AN EVALUATION OF FLORIDA
PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES'
WEBSITE COMMUNICATION
STRATEGIES

by

Carson Mann
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UNIVERSITY OF TAMPA

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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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CHAIRPERSON OF THE SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

DR. CHRIS GURRIE

ABSTRACT

A piece of work presented on the public-facing information put forth by Florida public universities to prospective Ph.D. and graduate students. Current literature discusses an epidemic going on with graduate students and their stress levels. This research focuses on the university websites and their accessibility when it comes to student resources. The communication that websites distribute to inform prospective and current student about supportive tools that the university provides for the student body.

Introduction

Universities depend on bright students to boost their programs and popularize their institutions for prospective students. Bright students might need help from other support systems rather than just their self-motivation. Resources are available at universities that are designed to help students be as successful as possible. When graduate students, like myself, are deciding on which universities to make our home for four to eight years these resources could play a key role in the choice. We as a technologically advanced generation gather all of our information from university websites. The prime promotional tool for admissions. 84% of prospective students report using institutional websites to gather information on institutions and they remain the most prevalent outlet for prospective student inquiries (NACAC, 2011). If these support systems are available, it should be apparent for these prospective students applying. This work first looks at the historical context and implications for important communication and explains why mental health matters. Understanding the issues college students face will help the researcher better understand how to conduct research in message making.

Historical Context

There is a growing struggle for graduate students with concerns of mental health and work/life balancing (Chan et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2018; Leviten-Reid et al., 2008; Stubb et al., 2011). Universities have been integral in supporting the efficiency of teaching but have not taken many initiatives for mental health awareness and intervention (Lashuel, 2020). The lack of promotional strategies by universities is an issue because one of the most vital things needed in these situations specifically for academics is a support system (Loissel, 2019).

Why mental health concerns matter

Graduate students are six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2018). According to the *2014 UC Berkeley Graduate Well-being Report,* almost 50% of its bioscience doctoral students met the threshold for depression (UC Berkeley, 2014). The graduate report from the University of Arizona resulted in the doctoral students stating that they are under "tremendous" stress because of education and school-related issues (Smith & Brooks, 2015). Individual suffering and isolation are results of critical mental health problems apparent in Ph.D. students (Levecque, 2017). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health concerns have escalated in students, and it is going to negatively impact students emotionally and academically (Aitkaliyeva, 2019). A Boston University School of Public Health report states that students have now started to rely on professors for assistance involving their mental health (Boston University, 2021). Professors have little to no experience, so they are looking toward their institutions for guidance (Boston University, 2021). Intervention strategies need to be investigated due to the critical status of the graduate student population (Evans et al., 2018).

Why student work/life balance matters

A significant part of good mental health is having a good work-life balance (Evans et al., 2018). Students aim for a healthy work-life even though it is not always successful (Martinez, 2013). It leads to them observing their stress levels, maintaining their health, and creating personal time (Martinez, 2013). A healthy balance of the work/life relationship has helped students to continue carrying out their roles and responsibilities (Martinez, 2013).

Graduate student parents

Hoffer states that the median age for women in doctoral studies is around 33 meaning there is a likelihood that the women could be deciding whether or not to have children during their education (Hoffer et al., 2006). A study found that graduate student women spend 102 hours per week on all duties, paid and unpaid, compared to the student fathers at 95 hours and childless students at 75 (Mason & Goulden, 2006). Graduate student parents of both sexes are not as likely to complete their degrees, earn tenure, and work as faculty at top research universities versus their non-parent cohort members (Kennelly and Spalter-Roth, 2006; Williams, 2004). It is strongly encouraged by researchers to participate in peer-support groups if a graduate student is a parent (Springer et al., 2009). Graduate student parents often struggle with stretched finances but do sometimes have access to campus resources like financial assistance (Springer et al., 2009).

Finances (Advice and Support)

Reports stated graduate students have very high levels of stress in multiple areas and one of the main ones being finances (Hyun et al., 2006). Financial stress is one of the major reasons graduate students who are struggling with mental health seek counseling studies have shown (Furr et al., 2001; Toews et al., 1997). The student debt in Florida is around 94.3 billion dollars at this point and the average student debt per student is $39,700 (U.S. Department of Education). Doctoral students are increasingly relying on loans to afford the price of attending colleges and universities (Hoffer et al., 2006). Institutions should be proactive in warranting Ph.D. students to not accepting loans with fully understanding the risks students are taking Mendoza et al., 2014).

Fitness and wellness

It has been found that most students will not increase their physical activity because they simply know they should (Keating et al., 2005). "Extra efforts are needed to promote physical activity among college students" (Keating et al., 2005). In a study done at the National Taiwan University, it was found that graduate students have high prevalence rates of fatigue which can cause adverse health effects if combined with stress (Lee et al., 2007). The prevalence rates can be attributed to the lack of physical activity (Lee et al., 2007).

Why support systems are needed

The most vital thing needed in these situations specifically for academics is a support system (Loissel, 2019). There is a need for intervention strategies that could address the mental health crisis (Evans et al., 2018). For the means of this work, I am defining support systems as university offered programs that focus on the needs of the student body. Doctoral students who can obtain support from their social circles like friends and family can have a more balanced approach to work, school, and life (Martinez et al., 2013). Assistantships help all students stay enrolled in school due to the funding they provide but also because it helps students socialize with faculty and peers (Mendoza et al., 2014). Universities have to examine what is being done on their campus to address the needs of their campus (Oswalt et al., 2007). Communication professionals should review the information strategies for universities services to ensure that graduate students are fully aware of the resources they have on their campus (Oswalt et al., 2007).

Purpose of This Work

Knowing these support systems are needed in institutions, what are the institutions doing to communicate these tools to prospective students? I want to figure out if there is a pattern in which universities display student resources. If I as a technology-savvy researcher struggle with finding information on university websites, then what about other students. This work wants to analyze the websites quality of communication by determining if the website is easy to navigate and information is accessible. To do so I will perform a content analysis on each website that will distinguish the functionality and accessibility quality.

Methods

In this study, the researcher seeks to find how Florida public universities describe in their own words their student resources such as mental health counseling, assistantships, childcare for student parents, fitness and wellness counseling, financial help, and student support groups and how it can benefit its student body. The content analysis will only concern the public-facing, university-produced communications of Floridan public universities. These communications only include the websites of the universities and the different pages within. The analysis will include the following public universities: *Florida State University, University of South Florida, University of Central Florida, Florida Atlantic University, University of Florida, and Florida Gulf Coast University.*

The study evaluates the materials that are open-source and analyzed how the information on student resources is presented. This work looks into the way support systems are presented on university websites in terms of their accessibility and the

quality of messaging. The support systems this analysis will focus on are the following based on the given literature describing student need:

Institution Student Support Systems

Mental Health Counseling	Psychological counseling that is focused on the betterment of the student body. Whether there are appointments available with a professional psychologist or a group counseling setting that target certain mental illnesses.
Childcare and Parental Aid Services	Services targeting students who have children. Offering them aid with daycare or daycare recommendations. Flexible scheduling advising and anything to better the quality of life for student parents.
Assistantships	Whether the assistantships be Teaching, Research, or Graduate positions, students are given the opportunity to not only obtain financial aid but work alongside their professors which will develop a more positive work environment.
Financial Help	Any aid provided to students concerning budgeting and advice on their current finances. As stated in the literature review, a large number of students who attend mental health

	counseling state that a big portion of their stress is attributed to their financial situation.
Fitness and Wellness	Services attributed to student health and wellness. Resources involving fitness advice, nutrition counseling, and any aid provided to promote healthy students.
Student Support Groups	Any mentioning of informal or formal student support groups on campus. Groups that are focused on the success of the students attending the school and can aid with any of the categories above.

The university website will be evaluated on the accessibility of information. Each website will receive a designation based on the following important distinction, is the information of student resources easy to find?

The following scoring system was designed based on the "So-called Rule of Five" defined by Zeldman that web designers kept in mind when creating websites and the adapted version described by Olivier Glassey (Zeldman, 2001). Olivier and Olivier François Glassey describe that if users have to click more than five times to find their intended information, they will assume that they are not going in the right direction (Glassey, 2008). Based off of Zeldman and Glassey's description of the architecture of websites, this study states that 6 or more clicks through a university website means that the design is poor, and the navigability is difficult.

Website Accessibility Definition and Scoring

Accessibility	In this work, I am defining accessibility by the number of clicks it takes to get to the desired page. The fewer clicks a prospective student has to use, the easier it is to gather information about the institution's resources. 1-2 Clicks = Easy to Access 3-5 Clicks = Moderate to Access 6+ Clicks = Difficult to Access

Findings

The way colleges present student resources is important for the institution to consider due to the message it sends to prospective students. If scholars understand that the learning environment they are considering joining for multiple years is one of support and respect, students may be more apt to send their applications. Support systems are vital to individuals struggling with mental illnesses, intense stress, and people in academic situations such as graduate studies. It is important to determine if these institutions are not communicating these resources on their websites because students may use it as their only tool for data gathering when considering the university. The table below displays the accessibility of each university website based on how many clicks it takes to find the student resources. The recording of clicks begins once starting at the university's landing page. I did not include clicks that brought drop-down menus because the user does not leave the page. Some of the scores have asterisks which are the pathways that were not available from the landing page.

Table Acronyms:

MHC = Mental Health Counseling

F&W = Fitness & Wellness

ASST. = Assistantships

FIN = Financial Help

CHLD = Childcare and Parental Aid Services

SUP = Student Support Groups

Accessibility	MHC	F&W	ASST.	FIN	CHLD	SUP
UF	3	3	5	3	4	3
FSU	4*	4*	4*	4*	4*	4*
USF	2	2	4	4	3	3
UCF	2	2	4	N/A	4*	2
FGCU	2	2	4	5	3	3
FAU	4*	3	3	N/A	N/A	3

Unexpected Results

While performing the study, it was unexpected that some of these resources are not accessible via the university landing page. These resources have been given the designation that if the only way they are accessible is by using the search directory, then it is not easy to access. Therefore, they have been automatically scored 4 and been given an asterisk. Another unexpected result came up during the study whilst navigating to the information about assistantships. A common trope among the majority of the institutions' websites, users are directed to find their major department to find specific information on the available assistantships.

Discussion

This research uncovered interesting things about the universities' communication strategies on their websites. Many of the institutions received a "4" destination because specific resources are not available via the landing page, specifically Florida State University and the University of Florida. I believe this to be a disadvantage compared to the University of South Florida and the University of Central Florida who had quick drop-down menus and an easy pathway to displaying the resources. The only way certain tools can be found is to search the directory. The searching is probably because most of the services are dense with information and online appointment abilities. We have to consider that prospective students are going to be relying on the main website to have all necessary information of resources.

It is important to note that the fastest and easiest to way access resources are mental health counseling and fitness and wellness. The University of South Florida, University of Central Florida, and Florida Gulf Coast University were the three

universities whose websites had the fastest functionality. The University of South Florida does have the most accessible information per their website based on the study. Assistantships were something to consider because the general information provided was very minimal. The majority of the websites direct users to their "majors department" for specific information about assistantships which is understandable. Assistantship information could be given to users to better clarify the resources overall. The university could give information like general definitions, responsibilities, and even provide school-specific statistics on assistantships currently.

Quick and efficient directories were mostly 2 clicks with dropdown menus and clear titling, whereby making it less of a chore to locate and use support systems necessary for academic life in graduate school.

Florida Atlantic University and the University of Central Florida have a few missing resources in general which can be considered an oversight. The universities could not have the resources to provide these systems or have either not considered them.

The findings do not directly show that a change is needed immediately but should be considered. If these resources are promoted more strategically then perhaps it could increase admissions.

Study Limitations

This work was a study about the quality of the Florida public universities' website communications. I only focused on the accessibility based on clicks, and not the quality of the actual appointment systems nor the quality of the given resources in general. This work was limited due to time constraints and funding capabilities. There are many other universities in Florida, and they may all have unique communication strategies when it comes to how their information is presented to searching applicants.

It should be recorded that every university website is massive and once the correct pathway is found for these resources it will be better for users. I as a researcher infer that once a university website is dissected to find a resource the user will be more familiarized which can affect the results.

Future Implications

Future research in support system links, presence, and accessibility could take shape in three ways:

1) Promotional content strategies for admissions and how they could work with relevant departments to increase the visibility of available student resources.

2) Surveys of outgoing students based on the website design and navigability

3) Studies performed to determine the diverse perspectives of student users. Focusing on variables like the amount of time it takes to navigate an institutions website, finding information on specific topics, and functionality with users.

Future research should focus on the promotional content produced to inform prospective and current students about their university's resources. Support systems are dire to students who are in need. These promotional communications could make a difference when it comes to a student seeking assistance. The quality of these messages could indeed give a student the push they need to pursue support systems that would greatly assist their academic journey. Student resources and support systems should be very marketable to incoming students. They signify that the university and its staff are addressing everything about their students. I suggest universities amplify their resources just like benefits at a new job. Applicants would be delighted to know that institutions are taking action to be supportive of their student body. If universities are not fully invested in these types of support systems, it should be addressed by the

students because it affects everyone involved. Why would admissions and university program directors want their students to not know about the available assistance? Happier students who are in a comfortable environment will produce the best research and results for universities.

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