

Squeezing the Virtual Turnip: Introducing Student Affairs Professionals to Open Source Technologies

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Technology

The far-fetched world of high tech gadgetry displayed in the Hanna-Barbera cartoon, *The Jetsons*, does not seem so much a fantasy as a reality for today's generation. Today's traditional college students, millennials, are accustomed to using technology in almost every function of daily life. Furthermore millennials have little tolerance for delays and demand immediate service (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In a recent survey (Oblinger, 2003), 79% of college students report using computer technology. It is no surprise, therefore, that college students have high expectations for universities to use technology in educating them. Technology is enabling students to stay connected and in touch constantly, which is forcing faculty and staff to review how services and programs are being offered. With technology, universities can keep students interested and engaged in their studies, in and out of the classroom. However, a lack of money, time constraints, issues with implementation, and limited expertise or training can prevent faculty and student affairs staff from fully embracing technology.

In this article, College Student Personnel (CSP) faculty members, who are all former student affairs practitioners, at Arkansas Tech University (ATU) offer potential solutions to face these obstacles with relative ease and at low cost. Since a student can earn the entire CSP master's degree on-line at ATU, faculty members are constantly seeking new and innovative ways to use technology to enhance teaching and learning. Technologies used to meet the educational needs of graduate students can easily be applied to functional areas in student affairs.

Technologies Used by ATU CSP

The faculty in the CSP program is employing a host of technologies which are low or no cost, require minimal setup, and are easy to use to deliver the graduate program both on campus and online. To illustrate, the faculty use wikis (<http://www.wiki.com/>) to provide opportunities for collaboration among students, Poll Everywhere (<http://www.poll everywhere.com/>) to enhance student participation, Dimdim (<http://www.dimdim.com/>) to conduct virtual meetings, and Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com/>) and Moodle (<http://moodle.org/>) to deliver course content.

The net effect of using these tools in instruction is that the courses are more appealing to technologically savvy students and are delivered in a cost effective and engaging manner. A collateral benefit is that student affairs graduate students, who gain facility with technology during their coursework, become student affairs practitioners who are proficient and comfortable employing technology in their work.

So how might a student affairs division employ some of these low cost applications? Student affairs work has many of the same needs as faculty teaching for collaboration, communication, conferencing and organizational tools to provide coordinated service to students. The applications highlighted in this paper all have uses in the practical work of student affairs departments.

Collaboration

One of the most rapidly shrinking resources is time. Student affairs work is collaborative and demands participation from many different areas. Difficulties arise when trying to schedule people with already packed schedules into one room for a finite period of time to create/write a policy, report, or presentation. Inefficiency can be eliminated if a department can set an asynchronous meeting that allows everyone to give input or add perspective to a presentation without the time-consuming compilation of many emails or drafts. This activity is easily accomplished through the use of a wiki. This article was created in just such a manner.

As an example, using a wiki to develop forms, policies, student handbooks, reports, or procedures allows input from multiple parties. Once a timeline is established for completion, each person can access the document on their own schedule and make changes, add content, and comment on the contributions of others all without having to coordinate schedules, arrange physical meetings, or assign staff to assemble the contributions. Documents are quickly and efficiently updated.



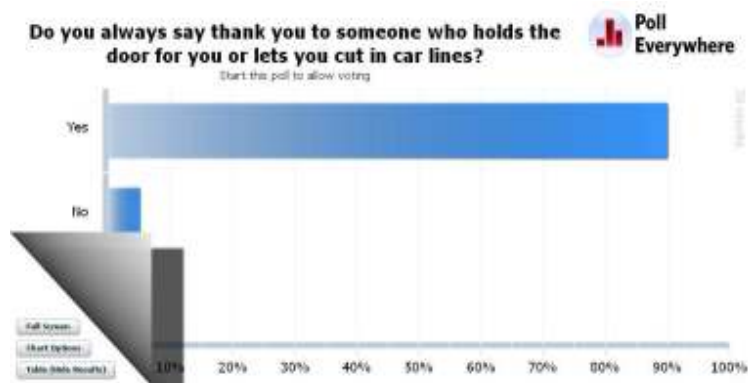
Communication

Most divisions need to gather opinions and build staff consensus, not to mention polling their students for opinions. Previous efforts to perform this task may have occurred via email, paper ballots, or phone calls, all of which require administrative compilation and dissemination. In this time of demand for rapid response, the ability to send for and receive an instant read on the temperature of your division, department, or responsibility area can be a dramatic way to improve engagement and increase communication.

Poll Everywhere, an audience-response software package, offers a quick and centralized way to get the opinions of staff or students from anywhere on campus with minimal time and effort, but with immediate results. Unlike the

audience response software often used in many college classrooms, there is no need for special equipment or clickers and respondents need not be in a single location. Questions can be sent to participants who respond from anywhere, on or off campus, by text messaging on their cell phone or through the internet. Through the use of a personal account, the person requiring feedback simply creates a question in one of three modes: short answer, multiple choice, or a numeric goal poll. Respondents simply respond anonymously through their cell phones with a short text message or number to a predetermined code that routes through Poll Everywhere's web servers. There is also the option of responding via the Internet. The results are displayed instantaneously to the sender and to the original poller, and can also be displayed online. Poll Everywhere also allows for polls to be placed on social networking sites such as twitter or facebook to allow for even broader communication to a targeted audience.

Illustrations of possible uses might be to query the inhabitants of a residence hall on their choice of a programming theme, to determine if a particular training effort met its desired outcome during the training, or to raise a certain donation for the hall's dedicated volunteer project. Departments can schedule impromptu meetings by polling their staff on the most convenient times to meet. Student programming boards can choose films by polling their organizations for the most popular choices. Everyone can immediately see the group consensus and results can be viewed using a web browser or PowerPoint. The software is easy to use, takes advantage of the ubiquitous cell phone technology already used by students and staff, and with 30 or fewer participants, is free.



Conferencing

Meetings are probably the most time-consuming portion of any professional's day. Increasing meeting efficiency can be achieved through video conferencing software such as Dimdim. The founders of Dimdim developed their product because they felt the existing web conferencing software options were too expensive or too complex (<http://www.dimdim.com/>). With no training and minimal setup a student affairs professional can host a virtual meeting using inexpensive webcams and microphones. The hosting party simply logs into the Dimdim site at <http://www.dimdim.com/> and sets up the conference for now or later. The entire process runs on the Dimdim browser and requires no installation on the user's computer. Participants are invited to attend via their e-mail addresses. To join a meeting the participants merely click a button and they can interact with the host and participants via public chats or with the host only through private chats. All participants can participate by typing input/questions and for those with a microphone they can participate through voice. The host can display their computer screen, a white board, web pages, or documents. The software is available at no cost for use with up to 20 participants and sessions can be recorded with the click of one button for those who could not attend but need to view the discussion and material later.



Busy student affairs professionals could enhance their meeting efficiency by limiting travel time and heighten their ability to share a host of materials. A residence life director, for example, could be more efficient by scheduling a video conference in lieu of face-to-face meetings to inform residence hall staff of policy or procedural changes. Everyone attends from their desktop without the wasted time of travelling from the residence halls to the central office. Student activities offices can hold interactive conferences with other universities so that student groups can share ideas across institutions. Individuals unable to physically attend meetings, such as staff at satellite campuses or those traveling for a professional meeting, can still participate through the use of video conferencing using a hybrid meeting, or by taping the conference so that it can be viewed later. Staff serving in professional organizations can save travel expenses by hosting or participating in discussions online. Additionally, web conferencing allows student affairs departments to take advantage of outside expertise without incurring travel expenses.

Organization

Learning management systems (LMS) are designed to provide a structure for faculty to deliver courses online but they also offer creative staff the opportunity to organize student affairs programs or student organizations' materials in an online configuration. If the campus has purchased a learning management system such as Blackboard the student affairs staff should be able to request sites for their use at no additional cost to their departments. An open source option is also available with Moodle. An LMS would allow for the selective

enrollment of participants, posting and collection of relevant materials, hosting of synchronous and asynchronous discussions, conducting surveys, and communicating with participants.

Conclusion

Although there are numerous open sources technologies available, this article has highlighted several technologies being used by faculty in a graduate program that offer a variety of uses in student affairs. Free or low cost resources for achieving results similar to the more expensive technologies abound on the internet. Careful investigation can reveal cost effective applications most suitable to specific operations. With appropriate use of these technologies student affairs practitioners can squeeze the virtual turnip to maximize their effectiveness, stretch limited resources, creatively meet program goals, and potentially reallocate both time and money into increased engagement with students.

References

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Oblinger, D. (2003, July/August). Boomers, gen-xers, millennials: Understanding the new students. *Educause Review*. Retrieved from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm0342.pdf>