

## 2008 Pride of CASE V awards

<b>Title of entry:</b>	<i>Accountability Dashboard: Proving our worth</i>
<b>Category 18c:</b>	Teresa Du Bois Exline Award for Best Practices in Communications and Marketing, 10,000 FTE and up
<b>Submitted by:</b>	Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system
<b>web link:</b>	<a href="http://www.mnscu.edu/board/accountability/index.html">http://www.mnscu.edu/board/accountability/index.html</a>
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### General description

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system launched an online Accountability Dashboard June 17 to track performance of the system and its 32 colleges and universities on 10 key measures. The Public Affairs division was charged with creating a positive public perception of the dashboard and generating as much local, state and national publicity as possible.

The dashboard was developed because the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board of Trustees decided it wanted an accountability reporting tool that would be easy to use, transparent and readily accessible to the public. The dashboard also was a concrete response to the call by state and national officials for higher education institutions to be more accountable. Last year, the Minnesota Legislature tied \$13 million of the \$1 billion biennial state appropriation for the system in the previous year to specific performance goals, which were subsequently met.

Over a 15-month period, an ad hoc committee that included trustees, presidents and system office staff met to guide the tool's development. Everyone agreed communications about the new tool would be crucial to how it was perceived by the faculty and staff on the system's 53 campuses, state officials and the public. So, the Public Affairs staff was involved early in the process. Specifically, Public Affairs advised developers to keep the look simple and graphically pleasing and persuaded them to use a short, easy-to-understand name "*Accountability Dashboard*" instead of yet another confusing higher education acronym.

The dashboard has drop-down menus that allow users to find specific information about the performance of a college or university on a specific measure. The dashboard uses speedometer-like dials to display three performance categories – gold for exceeds expectations, blue for meets expectations and red for needs attention. Thus, users can ascertain an indicator's status at a glance. Written statements explain why an indicator is red and what corrective steps are underway. To date, information is available for six of 10 measures. The rest are under development.

### Goals and objectives

One of the Public Affairs' three major goals in its ongoing strategic communication and marketing plan is to advance awareness and understanding of the system's value to the state among lawmakers, opinion leaders and business leaders. Promoting the Accountability Dashboard aligns perfectly with that goal because the dashboard is designed to provide evidence about the system's value to the state.

In creating the communications plan for unveiling the dashboard, two key messages emerged:

- We are accountable.
- We are committed to continuous improvement.

For maximum exposure in launching the dashboard, the Public Affairs staff decided to try something new – an electronic video news conference. Offered via a private company called WebEx, a video news conference seemed well suited to unveiling an online tool.

Also, the beauty of a video news conference is that reporters from around the state and elsewhere could participate without leaving their desks. During the news conference, they could see a visual demonstration of the dashboard from their own computers and hear the audio portion through their telephone or computer. They could ask questions by phone or type questions on their computer screen. We believed the strength of the subject and the novelty of a video news conference would pique reporters' interest and allow reporters from greater Minnesota to participate on an equal footing with Twin Cities-based reporters. Few, if any, outstate reporters would have driven to St. Paul to participate in a regular news conference even though the colleges and universities in their local areas are directly affected. To improve the odds of success, the Public Affairs staff took these steps:

- **Developed a communications plan** in consultation with those in the system office who developed the dashboard.
- **Worked with the system staff** that developed the dashboard to inform the dashboard experts who were appointed on each campus.
- **Explained the purpose of the dashboard** and how we planned to unveil it to a group of key communicators on our college campuses during a spring conference of our 25 two-year colleges. Several key communicators raised concerns and questions about the dashboard. We addressed those concerns.
- **Developed a news release and talking points** that presidents of the colleges and universities could use with their local media and a template for a news release template each of the 32 institutions could adapt to their own performance results.
- **Had telephone conversations with a few campus officials** who were uneasy because they thought the measures didn't fairly reflect their institution's performance. We worked to quell their anxieties so their concerns would not stop them from being strong advocates for the dashboard.
- **Held a Web-based conference call with all the key campus communicators** a week before the official rollout to make sure they understood the dashboard's purpose and how it worked and to give them suggestions about how they could talk about the dashboard with their local media. We sent the written materials to them in advance of the conference call. We scripted this call in advance to make sure it didn't drag and that we covered all our points. The call included a demonstration of the dashboard that they could see on their computers. We answered questions and went over the talking points and answered questions.
- **Planned the actual video news conference with care.** We decided to hold the press conference to no more than 30 minutes. We wrote a script that included 2- and 5-minute statements respectively for a trustee and the chancellor, followed by a 15-minute demonstration of the dashboard by system's research director. We planned 10 minutes for questions from reporters but were willing to go longer if needed. The senior vice chancellor of academic and student affairs also was on hand to answer questions. We did a practice run through before the actual event.
- **Sent a media advisory one week ahead of the actual event** to the media lists that we use for news releases, followed by personal phone calls to more than a dozen reporters and editorial writers at major newspapers around the state, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Education* and the *Wall Street Journal* asking them whether they planned to participate and answering any questions they had about the logistics or the content of the news conference. Two additional e-mails – one a few

days before and one the morning of the event with the logistical details of how to access the visual and audio portions of the news conference – were sent to the regular media lists. Though we didn't see this as a story that television would be interested in, we did get inquiries from television reporters.

- **Maintained complete control of the news conference** by virtue of the format. We did not, however, screen questions. We read aloud and answered every question that reporters and others asked. After the event, a written record was generated of the questions and who asked them.
- **Recorded the news conference so it could be accessed via the Internet**, so after the event, we sent another e-mail out to the full media distribution list saying if you missed the news conference but were interested in the event, you could view it via a link in the e-mail.
- **Set a benchmark for success** – having at least 15 reporters and analysts from various think tanks that often have newsletters and other public ways of expressing their opinions about public policies and institutions.
- **Coordinated our public relations plan** with one developed by iBusinessSolutions, the company that developed the dashboard software. Essentially, iBusinessSolutions agreed not to put anything out ahead of our release and to show us all their releases and materials before distributing them. We agreed to supply information about them when asked by reporters.

### **How project fits into overall institutional and/or advancement goals**

Establishing the dashboard and publicizing it fits perfectly with “Designing the Future,” the system's strategic plan for 2008-2012. In that plan are four strategic directions: 1) to increase access and opportunity, 2) promote and measure high-quality learning programs and services, 3) provide programs and services that enhance the economic competitiveness of the state and its regions and 4) innovate to meet current and future educational needs. Under the first direction, the goals are to raise Minnesota's participation and achievement in post-secondary education and to maintain an affordable cost of attendance. Therefore, the more Minnesotans who understand that the system has these directions and goals and that the dashboard gives them a way to check the progress, the more credibility the system will have with the public and policy makers.

### **Audience**

Media, public, legislators, opinion leaders (particularly at various public policy nonprofits or think tanks), students and parents

### **Staffing**

The Public Affairs division has four communications professionals, a Web communications director, a graphics director and an administrative assistant.

### **Budget**

Staff time was the only cost. Costs for the Web conferences were absorbed by the system's information technology division because they were so inconsequential.

### **Special circumstances or challenges faced**

The trustees wanted the dashboard to be used as a tool for improvement. This meant that it would offer a candid assessment of institutional and system performance. No sugar coating weaknesses. Otherwise, the dashboard's credibility and usefulness would be limited and a negative backlash could follow. This approach, however, created a public relations challenge: establish the dashboard as innovative and positive for the system without allowing criticism of institutional and system weaknesses to overshadow it. Thus, Public Affairs decided to try to turn the candid nature of the dashboard results into a strength. To do that, the news release and the scripts for both the key communicators' conference call and the news conference itself focused almost entirely on the dashboard – its development and how the measures were selected. We made only passing references to the outcomes.

The next challenge involved internal communications. We did not want faculty and staff on our campuses undermining the value of the dashboard, particularly if they didn't like the results for their institution. Although two presidents and institutional research directors from various campuses were involved during development of the dashboard's measures, many administrators and others on our 53 campuses didn't know much about the dashboard and had concerns. Some were fearful that being so open about areas where we're falling far short of our goals would generate a lot of negative publicity. Some quibbled with the measures that were selected.

To enhance buy-in of the dashboard on the campuses, the system's research office asked each college and university to designate a dashboard expert, who then attended information sessions about the dashboard. Public Affairs then linked each key communicator at a college or university with the resident dashboard expert on their campus.

This untested video news conference also carried some risks, however. Would reporters participate in something new like this? Would reporters be able to master the technical side of hooking into the visual and audio portions? Would the technology work? The answers to these questions were unknowable in advance. The best we could do in advance was careful planning to create the conditions for an optimal outcome.

As it turned out, execution of the technology went very smoothly. Twenty members of the media or policy analysts attended the news conference and a Wall Street Journal reporter inquired about the dashboard and is considering doing a story. Using this electronic format allowed us to track precisely what reporters participated and how long they stayed on the call. We also had a written record of the questions that were asked via the Web.

### **Documented results, measurements of effectiveness**

- A positive story in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*
- Favorable opinion pieces appeared in the (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune*, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, the *Mankato Free Press* and on the blog of a major think tank in the state, Growth and Justice, which awarded the dashboard a gold star.
- News stories appeared in the *Star Tribune*, Minnesota News Network, the *Duluth News Tribune*, *Winona Daily News*, *Finance and Commerce*, *Mankato Free Press*, *Rochester Post Bulletin*, *Bemidji Pioneer*, *Minnesota Public Radio*, *Faribault Daily News*, *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, *Minneapolis-St. Paul Business Journal*, *University Chronicle* (St. Cloud State University student newspaper), *Wadena Pioneer Journal*, *Grand Forks Herald*, *Duluth Journal*, Business North.com and the Government Innovators Network at Harvard University.
- A link to a news release about the dashboard put out by Northland Community College was in a daily listing of Academic Impressions, which compiles highlights of higher ed stories every day.
- 5,781 unique page views for the accountability landing page (<http://www.mnscu.edu/board/accountability/index.html>) between June 17 and July 14.
- The dashboard itself was opened 2,281 times from June 17 to July 9.
- An inquiry on July 7 from a Wall Street Journal reporter who is considering doing a story about the dashboard.
- Generated good will among lawmakers, according to feedback heard by one of our government relations staffers.