

Ready, Connect, Learn: Preparing Students for Campus Technology

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the progression through 4 methods of orienting incoming students in the use of Syracuse University's computer systems. It discusses design issues involving: content, costs, effectiveness, accessibility, and product shelf-life. Finally, it explores development decisions relating to software, production, and distribution.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5 INFORMATION INTERFACES AND PRESENTATION

H.5.2 User Interfaces

Subject Descriptor: Training, help, and documentation

General Terms

Management, Documentation, Human Factors

Keywords

Student Orientation, ResNET, training, help desk

1. INTRODUCTION

The challenge of distributing technology information; computer, ResNet, and email, to thousands of new and returning students is constantly evolving. As our communication systems continue to change, so must our means of communicating. Over the past four years, the Computing & Media Services Department at Syracuse University has progressed from printed manuals, to interactive CDs, then to CDs with web links, and this year, to an all-web product. We've gone from screen shots to video, layout to web design.

While our goal has remained the same: getting as many students productive in our computer environment in the shortest period of time possible, our methods and models have changed dramatically.

2. HISTORY

The students entering Syracuse University in the Fall of 2000 were entering a different world technologically from the students even a few years before. Many more of them than ever before had purchased a computer for their room, nearly all of our residence hall rooms had been wired for high-speed ResNET access, and all

student class scheduling/rescheduling was now occurring on the web.

Our method of orienting our new students to ResNET and Network Computing however, had remained unchanged for many years. In June of each year a mailing went out that included our "Student Computing at a Glance" book, a letter, and the student's login name and password for their new computing account.

2.1 Phase I

In December of 2000, a proposal was presented to produce a multimedia program to introduce students to computing at Syracuse University. A secondary goal was to improve the effectiveness of the appeal, delivery, accessibility, and understanding of the presented information thereby enhancing our image, communications, and services. It was also hoped that this would serve as a model for innovative ways to connect with incoming students.

In June of 2001, 3500 CDs, "Welcome to Computing at Syracuse University", were mailed to our domestic incoming students. This CD included all of the information previously printed in the computing handbook, along with videos, sound, interactive games, and software. Also included in the CD package was the student's login name and password for their new computing account.

Another 10,000+ CDs were prepared for distribution to returning students, foreign students, and those who had left their original copy at home.

2.2 Phase II

For Fall 2002, taking the lessons we had learned the previous year, we moved in a slightly different direction.

A CD was still mailed to the students in June, but we no longer tried to make it self contained. It became the starting point from which our new students could explore the Syracuse University Web site and learn what they needed to know about our computing services.

A new account system was also debuted that made it possible for students to activate their accounts using only their student ID number and a PIN number based on their birthday. This eliminated the need for mailings to include matched account information and allowed us to use outside mailing services.

2.3 Phase III

Secondarily to the CD distribution of 2002, we had the main file of the CD put up on our Computing & Media Services Web site and soon discovered that it worked at least as well as the CD version itself.

So in spring of 2003, we made another technological leap of faith. Based on information from our Admissions Office that over 90% of our new undergraduate students have provided us with an email address, we moved to an all web delivery of our computing information. The same basic format from 2002 – positioning the “Welcome to Computing” program as a jumping off point for exploration of the SU Web sites – was reused.

Postcards to all North American students were sent early in June in place of the old mailings, followed by emails to all students using their admission’s email address. The postcard told them to visit the Computing & Media Services Web site and click on the “Welcome New Students” link.

3. Production & Distribution

All of the instructional pieces involved production challenges, but none quite like the original CD venture.

Authorware was selected because of our desire to do interactive games for the students. Our Web production team had not used this package before and there was a significant learning curve. In addition to that we had a lot to learn about shooting video! The storyboarding, scripting, and casting went quite well but proper lighting and sound pick-up proved evasive. Several retakes later we had useable clips, but not exactly what we had envisioned.

Probably the most memorable moment was being asked to remove our equipment from in front of the chapel because Spike Lee was setting up to film. You might as well be pushed out by the best.

With text, video, and graphics in place the last obstacle to overcome was developing a format that would work on any platform.

This first attempt required five months to complete with one Web developer working nearly full time on the venture and several others involved regularly.

The second and third iterations of the CD were done in Flash and use of video and interactive games were removed. We used photographs and graphic art only, to go along with text and sound. These changes reduced the cross-platform problems and eliminated the video nightmares. But since so much of the information for the students depended upon our Web pages, we needed to put into place a management system to ensure links from the “Welcome to Computing” were live and accurate in time for the postcard mailing. This was not something we’d had to worry about in previous methods.

One of our biggest distribution challenges had revolved around getting each student the right information for activating their account. With the roll out of DayOne account authentication software in 2002 this was no longer a problem. Since this new system created accounts based on the student’s ID (already know to them) and birth date PIN, an identical mailing could go to each student.

Another distribution concern was mailing to addresses outside of North America. We had found that most of these students never received our mailing due to long delivery times and early arrival of our foreign students. With our newest Web delivered model, all students can now access this information at the same time. The email sent using the Admissions email address will arrive at the same time for students in NY or half way around the world.

Interestingly enough, we have a 100% reporting of email by our non-US students.

4. Costs

Our original costs for producing and mailing a printed manual for mailing to 3500 students and distributing up to 10,000 more at the opening of school were about \$4,500 per year.

In the first year of CD production, duplication and mailing of 3500 CDs and distribution of up to 10,000 more escalated to \$15,000, with the second year coming in at about the same figure.

This year, with distribution to all of our incoming students, including those with foreign addresses, our costs are expected to be around \$1,600.

5. Shelf Life

One area that created the most concern with both the printed “Student Computing at a Glance” and the first “Welcome to Syracuse University Computing” was the issue of shelf life. Even before the mailing had gone out the door, one or more pieces of information had already changed. Distribution of the materials during the spring term was difficult, due to these changes.

In the second CD and Web product every attempt was made to make the fixed pieces as generic as possible, particularly if any change was expected. Then changes could be made to the Web site at any time allowing the information to always be up-to-date and accurate.

6. Effectiveness

Effectiveness of these products can be hard to measure as they serve multiple functions. One purpose of the mailings has always been to make contact with the student and the parents, introduce ourselves and let them know we’re here to assist. This is part of our goal of enhancing our image and services. We won’t know until later this year if the postcard has the same impact as a letter, a book, or a CD arriving in the mail.

We do know that in some households, the parents of the student are more likely to look at the materials than the student. Many of the comments we received about the first CD attempt came from parents rather than students. That was the rationale for sending a postcard this year instead of a letter. Even if the parent doesn’t get to see everything the student has received, there is a chance the parent will see the postcard and follow up on it before it disappears into that great pile of mail received from the University over the summer.

Having now put something in the hands of the student and/or his parents let’s take a look at how well we did on introducing the student to the computer environment at Syracuse.

In general, students have been arriving on campus each year with improved understanding about all aspects of computing, networking, and email. This undoubtedly has a great deal more to

do with the growth of the computer culture throughout the world than our small contribution to the incoming student's knowledge, but we do know many of our students and their parents take time to investigate the materials they receive.

We did encounter a few interesting scenarios, however. One was that since this was a CD, then it must be software and it must be needed on the student's computer in order for the student to connect to the University network.

This caused great concern for some students who had forgotten or lost their CD and thought they needed it to register for ResNET.

A second one was that some of our students had upon receiving the CD and learning about ResNET and the steps to connect, thought that they should do it NOW, from home, over the summer. To overcome this we no longer include the "How to

Connect" steps on the CD. They are printed and distributed along with keys during moving-in.

7. Conclusion

Our expectation is that in the near future we will spend about as much time instructing students on the workings of the computer network as we currently do explaining cable TV to them. They will arrive with more and more understanding of computers and networks at the same time that our computing systems make getting connected and using the system as easy as plugging in a lamp.

They will turn to the Web for instant access to whatever information they are seeking and our only goal may become to introduce ourselves and let them know we're here in case they need us.