Family-friendly publications: Strategies and resources

Frustrated in your attempts to communicate with students and families? This workshop may help. Administrative professionals and their supervisors will get tips and tools to help develop and maintain effective publications.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Planning: Review key pre-publication steps
2. Developing: Examine the connection between form and function
3. Maintaining: Discuss quality control measures, consistency
4. Resources: Get familiar with design tools, clip art sources, websites, books, etc.

TOPICS/SUBJECTS:

1
- Defining your audience
- Determining your goals/purpose
- Creating some sort of plan/road map

2
- Drafting audience appropriate content
    a. Bias
    b. Perception
    c. Condescension
- Accessible formats: size, shape, white space, color
- Reinforcing messages and goals: frequency of distribution

3
- Developing quality control measures, consistency
    a. Sharing the load, multiple authors/contributors
    b. Reporting structure, who needs to see and approve what, when?
    c. Who is the final arbiter of content & tone? (Focusing, refocusing, or enforcing established goals/messages)
    d. Readability focus groups and feedback mechanisms

4
- Using resources
    a. College planning and academic enrichment Web sites
    b. Editorial resources like Chicago Manual of Style, Gregg Reference Manual
    c. Clip art resources like MS Design Gallery Live: *http://dgl.microsoft.com/*
    d. Common software applications: Adobe PageMaker and PhotoShop, MS Publisher and FrontPage, Babel Fish translations: *http://babelfish.altavista.com/babelfish/,* etc.
    e. Sources of free publications, EdFund, NELA, etc.

ACTIVITY (S):

1. Critiquing exercise – reviewing sample publications with a new eye, suggesting family-friendly alternatives

HANDOUTS

1. Online resources
2. Outline/summary of topics covered
3. Sample passages and/or publications

Family friendly publications: Talking points…

This talk is primarily intended to encourage us, as GEAR UP professionals, to look critically at the information materials we produce. I'm going to put forth a series of assertions about what I see in publications intended for GEAR UP audiences. This is only one opinion. Feel free to challenge, ignore, or use these ideas as you see fit. We'll start by looking at what I see as the key steps involved in planning, developing, and maintaining publications, and then at the resources that are available to help you do your work more effectively. Then we can break into groups to review some of the passages and publications I've brought along, hopefully with a new, more critical, eye.

PHASE 1: PLANNING

This really has two key parts: defining your audience and determining your goals and/or purpose.

- Defining your audience

  Develop a profile of your reader or end user. What appeals to him or her? What characteristics are common? If you have large limited English proficient readers, you might want to use more pictorial formats. If you have young readers who are likely to lose things, you might want to think about colors and paper sizes that are hard to ignore or forget.

  Check out magazines, TV shows, and websites that are popular with your target audience for ideas and tips on how to write for them and appeal to them. We can learn a lot about writing style and length from these resources. That said, be cautious about making your publications look like commercial teenybopper magazines. I think one of the biggest things I learned from looking at the progression of magazines from, Tiger Beat to Seventeen and Cosmo, is how the level of design sophistication changes. Things for young readers are busy and eye catching. But the older the target population, the cleaner the look becomes.

  Intuitively many of us know that young people are always trying to be older than they are, they want so much to grow up and be 'mature'. We know this, and yet when we develop our college planning publications, instead of challenging students to be the mature and responsible young people we want them to be and they want to be, we often create materials that look as thought they're meant for very young children. What does a childish publication, say to the older teen its intended for? That he or she is stupid or not capable of understanding more complex ideas? How will that impact your ability to get the message out? As you think about your audience, consider both the written and visual messages that might make your audience more receptive.

- Determining your goals/purpose

  The other thing I gained from looking at teen magazines is a better understanding of the connection between form and function. It seems to me that teen magazines are not designed to give information. Not the kind of information we're trying to give students, anyway. They're not designed to provide hard news like Newsweek or pure science like National Geographic. Teen magazines are intended to set trends and inspire consumer demand for goods. With that in mind, there's really only so much imitation that's appropriate for college planning publications. If we make our publications look like teen magazines, will students treat them like they treat the latest rag sheet? Three weeks from now a new magazine will come out and the old one will be discarded. Will students remember what they read? Or, in fact, do the magazine companies rely on the fact that students don't remember what they read, recycling old information each week or month, selling it to kids as if it's new?

  So when you think about determining a goal and purpose, think about how you want your information to be used. Is it information you want the student to skim or information you want the students to delve into and internalize. Is your intent for students to use the material as a reference tool? If so, the form of your materials might be more like a textbook. The goals and purpose you establish for your publication is important in making sure your final product or form has the desired impact.

PHASE 2: DEVELOPMENT

Once you know what you're purpose is and whom you're trying to reach, you invariably move onto creating a document or publication that reflects those goals. There are four things I like to keep in mind here: Audience appropriate content, hidden bias, focus, appearance, and frequency.

- Give readers what they want. Audience appropriate content.

  What is it that your audience needs or wants? I don't know. Do you? The best place to start may simply be to ask them. It seems like a novel concept but when you just sit and talk to students and families, really talk to them and engage in conversation, huge knowledge gaps start rearing their ugly faces. Students closer to college and the application and financial aid processes might have no clear idea about the relationships between college majors and professional careers, good grades, and test scores, etc. They may lack an understanding of how the FAFSA works or why college credit classes are of value. These are the areas where you might want to focus your keyboard or pen. I also try to talk to the page as if I was talking to a student or parent. Explain difficult concepts in lots of different ways using several different analogies and examples.

  Speaking more specifically about content, if the explosion of reality TV shows tells us anything, it's that young people, all people, appreciate voyeuristic looks at "real life" or in our case, 'college life'. We've talked often in our GEAR UP Project about wanting to put together a publication that just tells the stories of students in their own words. Our feeling is that we'd be doing students a *real* service if we told them not only how to go to college, but what to expect once they're there. How closely does college life resemble what they see on TV and imagine in their heads? On a small scale, you could bring in this element with humorous vignettes or serious life stories in featured columns. This is a great way to, like a fable, teach a lesson without preaching to

students and families. You let the example of others do the teaching for you. Besides the potential impact on readers, this is also a great opportunity for information professionals to, as I'll discuss later, share the load.

A brief note on hidden bias and perceptions... In publications, I often see things like, "College is not that expensive. Most people pay less than $4,000 per year to go." And while the numbers cited may be accurate, the tone makes me cringe. The underlying assumption is that $4,000 isn't a lot of money when, for most people, it is. If we look, really look at some of the things we're saying it, and how we're saying it, there are lots of instances of this hidden bias. We may ultimately get a far better response to our information materials if we have to acknowledge the reality that parents feel and know. The reality for most folks is that college is expensive. So, instead of saying college is not expensive, acknowledge that college is costly, but there are ways to cover the costs. Instead of saying, college is required for success, acknowledge that there are many levels of success, and college is one proven avenue for achieving some measure of financial success. People can appreciate and weigh for themselves whether the costs and benefits of education are worth the sacrifice. We just need to be honest with people about what the trade-offs are.

- Focus

  One of the challenges in any publications is making the focus narrow enough and focused enough to communicate a cohesive message. The temptation is to throw in everything but the kitchen sink, cover all the bases, and appeal to everyone, rather than covering a single issue or series of issues in depth. This is one of my biggest struggles.

  Ultimately though, it might be a better idea to focus exclusively on campus organizations, or exclusively on college majors, so that each publication has a clear focus. If you really feel like you need to cover everything in a single newsletter, then consider introducing each topic as regular feature that students can expect and look forward to. I suspect, however, that students are not inclined to wait three or four months to read about an organization or major they might like. Your chances of covering something that interests them are greater if you focus on several majors or organizations at a time.

- Appearance

  I'm not going to spend too much time talking about appearance since we covered that to some extent earlier, and design is not my area of expertise. Suffice it to say that appearance counts. Students appreciate white space, and I, for one, tend to favor clear designs with less background imagery and clutter.

- Frequency

  I think this is arguably the most difficult piece. As an author, once you've done something, you want to be done with it. By about the 4th revision or edit, you're ready to pull out your hair strand by strand. And newsletters in particular can be extremely wearing. As you plan, think about how often you can reasonably be expected to create the newsletter. Also keep in mind that the more people who need to review it, the more onerous the production task becomes.

  Generally, the minimum frequency for an offline/print newsletter is quarterly. This works well for large groups that you need to communicate with infrequently. It also works well when you don't have regular weekly or monthly meetings or deadlines that need to be communicated frequently. A monthly publication works better for small groups, or groups that need more contact and interaction. And for online newsletters, or for organizations with weekly events, subscribers are generally happy with short weekly issues. (think of how many online newsletters you get that are quickly discarded).

  Ideally, whatever schedule you choose, be consistent! If you won't be publishing due to vacations or holidays, etc., tell your readers ahead of time. And, as always, this is easier said than done.

- Patience, Patience, Patience

  Planning should be where you invest most of your time. I think my favorite quote in our college planning handbooks is the one where Eisenhower says, "I have always found that in battle, plans are worthless, but planning is indispensable." Good planning can make the rest of the process far smoother. All along the way, as we were developing our college planning handbooks, people would say, in one form or another, "Now, why are we saying, doing, including that?" Having the ability to refer people to the plan, and show how and why the information we were including helped reach our goals, was very helpful.

PHASE 3: MAINTENANCE

- Reporting Structure, Quality Control & Collaboration

  Reviewing structure, editing, "design police." Who needs to see or approve the newsletter for content and layout before you publish it? If you have a consistent process for compiling and producing the newsletters, everyone involved falls into a routine. They get used to seeing the publications in a certain way and they develop expectations for what things should look like. This helps you to remain consistent in style and appearance. It also helps article authors to learn how leadership wants things written. Over time, both the consistency and quality of the writing can improve, saving you editing time. Authors begin to write per leadership's expectations.

  Also as I hinted at earlier, guest columnists can play a pivotal role in reducing the workload of those tasked with developing publications. Sometimes, just being the compiler of news as opposed to the conceptual thinker is needed to recharge your creative batteries.

- Readability: Focus groups and feedback mechanisms

Readability is a constant battle for GEAR UP and outreach publications. Just a few tips on this, extra readability can be gained by using a larger type size and wider column width for the text of the main story in your newsletter. Subordinate topics or groups of smaller paragraphs can then be set in smaller type and a narrower column width.

1. Long passages of text can be very intimidating and especially difficult to read. That doesn't mean that we have to dumb down the concepts or the messages that we're trying to get across though. It just means Be generous with your red pen to remove unnecessary words or sentences.

   Other issues that fall into the readability category are the insistence of some, and this is just me talking, that we use words like *postsecondary*. While postsecondary is a great word – it's all-inclusive and precise, how many people outside educational circles know what the heck it means? What's wrong with saying school, college, or program, instead of postsecondary institution? When we write and we edit for GEAR UP audiences, use colloquialisms, parables, clichés, and some level of simplification. Clichés are clichés precisely because most of us are familiar with what they mean. That's a good thing when you're dealing with diverse audiences and trying to inform them about our complex educational system. Most clichés can be translated into (comparable or similar) colloquial sayings that match any culture or community. They are, in essence universal truths. This is what we want in our publications – ideas and examples that cut across socioeconomic lines and really make sense to people. Why bother with big, fancy words that only serve to make us seem smart and our readers seem less than. While it is easier, for political reasons, to use precise terms like postsecondary, it's not necessarily the best thing for our readers. This is not about pleasing joe shmoe politician, although that's certainly nice, it's about reaching kids and families with information they can use.

   By the same token, don't be afraid to start a sentence with and, but, so, or then. In school, they drill into your head that that's wrong, never to be tolerated, but these simple transitional words and conjunctions help readers follow your logic. They telegraph where you're going, break up difficult passages of text, and more closely resemble the way we speak to each other. All of these make your text easier to read.

2. Finally, in thinking about your audience, the choice of font says a lot about how you perceive the reader. Kid-looking or handwriting fonts, while cute and seemingly appropriate, *may* turn off an older audience. What we've heard and seen time and time again with our audiences is that they are particularly sensitive to the appearance of condescension and demeaning language. Handwriting fonts cannot only be seen as condescending, they are also more difficult to read. Try to stick with sans serif fonts like Albertus, Arial, Helvetica, Modern, Tahoma, or Trebuchet for main text passages, saving playful fonts for headlines and pull quotes.

3. Last but not least, use focus groups and interviews to get feedback. Send your publications out to the world and ask for real constructive criticism. Just hold on though, you ay get more input than you bargained for. =)

Critiquing Exercise:

Each table receives a one-paragraph excerpt (see below) from a real-life college planning publication. Word for word, it's been copied from the brochure or handbook. The goal here is to transform these paragraphs into something more accessible to typical GEAR UP audiences.

As you read each paragraph, think about what the author is trying to say. Is there a way that to simplify the paragraph, eliminate words or shorten phrases and quickly get the point? If so, how? Is there information that the author is assuming the reader has, if so, what is it? Is there a hidden assumption that the author is making about the reader's values?

Take a few moments to discuss this and report out when finished.

1. How do you teach them about money? You can start by discussing overall attitudes toward money and credit issues. To get the discussion rolling, ask your children what they think about the following statements. Use this time to listen carefully, explain basic concepts, and share what you've learned.

2. Even more important, knowledge workers must commit themselves to lifelong learning. The reason is simple: many economists think that people will be changing careers – not just jobs – every five to seven years. To thrive in that environment, workers will need to acquire new skills and refine their current skills throughout their lifetimes.

3. The mailed solicitation promises that, for a fee, you can receive information about little known or under-used scholarships or other financial aid. "They say there's all this money out there not being claimed. For this fee, they will do the search for you and they will guarantee five or six valid resources," says Joe Schmoe.

4. Selecting a post-secondary school is a major decision. But by helping your child follow a systematic approach in narrowing the choices, you can simplify the process… Your child will do best at a college where students share similar academic abilities and objectives. "You want your child to feel comfortable with academic expectations."

5. Contrary to widespread opinion, you are not significantly penalized for saving when it comes time to determine whether your child is eligible for financial aid. Under current law, you can only lose a total of $5 for every $100 you save. Saving for your child's future education requires you to assess your priorities.

Online Resources for Academic Outreach Programs

The following web sites may be of interest to you.

Academic Enrichment

- Access Washington: http://access.wa.gov/kids
- AIMS Education Gateway: http://www.aimsedu.org/
- The Copernicus Education Gateway: http://www.gocopernicus.com
- Gateway Curriculum & Lesson Plans: http://thegateway.org/
- Dr. Math Homework Help: http://mathforum.org/dr.math/
- Federal Resources for Education Excellence: http://www.ed.gov/free/index.html

College Planning/Preparation

- www.act.org
- www.collegeispossible.org
- www.collegenet.com
- www.collegeplan.org
- www.collegexpress.com
- www.insideguide.com
- www.makingcollegecount.com
- www.mapping-your-future.org
- www.students.gov

Financial Aid

- Federal Tax incentives : http://www.ed.gov/updates/97918tax.html
- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): http://www.fafsa.ed.gov
- United Negro College Fund : http://www.uncf.org
- Veterans Benefits: http://www.gibill.va.gov
- Washington Financial Aid Association : http://www.wfaa.org
- www.fastweb.com
- www.finaid.org
- www.scholarships.com
- www.winscholarships.com

Grant Support & Finance

- 21st Century Community Learning Centers: http://www.ed.gov/21stcclc/
- Education Excellence Partnership: http://www.edex.org
- National Council for Community & Education Partnerships: http://www.nccep.org
- U.S. Department of Education: http://www.ed.gov/

Learning Styles

- Teaching Techniques for Diverse Learners: http://www.geocities.com/~educationplace/ls.html
- How to Learn: http://www.howtolearn.com

Mentoring

- America's Promise: http://www.americaspromise.org
- Big Brothers Big Sisters: http://www.bbbsa.org
- National Mentoring Partnership: http://www.mentoring.org

Parent Involvement & Support

- Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership: http://www.cipl.org
- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education: http://www.ncpie.org
- U.S. Department of Education Resources for Parents
- Scholastic Books: www.ed.gov/thinkcollege/early/parent_guide.htm
- The Parenting Toolbox: http://parentingtoolbox.com/hand/education.html

SAT/ACT Test Preparation

- Online practice tests (ACT & SAT): http://www.rea.com/tests/index.cfm
- www.act.org
- www.collegeboard.com
- www.petersons.com
- www.review.com

Service Learning

- Association for Experiential Education: http://www.aee.org
- National Service Programs: http://www.cns.gov/americorps/index.html
- National Service Learning Clearinghouse: http://www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu

Tutoring

- America Reads in WA: http://www.ed.gov/americareads/ARC_FWS/washingt.html
- America Reads (National Resources): http://www.ed.gov/americareads/index.html
- Strategic Tutoring Resources: http://www.smarttogether.com

Youth Leadership Skills

- National Youth Leadership Council: http://www.nylc.org
- Washington State University Extension 4-H Programs: http://4h.wsu.edu
- White Stag Leadership Development (Affiliated with Boy Scouts of America): http://www.whitestag.org/skills/index.htm