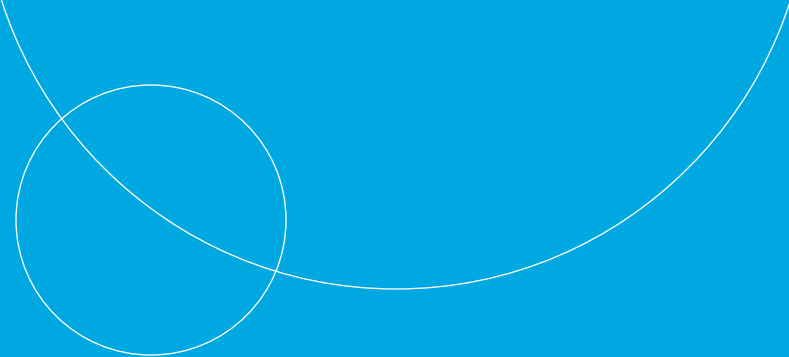rnl national conference
leading ai innovation
empowering higher education

Bridging the Gap: Running Collaborative SEO Projects

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The Team

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rnl national conference

Today's Topics

- Understanding the value of SEO

- Defining collaboration and establishing shared expectations

- Sharing campus success

- Crucial aspects of relationship building for shared marketing goals

- Maintaining SEO presence

Is your institution or department currently investing in Search Engine Optimization?

Understanding the value of SEO

1

The value of optimization

What does the data tell us?

- If you are not within the first listings, students are likely to go on to the next program of interest

- Being at the top of a search result is your opportunity to meet a student at the exact moment of inquiry

- Almost no differentiation by age of the student or their intended program format (online, in-person, hybrid)

92%

of prospective graduate students use a search engine as either their first or second step in their program search.
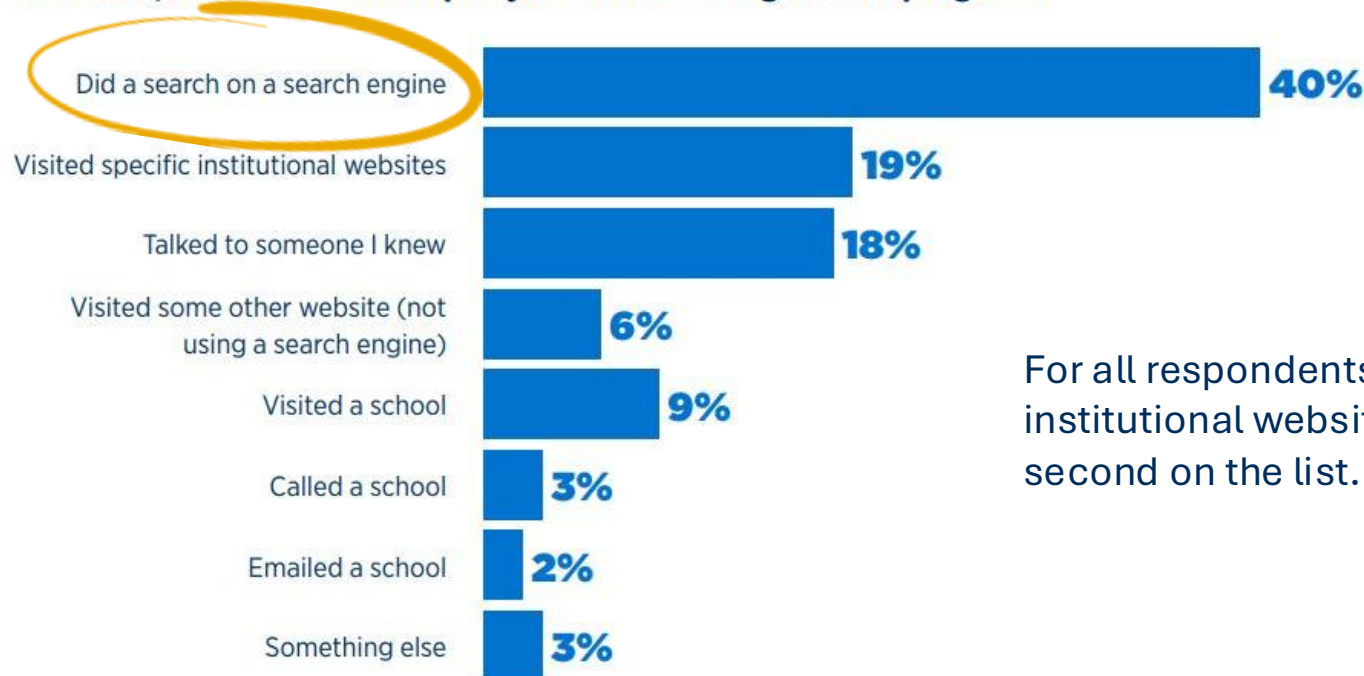
+85%

of undergraduate students used a search engine to identify online programs of interest.

"You often don't get a second chance to make a first impression online."

- Erin Minsart, 2023 Graduate Recruitment Report

Students' first step

What was/will be the first step in your search for a graduate program?

Response	Percentage
Did a search on a search engine	40%
Visited specific institutional websites	19%
Talked to someone I knew	18%
Visited some other website (not using a search engine)	6%
Visited a school	9%
Called a school	3%
Emailed a school	2%
Something else	3%

For all respondents, "visiting an institutional website" was second on the list.

First step by age (grad)

Search first step by age

SEARCH FIRST STEP	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
Did a search on a search engine	33%	42%	42%	40%	43%
Visited specific institutional websites	18%	17%	21%	23%	25%
Talked to someone I knew	19%	18%	18%	16%	14%
Visited some other website (not using a search engine)	6%	6%	5%	7%	4%
Visited a school	15%	8%	7%	6%	4%
Called a school	4%	2%	3%	2%	4%
Emailed a school	4%	3%	2%	1%	0%
Something else	2%	3%	2%	4%	7%

Other early sources (grad)

WHAT WERE YOUR OTHER EARLY SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT GRADUATE PROGRAMS?	ALL
Search engines	52%
Institutional websites	49%
Printed materials from institutions	23%
Ads on social media sites	21%
Other websites	21%
Videos on YouTube or elsewhere	19%
Ads on websites	17%
Printed rankings guides	17%
Ads on streaming TV	13%
Ads on broadcast or cable TV	10%
Ads in newspapers, magazines, etc.	8%
Ads on streaming radio	7%
Ads on billboards, buses, other outdoor	7%
Ads on local broadcast radio	6%

When graduate students don't start on a search engine, almost all of them use a search engine as a next step.

What implications does this have for SEO content?

tailored to your institution

relevant and engaging to your audience

ranked well by search engines

The power of paid + organic

SEO + PAID = SEM (or search engine marketing)

Both SEO and PPC share these similarities in creating an SEM strategy:

- Increase website visibility optimizing your target audience and search queries.

- Drive higher-quality traffic through paid ads and/or organic search results.

- Deep knowledge and expertise in keywords and target audience to better understand the intent behind the search query and how your competition looks at the search term.

What is the ultimate goal?

To attract the right visitors to your website so they can purchase, sign up for a service, or find an answer they are looking for.

The power of paid + organic

Optimize Content for SEO

50%
of higher ed traffic comes from search

75+%
of students use search engines

SEO Benefits

Helps students find your programs

Rank higher than your competitors

Improves search visibility and engagement

Drives organic traffic to enrollment funnels
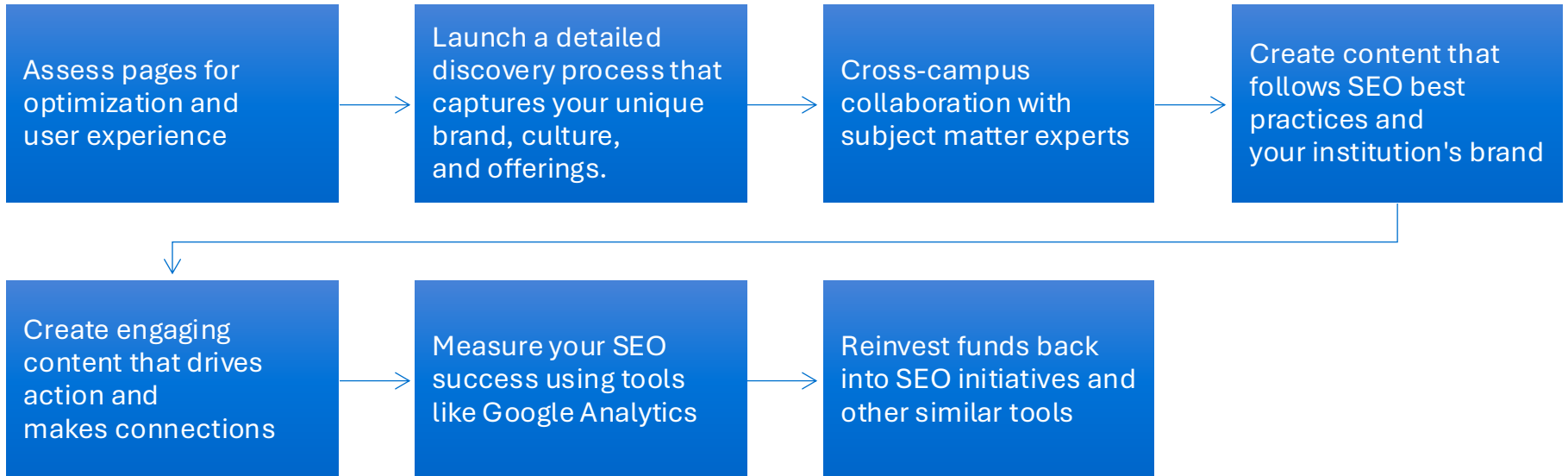
What do you need to improve your SEO?

Defining collaborative processes on your campus

2

The "RNL way" of writing for SEO

Leveraging SEO Writers

Assess pages for optimization and user experience

→

Launch a detailed discovery process that captures your unique brand, culture, and offerings.

→

Cross-campus collaboration with subject matter experts

→

Create content that follows SEO best practices and your institution's brand

Create engaging content that drives action and makes connections

→

Measure your SEO success using tools like Google Analytics

→

Reinvest funds back into SEO initiatives and other similar tools

Using AI as a framework for content, not as the content creator.

Smart processes for collaboration

- Project Management Tools
- Shared Expectations
- Documentation Process

83%

Of professionals rely on technology to collaborate, according to an Alfresco survey of more than 750 responses.

Smart processes for collaboration

Project management

- What project management tools or resources are available to you? Take inventory and consider multiple options.

- When is it time to innovate?

Shared expectations for results

- Shared timelines and attainable deadlines

- What are you measuring?

- When do you expect to see results?

83%

Of professionals rely on technology to collaborate, according to a survey by CareerBuilder.

Smart processes for collaboration

Process Documentation

Successful Collaboration

Shared File Location

Do you have a plan B?

Google Drive

Dropbox

SharePoint

Other cloud service

Sharing campus experiences

3

Alaska Fairbanks Case Study

Over the past year, RNL completed the overhaul of more than 50 program pages to improve SEO and include the most relevant keywords. The scope of work tapped into the campus partner's unique program offerings including a robust revamp of their dual-degree webpages.

Organic search indicators of success

- 83% of 538 keywords have appeared on page one over the last six months

- Exceptionally high ContentIQ score

- Optimized pages saw a 95% increase in estimated organic click traffic

- 65% increase in degree-related phrases ranking on page 1-3

- 41% YoY increase in organic entrances to careers page

- 64% YoY increase in new users to the careers section

Alaska Fairbanks Case Study

By the numbers

+65%

degree-related phrases ranking on pages 1-3 of search results

+41%

year-over-year increase in organic entrances to careers pages

+64%

year-over-year increase in new users to the careers section

Alaska Fairbanks Case Study

The Power of Great Design

Oakland University Case Study

Oakland University, a regional public institution in Rochester Hills, Michigan. For seven years, the university has partnered with RNL for search engine optimization (SEO). Our work for Oakland University has helped the institution produce strong search engine rankings and effective online engagement.

Organic search indicators of success

- Among 302 keywords that are resulting in placement on the first 10 pages of Google, **more than 40 percent have appeared on the first page** over the last six months.

- Deployed strategies have vaulted programs as diverse and competitive as teacher leadership, finance, mechanical engineering, and human resource development to the **first page of search results**.

- RNL's work has resulted in Oakland's Teacher Leadership program consistently ranking as **the first search result** under "teacher leadership degree."
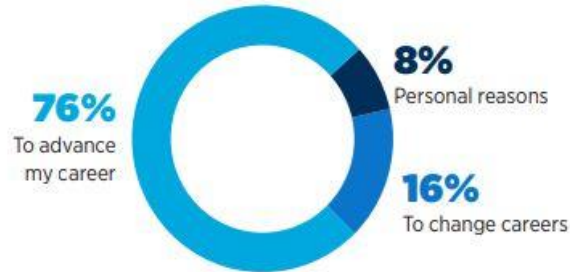
Oakland University Case Study

Goals:

✓ Optimize their program pages for better visibility

✓ Showcase career outcomes and career opportunities associated with each program

✓ Consistency across their site (over 200 degrees offered)

Graduate student motivations

1) Graduate students are motivated to enroll in order to advance their careers.

Primary Motivation for Enrolling in Graduate Study

76% To advance my career

8% Personal reasons

16% To change careers

Motivation by age

MOTIVATION	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
To change careers	9%	18%	19%	20%	14%
To advance my career	85%	75%	73%	67%	54%
Personal reasons	7%	7%	8%	13%	32%

ce

Key results for Oakland University

37%

degree-related phrases ranking on pages 1-3 of search results

+30%

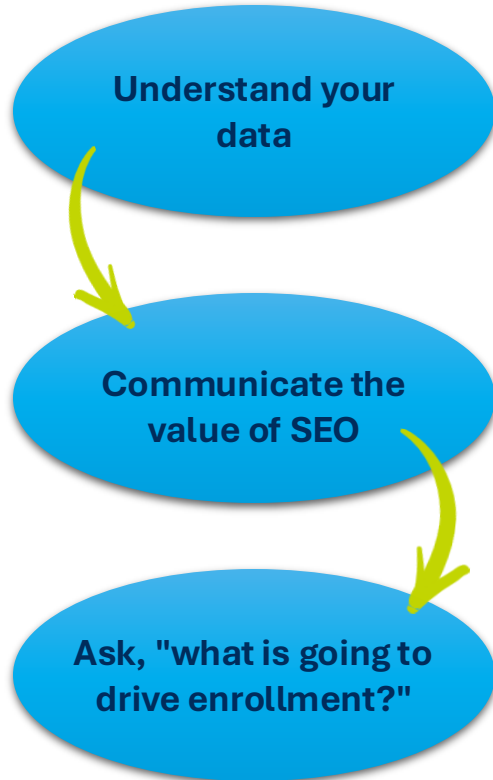year-over-year increase in organic entrances to careers pages

+25%

year-over-year increase in new users to the careers section
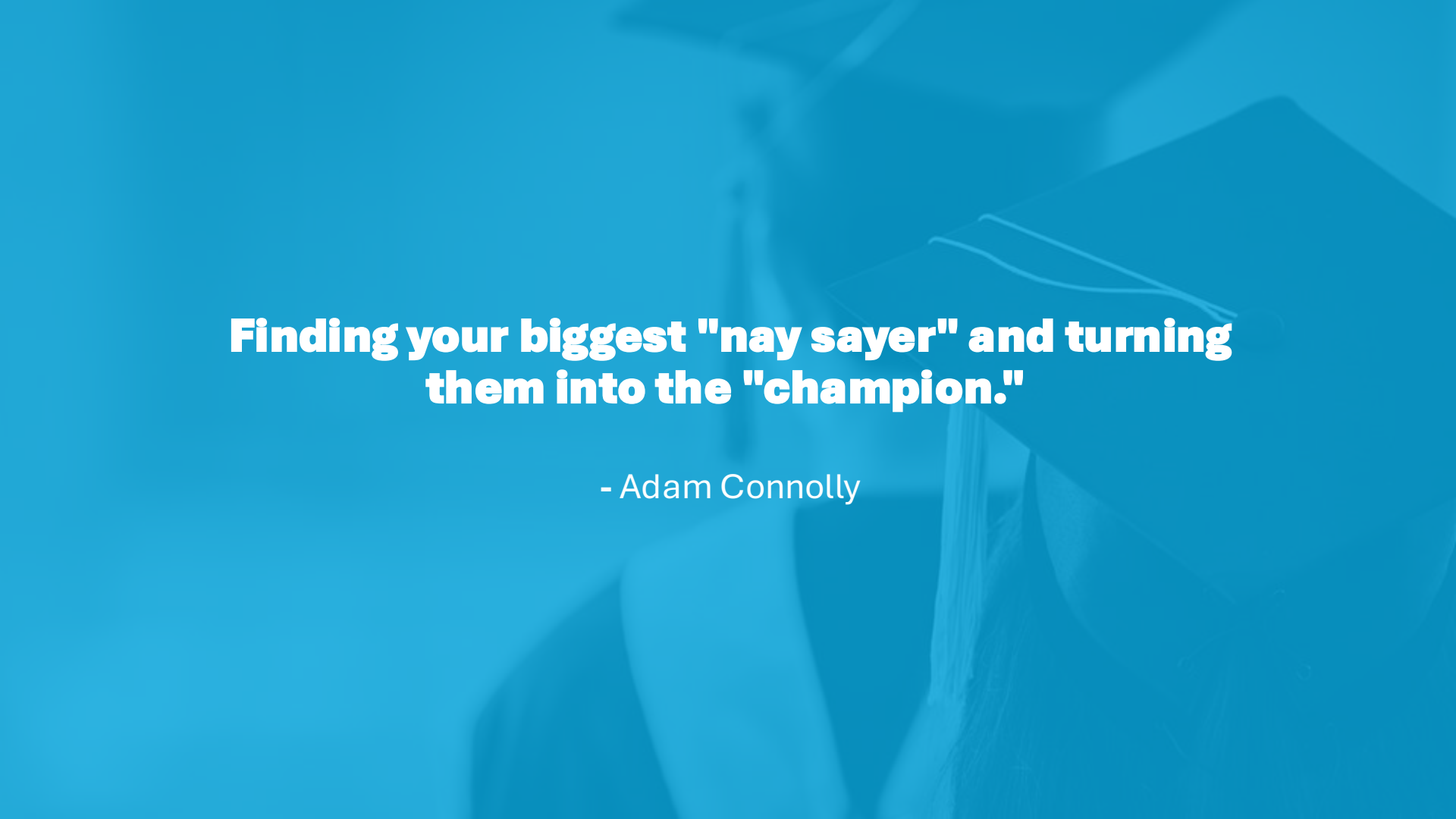
Relationship building for shared marketing goals

4

How to keep the website an ongoing priority on campus

Understand your data

Communicate the value of SEO

Ask, "what is going to drive enrollment?"

92%

of prospective graduate students use a search engine as either the first or second step in their program search

Finding your biggest "nay sayer" and turning them into the "champion."

- Adam Connolly

Building better relationships to attain marketing goals

Mutual respect

Everyone's contribution should be equally respected

Varying career and life experiences should not hinder your success

Clearly defined roles

Who manages or *owns* what?

Are the roles equitable?

Unnecessary hierarchies can become an obstacle

Building better relationships to attain marketing goals

Varying levels of priority

Different positions on campus can influence enthusiasm

Self-awareness is the first step toward breaking down collaboration barriers
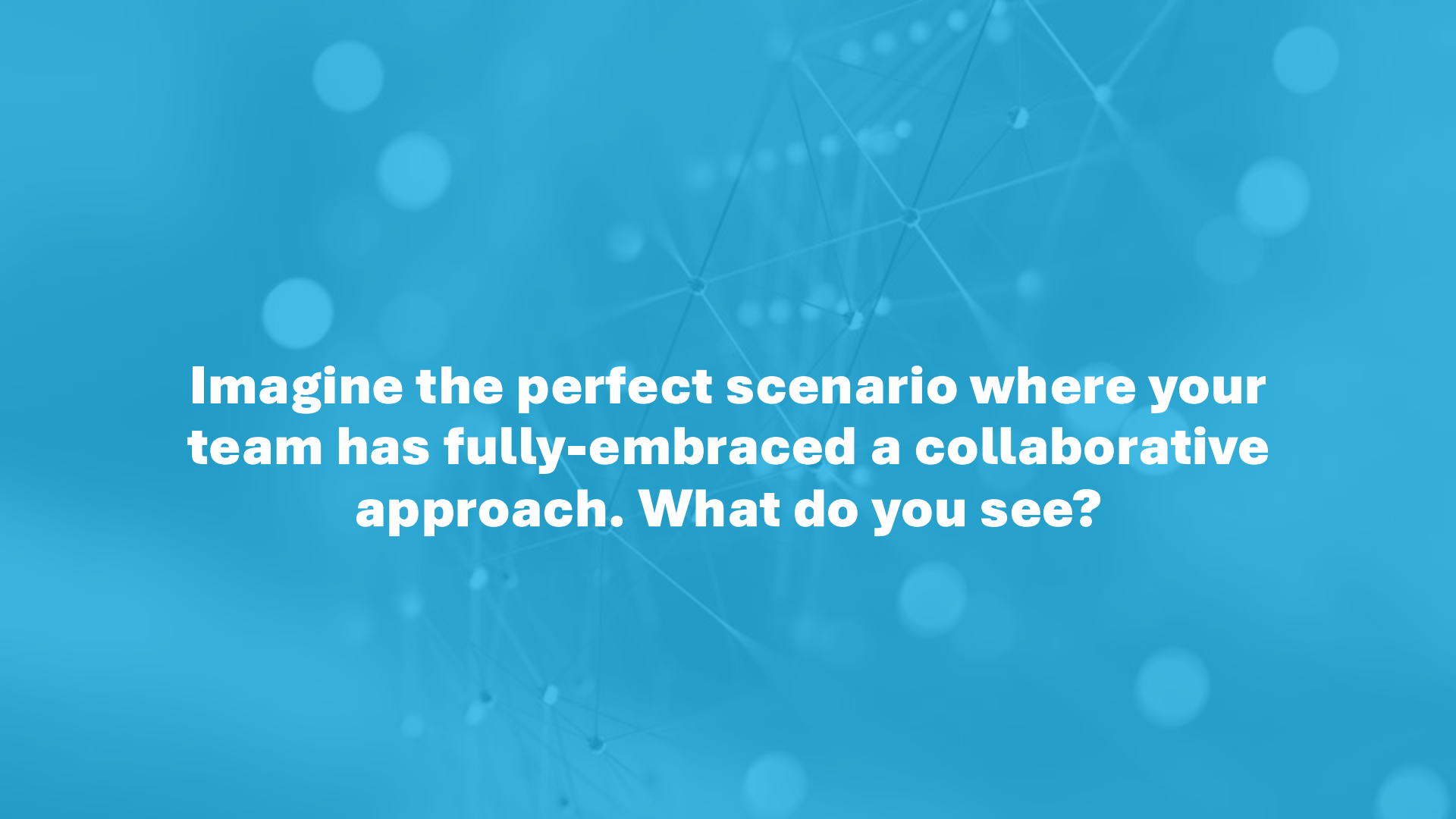
Consider your communication

Clear, Kind, and Transparent communication with collaborators

Data says collaboration is the answer

Imagine the perfect scenario where your team has fully-embraced a collaborative approach. What do you see?

How to maintain SEO presence

5

Common SEO Issues and Solutions

SEO Issue

Targeting the wrong keywords

Outdated content / Poor user experience

Not optimizing page titles and meta data

Technical issues on the website

Solutions

Prioritize keyword research

Create high-quality, original content with graphics or video

Add keywords to titles and meta data

Complete a technical audit to address errors

Raise your hand if you could relate to at least one of these common issues

Maintain SEO Presence

Content

Keep your content fresh! Update pages every 6-12 months. Search engines reward helpful content with a higher ranking.

Keywords

Research keywords. Free SEO tools like Google's Keyword Planner can help you find the best keywords for your content.

Competitors

Check out your competitors. Learn what's working for your competitors that you can implement in your SEO Strategies.

Technical SEO

Keep your website healthy with routine site audit crawls. Address any severe issues to prevent a drop in rank.

THANK YOU!

Questions or comments?

rnl national conference
leading ai innovation
empowering higher education

ready to lead the way with RNL?

schedule a quick consultation

scan here

Inspiration and Sources

Five tips for building healthy academic collaborations by Martyna Śliwa (The Times Higher Education, 2023)

Why Collaboration Yields Improved Productivity (And The Science Behind It) by Kate Vitasek (Forbes, 2022)

Writing for Higher Education SEO: Why You Need a Human Touch in the Age of AI by Robert Alexander (RNL, 2024)

2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report (RNL, 2023)

2022 Online Student Recruitment Report (RNL, 2023)