Optimizing Your Student Communications Strategy

Toolkit from Breaking Through the Student Communications Barrier
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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*
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.

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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
**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.

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

- **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?

What are our most critical messages?

Which messages conflict in timing?

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

Which messages are duplicative or contradictory?

How can we resolve them?

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.

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.

Immediate Next Step
Enter Information into Shared Google Spreadsheet
Commission IT staff to help create pivot tables and fill in content for further analysis.

Coordination at the University and Department Level

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

2 Approaches

Less Restrictive

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

More Restrictive

Tightly Managed List Permissions

• University 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"

Central Gatekeeper

The CIO of a public Midwestern research university serves as a gatekeeper for university-wide mass emails
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>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+1.5%</td>
<td>Subject line less than 30 characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.6%</td>
<td>Subject line more than 30 characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+1.7%</td>
<td>Subject line includes a &quot;?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+7.3%</td>
<td>Subject line includes &quot;How to...&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nine Effective Approaches
Adapted from Advisory Board’s Internal Guidelines

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

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

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
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on question 2, is the message readable for the average student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the message avoid passive voice? (e.g., &quot;must be completed by students&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the message address the student as “you” and appeal to their motivation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the message include a clear, explicit next step or call to action?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yes Yes 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

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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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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