



A Case Study for Incorporating Student Voice in Chatbot Implementation at University of South Carolina – Sumter

Overview of USC Sumter

The University of South Carolina Sumter is a two-year regional campus within the University of South Carolina system, and located in Sumter, South Carolina. USC Sumter awards two-year associate's degrees as well as baccalaureate degrees in nursing and education in conjunction with the University of South Carolina Aiken. For Fall 2025, there were 1,897 students enrolled. Of the 1,897 students, 1,202 were dual-enrollment students (concurrent enrollment in high school and college credit courses). USC Sumter's commitment to student success has been a long-standing part of its mission. At the core of this mission is the institution's emphasis on the holistic development of every student by fostering a learning environment that "develops respect for racial, geographical, intellectual, and economic diversity". USC Sumter strives to prepare students for continuing their education within the University of South Carolina system, and to have a sense of self-reliance and joy of learning to succeed in their careers.

Student success has been the center of USC Sumter's mission from its inception in 1973, and efforts have continued to evolve over the years. Around 1979, the institution expanded its efforts on the Shaw Air Force Base with the addition of a student services office for both the Air Force and Army communities. In the 1980's, USC Sumter adopted the University 101 program that was developed by the University of South Carolina to ease students' transition from high school to college. Since the 1980's, dual enrollment courses have been offered by USC Sumter to high school students in order for them to earn college credit, decrease college costs, and prepare for advanced-level college coursework. In 1990 and in accordance with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the institution established the Office of Student Disability Resource Center as a service to empower and advocate for students with disabilities. The establishment of the Federal TRIO Programs of 1968 gave USC Sumter insights to broaden its student success efforts. In 1997, USC Sumter's student success efforts became more inclusive with the addition of the Opportunity Scholars Program (or Student Support Services TRIO program). The Opportunity Scholars Program provides services to eligible first-generation students.

The Rationale for a Chatbot

The necessity for adopting chatbots in higher education stems directly from the ongoing dilemma of student attrition. Foundational retention theories emphasize the importance of integration and timely support for student persistence (Tinto, 1993). The literature confirms a demand for a shift from slow response processes toward instantaneous and scalable responses to provide timely

support. AI chatbots can serve as an essential technological remedy for this demand. By deploying chatbot assistance, USC Sumter expects to effectively triage routine administrative inquiries, such as general registration dates, financial aid deadlines, referrals to specific services, etc. to increase response time for timely support.

From fall 2023 to fall 2024 the retention rate at USC Sumter was 61.5%, and the graduation rate for fall 2024 was 39.2%. In addition to retention and graduation rates, USC Sumter includes students who transfer to other institutions in the student success metrics. For Fall 2024, 8.7% of students transferred to other institutions for degree programs. The primary rationale for initiating the chatbot project was to increase student success rates (retention, graduation, and transfer) by enhancing student engagement and providing timely support. Prior to the chatbot there was no intentional way to identify students who need immediate attention and assistance. This project was designed to determine if utilizing a chatbot could position USC Sumter to be intentional and proactive in meeting the needs of students.

Student Success

Currently, USC Sumter has a faculty-model for academic advisement, but the institution is transitioning toward a more comprehensive, holistic approach. The institution is designing a new and innovative student success center with input and ideas from a cross-functional team that integrates student success coaches and AI-driven technology to provide proactive support to students. This cross-functional team includes students, staff (members of the institution's library, Information Technology, and Student Support Services), faculty of the library committee, and leadership (Dean, Associate Dean, and Assistant Deans). Most importantly, the input from students is intentionally sought and is critical in the establishment of the student success center. One component of the student success center will be student success coaches. Student success coaches will provide personalized guidance, support, and strategies to help students overcome challenges, celebrate accomplishments, and succeed in their studies. Success coaches will be tasked with initiating intentional check-ins with students to discuss their transition to college, individualized action plans, career goals and exploration, experience and satisfaction, etc. Intentional check-ins will occur at least twice during each semester. At specific points in each semester, automated check-in nudges will be sent to students via text messaging with the assistance of artificial intelligence. USC Sumter has chosen a retention chatbot and check-in text messaging platform to assist success coaches with check-ins and to identify students who need immediate assistance.

During the setup phase for the chatbot, specific questions and responses were selected and customized for the chatbot. The wording of the questions and responses in conjunction with the timing for sending check-in questions to students are critical for encouraging student engagement with the chatbot, and ultimately, the success coaches.

This case study will focus on the following:

- 1) The incorporation of current student voice in how chatbot questions and responses are phrased.

- 2) A chatbot marketing and promotion campaign (including a name for the chatbot) designed by current students to encourage engagement with the chatbot.

Operational Aspect

The vendor for the chatbot was selected for a few reasons:

- Another regional USC campus is using the selected platform and reported positive results.
- The cost for the platform was a factor, therefore the vendor offered a cost reduction for a multi-campus agreement.
- The level of support offered by the vendor for setup and implementation was an additional factor.

The total cost for the chatbot platform, compensation for student employees, and marketing was \$22,125. The majority of these costs were for the institution's portion of the platform.

The student employees for this project responded to the following announcement that was sent via text messaging in June 2025:

📣 Exciting Opportunity for Students!

Join Our Team to Review and Revise Questions for an AI-Driven Chatbot!

Do you enjoy working in teams and solving problems? This is your chance to make a real impact!

What You'll Do:

- Collaborate with fellow students to review and improve chatbot questions.
- Provide valuable feedback to enhance the chatbot's performance.
- Collaborate with fellow students to create a marketing plan to promote the chatbot to the student body and name the chatbot.

Who Can Apply:

- All students with a passion for teamwork.
- No AI or coding experience required – just bring your enthusiasm!

Benefits:

- Enhance your teamwork and problem-solving skills.
- Receive a \$500 stipend at the end of the project.

How to Apply:

- Complete an electronic application
- Submit your application by 12:00pm on June 20, 2025.

Join us and be part of this work!

The Incorporation of Current Student Voice

USC Sumter understood the ethical and practical necessity of incorporating student perspectives in the chatbot development phase. Drawing from academic findings (Taylor & Francis Online, 2024; Mongoose, 2025), USC Sumter recognized that robotic language from the chatbot would undermine the level of student engagement and persistence the tool was meant to support. To prevent the chatbot from sounding impersonal, ensure its tone, content, functionality directly reflects student needs, and communication preferences; enrolled students were recruited to add a human element to the chatbot language.

Student Team Formation

The University of South Carolina system includes four regional campuses that are two-year community colleges. The chatbot initiative involved two of the four regional campuses. To recruit students from both campuses, a flyer was sent to students at USC Sumter and a key stakeholder at the other campus to share with their student body. The flyer asked interested students to complete an application and emphasized that no AI or coding experience was necessary or required. However, the flyer encouraged students with a passion for teamwork and enthusiasm for learning about artificial intelligence and chatbot development to apply. Selected student interns received a stipend at the conclusion of the project.

All applicants were invited to attend a virtual orientation to learn about their roles and commitments and the intended outcomes of the chatbot initiative. To process stipends, students were asked to complete documents required for the Office of Human Resources at USC Sumter. Because students were working in a shared folder and on shared documents, a confidentiality agreement was reviewed during the orientation. Some students who attended the orientation did not proceed with the required HR documents due to the tight deadline for submitting the documents. Six students attended the orientation, but two students completed the required HR documents. Both selected students were in their second and final year at the institution.

The chosen vendor for the chatbot provided lists of questions and responses for the chatbot. The intended objective was for student teams to work together to ensure the questions are clear, relatable, and phrased in a manner that encourages students to respond. Also, the student teams were charged to brainstorm potential responses from their peers to the check-in questions, and review and revise information provided by the chatbot.

Originally, it was planned for students to spend five to ten hours per week for three to five weeks to complete these objectives. These objectives were achieved with two student employees spending twenty hours per week for six weeks. The vendor shared 55 pages of questions and responses that the students reviewed and edited for a more student-centered voice.

Promoting the Chatbot for Student Engagement

The student workers generated ideas for promoting and marketing the chatbot to the student bodies of both USC regional campuses. The first task for marketing the chatbot was to name it. The students brainstormed options for a name and created a Microsoft form for students at both

campuses to vote anonymously. The ballot that was deployed to approximately 400 students via a link to the Microsoft form is below:

Name the Chatbot

USC Sumter and USC Union are creating an AI-driven chatbot to communicate with you and to answer your questions. What should we name the chatbot? Please select one name. The name receiving the most choices will be selected.

* Required

1. Which campus do you attend? *

- ☐ USC Sumter
- ☐ USC Union

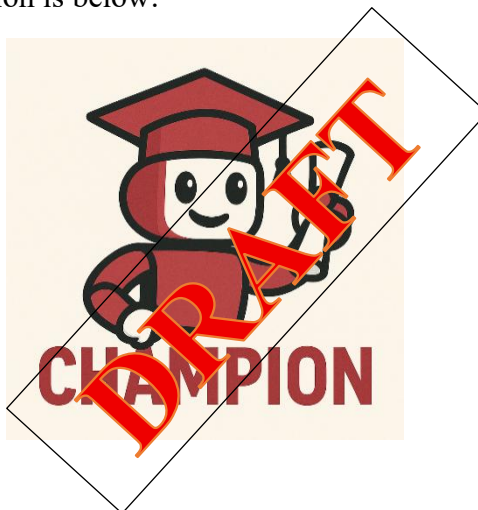
2. What should be the name for the chatbot? *

- ☐ Garnet Bot
- ☐ Champion
- ☐ Carolina

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.

 Microsoft Forms

Voting was open for a week, and twelve students chose to name the chatbot Champion. Subsequent to the chatbot name, an avatar was drafted for Champion as well. Students are more likely to interact with a chatbot that feels like a campus character rather than a faceless interface. The unofficial image for Champion is below:



Soft Launch

A soft launch was held on the first day of classes for the Fall 2025 semester. The Assistant Dean for Student Success sent an introductory text message to on-campus students about Champion.

This message was followed by a raffle from the vendor to encourage students to interact with Champion. A full launch to on-campus and online students is planned for spring 2026.

Outcomes From Soft Launch

Champion (the chatbot) launched during the first week of classes in the fall 2025 semester. Below is an overview of outcomes from the first week after the soft launch:

- 99% of the students opted to receive messages from Champion.
- Champion received 130 text messages from students within the first 24 hours after launching.
- The top 10 questions asked by students were:
 1. Where can I see my class schedule?
 2. Where do I see which textbooks I need?
 3. Where can I get textbooks for classes?
 4. How can I get degree planning support?
 5. Where can I find information about the bookstore?
 6. Are resources available to help students pay for textbooks?
 7. What is orientation?
 8. How do I access the student portal/what is my school portal username?
 9. When is the deadline to register for classes?
 10. Where is the bookstore? When is the bookstore open? How do I contact the bookstore?
- Additional responses from students to Champion:
 - “Thanks Champion, I appreciate it. I'll let you know if I need anything or have any questions.”
 - “Hey there nice to talk to you”
 - “Ok thanks Champ”
 - “Well, thank you so much for being so thoughtful and thinking of me I really do appreciate that champion. I will save you in my phone and again I'm very grateful that you messaged me and you may be hearing a lot from me.”
 - “Heyy, nice to meet ya champion. Glad to have you apart of my college experience!!”
 - “Fireeee thank you Champion college is confusing sometimes”

- “Hello champion welcome”

Below is an overview of the outcomes one month after the soft launch:

- 98% of the students continued to opt-in to receive messages from Champion, meaning they did not opt-out.
- 33% of the students who opted-in have engaged with Champion.
- Students sent 1,019 text messages to Champion.
- Approximately 35% of the text messages to Champion inquired about academic and campus services.
- Champion sent 8 proactive check-in campaigns to students on how they were feeling after one month in the semester and learned what areas they need the most support.
- The top three reasons students were unsure about returning in the spring:
 1. Financial Barriers
 2. Life Mental Health Concerns
 3. Sense of Belonging
- Champion connected 154 students to campus services and resources, and staff members conducted additional follow-up with these students.
- Additional responses to Champion from students:
 - “Do you have any wisdom to give to an incoming freshman”
 - “Aw thanks so much, I'm trying my best Champion!”
 - “I'm doing great, thanks for checking.”
 - “yes that is awesome! Thank you for informing me!”
 - “hey champion, how are you? and i do feel like i belong here.”

Lessons Learned

The implementation of Champion at USC Sumter provided critical insight into not only the intersection of artificial intelligence and student persistence, but also, the importance of incorporating student voice during the development phase to enhance student engagement. Prioritizing student voice seemed to reduce the skepticism that often times is associated with using automated services. Below are key lessons that were uncovered in this initiative:

- The students were ready to engage with the chatbot. There was uncertainty about whether students would engage with the chatbot, initially. The level of student engagement on the first day eliminated the uncertainty.
- The student workers need adequate time to review chatbot questions and responses. Even though the student workers were able to complete this task in a timely manner, six weeks were not adequate for both students to review and edit the same question and response. The list of questions and responses was divided equally for the two student workers, resulting in one review and edit for each question and response.

- The timeline for this initiative did not have enough time for the processing of Human Resource documents.
- The chatbot does not replace human interaction, but it does help to proactively identify students in need of support and intervention for their success.
- The chatbot revealed an unexpected volume of students who expressed mental health concerns. USC Sumter responded by connecting these students to mental health services quickly.

Future Steps

Additional work is needed to maintain and update the chatbot as it continues to gain knowledge through student engagement, and USC Sumter is committed to retain the student voice in every possible way. USC Sumter is exploring an internship program to expand the role of the students. This internship program will be a way to formalize the students' role in the chatbot implementation and utilization as well as deepen the chatbot ownership from the students' perspective.

About the ASN

The Advising Success Network (ASN) is a dynamic network of national organizations partnering to engage institutions in holistic advising redesign to advance success for all students, including Black, Latinx/a/o, Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander students and poverty-affected students. The network develops services and resources to guide institutions in implementing evidence-based advising practices. Since its formation in 2018, ASN has supported over 250 institutions in 30 states and created more than 50 open-source resources for practitioners and students. ASN is coordinated by NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and includes partners Achieving the Dream, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education, EDUCAUSE, NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and Young Invincibles.

Publications Language

NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and the Advising Success Network funded this project. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and the Advising Success Network. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information.