

Social Networking: Engaging Prospective and Admitted African American and Other Minority Students Before They Arrive on Campus

With the effectiveness of traditional methods of connecting with incoming Wittenberg University minority students waning, Forest B. Wortham spans the virtual and physical worlds to help them find their place.

By Forest B. Wortham

PLANNING PROGRAMS WITH LEARNING OUTCOMES that address diversity issues on campus can become fairly routine—a “plug and play” task—for a director of multicultural student affairs at a private, religious, predominantly white liberal arts university. However, connecting with African American and other minority students when they arrived on campus at Wittenberg University had become a challenge for me as the director, and for the student leaders of the African American student organization I advised. Despite our best efforts to engage our target population before they arrived on campus, progressively fewer students were connecting with us or participating in significant numbers in our programs and events once they arrived on campus. We were averaging only around 10 students during Welcome Week activities. The anecdotal feedback from students was that diversity awareness was, in their estimation, clichéd and passé.

My primary responsibility was diversity programming for the university community and monitoring the

academic progress of minority students, so I wanted to be successful. African American and minority students accounted for roughly 6 percent of the anticipated 1,900 students enrolled at the university. Each year, the admissions office admitted between 25 and 35 minority students. On the surface, my job seemed simple: contact the students, establish a relationship, and guide them through their college years while providing diversity awareness programming for the university community that hopefully would educate and diffuse any potential hostility they might encounter. But I was finding it difficult to make meaningful connections that moved beyond the “plug and play” routine.

The majority of minority students expressed the concern that they didn’t want to be associated with any race-specific organizations or events. They were more interested in “blending” into the predominantly white general student population in hopes they would be accepted for who they were rather than what ethnic group they represented. Experience, however, had taught me, and the African American student leaders, that at

some point many of the minority students would need help navigating the challenges they would encounter on a predominantly white campus. A web article titled “Black Student College Graduation Rates Remain Low, But Modest Progress Begins to Show” notes that “having a reference group that understands the challenges ... helps students to find themselves and adjust to an all white campus.” I therefore concluded that connecting with these students before they arrived was the key to engaging them on campus. Firsthand experience had proven that they needed to be shown that being a part of diverse activities and organizations could enhance their college experience and support them in their academic pursuits.

At the same time that I was looking for new ways to connect to incoming minority students, social networking was on the horizon. It seemed to be the most direct, socially credible method of accessing students in real time. I had no idea how many prospective minority students were using social networking; my assumption, however, was that it was the best medium to connect with them. In fact, according to Sherry L. Smith, who wrote about the Pew Internet and American Life Project: “African Americans are more likely (97 percent) than Hispanics (86 percent) and Whites (88 percent) to visit social networking sites and African Americans are also more likely (93 percent) than Whites (84 percent) to have a profile page on a social networking site.”

Of course, while Facebook provided the *high-tech* connection needed online, it was also necessary to establish a bit of *high touch* to ground and build the relationships once the students arrived on campus. “Black Student College Graduation Rates Remain Low” notes that “mentoring programs for ... first-year students involving upperclassmen have been successful at engaging students and helping to create a sense of belonging ... to help black students adapt to the culture of predominantly white campuses.” So minority students who engage in social activities become a part of the social environment and are more likely to persist.

THE DECISION

TECHNOLOGY COULD ENSURE INITIAL ENGAGEMENT with students before they moved to campus, but we still needed to engage them face-to-face once they arrived. The most effective way to accomplish that was to create a mentoring program. According to a *Campus Compact* article, “Best Practices in Campus-Based Mentoring”: “The college student mentor is both a friend and a role model who supports

and encourages a younger partner in ... academic and personal growth ... a guide who helps a young person make the difficult change ... from elementary to middle school to high school.” I concluded that our mentoring programs should engage new students like a friend would. There would be minimal tutoring, peer supervision, or advice giving—just informal activities that friends would do together socially. I wanted this mentoring program to be known for engaging students in addition to its diversity focus. The premise was if prospective and admitted students engaged with

matriculating students before they arrived on campus, they would be more likely to stay engaged with their mentors throughout the year. Those initial relationships developed during the first weeks would help the new students get connected to the campus community and physically “friend” someone during their first semester.

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We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Jean M. Henscheid (aboutcampus@pdx.edu), and please copy her on notes to authors.

CREATING THE PROGRAM

THE INITIAL PILOT PROGRAM BEGAN IN FALL 2005 and ran until 2010. The volunteer student mentors, who would be minority students with at least a 2.7 GPA, would be called “Connectors.” (In subsequent years, we expanded the criteria from just GPA to include a record of campus involvement, along with the submission of an essay explaining their desire and motivation to be a Connector.) The first group, a total of 16 student volunteers, was recruited by cold calls from a student worker. They reflected the gender balance of the incoming class and provided a one-to-two Connector-to-student ratio.

Two student workers and I trained the first group of Connectors three days before the new students arrived on campus using icebreakers, listening exercises, program planning, and group processing activities. Following the pilot program in 2005, we changed the recruiting cycle for Connectors and recruited in the fall prior rather than the summer. The first two years following the pilot, all Connectors were volunteers with the exception of the student manager. The last three years of the program we went from an all-volunteer force to competitive work-study paid positions with two students hired as student managers titled “Head Connectors.”

CONNECTOR RESPONSIBILITIES

THE ORIGINAL PILOT PROGRAM WAS DESIGNED to match two to three incoming students with one Connector. The final program design, however, paired two Connectors (one male and one female student) with a small group of three to four incoming students. Working with the university enrollment manager and multicultural admissions, I secured the contact information of all prospective and admitted minority students throughout the academic recruiting year. Students were assigned to Connectors according to gender, as well as geographic loca-

tion or high school. Facebook was especially helpful and effective at this point because as students interacted online, they could determine not only demographic information and high school attended, but also interests and hobbies, at a much faster pace than the enrollment manager could provide. To maintain the credibility of the program, a Facebook page was established for the program and maintained by the Connectors. My premise was that incoming students would be more candid interacting with their peers and asking questions if they were engaging on

a student Facebook page than they would be if using one of the university’s officially sponsored pages. While it is true that connections made online can be tenuous, according to the e-zine *Campus Compact*, a social networking site like Facebook “enables its users to present themselves in an online profile, and accumulate ‘friends’ who can post comments on each other’s pages, and view each other’s profiles ... see what classes they have in common, and learn each other’s hobbies, interests, musical tastes, and romantic relationship status through the profiles.” As a result, the admitted students estab-

lished a relationship with prospective students before they arrived on campus. Once admitted, previously online “friends” became real-life friends with someone about whom they already knew something.

To ensure the program established *high touch* along with the *high tech*, Connectors made sure to engage the new students personally once they were on campus in addition to their engagement via the online social networking community. Connectors were required to interact with the students assigned to them at least twice a week. The interaction could be as simple as eating together in the common dining hall, inviting them over to watch movies, or doing laundry or studying together. Connectors were also required to plan one outing per month to an event on campus with other Connector groups. Students documented their outings, including who participated

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and the purpose of the event, by submitting activity sheets online.

OUTCOMES

BEFORE THE CONNECTOR PROGRAM WAS ESTABLISHED, it was a struggle to attract incoming minority students to Welcome Week activities (especially minority male athletes) and diversity programs during the academic school year. During the years that the Connector program functioned, 2005–2010, the number of minority students who participated in Welcome Week activities increased significantly from a low of 10 to well over 70 students (including athletes). Participation in events sponsored by the Office of Multicultural Student Programs increased from an average of 30–35 to 60–100, depending on the program topic and cosponsorship. Participation in the minority student organization’s general body meeting increased as well.

Connectors also led their own events. When Connectors sponsored events together, they often averaged around 12 to 15 students in attendance, depending on the event. Some were even more popular: for example, Connector-sponsored game nights that included the strategy game “Mafia” from Facebook could attract over 50 students playing and watching. Connectors capitalized on the popularity of their events with self-initiated study tables where first-year students studied with upper-class students at different times during the semester. Rewardingly, as the word spread around campus about the positive work our Connectors were doing, other university departments began to request that the group partner with them in reaching out to their students and hosting their prospective students.

THE SUCCESS OF THE CONNECTORS PROGRAM

THE PROGRAM WAS SUCCESSFUL FOR THE FOUR YEARS that I ran it. In surveys distributed to Connectors and first-year students after the conclusion of their involvement, participants shared that they were extremely satisfied with the program and said they

hoped it would be repeated for the next incoming class. First-year students indicated that the program had made their adjustment to the university easier. In addition, recommendations for improvements in the program include: (1) ensuring that all Connectors made contact with all prospective students, (2) improving how incoming students are assigned to Connectors, and (3) ensuring timely notifications of when and where Connector events are being held. While the Connector program using social media functioned for four years, I left the program in the hands of others when I left the position in 2010.

The success of the program I designed can be attributed to pairing technology with personal human interaction. The program provided incoming students with access to those already doing what they aspired to do (attend the university) while at the same time exposing them to diversity. First-year students also benefitted by building a network of friends and acquaintances that made their adjustment to college easier.

It is important that student development professionals and educators stay current with the latest technology trends if they want to connect with today’s and tomorrow’s wired generations. Texting, Twitter, and Facebook continue to remain popular among students; however, on the horizon are the next generations of new media. Whether we are able to use these new technologies is only limited by our imagination.

NOTES

- Best practices in campus-based mentoring. (2011). *Campus Compact*. Retrieved from <http://www.compact.org/resources/mentoring/3697/#what-is-mentoring>
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