

BENCHMARKS FOR TODAY'S CAMPUSES

Student Self-Service Expectations in Higher Ed

Based on a nationally representative survey of 1,058 currently-enrolled U.S. college students, conducted May 14-18, 2026.



● **1,058** currently enrolled U.S. students surveyed

● **47 / 50** states represented

● **±3%** margin of error at 95% confidence

● **2026** fielded May 14-18, 2026

— EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bar Is Set by Every App in Their Pocket.

Higher education is facing a self-service gap, and students feel it every time they try to register, navigate financial aid, or get answers after 5 p.m. The 2026 Gravyty Student Self-Service Expectations Report surveyed 1,058 U.S. college students who are currently enrolled to understand what they expect from their institution's digital tools, where those tools are falling short, and what the consequences are when they do.

The findings paint a clear picture: students' daily experience with consumer technology has fundamentally reset their expectations for institutional digital service. Amazon, Spotify, and DoorDash have raised the floor for what "good" looks like, and most campuses haven't cleared it. Only 27% of students say their institution meets all or most of the qualities they associate with a modern campus digital experience.

The consequences are not only operational, but relational. Poor digital experiences erode belonging, fuel disengagement, delay academic progress, and — critically for advancement teams — quietly predict whether a student becomes a loyal alumni donor or drifts away entirely after graduation.



27% of students say their institution currently meets all or most of the qualities they associate with a modern campus digital experience.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five Things Every Higher Ed Leader Should Know from This Report:



58%

of students say consumer platforms like Amazon and Spotify have fundamentally reshaped what they expect from their institution's digital tools.



76%

expect to resolve most student service needs (e.g., financial aid, registration, advising) without contacting a staff member directly. **1 in 4 say their institution doesn't meet that standard.**



50%

have avoided reaching out to their institution about a question or concern simply because the process felt too difficult. **But 84% say instant chat or text support would make them more likely to actually ask for help.**



25%

say difficulties with their institution's digital tools have, at some point, made them question whether staying enrolled is worth the hassle.



73%

are more likely to stay engaged with their institution after graduation if they had a positive experience with its digital support tools while enrolled.



— INTRODUCTION

The Relationship Starts Before Day One

The relationship between a student and an institution doesn't start on the first day of class. It starts with the first interaction. Whether that's a website visit, a virtual assistant conversation, or a financial aid estimate, prospective students are forming impressions long before they apply — and those impressions carry forward.

Today's students have grown up in a world where answers are instant, transactions are frictionless, and personalization is expected. They track packages in real time. They get music recommendations tuned to their exact taste. They rebook flights from their phones in seconds. When those same students arrive at their institution's financial aid portal or registration system and find outdated interfaces, long wait times, and answers that require three transfers to get, their feelings land somewhere between frustrating and baffling.

For enrollment and retention leaders, that gap matters in the immediate term: students who can't get help efficiently disengage. But the downstream implications are just as significant. Students who feel well-supported, connected, and valued by their institution are the ones most likely to carry that relationship forward long after graduation. The ones who feel like an afterthought often don't.

The data in this study makes a clear argument for advancement leaders: the digital experience institutions provide today shapes the alumni relationship long before anyone asks for a gift.

This study benchmarks where student expectations actually stand in 2026 and what institutions stand to gain, or lose, by meeting or missing them.



***Every student in some way, shape, or form is an online student.
Every student interacts with us online.***

Roberto Suarez

Virtual Services Manager, [Portland Community College](#)

01

— FINDING 1

The Consumer Bar Has Been Set. Higher Ed Hasn't Cleared It.

Before students ever set foot in a classroom, they're evaluating whether their institution's digital experience is worth their time. And the bar is set by apps that never close, never make them repeat themselves, and never transfer them to another department.

When asked which resources they used when deciding which institution to attend, 62% of students cited their institution's website — more than any other channel, including word of mouth (48%) and college search platforms (41%). For graduate students, the website was even more decisive: they were 20% more likely than average to cite it as influential.

The first digital touchpoint matters enormously. For adult learners researching their return to school, AI tools like ChatGPT played an outsized role; they were 68% more likely than average to consult AI in their decision-making.

Once enrolled, students don't lower their expectations, they compare. Their daily experience with consumer platforms has fundamentally changed what "good" looks like for any service interaction. The evidence is direct: 58% say their experience with everyday apps has reshaped what they expect from institutional digital tools. And 39% say those tools currently fall short of what they'd expect from platforms like Amazon and Spotify.

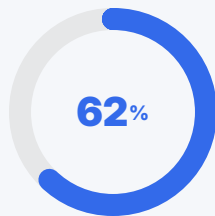
14%



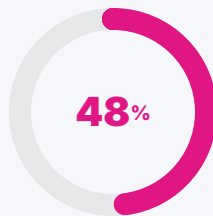
of students used AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini) when deciding which institution to attend. **Adult learners were 68% more likely than average to do so.**



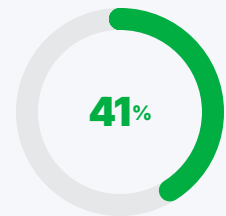
Resources students used when deciding which institution to attend



Institution's
website



Word of
mouth



College search
platforms

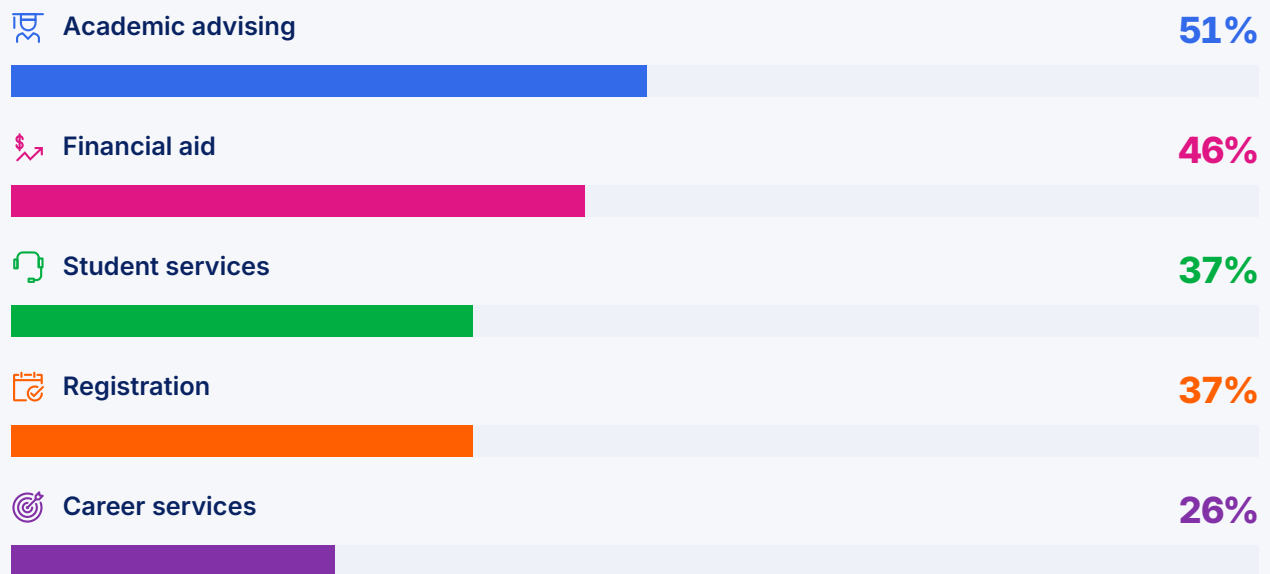
FINDING 1 · CONTINUED

The disconnect is sharpest in specific service areas. When asked where their institution falls furthest behind consumer-grade standards, students point to the functions that sit at the center of their academic and financial trajectory — not peripheral services.

Notably, men were 31% more likely than women to report this gap, a finding worth watching as institutions consider how different student populations experience digital friction.

Where the digital experience falls short

% of students ranking each area as furthest behind consumer-grade standards



“

We have to stay current with technology. If a student can go to one institution and get answers immediately, while another requires them to search through a website to find information, that institution has gained a customer.

Anthony Morrone

Director of Financial Aid, [Nevada State University](#)

02

— FINDING 2

Students Know Exactly What They Want (and It's Surprisingly Simple)

When students describe what better digital support looks like, their answers don't describe complexity. They describe parity. They want the same baseline their best consumer experiences deliver: speed, availability, and responses that treat them as individuals.

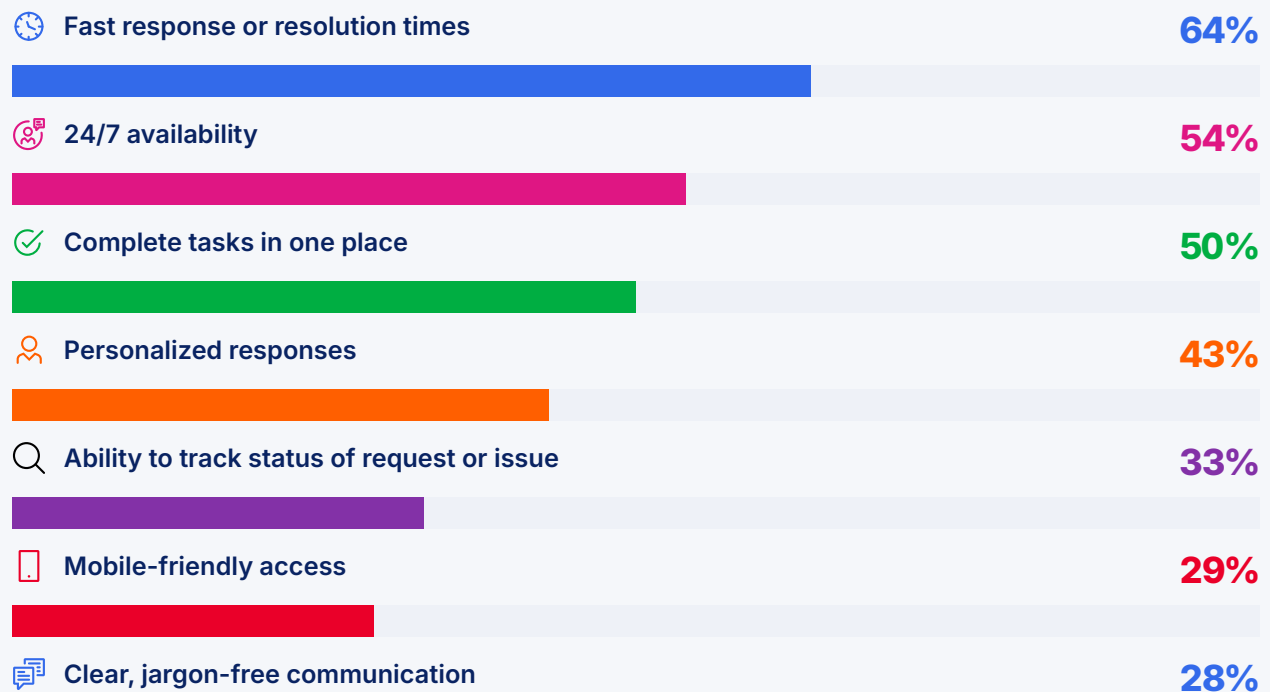
Speed is the top priority — more than any other attribute. 24/7 availability comes second, a structural mismatch because most institutional support runs on office hours while the busiest student segments need access precisely when offices are closed. Caregiving students were 47% more likely than average to say a response time of under one hour is their acceptable maximum.

Personalization rounds out the top three. 43% of students say personalized responses that reflect their specific situation (not generic FAQs) are critical to a good digital experience. And 56% include “personalized guidance that reflects my specific situation” in their definition of a modern campus digital experience.

64%

of students say fast response or resolution times are among the most important features they want from their institution's digital tools.

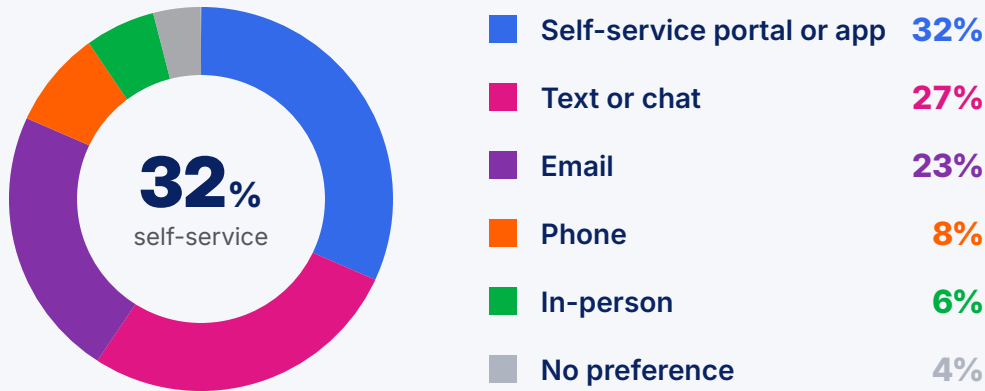
What students want from digital tools



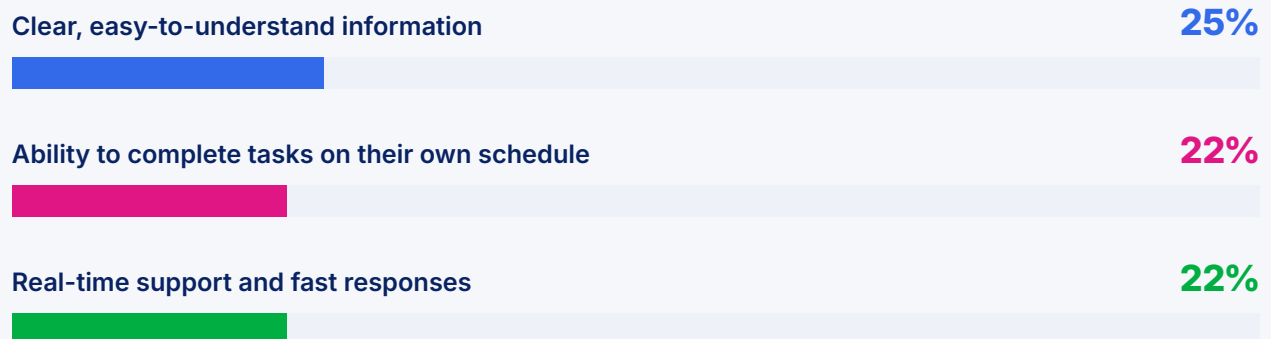
Respondents could choose up to 3 answers.

Where Students Want to Be Met.

Preferred channel for interacting with support



Primary need from digital tools



Students are not asking for perfection. They're asking for parity: a digital experience that treats their time and circumstances with the same respect their best consumer experiences do.

03

— FINDING 3

When Help Feels Too Hard to Access, Students Stop Reaching Out

The consequences of a frustrating digital experience don't always look like a complaint ticket or a dropout. Often they look like silence. Students who can't get help easily don't keep trying, they stop asking. The students most likely to go silent are often the ones who can least afford to.

50%

of students have avoided reaching out to their institution about a question or concern simply because the process felt too difficult.

84%

say instant chat or text support would make them more likely to actually reach out for help — a direct inversion of the 50% who've gone silent due to friction.

What students actually experience with institutional digital tools

Received a generic response that didn't address their situation **43%**



Resolved an issue faster by calling or showing up in person **41%**



Waited more than 24 hours for a response to an urgent question **41%**



Had to repeat the same information to multiple staff members **40%**



Were transferred between offices without resolution **34%**



Couldn't find what they needed and gave up entirely **31%**



Only 15% of students say they've never experienced any of these friction points — the other 85% have hit at least one concrete, measurable failure.

04

— FINDING 4

Digital Friction Has Real Consequences for Retention and Belonging

Frustration with digital tools compounds. And for a meaningful share of students, it reaches a threshold that puts their enrollment at risk.

38%



of students have delayed completing an important enrollment, financial aid, or academic task because their institution's digital tools were too difficult to navigate.

Students in Texas were 20% more likely than average to report this, possibly reflecting the scale and complexity of navigating some of the nation's largest higher education systems.

Root causes among students who delayed a critical task

Couldn't find the information they needed

68%



Process required too many steps or redirects

57%



Couldn't access tools during available hours

28%



35%

say a frustrating digital experience has hurt how connected they feel to their institution (**transfer students 21% more likely**).

25%

say digital-tool difficulties have made them question whether staying enrolled is worth the hassle (**students of color 18% more likely**).

FINDING 4 · CONTINUED

Belonging Is the Throughline.

The belonging connection is direct. 65% of students currently feel a strong sense of belonging at their institution — but 85% say a stronger sense of belonging would make them more confident about staying enrolled through difficult stretches. Digital tools that surface relevant communities, events, and resources are part of how institutions build that belonging.

85%



say a stronger sense of belonging would make them more confident about staying enrolled through difficult stretches.

71%



would feel more connected to campus life if digital tools surfaced relevant clubs, events, and peer communities — not just deadlines.

82%



say a more responsive, on-demand digital experience would make a significant or moderate difference in how manageable their program feels.

The survey also reveals a gap in how responsiveness affects overall well-being: 82% of students say a more responsive, on-demand digital experience would make either a significant (40%) or moderate (42%) difference in how manageable their program feels overall.

Yet **37%** say their institution's digital communications have never helped them discover any aspect of campus life they weren't already aware of — and first-year students are **21%** more likely to receive only administrative notices.



05

— FINDING 5

Different Students, Different Urgencies

Today's campuses enroll students with vastly different lives. A traditional-age 19-year-old living on campus and a 38-year-old returning professional juggling work and caregiving may share a classroom — but they experience institutional digital tools very differently, and bring very different expectations to the table.

47%



Caregiving students are this much more likely than average to say a response time of under one hour is their acceptable maximum for a routine request.



Adult learners (30+)

28% more likely to say sub-hour response times are their maximum acceptable standard, and 68% more likely to have used AI tools in their college decision. They actively seek self-directed, on-demand channels.



First-generation students

More likely to rely on institutional tools as their primary source of guidance. 49% of all students say they have nowhere else to turn outside their institution — a dependency even more acute for this group.



Transfer students

21% more likely to say a frustrating digital experience has hurt how connected they feel — logical for students who arrive without pre-existing campus relationships.



Students of color

18% more likely to say digital-tool difficulty has made them question staying enrolled. Black students specifically were 34% more likely to say a responsive experience would make a significant difference.

06

— FINDING 6

The Student Experience Shapes the Alumni Relationship Long Before Graduation

For advancement and alumni engagement teams, the data in this report tells a story that starts well before the first ask. Alumni engagement and giving don't begin at graduation. They begin in the accumulation of experiences, small and large, that shape how a student feels about their institution over the full term of their enrollment.

The evidence is direct. 74% of students say that more responsive and easier-to-use digital tools at their institution would strengthen their sense of loyalty to their school. 73% say they are more likely to stay engaged with their institution after graduation if they had a positive experience with its digital support tools while enrolled.

The inverse is equally instructive. 64% say a poor digital experience during their student years would make them less likely to give back to or stay connected with their institution after graduation, whether through events, mentorship, or other programming.

73%

are more likely to stay engaged after graduation if they had a positive digital support experience while enrolled.

64%

say a poor digital experience would make them less likely to give back or stay connected after graduation.

The path from student to alumni is already unclear for many. 53% of currently enrolled students say they have no clear sense of what staying connected to their institution as an alum would even look like. Students who don't feel a sense of belonging on campus were 66% more likely to say this. And 49% say their institution has never communicated to them what alumni engagement opportunities exist.

Institutions that wait until graduation to introduce alumni engagement are already too late. 75% of students say they would be more interested in future alumni engagement if their institution began introducing those opportunities before graduation. 88% say they would find value in career networking and mentorship connections with alumni while they're still enrolled.

— FINDING 6 · CONTINUED

When students are asked what would most influence their likelihood of giving back after graduation, the top drivers are deeply experiential. 63% cite feeling that their student experience was valued and supported. 55% cite confidence that their degree prepared them well for their career. 54% cite positive experiences with faculty or staff during enrollment. Institutional prestige (22%) and endowment size (6%) rank far lower. The case for future alumni engagement is built in the moments that make students feel seen, not in the moments that make the institution look impressive.

88%

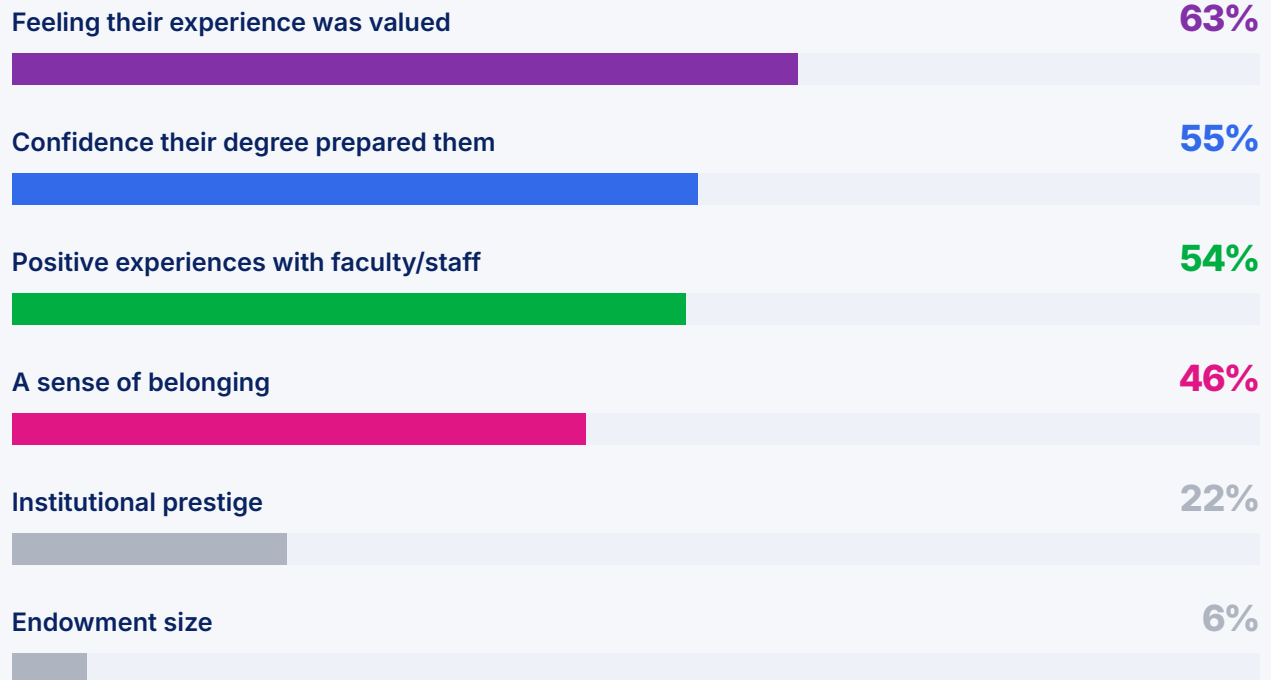


would find value in career networking and mentorship connections with alumni while still enrolled.



What would make students give back post-grad

Top drivers of post-graduation giving are experiential, not reputational



The financial aid advisor who picked up the phone, the registration system that worked the first time, the advising chatbot that gave a real answer at midnight before a drop deadline — these are the moments that build or erode the relationship advancement teams will later try to cultivate.

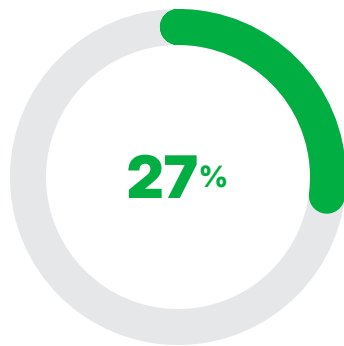


— THE BENCHMARK

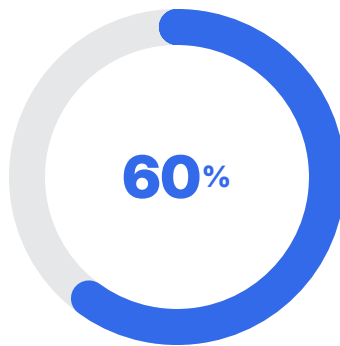
What a Modern Campus Digital Experience Looks Like to Students

Students weren't just asked what's broken. They were asked to define what good looks like — a consistent, achievable vision that most institutions are not currently delivering.

How well institutions meet that definition today



Meets all or most



Meets some



Meets few or none

That last group — the 13% whose institution meets few or none of their expectations — is perhaps the most consequential segment in this data: students still enrolled, still technically retained, but already accumulating the kind of disconnection advancement teams will spend years trying to bridge.

Qualities Students Say Define a Modern Campus Digital Experience.



“

The chatbot is another front door. Students don't know what technology is behind it. They only know whether they can get the information they need.

Anthony Morrone

Director of Financial Aid, [Nevada State University](#)



— CONCLUSION

One Interaction at a Time

From the first website visit as a prospective student to graduation day, institutions are continuously shaping the relationship that determines whether a student becomes a lifelong advocate or disengages entirely.

The pipeline from prospective student to donor has always been longer than a fiscal year. It's built over the full arc of enrollment and shaped by whether students felt supported at the moments that mattered, whether their institution treated them as individuals or as cases, and whether the relationship they developed felt worth continuing after they graduated.

The data in this report is direct. Every student who graduates feeling genuinely supported and valued is a future alumni relationship that doesn't have to be rebuilt from scratch. Every student who graduates feeling frustrated, overlooked, or underserved is a relationship that may never fully form at all.



— CONCLUSION · CONTINUED

The good news: the gap between what students experience and what they want is not primarily a technology gap. It is a design and prioritization gap. Students are not asking for futuristic AI experiences. They are asking for fast answers, 24/7 availability, personalized responses, and systems that don't make them repeat themselves.

These are solvable problems, and institutions that solve them are not just improving operations. They are strengthening enrollment, supporting retention, improving student well-being, and building the foundation for lifelong engagement.

Institutions that close the gap between what students expect and what they actually experience are doing so much more than improving operations. They are building the foundation for lifelong engagement — one interaction at a time.





— KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Four Moves That Close the Gap

01



Treat the digital experience as relationship infrastructure

Every interaction a student has with your digital tools — from financial aid questions to registration hiccups — shapes the alumni relationship you'll be working to build years from now.

02



Prioritize availability over perfection

Students aren't asking for AI-powered magic. They want fast answers, 24/7 access, and systems that don't make them repeat themselves. Meeting that bar is an operational and relational imperative.

03



Design for your highest-need students first

First-generation students, adult learners, caregivers, and students of color carry a disproportionate share of digital friction. Solutions that serve them well improve the experience for everyone.

04



Start building alumni engagement before graduation

75% of students say they'd be more interested in alumni engagement if their institution introduced those opportunities while they were still enrolled. The pipeline starts now.

Survey Methodology and Demographics

Methodology at a glance

Sample size	1,058 currently enrolled U.S. students
Confidence level	95%, $\pm 3\%$ margin of error
Field dates	May 14–18, 2026
Geographic coverage	47 of 50 states represented
Employment	68% employed or self-employed while enrolled

Institution types



About Kickstand

This report was produced in partnership with Kickstand, a global marketing agency specializing in support of high growth technology brands. Offering a data-first approach to PR and services that include media and analyst relations, research, content, crisis communications, and influencer marketing, Kickstand helps build well-defended market leaders in some of today's most innovative industries including mobility, robotics, AI, cybersecurity, fintech, insurtech, supply chain and logistics, sales and marketing tech, and eCommerce. Learn more at meetkickstand.com.



About Gravyty

Gravyty is a suite of AI-powered tools for higher education that spans the full student and alumni lifecycle — from enrollment to lifelong giving. Gravyty's suite includes Ivy & Ocelot (AI-powered virtual assistant), Raise (AI-fundraising assistant), Advance (fundraising platform), Graduway (alumni engagement platform), Gratavid (video messaging platform), and Athlete Network (athletics engagement platform). Learn more at gravyty.com.

