

December 16, 2009

Q&A from EducationDynamics Webinar Featuring Kris Stewart

Have you seen a direct link between parent engagement and increase in donations to support university development?

I don't have a quantitative answer yet on the direct link between parent engagement and donations. I will say that since we almost quadrupled the size of our Parents Council and increased our visibility around the country at events for parents, increased newsletters, email, etc. the Parents Fund went from \$150K to \$425K.

Hello, thanks for a great presentation. I would like to know what kind of software are you using to communicate with your families?

We use E-Illuminate for webinars, Microsoft Office Publisher to design our monthly email newsletters and a combination of programs from EducationDynamics to communicate with our first year parents.

How often does the Parent/Family Communication Committee meet? And who is the coordinator of the committee?

At Miami, it is a cross-campus council for all communication and we meet approximately once a month. It has been wonderful to meet with people in charge of communicating from all over campus. It is so helpful to know what's going out to students, faculty, staff, alums, and it helps us to deliver fresher content with much less duplication.

What is the structure of Kristine's office? (Staff, reporting, responsibilities)

I report directly to the Vice President for Student Affairs. I have one full-time support person, but I have an 11-month contract and she has a 10-month contract. The Parents Office manages disbursement of the Parents Fund among accounts and reads and makes decisions about (sometimes with other staff) Parents Fund grants for student initiatives, student travel requests, and the Faculty-Student Discourse Fund. Kris is the liaison to the MU Parents Council (helps recruit members and manages all PC events), the representative from Student Affairs on the University Communications Council, manages calls, emails, letters, faxes, etc. from parent constituents. The Parents Office handles myMiami for Families, an initiative that allows students to grant online access to parts of their student record to their family members or others. Kris participates in all orientations for new and transfer students, but Miami has a Director and Assistant Director of Orientation. Likewise, Kris and her assistant assist with some fundraising initiatives, but there is a full-time Director of Development for Student Affairs, who works with them and the Vice President. Kris is currently part of the working group writing standards for Parent & Family Programs for CAS.

A lot of the services you provide to families seems to be assisted greatly by technology. How are those who don't have these technological resources supposed to offer these services without them? How do you convince administration to provide you resources if you don't currently have them?

We now have two major pieces: the *Parent Lantern* for first year parent and *myMiami for Families* for all students. Mmff allows students to grant an online account and access to parts of the student record. Parents are able to see grades, class schedule, housing info, billing, and financial aid/scholarship information with their student's permission. It's the online equivalent of signing a FERPA release form. We worked for several years to get both of these initiatives. *The Parent Lantern* is an outside vendor (Education Dynamics) and we do *myMiami for Families* in house. My general office budget is funded through the Parents Fund. This is an obvious difference from some offices, where spending is directly related to a university/departmental/divisional budget. However, take a look at our monthly e-newsletter (<http://www.muohio.edu/parents>) at the "Stay in Touch" section. We solicit information for that newsletter from all over campus and after I decided on a format, I typed it up and had it completely proofed within a week. However, it can be a work in progress all month until the day of release. As I mentioned, we turn it into a pdf (even if you don't have that software, you can find free versions online) and post it on our website. Even with a decent budget, I have to be very mindful that I am spending gift monies on whatever initiative I'm doing. I need to be able to justify using my budget for these expenditures. One of the first pod-casts I ever saw for parents was done with almost no budget by a friend of mine at NC State. It wasn't Oprah, as I mentioned, but it filled the bill and parents really liked being able to tune in and see university staff answer questions. She had a panel from her counseling center, as I recall. Obviously, a larger budget gives you more choices, but I truly believe that you can be very creative and competitive without a large budget. I'd be happy to talk to you more about some ideas. There are some effective ways to get your university to take notice of the importance of parent support and involvement. A survey might be a good way to start. Even if your school doesn't have a survey tool, you can use something like Survey Monkey, which is quite easy to set up and relatively inexpensive.

Kristine, what content management software do you use for the *Parent Lantern* to gather information, assess your efforts, and schedule release of information?

Education Dynamics manages all of that for us for the *Parent Lantern*. We work with them to set everything up exactly as we want it with regard to reporting, surveys, release of editions, etc. Miami just introduced it's own content management system, but we have not launched it yet—coming soon!

How do you collect parent e-mails addresses?

We receive email addresses from Admission. They roll over to us after the May 1 deadline. We then officially invite them (through the *Parent Lantern*, but it could be our own initiative) to

receive information from the Parents Office. Once we have their email, we always include an “unsubscribe” option and we handle all change of parent mailing addresses and email addresses. We make it clear that this is a different mailing list than their student’s record, which can only be changed by the student. For instance, our emergency email addresses are part of the student record and entered by the student. When we have an emergency message to send to parents, we sent it to all of the emergency email addresses in the student records and to all of the email addresses on our Parents Office list. We also make it available to students via text messaging, post it on our website, news, etc. We believe better too many messages than not receiving one. Some of my colleagues collect email addresses through their website as listservs. Parents go to the website, click on listserv and sign themselves up. The parent is responsible for changing the email address, leaving/joining the list.

E-newsletters: how do you handle bounce-backs? Many servers do not let our emails through.

EducationDynamics handles this for the *Parent Lantern*. For our own monthly e-newsletters, my assistant handles the bouncebacks. We have a pretty clean list now, but my assistant, Betsey, has put in a lot of hours contacting people and finding our messages in their junk mailboxes. She explains how to allow our email, etc. It’s a lot of work on the front end, but after awhile, they taper off and people get it figured out.

My office has never done anything with our first year parents, you have given some very good ideas but what is your suggestion on what would be the best ideas to try to implement first?

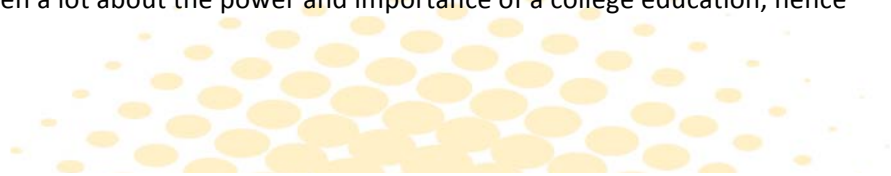
I would really recommend that we talk on the phone about this. I’d have to hear more details about your specific situation. I’m going to be gone over the semester recess this year, but I’ll be back in the office on January 11, and I would be more than happy to take some time to discuss it with you. My direct number is 513-529-3436 (Betsey is my assistant).

What survey tool do you use for these internal surveys?

We used to use Survey Monkey (very easy) but our university adopted Checkbox recently. I have not used it as much as my assistant has, and I would comment that it’s not as intuitive as Survey Monkey.

You quickly referred to George Kuh, Vincent Tinto , Alexander Astin and Nancy Schlossberg... can you repeat what you said they each focused on (Kuh- engagement, etc.)

Kuh is the person behind the NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) and he’s easy to find on Google, as are all the others. He’s at Indiana University and relates student success to being appropriately engaged on campus [Also see EducationDynamics webinar featuring Kuh at <http://www.educationdynamics.com/ndsrf/>]. Tinto is at Syracuse University and has written significantly on attaining student success. Astin is the power behind CIRP at UCLA (emeritus) – the very popular (your school might use it) tool to survey first year and senior students (coming and going). He’s written a lot about the power and importance of a college education, hence



the survey tool to prove that students leave an institution looking different than when they entered. Schlossberg writes about transition situations—the tools that different people have to cope with transition—how different people stay in different stages of transition shorter and longer, etc. Again, Google her – you’ll probably find a paper or presentation. Her first name is Nancy.

Besides the parent lantern, what types of evaluation tools has Kris Stewart used to gather information about her parent constituents?

Besides the Parent Lantern surveys, which are managed inside our EducationDynamics program, I have done my own surveys of parents every other year (online) and worked with other colleagues in AHEPPP (Association of Higher Ed Parent & Family Professionals—a mouthful) who also use surveys to help them determine programming, etc. We have agreed for several years to use the same questions for at least part of our surveys, thus producing some data showing more national and regional trends. I have also used focus groups for internal evaluation purposes.

I am associate dir. of annual giving for parent relations, brand new position I started in July, so I am one person parent dept. These are all wonderful ideas but for me just beginning to build this program where should I start first? (keeping in mind that my goals now are only dollar and visit goals)

Since I am not in charge of raising the money for the Parents Fund, only spending it, I would be happy to talk more with you and would be happy to introduce you to our Director of Development for Student Affairs. He’s on parental leave right now, but he’ll be back in January, as will I. I would be more than happy to talk to you about your specific situation and what might work for you.

