

First-year students' communication preferences

This report, written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subcommittee and based on the Beginning Student Survey from Fall 2023, discusses how first-year students would like to be communicated with from the university and provides information to assist university communication services in meeting those preferences. This report was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What platforms and modes of communication do respondents prefer for different types of content?
- 2) What types of video content are respondents most interested in receiving?

This report also provides insight into how these preferences vary by demographics, particularly for first-generation and U.S. nonresident respondents.

About the Beginning Student Survey

The BSS23 was administered online to new, first-time undergraduates (including Freshmen Connection) in select courses from October 16 - November 3, 2023.¹ During the Fall 2023 semester, 3,144 (50%) out of 6,250 new first-time students² completed the survey. The distribution of respondents by race/ethnicity and first-generation status mirrored that of the population. Female students were slightly over-represented (55% of respondents compared to 50% of the population). In-state students were also slightly over-represented (73% of respondents compared to 68% of the population).

General Communication Preferences

Eight to 11 weeks into their first semester, almost all respondents said they had accessed TerpMail. When asked about their preferred social media platform, over 70% said they prefer to receive information from UMD on Instagram.

Respondents were asked whether they had accessed their TerpMail email account this semester, and what their preferred social media platform was for receiving information from UMD.

- **Access to TerpMail:** Over 99% of respondents said they had accessed their TerpMail account by the time they took the survey. The remaining respondents either said they had not accessed their account yet (11 respondents) or were not sure (6 respondents).

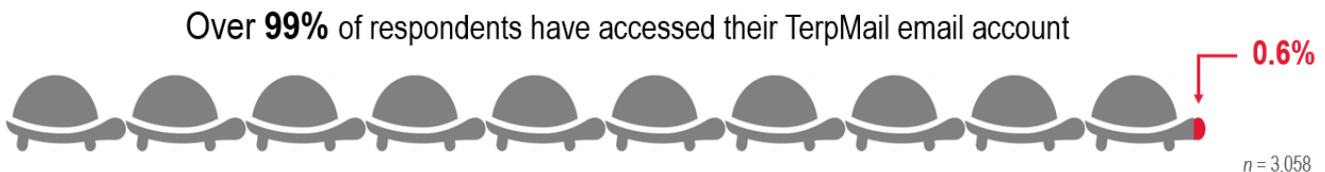


Figure 1. Percent of respondents who said “yes,” they have accessed their TerpMail email account this semester, BSS23.

¹ The BSS survey was administered in ENGL101, UNIV100, BSCV181, BSCV191, CPET100, CPGH100, CPJT100, CPSA100, CPSF100, CPSG100, CPSN100, FIRE120, GEMS100, HACS100, HBUS100, HGLO100, HLSC100, HHUM105, HNUH100, IDEA101, PLCY201S, and TLPL288D. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

² New first-time students include new freshmen, Freshmen Connection, and new Applied Agriculture students.

- **Students prefer Instagram:** The majority of students (72%) chose Instagram as their preferred social media platform for receiving information from the University. Twenty percent of respondents said they preferred YouTube. X/Twitter (2%) and Facebook (<1%) were chosen least often. Six percent of respondents said they do not use any of these social media platforms.³

Of the options listed below, which is your preferred social media platform to receive information from the University? Choose one.

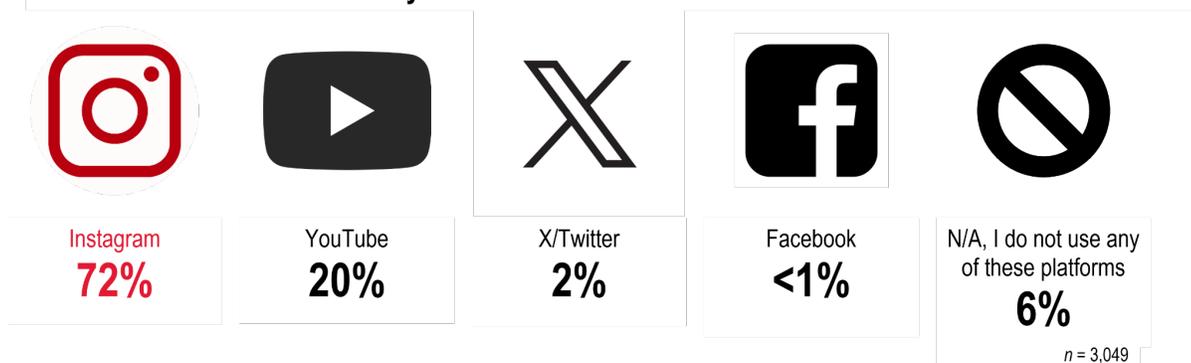


Figure 2. Distribution of responses to a survey question about respondents' preferred social media platform, BSS23.

Questions to Consider

- How do we adjust our email engagement strategy so that we can communicate more effectively with students?
- For campus communicators - What social media platforms are the campus using to connect with students? How do we adjust our social media to leverage student preferences? How can we elevate the University brand on current social media accounts and platforms?
- Who were the <1% of respondents who had not used their TerpMail account yet? Given the importance of receiving campus communications, these students may be at greater risk of not persisting. How do we communicate with and engage these students?

University Video Content

Over 60% of respondents said they were “somewhat” or “very” likely to watch videos from the University across content areas. Career exploration was the most popular.

This section asked respondents about how they prefer to watch University videos, and whether they would be “very likely,” “somewhat likely,” or “not at all likely” to watch videos created by the University about eight different topics.

- **Videos in emails:** About half of respondents (49%) said they preferred to view University videos embedded in an email. Instagram and YouTube (18% each) were the next frequently chosen answers, while 8% of respondents said they would prefer to watch University videos embedded in a website. Less than 1% of respondents each chose X/Twitter or Facebook. Seven percent of respondents said they would not watch University videos.
- **Open to different types of content:** Respondents were asked how likely they would be to watch videos with a variety of content. For each content area, the majority of respondents said they would be somewhat or very likely to watch them.

³ TikTok was not included as a response option, given the 2022 State directive that bans the use of certain applications, including TikTok, provided by several China- and Russia-based companies on State devices and networks.

- **Most popular content areas:** Of the content areas provided, “career exploration and readiness resources” was selected more often (44%) as a topic area that participants would be very likely to watch videos about. Next, 38% of respondents said they would be very likely to watch “explanations about navigating academic policies” followed by 34% of respondents who said they would be very likely to watch “trailers announcing large-scale Terp events.”
- **Least popular content areas:** Only 14% of respondents said they would be very likely to watch messages from senior administrators.

Indicate how likely you are to watch videos containing the following content:

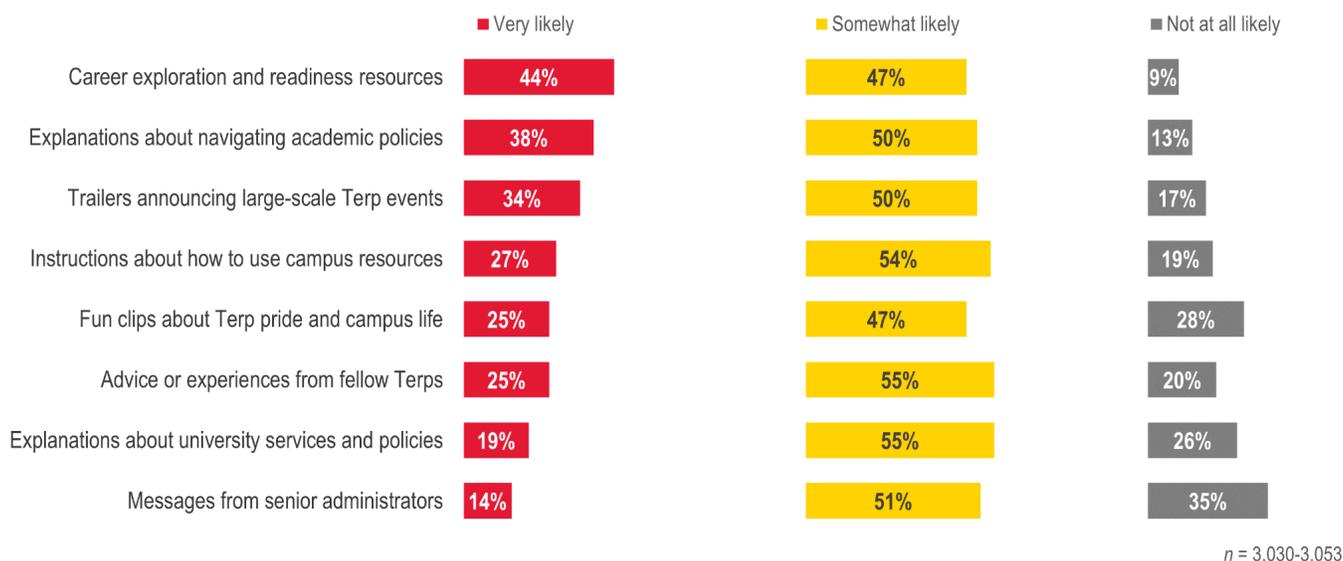


Figure 3. Distribution of responses to items about how likely respondents are to watch videos on different content areas, BSS23.

When allocating resources for video, it is important to consider that student preferences may vary based upon their backgrounds.

Communicators attend to equity issues when developing their communication strategies such as whether videos with closed captioning would be helpful to non-native speakers of English. Equity-centered assessment practices encourage disaggregation of results to provide a more nuanced understanding of student populations. Thus, first-generation and international respondents’ preferences appear below. This information may be useful when considering who to highlight within video content and expanding the diversity of who is showcased within social media content.

- **First-generation respondents:** On every item, more first-generation respondents said they would be very likely to watch videos than non-first-generation respondents. The difference was largest—10 percentage points or more—for four content areas: instructions about using campus resources, videos about Terp pride and campus life, explanations about university services and policies, and explanations about navigating academic policies. First-generation students comprised approximately 17% of the respondent sample ($n = 528$).
- **U.S. Nonresident respondents:** Similarly, there was at least a 10 percentage-point greater difference between U.S. nonresident respondents (as defined by the federally mandated racial/ethnic reporting categories) and the overall response for each item. The most notable differences were from advice or experiences from fellow Terps, career exploration and readiness resources, and trailers announcing large-scale Terp events. In this sample, about 3% identified as U.S. Nonresidents ($n = 91$).

Indicate how likely you are to watch videos containing the following content: (% Very likely)

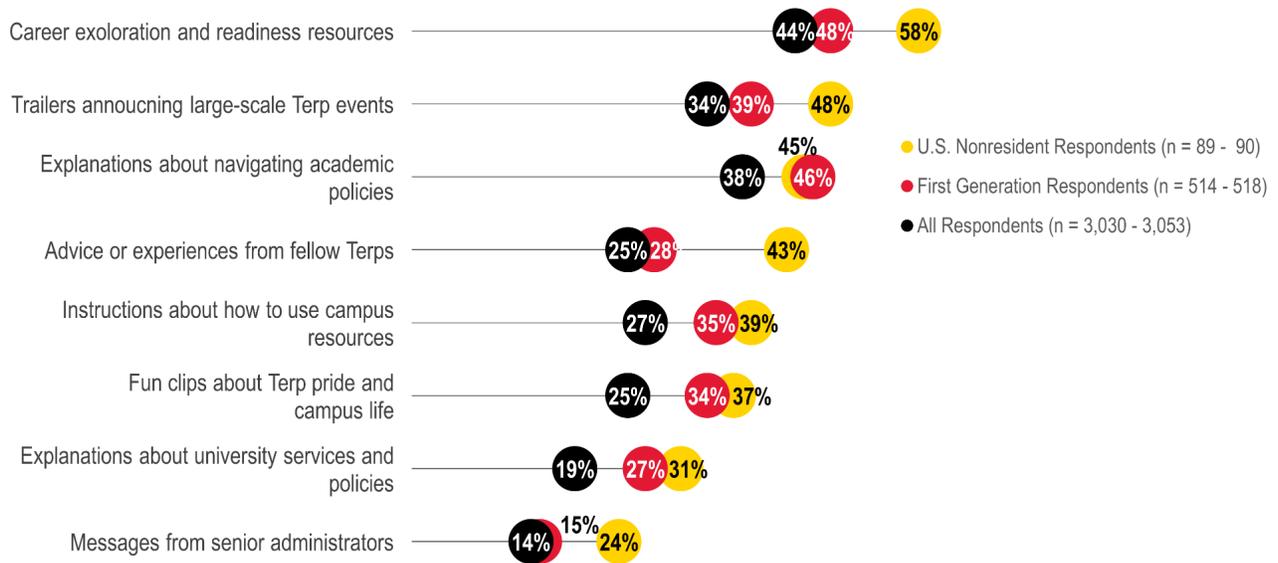


Figure 4. Percent of respondents who indicated they were “very likely” to watch videos by content area and demographic group, BSS23.

Questions to Consider

- Nearly half (49%) of respondents said they prefer to watch videos embedded in an email. Do your metrics for video and email engagement align with what is presented in this report?
- How do we develop equity-centered communication strategies that consider the differences seen among the first-generation and U.S. Nonresident respondents in this report, without unintentionally reinforcing the stereotyping of students based on a demographic characteristic?
- Why might first-time students express low interest in watching videos from administrators? Who among administrators would be more recognizable for the incoming cohort?

Modality Preferences

Respondents favored different modalities for receiving information about campus news, career-related opportunities, important deadlines, and social events and activities.

This section asked respondents whether they would like information on four content areas via text messages, e-newsletters, and social media. For each content area, respondents could answer “yes,” “no,” or “unsure.”

- **Campus news and announcements:** Seventy-two percent of respondents said they would like to receive information about campus news and announcements via social media. Only about half (56%) said they would like to receive this information via text message.
- **Career-related opportunities:** Most respondents were interested in receiving this information via all three modalities: Eighty percent said they would like to receive it via newsletters, 74% said they would like to receive it via social media, and 69% said they would like to receive it via text message.

- **Important deadlines and directives requiring action:** Eight in 10 respondents (81%) said they would like to receive this information via e-newsletters and text messages. A lower percentage (68%) said they wanted this information via social media.
- **Social events and activities:** Social media was the most popular modality for receiving information about social events and activities (77%). Sixty-nine percent said they would like to receive this information via e-newsletter. Text messages were the least popular method: 53% said they would like to receive this information via text.

I would like to receive [text messages, e-newsletters, social media posts] from the University with information about: (% Yes)

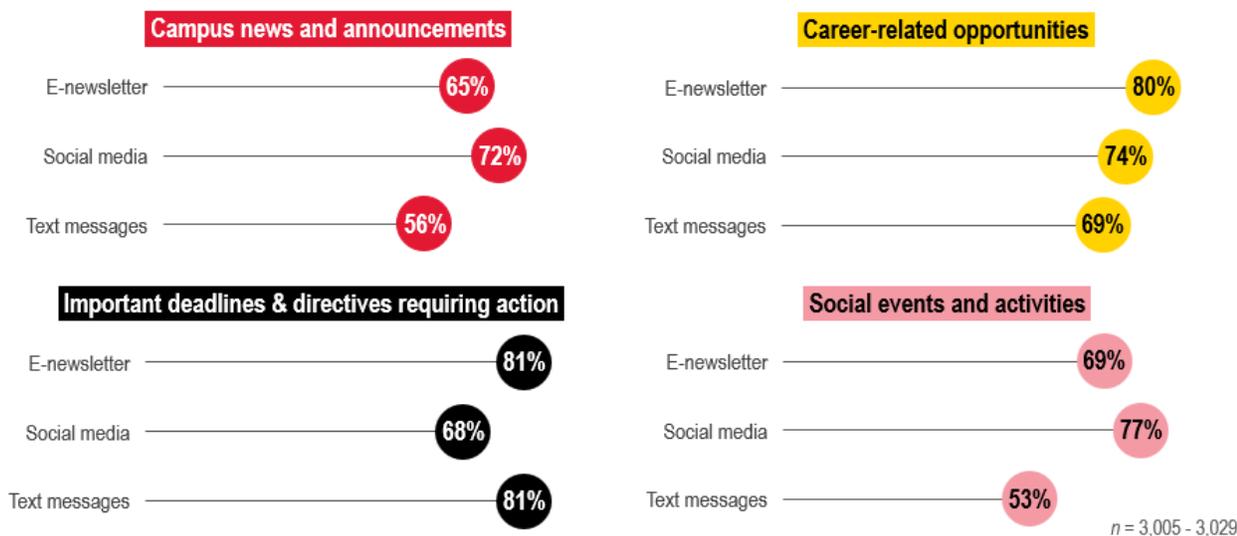


Figure 5. Percent of respondents who said “yes” when asked how they would like to receive information about different topics, BSS23.

Moving Forward

1. Dive deeper: What surprised you about these results? What other information would help inform how you communicate with students?
2. Take action: Based on these responses, how would you allocate resources (including time) in your communications strategy with students? How might these results impact your communications strategy? For example, how might this inform accessibility efforts or engagement with diverse student populations?

This report was written by the Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) Beginnings subgroup: Joann Prosser, Chair, Division of Student Affairs; Abby Do, Institutional Research, Planning & Assessment (IRPA); Traci Dula, Honors College; Jamie Edwards, IRPA; Danielle Glazer, IRPA; Melissa Hyre, Letters & Sciences; Lindsay Inge Carpenter, Libraries; Pearl Lo, Stamp Student Union; Alice Mitchell, Division of Student Affairs; Nick Orban, Enrollment Management; Tiffany Pao, Academic Technology Experience; Nicole Roop, School of Engineering; Tori Shay, Office of Orientation; Khris-Ann Small, Resident Life; Alan Socha, IRPA. For more information, to view past reports, or to join a CAWG subgroup, visit <http://ter.ps/CAWG>.