

Building Community in a Virtual Environment

Adrienne Draper Olson
Senior Research Analyst
The Education Advisory Board
olsona@advisory.com

Liz Rothenberg, PhD
Senior Research Consultant
The Education Advisory Board
rothenbe@advisory.com

Diana Wardell
Senior Research Analyst
The Education Advisory Board
wardelld@advisory.com

www.educationadvisoryboard.com

Traditionally, community in higher education has been rooted in the physical campus (the people, places, and face-to-face interactions) and most institutions rely on long-standing practices, such as print publications, alumni reunions, and on-campus events, to engage university stakeholders. Although research suggests that students, parents, and alumni are increasingly seeking opportunities to make connections online, most institutions are continuing business as usual. As a result, colleges and universities are missing important opportunities to engage with stakeholders in virtual environments.

Across 2009, the Student Affairs Leadership Council explored how innovative institutions are using technology, particularly social media, to foster engagement among the broader university community.* The following examples highlight some of these efforts at colleges and universities across the country: Targeted Blogging for University Constituencies, Online Parent Resources, and Student-Generated Content.

Targeted Blogging for University Constituencies

Student blogs represent an effective way to share student stories with prospective students and parents, providing insight into life on campus. Blogs are becoming an increasingly popular tool for admissions offices as prospective students want to hear from other students, rather than looking through viewbooks or comparing statistics, such as the number of volumes in the library.

At Ball State University, eight student bloggers are chosen annually by the Office of Undergraduate Admissions to write about their experiences through the school year and summer. Topics include campus events and student groups, classes, housing, as well as study abroad and internship opportunities. Links to their blogs are located on the website for prospective students and highlighted on the university homepage (<http://bsu.edu/reallife/>).

Butler University has put an unusual twist on the use of blogs by creating one for their mascot, "Butler Blue II." Through the Life and Times of Butler Blue II blog, interested parties can follow Blue's adventures and activities through posts, pictures, and video links. During March Madness, Blue sent out tweets to update his followers about the team's progress in the NCAA tournament. Although the target audience for Blue's blog is mainly prospective

students, the content is also appealing to a wide range of university stakeholders, including current students, alumni, and parents (<http://butlerblue2.blogspot.com/>).

Online Parent Resources

Parents and families are increasingly involved, not only in students' college searches, but also in their daily lives and activities on campus. Administrators interviewed by the Council note that technology enables parents to communicate with their children now more than ever, providing advice and support at the touch of a button. As a result, institutions are finding value in reaching out and engaging parents. Technology makes this task easier as many parents are already online and open to the idea of engaging with the institution via virtual environments. Some schools have focused on prospective parents, hosting dedicated websites and sending e-mail updates, while other institutions use electronic newsletters and Facebook to communicate with families of current students.

The University of Minnesota has developed a robust website for parents that is maintained collaboratively by University Relations and Student Affairs. The site features news updates and FAQs as well as links to other relevant university resources. In addition, the site has online workshops available for download in video, audio, and MP3 format. These sessions cover topics ranging from student mental health to study abroad to understanding student records privacy. (<http://www.parent.umn.edu/>).

In 2007, DePaul University launched an online social networking community called "The Quad," one of the first of its kind for parents. The site helps foster connections among parents as well as offering blogs, quick polls, and live chat sessions with university administrators. Discussion forums on the site cover a wide variety of topics ranging from housing to course registration to employment. Over the past two years, "The Quad" has engaged more than 1,800 parents, creating a vibrant community online for families to interact and connect with the institution (<http://www.depaulquad.com/s/1159/login.aspx>).

Student-Generated Content

The Council's research also uncovered many examples of Student Affairs practitioners leveraging social media sites to share student stories and experiences with university stakeholders. In Spring 2009, DePaul University sponsored a contest entitled "This Is DePaul" where students developed videos about their experiences at the institution. The university did not place many restrictions on the contest participants; video submissions were to be one to three minutes in length, include specific elements of the DePaul experience, and be appropriate for a general audience. The university received numerous entries ranging from a mock documentary to a profile of the diverse faces of DePaul to a music video (<http://www.depaul.edu/thisisdepaul/overview.asp>).

The 12 videos selected as finalists were posted on YouTube and reviewed by a university panel of judges (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-Cc-vRmNP4&feature=related>). Cash prizes were awarded for the best videos ranging from \$2,000 for first place to \$500 for third place. Students also had the opportunity to vote for their favorite video online, and the video with the most student votes received a \$500 prize. Overall, the contest attracted nearly 20,000 views on YouTube. Not only did the event energize current students but it also produced engaging content that can be leveraged with other stakeholders. For example, the winning video, "Faces of DePaul," was shared with alumni helping to generate conversation and reconnecting them to the institution.

Student Affairs organizations are also using photo-sharing sites to generate excitement and reinforce institutional bonds. To keep students connected with the university over the summer, Oregon State University launched a photo contest involving their mascot, Benny Beaver. Students were encouraged to pick up or print out a paper image of Benny with the goal of taking the most creative and spirited pictures with him during the summer. The contest resulted in over 250 photos with Benny that were uploaded to the Summer Session Facebook Fan Page and the Contest Flickr site. Students took pictures with Benny in 17 countries and diverse entries featured Benny camping,

lounging on the beach, and participating in Summer Session on campus. The top photos were awarded prizes that included an iTouch and gift certificates (<http://summer.oregonstate.edu/connect/#benny>).

Conclusion

Given the nature of their work, Student Affairs practitioners are uniquely positioned to profile and share aspects of student life with university stakeholders. As a result, the Council sees an important role for Student Affairs practitioners to play in new communication and engagement initiatives, helping to facilitate the creation and dissemination of content on student experiences through blogs, photo and video-sharing platforms, and social networking sites. These efforts are targeted at a variety of constituencies including prospective students, parents, and alumni for the purpose of facilitating engagement with the institution. In most cases, these initiatives are being used to supplement existing campaigns by creating virtual environments where community members can connect with the institution and build affinity online.

* The Student Affairs Leadership Council provides best practice research and implementation guidance for senior Student Affairs executives. The Council is part of the Education Advisory Board, which is located in Washington, DC. For more information on the Student Affairs Leadership Council and the Education Advisory Board, see <http://www.educationadvisoryboard.com/>