State of Engagement in Higher Ed

Drawn from a full academic year of messaging data across Text and Web Chat at 411 colleges and universities. Every number in this report comes from actual conversations on the Mongoose platform. No surveys, no projections, no estimates.

mongoose

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A full academic year of real student messaging: 53.4 million messages across Text and Web Chat at 411 colleges and universities. Not surveys. Not self-reports. What students and staff actually did.

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This report goes deeper than reply rates. We're surfacing what students are actually talking about, which topics carry the most frustration, which conversations go unresolved, and what the combined picture of after-hours demand and inbox caseloads reveals about capacity. The data points to a structural gap that has been there from the beginning. The final section names it plainly.

Key Questions This Report Answers

- When are students most engaged, and when are they reaching out with no one there?
- What messaging choices (channel, length, time of day) drive the highest (and lowest) engagement rates?
- What are the topics students are raising in their messages?
- What is the sentiment around those topics: appreciation, confusion, or frustration?
- Of those conversations, how many are left unresolved?
- Where is staff capacity most strained, and what does the data reveal about after-hours coverage gaps?

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Key Findings

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The Capacity Gap

The sector was never staffed for this.

One advisor for ~286 students, one admissions officer for ~1,000 applications, one staffer for 25,000 alumni: national averages, not outliers. In the messaging data, single inboxes hold up to 3,268 students and up to 8,359 donor contacts in Advancement.

Demand doesn't keep office hours.

Students reach out around the clock; staffing runs from nine to five.

Nearly 1 in 10 conversations gets no reply at all.

9.3% for Enrollment and 8.8% for Student Success. Within Student Success, Mental Health conversations fare worse still, at 10.6% unresolved, the most sensitive topic in the dataset and the one where an unresolved conversation carries the highest cost.

The gap is structural, not effort.

Never enough hours, or enough people.

Engagement and Outcomes

More conversations track with better outcomes at every step of the funnel.

Enrollment yield climbs **from 3% to 94%**, campus visits **from 4% to 73%**, and FAFSA completion **from 4% to 94%** as conversation volume rises.

Correlation, not causation, but steep and consistent across 304,913 students and three entry years.

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 roughly doubles the reply rate — in every team, with no exceptions.

Links lower replies.

A URL reduces reply rate everywhere; there's no team or message type where a link helps.

Shorter wins for the open.

Messages of 51–100 characters earn about 4x the reply rate of messages over 250. Once a student engages, length can grow with the context.

Conversational beats broadcast.

Smart Messages outperform standard outreach everywhere, from 2.3x more replies in Enrollment to 4.1x in Student Success.

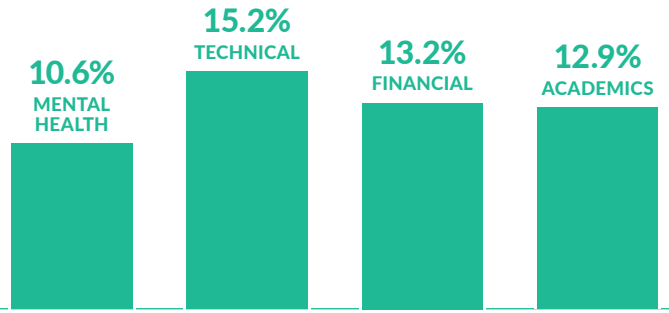
Timing isn't one-size-fits-all.

Enrollment peaks at 1 p.m., Student Success at 10 a.m., Advancement at 5 p.m., and on Sundays.

What Students Are Talking About

The hardest conversations go unanswered most.

Within Student Success, Mental Health (10.6% unresolved), Technical (15.2%), Financial (13.2%), and Academics (12.9%) carry the highest unresolved rates — the moments that most affect whether a student stays.



Students notice when it works.

Appreciation runs highest on topics like campus visits, student support, and donor stewardship — where a message helps someone move forward.

The conversation topic data, especially the unresolved rates across Mental Health, Technical, Financial, and Academics, may be the most actionable finding in this report.

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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

Long before texting, higher ed ran on ratios no team could personally serve:

Admissions

About 1,035 applications per officer at public four-year institutions. Files get read in 4–8 minutes.

(NACAC, 2019)

Advising

About 286 students per advisor at four-year publics (234 at privates). Under an hour of advising per student per year, against the 250:1 the Boyer 2030 Commission calls the realistic maximum.

(Tyton Partners, 2024)

Alumni

About 25,000 per engagement staffer. Roughly 80% never hear from anyone in a given year.

(VAESE / CASE, 2024)

HIGH SCHOOL ASKS

1 teacher to know about **150 students**

HIGHER ED ASKS

1 advisor to know about **286 students**

1 admissions officer to judge **1,000 students**

1 alumni staffer to engage **25,000 students**

These are national medians, measured by the sector's own associations. Definitions vary from benchmark to benchmark, and none is a target — they simply describe the load.

After Hours: When Students Reach Out

Across every team in this dataset, a meaningful share of student inbound messages arrives outside staffed hours. The table below shows the percentage of all student-initiated messages that came in before 8 a.m., after 5 p.m., or on weekends.

Team	Business Hours	Outside Business Hours
Enrollment	77.2%	22.8%
Student Success	81.6%	18.4%
Advancement	73.3%	26.7%
Combined (4-year)	77.3%	**22.7%**

Source: 2024-2025 inbound message volume by time window.
Outside business hours = before 8 a.m., after 5 p.m., and weekends.

22.7% of all 4-year student inbound messages arrive outside business hours — before 8 a.m., after 5 p.m., or on weekends.

Nearly 1 in 4 student messages arrives when no staff is there to answer it.

Across Advancement, that share climbs to more than 1 in 4. The hours students reach out and the hours staff can answer don't overlap. That cannot be solved by effort alone.

Staff Inbox Load

Messaging is how institutions try to bridge that gap, and the data shows that even the inboxes are overloaded. This table shows unique student or donor contacts per inbox across the 2024–2025 year. The medians look workable; the upper percentiles are where the math breaks.

Team / Inbox Type	Median	P75	P90	P95
Enrollment Shared Inbox	303	1,101	3,268	8,093
Enrollment Individual	218	955	2,331	3,502
Student Success Shared	168	598	1,266	2,287
Student Success Individual	80	262	578	1,110
Advancement Shared	2,150	4,607	**8,359**	13,569

At some institutions, one inbox answers to thousands of students.

3,268 contacts in Enrollment, 8,359 in Advancement. That's well past what a team can reach personally and on time. And these aren't outliers: they represent a meaningful share of institutions in the dataset.

The Structural Picture

Put it together, and the conclusion is hard to avoid.

There have never been enough people to answer every student personally, or enough hours in the staffed day to reach them in time, and the sector's own staffing ratios show the shortfall predates any technology.

The cost shows up plainly in the messaging data: nearly 1 in 10 conversations gets no staff response at all: 9.3% in Enrollment and 8.8% in Student Success. The sharpest gap sits within Student Success: Mental Health conversations go unresolved 10.6% of the time, the most sensitive topic in the dataset, and the one where an unanswered message costs the most.

Your team didn't fail.

The math never worked.

Community college data on this topic appears separately in the companion report. The pattern is consistent: across every institution type in the dataset, the hours students reach out and the hours staff can answer don't overlap.

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Engagement and Enrollment Outcomes

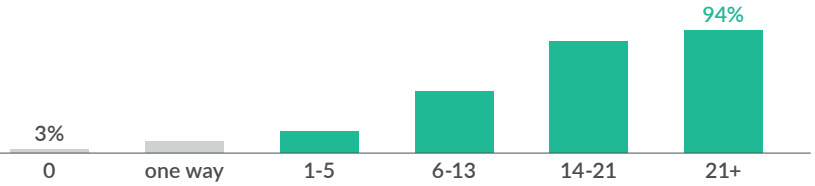
Engagement is only worth chasing if it moves the outcomes institutions actually care about.

We looked past messaging metrics to the enrollment funnel itself.

We matched conversation volume to real milestones for 304,913 first-year students at public and private institutions across three entry years (Fall 2022-2024). The pattern holds at every step of the funnel:

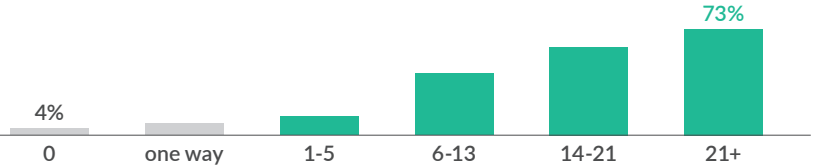
Enrollment yield

Students with no texts yielded at 3%; those with 21 or more conversations yielded at 94%.



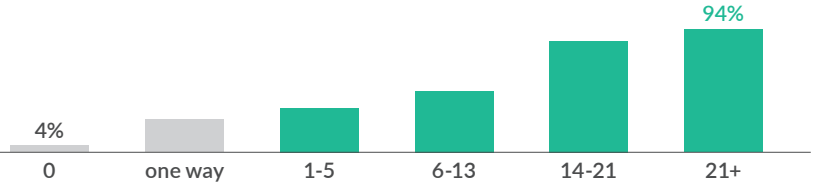
Campus visits

The same climb, from students who never texted to the most engaged.



FAFSA completion

Financial aid completion rose alongside conversation volume.



It's not a single jump. The rate climbs steadily with each band of conversation (1-5, 6-13, 14-21, 21+) — the more a student and institution talk, the higher it climbs.

A caveat that makes this stronger, not weaker. This is correlation, not proof of cause. Students already leaning toward a school naturally talk more, so some of this gap reflects intent, not the conversations themselves. But the climb is steep, rises with every added conversation, and holds across three separate milestones and three entry years. This is why engagement is worth treating as a lever, even though this data can't isolate exactly how much of the lift the conversations create.

Engagement isn't a vanity metric. It tracks closely and consistently with the outcomes that define an enrollment cycle. That's what makes the capacity gap so costly. Every conversation that an overloaded team can't have is a yield, a visit, or a FAFSA left on the table. The rest of this report is about what the highest-engagement teams do differently.

Scope: This is a separate analysis drawn from the subset of partner institutions able to provide funnel data, focused on enrollment milestones only. Persistence and giving outcomes are the natural next frontier as comparable data becomes available.

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Messaging Benchmarks

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What follows is a team-by-team look at the messaging patterns that drive the highest reply rates. Data covers text outreach: messages sent from Mongoose to two or more recipients at once.

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ENROLLMENT
4-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

228 Institutions

342 Departments

18.4 Million Recipients



OVERALL REPLY RATE



UNRESOLVED RATE

Enrollment is the highest-volume text channel in higher ed.

Two things stand out:

1. What earns replies is conversation, not broadcast.

2. The most routine questions are absorbing the time the hardest ones need.

Smart Message Group Message Sends

2025 Report	6,959
2026 Report	**7,697**
Change	**+10.6%**

Methodology note: Year-over-year comparisons are directional. In 2025, 2-year institutions were included in this segment; in 2026, they are reported separately. This means the 2025 baseline includes some community college data that is no longer in scope, so the true year-over-year growth is likely larger than shown here.

Best Times to Engage

1 p.m.: (5.1% reply rate).

Highest single hour. 11 a.m. (4.9%) and 3 p.m. (3.7%) are also consistently strong.

Monday: (4.6%).

Best day of the week. Thursday (4.3%) and Tuesday (4.2%) are close.

Saturday: (0.78%).

Near-zero — roughly 6x lower than Monday. Weekend outreach to prospective students rarely lands.

Evening sends generate replies that arrive hours into the next business day. A student who texts at 7 p.m. may not hear back until 9 a.m. That overnight window sits entirely outside staffed hours.

Message Length

13.7%

Reply rate for 51-100 character messages. These engage students at nearly **4x the rate** of messages over 200 characters.

The average Enrollment message runs 234 characters, well above the length where reply rates peak. The data supports brevity for the opening message; once a student replies, longer, more contextual responses are appropriate. 300+-character messages average a 2.3% reply rate — the floor of engagement in this segment.

Smart Messages

6.6% vs. 2.9%

Smart Message vs. standard outreach reply rate — **2.3x lift.**

61% of Enrollment institutions now use Smart Messages.

The average Smart Message send reaches 508 recipients vs. 170 for standard sends.

Smart Messages are the most effective outbound tool in this dataset — a 2.3x lift over standard sends. That lift comes from a conversational model: the message invites a reply rather than delivering information and stopping there.

The 2.3x lift concentrates in a few repeatable structural patterns visible across high-performing Enrollment teams. These teams:

- Send as a named counselor rather than an institutional account
- Trigger messages off student behavior (an inquiry submitted, an application started but not finished, a deposit not yet placed)
- Ask a single stage-appropriate question rather than delivering information and stopping

The most repeatable move: a yes/no or menu question that opens the dialogue before a link is offered, not a message that opens with the link.

Menu-driven sequences and behavioral triggers wired to the CRM appear consistently in the highest-performing group message sends.

Message Content: Questions and URLs

1%

Reply rate for a message with a URL and no question — the worst-performing content combination across all segments.

No URL + question.

The highest-performing content combination, consistent across all teams.

URL presence suppresses reply rates universally.

There is no team, message type, or context in this dataset where including a link improves engagement.

Messages with a question.

Approximately 2x the reply rate of messages without one.

MMS vs. SMS

MMS (messages that include an image).

2.5% vs. SMS 3.0%. Images add friction without adding reply rate. No uplift observed.

Smart Message + SMS.

6.6%, the ceiling for Enrollment outbound performance in this dataset.

How Enrollment Teams Are Using Smart Messages

Analysis of Enrollment Smart Messages across 2025 reveals 10 recurring use cases across the funnel, from first inquiry through deposit. Whatever the stage, the structural signature is consistent: a named counselor as the sender, a single stage-appropriate question, and a next action that matches where the student actually is.

Category	What Teams Are Doing	Volume
Inquiry Response and Nurture	Immediate, program-specific auto-response to a fresh inquiry; menu-driven triage at scale. The ask matches what the student just did.	Dominant
Application Completion	Stage-aware nudges for not-started, started, and not-submitted applicants. Fee waivers and deferral offers lower the cost of the next step.	Large
Events, Visits, and Webinars	Invitations to preview days, open houses, tours, and info sessions. Confirmation sends the day before cut no-shows.	Large
Registration, Orientation, and Onboarding	Getting admits through orientation, placement, and into a class schedule. Asks are procedural and help-oriented.	Large
Financial Aid and FAFSA	FAFSA reminders (often with the school code), aid-offer alerts, and scholarship deadlines timed to financial-aid milestones.	Moderate
Deposit, Commit, and Yield	Converting admits to deposits; melt-prevention check-ins over the summer. Copy turns warm and identity-forward.	Moderate
Admit and Congratulations	Delivering or celebrating the decision and immediately opening the next step.	Moderate
Documents and Checklist	Chasing transcripts, contact info, and missing file items that block a review.	Small
Surveys and Sentiment Polls	Decision-confidence polls and post-visit ratings that surface wobbling admits in time to intervene.	Small
Billing and Payment	Urgent past-due tuition notices protecting a student's class schedule. The sharpest tone in the category.	Small

Patterns Across All Enrollment Smart Messages

A built-in reply, every time.

Roughly 84% of messages end on a direct question: a yes/no, a numbered menu, or a 1 to 5 sentiment scale. The reply is the point.

Behavioral triggers, not blasts.

Messages fire off what a student just did or didn't do — inquired, started but didn't finish an application, got admitted, deposited, hasn't registered. The ask always matches the stage.

A named counselor as the sender.

'This is Makaeya, your admissions counselor...' The one-to-one framing does the relational work that a generic account cannot.

Menu-driven triage at scale.

'Which would you like to do next?' and lettered options route high volumes of prospects without a human reading every reply first.

Friction removal as the offer.

Fee-waiver codes, application deferral, and 'do you want assistance?' lower the cost of the next step rather than just asking for it.

Deadlines and urgency.

Priority scholarship dates, final registration days, and fee-waiver expirations create reasons to reply now.

What Enrollment Conversations Are About

Across 983,610 Enrollment conversations analyzed, teams resolved or responded to 90.7%, a 9.3% unresolved rate. Topic quality varies considerably.

Campus visits and student life.

Highest resolution rates and the most positive sentiment of any Enrollment topic.

Scholarships and financial aid.

78% resolved, 70% positive sentiment. Students express appreciation, but these conversations frequently require follow-up. Under-resolved relative to the stakes involved.

Tech support/account access.

61% resolved, 50% positive sentiment. The lowest resolution and sentiment rates of any Enrollment topic. Login and access issues generate frustration and often don't reach a clean close.

Withdrawal / deferred admissions.

66% positive sentiment. Despite the difficulty of these conversations, students value clear guidance. Even hard news, delivered clearly, earns appreciation.

Financial aid and tech support are the two highest-friction, lowest-resolution Enrollment topics, and among the most routine and repeatable. The most automatable conversations are absorbing the staff time that the hardest conversations need.

STUDENT SUCCESS
4-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

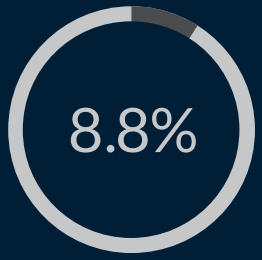
99 Institutions

140 Departments

2.6 Million Recipients



OVERALL REPLY RATE



UNRESOLVED RATE

Student Success teams use text to stay connected with enrolled students.

This is achieved through advising, academic check-ins, appointment scheduling, financial aid questions, and at-risk outreach. The goal is persistence: keeping students on track and flagging the ones who might drop out before they do.

Smart Message Reply Rate Lift

2025 Report ~4x (2024 est.)

2026 Report 4.1x

Change Consistent

Methodology note: Year-over-year comparisons are directional. In 2025, 2-year institutions were included in this segment; in 2026, they are reported separately. This means the 2025 baseline includes some community college data that is no longer in scope, so the true year-over-year growth is likely larger than shown here.

Best Times to Engage

10 a.m.: 8.9% reply rate.

The highest single-hour rate for any team in this report. Students are responsive mid-morning, between or after early classes.

6-7 a.m.: 7.8-8.1%: an underused send window.

Students check their phones early, before the day begins. Most teams aren't sending here yet.

Best days: Monday (6.8%), Friday (5.8%), Wednesday (5.5%).

Engagement is solid through the week.

Saturday: 4.3%.

Student Success sees meaningfully less weekend drop-off than Enrollment, reflecting a student population with non-traditional schedules.

Smart Messages

16.3% vs. 4.0%

Smart Message vs. standard outreach reply rate — **4.1x lift,** the highest multiplier of any 4-year team in this dataset.

Only 40 of 99 Student Success institutions (40%) use Smart Messages, the largest gap between proven performance and adoption anywhere in this report.

Smart Messages generate the highest lift in the dataset, yet only 40% of Student Success institutions use them. The opportunity is clear. Teams that haven't adopted them are leaving the most engagement on the table of any segment here.

The 4.1x lift concentrates on a few repeatable use cases:

- Fully templated appointment confirmations that eliminate no-shows at scale
- Early-alert nudges that pair a system-triggered flag with a student-led channel choice (would you prefer to meet in person, by phone, virtually, or by text?)
- Proactive wellness pulses using a 1 to 5 scale at high-stress moments like midterms or finals.

The common structural element is an invited reply tied to something the student already did or didn't do, sent from a named coach rather than an institutional account.

These are the patterns separating the 40% who have adopted Smart Messages from the 60% still leaving the lift on the table.

Message Content: Questions and URLs

10.6%

Reply rate for no-URL + question in Student Success — **more than 2x** the team average.

With a question.

8.3% vs. 3.5% without, a 2.4x lift. Asking a question is the single most reliable way to increase reply rate in Student Success.

URL + question: 1.3%.

Adding a URL completely neutralizes the lift that comes from asking a question. The link pulls the student out of the conversation before they can reply.

MMS vs. SMS

MMS (messages that include an image).

Lower reply rates than SMS. No uplift observed in this dataset.

Smart Message + SMS: 16.3%.

The ceiling for Student Success outbound performance in this dataset.

Conversation Volume and Quality

New in 2026.

We found that reply rate and conversation depth are closely linked. Teams that earn more replies don't just get more messages; they generate deeper student engagement, and the quality of that engagement is higher, not lower.

282.8 vs. 23.2

Conversations per 1,000 recipients — top reply-rate quartile vs. bottom.
A **12x gap** in actual student engagement depth.

7.6% vs. 11.4%

Unresolved rate: top reply-rate quartile vs. bottom — teams with higher reply rates also resolve conversations more often, not less. Top quartile: 8.8% frustration rate vs. 13.0% for the bottom quartile. More replies correlate with a better student experience, not just more volume.

Spearman r = 0.73: Between reply rate and conversations per recipient — a strong, consistent relationship across the dataset.

210,371 Student Success conversations analyzed.

Reply rate is not a vanity metric.

Teams that earn more replies have more conversations, resolve them better, and generate less student frustration. Engagement volume and engagement quality move in the same direction.

How Student Success Teams Are Using Smart Messages

Analysis of Student Success Smart Messages across 2025 reveals 10 recurring use cases across the persistence journey. The sends are more automated and more deeply merge-fielded than any other team in the dataset, reflecting tight integration with advising and student-information systems.

Category	What Teams Are Doing	Volume
Advising and Appointment Logistics	Booking, confirming, and reminding students for advising or coaching appointments. Fully templated confirmations run at scale.	Dominant
Onboarding and Orientation Completion	Walking new students through orientation requirements step by step. A distinct, accurate message for each student situation.	Large
Registration and Re-registration Nudges	Getting current students enrolled for the next term before seats fill. Often diagnostic: 'Can you tell us why?'	Large
Early-Alert and Success Coaching	A named coach reaches out to a student flagged as falling behind, framing it as support rather than a warning.	Large
Persistence and Melt Prevention	Continuation checks, withdrawal-deadline outreach, and drop-for-nonpayment warnings that protect a student's enrollment.	Moderate
Billing, Holds, and Account Blockers	Clearing financial and administrative obstacles that quietly block registration, often with a same-day deadline.	Moderate
Graduation and Completion Progress	Flagging missing graduation applications, prepping for commencement, and pushing students across the finish line.	Moderate
Financial Aid and FAFSA	Keeping aid in place for the coming term: FAFSA renewal, summer-aid eligibility, and grant re-application.	Small
Wellness and Belonging Check-Ins	Proactive emotional check-ins, often pegged to high-stress moments. Frequently use a 1 to 5 scale.	Small
Surveys and Feedback	Post-advising experience ratings and institutional surveys. Turning the reply into program data.	Small

Patterns Across All Student Success Smart Messages

An invited reply, every time.

About two-thirds end on a direct question: a yes/no, a 1 to 5 scale, or a channel-choice menu. The message is built to be answered, because the answer is the signal a coach acts on.

System-triggered, not seasonal.

Sends fire off a flag in a student-information or early-alert system: missing requisite, not registered, falling behind, stopped attending, or account hold.

Deep templating and automation.

About 66% carry merge fields, the highest rate in the dataset. Appointment confirmations are essentially token shells: appointment type, date, time, staff name, and location.

A named coach or office as the sender.

'This is your Success Coach, Jess.' A real, ownable point of contact makes the support feel personal.

Channel choice on the reply.

Coaching messages routinely ask 'how would you prefer to be contacted: in person, phone, virtual, or text?', meeting the student where they are.

A supportive register, with a sharp exception.

Most copy is warm and non-punitive. Billing, holds, and drop-for-nonpayment notices flip to urgent, with hard deadlines and clear consequences.

What Student Success Conversations Are About

Topics where Student Success conversations go well:

Appointments (39.9% of all volume): 8.3% unresolved, 43.1% appreciation.

The single largest topic by volume, and among the most consistently well-managed. Scheduling and advising check-ins at scale, handled well.

Student support services: 54.7% appreciation.

The highest appreciation rate of any Student Success topic.

Appointments are the highest-volume, lowest-unresolved conversation type in Student Success — 40% of all volume, 8.3% unresolved. The data shows repeatable workflows operating well at scale.

Topics where conversations carry the most friction:

Mental health.

44.9% frustration, 10.6% unresolved — the most sensitive topic in the dataset, where an unresolved conversation carries the highest cost. One in ten Mental Health conversations receives no staff response.

10.6% of Mental Health conversations go unresolved. This is the most sensitive topic in the dataset and the one where an unresolved conversation carries the highest cost. The data makes a strong case for ensuring these conversations are never left in an unread inbox.

Technical issues.

57.2% negative or confused sentiment, 15.2% unresolved — the highest unresolved rate of any Student Success topic. Login and access problems generate significant frustration and often don't resolve.

Financial.

41.7% negative or confused sentiment, 13.2% unresolved

Academics.

40.8% negative or confused sentiment, 12.9% unresolved

The hardest student moments: mental health, technical, financial, and academic. These cluster in topics that require specialist knowledge or escalation. These aren't resolution problems. They're routing and response-time problems, where the cost of delay is highest.

ADVANCEMENT
4-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

117 Institutions

155 Departments

9.2 Million Recipients



OVERALL REPLY RATE



UNRESOLVED RATE

Advancement teams use text to stay connected with donors, alumni, and prospects.

This is done throughout the giving cycle with events, annual fund appeals, giving days, pledge fulfillment, stewardship, and re-engagement. The channel operates differently from Enrollment and Student Success: larger audiences, fewer sends, and a relationship dynamic that rewards warmth and personalization over volume.

Best Times to Engage

7.4%

Reply rate for 5 p.m. sends — the highest single-hour rate for Advancement. Donors check their personal phones after the workday ends.

Sunday: 7.3%.

Higher than any weekday for Advancement. This is a distinct pattern not seen in Enrollment or Student Success. Weekend sends land differently with an alumni and donor audience.

10-11 a.m.

This time is also strong: **4.8-4.5%.**

Advancement donors engage at different hours than students. Early evening and Sunday are peak windows, not midday weekdays. A 6% reply rate in this context is strong by any measure.

Smart Messages

7.5% vs. 2.5%

Smart Message vs. standard outreach reply rate — **3x lift.**

79 of 117 Advancement institutions (67.5%) use Smart Messages.

Smart Messages are the highest-performing outbound format in Advancement. The 3x lift holds across giving days, event invitations, stewardship, and re-engagement campaigns alike.

Message Content: Questions and URLs

With a question.

6.0% vs. 2.5% without, a 2.4x lift. A 6% reply rate in Advancement is high by any benchmark standard.

No URL + question: 6.3%.

The top-performing content combination.

URL + question: 1.7%.

The URL suppresses reply rate even for a donor audience. The pattern is universal.

MMS vs. SMS

MMS (messages with images).

Lower reply rates than SMS across the dataset. No uplift observed.

The permission-to-send-the-link pattern.

This is the ceiling for Advancement outbound performance: ask a yes/no question, deliver the link only on reply.

Advancement runs the heaviest inbox of any team. A typical staffer carries 2,150 donor contacts, and the busiest carry 8,359. Donor relationships depend on timely, personal follow-up. At that volume, the math doesn't allow it. And these aren't outliers: they represent a real share of institutions in this dataset.

What Advancement Conversations Are About

Based on 280,425 Advancement conversations. The channel covers more than asking for gifts.

Events and reunions.

39.3% of all volume (110,220 conversations) — the largest topic by far. Regional receptions, watch parties, galas, homecoming, reunions. Advancement SMS is primarily a relationship and events channel.

Giving and donations.

23.6% (66,276 conversations) — annual fund appeals, giving days, year-end, pledge fulfillment.

Alumni engagement and relations.

4.6% (12,763 conversations) — stewardship, reconnection, ambassador recruitment.

Donor stewardship.

0.7% unresolved, 92.9% appreciation — the highest appreciation rate of any topic across all teams in this report. Thank-you messages earn outsized goodwill.

Alumni engagement.

1.8% unresolved, 63.2% appreciation

Events and reunions.

2.4% unresolved, 41.5% positive emotion

Donor Stewardship conversations generate 92.9% appreciation — the highest of any topic across any team in this report. The data makes a clear case for stewardship messaging as a relationship investment, not an afterthought.

How Advancement Teams Are Using Smart Messages

Analysis of 3,000+ Smart Message sends from Advancement teams across 2025 reveals 12 recurring use cases. Whatever the category, the messages share a structural signature: a named human sender, light personalization, and a question that invites a reply rather than delivering a link cold.

Category	What Teams Are Doing	Volume
Giving days and 24-hour Campaigns	Multi-message sequences with match unlocks during a branded day-of-giving push	Dominant
Events and Invitations	Regional receptions, watch parties, galas, reunions — often one template reskinned by city	Dominant
Annual Fund and Year-End Renewal	Renew lapsing donors before fiscal or calendar year-end; loyalty language, deadline urgency	Large
Stewardship and Donor Thanks	Thank donors and convert them into amplifiers ('Share with 2-3 friends')	Moderate
Pledge Reminders	Convert a verbal pledge to a paid gift; references caller name, pledge amount, date	Moderate
Membership and Society Renewals	Dues and recognition-society renewals, sometimes with a donor-choice reply menu	Moderate
Ambassador and Volunteer Recruiting	Recruit advocates to multiply a campaign, often with leaderboards and prizes	Moderate
Surveys, Feedback, and Polls	Post-event ratings, alumni surveys, preference polls; 1-5 scales minimize friction	Moderate
List Opt-In and Contact Updates	Confirm consent and refresh data — often the very first message a program sends	Moderate
Student and Scholarship Lifecycle	Scholarship applications, senior class gift, graduation — planting the donor relationship before students leave campus	Moderate
Cause-Specific and Affinity Giving	Hospital, athletics, food security, identity funds — mission-forward, emotionally specific copy	Moderate
Reconnection and Re-Engagement	Re-open a channel after a program change; quiet post-grad check-ins	Small

Patterns Across All Advancement Smart Messages

Permission to send the link.

The defining structural move across the entire Advancement dataset. Teams ask a yes/no question and deliver the link only on reply. This turns a broadcast into a dialogue.

A real, named sender.

'This is Steve from Mongoose University...' Authentic sender identity does more relational work than any other single element.

Rich CRM personalization.

Last gift amount, pledge date, fund name, class year, membership tier. The richest sends depend on tight CRM integration.

Urgency and match mechanics.

'TODAY,' 'before midnight,' matching challenges pacing giving-day and year-end sequences.

Templating at scale.

One campaign reskinned per city, sport, college, and class year. Variant management is core work, not an edge case.

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Cross-Team Comparisons

These findings hold across every team in this report.
They don't depend on institution size, region, or department.
They are as close to universal rules as the data produces.

Universal Takeaways

Smart Messages outperform standard outreach in every team.

Lift ranges from 2.3x (Enrollment) to 4.1x (Student Success).

A question roughly doubles or triples reply rates in every segment.

No exceptions in the dataset.

A URL reduces reply rates universally.

No team or context in which including a link improves engagement.

Saturday is the lowest-engagement day across all teams.

Roughly 6x lower than Monday, the top-performing day for two out of three teams.

Team Comparison

Teams	Best Day	Best Hour	Reply Rate	Unresolved Rate	SM Lift
Enrollment	Monday	1 p.m.	3.66%	9.3%	2.3x
Student Success	Monday	10 a.m.	5.17%	8.8%	4.1x
Advancement	Sunday	5 p.m.	4.44%	3.0%	3.0x

Unresolved rate = percentage of conversations that received no staff response. SM Lift = Smart Message reply rate vs. standard outreach reply rate.

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Web Chat: Key Findings

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This is Web Chat

The on-site assistant students and visitors use directly on institution websites, a separate channel from text. Based on 215,507 conversations across 2024-2025 (up slightly from the prior year; engagement rates marginally lower).

Total Web Chat Conversations

2025	2026	Change
~200K	215,507	Volume up

76%

Chat engagement rate

Percentage of visitors who interact beyond the opening prompt (answering at least one question or branch).

74%

Self-service rate

Visitors who resolved their need without a staff member becoming involved.

43%

After hours

Conversations that arrive outside business hours, with self-service holding at 74% even then.

43% of Web Chat conversations happen after hours, and the **self-service rate holds at 74%** even then — automated coverage performs as well outside business hours as during them. The text data in Section 3 shows the inverse: student inbound on text continues after hours, while institutional outbound drops off sharply.

Live chat request rate drops 50%.

when visitors engage with AI-assisted Chat flows versus those without. Automated handling resolves more needs before a staff member is needed.

34,000

Leads captured

Name and contact information collected across the Web Chat dataset through AI-assisted conversations.

These 34,000 leads were captured through Web Chat interactions — not by a staff member manually responding. This is the most direct quantitative evidence in this report that automated engagement creates downstream enrollment and advancement value.

15 Messages

Median chat conversation length

Total messages exchanged, with 40 messages at the 90th percentile.

A 15-message conversation is not a quick FAQ lookup. It's a real, sustained exchange. Multiplied across 215,507 conversations, the staff-hours equivalent of handling all of this manually is significant.

Note: 15 messages reflects total back-and-forth in the conversation, not 15 messages from the student alone.

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 institutions 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

This report draws on Mongoose platform data from the 2024-2025 academic year, collected from colleges and universities actively using the platform during that period.

Segment	Institutions
Enrollment (4-Year)	228
Student Success (4-Year)	99
Advancement (4-Year)	117
Total	411 institutions

Total messages analyzed: 53,424,365
Total unique contacts messaged: 10,186,748

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 three-day window. Conversations inactive for three days are treated as new conversations if re-initiated.

Conversation Dataset Scope

Conversation analytics cover 4-year Enrollment, Student Success, and Advancement teams. A minimum threshold of 1,000 recipients and 100 conversations per team was applied for correlation analysis.

Team	Conversations Analyzed	Teams (after threshold)	Unresolved Rate
Enrollment	983,610	258 teams	9.3%
Student Success	210,371	87 teams	8.8%
Advancement	280,425	121 teams	3.0%

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 — they indicate relationships in this dataset, not universal causal claims.

Appendix Frequently Asked Questions

What is the average reply rate for higher ed text messaging in 2026?

Reply rates vary by team type. Enrollment teams average 3.66%, Student Success teams average 5.17%, and Advancement teams average 4.44% across the 411 institutions in this dataset. Smart Messages consistently outperform standard sends by 2x to 4x, depending on the team.

What time of day do students respond to text messages?

It depends on the team. Enrollment reply rates peak at 1 p.m.. Student Success peaks at 10 a.m., with early-morning sends (6-7 a.m.) also performing well. Advancement donors engage most at 5 p.m. and on Sundays, a distinct pattern from student audiences. Saturday is the lowest-engagement day across all segments.

Do Smart Messages actually improve student engagement?

Yes, consistently. Across all teams in this dataset, Smart Messages outperform standard sends by 2.3x to 4.1x. Student Success sees the highest lift at 4.1x. Only 40% of Student Success institutions currently use Smart Messages, which represents the largest gap between proven performance and adoption in the report. High-performing teams drive this lift through a few repeatable structural patterns: sending from a named counselor or coach rather than an institutional account, triggering messages off student behavior, and asking a single direct question (yes/no, a numbered menu, or a 1 to 5 scale) rather than leading with information.

How many student conversations go unresolved at colleges and universities?

In this dataset, 9.3% of Enrollment conversations and 8.8% of Student Success conversations received no staff response. Advancement had a lower unresolved rate at 3.0%. Within Student Success, the highest unresolved rates occur in topics like Technical Issues (15.2%), Financial (13.2%), Academics (12.9%), and Mental Health (10.6%), all topics that require specialist knowledge or escalation.

What percentage of student engagement happens outside business hours?

A significant and consistent share. After 5 p.m., student inbound messaging runs at 2.1x to 3.3x its daytime rate across teams. Before 8 a.m., the ratio climbs to 2.2x for Enrollment, 2.5x for Student Success, and 9.7x for Advancement. 43% of Chat conversations also arrive outside business hours.

What are the most common topics in student success conversations?

Appointments are the largest topic in Student Success at 39.9% of all volume. Academics, Financial Aid, and Student Support Services follow. Topics with the highest friction (Technical Issues, Financial, Academics, and Mental Health) have higher unresolved rates and negative sentiment than the broader dataset.

What is the most effective way to improve higher ed text reply rates?

Three choices matter most. Asking a question in the message roughly doubles to triples reply rates across all teams. Removing links improves engagement: there is no team or context in this dataset where a URL improves reply rate. And using Smart Messages delivers a consistent 2x to 4x lift over standard sends. Within Smart Messages, the highest-performing teams trigger sends off student behavior, use a named human as the sender, and make the reply itself the next step, not a link to click elsewhere.