IBM

How digital assistants are closing equity gaps in higher education
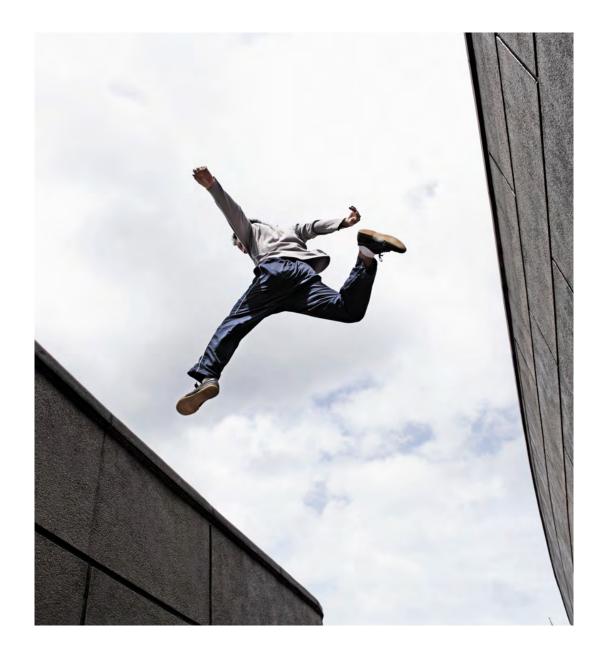
AtlasRTX and IBM watsonx
Assistant help college prospects
communicate on their own terms

by Jasmine Bonds

5-minute read

When the clock strikes 6:00 PM, an academic advisor saves the notes from his last meeting, grabs his belongings and locks up his office for the night.

At the same time, a prospective student finishes her shift at a grocery store a few blocks away. She closes out her till and hurries towards campus, hoping to speak with an advisor about the admissions process.

She reaches the advisor's office at 6:30 PM, only to find it closed for the

day. Dejected, she pulls out her phone and pores over her work schedule, searching for her next day off.

Sunday.

Unfortunately, the office will be closed then, too.

This is the reality many college prospects face today—balancing work, personal obligations and academic pursuits in a precarious juggling act. Every schedule conflict or missed connection puts the entire act at risk, forcing some prospects to drop one commitment in order to successfully balance the others.

As a consequence, higher education often falls by the wayside.

Researchers at Rockhurst University and Purdue University's Krannert School of Management were keen to increase enrollment by addressing barriers to entry, like in the scenario above, that potentially alienate their prospective students.

Though the two universities are hundreds of miles apart and offer their own distinct digital experiences, they shared a common goal—provide all prospects and current students with the same quality of service, regardless of how or when they choose to engage, what their native language is or the socioeconomic group in which they reside.

Krannert and Rockhurst began closely analyzing student engagement on their websites to identify when, where and how prospects were seeking information. Both schools discovered that the majority of their web traffic was generated after traditional business hours. "A lot of prospects work full time or have other obligations during the day, so they don't have time to contact the university when someone might be there to answer their call," says Chris Austin, Director of Market Development at AtlasRTX, a software development company in Park City, Utah.

"These prospects will research schools at night, on the weekends or whenever they can squeeze in a quick search. Staff members aren't typically available then, but these people still need information, and they need it fast."

Without the resources to hire more staff, two-thirds of those who visited krannert.purdue.edu or rockhurst.edu were left to sift through a labyrinth of new information on their own. Both universities knew they needed a way to automate student engagement when a human team member was unavailable.

"The modern student expects immediate results and real-time experiences, whether it's a phone call with a staff member at two in the afternoon or a chat session with a digital assistant at two in the morning."

Mike Bills, President, AtlasRTX

Of the applicants who engaged with a digital assistant

52%

were accepted into Krannert

With the help of a digital assistant, Rockhurst saved more than

260

employee hours per month

Bridging the information gap

Krannert and Rockhurst turned to AtlasRTX, an IBM Business Partner, to implement digital resources capable of communicating with anyone, at any time.

AtlasRTX uses a combination of AI, digital assistants and human teams to help universities facilitate meaningful engagement with their students. "Our philosophy is that humans and digital assistants work better together," says Mike Bills, President at AtlasRTX. "We want virtual and human resources working in tandem to give students the best service possible."

With the AtlasRTX conversational AI engagement platform, institutions like Purdue and Rockhurst can assign responsibilities to their digital assistants and staff based on their needs at the time. As Bills notes, "Digital assistants are better suited for certain functions, like answering

frequently asked questions, while university staff are more equipped to handle later-stage engagement, like bringing students in for a campus visit."

Krannert implemented an AtlasRTX digital assistant powered by IBM watsonx® Assistant technology for its residential and online graduate business programs. Because Purdue recruits internationally, Krannert's digital assistant had to be able to communicate in hundreds of different languages.

IBM watsonx Assistant is built on natural language processing (NLP) models that enable digital assistants to intelligently process large amounts of language data. With linguistic capabilities like intent classification and entity recognition, a digital assistant built and trained on IBM watsonx Assistant can learn to understand conversations

" Today's student population is more diverse than ever. More first-generation, international and working students are pursuing a higher education. The digital assistants we deploy use automation to ensure these students have access to the information they need, whenever they need it."

Mike Bills, President, AtlasRTX

as a native speaker would, no matter what language is being spoken.

Additionally, IBM watsonx Assistant has a nuanced understanding of the businesses it supports, like higher education, so not only does it respond to student inquiries with the right words, it also does so in the correct context. "In many cases, international students prefer to engage with a digital assistant. They can ask questions in their native language, knowing the digital assistant understands them, doesn't cast judgement and is always available," says Bills.

Rockhurst deployed an EduBot, known colloquially as "Kaycee," for its undergraduate programs. Kaycee, also powered by IBM watsonx Assistant, is a specialized digital assistant that serves as a crucial point of contact

for Rockhurst's undergraduate prospects. Kaycee engages in hundreds of conversations every day, answering questions and converting prospects into applicants.

"Engagement doesn't begin and end on the home page," says Bills. "Prospects will have new questions and needs based on where they are in their college journey. Kaycee can switch channels to continue interacting with them offline via SMS, web chats, and in-app or social messaging. As an example, Kaycee might send students a reminder text to complete their FAFSA forms."

As students deepen their research into Rockhurst, Kaycee is with them every step of the way—24 hours a day, seven days a week. Kaycee provides coverage for staff members

during off hours and serves as an additional resource for students around the clock.

The tailored, multichannel engagement and 24/7 availability Kaycee provides opens the door for strategic human engagement with prospects further down the line.

"Digital assistants have been a game-changer for us. Before implementing Kaycee, our users had to rely on a staff person being available to help them find very specific information or complete certain forms. We don't have a 24/7 call center, so adding Kaycee as a resource alongside our staff allows us to better serve our students at the level they expect from Rockhurst, both in person and online," says Dave Hunt, Associate Vice President of Marketing at Rockhurst University.

Turning informed prospects into future grads

Krannert and Rockhurst have both seen remarkable results after implementing their digital assistants.

Krannert's digital assistant is the university's second highest generator of new applications. In 2021, the conversion rate from prospect to applicant increased by more than 5%. Additionally, the university saw significant increases in conversion growth from its online program offerings. Almost 20% of engagements with online candidates resulted in application submissions. Of the applicants who engaged with the digital assistant before applying, 52% were eventually accepted into the Krannert School of Management.

Rockhurst's digital assistant has saved the university over 260 employee hours per month. Thirty-three percent of its web visitors have initiated a conversation with Kaycee, and of the prospects who reach the admissions page, a whopping 67% proactively engage with Kaycee for assistance.

"Academic institutions have a moral obligation to help their students succeed. When you can't bring in more staff to serve those students, digital assistants can help schools overcome disproportionate staff-to-student ratios and really move the needle on learning outcomes."

Mike Bills, President, AtlasRTX

About AtlasRTX

AtlasRTX (external link) helps companies create real-time experiences using a combination of AI, digital assistants and human teams to engage people at every stage of the buying cycle. The platform leverages popular channels like text, Facebook Messenger and web chat to drive customer acquisition, retention and loyalty.

Solution component

- IBM watsonx® Assistant

With Watson®

About With Watson

The With Watson® Program is a global customer success program providing exclusive brand, marketing and enablement resources to organizations that are embedding Watson technologies into their offerings.