“Tell Me What I Need To Know!”: Communicating With Students Effectively

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Why look at communicating with students?

Students need to receive information for Move-In and Room Selection enabling them to participate in processes. We need to use our resources intentionally to provide the most effective delivery of this information.

How can we improve delivery of information to students about Move-In and Room Selection?
There was a lot of information available about using different media effectively, but not much information on what method of communication was most effective in reaching students.

Dawn had already decided to invite students to open forums to get feedback on specific RLSS communications. Adrienne reviewed available online research, and created a questionnaire to be used in conjunction with the forums, which Lacey organized.

This report is based on the available online research, the questionnaire and conversations from the open forums.
Assumptions

1. One method of delivery would work exclusively better than others for a majority of students.

2. We would be able to allocate our communications efforts to the best method of delivery.

3. Because of students’ lifetime exposure to electronic communication, their preferred option for receiving information would be via smartphones.

Not even close!
Online Research

Communications: Effectiveness

http://www.newfangled.com/is_content_marketing_still_good_marketing

This video discussion is not specifically about communicating with students, but it makes the excellent point that the “content strategy” encompassing planned communications such as web, print, email and social media, should be based on genuinely caring (for students and what happens to them).

Empathy puts communications at a higher level beyond providing your audience with what they need to know, and letting them know what’s available for them.

In other words, communications cannot be viewed separately from content. By articulating that empathy clearly and consistently throughout Student Affairs we will be better able to create the supportive environment we want to provide students with at UMass Amherst.

Planning communications, not only in terms of selling a program or an event, but intentionally in terms that resonate with the overarching goals of our department will elevate the quality of communications, and result in greater effectiveness.
Communications: Email Effectiveness

Is Email Obsolete for Communicating with Students? posted by M. Nadeem 10/4/2013
http://www.educationnews.org/technology/is-e-mail-obsolete-for-communicating-with-students/#sthash.Erhu66vA.dpuf

Geared towards educators, the article posits that students don’t check their university email regularly and/or ignore university emails. Suggests best practice for educators is to clearly voice expectation that students will check emails for course updates.

For Student Affairs/Residential Life communication purposes this indicates that there is considerable competition for students attention in their email inboxes. Best practices therefore would be to:
1. Title and format emails to focus attention on deadlines and required actions, and
2. Not rely on email alone to provide information to students.
This is a report on a survey of technology use within the Student Affairs professionals. The results indicated that technology usage among Student Affairs professionals is high for social media, and also high in belief of the importance of social media to student engagement. The conclusion is that technology-based skills for social media, presentation and productivity are desirable for new Student Affairs professionals and should be encouraged.

This study indicates that Student Affairs professionals are using social media technology and believe social media communication to benefit student engagement. However, the survey does not differentiate the types of information provided to students through social media.
Communications: Social Media and Communications Planning

Elements of a Great (Institutional) Social Media Strategy

Hamilton’s Social Media Strategy (and Platform) posted by
Jessica Krywosa eduWeb 2013 8/5/2013
http://www.slideshare.net/jesskry/case-webinar-2013-1-26168749

Response to above posting:
Hamilton College’s “The Scroll” : The Value of an Open
Social Media Policy posted by David McIntyre
http://www.evertrue.com/blog/2013/08/06/hamilton-colleges-totally-open-social-media-policy/
This eduWeb presentation has been repeated in two
slideshares available online. The Eduweb documentation
does not seem to be available online any longer.

Ms. Krywosa’s paper asks for the following research:
• What is the problem we are trying to address
• Who is our audience?
• What does success look like?
• How do they currently engage with us? Do we know their preferences?
• How else have we/do we currently communicate this information?
• What is our call to action for the user?
• Who is our competition? How do they address this?
• What novel ways do other institutions or businesses deal with these issues?
• Are there new tools at our disposal?
• How can we be more creative while reinforcing the brand feeling?

Ms. Krywosa goes on to focus attention on use of social media and the policy developed for Hamilton College, where there is a clear vision of purpose and a wide and open participation.

In a follow-up comment posted by David McIntyre, he points out that it is one approach which works well for the particular style and environment in Hamilton College, but which would not necessarily translate to every institution.

What I found most interesting reading about this project was the preparation. Both research and strategy development were clear and intentional.

It was also made clear that buy-in and implementation must be addressed at the beginning of a communications plan (and I would infer on an ongoing basis) to be successful.
Online Research

Communications: Planning

From prospective students to lifelong learners: how to create a Higher Education ecosystem posted by Sebastien Dignard 7/22/2013

http://digitalbusiness.blogs.xerox.com/2013/07/22/from-prospective-students-to-lifelong-learners-how-to-create-a-higher-education-ecosystem/

This post is about communicating with student throughout their university time and beyond through alumni and donor status.

One interesting point was that students have high expectations from their institutions in terms of technology (in the area of education, but I don’t think it’s limited to that part of their university experience) and infrastructure.

Another was that communications should be customized for students (for instance first-year, transfer, off-campus, etc.) and integrated across media. (This was meant for recruitment, but it also follows with ongoing programming and process information.) All this points to a need for an ongoing Student Affairs communications strategy effort, together with an evaluation process.

The survey does not differentiate the types of information provided to students through social media.
Communications: Planning

This was about a “communications audit” done by Monroe Community College in Rochester, NY which found there was an overwhelming amount of emails, letters and phone calls directed at students about the process of enrollment. It led to the college coordinating it’s communications in terms of timing, presentation, integrated multiple sources such as postcards and emails, and targeted to particular student groups, such as first-time, non-traditional, etc.

This is essentially the same finding as the previous two items. Productive communications depend on a research and strategy for planning, timing, customization and integration for implementation.
Communications: Planning

As Students Scatter Online, Colleges Try to Keep Up by Katherine Mangan 9/10/2012
http://chronicle.com/article/Digitally-Savvy-Students-Play/134224/

This is a little older article, but makes some good points. Primarily it’s about social media and the need to have authentic voices and beware of reusing the same messaging. It also indicates email is the most efficient way of official communication with students but should be crafted intentionally.

Basically, emails should be quick, easy and to the point, and have strong subject lines. They should be timed for maximum readership (5-9 early evening) and supplemented with other media such as posters, postcards, etc.
Communications: Planning

Are They Listening? Social Media on Campuses of Higher Education posted by Amy F. Ratliff - Summer 2011 Edition StudentAffairs.com
http://studentaffairs.com/ejournal/Summer_2011/AreTheyListening.html

An older post about how students communicate in 2011.

Almost a whole 4-year program generation ago, it states “College student are now expecting communication with their academic and extra-curricular program to mimic the communication in the rest of their lives. They want to be connected constantly, informed instantaneously, and selective of what they find suitable for immediate, if any, response.”

The summary calls for planning, development of a strategy for higher ed professionals “that will not pollute their resources.” It also states “staying abreast of technologies and preferences is crucial to ensure the most effective incorporation of social media in communicating with students” and “Poor planning and utilization could result in negative participation and response rates from students.”
Communications: Planning

Improving Communication With Our Students by Alex Waddington November 2010
http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=8436

Although from 2010, this is a very direct look at student feedback on University communications. It also brings up issues which continue years later - such as students routinely deleting mass University emails, student expecting online interfaces to be tailored to their individual preferences, and students being unsure of how key information will be delivered to them.

It’s very interesting that student feedback about communications has been so consistent over time.
Online Research

Conclusions:

1. Students expect communications to be tailored for them, timely, and tell them step by step what they should do, and why, when and how they should do it.

2. Email is the most effective means of communicating with students, with the caveat that it has to be effectively designed.

3. Communication in all media should be clear, well-crafted and consistent.

4. Scheduling communications should be done with awareness of all the messaging the student is receiving at a given time.

5. Careful planning is the key to successful communication with students.
Open Forums

Dawn and Lacey organized six open forums, three in December 2013 and three in February 2014.

• Groups ranging from 6-12 students filled out the questionnaire.

• RLSS provided examples of publications and email and students were asked to review them, and make notes.

• Emails and publications for Move-In and Room Selection were discussed.

• One session in December was also focused on reviewing use of the Residential Life website to locate information.

• The questionnaires and notes were collected, and RLSS student staff also took notes on the discussions.
Questionnaire Results - Move-In

- Students most often remember receiving initial Move-In information via email.
- Students received additional information from a variety of sources, but most often by accessing the Residential Life website.
How did you first receive information about Room Selection from Residential Life Student Services?

- Students most often remember receiving initial Room Selection information via email.
- Students requested further information from a variety of sources, but most often by accessing the Residential Life website.

How did you request further information about Room Selection? (Please check all that apply)

- Didn't request information from any of these
- Asked other students
- Asked Residential Hall staff
- Visited Residential Life website
- Posted on Facebook
- Called Student Services
- Emailed Student services

Questionnaire Results – Room Selection
When I get *mail* from Residential Life Student Services....

- I don't open it at all
- I open and read it at some point
- I open and read it when I get it

When I get *email* from Residential Life Student Services....

- I get so much email I sometimes miss it
- I delete it without reading it
- I open and read it

How would you prefer to be notified of Room Selection process deadlines (Please check all that apply)

- Email
- Facebook
- Residential Life Website
- Poster
- Handout
- Door Hanger
- Other

Questionnaire Results - Email

- Students like a variety of notification options, but most prefer email.
- Students are likely to open and read email from RLSS.
Have you ever missed a program you would have liked to participate in because you didn’t know about it?

What would be a more effective way of letting you know about programs in your residence hall?

How did you receive information about events you attended on campus during the Fall 2013 semester?

Note: Highest # is least frequent source of information
Lowest # is most frequent source of information

Questionnaire Results – Programs and Events

• Almost half of students in groups claimed to have missed a program they would have participated in, because they didn’t know about it.

• Students indicated receiving program and event information via email and posters would be more effective than social media.
Students access their email and look for information online most often on laptops.

### Questionnaire Results – Device Use

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Charts above: Highest # is least frequent source of information. Lowest # is most frequent source of information.

**What device are you most likely to use to receive Residential Life Student Services email? Please number from most likely (1) to least likely (4):**

- Desktop Computer
- Laptop Computer
- Tablet
- Phone

**What device are you most likely to use to find information about a housing process? Please number from most likely (1) to least likely (4):**

- Desktop Computer
- Laptop Computer
- Tablet
- Phone

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**If you received information about Move-In electronically, how did you access it?**

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Open Forums

Results:

What we found from the open forums was that different students responded to different means of communication. No one option was exclusively desirable, although the highest percentage of students preferred that email be used to communicate with them, with specific format recommendations. Students also recommended that information be brought to them in one or two different options, and/or multiple instances to alert them and as reminders to take action on Room Selection and Move-In. Most utilized the website as a resource when they had to find out further information. When it came to events or programs on campus, students asked for email notification in addition to posters.

Feedback:

As far as distributing information on Move-In and Room Selection, Dawn Bond and her team have been utilizing an integrated process of delivering information to students for some time. The overall feedback from the Open Forums clearly indicated that this was optimum.

Feedback on design of RLSS publications including formatting and engagement and on Residential Life website functionality was very positive. A number of suggestions were offered about specific information which could be included, discontinued, or modified to improve delivery.

Feedback on email gave several easily-implemented guidelines for increasing accessibility. This feedback was in alignment with the online communication research.
Research Conclusions

1. Both online research and the open forums indicated similar directions for communicating with students.
2. Students prefer receiving information via email, providing it is well-designed and planned.
3. Students want information to be tailored to their needs and easy to access.
4. Students want to be reminded of what steps they need to take, and of deadlines and consequences.
5. Communicating with students should be planned with as much care as the rest of the program, event or process.
6. Residential Life Student Services is already providing a smart, integrated communication plan for Move-In and Room Selection.
7. All the print and electronic media avenues we currently use for communication are still needed.
8. Student use laptops far more consistently than smartphones or tablets to access email and online information.
Best Practices for Communicating with Students

1. Plan concept, messaging and a schedule for multiple delivery options as an integral part of program, event or process planning.

2. Use branding and identity consistently across media.

3. Format information for different media to make it easily accessible.

4. Provide contact and complete resource information online.

5. Get feedback.
Media Guidelines

Email
Email is generally agreed to be the most appropriate path for detailed and/or official information, but it is also clear that students do not read email consistently. Email communications should be constructed as mentioned above and given accurate and compelling titles. For processes, email should be set up to repeat or remind recipients 2-3 times of deadline information and include dates and direct links.

Print
Print communications should be concise, eye-catching, and include deadlines, important dates, contact information. Posters and brochures (mailed) are both effective. Posters when students are on campus, and brochures mailed when school is not in session. Posters and brochures should also be posted online, and featured prominently on main page with time-sensitive news and announcements.

Web
Print and email should refer to web as most accurate and up-to-date information resource. When planning communications, web updates should be included in the timeline. Information which is time-sensitive should be highlighted on the landing page to provide easy access.

Social Media
Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest and other social media are great options for conversation, reminders, to provide accessibility and for students to get quick responses to queries. Ideally, they should be integrated for a consistent, valuable effect without overloading students. A consistent commitment of staff time to monitor and provide content for social media is necessary for it to function effectively.
6 weeks out
• Identify what kind of information should be included in each delivery method, gather that information.
• Talk with a designer, identify your concept and/or your message.

5 weeks out
• Information for print options provided, design and branding in process.
• Information for each delivery method (type, quantity, delivery address) finalized.

4 weeks out
• Web information should be up.
  • Start getting pieces to print.
• Reach out to staff for assistance in spreading message

3 weeks out
• Send out mailings.
  • Distribute print materials (posters, brochures, door hangers, table tents).

2 weeks out
• Poster should be up, brochures and door hangers distributed.
  • Send first email and post first social media message.

1 week out
• Post second social media item.
• Table tent reminders should be in place.

Week of
• Send second email reminder.
• Last social media reminder.
Integrated Communications Planning

Student Affairs communicates directly with students regarding information, programs and processes. The planning of initiatives can be a long or short process, but ideally, communications planning should be integrated into the complete schedule from the very beginning of that process. This should include identifying the concept, the message and the communications schedule.

1. Organize information (if appropriate) to go into scheduled print communications/mailings for students, and/or prospective students (Open House publications). Be aware of print/mail deadlines.

2. Plan your print options using the the Scheduling Guidelines.

3. Update online information before the earliest time target audience will receive your print information.

4. Schedule emails to students and social media engagement. Push out to calendars if appropriate. Ensure that online and/or contact information is consistent, easily found and up-to-date.

5. **Important!** Get feedback on your visual and content presentation –
   - Is it effective, is it engaging?
   - Does it say what you want it to say?
   - How do students respond to it?
   - Are you providing all the information they need?

It’s all about the planning!