

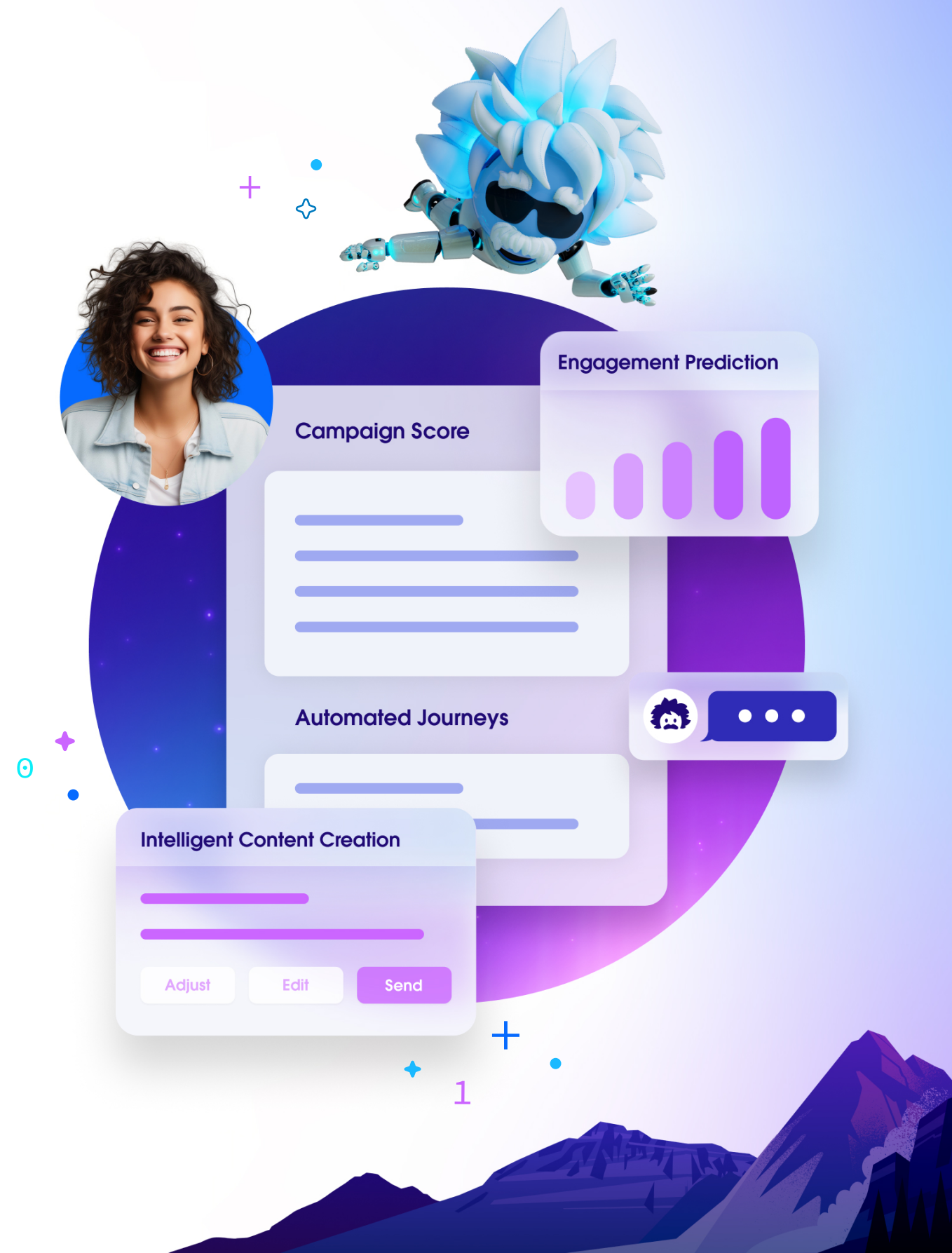


volt

This Changes Everything:

How Higher Ed Marcomm Teams Can Use AI Right Now

AI isn't coming, it's here. Colleges and universities adopting generative and predictive AI capabilities will gain first-mover advantage, but those that don't will fall behind. Here's how higher ed can stay ahead.



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Introduction

Not long ago, artificial intelligence (AI) was the stuff of science fiction. Today, it's in social media feeds, on the news, and likely something discussed with your friends.

In the past year, AI has evolved from a distant and abstract idea to a disruptive force impacting life and work for millions of people. The global AI market size is predicted to reach **\$990 billion by 2027** – up from an estimated revenue of **\$86.9 billion in 2022¹** and more than **80% of education administrators are expecting to see productivity boosts from AI.²**

AI is already impacting [higher ed](#): Faculty are experimenting with AI to personalize the learning experience for students and create engaging course content, while institutions are dedicating vast amounts of money to ensure they are prepared to both teach AI as a vital knowledge area and integrate it into their research functions.

But how is AI being adopted into higher ed marketing and communications (marcomm) functions? What roles will generative and predictive AI play in communications designed to attract, retain, and connect with students? What skills do today's marcomm leaders need? And how can higher ed communicators get the most out of AI while protecting their institution's brand?



¹ 5th Annual Global Technology Report, Bain & Company, 2024

² Why AI usage is now soaring among higher ed employees, University Business, 2024

The Shift is Here

AI presents an unprecedented call for change in higher ed that will transform educational practices and student experiences. For marcomm leaders, a paradigm shift in how humans and technology interact will be required to drive proactive communications across the entire student journey.

Gabrielle Young



Executive Director for Strategic
Marketing and Communications,
Maryville University



Dan Powell



Director of Digital Experience and
Transformation for IT,
Florida State University



Paul Napleton



Head of Digital and Marketing Automation,
University of East Anglia



Alice Maxwell



Senior Director of Marketing and
Communications for Student Affairs,
Florida State University





Challenge as Opportunity

Today's digitally savvy students expect a different higher ed experience than previous generations. They can spot a cookie-cutter email from a mile away and value authenticity in communications. **Nearly six in 10 students say the gap between students and institution leaders is due to a lack of consistent communications.**¹

Prospective students increasingly select institutions that listen and respond with accurate, relevant communications on their preferred channels. As they move from consideration to enrollment, they look for proactive, personalized engagement, covering everything from critical milestones to campus life, ensuring they are on track and don't miss opportunities to excel.

AI delivers that edge while also helping institutions achieve stronger retention and completion rates. Marcomm leaders can use AI to save time, accurately segment audiences, and rapidly build targeted content and campaign assets.

“We’re adopting a more customized and personalized experience using AI, to the point where we can start being more formulaic and proactive in our responses to students.”

Gabrielle Young,
Executive Director for Strategic Marketing and
Communications, Maryville University

Must-Know AI Vocabulary

Predictive AI

is **informative**. It uses machine learning and models to provide insights needed to take the next best action and rapidly analyze patterns in data to predict future behavior.

Generative AI

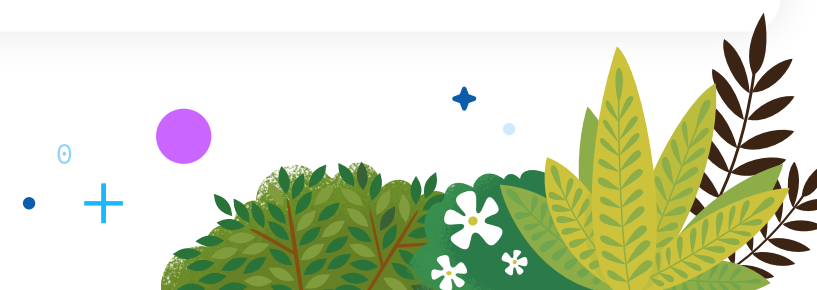
is **about taking action**. It enables staff to use prompts and existing data to create new assets and streamline tasks through automation, content generation, and acceleration.

AI Agents

is **the next evolution of AI** that combines the benefits of predictive and generative AI while also being able to anticipate, learn, and autonomously perform tasks (usually in the form of a chatbot). Agents can help users more easily take action in the form of segmenting campaign audiences, writing copy, designing images, and tailoring personalized messaging.

For instance, it can be used to identify a unique segment of prospective students who meet very particular criteria and then generate a personalized email journey specifically for that audience.

¹Connected Student Report, Second Edition, Salesforce, 2022



The Value of AI for Higher Ed Communicators

Marketing and communications is more important than ever to higher ed – and has arguably never been more challenging. Today's institutions spend between **\$429** and **\$623** per student on marketing and collectively allocate more than \$2 billion for advertising¹ at a time when the public's perception of higher ed is at an all-time low.²

Higher ed communicators have long aspired to organize campaign strategies based on analytics, engage and convert prospects, maximize marketing spend, and ensure future, current, and former students have their needs met quickly and accurately. AI can help these marketers with some very tactical aspects of their jobs – like survey development, copywriting, and audience segmentation.³

But it can also help marcomm professionals increase efficiencies and create highly targeted campaigns that drive long-term value by empowering them to:

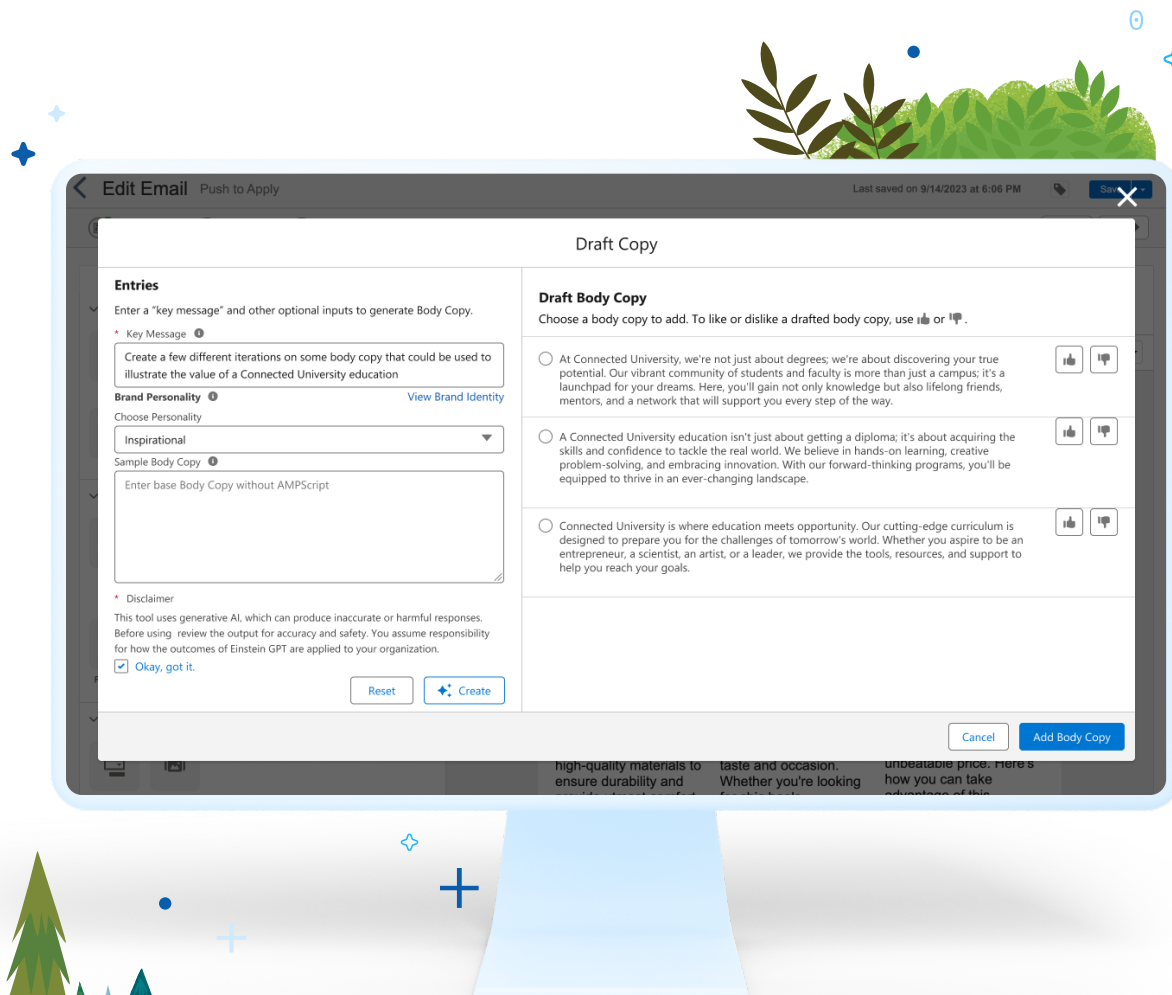
1. Enhance personalization with ease

AI tools can help institutions build stronger relationships with students by **making engagement recommendations and putting them into action**. This empowers marcomm professionals to auto-generate segment audiences with ease and create customized messages at scale that are likely to resonate and drive recipients to act. Marcomm teams can ultimately create personalized communications at scale while driving operational efficiencies for their staff.

¹Colleges throw billions at marketing themselves to attract students, The Hechinger Report, 2021

²American confidence in Higher Ed Hits Historic Low, Inside Higher Ed, 2023

³How to Use AI in Higher Ed Marketing and Enrollment, and How Not To, Volt, 2023



“We’re crafting the message that any AI tool we use is a complement to a professional’s skill set, and not a replacement.”

Gabrielle Young,
Executive Director for Strategic Marketing and
Communications, Maryville University

At [Florida State University](#) (FSU), some 125 communicators are using [Marketing Cloud](#) and taking advantage of features like Send Time Optimization to understand when emails are most likely to be opened.

“FSU students have an expectation of the experience they’re going to have, and we have a goal of the experience we’re going to provide, but those need to align,” **Powell** says. “Where AI fits in is helping us know who our prospects are and what they’re interested in so we can build out the affinity and interest model. We were doing it before, but AI lets us build personal and meaningful experiences for FSU students at scale.”

2. Leave no question unanswered

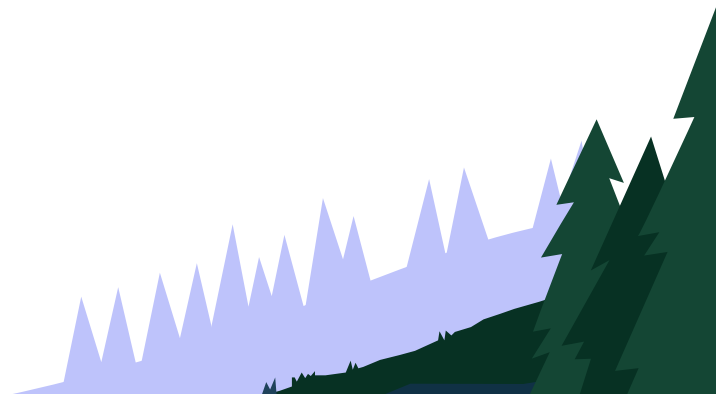
AI has evolved the chatbot from a tool that was often seen as inaccurate and clunky into a sophisticated example of conversational intelligence with immediate utility.

Florida State University uses its AI chatbot, **Ruby**, powered by Salesforce, to respond to queries from around the community and to help direct questions to the appropriate staff members. Florida State University’s marcomm professionals can see which questions are being asked most often, and by whom, and subsequently can ensure their communications get to the heart of what students really want and need to know.

Ruby is being fine-tuned to give Florida State University’s teams deep insights into student needs, but also to ensure she is **precisely tuned** to give accurate answers.

“Ruby is like a toddler picking up a rock,” **Powell** explains.

“The toddler has to choose what to do with the rock. ‘Should I eat it? Should I throw it? Should I place it on the wall?’ First, Ruby has to recognize it’s a rock, then, that she should place it on the wall. Eventually she starts to pick up on the 1,000 ways someone might ask the same question and recognize it as a rock each time.”



3. Realize the full power of data

Institutional data is an important commodity, yet is often captured across multiple, disjointed systems. For many thinly spread marcomm teams, **a holistic, data-driven approach to campaigns** has remained an aspiration.

By connecting data from multiple sources into a unified model with [Data Cloud](#), institutions can turn those aspirations into reality and take action on that data even faster. With a holistic view of target audiences, marcomm teams can gain insights into everything from a student's likelihood to enroll to a donor's willingness to engage over text or email. In short, unified data gives communicators the confidence they need to take the next right step.

“What’s really exciting about AI is that it actually lets you do something really powerful, which is talk to data,” [Napleton](#) says. “With AI, teams can access data in a much more meaningful way to find out how to engage and create value.”

For marcomm teams that want to use AI to more clearly and accurately understand their audiences, the quality and types of existing data they can feed into the models will determine the quality of both generative and predictive outputs.

In other words, the stronger the data that goes into AI, the more accurate and tailored the prediction or content generation will be.

Here’s what AI can do to help marcomm teams dedicated to areas like recruitment and admissions, student success, or alumni relations:



AI in Recruitment and Admissions

The pressure on institutions to enroll best-fit students is not a new phenomenon. But in the wake of more than a decade of declining enrollments, admissions professionals face the prospect of an even greater enrollment contraction—to the tune of 8% between 2026 and 2030.¹ With higher ed increasingly being asked to prove its value to the public, the stakes are growing, pushing institutions to rethink how they communicate with prospective students.


How can AI help marcomm professionals in recruitment and admissions?

1. Talk to data and predict enrollment trends

Always-on, AI-powered chatbots can eliminate the need to push out repetitive responses to routine admissions inquiries from students about topics like deadlines or financial aid. Institutions like [Maryville University](#) and [Florida State University](#) use AI to send automatic email responses when a student wants to learn about a specific program or entry requirements and to predict, based on interactions, when an email is most likely to be opened.

“Because our student population receives so many communications, the AI has a lot on which to base its predictions,” **Powell** says.

“Those predictions help communicators do more with data than was previously possible.”



"What's really exciting about AI is that it actually lets you do something really powerful, which is talk to data."

Paul Napleton

Head of Digital and Marketing Automation
The University of East Anglia

Half of admissions offices have already started using AI in their review processes,² and marcomm professionals can work closely with their admissions counterparts to synchronize activity. For example, engagement data pulled using AI tools can help admissions officers predict a student's likelihood of enrolling. Those insights can be shared with marcomm teams to create targeted communications like texts, emails, or social media replies.

“You can use Salesforce [personalization](#) to create the audiences you want to target,” **Napleton** says. “But from the enrollment perspective, you can use **AI tools to start thinking about predicting enrollment trends, and if you can do that, you're at a real advantage.**”

¹Strengthening higher education outcomes through partnerships, Mckinsey, 2023

²Admissions Offices Deploy AI, Inside Higher Ed, 2023



2. Connect prospective students with relevant communications

Intelligent segmentation gives admissions-focused marcomm teams a powerful means of ensuring they're talking to the right prospects in ways that resonate. With AI, teams can rapidly analyze and segment existing marketing data sets, automatically assigning a high score to groups of prospective students who are highly engaged, or a lower score to those who aren't.

What's more, **generative AI models get stronger and more accurate over time**. So, once an AI model learns what communications drive application completion, marcomm teams can replicate those messages across user journeys to scale desired outcomes.

When highly engaged prospective students meet highly personalized communications, the result is a major win for admissions teams.

3. Boost and protect the brand

Every institution needs a compelling, authentic brand to persuade today's prospective students. **AI can help communicators build, deliver, and protect that brand** – and the very use of AI itself can be a brand asset. Institutions using AI can position themselves as leaders on the cutting edge of higher ed, weaving their use of AI – for research, teaching, or personalized communications – into their brand story.¹

At the executional level, generative AI tools can tweak brand positioning to drive more engagement, or quickly create different versions of a logo to see what resonates more with students. AI-powered data analysis can give marcomm teams a clear picture of how their brand is stacking up against others' by rapidly analyzing social and web analytics, as well as keywords that are associated with their brand.

“Sometimes universities compete [for students] on prestige or location or brand, but actually I think data and tools like AI are a great way to gain a competitive advantage,” **Napleton** explains. **“AI can let you build bonds early with students. You can build stickiness and engagement before they've even joined.”**

Still, marcomm professionals must be vigilant to ensure AI tools don't inadvertently undermine their brand or alienate prospective students. To that end, AI-assisted brand sentiment monitoring tools – like those used in social media management systems – will become an even more important part of the marcomm toolkit.

“From the enrollment perspective, you can use AI tools to start thinking about predicting enrollment trends, and if you can do that, you're at a real advantage.”

Paul Napleton,
Head of Digital and Marketing Automation,
The University of East Anglia

¹AI's Impact on Institutional Reputation, Volt, 2023



AI in Student Success

The number of people who started college but left before earning a credential reached **40.4 million in 2021**.¹ The high number of stop-out students continues to be one of higher ed's biggest challenges. Ensuring students are supported in their studies – and as people – will be key for those colleges and universities looking to help students complete their education on time and with credentials.

How can marcomm teams use AI to help drive student success?

1. Connect students with the services they need

One of higher ed's biggest problems may also be its simplest to solve, thanks to AI. A 2023 report showed that 60% of students were unaware of the full array of services offered to them at their institution.² Not using or knowing about a campus service can undermine persistence and outcomes, and every detail matters when it comes to student success. For example, students who have a great onboarding experience are 35 times more likely to report having a great overall university experience.³

Predictive AI can help teams find hard-to-spot relationships between many variables of student life and the resulting behaviors and actions, yielding insights into who might need extra support. A team may realize that new students who are failing first-year math, and haven't visited their academic advisors more than once, are at a high risk of dropping out. Marcomm and student success teams can then work together to close the gaps, making sure services are proactively communicated at the right time.

¹Some College, No Credential Student Outcomes, NSC Research Center, 2023

²Driving Toward a Degree 2023: Awareness, Belonging, and Coordination, Tyton Partners, 2023

³Connected Student Report, Third Edition, 2022





At Florida State University, Maxwell's team used Salesforce's AI solution [Einstein](#) to aid in the launch of a cross-collaborative, interdepartmental communications campaign called "Hello FSU!".

"When a student starts at Florida State University, they get an email saying, 'Hello,' and listing services they can take advantage of. From there, the student's clicks are tracked and they receive follow-up emails according to their interests and needs," **Maxwell** says.

"Once the system learns which content pieces are effective, it can adjust the remaining messages in the campaign."

Social media monitoring on the back end tracks the campaign's success.

"We've seen so much more engagement, and a lot of it is driven by this Hello FSU! campaign and the cross-team collaboration," she says.

AI can help automate and streamline student success focused marcomm campaigns, requiring less manual message deployment. It's worth noting that, as helpful as AI-enabled interventions may be, this is an area that will require teams to be up-to-date and conscious of data privacy considerations.

2. Understand (instead of guess) what makes students stick around

AI is giving the [University of East Anglia](#) the insights it needs to more deeply understand the student experience, and it allows them to be iterative in refining their approach.

"We're looking at how we can use AI to uncover hidden insights and optimize the student lifecycle," **Napleton** says.

"For example, we can use it to analyze data from social media and gain insights into student opinions and preferences to inform enrollment management and beyond," he says.

Florida State University is also using data pulled from social and communications channels to ensure more satisfied and engaged students. Thanks to AI, **Maxwell** feels her team's data reporting capabilities are "infinitely better."

"Alice's team has been using the engagement scoring split in Einstein," explains **Powell**, **Maxwell's** colleague at Florida State University.

"AI looks at engagement and creates personas based on engagement, and creates different communications journeys for them. Ultimately, the more people we have using these tools, the more data we'll have and the better the experience we'll be able to deliver."



AI in Alumni Relations

According to LinkedIn, insufficient data is one of the top issues facing alumni relations teams. It can lead to lost opportunities to engage alumni and minimize the efficiency of outreach efforts.¹

How can AI help marketers and communicators within alumni engagement teams?

1. Fill in gaps in alumni data and improve the user experience

AI can create engagement scores that help teams gather valuable insights about people's willingness to engage, donate, or attend events. Where segmentation once took weeks or more, involved multiple teams, and didn't always yield the most accurate information, individual communicators can now segment audiences precisely, and in mere seconds.

Communicators can use AI to track and optimize their campaigns across platforms, ensuring a **360-degree view** of the alumni experience. Intelligent segmentation [empowers teams](#) working in this area to improve their forecasting, be more strategic with marcomm budget planning, and ultimately do more with less. This sharper image of alumni life and engagement afforded by AI minimizes the guesswork marcomm teams often resorted to in the past.

For the alumni, AI can also offer heightened control over their interactions with their alma mater as well as new, more efficient ways to connect.

“In the alumni sector,” [Young](#) explains, “AI tools within [Education Cloud](#) can give teams the ability to let alumni set their own profiles and user experiences – all the way down to things like ‘I don’t want the annual report sent to my house, I want a digital copy.’ We call it 5-star service.”

¹What are the most common data quality issues in alumni relations?, LinkedIn



2. Build learner relationships for life with a focus on skills

AI is enabling institutions like Maryville University and the University of East Anglia to entirely overhaul the long-held view of the student lifecycle. In an evolved model, completing a four-year undergraduate degree isn't the end of a student's time with an institution. This notion aligns more with what people today want and need out of postsecondary education – namely, skills. Nearly half (49%) of students surveyed say they plan to continue learning through a higher ed institution after graduating.¹

“The [president of Maryville University](#) is a real proponent of making sure the student experience isn't just a catch-and-release model,” **Young** says. “We're using AI to set up the model for our education platform to take you from learner to earner and back again. That includes workforce development opportunities, certifications and beyond.”

Marcomm teams are perfectly positioned to activate that “learner to earner” vision. AI can help teams communicate relevant information to alumni at every stage, including when they should consider returning to their institution to upskill or reskill. The shift from a higher ed experience that ends at graduation to one that extends across a person's lifetime can be a powerful reputational asset and expand the pool of prospective students to include those who have already graduated.

“We want our learners to go out into the world with the realization that upskilling and gaining extra information will put them ahead of the curve, and they can come right back to us, right on back home to get those skills that will let them stand apart from the competition,” **Young** shares.

¹Connected Student Report, Third Edition, Salesforce, 2022

3. Get the most out of campaigns and maximize creative assets

Alumni relations teams, like others, lean heavily on content to tell their stories and help people see themselves as part of the institution many years after graduation. AI can help drive fast, effective content creation and can also surface high-performing content for repurposing or reusing.

\$990 billion

The projected value of the global AI market by 2027, according to Forbes

For institutions like Maryville University, this kind of intentional content sharing and repurposing provides an example of how AI helps decentralize functions and break down silos.

“What we understand is that student life, student success, alumni relations ... they all need content,” **Young** explains. “I have decentralized a lot of the creative infrastructure [with AI]. We create the governance for content. But then we say, ‘OK, here are thousands of photos you can choose from. Design and create with them however you see fit.’ ”

Beyond extending the life of content, marcomm teams can use AI to build, deploy, and scale multichannel fundraising campaigns that incentivize alumni to donate based on personalization and likelihood to engage. This is yet another example of how AI can drive efficiency and efficacy, regardless of the goal.





What Types of Data Can Marcomm Teams Use with AI?

Data Type	Recruitment and Admissions focused marcomm teams	Student Success focused marcomm teams	Alumni focused marcomm teams
Contact information (Name, email address, address)	✓	✓	✓
Contact preferences (Text, email, phone, opt-in and opt-out forms)	✓	✓	✓
Demographic data (Age, enrollment status, location, gender identity/ pronouns, race, languages)	✓	✓	✓
Student life and campus engagement data (Card swipes, club participation, health and well-being service use)	✗	✓	✗
Email and web activity/engagement data (Email opens, time-on-page)	✓	✓	✓
Academic status and attainment data (Major/minor, GPA, at-risk status, class standing/ranking)	✓	✓	✓
Career and career services data (Stated career goals, internships, apprenticeships, other work experiences, jobs held, sector of employment)	✓	✓	✓
Event attendance data (Athletic ticket purchases, club events, open days)	✓	✓	✓
Personal interest and affiliations data (Clubs joined, social impact causes, philanthropic ventures)	✓	✓	✓
Email copy (Predict engagement rates and generate hyper-personalized communications)	✓	✓	✓

Meet the Human-Adjacent Asset

While this wave of AI innovation has sparked fears of job displacement in many sectors, the experts we spoke with said nothing could be further from the truth. As they see it, **AI will be a human-adjacent asset**, giving marcomm professionals the tools they have long wanted to do their jobs more efficiently, accurately, and collaboratively.

“We’re crafting the message that any AI tool we use is a complement to a professional’s skill set and not a replacement,” shares. “We’re saying, ‘You can do this, and...,’ instead of ‘You can’t do this.’ ”

The skill set of marcomm professionals will need to evolve and their purview may change. The marcomm toolkit will increasingly need to include high levels of adaptability, agility, technological prowess, visionary thinking, and strong communication and collaboration skills. But by spending less time on laborious tasks that once took days or even weeks – like creating an image, writing copy, or building out campaign segments – marcomm professionals will have more time to focus on strategy, analyze results, and ensure that every campaign or piece of communication is at the **very top** of its game.



An Edge ... For Those Who Act Quickly

AI is the catalyst for a profound and necessary metamorphosis.

The experts we spoke to believe AI is empowering them to do their jobs better by enabling new ways of engaging with students, breaking down silos, creating greater cross-collaboration, and advancing analytics to make stronger marketing decisions.

“The horse has already bolted with AI,” explains [Napleton](#). “There’s no point putting our heads in the sand now. Those universities that test and learn will be those that succeed. Right now, there’s a first-mover advantage.”

Maryville University, University of East Anglia, and Florida State University all are bound by a common thread: They inherently recognize the power of AI to bring efficiency to marketing and communications, while putting their teams in the driver’s seat of delivering more personalized engagements and a stronger student experience.

No matter the size, mission, or student body of an institution, AI can help marcomm professionals listen and communicate better. That, in turn, will give institutions the power to do better. The end result? **Stronger student outcomes.** In the long term, AI can help to deepen institutions’ connections to people throughout every stage of their “learner to earner” journey – from prospective student, to enrolled student, employee, graduate student, certificate earner, and retired alumnus. In using AI in these ways, institutions can help redefine the very mission of higher ed while ensuring that its value proposition remains viable and clear to the general public.

AI is not just the latest shiny tech trend. It is a new and powerful catalyst for growth and evolution, and an enabler of every institution’s inherent mission: improving lives through education.

Learn more about Salesforce
for higher ed communications

Dive deeper





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