

Where the Students Are: Using Social-Networking Sites in Summer Communication

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In summer 2009, the Learning Commons at Allegheny took a new approach to communicating with the class of 2013. Allegheny College is a liberal arts college of 2,100 students located in northwestern Pennsylvania. Our first-year class typically consists of 600 students, with roughly 50% of the class coming from out of state. Orientation at Allegheny is coordinated and run by the Learning Commons, a small staff of three professionals and two students in the academic support office on campus. The new student orientation program takes place just before classes begin in August and lasts for five days. New students move in on a Saturday, schedule classes on Monday, receive course schedules on Tuesday, and start class as fully matriculated students on Thursday.

Effective communication over the summer is imperative to our new students and their parents. Several mailings are sent throughout the summer with forms that need to be mailed back. Phone calls and paper mailings weren't getting the job done any more; we were looking for a new way to connect and communicate with our students. In the past, we sent mailings to the entire first-year class in February, May, June, July, and August with a total of 27 pieces of information being sent (i.e., letters and forms). We now send only three mailings with a total of 17 pieces of information included and instead utilize social networking sites, e-mail, and text messaging.

As orientation professionals, it's important to stay current by looking at what students are using for communication and trying it ourselves. At Allegheny we implemented a multifaceted approach utilizing three of the most popular, current Internet sites right now: Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. We have a small staff of professionals spending the summer preparing for August orientation, so we needed to think of a way to connect with large numbers of students spread throughout the country and globe, with relative ease and little cost.

Many incoming students use Facebook before they come to campus to start connecting with their peers, meet their new roommate, and gather information about their new school. The staff at the Learning Commons decided to use this popular technology by setting up a "Class of 2013" group on Facebook. This group enabled us to communicate with the class outside of our usual mailings to their homes. The Class of 2013 group gave new students an opportunity to tailor their

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own summer communication. While the Learning Commons chooses what goes into the many mailings that are sent to their houses throughout the United States and around the world, Facebook gives them an opportunity to ask questions about what they really want to know as they wait anxiously for orientation in August.

By the time orientation began, the group had 646 members, with 467 of those members being first-year students. The other members were a mixture of upperclass students, faculty, and staff. There were 595 wall posts and 106 discussion topics including questions about courses, best residence halls to live in, clubs to join, and much more. The group was also a place for us to post pictures of residence hall rooms as students tried to think of what to pack. We were able to “message” [a Facebook e-mail] the whole group with reminders about everything from forms that were due to more immediate “hot topics” like which students should be taking math and chemistry placement tests. Many first-year students also sent messages to Allegheny’s administrators on Facebook with private questions they didn’t feel comfortable posting on the wall of the group. The Class of 2013 group, private Facebook messages, and Facebook chat replaced the many phone calls the Learning Commons would get from first-year students and their parents over the summer.

After seeing how often students were writing on the Class of 2013 Facebook wall, we decided to try communicating with our incoming students through other social networking sites. The Office of Public Affairs at Allegheny had already used YouTube frequently to post videos so prospective students, alums, donors, and other constituents could stay up-to-date on current events at the college. The Learning Commons decided to use YouTube to address some concerns our incoming students often have over the summer in a fun and informative way. A major challenge we face in preparing for orientation at Allegheny is that our students don’t register for their courses until two days before classes actually start. Anxiety within the class is high over the summer as they hear from their friends attending other institutions with course schedules in hand in June and July. We chose two topics that seem to cause the most anxiety for our incoming students, created videos addressing those issues, and posted them on YouTube.

The first topic was the selection of a “First Year Seminar,” otherwise known at Allegheny as FS 101. First-year students are asked to submit their top seven FS 101 choices in June and are informed of their course placement in July. Based on the many questions students were posting on the Facebook group’s wall, we made a short video titled “FS Selection Made Easy” and posted it to our orientation website, the Facebook Class of 2013 group site, and Allegheny’s YouTube site (www.youtube.com/alleghenycollege).

The next video we made was titled “Class Registration: Demystified” and posted to the same sites. Both of these videos answered questions that were commonly asked on Facebook or by students and parents calling the Learning Commons. By the end of the summer, the FS selection video was viewed 414 times, and the course registration video was viewed 593 times. It took our two student staff members a couple of hours to make the videos and post them online, but it saved us time answering hundreds of phone calls about these topics so we could

spend our time doing other orientation prep work.

The third social networking site we decided to try using in our summer communication was Twitter. On a postcard we sent home to students reminding them about orientation in August, we included a graphic encouraging students to “sign up to receive up to the minute orientation text message updates.” The students themselves never actually had to sign up for Twitter. They simply had to text “follow alleghenyorient” to the number 40404, and Twitter signed them up as “followers” of alleghenyorient (our username). Then, anytime a video was posted online or a deadline for a form was coming up, a Learning Commons staff member could write a quick, 140-character message letting the students know, and that message was sent to their cell phones as a text message. Over the summer most “tweets” [Twitter updates] were deadline reminders or notifications about new content on the Facebook group or orientation website.

By August, 182 students chose to receive the text updates, but the number of students actually reached was on display the final night of orientation. During the annual All College Celebration, a social event that takes place in our Campus Center, an administrator would send out tweets to have students go to various places in the buildings to get prizes. For example, one tweet read, “The first person to bring a picture of Chompers, our mascot, on their phone to the air hockey table in the game room gets a prize!” When that tweet was sent out, large packs of students could be seen crowded around one of their friends who received the text message. Tweets could also be sent to remind students of a program or to notify them of a change to the schedule. Twitter was extremely effective tool for enabling one person to communicate with a large number of first-year students quickly.

As Allegheny prepared for August 2010 orientation, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter figured prominently in our plans. In an effort to be fiscally and environmentally responsible, the Learning Commons once again cut down on the number of mailings and instead utilized these social networking sites to communicate with incoming students. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are all free, user-friendly sites our first-year students use frequently. Therefore, Allegheny College’s small orientation team will continue to meet students where they already are and look forward to seeing the same exciting results.