Effectiveness, Advantages, and Applications of SMS in Higher Education

Introduction

In the world of marketing and engagement, text messages reign supreme. Text messages have a 98% open rate, a 45% response rate, and 90% of texts are opened within 3 minutes of delivery (Tocci, 2021). To put these numbers in perspective, only 25% of emails are opened, and less than 7% of emails receive a reply (Campaign Monitor, 2019). This boils down to text messages having an "8x higher engagement rate than email" (Abele, 2020). Despite the strengths of text messaging as a communication tool, and research indicating that text messaging is the preferred form of communication among the 18-25 demographic, the majority of higher education institutions still rely on email as their primary form of communication with students (Wesley & Dunlap, 2020). However, in light of the recent downward trends in enrollment and retention caused by the pandemic, institutions are hungry for innovative and effective means of connecting with their students and keeping them on track. The schools that have made the pivot to incorporate more text messaging programs on their campus have seen significant increases in student engagement, enrollment, retention, and success (Castleman & Meyer, 2020; Castleman & Page, 2014; Naismith, 2007; Rios et al., 2018).

The potential for text messaging programs as a means of increasing student engagement and facilitating student support in higher education warrants further investigation. The goal of this research brief is to explore the effectiveness of text messaging programs in higher education, the unique advantages of this medium, and its potential applications in higher education.

Why Texting Works: Distinct Features & Advantages

The success of text messaging as a form of communication in higher education is often attributed to two primary factors: the medium's features and its relevance among college students.

Accessibility, Convenience, and Customization Features

Text messaging services on college campuses possess several unique advantages and capabilities in comparison to other mediums. Fundamentally, text messages are highly accessible and convenient for students as a form of communication. The ECAR 2018 Report on Undergraduate Students and Information Technology indicates that 95% of college students have

access to a smart phone, making mobile phones the most widely accessible electronic device among college students (Galanek et al., 2018). SMS messaging does not require an internet connection and is a "permanent fixture on everyone's phone," which saves students the extra step of having to download an application to utilize their school's messaging service (Deshpande, 2017).

The high open rates associated with text messages can also be attributed to their delivery method; "texts have the unique advantage that they are accompanied by alert notifications by default, so each message captures students' attention, at least for a moment in time" (Castleman & Meyer, 2020). Campaign Monitor (2021) reports that the average college student can receive up to twenty emails per day, which makes it easy for emails from colleges to get lost in the shuffle. Text messages can cut through the noise in a student's day to day media consumption, which is invaluable when the message contains information critical for student success.

Additionally, text messaging services outperform other platforms with their unique features and customization options. Texting platforms allow schools to segment their contact lists into different groups, ensuring that relevant messages reach the correct audience. "Engineering students don't want to receive psychology department updates, and alumni shouldn't be bothered with new student orientation schedules…the segmentation features increase student satisfaction" (Wright, 2021). While segmentation is possible via email, the segmentation process is streamlined by texting platforms by using the keyword feature. "A keyword is a word or phrase members of the student body can text to your number to sign up for information on a particular topic. For example, if the student is looking for more information on financial aid, you could create the keyword 'FINANCE'. When a student texts the word 'FINANCE' it sends them links to relevant information on how to apply for financial aid at your university" (Dodd, 2021). The keyword feature not only makes segmentation easy, but it gives students the freedom to customize or update the content they receive from their school at any time. A student's needs or interests can change rapidly throughout the course of their education journey; keyword functions allow the kinds of messaging they receive to grow and change with them just by sending a simple text. When you add automated responses and chatbot features into the mix, which can address student questions in real-time, text messaging services have the potential to provide unmatched support for students.

The Medium is the Message: Texting as a form of Connection

Castleman & Meyer, pioneer researchers into the applications of text messaging in higher education, posit that much of text messaging's success on college campuses has less to do with the medium's capabilities and more to do with the medium's relevance among its audience of recipients. "While text messaging offers several advantages, the success of these campaigns is likely more a function of identifying communication channels that young people are engaging with on a regular basis" (Castleman & Meyer, 2020).

77% of college students indicate that they'd prefer to receive information from colleges via text message (Verity, 2022). College students report being more comfortable communicating via text message than any other communication medium, which makes reaching out for help or information via text feel less intimidating (Wright, 2021). The transition from high school to college is a major culture shock, particularly for students who are struggling to develop independent learning skills and self-advocacy skills. Navigating various communication channels to access campus resources is a difficult process to master, which may explain why "many students lack confidence in their ability to deal with the organizational structures" at their college or university (Wright, 2021). By communicating with college students via a platform with which they are familiar and comfortable, colleges can aid this transition and help students feel more connected to their campus. Garner et al. (2002) suggests text messaging can help "promote involvement in a community of learners, thus encouraging the development of independent learners and reducing feelings of isolation through promoting community" (Garner et al., 2002; Naismith, 2007;). Institutions may even consider the implementation of a text messaging service as a means of increasing transparency and abolishing the "hidden curriculum" that leaves many first-generation students feeling lost and isolated. Text messaging is an inclusive medium that allows colleges to communicate with students on their own terms while still helping them integrate into the campus community.

Message Impacts: 10 Case Studies on the use of SMS in Higher Education

The following section highlights the results of several case studies and pilot programs that utilized text messaging to support students.

South Arkansas Community College: Recruitment Texts Boost Enrollment Numbers. In 2020 SACC launched a text message recruitment campaign that resulted in greater

response rates, greater recruitment rates, and better student engagement overall (Simple Texting LLC, 2020).

North Carolina State University: Orientation Texting Hotline Aids First Year Experience. NCSU developed a "text hotline" for incoming freshman during orientation that received over 6,000 messages in the first week from the 700 students that opted-in. Positive student feedback prompted NCSU to launch a "semester long texting hotline to help connect students to various services and resources on campus" (Simple Texting LLC., 2020).

Georgia State University: Texting Chatbot Revolutionizes Student Support Services. In 2015 GSU launched "Pounce," an automated chatbot texting service capable of sending reminders and instantly answer students' questions. Incoming freshman who used pounce had "significantly higher completion rates of key enrollment steps" that those who were not subscribed to the service (Mainstay Engagement, 2022).

West Virginia: Statewide Texting Initiative Boosts Matriculation Rates. The West Virginia Higher Education Commission boosted matriculation rates among low income and first-generation high school students through a statewide text message college advising program. The program resulted in college enrollment increases in three of the four school districts, and "students who received the texts attempted and completed more credits than their non-treated peers and were more likely to remain enrolled in college throughout their first year" (Castleman & Meyer, 2020).

UCLA: Text Message Reminders Boost Financial Aid Applications and Rewards. In March of 2018 UCLA implemented a mass texting service designed to help students apply for financial aid. "Participating students had higher financial aid awards on average and reported greater interest in information on financial aid components" (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2019).

University of Texas at Austin: Texting Campaign Promotes Student Health and Wellness. UTA used a mass text-messaging program to encourage students to "engage in positive health behaviors" and provide them with information about health resources (Glowacki et al., 2018). 61% of students enrolled in the program reported that participating helped "increase their awareness regarding their health" (Glowacki et al., 2018).

University of Virginia: Text Advising Program Aims to Reduce the "Stop-out" Trend. The Texas Higher Education Foundation is currently using a mass texting program at the University of Virginia to reduce "stop-outs," or students with a substantial number of credits

who withdraw before completing their degree. Positive indicators in early data collection have prompted them to expand the program to "Dallas County Community College District, El Paso Community College, the Houston Community College System, and Texas State University" (Texas Higher Education Foundation, 2018).

National Texting Campaign: College Advising Program for Low Income Students. 30,000 high school seniors received regularly scheduled text messages that "offered a combination of information, assistance, nudges, and emotional support" throughout the college application process (Arnold et al., 2020). High levels of student satisfaction may suggest that in comparison to traditional outreach programs, "text messaging is best suited to providing advising on financial aid and other topics requiring specific information and concrete tasks" (Arnold et al., 2020).

Adult Education Program Reduced Dropouts by 36% After Texting Students. Adult education students in the UK were sent weekly text messages aimed to provide words of encouragement, deadline reminders, and helpful studying tips. This program resulted in a 36% reduction in dropout rates among the student population, suggesting that "gentle nudging" throughout the semester via text messages can positively impact a student's perseverance throughout the semester (Chande et al., 2015).

California Community Colleges Create Crisis Text-line to Support Mental Health. First launched in 2017, this program connects struggling students with trained counselors through a confidential texting hotline available 24 hours a day. The program allows students to opt-in by texting the keyword "COURAGE." In its first year the program averaged over 400 conversations per month (Crisis Text Line, 2017).

Best Practices: Strategies for Texting Students

As demonstrated by the research highlights, expanding the use of text messaging on college campuses has the potential to revolutionize communication with students and increase the accessibility of resources and support. However, texting initiatives with poor implementation practices can easily fall short of their intended results and exacerbate existing communication issues. The following best practices for implementing text messaging programs in higher education are designed to promote engagement and student satisfaction.

Segmentation

The efficacy of a texting program hinges on its ability to tailor and target messages to fit the needs of individual students. Texting programs in which everyone in the subscriber pool receives the same messages tend to have high opt-out rates and low student approval ratings (Glowacki et al., 2018). While some messages are appropriate to send to all subscribers, such as campus safety alerts or registration deadlines, less universal and less vital programming should be optional for students. "Access to someone's SMS inbox is a privilege. That means proper segmentation," or giving your students the ability to choose which kinds of messages they receive is "key to earning and keeping student trust, which can be easily lost if abused" (Wright, 2021).

Institutions can provide students with screening assessments upon enrollment that allow them to indicate which kinds of topics/services they perceive as relevant to them. Messages can also be segmented by student characteristics, like a student's major or class standing. The majority of text messaging programs track opt-out rates, which can allow your institution to monitor which kinds of messages trigger the greatest number of opt-outs among students. For example, if high op-out rates are recorded on a day in which a message about scholarship opportunities was sent out to all subscribers, you might want to consider adding "scholarship opportunities" to your list of "opt-in only" message topics. As tempting as it is to take full advantage of texting's high open rates, institutions should prioritize student satisfaction by implementing a segmentation system that allows students opt in and out of various programming.

Frequency & Scheduling

Industry experts from Simple Texting LLC (2022) and Marketing Innovations (2021) recommend sending about two to six texts per month. The goal is to provide helpful nudges without overloading your students. "No one wants a daily text message. SMS is a personal communication channel that should be respected," and excessive communication will cause subscribers to opt-out (Marketing Innovations, 2021). Numerous case studies have demonstrated the positive impact of strategically timing texts to correspond with important deadlines at key points in the semester (Castleman & Page, 2015; Chande et al., 2015; Rios et al., 2018). SMS messages have greater success rates than other modes of communication when it comes to prompting immediate action among students, so synchronizing your text messages with required

action is key to helping students reach important milestones throughout the semester (Castleman & Meyer, 2020).

In terms of timing, it's a common courtesy to only send text messages during normal hours (students don't take kindly to being woken up by a text message). Most text messaging service providers allow institutions to track and timestamp student engagement and click-through-rates, which should allow you to identify engagement trends among your student population and pinpoint the ideal time/day to text students. However, one of the unique benefits of utilizing a text messaging service is the ability for students to receive help and resources around the clock through automated replies. It's not uncommon for students to operate outside of "normal business hours," but when institutions are utilizing keyword services that trigger automated responses, students no longer have to wait until Monday morning to receive a reply or access support.

Regardless of when you send students messages, it's important to be transparent about the timing and scheduling of your texting program. Students should have clear expectations about when and how often you'll be texting them. "People should know exactly what to expect before subscribing to your SMS marketing list. The intent of your program should be clear, and you should set expectations about what people will be receiving in the future" (Slick Marketing Innovations, 2021).

Length & Format

While the classic limit for SMS messages is 160 characters, most research suggests SMS marketing messages should be even shorter. "The attention span of Gen Z consumers is measured at only 8 seconds, which means it's even more important to get to the point with your marketing message when engaging with this cohort" (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). Students should be able to quickly scan the text message and immediately recognize the call to action the message is prompting. Long form text should be avoided at all costs, in favor of short-form messages and the incorporation of visual elements, such as graphics, memes, emojis, and GIFs (Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). Adams (2021) found that when it comes to texting students, short messages that are "relevant, personalized, actionable, and contain links" are viewed more favorably and are more helpful to students.

Content & Tone

The content and tone of text messages sent to students should match their expectations for texting as a mode of communication: text messages are typically personal, casual, and action oriented. Messages should address the student by name and should be written in conversational language that prompts a certain action and/or facilitates connection to further resources. "Texting is a personal, immediate way to communicate. Keep it casual and natural, and don't use academic or formal language" (Caylor, 2021). Framing and tone are some of the most important factors to consider when crafting SMS messages if the goal is to provide encouragement and prompt action from students. Clarity of the message is key; there should be a clear call to action and an easy path to support, such as an embedded hyperlink or a suggested keyword.

If the message is coming from a specific person or department in your institution, let students know who is reaching out (Verity, 2020). Identifying the sender of the message puts students at ease (no one likes receiving anonymous messages), personalizes the communication, and helps students learn more about the various departments and services on campus.

There are no definitive recommendations for the subject matters that are best suited for communication with students via text message; over the past two decades a growing body of research into the use of text messaging in higher education has demonstrated its effectiveness in a variety of applications, such as academic advising, financial aid, retention, matriculation, student wellness, the first-year experience, providing support and motivation, tutoring, alerts and reminders, and promoting interactivity among students (Arnold et al., 2020; Bettinger et al., 2013; Bird et al., 2019; Castleman & Meyer, Glowacki et al., 2018; Harley, 2007; Mainstay Engagement, 2022; Naismith, 2007; Polk, 2021; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2018).

While its applications seem endless, it's important to remember that you need to be selective about when and how you're using texting as a tool. The more you use it, the more you risk that your messages will become "diluted and students will stop paying attention" (Verity, 2020). Texting should "fit within a larger communication strategy that incorporates channels like email, phone, chatbot" and other forms of communication (Verity, 2020).

Subscription Service Practices

The world of text message marketing is governed by various rules and guidelines that are enforced by the Federal Communications Commission and The Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association. While tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations (including most colleges) are

not required to comply with the majority of these rules, there are still a few applicable guidelines and requirements institutions must follow. First, institutions must obtain express consent from students before texting them. "You can embed consent forms on your website, landing pages, online enrollment forms, or in emails. You can also include opt-in language in your admissions packages so that when students give you their cell phone number, they can check a box to give you permission to send them texts" (Caylor, 2021). Consent can also be obtained by having students text keywords to subscribe.

Second, the very first text message institutions send students must identify the college by name. "This is one area where FCC rules apply even to nonprofit institutions. Fines can range from $500 to $1,500 per violation, so this is one area where you definitely want to stay in compliance" (DeFlitch, 2022).

Finally, the opt-out process should be easy, quick, and readily accessible. "The FCC requires that there must be an automated method available for opting out of future text messages; in other words, something like "Reply STOP to opt out of future text messages" (DeFlitch, 2022). Regulations aside, students will be more likely to remain subscribed to a texting service if they can voluntarily subscribe, easily identify messages from their institution, and opt-out whenever they please. These practices demonstrate a level of respect for students' time and promote self-advocacy skills among students by giving them the agency to seek out and/or avoid information.

Conclusion

Text message programs on colleges campuses have been shown to aid student support and promote student success. A growing body of research suggests that higher education institutions need to be responsive to students' clear preference for text message communication and update their communication systems as a means of adapting to this preference. "If you still rely on email to connect with prospects, students, or alumni, you might be noticing there's a lot of room for improvement in this channel's performance. It's not your copywriter's fault. Gen Z just isn't checking their emails or taking the time to reply. Text messaging is your best avenue to connect with students" (Rebecca, 2021). When implemented effectively, text messaging systems have demonstrated the potential to transform communications between students and their institutions.

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