

A. BACKGROUND

CONTEXT

As colleges across America end a semester defined by sudden transitions, students, families, faculty, staff, and community members are now awaiting the answer to the following question: **Will campus reopen this fall?** No matter how institutions answer that question, it is increasingly likely that they will need to retool how they interact with their campus communities, accounting for at least some element of remote instruction and engagement as they navigate public health guidelines and concerns.

Institutional leaders will have to provide information on equity-related topics essential to students' success, including online instruction, financial aid, and access to student supports. They will also have to identify the most effective channels to connect students, particularly those who are the most vulnerable, with the related insights and resources they need to thrive. Addressing both what—and how—we communicate about equity issues can have implications for the extent to which our institutions are able to effectively support our most underserved students.

PURPOSE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACTION GUIDE

Drawing on examples from the ATI membership, this guide aims to support institutions' and presidents' communications offices with ideas to consider as they develop approaches to effectively communicating about the status of the fall semester, including attention to how to provide clarity for lower-income students and address equity-related concerns. While developed for the current context, this resource can also be useful when conveying any significant decisions to the campus community and as a guide to generally expand the ways in which our members connect with their key stakeholders.

The following guide includes **five messaging principles** that presidents and their teams can adapt as they engage with their campus communities to address these issues—and **four communications tactics** to spotlight those principles.

Messaging Principles:

1. Rooting messages in clear values
2. Accounting for the student experience
3. Focusing on financial uncertainty
4. Prioritizing transparency
5. Ensuring high-quality remote learning

Communications Tactics:

1. Equity-minded FAQs
2. Community-building virtual forums
3. Prominently featured student support resource hubs
4. Inclusive, student-focused new media platforms

We highlighted a set of exemplar institutions to illustrate how each of these are put into practice and offer suggested guidance as you look to adapt them to your campus context. The following insights build on a scan of websites and presidential communications from half of the ATI members, including institutions of different size and type (e.g., public and private), for the channels they use to communicate about key messages and themes, particularly regarding supports and resources for lower-income students.

For questions about this resource, or other items in the ATI communications toolkit, please contact Adam Rabinowitz at Adam.Rabinowitz@aspeninstitute.org.

B. MESSAGING GUIDANCE AND EXEMPLARS

Principle One: Rooting Messages in Clear Values

- As institutions relay updates about the fall semester, they can continually reference, link to, and highlight their guiding values (especially equity, opportunity, and inclusion) as presidents and chancellors continue to make difficult decisions and engage regularly with their communities.
- Such an approach can help ground explanations about major decisions or changes in clear institutional principles. It can also convey a commitment to longstanding mission, a steady anchor during uncertain times—and, to many, a bellwether of sound action.

Featured Example:



*“UMD’s framework for planning the reopening is informed by four principles: (1) Prioritize the health and safety of every member of our campus community; (2) Protect and support educational and research missions to maintain academic excellence; (3) **Make decisions grounded in values of equity and inclusion**; and (4) Provide timely and transparent communication and obtain input from internal and external stakeholders about the proposed reopening plans.”*

Additional Examples:

- [New York University](#), [University of Delaware](#), and [American University](#) also offer guidance in describing their guiding values in messages about planning for the fall semester.
- [Emory University](#) also offers a full list of principles that undergird its decision-making process, including academic excellence, affordability, public health, and shared governance.

Principle Two: Accounting for the Student Experience

- In key communications about fall reopening, institutions can commit to further elevating the student experience in all related decision-making processes, thereby helping students understand that their interests and needs will be addressed.
- To underscore the institution’s commitment to inclusion, these communications can feature student workgroups and task forces that represent a diverse assortment of backgrounds.

Featured Example:



*“Although students do not sit on these largely administrative task forces, **their experiences, perspective, and suggestions for these groups are vital to DU’s successful planning.** Working closely with Undergraduate Student Government and Graduate Student Government, I will be convening a Special Student Advisory Board that will be in active conversation with all five of the task forces, including joining some of the planning meetings.”*

**There are nearly 20 students who are part of the Advisory Board, representing the wide breadth of academic disciplines within the University—from humanities and education to business and engineering.*

Additional Examples:

- [Centre College](#) publishes comprehensive syntheses of major insights from all task force meetings, aggregating insights from 10 subcommittees that each reflect student interests.
- [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) has issued an open call for students to inform the institution's public health, housing, and values-based responses for the upcoming semester.

Principle Three: Focusing on Financial Uncertainty

- As institutions convey difficult trade-offs and necessary financial cuts, they can highlight their commitment to support students, highlighting specific efforts made through, for example, tuition deferrals and freezes and increases in endowment spending for financial aid.
- This helps to address economic anxieties shared by members of the campus community and indicates that institutions are devoted to addressing the negative implications of these challenges.

Featured Example:



For William & Mary, flattening the curve of financial impact for our community will mean ***balancing awareness of the economic vulnerability of students and families with preserving our dedicated workforce for the long term.*** The global pandemic has created immense financial vulnerability... we must be attentive to the changed circumstances of families and organizations in Virginia and around the world."

Additional Examples:

- Some institutions that initiated tuition freezes or deferrals, like [Penn State University](#) and [Davidson College](#), use dedicated news items or communications to highlight these commitments.
- [Amherst College](#) recognizes, and is seeking to address, socioeconomic and racial disparities that have grown as a result of the pandemic and pose challenges to preparing for the fall semester.

Principle Four: Prioritizing Transparency

- As institutions field increasing concerns and questions from their campus communities, many have sought to be as upfront as possible, affirming a public perception of trust and accessibility.
- Offering detailed explanations of furloughs, applicable uses of the endowment, and operational processes convey that institutions are doing what they can to support students, faculty, and staff.

Featured Example:



"These are difficult times for all of us, and although I cannot promise always to deliver good news with every letter, we will stay in touch on issues about budgets and employment that will affect the community. ... We will remain transparent about actions that may become necessary as we learn more about next year. ***We remain committed to shared governance even when we disagree.***"

Additional Examples:

- In the wake of summer furloughs, [Smith College](#) elaborated on the financial circumstances that informed this decision and addressed misconceptions around uses of the endowment.

- [Fordham University](#) has outlined its academic planning process in detail, offering a robust rationale for hybrid learning and suggesting how the college plans to reinforce students' sense of community.
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Principle Five: Ensuring High-Quality Remote Learning

- As institutions consider the need for a virtual semester, some are proactively addressing student concerns about online learning quality and outlining how to build on initial efforts from the spring.
- This is vital for students that lack stable broadband access or require asynchronous learning, positioning institutions to showcase how students will be able to more meaningfully engage with courses and participate in high-impact social-emotional and extracurricular programs.

Featured Example:



“Our faculty have been working extremely hard, even while finishing classes during the end of this spring semester, to **develop an academic calendar that will provide increased flexibility for our students** as we all navigate a complex, and ever-changing, national and global crisis. Our staff are devoting equally long days to ***ensuring that the out-of-class experience will remain strong and supportive of students’ academic success.***”

Additional Examples:

- [Bowdoin College](#) has committed to developing a robust remote learning model to its community, ensuring that faculty have the tools and skills to promote engaging, accessible instruction.
- [Harvard University](#) reinforced its commitment to a more engaging, higher-quality online learning experience in the case of a remote semester, expanding beyond academic instruction to include extra-curricular, professional development, and research experiences.

C. COMMUNICATIONS PROMISING PRACTICES

Tactic One: Equity-Minded Frequently Asked Questions

- As institutions refine their FAQs amid the uncertainty of the fall semester, several devote at least a section to concerns that lower-income students may have regarding broadband access, technological support, access to basic needs, CARES Act stipends, and financial services.
- This reduces the burden that students traditionally encounter to access such details, bridging information gaps and reaffirming institutional commitments to access and opportunity.

Featured Example:



Indiana University elevates equity-related keywords in its dynamic [FAQ search process](#), directing students to questions such as:

“I’m experiencing a financial hardship due to the pandemic. Will there be any financial assistance or tuition relief if I can’t afford my tuition?”

**The institution also developed [sets of FAQ’s](#) specifically designed to address concerns relating to reopening in the fall.*

Additional Examples:

- [Emory University](#) developed clear responses to how it is supporting vulnerable students, including those with DACA status, lacking internet access at home, and in need of work-study jobs.
- [William & Mary](#) uses its FAQs to prioritize students with financial need and direct donors and other community to donate funds to those that may experience particular hardships.

Tactic Two: Community-Building Virtual Forums

- Several institutions have created remote, community-wide convenings to coordinate responses to shared questions on such issues as reopening the campus for the fall semester, online instruction, financial aid, and other topics, some of which are related to equity.
- Moderated by university leadership and recorded for the public, these forums enable institutions to offer one source of information, project transparency, address real-time concerns, and promote a sense of community that is vital to maintain for first-generation and lower-income students.
- Town halls can also be recorded, ensuring the information is available to those in the campus community who cannot attend.

Featured Example:



Bowdoin College has offered **specialized town halls** for faculty, staff, and students that are directly led by President Rose. Given the success of these engagements, they have even devoted a dedicated forum for remote instruction from their Dean of Academic Affairs.

Additional Examples:

- President Byerly at Lafayette College organized her cabinet to [kick off a series of virtual town halls](#) with her campus community, both to convey major updates and address real-time questions.
- Virginia Tech included local and county leaders in a [community conversation](#) about the university’s fall operational planning, expanding the reach of the process and accounting for the broader impact of decisions.

Tactic Three: Prominently Featured Student Support Resource Hubs

- As institutions grapple with the prospect of a virtual semester, they are structuring supports for students seeking financial, academic, wellness, and advising services; these range from toolkits devoted to online learning and flyers on financial assistance to lectures from wellness experts.
- The visibility and accessibility of these resources is especially important to first-generation and lower-income students, many of whom already have limited time amid various financial and family commitments or lack stable broadband.
- Colleges and universities have showcased collections of these external resources, designed to provide students with a firm foundation for success and complement individualized support.

Featured Example:



Lebanon Valley College has posed [information](#) on equity-related topics as varied as (1) [food insecurity](#), (2) [student employment](#), (3) [counseling services](#), and (4) [accessing instruction while in different time zones](#)—and created a [dedicated blog](#) that serves as a central hub of these and other resources for students.

Additional Examples:

- Ohio State University includes an [assortment of specialized resources](#) for students at the end of each correspondence President Drake sends to the university community.
- University of Miami created an [all-encompassing student services guide](#) to attend to academic, financial, social-emotional, and other needs students may experience during the pandemic.

Tactic Four: Inclusive, Student-Focused New Media Platforms

- Institutions are increasing their presence on platforms that directly reach students amid a potential virtual semester, expanding beyond standard email practices that may be used along with in-person engagement. These include podcasts, Facebook Live, and Instagram stories.
- Taken together, these channels can elevate powerful stories from members of the campus community, showcase important resources, and/or position presidents and other cabinet members to answer pressing questions in real time and offer more informal reflections.
- Given the success of texting and email alternatives in reaching first-generation and lower-income students, piloting a broader set of media platforms may help reach audiences that are overlooked or not effectively reached by traditional channels.

Featured Example:



Princeton University launched a [“We Roar” podcast](#) during the pandemic, offering an opportunity to elevate voices from across the university, bring members of the campus community together, and showcase the various ways in which they are making an impact.

Additional Examples:

- Baylor University’s [Connections podcast](#) spotlights how staff have adapted to supporting students, primarily through retooled counseling services and mentoring networks.
- UC-Davis launched [“Thursday Thoughts”](#) videos with Chancellor May on YouTube, providing a platform to build camaraderie for major events and offer insights on topics important to students.