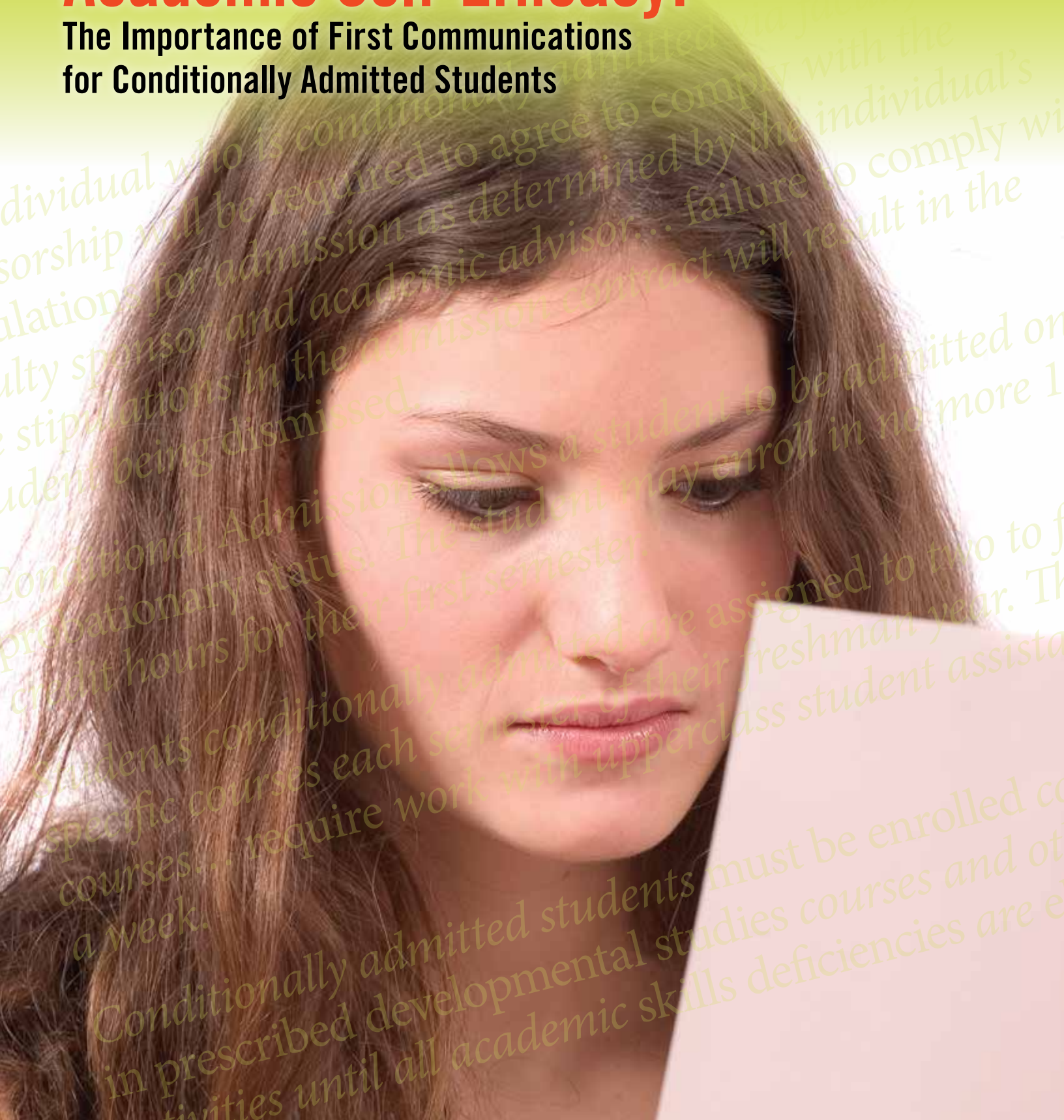


by Joyce Stewart and April Heaney

# Admission Rhetoric and Academic Self-Efficacy:

## The Importance of First Communications for Conditionally Admitted Students



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## Abstract

**This article advocates for increased attention on the college admission letter to strengthen conditionally admitted students' academic self-efficacy as they begin the college experience. Although first communications are often considered perfunctory, the language of admission materials has strong potential to help at-risk students begin college with a mindset for success.**

## Introduction

As the number of students enrolling in colleges and universities grows (25 percent over the past 20 years), the number of students who are underprepared or “at-risk” for academic failure also increases (Kinzie, 2008). The American Association of College and Universities (AAC&U) reports that 53 percent of students entering colleges and universities are academically underprepared, defined more specifically as students who lack skills in at least one of the three basic areas of reading, writing or mathematics (Tritelli, 2003). Not surprisingly, of these at-risk students, those most underprepared for college work often complete high school with low GPAs and/or low standardized test scores. These students recognize that their options are restricted by admission requirements. In response to a national effort to increase access to college for underrepresented groups, and in some cases to better satisfy institutional missions, many universities develop admission policies that allow underprepared students who do not meet GPA or entrance exam requirements to matriculate under “provisional” or “conditional” status. Models for conditional-admission vary by institution, but conditionally-admitted students are often required to complete basic skills coursework in reading, writing or math, participate in a tutoring program, and/or meet with an advisor or mentor on a regular basis during the first year.

Offering developmental support in coursework is a significant part of increasing odds of success among at-risk students, but a more complex challenge arises when conditionally-admitted students also possess social or demographic risk factors that hinder their prospects for success in college—even before they arrive on campus. At the University of Wyoming (UW), for example, conditionally-admitted students are characterized not only by low high school GPA or ACT scores, but are also more likely than the general student population to be low income, first-generation college students, and/or ethnic minorities. This compounding of factors can make it difficult for conditionally-admitted students to gain solid footing in their first semester of college in both academic and social realms.

Many institutions have developed comprehensive programs to support at-risk students during their first year of college, but we wish in this article to highlight a less visible timeframe in supporting conditionally-admitted students: the critical period during which students receive admission materials from the university. Because the admission

letter serves as the first communication students receive, it has a unique capability to bolster or inhibit conditionally-admitted students' confidence and academic self-image as they enter the university. In the case of required first-year programs for conditionally-admitted students, the university's first communication also dramatically colors students' attitudes toward structures they must experience as part of their transition to college. Unfortunately, the language aimed at conditionally-admitted students in many universities' admission materials can actually undermine the university's goals for these students in their first year.

In addition to presenting a rationale for greater attention to designing pre-fall admission and programmatic “welcome” letters, this article highlights a process of developing admission rhetoric for the Synergy learning community for conditionally-admitted students at UW. The Synergy program enrolls students in peer cohorts and includes four general education courses in the first year, as well as faculty and peer mentors who devote substantial one-on-one time with participating students.

In 2005, the program changed from a voluntary learning community for 30-40 at-risk students per year to a required program serving 150 conditionally-admitted students each fall. The expansion was based on promising GPA and first-year persistence data for participating students in the program. However, we anticipated immediately the possible negative impact Synergy might suffer as a result of the change from an elected program to a requirement in terms of students' motivation and attitudes. In the first four years of the required program, we attempted to develop and assess admission materials that employ similar rhetoric to recruiting documents for university honors programs. Our goal was to bolster rather than deflate at-risk students' self-image as they enter the university, and we initiated a process of revising the materials based on student assessment.

While we are not suggesting that the admission materials alone can compensate for programs or methods that are poorly tailored to the needs of conditionally-admitted students, we hope to raise awareness of the power of admission rhetoric in shaping students' initial responses to support efforts (often viewed by students as indicators of their “deficiencies”), as well as their sense of academic self-efficacy as they enter college.

### Academic Self-Efficacy and College Transition

College retention studies point to the first five weeks of students' time in college as the most ripe window for influencing students' degree commitment and self-efficacy. Woosely (2003) suggests that students during these weeks begin to develop a belief in their own ability to succeed in college. However, for academically underprepared students, the sensitive timeframe for developing self-efficacy for college work often begins even earlier when they receive the admission letter. Most admission letters contain a description of the university's stipulations for students entering under conditions—typically a brief paragraph that communicates powerful signals about the university's confidence in student's abilities and future prospects at the institution.

It won't surprise most admission, school and college counselors, professors, and other invested educators, that at-risk college students tend to possess lower levels of academic self-efficacy than their regularly-admitted peers (Lynch, Hurford and Cole 2002; Higbee, 2005). Apart from academic preparation, self-efficacy is different from students' behaviors and even expectations as it encompasses their beliefs about their own capabilities to accomplish their goals. Not surprisingly, students' self-efficacy when they enter college is positively correlated with college GPA, writing performance and persistence (Bong, 2001; Pajares and Schunk, 2001; Meier, McCarthy and Schmeck, 1984). A study by Vuong, Brown-Welty and Tracz (2010), for example, found that academic efficacy as measured by the College Self-efficacy Inventory (CSEI) was a strong predictor of academic success for sophomore students across five California State University campuses.

In order to highlight the challenges at-risk students face in developing academic self-efficacy, it is helpful to compare conditionally-admitted students' pre-college attitudes and habits with those of their high achieving peers. According to a study by Horn and Carroll (1997), high school honors students are significantly more likely than at-risk students to aspire to a college degree in 10th grade (56 percent of at-risk students compared to 81 percent of honors students). Of the at-risk students who aspired to a college degree, only 44 percent of these proceeded to the next step of completing a college entrance exam compared with 75 percent of honors students. Lubrano (2005) explains this difference in postsecondary goals by pointing out that many at-risk students hold a long-standing conception of themselves as unsuited for academic success, and they miss out on cues from parents and teachers that help lead to those goals. First-generation college students, moreover, often begin school with "significantly less implicit linguistic knowledge of books" and unfamiliarity with the habits of mind and behavior conducive to academic success (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre and Frep-pon, 1995, p. 659. Also see Dimaggio, 1982).

Once at-risk students begin the process of applying to college, their already-shaky confidence as members of the university can be further

undermined by the admission letter. As we reconsider and revise letters to conditionally-admitted students at UW, we collect admission language aimed at both honors and conditionally-admitted students (and have done so for the past few years from around the US). Even with the clear differences between the honors and conditional admission categories, the differences between associated correspondences are striking. The following excerpts represent common Honors Program messages to incoming students (emphasis added):

*All Honors classes **help students develop and articulate** their own perspectives by cultivating verbal and written style. The classes help students **mature intellectually and prepare them to engage** in their **own** explorations and research.*

*This Honors Program **empowers** students to see themselves as **generators of knowledge** rather than passive.*

*This program is for **enthusiastic and energetic students** who **enjoy** small classes, extensive discussions with professors, and the **challenge** of articulating and refining their ideas.*

Consider the language in these descriptions as compared with the following excerpts from a handful of universities' admission policies for conditionally admitted students (emphasis added):

*An individual who is conditionally admitted via faculty sponsorship will be **required to agree to comply** with the **stipulations** for admission as determined by the individual's faculty sponsor and academic advisor... **failure to comply** with the stipulations in the admission contract will result in the student being **dismissed**.*

*Conditional Admission **allows** a student to be admitted on a **probationary status**. The student may enroll in no more 12 credit hours for their first semester.*

*Students conditionally admitted are **assigned** to two to four specific courses each semester of their freshman year. These core courses... **require** work with upperclass student assistants twice a week.*

*Conditionally admitted students **must be enrolled** continuously **in prescribed developmental studies** courses and other assigned activities until all academic **skills deficiencies** are **eliminated**.*

These passages hint at the attitudes with which these two groups of students enter the university. Honors students are more likely to feel valued, supported and autonomous; conditionally admitted students shamed, diminished and marginalized.

While admission letters represent a one-time communication that fades shortly for most students, the "institutional voice" embedded within the letter can exert a continuing influence on conditional admits, surpassing at times supportive messages from peers or parents. In his studies investigating the effects of institutional

rhetoric on individuals' decision-making, Sociologist Hugh Mehan (1983) found that people are much more likely to believe messages from an institution they perceive to be professional than they are to accept messages from trusted peers. Unlike messages from peers, institutional messages are often "accepted without challenge or question" (p. 187). Hence, although some conditionally-admitted students enjoy the support of peers and family in their first year of college, this positive support may take a secondary role in students' minds to the university's initial messages, like those presented in the admission letter.

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Much of the rhetoric directed to conditionally-admitted students reflects deep institutional uncertainty about the value of at-risk students to the university. Admission letters that threaten dismissal if requirements are not met, for example, belie a conception that at-risk students are inherently at odds with the university, a relationship grounded in othering instead of including. This implicit (or sometimes not-so-implicit) belief is driven by understandable reasons—student attrition, academic probation and poor use of academic resources can lead administrators to view conditionally-admitted students as a poor reflection of the university's caliber.

However, it is worth noting that some evidence suggests that at-risk students may bring perspectives and experiences critical to the democratic values of most universities. One nationally-funded research study focusing on three flagship universities, for instance, discovered that students who achieved the highest scores on tests were "significantly less likely to see the world from someone else's perspective... high test scores do not translate into more complex thinking needed for participation in a diverse democracy" (Hurtado, et al., 2002, p. 175). In contrast, academically at-risk students often excel in the complex and empathetic thinking that develops when individuals are less concerned with modeling dominant views and mindsets. Synergy instructors at UW report year after year that at-risk students establish higher degrees of peer support and genuine consideration of each other's ideas in group projects than students in both regular and honors courses. If universities truly value what conditionally admitted students have to offer as college students (and beyond), surely the admission letter offers a rich invitation for administrators and staff to examine underlying attitudes toward conditionally-admitted students, as well as the messages implicit in early communications. The admission letter is part of a complex mission at many universities that seek to promote exposure to diverse people and perspectives as a way to enhance student preparation for a diverse campus and broader society.

#### **Local Context: Developing a letter for the Synergy Learning Community**

At UW, the Synergy Program's goal is to address conditionally admitted

students as valuable members of the university and offer them support in overcoming various obstacles to university success. Obstacles commonly include habits of thought or behavior, counterproductive perceptions of writing and reading, family pressures, fear, or conflicted emotions about a college degree. The learning community includes four general education courses in the first year: College Composition and Rhetoric, US and Wyoming Government, Introduction to Public Speaking, and Critical Reflection in Intellectual Communities (a reading and research-focused course). Synergy's writing and reading class sizes are smaller than regular courses—18 students vs. 23 for

regular classes. Instructors and past students volunteer to teach and mentor in the learning community.

By creating small cohort groups based around academic courses, Synergy seeks to promote social and academic integration (Astin, 1999; Berger and Milem, 1999; Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004). Many at-risk students enter the university with a history of feeling overlooked for a wide range of reasons including race, social class, family or educational background, personal interests, or other factors. Most importantly, though, these students tend to feel a keen sense of marginalization from academic settings, a factor that can contribute powerfully to a student's motivation to succeed in college.

In developing an admission letter for the Synergy Program, the program director and faculty worked collaboratively with admission staff to craft language that would build self-efficacy and give students a leg-up in motivation before they arrive for the first year. As we worked through possible representations of the Synergy program, we attempted to adopt affirming rhetoric and give students a positive impression of the required program.

The following passages illustrate our attempt to integrate affirming language in the program's letter to conditionally-admitted students:

- Synergy is a nationally acclaimed learning community for first-year students that provides a challenging set of courses in a supportive environment.
- Synergy recruits the finest instructors at UW to teach in the learning community, and the curriculum has won a national award for its success in strengthening academic skills and engaging students' creativity.
- Students who participate in Synergy earn significantly higher first-year GPA scores and earn lower academic probation than students before the learning community began.

- Synergy students will:
  - ✓ Take three core courses in the fall with the same group of students (along with an elective of their choice) and take one core course together in the spring
  - ✓ Establish friendships while participating in optional study groups and supplemental instruction

In the first years of the required program, Synergy students participated in spring focus groups probing their perceptions of the admission letter (and other program descriptions, such as the program's website), as well as other factors that most supported and impeded their academic success in the first semester. On average, 40–50 students have participated in groups of six–eight in each spring's focus groups. Before beginning the focus groups, students write responses to several questions including, (1) “How did you find out about the Synergy Program?” and (2) “What do you remember about the tone or language of information you received about Synergy? (through letters, website, orientation presentation, admission, etc.),” and (3) “How would you describe the Synergy Program to an incoming student?”

Students' written responses indicate that approximately 65–70 percent of students first hear about the Synergy Program through the admission letter. Other prominent ways students learn about the program include advisors or athletics personnel, parents and instructors. In assessing students' written comments about their own memories of the tone or language of the information they receive, we have organized responses into “positive,” “don't remember” and “negative.” Of the total, 58 percent of students have written positive statements, including comments, such as “very positive and informative,” “an awesome jumpstart” and “good, enthusiastic energy.” One student wrote, “I could see they thought very highly about the program.”

More than a third of students, 36 percent, did not remember the language of their first communication. And six percent responded negatively to the tone and/or language of the materials, including comments, such as “the tone or language did not inspire confidence in me” and “At first when I heard of the Synergy Program I thought it was for kids that have problems in school.” Most of the negative comments, not surprisingly, indicate students' frustration with any perception that they need additional support in college-level coursework.

It is important to note that when asked to describe the learning community for new students, the focus group respondents frequently praise elements of the program that are foregrounded in the admission letter and in other descriptions of the program (website, fliers and orientation materials). For example, multiple references to “community,” “peers,” “smaller classes,” and “caring teachers” appear in the program descriptions. A few of the written comments include:

- “The thing I enjoy about Synergy is the fact that there are the same people in a majority of all your classes. This makes it easy to find help when you need it in certain classes. It is like having a miniature community in our classes. Of all of my classes the ones I look forward to going to as well as doing the best in are my Synergy classes.”
- “Now that I have actually got into the program and have been in the classes I am really grateful that I am there. I am in the same classes with the same people and it makes it a lot easier to study. I am very glad that this program is available.”
- “Synergy is an excellent program for the students that need extra help. It has helped me to bring up my grades and study more than I used to. It is nice to have teachers that care about the student instead of others who could care less whether you pass or not. Teachers require you to go in their office and have conferences if you're having trouble and/or problems with a subject or a class.”

We acknowledge the possibility that these comments may simply reflect the core strengths of the program, which are also highlighted in program materials. However, we want to emphasize that by spending time articulating an institutional voice for the program in the admission materials, the faculty, admission staff and administrators developed shared goals for the program. The admission materials ultimately helped solidify the “picture” of the Synergy Program participating students encounter, not only in their courses, but also in departmental advising and other representations of the program on campus. These positive student responses also show that participants picked up on the “voices” that describe the program, and even more importantly, internalized the letter's positive institutional expectations for their membership in the university.

Since the program began in 2005, we have kept careful track of students' first semester GPA, probation rates and persistence. We have compared this data to the same indicators for conditional admits who matriculated in the four years before Synergy was institutionalized on campus. In the required program, learning community participants have earned an average first-semester GPA of 2.14, compared to an average of 1.79 for the comparison group (and 2.6 for regularly admitted students). Learning community students have also maintained an average first semester academic probation rate of 40 percent, a full 20 percent lower than the comparison group. While Synergy's fall-to-fall retention has fluctuated somewhat in the past three years (a university-wide trend), Synergy participants have maintained a 53–60 percent second-year return rate (compared to 47–51 percent for the comparison group). Given that our university conditionally accepts students with high school GPAs beginning at 2.25 (or lower, with admission exceptions), these outcomes show meaningful progress for success among at-risk students.

While it is difficult to claim direct causality between these outcomes and the language of the admission letter, the link between student success and institutional rhetoric is supported by past research. Pascarella and Terencini (1992) suggest that students' initial encounters with the university and its people "can have profound effects on subsequent levels of involvement and aspirations for intellectual achievement" (p. 4). Kealy and Rockel (1987) further contend that students with a positive first impression of a college are more extrinsically motivated to persist. In short, what we know intuitively about the importance of first impressions is relevant to entering freshmen in their academic self-confidence.

### Conclusion

Like any retention effort, supporting at-risk students is a multi-faceted process that does not begin when students arrive on campus, but instead when students read admission letters detailing the university's approach to conditionally-admitted students. This communication sets the stage for student attitudes, and more importantly, academic self-efficacy. If the first communication students receive from the university influences their success and persistence (as well as their attitudes toward support programs), it makes sense for universities to capitalize on the power of this letter to position students for success.

Ideally, admission letters for at-risk students will communicate an attitude of inclusion and membership and attempt to allay

misgivings students may hold about their "place" in higher education. Finally, and equally importantly, admission materials can become a generative focal point for articulating institutional approaches to at-risk students, including support goals and philosophy and efforts to promote a common image of the support (whether optional or required).



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