Organizational Influences and Constraints on Community College Web-based Media Relations

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Various organizational, departmental, and interdepartmental factors influence how an educational institution practices public relations. These factors may enable or hinder the ways in which communication practitioners build and maintain relationships with the media. Higher education institutions are especially in need of public relations efforts. The general public is largely unaware that community colleges enroll nearly half of all students in higher education—more than 11 million annually (Hutchins & Brock, 2006). It is through media relations that community colleges can tell their story. The purpose of this paper is to explore how internal organizational dynamics influence the use of web sites for media relations of community colleges in New Jersey. The findings suggest that the success of the web-based media relations initiatives is largely dependent on two organizational factors: (a) the level of control that the public relations practitioners have over the web site, and (b) whether or not the practitioners are able to get diverse organizational and stakeholder interests to agree on the web site’s purpose. This paper discusses the implications of these findings for community college institutions.

Web sites have emerged as important tools in how organizations communicate with publics and the media. Although all types of organizations would benefit from better web site design, Kang and Norton (2006) and McAllister and Taylor (2007) have identified colleges and universities as organizations that could do more to improve their web sites for media relations. Community colleges need to develop positive and continual relationships with internal and external stakeholders, and their web sites have the potential to promote these relationships (Hegeman, Davies, & Banning, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to understand how community college communication practitioners view and use the potential of web sites in building relationships with the media. More specifically, it seeks to understand the various internal organizational dynamics that influence community college web site design for media relations. The first part of this paper provides a brief overview of the Internet as a mediated tool in community
college-media relationships. The second part of the paper outlines the methodology used to study how practitioners in New Jersey’s community colleges view the potential of the Internet in their jobs. The final sections report and discuss the implications of this study for Internet-facilitated media relations for community college institutions.

WEB SITES AS THE NEXUS OF NEW MEDIA RELATIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Organizational Use of the Internet to Facilitate Media Coverage

The use of Internet technologies is gaining increasing attention from public relations practitioners and scholars. Public relations professionals should use the web in two ways: (a) to subsidize information for journalists, and (b) to fulfill strategic objectives in their advocacy role for the organization (Shin & Cameron, 2003). Indeed, in an exploratory survey of how public relations educators can best prepare graduates for the demands of the public relations profession, Gower and Cho (2001) found that the Internet has changed the way traditional public relations tactics were used to deliver messages to key audiences. The Internet provides an opportunity to expand the role of public relations (Gower & Cho, 2001).

New media technology impacts practitioners’ and journalists’ activities in source-reporter relationships (Shin & Cameron, 2003). The web makes the public relations role much broader and provides both opportunities and challenges for practitioners in media relations. Newland Hill and White (2000) studied practitioner perceptions of the web as a tool for communication. They found that public relations practitioners did not get enough training, have enough time, or obtain enough organizational resources to maximize the potential of the web in media relations. Newland Hill and White called webbed public relations a B-list job that often took a backseat to other more pressing matters (2000). The web site has become one more job added to a long list of tasks including marketing, advertising, employee relations, government relations, and publication design.

Gregory (2004) has argued that the scope of public relations activities is largely dependent on organizational and cultural factors. Community colleges have unique needs in that they are evolving into large-scale organizations that embody a tension between forces of cohesion (dynamics holding an institution together) and fragmentation (dynamics dividing an institution into parts) (Alfred, 2008). This tension in internal organizational relationships and factors influences external relationships with publics and the media. Pavlik and Dozier (1996) surveyed companies that were in the early stages of diffusing media relations tactics into their web sites. They found that there were a variety of factors that influence decisions regarding what content to offer and how the site is to be used. Many organizations in their study noted that there were competing goals for the web, site and this would influence its design and function. Pavlik and Dozier (1996) recounted how one organization refused to take time to answer the researchers’ questions: “Unfortunately, we must decline to participate in your study at this time, mainly because we are really busy trying to figure out how to develop our Internet services. :-)” (Pavlik & Dozier, p. 8, emoticon in original). The internal debate about how to develop the Internet services appeared to be influencing not only the eventual content of the site, but also the ability of the organization to even get their site uploaded.
There are many internal issues that influence all parts of public relations. For instance, in many organizations, the public relations function is managed by the marketing director. This situation, known as encroachment (Lauzen, 1992), will influence how public relations is practiced. When encroachment occurs, public relations frequently becomes little more than a technical support function servicing other units of the organization—rather than a central management function in itself (Lauzen, 1992). Feminist public relations scholars have suggested that the organizational environment may be the reason some female public relations practitioners lack influence in their organizations (O’Neil, 2003). Kent (2001) argued that the web—guided by technical and creative limitations—is composed of diverse communities guided more by organizational principles of anonymity than by communal principles of collaboration and camaraderie. This lack of cooperation is negatively impacting the practitioners’ ability to build and maintain dialogic relationships via the Internet (Kent, 2001).

Other organizational issues might impact how the public relations department determines the objectives of the site. Is the web site’s goal to be a merely an online brochure, is it a sales vehicle, does it seek to attract members, or does it seek to inform the media about the organization? Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) noted that activist organizations that seek to be more membership driven had more dialogic web sites than those activist groups that merely sought to use their web sites to publicize the misdeeds of corporations.

Another organizational issue influencing web site design is whether the public relations function is involved in maintaining the site and whether the public relations department supplies and/or manages the content for the site. If the information technology unit of the organization manages the web site, the design of the site will mostly likely be different than if the public relations function manages it. Newland Hill and White (2000) found that many practitioners lack sufficient resources for web site development and maintenance. This may also influence site design and its value for media relations.

Callison (2003), Gower and Cho (2001), and most recently, Gonzalez-Herrero and Ruiz (2006) have explored practitioners’ assessments of how they adapt traditional media relations practices to the new technologies. The literature suggests that practitioner use of web sites in communication with publics reflects an assumption of the empowering potential of the Internet (Porter, Sallot, Cameron, & Schamp, 2001; Porter & Sallot, 2005; Sallot, Porter, & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004). These articles point to the web as having great potential to be a key public relations tool; however, many articles in the research literature indicate that the web is not being used to its full potential in media relations (Callison, 2003).

Johnson (1997) first reported that practitioners’ use of the web empowered them to improve productivity and efficiency when conducting media relations. Callison’s (2003) content analysis of all the Fortune 500 company web sites from 2001 revealed that the majority of web sites did not have dedicated press rooms where media content was centralized. Of the sites that offered press rooms, the most common materials offered include news releases, executive biographies, and executive photographs. The findings also indicated that the sites of the higher-ranking companies provided press rooms and materials in the press room more often than lower-ranking companies (Callison, 2003).

In an analysis of 120 corporate web sites, Gonzalez-Herrero and Ruiz (2006) emphasized the importance of offering web-based media centers. They argued that these centers would allow the organization to meet journalists’ demands for information and audiovisual resources. Gonzalez-Herrero and Ruiz’s (2006) study shows that effective use of the web in certain areas
coexists with significant shortcomings of web site use in other areas. This inconsistency results in poor press rooms that may not achieve the desired public relations objectives. This is particularly true for the large international companies that appear to be missing out on the relationship building function of the Internet (Gonzalez-Herrero & Ruiz, 2006).

**Relationship Building through Web Sites**

Many scholars have attempted to show the potential of the Internet for relationship building. In the early years of web site research, Coombs (1998) and Heath (1998) wrote about the great potential of the Internet for organizations to participate in public debate. They showed how individuals and groups could use the web to communicate their position to the media and to the world. Coombs (1998) and Heath (1998) viewed the Internet and organizational web sites as possible “equilizers” that would put activist groups on level footing with large corporations.

At the same time, Kent and Taylor (1998) argued dialogic theory could help us to understand the Internet in its important role in relationship building with the media and publics. Kent and Taylor proposed five features that web sites could incorporate that would enhance mediated dialogue with the media and publics. These features included usefulness of information, ease of use, dialogic loop, generating return visits, and conservation of visitors. Later work by Kent and Taylor tested to see if organizations were indeed incorporating these dialogic features into their web site design (Kent, Taylor & White, 2003; Taylor et al., 2001). Other scholars have continued to refine the dialogic research of web sites. Some have examined usability of web sites (Hallahan, 2001; McAllister-Spooner, 2008; Vorvoreanu, 2006). And others have looked specifically at how sites serve media needs (Reber & Kim, 2006). The findings are mixed. The full promise of dialogic web site design, especially for media relations, has yet to be determined.

**Media Reliance on Web Sites**

Journalists regularly use online tools for researching and reporting. To discover what journalists from newspapers, magazines, and online publications were looking for in corporate web sites, Bransford (2001) surveyed 72 journalists. The findings revealed that 90% of reporters confirmed that they used the web to gather information about a company. However, the journalists reported that they were not finding what they were looking for a majority of the time. The journalists indicated that they liked the immediate delivery capabilities of the web and that they would scan the site before calling the public relations representative. The journalists often commented that press releases, corporate information, or contact information could not be found on the web site (Bransford, 2001). This is a missed opportunity in media relations.

Hachigian and Hallahan (2003) explored usage and perceptions of public relations web sites as a newsgathering tool. Their work was based on the theoretical framework of journalistic conventions and routines. Hachigian and Hallahan (2003) found that the information value of the content, source credibility and reputation, perceptions about cost- and time-savings, and self-reported total hours of use were all critical predictors of web use. This study advanced understanding of how public relations practitioners might take better advantage of web sites by focusing on journalists’ assessments of this important new communications technology.
The data suggested that content quality is a critical issue in whether or not public-relations-generated-materials make it into news coverage. Information quality includes the value of the web site’s content as well as its usability (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003).

High quality content, especially for political candidate web sites, is key to agenda setting (Ku, Kaid, & Pfau, 2003). In their analysis of presidential web sites from the 2000 presidential election, Ku et al. noted that “a political candidate who wants to run a web site needs to focus on direct web site strategies to reach online users, as well as provide news releases for the traditional news media” (2003, p. 544). Ku et al. found that journalists and editors are indeed integrating web site content into their news coverage of candidates and political platforms.

The research reviewed above shows that the media rely on web sites for news content and that many organizations are failing to provide useful and easily accessible information to the media. The question then to be asked is why do organizations fail to fulfill a basic public relations function? The answer may be found in a variety of internal organizational relationships. web site design may often reflect organizational issues rather than an acknowledgment of media needs.

**Different Types of Organizations Have Different Media Relations Needs**

Ryan (2003) hypothesized that different types of organizations may have different needs influencing web site design. That is, internal needs may actually influence relationship building with external publics. A brief review of web site research in public relations confirms Ryan’s observation.

**Corporations**

Corporations are using their web sites to communicate their corporate social responsibility (Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 1999, 2000). The Fortune 500 companies appear to be using their sites for philanthropy and crisis communication (Greer & Moreland, 2007).

**Activists**

Taylor et al. (2001) and Kent et al. (2003) studied environmental activist organizations. Their research found that activists are effective in using the Internet to provide useful information to a variety of publics including the media. Reber and Kim (2006) specifically studied media relations of environmental activists’ sites and noted that activist web sites did not provide strong dialogic features for journalists, but dialogic features were more available for the general public. Furthermore, although some of the general ease-of-use measures were present, there was a relative lack of features that might make the web sites easy for journalists to use (Reber & Kim, 2006).

**Educational Institutions**

There are only a few articles about the use of the web for media relations by higher education institutions (Poock & Lefond, 2001, 2003). Kang and Norton (2006) reported on how higher education institutions are using their web sites. Although the universities offered simplified
design, minimal navigation menus, high navigation speed, and inclusion of site maps, they were greatly lacking in the area of creating synchronous dialogic loops with the targeted publics (Kang & Norton, 2006). Will and Callison (2006) sampled and analyzed nearly 4,000 U.S.-based college and university web sites. They found that higher education organizations employ the Internet to communicate with prospective donors, faculty and staff, and students (Will & Callison, 2006).

Regarding community colleges, McAllister and Taylor (2007) found that New Jersey’s community colleges were only using the Internet for early relationship-building functions and that, although they appeal to a variety of publics, more attention to the dialogic potential of the Internet can better adapt to the needs of their various publics such as the media (McAllister & Taylor, 2007). Similarly, although Poock and Andrews Bishop (2006) and Hegeman et al. (2007) offer recommendations for community colleges to build and maintain relationships via the Internet with key stakeholders, they neglect to consider the information needs of the media. This study seeks to fill the voids in the literature by posing the following research question:

RQ1: How do community college practitioners view the role of the Internet in the creation and formation of relationships with the media?

A review of the literature also reveals that few studies have examined how internal organizational factors influence externally focused web-based public relations efforts. This current study seeks to fill that void by posing a second research question:

RQ2: What types of internal organizational factors influence the creation and formation of community college media relationships via the Internet?

The first two research questions provide evidence of the community college practitioner perceptions of the Internet in media relations and the types of factors that influence their web site designs in media relations. The researchers wanted to explore if a relationship exists between practitioner perceptions of web sites for media relations and the actual design features of their web site. In other words, if community college practitioners rate certain dialogic features as important, are they following through on that value by incorporating those features into their own web sites for media relations?

H1: There is a relationship between community college practitioner perceptions of their web sites and actual utilization of dialogic media relations tactics.

Taken together, the two research questions and the hypothesis will provide practitioner perspectives of the role that the Internet plays in community college public relations, particularly in the areas of relationship-building and fostering dialogue with media publics.

METHOD

Sample

The sample of this study reflects an interest in understanding community colleges. The rationale is that community colleges as a group face similar public relations needs for their Web sites.
And, perhaps more importantly, the practitioners face similar internal factors that will influence how they conduct media relations. As a public institution, the community college depends upon securing financial revenue from a variety of sources (Kenton, Schuh, Huba, & Shelley, 2004). As an economic and cultural core of local communities, the success of a college or university and its local community may depend on how effectively it maintains mutually beneficial relationships with its local community (Kim, Brunner, & Fitch-Hauser, 2006).

Jaschik (2006), higher education editor for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, maintains that in an era of 24/7 news cycles, public trust, accessibility, and accountability are key factors in garnering media coverage. According to Jaschik, community colleges often lack media coverage. The public does not have a clear understanding of community colleges, and media coverage is the best way to educate the public. This is problematic because, as Jaschik explains, as an economic and cultural core of local communities, the success of a college depends on how effectively it reaches and serves the public (Jaschik, 2006).

Indeed, media relations are a core public relations function for community colleges. Because of the size of the state, the density of the population, and their close proximity to major cities such as Philadelphia and New York, the 19 community colleges in New Jersey compete for coverage in the same media outlets. They also compete for students. This sample is a starting point for understanding educational institutions in general and community colleges in particular. It provides baseline data to view Internet media relations.

The study employed survey methodology. The sampling frame includes the entire population (N = 19) of community college public relations directors located in New Jersey. These practitioners are all members of the New Jersey Council of Community Colleges (NJCCC). The rationale for choosing colleges from one state is to have a representative pool of institutions. Participants were identified the New Jersey Council of Community Colleges and asked to participate. Of the 19 public relations executives invited to participate, over 89% responded (n = 17).

The Survey Instrument

A survey measured community college practitioner perceptions of the importance and utility of dialogic media relations tactics. This survey was based on Kent and Taylor (1998) categories. The anonymity and confidentiality of the subjects was preserved in all phases of the research. A pretest of the survey was performed by a former director of public relations at one of the community colleges. Revisions were made to the survey.

In addition to collecting descriptive data regarding departmental staff and budget allocations, the preliminary questions are designed to provide the public relations functions of the college’s web site including baseline knowledge of the primary purposes for which the Internet is being used by practitioners, the primary tools they use on the Internet, and their primary methods of evaluating their public relations efforts on the Internet (nine items ranging from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree).

Based on the research design of Johnson (1997), Newland Hill and White (2000), Gower and Cho (2001), Ryan (2003), Sallot et al. (2004), and Porter and Sallot (2005), the second set of questions taps into public relations perceptions of the importance of offering dialogic features (23 items ranging from very important to unimportant).
As set forth by Callison (2003) and Johnson (1997) the third set of questions tapped into public relations perceptions of the ease and/or difficulties of offering dialogic features (17 items ranging from very strongly agree to very strongly disagree).

To answer RQ1, the survey asked community college practitioners about their perceptions about the importance of offering links for contacting experts in the field, links to news releases, links to downloadable information, links to annual reports, links to philosophy mission statements, and links to speeches and/or policy papers. The questions were posed on seven-point Likert scales ranging from -3 (extremely negative) to 3 (extremely positive), with 0 indicating neutral assessments of the given feature. Means and standard deviations of the collective features will be calculated.

To answer RQ2, the survey asked community college practitioners about their perceptions of the importance of offering useful information for media publics. Participants were asked whether the public relations department determines the objectives of the site, whether they are personally and intimately involved in maintaining the site, and whether the public relations department supplies a great deal of content for the site. The questions were posed on a seven-point Likert scales ranging from -3 (extremely negative) to 3 (extremely positive), with 0 indicating neutral assessments of the given feature. Means and standard deviations of the collective features will be calculated.

To test H1, community college practitioners’ perceptions of the importance of offering Dialogic Feedback Loop features for media publics were assessed by asking whether the web site allows the public relations department to communicate more effectively with the college’s publics, whether the college’s site allows the public to communicate more effectively with the public relations department, whether offering links that facilitate two-way communication are important, whether colleges should supply links for gathering the publics’ ideas, and whether links for contacting staff, administration, and governing boards should be offered.

To test the hypothesis about the relationship between community college practitioner ratings of their respective web sites and utilization of dialogic media relations tactics, the researchers employed a stepwise multiple regression analysis. Stepwise regression was selected because it systematically adds variables in order of importance. Furthermore, it removes any variables already in the model that are no longer significant predictors. This approach allows for the presentation of a more parsimonious model. One caveat is needed: the stepwise regression does not explore curvilinear relationships among the independent variables as they explain the dependent variable.

RESULTS

Perceptions of the Importance of Dialogic Media Relations

RQ1 asked how community college practitioners view the role of the Internet in the creation and formation of media relationships. Table 1 reports the practitioner perceptions of the importance and utilization of Kent and Taylor’s dialogic media relations features. The results support the findings of Ryan (2003), in that the practitioners overwhelmingly agreed that it is necessary to offer many information features for the media.

The perceived importance of offering content about news, leadership, products, and services is high as indicated by the scores for offering links to downloadable information ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.94$), annual reports ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.43$), philosophy/mission statements ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.04$), and speeches and policy papers ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.43$).
According to Ryan (2003), public relations practitioners report that news releases are perceived as one of the most important content items. This research supports those findings in that the respondents overwhelmingly indicated that offering links to news releases is important ($M = 2.53, SD = 1.0$). Practitioners also agreed that it is necessary to offer graphic and multimedia elements such as the college logo; photographs of the facilities, faculty, and students; and striking graphics on college web sites. The respondents also believe that it is important to offer links to virtual tours and streaming video.

### Table 1
Practitioner Assessments of Dialogic Media Relations Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale item</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Useful information features (nine items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine objectives of the site</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimately involved in site maintenance</td>
<td>.875</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oversee content</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of links for contacting experts</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of links to news releases</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to downloadable information</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of links to the annual report</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of links to philosophy/mission statements</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of links to speeches and policy papers</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ease of interface features (three items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to ensure the site is easy to navigate</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to ensure the site is well organized</td>
<td>-.125</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to ensure the site is easy to find</td>
<td>-.063</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conservation of visitors features (nine items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to ensure the site is easily accessible</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to ensure that site loads quickly</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of college logo on every page</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of photographs of the facilities</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of photographs of the faculty</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of photographs of the students</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of striking graphics</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>.996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of virtual tours</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of streaming video</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generation of return visitor (two items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to ensure the content is accurate</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of downloadable forms</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>.588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dialogic feedback loop features (eight items)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site enables PR department to communicate with publics</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site enables publics to communicate with PR department</td>
<td>-.059</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites should provide two-way links</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites should provide links for comments</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>.827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of direct links to PR department</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of direct links to college administrators</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of direct links to the governing board</td>
<td>.588</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of links to gather ideas</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>.992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. $N = 17$.*
The intrinsic interactivity of the web distinguishes itself from the traditional media. Regarding Feedback Loop features, the community college practitioners agreed that it is important to offer two-way communication opportunities for users to provide feedback \((M = 1.88, SD = 1.16)\). Respondents reported that sites should provide links for submitting comments, complaints, and suggestions \((M = 2.06, SD = .827)\), and that web sites should provide two-way links \((M = 1.53, SD = 1.69)\), as well as links to collect ideas \((M = 1.88, SD = 1.92)\).

Organizational Factors Impacting Dialogic Relationship-Building

RQ2 asked about organizational factors that influence web-based media relations efforts. The scope of public relations activities is largely dependent on organizational and cultural factors. Porter et al. (2001) reported that practitioners’ use of technology can help them gain a seat at the management table. Practitioners can add the responsibility of issues management to their jobs to provide management with information. Table 2 shows the responsibilities of community college public relations practitioners are extensive. Over 94% of the departments are responsible for managing advertising, marketing, media relations, and photography. Furthermore, many of the departments had the added responsibility of managing publications and graphic design, web design and content management, enrollment management, government relations, development and alumni relations, television and radio facilities, and fundraising activities. The media relations function is part of 94% of the respondents’ jobs, but only 74% reported that they are responsible for the web site.

**Web Management**

The respondents reported that content is also overseen by key stakeholders in the enrollment-management departments, information technology departments, and learning resources departments. For nearly 60% of the colleges, content is maintained through one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>n%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photography</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic design</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web site management</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment management</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government relations</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development/alumni</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV/radio facilities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 17.*
centralized department. This helps the organizations to maintain consistent messaging. Forty seven percent of the public relations departments are responsible for establishing design standards.

Lack of Funding and Resources

Practitioners noted that a web site symbolizes an organization’s competitiveness, enhances an organization’s image, and increases the practitioner’s personal sense of professionalism. The results show, however, that practitioners often have the responsibility for their web site without additional resources to maintain it. In this particular study, 75% of the practitioners report that the public relations staff is interested in Web development, but 53% reported that they have not received sufficient technical training. Over 35% reported that they do not receive sufficient conceptual training. The practitioners also reported that they have difficulties getting diverse interests to agree on the site’s purpose. Finding time to develop and refine web sites is also a factor. More than half of the practitioners report not having sufficient time to devote to web initiatives. More importantly, finding monetary resources to support for web initiatives is also a problem.

Newland Hill and White (2000) reported that working on the web site was a low priority. The respondents reported that the percentage of the total departmental budget allocated to webbed communications ranged from 0 to 18%. This amount pales in comparison to the percentage of their budget allocated to print communications (4% to 95% of overall budget). For dialogic communication to take place on the web there must be a commitment of resources on the part of the web site providers. In the current study, the data suggest there is a lack of organizational commitment to supporting dialogic public relations practices via the Internet for the New Jersey community colleges. This can influence relationship-building efforts with the media.

Relationship Between Practitioners’ Ideal Sites and Utilization of Dialogic Features

H1 inquired if there were relationships between community college practitioner perceptions of their web sites and actual utilization of dialogic media relations tactics. That is, do the practitioners who value dialogic media relations actually create/maintain web sites that embrace this philosophy? A stepwise regression tested this proposition. Items measuring the utilization of Useful Information features included in the model were “public relations office determines the objectives of the site,” “public relations office is intimately involved in site maintenance,” and “public relations office oversees the content.” Items measuring the utilization of Ease of Interface features included in the model were “ability to ensure the site is easy to navigate,” “ability to ensure the site is well organized,” and “ability to ensure the site is easy to find.” Items measuring the utilization of Conservation of Visitors features included in the model were “ability to ensure the site is easily accessible” and “ability to ensure the site loads quickly.” The item measuring the utilization of Generation of Return Visitors feature included in the model was “ability to ensure the content is accurate.” Items measuring the utilization of Dialogic Feedback Loop features included in the model were “site enables the public relations staff to communicate with publics” and “site enables public to communicate with the college.” Assumptions were tested by examining normal probability plots, residuals and scatter diagrams of residuals versus predicted residuals. No violations of normality,
linearity, or homoscedasticity of residuals were detected. In addition, box plots revealed no evidence of outliers.

Results of the stepwise regression revealed three models that significantly predicted the ratings of the web sites, $F(3, 13) = 13.12, p = .001$, $F(2, 13) = 9.76, p = .004$, and $F(3, 13) = 13.12, p = .001$. The models—responsible for considerable variance, 68.8%, 45.4%, and 80%, respectively—retained three items ("ability to ensure the site is easily accessible," "public relations office oversees the content," and "public relations office is intimately involved in site maintenance").

These findings indicate that the level of control that the community college public relations practitioners have over content, maintenance, and accessibility directly impacts their ratings of the respective sites. Table 3 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients (B), intercept, and standardized regression coefficients ($\beta$) for each variable in the respective models.

In terms of individual relationships between the independent variables and the practitioners’ ideal site features, "ability to ensure the site is easily accessible" ($t = 3.29, p = .006$); "public relations office oversees the content" ($t = -2.25, p = .046$); and "public relations office is intimately involved in site maintenance" ($t = 2.79, p = .019$) each significantly predicted site ratings. Together those variables contributed 79.9% in shared variability. Most germane to this current study is that "ability to ensure the site is easily accessible" contributed 47.4% in shared variability with the dependent variable.

Measures of Association between Organizational Factors and Dialogic Feature Utilization

To test the impact of internal organizational factors on dialogic web site design for external media relations, the researchers added the following organizational factors into the model: "ability to get diverse interests to agree on the site’s purpose," "ability to receive financial support for web initiatives," "ability to receive administrative direction for web initiatives," and "ability to receive necessary time to devote to web initiatives." The results of the stepwise regression revealed one model that significantly predicted the ratings of the web sites, $f(1, 12) = 7.39, p = .020$. Interestingly, the model—responsible for 40.2% of the variance—dropped all items except "ability to get diverse interests to agree on the site’s purpose." Table 4 displays the unstandardized regression coefficient (B), intercept, and standardized regression coefficient ($\beta$) for the variable in the respective model.
Of all the potential organizational factors, the findings of the regression analysis indicate that the success of community college web-based public relations media initiatives is largely dependent on the level of control that the public relations office has over the site and whether or not the practitioners are able to get diverse interests to agree on the web site’s purpose.

DISCUSSION: A MATTER OF CONTROL

The results suggest three important findings that can better help us to understand the opportunities and challenges of the mediated public relations efforts of community colleges. First, community college practitioners have multiple responsibilities that shape how they use their web sites for media relations. Second, there are a variety of organizational factors that shape the outcome of a community college’s web site design. The third finding of this study suggests that the inability to get diverse interests to agree on the very purpose of the site may undermine the dialogic promise for community colleges.

Too Many Responsibilities?

The practitioners who work in these departments have multiple, and sometimes competing, responsibilities. Table 2 shows all of the tasks accomplished by the public relations departments of the New Jersey community colleges. The responsibilities have the potential to shape how they use their web sites for media relations. These roles may be at odds with the goals of public relations and may have the community college practitioner design sites for marketing or advertising functions.

Lauzen (1992) has argued that encroachment can be a serious issue for professionalism in public relations. The convergence of reported roles in marketing, advertising, and public relations (all at 94%) suggests that community colleges view these three functions as the foundational and, perhaps, even convergent responsibilities of the public relations department.

Competing Internal Interests Influence External Relations

Gregory (2004) argued that public relations outcomes are often shaped by internal factors. There are a variety of organizational factors that shape the outcome of web site design. Thorton (2000)
notes that the relationship between a reporter and a communication officer requires three things: understanding, respect, and trust. Jaschik (2006) supports Thorton’s assertion, and he notes the competition for media coverage is fierce. Community colleges are “more public than other public institutions” and, thus, are held accountable to the publics that fund them (Jaschik, 2006).

The data suggest that a community college public relations practitioner’s most significant task may be in getting diverse interests to agree on the very purpose of the site. There are various stakeholders that have an interest in the content and design of a web site. Not all of the stakeholders may agree with the dialogic perspective of public relations. Heath et al. (2006) contend that one of the impediments to dialogue is the tendency for people to believe that they can guide, manipulate, and shape the process to achieve the outcome they prefer from the start. The data for the current study suggest that the practitioners lack the power and control to facilitate dialogic public relations tactics. The current study supports Kent’s (2001) findings that web site design is influenced by technical, creative, and collaborative limitations. This lack of cooperation is negatively impacting the community college practitioners’ ability to build and maintain dialogic media relationships via the Internet.

Implications for Communication Practitioners

Based on the adage of “thinking globally and acting locally,” community colleges will need to embrace new technologies as they try to maintain or increase market share in a world of new educational players, new rules, and ever-more demanding stakeholders. The world of community colleges could be described as disequilibrium and hyper competition (Alfred, 2008) that requires a sophisticated media relations strategy. The goal of this research is not only to identify the factors that may be influencing community college media relations, but also to help communication professionals at community colleges to institutionalize dialogic relationship-building efforts with the media. Based on the data and the public relations literature, Table 5 identifies seven recommended organizational changes. At the heart of any effort to improve web-based media relations needs to be the creation of policies and procedures that define the roles and responsibilities of all organizational stakeholders involved with the site. Each community college needs to decide who controls the content and look of the site.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practical Recommendations to Institutionalize Dialogic Relationship-building with Media</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. It’s a matter of policy: Implement policies and procedures that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all organizational stakeholders involved with the site.</td>
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<td>2. Get buy-in from the top: Get executive approval of all policies and procedures and give regular reports of progress.</td>
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<td>3. Allocate resources: Reevaluate and redistribute staff and funding allocations for web-based communications.</td>
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<td>4. Accuracy is key: Conduct regularly scheduled institution-wide content audits. Be sure to identify content managers and establish realistic time schedules.</td>
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<td>5. Ease of use: Regularly test the ease of use and navigation by conducting usability studies.</td>
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<td>6. Collect and disseminate feedback: Take advantage of the technological tools—there are many automated programs that collect, store, and disseminate user feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Timely responses: Do not offer e-mail links if they will not be answered within a reasonable time (two days). Create immediate responses telling the visitor that their message has been received.</td>
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</table>
Web sites will also benefit when the college leaders approve these policies and procedures. The person or department responsible for web site control must provide regular progress reports. Web site analytical tools such as Google Analytics, Webtrends, and Statcounter should be used to track media relations traffic.

Each college needs to reevaluate staff and funding allocations. Decisions need to be made to redistribute resources to improve web-based communications. Many community colleges have budgets for print materials, but it may be time to reassess these budgets and devote some of the resources to web design and content.

To accomplish this, the college may want to conduct an institution-wide audit of all external communication messages. During this audit, the content managers can establish realistic time schedules for intradepartment contributions to the web site.

No matter who controls the content and look of the web site, each community college unit must be responsible for testing the ease of use of their portion of the site. This usability test should occur at least every quarter so that any portion of their site that is difficult to use, slow in loading, or has dead end links, can be corrected.

There are so many new technological tools that can now be used to collect data about user feedback. Many educational organizations now have links on the bottom of their pages asking visitors if they found this page useful. This feedback feature would provide useful information in revising the web site and would be a significant part of the dialogic loop needed to improve understanding.

The last suggestion is based on a realistic view of organizational resources. We recommend that community colleges—or individual units within the college—should not offer e-mail links if they will not be answered within a reasonable time. Research by Taylor et al. suggests that two business days is considered an acceptable norm of response. If your unit cannot ensure a two-day response to visitor questions, then reconsider the use of the e-mail link. Instead, consider posting a “frequently asked questions” link that may be able to address most questions.

Community colleges will benefit when they use their web sites to better serve their publics and the media. This means giving the web site the same type of close read and close attention to detail the course catalogue or the annual report receives. As Kang and Norton note, higher education institutions are only using their web sites to offer simplified design, minimal navigation menus, high navigation speed, and inclusion of site maps. These institutions lack the commitment to create synchronous dialogic loops with the targeted publics, and this research study tells us the organizational factors that explain such a disconnect.

CONCLUSION

The authors would be remiss not to note that there are a number of limitations to this current investigation. However, these limitations, in combination with the findings discussed previously, can provide the basis for further research. Although the New Jersey colleges researched constitute a complete population, the small number of cases (19 colleges) limits the generalizability of the results to community colleges beyond New Jersey. Porter et al. (2001) have argued that there is value to such studies because they provide propositions for consideration by researchers. To validate and extend the generalizability of the results, future researchers should consider replicating the study with a different sample in a different state. Given the small sample size of...
practitioners from the same geographic region of the United States, the findings should be taken more as a series of propositions worth considering rather than a definitive reading of practitioner perceptions of dialogic media relations practices via the Internet. To gain a better understanding of the organizational factors inhibiting dialogic public relations practices at community colleges, future research should consider surveying executive-level administrators, as well as stakeholders of these institutions.

Yet, even recognizing these minor limitations, we have a baseline to better understand community college media relations via the Internet. The findings of this current study support Grunig’s (1992) argument that too often public relations practitioners lack the formal authority for action. Web sites are very poorly used dialogic tools for community college public relations. The data support previous findings that organizational web sites acknowledge the importance of multiple publics or audiences, but they often fail to provide media and visitors with key information and experiences. The data also support the authors’ claim that there seems to be a gap between acknowledging the importance of the concerns of a public and actually engaging that same public interactively. Researchers need to continue to explore the internal organizational factors that are influencing external media relationships in all types of educational institutions.

REFERENCES


