AWARDSPRING

AN AWARDSPRING RESEARCH REPORT

The Stewardship Benchmark

What 125 foundations across higher education revealed about stewardship, and the AI inflection point ahead.

SURVEYED FEBRUARY TO APRIL 2026

FOREWORD

A systems problem has *a systems answer.*

Scholarship programs are good at getting money to students. What comes next, telling donors what their gift actually did and doing it well enough that they give again, gets far less attention and far less infrastructure. This study set out to measure that second half of the job.

Stewardship has stayed a black box. Most teams have no shared definition of good, and no easy way to know whether they are ahead of the field or behind it. Working alongside foundations across the country, we kept seeing the same pattern, and we wanted to put real numbers to it.

125 foundations told us how stewardship works at their organizations. The picture is candid, and in places it is hard: programs running on less than one person, reports mailed out with no idea whether they are read, and funds going unawarded with no one telling the donor. The field rates its own work a 2.66 out of 5, and most have no way to check whether even that is right.

What comes through in the findings is not indifference. These are people who care a great deal and have been handed almost no infrastructure to act on it. That distinction is the hopeful part of this report, because a field that lacks the will to do better is stuck, while a field that simply lacks the systems is one good decision away from better.

AI is what changes the math, and half the field is already experimenting with it. The programs that turn those experiments into everyday workflow this year will define what good stewardship looks like for the next decade. That window is open now, and it will not stay open for long.

We built this benchmark to give you a reference point. Where you take it from here is up to you.

Alex Stepien
Chief Executive Officer, AwardSpring

THE HEADLINE NUMBERS

The numbers that *describe the field.*

46%

of programs run on **one FTE or less** dedicated to donor stewardship

71%

had **a fund go unawarded** last year; 37% had no protocol to tell the donor

79%

still send donor reports by **U.S. mail**; 45% cannot tell if they are read

2.66

average **self-rated quality**, out of 5; only 5% regularly collect donor feedback

50%

are **experimenting with AI** for stewardship; only 15% use it consistently

125

foundations across higher education, the basis for this benchmark

Read together, these six numbers describe a field that wants to steward donors well and has been handed very little to do it with.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

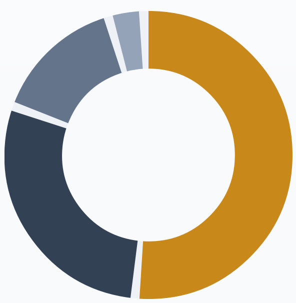
Stewardship has always been treated as unmeasurable. *It is not.*

For years, stewardship got filed under relationships, the human and supposedly unmeasurable side of fundraising. For most foundations, that label quietly became an excuse. Resourcing and process decisions get made with no reference point for what other programs do, or how they perform.

AwardSpring ran this study to change that. In early 2026 we surveyed 125 foundations on staffing, reporting, donor communication, thank-you letter workflows, and AI adoption. This report presents seven findings, a three-part narrative framework, and three concrete recommendations for programs ready to close the gap.

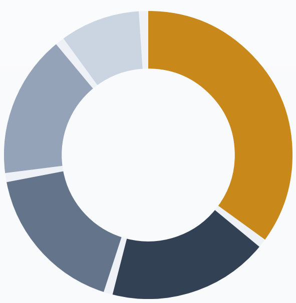
METHODOLOGY

Institution type



Community college foundations	52%
Four-year college or university	29%
Private or community foundations	15%
Other	4%

Respondent role



Financial Aid / Scholarships	36%
Donor Relations / Stewardship	19%
Administration / Leadership	18%
Advancement / Development	17%
Other	10%

> SCOPE NOTE
>
> 125 usable responses were collected via SurveyMonkey from AwardSpring customers between February and April 2026. Because respondents are customers, not a random sample of the broader field, findings reflect the practices of foundations actively using dedicated scholarship management software. Where this report says "the field," it means that population. Statistics drawn from sub-samples under 50 respondents should be read as directional.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

High aspiration. *Thin infrastructure.*

Seven findings emerge from this study. Taken together they tell one story: a field where aspiration is high, infrastructure is thin, and the gap between the two is growing, but where the tools to close it now exist. The payoff is not theoretical: programs credit good stewardship with stronger donor retention, larger gifts, and deeper engagement. Three pillars frame the findings.

PILLAR 01

The Capacity-Quality Trap

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

PILLAR 02

The Measurement Blind Spot

The field delivers stewardship into a void. There is no tracking, staff quietly suspect their reports fall short, and donors are almost never asked what they think.

PILLAR 03

The AI Inflection Point

Half of organizations are already experimenting with AI. Few have made it routine, and the opening to lead is now.

What programs credit to good stewardship

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 efforts. Most of the field still measures this only by impression, which is the gap Pillar 02 names.

THE FINDINGS

Seven findings, *at a glance.*

PILLAR 01 · THE CAPACITY-QUALITY TRAP

Manual work at scale, not a lack of care.

46%
operate on one FTE or less

2.66/5
average self-rated quality

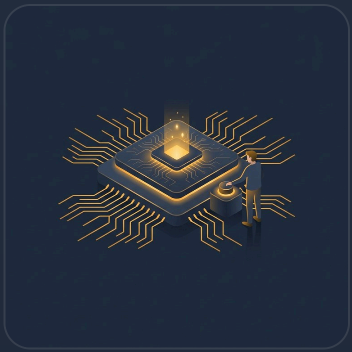
29%
send weak thank-you letters anyway

PILLAR 02 · THE MEASUREMENT BLIND SPOT

What the field cannot see, it cannot fix.

79%
still mail donor reports

71%
had a fund go unawarded last year



PILLAR 03 · THE AI INFLECTION POINT

Half are experimenting; the opening to lead is now.

50%
experimenting with AI

19%
zero FA–Advancement coordination

PILLAR 01

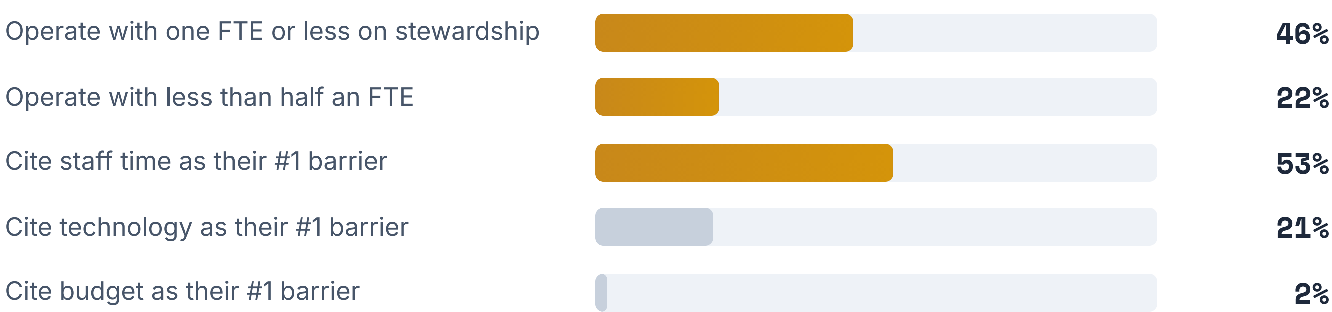
The Capacity-Quality *Trap.*

The fix is not headcount. It is systems that absorb the volume, so your people can spend their time on the part only people can do.

- Staffing capacity
- Report quality
- Thank-you letters

The capacity gap is real, and worse than expected

The most consistent theme in this study is not technology, budget, or donor expectations. It is time. Staff simply do not have enough of it.



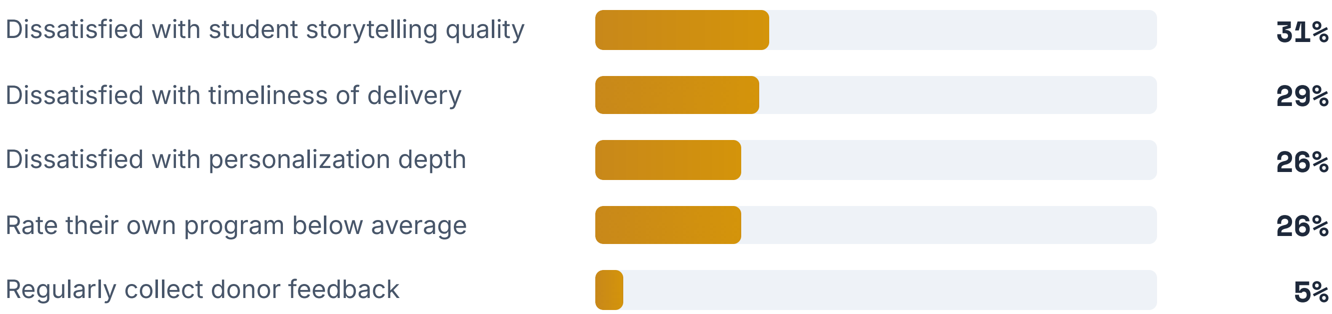
Staff time outranks technology and budget as a barrier by more than two to one, which points less to underinvestment than to a structural mismatch between fund volume and the people available to handle it. More than 40% of programs administer 150 or more active scholarship funds, and CUPA-HR (2024) reports that 56% of financial aid staff are likely to leave within a year, so any program that runs on what one person knows is one resignation away from starting over. The first defense is not a hire but a written workflow for the three things that cannot stop when someone leaves: report generation, thank-you routing, and unawarded-fund outreach.

THE REAL CONSTRAINT

The programs in this study are not under-prioritizing stewardship. Budget is the single biggest barrier for just 2% of them, and not one named a lack of leadership; the constraint is time and tools. The honest question is whether your tools fit the team you have, not the team you wish you had.

Most programs are flying blind on quality

Asked to rate the quality of their stewardship reports against peers, programs averaged 2.66 out of 5. Just 11% rate their own work well above average, and almost none have a way to check whether they are right.



The deeper problem is the missing feedback loop. Programs suspect they are below average, send their work out anyway, and rarely build any way to learn whether it landed. 38% have never even explored collecting donor feedback. A score nobody measures is a score that never moves, and that is most of the story behind the 2.66. The fix starts small: one question added to the next report cycle (did this tell you what your gift accomplished?), tracked over time, is a baseline. An annual survey nobody answers is not.

THE MISSING FEEDBACK LOOP

Rate yourself a 3 with no donor feedback to check it, and you are guessing. The first improvement is not a better template but a way to hear what is actually landing, and what is not.

Thank-you letters: high compliance, low quality

The sector has solved letter collection. 52% require thank-you letters as a firm award condition, and 56% report submission rates above 90%. Compliance is not the problem. Quality is.

Send low-quality letters to donors anyway	29%
Coach students and request a resubmission	34%
Substitute a staff-written narrative	14%
Run the workflow entirely manually	21%

The thank-you letter is often the most personal thing a donor receives about the impact of a gift. A perfunctory one can do more harm than no letter at all, because it quietly signals the relationship was not worth the effort. The catch is that coaching and re-collecting every weak letter takes exactly the staff time these programs have already said they do not have.

WHERE IT BREAKS

Collection is handled. The break is at review and rewrite, the judgment-heavy step that eats the most time and the one place a system can carry the load, so staff stop having to choose between quality and capacity.

PILLAR 02

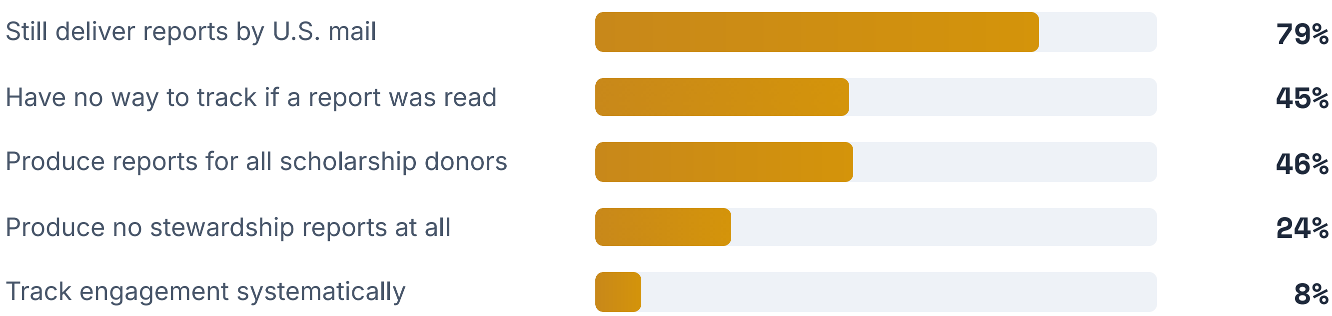
The Measurement *Blind Spot.*

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

- Reporting channels
- Unawarded funds

Reporting is slow, inconsistent, and on the wrong channels

Only 46% of programs produce stewardship reports for all scholarship donors. 24% produce none at all. Of those who report, most take months, and almost none can see whether the report was opened.



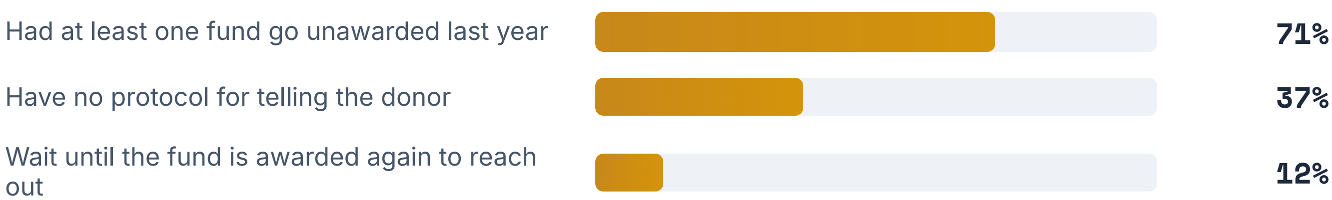
The channel problem feeds itself. With no way to measure whether a report lands, there is no feedback, and with no feedback there is no case for changing how reports go out, so another year of printed mail goes into the void. Timeliness drifts the same way: 61% take one to six months to get from disbursement to a delivered report, and 18% run on no consistent timeline at all.

WHY IT COMPOUNDS

A report you cannot measure is a report you cannot improve. Before the better template and the nicer design, the first move is a channel that tells you whether anyone opened it.

Unawarded funds: silent risk, no protocol

An unawarded scholarship fund is a donor relationship in jeopardy. The donor committed to supporting a student who never materialized, and in most cases no one told them.



An unawarded fund with no proactive donor communication is more than a stewardship miss. It is an unmanaged retention risk, occurring silently at the majority of institutions, with no standard catch-and-communicate process in place. The 12% who wait until the fund is awarded again may leave the donor in the dark for a year or more. A system that flags the fund is the durable fix, but the manual version works too: run a year-end list of funds that did not award, and send each donor an honest note on what happened and the plan to award next cycle.

THE SILENT PART

An unawarded fund is recoverable. The silence around it is what does the damage, year after year. A system that flags the fund and prompts the outreach turns a quiet liability into a reason to call the donor with something honest to say.

PILLAR 03

The AI *Inflection Point.*

Half the field is already experimenting with AI. The programs that turn experiments into everyday workflow this year will set the pace. The ones that wait will spend years catching up.

- AI adoption
- Office alignment

PILLAR 03 / AI INFLECTION POINT

AI adoption: intent outpaces execution

Half of respondents are already experimenting with AI for stewardship, but only 15% use it regularly. The barrier now is not awareness but routine: getting AI out of a browser tab someone opens once in a while and into a workflow that runs every time.

Where AI adoption stands today

Use AI regularly	15%
Have tried it inconsistently	35%
Interested but have not started	31%
No interest	19%

Where programs already point AI, among the 50% experimenting

Personalized donor cover letters	67%
Fund impact summaries	48%
Editing student thank-you letters	41%
Drafting student bio narratives	37%

The use cases cluster around drafting, the high-volume work where the facts already live in the scholarship record. Start where volume is highest: cover letters and impact summaries are the clearest first moves, since every donor needs one and the format repeats. Thank-you review comes next, with AI flagging the weak letters so staff touch only the ones that need a person, and bio narratives are the last to hand off. That order is the roadmap respondents asked for.

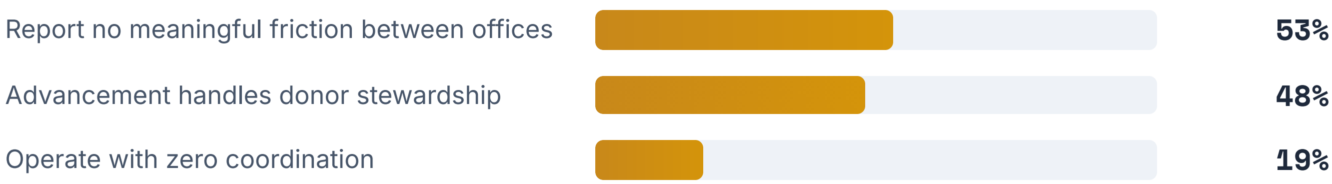
FROM EXPERIMENT TO WORKFLOW

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, so the work that repeats becomes a workflow and the judgment stays with your team.

PILLAR 03 / OFFICE ALIGNMENT

Financial Aid and Advancement: better aligned than expected, with gaps

The relationship between Financial Aid and Advancement is a perennial concern. The data is more encouraging than expected, with one real exception.



The average alignment score was 3.73 out of 5, and most programs describe the handoff as workable. At 19% of programs, though, Financial Aid and Advancement do not coordinate at all: no shared data, no joint workflows, and no view of how stewardship connects to donor retention. Where friction does show up, it traces back to timing and student-data sharing, both of which are systems problems before they are relationship problems.

WHAT THE GAP COSTS

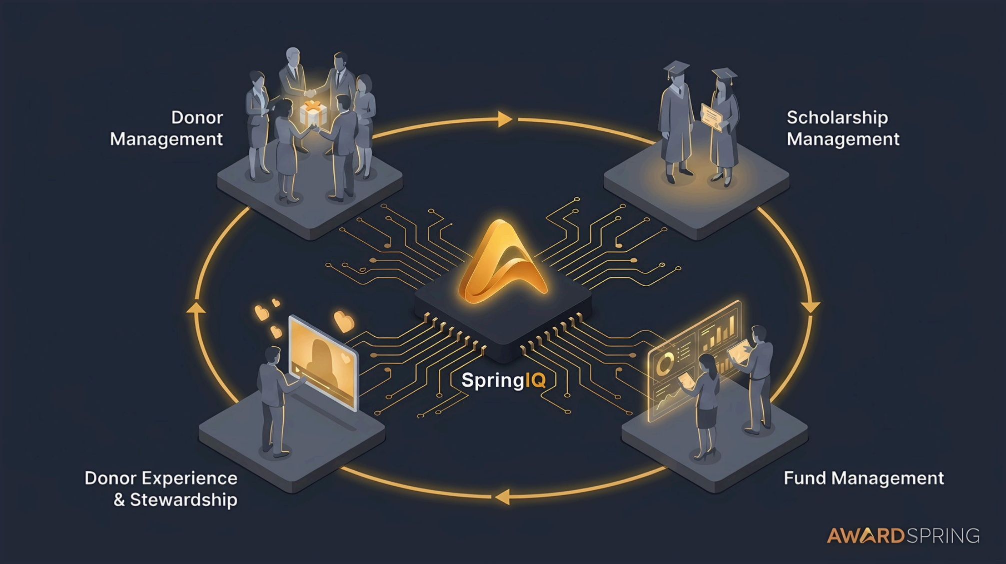
When Financial Aid and Advancement do not share the record, neither office can see how stewardship drives retention. The 19% are not failing at the relationship; they are missing the shared system that would surface it in the data. That is a connection worth building before the next campaign, not after.

Directional finding. The FA-pathway sub-sample is n=30 to 33.

THE FUND PLATFORM

Behind the findings, *one platform.*

Every gap in this report traces back to one root cause: stewardship runs on disconnected tools and manual work. AwardSpring is one platform that puts the whole cycle on a single record, from the scholarship application to the impact the donor sees, with SpringIQ as the AI layer across all of it, on the control you choose: autopilot, co-pilot, or human-in-the-loop.



● **Donor Management**	LIVE TODAY	The donor CRM: one shared record, Smart Reports, and a Retention Dashboard.
● **Scholarship Management**	LIVE TODAY	The full scholarship lifecycle, from application to award decision.
○ **Donor Experience & Stewardship**	SUMMER 2026	The donor-facing layer: a living impact portal and automated thank-yous.
○ **Fund Management**	AUTUMN 2026	A real-time view of every fund: on track, at risk, or unspent.

For donor stewardship specifically, the advantage is that **the proof already lives in the scholarship office, not a separate donor database.** AwardSpring knows who each fund supported and what happened to those students.

Donor Management is live today · awardspring.com/donor-management

Join the Donor Experience waitlist · awardspring.com/donor-experience-stewardship

IN THEIR WORDS

What changes when the *system carries the work.*

The findings describe the problem. These foundations describe what moves when the infrastructure is in place.

> *"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
> **On reaching donors**

> *"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
> **On reclaimed capacity**

> *"AwardSpring integrates with our Banner student information system, eliminating the need to cross-reference every single applicant's information across platforms."*
>
> **Kathryn Swisher** · Scholarship and Stewardship Officer, University of South Florida Foundation
> **On one connected record**

> *"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
> **On the result**

WHAT TO DO WITH THIS

Three places *to start.*

The data points to three concrete starting points for programs ready to close the gap between where stewardship is and where it needs to be. None requires a heroic budget. All require an honest look.

1

Audit your capacity reality

Map FTE against fund count. Find the manual bottlenecks (reporting, letter review, donor communication) that eat the most time per fund. Flag unawarded funds before the relationship drifts. This audit needs no new software, just honest accounting of where staff time goes and whether it is sustainable at your volume.

2

Build a measurement baseline

Right now, most programs are guessing. Pick one cohort, say your top 25 donors by lifetime giving, and this cycle send their report by trackable email instead of mail so you can watch one number: the open rate. Add a single reply question (did this tell you what your gift did?). That cohort is your baseline, and next year you will know whether you improved. The programs that start measuring now will hold a real advantage in a few years. And when you outgrow the manual version, Donor Management does this for you today, with Smart Reports and a live Retention Dashboard.

3

Operationalize AI, do not just experiment

What separates the 15% who use AI regularly from the 35% who use it inconsistently is workflow, not tools. Pick one high-volume, time-consuming process (start with donor cover letters or fund impact summaries, where volume is highest and the inputs already live in your records), build a repeatable AI-assisted step around it, measure the time saved, and expand from there.

SCORE YOUR STEWARDSHIP

See how your stewardship *stacks up.*

1 **Take the two-minute survey**
Share how your stewardship program operates today.

2 **Upload an artifact (optional)**
Share a thank-you letter or a donor report; a team member and an AI reviewer score its quality.

3 **Get your score**
Your benchmark against the 125-foundation field, and the fixes that move it most.

Score your stewardship · benchmark.awardspring.com/survey

YOUR BENCHMARK

4.1
OUT OF 5

You are ahead of most programs, with a clear edge to build on.

STRONGEST AREA
Reporting depth
●●●●○

PRIORITY AREA
Donor feedback loop
●●○○○

Self-rated quality
You 3.8 / field 2.7
You rated yourself **higher** than the field average.

Funds per FTE
You 149 / field 113
36 more funds per FTE than the field.

The report shows most programs cannot judge their own stewardship. This is the fastest way to judge yours, scored against the same 125-foundation benchmark.

AWARDSPRING

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

Benchmark your work

Score a real artifact on four dimensions and turn the field's 2.66 into your own number. Free.

benchmark.awardspring.com/survey

Go deeper

Watch the webinar, get the brief, share the report.

awardspring.com/2026-donor-stewardship-benchmarking-webinar

Talk to us

See what stewardship looks like with the manual work off your team.

awardspring.com/contact

Donor Management is live today. Donor Experience & Stewardship follows summer 2026; join the waitlist at awardspring.com/donor-experience-stewardship

About *AwardSpring*

AwardSpring is the Fund Platform behind scholarship and foundation programs across higher education. From application to award to donor impact, it connects the work of Financial Aid, Advancement, and Finance on one record, with SpringIQ providing AI on the control you choose. This benchmark is part of AwardSpring research into how scholarship programs run, and how they can run better.

600+
Organizations

Hundreds of millions
Awarded annually

10+ yrs
Running on AwardSpring

Methodology and use

The 2026 Donor Stewardship Benchmark reflects 125 usable responses collected via SurveyMonkey from AwardSpring customers, February to April 2026. Because respondents are customers rather than a random sample, findings describe foundations using dedicated scholarship management software. Sub-samples under 50 respondents are directional. External figure: financial aid turnover from CUPA-HR, 2024. You are welcome to cite this report with attribution to AwardSpring.

954 W Washington Blvd, Suite 730 · Chicago, IL 60607 · 888-258-5628 · awardspring.com ·