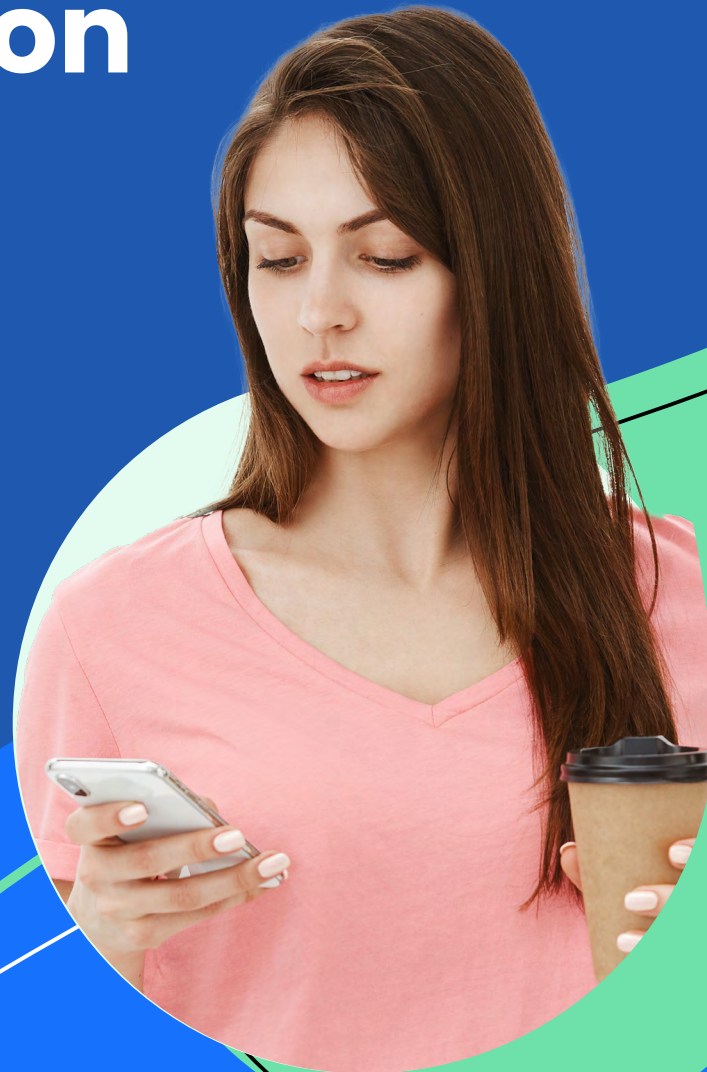


# The Student Communication Playbook

**How to Reach, Engage, and Retain Students in a Digital-First World**

*A Guide for Enrollment, Student Success, and Marketing Teams*

**drips**





# The Communication Problem No One Talks About

Ask any enrollment leader what keeps them up at night and they will name yield rates, summer melt, and FAFSA completion. Underneath these challenges lies a fundamental problem: institutions communicate constantly, yet rarely connect with their students. In one documented case, a prospective student received 2,374 emails from 115 universities in a single cycle, with nine using identical vendor templates.

The difference isn't budget or staffing; it's the approach. Institutions using two-way texting report 75 to 80 percent response rates, and **AI-driven outreach has cut summer melt by over 21 percent**. Students are overwhelmed by irrelevant communication rather than sheer volume. **The most successful institutions send targeted messages through the right channels at the right moments to invite real responses.**

This playbook is built on a simple idea. Students are not overwhelmed by how much we communicate. They are overwhelmed by how little of it feels relevant.

Using a  **green flag** /  **red flag** framework this playbook contrasts the broadcast tactics that fail with the conversational strategies that drive actual enrollment. Ultimately, this playbook provides higher education leaders with a shared strategic lens to effectively connect with the students who need them most.



Students who engage in two-way text conversations are **7.5x more likely to enroll** than those who only receive one-way notifications.

Mongoose Higher Ed Messaging Benchmark Report, 2025  
(80 million messages analyzed)

# 1 Channel Strategy Behavior

Students frequently state they prefer email, but their actual behavior shows they respond much more consistently to text. EAB found that 88 percent of high schoolers check email daily for college info, but only 8 percent click sponsored content. Channel effectiveness shifts across the funnel, meaning students prefer low-intrusion emails early in their search but become more open to text as urgency rises.

## What this looks like in practice

### Match channel to moment



Default to text across the funnel for real-time reach, and layer in email for long-form content.

### Lock in a single-channel strategy



Declaring 'we're an email school' optimizes for institutional convenience, not student behavior.

### Measure response behavior



Build channel decisions around what students actually do, such as click-throughs and response rates.

### Take preference surveys at face value



Stated preferences on surveys do not equate to the action-driving channels needed for deadlines.



**88% of high school students check email daily for college info.** Only 8% click on sponsored content. SMS response rates are 45% vs. 6% for email.

EAB Communication Preferences Survey, 2025 (n=19,299); Gartner

## 2 | Trust and Personalization

Public confidence in higher education has dropped significantly, with 45 percent of students perceiving a trust gap with leadership. Most institutional communication moves students through a process rather than showing genuine care, which actively erodes trust. Personalized web experiences that directly address a student's specific situation have been shown to increase applications by 962 percent.

### What this looks like in practice

#### Name the specific step

Tell students exactly where they are stuck to signal care and attention.

#### Send the same message to everyone

Generic mass communication actively erodes trust and signals they are just a segment.

#### Respond faster than expected

Beat the 24-hour expectation to build rapid trust.

#### Treat silence as neutral

A lack of response signals to the student that they are not important.



Students who have a great onboarding experience are **35x more likely to rate their overall university experience as great**. Only 12% of students currently feel a strong sense of belonging.

Salesforce Connected Student Report, 3rd Edition, 2022 (n=1,300+ students globally)

# 3 | Shift to Conversation

The fundamental communication issue is not the volume of messages, but that they deliver one-way information rather than invite a response. A randomized controlled trial showed that AI-driven two-way outreach reduced summer melt by 21.4 percent and increased overall enrollment by 3.3 percent. A conversational approach also drives equity, as Pell-eligible students sent 31.7 percent more messages than average when given accessible formats.

## What this looks like in practice

### Ask before you tell

Start sequences with low-stakes questions rather than task lists to build commitment.

### Lead every message with a task

Opening with a checklist treats students as compliance subjects rather than people.

### Build in response infrastructure

Support two-way text with staffed platforms or intent-recognition tools to handle replies.

### Use text as a new broadcast channel

Text blasts without response mechanisms are just emails with higher open rates.



**Pell-eligible students sent 31.7% more messages** than average in AI-driven outreach trials. Two-way outreach isn't just more effective. It's most effective for students who need it most.

Peer-reviewed RCT on AI-driven outreach; Mongoose Higher Ed Messaging Benchmark Report, 2025

# 4 | The Coordination Problem

The average institution uses 35 different systems to manage the student lifecycle, leading to heavily siloed departmental communications. Uncoordinated messages disproportionately harm first-generation students who lack parental guidance to filter the institutional noise. While 62 percent of institutions have a CRM, most fail to use it for cross-departmental coordination.

## What this looks like in practice

### Map the student's experience, not your department's



Audit the complete message timeline from inquiry to first term to reveal redundancies.

### Optimize each department's communication in isolation



Department silos make the overall student experience louder and more confusing.

### Assign someone accountability for the full experience



Give a specific person or cross-functional committee authority over the full communication experience.

### Assume a CRM purchase solves the coordination problem



Assuming a CRM solves the problem ignores the need for strict governance and journey mapping.



The average institution uses **35 different systems to manage the student lifecycle**. Nearly 1 in 5 uses 70 or more. No single department sees the full picture of what a student receives.

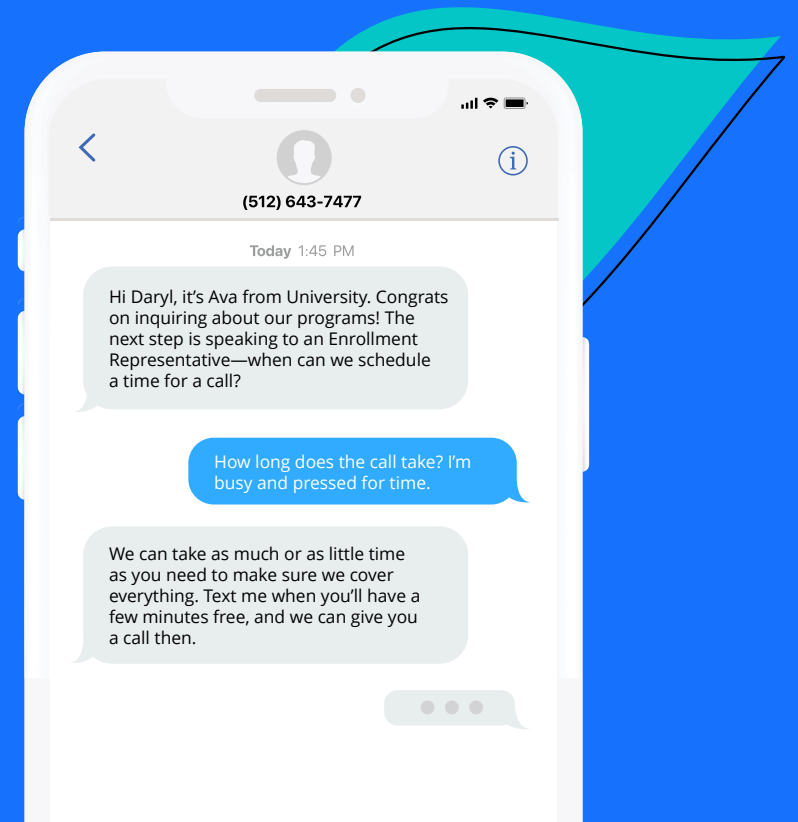
Salesforce-commissioned Forrester study

# Putting It Together: The Communication Shift

Student communication is not a volume problem; it is a relevance, responsiveness, and coordination problem. Institutions that match channel to moment, personalize outreach, ask questions, and enable two-way conversation are better positioned to build trust, reduce melt, and move more students from interest to enrollment. For higher education leaders, the goal is not simply to send fewer messages, but to create a communication strategy that feels timely, specific, and human across the student journey.

**Ready to drive outcomes  
through conversations?**

Contact Drips



## Research Sources

Statistics cited in this guide draw from: EAB Communication Preferences Survey (2025, n=19,299); Mongoose Higher Ed Messaging Benchmark Report (2025, 80M messages analyzed); peer-reviewed RCT on AI-driven outreach and summer melt, published in Research in Higher Education (2021); Salesforce Connected Student Report, 3rd and 4th Editions (2022, 2024); Gallup-Purdue Index (2014, n=29,560+); Gallup/Lumina Foundation State of Higher Education (2025); Forrester Total Economic Impact Study, Salesforce Education Cloud (2023); Mobilesquared SMS open rate correction, Nick Lane (2022); Castleman & Page, Summer Melt, Harvard Education Press (2014); NBER Working Paper, Avery, Castleman et al. (2020); EDUCAUSE QuickPoll CRM adoption (2021); Spark451/Jenzabar personalization survey (2024); Uswitch phone avoidance survey (2024, n=2,000); Pew Research Center teen internet usage (2024, n=1,391); TerminalFour email volume analysis (2018); Cialdini, Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion (multiple editions); Freedman & Fraser foot-in-the-door study, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (1966); Walther Hyperpersonal Model (1996, 2021 review).