

Promising Practice: Using Facebook Gateway Community and Technical College

Gateway Community and Technical College's HPOG program has recognized the potential power of social media and created an HPOG Facebook group. Open only to program participants and staff, this Facebook group facilitates the two-way communication that is necessary for HPOG to successfully meet the needs of its target population. For instance, staff can share information about upcoming events, alert students to scheduling changes, point students towards employers that are hiring, keep in touch with program graduates, and answer questions. Students can ask for assistance, share the news of a successful test session or internship, celebrate a life event, and give and receive peer encouragement. The accessibility of Facebook (it can be accessed from stationary computers as well as cell phones and mobile devices) allows students to get the assistance or information they need without having to be on campus.

Gateway's HPOG project director, Terri Green, explained that the Facebook group was set up a few months after the program launched, with a staff member from the college's public relations team assisting in the design of the page. Program staff inform students about the group during HPOG orientation workshops, encouraging them to sign up for an invitation to join. This invitation comes from program staff, thereby ensuring that only HPOG students have access to the page. However, Ms. Green noted that the privacy concerns inherent in social media apply to the HPOG Facebook group, leading her to recommend the creation of "professional" Facebook accounts for staff interacting with the HPOG page. Rather than containing a staff member's full name and personal information, a "professional" account usually contains only the staff member's first name followed by HPOG, e.g., "Jennifer HPOG." The program's case managers and career specialists all have accounts, as does Ms. Green.

By leveraging the power of social media, Ms. Green and her team have helped strengthen the sense of community for Gateway's HPOG participants and increased the accessibility of the supports needed for their success.