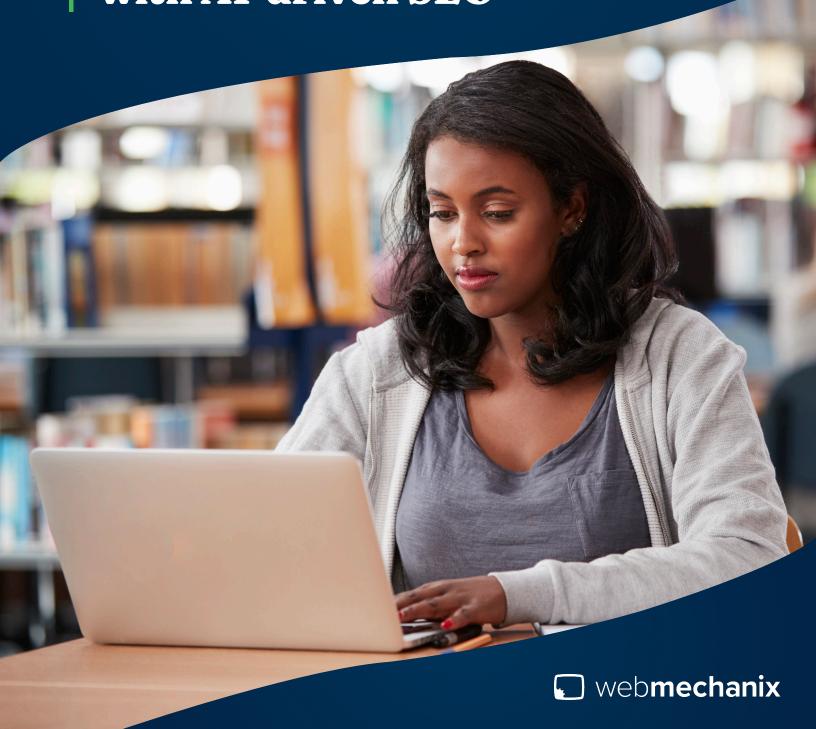# How an online university doubled their new student inquiries with AI-driven SEO

**webmechanix**

# Winning more students with SEO + ChatGPT

## Background:

Stevenson University Online is a leading producer of online degrees for students pursuing bachelor, graduate and PhD programs in a variety of disciplines.

This case study details how smart SEO combined with savvy use of generative AI helped their small marketing team produce big organic search results.

## The challenge:

Stevenson wanted to drive more inquiries from prospective students searching for information around the kinds of online programs they offered.

While their program pages were generating some inquiries, they weren't ranking high enough to secure a steady flow of organic leads. And while their blogs generated traffic, almost none of that traffic converted to organic inquiries.

While Stevenson knew they needed to create more content to get more traffic, the challenge was what content to write that would attract prospective students. And with a small marketing team and limited budget, it was difficult to even get the content created in the first place!

Stevenson approached WebMechanix with the goal of creating and publishing search-optimized content that would attract prospective students, with content they would actually want to read, which would encourage them to take the next step in their higher education journey with Stevenson.

## The proof is in the numbers:

### 143%
Increase organic users

### 238%
Increase organic inquiries

### 522%
Increase average organic rankings

# The solution:

After evaluating Stevenson's current organic presence and website content, WebMechanix noticed three things:

1. Their program pages were thin on helpful content. We needed a creative way to help answer prospective students' questions without over-cluttering the program page content.

2. Their blog posts were more focused on general topics than specific questions a person looking for a degree Stevenson offered might be searching. So the traffic wasn't relevant or likely to convert to a student inquiry.

3. Due to compliance standards in higher education, Stevenson was limited by how they could describe their programs on their programs pages. How they were allowed to represent their programs didn't necessarily align with how prospective students searched for them.

To solve this problem, we implemented a "Tier 2" page approach to content. The big idea was to create content on the blog ("Tier 2") that would be helpful for a student in the middle of their journey to considering an online degree program.

Next, we would link to the "Tier 2" pages from the program ("Tier 1") pages and vice versa. This would allow prospective students visiting the program pages to have added-value links they could follow to help with their decision-making process. And blog visitors would more likely be in the market for an online degree program, then be able to immediately learn more about Stevenson's programs.

So how did we execute this strategy to make the biggest impact? We started by focusing on the "leading horses" — the top 6 programs for which Stevenson wanted to generate applications.

| Landing page + | ↓ Sessions | Users | New users | Average engagement time per session | Conversions info_request ▾ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 904 vs. 243 ↑ 272.02% | 645 vs. 188 ↑ 243.09% | 465 vs. 128 ↑ 263.28% | 1m 49s vs. 97.17 ↑ 12.7% | 31.00 vs. 3.00 ↑ 933.33% |
| 1 /online/academics/online-graduate-programs/nursing | | | | | |
| Feb 1 - Oct 29, 2023 | 904 | 645 | 465 | 1m 49s | 31.00 |
| May 6, 2022 - Jan 31, 2023 | 242 | 187 | 128 | 1m 37s | 3.00 |
| % change | 273.55% | 244.92% | 263.28% | 12.24% | 933.33% |

| Landing page + | ↓ Sessions | Users | New users | Average engagement time per session | Conversions info_request ▾ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 758 vs. 152 ↑ 398.68% | 674 vs. 127 ↑ 430.71% | 617 vs. 113 ↑ 446.02% | 1m 20s vs. 76.36 ↑ 5.5% | 30.00 vs. 1.00 ↑ 2,900% |
| 1 /online/academics/online-graduate-programs/forensic-accounting | | | | | |
| Feb 1 - Oct 29, 2023 | 758 | 674 | 617 | 1m 20s | 30.00 |
| May 6, 2022 - Jan 31, 2023 | 152 | 127 | 113 | 1m 16s | 1.00 |
| % change | 398.68% | 430.71% | 446.02% | 5.5% | 2,900% |

We then identified the primary keywords that we needed to rank those pages for, followed by related secondary keywords that would be the target keywords for the blog posts. During this phase, we also observed what content was already ranking for those keywords to get a baseline of what kind of content we would need to publish to compete.

This is where it gets fun (enter ChatGPT)...

Leveraging AI, we took time to understand the prospective students' personas: where are they in their journey to an online degree program? And what information do they need to take the next step? We used these insights to identify the topics that would be useful, engaging and inspiring to prospective students looking for these programs (such as an "RN to BSN degree").

Next, we used ChatGPT to outline highly-engaging, SEO optimized content with these inputs. Based on the outline, we then asked ChatGPT to actually write the content, observing the outputs closely and cleaning up or improving them where necessary for tone and accuracy.

Finally, we made sure that these newly-published pages linked back to the program pages using appropriate SEO anchor text. We also linked from the program pages back to these tier 2 pages to create a seamless navigation experience for users and robots alike.

| Performance by Landing Page | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Page path | Sessions ▼ | New users | Engagement rate |
| /online/about-us/news/crime-scene-investigation-csi-vs-forensic-science/ | 4,613 | 3,914 | 60.13% |
| /online/about-us/news/forensic-accounting-vs-auditing/ | 2,938 | 2,564 | 59.29% |
| /online/about-us/news/what-can-you-do-with-a-masters-in-forensic-science/ | 1,073 | 1,003 | 76.51% |
| /online/about-us/news/career-paths-in-crime-scene-investigation/ | 941 | 844 | 77.05% |
| /online/about-us/news/masters-in-forensic-accounting-career-opportunities/ | 289 | 237 | 65.74% |
| /online/about-us/news/exploring-the-forensic-science-career-path/ | 95 | 72 | 57.89% |

# The result:

In the 5 month period after we published the new content, we saw:

- **Median rankings improvement: from position 47 to position 9**
- **Organic users – up 143%**
- **Organic inquiries – up 238%**

Because our blog content was actually relevant, we started generating inquiries from them directly. And because our program pages were more helpful and content-rich, rankings, visitors and conversions all went up.

Needless to say, Stevenson's marketing team was thrilled with the results. We're now doubling down on this strategy for the rest of their programs and continuing to build out helpful content to support their prospective students' journey.

# The bottom line:

When your current strategy for attracting students or leads isn't working as well as you'd like, it's time to rethink your approach.

And when you have limited resources to do it right, it's time to get scrappy.

This case study shows the power of supercharging proven SEO strategies with the latest technology to remove barriers to results and accelerate the time-to-value.

It also shows the importance of adopting cost-effective new technologies (including generative AI tools like ChatGPT) to get an edge on the competition.

No matter if you're an online university or otherwise…

Take these lessons and apply them to your SEO and marketing efforts. We bet you'll be pleasantly surprised at the results. ;)

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>
> Even with our roots as a regional institution, WebMechanix has shown us it's possible for us to attract students to our brand at the national level. We're excited to continue this SEO strategy with them to grow our presence for our online degree programs.
>
> **John Buettner**
> Vice President of Marketing and Digital Communications @ Stevenson University Online

# What about you?

Is your SEO attracting the amount of inquiries you want?

Is your agency putting generative AI to work for you?

If not, we can help! Give us a shout. Together, we'll talk through your organization's goals and recommend a game plan. And even if we're not a fit, we'll try to point you in the right direction.

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