EAB

The 2025 Advancement Leaders Playbook

Insights from EAB's Advancement Leaders Survey

Project Contributors

Project Director

Jo Smith

Contributing Consultants

Dakota Anderson
Jenny Jones, PhD
Evan Kahn

Table of Contents

eab.com

Executive Overview

▶ **Despite Adversity, Advancement Leaders Have Opportunity in Three Key Areas**

The data from our 2024 Advancement Leaders Survey painted a challenging picture of the advancement landscape, with threats to staffing and donor pipelines and ongoing struggles to effectively manage data and technology. Advancement leaders are being tasked with tackling the fires directly in front of them while also working to ensure the health and sustainability of their efforts for years to come. The good news is our findings also revealed several opportunities for leaders and their teams to get more out of the resources that they do have, to better craft targeted strategies and initiatives to reach key audiences, and to think more strategically about how data and technology can inform their approach.

Advancement Leaders Are Focused on the Health of Their Teams and Their Pipelines

37% of respondents ranked hiring and retaining productive team members their top priority in the next year

67% of respondents ranked expanding mid-level or leadership annual giving efforts as one of their top three priorities in the next year

▶ **Focus of This Report: Three Areas of Challenge and Opportunity**

This past fall, EAB conducted its 2024 Advancement Leader Survey to better understand how advancement leaders and their teams were navigating an increasingly difficult advancement landscape. This insight paper focuses on three key challenges that emerged from the data, including a deeper dive on the pain points plaguing advancement teams and areas of opportunities for advancement leaders within each. Section 1 shares key findings around the workforce, Section 2 takes a deep dive into the donor pipeline, and Section 3 explores how data and technology are being effectively used – and not used – in today's advancement offices.

About the 2024 Advancement Leaders Survey

164

Advancement leaders responded

30

Questions asked

Questions Explored:
- What are the top priorities for your advancement team in the next 12 months?
- How would you rate your team's understanding of AI?
- Which steps has your institution taken in the last year to adapt advancement operations amid staffing shortages?
- Which donor demographics present the most significant challenges for engagement?
- What is your institution's biggest challenge with digital marketing?

For more details about the survey and participant profile, refer to p. 28 of this report.

Advancement Faces Big Challenges and Bigger Goals

Advancement Teams Continue to Work in a Constrained Environment

Today's advancement landscape is a difficult one. From staff vacancies to changing donor behaviors to evolving communication channels, advancement teams are juggling a myriad of challenges while pushing to reach higher and higher goals. We began our 2024 Advancement Leaders Survey by seeking to understand which among these constraints were the most pressing. Respondents overwhelmingly identified limited budgets and resources as a top challenge, followed by decreased donor and alumni engagement and staffing shortages.

Q. What are the top three challenges your advancement team is currently facing?
Respondents could select up to three, n = 160

Challenge	%
Limited budget/resources	79%
Decreased donor and alumni engagement	61%
Staffing shortages	54%
Increased competition for donations	49%
Adapting to digital marketing	23%
Other	12%
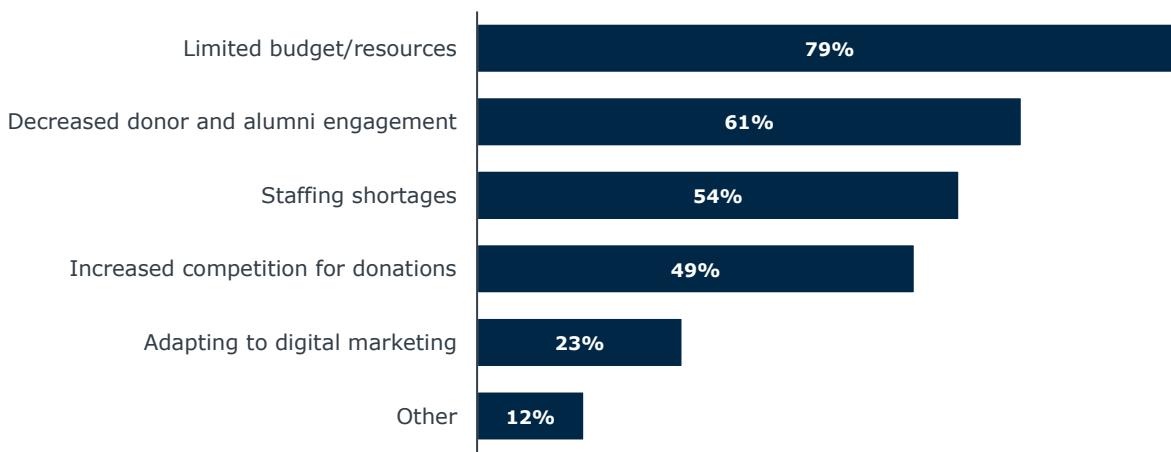
Despite these constraints, advancement teams face more pressure than ever to raise critical funding amid economic uncertainty. Additionally, the 2025-26 demographic cliff will likely continue to drive enrollment and tuition deficits, only putting more pressure on advancement. The result is advancement teams who must maximize the resources they have available to them and find opportunities to more efficiently reach new donors and engage exiting ones.

The following report includes insights from EAB's 2024 Advancement Leaders Survey, which surveyed 160+ advancement leaders from across the country on their top priorities, concerns, and team practices. The report is broken into three sections reflecting these top challenge areas: workforce, donor pipeline, and data and technology. Each section provides a closer look at the distinct challenge based on insights from the survey, followed by strategies advancement leaders can take to successfully navigate the months ahead.

A Note on Unrestricted Giving

At a time when financial stability and institutional flexibility are paramount, it's worth taking a moment to highlight the emphasis on unrestricted giving. Unrestricted giving plays a critical role in affording advancement teams and university leadership the flexibility they need in today's climate – but it is often less popular with donors, who prefer to support their favorite campus causes or initiatives. That is why it's not surprising that responding to increased pressure from university leaders for unrestricted or budget support was one of the most common top priorities in the coming year among survey respondents, second in popularity only to hiring and retaining productive team members (more on this on page 8). Thankfully, annual giving provides an effective path to bolster donors in this space – and will be a focus in the solutions outlined in the rest of this report.

24%

of survey respondents ranked **responding to increased pressures from university leaders for unrestricted or budget support as their top priority** in the next 12 months

Challenge 1:
The Workforce

SECTION

1

Hiring Remains Top Priority for Advancement Leaders

Staffing Is an Uphill Battle for Advancement Offices Across the Country

Few advancement shops have remained unscathed by the staffing challenges plaguing higher education. In fact, three-quarters of advancement leaders surveyed reported having current vacancies on their team and over half of respondents ranked staffing shortages as one of the top challenges they currently faced. Staff vacancies can lead to thinly stretched teams and unmet goals – more than eighty percent of respondents reported increasing workloads for existing advancement staff in the last year, and 42% of respondents reporting deprioritizing less urgent projects. Additionally, high levels of turnover can result in an influx of green team members in need of significant training.

For all these reasons, it's not surprising that hiring emerged as the top priority among advancement leaders and their teams. When we asked respondents to rank six priorities for their advancement teams in the next 12 months, "hiring and retaining productive team members" was the most frequently ranked top priority across all role levels.

75%
of respondents reported having **current vacancies** in their advancement office

This is especially true among large schools: **93% of respondents at large schools** reported vacancies.

54%
of respondents ranked staffing shortages as **one of the top three challenges** currently facing their team

VPs were less likely to select staffing shortages as a top challenge than were AVPs and Directors.

37%
of respondents ranked hiring and retaining productive team members their **#1 priority** in the next 12 months

Another **20%** of respondents ranked hiring as their #2 priority in the next 12 months.

Opportunities to Utilize New Tech and External Help

Area of Opportunity #1

Adoption of Hybrid or Remote Work Options Can Help Appeal to New and Existing Employees

In a departure from the pre-COVID days, a majority of survey respondents reported now offering partial hybrid/remote work options for their employees. This is an important development for advancement offices considering the broader expectations and norms in today's workforce. Flexible work arrangements can be a useful tool for recruiting and retaining talent. That said, 24% of respondents reported that their employees are never allowed to work outside of the office. This presents an opportunity for advancement leaders to consider the impact that more stringent policies can have on efforts to hire and retain productive team members.

Area of Opportunity #2

Opportunities Remain to Better Utilize New Technologies and External Supports

While flexible work options can make advancement offices more appealing to potential new hires, there is no escaping the reality of the workforce challenges the broader higher education space is facing. Considering these limitations, it can be valuable for advancement leaders to consider augmenting their internal capabilities through new technologies or strategic external partners. New technologies can help teams streamline processes and improve the quality of data management practices (which will be covered in more depth in section three). The right external partner can offer strategic guidance, staffing at scale, wider expertise, and access to channels and practices that may currently be out of reach for advancement teams.

Despite these potential benefits, the minority of advancement leaders in our survey indicated that they had brought in new technologies or external contractors to account for staffing shortages.

Q: Which steps has your institution taken in the last year to adapt advancement operations amid staffing shortages?
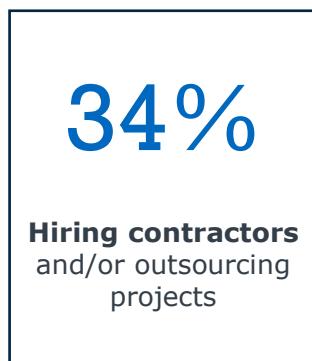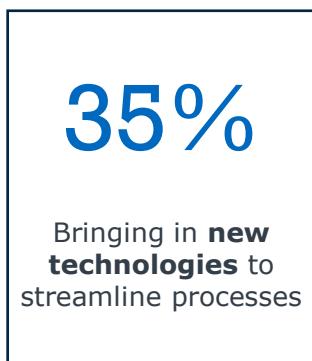
Results Broken Down by School Size

35%
Bringing in **new technologies** to streamline processes

34%
Hiring contractors and/or outsourcing projects

Bringing in **new technologies** to streamline processes
- 27%
- 44%

Hiring contractors and/or outsourcing projects
- 39%
- 31%

■ Small/Medium Schools
■ Large Schools
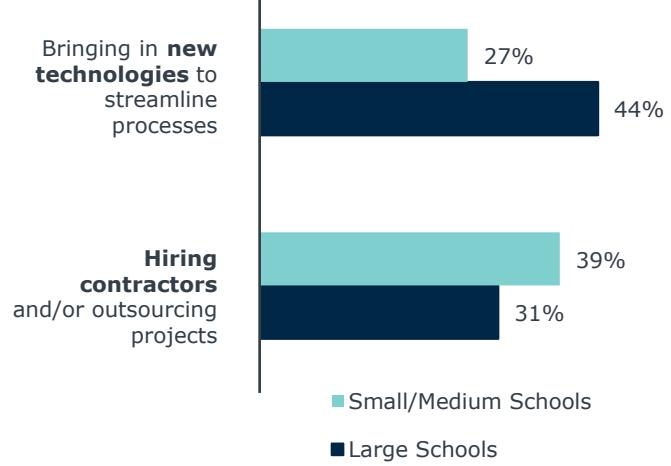
Interestingly, differences among preferred methods of external support emerged based on school size, with respondents from large schools more likely to bring in new technologies to streamline their processes and respondents from medium/small schools more likely to hire contractors and/or outsource projects. It may be that smaller schools lack the staff needed to implement and run new technologies, making them less efficient. Regardless, schools of all sizes can benefit from working with the right trusted partner.

Finding the Right Trusted Partner

The Benefits of a Strategic Partnership with EAB's Advancement Marketing Services

A trusted advancement partner can help expand your capacity and bandwidth, provide fresh insights and innovations, and ensure your campaigns stay on track, even when your team is stretched thin. At EAB, we work alongside advancement teams to provide consistent support, strategic guidance, and hands-on partnership. Whether it's maintaining momentum through staff turnover, helping you make the most of your channels, or providing data-driven personalization strategies, we ensure that you're not just doing more with less—you're doing it more effectively and with greater impact.

In-House Only Annual Giving

$77,568
Median salary for Annual Giving Director
+ additional costs for benefits, training, etc. Median salary up 22% since 2019.

+ Costs for direct marketing campaigns
(production, print, and postage for direct mail; social media ad development and optimization, email platforms)

+ Costs for additional staff support
(i.e., Database Manager for segmentation, lists, and performance analysis; Marcomms support to design creative assets)

Limitations:

Limited bandwidth and expertise

Varying degree of expertise and bandwidth for strategy, data, and design; forces tradeoffs with higher-ROI efforts

Fluctuating costs

Costs dependent on market, staffing, program variances, and ability to retain staff

Advancement Marketing Services

2:1
ROI
(or better)

7%
Average growth
in gift revenue

+ Direct marketing strategy + deployment
(audience modeling, targeted segmentation/personalization, dynamic copy, design, print and postage; social media ad development and optimization, email platforms)

+ Strategy, analytics, + consultative support
(acquisition, retention, upgrades, and interventions; ad hoc consulting; in-house bandwidth is redeployed to higher-ROI efforts)

Benefits:

Dedicated team

Lead Strategist, Strategic Leader, Full Creative Team, Account Manager, Data Analyst

Equivalent to 3-4 FTEs

Support tools

Reporting and analytics, real-time performance dashboard

Challenge 2:
The Donor Pipeline

SECTION

2

The Donor Pipeline Faces Threats from All Sides

From Declining Donor Counts to Missing Key Audiences, the Pipeline Is Struggling

When it comes to the state of their donor pipeline, many advancement leaders are worried – and with good reason. Our 2024 Advancement Leaders Survey asked respondents about a wide range of topics affecting the health of their pipeline, from donor counts to bringing in funds from diverse audiences to alumni engagement to current efforts to proactively strengthen their pipeline. The data paints a troubling picture of the current state of advancement. We'll begin this section by diving into top areas of concern among advancement leaders and what advancement teams are currently doing (and not doing) in their efforts to engage and attract donors. Then we'll explore opportunities for teams to take a more strategic approach in the months ahead.

Declining Donor Counts Threaten the Health of the Future Pipeline

At the foundation of concern among advancement leaders is declining donor counts. Over eighty percent of respondents reported feeling "very concerned" or "concerned" about how declining donor counts are affecting their donor pipeline and the potential implications on the health and viability of future fundraising. This was especially true among top leadership, with Vice Presidents indicating being concerned or very concerned at higher rates than their AVP colleagues. But it is worth noting that despite this level of concern, over a third of respondents still reported not prioritizing expanding their donor pipeline in light of declining donor counts in recent years. Rather, Vice Presidents were most likely to report prioritizing improving engagement with mid-level donors and focusing on major gift cultivation (see the full chart on page 15).

Q. How concerned are you about the declining donor counts affecting your donor pipeline?
n = 161

Very concerned	40%
Concerned	44%
Slightly concerned	14%
Not concerned	2%
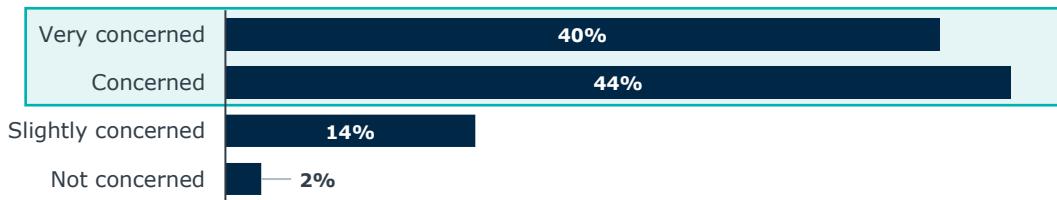
The Majority of Advancement Leaders Worry About Bringing in Funds from Diverse Audiences

To fortify the pipeline in the months and years ahead, it will be critical for advancement teams to be able to bring in funds from diverse audiences. Unfortunately, data suggests this is not currently a strength for many advancement shops – an issue that is top of mind for advancement leaders. Sixty percent of survey respondents reported that bringing in funds from diverse audiences was a high or very high concern. Once again, VPs were more likely to report being concerned or very concerned than were AVP/Directors.

Q. How would you rate your level of concern about bringing in funds from diverse audiences?
n = 158

Very High	13%
High	47%
Moderate	34%
Low	5%
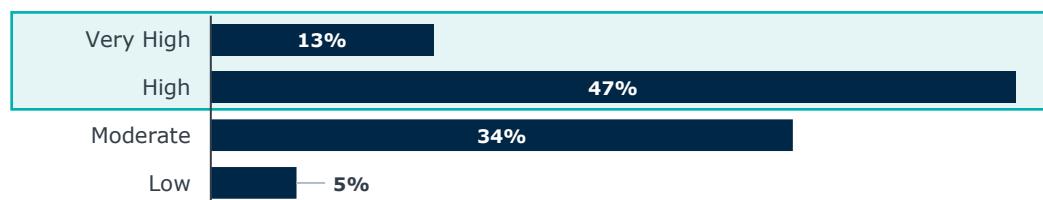
Noteworthy Concerns Among Key Audiences

Attracting Donors from Diverse Generations Proves to Be Especially Difficult

To further understand which demographics advancement teams were struggling with, we asked survey respondents to select two demographics from the list at the right. When prompted on which group presented the most significant challenge, age was the clear winner. This is consistent with our findings that advancement teams are not effectively reaching young alumni, Millennials and Gen Z donors. This is a particularly troubling finding given the role young donors will play in cultivating a future pipeline. We'll dive into strategies and opportunities to better engage this group on page 15.

In addition to age, race and alumni status stood out as demographic segments presenting a challenge to advancement teams.

Q. Which donor demographics present the most significant challenges for engagement?
Respondents could select 2, n = 162

Demographic	
Age	76%
Race	46%
Alumni status	39%
Gender	4%
Education Status	3%
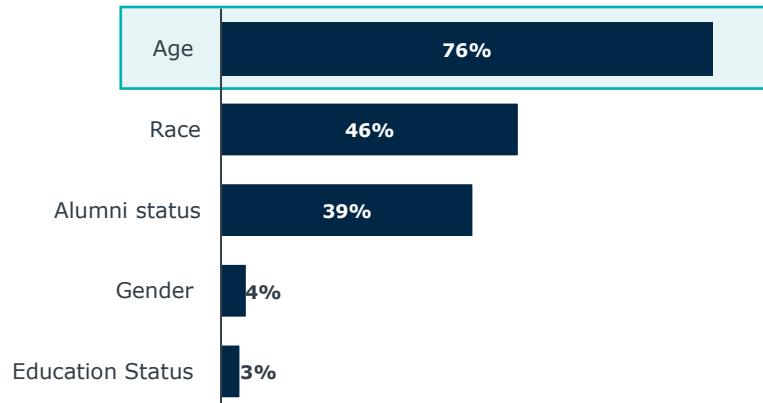
Most Schools Report Stagnant or Declining Alumni Participation Rate

Alumni have long served as an important and reliable donor constituency – but even that has begun to erode. When asked about alumni participation rate over the last five years, 41% of schools reported a decline, with another 41% remaining stagnant. Less than a fifth of schools reported a growth in participation rate, with small and medium-sized institutions less likely than their large counterparts to account for that group. These trends are troubling for both current fundraising efforts and pipeline implications and suggest advancement teams may need to renew their efforts to engage alumni despite *U.S. News and World Report's* changes to ranking calculations.

Q. Over the last 5 years, how would you describe your alumni participation rate?
n = 162

- Declined — 41%
- Stagnant — 41%
- Grown — 18%
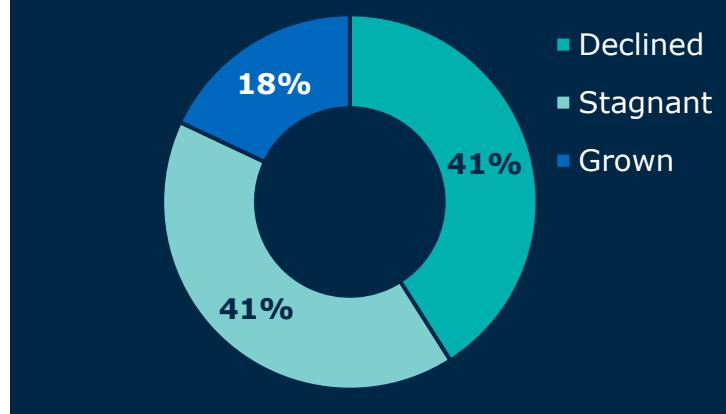
Noteworthy Audience: Mid-Level Donors

Mid-level and leadership annual givers represent a critical part of the donor pipeline – both for the meaningful impact of their compiled contributions and for the opportunities they present as future major givers. But historically this group of donors has been overlooked, with advancement teams failing to craft the targeted strategies and tailored donor experience needed to nurture and grow this important part of the funnel.

Seize Opportunities to Strengthen the Donor Pipeline

Despite These Concerning Trends, Many Teams Aren't Focused on Reaching New Donors

While there is no shortage of concern when it comes to pipeline development among advancement leaders, survey data showed that there was room for improvement across several key strategic initiatives. In fact, at a time when it is more important than ever to be strengthening the donor pipeline, 44% of respondents indicated they are not currently focused on acquiring new donor populations, such as parents, friends and community members, and 28% indicated they are not currently focused on engaging recent graduates, which EAB defines as alumni who graduated within the past 10 years. If they fail to bring in new audiences today, advancement teams face a bleak reality in the coming years: a donor pipeline devoid of both mid-level and major gift prospects. The good news is this suggests there is ample running room to tackle these pipeline challenges head-on – but advancement teams will need to lean into proactive strategies and high-performing channels to combat these trends.

Q. How are you focused on building a pipeline for future giving? (select all that apply)
n = 161

Category	Percentage
Outreach to mid-level donors	83%
Engaging recent graduates	72%
Establishing planned giving initiatives	68%
Acquisition of new donor populations (parents, community members, etc.)	56%
Digital gift officers	24%

44% are not focused on **acquiring new donor populations**

28% are not focused on **engaging recent graduates**
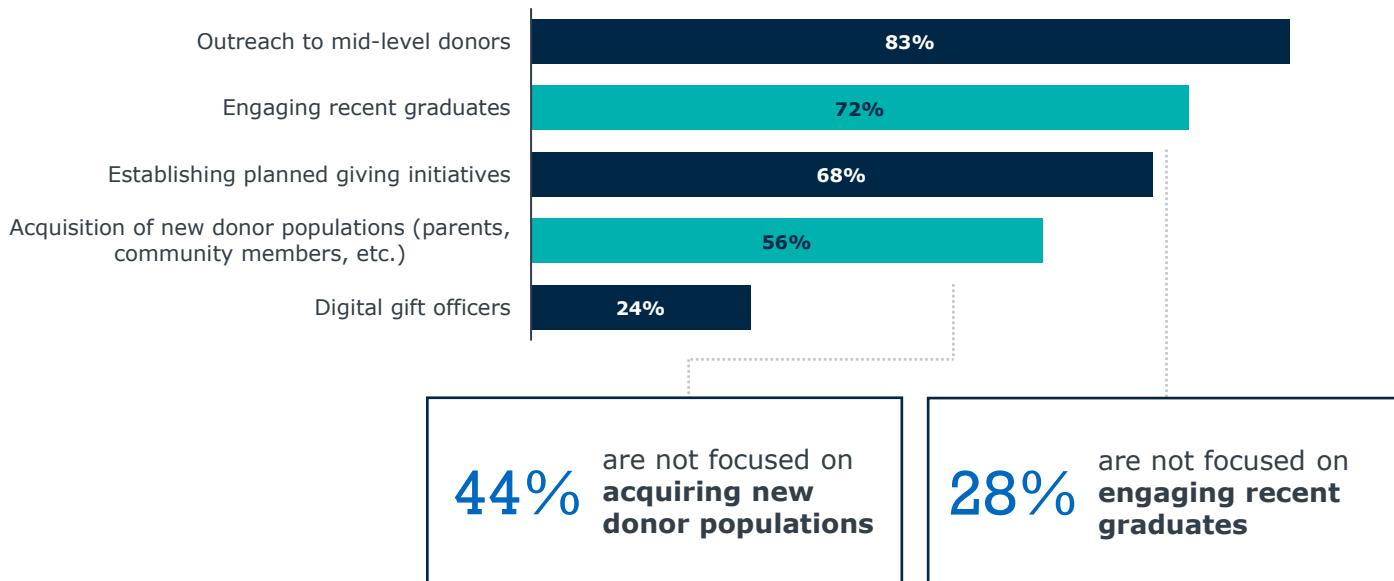
Key Strategies Remain Underutilized in Addressing Declining Donor Counts

Continuing this trend, survey findings revealed there were several areas in which advancement leaders could immediately drive impact to counteract declining donor counts. Two are particularly noteworthy. First, only half of respondents indicated their team was prioritizing using data to inform and tailor their strategies, a fact that is consistent with our findings on data limitations (you can read more about this in section three). Second, almost 30% of respondents reported that boosting annual giving efforts was not a priority – a cause of concern given the role that annual giving can play in bringing in new donors, nurturing those relationships over time, and unlocking unrestricted giving dollars. You can see more about what initiatives they are prioritizing at the top of the next page.

50% are not prioritizing **adjusting strategies based on data insights**

29% are not prioritizing **boosting annual giving efforts**

Amplify Efforts to Bring In Funds from Diverse Donors

Area of Opportunity #3

When asked how they were responding to declining donor counts, a noteworthy 34% of survey respondents reported not prioritizing expanding their donor pipeline. This presents a huge opportunity for advancement teams to be more intentional about these efforts, including using strategic initiatives to better engage donors from diverse audiences and key populations (such as alumni and mid-level or leadership annual givers).

Q. In light of declining donor counts in recent years, which of the following strategies is your institution prioritizing? (select all that apply)
n = 161

Strategy	Percentage
Improving engagement with mid-level donors	72%
Focusing on major gift cultivation	72%
Boosting annual giving efforts	71%
Enhancing donor retention	71%
Expanding our donor pipeline	66%
Adjusting strategies based on data insights	50%
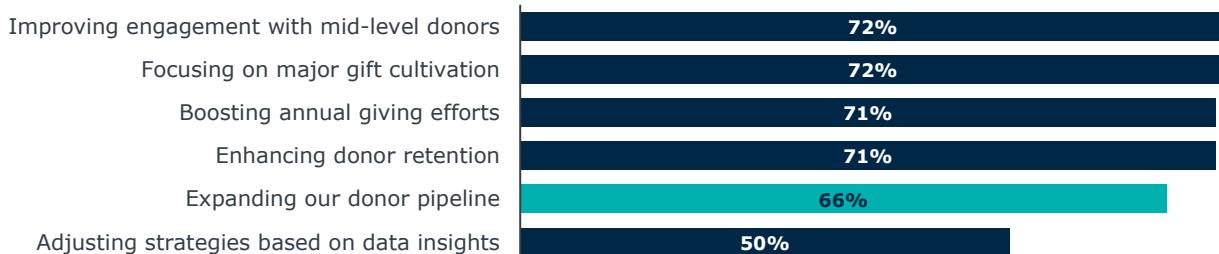
Using Strategic Initiatives to Engage Donors from Diverse Audiences

We wanted to know what advancement teams were doing to bring diverse donors into their fundraising efforts – and where there were opportunities for teams to better engage these donors. The data revealed that only three initiatives, shown in the chart below, have gained widespread adoption while the rest remain more limited. Notably, 7% of respondents reported not currently taking any initiatives to increase donor support from diverse audiences. Advancement teams should assess which initiatives they have already taken in this space and consider if there are additional strategies from the list below that could be integrated into their processes.

Q. Which of the following initiatives have you taken on to increase donor support from diverse audiences? *n = 160*

Majority of respondents:		Minority of respondents:	
Asked individuals from diverse audiences to serve in leadership positions (on boards, as lead volunteers, etc.)	71%	Created affinity-based giving circles for diverse constituents	30%
Used inclusive communication, including culturally sensitive language and imagery in all outreach materials	63%	Included inclusion and belonging sentiment in alumni/donor surveys	27%
Developed targeted marketing campaigns that address the specific interests and concerns of different demographic groups	55%	Shared resources and information about the unique challenges faced by different demographic groups to build empathy and understanding	26%

Reaching Donors from Diverse Audiences Will Require Better Data

In addition to the initiatives outlined above, data will play an important role in better serving an increasingly diverse group of constituents. Data from our 2024 Advancement Leaders Survey revealed that a majority of respondents do not currently collect DEI data from donors. Doing so would be a quick win to empower teams to provide potential donors with a more personalized donor experience (see more on data in section three).

55% of respondents **do not collect** DEI data from donors
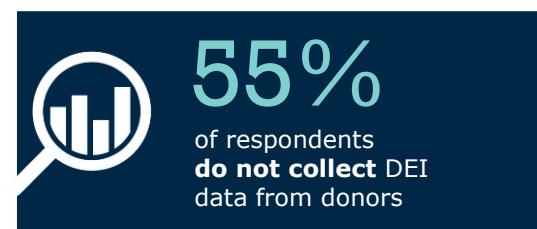
Engage Your Largest Group of Donors: Alumni

Area of Opportunity #4

### Despite Recent Changes, Alumni Engagement Remains Critically Important

In spring 2023, *U.S. News and World Report* announced that they would be removing alumni giving metrics from consideration for their 2024 college rankings. This news marked a meaningful shift, especially among Boards and Presidents, who have long focused on alumni participation to support their institutions' standings in the rankings. But the reality is that the value of alumni extends far beyond a ranking metric – alumni are still the largest group of individual donors and play a critical role in the health and sustainability of donor pipelines. That's why advancement leaders must ensure their alumni efforts are aligned with their interests and expectations.

A Major Opportunity Remains for Tracking Alumni Engagement

When asked about their tracking metrics for alumni engagement, advancement leaders reported high levels of tracking for event attendance, giving history, and volunteerism. But survey data revealed there was an opportunity to better track a metric that can prove to be especially important for young alumni: online and email activity. Nearly a third of survey respondents reported not tracking alumni online and email activity, a source of information that can help teams effectively tailor their efforts to meet alumni where they are. This is especially relevant for teams looking to improve their results with young alumni, whose digital presence and behavior can reveal a lot about their interests and stage of the donor journey.

It is worth noting, however, that tracking online and email activity can be difficult without the buying power, sophistication of systems, and expertise needed to ensure digital efforts are reaching the desired audiences in the first place. As covered in more depth on the following page, survey data continued to suggest that digital channels present untapped opportunities to expand donor ecosystems and more strategically access hard-to-reach (but important) donor audiences.

Q. How are you currently tracking alumni engagement? (check all that apply)
n = 162

Metric	%
Event attendance	94%
Giving history	91%
Volunteerism	87%
Giving longevity	73%
Online/email activity	69%
Involvement with students	65%
Number of alumni reached and using…	46%
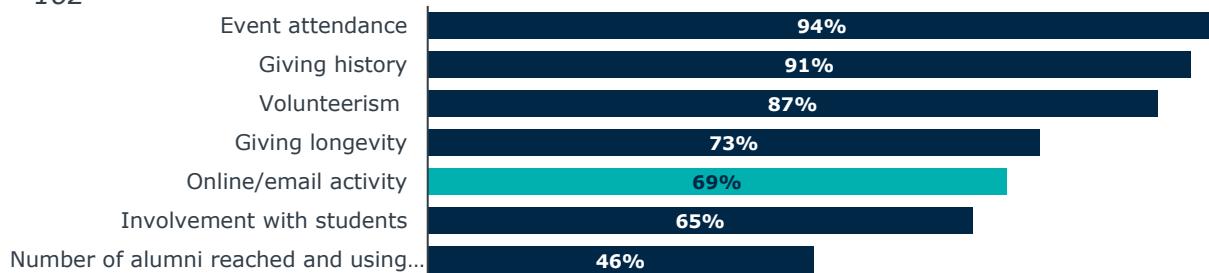
Highlight Institution-Specific and Cause-Based Giving in Messaging to Alumni

Like all donors today, alumni are inundated with appeals for their increasingly limited discretionary dollars. That's why advancement teams must evolve their approach past broad appeals for endowment or student support and focus their messaging instead on what inspires alumni. Alumni want to know how their contribution will be making an impact on the causes they care about, and how it is unique to the institution. The chart on the right shows the top four areas where respondents reported alumni were donating their dollars – suggesting areas of opportunity for distinct messaging.

Q. In what areas are alumni donating the highest number of dollars to your institution?
Respondents could select 3, n = 160

Area	%
Scholarship	89%
Athletics	54%
Academics	41%
Emergency Funds	21%
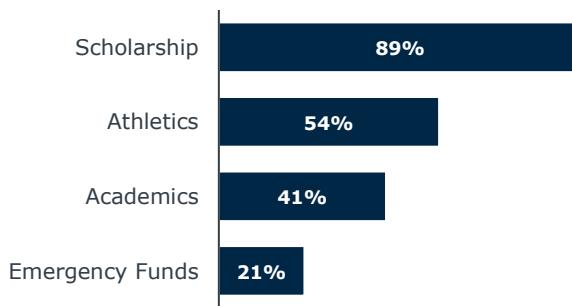
Do More with Digital

Area of Opportunity #5

Digital Marketing Opens the Doors to Key Audiences and Is Vital to Expand Reach

At the intersection of many key groups covered in this section (donors from diverse audiences, alumni, new donors) lies one channel: digital marketing. We know that younger donors prioritize personalized, digital-first interactions. They want to be engaged in real time in the spaces they are already in – they are digitally savvy, discerning, and inundated with messages vying for their attention and contributions. They are also deeply philanthropic and passionate about their causes, making it crucial for advancement teams to bring them into the pipeline.

Schools Are Leveraging Many Digital Marketing Tools, but Missing One Big Opportunity

To better understand how advancement teams are currently using digital marketing, we asked respondents about their team's adoption of digital marketing channels. Respondents reported widespread use of email, school websites, and social media, which have historically proven to be successful avenues to reach new donors and stay in touch with existing ones. It is worth highlighting the current challenges to email (donors flooded with appeals, deliverability woes, etc.) and keeping those top of mind given email's universal usage among advancement teams.

Notably, there was one tool that remained distinctly underutilized: digital ads. Nearly half of respondents did not use digital ads to reach and engage donors. This presents a valuable opportunity for schools to more effectively expand their donor ecosystem to populations they may currently be missing.

Which digital marketing channels do you currently use for donor engagement?
Respondents could select all that apply; n = 162

Channel	%
Emails	100%
Institution's Website	97%
Social Media	95%
Digital Ads	56%
Other	
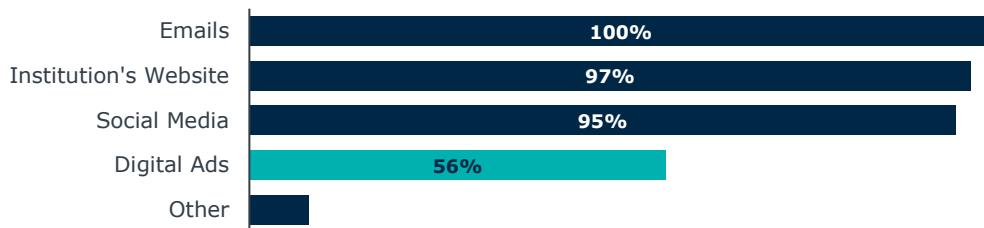
Advancement Teams Will Need to Understand and Address Their Current Limitations

We asked advancement leaders about the biggest challenges facing their team in digital marketing - limitations that may be preventing them from reaching their full potential in this critical channel. Survey respondents cited difficulty measuring ROI as the most common challenge, followed closely by limited budgets and lack of staff expertise.

Q: What is your institution's biggest challenge with digital marketing?

Respondents could select all that apply; n = 162

Challenge	%
Difficulty Measuring ROI	57%
Limited Budgets	56%
Lack of Staff Expertise	54%
Low Donor Engagement	40%
Other	14%
None	
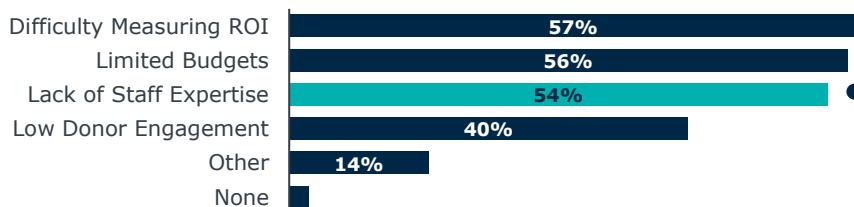
33%
of **Vice Presidents** ranked lack of staff expertise as a challenge, compared to 56% of AVPs/Directors.

But what really stood out was the differences that emerged when responses were broken down by role. Vice Presidents were far less likely to identify lack of staff expertise as a major challenge than their AVP/Directors colleagues, which suggests that VPs may be overestimating their team's proficiency. Effectively leveraging digital marketing isn't just about using the channel – it's about using it in the right ways, with messages that will resonate with the audiences there, at times that will inspire them to act. Advancement leaders will need to ensure that the individuals managing their digital marketing have the expertise needed to inflict real impact.

EAB's Omni-Channel Approach

Digital Marketing Is a Key Component to Omni-Channel Strategy

At EAB, we design and deploy omni-channel marketing strategies to help partners reach their ambitious goals. Omni-channel marketing is a user-centric strategy designed to ensure consistent messaging and branding across multiple channels. By seamlessly connecting touchpoints across platforms, omni-channel marketing enhances donor engagement, ultimately increasing the likelihood of support for your institution. Omni-channel marketing requires deep expertise and sizable bandwidth to ensure effective outreach across all channels (including in the constantly evolving digital landscape). Our Advancement Marketing Services team works with partners to ensure their content is reaching their audiences, fostering deeper donor engagement, and boosting revenue generation across channels.

How Advancement Marketing Services Maximizes the Benefits of Digital Marketing

EAB's team of experts knows that digital is critical to stronger engagement and conversions, which is why they help partners craft and deploy tailored digital strategies to keep them on the leading edge. Whether it is driving efficiency, creativity, and impact through digital outreach or expanding donor ecosystems through display ads, our team ensures that partners are in front of donors when they are ready to give. The results speak for themselves, with EAB partners[1] seeing a 26:1 Return on Ad Spend, a 92% increase in gift value on digital channels, and a 93% increase in click through rate. Below are a few of the digital strategies our experts use to generate these outcomes.

Strategy	Benefits
Lead Generation Engage targeted audience and collect information for future appeals	• Improves lists • Engages disconnected audiences • Improves performance of future program-based campaigns
Remarketing Target an additional list to supplement standard segmentation or reach people between program-based campaigns	• Targets specific audiences • Supports institutions' unique priorities or events • Leads into/calibrates larger and more expensive campaigns • Leverages partner content
Retargeting Show ads to an audience based on the actions they take on owned website(s), video, or other ad	• Reaches audience at a point during which they're primed to act • Can run for extended periods of time to generate gifts between campaigns

Lower Cost Per Conversion	Frequent Touchpoints	Greater Flexibility	Real-Time Analytics	New Donors into Your Ecosystem

1) Among EAB partners in CYE23.

eab.com

Renew Your Focus on Mid-Level Donors

Area of Opportunity #6

Finally, mid-level and leadership annual giving donors hold significant potential for pipeline development but have historically been overlooked in advancement efforts. Our Advancement Leader Survey found that the momentum here is starting to change, presenting an exciting opportunity to strengthen donor pipelines.

Mid-Level Giving Consistently Ranked Among Top Priorities for the Year Ahead

While mid-level and leadership annual giving have at times been referred to as the "forgotten middle," this group of donors is gaining renewed attention among advancement leaders. Advancement leaders ranked expanding mid-level or leadership annual giving efforts highly in all top three priority spots compared to other priorities in the year ahead, and 92% of respondents rated mid-level giving as a high or moderate priority in their advancement strategy.

67% of respondents ranked expanding mid-level or leadership annual giving efforts as **one of their top three priorities** in the next 12 months, second only to hiring and retaining productive team members.

Q: How much of a priority is mid-level and leadership annual giving in your advancement strategy?
N = 159

High Priority	Moderate Priority	Low Priority
50%	42%	8%

92% of respondents rated mid-level giving as a high or moderate priority
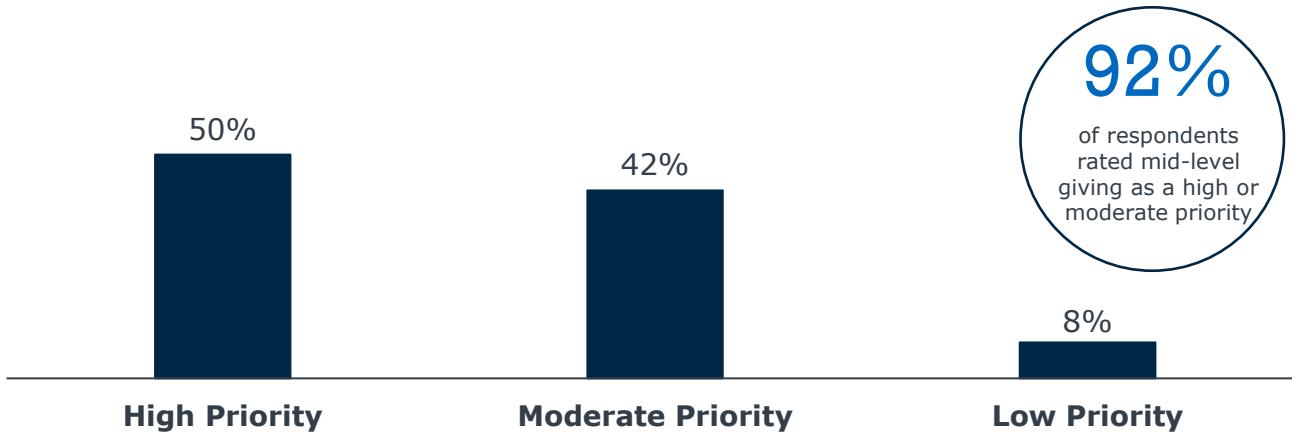
Advancement Teams Must Use This Momentum Strategically to Reach Key Donors

When we asked respondents what strategies they were prioritizing to address donor decline (page 15), the most common response was "improving engagement with mid-level donors." Similarly, when we asked how they were focused on building a pipeline for future giving (page 14) "outreach to mid-level donors" again ranked as the most popular response. This suggests leaders are moving past interest and into action. That said, many advancement teams aren't currently creating and deploying the tailored strategies need to engage and cultivate this segment. Looking to the year ahead, leaders will need to ensure they are using data-driven strategies and crafting segment-specific messaging and campaigns to drive impact among this key audience.

Challenge 3:
Data and Technology

3

# Many Advancement Teams Fall Short on Data Practices

Data plays a critical role in the success of many advancement efforts – it is the cornerstone of personalization, segmentation, and process efficiencies, to name a few. Additionally, many advancement leaders are hoping AI will become a silver bullet for their bandwidth challenges. But unfortunately, data from our 2024 Advancement Leaders Survey shows widespread challenges with data management and limited knowledge about effectively using AI.

Inaccurate and Siloed Data Plagues Advancement Teams

We asked survey respondents to rate their institution's data management practices on a scale from poor to excellent. While just over half of respondents rated their practices as "good," a noteworthy 45% rated them as either "fair" or "poor". To further narrow in on the problem, we asked respondents to identify the top two data management challenges their team is facing. More than half of respondents selected "data silos" and "inaccurate data" as the top two challenges, with "limited staff expertise" coming in third.

How would you rate your institution's data management practices?
n = 157

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
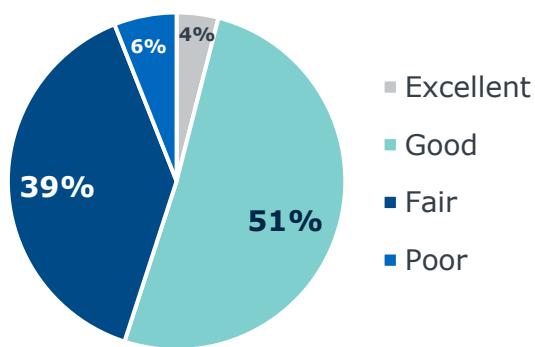
What are your biggest data management challenges?
Respondents could select up to 2; n = 163

#1 **Data Silos on Campus**
59%

#2 **Inaccurate/Incomplete/ Outdated Data**
54%

#3 **Limited Staff Expertise**
35%

Not All Challenges Are Created Equal: Differences Emerge by Role and Institution Size

When broken down by role and size, survey data revealed that Vice Presidents were more likely to identify limited staff expertise as a top challenge, while AVP/Directors were more likely to raise concerns about data silos. Meanwhile, small schools were significantly more likely to indicate limited staff expertise as a top challenge, while large schools were more likely to struggle with data silos and inaccurate data.

- VP
- AVP/Director

N= 133

- Large Schools
  10,000+ Full-Time Students
- Small Schools
  1,000-2,999 Full-Time Students

N= 104

eab.com
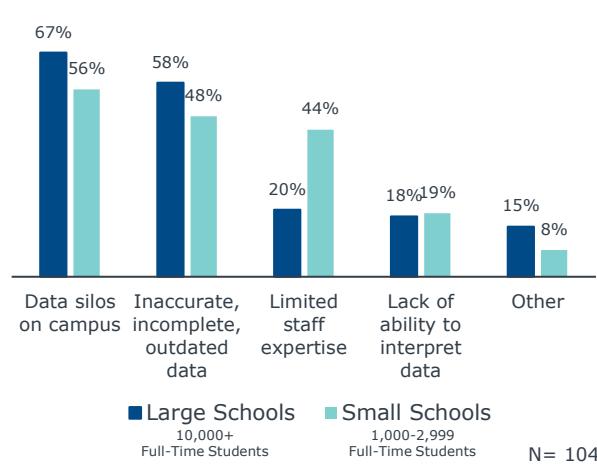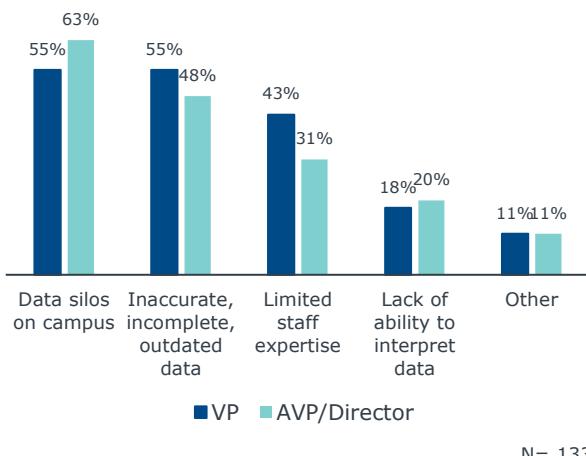
Leaders Have High Hopes but Limited Proficiency in AI

Advancement Leaders Report Overwhelming Interest in AI, Especially at the Top

Interest in AI is pervasive, with advancement leaders increasingly viewing generative AI as a tool for streamlining annual giving. The data reflects this level of enthusiasm, with 86% of respondents indicating some level of interest. This was particularly true among top leadership, with 54% of Vice Presidents selecting "very interested" and only 8% reporting being neutral or not interested.

Q. What is your current interest in incorporating AI in your office?
n = 162

Very Interested	48%
Somewhat Interested	38%
Neutral	14%
Not Interested	

54%
of Vice Presidents surveyed selected "very interested"
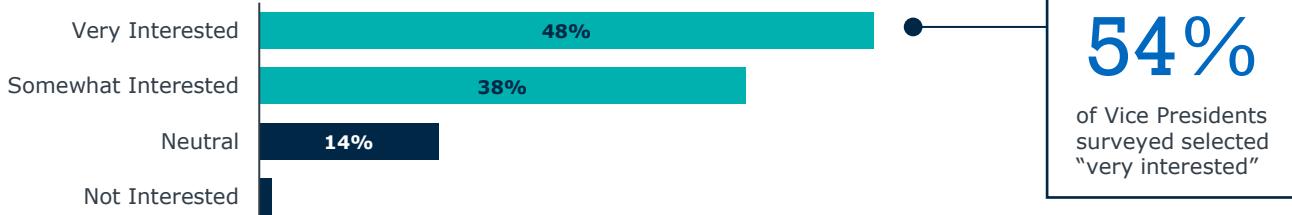
But Interest Does Not Translate to Expertise or Implementation

Despite immense interest in AI, advancement leaders report more subdued levels of confidence in their team's understanding of it. Only 11% of respondents believed their team had a strong understanding of it, with almost a third suggesting their team's understanding was weak. What's more, AVPs/Directors were more likely to rank their team's understanding of AI as weak than their VP counterparts, which suggests top leadership may again be misjudging the realities of their team's capabilities.

Q. How would you rate your team's understanding of AI?
*n = 162*

Strong	11%
Moderate	59%
Weak	30%
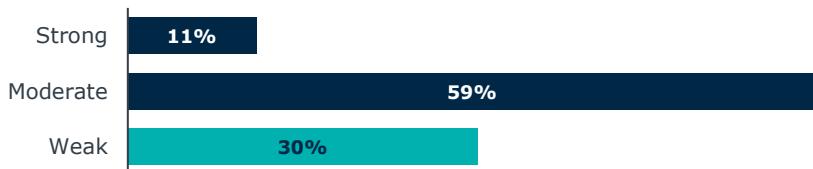
When asked how their teams were currently using AI in their advancement offices, over a third of respondents reported that they were not using AI at all (see more about these results page 24). While email generation and tailoring of communication to prospects had gained some traction among advancement leaders, teams have not had the bandwidth, resources, or prioritization needed to effectively leverage the many other uses of AI. Looking ahead, that is not likely to change in the next twelve months based on respondents' own reported prioritization. When asked to rank six top-of-mind advancement issues by priority for the year ahead, integrating AI and technology into advancement practices was the most likely to come in last by a considerable margin.

38%
of respondents reported **not using AI** in their advancement offices

43%
of respondents ranked integrating AI and technology into their practices **as their lowest priority**

Make Data Accessible and Actionable

Area of Opportunity #7

Advancement Leaders Must Ensure Strong Data Foundations and Necessary Know-how

Data plays a critical role in the success of advancement programs. Teams who can effectively capture and analyze their data, then optimize their efforts with those findings, will hold the key to getting and staying ahead. But this won't be possible without advancement leaders prioritizing the steps needed to get there. First, advancement leaders need to create a centralized database and continuously work to break down the silos that keep valuable data just out of reach. Useful data can live across campus – spread across advancement communication systems and CRMs, admissions offices, student affairs, alumni relations, finance, and institutional research. Before teams can do anything with data, they must be able to access it. Second, advancement leaders will need to ensure their staff is equipped with the expertise to know what type of data to leverage and how. Finally, leaders and their teams will need to engrain data analysis into their strategic and everyday decisions, to ensure they are stretching their resources and making the greatest impact on their high-priority audiences.

For Many, Better Data Practices Start with Their CRM

As more advancement leaders turn to data to help them craft strategy, make decisions and deliver a more personalized donor experience, many are finding that their existing CRM does not meet their needs. As a result, there has been a wave of CRM migrations. A staggering 41% of respondents reported migrating to a new CRM in the past five years, reflecting advancement leaders' overwhelming focus on data management. Blackbaud remains the most common CRM overall (55% of respondents use a Blackbaud platform), with Ellucian emerging as the second most common platform choice among respondents who migrated in the past five years.

41%

of respondents reported **migrating to a new CRM in the past five years**

It should be noted that simply moving to a new CRM isn't enough if advancement leaders and their teams don't know how to use the new technology effectively.

Establishing In-House or External Partnership for Expertise

When it comes to leveraging data, advancement teams need to know not only what data to use and where it lives, but also how to use it. From their own campaign outcomes and marketing metrics to institutional information (i.e., donor demographics, engagement, indicators of college experience) and external data, these types of data become valuable only when a team effectively uses them.

As we've seen from the prior sections, advancement leaders are facing limited budgets and difficult-to-reach donors. Data-driven strategy can help advancement leaders stretch their resources further and ensure a higher return on investment. In particular, data can be used to create a more personalized experience for donors – especially those who are historically hard to reach or currently missing from the donor pipeline. But each of these steps requires a deep understanding of data, data management best practices, and data analytics. Advancement leaders will need to consider investing internally or externally in that knowledge in order to unlock its potential.

Craft an AI Strategy That's Grounded in Expertise

Area of Opportunity #8

Getting More Out of AI

While email generation and tailoring of communication to prospects have gained some traction among advancement teams, there remains a significant opportunity to better leverage AI to enhance segmentation, personalization, analysis, and process efficiencies. The reality of constrained bandwidth, competing priorities, and hesitancy around new technologies means that even the best-intentioned teams can fall short of their aspirations for the role AI can play in streamlining annual giving without additional support and guidance.

Q. In which of the following ways do you currently use AI in your advancement office?
n = 156

Email generation	We do not use AI in our Advancement office	Tailoring communication strategies for prospects	Segmentation based on various factors	Analyzing social media trends	Examining patterns in alumni engagement	Chatbots to handle routine queries from constituents
42%	38%	28%	17%	11%	8%	5%
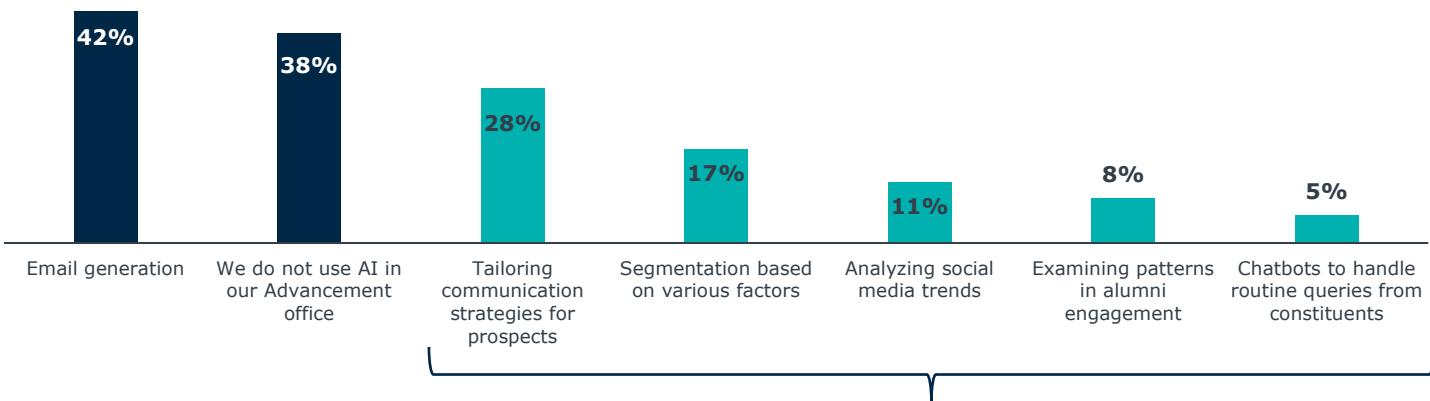
Areas of opportunity for advancement leaders to more effectively use AI to deliver a more personalized donor experience

AI can be a powerful asset in improving the efficiency of your fundraising efforts, but for it to be successful requires large amounts of quality data to feed it and human expertise to manage it. When done correctly, AI can be an invaluable tool for campaign personalization, data and analytics reporting, deployment testing, and predictive modeling, among other capabilities.

Practically, AI should be helping you make smarter decisions **faster** by quickly analyzing your data to understand key trends and what is driving them, helping you or your team organize your work or get faster answers from non-data questions, and developing personalized content at greater scale. Whether it is building the expertise in-house or working with a strategic partner to leverage these exciting opportunities, there is a lot to be gained from strategic use of AI.

Exploring Opportunities in AI with Advancement Marketing Services

At EAB, our experts are continuously seeking new ways to effectively use AI and exploring how AI can better support our partners. Specifically, our Advancement Marketing Services team is testing how we can leverage our best-in-class data quality and depth to maximize the benefits of modern AI through the lens of targeted personalization, smart segmentation, and analytics. As part of our relentless pursuit of innovation, our testing agenda expands beyond just what AI can do now and looks toward what opportunities may lie ahead for targeted and strategic AI utilization.

eab.com

Key Takeaways and Additional Resources

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

1

Advancement teams face mounting challenges (and goals)

Advancement teams continue to work in a constrained environment. Survey data shows that that a majority of respondents are struggling with limited budgets and resources, donor declines, alumni engagement and staffing shortages, all while fielding increasing pressure to bring in funds (especially unrestricted) to ensure their institution's financial stability and institutional flexibility.

2

Hiring remains advancement leaders' top priority

Three-fourths of survey respondents report having current vacancies in their offices, and hiring was the most common #1 priority among advancement leaders for the next year. Exploring flexible work options, new technologies, and external support through strategic partnerships can help advancement leaders keep their operations running and meet their goals.

3

There are many opportunities to better address donor pipeline challenges

Many promising tactics remain underutilized when it comes to addressing the challenges plaguing donor pipelines. From using targeted strategies to reach key audiences to unlocking the potential of digital channels, advancement leaders will need to lean into a modernized approach to ensure the health of their donor pipeline for years to come.

4

Advancement teams will need expertise to navigate today's data and technology

Forty-five percent of survey respondents ranked their team's data management skills as fair or poor, and nearly 40 percent reported not using AI in their offices at all. Advancement teams will need more than interest to be able to effectively navigate the evolving technological landscape and access the potential offered by data analytics. Whether it is in-house or through an external partnership, advancement leaders must ensure their teams are equipped with the knowledge they need to get ahead.

Conversation Guide

Workforce Strategies for Advancement Leaders: Questions to Consider

☐ How are you currently working to recruit and retain top talent?

☐ Do you currently have any technologies to help streamline your processes? If you could, what kind of technology would you integrate?

☐ Do you currently work with any external contractors to support your team's efforts? If you could, what projects or initiatives would you most want support with?

Donor Pipeline Strategies for Advancement Leaders: Questions to Consider

☐ How is your team focusing on acquiring new donor populations?

☐ What strategies is your team currently leveraging to bring in funds from diverse audiences?

☐ Assess your team's current approach to digital marketing. What channels are you using? What channels are you missing? How are you tailoring your messaging to key audiences?

☐ Are mid-level donors and leadership annual giving a top priority for your team in the next 12 months? If so, what are you doing to act on that?

Data Strategies for Advancement Leaders: Questions to Consider

☐ How is your team currently using data to inform your advancement strategy? How does it empower your donor experience?

☐ Does your current CRM meet your data needs? If you recently migrated, do you feel equipped to maximize the capabilities of your new CRM?

☐ Assess your team's current level of AI expertise. Where are your strengths? Where are your weaknesses? How can you strengthen your AI capabilities?

Research Overview

About the 2024 Advancement Leaders Survey

EAB's Advancement Marketing Services collected responses from advancement leaders across the country in September and October of 2024. The goal of this research was to learn more about advancement leaders' top concerns, priorities, and practices with respect to navigating the current advancement landscape. The results include responses from 164 participants.

Participant Profile

Role Title	Percentage
Vice President of Advancement	38%
Associate Vice President of Advancement	32%
Director of Advancement	12%
Other	18%

Institution Size	Percentage
Very Small (<1,000 full-time students)	10%
Small (1,000-2,999 full-time students)	29%
Medium (3,000-9,999 full-time students)	20%
Large (10,000+ full-time students)	41%

Institution Type	Percentage
Public	46%
Private	54%

Primary Degree Conferred	Percentage
Bachelor's	81%
Graduate	19%

Advancement Marketing Services

How EAB Supports Your Team's Advancement Goals

1 **Strategy**
Evaluate your strategy to optimize efforts and increase outcomes

2 **Marketing**
Strengthen donor and alumni experience using omnichannel marketing

3 **Data**
Optimize program through data insights and strategic partnership

---

NEW

Advancement Dashboards
A Smarter Way To Use Your Data

Review your **metrics and data in real-time** for quicker decision making

View **upgrade and downgrade trends** to better understand donor behavior

Get **customized insights and recommendations** for strategy optimization

---
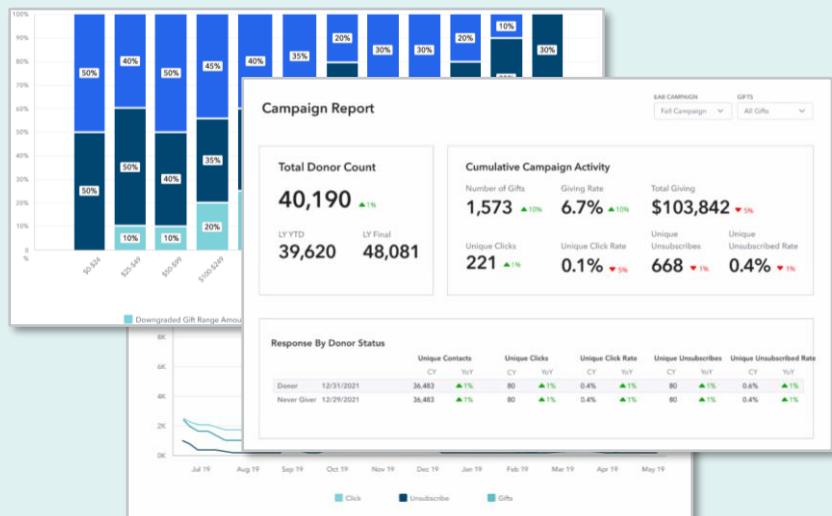
14%
Increase in donors counts in average first year of partnership

2:1–7:1
**Return on Investments** via sourced and influenced giving

11%
Higher than national average donor retention rates for partners

---

To learn more, visit **eab.com/AMS** or email **AMS@eab.com**.

Insight-powered Solutions for Your Top Priorities and Toughest Challenges

Future-proof your institution by addressing immediate and long-term opportunities and threats

Institutional Strategy

Reach, engage, and enroll future classes in a dynamic market with demographic headwinds

Undergraduate Marketing and Enrollment

Meet aspirational giving goals in an era of competing fundraising priorities and shifting donor interest

Advancement

Secure enrollments and revenue in an evolving graduate, online, and adult learner market

Graduate Marketing and Enrollment

Improve decision-making and accelerate innovation with a modern data and analytics infrastructure

Data and Analytics

Student Success

Support, retain, and empower students in college and beyond

We partner with 2,800+ institutions to accelerate progress, deliver results, and enable lasting change.

95%+ of our partners return to us year after year because of results we achieve, together.

ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.

39484