



Optimizing Your Student Communications Strategy

Toolkit from *Breaking Through the
Student Communications Barrier*

Navigate

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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, like 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 universities 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.

Millennials Can Check Email Anywhere...



85%

Of 18-24 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

University 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 universities' 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 university "white noise." It's no wonder that, at one university, over half of students reported they "don't always reading emails from the university 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 enough, 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

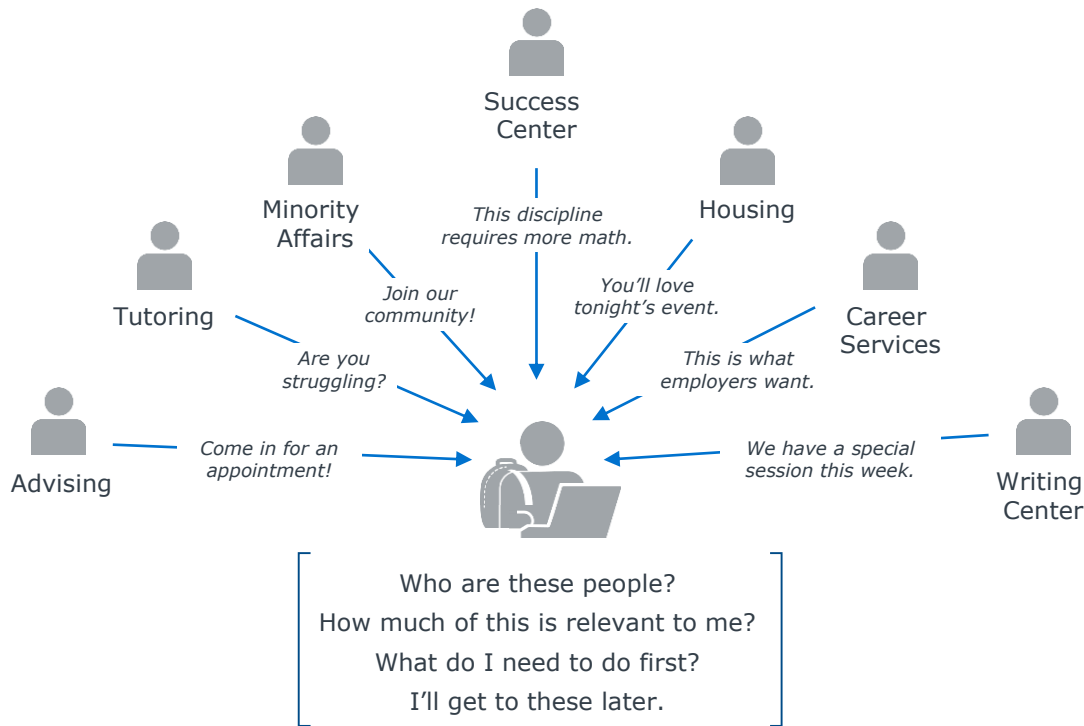
TOOLKIT

1

University-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 representatives from 12 divisions to discuss over-contact of at-risk students

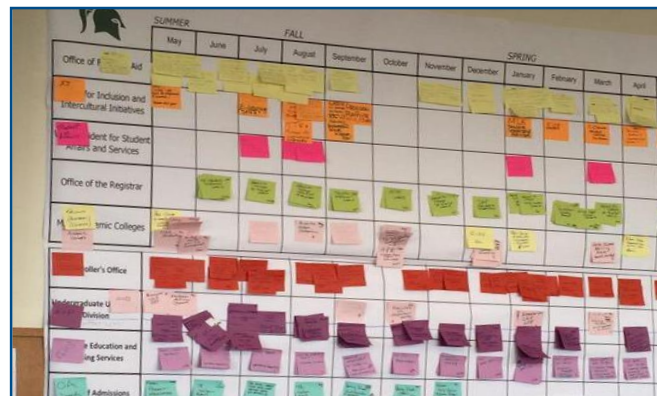


Participants posted sticky notes for all messaging tied to specific risk behaviors month by month



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 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, the first step in improving and streamlining university 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 understood 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 3-4 smaller groups (maximum 20 participants per group). Determine groups ahead of time to ensure diversity of participants.

4



Work in Small Groups to Catalog Messages

Fill out sticky notes for individual messages (with detail about the modality and content) and adhere them to a group chart organized by department and month.

5



Consolidate Messages in One Master Chart

Reconvene large group to assemble small group findings in one large chart by department and month. 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 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.

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					
Office of Undergraduate Education					

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.

Message Content: _____

Date: _____

Modality: _____
 (e.g., email / text / phone / web)

Message Content:
 Time-sensitive reminder to complete campus climate survey on sexual misconduct

Date: October 10

Modality: Student portal

Message Content:
 Announcement for upcoming Fall Career Fair

Date: September 24

Modality: Email

Color indicates originating department

Tool #2: Next Steps after Mapping Communications

Discussion Questions for Process Mapping

What are the busiest times for student communications?

Which messages conflict 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.

Reduce redundant and confusing messages, and postpone messages that conflict with more urgent priorities.

Analyze Message Content

Convene 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

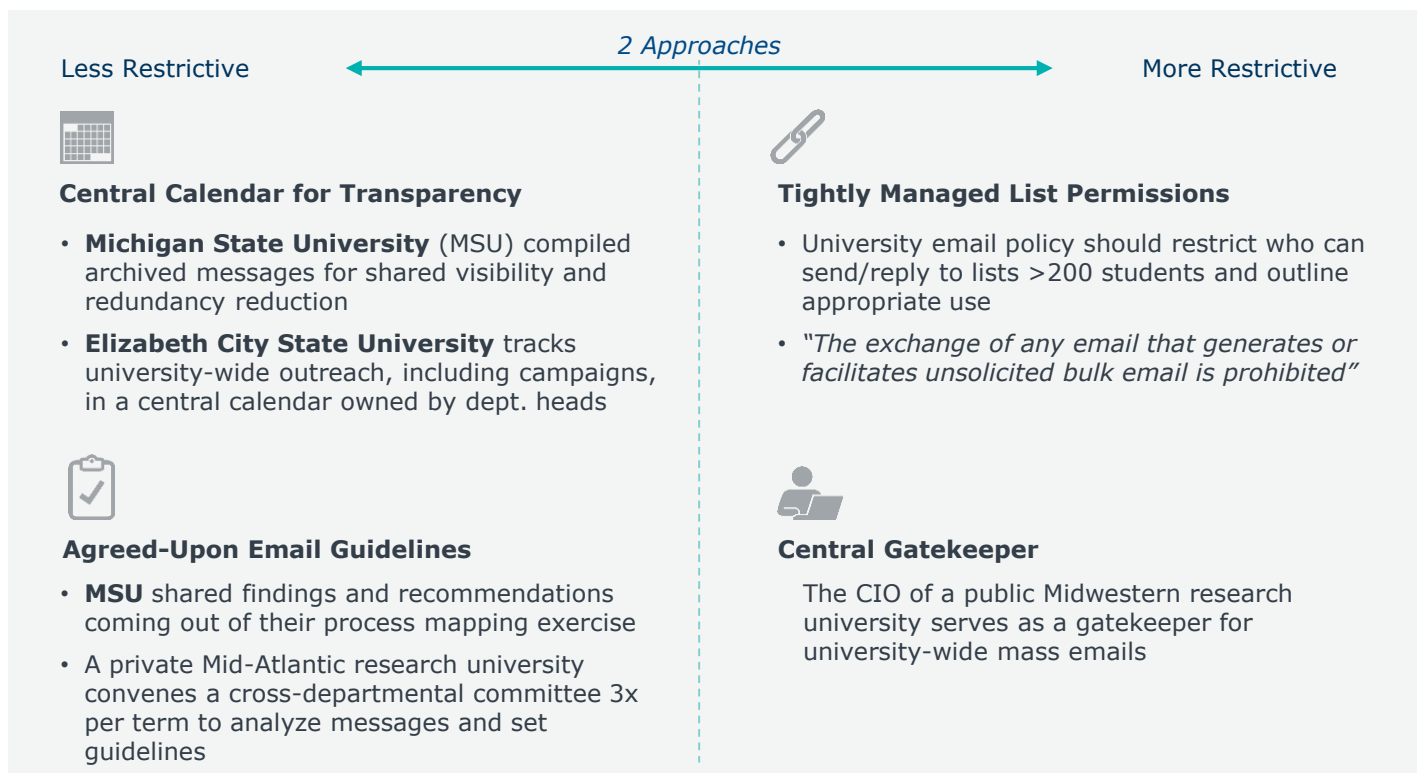
Establish criteria for departments to elevate urgent messages and embargo nonessential messages.

Identify Individual Units for Further Process Mapping

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

► Coordination at the University 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*

TOOLKIT

2

Student Communications Best Practices

► Make Your Subject Line Do More Work

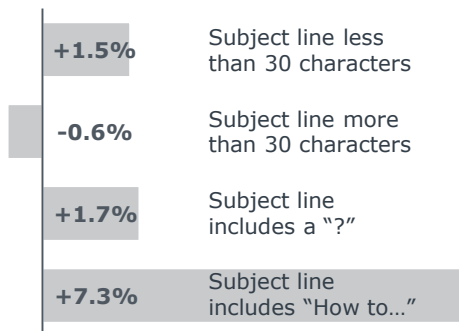
A Good First Impression Drives Higher Open Rates

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 Approaches

Adapted from Advisory Board'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

"Whitehouse University 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 (Royall 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 are 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 [Supporting Student Conversations with SSC](#) and [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 university. It's designed as a group or independent activity to ensure student-friendly 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.

	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"/>

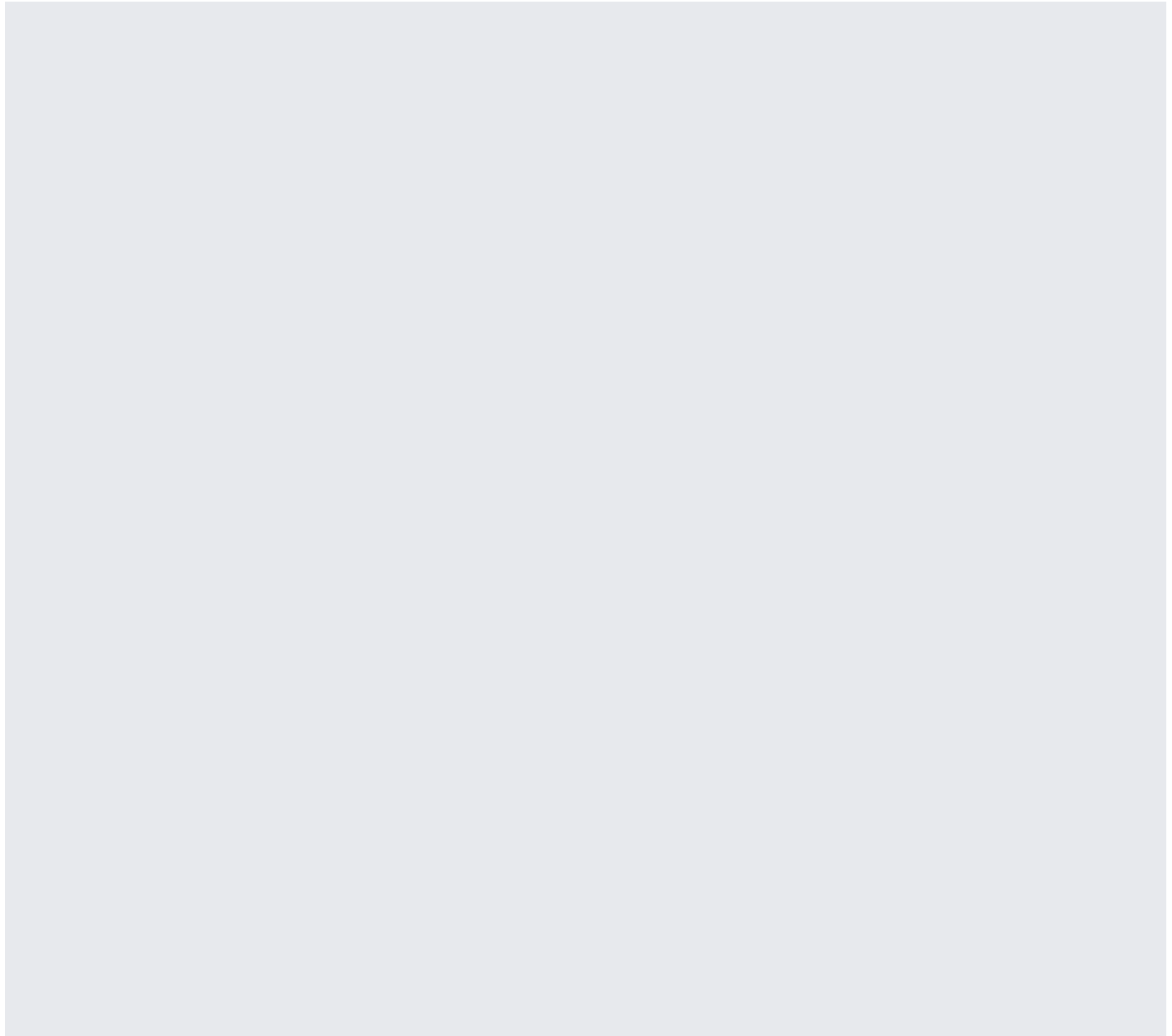
4. Identify jargon in the message (words of three or more syllables that someone outside of higher education might not know). Translate jargon into plain-speak explanations.

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

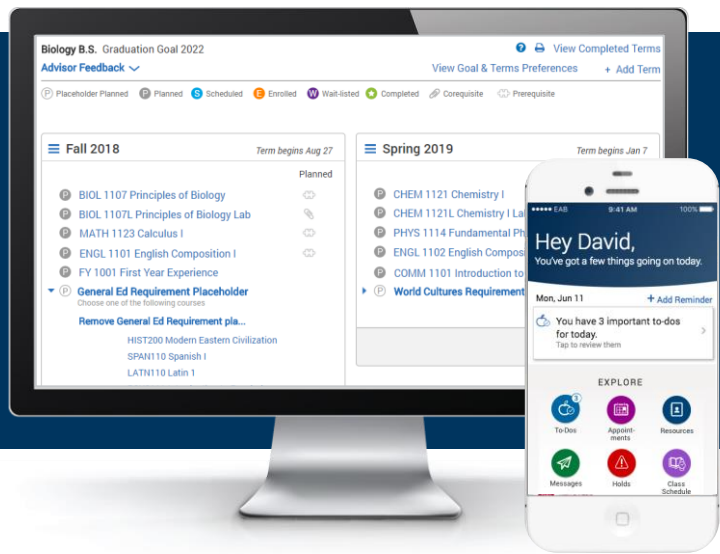
Worksheet: Student Communications Audit (cont.)

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

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 or visit www.eab.com/studentsuccess.



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