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Adopting a Web-centric Communications Model

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The Future is Now: Adopting a Web-centric Communications Model

and re-visioning HCC's marketing and public relations functions for the new era

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Introduction

About Holyoke Community College

Founded in 1946 as the city-sponsored Holyoke Junior College, Holyoke Community College now serves students from Western Massachusetts and beyond from its 135-acre campus in Holyoke, Massachusetts and satellite locations throughout the Pioneer Valley. HCC offers more than 100 associate degree and certificate options, in a variety of disciplines, for immediate career entry or transfer to four-year institutions and awards the fourth highest number of associate degrees and certificates of all 15 Massachusetts community colleges.

Annually serving almost 9,000 credit students and more than 5,500 in noncredit courses and workforce development programs, HCC's enrollment is the largest among Western Massachusetts community colleges. Eighty percent of HCC's credit students reside in the Western Massachusetts communities of Springfield, Holyoke, Chicopee, Westfield, West Springfield, Agawam, Northampton, Easthampton, South Hadley, Ludlow, Belchertown, Southwick, Amherst, and Southampton.

In the noncredit arena, HCC offers adult basic education/GED programs, alternative high school and drop-out remediation programs, education and training for business and industry, career and testing services, and personal and professional enrichment courses. While HCC offers comprehensive student support services for all students, it also offers many access and transition programs for special populations, and is known for its Commonwealth Honors program and Learning Communities. It hosts competitive varsity athletic teams and more than 50 student clubs and activities. It hosts many recreational and cultural activities for students and the larger community year-round.

Project Background

Project Purpose

Technology has rapidly transformed the higher education landscape. The "web-centric" approach to marketing and communications has, in a relatively short time, replaced conventional methods because of its timeliness, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. A web-centric approach assumes communications are conceived and implemented first as web communications, and secondarily extended to print and electronic communications modes—a departure from HCC's current practice.

Augmented with new media and Web 2.0 applications, the web-centric approach is the ascendant communications strategy and has become necessary for achieving strategic objectives in marketing, public relations, enrollment management, and crisis communications. More and more colleges and universities have successfully transitioned to web-centric communications and have restructured their communications functions (known as marketing and public relations at HCC) to embrace opportunities made possible by new media.

To maintain HCC's competitive advantage and to meet college needs, we must pare inefficient, outdated modes of marketing and communications and embrace the new communications ideologies and technological tools that have become increasingly standard in education and business. Re-visioning and re-organizing are overdue antecedents to accomplish the shift into efficient web-centric and distributed content communication modes. As the college struggles with current and impending budget constraints, reinvigorating our web presence and shifting from heavily print-based communications to web-centric communications not only improves the quality, speed, relevance, and breadth of communication but provides substantial cost savings in print products and labor.

College Need

The cornerstone of this project was to achieve a website redevelopment strategy—the college's most pressing public information need and the foundation upon which the entire shift to web-

centric communications is predicated. My goal was to determine how this might be done, launch the effort, and complete the needs analysis/research phase and the redevelopment strategy by current fiscal year end.

A fair assessment of HCC's present web situation, which I anticipate will be borne out by the consultant's research, is that of discontent on several fronts: public information, usability, relevance, design, and management. Re-designed in 2004-2005, HCC's website has largely languished since without centralized management (through a team, department, or individual) of overarching information architecture and content, growth strategy, project prioritization, or policy/guideline development and enforcement. Neither the website nor the information it contains is managed holistically, opening the door to conflicting, redundant, hard-to-find, and out-of-date information. Although no one's fault, the sentiment expressed by an HCC dean: "it is the college's Achilles' heel," is apt. Some college units have arranged external hosting and maintenance, further divorcing their content from the college website.

The college's organizational structure relative to the website also contributes to confusion. The part-time webmaster, who implements content changes per college community request (all comers), resides in the Information Technology (IT) Division, with little formal connection with the marketing and public relations department which manages college brand and public information via publications and media relations. While IT management of the web was the norm in the early years of web adoption in the 1990s, it has since typically been assumed by college communications departments—albeit working closely with IT and others—so it aligns with the institution's other public information platforms, and supports college brand, messaging, and visual identity standards. The website, thus its proper redevelopment is important because:

- The website is the public face of the institution where most people go first to learn more about HCC. A critical component of college brand, it is a key tool for creating and maintaining a positive image, and critical to enrollment management and donor, community, and political support.
- Accurate, relevant, consistent, accessible, and timely public information is required specifically by our accrediting organization, NEASC, in Standard 10: Public Disclosure

- Centralized oversight, combined with distributed content schemes will allow us to manage public information for a complex organization with a tremendous breath and scope of mission.
- A well-designed site makes everyone's job easier—it cuts down on ambiguities and conflicting information that cause confusion and necessitate individual handling of problems
- Appropriate, managed technology can streamline our business processes and reduce demands on staff
- An effective web presence reduces dependence on and costs for print publications and associated distribution.

Personal and Professional Reasons for this Project

The above reasons drove my interest in this project, along with my belief that our present situation needed sorting out to achieve these objectives and that we needed to adapt to the exponentially-changing communications world around us. Arriving at HCC in 2005, I found a marketing and public relations department that was short-staffed and suffering from staff turnover—three different directors held the job between 1998 and 2004. Discontinuity, coupled with vacancies during protracted searches, created difficulties managing existing workload, let alone planning strategies and systems for improvement.

A fundamental problem was that the department was perceived as a "service bureau," existing to produce brochures for an amazing number of college programs and services, for essentially anyone who asked, and to publicize any and all events regardless of their media relations significance. In this environment, many lacked a basic understanding of marketing—consistently confused with promotion—and the brochure was considered the panacea for all "marketing" problems.

Marketing of course is a broader concept. Simply expressed, it comprises the four Ps: product, price, position, and promotion. I argue that in public higher education, two additional Ps are at play: politics and policies, but that is a discussion for another day. Often, we see the "Field of Dreams" approach to marketing: if we build it, people will come. After the fact, we are asked to

spend money and effort promoting something already built—even though it may have serious flaws in critical and integral "P" components: product, price, and/or position.

My mandate in 2005 was to centralize the marketing and public relations function and budget and, via a consultant, facilitate a branding initiative. Through the branding process, we determined what differentiated us from our competitors, established a brand promise, "exceptional preparation for success," identified supporting brand drivers (or themes), and established visual image standards and messaging to reinforce our brand promise. These brand goals have been largely achieved in advertising and publications, and have likely contributed to enrollment growth. Improving the website and leveraging new technology is the next frontier not only for branding and communications, but for the numerous other benefits it brings the college.

Being perceived as a service bureau is deleterious to the marketing and public relations office. We must better educate the college community and leadership about marketing in its correctly broad sense, the value it can add to their specific endeavors and to the college when appropriately resourced, and that it is a shared responsibility. This is an antecedent to moving to the web-centric communications model. A web-centric communications model, where all college communications are technology-appropriate, brand enhancing, managed efficiently, and strategy supporting, must be our clear, articulated vision. This is a vision our department can assume a strategic role in advancing.

Project Description

Objectives

My project's primary objectives were:
1. To accomplish the cornerstone project: a web redevelopment strategy for HCC, upon which this entire shift is predicated, within the current fiscal year.
2. To evaluate HCC's communications strategies and practices in light of moving from largely print-based to web-centric communications augmented by appropriate new media and distributed content schemes.

a. Examine current marketing and public relations functions, considering best practices in other institutions/organizations. Propose how these functions can be reinvented to support a web-centric approach to strategic communications and to assume a more strategic role in advancing college mission, institutional focus and direction, enrollment goals, and enhancing institutional stature.

3. Identify and prepare a phased plan for related projects that facilitate this shift and improve marketing and communications and efficiency.

Research Questions

To meet these objectives, I considered the following research questions:

1. How should HCC best move from largely print-based to web-centric communications?

    a. What efficiencies (money and time) can be achieved through moving from print to web-centric communications?

    b. What are the most appropriate new media to support communications, marketing, and enrollment strategies, and how might we implement them?

    c. What strategies and systems (content management systems, e-communications, etc.) can we employ so college departments "self serve" their specific communications needs while maintaining overall quality, message integrity, and college brand identity?

    d. How best to align identified component projects with the college's existing planning and budgeting processes?

2. How does a web-centric strategy transform the role of marketing and public relations?

    a. Location within institutional organizational structure

    b. Alignment with other functional units

    c. Roles and responsibilities (within the unit or outsourced)

    d. How we address institutional perceptions about marketing and public relations that may impede the shift to web-centric communications.

Deliverables

The three deliverables that might reasonably be begun, or accomplished, in the current fiscal year, to align with CCLA deadlines, were:

1. Web redevelopment strategy (Phase I).

2. Proposal to re-vision the marketing and public relations functions to support the new web-centric strategy.

3. Identify related projects that push the move from print-based to web-centric communications and increase efficiency and save money.

These will be discussed detail in the Project Components section of this report.

Literature Review

Project objectives that best lent themselves to literature review pertained to:

- Identifying and analyzing best practices in moving from largely print-based to web-centric communications that can be applied to HCC.

- Investigating new social media and emerging technology.

- Considering best practices in other institutions/organizations, and proposing how HCC's marketing and public relations function can be reinvented to support web-centric communications while assuming a more strategic role in advancing college mission, institutional focus and direction, enrollment goals, and enhancing institutional stature.

Other objectives—such as identifying component projects facilitating this shift and accomplishing the web redevelopment strategy had more to do with our internal processes and management and were not as applicable to a literature review.

The literature review identified sources that could familiarize me with new and social media, and evaluate trends and best implementation practices to support new communication modes. I used the literature review to develop a resource base for further study. It included:

- Examples of implemented best practices

- Wisdom (including pitfalls experienced) from higher education leaders

- Conference presentations and webinars

- White papers by topical experts, software vendors, and others who have developed new technology solutions

- Professional associations

- Job search websites

- "e-mergence" or following the popularity and ascendance (or descend-ance) of a particular technology. What is "hot" and what is not, and why. Trying to determine what will emerge as the "alpha dog," important in the galaxy of new media.

While *Campus Technology* magazine was an excellent resource to acquaint me with emerging technology, I found studying emerging trends and technology to be a "learn as you go" process, and that time spent searching online databases for pertinent written material was not particularly productive because change was happening so fast. The "gray literature"–white papers, conference presentations, and seminars/webinars—and online discussion proved the most helpful and current. Interestingly, as far as new and social media is concerned, much of the conversation occurs in the "space" to which it refers: people use new technology to talk about new technology. One must reach into the blogosphere, Facebook, and other new media to not just to find the best intelligence but often simply to access the conversation. Other resources included:

Professional Organizations and Associations

- American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) www.aacrao.org

- American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) www.aacc.org

- American Marketing Association (AMA) www.marketingpower.com

- Council for Advancement and Support of Higher Education (CASE) www.case.org

- National Council for Marketing and Public Relations (NCMPR) an affiliate of AACC www.ncmpr.org

- Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) www.prsa.org

- Society for New Communications Research (American Marketing Association content partner) www.sncr.org

Topical Experts

- Educational Marketing Group, Inc. www.emgonline.com

- Stamats, Inc. www.stamats.com

Listservs, Blogs, Facebook Groups

- PIONET listserv for Public Information Officers: PIOnet. pionet@lists.newswise.com http://www.newswise.com/community/pionet/

- PIOnet's Facebook "group" recently converted to a "page" called "PIOnet": "The College Social Media Study," created by Dan Forbush, executive director, communications Skidmore College. About 400 communications and advancement professional access it.

  http://www.facebook.com/pages/PIOnet/52858944921

  http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=20299145518&ref=ts

- .eduGuru This blog is about the pursuit of Internet marketing in higher education.

  http://doteduguru.com/

- Karlyn Morissette. E e-marketing strategist, specializing in higher education.

  http://karlynmorissette.karlyn.me/about/

- mStoner.com, communications consultant blog

http://www.mstonerblog.com/index.php/blog/C9/

Job and Employment Sources

- HigherEdJobs.com

- *Chronicle of Higher Education*

Journals

- *Chronicle of Higher Education*

- *Community College Week*

- *Campus Technology*

Project Components

Website Redevelopment Phase I: Research

My intent was to launch (with help from consultant) a "phase I" project—a comprehensive needs analysis and web redevelopment strategy (WRS) once my CCLA project proposal was approved in fall 2008, and to accomplish this phase before fiscal year end. I was hopeful that a Phase II project for design, development, and deployment of a new college web presence would follow in FY10. The phase I research and redevelopment plan would consider capabilities, needs, and management; Content Management System (CMS) recommendations; resource development plan (human and equipment); and recommendations for Web 2.0

technologies (analytics, interactivity, syndication, collaboration, and personalization). The website doesn't fall within my budget or jurisdiction, but to further project goals, I rearranged the FY09 marketing budget (by cuts to printing, direct mail, and advertising) to allow $25,000 to fund a consultant.

Request for Proposal (RFP)

I developed a Request for Proposal (RFP). See Appendix A. It included the following proposal components:

a. Identify HCC's goals for its web presence/functionality.

b. Assess current in-house web capabilities and resources: infrastructure, hosting platforms, content management, e-commerce capabilities, and programming/developing skills related to site build out.

c. Identify websites for college programs, services, or functional areas that are currently outsourced/not hosted on HCC servers and plan for integration.

d. Consider role of Banner products (and/or that of other third party vendors) in the overall scheme of HCC's web strategy. Include in the Website Redevelopment Strategy implementation timeline for Banner (or other third party) functionality that can improve college communications and operational efficiency.

e. Evaluate and recommend guidelines for HCC's intranet so there is a clear, appropriate information architecture and delineation between intranet content vs. HCC's public web presence.

f. Develop information architecture and navigational scheme

g. Propose content management scheme

h. Evaluate and recommend appropriate Web 2.0 technologies, which may include but are not limited to social networking software, RSS, blogs, personalized content, etc.

i. Specify approximate costs and implementation timelines for plan components

Vendor Selection

Vendor selection occurred November 2008-January 2009. We sent the RFP to six consultants, formed an in-house Website Redevelopment Strategy (WRS) Team (CIO, vice president of

Institutional Development, the assistant director of marketing and public relations, and myself) to review proposals. We interviewed three finalists, selected Interact Communications, Inc. of Onalaska, WI, for reasons including research background, experience nationally surveying prospective college student web preferences, and lowest cost.

While our specifications were explicit, the resulting proposals ranged greatly in approach and price ($22,000 to more than $60,000). We proved wise, although not intentionally so for reasons other than saving money, to split the larger effort into two phases: 1) research/strategy and 2) redesign, as each consultant clearly had strengths in one area or the other. The two-phase split meant we were not committed to one firm throughout, but could do RFPs for each phase, allowing us to choose the consultant best suited for the problem at hand. Interact conducted research in February and March. Their report and recommendations have just arrived (end of May). We have yet to review them so I cannot include an analysis here, but they provide a basis for our impending work.

Communicating with the College Community

Communicating with the college community was essential for garnering the most input and participation for the research phase from across the spectrum of college constituencies. We billed this project as an effort to upgrade the college's web presence to better meet the needs of HCC current and prospective students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the public. No argument was found there, as our current web presence seemed a source of fairly broad discontent. A couple of faculty members felt we should not invest in research because good community college website models exist. True, but planning money is money well spent, as it helps us fully understand the range of institutional needs before launching a Phase II project for design, development, and deployment of a new college web presence. As this could easily take a full year or more and a significant resource outlay, we wanted to ensure all needs had been discovered and we were headed down the right track.

Competing with the plethora of campus information and activities, we needed consistent communication to generate interest and ensure participation and continued enthusiasm. Our communications explained:

- Background
- What's the difference between this web redevelopment strategy project and a web redesign?
- Why are these projects important?
  - The website is the public face of the institution and where most people go first to learn more about HCC.
  - Accurate, relevant, consistent, accessible, and timely public information is required by NEASC Standard 10: Public Disclosure
  - Clear, technology-appropriate communication makes everyone's job easier—by cutting ambiguity and confusion that necessitate individual handling of problems
  - Appropriate, managed technology can streamline our business processes
  - Good use of the website reduces dependence on print publications and cuts associated costs; important as the college struggles with budget cuts
- Your participation is welcome and essential!
- What's next?

Website Redevelopment Strategy Research Activities

Website Redevelopment Strategy (WRS) research activities were conducted February-April and included: telephone and in-person interviews, focus groups, technical research, an online survey, a Q-sort activity (explanation follows), and a one-day site visit. Marketing and public relations staff provided support organizing and promoting participation, and, along with two other college staff members, were trained to administer Q-sorts. The complement of research activities included:

1. Online survey: Web Strategy & Process Inventory (WSPI), a web needs/preferences survey for faculty and staff, alumni, and current students.

2. Technical resource interviews with Information Technology staff and others to determine: current in-house web capability, Banner capability, scope of current content management system, contributors, areas, access, etc., and management of non-HCC hosted sites.

3. In-person or telephone interviews with the president, vice presidents (Academic Affairs, Administration and Finance, Business & Community Services, Student Affairs, and Institutional Development), CIO, and Office for Students with Disabilities.

4. Focus groups for current student, prospective students, Strategic Enrollment Management Team, faculty and staff, high school students, and others.

5. Q-sort activity—a drop-in research activity, conducted by consultant or trained HCC staff, to learn how individuals prefer information organized on a college website. Participants are given a "deck" of 100 cards, each representing an HCC website component topic, and asked to organize the cards into groups that make the most sense to them. Discovering organizational preferences by audience type guides information architecture development.

<u>What I learned</u>

Undertaking a big public project assures one will learn a thing or two. In hindsight, I would have delved more into the historical context of web projects undertaken prior to my arrival at HCC, and any lingering angst in this regard. Expect an occasional display of churlishness. The time we expended providing support and input for the consultant was substantial: vetting and adjusting the Q-sort topics, scheduling the visit, arranging focus groups, and simply getting people's attention in an environment where too many things vie at once for time and attention. Getting adequate faculty participation was difficult. Although it kept the price down, I would not recommend a one-day site visit—it is grueling and maximizing attendance is difficult. Another issue on the research end was accessibility; the Q-sort was not accessible. Given that the website must be accessible, so should the research instruments. We arranged a phone interview with our disabilities staff, but would have benefited from fully accessible research tools.

The consultant's philosophy of using our current website as a sounding board in research, to discover "pain points" concerned us. Our WRS Team already knew the website's shortcomings and did not want an exhaustive analysis of what we knew—we wanted a vision for the future. However, to achieve this, the consultants insisted we needed an anchor in the present. Asking hypothetical preferences would not yield valid data. A concrete reference point (our current website) was needed.

Beware the alluring idea—my particular weakness. I can be seduced by what seems, at first blush a good idea, without inspecting fully for potential downsides. Q-sorts seemed in concept

a creative method for getting at web organization preferences and content deemed irrelevant by audience type. In practice, Q-sorts proved cumbersome to administer and too representative of current website topics including the redundant and unnecessary. As we personally administered some, we saw how challenging and time-consuming they could be. One hundred topics (on little cards) are too many for most people to sort and keep their train of thought long enough to organize. Supposedly complete-able in 15-30 minutes, double that time proved the norm. Data integrity was a concern if, when mid-way through, subjects started taking less care because they were overwhelmed or just wanted to get it over with.

As successful models for web navigation and organization exist, I would have used the Q-sort to test only areas clearly open to interpretation. I would not have tested the obvious and would limit topics to a standard 52-card deck. Administering it electronically, like the computer Solitaire game, where cards can be dragged and dropped into place, and decks reorganized to their original state in one click, would be a great improvement. (Our consultant felt results would not be statistically accurate if we did not re-order each deck back to its original state before administering to the next subject, a tedious and time-consuming task.) A wild-card so subjects could add a topic not included in the deck, would help expose gaps between what we think and what others think.

Re-visioning Marketing and Public Relations to Support Web-Centric Strategy

Re-visioning the marketing and public relations function is necessary to support web-centric communications strategy. Recommendations must be derived, in part, from the consultant's findings, and our subsequent decision about a content management system (CMS). As this information is not yet available or has not yet been fully analyzed, my recommendations are general, based on reconnaissance to date and on forces that have bearing on our decisions.

<u>Managing and Maintaining the Website</u>

In reconfiguring the marketing and public relations function to support web-centric communications, we must be explicit about all involved in managing and maintaining its foundation—the website itself. In *The Web Job Description*, C. David Gammel, president of High Context Consulting, LLC (n.d.), identifies five essential areas of responsibility necessary for

developing and maintaining a higher education website: content management, design, online community, technical administration, and strategy and planning. These functions must be covered whether through staff positions or outsourcing. Gammel's expanded list, see Appendix B, should be our working document. It is an appropriate starting point for crafting job descriptions, re-aligning human resources, and determining organizational location. Briefly:

Content management covers activities required to generate new content and maintain existing content on the organization's website.

Design encompasses the look and feel and creation of graphics and templates and multimedia.

Online community covers any activity related to connecting college constituents electronically. Online communities require hands-on attention by staff in order to flourish.

Technical administration of web servers and software ensures that the website is operating efficiently and meets performance requirements for availability.

Strategy and planning aligns web efforts with overall organizational goals and objectives, a prerequisite for successfully developing and managing complex systems.

Our WRS Team sponsored a three-webinar series (for ourselves and open to the college community) "Website Redesign Boot Camp: what you need to know before jumping into a redesign project," by Higher Ed Experts. It covered:

- Top Trends in Higher Ed Redesigned Websites
- Website Redesign & CMS Implementation: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
- Web Redesign on a Dime in 10 Steps

Projects that Support Web-Centric Communications Strategy

I planned to identify and develop a phased plan for related projects that would support web-centric communications strategy—pushing the move from print-based to web-centric communications to increase efficiency and save money. By involving others, these projects could build the drumbeat for institution-wide change. I presented to my division vice president three projects that advanced these goals and could be started and/or completed by fiscal year end. Before I was able to develop a phased plan, the budget crisis intervened with urgency,

trumping planning and phasing, but providing a clear impetus for web-centric communications, with its potential for immediate cost savings and future efficiencies. Work has begun on these, but some need further fleshing out in FY10 proposals. Three are cross-divisional, requiring involvement or leadership from colleagues in other divisions. Only #2, below, falls directly under marketing and public relations' control. Projects include:

1) Online application and inquiry. At present, HCC does not have online inquiry or online application in place. The admissions director and Banner products manager (Division of Student Services) have worked on it but progress has been impeded by other urgent projects. The college has six separate multi-page paper applications, for which print costs run more than $11,000 annually. We cut this amount from the FY10 budget, which forces our hand on implementation. Labor savings could be extraordinary: we have approximately 5,000 new students per year (who are required to complete an application). Calculate the time it takes a staff person to retype the handwritten information contained in each application into the Banner system and multiply by 5,000 minimum (as applicants outnumber enrollees).

2) Improve news and events page of college website and ready it for future blogging per web redevelopment strategy. The assistant director of marketing and public relations has developed an excellent news and events page, and is researching blogging capabilities and policies.

3) A segmented e-communications plan with customized communications for students/prospects segments. North Shore Community College's e-communications plan using "Constant Contact," a best practice, can be a model. This requires involvement from admissions, Banner products manager, marketing and public relations, and the Strategic Enrollment Management Team. It remains to be detailed in an FY10 proposal, but it involves a formal communications plan for segmented e-communications (customized by target audiences) and assigning management responsibility. Target audiences could include:

A. Credit students/prospective students

- Prospects (recruit)
- Current students
- Financial aid students
- Accepted but not enrolled

- Non-returners/stop-outs/drop-outs (retention)

   B. Noncredit students/prospective students

   C. Business & industry/corporate clients

Supporting these initiatives, the vice president of Institutional Development convened a group to concentrate on moving to electronic communications, reducing paper use and mailing, and applied the impetus to advance these projects. In this spirit, and within the scope of my routine responsibilities, I reduced printing and distribution runs of the *Summer 2009 Course Bulletin* by 41%, saving $16,000 (61,000 printed and 50,000 mailed vs. the *Spring 2009 Course Bulletin's* 103,000 printed and 91,000 mailed). While not fully a break from print to online, it is a step toward weaning ourselves from reliance on print, and illustrates that we can save money without deleterious effect on enrollment.

Findings and Recommendations

Forces, Threats, and Opportunities

Disintermediation

Forces that will profoundly affect us have gathered and they are no longer on the horizon—but loom directly overhead. Discussing the changing roles of traditional media and college communicators in the new information world, Andrew Careaga, director of communications at Missouri University of Science and Technology, sees the momentous shift now occurring as the "move to disintermediation." (2008, December 5). Disintermediation, Careaga explains, is a term used by economists that refers to the removal of the middleman (intermediary) from a product supply chain. For example, consider the travel industry's shift from travel agent intermediaries to direct consumer online access (2008).

Disintermediation has occurred in the traditional media, which Careaga says, "no longer has a monopoly on the flow of information, it has been disintermediated to smithereens" (2008). Nor are college and university communicators the sole distributers (controllers) of information and message. Those days are over, forever changed because everybody can access and share

information, respond to information put out by others, and create and disseminate their own content—without the need for interacting with traditional media outlets or organization's officially-sanctioned information providers.

We must consider how Facebook, YouTube, blogging, online chat, and others fit into our institution's communications strategy. New interactive communications technologies—including personalized experiences and user-generated content—create a disintermediated world where the communicator's role has turned from keeping the public informed to managing information streaming from any number of dispersed contact points.

To thrive, Careaga says campus communicators must "expand our role beyond traditional storytellers, we must also become multimedia facilitators for other storytellers, commentators, critics, pundits, and reporters." We must be prepared to facilitate others in telling our story, which fundamentally changes our role (2008).

Blogs allow others to express their point of view, respond to ours, and their comments create new information. While we may reasonably control our image in an institution-sponsored Facebook page (if we pay attention and act when necessary to what others post), our image (or more correctly, an interpretation of it) emerges whenever students and others present HCC in some way on their own Facebook and MySpace pages, on Twitter, or on YouTube. We have relinquished message control, or more accurately, it has been wrested from us. But this is also an opportunity. Content from others can be enriching in ways we haven't even dreamed of and multiple views create authenticity by presenting experience from many angles.

The Social Media Juggernaut

"Right now, we've got a blog, a Facebook page, we're LinkedIn, have Yammer, use Instant Messenger and Skype to talk to colleagues, researchers and reporters alike." Earle Holland, assistant vice president for Research Communications, Ohio State University (2008, December 8). Consider Tarleton State University Director of Public Information Nancy Pricer's email signature block for connecting with Tarleton:

Put yourself in the loop! Become a fan of Tarleton State University's Facebook at

http://www.facebook.com/pages/Stephenville-TX/Tarleton-State-

University/39882915052?ref=mf

and

MySpace at http://www.myspace.com/tarletontexans.

Check out Tarleton YouTube videos at http://www.youtube.com/user/tarletonstateu.

Follow Tarleton on Twitter at http://twitter.com/tarletonstate.

You can also subscribe to Tarleton's RSS news feed today at

http://www.tarleton.edu/scripts/press/subscribe.asp and receive Tarleton news

releases as soon as they are sent out to the media.

News release archive: http://www.tarleton.edu/scripts/press/releases.asp.

Social media, a burgeoning field with many players, has potential uses ranging from expanding the reach of institutional news and distributed content; to building community among alumni, accepted students, and others; to emergency notification; and to marketing. Researching this project, I watched the juggernaut of new media adoption by more and more businesses, organizations, agencies, and educational institutions. We must investigate this phenomenon: what it is, where it is going, and what is best for us. As we explore and adopt new technologies, we must ensure they achieve our objectives, fit our overall communications strategy, and consider the return on investment (ROI) which measures benefit of returns compared to costs. We need to establish metrics to measure our success, whether they are traffic, links, comments, or other measures.

Social media shows promise for improving efficiency in our recruiting efforts. In "Point, Click, Match," Peter Schworm (2008, December 14) discusses the potential for online college search "matchmaking" sites to fundamentally change the traditional college recruiting paradigm by allowing prospective students to learn about colleges on their own terms in their own medium. "Colleges, no longer content to cede the digital terrain to the teenage set, are also turning to Facebook-like pages in their recruiting efforts." He adds, "The shift is reshaping the admissions process, long dominated by mass mailings and college fairs, into a virtual, but highly personal, courting process many liken to online dating." (Schworm, 2008). Compare this for efficiency with the labor and cost involved in creating, printing, purchasing lists and mailing recruitment

materials to prospective students who may yet be "unqualified" leads with no interest in your institution. Schworm identifies five social networking sites providing this alternative to traditional college search: Campus Explorer, Check my Campus, ConnectEDU, Cappex.com, and mycollegeoptions.com. These sites help students cut through the crowded higher education field to find a match. Colleges express interest in a student and a student in a college—similar to a Facebook friend request. Private, permissioned student profiles allow colleges to search students by profile characteristics (test scores, demographic characteristics, etc.)

Marketing and Public Relations' Role in a Web-centric World

Our research findings will inform the web redevelopment strategy which, once formalized, should drive the "re-visioning" of the college's web presence(s) as well as redefine the roles and responsibilities of marketing and public relations, and its relationships with Information Technology, and other college staff to support this reconfiguration. Our decisions about a content management system, departmental content maintenance responsibilities, website configuration, online business processes, e-commerce, social media applications, and analytics, will impact how we define our own job titles and responsibilities and those of new position(s).

By reinventing our role, the marketing and public relations department could not only support web-centric, strategic communications, but (ideally) could be positioned to assume a more strategic role in advancing college mission, institutional focus and direction, enrollment goals, and enhancing institutional stature. Shifting from print to web-centric communications will improve quality, speed, relevance, and breadth of communication while saving money and labor. While the latter may be easily calculated (consider online application vs. print example), the harder task is positioning the marketing and pubic relations function institutionally to assume a more strategic role.

Discretion being the better part of valor, my approach first considers change orchestrated within existing channels. Integrating web-centric initiatives into existing college planning and budgeting processes is an example: our Strategic Enrollment Management Plan (SEMP) has four broad goals, and web-centric initiatives fit within Goal 4 "Effective Communications." Tactical Strategic Action Plans (SAPs) underpin the plan and I have written a SAP for the web-centric

communications model, thus aligning it with the SEMP framework. See Appendix C. It has also been proffered for inclusion as initiative in the college's strategic plan.

Our highest and best use as a department is to develop systems to maintain quality, message integrity, and college brand identity. We can adopt more of a consultant role for the college's lower-level communications needs, i.e., we provide guidance, tools, training, and oversight and content generators provide labor. In the case of web CMS, this means decentralized content development and maintenance with centralized approval through marketing and public relations. In the distributed content CMS model, identifying and training content providers from throughout the college's departments and functional areas is critical. Our department can play a strategic role, for example, by:

- Working toward having job descriptions of individuals within identified departments re-crafted to include responsibility for providing and maintaining accurate, timely web content information via the CMS.

- Establishing a "Content Provider Group" via an in-person or online community (e.g., Facebook group) for those individuals. This could include regular meetings to discuss issues, provide training and assistance with technical and editorial issues, keep up-to-date with technology and how it might be further employed to solve department problems or streamline business practices. This not only improves college public information practice, but provides professional development opportunities for college staff.

A review of Gammel's website component responsibilities and the scope of HCC's web needs underscore the fact that one person cannot be expected to manage content in the old "webmaster" model, where one person was responsible for creating and maintaining all aspects of the website.

Marketing and Public Relations must partner, in some form, with Information Technology department and Banner managers, among others (possibly via a Web Team). This will be essential not only for linking technical expertise with communications, but for holistically

establishing and administering policies and procedures, prioritizing projects, and making decisions about future functionality and development. We will need to plan for interactivity and social media which need oversight, acceptable use policies, and monitoring of online behavior. College-provided content must be vibrant and engaging.

The New Jobs

Job titles for web positions vary across organizations and gain added complexity when a worker has responsibilities additional to (and sometimes unrelated to) their web responsibilities. Although the same title might have significantly different responsibilities in different organizations, it is important for titles to convey the position's responsibilities internally and externally to reduce confusion.

In a disintermediated age, new technology and social media responsibilities are increasingly common in marketing and public relations/communication director positions and point to the reorientation taking place because of Web 2.0 technologies: e-communications manager, e-marketing manager, director of web communications, (or) online marketing (or) online communications, are a few. Specialized support positions such as e-marketing, internet, web communications, or new or social media specialists are also appearing in postings.

Dalhousie University's media relations manager, whose position was expanding to include all social media outreach including a new direct report dealing exclusively with new media, sought suggestions for possible job titles that reflected the new responsibility and the importance the university is placing on social media. Director of Communications Bob LeDrew, Algonquin College, suggests: manager of media relations and new media outreach; manager, media relations and conversational media; and manager, media relations and online communications. (2009, January 8)

As for job responsibilities in this new age, consider: a Keene State College, New Hampshire, position posting for Director of Online Communications, seeking a "chief advocate for emerging technologies including the overarching web sphere development and presence." Responsibilities included: addressing communications needs through emerging technologies;

providing leadership for Online Communications Office; cultivation of friend, alumni, and fundraising; and developing plans to support effective college communications. (2008, November 15-16).

Northern Essex Community College, Haverhill MA, posted for a Director of Web Communications seeking a "hands–on leader to provide centralized and strategic management for our expanding online presence." Responsibilities included: website and intranet management, email marketing campaigns, training and support of departmental content managers in use of online tools; strategic use of third-party social software and online community tools (blogs, MySpace, Facebook, Wikipedia, Youtube, Flickr); web traffic analysis and reporting (2009, January 26).

Re-visioning Marketing and Public Relations at HCC

Changing our department name so it no longer lodges us in the past is important. "Public relations" reflects old models of practice and outlook. Communications is more standard, current and broad enough to reflect the shifts described above. While job descriptions must be more fully considered, I believe we have the talent and the vision to benefit by re-aligning our human resources within the department. While we clearly need an additional hand on deck to fulfill responsibilities, I would not recommend hiring a "webmaster" position because it cannot solve institutional needs for website development and maintenance (per Gammel) and doesn't address social technologies. I recommend that the communications department become "strategic" and we upgrade one of our current positions into an "e-manager" position. For example: Director (marketing and strategic communications) and E-communications manager (web, social media, e-communications). I would then backfill the lower-level publications coordinating and publicity functions that consume so much of our time with an associate-level position. I estimate this would save about $10,000 per year vs. keeping the status quo in marketing and public relations and adding a "webmaster" position. More importantly, it would position us to better support the web-centric communications model.

Conclusion

My project emerged from my concern that while technology has rapidly transformed the higher education landscape, and the "web-centric" approach to marketing and communications has, in a relatively short time, replaced conventional methods. While I recognized that HCC was in the in the nascent stage, I did not know, before starting my investigation, how rapidly new media and Web 2.0 strategies are being adopted and used to achieve strategic objectives in marketing, public relations, enrollment management, and crisis communications. Disintermediation and the new and social media juggernaut directly affect us. New ideologies and technological tools have inherently changed our jobs, not just in skills required, but because they fundamentally change the flow and control of information. This CCLA project has increased my knowledge in this area, suggests what lies ahead, and I hope will focus institutional attention and support for re-envisioning our practices.

<u>Next Steps</u>

We are reviewing consultant research now and expect to complete the web redevelopment strategy by the end of June. Over the next year, this strategy will provide direction and for "re-visioning" the college's web presence(s) and for redefining of the roles and responsibilities of the unit formerly known as marketing and public relations, and its linkages with Information Technology, and other college staff and departments to support the new configuration.

As noted, decisions concerning a content management system, departmental content maintenance responsibilities, online applications for business processes, e-commerce, web analytics, and social media applications, will be part of the plan. Next steps include:

- Review consultant research findings and other research
- Draft web redevelopment strategy
- Outline web redesign project: timelines, schedules, budgets, responsibilities
- Research content management systems
- Develop new media plan
- Finalize staffing recommendation

- Launch Website Redevelopment Phase II (redesign and implementation based on web redevelopment strategy) in September/October 2009.

We have made a proposal for FY10 economic stimulus funds to advance the web-centric communications model through a phase II web redesign and purchase of a CMS. HCC administration envisions economic stimulus dollars as one-time money for projects that strengthen the institution and better position it for subsequent fiscal years). See Appendix D.

<u>The Future is Now!</u>

While it is tricky to navigate and negotiate change, adopting a web-centric communications model and re-visioning our role in supporting this shift will be an important accomplishment to position us for the future (now): for efficiency in human and financial resources, for improving HCC's public information, and for more fully engaging our constituencies with the wealth of opportunities that comprise HCC. This shift will help more of us become aware of, and more fully use the communication capabilities presented by new technologies in our interactions with students, customers, partners, the community, and among ourselves. With talent, dedication, and resources, and a little luck and the proper alignment of the sun, moon, and stars, we can make this happen. And leveraging these opportunities now position us for future developments: perhaps instruction delivered to student's hand-held devices, to Second Life virtual world instruction, and more. Who knows what the future may bring.

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