



# What's in a decision letter? Care, concern, & support

July 22, 2020

# Agenda

1. Introduction & context
2. OUR – Degree Audit
3. LA&PS – Office of the Dean, Advising, & Communications
4. What we've learned
5. Q&A
6. Our next steps
7. Contacts

# Research-Inspired Practice Improvement



<http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org/>

[http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org/content/sass\\_toolkit\\_researchbrief\\_final.pdf](http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org/content/sass_toolkit_researchbrief_final.pdf)



<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>

Evaluating the Impact of Academic Standing Letters on the Experience and Retention of Students

# Psychologically Attuned Letters

Typical academic decision letters may allow worries and shame for students by not fully and explicitly communicating our positive intentions

"Psychologically attuned" letters strive to reduce shame and sustain engagement with the goal of providing clear, positive, answers to critical questions on students' minds

- The academic decision is a process, not a label
- "You're not the only one"
- Acknowledge valid reasons students can struggle
- Offer hope for returning to good standing

Brady, S. T., Kroeper, K. M., Ozier, E. M., Henderson, A. G., Walton, G. M. & the College Transition Collaborative (2018). Academic Probation and the Role of Notification Letters [Research Brief]. Retrieved from: [http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org/content/sass\\_toolkit\\_researchbrief\\_final.pdf](http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org/content/sass_toolkit_researchbrief_final.pdf)

# Psychologically Attuned Decision Letters @ York

## What:

- Intentionally re-design letters that we send to students when they receive a negative academic standing decision

## Why:

- Deliver essentially what is bad news in a more positive way
- Consider students' experiences
- Attempt to reduce feelings of shame, stigma, & guilt
- Convey to students that they are valued, respected, & can excel

# Office of the University Registrar

Degree Audit Team

## Degree Audit – Psychologically Attuned Letters and Email Auto Response

- Each year the Degree Audit Team receives approximately 7,000 undergraduate applications to graduate
- For the February 2020 and June 2020 convocations, 215 ineligible letters were sent to students
- We were inspired and motivated to edit the letter correspondence we send to students as well as our email auto response

# Degree Audit – Psychologically Attuned Letters and Email Auto Response

Dear Polina [REDACTED]:

Student number: [REDACTED]

Program: School of the Arts, Media, Performance and Design, B.F.A., Spec. Hons. Music

Academic Calendar: [http://calendars.registrar.yorku.ca/2012-2013/faculty\\_programs/FA/visual\\_arts.htm](http://calendars.registrar.yorku.ca/2012-2013/faculty_programs/FA/visual_arts.htm)

Thank you for your application to graduate at the October 2019 convocation. A review of your academic record today indicates that you are missing the following requirement(s) to graduate from the above program with the School of Arts, Media, Performance & Design.

- At least 6 credits earned from approved “Natural Science Area” courses (You have 3 credits)

Please let us know if you have additional information that would help us with our assessment of your academic record. For example, if you have received a departmental or faculty waiver for this particular requirement, please forward a copy of the waiver to us [degaud@yorku.ca](mailto:degaud@yorku.ca) as soon as possible. Once received, we will reassess your record and will notify you of the results.

Your Degree Progress Report is available [online](#) where you can review your program requirements. You may also want to contact your major department or the Office of Advising and Integrated Student Services (OAISS) for [academic advising](#) where an academic advisor will be pleased to assist you.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact us at [degaud@yorku.ca](mailto:degaud@yorku.ca).

We wish you success in the completion of your degree.

## Previous Ineligible Letter

- Faculty-Specific
- Uses language that may be interpreted as vague/insincere
- Could be more concise, offer more guidance/support



# Degree Audit – Psychologically Attuned Letters and Email Auto Response

## New Psychologically Attuned Letter

- Uses language that encourages the student, as well as provides guidance and support for next steps

Dear Rundong [REDACTED]:

Student number: [REDACTED]

Program: Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, B.A., Business Economics |

Academic Calendar: [http://calendars.registrar.yorku.ca/2015-](http://calendars.registrar.yorku.ca/2015-2016/faculty_programs/AP/business_economics.htm)

[2016/faculty\\_programs/AP/business\\_economics.htm](http://calendars.registrar.yorku.ca/2015-2016/faculty_programs/AP/business_economics.htm)

**Thank you for your application to graduate at the February 2020 convocation in absentia.** A review of your academic record today indicates that you are missing the following requirement(s) to graduate from the program listed above:

- **At least 18 credits earned outside the major (you have 15 credits)**

**We are here to support your success.** Please let us know if you have any additional information that would help us with our assessment of your academic record. For example, if you have received a departmental or faculty waiver for this particular requirement, please forward a copy of the waiver to us at [degaud@yorku.ca](mailto:degaud@yorku.ca) as soon as possible. Once received, we will reassess your record and will notify you if this changes your eligibility to graduate.

**We are confident that you can meet these requirements and encourage you to review your online Degree Progress Report.** You may also want to contact your [major school or program office](#) for concerns about program-specific requirements or [LA&PS' Academic Advising Services](#) for faculty-based requirements (e.g. general education courses or grade point averages) where an academic advisor will be pleased to assist you.

**We are eager to help you succeed.** If you have any questions, **we encourage you to** contact us at [degaud@yorku.ca](mailto:degaud@yorku.ca).

**We wish you success in the completion of your degree.**

# Degree Audit – Psychologically Attuned Letters and Email Auto Response

Hello Emilie!

Thank you for your email. Your email is in queue and will be answered in priority sequence.

The **deadline** for the June 2020 convocation has passed, as such we are no longer accepting applications. The online application for the October 2020 is now open, <https://convocation.students.yorku.ca/preparing/apply>

If you have submitted an application to graduate, you may monitor your graduation status online at <http://convocation.students.yorku.ca/preparing/eligibility>

Academic decisions for students who have applied to graduate in **February and June 2020** are reflected on the grade report. If you would like to **order a transcript** with your degree conferral, you may do so at this time.

We are here to support your success and encourage you to verify your degree status using the online **Degree Progress Report (DPR)**. As the DPR is available only for single major programs, you may want to contact your major or minor program office for concerns about program-specific requirements. For Faculty-based requirements (i.e. general education courses, grade point average, etc), you can contact your [Faculty Academic Advising Office](#)

We encourage students to monitor the [Current Students](#) website.

We wish you the best of luck in the completion on your degree.

Best,  
Nadia Di Rienzo  
The Degree Audit Team

## Email Auto Response

- Important information such as deadlines, is highlighted and communicated effectively, while providing guidance and support for next steps
- Provides links to important websites and other services

# Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies

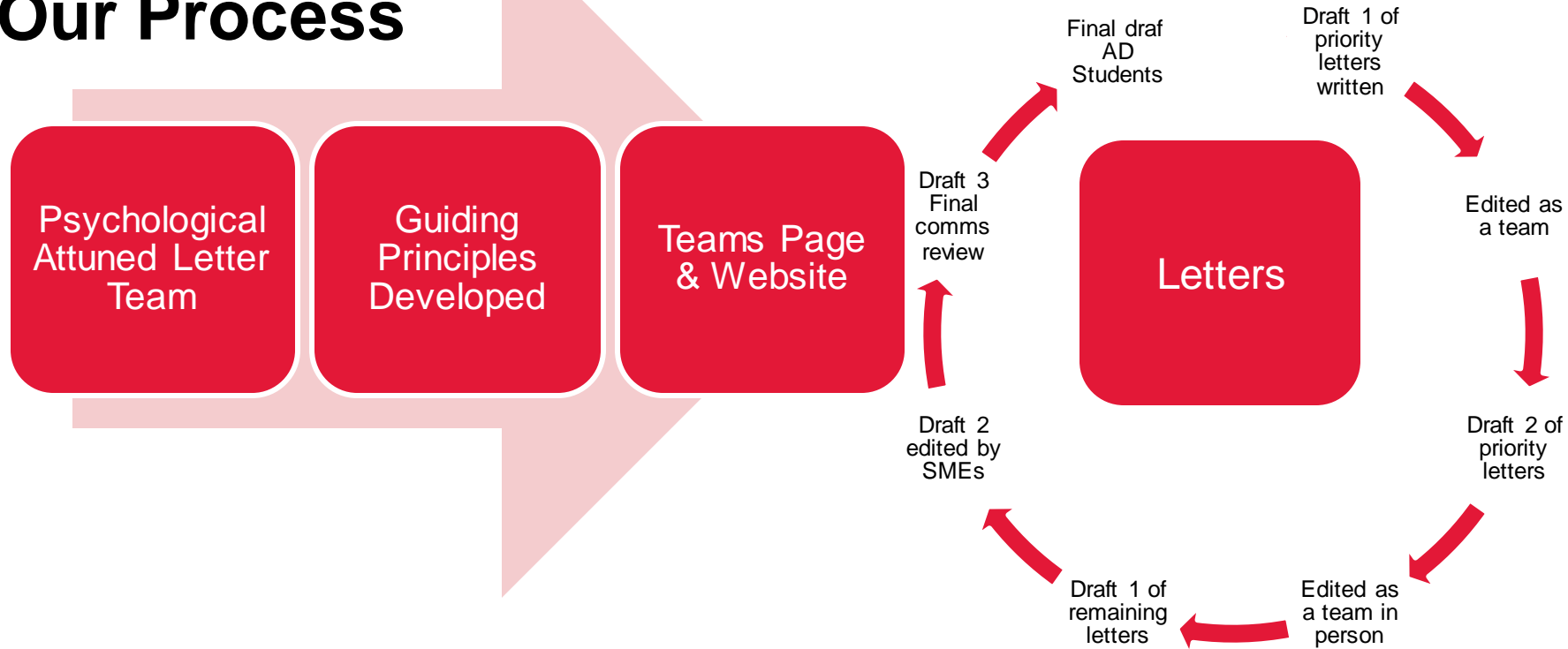
Office of the Dean, Advising, & Communications

# LA&PS Psychologically Attuned Academic Decisions Letters

- Sent to students with negative academic decisions
- 10 types of letters ranging from Academic Warning -> Exit
- **Approximately 6000 letters sent each Spring**
- Past: AD Letters = bad news + next steps
- Present: AD Letters = bad news + **normalizing** + next steps + **we believe in you, your success and are here to help**

# LA&PS Psychologically Attuned Letters

## Our Process



# LA&PS Psychologically Attuned Letters

## Example #1 – The "old" version

Dear Student,

I am contacting you today because your grade report for the Fall/Winter 2018-2019 academic session indicates that you are on **Academic Warning**. You may view this Academic Decision at: <https://myonlineservices.students.yorku.ca/> and click on the link titled "Fall/Winter grade report".

← Impersonal / Bold

Students on academic warning must achieve a cumulative grade point average of at least 4.0 [C] within the next 24 credits taken or earn a sessional grade point average of at least 5.0 [C+] in the session in which that 24th credit is taken and in each subsequent session until the cumulative grade point average reaches 4.0. If you do not fulfil these conditions, you will be required to withdraw from the university for 12 months. Students whose cumulative grade point average on at least 24 York credits is below 2.5 will be required to withdraw for 12 months.

← Legislative Jargon

You may proceed in the 90 credit bachelor degree program in an effort to raise your grade point average.

← Blunt

# LA&PS Psychologically Attuned Letters

## Example #1 – The "old" version continued....

For more information about Academic Advising please click here:

<http://laps.yorku.ca/student-resources/student-services/academic-advising-services/>

We also encourage you to take advantage of the following resources:

- Understanding your Undergraduate Grade Report slide deck: <http://www.registrar.yorku.ca/grades/report>.
- Learning Commons: <http://www.library.yorku.ca/cms/learning-commons/>
- Learning Skills: <http://lss.info.yorku.ca/>
- Writing Department: <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/writ/>

← Vague & Impersonal

Best regards,

← Insincere & Short

Peter Avery  
Associate Dean, Students  
Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies

# LA&PS Psychologically Attuned Letters

## Example #2 – The new and improved!

Dear contact.firstname,

I am writing to inform you that your most recent grade report indicates that you have been placed on academic warning. For more information on this please visit the [LA&PS Academic Decisions webpage](#).

We invite you to take part in our online info sessions about your academic decision. To participate in one of the sessions, please register at one of the links below:

- [Register Here for June 01 2020 @ 8:30 AM](#)
- [Register Here for June 01 2020 @ 3:00 PM](#)
- [Register Here for June 02 2020 @ 8:30 AM](#)
- [Register here for June 02 2020 @ 3:00 PM](#)

*You will receive a confirmation email including a Zoom link upon completion of the form.*

This decision does not impact your ability to enrol in courses for the next academic session. Each year, students receive this decision and successfully go on to complete their programs at York. We are confident that you can meet the standards for continued success.

← Softer language

← Invited to sessions

← Explains impact & normalizes experience



# LA&PS Psychologically Attuned Letters

## Example #2 – The new and improved continued ...

We hope that you are aware of the many resources available at York to assist you in getting back on track with your studies. To review these resources, please visit the [LA&PS Student Success website](#).

There are many reasons students are on academic warning. You may be experiencing personal, financial, health or family issues. We encourage you to book a meeting with an Academic Advisor, by going to their [webpage](#) and following the steps. An advisor can help you review your options so that you can move forward successfully with your studies.

Your success is important to us and we want to help you reach your academic goals.

Sincerely,

Peter Avery

Associate Dean, Students  
Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies

← Hopeful & Resourceful

← Normalizing & benefits of connecting with an advisor

← Softer closing

# What We've Learned

# What We've Learned

- It takes time!!!
- Fine balance between negative decision and gentle language
- TEAMS is helpful
- Collaboration with colleagues across campus helps to maintain solid relationships and make effective referrals for students
- Students were more receptive to the new communication style in that their responses were less stigmatized, and they even looped back with us with updates

# Questions



# Next Steps

# Next Steps

## **OUR – Degree Audit**

- Email templates
- Websites
- Emails

## **LA&PS**

- Academic Honesty Letters
- Petition Letters
- Websites, Emails
- Assessment

# Contacts

## **Degree Audit:**

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