Winning the Battle for Student Success

All higher education institutions are fighting a similar battle: how to drive better student engagement and connect campus communities in a way that helps students be more successful. At South Texas College (STC), administrators and faculty are fighting that battle in the midst of especially challenging conditions ... and they’re winning.

STC is located in McAllen, Texas, 11 miles from the Mexico border. The city has a 7.9 percent unemployment rate, and roughly 30 percent of residents live in poverty—among the highest rates in the United States. Furthermore, more than 70 percent of students are the first in their families to attend college, and more than 95 percent of students are Hispanic—a significant number of whom do not speak English as their primary language. The challenges don’t end there. Across the border is Reynosa, a community saddled by drug-related crime, creating an environment that has become the norm for many students and residents alike.

Yet through a new alliance formed between STC and Universidad Tamaulipeca, more students in Reynosa will have access to the faculty, programs, and resources offered by STC, giving them the chance to gain the education needed to work toward making economic changes and breaking the cycle of poverty and crime. STC President Shirley Reed noted of this partnership: “It’s important for the economic development of the region because we have quality programs that we can share with them, and they have outstanding faculty with unique expertise they can share with us. We can work together, we can benefit, and we can learn from each other.”

For most students attending the college, STC is a lifeline—a way toward a better situation and a brighter future. But because of language barriers and a student population in which many students are isolated and highly impoverished and rely on mobile phones as their primary technology access point, a foundational piece in receiving that education has been missing until recently, when the school adopted Pronto, a mobile-first and student-centric communication platform.

Ana Peña, director of distance learning, and Simon Rodríguez, distance learning media manager, have led STC’s effort to find tools that will enable students to comfortably and confidently connect with professors, classmates, and advisors in real time. Increasing students’ access and engagement is key to their success. One way Pronto has helped is through instant communication. Rene Zuniga, chair of the Education Department and associate professor of education at STC, noted: “Students ask a question, and I get it right away.”

The language barrier for students at STC can be a significant roadblock to their success. Zuniga further commented: “We think we’re sending a certain message, but our students are receiving a completely different message due to the language barriers that exist on campus.” Furthermore, when students send messages, “you can tell right away” if their primary language is not English. As a result of the shortcomings of available tools, students have resorted to either awkwardly toggling between different translation applications or merely trying their best to communicate.

Pronto’s automatic message-translation solution allows students to both send and receive messages in their native language through a mobile application. This feature is breaking down language barriers and connecting students and professors; thanks to these message-translation capabilities, more than 90 percent of STC professors using...
Pronto have connected with at least one student with whom they previously were unable to connect.

Breaking down communication barriers carries many benefits. Connected students feel more confident—about what professors expect of them and about their ability to succeed. By building students’ confidence in the classroom, higher education institutions can tackle another problem: student enrollment and retention. Mario Reyna, dean of business, public safety, and technology at STC, stated: “Imagine a world where students can speak freely in whatever language they’re comfortable speaking! Can you imagine what that will do to student enrollment?”

The economic barrier for students who are working full-time and can’t afford a laptop or have limited access to a computer can also present a significant challenge to succeeding in college. Pronto CEO Zach Mangum commented: “At the core of Pronto is a firm belief in helping students through accessibility—not just the traditional accessibility standards which include screen readers and voice-over, but also linguistic accessibility and economic accessibility. Pronto allows students to communicate freely in their native language on some of the least expensive mobile devices on the market.”

STC represents a more literal version of a situation that most students face: frustration around not having a voice that can be heard and understood; and feelings of isolation from, and lack of access to, the people who can help. On college and university campuses worldwide, students are more connected—but also disconnected—than ever. Students walk around campus increasingly plugged-in, with their faces in their phones and cut off from the campus community around them. It’s obvious where students want to connect: on their mobile devices. “Sometimes people are more prone to answering a message than a call,” says Jessica Gonzalez, an instructional designer at STC. “With time-sensitive information that students need and want to know, instead of flooding their email, we send it out through Pronto.”

Unfortunately, too many colleges and universities have been slow to adopt mobile-first communication tools and instead rely on older mediums such as email—often ignored by many students—and on communication tools available inside of an institution’s learning management system. Whereas LMS providers offer phenomenal learning tools, few offer fully robust, engaging communication tools. In fact, many LMS providers offer integrations with dedicated synchronous communication platforms because these platforms deliver specific benefits that the LMS simply cannot.

To truly engage students—something every college and university is desperately trying to do—institutions must adopt platforms that students enjoy and want to use. At STC, faculty had tried a variety of communication channels (e.g., email, WhatsApp) to engage with students. Through Pronto’s LMS integration, everyone is connected on day one—students, classmates, teachers, advisors, tutors. Nicolas Alcantar, a student at STC, noted: “Before Pronto, Spanish-speaking students might only seek help from friends or classmates who speak Spanish. Now they can seek help from other students who may not speak Spanish.”

Since implementing Pronto in January 2019, STC is noting several remarkable changes on campus. “I have seen students who are very afraid of using their voice to communicate. I have heard students say that they don’t feel comfortable speaking. With Pronto, students are more comfortable participating in class because even if they don’t know how to say something in English, they use Pronto, and it will translate it for them,” said Marisol Chavez, technology specialist at STC.

When students feel more confident in sharing their ideas and in getting the help they need, right away, they will be more successful. And higher education institutions will win the battle.

Notes
2. Interview with Simon Rodríguez, May 23, 2019.
5. Interview with Simon Rodríguez, May 29, 2019.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

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