

Plymouth State University Leverages Luminis® Platform to Strengthen Interactions and Connections With Alumni

By personalizing content and incorporating the social networking tools that young alumni are accustomed to into its alumni portal, Plymouth State University (PSU) has greatly enhanced the value of its portal and the strength of its connections to alumni.

The university first went live with its alumni portal in 2005. Since then, it has integrated outside technologies including career building tools, a photo gallery, an open alumni directory, a myNews tab, a myProfile channel and a myMusic channel, all with the goal of bringing alumni back repeatedly to the myPlymouth portal and keeping them engaged with the university. The institution is currently working on integrating MySpace, facebook, LinkedIn and other social networking sites with myPlymouth.

“We want myPlymouth to be the main place that alumni return to access all their networking tools. The ability to integrate these outside technologies with our portal is essential to keeping it viable,” said Joe Long, director, alumni relations at PSU.

“We want our alumni to be thinking about Plymouth State and to be involved with us on a regular basis,” echoed Zachary Tirrell, MIS manager at PSU. “The more they are engaged with us, the more they will donate their time, money and resources back to the university. Our portal is only one piece of a multi-pronged engagement strategy, but it is a very important one.”



Plymouth State University

Enrollment: 6,562

Plymouth, NH

www.plymouth.edu

Results With SunGard Higher Education:

- More alumni are staying involved with the university
- University portal stays relevant amid competing social networking sites
- Alumni portal fosters social networking after university life
- Secure and convenient online approach supports gift giving





The portal is built on the Luminis Platform and Banner® administrative system from SunGard Higher Education. The Luminis Platform provides the solid foundation of portal features, integrated enterprise applications and supporting infrastructure required to support an institution's digital campus. The release of the Luminis IV Platform provided Plymouth State with the capability to easily incorporate more third-party applications, all with the goal of making the Plymouth site more engaging and more like the Web-based applications that young alumni are accustomed to. The applications include the Zimbra Collaboration Suite of collaboration tools that include email and calendar and other tools. "The Zimbra Suite has a great web-based feel to it that meets the expectations of our young alumni," said Tirrell.

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Alumni career services also are available on the portal via single sign-on through Experience.com. "The tools we are presenting through Experience.com are very exciting," said Tirrell. "This isn't just a nicety, it is something that alumni see as valuable and are excited about. Alumni no longer get excited about being offered an email address for life. We need to be able to bring in the next killer app into our portal and the Luminis Platform lets us accomplish that."



Another popular application that is integrated into the portal is smugmug where alum can share their photo galleries and purchase prints. "Students are drawn to high-graphic channels. They find the full-color channels much more engaging than the others, so bringing in smugmug gives them another reason to start with myPlymouth, and then jump off into the applications available to them on it," said Long.

Also on the myPlymouth portal, alumni will have access to the popular sites of LinkedIn, MySpace and Facebook. The portal also is populated with many features and applications generated by Plymouth State including campus news, information on class reunions, alumni scholarships and awards, an alumni directory, unofficial transcripts, weather, and channels with personal announcements and real time alumni news. An online giving application was implemented in fall 2004. As a result, online gifts have increased in the first half of 2009 to levels that almost exceed the highest full year levels for both dollars and number of gifts in any prior year.

Alumni volunteers and members of the scholarship committee regularly use the portal to have online discussions about various issues. "The portal is a really useful tool for us to engage our volunteers. They are active users of the portal and its applications. Now our emphasis is on engaging our non-volunteer alumni more," said Long.



News of the portal is communicated to alumni through the university's Web-based magazine and its email newsletter. Typically, the university sees a surge in activity of about 20 percent after the portal is highlighted in an article.

Another way that PSU keeps traffic high on the portal is using it as a vehicle for alum to register for services, games and alumni events. In recent years, the attendance of young alumni at programs has skyrocketed, an outcome that Long attributes to their ongoing engagement through the portal.

"We offer many desirable features on our portal that keep alums coming back, and the results are showing in our programs," said Long.

To increase engagement even more, the university has automatically populated the affinity and class groups. In the past, users had to "opt in" to a group, such as the Class of 2007.



Portal Relationship Begins Freshmen Year

The myPlymouth portal is a familiar tool to alumni, who are introduced to it during their undergraduate years. The data is clear that those who attended the university since 2000, when the portal first went live, are the most active alumni users.

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Because the portal is integrated to the data in the Banner system, the resources presented to a user automatically change as a user's role changes, from student to alumni for example.

"We gain added value by having our portal integrated with our student data in Banner," said Long. "The integration provides us with immediate updates, so that we can keep our communications current and personalized. And the Luminis Platform gives us a mechanism to monitor usage of the portal."



When students reach senior status, they are automatically presented with the alumni portal. “We want to get them acclimated to using the alumni portal and to see all the services that are available to them,” explained Long. “And some of the services, like mentoring, career services, and career networking, have value to students during their senior year.”

“The seniors start seeing photos of alumni events and they can view other resources so they can start thinking about what it means to be an alumni, and what we can offer them,” added Tirrell. “It’s a lot easier to keep someone engaged with Plymouth State than to try to re-engage them after they’ve lost contact with the university.”

The ability to personalize and target information to users, whether they are freshmen, seniors, or alum, is one of the strengths of the Luminis Platform.

“The ability to personalize content is of great value to us,” said Tirrell. “It helps keep the portal relevant to our users. It makes the portal something that users want to access, and not just a necessary gateway to the university.”

The data collected in the Banner system helps the university better understand and track learners’ interest as students, and then leverage that information when they become alums. For example, if a student often bought tickets to the theatre, the university might alert them to theatre events when he or she is an alumni.

“We can really tailor our messages and content to specific groups. With all the competing social networks and other online tools available today, alumni offices need to work a little harder to strengthen an alumni’s connection to the institution. We look for their connection to the university through clubs, groups, hobbies, sports teams, volunteerism and other avenues. The ability to track this data, and then deliver tailored information in a personalized and visually engaging way through the portal has made our communications much more effective,” said Long.