



# Higher Education Enrollment Trends 2024

## Breaking Down the Data



# The Background

The latest higher education enrollment trends paint a bleak picture. Since 2017, total US postsecondary enrollment has fallen every year, resulting in a **9%** overall drop. This equates to over 1.9 million less students in higher education.

The causes for this run deep. As birth rates have declined, so too has the number of college-aged individuals who may pursue higher education. The rising cost of education amidst inflation has had a considerable impact too, alongside disruption caused by Covid-19. There are also many more alternatives to traditional postsecondary education now more than ever, with the flexibility and affordability of vocational schools and online courses attracting many.

Whatever the causes for the college enrollment decline, the result remains unchanged - **the same number of schools are fighting over a reduced pool of potential students.**

However, it's not all doom and gloom. As this report will show, there are strong signs of stabilization across sectors, especially among private for-profit 4-year institutions. Freshmen enrollment is also a particular bright spot.

Read on to explore the data behind the college enrollment decline, broken down by sector, gender, age, major and region. This chapter is then followed by proven admission strategies that help to increase prospective student engagement and enrollment.







## CHAPTER 1

# Breaking Down the Enrollment Data

This chapter provides key enrollment data from US postsecondary institutions to reveal trends in higher education enrollment. The data comes from the latest [CTEE Expanded Edition report](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. It collects data from more than 3,600 postsecondary schools, representing **97%** of the nation's postsecondary enrollments in degree-granting institutions, as of fall 2019.



# POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT BY SECTOR

**Total postsecondary enrollment** dropped across every sector from fall 2020-2021 at an average of **2.5%**, constituting 469,000 less students. Community public colleges were hit hard as enrollment dropped by **6.7%** (-320,000 students), while the private non-profit 4-year sector performed best with a **0.5%** decline (-21,200 students).

The picture was worse for undergraduate fall enrollment which fell by **3.5%** from 2020-2021 (-542,000 students), compounding a **3.7%** drop from 2019-2020 too.

However, the latest data reveals that this trend may be stabilizing. From 2021 to 2022, postsecondary fall enrollment contracted by only **0.7%** (-132,000 students). Community college enrollment was essentially flat (+0.4%, +16,700 students) and private for-profit 4-year bounced back to exceed 2020's numbers with a **2.6%** increase (+21,600 students).

This stabilization can be seen in **undergraduate fall enrollment** too, contracting by only **0.6%** from 2021 to 2022. The growth noted in private for-profit 4-year colleges was driven by undergraduate enrollment, rising by **5%** from 2020-2021.

Annual % change in total postsecondary fall enrollment by sector

| Sector                    | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 | 2021-2022 |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| All sectors               | -2.6%     | -2.5%     | -0.7%     |
| Public 4-year             | +0.4%     | -0.9%     | -1.2%     |
| Private non-profit 4-year | -0.2%     | -0.5%     | -0.6%     |
| Private for-profit 4 year | +4.5%     | -2.1%     | +2.6%     |
| PABs*                     | -5.5%     | -7%**     | -1.7%     |
| Public 2-year             | -10.5%    | -6.7%     | +0.4%     |

Annual % change in undergraduate fall enrollment by sector

| Sector                    | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 | 2021-2022 |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| All sectors               | -3.7%     | -3.5%     | -0.6%     |
| Public 4-year             | -0.3%     | -1.9%     | -1.4%     |
| Private non-profit 4-year | -1.3%     | -1.6%     | -0.1%     |
| Private for-profit 4 year | +5.7%     | -1.6%     | +5%       |
| PABs                      | -5.5%     | -6.9%**   | -1.7%     |
| Public 2-year             | -10.5%    | -6.7%     | +0.4%     |





**Freshmen fall enrollment** is particularly on the rise, jumping by **4.3%** from 2021-2022 (+97,000 students). However, it is worth noting that freshmen enrollment still remains down by 150,000 students compared to fall 2019.

Annual % change in freshmen fall enrollment

| Sector                    | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 | 2021-2022 |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| All sectors               | -10.2%    | +0.2%     | +4.3%     |
| Public 4-year             | -6.9%     | +1.3%     | +3.9%     |
| Private non-profit 4-year | -3.7%     | +3.8%     | +1.8%     |
| Private for-profit 4 year | +2.5%     | -3.5%     | +6.9%     |
| PABs                      | +9.2%     | -3.6%     | -15.8%    |
| Public 2-year             | -17.6%    | -3%       | +6.1%     |

**Graduate enrollment** has not fared so well. Although it experienced two consecutive years of strong growth from fall 2019-2021, figures dropped by **1.2%** (-39,000 students) from 2021-2022. This may indicate that the pandemic-fueled interest in graduate programs has come to an end.

Annual % change in graduate fall enrollment by sector

| Sector                    | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 | 2021-2022 |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| All sectors               | +3%       | +2.4%     | -1.2%     |
| Public 4-year             | +3.9%     | +3.4%     | -0.3%     |
| Private non-profit 4-year | +2.3%     | +1.7%     | -1.6%     |
| Private for-profit 4 year | +1.5%     | -3.5%     | -3.1%     |



# POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT BY SECTOR & GENDER

Overall, **male undergraduate enrollment** stabilized from fall 2021-2022, rising by **0.2%** (+15,000 students) after a substantial drop in 2020 and 2021. (-6% and -3% respectively).

However, the same cannot be said for **female undergraduate enrollment** which continued to drop by **1.5%** (-122,000 students). These data points follow the trend of increased enrollment for men relative to women which we first saw in fall 2021. However, there still remains over 2.1 million more women in undergraduate study than men.

## Annual undergraduate fall enrollment by sector and gender

| Sector                    | Gender | 2020       |                             | 2021       |                             | 2022       |                             |
|---------------------------|--------|------------|-----------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
|                           |        | Enrollment | % Change From Previous Y... | Enrollment | % Change From Previous Y... | Enrollment | % Change From Previous Y... |
| All sectors               | Men    | 6,250,349  | -0.6%                       | 6,062,004  | -3.0%                       | 6,077,147  | -0.2%                       |
|                           | Women  | 8,710,407  | -1.7%                       | 8,387,421  | -3.7%                       | 8,265,501  | -1.5%                       |
| Public 4-year             | Men    | 2,612,909  | -2.0%                       | 2,548,361  | -2.5%                       | 2,516,033  | -1.3%                       |
|                           | Women  | 3,307,728  | 1.1%                        | 3,262,579  | -1.4%                       | 3,203,322  | -1.8%                       |
| Private non-profit 4-year | Men    | 1,094,770  | -1.6%                       | 1,081,832  | -1.2%                       | 1,084,479  | 0.2%                        |
|                           | Women  | 1,539,370  | -0.9%                       | 1,515,984  | -1.5%                       | 1,507,180  | -0.6%                       |
| Private for-profit 4 year | Men    | 202,883    | 9.7%                        | 199,561    | -1.6%                       | 206,112    | 3.3%                        |
|                           | Women  | 371,651    | 4.4%                        | 368,075    | -1.0%                       | 390,989    | 6.2%                        |
| PABs                      | Men    | 403,452    | -9.9%                       | 379,080    | -6.0%                       | 384,220    | 1.4%                        |
|                           | Women  | 617,345    | -2.5%                       | 567,075    | -8.1%                       | 541,037    | -4.6%                       |
| Public 2-year             | Men    | 1,826,007  | -14.5%                      | 1,733,537  | -5.2%                       | 1,778,947  | 2.6%                        |
|                           | Women  | 2,725,769  | -7.0%                       | 2,510,909  | -7.9%                       | 2,478,871  | -1.3%                       |



# POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT BY MAJOR

Of the top five **undergraduate 4-year majors** in fall 2022, four dropped from 2021 to 2022, including Health Professions, Liberal Arts, Biological Sciences, and Engineering. Business was the only major to grow by 1.2% (+19,000 students).

Notably, Computer and Information Sciences enrollment increased more than any other major, continuing its strong growth for many years. From fall 2017 to 2022, the number of students enrolled in this major has increased by 34%. There are only four other top 20 majors that have grown in the past five years:

- Psychology: 14.9%
- Agriculture and Operations: 7.9%
- National Resources & Conservation: 7.4%
- Visual Performing Arts: 2.6%

In direct contrast, enrollment in English Language & Literature has decreased by 23% within the same time period – the largest drop of all top 20 majors.





# National under-graduate 4-year top 20 majors, 2020-2022

| CIP Category  | 2020      |          | 2021      |          | 2022      |          |
|---|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
|   | N         | % Change | N         | % Change | N         | % Change |
| Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support      | 1,573,827 | -0.9%    | 1,543,507 | -2.0%    | 1,562,597 | 1.2%     |
| Health Professions and Related Clinical Sciences          | 1,027,354 | 1.6%     | 1,005,846 | -2.1%    | 969,281   | -3.6%    |
| Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and Humanities | 820,110   | -6.4%    | 798,235   | -2.7%    | 760,002   | -4.8%    |
| Biological and Biomedical Sciences                        | 627,528   | 0.2%     | 609,701   | -2.8%    | 595,191   | -2.4%    |
| Engineering   | 614,969   | -2.4%    | 596,908   | -2.9%    | 589,126   | -1.3%    |
| Computer and Information Sciences and Support Services    | 499,880   | 6.2%     | 519,257   | 3.9%     | 573,301   | 10.4%    |
| Psychology  | 498,114   | 6.9%     | 516,993   | 3.8%     | 522,645   | 1.1%     |
| Education   | 455,211   | 2.3%     | 445,683   | -2.1%    | 433,784   | -2.7%    |
| Visual and Performing Arts                                | 412,133   | 0.2%     | 415,663   | 0.9%     | 422,529   | 1.7%     |
| Social Sciences   | 437,830   | -1.8%    | 423,582   | -3.3%    | 404,295   | -4.6%    |
| CIP Missing   | 343,006   | 2.2%     | 323,220   | -5.8%    | 353,051   | 9.2%     |
| Communication, Journalism, and Relate Programs            | 308,884   | -3.1%    | 284,245   | -8.0%    | 275,808   | -3.0%    |
| Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies                           | 259,356   | 0.3%     | 261,854   | 1.0%     | 262,453   | 0.2%     |
| Security and Protective Services                          | 270,415   | 0.1%     | 253,064   | -6.4%    | 242,286   | -4.3%    |
| Parks, Recreation, Leisure and Fitness Studies            | 235,580   | 1.3%     | 231,157   | -1.9%    | 234,288   | 1.4%     |
| Physical Sciences   | 133,011   | -4.8%    | 125,590   | -5.6%    | 120,008   | -4.4%    |
| Public Administration and Social Service Professions      | 129,861   | 0.1%     | 124,008   | -4.5%    | 115,963   | -6.5%    |
| English Language and Literature/letters                   | 122,290   | -6.6%    | 114,948   | -6.0%    | 113,198   | -1.5%    |
| Agriculture, Agriculture Operations, and Related Scien    | 96,043    | -1.5%    | 96,438    | 0.4%     | 97,659    | 1.3%     |
| Natural Resources and Conservation                        | 82,697    | 0.5%     | 84,359    | 2.0%     | 86,887    | 3.0%     |



# POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT BY **REGION**

Across the U.S., **postsecondary fall enrollment** dropped by just **0.7%** from 2021 to 2022, indicating that the Covid-fueled enrollment decline may be coming to an end. There is, however, significant disparity between regions.

The West and South postsecondary enrollments both increased (by 0.4% and 0.2% respectively), while the Midwest declined substantially (by 1.1%).

\*Primarily Associate Degree Granting Baccalaureate Institutions  
\*\*New Carnegie classifications in 2021 reduced the number of PABs from 142 in 2020 to 128 in 2021. This has driven enrollment down in the sector.

Annual % change in total postsecondary fall enrollment by region

| Region         | 2019-2020 | 2020-2021 | 2021-2022 |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Nationwide     | -2.6%     | -2.5%     | -0.7%     |
| Midwest        | -4.4%     | -2.3%     | -1.1%     |
| Northeast      | -3.9%     | -3.1%     | -0.6%     |
| South          | -2%       | -2.2%     | +0.2%     |
| West           | -3.3%     | -3.6%     | +0.4%     |
| POI/Multistate | +2.1%     | -2.7%     | -0.8%     |

## CHAPTER 2

# 4 Higher Education Enrollment Strategies



To grab the attention of today's smaller student population, colleges must adopt new strategies that put students front and center. They must cater to their behaviors, expectations, and needs as closely as possible, providing them with a customer experience (CX) that mirrors that of B2C brands.

To increase enrollment at your college, here are 4 key strategies that any school can adopt with even the most limited of budgets.





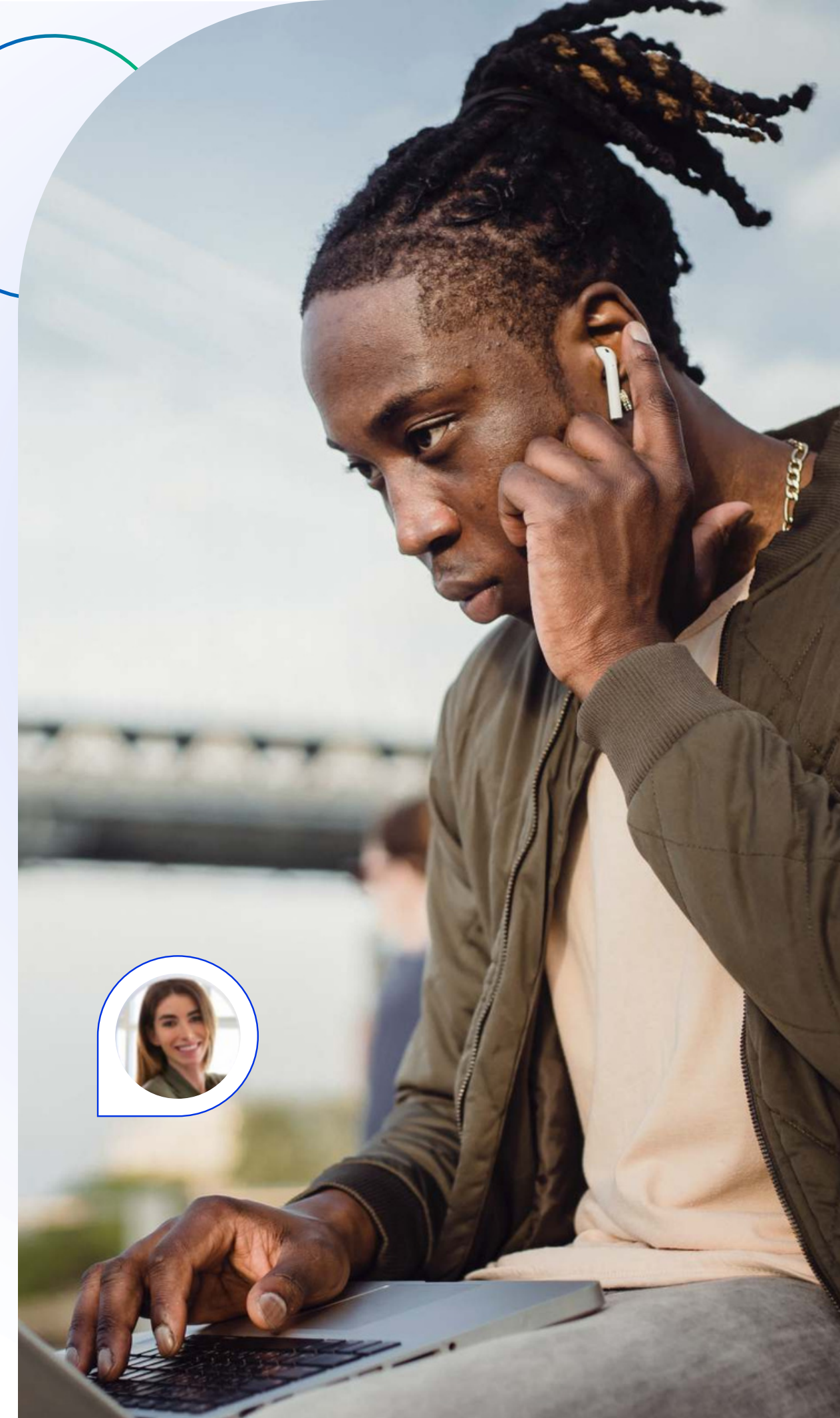
## STRATEGY 1- REMOVE BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT WITH **LIVE CHAT**

To maximize engagement with prospective students, colleges must make it as easy as possible for students to connect with them when they have a question. However, with a reliance on phone and email, many colleges are failing to provide this experience as today's students move away from these traditional channels in favor of digital, real-time support.

When students were polled on what communication channels they preferred, [live chat was ranked number one](#). Live chat allows students to quickly and conveniently connect with potential schools in real-time, breaking down a key barrier to engagement.

Live chat also supports inclusion and accessibility to cater to all student needs. Students with disabilities or those who have difficulty accessing traditional support services, such as those who live off-campus, can still access support through live chat. Some live chat software also provides multilingual support, making it easier for non-native English speakers to seek support and ensure colleges offer inclusive support to students from diverse backgrounds.

Find out [how Thompson Rivers University's Admissions department boosted enrollment by introducing Comm100 Live Chat](#).



## STRATEGY 2-

# DELIVER INSTANT, 24/7 SUPPORT WITH AUTOMATION

Grown up surrounded by technology, today's students have high support expectations. They don't just value, but they expect, around-the-clock support. In a [pre-enrollment survey](#), students were asked - 'How important it is for a school to provide 24/7 support?'. An incredible 99% agreed that it is 'at least somewhat important' to them.

The only viable and cost-effective way to offer **24/7** support is through [chatbots](#) - and thankfully students are happy to use them. In the same [poll](#) as above, 95% of students said they were open to using chatbots to receive support from their school.

As well as 24/7 support, the openness to bots also lies in the speed they can provide. Rather than waiting for an agent to respond, a bot delivers immediate support no matter the time of day. As more and more requests are answered by the bot, this also frees up agent time so students who do want to speak with a human experience shorter wait times too. Overall, this helps increase engagement with prospective students, while also increasing support capacity without sacrificing quality.





## STRATEGY 3-

# PRIORITIZE CONNECTION VIA PERSONALIZATION

In a [survey asking prospective students](#) what they value when choosing which school to join, 92% said it was important they were treated like an individual. On top of this, 77% said they wanted support staff to remember previous conversations they have had.

This data reveals the importance for Admission departments to provide personalized support to prospective students. To do so, [omnichannel student engagement software](#) is essential. This technology connects every communication channel together into one platform, while integrating other key data systems. This gives the agent a detailed understanding of every student they speak to, no matter what channel they use, including conversation history, course details, geographical information, and so much more.

With all this data at hand, agents can provide more helpful and personalized support. This helps colleges to build stronger and more personal connections with prospective students, as well as supporting diversity and inclusion across all student backgrounds and needs.





## STRATEGY 4-

# GRAB THEIR ATTENTION WITH SMS

Today's students are inundated with information as brands clamor to get their attention. For admissions teams to get a slice of this attention, SMS is a key channel. In fact, it is statistically the most effective channel for connecting with students as text messages have an open rate of 98%.

Through [Comm100 Outreach](#), admissions departments can send bulk and personalized SMS messages to prospective students to keep them engaged and avoid student melt. Targeted SMS campaigns can include invitations to on-campus events, admissions reminders, or links to new marketing materials.

Comm100 Outreach also enables two-way messaging so students can respond to these texts and further foster the connection with the school. Compared to email, SMS messages are more than [four times as likely](#) to receive a reply.







## WRAP UP

To tackle the enrollment slump that most colleges are still facing, schools must deliver support that is:

**Digital**  
**Convenient**  
**Fast**  
**Personalized**  
**24/7**

With Comm100 Omnichannel, they can do just this. Comm100 Omnichannel integrates every key digital channel into one unified agent console, powered by zero downtime, the highest standards in security, and AI automation.

Join top institutions like Stanford University, McMaster University, The Open University, and Thompson Rivers University and start reversing the enrollment slump!

[Learn more](#)

