Unique Screen Saver Offers Norming Message

If you want your social norming message to get through to students, the best place to post it is in the one place every student spends hour after hour: in front of a computer screen.

That's the theory behind the latest project from the social norming pioneers at Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS) in Geneva, N.Y. Chemistry Professor David W. Craig, Ph.D. and his fellow social normer H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D., professor of sociology, say their new screen-saver social norming project works so well that they're helping other schools to implement the program on their own campus (see their web site at: www.hws.edu/alcohol).

HWS' norming messages, called "Factoids," feature statistical tidbits about student life (sleep habits, library usage, exercise) and student opinions (on issues like the death penalty) mixed with social norming messages about the true level of alcohol consumption, substance abuse and sexual behaviors of HWS students.

Back in 1997 Craig and Perkins were running the Factoids in the newspaper and featuring them on posters around campus, but they wanted to bring the message to where the students were and they wanted to use a more dynamic and cost-efficient medium. From that desire came the birth of a Factoid screen saver and a full-featured multimedia windows program called "Campus Factoids."

Using electronic media in a social norms campaign offers several advantages, Craig said. "Students, faculty, and administrators are constantly using computers in their daily work. We can bring normative messages to them where they are, we can update the messages as new informa-

tion becomes available and provide instantaneous deployment to hundreds, even thousands of remote sites with absolutely no printing or distribution costs," he explained.

Screen-saver programs are not interactive, however. "We liked the features and capabilities of the screen saver, but we wanted to do more than just deliver messages," said Craig. So, they added a "Campus Factoids" icon to the desktop of every college-owned computer available for student use on campus. Students who click on it can browse Factoids and sort by subject matter such as alcohol, tobacco, classes, gender, politics or sports. Students can even submit their own Factoid suggestions.

Craig and Perkins continuously add new Factoids and multimedia resources including student and staff video clips, graphical data displays and photos. Computer log files make it possible to track just how many students are reading Campus Factoids, providing an immediate assessment of how well newspaper and poster promotions of the program are working and when new promotions are needed to stimulate more activity.

The programs came out at HWS just after winter break in 1997. By the end of the academic year, just over 1,300 sessions were logged on the network of the 1,700-student campus. A year later, that figure had doubled to about 3,000. Now, 61 percent of students report using electronic Campus Factoids and 81 percent report reading Campus Factoids either in print or online.

"Together with the print media

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we have seen a real impact on the levels of alcohol abuse and its consequences," Craig said. Just during the first 18 months of the program the normers recorded a 15 percent reduction in the number of perceived heavy drinkers at parties and bars by students. Along with this reduction, Craig and Perkins found a 21 percent reduction in actual, frequent, heavy drinking. Consequences of heavy drinking went down too. During this same period they saw a 31 percent reduction in missed classes, a 36 percent reduction in property damage and a 40 percent reduction in unprotected sex.

"We also wanted to figure out a way to create a dynamic public conversation about campus life issues to bring the Campus Factoids project to a new level," recalled Craig. The solution was an idea that increased the program's popularity even more — allowing students to submit online responses to the Factoids. The new "Reactoids" not only led more students to log on to the program, they also increased the number of Factoids the students read during each session.

Reactoids are limited to 400 characters and may not contain foul language or personal attacks. They have to be signed and the school checks the user name to make sure the person who signed the Reactoid really wrote it. "If they didn't put their name to it, we'd have frivolous things written," explained Craig.

Student Reactoids often question a particular Factoid or ask for more information. "We'll jump into the fray when students question a Factoid, or ask for more data," he said. During the fall term of 1999, there were 581 campus Factoid sessions with 4,095 Factoids read and 1,450 Reactoids read.

Still not content with just the Reactoid interactive feature, Craig and Perkins's have a new feature planned for release this spring: a Factoid quiz where students, faculty and staff can win prizes for the weekly high score. The plan is to have five questions randomly selected from a database each time a person elects to take the quiz. The questions get progressively harder and your score is based, in part, on the passage of time. The game will tell you if you've answered a question correctly, but it won't supply the answer if you get the question wrong.

Ever the normer, Craig will be logging the number of right and wrong answers. "I want to get an assessment of what percentage of the community get each question right. It can be an assessment tool that helps us to see how accurate perceptions are and how they are changing over time. Students can take the quiz as many times as they like. The prizes, we hope, will keep them coming back, reading more Factoids and retaking the quiz to do better," he explained.

Craig and Perkins also have an eye on expanding the whole suite of electronic tools to other schools. In January, he was trying to identify test sites to assess the impact of the program in a variety of institutional settings.

"We want to work with our test site schools to maximize their chances for success and to collect assessment information so that we can accurately describe to the profession how well this channel of social norms communication works in a variety of institutional environments," said Craig.

If you're interested in being a test site, you can email Craig at: *craig@hws.edu*