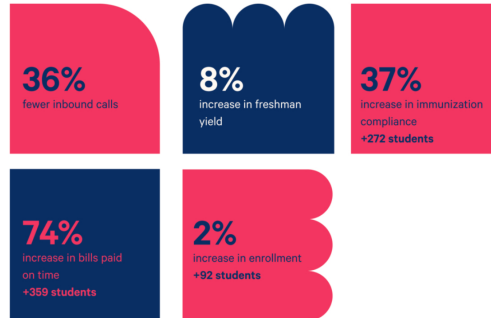


Winston-Salem State University combines strategy and AI to increase on-campus readiness

First-year results



Winston-Salem State University

Location
Winston Salem,
North Carolina

Population
5,124
undergraduates

Students entering Winston-Salem State University were facing barriers when it came to on-campus readiness. Email and phone communication weren't engaging enough to help them prepare for the college experience, while staff was overloaded. With a student-centered communication strategy supported by their Mainstay chatbot, Winston, more students completed enrollment tasks, staff burden was reduced and student enrollment went up.

First Year Results:

The Email Challenge

Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) is a historically black university (HBCU) in North Carolina with 5,124 undergraduate students. In 2017, the university found that traditional methods of communication, such as email, phone and mailings, were yielding low engagement from students. Because students weren't paying attention to important school communications, WSSU offices saw an influx of emails and phone calls from students asking repetitive enrollment questions.

Since staff had to personally respond to each email and phone call, they quickly became overwhelmed, and the university's reputation began to suffer. They even received comments from students on social media complaining about long response times.

"There was a reputational impact, first and foremost, because students felt like we weren't responsive," said Joel Lee, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management at Winston-Salem State University. "We just couldn't keep up with the volume."

In an average month, WSSU offices were receiving about 12,000 calls. With so many questions going unanswered, the university found that fewer students were ready to attend school in the fall. That's when they knew it was time to change their approach to student communication.

Enrollment: A Strategic Start

Two of the biggest areas where WSSU saw students failing to complete enrollment steps were immunization compliance and bill payment. As part of the university's Ram Ready campaign, designed to help students complete key enrollment tasks before moving into their dorm, WSSU set a goal to move from 50% immunization compliance by the first deadline to 90%. For bill payment, they aimed to move from 36% by the first deadline to 90%.

The first step in achieving their goals was to develop an omnichannel communication strategy. According to Jaime Hunt, Vice Chancellor of Strategic Communications at Winston-Salem State University, this meant moving from multiple channel strategies to **a unified strategy that encompasses all channels and focuses on university-wide goals.**

"When I first joined WSSU, we had separate strategies for social media, print materials, our website and beyond," said Jaime. "This was highly ineffective and inconsistent. Instead, we wanted to consider what we were attempting to accomplish, such as improving readiness by 30%. And then look at which tools we could use to achieve that goal."

Jaime advises other universities to do the same — focus on what they're trying to accomplish versus the tasks they're completing with tools.



“Your tools need to serve your overarching strategy. I think that’s something that marketers and communicators outside of higher education understand, and that’s why they have effective marketing.”

Jaime Hunt
Vice Chancellor of Strategic Communications
Winston-Salem State University

Another important element to successful communication in higher education is collaboration with other departments across the institution, she added.

“One of the key things we’ve done is try to **communicate and interact with offices and departments across campus** to help them understand that we want to start from an objective, and then build up a campaign around that,” she said.

AI Chatbot Moves Students Forward

WSSU wanted to find a way to help students complete each step in the enrollment process, and needed a solution that would supplement their email and phone communications while taking the burden off of their staff.

“We were looking for an automated AI solution that would provide a way to communicate with students at scale while also giving us the ability to respond in a personalized way without requiring staff to personally answer every inquiry,” said Joel.

So they decided to add an Mainstay AI chatbot to their communication platform. Named “Winston,” the chatbot allows the university to send student communications via text message, as well as respond to student questions 24/7.

What time do the shuttles start running?



WSSU offers campus shuttle services. Learn more at bit.ly/wssu-campusshuttle



How much does the library charge for printing?



Printing is 10 cents per single-sided B&W page, and 5 cents per double-sided B&W page.



With Winston’s help, **inbound phone calls to enrollment management offices decreased by 36%** during the first year, from fall 2017 – fall 2018, while students yielded higher engagement, going from 30- 50% read rates with email to 100% read rates with text.

With this high engagement, WSSU was able to help students complete their enrollment steps, resulting in a 74% year-over-year improvement in the number of first-time freshmen who paid their bill on time. **Immunization compliance also improved by 37%**. One of the most impactful ways that WSSU was able to reach their goal for immunization compliance was by sending a proactive nudge via text, specifically to students who hadn’t submitted theirs yet.

Alexandra, your immunization compliance must be verified by Sept. 18 so you can stay on campus and attend classes.



Hello. How do I upload my immunization records?



You must show official proof of immunization in order to attend the University. Check out bit.ly/wssu-shc for information on how to obtain and submit the forms.



Additionally, freshman yield climbed from 21.6% to 23.3%, and **overall enrollment at WSSU grew by 2%, bringing 92 more students to campus.**

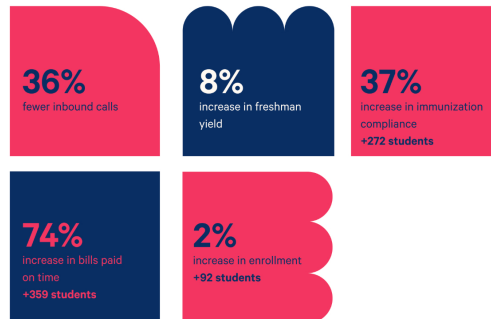
The university has also started using Winston for more interactive campaigns such as asking transfer students if they're still planning to attend WSSU. If they say yes, they get an automated response asking if they'd like to be contacted by an admissions counselor.

"The admissions team really likes it because it narrows down their contacts to people who really need to be contacted," said Joel. "Instead of calling 200 transfer students, they now might only call 60, but they know that those 60 are still interested in coming and want help. The answer rates on those campaigns are also much higher than email."

“The results so far this year are pretty staggering ... This meant more students than ever were ready to enjoy new student orientation, make new friends, and figure out their next phase in life without the weight of unfinished business hanging over their heads.”

Joel Lee
Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management
Winston-Salem State University

First-year results



The Plan for Retention

This year, WSSU will expand Winston's reach to help guide undergraduate students all the way through graduation.

"One pain point I hear all the time is that students leave for the summer, and then they don't register for fall classes until they come back, and that's kind of risky because they're not really committed to returning," said Joel. "One of our big priorities will be moving the needle on that."

GOALS:

- Increase retention
- Improve spring registration
- Improve on-time bill pay

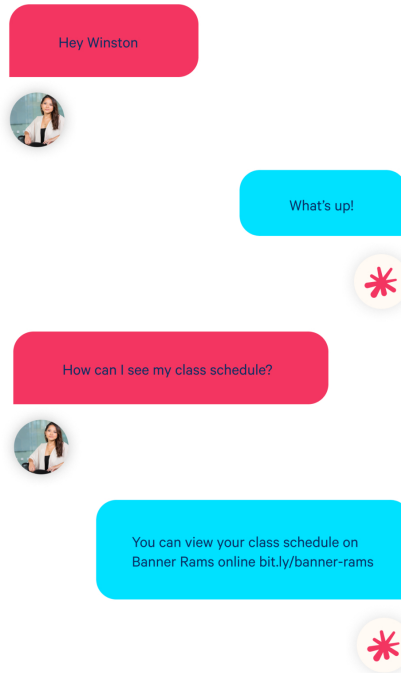
WSSU currently tracks the ebbs and flows of the student experience throughout the semester to help guide what types of communications staff should be sending during certain cycles, such as "So close!" or "Don't give up!" messages when the start of the semester nears. They use this cycle to guide their social media messaging, but Jaime thinks they'll be able to use Winston to send out similar text messages, and that eventually, just as every project has a social media component, each will have a chatbot component as well.

"One other thing I think is really important with the retention bot is that there's a sense that all offices responsible for retention (which is pretty much everyone) understands what we're trying to do and how we're going to communicate with students," she said.

Breaking Down Barriers

One of the big challenges around readiness, particularly at access institutions, is that first-generation college students may not have the family knowledge or experience to ask the right questions to help them be successful. Or they might be afraid of contacting a live person to ask a question.

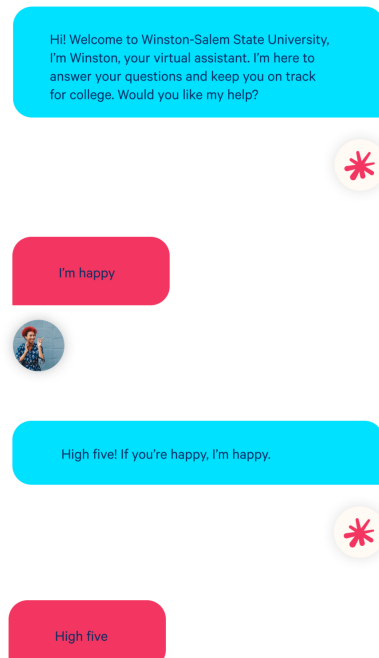
An AI-powered chatbot like Winston can be a great way to help remove these barriers, as it's less intimidating and won't judge students for not knowing all the answers.

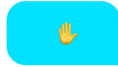


“With Winston, they can engage in a ‘conversation’ with a bot that’s less scary or less threatening. Rather than admitting you don’t know something, you’re interacting in this two-way format to get that information in a less daunting manner.”

Jaime Hunt
Vice Chancellor of Strategic Communications
Winston-Salem State University

In fact, the conversational tone is one of the aspects of the chatbot that WSSU found surprising. Joel noted that students talk to Winston “like a human,” thanking it and sending emojis as responses.





"It was kind of funny the way they engaged with it like they would text a friend," he said. "Just seeing how different the engagement was with the text versus the email campaigns we've been sending out — the chatbot exceeded my expectations."

We're proud of everything that Winston-Salem State University has achieved with Winston at their side, helping students enroll and attend university to fulfill their educational dreams. We're excited to see the results of the next phase of our growing partnership.

Published February 2020

More case studies

Get a glimpse into our engagement platform in action with these quick partner success stories.

Case Study

**When IT Thinks Beyond IT:
How Adelphi Gained Capacity
by Reducing Barriers for
Students**

- 50% increase in signups
- 1,300+ staff capacity hours restored
- 94% overall student engagement

[Read more →](#)

Case Study

**Do "Mo" with the Same: How
Grede Expands Human
Potential with AI**

- 20% increase in new hire retention
- 30% increase in YoY survey participation

[Read more →](#)

Case Study

**Scaling Student Support at
UMES: How AI + Human
Expertise Reduced Enrollment
Holds by 95%**

- 95% reduction in enrollment holds

[Read more →](#)



Get student engagement insights in your inbox

Subscribe

[Home for the journey](#)

[Request a consultation →](#)

[Learn more about our platform →](#)

[Media kit →](#)

[Support →](#)



© 2020 Mainstay. All rights reserved.
500 100 1000 Avenue, Suite 170, Burlington, VT 05400



[About Us](#)
[Contact](#)
[Media Kit](#)
[Terms of Use](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)

