Community college web sites as tools for fostering dialogue

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Abstract

This research brief reports the results of an analysis of community college Web sites as places for fostering dialogic relationships with key publics. Our research suggests that community colleges have created easy to use, information sites that appeal to a variety of publics. With a more attention to the dialogic potential of the Internet, community colleges can better adapt to the needs of their various publics.

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1. Introduction

Many of us cringe when we look at our department’s or college’s Web site. We know the potential of a carefully designed site. For some educational institutions, their Web sites may be the difference between surviving or thriving. This article examines community college Web sites as cyber sites for fostering dialogue and forming organization-public relationships. The interactive character of the Internet gives public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics about a variety of issues.

Community colleges have become complex organizations influenced by changes in technology and market needs. For instance, they need to know what skills local businesses seek. They also need to know what skills their community members’ desire. Furthermore, with more students entering community colleges directly from high school, the communication links between community colleges and secondary schools have become more crucial than ever. Today, many schools seek to increase enrollment and this demands that colleges get their message out to broader audiences. Community college Web sites are transitioning from a tool to promote programs or events to a tool for creating a relationship between the institution and its key publics. To better understand the communication potential of these Web sites, the researchers asked the following questions:

RQ1: Who are the target publics of community college Web sites?
RQ2: What are the dialogic characteristics of community college Web sites?
2. Methodology of the study

This research content analyzed the entire population of nineteen New Jersey Community Colleges. The 19 community colleges were evaluated on an 11-part, 52-item scale, modified from the dialogic scale first introduced by Kent and Taylor (1998), and later refined by the authors. Cohen’s Kappa coefficient showed the overall level of reliability between the two coders as .942.

3. Results of the content analysis

RQ1 inquires about the target publics of community college Web sites. Community college sites are designed to provide information to four main publics. The first public was students/prospective students. The second group was employees/prospective employees. The third group was external stakeholders comprised of political leaders at municipal, county, state, and national levels, business and industry leaders, past, current, and future Trustees and Foundation members; alumni and/or potential donors. The final group identified is the media.

The researchers inquired if these Web sites were meeting the information needs of these four publics. For general student publics (M= 9.68, S= 1.06), 47% of the sites offered online applications, 58% offered online registration and course searches, nearly 90% offered downloadable forms, 63% offered “click and submit” forms, nearly 21% of the sites offered electronic versions of the catalog, and nearly 37% offered virtual campus tours.

Regarding features of usefulness of information specific to employees/prospective employees (M=2.47, S=1.02), nearly 90% of the sites offered an employment opportunities section, 68% offered fair business statements, and 74% offered college policies and procedures. Seventy-nine percent of the sites offered a separate human resources section that provided information about cultural diversity, civic involvement, and quality of work life.

When the features of usefulness of information specific to external stakeholders were examined (M= 4.68, S= 1.16), 79% of the sites displayed the college’s accreditations, 26% offered annual reports, 100% offered career placement services, 95% offered continuing education opportunities, 80% offered information on how to contribute to the college, and 90% offered information about workforce and economic development programs.

Regarding features of usefulness of information specific to media publics (M= 4.68, S= 1.16), while 100% of the sites offered time sensitive press releases, only 58% offered a dedicated press room where media content was centralized. Twenty-six percent offered audio and/or video clips and e-newsletters, 68% offered downloadable demographic reports, and 10% offered downloadable logos, graphics and pictures, as well as downloadable speeches and clear statements about the college’s positions on policy issues.

RQ2 inquired about the dialogic characteristics of community college Web sites. Regarding the 11 general features of usefulness of information common to all audiences (M= 9.68, S= 1.06), 100% of the sites identified the constituent base on the home page, offered clear links to the academic, admissions, registration and contact information. For the usefulness of information features, 47% offered online applications, 58% offered online registration and course searches, nearly 90% offered downloadable forms, 63% offered “click and submit” forms, nearly 21% of the Web sites offered electronic versions of the catalog, and nearly 37% offered virtual campus tours.

The ease of interface features appear quite regularly on these Web sites (M = 3.79, S = 1.27). Nearly 90% had major links to the rest of the site clearly identified on the front page, 84% had search engine boxes on the front page, and nearly 79% had site maps clearly identifiable on the front page and utilized self explanatory image maps. Almost 50% integrate slow moving graphics on their sites.

The sites also seek to conserve visitors (M = 1.84, S = .83). Most sites loaded within 3 s on a medium speed, networked computer. Nearly 37% of the sites had a clear posting of the date and time the site was last updated. Nearly 60% provided e-mail links in the “Contact Us” sections, and 68% offered comment response features.

The principle of generation of return visits features (M = 3.42, S = .90) appears to be not as prevalent as other features. Explicit statements inviting visitors to return, or encouraging visitors to “bookmark this page now” were not detected in any of the sites. Over 60% of the sites provided visitors with question and answer formats in the FAQ sections, nearly 95% offered calendars of events, downloadable and regularly updated information, and 90% provided links to outside Web sites.

The data suggest that the dialogic feedback loop features scored very low (M = .95, S = .71). Although 58% of the sites offered opportunities for visitors to send e-mail messages to the organization, only 16% offered the option...
for visitors to fill out surveys. The next section provides an analysis of what these data mean for public relations practitioners at educational institutions.

4. Discussion

4.1. Easy to use sites serve multiple publics' information needs

Research question one inquired about the dialogic features of community college Web sites. The data from the analysis shows mixed findings. Although most community colleges scored high in the usefulness of information and ease of use features, scores on conservation of visitors and dialogic feedback loop features were very low. In an effort to generate return visits, the data indicate that community colleges are using the Internet to keep the diverse publics up to date and are providing useful information to a variety of publics. Colleges also provided links to emphasize unique programs and services for key publics.

4.2. Dialogic limitations

Even if a site follows four of the five dialogic principles, it is not fully dialogic if it does not offer and follow through with two-way communication. Although more than half of the colleges provided e-mail links in the “Contact Us” sections, other interactive features that solicit input and feedback were missing.

The overall lack of interactive features that solicit input and feedback from key stakeholders could directly impact the dialogic potential of these public relations Web sites. The weaknesses detected in dialogic features limits opportunities for public relations practitioners to collect information and monitor public opinion from individuals, as well as regional, state, and federal entities. Furthermore, the absence of feedback opportunities essentially makes these sites one-way communication tools. They are not much different than a printed brochure. This sender-to-receiver focus is not helping to build relationships among key publics.

5. Conclusion

Community colleges need to be able to respond to changes in their environment. As competition for students, resources, and business attention grows, Web sites are the “face” of the college. They often provide the first interaction between the organization and its key publics. Creating interactive strategies such as forums and question and answer formats could lead to relationship building. The future will provide both opportunities and challenges for organizations that serve as social and economic change agents. In such times of transformation, it is fundamental that community colleges, using public relations, keep reliable channels open so that they can adapt to changing public needs. The complete results of the study are available from the first author.
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