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Student Recruitment and Engagement in the COVID-19 Era

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Editor's Note: In an effort to promote the growth of the environmental health profession and the academic programs that fuel that growth, NEHA has teamed up with the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AEHAP's mission is to support environmental health education to ensure the optimal health of people and the environment. The organization works hand in hand with the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) to accredit, market, and promote EHAC-accredited environmental health degree programs.

This column provides AEHAP with the opportunity to share current trends within undergraduate and graduate environmental health programs, as well as efforts to further the environmental health field and its available resources and information.

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There is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on virtually every facet of our lives. In particular, higher education has suffered a significant blow. Across the U.S., universities and academic institutions made tough decisions to keep their students, faculty, and staff safe in the face of COVID-19. Some completely shut their doors, some offered alternative delivery methods, and most shifted completely to online instruction. While many shifted online, it is important to note that faculty were forced to simply move content online and were not afforded the opportunity to research or learn effective online pedagogy (Crawford et al., 2020). This rapid

shift also highlighted those “poorly resourced institutions and socially disadvantaged learners where limited access to technology and the Internet” impacted the student's ability to learn or effectively engage in the online environment (Zhong, 2020).

As educators, we know this might not have been our finest teaching moment; however, it has pushed open the door of online learning in many areas that many had held firmly closed prior to COVID-19. We were catapulted, whether ready or willing, into a new format that forced our hands to try new and innovative techniques to engage our students. While so much is still unknown about our future, it is important for higher educa-

tion to learn from our shortcomings and take this opportunity to grow. With this column, we review how environmental health programs can use the current pandemic to recruit and engage students to grow their programs despite the challenges.

Environmental health programs have a unique advantage in the face of COVID-19. The pandemic and subsequent response highlights the importance of environmental health in our world. In these unprecedented times, as our national and state officials were declaring nationwide emergencies and stay-at-home orders, it was largely at the guidance and recommendation of our public and environmental health professionals. In recent history, never has so much emphasis been placed on public and environmental health. So how do we, as environmental health academic programs, use current events to our advantage and engage our current students and attract future professionals?

Social Media

The use of social media has grown tremendously over the last decade. According to Kemp (2020), there are roughly 3.8 billion social media users across the globe and that number is expected to grow. With its exponential growth, it is not surprising that social media has become an important tool and marketing platform for a myriad of businesses, including higher education. Using social media is an excellent way for programs to engage with students using a relatable voice and message on the platforms they use every day. Many social media platforms have the potential to reach hundreds of thousands of prospective

students with minimal effort and cost to the program. When you compare this method to more traditional methods of recruitment—such as vendor events where departments pay an exhibitor fee, have giveaways, and send an individual to the event in order to yield contact with a couple hundred prospective students—it seems that social media engagement is a much more cost-effective method. While we know and understand in-person events are effective, it is becoming increasingly difficult to attend all the necessary events to reach the number of prospective students that a paid social media advertisement could reach. It is particularly important for environmental health programs to increase social media activity in the COVID-19 era as it is unlikely we will even be able to engage at in-person events in the near future. Relying on digital media will be crucial in spreading our message to potential students.

Current Social Media Usage Among Environmental Health Programs

According to a recent report from the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC, 2019), “social media tools paled in comparison to methods employing face to face contact by both faculty and fellow students.” Facebook was reported as useful by several undergraduate and graduate degree programs; however, YouTube and Twitter were among the least reported recruitment tools with no mention of Instagram or any other social media platforms. Are EHAC programs missing the mark? Are we missing out on this important and cost-effective recruitment and engagement opportunity? If we want to grow our programs, retain and engage our students, meet prospective students, and be more present, we must improve our usage of social media. Social media is an important tool, especially in this era, and we need to use it to our advantage.

Tips on Effectively and Efficiently Using Social Media

While social media platforms are key marketing strategies for entire universities, it is important for individual programs to take the initiative to develop and use their own platforms to get their message out and drive student engagement. The key to an interactive and effective social media presence is to have

a strategic plan. Programs must create good content that resonates with students and shines a positive light on what the program can offer. Highlighting student activities, successful alumni, faculty stories and research, internships, and employment opportunities are among just a few of the ways environmental health programs can utilize social media. Utilizing student workers and graduate assistants to assist with social media messaging and posts can also be beneficial for programs. Doing so frees up faculty and staff, allowing the messages to come from individuals in the targeted age group we are trying to reach.

Examples of Social Media Usage: Facebook

In May 2020, Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), an EHAC-accredited program, created a graduation montage video honoring 2020 graduates. The video featured pictures and personal statements from students detailing their time in the Environmental Health Science (EHS) program. Once the video was posted, it received a huge organic response from students, friends, family, and alumni. The department wanted to utilize the video to reach an even broader audience and the post was boosted to target 18–24-year old individuals in the university’s service region. With the sponsored post, the video reached over 6,000 people with over 2,700 views and nearly 500 ThruPlays of the entire video. While just one example, it definitely shows how powerful social media can be in reaching and engaging current and prospective students.

Support for Incoming Students

With increasing concern over university budgets, especially after the abrupt disruption the COVID-19 response caused this spring, it is more important now than ever to reach out to incoming students. The EHS Department at EKU contemplated how they could begin relationship building with incoming first-year and transfer students in the COVID-19 era. Such relationships are an important determinant of academic outcomes and retention of students. In fact, Ingraham and coauthors (2018) cite that building authentic relationships with students, modeling caring behaviors, and practicing mutual respect can lead to improved academic outcomes for students. The EKU EHS faculty created individualized messages for all incoming first-year

and transfer undergraduate students. The video messages include an introduction from a faculty member and contact information for questions regarding coursework and campus life. The videos were created using Zoom and a free, online editing platform.

While the current pandemic has caused significant challenges for higher education, we are fortunate that it came during a time in which we have the technological advances in place to rise above the challenges and continue to grow our programs and engage our students. The Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs challenge its environmental health programs to be creative and innovative during this time. Let us continue to use social media and technology to get our message out there! 🗣️

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