Valdosta State University Automates Its Entire Media Communications Strategy

M + V STATE VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Valdosta State University

Valdosta, Georgia

Institution
Valdosta State University

Location
Valdosta, Georgia

Established
1913

Enrollment
11,000

VALDOSTA STATE
UNIVERSITY

Overview of Valdosta State University and Challenges

Valdosta State University is public comprehensive university in Georgia, with 12,000+ students and a small centralized Communications office. In the last decade, VSU faced many of the challenges encountered by modern institutions: enrollment challenges, budget reductions, and limited staff resources. Following a reduction in force that left the university with one communications professional in 2015, Leadership in the university's central marketing and communications office recognized that in order to maintain media relations and effective communications, VSU needed to automate as much content as possible while generating maximum impact.

In reviewing their processes and content, VSU learned that sending scholarship, graduation, and honors information to hometown media outlets generated a higher return than their other media relations efforts, but required significant time and research to accomplish for graduating classes of 1,500-2,000 students each year. To enable their team to continue creating high-engagement content, VSU sought out a vendor to assist in automation and efficiency.

Situation & Goals

Goal: Automate Hometown News Releases, Maximize Efficiency

VSU's primary goal in seeking a partner for hometown media releases was to free up the workload of their limited media relations and communications team. Their process, on average, required 5 to 7 working days after each commencement ceremony and dean's list announcements – 20 to 30 working days each year! With this workload, the team was unable to take advantage of other media opportunities, to write for publications and social media, or efficiently manage internal communications on campus.

Despite the inefficiency and time lost on these projects, the return on media mentions and brand amplification was significant enough to not remove hometown releases from their tactics. In their search for a vendor, they looked to solve this problem by automating and standardizing high-impact hometown media content while providing time in their workflow for other content.

Requirements for Vendor

While seeking a vendor to partner with on this project, VSU had two clear requirements.

First, the partnership must provide students with an easy-to-access destination for all academic and extracurricular achievements, as well as all media mentions in hometown news releases, serving as a scrapbook/resume hybrid.

In previous surveys, students had expressed a dislike for multiple logins and portals to track academic progress, advising, career counseling, student life, and other experiences separately. To address this, the university had developed cumulative portals and platforms that integrated student data into single portals, and required that new solutions follow this trend. Implementing a solution for media releases and student achievement had to easily integrate with existing technologies and provide a single location to track the data. In doing so, the university predicted that students would be more likely to use the solution.

Second, the solution needed to automate most or all of the hometown news release process for VSU's communications team. The team identified a need to generate standardized processes for seasonal and recurring announcements like dean's lists, graduations, academic recognitions, and scholarships. Their existing processes varied among team members, and included writing individual releases using find-and-replace or mail merge features with word processors, then mass-emailing the releases to all of their media contacts. Any new solution had to automate as much of this as possible, freeing up time for the team to focus on generating high-engagement content and media relations.

Implementation & Use

Automation

Valdosta State implemented Merit Pages in 2011, beginning with their hometown news releases for graduation and dean's lists. Using a news release template in Merit, the team added variables for student name, hometown, major, college, and more to automate individual releases for over 1,000 graduates in one workday. The releases were then sent automatically to each graduate's hometown news media on behalf of the university, using Merit's active network of media contacts to target the correct markets. What once took the VSU team a week to produce was complete in less than two days!

|	
STUDENT EMAIL ADDRESS *	Email
STUDENT EMAIL ADDRESS 2	
FIRST NAME *	First
LAST NAME *	Last
SUFFIX	
POSTAL CODE *	Zip code
HOMETOWN	Hometown
MIDDLE NAME	
STATE	
MAJOR	Major
MINOR	
DEGREE	Degree
CLASS YEAR (e.g., 2019)	Class
CEEB CODE (?)	CEEB Code
PARENT POSTAL CODES (?)	
EMAIL CC (?)	☐ Personal Email ☐ Parent email

SAVE & CONTINUE

On-Demand Content and Collaboration

Following success with graduation and dean's lists, VSU expanded their use of student Merit Pages beyond seasonal events to on-demand content to recognize students with custom releases and achievement badges for scholarships, Greek Life membership, community service activities, academic honors, and more. Collaborations with other teams on campus allowed VSU to provide students with a deliverable to record their achievement and engagement over their entire college career.

"Our key to success with Merit, once we met our initial goals of automation and workflow, was to share with our campus partners how to efficiently use the platform. It gave us an opportunity to partner with student life and academic affairs to recognize student achievements in ways that they just didn't have the capacity to do on their own," said Keith Warburg, who lead the VSU team. "It was a benefit to students, but also a great way to build collaboration across campus for our team."

Student Interaction

The VSU team uploaded student data into the system automatically, providing each student with a Merit Page listing their achievements and news releases without any effort required by the student, another key requirement for the project. As the success of the platform grew, VSU encouraged students to upload their own achievements as user-generated content. Students in leadership positions in organizations or who participated in extracurricular activities began to upload their own content to their Merit Pages, expanding the return on investment for the project and supplying the Communications team with a new source of content for their newsroom.
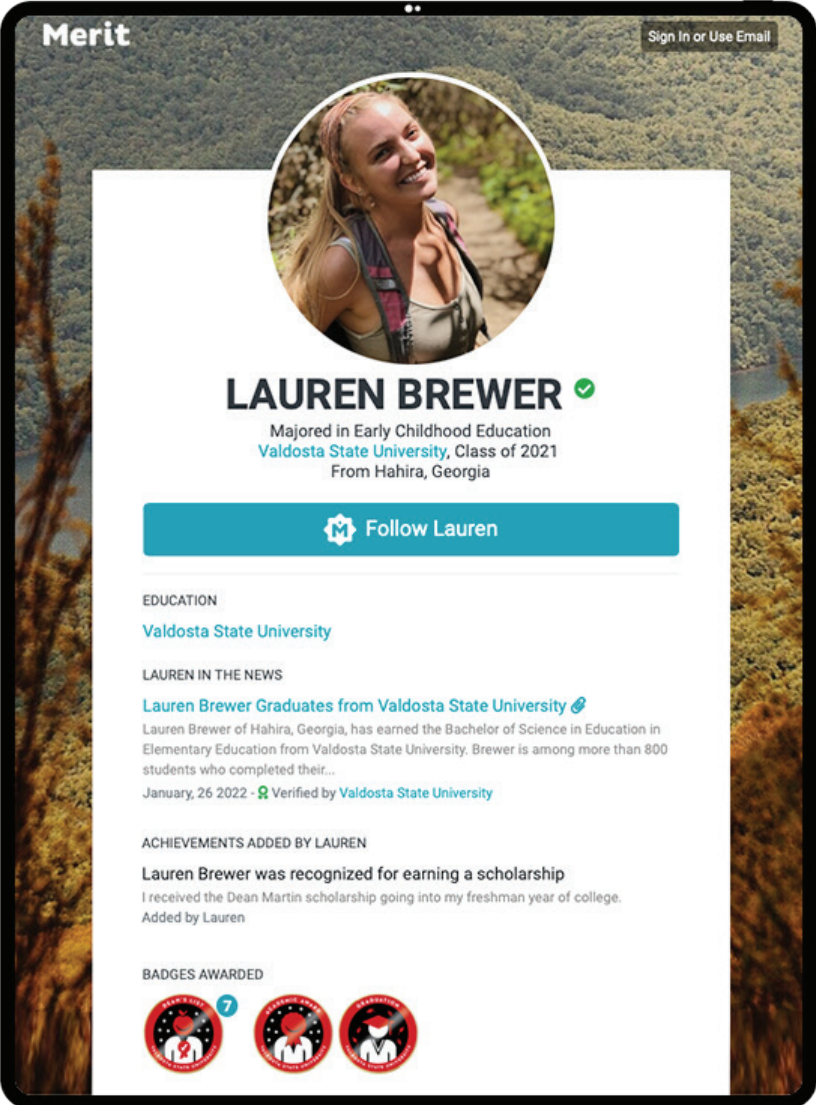
The Results

By maintaining a strong partnership with Merit for multiple years, the Valdosta State University team has provided nearly **26,000 students** with a consistent, easy-to-use platform for tracking their achievements and recognitions throughout their college career.

The partnership also allowed the VSU team to free up their workload to focus on high-impact content, enabling the hire of a full-time social media coordinator and an additional graduate assistant to focus on strategic content initiatives and to resurrect the university's magazine, which had been discontinued due to insufficient resources. Merit was integrated into the team's media relations workflow by uploading magazine features, media advisories, and press releases into Merit and tagging students – and faculty – in the content to reach their hometown media outlets, expanding the reach of their content and the affinity of their students.

After experiencing success with student pages, VSU approached Merit to develop Faculty pages as a resource for highlighting faculty recognition, publications, and achievements for recruiting new students, attracting potential donors, and increasing media requests for subject matter experts. By collaborating with Merit's product development team, VSU created an searchable, dynamic resource for their admissions counselors, fundraisers, and media relations team without having to develop their own solution or solicit another vendor contract.

SHANI WILFRED PHD ✓

Professor, General Education Coordinator, Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice at Valdosta State University
From Miami, FL

🌐

M Follow Shani

INTERESTS + EXPERTISE

Restorative Justice | Curriculum and Pedagogy Assessment

Faith-Based Organizations | Community Based Organizations

Community Based Organizations and their involvement with offenders and the criminal justice system

Juvenile Justice Issues | juvenile waivers | ATOD | Mentally-Ill Offenders,

Community Corrections | the use of community service | probation

electronic monitoring as alternative forms of sentencing

Minorities in the Criminal Justice System

Factors Influencing Student Success

EDUCATION

Taylor University
Indiana University Bloomington

WORK EXPERIENCE

Professor at Valdosta State University

SANJAY GUPTA PHD, CPA, CMA

Associate Dean of the Harley Langdale Jr. College of Business Administration, Professor of Accounting at Valdosta State University
From Valdosta, GA

M Follow Sanjay

INTERESTS + EXPERTISE

Managerial Accounting | Internal Reporting | IMA | CMA | Business Ethics

Career Strategies | Certified Management Accountant

Managerial and Cost Accounting | Certified Public Accountant | CPA

EDUCATION

Georgia Southern University
University of Central Florida
University of Calcutta

WORK EXPERIENCE

Associate Dean at Valdosta State University

During this time period, I earned the following awards and recognitions:
* 2018, 2017, 2016 Award of Excellence, Outstanding Student Chapter, IMA

* 2015 Ursel K. Albers IMA Campus Advocate of the Year Award

* 2014 Outstanding Teacher Award, Department of Accounting

* 2014 Rea and Lillian Steele Outstanding Service Award

July 2014 - Present

EDUCATION

Georgia Southern University
University of Central Florida
University of Calcutta

CURRICULUM VITAE

Curriculum Vitae 🔖

By the Numbers

In the last two fiscal years (July 2018 to June 2020), VSU distributed **5,682 hometown news releases**, and the media outlets that received hometown releases in that period covered **21,190 postal codes** in **49 states**.

Currently, the total number of students uploaded into the system with at least one release produced (all-time or current) is **25,890 students**, of which **25,562 (98.7%)** have at least one achievement in Merit. **5,580 students** in VSU's Merit portal are current undergraduates, which represents **70% of the undergrad population**.

July 2018 to June 2020

5,682	21,190	49
Hometown News Releases	Postal Codes Distributed To	States Reached

VSU Students Enrolled in Merit, Spring 2020

25,890	98.7%
Students Enrolled in Merit	Of Students Have At Least **One Merit Achievement**

(Source: Spring 2020 Enrollment Report, VSU)