

# From Stuffing Mailboxes to Blogging — The Evolution of Student Communication

by Victor Massaglia and Christina Jackson

Effective communication with students is one of the most important aspects of the career services/development office. Getting relevant and timely information to students in an efficient manner is challenging. In this article, we explore the evolution of student communication from mailbox stuffing to blogging and will hopefully give you some great ideas for your next student communication.

Everyone remembers the basic ways of communicating with students. In fact, most of us who work in career services probably use at least one of the “old school” forms of communication. Who doesn’t remember fondly the days of stuffing student mailboxes? (Was that just yesterday?) Maybe your school didn’t have student mailboxes, so you were forced to be more creative. You used bulletin boards, classroom chalk or dry erase boards, word of mouth, etc. While you could guarantee that you posted a notice on the bulletin board or stuffed each student’s mailbox, there was no guarantee your message was being read. Then there was the expenditure in time and paper to get your message to its intended target. And wouldn’t you know, as soon as you came up with the content for your weekly missive and got it all stuffed, some other issue would arise, and you had to do it all over again. All in all, these systems were not very effective in providing students with information in a timely or efficient manner.

Then, along came e-mail. E-mail blasts can be used very effectively in one-way communication with students. They offer the added benefit of students being able to respond to your e-mail immediately with questions or concerns. In addition, e-mails allow you to type a message one time and send it to all of your students in a matter of seconds. No more time-consuming mailbox stuffing.

Similar to mailbox stuffing, you know your message is getting to your intended audience. However, contrary to the old methods, with e-mail you can also see that students have opened your message. Yes, they may open and not read the message, but you’ve increased your chances that students are getting the information you need them to receive. You also have the added knowledge, should you need it, that the student got and opened your message.

There are some drawbacks to e-mail. E-mail is not fully interactive, so students cannot post comments (although this might be viewed by some as an advantage). Students cannot stop you from sending them e-mails (although why they would want to is a mystery to us). They may complain that they get so many e-mails in a day, they don’t read yours (although we’re sure you’ve never heard this one). Simply limiting updates to a weekly e-mail and limiting inter-week student body-wide communication to very important issues can solve the latter two issues. As we’ve told our students, if they get an e-mail from the CSO during the week, they had better read it, because it’s important. Our “Weekly CSO Updates” have been very effective in getting students to meet deadlines, follow up on action items, and check other sources for items of interest.

While e-mail can be effective, some of you may be looking for something more. If this is the case, then a “new” form of communication, the blog, may be for you. As we’re sure you know by now, *blog* is short for *web log*. Blogs are all over the Internet in many different forms. Most of you have probably already counseled your students about judicious use of blogs and the pitfalls of careless use.

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For all of the evil things written about them in legal trade journals, however, they can be a very effective way of communicating with students. Not only can blogs do all the things e-mail blasts can do, but they can do them even more quickly and in a more interactive way. Further, you can monitor how much traffic your blog is getting (i.e., are students reading it?) by checking the hit meter (more regarding this later).

Blogs have become a way to direct students to more in-depth information. You can answer questions, provide topic-specific articles (e.g., how to participate in a phone interview), and alert students to legal news relevant to professional and/or career-related topics.

## Reasons to Blog

- Technorati, an Internet search engine, reports that it is indexing over 75 million blogs. Our students are extremely comfortable with the medium and gather much of their day-to-day news and information via blogs. Blogging helps streamline and organize a lot of information and provides easy archiving capability.
- Blogs are cost and time effective and are a quick way to get information such as notices, events, and relevant articles out, and to do so frequently. Depending on what platform you choose, blogging can be extremely inexpensive. Think about the cost and time savings compared to the expenses associated with printing and distributing newsletters. Both students and trees will be thanking you.
- Oh, and by the way, blogs are not only extremely easy to produce and maintain, they are also a lot fun.

Following are some keys to consider as you put together your own CSO blog.

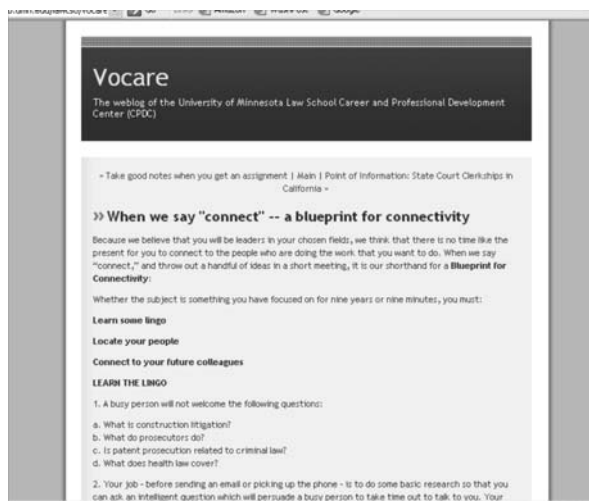
## Choose an Appropriate Platform

There are many blog platforms available — and many of them are free. “Blog platform” refers to the software one is using to create and maintain a blog. Some of these include MovableType, TypePad, Wordpress, Live Journal, Blogger, Windows Spaces, and WinJournal. Many university libraries are already using a blog platform program and are excellent resources for you.

## Create an Effective Format

There are many things to consider when designing your blog for greatest readability and quick access to content. We suggest that your blog include topical “categories” to introduce readers to your various postings. Also, a “search” function is a must. In addition to these elements, consider the following design issues. Note that most platform templates will provide many options for you.

- Content placement
- Use of colors (background/text)
- Size and type of font
- Use of graphics and links



*Example of University of Minnesota blog.*

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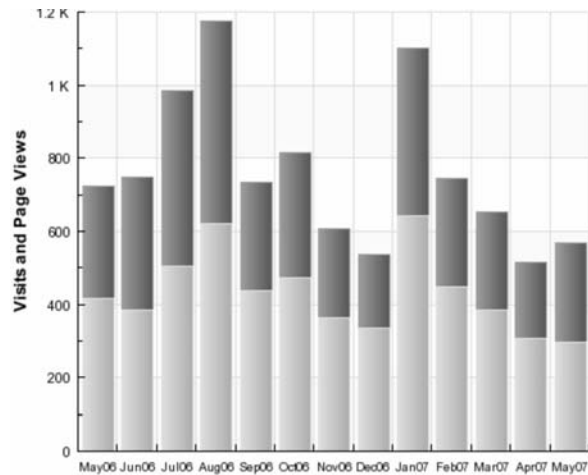
## Market Your Blog and Track Its Use

- Send an announcement to students, faculty, and staff celebrating your new site.
- Send e-mail announcements alerting readers to new postings (include links to your blog) as well as upcoming programming. The University of Minnesota will soon be using a marketing e-mail program for a more professional and readable format.
- Display your blog's URL throughout your CSO website and on your business cards as well as in your e-mail signature block.
- Tracking software such as that available from *Sitemeter.com* can help you monitor the number of visits to the blog.

New communication technology is constantly emerging, and sometimes it seems like a new tool emerges every time we get used to the previous one. Students are usually on the front edge of those changes, so it's important for those working hard to try to communicate with them to stay ahead of the communication curve (or at least keep up with it). It's also important to remember that despite all these new communication tools, the most effective form of communication is still done face-to-face.

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Month of the Year	Visits	Page Views
May07	298	567
Apr07	308	514
Mar07	386	652
Feb07	449	746
Jan07	642	1,102
Dec06	334	536
Nov06	365	607
Oct06	474	815
Sep06	436	734
Aug06	622	1,177
Jul06	504	984
Jun06	386	747
May06	418	724

*Example of site meter.*