

Katy Oliveira:

In this episode, I'm talking to Ryan Bailey, Director of the Student Success Center, and Jamie Muhlestein, Associate Director of Student Success and Support at Utah Valley University. We are talking about how Utah Valley University's Student Success Center created Student Success Specialist roles for recent graduates and upper-class students. These roles aren't just part-time student worker jobs. These are professional jobs that are part of a concerted effort to build closer connections and relationships with students.

The Student Success Specialists are helping out on a number of initiatives by texting, also sometimes emailing and calling students in their caseload for a variety of reasons—everything from welcoming them to campus to checking in after a professor submits an alert or to check in if a student hasn't logged into the LMS for a particular class to make sure the student actually enrolled. They've had wild success. Jamie shared a great anecdote at the end of the episode about how a student came up to her at graduation and thanked her for having Student Success Specialist roles, saying that her particular Student Success Specialist was integral to helping her graduate and then showing the student in her phone—which, of course, is the Success Center's text line—but the student didn't know that. The interactions were so authentic and so real.

The student really believed that she was texting directly with her Student Success Specialist. They have seen great success by incorporating students into their student success efforts and have developed a really great professional development program to help the students do so in ways that align with student success professional protocols. This approach is helping to build authentic relationships with students who really might need a hand during their college experience—who might not otherwise ask for help.

Our guest today, Jamie Muhlestein, currently serves as the Associate Director of Student Success and Support in UVU's Student Success Center. With over eight years in higher ed, she's an expert in student retention, data management, and helping students navigate their college experience. She is passionate about building relationships with those she interacts with and creating atmospheres where others feel a sense of belonging and have an opportunity to enhance their personal experiences. In her free time, she enjoys running, playing pickleball, and traveling the world.

I'm also joined by Ryan Bailey, the Director of the Student Success Center at UVU. He's spent the past 10 years in student success, retention, and the first-year experience field, focusing on enhancing student experiences and removing barriers to success. Ryan found his purpose and career during his own college journey, and he hasn't looked back. When he's not working, you'll find him doing DIY home projects or spending time with his family.

Katy Oliveira:

Hi, Ryan and Jamie. Welcome to the Next Practices podcast.

Ryan Bailey:

Hey. Thanks for having us.

Jamie Muhlestein:

Hi. Thanks for having us.

Katy Oliveira:

I'd love to begin by learning more about UVU and the students you serve.

Ryan Bailey:

So UVU is a dual-mission institution. We're the largest institution in the state of Utah. So we've grown substantially, and we are in Utah County, which is one of the fastest-growing counties in the state. So we're now at 43,000 students, and we offer everything from certificates to master's degrees. So when we say dual mission, we mean we're a community college and we're a university. And that's unique in the nation—there aren't a lot of institutions that are like that. So we have open enrollment, and we also have graduate-level selective programs. And that presents challenges, but it also presents opportunities. And when it comes to student success, it really creates a very diverse student population in terms of needs, goals, and experiences.

Katy Oliveira:

And what does the Student Success Center look like in that context?

Jamie Muhlestein:

So here in the Student Success Center, we support students pretty broadly. Our job is to be generalists. So we have a leave of absence program. We also support tuition waivers, which help students retain and complete. And then we have coaching and Student Success programs that work to help students throughout their experience.

Ryan Bailey:

And to add to that, we really try to be the one-stop hub where a student can get answers to anything. And we may not always know the answer, but our role is to connect them to the resource that does and follow up to make sure they got what they needed. That's our philosophy—relationships first, and connection is key.

Katy Oliveira:

Let's shift to your Student Success Specialist roles. What are they, and how did they come to be?

Ryan Bailey:

So we actually started with a Retention Mentor Program back in 2012. The idea was to have peer mentors who would support students, especially in their first year. But as time went on, we realized we needed something a bit more formalized—something that felt more like a professional role than a student worker job. So, in 2020, that program evolved into our Student Success Specialists. Now, these are part-time staff positions, typically held by recent grads or upper-division students. We train them as professionals. They're not just sending out generic texts—they're engaging with students, tracking follow-up, and being that consistent point of connection.

Jamie Muhlestein:

We currently have nine Student Success Specialists. They each have their own caseloads and focus areas. We use Civitas to help identify students who might need outreach—maybe they haven't logged into Canvas or a professor submits an early alert. We can follow up by text or call within one business day.

Katy Oliveira:

That sounds like a powerful model. Why focus on texting?

Jamie Muhlestein:

It's what students respond to. Email doesn't always cut through, and phone calls can be hit or miss. But texting? It's direct, it's personal, and it allows for a more natural back-and-forth. And because our specialists are trained and consistent, students start to recognize that name. It becomes a relationship, not a reminder.

Ryan Bailey:

Right—and one of our goals was to make support feel like a conversation, not a compliance checkpoint. If a student's struggling, we want them to know someone's there—not to check a box, but to actually help them navigate whatever's going on.

Katy Oliveira:

How do you ensure the messages students receive feel genuine—not just another automated nudge?

Jamie Muhlestein:

That's been really important to us. Our specialists personalize everything. Even though the outreach might be triggered by something like an early alert or lack of LMS activity, the actual message is crafted with care. It references what's going on with that student, and it's written in the voice of a real person who's been trained to connect—not just inform.

Ryan Bailey:

We even have guidelines like: don't send the same message twice. Every outreach should feel like it was written just for that student. That might take a little more time, but it's what builds trust. And the students can tell. They know when it's real.

Katy Oliveira:

What kind of impact have you seen so far?

Ryan Bailey:

We've seen a measurable bump in retention—about 3 percentage points. That might not sound huge, but when you're talking about 40,000+ students, that's significant. And it's not just the numbers. We've had students tell us their specialist helped them stay enrolled or get through a tough time. They felt like someone actually cared.

Jamie Muhlestein:

I had a student come up to me at graduation recently. She told me she wouldn't have made it

without her specialist. She even showed me her phone—she had saved the Success Center’s text line under her specialist’s name, “Manette.” She thought it was Manette’s personal number the whole time. That’s how real the connection felt.

Katy Oliveira:

That’s incredible. A great reminder of how human connection—when scaled thoughtfully—can change a student’s path entirely.

Katy Oliveira:

You mentioned Civitas Learning earlier. How are you using the platform to support your team’s outreach?

Ryan Bailey:

We use Civitas as our hub for early alerts and insights. Faculty can submit alerts directly through Canvas, and we get those in real time. That lets us act fast—our goal is always to follow up within one business day. What’s great is that Civitas doesn’t just give us the “what,” it helps us ask “why.” Why might a student be disengaging? What patterns are we seeing across a caseload? It makes our outreach not just timely, but more strategic.

Jamie Muhlestein:

And because everything is documented in the platform, our specialists can see a full history of interactions. That helps us personalize follow-up. If we text a student again two weeks later, we’re not starting from scratch—we’re building on a relationship.

Katy Oliveira:

Have you expanded this outreach model to other student populations?

Ryan Bailey:

Yes. Initially, our focus was on first-year students, but we realized juniors and seniors need support too—especially if they’re close to graduating and hit a roadblock. So we’ve expanded our efforts to include upperclassmen and even students who’ve stopped out with just a few credits remaining. We’ve also added full-time Student Success Coordinators to support this outreach. It’s all part of making sure no one falls through the cracks.

Jamie Muhlestein:

And for students who’ve left, we’re working on reengagement campaigns. If someone is a few classes short of finishing, we want to reach out and help them find a path back—whether that’s connecting to financial resources, academic planning, or just letting them know someone’s on their side.

Katy Oliveira:

It sounds like your team is really thinking about student support as a long-term relationship—not just a one-time intervention.

Ryan Bailey:

Exactly. We're building a culture of care. Whether it's a student's first day or they've been away for two years, we want them to know we see them. We're here. We're rooting for them.

Jamie Muhlestein:

And we're constantly evolving. We try things, we iterate, we listen to what students need. Having a centralized Success Center gives us the flexibility to be creative and responsive. We're not just maintaining—we're building something that adapts as students change.

Katy Oliveira:

What advice would you give other institutions thinking about building a similar model?

Ryan Bailey:

Start small, but start. You don't need 10 specialists on day one. Maybe it's one part-time role with a focused caseload. Invest in training. Make it feel like a real position. And listen—let students guide the process.

Jamie Muhlestein:

And don't underestimate the power of connection. Students aren't just looking for information—they're looking for someone who cares. If you can offer that, you've already made a difference.

Katy Oliveira:

Ryan, Jamie—thank you so much for sharing your work with us today. It's inspiring to see how a few intentional shifts—like texting students or removing unnecessary holds—can lead to powerful outcomes.

Ryan Bailey:

Thank you. We're happy to share.

Jamie Muhlestein:

Thanks for having us.