

Student Communication Tool Set as the SACS-QEP

Submitted

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The story of the Minotaur is found in Greek mythology. Theseus, after slaying the monster, must also find his way out of a maze. Unlike those who had gone before him, Theseus had an advantage. He used an effective navigational tool, a thread, to find his way out.

We need to give each of our students at Brevard Community College (BCC) the techniques to navigate the maze of policies and problems they might encounter as they progress through college. We can do this by improving student access to information and services at BCC with current available technology. Measurements will be taken before and after implementing a prototype study about BCC resources available.

Students entering Brevard Community College for the first time or adult students returning to college to update their skill set might find answering simple questions as to how, where and with whom to register for classes a maze of communication barriers. If we want BCC students to succeed, then we need a high speed, high throughput, two-way communication channel between students and the college. Using new technology such as mobile applications, Facebook and Twitter, the college could answer students' questions more quickly and make information more accessible. Furthermore, current students should be involved in the process. This paper advocates that these suggestions become Brevard Community College's Quality Enhancement Plan.

Defining the Problem

The Quality Enhancement Plan Online Survey Results released via Email by Dr. Laura Dunn on May 17, 2011 points to a problem with communication particularly with regard to information access. This involves getting general information such as library or lab hours as well as information to solve problems such as issues dealing with registration. Students want information quickly. They want to be connected and interactive (Frاند, 2000) and increasingly they want mobility (Evans, 2006).

Currently students have the option to obtain information through various ways. First, information can be found through “hard copy” (catalogue, schedule of classes etc.). Additionally, students can phone or come to campus for assistance. Finally, BCC’s online access is available. Each method has serious drawbacks. For example, using a hard copy requires physical possession of the material, is not interactive and information may or may not be found quickly. Personal interaction requires that offices be open and staff available. Here too is the problem of long waits during peak periods. Information is available interactively but not quickly. Online access to information is “always open” but students have indicated that finding information is not always easy to do so information, again, may not be available and specific questions may not be answered quickly.

According to a study conducted by Billington (1988), an “environment that encourages experimentation and creativity with regular feedback mechanisms for students to inform faculty and administrators what they want and need are the best way to increase the learning experience.” This paper suggests a few methods to allow that to happen.

Types of Students

Prensky (2001) observed that there are two types of students in today's classrooms. These types are the Digital Natives and the Digital Immigrants. The Digital Natives grew up in an environment where digital technology was the norm. PCs, video games and cell phones are ubiquitous. Digital Immigrants (generally older students) may be new to the latest technology.

Frans (2000) makes three major points about Digital Natives:

1. Computers are not viewed as technology. For the information-age student, the computer is here and now; it is not technical. It is currently part of his or her universe and is not novel.
2. The Digital Native wants to be connected and be interactive.
3. Being highly connected via mobile devices is also a very important to these Digital Native students. A sense of being connected and staying connected is a natural part of life for the Digital Native.

This is why we should actively be connecting with these students with Facebook, Twitter and other mobile applications. While users between 18 and 24, Digital Natives, make up about 50% of Facebook users, 38% are those older than 24, Digital Immigrants (Evans, 2006).

93% of students own a computer (Kvavik, 2006). Caruso (2008) found that students spent an average of 19.6 hours per week doing online activities. Evans (2006) says that "mobile is the future for content delivery. Colleges and universities need to establish a strategy now and make the decisions necessary to take advantage of this communication opportunity." Mobile phone

apps communicate information and it is one of the quickest growing thoroughfares for information flow.

A Ball State study (Hanley, 2008) reports a 99% usage of cell phones by their students. Smart phones accounted for 53% of the student population. Hanley said “the computer is quickly being left behind” to the smart phone. These phones can be used with a web browser or run specialized applications locally on themselves. Smart phones are convenient and are portable. Since students have them in cars, in our hallways, and in our class rooms, it makes sense to write applications that are run on their phones and which can access our college information base from anywhere. The same application should have a parallel application on our website for students without smart phones may access the same information.

Evans states some rules for colleges starting new mobile applications:

1. The first mobile site can and should create a foundation for more to come. It is acceptable to start by matching up some of what students want with content that already exists. For instance, a quick implementation app could include major parts of the current BCC website.
2. Whatever your concerns about mobile, they are likely shared by other institutions. Call colleagues at the college or university across town and find out what they're doing. Unlike the corporate world, the higher education community is collaborative. We expect to share what we know, and what we have, with others trying to do the same thing.

3. There's more than one way to deliver mobile content, and the circumstances at your institution can drive the choice. If you have the budget, consider hiring a consultant. If you have strong design and technical teams, some rock-solid open source for mobile is available. A vendor of one of the enterprise systems used on your campus may also offer a module for mobile.
4. The design of a mobile site needs to be simple, with impact. Take cues from those outside of higher education who are already doing this well. A mobile interface must be clean and practical while comparing well with the thousands of attractive apps and other mobile-ready sites. Audiences are using their fingers and thumbs, not a mouse pointer.
5. Once you launch a mobile site, metrics can be used to identify future content. Maps and the people directory also get a lot of traffic.
6. A mobile strategy need not be one type of phone only. Agnostic delivery of mobile content is a better choice. Apple and Android are the top two phone operating systems.

Our students should be a major component of this effort given that they know the problems that their fellow students face. To aid in developing this application, BCC should offer a class in mobile development. The product from this class will become BCC phone apps. These apps should link to the above BCC web blog. A student independently wrote the first mobile app at FSU (Ray, 2010). After viewing the app, FSU decided to adopt it and it became the official FSU app.

The BCC website answers many student questions with return email. The problem with this method is that it is ask once and receive the answer once. Other students may have the same question. A better method seems to be using Facebook or web blog approach that saves all replies and other students with similar questions can see the answers already published.

Millions of students use social networking sites. Facebook, now the largest, was created to serve students. It uses a one-to-many style of communication. Pempek (2009) found that students use Facebook approximately thirty minutes throughout the day as part of their daily routine. Twenty-two percent of students using Facebook use it to connect and re-connect with others and eighteen percent use Facebook to learn new information. BCC should expand its current Facebook page and hire students to observe and respond to questions and comments from others students and perspective students.

The central tenets of social networking are sharing information and building and sustaining relationships. The tools or mechanisms for facilitating communication may change, but the underlying need for social interaction remains a powerful aspect of human nature. Good communication is the key ingredient in building relationships with constituencies across the campus.

Similarly, BCC should continue and expand the use of its Twitter account. Make it a daily must see for students and staff. People who work Twitter should be student volunteers, faculty, staff and administrators. For instance, each day a member of the student body or staff or faculty use Twitter to record their daily activities. Using this information stream should make students engaged and interested to learn more about their campus and college. This Twitter

stream could be used as one more avenue for Titan email. How many students read important college email? Most students will follow a Twitter stream at least once a day.

BCC should have a frequently asked questions (FAQ) online and a video made by students answering these FAQ. The video should be uploaded to YouTube for easy access playback with links for BCC websites and other BCC applications.

Additionally, the BCC website should be looked at for usability. A usability study would include items such as:

1. How many button clicks does it take to answer a question or receive information?
2. Does the design of the web page increase awareness of page content?
3. How many items are on each page?

This would improve online access for both Digital Natives and Immigrants alike.

Recommendations

Based on an analysis of the Quality Enhancement Plan Online Survey Results the following recommendations concerning communication skills, if followed, would allow Brevard Community College to create a stronger, more viable institute of higher learning.

1. Begin a usability study of the BCC website. This type of study is done with real users, under real environmental conditions. This is a human factors type of study including items as: is there any misunderstanding and how quickly can a user navigate to the user requested item.

2. Increase use of the BCC Facebook page. Students, faculty, and staff should join and become actively involved.
3. Increase use of the BCC Twitter account (@BrevardCC). Students should be the main driver with faculty and staff checking for accuracy and to follow up with details.
4. BCC should write mobile applications that students will use. A FAQ page that will answer most students' questions should be one of the apps. Any current BCC website application should be considered to run as a mobile. BCC should start a mobile development class where students would design, develop, and test apps.
5. Many questions should be answered via video and uploaded to the YouTube website for future viewing by students.

Measuring Results

A small study could take place before the start of the upcoming fall term. An online survey will contain questions that address the student's knowledge of resources. After the start of classes, a sampling of students could re-take the survey to measure how well the information was communicated to the students.

Summary

In summary, communication between the college and the student is a most consequential QEP topic. We can do this by improving student access to information and services at BCC with current available technology.

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