

6 Strategies To Help You Tackle The Student Retention Crisis

Introduction 03

A Quick Review: Higher Education & AI 04

6 AI-Fueled Student Retention Strategies 06

Strategy 1: Take a unified approach to student engagement 07

Strategy 2: Deliver personalized experiences 10

Strategy 3: Foster flexibility and accessibility 13

Strategy 4: Expand financial support communications 16

Strategy 5: Create a feeling of belonging with proactive tools 18

Strategy 6: Expand your career services 21

Embrace Technology With Ocelot 22



Today, students have become more and more used to accessing the information, services, and learnings they need at the push of a button. The institutions that recognize this are adapting the way departments across campus engage and retain their students. The ones that don't are falling behind.

Since 2004, over **800 US colleges and nearly 10,000 campuses** have closed, with many citing poor enrollment figures and dropout rates as a leading cause. But this doesn't have to be the case.

Today, we'll discuss six strategies higher-ed professionals from Enrollment, Student Services, Financial Aid, and beyond can leverage to retain students and make the university experience easier to navigate for everyone. We'll even detail how each of these steps can be made more efficient and effective with the use of modern, human-centric artificial intelligence (AI). Let's dive in!

Higher Education & AI



A Quick Review

With nearly **18 million students** currently enrolled in postsecondary education in the US, it might seem impossible to provide a tailored experience to each. Considering the variety of needs they have, from sorting out financial aid to leveraging online enrollment systems, applying for student housing, and countless other areas, higher education professionals could spend every second answering student questions by phone, email, and in office, and still have a full inbox at the end of the day. Thankfully, many universities have found a more efficient solution to meeting student needs by incorporating AI-focused strategies.

You're probably already familiar with ChatGPT and DALL-E, but the power of artificial intelligence goes beyond content generation. With AI, institutions of higher education (IHEs) can provide students with the right information, at a place and time that's convenient for them (via their phones and laptops).



You can learn more about AI for higher education in this [white paper!](#)

No more waiting in line to visit their school's financial aid department, or calling administration with yet another question they couldn't find the answer to online. AI-powered solutions such as chatbots or **two-way texting** empower students to self-serve, alleviating frustrations and hurdles to education milestones.

Even more, these solutions give staff the freedom to offload repetitive tasks and focus on those human interactions that make the biggest difference to students, providing the best college experience possible. Sounds like a win-win, right? Now, let's get into those AI-fueled student retention strategies.

6 AI-Fueled Student Retention Strategies

Take a unified approach to student engagement

When you're looking to increase student retention, gathering data on the needs, successes, or risk profiles of students at your university is a great start. But unless cross-campus departments are aligned, you won't be able to monitor key indicators or provide consistent support effectively.

By taking a unified approach to the way you collect, store, and act on that data, your institution can ensure issues are dealt with at the right time, by the right team—simplifying the process for administrators and improving the student's overall experience.



Proactive, targeted outreach

Early intervention is vital for student retention. For example, the [Education Advisory Board](#) states that 33% of first-generation (first-gen) students leave college within their first three years. Many attribute this to financial struggles, lack of peer support, and unequal access to resources.

By consolidating information from various departments within an institution — from academic records and attendance, to extracurricular activities and behavioral history — administrators can access vital information about each student in real time, allowing staff to proactively identify students who are at risk of falling behind.

Removing barriers with two-way text

One example of proactive outreach success comes from a California community college, who identified six thousand students who were unable to re-enroll for classes due to an unpaid tuition hold on their account.

The school realized that these students were likely unaware of a fund available to help students pay off their tuition. They decided to use Ocelot's Two-Way Texting solution to inform that segment of students about their options, and the result was incredible:

50% of those students re-enrolled that semester

The school recovered millions in unpaid tuition and possible student attrition



Collaboration between departments with integrations

Being able to understand whether or not students have attended class, if they've purchased course materials, and even whether or not they've registered for the required courses associated with their degree so they can graduate on time is absolutely vital to retention efforts. And to achieve that level of transparency and proactivity, you need to be able to integrate platforms.



Learn more about how Ocelot can integrate with your SIS, CRM, and other knowledge sources [here!](#)

Integrated platforms are a powerful way to move departments away from traditional, silo-based approaches, making it far easier to share information and coordinate efforts effectively. Ultimately, when staff are provided with the data to better understand their students, student support becomes seamless—and with the help of technology, much of the hard work can be automated.

For example, Ocelot solutions plug into existing SIS and other knowledge sources on campus, providing personal guidance and suggested next steps based on individual student profiles—instantly accessing key insights to guide conversations from course enrollment to financial aid status.

Deliver personalized experiences

Different people have different needs and expectations when it comes to communication. But whether they're a first-gen student in need of financial aid or a non-traditional student with a full-time job, one thing they all have in common is the desire for a tailored and consistent college experience.

Taking a data and technology-driven approach to personalize communication and engagement can go a long way to meeting your retention goals—from onboarding and beyond.

Enrollment and orientation

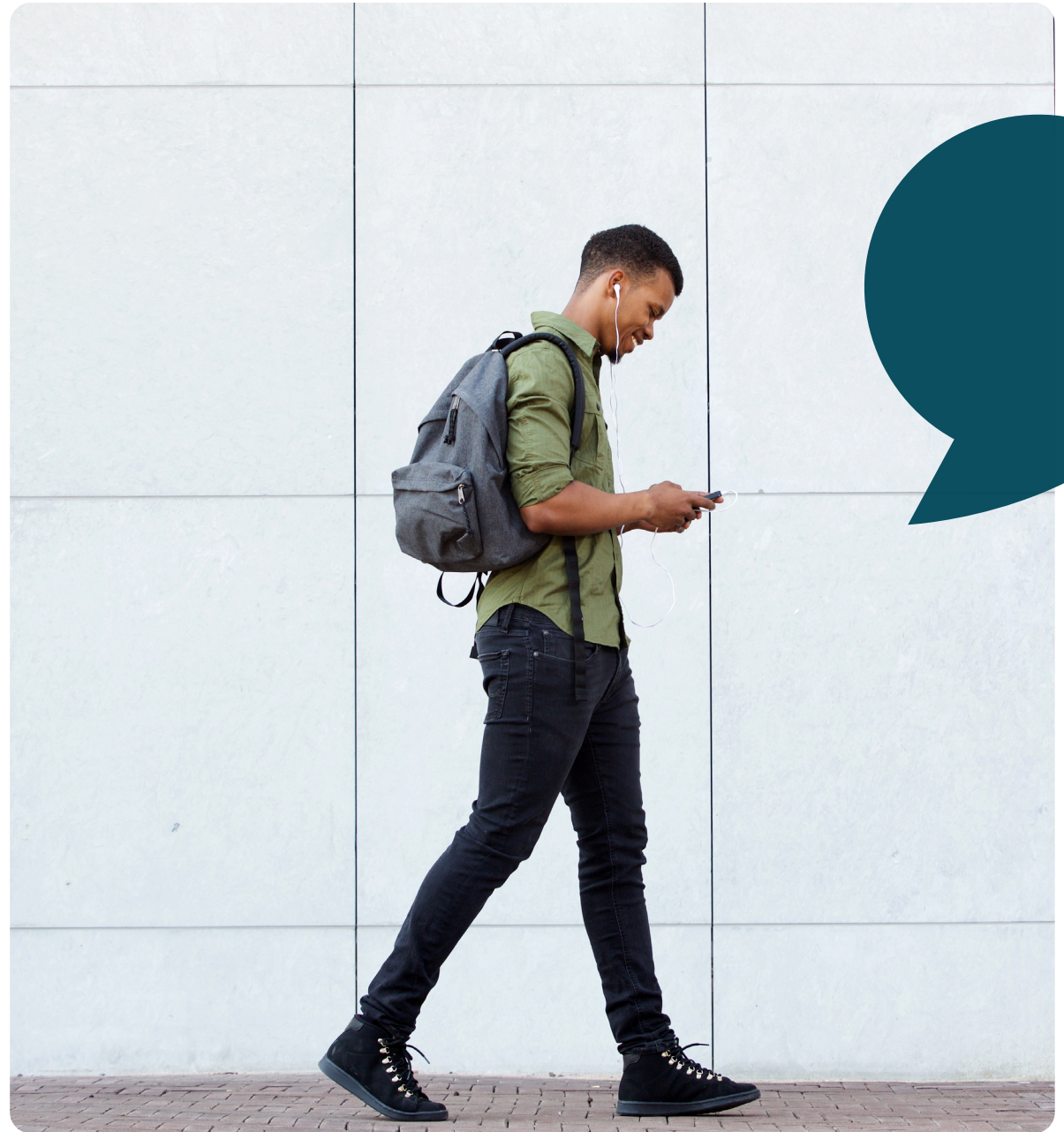
If the enrollment process is confusing and time-consuming, many individuals will abandon their applications entirely. In [Ocelot & Higher ED Drive's recent report](#), 87% of higher education leaders agreed that students who can't easily access information are less likely to complete applications, highlighting that change is needed.

Ensuring prospective students have access to the relevant information (in a format they're likely to engage with) should be the first step to providing a tailored student experience. And the same can be said for the orientation process. The first few weeks of college could make or break a student's experience. Institutions should be on hand to deal with issues before they escalate, and provide multiple communication channels for convenience.

Data-driven communication

With so much information constantly hitting their inbox, students are bound to be overwhelmed. So, how do you make sure your students are receiving the information they need when they need it? And even more, that they're receiving that information via the channels that work best for them? One factor to consider is that **two thirds** of Gen Zers prefer text messaging to emails.

Using AI communication tools like two-way text, **chatbots**, and live chat can go a long way to crystal clear communication, delivering information from your SIS and CRM in a way that's intuitive and personalized. Even better, you can provide answers to specific questions for that student, without adding to the noise.



Colorado State University Global

No institution knows the challenge of changing demographics better than **CSU Global**. As the first fully accredited online university, they were faced with the challenge of disappearing students. To connect with potential dropouts about why they were thinking of leaving, they wanted to reach out to them in a way they were likely to engage with.

Enter: Ocelot's two-way chatbot. In one text campaign they reached over 1,700 students who hadn't attended class in more than four months, with a 50% engagement rate. The results aren't surprising given that college students admittedly spend between **8 to 10 hours per day** on their cellphones.

Not only did CSU Global efficiently project their course completion rate, they also learned more about what they could do differently to improve their student experience and increase retention in the future.



[Read the full CSU Global story](#)

Foster flexibility and accessibility

Every student's circumstances are different. The average college student might be between 18–22 with few responsibilities other than attending classes, but a growing number of individuals are enrolling in college who don't fit this demographic—from mature students, to parents and carers, to those with demanding full-time jobs.

Students want to feel like a name, not a number. Making sure information is available to them no matter their schedule or unique situation lets them know you care about their educational development and them as a person.

Offer 24/7 support

Giving students the power to self-serve is the first step toward creating this experience. Take office hours, for example. If a student has other commitments outside of college, accessing information between 9 to 5 might be impossible. Take this information online, however, and it's available 24/7.

This isn't to say you should stop prioritizing in-person support, though. In fact, 94% of respondents in a [recent Ocelot survey](#) said they wanted to speak to a person when it suited them. So, if you combine the two communication strategies, students can find the answer they're looking for online—and those that can't, know where to find you.

Even better, when they do find you with their more complex and personal asks, you'll have the time to devote to that interaction because other students have been able to leverage a chatbot to answer their questions.

Leverage always-on AI technology

Although email was previously viewed as a revolutionary way to perform student outreach, attitudes have changed—and so has technology. Many students don't want to even take a look at an email inbox; they want instant communication via the preferred

channels they use in their everyday lives: chatbots and text messages.

In 2023, the best way to reach students is through AI platforms like chatbots, two-way texting, and live chat. Again, think flexibly—what works for one person might not work for another. Providing a combination of tools to engage with and seek help from is key.



California State University Long Beach

CSU Long Beach “texted 6,000 students to let them know they could use COVID-19 relief funds to pay off past-due balances. The college re-enrolled 3,100 students from this campaign—more than 50%. They recouped \$1.8 million in tuition with a single text message.”

Rather than posting this information online for students to find at will, CSU Long Beach ensured it reached the right students directly, so that those struggling financially would be the first to know.



Read the full CSU Long Beach story

Expand financial support communications

Financial aid has long been a challenge for students and institutions, especially with updates like the FAFSA Simplification Act. A typical four-year college degree can cost in-state students **\$10,200 per year**, while those enrolling from outside the state could be charged around \$26,290 annually. And for private non-profit universities, like Harvey Mudd College, University of Pennsylvania, Amherst College, and similar, these figures are even higher.

Beyond the cost of tuition, students must also factor in accommodation and living expenses, the price of which can vary by location. Either way, students can expect to pay between \$500–\$3,500 per month just on rent, not including utilities, food, or other essentials. And if IHEs fail to convey vital information around financial aid, this could have consequences.

Support at every application stage

With so many academic deadlines to keep track of, key dates for financial aid and scholarship applications can easily get sidelined. It's up to administration teams, then, to ensure students at risk of financial instability get the right information around scheduling and deadlines, at the right time.

Plenty of universities make the honest mistake of posting updates on their website and thinking students will see it. But what if they don't have time to search for it? And what if they don't even know it's there? Meeting financial aid and payment deadlines is a key indicator of a student's success or risk. And making sure they're able to access the financial aid they need can actually boost your retention strategy.

Fill the gaps in financial aid with AI

Financial aid teams are often stretched too thin to be able to deal with the number of student queries they receive. Plus, with the **FAFSA Simplification Act** being put in place over the next few years—and limited guidance from the Federal Student Aid handbook—staff will need new tools to help them respond to student concerns.

Ocelot's AI platform ensures IHEs have the resources to assist their staff and students, while remaining compliant and prioritizing the student experience:

Student-facing financial aid chatbot: Delivers instant responses to financial aid questions 24/7, 365 days a year

Internal FAFSA Simplification training chatbot: Trains financial aid and administrative teams to understand FAFSA Simplification changes

Campaign texting templates: Gives access to dozens of FAFSA Simplification texting campaigns

Our team has updated 6,735 FAFSA-related chatbot questions, texting templates, and videos in the first 8 months of 2023 alone, making sure our clients are providing students with the most up to date information.



Create a feeling of belonging

Whatever stage of life we're at, we all want to feel like we belong. And this is especially true for college students. For many, university will be the first time they've lived away from home—and with this transition, their traditional support systems of family, friends, and school will change too. Because of this extreme phase of transition, it's important for students to know that there are support options available to them.

Facilitate peer-to-peer support

According to **Gallup**, one of the main reasons for rising student dropout rates is emotional stress and a lack of mental health support. In fact, their research shows that student mental health has significantly worsened over the past two years.

Many young people feel they have no one to turn to—but conversely, when students can identify a compassionate adult on campus

who they can go to with concerns, the likelihood of them completing their degree skyrockets. So, if technology is equipped with the information to connect students with counselors and peers to support them, universities can take an active role in improving that feeling of belonging.

Make space for underrepresented communities

Beyond having an individual to turn to during a time of need, IHEs should foster a safe and inclusive environment for students from underrepresented communities—such as student carers, LGBTQ+ students, or those from different religious backgrounds.

The risk of dropout is much higher among these groups, which is why it's so important for institutions to tailor the student journey to their unique needs. And providing access to

the relevant information, whether that's on-campus childcare options, community groups they can join, or mental health services, is the first step to helping students along the path to belonging—and therefore, success.

Connect students with support

When an individual is suffering, often the last thing they want to do is admit they need help. In fact, **almost half of US adults** don't seek medical treatment for their mental health, with stigma ranking as one of the top reasons.

IHEs have a duty of care to ensure this same statistic doesn't befall their own students—and the first step toward achieving that goal is by connecting students with the support they need, when they need it.

Through harnessing AI technology like chatbots or live chat, students who may feel embarrassed to get help can bypass awkward interactions with their peers or professors. These AI powered tools allow for anonymity, which encourages students to access campus-based mental health centers or academic advising services, right at their fingertips and when they need them.

Give parents peace of mind

College may be a great time for young people to gain independence, but that doesn't mean their original support ecosystem (like parents and guardians) should be left out of the loop. Providing simultaneous access to information on academic and wellbeing support services is vital, both for their peace of mind, and their child's educational engagement.



California State University Long Beach

Ensuring students can access the information they need could make a world of difference, especially when it comes to wellbeing. And CSU Long Beach can attest to this.

Realizing they needed to do a better job of checking in with their students at the start of the year, they conducted a student survey via text message to ask: “How were your first weeks of class? Is there anything you need help with?”. They saw a response rate of almost 50%, and while not all were reporting problems, many gave feedback along the lines of, “I don’t need anything right now, but I think it’s really cool that you’re doing this.”

Rather than letting their students find the advice they needed on their own, CSU Long Beach took a proactive approach that put information directly into their students’ hands.



[Read the full CSU Long Beach story](#)

Expand your career services

Perhaps one of the most compelling reasons students choose to go to college is the possibility of securing a higher-paying career. It's a fact: Earning a degree or certification helps students to realize their potential and live the life of their dreams.

According to the **US Bureau of Labor Statistics**, workers with Bachelor's degrees earned a median of \$1,305 per week, compared to \$781 for those with just their GED. They also found that college graduates were less likely to struggle with unemployment, with a rate of 2.1% compared to 4.6% for their high school-educated counterparts—motivation for students to complete their degrees.

Communicating these benefits effectively, and providing extra career support, could make a positive difference to your enrollment and retention figures.

Offer career development opportunities

With this in mind, universities must respond by providing enough career support. And as trade schools and alternative vocational programs continue to gain popularity, it's vital that you can compete in quality and consistency. Your career services should:

- Establish mentorship programs from the beginning
- Schedule regular career discussions with academic advisors
- Create partnerships with organizations for internships

But of course, any changes are pointless if students don't know about them. That's where a two-way texting strategy comes in handy. Leverage your solution to send students notifications about upcoming job fairs or remind them about your on-campus career advisors. Remember, it's not about putting the information out there and expecting students to find it. It's about streamlining information to them!

Embrace Technology With Ocelot

In today's fast-paced world, higher education institutions are looking for innovative ways to improve student retention and engagement.

Ocelot's suite of AI-powered solutions are here to assist staff members in addressing students' needs while streamlining processes. Here's how Ocelot's products can support institutions in enhancing student retention:



Ocelot AI Chatbot

- Personalized support for students 24/7 – free up staff time by automating common questions
- Integrates with SIS and CRM systems for a unified student experience
- Multilingual capabilities
- Access to an extensive knowledge base and video library
- Supports various campus departments



Ocelot AI-Powered Two-Way Texting

- Engages students on their preferred mobile devices
- Allows for proactive text campaigns throughout the student lifecycle
- Integrates with the AI chatbot for seamless support – provides real-time, efficient assistance
- Offers a template library of message examples
- Comes with an admin view to monitor communication activities



Ocelot AI-Assisted Live Chat

- Offers personalized assistance to students for urgent situations
- AI-assisted responses for accurate and timely information
- Seamless transition from chatbot to live agent
- Agent triage and handoff for optimal support
- Authentication and video conferencing integration

Making a better life more accessible.



500+

Colleges and
Universities **Trust Ocelot**



15.6M

Questions Answered
in the Last 12 Months



864.5k

Staff Hours **Saved**

Talk to us and learn how we can help your institution optimize student communications and improve student experiences!

All three products are accessible through the Ocelot AI Communications Platform, which provides multiple ecosystem integrations for a tailored student experience, as well as detailed analytics for data-driven student engagement insights across all products.

With over 500 higher education institutions trusting Ocelot, advanced technology and dedicated support come together to drive enrollment, retention, and student success. By incorporating Ocelot's AI-powered solutions, institutions can enhance student experiences and support collaborative growth between technology and higher education.

www.ocelotbot.com

[Get a live 1:1 demo](#)

[Fill out our contact form](#)

OCELOT[®]

Ocelot offers community colleges and four-year higher education institutions a comprehensive, AI-fueled platform that helps to improve student engagement and retention, offering supporting analytics, system integrations, and higher-education specific pre-loaded content.

Through the power of AI, Ocelot ensures every student has access to the answers they need when they need them, so they can build a better life, empowered by education.

For more information, visit www.ocelotbot.com or get connected with our team [here](#).