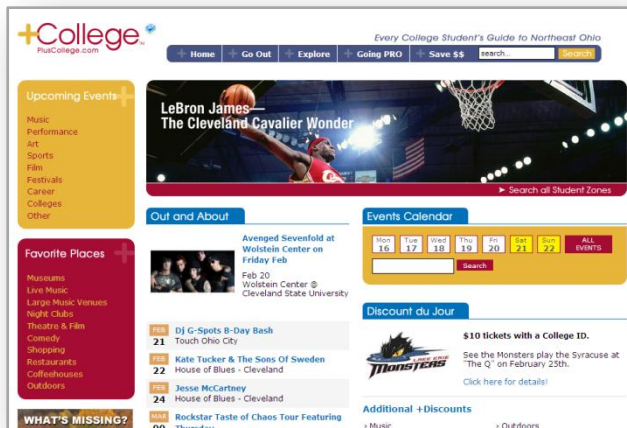


Cleveland Plus using pluscollege.com Web site to keep college students in region

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The Cleveland Plus marketing campaign is turning its boosterish focus on a new goal - retaining our college talent. A new Web site, pluscollege.com, will build on the withered efforts of College 360, which launched with great fanfare 3½ years ago then sank for lack of leadership and funding. At pluscollege.com, students will find links to three things surveys show they value highly - events, discounts and internships, organizers say.



The Web site's thrust is to draw more of the region's 180,000 students into the community. "If our economy is going to turn, it depends on educating more students, engaging them and anchoring them here," said Tom Chema, president of Hiram College.

The Cleveland Plus Marketing Alliance used a \$42,000 grant from the George Gund Foundation for the Web site. It's scheduled to go live Monday. Using a mix of corporate and state funding, the Cleveland Plus alliance sells a 16-county region to tourists and businesses and strives to build regional pride.

Now, add college students to the focus, said Rick Batyko, who manages the Cleveland Plus effort.

Batyko said he views pluscollege.com "as a tactic in a larger effort to retain students," adding, "This is our niche. Often, students come here, go back to the dorm and they move on," Batyko said. "We're simply trying to make it easier for them to get to know us better."

It's a modest effort, compared with its predecessor. College 360 launched in the summer of 2005, backed by money from 15 colleges and universities, local foundations and the Ohio Department of Development. The ambitious, four-year plan sought to raise \$5 million for a three-pronged goal - boost enrollment, engage students in the region's vitality and keep more of them once they graduate.

The Northeast Ohio Council on Higher Education administered the strategy, crafted by Collegia Inc. The firm, based in a Boston suburb, specializes in linking colleges with their communities and local economies. But 3½ years into the plan, organizers acknowledge College 360 fell flat.

"I think we may have bitten off too much at one time," said Chema, who co-chaired College 360.

Todd Hoffman, president of Collegia, said the effort needed a full-time director. But funding couldn't be sustained, mainly because universities started to tighten their belts, Chema said.

The effort raised about \$1.5 million, Hoffman said. The "greatest folly," he said, was lack of involvement from Edward Hundert, the former president of Case Western Reserve University. The region's premier research university kicked in money but Hundert offered little vocal support, Hoffman said. "He was reluctant to get on board," Hoffman said. "That threw us for a big loop." Hundert could not be reached for comment.

College 360's marketing efforts, including a Web site, an annual magazine and discount-ticket nights at Indians games, pulled more students into the community and raised collaboration among universities, Chema and Hoffman believe.

Pluscollege.com will rise from the remnants of a Web site that was part of the College 360 effort. Hoffman's company, Collegia, built both sites.

The College 360 effort asked colleges and universities to kick in up to \$25,000 a year. Cleveland Plus wants \$5,000 a year from participating schools, officials said.

Besides featuring regional events and entertainment, pluscollege.com links with 11 college Web sites and NEOintern.net. That site, run by the Northeast Ohio Council on Higher Education, seeks to link college students with internships offered by local employers.

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