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Dialogic Public Relations and Resource Dependency: New Jersey Community Colleges as Models for Web Site Effectiveness

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This study examines the organization–public communication of community college Web sites in light of two important bodies of public relations research: dialogic communication and resource dependency theory. Dialogue is important to understand because highly resource-dependant organizations like community colleges need to be able to effectively communicate with a variety of influential publics. This study seeks to better understand how organization and stakeholder information needs are met by effective Web design in highly resource dependant environments. This study reviews the current literature on community colleges, resource dependency theory, and dialogue; conducts a study of nineteen community college Web sites; and discusses the findings and directions for future research in public relations.

The importance to organizations of having a Web presence is well established in the literature (Callison, 2003; Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 1999, 2000; Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003; Jo & Kim, 2003; Kang & Norton, 2004; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Leichty & Esrock, 2001; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Reber & Kim, 2006; Rennie & Mackey, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Taylor & Perry, 2005). As the World Wide Web becomes more ubiquitous, Internet users have become increasingly sophisticated. However, many organizations have not kept up. Most organizations are content just to have a Web site with the latest bells and whistles (or JAVA script) but do a poor job of monitoring the site, training employees to use it, or using their sites effectively as communication tools.

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One realm in particular where understanding the Web is vitally important is in the area of education. Colleges and universities throughout the United States are increasingly competing for the best students. Because the logic of the Internet is one of pull rather than push (Boutie, 1996; Kent, 2001; Yavovich, 1996), and because Internet users are increasingly more sophisticated (McCollum, 1998; Stoner, 2004), meeting the needs of diverse publics is difficult. Educational institutions at all levels need to understand how to best attract, interest, and satisfy diverse publics that include parents, students, alumni, teachers, public officials, community leaders, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and the media. Different individuals and publics have different Internet needs and skills, and differing levels of resource access, and thus require different message channels and message content to satisfy their information needs.

In light of the imperatives of new technology in higher education, the purpose of this essay is to better understand how organization and stakeholder information needs in educational settings are facilitated by dialogic Web design. Dialogue is an important framework throughout all higher education as schools increasingly compete for the best students. This latest generation of college students, called “millennials,” expects to be doted upon and expect organizations to treat them as *valuable* individuals (Cafasso, 2007; Gohn & Albin, 2007; William Blair & Company, 2007). Community colleges and universities need to understand the students of today if they are to succeed in attracting them. Thus, the importance of dialogue as a public relations approach is obvious.

Although colleges and universities are increasingly using the World Wide Web as a vehicle for student application, recruitment, and retention, examination of the literature reveals that little is known about effective use of the Web in higher education settings (Poock & Lefond, 2001, 2003; Stoner, 2004). The research also suggests that organizations are not fully utilizing the interactive potential of the Internet to build and maintain organization–public relationships, and respond to stakeholder information needs. Only a few studies have examined how dialogue may be used in higher education settings.

This article seeks to fill in some of the gaps in understanding dialogue in higher education, as well as examine how highly resource dependant organizations like New Jersey’s community colleges can use their Web sites more effectively. The article is divided into three sections: *The first section* reviews the literature on community colleges, resource dependency theory, and dialogue. *The second section* outlines the methodology, data, and results of a study that examined community college Web sites. *The third section* discusses the findings and directions for future research in public relations.

REVIEW OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES, RESOURCE DEPENDENCY, AND DIALOGUE

Dialogic public relations is considered one of the most ethical and effective approaches to practicing public relations in situations when organizations are highly resource dependant, however, most organizations still do not employ dialogue very effectively or respond to the needs of their publics (Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Kent et al., 2003). To highlight the three interrelated issues examined in this article: community colleges, resource dependency, and dialogue in public relations, the research in each area is reviewed, starting with community colleges.

Community Colleges

In the late 80s and early 90s, many U.S. educators and community leaders feared the demise of the community college system. As more students began attending 4-year colleges and universities, and as communities became more diverse, the future of the community college system was unclear. Fortunately, not only have community colleges survived, they have thrived and demonstrated a remarkable resiliency by becoming centers of educational opportunity to all community members (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). Community colleges continue to experience increased demand for students as more university-bound students begin their bachelor's educations at community colleges before transferring credits to 4-year degree programs (Borden, Brown, & Garver, 2005, p. 9). In the state of New Jersey, the focus of this study, full-time student enrollment at New Jersey's 19 community colleges has reached a new record high. More than 158,000 students are taking college-credit courses in New Jersey's community colleges (New Jersey Council of County Colleges, 2007).

Education is not static. As the needs of the U.S. population shift, so do the behaviors of its citizens. By understanding the needs of publics and environmental constraints, organization's can anticipate member's needs and better distribute resources to meet those needs (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). As public institutions, community colleges, like universities, must secure financial resources from a variety of sources (Kenton, Schuh, Huba, & Shelley, 2004). Community colleges, as resource-dependent organizations, need to maximize their scarce resources (student, government, and community support) if they are to thrive and survive. Resource dependency theory is relevant because it posits that organizational stability depends upon the ability to understand and use resources effectively (Kenton et al., 2004).

Resource Dependency Theory

According to Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), interdependence exists whenever one actor does not entirely control all the conditions necessary for the achievement of an action or for obtaining the outcome desired from an action (p. 40). Because resource dependency theory suggests that organizations vary in their dependency on external publics and their environment for achieving their goals, many public relations researchers assume a resource dependency model when they theorize about the organization–public relationship (cf. Kent et al., 2003).

For example, Badaracco (1998) showed how communication technologies enabled organizations to increase their public influence. Characterizing issues management as power resource management, Heath (1998) showed how mediated information shared between members of Greenpeace helped influence the decisions of Shell in the United Kingdom and suggested that the group best able to access and mobilize resources will have the upper hand in resource management. Coombs (1998) showed how the Internet has allowed activist groups to harness the power of the Web to become more powerful and to command the attention of large, well-financed organizations (Sommerfeldt, 2007). More recently, Kent et al. (2003) extended the resource dependency model to Internet-mediated relationships, arguing that organizations that appear more dialogic probably understand the communication process better.

The resources available to institutions directly affect their ability to achieve goals and may even affect their survival (Pfeffer, 1982). Because of increased accountability to various constituencies, colleges and universities have experienced an increasing external interdepen-

dence. Outside agencies have increased their power over colleges and universities by requiring justification of operations to maintain funding (Kanter, Gamson, & London, 1997). Resource dependency theory has also been applied to research looking at funding allocations of community colleges. As Pfeffer suggested, “Organizations will (and should) respond more to the demands of those organizations or groups in the environment that control critical resources” (p. 183). Kenton (2003) examined state funding constraints in relation to funding models developed to support community colleges, noting that community college revenue management is best understood by the history, cultures, and norms of the individual states in which they are located.¹ Although community college funding allocation formulas vary from state to state, funding appropriations typically come from fixed revenues. As is the case with New Jersey’s community colleges, because community colleges were created in part to make higher education accessible to everyone, primary funding typically comes from sources other than tuition and fees (Kenton et al., 2004, p. 1). Thus, community colleges are an ideal type of resource dependant organization to examine because so much of their resources depend on levels of enrollment and perceived success in the eyes of community leaders and lawmakers.

Resource dependency theory aligns with dialogic theory because both theories assume that organizations and public are interrelated. One of the keys to organizations meeting the information needs of publics is to communicate with them.

Dialogic Theory in Public Relations

One of the most influential theoretical perspectives that has emerged is relationship management. Dialogic theory comes out of research into interpersonal theory and relational communication. The relational approach situates relationship building as a central public relations activity (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997). The idea of dialogue in public relations is that organizations should work to create open relationships with individuals and groups rather than remaining closed and secretive. Indeed, the newest trend among advertising and marketing professionals (and public relations professionals for more than 10 years) is toward creating “relationships.”

Deeply rooted in philosophy and relational communication theory, Kent and Taylor (2002) argued “the inclusion of the concept of dialogue in public relations vocabulary is an important step toward understanding how organizations can build relationships that serve both organizational and public interests” (p. 21). Dialogic communication is relational; dialogue involves an understanding of the past and the present but also has a focus on a continued and shared future for all participants (p. 26).

¹Historically, community colleges were set to serve the needs of the “community,” that is, by providing personal development classes (computers, pottery, jewelry making, etc.), skills training (air frame maintenance, automotive, electrical, plumbing training, etc.), and other “community”-oriented curricula. Although, as Kenton suggested, community colleges have essentially developed according to the needs of their individual communities, demographics, and state economics, in the mid- to late 80s, many community colleges became concerned with the rise in college-bound high school graduates. To stay competitive, many community colleges merged into statewide systems (e.g., Alaska), and started to offer core (required) college curriculum (public speaking, introduction to X, etc.) as a means of hedging their bets and increasing their sway over state higher education dollars. Thus, although community colleges “historically” served diverse publics, modern colleges have become more homogenous and are competing for the same students. The ability to build relationships quickly and effectively with potential students allows (more desirable) colleges to be more competitive and more successful.

As a first step toward articulating a public relations theory of dialogue, Kent and Taylor (2002) identified five overarching dialogic tenets: *mutuality*, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; *propinquity*, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; *empathy*, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; *risk*, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and *commitment*, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics.

Dialogic Internet Principles. In 1998, Kent and Taylor advanced a five-part dialogic public relations schema that has been used to evaluate the dialogic potential of a number of organizations and industries. The dialogic public relations schema includes dialogic loops, providing useful information to publics, encouraging return visits, providing an easy to navigate interface, and “conserving visitors,” or keeping them on the organization’s Web site long enough to facilitate developing a relationship.

1. The *dialogic feedback loop* allows publics to communicate with organizations and help to build mutually beneficial relationships (pp. 326–327). Ideally, dialogic contact with stakeholders is conducted by trained professionals rather than interns of Web site managers who have limited formal communication training.
2. *Usefulness of information.* Organizations are encouraged to respond to stakeholder questions and concerns and provide an assortment of information to Web site visitors as a means of building relational trust and commitment (pp. 327–328). The second principle also suggests that organizations provide useful information of general value to *all* publics and organize Web content so that it is easy to use. Relationships with publics are cultivated not only to serve the public relations goals of an organization, but so that the interests, values, and concerns of publics are also addressed. The goal is to build mutually beneficial relationships and not to trick or exploit individuals and publics just to get what the organization wants.
3. *Generation of return visits.* Seeks to create the foundation for long-lasting relationships through the generation of return visits and interaction (fundamental, interpersonal, relationship-building concepts). Recommendations include offering online question-and-answer sessions, having available online “experts” to answer questions for interested visitors, and offering up-to-date information on changing issues through special forums and commentaries. The goal is to maximize the quality of organization–public communication rather than trying to minimize contact with individuals and publics as many telephone and electronic customer service systems do.
4. *Intuitiveness/ease of interface.* Involves creating user-friendly, “convivial” interfaces. Although the Web is designed to be rich in content, Kent and Taylor argued that sites intended to provide information should do it as quickly and efficiently as possible. The authors maintained, “sites should be dynamic enough to encourage all potential publics to explore them, information rich enough to meet the needs of very diverse publics, and interactive enough to allow users to pursue further informational issues and dialogic relationships” (p. 341).
5. *The rule of conservation of visitors.* Suggests that Web sites should contain features that make them attractive for repeat visits such as updated information, changing issues,

special forums, new commentaries, online question-and-answer sessions, and online experts to answer questions for interested visitors (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Conservation of visitors was developed out of respect for the time, informational needs, and interests of valued stakeholders. The rule maintains that organizational Web sites should include only essential links to other related sites and focus messages and site content on issues of interest to key publics.

Applications of Dialogic Internet principles. Kent and Taylor's Dialogic Principles have been applied to research exploring organization types such as: nonprofit activist organizations (Kent et al., 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Taylor et al., 2001), Fortune 500 companies (Esrock & Leichty, 1999, 2000), colleges and universities (Kang & Norton, 2006; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; McAllister-Spooner, 2008), congressional Web sites (Taylor & Kent, 2004), and litigation public relations firms (Reber, Gower, & Robinson, 2006).

To extend the work on resource dependency and dialogue on the Web, the authors conducted a study of community college Web sites. Given the highly resource dependant nature of community colleges, and their need to respond to individuals and publics who not only have many choices but *expect* to be treated as "special," this sample is perfect for extending the previous work in these areas.

A STUDY OF DIALOGIC STRATEGIES ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE WEB SITES

The dialogic capacity of community college Web sites was assessed in an empirical study that surveyed the Web sites of *all* 19 community college Web sites in New Jersey. The Web sites were examined for the extent to which they employed dialogic communication principles in their design and everyday use. The study involves a multimethod design that first examined community college Web sites using Kent and Taylor's (1998) Dialogic Principles and second conducted an evaluation of Web site responsiveness via e-mail requests for information. Two research questions were posed.

Research Questions

Research Question 1 asked, "What is the current dialogic capacity of New Jersey community college Web sites?" Question 1 involved an assessment of the extent to which a sample of community college Web sites incorporated Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) five principles of dialogic public relations.

Research Question 2 asked, "How adept are community colleges at responding to stakeholder information needs?" Question 2 involved an actual assessment of the responsiveness to stakeholder information seeking behaviors based on message and response evaluation strategies.

Hypothesis

Although Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) five Dialogic Principles are hypothesized to have an effect on dialogic communication and the level of responsiveness between organizations and

their publics, different principles are likely to elicit different effects. This study examines the relationship between the dialogic principles (combined and separate), dialogic communication, and responsiveness to stakeholder information-seeking behaviors to identify which principles are believed to have the most impact or value when creating relationships via the World Wide Web. The following two-tailed hypothesis was posed:

H1: There is a relationship between dialogic Web site design and organization–public responsiveness.²

Kent and Taylor’s Internet Principles are hypothesized to have an effect on dialogic communication and responses. According to Taylor et al. (2001), an actual dialogic response is a more accurate measurement of an organization’s dialogic commitment. Based on the research design of Taylor et al. (2001) and Kent et al. (2003), the researchers examined the actual responsiveness in relation to how dialogic the colleges appear to be.

Method

A preliminary content analysis was conducted in a pilot study to determine if there were distinctive features of community college Web sites that should be evaluated in the respective dialogic categories. The researchers identified dialogic features, particularly in the area of usefulness of information, specific to college Web sites including degrees offered, course listings, admissions criteria, and registration information. Interactive features identified in the initial screening include online admissions applications, online registration and course searches, “click and submit” forms, and virtual campus tours. Based on the results of the *preliminary* content analysis, a more comprehensive content analysis was performed to determine public relations practices offered via the Internet.

To establish intercoder reliability, two coders were trained and a pre-test was performed on two randomly selected Web sites (10% of the original sample). The coders were trained on the coding instrument and how to write qualitative comments about each site. Additional training and instrument adjustments were performed until the reliability levels between the coders reached or exceeded the minimum acceptable level of .7 using Cohen’s Kappa on each dialogic principle. The overall level of reliability between coders was .942.

The research instrument itself was based on a nine-part, 59-item scale, modified from the dialogic scale introduced by Kent and Taylor (1998), and refined by Taylor et al. (2001) and Kent et al. (2003). Operationalization of each of the five principles included a range of 3 to 12 items per dimension, with a mean of seven categories per principle. Over the span of 1 month, each site was coded for the presence or absence of 59 characteristics from a medium-speed, local area network computer.

Each site was coded for the presence of five principles of dialogue identified by Kent and Taylor (1998) and tested by Kent et al. (2003) and Taylor et al. (2001): (a) Ease of Interface,

²An earlier version of this article was delivered to the 2007 National Communication Conference (Public Relations Division) in Chicago and contained a slightly different hypothesis explained by a model: “H: There is an association between Kent & Taylor’s (1998, 2002) Dialogic Principles (DP), Dialogic Communication (DC), and Organization–public Responsiveness (R).” We have simplified the hypothesis in this article for clarity because we do not discuss the model in this article.

(b) Usefulness of Information, (c) Conservation of Visitors, (d) Generation of Return Visits, and (e) Dialogic Feedback Loops.

To ensure reliability of the instrument, each characteristic was operationalized based on Kent and Taylor's original scale as well as an assessment of six features of usefulness of information specific to employees/prospective employees³ and the presence of seven features of usefulness of information specific to external stakeholders.⁴ The practice of identifying organization relevant publics when analyzing Web sites in particular industries is consistent with Kent and Taylor's previous studies. The usefulness of information scale also included nine features of usefulness of information specific to media publics.⁵ The coders assessed whether links were made available to contact the public relations staff directly, the faculty experts directly, the administrators directly, and the governing board directly.

Stage 2: Responsiveness

An actual dialogic response creates a more accurate measure of an organization's dialogic potential than simply whether visitors can "respond" or "express an opinion" (Taylor et al., 2001). Kent et al. (2003) reported that organizational type and level of dependence on publics for accomplishing an organizational mission influence responsiveness.

The actual responsiveness of the community college Web sites was tested by e-mailing the following message to each of the 19 community colleges' Web sites, inquiring about enrollment opportunities, using an alias e-mail address: "I am interested in enrolling at your college. Is it too late to apply? If so, can I still take classes and apply later?" Messages were sent in early August to the appropriate e-mail contact listed on the college Web sites in the following rank order: (a) the "admissions contact" e-mail address, (b) the "registration contact" e-mail address, and (c) the "contact us" e-mail address. The researchers first attempted to send the query to the admissions contact. If there was no admissions e-mail address, the query was sent to the registration contact. If there was no admissions contact or registration contact, the query was sent to the contact us e-mail address. Priority was given to the e-mail address that suggested the greatest likelihood of responsiveness.

Given the time-sensitive nature of the information requested, each college was coded as "responsive" if it returned a response to the e-mail address within 5 days (a lengthy span of time for an e-mail response about enrollment). Colleges were coded as "nonresponsive" if they took longer than 5 days. Colleges that had immediate automated responses and that were accompanied by user-specific responses within 3 days were coded as "highly responsive."

³The presence of an employment opportunities section, fair business practices statements, college policies and procedures, cultural diversity (EOE) statements, work environment statements, and civic involvement statements.

⁴Donors, politicians, business and opinion leaders, accreditation information, annual reports, career placement services, continuing education opportunities, funding opportunities, grant opportunities, and workforce and economic development programs.

⁵Time-sensitive press releases highlighting academic programs and student and faculty accomplishments, a dedicated press room where media content is centralized, audio and/or video clips, biographies and backgrounders on key organizational members, faculty expert base that media can consult for stories, downloadable demographic reports, downloadable logos and graphics, downloadable press photos, and access to the college philosophy and/or mission statement.

TABLE 1
Cronbach's Reliability Analysis of the Content Analysis Instrument

<i>Scale</i>	<i>A</i> ^a	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Combined features (59-item scale)	.747	22.21	5.56
Individual indices			
Useful Information	.78	15.16	4.59
Ease of Interface	.34	4.31	1.34
Conservation of Visitors	.042	3.68	1.29
Generation of Return Visitors	.78	3.05	1.29
Dialogic Feedback Loop	-.432	.842	.688

Note. $N = 19$.

^aPresence = 1, Absence = 0.

RESULTS

Research Question 1 inquired about the dialogic features of community college Web sites. This question involves an assessment of the extent to which a sample of community college Web sites incorporate Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) principles of dialogic public relations via the Internet.

The reliability of the *scale* and its individual items were empirically examined through the calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficients. As a correlation coefficient, alpha scores range from 0 to 1. Generally, scales that obtain alpha levels of .7 or greater are considered reliable (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). Table 1 indicates for each index the number of items comprising it, the mean, and standard deviation of the calculated index scores, and the reliability measure indicating the extent to which the items in the index tended to vary. The analysis of the 57-item scale produced an alpha coefficient of .78 ($M = 26.79$, $SD = 6.46$), indicating that the scale had acceptable internal consistency. Of the 57 items, 52 were retained. The following five variables which had zero variance were removed from the scale: "admissions information" (*Useful Information*), "statement to return," "bookmark now statements" (*Generation of Return Visitors*), "surveys to voice opinions," and "links to contact board" (*Dialogic Feedback Loop*).

With the exception of the 11-item Usefulness of Information subscale, which has adequate internal consistency, the remaining subscales had weak internal reliability, particularly the Conservation of Visitors and Generation of Return Visitor subscales. These findings suggest that, given the small sample size, there are not enough items in the subscales. In essence, the totality of the scale is stronger than its parts. Given the high reliability of the total scale, the findings also suggest that dialogic communication via the Internet is a complex process that may not be easily separated into discrete categories. With a review of the reliability of the content analysis research instrument in place, the next section reports the dialogic feature scores of the community college Web sites.

Dialogic Feature Scores

Based on the dialogic criteria set forth by Taylor et al. (2001), scores for the dialogic principle indices were computed by dividing the number of observed "yes" responses on the items

composing the index by the number of total items in the index and treating the result as a percentage. Table 2 reports the scores, means, and standard deviations of the Internet principles.

The data support the findings reported by Taylor et al. (2001) regarding activist Web sites. A wide variance in the presence of the characteristics of dialogue, with a range of 0% to 95% of the features present ($M = 46.43\%$), was found. The principle indices for Conservation of Visitors scored the highest (84.33%), followed by Ease of Interface (61.57%), Generation of Return Visitors (61.20%), and Useful Information (49.41%). The Dialogic Feedback Loop indices scored the lowest (10.43%).

Comparison of Dialogic Features per Case

Table 3 reports the dialogic feature scores for each of the 19 colleges in the study. Cases that scored high (where 50% or more of the features were detected) in the respective features have the foundational features for dialogic potential. The findings of the first stage of data collection and analysis reveal that all of the colleges examined are failing to capitalize on the interactive potential offered by the Internet. Of the 19 colleges examined, only 5 (26.32%) have dialogic Web sites (see Table 3 for details).

Of the 19 colleges, only 6 (31.6%) scored high in the Useful Information features, 14 (73.7%) scored high in the Ease of Interface features, 17 (89.5%) scored high in the Conservation of Visitors features, 2 (10.5%) scored high in the Generation of Return Visitors features, and none (0%) of the colleges scored high in the Dialogic Feedback Loop features.

TABLE 2
Occurrence of Usefulness of Information Features

<i>Features</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>n %</i>	<i>k</i>
Usefulness of information: General ^a			
Academic programs	18	95	1.0
Admissions information	18	95	1.0
Clear links to academic information	18	95	1.0
Majors	18	95	1.0
Online application	13	68	.872
Online course search	13	68	.883
Online registration	12	63	.883
Catalog	12	63	1.0
"Click and Submit" forms	12	63	1.0
History	11	58	1.0
Downloadable forms	10	53	1.0
Identifies constituent base	5	26	1.0
Usefulness of information: Employee/Potential employee ^b			
Employment opportunities	16	84	1.0
Policies and procedures	4	21	.855
Cultural diversity (EOE) statements	4	21	.844
Civic involvement	3	16	.826
Fair business practices statements	3	16	1.0
Work environment statements	3	16	.826

(continued)

TABLE 2
(Continued)

Features	N	n %	k
Usefulness of information: External stakeholders ^c			
Continuing education opportunities	17	89	1.0
Accreditations	16	84	.826
Funding opportunities	12	63	.883
Career placement services	10	53	1.0
Workforce and economic development	9	47	.895
Grant opportunities	6	32	.883
Annual reports	5	26	1.0
Usefulness of information: Media publics ^d			
Press releases	17	89	1.0
Dedicated pressroom	13	68	1.0
Philosophy/Mission statements	13	68	1.0
Audio/Video clips	2	10	.894
Demographic reports	2	10	1.0
Faculty expert list	2	10	1.0
Downloadable graphics	1	5	1.0
Downloadable images	1	5	1.0
Faculty bios	1	5	1.0
Ease of interface ^e			
Major links to rest of site	18	95	1.0
Logical hierarchy	15	79	.826
Search engine box	14	74	.855
Site map	13	68	1.0
Image maps	12	63	1.0
Low reliance on graphics	8	42	.894
Info accessible with images off	2	10	1.0
Conservation of visitors ^f			
Important info available on first page	18	95	.894
Short loading time (<4)	18	95	.855
Posting of last updated time and date	12	63	.893
Generation of return visits ^g			
Calendar of Events	15	79	1.0
News items posted within last 30 days	15	79	1.0
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section	11	58	1.0
Downloadable information	10	53	1.0
Links to other Web sites	7	37	1.0
"Bookmark Now" statements	0	0	1.0
Statement to return	0	0	1.0
Dialogic feedback loops ^h			
Links for contacting PR staff directly	7	37	.890
Opportunity for e-mail response	4	21	.855
Links for contacting administrators directly	2	10	1.0
Links for contacting faculty experts directly	1	5	1.0
Links for contacting governing board directly	0	0	1.0
Opportunities to vote on issues	0	0	.892
Surveys to voice opinions	0	0	.892

Note. N = 19.

^a12 items ($M = 13.77$, $SD = 4.17$). ^b6 items ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 5.16$). ^c7 items ($M = 10.71$, $SD = 4.61$). ^d9 items ($M = 5.7$, $SD = 6.16$). ^e7 items ($M = 11.86$, $SD = 5.14$). ^f3 items ($M = 16$, $SD = 3.46$). ^g7 items ($M = 8.29$, $SD = 6.32$). ^h7 items ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 2.65$).

TABLE 3
Dialogic Feature Scores for Each College

Case	Useful Information ^a		Ease of Interface ^b		Conservation of Visitor ^c		Generation of Return Visitors ^d		Dialogic Feedback Loop ^e		Total Score ^f	
	n	n %	n	n %	n	n %	n	n %	n	n %	n	n %
1	17	50*	4	57*	3	100*	4	57*	1	14	29	50*
2	28	82*	5	71*	3	100*	4	57*	2	29	42	72*
3	14	41	6	86*	3	100*	2	29	0	0	25	43
4	19	56*	5	71*	3	100*	3	43	1	14	31	53*
5	14	41	6	86*	2	66*	2	29	2	29	26	45
6	15	44	4	57*	3	100*	3	43	1	14	26	45
7	22	65*	4	57*	3	100*	0	0	1	14	30	52*
8	11	32	3	43	1	33	1	14	0	0	16	28
9	12	35	2	29	3	100*	2	29	0	0	19	33
10	17	50*	3	43	2	66*	2	29	1	14	25	43
11	16	47	3	43	2	66*	3	43	3	43	25	43
12	20	59*	6	86*	2	66*	3	43	3	43	32	55*
13	14	34	5	71*	2	66*	3	43	1	14	25	43
14	12	35	1	14	1	33	2	29	0	0	16	28
15	16	47	5	71	3	100*	2	29	0	0	26	45
16	10	29	5	71	3	100*	2	29	1	14	21	36
17	8	23	4	57*	2	66*	2	29	0	0	16	28
18	13	38	5	71*	2	66*	2	29	0	0	22	38
19	15	44	6	86*	2	66*	1	14	1	14	25	43

Note. $N = 19$, $M = 25.1$, $SD = 6.33$.

^a34 items ($M = 15.42$, $SD = 4.60$). ^b7 items ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.41$). ^c7 items ($M = 2.37$, $SD = .684$). ^d7 items ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .991$). ^e7 items ($M = .737$, $SD = .653$). ^f58 items ($M = 25.10$, $SD = 6.33$).

*High scoring case in respective dialogic feature (>50% of potential items detected).

Measures of association. Pearson correlations between the casewise total scores and the five dialogic feature scores were calculated to reveal significant relationships with the Ease of Interface features ($r = .501, p < .05$), the Conservation of Visitors features ($r = .529, p < .05$), and the Generation of Return Visitors features ($r = .482, p < .05$). Highly significant relationships were found with the remaining two dialogic features, namely Useful Information ($r = .939, p < .01$), and Dialogic Feedback Loop ($r = .719, p < .01$). These findings suggest that overall scores of the cases accurately measure the potential dialogic capacity of the respective colleges.

The function of dialogic communication in fostering responsiveness. Research Question 2 inquired about the relationship between the dialogic features and organization–public responsiveness. Kent and Taylor’s Internet Principles are hypothesized to have an effect on dialogic communication and responsiveness. According to Taylor et al. (2001), an actual dialogic response creates a more accurate measurement of an organization’s dialogic orientation. In this particular study, responsiveness was tested by e-mailing queries about semester application/enrollment opportunities to each of the 19 community colleges.

Table 4 reports the actual responsiveness scores of the colleges. Of the 19 community colleges in the sample, only 7 (37%) of the colleges were “highly responsive,” meaning that they issued immediate automated responses acknowledging receipt of the e-mail query, and followed up with tailored written responses within 3 days of the original request. The highly responsive colleges also followed up by sending print applications and materials via traditional mail within 2 weeks of the request. Most community colleges (57%) responded to the e-mail request within 5 working days ($n = 11$), but 1 school (5%) did not respond at all.

As with Taylor et al. (2001), the results of the content analysis were examined to determine if the scores of the five dialogic indices could be used to “retrodict” responsiveness for the

TABLE 4
Actual Responsiveness Scores of Colleges

<i>Responsiveness Scores</i>		
<i>Highly Responsive^a</i>	<i>Responsive^b</i>	<i>Nonresponsive^c</i>
Case 1	Case 2	Case 14
Case 5	Case 3	
Case 11	Case 4	
Case 13	Case 6	
Case 15	Case 7	
Case 17	Case 8	
Case 19	Case 9	
	Case 10	
	Case 12	
	Case 16	
	Case 18	

Note. $N = 19$.

^a $n = 7, n \% = 36.8$. ^b $n = 11, n \% = 57.9$. ^c $n = 1, n \% = 5.3$.

19 colleges. As Table 5 indicates, the highly responsive colleges only had the highest scores for three of the five indices, namely Ease of Interface, Generation of Return Visitors, and Dialogic Feedback Loop. Of interest, the responsive colleges scored higher than the highly responsive colleges for the Useful Information and Conservation of Visitors indices. In addition, the differences for the remaining three indices were minimal. The scores for the nonresponsive schools were significantly lower than the highly responsive and responsive scores for all of the five dialogic principles. In light of the modest sample size and the large standard deviations, these findings should be interpreted cautiously.

Based on these findings, the researchers employed a multiple regression analysis to test the relative influence of Kent and Taylor’s Dialogic Internet Principles on the actual responsiveness of the colleges. Although nonsignificant, of the five independent indices, Useful Information emerged as the strongest measure of responsiveness ($\beta = -.423, t = -1.34, p = .204$), followed by Ease of Interface ($\beta = .376, t = 1.40, p = .184$), Conservation of Visitors ($\beta = .054, t = .199, p = .846$), Generation of Return Visitors ($\beta = .120, t = .462, p = .652$), and Dialogic Feedback Loop ($\beta = .284, t = .872, p = .399$).

Prompted by these findings, the researchers employed a multiple regression analysis to test the relative influence of the remaining four dialogic principles on the “usefulness” of the college Web sites. Of interest, the analysis, responsible for 37.5% of the variance, dropped all items except the Dialogic Feedback Loop index. According to Kent and Taylor (2002), even if a site follows the suggestions of the first four dialogic principles, it cannot be fully dialogic if it does not offer and follow through on two-way communication. Dialogue involves more than access to information. The findings of this study are compelling; of the five Dialogic Internet Principles, Usefulness of Information emerged as the strongest measure of responsiveness. Furthermore, of the remaining dialogic principles, Dialogic Feedback Loop was found to have the strongest influence on the “usefulness” of the college Web sites. Such findings can help practitioners better design their organization’s Web sites.

TABLE 5
Difference Between Highly Responsive, Responsive, and Nonresponsive Colleges

Index	Highly Resp. ^a		Resp.		Nonresp.		Difference Test					
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	df	HR	tR	NR	HR	R
Useful Information	14.29	2.98	16.45	5.43	12.0	0.0	6	10	*	12.6**	10.0**	*
Ease of Interface	4.71	1.11	4.36	1.29	1.0	0.0	6	10	*	11.21**	11.25**	*
Conservation of Visitors	2.29	.488	2.55	.688	1.0	0.0	6	10	*	12.27**	12.39**	*
Generation of Return Visitors	2.42	.976	2.18	1.08	2.0	0.0	6	10	*	6.58**	6.70**	*
Dialogic Feedback Loop	.857	.690	.727	.647	0.0	0.0	6	10	*	3.29**	3.73**	*

Note. N = 19. Resp. = Responsive.

^an = 7, n % = 36.8. ^bn = 11, n % = 57.9. ^cn = 1, n % = 5.3.

*t cannot be computed because the standard deviation is 0. **p < .001, one-tailed test.

EXTENDING THEORY TO PRAXIS: EXEMPLARS OF DIALOGIC TACTICS

The goal of this research is not only to identify the strengths and weaknesses of community college Web sites but also to highlight exemplars of how colleges have used the Internet in relationship-building efforts.

Meeting Information Needs of Key Publics

Content, the most important element of Web sites, is irrelevant if it cannot be found. Navigation has to be intuitive and easy to use. Poock and Lefond (2001) found that college Web pages organized by target public were more effective than those organized topically. By offering a combination of information and audience-driven navigation links on Web sites, many of the colleges examined in this study facilitated interactivity and were more responsiveness to stakeholder information requests.

For example, in addition to offering global navigation links to information about Admissions, Academics, Student Life, and Student Service, Ocean County College offered separate content pages for “Future Students,” “Current Students,” “Parents,” “Alumni,” “Community,” and “Faculty & Staff.” Each of these sections offered information specific to that audience. The “Parents” section offered information about tuition and fees, scholarships, programs, and the application process, and the “Faculty & Staff” section offered links to Web-based employee resources like continuing and professional education, safety and security, and health services (<http://www.ocean.edu/index.htm>). Similarly, Essex County College offers targeted content for international students (<http://www.essex.edu/admissions/international>), and Gloucester County College provides informational content to students with special needs (http://www.gccnj.edu/student_services/special_needs/index.cfm).

Encouraging Return Visits by Providing Links to Useful Content

Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested that one of the ways that organizations transform Web sites into practical resources for visitors is to provide content of value (pp. 327–328). At the same time, organizations want to avoid directing visitors away from their own site by offering links to competing content (pp. 330–331). The balance to be struck is to respect Web site visitors by linking to information of value to them while conserving visitors by offering only essential external links. Although many of the sites do not offer links to external sites, there are notable exceptions. For example, one of the colleges displayed a banner ad promoting “immediate decision days” for a local 4-year college on its home page. Given the number of college students who begin their educational careers at community colleges, such “collaborative” linking makes a lot of dialogic sense. In an effort to recover state funding allocated to the community colleges, another college offered a direct link for constituents to submit a letter to the New Jersey Legislature. Again, helping visitors to take action that is both valuable to themselves, and in the organization’s best interest, suggests identification (or “coorientation,” a dialogic technique) with the audience, and a recognition of the organization’s shared commitment and mutuality with the public (Kent & Taylor, 2002, pp. 25–26). By offering links to external organizations,

the colleges are communicating a larger institutional message—that they are aware of, and respect, the information and communication needs of their publics.

Interactive Media to Generate Return Visits

Although not typical of all colleges, some of the colleges have well-developed interactive features. For example, Burlington County College offers streaming audio links to the college radio station, Web casts, and links to video recaps of college events (<http://www.bcc.edu/pages/1.asp>). Similarly, Union County College offers *Internet Video from UCC-NJ* on the college's home page (<http://www.ucc.edu/default.htm>), and Raritan Valley offered online access to audio and videocasts (podcasts and vodcasts) featuring faculty lectures, interviews, and career advice (<http://www.raritanval.edu/pstudents/videos.html>).

The colleges also offer links to highlight programs and services. For example, all of the colleges offer links on the front page to information about the NJ STAR program, a merit-based scholarship that affords all New Jersey high school students who graduate in the top 20% of their class the opportunity to attend New Jersey's community colleges tuition free. Regarding services that are unique to the colleges, Atlantic Cape Community College provides separate links on the front page for its Academy of Culinary Arts and Casino Career Institute (<http://www.atlantic.edu>), and, at the time this article was written, Salem Community College was highlighting its Glass Education Center with graphic representations of glass art and a prominent link to the glass center on the front page (<http://www.salemcc.edu>).

Solicit Feedback and Encourage Dialogue

Like commercial sites, Stoner (2000) recommended that colleges use well-developed interactive features to capture users' requests and to track users' interests and needs. The coders identified examples of interactive dialogic tactics on several college Web sites. Camden Community College, for example, offers "C3," an interactive hangout where students can post messages, blogs, and videos on their favorite social media platforms (<http://www.camdencc.edu/c3/C3/Welcome.html>).

On the surface, these tactics serve to promote college programs and features while increasing the stickiness of the site. On a deeper level, these tactics create the foundation for long-lasting relationships by providing stakeholders with information and opportunities to communicate with others about important issues. Increasing the likelihood of return visits increases the organization's chances of building a relationship with stakeholders, and increases organization–public engagement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research question one inquired about the dialogic features of community college Web sites. The data from the first stage of the research design support the findings reported by Taylor et al. (2001) that a wide variance in the presence of the characteristics of dialogue was found. But even if an organizational Web site follows four of the five dialogic principles, it will not be fully dialogic unless it follows through on two-way communication (Taylor et al., 2001).

Unfortunately, the Dialogic Feedback Loop indices scored the lowest. Collectively, the data suggest that the 19 community colleges are not fully utilizing the dialogic capacity of the Internet, particularly in the areas of the Generation of Return Visitors and Dialogic Feedback Loop. The findings of the first stage of data collection and analysis also reveal that the colleges are not capitalizing on the interactive potential offered by the Internet.

Research Question 2 inquired about the relationship between the dialogic features and organization–public responsiveness. Kent and Taylor’s Internet Principles were hypothesized to have an effect on dialogic communication and responsiveness. The highly responsive colleges received the highest scores for three of the five indices, namely, Ease of Interface, Generation of Return Visitors, and Dialogic Feedback Loop, and the responsive colleges scored higher than the highly responsive colleges for the Useful Information and Conservation of Visitors indices. The scores for the nonresponsive scores were significantly lower than the highly responsive and responsive scores for all of the five dialogic principles. The findings suggest that there is a direct relationship between Kent and Taylor’s Internet Principles and dialogic communication.

The data also show that different principles did in fact elicit different dialogic and responsiveness effects. College Web sites that appeared to be dialogic were more responsive to user requests. In terms of dialogic communication, the data suggest that the Useful Information, Ease of Use, Generation of Return Visitors, and Dialogic Feedback Loop features are strong predictors of dialogic communication, whereas the Conservation of Visitors feature have weak predictive ability, as indicated by the nonsignificant correlations with the overall dialogic scores in the user experiences and assessments.

The researchers’ attempt to apply Kent and Taylor’s Dialogic Internet Principles to community colleges suggests that because we are dealing with complex communicative events, dialogic communication cannot be easily broken into neatly separated pieces. The results also suggest that the availability of Dialogic Feedback Loops strongly influences the relative “usefulness” of a college Web site. More important, the results suggest that there is a direct relationship between colleges that offer opportunities for dialogic feedback and the actual responsiveness of the colleges to users’ requests.

The success of colleges/universities, the economic and cultural cores of local communities, largely depends on how effectively schools maintain mutually beneficial relationships with their local communities (Kim, Brunner, & Fitch-Hauser, 2006). As noted earlier, resource dependency theory suggests that the resources available to institutions, directly affect their ability to achieve goals and may even affect their survival (Pfeffer, 1982). As suggested by Bruning (2002), shifting the study and practice of public relations to a relational, dialogic approach, will help focus the field on developing techniques for initiating, building, and maintaining mutually beneficial, mutually satisfying, and mutually committed relationships.

For a decade, Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) Dialogic Internet Principles have extended the breadth and depth of the study and practice of Web-based public relations. Despite the fact that more students are enrolling in community colleges than ever before (Templin, 2004), the data suggest that New Jersey’s community colleges and similar schools may be in the early stages of developing collaborative, mutually beneficial relationships with their publics.

The findings of this study lend support to many of the critical, qualitative, and quantitative assessments of dialogic public relations practices via the Internet. By fully explicating Kent and Taylor’s five Dialogic Principles, this study examined the relationship between the Dialogic Principles (combined and separate), dialogic communication, and relationship-

building exchanges. The findings of this study—which indicate that two of the five dialogic principles (Useful Information and Dialogic Feedback Loop) are stronger predictors of actual responsiveness—can guide future research and development of college Web sites.

However, the results of this study are also instructive for organizations of all sizes. As this and several other studies mentioned earlier have demonstrated, organizations that *should* be the best at utilizing mediated communication channels like the Internet are often not very good at it. Some current scholarship is examining how to broaden the idea of dialogic public relations with stakeholders and publics to include more of a focus on internal publics and using dialogue as a framework for ethical communication as its original theorists imagined (cf. Kent, 2008).

Future research needs to focus on how to incorporate dialogic, interactive, communication *into* organizational Web sites, rather than just evaluating its absence or presence. An experimental approach might allow researchers to test various principles using altered Web sites and enable researchers to determine which strategies are of the most importance and provide the highest return in terms of responsiveness and relationship management.

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