State of Engagement in Higher Ed

A full academic year of real student messaging across 109 community and technical colleges — 10.7 million recipients, 646,423 conversations. Not surveys. Not self-reports. What students and staff actually did.

mongoose

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Community and Technical College Students Reach Out in the Cracks of a Full Life

They do this on a lunch break, after a shift, before the kids are up. They reach out in greater numbers, and across more hours, than any advising or support team can realistically cover. That gap — between what students need and what staff can give — runs underneath every number in this report.

Across those 109 colleges, we spent a year learning what actually moves students to engage. The clearest lever is also the simplest. A few small choices — whether you ask a question, whether you add a link, how short you keep the first message — decide whether it engages a student or disappears into a phone.

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Key Findings

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All figures drawn from the 2024-2025 academic year dataset.
Each finding links to the relevant section for detail.

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The Capacity Gap

The sector was never staffed for this.

Community-college advising runs to 441 students per advisor nationally — and past 1,000:1 at many colleges — so the typical student sees an advisor once or twice a year. In the messaging data, a single shared inbox can carry 2,200 students, and 4,000+ at the extreme. (NACADA / CCRC)

Demand doesn't keep office hours.

Students reach out around the clock — between shifts, after the kids are down, before an early start. Staffing runs from nine to five.

Nearly 1 in 10 conversations gets no reply at all.

9.1% overall, and 18.8% for the communication issues that can block a student's semester.

The gap is structural, not effort.

Never enough hours, or enough people.

What Makes Students Engage

A reply is the clearest sign a student is engaging. Here's what earns more of them.

Ask a question.

A question lifts the reply rate 3.6x (7.9% vs. 2.2%).

Links lower replies.

A message with a link and no question drops to 1.0%; no link plus a question reaches 9.1%.

Shorter wins for the open.

Messages of 101–150 characters perform best; the average runs 221, above the sweet spot. Once a student engages, length can grow with the context.

Conversational beats broadcast.

Smart Messages earn 4.6x the reply rate of standard outreach (11.1% vs. 2.4%) — the biggest single lift in the report — and nearly three-quarters of colleges already use them.

Timing isn't one-size-fits-all.

1 p.m. (4.7%) and mid-morning (4.0–4.1%) are the peak windows, Monday and Tuesday lead the week, and engagement stays steady across weekdays.

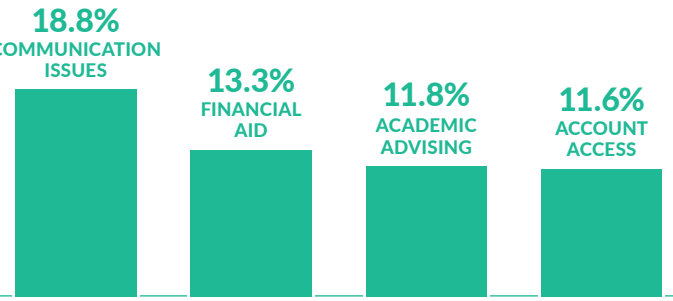
What Students Are Talking About

Registration and holds are the #1 thing students message about.

15.6% of all conversations, more than admissions or financial aid. The operational barriers that can stop a semester before it starts.

The hardest conversations go unanswered most.

Communication issues (18.8% unresolved), financial aid (13.3%), academic advising (11.8%), and account access (11.6%) — the exact barriers to staying enrolled.



Students notice when it works.

Appreciation runs highest on scholarships, orientation, check-ins, and career guidance — the conversations that help a student take a clear next step.

Community college teams cover every student function in one stream — admissions, registration, financial aid, advising, orientation, and support — each with very different reply patterns. So an overall reply rate is only a starting point: what students are actually asking about, and how those conversations resolve, is where the real signal is.

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The Capacity Gap

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The capacity gap is simple: students reach out in greater numbers, and across more hours, than any individual staff member or team can support. It's been true for years, and the data just makes it impossible to ignore.

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The Sector Was Never Staffed for This

Community college advising runs to 441 students per advisor nationally — and past 1,000:1 at many colleges. At those caseloads, the average student sees an advisor once or twice a year. (NACADA / CCRC)

HIGH SCHOOL ASKS

1 teacher to know about **150 students**

COMMUNITY COLLEGE ASKS

1 advisor to know about **441 (and often more than 1,000) students**

Open-access admissions means there's no national applicant-per-officer benchmark for community colleges; the capacity crunch shows up in advising and front-line support instead.

Staff Inbox Load

Messaging is how these teams try to bridge that gap, and even the inboxes are overloaded. The table shows unique student contacts per shared inbox across the 2024-2025 year.

Community College Shared Inbox	
Median	204
P75	about 850
P90	2,200+
P95	4,000+

At the 90th percentile, one shared inbox carries 2,200+ students; at the 95th, 4,000+, often two or three staff members serving an entire college's advising and support function. The median looks workable; the upper end is the real picture for a meaningful share of colleges.

Off Hours

After 5 p.m., and on weekends, colleges go nearly silent, but students don't. Demand doesn't keep office hours, but answers do.

In fact, 17.2% of community college student messages arrive outside business hours — before 8 a.m., after 5 p.m., and on weekends.

The Structural Picture

Put it together, and the conclusion is hard to avoid. There have never been enough advisors to reach every student personally, or enough hours in the staffed day to answer them in time — and for a working-adult population, "in time" often means nights and weekends.

The cost shows up plainly: 9.1% of conversations get no staff response at all, rising to 18.8% for the communication issues that can block a student's semester. This isn't a motivation problem. The math has never worked.

This is not a failure of effort. It's a structural reality that has been there from the start — and the data makes it visible.

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Messaging Benchmarks

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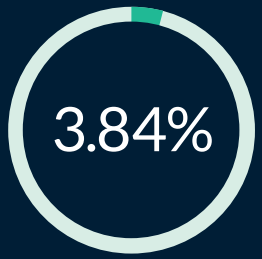
109 Institutions

547 Departments

2,166 Unique Users

10.7 Million Recipients

410,435 Replies



OVERALL REPLY RATE

Average outreach send: 156 recipients

Community college teams use text across every student-facing function:

admissions, registration, financial aid, advising, orientation, student life, and support. With 547 departments across 109 colleges, text is woven through how these institutions actually operate. And the pattern underneath the numbers is consistent: the outreach that works looks like a conversation, not a broadcast.

Smart Message Sends

2025 Report about 3,800 (2024 est.)

2026 Report **4,548**

Change **Up about 20%**

Methodology note: Year-over-year comparisons are directional. In 2025, community and technical colleges were reported within the broader dataset rather than as a separate segment, so this figure is estimated from 2024 data. The true 2025 total for this segment wasn't tracked in isolation.

Best Times to Engage

1 p.m.: (4.7%)

This is the top hour; mid-morning (10-11 a.m., 4.0-4.1%) is also strong.

Monday: (4.2%)

This leads, Tuesday (4.0%) close behind, and engagement holds steady across weekdays.

Saturday: (1.3%)

This is the low point — about 3x below Monday.

The steady weekday pattern reflects who these students are — fitting college into the rest of their lives. The 1 p.m. peak lines up with midday breaks between shifts or classes, when students have a few minutes to check their phones.

Message Length

4.3% Reply rate for 101-150 character messages, the top-performing length band for community colleges.

101-150 characters (4.3%) is the top band; 51-100 (3.9%) is close. The average message runs 221 characters, above the sweet spot, and 300+ bottoms out at 2.6%. Keep the opening short — once a student engages, length can grow with the context.

Smart Messages

11.1% vs. 2.4%

Smart Message vs. standard outreach reply rate — **4.6x lift**, the highest multiplier of any institution type in this dataset.

80 of 109 institutions (73%) now use Smart Messages.

Strong adoption, with meaningful room to grow.

Average Smart Message send reaches 379 recipients vs. 140 for standard sends.

Smart Messages cover more ground per send.

The 4.6x Smart Message lift is the highest of any institution type in the dataset. Community college students are especially responsive to conversational, question-driven outreach, which makes sense given what they're navigating. A message that invites a reply signals the institution is ready for a dialogue, not just broadcasting information.

The 4.6x lift reflects a specific structural approach that shows up consistently across high-performing community college group message sends:

- A named advisor or coach as the sender rather than an institutional account
- A trigger tied to what a student has or hasn't done (not yet registered, missed orientation, flagged by an early-alert system)
- A single direct question as the ask — menu-driven sequences and channel-choice replies appear often

The sends that perform best invite a reply rather than deliver information and stop there. For community college students fitting education into the rest of their lives, a message that signals the institution is ready for a dialogue rather than broadcasting at them is the difference between a reply and silence.

Message Content: Questions and URLs

9.1% Reply rate for no-URL + question — the top-performing content combination for community colleges.

1.0% Reply rate for URL + no question — the worst-performing combination.

With a question: 7.9% vs. 2.2% without.

A 3.6x lift. The largest question multiplier of any institution type in this dataset.

URL + question: 1.4%.

The URL completely neutralizes the lift from asking a question.

URL suppression is universal.

There is no context in this dataset where including a link improves engagement.

Community college students respond to outreach that invites a conversation, not to messages that send them somewhere else. The 3.6x question lift is the strongest in the dataset. The URL finding holds universally: links pull students out of the conversation.

MMS vs. SMS

MMS (messages that include an image).

1.4% vs. SMS 2.6% — images reduce engagement. No uplift observed.

Smart Message + SMS.

11.1% — the ceiling for community college outbound performance.

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Conversation Analysis

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Based on 646,423 conversations across every team function at community and technical colleges. These teams cover the whole student journey in one stream — admissions, registration, financial aid, advising, orientation, and support — so an overall reply rate is only a starting point. What students are actually asking about, and how those conversations resolve, is where the real signal is.

9.1%

Overall unresolved rate — 9.1% of conversations received no staff response.

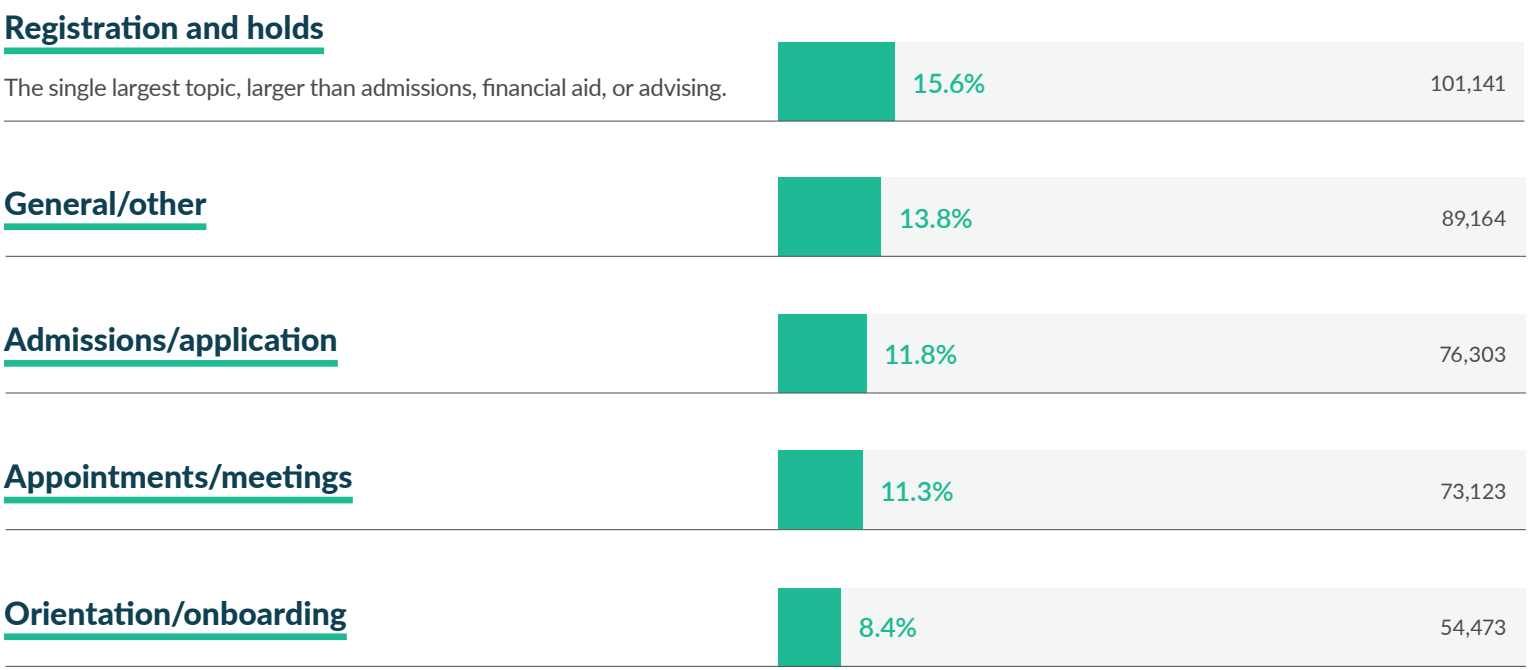
Engagement Depth and Reply Rate

Teams in the top reply-rate quartile generate **274.5 conversations per 1,000 recipients vs. 11.8** for the bottom quartile — a 23x gap. And quality moves with engagement, not against it: top-quartile teams run **7.9% unresolved and 9.4% frustration**, versus 16.5% and 18.9% at the bottom.

Reply rate isn't a vanity metric. Teams that earn more replies have more conversations and resolve them better. The correlation between reply rate and conversations per recipient is strong (Spearman r = 0.89) — more engagement consistently tracks with better outcomes.

What Students Are Talking About

Below are the most common topics across 646,423 conversations.



Registration and holds top the list — the operational barriers (course holds, incomplete records, deadlines) that can stop a semester before it starts.

Where Conversations Go Well

The topics with the lowest unresolved rates and highest appreciation are the ones that help a student take a clear next step:

Scholarships and Aid: 4.8% unresolved, 52.8% appreciation.

Students are grateful when financial guidance is clear and actionable.

Orientation/Onboarding: 5.4% unresolved, 47.9% appreciation.

Structured onboarding support earns strong appreciation. Students value knowing what to do next.

Check-ins: 6.0% unresolved, 54.8% appreciation.

Proactive student progress conversations are consistently well received.

Extracurriculars/Student Life.

6.3% unresolved, 66.9% positive emotion — the highest positive emotion rate of any topic.

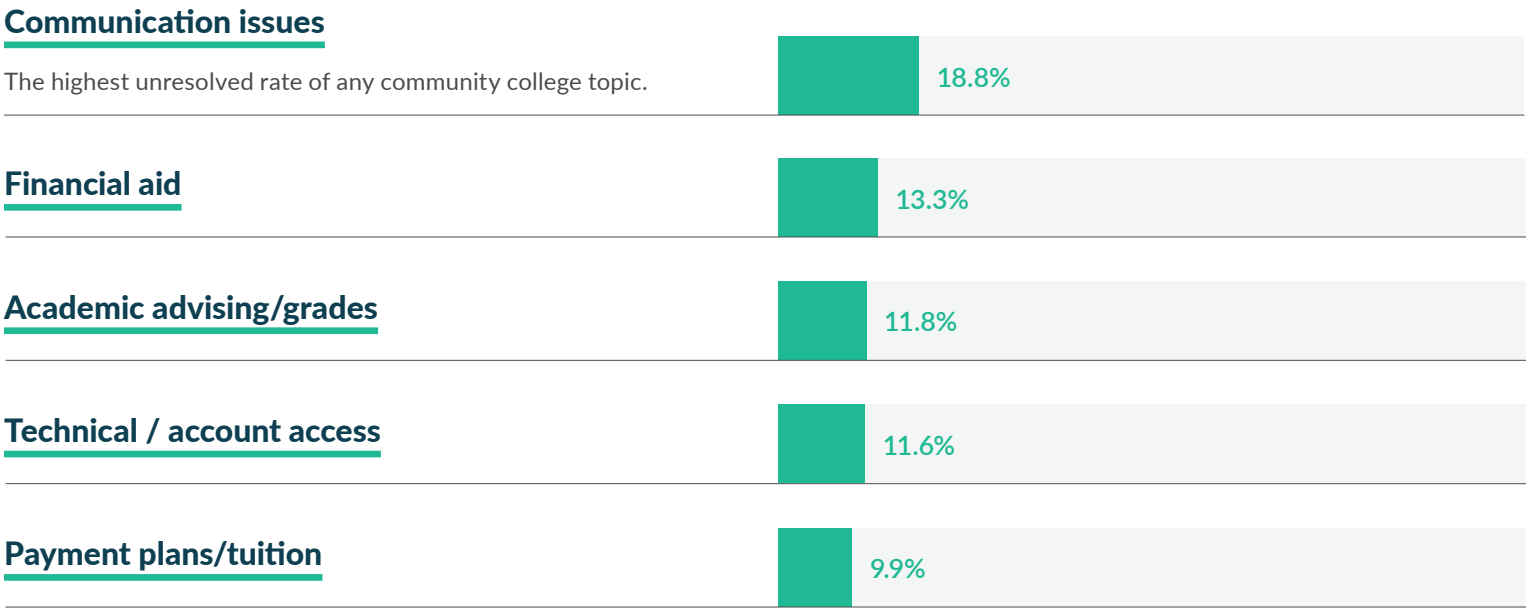
Career Guidance and Planning: 7.2% unresolved, 56.6% appreciation.

Students value career support, and these conversations resolve well.

Students notice when a message moves them forward:
finishing an orientation checklist, locking in a scholarship, confirming a meeting, or planning a career. These are progress moments.

Where Conversations Carry Friction

The highest unresolved rates cluster in the conversations that decide whether a student stays enrolled. These same topics also carry the most frustration and confusion in the data.



These aren't incidental frustrations. Account access blocks the portal, aid confusion threatens a package, a hold freezes registration — the exact moments a student decides whether to persist or stop out.

18.8% Communication Issues unresolved rate — the highest of any topic in this dataset.

13.3% Financial Aid unresolved rate — conversations about eligibility, deadlines, and required documents that don't reach a resolution.

Smart Message Quality Patterns

Teams that lean on Smart Messages show markedly better conversation outcomes.

5.7% unresolved and 6.7% frustration

versus

12.4% and 14.3% for teams that don't

and a 10.4% vs. 3.2% median reply rate.

(Correlation, not cause — teams already engaging well may also adopt Smart Messages more. But the gap is large and worth tracking as adoption grows.)

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Web Chat: Key Findings

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This is Web Chat

The on-site assistant students use directly on a college's website, around the clock, and a separate channel from text. Findings are consistent with prior years; volume is up slightly, and engagement rates are marginally lower.

47%

Chat conversations occurring outside institution business hours.

Nearly half of all community college Chat activity.

98%

Visitors who interact with AI-assisted Chat during off-hours.

Engagement is higher after hours than during them.

Engagement is higher in those windows than during business hours, not lower. Students who can't get through during the day find their way in the evening. This is the clearest evidence in the Chat data that automated support works at the hours community college students actually need it.

Only 6% escalate to a live person.

The vast majority are handled without a staff member.

30% of follow-up requests come from off-hours conversations.

Queued for staff the next day.

About 25% lead capture.

Name and contact info collected through Chat, with some tools over 50%.

The contrast with text is the point. On text, a message sent in the evening waits for the next morning; on Web Chat, nearly half of the demand arrives after hours and still gets handled. Same round-the-clock demand — very different coverage.

The one catch.

After-hours conversations that do need a person become next-day follow-up, which lands right back on the capacity question.

A Word From mongoose

Every number in this report comes from real conversations on Mongoose, the AI engagement platform 1,000+ higher ed institutions already trust. So we'll say plainly what the data shows.

Your team didn't fail.

The math never worked.

The hours students reach out have never matched the hours staff can answer, and no institution can hire its way across that gap.

Mongoose AI Agents close it. They handle routine inbound after hours, route the complex conversations to the right person before staff opens their inboxes, and make sure a student who texts at 11 p.m. doesn't talk themselves out of enrolling by Tuesday morning. Every agent hands off to a human, cleanly, the moment judgment is required.

Same team. More capacity. Better outcomes.

The Math Can Work Now

→ hellomongoose.com/mongoose-ai-agents

Want to See it In Action?

→ Book a demo at hellomongoose.com/book-a-demo

Mongoose is the sponsor of this report. All data in the preceding sections comes from community and technical colleges using the Mongoose platform.

Appendix Terminology

Resolution of Conversations

Every conversation in this dataset falls into one of three states: Resolved (the student's need was fully met), Responded (staff replied but the conversation remained open), or Unresolved (no staff response). 'Unresolved rate' is the primary quality metric throughout this report. It measures the percentage of conversations with no staff response — not the same as a conversation that was responded to but not yet fully resolved.

Smart Messages

Smart Messages are interactive, response-driven outreach built for two-way conversation. Unlike a standard outreach send, a Smart Message uses branching logic, response options, and personalization to prompt a specific reply. Throughout this report, 'Smart Messages' refers to this format, and 'standard outreach' refers to single-direction messages sent to multiple recipients without interactive branching.

Group Message Sends

Throughout this report, 'group message sends' refers to messages sent from Mongoose to two or more recipients at once (what has historically been called a 'batch send'). The term has been updated to more accurately reflect the targeted, advising-style outreach most teams are running, which differs meaningfully from the mass-broadcast model the word 'batch' implies.

Opt-Out Rates

Opt-out rates in this report are calculated per conversation, not per message. This differs from how industry benchmarks and platform dashboards typically calculate opt-out rates, which use total messages sent as the denominator. The conversation-based calculation produces higher percentages and should not be compared directly to industry-standard figures.

Reply Rate

The percentage of outgoing messages that received a reply — calculated as replies divided by total outgoing messages sent. This is the primary engagement metric for text outreach throughout this report.

Chat Engagement Rate

Chat engagement rate measures the percentage of website visitors who actively interact with the Web Chat assistant beyond the initial prompt, meaning they respond to at least one question or branch in the conversation.

Incoming-to-Outgoing Ratio

New in 2026. Measures student inbound message volume relative to institutional outbound volume. Calculated as incoming messages divided by outgoing messages, expressed as a percentage. A higher ratio after hours means student inbound is elevated relative to institutional outbound, indicating unmet demand, not simply lower activity on both sides.

Appendix Methodology

Data Sources and Integrity

Mongoose prioritizes data security and privacy. All messaging data is aggregated and anonymized before analysis. No personally identifiable information is shared or made public. Institutions maintain complete control over their own communications data.

Dataset

Metric	Figure	Notes
Institutions	109	Community and technical colleges
Departments	547	Highest of any segment in the dataset
Unique users	2,166	
Total messages	12.3M	
Unique Students Contacted	2.3M	
Replies	410,435	
Overall reply rate	3.84%	

How We Define a Text Conversation

A conversation is a series of text messages exchanged between a recipient and a staff member within a specific inbox over a rolling 3-day window. Conversations inactive for three days are treated as new conversations if re-initiated.

Conversation Dataset Scope

Metric	Figure	Notes
Total conversations analyzed	646,423	All team functions at 2-year institutions
Teams with reply + conversation data	530	Matched at institution + department level
Teams after threshold	318	Minimum: 1,000 recipients and 100 conversations
Overall unresolved rate	9.1%	9.1% of conversations received no staff response

Opt-out classified conversations are excluded from all conversation metrics. Topic rankings use a minimum of 1,000 conversations to avoid small-sample artifacts. Correlations use Spearman's rank correlation and are exploratory, not causal claims.

Appendix Frequently Asked Questions

What is the average reply rate for community college text messaging in 2026?

Community and technical colleges in this dataset average a 3.84% overall reply rate. Smart Messages (interactive, response-driven texts) generate an 11.1% reply rate compared to 2.4% for standard outreach, a 4.6x lift that is the highest of any institution type in this dataset.

What time of day do community college students respond to text messages?

Reply rates peak at 1 p.m. (4.7%) and are strong throughout the 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. window. Monday and Tuesday lead the week. Saturday is near-zero. Unlike 4-year residential campuses, community college engagement is fairly steady across weekdays, reflecting a working-adult population with less predictable schedules.

How do Smart Messages improve engagement at 2-year institutions?

Smart Messages generate 4.6x the reply rate of standard outreach at community colleges, the highest multiplier of any institution type. 73% of institutions now use them. High-performing teams drive this lift through a few repeatable structural patterns: sending from a named advisor or coach rather than an institutional account, triggering messages based on what a student has or hasn't done, and asking a single direct question rather than leading with information. Menu-driven sequences and channel-choice replies appear consistently in the highest-performing group message sends.

What student topics go most often unresolved at community and technical colleges?

Communication Issues have the highest unresolved rate at 18.8%. Financial Aid follows at 13.3%, Academic Advising at 11.8%, and Technical Issues at 11.6%. These are conversations about the barriers that directly determine whether a student stays enrolled: registration holds, aid eligibility, and account access.

How much of student engagement at community colleges happens outside business hours?

A meaningful share. After 5 p.m., student inbound messaging runs at 2.4x its daytime rate. 47% of Chat conversations arrive outside business hours. Before 8 a.m., students are also active, particularly for time-sensitive questions about registration and financial aid deadlines.

What is the most common conversation topic at 2-year institutions?

Registration and Holds is the single largest topic at 15.6% of all conversations (101,141 conversations), larger than admissions, financial aid, or advising. These are conversations about the operational barriers that can stop a student's semester before it starts: course holds, incomplete records, and late registration fees.

How do reply rates at community colleges compare to 4-year institutions?

Community college overall reply rates (3.84%) are comparable to 4-year Enrollment teams (3.66%). Smart Message lift is highest at community colleges (4.6x) versus any 4-year team. The biggest difference is context: community college teams cover every student function in one dataset, while 4-year data is segmented by department (Enrollment, Student Success, Advancement).