

2020 CASE Award Entry / The College

Category

Best Practices in Communications & Marketing

Title

Evolving Communications to Inform, Guide and Connect the University of Chicago College During COVID-19

Summary of Entry

When COVID-19 required the 6,700 students of the University of Chicago College (UChicago), the #6 ranked undergraduate college in the U.S., to pack their belongings and travel home to learn remotely for the Spring 2020 quarter, communication became the foremost means of informing, guiding, and maintaining the connectivity of the undergraduate community. Only two years prior, the College had hired its first communications team to build its first communications function. Now, the team would need to quickly evolve how it executed internal, external, and digital communications, creating new strategies, platforms, and channels to (1) preserve reputation and enrollment while helping (2) faculty and students to seamlessly teach and learn remotely, (3) on-campus programming to virtually maintain culture and student engagement, and (4) students to access academic and wellness resources, regardless of whether they were located near campus or across the U.S., Europe, Asia or the Middle East. Not only were 154 communication and crisis management activities successfully executed and all goals achieved with 40% engagement gains across multiple communication channels, but the College also experienced no decline in enrollment the following academic year.

Methodology and Strategy

With objectives of maintaining constituent confidence, clarity and connectedness, the College communications team created **Spring 2020 in the College**, a new digital communications platform of information and resources dedicated to helping UChicago College students navigate the impact of COVID-19 on Spring break and Spring quarter.

Strategies, tactics and outcomes follow. The overarching result was the College fulfilled its commitment to students, maintaining connectedness while delivering UChicago's distinctive education.

1. **Strategy:** Transition the College to remote learning in Spring Quarter, evolving its communication strategy and platforms to align with virtual learning, and developing communication and crisis management activities to preserve reputation while informing, guiding, and engaging constituents.
 - a) **Redesigned the College's website** (40% traffic increase from FY19) as an active virtual platform to inform, guide, and foster connectivity. This included creating a [Spring 2020 in the College webpage](#) (11,000 pageviews) knowledge hub for COVID-19 messages, decisions, instructions and resources, and a [Virtual Programming webpage](#) (3,800 pageviews) and a [Virtual Events Calendar](#) (1,800 pageviews) to drive student engagement.
 - b) **Authored 25 operational messages**, a [College newsletter special edition](#) (41% open rate), and **new social content** (26% overall increase in followers from FY19; 40% increase in followers on Instagram) to influence awareness, emotional connection and pride.
2. **Strategy:** Modernize the College's communication practices, faculty interaction, and student life activities to align with and support the remote community.
 - c) **Transitioned from written to video communication**, including [recorded messages](#) (12,100 views) from deans and a [faculty video series](#) (12,000 views across social media channels) that conveyed "we'll get through this together" and reinforced emotional support.
 - d) **Created the College's first Virtual Variety Show** (7,000 views across social media channels), transforming the annual on-campus Spring Breeze concert event into a video-based variety show for student clubs, to drive engagement.

- e) Recorded first [live-stream video](#) formats for ceremonial events (39,000 reach) including Phi Beta Kappa Induction, Class Day, and nine Convocation ceremonies.
- f) Told Spring quarter stories of success with original content and top-tier press, authoring four remote learning editorial articles for the College website, such as “[Glowing algebra theorems and glimpses into hospital life make science lessons unique](#),” and influencing a feature by *The Wall Street Journal* (38.5 million reach) on UChicago career and alumni support during COVID-19 and inclusion by *The New York Times* (119 million reach) of a College dean perspective letter to students.
- g) Enhanced Senior Class communications to further pride and support for Seniors remotely experiencing their final quarter and graduation, including [care package unboxing videos on social media](#) (5,300 views), and the commissioning of a [downloadable student-illustrated coloring book](#) (650 downloads, physical copies distributed to the Class of 2020) of favorite UChicago campus locations and experiences.
- h) Coordinated the College’s first [nine-presenter] town hall to inform College students and parents of UChicago’s Autumn plans. Nearly 3,000 students and parents attended, and 1,300 questions were submitted in advance.

Key Audiences and How Needs Were Met

College students, parents and families were the primary audiences. Secondary were alumni, donors, employer partners, and University’s surrounding communities. With the unprecedented nature of COVID-19, uncertainty about its impact prompted questions and concerns. The College took a proactive approach to anticipating informational needs and subsequent guidance, ranging from townhalls and instructional emails to a special edition newsletter roundup, to ensure students, parents and families were aware of all information available and the planning or actions suggested at the time. As a result, communication was strategic, intentional and considered value-added.

What Makes This Entry Distinctive

Historically, the College mostly communicated with parents and families when students were entering and graduating from UChicago. With COVID-19, the communications team identified parents and families as members of the community who should be frequently informed and updated on the impact of the virus on the University, College and students’ education.

In addition, as mentioned in the summary, only two years ago the College hired its first communications team to create its first communications strategy. While for many institutions some of the communication practices in this submission are common, they all were new to the College. To have immediate executive-level support and approval to develop and execute the initiatives – within a timeframe of three months – is significant.

Anything else important to know about this Entry

John W. Boyer, the dean of the College, is a distinguished scholar whose 27-year leadership of UChicago’s undergraduate college makes him the longest-term dean in the U.S. While he has traditionally preferred written communications, he embraced the communication team’s strategic counsel to pivot to digital communication and virtual programming, quickly recognizing the value in its ability to further relevancy, community connection and engagement. Today, the communication strategies introduced during COVID-19 have established a new standard for how the Dean personally prefers to, and wishes the College to, continue to communicate.

Discuss Major Budget Components and Amounts

No additional budget was provided due to University restrictions, requiring in-house design and production for most activities.