EAB

Higher Ed Jargon Reduction

A guide to making university materials more accessible for first-generation students

Background: Do You Speak Higher Ed?

First-generation college students experience a sense of unfamiliarity and uncertainty around navigating college as soon as they begin interacting with institutions.

Once accepted, they receive an influx of communication about important topics such as financial aid and course registration. They are directed to institutional webpages that are often filled with inaccessible words and higher education jargon.

Consider how unfamiliar some of the words on this page would be to someone with no experience in higher education. Not only does this make completing tasks confusing and more difficult, it can also reinforce feelings of not belonging that often hinder first-generation college students' transition.

A study found that 70 percent of students were confused by higher education terms on community colleges' institutional websites. While this study focused on community college students, the results would likely be similar if replicated at four-year institutions.

There will be a learning curve for first-generation college students as they acclimate to their institutions. Institutions need to make the language used in initial interactions less confusing so these students will be more likely to be successful.

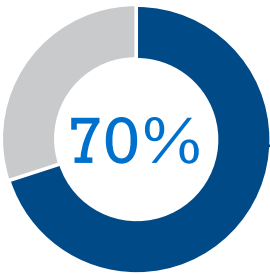## Students Unfamiliar with College-Specific Jargon

Seemingly Foreign Language
Common Higher Education Terminology

Prerequisite	Course Sequence
FAFSA	Registrar
Credit Hours	Liberal Arts
Syllabus	Distribution
Semester	Developmental
Course Catalog	Disbursement
Bursar	Program of Study

Jargon Abundant on Student Portals
Community College Journal Study of Accessibility and Usability of College Websites

70% Students surveyed who were confused by higher education terms on institutional websites[1]

Keeping the Reader in Mind

"We realized that we were explaining things from the point of view of the college, but new students don't know that language yet."

Dr. Joyce Romano, Vice President Student Affairs Valencia College

Source: William Erickson, Sharon Trerirse, et al. "The Accessibility and Usability of College Websites: Is your Website Presenting Barriers to Potential Students?" Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 2013; EAB interviews and analysis.

1) n=30

What is the Gunning Fog Index?

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill completed a "translation exercise" for some of their most accessed campus resources for incoming students. They used the Gunning Fog Index (GFI) to evaluate their communications. The GFI is an online tool that generates a score indicating the reading level necessary to comprehend that text.

The financial aid text that UNC entered generated a score indicating that someone would need a partial college education in order to comprehend the text. After rewriting it with guidelines provided by Gunning Fog, their new description was classified as "widely accessible."

As a general frame of reference, Gunning Fog recommends a score of 12 or less for text that is intended for a wide audience, and less than 8 to be near universal. To the left are recommendations for creating more accessible text. These steps are especially helpful for colleges who serve a number of students from families with no post secondary education and/or non-native English speaking families.

The Gunning Fog Index Calls Attention to Inaccessible Text

Translating Financial Aid Language at UNC Chapel Hill

Before: The Carolina Computing Initiative ensures that students have access to high-quality and affordable technology. Through CCI, all students are required to own a laptop computer, and grants are available to help eligible students purchase their laptops.

After: UNC requires you to have a laptop computer. If you can't afford one, grants are available.

Gunning Fog Index Score: 17.2

Gunning Fog Index Score: 10.7

Creating more Accessible Text

1 Bring down words per sentence

2 Minimize complex words

3 Reduce proper nouns and familiar jargon

Connecting with a Wider Audience

☑ Families with no PSE experience

☑ Non-native English speaking families

☑ Families reluctant to ask for help

Source: Gunning Fog Index, http://gunning-fog-index.com/; Narayan A, "US Higher Education Glossary", *US News and World* Report, August 15, 2011, http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/ 2011/08/15/us-higher-education-glossary; EAB interviews and analysis.

Higher Ed Jargon Reduction in Practice

Example:

Original Text:

Take the College Placement Test

After you have been admitted to the college, you must take the **college placement test**. Schedule your test by going to www.eabcc.edu or by calling. If *you have* successfully completed a **college-level** English or math course from another college or have taken EABCC placement testing at an earlier date, you may qualify for an __exemption__ from all or part of the test. In order to be __eligible__ to participate in a specific academic program and/or enroll in **credit classes**, students must achieve a **minimum score** of 33 out of 120 on the reading portion of the test.

Gunning Fog Index Score: 12.65

Revised Text:

Take the College Placement Test

If you are an admitted student, you must take a test that measures what classes you are ready to take, called "Placement Tests." It's important to prepare for this test because it could impact how fast you can graduate if you place into classes that do not count towards your degree. To enroll in classes that do count towards your degree, you need score at least 33 out of 120 on the reading section.

You'll need an appointment to take the test. You should schedule it by going to www.eabcc.edu or by calling (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

There are two reasons you may not need to take the test.

1) If you completed and passed an English or math course for college credit at another school

2) If you took the placement test at EABCC in the past

Gunning Fog Index Score: 8.79

Key:

Passive Voice

Jargon

Multisyllabic

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Higher Ed Jargon Reduction Exercise

Despite efforts to help first-generation college students learn the terminology we use in institutional communications, college websites and informational materials often contain unnecessary jargon. Use the following exercise to determine which materials are the highest priority for translation.

Step 1: Identify commonly used webpages and materials

Ask the information technology staff to identify college webpages with highest volume of traffic. Once you have this list, have each department use the list below to brainstorm all additional student- and parent-facing materials that generate a high volume of in-person traffic to their offices.

Resource #1: Course registration packet

Resource #2: _____

Resource #3: _____

Resource #4: _____

Resource #5: _____

Step 2: Complete jargon reduction exercise

Ask staff to assess the materials and webpages they've identified, using the steps below to make communication as clear and accessible as possible.

1. **Reduce multisyllabic words:** Underline all words with more than two syllables. Identify and replace them with shorter words (even if this requires using multiple words in the place of one multisyllabic word).

2. **Remove passive voice:** Highlight all language in passive voice; rephrase sentences to be in active voice.

3. **Group related information:** Condense all text that pertains to the same topic in a specific area and use white space to separate it from information pertaining to another topic.

4. **Translate jargon:** Replace jargon (where appropriate) with translations for a non-higher education audience. (This step is especially effective when completed with new employees unfamiliar with higher education jargon.)

Step 3: Run new text through the Gunning Fog Index

Using the Gunning Fog index to cross-check your work will help ensure that it is truly accessible.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.