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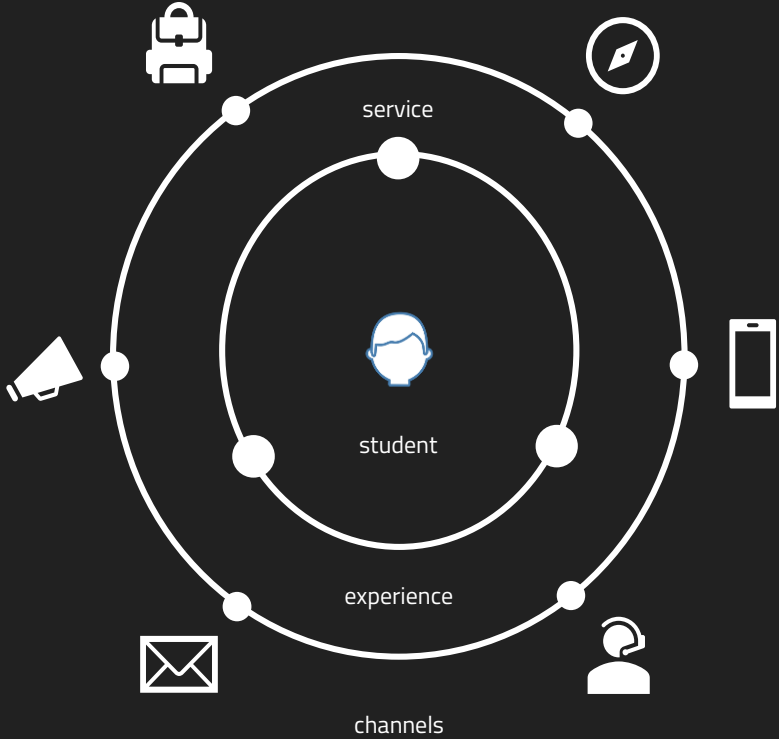## Communicating With Students: The Impact of Mobile Technology

Communications Whitepaper
April 2018

Contents

Executive Summary

Colleges and universities across the globe are experiencing significant challenges in communicating effectively with students. With email no longer being effective, departments such as student affairs, enrollment and alumni relations are turning to mobile technology to engage with Generation Z students.

Communication is critical to engagement efforts, but institutions are struggling to effectively deliver messages to a new generation of students. Communication gaps across campuses are the result of a variety of factors. Students are not opening emails because they receive a plethora of content to sift through.

The importance of communication can be seen across all departments of the institution, impacting students' lives in various ways:

- Improved use and **access to services and resources** on campus
- **Data-driven programming decisions** incorporating real-time feedback from students
- **Push-notification message delivery** – particularly in emergency situations

However, addressing those communication challenges is an area where institutions are still struggling. Specifically, key areas to address include:

- No access to the **student mindshare** (too much content to sift through)

- **Duplication of work** & mixed messages sent by departmental/channel-specific approach
- Inability to **tailor messages** to specific student cohorts
- Inability to **measure the impact** and success of delivered content

Mobile technology has changed the communication landscape. The penetration rate for smartphones among millennials and Gen Z students is 97% (and rising). Mobile enables an unprecedented method of personalized communication with:

- **Real-time message** delivery through push notifications
- Location and **event-specific content**
- **Deep analytics** and oversight to understand impact

Companies in the private sector have already begun using mobile to personalize communications and content to their consumers. Generation Z has come to expect this treatment from all their experiences – especially the student experience.

Institutions that are looking to connect with students where they are need to begin thinking about making mobile a central aspect to their communications strategy.

Why is Effective Communication So Critical?

Colleges across the United States have been competing for student attention for everything from enrollment to student affairs to advancement. All of this is underscored by a cultural change in the makeup of college students. Non-traditional, first-generation, commuter and distance learners are attending in greater numbers.

Colleges across the United States have been competing for student attention for everything from enrolment to student affairs to advancement. While this lack of access to the student mindshare manifests in various ways, the impact on the bottom lines of institutions makes it a critical issue.

For example, according to data published by National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in their Spring 2017 Report, enrollment across all post-secondary sectors has decreased by 1.5% on average every semester between Fall '14 – Spring '17.

For the students that do enroll, student facing departments experience a similar communication challenge; attempting to get students' attention focused on the plethora of academic, co-curricular and extra-curricular resources, services and events taking place on campus.

According to a study conducted at Michigan State University, senior admins found they were sending over 400 emails a year to their students (from their departments alone). Adding in the emails from groups, clubs and automated messages, the total

number would be considerably higher.

Impact of effective communication:

Colleges across the nation are facing the impact of ineffective communications on student completion rates with the national six-year college completion rate at 59% for undergraduate students.

All of this is underscored by a cultural change in the makeup of college students. Non-traditional, first-generation, commuter and distance learners are just some of the new types of college student for whom traditional communications may not be sufficient. Furthermore, the burgeoning numbers of Generation Z students means beside the quality/quantity of communication, the traditional mediums themselves are becoming obsolete.

The proliferation of mobile technology has been well documented over the past decade, but its replacement of laptop or desktop devices is a more recent trend. This means laptops and websites are no longer the 'most accessible' option, and

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having a mobile communication strategy is imperative to effective communication with students.

According to a study in the New York Times, a person living in an urban city would be exposed to over 5,000 ad messages a day. This underscores the sheer volume of information an individual has to sift through. Institutions need to learn how to separate critical communication from the noise and make sure students are engaged with their campus.

Specifically, colleges and universities need to rethink communication to:

– **Improve use and access to services and resources on campus**

Institutions have significant budget outlays for programming geared towards students in the form of campus services, resources and events. To make sure there is any type of outcome return on student investment, they would first need to know of the existence of said programming. Traditional banners, posters and flyers end up being costly, difficult to edit and most importantly, ignored. In order to get students to attend workshops, advising sessions and other services, effective communication is critical.

Understanding the effectiveness of student services and resources on campus is crucial when trying to improve the overall campus experience. Communicating with students to determine the strengths and weaknesses of these resources is critical. However, in order to eliminate data-blind decisions, institutions must find a way to effectively and efficiently gather information

– **Eliminate data-blind decisions with real-time feedback from students**

By asking the student a short, simple question after they've attended an event or service, the institution can determine how successful it was, in real time, and make suggestions for future activities accordingly. Soliciting student feedback in this manner

can assist with future program development, while also providing a greater sense of student ownership over their engagement.

A person living in an urban city would be exposed to over 5,000 ad messages a day.

– **Assist with emergency and security alerts through 'stubborn' push-notifications**

Unlike regular text messages, an emergency push notification must be acknowledged in order for it to be removed from the students' mobile screen. By requiring the student to hold their finger on the notification for a set amount of time in order for the message to disappear, it is virtually impossible for the student to accidentally dismiss it.

According to a recent study "warning messages sent through text messages are perceived to be more serious than warning messages sent through social media...Texting is not only faster than logging in to social media, but it is near-synchronous" [1].

Communication Challenges On & Off Campus

Administrators across the college campus are struggling to access the student mindshare, with disparate departments unable to consolidate messages across their channels. As a result, communications and work are duplicated across departments. This also leads to challenges in understanding the effectiveness of communications or the ROI of programming activities.

Thanks to the countless number of resources available to institutions today, communication is more accessible than ever before. From snail mail, to email, to social media updates and direct messaging, institutions have the ability to connect with students anywhere, and at any time. However, centralizing this communication is one of the biggest challenges facing higher education.

According to Inside Higher Ed, "the degree of difficulty for campus communications is directly proportional to the degree of autonomy enjoyed by people (and schools / departments / divisions) at the university." Put simply, communication on campus is fractured, causing students to miss key information.

Institutions are often made up of autonomous departments sending too much information to the wrong groups of students, causing students to essentially drown in a sea of irrelevant information. While it is important for students to be aware of what's happening on campus, the sheer amount of emails that make it into a student's inbox is overwhelming.

By sending students information that is irrelevant to them as an individual, they oftentimes dismiss important emails, believing them to be junk. According to a paper by researchers at Bowling State University, "72% of [student] respondents say they treat student organization emails as spam, 54% don't always read emails from the university or academic departments, and 39% said they don't always open academic advisors' emails"[1].

Gone are the times where the one-size-fits-all model would suffice. Today's students expect personalized experiences, tailored to them as an individual. "At its core, a culture of communication is about using the right techniques to engage the right audience about a relevant topic at the optimal time" [1]

In order to overcome communication gaps on campus, institutions must find a sustainable and up-to-date method to simplify and personalize their messaging. Put simply, institutions must send students the right data at the right time.

Another communication challenge that is often overlooked in higher education is the effectiveness of communication. According to the Education Advisory Board, a "lack of access to email metrics" is one of the reasons institutions are failing to successfully communicate with students. If a campus cannot identity what type of communication resonates with students, then their communication strategy will always be hit and miss, rather than precise and efficient.

- **Access to the student mindshare**

Students are inundated with messages, content and information on a near-constant basis. As a result, they have developed '8-second filters' in which the decide whether or not material is relevant to them. Without access to the student mindshare – by getting through that filter – messages will be ignored.

- **Duplication of work**

Departments typically use channel-specific messaging to deliver their content to a student. However, without looking at this from the student perspective, it is quite simple to duplicate work and messages. An example of this would be a transfer student receiving orientation information from the 'Transition' department, as well as the Faculty into which they transferred.

- **Persona-tailored content**

As students are becoming increasingly expectant of personalized services (e.g. Uber, Google, Amazon) from their institution, departmental or channel approaches are rendered ineffective. Institutions need to be able to deliver information that is relevant, timely and contextual – otherwise it renders both the message and sender irrelevant to the recipient.

- **Programming ROI (Return on Investment)**

In order to assess the effectiveness and measure the impact of messages sent to students, institutions need to be able to understand critical metrics such as delivery rates, open rates, click rates and engagement 'actions' undertaken as a result of the message.

Exhibit 1: Channel-Specific Messaging

services   resources   academics

channels

student
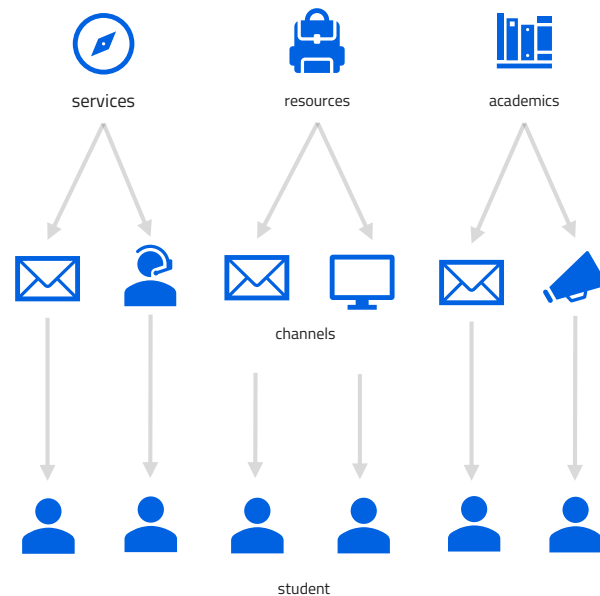
The Impact of Mobile Technology

Mobile technology has transformed industries, from retail to transportation, but rooted in all those innovations are fundamental changes in how we communicate. Mobile enables a scope, method and medium of communication that is hyper-personalized, delivered-instantly and scalable. The nature of mobile has also changed the expectations of students in their interaction with institutions.

Since the inception of modern smartphones in the summer of 2008, there has been an ever increasing trend of global smartphone ownership.

On average an individual checks their mobile devices over 150 times a day, with 58% checking their devices *every hour.* The technology has without a doubt changed the nature and possibility of human communications. Previous incarnations of communication technology, even email, had limitations on the length, scope and complexity of content delivery.

Impact on higher education:

Exhibit 2 tracks the Google search trends data for the term 'app on campus' in the United States, spanning from 2004 – 2018. What is apparent is the search for mobile apps for the student experience is something that is becoming increasingly important to incoming students.

Exhibit 2: Google Search Trends: 'app on campus'
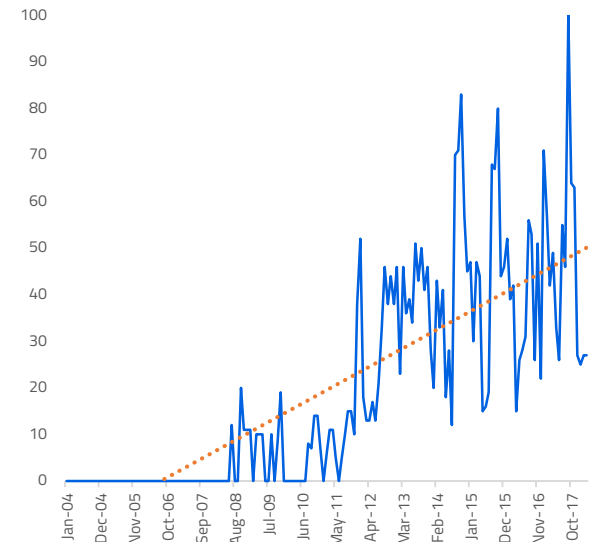
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The current generation is using this technology in all aspects of their lives, and expect a similar experience when they step onto a college campus (or even into a virtual one). They are not going separate their 'mobile experience' of campus from their overall 'student experience.'

Mobile apps take advantage of all of the unique characteristics of mobile technology that traditional 'web-portals' or email communications simply cannot match.

Exhibit 3: impact of Mobile Technology on Communications

Mobile-Feature	Impacts	Institutional Impact	
		Student Affairs	Information Technology
Always On	• Always on hand • Ability to deliver anytime	• Push notification reminders for events and services	• Emergency notifications delivered on device
Location-Aware	• Navigation capability • Location-contextual information delivery	• Directions and mapping around campus for orientation & prospective students	• Receiving notifications based on campus location (e.g. dining hall menu)
Personal	• Student sense of ownership • Personalized views, content.	• Improve sense of community and belonging on campus	
Social	• Ability to communicate • Sharing from one-to-many capability	• Campus Wall enables community-sourcing of information	• Administration tools to prevent abusive behaviour
Web-Enabled	• Instant access to information	• Instant updates and refreshing of critical information	
Backed up	• Constantly secured online • Anything is accessible, anytime		• No data loss of communication or engagement behaviour
Data Rich	• Every interaction can be measured	• Student co-curricular engagement (events / services) tracking	• Understand usage trends for different services
Integrated	• Modernizing display of legacy systems		• SIS and LMS integration puts critical information up front
Secure	• Held securely (Face ID, Fingerprints) • Remote access to wipe		• SSO prevents unauthorized access • Unified login to all campus services

Utilizing Engagement in Communication

Communication is no longer limited to the delivery of messages. The timing, manner and experiences associated with the message are all critical elements in communication. Companies such as Amazon, Google and Snapchat have take advantage of these changes to drive user engagement on their platforms, but more importantly, in their communication with their customers.

Mobile technology has changed the nature of information exchange to such a degree that the industry standard in information searching – Google – updated its indexing algorithms to prioritize mobile-friendly oriented content.

These kinds of actions may seem small on the grand scale of communications, but looking at some of the largest technology companies in the world, a trend begins to appear: they are all utilizing mobile engagement as a core strategy.

Impact on higher education:

The reason companies are doing this is because the exchange of information – everything from searching for a cab to booking a restaurant – has been crafted into an experience. Uber utilizes GPS and real-time feedback to show you how far away your ride is and an approximate arrival time. Facebook uses notifications to continuously push new content and try to get you to share more of your life with your network. All of them recognize that simply creating the mechanism is not sufficient, and the 'experience' in information exchange is just as critical.

Exhibit 4: How the Private Sector is changing Communication Experiences

Amazon
One-click access to shopping

Google
Personalized search results

Facebook
Relevant news and updates

Uber
On-demand transportation

Snapchat
Network based short messaging

Post-Secondary Communications Strategies

As students progress through the student life cycle, their needs change dramatically. Whether they are freshmen or seniors, the communications required can vary significantly. In order to be effective, it is important to ensure that the needs of every student are being met at the appropriate time.

Starting Out

At the beginning of the student lifecycle, as students are getting used to their environment and adjusting to a new way of life, they are focused on gathering information and making friends. New students are unfamiliar with the campus and may not know which services and resources are available to them.

On top of this, new students are also looking to build a social circle by meeting peers and making friends. Trying to navigate a complex campus environment while quickly trying to learn new skills and make friends can be extremely stressful for first year students.

As students progress through the lifecycle, they become more familiar with the campus and have a better understanding of their academic requirements. At this point, they have often also established a social circle.

Therefore, the resources students needed in their first year may no longer be as relevant in their second year. While new students worry about campus navigation and making friends, mature students might be more concerned with careers and extra-curriculars.

Identifying Critical Resources

At the beginning of the year, students need access to resources that will ease their transition into student life. Information on New Student Programs, Academic Advising and Residence Life can be particularly valuable. As the year progresses and students become more comfortable, their needs may evolve to include Career Counselling and Financial Aid.

As an institution, it is important to recognize this shift within the academic year and provide students with access to the resources that are most relevant to them. Today's students are a mobile-first generation who want to have access to information and resources instantly.

Delivering this information through a campus app can therefore be an extremely powerful communication tool.

Connecting Students to Service Providers

The Campus Wall on your campus app is a powerful tool that connects students to their institution in real-time, allowing them to ask questions and inquire about the campus at any time of day. A great way institutions can leverage this tool is by connecting students with certain service providers during specific times of the year.

The type of service providers that connect with students can change depending on the time of the year, once again ensuring that students have access to all of the information and resources they need, at the right time.

Adopting a Student-Centric Communication Strategy

As Exhibit 4 shows, the move from a channel-specific to student-centric strategy highlights the recipients experience as a critical element of the communication.

This methodology enables a student to access information in the most effective manner, leading to a better student experience and positive engagement.

As Generation-Z students are a mobile-first population, that experience is a critical one for institutions to develop in order to succeed in engaging the current generation of students.

Exhibit 4: Moving from a Channel-Specific to Student-Centric Messaging
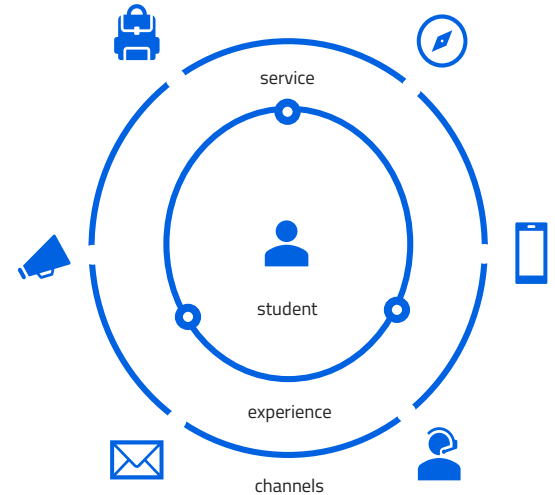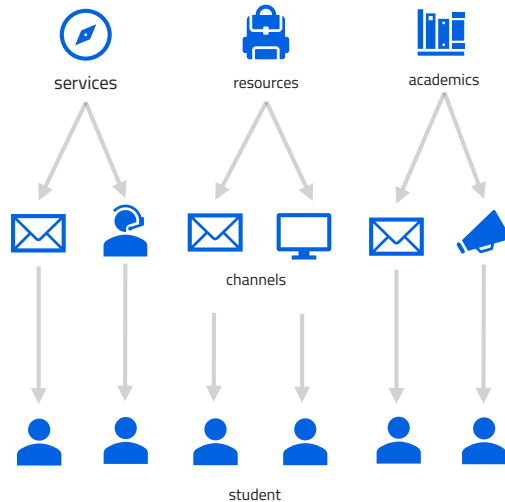
About Ready Education

"Ready Education allows students to communicate and access information quickly and easily, helping us build a campus community."

Sonja Daniels
Associate Vice-President – Student Engagement
San Jose State University

About Ready Education:

Student engagement and persistence pose a significant challenge in higher education.

Ready Education, the preferred choice of over 200 post-secondary institutions, offers custom mobile app solutions that enable colleges and universities to personalize the student experience and support engagement.

Mission:

Our mission is to make college a successful journey for every student. The Ready Education platform is designed to support student success by unifying campus resources – LMS, co-curricular, athletics, clubs/orgs, events and many more – within a branded, integrated, college app. By adopting the Ready Education platform, administrators are able to track student engagement, get immediate feedback, and send targeted content to their students.

Contact Information

Request a personal consult to learn how to bring Ready Education to your campus.

- **Email: hello@readyeducation.com**
- **Website: www.readyeducation.com**
- **Phone: 1-877-588-7508**