



THE MURRAY STATE NEWS

March 5–April 1, 2026
Vol. 99, No. 8



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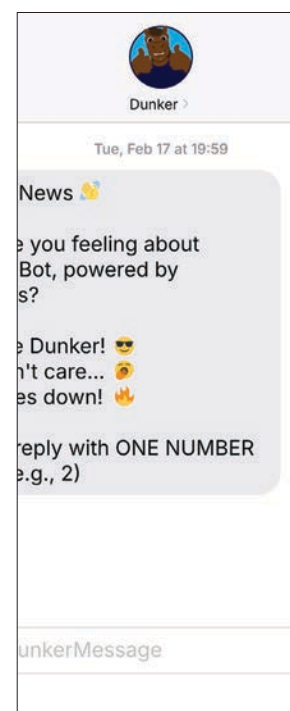
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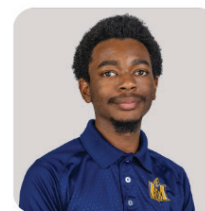
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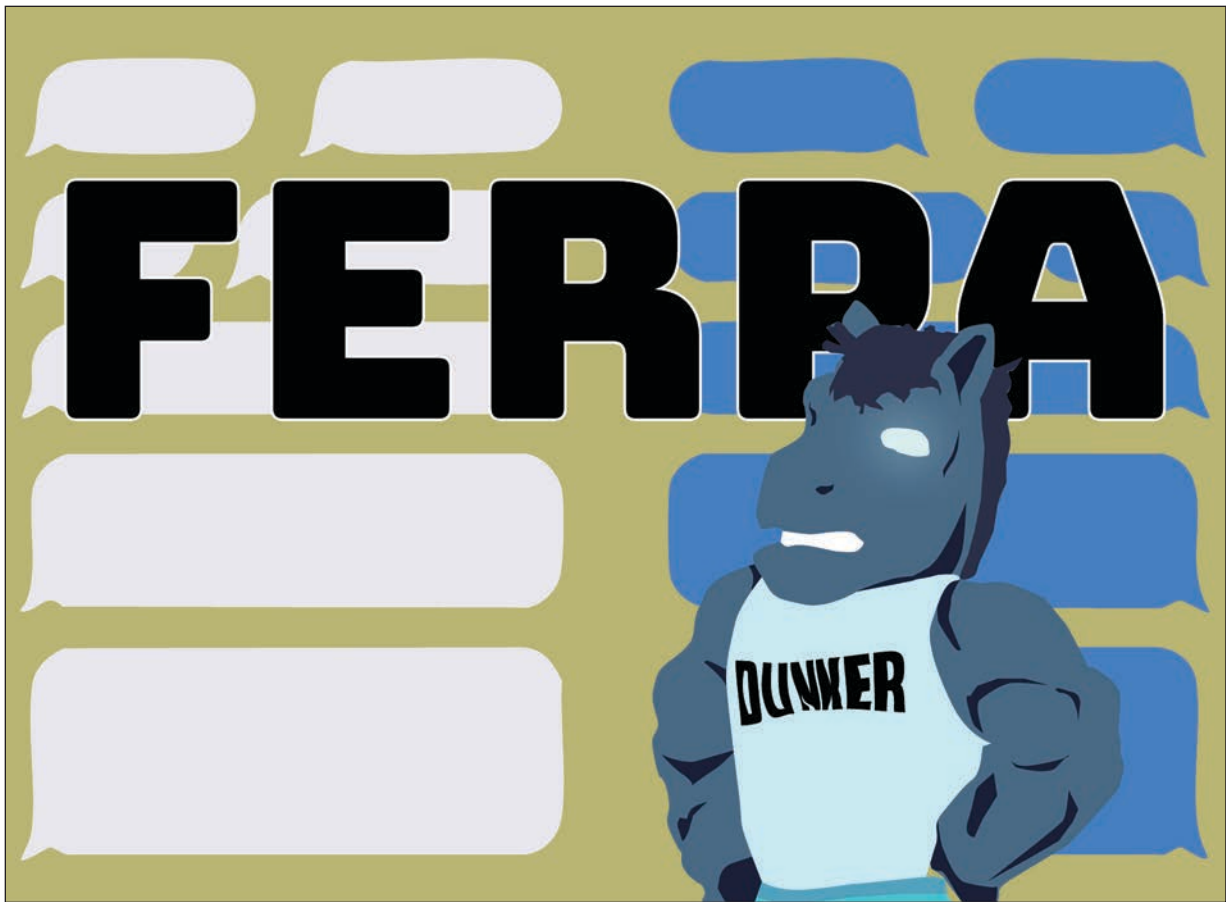
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MacKenzie Rogers/The News

Dunker chatbot has access to personal, confidential data

Shelby Bloomer
Staff Writer
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Campuswide, phones buzzed with a text notification – a message from an AI chatbot that referenced each recipient by name.

Murray State announced the launch of a new AI chatbot called “Dunker,” through a partnership with EdSights, a company offering a platform combining “conversational AI and retention research to increase persistence.”

The new service is designed to increase student retention by answering questions, connecting students with campus resources and identifying students who may need additional assistance.

The introductory message from Dunker said messages are not anonymous, and a University staff member may follow up with the student concerning any issues that are disclosed to the chatbot.

According to the company website, the platform “uses AI to check in with students every 7-10 days. This real-time approach helps proactively identify barriers and provides scalable, increasingly personalized support as the AI learns about each student’s unique needs.”

On Feb. 17, every Murray State student received the same text message, beginning with: “Hi (name), it’s Dunker from Murray State University!” As part of the University’s new contract with EdSights, each student is automatically opted in to the service.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act is a law protecting the privacy of college students. Thanks to EdSights’s status as a “school official,” as per the contractual agreement, the company has legal access to a student body’s personally identifiable information.

The Murray State contract refers to this information as “Confidential Student Information,” which

includes but is not limited to the student’s name, name(s) of the student’s family member(s), home address and any other information that a student may provide during conversations with the chatbot.

Patrick Hertz, the partnership director at EdSights, said the company implements measures to keep personal information out of the hands of third parties.

“We collect and process only the minimum student data necessary to provide our services and restrict access to authorized personnel under strict role-based access controls,” Hertz said. “EdSights remains under the direct control of each partner institution with respect to the use and maintenance of student and education records, and does not sell or rent student data to third parties.”

Hertz said the company has administrative and technical safeguards in place to prevent the unauthorized access or disclosure of student information. He said these safeguards include encryption, network security controls, access logging and regular monitoring.

“Students exercise their FERPA rights, including requests to access, amend or delete records through their institution, and EdSights supports institutions in fulfilling such requests in accordance with applicable law and contractual obligations,” Hertz said.

During the Murray State Board of Regents quarterly meeting on Feb. 27, President Ron Patterson said in the first week of the service’s launch, the chatbot received 2,000 messages from students requesting information about resources, cutting down on the workload of human staff.

He said Murray State is the third institution he has brought the service to.

Some students have shared their opinions with The Murray State News, displaying mixed reactions to the new service.

First round of provost search cost exceeds \$100K for travel, meals, adverts

Harper Spaulding
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Since Murray State began its provost search last October, it has spent \$137,922.51 on search, travel and interview expenses.

Since it was announced that former Murray State Provost Tim Todd would be stepping down effective Nov. 1, 2025, the University continues its search for his replacement.

On Sept. 22, 2025, President Ron Patterson signed a \$126,000 contract with executive search firm Greenwood Asher & Associates LLC. to manage the provost search through to June 30. The Florida-based search firm has helped complete provost searches for dozens of colleges, including the University of Kentucky.

In a document submitted to the Kentucky Legislative Research Commission, the University reported that the funds for this contract had been sourced from the state’s general fund. The contract is being paid off through a series of disbursements to the agency.

According to an email by Haley Stedelin, associate director of human resources, the University had paid \$65,334 toward the con-

tract as of Jan. 6.

As well as the contract with Greenwood Asher & Associates, the University took on a number of direct expenses relating to advertisements, travel and interviews of prospective candidates.

In total, the University spent \$2,372.46 on catering and meals with candidates and another \$7,956.05 for candidates’ travel and stay during the interview process. The University paid \$1,594 for candidate advertising in various job boards and publications. The advertising cost is also being reimbursed by state funds.

Since the first iteration of the provost search did not conclude with any candidate being hired, the University is moving forward with a second search. According to an email by GA&A Vice President of Executive Search Jeremy Duff, the agency expects to advertise less in future iterations of the search.

Read more on our website for recent provost coverage:



Provost Search	
Murray State	
1375 Chestnut St, Murray, KY 42071	
Greenwood Asher & Associates LLC.	\$126,000
Candidate Expenses	
Catering and meals	\$2,372.46
Travel and stay	\$7,956.05
Advertising	\$1,594
Total	\$137,922.51

Avery “Gingy” Poston/The News

Second round of candidates for provost speak at town hall

Harper Spaulding

Staff Writer

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Provost finalists gathered at Wrather Hall this week to make their pitch to be the next academic administrator for Murray State University.

This week, finalists Aimee Shouse, Brian Parr and Paul Twigg took questions and made their address to the Murray community for why they should be chosen for Murray State's next provost. On Monday, Shouse appeared in front of faculty and students to address her academic qualifications and plan for the University.

Shouse has worked in academic leadership roles since 1993 and currently serves as associate provost and vice president for curriculum and faculty affairs at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas. Shouse said her skills lie in building relations and managing interactions, something she said would suit this university more than it does her current role.

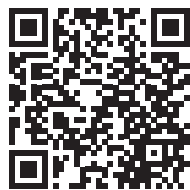
"Across the course of my career I just gained a lot of knowledge and a lot of experience from multiple institutions," Shouse said. "Which leads to a point where I think I would like

to make a bigger impact than I can as an associate provost."

After her introduction, Shouse took a question from faculty regarding deficiencies she had seen in Murray State's curriculum. Shouse responded that as an outsider she did not want to come into the University critiquing its curriculum and faculty without the context and experience to understand it. Shouse said she hopes to work with faculty to learn what can be done and get a lay of the land before she makes serious decisions.

On the role she wants to play for faculty at the University, Shouse expressed that her job would entail both advocacy for faculty ideas to academic affairs as well as defending academic affairs when necessary. Shouse said people know what's best in their roles and disciplines, but that all ideas have to be tempered by what's best for students.

Read more on our website:



SGA members pose for a photo in Frankfort

Photo provided by Kade Gambill

Student Government lobbies General Assembly over legislation in Frankfort

Baden Grubbs

Contributing Writer

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Executive members of Murray State's Student Government Association traveled to Frankfort recently, to participate in the Student Rally for Higher Education.

According to a Facebook post made by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, the event was organized by state presidents of university student

body organizations. Aaron Thompson, the CPE president, also attended.

Ali Khatib, SGA president, said that he and the executive members of SGA met with various legislators, CPE representatives and members of other student government groups across Kentucky, who he must meet with once a month.

In particular, they met with Rep. Mary-Beth Imes, R-Murray, Rep. JT Payne, R-Uniontown, Rep. Adam Moore, R-Lexington, Sen.

Jason Howell, R-Murray and Majority Leader Steven Rudy, R-Paducah.

Khatib said members of SGA spoke to legislators about House Bill 490, advising them to vote against it.

Read more on our website:



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This workshop and refreshments are offered at no cost, thanks to the generous support of the Murray State Philanthropy and Leadership Collective in collaboration with the MSU Center for Student Engagement and Success.

Through this workshop, students will be able to define their personal brand, communicate their professional identity, and much more!



MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY

Philanthropy and Leadership Collective

Entire Murray State workforce to enjoy Spring Break

University staff pleased with recent policy change to spring calendar

Shelby Bloomer

Staff Writer

sbloomer@murraystate.edu

Effective March, the entire week of spring break will be considered a holiday for all Murray State University employees. University President Ron Patterson made the announcement via email.

According to Section IV-D of the MSU Personnel Policies and Procedures Manual, the week of spring break is only considered a holiday for students and faculty on academic year contracts.

For the rest of the job force at Murray State, only the last three days of that week are recognized.

However, that policy changes this year.

According to the release, the decision was made "to bring this policy more in line with what is equitable for the entire University community."

However, the current, publicly avail-

able employee manual has not been updated to include this change in the holiday policy.

Cindy Clark, senior coordinator of circulation and Waterfield Library, spoke on the extended Spring Break.

"We are pretty excited about it," Clark said, "I've worked here for 34 years so this is the first year we've actually got the entire week and I'm very excited and very thankful."

"I think it's a good thing because in the past I've worked at Murray State and with just having a couple days off, we wanted the whole week off," said Lisa Winchester, a Sodexo cashier at Winslow Dining hall. "I think it's a good thing."

Reporter Baden Grubbs contributed to this story.



MacKenzie Rogers/The News

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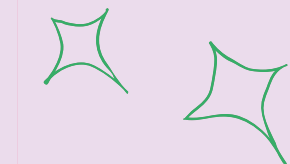
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2026

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New laws could extend KEES scholarship

Bills would create domestic violence registry, end child marriage

River Murt
News Editor
rmurt1@murraystate.edu

The Commonwealth of Kentucky is 58 days into its legislative session, with 43 to go.

Five bills have the opportunity to be passed through the House and Senate chambers before being signed into law by Gov. Andy Beshear — and potentially affecting Murray State students and western Kentuckians.

The following bills are in various stages of the legislative process.

The status of these bills and the language used in their respective documents can be found and viewed on the Kentucky.gov website for the Kentucky General Assembly, or through the bill-tracking website, Legiscan.

House Bill 787

House Bill 787, sponsored by Rep. Kimberly Holloway, R-Paducah, would institute a domestic violence registry in the Commonwealth.

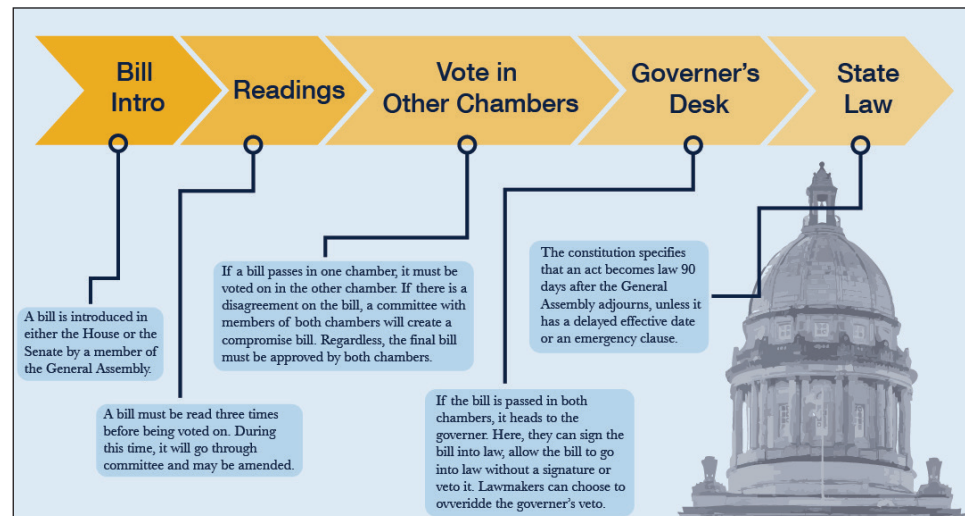
The parameters of this list would be similar to the sex offender registry. “Persistent offenders” would meet the criteria for registration if they are any of the following, as detailed in the bill’s current language.

- “Domestic violence offense” means a crime ... when the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim meets the definition of family member or member of an unmarried couple as defined in KRS 403.720;
- any person eighteen (18) years of age or older at the time of the offense, or any youthful offender as defined in KRS 15 600.020, who has been:
 1. Convicted of, pled guilty to, or entered an Alford plea to at least two (2) domestic violence offenses; or
 2. Placed on pretrial diversion pursuant to KRS 533.250 for at least two (2) domestic violence offenses until the diversionary period is successfully completed.

Offenders have the opportunity to be removed from the system if they meet certain requirements based on their specific convictions.

The passage of HB 787, while it stands only with the House Committee on Committees as of Feb. 26, would be the second instance for a registry of its kind in the United States, after Tennessee.

The Tennessee Legislature passed Tennessee Public Chapter 520, other-



Avery “Gingy” Poston/The News

wise known as Savannah’s law, earlier this year, and it is operated by the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. In Kentucky’s case, as it’s detailed in the current text, the registry is to be handled by the Justice and Public Safety Cabinet.

House Bill 769

Meanwhile, HB 769 would extend KEES scholarship eligibility from five to eight years for students after high school.

If HB 769 passes, graduating high school students would have consistent scholarship funding for 16 semesters of

their college career, rather than 10.

The bill would amend previous legislation, KRS. 164.7881 and 164.7884, to update the numeric language.

Read more on our website



Rodeo clown dances with bull

Kristopher Fister/The News

50th Annual Rodeo to start today

River Murt
News Editor
rmurt1@murraystate.edu

After being postponed because of an epidemic scare, the Murray State 50th Annual Rodeo will finally be underway this weekend.

The rodeo will be during March 5 - 7, with all events beginning at 7 p.m., ending at 11 p.m.

Coach Matt Papszycki, the rodeo coach for Murray State University, said in an interview with radio station WKDZ on Nov. 19, tickets previously purchased in the fall semester would be validated this weekend if patrons did not pursue a refund.

Papszycki spoke on the anticipation of the event that’s garnered in the last three months with the Murray State News.

“We’re beyond excited to get (the 50th Annual Rodeo) started this weekend,” Papszycki said. “We had to postpone to help stop the spread of a virus that became prevalent a day before our scheduled event. No remorse, since it died down pretty quickly.”

Read more on our website:



War in Iran spikes gas prices; leaves students concerned

River Murt
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The death toll of the escalating conflict between the United States, Israel, Iran and other actors in the Middle East, has reached over 1,000 since the conflict began on Feb. 28.

The price of gas in the United States is expected to spike due to the war with Iran. As of Feb. 25, AAA reported Calloway County’s average gas price to be about \$2.624 per gallon, Kentucky at about \$2.637 per gallon with the national average at \$2.975.

As of March 4, the average price of gas in Calloway County and Kentucky stand about \$2.874 per gallon, with the national average at \$3.198 per gallon.

According to the Associated Press, AAA spokeswoman Aixa Diaz said gas prices were already expected to rise during the summer, in accordance with additives in the “summer blend” of fuel that prevents gasoline from evaporating in the heat.

AP also reported the Dow Jones dropped during March 3.

“The Dow Jones Industrial Aver-

age dropped 403 points, or 0.8%, after plunging more than 1,200 points earlier in the morning,” AP said. “On (March 3), oil prices rose again and raised more alarms. The price for a barrel of Brent crude, the international standard, briefly leaped above \$84.”

Murray State students expressed their concern about another conflict in the Middle East, and how its going to affect them.

Hayden Thomas, a fire and safety sophomore, and someone who drives to Eddyville for work, is concerned for his budget.

“I work two jobs, and I have to pay for college, and I’m about to put down payment on a new car because my car is going out and I have rent to pay for,” Thomas said.

Read more on our website:



Back-to-back champs

The Racers closed out their season at The Bank with a win over the University of Evansville on Saturday, Feb. 28. This win capped off an undefeated home season for the first time since 2008-2009. As the outright regular

season champions, Murray State secured the number one seed in the Missouri Valley Conference tournament set for March 12-15.

Scan the QR code to view the full gallery and catch up on all the action on our site.

Photos by Kristopher Fister & Lindsey Hopper



What is the Dunker chatbot: Q&A with Jordan Garner

Gray Hawkins

Features Editor

hhawkins4@murraystate.edu

The Dunker AI chatbot was implemented by a commission on retention and persistence, formed shortly after Ron Patterson's presidency began. The commission is composed of University staff across the Office of Academic Affairs and the Office of Student Affairs. The program has been in development since November 2025.

So far, University officials have not directly sent students a detailed explanation of what this chatbot can do, the limits of what students can do with it or why University funding is going to this program instead of elsewhere on campus.

Jordan Garner, director for the Center of Student Engagement and Success, provided some clarity on the program's functionality, intended benefits to Murray State students and the University's operational goals.

Q: How does the chatbot work?

Garner: It's going to message students in two ways. It will be proactive, so it will send out regular messages throughout the semester checking in with students to see how they are liking their classes, how they're doing personally (or) socially. It will also be reactive, so students can text the chatbot 24/7 and get responses that help answer their questions or point them to resources and things like that.

It's SMS chat-based, so it will only communicate through text messaging with the students. It's personalized to Murray State University, so it will be knowledgeable about resources here at Murray State specifically (and) taking on the persona of Dunker.

Q: Does it operate on pre-programmed inputs or generative models?

Garner: It's more the first thing. When we say "AI," it's not like ChatGPT or Google Gemini, where it's surfing the web or creating its own personality. It relies on a scripted answer we have given it already. The knowledge base for the chatbot is information we have given it. It's not going to go off script and find information elsewhere. It's very self-contained in Murray State's realm here.

Q: What kind of questions can it answer?

Garner: Students can — with the responses to the check-ins the chatbot will be sending or just 24/7 random texting — ask questions like 'How can I get a hold of my academic adviser to register for next semester?' or 'Is there tutoring available for my chemistry class?' The chatbot will then point to those resources we have on campus if they are available. There is a certain level where maybe the chatbot is not necessarily equipped to answer, so then it would point to a human. That's where our office will come into play. We will have opportunities to follow up with students if we see that as a need, or if there is a need for immediate intervention from a human, there (are) alerts that will be sent out so we can get those quickly.

Q: How was the chatbot implemented?

Garner: The platform we are using is called EdSights. It's the "Retain" version, so it's focused on retention or helping students who are currently enrolled at Murray State University. It's also framework-driven. The framework coming from EdSights is focused on four key areas. Those are academic engagement, wellness, financial distress and engagement in general, which focuses on belonging and morale.

Q: Is retention the main goal?

Garner: That's the end goal from an operational university perspective. The first goal is helping students connect with the resources they need. In turn,

that leads to students being able to stay here at Murray State if that's what they need.

The goal is to really capture the students' voice from the students themselves. We have lots of data about students — their academic performance, their demographics (and) if faculty or staff raise flags or concerns for students — but we want to hear from the students first. If they have underlying issues or things they're struggling with and have questions, we want to have more accessibility for them to reach out to us or reach out to Dunker in this sense to connect with resources.

Q: What do you mean by 'capturing student voice'?

Garner: We'll be able to ideally gather data based on what the chatbot gives us. If a certain amount of students indicate they're struggling in math this semester, then we know that — well, that's a poor example, but — math is a hard class, so we need to focus on our efforts to help students succeed in math more.

That kind of captures the collective student voice in that way, but also, on an individual, personalized level with the student, they have more opportunities to share what they're struggling with or what they need here at Murray State through the chatbot.



Provided by Digital Media Services.

Jordan Garner

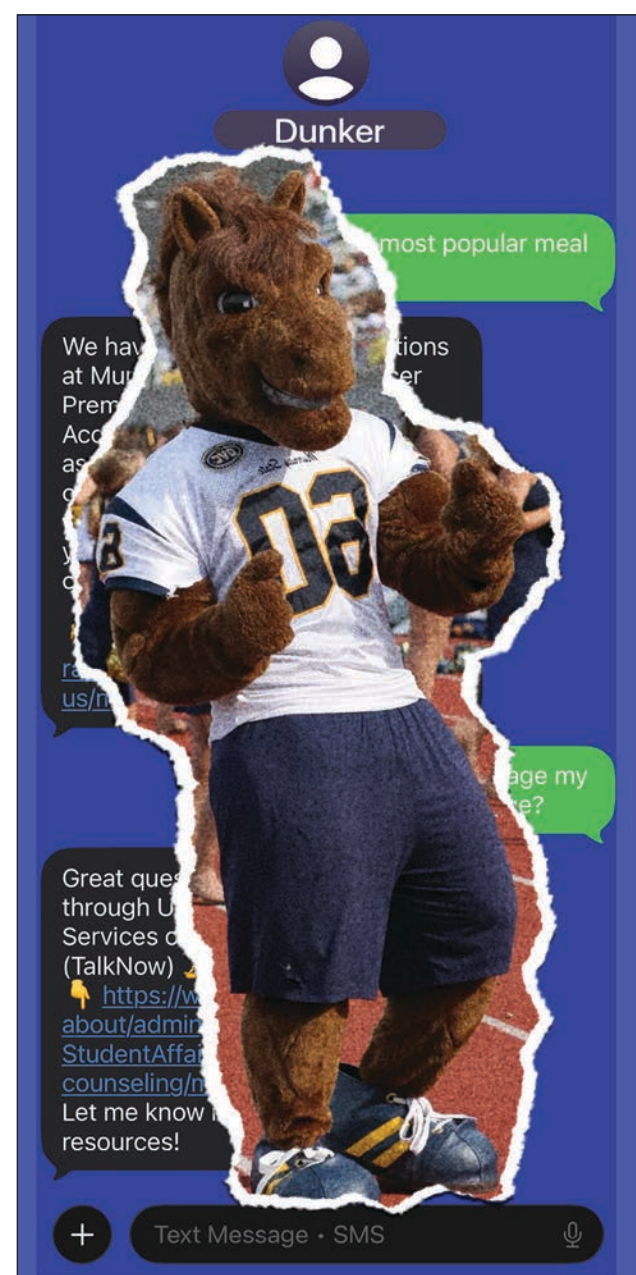
Q: Did the retention commission conduct any research or polling to see if Murray State students will engage with it?

Garner: EdSights has shared with us that at other institutions, they have over a 90% opt-in rate. Students do have the ability to opt out of texting with the EdSights chatbot if they wish to, but most institutions have shown that most students do opt in. Dr. Patterson, who was the first to bring EdSights to our attention here at Murray State, has had this product at his previous institutions he's been at and shared that it had made a significant impact in retention at those institutions.

Q: How will the chatbot react if a student tries to use it outside its intended purposes?

Garner: We're expecting in the beginning of the launch of the chatbot, students will probably be inclined to play around with it and test what the chatbot will know or react to certain things. I would caution students that if they were to trigger something to make the chatbot think there was an immediate concern, we will be taking action as a precaution to make sure students are safe. I would advise (students) to be careful with the language you use and the things you are messaging it if you are texting it.

Where our immediate intervention will come in, there are four different types of alerts. One of those is a dropout alert, which would indicate if a student may not be able to or may not want to stay in school. Another would be a mental health alert (if) a mental



Avery Poston/The News

health issue or concern was present. The third is Title IX, and (the) fourth is violence. If we felt like anyone was in danger — the student or anyone else on campus — those alerts would be triggered. Otherwise, I think the chatbot would kind of just disregard inappropriate misbehavior.

Q: What can the chatbot do that our preexisting resources can't?

Garner: It's available 24/7. If a student is studying late at night and has a question, they can text Dunker and get a quick answer, rather than if they send an email to an instructor or to our office, they may wait until the next day or next business day to get a response. Students may feel more comfortable texting Dunker than talking to their instructor, who maybe is a little bit more intimidating to go to with a concern.

They may feel more apt to share information or share they're not doing as well in certain classes with a chatbot who's not necessarily a real person who will judge them, compared to their adviser or a family member. At the same time, there may be some people who don't consider the chatbot as helpful, and they're more likely to talk to a real person like their adviser, family or friends. My goal is that some students will find it helpful and be more willing to share that information and be connected with resources they need than they otherwise wouldn't have found out about.

The chatbot is not to replace asking for help from your instructors, advisers or the student engagement and success staff. We are still here to help; the chatbot is just another resource.



MacKenzie Rogers/The News

EdSights chatbots spark varied reactions across the nation

Gray Hawkins

Features Editor
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Students from across the country received text messages from robots sanctioned by their university or college.

Some wore the familiar faces of established mascots, and others made their first introductions then and there. Some schools informed students about the incoming texts months in advance, and others gave about a week's notice.

Each of them was created by EdSights and said it was there to guide students through their academic journey.

The Murray State News analyzed news coverage and announcements from five other universities or colleges surrounding EdSights chatbots, finding mixed reactions and potential inconsistencies with how those chatbots were implemented compared to Murray State's.

Here's what administrators and students from across the country had to say about their own AI companions.

Chadron State College

Our new digital Dunker could be considered the spiritual successor to Elmo the Eagle of Chadron State College in Chadron, Nebraska, given how Murray State President Ron Patterson suggested the program because of its success at his former place of employment.

The college's website provides a brief introduction of the program and the phone number where enrolled students "may proactively text Elmo." The page informs students they can opt out of the program at any time by texting "STOP."

Austen Stephens, dean of student affairs at Chadron State College, clarified that students were automatically enrolled in the service with the option to opt out and said the intent was to

encourage students to start conversations with Elmo outside the established framework of check-in messages.

North Carolina A&T State

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, North Carolina, introduced its students to EdSight's recreation of Aggie the Bulldog in February 2025. North Carolina A&T became the first historically Black college or university to surpass 15,000 enrolled students in the fall of 2025.

North Carolina A&T's student newspaper, The A&T Register, published an article informing the university's student body about the new retention tool and sharing university officials' explanations of how and why they chose to bring EdSights to North Carolina A&T.

"By simply texting 844-759-1419, continuing students can opt in to an advanced system to receive important information throughout the school year," the article said. "The 24/7 text service can also answer any university-related questions and conduct feedback surveys with users."

Eckerd College

The approximately 1,900 students of Eckerd, a private liberal arts college in St. Petersburg, Florida, met their own AI chatbot on July 15 last year. According to Triton Publications, Eckerd's official student media organization, students were informed of the implementation several months prior, in April, and included in designing the AI's persona, Ecky the Snail.

Triton Publications said a survey they sent to Eckerd's student body yielded 84 responses, 79.8% of which felt negatively about the chatbot.

"The majority of respondents who chose to explain their reasoning behind their negative feelings cited environmental concerns as a chief complaint," the article said. "In addition

to environmental concerns, students have reported operational flaws with the chatbot. These complaints range from the bot failing to answer basic questions to the STOP function not working."

Triton Publications reported that the program had falsely flagged students' messages for EdSights' violence, Title IX, mental health crisis and dropout alerts since implementation.

In the article, Eckerd's vice president of student success and student success coordinator said the chatbot was a work in progress and could be the only way some students would comfortably reach out for help, despite student concerns and feedback.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in Lincoln, Nebraska, the EdSights chatbot program took the form of an anthropomorphic ear of corn named Cornelius. Cornelius made its debut in early November 2025. An article by The Daily Nebraskan, the university's independent student publication, was published on Nov. 12, 2025 and said 94% of automatically signed-up students were still "opted in" and clarified that students would have to manually opt out to end communication.

The article quoted University of Nebraska-Lincoln students who had positive and negative impressions of the chatbot, including a student who was "dumbfounded by its inability to even answer simple, campus-related questions" and felt concerned that questions better directed towards advisers were being delegated to "a bot who can't answer them half the time."

In addition to student reactions, The Daily Nebraskan reported that an unidentified donor was responsible for the implementation.

"The chatbot created by EdSights is

funded through a \$1 million donation from a private foundation, which (the senior associate vice chancellor and dean of undergraduate education) declined to identify, for all of the University of Nebraska system's undergraduate students in Lincoln, Kearney and Omaha," the article said.

University of Missouri

University of Missouri students in Columbia, Missouri, met Roary, an original personality independent from school mascot Truman the Tiger, on Jan. 22, 2025.

The university's student news outlet, The Maneater, published an opinion column three weeks later, on Feb. 13, voicing disappointment with the program's functionality and questioning university officials' explanation of how it works.

A particular complaint in the column said the university's deputy AIDE coordinator of the Missouri Students Association described Roary as a "middle man and not ... an AI robot," while the chatbot referred to itself as an "AI tool" in its introductory text.

"A lack of consistent wording makes it unclear if those who created Roary even know what its purpose is supposed to be," the article said.

The Maneater's column explained difficulties getting the chatbot to understand questions about the University of Missouri's campus and student life, including "When is spring break?"

"If MU wants students to start using Roary regularly, those behind the chatbot should further clarify its goals for the chatbot," the article said. "Until then, Roary's limited usefulness leaves much to be desired."

These are just a few of the over 250 schools using EdSights, and the same concerns and justifications from these institutions are now echoed, some three months to a year later, here at Murray State.

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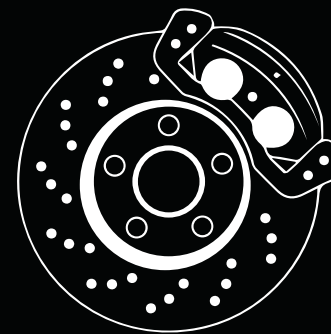
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Franklin students collectively adopt Lottie the sewer cat

Ainsley Beatty

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Amidst the setting sun and cool winter breeze of an early December evening, a small figure darted its way under cars and skirted along sidewalk curbs. She moved so quickly — a flash of gray fur and olive eyes through the dusk then gone.

She never showed her face for long or let anyone come too close, but she captured students' attention — and their hearts — instantly.

Near the end of the fall 2025 semester, residents of Franklin Residential College discovered a kitten wandering outside their dorm. The tiny animal, seemingly living in the curb inlet in front of Franklin, began exploring the front lawn and parking lot.

As the semester drew to a close, residents didn't get to see much of her as finals wrapped up and everyone headed home for winter break.

No one expected to find the kitten still lurking around in January, but she seemed to be staying for good. Franklin residents began to leave food and water dishes out for her.

Toward the end of January, with the big snowstorm moving in, everyone was concerned for her safety. An unknown student placed a makeshift crate by the sewer entrance before the storm. The kitten's new home consisted of a plastic tub with a small opening cut out of the front leading into a nest of blankets. The outside of the tub read "Lot Goblin," which was shortened to "Lottie" — and the name has stuck.

Lottie has done nothing but flourish according to students who have seen her. She has grown from a thin stray to a healthy-looking, well-fed street cat. Residents leave her food consistently, and she is becoming less and less skittish around people.

Where she once only ventured along the edge of the sidewalk and back to the storm drain, Lottie now roams the area freely — not only up and down the sidewalks and grass around Franklin, but also through the parking lot between Franklin and Hart Residential College.

Lottie has grown much more comfortable around people, and while she doesn't want to be touched, she will walk up to people and can often be seen tailing behind them.

Ask any Franklin resident, and they will tell you about the overwhelming love and care for Lottie from the community. Sidney Lasley, a sophomore marketing and entrepreneurship major, has had a few opportunities to feed Lottie herself.

"I was walking back to Franklin and saw her sunbathing by a car," Lasley said. "I gave her a piece of tuna from my sushi. Whenever I came back from running errands, she had finished the tuna and was still just sunbathing."

Lasley said that while she is allergic to cats, she has loved being able to help care for one indirectly alongside other residents.

"I've honestly been really touched by how the whole Franklin community has come together to make her shelter and keep her fed in a way where she is safe and comfortable," she said. "(Watching) her become more comfortable around people has been so sweet."



Owen Hansen/The News

Lottie wanders the front yard of Franklin and naps in the parking lot.



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EDITORIAL: New Dunker AI raises concerns about use of University finances

The News Editorial Board
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Murray State’s new Dunker AI chatbot launched on Feb. 17, receiving a mixed reception from the student body. A 24/7 resource for students to contact, the University views the Dunker chatbot as a promising investment. Here at The News, we view this chatbot differently — as a waste of University resources.

The Dunker AI chatbot is a partnership with EdSights. The company creates AI chatbots for universities, themed after the school’s mascot, that reach out to students via text message. Here at Murray State, we have Dunker to answer our questions and redirect us to University resources.

Founded by two first-generation college students, EdSights helps universities with retention by giving students an easier way to get help for problems that could cause them to drop out.

Students having easy access to assistance is, undeniably, a good thing. However, using AI for this raises several issues. For one, we view the further implementation of AI into our education as problematic. While EdSights does not use GenAI in the same way as something like ChatGPT, it still raises similar concerns.

Wanting students to turn to AI as their first resource for help can be more detrimental to student success than helpful. While having an AI to contact seems beneficial for students with conditions such as anxiety, the truth is that it cannot solve everything. Several issues, such as those involving a professor, require face-to-face communication. Asking an AI for help will

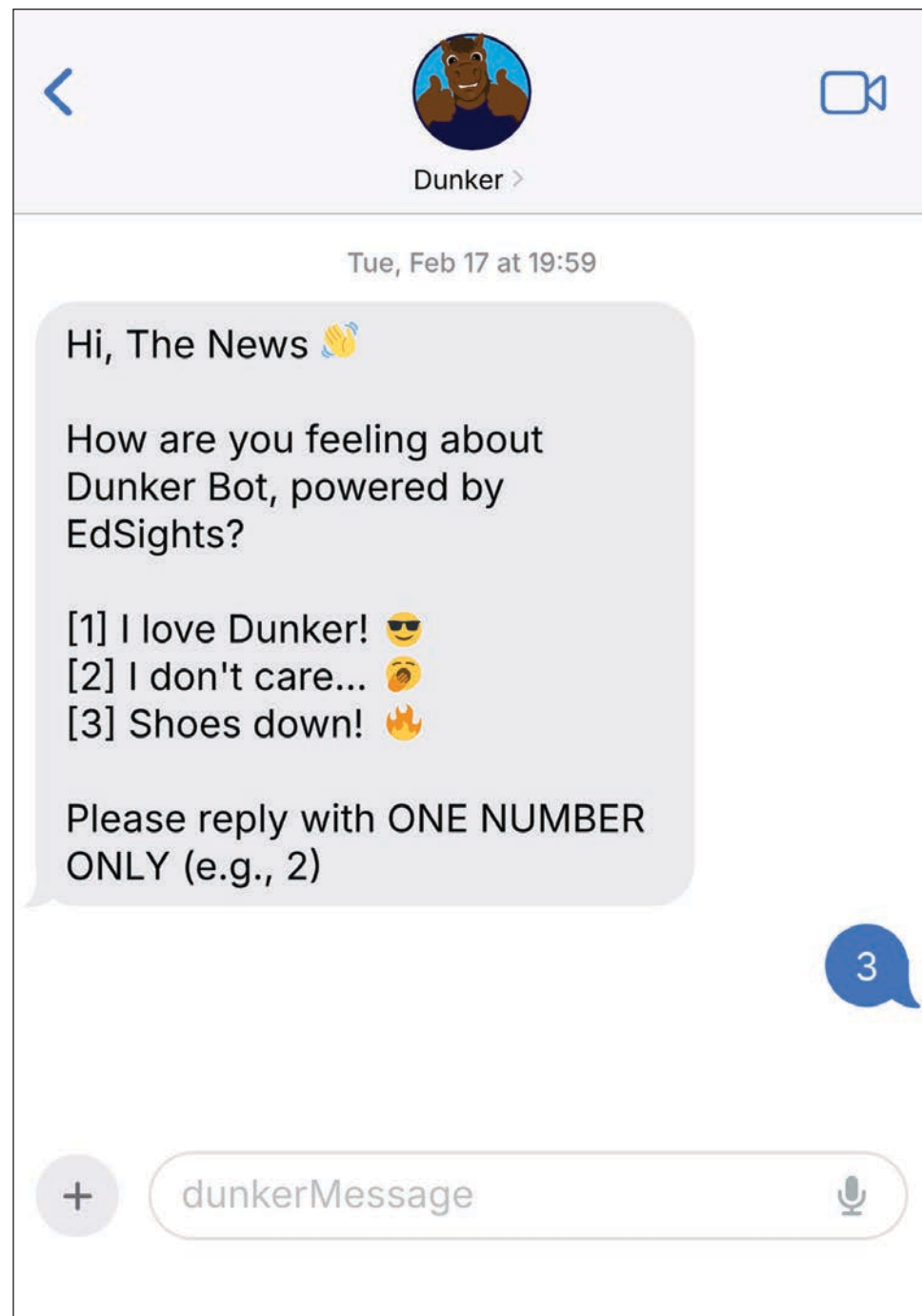
lead to students struggling to reach out to others and advocate for themselves.

The average four-year university, like Murray State, loses about \$21,000 per student dropout. Naturally, student retention is important to universities, which makes EdSights’s pitch alluring. EdSights promises a 7% increase in student retention from the use of their program. While that stat checks out, we cannot help but feel that EdSights’s chatbot was a non-optimal investment.

EdSights gives the University easier access to student opinions, but it’s an overly expensive way to do so. According to the contract agreement between EdSights and Murray State University, the University is paying \$75,600 for its first year with Dunker AI. Following this first year, the cost will rise to a staggering \$94,500. This is an extraordinary amount of money for a simple chatbot.

There are several less expensive alternatives, such as open-ended surveys, that the University could use instead of EdSights. If the University wants to listen to us, we are more than willing to talk.

As students, we know that complaints amongst the student body are not kept quiet, so we find it hard to believe that the University does not know that there are several more pressing issues on campus that we want to see solved. Parking all across campus is an unimaginable disaster, buildings such as Wilson Hall and the Business Building are practically falling apart and most of the campus’s dining options are vastly unpopular amongst students. Investing more money into solving these problems would likely



Owen Hansen/The News

cause a higher increase in student retention than any AI could.

With a nearly \$100,000 price tag, EdSights undeniably loses its luster. We believe that this money would be much better spent elsewhere if student

retention is the goal. If the University claims that it wants to listen, it should have known a chatbot is a pitiful attempt to keep us around in comparison to fixing the actual problems on campus.

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- March 7 - Softball vs. UNI (1 p.m.)
- March 10 - Baseball vs. Kentucky State (3 p.m.)
- March 13 - Softball vs. Valparaiso (1 & 3:30 p.m.)
- March 14 - Softball vs. Valparaiso (1 p.m.)
- March 17 - Baseball vs. Middle Tennessee
- Softball vs. Eastern Illinois (3 p.m.)
- March 20 - Track: Margaret Simmons Invitational
- Baseball vs. Valparaiso (3 p.m.)
- March 21 - Track: Margaret Simmons Invitational
- Baseball vs. Valparaiso (2 p.m.)
- March 22 - Baseball vs. Valparaiso (1 p.m.)
- March 25 - Softball vs. Austin Peay (3 p.m.)
- March 28 - Tennis vs. Drake (12 p.m.)
- March 29 - Tennis vs. UNI (12 p.m.)
- April 2 - Baseball vs. Belmont (5 p.m.)



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Racers Athletics provides update

Yantko discusses contract extension, Learfield partnership, CFSB upgrades in News interview

Zach Simmons

Editor-in-Chief

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Crossover season is in full swing (pun intended) for athletic programs across the country, and Murray State is no exception.

Murray State men's basketball begins their run for a Missouri Valley Conference championship on March 6 at Arch Madness, the women's basketball team went back-to-back as regular season champs of the MVC, baseball is off to a hot start right where they left off after last summer's special run to the Men's College World Series and softball is gearing up for conference play.

Nico Yantko, director of athletics, said they've already accomplished so much since the calendar turned to 2026.

"When you take a step back and look at what we've been able to accomplish so far, we have two championships already," Yantko said. "Men's basketball got a first-round bye and a 20-win season with a first-year head coach. Men's basketball, women's basketball and baseball were all ranked in the mid-major top-25 of their respective polls."

Yantko shared his appreciation for the investors, Board of Regents and University President Ron Patterson for being able to properly align with the goals of the athletic department as a whole.

"We have so many great things going on and iron in the fire and the programs are really starting on this new trajectory," Yantko said. "We're never satisfied. We're going to be competitive in everything we do, we're going to punch above our weight class, we're going to find ways to compete with other institutions and leagues and I think we're on the right path."

On Feb. 27, ESPN's Pete Thamel announced on social media that Yantko had received a five-year contract extension that would keep him as the athletic director at Murray State until 2031.

"The compliment really goes to Dr. Patterson for his vision for athletics and his conviction in our plan and the Board (of Regents) belief in that plan," Yantko said. "I believe that institutions that are most aligned in their approach to position athletics departments in this new era will have the most success. I'm grateful for both of those groups."

On Dec. 22, 2025, Murray State Athletics announced a 10-year partnership with Learfield, a media and technology company. The contract began on Jan. 1. Yantko said this partnership would help "maximize our brand and maximize our revenue generation."

"Learfield is the industry leader in the multimedia rights space," Yantko said. "That's sponsorships, television, radio and all of those mediums. This is a group that's never really been interested in working with Murray State, so that shows you the trajectory we're on and the investment that they see here."

Yantko noted that four positions will be hired in partnership with Learfield, two of which have already been filled. The first spot filled was the director of



Ron Patterson, Rechelle Turner and Nico Yantko celebrate after the women's basketball team won their second straight regular season title. Kristopher Fister/The News

broadcasting, which Dave Winder will fill. Winder is the longtime sports information director at Murray State and was a Murray State baseball player from 1983-87 under legendary coach Johnny Reagan.

"I think one of Dave's special traits is that he's a storyteller," Yantko said. "I'm really excited for Dave to narrate not only our past, but our future."

Winder's role will be to "work closely with Learfield to elevate Murray State's live game broadcasts and storytelling across radio and digital platforms," according to a Feb. 4 press release.

The other position was general manager of Murray State Sports Properties. That spot will be filled by Sal Miliotto. Miliotto served as the manager of business developments for Omaha Sports Properties, the Learfield team affiliated with the University of Nebraska Omaha.

"We are thrilled to have Sal join Racer Nation as general manager of our new Learfield property," Yantko said in a Jan. 26 press release. "His thorough approach to revenue generation will create new opportunities for the department and our sponsors. He will be a tremendous asset for us as we finish building out this team."

Learfield will also help them with NIL and licensing rights, as well as bringing brands to the table with Murray State that might not have been thought about before, Yantko said.

"This is a really good piece for us to continue to elevate and it's one of the more lucrative deals in the mid-major space," Yantko said.

Conference championship time

The annual Missouri Valley Conference Men's Basketball Championship Tournament begins on March 5, and Murray State locked in the fourth seed on March 1. That seed is their highest since joining the MVC and Yantko credits the work of first-year head coach Ryan Miller.

"I'm ecstatic for coach Miller," Yantko said. "No one can second guess his enthusiasm, professionalism and his ability to just outwork people. That's what we do here at Murray State. We're blue collar, but we're going to continue to have high-level expectations here across the board. We've checked a lot of boxes we've never seen or gotten close to before."

Miller led the men's basketball team to their first 20-win season and their highest seed in Arch Madness since joining the MVC.

For the first time in women's basketball program history, the team has won back-to-back regular season championships. Despite hitting some turbulence

in the first few seasons of MVC play, Yantko is thrilled by what head coach Rechelle Turner has done with the team.

"She has been able to reposition the program, leverage the resources at her disposal and just outwork everyone," Yantko said. "I love Rechelle's passion and enthusiasm. She's a grinder and her players love her."

Upgrades coming to athletic facilities

It's been known and announced that the CFSB Center would be undergoing renovations at the conclusion of this year and Yantko made it clear that everything was still on track.

"On March 9, demo will begin at the CFSB Center," Yantko said. "This will be the largest project in athletics history, and as it should be. It's the crown jewel of our sports complex. It's the largest venue in our campus footprint and region, and we continue to expect to serve our region."

The renovations will include brand-new lower bowl seating, retractable student section seating, which will allow for other events like commencement and other things, a "courtside club," loge boxes around the concourse and "new, creative and modern concepts and courtside seating."

If you came to a men's or women's basketball game and entered from the lower ticket office, you may have noticed some renderings of Roy Stewart Stadium with some potential upgrades. Yantko noted that they want the facilities to reflect "the neighborhood we live in", which is the MVC. With all of the great changes happening at the CFSB Center and Reagan Field, Yantko knew it was due time for Stewart Stadium to get some love, too.

"We're going to completely renovate the track, which will be the first time it's been done, where we'll take the track all the way down to its base level and come back with a nice blue and gold track," Yantko said. "We're also going to put in what I think is a really unique asset for us, which will mimic Churchill Downs when you look at the grandstand side that faces a very large videoboard on the opposite end."

Yantko said they will be redoing the entire first floor of Stewart Stadium due to it being an "archaic space" with no branding.

Yantko thanked the fans and the University as a whole at the end of the interview.

"Ultimately, the thanks goes to our fans," Yantko said. "Racer Nation continues to propel and fuel our race towards excellence. I can't thank the University enough for their belief in our plan, and I promise you, we say it all the time, but the best is yet to come."



Graphic courtesy of the Missouri Valley Conference

Looking ahead to Arch Madness 2026

Zach Simmons
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Arch Madness is upon us. The second-oldest conference in Division I is hosting its 50th conference championship tournament and 35th in St. Louis. Eleven teams will be vying for the Missouri Valley Conference's automatic bid to the NCAA tournament. It's time to take a look at what this year's tournament looks like and see what each team brings to the table.

First and Second Round matchups

Thursday Schedule:

Game 1: No. 8 Southern Illinois vs. No. 9 Drake (3:30 p.m.)

Game 2: No. 7 Valparaiso vs. No. 10 Indiana State (*6 p.m.)

Game 3: No. 6 Northern Iowa vs. No. 11 Evansville (*8:30 p.m.)

Friday Schedule:

Game 1: No. 1 Belmont vs. 8/9 Winner (noon)

Game 2: No. 4 Murray State vs. No. 5 Illinois-Chicago (*2:30 p.m.)

Game 3: No. 2 Bradley vs. 7/10 Winner (6 p.m.)

Game 4: No. 3 Illinois State vs. 6/11 Winner (*8:30 p.m.)

*Approximate game times

Belmont

The Bruins are the No. 1 overall seed in Arch Madness and are fresh off winning the MVC regular season title. They are led by graduate guard Tyler Lundblade. Lundblade averages 15.8 points per game and is ranked second in the nation in three-pointers made this season with 112. He is this year's winner of the Larry Bird Player of the Year trophy, which was announced on March 4. Outside of Lundblade, Belmont has redshirt sophomores who are helping lead them into St. Louis. Forwards Sam Orme and Drew

Scharnowski are second and third in scoring for the Bruins, respectively. They are the top two rebounders on the team, with Scharnowski averaging six a game and Orme averaging 5.1. Scharnowski was named to the All-MVC first team and Orme to the All-MVC second team. MVC Coach of the Year Casey Alexander has a deep squad that looks to capture their first MVC championship and get back to the NCAA tournament for the first time since 2019, when they were in the Ohio Valley Conference.

Bradley

Head coach Brian Wardle has coached his seventh 20-win team, the most in program history. It's also his fourth straight 20-win season. To say Bradley isn't a favorite to make it to championship Sunday is crazy. Some would say that this is the most physical team in the tournament, and in a tournament where all the games are more physical than any during the regular season, that could play to Bradley's favor. Sophomore guard Jaquan Johnson leads the team in scoring, averaging 17.4 points per game, which is 4.8 points per game more than the second leading scorer on the team. His 2.6 steals per game is the highest in the conference and good for sixth in the nation. Johnson is nicknamed "Bully" for the way he gets to the rim, absorbs contact and finishes at the basket. His 5'11", 195-pound frame is not one you want to be in front of if he gets downhill off of a flat ball screen. Johnson was named as the team captain for the MVC's most improved team on March 3, and played his way onto the All-MVC first team and All-MVC defensive team. Graduate guard Alex Huibregtse is the second on the team in scoring (12.6 PPG) after transferring to Peoria after spending 2020-2025 at Wright State. He was named to the All-MVC third team and All-Newcomer team. And you can't talk about Bradley without mentioning their 7'1" paint presence, Ahmet Jonovic. While not a focal point of the offense, he leads the team in rebounds (5.4) and field goal percentage (52.5%).

Illinois State

In a preseason poll by the professional and student media members of the MVC schools, Illinois State was picked to win the conference. The team that returned the most players in the conference from a season ago beat Belmont in the final game of the regular season. Their junior dynamic duo of Chase Walker and Johnny Kinziger has been the talk of the conference, despite finishing third. Walker leads the team in points and rebounds, averaging 13.6 points and 5.3 rebounds per game. Walker was named preseason Player of the Year in The Valley and found his way to the All-MVC first team. Kinziger was second on the team in scoring (11.3 PPG) and led the Redbirds with 3.2 assists per game. His best scoring night this season came against Valpo when he dropped 21, but it feels like he's due for a big game in St. Louis. The Redbirds have had high expectations all season long. Can they live up to them in the tournament?



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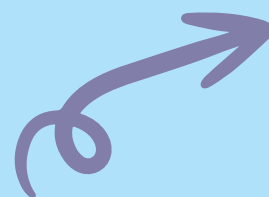


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