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News

Can You Hear Me Now?

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As a professor, how do you get dropout-prone college students to stay in school? Give them your cell phone number. How do you get professors to promptly field text messages, calls and e-mails from students? Buy them smartphones and pay for the service plan.

That is the logic Georgia Gwinnett College employed when it decided to offer its more than 300 full- and part-time faculty members cell phones and encouraged them to respond to any calls or texts from students within 24 hours.

Under the program, professors are offered a state-of-the-art smartphone and a Sprint data plan that includes the most sophisticated wireless Internet coverage. It is part of a several-tier effort by Georgia Gwinnett — a public, four-year, noncompetitive-admissions college founded in 2005 — to defy the historically low retention rates typical of colleges that set such a modest bar for admission (Georgia Gwinnett admits any Georgia high school graduate).

And so far, they say, it is working. The retention rate for returning sophomores at Georgia Gwinnett stands at 75 percent. That is about double the average rate for noncompetitive-admissions colleges in Georgia, according to Tom Mundie, dean of the school of science and technology at Georgia Gwinnett, and on par with many public institutions that have competitive admissions. In engagement surveys, Mundie says, students have reported “feeling that faculty care about and are accessible to them.”

These plaudits and retention numbers are not driven solely by invitations to call or text professors and expect a reasonably swift response, Mundie says. Other aspects of the college’s retention effort probably contribute as well, including small class sizes and a mentoring program that arranges for professors to advise students on academic, career, and personal matters. But professors and administrators at the college seem to believe there is a substantial correlation between the cell phone program and the young institution’s impressive retention numbers -- enough that the college, which has grown its student body and faculty by leaps and bounds since its founding five years ago, is preparing to spend \$350,000 on faculty cell phones and data plans this year.

That works out to about \$1,000 per faculty member — a significant investment, and one Lonnie D. Harvel, Georgia Gwinnett's vice president for instructional technology, is hesitant to divulge, given the eagerness of Georgia legislators to find anything to cut. Georgia Gwinnett sprung for some pretty sophisticated gadgets: for full-time professors, it offers Motorola Evo smartphones with Google's Android operating system and 4G coverage. For part-time professors, it offers Sprint's HTC Snap smartphone, which is lighter-weight but still retails for several hundred dollars. The college offers the professors regular upgrades. Professors can make the college-funded phone their only phone, and there is no ban on using it for nonwork purposes (Georgia Gwinnett's deal with Sprint allows additional activity on the network without added costs). If the professors do not want the phones, the college offers to pay the bill on their existing cell phones as long as they put the contact number on their syllabuses.

Harvel says that if state legislators try to frame publicly funded Georgia Gwinnett's cell phone giveaway as wasteful, he's "ready to fight that battle." He says the college has observed a bump in faculty productivity as a result of the phones equivalent to "hundreds of thousands of dollars" in labor. For example, Georgia Gwinnett faculty are not required to hold office hours — the idea being that a big bulk of outside-of-class communication with students can be handled via the mobile devices, allowing faculty to deploy their energies on other things. Also, the desktop phone bills are down and inter-faculty communication is up, Harvel says. "A cost analysis demonstrates that the program saves more money than it costs," Harvel says (though he adds that the benefits are "only valid if the institution is intent on expending resources on student engagement").

A Burden on Professors?

So the cell phone program appears to be a boon for student engagement, but is it a threat to faculty sanity? Does giving students such access and pledging a prompt response invite a deluge of text messages — sometimes at odd hours, sometimes inane or easily answerable elsewhere — that might leave professors feeling held hostage by the technology?

Apparently not, according to a handful of professors contacted at random by *Inside Higher Ed*.

"I've never known a professor to keep business hours, anyway," says Brigitte Clifton, an English professor. "...Yes, I've talked a student through a research assignment on my cell in the grocery store while contemplating a bag of beans, but several folks in the aisle around me were doing the same thing in their own lines of work."

Tee Barron, an associate professor of mathematics, says she sometimes gets texts from students asking questions that they could easily have answered by consulting a classmate or the syllabus, but that can be corrected with a benign rebuke. "I'll sometimes text back, 'Hahaha by the time it took me to e-mail or text me you could have found this out yourself and now you're going to have to anyway,'" Barron says. "I think after the first couple times the [students] who are high-maintenance and try that — they start getting it." She said she is contacted "daily" by students via her phone, but has hardly been overwhelmed.

The key is defining boundaries at the outset, they say. While professors say the college encourages a 24-hour response time, they say it is a guideline more than an enforced rule, and that they have the autonomy to lay out expectations — and limitations — to students on a class-by-class basis. The idea is not so much to turn professors into a 24/7 support service as much as to establish a connection with students that ventures, to a reasonable extent, into the world of real-time, person-to-person interchange.

"Even those students with perhaps unreasonable expectations for communications will learn that the professor is not at their immediate disposal, but that we are readily available for questions outside of class,"

says Clifton. “In my real-world experience, bosses have much more rigid expectations of access and response outside of office hours.”

Engagement, after all, is a two-way street, says Mundie, the technology and sciences dean; faculty are expected to be responsive to the needs of students, just as students are expected to be responsive to the expectations of their professors.

And if a student skips a few class sessions, he says, “They might even get a call on their cell phone.”

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— **Steve Kolowich**

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