

## Cost-Effective Modalities for Use by Student Chapters of Professional Organizations in Online Settings

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The use of technology has increased dramatically over the past decade in universities, and the number of colleges and universities offering online educational programs is a testament to the increase. Technology can be used as a cost-effective method for increasing participation and communication across the professional landscape, both in terms of education and professional development. Students participating in student organizations that are affiliated with professional organizations are groups of students in a formal group supported by at least one faculty member. This faculty member serves as a mentor and valuable resource to students in the group. Student professional organizations can benefit from the use of cost-effective modalities to increase their participation in the professional arena. Technology has allowed for the development of many cost-effective modalities for professional development through student chapters such as Web conferencing, listservs, and online mediums for discussion topics, and has fostered an environment that allows for more participation of underrepresented populations. Technology also allows for a broader application of social learning theory and social constructivism via creating virtual learning environments that allow for professional development.

Counseling practice is a theory-driven profession. We are driven by our theoretical orientations, which guide our interventions and techniques. Professional development can be much the same. Social constructionism is largely based on the use of language and is a function of the environment in which people surround themselves (Corey, 2005). The environments in which students participate can enhance their professional development and aid them in becoming highly competent and ethical practitioners. Gergen (1985) noted that knowledge is not something that one possesses in his or her head but rather it is something that people do together. To elaborate, the mind becomes a form of social myth, and one's self-concept is removed from the internal and placed within the sphere of social discourse (Gergen, 1985). One's concept of him- or

herself as a counselor can be enhanced through participation in professional organizations. Knowledge can be understood to grow and develop through social processes, and student chapters can assist in this process.

Self-efficacy theory is interactional, interdisciplinary, and multimodal (Bandura & Walters, 1963). *Self-efficacy* refers to the belief or expectation one has in his or her ability to master a situation and bring about change (Bandura, 1982, 1997). Further, our behaviors can be seen as a result of triadic reciprocal interaction between the environment, personal factors (e.g., preferences, expectations, self-perceptions), and individual behavior (Bandura, 1977). This theory is useful in understanding the role of student professional organizations. If students can participate in an inclusive and supportive group, which nurtures their counseling abilities, they may emerge better prepared for their professional lives. Through participation in professional organizations, counseling students can be supported and can learn from professionals in the field.

Students involved in professional organizations at both a national and school level reap many benefits including exposure to leading professionals in the field through scholarly journals and participation in listservs. The medium of professional organizations complements the educational process by allowing students to learn professional behaviors, and further cements their understanding of ethical counseling values and behaviors in a supportive environment surrounded by professionals in the field and their fellow students. Benefits can be further increased by involvement at the national level. While attendance at national conferences is an ideal method for furthering the professional development of students, it is not always possible. Technology can be used to stimulate communication and involvement. Other benefits of using technology are allowing the student chapters to address two major multicultural issues that can occur in traditional programs. The first issue that can be addressed is accessibility. Often students with disabilities or special needs are unable to attend or fully participate in chapter

meetings. Technology allows them to have an equal footing in all chapter decisions. The second issue addressed is that of unconscious bias. The anonymity provided by online chapter meetings does not reveal race, ethnicity, or disability status. This is not possible in traditional settings where students are face to face.

Professional organizations can reap many benefits from student chapters. Professional organization student chapters allow for students to become involved first at a local level and also add the piece of national-level involvement. These chapters can foster and instill a belief in the need and value of professional organizations in advancing the field of counseling. They learn that these organizations provide research on theory and practice and are active in public policy and legislation, which can improve outcomes for those served and the status of the counseling profession. Students who value membership in professional organizations during their formative years may well continue to value this in their professional careers. The use of cost-effective modalities provided by technology can provide a mechanism for increased participation in student chapters and professional organizations by allowing for increased communication among students and professionals.

A key to any professional student chapter is communication among the members. With distance students, communication has been the major barrier to effective online student chapters. When left to rely solely on e-mails or phone calls, students lose immediacy and are often reluctant to spend the money that can result from lengthy long-distance phone calls. Advances in the areas of distance learning technology, such as peer-to-peer technology, content management systems, and wider availability of broadband Internet connections, have allowed cost-effective and time-effective interactions among students, faculty, and speakers to occur. An examination of various low-cost technologies that can facilitate these interactions follows.

Of key importance to any online student chapter is a "shell" to house the chapter. These shells are referred to as content management systems (CMS). Two of the most common CMS used in online programs today are WebCT and Blackboard. While the cost to the school for using WebCT or Blackboard initially can be quite high, once they are set up there is no cost to adding a shell for an online program. Creating a course, which is given the title of the student chapter, most easily does this. There are many advantages to using an existing CMS at a school, such as password protection, allowing students to have designer access to mold the shell to their needs, and easy monitoring by faculty advisers. In most cases, schools have a

technical support staff for their CMS, which in turn would provide technical support for the student chapter.

A working CMS provides many opportunities for a student chapter to operate similarly to a chapter in a traditional program. These systems provide threaded discussion forums, internal e-mail, chat rooms, the ability to post information and documents and to archive materials, and a system for anonymous voting through their test-making capabilities. Threaded discussion forums are key to the operation of an online student chapter. They enable students to submit questions and answers, review other students' submissions, and provide discussion over a period of time on items necessary for the chapter. This occurs asynchronously, which is beneficial through allowing students from different time zones and with different work schedules to participate in the chapter meetings. Threaded discussion forums also allow more interaction with guest speakers than a traditional lecture, in that the speaker can continue to answer questions over a set period of time. Threaded discussions can also be set up so that only certain members can see or participate in them, allowing executive councils of student chapters to have a private meeting place in addition to the general discussion area.

Having an internal e-mail system within the CMS provides security and complete immunity from spam e-mails. This is beneficial to the students in that it allows them to have an e-mail address that will only be used for chapter business by chapter members. An added benefit of this is an effective archiving of all e-mails so the history of the chapter and its activities can be tracked. Chat rooms also are beneficial to the students in that they are able to have a real-time written discussion with other members of the student chapters. Many CMS have the ability to run multiple chat rooms at once, allowing different conversations to take place at the same time. These chat rooms could be set for social interactions, chapter business, discussion of classes, or a multitude of other topics. Many times chat rooms can be set for invitation only, allowing students to have confidential real-time conversations.

Outside of the CMS realm, instant messaging and other peer-to-peer exchanges have become both common place and, in many cases, inexpensive. Instant messaging is generally a free service, which allows the user to send written messages instantly to other individuals, giving similar experience to the chat room without having to be in the CMS. The other main difference from a chat room is that generally the instant messaging is a one-to-one experience. However, the individual can have multiple instant messaging conversations occurring in separate windows at the same time. Another benefit of these peer-to-peer

messengers is that files can be exchanged instantly over the Internet, enhancing collaboration between chapter members. There are multiple instant messaging providers available, the most popular being AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, and MSN Messenger. All of these can be downloaded from the Internet for free, and there is no cost for their use.

The feature of instant messaging that has been recently gaining in popularity is the ability to have both audio and video conversations in real time over the Internet for free. The only cost for this functionality is in the purchase of a microphone and webcam, which can range in cost from as low as \$20 to over \$100. Installation is generally easy and fast, and students can be conversing with video in a matter of minutes. With this advancement, students from around the world can have a face-to-face real-time conversation for the cost of a webcam and microphone. This advancement can greatly increase interactions among students and be more personable than e-mail or phone conversations. In most distance education programs, the actual face-to-face time among students is minimal. Providing a format through which students from distant locations can have face-to-face interactions can increase the feeling of community that many distant education students feel is lacking.

With these inexpensive technologies, as well as support of the faculty, distance learners are no longer left on their own in terms of immediate access to professional organizations and their chapters. When one considers the benefits of belonging to professional organizations and their school chapters, the need to continue developing modalities and encouraging students to become members is apparent. New students and members are necessary for any professional organization to continue. By opening new avenues of membership and participation to previously isolated potential members, membership and a sense of ownership can be increased for these individuals.

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