

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

# Nudging in a Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Text Messaging College Students amid COVID-19

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This study analyzed six months of student feedback from a text messaging program serving 40 Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) in the United States immediately after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020. Findings suggest institutions of higher education could have communicated curricular models and campus information in a more timely, clear manner to assuage student anxiety and support student persistence and graduation. Implications for enrollment management and financial aid practitioners are addressed.

As technologies have changed and advanced over the past 30 years, colleges and universities have started to embrace communicating with students through new formats, including email, social media, and text message (Bird, *et al.* 2019). In an effort to engage students, institutions have been text messaging their students to encourage them to accomplish enrollment management and financial aid tasks, such as completing applications and submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). To date, several studies have analyzed the efficiency and effectiveness of text messaging campaigns, sometimes finding that text messages (nudging) can be a low-cost solution to encourage students to perform a task in order to either enroll or retain that student at the institution, possibly driving higher yield, per-

sistence, and graduation rates (Page, *et al.* 2020). However, text nudging research has offered mixed results, as studies have also found that such efforts may not improve student grades or persistence over longitudinal periods of time (Oreopoulos and Petronijevic 2019), and nudging may not be as important for behavior as an individual's motivations (Damgaard and Nielsen 2018).

In the field of strategic enrollment management (SEM), decades of research has posited that a plethora of student-focused communication is necessary for institutions to truly practice *strategic* enrollment management, including communication related to applications, admissions, financial aid, housing, and much more (Bontrager 2004; Dolence 1988; Hossler and Bontrager 2014). According to such research, communication di-

rectly related to admissions processing and financial aid is crucial to ensure administrators can clear students to enroll in courses and pay their tuition and fees. Here, researchers have consistently emphasized that clear communication in these two units—admissions and financial aid—is essential for SEM. Over the past two decades, text messaging has become an important communication strategy for both enrollment management and financial aid offices to provide early outreach to students to engage them in their college decision-making process.

Yet, challenges exist, and many are owed to communication clarity of enrollment procedures and finances. For instance, Dennis (1998) indicated that financial aid communication was critical for smooth enrollment management processes, as many students do not and will not access an institution without the proper funding to do so. To assuage poor communication, Bontrager (2004) pointed out that “creating and continuously strengthening linkages with functions and activities across the campus” (9) is absolutely essential to collaborate internally so that external communication is sound. To facilitate this sense of collaboration, enrollment management experts have stated that institutions must communicate internally to ensure that admissions and financial aid staff understand each other’s student milestones and deadlines (*e.g.*, application deadlines, priority application dates for financial aid, etc.) so that students receive a clear, consistent, accurate message from the institution, no matter which unit a student communicates with (Dennis 1998; Hope 2015; Pulliam and Sasso 2016).

However, the COVID-19 global pandemic thrust colleges and universities into crisis mode, and institutions were tasked with communicating with students in an unprecedented fashion. With the U.S. federal government providing CARES Act funding, colleges and universities needed to alert students to the opportunity for applying for these funds as well as articulate the application process and ensure that students were awarded their emergency funds to overcome whatever personal crisis they were facing. In no uncertain terms, the early months of the pandemic were extremely stressful for

all stakeholders involved. Enrollment management professionals were simultaneously tasked with monitoring their own health and safety while communicating with current and prospective student audiences with heightened sense of urgency, speed, and timing. Additionally, institutional leaders did not have precedent to draw upon, as a global pandemic has not affected postsecondary education since the Spanish Flu in the early 1900s, and even then, postsecondary communication structures were not nearly as complex and multifaceted.

To rapidly communicate critical and potentially life-saving resources, countless institutions of higher education used text messaging to promote COVID-related emergency programs and other critical pieces of institution communication. However, no prior text messaging or nudge research has explored how students respond to text messages in a global crisis and what resources they need to persist through that crisis. Moreover, the field of strategic enrollment management is missing a critical analysis regarding how a text messaging program can communicate many types of enrollment management communication (enrollment, financial aid, retention, academics, campus life, housing, etc.) and how students viewed the clarity and effectiveness of that messaging amidst a global pandemic.

As a result, this study reports qualitative findings from a months-long text messaging program to articulate what institutions of higher education could have communicated better to college students and their support networks amid the COVID-19 pandemic. These qualitative findings include student feedback from text messages meant to encourage students to engage with on- or off-campus resources to help them persist through the COVID-19 crisis and stay enrolled at their institution. Yet, the findings reveal that many institutions of higher education did not communicate basic information such as how to contact advisors and support staff, how to procure technology resources on and off campus, and how to locate various due dates for student-focused tasks. Herein, the research team addresses implications for enrollment management practitioners looking to improve their communication, as well as implications for student audiences anticipating com-

munication from their institution of higher education in crisis situations.

## Data Sources, Program Information, and Analysis Overview

### *Data Sources*

This study drew upon student feedback from a text messaging program from March 2020 until September 2020, the first six months of the COVID-19 global pandemic. During that time, the text messaging program supported roughly 40 Minority-Serving Institutions (both four-year institutions and community colleges), and text messages were sent on a semi-regular (at least once per semester) basis to every institution of higher education.

When text messages were sent, students had the option of replying to the text message and expressing their needs or asking specific questions from their institution regarding a variety of topics. The research team gathered this feedback from students and synthesized this feedback into three cohesive themes to inform practitioners on how to communicate with students in a global pandemic. At the time of writing this article in early 2021, the COVID-19 global pandemic was slowing but still a looming threat (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021); therefore, this study is especially important for practitioners looking to better communicate with their students—especially minoritized students of color—through this crisis.

### *Scope of Text Messaging Program*

The text messaging program was originally designed for sixteen Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) across a seven-state footprint in the U.S. Southeast and all institutional sectors: two-year community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, and public and private institutions. As the program matured, more institutions were added to the program portfolio to result in 40 participating institutions overall as of March 2020. To place the scope in perspective, in 2020 alone, the program was responsible for helping institutions send 2.6 million text messages to more than 470,000 unique students attending MSIs. These institutions were comprised of a

majority of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), several Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and a few Predominantly-Black Institutions (PBIs). The program was administered by an educational nonprofit that partnered with the institutions themselves; as a result, the administrators of the text program were not employees of the institution but third-party contractors working on behalf of the institution to communicate with its students.

The program focused on creating messaging under three main topic umbrellas; the first was enrollment management. This included any nudges related to finalizing enrollment after acceptance to the institution, whether that was registration, advising, or re-engaging with students who stopped out in previous terms. The second umbrella was financial aid. Under this topic area, FAFSA completion and verification-related messages were sent as well as communication about scholarships, awards, aid, and anything else that would fall under the financial aid category. And finally, there was the broad umbrella of student affairs. This area included financial literacy, self-care, student life, residence life, academic advising, and wellness messaging to get students through difficult times, including the time immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic declaration by the World Health Organization.

Text messages included information about enrollment for classes, completion of financial aid processes, or general outreach to support students during the COVID-19 global pandemic, including instructions for how to apply for CARES funding. Text messages were sent on behalf of the institution by a third-party and often contained institutional contact information for students to reach out and learn more about their resources or options. A commercial texting platform was used, which allowed two-way text messaging, and the program staffed communications professionals to monitor student questions via text in real time during normal business hours. After each text message, the communications professionals replied to any student who responded to the text and then gathered those responses, coded them into categories, and reported those categories to the institution. Fewer than 10 percent of

text messages received student responses from the 1.3 million overall texts sent. The results of this two-way communication and the categories of student responses represent the primary data source used in this study.

### *Analyzing the Data*

Within the program, the text messaging communications team gathered the week's "text trends," or the main responses from students in response to that week's text messaging organized by institution. These trends were used to provide feedback and insight to institutional partners about what their students were thinking, feeling, or may be dealing with, informing institutional communication to and support of students. In all, the research team gathered each weekly "text trend" between March 2020 and September 2020 and grouped them into three coherent themes, spanning 1.3 million texts across 40 Minority-Serving Institutions. The research team was comprised of three members, and each reviewed the "text trends" independently and then collaborated to share codes and consolidate initial themes. This resulted in a blinded coding strategy that added a level of rigor and complexity to the study while also maintaining a simplicity that would be easily interpretable by both research-focused and practice-focused audiences of enrollment management professionals.

### *Limitations and Strengths of the Study's Population*

As a condition of program participation, all institutions in this study were anonymous. All student identities were also anonymous to protect the integrity of the text message program and to remove bias from this study's findings and its implications for policy and practice. Given these limitations, it is important to note that the majority of the students in this study were likely students of color (attending either an HBCU, HSI, or PBI). The concerns of these students must be prioritized, and their privacy must be protected given the historical inequities faced by students of color and low-income students in U.S. higher education. In addition, the institutions served by the text messaging program

are Minority-Serving Institutions and likely have not been granted the same access to tools, funding, and human resources as their predominantly White counterparts (Gasman 2010; Gasman, *et al.* 2008). Therefore, the implications for this study are especially relevant to minoritized institutions in the United States, compared to predominantly White institutions.

As a result, this study may not be generalizable to all enrollment management professionals across the United States, yet this study's population represents an incredibly valuable and underserved student body: students attending Minority-Serving Institutions. Although data sharing will be limited per the program guidelines, this limitation is a strength. Liberating the voices of students of color and informing enrollment management professionals how to best communicate with students of color represents an opportunity to simultaneously inform enrollment management professionals and mitigate the burden of cultural taxation on communities of color, protecting the integrity of the program and the confidentiality of the students' information.

### *Findings*

After analyzing the aforementioned "text trends," three clear themes emerged from the data spanning 1.3 million text messages to students attending Minority-Serving Institutions between March 2020 and September 2020. These themes are related not only to enrollment management concerns but also institutional support constraints and recommendations, given the crisis that both students and staff experienced in the early months of the pandemic. As a result, both enrollment management and student affairs professionals will learn how to better support students in an emergency and whether institutional supports can be developed to close service gaps and improve student engagement and retention.

### *Students Frustrated and Endangered Without Institutional Information*

As campuses transitioned to the remote environment from March 2020 until the end of the spring 2020 semester, many students simply said they just didn't know enough about what was happening or when it

was happening. Early on, throughout the month of April, students from multiple campuses expressed their frustration with the lack of institutional information regarding COVID-19 procedures, including how instruction would be delivered, where and if COVID-19 testing would be available, and how to file for emergency funds and institutional refunds. Moreover, students expressed concern with the unresponsive nature of institutional communication, with many claiming that they could not contact an institutional representative regarding enrollment or financial aid-related issues.

What became clear was that students were not being provided consistent and live updates from reliable institutional sources. This lack of institutional communication led to students feeding the rumor mill in full force, both on and off institutional campuses. After engaging in two-way communication through text and learning more from the students, it appeared that students were often misinformed or not informed at all about what was happening. Students expressed confusion about the timing and urgency of campus closures, housing costs, and adjusted course schedules. Countless text messages from students expressed strong anxiety and confusion about how institutions would adjust course schedules in a remote environment and whether they would provide alternative forms of instruction and assessment.

Moreover, a large population of students had urgent and critical questions related to housing, including whether they could continue living on campus or if the institution could help make alternative plans, as some students did not have safe homes to return to once leaving campus. In this crisis moment—March through May 2020—students were struggling to simultaneously understand how to leave campus and find a safe living arrangement while juggling their academics and finances. Several students questioned whether they could afford the airfare to return home and if such modes of transportation were even safe.

Another group of students, who were already potentially food insecure and on the brink of homelessness given the crisis, were very concerned that they would not have a safe home environment, or any environment, to return to. As the research team considered the dis-

proportionate impact of the pandemic on minoritized communities and the students the program served, the team had to consider what it meant for campuses to shutter and dining halls to be suddenly unavailable to food insecure and homeless or housing insecure students. As institutional administration, faculty, and staff began the move toward remote operations, the impact on students' food insecurity was evident in responses from students. During the two-way communication, students expressed difficulty communicating with their institution, as many campuses did not have the infrastructure or human resources to guide thousands of students away from campus and toward family- or community-based resources to replace what would be unavailable at their institution of higher education.

To provide context for the communication lag, students were texting the team amidst the early months of the pandemic and expressing that it took weeks for institutional support offices to respond to questions and concerns. This often meant that students texted a question in late March and finished the spring 2020 semester in May without any institutional response to their question. This lag suggests that students who persisted during this period were extremely resilient, resourceful, and responsible, as many students lost their housing, food, and educational resources within a two-week time frame when the pandemic began in mid-March of 2020. Students often reported their issues as time sensitive, and ultimately, these students were left without answers and to fend for themselves for an entire semester.

### *Students Felt Unsupported in Digital Learning Environments*

Throughout the early months of the pandemic, students expressed concerns about learning online, including their difficulty in procuring technology, reliable internet access, and time away from work or family for their online studies. In addition, students voiced their displeasure for online learning and their new virtual reality, often expressing a longing for campus to return to normal and to see their friends and classmates on campus.

Of those students who were in their first year, many expressed concern about losing the experience of being

on campus and attending what they referred to as their “dream school.” Other students responded to the messaging by explaining that without campus resources, they simply lacked access to a reliable computer or internet, rendering online learning impossible. Moreover, students claimed that they were not provided any guidance—in the early months—regarding how to procure these necessities and maintain academic progress toward their degree. Many students had not been fully aware of the crisis management required on college campuses, especially considering COVID-19 presented problems that had no precedent for at least 100 years in higher education.

But even after having access to a computer or the internet, many students were experiencing a plethora of technical difficulties. Students expressed a wealth of frustration with unresponsive professors and IT staff, many of whom likely had their own crises to deal with and needed to take care of themselves and their families first. Yet, the lack of a timely institutional response caused many students to miss classes and fall behind in coursework. Many academic-focused issues were related to instructor knowledge and use of the institution’s learning management system (LMS). For example, several students shared that they were unable to turn in their assignments on time or submit tests when they were due because their instructor had not updated the LMS or instructors were not clear on how to use the LMS from a student perspective. Additionally, students complained that they were not able to log into their live class sessions because of how the instructor organized the LMS.

Unfortunately, many students also expressed their disappointment in the lack of empathy from professors when their coursework was not completed on time, even after having reached out to resolve the issue early on and not receiving a timely response. Students claimed that their grades suffered, and institutional support was lacking, even though the students had documented their concerns over institutional email and the institution’s LMS. Many students finished the spring 2020 semester with unresolved academic issues, many of which may have informed their choice to leave the institution.

### *Students Expressed Confusion and Anxiety Surrounding Financial Aid Processes*

According to the content of many text messages in the program (meant for student financial processes), many students were confused about financial aid processes, and this was possibly made worse by the anxiety and stress they felt amid the pandemic. Students often asked pointed questions about submitting the FAFSA and completing the verification process to procure their aid. Moreover, given the affordance of CARES Act funding to eligible Title IV institutions of higher education, students caught wind of the availability of emergency aid funds but were unclear about how to apply for the funds to assuage their financial circumstances.

During the March 2020–September 2020 time period, the number one concern that came from students was that they were concerned about how they would continue to pay for their education when they were facing a loss of personal income as well as the possibility that their parents would lose income. Students also expressed anxiety about what it would mean for them to lose their on-campus employment, whether that was through federal work study or other means. As students were concerned over the campus or the nearby community shutting down, some subsequently lost their employment without any means of quickly recouping those funds to pay bills.

As the months passed and students transitioned back home or wherever they could, the research team experienced a lot of communication that explained how students were financially supporting their family or community in a variety of ways: babysitting, taking up odd jobs, or becoming the teacher or support system for younger siblings or family members who were in need of remote learning instructors. Countless students were forced to leave a stressful yet reliable campus living arrangement for an unclear home situation where they were relied upon to be breadwinners, placing their education second and their family first. Specifically, regarding enrollment management, many students spoke about how they did not plan to re-enroll at their prior institution or pursue higher education anywhere else, as the uncertainty over their financial struggles



was simply too much to endure. Many of these issues stemmed from students leaving campus and immediately transitioning into a caretaker or breadwinner role.

Finally, once the first round of CARES Act funding was released and available to higher education institutions to distribute to their students in mid-2020, students had a plethora of questions and could not find their answers through institutional means:

- How do I apply?
- Is there a deadline?
- How much money will I receive?
- When will the funding be approved for me to receive it?
- When will I receive it?
- How will I receive it?
- How quickly will I be able to use it?
- What will I be able to use it for?

Students asked these questions—through two-way text messaging—throughout the early months of the pandemic, as institutions may not have communicated the answers in a timely or accurate manner for any variety of reasons. This study found that students were overwhelmed in general about what it meant for them to navigate a pandemic while trying to support their spouses and/or children, or what it meant for them to be paying for what they called an “experience” that was now in a remote environment. Many institutions in the program had extremely vibrant and engaging campus communities and on-campus experiences, and students consistently expressed frustration with that being taken from them by the pandemic yet still having to pay full price. The lack of institutional contact made that tension even more challenging for students to navigate a pandemic and decide whether to stay at their institution, seek higher education elsewhere, or put their higher education dreams on pause.

## Implications for Enrollment Management Practitioners

Given the immediate crisis presented by COVID-19, this qualitative study suggests that institutions of higher education were often not prepared to communicate

with students about campus plans, curricular delivery methods, and emergency aid funds, even though these institutions may have had resources for students to access. From here, institutions should not only prioritize resources for students, but develop strategic communication plans to deliver this information to students in a timely and efficient manner. A communication plan might mitigate any effects that COVID-19 or another similar catastrophe could have on institutional communication and student success.

The study also demonstrates that many students immediately disliked the move to online learning, suggesting that although technology continues to advance, students may prefer an in-class or in-person instructional model where they can connect with friends and classmates and develop both socially and academically. The emotional toll that COVID-19 has taken on students of color and minoritized populations has been well documented in the news in recent months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). Yet, this research suggests that the pandemic may have levied an undue burden on minoritized students, extenuating the equity gap in United States higher education that has been pervasive for so many years. Much can be learned from this study and implemented into strategic enrollment communication moving forward.

First and foremost, institutions must maintain a very clear, consistent messaging structure, as institutions can avoid the spread of misinformation by directly communicating with their students. As soon as the CARES Act funding was disseminated to institutions of higher education, scams emerged. Fraudulent companies were sharing misinformation with students, telling them that there was money available that was not (Internal Revenue Service 2021). Can institutions consolidate their communication and ensure consistency across many channels—including email, social media, websites, and text messaging—in efforts to provide students with verified and trusted information? This is the question that enrollment management professionals must grapple with as communication plans are formed and communication channels are used in the future across several units on a single campus.

Second, if institutions communicate through text messaging or emails, can institutions set expectations with students about when they can anticipate hearing from their institution? Consider this scenario: An institutional admissions office sends a text message at 9:00AM, but a student responds to the message at 10:00PM, far beyond normal office hours. Does a student anticipate a response? Can automated “out of office” messages be scheduled to handle student concerns beyond business hours? And what can the “new normal” look like in terms of student communication beyond the hours of 8:00AM to 5:00PM? Institutions must take inventory of their current communications capacity and set student expectations. Amid a crisis such as COVID-19, there may need to be communication expectations set between institutions and students to alleviate some of the anxieties surrounding financial crisis or the pandemic or any other crisis a student might be living through.

Institutions must also keep it simple and avoid using institutional jargon to ensure that messaging is readable and clear for students. Did students know what the CARES Act was? Surely, students may understand a term such as “emergency funds,” but were institutions communicating to students using “CARES funds” or “CRSSA” or “HEERF,” three acronyms that may have been more difficult to understand? Here, enrollment management professionals should understand their own institutional jargon, work alongside current students to understand what jargon is most problematic, and simplify their communication to meet students where they are. Enrollment management professionals must also consider first generation college students who may not understand the difference between “enrollment,” “registration,” “matriculation,” or any other enrollment management-focused term. In this regard, institutions should simplify their messaging to address student audiences appropriately and maintain consistency across all channels of communication from every unit of campus.

Perhaps the most important implication of this work is the planning that enrollment management

staff undergo to ensure a two-pronged communication approach: 1) internal collaboration and clarity for 2) external (student) understanding. As students shared in their text messages, institutions and their faculty members were slow to respond to student concerns, and as a result, many students may have stopped out, dropped out, or transferred to other institutions. More critically, these students were not supported as *humans first, students second*, and many may have suffered through food and housing insecurity as a result of the pandemic in addition to having their academics interrupted or stopped entirely. Given these dire circumstances, enrollment management professionals need a clear, consistent communication plan across campus to simultaneously disseminate information in a lucid, rapid manner while also understanding their institution’s human resources to set student expectations for that communication. It may be the case that many institutions simply could not respond to student demands in a timely manner—if this was the case, the institution should deliver this message to maintain clarity and transparency with their students.

Ultimately, this study strongly suggests that institutions of higher education—unsurprisingly—were not ready for the COVID-19 pandemic and its stresses on institutional communication; no one was ready. However, in the future, if enrollment management professionals can internally collaborate with student services, faculty affairs, teaching and learning centers, and other campus resources, student-focused communication can be simpler, faster, and more reliable for at-risk student populations. This type of collaboration and outreach will work to both regain the trust and confidence of students in their institution’s communication, as well as plan for future communication that will not jeopardize this trust and confidence in the first place. Whether by text message, email, phone call, social media, or other form of communication, strategic enrollment management should be positioned to anticipate student concerns, set student expectations, and respond accordingly, lest the “strategy” of enrollment management does not truly serve students at all.



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