I'll Wait for the Movie: Another Way to Promote Student Services

Abstract

Many students find the transition from high school to university difficult. Efforts to make them aware of the services and resources available are made prior to and early in their first year of study, but they often experience “information overload.” At Cape Breton University, the Teaching and Learning Centre, Student Services Centre, and Video Production unit have produced a short video to familiarize students with campus layout and major student services. The video’s lively, student-centred approach allows viewers to see and to hear from many of the service providers, making it more personal than written materials. In this paper, we outline the rationale behind the project and describe how students have responded to receiving information in this format.

Introduction

The idea to produce a student service information video for first-year students emerged from a Cape Breton University workshop focusing on barriers to educational participation. Beder (1990) defines barriers as factors that prevent students, who are otherwise motivated, from participating in learning opportunities. These influences may include dispositional factors such as attitudes, opinions, values, self concept; situational factors such as time constraints and family constraints; institutional factors such as inflexible schedules; and variables such as gender, race, culture and class (Ballantine, 1997; Beder, 1990; Connell, 1997; Scanlan, 1986).

Cross (cited in Covert, 2002) maintains that, “if an individual is motivated to participate in some form of learning activity, barriers can be overcome if sufficient information exists about the types of opportunities that are available” (pp. 40-41). Cape Breton University students are informed though various means, such as the student handbook and the academic calendar, about services that could help them to overcome many of these barriers. We know, however, that students often do not take advantage of these services perhaps because they do not read the material that describes those services or because do not retain what they read. For that reason, Cape Breton University’s Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) took the initiative to inform students in a format intended to be more interesting, lively, and memorable. In the TLC video, a student narrator interviewed key student service providers on campus. This format enabled us to show the location of services on the Cape Breton University campus and the faces of those offering the services.

The original video, produced in 2001, was shown in several introductory courses during the first week of classes and at strategic locations where students waited during the registration process. The video has been updated periodically since then. In 2004, we decided to elicit and analyze students’ responses to
this format. We asked students who had watched the video in class to complete a questionnaire providing information on their opinion of the video, their prior knowledge of student services, and whether the video made it more likely that they would use those services.

**Method**

**Participants**

Two hundred and sixty-three students, ranging in age from 17-45 years (Mean = 19.6 years) completed the questionnaire. Of those, 138 were women and 122 were men. The majority (93.5%) of participants were full-time students, defined as those carrying at least three courses per term; 62% were attending Cape Breton University for the first time. Participants represented a wide range of Cape Breton University’s programs, although students in the university’s two Arts degrees (BA and Bachelor of Arts Community Studies) constituted a majority (63.5%).

**Materials**

The first section of the questionnaire asked participants to indicate their age, gender, program of study, their status as full- or part-time students, and whether they were attending Cape Breton University for the first time. To assess students' reactions to the video, they were asked to rate their agreement with five statements, using a 5-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree or neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. These five statements were: 1) The video was entertaining; 2) The video was informative; 3) The video was an appropriate length (neither too short nor too long); 4) I would prefer to be given this information in written form; 5) I would recommend that students attending Cape Breton University for the first time view this video. In addition, students were asked to check off which of the services they had prior knowledge of. On a second list, they were asked to indicate which of the services they thought they would be more likely to use because they had viewed the video.

**Procedure**

Students enrolled in introductory courses in a variety of disciplines were shown the student services video by their instructors during the first week of classes in September 2004. After showing the video, the instructors distributed the questionnaires and participants completed them in class. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

**Results and Discussion**

Results indicated that students responded positively to the video. Combined percentages for the “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” responses showed that most students thought that the video was informative (90.1%) and appropriate in length (65.7%) and would recommend that first year students view it (80.6%). Most students preferred the video format; 66.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they would prefer to receive the information in written form. The students’ assessment of whether the video was entertaining was more mixed; 41.1% responded positively, 23.6% responded negatively, and a rather large proportion (35.4%) chose the “neutral” rating.
The proportion of students who indicated they had prior knowledge of the services featured in the video varied widely, from a low of 21.3% for the Disability Resource Office, to a high of 93.9% for Library Services. A majority of participants said they knew about the services offered through the Financial Aid Office (61.6%), Student Counseling Service (53.6%), Fitness Facility (84.4%), recreational use of sports facilities (72.2%), and Student Union services (89.4%). Fewer than half had prior knowledge of Health Services (24.3%), the Human Rights Office (31.6%), the Reading and Writing Development Center (41.4%), and International Student Services (42.6%).

To gauge the effectiveness of the video, respondents were asked to indicate which services they would be more likely to use because they had seen the video. In particular, we expected that some students who had not previously known about a service would be more likely to access it once informed about it. Even for students who already knew about a particular service, viewing the video might make them more likely to use it. Of course, no matter what their knowledge of a service, students are unlikely to use a service they do not think they would have any need of and this would be particularly true for services with a more specific focus, such as the Disability Resource Centre. Still, for every service listed, some students indicated that they would be more likely to use the service because of viewing the information video. The proportion of participants so indicating varied, from a low of 9.9% for International Student Services, to a high of 75.7% for Library Services. A majority of students indicated that seeing the video made it more likely that they would use the Fitness Facility (67.3%), recreational use of sports facilities (51.7%), the Reading and Writing Development Centre (67.3%), and Student Union services (66.5%). Smaller proportions indicated they would be more likely to use the Financial Aid Office (33.85%), Student Counseling Service (32.7%), Health Services (32.7%), the Disability Resource Centre (11.0%), and the Human Rights Office (23.2%).

The results of this evaluation clearly indicated that the student service information video accomplished what its producers intended. The survey showed that many first-year students do not know about services available to them on campus, services that could help them participate more fully in their learning. The results indicated that video presentation effectively provided information that students might not obtain, or pay attention to, in written materials only. The survey results are also useful to Cape Breton University for other purposes. The findings will be distributed to those units with responsibility for the services featured in the video. The hope is those departments can use the video and the information in this report to improve their publicity campaigns, especially for first-year students. More effective publicity about student services could enhance the first-year learning experience for, as well as increase retention of, first-year students at Cape Breton University.

References


