

Student Communication & Engagement Strategies

Ideally, the goal for your institution's communications strategy for the fall semester should be **to reduce confusion and build trust through proactive, directional, caring, and responsive messaging**. As your institution continues to evolve in policies, procedures, and support, everyone in the institution is adjusting to the new experience. Students in particular don't know what they don't know. A thoughtful communication plan supports students where they are with individualized messages that support timely responses.

Student communication should attempt to accomplish three different things: to be informational, to be responsive to students and their concerns, and to develop a relationship through a sense of understanding. Messaging strategies must be different for prospective, current, and former students, as COVID-19 is impacting each of these populations differently. Delineating the messaging enables tactics to accomplish discreet goals.



PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

Prospective students will pick up on the culture of your institution by how you communicate with them, how you guide them to resources, and how you connect with them emotionally. These students, regardless of age, are overwhelmed by today's events. This segment of students is eager for information, so it's important to communicate with them regularly and to answer their questions as quickly as possible.

Challenge: Building Relationships

"It's hard to find information on [the school's] website, and I feel like it is annoying asking my admissions counselor a lot of questions."

Communication Options:

Let prospects know that your enrollment team wants to hear from them, and commit to providing them with answers to their questions. When prospects know that you are looking at and answering every question, they will feel more comfortable reaching out. If you choose to text your prospects, this can help make conversations with them feel less formal. Without the formality, students can drop one-off questions. For example, if your institution has access to a [two-way texting platform](#) like Signal Vine, you can invite students to text in their questions. Depending on the texting platform, you can set up automated responses to frequently asked questions while giving necessary attention to students who have specific, personal questions or concerns.

Advantages Created:

These practices make it easy for prospects and admitted students to get information without feeling hesitant about asking questions. Even better, texting in particular will open up a consistent two-way dialog so that prospects can ask questions whenever they think of them.

You have a narrow window to respond. Research shows that “speed to lead” impacts every stage of the enrollment funnel, and a quick response will result in a more committed pipeline. By engaging students with new content across channels, you are further stimulating their engagement. Some content ideas include the following:

- New application and decision dates
- New virtual events
- New touring options
- New admissions policies and procedures

Your ability to convey confidence and an ease of “doing business” with your institution will increase the likelihood that students trust you as a destination not only for academic concerns, but also your ability to weather the unknown of the next few years instigated by COVID-19.

Your ability to build a relationship of trust with these students is critical. While many institutions are already turning to general emails and website updates, you can take your communications a step further with texting, giving prospects nearly instant access to information.

Challenge: Policy Changes

“My top choice colleges keep changing the rules. My mom and I can’t figure out how to stay updated because every institution is doing something different and their websites are all different and in their emails they all write it kind of differently.”

Communication Options:

Create an FAQ on your website and a link to your daily digest. Any time you add an update, consider texting your students who have made a deposit about the change with a link. Then, as students respond with questions, add them to your FAQ and consider adding them to your texting campaigns.

Advantage Created:

You are conveying to students that you responsive to new information and that they can trust you to make smart changes and be transparent.



Texting provides the ability for prospective students to receive information specific to them while making it easy for them to respond while campuses are closed and staff and faculty are moving to virtual meetings with students. Signal Vine's [Blended Messaging®](#) feature enables students to quickly get a response to general questions and enable your admissions counselors to focus on the more personalized inquiries and escalate to the phone, if desired.

Data from your communications campaigns will help you segment your inquiry pool and draw insights into how prospective students are moving through your funnel. The data will help you understand which messages are most compelling and identify new creative strategies to share the special qualities of your community. Especially in the era of COVID-19, responding quickly to health and safety issues builds confidence in prospective students about your institution's ability and commitment to resuming regular activities while keeping in mind personal health and wellness.

Faculty Tips

Faculty are an important part of the freshman enrollment cycle. Reaching out to students when they register and prior to coming on campus/before classes begin serves three main purposes: generating excitement for the class and what students will learn, setting expectations on student involvement in class and suggested preparations, and alleviating anxiety about being in a college class for the first time.

To optimize this opportunity, you can plan out a series of messages. As you write your messages, you might ask yourself these questions:

- What is the goal of my message (which of the three purposes)?
- What do I want the student to do (the call to action)?
- What do I want the student to think/feel (the language to show support, encouragement)?

A thoughtful message plan will ensure that students come to your first class excited to meet you and prepared to be engaged in class.

CURRENT STUDENTS

Current students have just weathered the whirlwind semester of moving online. Your current students will fall into one of three groups: rising second-year students, rising juniors and seniors, and graduating seniors. Each of these groups needs support and updates for very different reasons. Your ability to ensure that you retain students (so that they don't transfer somewhere else), support students (so that they use the resources to be successful graduates), and demonstrate commitment to your graduates as they move into the donor pipeline has short- and long-term implications to the institution.

	Rising Sophomores	Rising Juniors	Graduating Seniors
Risk to Institution	Considering transfer	Option to transfer	Feeling stuck
Career Support Needs	Paid summer jobs	Internships	Full-time jobs
Registrar Support Needs	Registration	Registration	Graduation application
Financial Aid Needs	FAFSA	FAFSA	-
Connection Needs	Connecting to peer/faculty tutoring	Connecting to peer/faculty tutoring	Connecting to alumni career development
Updates & Potential Action	New grading policy Spring refund plan Housing plan	New grading policy Spring refund plan Housing plan	How to access official transcripts Virtual graduation Graduate school incentive

Challenge: Segmenting communication

“My inbox looks like a junk mail folder. As a graduating senior, I don’t want information about registration, financial aid, or other things not relevant to me. So I don’t read any of it.”

Communication Options:

Segmenting your populations is critical to helping your students feel like more than “just a number.” Communications should be personalized, making each student feel like you’re aware of their exact placement in their educational journey. In turn, this can help students persist.

Advantage Created:

Students will remember the outreach to check on them, a gentle suggestion for alternative support, or an introduction to an alum, and knowing where they are in the journey and recognizing the unique challenges in that point of time will never be forgotten. They aren’t just students; they are individuals.

Topics to cover in your communications strategy might include the following:

- Emotional support
- Financial support
- Enrollment information
- Job/Internship alerts
- Tutoring and assignment IT support
- New grading policies

For institutions that have had a bumpy transition to remote learning, easing the business of being a student is key. Pushing students personal updates and being responsive to incoming messages provides valuable information on where to make referrals (both COVID-related and general inquiries). Even better, if you do this outreach via text message, you will come across as less formal and give students an immediate place to go whenever they need help.

Assistance from the career center is essential as students seek out alternative pathways to jobs and internships. Previously, students may have put career development as a lower priority to their social commitments. Now is the time to engage students with new tactics to keep their career plans on track.

Seniors need very specific outreach - not just for jobs, but in confirming that their remaining requirements are completed and supporting them as they transition to the working world, which is often a confusing transition to make.

Polling Current Students:

One community college had the feeling that students were really feeling dejected. Through a series of polls, messages, and connections to resources, students reported reduced feelings of despair, more control of the situation, and feeling supported to reach their goals.

Faculty Tips

Since the COVID-19 pandemic changed how classes are administered, students are reporting feeling overwhelmed, listless, and having trouble focusing. You can use your communications plan to support your students, help students engage with the material, and demonstrate your availability.



Faculty may want to use texting to reach out to the whole class to remind students of upcoming open offices hours or an assignment being due. They might also highlight an article or video clip that was in the news that they want to talk about in class that day. They could make announcements to reiterate a change in the syllabus or other amendment that was discussed in class and even issue a poll to take the pulse on the class. Faculty can use texting to reach out to individual students to send them gentle reminders that assignments weren't turned in on assigned dates, invitations to discuss feedback on class or assignments, and to touch base on how the class is meeting their major/minor goals.

ALUMNI

Alumni may not feel like your top priority in terms of services, but their contributions to campus, especially in these times, cannot be underestimated. Donations for those who are able are welcome, but it is those connections to jobs and internships that will bring incremental value to campuses. Other alumni may be considering the option of returning for another degree - and where better to go than back to their alma mater?

Challenge: Alumni boomeranging

"I hadn't even considered returning to my alma mater for a graduate degree. I really want to get an MS in Analytics, but I haven't seen anything in their alumni emails about it."

Communication Options:

Reach out to alumni to offer support and encourage giving, if they are in a position to offer it.

Advantages Created:

Reconnecting with alumni when there is a mutual benefit.

When communicating with your alumni, you might consider noting the following in conversations:

- Reengaging alumni to strengthen your relationship with them
- Noting the power of life-long learning
- Generating a pipeline for students to jobs/internships
- Reminding them about access to funding

Engaging with alumni at this time can result in stronger job outcomes, as well as an unplanned funnel of students into your pipeline.

Challenge: Finding jobs and internships for current students

"I don't have the funds to donate right now, and I'm overwhelmed with projects at work."

Communication Options:

Reach out to alumni to offer support. If they are in a position to offer a donation, understand how they would be able to support your institution with greatest impact.

Advantage Created:

Reconnecting with alumni when there is a mutual benefit. Students need jobs and internships – now with the flexibility of working remotely. There is always the possibility of getting a rich story about what the alum is currently doing and translate it into a success story for recruitment purposes.