



# Optimizing Your Student Communications Strategy

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Toolkit from *Breaking Through the  
Student Communications Barrier*

Navigate

# Executive Overview

## Refining Your Campus's Student Communication Strategy

From matriculation to graduation, students must navigate a maze of requirements beyond academic coursework. Secondary challenges, such as registering for courses, maintaining financial aid, and resolving administrative holds, can derail a student on their path to commencement.

To help students graduate, institutions must do more than rely on the traditional once-per-semester advising appointment—they need to send timely communications that prompt students to complete required tasks. However, many colleges struggle to reach students where they are, at the moment of need, with messages that motivate the students to act.

These failures result from campus units' inability to strategically leverage communication channels, coordinate contact, and craft clear and compelling messages.

In addition, during the time of COVID-19 it is more important than ever to have an established student communications strategy and empower your institution to write strong, clear messages to students.

### Millennials Can Check Email Anywhere...



96%

Of 18-29-year-olds own a smartphone

### ...But Read and Respond Selectively

Results of BGSU Communications Survey  
(315 students)



54%

Of respondents said they don't always read emails from the university or academic departments



39%

Of respondents said they don't always open emails from their advisors

### College Messages Tend to Be:



#### Too high in volume

No limit on message volume leads to student inboxes flooded with "white noise"



#### Duplicative and inconsistent

Lack of coordination between units lead to redundant or confusing information



#### Generic and passive

Impersonal e-mails that do not list required actions are easy to ignore



#### Not mobile-responsive

Administrators fail to use channels that students check most frequently

On the receiving end of their colleges' communication efforts, students can find the lack of a coherent messaging strategy frustrating. Often facing a barrage of emails from the moment they enroll, many students experience communication overload and become numb to college "white noise."

It's no wonder that at one institution, more than half of students reported they "don't always read emails from the institution or academic departments." As a result, students may miss or ignore critical information and prompts, causing them to fall behind or fall off track.

Many institutions realize that their current student communications strategy isn't adequate but lack the tools to identify how to improve.



### Student Communications Toolkit

The following resource synthesizes EAB research into the **best practices for inflecting student behavior through digital communications**, including strategies you can implement today to:

- Promote unit coordination
- Refine student messaging

### Use This Resource to...

- ✓ Understand the most common mistakes institutions make in communicating to their students
- ✓ Audit your institution's student communication volume and quality
- ✓ Learn how to improve message coordination and clarity



# Process-Mapping Student Communications

*Tools for Breaking Through the Student Communications Barrier*

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TOOLKIT

1

# Institution-Level Coordination to Reduce Inbox Noise

## ► What the Student Experiences

*Well-Meaning but Siloed Success Efforts Create Inbox Clutter, Confusion*



## ► The First Step Is Admitting You Have a Problem

*Michigan State Confirmed Over-Contact with Process-Mapping Exercise*

### What MSU Did



IT convened reps from 12 divisions to discuss over-contact of students at risk of failing a course

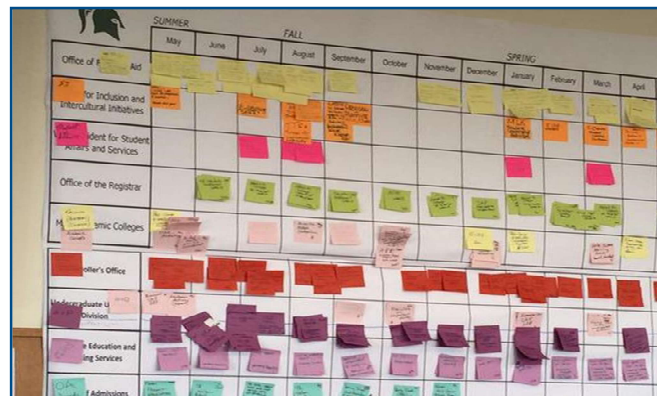


Participants posted sticky notes that represented all messaging tied to specific behaviors month by month



Live discussion and correction of duplicative and contradictory student messages

### A Low-Tech Visualization of Student Over-Contact



### What They Discovered

50

Online portals to navigate

90+

Different types of registration holds

400+

Email messages within one year

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

# Tool #1: Process-Mapping Student Communications

## Guide to Visualizing Student Contact

Most institutional staff members who send students communications on behalf of their departments have limited to no visibility into the messaging activity of other units. A cross-departmental process-mapping exercise makes these communications visible and transparent, which is the first step in improving and streamlining college communications. This tool will help you conduct a one- to two-day workshop to visualize and analyze student contact across campus.

1



### Recruit the Participants

Convene high-level representatives from any division that communicates directly with students.

Departmental representatives should have a comprehensive view of their unit's activities (i.e., one reporting level below VP) but understand enough detail about day-to-day student communications to participate. Select one representative per department.

#### Sample groups:

*Admissions*

*Pre-Major Advising*

*Office of Undergraduate Education*

*Office for Inclusion & Intercultural Initiatives*

*Information Technology Services*

*Controller's Office*

*Office of the Provost*

*Office of the VP for Student Affairs*

*Residence Education & Housing Services*

*Academic Colleges – Advisors and Faculty*

*Student Success Programs*

*Financial Aid*

*Registrar*

2



### Set the Context

Explain why the members are convened, lay out the goals of the exercise, and let them get to know each other.

To set the stage, consider presenting slides on inbox overload from EAB's research "Breaking the Student Communications Barrier" ([online](#)).

Follow the presentation with this suggested scripting:

*"We live with the same challenges on our campus. Timely communication of critical information is tied directly to student success, but too often students miss our communications amidst the many others they receive. Therefore, my goal for this meeting is to process-map our own communications and develop recommendations."*

3



### Break Out into Small Groups

Divide into three to four smaller groups (maximum 20 participants per group). Configure groups ahead of time to ensure diversity of participants.

4



### Work in Small Groups to Catalog Messages

Ask participants to write samples of their departments' typical email messages on sticky notes (with detail about the modality and content), and adhere the sticky notes to a group chart organized by department and month.

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### Consolidate Messages in One Master Chart

Reconvene the large group to assemble small group findings in one large chart by department and month (chart template below). Present high-level findings and areas of opportunity to improve.

*See next page for master chart template*

# Templates for Process-Mapping Exercise

## Chart for Consolidating Campus-Wide Communications

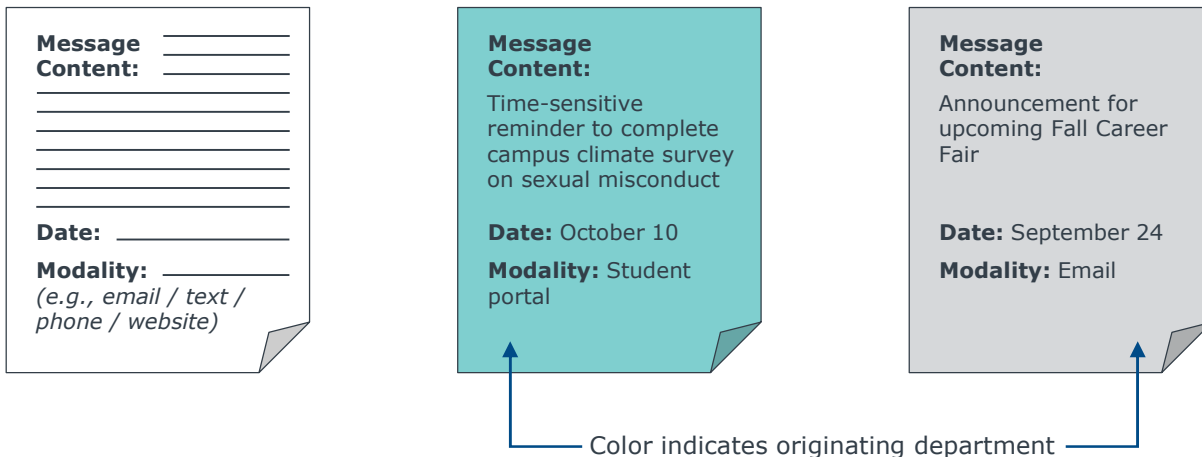
We recommend drawing this chart on a large whiteboard or printing it on a large sheet of butcher paper. The scope of time for message analysis can range from 4 to 12 months. Organizers should select a time period based on when students struggle to respond or act based on email communications. For example, Michigan State narrowed their focus to the first four months (May-August) of contact for incoming first-year students because the majority of emails are sent during that window of time.

As circumstances caused by the recent COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, campus-wide communication plans can change rapidly. During this mapping exercise, ensure all stakeholders understand what their roles are in crisis communications.

Department	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
Admissions					
Office of Financial Aid					
Vice President for Student Affairs and Services					
Office of the Registrar					
Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Affairs					
Residence Education & Housing Services					
Pre-Major Advising					

## Template for Sticky-Note Content

Bring a different colored pad of sticky notes for each participating department. Participants summarize message content and indicate timing and modality of message on the sticky, corresponding the color to their department.



# Tool #2: Next Steps after Mapping Communications

## Discussion Questions for Process-Mapping

**What are the busiest times for student communications?**

**Which messages overlap in timing?**

**What are our most critical messages?**

**Do these critical messages convey information in a clear and effective way?**

**Which messages are duplicative or contradictory?**

**How can we resolve them?**

### Immediate Next Step

#### Enter Information into Shared Google Spreadsheet

Commission IT staff to help create pivot tables and fill in content for further analysis.

## Strategies to Coordinate Communications

### Development a Joint Communication Calendar

Create a calendar that triages the most urgent messages and provides visibility into other departments' priorities.

Revise and improve redundant and confusing messages, and postpone messages that compete with more urgent priorities.

### Analyze Message Content

Convene a working group to analyze critical student messages for clarity and efficacy, particularly those that relate to financial matters and academic standing.

*Refer to the Email Templates and Best Practices tool for communications audit worksheet.*

### Achieve a Consensus Communication Policy

Establish criteria for departments to elevate urgent messages and embargo nonessential messages, especially during crises.

### Identify Individual Units for Further Process-Mapping

Identify departments with significant impact on student experience. Process-map student interactions to inform services review and redesign.

## ► Coordination at the Institution and Department Level

*Profiles of Institutions Mitigating the Tragedy of the (Inbox) Commons*





# Email Communications Audit and Best Practices

Tools from *Breaking Through the Student Communications Barrier*

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TOOLKIT

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# Student Communications Best Practices

## ► Make Your Subject Line Do More Work

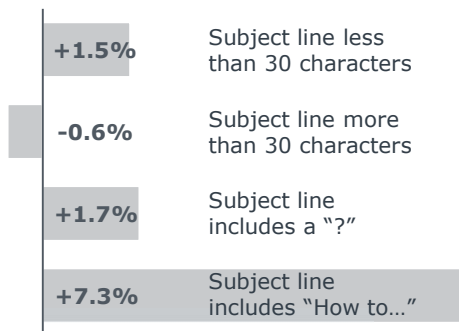
*A Good First Impression Drives Higher Open Rates*

### Insights from Out-of-Industry

*Mixpanel Analysis of 85,637 Subject Lines*

**13.5%** Benchmark open rate for 1.7 billion emails

### Change in Open Rate



### Nine Effective Subject Line Examples

*Adapted from EAB's Internal Guidelines*

<b>Catchy</b>	Oops—you missed your registration deadline!
<b>Direct</b>	Concerned about your midterm grades?
<b>Urgent</b>	URGENT: Your academic plan
<b>Authoritative</b>	Next steps to get you back on track
<b>Conversational</b>	Let's chat about chemistry
<b>Mysterious</b>	You qualify for a new program!
<b>Guiding</b>	How to improve your GPA at the Tutoring Center
<b>Action-oriented</b>	Schedule some time with me this week
<b>Questioning</b>	Is there a reason you haven't registered yet?

## ► Write for Your Audience

*Effective Messages Are Student-Centered and Student-Friendly*

### Tone Should Focus on Students and Their Goals, Not Rules or Policies

#### Impersonal Copy

"Whitehurst College cares about your success and offers a number of resources for students in need of additional support. Students have found the tutoring center to be critical in improving their GPA for admission into certain selective programs."

#### Student-Centered Copy

"I care about your success and noticed that your math midterm grade is not up to standards for the Business School, which you want to apply for next semester. You should schedule an appointment with the tutoring center."

**50%** Increase in response rate (Sample recruitment campaign)

### Language Should Be Clear to All Students (Including ESL)

#### ► Reduce multisyllabic words

"Exempted" → "Do not need to"

#### ► Remove passive voice

"If you are contacted by your advisor" → "If your advisor contacts you"

#### ► Translate jargon

"Non-credit-bearing" → "Does not count for credit"

#### ► Ensure readability

The Gunning Fog Index is an online tool to assess the grade-level of a given text



**Tool:** "Higher Ed Jargon Reduction Exercise" on eab.com

## ► Don't Ignore Your CTA

*The Call to Action Is Critical, but It's Often the Hardest Part to Get Right*

### Out-of-Industry Best Practices

#### Include Only One CTA When Possible

42% ↑

increase in clicks when the number of CTAs is reduced from 4 to 1

#### Make Your CTA Stand Out

**Register Now**

Offset CTAs with bold, different-colored text, or buttons



#### Lead with a CTA in the Subject Line



Include the CTA in the subject line so students immediately know what they need to do

#### Convey a Sense of Urgency



Use action verbs that convey a sense of urgency, such as "sign up," "schedule," or "pay"



For more on effective student communications, view [Breaking Through the Student Communications Barrier](#) on eab.com

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# Worksheet: Student Communications Audit

## Purpose of the Tool

This worksheet will help you identify common missteps that prevent students from understanding and acting on emails from the college. It's designed as a tool for use by a group or as an independent activity to ensure student-friendly communications. Learn to evaluate the message, readability, effectiveness, and jargon of the emails within your communications.

1. Identify the purpose of the message. What is it meant to teach the student or get them to do?

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2. Assess readability by copying and pasting the message into the Gunning-Fog Index online tool: [www.gunning-fog-index.com](http://www.gunning-fog-index.com). Then fill in the following information.

Gunning-Fog Index Score   
Recommended score: **10 or lower**

Number of Words   
Recommended number: **<200 words**

Number of 3+ Syllable Words   
Recommended number: **<20 words**

3. Use the rubric below to assess the effectiveness of the message's copy.

	Yes	No
Based on question 2, is the message readable for the average student?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the message avoid passive voice? (e.g., "must be completed by students")	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the message address the student as "you" and appeal to their motivation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the message include a clear, explicit next step or call to action?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Identify jargon in the message (words of three or more syllables that someone outside of higher education might not know). Translate jargon into plain-speak explanations.

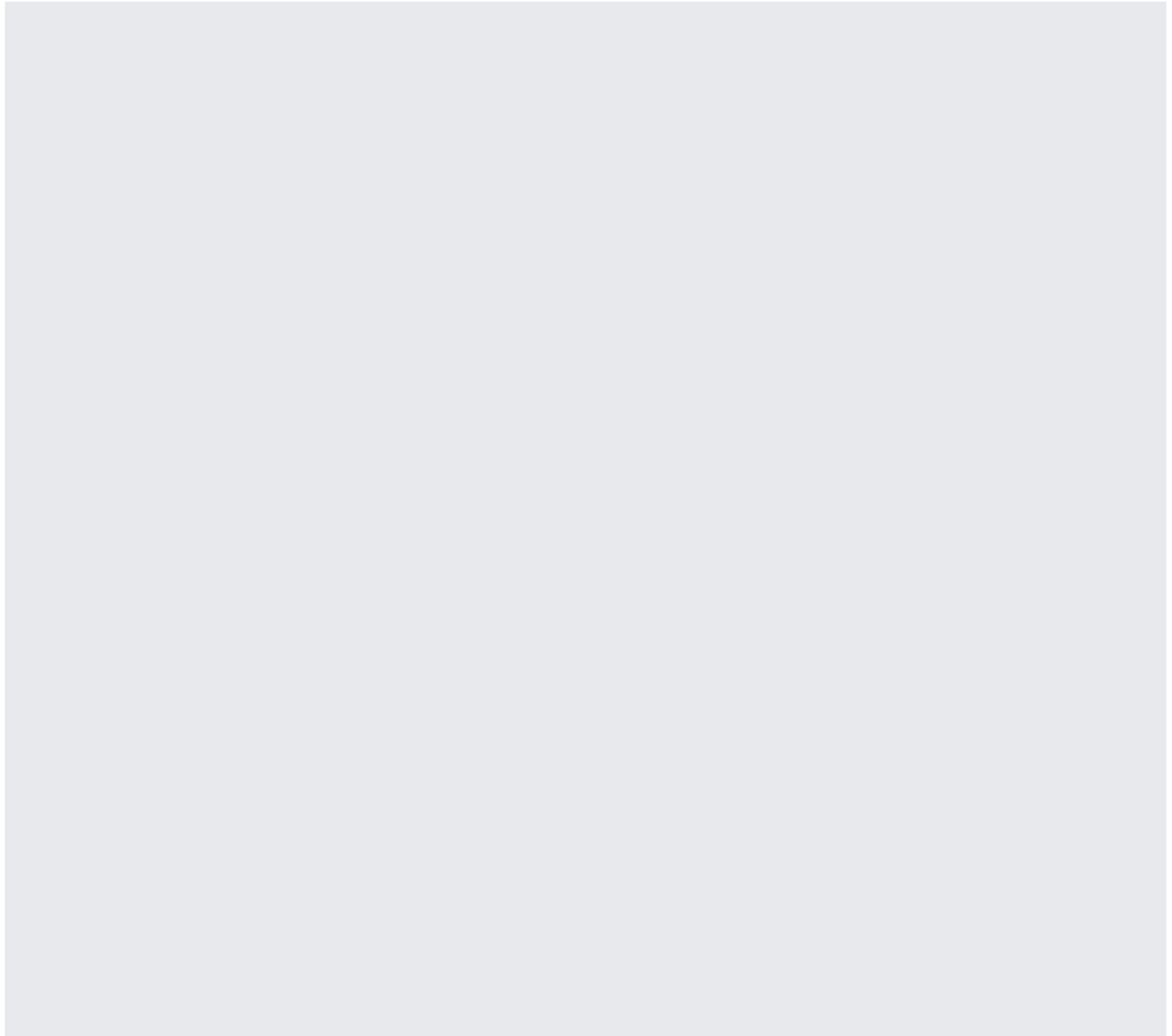
Jargon	Translation
e.g., Prerequisite	e.g., a course you must complete before X

Word Bank: Common Higher Education Jargon	
prerequisite	bursar
disbursement	deficit
subsidized	registrar
dismissal	eligibility
probation	audit
academic standing	misconduct

## Worksheet: Student Communications Audit (cont.)

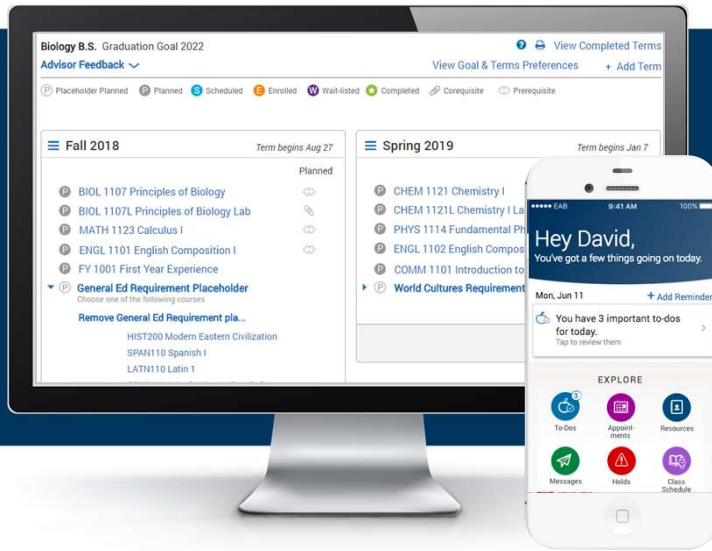
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5. Based on the audit you just completed, revise the message by removing passive voice, appealing to the student's motivation, and including clear next steps. Remove jargon where possible; if you must include jargon, ensure there is enough context for the student to understand it.



# Deploying a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communication Strategy

## Introducing EAB's Navigate



EAB's Student Success Management System, Navigate, provides students with a dynamic mobile and desktop platform to plan, schedule, and register for courses, and one central place for all things student success—ensuring they never miss a step on their path to graduation.

We created the intuitive Navigate platform based on extensive research into digital communication, student psychology and behavior, and user experience best practices.

### FOR STUDENTS



Make it easy for students to **select best-fit courses** with a clear path to graduation



Give them clear, timely **nudges** to act at the **pivotal moments** in their college career



Empower students with **self-service tools** to confidently schedule courses, explore college, and resolve problems

### FOR ADVISORS AND STAFF



Collaborate on academic plans with students in a **shared workspace** that allows real-time course correction



Customize the nudges and reminders students see with the **content administration tool**



Monitor student engagement and catch students who fall off path with **smart guidance analytics**

## Achieving High Engagement and a Better Student Experience with Navigate

**310K+**

Students active on the Navigate platform

**94%**

Percent of freshmen who downloaded Navigate, contributing to a 2% increase in first-year retention

ROBERT MORRIS UNIVERSITY

**80%**

Of steps completed by students in Navigate, on average

METROPOLITAN STATE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

"[Navigate] was almost like a secret tool or a "college hack" that I could just carry on my phone."

—Student

► To learn more about how Navigate delivers personalized, timely guidance to your students, contact [eabcommunications@eab.com](mailto:eabcommunications@eab.com) or visit [www.eab.com/studentsuccess](http://www.eab.com/studentsuccess).



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served

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by our SSMS

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with us year after year,  
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