Technology-Enhanced Learning and Community with Market Appeal

Why the University of Dayton's Personalized Virtual Room is attractive to students, parents, faculty, and staff

by **Brian Alexander Young**

Think of the advantages to your college or university if you could effectively communicate with all of your prospective incoming first-year students in early June—nearly three months before they set foot on campus for the traditional orientation program. How excited would faculty be to use technology to actively engage students in an educational dialogue before they actually see the students in class? What would it mean for your institution to allow first-year students to feel connected and a part of your community long before they arrive on campus? The University of Dayton, engaged in developing technology-enhanced learning environments, has developed a program called Personalized Virtual Room that enables this communication and connectivity, generating market appeal through technology.

Some of the things we wanted to accomplish through Personalized Virtual Room were:

- Generate excitement for first-year students before they get to campus
- Eliminate the traditional mass "snail-mail" approach to connecting with students

- Reduce the costs of introducing a first-year class to our campus
- Teach the first-year experience course and share orientation materials before students get to campus
- Create a connected learning environment that enables roommates to get to know each other virtually
- Introduce first-year students to their floor-mates and their resident assistant before they move into their residence hall
- Enable students to read university manuals and policies (without the cost of print and distribution)
- Encourage students to use their university-provided e-mail account and wean them from their high-school accounts
- Reduce the cost for parents during the summer months when roommates spend hours on the phone (long distance) getting to know each other
- Find a learning environment that gives the university a strategic advantage in recruiting and retaining students

What is the Personalized Virtual Room?

Each interactive room in the application features contact information for the roommates, an instant chat system for private messages between roommates, a checklist of suggested items to bring to campus, and information and interactive training sessions on the computer that will be waiting for each first-year student. Students can also see pictures and actual video of the room in which they will live. The reading list for the first-year experience course is provided as are components of the university orientation program, and a profile search allows incoming students to search for other residents with similar interests. All of this occurs through a simple, private Web interface to a virtual space that looks and feels like a campus residence.

This year the Personalized Virtual Room tapped into a hidden treasure, otherwise known as first-year student vigor—the energy and excitement that incoming first-year students have before they arrive on campus. These new students are extremely enthusiastic, willing to learn, and excited about making a good impression. Moreover, we found the following to be true since implementing the Personalized Virtual Room:

- 1,500 of 1,800 incoming first-year students logged in within two days of

Is Virtual Room a success? Here are some testimonials from students…

I absolutely love "The Virtual Room"! I feel like I already have friends at UD, and I haven't even started school there. I originally wasn't all that excited about going to school in the fall because I was afraid that I wouldn't know anyone. Because of this virtual room, I am able to get to know people before school even starts, and I think that is the coolest thing ever.

I just wanted to let you know that I think the virtual room is awesome! As an incoming freshman, this has become one of my favorite features of UD. I know of no other school that offers this and all of my friends are jealous. I love that you can find info about your roommates easily, and can even leave messages for them. I found out who my roommates are just yesterday and we have all already corresponded through the virtual room several times. Plus it is a casual, easy way to get to know your roommates without it being awkward or uncomfortable. My other favorite part is the virtual building. What a great way to even just get familiar with names. You guys did an awesome job, we appreciate it! Thanks!!!

I was a little nervous about college because it was so far away from my home, but the online dorm helps you to get a feel for the university, and it also makes you feel like they really care about you…. I love the fact that I can chat online with my roommate and that we can plan out what our room will look like; all of this makes me feel a little less apprehensive about moving away from home.

The Virtual Dorm was great. I was able to have all of my family from India learning about my room and my roommate. Thanks very much.

I think you did a super job. I am not that familiar with computers, but I was easily able to access and learn through the Online Dorm. Thanks for all your help.

I am from Puerto Rico and I was excited to be able to use the Virtual Dorm[;] none of my other friends going to American colleges had this opportunity.

receiving their Personalized Virtual Room username and password, and another 100 had logged in within one week to begin their educational journey at the university.

- When students logged into their Personalized Virtual Room, the average

time spent interacting with roommates, floor-mates, and resident assistant or preparing for their University of Dayton experience was 1.5 hours.

But what about the 200 or so students who did not log into their Personalized Virtual Room? What were their reasons

for not being a part of this technology-enhanced learning and community environment? Early information collection suggests that some of the reasons students did not participate were:

- They were not sure if they were really coming to the university.
- They were away all summer traveling and never got the chance to get their username and password until a few days before school started.
- They did not have a computer at home and did not want to spend time online at the local library.

We plan to capture and analyze more data so we will be able to understand this aspect of the Personalized Virtual Room more completely.

What Are the Lessons Learned?

There is massive potential for colleges and universities to cultivate the energy and eagerness that recent high-school graduates have toward their anticipated college experience long before they arrive on campus.

Author of *Growing Up Digital*, Don Tapscott, suggests that students today want instant gratification and instant access to information tailored to their wants and wishes.[1] Students do not want to merely surf for information; they have a thirst to interact with it. The Personalized Virtual Room provides that access so that students do not have to wait to interact with their roommate, their hall-mates, their resident assistants, or their orientation materials.

Customized interaction also strengthens university connection with students. And the more you can do to provide opportunities for your students to connect, to be excited about and attracted to your university community, the more likely you are to see higher student retention rates, stronger campus communities, and more engagement and excitement about learning.

Another lesson we learned is about the importance of making our own connections throughout campus when implementing such a project. In working closely with a cross-section of offices across campus to launch our initiative, we found uses for the Personalized Virtual Room that we had not anticipated. For example, next year we plan to allow for minority and international student populations and students with common majors to interact with each other through their Personalized Virtual Room, and our humanities faculty plan to hold live Virtual Room chats to discuss summer readings.

Kelly Zito describes the power of technology with regard to first-year students when she quotes Professor Brian Smith:

Giving first-year students the chance to get to know each other, their roommates, their advisor, and others is an investment that is truly paying off for the University of Dayton.

"It is important for them to have communities that they feel a part of. If the computer can help include them, it will enhance their educational experience."[2]

The timeless advice of Benjamin Franklin sums up the philosophy that underlies our implementation of the Personalized Virtual Room very well: "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." Giving first-year students the chance to get to know each other, their roommates, their advisor, and others is an investment that is truly paying off for the University of Dayton. *e*

Endnotes:
1. D. Tapscott, *Growing up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998).
2. K. Zito, "The Digital Difference," in R. Holeton (ed.), *Composing Cyberspace: Collection of Essays on Identity, Community and Knowledge in the Electronic Age* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998), p. 409.

Brian Alexander Young (bay@udayton.edu) is chief technologist and director of Educational Technology Initiatives at the University of Dayton.

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