Optimizing Your Student Communications Strategy

Toolkit from *Breaking Through the Student Communications Barrier*
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.

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.

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*
**Institution-Level Coordination to Reduce Inbox Noise**

▶ **What the Student Experiences**  
*Well-Meaning but Siloed Success Efforts Create Inbox Clutter, Confusion*

![Diagram showing various student support services and messaging]

**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.

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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.

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.

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.

5. **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.

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

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.”

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admissions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office of Financial Aid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vice President for Student Affairs and Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office of the Registrar</td>
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<td>Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Affairs</td>
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<td>Residence Education &amp; Housing Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-Major Advising</td>
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</table>

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?**

**What are our most critical messages?**

**Which messages overlap in timing?**

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

**What are our most critical messages?**

**Which messages are duplicative or contradictory?**

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

**How can we resolve them?**

### Strategies to Coordinate Communications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development a Joint Communication Calendar</th>
<th>Analyze Message Content</th>
<th>Achieve a Consensus Communication Policy</th>
<th>Identify Individual Units for Further Process-Mapping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a calendar that triages the most urgent messages and provides visibility into other departments’ priorities.</td>
<td>Convene a working group to analyze critical student messages for clarity and efficacy, particularly those that relate to financial matters and academic standing.</td>
<td>Establish criteria for departments to elevate urgent messages and embargo nonessential messages, especially during crises.</td>
<td>Identify departments with significant impact on student experience. Process-map student interactions to inform services review and redesign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise and improve redundant and confusing messages, and postpone messages that compete with more urgent priorities.</td>
<td>Refer to the Email Templates and Best Practices tool for communications audit worksheet.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Coordination at the Institution and Department Level

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

#### Central Calendar for Transparency

- **Michigan State University** (MSU) compiled archived messages for shared visibility and redundancy reduction
- **Elizabeth City State University** tracks university-wide outreach, including campaigns, in a central calendar owned by dept. heads

#### Agreed-Upon Email Guidelines

- **MSU** shared findings and recommendations coming out of their process-mapping exercise
- A private Mid-Atlantic research university convenes a cross-departmental committee 3x per term to analyze messages and set guidelines

#### Central Gatekeeper

The CIO of a public Midwestern research university serves as a gatekeeper for university-wide mass emails

#### Tightly Managed List Permissions

- Institutional email policy should restrict who can send/reply to lists >200 students and outline appropriate use
- "The exchange of any email that generates or facilitates unsolicited bulk email is prohibited"

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**Immediate Next Step**

**Enter Information into Shared Google Spreadsheet**

Commission IT staff to help create pivot tables and fill in content for further analysis.
Email Communications Audit and Best Practices

Tools from *Breaking Through the Student Communications Barrier*
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Open Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+1.5%</td>
<td>Subject line less than 30 characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.6%</td>
<td>Subject line more than 30 characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+1.7%</td>
<td>Subject line includes a “?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+7.3%</td>
<td>Subject line includes “How to...”</td>
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</table>

Nine Effective Subject Line Examples
Adapted from EAB’s Internal Guidelines

- Catchy: Oops—you missed your registration deadline!
- Direct: Concerned about your midterm grades?
- Urgent: URGENT: Your academic plan
- Authoritative: Next steps to get you back on track
- Conversational: Let’s chat about chemistry
- Mysterious: You qualify for a new program!
- Guiding: How to improve your GPA at the Tutoring Center
- Action-oriented: Schedule some time with me this week
- Questioning: 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

Lead with a CTA in the Subject Line

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

Make Your CTA Stand Out

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

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
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?

2. Assess readability by copying and pasting the message into the Gunning-Fog Index online tool: 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.

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

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jargon</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e.g., Prerequisite</td>
<td>e.g., a course you must complete before X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Word Bank: Common Higher Education Jargon**
- prerequisite
- disbursement
- subsidized
- dismissal
- probation
- academic standing

- bursar
- deficit
- registrar
- eligibility
- audit
- misconduct
Worksheet: Student Communications Audit (cont.)

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 21st 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

80% Of steps completed by students in Navigate, on average

"[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 or visit www.eab.com/studentsuccess.
We help schools support students from enrollment to graduation and beyond.

- Find and enroll your right-fit students
- Support and graduate more students
- Prepare your institution for the future

ROOTED IN RESEARCH
- 7,500+ Peer-tested best practices
- 500+ Enrollment innovations tested annually

ADVANTAGE OF SCALE
- 1,500+ Institutions served
- 4 M+ Students supported by our SSMS

WE DELIVER RESULTS
- 95% Of our partners continue with us year after year, reflecting the goals we achieve together