

AWARDSPRING

THE 2026 DONOR STEWARDSHIP BENCHMARK

# The Stewardship Benchmark

*What 125 foundations across higher education revealed about  
stewardship — and why AI changes everything.*

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AWARDSRING

TODAY'S SPEAKER

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*Alex leads AwardSpring, the scholarship management platform powering operations at more than 650 institutions across U.S. higher education. He's focused on what AI changes about this work — and what it shouldn't.*



AWARDSPRING

ABOUT AWARDSRING

# Built for higher education. *Scholarship-first, since 2014.*

**10+**

**Years building for  
higher ed**

Since 2014 — purpose-built  
for scholarship operations,  
not retrofitted.

**650+**

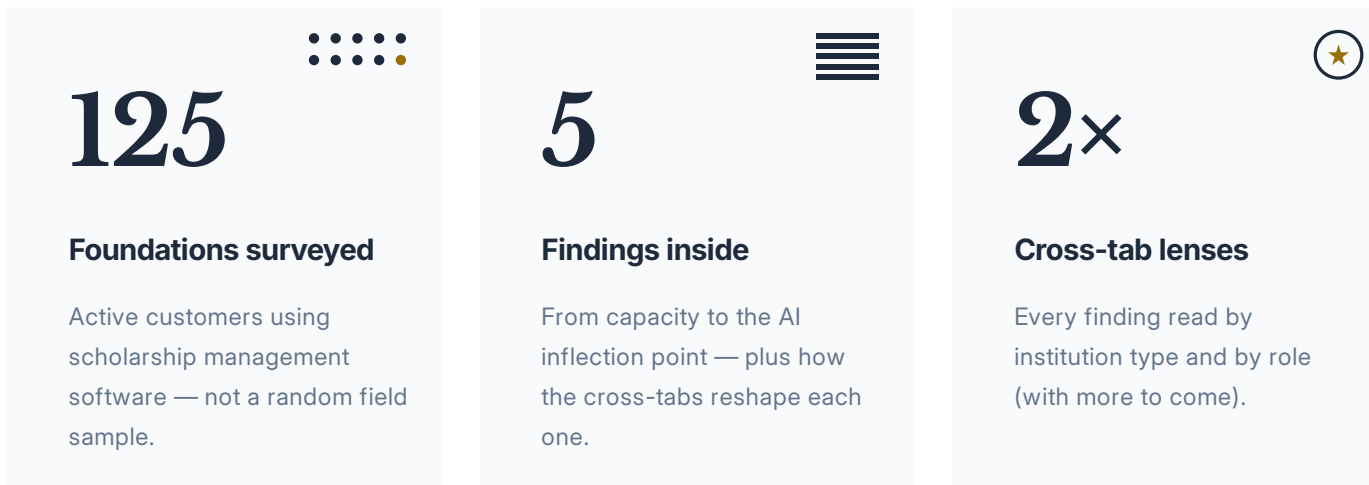
**Institutions on the  
platform**

Foundations, community  
colleges, and universities  
across U.S. higher ed.



*Fifteen years of scholarship operations. One operating system.*

# A close read of how scholarship stewardship actually works.



*Operational practice, not aspiration — the work as it actually happens.*

71%

A horizontal progress bar with a yellow segment on the left representing 71% and a grey segment on the right representing the remaining 29%.

of foundations had at least one scholarship fund go unawarded last year.

37%

A horizontal progress bar with a yellow segment on the left representing 37% and a grey segment on the right representing the remaining 63%.

had no standard protocol for telling the donor when it happened.

*This is not a rare edge case. It is the norm.*

**Human resources are the biggest constraint.**

# Stewardship runs on almost nothing.

46%

Run on 1 FTE or less

Stewardship operates on a single full-time-equivalent or less.

22%

Under 0.5 FTE

More than one in five runs the function on less than half a person.

63%

Managed centrally

Centralized in a foundation or advancement office, not by program.

53%

Time is the #1 barrier

The most-named obstacle — ahead of budget, tools, and data.

*Not a prioritization failure. A structural reality.*

# The capacity gap inverts.

37%

**Community colleges**

On ≤1.0 FTE — the best-staffed segment. n=35.

54%

**Four-year foundations**

On ≤1.0 FTE despite separate fundraising offices. n=13, directional.

64%

**Private foundations**

On ≤1.0 FTE — often solo operations. n=11, directional.

46%

**Field-wide**

On ≤1.0 FTE on average — the field headline hides the inversion underneath.

*Community college foundations are not the lean outlier. They are the best-staffed segment in the field.*

**Fake it 'til we make it.**

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## There is no field norm. That's the finding.

### No dominant season

Reports go out across the calendar — no spring, summer, or fall consensus.

**24%** of foundations produce no donor report at all.

### No consistent timeline

18% of foundations have no consistent schedule for donor reporting at all.

**18%** report on no consistent timeline whatsoever.

# The field can't see what it's sending.

2.66/5



**Average self-rated quality**

On a five-point scale, foundations rate their own stewardship a 2.66.

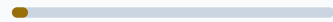
79%



**Mail their impact reports**

Still deliver donor impact reports by U.S. postal mail.

5%



**Collect donor feedback**

Regularly ask donors how the reporting is landing.

*Not a quality problem. A visibility problem.*

# The mail-only field is the four-year field.

100%

**Four-year, by mail**

Every four-year deliverer in the sample uses U.S. mail.

30%

**Four-year, by email**

By email PDF. Community colleges use email at 64% — more than 2x the four-year rate.

50%

**No engagement tracking**

Four-year foundations with no way to track whether donors opened the report.

69%

**Report to all donors**

Four-year coverage — the most ambitious reach of any segment, with the least feedback.

*The most stewardship-intensive segment is the one operating with the least feedback.*

# Same report. Two ratings.

## ADVANCEMENT

2.38

### Report quality, 1-5

How Advancement rates the stewardship reports they help drive renewals against.

47%

### Program below average

Share of Advancement respondents rating their own program below average overall.

2.67

### Peer-review confidence

How confident Advancement is that artifacts would be rated as high quality.

## DONOR RELATIONS

2.94

### Report quality, 1-5

How the people who produce stewardship reports rate the same kind of work.

13%

### Program below average

Same lens, same kind of program — DR is far more positive on the result.

2.88

### Peer-review confidence

DR is more confident than Advancement that artifacts hold up to peer review.

*Producers rate the work higher than the colleagues who use it for fundraising. The pattern holds across three independent measures.*

**Getting it done doesn't mean doing it well.**

# Student compliance is largely solved. Quality is where the time goes.

## What happens to low-quality letters.

- 29% are sent anyway, low quality and all.
- 34% are resubmitted to the student for revision.
- 14% are rewritten by staff entirely.
- 21% receive a fully manual quality review.

## Self-assess your own program.

- Specificity — names the fund, donor, and what changed.
- Personal story — the student's voice.
- Impact language — concrete outcomes, never generic.
- Length — long enough to feel personal, short enough to read.

# Coaching is a Donor Relations practice.

63%

**Donor Relations**

Coach the student and request a resubmit of low-quality letters.

19%

**Advancement**

Coach low-quality letters — more than three times less likely than Donor Relations.

64%

**Four-year foundations**

Coach and resubmit at the institution level.

27%

**Community colleges**

Coach — but 37% send the letter to the donor as-is.

*Letter quality follows labor distribution: where Donor Relations exists with capacity, coaching happens. Where it doesn't, donors get what students submit.*

**Is AI the answer?**

# The barrier to AI isn't awareness. It's operationalization.

*Across 125 foundations, where AI sits today — and what they want it to do next.*

USE REGULARLY

15%

have operationalized AI into standing practice.

TRIED INCONSISTENTLY

35%

are experimenting but haven't made it routine yet.

WANT AI QUALITY ASSESSMENT

81%

would submit their own stewardship work to be scored.

DONOR COVER LETTERS

67%

top AI use case — drafting personalized donor letters.

FUND IMPACT SUMMARIES

48%

summarizing how funds are being used and what they did.

EDITING THANK-YOU LETTERS

41%

polishing student-written letters before they ship.

# AI moves fastest where capacity is thinnest.

21%

## Community colleges

Regular AI use today. The most-staffed segment is also the most-adopted. n=29, anchor sample.

2×

## More likely than private

Community colleges are more than twice as likely as private foundations to use AI regularly.

27%

## Leadership

Executives regularly using AI — the highest of any role. Advancement is lowest at 7%.

Limited

## Four-year regulars

Among the eleven four-year respondents, none reports regular AI use yet.

*Community colleges and senior leaders are operationalizing first. Four-year foundations have not begun; practitioners are not catching up.*

**Free resources so you can take action.**

# Your free tool: The Stewardship Benchmark.

01 **Submit**

Upload any stewardship artifact — a letter, a report, a donor email.



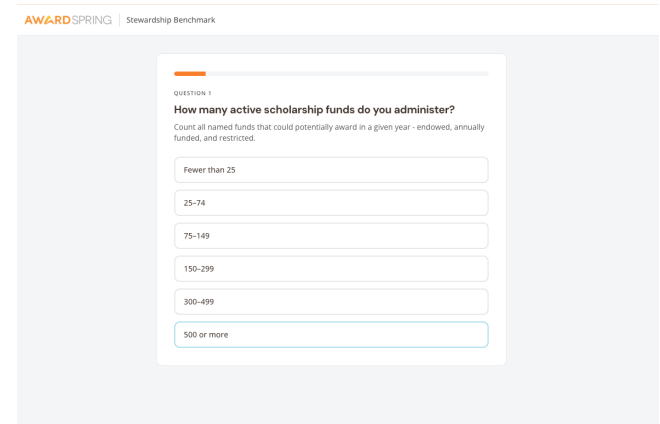
02 **Score**

Benchmarked against the 2.66 / 5 field average across 125 foundations.



03 **Improve**

Specific recommendations on specificity, story, impact, and length.



*Link is in the chat now — and in your follow-up email this evening.*

# Built against this study: *Meet the Stewardship Builder.*

## Beta

### Launches in June

A new feature inside Scholarship Management — open to every AwardSpring customer to try.

## Sept 1

### Free trial ends

After Sept 1 the Builder moves into the Enterprise tier — alongside SpringIQ AI features.

## 18

### Block types

Drag-and-drop authoring for multi-page reports — text, images, charts, fund and donor aggregates.

## Once

### Build, reuse, repeat

Templates that scale across donors without rebuilding the report each time.

*Built for the team size you actually have — not the team size you wish you had.*

# Questions?

*Use the Q&A tool to drop your questions*

THE BENCHMARK IN FIVE NUMBERS

**46%**

run on 1 FTE  
or less

**71%**

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unawarded

**79%**

deliver reports  
by mail

**2.66**

average self-rated  
quality (out of 5)

**50%**

already using AI  
in some form