

Tips to Make a University Student Blogging Program Successful

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What follows is my advice to members of faculty and administration on implementing a successful student blogging program for their college or university. It is assumed that the reader knows that blogging is a valuable tool for public relations (PR). As a disclaimer, I should remind the reader that this is only my opinion, and I can by no means guarantee that my advice is correct.

Fact: Prospective Students Want Information

One thing I can promise you about prospective students is that they want as much information as they can possibly get about which university they should attend. While brochures and booklets are regarded as the conventional form of PR, very few students actually base their decisions on them. Prospective students look to current students and alumni for their advice on each university that they are considering. They often make their decision based on the experiences and opinions of current students, and they will seek out this information regardless of whether or not the university makes it easy to find.

Blogging is No Easy Task

Blogging is here to stay, and any university that does not already have a student blogging program should definitely consider it. Unfortunately, writing is not a talent everyone possesses. A browse through the 53 million+ blogs tracked by Technorati (www.technorati.com) will verify this claim. The quality of writing is usually the deciding factor between success and failure for a blog, and quality blogging can be just as hard as writing for a newspaper. It is reasonable for a university to require that students submit applications and sample posts before giving them official student blogs. At the same time, it is important that a group of bloggers be made up of students that do not already have a direct voice in PR. As easy as it might be to just invite all the student newspaper editors or campus tour guides to blog for their university, this would not necessarily offer readers a new or valuable perspective.

Bloggers Should Reflect the Student Body

The first step to a successful student blogging program is to bring together a group of students that represent their university. A university that wants to portray its student body as having “diversity of thought” and coming from “all walks of life” would not be served well by a group of bloggers from the same major, hometown, year, and ethnicity. Universities should consider having at least one blogger from each college, or having bloggers involved in different

aspects of student life. It is important to represent both graduates and undergraduates, seniors and new students, transfers and internationals. If it is necessary to have twelve bloggers instead of six in order to provide adequate representation, then have twelve.

Avoid the “Today I Brushed My Teeth” Blogs

The next step to a successful student blogging program is to ensure that student blogs do not become nothing more than glorified diaries. Writers should think about what they would be interested in reading if they were prospective students themselves. It is reasonable to encourage them to talk about their classes, the events they go to, and the things they like to do on campus. It is also important to treat them like the journalists they really are. Give them the same opportunities to attend concerts, sporting events, and guest lectures on campus as you would give a reporter for the campus newspaper. After all, if they are good bloggers they probably deserve it.

You Can Never Have Enough Feedback

The final step to a successful student blogging program is to constantly pursue feedback. Successful bloggers utilize user feedback to improve their writing and focus on topics that their readers would be interested in. Ask prospective students, current students, alumni, and staff to give their impressions of these blogs and suggestions of what they would like to see. Some of my best blog entries were inspired by e-mails from readers who asked what I had to say on a topic that interested them. Readers enjoy being a part of the conversation and having their feedback valued.

No Amount of PR is Better Than Happy Students

Any university that is afraid of giving their students a voice knows that their students have negative things to say. Blogging should always be honest and transparent. Therefore, any university considering a student blogging program should give their students good things to talk about.

Do Not Stop At Text

Blogs are a great start for giving prospective students an honest look into your college or university, but it does not have to stop at text. Pictures are very important and readers love them. Encourage bloggers to share pictures in their entries whether they are hosted on their own blog or through an online service such as Flickr [1] (www.flickr.com). You could also encourage student photographers to host an official photoblog. Finally, consider audio blogging (podcasting) and video blogging; two far more difficult but innovative ways to reach

prospective students. The web provides a wealth of options for PR, and the benefits are waiting for those universities brave enough to take advantage of them.

[1] Flickr prohibits use of their service by publishers who are paid to blog.

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