

So, You Think You Need A Chatbot

A Guide to Navigating AI in Higher Education



Chatbot Buying Guide

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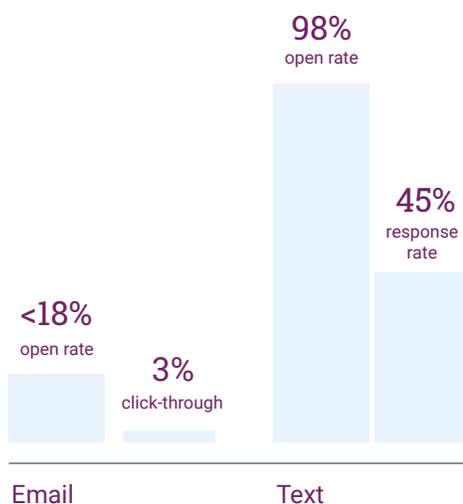
Just a few years ago, nobody had heard of chatbots and their potential for revolutionizing student support. But institutions like Georgia State—which has seen phenomenal success with AI-based student support—have put bots on the map. Just about every college and university is interested in one now. Chances are, if you're reading this, your institution is too.

But where to begin? The most successful institutions go beyond just shopping for a bot. They are looking for a way to communicate in a fundamentally different way with a new generation of students. Today's students have grown so accustomed to near-instant gratification that on-demand service isn't a plus, it's expected. They also are increasingly drawn to online channels that are casual and intimate in nature. Messaging apps, for example, have eclipsed social

networks in popularity. And, as the [BBC](#) recently put it, young adults today see email as “formal, boring and unsolicited”—the last thing a college wants.

Indeed, across higher education, emails have less than an 18% open rate, and only 3% of recipients click through to visit a website or take some sort of action. And young adults almost never pick up the phone. Text messages, in contrast, have a 98% open rate, and a typical 45% response rate. But more than just pushing information, or nudging—messaging is about finding a way to actually create a closer relationship with students. Far from being impersonal, the best chatbots put the fun and human connection back into the relationship between a student and a college.

Amy Smith, Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management at Georgia Southern, says Gusbot, named for the university's mascot, has provided a window into the student experience that doesn't come across over email, or even phone calls. Students don't hesitate to text Gusbot a quick question the moment it pops into their mind. “We have more of a sense of what students are thinking about in their day-to-day experience,” she says. “Then you also see some students just bantering with the bot. The interaction feels totally natural.”

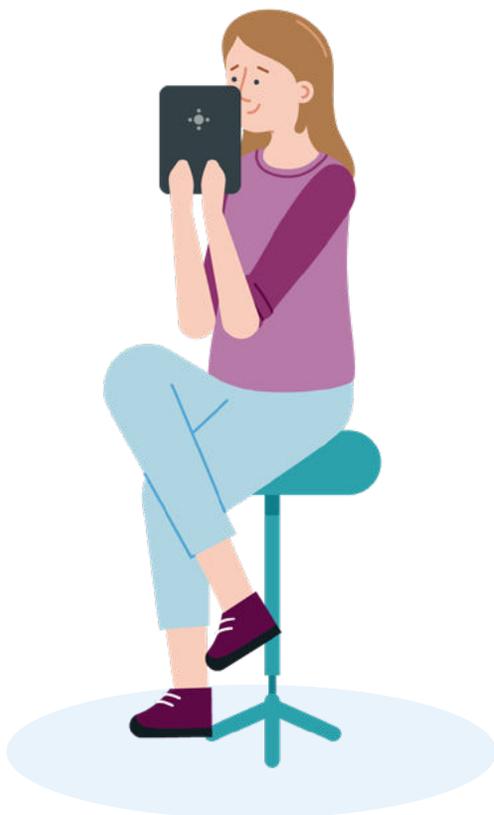


“ We have more of a sense of what students are thinking about in their day-to-day experience.”

Amy Smith, Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management, Georgia Southern

Nevertheless, the vast majority of institutions don't start out thinking about the joy—and bottom line benefits—of a bantering bot. Most leaders in enrollment management or student affairs start out looking for a tool to better manage critical processes, from admissions and enrollment to financial aid renewal and on-going engagement. They want to reduce wait time for potential and current students, cut down on staff fatigue from answering the same dozens of questions over and over, and push out information to applicants and students more efficiently.

And, indeed, a chatbot can do all those things. If well-designed, bots can provide answers to questions in mere seconds, and they can take care of the majority of the inquiries that come in after hours—one in five do—so they aren't waiting for staff the next morning. An effective bot can answer between 65-85 percent of the questions that come through, and the ones it can't address are typically more nuanced issues that need a human touch.



But bots truly earn their keep when they're directed toward more strategic matters—such as assessing an applicants' continued interest or encouraging an admitted student to actually show up in the fall. Indeed, institutions are missing the real opportunity if they aren't thinking about a chatbot as a tool for broad enrollment strategy, as well as student engagement and support. Regular student contact, which bots excel at, is critical to addressing a whole host of challenges, from summer melt to keeping students on track to graduation, that bedevil institutions.

But it takes more than a simple question-and-answer chatbot to see real results. Bots must be built with sophisticated AI technology and paired with a thoughtful strategy. Georgia State University's partnership with AdmitHub, for one, has shown what that looks like:



They were also more likely to hit key enrollment milestones—such as:

- Submitting transcripts and immunization records on time
- Showing up for orientation
- Less likely to be selected for FAFSA verification, meaning they had fewer errors or omissions in their financial aid applications.

When it comes to chatbots, are you an enthusiast, pragmatist, or strategist?

To see these kinds of results, institutions need a broad engagement tool—backed by a true thought partner on student success—as much as a technology solution. Maybe you're already there, but more likely you're not. Institutions have three common approaches, and in our experience, most start as either the enthusiast or the pragmatist. Where do you stand?



The Enthusiast

I heard about chatbots and they seem innovative and cool. All our peers are starting to use them, and we don't want to fall behind in serving our applicants and students.



The Pragmatist

I'm getting thousands of calls and emails asking the same questions over and over, and my staff just can't keep up. We need a chatbot to increase efficiency and scale, and reduce wait times for applicants and students.



The Strategist

I want to improve results, and I have specific goals in mind. I believe that a chatbot—if designed well—can be a great strategic engagement tool.

The goal of this guide is to take your institution from wherever you are and help you understand how to maximize what a chatbot can do for you. We believe every institution has the chatbot strategist in them.

A few questions to get you there:



For The Enthusiast

- Are your peers using their bots tactically—to improve workflow, reduce staff load, and provide better service—or strategically, which combines the tactical with a clear focus on larger goals?
- If they are goal oriented, what are their goals, from growing their applicant pool to boosting retention? And are their bots producing results?
- Where are your biggest admissions, retention and graduation challenges? How might you deploy AI-based engagement to address those?



For The Pragmatist

- How do your tactical needs, from reducing staff overload to providing better service, connect to larger goals?
- How will you redeploy staff resources to improve your odds of meeting those goals? How can the bot and your human team best work in sync?
- Beyond freeing up resources, how might the bot help you meet targets for enrollment, retention, and graduation, as well as other critical goals?



For The Strategist

- Great to hear that you're already thinking about how you could use a chatbot strategically. In our experience, most institutions in this place are thinking about one or two ways a bot might help them meet their strategic goals—and we challenge them to think even more broadly about how AI technology might improve communications, student support, and ultimately outcomes. Have you considered all the questions above?
- What are all of your most critical institutional goals, even if you don't think of them as communication or engagement issues?
- What is the university's biggest goal in the next 24 months? Even if a bot seems irrelevant, it might actually be able to help.

Institutions should not only spend time thinking about these questions—they also should engage any potential chatbot provider in a conversation about them. A technology provider should be a partner who also understands higher education, and that is able to work alongside institutions in developing a comprehensive plan for better student support. And understanding your true needs is essential to knowing what kind of technology and partner you ultimately need.

What Makes a Good Chatbot



A growing number of products are touting AI and machine learning as part of their sales pitch. But what's the difference between AI that can actually help students succeed and simple decision trees or marketing ploys? Here's a brief explanation of the technology that can help you tell the difference:

The user interface for most non-AI computer programs is a mouse, keyboard, or touch screen. Chatbots, like Siri and Alexa, provide a different kind of user interface for AI systems that uses speech (either spoken or typed). These AI programs range in sophistication from relatively simple and rule-based (e.g., providing a canned response to a specific question) to more complex and AI-enabled (able to parse human language and learn from previous conversations to improve accuracy constantly).

It is easy to build a simple chatbot, but complex to build a genuine AI chatbot. A chatbot's ability to understand run-on questions, handle misspellings, and deal with emojis are all key indicators of a chatbot powered by AI. Because they can respond to a nearly limitless number of students at once, chatbots have the potential to provide unprecedented support in real-time – which can streamline processes like admissions and enrollment and enable advisors and support staff to focus on students who need more hands-on, personalized support.

Learn more with the [University Leader's Glossary for AI and Machine Learning](#).

Roving Bots: Go Places You Never Thought

Chatbots are the ultimate utility player. They're able to provide an assist in critical areas well beyond admissions and enrollment management, especially when paired with a thoughtful student engagement plan and partner. As institutions begin working with bots, they often find more and more university departments asking for their help. You'll start with a leg up if you consider a wide range of possibilities from the outset.



Admissions

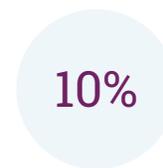
Higher education enrollments have declined for eight years in a row, and the number of new high school graduates is expected to vacillate but ultimately decline over the next decade. At the same time, the pool of potential college students is becoming more diverse, with more potential students coming from groups—low-income, first-generation, underrepresented minority—that higher education has typically struggled to recruit and retain. Chatbots present a new opportunity to meet a diverse pool of applicants where they are. Well-designed communications campaigns, powered by the customization and real-time responses of AI-technology, can increase applications, boost yield, and reduce summer melt.

The University of Wyoming, for example, was looking to grow enrollment, particularly among first-time students. The enrollment team knew they had a problem: over the summer months, there was a 6-8 week gap where admitted students weren't receiving any strategic communications. And too many were

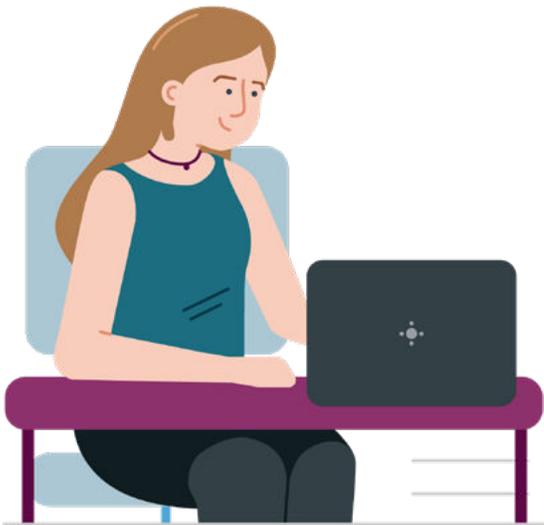
disappearing before the first day of classes. But the team was already strapped for time, and many of the tools they had available to them, such as email or a calling campaign, were time intensive and often yielded little response. When they landed on a chatbot as a possible solution, everything shifted. Cowboy Joe, a bot with a sassy personality, now keeps in regular touch with incoming students over the summer—and they are all too happy to chat and fill him in on their latest plans. The university has a much better sense of how the incoming class is shaping up—and summer melt dropped 32% in the first year with the bot. That meant the university welcomed almost 10% more freshmen to campus that fall, making it the largest incoming class in the institution's history.



drop in summer melt



more incoming freshmen

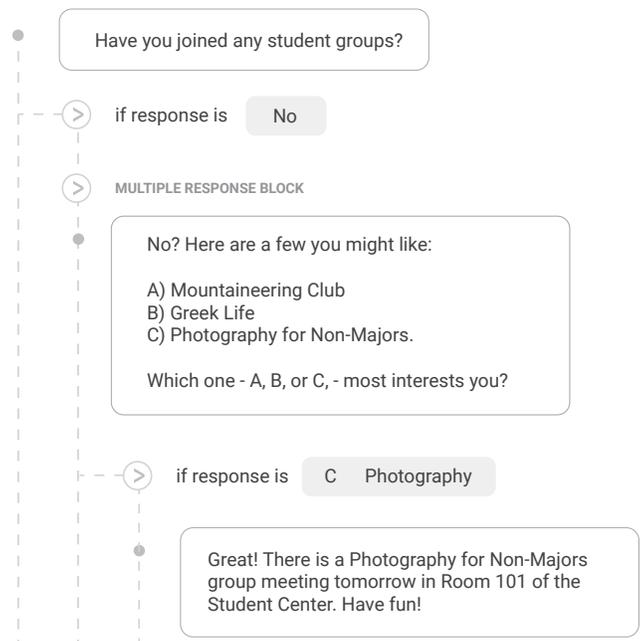


Student Engagement

Research is clear that students who are engaged on campus are more likely to persist and ultimately graduate, even more so for those that are invested in a group throughout college. But the students who are most in need of such connections are often the most difficult to reach. They aren't the ones who are going to show up to the student group fair on the quad or respond to a generic email. Chatbots can break through that wall by tailoring who they target and asking straightforward questions and offering simple advice:

Financial Aid

The complexity of the financial aid process and its various deadlines trips up millions of potential college students, particularly those from low-income and first-generation backgrounds who often lack support in navigating the blizzard of paperwork. Nearly half of low-income students who are accepted to college never show up for the first day of classes, and for many, the intensive and bewildering financial aid process was the roadblock. Among students who are selected for federal financial aid verification, almost a quarter never complete the process—leaving them with few options to pay for college and, more likely, pushing them to drop out. The process is particularly difficult for incoming students, but the annual re-application process can beleaguer returning students as well. Chatbots can transform this process for students—providing the kind of targeted, consistent, just-in-time communication that even the most robust financial aid staff simply can't. It can demystify the process for large numbers of would-be students, while freeing up staff to focus on supporting students with the most complicated situations.



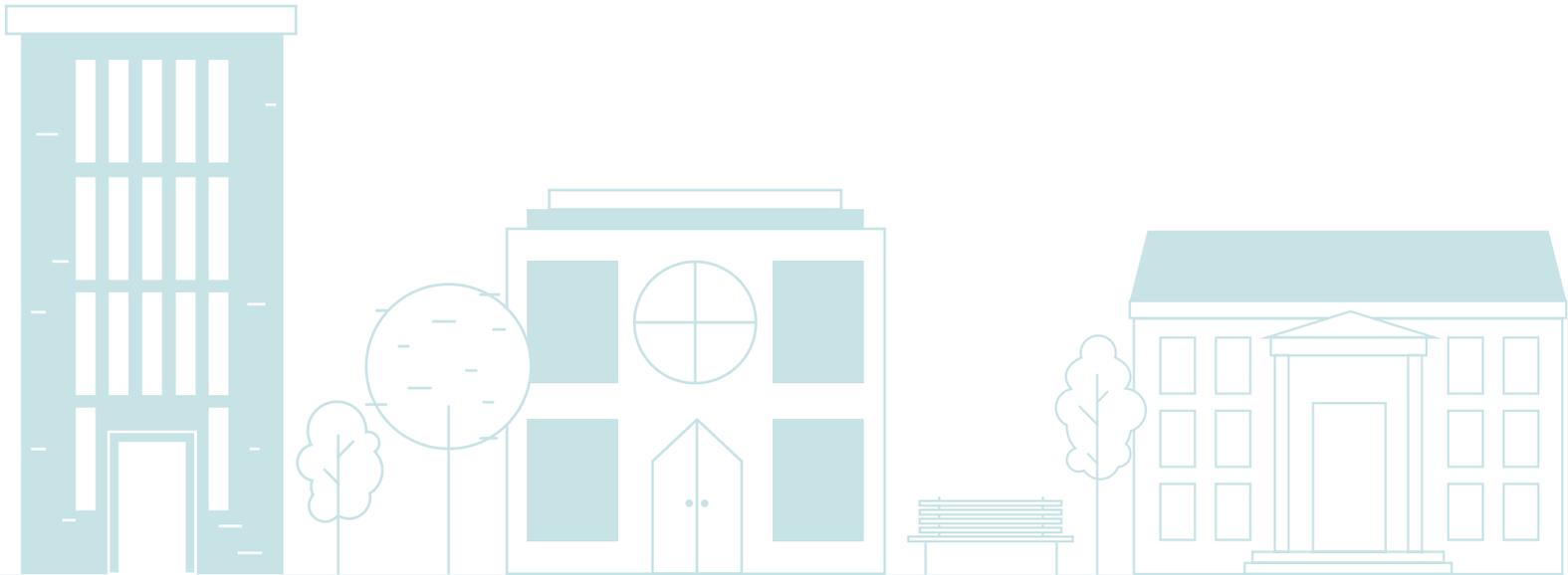
A bot-student conversation that might only take a matter of minutes can set a student up for deep connections over the next four years.

Community

Higher education institutions pride themselves on serving as engines of social mobility and economic prosperity. Four-year and two-year colleges are the workhorses of the local economy in thousands of communities across the country. And, perhaps surprisingly, chatbots can give them a hand in meeting this public service mission. From Detroit to Austin, higher education institutions and agencies are partnering with regional government and business leaders to leverage chatbot technology to demystify postsecondary education, draw more people into advanced training, and develop the workforce. In Arizona, for example, a coalition of organizations from across the K-12, higher education, and non-profit fields formed Project Benjamin to use a chatbot to implement a broad strategy to boost Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completions in 67 high schools.

Serendipity and Fun

Some people call this institutional identity or cross-cutting engagement. But we call it what it truly is—fun. People develop attachments to institutions for a lot of reasons, but what always sticks with applicants and students is how the place made them feel. Bots can inject personality and joy into processes that otherwise can be, let's be honest, a bit mind-numbing. They also can take routine communications and make them feel more like serendipity. Like when a student at Georgia Southern University was circling campus, lost and looking for orientation—and just happened to get a text from the campus bot asking her if she was still coming by and giving the exact location.



To Get Results, You Need A Partner, Not Just a Bot



To maximize AI technology, you need more than just a bot. You need a strategy—and a thought partner to help get you there. At AdmitHub, we focus on strategic communication around the full student lifecycle. A chatbot can extend an institution’s reach—and the support it can provide students—in ways that simply wouldn’t be possible with traditional staff alone. It can also help maximize the student support services in which institutions are already heavily investing. Too often, the impact of those services is limited because institutions simply aren’t reaching students, or they aren’t talking with them consistently enough to spark action.

For example, despite the fact that incoming freshmen say their [No. 1 motivation](#) for attending college is the prospect of getting a good job—only [52% of graduates](#) actually visited their career services office, and only 22% regularly took advantage of its resources. And that’s among students who actually graduated. Recognizing that career counselors’ time is limited, an institution might not want to just increase those numbers across the board—but rather target students with the highest potential need. Depending on the institution, a plan might focus outreach on first-generation or low-income students who are less likely than their more-advantaged peers to have the type of social networks they can draw on for career advice and professional connections. Or a university might see that the career outcomes of its history and biology majors lag behind other students and focus its efforts there. With a bot, the level of tailoring is nearly endless—and the technology can do the hard work of initial outreach and sorting, so that the students who end up in front of a career counselor are the ones who actually need the most support.

But a bot alone won’t help you arrive at the right focus. That’s why a strategic thought partner is absolutely essential. A university’s chatbot roll out should be aligned with its overall student success strategy, what data and experience say about its student needs, and where it is in its own organizational development. Perhaps, to continue our example, career counseling is an area that needs more student engagement, but if you’re losing 30% of your students between the first and second year, it may not be the first place you need to focus. That’s why we at AdmitHub collaborate with our partners to think broadly about what a chatbot can do, but also to act narrowly—focusing effort on the levers with the greatest potential impact. We believe that success is built on a deep understanding of a partner’s goals and key success metrics, and a plan that aligns with the institution’s student success framework and its development and capacity. We work closely together to diagnose where you are, and to create an AI-powered communications plan that addresses the areas of highest need and potential.

Real change requires both the technology and the human touch. Here’s what that looks like on the ground at three of our partner institutions.

At Allegheny College, Fun Comes with Function

When Jason Andracki in the admissions office at Allegheny College first started looking for chatbot technology, he saw it as the next logical evolution in the way colleges communicate to applicants. And, as Associate Director of Marketing & Communications, he was eager for ways to stay ahead of the curve. His staff also was going through a period of burnout and he was looking for ways to ease the load and maximize their limited time.

Andracki saw a lot of chatbots that could do just that. But when he saw one that was truly AI-capable, he realized that chatbots would be a lot more than a glorified FAQ search box or even a text-messaging campaign. “The AI is what grabbed us,” he says, “There are whole conversations that students have with the chatbot that we don’t have to get involved in at all. We don’t lift a finger, and that conversation might be happening at 9 pm on a Sunday.”

He also soon realized—with encouragement from his partners at AdmitHub—that the university’s chatbot, Chompers, could inject more personality into the admissions process. Sometimes, Chompers can be downright silly. And while that’s a nice change of pace for staff and for prospective students, it’s also

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Jason Andracki, Associate Director of Marketing & Communications, Allegheny College

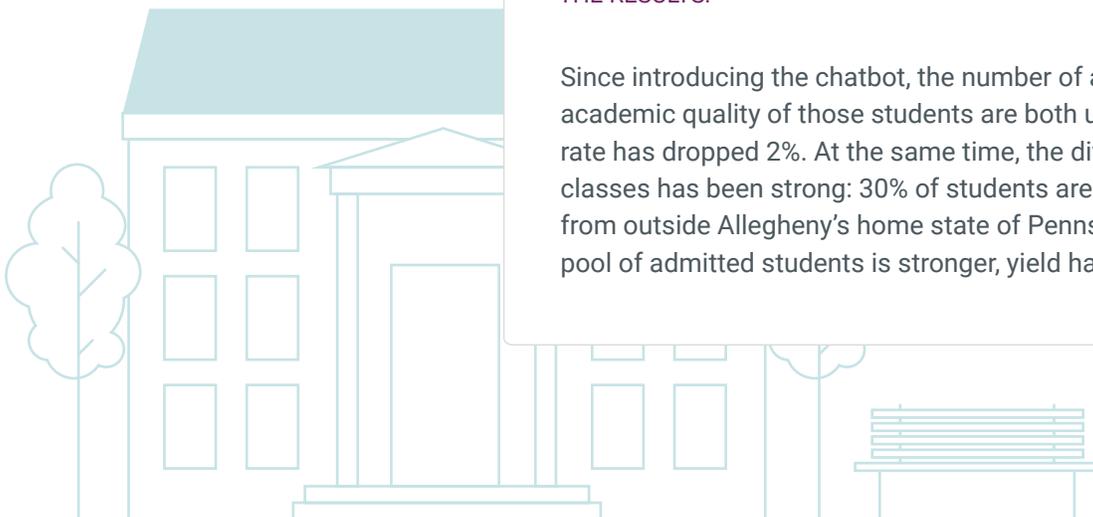
calculated. Inducing a good belly laugh can really make a college stand out in a crowded field.

Chompers can also hold students attention long enough—and target them at just the right time—to move them to get things done. The admissions team gets faster, more reliable responses from students when they use the bot, rather than email. “We’re able to actually connect with students and get their questions answered,” Andracki says.

And that, he says, is both rewarding—and yes, fun.

THE RESULTS:

Since introducing the chatbot, the number of applications and the academic quality of those students are both up, and Allegheny’s admission rate has dropped 2%. At the same time, the diversity of the incoming classes has been strong: 30% of students are first-generation and 50% are from outside Allegheny’s home state of Pennsylvania. And, even though the pool of admitted students is stronger, yield has increased by 2%.



At Wayne State University, Building a Modern Economy One Chat at a Time

Dawn Medley has worked at a lot of institutions, and Wayne State is easily the leanest. It works hard to maximize limited dollars and deliver on its mission of powering regional economic growth and expanding opportunities for lower-income, first-generation and minority students who are not typically well-served by higher education. So it was that, Medley, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management, found herself running a one-stop support center that was intended to address anything—admissions, financial aid, registration, and billing—that an incoming student might need. It was supposed to have 27 staff members, but only had 15. “It was not really a one-stop; it was a come-in-and-get-frustrated,” Medley says. Enrollment was dropping, and the institution wasn’t enrolling and keeping the underrepresented students it most wanted to serve.

Then, several years ago, Wayne State launched its New Student Retention Initiative. It was promising, but Medley knew the university wouldn’t be able to attract more students if it didn’t start to communicate with them more effectively. That’s when she heard about chatbots. The technology allowed her team to meet students where they were—on their phones—and could engage them in a conversation they could relate

to, even if they knew they were talking to a machine. The university saw impressive increases in overall enrollment and underserved students in particular.

Now, the university is drawing on that experience to extend the benefits of chatbot technology to the broader region—with a focus on bringing adults with no college degree back into the educational pipeline. About 690,000 adults in metro Detroit and 1.4 million across the state of Michigan have no college degree. “A lot of those folks are disengaged with higher education, but we don’t know where or what point,” Medley says. “They may or may not have graduated high school, they might still need a GED, they may have earned some college credits but aren’t sure how or where to continue.”

Wayne State has teamed up with the mayor’s office for workforce, regional colleges, the United Way, and other groups to build the “Detroit Ed 411” service that will provide information on postsecondary education in the region through a bot on Facebook Messenger. It is designed to strengthen the city’s workforce by providing 24-7 guidance and resources on vocational training, GED programs, community colleges and four-year institutions. Wayne State expects disengaged adult learners to see similar benefits as its own students have, and they hope to serve as a national model for how to power educational attainment and economic opportunity in a whole region.

THE RESULTS:

Not only has overall enrollment grown substantially since introducing the chatbot, but the university also is reaching more underserved students. Last year, it saw significant increases in first-generation (18%), Pell-eligible (13%), Hispanic (28%), and black (13%) students.



At Arizona State University, a ‘Sunny’ Bot Has Just the Right Touch

Arizona State, one of a handful of emerging mega universities, conjures images of sheer volume. Applications counted in the tens of thousands, incoming classes the size of entire institutions. But the university has a highly-targeted, high-touch admissions process. “We are extremely surgical in recruitment,” says Matthew Lopez, Executive Director of Admission Services.

So, when the university went looking for a technology platform to extend their outreach, they wanted something that could be just as finely targeted. An AI-capable chatbot was the ideal tool. At first, the institution used its bot, Sunny, for the transactional aspects of the admissions process—say, texting a student to remind her you still need her high school transcript. All the better, you can text at 8:30 am just as she’s walking into her high school, and most likely to continue on to her guidance office and just get the task done. And with a bot, you can do that for thousands of students at once and respond in real-time if they get back with questions.

The university also soon learned that it could drive the most engagement by sending interactive survey questions, rather than simple reminders or open-ended prompts. With housing, for example, Sunny will say, “Hey, you have a housing assignment. Please respond

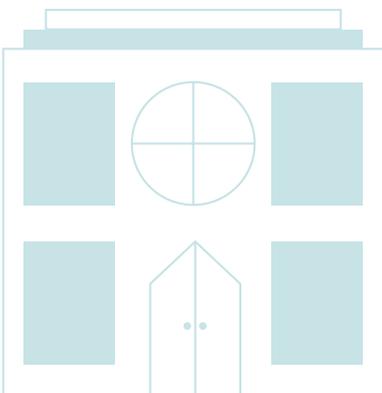
to one of the following prompts on where you are in the process,” and give a series of choices, including asking for someone to call to talk things through. With those types of messages, the university can get thousands of responses within minutes, rather than days.

The institution is now working to extend that approach to retention and on-going student engagement. “We already had a pretty robust communication plan for retention,” Lopez says, “So we didn’t want to just say the same thing in text.” They tried a few different approaches, and for now at least, have settled on using Sunny more for affirmation than prompting a specific action. The bot will reach out to offer encouragement at key points in the academic cycle, such as finals. “It’s finals time, we know it’s tough,” Sunny will text. “You aren’t the only one going through this. Here are resources if you need support.”

Responses typically start pouring in, but they often seem far afield. “They don’t just wake up one day and start asking Sunny questions,” Lopez says. “What they do is respond to campaigns, but it’s often in a completely different way than you intended. They’ll ask a totally unrelated question.” And that’s just fine. The point after all, is to reassure them that somebody is there—and to keep them engaged all the way through graduation.

THE RESULTS:

Since introducing the bot, the student response rate to communications is up, and time to respond is down. The university will receive thousands of replies within minutes, rather than days. Perhaps more important, the enrollment team is able to interact with students on a personal, tailored level that simply wouldn’t be possible at a university of ASU’s size without an approach backed by AI technology.



Confidently Go Forth



Whether you most identify as an enthusiast, pragmatist, or strategist—as you read this guide and how other institutions’ approaches have evolved, you probably identified some of your institution in all three. Many well-thought out plans for AI technology will include components of all three frameworks, though we believe that all institutions ultimately need to embed their chatbot in a broader student success and communications strategy in order to be successful.

Technology providers who see themselves as strategic thought partners, more than simply vendors, will be able to help you zero in on the details of exactly what

the right mix looks like given your institution’s needs, existing capabilities, and resources. They’ll design solutions alongside you, built on a deep understanding of your goals and key metrics for success. And those conversations should begin before you sign on the dotted line. It’s okay to expect the same level of engagement, care, and thoughtfulness that you’re looking to provide students. In fact, it’s essential for true success.



[Click here to schedule a 20-30 minute Student Communications Assessment.](#)

A member of our team will reach out to learn more about your current strategy and how you can better engage students to set them up for success!

Contact us today at info@admithub.com, or visit our website at www.admithub.com