3 Ways Mobile Apps Improve Student-Professor Communications

By **DEREK HANDOVA** - **Contributor**

There are 50 million Americans younger than age 20, and over 80 percent of them agree that an undergraduate degree is crucial to success. Since engagement is key to successfully completing a university education, communicating with members of Generation Z in the ways they most prefer could be key to keeping them engaged, according to Capture Higher Ed. With mobile use continuing to be on the rise, developing university mobile apps for students should be a high priority to ensure engagement.

University mobile apps can help keep students engaged with their professors outside of class as well as the campus at large, which boosts retention and improves student success.

Scheduling office hours with professors will inevitably become more difficult with increasing enrollment and likely static faculty staffing, but student access to professors supports engagement. Students benefit when colleges customize their digital tools for engagement outside the classroom. When creating university mobile apps, enabling one-on-one communication between students and professors will be critical.

Increase Flexibility for Professors and Students

With larger lecture classes often having hundreds of students, it would be understandable if instructors were hesitant to give out their personal phone numbers so they can be reached outside of office hours. However, university mobile apps — including some repurposed business chat apps — enable instructors to directly communicate with students at any time. This provides more prompt responses than students waiting until traditional office hours, according to the journal QScience.

Additionally, business chat apps enable direct-call phone operation so the student and professor can communicate using video or audio. This functionality is similar to some of the other apps students find helpful, such as video-calling programs, chat programs, and in-classroom e-tools that are strictly academic.

For those institutions that want their own audio-capable mobile apps, these can be based on a voice proxy API similar to the one a ride-share company uses to let drivers and riders talk directly via their app. These types of communications APIs for universities enable secure communication and ensure the privacy of professor and student alike. The app lets students know when a professor is available to talk, and both parties can address concerns or questions about assignments or course materials in real time.

For example, some university mobile apps allow students to look up faculty and other campus contact information such as virtual office hours. If they cannot talk live to their professor, students can leave a voicemail, which is also delivered as a text message or via in-app messaging. These apps can help make students more productive so they can ask questions right away rather than waiting for the next class session — which could be as many as five days in the future.

It's clear that engagement is a crucial component of success for college and university students. Keeping them informed and connected in the mobile format they're most accustomed to and comfortable with will be key to that success.

Engage Students and Reduce Dropout Rates

While the most practical benefit of college mobile apps are their effect on increased flexibility for professors and students to communicate outside of office hours, a more significant impact is their ability to engage students — and as a consequence reduce the dropout rate.

Retention is a big issue for colleges and universities. U.S. News & World Report shows that as many as one in three first-year students drop out of college after their first year, for reasons ranging from academic challenges to loneliness and feeling out of place.

A case study published in Educause Review follows the implementation of a mobile app at Texas A&M University at Galveston (TAMUG). After it was implemented, the campus achieved near-universal undergraduate engagement. They registered a 91.7 percent conversion rate, meaning students downloaded the app, created an account, and actively used it. The objective was to set an early pattern of success and ease of use for incoming first-year students, 83 percent of whom said the app got them off to a good start by helping them locate and register for classes and network with other students. Overall, 96 percent agreed that the app helped them feel at home in the TAMUG community.

Using the TAMUG app, freshman students can post questions in the app feed about specific courses that many upperclassmen feel empowered to answer based on their experiences. First-year students can stay informed about general campus news and events, which further supports engagement. The app also provides support with scheduling and even offers GPS to help students navigate the campus.

Improve Collaboration with University Mobile Apps

While the use of smartphones, tablets, and mobile apps in the classroom remains debatable, some education professionals find they aid collaboration, according to National Public Radio. Jesse Stommel, who directs the Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington, was interviewed for the report. "We can also ask students to use their devices in ways that help them and the rest of the class, looking up a confusing term, polling their friends on Facebook about a topic we're discussing, or taking collaborative notes in an open document," she said.

But in the experience of some higher education strategic thinkers, it's most important to have the students themselves involved in the design and development of any college mobile app that is deployed to ensure their needs are met.

According to the State Press, this level of collaboration can be seen at Arizona State University, where undergraduate students are developing and beta testing an interactive social app that lets them talk within channels about specific classes with their peers, share class notes, and even potentially receive academic advising from a chatbot.

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