SignalVine

HOW TO

ENGAGE GEN Z STUDENTS
WITH A
PERSONALIZED APPROACH

This ebook shows how colleges and universities deliver personalization at scale—providing personalized communications and interactions with all students. The ebook advocates a version of personalization at scale derived from Signal Vine's experience supporting today's tech-savvy Gen Z student.

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The Appeal of Personalization to
GEN Z

Is there anyone working in higher education today who is not aware of Gen Z (those born in 1995 on)? This is unlikely given the ever-increasing volume of reports and studies about this new generation, its transformative impact on societal norms, technology adoption and business practices. Naturally, common to all this research is Gen Z's espousal of and dependence on digital devices. This generation is a uniquely screen addicted one.

A study found that 69% of Gen Zers can't go more than eight hours without being online; 27% cannot go one hour.[1] For organizations aspiring to engage Gen Z, it is critical to understand their digital preferences and behaviors. One seemingly counterintuitive Gen Z preference is a willingness to share personal data in exchange for more personalized interactions. [2] Despite heightened levels of awareness about data privacy and security issues, Gen Z will disclose information to an organization in return for offerings that reflect who the consumer is, and their past behaviors. One article articulated Gen Z's unique take on this trade-off: *"[They have] grown up in a world where it's usual for their favorite brands to gather extensive data on them in order to tailor marketing communications to their specific wants... unlike older generations, Gen Z doesn't view this as an invasion of privacy, but instead an expected marketing technique of any company wanting to provide a good customer experience."*[3] For digital natives, personalization not only trumps fears of data breaches but also forms a basic expectation for their digital interactions.

Personalization is a two-way street in that consumers will share more information with organizations that use these data to provide more intuitive, simpler and integrated consumer experiences; witness the impact of one-click ordering on Amazon Prime. However, Gen Z's desire for personalization is a nonnegotiable for enterprises and institutions whose continued success depends on attracting, engaging and retaining Gen Z as customers advocates, and students.

The Power of Personalization:
A NETFLIX ORIGINAL

Close to 50% of all U.S. households have a Netflix subscription, so it's very likely you have experienced this streaming service. It is also highly likely you notice that your Netflix homepage changes regularly. The company uses data algorithms to update the homepage every 24 hours. The nature of these changes is extensive; everyone's Netflix homepage is close to "being totally personalized: the banner, carousels, order, artwork, text and search. That is why they state that a good recommender system considers: what, how, when and where a title is recommended."[4] Netflix's investment in continuous personalization has generated significant competitive advantage and market returns. A Reuters' study found that Netflix, at the end of March 2017, had nearly 48 million U.S. subscribers-nearly double Amazon's streaming audience of 26 million.[5]

Personalization is an effective way to engage consumers, but it goes well beyond individualized recommendations. The management consulting firm McKinsey defines personalization as: "an approach to customer engagement—almost a philosophy—that focuses on delivering tailored, meaningful and relevant customer communication."[6] In more basic terms, personalization involves making things demonstrably easier for your customers. Netflix distills its personalization approach as a formula:

Netflix Personalization = Maximize enjoyment + Minimize search time. And the formula works-over 90% plus of Netflix subscribers renew, the highest among all video streaming services.

> *Personalization is an approach to customer engagement— almost a philosophy—that focuses on delivering tailored, meaningful and relevant customer communication.*
>
> McKinsey & Company

This focus on Netflix is not to suggest that higher education is similar to video streaming. It is to illustrate personalization's ability to attract and retain consumers in a highly competitive market. Today's students are digital natives—consumers who've always had mobile phones and the Internet. Their service expectations, attitudes and behaviors have been indelibly shaped by the personalization provided by Netflix, Spotify, Zappos, Amazon, etc. One consumer summed up today's expectations: "I may not have chosen to live in a world where brands have so much information about me, but they do, and I expect them to make my experience easier, faster and better."[7]

> **Brands that create personalized experiences by integrating advanced digital technologies and proprietary data for customers are seeing revenue increase by 6% to 10%—two to three times faster than those that don't.**
>
> Boston Consulting Group

Let's consider the preceding quotation in the context of Gen Z students enrolled at two- and four-year institutions by replacing "brands" with "institutions": "I may not have chosen to live in a world where **institutions** have so much information about me, but they do, and I expect them to make my experience easier, faster and better." How many administrators could say their students do not share such expectations?

Colleges and universities have vast amounts of demographic and behavioral information on their current students. These data are constantly refreshed through ongoing relationships with students and grant every institution the opportunity to use personalization to retain more students.

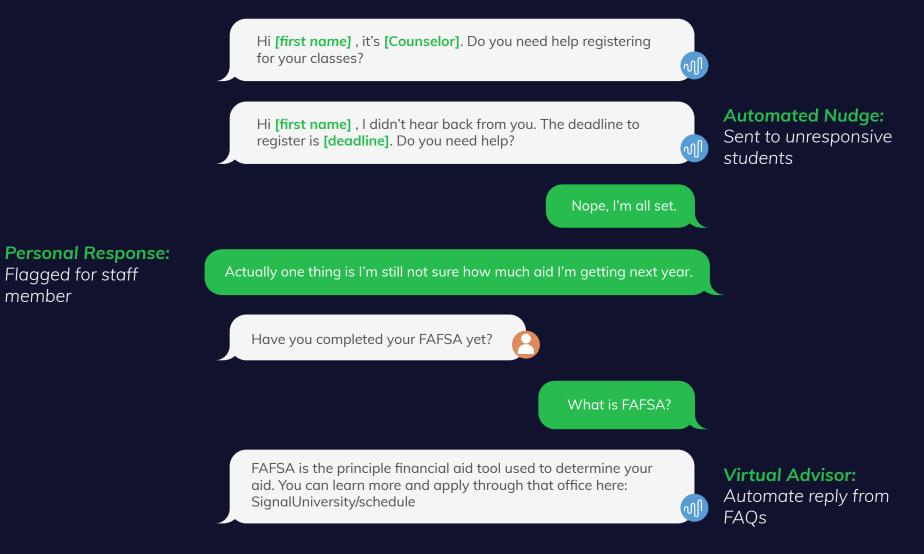# A **GEN ZER** IS BOTH A **STUDENT** AND A **CONSUMER**

The students enrolled at every institution are also consumers and, as such, have explicit and implicit expectations about switching between devices, gathering information and making a transaction that administrators ignore at their peril. A recent New Yorker article on technology adoption[8] noted "consumer technology is all about letting me be me." And personalization is a key enabler of a consumer's sense of digital independence. Is a student, especially a digital native, going to leave the devices and digital habits at the campus gate that let "me be me"? Just as personalization is a cost of doing business for all business-to-consumer firms, personalization is integral to communicating, engaging and retaining today's generation of students.

This whitepaper examines how institutions of all types can use personalization to enhance retention and graduation rates among Gen Z students. Our purpose is to show how colleges and universities deliver personalization at scale—delivering personalized communications and interactions with all students. This whitepaper promotes a version of personalization at scale derived from Signal Vine's experience with today's tech-savvy student—pragmatic personalization. It is pragmatic because it takes into account tight institutional budgets, ever-growing demand for student support services and demographic shifts that amplify the necessity to retain more students.

At its core, pragmatic personalization is about providing the right message to the right student at the right time. It achieves this by:

- *Using the digital device central to all digital natives' lives—their mobile phone—to engage them*

- *Helping students to make decisions that create better outcomes for themselves*

- *Capitalizing on the student demographic and behavioral information contained in campus systems*

- *Delivering measurable retention benefits while minimizing additional staff and IT investments*

PRAGMATIC PERSONALIZATION ON CAMPUS

Hi **[first name]** , it's **[Counselor]**. Do you need help registering for your classes?

Hi **[first name]** , I didn't hear back from you. The deadline to register is **[deadline]**. Do you need help?

Automated Nudge:
Sent to unresponsive students

Nope, I'm all set.

Personal Response:
Flagged for staff member

Actually one thing is I'm still not sure how much aid I'm getting next year.

Have you completed your FAFSA yet?

What is FAFSA?

FAFSA is the principle financial aid tool used to determine your aid. You can learn more and apply through that office here: SignalUniversity/schedule

Virtual Advisor:
Automate reply from FAQs

The core elements of pragmatic personalization are depicted in the above graphic. It shows how an academic advisor at ABC University uses Blended Messaging® to connect with one student to address a common challenge: ensuring students register for classes.

ABC University harnesses the foundational aspects of pragmatic personalization by:

- **Being Mobile Centric:** *The Academic Advising unit uses mobile messaging to tap into Gen Z's preference for personalized, convenient, timely and mobile-centric communications.*

- **Leveraging Student Data:** *The university uses SIS (Student Information System) data to segment students based on their major, academic performance, deadlines, etc. Segmentation ensures that messages are relevant and timely for all recipients.*

The advisor's assigned students have to register for classes in the spring semester. Pragmatic personalization helps this advisor manage her case load by:

- **Deploying a Communications Calendar:** *Academic Advising has a centralized calendar that schedules and manages all messages. The advisor knows exactly when the reminder message about registration will be sent by the system. (An example of a communications calendar is in the Weber State University case study on PG.18.)*

- **Using a Message Bank:** *Fueling the calendar is a portfolio of SMS and MMS communications tied to each segment's key events (course registration, FAFSA deadlines, fees and billing, etc.) and behaviors (ignoring impending deadlines, required advisor appointments, etc.)*

Per the graphic, the first message is an offer of help triggered in the calendar by the upcoming registration deadline. This message illustrates how pragmatic personalization is delivered at scale—the same inquiry is sent to all the students in the relevant segment while the first name and that of the advisor are customized.

The student's reaction (or lack thereof) to the message shows how the messaging platform helps the advisor prioritize next steps based on her students' behaviors. This is achieved by:

- **Nudging Students:** *The messages incorporate behavioral economic insights by framing choices to encourage students to make decisions that are in their own best interests. In the ABC University example, the messages are questions, not diktats, always offer assistance and make it very easy to access help.*

- **Having Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assess Responses:** *Many students are on top of their academic tasks and may reply with some version of the "Nope, I'm all set" message shown in the graphic. The messaging platform is built on an AI engine that recognizes language indicating the student is fine. The advisors stipulated in advance what those affirmative words are. Using machine learning, the system automatically responds with a message triggered by the student's text; one that nudges the student about a related task. The automation depicted above is not about displacing the advisor; it is empowering advisors to triage interventions. In the ABC example, the AI flags a reply for the advisor that requires an individualized response.*

Lastly, this example speaks to the benefits of mobile-based messaging and nudging in terms of institutional resources. Pragmatic personalization applies the power of AI to boost campus staff's ability to pinpoint students who need additional support faster and to target high-touch interventions. Staff capacity improves without requiring additional hiring. The messaging platform capitalizes on existing systems and student information, reducing the need for significant upfront investment.

A Snapshot of **Generation Z**

There is an extensive body of work profiling Gen Z, their attitudes and behaviors. While this whitepaper is not designed to be another wide-ranging report about Gen Z, it is helpful to provide some background information. This whitepaper will describe the generation as Gen Z and occasionally as digital natives.

Key Attributes of Gen Z

Generational Timeline

There is no one universally accepted year for when the millennials ended and Gen Z began. The Pew Research Center[9], for instance, identifies anyone born in 1997 onward as a Gen Zer. Most studies [10] mention 1995 or 1996. In 2019, accordingly, the oldest Gen Zer is turning 24; the youngest turns 7. The exact year that the last members of the generation were born is also disputed, but it is typically stated to be between 2012 and 2014. Due to researchers using different start and end years for Gen Z, there is variation in some of the statistics around the size and composition of this generation.

Demographics

- *If Gen Z is defined as those born between 1995 and 2012, there are 74 million Gen Zers in the U.S.[11]*

- *In 2017, this generation accounted for roughly 26% of the population in the United States. In that year, Millennials made up about 22% of the population.[12]*

- *Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation thus far. Per the U.S. Census Bureau, the generation is 57% White, 27% Hispanic and 17% Black.*

- *A 2018 Pew Research Center report[13] found even greater diversity with just over half (52%) of 6- to 21-year-olds being non-Hispanic whites. The equivalent figure among Millennials in 2002 was 61%.*

Truly Digital Natives

Gen Z is the first generation to have always had access to the internet and digital technologies. They move seamlessly between digital and real-world environments, and expect organizations to accommodate this. As over 70% of Gen Zers claim to influence their family's spending, retailers have studied their habits, preferences and purchasing behaviors intensively. This work provides insight on Gen Z as consumers that is pertinent to higher education. A 2017 study co-sponsored by IBM and the National Retail Federation[14] highlighted how immersed Gen Z is in digital:

- *Going online is the most popular way of using free time (74% of participants). The activities tied for the second most popular response*

lagged this considerably—44% of participants chose watching TV and movies, hanging out with friends and spending time with family.

- *Mobile/Smartphone is the "device of choice" among Gen Z (75% of participants). Trailing in second place are laptops (45%).*

- *73% of Gen Zers cited texting and chatting as their primary mobile-phone activities, followed by entertainment (59%) and gaming (58%).*

- *Using multiple devices simultaneously is common: 66% reported they frequently use more than one device at a time. This multitasking may explain why Gen Z has little patience with cumbersome or slow technologies. 62% of participants will not use apps that are hard to navigate or too slow to load.*

- *Gen Zers are willing to share personal data with companies in return for a better online experience. Specifically, 62% will share purchase history, 42% contact details, and 27%*

health and wellness information. But only 18% will share payment information.

The Importance of Authenticity

As a generation, Gen Z is truly a post-Millennial one, different in size, composition, behaviors and attitudes to the Millennials. It also possesses immense and growing purchasing power as the quotation from Ernst & Young[15], the consulting firm, attests to. The Great Recession and accompanying property market crash shaped Gen Z's attitude to purchase decisions, receptivity to marketing messages, and perceptions of brands, products and companies. Consequently, authenticity is a key value for digital natives. The IBM and the National Retail Federation report emphasized: "Gen Zers are both practical and skeptical. Their focus is on quality and authenticity – not on marketing hype."[16]

Currently, Gen Z holds up to $143 billion in direct buying power, with the potential to impact more than $665 billion in family spending—and they have only just gotten started! While some of their influence is on adults around them, they should still be top of mind to retailers right now as their power is only getting stronger—representing over 40% of consumers by 2020.

Ernst & Young

Organizations seeking to engage Gen Z have to ensure that their communications and offerings meet this criterion. There are some key takeaways concerning authenticity:

Peer-to-peer impressions are critical. In their hyper-connected digital world, Gen Zers are very conscious of how their online identities are perceived and peer-to-peer communication shape these identities. For example, almost half of Gen Zers indicate their friends' opinions and recommendations are important in purchasing situations.

Crowd-sourced opinions matter. YouTube is indispensable to most Gen Zers as a resource to explore, discover and to connect with influencers; plus it's free. The platform grants access to an incredible assortment of opinions—anyone can set up their own channel—in an entertaining and consumable manner. If you have younger digital natives in your family, ask them about their favorite YouTube stars; the answers are illuminating!

Two-way engagement is expected. Digital natives want to interact with organizations whose products and services they use or explore. Companies seeking to engage with Gen Zers must earn their trust by soliciting and responding to their opinions. According to the IBM and NRF study, 60% of Gen Zers feel it is important for brands to value their opinions. Transparency is nonnegotiable: companies requesting personal information or feedback must stipulate how these data will be used to benefit the consumer. Gen Z expects their voices to be heard and valued, so their reviews, comments and social media shares need to be acknowledged and responded to.

A Fishy Tale: Gen Z, Goldfish and the 8-Second Attention Span Myth

There is a much-used statistic about Gen Z: Their attention span is estimated at just eight seconds, compared to 12 seconds for Millennials. Apparently, a typical Gen Zer lags the nine-second attention span of your average goldfish. Many commentators have seized on this story to illuminate the difficulties in getting Gen Z to pay attention to anything. Alas for headline writers and conference speakers, none of this is true: the statistics cited or the validity of attributing a standard attention span to people. Moreover, the goldfish has been slandered! A BBC reporter debunked the entire story and interviewed a professor who has spent almost 50 years studying fish behaviors: *"That a species that's used by neuro-psychologists and scientists as a model for studying memory formation should be the very species that has this reputation - I think that's an interesting irony."*

Delivering Pragmatic Personalization for Gen Z

B2C companies are pursuing personalization to acquire and keep customers in an era of retail consolidation, global competition and consumers' ability to price, compare and purchase on their phones 24/7. Higher education is undergoing its own profound business model challenges in acquiring and retaining students, its de facto "customers." A consumer's affinity for personalization persists when he or she enrolls in college. This facet of Gen Z creates both engagement opportunities and operational challenges for institutions. Pragmatic personalization adapts the power of the concept to student and institutional realities—enable campus staff to guide Gen Z students from matriculation to graduation through flexible, intuitive and customized support. It does so by embracing three imperatives:

Imperative 1—Meeting Gen Z students where they are

Capitalize on their mobile-first mindset—It is incontrovertible that Gen Z likes to stay constantly connected to the digital world. For Gen Z, smartphones are obligatory irrespective of socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and geography. Research by Google[17] found that getting a new phone is a life-changing event for Gen Z, with only graduating from school and getting a license seen as more important. Deloitte[18] reported that older digital natives

(18-24-year olds) check their phones, on average, 82 times a day. This phone addiction (see definition of nomophobia) creates significant opportunities to connect with student populations:
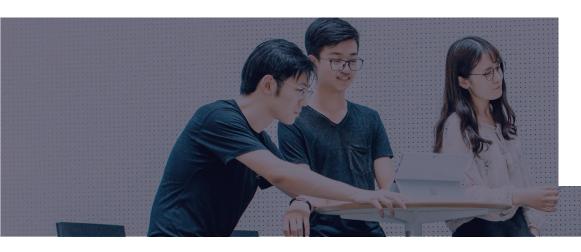
- *Mobile is the critical channel for personalization efforts targeting today's students*

- *Most Gen Z students opt-in to receive mobile messages from campus units*

- *As technologies embedded in every phone, SMS (Short Message Service) and MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) are the key channels for personalized communications.*

  - *The relevance of SMS or text messaging is illustrated by one study[19] that found close to 75% of Gen Z prefers to text people rather than speak with them.*

  - *MMS enables campus staff to send students videos of up to 40 seconds in length, GIFs, single images or slideshows, and audio clips. And it gets around the 160-character limits for SMS.*

> *Cambridge Dictionary recently selected "nomophobia" as its word of the year [2018]......it refers to the fear of not having your mobile phone.*

The Economist, December 8, 2018

Align outreach to Gen Z's consumer behaviors—Digital natives' decision-making habits and preferences are indelibly shaped by their internet and mobile experiences with products and services. Companies from financial services (Rocket Mortgage) to house paints (Valspar Paint app) are accommodating digital natives' preference for convenience, personalization and responsiveness. Similarly, institutions can only benefit by factoring in digital native behaviors. For instance, Gen Z likes to save time by automating basic day-to-day tasks in their lives. Automating text and email reminders for registration or FAFSA deadlines provides personalized communications that reflect how Gen Z behaves.

Take an 80/20 approach to personalization—A key initial step in pragmatic personalization is creating a portfolio of messages triggered for recurring events such as registration, billing, deadlines and advising appointments. This approach cannot anticipate the individual circumstances of every potential stop-out, drop-out or transfer student. It does, however, help campus staff triage their support: For most students **(the 80%)**, calendaring and automating reminders and event-based messages provides decision support while enabling them to connect with specific services as needed. Messaging platforms that monitor and flag responses to messages help staff pinpoint the **"20%"** of students requiring more individualized support.

Imperative 2—Leveraging high-quality student data already available

Access student socioeconomic and behavioral information—E-commerce firms have to track and analyze vast amounts of customer data to send individualized messages to every consumer. In contrast, university and college CRM and SIS databases contain significant amounts of verified student data, from demographic attributes to academic performance. Analyzing student records provides the data building blocks for pragmatic personalization—segmenting students (major, college, GPA, etc.) to determine the timing, type and content for tailored SMS and MMS communications.

Imperative 3—Harnessing the power of behavioral economics (nudging):

Nudge students in the right direction— A nudge is any intervention (a text, a letter, an incentive, etc.) that affects how people respond to choices. Richard Thaler, behavioral-economics pioneer[20] and Nobel Prize winner, stresses that nudges are designed to "make people better off, not worse off, as judged by them." In higher education, nudging is proven to help students make choices that advance their own best interests such as completing the FAFSA or paying bills on time. Personalization is indispensable for effective nudging as it ensures that nudges are relevant and timely for each student. Download Signal Vine's eBook on Nudge Technology and Higher Education

Pragmatic Personalization at Work in Higher Ed

Pragmatic personalization helps institutions deliver the right message to the right student at the right time. A number of campuses have implemented pragmatic personalization creating two-way conversations with digital natives that are more intuitive, relevant and effective. The following case studies show how two- and four-year institutions applied personalization using targeted mobile messaging to boost student success outcomes.

As context for the case studies, the core elements of pragmatic personalization encompass:

1. Mobile Centric

Leveraging mobile messaging to tap into Gen Z's preference for personalized, convenient, and timely communications

2. Leverage Student Data

Using CRM or SIS data to segment students based on major, academic performance, deadlines, etc.

3. Message Bank

Developing a portfolio of SMS (Short Message Service) and MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) communications tied to each segment's key events (course registration, FAFSA deadlines, fees and billing, etc.) and behaviors (deadlines, academic holds, advisor appointments, etc.)

4. Communications Calendar

Scheduling and managing all communications through a centralized calendar available to campus staff

5. Nudge Students

Incorporating behavioral economic insights (nudges) in communications to support student decision making and actions that enhance persistence

6. Cost Effective

Maximizing the benefits of personalization without significant upfront investment or draw on staff capacity

Enhancing the Impact of Peer Mentors on Persistence through Personalization

A great many higher education institutions offer first-year experience programs to materially improve students' persistence and retention rates. First-year experience programs help freshmen transition to the academic requirements of postsecondary education and build connections to the larger campus community. Recruiting upperclassmen as peer mentors to newly matriculated students is a core part of first-year experience programs.

Brigham Young University (BYU)

Shows how universities with a large incoming first-year class can help peer mentors provide one-on-one support that new students both value and benefit from.

BYU
BRIGHAM YOUNG
UNIVERSITY

Enrollment:	**33,000+**
Institutional Type:	**Private**
Location:	**Provo, Utah**
Signal Vine Partner since:	**2015**

Student Success Challenge

BYU's Office of First-Year Experience offers BYU First-Year Mentoring. The mentors are upperclassmen trained to provide advice and support (via messaging and in-person) to newly arrived freshman. At issue was the use of personal phones by mentors to text with mentees. While mobile is a perfect conduit for personalized interactions among Gen Z, the use of personal phones created challenges for all parties:

- *Overstretched mentors' capacity—Because their personal cell phones were the conduit for mentees, peer mentors found themselves on call 24/7.*

- *Hindered freshman participation-Peer mentors' time management and capacity issues, combined with absence of centralized control, made it difficult to connect with students and for mentees to get timely responses or deadline prompts.*

- *Limited ability of Office of First-Year Experience to provide oversight—The staff had no way of knowing if and when peer mentors were texting with students. The office was aware of potential privacy and security issues: the peer-to-mentee communications resided on hundreds of personal devices instead of one centralized campus system*

Delivering a Personalization at Scale Solution

The Office of First-Year Experience partnered with Signal Vine to deploy its Blended Messaging® platform to improve mentors' abilities to deliver individualized support; spur mentees to interact with mentors; and enable BYU to oversee the interactions without jeopardizing the value of personal interactions or the privacy of participants. BYU, the peer mentors and Signal Vine worked together to:

Develop a centralized portfolio of messages for peer mentors: The messages dealt with deadline alerts and reminders to complete required academic or administrative tasks. They went out automatically per a scheduled calendar managed on Signal Vine's platform.

Help peer mentors triage support: Each mentor accesses a Signal Vine account (via any personal digital device) to manage interactions with their assigned mentees. The account identifies when texts are sent and tracks responses. This enables mentors to respond personally to queries and issues sent by their mentees.

Streamline Peer Mentor program management: BYU staff use Signal Vine's platform to coordinate messaging, automate delivery, track responses and maintain data privacy and security protocols.

Outcomes

Pragmatic personalization boosted the program's value for the mentors, mentees and university. Findings included:

- *Mobile messaging is the preferred communication channel for Gen Z students and is significantly more effective than email in establishing effective peer and mentee connections.*

- *Personalized messaging boosts the impact of peer mentors by combining automated scripted messages with an AI-enabled system that screens responses and alerts mentors to mentees who need one-on-one communications.*

- *Volume of interactions and their value to mentees increases through the use of Signal Vine's platform. First-year students communicated more frequently with peer mentors and reported stronger relationships with their mentors, too. 66% of first-year students interacted with their peer mentors.*

> *I love Signal Vine because most of my students are a lot more comfortable texting me than actually talking to me. It allows me to respond to them more quickly and easily than I otherwise could.*

Peer Mentor, Brigham Young University

Applying Pragmatic Personalization to the First-Year Experience

Summer melt is a particularly invidious problem for colleges and universities in a time of heightened competition for undergraduates. Research by Benjamin Castleman, Lindsay Page and Ashley Snowdon indicates that nationally between 10% to 40% of students admitted to four-year colleges don't turn up for classes. The large range in the melt statistics reflects the access barriers facing the ever greater numbers of historically underrepresented, lower income and first generation students within high schools. Being Gen Z doesn't mitigate longstanding educational disadvantages. For equity and economic reasons, institutions are seeking ways to combat summer melt among underrepresented students and retain more of those who matriculate.

Weber State University (WSU)

Shows how a regional public university can deploy mobile-based communications to help admitted students turn up to campus and navigate the first semester successfully.

WEBER STATE
UNIVERSITY

Enrollment:	**26,000+**
Institutional Type:	**Public**
Location:	**Ogden, Utah**
Signal Vine Partner since:	**2016**

Student Success Challenge

Weber State has a First-Year Transition program to support historically underrepresented, first-generation, and low-income students. Facing escalating demand for student services and limited resources, the program administrators wrestled with a set of interrelated challenges:

- *How to create a scalable and cost-effective two-way communication channel that bolsters admitted students wavering over attendance and helps matriculated students persist through the first year.*

- *How to maximize the value of peer mentors to incoming freshmen.*

- *How to establish a communication strategy that resonates with digital native students while enabling sufficient oversight of messaging, responses and action.*
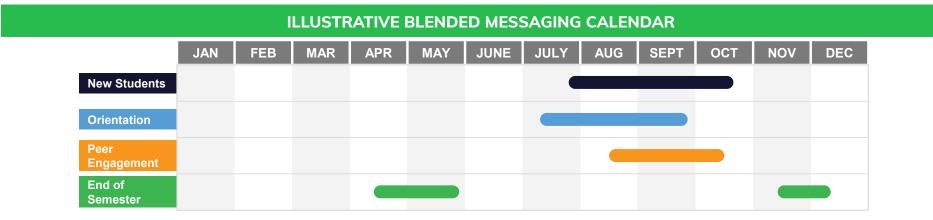
Delivering a Personalization at Scale Solution

The First-Year Transition team worked with Signal Vine to use the Blended Messaging® platform to employ nudges to pinpoint students at risk of melting; harness the peer-to-peer credibility of mentors to shape messaging; and implement a coordinated message campaign tied to key first-year milestones.

WSU worked with Signal Vine to:

Focus communication strategy on text messaging: Employ texting as smartphones are where today's students from all backgrounds operate the most and have much less "noise" compared to other channels. A mobile-centric strategy guaranteed response rates superior to the previous email-based approach.

Develop a messaging calendar: First-Year Transition staff used a centralized calendar and messages were sent to different students based on their attributes per the university's databases (admitted vs. matriculated) and upcoming deadlines (orientation, end of the semester). An illustrative example is shown below. The guiding principles on scheduling are to send texts 3-5 days before a deadline and do not send more than 3-5 mass texts per month.

Combine peer mentor input and best practice templates to craft messages: WSU tapped the expertise of peer mentors and Signal Vine's messaging templates to create messages tailored to Gen Z preferences, the student segment, event, call to action and response.

ILLUSTRATIVE BLENDED MESSAGING CALENDAR

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC
New Students								■	■	■		
Orientation							■	■	■			
Peer Engagement								■	■			
End of Semester				■	■						■	■

Outcomes

Deploying texts to nudge students, having two-way conversations with students and targeting high-touch interventions benefitted the First-Year Transition team, first-year students, mentors and Weber State, including:

Reduced summer melt: WSU sent texts to admitted students nudging them about deadlines tied to matriculation. For instance, in mid-July students were asked if they finished registering for fall classes. The responses or lack thereof are an early-warning system that the student is at risk of melting. Moreover, just starting communications with students can spark conversations about issues wholly unrelated to the original message but worrying the student. The registration text prompted admitted students to ask for help with issues impeding enrollment. Verbatim replies include:

- *Where can I find out how much my first semester will cost?*

- *Yes but I have no idea how to use the money I got from FAFSA*

- *I've registered for four classes but I'm not sure if that is enough*

Increased bandwidth of WSU staff: The calendar harnesses artificial intelligence to guide message personalization and scheduling. The team schedules texts for orientation, registration and other events and the associated deadlines, sets up automated replies based on a student's response (or non-response), and receives alerts when a reply indicates that a one-on-one conversation is necessary. The message portfolio and calendar work in concert to free up First-Year Transition staff and peer mentors from time-consuming logistical and tracking duties.

First-year students confirmed effectiveness of texting: Gen Z in general likes to have its opinion solicited on products and services. In this vein, WSU asked first-year students to rate the helpfulness of the text messages on a scale of 1-5 (5 being great). 86% scored it a 4 or 5.

> *[Text messages] has helped me a lot to know about important or helpful stuff going on in school. Whenever I have a question about my classes or my credits, I can ask through messages with no need of going to school or calling the school offices for information.*

First-Year Student, Weber State University

10 Pragmatic Personalization Tips

These 10 implementation tips are derived from Signal Vine's extensive work with two- and four-year public and private institutions and educational not-for-profits on improving student retention.

☐ **1.** *Contextualize your messages by using data from your existing CRM or SIS. For example, messaging students with GPAs between 2.0 and 2.5 with information about tutoring is more effective than a message to the entire student body.*

☐ **2.** *Humanize your communication by providing context based on student behaviors. This is a generation that is skeptical of bots and seeks out the opportunity to expose them wherever possible. We've seen many students ask if they were speaking to a bot and asked the advisor to prove they were not a robot!*

☐ **3.** *Knowing student skepticism, use AI effectively. Create FAQ hacks like creating a set of common questions and on-message responses that can either be automated or shared by your team so you can create a common voice.*

☐ **4.** *Use the 80/20 rule- 80% of your audience will not need high-touch interactions so automating messages about the simple tasks while identifying the 20% who need the extra touch and will make or break your persistence goals.*

☐ **5.** *Gen Z values Pragmatism. Don't text like you are writing an email- keep it short with a clear call to action and link to more in-depth data or "to register do this"or "to declare do this."*

☐ **6.** *Partner with students to engage other students and send messages, like a freshmen-year experience program, so you create peer-to-peer engagement and add credibility in your communication.*

☐ **7.** *Anticipate student responses before they happen. 70% of students who reply will do so within 4 minutes. Plan your messages so that you are ready to respond within minutes of sending.*

☐ **8.** *Use multimedia communication to create engagement and add a more personal approach. Well-placed GIFs can really help establish trust and engagement.*

☐ **9.** *Support students with mental health check-ins. Proactively communicate with students to see how they are acclimating and experiencing your institution so students feel connected.*

☐ **10.** *Foster out-of-classroom learning in your student affairs or student success approach. Much of a student's growth comes from independence and discovery.*

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If you have questions or want to discuss implementing
a texting strategy at your institution, visit:
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