Voting With Their Mice

The best Democratic candidate for president is Barack Obama, Macs are better than PCs and modestly dressed women are more attractive than those who flaunt their bodies.

At least, that’s what Dartmouth College students have to say on the matter.

Those insights and others are available to anyone who visits Openvote, a Web site that tallies responses from within a college campus to literally any query a student can dream up. From the data, one can tentatively conclude that almost as many students at Dartmouth believe in God as those who don’t; “The Moose” should be Dartmouth’s mascot; a large majority does not support the alumni association’s lawsuit against the college; and plenty more.

The site, an Internet startup that began as part of a class project, is the brainchild of two students at Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business. Their concept is simple: that traditional telephone polling skips over most college students, and that no free service currently gauges their opinions in matters of politics, preferences and other weighty (or not so weighty) issues of the day. But rather than the traditional top-down model, students poll each other.

“One of the beauties of user-generated content and Web sites like this is that they dictate what’s important for them,” said Colin Van Ostern, a first-year student who worked on John Edwards’ 2004 presidential campaign.

Of course, online polls of this type will always be somewhat unscientific, with problems of self-selection and sample size. Questions elicit anywhere from a few scattered responses to between 600 and 700, with active comment boards, for the most popular topics. “This is a way to take the medium that students are most comfortable with ... and use it in ways that make everyone’s lives a little bit better,” Van Ostern said. Along with Jason Freedman, a second-year student, his goal is to compile “better insight than we have now” on student beliefs and to make their opinions more transparent. For example, the site eliminates multiple votes by the same person and takes other measures to reduce fraud and poll manipulation.

“It is one of these wonderfully virile things that so quickly captures the imagination and participation of college students in particular,” said Colin C. Blaydon, the director of Tuck’s Center for Private Equity and Entrepreneurship, which provides the Openvote project with incubator space. “To have one of these kinds of networking but opinion-seeking devices that in fact is controlled by the participants, so they are both posing the questions to their peers but everyone is getting the chance to see what the response is ... is a fabulous way of gauging opinion because you’re gauging opinion not just from the responses but you’re gauging opinion from the queries....”
Openvote began at Dartmouth just before the Democratic presidential debate on campus, and just in time to ask students who won (Hillary Clinton). It’s since expanded to Drexel University and Washington University in St. Louis, with more in the works.

The project’s genesis took place last winter, in Tuck’s Introduction to Entrepreneurship course. Van Ostern and Freedman continued working on the idea as part of the Tuck First-Year Project, a program that requires students to develop and pursue business ideas or consult for existing firms. And while most of their peers were busy interviewing for high-powered summer internships, the two were hard at work refining their idea and setting up the first Openvote Web site, for Dartmouth students.

The resources at Tuck, including the entrepreneurship course, the guided first-year project and opportunities to support students’ startup ideas, were enough to convince Van Ostern and Freedman that being at business school was a distinct advantage over trying to start a company from scratch off campus.

“If I hadn’t gone to school, I wouldn’t have been able to do [it] on my own,” Van Ostern said.

The Center for Private Equity and Entrepreneurship, for example, helped the students connect with venture-capital firms and potential backers; Freedman gave a presentation to the center’s board as an example of the entrepreneurial work being done by current students. He also won a fellowship from the Maynard Entrepreneurial Internship Program, which helps to support students working on startup projects over the summer.

The two students plan to continue developing their startup with hopes of launching as a full-blown Internet company after earning their M.B.A. degrees. The site is free, with plans to introduce Web advertising as a revenue stream.

“We’re pretty excited when the resources we’re providing to entrepreneurial students seem to bear fruit the way this one is,” Blaydon said.

— Andy Guess

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/12/10/openvote.

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