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Marketing Learning Communities to Generation Z: The importance of face-to-face interaction in a digitally driven world

Julia Spears

Northern Illinois University, spearsjulia@gmail.com

Stephanie R. Zobac

Northern Illinois University, szobac@noctrl.edu

Allison Spillane

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, aspillan@iupui.edu

Shannon Thomas

Northern Illinois University, sthomas2@niu.edu

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Abstract

This article aims to identify the marketing strategies utilized by Learning Community (LC) administrators at two large, public, four-year research universities in the Midwest. The use of digital media coupled with face-to-face interaction is identified as an effective method of marketing LCs to the newest population of incoming college students, referred to as Generation Z. The students who fall into the Generation Z population are identified as technologically savvy and highly attuned to the variety of digital platforms available to share, gather, and exchange information. They expect to receive information through digital media. Findings on LC marketing success indicate that LC administrators should utilize current trends of conveying information through digital marketing strategies which serve to reinforce face-to-face interactions in order to recruit Generation Z students into LC programs.

Keywords

Learning communities, Generation Z, marketing, face-to-face interaction, digital media

Introduction

Colleges and universities across the country are creating learning communities (LCs) to improve the experience and success of their students. This proven practice (Kuh, 2008) has led countless students to meet peers, faculty, and staff who will help them navigate their college journey. As with many programs in higher education, the variety in institutional cultures has resulted in the numerous models and variations of the learning communities we see today. Whether the program is residential, academic, or a combination of the two, all LC programs need to market to students. Consequently, LC administrators need to know their target population in order to develop effective marketing strategies.

In this practice-based article, we share the experiences of LC administrators at two large, public research universities, Northern Illinois University (NIU) and Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). Both programs have one director and one program coordinator to assist with running the LC programs and recruiting students by using multiple marketing techniques. Our results suggest that face-to-face interaction is the strongest influence in a student's decision to enroll in an LC. We have learned through practice and assessment that in order to ensure buy-in and understanding of the LC experience, students prefer to talk to someone before they commit to registering for an LC. While digital media can provide information about the LC program, digital media alone might not be enough to "seal the deal" with regards to recruiting students to LCs, even students from Generation Z.

Who is Generation Z?

In recent years, college administrators have focused on reaching out to the previous generation of Millennials. However, college administrators need to be equally attentive to the newest generation: Generation Z. As we take a closer look at Generation Z, it is important to point out that although some experts dispute the actual year Generation Z begins (with most agreeing they were born after 1990 [Peterson, 2014]), all agree that students in Generation Z display shared characteristics, including being technologically savvy and consuming information through digital media (Glum, 2015; Holmes, 2011). Digital media is defined as "audio, video, and images that exist in a computer-readable format, and can reside on a local device (CD, DVD, hard drive), or remote location (website)" (University of Guelph, 2006).

So what technology does Generation Z have access to and how do they receive information? Generation Z has been raised in a time in which the Internet has always existed, meaning that this generation is accustomed to having information at their fingertips and being in constant communication through digital media (Berland, 2010; Holmes, 2011; Roberts, Yaya, & Manolis, 2014).

Generation Z is highly active on social media as indicated by the 94 percent of teenagers who have a Facebook account as of 2012 (Lenhart, 2013). Generation Z gathers and spreads information by sharing their experiences online through videos and links (Relander, 2014). Such use of digital media on smart phones, tablets, and laptops results in Generation Z switching back and forth between up to five screens throughout their day (Relander, 2014). Given Generation Z's daily use of technology and Internet, social media and digital advertising are important marketing strategies (Glum, 2015). Thus, LC administrators must capitalize on Generation Z's frequent use of technology to effectively market LCs.

However, although Generation Z utilizes digital media consistently, LC administrators should also be aware of the value of face-to-face communication with regards to this technology-driven generation. Personal interaction remains a desired method of communication, with 53% of Generation Z indicating that they prefer in-person communication in place of digital communication (Schawbel, 2014). As we continue to explore how to market to Generation Z, it is imperative to remember that this generation gathers information through digital media while also relying on face-to-face interaction, suggesting that marketing strategies should combine both practices.

Marketing to Generation Z

While reflecting on how we at NIU and IUPUI are effectively reaching students, we realize there is no right way to "get the word out" to students. Yet given what we know about Generation Z, as well as feedback gathered from LC students, we have identified here our most effective marketing strategies.

We rely heavily on digital media to market LCs to Generation Z. We find that digital media often helps to provide important and relevant LC information to students, including the benefits of participation, logistics of how to enroll, and the impact of LCs on student success. Both NIU and IUPUI send emails with LC information to students prior to their orientation date. Emails are a strong communication method for Generation Z, as they can be easily accessed on multiple screens and devices (Relander, 2014). Utilizing social media (e.g., Facebook) is another valuable method for disseminating information to students since the majority of Generation Z have a Facebook profile and many have multiple social media accounts (Lenhart, 2013).

Despite the shift to include LC information online, we also rely heavily on face-to-face communication. Reaching out to students in person at visit days, orientation sessions, and advising sessions allows us to have face-to-face interaction with Generation Z. It is important to note that the face-to-face interaction does not necessarily have to come from LC administrators themselves. Instead, campus partners (e.g., academic advisors and admissions counselors) can also provide LC information during their interactions with students.

While there are many more marketing strategies used by both institutions, what became clear as we reflected on the methods that created the greatest impact on recruitment was the way face-to-face encounters reinforced the LC information shared on digital and social media.

Reflections from Practice

It is clear that Generation Z expects to receive information through digital media. As such, there is an increased pressure on LC administrators to shift marketing strategies towards digital media. We have reflected upon and assessed the marketing strategies at NIU and IUPUI to determine the effectiveness of both digital marketing and face-to-face communication when recruiting Generation Z to LCs. The following information guides NIU and IUPUI's marketing strategies, specifically with an eye towards Generation Z.

Digital Platforms are Essential

Social media is a direct form of digital marketing since posts made on these sites are available in computer-readable format. Sites include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, vlogs (video blogs), and more. Conveniently, many social media sites provide assessments on posts, meaning that information regarding digital marketing is made readily available. For the purpose of this article, we focus specifically on Facebook because it is widely used by this generation (Lenhart, 2013) and provides robust information to administrators on user interactions.

Such information shines light on the number of people who come in contact with information put forth by LC administrators, helping to determine the success of an informational post. For example, one post by NIU LC administrators during summer 2014 included pictures related to LCs at the institution. These images included LC administrators at the orientation information fair interacting with incoming students and families, as well as images of chalk messages encouraging students to join an LC. Facebook analytics indicated that this post reached a total of 521 people through the following interactions: 26 times when someone liked, commented, or shared the post and 545 when that someone clicked the post's photos, or links. Although Facebook does not provide the final destination of this web traffic (i.e., LC administrators cannot determine which links were clicked most), it does indicate that LC Facebook posts are reaching a relatively large audience.

Results were also gathered from Facebook posts made by NIU LC administrators in the NIU Class of 2018 closed Facebook group where information was shared to increase incoming students' awareness of LC opportunities. Over the course of summer 2014, LC administrators wrote 34 posts to the student group. These 34 posts received a total of 22 Likes, 13 of which

were from faculty or staff members while only 9 were incoming students. Thus, of the 34 posts, the majority of the posts (20) received zero Likes from students or faculty/staff (see figure 1).

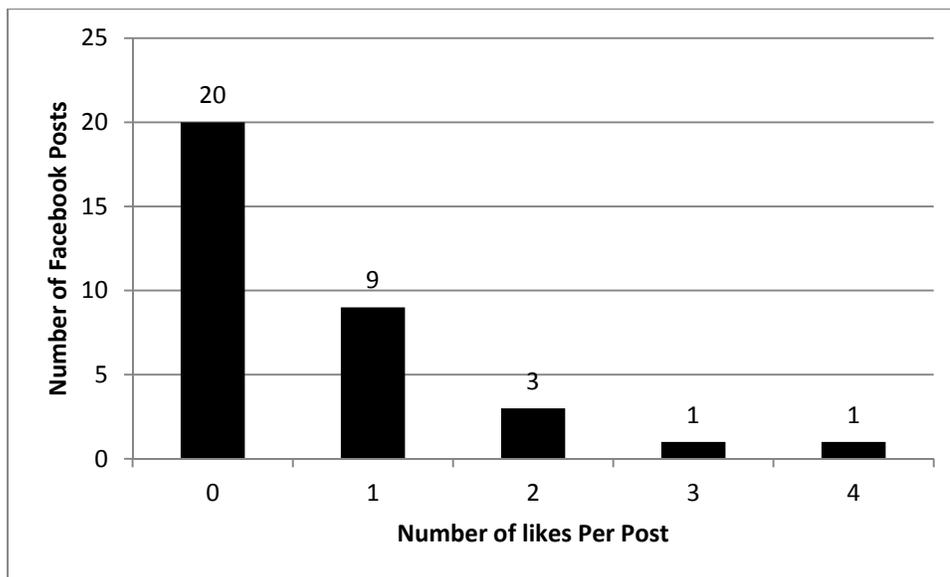


Figure 1. Number of Facebook Likes per LC post in NIU Class of 2018 Facebook group

This indicates that while LC administrators were interacting in the Facebook Group, students and faculty/staff were often not directly interacting with the posts. Only 14 posts received direct interaction, with nine posts receiving one Like, and five posts receiving two or more Likes. This data indicates that Generation Z might not interact with Facebook posts made by LC administrators.

Although these posts received minimal interaction as tracked by Facebook, students in the group have the opportunity to read this LC information regardless of whether they click like or leave a comment. Thus, while Facebook tracking mechanisms provide information that can help LC administrators better reach Generation Z, the overall impact of these posts cannot be fully determined solely by Facebook analytics.

Face-to-face Interactions are Essential

Both NIU and IUPUI also rely on face-to-face interaction to share LC information with students. At NIU, the impact of face-to face-interaction is measured in a mid-semester survey distributed to all LC students. On the survey, students are asked their reason for choosing to participate in an LC. Student responses from LC participants over the last three years indicate that a majority of

LC students selected to participate based on the interaction with an advisor or university staff member during orientation (See Figure 2).

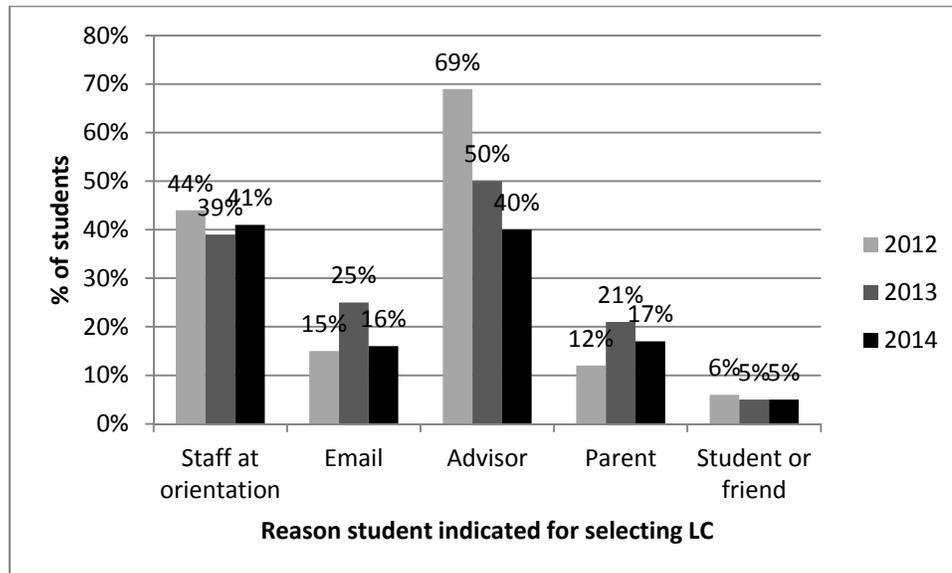


Figure 2. Reasons students chose to participate in an LC at NIU in Fall 2012, Fall 2013, and Fall 2014

As indicated in Figure 2, the most common reason students chose to participate in an LC over the last three years was their interaction with an advisor during summer orientation, although it is important to note that each year fewer students have indicated that interaction with an advisor led them to select an LC. The second most influential method of LC promotion was through staff members at orientation. IUPUI recognizes the same trend with their students, with many indicating that the driving factor for their enrollment in an LC was that their “academic advisor suggested [an LC] at Orientation.”

Despite the importance of technology (isn’t email a form of technology?) and digital media in the students’ lives (Roberts, Yaya, & Manolis, 2014), e-mail communication, which can be received on multiple devices, was the third most effective method for LC promotion. Speaking with parents or peers were the least indicated as reasons students chose to participate in LCs. Students who marked “other” indicated the following reasons for choosing an LC: interest in theme, selected or placed into, only available class, received a direct mailing, and family other than parents. No indication of information gathered from social media was included in their responses.

Our experience regarding marketing through digital/social media (Facebook) and face-to-face interactions suggests that face-to-face interactions

with university staff (advisors, orientation leaders, and staff, etc.) are most influential in helping recruit Generation Z to LCs

Six Strategies for Success

Given our experiences at NIU and IUPUI we have outlined the following six strategies that have worked on our campuses.

1. Face-to-face interaction with students

LC administrators must continue to interact with students in Generation Z through face-to-face interaction. As our findings indicate and research suggests, Generation Z remains highly influenced by in-person communication. One way to accomplish this is to be physically present during orientation sessions and visit days. Both NIU and IUPUI host tables during orientation resource fairs to interact face-to-face with incoming students and their families. These interactions allow LC administrators to provide information about LCs, clarify questions, and confirm students' decisions to participate in an LC. Additionally, LC administrators at NIU find great value in being physically present during academic advising sessions. At NIU, LC staff present on benefits and types of LCs to incoming students as a part of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences advising presentation (our largest college with the greatest number of LCs). After the presentation, we remain available to interact with students during their course selection time, which provides another method of face-to-face communication, and to help students navigate the process of selecting an LC. LC administrators could expand their reach by hosting tables at various other campus events, including dates when students come to campus to take placement tests, athletic events, and other university recruitment days.

2. Maximizing Campus Partnerships to Increase Face-to-Face Interactions

Building relationships across campus is integral in LC marketing success because it allows the LC story to be shared and told by multiple administrators. Both NIU and IUPUI work with orientation to reach out to incoming students through Orientation Leaders (OLs). Training OLs on the benefits of LCs means that this group of student leaders can share the LC story with every student who attends summer orientation. Many students who have chosen to enroll in an LC at IUPUI have stated that their OL was the main reason for participating, with feedback including "My Orientation Leader told me about it!" and "When I was at orientation, it was highly talked about." NIU LC administrators also utilize sidewalk chalk around campus near orientation tour routes to market LCs ("There's an LC for you and me!"), a method that sparks conversation between

OLs and incoming students. Likewise, LC administrators at NIU also work with academic advisors to help share LC information with students. During advising sessions, academic advisors encourage students to enroll in an LC through formal presentations and more personal advising sessions.

3. Maximizing Campus Partnerships to Increase the Scope of Digital Outreach

NIU also collaborates across campus to develop technology-based partnerships. LC administrators work directly with the university webmaster to include LC information on webpages that have high traffic for incoming students. The webmaster has created a header on the home page and the incoming student page to direct students to the LC website, while also adding LCs as a step on the freshman “to-do” list. We also reach out to various departments across campus that host LCs, asking them to share the LC webpage link on their website and social media and through other digital media methods. Furthermore, LC administrators at NIU work in partnership with Undergraduate Admissions to interact with new students in the Admissions Facebook group created specifically for the incoming class of students. This provides another platform for distributing LC information and answering students’ questions. Moreover, LC administrators at both institutions utilize additional digital media platforms to share LC information on multiple screens. For example, both programs collaborate with the campus circuit television to provide LC informational slides that scroll on campus TV screens. These screens are viewed during resource fairs, campus tours, recruiting events, and more.

4. Using digital platforms to share LC information

Although the findings of this article indicate that face-to-face communication is the method with the greatest impact on recruiting Generation Z to LCs, continuing to use digital media to share LC information and stories is an important step in an LC marketing strategy. Social media and websites provide up-to-date information to students through media forms they are familiar with. Although these platforms might not be the deciding factor in whether the student enrolls in an LC, they are often informally cited as a contributing factor. LC administrators at NIU and IUPUI often hear “I saw that on the Facebook group” or “I saw a video on LCs” when interacting with incoming students. Although digital media is not the driving factor for choosing to participate in an LC, it both informs the student of the LC options and allows LC representatives to share stories with students who are already familiar with the LC concept.

Additionally, students and student workers who are familiar with LCs can create and post blogs, videos, and even vlogs to share LC information in digital

format. LC administrators might also send personalized emails to incoming students regarding LC options and best fit. These emails are available to Generation Z on various technologies (cell phone, tablet, etc.) and encourage students to explore LCs before they meet with their academic advisor and make their class schedule, allowing students to incorporate the LC classes into their academic plan. In this way, LCs administrators can incorporate the person-to-person interaction in an online context to reach a larger number of students.

5. Hiring student help

Hiring student help at the busiest times during the year is also a key marketing strategy for recruiting Generation Z to LCs. These times often include—but are not limited to—orientation, visit days, open houses, admissions tour dates, and more. In our experience, since student workers are often from the same Generation Z population, they interact with their peers in ways that have stronger influence on the target population. The power that peer influence has on students' decision-making processes (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005) should play a significant role in LC marketing. By hiring a student (or graduate assistants) to assist at times when incoming students are present on campus, LC staff can reach a larger number of students.

Additionally, utilizing students helps LC administrators with managing digital media. Students are often most familiar with the types of digital media that their peers are using and can navigate these media forms with ease. Thus, student representatives can share the LC message across multiple forms of digital media. For offices with limited funding, we recommend exploring the opportunities to secure student help through an internship (paid, for credit, or unpaid) or federal work study position.

6. Adapting through assessment

Finally, it is key that LC administrators continue to adapt to changing demographics. With such rapidly changing technology, even members of Generation Z will likely start receiving messages in new ways in the coming months and years. LC administrators need to understand what methods are most successful on their campus and with their population; thus, LC administrators might consider asking “Why did you chose to enroll in this LC?” on a pre- or post- survey for LC students. This will provide direct feedback about which marketing methods are most influential at the institution and allow greater focus on certain areas while improving or developing other methods. In addition, it is necessary to stay abreast of new marketing and digital media methods in order to respond to students' feedback that might include preferences to receive information through new social media sites, etc. Knowing the student population

will allow administrators to select methods of marketing that align with how that population, including the newest Generation Z students, is hearing messages.

Conclusion

As the digital world continues to evolve, creating and maintaining connections with incoming college students is integral in recruiting Generation Z to LCs. As our experiences suggest, face-to-face interactions between higher education administrators and students continue to be a powerful form of marketing LCs. Sharing LC information through digital marketing methods can reinforce the LC message. Therefore, LC administrators must decide what balance of face-to-face and digital marketing to utilize, while keeping in mind that, because technology and social media are ever changing, so are the possibilities of how to reach Generation Z.

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