

**CSPA-NYS Journal of Student Affairs****Volume 12, Issue 1, 2012***Article***Reaching Real-Time Moving Targets:****The Use of Digital Communications to Inform and Mobilize College Students**

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College professionals and faculty continually look for effective ways to inform and mobilize their students. In pursuit of this goal, the newly-established Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) embarked on a fact-finding process to determine the effectiveness of current digital communication methods, identify challenges, and ascertain student preferences for information dissemination. Based on the study findings and after reviewing appropriate literature, new social media strategies were developed and launched, resulting in the CCE's award-winning marketing and social networking initiatives. This article provides insight into the particular mediums students prefer, development and application of strategies, and their level of effectiveness in engaging young adults.

The Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) was officially established in 2010 to address the university's need for a more centralized approach toward community involvement and student engagement, with an emphasis on experiential education. Its mission is to work with on campus

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and external communities to provide meaningful opportunities that support the attainment of academic, personal, and professional growth to develop active and engaged citizens.

One of the primary challenges faced by the CCE in its initial year was establishing its identity and making its presence, mission, and activities known to the student body, faculty, and university personnel, as well as those off campus. Each of these core audiences has different information needs, interests, and motivations which require appropriate strategies for effectively reaching them.

With nearly 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students, building awareness among the student body posed a significant challenge for a campus start-up with limited staff and resources. The traditional static means of communication used to inform an older demographic is not effective for many college students. While most college students access information through the Internet, the actual formats and means they prefer are constantly evolving (Caruso & Smith, 2010). With this in mind, the CCE embarked on a fact-finding process to identify the challenges, determine the effectiveness of current university methods and ascertain student preferences for information dissemination. After a review of the appropriate literature, new strategies were developed and launched, resulting in the CCE's award-winning marketing and social networking initiatives.

The Center for Civic Engagement's progress in studying student communication preferences, developing new strategies, and evaluating program implementation have useful implications for college professionals interested in alternative forms of information management to actively engage students. This article provides insights into communication strategies that are effectively employed, based on the preferences of young people. For practitioners, the results of

this study may provide impetus to rethink the mechanisms for information dissemination to target audiences.

Literature Review

The overall purpose of attracting and engaging college students in co-curricular activities is to provide them with additional opportunities to learn and grow. To this end, the ability to understand how the behavior, needs, and preferences of younger demographics are evolving has important implications. How to capture the attention, effectively serve and activate this population is an issue at the crux of higher education. With that in mind, several bodies of literature are examined here to frame the knowledge-building goal and foster better understanding of how to reach and mobilize college students including: constructivism, student engagement, student use of information technology, and modern marketing approaches.

Knowledge-building within Context--Constructivism

Grounded in the work of John Dewey (1916), constructivist pedagogy essentially took root within education scholarship and practice in the 45 years following the publication of Jerome Bruner's (1966) classic, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, in which he laid out the basic principles of constructivism. This educational theory continued to influence and, in fact, revolutionized teaching to the point that Lambert's *Constructivist Leader* (1995) became a best-selling textbook on campuses across the country.

Constructivism is based on the contention that knowledge is 1) constructed by the learner within contexts, 2) emergent, and 3) anchored in action and experience (Twomey Fosnot, 2005). Essentially this education pedagogy challenges teachers and other leaders to introduce learning experiences that lead students in making their own discoveries and building of their own understandings, rather than having a list of facts and conclusions directly provided to them. In

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other words, constructivism supports the many and varied forms of experiential education (Carver, 1996; DeLay, 1996). Evidence suggests that there is a particularly good fit between the use of technology and the construction of knowledge (Perkins, 1992). This is due to the student's ability to use the Internet to facilitate knowledge exploration that enables the construction of complex information bases that can then be shared with others (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999).

Implicit in constructivism is the importance of student learning as it extends far beyond classroom settings. College student affairs professionals contribute to the educational process mainly through various types of co-curricular experiences, both on and off campus. "Leadership as critical social and intellectual transformation is achieved through reciprocal, purposeful learning in the community" (Lambert, 2002, p. xviii). Providing guided opportunities for students to engage in the community enables them to develop their own ideas, concepts, and conclusions about the world around them and its complexities. In fact, some contend that student engagement in public issues that emphasize community contexts and impact through civic action is essentially the pursuit of democracy (Lambert, 2002).

True to constructivist theory, one must examine the goal of creating knowledge-building opportunities within the appropriate contexts. Within the realm of student services on college campuses, this requires a focus on reaching and mobilizing students who are not otherwise required to participate. Discussion follows on the importance of student engagement, student utilization of information technology and implications for its use in reaching and involving young people, and attracting students through the use of modern marketing approaches.

Student Engagement

The construct of engagement in higher education is largely based on Astin's (1999)

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student involvement theory, which asserted that increased student participation is directly tied to greater personal development, growth, and achievement. Involvement, now referred to as engagement, includes investment both in and outside the classroom (i.e. time and effort spent interacting with peers, faculty, and staff, as well as participating in co-curricular activities). This landmark study made several important contributions, including: focusing on student motivation and behavior, viewing students' time and energy as valued, acknowledging that resources are finite, and assessing successful practice by the degree of involvement fostered. Research has since expanded upon this notion and affirmed the importance involvement holds in successful educational outcomes (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2009).

Building on Astin's recommendations, Kuh (2009) urges higher education institutions to start viewing engagement as a two-way exchange and no longer maintain a mindset that places the onus solely on students to adjust to an institution's policies and practices. This call to reexamine program and service design to better meet the needs and preferences of students is echoed across student affairs literature (Jones & Hill, 2003; Lowery, 2004; Winniford, Carpenter, & Grider, 1995). The first step toward improving service is to better understand student motivations and preferences.

The motivation to participate in activities varies from student-to-student and across differing circumstances, with many subtle differences between forms of volunteer service (Winniford et al., 1995). The literature consistently points toward the important role of peers and the need for affiliation in motivating students to engage. Recent findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (2010) affirmed that shared learning activities among students were positively related to heightened involvement.

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In addition to general apathy, demands on students' time looms as the largest deterrent to participation in service and engagement activities (Raill & Hollander, 2006; Zimmerman & Halfacre-Hitchcock, 2006). According to a 2008 NSSE survey, employment responsibilities were maintained in addition to academic requirements for "half of full-time first-year students and three-quarters of seniors at four-year colleges and universities" (as quoted in Kuh, 2009, p. 693). It is no surprise, then, that students today show preferences for offerings that are convenient, accessible, and allow for instant gratification (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Lowery, 2004; Moneta, 2005).

Student Use of Information Technology

University offices and instructors have increased their use of innovations in information and communication technology (ICT) in order to connect and engage with modern students. ICT progress has led to an environment today where Internet access pervades society and is engrained in daily life, especially that of college students. A recent nationwide study indicated that Internet use is close to ubiquitous (93%) among teenagers and young adults (Zickuhr, 2010). The study showed younger populations (ages 12-33) to be most active in social activities across the web, while displaying an increased propensity for using mobile technologies. Caruso and Smith (2010) affirmed these findings and identify text messaging and the use of social networking websites as the most prevalent forms of ICT use among students. A recent Student Monitor study indicated that 98% of college students use Facebook for online socializing, averaging four hours per week (Kolowich, 2011). Many college instructors who see potential educational benefits incorporate new technological approaches into their classes, as evidenced by the increased popularity of journals that address the topic, such as *Computers & Education* and *Journal of Computer-Assisted Learning*. There has been some evidence that the incorporation of Twitter

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into academic offerings not only improves college student engagement, but that it may actually improve grades (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010).

While still a nascent field, a positive relationship between information technology use and student engagement has found support with institutional resources serving an important role (Laird & Kuh, 2005). Heiberger and Harper (2008) recently built upon these findings by drawing positive connections between the use of social networking sites and increased student engagement. Moreover, use of the Internet as a resource and interactive forum has been shown to spur civic engagement, at times more so than traditional means of media and communications (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

How students use technology and their related expectations have taken on heightened importance at colleges and influence their offerings. However, institutions often are ill-suited to accommodate increasingly tech-savvy students (Moneta, 2005). Reflecting this, calls for higher education institutions to become more adept at change and “meet students where they are” are common refrains in the literature (Cotten, 2008; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007). There is no definitive response to this growing phenomenon. However, frequently cited suggestions include: utilizing multiple marketing mediums, remaining open minded to innovation, adopting a real-time mindset, personalizing communications, and fostering an ongoing dialogue with students to determine preferences for interaction (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Scott, 2010).

Modern Marketing Approaches

Adapting to the ever-evolving student demographic presents unique marketing challenges for colleges and universities. According to Kotler & Levy (1969), marketing serves as “the function of an organization that can keep in constant touch with consumers, assess their needs

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and develop ‘products’ that meet identified needs” (p. 15). This classic article champions a consumer orientation and remains relevant for marketing in today’s information-rich Internet era, where time is of the essence, speed is rewarded, and brands are largely defined by experiences, interactions, and consumer perceptions (Dobele, Toleman, & Beverland, 2005; Scott, 2010).

Viral marketing is one unique approach amenable to younger populations that accounts for these environmental factors and has potential for generating buzz, spurring word-of-mouth referral, and engaging widespread audiences. In order to be successful, such campaigns must reach their target audience with a compelling message, ease participation, encourage individuals to share content, leverage technology, and link to an organization’s mission (Dobele et al., 2005).

Inbound marketing is another means of bridging the physical and virtual worlds and tapping into students’ social networks. This progressive approach is founded on the idea of leveraging an organization’s web presence (i.e. search-engine optimization and social media) and “getting found” by customers, rather than devoting a majority of resources to traditional methods where efforts are concentrated on pushing the message out (Halligan & Shah, 2009). It emphasizes the importance of digital visibility and advocates for organizations to engage with consumers via social platforms.

With consideration to the constant advances in ICTs, marketing and student affairs professionals alike champion notions of using a multi-faceted approach and adapting one’s mindset to the environment, not to specific technologies (Cotten, 2008; Muñoz & Strotmeyer, 2010; Scott, 2010). The discussion of how the Center for Civic Engagement effectively leveraged these strategies and incorporated new technologies to engage a greater audience of students began with a better understanding of student preferences.

Methodology

To assess how students prefer to receive information from the CCE and determine effective strategies to meet these preferences, it was important to first understand student perspectives. In April 2010 practical assessments and a focus group were conducted with the purposes of 1) identifying the current level of satisfaction of students (to be used as a rough baseline for comparison at a later time) and 2) identifying their preferred communication methods. Twelve students participated; six were already very engaged in service activities and each was asked to bring an uninvolved friend. The students were first seated in a computer lab where they were asked to search for information that would be required for their involvement in activities for each of six scenarios (i.e., immediate weekend service, longer-term project, service-learning class, community-based research, and large-scale activity for their student group). A debriefing followed, during which they reported on the paths of their online navigation and the degree of their success. This also served as a pre-focus group priming exercise. During the 60 minute focus group several questions were posed that focused on their ICT preferences and what they believed to be the ideal methods of communication and outreach for the CCE.

Approximately one year later, another series of focus groups were conducted to determine to what extent the CCE was successful in its goal of reaching and mobilizing students. Four focus groups comprised of 33 students were conducted during March 2011. Students were recruited through the CCE e-newsletter, and were asked to invite others--some of whom were unfamiliar with the CCE (snowball sampling). The recruited sample was comprised of 17 females and 16 males, four of whom were freshmen, five sophomores, eight juniors, 11 seniors, and five graduate students. Twenty of the 33 participants identified themselves as familiar with the CCE prior to the focus group. All but four individuals identified themselves as having

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participated in some form of service activity as a student. Each focus group lasted for at least one hour.

Short pre-focus group surveys were administered electronically, via iPod Touch devices distributed to participants upon arrival, and were completed prior to the discussion. The surveys collected basic demographic information and assessed whether students had previously been involved with the CCE and/or had previously participated in service activities. Upon completing the survey, participants viewed snapshots of the CCE's outreach materials and a brief explanation of outreach efforts was provided. Student participants were asked a number of questions regarding their evaluation of current CCE communication materials and strategies, their own preferences, their actual experiences accessing information (including obstacles), the role peers play in their involvement, and suggestions for expanding and improving the current methods to attract a broader audience.

To gather additional information on the effectiveness of the office's outreach methods, in February 2011, a pilot-testing experiment was conducted on a new CCE initiative focused on involving students in spontaneous acts of service on and off-campus, Service on the Spot (S.O.S). This initiative was grounded directly in the literature on modern marketing approaches and was used to test the impact of the CCE's presence on social networking sites and its effectiveness in moving students to action. S.O.S. was designed to help address community and campus needs by incorporating the ideals of viral marketing and the recent popularity of flash mobs (a group that assembles suddenly in a public place, performs some act for a brief time then disperses). The CCE puts out a "call for help" in the days and hours leading up to an event or activity, sending out details about the specific service project via its various methods of outreach, including its social networking sites, to recruit individuals to participate. To test the effectiveness

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of the virtual presence of the CCE, for its inaugural S.O.S. activity, the only means utilized for recruitment were online and mobile forms of social media. Other tools were used to drive students to the CCE's social networking sites, but did not provide the details needed to engage. This was to ensure that those students who came seeking involvement only received the notification and information through these new strategies. The results of this test provided valuable insight into the reach of the CCE's marketing instruments and their effectiveness in moving students to action.

Results

The initial study conducted in April 2010 yielded very useful data, which helped direct the design and form of the CCE's early information outreach efforts. All 12 participants indicated dissatisfaction with the current online information and resources regarding service and engagement opportunities. While attempting to obtain the information necessary to participate in the six scenarios, only those who had previous service experiences and relationships with university faculty and staff or community organizations knew how to access it. They indicated, however, that they only found details on two to three of the six possible activities with which they were presented. The students with little or no previous involvement grew very frustrated with their inability to locate the needed information. They reported that they looked for 6-10 minutes per activity before giving up, which they indicated was longer than the 3-5 minutes they would have explored on their own under normal circumstances. Consistent with the literature, students indicated a strong preference for online interaction (e.g., Twitter; Facebook; websites; and short, informative emails) over more traditional means. When asked to prioritize the list of possible methods for information dissemination, however, there was no consensus, as each student had his/her own preference. In fact, several made the point that the CCE should continue

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all its traditional communication methods, as well. Based on these results, the CCE made plans to develop a virtual presence and adopt new marketing initiatives to reach a student demographic that are continually evolving (detailed later).

One year later, after implementing a number of new communication and outreach strategies, a series of more in-depth focus groups were conducted to investigate the progress the CCE had made toward its goal of reaching and mobilizing students. While indicating growth, the data collected highlighted student need/preference for accessibility, convenience, and responsiveness. The findings called for the CCE to address these characteristics through a multi-faceted approach to ensure that information be available through various mediums and foster a spirit of community among students through online networks and collaborative initiatives on and off campus (Naglieri, 2011).

Focus group participants provided greater understanding regarding their unique and diverse preferences for receiving information, the mediums which are effective and ineffective in reaching them, their reactions towards current CCE marketing efforts, their expectations from a university office, as well as ideas for how to reach students who are not currently involved and/or aware of the CCE's resources. Several consistent themes emerged from the four sessions: 1) students demonstrated a strong interest in getting involved; 2) accessibility, convenience, and responsiveness were cited as integral components of effective student outreach; 3) the opportunity for shared experiences and to learn about opportunities from peers was important to students; 4) an active presence on social networking sites and making information available via mobile devices were reported as referred tools for reaching and mobilizing students; 5) the CCE must be vigilant in the manner and methods with which it disseminates information to maintain

an engaged student audience; and 6) it is important for the CCE to distinguish itself and maintain a visible presence across campus.

Finding 1: Students Interested in Engagement

Students demonstrated a strong interest in getting involved with service and engagement activities through the CCE. Reaching and maintaining an engaged audience amongst students is a critical factor in the CCE's efforts to continue to grow into a viable center. Both the turnout and level of interest exhibited during the four sessions offered encouraging signs. As one participant noted, "This is great. I never knew this existed. I have a mandatory service requirement that I was dreading and now I feel much better knowing I can not only find something, but find something I want to do."

The discussions in each of the first three focus group sessions continued well past the allotted duration of time (one hour) in spite of the fact all topics had been covered. Moreover, two or more students willingly stayed following every session to inquire about how to become more involved with the CCE, learn about current opportunities, and/or share more ideas about how the CCE can reach a greater audience of students. Of the 16 participants not already signed up for the CCE listserv, 14 opted to receive communications either immediately following the session or in the subsequent days via personal e-mail contact. Additionally, seven individuals subscribed to receive the office's social media updates via Facebook. In all four sessions, at least one participant affiliated with a student group or project mentioned interest in either partnering with the CCE or utilizing the office to help promote their initiatives.

Finding 2: Students Prefer Easy Access, Convenience, and Responsiveness

Accessibility, convenience, and responsiveness are integral components of effective student outreach. Participants in all four sessions touched on the importance of websites being

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easy to navigate with updated and current information. A common obstacle described was not being able to find desired information and/or having to click through multiple pages to locate it. As one participant summed it up, “I want a website to take me quickly to where I need to go. Students don’t have the time and don’t want to wait. We’re too busy.”

Across multiple sessions, preferences were voiced for personalized and customizable content, including the ability to view a website in different languages, as well as the ability to perform refined searches for information. It was also deemed important to provide information across multiple mediums, including social networking sites, as well as to utilize tools that provide event reminders, such as Facebook events and Google Calendar. Participants in all four focus group sessions expressed frustration with not being able to find and receive information when they need it. There were multiple mentions alluding to an existing disconnect between the busy schedules and lifestyle of students and the traditional hours maintained and supports available via campus offices. Participants in each session also indicated a strong interest in receiving information outside of traditional hours. As one student put it, “Sometimes my free time doesn’t start until 4 or 5 pm. It really limits you. The option to access information and answers at night or somehow over the weekend would be really important.”

The response to the CCE’s weekly e-newsletter, one of the office’s primary outreach tools, was largely positive, but revealed a preference for a more convenient-to-read format. As one participant put it, “I receive the newsletter and quite frankly, I don’t read it because I don’t have the time to read through that much information.” Others added that it could be “a bit overbearing,” should be “more concise,” and that “students just don’t have the time to consume this much information.” The variety of opportunities, multitude of links, as well as the three-column format, were all considered strong points. Its utility was often compared to *B-Line*, the

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university-wide e-mail of daily announcements. While there was dissenting opinion on *B-Line*'s effectiveness, its ability to be quickly scanned was deemed very important. In the final focus group session, participants were provided with an updated edition of the e-newsletter intentionally formatted with more concise descriptions. This was the only session where feedback related to having too much written copy was not offered.

The desire to receive answers quickly was deemed a priority in all sessions, however, it was acknowledged that receiving a timetable on when an answer could be expected was valued and would likely suffice on most occasions. As one participant noted, "It is important that you get a response even if you do not get the answers you are looking for right away. Even if it is an automated response that tells me I will hear something within 24 or 48 hours. It helps you feel like you matter." Suggestions included having Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) pages online or having the option to connect with a staff member via instant message chat.

Finding 3: Peer Interaction Preferred

The opportunity for shared experiences and to learn about opportunities from peers is important to students. Focus group participants collectively agreed they would be more inclined to participate in an activity when they had friends or knew others who would be participating as well. As one student described, "You don't want to go somewhere by yourself usually. Sometimes that is why I don't get involved in as many things as I could." A few individuals mentioned they would not necessarily reject an activity just because they didn't know others attending, but also described the opportunity for shared experiences as an "important and fun part of the college experience."

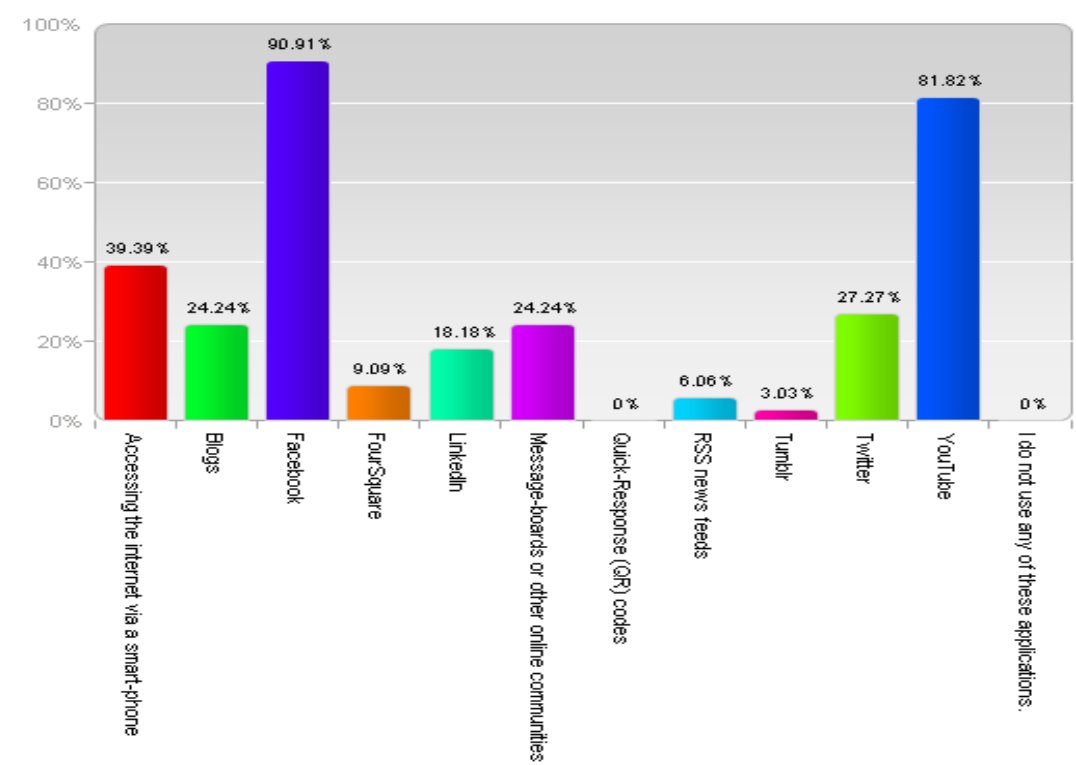
The idea of the CCE utilizing students as ambassadors was discussed in the final two focus group sessions. Participants within both sessions indicated they would be more likely to

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get involved if they heard about opportunities from a fellow student. Upon hearing this idea, at least three participants offered to act as the conduits through which the CCE can reach more students with one individual saying, “When you do it, I am definitely your man.” It was noted that ambassadors for on-campus offices are “noticeable” and “have a presence” on campus.

Finding 4: Students Prefer Social Media and Mobile Devices

An active presence on social networking sites and making information available via mobile devices can be useful tools for reaching and mobilizing students. Both social networking sites and mobile devices were designated as significant resources for information and integral parts of everyday life. Approximately 90% of the participants indicated that they were active Facebook users. One participant identified himself as an active user of eight different social platforms. Additionally, nearly 40% of the participants indicated that they use their phones to access the Internet. A detailed look at the participants’ use of social media and ICT applications can be found in Figure 1.



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Figure 1. Focus group participants' use of social media and ITC applications.

In each focus group session, social networking sites were identified as an essential communication tool. As one particularly active user suggested, "Social media should be a place for outreach to students. It's kind of like, 'Hey, we are just like you.' It's about interaction and getting everyone involved in the conversation." Others mentioned that this medium is "more personal," "something we are going to check all the time," and "somewhere we want to be reached." One individual, who identified herself as not being active on any social networking sites, still regarded it as "essential to connect with students."

Students said that they held different expectations for the information made available through social networking sites compared to that found on a university website. Social networking sites were expected to have content that is "actively updated," "more interactive," and "like a conversation with and between students." Two participants pointed out how there was currently little interaction on the CCE's Facebook page with most content originating from the office itself. Ideas were offered to spur more interaction including: having contests, seeking feedback on new ideas, as well as having students involved with the CCE to help manage and monitor it.

Upon describing the Service on the Spot program (the spontaneous service activity promoted through social media) in three focus group sessions, participants responded favorably, communicating interest in participating. As one student who identified herself as not being very involved said, "That's a fun idea. I would definitely be interested in participating in that type of event."

The ability to receive information via mobile phones was also very well-received. As one student put it, "My phone is how I stay informed on-the-go during the day. You don't have to be

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at your computer all the time. It is just really convenient.” Text messaging, in particular, was identified as a useful tool to reach students as a reminder for upcoming events or programs. This was particularly relevant for participants who might want to be involved, but do not have Internet access on their phones. Another student added, “Not everyone is able to check their email, but almost everyone can get texts. If it’s something I signed up for, I would appreciate it. Not many others on campus are using it.” The fact that it is not being utilized on campus very much presents an opportunity for the CCE, however, the way in which it is used is vital to its success. The frequency of text message reminders, their content, the ability to easily opt-in and opt-out, and the timing with which they are delivered were all mentioned as important items to consider.

Finding 5: Limited Contact Preferred

The CCE must be vigilant in the manner and methods with which it disseminates information to maintain an engaged student audience. Through the four sessions, it became clear that many marketing challenges exist not only in reaching students, but in maintaining their interest. While participants called for a presence in multiple mediums and were receptive to receiving text alerts, they cautioned how easily they can be discouraged. As one student warned, “Technology is a double-edged sword. While we like to have information available to us in different ways, it’s also really easy to get overwhelmed.” Another participant shared how he had been interested in getting involved with a student group, but had been “bombarded” with e-mails through their listserv, which led him to unsubscribe and rule out ever following up with them. Cautions not to “spam” or send out too many messages, whether through e-mail or social networking sites, were offered in each focus group session and found agreement amongst participants.

Finding 6: Establishing Campus Presence

It is important for the CCE to distinguish itself and maintain a consistent and visible presence across campus. While the CCE has made progress during its first year, the challenge lies in distinguishing the role and services it provides for students and communicating it to a larger audience. Across each focus group, participants indicated that having a presence at major campus events and collaborating with already-established offices, student groups, and community organizations is important to reach and identify with a larger audience of students. While the CCE has engaged in these activities throughout the year, the feedback received might indicate that a more consistent presence is warranted.

Different outlets for increasing the CCE's visibility that students frequently mentioned included: social media offerings, signage across campus, having students serve as ambassadors for the office, and the continued development of the S.O.S. program. Offering incentives for individuals to get involved and the continued use of new technologies were also cited as attractive methods to move students to participate. A detailed list of the strategies mentioned to increase visibility can be found in Table 1 below.

For the CCE to better distinguish itself, participants in all four focus groups deemed it important to demonstrate the benefits of getting involved and the services the office provides. Multiple students involved with student groups on campus were unaware the CCE could sponsor, help promote, and recruit for their events. As one graduate student mentioned, "I can remember back to my early undergrad days and I wouldn't have known what civic engagement was or how that meant I could be involved on campus and in the community." Suggestions to address this disconnect included showcasing how others have already benefitted through the use of video. The University's Real-to-Reel video series (short, student-created videos located on the main

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university anchor page) received multiple mentions as an effective use of video currently on campus.

Table 1

Social Media Outlets Mentioned for Increasing the Center for Community Engagement's Visibility Among Students

Social Media Outlet	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Total
B-Line	2	2	4	2	10
Facebook	4	6	5	4	19
Giveaways/Incentives	2	3	2	4	11
Partnering with community organizations	1	1	3	1	6
Partnering with established campus offices	2	2	1	5	10
Partnering with student groups and organizations	2	3	3	6	14
Presence at events (hosting/ Sponsoring/ tabling)	5	4	3	4	16
Residential communities/dorms	2	4	3	-	9
Service on the Spot (SOS) program	3	-	4	4	11
Signage (flyers, posters, table tents)	3	3	4	2	12
Speaking in classes	2	-	2	1	5
Student ambassadors	-	2	4	5	11
Use of new IT (including QR codes)	3	-	5	5	13
Video (YouTube or BU's R2R series)	1	2	5	2	10

Service on the Spot Pilot Test

Considerable thought and planning have gone into investigating the degree to which the CCE strategies have impacted student interest and engagement. Because it is still a maturing field it is particularly difficult to ascertain the number of students that social media are able to move to action. To investigate this, the CCE tested the success of social media outreach through its first Service on the Spot (S.O.S.) activity on February 16, 2011. It involved recruiting students to be transported to an off-campus site so they could participate in a collaborative activity--the

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Bridging the Digital Divide Project. This project increases computer access to marginalized populations by refurbishing used computers that are then loaned to them through five local collaborating nonprofits. For this particular S.O.S. activity, students unloaded, sorted, tested and then delivered equipment prior to the start of the refurbishing phase.

The only means utilized for recruiting students for the activities and providing details required to participate were online and mobile social media. This meant that those students who attended only received the notification and information through the new strategies or by word-of-mouth. The CCE was able to recruit 25 students for its initial spontaneous activity using only social media. The students arrived either individually or with friends and expressed their excitement and enthusiasm. At the conclusion of the activity, all students indicated that they found the experience worthwhile and would participate in another. This demonstrated the success of the new recruitment methods for the S.O.S. spontaneous activity. The results of this test provided valuable insight into the reach of the CCE's current marketing instruments and their effectiveness in moving students to action through the exclusive use of social media.

Discussion

Students are vital to fulfilling the CCE's mission to strengthen relationships between the university and the community. As a new office, engaging and fostering support amongst students and instituting effective means of reaching them is an essential component for establishing a viable center. The focus of the CCE's marketing and digital initiatives was twofold: to raise awareness of the CCE's services and offerings among students, as well as to stimulate and support campus-wide interest in service and engagement activities. Driving these efforts was the implementation of various ICT tools designed to inform students through

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methods they have indicated they prefer, to promote interaction, and expand the CCE's online visibility across various platforms. These new initiatives:

- Address evolving student preferences for information across various online and mobile platforms.
- Increase interest and make it easier for students to participate in meaningful service activities.
- Foster a spirit of service and community among students through online networks and collaborative events on and off campus.
- Present new and unique opportunities for students to interact with the CCE's offerings.
- Raise awareness of the newly-formed CCE office and expand its reach among students.

Design of Information Management Program

Based on the findings reported above and specific recommendations provided through ongoing interactions with students, a number of new methods utilizing social media to connect with students were initiated. The CCE utilizes a multi-faceted marketing approach to disseminate information about its offerings and promote events and opportunities to students. It has established and is maintaining a presence across a number of social network sites, including Facebook, Twitter, FourSquare, Flickr, Pinterest, and LinkedIn, to ensure that students can receive information and engage with the office through their preferred medium.

Facebook serves as the CCE's social media hub and through the use of a social plug-in, displays the content of the CCE Facebook page on its official university website (allowing the CCE site visitors to access its Facebook offerings without having to be a member of the site). This is an important vehicle not only to drive traffic to the CCE website, but to feature additional content, as well as to communicate and interact directly with students. Additionally, the CCE

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Facebook page has been customized to display updates from the CCE Twitter feed, as well as to view Foursquare updates – once again syncing content to help ease consumption. The content promoted via the Twitter account is used in a similar vein to Facebook, but is also used as a public relations outreach tool to promote the CCE initiatives and events. For example, the CCE reached out to the Boys & Girls Club of America via Twitter and had the national organization share a YouTube video to its following detailing a unique collaboration between a student group and the local chapter of the Boys & Girls Club (which was just awarded \$15,000 in a competition held by the Newman’s Own Foundation, coordinated through the CCE).

Foursquare is a location-based social networking service, mostly used via smartphones. By checking in via a mobile phone application or text message, users share their location with friends and earn points for activity. The CCE is leveraging this platform to drive traffic and encourage repeat visitors to the office and CCE-sponsored events. Currently, the CCE has verified its office as a location on the service, making it visible to all users on campus. It has also created a “special” which notifies Foursquare users of an incentive (free CCE t-shirt) if they visit the office and use the program to record the visit.

One example of how the CCE has leveraged its presence on social networking sites is the promotion of the new Service on the Spot (S.O.S.) initiative focused on involving students in spontaneous acts of service on and off campus. The CCE puts out a “call for help” in the days and hours leading up to an event, sending out details about the specific service project via its social network sites, and recruiting individuals to participate in meaningful activities. Students who participate receive free food and S.O.S. t-shirts and have the opportunity to contribute to the community in a convenient, fun, and unique manner – with the hope of increasing student interest in the CCE and service projects.

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Mobile tagging is a technique being utilized to engage an increasingly tech-savvy generation of students. This is used to engage students in the CCE's online offerings via a mobile device or smart phone through the scanning of a QR or "quick response" code (a URL encoded in a two-dimensional barcode) which links directly to a designated URL in a matter of seconds. The CCE is currently utilizing QR codes in several of its promotional materials, including its student brochure, on-campus flyers and posters, and t-shirts. Moreover, embedded in each code is a link tracking mechanism which provides analytics to track how the materials are being utilized, including information on the date, time, and total scans which have taken place.

The CCE student brochure features a series of four QR codes which direct users to unique mobile-optimized websites with functionality tailored to the student audience and application. A student can use his/her smartphone to scan or photograph these codes and instantly visit the CCE website, join the CCE Facebook fan page, explore the CCE's online event calendar to learn about upcoming events on campus, or sign up for the CCE's weekly e-newsletter. In this respect, the brochure transcends its utility as a traditional print piece and becomes a mechanism to foster student interaction with the CCE. This technique has also been utilized on marketing flyers with direct links to the CCE online offerings, as well as specific event information. Students can instantly RSVP for an event by scanning a QR code directly connected to an "event" created on the CCE's Facebook fan page. The use of mobile tagging is also featured prominently on the CCE t-shirts printed in support of S.O.S. (the new initiative promoting spontaneous acts of service). These t-shirts are given away to S.O.S. participants, as well as individuals who have worked with the CCE, as a means to raise awareness across campus. The backs of the shirts include a large QR code which can be scanned and link directly to the CCE Facebook fan page, allowing students to learn about the CCE and instantly use their

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phone to opt-in and begin receiving the office's social media postings. One intent of placing the QR code on the back of the t-shirt was to encourage others walking behind the wearer to scan the code to see where it will take them.

Based on student input during the study, the CCE has created a text or short message service (SMS) alert system that is used to notify students of upcoming CCE events and provide details for the S.O.S. initiative via text message to student phones, whether or not they are smartphones. Students opt-in to receive text updates by sending a text message to a designated phone number with their name and a message that reads "Add me." Upon sending that message, individuals receive an automated notice thanking them for signing up and providing details on the S.O.S. program, as well as information on how to unsubscribe. The CCE utilizes Google Voice to host the designated phone number and send out the text message/SMS updates. This is a quick and easy means of communicating with students.

To aid in the management of these offerings, the CCE utilizes Hootsuite (hootsuite.com), one of several free online multimedia management services available, to operate its multiple social network offerings. Hootsuite allows the CCE to perform simultaneous updates across its Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Foursquare pages, which significantly reduces the staff time necessary to oversee these pages and ensuring that the office has a consistent presence and message across each medium.

While the planning process for the outreach and marketing strategies has been time-consuming, the resources necessary to implement and maintain the initiatives are minimal. The CCE relies heavily on student assistants, interns, and volunteers to carry out marketing strategies and programs. The key people responsible for proposing, developing, and overseeing the interactive multimedia methods are the Social Media and Marketing Interns, students who

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receive four credits each semester. Final approval of the use of new communication methods, periodic reviews, and quality checks are conducted by the Coordinator of Community Engagement and the Director.

The cost to implement these new communication initiatives has been minimal, due to the arrival of free online technology tools. Additionally, the utilization of the aforementioned multimedia management tool, Hootsuite, has reduced the amount of staff time that is needed to manage these campaigns.

Conclusions

The Center for Civic Engagement has made significant progress on its charge to connect with and engage students, faculty, and staff in community-based activities and projects since its opening in 2010. All of the strategies described above have been fully implemented and continue to expand and evolve, based on student feedback, suggestions, and usage metrics. Online analytics have been set up for use in measuring student connection levels and demonstrate the degree to which the new marketing efforts were successful. Since employing these new strategies, the CCE has added nearly 2,000 individuals to its email listserv, almost 500 social media subscribers, and website page views of on average almost 1,000 per week (with one week exceeding 4,000).

Of course, the success of CCE communication strategies will continue to be assessed and monitored so that findings can be directly applied for improvement. It is this responsive, flexible philosophy that allows the immediate incorporation of new ideas and suggestions and has led to the early success of the CCE. Last fall, the CCE was recognized with the SUNY Outstanding Student Affairs Program in the Innovative Use of Social Media for 2011 Award.

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Based on student feedback and the number of new participants, the objectives have been successfully met. More specifically, 1) many new methods have been implemented to provide access to information through the online and mobile platforms that students have indicated they prefer; 2) student interest and participation has increased, indicating that the engagement strategies have been successful; 3) many new students have joined the various networks, stopped by the office, and/or contacted the CCE via phone or email; and 4) students have expressed approval of the community-building aspects of the strategies (supported by student comments and the number who have asked how they can get their student groups involved).

The CCE will continue to conduct usage and quality assessments as part of its ongoing formative evaluation process, which helps guide the design and construction of new aspects of its digital communication program and allows for real-time modifications during implementation.

Recommendations

College/university professional staff and faculty continue to look for effective ways to inform and mobilize their students. Over the last 18 months, the CCE has learned a great deal about this challenge and has successfully developed strategies to meet this goal. In the course of this process, important lessons have been learned and are shared here for the benefit of others interested in engaging college students.

Before implementing new approaches, it is important to:

- inventory current practices and determine how well they meet the desired objectives;
- consult and engage students early in and throughout the process to identify their perspectives and preferences, gather their input on design and implementation, and utilize their support; and
- conduct a feasibility review.

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Before implementing a student-recommended method, conduct a brief feasibility assessment to determine if there are adequate resources and knowledgeable people to develop and oversee the process. Consider how well the new approach can be supported both in the immediate and long-term. It is imperative that it can be sustained with minimal staff time, or it may not be worth the considerable investment of time it takes to launch. While it is advisable and possibly more efficient to use student support, careful oversight is important because students may not have a clear sense of the differences between personal and professional uses of social media. While remaining open-minded to new means of communicating, attend to the need to remain efficient and professional.

Utilizing the most popular means for communicating with students is by its nature an ever-evolving endeavor. This requires constant vigilance and ongoing assessments to determine impact and may involve risk. Pioneering new tactics may mean that on occasion one does not prove to be as effective as hoped. For example, the CCE has recently included Pinterest in its cadre of communication strategies, though predictions regarding its long-term ability to attract followers are mixed.

The available forms of social media are constantly growing and may quickly overwhelm novices. As an office decides to adopt new methods of communication, it is important to start with one or two innovations and master those before expanding. Also, there is a limit to how many communication platforms can effectively be managed by one office, so it is important to identify those that are most helpful in reaching the unit's goals and concentrate on those.

Most important in the implementation of new information dissemination strategies is the development of a comprehensive plan. It is recommended that experienced professional staff and other reliable sources be consulted to take advantage of knowledge that is as current as

possible. After careful investigation, planning, and preparation, the most appropriate and effective digital communication tools will be identified and, if closely monitored and modified as needed, will result in successfully informing and engaging students.

Recommendations for Future Research

Investigating the use of social media and other digital means of communication to inform and mobilize college students is a relatively new area of research. As such, there are many unexplored aspects which, if studied, could provide direct benefit to college/university staff and faculty, as well as the students they serve.

As discussed in detail above, available digital means for communication are constantly changing. The degree to which these new tools can be employed on college campuses and strategies for their effective utilization would be of keen interest to those charged with communicating with students. In addition, as new forms and tools are developed, ongoing study is needed to ascertain current student preferences, which are essentially moving targets. These may also differ some from campus-to-campus, so it would be useful to compare student preferences across multiple campuses to determine if there are discernible patterns.

Efficiency of effort is of great concern on resource-strapped campuses today. Managing a variety of forms of outreach through a single management program would be highly desirable. As new online tools are developed to manage multiple methods of digital communications, it is important to identify, test, and report on those of greatest utility and benefit.

Lastly, more research is needed to determine to what degree each form of communication is successful, either solely or in combination with others, in actually mobilizing students to become engaged. While it is relatively simple to assess the number of “hits” on digitally-based information, it is more difficult to ascertain the impact these have had on student behavior. Ultimately, mobilizing informed students is the goal of college engagement initiatives.

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