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Colleges Create Facebook-Style Social Networks to Reach Alumni

By JJ HERMES

Trying to emulate the popularity of Web sites like Facebook and MySpace, hundreds of college alumni associations have begun to offer their own online social networks, seeking to stake a claim on the computer screens of current and former students, especially young alumni.

But many of the sites have struggled to attract alumni and to keep them interacting with the devotion they show to their online profiles on other networks. That makes the sites less useful to colleges, which want to foster closer ties with alumni and keep tabs on their whereabouts for fund raising and other purposes.

"Social networking is definitely hot, and people want to know what to do," says Andrew Shaindlin, executive director of the alumni association at the California Institute of Technology.

The question, he says, is, Do these exclusive networks fill a need for alumni?

Facebook, which allows users to create and share digital identities, has more than 70 million users. The site says some 85 percent of students at four-year universities have Facebook profiles. Users can connect with anyone who has a profile.

Colleges have long tried to tap into Facebook by establishing affinity groups there, but they cannot easily mine the site for data or contact information. So, in order to embrace the social-networking phenomenon themselves, many institutions have simply built their own networks.

Reconnecting People

While online directories have been part of alumni-association Web sites for more than a decade, such static content gives former students little reason to keep coming back.

College alumni-affairs directors have revamped those sites in recent years to serve as better gateways for former students to reconnect with one another and their alma maters. Any contact information that alumni update on their colleges' new social-networking sites is automatically updated in the alumni association's database as well, making it easier for colleges to reach alumni in the future, whether to ask for donations or to provide digital alerts for events like reunions or meet-ups.

While online socializing is one attraction for alumni, career development has grown as another major draw for the colleges' networking sites. Now job hunters can more easily identify and contact fellow alumni who are employed at companies where they want to work. Some employers that pay a fee can tap into the sites to recruit alumni from specific institutions or who graduated with certain majors.

Colleges may also integrate the sites with their print publications, delivering some content online to allow alumni to interact immediately.

"We're thinking about how to create a seamless experience between the site and the alumni magazine," says Charlie J. Melichar, vice president for public relations and communications at Colgate University.

Several companies offer platforms for institutional alumni networks, and two have taken a particularly large share of the business. Affinity Circles Inc., which was created in 2002 by Stanford University students, offers a product called inCircle and says it has about 95 college customers. Another company, iModules Software Inc., has offered alumni-centric products since 1999, including one for social networking called Encompass. More than 500 colleges and universities use its products, the company says.

Officials of both businesses say their services cost at least $10,000 a year and sometimes include start-up fees, which vary depending on colleges' needs.

But the number of people making connections within the networks can justify the cost, says Matthew L. Brandon, associate vice president for alumni relations at Lynchburg College, in Virginia. More than 10 percent of the college's alumni have registered with its iModules-based online social network since it began nine months ago.

"We don't do many events where we can reconnect 2,300 people simultaneously," says Mr. Brandon. "We see a lot of groups of friends reconnecting online."

Specialized Sites

While most alumni associations have used commercial vendors to construct their social-networking presences, a few colleges have built their own.

Elon University released its online "town square," called E², last May. Administrators were looking to revamp the alumni association's Web site to make it more dynamic. They ended up building a social network not just for alumni but also for current students, faculty members, and even parents.

"We tried to think of a way that would give them online resources that would make it more attractive to come back frequently," says Daniel J. Anderson, assistant vice president and director of university relations, who helped lead the effort.

The site has a feel similar to that of a Facebook profile page but with several additional features, including the option for students and alumni to post résumés along with their profiles.

"We know we're not going to be able to compete with Facebook," says John D. Parsons, a Web-application developer at Elon. "But we thought about what we could offer specialized to our university," like campus-centered news feeds and the privacy of a closed network.

Alumni may find the network more attractive than current students do. "I've heard there's a lot of resistance from the students to using it — they think it's cheesy and repetitive of Facebook," says Caroline E. Sage, a 2002 graduate. "But I do know a lot of people who have reconnected, and I have been surprised by the alumni involvement."

Mr. Parsons says he worked full time on the site for about four months, and a few other college employees worked on design elements. But now that the network is up and running, Elon has full control of its content and does not have to pay an annual fee.

"There really aren't any ongoing costs," says Mr. Anderson, who notes that about 250 students and alumni log on to the site every day on the campus of about 5,500 students.

A Closed Environment

Carleton College, too, is creating its own alumni-networking site, using an open-source framework called Elgg. The exclusivity of existing platforms was one reason campus officials decided to forgo commercial vendors and build their own site, which will allow alumni to interact with people outside the college community.

"They were all working in the model of creating a closed environment where your alums can do all the stuff they can

on Facebook," says Mark F. Heiman, a senior Web-application developer at Carleton. "We looked at that and said, 'This is not going to work. Nobody is going to sign on to this.'"

That message has not been lost on some alumni directors, who see the restrictive nature of the social-networking sites offered by colleges as a major drawback.

"Students are training themselves to use Facebook," says Scott Mory, associate senior vice president for alumni relations at the University of Southern California. "For us to try to retrain them to use another tool that almost all of their friends can't use who didn't go to their university, there's a piece of logic that's missing there."

He suggests that colleges focus on working as best as they can to stay connected with current and former students through Web sites those people already use, including the career-networking site LinkedIn.

Most software companies that build online-networking systems for colleges have been reluctant to confront the issue of how having closed environments can put those systems at a disadvantage. Mike McCamon, vice president for marketing at iModules, says his company is considering steps to allow alumni associations to interact with iModules customers at other institutions but has no immediate plans to do so.

Still, while there may be some aspects of the sites that require tweaking, the networks do facilitate the universal desire of alumni: to be found by other alumni, says Caltech's Mr. Shaindlin.

And the medium certainly suits young alumni: About 70 percent of Internet users ages 18 to 29 have profiles on online social networks, the Pew Internet & American Life Project recently found.

"It really was kind of an experiment," says Mr. Anderson of Elon's efforts to foster closer ties to its alumni. "But I think the jury is still out on how much it will be used."

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