

How to Communicate With Today's Students



- The rise of artificial intelligence
- The appeal of short-form video
- Frequent and consistent multimodal communication
- Relatability, engagement, and informality

New approaches — including AI and short-form video — are shifting the ways colleges engage with their students.

This is a time of historic change in communication methods. Today's traditional-age college students, the members of Generation Z, grew up with the internet, smartphones, and social media — all of which drastically altered how they interacted with their families, their friends, and the wider world. And

the recent rise of generative artificial intelligence is poised to bring even more dramatic disruptions, all of which means that the methods for colleges to best communicate may be changing as never before. How can academe navigate this transformation?

Experts say most colleges are just beginning to think through how to use AI in student communication, but it has enormous potential to bring efficiency, convenience, and personalization to interactions, whether with prospective students, current students, or alumni.

These experts also believe higher ed should embrace the popularity of short-form video, communicate frequently through many different channels, and strive to be authentic and relatable.

The rise of artificial intelligence

While not a replacement for in-person interactions, AI has already been enabling higher ed to be more responsive in connecting students with information on demand. Madeleine Rhyneer, vice president of consulting services and the dean of enrollment management at EAB, a higher-ed consulting firm, says communication will continue to change as the use of AI-powered chatbots grows and college employees increasingly rely on AI to brainstorm, draft, and edit messages to students.

Half of the prospective students in a 2019 EAB survey [said](#) chatbots were “extremely or very useful.” Current students can ask a chatbot questions, including those they might be embarrassed to ask a real person, at any time of day or night, without having to go to an office on campus. Colleges can also learn a lot from the questions prospective and current students are asking chatbots.

AI will bring new challenges to communicating with students, however. While it may ease the burden of admissions offices by helping with the initial screening and sorting of applications, Rhyneer says, those offices will have the added task of applying further scrutiny to prospective students’ communications, specifically to evaluate whether their application essays reflect their own writing abilities or use of AI.

AI-drafted communications from colleges, meanwhile, will require “an authenticity check,” says Teresa Valerio Parrot, principal at TVP Communications, a higher-education consultancy. She adds that colleges will want to avoid AI-generated messaging that sounds robotic and make sure it’s appropriate to their individual institutions, reflecting their

unique characters and cultures. It should sound like “connecting with a member of the community rather than a technology tool,” she says.

More fundamentally, according to Rhyneer, AI-drafted communication must be checked for accuracy. “Even if you tell it to read your manual on student life or your campus policies, you still have to test it with a bunch of questions and make sure its answers are correct,” she says. “For bigger institutions, it makes sense to invest money and human capital [in this effort], but it’s harder to see this at scale at smaller institutions, because of the start-up costs — the cost of money and probably an even greater cost of time.”

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The appeal of short-form video

Though higher ed has used video to communicate for decades, especially after the rise of online streaming in the mid-2000s, colleges are responding to the growing popularity of short-form video on social media. It’s common for official university accounts to post videos depicting a day in students’ lives on campus or for presidents to be active on video platforms, sharing content that seems real and authentic.

Rhyneer notes that Gen Z students have grown up in a world of digital media, and that they don’t always prefer to learn through reading. Instead they like to curate their own experiences of the online world through images and clips in their feeds.

“This generation is a ‘show me’ generation, not a ‘tell me’ generation,” says Wendy Zajack, who teaches marketing and communications as an associate professor of the practice at Georgetown

University's School of Continuing Studies. "If you wanted to know how to change a tire, for instance, or the water filter on your refrigerator, you used to look at a manual. Now you'd look at a video."

Rhyneer also notes that, a decade or two ago, institutions advertising to prospective students might have focused on a highly produced commercial with stirring music and professional editing, but that's not necessarily what's going to work today. Part of the appeal of shorter, informal-looking videos, typically shot with a standard smartphone, is their relatability. If they look like they've been shot spontaneously, or at least appear unscripted, that can add to their authenticity.

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Frequent and consistent multimodal communication

The popularity of video doesn't mean other kinds of communication are obsolete, of course. Colleges still find it vital to use a mix of methods to reach their current, former, and prospective students, including emails, text messages, postal mail, and fliers on campus. In fact, in today's world of constant digital distractions, with so much vying for their attention, students expect to receive information in multiple ways — and often multiple times. Email isn't as much of a focus as it used to be, though.

"If you tell students, 'Well, it was in an email,' they'll just sort of roll their eyes

at you," says Jonathan Koppell, president of Montclair State University. (One of the potential uses of AI, says Valerio Parrot, is extracting key points from lengthy emails to campus communities, and condensing them into skimmable messages that more students are likely to read.)

Koppell argues that texting is better for communicating about vital or time-sensitive matters and that, regardless of how the information is conveyed, students should know where they can find it. Some of this is common sense. For example, if a professor sets an expectation that updates about a course will be posted on a learning-management system, that's where they should appear.

"There was a period of time when email did the trick," says James Herbert, president of the University of New England. "People weren't so inundated with email. That doesn't work anymore. You can't just say something once and think it's gotten through. You have to repeat it without being obnoxious."

Herbert believes that official university communications with students should be limited. "If those come out too frequently, then they just get ignored," he says. "It's why we're very careful about not overdoing text messaging. Historically, we've only used texts to inform students about emergency situations like lockdowns and that sort of thing — and we're now going to move into using texts for important reminders such as for scheduling courses. Those will be tailored to students as needed." That said, he believes that academic departments and resident assistants can communicate more frequently with students.

Relatability, engagement, and informality

Less-formal communication styles are proving successful. Koppell says students don't want him to be a distant, unapproachable figure. They can sign up to

take walks with him around campus, and he hosts a student-produced cooking show and a radio program on the campus station.

“It creates a better foundation for communication,” he adds. “Instead of just a hierarchy, you have human beings who can have a good time together. When questions do arise about why a decision was made or why a policy is in place, we’re communicating as members of a community together.” Koppell adds that this approach is “compatible with also being serious and rigorous and setting high expectations for your institution.”

Like Koppell, Herbert tries to make a personal connection on and off social media. He’ll accept an invitation to go for a run with the women’s cross-country team, or make a plan to go snorkeling with marine-science students. He’ll post about visiting his autistic adult son or his toddler grandson, and he says that kind of content invariably gets the biggest reaction.”

Admissions offices are also focused on making communication more relatable. Collegis Education, a higher-education technology company, [emphasizes](#) that admissions professionals should use a welcoming tone when reaching out to prospective students and should make sure communication is concise and digestible — perhaps with bullet points — and speaks to their concerns.

Melissa Farmer Richards, principal and founder of a [consulting firm](#) that focuses on marketing for higher ed, says Gen Z students equate frequency of communication with transparency. “They want to be informed and not feel like there’s a void of information,” Richards

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says. “A steady stream of updates and engagement with current students is really important, regardless of the format.”

Colleges will face many tradeoffs as they continue to adapt. In finding more uses for AI, they’ll see benefits to students and employees, but also a growing need to devote resources — including employees’ time — to ensuring accurate and authentic communication. Even as they embrace the use of more digital channels, they’ll need to contend with the ways screen time and social media may actually harm students, whether through adverse effects on mental health or incentivizing inflammatory conflicts over sensitive issues. This isn’t only detrimental to good communication with students — it’s detrimental to students’ overall well-being. New means of communicating will need to be balanced and integrated with tried-and-true methods, in an effort to retain the healthy, positive exchanges the best in-person interactions can yield. Yet by meeting today’s students where they are — communicating with them in ways they’ll appreciate and respond to — institutions can ensure their continued relevance and effectiveness in an era of change.

*“How to Communicate with Today’s Students”
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