



THE RISE OF MOBILE MESSAGING MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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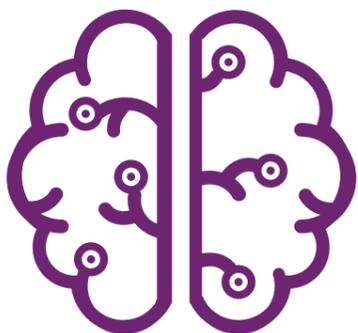
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INTRODUCTION

Messaging students over mobile has recently become the most effective way to foster productive conversations throughout the college enrollment process. The challenge for enrollment teams is scaling these conversations—and personalizing them—with a mass audience. With the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), colleges have a great opportunity to use this technology to their advantage in meeting students where they are, 24-7.

In this white paper, we'll explain how educators and marketers can capture students' attention over text message and messaging apps and utilize these methods of communication to support more students throughout their student life cycle. Specifically, we'll cover the emerging field of messaging, how to message students throughout the enrollment cycle, best practices to manage mobile messaging, and the legality of texting.

Terms



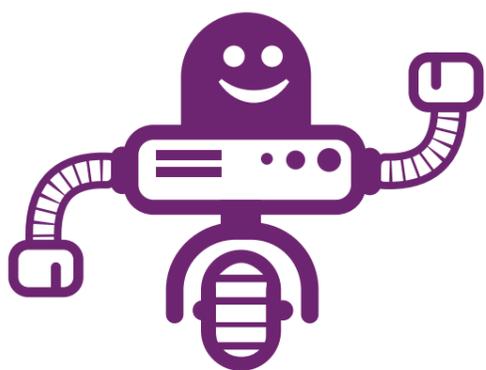
AI

when a machine mimics
“cognitive” functions



MACHINE LEARNING

ability to “learn” without
explicit programming



AI ASSISTANT

a bot that performs tasks or
services for an individual



CHATBOT

a bot that uses human
language to communicate



NLP/NLU/NLG

interaction between
computers and humans using
natural languages

The Mobile-Centric World

Key Takeaways

- Time spent on mobile phones and particularly messaging apps is at an all-time high.
- Students welcome text messages from colleges, yet few institutions currently use this form of communication.
- If your communication strategy isn't nimble, it's already obsolete in the constantly evolving mobile world.
- Read more to find out about how to capture students' attention over mobile messaging.

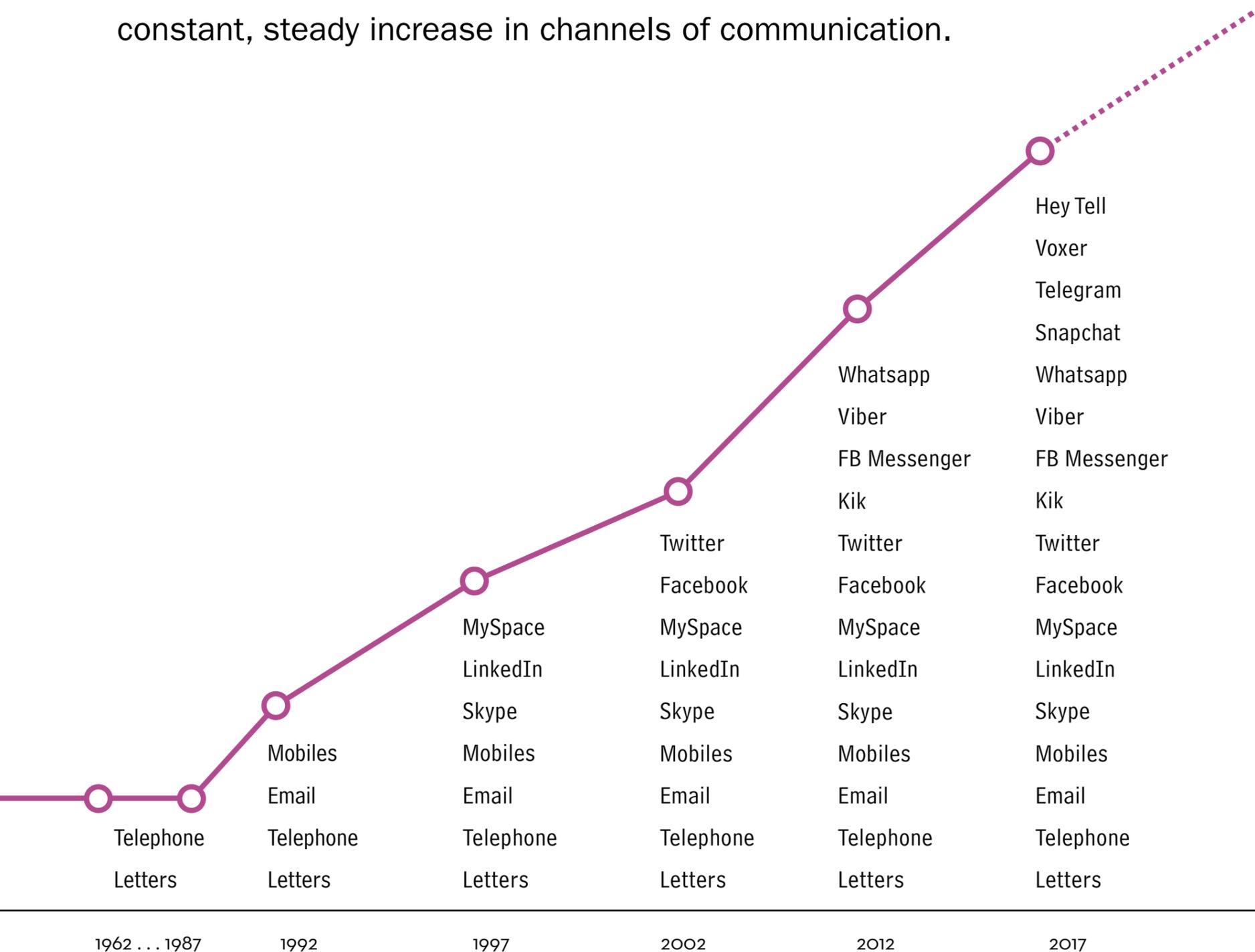
Constant Channel Changing

In 2017, the landscape connecting with students via multiple marketing channels has never been so diverse. It boggles my Gen X mind that in a given day, a high school student may engage with someone on Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, SMS (text message), WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Kik, mostly—if not exclusively—on their mobile device. What happened to talking on the phone?



Source: movoto.com

One can only think that this trend of communicating on new and more platforms will continue at this rate, if not faster. When looking at baby boomers' communication channels on a linear graph, it lies rather flat for 40 years and then increases exponentially in the past 10 to 15 years. Generation Z (born 1996 to 2010), on the other hand, has a constant, steady increase in channels of communication.



Source: <https://www.quora.com/When-did-email-start-to-become-popularly-used-in-the-US>

With so much information buzzing on their mobile device at all times, Gen Z is conditioned to put up their blinders to information not relevant or timely to them. As a result, attention spans have reduced, and when attention turns to a certain topic, near-instant gratification is expected. Now, college admission and enrollment teams must continually shift their marketing methods to meet students where they spend their time and attention. The technology used to communicate with students needs to be nimble, otherwise it quickly becomes obsolete. Students tend to be the earliest adopters of new technology and are quick to evolve as methods of connecting with one another become popular.



Source: <http://deathtothestockphoto.com/>

If educators weren't already challenged enough by having to be the most innovative industry to continually adapt to 18- to 24-year-olds each year, the competition for enrollment is at an all-time high for colleges. Angel investor and writer George Beall notes that high schoolers are taking alternate paths to the workplace after graduation. Moreover, Jason DeWitt of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reports that colleges are down over 1 million enrollments since 2011, making it harder for them to attract and yield more students.

While the number of commonly used communication channels has increased in the past ten years, the way in which people communicate has drifted toward *conversation*. The style and length of email has shifted toward shorter, back-and-forth messages. The time and attention spent messaging has, in turn, increased. As of 2015, the top four messaging apps have more downloads, greater usage, and longer retention rates than the top four social networks. The demographics are wide among chat app users, and the most frequent users are high school and college-aged.

While text and chat messaging is not meant to replace email, post, and phone call outreach to students, it is something that must be done to meet students where they spend their time.

Going “All In” on Mobile

You don't have to look far to see that Gen Z engages mostly on mobile. Furthermore, marketing and media guru Gary Vaynerchuk thinks that businesses and institutions need to be “all in” on mobile communication. In Gary's article “Marketing in the Year 2016,” he warns, “Anyone who doesn't realize that the cell phone is exactly the same thing that the television was in 1965 is completely ignoring the future.” For a stunning visual representation of why Gary feels so strongly about this, check out the scene at Christmas Mass in Vatican Square, first in 2005, then in 2013:



Source: <https://petapixel.com/assets/uploads/2013/03/comparison1.jpg>

Gary's point is to find where students' attention is and to follow it. You must meet Gen Z where they are, instead of hoping they'll come to you.

Furthermore, Ruffalo Noel Levitz points out a huge gap between high schoolers' welcoming attitude toward messaging from colleges and the number of colleges messaging prospective students on a mass scale. In RNL's 2015 E-Expectations Report, 73% of high school seniors would welcome a text message from colleges, yet only 29% of the seniors received one. To make a more seamless path to enrollment and graduate success, mobile messaging should be integrated into a student communication flow.

Does being "all in" sound possible? Many student-facing teams are already strapped for resources. Along with the shift in mobile messaging among Generation Z and the rest of the world, there have also been significant advances in conversational AI which can help amplify outreach among a large group of people. Previously, the only possible way to have personal conversations at scale was a massive investment in human resources. Now, AI enables a fundamental restructuring in how work gets done. AI can be the first level of support for students, opening up the deeper conversations for humans.

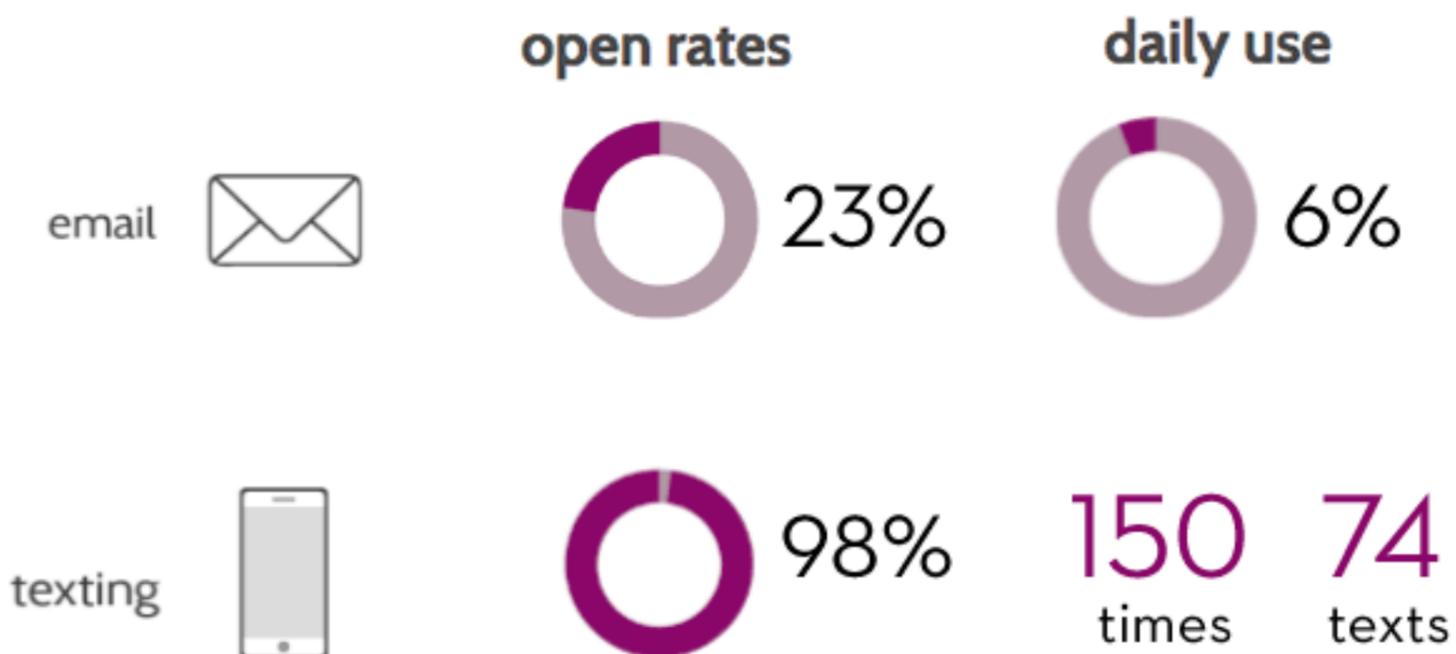
Thanks to recent advancements in conversational artificial intelligence, it's now possible to personally engage an enormous audience without needing to hire any additional staff members.

The Power of Nudging

Key Takeaways

- Traditional methods of communication, like email and even social networks, are no longer providing results.
- Nudges have proven to be effective in changing student behavior.
- Text message is the most immediate channel for this generation and the simplest way to nudge a student in the right direction.

For decades, colleges and businesses alike have used email as the primary method of communication, but results have recently diminished. Email open rates and reply rates have reduced in effectiveness, and fewer students are answering calls or returning voicemails. Many colleges have leveraged social networking to share content with students, but now even social networks are reducing in popularity among Gen Z. Many educators have now turned to messaging to converse with prospective or currently enrolled students.



Source: AdmitHub

In the article [“Small Nudges Can Improve How Students Apply to College,”](#) Dr. Lindsay Page discusses how text messaging can be a cost-effective way to help students matriculate.

Dr. Page explains three theories for student success found in her research: (1) educators need to shift from thinking about *whether* students apply to college to *how* students navigate the college search and application process; (2) beyond thinking about the application process broadly, educators should focus on understanding the large set of procedural micro-barriers involved; and (3) students benefit from proactive outreach, encouragement, and support.

This ties in with what behavioral researchers Richard Thaler (University of Chicago) and Cass Sunstein (Harvard Law School) discuss regarding the importance of nudges and choice architecture.



nudge *verb*

To give (someone) a gentle reminder or encouragement

Each year, students go through processes of applying to college, applying for financial aid, registering for classes, and multiple other tasks. Thaler and Sunstein found that the way these tasks are presented to students can have drastic effects on the completion rate of these tasks. Thus, by nudging and creating a path of least resistance for college-bound students, administrators can help increase student success on the path to and through college.

In order to encourage a behavior, as with a nudge, the Behavioural Insights Team devised the EAST framework:

Messages should be **Easy**, **Attractive**, **Social**, and **Timely**. When nudging a student to complete a certain task, the message should be simple and clear, should capture their attention and make them *want* to act, should draw on the supportive power of social networks, and should be sent when the student is in most need of the information. We'll add **Personalized** to this list—messages should be crafted to each particular student's needs, instead of generically blasted to a mass audience.

Text Messaging in the Enrollment Life Cycle

Key Takeaways

- Students welcome timely and relevant communication at different points in the enrollment cycle.
- A fast response time to students' text messages is crucial to building strong connections.
- Artificial intelligence can be an enrollment team's best friend, handling the majority of repetitive Q&A so they can focus on the students who need the most support.

Students are welcoming conversation and support along their entire enrollment life cycle, and high engagement rates make mobile messaging an excellent way to communicate. When starting a conversation and providing personalized support, it's essential to be relevant and timely. Although the conversations change throughout the enrollment life cycle, the overarching philosophy of providing the right information at the right time holds constant.

Recruitment

Colleges across the nation have ramped up efforts to attract more prospective students. The type of students that colleges recruit varies by institution, but every VP of enrollment and dean of admission still focuses on how to fill their applicant pool with qualified students each year.

Public institutions may be focused on attracting high-achieving, in-state students, enticing exceptional out-of-state and international students, and increasing socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity in their applicant pools. In achieving these recruitment goals, it's important to cast a wide net to prospective students, but only if you

can continue to be responsive. Impersonal communication blasts typically do not foster the type of relationship building that appeals to prospective students as they search for the college of their dreams.

It's a missed opportunity when a student sends a text message expecting a quick response and then has to wait several days to get a simple generic reply. Messaging has the advantage over other forms of communication because it's conversational and meets students where they're already talking with friends and family, but institutions only get that benefit when they are responsive and personal.

Choosing a college is a major decision for a young person, so naturally we've seen very high engagement rates when being conversational and asking about the prospective student's college plans, instead of merely blasting them with a generic reminder about an app deadline, for example. The conversation is where the primary influence happens and where mindsets are formed and changed, and it can be effective to nudge students to apply once they've built a conversational relationship over time.

*“After Increasing Enrollment by 3.9%:
We were not just looking for a one-
way conversation with a student, we
wanted ways that we could more
personalize that particular process.”*

Scott Burke, AVP & Dir. of Undergraduate Admission at GSU

We've seen many instances in text message conversations where Gen Z students are enthusiastic about a particular institution, so it's best to instantly reply to them and give them the information they need at the time they need it. For example, Allegheny College saw an immediate spike in their Facebook group membership after sending a timely message via "Chompers," their virtual admission assistant. Also, interestingly, after texting students about an upcoming program, *they surpassed the total number of evaluations submitted for the previous two events combined.*

Getting students to complete their applications is another key touch point. Colleges traditionally send various emails and call students on the phone to encourage this step, but these efforts are frequently ignored by students. A personalized text message, however, informing students of their own unique steps to completing their application can pay big dividends in capturing their attention and getting them to follow through on clicking Submit.

After students apply, they inevitably want to know what's up next, and they also start asking about the college and its culture. The range of topics is immense, everything from "When will I get my decision?" to "Tell me more about your engineering program" to "Can I bring my salamander to my dorm room?" Engaging students in these conversations over text message fosters a strong connection to the college and, ultimately, can increase the likelihood of attending if accepted. These types of Q&A are perfectly suited to conversational AI and can be provided instantly to the inquiring students, thus saving admission officers hours of precious time.

Yield

For many admission teams, yielding students is top of mind and the most important part of the enrollment cycle. Some students can be difficult to reach to get an understanding of their college plans. It can also be challenging to get students to complete important items on

the enrollment checklist like registering for orientation, submitting a tuition deposit, and sending in their final transcript or immunization forms.

Before National College Decision Day on May 1, institutions can utilize texting to gauge interest and help committed students get a head start on their enrollment checklist. Connecting with students during this critical time using more traditional methods of outreach can lead to mixed results because students rarely answer unrecognized incoming phone calls, and email open rates in higher education hover in the mid to lower 20% range.

A popular texting intervention around yield is a survey in the late-March early-April time frame to gauge how interested a student is in attending, on a scale of 1 to 4. Based on the reply, you can send a targeted message or encourage further follow-up. If a student replies with a “1” (I’m definitely coming), you can instantly reply with a nudge to submit his or her intent to enroll. If the reply is a “3” (I’ll likely go elsewhere), it’s valuable for the university and admission team to follow up and find out the reason for going elsewhere. For those students who reply with a “2,” meaning they’re on the fence and undecided, it’s great to have your admission team reach out individually and focus on supporting them in the remaining weeks before decision day.



Hi Nora, Welcome to Owl University! I'm Oli, your virtual assistant. How excited are you about attending Owl U?

- [1] It's my top choice
- [2] It's in the mix
- [3] I'll likely go elsewhere
- [4] Not sure/rather not say

2

Wonderful. Would you like to speak with someone to learn more?

Sure!

Cool. Someone will be in touch with you shortly. Let me know if you have any questions in the meantime!

Thanks!

Sample Conversation



Collect Information

Counselors can use the messaging conversation to set up a call to address a respondent's concerns. This not only shows the student that you care about his or her thoughts and want to help him or her through this process but also provides admissions counselors feedback on how they can impact yield.

Mobile messaging is also a great way to send proactive reminders to students who have yet to complete an important task. In a randomized control trial (RCT) with Georgia State University, we saw that text messaging powered by AI had a positive impact on various key items on the enrollment checklist and ultimately increased enrollment by 3.9%.

Student Success and Retention

Student success and retention doesn't follow quite the same linear path as recruitment and enrollment. However, the same rule applies: being helpful and responsive are of the utmost importance. Students find that being introduced to the resources like tutoring or having an academic advisor available to them on campus is helpful.

Reminders about financing education is also really important. Many students who previously applied for the FAFSA either forget to do so or don't realize they have to reapply. Sheila Bair, President of Washington College, notes that one of the two main reasons students drop out after their first year is financial need. Proactive reminders and guidance for completing the FAFSA or applying for scholarships can positively increase retention rates.

Colleges should also have a communication flow that can address students who are considered at-risk. By personally connecting with them before their challenges are exacerbated, colleges can dramatically improve their chances for success. Messages at touchpoints like birthday wishes and congratulations for finishing their first semester can be nice reminders that the institution cares about them.

The type of outreach will differ at each institution, but as a general rule of thumb, educators and administrators should think about how students go from point A to B in each area of the enrollment life cycle. Then, they should help make that journey as seamless as possible. Chances are that Gen Z likes their guidance and support to be conversational, personalized, and on demand.

Best Practices of Mobile Messaging

Key Takeaways

- Mobile messaging, especially texting, has high response rates among students.
- Messages should be short, pertinent, and FUN to encourage student engagement—flip through to the checklist for more detailed tips.
- Georgia State University reduced their summer melt over 21% using an AI virtual assistant and mobile messaging. Read more about the results of this RCT [on our blog](#).

Mobile messaging doesn't necessarily have to be text messaging. In fact, many colleges are using messaging applications like WeChat and WhatsApp to communicate with international students. It won't be long before colleges are communicating with domestic students using some of the most popular messaging apps like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Kik, or perhaps even Snapchat. How are your puppy filter skills?



Source: nymag.com

Messaging apps are quickly evolving and capturing more attention, especially among Gen Z, the most active group on messaging apps. For now, the ways people communicate with SMS text messaging and messaging applications is quite similar.

Of all the methods of communication sent to students, colleges see the highest response rate via mobile messaging. The average reply rate for text messaging is 40% so it's important to ensure that your staff is ready and equipped to handle responses in an efficient and timely manner.

If you are considering text messaging with prospective students, here are a number of best practices to ensure a positive, efficient experience for everyone involved:

Texting Best Practices

- ✓ Introduce who you are in the initial message.
- ✓ Make sure you have a clear way for students to opt out of messaging.
- ✓ Follow legal texting guidelines (see next section).
- ✓ Devise a communication plan for outgoing texts that is proactive.
- ✓ Use a student's first name in some of the initial messages or when you haven't messaged them in a while.
- ✓ Respond to messages quickly. Less than two hours is ideal, but more than two days creates a poor experience.
- ✓ Text to be helpful. Communicate only what is relevant for that particular student.
- ✓ Be short and concise with messaging.
- ✓ Use a mobile messaging platform so students' messages don't slip through the cracks.
- ✓ Use AI to decrease response time to students and increase the efficiency of your team.
- ✓ Make the texting fun! Use GIFs and emoji.

To give you an idea of the staff time needed to respond to messages, here is an example of the volume required over the course of a yield season (the numbers of students and messages are taken directly from our case study with GSU).

A YIELD SEASON LASTS FROM **MID-APRIL** TO THE **END OF AUGUST**

138 DAYS
(INCLUDING WEEKENDS)

3,200 SEND **50,000**
FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS INCOMING MESSAGES

IF YOU CAN HIRE A SUPERHUMAN IT WOULD TAKE...



30 = **417**
seconds per message hours of responding to messages

IT AMOUNTS ALMOST TO

52 DAYS

...in the time that staff is also doing everything from hosting yield events to attending spring college fairs and programs, as well as hiring staff, taking much needed vacation, interviewing students, and preparing for the upcoming fall recruitment season.

AND THEY ARE NOT SUPERHUMANS...

This could be a very different story if a college uses AI to take this burden off their admission department. Colleges are now turning to conversational AI to supercharge their staff and amplify their outreach and support. Think of it like wearing an Iron Man suit for communication...



Source: Walt Disney/Marvel Studios

Many questions that students ask are process or status related and can be answered instantly and automatically using an AI virtual assistant. This not only makes a better experience for your students by getting a quick reply 24-7 but also takes the burden off your busy staff to answer question after repetitive question, over and over again. Scott Burke, Associate VP and Director of Undergraduate Admissions at GSU, utilizes AdmitHub's AI virtual assistant and chatbot Pounce to complement his current staff. He lauds that it's able to answer over 80% of students' questions, it answers questions in as little as 7 seconds, and has conversations that rival what a human can do. What's more, it handles a level of personalized communication and targeted outreach that he would have to hire 10 to 15 more staff members to accomplish.

The AI in AdmitHub's virtual assistants utilize natural language processing and machine learning to quickly learn from each interaction. It's a remarkable process where the AI actually becomes smarter with every incoming student question.



Source: <http://deathtothestockphoto.com/>

Legality of Text Messaging

Key Takeaways

- Ensure your texting is TCPA compliant.
- Avoid FERPA violations with compliant software.
- Always be careful about sending sensitive information.

Before you begin text messaging with students, it's a good idea to learn about the rules and laws of reaching out. The rules are a bit different for each institution in terms of how you use text messaging, so we recommend you consult your own legal counsel.

The first act educators must be aware of before texting students is the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA). The TCPA was passed by Congress in 1991 to stop telemarketers from sending out unwanted messages to millions of people without any way for them to opt out of these messages.

At a high level, the TCPA prohibits telemarketers from calling or texting without prior express consent when using an autodialer or mass calling/texting system.



Source: <https://i.imgflip.com/m79pn.jpg>

The twist for many institutions is that tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations are not subject to some provisions of the TCPA. In August 2016, the Federal Communications Commission cleared up some gray areas in the TCPA, determining that people who provide their mobile number to a nonprofit institution have indeed provided their expressed prior consent to receive communications related to the institution's core functions.

Another key act to consider is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). FERPA protects the privacy of student education records. This is especially important with texting because there is the potential for a great deal of sensitive information to be transferred. If you are texting your students or their families, you must ensure that you are texting with a secure, FERPA-compliant system. AdmitHub's proprietary software is FERPA compliant, for example, but texting on one's own personal phone may not be.

With regard to FERPA, colleges should also be careful about sending or soliciting sensitive information via SMS. That means no Social Security numbers, sensitive financial information, or student grades.

CONCLUSION

Generation Z is entrenched in mobile technology unlike any of their predecessors. Research has proven that in order for educators and markets to truly engage them, they must meet Gen Z where they spend their time: the cell phone. We have found that one of the oldest and most persistent mobile technologies, messaging, is still welcomed and widely embraced by students. There is tremendous opportunity in employing messaging to support students on their path to and through college. With advancements in conversational AI, admission and enrollment teams now have the power to efficiently communicate with mass numbers of students, hold personalized conversations that build strong relationships, and significantly boost key enrollment metrics.

About the Authors

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