

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

Improving Communications to At-promise Students: A Validating Approach

Effectively sharing information with students is a challenge for most postsecondary institutions, as students are inundated with a continuous stream of emails and social media posts vying for their attention. Instead of streamlining communications and ensuring that messaging resonates with students, many institutions opt to increase the amount of emails students receive, a strategy that can backfire. Given that some emails contain time-sensitive information impacting student success, postsecondary educators face particular pressure to enhance communication, especially for at-promise students (e.g., low-income, racially minoritized, or first-generation college students) who may require additional support navigating campus resources.

The ecological validation framework provides an approach for helping institutions and programs rethink how to communicate essential information and engage students meaningfully. The below activities are intended to stimulate educators to think about how they communicate with at-promise students. Applying an ecological validation lens to vetting communications has the potential to increase the likelihood that at-promise students make use of campus resources, thus bolstering their success. As an additional bonus, streamlined and intentional communication has the potential to positively impact *all* students at an institution.

General Questions to Consider

When implementing a student support approach or sharing details about a program or opportunity on campus, it can be easy to overlook the value of how information is communicated. Use the below questions to start a conversation in your unit or among colleagues about how you communicate with at-promise students. Start by identifying current patterns and challenges and then move toward imagining how you might improve communications; the activities below will also help you improve your communications approach.

- How does the high frequency, content, and lack of coordination of messages affect our students' stress level and ability to navigate campus resources?
- How are we tracking the quantity, timing and content of emails across various aspects of campus (e.g., departments, student affairs, academic affairs, programs)?
- How could a coordinated approach that helps students prioritize action items increase the likelihood students will make use of resources highlighted in emails?
- How will we integrate accountability into messaging and follow-through? How will we ascertain how students react to emails?

Student-centered Activities

In order to improve communication, it is essential to seek input from your target audience, the students themselves. Below are a few ideas for engaging students in critiquing and reimagining communications approaches. Simple interviews and panel discussion can also assist your team in better understanding how students interact with campus communications.

1. **Student focus groups**—invite a group of students to participate in a focus group about the quantity, tone and effectiveness of communications received. Focus group questions might explore students' preferred frequency, timing and tone of emails as well as solicit feedback on preferred modes and styles of communication.

2. **Secret shoppers**—purposefully select a group of students to forward all messages they receive from university emails to a designated address. You could track student emails across an entire semester, or just around a particular point in time (e.g., orientation; add/drop deadlines). When students forward emails, ask them to include an emoji about how the email made them feel and a note about if the email was helpful or not. Review responses to determine communication flow and how to reduce and prioritize emails. Compensate students for their feedback.
3. **Automated email audit**—purposefully select a group of students across colleges and identities (first gen, low-income, transfer, etc.) and seek their permission to automatically forward all emails that derive from university emails to a research account. Log each email, noting unit sender, day/time, and purpose. Review to better understand where emails are coming from, timing of dissemination, and duplication of information shared. Compensate students for participating.

Program or Systems-oriented Activities

Working with your colleagues, reflect on how communications might be crafted in ways that more effectively validate students' experiences. Aim for systematic approaches that can be easily conveyed to others through trainings or evergreen resources (e.g., webpages or handouts).

- **Language audit**—bring in an example of a student-facing email communication conveying a concern (e.g., academic probation, financial hold). Using the norms of ecological validation, reflect on the tone and content of the email. Was the communication asset-based, identity-conscious, holistic, and developmentally appropriate? If not, rewrite the message to ensure it is informed by an EV approach.
- **Pre-writing checklist**—develop a checklist for communication based on the norms of ecological validation. The checklist should be tailored to the purpose and goals, audience, clarity and inclusivity of language, and mode of communication. Categories could include “not validating/needs improvement/validating.” Use the checklist to ensure that language is inclusive [see [APA guidelines for inclusive language](#)] and resonates with at-promise students.

For more information about the PASS project, please visit our [website](#). Please note that resources for practitioners are located [here](#) and materials related to Professional Learning Community can be found [here](#).

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For an extended discussion of vetting communications through an ecological lens, visit <https://pass.pullias.usc.edu/practice/>