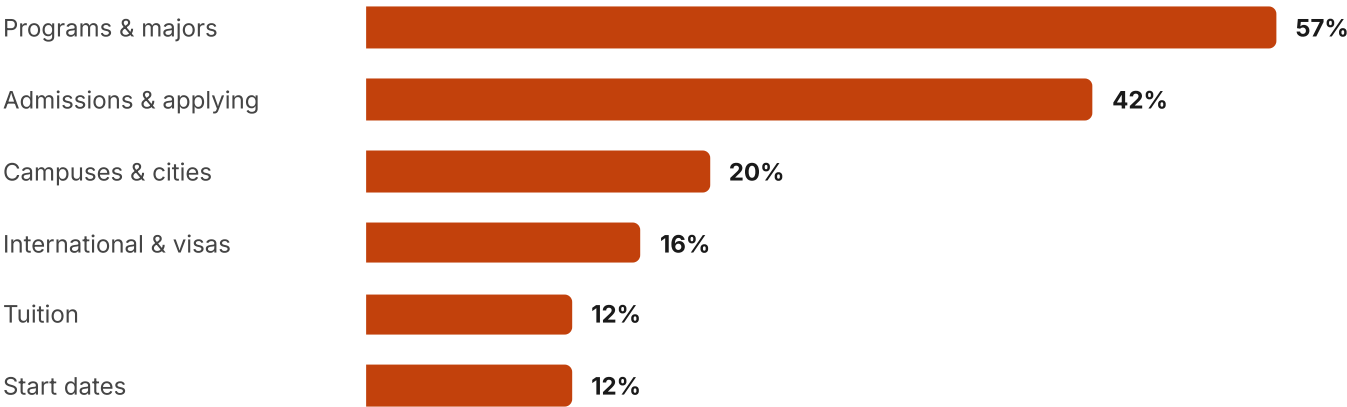
institutions already studied by EAB for their admissions assistants: a standard settling in, not an experiment.¹¹

Half a million visitors, four campuses, three months

A French private higher education group (four institutions, not named here) deployed a conversational AI assistant across all of its websites. Real figures, cumulative over less than three months, rounded to preserve anonymity.¹⁵



WHAT STUDENTS ASK ABOUT · CONVERSATION THEMES**



+52 → +71%

annual growth in online leads, before / after activation

Over the window analyzed, the group's annual growth in online leads went from +52% to +71% after the assistants were switched on: **around 500 additional leads attributable to the channel.**¹⁵

* Measured on conversations that generated a lead. ** More than one theme is possible per conversation. † Conversations with more than one exchange; half of all conversations stop at the first message. Before / after attribution partial (internal analysis).

Fifteen questions in one evening

This is what the conversations in the deployment actually look like: the same questions your team receives, asked at the hour when nobody can answer them.*

"Can I still apply for the spring intake?"

"Do my AP credits count toward the major?"

"What is tuition for the first year?"

"Can I pay in installments?"

"Do you have employer partners for the co-op?"

"Is my foreign diploma recognized for admission?"

"Do I need an F-1 visa? Do you issue the I-20?"

"Is a TOEFL score required to apply?"

"Can I switch campus part-way through the program?"

"Are there scholarships or financial aid?"

"When is the next campus visit day?"

"Do transfer students have to test in as sophomores?"

"What is the application deadline?"

"What jobs do your graduates go into?"

"Do you offer housing, or help finding it?"

Every unanswered question is a tab that closes. Every answer is a potential lead, and one less email to deal with on Monday morning.

* Typical wordings, faithfully reconstructed from the themes actually measured in chapter 05 (programs, admissions, tuition, international, start dates, work placements, scholarships). No conversation is quoted verbatim, out of respect for anonymity.

Three minutes, one lead

The same mechanism, seen up close: a reconstructed conversation, representative of the ones in the deployment.*

TUESDAY · 10:51 P.M. · ON MOBILE

Hi, I'm a senior, mostly AP classes. Can I apply to the communications program?

Yes: the communications program is open to every high school track. Applications for the fall intake are open until June 30. Which campus did you have in mind?

Chicago. What is tuition?

In Chicago, \$21,000 a year, tuition and fees, payable in four installments at no extra cost. Institutional scholarships and aid are available. Want me to send you the program brochure?

Yes, please.

Great, I just need your email. And if you like, I can offer you a slot to speak with the admissions team.

QUALIFIED LEAD · HOT · SENT TO THE CRM

10:51 p.m.

The assistant opens, from the program page, on mobile.

+ 40 sec

First answer: complete, drawn from the institution's content, nothing else.

10:54 p.m.

Qualified lead in the CRM: scored hot, spam ruled out, transcript attached.

Mon 9:02 a.m.

Call back from the admissions team: a student who has just written, not a cold form.

The 10:48 p.m. question is not waiting for Monday. **It is waiting forty seconds.**

* Reconstructed conversation, representative of the exchanges in the chapter 05 deployment; no verbatim quotes, figures for illustration.

What it returns, what it costs

Apply the rates of an optimized deployment, where the assistant is given prominence, to a website with 100,000 visitors a year (the size of one institution, not a system).

100,000	unique visitors over the year	your current traffic
5,000	open the assistant	5% of traffic
3,000	exchange with the assistant	60% of those who open it
1,500	engage beyond the first message	1 conversation in 2
330	qualified leads, spam filtered	22% of engaged conversations
20	enrollments	cautious benchmark: 6% of leads

≈ \$1.6M

in degree revenue (20 enrollments × \$20,000 × 4 years)

≈ \$30k

first-year cost (pilot + subscription)

×50+

return on investment in year 1

< 10 days

to pay back the whole year's investment

The stance is deliberately cautious: only 6% lead → enrollment conversion, revenue limited to tuition, a full first-year cost. Halve the open rate again: the return stays above ×25. And converting those leads is still your admissions team's job: the five-minute window from chapter 02 finally works in its favor.

**One enrollment alone, \$80,000 over the degree,
funds the assistant for three years.**

Assumptions: tuition \$20,000 / year, 4-year degree; open and exchange rates = vendor benchmark, widget given prominence; engagement and leads = rates observed in chapter 05; lead → enrollment 6% (internal benchmark); first-year cost = US pilot rate, indicative.

A campus chatbot is not a generic chatbot

The results in chapter 05 do not come from a widget dropped onto a website. Ten requirements make the difference.

✓ **Trained on your content**

Programs, tuition, calendar, admissions process. No generic answers.

✓ **Qualification built in**

Every lead arrives scored: hot, warm, cold. Never in bulk.

✓ **Spam filtered before the CRM**

On the chapter 05 deployment, 28% of raw submissions were spam. Your team sees none of them.

✓ **Multilingual**

64% of the leads observed come from abroad. The assistant answers in their language.

✓ **Mobile first**

79% of conversations come from a phone. The experience is built for that.

✓ **Available 24/7**

Because 75% of questions arrive after the office closes.¹¹

✓ **Wired into your CRM**

Leads land where your team already works, in real time.

✓ **Measurable end to end**

The full funnel, from visitor to enrollment, campus by campus.

✓ **A controlled scope**

The assistant answers on your institution only, and hands over to your team when it should.

✓ **No website rebuild**

One script to add, no technical dependency. Live in a few days.

Those ten requirements are the brief. The chapter 05 figures are what it produces **once the brief is met.**

What Skolbot does, exactly

Six links in a chain, no change for your team, other than qualified leads arriving where it already works.

Your content

Programs, tuition, calendar, admissions process: the assistant is trained on your website, and invents nothing beyond it.



Skolbot

Understands the question, answers in forty seconds, in the student's language, 24/7.



The conversation

On mobile first, at the exact moment the question comes up, 10:48 p.m. included.



Qualification

Every exchange is analyzed: hot, warm, cold. Spam is filtered out before it reaches your team.



Your CRM

The lead arrives in real time, with the full context of the conversation.



Your admissions

Your team calls back a student who has just written: the five-minute window from chapter 02 finally works in its favor.

Live in a few days. One script to add, **no website rebuild.**

10:48 p.m.

Another Tuesday, another Maya. The same question, at the same hour: *"Is the co-op paid, and does it start sophomore year or only junior year?"*

This time, an answer. In forty seconds, from your own content: the schedule, the year it starts, and whether it is paid.

Three questions later, she downloads the brochure and leaves her email address.

Monday, 9:02 a.m.: your team calls back **a qualified lead, still warm**, instead of sorting through empty forms.

Every day, your institution pays for visitors who leave without asking their question. You can carry on buying more traffic. Or start answering the traffic you already have.

See it answer on your own content

The demonstration is built in a few days from your public website. Your programs, your tuition, your dates: judge it on the evidence.

skolbot.ai

Where these figures come from

The market data quoted in this document comes from the public sources listed below, and is US data unless stated otherwise; amounts are shown in dollars as published, rounded. The figures in chapters 05 and 06 come from a live Skolbot deployment with a private higher education group in France (2026): they are anonymized and rounded to protect the institution's confidentiality, and internal measurements not validated by a third party are flagged as such. That deployment is used because it is the one measured end to end; the behavior it documents (evening traffic, mobile, stealth applicants) is the same behavior the US sources describe. The "typical questions" and the reconstructed conversation in chapter 05 are faithful to the themes measured, never verbatim quotes.

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|---|--|----|--|
| 1 | LocaliQ / WordStream, Google Ads Benchmarks, 2025. | 9 | EducationDynamics, Online College Students Report, 2024. |
| 2 | Search Influence, 2026 Higher Education Marketing Benchmarks. | 10 | EducationDynamics, Marketing & Enrollment Management Benchmarks, 2026. |
| 3 | Oldroyd (MIT) / InsideSales.com, Lead Response Management Study, 2007. | 11 | EAB, "What are students asking university chatbots?", 2025. |
| 4 | Harvard Business Review, "The Short Life of Online Sales Leads", 2011. | 12 | Intercom, "Live Chat for Marketing", 2019 (vendor data). |
| 5 | UPCEA, Secret Shopper Benchmarking Study, 2025. | 13 | Gartner, press release, March 2025 (agentic AI and customer service). |
| 6 | HubSpot Research, consumer survey, 2018. | 14 | MarketsandMarkets, "AI in Education Market", 2024. |
| 7 | RNL (Ruffalo Noel Levitz), E-Expectations Trend Report, 2023. | 15 | Skolbot data, anonymized deployment, France, 2026. |
| 8 | RNL, Online Student Recruitment Report, 2024. | | |