"U" Won't Get a Response:
Community College Student Preferences for Institutional Text Messages

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Although institutions of higher education have started engaging students and prospective students via text messages, no extant research has addressed student preferences for receiving text messages. Elaborating upon Castleman and Page's (2016) and Taylor and Serna's (2019) work, a large, metropolitan community college system surveyed 123 community college students to learn more about how a community college should text their students. Data from this study suggest that community college students prefer text messages that omit slang or textese (i.e. "u" instead of "you," "2" instead of "two"), text messages with exclamation points versus periods, text messages with hyperlinks, and mention the student's name, the sender's name, and their institution.

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"U" Won't Get a Response:
Community College Student Preferences for Institutional Text Messages

Since its inception, text messaging has become increasingly popular. In the United States (U.S.), over 97 percent of the 223 million smartphone users have reported sending text messages regularly (Pew Research Center, 2017). As the popularity of text messaging has increased, varying types of institutions of higher education have taken notice. The Minnesota Office of Higher Education, in 2016, began a summer nudging program that reached 1,800 prospective postsecondary students in 300 public schools to remind these students of financial aid deadlines and postsecondary enrollment requirements (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2017). Likewise, U.S. community colleges have implemented text messaging programs to inform students of financial aid requirements, study habits, time management skills, and enrollment procedures (Fishbane & Fletcher, 2016).

Despite the ubiquity of text messaging and its emerging use by practitioners in community colleges, little academic research exists documenting the preferences of community college students as it relates to receiving text messages from their institutions. Serna and Taylor (2018) reported on a text messaging program to promote financial literacy among community college students, with their results suggesting female community college students were more likely to participate in and complete the text messaging program than male students. In a follow-up study, Taylor and Serna's (2019) qualitative analysis of 13 community college students found community college students were open to receiving between one to three text messages from

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their institutions per week. In addition, these students preferred their institution avoid slang and emojis in text messages but include hyperlinks to useful resources (Taylor & Serna, 2019). However, this study is limited as a result of the small sample size of students interviewed.

Of other studies addressing sending text messages to community college students, nearly all have been intervention-focused, targeting smokers wanting to quit (Prokhorov et al., 2017), heavy drinkers (Bock et al., 2016), and students struggling with other health-related problems (Brown, O'Connor, & Savaiano, 2014). In addition, these studies discuss community college students receiving a text message from a program or intervention service, not the student's institution.

Castleman and Page's (2016) foundational study touched upon text messaging interventions focused on student completion of the Free Application for Federal Aid (FAFSA), but their study did not articulate specific community college student preferences toward receiving a text message from their institution, nor did their study employ A/B testing to learn whether the impact of the text messages was maximized. For instance, Castleman and Page's text messages included slang (2016, p. 410), inclusion of the recipient's name in some texts but not in others (p. 410), hyperlinks (p. 411), and variable punctuation such as a combination of exclamation points, periods, and question marks (p. 412) without any explanation as to why these elements were used. Furthermore, Castleman and Page (2016) did not articulate why text messages were sent in a sporadic time frequency: sometimes texts were sent weekly, and other times up to three weeks lapsed between text messages (pp. 410-412).

Ultimately, it is important to learn about how community college students prefer to be texted by their institution, as such emerging technologies may play a critical role in reducing summer melt, or the phenomenon where students are admitted to an institution in the spring but never enroll or attend courses in the fall (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Embracing text messaging as a viable method of student communication could lead to increased student persistence, retention, and graduation (Castleman & Page, 2016; Taylor & Serna, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap in the literature by answering the following questions:

1.) How often throughout the day do community college students text?
2.) What elements of a text message do community college students prefer, including slang, inclusion of their name, hyperlinks, and punctuation?

In all, this study surveyed 123 first-time-in-college (FTIC) community college students regarding their text messaging preferences, using the text messages in Castleman and Page's (2016) and Taylor and Serna's (2019) studies as the foundation to better understand community college student text messaging preferences and inform best practices.

Method

The research team collected survey data during the Fall 2017 semester from community college students enrolled at Downtown Community College (DCC, a pseudonym), a large, eleven-campus community college situated in the downtown area of a metropolis in Texas. Overall, the DCC student body can be described thus: over 41,000 students, 78% attending part-time, 55% female, 44% White, 32% Hispanic, 37% over the age of 25, and 95% are first-time degree-seeking students.

The research team identified this study's sample after visiting first-time-in-college (FTIC) DCC students in a required first-year course titled, "Effective Learning: Keys to College Success." During the course, members of the research team visited students to share information

regarding financial literacy, providing these FTIC students with the option to sign up for a mailing list from DCC's financial literacy office. In all, 2,459 FTIC students signed up for the mailing list in Fall 2017.

Later in the Fall 2017 semester, the research team sent all 2,459 FTIC students a four-question survey asking for their preferences for receiving a text message from DCC. One-hundred-twenty-three students responded to the survey, most within one day of receiving the invitation. To reduce the chance for duplicate answers from the same student, the researchers asked students to complete the survey once. The survey was sent as an embedded Google Form, allowing the students to easily respond on their smartphone or computer without needing to open the survey in a browser. The research team sent to complete the survey during a two-day period in the middle of the week around noon in Fall 2017. Although this study's self-selected sample (Lavrakas, 2008) represents only 5% of the total population (2,459 DCC students signed up for the email service and 123 completed this study's survey), this exploratory study represents the first and only to articulate FTIC community college student preferences for receiving a text message from their institution, rendering the findings valuable and informative.

Surveys were created by using Castleman and Page's (2016) exemplars (pp. 410-412) and altering the content so that it was relevant to the community college students in the sample. In total there were four survey questions. The first question inquired about how many text messages students sent daily. The remaining three questions contained multiple versions of text messages using different elements, such as variance in slang use, punctuation, and hyperlinks. The final question was optional and open-ended, giving DCC students an opportunity to share any additional thoughts about text messaging.

The researchers did not test the survey for validity, as this survey was not measuring a construct such as happiness or leadership ability (Sullivan, 2011). Rather, the survey was written to measure student preferences, with each question having possible answers adapted directly from Castleman and Page's (2016) work. In addition, the researchers did not test the survey for reliability, as DCC serves a highly transient and changing student population: Surveying the same students twice to measure reliability was not feasible for this exploratory study given this changing student population and the researchers' access to the population (Sullivan, 2011). To render the findings easily interpretable, the researchers reported survey response means, found in Table 2 in the Results and Discussion section.

Prior research suggests those who receive a text message often view text messages ending in a period as insincere (Gunraj, Drumm-Hewitt, Dashow, Upadhyay, & Klin, 2016), so text messages in this study's survey included those ending with a period and those ending with an exclamation point to learn whether students preferred one punctuation mark over another. Although outside of the scope of community college research, extant studies have used hyperlinks to engage with audiences through text message, but results have varied regarding the effectiveness of embedding a hyperlink into a text message (McGeeney & Yan, 2016; Sosa et al., 2017). Finally, the field of sociolinguistics has published extensively on college-aged people (aged 18-24) and the popularity of slang usage in social settings (Eble, 1996; Hummon, 1994; Wang, 2016), but no extant research has addressed community college student preferences for slang inclusion in a text message from their institution.

Results and Discussion

The frequency of community college student text messaging habits is displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Community college student (n=123) text messaging frequency, per day

Text messaging frequency	% of respondents
Fewer than ten per day	27.6%
11-50 per day	40.7%
51-100 per day	17.9%
100 or more per day	13.8%

This survey question attempted to quantify the number of text messages students sent daily. Nearly 60% of the student survey sample indicated they send between eleven and one hundred text messages per day. Although the survey did not ask who the students were texting—out of respect of their privacy—text messaging appears to be a widely-accepted method of communication used on a daily basis by community college students. Castleman and Page's (2016) study indicated text messages were sent to students between once per week and once every three weeks, while Taylor and Serna's (2019) study suggested community college students are open to receiving at least one text message from their institution per week. However, the results of this study suggest community colleges could text their students more frequently, given the popularity of the communication platform.

The survey results of community college student (n=123) text preferences are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Survey results of community college student (n=123) text messaging preferences

Question 1: Which text message would you most likely respond to?	% of respondents
Hi! It's [NAME] from DCC. U signed up 2 receive texts 2 stay on top of things. Still want them? Y or N	6.5%
Hi! It's [NAME] from DCC. You signed up to receive texts to stay on top of things. Still want them? Y or N	49.6%
Hi! It's [NAME] from DCC :) You signed up to receive texts to stay on top of things. Still want them? Y or N	43.9%

Question 2: Which text message would you most likely respond to?	
Hey. This is [NAME] from DCC. Your tuition payment is due soon. Check here for more details: bit.ly/2h5eX38	22.8%
Hey! This is [NAME] from DCC! Your tuition payment is due soon! Check here for more details: bit.ly/2h5eX38	56.9%
Hey! This is [NAME] from DCC. Your tuition payment is due soon. Contact the DCC Help Desk for more info!	20.3%
Question 3: Which text message would you most likely respond to?	
Hey [NAME]: Do you need help completing your FAFSA? We have lots of FAFSA completion events coming up...text me your campus and I'll send you the next event.	23.6%
Do you need help completing your FAFSA? We have lots of FAFSA completion events coming up...text me your campus and I'll send you the next event.	28.5%
Hey [NAME], it's [NAME] from DCC: need help completing your FAFSA? We have lots of FAFSA completion events coming up...text me your campus and I'll send you info!	48.0%

The survey questions aimed to identify elements of messages that students preferred. Data in this study suggest that community college students prefer text messages omitting slang or textese (such as using "U" in place of "you"), supporting Taylor and Serna's (2019) findings. In question one, students overwhelmingly expressed preference for the messages without slang as indicated by 49.6% favoring the second choice, and 43.9% preferring the third option. Among the respondents who expressed a preference for omitting slang, there was a slight preference for text messages that omitted an emoji: 5.7% more community college students chose the text message that did not include the ":)" emoji.

The results from question two demonstrate a clear community college student preference for text messages with exclamation points and hyperlinks, again supporting Taylor and Serna's (2019) study. Nearly 57% of respondents preferred the text message including three exclamation points and a hyperlink, whereas 22.8% of respondents preferred the text message with periods and the same hyperlink. The other question option—a text message that used one exclamation point and omitted the hyperlink—was less preferred among community college students, as only 20.3% of the survey sample chose this option. This supports extant research suggesting text messages ending in a period may be viewed as insincere (Gunraj et al., 2016). As a result, community colleges may consider adding exclamatory punctuation and hyperlinks to text messages sent to their students.

Finally, community college students responded most favorably to text messages including the recipient's name, sender's name, and institution of the sender as evidenced in the results of question three. Overall, 48% of community college students preferred the text message with their name first, the sender's name second, and a mention of the institution, whereas only 28.5% of students preferred no mention of names or their institution, and 23.6% preferred a mention of only their name in the text message. As a result, community colleges may consider including the student's name, sender's name, and institution name in the text message to potentially increase their students' interaction with the text message, echoing Taylor and Serna's (2019) research.

Implications

The data in this study suggest that community college practitioners may be able to send text message to students more frequently and include specific text message elements to increase the student engagement with the text message itself. Beyond reminding community college students of important deadlines, such as completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and enrolling in courses, community college practitioners may consider sending text messages to students reminding them of on-campus events, coursework deadlines, and institutional resources such as tutoring services or academic advising.

Data in this study also suggest that community college practitioners should consider avoiding slang and/or emojis in text messages sent to students. Akin to Gunraj et al.'s (2016) study, the punctuation of a text message influences how the recipient views the message. This study found exclamatory punctuation, such as the exclamation point, appealing to community college students. Inversely, this study found emojis to negatively impact a community college student's perception of the text message. As a result, community college practitioners should pay close attention to how they compose a text message for student consumption, paying special attention to punctuation and the use of emojis.

Finally, community college practitioners should consider addressing students by their name in text messages, followed by the sender's name and the institution, potentially alerting the attention of the student and lending more trustworthiness and credibility to the text message itself. Similar to punctuation, hyperlinks, and emojis, this study suggests community college practitioners can positively influence their students' perception of an institutional text message by simply including basic communicative elements in the text, such as recipient, sender, and institution name.

Conclusion

Castleman and Page's (2016) and Taylor and Serna's (2019) foundational studies paved the way for more research exploring how and why community colleges should use text messages as a tool to increase student persistence, retention, and graduation. At times in their study, Castleman and Page (2016) texted students once per week, yet the results of this study support Taylor and Serna's (2019) work suggesting community colleges could connect with their students via text message far more frequently. Moreover, if community college practitioners pay careful attention to the punctuation and composition of each message, practitioners could maximize student engagement through text messaging, a technology that is incredibly popular and influential among young people (Pew Research Center, 2017).

However, this study is limited by its self-selected sample (Lavrakas, 2008) and the exploratory nature of the survey development. As a result, future research could address the specific timing of text messages, how frequently a community college should text a student, specific content that community college students prefer, and what technological elements are appropriate to include in a text message to a community college student, such as pictures, videos, emojis, and other elements. Moreover, future survey work should ensure the reliability and validity of the survey instrument, if the survey is measuring a construct such as a student's comfort or familiarity with receiving communication from an institution (Sullivan, 2011).

Prior research has suggested that community college students are open to receiving text messages from their institution or another educational organization to engage them in their educational endeavors (Castleman & Page, 2016; Fishbane & Fletcher, 2016; Serna & Taylor, 2018; Taylor & Serna, 2019). For as popular as text messaging has become, it is important for community colleges to take notice and consider utilizing text messaging as an institutional intervention to improve the persistence, retention, and graduation rates of community college students across the country.

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