



# NAU Search Engine Optimization Strategy

Northern Arizona University, University Marketing | FY24 Q2 | Draft 2  
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## At-a-glance search optimization strategy

NAU's **search engine optimization (SEO)** strategy is focused—first and foremost—on using **organic search** as a medium for uplifting the university's responsibilities to **recruit** and **retain students** in alignment with [overarching strategic plans](#).

We aim to meet these goals through [coordinated efforts](#) in three key areas: [SEO-specialized education](#) across the university's digital workforce, SEO implementation through [existing prioritized workstreams](#), and innovative advancement through [new research and development](#).

At the same time, we are advancing toward [maturity in our search optimization operations](#). Adapting existing maturity models from the user experience research field, we aim to move from ad hoc and opportunistic SEO implementation toward mature and industry-leading SEO operations—demonstrated through quality, consistent web and content development.

## Key pillars of NAU SEO strategy

### Education & awareness

**Investing in our people.** We promote robust education in SEO best practices among existing and developing stewards of our web assets—including department **site stewards**—within University Marketing and across the broader institution, generating a high level of professional expertise in organic traffic generation throughout the university's digital workforce.

### Existing workstreams

**Identifying optimal areas for improvement.** We position the majority of SEO implementation alongside existing, prioritized workstreams (including [ongoing site migrations](#), new content development, and content marketing opportunities like [blog publishing](#)) to best accommodate the needs of current and future students through search media.

### Research & development

**Creating a data-driven culture.** We back up our education and implementation initiatives with innovative research, testing, and development—led by University Marketing's [in-house SEO team](#) and supported by approved external partners. This research empowers NAU to leverage individualized benchmarks, insights, and implementation strategies that complement and refine existing university processes.

## Why do we need a search optimization strategy?

As the university promotes access, affordability, excellence in higher education, and more, the university's websites—including the primary site at [nau.edu](#) and home-grown degree comparison tool at [degree-search.nau.edu](#)—are well positioned as the top asset to drive recruitment and retention at a low cost.

Compared to other media and channels—including digital advertising campaigns—**search engine optimization** supports low-cost content marketing strategies to capture niche prospective student audiences by developing subject matter authority in the university's focus areas.

**54%**

of all website traffic comes from organic search.

[BrightEdge Organic Channel Report 2021](#)

**67%**

of nau.edu active users come from organic search, while **72%** of NAU Google clicks come from branded queries.

**Internal data, Q1 FY24**



## Adopting mature and modern search operations

The scope of modern SEO can change rapidly due to [search engine algorithm updates](#), new developments in [desktop and mobile technology](#), changes to browser features (e.g., the controversy over browser extension standards and the [implementation of Manifest V3 in Chromium-based browsers](#)), and much more. Alongside these changes, industry stakeholders—like Google—have increasingly highlighted the immense value of **user experience** within the search engine optimization industry—both as [direct signals for Search Engine Result Page \(SERP\) ranking](#) and as a broader consideration for SEO experts.

In contrast to previous SEO strategies at NAU—characterized by limiting scope definitions for search optimization, an ad-hoc approach to implementation, and limited transparency into key search data—we advocate for two high-level adaptations within our search optimization strategy:

1. embracing a [broad, flexible, and nuanced definition for modern SEO](#)
2. building goals based on a [user experience research-inspired model for search operations maturity](#)

The maturity model outlined here draws inspiration and shape from well-respected models within the user-experience industry, including: the [Nielsen Norman Group's 6 Levels of UX Maturity](#), [User Testing's Stages of UX Maturity](#), and other emerging work to simplify these stages into broader categories. This model proposes **four stages to mature search operations**: emerging, progressing, mature, and leading.

## What does search engine optimization mean at NAU?



**Search engine optimization (SEO)** describes strategies for—or changes to—a website promoting visibility and goal behaviors for search engine users (e.g., Google search users). Modern SEO considers alignment between search **queries** and **on-site behavior**, goals of returning searchers, site **speed** and **performance**, user **experience** and **accessibility**, Search Engine Result Page (SERP) **rankings**, and much **more**.

# How do we reach mature search operations?

The University Marketing SEO team finds NAU in transition between “emerging” and “progressing” stages!



## 1. Emerging: ad hoc SEO implementation

As search optimizations begin within the organization, we expect individuals will implement search optimizations on an ad-hoc basis and will often work in siloes—with limited awareness of other optimizations happening around the organization.

If there is a centralized SEO operation, its primary purposes are to implement ad hoc search optimizations and to educate others in a one-directional manner. If present, key performance indicators (KPIs) are not frequently visible or useful to individuals implementing search optimizations.

**Target timeline:** December 2021 (NAU21 initial launch)

### Differentiating features

- siloed SEO implementation
- limited KPI visibility
- centralized SEO primarily educates



## 2. Progressing: opportunistic SEO implementation

As search operations progress, we expect that individuals will begin to develop greater confidence in search optimization while increasingly collaborating across operational units. As individuals take greater responsibility for search optimizations in their respective workstreams, centralized SEO operations can begin to provide more individualized support and analysis.

KPIs should be established and will be increasingly visible to individual contributors.

**Target timeline:** January 2024 (FY24 Q3)

### Differentiating features

- SEO integration across units
- increased KPI visibility
- centralized SEO works collaboratively across units



## 3. Mature: ensuring quality and consistency of SEO

As the university’s search operations mature, we expect that individuals from around the institution will begin developing subject matter expertise in search engine optimization as it relates to their own unit or area. As these decentralized SEO advocates gain increasing confidence, University Marketing’s centralized SEO experts will shift to focus more primarily on industry research and supporting consistent, quality SEO implementation across the institution.

As institutional KPIs should now be highly visible and well refined, and as the university’s culture has internalized an SEO-friendly approach, we expect non-SEO-focused projects to increasingly begin reporting their own SEO-related KPIs.

**Target timeline:** July 2027 (FY28 Q1)

### Differentiating features:

- units demonstrate internal SEO subject matter expertise
- established visibility for per-project KPIs
- centralized SEO primary focus on industry research



## 4. Leading: evolving SEO alongside the industry

University Marketing’s SEO leads always aspire to achieve at the highest levels in the industry, acting as experts within their field and evolving alongside the search industry. At this level of maturity, decentralized SEO advocates from around the university will be prepared to collaborate across their units, with oversight reserved for large-scale changes that include multiple sections of the site. We also expect that KPI benchmarks should be set internally, not relative to industry standards, as the university will have developed a predictable SEO program and identified key areas of significant risk.

**Target timeline:** July 2035 (FY36 Q1)

### Differentiating features:

- decentralized SEO SMEs collaborate across units
- highly visible KPIs related to internally researched benchmarks
- centralized SEO leads are among the leading experts in the industry



# SEO key projects and priorities (FY24)

This **search engine optimization strategy** highlights strategic projects and focus areas for the current fiscal year.



SEO key projects and priorities (cont.)

## Optimization of degree information pages

The University Marketing SEO team identifies the **many disparate sources of degree information**—including the university’s [official degree and course catalog](#), catalog-driven template pages in WordPress ([catalog template example from The W. A. Franke College of Business](#)), and the [degree-search comparison and lead generation tool](#)—as both one of the greatest risks and greatest areas of possible improvement for search engine optimization.

As of November 2023, we estimate that **degree-search.nau.edu** accounts for approximately **16%** of all page views and **18%** of active users—all in lead-generating sessions on the nau.edu website. While these metrics may seem relatively low, this makes **degree-search.nau.edu the #1 top nau.edu site for generating leads** that does not act as a destination for RFI links (e.g., excluding degrees.nau.edu, nau.edu/legacy, and nau.edu/request-information).

**Source: Google Analytics 4, 2023/01/06 – 2023/11/12 (all available data), segmented for sessions including generate\_lead event and broken down by hostname.**

### Key goals for optimization of degree information pages

- **High priority (blocker for other goals):** prepare degree-search.nau.edu as a viable destination for search engine indexation and search intent alignment.
- Optimize official degree and course catalog for search intent alignment that best corresponds with its purpose.
- Clarify desired relationship between catalog.nau.edu and degree-search.nau.edu.
- Implement a nuanced, intent-informed linking strategy to drive users toward related degrees in the degree-search.nau.edu and catalog.nau.edu destinations.
- Retire or optimize WordPress catalog template pages in alignment with search intent-aware strategies implemented across the site.

### Highlights of degree information optimization

**Primary goal:** funnel search engine users to intent-appropriate destinations for degree information, highlighting opportunities for lead generation among exploratory prospective students.

**Non-SEO resources:** ITS developers (degree-search, WordPress, and catalog), curriculum & assessment, marketing copywriters, marketing copyeditors, and marketing web publishers.



SEO key projects and priorities (cont.)

## Launch of nau.edu blog projects

Publication of regular blog posts reflecting niche subject expertise and informational content represents a step toward building robust **content hubs**—using hub-and-spoke and other SEO content marketing techniques. The University Marketing SEO team aims to primarily support these efforts through education and by supporting analysis of viable opportunities for search marketing.

Over time, as the university builds out robust blog posts in a wide range of focus areas, we aim to both **establish subject matter expertise to improve rankings** and cast a **broad net to capture niche search queries in the university’s focus areas**.

### Overall nau.edu blog strategy

Our overall blogging strategy should reflect the expertise and focus areas where the university is most in alignment with our target audiences. Areas of high interest to prospective students—such as **cost** of attendance, **scholarships**, and **housing** options—or relating to expert areas within the university’s academic communities may be prioritized for alignment with **informational** or **commercial** search intent.

### Highlights of nau.edu blog projects

**Primary goal:** establish niche subject authority and drive search traffic through intent-aware content and backlinking strategies.

**Non-SEO resources:** department site stewards, marketing copywriters, marketing copyeditors, marketing web publishers, and external stakeholders.



SEO key projects and priorities (cont.)

## Operational enhancements to NAU25 theme migration process

Migrations into the NAU25 theme represent a significant portion of the digital publishing team's **existing prioritized work**. In response, we propose to continue focusing on operational enhancements to **minimize risk** and **increase value** through these migration efforts—through improvements to SEO-related migration processes, including 301 and 302 redirect implementation, information architecture design, link structure, and more.

By designing and promoting highly effective migration processes—and providing oversight and consultation in SEO-critical areas—the University Marketing SEO team aims to affirm the value and goals of ongoing migrations into the NAU25 theme with a special focus on search engine optimization.

### Highlights of enhancements to migration process

**Primary goal:** maintain and build site authority by minimizing risk in SEO-critical areas of migration process, including: redirecting old to new URLs; drafting updated URLs, titles, meta descriptions; information architecture and technical site layout.

**Non-SEO resources:** marketing web publishers, marketing copywriters, marketing copyeditors, and marketing client service managers.



SEO key projects and priorities (cont.)

## Operational enhancements to WordPress NAU25 theme through iterative development

The NAU25 WordPress theme represents a significant investment in time and effort since its initial release in December 2021. The University Marketing SEO team proposes to continue collaborating with the university's in-house developers to implement new blocks and functionalities that will support SEO-friendly publishing with limited implementation overhead (structured data, hreflang alt, etc.) while increasing site performance in key ranking areas.

While pursuing operational enhancements to the WordPress theme, the SEO team also proposes additional analytics, research, and benchmarking to better report on and prioritize site performance over a broad range of pages—including tracking core web vitals such as Largest Contentful Paint (LCP), Interaction to Next Paint (INP), Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS), and others.

### Highlights of enhancements to WordPress NAU25 theme

**Primary goal:** increase organic search traffic by implementing SEO-friendly enhancements to the NAU25 theme, including: addition of structured data-friendly blocks, improvements to meta tags and header responses, increases in rank-signaling core web vital metrics.

**Non-SEO resources:** ITS developers (WordPress), marketing web publishers, marketing copywriters, and marketing copyeditors.



SEO key projects and priorities (cont.)

## SEO office hours and confidence KPIs surveys

Reflecting this strategy's pillar to promote **education and awareness** in support of search engine optimization across the university, we propose regular SEO office hours and surveys to both encourage and assess the university's education of SEO best practices.

We propose a phased rollout of SEO office hours and confidence surveys, beginning with internal University Marketing teams and growing to support the broader university community. Paired with ongoing surveys and reporting, we aim to approach education through a flexible and extensible model that best addresses the **current** needs of an increasingly SEO-aware organization.

### Highlights of office hours and confidence KPIs

**Primary goal:** increase awareness and adoption of SEO-friendly best practices through intentional education efforts.

**Non-SEO resources:** department site stewards, marketing web publishers, marketing copywriters, marketing copyeditors, department site stewards, and marketing client service managers.



SEO key projects and priorities (cont.)

## A/B/n testing and collaboration with user experience (UX) experts

In response to increasing interplay between **user experience** and **search engine optimization** disciplines, we propose continued **collaboration** with the university's UX experts to support SEO in strategic areas:

- increase alignment between search intent and on-site behavior
- improve performance among rank-signaling user experience metrics
- champion combined SEO+UX efforts to avoid rework and improve collaborative work

### Highlights of A/B/n testing and UX collaboration

**Primary goal:** increase alignment between search intent and on-site behavior through strategic optimization of blocks, page layout, user experience design, information architecture, and other on-page elements.

**Non-SEO resources:** ITS user experience/user interface analysts, ITS developers (degree-search, WordPress, and catalog), marketing web publishers, marketing copywriters, and marketing copyeditors.



# University Marketing in-house SEO team

## University Marketing SEO team lead

All University Marketing **search engine optimization** efforts are to be **led** by a full-time staff professional with extensive knowledge in search engine optimization. SEO team leads demonstrate expertise and professional competency in data analysis for modern SEO; strong team leadership skills and collaborative approach; and cross-functional competency in web development, user experience, and content development. This SEO team lead is responsible for managing all three pillars of the university's SEO strategy—for education, work prioritization, and research—in collaboration with University Marketing's digital and organizational leadership.

**Current SEO lead:** [Geoffrey Conley, Senior Search Engine Optimization Analyst](#)

## SEO-specific student worker support

University Marketing **search engine optimization implementation** efforts are expected to be **supported** by 2-3 dedicated student workers. Student workers will be selected from applicant pools of qualified NAU students or exceptional student workers within the University Marketing digital team.

Student workers supporting SEO efforts should enter their role with basic competencies in data analysis and web publishing areas:

- basic competence with data analysis, including tools such as Microsoft Excel, Google Sheets, and others
- basic competence with web publishing using modern WordPress implementations
- strong interest in user experience, web accessibility, data analysis, or other related areas



Student workers supporting SEO efforts should develop and demonstrate strong competencies in data analysis and web publishing during their time on the SEO team:

- strong competence in web publishing with modern WordPress implementations using the Gutenberg editor and Advanced Custom Fields Pro-based blocks
- strong competence in common SEO best practices, including SEO-friendly titles, meta descriptions, URLs, heading hierarchy, and page layout
- strong competence in data analysis for SEO using tools including Google Search Console, Google Analytics 4, SEMRush, and others

# SEO strategy summary and resources

This strategy highlights the critical pillars, models, and projects of Northern Arizona University's search optimization strategy for the FY24 fiscal year. With special attention to the areas of SEO education, work prioritization, and research, we aim to refine a mature search operations unit with capacity to support the public web presence of a large organization like NAU with appropriate consideration for the various modes of communication employed in such a broad ecosystem. These strategies touch on disciplines in general search, e-commerce optimization, content marketing, and much more.

None of this work is possible without collaboration and investments—of time, resources, and culture—from the broad university community. However, through that collaboration, we have the opportunity to drive notable improvements in lead generation and brand awareness.

## Resources

- NAU web best practices guide ([nau.edu/university-marketing/marketing-resources/web-best-practices-guide](https://nau.edu/university-marketing/marketing-resources/web-best-practices-guide))
- NAU web content creation guide ([nau.edu/university-marketing/marketing-resources/web-content-creation-guide](https://nau.edu/university-marketing/marketing-resources/web-content-creation-guide))
- NAU essential guide to successful blogging ([nau.edu/university-marketing/marketing-resources/essential-guide-successful-blogging](https://nau.edu/university-marketing/marketing-resources/essential-guide-successful-blogging))

## Contact University Marketing

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