

Boost student success with text messaging

By Joan Hope, Ph.D., Editor

CHICAGO — Many admissions offices use text messaging to engage with prospective students. It can also be useful for boosting retention and GPAs by engaging enrolled students.

At Pellissippi State Community College, text messaging provides an effective, low-cost way for advisors to communicate with students. Stephanie Baker-Harden and Christian Lockhart, who are both advisors at PSCC, explained how the program is a success at a session at the American Association of Community Colleges annual convention.

Texting helps the advising center meet its goals, Lockhart said. The goals are to help students:

- Clarify academic goals.
- Develop academic plans.
- Connect with campus resources.

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission offered grants to support Tennessee Promise students through credential completion, Lockhart said. The commission was interested in innovative ways institutions could communicate using technology and in creating proactive advising models to provide students with information before they know they need it, Lockhart said.

Working together to earn a grant, Lockhart focused on proactive advising, and Baker-Harden focused on technology.

Baker-Harden sought a user-friendly communications solution that any advisor could use. She

chose Signal Vine texting because it allows two-way communication, there's no spamming, it's Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act compliant, multiple advisors can use it, and the cost is reasonable.

Advisors use a program on their computers rather than cell phones to text with students. "Texting is a personal means of communication. We don't want to lose that," said Brian Kathman, chief executive officer at Signal Vine. The goal of the Signal Vine platform is to replicate the experience of pulling out a phone and texting while getting around the challenges of doing that with hundreds of students. The texts are sent from a 10-digit number, but it's not the sender's personal phone number. That maintains privacy for the sender and the student, Kathman said. It avoids the potential privacy concerns that would occur if an advisor lost his phone with the student's personal information on it.

For functions that require privacy such as financial aid and advising, campus officials see texts from only the students assigned to them.

The Signal Vine platform looks and feels like email for the campus official using the program, Kathman said. That means it's easy to learn. The student receives a regular text message, so students don't have to download an app. When students are asked to download apps, typically only 10 to 20 percent do so, Kathman said.

Officials wanted the tool to encourage genuine two-way communication, Lockhart said. And

Consider advantages of texting

Students are hard to reach. According to research, less than 5 percent of them check their email every day, said Brian Kathman, chief executive officer at Signal Vine.

They are using social media. But research conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that any network will reach no more than 30 percent of students, Kathman said.

But at least 90 percent of students — and probably close to 100 percent — text.

Kathman said you should consider the effects of texting that make it valuable. A text message can:

- ✓ **Captivate.** If you get a text, you'll probably pull out your phone and look at it.
- ✓ **Simplify.** Simplifying helps you as a communicator. "Lead with the point" is common advice, Kathman said. "Text is all point," he said.

✓ **Interact.** Texting allows you to solve problems in minutes without a phone call. Plus you can engage in multiple conversations without others knowing you are doing that. And if you can't respond immediately, you can get back to the text later.

✓ **Nudge.** Texts can be a powerful way to nudge if you do the other three items, Kathman said.

Research has shown that texting programs can have impacts from increasing matriculation to decreasing loan-borrowing amounts, Kathman said. One study showed a 20 percent decrease in loan-borrowing amounts for community college students. And borrowing less can mean fewer defaults, he said. Research has also shown a 20 percent increase in persistence to the second year among those who received nudges, Kathman said. Nudges can include reminders to renew financial aid and to remember processes and deadlines, he added. ■

students ask everything using it, he added. The advisor answering the text doesn't have to be all things to all people, but he can point students to the resources and offices they need. Messages can include links to information on the portal or to forms.

The Signal Vine program gives officials the ability to make texts not appear to be mass texts. For example, a text can include the student's name. One might say, "Jake, don't forget to complete your FAFSA by 2/14. This is a requirement to stay eligible for TN Promise."

Making texts personal lets students know you are talking to them.

Signal Vine customers can program messages they will use repeatedly. The system has a mail merge feature and a "Mad Lib"-type feature that enables advisors to personalize multiple elements in the text, Kathman said. Users can program messages to go out to just students who haven't responded to a previous message, just students who came in with a GPA under 3.0, or to many other groups. "The limits are your imagination," Kathman said.

It's also possible to branch messages based on responses. For example, if a student responds to a question with "no," an automated text message can be different from the one that goes out for "yes." That means advisors don't have to compose each message they send.

Lockhart designs texts to elicit responses. For example, if registration is coming up, a text might say, "Let's meet before then."

Officials collected phone numbers for the text messages from the students' applications. Some of those numbers turned out to be parents' cell phones, and some of the students didn't ever attend classes. But

Review 4 keys for effective text messaging

To make your text messages effective and relevant, Brian Kathman, chief executive officer at Signal Vine, offered these four tips:

✓ **Personalization.** Create a student profile. It can have a few points of data or 100. They might include name, GPA, and major. "If you use the student's first name, engagement goes up. If you use yours, it goes up again," Kathman said.

✓ **Relevance.** If you send one message that a student thinks is not for him, the student is more likely to ignore the next message you send.

✓ **Timeliness/urgency.** If you communicate about something that's coming up in a month, students won't see that as urgent, Kathman said.

✓ **Call to action.** What do you want students to do? For example, you might ask students to schedule a time to meet with you. ■

slightly more than half of the numbers were for students who engaged in some way through text. And the results were positive for students who engaged through text:

➤ The average fall 2015 GPA for all incoming students was 2.24. Those who sent one text message had an average GPA of 2.4. Those who sent three or more had an average GPA of 2.51.

➤ Overall retention of first-year students from fall 2015 to spring 2016 was 86 percent. But 96 percent of students who sent three or more text messages registered for the spring semester. ■

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