

Psychologically Attuned Communications (PAC):

Summer Melt and Times of Uncertainty

What We Say – And *How* We Say It – Matters

Today's Agenda

1. Introductions
2. College Student Success Innovation Centre (CSSIC)
3. Principles of Psychologically Attuned Communications (PAC)
4. Mohawk College Applications of PAC
 - Probation, Summer Melt, and At-Risk
5. Debrief, Questions, and Discussion

Research Team

CSSIC Team

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Vision

“...to lead the province in the design, implementation, assessment and evaluation of **innovative interventions throughout the student lifecycle that improve student success**”

Outcomes

“...a more collaborative, supportive college system ... **informed by rigorous evidence about what works**”



Innovation



Capacity Building



Knowledge Sharing

Psychologically Attuned Communications (PAC):

What Is PAC – And Why Does It Matter?

Psychological Attunement



WHY?

- People are “meaning makers”
- Interested in figuring out where we **belong**, where we **thrive**, and where we are **valued**
- Subtle differences in the way we communicate to someone can change the meaning they make of it



WHAT?

- Adopting an **attunement mindset**
- Focused on the meaning that students might make
- Uses precise, theory, and research-informed technique to alter these meanings
- Aims to strike a sincere tone and ensure message-to-context match



WHO?

- Intended to help **all students**
- Potential to especially help students that are marginalized or under-represented

(Brady, 2020)

Communications During Times of Uncertainty

Normalize



- Normalize the experience of finding the current situation difficult and upsetting

Convey



- Convey compassion and understanding for students' concerns and challenges

Reassure



- Reassure them that these are highly unusual times and college leadership, staff, instructors, and students are learning how to handle it, together

Validate and Address



- Validate and address their concerns or questions as well as you are able given the information available to you, and your own capacity

Acknowledge



- Acknowledge that the situation is changing quickly, and that solutions are changing as circumstances change

Connect



- Connect them to places where they can get updated information as plans continue to unfold

(College Transition Collaborative [CTC], 2020)

Communications During Times of Uncertainty

Examples of Student Concerns and Potential Responses

What They Say

How You Can Begin to Address It

"I'm worried I have Coronavirus or am worried about getting coronavirus. What should I do?"

"That concern is understandable. Here is where you can find the most up to date information from [our school/city/province/ public health department] about what to do next."

"I'm worried about my vulnerable family/friends."

"I think many people share your concern right now. This is such a difficult situation. Can you tell me a bit more about how this worry is impacting you?"

(CTC, 2020)

The Impact of PAC



How we communicate to students **matters**



Communication is a **cost-effective strategy**

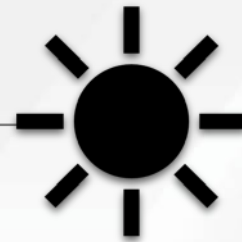


Iterative development process is very **useful and informative**

PAC at Mohawk College



**Academic
Standing Letters**



**Summer
Melt**



**At-Risk
Communications**

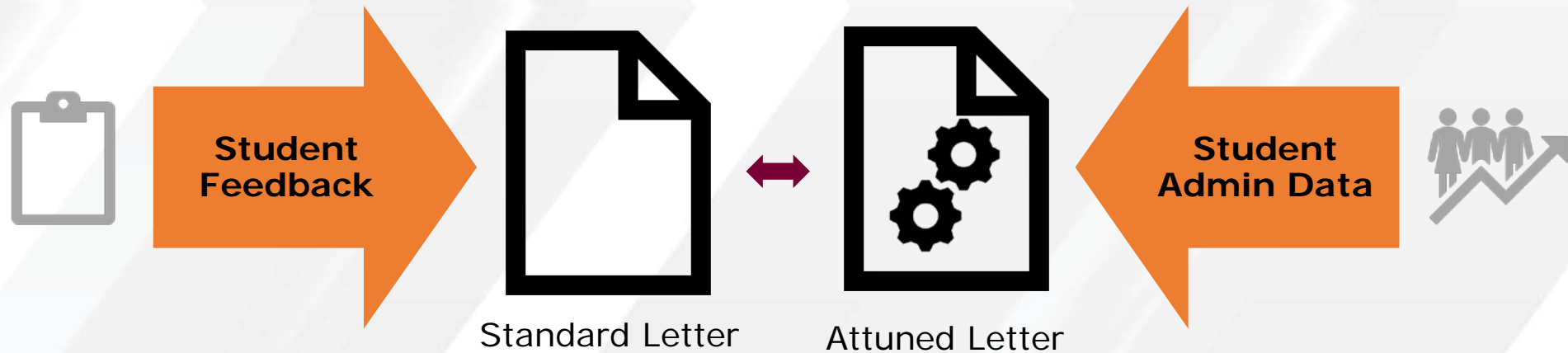
Academic Standing Letters (ASL)

The screenshot shows the website of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). The header includes the HEQCO logo, navigation links (Home, Newsroom, Contact Us, Sitemap, Français), a search bar, and a menu with 'Our Priorities', 'Research', 'Events', 'ItsNotAcademic Blog', and 'About Us'. The main content area features a sidebar with 'ACCESS' and sub-items 'Access', 'Learning Outcomes', and 'System Design'. The main article is titled 'Evaluating the Impact of Academic Standing Letters on the Experience and Retention of Students' and includes the Mohawk College logo and text identifying Tim Fricker as the Primary Investigator. A small thumbnail image of the report cover is also visible.

1. Gathered information about how students felt, responded to, and made meaning of their experiences of being placed on a status other than Promote with Good Standing (PG).
2. Customized, implemented, and evaluated psychologically attuned academic standing letters that supported student emotional and academic success.
3. Analysed students' **emotional** responses to and the **academic** impacts of psychologically attuned notification letters.

(Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO], 2018)

Method for ASL



Phase One

- Mohawk students (survey and focus groups)
- Standard letter vs. PAC versions

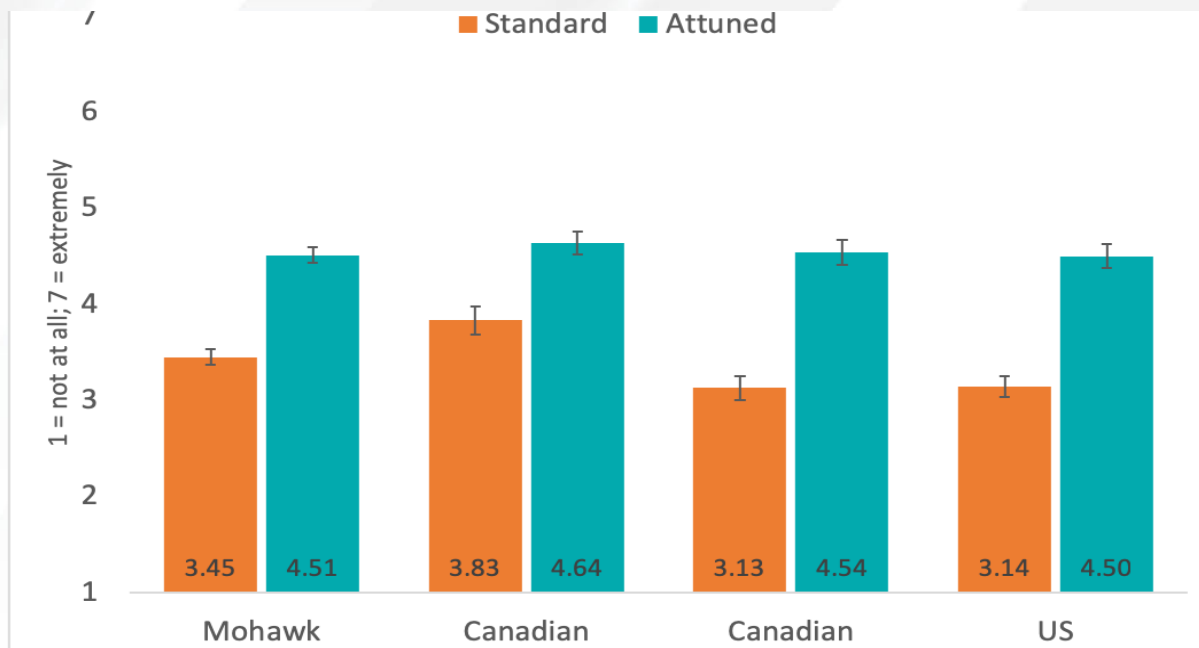
Phase Two

- Surveys: 3 Canadian and 1 American institution
- 2 standard letters vs. 1 PAC

Phase Three

- Examined retention and GPA data of Mohawk Students

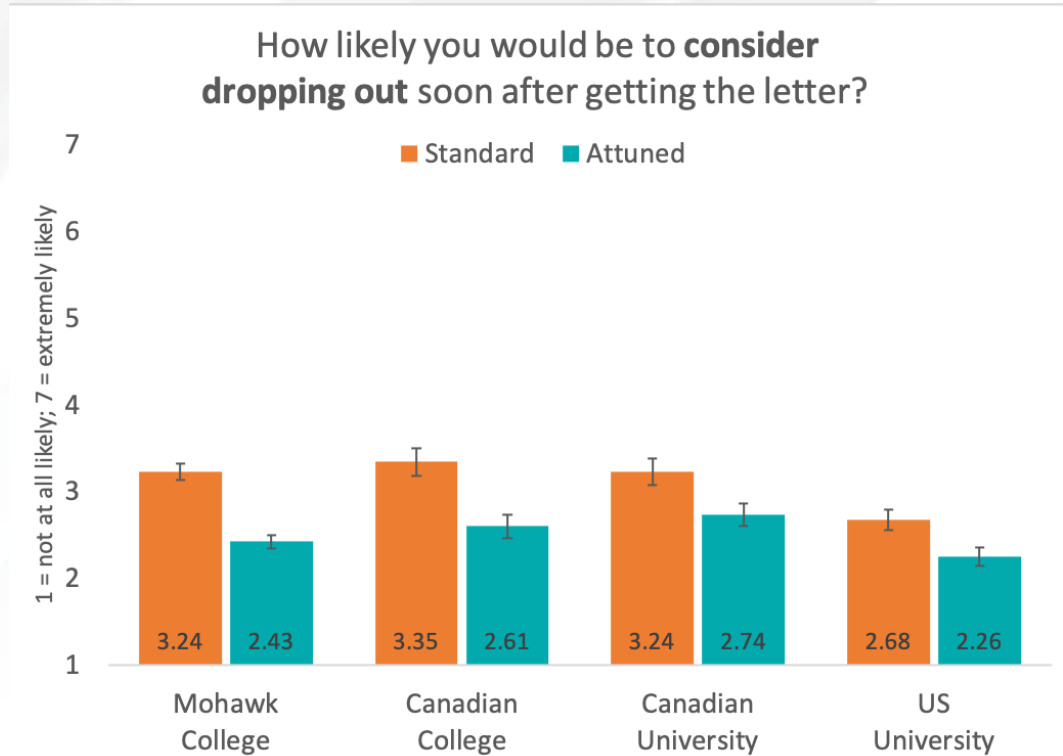
ASL Project Findings (1)



Positive effects on anticipated emotions:

- Reduced shame
- Increased hope

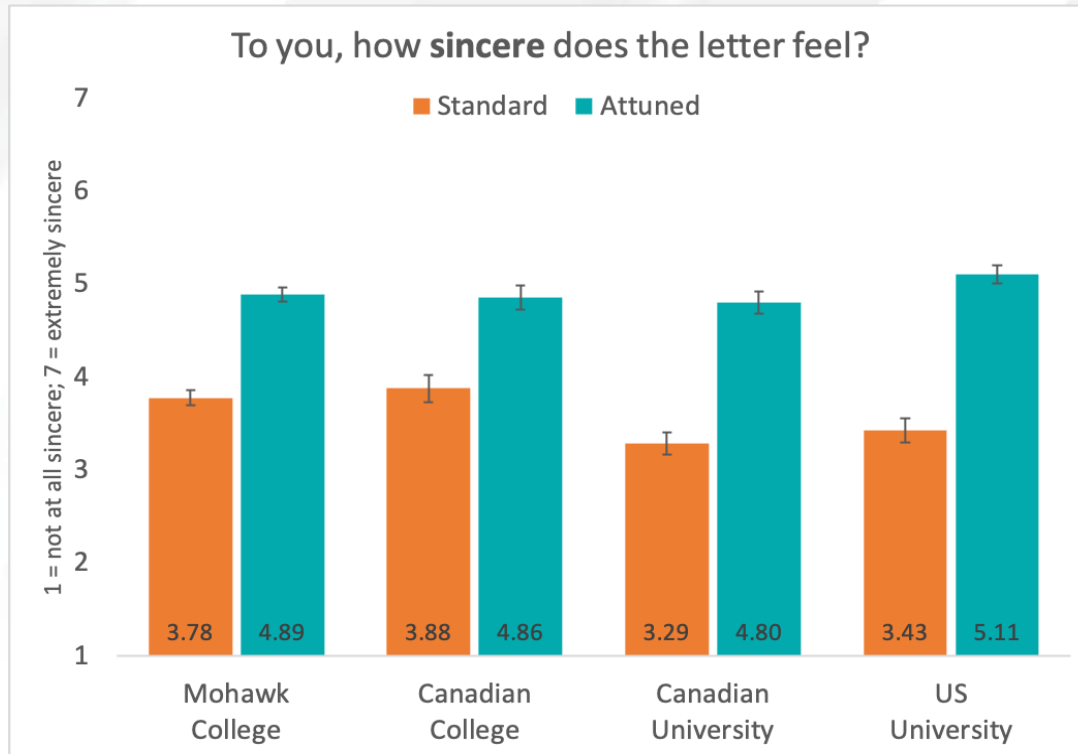
ASL Project Findings (2)



Positive effects on behaviour and intention:

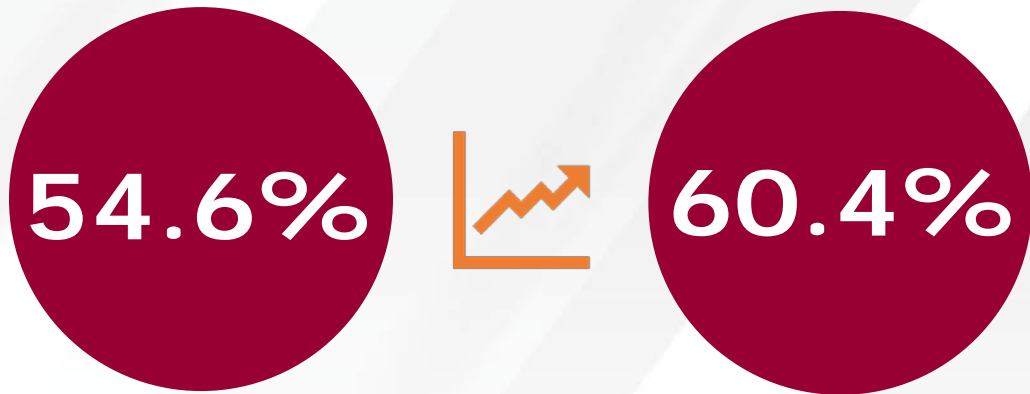
- More help-seeking (seeing a tutor or advisor)
- Less likely to drop-out

ASL Project Findings (3)



**Positive effects on
perceived sincerity of the
College**

ASL Project Findings (4)



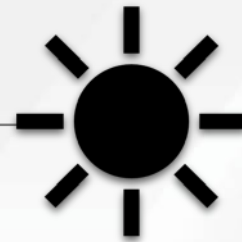
Subsequent term GPA improvement of 5.8 percentage points

- Students on Probation (PB) and Compulsory Withdrawal (CW)

Could this process be applied to other types of communication?



Academic
Standing Letters



Summer
Melt



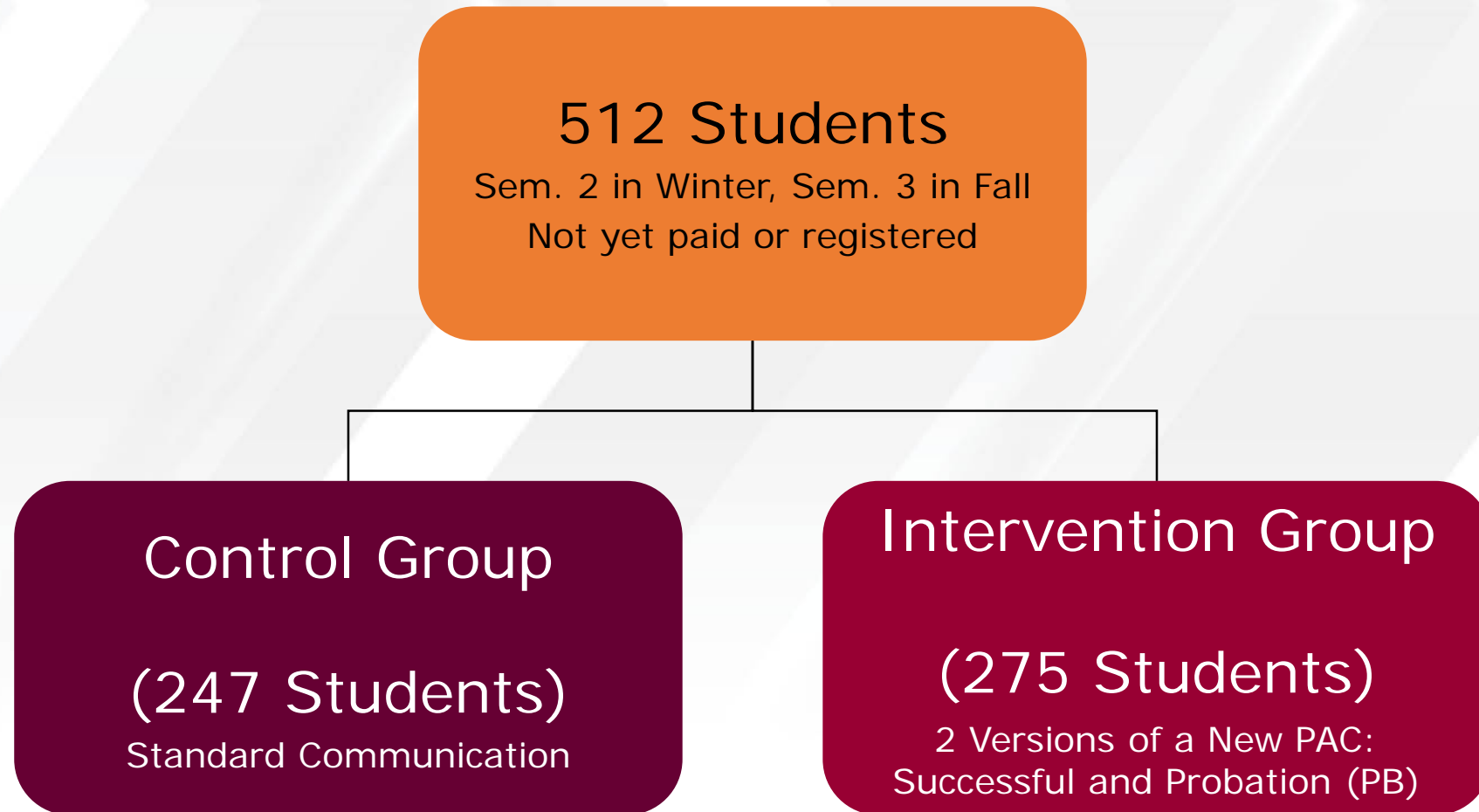
At-Risk
Communications

What is “Summer Melt”?

- College-intending students who fail to enroll in college
- Considered a “failure to transition”
- In the United States, this accounts for about 10 to 40% of college-intending students
- Low-cost interventions can have a significant impact on alleviating this phenomenon

(Castleman, Page, & Snowden, 2013)

"Summer Melt" Pilot Results



“Summer Melt” Pilot Findings

Control Group
(247 Students)

148 (59.9%) Registered

Intervention Group
(275 Students)

188 (68.4%)* Registered
* Significant at 0.1 level ($p=0.0545$)

- **8.5 percentage point** increase (14% relative improvement)
- **23 students** re-registered
- **44 students** would be retained in the future

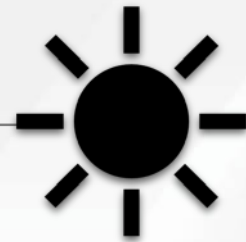
“Summer Melt” Lessons

- This was a cohort who previously did not receive any communication – are there others?
- Strategic (and psychologically attuned) communication is cheap!
- Process is ideal for any and all types of “bad news” – are there others?
- Similar interventions exist related to a) behavioural nudges, b) belonging, c) social norms, d) Growth Mindset, etc.
- Full implementation – and fitting this type of communication into routine activities – is an important next step

Could this process be applied to other types of communication?



Academic
Standing Letters



Summer
Melt

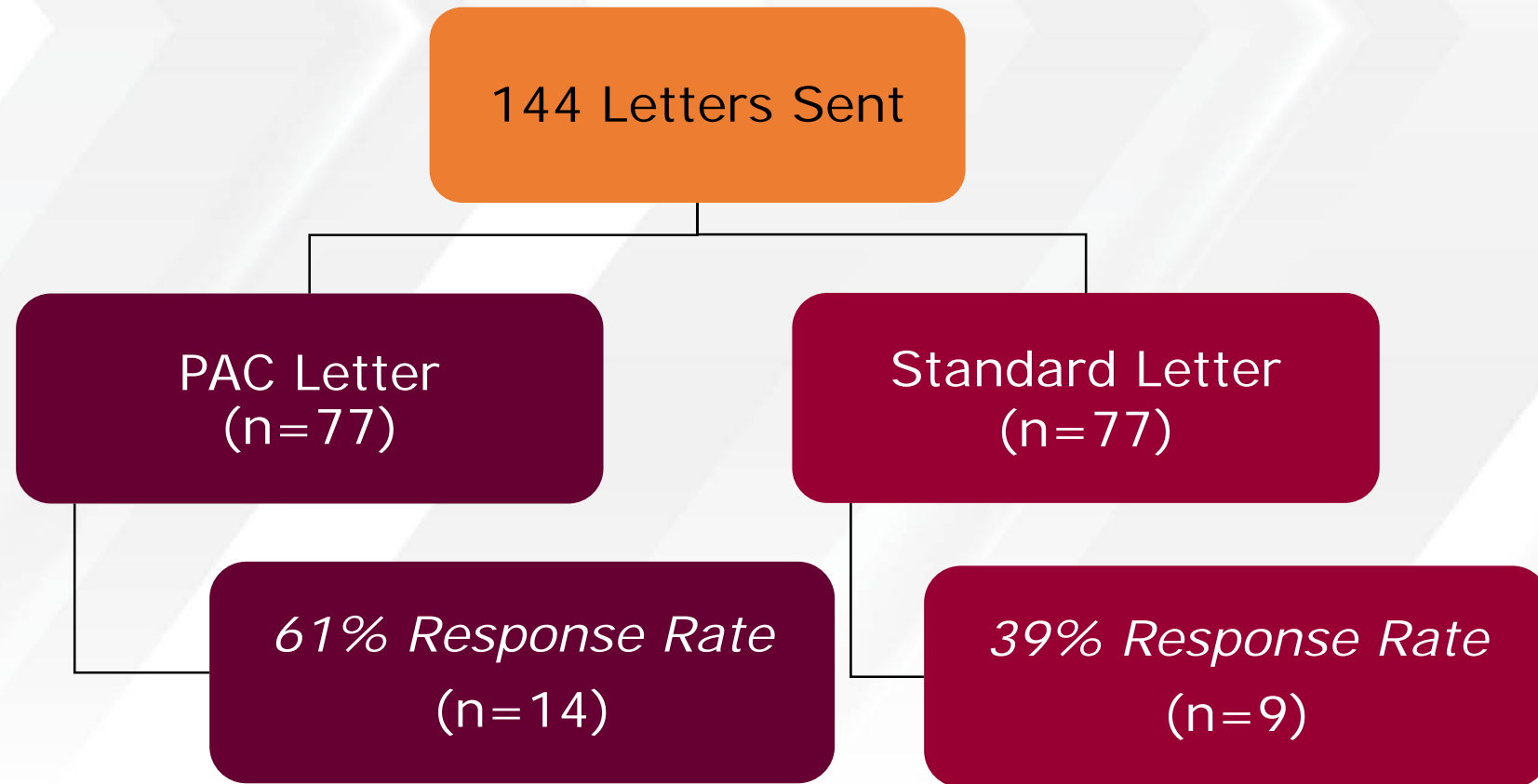


**At-Risk
Communications**

At-Risk Communication

- Student Success Advisors & Coaches (SSA/Cs) reach out to faculty to identify potentially “at-risk” students
 - A randomized controlled trial (RCT): attuned letter vs. standard letter
 - Tracked the response and appointment rate for both groups of students

At-Risk Communication Pilot Results



(23 responses received in total)

Breakdown of PAC

Considerations for Implementation

Common Communication Types



- What communications are sent at your institution?
- How might these communications be received by the student?
- Is there the potential that these communications might be received as “bad news” by the student?

Considerations Unique to PAC

Student concerns can include:



- How am I viewed by the institution?
- What does this mean for me and my relationship with the institution going forward?

Key Letter Attunement Principles



- Describe the status/situation as a **process, not a label**



- Communicate that **you're not the only one**



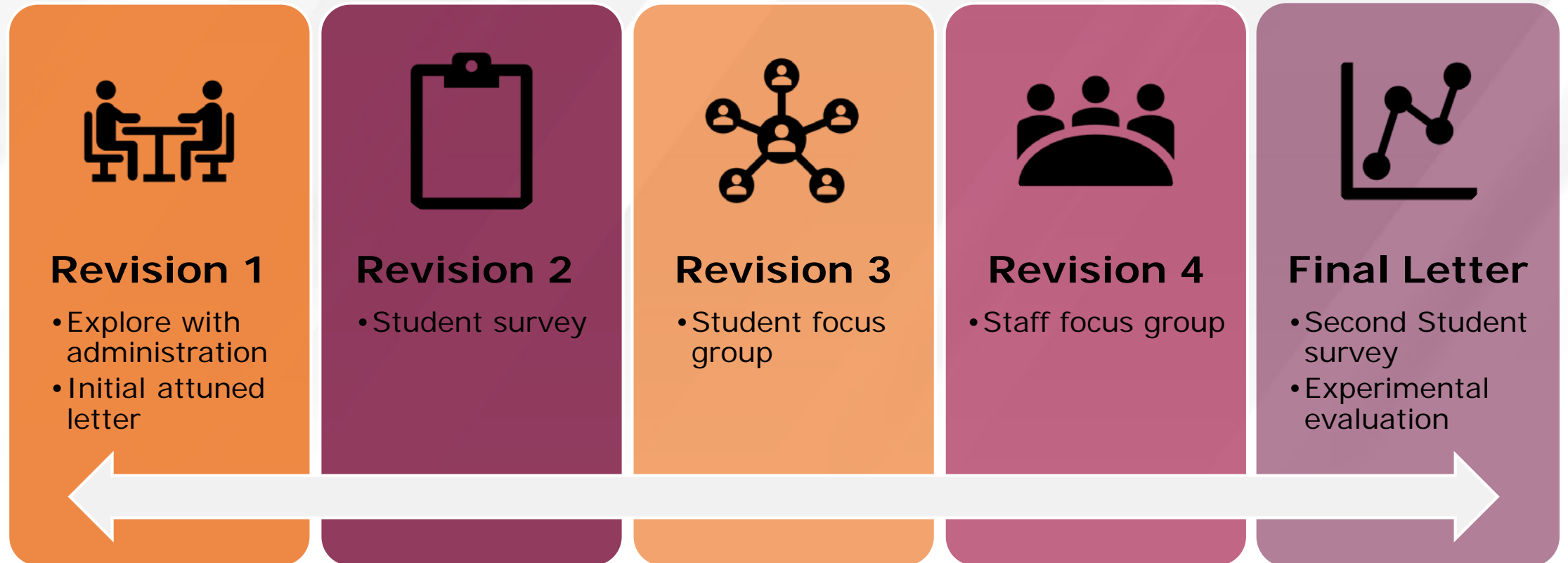
- **Acknowledge** many reasons



- Offer **hope and support** (e.g., student stories)

(Brady, 2020)

Iterative Development Process



PAC Development Strategies

"...You will have an academic probation status beginning [Term]. This process is simply designed to alert you to academic difficulties in time to help you identify those areas where you may be experiencing problems and determine how best to address them. It will not appear

to address them. It will not appear on your official transcript. Additionally, if you meet the requirements for satisfactory academic progress, this probationary status will end."

Frame the status as a process, by both explicitly calling it a process and de-capitalizing the word

PAC Development Strategies

“When I failed an important math class, I was devastated. If anything, getting the probation notice made me feel worse. I thought I was the only one having a hard time. Eventually, I got up the courage to talk

told me, ‘You’d be surprised how many times I’ve had this conversation. Every time a person walks in thinking they are the only one, but really, lots of students struggle.’

academically – I learned something important in the process, about how to face up to challenges, to reach out to others for help, and find a way forward. That was some time ago, and I can see now that the process was productive for me and helped me grow as a person.

Normalize student difficulties

PAC Development Strategies (ASL)

“There are many reasons students enter the academic probation process. These reasons can include personal, financial, health, family, or other issues. Our goal

them. You should also know that you are not alone in experiencing these difficulties. Many students enter and participate in the probation process each year, and by working with their advisors, many leave the process and continue a successful career at [School]. For descriptions of the experiences of some past students who have gone through this process, please see the attached document, *Students’ Perspectives on the Probation Process.*”

Acknowledge specific non-pejorative factors that contribute to student difficulties

PAC Development Strategies

“When I failed an important math class, I was devastated. If anything, getting the probation notice made me feel worse.

to my RA...I was so worried what he would think. But I'll never forget his response. He told me, 'You'd be surprised how many times I've had this conversation. Every time a person walks in thinking they are the only one, but really, lots of students struggle.' I saw that there's no shame in struggling academically – I learned something important in the process, about how to face up to challenges, to reach out to others for help, and find a way forward. That was some time ago, and I can see now that the process was productive for me and helped me grow as a person.

Acknowledge that this status can elicit negative feelings and worries

PAC Development Strategies

“When I failed an important math class, I was devastated. If anything, getting the

time. Eventually, I got up the courage to talk to my RA...I was so worried what he would think. But I’ll never forget his response. He told me, ‘You’d be surprised how many times I’ve had this conversation. Every time a

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Illustrate ways students can access support

PAC Development Strategies

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was productive for me and helped me grow as a person.

Describe the process as an opportunity for growth and learning

PAC Development Strategies

"...You will have an academic probation status beginning [Term]. This process is simply designed to alert you to academic difficulties in time to help you identify those areas where you may be experiencing problems and determine how best

to address them. It will not appear on your official transcript. Additionally,

if you demonstrate satisfactory academic progress, this probationary status will end."

Remove unnecessary legalese

PAC Development Strategies

"...You will have an academic probation status beginning [Term]. This process is simply designed to alert you to academic difficulties in time to help you identify those areas where you may be experiencing problems and determine how best to address them. It will not appear

if you meet the requirements for satisfactory academic progress, this probationary status will end."

State explicitly that the status will end when requirements are met

PAC Development Strategies (ASL)

"There are many reasons students enter the academic probation process. These reasons can include personal, financial,

health, family, or other issues. Our goal is to help you identify the factors that are relevant to you and to help you address them. You should also know that you are not alone in experiencing these difficulties.

working with their advisors, many leave the process and continue a successful career at [School]. For descriptions of the experiences of some past students who have gone through this process, please see the attached document, *Students' Perspectives on the Probation Process.*"

Represent the student as agentic and capable

PAC Development Strategies (ASL)

"We are confident that you can meet these standards. However, it is

important that you take steps to address the causes of your academic difficulties. If these conditions are not met, you may be at risk for restricted registration status or suspension."

Emphasize belief in student's ability

PAC Development Strategies (ASL)

"We are confident that you can meet these standards. However, it is important that you take steps to address the causes of your academic difficulties. If these conditions are not met, you may be at risk for restricted registration status or suspension."

Communicate clearly
about requirements

At-Risk Standard Letter

As your Student Success Coach, I am reaching out to you to offer academic support. You have been identified by one or more of your instructors as a student that they are concerned about in their course based on one or more of the following factors:

1. **Attendance (missing several classes)**
2. **Not accessing the course on eLearn – instructors can check the ‘User Progress’ for their individual courses**
3. **Missed or failed quizzes/tests/assignments; and/or has not completed any course work**

Much of the learning takes place in the classroom and it is always to your advantage to attend and participate; the more time away from the in-class portions of your course(s) make it extremely difficult to catch up therefore decreasing your chances of success moving forward.

It is not all doom & gloom! Your Student Success Team is here to support your success so you can reach your personal goal of graduating from your chosen program. But is there something that is preventing you from attending or engaging in the program? If we can address it now, there is still time for you to get back on track!

If you would like to meet and co-create a success plan together, we would be happy to do so! If you are interested in making a difference, please call our front desk in A111 at **905-575-2149** to book an appointment.

Please visit one of the many support services that are offered to ALL registered students:

- [Counselling Services](#) – The Square, 905.90
- [Accessible Learning Services](#) – The Square, 905.90
- [Learning Support Centre](#) - Peer Tutoring, Math help & Writing Centre, ESL Conversation Club, Room C122 (across from the Scotia Bank on campus)
- [Coffee Club](#) – A great place for international students to meet and talk about their experiences (snacks are available), Room J137 **International Square**
- [Academic Resources \(online videos\)](#)

Hi there,

and I are your Student Success Advisors (SSA). We might have met during our class visits earlier this semester.

We are writing because one or more of your instructors are concerned about your academic progress in their course based on one or more of the following:

1. **Attendance**
2. **Accessing the course on eLearn**
3. **Missed or failed quizzes/tests/assignments**

It's important for you to know that you could be at risk of not passing one or more of your courses this semester.

Receiving referrals from faculty, and then reaching out to offer our support is a normal part of what we do with many students. We also know that college can be overwhelming, and that there are many reasons why students experience academic difficulties. These reasons can include personal, financial, health, family, or other issues. Whatever your situation is, we can provide you with the appropriate support, and co-create a success plan that works for you.

We encourage you to book an appointment, come into A111 or call our front desk at 905-575-2414.

Most students we meet with get back on track and continue to have a successful semester. We know you can too. Utilizing the college's support services through [The Square](#) or the [Learning Support Centre](#) is often part of the success plan. Open the attachment in this email to see more information on the full list of Mohawk College support services (which are free and available to all registered students).

We look forward to meeting with you in the near future!

Best Regards,



PAC Development Example #1

INSTEAD OF:

"You are currently a non-registered student,"
"You are in default," or
"Your status is balance-owing."

CONSIDER:

"We noticed you have not yet registered. We know this process can be overwhelming. We're here to help."

PAC Development Example #2

INSTEAD OF:

"Registration is open and if you want to get into your courses, you need to register by Friday."

CONSIDER:

"We understand that the list of things to get ready for September can be overwhelming. Many students have returned to their communities and are working, and next semester can seem really far away."

Summary

- Psychologically attuned communication is an effective strategy to deliver college—based communications
- PAC is a simple and cost effective intervention
- PAC is widely accepted by staff as a simple strategy to support student success
- CSSIC can provide ongoing support and consultation to implement the PAC at your institution

*What questions do you
have?*

References

Brady, S. (2020, March). Psychological attunement to support students on academic probation. *CSSIC 2nd Annual Symposium*. Hamilton, ON.

Brady, S., Fricker, T., Redmond, N., & Gallo, M. (n.d.). Evaluating the impact of academic standing letters on the experience and retention of Students. *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario*. Retrieved from <http://www.heqco.ca/en-ca/OurPriorities/Access/Pages/ARC-Evaluating-the-Impact-of-Academic-standing-Letters-on-the-Experience-and-Retention-of-Students.aspx>

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College Transition Collaborative [CTC]. (2020). *Communicating in times of uncertainty*. Retrieved May 19, 2020, from <http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org/covid-19-response-supporting-students-in-times-of-uncertainty/communication-guide/>