

Making Sense of SAP:
Heuristic Analysis of Federal Aid
Communication at Four Alabama
Universities

Executive Summary

The Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) Policy determines a college student's eligibility for continued federal financial aid based on their total number of credit hours attempted and completed, overall GPA, and adherence to the Maximum Time Limit (MTL) for degree completion. Although SAP standards are federally mandated, universities may determine how those policies are communicated and implemented. As a result, variation in website structure, document tone, terminology, and access to appeal information leads to markedly different experiences for students trying to locate appeal information, understand requirements, and maintain eligibility for their financial aid.

For students who rely on federal financial aid, dense or policy-centered language can be difficult to interpret, especially for those individuals who are the first in their family to attend a postsecondary institution. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI, 2023), 55.7% of first-generation college students received a Pell grant in the 2019-2020 academic year, and one third of first-generation students received a federal loan. Because first-generation students disproportionately depend on federal financial aid, clarity and accessibility in SAP communication play a critical role in education equity and student success and retention.

This project evaluates the clarity, accessibility and usability of SAP policy communication at four Alabama institutions (Auburn University, University of North Alabama, University of Alabama, and Alabama State University) and compares them to a national best-practice model developed by academic advisors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Using a plain language rubric grounded in research from technical communication, user experience, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), this study analyzes each school's landing page, appeal information, and supporting materials. Preliminary review indicates substantial differences across institutions in readability, findability, tone, and available support resources. UNC's advisor-developed SAP Appeal Resource Guide uses plain language, student-centered tone, and a navigable format that allows students to access all of the needed information in one place.

Background

Because financial concerns are directly tied to student success, persistence, and overall attrition in postsecondary students (Tinto, 1993), unclear communication surrounding financial aid can create disproportionate barriers for students who lack prior familiarity with higher-education bureaucracy. Research consistently shows that first-generation,

rural, low-income, and multilingual students are more likely to struggle with institutional language, policy jargon, and ambiguous procedural instructions. When students cannot easily locate or interpret SAP appeal information, students may miss deadlines, misunderstand requirements, or assume they have no recourse for maintaining their aid, jeopardizing their financial stability and postsecondary enrollment.

Despite the high stakes, SAP policies across institutions tend to be written from a compliance perspective rather than a student-centered one. University websites often emphasize regulatory language, define terms inconsistently, or bury appeal instructions within long policy documents. As a result, students who need guidance during moments of academic and financial vulnerability may experience confusion, anxiety, and delays in submitting appeals. And in cases where support resources or contact information is not easily identifiable, those individuals risk losing the federal aid that allows them to remain enrolled as college students.

Within Alabama's higher education landscape, SAP communication varies widely in clarity and transparency. Some institutions provide direct, student-centered steps for finding and utilizing information while others may limit access to appeal forms or require students to navigate through multiple internal systems. In contrast, UNC Chapel Hill's SAP Appeal Resource Guide explicitly models supportive tone, clear design principles, step-by-step instructions on locating resources and appealing their SAP status. This variation raises the question: How well do Alabama institutions communicate such a high-stakes process, and what barriers might students encounter when seeking to understand or appeal their SAP status?

Literature Review

Plain Language in Technical Communication

Plain language is a central concept in technical and professional communication, emphasizing clarity, conciseness, and user-centered design. At its core, plain language allows readers and users to find what they need, understand it, and use it to accomplish their goals (IPLF). In situations where readers are unfamiliar in institutional or legal jargon, plain language revisions employ "shorter, less complex sentences; active voice; and common words" can significantly improve comprehension and accessibility (Bivins, 2008). Dense text, jargon, and inconsistent terminology across institutions increases cognitive load, especially when that reader is under stress or time constraints, both characteristics of students navigating financial aid policies like SAP.

SAP policies and appeal instructions constitute high-stakes communication, which groups like the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business say leads to

essential communication being “hidden in the ‘fine print’... In those cases, some readers might rely on others to explain the document, but it can be risky for them to trust someone else’s interpretation of an important paper, not to mention unethical for writers to make it necessary for readers to do so” (AACSB, 2022). Students have to navigate eligibility rules while simultaneously managing anxiety about losing financial aid. This intersection of emotional vulnerability and procedural complexity places a burden on those universities to reduce ambiguity and support user comprehension.

High-Stakes Administrative Documents and Educational Equity

Institutional documents related to financial aid, academic standing, and appeals function as gatekeeping mechanisms in higher education. Vincent Tinto, and other retention scholars emphasize that unclear institutional communication disproportionately impacts students who lack familiarity with higher-education systems, including first-generation students and those from historically vulnerable backgrounds. In fact, it is rarely only academic ability that causes students to drop out of college. Administrative barriers and challenges in becoming academically and socially integrated frequently indicate whether students persist (Tinto, 1993).

SAP appeal processes represent one such barrier. When appeal requirements are unclear or hidden behind multiple digital pathways, students may assume they are ineligible to appeal, leading to avoidable attrition. Thus, SAP appeal communication is not merely an administrative requirement or federal requirement, it constitutes a structural equity issue that shapes who is able to remain enrolled in post secondary studies.

Usability and Digital Communication in Higher Education

Usability research provides additional insight into how readers interact with digital policy information. Students rarely read institutional text word-for-word. Instead, they scan for headings, keywords and actionable steps or lists (Nielsen, 2009). Poor navigational design, such as long scrolling pages, inconsistent or broken links, or unclear headings can impact a user’s ability or motivation to complete a required task.

Higher education websites often blend multiple genres (policy, support information, FAQs), which can cause confusion and cognitive overload. SAP pages combine federal definitions, institutional policy, and procedural instructions into a single document.

Effective usability in this context may look like:

- Descriptive, hierarchical headings
- Bulleted steps
- Proximity of instructions to relevant forms

- Examples of what is included in successful appeals
- Consistent terminology throughout

Many institutions do not meet this criteria, reinforcing the need for a systematic examination of SAP appeal communication.

Accessibility and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) advocates for presenting information in multiple ways to meet the needs of diverse learners (Cornell University). The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) identifies key features of accessible documents, including predictable structure, clear language, visual organization, and assistive cues that scaffold comprehension. Although UDL was originally created with instructional environments in mind, these principles can be increasingly applied to administrative communication because of their shared goal of reducing barriers to understanding.

When an institution's SAP site pages rely solely on long paragraphs, technical vocabulary, or embedded PDFs, it may fail to support students with disabilities, multilingual students, and students unfamiliar with higher education bureaucracy and policy. Plain language and UDL overlap in their endorsement of (Turner and Schomberg, 2016):

- Short sentences
- Explicit definitions
- Step-by-step instructions
- Readable formatting
- Intentional chunking of information

Practitioner-Created Resources as Best-Practice Models

A growing body of scholarship in technical and professional communication is adamant about the importance of practitioner expertise when producing institutional documents. When a frontline practitioner— in this case meaning academic advisors, financial-aid counselors, and student support staff— work directly with the audiences who rely on these documents. This proximity means practitioners have an intimate understanding of common areas of confusion, emotional stressors, and the contextual knowledge students bring to these processes (Salvo, 2001; Spinuzzi, 2005). Because of this situated knowledge, practitioner-produced materials often demonstrate stronger user-centered design than those created by compliance experts or outside communicators.

In higher education, advisors serve as mediators between students and institutional policy. They routinely “translate” complex academic regulations and financial aid requirements into more understandable forms. Scholars in academic advising have

argued that advisors not only interpret policy, but are also meaning-makers who reconstruct it in student-centered language, effectively functioning as technical communicators within their institutions (Lowenstein, 2005; NACADA, 2020)

Taken together, the scholarship on plain language, usability in digital communication, and educational equity highlights a consistent pattern: students are most successful when institutions communicate complex requirements in clear, structured, and supportive ways.

To investigate how these issues appear in institutional practice, this study employs a structured analysis of SAP materials from four Alabama universities, using UNC Chapel Hill's advisor-developed guide as a benchmark. The following section outlines what methods are used to conduct this comparison.

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods document analysis to examine how universities communicate Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements and appeal procedures on their publicly available websites. There will also be two anonymized examples of student-facing communication regarding SAP status at Auburn University. Document analysis is an established methodology in technical communication. In Thayer, et. al, we read that content analysis is a powerful empirical method for analyzing text and may help reveal hidden relationships among ideas that seem disconnected (Thayer, et al., 2007). However, when a study lacks quantitative analysis, it may also lack credibility (Boettger, Palmer, 2010).

To strengthen methodological rigor, this study incorporates a weighted scoring model to evaluate an eight-category plain language rubric that assigns numerical scores for clarity, navigability, tone, accessibility, tone, and overall usability. These quantitative scores, paired with qualitative document study, allows the analysis to capture measurable patterns and nuanced rhetorical theory embedded into each institution's policy documentation.

Institution Selection

Four public universities were selected for analysis: Auburn University (AU), the University of North Alabama (UNA), the University of Alabama (UA), and Alabama State University (ASU). These institutions were chosen because:

- They represented a range of institutional types (R1, HBCU, land-grant) within the same regulatory environment.
- They differ in website infrastructure and communication design.

- They provide a representative image of SAP communication practices in Alabama higher education.

The University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill was included as a comparison because its SAP Resource Guide is practitioner-developed and reflects established principles of plain language, accessibility, and student-centered design. UNC will serve as a “high-standard” model against which our chosen Alabama universities can be evaluated.

Data Collection

For each institution, all publicly accessible documents related to SAP were evaluated. These included:

- SAP policy landing pages
- Appeal Instructions
- Appeal Forms (when publicly available)
- Linked PDFs or supplemental guidance
- Any embedded FAQs, definitions, or advising resources

Because some universities restrict access to appeal forms behind authentication systems, only materials available to prospective or current students without login credentials are included in the study. This limitation is understood to be a significant communication variable, given that this restricted material could affect student understanding and access.

Heuristic Development

A quantitative rubric was developed using principles from plain language, usability, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). In technical communication, heuristics provide evaluators with a structured set of criteria rooted in theory and best practice. The rubric contained seven categories, each evaluated on a 1-5 numerical scale:

- 1 = Not present
- 2 = Very weak
- 3 = Moderately clear
- 4 = Mostly clear
- 5 = Strong, meets best practices

Each institution received a score in every category. These scores were then weighted based on standard usability and plain-language priorities. The formula for calculating this score is:

$$\text{Score} = \frac{\text{Rating}}{5} \times \text{Max Points}$$

For example, if a school received a findability score of 3, the formula would work like this: $(3 \div 5) \times 15 = 9$ points

	Weight (% of total score)
Findability- How easily can a student locate SAP and appeal information?	15%
Plain Language Clarity- Are terms defined? Is language concise, direct, and free from jargon?	20%
Appeal Process- Are steps clearly numbered and actionable? Are timelines explicit?	20%
Transparency of Requirements & Consequences- Are policy details (GPA, pace, time limits) clearly explained?	10%
Accessibility Alignment- Are headings, lists, visuals, and organization supportive of comprehension?	15%
Institutional Support Resources- Are advising contacts, examples, FAQs, or templates provided?	10%
Cross platform consistency- Is institutional language consistent across pages and communication?	10%

Analytic Procedures

Each site was independently reviewed in three stages.

1. **Initial Surface Scan-** Each webpage was reviewed for immediate impressions of clarity, structure, and usability.
2. **Rubric Application-** Each institution was scored across all eight parameters. Scores were recorded, and excerpts of problematic or exemplary language were noted.
3. **Cross-institutional Comparison-** Findings were synthesized to identify patterns across Alabama institutions, highlight gaps, and articulate how UNC's model differs from or exemplifies recommended practices.

Findings

The plain-language heuristic applied in this study revealed substantial differences in how Alabama institutions communicate Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policies and appeal procedures. While all of these institutions are bound by the same federal standards, their levels of clarity, usability, and accessibility vary dramatically. In contrast, UNC Chapel Hill's advisor-developed SAP Appeal Resource Guide consistently demonstrated best-practice principles and served as an effective benchmark for comparison.

Institution	Total Score/ 100	Strengths	Weaknesses
Auburn University (AU)	57	Bullet points, tables, resources for Financial Aid listed	Compliance-focused language; next steps not publicly accessible; could not locate appeal form
Alabama State University (ASU)	61	SAP policy handbook; ACES office	Could not locate appeal form; navigability on site is very difficult
University of Alabama (UA)	81	Clear structure and headings; Appeal Process linked and easily accessible in multiple formats	Lack of student support resources; could benefit from more visual aids
University of North Alabama (UNA)	68	Plain language and student language focused	Lack of examples of extenuating circumstances, bare bones info on site

Theme 1: High Policy Clarity but Low Usability Across Institutions

Across all four Alabama universities, the clearest and most consistently communicated information was the policy rules themselves. This includes definitions of GPA minimums, passage rate requirements, and maximum time frame standards. These areas received the strongest scores across institutions.

However, knowing the rules did not translate into usable guidance. Three of the four universities relied heavily on compliance-oriented language. This policy focused language was accurate but dense, text-heavy and written primarily to satisfy federal documentation requirements rather than to support student comprehension.

For example, Auburn presented accurate descriptions of SAP standards but embedded them in dense text blocks with inconsistent headings and limited orientation cues to help students determine next steps. Alabama State University performed somewhat better in this section, offering more structure with its available handbook, but it still lacked actionable direction or student-centered framing. University of North Alabama (UNA) fell in the middle of the group. Their SAP policy page provides a reasonably clear description of SAP criteria (GPA, completion pace, and maximum time frame), and the language is generally accurate and readable.

UNC Chapel Hill's resource guide integrates policy and student centered communication, providing students with immediate opportunities to interpret their own standing, understand their options, and identify where to go for help. This difference highlights how Alabama institutions tend to communicate *what* SAP is, but not *what students should do* if they find themselves falling short.

Theme 2: Appeal Procedures Are the Weakest Point Across Campuses

The lowest performing category across institutions was Appeal Process Usability, arguably the most important aspect of SAP communication because it will be the most sought after once a student has been informed they are in SAP failing status.

Common problems included:

- Appeals described in broad, non-actionable terms
- Missing or vague timelines and deadlines for submission
- No explanation of documentation expectations
- Appeal forms hidden within sites, behind authentication blocks, or not locatable at all
- Lack of student-facing guidance on how to write an appeal letter or what constitutes extenuating circumstances (in the case of Auburn and UNA).

The University of Alabama performed best in this category, offering clear sequential instructions, examples of successful appeal inclusions, deadlines for submission and decision, and a consistent layout. Still, their communication lacks the depth of guidance provided in UNC's resource, which includes templates, checklists, and an evaluation rubric.

For UNA, the appeal process section was one of the lowest scoring categories. While UNA does include a short bullet-point outline of appeal requirements, the steps are not sequenced, deadlines are not provided, and the instructions lack actionable detail. Alabama State University's handbook was a huge plus in this category, but the broken link to the appeal form meant that once a student read over the supplemental information, they had no recourse for actually submitting an appeal.

Overall, appeal procedures across Alabama appear policy-heavy and navigation light, leaving students, especially first-generation or those unfamiliar with the different institutional systems, without the support needed in a high-stakes academic moment.

Theme 3: Lack of Support Resources

A notable gap across Alabama institutions is the absence of student support resources that explain or contextualize the appeals process or provide contact information on who to reach out to with questions. Alabama State University seems to be the strongest in this area because of their Academic Center for Educational Excellence (ACES). This office requires that any student on federal aid that is also on SAP Probation *must* meet with a member of ACES staff to be cleared for registration (similar to the mandatory advising requirements in some colleges at Auburn University). At UNA, support resources were minimal. The page lists the financial aid office phone number, but it does not direct students to academic advising, counseling, disability services, or any other relevant campus support.

This ensures that students do not face these requirements alone and are given ample opportunity to ask questions, file an appeal with a knowledgeable staff member, and be directed to additional campus resources like mental health counseling or accessibility accommodations when needed.

UNC Chapel Hill goes one step further by making their materials publicly available and transforming the appeals process into a guided, supportive experience. They include step-by-step instructions, reflection prompts, SMART goal guidance, and tips for documentation to directly address the emotional and procedural burden students may carry.

Theme 4: Accessibility & UDL Gaps

All four Alabama universities lacked consistent alignment with *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)* and accessibility best practices. Patterns included:

- Dense paragraphs with limited headings
- Minimal use of lists or white space
- Inconsistent formatting
- PDFs without clear navigation cues
- Jargon left undefined or explained only in policy terms

Cross-platform consistency was also problematic. Auburn and ASU in particular displayed large discrepancies in formatting between their policy text, website pages, and communication from advising or financial aid. This fragmentation burdens students with reconciling mixed messages, especially concerning SAP categories, timelines, and documentation.

By contrast, UNC's materials use:

- Logical sequencing
- Chunked information
- Clear typography
- Pathways for students with different learning preferences
- Visual structuring that guides users through complex processes

This reveals not only a plain-language gap but a broader discrepancy in usability culture between institutions.

Theme 5: Low Transparency on Deadlines and Consequences

Transparency about *what happens next* (deadlines, required documentation, how decisions are made, or what probation entails) was inconsistent and often missing.

Examples:

- Some institutions such as Auburn and University of North Alabama did not list appeal deadlines publicly.
- Consequences were listed very dryly, if at all, and often did not include information on what would happen in the case of approval or denial of an appeal (except in the case of Alabama State University).
- Information about probation expectations was often missing

Students cannot make informed decisions about enrollment, course registration, or financial planning without clear timelines.

UNC's guide provides an exemplary contrast, including:

- Clear appeal windows
- Expected decision timelines
- Criteria used by review committees
- Guidance on what students should prepare for following submission

This transparency provides predictability in an otherwise stressful process—an element missing across all evaluated Alabama institutions.

Recommendations & Implementation

Increase plain-language transparency for appeals.

Institutions should publish clear timelines, examples of documentation, definitions of extenuating circumstances, and sequenced steps.

Make appeal forms publicly discoverable.

Restricting forms behind authentication creates unnecessary barriers. A public-facing preview maintains transparency while protecting student data.

Expand student support resources.

Institutions should integrate advising, counseling, disability services, and basic needs resources directly into SAP and appeal webpages.

Adopt UDL-aligned formatting standards.

Using chunked sections, lists, bold key terms, and consistent headings substantially improves comprehension and reduces cognitive load.

Prioritize cross-platform consistency.

Terminology, SAP categories, deadlines, and process steps should align across policy pages, PDFs, advising communication, and forms.

Include practitioners in policy communication design.

Academic advisors, financial aid counselors, and student-support staff should be involved in drafting all SAP-facing materials.

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