

# **University Relations**

## **Mississippi State University**

### Annual Communications Plan 2004-2005

#### **I. Linkage to university priorities and goals**

##### **Leadership for the 21st Century Mississippi State University Priorities and Goals FY 2003-2007**

#### VI. ENSURE SUPPORT FOR THE UNIVERSITY FROM ALUMNI, FRIENDS, FACULTY AND STAFF, AND THE PUBLIC

- B. Increase understanding of the university's unique role in the state as a land-grant, research institution and heighten national visibility.
  - 1. External communications will support university priorities and help build greater statewide and national visibility for areas of strength.

#### **II. University Relations Mission Statement**

The mission of University Relations is to improve and maintain attitudes and perceptions about Mississippi State.

#### **III. Communication Plan**

##### **Positioning statement**

Mississippi State University, founded in 1878 as a land-grant institution, is proud of its past and its sense of place, but is bound by neither. Throughout its history, the University has been an agent of progress in advancing Mississippi's efforts to provide quality education and to resolve social and economic problems. With 16,000 students and a beautifully landscaped campus in a location that offers small town convenience, quality of life, and outdoor recreation, the University is large enough to offer a wide variety of academic programs and services, and small enough to retain its historic atmosphere of friendliness, helpfulness, and concern for individuals. The student body is predominantly undergraduate, although graduate students are a significant and growing segment of the University. About 75 percent of the students are Mississippi residents, with every state and about 80 countries also represented. While most students pursue professional and career-oriented academic programs, strong foundations in general education and the liberal arts are part of each student's curriculum.

Mississippi State is the principal research and service university of Mississippi. Although instruction is central to the University's purpose, Mississippi State is among the nation's top tier of research institutions, as indicated by its designation by the Carnegie Foundation as a Doctoral/Research-Extensive institution and by its ranking of 57<sup>th</sup> among public

universities in research and development expenditures, according to the National Science Foundation. Scientists, scholars, technicians and other professionals are building better airplanes, ships and computers; developing new crops and food products and methods to protect them; and fighting pollution, illiteracy, and crime. Through its statewide programs of teaching, research and service, the University provides assistance to business and industry, agriculture and forestry, and government agencies and public education, ensuring a better quality of life for all Mississippians.

### **Comparative strengths and weaknesses of Mississippi State**

Market research surveys conducted in 1991-92, 1996, and 1998 lend credibility to several widespread perceptions about the University. An extensive telephone survey of target audiences suggests that the perceived comparative advantages of Mississippi State include:

#### **Strongest Perceptions**

- Good place to study agriculture, forestry, veterinary medicine, and engineering
- Best in state in research
- Best in state in aid to agriculture and forestry

#### **Strong Perceptions**

- Good place to study architecture, education, business, accounting, science, liberal arts
- Best in state in athletics
- Best in state in aid to economic development
- Safe campus
- Smart students
- Friendly campus
- Good undergraduate and graduate programs
- Good environment for minorities and women

#### **Perceived weaknesses**

- Insufficient financial resources, or unmet needs directly related to the availability of funding. Faculty and staff tend to view the problem first in terms of compensation. Students are more likely to cite perceived shortcomings in student services and campus facilities (particularly parking).
- The University's location is cited frequently as a handicap, both for its lack of proximity to population centers within the state in terms of national perceptions of Mississippi.

#### **The competitive environment**

As the state's largest and most diverse institution and the University with the strongest claim to a statewide presence, Mississippi State enjoys high visibility within the state. Market research suggests that awareness of the University and knowledge of its primary strengths appear to be high within Mississippi. The University generally receives as much or more notice in the state's news media as any other institution, based on state newspaper clipping service results. Surveys of prospective students and analysis of more ACT reports indicate that Mississippi State's principal competitors for freshmen students are the University of Mississippi, the

University of Southern Mississippi, Auburn University, Louisiana State University, the University of Alabama, and Jackson State University. Out-of-state institutions that attract students who might otherwise attend Mississippi State (in addition to those already cited) tend to be large public institutions. Surveys reveal only slight consideration among prospective Mississippi State students for the smaller in-state universities, community colleges, or liberal arts colleges. Overall, almost 80 percent of the prospective students who named an institution other than Mississippi State as their first choice (in-state or out-of-state) favored either a large public university or a regional public university, with large and small private institutions and two-year colleges preferred by the remainder. Although in-state community colleges are a significant source of Mississippi State students (almost half of MSU graduates entered the university as transfer students), the community colleges as a group were less likely than any other type of institution to be named as a first, second, or third choice by prospective Mississippi State students contemplating their first college experience. Although Mississippi State maintains its position as the state institution with the largest enrollment by a large margin, new student enrollment has declined recently. Mississippi State continues to attract the state's entering freshmen with the strongest academic credentials, as indicated by average ACT and SAT scores.

In student recruiting, the University holds advantages over in-state institutions in competing for students in engineering and agriculture- and forestry-related fields. Mississippi State has the state's only accredited programs in architecture, forestry, and veterinary medicine, and survey results indicate that the university's enjoys a dominant position in public perception of strength in these areas, as well as in engineering. In public perceptions, the university is highly competitive in such typically large programs such as business, teacher education, communication, art, and liberal arts. Mississippi State lags in public perception of program strength in only two areas in which it competes: pre-medicine and pre-law.

Mississippi State enjoys advantages over the competing in-state institutions in its research and development capability, particularly in areas of greatest academic strengths, and in the organizational ability to deliver services directly to major segments of the state's economy. This advantage is reflected in the levels of external funding for research and development at Mississippi State, compared with other state institutions. Survey results also demonstrate a high level of public awareness of the university's strengths in research and economic development.

### **Regionally and nationally:**

Regionally and nationally, Mississippi State is highly competitive in research and development in selected fields including engineering and agricultural sciences. Outside Mississippi, the University's name recognition and familiarity with its programs decrease dramatically.

In 2000, University Relations contracted with Gehrung Associates, a national university relations counseling firm, to help expand Mississippi State's visibility among national media outlets. An account executive with the Keene, N.H.-based firm is assigned to MSU as an extension of the news staff. Staff members in University Relations identify and help develop potential story ideas, which are pitched to outlets ranging from the Wall Street Journal to National Public radio by the Gehrung staff member. MSU has seen a significant rise in the number of placements in both national and regional outlets. A partial list includes the New York Times, the Washington Post, USA Today, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Philadelphia Inquirer, Christian Science Monitor, National Public Radio (two separate features), Los Angeles Times, Fresno Bee, San Diego Union-Tribune, Cincinnati Post, Fitness Magazine, CNN.com, CBSNews.com, Salon.com, and others.

## Primary Message

**Mississippi State works for the State of Mississippi by helping its people achieve a higher quality of life and is a national resource for education and research.**

- The University works with individuals to help them achieve a higher quality of life by realizing their personal and professional goals.
  - Mississippi State offers a warm and caring environment in which students may enjoy in safety and security opportunities for social and intellectual interaction with people of varied backgrounds and cultures, aiding their development as productive and enlightened citizens.
  - Mississippi State prepares students for positions of leadership in their professions and in their communities through outstanding teaching and learning opportunities in career-oriented undergraduate and graduate programs based on strong foundations in general education and the liberal arts.
  - Mississippi State, through its continuing education and extension efforts, extends leadership development through lifelong learning programs.
  - Mississippi State aids state business, industry, agriculture, government and education by producing graduates who are ready to work in a global economic environment and by aiding in the professional development and training of employees for an increasingly complex and international working environment.
  
- **The University works with private and public entities, including corporations, governments, schools, communities, and civic and industry groups, to help resolve social problems and improve economic and educational opportunities for all Mississippians.**
  - Mississippi State conducts research and service that helps Mississippi business, industry and agriculture become more competitive and more profitable by solving technical problems and adopting new technologies and by developing new products and markets.
  - Mississippi State provides expert assistance to government agencies and public education, as well as private business and individuals, through research and service that helps address issues including poverty, illiteracy, crime, pollution, and rural health needs that affect Mississippi's progress and development.
  
- **Mississippi State supports the State of Mississippi in its development of global economic and cultural opportunities.**
  - The University helps business, industry and agriculture develop new markets overseas, and helps make Mississippi business and industry more competitive with foreign enterprises.
  - The University supports scientific research of national significance that serves as a magnet for industry and a catalyst for economic development in Mississippi.
  - The University conducts agricultural research that helps solve global problems of hunger and malnutrition and poverty.

## **Primary Communicators: the Internal Audience**

As a large, diverse and complex organization, Mississippi State University continually sends thousands of "messages" to thousands of potential receivers of those messages. Some of the messages are consciously crafted; many others are not. Sometimes we are aware of our potential audiences; often we are not. Everyone who is associated with Mississippi State communicates about the institution, both within the University and to external audiences. The cumulative power of the communications about the University that emanate from the thousands of people within the Mississippi State family does much to shape the perceptions of the University held by external audiences. Surveys of Mississippi State constituents suggest that "word of mouth" communications from faculty and staff, students and alumni constitute a major source of information about the University, rivaling more "official" University communications and the mass media. It is clearly in the University's interests that communications from all sources, informal as well as formal, be as accurate and as consistent as possible, if the University is to be widely known and understood. That is one reason why the faculty, staff and students of the University are viewed as a primary audience for University communications: the thousands of University communicators cannot convey accurate and helpful information about the University to external audiences until they have received such information themselves. The University's role in helping individuals communicate about the institution consists of providing them with timely and relevant information, and working to create a common understanding of goals and purposes; nothing in this communication plan should be construed as an attempt to impede the expression of dissenting opinions.

## **Institutional Visual Identity System**

Mississippi State communicates visually, as well as verbally. All of the University's publications have a visual as well as a verbal element, and the name or symbols of the University are displayed frequently on signs, buildings, vehicles and myriad other applications. A consistent visual image, which is both easily recognized and memorable, can help create or strengthen awareness of the institution and lend support to the University's primary messages. Mississippi State in 1992 created and adopted a university-wide symbol-signature, or "logo" and accompanying graphic standards to ensure appropriate use. These elements have won wide acceptance and form the foundation of the university's visual identity system. They should continue to be used consistently as the primary means of visually communicating the name of the university.

## **Selecting and Using Appropriate Media**

Once primary messages and audiences have been agreed upon, communicators must select or develop the combination of media channels best suited to the goals of the communications effort and the human and financial resources available. A large number of communications activities are under way at Mississippi State in a variety of media. The media mix to be used must be determined in conjunction with decisions about budgets, staffing and scheduling.

Use of the mass media can enable the University to reach large numbers of people throughout the state and nation and potentially throughout the world. The mass media also have the advantage of offering quick dissemination of information at little cost. Control of the timing, extent and content of messages delivered via the mass media is, however, minimal. Since the mass media are used to some extent in communicating with all audiences, and since it often is difficult to target a particular audience through the mass media, opportunities that involve

newspapers, magazines, radio, and television broadcasters and so on are discussed here without reference to particular audiences.

Offices assigned external relations responsibilities should expand opportunities for Mississippi State University coverage in a variety of professional, national, and regional media to support and promote University strengths. Communicators should use a variety of technologies and approaches, including phone calls, query letters, email, photography, and news releases for broadcast and print media, and the Internet. They should develop and explore varied media placements such as opinion pieces and guest columns in major newspapers and broadcast "talk shows."

To foster closer relationships with state broadcast and print media, staff members should maintain affiliations with professional organizations and arrange frequent media visits to campus.

### **Promoting awareness and visibility of academic and research programs**

The Office of University Relations creates increased awareness of Mississippi State University's academic programs and research strengths through a variety of established outreach efforts at the state, regional, and national level, including:

**Staff members contribute approximately one Mississippi State University story a month to "Newswise," a national electronic posting service.** This electronic service distributes news from top academic institutions engaged in scientific, medical, liberal arts and business research. Mississippi State posts stories in all of these areas, and journalists can browse the news releases posted weekly, or get e-mail notification that allows them to retrieve news releases. Postings have appeared in online publications such as Environmental Network News and CNN.com, and have generated media follow-up in publications ranging from the San Jose Mercury News to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Inquiries have come from as far away as the United Kingdom.

Staff members make regular national media contact through ProfNet (The Professors Network, a national electronic bulletin board). Through the service, staff members provide timely response to queries from media outlets as small as the Lancaster (Pa.) *New Era* and as large as the *Washington Post*. Mississippi State is one of 2,000 universities, federal labs, and non-profits belonging to ProfNet, an on-line cooperative of public relations officers, and is a charter subscriber, joining in 1993. ProfNet allows staff members to respond to specific media needs by matching Mississippi State University expertise to the question; staff have responded to requests from U.S. News & World Report, the British Broadcasting System, the Charlotte Observer, the Washington Post, and others.

Through a continually updated Experts list, University Relations maintains a database of faculty research and teaching specialties. State media outlets often refer to this list in localizing stories about major news events, and the list serves as a resource for staff members responding to daily media inquiries.

A weekly electronic newsletter, initiated in 1999, currently has more than 4,000 subscribers. "ThisWeek@MsState" includes the latest news about Mississippi State University academics, athletics, and alumni interests. The university's top-level web site features university news, calendars, announcements, and a daily news photo. The site will be continually upgraded.

Opinion pieces by faculty experts are developed and placed in major papers a few times each year. Staff members work with faculty members to craft and place opinion pieces with state, regional, and national media.

About 400 news releases are produced each year to call attention to events, activities, honors, research, academic, and service contributions. Releases are targeted to appropriate media outlets and major news releases are posted at the university's World Wide Web site.

Approximately 40 print "News You Can Use" features will be produced annually for more than 100 newspapers in the state.

Staff members continue to highlight university strengths by producing 50 "Perspectives" radio features annually. This weekly public affairs program produced by University Relations will continue to highlight faculty research interests, comment on current issues, and contributions to the community and the state. The program is also archived on the university website, where it is accessed by about 500 visitors each week. In 2003, "Perspectives" received a Gold Award from the Mississippi Association of Broadcasters; in 2004 it received a first-place award from the College Public Relations Association of Mississippi.

- Staff members produce six annual issues of "Serving Mississippi," a newsletter targeting state opinion leaders and friends. This publication communicates the university's leadership in providing research and teaching for Mississippi's economic competitiveness and quality of life.
- Academic programs are featured in football program articles prepared by University Relations.
- The World Wide Web is used to present the university's messages to a variety of audiences, especially technologically astute prospective and current students. The university's Web site is its most visible publication with almost 10 million viewings of the top-level page each year.
- Forty issues of *Memo*, the faculty-staff newsletter will be produced annually. *Memo* provides opportunities to communicate university messages and information to about 4,200 readers.
- *Alumnus* magazine is produced three times a year for active alumni and *Connection* for younger alumni is produced twice a year.
- A university calendar is produced for sale by mid-September each year.
- The Visual Identity Standards are be updated as needed and a wide range of university publications are monitored for compliance.
- Advertising in support of student recruiting and for other special purposes is designed and placed in a variety of media.
- The publications office produces publications produced including magazines, calendars, newsletters, posters, brochures, annual reports, flyers, invitations, postcards, and the university's faculty/staff newsletter and is responsible for the proper use of the official symbols, marks and logos for the university and for maintaining graphic standards for these

logos. The number of jobs per year ranges from 200-250, not counting those initiated by other departments for which the staff provides proofreading, editing, and/or design consultation. Some specific publications include:

- Annual reports have been produced for the President’s Office, Accounting, Computer Science, the Foundation and the College of Business and Industry
- three issues a year of the *Alumnus* magazine
- two issues a year of the alumni tabloid *Connection*
- four issues a year of donor newsletter *Foundations*
- photographic calendar for the university
- six issues a year of the *Serving Mississippi* newsletter for university constituents
- weekly faculty/staff newsletter *MSU Memo*
- one issue a year of university’s research magazine, *Windows*
- Billboards and newspaper, journal and magazine ads for recruiting and donor relations
- Newsletters for colleges and departments on campus, including the College of Education, College of Arts and Sciences, and College Forest Resources.
- Student Affairs and recruiting publications including:
  - Viewbook, search piece, and travel piece
  - Application and informational packet
  - Series of 10 postcards a year to be sent with personal notes to prospective students
  - One large digital display for college fair use
  - Eight smaller tabletop displays for use by admissions counselors on the road
  - Discovery Day posters and direct mail postcards
  - Minority Student Achievement materials
  - Scholars’ Recognition Day materials
  - Spring Testing materials
  - Orientation materials including folders, flyers, a full color/multiple-page Orientation brochure
  - Orientation Leader posters and information brochures, etc.
  - Roadrunner poster
  - Sanderson Center promotional brochure
  - Student Health Center brochure and forms
  - Mentoring program materials and logo
  - Enrollment visitation posters—hung at high schools to announce visits from MSU
  - Enrollment poster—companion piece to Viewbook with important dates on campus
  - Series of junior/community college ads—do 4 sets of 13 ads throughout year
  - Marketing and production of Dawg Daze materials for freshman students, including posters, postcards, flyers, t-shirt designs, etc.
  - Housing posters and postcards
  - Counseling center brochures
  - Student Affairs Fund-raising brochures
  - Student Support Services brochures
  - Financial Aid and Scholarship flyers and information brochures
  - International Students Admission brochure and form
  - Admissions brochure and form
  - Honors Program handbook and application form

#### **IV. Assessment of Current Efforts**

The ultimate measure of communications success is the extent to which the behavior of target audiences is modified in accordance with university goals. Improved enrollment, increased private contributions, and increased government appropriations are legitimate indicators, for example, but are heavily influenced by many factors other than communications, and so are not adequate indicators when considered alone.

Changes in attitudes and perceptions toward Mississippi State among the university's constituencies will to some extent reflect the successes or failures of the university's communications efforts. University Relations will regularly assess public opinion and any apparent changes in perceptions of the institution.

Measures of communications output (number of news releases, number of publications, etc.) can be measured easily and can be attributed directly and almost exclusively to departmental efforts. These may reflect gains and losses in performance, and ought to be monitored, although they are not in themselves indicators of effectiveness. University Relations analyzes comparative coverage in the state's major newspaper of the university and its major in-state competitors each quarter.

Third-party assessments of communications efforts can offer both a greater degree of objectivity and a valuable outside perspective, and therefore should be systematically collected.

The university each year should evaluate the overall communications effort in support of each of the areas of fund-raising, student recruitment, and government relations. Each assessment will include a measure of outputs directed to those areas (publications, news releases, etc.) and the elicitation of opinions of campus professionals working in each of those areas on the extent and quality of communications support. We will correlate assessments of communications effort with overall university outcomes in each area.

#### **V. Goals and Assessment Activities for 2004-2005**

##### **Goals**

- The statewide attitude and opinion survey will be repeated, with slight modifications to reflect changed circumstances, in summer 2004. Comparison of results with previous surveys will provide an assessment of shifts in perceptions and the basis for refinement and redirection as necessary of communication objectives.

##### *News*

- The president of Gehrung Associates will be retained during 2004-05 to conduct an evaluation and assessment of the university's state, regional and national communications efforts and make recommendations for improvement.
- Increase national news placements using Gehrung, ProfNet and Newswise
- The weekly electronic newsletter will be redesigned to incorporate more graphics and photos and will be made available in HTML format; all alumni with known

email addresses will receive the redesigned newsletter, with an option to suspend further mailings.

- Increase feature photo placements, especially with AP

### *Web pages*

Each issue of *Alumnus* will be posted on the top-level of the university website prior to distribution of the print version. (Accomplished.)

Update on-line publications archives

Develop web privacy statement

Upgrade campus building locator on web

Develop mechanisms for the delivery of news about the university using emerging technologies such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and the university's incipient web portal.

Maintain and improve major web site utilities, such as the search facility, the campus maps, and building locator;

Maintain and improve major subsites, such as those for the Meridian Campus and the President;

Maintain and improve major web-based resources, such as the Faculty Handbook and the database of Standing Committees;

### *Publications*

- Student recruitment publications will be expanded and refocused to incorporate additional information about scholarships and financial aid and to emphasize institutional support for student success.
- *Memo* will be redesigned with additional color and graphics. (Accomplished).
- The visual identity manual and guidelines that have been in effect for several years will be formally incorporated into the university Policies and Procedures manual.  
Redesign and rework publications that need to be revamped and updated such as the *Alumnus* magazine, *Research Windows*, departmental newsletters, etc.

### *Other*

Improve institutional communications with Board of Trustees

Support communications for capital campaign

### **Assessment methods**

- The attitude and opinion survey of a random sample of adult Mississippians will be repeated. Survey results become more valuable as data accumulates, enabling the university to track changing attitudes, spot developing weaknesses and opportunities, and evaluate and refine public relations strategies.
- An external reviewer will be asked to make a communications audit of the university and assess the role of University Relations.
- Communications staff will monitor outputs in the following areas, and make comparisons at quarterly of changes from previous comparable periods:
  - News releases issued.

- Clippings collected from selected state media.
  - Number of publications produced.
  - Accesses to university web sites.
- Surveys to assess University Relations performance will be conducted with constituencies including state newspaper editors, publication clients, and web visitors.