THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS | WEB STRATEGY

Optimizing "Planning to Apply"

An apples-to-apples analysis of our refactored graduate-admissions content block — and how it lifts performance across all eight of our optimization categories.

GEO SEO AEO UX WCAG 2.1 AA Conversions Accessibility UI

WHY WE REBUILT THIS PAGE

The objective: turn a thin landing page into an engagement engine

Our three target sections — **Identify your discipline**, **Know deadlines and requirements**, and **Reach out to the right people** — were single paragraphs with one link each. They communicate, but they give a prospective student almost nothing to *do*, and very little for a search or answer engine to extract. Our goal is to raise average engagement time from roughly **20 seconds** toward the higher-ed norm while strengthening discoverability.

~44s

Typical GA4 average engagement time for considered-purchase, research-style sites — our working target band is 44–52s

53%

Of engaged sessions on higher-ed sites come from organic search — our most valuable, most engaged audience

2×

Organic visitors spend about twice as long on higher-ed sites as direct visitors, across ~100 institutions studied

Why the target is realistic: education sites run longer sessions than most industries because students actively research programs, cost, and requirements. A page built to be worked through — not just read — supports that behavior. Engagement is also a documented input to Google's ranking systems, so time-on-page improvements compound into search gains.

Sources: circle S studio GA4 benchmarks (Jan 2025 data); Carnegie 2024 Higher-Ed SEO Benchmarks; EAB GA4 engagement study (~100 institutions); Databox GA4 industry benchmarks.

APPLES TO APPLES

What changed, at a glance

LEGACY DRUPAL SECTIONS

- Three separate paragraph blocks, each a heading + one sentence + one link
- Large decorative images and Bootstrap grid markup dominate the code; low text-to-code ratio
- No structured data — nothing for AI or answer engines to extract
- No interaction: nothing to click, track, or complete
- Thin, generic copy that does not answer the specific questions students ask

OPTIMIZED BLOCK #KU-PLAN-V1

- One semantic, self-contained block: ordered three-step process + a real FAQ
- Substantive, answer-first copy: degree types, a requirements table, deadline guidance, a reusable outreach email
- Four schema types that mirror the visible content (HowTo, FAQPage, Breadcrumb, WebPage + speakable)
- Interactive dwell drivers: a persistent progress checklist, expandable detail panels, animated counters, copy-to-clipboard
- WCAG 2.1 AA disclosure and form patterns; reduced-motion and keyboard support built in

One deliberate trade-off: the block replaces three large decorative photos with scannable, extractable content. That is a net gain for content-load speed, text-to-code ratio, and AI extraction. If we want a single supporting image for warmth, we can reintroduce one without affecting the structure.

THE EIGHT-CATEGORY SCORECARD

Our assessment: legacy vs. optimized

CATEGORY	LEGACY	OPTIMIZED	WHY THE OPTIMIZED VERSION WINS
GEO	ABSENT	STRONG	Answer-first, semantically chunked content plus FAQ/HowTo schema gives generative engines clean, citable units.
SEO	THIN	STRONG	Real heading hierarchy, keyword-relevant Q&A copy, breadcrumb schema, and far higher text-to-code ratio.
AEO	ABSENT	STRONG	Direct question-and-answer phrasing and speakable schema target Position Zero and voice/AI answers.
UX	STATIC	STRONG	Progress tracking, expandable detail, and a clear next action reduce friction and reward exploration.
WCAG 2.1 AA	PARTIAL	CONFORMANT	Native form controls, ARIA disclosure pattern, visible focus, reduced-motion override, AA contrast.
CONVERSIONS	ONE LINK	MULTI-PATH	Task-oriented checklists and well-placed CTAs move students toward the program index, requirements, and contacts.
ACCESSIBILITY	BASIC	STRONG	Full keyboard operation, live-region progress announcements, screen-reader-friendly labels and semantics.
UI	PLAIN	ON-BRAND	KU palette, United Sans display type, "Fire & Ice" interactive accents, and signature offset-shadow buttons.

Ratings are our qualitative assessment against the KU optimization framework, to be confirmed empirically in the tools on slides 9–11.

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Built for how people — and machines — read now

ANSWER-FIRST & FACTUALLY DENSE

Each section opens with a direct answer, then supports it with specifics — degree types, a requirements table, deadline definitions. Research on generative engines finds that content with direct answers, statistics, and citations earns materially higher visibility in AI responses.

Princeton / Georgia Tech GEO study (KDD 2024): citations, quotations, and statistics raised AI visibility ~30–40%.

SEMANTIC CHUNKING

Every step and every FAQ is a self-contained unit an engine can lift without surrounding context. Short paragraphs and clean H2→H3→H4 structure make extraction reliable.

Pages cited in AI Overviews score ~20% better on heading hierarchy and structure (industry analysis, 2026).

QUESTION-SHAPED FOR ANSWER ENGINES

The FAQ mirrors the exact phrasing students use with Google, ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Gemini: deadlines, test requirements, recommendation counts, faculty outreach. This is the language of "query fan-out," where an AI breaks a question into sub-queries and retrieves the best-matching answer.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

AI-referred website sessions grew **527%** in the first five months of 2025, and AI Overviews increasingly cite sources that are *not* top-10 organic results. Being structured and extractable is how we earn those citations.

Previsible 2025 AI Traffic Report; Ahrefs AI Overview citation analysis (2026).

THE SCHEMA, HONESTLY

What our structured data does — and what it no longer does

We implemented four schema types in one JSON-LD graph. It is important we set expectations correctly, because Google has changed what these types produce.

THE REALITY OF RICH RESULTS

- **HowTo** rich results were deprecated in September 2023 and no longer appear in Google Search.
- **FAQ** rich results were removed on **May 7, 2026**; the Search Console FAQ report and Rich Results Test support sunset in mid-2026.
- Both remain **valid Schema.org types**, and Google confirms it still **parses** them to understand pages. Unused structured data does not harm Search.

WHERE THE VALUE LIVES NOW

- Google's own guidance: **no special schema is required** for AI Overviews or AI Mode, but structured data **should match the visible content** — which ours does exactly.
- FAQ-structured content is associated with markedly higher inclusion in AI answers across the industry; the visible Q&A does the load-bearing work, schema reinforces it.
- Breadcrumb schema still produces a standard rich result; speakable supports voice answers.

Our position: we treat schema as low-cost reinforcement of strong, visible, answer-first content — not as a magic switch. The honest evidence on schema-to-AI-citation is mixed, so we lead with content quality and let the markup help where it can.

Sources: Google Search Central (HowTo/FAQ deprecation notices, 2023 and 2026); Google AI features structured-data guidance; Search Engine Journal; industry GEO analyses (2026).

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

How the block earns the 20s → 45s lift

Average engagement time only rises when there is a reason to stay and act. Each mechanic below is a deliberate, natural dwell driver — not a gimmick.

MECHANIC	WHAT IT DOES	WHY IT LIFTS ENGAGEMENT TIME
PROGRESS CHECKLIST	Eleven checkable steps with a live progress bar that persists across visits.	Gives students a task to complete; the sense of progress and the saved state pull them through and bring them back.
EXPANDABLE DETAIL	"What this involves" panels reveal the requirements table, degree types, and outreach guidance on demand.	Each open is an interaction GA4 can register; deeper reading raises active time without cluttering the first view.
REUSABLE EMAIL	A ready-to-adapt faculty outreach email with one-click copy.	Genuinely useful utility that turns a passive read into a completed action students take with them.
ANIMATED COUNTERS	Key facts (100+ departments, GRE code 6871) count up when scrolled into view.	Draws the eye down the page and rewards scrolling, encouraging continued exploration.
REAL FAQ	Six questions answered in the student's own words.	Answers the follow-up questions on-page, so students stay here instead of leaving to search again.

Engaged session = 10s+, a conversion event, or 2+ page/screen views (Google GA4). The checklist, panel opens, and copy action each create qualifying interactions.

UX • WCAG • PERFORMANCE

Inclusive by construction, light by design

ACCESSIBILITY & WCAG 2.1 AA

- Native checkboxes and labels — full keyboard and screen-reader support for free
- ARIA disclosure pattern (`aria-expanded` / `aria-controls`) on every panel and FAQ
- Progress announced through a polite live region; progress bar exposes value to assistive tech
- Visible focus outlines, AA-contrast text, and a full `prefers-reduced-motion` override
- No inline event handlers; all behavior is attached in one vanilla script

PERFORMANCE & LOAD

- One self-contained block: a single scoped stylesheet and one small vanilla-JS module — no jQuery, no framework, no external requests
- All content ships in the server-rendered HTML; JavaScript only enhances, so AI crawlers and no-JS users still get everything
- Counters initialize lazily via IntersectionObserver — no work until scrolled into view
- Replacing three large images with text reduces image payload and speeds content render
- Zero-specificity fallbacks let the live KU theme win, avoiding layout conflicts

CKEditor-safe: the block avoids the mutation traps we have hit before — no empty spans, no `<noscript>`, no split-prone nested spans — and every DOM write is null-guarded so a single paste renders reliably.

How we track this in GA4, Search Console, Ahrefs, and Clarity

First, the key expectation: the program/HowTo and FAQ schema we added **do not generate a dedicated Search Console "Enhancements" report**. There is no single dashboard that says "schema is working." We measure it indirectly, through four signals we already have the tools to read.

SIGNAL	WHAT IT TELLS US	PRIMARY TOOL & WHERE WE LOOK
ENGAGEMENT LIFT	Are students staying and acting on the page?	**GA4** → Reports > Engagement > Pages and screens; filter to this URL and watch average engagement time, engaged sessions, and event counts.
AI REFERRAL TRAFFIC	Are LLMs surfacing and sending us traffic? (GEO win)	**GA4** → Acquisition > Traffic acquisition; segment Session source for chatgpt.com, perplexity.ai, gemini.google.com, copilot.microsoft.com.
SEARCH VISIBILITY	Are impressions, CTR, and position improving on this page?	**GSC** → Performance; filter by Page, compare before/after, and split branded vs. non-branded with a query regex.
ANSWER OWNERSHIP	Are we capturing snippets and AI citations? (AEO win)	**Ahrefs** → Rank Tracker (tag this URL) and Organic keywords; watch SERP-feature captures and non-branded movement.
ON-PAGE BEHAVIOR	Do the new interactions actually get used?	**Clarity** → filter recordings/heatmaps to this URL; watch scroll depth, panel/checklist clicks, and rage/dead clicks.

Exactly where to click in each tool

GA4 — ENGAGEMENT & AI TRAFFIC

- **Engagement:** Reports > Engagement > Pages and screens → set dimension to "Page path" and search our URL. Track **average engagement time** as the headline number against our 44–52s band.
- **AI traffic:** Reports > Acquisition > Traffic acquisition → add Session source; build a comparison for the AI hostnames. Many AI tools strip the referrer and arrive as **direct**, so watch direct + branded lift together.
- **Tie to leads:** layer our RFI / apply events on the same view to connect engagement to action.

SEARCH CONSOLE — THE SEO/AEO SIDE

- Performance > Search results → filter **Page** = this URL; compare a 28-day window before and after launch for impressions, clicks, CTR, and average position.
- Add a **Query regex** (kansas | jayhawk | \bku\b) to separate branded from non-branded and spot brand lift.
- Use **URL Inspection > Test live URL** to confirm the JSON-LD is valid and eligible — even though no aggregate FAQ/HowTo report exists.

AHREFS — RANKINGS & SERP FEATURES

- Rank Tracker: tag this URL; watch position change and the **SERP features** column for featured-snippet and "People Also Ask" captures.
- Site Explorer > Organic keywords: filter to "SERP features where target ranks" to confirm answer ownership over time.

MICROSOFT CLARITY — THE PROOF OF BEHAVIOR

- Filter recordings and heatmaps to this URL.
- Confirm students reach the checklist and FAQ (scroll depth), open the panels (click maps), and hit no friction (rage/dead clicks).
- This is our qualitative check that the dwell drivers are actually being used.

READING THE RESULTS RESPONSIBLY

Our measurement timeline

Schema and content changes need time to be re-crawled, indexed, and ingested by AI systems. We set the baseline first and judge results on the right horizon — week-one flat numbers tell us nothing.

Day 0

Capture a 28–30 day baseline in GA4 and GSC. Annotate the launch date in our reporting doc.

Weeks 1–3

Validate in Clarity that the interactions are used; confirm schema is valid in GSC URL Inspection. Engagement time should start moving first.

Weeks 6–8

Search impressions, CTR, SERP features, and any AI-referral traffic become readable. This is when we compare against baseline.

Primary

Average engagement time on this URL (GA4)

Primary

Impressions, CTR & position (GSC)

Secondary

SERP-feature captures (Ahrefs)

Secondary

AI-referral sessions & conversions (GA4)

Owner alignment: these map directly to our 2026 Web Reporting Framework — Discoverability/Search, Engagement/Conversion, and Measurement/Attribution — so this page rolls up into the reporting we already run monthly.

BEYOND THE CODED BLOCK

Recommendations for the rest of the page

These were out of scope for this build but would compound the gains. We can take them on next.

SECTION	OPPORTUNITY	RECOMMENDED MOVE
HERO "PLANNING TO APPLY"	Intro is warm but not answer-first or keyword-rich.	Open with a one-sentence direct answer ("Applying to a KU graduate program takes three steps…") to feed snippets and AI summaries.
"TAKE THE NECESSARY TESTS"	Three static cards; GRE/GMAT/English links leave the site immediately.	Add a short "Is my program test-optional?" line and keep the GRE code (6871) visible; consider the same disclosure pattern for parity.
"GET STARTED" CTA	Strong action, but isolated from the planning context.	Reinforce with a microcopy line on what happens after applying (review, funding, next steps) to reduce hesitation.
PAGE METADATA	Title and description are solid; no page-level Article/WebPage graph beyond our block.	Ensure the page title's primary keyword ("graduate application steps") is mirrored in the H1 and first paragraph.
INTERNAL LINKING	Links point outward to portals; few contextual cross-links to program pages.	Add contextual links to high-intent program and funding pages to spread authority and keep students on-site.

EVIDENCE BASE

Sources & references

— **Google Search Central** — "Changes to HowTo and FAQ rich results" (2023) and FAQ structured-data deprecation notice (May 2026). developers.google.com/search

— **Google AI features guidance** — structured data for AI Overviews/AI Mode (no special markup; must match visible content).

— **Princeton & Georgia Tech** — "GEO: Generative Engine Optimization," KDD 2024 (citations/quotes/statistics raise AI visibility ~30–40%).

— **Carnegie** — 2024 Higher-Ed SEO Benchmarks Report (organic = 53% of engaged sessions; 61% engagement rate).

— **EAB** — GA4 engagement-rate study, ~100 institutions (organic visitors ~2× time on site).

— **circle S studio** — GA4 engagement benchmarks, Jan 2025 data (~44s average engagement time for research-style sites).

— **Databox** — GA4 industry benchmarks (education runs longer sessions).

— **Previsible** — 2025 AI Traffic Report (AI-referred sessions +527%, Jan–May 2025).

— **Ahrefs** — AI Overview citation analysis, 2026 (declining overlap between top-10 organic and AI citations).

— **Search Engine Journal; Frase; industry GEO/AEO analyses** — FAQ schema and AI-citation behavior (2026).

— **KU internal** — 2026 Web Reporting & Planning framework; KU optimization metaprompt; KU Brand Center typography and elements.

Figures cited from third-party studies reflect each source's methodology and sample; we treat them as directional benchmarks, not guarantees. No one can promise placement in AI answers — our approach is to maximize the signals that make citation and ranking more likely, then measure honestly.