

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

St. Mary's U. Finds That When It Texts, Students Come

September 21, 2011, 6:37 pm

By [Alex Campbell](#)



A prospective undergraduate named Porsha got a text in January.

“StMarysU: R u still interested in StMarys? A complete application includes an official transcript and test scores. Call 800-367-7868 with ?s about ur status.”

“My transcript has been sent along with my tests results,” Porsha quickly replied.

“Great!” said the text back, two minutes later. “We should get it soon, and we will be in touch with an admission decision.”

At [St. Mary's University](#), in San Antonio, Tex., potential students are given the option to sign up for updates when they first make contact with the institution. Throughout the application process, they get alerts, and, if they reply, the university writes back to them individually.

For the second straight year, students who signed up were more likely to apply than those who didn't, and, if they got accepted, they were more likely to matriculate. Students didn't sign up for texts en masse this past year—1,923 signed up out of 40,000 who showed interest in the university—but 30.8 percent of those who did ended up applying, compared with 10.9 percent of all prospective students, according to [Mongoose Research](#), the company that created the program for St. Mary's.

Meanwhile, 42 percent of the texting students paid a deposit to attend the university compared with 26 percent of all accepted students.

The results show that students who sign up for the service already have a strong interest in the institution, said Suzanne Petrusch, vice president for enrollment management. That helps St. Mary's admissions staff know whom to target their time and resources on, she said.

Students who signed up for text updates were much likelier to get in last year, too. Ms. Petrusch said that's probably "part of a self-selection process," meaning that those students perhaps spent more time making sure they were the right fit for the institution.

The program allows the university to target groups of students based on a number of variables. If a member of the university's Board of Trustees is hosting a reception in El Paso, for example, the institution can text signed-up students from that area. Administrators can specify text recipients by whether a student has visited the campus, completely filled out an application, or is scholarship-eligible, or by a number of other factors.

Jim Miller, president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, said "it's not terribly common yet" for colleges to send texts to prospective students on a mass-broadcast basis, though he has heard of it elsewhere and he expects more institutions to start.

Mr. Miller said the St. Mary's idea sounds reasonable, provided students are not forced to receive those messages. "What I'm hearing from the younger folks is that e-mail is so yesterday," he said, "and texting is where it's at."

Prospective students are often an elusive audience, said David Marshall, president of Mongoose Research. They don't read snail mail, and aren't that likely to read e-mail either, he said. "You can Facebook them," he said, "but that's awkward."

The key is that the program is opt-in, so students don't feel bothered or harassed by the messages, Mr. Marshall said. The messages are sent sporadically, too—"never overwhelming them."

Samford University, in Birmingham, Ala., sends out text messages on an opt-out basis, said Jason Black, the university's dean of admission. It too sends out messages tailored to specific students' location and application status, but it includes information at the end of the message telling students how to stop receiving text updates if they don't want them.

St. Mary's was the first institution to use Mr. Marshall's program; Champlain College, in Vermont, got its program going in March, so there haven't yet been any results there. "We're certainly in the early-adopter phase of it," Mr. Marshall said.