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## Call for a Paradigm Shift in Institutional Communication Norms

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## Call for a Paradigm Shift in Institutional Communication Norms

Ann Colgan, *West Chester University*

Many faculty, staff, and administrators can recount stories about students who missed important information, and the resulting consequences ranged from hilarious to tragic. The ability to comprehend, act upon, and disseminate essential communication plays a critical part in student success in higher education. Yet most institutions persist in engaging in forms of communication to which students and families give inadequate attention, such as mailings with complex instructions and undefined jargon, and mass emails to students accounts already saturated with too much ephemera. Academic discourse in convoluted formats remains especially challenging for first-generation and under-represented minority students and their supporters. Therefore, academic personnel must diagnose missing comprehension by detecting students' selective hearing, partial reading, or limited grasp of complex, detailed instructions.

Before students even arrive on campus for Orientation, employees of colleges and universities inundate the newly matriculated, and quickly overwhelmed, students and their families with jargon unique to higher education. Many advisors and admissions administrators know students and families stop reading after the good news: "Congratulations! You've been accepted to State U!" Yet, year after year, colleges and universities use similar formats to communicate vital information regarding acceptance conditions and important next steps, and the stakes only get higher when students arrive on campus.

Miscommunication in higher education has many causes: students' fear and perplexity, their emotional baggage regarding fitting in and transactions with authority, educational experiences which attenuate a student's "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky as cited by Derry, 2013) wherein optimal learning and communication take place; all these factors, and more, complicate genuine exchanges between human minds. Consequently, before students even set foot in class, they encounter many potential problems with clear understanding of expectations in higher education. Even well-resourced students miss meaningful data, so how much greater must the challenges be for students whose families and communities have limited experience with the contexts and requirements of higher education? Importantly, just because university and college employees convey information does not mean it has been understood enough to become actionable. Communication is far more complex than a simple delivery: receipt of information parcels. Academic personnel, therefore, must diagnose when and whether crucial information reaches students and must also develop the capacity to elicit relevant information from students which indicates satisfactory comprehension of vital details. Most fields of endeavor require effective communication, and academia can benefit from a brief exploration of the literature which includes other domains. An example with accompanying analysis, followed by questions for institutional consideration leads to a call for developing more effective tools for reaching students and their advocates with critical information.

## Communication in Academia

College students collect and transmit vast quantities of communication, both deliberately and implicitly. While much of the flood of information occurs prior to their arrival on campus, once enrolled, students must navigate new policies and rules, new knowledge, and new social and academic expectations in a new physical environment among new people. Acknowledging the complexities of students' experiences in a completely new environment, especially for first-generation students, means that academic personnel should regard the specificity of contexts and vocabulary in higher education as intercultural communication. When higher education "natives" engage in self-reflection regarding communication practices, the development of "intercultural communication competence" as described by Yi Zhang (2015, p. 49) should facilitate genuine exchanges with new students rather than persisting in communication methodologies of questionable efficacy. This paper focuses on academic communication, but other types and formats of transmission certainly affect the academic. College personnel need to comprehend the entirety of students' experiences: academic, social, and emotional, to draw accurate conclusions and provide realistic and actionable recommendations and instructions, which students will more likely implement. Effective advising, by faculty, staff and managers, remains one of the best ways to connect students to their curricula and institutions; advising communication is "central to retention and to student development" (Shockley-Zalabak, 2012, p.16). Often, students do not arrive in their professors' office hours or their advisers' offices until the middle, or end, of the academic term. Faculty and advisors cannot begin to diagnose and rectify communication problems if students do not arrive equipped to ask for help. Hunter and White (2004) mourned missed opportunities for timely graduation, and meaningful engagement with lessons on the part of students who "dodge advising systems" (p. 21) although such dodging might be inadvertent. Students choose, actively or passively, when and whether to participate in office hours and advising.

Moreover, students constantly receive feedback from faculty in the form of grades and comments on papers but may not yet have the skills to correctly interpret or apply such corrective information. Feedback from professors may identify gaps in content knowledge or gaps in cognitive skills, but student receptivity to this critical information varies widely (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010, pp. 278-279). University personnel, then, must identify to what extent students have grasped their professors' evaluations. Students often have a 'one and done' approach to faculty feedback; in other words, many students see their grades as closing the door on that particular content. Because the message is not explicit, they might not understand grades and comments from faculty as suggestions, a dialog, regarding areas that need further development. "Feedback can only be effective when the learner understands the feedback and is willing and able to act on it" (Price, et al, 2010, p.279). However, students frequently misunderstand the most common form of academic communication in higher education. A commonly heard faculty lament focuses on students' failure to come to office hours to ask for help, but academics often have not communicated what office hours are and how students should use them. Institutions cannot retain students who need assistance but do not even know how to ask for support.

### Ostrich Effect and Gen Z

Additional impediments to effective academic communication include time constraints which dictate the length of meeting times, the sheer magnitude of detailed tasks involved, and more. In addition to such structural obstacles, faculty, administrative supporters, and students may suffer from selective exposure: in other words, people use information management to allocate attention based upon their prior conditioning and beliefs (Karlsson, Loewenstein, and Seppi, 2009, p.96). Thus, information which conflicts with students' world-views, beliefs, or self-perception will meet internal barriers to effective communication. Furthermore, Karlsson, Loewenstein, and Seppi (2009) described an active avoidance technique which they labeled the "ostrich effect" (pp. 96-97). Brashers, Goldsmith and Hsieh (2002) observed medical patients who avoided diagnostic testing and results in order to reduce anxiety (pp.260-261). Mindset, as described by Carol Dweck (2016), may impact a person's susceptibility to the ostrich effect and motivated ignorance since "people in a fixed mindset often run away from their problems" (p. 242). Humans may avoid information with the potential to cause cognitive dissonance, and the ostrich effect explains why some students avoid seeking accurate information; they simply do not want to confront anticipated negative news.

When students make choices not to engage with classroom and advising professionals, they actively employ a form of "information management," described in a medical context by Brashers, Goldsmith and Hsieh (2002) as "communicative and cognitive activities such as seeking, avoiding, providing, appraising, and interpreting those environmental stimuli" (p.259). Avoidance as information management might have benefits for both patients and college students. Inexperienced, developing students, especially, exhibit a tendency to reach conclusions in the absence of information, and dissuading them from the resulting inaccurate conclusion, thought-processes, and generalizations challenges the most experienced university professionals. Yet, many faculty and staff find information avoidance common among Gen Z students, those traditional college students born between mid-1990s through the early 2000s, resulting from students' learned expectations that authority figures will nurture their preferences and opinions regardless of the context (Tulgan, 2015, p. 188-189). In fact, Tulgan (2015) found that Generation Z students carried an expectation of exceptional treatment into the workplace; for example, managers clarifying the need for timeliness described active resistance from young employees who exerted their "special case" status (p. 13) and did not see a reason to "conform" to workplace norms (p. 16). Students who have learned to view the majority of communications they receive as conditional may not take course and program requirements seriously enough.

Another pattern of frequent misapprehension occurs in students' choices of majors. Gen Z students often prematurely determine their academic majors based on mistaken ideas about programs and careers, and such students may resist precise reflections of their realities because they 'know they can do it they just put their minds to it,' or if they take a course with a different instructor. Since they are digital natives, Gen Z students "try on personas virtually," (Tulgan, p.16) and apply cultural relativism to academic and employment contexts, resulting in major choices based on perceived attractiveness of potential careers. Foreclosed students, those who engage in premature decision-making prior to acquiring necessary information, of which these students are a subset, may resist corrective communication because of the positive reinforcement they experience from certainty (Shaffer and Zalewski, 2011, pp.65-69). Concerns about getting

the “wrong” answer can paralyze students who have had to demonstrate learning by taking standardized tests throughout their entire prior education. The fixed mindset of foreclosed students often stems from internalized fear of failure or from self-characterization as someone who has failed in a particular area (Dweck, 2016, 206). University personnel must effectively communicate program requirements so students position themselves to make informed decisions.

Faculty, staff and administrators are, no doubt, familiar with a similar self-protective called “motivated ignorance” (Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017). People engage in this kind of selective exposure, according to Frimer, Skitka, and Motyl (2017), because of a need to defend against beliefs and truths which conflict with their self- and group-identities (pp. 1-2). College personnel sometimes observe motivated ignorance in college students. Students whose self-perception relies upon incomplete information, such that they circumvent exposure to conflicting data like poor test scores, frequently develop avoidance techniques, for example: not being physically present when tests results are posted. Students manage overwhelming, new, hugely varied information from sources including faculty, texts, fellow-students, and more. When that information conflicts with ingrained beliefs, students face a dilemma: do the work of analysis to determine which world-view has more basis in truth and work to integrate it, or find some rationale for declaring the invalidity of the new data. Upon reflection, the unconscious beliefs we have about self and others and events, which may impede academic success and communication, can yield to logic, analysis, and work (Dweck, pp. 225-226). To facilitate open-mindedness and accurate communication, university and faculty, staff, and management must accurately distinguish when and whether communication occurred. Students cannot succeed in the absence of effective communication.

### **Diagnosing Academic Communication**

College professionals, then, must navigate institution-to-student and student-to-institution communication. They must determine when communication has not actually happened and, if possible, take steps to correct the situation. To detect misunderstandings, academics must place themselves in the students’ contextual reality. Champlin-Scharff (2010) recommended application of Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutic philosophy to understand the whole student by comprehending each student’s shifting contexts. Gen Z students interpret information and events through the lenses of their post 9/11, post-recession experiences, roles, beliefs, so college personnel seeking to ensure equitable access to information need to engage with how students make sense of their own lives. Champlin-Scharff advocated participating in open-ended discussions with advisees to “allow students to reveal their contextualization through conversation about their everyday lives” (p. 63). Contextualizing students’ actualities leads to insight regarding what they have understood and adds depth and complexity to students’ reports of their experiences.

The key to fully engaging with students’ contexts lies in encountering the whole student in a dialogic process, which yields insight regarding students’ realities. Academics who encounter students in an I-You dialog of shared self “construct a reality in the space between them” (Colgan, 2016, para. 13) enabling faculty and staff to participate, for that moment, in the student’s understanding of his/her experience. This application of Martin Buber’s dialogic philosophy of the self provides a range of tools for diagnosing and addressing communication

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issues by firmly placing students' experiences, learning needs, feelings, and more within the comprehension of college employees. Such depth of perception permits advisors and faculty to diagnose students' interpretation of communications. Personnel can imbue their meetings with students with the kind of acceptance and openness to other which does not require a leap of faith or what Hagen (2008) called a "leap of the imagination" (p. 19). Since I-You dialog precludes the need for such a leap (Colgan, 2016), the advisor's self recognizes the other with gentle appreciation for a student's own self-sense. The scenario that follows explores several circumstances of diagnostic perception.

### **"Yes, you have to attend the lab."**

Alexa considers herself a developmental adviser and works with mostly first-year students. She deliberately asks open-ended questions about students' academics to gauge their transition to college in several areas. One fall semester, as she worked with that year's new students, Alexa discerned a disturbing pattern.

About five weeks into the semester, she welcomed Jamil into her office and asked, "How's everything going?" Jamil responded, as students often do, "Good." Alexa always uses that categorization to define terms, so she said, "Good, to me, means As and Bs." "Oh," Jamil clarified, "I'm pretty sure I have that in most of my classes, but I'm not sure about BIO." "Why aren't you sure about BIO? How'd you do on the test last week?" Alexa wanted to know. "I don't know," Jamil explained, "We get the test grades during lab." After deliberately waiting several seconds, so he could hear the echoes of his own statement, Alexa clarified to make the situation plain, "You didn't go to lab. Why not?" "Oh," Jamil waved his hand breezily, "Lab is optional." Alexa's astounded response: "Wait! I'm pretty sure it's not optional." The advising session continued with Alexa's admonition to return to attending lab because lab quizzes, administered every week, count towards the final course grade and 25% of test questions on exams come directly from those quizzes. This critical information was easily located in the course syllabus, but since Jamil was a first-year student, Alexa knew he had limited exposure to the importance of the syllabus.

By itself, this incident provides an emblematic example of selective listening since Jamil isolated and gravitated to partial information out of context of the total conveyed by the professor during the first class. He did so because the partial information corresponded with his view of the effort he planned to invest in the course. Alexa worked with Jamil to discover accurate material which contradicted his shallower impression of the course requirements and urged him to revise his conception of the professor's intent. However, in the week that followed Alexa had similar conversations with two additional students, and none of the students were acquainted, so they did not simply share erroneous beliefs.

Baffled, Alexa contacted the professor, a friend of hers, and asked, "Max, are you telling the BIO100 students that lab is optional because I've met with several students who think it is?" Outraged, Max sputtered, "What? That's not what I said!" Once Max calmed down, he explained, "What I tell students on the first day, and what's written in the syllabus, is that students will earn 30 extra points towards their final grades if they attend ALL the labs."

## Analysis

The professor told students they could earn extra points, but more than one student engaged, perhaps unconsciously, in a rationalization. The students reasoned, without examination of total course requirements or consequences: '30 extra points for all labs; I will not need 30 extra points; I can skip labs.' The professor and the syllabus portrayed the course expectations clearly, but students' internal calculations distorted the intent of those communications. Students' attention, or lack thereof, to the combined communications from syllabus and professor, resulted in their failure to update critical behaviors based on new reference points unique to higher education and, thus, impacted the utility of information (Karlsson, et al, 2009, p.99). They employed information management strategies developed in secondary education, where frequent "extra-credit" opportunities may permit students to cherry-pick the intensity of their participation in more rigorously academic coursework. Further, students who attended under-resourced schools prior to college may not fully grasp the utility of textbooks and labs since they frequently have limited experience with those assets. Additionally, the experiential remoteness of the learning environment for this course, held in a large auditorium with more than 200 students, also impacts new students' capacities for sustained attention to the professor.

Recent high school graduates, further, often have vague notions regarding the amount of effort required for college success. Their self-perceptions affect their mindsets about the messages provided by grades and professor feedback (Dweck, 2016, pp.66-77). The students in the scenario above may have had an additional reason for avoiding lab: they dreaded confirmation of their fears regarding their test grades. Student aversion to acquiring negative performance information (Karlsson, et al, 2009, p.99) may originate from a need for academic stress reduction based upon a perceived lack of coping and recovery skills (Brashers, et al, 2002). Consequently, while the failure of the students described above to attend lab resulted from interpretive mistakes, they may have been driven by an unconscious craving for self-protection. Critically, this type of communication failure occurs frequently in higher education, yet institutions continue with practices that served in the past but which no longer demonstrate effectiveness.

## Questions for Consideration

The most obvious question in this type of scenario is what could the professor, and perhaps the advisor, have done differently to circumvent students' misapprehension of decisive components of the course and syllabus? This question assumes that newly post-secondary, transitional students likely experience inevitable misunderstandings, but is that necessarily true? In addition, the first question assumes the capacity of members of the University community to employ a theory of mind to the effect that we recognize what students have most likely mis/understood. Assuming the possibility of obtaining that depth of understanding, how can academics develop methodologies to guarantee the consistent application of effective tools for ensuring communication?

## Call for Paradigm Shift: What's an Academic to Do?

College personnel observe the interplay of new students and the various constituencies of their unfamiliar learning environment. A commonly heard refrain bewails the lack of student engagement with, and response to, habitual communication methods, such as email, syllabi, letters and post-cards from Admissions, even postings on learning management systems. However, reflecting on what we know about today's Gen Z college students, especially first-year students, our recurrent, futile attempts to deliver critical information smack of insanity: doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results. While hermeneutic and dialogic connections positively affect communication, college professionals must accurately diagnose gaps and misunderstandings with the potential to negatively impact student success. Using hermeneutic communication advocated by Champlin-Scharff (2010) by applying the dialogic advising described by Colgan (2016), academic and student affairs personnel develop a complex and profound appreciation for each student's intersecting contexts. Applying open-ended questions and listening carefully enables college professionals and administrators to diagnose students' access to necessary resources.

Typically, the adults in the relationship, employees of colleges and universities should expect to be engaged in student development. Professionals in higher education would do well to reframe their communication paradigms to engender genuine student contact and to teach appropriate responses regarding significant information. According to Tulgan (2015), Gen Z students respond to positivity and want feedback even though their own communication practices are "informal staccato and relatively low-stakes . . . because of their constant use of hand-held devices and the mores of social media and instant messaging (p. 123). Academics observe the reality of students' communication preferences, but instead of meeting them where they are, college professionals often castigate students. Integrating contextual realities enables a more accurate perception of students' reasonings and encourages a growth mindset related to continuing analysis of whether and how communication can happen, rather than blaming students for failures to communicate. Additional tools and methodologies from outside academia have the potential to assist in the development of new diagnostic techniques.

Perhaps the time has come to send text reminders, use Snapchat teasers for new course material, put a review question on Instagram, and more. Administrative and institutional sponsorship for effective communication of critical information to students should take the form of funding, technical support, and assessment to evaluate what works. Further, college personnel sometimes complain about the influence of peers on their students, "His roommate told him that the lab was optional, so he didn't even bother to read the syllabus!" Instead, let the professionals harness the power of peer-to-peer communication for vital information; the Biology professor invites a former student to present her experiences with the course and the key behaviors that led to her success. She uses humor and phrases that exactly echo what the students in the auditorium feel and comprehend in that moment. She communicates. Student Affairs offices already make effective use of this method during pre-college visits and Orientation, among other occasions. Professionals in higher education need to spend more time developing tools, techniques, and methods which effectively impart critical information and less time complaining that students do not respond to methods which we know do not work.

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## Biography

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