

AT&T Landline Texting gives Seminole State an edge in education



- **Business Needs** - Promote better communications between students and staff, including student advisors, to assure mutual success for students and college.
- **Solution** - AT&T Landline Texting lets existing administration phone numbers send and receive texts, the preferred method of communication for the majority of students. Landline Texting includes important features, including the ability to attach documents, automatic archiving and pre-scheduled texts.
- **Value** - The response rate among students skyrocketed, even without promotional efforts, and has increased productivity ten-fold.
- **Industry Focus** - Education
- **Size** - A student body of over 30,000.

A preferred communication method has students truly connecting

One of the biggest challenges facing colleges and universities today may be their ability to communicate with their students. Institutions of higher learning have to learn the most efficient method of connecting with students who have been brought up with technology and have strong preferences for how they'll most readily respond.

It was certainly that way for Seminole State College of Florida, a full-service educational institution, offering bachelor's degrees, two-year college-credits, and continuing professional and adult education. With a total enrollment of over 30,000 students, communication is critical whether it's transactional – such as interactions with the IT help desk – or relationship-based – as it is with one of 25 student advisors charged with supporting an assigned group of students.

With an average age of 28 – owing to the school's mix of baccalaureate degrees, associate degrees, continuing and adult education curricula – Seminole State's students have been steeped in technology from a young age, usually

developing strong preferences for certain communication channels. They may also often have competing priorities, including jobs, young families and leisure activities. Finding ways to communicate that will break through the “noise” is equally important to the school as it is to the students. This was a challenge perfectly suited to Dr. Dick Hamann, Seminole’s CIO and vice president of Student Affairs.

“Our new generation of students simply do not want to use email or phone,” Hamann says. “They just don’t. And communicating with our students is a big deal. Having extensively researched mobile technology and how to use mobile technologies and mobile devices to enhance engagement, I knew we had to figure out how we can get to students in a place where they’re likely to engage.”

Priorities and preferences

Hamann was already in charge of the school’s information technology when the administration asked him to take on the additional responsibility of temporarily overseeing student affairs – two very different management roles – but also roles which



allow him to oversee the increasing role technology was playing on campus. (Four years later, Hamann still holds the “temporary” student affairs position.)

A confluence of people, perspective and technology occurred several months ago that significantly helped Seminole State surmount the communications challenge. The people were Hamann, his team and an AT&T representative; the perspective was Hamann’s recognition of mobile technology’s power; and the technology was AT&T Landline Texting, a service that allows existing toll-free and landline phone numbers to send and receive text messages.

Although Seminole State had been broadcast texting to students, there was no easy way to accomplish one-to-one texting without students needing to remember multiple numbers or staff granting access to their private numbers. The school had fully functioning email systems, had tried directing students to websites, welcomed in-person appointments, and encouraged video chats through Skype, but no method was capturing the response rates the school needed to keep information flowing.

Text connects

Hamann immediately recognized the potential of Landline Texting, and decided to trial the application on the school’s IT help desk for 60 days.

“Our main advertisement for texting was a simple ‘Text us’ on our website page next to the number where it says ‘Call us,’” Hamann says. “We didn’t even update our email signatures. Students found the information and came to us via text.”

With AT&T Landline Texting no new numbers are needed. The simplicity of using existing telephone numbers – ones that may be familiar to users – is one of Landline Texting’s most attractive features.

Within a week of the trial, the Student Affairs team was getting bombarded with texts.

“This was good because at that point, not only were we supporting far more students,” Hamann says. “But a staff member who is talking on the phone or handling an email could also be handling a text at the same time.”

The trial was so successful, in fact, that no promotion has ever been needed to entice students to use texting. And the application was rolled out to other student-facing groups, including a coterie of eServices specialists who never see students face-to-face, but communicate with students exclusively through phone, email and video chats – and now text.

“We simply said, ‘Text me.’ There was no change to the number, nothing,” Hamann says. “You could literally see one of these specialists taking care of 15 people at the same time. Another advisor can come in and look at the shared portal and know, ‘Oh, okay, you’re already taking care of these.’”

Multiply by thousands of texts

“You can multiply the savings by the thousands of text messages and you can see how it quickly mounts up, how beneficial it is,” Hamann says.

Considering that every call coming in to Seminole State’s call center costs the college \$4, regardless of

length, it’s not hard to see how the texting capability saves the institution money – significant money – at the same time it is serving students faster and more efficiently.

“AT&T Landline Texting is something that showed up at my front door. I had no money set aside for this application, but I knew that if the college was to invest in this technology, it would reduce the number of call center calls,” Hamann says. “100 percent of the cost of implementing Landline Texting has been paid for by the reduction in call center phone calls. And our productivity gains have been at least ten-fold.”

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Staff reaction

Some staff members who were equipped with Landline Texting were concerned it would increase their workload, but soon came to realize that it was not more work, but more efficient work.

“They no longer have to chase students. And chase is the operative word,” says Adam Stark, manager of administrative computing for Seminole. “They no longer have to send one, two, three emails and leave multiple voice mails. They’re connecting on the first try.”

Although faculty members work differently with students, Hamann believes there may be opportunities to expand the use of Landline Texting with the distance learning faculty. He based this on one instance in which he used texting to help a faculty member with a low success rate. Of 18 students, perhaps only six or seven were passing her course.

“Why don’t we ask your students to voluntarily give you their cell phone numbers? And two days before a major assignment is due, text them about it being due. Or text if you’re going to have a mid-term or a quiz a couple of days before,” Hamann suggested.

Using the scheduling capabilities of Landline Texting, the instructor was able to automatically send text alerts to coincide with her syllabus to those students who had supplied their numbers. After the first couple of alerts, she noticed that those people that had given her their phone numbers were getting better grades. One of her students admitted it had helped: “I was at a party with some friends and suddenly I got this text message telling me that I had a test on Monday. So, I just said, ‘You know what, let me go home and study for the test.’”

Now this instructor has improved her students’ success rates from 30 percent passing her course

to nearly 90 percent attributable at least in part to AT&T Landline Texting.

Relationship by text

The college also equipped 25 student advisors - whose jobs are wholly dependent upon successful engagement with students - with AT&T Landline Texting directed to their individual landline extensions. This is the area where the technology has the potential to go way beyond dollar savings. Hamann credits the ability to communicate with students - to actually connect with them - as making a really measurable difference in students’ lives and the college’s success.

“Every single advisor has a set of students assigned to them and their job is to make meaningful contact with the students every week, month, or semester. You typically have the straight A students who are always on top of everything, and therefore low-maintenance. But you also have students who require a little bit more direct contact to keep engaged. A faculty member may tell an advisor that a student missed two days of classes. The advisor, in turn, can send off a text to check on the student.”

Because a one-to-one relationship exists between the advisor and the student, students might share that they lacked money for the bus, or that there’s been car trouble, or a child care issue at home. Seminole State has brought resources to bear to help students in these situations, including financial help to deal with transportation or daycare.

And it all starts with a text that connects.

Feature-rich

Documents can also be shared via text. A photo of a completed form from a smartphone can be sent into college administrators via text, precluding the need for scanners, copiers, or visits to campus.

Another useful AT&T Landline Texting feature is the keyword trigger used by staff for out-of-hours replies.

“College students are 24-hour people. They don’t work nine-to-five. So we use the automated response to indicate the office hours or help desk hours, so it doesn’t go into a black hole and keep a student waiting for a response,” Stark says.

“Praise from the students is constant, literally over and over again. They really appreciate the fact that somebody gets back to them quickly and they appreciate the fact that this technology’s available,” Hamann says.

And just as call center calls are routinely recorded, AT&T Landline Texting automatically archives text

messages as part of each student’s permanent record. The default archive feature is for 18 months, but can be programmed for up to seven years.

Text for success

“We can get faltering students back on track and get them in touch with our support center, our tutoring center, whatever it might be. We take a student that we may have lost, we made that connection, and we’re putting them back in the classroom. It’s how we make the student successful.”

Student success is a measure of Seminole State’s success. The percentage of graduating students is important since future enrollment may depend on it.

“It sometimes is an issue of life getting in the way. So, we decided to say, ‘How can we help the students deal with life events and surround them with resources that will help them get there? AT&T Landline Texting has helped with that’ Hamann says. “And for the year 2016-17, we have a net gain of a five percent enrollment increase this year.”



Fruitful communications encourage student success, which translates to college success. Higher graduation rates reflect well on the school and spur growth. Seminole State has had a five percent enrollment gain for 2016-2017.