

AWARDSPRING WEBINAR • SEPTEMBER 15, 2026 • 2:00 PM ET

The Deep Dive.

Inside the 2026 Donor Stewardship Benchmark: seven findings, the data behind them, and where your program stands.

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WHY THIS EXISTS

The first benchmark of its kind.

Donor stewardship in scholarship programs has never had a shared measuring stick. Every office suspects how it is doing; almost none can check.

So we built one. Early this year, 125 scholarship foundations told us how stewardship really runs: what gets reported, what gets skipped, and where the hours go.

THE SAMPLE

125 usable responses

52% two-year college foundations

29% four-year institutions

15% private and community

Surveyed February to April 2026

THE HONEST FRAME

Respondents are foundations already running dedicated scholarship software, not a random sample of every program in the country. That makes these numbers a floor, not a ceiling: this is what stewardship looks like at programs ahead of the tooling curve.

WHAT 125 FOUNDATIONS TOLD US

Three numbers tell the story.

46%

run stewardship on one person or less

79%

still send donor reports by U.S. mail

24%

send no stewardship reports at all

*High aspiration. Thin infrastructure. And a growing gap between the two,
at exactly the moment the tools to close it exist.*

WHY IT MATTERS

Stewardship pays, and the programs doing it well can prove it.

46%

report stronger donor retention or renewal

44%

see more donor engagement

41%

see larger or additional gifts

Self-reported by programs crediting outcomes to their stewardship. Most still measure by impression, which is exactly the blind spot ahead.

THE NEXT 30 MINUTES: THREE PILLARS, SEVEN FINDINGS

01 The Capacity-Quality Trap

02 The Measurement Blind Spot

03 The AI Inflection Point

PILLAR 01

The Capacity-Quality Trap.

01

Manual processes at scale produce inconsistency by design. The answer is not more staff. It is systems that handle the volume so people can handle the relationship.

FINDING 1 OF 7 · CAPACITY

The capacity gap is real, and worse than expected.



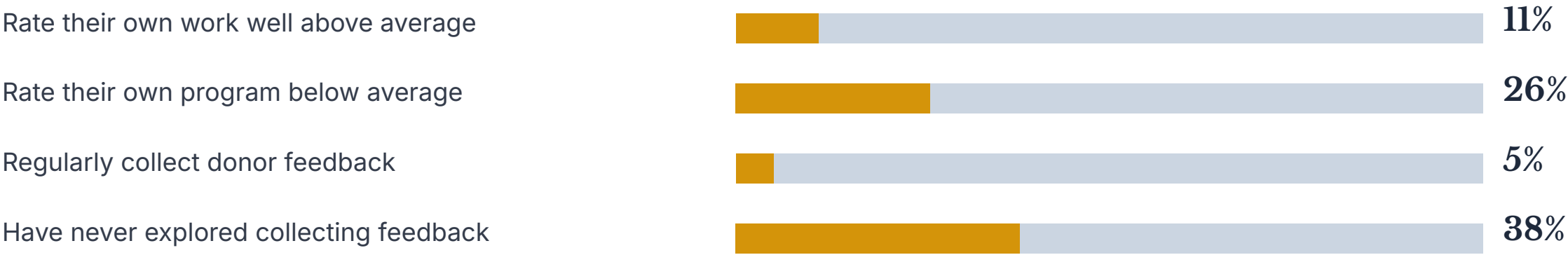
THE REAL CONSTRAINT

Budget is the biggest barrier for just 2% of programs, and no one named leadership. The constraint is time and tools: over 40% administer 150+ active funds, and CUPA-HR (2024) found 56% of financial aid staff at least somewhat likely to look for another job. A program that runs on what one person knows is one resignation from starting over.

Most programs are flying blind on quality.

2.66 / 5

average self-rated stewardship report quality



THE MISSING FEEDBACK LOOP

Programs suspect they are below average, send the work out anyway, and rarely build a way to learn whether it landed. A score nobody measures is a score that never moves. The fix starts with one question on the next report cycle: did this tell you what your gift accomplished?

FINDING 3 OF 7 • THANK-YOU LETTERS

Thank-you letters: high compliance, low quality.



WHERE IT BREAKS

Collection is solved. The break is review and rewrite, the judgment-heavy step that eats the most staff time. A perfunctory letter can do more harm than none at all: it quietly signals the relationship was not worth the effort.

PILLAR 02

The Measurement Blind Spot.

02

You cannot improve what you cannot see. Most programs send stewardship into a void and never learn whether it arrived, was read, or changed anything.

FINDING 4 OF 7 • REPORTING

Reporting is slow, inconsistent, and on the wrong channels.



WHY IT COMPOUNDS

No measurement means no feedback; no feedback means no case for changing the channel; so another year of printed mail goes into the void. Timeliness drifts the same way: 61% take one to six months from disbursement to delivered report, and 18% run on no consistent timeline at all.

Unawarded funds: silent risk, no protocol.

71%

had at least one fund go unawarded
last year

37%

have no protocol for telling the donor

12%

wait until it awards again to reach
out

THE SILENT PART

An unawarded fund is a donor who committed to a student who never materialized, and in most cases nobody told them. The fund is recoverable; the silence is what does the damage. The 12% who wait for the next award cycle may leave a donor in the dark for a year or more.

PILLAR 03

The AI Inflection Point.

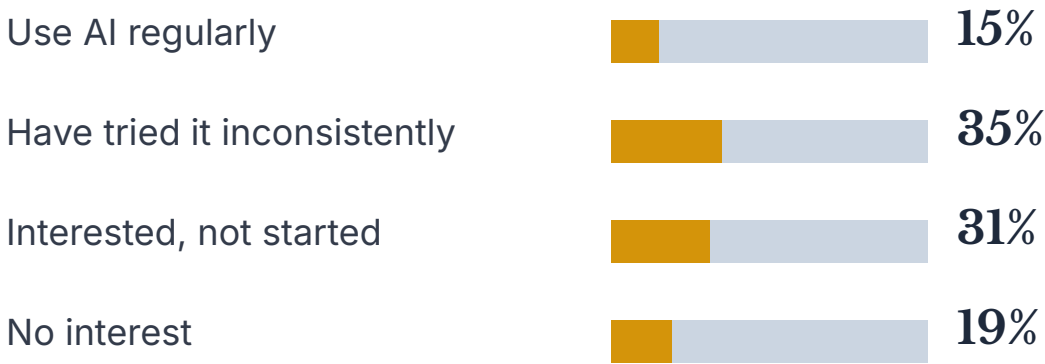
03

Half the programs we surveyed are already experimenting with AI. The ones that turn experiments into everyday workflow this year will set the pace.

FINDING 6 OF 7 • AI ADOPTION

AI adoption: intent outpaces execution.

WHERE ADOPTION STANDS



WHERE THE EXPERIMENTERS POINT IT



FROM EXPERIMENT TO WORKFLOW

What separates the 15% from the 35% is whether the AI step is built into the process or left to memory. That is the idea behind SpringIQ, the AI layer across AwardSpring: it drafts from your real fund and student data, fact-checked, on the control you choose, and the judgment stays with your team.

Financial Aid and Advancement: just over half report no friction.

53%

report no meaningful friction
between the two offices

3.73/5

average alignment score across
programs

19%

operate with zero coordination at all

WHAT THE GAP COSTS

At the 19%, no shared data, no joint workflows, and no view of how stewardship connects to retention. They are not failing at the relationship; they are missing the shared system that would surface it in the data. Directional finding: the FA-pathway sub-sample is n=30 to 33.

WHERE YOUR PROGRAM STANDS

Turn the field's 2.66 into your own number.

1

Take the two-minute survey

Share how your stewardship program operates today.

2

Upload an artifact, optional

A thank-you letter or donor report; a team member and an AI reviewer score its quality.

3

Get your score

Your benchmark against the 125-foundation study, and the fixes that move it most.

benchmark.awardspring.com/survey

Free, two minutes, scored against the same 125-foundation benchmark. Link is in the chat.

BEHIND THE FINDINGS

Every gap in this study traces to one root cause: disconnected tools.

Scholarship Management

LIVE TODAY

The full scholarship lifecycle, from application to award decision.

Donor Management

LIVE TODAY

The donor CRM: one shared record, Smart Reports, a live Retention Dashboard.

Donor Experience & Stewardship

NEW THIS MONTH

The donor-facing layer: a living impact portal and automated thank-yous.

Fund Management

NOVEMBER 2026

A real-time view of every fund: on track, at risk, or unspent.

One platform, one record, with SpringIQ as the AI layer across all of it, on the control you choose. The stewardship advantage: the proof already lives in the scholarship office.

IN THEIR WORDS

What changes when the system carries the work.

“AwardSpring has revolutionized our 30-year old scholarship program by allowing us to focus our efforts on reaching donors and increasing funding for students.”

Helen Kennedy · Executive Director, New Haven Schools Foundation

“Manual scholarship administration added up to about 100 hours of overtime. Now, I might put in just 20 hours. It's saved us a lot of money. And my sanity!”

Cindy Perez · Scholarship Coordinator, Grayson College

“We doubled our application pool with qualified applicants. AwardSpring has been an absolute gamechanger.”

Dr. Samantha Hicks · AVP of Financial Aid and Scholarships, Coastal Carolina University

See where you stand. Then decide where you want to be.

SCORE YOUR STEWARDSHIP

benchmark.awardspring.com/survey

Two minutes; scored against the 125-foundation study.

GET THE FULL REPORT

awardspring.com/stewardship-benchmark

All seven findings, the data, and the three starting moves.

SEE IT ON YOUR OWN FUNDS

awardspring.com/demo

What stewardship looks like with the manual work off your team.

FOLLOW ALONG WITH AWARDSPRING

linkedin.com/company/awardspring

Where the field data lands between studies.

Questions.

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Questions.

Ask anything now, or reach me directly after the call.

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