



Upswing

Executive Brief: Ana Insights **2025**

Findings from the 2024-25 Academic Year

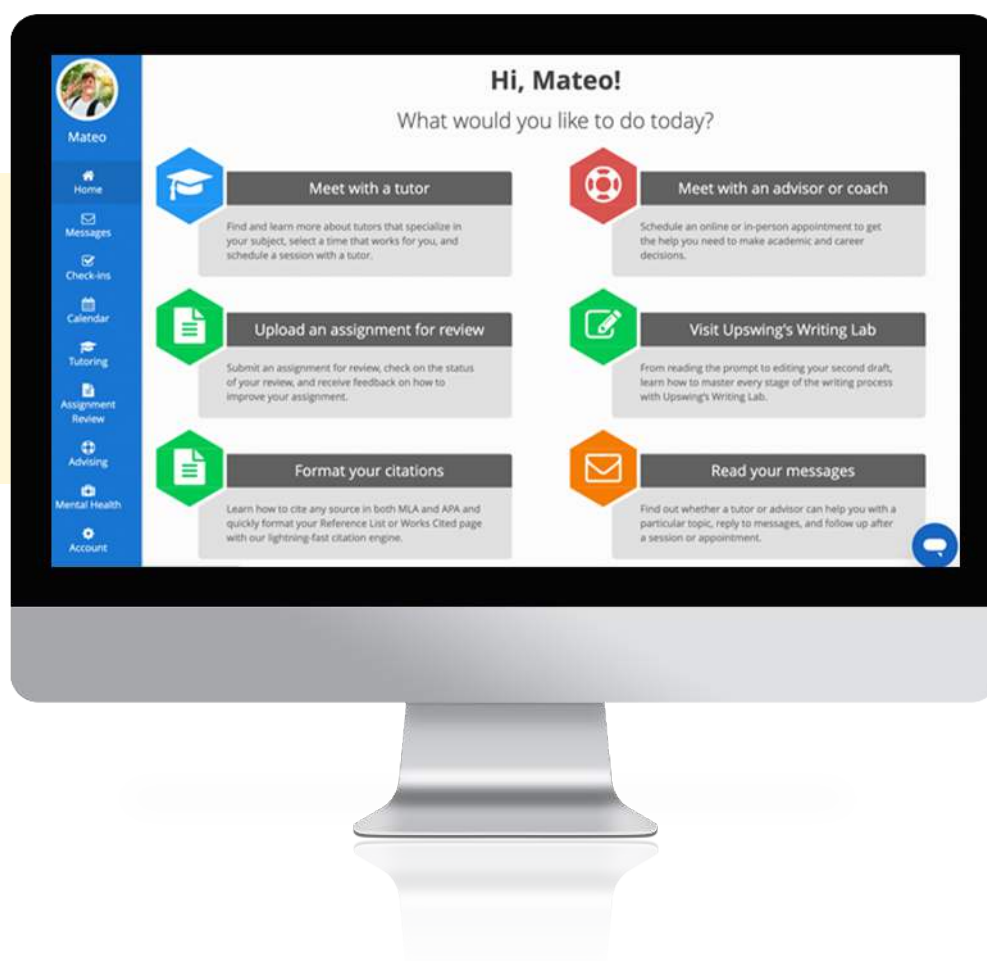
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Background: About Upswing and Ana

Upswing is a mission-driven, integrated student services ecosystem dedicated to supporting the success and retention of non-traditional and underserved college students. Founded with the belief that every learner deserves equitable access to academic resources, Upswing partners with colleges and universities to bridge gaps in student support—both inside and outside the classroom.

Through its digital platform, Upswing connects students to a wide range of services including on-demand tutoring, mental health resources, writing support, critical needs support, and success coaching—all accessible within their learning management systems. By combining human support with data-driven insights, Upswing helps institutions strengthen engagement, improve academic outcomes, and reduce barriers that disproportionately affect first-generation, working-adult, and online learners.



Each year, Upswing serves nearly 1 million students across nearly 100 higher education institutions. Its holistic approach emphasizes not only academic achievement, but also the social and emotional well-being that drives long-term persistence and graduation.

About Ana



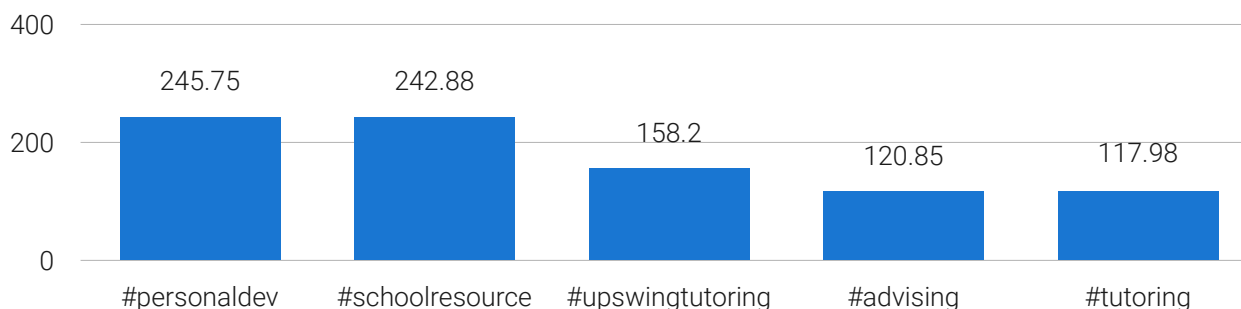
Ana is Upswing's virtual co-pilot—a conversational SMS-based message tool that delivers more than 1 million conversations annually. Ana is designed to proactively engage students, answer their questions, and connect them with the resources they need most. Built to operate as a digital ally, Ana offers personalized, human-backed interactions that encourage persistence and timely action.

Unlike static chatbots that only react to inquiries, Ana is an intelligent engagement tool that initiates meaningful conversations. It can remind students about key academic deadlines, direct them to tutoring and advising resources, and even check in about non-academic factors like motivation, time management, or feelings of belonging.

Ana's insights are driven by a combination of behavioral data and natural language understanding. Through millions of student interactions, Ana has become a powerful lens into the lived experiences of today's learners—revealing trends in student stress, confidence, and engagement that help institutions make data-informed decisions.

By translating student voice into actionable insights, Ana provides schools with key data that then empowers participating institutions to respond to emerging challenges before they affect retention. These data points include more than 200 referrals per month per partner, and nearly 9 escalations annually.

Ana Referrals per 1k Students by Type



Introduction to the Ana Insights Report 2025:

The purpose of this report is to provide a comprehensive overview of the key findings from the 2024-2025 academic year as collected by Ana, Upswing's SMS engagement tool. This report aims to illuminate the challenges and successes experienced by students across various institutions, particularly focusing on non-traditional and historically marginalized groups. By sharing these insights, we hope to inform and support administrators in enhancing their strategies for student engagement and success.

Data for this report was gathered through Ana's proactive and reactive messaging campaigns, which send millions of messages to students each year. Each message was designed to offer information, reminders, connections to resources, and encouragement. The responses from students, whether solicited by Ana or initiated by the students themselves, provided a rich source of data reflecting their needs, concerns, and sentiments. Our Student Success team, trained to act as an extension of our

partners' campuses, played a crucial role in analyzing this data to improve campaign content and offer timely support to students.

The report details specific insights derived from data from the 2024-2025 academic year. These insights are categorized into four overarching themes: **financial aid and stability, academic support, student experience & belonging, and student sentiment**. Each insight provides detailed analyses, industry trends, and actionable recommendations based on the data collected.

Ultimately, the goal of this report is to equip educational administrators with the knowledge and insights needed to foster a supportive and responsive environment for all students. By leveraging the data and recommendations provided, we hope to enhance the overall student experience, increase engagement, boost retention, and support the academic and personal success of every student.



FINDINGS FROM ANA INSIGHTS 2024-2025

INSIGHT

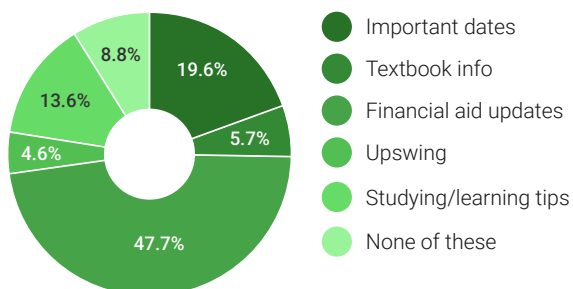
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Proactive Messaging Can Reduce Stressors Early in the Semester

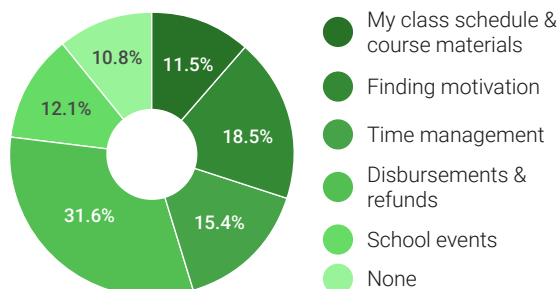
Background Information

Each semester, Ana sends a “Getting the Semester Started” campaign within the first two weeks of classes. The goal is to equip students with essential information to help them feel prepared—whether that’s understanding their course schedule, accessing textbooks, taking care of administrative tasks, or managing time and motivation.

Fall 2024: Getting the Semester Started



Spring 2025: Getting the Semester Started



Campaign Analysis

Across both semesters, financial concerns were the top priority for students at the start of semester. Nearly half of the students who engaged in Fall 2024 selected “Financial aid updates,” and nearly a third of Spring 2025 students chose “Disbursements & refunds.”

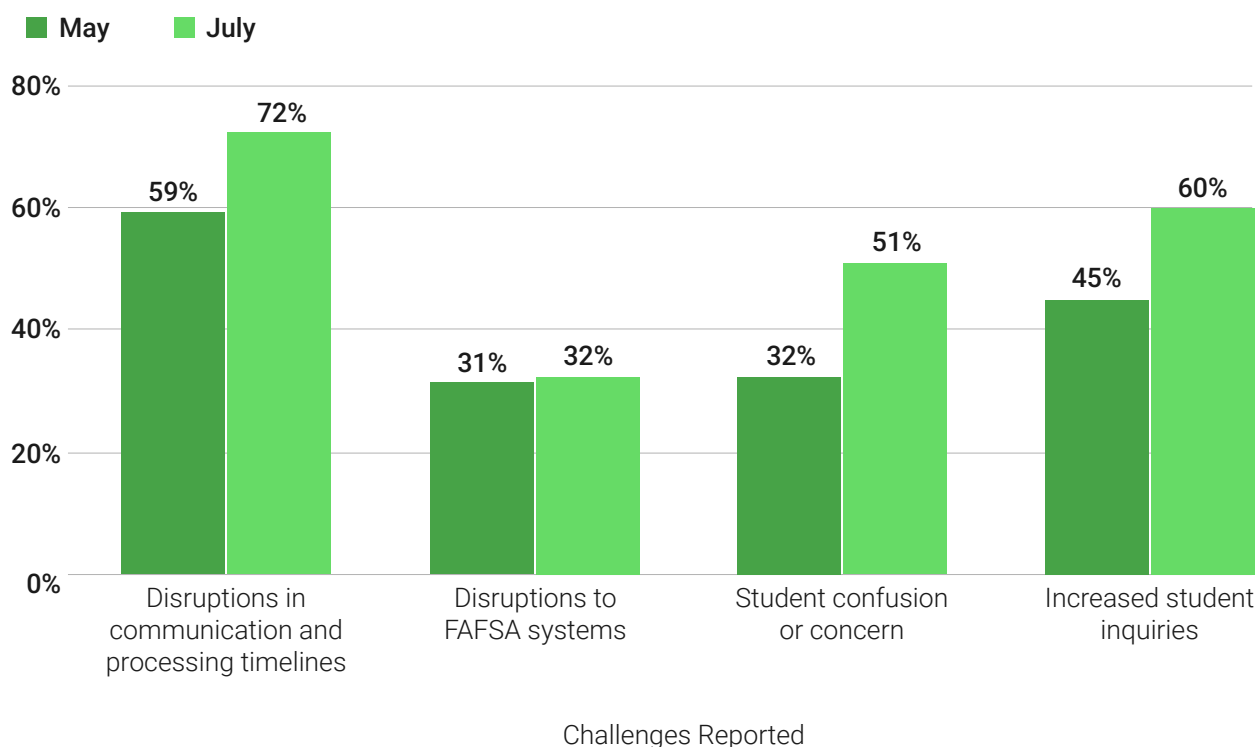
This data reinforces a clear theme: before students can focus on academics, they need clarity about their financial situation. The phrasing differs in the top-performing choices between semesters (“financial aid updates” in fall vs. “disbursements & refunds” in spring), but the underlying concern students have around their financial stability remains true.

This trend also aligns with broader national challenges, including delayed federal aid, the Better FAFSA (Free Application for Financial Student Aid), and increasing uncertainty around the cost of attendance.

*While these insights were enlightening this year, it was nonetheless not surprising given so many changes the students have experienced,” says **Melvin Hines, CEO and co-founder of Upswing.** “If institutions have had trouble planning for and understanding what their budgets might look like in twelve months, we must presume that our students are facing even more of a burden here.*

Indeed, these concerns have been expressed externally as well. In July, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators released its survey results from college administrators. The results indicated that student confusion around the cost of college had increased dramatically.

Change in Financial Aid Challenges



In a subsequent interview to [BestColleges.com](https://www.bestcolleges.com), Melanie Storey, CEO and President of NASFAA, expressed concern of the trickle-down effect on students from the downsizing of the Education Department.

Recommendations to Institutions

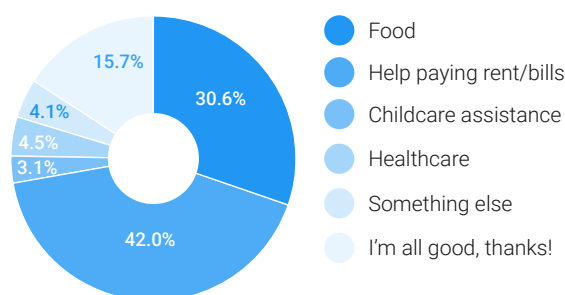
Even if detailed financial information is not yet available, a simple, proactive message campaign to students about when they can expect disbursement updates could help reduce anxiety and build trust. Sharing even general timelines or acknowledgement of pending aid decisions can make a measurable difference.

The Demand for Basic Needs Support Is Widespread

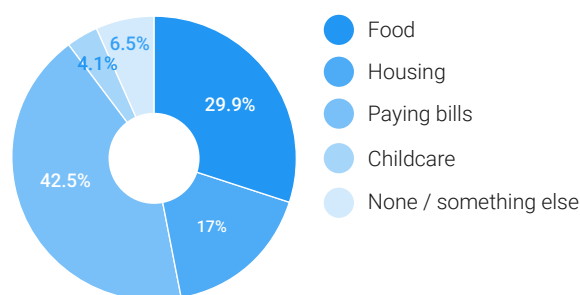
Background Information

Ana's Community Resources campaigns are designed to connect students with support for non-academic needs—including food, housing, financial support, childcare, and healthcare. For many college students, non-tuition expenses are a defining factor in their ability to remain in school. Over the years, the Community Resources campaign has proven to be a very important message we send as it showcases that Ana is here to provide more than just academic or administrative support.

Fall 2024: Community Resources



Spring 2025: Community Resources



Campaign Analysis

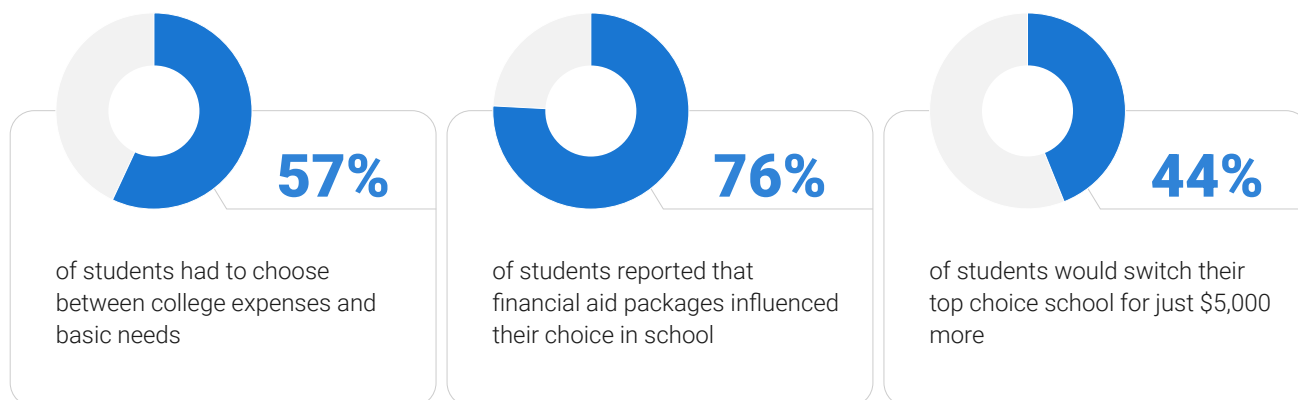
In both semesters, help with paying bills was the top choice among students who engaged. In Fall 2024, 42% selected this option, and in Spring 2025, that number remained nearly identical at 42.5%. This academic year was the first year we included the option for assistance with bill payments, something we decided to do as a result of the deluge of questions Ana received from students asking for help with expenses. That option, as broad as it is, reflects the financial pressures students face.

Steven Williams, CEO of Single Stop, an organization dedicated to supporting students with critical needs supports, agrees. "We're witnessing a significant

increase in the number of students reaching out for help with basic needs—not just food or housing, but everyday essentials that make staying enrolled possible," he says.

Left unresolved, these challenges can lead to significant declines in student enrollment and graduation rates. A recent study published by Ellucian highlights just how impactful these challenges are in today's students. According to the study, 59% of students considered dropping out of college due to financial distress. 57% said they have had to choose between tuition and basic needs such as food and clothing.

“These challenges are not peripheral to student success; they are at the heart of it,”
states Williams.



“Food assistance”, which was the leading choice in previous years, was the second most selected option both semesters. This reinforces findings from previous years that food insecurity is still a concern amongst students.

Recommendations to Institutions

We encourage institutions to review their upcoming messages to students in order ensure that those outreaches include information about basic needs support available on campus or in the community. By being proactive with your students, you can help them realize that support is available, and that they don't need to struggle alone.



FAFSA Confusion Limits Student Engagement; Increases Demand for Scholarship Opportunities

Background Information

Each fall, Ana sends a dedicated FAFSA campaign to help students prepare for and complete their financial aid applications for the following academic year. However, the 2024–2025 cycle created unprecedented challenges. The FAFSA, which the federal government had initially announced would open on October 1, 2024, was unexpectedly delayed until December 1. Because of this delay, the FAFSA campaign wasn't sent until the first week of December, a time in the semester when students are highly focused on final exams and end-of-semester assignments.

Recognizing these challenges, Ana delivered dedicated messaging in both the fall and spring semesters to help students find alternative sources of financial support.

Campaign Analysis

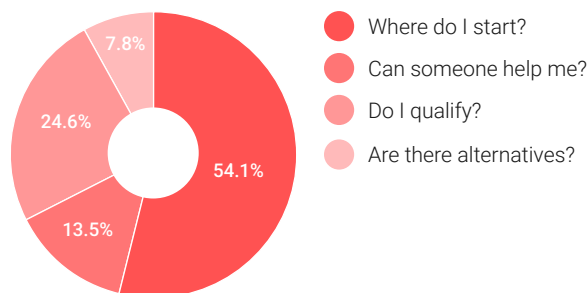
This was the second year students ran into trouble with the FAFSA process. The launch of the Better FAFSA in the previous school year introduced many new complexities to the application process for non-traditional students. The delay of the FAFSA for a second time may have caused students to feel frustrated, disillusioned, or distrustful of the FAFSA process as a whole.

That said, the most selected option was “Where do I start?”, confirming that students are still looking for clear, step-by-step direction. The data also reflects confusion about eligibility and a desire for human support, shown in selections like “Do I qualify?” and “Can someone help me?”

Dr. Adrian Haugabrook, Founder and Principal of higher education consulting firm Quinta Essentia Ventures, and former Executive Vice President at Southern New Hampshire University, understands firsthand how such challenges and complexities can impact students midway through their academic year.



Fall 2024: FAFSA Reminder



FAFSA isn't just paperwork for new traditional students; it's hope," says Dr. Haugabrook.

"It's the bridge that connects a parent, a veteran, or a working adult to the opportunity they've fought hard to reach. When that bridge becomes unstable through funding challenges, it threatens to cut off entire groups of learners who already stand at the margins of higher education."

Upswing's Ana isn't the only place students sought support. According to the Government Accountability Office, there were more than 5.4 million calls to the Department of Education's Call Center seeking help with FAFSA challenges. Unfortunately, due to understaffing, 74% of those calls were never answered.

Total Calls to Education's Call Center, First 5 Months of FAFSA Application Cycle, 2024

Total calls
5.4 million



Total calls unanswered
4.0 million (74%)



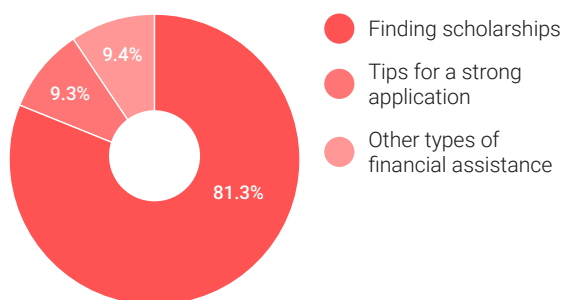
Total calls answered
1.4 million (26%)



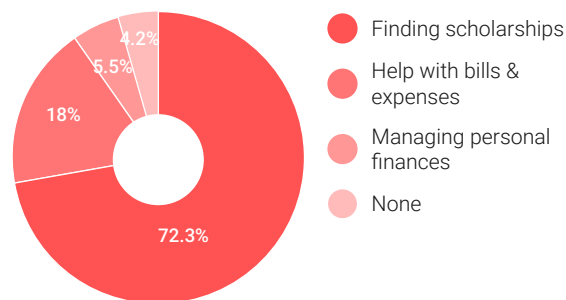
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data. | GAO-24-107407

According to the GAO report, "Call center representatives advised some students to just 'try again later' rather than proactively notifying them when the problem was resolved. At times, this took months." The impact was that there were 9% fewer FAFSA applications completed compared to the previous year.

FALL 2024: Scholarship Season



Spring 2025: Scholarships / Money Resources



Results from the previous year's Ana insights also highlight that in both semesters, "Finding scholarships" was the overwhelmingly top choice among students who engaged, accounting for more than 70% of selections each semester.

This shift in behavior from previous years can also likely be attributed to challenges with FAFSA. Facing increasing financial pressure, students who continue to purchase higher education appear to be seeking alternatives to FAFSA funding options.

*When financial aid systems falter, it's non-traditional students who feel the tremors first," **says Dr. Haugabrook.** "The increase we're seeing in students asking Ana for scholarship support is a clear signal: the safety nets that once sustained them are fraying."*

Recommendation to Institutions

Responsive Messaging Strategy:

In light of such challenges, it is becoming increasingly important for institutions to remain on high alert for any delays or changes to the FAFSA process for the upcoming school year. To prevent any possible miscommunication around the FAFSA, the timing of proactive message campaigns can significantly impact the likelihood for student success.

Ongoing and Enhanced Messaging Around Financial Aid Alternatives:

The financial aid system is one that we will continue to carefully monitor going forward. Because the FAFSA process has become less predictable, institutions should place greater emphasis on alternative forms of aid and financial assistance for their students.

Cross-Campaign Financial Aid Support:

Funding challenges pervade many of the other challenges students have. As a result, even when marketing other resources such as mental health, or career support resources, institutions should consider highlighting non-based financial support resources as well.



Affirmative and Supportive Wording May Reduce Stigma When Discussing Academic Support

Background Information

While the Academic Support campaign was designed to introduce students to available academic resources, it also revealed a deeper behavioral trend around how students perceive tutoring. In Fall 2024, we tested a subtle shift in language by presenting the academic support option with a more encouraging tone.

This was an intentional effort to reduce the stigma often associated with asking for academic help. Many community college students view tutoring as something reserved for students in crisis, rather than a tool for skill-building or ongoing support.

In Fall 2024, the Ana support team found that by introducing simple, subtle, and positive affirmations around getting academic support, students were much more likely to elect to try out receiving academic support. In fact, the subtle shift in language improved its ranking to become the top choice among students who responded.

Campaign Analysis

The improvement in engagement reinforces a key idea: how we talk about support influences how students engage with it. In the fall, the casual, affirming phrasing likely made students more comfortable selecting tutoring. In the spring, when the option was presented more plainly, interest declined.

This suggests that even students who are open to help may need reassurance that tutoring is not remedial or only for those in crisis. This distinction is especially important in today's learning environment, where students are managing increased academic pressure, cognitive fatigue, and external pressures. Framing tutoring as a proactive and normal part of academic success makes it more approachable.

Recommendations for Institutions

We encourage institutions to review how tutoring is described across student-facing channels. Presenting tutoring as part of an academic success plan, rather than a last resort, can help normalize its use and reduce stigma for students across all performance levels. Based on the positive response to supportive language in the Fall 2024 campaign, Ana will continue to present tutoring as a resource for all students, not just those in crisis.





**See How Proactive Support Powered by Ana
Drives Real Results in Student Retention**

If you'd like to learn more about the Ana Insights Report, or are interested in bringing Ana to your institution, you can reach out to the Upswing team at:



retention@upswing.io