UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–STOUT

ENROLLMENT COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT AND PLAN

Executive Summary

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JAMES TOWER

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communications
group

INTRODUCTION

It is a difficult and uncertain time in higher education. The University of Wisconsin-Stout, like most colleges and universities, faces significant financial, demographic, and technological challenges in its efforts to recruit and admit each new class of students Prospective students and their families have ever-increasing expectations for communication about the university's programs, its admissions and financial aid processes, and the long-term benefits of a UW-Stout degree. Our communications audit found that the university is positioned to successfully own a well-defined niche in the marketplace. Much of the institutional communications infrastructure is in place to shape and refine current and proposed communications vehicles. The university is in the enviable position of being poised to move forward without having to create entirely new systems.

AUDIT PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

We conducted a communications audit intended to assess the breadth and consistency of the university's communications effort related to Admissions and Enrollment. We attempted to collect all print materials produced by and for UW–Stout. We reviewed the current structure of the University Relations office as it relates to the development and production of admissions materials. We also analyzed the university website and websites of competitor institutions, and reviewed television and print advertisements. We approached the website and many of the materials as if we were a prospective family encountering UW–Stout for the first time. For pieces that were clearly designed for audiences familiar with UW–Stout we looked for the key messages that each of them highlighted.

Two key findings are a highly structured system by which communications efforts are reviewed and produced, and a robust Information Technology department. The strong direction of the University Relations department over publications helps to enforce consistency of messages and materials. The IT infrastructure and staff allows the university to be both responsive and innovative, and provides a framework for increased outreach to key external audiences.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

UW–Stout has many strengths and a progressive academic core. Its challenge is to create a clear and distinct impression in the minds of a declining number of college-bound high school students. Its recruiting materials must be highly focused, well-produced, clearly defined and carefully timed to allow UW–Stout to cut through the clutter to create a distinct and attractive perception in the marketplace. Each component of a communications plan, every website, every printed publication, and every interaction between community members and a prospective student provides an opportunity to define what makes the education at UW–Stout valuable. The high degree of visual and message consistency across general promotional materials provides a solid foundation for other more targeted pieces.

- The university should increase the use of the well-developed and well-regarded standards manual and vetting process to further tighten standards for Admissions-related publications, and should extend the standards and vetting process to other communication vehicles, regardless of which office or program sponsors or produces a publication, website or advertisement.

UW–Stout has justifiable pride in its ability to collect and analyze information.

- The university should continue to invest in enrollment-centered information systems and data analysis to focus its recruiting efforts and expenditures on the most desirable and most likely prospects.

DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–STOUT EDUCATION

UW–Stout must positively differentiate itself from a wide range of other institutions: regional state-supported universities, for-profit online colleges and an array of private schools. Useful characteristics include:

- the size and location of the university
- the majors and programs available (especially majors not offered elsewhere in the UW system)
- the highly individualized and student-centered academic experience offered
- the technical and lab-oriented nature of the UW–Stout education
- the career successes achieved by recent graduates
- the E-Scholars program
- affordable and inclusive pricing/value

RESEARCH AND DATA

UW–Stout collects a remarkable amount of data, but there remain opportunities to gather additional information about the opinions and perceptions of prospective students and families.

- What other colleges do prospective students from various regions (local, eastern Wisconsin, Twin Cities) consider?
- Why do students decide *not* to apply to UW–Stout?
- Where do other admitted students enroll instead of Stout, and why?
- What are UW–Stout's particular strengths against these institutions, and how can these be leveraged to Stout's advantage?
- What misperceptions exist in the marketplace that can be corrected?

We strongly encourage efforts to complete the cancellation study proposed by Admissions staff. The information gathered in this study will feed directly into the development of the next series of key messages and associated communications vehicles.

E-COMMUNICATION / WEBSITE

The current website has great depth of content, works well with a variety of web browsers and operating systems, and generally seems well maintained. We found very few broken links and no major system performance issues. A higher degree of design consistency deeper in the site will assist users, particularly within the Admissions and Enrollment sections.

- There are a number of opportunities to add functionality, including an online inquiry form, an online application form, and links to the application from department and program pages which may be a prospective student's first contact with the university.

- Dedicated sites for accepted students and for deposited students can provide opportunities to deliver timely information about applications, admission status, housing or registration that can provide cost savings to the university and increased engagement with students.

- Highlighting the immediate assignment of e-mail addresses to accepted students is a powerful tool to connect students to campus and to each other. It reinforces two key messages for UW–Stout: it is a responsive campus that pays attention to individual students and it is a technically proficient place.

- Increasingly, websites have become a core marketing tool for institutions of higher learning. As such, the management of the site becomes a vital component of the Office of University Relations as it works to most effectively integrate the communications efforts of the university.

ADVERTISING / PHOTOGRAPHY / PRINT MATERIALS

There is a high degree of consistency and focus in message and presentation of the print materials we reviewed. Current publications and the website include a very high percentage of pictures, making the case for the technical aspects of learning. Print materials are well-designed and attractive. There are opportunities to increase the correspondence and correlation between the various communications vehicles; for example, the university website address is only occasionally included in pieces developed by offices other than Admissions or University Relations. Each additional mention of the site gives external audiences another reminder of your web presence, which can become a strong representation of the university.

AUDIT CONCLUSION

It has been a rewarding experience learning about the opportunities for students and meeting many of the staff and faculty on campus. UW–Stout has the educational resources to provide students with a remarkable array of academic and professional opportunities. It has the structure and skilled staff to communicate the lasting worth of a UW–Stout education to the next generations of students.

The University of Wisconsin–Stout has a substantial strategic and tactical foundation on which to build. In most areas, our recommendations are designed to strengthen or complement current resources and practices.

Strategic Imperatives
- Develop a limited number of key messages to differentiate UW–Stout from its local, regional and in some cases national competitors.

- Continue development of focused communications sequences from the Admissions Office to students who have expressed interest via test score submissions or other inquiries; establish new admissions communications sequences to applicants, accepted students and deposited students.

- Ensure that *all* communications to prospective and accepted students can be tracked and viewed by the Admissions staff, including information from other offices that communicate with incoming students (e.g., financial aid, registration, housing, student life, athletics, specific Colleges, etc.).

- Identify programs that need renaming to reflect the marketplace and describe them in ways that the general public will quickly recognize and understand.

- Continue quick turnaround on applications and on housing deposits.

- Collect campus success stories from faculty and program directors for use in print, e-mail and web applications.

- Continue development of a robust online presence that actively engages students from their first contact with the university. Create a differentiated online experience that recognizes each individual student and their status in the overall admissions process.

Message Management
- Focus communications on a limited number of key messages reflecting the university's distinctive characteristics.

Graphic Identity Program
- Tighten standards even further and develop a more consistent, systematic look for publications. Print pieces received by prospective students should be quickly and easily identifiable as "UW–Stout" publications.
- Establish guidelines to ensure visual correspondence between print materials and the university websites.

The "UW–Stout" Brand
- Design each piece intended to reach prospective students as a possible "first contact" piece; ensure consistent information and messages about UW–Stout as a whole.

Institutional Website
- Implement a robust content management system to provide the understaffed web services office the tools to more effectively control the appearance, atmosphere and content of the entire university website.
- Centralize management of the website under the Office of University Relations.

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Program Identity
- Commit to a market research program (program audits, surveys, focus groups, etc.) to assess external perceptions of key university programs, and launch re-branding initiatives on the basis of this information.

Inquiry Communications Sequences
- Build a sequence of three to five communications vehicles to sustain prospective student interest and to begin creating stronger links and stronger two-way communications between students and the university.
- Develop a communications sequence specifically designed to address the concerns and interests of transfer students.

Refine Accepted-Student Communications Sequence
- Develop and implement a communications sequence for admitted students that coordinates contact of all university functions, and tailors messages on the basis of information already captured.

Admissions Web Presence
- Redesign or reorganize the Admissions section of the university website around the stages of the admissions process and add appropriate functionality to anticipate and address applicant concerns.

Expand Use of Data Collection
- Develop a research agenda to guide future data collection, storage and analysis to provide reliable information on which to base system enhancements and improve recruiting.

Electronic Communications
- Develop e-mail campaigns to enhance more traditional communications methods. Utilize experienced, external vendors who specialize in these kinds of communications processes to ensure campaign penetration and effectiveness.

Alumni – Admission Collaboration
- Create opportunities for alumni to refer names of prospective students back to UW–Stout and provide opportunities to connect with prospective students and parents.

ENROLLMENT COMMUNICATIONS PLAN STAGING AND TIMELINE

The recommendations above can be effectively implemented over a two-year period. We further recommend that the overall plan and every element of UW–Stout's enrollment communications be reviewed on an annual cycle to ensure timeliness and effectiveness.