

SPRING 2020

## Important Dates

### ACADEMIC PROGRESS REPORT #1

RIT Main Campus, RIT Croatia, & RIT Dubai  
Opens Monday, February 3 at 7 AM EST  
Closes Sunday, February 23 at 11:00 PM EST

RIT Kosovo

Opens Monday, February 10 at 7 AM CET  
Closes Sunday, February 23 at 11:00 PM CET

### ACADEMIC PROGRESS REPORT #2

RIT Main Campus, RIT Croatia, & RIT Dubai  
Opens Monday, March 2 at 7 AM EST  
Closes Sunday, March 29 at 11:00 PM EDT

RIT Kosovo

Opens Monday, March 9 at 7 AM CET  
Closes Sunday, March 29 at 11:00 PM CEST

### STARFISH TRAINING

To learn more about how to use the Starfish system, attend one of the sessions below. Registration is required through the RIT Center for Professional Development website: <https://www.rit.edu/fa/cpd/starfish-academic-alert-instructors-and-advisors>

- Tuesday, February 4 from 2 PM - 3 PM
- Wednesday, February 12 from 10 AM - 11 AM
- Tuesday, March 10 from 1 PM - 2 PM
- Tuesday, March 17 from 3 PM - 4 PM
- Wednesday, March 25 from 9 AM - 10 AM

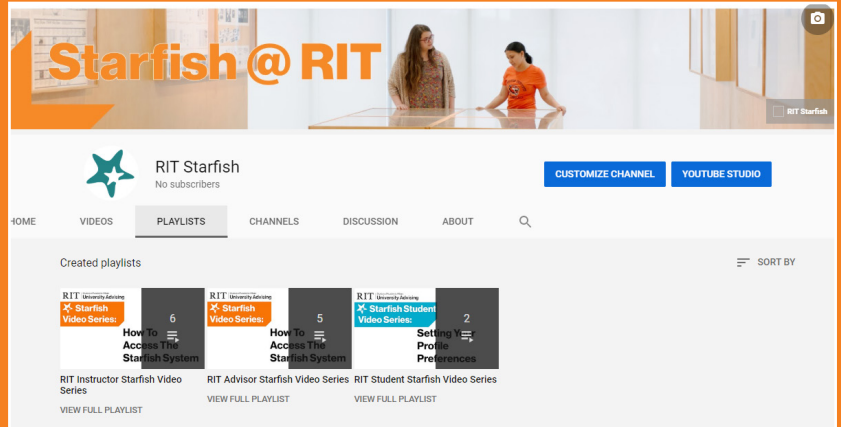
# Beyond the Alerts

## New RIT Starfish YouTube Channel!

Need a Starfish refresher? This semester we launched an RIT [Starfish YouTube Channel](#). The channel features the Starfish Video Series, which offers brief "how-to" videos about the most used Starfish features. There are three different YouTube Playlists to choose from [Instructor](#), [Advisor](#), and [Student](#). Select your playlist to get started.

In addition to the YouTube playlists, we have placed the how to videos on the corresponding page of the [Starfish website](#). Each video will appear at the top of the corresponding page and includes captioning.

Have an idea for a new video? Send us an email at [Starfish@rit.edu](mailto:Starfish@rit.edu)



# Starfish Spotlight



**Tom Dooley**  
**Lecturer in**  
**Communications**

Tom Dooley has been using Starfish since he started teaching at RIT in 2017. We are spotlighting Tom for his excellent use of comments in his alerts to students. His remarks are worded directly to the student, factual, supportive, and inviting. Here is an example of one of his comments:

**I'm writing to express a concern that you have missed a couple of assignments. One was relatively low-stakes (List of topics of interest) and the other (LinkedIn Learning) was more critical to learning. What can I do to help you keep up with the assignments? I'm happy to chat with you about strategies. I hope we can work together on this.**

During the interview, Tom expressed the value of Starfish as a communication tool. When students have followed up with Tom, the conversations have led to a better understanding of students' current situations. Connecting with the student often led to a resolution to the problem, increased involvement in the class on the part of the student and in some cases better grades.

In addition to students, Tom discussed Starfish's ability to connect academic advisors to the student's alerts. "Advisors have a fuller picture of the student." When an advisor is following up with his alert, he appreciates when they communicate back about the resolution. He stated everyone involved with the student should be working together, collaborating to assist the student moving forward.

Besides discussing the system as a communication tool, Tom noted how easy Starfish was to use. As his role as an instructor, Tom completes his Academic Progress Reports every semester and manually raises flags for students as needed throughout the semester. Lastly, Tom shared that using Kudos in Starfish seemed to motivate students in his classes. "Some of my students have approached me in class after receiving a kudos, they have told me how getting that recognition made their day, encouraged them, and that they wish they heard that kind of positive feedback from faculty more often."



**Vicki Rocha**  
**Academic Advisor,**  
**Chemical Engineering**

Vicki has been using Starfish for 2.5 years in her role as an academic advisor. We are highlighting Vicki because of her consistent use of Starfish. We shared some prompts with Vicki and here are some of the insights she provided in her response:

**What reactions have you received from your alert follow up/outreach from students and/or instructors?**

The reactions that I have received from students have been positive. Many times, students are not initially clear on expectations from the faculty, and with encouragement from their message in Starfish, the student is more willing to outreach to faculty for support. The faculty response I've received has been positive and many times the faculty can provide more information in regards to a student's performance.

**What successes have you had using Starfish?**

Starfish is beneficial to both the students and myself when it encourages collaboration between the faculty and me. Students receive a professor's perspective and a staff viewpoint with every flag, thus receiving multiple ideas for improving their academic performance.

**Do you have any advice for other advisors on how to use Starfish to support student success?**

Starfish provides advisors the ability to be proactive with students before situations escalate and become unmanageable. At its core, Starfish is an early intervention tool to communicate with students about resources that are available to them and to encourage them to come discuss their performance.

# Course Design with Alerts in Mind

written by **Michael Starenko**,  
Instructional Design  
Researcher & Consultant,  
Innovative Learning Institute

If you're a faculty member who regularly teaches undergraduate students, you probably know that RIT's Starfish platform is a collaborative environment for faculty, advisors, and department/college leadership to help support student success and persistence.

Additionally, RIT uses Starfish to:

- Provide students with personalized and timely feedback from instructors
- Send "kudos" to students when they are doing well
- Reinforce the message that instructors care and want students to succeed
- Keep advisors in the loop and help them to prioritize outreach
- Provide a platform for collaboration between the instructor, student, and advisor to develop a plan and outline strategies for success

You may be less certain, however, about how to incorporate Starfish into your syllabus and what exactly to say in your feedback to students. In the remainder of this article, I'd like to pass on a few things I learned about syllabus design as a long-time instructional designer in the Innovative Learning Institute (ILI). To summarize what follows, in writing your syllabus and responding to students' actions and works, **tone matters as much as content**.

## Developing a Learning Centered Syllabus

There appears to be widespread agreement about the content of a syllabus (see the [ILI webpage on syllabus design](#)). A proper syllabus is expected to include the following components:

- Course Description and Learning Outcomes
- Instructor Contact Information
- Course Materials
- Grading and Evaluation
- Course Schedule
- Course Policies and Student Support Resource

If you're not already doing it, I urge you to include a basic one-paragraph Starfish statement in this last component. You'll find a templated statement on the ILI [RIT Policies subpage](#). Another easy-to-adopt strategy is organizing your Course Schedule to align your feedback and/or graded assessments with the Starfish timeline (i.e., the Weeks 4-6 and 8-10 academic progress reports). A sample timeline can be found at <https://wiki.rit.edu/display/earlyalert/Instructor+r+Resources+For+Course+Design> (Note: If you're not currently providing feedback or assigning any graded work during the first four weeks, awareness of the Weeks 4-6 progress report may sway you to do otherwise.)

In recent years, attention has shifted from the contractual, teacher-centered syllabus to a learner-centered approach that envisions the syllabus as a learning tool.

## Syllabus Examples

Let's take a moment to consider how one might redesign, for instance, their Class Participation statement to be both learner-centered and Starfish-inclusive. Take this example from a hypothetical teacher-centered syllabus ("cold" in tone):

*Your active participation is expected in this course. I expect you to actively participate by helping to summarize key learnings from the lectures and class discussions. Your comments, thoughts, questions, and engagement in the in-class demonstrations will count up to 10 points (out of 100) toward your final grade.*

### Characteristics of a learner-centered syllabus include:

- Influences student attitudes, perspectives, and motivation for learning
- Conveys instructor approachability and empathy
- Recognizes that students learn as much or more outside of class as inside
- Allows students the opportunity to make choices in how they learn and to take responsibility for those choices
- Places emphasis on student and instructor intentions, roles, and attitudes in order to help students understand and work toward the learning goals

Now, compare that statement to this one from a hypothetical learner-centered syllabus ("warm" in tone):

*Your active participation is expected in this course. I have found this is the best way to engage you in learning the material (and it makes the lectures more fun). I welcome your comments, thoughts, questions, and hope you take an active role in the in-class demonstration. Throughout the semester I will use myCourses, emails, and Starfish to provide timely and constructive feedback on your participation. Starfish is valuable because it directly connects us to your advisor and others in your support network.*

As the above examples suggest, the principles of learner-centered syllabus design—and learner-centered teaching, for that matter—apply to giving student feedback with Starfish. In a nod in that direction, the [Fall 2019 issue](#) of this newsletter offered several useful “Tips on Writing Comments in Academic Alerts” and four model examples. From these examples we can discern key characteristics of instructor-to-student feedback (and evaluation) that can rightfully be described as helpful. These characteristics are, to paraphrase Stephen Brookfield in *The Skillful Teacher* (2006):

**Clarity:** Let students know from the very beginning what criteria you are using to assess their efforts.

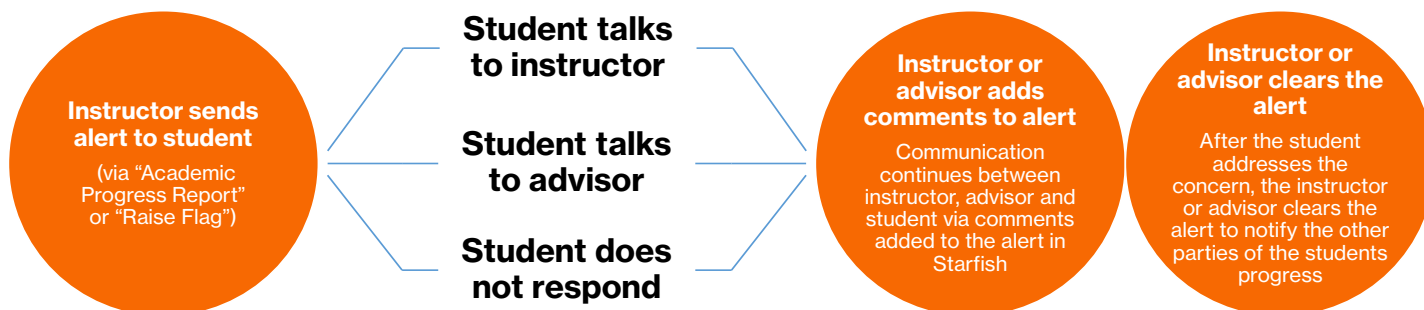
**Individualized:** Giving detailed individualized attention to student’s efforts indicates that you consider it important that they learn and also shows that you respect their effort.

**Affirming:** Always try to acknowledge students’ efforts and achievements, however slight these might seem to you, before making comments about their behaviors or work.

**Future-oriented:** Give clear suggestions about specific actions (e.g., coming to your office hours or going to an open lab) students should take to make progress in the short and long term.

## Clearing Alerts in Starfish

Starfish provides a place for the student’s success network to view and add comments about alerts that have been raised. Additionally, either instructors or advisors can clear alerts once they’ve talked with the student about their plan for getting back on track in a course. This process documents the conversation with the student and resolves the alert in the system, which in turn provides advisors and instructors a current list of students who have not followed up with an action plan for course recovery. If a student communicates a plan for success but continues to struggle, instructors can send a new alert to notify the student that they are still at risk in the course.



### If you are an instructor:

After you raise an alert, it is helpful for the advisor to know if the student has followed up with you. If there is no longer a concern or if the student has updated you with a plan for success, you can clear the alert you raised. The academic advisor will receive a notification that the alert was cleared. This includes any comments you added.

### If you are an advisor:

If interactions with the student indicate they are working on a plan to be successful in the course, you can clear the alert and “close the loop” to the instructor. This allows the instructor to know what resources, plans, and/or suggestions were discussed with the student. This process can streamline followup and partnerships between instructors and advisors.

For step-by-step instructions or to watch the **Starfish Video Series: How to Clear Flags and Close the Loop** visit: <https://wiki.rit.edu/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=127542444>