

New Marketing Initiatives for Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement

By

Anthony G. Naglieri

BS, Binghamton University, 2006

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Kristina Lambright
Assistant Professor and Director of Graduate Studies
Department of Public Administration
May 12, 2011

Thomas Sinclair
Associate Professor
Department of Public Administration
May 12, 2011

Allison Alden
Founding Director
Binghamton University Center for Civic Engagement
May 12, 2011

Executive Summary

Students are vital to fulfill the Center for Civic Engagement's mission to strengthen relationships between Binghamton 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.

At the onset of its growing year, CCE's marketing strategies were ill-equipped to reach a student demographic that is continually evolving and increasingly reliant on the internet and new technologies for its information needs. The ability to understand and effectively adapt to the changing expectations and preferences of students is a vital component to CCE's efforts to appeal to a broader audience.

This research addresses how CCE can improve its marketing and outreach processes to raise awareness of its services and offerings among Binghamton University students. Relevant literature on student engagement, information technology use, and modern marketing approaches was examined to foster a better understanding of how CCE can extend its reach among students. The report analyzes qualitative data collected from focus groups consisting of 33 Binghamton University students, along with results of a pilot experiment which tested the ability of CCE's social media offerings to move students to action.

The data collected highlighted accessibility, convenience, and responsiveness as important components in effective outreach. The study's findings call for CCE to address these characteristics through a multi-faceted approach that ensures information is available through various mediums and fosters a spirit of community among students through online networks and collaborative initiatives on and off campus.

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Problem Definition

Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) is a newly formed office within the Division of Student Affairs created to address the institution's need for a more

as well as a database of community opportunities that was inundated with inaccurate and outdated information. With over 1,500 contacts, the office listserv remains an important means of contacting students. The mailing list was previously maintained by BU's Volunteer Programs office, which was subsumed in the formation of CCE, and while efforts were made to manage the list, many shortcomings existed. No protocol was established for utilizing the listserv, contacts were outdated, requests to be removed from the list often were not fulfilled, and communications, at times, included inaccurate information (Alden, personal communication, November 2, 2010).

While efforts by staff are underway to improve the current offerings, it was apparent that CCE needed to rethink the manners in which it disseminates information to students. The resources (time, staff, and technical know-how) available to CCE to address this area are limited. This is an important area to address as it could curtail the effectiveness of the office's outreach efforts. In order to deepen its current partnerships and develop new connections, CCE's disconnect with engaging students must be addressed. In fact, the forms of information dissemination have evolved at a very fast pace over the last six months, largely due to the input this research project has already had. This report will extend and expand current efforts and provide documentation that could bolster future funding initiatives. A list of CCE's current outreach and dissemination methods is presented in Appendix A.

This issue also has important implications for the field of public administration. As new technologies become more predominant, the task of engaging and providing information to the public continues to become more challenging. This study will provide insight into how young people absorb information, the particular mediums by which they prefer to be informed, as well as how effective these mediums are at mobilizing young adults. For practitioners, the results of

fostered. Research has since expanded upon this

work on top of their academic requirements according to a 2008 NSSE survey (as cited in Kuh, 2009). It is, thus, no surprise that students today increasingly have shown preferences for offerings that are convenient, accessible, and allow for instant gratification (Lowery, 2004; Moneta, 2005; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008).

Students & Information Technology Use

Student affairs organizations are increasingly embracing 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 percent) 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.

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).

For student affairs practitioners, the need to assess students' use of technologies and how their accompanying expectations influence their offerings has taken on heightened importance.

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 research (Cotten, 2008; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008, Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007). There is no definitive answer to this growing phenomenon. However, frequently cited suggestions include: utilizing multiple marketing mediums, remaining

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 (PR 20/20, 2010; HubSpot, 2008). 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; Munoz & Strotmeyer, 2010; Scott, 2010). The discussion of how CCE can effectively leverage these strategies and incorporate new technologies in a way that helps engage a greater audience of students must first begin with better understanding student preferences.

Methodology

In order to assess how students perceive (sw [3s]-)5(as0f)Ddegi(d)T-j(0)4(10(T4[ga)4(u)l)e24(e3eT(d)T)Bj(7d)) (2)(4)(98)2un2(91bqudet)-2,4(onsun-10(w)2(i)y.)9()-orha

Touch, student brochure, and weekly newsletter. In addition to these materials, free t-shirts were distributed to all participants. The t-shirts are a promotional component of CCE's new spontaneous service program and feature a growing form of mobile advertising known as quick response (QR) codes. An explanation of the new program was discussed prior to each group discussion. Examples of these CCE marketing materials and t-shirts can be found in Appendix F

A focus group questionnaire containing open-ended questions was utilized to maintain consistency, though the sessions were semi-structured, allowing for the flexibility to probe for

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affairs. One participant identified himself as undeclared. Twenty of the 33 participants identified themselves as familiar with CCE prior to the focus group, while 17 indicated they were members of the office's listserv. All but four individuals identified themselves as having participated in some form of involvement activity as a student. The degree to which they were involved, however, was not addressed.

Service On the Spot Pilot Test.

To supplement the results of the four student focus groups, the results of a pilot test experiment CCE conducted in February 2011 were also utilized. The experiment leveraged CCE's presence on social networking sites in its promotion of a new initiative, *Service On the Spot* (S.O.S). This program helps to address community and campus needs by incorporating the aforementioned ideals of viral marketing and the recent popularity of flash mobs (a group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, perform some act for a brief time then disperse). 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 exclusively via itseim CCvoje(.)-17projeme

The extent to which recruitment efforts were representative of the audience CCE seeks to reach was an important factor in this study. Because CCE aims to expand its reach and appeal to a broader audience, it was important that the perspectives of students not already familiar with the office and/or students who were not already involved were included in this study. The study was successful in attracting 16 participants who were not already receiving CCE communications via its listserv, 13 of whom identified themselves as unfamiliar with the office prior to the focus groups. The degree to which the participating students were already involved on- and-off campus, however, was not assessed and represents a limitation to the data collected. Knowing this information would help provide a clearer picture of the audience the focus groups were successful in reaching.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the four student focus groups was analyzed thematically. Upon completion of the focus groups, a thorough review of the session notes and transcript was conducted and analyzed using an inductive method, searching for patterns and commonalities surrounding particular questions and across group sessions.

Findings

Focus group participants provided unique and diverse insight into their 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 CCE's resources. Several consistent themes emerged from the four sessions: 1) students demonstrated a strong interest in getting involved with CCE; 2) accessibility, convenience, and responsiveness are integral components of effective student outreach; 3) the opportunity for shared experiences

NEW MARKETING INITIATIVES FOR BU's

NEW MARKETING INITIATIVES FOR BU'S CENTER FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

described the opportunity for shared experiences as an “important and fun part of the college experience.”

The idea of 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 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 CCE can reach more students with

Considerable thought and planning have gone into investigating the degree which CCE

Different outlets for increasing CCE's visibility that focus groups participants 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

of video. The University's Real-to-Reel video series received multiple mentions as an effective use of video currently on campus.

Recommendations

As CCE continues to grow into a viable center it is important that the office utilize a multi-faceted marketing approach, both online and offline, to continue to build and maintain its reach among students. The following actionable steps are recommended for CCE to enhance its student marketing efforts: 1) engage with students "where they are" and work towards adopting a "real-time" mindset across current outreach methods; 2) take appropriate steps to make information and offerings more user-friendly and easily accessible; 3) make a concerted effort to promote benefits of getting involved and the resources CCE offers to students; 4) continue to develop programming and initiatives which allow for peer involvement, spur word-of-mouth referral, and are collaborative in nature; and 5) foster and support continued mechanisms for incorporating student feedback into offerings.

Recommendation 1: Engage with students "where they are" and work towards incorporating that mindset across current outreach methods.

It is vital for CCE to engage students through mediums which they prefer to receive information and interact. Maintaining an active presence across relevant social media platforms and making information readily available via mobile devices can help CCE reach students in a way that is both relevant and convenient. Recent literature, as well as the results of this study, help affirm that "where students are" is increasingly online participating in social activities and on their mobile devices (Cotten, 2008; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007; Zickuhr, 2010).

Currently, CCE has established a presence on four major social networking sites: Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, and LinkedIn. It is important these platforms are actively maintained and utilized not only to send out information, but also increasingly serve as a forum for interaction and discussion with and between students. It is also important for CCE to continually make these offerings accessible across its outreach methods. This could be achieved via direct website and newsletter links to Facebook events as students suggested or further promotion of its social networking sites in print collateral (flyers, posters, and brochures). As the literature suggests, however, more important than the specific methods or technologies used is the shift in mindset to fit the present environment (Cotten, 2008; Munoz & Strotmeyer, 2010; Scott, 2010). It is important for CCE to actively consider ways it can incorporate social media not only in its outreach, but across its programming and offerings in an effort to better meet student preferences.

CCE can accommodate the increasing interest in receiving information on-the-go via mobile devices by instituting a short message service (SMS) alert system which allows the office to send out group text message alerts. This is a direct and personal means CCE can use to communicate with students. Based on focus group discussions, a text alert system was a desirable option that would make it easier for students to get involved and it would be best utilized by sending out brief reminders to students either the day or hours prior to an event. The influx of free online and technology tools allows for this to be implemented without any cost (via Gmail and Google Voice). Because it is a more personal means of communication it is strongly urged that student feedback is sought throughout the rollout process.

In addition to offering text alerts, it would be prudent for CCE to take the appropriate steps to ensure the content of its website translates well across mobile devices. With the

increasing preference for accessing information in this manner, this is an important characteristic in one's virtual presence to consider. A first step to exploring this further would entail consulting with the University's web services team.

Recommendation 2:

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Winniford et. al, 1997). With this in mind, it is important for CCE to continue fostering opportunities for shared experience and which generate word-of-mouth referral among students.

In its growing year, CCE has already begun establishing a strong and committed audience of students. It may serve the office well by tapping into this group, as well as others outside it, by establishing a student ambassador program. Students expressed approval of the convenience and comfortable nature of learning about opportunities from fellow students, as well as the benefits in visibility this strategy could offer for CCE. This is supported by student comments and mentions of the presence other campus officers utilizing ambassadors have. It is worthwhile for CCE to consider how the use of ambassadors both online and offline could help expands its reach across campus and make it more comfortable for students to get involved.

The continued development of the *Service On the Spot* initiative, a program centered on making meaningful service opportunities fun and convenient, might be another avenue to address preferences for shared experiences. The program leverages the office's presence on social networking sites and can serve a vital role in generating buzz and building CCE's brand on campus. The word-of-mouth effects generated by S.O.S. have apparently caught on after its initial activity as students have already requested to collaborate with CCE to use it to help recruit groups of volunteers to execute their programs.

Recommendation 5: Foster and support continued mechanisms for incorporating student feedback into offerings.

To not only reach a broader audience of students, but also maintain their interest once they are reached – continual feedback is a necessity. The success of CCE programs and particular strategies should continue to be assessed and monitored so that findings can be directly applied for program modification and improvement. Such a responsive, flexible philosophy that

forward which can be directly applied towards future modes of outreach and program modification.

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Appendixes

Current CCE Outreach & Dissemination Methods	Appendix A
Focus Group Information	Appendix B
Pre-Focus Group Survey	Appendix C
Focus Group Participant Information Sheet	Appendix D
Focus Group Oral Consent and Audio Release Statement	Appendix E
CCE Outreach Materials Used in Priming Exercise	Appendix F
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Appendix B
Focus Group Information

	Location	Number of Participants
Wednesday, March 16, 2011	University Union 145	8
Thursday, March 17, 2011	University Union 145	8
Tuesday, March 22, 2011	University Union 145	6
Wednesday, March 30, 2011	University Union 145	11
Four Focus Group Sessions	Total	33

Appendix C
Pre-Focus Group Survey

Binghamton University Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) Pre-Focus Group Survey

You have been invited to participate in a focus group on how students would prefer to receive information about service events and community opportunities from Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement. We are asking all individuals recruited to participate in a focus

5. Have you participated in any of the following activities as a Binghamton University student? (Check all that apply)

- Coursework with a community component (service learning)
- Practicum, internship, or field experience
- Community service or volunteer work
- Research project with a faculty/staff member outside of course or program requirements
- Co-curricular activities (student organizations/government, greek life, intercollegiate/intramural sports)
- Independent study or self-designed major
- Study abroad
- Work for pay on campus
-

6. Do you actively use any of the following IT or social media applications? (Check all that apply)

Note: The pre-focus group surveys were administered electronically on Apple iPod Touch devices.

Appendix D
Focus Group Participant Information Sheet

Binghamton University Center for Civic Engagement (CCE)
Focus Group Participant Information Sheet

Thank you for your participation in the CCE Focus Group Project. The purpose of this project is to determine how students would like to engage with the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) and receive information regarding service events and community opportunities. As a research subject in this project, please familiarize yourself with the following information.

• Your participation is voluntary.

You are not obligated to answer all questions and you may choose to leave the focus group at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate in the focus group will not in any way influence your relationship with Binghamton University or Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement.

• All personal information collected in the focus group will be confidential.

All personal information collected in the focus group will be kept confidential by research project staff and will be utilized only for this project.

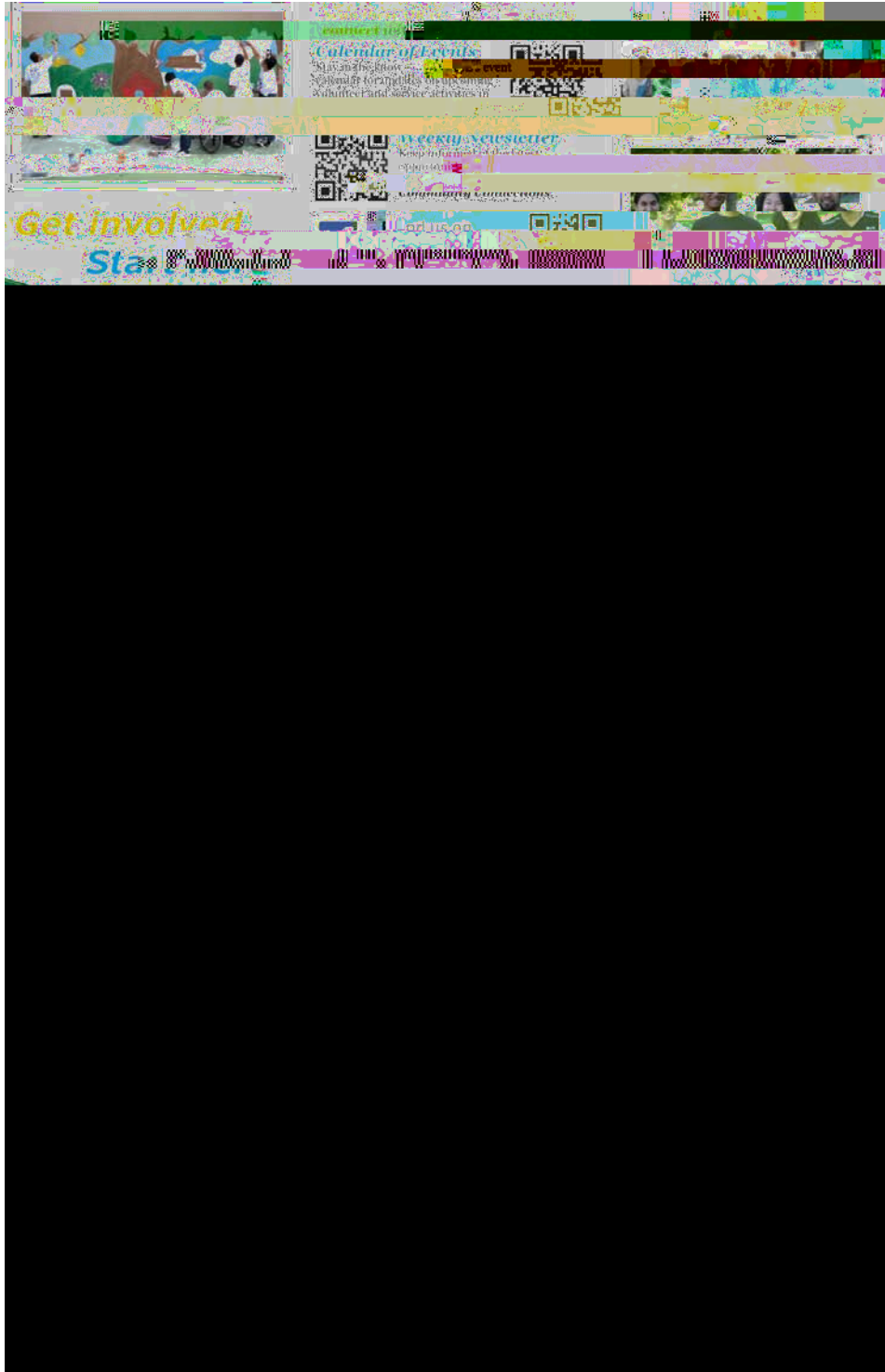
• The focus group sessions will be recorded.

Focus group sessions will be recorded only to ensure accuracy of notes taken by research project staff. The recordings will be destroyed upon the project's completion. *You may decline to have the focus group s*

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Appendix F
CCE Outreach Materials Used in Priming Exercise

Student Brochure



Service On the Spot T-Shirts

Note: An explanation of CCE's new Service On the Spot program was discussed prior to each focus group discussion. The t-shirts provided to each participant feature a growing form of mobile advertising, known as quick-response (QR) codes, which allows smartphone users to

Campus & Community Connections E-Newsletter



Note: Pictured is a snapshot of the newsletter that was provided to participants in the first three focus group sessions. In the final session, a streamlined version of the newsletter was provided.

Appendix G

Focus Group Questionnaire

Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement (CCE)

Focus Group Questions

- Priming exercise using iPod Touch device: Each individual instructed to view CCE newsletter, student brochure, Facebook page; QR code demonstration
- What are your initial impressions after viewing this snapshot of CCE's marketing materials?
 - What was effective / ineffective?
 - What are suggestions for improvement/changes might you suggest to the staff?
- What characteristics are important to you in an organization's virtual presence?
 - Is it important to be able to access information outside traditional office hours?
- Experiences you have had looking for online information related to University events?
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Appendix H
IRB Approval

Date: