

Program grew out of alumni contacting legislators, expanded beyond the legislative circle. "There are a lot of people who may be touched by the Univ of Ill only because they know we have a sports team. But everybody is a taxpayer. I hope we're doing a better job of educating people about the benefits the university provides to the taxpayers of this state."

Giving Back To OLs

- "We like to know what we can do for them -- how we can provide them info & support -- as well as what they can do for us," Rose Bellanca of Macomb Community College told pr. **Half-day seminar called Macomb in the New Millenium** is planned. Database of OLs will be invited. "We'll address issues relating to workforce development, education, health & lifestyles in our county & how these things might impact their role in what they do." College also does a yearly economic outlook forecast -- the state of the economy -- to which OLs are invited.

Internal Advocates

- "We identify people who are influential among the faculty as we do campus communications. We communicate directly with them to get them to tell our story," Don Hale of Carnegie Mellon Univ told pr.
- "We need to consider that our own employees are opinion leaders -- in their churches, professional ass'ns, hobbies. It's in our marketing plan to identify among them who belongs to what organizations, what activities. We do that now but haphazardly. We want to organize & build a database of our own people & who they influence in our community. There's a lot of power in that concept," explains Susan Hardy Brooks.

Problems To Overcome

- "We have a lot of demands on our time in terms of what people think pr should do. It's getting people's heads turned around a bit -- saying we need to do some of those things, but we also need to put time & resources into these kinds of things [OL/ambassador programs] if we're really going to have a payoff. That's a big obstacle. It's education & expectation & getting people to understand what pr really does, as opposed to 'give us publications,'" notes one practitioner whose hopes for a database are forced to the backburner.

Future Hope

- "We have a database of all our OL groups. We call on them regularly -- most of the time highly targeted, specific to their area of interest. Most effective is face-to-face, but we maintain dialog thruout the year via phone. Eventually we hope to dialog electronically with them thru our Web site. I think there's a lot of potential in terms of communicating with OLs electronically, especially on issues that are urgent, need to reach them quickly & need immediate action," says Susan Hardy Brooks.

Focus Issue on this Essential New Technique

COLLEGES ARE A STUDY IN STARTING OPINION LEADER PROGRAMS

There's no denying the role opinion leaders (OLs) play. Yet many practitioners have met resistance in launching systematized programs to build ongoing relationships with them. Few have OL lists.

Higher education is a case study in these difficulties -- as well as the payoffs of such initiatives. *CASE Currents*, urging college pr folks to "be more relationship-oriented, with less mass mailing & more sophisticated tracking of what constituents want," reported last month it "had to kill a story about how campus pr people track opinion leaders on their databases because we couldn't find anyone who was doing it."

After a multitude of phone calls, pr did ferret out some higher ed OL programs. **And also learned some things applicable to any organization ready to practice the New Public Relations -- in which OLs are one key.**

WHY OL PROGRAMS WORK

"Higher education is fortunate that we have people who are very interested in us & will give us their time & expertise for free -- because they are alumni or because they hire our graduates. There are people who feel passionately about us & will help us out if we ask them & give them something meaningful to do," finds Catherine Sams of Clemson Univ (South Carolina).

It's an environment conducive for building opinion leader/ambassador programs. Some in higher education are doing that, tho not all systematically. Of 11 schools pr contacted for this article:

- 4 have full-blown programs with database management
- 2 have programs & are in the process of building a database
- 5 do use OLs to support their projects, but they are usually sought project by project &, in some cases, their names are stored only in the heads of the institution's long-time employees

A LOOK AT SOME OPINION LEADER / AMBASSADOR PROGRAMS

Institutional Advisory Taskforces

- **An Image Taskforce at Francis Tuttle** (vo-tech ctr for high school jrs & srs, & for adults) looked into changing its name. Members included 18 OLs from industry, gov't, parents, students & people from schools in the area. With their insights & market research, decided to drop Vo-Tech from its name & do more niche marketing of its various centers. "We continue to call on them to get their pulse on issues. They're a good 3rd party endorsement," Susan Hardy Brooks told pr.



- **Clemson Univ has a Board of Visitors** (not a policy group like the board of trustees). It's made up of volunteers who come to campus twice a year to hear presentations & give feedback about the school's plans. "It helps to have people not as close to a situation as we are to find the holes in our plans," Catherine Sams told pr.
- **Commission on the Future of Clemson** is another advisory group of 250-300 highly regarded professionals -- some alums, some not. "They hear our plans & give us feedback, trying to set priorities. We want their insights & perspectives, to bring that to our planning process. We've received a lot of good advice this way. Our president speaks about the need to expand our circle of friends. These are ways of doing that. It's not about asking people to go out & parrot our words. They help us set a direction & bring perspective from their communities, that something won't fly in their county. And that's good for us to hear before we go out & do something bone headed."
- **The Illinois Connection** "enlists the aid of 400 ambassadors who give us feedback from their communities," Judy Babb, coordinator of this Univ of Ill ambassador program, told pr. Ambassadors are sent 5-times-yearly newsletter ("issues based, not slick") to keep them abreast of school-wide issues "so they can be conversational." Also sent bullet points "which they can use to speak about with those they know well enough, to let them know that the U of Ill is important to them.... We're educating them so they can tell others, or they can let us know when they're hearing something that isn't quite right & we can give them our perspective. Or, if we're wrong, we need to know that."
- **Macomb Community College's database of local decisionmakers** & alumni is used as a sounding board. They are asked, from their perspective "how do they think this would be interpreted, or what do they think is a good direction, or how would this impact them," Rose Bellanca told pr.

Educational Advisory Committees

- **"We encourage all academic dep'ts & colleges to have advisory groups & to use those groups to help them raise funds, get feedback from programs, etc.** Tho it's not out of this office, we feel it's a very important part of the overall com'ns/pr program for the university. And there's a direct relationship between success & those advisory committees. Dep'ts that have strong relationships with their advisory groups are more effective in fundraising, internships, scholarship programs, etc. Dep'ts that don't have those links, don't have the same kinds of bottomline numbers," Paul Kincaid, Southwest Missouri State, told pr.
- **Each instructional area is required to have an industry advisory committee**, made up of the industry's key leaders, at Francis Tuttle. Instructors meet with them at least twice yearly to learn what's going on in the industry & to share what's going on in their instructional area. Advisory committee members "become 3rd party endorsers. They help us do the right thing & they go back & talk about us with their peers." Some advisory committees are more active than others. "It's obvious the programs with the most active advisory committees because they are also the programs with the best enrollment & the best placement, hands down."

Legislative Advocates

- **"This is our most targeted use of OLs.** We're working to become more sophisticated in it. We have new computer software & hardware that we're converting to. When that's up & running we'll make this a more sophisticated process, more precise. Now, we have a list of alumni, donors & community people we know are linked to some legislators. When we need their help we call them & send them a bullet sheet of info & a list of people we'd like them to contact. They make the contacts & then feed back to us what the reaction was. We're only working with 30+ people now. We hope to expand that to at least 1 or a group of alumni in every county in the state," Paul Kincaid told pr.
- **Getting out the vote.** For school districts to use Francis Tuttle, they "must vote to increase taxes to annex into our vo-tech district. We use OLs in communities attempting to do this. *We've used OLs very effectively in that effort*" -- enlisting people from all walks of life, not just educators or parents.
- **Illinois Connection's ambassadors are asked to contact their state legislators during the budget process.** One reason program began was "we were hearing from legislators that they weren't hearing from our alumni that funding for higher education was a concern to them. We need to educate our alumni & let them know that the amount of support from the state is down to 31%," Judy Babb told pr.
- **Clemson's Legislative Advocates Group** is a group of volunteers in communities around the state. "They work with us to get information out when issues are coming before the general assembly."
- **Univ of Wisconsin-Stout also has a group called the Advocates.** These are "community people -- business leaders, educators, retired faculty members -- who do lobbying for us. The Chancellor & I bring them in, inform them about university issues, then call on them to do lobbying for us, particularly for the state budget," John Enger told pr. Univ of Wisc is in the process of developing a database that would match alumni to legislative districts. "I want to identify people in various districts who are willing to help us out with lobbying, talk with them & call on them when there are critical votes coming from their districts."

Reputational Programs

- **Reconnecting the Univ of Ill with the people of the state**, is a goal of Illinois Connection. To do this, univ president meets 1-on-1 with community members during full-day visits to specific communities. Day includes a.m. radio talk show, community leader breakfast, luncheon, concludes with an alumni reception in the evening. "During the day he's there to learn about the community & to put a face on the University of Ill. It has become a trademark of his presidency, to come, listen & learn. He meets with community colleges, legislators, mayors, high school students, media."

Ambassadors co-host the visit, identify invitees. "We would never know thruout all the communities in Ill with whom he should meet & what the issues are they want to hear about. It's a feather in the ambassadors' caps when they can stand in their community & be the host. He goes as often as he can get dates on his calendar," Babb reports.