

Meeting Students Halfway: Boosting Student Engagement with Two-Way Texting

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Introduction

From enrollment to graduation, student success is often dependent on the accessibility of student support services and other campus resources. The efficacy of these resources hinges on the communication strategies implemented by an institution to ensure students are aware of these resources and know when and how to use them (Wesley & Dunlap, 2020). As the California Community Colleges strive to adapt to the ever-growing student demand for more online services and course offerings, the necessity of a digital-first communication strategy has only strengthened (Piacentino, 2020).

Email has served as the cornerstone of digital campus communication for several decades. However, research indicates only 12% of college students identify email as their preferred form of communication, and more than half of students report “not always opening emails from their university or academic departments” (Miars et al., 2021; Straumsheim, 2016; Wesley & Dunlap, 2020). In light of these findings, many institutions have pivoted to the use of two-way text message for student outreach and support, often resulting in significant increases in student engagement, enrollment, retention, and success (Castleman & Meyer, 2020; Castleman & Page, 2014; Naismith, 2007; Rios et al., 2018).

Our current research advances this line of inquiry into the applications of digital mediated communication in higher education by exploring the impact of personalized, two-way text messaging on response rates for high-touch student services departments in at Moorpark College, a mid-size community college in southern California.

Methods

In Spring of 2022, we conducted a series of surveys, focus groups, and data analyses to evaluate the efficacy of Moorpark College’s communication with students. Preliminary research indicated students were overwhelmed by the number of emails they received each week, and were eager to connect more with counselors, instructors, and student support professionals in a one-on-one capacity. This feedback inspired a collaboration between The Communication & Marketing Department and Institutional Research to launch four two-way text messaging pilot programs in Fall 2022. The goal of this

collaboration was to evaluate the use of text message as a means of communicating with students and measure its impact on key metrics such as matriculation, retention, and academic success.

The research design for all four pilot studies followed the same steps: identify a target student population (students on academic probation, students who had applied but not enrolled, etc.) and split them into randomized treatment and control groups; communicate with students in that population via personalized, two-way text messages; and compare the outcomes of the students who received the texts to the outcomes of those who did not. For two of the studies, the sample size was large enough to determine statistical significance via chi-square tests; for the other two, the sample sizes were large enough to draw anecdotal conclusions, but not large enough to make significance testing possible.

Pilot 1: Registration

Academic counselors wanted to encourage students to register for classes during their registration period by offering registration guidance via text message. The goal of this pilot was to increase the number of students that registered early for Spring 2022 classes, and increase retention from Fall 2022 to Spring 2023. Each student in the treatment group received this message:

Hi [student's first name] □ I work in the counseling department at Moorpark College and I'm reaching out about registration. Do you need any help figuring out what classes you want to take next semester? Your registration date is 11/16, so now is the time to start planning! If you have any questions or need any help, just text me back here □

695 students participated in the pilot. As of one week following this text message campaign, 23.7% of the students who received this text were registered for Spring 2023 classes, in comparison to only 15.3% of students who did not receive this text. As of the first week of the Spring 2023 semester, 70.9% of students who communicated with a counselor via text were enrolled in Spring 2023 classes, in comparison to only 62% of students who did not. Additionally, Hispanic students who received the text were registered at a rate 12.6 points higher than Hispanic students who did not, which is almost double the margin of difference between White students who did and did not participate (6.8 percentage-point

difference). This suggests that receiving academic counseling assistance via text may help close equity gaps between white and Hispanic students pertaining to enrollment/persistence.

The proportion of students who registered after receiving a text differed from those who did not, $X^2(1, N = 7848) = 43.784, p < .001$.

Pilot 2: Nonpayment

Financial Aid specialists wanted to reduce the number of students with outstanding account balances in Spring of 2022, prior to the April 10th payment deadline. The students with balances were broken into groups depending on how much they owed, and student workers in the Financial Aid office devoted between 2 and 6 hours per week to contacting students in each group and walking them through the process of either setting up a payment plan or applying for financial aid. Each student in the treatment group received this message:

Hi [student's first name] my name is [financial aid specialist's first name] and I work in the financial aid office at Moorpark College. I'm reaching out because you have an unpaid account balance. This balance must be paid by April 10th to avoid receiving a hold on your account that will prevent you from registering for classes. Do you have a few minutes to chat about payment options? I can tell you how much you owe and walk you through our payment plans and other financial resources. I'm here to help.

Between February 13 and March 15th, Moorpark reduced the number of non-payment students by 19.7 percentage points. To determine the statistical significance of these differences, we compared the non-payment rates of the three colleges in the Ventura County Community College District, designating Moorpark's rates the treatment, and Oxnard and Ventura Colleges' rates as the control. To establish a baseline, we conducted a chi-square test of independence for the nonpayment rates among the colleges, and found there was no significant difference among the colleges during the period before Moorpark College began the pilot program, $X^2(1, N = 1811) = 1.39, p > .05$. We then conducted a second chi-square test of independence, using the nonpayment rates from each of the colleges after Moorpark launched the

pilot program, and found there was a significant difference between Moorpark and the other colleges in the district, $X^2(1, N = 1715) = 20.84, p < .05$.

Pilot 3: Financial Aid Eligibility

The Financial Aid department reached out to a population of students who were eligible for increase Cal Grant funding but did not submit necessary documentation. Previous outreach methods had failed to connect with these students. Students in this group received this message:

Hi Josie, I work in the financial aid department at Moorpark College. I see you might be eligible for more Cal Grant aid based on your status. If you'd like to learn more about increasing your aid, please feel free to text me back ☐

54% of the students contacted responded to the text, and 100% of those students were able to successfully submit the documentation necessary for increasing their Cal Grant funding. The sample size for this study was too small to make statistical testing possible.

Pilot 4: Academic Notice

The goal of this text message pilot was to encourage students placed on Academic Notice to schedule a counseling appointment to begin the process of restoring their academic standing. Counseling support specialists reached out to students via text message over a 48-hour period. Each student in the treatment group received this message:

Hi [student's first name]! I work in the counseling office at Moorpark and I wanted to reach out to you to help with Spring Registration. Based on your academic standing, it looks like you aren't eligible to register for spring classes at the moment. No worries! We can fix it by scheduling you a priority appointment with a counselor. Just simply text me back to schedule something and I will get you set up. Talk soon ☺

31% of students responded to the text within 48 hours of receipt. Of those that responded, 90% successfully booked an appointment with a counselor to complete their Academic Notice workshop and begin steps to restoring academic status. The sample size for this study was too small to make statistical testing possible.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of our pilot studies are promising, and we encourage other institutions to launch similar studies of their own. Our findings also suggest keeping communication casual, conversational, and friendly is a more effective approach than the formal language often found in official communications from an institution's administrative offices. Additionally, the results of our pilot studies suggest students may be more likely to engage with student support services via text message, as previous outreach efforts facilitated through traditional communication channels, such as email or phone call, failed to yield successful results. This could be attributed to research findings that suggest students are 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). In the focus groups we conducted with students, feedback indicated the messages they receive via email are often long-winded and full of academic jargon that make them difficult to understand. As our results show, using more approachable language in text communications has led to significant improvements in student engagement rates.

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