Innovation vs. Sustainability: A Case Study of a Successful Graduate Ambassador Program Destined to Fail

Presented by:
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Innovation vs. Sustainability

Innovation

Complacency

NO!

Innovation

Sustainability

YES?
Welcome!

Allison Machiaverna
Graduate Student Counselor
- 2x Rutgers alumna (2x SC&I alumna!)
- 5 years experience working with adult and graduate students
- 2 years working at SC&I

Jay Stefanelli
Associate Director of Student Services for Enrollment Management
- 2x Rutgers alumnus (working towards Ph.D.)
- 12 years experience working with adult and graduate students
- 5 years working at SC&I
Today’s Goals

1. Tell you our story
2. Help you as you begin crafting an “ambassador” program
3. Help you avoid the pitfalls we experienced
Agenda

1. Rutgers University Overview
2. SC&I Overview
3. Innovation (“The Rise”)
4. Sustainability (“The Fall”)
5. What’s Next for SC&I? (“The Rebound”)
6. Q&A
Rutgers University

- State University of New Jersey
- Founded in 1766
  - Nation’s 8th oldest institution of higher ed
  - Celebrated 250th Anniversary in Nov. 2016

- Rutgers is the only university in the nation:
  - a colonial college
  - a land-grant institution
  - a leading public research university
Rutgers University

- Three Campuses – 69,000+ students
  - Camden: 6,600+
  - Newark: 12,300+
  - New Brunswick: 50,100+
    - Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences: 7,800+
- 49,500+ undergraduates
- 19,500+ graduate students
- 30 schools and colleges
School of Communication and Information

- SC&I: ~2500 students
  - Master of Communication and Media: 113
  - Master of Information: 420
    - Ranked #7 in Nation*
    - Ranked #1 in School Library Media*
- Aged 21-62 (Average 31)
- Female/Male/Other: 76%/24%/<1%
- Part-time/Full-time: 65%/35%
- On-campus/Online: 63%/37%

*U.S. News and World Report, 2017
Fall 2015 launched the “Graduate Advisory Network”
Attracted ~25 “Graduate Liaisons”

Goals:
- Create a welcoming and informative environment for prospective, new, and current students
- Discuss the program, the admission process, current course offerings, the community at SC&I
- Focus on a friendly and genuine student perspective
Innovation: How did we do it?

1. Determined our (institutional) goals and vision
2. Analyzed the current state of our community
3. Designed an initiative to promote student engagement
4. Identified technology and support needs
5. Evaluated the outcomes
Innovation: Determine goals and vision

What are you trying to accomplish? What is your mission?
- Do they align with the student population’s goals?

Our goal(s): Peer Network/Mentorship
- To engage current students in the recruitment and retention process
- To enhance the academic experiences by cultivating community
- To identify leaders continuously
- To incorporate our online and on-campus students
Innovation: Current state of community

What is graduate community?

For our purposes, “graduate student engagement”

- Integration - Academic and social, “cutting ties” (Tinto, 1975)
- Involvement - Onus on student, based on behavior (Astin, 1984)
- Engagement - Co-facilitated by university and student (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007)
Innovation: Current state of community

Why graduate community is needed?

Strong link between engagement and persistence (Tinto, 2000)

Engagement

Persistence
Innovation: Current state of community

Why focus on online students?

There is evidence that dropout rates among distance learners are higher than those of traditional, campus-based learners (Allen & Seaman, 2009).
Innovation: Brief Analysis

- Are your students engaged?
  - Outside the classroom?

- Do you have any student groups?
  - How many groups?
  - How many students actively participate in them?

- Do you hold events?
  - Are they social or academic?
  - How is participation?

- Do you have online students?
  - Do they participate? How?
Innovation: Graduate Community

Student

Where it all begins! Must be sure to make students are aware of opportunities to form community.

Student Colleagues

The interpersonal interactions with peers both inside and outside the classroom.

Faculty/Staff

The meaningful and memorable interactions with faculty and staff. Not necessarily just transactional.

Institution

Opportunities to interact and form relationships with other students at the school, college, or university.
Innovation: Role and impact of community

What role does it play in your program's success?
Innovation: Promote student engagement

What are the students looking for?

**Phase I Challenges**
- Admission
- Coursework begins
- Learning balance
- Transition from UG to GR expectations

**Support**
- Orientation
- Initial relationships formed with peers and faculty

**Phase II Challenges**
- Coursework
- Examinations
- Changing role

**Support**
- Peer relationships
- Advisor relationship

**Phase III Challenges**
- Candidacy
- Dissertation work
- Job search
- Transition to professional role

**Support**
- Writing groups
- Advisor
- Mentors

Possible program departure
Innovation: Promote student engagement

Gardner’s Graduate Student Development Theory (2009)

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Possible program departure

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Support
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- Advisor
- Mentors

Possible program departure
Innovation: Promote student engagement

- What motivates them to participate?
- Focus Groups
  - Value
  - Awareness
  - Space
  - Expectations
Results of Focus Group

1) Value (WIIFM)
   - Must relate directly with academic and professional goals
   - Must be perceived as valuable across different populations
   - Must be worth time away from family, friends, work, school, etc.
     - Many adult learners cast themselves parents first (Kasworm, Poison, & Fishback, 2002)

Example:
   - Student groups have a clear connection to a professional organization or professional outcome.
Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement (1984) says...

- Student time is a resource
- Student time is finite
- Competing for time is a “zero-sum” game

Must perceive value if they are going to dedicate time and energy

- “Make time”, not “find time”
Results of Focus Group

2) Awareness

► Must know about an **opportunity** to take advantage of it
► Must be **consistent** in communicating
► Must know the **commitment** level (time/energy)
► Must meet consistently in set **time** and **space**
► Must know what **resources** are available to them

Example:

► Student groups are required to define membership and leadership roles and articulate the respective responsibilities.
Results of Focus Group

3) Space
  ▶ Must have a virtual space
  ▶ Must have a professional space

Example:
  ▶ Student groups met in a noisy student lounge, now they have the option to meet in our smart meeting room.
Results of Focus Group

4) Expectations

▶ Students expectations for you
▶ Your expectations on the students
▶ Set them high and let them know it
▶ Must have strong leadership

Example:

▶ Stream every meeting, event, speaker, etc.
Innovation: Technology and support needs

- Support ➔ Ownership ("co-facilitated")
  - An engaged student leader
  - A dedicated staff member

- Technology...
Welcome to the Graduate Advisory Network

The mission of the Graduate Advisory Network is to create a welcoming and informative environment for prospective, new, and current students. Our Graduate Liaisons demonstrate professionalism, dedication, and a drive to build community through memorable and meaningful peer-to-peer interactions.

Please feel free to reach out to any of our Graduate Liaisons to discuss the program, the admission process, current course offerings, the community at SC&I, and anything else where you would like a genuine and friendly student perspective.

If you are a current student and would like to know more about becoming a Graduate Liaison, please contact Jay Stefanelli (jstefanelli@rutgers.edu).

Alex
Email: a....
Began at Rutgers: Fall 2014
Even among non-traditional students, I am non-traditional. I initially came to Rutgers as an employee in the Office of Information Technology ...

Allison
Email: a....
Began at Rutgers: Fall 2013
In addition to being a successful MCIS student and President of the Graduate Student Association, Allison is an AmeriCorps VISTA ...

Ally
Email: a....
Began at Rutgers: Fall 2014
I'm a first-year MLIS student, a Reference Associate at the Peterson Free Public Library, and a proud AmeriCorps alumnus. My professional ...

Read More

Read More

Read More

In Commuter, Grad Student, MLIS, On-campus Student, Returning to School after 20 years, Rutgers Alumni, Willing to help with technology issues

In Current Student, Grad Student, MCIS, MCIS Graduate Student Association

In Grad Student, MLIS

Read More

Read More

Read More
Innovation: The outcomes...

▶ How did the GAN impact our operation?
▶ A qualitative difference in events and information sharing
  ▶ Current students felt like they were contributing to the community
  ▶ New students felt welcome to the community
  ▶ Prospective students had an additional resource and could “peek in” at the existing community
Sustainability: “The Fall”

“Graduate Advisory Network” dissolved and discontinued activities within eighteen months.

What happened?
Sustainability: What went wrong?

- Massive enrollment decline
- Attention needed elsewhere
- Lack of resources
- Lack of training
- Too many cooks...
Sustainability: Impact of the failure

- On student at all phases of the process
- On staff
Our future plans: “The Rebound”

Current conditions

► Name change success
► Enrollment rebounded drastically
  ► Fall 2015: 326 students, Spring 2016: 306 students
  ► Fall 2017: 490 students, Spring 2018: 533 students
► Implemented CRM
  ► Manages daily communication
► One additional staff member
► New Program Directors
“The Rebound” continued..

Current initiatives

▶ Facebook groups
  ▶ Increased interaction and mentorship
  ▶ Responsibility on the student leaders
    ▶ Training provided
  ▶ Students own the space
  ▶ Admit comings receive Facebook invite automatically

▶ Sponsored mingles and events

▶ In person and virtual orientation events
“The Rebound” continued..

Future Plans & Ideas

- Offer resources, guidance and recognition to leaders
  - Awards recognizing excellence in student leadership

- New events
  - Welcome Back event
  - Work/Life Balance Workshop

- Focus on student health and wellbeing
  - Graduate students have been found to have more negative life events, greater depression, and higher anxiety than their undergraduate peers (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992)
Future Plans: Online Community

▶ Engaging students in an online environment

▶ What we need to do:

▶ Increase interaction
  ▶ Interaction is related to student perception of presence, which is a predictor of student satisfaction in computer-mediated environments (Picciano, 2002)

▶ Develop social presence
  ▶ The ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project personal characteristics into the community and present themselves as ‘real people’ (Rourke et al., 1999)
  ▶ Building relationships among students
  ▶ Trust and a sense of belonging
Online Community continued...

► Ideas

► Virtual presenters
► Virtual career services workshops and office hours
► Live-streaming all campus events
► Post orientation mingle
FINAL THOUGHTS

Bringing It All Together!
Final Thoughts

▶ Are your students engaged?

▶ Would your students benefit from a student ambassador program?

▶ Most importantly: will you be able to sustain it?

▶ Advice.. start small!
Summary

1. Rutgers University Overview
2. SC&I Overview
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4. Sustainability (“The Fall”)
5. What’s Next for SC&I? (“The Rebound”)
QUESTION AND ANSWER

... and sharing. Sharing is important too. Please share.
Your Presenters

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THANK YOU!

Really, thank you.
References

Everything after this slide is for reference only!
TAKEAWAY 1: ANALYZE YOUR COMMUNITY

Take the pulse of your campus
Step 3: Identify areas for improvement

**Opportunities to/for…**
- Connect
- Share
- Network
- Professional development
- Programming
  - Speakers
  - Trips
  - Events

**Lack of...**
- Participation
- Mentorship
- Awareness
- Time
- Professional connections
- Direction/Vision/Goals
- Space
  - On-campus
  - Online
- Event calendar
- Perceived value
Step 4: Design and Implement Initiatives

Must support and promote student engagement

Have an owner (you OR the students)

Increase the positives OR decrease the negatives
Initiatives that...

Opportunities to/for...
- Connect
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OWNER: STUDENTS
OWNER: YOU!
Examples: Fostering Leadership

- Identifying Leaders
  - Faculty
  - Student Organizations
  - TA’s/GA’s
  - Self-nomination

- Encouraging Involvement on Campus
  - Graduate Advisory Network/Advisory Council
  - Ambassador Program for Recruitment
  - Fellowships for Leadership (Civic Engagement)
IMPACT

► Students are more connected to the university
  ► Fosters retention
  ► Increases participation and leadership roles
  ► Greater student satisfaction

► Makes your job easier
  ► Recruitment
  ► Enrollment and Retention
  ► Student Services
  ► Alumni Relations
Examples: Creating Connections Through Events

► Enrollment Events
  ► Open House
  ► Admitted Students Day
  ► Orientation

► Academic/Community Service Events
  ► Student Workshops (Library, Time Management, Resumes)
  ► Guest Speakers Linked to Greater Community
  ► Alumni Career Panel
  ► “Day of Service”
Examples: Creating Connections Through Events

▶ Connecting With Students
  ▶ Email Newsletter
  ▶ Social Media
  ▶ Graduate Program Directors
  ▶ Current Student Leaders

▶ Results of Outreach and Support
  ▶ GSC quadrupled participation in socials from Fall 2013 to Spring 2015.
  ▶ Students are more connected within their departments but now also engage in cross-disciplinary conversations at events
  ▶ Students are more engaged in the campus community as a whole