

Blending the Three-Part Mission of the Land Grant University

Introduction

The core of the land-grant university system is the three-part mission of research, extension, and education. Ideally, each part of the mission should benefit the other components of the mission. The “Explore Research at the University of Florida” video project has successfully blended all three parts of the mission. Students take an advanced digital media production course where they develop videos documenting research at the university, and the videos then serve as extension of research. The videos are then displayed at the Florida Museum of Natural History and various online, broadcast, and cable television outlets.

Teaching

To be accepted into the class where the sole focus is the production of the videos, students must submit video resumes showcasing what they have been able to apply in an introductory digital media course. The advanced production course begins with students practicing shooting and editing videos before they begin working with researchers. The production process goes as follows: 1) stories are assigned to students, 2) students conduct pre-interviews with researchers as preparation for both the students and the researchers, 3) the interviews are conducted, 4) students edit their videos, 5) the videos are critiqued by the instructors and fellow students at least twice, 6) the researchers review the videos, 7) re-editing occurs if the researchers do not approve of the videos initially, 8) final approvals are received from the researchers, 9) and videos are submitted to the museum. Surveys have been conducted of both the students and participating researchers. As found in surveys, the students have reported increased skills in video production, improved ability to coach interviewees, and gains in communicating science. Other impacts on the students includes the museum hiring three students as video producers as a direct result of having participated in the class. In total, 130 videos have been produced for the project.

Research

The videos focus on explaining the practical impacts of scientific research being conducted at the University of Florida. The goal of the videos is to take what can sometimes seem like esoteric research and show how the research translates into real-world applications. Some examples include the use of algorithms to detect landmines, mapping cell phone use to track malaria, and manipulating light colors to affect plant growth. The researchers are able to tell the story of their research in their own words, in an understandable manner. They have realized increased exposure for themselves, their research, and their departments/centers. Surveys have shown the researchers have been satisfied with the process. They also reported positive feedback from viewers, resulting from their stories being aired on the local PBS affiliate.

Extension

The extension component of the project stems from the dissemination of the videos. Initially, the videos were intended to be on display at the Florida Museum of Natural History, as well as being made available through the museum’s YouTube and TeacherTube pages. Since September 2012, there have been almost 200,000 views of the videos online. The videos have reached other outlets, including the National Science Foundation website, a local PBS affiliate, cable television outlets across the state, webinars generated from video content, and use in the curriculum of the Florida Virtual School. The videos have also been used to tie into articles from the Explore Research magazine produced by the UF Office of Research.

Recommendations for Implementing Similar Programs

To implement a similar program at another university, it is recommended to identify and work with a real client, in this case, the Florida Museum of Natural History. At other universities, it may be working a university’s Office of Research or Experiment Station as a first step. It is also worth considering specialized centers at your university. Examples at UF include the Water Institute, Climate Institute, and Center for Public Issues Education, though more exist. It is also important to note these programs are not

meant to supplant college and/or university communications centers. The programs should exist to provide students with learning opportunities, while also benefiting the universities' other functions.

Recommendations for Incorporating Students

For a course like this that incorporates the three-part mission of the land-grant system to succeed, it is important to make the course worthwhile for the students, providing them with something more than a grade. Students should feel that they are beneficially contributing to a client, with an end product that will be used, while at the same time, students should gain important knowledge and skills in the process of meeting the needs of the client. This particular course utilizes a real client with a real project. This is contrasted with courses that develop projects for a real client, but the client does use the finished product, or with courses that create hypothetical clients and hypothetical projects that are never used. It is important for the projects to be client-driven, to provide students with the real-world experiences they face upon graduation. Setting a high bar of professional expectation is also necessary for success. Students need to know that they are expected to create as close to a professionally produced project as possible. It is the experience of instructors of this course that students have risen to the expectations that are explained to them at the beginning of the semester. It is also recommended that instructors be selective when admitting students to a course of this nature. In addition to showing excellence in the introductory digital media production course, students had to submit a resume video and provide a brief explanation on why they wanted to take the course, before being allowed to enroll. Having a system like this in place means only those students who want to excel, learn new or advanced skills, and benefit from the high-stakes assignments will be part of the course.

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