

USING WEBSITES TO COMMUNICATE TO STUDENTS ABOUT HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORTS

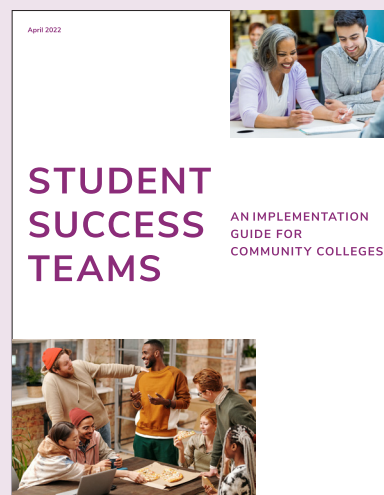
#6 IN THE *BREAKING IT ALL DOWN* SERIES

This is a companion to [Student Success Teams: An Implementation Guide for Community Colleges.](#)

This document is based on an exploration of thirty California Community College websites.

Phase Two Advisory believes that reform is adaptive, not adoptive. Institutions should take what is shared here and refine it for their own culture and context.

Please cite this piece as:
Lyons, Suzanne M., & Karp, Melinda M. (2022). *Using Websites to Communicate to Students about Holistic Student Supports*. Denver, CO: Phase Two Advisory.



COMMUNICATING HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORT ONLINE

Holistic Student Support (HSS)¹ systems address the reality that students' needs beyond the classroom play an important role in their ability to be effective learners. In this digital age, college's websites are as important to the student experience as the physical environment. As a result, HSS efforts should seek to better understand and improve students' experiences navigating support online in the same way they seek to minimize student ping-ponging from office to office in person.

At Phase Two Advisory, we see HSS as having two sides:

1. The college's back-end HSS structures that are strategically designed to deliver integrated support for student success, anchored in equity and the student experience — which is what faculty and staff see; and
2. The student experience of the HSS system, which is responsive to student needs and easy to navigate.

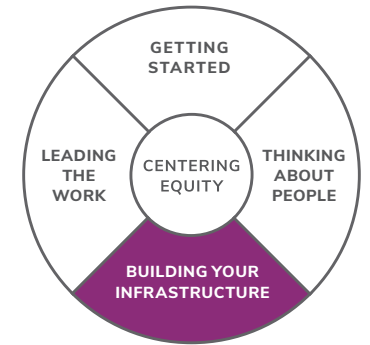
Students do not need to see all of the institutional structures and processes that go into HSS, as long as they experience a simple way to get the support they need when they need it.

This conceptualization framed our efforts to understand the potential student experience accessing support via their colleges' websites.² This document explores how colleges can support students' abilities to access HSS by creating coherent and easily navigable websites that seamlessly connect students to Student Success Teams or other support structures.

As you communicate your HSS system via your website, consider the “why” behind your efforts. Remember, HSS recognizes that different students — and different groups of students — have different needs. Two common rationales for HSS, that we saw in our review of websites, highlight the importance of creating a seamless, navigable, and culturally relevant experience.

Promoting equity: To identify and address the ways in which colleges' existing procedures and practices structurally disadvantage students.

Providing wayfinding/sense of belonging: To identify and address the difficulty students experience navigating disparate offices and establishing positive, productive connections across offices and staff members.



¹ HSS is often also referred to as integrated, wraparound, comprehensive, or multi-faceted student support.

² As part of our ongoing Student Success Team (SST) work, we wanted to better understand how students in California community colleges might find and access Holistic Student Support (HSS) via college websites. To do so, we scanned thirty sites — spending fifteen minutes on each — to identify the resources available from a student perspective.

TRANSLATING SERVICES INTO STUDENT-CENTERED SYSTEMS ONLINE

The colleges whose websites we explored countless programs, services, and structures available to their students. Beyond SSTs, which were the focus of our original study, colleges are leveraging welcome centers, co-located services, assigned single points of contact, and early alert networks to support their students from entry to completion.

When we reviewed the websites with a student lens,³ we noticed that — though college websites are providing a holistic menu of supports through an array of services — they are not necessarily communicating a clear HSS **system** that is responsive to student needs or easy to navigate online.

For instance, even at some colleges that have developed SSTs to create coherent points of contact and support for students, we could not find the SSTs or their purposes online; or, the SSTs were buried in a long list of other services. In other words, **colleges created HSS systems, but did not make those systems obvious to students**, potentially reducing their impact.

Great care is needed to ensure that comprehensive supports are felt as integrated, not fragmented, by students. Importantly, **even if you don't have a single structure to deliver support, you can still strategically design your website so that is easy for students to navigate and feel supported by your institution.**

As you communicate your HSS system via your website, consider what you want the front-end experience of back-end structures to be like for new and returning students. Remember:

- **Whatever is most prominent on the page is what will get noticed:** Size, color, and placement all influence what catches the viewer's attention. Several sites had HSS structures and virtual welcome/help centers anchored on their home page, making them visible entry points for students seeking support.
- **The “what” is different from the “how”:** Even sites that used the student-centered language and clearly communicated “what” services they provided fell short at times with communicating “how” to access those services. The best examples of this gap were websites where structures like SSTs had clear, student-friendly descriptions but failed to provide contact information or other ways for students to request support from them.

³ The reflections in this document are based on our experiences exploring the thirty colleges' websites. Colleges should engage students in an assessment of their website navigability for their own context.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID COMMON WEBSITE PITFALLS

In our website review, we identified three common organizational challenges that may make it difficult for students to feel seamlessly connected to HSS systems. We also identified strategies to address fragmentation and bring HSS systems into the digital space. **The best partner in this work is your students themselves — engage them in auditing your web design and language to ensure that their digital experience of support is seamless, navigable, and culturally relevant.**

	WHY IT MATTERS & COMMON ISSUES	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
Confusing naming conventions and jargon	<p>The naming conventions used are critical to how easily students can navigate finding support via the website. Often, the names of offices and services are redundant, unclear, or overly complicated.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Websites often have both Student Services and Student Life listed (or their equivalents) along with an Academics page. The difference between services and life may not be clear to students unfamiliar with the structure of higher ed. • Help Desk in higher education talk usually means IT support, but to students help is help, not technology. • Acronyms, while great for internal talk, can be confusing online for students who may not know what programs like EOPS, MESA, or TRIO are. 	<p>At some schools, there is a single “Student Support & Success” landing page that branches out into sub-pages, the IT help desk page directs students to other support services, and/or there are little info buttons next to names and acronyms to help students decipher what they mean.</p> <p>Remember, at the end of the day, naming mechanisms are communication mechanisms — what are department and resource names conveying (or not) to students?</p>
Unclear messaging	<p>Opening text on resource pages is equally important to how a student experiences support. Once a student gets past the “what’s this word/name mean?” they need an additional explanation on what to expect from a resource.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At one school, the opening text on the “Student Success and Support Programs” page focused on transfer students, while at another school the “Student Services” page opening text focused on probation students. In both cases, students may find themselves thinking “this resource can’t help me” or “I don’t belong here.” • At some other schools, opening text is entirely missing, leaving web viewers to wonder what an SST or Welcome Center is. 	<p>Ask yourself:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the opening text accurate?; 2. Is it student friendly?; 3. Is the message on the entire page consistent?
Disorganized website architecture	<p>Without an organizing structure or landing page, comprehensive student supports online can quickly lose the seamless experience needed by students. The challenge with lists is that central structures (such as SSTs) can get lost in the fray and become hard to find, unless you’re looking for them (like we were).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alphabetizing the list of supports partially helps with organization, but can get confusing — for instance, one college had SSTs listed under M for “Meet your SST.” 	<p>Easier-to-navigate sites include filter functions by student type, organize support into specific categories, and/or have their central structure (e.g., SSTs) listed front and center. Two sites even had a button for students to suggest resources they needed or to provide feedback on their experiences accessing support.</p>

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This project was generously funded by The College Futures Foundation.

Want to learn more? Visit www.phasetwoadvisory.com/sst-guide

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