



Vela Institute
Illuminating Education

STUDENT SUCCESS **AGENCY**

Student Success Agency Service Evaluation:

South Texas Pilot Study of Post-Secondary Persistence

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About Vela Institute

Vela Institute is a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing access to evaluation, analytics, and data tracking to education partners to improve student and community outcomes. Established in 2017, Vela Institute accomplishes its mission through applied research, data analytics, and the use of evidence-based practices.

This external evaluation of South Texas SSA was conducted at the request of Student Success Agency.

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Executive Summary

This project examined a convenience sample of 788 students from two high schools in the state of Texas. Students included in the sample had shown an initial interest in engaging with the Student Success Agency (SSA), graduated in 2017, and for whom SSA had information about the students' post-secondary enrollment (PSE). The overall goal of the project was to describe and to determine if a relationship exists between SSA participation and persistence in postsecondary education.

Building on earlier work assessing connections between program participation and post-secondary enrollment the following categories were used to describe the sample:



Non-Participant

Students who initially showed interest in engaging with SSA, but never engaged or interacted with an SSA agent.



Disengaged

Students who initially showed interest in engaging with SSA, signed up with an agent, had some interactions, but ended their engagement prior to the end of the performance period (September 2015-January 2017).



Engaged

Students who initially showed interest in engaging with SSA, signed up with an agent, and interacted with their SSA agent through the performance period.

Examining the relationship between SSA program usage and persistence data found that:

1

SSA students were more likely to persist in post-secondary enrollment



2

Engaged SSA participants persisted at a higher rate (55.1%) than the rate of non-participants (45.6%)



3

Persistence effects were strongest for students whom enrolled in the fall semester immediately following high school graduation and attended public higher education institutions



4

As participants received more frequent contact with their agent, persistence increased at 4-year institutions of higher education



It is important to note that these results are descriptive and correlational, therefore additional analyses are needed before implying causation. The relatively limited size of the sample also reduced the ability to draw statistically significant conclusions. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample or aggregated samples across multiple schools to increase the ability to find substantial differences between the SSA engagement categories. However, data from the current project provides encouraging evidence for the SSA program and student engagement with SSA agents. Together, these results suggest that continued interaction and engagement with SSA agents are related to positive persistence outcomes.

A photograph of a man and a woman looking at a laptop screen. The man is on the left, wearing glasses and a blue sweater over a light blue collared shirt. The woman is on the right, with blonde hair, wearing a white shirt and large hoop earrings. They are both looking down at the laptop screen. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a classroom or office setting with other people and furniture.

Project

Background

To understand and better assess the breadth of impact, the Student Success Agency (SSA) requested analysis of participant engagement and persistence in higher education. SSA provided thousands of participant contact records describing the type and duration of interaction between mentor and mentee. This data was combined with post-secondary enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

This project examined a convenience sample of 788 students who had shown an initial interest in engaging with the Student Success Agency (SSA), graduated in 2017, and for whom SSA had information about the students' postsecondary enrollment (PSE). The overall goal of the project was to determine the relationship between SSA engagement and post-secondary persistence.

Given the observation nature of the data, the lack of demographic student data to use as control, and the correlational methods used to generate the results, the results presented demonstrate the nature and strength of the relationship between the SSA program and college persistence but do not demonstrate causation. However, the association between SSA program usage and PSE can begin to be established using the current project's data and will provide empirical support for the link between SSA engagement and college persistence.



SSA provided Vela with a sample of 788 students who had initially shown interest in engaging with the SSA. This sample of students completed high school in the spring of 2017, potentially enrolled in higher education in the fall of 2017, and potentially persisted into their second year of higher education in the fall of 2018.

SSA also provided Vela with information regarding the student's engagement with an SSA agent through text message, telephone calls, and emails. More specifically, SSA provided Vela with monthly counts of student-agent contacts from September 2015 to January 2017 for these three mediums.

The extent to which the students in the current sample interacted with an SSA agent varied. Thus, SSA provided Vela with information that categorized the student sample into the following activity categories:



Non-Participant

158 students who initially showed interest in engaging with SSA, signed up with an agent, and interacted with their SSA agent through the performance period.



Disengaged

104 students who initially showed interest in engaging with SSA, signed up with an agent, had some interactions with their SSA agent, but ultimately stopped their engagement with their SSA agent prior to the end of the performance period (September 2015-January 2017).



Engaged

526 students who initially showed interest in engaging with SSA, but never engaged or interacted with an SSA agent.

Finally, SSA provided Vela the raw PSE data, that was obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse. The data allowed Vela to create persistence categories that were used as the criteria for the impact analysis. These categories were:



Persisted

Students who enrolled in any postsecondary (PS) institution in the fall semester immediately after high school graduation and enrolled in the fall semester one year immediately after high school graduation.



Persisted
2-Year

Students who first enrolled at a 2-year institution immediately following high school graduation and persisted.



Persisted
4-Year

Students who enrolled in a public PS institution in fall semester immediately after high school graduation and persisted.



Persisted
Public

Students who first enrolled at a public institution in the fall semester immediately following high school and persisted.



Persisted
Private

Students who first enrolled at a private institution in the fall semester immediately following high school and persisted.

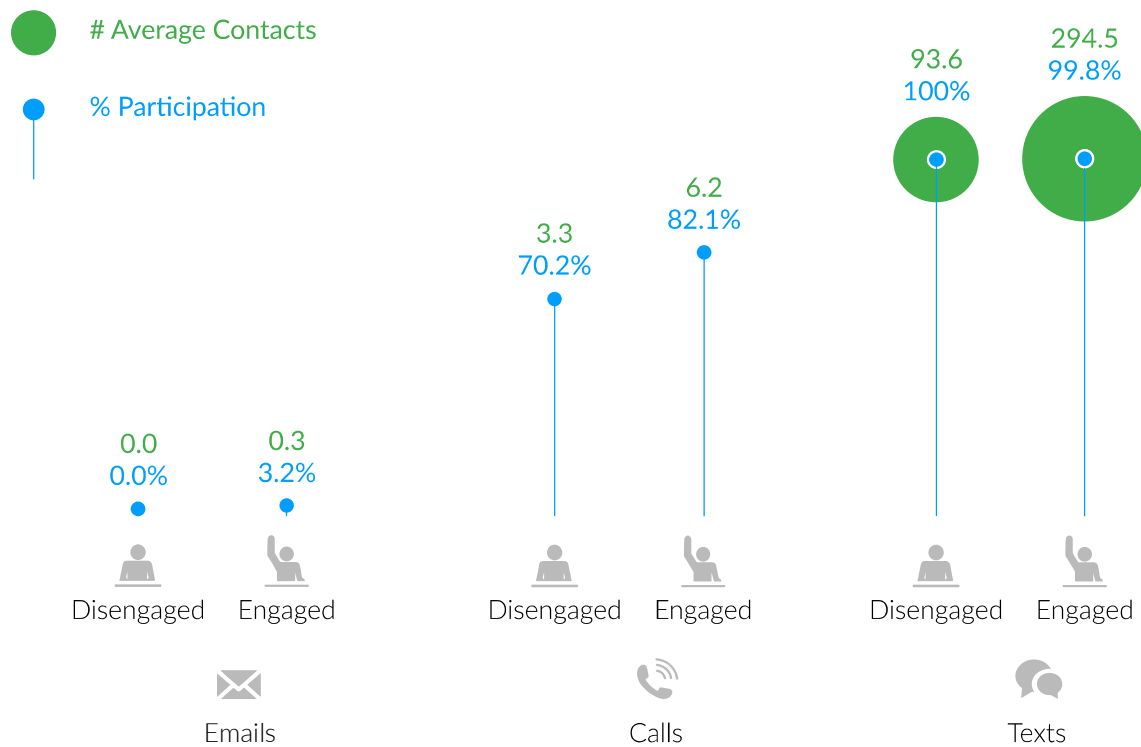
SSA

Usage

The project first described SSA program usage, aggregated by interaction type, and explored who initiated (mentor or mentee) those interactions. The engaged and disengaged activity categories were used to disaggregate the usage patterns (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

While both Engaged Students and Disengaged Students preferred texting, Engaged Students were in more frequent contact with SSA.

Figure 1: SSA Engagement by Contact Type and Activity Category



Notes: Contacts between students and SSA mentors during the entire performance period (i.e., Sept 2015 to Jan 2017).

Percent: Represents the percentage of student contacts using a specific medium (i.e., text, phone call, or email) during the performance period.

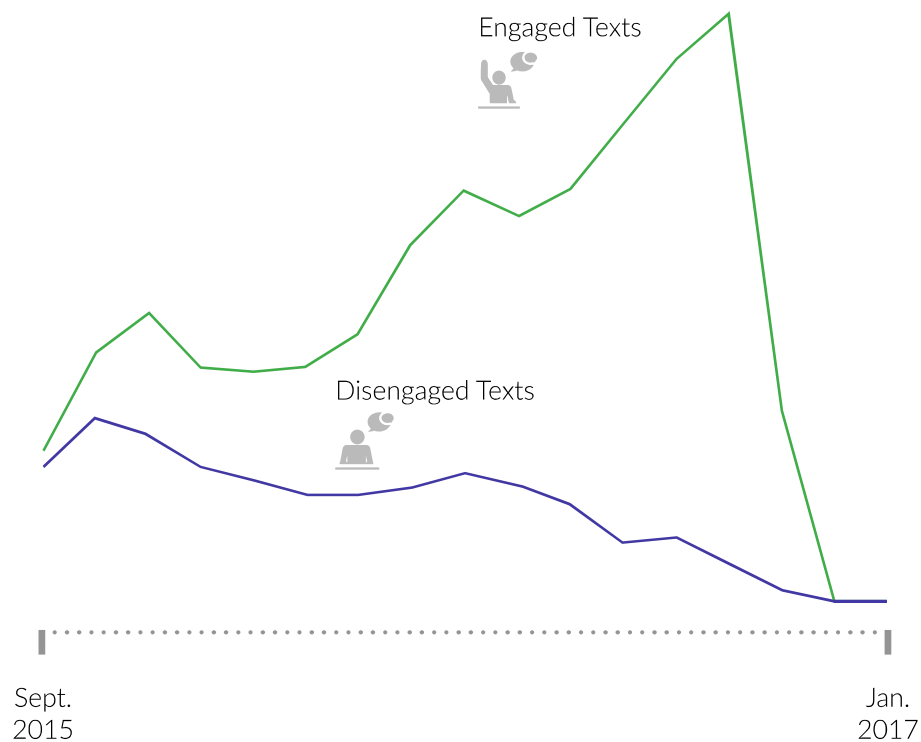
Average: Represents the average number of contacts using a specific medium (i.e., text, phone call, or email) during the performance period.

Notable Results from Figure 1

- Text messaging was the preferred method of contact
 - o Almost all SSA students received at least one text message
 - Engaged: 99.8% exchanged at least one text message
 - Disengaged: 100% exchanged at least one text message
 - o The average number of text messages sent was much higher for engaged students
 - Engaged: 294.5 text messages
 - Disengaged: 93.6 text messages
- While most students had at least one phone call from their agent, SSA students tended to use texting instead of interacting with the agent through phone calls
 - o The majority of SSA students had at least one phone call with their agent
 - Engaged: 82.1%
 - Disengaged: 70.2%
 - o The average number of phone calls over the performance period was relatively low, but engaged students had a higher average number of phone calls.
 - Engaged: 6.2
 - Disengaged: 3.3
- Email was not the preferred method of contact for students or SSA agents
 - o 3.2% of engaged and 0% of disengaged communicated via email
- SSA agents were fairly consistent in being proactive with contacting their students
 - o Agents tended to be a more proactive when calling their students
 - o Agents also initiated the majority of text message communications
- Students who remained engaged were more likely to initiate conversation with their agents
 - o Lower average percentage of mentor-initiated text contacts for engaged students (64.4%) compared with mentor-initiated text contacts for disengaged students (78.1%)

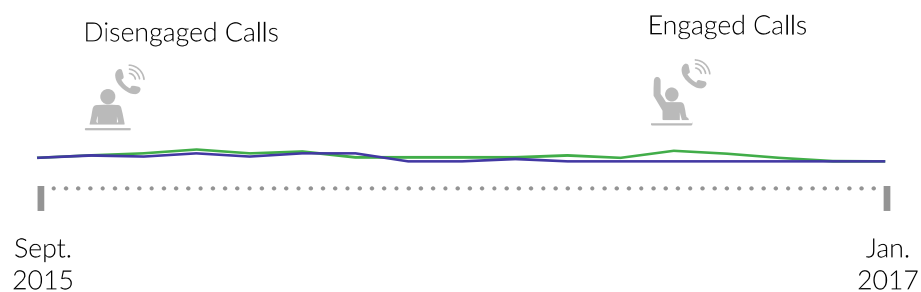
Texts between SSA mentors and Fully Engaged students steadily increased over the performance period whereas texts from Disengaged students steadily decreased.

Figure 2: Average Monthly Texts by Type and Activity Category



Phone calls remained relatively low for both activity categories, but Fully Engaged Students still had more average monthly phone calls than Disengaged Students.

Figure 3: Average Monthly Calls by Type and Activity Category



Notes: Results are the average number of contacts between students and SSA mentors during the performance period (i.e., Sept 2015 to Jan 2017). Due to extremely low usages, email contacts were not included in these figures.

Notable Results from Figures 2 and 3

- The average number of text messages exchanged between engaged students and their agents generally increased between September 2015 and November 2016
 - The average number of text messages exchanged between disengaged students and their agents steadily declined over this same period
- Telephone contacts between engaged and disengaged students remained low and relatively steady over the performance period

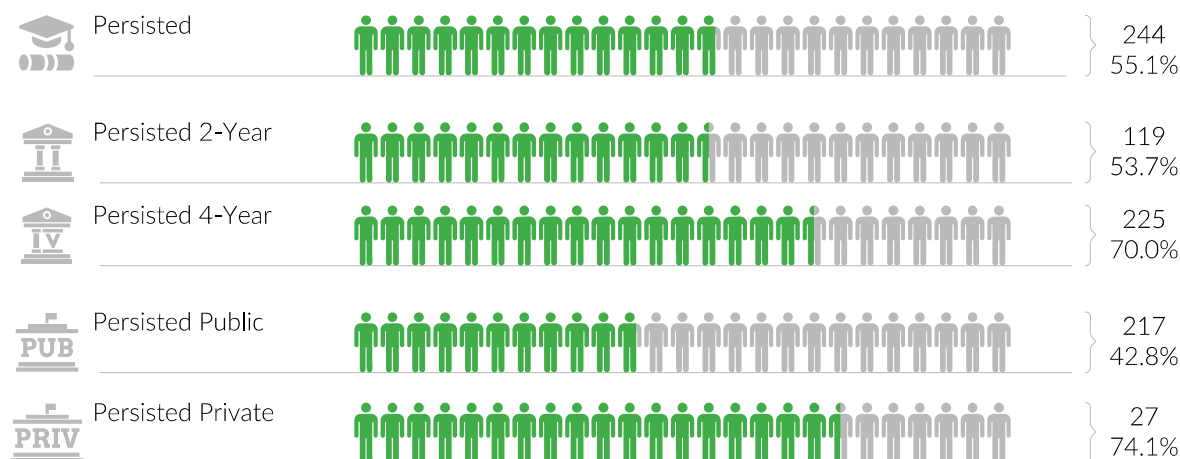
SSA Usage

and Persistence

Next the project determined relationship between SSA engagement and persistence in PSE. Analyses also explored if additional engagement with SSA agents, type of engagement, and who initiated the contact for engaged students was related to persistence in PSE.

Persistence Rates were highest for 4-Year and Private Institutions

Figure 4: Persistence Categories for Total Sample of Engaged Students



Note: Results above are the overall Persistence categories for the student in the overall sample (regardless of activity category).

Notable Results from Figure 4

- Persistence rates were 4-year institutions were higher than 2-year institutions
- Persistence rates at private institutions was higher than public institutions
- Public institutions had the lowest persistence rates (42.8%)

Engaged Students had the highest persistence rates in the cohort.

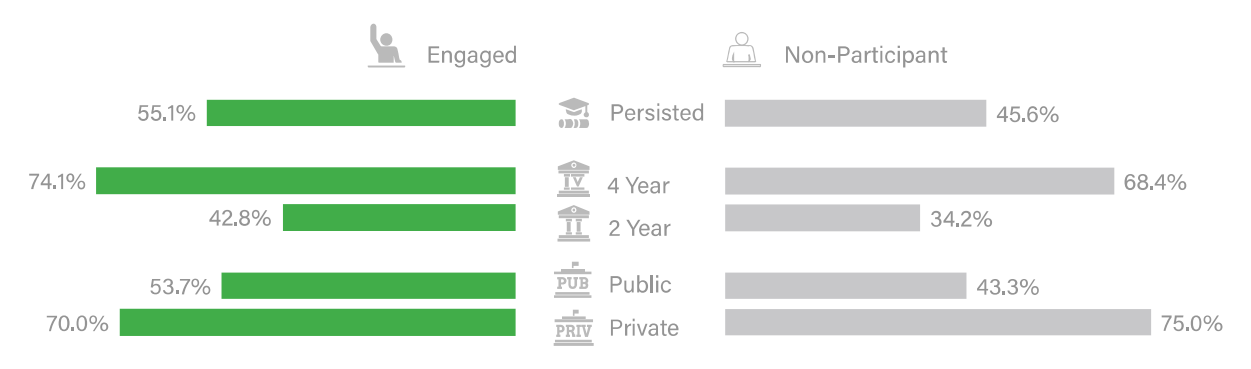
Figure 5: Persistence by Engagement Categories



Note: Results above are a breakdown of the number of students in the overall sample (regardless of activity category) subdivided by the various Persistence categories

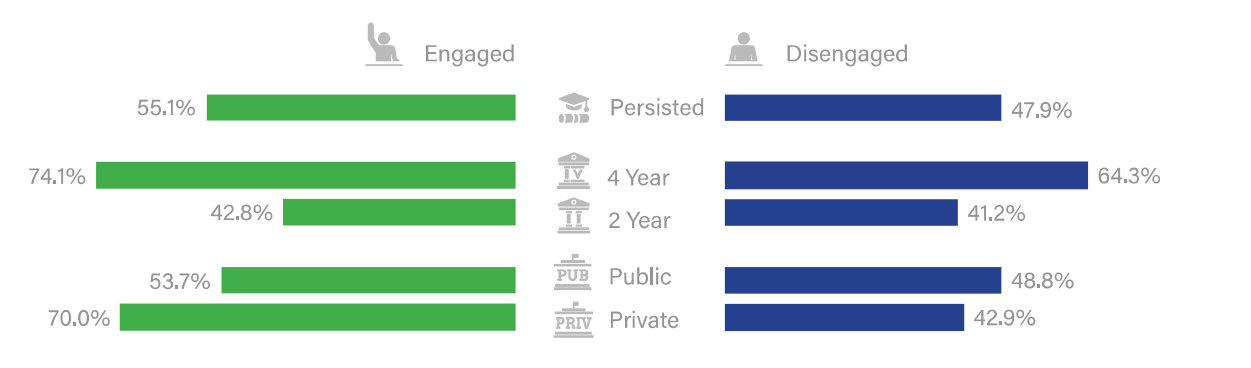
Fully Engaged students had higher rates of post-secondary persistence than Non-Participants.

Figure 6: Post-Secondary Persistence for Engaged Students vs. Non-Participants



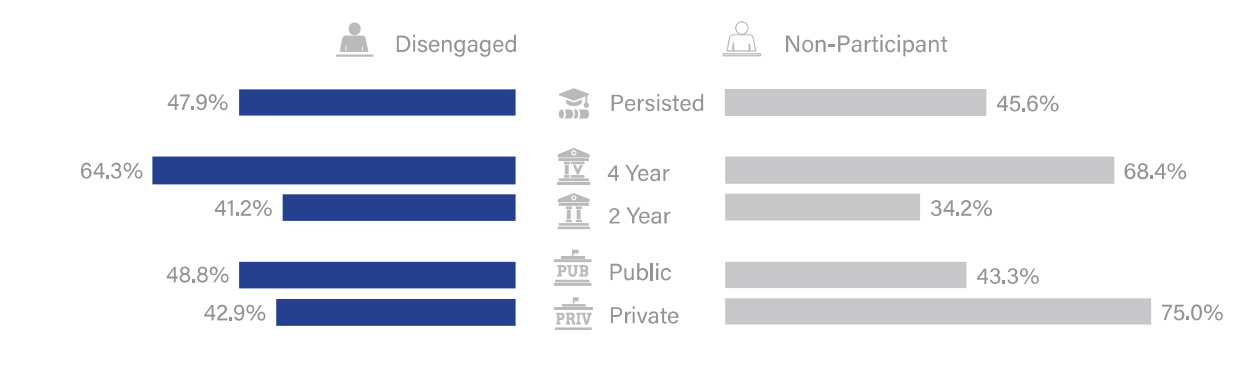
Fully Engaged students also had higher rates of post-secondary enrollment than Disengaged students.

Figure 7: Post-Secondary Persistence for Disengaged Students vs. Late Engaged



Disengaged SSA students had comparable rates of post-secondary persistence as Non-Participants.

Figure 8: Post-Secondary Persistence for Disengaged Students vs. Non-Participants



Notable Results from Figures 6 through 8

- Engaged SSA participants tended to have higher persistence rates compared with disengaged students that did not participate in SSA
 - o These differences were largest for persistence for students enrolled at public institutions
- Disengaged students were more likely to persist at private institutions compared with engaged students

Next the project determined relationship between SSA engagement and persistence in PSE. Analyses also explored if additional engagement with SSA agents, type of engagement, and who initiated the contact for engaged students was related to persistence in PSE.

Table 1: Additional SSA Engagement and PERSISTENCE: Engaged Students

Category	Text			Call		
	Total	Mentor Initiated	Student Initiated	Total	Mentor Initiated	Student Initiated
Persisted	<i>0.08</i>	<i>0.03</i>	<i>-0.04</i>	<i>0.04</i>	<i>-0.03</i>	<i>0.02</i>
2-Year	<i>-0.01</i>	<i>0.06</i>	<i>-0.07</i>	<i>-0.02</i>	<i>-0.03</i>	<i>0.03</i>
4-Year	0.16	<i>0.06</i>	<i>-0.04</i>	<i>0.07</i>	<i>-0.11</i>	<i>0.08</i>
Public	<i>0.08</i>	<i>0.02</i>	<i>-0.03</i>	<i>0.04</i>	<i>-0.05</i>	<i>0.03</i>
Private	<i>0.01</i>	<i>0.11</i>	<i>-0.10</i>	<i>-0.12</i>	<i>0.18</i>	<i>-0.11</i>

Notes: results are for SSA Engaged Students only. Figure 4 presented above are Spearman correlations. Positive correlations indicate that the additional SSA engagement lead to higher PERSISTENCE. Correlations in italics should be considered non-significant, negligible.

Total: the total number of contacts between engaged SSA students and SSA agents during the performance period for the respective contact method (i.e., text or telephone call).

Mentor Initiated: the ratio of mentor initiated contacts to the total number of contacts for the respective contact method (i.e., text or telephone call) during the performance period.

Student Initiated: the ratio of student initiated contacts to the total number of contacts for the respective contact method (i.e., text or telephone call) during the performance period.

Notable Results from Table 1:

- More engagement with mentors were to be positively related to persistence at 4-year institutions of higher education (correlation of .16).



Conclusions and

Next Steps

Overall, the results suggest that engagement with an SSA agent were positively related to persistence outcomes. While both disengaged and engaged SSA participants tended to have higher persistence rates compared with non-participants, one of the most encouraging findings was that engaged SSA students had higher persistence rates compared non-participants. A further encouraging finding is that additional engagement with SSA agents indicated encouraging potential for increased persistence outcomes.

It is important to note that these results are descriptive and correlational, therefore additional analyses are needed before implying causation. The relatively limited size of the sample also reduced the ability to draw statistically significant conclusions. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample or aggregated samples across multiple schools to increase the ability to find substantial differences between the SSA engagement categories. However, data from the current project provides encouraging evidence for the SSA program and student engagement with SSA agents. Together, these results suggest that continued interaction and engagement with SSA agents are related to positive persistence outcomes.

Despite these potential limitations, the results of the current project do provide some encouraging results for SSA engagement and student interactions with SSA agents. Further analysis with the recommended sample will provide additional detail and confidence of the relationship between participants and persistence rates.