

CASE STUDY

The University of Alabama Reaches New Markets with Merit



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THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA[®]



The University of Alabama

Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Institution

The University of Alabama

Location

Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Established

1831

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2016



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In 2016, the University of Alabama started using Merit to publish its Dean's list and President's list stories. They elected to bring on Merit as it drastically reduced the time and effort it takes to publish these massive stories and handled the distribution to share the story with the media outlets local to each student mentioned. UA's Merit strategy evolved from 2016-2020 as they worked to publish and distribute even more stories through the tool about other accomplishments students are making while attending. However, they became

limited in what they could publish due to restricted bandwidth. There was only one staff member operating Merit at the time, and her other responsibilities did not offer them much time to devote to expanding the school's use of Merit.

However, in 2021, UA hired Stephanie Pettis as Assistant Director for Strategic Initiatives and Analytics, who was challenged to take their use of Merit to the next level. The goal of the UA communications department was to expand how they're using Merit and discover new strategies they can implement with its help.



FIRST DA

UA
2023

When we spoke with Stephanie, she reminisced about her time working as a student during her undergraduate years, where it was her job to fax a story about a student to every media network pertinent to that student. It was her job to make sure the student's story got to the right people, but it was a massively manual process. After she joined UA and got started using Merit, that experience came full circle. She shared,



“When I first started using [Merit], it flashed me back to when I would be the person that was standing there, you know, putting everyone in the [machine], but it's that mindset of, every student deserves to have their story told and, and we're in the business of storytelling, that's what we do. And so every student deserves that same level of recognition and same level of work to help push them forward in whatever it is they feel passionately about.”



to limit to what can be
and if it doesn't matter
to get the credit.
PRODUCTION | COLLABORATION

Handwritten notes on a sticky note at the top of the cubicle wall.

Handwritten notes inside the elephant cutouts on the cubicle wall, including phrases like "I'm not a legend", "I'm a legend", and "I'm a legend".

WHERE LEGENDS ARE MADE



So began Merit's evolution at UA, spurred by the communications team's desire to recognize as many students as they can and Stephanie's prioritization of educating staff, students and parents about Merit. As she explored how UA can take Merit further, she revitalized a feeder network of staff that would share potential stories with her. This was the catalyst for how UA uses Merit today.

Stephanie, aided by the help of Jennifer Brady, who later joined the UA Merit team to aid in writing and publishing content through Merit, utilized live trainings Merit offers its users to educate other communications and marketing

directors, specialists, and managers on campus about the tool and what types of stories they want to publish through it. As they came to understand the power of Merit's distribution, these staff members began sending Stephanie and Jennifer stories about students in their departments or clubs that should be recognized. UA already had an excellent news center strategy to share stories about its students on the UA website, but once department heads learned how their students' stories would get shared with an even wider audience when sent through Merit, they began sending Stephanie and Jennifer emails of their students to highlight.



Having this network gives UA the ability to recognize students who otherwise might not be highlighted. Stephanie explained that she'll get, "A list of students from arts and art history that receive scholarships, and it may just be a small scholarship in the grander sense,...but we still push it out because what we've been able to do is reach these rural newspapers and media for a lot of our students across the nation that we never would have had the capacity to do because finding all of those media is virtually impossible." That's the power of Merit that UA has been able to harness. Expanding their reach far beyond media in their immediate area and capitalizing on the success of student-driven stories to hometown outlets.

Additionally, the UA team prioritized educating incoming students about Merit to ensure they are familiar with their account and know how to reach and share the stories that mention them. During Bama Bound, which is UA's orientation, students and parents are introduced to Merit. They are given a card that tells them what Merit is, how to opt in, how to customize their account and what to expect when stories are published mentioning them. This ensures students and parents are familiar with Merit before the semester even begins and increases their engagement when stories are published. Students and parents are more likely to share them across social media or with others in the student's support network.



With these combined strategies of educating the key stakeholders about Merit and emphasizing student recognition, UA has skyrocketed the number of achievements it publishes through Merit from 80 in 2017 to 126 stories in 2022, and they are already on track in 2023 to exceed that number from last year. The sheer range of stories UA publishes each academic year is astounding, from scholarships to academic achievements to extracurriculars to research; as Stephanie put it, “If a campus partner sends an achievement to us, we will figure out a way to make it work. We consider it a challenge.” UA certainly has the mindset to do whatever it takes to get its students recognized and highlighted by their community and peers!

Stephanie commented that certain stories are made for mainstream media, and others wouldn't likely get picked up. For instance, a story about the university's sports team would serve well in mainstream media, but a story about a student's ballroom dance competition likely would get passed over. But with Merit, they can share these niche stories and ensure that all students receive equal recognition for the successes they are achieving at UA by reaching the student's hometown media. Jennifer shared this sentiment, going on to say, “Merit is a great way for us to get students recognized that are not necessarily getting recognized on campus. They're not in every club, they're not 4.0 plus GPA every semester, they're not campaigning for different things, but they're achieving great things in their own right, and Merit helps us get them recognized.”



Taking Merit to the next level at UA has centered around student recognition and, in doing so, has expanded UA's reach. With so many students from all over the country, it's difficult to maintain relationships with every media outlet UA would like to reach. As Stephanie shared, "We just don't have the people power capacity to be able to do that. And, without Merit, I don't think we would be able to reach some of those markets that we do now." For instance, UA has rural health scholars that, because they are from such small areas of the country their stories don't make it as press releases, but with a tool like Merit, the university is able to send a personalized story about the student to their

local media and the story gets picked up because these areas are wanting for news to publish. Without access to Merit's maintained database of media contacts, Stephanie and Jennifer wouldn't have the bandwidth to connect with these small media outlets and make it easy for them to publish the story. They have gotten feedback from these outlets expressing their gratitude that the story sent through Merit is already written and formulated for them to copy, paste and publish. As Stephanie explained, "It's a crucial way that we incorporate what we're trying to do to not only recognize our students but reach our media and help them."



Beyond written stories, the UA team plans to explore how Merit can assist them in expanding their multimedia content distribution. Merit's ability to send videos with the stories published through its platform offers Jennifer and Stephanie the ability to write stories to be picked up by broadcast media, and their goal is to devote more time and resources to that type of content production now that they've had a multimedia specialist join their communications department.





Stories Published

August 21, 2022 - August 21, 2023

122 Merit Achievements

22,625 Personalized Member Stories



Students

38,645



Audiences Reached

Parents	130
Media	4.5K
High Schools	2.6K
Government Reps	11.4K



Top Referring Sites

Meritpages.com	67.7%
Direct	12.2%
Facebook	10.2%



Email Performance¹

Member Emails Sent	37,076
Open Rate	68%
Click-Through Rate	45%
Parent Emails Sent	226
Open Rate	74%
Click-Through Rate ²	40%



Engagement and Impressions

Social Actions ³	9.7K
Estimated impressions across Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn	2.29M
Government Comments ⁴	5.4K
Page Views ⁵	57,360

¹ Emails are sent to delegates, parents, and schools ² Benchmark click-to-open rate in the education sector is around 12%. With Merit, Arkansas Boys State had a clickto-open rate over 3 times the industry average. ³ Social media shares, reactions, comments, and clicks that referenced your achievements ⁴ Comments and congratulatory messages sent by government officials members ⁵ Number of times someone read a Merit story on www.ua.edu



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