

The New Haven Register (nhregister.com), Serving New Haven, CT

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'360' view part of UNH Web success

Monday, June 15, 2009

By Matt Coyne, Special to the Register

The University of New Haven is now one of only six schools nationwide to offer prospective students a chance to "visit" campus without ever leaving their computer.

The "virtual tour," launched recently, is part of a string of Web-based recruiting projects undertaken by UNH's admissions office. The office started using the Web to recruit students two years ago, and to great effect.

Since the online recruitment drive began, the school has seen a 160 percent increase in applications, and a 90 percent increase in enrollment, while many other schools have seen stagnant or declining admissions figures.

"Any way we can communicate our message outside of traditional forms of communication ... is always an advantage for us, especially if it's different from other schools," Director for Admissions and Enrollment Technology Gil Rogers said.

A year and a half ago, the school got on Facebook, connecting with students on a platform that boasts more than 200 million active users. More recently UNH has been utilizing the microblogging site Twitter and YourCampus360, an online campus tour that integrates maps, photos, videos and panoramic media to give prospective students an interactive preview of campus.

UNH's YourCampus360 tour, which went live on May 29, allows users to "walk" around campus on a predefined path. Users can look to their left, right, in front of them or behind them along the tour. A "360s" section of the tour allows students to look around some of the school's facilities, like classrooms, the campus store, science labs and the gym as if they were standing there. The video section consists of television news clips featuring the university, as well as interviews with students and student-produced content.

"We feel that (YourCampus360) will enhance our entire visitation process," said Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management Kevin Phillips. "They (prospective students) will be able to go back in and see some of the facilities."

Phillips estimated a 250 percent increase in prospective student visits to campus over the last two years, because of new programs targeting specific majors and allowing prospective students to shadow current students.

Since many high school upperclassmen visit more than one college in a short period of time, the virtual tour allows students who have visited campus to go back and see UNH again.

"We just feel its going to enhance the whole process, not replace anything," Phillips said.

"It's absolutely critical that schools keep up with the technology and give prospective students what they really want to see," said Endri Polka, a managing partner at Massachusetts-based YourCampus360.

"(When we started) we analyzed a lot of colleges and a lot of products, but none could really give prospective students what they were really looking for. We tried to include the student's side of what it is really like to live on that campus," said Polka.

While UNH is the first in the state to utilize this new kind of virtual tour, Albertus Magnus College in New Haven is not far behind.

Its virtual tour is expected to be up in the coming months, with Columbia, Harvard and Albania's Tirana University coming soon as well.

Using technology in admissions is "a huge advantage. We're able to reach a target market that was otherwise inaccessible," said Albertus Magnus Director of Admissions Jessica Van Deren. "Using technology, we're able to 'recruit' outside of our area."

"I can't speak for other colleges, but I feel if other colleges are not doing this, they are losing contact with students of this generation," Phillips said.

Phillips foresees the school hitting the 10,000-application mark next year when admitting the class of 2014. Two years ago the figure was 3,668.

Phillips made it clear that these measures are in place to get students to set foot on the UNH campus.

"Our goal is to get the people to come to campus," Phillips said. "There is no substitute for coming to campus. We're adapting to how students are communicating with each other. I think a lot of it has to do is adjusting to the times."

URL: http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2009/06/15/news/new_haven/b4_mon_unhgoes360.prt

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