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Over the past several years, smart phones and mobile applications have become an extraordinary tool for users to connect with family, friends and businesses alike. Universities have the unique opportunity to foster such connections within a mobile application for its students and much, much more.

As the number of mobile device users continues to grow year after year, college leaders must begin to evaluate ways in which their institution can advance its current mobile application's functionality and take advantage of this growing trend. Moreover, a significant number of prospective college students, such as current high school students, are frequently using and highly active on their smart phones.

One of the major roadblocks that prevent universities from making use of the vast capabilities of a mobile application is the great deal of commitment, coordination and management it entails relative to the numerous internal departments many colleges often have. Within a single university, there can be several important departments that all believe their messaging should be prioritized over others', such as a student's particular academic unit, student affairs, the president's office, academic advising and public safety. The management of the content and communication from each of these units within a university's mobile application is essential in order to ensure the mobile application's overall quality and student experience is not jeopardized. Additionally, a standard must be established for the level of commitment by each of the departments to proactively keep the university's mobile application team and its end users abreast of current events and updates. For instance, one of the greatest values a mobile application can provide are real time alerts. However, if such information isn't shared in a timely manner, the value of the notification can depreciate.

Unfortunately, many universities aren't making full use of mobile applications, though they often do provide a very basic functioning one at the least. Some mobile application functionality that universities should consider exploring further, if they are not already doing so, can include the following:

1. Ongoing user contests for school prizes;

2. Access to the university's electronic mail system;

3. A platform to connect for prospective students, current students and alumni;

4. A news feed tailored to each student's interests;

5. Specific alerts for professional development opportunities that are relevant to a student's field of study;

6. An updated general calendar of university wide events;

7.   Reminders about important deadlines specifically tailored to each student.

Tremendous value could be gained by various users of such a college mobile application. For example, prospective students would have the opportunity to learn, explore and gain a sense of what it might be like as an enrolled student. Existing students can stay current and active within their academic programs. University alumni can remain engaged and aware of opportunities to either serve the current student base or contribute in some other capacity.

Three major benefits that an efficient and effective mobile application provides a university and its various users, which specifically includes its current students, are:

1.   An improved and more personalized student experience

2.   Real time notifications of important university messages

3.   A more engaged and active university population in which prospective students, existing students, and alumni can connect

I'll run through all of these in greater detail.

1. Improved and Personalized Student Experience

First, it can provide students with an improved and more personalized experience by communicating information that is specifically tailored to each of them. For example, students within a university's mobile application should be able to create a user profile that filters the content and messaging shared with them; such as only their specific academic program deadlines and not any others. Moreover, users can select what university units they want the mobile application to prioritize, such as professional career opportunities, student events on campus, and an athletic team's most recent scores. Providing students with a more personalized experience is something that many students have indicated a demand for.

For example, a recently conducted study that explored why an admitted college student failed to enroll, each of the participants indicated a specific need or want for a more personalized experience; and the lack of it lead to their failure to enroll (Hudnett, 2015).

2. Real-Time Notifications of Important Messages

Second, it can alert students about important messages in real-time through the mobile application's rather than the too often overlooked and widely used electronic mail. Although electronic mail is considered reliable and a highly acceptable form of communication, many issues with its transmittal and receipt can occur. Some of these issues can consist of the following:

1.   The frequency with which a student checks their email

2.   The number of electronic mail addresses a student has and the priority to view new messages in each of them

3.   The amount of electronic mail a student receives and how each message is categorized by the electronic mail service provider

4.   The level of importance indicated in the subject line that guides their decision making process to either read it or not

However, a university's mobile application that is downloaded on a student's smartphone can be a much more effective channel of communication as it alleviates most, if not all such possible issues by notify users directly on their smart phone devices.

3. Improved Engagement Across the University Community

Lastly, a mobile application's vast capabilities can add tremendous value for student's long term by simply getting them more engaged with various academic, professional, and social activities they may have otherwise overlooked. For example, some features within

a university's mobile application that can likely achieve this might include the following:

1.   Allowing students to connect with each other within the mobile application to form study groups

2.   Alerts about new employment opportunities in their field of study

3.   Events relative to their interests

Moreover, a university's mobile application doesn't only have to connect and cater to its current student population, rather it can also add value and get prospective students and alumni equally involved.

Creating a Personalized Experience

What truly makes a mobile application very unique is the unlimited potential it has to provide its users with real time, personalized information that is convenient and separated from the World Wide Web. Moreover, it can be utilized by university's to not only connect with its current students; but, countless others such as its prospective students and alumni. As more people globally continue to transition from their desktop computer to smartphone to accomplish common tasks; students in a classroom will likely have similar expectations.

Take a moment and think about how many thousands of prospective students, current students, and alumni any single university has at this exact moment; for some larger universities, it can be in the millions. The opportunity is very clear for such a university to create a platform that keeps all of them actively engaged during various stages in their academic and professional careers.

Why wouldn't a university want to be the top choice when just one of their current students, prospective students, or alumni are looking for a platform to connect with others, share ideas, and get real time content about the school?