



Research Brief II

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Texting to Increase College Access and Success: *Lessons from the Field*

By Zoë B. Corwin, Tattiya Maruco, Maria Romero-Morales, and Christine Rocha

INTRODUCTION. Within the last decade, the college access and success fields have been inundated with approaches that rely on technology to relay information and provide support to students. In many regards, the migration of college-related information to online platforms has been helpful in promoting college access. Prospective students can learn about colleges through elaborate websites and virtual tours without having to fund a preliminary visit to campus; they can use online calculators to reveal the actual costs of college (beyond tuition) and compare costs between institutions; and they can connect with older friends and extended family through social media to get a better understanding of college life. Information about particular student groups (i.e. students with experiences in foster care or students who identify as Dreamers or undocumented or unhoused) can be found in evergreen locations online.

Yet in subtle and pervasive ways, online resources have the potential to exacerbate inequities. With the assumption that students have access to resources because they are online, we run the risk of not ensuring that all students understand and have the ability to access those resources and related support. Barriers to access are particularly salient for students without adequate access to digital devices and/or Broadband - at home or school - or for students with low levels of digital literacy. With the expectation that Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), college applications, and increased amounts of coursework be completed online, access to digital tools and digital literacy has become intertwined with college access and success.

In 2014, the Pullias Center for Higher Education embarked on a partnership with the non-profit *Get Schooled* to pilot a gamified college access approach in high schools across California. Our goal was to use games, online content, social media and gamification to generate “buzz” around applying to college and for financial aid – and ultimately, to increase FAFSA, Dream Act, and college application completion rates. The intervention we developed and implemented together – along with game designers from *USC’s Game Innovation Lab* – illustrated a positive *impact* on FAFSA completion rates in treatment schools. Since that time, our collaborative approach has evolved, as has the range of digital tools available related to college access/success and financial aid.

Over the past two years, Pullias Center researchers and practitioners from Get Schooled have collaborated on a project designed to boost first year persistence and success at California State University, Dominguez Hills. This brief is intended to share outcomes and lessons learned from implementing the texting component of Get Schooled’s digital strategy. Our aim is to share concrete examples that might be useful to practitioners and policymakers interested in incorporating texting into their institutions and programs.

BACKGROUND

Not all texting approaches are created equally or for the same purposes. Some texting applications are designed to simply broadcast information; others aim to “nudge” students towards taking action through regular contact and reminders. While research suggests that large-scale, one-way nudging campaigns are not effective for FAFSA completion, there is evidence that suggests that small-scale nudging campaigns from local organizations have positive impacts on student outcomes.¹

Nudging can be a cost-effective digital approach that steers an individual’s behavior towards a desired outcome.² In education, nudging interventions can serve as a tool to influence students’ behavior in the classroom, during the college application process, and once at college. Text nudging appears to have the potential to positively affect the college-going trajectories of first-generation and low-income students.³

Nudging also has the potential to have a positive effect on postsecondary students. A recent study showed how community college students studying STEM-related majors improved their studying habits and became aware of on-campus resources as a result of nudging.⁴ Another study used nudging to remind students of important deadlines while encouraging them to meet with their peer mentor for additional support.⁵ Nudging has also been shown to direct students towards academic resources, such as tutoring.⁶

As texting approaches grow in popularity, we will learn more about optimal frequency of texts, how to most effectively convey content, and types of supplementary support needed to ensure the greatest impact.

REFLECTING ON PRACTICE

In an effort to advance understandings of how texting might support students, below we highlight strategies and challenges documented through our **research-practice partnership** with Get Schooled. The scope of Get Schooled’s outreach and their track record of sustaining contact with students provides a unique vantage point to better understand the potential that texting interventions may hold in promoting college access and success, especially given research on the null effect of large scale, impersonal texting campaigns.⁷ Get Schooled’s approach is designed to run at scale while maintaining a strong focus on personalization and student engagement.

We first describe Get Schooled’s overarching approach and then focus on their texting platform and the students who use the textline. We then highlight strategies employed by Get Schooled to connect with students and encourage behaviors conducive to college access and success.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM

Get Schooled’s overarching approach centers around three primary strategies: (1) curate free digital content around milestone-based journeys; (2) provide free personalized support and reminders via multiple communication channels, including text, emails, and social media; and (3) leverage partnerships with schools, school districts, state agencies and other non-profit organizations to grow reach and impact.

Get Schooled launched their textline in 2016. Since then, **staff with expertise in college access and admissions** have exchanged over 1.2 million texts with 183,000 participants.

While reading, please keep the following questions in mind:

- ◇ *What are the unique informational needs of the students your organization serves?*
- ◇ *What types of behaviors would be helpful to encourage through texting?*
- ◇ *How do you build trust between a student and a texting intervention?*
- ◇ *What digital access challenges do your students need support with?*
- ◇ *Are there specific texting strategies that make sense to pilot?*
- ◇ *How will you evaluate which texting strategies are effective?*
- ◇ *Once you identify an approach you’d like to employ, how will you plan and support implementation?*

HOW DOES THE TEXTLINE WORK?

Get Schooled manages two types of texts: (1) texts generated by Get Schooled that are intended to share information, foster dialogue or encourage behavior; and (2) texts initiated by students, usually seeking answers to questions or support during the college application, financial aid and/or college transition processes.

In order to customize messaging, Get Schooled collects information on high school graduation year and city. Messaging is then tailored around key milestones related to preparing for college, applying to college and for financial aid, enrolling in college, transitioning to college, or navigating the first year of college.

Upon sending texts, the team determines what branching options exist. In other words, is an automated or human response better suited for a particular text? For example, a text that asks ‘have you registered for the SAT?’ can easily be addressed by the system automatically generating a response that offers a link to sign up for the test or tips on how to study/prepare; whereas a text that inquires ‘what are your concerns about affording college?’ merits an individualized response crafted by a staff member.

The textline staff regularly monitors engagement metrics. Trends in responses influence content of new texts. For example, during the 2019 school year, they witnessed active and consistent responses to broadcasts related to scholarships. Consequently, they continued disseminating scholarship-related information until that engagement tapered.

Program-generated texts. Of the unique texts pushed to high school juniors, the focus on academics and preparing for college. As one example, juniors received multiple choice college entrance exam questions daily. These types of text messages can be categorized as operational, such that they serve the purpose of encouraging students to complete a concrete task or consume important information.

Of the unique texts pushed to high school seniors, approximately half were operational texts focused on financial aid for college, either by encouraging FAFSA completion or providing scholarship opportunities. The majority of other operational texts communicated information related to the college application process.

Student-initiated texts. Get Schooled also receives self-initiated questions from students (i.e. generated by students without having responded to a prompt). In 2019, the majority of self-initiated text messages from juniors revolved around the SAT/ACT and academics. Self-initiated questions from seniors focused on financial aid and the broader college application process. First-year students most frequently inquired about academics and financial aid.

Other common types of student-initiated texts were to: (1) initiate a conversation with staff (‘What’s up Get Schooled?’); (2) determine if the textline was automated or not (‘text back bruh’); (3) reach out for socio-emotional support (‘hello I don’t know who’s here today but I need to talk I’m feeling down’); or to (4) solicit advice on a specific question (‘Should I keep doing leadership? I’m tired of it honestly’ – ‘What year in high school should I start applying for colleges? How long is the application process?’ – ‘My mom’s getting evicted while I’m away at college’). Questions and comments appeared to indicate that students were reaching out to whoever was on the end of the textline and highlight the benefit of having an open-ended communication channel for students who feel like they might not be able to reach out otherwise.

Challenges of running the texting platform relate to logistics. It can be difficult to track and segment students (i.e. segmenting has to be done on manually or on a broad-cast-by-broadcast basis). Building comprehensive profiles for each student when working with thousands of students is virtually impossible. Responding to high output of texts requires careful and timely maneuvering.

STRATEGIES FOR USING TEXTING TO ENGAGE AND SUPPORT STUDENTS

The below strategies derive from lessons learned from (1) interviews with Get Schooled practitioners, (2) reflections on collaborating with the Get Schooled team on a large-scale high school program (i.e. with 60 California high schools) and a small-scale postsecondary pilot study (i.e. with one postsecondary institution), and (3) analysis of textline engagement metrics and the content of text broadcasts and exchanges. The list of strategies is not exhaustive, nor is it meant to be adopted in its entirety. Rather we hope to stimulate dialogue among practitioners in schools and organizations about how to thoughtfully pilot, implement, and evaluate texting applications in order to effectively serve at-promise students.

Know your audience, be relatable, and build trust. Get Schooled texts are characterized by accessible language, concise messaging, and positive framing. Gen Z students appreciate authenticity. The importance of building a relationship and trust with students via text is paramount to the ongoing success of the program. If students think they are being texted by a robot, rather than a real human being who understands their geography and personal circumstances, their overall rate of participation drops significantly.

Relatability is a key component of long and short-term engagement in text outreach. Response rates and student-initiated texts increase when students are certain they are (a) speaking with a real person and (b) when information matches events and dates in their city/state.

Establishing a personal identity (rather than an organizational one) is critical on text. This is likely because text is a medium primarily used for communication between close friends and acquaintances (contrast this with email - a medium in which users are very accustomed to emails from companies and entities). Students are more likely to trust information coming from someone they know and trust.

Capitalize on calendar milestones. Plan a texting schedule that follows key school, state, college/testing/financial aid application, and/or college deadlines. Pay attention to students' needs as they approach different milestones, such as waiting for acceptances or matriculating to college (i.e. when summer melt poses a risk). As two examples, college essays and application seasons generate lots of questions (September through November - depending on the state) and after application season winds down (mid-December), students are anxious for information about scholarships and financial aid.

Time broadcasts strategically. Noon is a good time to broadcast texts. High school students like to respond during lunch; their second most popular response time is right after school.

Geopersonalize. Blanket messaging sent out to students nationally doesn't facilitate necessary relatability and trust. Effectively communicating with students via text

demands sensitivity to and acknowledgement of local circumstance (e.g., testing dates in a student’s school district, state-specific financial aid deadlines, major events affecting specific geographies).

Individualize wisely. Even one broadcast containing information that doesn’t apply to a student (e.g., a call to get ready for finals if the student is in a school district that does not have finals for several months) can cause participants to opt-out.

Act nimbly and creatively; amplify other digital resources. Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of a texting approach is its ability to respond rapidly to social trends or challenges. Get Schooled was able to pivot quickly to address immediate informational needs related to Dreamer students (2016) and COVID-19 (2020). By creating clear messages and directing students to online resources, they were able to nimbly amplify existing efforts to support students. Because students can be overwhelmed by too many communications (i.e. via email, text and social media), the aesthetics and clear content of text messages matter.

Evaluate what works and adjust accordingly. Don’t be afraid to adjust strategies in response to student engagement and feedback from students and practitioners. Get Schooled tracks textline engagement by monitoring: (1) Basic response rate, (2) Conversion rate (links clicked through), and (3) Exchange rate (number of back and forths).

They found that students tend not to respond if they receive a link in a text, regardless of how the text is worded. Rather, posing a question first elicits a stronger response rate – a trend also found in the literature.⁸ Consequently, Get Schooled suggests first asking a question with new broadcasts – which ideally opens the window for getting to know the student on the other end of the textline – then sending a link.

Backend analytics can be overwhelming. Focus on salient metrics that further your goals for the texting approach.

Be hyper-vigilant of digital equity issues. Finally, and most importantly, recognize that a texting application is only effective for students who have a mobile device (or computer where they can receive texts), a robust texting plan, and/or strong Broadband access. Be diligent about vetting digital access issues and accommodate accordingly.

CONCLUSION

We have learned that significant challenges exist in bringing individualized texting strategies to scale. And yet, texting remains one of the most common and popular modes of communication employed by high school and college students. This tension merits deeper consideration.

Our current thinking on the topic is guided by an understanding that Generation Z students tend to be tech-savvy, self-reliant, are accustomed to immediate feedback and instant gratification, and adept in their ability to communicate via micro-conversations. Short, simple, personalized, and authentic messages resonate with this group.⁹ Gen Z students can identify when someone is simply trying to sell a product versus trying to connect with them. Consequently, transparency is an important factor when engaging with this generation.¹⁰ As the field moves forward, we are hopeful that researchers and practitioners will continue to dialogue about the role of texting as a viable tool in college access and success spaces – and develop best practices accordingly.

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Endnotes

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