

When IT Thinks *Beyond IT*

How Adelphi Gained Capacity by Reducing Student Barriers

Like many private institutions, Adelphi University is operating under real pressure: limited staffing, ongoing student support needs, and broader enrollment headwinds in private higher education. Support teams are stretched thin. Students are unsure where to go for help. When they do reach out, it is often to the wrong office, or their issue has become critical.

Calls went unanswered.
Confusion compounded.
Capacity was consumed by preventable problems.

Within Adelphi's IT Customer Experience team, these patterns were becoming increasingly visible. As the group responsible for the University's IT Help Desk, the team had a unique vantage point: they were often the place students turned when they didn't know where else to go. That perspective prompted a broader question: could Adelphi address patterns of campus community questions more efficiently?

"The IT Help Desk often notices confusion and patterns before anyone else does," said Kerry Nicollet, who heads Adelphi's IT Customer Experience team as Executive Director of Strategic Engagement and Portfolio Management.

"Students weren't just asking technical questions. They were asking everything—financial aid deadlines, registration problems, account access. That told us the issue wasn't just technology. It was navigation."



Kerry Nicollet
Executive Director of Strategic Engagement & Portfolio Management


What Adelphi did next did not begin as a retention or enrollment initiative.

It began in IT.

The initial goal was straightforward: replace an end-of-life web chat tool used by the IT Help Desk. But early on, the IT Customer Experience team recognized a larger need and greater opportunity. Rather than treating the chatbot as a narrow technical solution, they began asking a broader question: what if the technology could help surface and proactively address where students were getting stuck?

"Once you see the patterns in the questions students are asking, you realize the problem isn't just answering them faster," said Kate McDowell, Senior Director of Strategic Communications at Adelphi University.

"The real opportunity is making sure the right information reaches students before confusion turns into a problem."



Kate McDowell
Senior Director of Strategic Communications


That question reframed IT's role. Rather than owning only systems and integrations, IT became a conduit across institutional silos—translating student confusion into shared institutional action and helping establish the cross-functional collaboration that would later become operationalized through the Adele Communications Task Force.

In January 2022, Adelphi University launched Adele, a conversational AI assistant powered by the Mainstay platform, to support high volumes of questions on certain Adelphi web pages. By March 2023, Adele was upgraded to support two-way SMS messaging for approximately 6,000 current students. Via SMS, Adele would send prompts, reminders and interactive nudges about academic and financial deadlines as well



Location
Garden City, NY

Population
7,600 Students

Institution Type
Private

How It Started

Adelphi's commencement team was the first to use Adele to remind eligible students of the steps required to apply for graduation and prepare for Commencement.

The program significantly increased the number of students who completed all critical steps.

How It's Going

50%+
increased sign ups

1,300+
staff capacity hours restored



94%
overall student engagement

as engagement and learning opportunities. Students can hold ongoing text conversations with Adele and are directed to a human staff member when a question requires additional support. Students who opt in to receive messages can also initiate conversations with Adele at any time for guidance on specific needs.

While Adele is very visible to students through this proactive SMS outreach, IT continues to expand the web-based chatbot across more pages of Adelphi's website, supported by a growing knowledge base, generative AI and the dedicated Adele Communications Task Force. Both channels draw from the same knowledge base, voice, and institutional strategy—creating a unified digital support environment that supports members of the community and the public.

Since launching, **Adele has helped to surface patterns that were previously unseen:**

- Repeated student questions about academic and financial deadlines and requirements
- Students contacting the IT Help Desk when other offices were unreachable
- High-risk moments (e.g., phishing, access issues) where automation alone was inappropriate
- Points in the student journey where confusion signaled the need for human outreach

Crucially, Adelphi made deliberate service choices about what Adele processes are managed or automated in the Mainstay platform:

- High-risk situations that demand timely human intervention (safety, reputation)
- When needed, the bot requests human interaction from applicable offices in real time via email, rather than silently creating a helpdesk ticket
- Proactive outreach is identified and executed thoughtfully, not indiscriminately
- The bot's knowledge base is actively managed to support strong Gen-AI results and customized answers where needed

Adele became both an answer engine and a front-line signal of institutional barriers.

The Adele Taskforce

To ensure that the platform could scale effectively across the institution, Adelphi established the Adele Communications Task Force in late 2023. Created collaboratively by University Communications and Marketing, which leads messaging strategy and student communications, and Information Technology, which manages the platform's technical infrastructure and knowledge base, the cross-functional group also includes representatives from the One Stop Student Services Center, Student Affairs and Academic Services. The Task Force is supported by two dedicated Mainstay partners—an Engagement Specialist and a Partnership Director—who provide hands-on expertise in the platform and campaign management.

Each office brings a critical perspective on the Adelphi experience. One Stop Student Services supports students and prospects through key academic and financial interactions—from registration and billing to graduation. Academic Services works closely with One Stop to advise and guide students through course planning, registration and academic progress. Student Affairs oversees student engagement, support services and co-curricular opportunities that shape campus life.

Together, the Task Force supports the broader Adele conversational environment, which includes both two-way SMS messaging with current students and a public-facing web chat integrated across Adelphi's website. While these tools serve different purposes—SMS supporting proactive outreach and ongoing student conversation, and web chat providing on-demand guidance for prospective and current users—they operate from the same knowledge base and share a consistent personality, brand voice and institutional mission. **This coordinated approach helps Adelphi address the most common questions and barriers students encounter, strengthening the institution's ability to support persistence and retention.**

From Pilot to Practice

As adoption expanded and results became measurable, the Task Force also recognized the need for institutional standards to guide the use of conversational messaging. The group developed a University policy establishing requirements and best practices for the approved use of text (one-way) and SMS (two-way) messaging to Adelphi community members through University-supported platforms, including Mainstay (Adele), Stellic, Slate, Regroup Alert, StarRez and Twilio.

In June 2024, Adelphi's executive leadership formally approved the policy, operationalizing Adele's SMS communication capabilities across the institution and ensuring that conversational messaging would be implemented in a coordinated, strategic and student-centered way.

5 Outcomes Worth Noting

1 From awareness to action

A coordinated messaging strategy using Adele’s student SMS channel and website chat increased engagement and drove measurable action. An interactive chatbot campaign supporting a spring concert generated a **50% year-over-year increase in sign ups**, demonstrating that students were not only reached but motivated to act. Over time, patterns in students’ questions and needs emerged from both SMS conversations and website chat interactions. These insights now inform proactive campaigns that address common challenges earlier—before confusion becomes a barrier to participation or success.

2 From limited capacity to expanded reach

A cross-functional task force—supported by two dedicated Mainstay partners (an Engagement Specialist and Partnership Director)—delivers coordinated outreach and scalable support. Through Adele’s 24/7 website chat, prospects, families, faculty, staff, and other visitors, and through student SMS messaging, the University can engage far more stakeholders than traditional support channels could reach. The Adele Communications Task Force designed campaigns and response flows that surface needs earlier, route questions more accurately and deliver support more efficiently—extending institutional capacity without expanding staffing. “The goal wasn’t just to answer more questions,” said Nicollet. “It was to reach stakeholders before confusion turned into a bigger problem. Mainstay enables us to do that at a scale the IT Help Desk couldn’t achieve on its own.”

3 From channel fatigue to channel trust

A disciplined cadence (2–3 messages per week), thoughtfully diversified messaging and a carefully designed persona rebuilt trust in the channel. The Adele Communications Task Force developed the platform’s voice and outreach parameters using higher education benchmarks and engagement data. Positioning Adele with a peer-like voice—more of a fellow student than an institutional authority—encouraged stronger engagement and more natural conversations. In some cases, parents even corrected contact records to ensure that students—not parents—received the messages directly. Trust became an operational asset, enabling the University to communicate timely information through a channel students were willing to engage with.

4 From misrouted demand to higher-value human work

Adele functions as a front-line support layer through both website chat and student texting. The platform resolves routine questions instantly and routes more complex issues to the appropriate office using escalation pathways developed collaboratively across the institution. IT also monitors chats and jumps in as a “live human helper” if needed. This approach contains routine inquiries, escalates only when human judgment is required, and directs staff time toward higher-value student support. The result is reduced avoidable demand and more consistent service across departments. Furthermore, responses reflect shared institutional knowledge—not just IT.

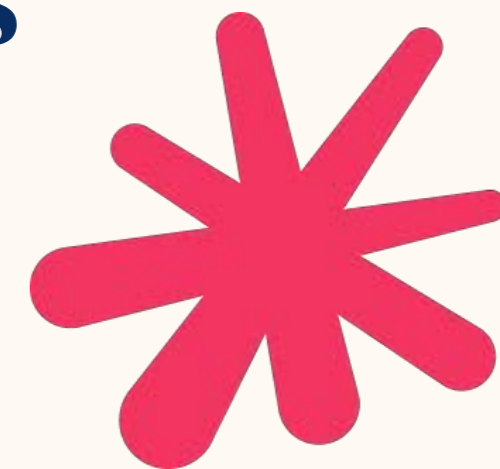
5 From operational tool to institutional insight

Data generated through Adele’s website chat and student SMS interactions provides actionable insight into stakeholder needs across the University. Performance metrics—including engagement trends, generative AI utilization and student satisfaction signals—are incorporated into regular executive leadership updates and board-level reporting. Patterns in questions and conversations reveal where students and visitors encounter friction in university processes, allowing leadership to address barriers earlier and improve the overall student experience.

Why This Matters for Private Colleges & Universities

Private institutions operate in an environment of tight margins, limited staffing capacity and increasing pressure to retain / enroll students. Adelphi's experience shows that capacity can be gained without expansion by focusing on removing barriers. Although true, the lesson is not that "retention and enrollment are everyone's responsibility." It's to take steps to break down silos & play a meaningful role in the bigger picture of institutional success.

Key Takeaways from Adelphi University



Remove barriers → reduce avoidable demand

Create shared visibility → coordinate better support across the student experience

At Adelphi, the Adele environment—spanning web chat and student texting—helps the institution identify where and when questions and conversations peak and respond in time to capitalize on those moments.

Ready to restore your capacity?

Our experts will work by your side to execute your strategic plan with conversational AI designed to elevate the effectiveness of your staff.

SPEAK WITH US

