

Building Community

Capstone Institute and ConnectYard

“We chose ConnectYard to support our study project because it effectively increases student-student and student-faculty communication. Its ability to make students aware of important information via Facebook and text messaging was also extremely important.”

-Wade Boykin, Ph.D., Director of the Capstone Institute

Challenge

Capstone Institute was initiating a new study group project. The goal of the project was to increase collaboration among freshman students and develop a community of scholars featuring increased student-student and student-faculty interactions. However, today's social networking environment made reaching students difficult.

Solution

Capstone Institute implemented ConnectYard. ConnectYard leverages social networking tools to increase connections between students and the university community. ConnectYard also features a suite of collaboration tools that support each study group.

Howard University's Capstone Institute specializes in comprehensive school reform. Capstone's trademarked Talent Development model focuses on educating the whole student by: building on assets that students bring into educational settings; providing multiple pathways to success through varied educational programs and activities; and implementing co-constructive programs that are tailored to the needs of a particular educational setting. For the past decade, the Capstone Institute has been at the vanguard of institutions providing evidence-based methods for improving teaching and learning in urban school districts. The Capstone Institute recently turned its focus to the college environment and needed a tool that complemented its comprehensive strategy to teaching and learning. That is when Capstone found ConnectYard.

The Situation

Capstone Institute has recently begun applying its Talent Development model to improve the performance, persistence, and graduation rates of students enrolled in first-year Calculus, Physics, and Chemistry courses at Howard University. These courses are critical prerequisites to advanced courses in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), and represent a significant hurdle to persistence in these majors. Attrition rates for STEM majors approach 33% across the nation and the US consistently produces less STEM majors than are required to fill jobs in these areas. Attrition rates among minority students are significantly higher.

To address the challenge of retaining STEM students at Howard University, an historically Black institution, Capstone has initiated the PASS Academic Support Program. The PASS program involves creating structured study groups to support the targeted courses. The study groups incorporate peer learning techniques that increase student connection to the learning material and involve students of different years and standing. The study group sessions are coordinated by Graduate students in Physics, Chemistry, and Engineering and administered by upper-level undergraduate students who lead each



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session. Student participants are strongly encouraged during the sessions to work with their peers in group problem solving techniques, and encouraged to pursue this strategy outside of the sessions. They also have access to tutoring sessions provided by the Graduate students.

To ensure the success of the project, communication and community-building are essential.

The Challenge

Today's students are extremely busy. They are connected to their social networks 24/7 through popular sites like Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, and from their networked devices like cellphones. It can be difficult for University messages to penetrate into this environment and catch students' attention. As a consequence, University support services such as tutoring can be underutilized. In addition, social networking and texting has displaced email as a common form of communication among students. Facebook states that it has an 85%+ penetration rate among college students. Some Universities have Facebook usage rates topping 90% among their student population. However, despite its popularity among students it is difficult to facilitate dialogue between students and faculty on these sites. There is a natural question about appropriate boundaries between student and instructor that limits this type of interaction. This same boundary may prohibit students from "friending" another student.

Research conducted at Capstone and elsewhere demonstrated that student performance is positively impacted by integrating them into the University community. However, it is difficult to create strong community bonds if you cannot communicate with students in their space, the social network facilitated by Web 2.0. Capstone realized it needed a solution that supported

community building and provided a host of collaboration tools that could support the PASS project.

The Solution

The Capstone Institute implemented ConnectYard to support their PASS project. ConnectYard combines best-in-class features for community building, including ConnectYard's Matching Engine which suggest people, materials, and events that would be of interest to students, and collaboration, such as whiteboards and voice conferencing.

Capstone Institute was impressed with ConnectYard's social learning tools. They noticed that the walls allowed easy, asynchronous communication among PASS project participants. Since the ConnectYard platform is independent of Facebook and other social networking sites, students, staff, and faculty can freely communicate without having to worry about intermingling private and academic discussions. In addition, the QuickConnect feature allows for threaded social dialogue around important topics, which facilitates peer-to-peer discussions.

ConnectYard also supports strong messaging features that ensure students receive relevant messages by mechanisms they frequently use. Capstone appreciated ConnectYard's ability to interface with Facebook via Facebook Connect, which allows messages from ConnectYard to be posted to a student's Facebook profile, with no "friending" involved.

The Results

Capstone has integrated ConnectYard into its study group program. Via ConnectYard students are able to form and discover study groups online by leveraging ConnectYard's Web 2.0 community building features. This is particularly important for the study project, which is comprised primarily of first-year



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students. The ConnectYard Matching Engine facilitates introductions between students by suggesting study partners that share the same academic interests, courses, major, etc. Students are then able to determine if any of these suggested matches share mutual friends through social networking sites like Facebook or mutual academic connections through their group activities on ConnectYard, which opens the door for communication. They are also able to assess the potential of other students by gauging their participation levels in other groups based on points earned for social actions such as contributing to group discussions and supporting activities as well as recommendations received by other group members. These additional features have helped encourage students to form connections that reach beyond their existing social networks.

ConnectYard has also successfully extended conversations beyond the classroom. Using the QuickConnect feature, study group participants are able to post questions to their network of connections, study group leaders, graduate assistants, and faculty. In addition, each ConnectYard group provides students with access to a wall for promoting intra-group discussions on study group related subjects.

The ConnectYard solution also includes a strong suite of collaboration tools associated with each group. The ConnectYard whiteboard has been used for online tutoring. Initiated either by tutors, or by the students themselves, the whiteboard feature has supported real-time

teaching and learning via the web. The whiteboard has support for common mathematical symbols, text, free-hand drawing, and common shapes. The whiteboard sessions can also be saved, printed, or emailed. This has made tutoring sessions much more convenient for both the tutor and tutee; each can participate from the comfort of their dorm rooms. Group members also have access to a repository of study materials that are uploaded by any member of the study group team. The team leaders have uploaded the lesson plan from each study group session for study group participants to access on-demand.

The Matching Engine also helps students locate relevant documents. Any public documents uploaded to ConnectYard are suggested to students for them to add to their study groups if there is a potential match based on relevant subject matter. Similarly, the Matching Engine makes students aware of events on campus that are a match with their academic interests, as well as academic support services that could be of benefit to them. All of these steps are essential for building a knowledge network on campus.

ConnectYard has been a strong addition to Capstone's Talent Development framework.

For more information, please contact a ConnectYard representative at:

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