It’s important to understand that Unified Communications is vital not just for a pandemic like COVID-19, but also for the inevitable crises that will come in the future.
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Introduction

Any crisis for a university, such as a global pandemic, will reveal how truly unified or disconnected a university’s communications strategy is. Are your constituents receiving multiple overlapping messages? Is the messaging timely and relevant to them? Are they receiving a unified and consistent message that shows the university is internally aligned? The chances are good that university communicators had to answer these questions in 2020.

It’s important to understand that Unified Communications is vital not just for a pandemic like COVID-19, but also for the inevitable crises that will come in the future. As every storm will pass, a new one will inevitably form, whether due to external forces like a global pandemic, or internal forces such as missteps by faculty, staff or executives.

In Higher Education, communications more often than not occurs in a landscape where most communicators and marketers on campus report up through their respective deans or VP’s rather than through Central Communications and Marketing. As a result, the work to align and unify communications isn’t necessarily straightforward. Unified Communications requires multiple functions working together, aligning how they work and what they say, while still enabling departments and colleges to function independently when appropriate. This goes beyond the Technology being used and needs to include the People involved, the Processes by which they work together, and the Data that allows them to better understand their constituents.
Universities need to develop a strategy to align messaging through People, Process, Technology and Data to bolster their ability to effectively communicate and engage with constituents. Doing so ensures that when the next crisis hits you’re not caught off-guard sending 8 emails a day to a potential donor, unable to suppress messages to the right audience, or unable to get timely, correct messages out at a central communications level.
Benefits to Unified Communications

There are many benefits to Unified Communications that extend beyond increased engagement from constituents. These are important operational efficiencies that save time to implement communications, increase knowledge of communicators, and share costs. As budgets are tightened during a crisis, communicators need to be able to show the tangible benefits of bringing campus communications closer together.
1 Shared Cost

Most, if not all, universities have communicators using different email, social and web technologies. This cornucopia of technology brings about redundant costs that are hard to see at the individual unit/department level, but become apparent when viewed across the entire university. **Unifying communications technology allows a school to share costs** by shifting away from multiple point solutions implemented across campus to a single best-in-class technology that otherwise would be cost-prohibitive for individual departments or colleges.

2 Shared Knowledge

When communicators are using different technologies, there is limited ability to combine knowledge to drive innovation and understanding. With multiple communications technologies on campus, hosting training sessions becomes difficult, sharing assets (such as email templates, forms, constituent journeys) is largely ineffective, and individual communicators often have to fend for themselves to get their messages dispersed.

3 Shared Data

In today’s digital environment, it’s crucial that departments and colleges are working from a similar set of data. Many times, constituents are receiving multiple emails every day from different entities within a university. Without data being shared across these units, there is no way of understanding how universities are engaging with constituents in a way that truly makes sense for them. Shared data puts the focus back on who is most important: the constituent.

4 Shared Messaging

Ultimately, Unified Communications is about clear and consistent messaging. This doesn’t mean that every constituent, be it a student, faculty member, alumni or parent get the exact same message. Rather, the core message can be similar across constituent groups but with a level of personalization gained through segmentation. Constituents view the university as one entity, so the more consistent the message, the more likely it will resonate.
5 Pillars to Higher Ed Unified Communications

While understanding the benefits of Unified Communications is important, there are 5 key pillars that university communicators must follow in order to build a foundation to achieve Unified Communications.
5 Pillars to Higher Ed Unified Communications

1. Consistent Messaging, Voice, and Tone
   Establish a communications platform that is relevant for the entire university

2. Proper Segmentation of Constituents
   Know your different constituents, how they’re used by campus, and when segmentation is relevant for different kinds of communications

3. Robust Support Services
   Developing a campus community, training, documentation, and more to help support communications

4. Develop a Martech Strategy
   Implement campus-wide digital marketing/communications platforms that enable internal users to support unified communications

5. Gain Adoption - Plan Big; Be Nimble
   Plan strategically and understand where you’re trying to go with Unified Communications for all of campus, but start small to iterate and build organically
While this may seem obvious, a messaging platform that everyone across the university can access and use for their needs is vital to establishing unified communications across campus. While a central message, voice, and tone is significant, if it isn’t relevant for different departments and colleges across campus, it won’t be widely adopted. What may work for discussing overall recruitment and admissions may be different when attracting funding for research-based projects. Understanding the overlap of strategically important audiences is key. This is essential to creating unified messaging that resonates with them.

From a media perspective, a consistent message, voice, and tone are key to how to engage with media outlets. For many universities, there are rules around who can engage with external media, whether through pitching to media outlets or responding to media inquiries. Without clear understanding across campus around how and when to engage with media, this can lead to inconsistent messaging that causes confusion around university positioning. The unity of consistent messaging, voice, and tone extends to press releases, social media, how web pages are written, and even how email communications are developed.

From a brand perspective, universities aren’t set up to support a house of brands approach. The complexity involved and resources needed to do so make it nearly impossible for universities to accomplish effectively. They need to embrace a branded house strategy where resources can be shared. The unified brand needs to be functional for paid and owned media used both centrally and also across the campus departments and colleges. While there are key brand elements like the look, feel, and tone that will extend to all the different uses, the unique content can be customized to work for the individual department or college.
Proper Segmentation of Constituents

Know your different constituents, how they’re used by campus, and when segmentation is relevant for different kinds of communications

COVID-19 forced schools to better understand who they were communicating with, what they were saying to them, and how that messaging was being interpreted. Segmentation of audiences is not an unfamiliar topic among communicators and marketers at universities. It’s discussed often, and getting internal audiences to understand the importance isn’t really the issue. However, the reality is that data restrictions make developing proper segmentation difficult. Instead of developing messaging for the key audiences (including Prospective Students, Prospective Parents, Current Students, Parents of Current Students, Alumni, Faculty, Staff, and Community around the physical campus) on a regular basis, most email communications are done using out-of-date records or lists that just contain email addresses. This perpetuates batch-and-blast email tactics.

It may seem as though sending the same message to everyone is a way to unify communications. However, by sending the same message en masse, it makes that messaging less relevant for the intended audience. If campus partners know that the messaging isn’t segmented for their audience, it makes getting campus buy-in that much more difficult.

One of the main reasons that segmentation is difficult to achieve is that communicators aren’t able to get metadata for each individual they are communicating with. At a base level, metadata is data that provides information about other data. Essentially, these are the descriptive information pieces about your contacts that allow you to segment audiences. Often, email address is used as the key identification field. If email address is used as the key field, metadata for constituents would include both demographic and behavioral information about a constituent.

This metadata informs how you segment audiences and tailor messaging to each audience. Personalization must go beyond including their name in the greeting of an email. The more you know about how they are engaging with your content and who they actually are, the more appealing you can make communications.

Metadata will allow for constituent journeys to also be used where you can drive communications and marketing based upon the data and interactions that constituents take. This allows for even deeper and more personalized communications, driving higher engagement.

One key consideration is understanding where this data lies and how it can be readily accessible in a timely fashion to the communication platforms used. Can a direct API connection be built, do you need to use custom development work, or can a middleware technology be used to connect the data? Once you establish how to bring the data in on a consistent basis, you’ll want to ensure that you can do some form of segmentation, either from a dedicated segmentation technology (like a Customer Data Platform) or within your communications platform (if it has that capability).
To drive a university's brand messaging, it is important for Central Communications and Marketing to be seen as a strategic partner and not an order-taker for the rest of campus. At the same time, achieving Unified Communications that the rest of campus can get on board with requires not only being that strategic partner, but also providing the necessary support to enable a unified communications strategy. However, just because you’re providing the support doesn’t mean you’re an order-taker. But with so many components to modern digital communications, including understanding how to use technology platforms, developing assets for messaging, connecting data to drive segmentation and more, the Central Communications and Marketing department can’t just put brand assets online, provide users with access to technology and expect campus to unify communications organically.

Achieving adoption and driving innovation for Unified Communications requires developing support services that bring campus communicators together. This starts with providing documentation around best practices and having brand assets easily accessible online. But it can’t stop there. It must include initial and ongoing training so that communications partners across campus understand the university message, voice, tone, how it should be used, and also how to best utilize the communications technologies that can deliver the brand message.

Universities that have achieved Unified Communications conduct monthly meetings with all their campus partners where they can share learnings and discuss ways to drive engagement with the different constituents across campus. These can’t be conducted as a way for Central Communications to have a show-and-tell about messaging that they’re doing for the rest of campus, but also need to include those campus partners presenting ways that they’re taking advantage of the technology, messaging platform and more. Having that message coming from the campus partners will resonate with those on campus that might still be skeptical of a top-down approach to Unified Communications.

Effective Unified Communications requires consistent internal communication to understand campus partner needs and opportunities to partner further. Ironically, it’s the internal communication between communications peers that is often overlooked. But as we’ve seen with many universities, campus communicators are looking to the Central Communications and Marketing department for guidance on strategy, messaging, technology, and more. You can’t lead from behind and expect adoption to happen by others.

See the next page for suggested support services needed at the Central Communications level to drive Unified Communications.
Support Services needed at the Central Communications level to drive Unified Communications

**Brand Assets Library**
Everything from Typography, Color Palette and Graphic Elements, and also including Email Templates, Social Media Guide and Web Standards that are the foundation of getting started

**Training**
Includes initial onboarding, but also ongoing training to understand updates to platforms, messaging, etc. Requires a balance of having to teach a 101 class for beginners, all the way up to a 501 class to keep your innovative partners engaged

**Campus Community**
Regular meeting of communicators that allows Central Comms to share strategy and direction, along with providing campus partners the opportunity to share their stories

**Governance Model**
Establish what the rules of engagement that campus partners must follow in order to be part of the Unified Communications model set out by Central Communications and Marketing. Ideally, Central Communications and Marketing is the business owner of this

**Center of Excellence**
Especially necessary from a technology platform perspective. This is where campus partners will be able to ask specific product questions, understand how to use technology in a way that is consistent with the rest of campus outside of some of the more formal channels like Campus Community meetings

**Innovation Workshops**
Sessions where everyone (including Central Communications) can learn about new features/functionality of communications technology not currently be used. Testing to see how those features might be used in the future

**Best Practices Sharing**
Bi-monthly or quarterly sharing of what’s working, what’s not and opportunities for others to learn from your mistakes/successes
As previous pillars have shown, the Brand Message is key to Unified Communications, but it needs to be supported by other important functions. **Given the amount of communications that universities send today via digital channels, it’s important to have a Martech Strategy that helps drive Unified Communications on a day-to-day basis.** A campus-wide communications technology platform is especially important when Crisis Communications are needed. Effective communications technology platforms allow Central Communications and Marketing to understand what messages are going out and to whom they are being sent. When messaging alignment is crucial in a time of crisis, a developed martech strategy allows for clarity in delivering communications.

While the most obvious Unified Communications Martech platform would seem to be email, it extends well beyond that to include web, social media and advertising platforms. Effective Unified Communications connects these platforms to drive not only the desired messaging, but also increase your understanding of the constituents the university is communicating with. This is where a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform becomes essential to combine all the known demographic information of a constituent that can be utilized by other Martech platforms for personalized, timely, and relevant communications.

A mature Communications and Marketing department understands that driving engagement with the right audience needs to happen through a strong central Martech strategy. The channels by which Unified Communications occurs is important, but tying digital platforms and the underlying data together is what drives success.
Once you’ve gotten to a point where you’ve defined your brand message platform, identified campus-wide technology that can enable Unified Communications, and built the proper support systems to manage it, you’ll need to get campus buy-in to put the strategy in motion. However, most universities operate a decentralized communications model where the individual communicators across campus report up through their respective deans or VP’s instead of through Central Communications and Marketing. In lieu of something like a mandate from the university President, getting others on board requires something more akin to consensus building. This is often where campus-wide projects end up living or dying. If buy-in and working with Central Communications is too burdensome or confusing for campus partners, they’ll choose to go alone, often developing their own interpretation of how to communicate the brand, using outside partners or buying their own technology.

Rather than bringing everyone on board at once, central communicators and marketers need to identify specific initial partners on campus that they can pilot, test, and fine-tune how Unified Communications can work. The learnings from these initial partnerships are important as they end up being the model by which the rest of campus would be part of Unified Communications. By taking this approach of starting small, you’re able to build a sense of eagerness and anticipation to be involved by others on campus. Once they see the initial wins of Unified Communications, they understand how they can benefit and a desire to be part of what’s being developed.

How To Get Started With Unified Communications Adoption:

✔️ Identify one large, strategic partner on campus that is important to success

Have them be part of strategic planning as it relates to message development, how technology would be used for them, and the support services they could need. This will likely need to be Admissions, Advancement, or one of the larger, more influential colleges at your university. This shows the rest of the university how important this initiative is if you’ve got Central Communications and Marketing partnering with another larger entity on campus.

✔️ Bring on one or two smaller departments that you’re already working close with

Usually these are departments that while small, already understand the benefits of Unified Communications and are willing to learn with you along the way. They understand that there will be growing pains, but know why it is important.

✔️ Keep the rest of campus informed of these partnerships

You can’t expect to gain consensus if you’re not up-front with what you’re developing. Others on campus will be skeptical about something that’s been developing for months and only revealed after the pilot has been completed. The repetition of informing people is what is important. It’s also going to keep you accountable to drive execution of the strategy.
5 Pitfalls to Higher Ed Unified Communications

Just as crucial as the 5 pillars, there are 5 pitfalls that university communicators must avoid if they intend to bring their campus communications together. These are the things that you need to be aware of and potentially overcome.
5 Pitfalls to Higher Ed Unified Communications

1. Lack of Desire to Change
   - Higher Ed is notoriously resistant to change. The perception that the current state is fine can derail Unified Communications.

2. Siloed Nature of Colleges and Departments
   - The decentralization of higher education also makes coming together more difficult as units develop infrastructure in relative isolation.

3. Shadow Martech
   - Marketing Technology systems purchased and implemented without input or guidance from Marketing or IT to ensure security, standardization and integration.

4. Going Around Central Communications and Marketing
   - When Central Communications and Marketing are not viewed as strategic partners, units on campus will use external partners to accomplish their communications needs.

5. Onboarding Campus Too Quickly
   - Trying to get too many units on campus onboarded within a short period of time can end up making adoption much more difficult.
1 Lack of Desire to Change
(Both Within Central Communications and Across Campus)

A common mindset across Higher Education can end initiatives before they even have a chance to get off the ground. The idea that “Here’s yet another change initiative that will fail” can persist. Sometimes, there are even folks that believe they can just outlast the desire for change. While 2020 forced changes in Higher Ed, this mentality still persists.

Things to do to avoid this pitfall:

- **Point to specific current state examples**
  Point to specific examples of how the current state is not sustainable and the effects that could have Make it real for others in your department and on campus. Play the scenario out as to why not changing will lead to certain outcomes (reduced engagement, reduced donations, reduced enrollment, or lack of personalization that leads to poor constituent experience).

- **Gain leadership buy-in**
  Gain leadership buy-in (especially from Deans of colleges). This will help reinforce why change is necessary. In an environment where change is lacking, building consensus with Deans that are willing to partner can help drive the change.
Siloed Nature of Colleges and Departments

As previously mentioned, the decentralized nature of communications will make buy-in difficult. The lack of desire for change can to a certain extent be explained by the siloed nature of colleges and departments at universities. Since it’s virtually impossible that an initiative around Unified Communications will change this structure, it is important that you overcome the silo mindset to achieve Unified Communications. Much like the lack of desire pitfall, this has been tested during 2020. When key, timely, consistent messaging is important, it’s become apparent to universities that there needs to be better structure in place to share and cascade messages more easily. Knowing what others on campus are saying is vital to alignment.

Things to do to avoid this pitfall:

- **Drive the need for change**
  Drive the need for change by highlighting the increased cost through overlapping technology (like multiple instances of email technology) as well as the redundant work required to get similar projects completed.

- **Determine commonalities**
  Determine where commonalities in messaging, technology, processes, etc. exists among different colleges and departments today and highlight how partnering on these will benefit everyone not only internally, but also your constituents.
3 Shadow Martech

A common phrase in IT is “Shadow IT”, used to define the use of information technology systems without specific IT department approval. Employees usually engage in Shadow IT because it’s more efficient and timely for them to accomplish their needs rather than going through Central IT. As Communications and Marketing departments become more digital and data-driven focused, the need for Marketing Technology grows. Similar to IT needs at a department level, communicators and marketers in Higher Ed non-central departments will often use point solutions to help them accomplish their Martech needs. **Shadow Martech is mainly driven by a lack of a formal Martech Strategic Roadmap that needs to be led by Central Communications and Marketing.** As a result, universities commonly have multiple instances, sometimes more than 20, of martech platforms for email marketing. An abundance of overlapping and redundant Martech systems that cover CRM, Email, Social and Web make Unified Communications difficult, if not impossible.

While these point solutions may not necessarily pose the same security risks as shadow IT, Shadow Martech certainly contributes to a decentralized communications strategy. Unified Communications inherently becomes easier when communicators are using similar Marketing Technology platforms. Troublingly, it can ultimately affect the constituent experience, leading to lower engagement.

**Things to do to avoid this pitfall:**

- **Develop a campus-wide strategy**
  
  Develop campus-wide martech strategy where you can start with core martech platforms (like CRM, Marketing Automation, Social Media, Analytics, Web) that others can use, then expand from there.

- **Work with the campus**
  
  Work with campus to determine why they’re using a specific point solution, what their needs are, and help them understand why working together is beneficial for not only them, but also their constituents. Reinforce the idea of Shared Cost, Shared Knowledge, Shared Data and Shared Messaging.
Central Communications and Marketing isn’t viewed as a strategic partner and tends to be engaged either only for smaller projects, if at all. While this can extend to Shadow Martech, it more often refers to the use of external vendors and agencies to perform design, content, branding, web development, and even technology implementations. These can be either one-off projects or for ongoing work. This usually occurs when Central Communications and Marketing either doesn’t have the structure to support this work or isn’t viewed as a strategic partner to drive the university brand, communications can’t handle the workload to partner. Either way, it perpetuates a decentralized communications reality.

**Things to do to avoid this pitfall:**

- **Develop a preferred vendor list**
  Develop a preferred vendor list that departments can use. Work with the agencies used most often around campus to ensure they are following proper design standards, brand message, and correct technology platforms. This helps ensure that the departments and colleges are using a similar set of tools and a foundation of the intended brand message included in their communications.

- **Present a broader view**
  You must be able to present a broader view into how misalignment across campus from Central Communications and Marketing is causing engagement issues with everyone’s shared constituents. The focus should be on the common goal of constituent engagement.
Onboarding Campus Too Quickly

While you might get people bought in to your strategy, the execution of the plan is where buy-in becomes difficult. Campus partners want to know how this will affect their day-to-day job and how they get things done. If your strategy can’t address that, you’ll end up having partners choose to continue to go it alone. In an ideal state, you’d be able to accomplish everything at once. However, universities are not set up organizationally to make this happen.

5 Start small

Start small by selecting specific campus partners to that can help you improve an initial pilot program which can then be rolled out across other departments. The iterative learnings that you get with initial partnerships are key to developing a workable plan that others can follow.

Have campus partners showcase their success

Have these partners present to the rest of campus to help tell the story. The departments and colleges can envision how Unified Communications could work for them if they see how it’s currently working for a similar unit.

Things to do to avoid this pitfall:
Closing

While accomplishing Unified Communications requires alignment across a number of different functions as well as departments and colleges, it is possible. By understanding the core pillars that enable success, Central Communicators and Marketers in Higher Ed can achieve greater operational efficiency, a better understanding of the Martech landscape across campus, and increased engagement from their constituents. Understand where to concentrate your efforts and which pitfalls to avoid as you develop a Unified Communications strategy.