



Telling a Better Story: Narrating Student Successes at Minority Serving Institutions

Minority students make up an increasing percentage of the student body at many colleges and universities, but four types of institutions of higher education stand out for their exceptional commitment to low-income, students of color. Known collectively as Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), these specific institutional types are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs). These colleges and universities go out of their way to recruit students of color and to sustain institutional missions and cultures that support the success of these students.

If Minority Serving Institutions don't tell their stories, someone else will.

MSIs have inspiring students and dedicated faculty, and their initiatives to help traditionally underserved students are having an impact in their respective communities and across the country.

Yet, all too often, these success stories go untold or are shared with only a small group of insiders. As a result, some MSIs have an image problem: Too many people either have not heard of them at all, or what little they do know about them is negative. It is long past time for MSIs to take control of their stories—to seize the lead in telling them, and to find wider audiences for them.

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In this report, we point to examples of MSIs 'telling a better story' in myriad ways including through the use of educational data, by participating in national research studies, by communicating their success in diverse venues and to multiple audiences, and by engaging institutional presidents in 'story telling' and speaking out on national issues.

A MORE EXPANSIVE VIEW OF EDUCATIONAL DATA

Like many colleges and universities, MSIs collect educational data primarily to secure and retain federal and state funding. But there is a growing sense among these institutions that data collection does not have to be limited to meeting funding requirements. MSIs increasingly see the value of gathering and using student progress data for strategic planning, institutional decision-making, and communicating the successes of their institutions. To do this effectively, MSIs need to collect data that enables them to spread the word of their successes in ways that highlight the uniqueness of their students' experiences, bring attention to their institutional strengths, attract funders, and create opportunities for collaboration.



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AN MSI STORY

PAUL QUINN COLLEGE

Paul Quinn College is using data to change the way the college works. With fewer than 300 students enrolled, retention is paramount at this HBCU located in Dallas, Texas. “Leave No Quinnite Behind,” Paul Quinn’s retention plan, takes a comprehensive approach to gathering and using educational data. The plan uses a case management approach to advise and track students; an early alert system lets faculty and staff know who needs additional support; and a centralized student support services office gathers progress reports and referrals and communicates outcomes to students and staff through various student-focused programs.

The results are telling:

- *An 86% retention rate for returning students from fall 2012 to spring 2013*
- *Increased traffic to the student support services area for tutoring, workshops, and individual and small group studying*
- *Improved data collection and inputting processes at each stage of the enrollment process, which provide a clearer picture of student needs, including potential retention flags*
- *Enhanced ability to “pull” and analyze student data (attendance, grades, tutoring, etc.)*

But just as importantly, by tracking this data, Paul Quinn is now in a position to tell the Quinnite success story to anyone who will listen. And people are listening. Over the past year and a half, the college’s success has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, the Chronicle of Higher Education, and the Huffington Post.



PROACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Historically, many MSIs have had to defend their institutions against poorly presented and misconstrued data. As a result, they tend to be reluctant to participate in national higher education surveys or to provide information to researchers. Staff and resource shortages also account for why MSIs often opt out of participating in data-gathering efforts. In the long run, this lack of participation hurts MSIs. Connecting with researchers who have a high ethic of care and who also understand the unique context, challenges, and cultures found at MSIs can be beneficial. That’s because national surveys and research projects are ideal vehicles for MSIs to tell their stories. By participating, MSIs have a say in how their narrative is presented.

MULTIPLE WAYS, MULTIPLE VENUES FOR TELLING A STORY

By developing a rich and consistent presence in traditional and nontraditional media as well as social networks, MSIs and their leaders can build buzz around their stories of success. Colleges and universities use all of these outlets to let students, staff, alumni, the public, and policy makers know what is happening. Engaging with the media also increases the capacity of MSI leaders to shape public perceptions of their institutions. Websites, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and online marketing campaigns are critical public relations tools for MSIs. And by giving interviews and responding to media outreach, MSIs and their leaders can make space for their stories in the media, tempering negative—and often mistaken—information that is presented about them.

AN MSI STORY

CHIEF DULL KNIFE COLLEGE

To address the challenge of preparing students to succeed in college-level mathematics courses, Chief Dull Knife College (CDKC) has experimented with a series of innovations over the past decade through partnerships with federal agencies and regional universities. The college has developed a hybrid math emporium that combines an emphasis on problem-solving with constant feedback from faculty, computerized tutoring, and peers. The emporium provides students a safe space in which to learn mathematics and, at the same time, challenges them to use mathematics for real-world applications. The results have been documented in numerous articles in the Tribal College Journal and a host of National Science Foundation reports. Because Chief Dull Knife and its partners have shared this story, the college has contributed to our national understanding of how to improve students’ competence in math, complicated our critiques of developmental classes, and deepened our understanding of the role tribal colleges can play in helping Native American students achieve academic success. And by participating in educational research, CDKC has had a say in how the MSI story is told.



AN MSI STORY

SACRAMENTO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Full Circle Project (FCP) is a case study of the savvy use of multiple media. It is also a comprehensive approach by California State University, Sacramento, the Department of Ethnic Studies, and the Asian American Studies program to implement a campus-wide effort to improve retention and graduation rates of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students. FCP aims to assist AAPI students throughout their college careers, and provides ample opportunities to engage in service both on and off campus to enhance their university experience. The entire story of the Full Circle Project is featured on the program's interactive website which tells the program's story to a larger audience using compelling visuals and interactive media. (www.csus.edu/fcp) In order to garner interest and support in FCP, the staff and student participants also use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram as well as traditional media extensively.

MULTIPLE AUDIENCES

Stories of success have different effects on different audiences. MSIs need to become adept at telling stories to multiple audiences—from alumni to funders to their communities.

[ALUMNI] Sharing news with alumni on an ongoing basis will:

- Enhance their pride in their alma mater, resulting in more engagement
- Serve as a “soft touch” interaction as opposed to the expected annual solicitation
- Inspire them to act as institutional ambassadors by sharing the news with friends, fellow alumni, and colleagues

[FUNDERS] Sharing stories with funders will:

- Ensure that they are familiar with institutional strengths
- Provide accountability for grant-funded programs
- Instill in them a sense of satisfaction with their decision to invest in MSIs
- Increase the possibility of garnering additional funding based on institutional success

[COMMUNITY] Sharing stories with the community will:

- Improve the institution's reputation and dispel myths
- Bolster support for the institution's contributions to the community
- Further connect and imbed the institution in the community

ENGAGING THE MEDIA

If MSIs don't tell their stories, someone else will. That's why it's critically important for MSIs to initiate conversations with the media. By doing so, media outlets will have a more positive angle to consider when crafting a story—one that may attract positive attention from potential students, funders, and policy makers.

Steps to take:

- Tap experts in the field who will speak to the institution's student success efforts and corresponding research when interviewed by the media; provide them with data on institutional success
- Send material about the institution to media outlets regularly
- Connect institutional successes to national issues

The president is the living logo of an institution. Presidents represent the vision and mission of their institutions through their speeches, writings, and their leadership styles. He or she is the best source of advertisement a college or university has beyond its students.



THE ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT

The president is the living logo of an institution. Presidents represent the vision and mission of their institutions through their speeches, writings, and their leadership styles. In order to tell their institutional story most effectively, presidents need to consider using social media to keep campus constituents apprised of the progress, accomplishments, and points of pride on campus. Likewise, presidents can share their institutional stories more widely by regularly writing opinion pieces for local, regional, and national news outlets. Speaking out publicly, especially on issues of national importance, increases the value and relevance of the institution to multiple audiences, both internal and external.

AN MSI STORY

THE PRESIDENT'S ROLE IN BRINGING ATTENTION TO THE INSTITUTION AND ITS STUDENTS

North Seattle Community College

Mark Mitsui, President—A Personal Narrative of Bravery on Behalf of Students

"I was designed in Mexico and assembled in the United States." So began the testimony of a young, undocumented college student at the Washington State Senate Higher Education Committee hearing on March 28, 2013. She and another undocumented student born in Asia eloquently personified the impressive contributions of undocumented students to our nation and the tremendous potential for contributing even more, if given an opportunity. The Washington State Dream Act (House Bill 1817) would have allowed undocumented students to receive Washington State financial aid. The bill passed the House 77-20 and was now in the State Senate.

Through a partnership between North Seattle Community College and the Seattle-based Latino Education Achievement Project (LEAP), I met several outstanding, young leaders. They were student body presidents, service project leaders, honor society members, and student-athletes, all actively engaged in their school and local communities. Over the years, I had also worked with and assisted many undocumented community college students. They were poised to enter fields such as medicine, psychology, computer science, and engineering. They had already overcome hardships few of us can begin to imagine. So when my friend Ricardo Sanchez of LEAP asked me to testify at the Senate public hearing, I told him I would be there.

The hearing room was full, and the controversial nature of the issue was underscored by the presence of state troopers standing by the entrances and exits. I was the only college or university president scheduled to testify, and I would be lying if I said that I wasn't nervous about that. However, I reminded myself that this is why I became a college president. And then I heard the students speak and, as always, was inspired by them.

I testified briefly about how the Washington State Dream Act was not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do. Investing in our undocumented students would pay dividends across generations. I asked for funding for the inclusion of our undocumented students among those eligible for funding.

Despite the good work of many people, the bill died in committee. However, this is the farthest this kind of bill has gone in the legislature, and I am sure there will be another attempt next year. Our students and our state deserve as much.