

IX. Communication

Communication has been a major focus for the IPaSS team. It doesn't matter how well-crafted or targeted a message is if it never reaches the student. If our students aren't hearing or seeing our words of encouragement and support, are we really even offering them? Good communication is foundational, and it touches all aspects of College business practices. Our communication-related recommendations are as follows:

Commit to User-Centered and Accessible Web Design

Our current website is, to put it bluntly, a barrier to student success. Many areas are difficult to navigate, overly wordy, and unintuitive. An [onboarding report](#) conducted by ARC's consultant, Cheri Jones, points out several ways in which our website uses inconsistent, institutional-focused language and is difficult to navigate.³⁴

Many different folks with varying levels of usability training currently update the website, and webpage editors are given little guidance. In the past, many web editors have only received basic training on how to use the Content Management System (Ingeniux). This is not enough. Designing *and maintaining* a usable, accessible, mobile-friendly website requires a coordinated effort, a specialized skill set, and a sustained commitment to iterative design informed by continual user testing and user feedback. Our students rely on our website for information and to navigate college processes and **we must do better**. We know that the College is currently in the process of a major website overhaul, which is great. However, a redesign is not a guarantee of ongoing usability.

Therefore, we recommend the College take steps to ensure that our new website is and remains:

- designed according to usability and accessibility principles,
- designed in response to continual user testing and user feedback,
- easy to navigate, and
- mobile-friendly.

We think some options for how to achieve these objectives could include:

- Hiring a full-time web design and usability specialist
- Creating a standing web usability team that is guided by shared principles, conducts regular user testing, and incorporates user feedback into future designs

³⁴ See, for example, pages 7-11, which describe how the online orientation information on the ARC website directs students to two parallel paths with different numbers of steps, uses unfamiliar terms like "unified password" which may create barriers especially for English language learners and students with low computer literacy skills, and uses terms such as "registration" and "enrollment" interchangeably, which may create confusion.

- Offering robust usability training and a suite of suggested resources to all web editors³⁵
- Adopting, creating, and disseminating a brief guide to ARC web standards including topics such as:
 - Ensuring web pages are accessible
 - Writing effectively for the web³⁶
 - Designing effective web forms
- Regularly reviewing College web pages to ensure they comply with adopted usability guidelines and accessibility requirements.

Acquire a “Student Experience Lifecycle” Tool³⁷

The District has coined the term “Student Experience Lifecycle” tool to describe the suite of technologies upon which our model (SSIPP-informed, technology-mediated advising) is based. These technologies that underpin the IPaSS model include:

- Early Alert
- A system to facilitate and track referrals
- Shared case notes
- Degree planning
- Predictive analytics

The IPaSS recommendations rely on these technologies to streamline communication, facilitate Early Alert, enable referrals and shared case notes, and make degree planning easier to visualize for students. Case management cannot function long term, at scale without these technologies. ***We cannot emphasize this strongly enough. We must have an SEL in place in order to scale our recommendations.*** We understand that the District is working to select and purchase an SEL for Los Rios. IPaSS recommends that ARC decide on a timeline after which, if the District has not chosen and implemented SEL software, we will seek out and purchase these technologies on our own so that we can implement case management at scale. We also recommend that ARC convey to the District the level of urgency with which we need these technologies in place.³⁸

Implement a Campus-Wide Website Portal

By “portal” we mean a central sign-in, often located in the top right corner of a website, that brings users to a page containing placards or links for key services such as College email, registration, degree planning, financial aid messages, etc. Website portals are the norm at high

³⁵ Resources could include, for example, [Steve Krug’s excellent book, *Don’t Make Me Think, Revisited: A Common-Sense Approach to Web Usability*](#).

³⁶ See, for example, [Letting Go of the Words by Janice Reddish](#).

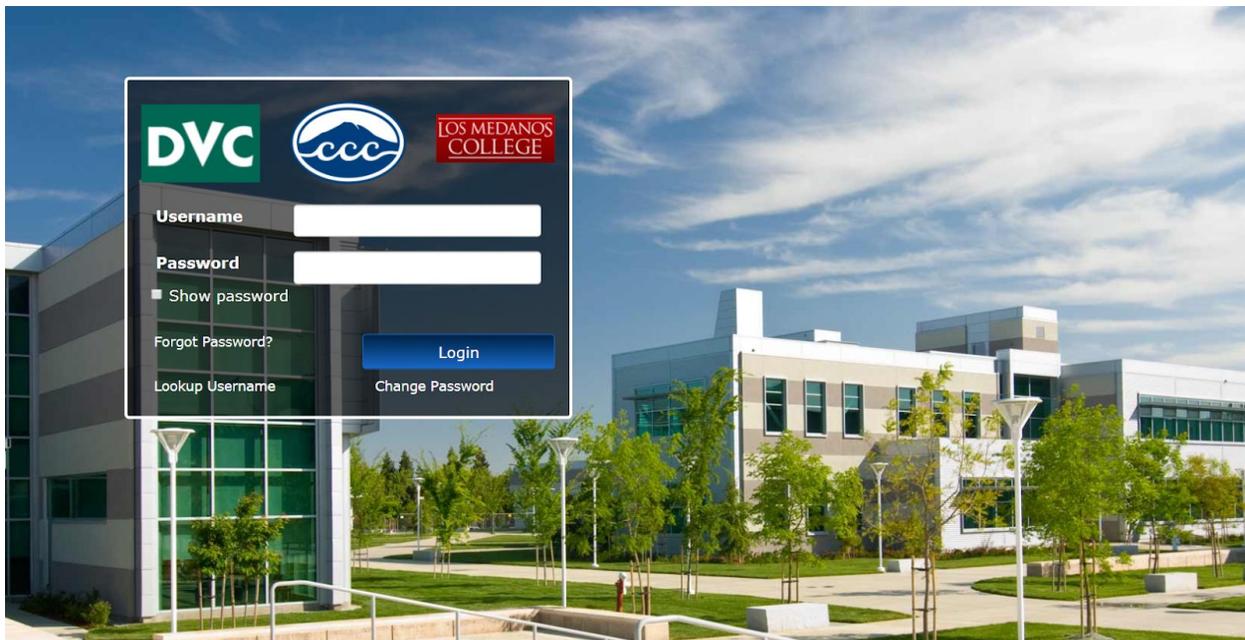
³⁷ Starfish and EAB are two well-known vendors in this industry, and packages of various modules can be put together to provide the above-listed functionalities.

³⁸ IPaSS’s understanding is that Melanie Dixon, Associate Vice Chancellor of Educational Services and Student Success, has been charged with stewarding the SEL selection process for the District.

schools and colleges across the nation, and can be used for students as well as staff. Currently, ARC students must remember how to navigate to many different areas on our website in order to access their school email, financial aid documents, class schedule, and other needed services. Many students do not know how to set up or access their Los Rios Gmail; a portal would help make College communications “inescapable” by providing an easy, “all in one” place for students to access their most-needed information.

We understand that there may be technology-related barriers to adopting a portal, but we ***strongly recommend*** taking whatever steps are needed to overcome them. Many other colleges have overcome these barriers; we owe it to our students to do it too. A “Student Experience Lifecycle” product does not replace the need for a portal; these two tools can and should integrate and exist simultaneously.

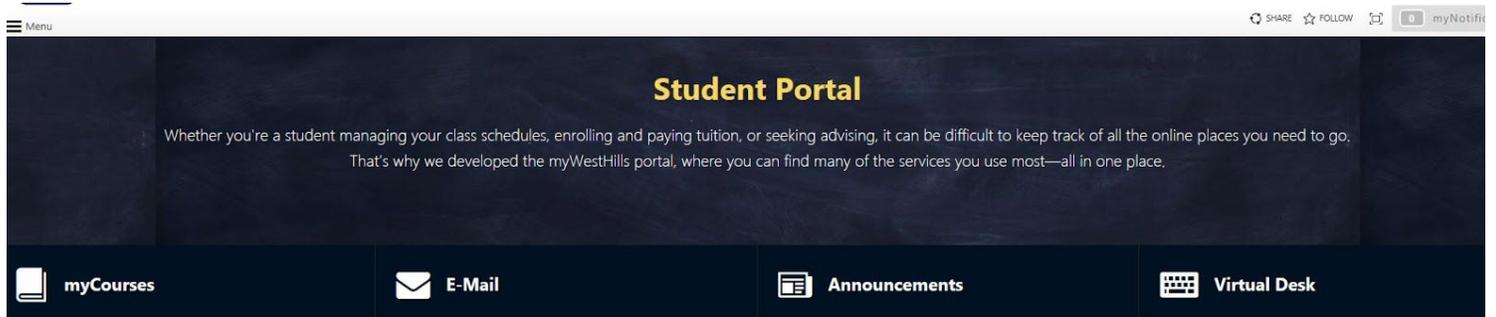
Our campus computers could be set up so that logging into any machine on campus takes students directly to their portal page. Here is an example of a campus computer portal login page from the Contra Costa Community College District:



Here is an example of a portal sign-in and landing page from West Hills College (myWestHills):



Here is what the Student Portal landing page looks like at West Hills College.³⁹



Service Desk

Find all the help you need to succeed by taking advantage of our self service tools and resources below.

Counseling & Advising	▼
Financial Aid	▼
Financial Information	▼
Registration	▼
West Hills Profile	▼

Search & Register for Courses

- Find Classes You Need**
Search and add classes to your preferred list by term, subject, date, time, and location
- Register for Classes**
View your preferred list and register for classes

³⁹ West Hills College uses Microsoft Sharepoint to power their portal. Their heading states: “Whether you’re a student managing your class schedules, enrolling and paying tuition, or seeking advising, it can be difficult to keep track of all the online places you need to go. That’s why we developed the myWestHills portal, where you can find many of the services you use most -- all in one place.”

Additional Communication Recommendations

- Form a standing communication team to oversee student communication. (This would not need to be a large team). We hope this group would seek out and use social science research, collect data on ARC student communication preferences, and use the district's predictive analytics tool (Civitas) to create a thoughtful, streamlined, strategic communication plan for students.
- Whenever possible, communications should be sent by someone the student knows and who can respond to their questions. Student should know how to initiate contact with that person via all communication platforms and in person. This is in accordance with the SSIPP principle of personalized support.
- Develop robust FAQs. In their 2017 report, Georgia State University identified that launching a new student portal with an embedded FAQ chatbot was one of the high-impact practices that helped significantly lower their rates of "summer melt."⁴⁰ We recommend that ARC consider implementing a similar chat-bot,⁴¹ or at the very least, develop a robust set of FAQs that answer students' commonly asked questions. This will make it easier for students to navigate college processes and find information on their own.
- Consider sending personalized acceptance letters to students to make them feel engaged and included in the College.
- Develop communication best practices to guide College personnel in writing effective communications to students. Create and disseminate a brief guide to these standards with simple reminders such as:
 - Communications should be brief, readable, and friendly
 - Avoid using jargon, acronyms, or institutional language that a new student may not know
 - Target the communication modality to the messages
 - Example: send text message for reminders of upcoming deadlines

⁴⁰ "Summer melt" refers to the phenomenon of students registering for classes in the Spring but failing to show up in the Fall. See page 10 of Georgia State University's 2017 Report. They estimate that this intervention lowered their rates of summer melt by 22% in one year, noting "*this translates into 324 more students, mostly low-income and first-generation, enrolling for freshman fall who, one year earlier, were sitting out the college experience.*"

<https://success.gsu.edu/download/2017-status-report-georgia-state-university-complete-college-georgia/?wpdmdl=6471592&refresh=5acf9e24a86a71523555876>

⁴¹ Georgia State uses AdmitHub to power their chatbot. A product called Libraryh3lp could potentially be a low-cost alternative; it costs approximately \$500/year for unlimited use. The ARC Library already subscribes to this service and it can be used to build a searchable knowledge base.

- Develop a timeline and a calendar for disseminating critical reminders about issues such as drop deadlines and financial aid deadlines to all students.
 - Evidence suggests that financial aid reminders may increase persistence.⁴²
- Consider giving students email addresses with their names, not W#####
 - Giving students personalized email addresses may encourage them to use those addresses outside of the college, making it more likely that they'll check their College email account more often.
- Format college systems to send transaction confirmations.
 - For example, when students register for classes, it would be nice if they got an email confirmation summarizing what classes they registered for. Data from a small-scale student communications survey conducted by the IPaSS Communication sub-Team indicated that students highly value these communications. More research is needed to validate this finding and to learn more about student communication preferences in general.
- Assess communication efforts on a regular basis
 - Seek student feedback on college communications via a yearly survey and/or focus groups
 - Based on student feedback, deploy communications in accordance with student preferences
- Keep the [staff and faculty directory](#) up-to-date. Currently, many College personnel, especially adjunct instructors, are not listed in this directory. This creates a barrier to students being able to contact their instructors.

⁴² Castleman, Benjamin L. and Lindsay C. Page. "Freshman Year Financial Aid Nudges: An Experiment to Increase FAFSA Renewal and College Persistence." *EdPolicyWorks*, 2014. http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/29_Freshman_Year_Financial_Aid_Nudges.pdf. Excerpt from the abstract: "In this paper we investigate, through a randomized controlled trial design, the impact of a low-touch intervention in which we sent college freshman a series of personalized text message reminders related to FAFSA re-filing. The messages (1) provided information about where to obtain help with financial aid; (2) reminded students about important aid-related deadlines and requirements; and (3) offered assistance on financial-aid related processes. The intervention cost approximately \$5 per student served. The intervention produced large and positive effects among freshmen at community colleges. Specifically, text recipients at community colleges were nearly 12 percentage points more likely to persist into the fall of their sophomore year of college compared to community college freshmen who did not receive this outreach, and were almost 14 percentage points more likely to remain continuously enrolled through the spring of sophomore year."