



Equity Is Impossible without Communication Skills

How higher ed can level the playing field
for student success

In this ebook, we'll explore five ways your institution can start to capture a bigger picture of student communication and ensure students get what they need to achieve their full potential.

How do you define student success? Is it attendance, grades, and graduation rates? Is it experience, engagement, and community? Or, perhaps, is it how prepared students are to accomplish their professional goals post graduation?

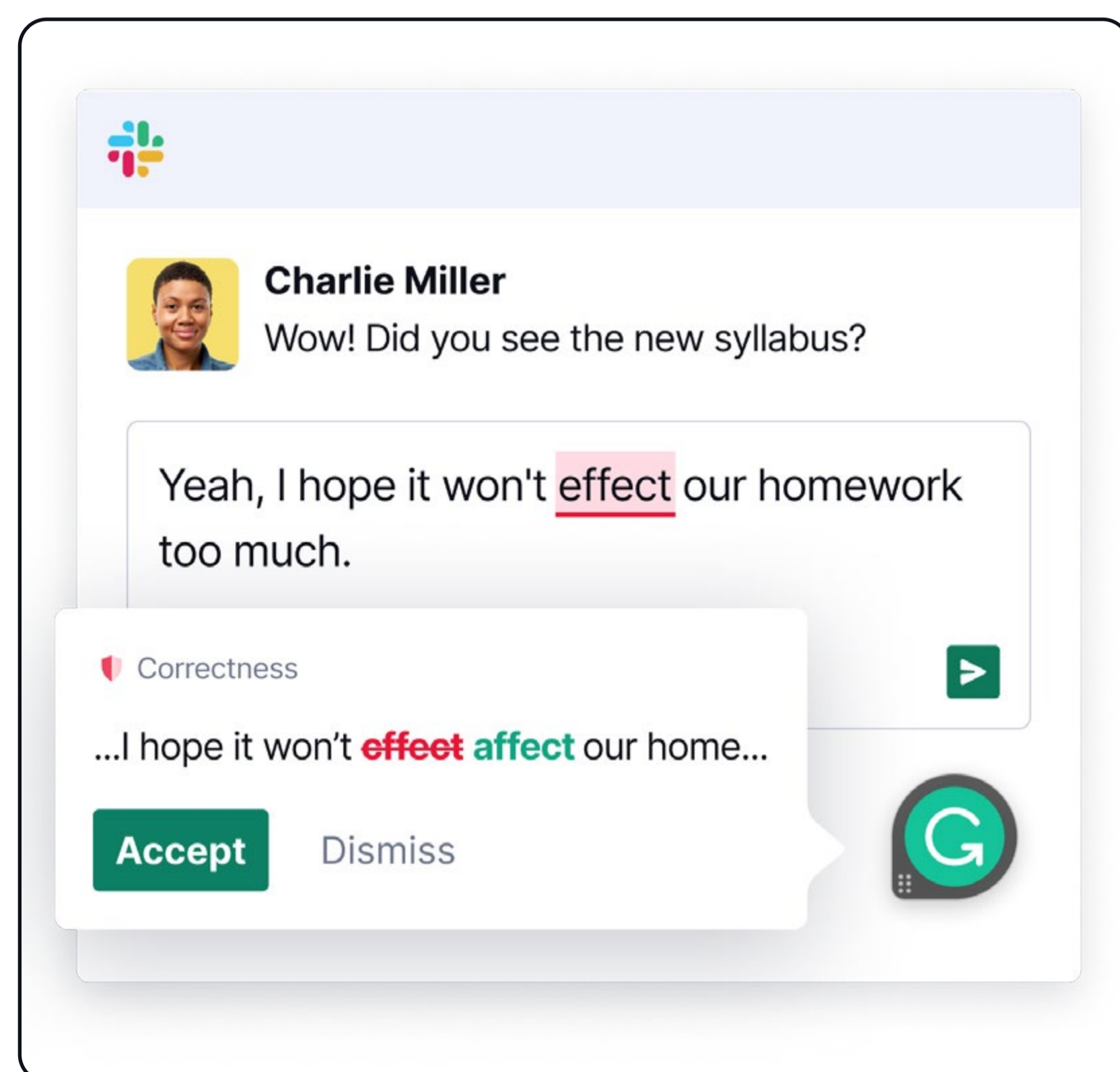
Different institutions might have different answers. But the common thread across all institutions is the role communication skills play in students' success while they're enrolled in an institution and when they step into the workforce.

There's just one problem: Different students step into higher education with different experiences, education, and skills. Communication is a diversity, equity, and inclusion challenge—and very few institutions are treating it like one. Not all segments of the student population are set up for success in higher education the way they should be, a divide exacerbated by changes to the student body and by COVID-19.

At the heart of this divide is students' ability to clearly and effectively communicate what they're learning to their instructors and what they're thinking to fellow students—which translates to their ability to communicate on the job with their employers.

"For better or worse, so much of the actual value of what an individual can bring into the classroom or the workplace is filtered through their ability to communicate," says Dorian Stone, head of organizations revenue at Grammarly. "When you support someone's ability to communicate better, you give them the skills they need to unlock their true potential and be seen as more valuable in the classroom and the workforce. And the earlier you can begin that process in a student's educational career, the more that student and everyone they interact with will benefit."

Achieving equity in communication in higher education can't be reduced to a checklist—it's much too big an undertaking for that. But there are some meaningful steps institutions can take to lay a foundation for equity in communications and, over time, make real progress in leveling the playing field for all students.



Level the Playing Field for Student Success

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Understand the uniqueness of every student

STEP 2

Watch for institutional communication skills gaps

STEP 3

Highlight the importance of communication to students

STEP 4

Equip key institutional functions with the right tools

STEP 5

See the institution as a source of equal access



“At some institutions, the push for diversity, equity, and inclusion is led by a grassroots movement of students and faculty. At other institutions, it’s led from top-down by the administration.

“What’s universal today, however, is that diversity, equity, and inclusion is increasingly acknowledged as mission critical by everyone in higher education.”

—Kendra Grinnage, Senior Manager and DEI Consultant
at Kennedy & Company Education Strategies



Equity Exploration 1:

Understand the uniqueness of every student

The higher education space is actively studying and investing in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that might be the case at your institution, too. But have the results of your exploration of DEI or any data you've collected informed how you support your student body and the individual students that make it up? And are you looking five to ten years out from your current student body to understand how it will change over the next decade? With a growing, diverse student body, there will be an even greater breadth of needs to be supported in the future.

While having a big-picture view of your institution's diversity metrics is helpful, the truth is that every student is unique and brings different strengths and needs to the classroom. The most effective institutions create a safe learning space where every student can bring their unique background and be as successful as any other student with a different background—a truly level playing field.



Sources of Diversity and Uniqueness

Race and ethnicity, gender, and religion are core sources of diversity. But they're not the only factors that make a student unique. Every student enters the higher education environment with a unique background and a vast array of factors that influence their communication ability. Those factors dial up or dial down the severity of their need for additional support but don't fundamentally change that need. Institutions must consider how these factors can further complicate communication inequality and impact student needs.

- International
- Nontraditional, Older
- Nontraditional, Part-Time
- Cognitive Aptitude
- English as a Second Language (ESL)
- Nontraditional, Commuter
- Mental Disabilities
- Fully-Remote
- Socioeconomic Status
- Nontraditional, Parent
- Physical Disabilities
- Hybrid Remote and Online

A level playing field benefits individual students by allowing them to succeed based on their true potential, not just their circumstances. And when individual student potential is unlocked, it benefits the entire institution, other students, and instructors by unlocking one of the institution's greatest strengths: diversity. As an institution, make sure you approach communication skills training with the uniqueness of every student in mind.

"One of the greatest gifts higher education has to offer every student is exposure to diverse ways of thinking, living, and learning," says Stone. "When you equip individual students with communication skills and common standards, you empower them to communicate better and more clearly. Ultimately, they can create stronger bonds with other students and contribute to the institutional community."

40%

or more of undergraduate students at American colleges and universities can be considered nontraditional¹

"Higher education is shifting toward 'nontraditional' learners. Students are increasingly likely to delay enrollment, attend part-time, balance work and school, and juggle family commitments. Every individual brings unique circumstances and needs to the classroom. True equity in communications allows all students the opportunity to write clearly, confidently, and effectively."

—Mary Rose Craycraft, Head of Education Customer Success at Grammarly

¹ "Yesterday's Non-Traditional Student is Today's Traditional Student," Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, updated Jan. 14, 2015.

“What diversity, equity, and inclusion mean at a historically Black college or university (HBCU) is not the same as at a state institution in Florida. To make an impact in this space, you have to understand your context and where your students are coming from.”

—Kendra Grinnage, Senior Manager and DEI Consultant
at Kennedy & Company Education Strategies

Equity Exploration 2:

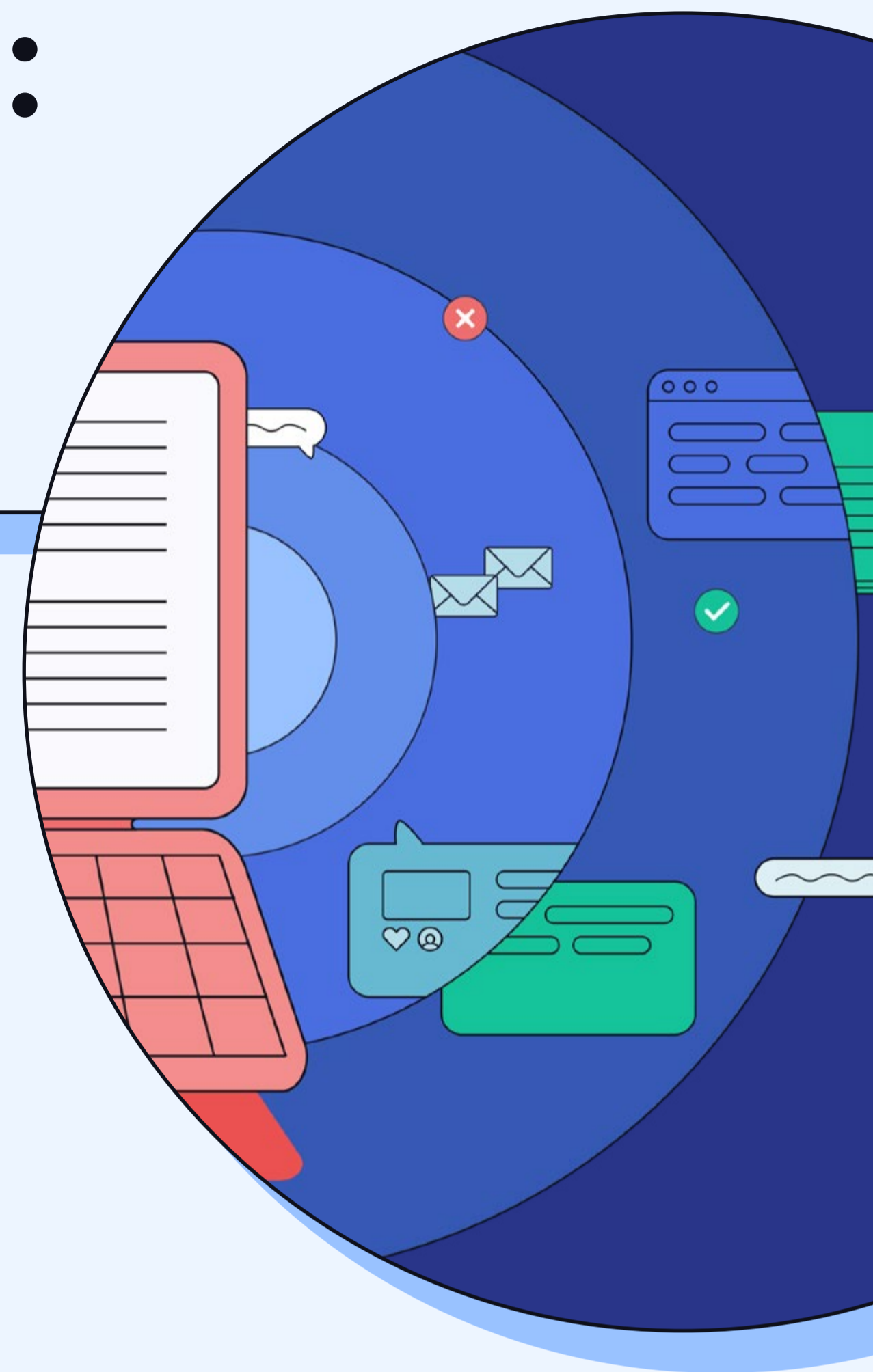
Watch for institutional communication skills gaps

Communication skills gaps lurk in even the best-organized and well-regarded institutions. It's not that students, faculty, and staff don't want to communicate well. The default is to remain at whatever level of communication skill you're at until intentional progress is made. Within the structure of an institution, this means institutional communication gaps can grow wherever there is no deliberate support or awareness of support.

For example, in areas of study that focus on reading, writing, and written and verbal communication, communication skills are learned, practiced, and analyzed. But outside those areas of study, those skills might not receive much attention and might become a barrier between the instructor and the student's learning experience. And yet, a student's grade point average (GPA) and subsequent career opportunities are decided based on rubrics that grade on quality of argument; clarity of thought; originality; and the mechanics of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Students are expected to be experienced, effective writers with only the most basic writing instruction.

The disconnect between what's expected of students' communication skills versus the effort higher education institutions make from day one through graduation to sharpen those skills can cause real problems for a student's long-term success, ultimately limiting what a student can get out of their educational experience.

When institutional communication skills gaps are filled, students' grades across all their papers can be more directly focused on their clarity, originality, and ideas instead of their mechanics, pushing students to differentiate themselves through the quality of their arguments and critical thinking instead of their communication skills.



“There are so many scenarios where the instructor’s purpose is not expressly to teach writing, but they find themselves unable to extract the concepts and ideas of a student’s work because of challenges in written communication,” says Stone. “If a student can’t effectively communicate what they’re learning, an instructor can’t assess whether or not their instruction is effective.”

In such a scenario, students without communication skills are at an unfair disadvantage. A student may have a strong understanding of the curriculum, but if communication gaps prevent them from clearly expressing that understanding through writing, they may be seen as less valuable, and this inequity can affect how educators grade their work.

Closing institutional communication gaps is critical for the health of the institutional culture, too. Stone notes that a shared identity and deeply rooted culture is important for an institution to propel itself into the future. Communication and shared meaning create a deep connection among students, instructors, and administrators alike. The challenge is that some institutions have the resources to invest heavily in creating that shared identity and some don’t. The institutions with the resources to do so aren’t necessarily better; they just have an advantage that others don’t—and the same goes for their students.



“Institutions today are a lot more thoughtful and strategic about how they approach diversity, equity, and inclusion. They’re more willing to say, ‘We don’t know what we don’t know,’ and more willing to learn. That open-mindedness and willingness to learn in is the mark of an institution that’s ready to make lasting, impactful changes.”

—Kendra Grinnage, Senior Manager and DEI Consultant
at Kennedy & Company Education Strategies



Equity Exploration 3:

Highlight the importance of communication to students

Higher education is a critical time for students to practice the communication skills that allow them to express their ideas and their knowledge. Without intentional practice of these skills—supported by accessible, intuitive tools—students enter the workforce having not developed or refined critical workplace skills.

This creates a real challenge for institutions that want to prepare students for the workplace. Why? Because employers increasingly seek entry-level employees with skills in teamwork and written and verbal communication, but only 44 percent of employers report that graduates are well-prepared to communicate effectively through writing. Institutions have an opportunity to make it clear to students that communication is not just an area to specialize in—it’s a tool that can make or break how they are perceived in the classroom and in the workforce.

“Students need to understand that communication is valuable, no matter what they’re majoring in or their program of study,” says Kendra Grinnage.

Consider what your institution can do to take more responsibility for your students’ written communication skills. Start by making it clear to students how much you value good writing, and set high expectations for the quality of the work to be turned in, regardless of which department or specialty a student is concentrating in. Then support students in meeting those expectations by clearly laying out what resources you’ve put in place to help them develop, practice, and maintain their skills.

¹ Ashley Finley, “How Colleges Contribute to Workforce Success,” Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021.

44%

of employers report that graduates are well-prepared to communicate effectively through writing¹

“Education around communication skills needs to be embedded in the curriculum across the institution and be a natural part of what’s happening in the classroom to make sure that students are prepared for the future and life after school.”

—Kendra Grinnage,
Senior Manager
and DEI Consultant
at Kennedy & Company
Education Strategies



“When students step into the world of higher education, they bring with them everything that makes them who they are: where they came from, how they think, and how they learn. Continuously exposing other students and faculty to new ideas, cultures, and backgrounds is a huge value for the entire institution—and it’s only possible when those individuals can communicate clearly.”

—Dorian Stone, Head of Organizations Revenue at Grammarly



Equity Exploration 4:

Equip key institutional functions with the right tools

Every part of the institutional organization exists to support overall student success. But key institutional functions such as career centers, learning centers, and academic success centers act as important focal points as students learn to refine their communication skills throughout their college years. These resources can have a significant impact on student success postgraduation, but there's just one problem: these resources are notoriously underused. One report from Gallup and the Strada Education Network shows that fewer than 20 percent of undergraduate students reach out to their school's career centers, and one institution reported that only 5 percent of students used their institution's resource center over a period of three years.¹

Furthermore, when it comes to equipping these resources with tools, there's a fine line between helping and simply "throwing tech at the problem." This has become more of a problem in recent years, with a survey revealing that more than a quarter of students feel they're being assigned too many different learning tools, and 16 percent of those students reported difficulty navigating and using those tools.

Institutions face two significant challenges: encouraging more students to engage with these key institutional functions and equipping students with tools that don't add clutter to their technology experience.

20%

of undergraduate students reach out to their school's career centers¹

5%

of students used their institution's resource center over a period of three years²

27%

of students feel they're being assigned too many different learning tools³

¹ Lola Fadulu, "Why Aren't College Students Using Career Services?," The Atlantic, Jan. 20 2018.

² Tamara Shelton Miles, "The Association between Success Center Utilization and a Technical College's Student Retention" (PhD diss., Walden University, 2020), 45, table 1, "Frequency and Percentage Statistics".

³ Rhea Kelly, "Survey: 1 in 4 Students Say They're Assigned Too Many Learning Tools," Campus Technology, Feb. 24, 2022.

Get More Students Involved

Getting students to utilize resources like career centers, learning centers, and academic success centers is an ongoing priority for higher education institutions.

Many colleges and universities have honed in on opportunities to raise awareness and increase utilization through actions like the following:

- Making it clear what resources your campus offers and advertising them to students in communal spaces
- Positioning these resources as a complement to classroom learning, not as a remedial experience for struggling students
- Sharing success stories for each resource, citing instances of students securing employment, improving grades, or creating a plan for academic success
- Hosting regular in-person and virtual open-office hours for these resources so that students on flexible schedules can access them

Offer Easy-to-Use Tools

Instead of defaulting to adding more technology to the ecosystem, communication tools like Grammarly for Education layer on to the technology your students already use.

For example, a major public research (R1) university serving the mid-Atlantic region layered Grammarly onto its tech stack across the campus. Seeking greater equity and inclusion among students, they chose Grammarly in particular because they wanted to provide a tool that contributed to a level playing field without asking too much from those involved. Students get personal, digital writing feedback on every assignment, ensuring they submit their best work regardless of where or when they complete their assignments.

“Students, faculty, and administration can all implement the tool in a way that does not ask them to drastically change their workflows,” says Mary Rose Craycraft, head of education customer success at Grammarly.

“It’s much easier to get everyone involved when the tool clearly adds value as a simple overlay or integration onto existing workflows rather than introducing something totally new.”

—Mary Rose Craycraft, Head of Education Customer Success at Grammarly

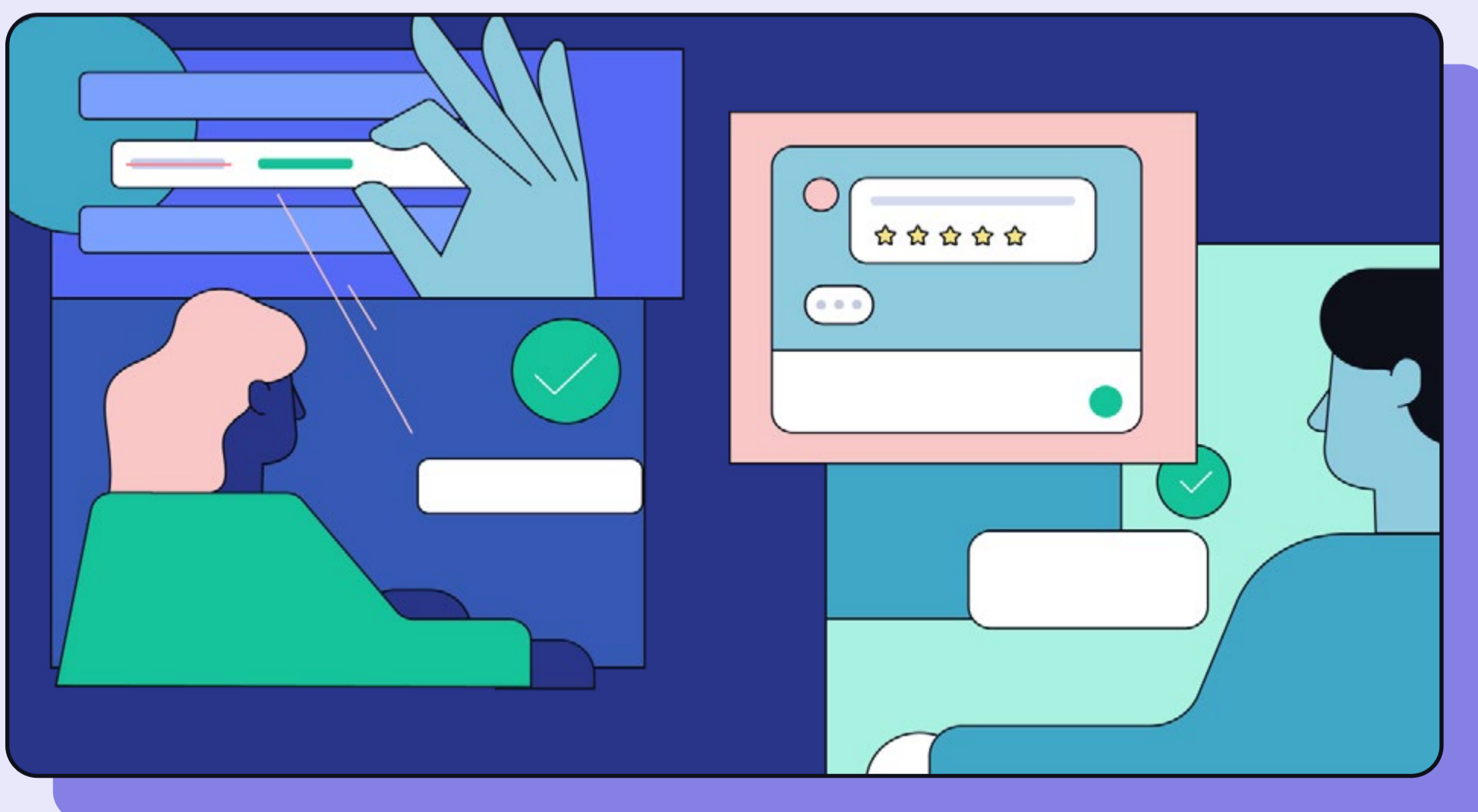


Equity Exploration 5:

See the institution as a source of equal access

Access plays an important role in the relationship between communication skills and equity. Simply put, some students come into a higher education environment with the privilege of experiences, relationships, education, tools, and technology that others don't have. For example, during the height of COVID-19 and the digital divide, as much as 19 percent of undergraduate students at Indiana University–Bloomington and at the Ohio State University did not have the technology they needed to participate in online learning, and the rates were even higher among Black, Hispanic, and small-town or rural students.

The unequal distribution of tools and technology exacerbates equity issues. Not only do students not have access to instruction and information they need to succeed in college, but they also face the disadvantage of not being trained on platforms and tools they'll need to thrive in the workplace. For example, a student without a laptop or access to the internet cannot attend class virtually, but they also cannot learn how to type and brainstorm quickly, research efficiently, or collaborate digitally.



19%

of undergraduate students at Indiana University–Bloomington and at the Ohio State University did not have the technology they needed to participate in online learning¹

“When you use technology really well, not just for technology’s sake, it can be a really powerful tool. It’s what you do with it that decides whether the tool is impactful or not.”

—Kendra Grinnage,
Senior Manager
and DEI Consultant
at Kennedy & Company
Education Strategies

¹ Sarah Wood, “How Colleges are Bridging the Digital Divide,” U.S. News and World Report, Nov. 10, 2021.



The institution is not just a place of higher learning and community. It's also a place that provides access to advantages and resources that students might not otherwise have. When you start to see the bigger picture of equity within your institution, you see that including institution-wide access to technology and resources that support communication—as well as making sure students know how to use it and are using it—is integral to overall student success.

“Providing the right tools and technology is a matter of preparation,” says Grinnage. “You have a lot of different students, so how can you create structures and processes that enable you to serve all of those students well? As an institution, you have a mission to educate students. Inevitably, those students will look, think, and learn differently. So you cannot deliver on your mission if you do not embed diversity, equity, inclusion, and access in everything you do.”

“The communication skills piece of diversity, equity, and inclusion isn’t often top of mind for institutions or students, but I find that once you drill down, that communication piece rises to the top. You need to push on the communication piece as the crux of making change in the bigger picture.”

—Kendra Grinnage, Senior Manager and DEI Consultant
at Kennedy & Company Education Strategies



Leveling the Playing Field

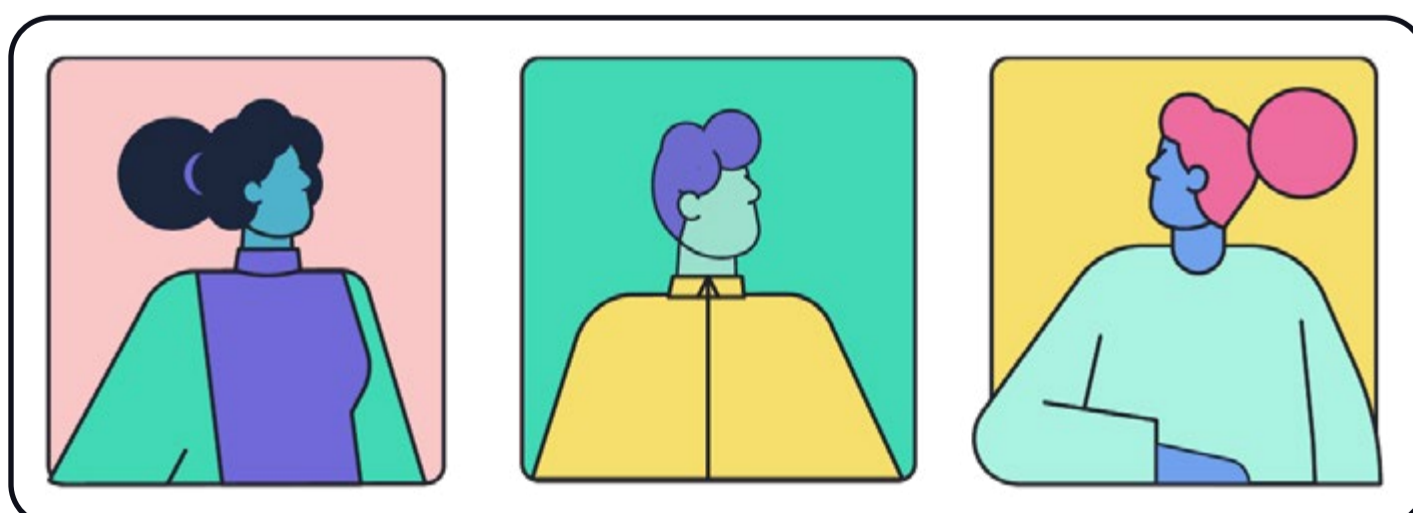
Institutions that want to build equity and inclusivity into their educational environments need to do everything in their power to help students feel confident and comfortable when expressing themselves. Without this kind of support, institutions fail to connect students to the skills and community required for success.

On-demand, digital-first tools like Grammarly for Education level the playing field. Grammarly's writing assistant empowers students of all backgrounds to improve their communication skills, clearly express their knowledge through writing, and feel confident that they're submitting their best work. Grammarly doesn't automatically correct student errors. Instead, it offers thoughtful suggestions to students and instructs them on how each suggestion improves their writing. Over time, students pick up and internalize those nuances of language, improving their ability to express their value in the classroom and eventually in the workforce.

Lay a Foundation for Equity with Clear Communication

Equity in higher education is impossible without clear communication. Every student must be able to communicate effectively to build relationships, ask questions, and express understanding. Investing early on in your students' ability to communicate helps them succeed throughout their college years and into their careers.

Creating equity in communication is no small task. But recognizing gaps and areas for improvement now can help lay the foundation for the vital work you're doing. Today, you have an opportunity to invest in your students at the institutional level, providing integrated tools that benefit the whole institution by empowering the individual.



“Communication is the filter through which the world evaluates the value and total potential of our contributions. The more effectively a student can communicate, the better the world will be able to see their true value and potential—which translates to better engagement and success during their time at the institution and beyond.”

—Dorian Stone, Head of Organizations Revenue at Grammarly



For students:

Grammarly helps students master effective written communication.



For educators:

Grammarly allows teachers to focus on teaching, not the mechanics of communication.

With Grammarly, your entire institution gains access to an AI-powered writing assistant, offering suggestions that augment classroom instruction and improve student writing and communication.

To get started, contact our team at edu@grammarly.com.