

How Onondaga Community College built a campus-wide communication model

Overview

Onondaga Community College (OCC), a two-year public college in Syracuse, New York, has used Mongoose for eight years to build a campus-wide network of about 50 staff across enrollment, financial aid, career services, and four academic-school hubs, all texting students as real people. Ryan Nellenback led onboarding for nearly a decade before moving to International Student Services, a shift he credits partly to Mongoose's WhatsApp integration.

INSTITUTION	Public two-year college
LOCATION	Syracuse, NY
PARTNER FOR	8 years
TEXTING STAFF	~50 across campus
CHANNELS	Text, WhatsApp
CRM	Slate

The challenge

OCC wanted every student to feel they belonged, without the staff to do it one-on-one. The project ran through a Title III grant with a blank slate: no shared inboxes, no workflows, and 50 staff who needed to come across as approachable, individual contacts, not a faceless office.

- Belonging at scale, without one-on-one staffing
- No shared inboxes or workflows yet
- Personal enough to feel real, structured enough to scale

Why Mongoose

OCC's first model, later nicknamed OneTeam OCC, had Ryan Nellenback write texts on behalf of about 50 "onboarding contacts" across campus: staff in the library, financial aid, and elsewhere who each served as the point of contact for a cohort of students. Students only ever saw one name: the person assigned to them. Ryan sums up the result: "The employee looks like they know everything about anything."

~50 staff texting students as named, personal contacts across campus.

“We wanted to build something where every student had a home.”

RYAN NELLENBACK · DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SERVICES

One voice per student, expertise behind the scenes

Behind each named contact sat an admissions expert they could loop in whenever a question came up, so the actual expertise stayed centralized and manageable.

“I would write the text and send it on behalf of fifty different people, using each student’s first name and each employee’s first name, so it felt like a personal message from someone they knew, even though I was the one sending it to a thousand students at once.”

RYAN NELLENBACK · ONONDAGA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

01

From one hub to four

As OCC’s structure matured, a single enrollment-owned hub split into four school-based hubs, each with its own shared inbox, trained navigators and advisors, and department secretaries with individual numbers.

02

Departments own their texting

Ryan now stays largely hands-off once a student registers and moves into a school. Admissions kept a smaller workflow of its own, and OCC recently added Slate, with deeper integration planned.

“They’re in charge of their own department’s communications now. They’ve all been trained on the language, and the standard is that every student should know who’s texting them and feel like that person knows their name.”

RYAN NELLENBACK

SMART MESSAGES THAT CATCH THE 10% WHO NEED A PERSON

Ryan uses Smart Messages as a first pass, not a replacement for staff time. The same logic shapes OCC’s registration cadence, built three years ago and still running: a Tuesday text to new students, a Wednesday follow-up to the previous week’s group, and a Thursday check-in for anyone who asked for the registration link but hasn’t used it.

“With every text we send, about ten percent of replies have real questions we need to answer. Smart messaging clears out all the quick ones, the yes-or-no replies, the ‘here’s the link’ responses, so we can focus on the ones that actually need a person. That’s where the efficiency gains come from.”

RYAN NELLENBACK

Catching students before they fall through

OCC built a report that flags students who drop classes mid-cycle, so staff can text them before assuming the drop was intentional.

01

A financial aid catch

A student dropped their classes and texted Ryan that they couldn't afford it. Financial aid confirmed the student had dropped before their aid posted. Ryan texted that explanation back, and the student, an adult learner, re-registered and stayed enrolled.

02

No more waiting in line

OCC texts FAFSA reminders and uses Mongoose as a notification system in its financial aid service center, so students hear when a specialist is ready instead of sitting in a physical queue.

03

Discretion when it matters

When a student had to miss class after a personal emergency, Ryan texted the professor just enough to get the absence excused, without sharing what happened.

04

WhatsApp for international students

Ryan now supports OCC's roughly 40 international students. When one dropped below full-time status over the summer, a text conversation caught it in time to stay in compliance.

HUMAN-IN-THE-LOOP, BY DESIGN

Ryan encourages staff to use AI, but not to let it write the whole conversation.

“I encourage people to use AI, but I also encourage them to keep using their own voice. Don't just copy and paste what it gives you. Put your own twist on it.”

RYAN NELLENBACK

“AI can do a lot, but it should support our work, not take it over. You can search a website with AI, but you can't use it to appeal a tuition charge or explain that your car broke down on the way to class. Sometimes you just need to text a real person who can reach out to your professor for you.”

RYAN NELLENBACK

“Texting removes some of that in-person bias, because you're reaching out to a number, not reacting to how someone looks or presents in person. There's no title attached; they're just texting somebody who helps them.”

RYAN NELLENBACK

BUILT OUT FURTHER THAN MOST

A new staff member who'd used Mongoose at a previous job told Ryan she was surprised by how much more built out OCC's setup was compared to what she'd had before.

Working with Mongoose

Asked whether he'd recommend Mongoose to another school, Ryan was unequivocal: "If I were at another school in a similar position, I'd absolutely recommend Mongoose." At a SUNY conference, he made the case for two-way texting over one-way outreach, then pushed for SUNY-wide pricing. That tier now exists, making Mongoose more accessible to community colleges that would otherwise be priced out.

“Responses are always quick. Customer success has been great. I get people who are like-minded, who've done the work themselves, and who are willing to say, 'that's a good idea, let's share it with other schools.'”

RYAN NELLENBACK

WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE

- **Personal at scale.** 50+ staff and four hubs, with every message reading as if it came from one person.
- **Smart Messages as a filter.** Routine replies clear, so staff time goes to the 10% that need a person.
- **An early-warning system.** Drop reports, aid nudges, and compliance check-ins catch students in time.
- **Human-in-the-loop.** Two-way texting handles sensitive moments with discretion.

LOOKING AHEAD

Ryan is carrying OCC's playbook into International Student Services and expanding WhatsApp as that population grows. He's also watching as the admissions communications he helped build continue without him.

“I'll be interested to see if they keep the same approach or evolve it. If response rates ever dip, my instinct won't be to just change things back. It'll be to figure out what each new class of students actually needs and adapt to that.”

Ryan Nellenback

He added: "It's like MySpace versus Facebook: you adapt, or you get left behind. It's a lot easier to adapt early than to come from behind."

“Text these students like you're on your own phone, not like you're writing an email. None of us are that old. We've worked with students for years, and we were students ourselves once. I would have loved getting a text instead of an email or having to sit through a meeting.”

RYAN NELLENBACK

Want to see what a campus-wide texting model could look like at your college?

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