

## College Transition Collaborative: Communications Management Guidelines

### Q & A for Liaisons:

Now that the College Transition Collaborative (CTC) has launched at your institution, we anticipate that you, as the campus liaison for this collaborative project, may be asked by others about the purpose and goals of the program or might want to relay information about your school's involvement with CTC. Because awareness of the program might impact how students process the materials in the short-term and how their experience unfolds over time, we all must be thoughtful in the ways we talk about it and its expected effects.

With colleagues and administrators, you should definitely feel free to discuss the purpose and goals of CTC, how you and your school are involved, and which other schools are participating. You can also direct them to the [CTC webpage](#) for an overview of the project and goals.

However, to ensure the integrity of this program, and to give it the best shot of improving outcomes for students, it is important to carefully consider how you talk with students and those who are in close contact with students about it.

What follows is a list of tips for handling questions about the program from various groups of people as well as possible responses to likely questions.

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### **Speaking with participating students:**

1. When talking with students, **DON'T** emphasize that this program is meant to help them.

**WHY?** Doing so can actually interfere with the project's ability to help students. Sometimes people get defensive when they are told something is meant to help them. They may feel insulted if they think others think they need help. They can also become unduly skeptical, and this can prevent them from taking in the key ideas.

**Suggested language:** "This activity gives students the opportunity to learn more about students' experiences coming to college and to share their own perspective on the transition. We hope to use your insights to help improve the transition for future students."

2. When talking with students, **DON'T** emphasize race/ethnicity or other groups.

**WHY?** Telling students—particularly those from at-risk groups—that the program is intended to help them in particular or to remedy an achievement gap, can suggest to them that they are seen as in need of extra assistance. This may call to mind stereotypic expectations and undermine the potential benefits of the program.

3. If students ask why they should complete the writing activity, **DO** emphasize that they are being asked to complete it because your school wants to hear their feedback and know about them.

**Suggested language:** "As students currently in the transition to college, you know first-hand about the challenges you're facing. We want to learn more from you and your classmates about what the transition to our campus is like. We hope to share your experiences with future students to help them with their transition to college. In addition, most students who have completed this survey in the past have told us that they enjoyed reading stories from older students who have gone through the transition, and that they learned something from doing so."

4. If asked by a student whether there are different versions of the survey for different students, **acknowledge** there are but **DON'T** say that some versions may be more beneficial than others.

**Suggested language:** "Because there are many aspects of the college transition, we can't share everything the current students described with you in this survey, so some incoming students

will see other portions. We look forward to hearing your own thoughts about the materials you read and about your transition.”

### **Speaking with colleagues or administrators:**

1. When talking with colleagues and administrators, **DO emphasize that this program is intended to complement existing efforts to promote student success.**

**Suggested language:** “The CTC program works by ‘priming the pump’—by preventing students from thinking that early challenges in the transition to college simply mean they don’t belong or can’t succeed. That way students are more likely to reach out for help when they experience difficulties. That’s why, to be effective, CTC depends on the programs and support mechanisms we have in place on campus, like financial aid, mentoring programs, advising services, etc...”

2. When talking with colleagues and administrators, **DON’T promise that the program will work, but DO talk about (1) the promise of this approach based on existing [evidence](#) and (2) our goal to learn more about how to use this approach effectively in your school.**

**Suggested language:** “We do not know whether students or specific subgroups of students will benefit from the activity. However, this approach is promising. There is evidence that students at different schools [or our school] can benefit from it. We need to learn more about this approach to see if it will be effective at our school. To do so, the CTC team is adapting the program for our context and then testing it formally.”

3. When talking with colleagues and administrators, **DO emphasize that the program is customized to your school.**

**Suggested language:** “ CTC is adapting the program for our school. They have conducted extensive surveys and focus groups with current students here about the concerns they experience coming to our school. They have addressed some of these concerns in the exercise materials. In this way, the materials are tailored to our students’ experiences transitioning to our school.”

4. If colleagues or administrators ask why we have a control group, **DO emphasize the importance of learning about whether this approach is effective and how we can make it more effective to improve outcomes for students.**

**Suggested language:** “One of the main purposes of CTC is to evaluate the benefits of this approach on our campus and with diverse students at a wide range of campuses. To know

whether the program is effective and thus whether we should continue to invest in it, it's critical to include a group that doesn't receive the intervention. Most students on our campus are receiving the intervention. CTC is testing two different interventions, one that is tailored to our campus and one that is not. That means that two-thirds of our students are getting an intervention, and one-third are not.

Students are randomly assigned to one of these three groups--the two versions of the intervention and the control condition. Those in the control condition complete an inert version of the materials. They think about the challenges of entering a new physical environment (e.g., the weather, navigating campus). If students in either of the two intervention conditions fare better (e.g., better grades, less attrition, greater engagement,...), compared to those in the control, then we will have evidence in support of the beneficial effects of the intervention. Without this control condition, we would not know whether the interventions are helping students succeed. Once we know whether this approach is effective, we can provide the most effective materials to all incoming students."

5. Since there is evidence this program works, is it unethical for some students not to receive it?

**Suggested language:** "There is evidence the program works at some schools but we don't yet know whether it works at our school, or at what kinds of schools it is most effective. The data collected in this collaboration will help us learn more. Once we know whether this approach is effective on our campus, we can provide the most effective materials to all incoming students."

Why is it so important to know whether the program is effective on our campus? At every college, students' experiences are different. They face different challenges. Because the goal of this program is to help students think about the challenges they face in more productive ways, it is imperative to make sure that content resonates with students on our campus. This is one reason why a great deal of effort has been invested in creating a new customized version of the program for our campus."

### **Speaking to the general public or local media:**

1. When talking with the public or media, **DO** talk about the collaborative project in the broader context of your school's efforts.

**Suggested language:** "This project is one part of our broader efforts to support all students in making an effective transition to college life."

2. As discussed above, **DON'T** emphasize specific students groups or achievement gaps. Doing so might activate and perpetuate stereotypes.
3. **DO** talk about some of the common transition challenges students experience coming to college, and how this can feel to students.

**Suggested language:** “New college students can be worried about taking college classes, interacting with professors, making new friends, and being more independent. When that’s tough, it’s easy for students to worry, ‘Maybe I don’t belong here’ or ‘Maybe I’m not cut out for college.’ We want to help students see that these challenges are things many students face and get through. It’s just part of the normal difficulty of going to college.”

4. When speaking with the public or media, **DO** emphasize that this approach is not a substitute for structural changes but a complement--for instance, to improved financial aid, advising, etc..

**Suggested language:** “College students face many barriers to success--it’s tough financially, and, sometimes, students can have trouble reaching advisors or doing the work. That’s why we are continuing to invest in financial aid programs, mentors and advisors and tutors for students, etc. This approach is one piece of the puzzle: It’s designed to help students see the challenges they face as ones they can overcome with the supports available on campus.”

Here is a short description of this collaborative project and the CTC you can use when speaking with the general public or local media about your school’s involvement.

“The College Transition Collaborative (CTC) is investigating how to use interventions, drawn from decades of scientific research, to improve the college transition for incoming freshmen. In particular, it focuses on helping students understand normal challenges in the transition to college and our college in particular as normal and as ones people can overcome. The transition to college is difficult. Knowing what to expect can help students make a smoother transition. This project is a partnership between researchers and administrators from multiple universities working together to create, evaluate, and disseminate these interventions to potentially help our incoming students and students at other campuses.”

### **Speaking with potential funders or government officials:**

Feel free to discuss CTC and your school’s involvement with potential funders and government officials. Here is a short summary you can use in these conversations:

“The College Transition Collaborative (CTC) is a group of researchers and colleges and universities working together to create, evaluate, and disseminate brief social-psychological interventions to improve the transition to college at the scale of institutions. When students feel lonely or struggle in class, they can worry that this means they don’t belong or can’t succeed in college. CTC interventions help students see challenges like these as normal and as ones they can overcome. This message can be especially helpful for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds--like first-generation college students and students who face negative racial stereotypes on campus--who can otherwise worry whether “people like me” can belong in college. Previous large-scale, rigorous trials suggest that CTC interventions can improve persistence and achievement among first-generation and ethnic-minority students, reducing group-based achievement gaps. The current CTC trials evaluate these interventions with diverse students in diverse institutions so as to assess where and with whom this approach is more and less effective.”

Several members of the research team have experience writing and talking about these kinds of interventions with funders and government officials, so feel free to ask us more specific questions. Additionally, some of the other schools’ liaisons have experience with this as well, and we hope that the liaison listserv can be a resource for such discussions and exchanges of information, advice, and resources.

To be added to the liaison listserv, email [ctc-liaisons+subscribe@googlegroups.com](mailto:ctc-liaisons+subscribe@googlegroups.com) with the word “subscribe” in the subject line of the email.

To post to the list, email [ctc-liaisons@googlegroups.com](mailto:ctc-liaisons@googlegroups.com). (You must be a member to post.)