

Building Residence Hall Community, Friendships & Learning with Web Tools

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How can a freshman resident at Weinstein Hall who interned for the NAACP in her hometown of Midland, Texas get connected with another freshman resident from Malibu, California who is interested in social justice initiatives and who lives in the same building but on a different floor? NYU's Department of Residential Education supports extensive social and educational programming, active hall student councils, and community-based living-learning programs. Nonetheless, when limited to face-to-face contact, hall residents do not have many opportunities to keep up with what is going on in their communities, communicate with each other, and initiate connections and shared activities with the whole range of interesting residents, staff, and, in some instances, faculty in their buildings.

Many hall residents have reported the "lack of community" they feel, and their wish that there were better ways for them to have meaningful interactions that would increase the "sense of community" and help them to take advantage of all the opportunities that NYU offers.

SOLUTION: **The Virtual Community Development Tool**

As of September 2004, the two Weinstein residents of our example, as well as the other 11,000-plus NYU residents, have the ability to meet and communicate through one of the country's most creatively integrated approaches to connecting resident students.

The new Virtual Community Development Tool was designed to address students' needs for connection and community by adding powerful interactive communications tools to the existing information- and resource-oriented residence hall websites at <http://www.nyu.edu/housing/residencehalls/>. This resource combines a set of hall-editable web pages, a Blackboard site for every hall, and E-mail Direct for contacting all residents. Residents can access these powerful interactive communications tools through both the individual hall websites and the Residence Hall Community Connection channel in NYUHome.

The development of the Virtual Community Tool brought together the expertise of the ITS Academic Computing Services and eServices departments, the Department of

Housing and its website development staff, and the Department of Residential Education and its community education staff in a unique and wonderful collaboration to enhance students' experiences in NYU residence halls.

To understand what the Virtual Community Tool offers, envision our two Weinstein students having a means to communicate with the help of interactive Internet software. They can view the latest events in their building, share information about a class, participate in interactive discussion groups focusing on classroom,



Figure 1. Hall residents can use the hall web and Blackboard sites to keep up with events and connect with other residents throughout the hall.

personal, and residence hall topics, and learn about campus resources.

The principal residence hall website and Blackboard tools that have been introduced this semester include:

- Community Opportunities pages, with links to all the interactive communications tools and hall resources.
- Learning Opportunities pages with access to hall programs, living-learning options, and other learning and support resources available to residents.
- Community News, with hall-editable Notices and Features, Community News Reports, Hall Council News, and Coming Events announcements that hall residents, organizations, and staff can contribute to.
- Staff greetings, information, and e-mail links for personal communications and assistance.
- Connect! Community Forum, using Blackboard to provide hall residents with their own discussion boards on community interests; survey, signup, and voting opportunities; floor and group communication and collaboration tools; and sometimes hall event, Faculty Fellow, staff contact, news, and other special pages.
- Hall Student Council pages.

TOOLS TO HELP HALL STAFF MAINTAIN THEIR WEBSITES

As part of the Virtual Community Tool, *Contribute*, a software package by Macromedia, gives hall educational staff the ability to easily and safely edit critical content in their hall web pages without knowing HTML or waiting for a website developer to make the changes. The Housing website developer,

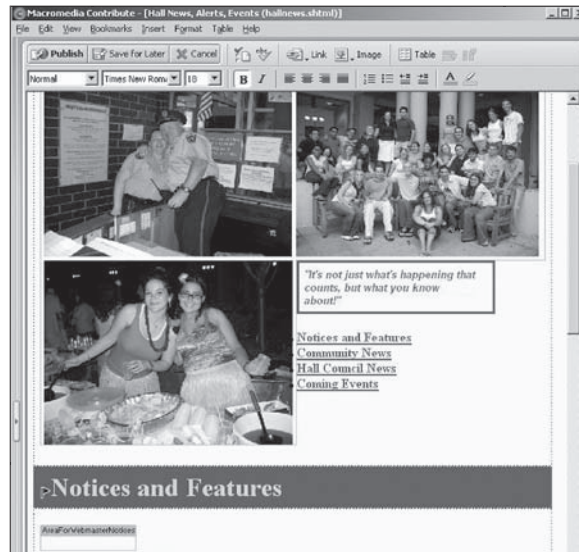


Figure 2. Hall educational staff can use the *Contribute* tool to easily, safely, and instantly edit and publish their hall web pages.

in collaboration with Residential Education staff, has constructed the hall pages with Macromedia Dreamweaver templates, which protect site navigation and organization while allowing content owners to make changes in designated editable areas of their pages. The developer then used an encrypted *Contribute* Connection Key to give the Community Development Educator (CDE) in each residence hall permission to make appropriate edits in the hall web pages and publish them to the server. Editable areas in the hall Community News pages include staff Notices, as well as student-contributed Features, News reports by residents, Hall Council News by the student Hall Council, and the latest Coming Events by event organizers.

Contribute lets hall staff use simple menu tools to edit and format content on their hall web pages; create tables, hyperlinks, and other web elements; and import formatted material already prepared in Microsoft Word by other hall staff or residents. Meanwhile, the permission

controls put in place by the developer prevent serious damage to hall web pages, creation or deletion of pages, or access to any other websites. When their edited pages look the way they want, CDEs simply click the Publish button on their *Contribute* screen to instantly upload the revised pages to the server, without the need for a personal website account. These powerful and flexible *Contribute* tools make it easy to keep the hall websites dynamic, interactive, and up to date.

BLACKBOARD: NOT JUST FOR CLASSES ANYMORE

Many readers are familiar with Blackboard through its use as an online course management tool at NYU, but the capabilities of this powerful software package are not limited to classes. Some of the most exciting interactive features of the Virtual Community Development Tool have been implemented through Blackboard, which offers a broad array of flexible communications tools while providing security by limiting access only to hall residents.

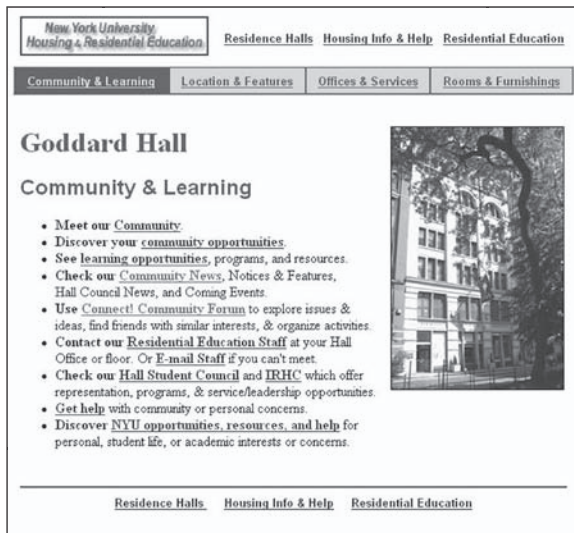


Figure 3. Each hall's home page is the easiest point of access to the interactive communications features available on the website.

During the summer of 2004, ITS, Housing, and many Residential Education staff collaborated on developing a template of Blackboard features with great potential for enhancing hall communications. The Residential Education course builder for the Blackboard sites and many hall educational staff members tested the template, contributed ideas, previewed features, and became acquainted with the program before their formal training.

At the end of the summer, ITS cloned the template that had been developed and gave each residential community at NYU its own site. Once that was done, hall staff set about adapting the tool to their own needs. There is no "typical" NYU residential community; some communities such as Hayden and Weinstein halls are close to a traditional campus residence hall, while others such as Water Street and Uptown can be confused with the swanky pads inhabited by young professionals. Some communities are small and cozy, while some stretch across the 80 acres of trees and grass of Stuyvesant

Town. The way Blackboard has been used in the halls reflects this diversity. Following are some of the highlights.

Community Groups

The role of Resident Assistants (RAs) in community development cannot be overstated. They are the front line resources for residents, and the key community partners that link the institutional and personal elements of residence halls. It is only natural, then, that RA uses of Blackboard have been an area of rapid development of the project.

In some of the residence halls, RAs have requested that a Blackboard group be set up for their residents. Generally, each group has been given its own discussion board, e-mail list, and file distribution facility. RAs can use these groups to e-mail residents, to elicit feedback in discussions, and even to encourage residents to help produce a hall newsletter.

Calendar

RAs are constantly trying to help residents connect with each other, and to learn about resources and opportunities for personal growth. There is always something going on in the communities, and it is not uncommon for several activities to be scheduled on the same day. Some of the residence halls have started using the calendar function of Blackboard to post information about programming times and dates.

Hall Elections

A number of residence halls have conducted elections for their Hall Councils through Blackboard. The ballots are sent out as a survey, and results are available immediately (even while the election is in progress). In some instances, the candidates have been able to



Figure 4. Blackboard sites can integrate hall events web pages to help residents keep up to date with the latest activities.

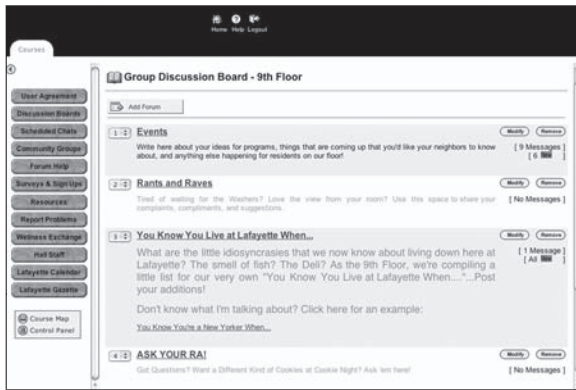


Figure 5. An illustration of an RA using her Group's discussion board to elicit information and feedback from her residents.

post blurbs about themselves on the site.

Faculty Fellows in Residence

The Faculty Fellows in Residence have been added to the different community sites, and have been actively using them. Some of the faculty have added their own profiles to the sites in an effort to introduce themselves to residents they have not met in person. Faculty have also used the sites to advertise programs and distribute materials for informal discussions. An unexpected benefit of the integration of faculty in residence into the Blackboard communities has been that they have contributed

their expertise to the sites, redesigning graphical elements and adding functionality to them.

Wellness and the University

In light of the University's attempt to raise consciousness of wellness resources on campus, all building sites offer a resources area listing useful wellness links. Hall staff and residents are able to refer to the resources area for immediate access to a collection of University links tailored to the specific needs of residents. The links themselves are the result of staff input during the development stage. A few weeks into the Fall 2004 semester, a direct link to the University's new Wellness Exchange home page was prominently added to all hall sites.

E-MAIL DIRECT

Even with all of the new website and Blackboard communication capabilities available through the Virtual Community Development Tool, residents sometimes need a little nudge to check things out. When residents are bouncing between classes, extra-curricular activities, and friends, and at the same time getting to know the city, simply informing them of important

hall and University events can be a daunting challenge, but NYU E-mail Direct provides a way.

NYU E-mail Direct is a bulk e-mail service through which pre-authorized NYU faculty, staff, and administrators can request to send an e-mail message to a segment of the University community or to the entire community (<http://www.nyu.edu/its/emalldirect/>). This handy tool allows residence hall educational staff to selectively grab the attention of any sector of residents living in any of the NYU residence halls.

PROGRESS OF THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Although access, staff training, and marketing of some features of the new Virtual Community Development Tool are still being rolled out, examination of the hall websites and Blackboard sites shows that many hall communities are already effectively using a variety of the new interactive tools to expand hall communications, increase resident participation in community activities and programs, facilitate access to resources and support, and build vibrant hall communities.

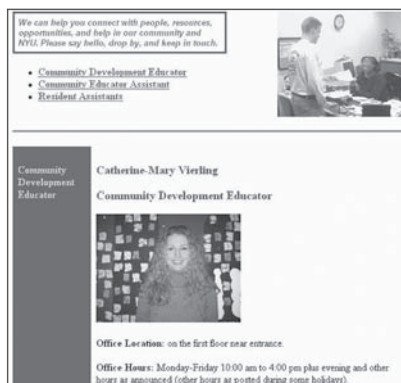


Figure 6. Residence hall staff introduce themselves through the website, and encourage residents to contact them in person or by e-mail.

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