Developing a Texting Communications Plan for Current Students

Sections

Sections

Why do you need a texting communications plan?

Students don't open their emails If you call students, you'll likely go straight to voicemail And with social media, "You can tweet something, and within two minutes, it's 80 messages down their timeline," noted Andy Storms, director of student success at Ozark Christian College.

Texting works.

It helps increase matriculation rates[1] and encourage retention.[2]
"Having their phone vibrate when you send them something is pretty invaluable," stated Jeff McNamara, director of student success at Carroll University. More and more institutions are realizing that they can achieve exceptional results, including fewer missed deadlines, higher attendance at events, and even reducing hunger on campus (see page 8 to learn how). **So why do you need a texting communications plan? Because jumping into texting without one could burn the medium.**

More students studying remotely means more communication barriers.

Remote and learning will continue to grow. It's even more important for your staff to take advantage of every opportunity to connect with and guide students. By establishing texting guidelines to help online learners through the funnel, you'll ensure they don't get left behind.

Let's get started.

1   White, S. The Cost Effectiveness of Texting to Nudge Students Towards College Matriculation. Chicago Policy Review.
     Available at: http://chicagopolicyreview.org/2015/05/11/the-cost-effectiveness-of-texting-to-nudge-students-towards-college-matriculation/.

2   Boath E, Jinks A, Thomas N, Thompson R, Evans J, O'Connell P, Taylor L. Don't go with the 'FLO' - a student mobile texting service to enhance
     nursing student retention. Nurse Education Today, October 2016.

Whether you're already using texting extensively on campus — or you're just starting to think about ways to improve student outcomes through texting — you'll get expert advice, learn about proven best practices, and discover exactly how to create and implement an effective plan for your institution.

How to create and implement your texting communications plan.

On the following pages, you'll find step-by-step instructions for building your texting communications plan.

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N

❯ **STEP 1**

Identify the objectives for your department and institution

Before you start thinking about all the fun emojis you're going to send students, think about what you want to achieve through texting.
What are your departmental objectives? What are your institutional goals? What are the key metrics you use to measure success?

Typically, schools want to improve in the following areas:

❯ **Student success**

Retention rate (at-risk students and interventions)

Academic outcomes

Graduation rate

Responsiveness in addressing student needs and concerns

Overall student satisfaction

❯ **Student engagement**

Attendance at campus programs and in-person and virtual events

Student involvement and engagement

❯ **Career services**

Job placement rate

❯ **Business operations**

Streamlining financial aid

Registrar deadlines

❯ **Advancement**

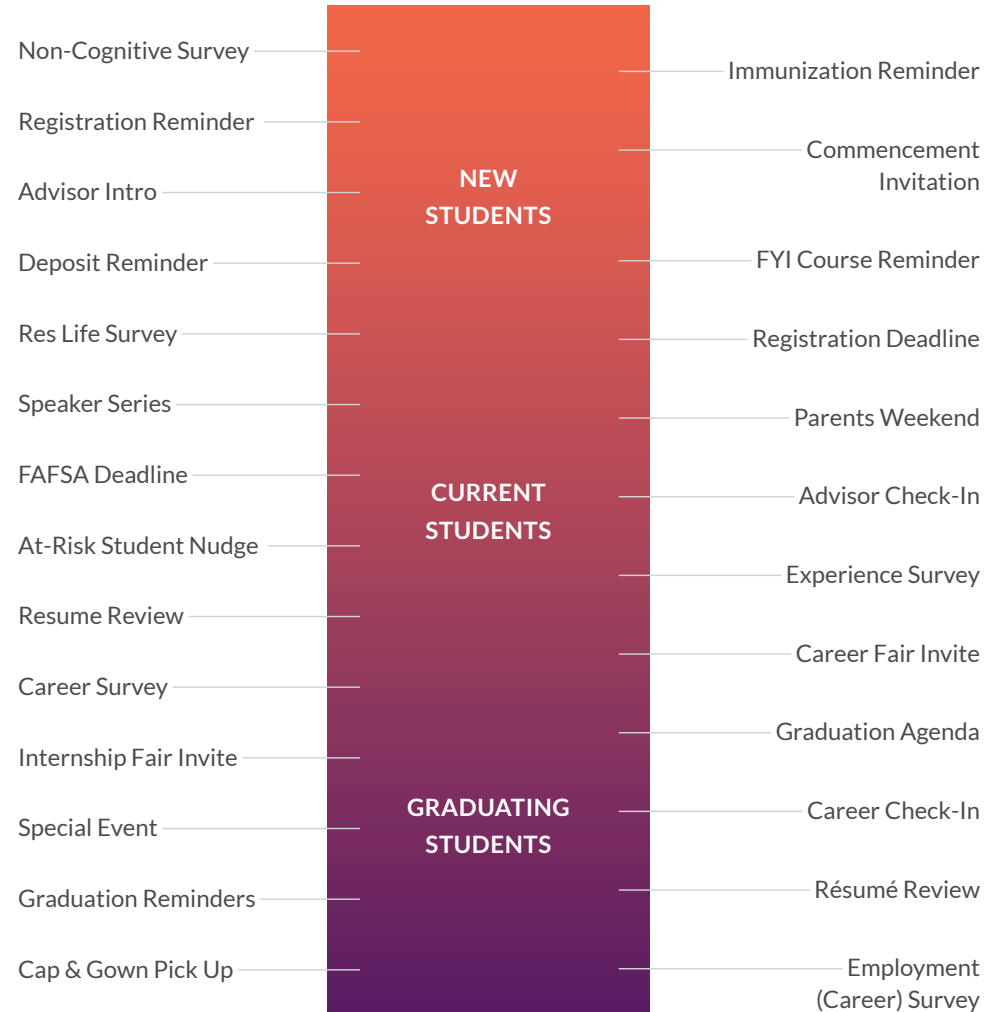Engagement and fundraising (getting students accustomed to receiving texts from your institution)

Chapters and affinity-group event reminders

When you're writing your goals, be specific, and choose your words carefully to get everyone on the same page. For example, instead of just saying you want to improve student success, consider a more concrete goal such as increasing retention by 10%.

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N

For each of the objectives you identified in Step 1, identify 3 – 5 touchpoints.
A touchpoint is simply an opportunity to communicate with a student in a way
that supports your ultimate goal. By identifying these touchpoints, you can start
to determine when and how you can use texting to achieve your objectives.

> STEP 2

Identify touchpoints for each objective

NEW STUDENTS

Non-Cognitive Survey

Registration Reminder

Advisor Intro

Deposit Reminder

Res Life Survey

Speaker Series

Immunization Reminder

Commencement Invitation

FYI Course Reminder

Registration Deadline

Parents Weekend

CURRENT STUDENTS

FAFSA Deadline

At-Risk Student Nudge

Resume Review

Career Survey

Internship Fair Invite

Advisor Check-In

Experience Survey

Career Fair Invite

Graduation Agenda

GRADUATING STUDENTS

Special Event

Graduation Reminders

Cap & Gown Pick Up

Career Check-In

Résumé Review

Employment (Career) Survey

Start texting sooner

At Carroll University, the student success team assigns all full-time undergraduate incoming freshmen to a staff member. Texting students during the summer helps them feel more comfortable once they're actually on campus.

Look at the big picture

Yes, freshman year is very important — but take the time to consider how you'll communicate with students throughout the student lifecycle, especially as you focus on retention and career services.

Coordinate with your colleagues so you aren't overtexting

Every department thinks they have something important to say, but trust us — students don't want 20 texts a day from you. "It's been such a great tool that we're concerned about overtexting and having students opt out because they're getting too much," said Amy Gray, vice president of student success at Aurora University.[3] Some schools use separate calendars to track when each department is sending texts, emails, and other communications.

Give students nudges

Nudges are "a huge part of student success," noted Kathy Woughter, vice president for student affairs at Alfred University. A nudge can be a gentle reminder about an upcoming deadline, a text about counseling services for students who are stressed out during finals week, or information about a career opportunity.

> Don't be afraid to think outside the box when you're thinking about touchpoints. For example, Alfred University wanted to help address student hunger. Now, when there's leftover food at the end of a catered event, the campus dining staff sends a text to students who have signed up for the campus food bank. Hungry students come and get the free food, and campus dining has less waste to deal with — all thanks to one text.

3   Texting Throughout the Student Lifecycle, Mongoose webinar.
      Available at: https://mongooseresearch.com/webinars/texting-throughout-student-lifecycle/

"Did you see my email?"

At Carroll University, Jeff McNamara often emails students to request an appointment, and then follows up with a text. "It's a tap on the shoulder," said Jeff — and it works, getting students to respond to his original email, as he explained during a Higher Ed Live webinar.[4]

Remember: touchpoints are simply tools to help you achieve your objectives

Sending a text or an email — or even having a face-to-face meeting — isn't your ultimate goal. Your real objective is to achieve a higher graduation rate, retention rate, or some other measure of student success. Touchpoints are simply the way to get there.

> "Our freshman retention rate went up over five percentage points," said Amy Gray from Aurora University.[5] "Certainly there are other initiatives that we used during the past year that contributed to that as well, but [texting] was certainly part of that... [and] for this year's class, we have more financial aid files complete, we have fewer freshmen with unpaid balances, and we had greater participation in our first-year advising workshops."

4   Text Messaging for Student Success, Higher Ed Live Special Edition.
      Available at: http://higheredlive.com/text-messaging-for-student-success/.

5   Texting Throughout the Student Lifecycle, Mongoose webinar.

> **STEP 3**

Incorporate text nudges within your broader communications strategy

Now that you have a better sense of how and when you can use texting, take a step back and consider how it fits in the context of your overall communications strategy.

Remember to keep doing what works

If emails, campus flyers, and other mediums are working for you, plan to keep using them, at least on a limited basis. Yes, texting is more effective than other mediums — but it isn't a magic wand that will immediately replace all of your other tools.

Plan to use texting as a supplemental medium to get some easy, immediate wins

The best way to get buy-in across campus is to show your colleagues and leadership that texting works. Here are a few ways that texting can have a positive impact right away:

> **Registration reminders**

> **Advising check-ins**

> **Scheduling appointments (you'll be amazed how quickly students will schedule appointments via text vs. email and other mediums)**

Consider your campus culture

Are there any reasons why your students wouldn't be receptive to texting? How will your campus leadership feel about using texts to improve retention, graduation rates, and other key metrics? What proof will they need to see that texting works — and when will they want to see it? You can't anticipate everyone's reaction, but thinking ahead will help you identify any likely challenges, so you can plan now on how you'll address them.

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N

> **STEP 4**

Select a texting platform for your institution

Any texting platform will let you text your students, just like any car will let you drive across town. But — just like buying a car — it's important to think about how you're really going to use it.

What if you want to go further? What if someone else wants to use it? Is it easy to use? Does it fit in with everything else you're doing? What are the legal and safety issues you need to consider? Who will maintain it? **These are a few of the questions to consider as you decide which texting platform is right for you.**

What is a texting platform?

A texting platform typically lets staff members use a computer, tablet, or smartphone to send text messages to a student's mobile phone. To the student, the message appears as a normal text. For the staff member, the texting platform lets them track conversations, integrate with their student information system, send messages to groups of students simultaneously, track results, and provide access to colleagues and department heads who may also need to view conversations or communicate with students.

Why do you need a platform?

Some institutions choose to text students from personal staff phones. It's a cheap, easy, and — unfortunately — risky solution. "I gave out my cell phone number in a few instances with students," noted Jeff McNamara from Carroll University.[7] Then he started to get texts from random students, asking if school was canceled because of bad weather. "You start getting the 4 a.m. texts, 'Do we have classes today?' and you have no idea who it's from."

A texting platform removes this risk by providing staff with an institutional phone number, typically one that looks just like a regular phone number from your area code. Students still feel as if they're texting directly with staff, but your staff doesn't have to give out their personal phone numbers.

6   Text Messaging for Student Success, Higher Ed Live Special Edition.

PAGE 11

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N

If other departments will be using the texting platform, invite representatives from those units to be involved in the selection process early on. Their input and feedback can help ensure that whatever platform you choose will be a good fit for everyone, thereby maximizing the institutional investment, and making sure that everyone's using the same tools (and sharing their results).

Think about how you'll be using texts

Having a general idea of how texting fits in your plan will help you determine what type of texting platform you need.

> Will you be texting students mostly one-on-one, in small groups, or will you be texting all students at once?

> How often will you be texting?

> Who will be texting?

> Which departments?

> How many people?

How to choose a texting platform

Ultimately, you have to look at what functionality and support is important to you and your staff. Here are a few key areas to consider:

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

H

I

J

K

L

M

N

> **INTEGRATION** How does the platform integrate with your student information system (SIS)/student success system?

> **APPEARANCE** How will messages you send appear to students?

> **CAMPAIGNS** Ask about the ability to send campaigns to groups of students, track mass messages as campaigns, and review reporting related to each campaign.

> **TEMPLATES** Can staff members quickly choose a prewritten template for common messages and responses?

> **SUPERVISORY ROLES** Can supervisors oversee staff texting accounts and monitor them for appropriate use?

> **ENTERPRISE FUNCTIONALITY** How do you ensure a consistent experience and department-level flexibility? For example, ask if each department can see the information about each student that matters to them.

> **SECURITY** How safe is student data?

> **COMPLIANCE** Ask if opt-outs are recorded in the platform and in your CRM/SIS.

> **DATA VALIDATION** Does the platform have a way to validate that each phone number you collect is a valid, mobile phone number?

> **TRAINING AND SUPPORT** Who will help you set it up and ensure you're getting the best results?

> **MEASUREMENT AND TRACKING** Can you measure engagement and outcomes, and does your texting platform provider offer historical guidelines for what to expect based on your type of school, student mix, and other factors?

> **USER EXPERIENCE** People have high expectations. If the user experience isn't exceptional, your colleagues will either struggle to use the platform, or simply stop using it altogether.

Some platforms have a smartphone app that gives you access to all of a student's data as you're texting with them, which can help your staff when they're not at their desks. "If I'm standing in my kitchen and it's a Saturday and I receive a text and I've been working with a student, I have all that [information] at my fingertips and it's a lot quicker and easier than logging in and grabbing information remotely," noted Jeff McNamara from Carroll University.[7]

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7   Text Messaging for Student Success, Higher Ed Live Special Edition.

> **STEP 5**

Learn best practices for texting current students

Just because you can text someone doesn't mean that you should. In this section, we'll cover some proven best practices for texting students. Your texting platform provider should also be able to provide you with additional best practices.

Think about the purpose of the text

Texting works because it gets students' attention. But if you're going to interrupt a student with a text, you need to make sure it's worth their time.

Here are the three questions you should ask when you're deciding whether or not to text a student:

1. **Is this valuable for the students?**
2. **Is this relevant?**
3. **Am I being personal?**

If you can't answer yes to all three questions, you probably shouldn't use texting for this communication. As Michael Stoner, president of mStoner, wrote, "Let's be clear: just because the average teen texts dozens of times a day doesn't mean they want to get texts from you — or the college or university you work for."[8]

Introduce yourself

"I learned through trial and error that…when you're starting a text conversation, in that initial text, you need to identify who you are, or you will get a lot of replies from people saying, 'Who is this?'" noted Amy Gray from Aurora University.[9] Yes, identifying yourself takes up valuable space in your text. But otherwise, you'll just end up going back and forth with students, explaining who you are and why you're texting them.

8   Stoner, M. Texting Teens? Proceed with Caution. Higher Ed Live, December 7, 2017.
9   Texting Throughout the Student Lifecycle, Mongoose webinar.

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

H

I

J

K

L

M

N

Think about whether you're asking for a response

Sometimes, you need information from students (e.g., you need to know if they're returning next semester). Other times, you just want to make an announcement (e.g., schedule change for an event). **You'll want to write your text differently depending on your goal.**

IF YOU WANT A RESPONSE   End your text with a relevant question, so it's clear that you want students to reply.

IF YOU DON'T WANT A RESPONSE   Make sure the text contains all the information that students need.

If you ask a student for a response — and don't get one — that tells you something. Students almost always get their texts, so if they're not responding, it's "pretty intentional," noted Jeff McNamara from Carroll University.[10]

Give students an action step

Don't force students to guess what you want them to do next. Provide a clear call to action, whether that's directing them to your website or responding back to the text.

Hey <STUDENT-FIRST-NAME>, I noticed your grades are slipping a bit in English — visit the writing center if you need help.

Keep it positive

Because texting is a more casual, everyday medium, many schools prefer to keep texting associated with positive (or at least neutral) messages. If you need to communicate bad news, consider sending a letter or other more formal correspondence.

10   Text Messaging for Student Success, Higher Ed Live Special Edition.

Don't be a robot

Use natural, conversational language when you're talking with students.
Rule of thumb: read your message out loud. If it sounds strange to say, it'll be strange to read on the other end.

DO NOT BE A ROBOT

> Mongoose University: You have applied but we have not received ur transcript. Rply STOP2 end. Std msg rates apply.

BE A PERSON WITH A CALL-TO-ACTION

> Hi Chris – it's Steph from Mongoose University. Looking at your file, I see you applied, but we have not received your transcript. Are you still interested? Let me know! Thanks.

But remember that you're not their BFF

Even when you're texting, you're still representing your institution. Students expect slang and abbreviations (and 2 a.m. texts) from their best friends — not from their university.

> Using emojis shows students that you're approachable and fun. Just don't go overboard. Stick to the emojis that have a clear meaning. 😅 This emoji looks like a crying face, but the "tear" is actually supposed to be a bead of sweat, showing that you're feeling relieved.

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

H

I

J

K

L

M

N

> **STEP 6**

Develop content templates for your team

Whatever you do, don't skip this section. Seriously. Creating content templates is one of the most important steps of the process, since templates are the foundation for most of the text messages you'll send.

What are templates?

Content templates are text messages that you write ahead of time, with specific audiences and opportunities in mind. Once you have your templates, you can use one of your templates as a starting point when you need to send a text, and simply adjust the text as needed.

Think of your template as a tried-and-true recipe. Sure, you might take out the onions or add a bit more salt to your recipe — just like you might change a few words in your template depending on your audience . But in general, your template is your best formula for what works.

For example, here's a template for students who are not registered yet.

> Hello <STUDENT-FIRST-NAME>, this is <STAFF-FIRST-NAME> <STAFF-LAST-NAME> with the Advising Center. I noticed you have not registered yet. Are you planning on returning to MU for the Spring 2017 semester?

As you can see, the template will automatically pull in the student's first name and the staff member's first and last name (please note the formatting may be different depending on your texting platform).

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

H

I

J

K

L

M

N

Save time, reduce risk, and get better results

Yes, it takes some work to write your templates. But any effort you put in now will pay off tenfold down the road. **Here's why you should take the time to build your templates:**

MORE EFFICIENT   Instead of reinventing the wheel each time you have to send a text message, you can simply refer to your templates.

LESS RISK   Like any medium, text messaging can be misused. Writing templates ahead of time (and having them approved by leadership) helps reduce the potential for confusing language and other missteps.

IMPROVED RESULTS   Your template should have the most effective, up-to-date language; you can (and should) keep testing different approaches, but your template gives you the strongest starting point.

Start with your touchpoints from Step 2

In Step 2, you identified the opportunities to reach students throughout the student lifecycle. With these touchpoints in mind, you can write a content template for each touchpoint (or more than one template per touchpoint, depending on the opportunity, audience, and other factors).

Ideally, you should have enough content templates to cover approximately 80% of your touchpoints. This lets you be efficient, while still allowing for the 20% of texts that may need a more customized or personal approach.

Write templates that sound human

Texts may be sent to an individual student or a group of students. When the message is personal in nature, the student should always feel you are texting them directly.

Template examples

ENGAGEMENT Event registration, promotion, and schedule updates

> Hey <STUDENT-FIRST-NAME>, MLK Day of Service registration starts today . Click here to register for your preferred event . We can't wait to see you on January 18th! http://goog .gl/eventsignup321

> Melissa McAllister will be hosting "Coffee and Career Conversations" with senior business majors on April 28th at 4:00 p.m. Learn about helpful interview tips and job openings!

JOB PLACEMENT Career center invitation and announcement

> Hi <STUDENT-FIRST-NAME>! This is your Career Counselor Amanda at Mongoose University. "Big Four" accounting firms are visiting campus April 28th . We have time slots open 12:00 – 5:00 p .m . Are you interested in signing up?

> Hi <STUDENT-FIRST-NAME>! Mongoose "Get Hired" Career Fair is March 14th . Connect with over 100 employers . Dress to impress! Do you have any questions? Check your email for the registration link.

FAFSA REMINDER

> Hello <STUDENT-FIRST-NAME>, last year, you filled out a FAFSA and this year you did not. If you would like to receive financial aid, please visit: www.fafsa.gov. For questions, please text us or visit our office.

STUDENT SUCCESS Advisor check-in

> Hi James! Dr . Janicki here . We need to take a look at your prerequisites and course load in general . Can you come in this week?

RETENTION Referral

> Hi <STUDENT-FIRST-NAME>! This is <STAFF-FIRST-NAME> <STAFF-LAST-NAME> . Some of your midterm grades are looking a little low, and I want to make sure you've got what you need to be successful . Have you looked into visiting the tutoring center?

RETENTION At-risk student outreach

> Hi Patrick: Based on your first-year assessment, we are recommending additional academic engagement . Our Student Success Center is set up to help you . Would you like me to help set up an appointment? - Charlie Adams

STUDENT EXPERIENCE Graduation assessment

> Hi Amy, congrats on graduation . Please pick up your cap and gown in Founder's Hall, April 28th, 9:00 a .m . – 3:00 p .m . Please check your email for a brief survery and you will be entered to win an Apple iPad!

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C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
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> **STEP 7**

Determine who should be texting students

Start small. Think about who needs to text students — not just who wants to text students. You can always add more staff once you're up and running, if they're needed to help you achieve your goals.

Consider who's responsible for your objectives

Everything should tie back to your objectives. For example, if one of your goals is to improve your retention rate, then the people responsible for that specific goal should be able to text students (or at least have significant input in terms of when and how to text students).

Make sure everyone is aligned with your goals, regardless of what individual motivation they may have. For example, student engagement staff are typically focused on driving students to events. But before they start texting students, they should understand all of your objectives — including how attendance at events fits into the bigger picture.

Establish guidelines and standards

"It's really important to coordinate across campus," noted Amy Gray from Aurora University.[11] "Make sure you're getting all those folks around the table, and talking about how — and in what circumstances — you will be using [texting]." Many campuses create a text messaging policy that outlines exactly how texting should — and shouldn't — be used.[12] **Don't forget to train everyone in best practices, which we covered in Step 5.**

Here are a few things to consider:

> Which departments are allowed to text students?

> How often is each department allowed to text?

> Will everyone in each department be able to text students, or just specific people?

> Will each student be assigned to a staff member in the texting platform?

> What access and responsibilities will administrators have?

In some text platforms, you can choose to either assign students to a specific staff member, or allow any staff member to text with any student. Assigning students can be helpful when you're doing advising or other tasks that involve one-on-one outreach — but it can also hinder the ability of colleagues to help with shared workloads. Think carefully before you decide how to set up your platform.

11   Texting Throughout the Student Lifecycle, Mongoose webinar.
12   You can see a sample Text Messaging Policy on the Mongoose website:
      https://blog.mongooseresearch.com/2017/05/30/free-template-text-messaging-policy-campus

> **STEP 8**

Collect student mobile phone numbers and get students to opt in to texting

In order to text with a student, you need their mobile phone number. Even once you have their number, you may need to ask for consent to text them. In this section, we'll discuss how to get phone numbers, obtain opt-ins (when needed), and let students manage which texts they want to receive.

What is an opt-in?

As a nonprofit institution, the generally accepted rule is that as long as a student provides their mobile phone number, you're not legally required to get explicit consent in order to text them. But there are times when you'll want to get consent (keep reading to find out why). This consent is called an "opt-in."

> What about FERPA? Whatever you do for student emails and phone calls, just apply the same logic and policy to texting. It's really that simple, because texting is just another medium for communicating with students.

Collecting and updating student phone numbers

If you don't already have student numbers from admissions or other sources — or if you want to make sure they're current — ask students to provide or verify their mobile number during key touchpoints. "We decided to have students go in during registration and update their emergency contact information, validate that their current address and phone number are correct, and provide a mobile number," noted Brian Jackson, application support specialist at McLennan Community College .[13]

13   Texting Throughout the Student Lifecycle, Mongoose webinar.

Validating mobile numbers

While students may provide your school with a number they claim is their mobile number, sometimes they enter a landline number or a number that's invalid altogether. Sending text messages to landline phone numbers or invalid phone numbers will increase your undelivered rate, which can eventually lead to carrier violations, much like spam filters for email. **Your texting platform should have a validation process that tells you whether or not each number is a true, valid mobile number** (some texting platforms automatically check for validation each time you add, import, or edit data).

Getting student opt-in

Even after you have a student's correct phone number, you may still want to get their opt-in.
There are three ways that schools typically obtain opt-in permission from students:

AUTOMATIC OPT-IN   Many institutions choose to automatically opt students in to receive text messages, especially from business units such as financial aid and the registrar's office.

ASSUME OPT-INS FROM ADMISSIONS   If your admissions team is already texting with students (who have presumably opted in), you may be able to assume these opt-ins once students are enrolled.

ASK STUDENTS TO OPT IN   You can ask students (through email or other communications) to opt in to receive text messages. If your school already uses texting for admissions, be clear that you're asking students to opt in to receive text messages as a current student; otherwise, students may think that they already opted in as prospective students, and don't have to opt in again.

> Regardless of how you decide to obtain opt-in, check with your legal team to ensure that your method is in compliance with any institutional policies.

HERE'S LANGUAGE YOU CAN USE FOR AN EMAIL TO STUDENTS, ASKING THEM TO OPT IN FOR TEXT MESSAGES:

<STUDENT-FIRST-NAME>,

Now you can get text message updates about upcoming deadlines, schedule changes, and events on campus. Please reply yes to this email to receive text messages to <STUDENT-PHONE-NUMBER>.

If <STUDENT-PHONE-NUMBER> is not your correct mobile phone number, please reply to this message with the correct number.

For more information about what types of text messages you may receive from [INSTITUTION], please visit [WEBSITE PAGE].

Your opt-in process may be different for various departments

With most texting platforms, you can have different settings for each department, which means you can control how you get opt-in on a departmental level. For messages coming from the registrar or financial aid office, you may decide to have students automatically opted in. For other departments, like campus life, you may want to ask the student to opt in.

Here are some common opt-in procedures from schools that are already texting students.

DEPARTMENT	OPT-IN	COMMENTS
Registrar & Financial Aid	Automatic	Very few institutions require consent in order to text students related to registration, deadlines, and relevant financial matters.
Advisors	Automatic	Most schools do not require consent for advisors to text with their students.
Student Success	Depends on the school	Some institutions require consent for success coaches to text with students.
Campus Events & Student Life	Ask	Most schools require consent for campus event announcements. Tip: track student-interest areas in order to keep text messages relevant and personal.
Housing	Ask	Most institutions require consent for non-emergency housing announcements.

As you can see, we don't typically recommend granting auto opt-in access to student life, campus activities, or any cocurricular/extracurricular offices. Students can (and will) manually opt in for these texts if they want to get them.
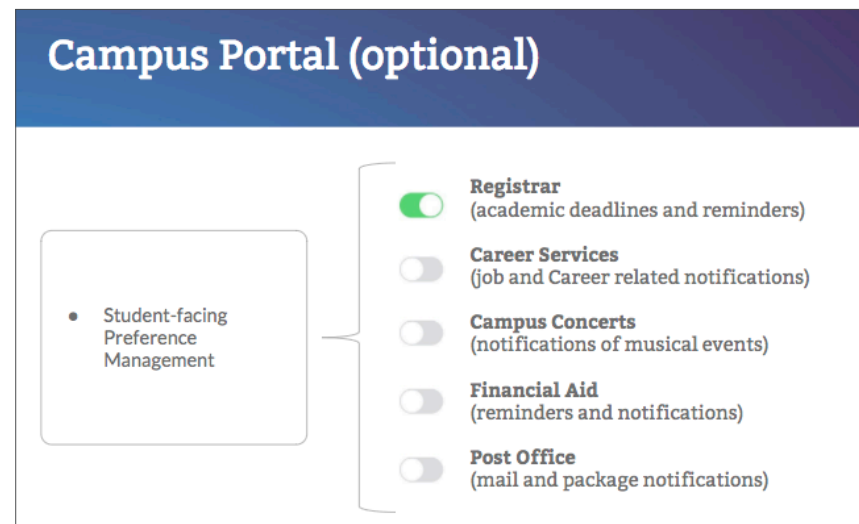
Use a campus portal to give students control

Some texting platforms allow students to determine which departments they want to receive texts from. Giving students this choice typically improves your results, since you're only texting students who want to hear what you have to say.

Managing opt-outs

Students can — and will — choose to opt out from texts. When they do, you may want your staff to follow up with them, confirm that the student really wants to opt out, and let them know that they'll only be getting critical information via text.

> Opting out of one area should not opt a student out of all texting on campus. As Amy Gray from Aurora University explained, a good strategy is to set up multiple departments in your texting platform, so if students opt out of one department, they're not opting out of the others.[14]

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N

> **STEP 9**

Implement and manage your texting communications plan

The big day is here, you've done all of your planning, and now you're ready to start texting students. Here's how to make sure everything goes smoothly for your staff, your leadership, and your students.

Communicate with your staff and other key stakeholders

Everyone who's going to be involved with texting students directly — or impacted by the texting (including your senior leadership) — should know what to expect. This includes:

> When you're going to start texting students

> Which departments (or staff members) will be texting students

> The official text messaging policy (see Step 6)

> Contact information for texting platform administrators

Make sure students know how to text you

If you want students to proactively text you (and not just respond to texts that you send), make sure they know how. Your texting number(s) should be on your website, your business cards, flyers, and other student-facing communications.

Have an ongoing stewardship plan

At Aurora University, a biweekly text-messaging-users-group meeting gives staff a chance to review how texting is working, share best practices, and plan for future communications.

Be prepared to expand your user base

We've seen it time and time again — as other people on campus see how successful texting is, they want it for their own department. **When others start asking you for access to the texting platform — and they will — be ready with a ballpark timeline and plan for rolling it out to others.** (And don't forget to pat yourself on the back for leading the way.)

Get ready for students to text you with other questions

Students see texting as just another way to get in touch with you. At one university, for example, students were having a problem finding a meeting room — so they texted a staff member to find out where they were supposed to be. It's not how the staff intended texting to be used — but you can't always control how your audience will use it.

> **STEP 10**

Measure, measure, measure

With texting, it's easy to see the results, often in just a few minutes or hours. But it's important to look at the right data — and know how to use it.

Look beyond response rates

Everyone wants to know what a good response rate is when texting. But response rate is only one metric. **Ultimately, student behavior is the most important metric, which can be answered by asking an even simpler question: are they doing what you want them to do?** Go back to the objectives you established in Step 1, and see how your results measure up.

What's a good response rate? It's normally between 50 – 75 percent, assuming you have clean data and a solid content strategy. That said, some messages are more informational, and are not designed to elicit a response. For those messages, consider using the auto-reply feature (available in some texting platforms) for students who reply to the text looking for more information.

Test, test, test

With most texting platforms, it's very easy to run A/B tests to determine what types of texts work best. **Some of the things you can test include:**

TIMING When in the student lifecycle is it best to text students for each of your objectives?

LANGUAGE Are there certain words or phrases that get students' attention?

FREQUENCY How often should you send texts?

Use data to convince skeptics

"We had some departments that weren't really on board with the texting," said Brian Jackson from McLennan Community College.[15] They understood that students are always on their phones — they just weren't convinced that it would work for their campus. But once they saw the data from their campus colleagues, and looked at the positive student feedback, "they are texting more than the ones who were on board from the start."

Remember the power of anecdotes

You'll have plenty of hard data to show your colleagues why texting works. But sometimes a story is even more impactful.

"This freshman, an aspiring nurse, had a fall in her dorm room the night before the last day of classes," said Jeff McNamara from Carroll University . "At the hospital, they noticed a mass in her brain — it turned out she had a brain tumor and needed to have surgery. But she still had to take her final exams, because she was applying to a competitive science program and they needed her grades . So, she was texting with me to coordinate with professors to take proctored exams once she recovered . It all worked out — she did great on her exams, and was admitted to the program — and I was able to help her stay calm and alleviate some of her anxiety because we were texting . With texts, we could communicate quickly and easily, and I knew she was getting my messages ."

It's good to have goals. But remember that not everything is measurable. As Andy Storms from Ozark Christian College said, "It's hard to quantify a relationship."

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15   Texting Throughout the Student Lifecycle, Mongoose webinar.

> **STEP 11**

Share your experience with others

Once you start getting results from texting students on campus, you can use what you've learned to help others on campus, discover additional opportunities to work toward your institutional goals, and even find ways to advance your own career.

Spread the news across campus

Texting works. It works with prospective students, current students, alumni, and even parents — but your colleagues may need to see it for themselves in order to believe it. By showing others on campus exactly how texting helps you reach your objectives, you can help them understand how it could work for them. **Here are some of the ways that universities are using texting:**

ADMISSIONS Identifying the most interested prospective students, communicating with parents, deadline reminders

ATHLETICS Recruiting high school students, scheduling for team members

ENGAGEMENT Event announcements

RETENTION/STUDENT SUCCESS Outreach to at-risk students, scheduling advising appointments

ADVANCEMENT Keeping in touch with young alums, sharing information about upcoming events

Consider industry-wide opportunities to promote your institution

As more schools consider and implement texting platforms, there are more and more opportunities to share your expertise — and your results — with others outside of your institution. Whether you want to speak at a conference, participate in a webinar or panel discussion, or be interviewed by industry publications, you'll have numerous opportunities to talk about how well texting works at your school.

Strengthen your leadership position

Let's be honest — everyone likes to be recognized for great work. One way to stand out — on campus and throughout the industry — is to be an advocate for texting students. Why? Because it shows that you're using innovative solutions to address specific challenges, improve student outcomes, and get better results.

Conclusion and next steps

Creating, implementing, and managing a texting communications plan for current students takes planning, collaboration, and ongoing work. But the results are truly transformative. Texting can help you achieve your objectives in student success, engagement, retention — and far beyond.

Now that you have a thorough understanding of what's needed to develop your plan, here's what we recommend you do next:

> Determine if texting is right for your institution (hint: it probably is).

> Set a goal deadline for having a texting platform in place; depending on your schedule, the software evaluation process, and budget cycles, this process typically takes 6 – 18 months.

> Identify which team members and others across campus (e.g., information technology) will be involved with each of the steps outlined in this plan, and share this document with them.

> Stay up-to-date on texting by following industry leaders on social media, attending texting workshops and presentations at conferences, and reading relevant blog posts and articles.

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