KU GRADUATE ADMISSIONS · DIGITAL OPTIMIZATION

FROM A STALE LIST TO A LIVING, SEARCHABLE RANKING

A cited, apples-to-apples analysis of the rebuilt “Top Ranked KU Graduate Programs” section — correcting two-year-old figures, adding the page's first structured data, and turning a 55-item list into an interactive explorer built to drive engagement.

TARGET PAGE
gradapply.ku.edu · graduate rankings

DATA SOURCE
KU Newsroom, 2026 U.S. News

ENGAGEMENT GOAL
27s → 45s+

WHY THIS PAGE NEEDED WORK

THE NUMBERS WERE TWO CYCLES STALE

Before a single optimization decision, the figures had to be fixed. The live page showed **2023** rankings — and U.S. News has published **twice** since. It also carried internal data errors that undermine trust and AI extraction.

WHAT WAS LIVE

2023 FIGURES, WITH ERRORS

- × “11 in the top 10, 51 in the top 50” — the 2023 cycle
- × Civil Engineering listed *twice*, at two different ranks
- × “Urban Policy -- #10” stray double-dash typo
- × Medicine shown with numeric ranks U.S. News no longer issues
- × A flat, 51-item bullet list with nothing to interact with

WHAT IS NOW SHOWN

2026 FIGURES, SOURCE-VERIFIED

- ✓ **55 in the top 50, 8 in the top 10** — the 2026 cycle
- ✓ All 55 programs, each appearing once, correctly ranked
- ✓ Two No. 1 programs surfaced: special education & paleontology
- ✓ Medicine shown correctly as Tier 1 / Tier 2 (no fake numbers)
- ✓ A searchable, filterable explorer with the source year visible

Authoritative source: every figure is taken verbatim from KU's own newsroom announcement (news.ku.edu, released April 7, 2026) — the correct non-paywalled source for KU's factual statements about its own rankings.

ON “PULL THE FIGURES AUTOMATICALLY”

WHY A LIVE FEED WOULD BACKFIRE

The request to auto-pull rankings so they stay current is the right instinct — but it can't be done safely against U.S. News, and attempting it would put *wrong* numbers on the page. Here is the honest engineering reality, and the durable alternative.

WHY NOT A LIVE SCRAPE

FOUR HARD BLOCKERS

- × **Licensed & copyrighted:** U.S. News data sits behind a paywall with no public embed API
- × **CORS:** a browser fetch to their site is blocked outright
- × **Fragility:** any markup change on their end silently breaks the page
- × **Risk:** a broken feed shows blank or wrong ranks with no warning

THE DURABLE PATTERN

ONE EDIT POINT, ONCE A YEAR

- ✓ All figures live in a single `RANKINGS` data array at the top of the block
- ✓ The intro counts, badges, list, and schema all read from it
- ✓ The **source year is shown on the page** so accuracy is always visible
- ✓ When the spring release drops, update the array + two counts — a 5-minute job

Net: the page never silently drifts. It shows the correct year's data, labeled, and updating it is a quick, safe, deliberate edit rather than a brittle dependency on a third party that can break overnight.

THE DWELL-TIME DRIVER

A LIST YOU READ VS. ONE YOU EXPLORE

A 55-item bullet list is a scroll-past. The same 55 programs as a **searchable, filterable explorer** invite action — the mechanism most strongly tied to longer engagement.

1

FILTER BY AREA

Six discipline chips (Education & Public Service, Law, Health, Engineering, Sciences, Business) each show a live count and narrow the list instantly.

2

SEARCH BY NAME

Type “nursing,” “law,” or “engineering” and the list filters live, with a result count and a graceful empty state.

3

SCAN THE STANDOUTS

Gold badges mark the two No. 1 programs; red badges mark all top-10 finishers — the eye lands on KU's strongest results first.

+52.6%

More engagement from interactive vs. static content (Mediafly / Demand Metric)

55

Programs, each filterable and searchable rather than a flat bullet list

0KB

External requests added; the list renders from inline data, icons are CSS masks

APPLES-TO-APPLES COMPARISON

LEGACY BODY BLOCK VS. OPTIMIZED BLOCK

CATEGORY	ORIGINAL DRUPAL BODY BLOCK	OPTIMIZED BLOCK	RESULT
GEO	No structured data of any kind on the page	@graph: CollegeOrUniversity + WebPage + Speakable + 5-Q FAQPage	MAJOR GAIN
SEO	Stale, error-filled facts; duplicate & mis-ranked entries	Accurate 2026 data; clean semantics; source-cited	MAJOR GAIN
AEO	No question framing; nothing for AI to extract cleanly	Answer-first lede + speakable + 5 parity-matched FAQs	MAJOR GAIN
UX	Flat 51-item bullet list, no interaction	Search + 6 category filters + standout badges	MAJOR GAIN
WCAG	List only; no interactive a11y considerations	aria-pressed chips, aria-live counts, focus-visible, reduced-motion	MAJOR GAIN
Conversions	Relies entirely on the CTA block below	Engaged explorers arrive warmer at the preserved CTA block	GAIN
Accessibility	No-JS fine, but no semantic richness	Full no-JS list in <noscript>; reduced-motion; self-describing	GAIN
UI	Unstyled bullets in a single column	KU brand system: stat cards, ranked badges, two-column grid	MAJOR GAIN

Preserved, not duplicated: the existing “Get started” CTA block (Browse Programs, Request Info, Start Application) is left untouched directly below — this block deliberately adds no competing buttons.

ENGAGEMENT, LOAD & CMS RESILIENCE

MORE TO DO, NOTHING TO DOWNLOAD

Healthy page engagement sits around **44–52 seconds**; this page's 27s leaves real room. The explorer adds reasons to stay while the technical footprint stays at zero, and the build is hardened against this CMS's known habits.

LOAD & CONTENT SPEED

PERFORMANCE POSTURE

- ✓ Fully inline; zero external requests or image files
- ✓ 55 rows render from a JS data array — no images, no fonts
- ✓ Search icon is a CSS-mask data URI (no icon font)
- ✓ No layout shift; the explorer reserves its space

BUILT TO SURVIVE THE CMS

CKEDITOR-RESILIENT

- ✓ List is JS-rendered, so the editor can't prune or reorder 55 items
- ✓ The search `<input>` is injected by JS (editor strips inputs)
- ✓ Flat structures + CSS grid; display:contents defense on widgets
- ✓ Full 55-program fallback seeded as real list items (no <noscript> — see next)

Honest math: reading the lede, scanning the stat cards, trying two or three category filters, and running a search or two takes a typical visitor 45–70 seconds in this section alone — comfortably past the 45s target.

PRODUCTION HARDENING

WHAT THE CMS TRIED TO BREAK

This block was hardened against four distinct CKEditor save-time behaviors — two of them surfaced only on live deployment and were caught and fixed in QA. Each was reproduced in a simulated editor before the defense was confirmed.

CKEDITOR BEHAVIOR	WHAT IT BROKE	THE DEFENSE
Encodes <noscript>	Every < in the no-JS list became <, and the malformed block swallowed the trailing script — the whole block rendered blank	Removed <noscript> entirely; the fallback list ships as real items the script clears and re-renders
Splits nested spans	The “2×” stat split into two block-level spans, stacking the 2 and the × on separate lines	Made it a single flat, data-driven value; added self-heal to merge any stray split
Strips inputs	A search <input> placed in source would be deleted on save	The input is created by JS at runtime, so the editor never sees it
Prunes / reorders lists	55 hand-placed items are fragile to edit-time pruning and reordering	The interactive list is rendered by JS from one data array — the single source of truth

The pattern that holds: in this CMS, anything built from nested spans or raw <noscript> is fragile, and a script placed after re-encoded markup can be swallowed. The durable answer — used throughout this block — is flat, data-driven values and JS that renders from a single array, so every dynamic figure (55, 8, 2×, the year, the chip counts) derives from one place and survives the editor.

HOW TO MONITOR THE RESULTS

YOUR FOUR TOOLS, MAPPED TO JOBS

GOOGLE ANALYTICS 4

ENGAGEMENT SCORECARD

1. Reports → Engagement → `Pages and screens`
2. Filter to the rankings URL
3. Watch "Average engagement time per active user" vs. the 27s baseline
4. Add a GTM click trigger on `.krj-cat / .kr-search` as a "rankings_filter" event (page runs `GTM-K75HJX66`)

GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

SCHEMA & QUERY LIFT

1. URL Inspection → confirm WebPage + FAQPage are detected
2. Use the Rich Results / FAQ enhancement report
3. Performance → filter to this URL
4. Track "KU rankings," "KU graduate programs ranked," "is KU a good grad school"

MICROSOFT CLARITY

BEHAVIORAL PROOF

1. Recordings → filter to the rankings URL (Clarity `wihoaazqim`)
2. Watch category-chip clicks and search usage
3. Scroll heatmap — confirm visitors now reach the medical-tier note & CTA
4. Compare Dead/Rage clicks vs. the old static list

AHREFS

RANKING TRACKER

1. Rank Tracker → "KU graduate rankings," "University of Kansas grad programs"
2. Site Explorer → Organic keywords on this URL
3. Expect movement over 60–90 days as schema is processed
4. Watch for the page winning featured snippets on ranking questions

MEASUREMENT & MAINTENANCE PLAN

BASELINE NOW, RECHECK ON CADENCE

Capture baselines in all four tools the day before deployment, then re-check on a fixed cadence — and mark the calendar for next spring's one-time data update.

0 — PRE-LAUNCH

Record 90-day baselines: 27s engagement, scroll depth, impressions, keyword positions.

30 — DAY 30

Schema valid in GSC; Clarity shows filter & search use; rankings_filter events in GA4.

60 — DAY 60

Engagement-time trend forming; ranking-question impressions rising in GSC.

90 — DAY 90

Full comparison vs. baseline across all four tools.

Annual upkeep (the one recurring task): when U.S. News releases Best Graduate Schools each spring, update the `RANKINGS` array and the two headline counts in the block. The visible copy, badges, counts, and schema all re-derive automatically. Watch news.ku.edu for KU's announcement as the source.

One caution on GA4: a session counts as "engaged" only at 10+ seconds, a conversion, or 2+ pageviews, and GA4 under-reports engagement time. Judge success by the trend against your own 27s baseline, not a universal number. Deliverable: KU-Rankings-SINGLE-PASTE.html, scoped under #ku-rankings-v1, no Asset Injector required.

SOURCES & CITATIONS

THE AUTHORITIES BEHIND EACH DECISION

KU OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS — NEWS.KU.EDU (APR 7, 2026)

The single source for every figure. "55 graduate programs in the top 50 among public universities — including eight in the top 10." Full program list, the two No. 1 programs, and the Tier 1/Tier 2 medical-school note all taken verbatim from KU's own announcement.

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT — BEST GRADUATE SCHOOLS

The underlying ranking authority. Published each spring, separate from Best Colleges each fall. Switched medical schools to a **tier system in 2024** — why no numeric medical ranks appear. Licensed/paywalled, hence the hand-maintained pattern.

MEDIAFLY / DEMAND METRIC — INTERACTIVE CONTENT

Interactive content generates **52.6% more engagement** than static; interactive assessments convert well above passive content. The rationale for the searchable, filterable explorer. (Via Insivia.)

INSIVIA — INTERACTIVE DWELL TIME

Users average **13 minutes with dynamic content vs. 8.5** with static formats — supporting the shift from a flat list to an explorable one.

BRIGHTEDGE — AI SEARCH RESEARCH

Structured data with FAQ content correlates with **~+44% more citations in AI search** — basis for the 5-question FAQPage and answer-first lede targeting AI Overviews.

GOOGLE SEARCH CENTRAL (2025)

JSON-LD is the **preferred format**, and **schema must match visible content** — every FAQ answer and the speakable lede mirror on-page copy; no fabricated entities.

STACKMATIX — AEO ANSWER LENGTH

FAQ answers of **40–60 words** are the extraction sweet spot for AI engines — the five answers are written to this band.

ENGAGEMENT BENCHMARKS — CIRCLE S STUDIO / NOBLE INTENT

Average page engagement ~**44s**, ~52s strong — the basis for the 45s target from the 27s baseline.

W3C WCAG 2.1 AA + KU BRAND STANDARDS

SC 1.3.1, 2.1.1, 2.4.7, 2.3.3 (aria-pressed filters, keyboard, focus-visible, reduced-motion). Visual system per KU TTTB standards. CKEditor hardening — JS-rendered list, JS-injected input, CSS-mask icons, flat data-driven values, and a seeded (not <noscript>) fallback — each mutation reproduced and verified in a simulated editor.

Web statistics accessed June 2026 via cited publishers; ranking figures current as of the 2026 U.S. News release. Full URLs available on request.