
A FIELD REPORT ON DONOR STEWARDSHIP

The Capacity- Quality Trap in Higher Ed Stewardship

*Seven findings from a survey of 125 foundations —
and what they say about the year ahead.*

SURVEY PERIOD

February–April 2026

RESPONDENTS

125 Foundations

PUBLISHED

May 2026

FULL REPORT

NASFAA · June 29

What the data shows

FINDING 01

46%

OPERATE ON 1 FTE OR LESS

The capacity gap is structural, not seasonal.

Nearly half of higher-ed foundations run donor stewardship on one full-time employee or less, and **22% run it on under half an FTE**. When asked what holds the program back, **53% named staff time as their #1 barrier** — more than technology, budget, and every other obstacle combined.

Stewardship isn't underfunded because it's undervalued; it's underfunded because the work is invisible until something breaks.

FINDING 02

2.66/5

SELF-RATED QUALITY

Foundations are flying blind on quality.

Average self-rating: **2.66 out of 5**. Fewer than 20% feel confident a peer would rate their materials as high quality. **26% rate their own program as below average**, and only **5% formally collect donor feedback at all**.

The field is grading its own work without a rubric — and most teams suspect they'd score lower if anyone checked.

FINDING 03

79%

STILL DELIVER BY U.S. MAIL

Reporting is slow, manual, and invisible.

Nearly four in five foundations still deliver stewardship reports by U.S. mail. **45% have no way to track whether a donor opened or read the report**, and **61% take one to six months from disbursement to delivery**.

Mail is the default not because donors prefer it, but because no one has time to redesign the workflow.

FINDING 04

29%

SEND LOW-QUALITY LETTERS ANYWAY

Thank-you letters: high compliance, low quality.

52% require a thank-you letter as a firm condition of the award, but **29% pass low-quality letters through to donors anyway**. The rest manage the gap on the fly: **34% coach students and ask for resubmission**, and **14% substitute a staff-written narrative**.

Compliance gets measured. Quality gets absorbed by whoever has the bandwidth that week.

FINDING 05

50%

EXPERIMENTING WITH AI

AI adoption: intent outpaces execution.

Half of foundations are experimenting with AI for stewardship, but **only 15% use it consistently**. The barrier isn't awareness — it's operationalization. Where AI is already in production: **personalized donor cover letters (67%), fund impact summaries (48%), and editing student letters (41%)**.

The teams pulling ahead aren't the ones with the best tools — they're the ones who built a workflow around them.

FINDING 06

19%

ZERO FA-ADVANCEMENT COORDINATION

FA and Advancement alignment is thinner than it looks.

48% report a clean handoff between Financial Aid and Advancement. But **19% report zero coordination** — the donor relationship and the award decision happen on parallel tracks with no shared system. Average alignment score across the field: **3.73 out of 5**.

When the handoff breaks, it shows up later — usually as a renewal conversation that didn't happen.

FINDING 07

71%

HAD A FUND GO UNAWARDED

Unawarded funds are the quiet relationship killer.

More than seven in ten foundations had at least one fund go unawarded in the past year. **37% have no standard protocol** for telling the donor, and **12% wait until the fund is awarded again before reaching out** — sometimes years later.

Silence after a fund underperforms is the moment a donor decides whether to renew.

METHODOLOGY

125 responses collected via SurveyMonkey from AwardSpring customers, **February–April 2026**. Audience composition: 52% community college foundations, 29% four-year institutions, 15% private and community foundations. Role mix: 36% Financial Aid, 19% Donor Relations, 17% Advancement, 9% Foundation Administration, 9% Executive Leadership, 10% Other.

Three signals from the field.

Capacity, measurement, and AI aren't separate stories — they're the same story told three ways. Each one is a chance to define what "good" looks like before the field defaults to whatever's easiest.

PILLAR 01

The Capacity-Quality Trap

Manual processes at scale produce inconsistency by design. When 46% of foundations run stewardship on one FTE or less, quality is whatever survives the calendar. Fixing this isn't about hiring — it's about removing the work that shouldn't exist in the first place.

PILLAR 02

The Measurement Blind Spot

The field delivers stewardship into a void and rarely asks if it landed. 45% can't tell whether a donor opened the report. 5% formally collect feedback. Without a feedback loop, every program drifts toward "we've always done it this way."

PILLAR 03

The AI Inflection Point

Half the field is experimenting; 15% have it in production. The window to define what responsible, donor-centered AI use looks like in stewardship is open right now — and it will close fast.

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