

## Proposal

We recommend that Black Hills State University develop a comprehensive communication plan that provides step-by-step guidance to admitted and newly registered students and their families as well as validates their decision to choose BHSU by highlighting the University's academic strengths and opportunities for experiences outside the classroom. To fully implement this multi-channel communication strategy, we also propose that the University invest in a technology solution that would facilitate texting.

## Why?

Anecdotal evidence provided by University staff, faculty, alumni, and current students as well as firsthand knowledge of students and their families who've described the BHSU admissions and registration experience as cumbersome and confusing have demonstrated a need to revise our current communication strategies to new students and their families. National research and best practices identified by similar universities support a revised communication strategy for BHSU.

1. Anecdotal evidence includes:
  - a. People who've referenced SDSU or other in-state institutions' communications to know what to do when applying to BHSU and going through the admissions/registration process.
    - i. BHSU staff and faculty whose children have received communications from other institutions of higher education
2. Registrar's Office – firsthand knowledge of students who have struggled through the process. Some groups in particular have specific matters that need to be addressed.
  - a. Dual Credit students – not sending all their transcripts, out of course rotation, possibly not qualifying for certain scholarships.
  - b. Transfer students – finding out at the last minute that courses will not transfer in, or in some cases, already being a year or two into their degree program and finding out classes didn't transfer in as expected.
3. BHSU RNL Report – Strong connection/relationship between Admissions and Registrar's Office is vital
4. Chronicle of Higher Ed report on Gen Z students
  - a. Coming in less prepared, less knowledge of higher ed processes than previous generations
  - b. Less patience, expect communication and technology processes to be smooth and seamless
  - c. Two flavors of students – those coming in pre-professional, knowing exactly what they want to be in life, or those not wanting to be pigeonholed into any one box
  - d. Questioning the value of a college education, wanting a guaranteed ROI (e.g. this degree will get them a job in their chosen field)
5. Marketing Directors group – USD estimates that the majority of their communications to admitted students are transactional emails at the moment although their Marketing Office is beginning to write a great deal of affinity-type emails for admitted students to learn about their programs and the opportunities at USD, so the balance may be shifting in the near future.

## Explanation/Details

1. Ensure communications are timely and relevant to the audience receiving them
  - Different communication streams targeted to provide relevant information for different student audiences - transfer, dual credit, first time freshmen (maybe first gen vs not), adult learners, non-degree seeking, international, graduate
    - Include dual credit and transfer specific advice for those audiences throughout their entire process (e.g. advising students on
  - TargetX emails tailored to where a student is in the application/registration process (transactional emails) – action-oriented communication, this is the next step you need to take in the application process
  - TargetX emails to admitted students and parents
  - TargetX admitted student portals – continue to expand and develop for various audiences
  - Website – revamp the Admissions/New Student pages in particular, so students can more clearly navigate through the admissions and registration process. Add a Parent page or pages to provide info for parents.
    - UW “Next Steps” page
    - Add additional models from other universities
2. Invest in a campus-wide system for texting both admitted and current students. To ensure that the system would integrate well with current systems already used on campus, we would recommend looking at expanding a solution in which BHSU is already invested.
  - Banner – Ven is checking to see if this is possible through Banner.
  - TargetX Retention Suite expansion - \$29,000 per year plus one-time implementation services cost of \$14,500.
    - Selling Point: The “traditional” student no longer follows a linear path to graduation, but rather, may cycle in/out of the institution at various stages. The one platform approach expands visibility into the student’s complete journey, better facilitating actionable strategies for retaining, re-enrolling and supporting students.
3. Faculty and staff – developing internal communications and training materials for faculty and staff to understand the special needs of dual credit, transfer, etc., so they can better handle conversations with these students in advising sessions, etc.
4. Academic program coordinator suggestion from Trenton – add in communications direct from that coordinator to students enrolling in their program, provide program specific info, give students a point of contact for questions about their specific program
5. Common database/terms, systems
  - When they get to the Registrar’s Office, students don’t have all the information they need to register for classes.
    - Students may not understand the process.
    - They don’t need to know what they need to do to
6. Identifying personnel or otherwise improve the admissions and registration process
  - smooth transition between – registration clearance office/personnel?

- Dedicated transfer person
- 7. Revamping Admissions web pages
  - Add a parent page on the website
  - Adapt the UW Office of Admissions and Next Steps for Admitted Students pages
- 8. Admissions – newsletter to parents, promoting good news, etc.
  - Combined with “transactional” kinds of emails about when bills are due, invites to attend campus events/activities, etc.
- 9. Make sure we add example emails, websites, processes, etc. that we find here.

#### **Resources Needed:**

- A staff member should be identified to prepare students for registration, working with students and their families to ensure all necessary information has been submitted to the University so their registration experience can be a positive start to their University career.
- Ideally, a dedicated CRM Coordinator would be identified to ensure the communication strategy is streamlined.

#### **Outcomes**

- First, we believe that yield of admitted students to fully enrolled students would be improved through this multi-channel communication effort. Research by higher education consultants at RNL has shown that continuing to communicate value and affordability to admitted students makes the best case for attending a University. EAB, another company with years of experience in higher education, also recommends “post-deposit gap communications” that create a non-transactional, affinity-building monthly email series that can be initiated as soon as a student is admitted into the University. This would fill the gap until post decision-day communications start (Olsen, *EAB Insights*, 2018)
- First impressions and interactions mean everything. As research has shown that prospective students are now coming into college less prepared and with less knowledge of higher education processes than previous generations, an improved overarching communications strategy will help our admitted students gain confidence and an understanding of the University system that will then make their next steps of fully enrolling at BHSU and continuing their education through graduation less stressful for them.
- Starting on a good footing by having clear expectations and an understanding of the importance of their University degree, outlined through communication to admitted students as well as their family support systems, will also lead to increased retention.