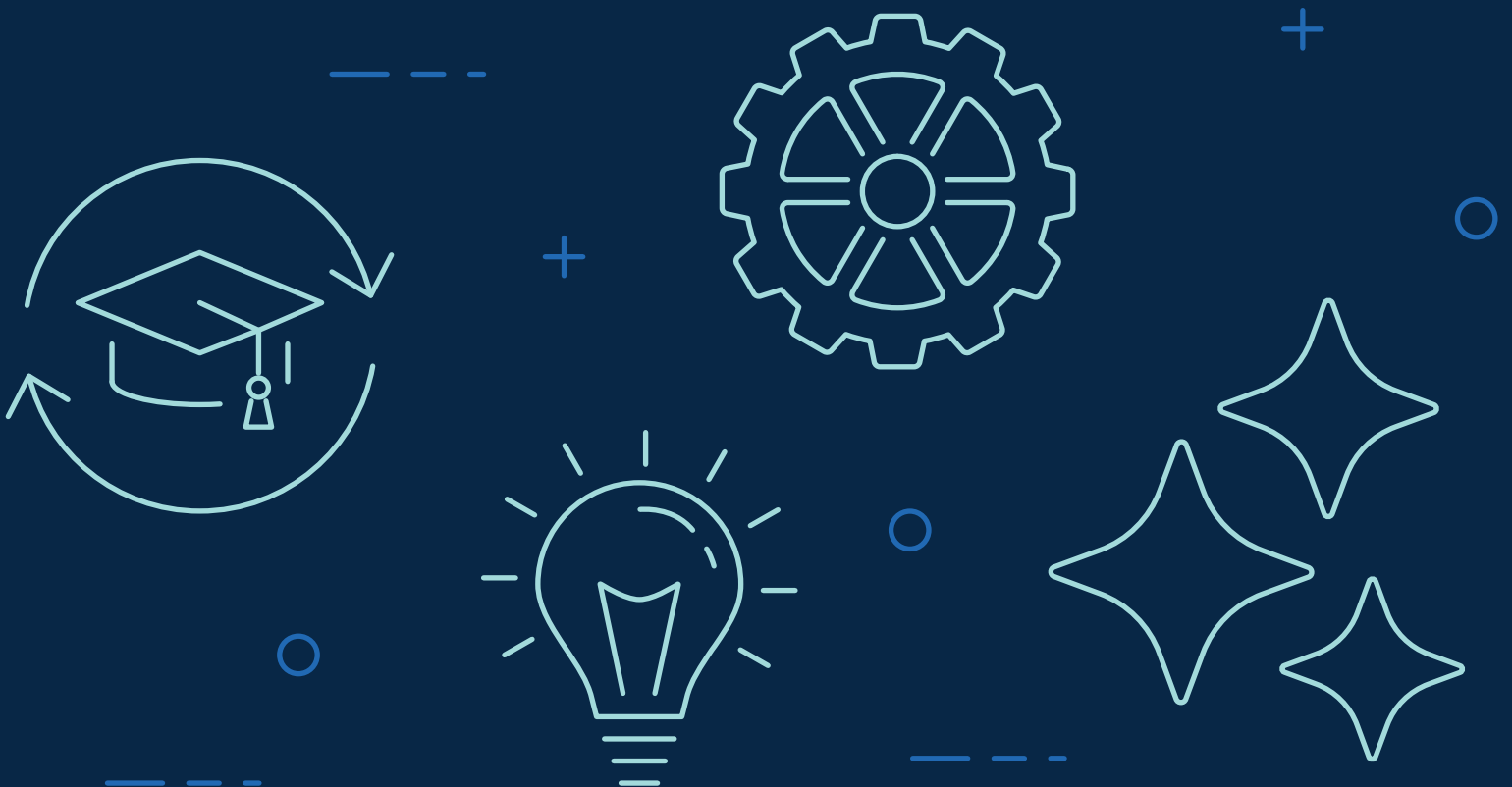




INSIGHT PAPER

Meeting Student Needs with Limited Resources

A Special Brief for Small Colleges on Student
Success Technology and Artificial Intelligence



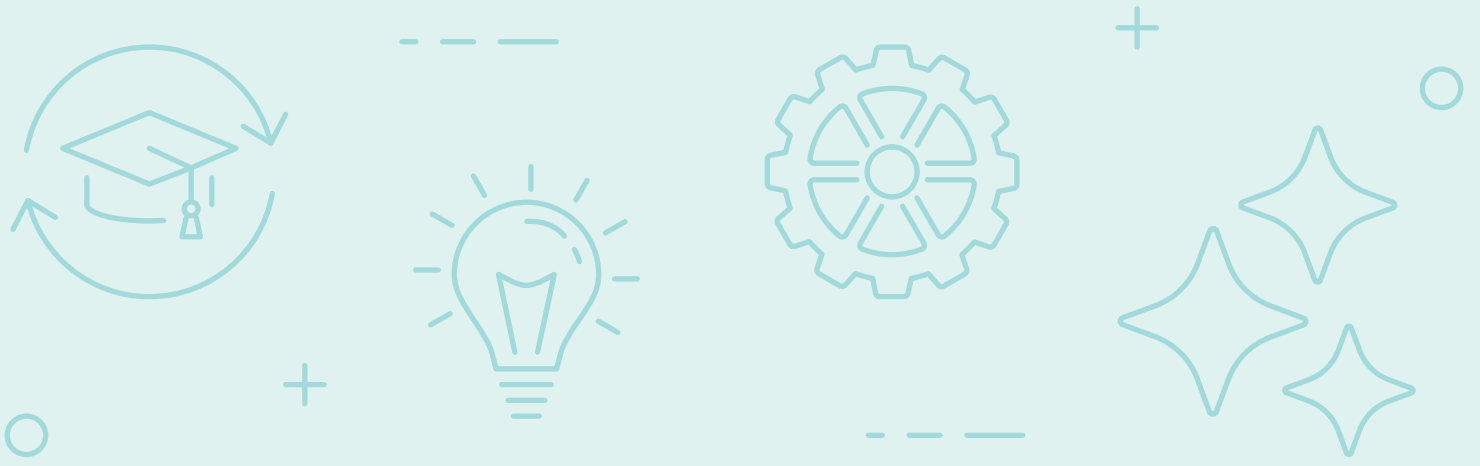


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1

Introduction

Small colleges play a key role in the US higher education system. Roughly half of American nonprofit colleges enroll fewer than 2,500 students.¹ While individually small, these schools together serve nearly 1.7 million students and play important roles in their local communities. Now, several years of flat and declining enrollments are creating financial pressures that are forcing smaller institutions to reevaluate their long-term sustainability.

As it becomes harder to recruit new students, retaining current students becomes even more important. Retention strategies keep students engaged and enrolled through to graduation. This is good for students, but it is also good for the school. A strong retention strategy plays a critical role in securing tuition revenue and protecting the sunk costs associated with recruitment.

Retention strategies at small colleges are most often built around relationships and tailored support. Providing this level of support for students becomes harder in times like these when budgets shrink, positions remain unfilled, and remaining staff are overwhelmed by additional responsibilities.

In response, small colleges are looking to free up time for their student success team members by eliminating administrative burdens, thus allowing them to focus on their relationships with students. This paper explores ideas and tactics that small-college student success teams are employing to prepare for a future where they can meet student needs despite operating with limited resources.

Student Success as a Financial Imperative at Small Colleges

The post-pandemic enrollment recovery has been uneven across higher education, with small colleges lagging behind their larger counterparts. Small regional four-year institutions and small two-year colleges, defined as enrolling fewer than 2,500 students, were among the most impacted by the change in enrollment from 2019 to 2021 (figure 1).² This sharp downturn punctuated what had already been a tough decade for many schools in these segments.

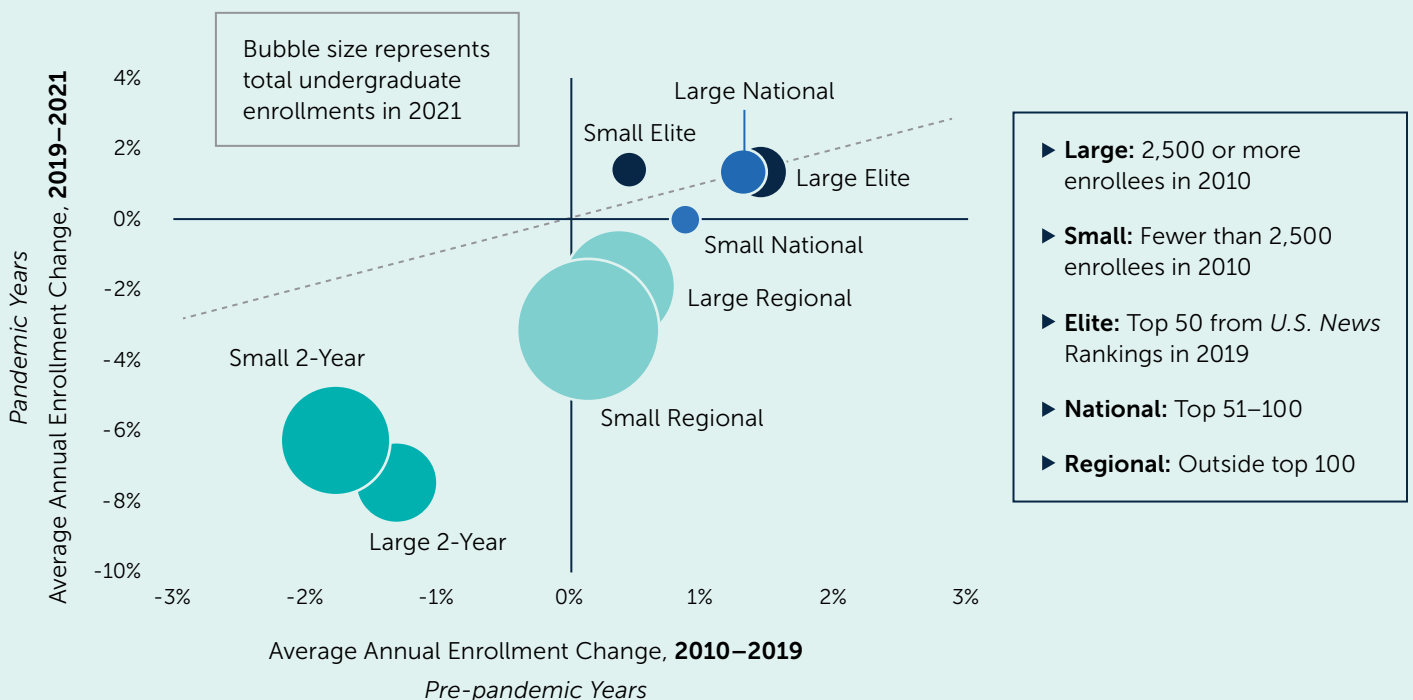
Enrollment declines at small private colleges continued during the 2021–2022 academic year even as larger institutions recovered.³ Falling enrollment at small colleges is forcing tighter budgets across all areas of operation, including student success initiatives.

In this environment, retaining tuition revenue has become more critical than ever for securing the future of a small college. This reality is pushing many small colleges to take a closer look at their approach to student success. With each student representing a significant portion of revenue, losing even a small number of enrollees can have an outsized financial impact. Indeed, of the institutions that have shut their doors since the pandemic began, the vast majority had enrollments of fewer than a thousand.⁴ While closures are still relatively rare even among small colleges, the pace is accelerating. As of summer 2024, approximately one school per week was announcing an end to operations,⁵ a trend that is making headlines and generating significant concern about what the next few years will bring. By prioritizing student success efforts, small colleges hope to improve student outcomes and, by extension, their own financial stability.

FIGURE 1

Undergraduate Enrollment Trends by Segment

IPEDS Data



Emerging Challenges Make Retention Harder at Small Colleges

Student retention has become harder in the 2020s. Familiar challenges from the previous decade were exacerbated by pandemic-era disruptions to K-12 learning and student development that persist even as education returns to normalcy. Small colleges with modest endowments and geographic footprints may find themselves especially susceptible to these three major attrition drivers:



1. Student Mental Health Crisis

College students' mental health needs doubled from 2013 to 2023,⁶ a trend that started in the prior decade and was exacerbated by the pandemic (figure 2). Small colleges, often operating with limited resources, are struggling to meet the demand for support. This not only affects student well-being but also can have a direct impact on retention. Indeed, mental health is now the top reason students cite for their departure when they consider leaving school.⁷



2. Academic Preparation Gaps

Many incoming students are arriving on campus with significant gaps in their academic preparation due to pandemic-era unfinished learning, particularly in subjects such as mathematics. On average, students are a year behind in their learning progress from where we would have expected them to have been in 2019.⁸ Longitudinal test scores show slow recovery, meaning that institutions could be dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic until well into the 2030s.⁹ Small colleges that do not already have robust developmental education or supplemental instruction programs may find themselves caught flat-footed as they attempt to bring more and more students up to expectations of college-level preparation.



3. College Value Concerns

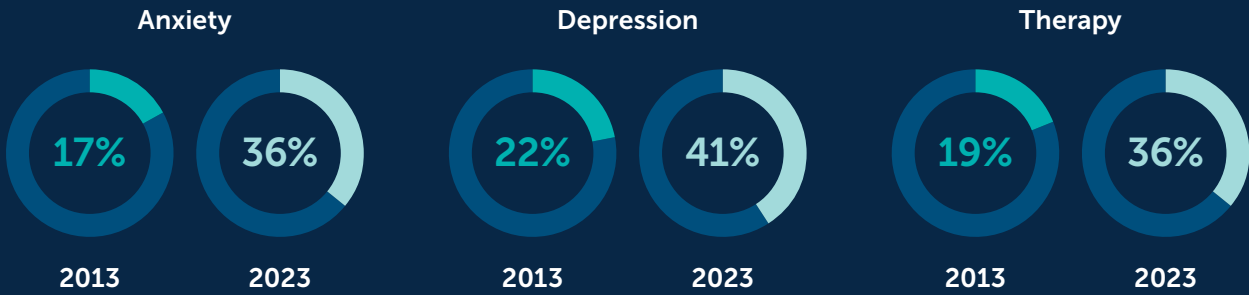
With rising tuition costs and growing skepticism about the return on investment of a college degree, higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their value proposition. For most students, "value" means delivering on career outcomes that make the investment of time and tuition worthwhile. Pivoting to workforce-focused academic programs may be especially challenging for small colleges, which are often grounded in a traditional liberal arts curriculum. Furthermore, many small colleges have centered their value propositions on providing a high-touch, personalized campus experience, thereby justifying tuition costs by providing outstanding amenities and services. This value proposition will become more difficult to defend as budgets get tighter and many elements of the campus experience must be scaled back.

FIGURE 2

Students' Mental Health Needs Are Now the Biggest Threat to Retention

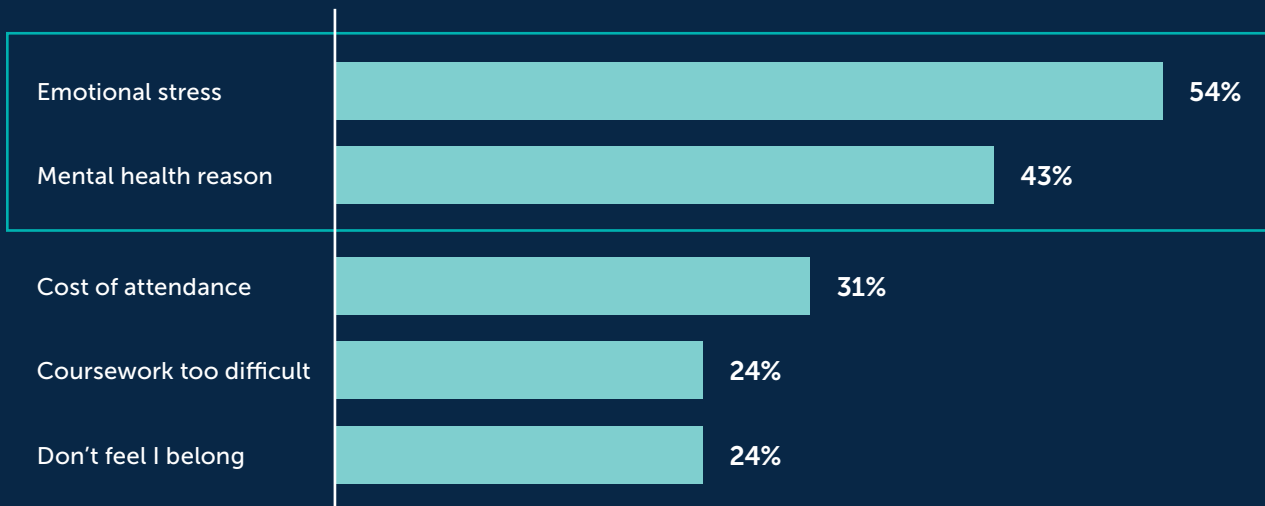
Student Mental Health Diagnoses and Needs Have Doubled over the Last Decade

Healthy Minds Survey



Why Are Students Considering Stopping Out?

Fall 2023 Gallup/Lumina survey of students who considered stopping out in the prior six months, multiple responses allowed



2



Shrinking budgets and overworked staff threaten retention models

Small Colleges Emphasize Interpersonal Connections

Small colleges pride themselves on their ability to provide personalized attention and support to students through close-knit communities and low student-to-staff ratios. This approach, which concentrates on interpersonal connections, has been a cornerstone of their student success strategies.

At the heart of small-college student success teams are the deep, personal relationships formed between staff and students. Advisors and student success professionals at these institutions thrive when they can get to know their students on an individual level. This personalized approach allows them to tailor their support, anticipate challenges, and intervene proactively when students struggle.

Students who choose small colleges often do so precisely because of this promise of individualized attention. The value proposition of a small college education frequently hinges on the idea that students won't be just another face in the crowd but will be known and supported throughout their academic journey. This expectation creates a reciprocal relationship where both students and staff invest in building meaningful connections.

The power of these interpersonal connections cannot be overstated. They contribute to a sense of belonging, which research has consistently shown to be a critical factor in student retention and success. When students feel seen, heard, and supported by their advisors and success staff, they are more likely to persist through challenges and complete their degrees.

Staff Burnout Threatens the Interpersonal Student Success Model

Despite the proven effectiveness of this high-touch approach, staffing challenges are threatening the ability of small colleges to maintain these intensive support structures. The loss of just one or two team members can have a big impact on the capacity of the team to provide the level of care they aspire to achieve or can be reasonably expected to deliver without negatively impacting their mental and emotional health.

Unfortunately, many small-college student success teams were already understaffed before the pandemic, a situation that has only grown worse in recent years. There are three big factors at play, and because these factors, which are listed on the following page, are interconnected, they can have a compound effect that makes mitigation even harder.

1 Pay and Compensation

When student success professionals feel overwhelmed and unable to fulfill their core mission of supporting students, job satisfaction and retention rates suffer. Most of these professionals feel they are underpaid, and many are choosing to leave the profession. As a result, many student success leaders at small colleges find themselves trapped in an endless hiring cycle.

2 Expanding Responsibilities

As small colleges grapple with staffing shortages, many remaining team members find themselves taking on additional duties outside their primary roles. This expansion of responsibilities can dilute the focus on student support and reduce the time available for building those crucial interpersonal connections. Worse, it can contribute to overwork, which can lead to further attrition. Indeed, the 2023 survey by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) found that taking on out-of-scope responsibility and absorbing the workload of others are two of the stronger factors driving employees to look for new jobs.¹⁰

3 Overworked Teams

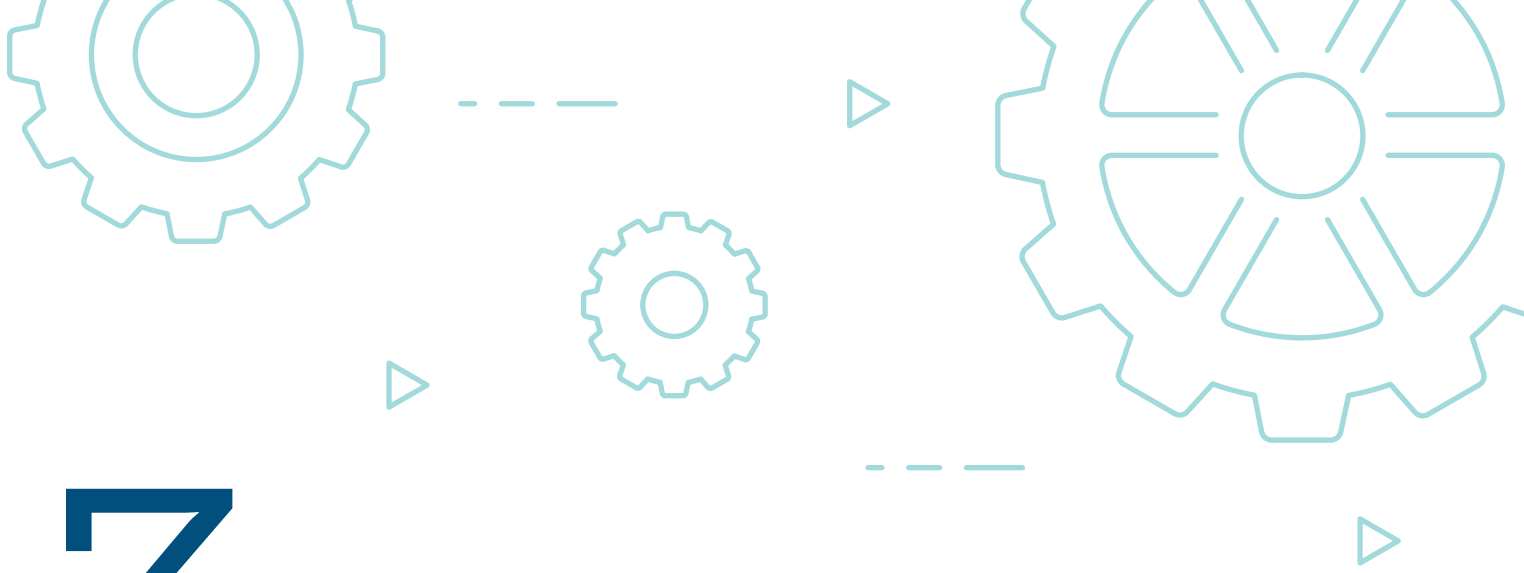
The 2023 CUPA-HR survey found that half of college administrators work extra hours to keep up with their responsibilities.¹¹ This overwork is not sustainable and can lead to burnout, decreased effectiveness, and ultimately, staff turnover. Much as with an unexpected increase in responsibilities, overwork from taking on extra hours and working weekends is a strong factor in driving staff attrition.

Taken together, staff attrition due to low pay leads to extra work for remaining team members, with each additional departure making the situation worse and resulting in even more attrition. Small-college leaders must find a way to break this cycle during a time when they are unable to increase salaries or team size.

Fortunately, student success technologies offer a solution. Staff can reclaim precious time by using technology to automate common tasks and reduce administrative burdens. Doing so not only creates a better experience for students but also leads to improvements in job satisfaction and morale, which can improve staff retention.

20 Things Small-College Student Success Staff Could Be Doing Instead of Administrative Tasks

1. Onboarding and orientation
2. First-year experience
3. Dedicated advising
4. Preenrollment bridge programs and boot camps
5. Early-alert response
6. Connecting to academic support
7. Improved access to mental health resources
8. Programs to develop student resilience
9. Wellness programs
10. Relationship-building with students
11. Relationship-building with faculty
12. Mentoring programs
13. Regular communication with parents
14. Guidance for parents on supporting students
15. Promoting a sense of belonging
16. Small group and learning communities
17. Peer mentor networks
18. Campus and community events
19. Addressing financial concerns
20. Supporting the financial aid process



3

How are student success teams at small colleges using automations?

Advisors play a crucial role in guiding students through their academic journey, but administrative tasks often divert them from this essential function. When advisors spend excessive time on paperwork, scheduling, and other routine tasks, their ability to offer meaningful support to students is diminished. To address this, small colleges are increasingly using technology to automate basic student success functions, thereby freeing up valuable time for advisors and support staff.

These technologies enable teams to set up workflows that monitor incoming student data and automatically initiate actions—such as sending communications, opening cases, or raising flags—when students meet specified criteria. By automating regular and repetitive tasks, student success teams can focus more on their core mission of providing personalized support to students.

The benefits of automation extend beyond just time savings. Removing mundane and repetitive tasks allows staff to focus on the aspects of their job that are most fulfilling and impactful, thereby increasing job satisfaction and employee retention. As small colleges navigate the challenges of limited resources and shifting student needs, embracing automation will be key to maintaining and improving their ability to support student success.

Many colleges are using platforms such as Navigate360 to implement automation strategies that enhance their operations and student support systems (figure 3). Shown on the next page are a few examples of how various small and under-resourced institutions are putting automations into practice.



Kansas Wesleyan University (825 undergraduates): Kansas Wesleyan has integrated LMS data into their Navigate360 platform and uses it to trigger automated actions. For example, the system sends the advisor assigned to a student an automated alert if that student misses an assignment or receives a grade of "0." Advisors can track student performance and reach out to check in on a struggling student and offer assistance.



Grand View University (1,757 undergraduates): Grand View University has set up automated messaging around administrative tasks that can trip up students and require staff time to resolve. Chief among these are messages that are triggered when a student has completed enough credits to graduate but still needs to complete their paperwork and messages that are triggered by bursar holds and provide students with pathways to resolution. Grand View has also set up automated messages that help students secure internships when they register for a corresponding course.

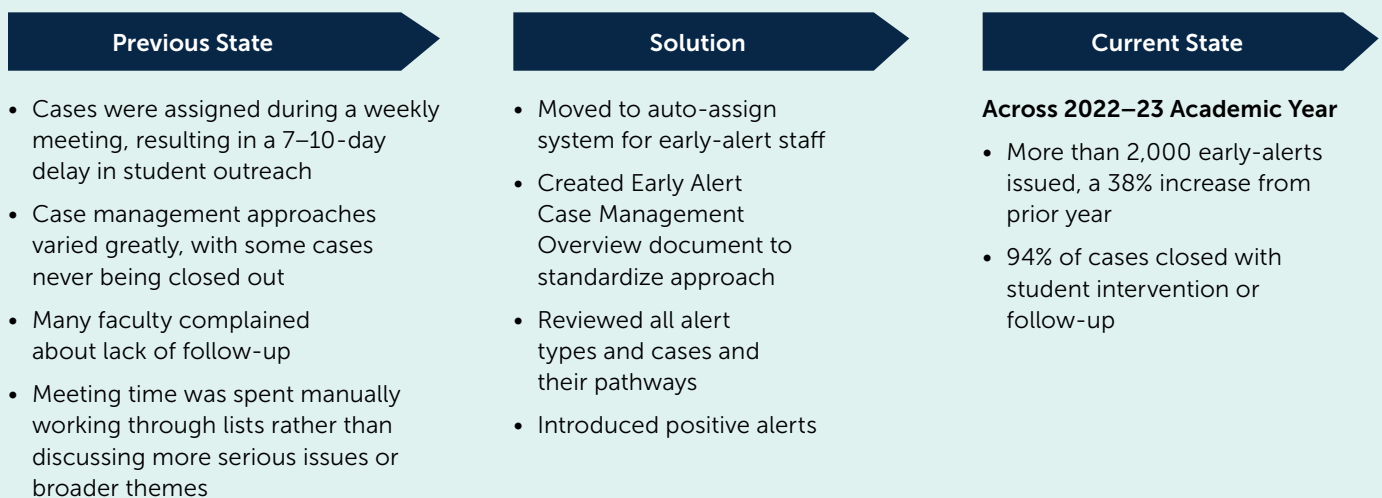


Southeast Technical College (2,330 undergraduates): As part of their onboarding and orientation, Southeast Technical College sends students a survey asking them to self-identify topics they have questions about or about which they need more information. Students can select from nearly 20 different areas, including housing, childcare, and credit articulation. Their responses trigger automated messages that connect students with the resources corresponding to their needs.



Buena Vista University (1,959 undergraduates): Buena Vista University automated the process of assigning academic early-alerts to advisors for intervention. Previously, this process was handled manually, costing staff time and leading to delays and faculty complaints. Automating this process led to a 38% increase in alert volume and a 94% resolution rate.

FIGURE 3
How Buena Vista University Took Advantage of Automations



How Do Automated Actions Work?



If a student meets predefined criteria and timing



An action is triggered

(e.g., a message is sent or an alert is created)

Sample Messaging Automations



Intake Survey Responses

Email all students who say they are interested in certain resources with a message to connect



New Assigned Students

Email students with what to expect in the coming year and their advisor's appointment availability



Category-Based

Email all first-generation students with a welcome message

Sample Alert Automations



Summer Melt

Issue an alert for any students who have not enrolled for credits in the upcoming term



FAFSA Completion

Issue an alert for students with missing financial aid information or paperwork



Missed Success Markers

Issue an alert for any student who has not passed key required courses by a predetermined time

What Can Be Automated?

Student success teams can automate a wide range of tasks. Some ideas for automation include:

- 1 Appointment scheduling:** Automated systems can handle the complex task of matching student availability with advisor schedules, reducing back-and-forth communications.
- 2 Preplanned communication:** Automated email and text campaigns can deliver timely, personalized information to students based on their academic status or upcoming deadlines.
- 3 Follow-up communication:** After advising sessions or important events, automated messages can reinforce key points and provide additional resources.
- 4 Survey and poll responses:** Automated follow-up to surveys or polls provides students with immediate guidance based on their specific goals, attitudes, needs, and concerns.
- 5 High-volume questions:** Chatbots or AI-powered knowledge bases can answer common student queries, freeing up advisors to handle more complex issues.
- 6 Early-alert assignment:** Alerts issued by faculty or other staff can be automatically assigned to an advisor for follow-up, saving time and improving resolution rates.
- 7 Student reminders:** Automated reminders about registration deadlines, financial aid applications, or upcoming appointments can help keep students on track.
- 8 Manual reporting:** Automation can generate regular reports on student progress, advisor activities, and other key metrics without manual data entry.
- 9 Paperwork:** Digital forms and automated workflows can streamline processes such as course add/drops, major changes, or graduation applications.

4



Harnessing artificial intelligence for student success

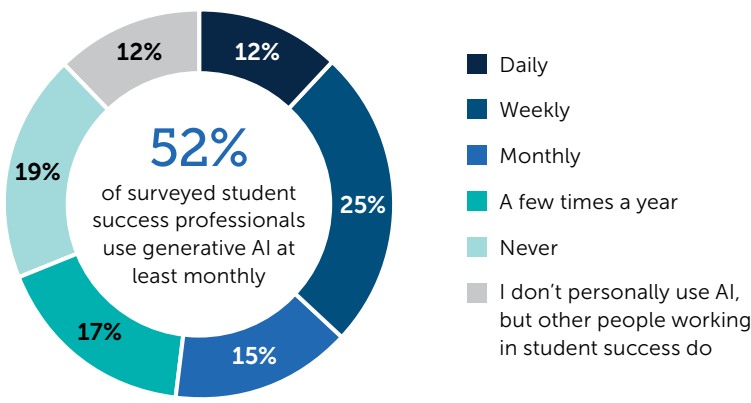
The recent emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) presents new opportunities for small colleges to augment staff capacity with technology. Automated actions such as the ones described above still rely on human-generated content and logic structures. Generative AI is different in that it creates original content that mimics human-generated content but doesn't require direct human input. This ability to produce novel content opens new opportunities to support students.

The potential of generative AI to revolutionize student services is immense. It can enable personalized assistance for students, improve operational efficiency, enhance accessibility to educational resources, promote inclusivity, and facilitate data-driven decision-making. By utilizing generative AI, colleges can better tailor their services to meet individual student needs, ultimately improving student retention and success rates.

Generative AI is still in its early days, but we are already seeing applications showing up in student success offices. Pioneering staff have been experimenting with using publicly available services such as ChatGPT to generate emails, reports, and grant applications. A recent EAB survey found that just over half of student success professionals are using generative AI at least once a month. (figure 4)

Now, generative AIs are starting to be built directly into the technologies that these staff are using to support their students. AI is also powering the next generation of student success chatbots, enabling colleges to provide students with answers and support 24 hours a day.

FIGURE 4
How often do you personally use AI in your role?
EAB survey of student success professionals, n=221



Overview of AI Capabilities in Navigate360

Navigate360 is a comprehensive student success platform that integrates AI to streamline various functions. Here are some key AI capabilities that small colleges can leverage:



Message Content Creator:

Optimize Navigate360's most powerful feature, Campaigns and Messaging, by minimizing time spent creating message content. Use the tone enhancement option to ensure students read and act on key messages.



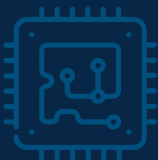
Student Knowledge Bot:

Reduce the time spent training chatbots and effortlessly provide students with secure access to support, instructions, and FAQs. The Knowledge Bot is fed your proprietary, institution-specific materials to ensure that your students see only the most secure, relevant answers.



Report Assistant:

Easily create and visualize reports. State what data you're looking for in natural language, and this feature will then suggest report filters. Then, act on the insights from reports at scale with automated actions—such as messaging, alerts, and more.



Overcoming Barriers to Adopting AI at Small Colleges

With the rapid adoption of AI in education, both excitement and hesitation are being observed among education professionals as they explore the possibilities of generative AI. Many are keen to understand how they can leverage this technology but are concerned about risks and negative implications. Others just don't know where to start or are reluctant to embrace such a new technology without clear guidance from their institutional leadership. Following are four suggestions related to how you and your team can overcome common barriers to AI exploration and adoption.

1 Set a Centralized AI Policy

To ensure a cohesive approach to AI adoption, small colleges should establish a centralized AI policy based on best practices. This policy should outline the goals, ethical considerations, and implementation strategies for AI across the institution. A centralized policy helps align efforts and ensures that AI tools are used consistently and effectively.

2 Promote Peer-to-Peer Learning

Encouraging peer-to-peer learning can help staff become more comfortable with AI. Creating opportunities for staff to share their experiences and successes with AI can demystify the technology and promote its adoption. For example, colleges can organize "show and tell" sessions where staff demonstrate how they use AI tools in their work. Additionally, establishing a sandbox environment allows staff to experiment with AI applications in a controlled setting, fostering innovation and confidence.

3 Define and Address Risks

It is essential to define and address the risks associated with AI adoption. This includes consideration of data privacy, potential biases in AI algorithms, and ethical implications of AI use. By openly discussing these concerns and developing guidelines to mitigate risks, colleges can build trust and ensure responsible AI implementation.

4 Make AI a Strategic Priority

To fully realize the benefits of AI, small colleges must make it a strategic priority. This involves investing in AI technologies, providing training and support for staff, and continuously evaluating the impact of AI on student success. By prioritizing AI, colleges can stay ahead of the curve and create a more efficient and effective student support system.

Generative AI offers significant opportunities for small colleges to improve their student success initiatives and elevate the student experience, yet it remains somewhat in the shadows. To realize the many benefits AI offers, colleges will need to normalize the use of generative AI in addition to providing their teams with access to AI tools.

Conclusion

The challenges small colleges and their student success teams are facing are significant—but not insurmountable. By embracing innovative approaches, leveraging technology wisely, and refocusing on their core strengths, these institutions can preserve the essence of their high-touch support model while adapting to new financial realities.

The key will be to find ways to maintain meaningful interpersonal connections—the hallmark of the small college experience—while operating more efficiently and sustainably. Small student success teams can meet this challenge by aggressively identifying and automating time-consuming tasks while exploring opportunities to use AI to further increase their scale and reach. Doing so is essential to ensure that small colleges can continue to provide the personalized education and support that their students expect and deserve.

As you undertake this vital work, EAB's student success experts are here to help.

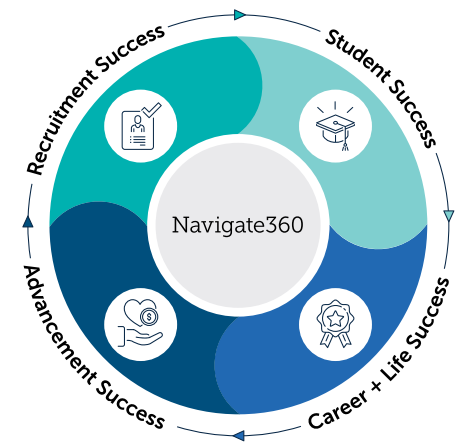
► To learn more, visit us at eab.com/Navigate360.



About Navigate360

Recruit, Retain, and Empower Students in College and Beyond

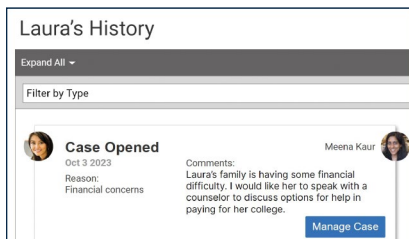
Navigate360 is the leading student CRM for community colleges, a powerful technology that unites administrators, faculty, staff, and students in a collaborative network that supports the entire student experience, from recruitment to career. Navigate360 is powered by over a decade of student success research honed from billions of student interactions—and now, it's also amplified by AI.



Staff Workflow and Automation

Empower staff to proactively engage with prospective and current students

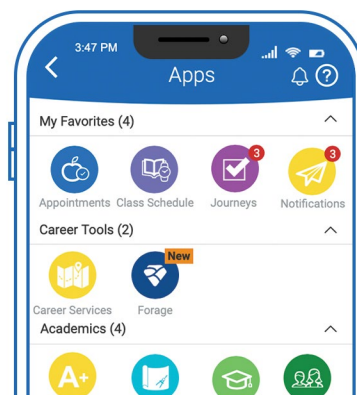
- ▶ AI-Powered Messaging
- ▶ Complete Student Profile
- ▶ Coordinated Care Network
- ▶ Cases and Referrals
- ▶ Automated Alerts and Messaging
- ▶ Two-Way SMS
- ▶ Campaigns and Template Library
- ▶ To-Dos
- ▶ Appointments and Surveys
- ▶ Events
- ▶ Notes and Attachments
- ▶ Faculty Progress Reports
- ▶ Prospect Application Management



Student Engagement Hub

Provide your students with a one-stop shop for self-service resources

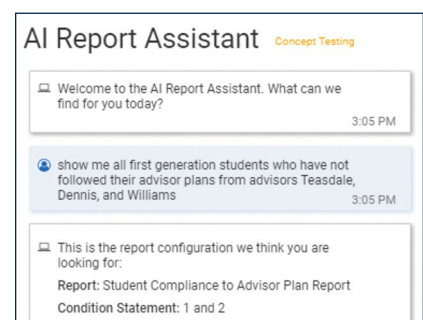
- ▶ AI-Powered Knowledge Bot
- ▶ iOS and Android Apps
- ▶ Student Success Network
- ▶ Campus Resources
- ▶ Appointment Scheduling
- ▶ Class Schedule
- ▶ In-App Messaging, Notifications, and Surveys
- ▶ Career Match and Journeys
- ▶ Study Buddies
- ▶ Financial Planner
- ▶ Prospect Portal



Reporting and Analytics

Proactively identify opportunities for better student support

- ▶ AI-Powered Report Builder
- ▶ Advanced Query Builder
- ▶ Data Visualizer
- ▶ Templated and Scheduled Reports
- ▶ Automated Workflow from Reports
- ▶ Population Health Analytics
- ▶ Activity Analytics
- ▶ Intervention Effectiveness Analytics
- ▶ Historical Analytics
- ▶ Predictive Model
- ▶ Analytics Data Exports



OUR PARTNERS

850+

Partner Institutions

10M+

Students Served

OUR IMPACT

3.5%

Typical improvement in graduation rate

5:1

ROI based on 500 partner value stories

Schedule a Navigate360 demo at eab.com/Navigate360.

Project Director

Ed Venit

Contributing Consultant

Tara Zirkel

Designer

Kelsey Stoneham

Endnotes

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