Working with the News Media
Tips for Plus 50 Initiative Community Colleges

You play a very important role in helping news media learn about your community college and the Plus 50 Completion Strategy and the Plus 50 Encore Completion Program. Your work locally can help news media see the role of the community college in helping plus 50 adults complete high value degrees or certificates as America recovers from the Great Recession and gets back to work. Here are a few tips to help you be prepared when working with the news media.

Story Hooks: Know How to Spot a Good Story Idea
Most community colleges want to get coverage of their programs in the newspaper, on television, or on the radio. But news reporters don’t think about programs, and they definitely don’t like the idea of “promotion.” Every piece a reporter writes or prepares for broadcast is designed to tell a story. You can help your college public information officer and AACC by identifying strong story ideas.

Before approaching the media, it’s important that you identify a story hook. A strong story hook demonstrates how timely, compelling and newsworthy your story idea is. It can link your story to national or local news.

A story hook might demonstrate how a plus 50 program relates to national news, or an important news story in the community. For example, a workforce training program helping laid off workers, or a special seminar on career paths for plus 50 workers that is open to the public – both relate to the story of the recession recovery. A class that includes a group of students who worked at a large factory in the community that recently closed will be of interest to the media, because the media like to cover large local employers. A story about a plus 50 adult going back to college to change careers and become a pharmacy technician, shows how aging baby boomers are turning to careers that give back and profiles careers that are hiring.

If the news hook talks about how today’s plus 50 adults are debunking stereotypes about retirement, the story may get more interest from the media. It may also be useful in demonstrating how plus 50 adults are rewriting the rulebook on retirement, and how your community college programs are helping them re-define what their next steps in life will be.

Human interest story hooks focus on intriguing personalities, such as a student who has a compelling personal story. Perhaps you know a plus 50 student who has survived
breast cancer and has a particularly inspiring personal story. She might make a fascinating profile that shows how your program is helping plus 50 students, and media would like be more interested in covering that type of story in October, during Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

The person approaching the media with your “story pitch” will want to package and present to the reporter a story idea that includes your story hook and mentions who might be interviewed or what other sources are available. With the Internet enhancing print, radio, and television, the opportunity to take photos and gather video footage that can help tell the story is important. If your students are doing a photogenic activity that relates to the story, a lab experiment or hands-on activity, try to mention that too.

Examples of story ideas plus 50 colleges have used that resulted in news coverage:
- an unusual, not your run-of-the-mill college program is helping plus 50 adults prepare for new careers.
- a plus 50 student who overcame a barrier or challenge to succeed at community college is now gearing up for a successful life moving forward.
- new courses are open for registration that are designed to help unemployed baby boomers and offer training in specific fields.
- a workshop is being held to help adults over 50 cope with an economy in turmoil and the community is invited.
- the college is offering a tour for prospective plus 50 students of its health care facilities and programs.

Know Your Local Media
Now that your story hook is ready – who is best to pursue for a story? Your public information officer at your college works with the media on a daily basis and will work with you to select the best target for a news story. Ideally, the best option for a story about a plus 50 program is a reporter who covers higher education on a regular basis, a reporter who covers issues related to business or aging, or someone producing human interest profiles or features. But many other types of reporters may be interested in hearing from you, depending on the story.

The public information officer at your community college will probably assemble a media list to send a story pitch or news release to. It may be helpful to review the list together and discuss which reporters are likely to be more receptive. A media list can include reporters from daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, community magazines or newsletters, radio stations, television stations, news websites or blogs. The list typically includes the names, mailing addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses for the
reporters, as well as information about their areas of interest or “beats.” These lists go out-of-date quickly and require frequent updating.

If requesting news coverage, your public information officer may contact the assignment editor (television), news director (radio, television), or city desk editor/metro editor/assignment desk editor/education reporter/business desk (newspaper). A life editor might be pitched for a human interest story. A reporter covering higher education may be interested in profiling an innovative new program for baby boomers at the college or this new demographic of college student.

If you plan to request public service advertising (free advertising) to reach baby boomers (which is very different from requesting a news story), you will need to discuss the request with the public information officer, who will help you contact the public service director, advertising manager, or publisher to ask for the donation.

Your college public information officer will also consider scheduling and timing for approaching reporters. Many colleges try to coordinate media outreach. If there are two strong story ideas – such as an announcement by a college president about the budget, and an innovative program – the public information officer may need to present only one story idea at a time to the press, so the two stories do not compete for attention.

**Taking Your Story Idea to the Media: The Story Pitch or News Release**

Your college public information officer will likely write a story pitch or news release, or would like your help in drafting one. It’s helpful to know what goes into a story pitch or news release, so you can gather the information needed. A story pitch is a one-paragraph email or a short phone call to a reporter explaining your story idea, why it is newsworthy and the types of resources you have available that will make assembling the story simple and quick. A sample story pitch email might be:

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SAMPLE PITCH

Dear John,
Thanks for your story last week on baby boomers struggling in the new economy. Many out of work boomers are signing up for classes like “Planning Your Next Career Move” at XYZ Community College. They’re students like Jane Smith, who despaired of ever finding new employment after losing her job of 20 years when ABC plant closed. At 53 years of age, Jane is renewing her confidence and skills at community college. She is planning to become a pharmacy technician and is excited about getting back to work within a year. We hope to help more unemployed boomers like Jane and will announce our fall semester courses next
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A week. An article about Jane’s inspiring story and our new courses could offer hope to many who are struggling today to update their skills and want to complete a degree or certificate and get back to work. Thanks for your time and consideration. I can be reached at (123)123-1234 or xyz@XyzCollege.edu. She and the other students would be happy to talk with you.

Sincerely,
Carrie Jones

Why does it work? The story pitch starts with a compliment that shows the author read an article the reporter authored on a similar issue. The tone is polite and helpful. The pitch links to larger issues, such as the economy. The local plant closure briefly referenced was probably covered by the press and remains of interest to the media. Jane’s story is representative of a bigger and compelling issue. By understanding one student’s journey, a reporter can understand the journeys that many are taking at community college.

The more heartstrings that can be tugged, the more compelling the story is for the reporter and his/her readers and viewers. Adding personal information (with the permission of the student) enhances the power of the pitch. The author also asks the reporter to help distribute information and provides a way for other community members to participate in the future, which makes the reporter believe that a story could improve the public interest and help others.

Whether you send a story pitch by email or say it over the phone, depends on the news reporter. Some reporters prefer to only be contacted by email, and definitely the pendulum seems to be swinging more toward this preference as reporters are more time-strapped. But some prefer a phone call and are deluged by email. Every college public information officer probably wishes he or she had a crystal ball and could predict the perfect method and time to contact every reporter!

The other way a news story is offered to a reporter is to send a media advisory or news release by email or by postal mail. Typically these provide “the 5 W’s and the H.” In other words, the release explains the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the
story. With your help, your college public information officer can write a news release and send it to reporters. Here’s a sample news advisory:

**HOT JOBS FOR WORKERS OF ANY AGE: BABY BOOMERS RETURN TO COLLEGE TO TRAIN FOR NEW CAREERS IN HEALTH CARE**

_Pharmacy technician classes begin September 4 with 20 baby boomers enrolled_

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - July 26, 2013    Contact: Jane Doe, (123)123-1234  
jane@xyzcollege.com

City, State – Training for a new career can be daunting, especially if you’ve been away from campus for a few decades. But the Plus 50 Encore Completion Program at XYZ Community College is helping adults age 50 and over come back to college and preparing them for careers that are hiring in health care. Many are achieving their ultimate “bucket list” item later in life – a college degree or certificate.

** MEDIA ADVISORY – MEDIA COVERAGE INVITED **

_Who:_ 20 students age 50 or better, 1 community college instructor

_What:_ Students will be in the pharmacy technology lab and doing interactive activities

_When:_ Wednesday, September 4, 2013, 10:00am-11:30am

_Where:_ XYZ College, Address, Phone Number

_Why:_ Many baby boomers want to continue working, but they find that their skills need updating. This innovative community college program is inspiring many to come back to college and re-train for new jobs quickly that give back in health care, social services and education.

_Photography Opportunity:_ Students will be in a pharmacy technology lab and doing interactive activities that are photogenic.

_How:_ By helping plus 50 adults complete degrees or certificates in high value careers that are hiring, the Plus 50 Encore Completion Program at XYZ Community College is helping baby boomers be successful and supporting a healthy economy. XYZ College is part of the Plus 50 Initiative at the American
Association of Community Colleges, a grant program reaching out to 100 community colleges that is helping baby boomers earn high value degrees or certificates in fields that give back and are hiring. More information is available at http://plus50.aacc.nche.edu/

XYZ Community College has served students in XYZ community for XYZ years and focuses on XYZ. More information is available at www.xyzcollege.com.

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After sending your media advisory or news release to a reporter, it’s always a good idea to phone the reporter and follow up to find out if he/she received the advisory and is planning to cover the story. Sometimes news releases are trapped in email spam filters, or get overlooked in a hectic news room. Even if the reporter is not able to cover the story, he or she might recommend a colleague to approach.

**Questions Media Might Ask Community College Faculty, Staff and Students**

Anyone doing an interview about the plus 50 program at your college will likely be asked questions by the reporter. Reviewing this list of potential questions and rehearsing answers can build confidence and help college faculty, staff, and students prepare. Your college public information officer may have additional questions to add to the list or want to practice potential answers with anyone being interviewed by the media.

- Describe the plus 50 program at XYZ Community College.

- What types of courses are offered? When are the classes offered? How much do they cost? How are students responding to these courses?

- How does the program help adults over 50 who are out of work or seeking direction in their lives?

- How many students does the plus 50 program help at this college?

- Baby boomers are considered a non-traditional student group. How many students at the college are age 50 and over? Are baby boomers involved in campus activities? How do younger students respond to having older students on campus?
Why is it important for community colleges to reach out to students of all ages and from all walks of life?

How can these programs help people who are seeking to train for a new career or want to complete a degree or certificate?

How long will the program take? What kinds of careers might be possible with this type of degree or certificate?

Practicing before a media interview can build confidence. It’s important that anyone practicing to talk with the media, do activities that allow him or her to practice potential questions and activities that help him or her feel in control. People who are nervous about talking with the news media, may find it helpful to visualize a successful interview by rehearsing answers in front of a mirror at home, while wearing the same outfit planned for the interview. Others find it helpful to practice responses with a friend or colleague.

What to Wear for a News Media Interview
Quite often, people worry more about what to wear for a news media interview than what they will say. Both are important. After all, pictures and words combine to tell a story. Here are some tips to help faculty, staff and students look their best.

Be yourself. You will be more at ease during the interview if you are comfortable. If you normally wear a suit, wear one. If you prefer to wear a comfortable shirt and slacks, wear what is familiar to you. Just be neat.

A college-branded polo shirt, hat, or lapel pin may help ensure that it’s easy for the reporter to spot college faculty, staff or students and know who is speaking about the program. Wearing one of these items can ensure that the college’s identity is consistently communicated in the story that is eventually produced.

Generally, a shirt with a collar will look better on camera, than a shirt without one.

Avoid clothing with large patterns, logos, slogans, or sayings. Solid colors are generally the best option, and will show up better on camera.

Looking neat is very important. Hair should be neatly combed, fingernails tidy, and clothing pressed.
• If used, makeup should be applied to look as natural as possible. Cameras today are hi-definition and they do notice makeup errors more now, than in the past.

• While television crews often film seated interviews from the chest up, the bottom half of your body may appear in other footage taken for the story. Faculty, staff, or students may be seen walking on campus, teaching, or doing activities in a laboratory. This may not be the best time to wear those old shoes or lab-stained khakis.

Setting Up Before the Interview
• Look at the interview location with your college public information officer. Are there distracting signs, a messy note board, or loud noises (from a construction crew with a jack hammer)? Try to find a location that is quiet and well-lit. Depending on the weather and nearby distractions, outside can work well.

• If the crew will visit a classroom to get footage, look at the configuration of seats. Think about the camera person. Where will he or she stand? Will he or she have to walk to take footage of the entire class? An aisle may need to be created to the side. Lighting may need to be adjusted.

• Sometimes nerves can cause a person to subconsciously move or sway. Standing during an interview may cause someone to shuffle his/her feet due to nerves. As a result, his or her head will bob during the interview and distract the viewer from what is being said. If someone is extremely nervous, being seated in a chair with a back (not a stool) on a flat surface can help.

During the Interview
• Relax! Remember – you are being interviewed because you are the expert. You are being asked about your life and goals, the programs you manage every day, the people you’ve worked with and supported, or the institution you work for. You know this subject backwards and forwards.

• If you need a break, ask the reporter if you can take one. Stretch your legs or get a glass of water.

• Remember to mention the college and AACC’s Plus 50 Encore Completion Program or Plus 50 Completion Strategy by name if possible.
• Remember to breathe. Sometimes when people get nervous during an interview, they will hold their breath during the pause in-between questions. Then they try to breathe and respond to the reporter, all at the same time. This doesn’t work. Try to breathe normally. It is ok to take a breath before answering a question, this gives you time to think. The pause is almost always much shorter than you perceive it to be.

• Never say “no comment.” It carries an implication of guilt, even if you have not done anything wrong.

• If you don’t know the answer to a question, don’t make up the response. Instead say, “I don’t know the answer to that, but I can get that information for you.” Then follow through, get the information, and share it with the reporter.

• If you are asked a question you cannot respond to, say, “I am not the right person to help you with that, but I can get you the name and number for someone else who can.” Then follow through and provide the name and number.

• Reporters are charged to gather information independently for stories. Do not tell a reporter to collect information from another reporter. Each reporter needs to gather his or her information for a story separately.

After the Interview

• Thank the reporter for taking the time to do the story. This can be done via email, over the phone, or with an old-fashioned thank you note.

• Offer to help with any additional information the reporter may need.

• Ask the reporter to include a link to your community college website and the AACC Plus 50 website (http://plus50.aacc.nche.edu) if possible. TV, radio, and newspaper stories all end up on the internet now, so many media outlets will link to additional resources.

• You should not ask to see or approve a story before it is published or aired. Many news agencies have strict ethical standards that discourage this practice (which include firing a reporter for doing this). Reporters are often offended to be asked this question, and making this request could negatively impact the story. If you are worried about something you said, you can ask to “confirm” a quote.
• It is ok to ask when the story might air or run. Often the reporter will not know an approximate air time or publication date, but he or she is usually happy to let you know.

• If the media outlet allows public comments, post a comment on the website thanking the reporter for the story. Include additional information you’d like to share.

• Let your public information officer know how the interview went if he or she was not able to attend. Don’t forget to drop an email to AACC’s Plus 50 staff too! We are always happy to hear about your experiences with the news media and to celebrate your success with you.

The Amplifier for Your Story: Send Story Ideas & Student Profile Nominations to AACC

Story ideas about plus 50 programs and student stories are also very helpful for AACC’s Plus 50 program. These ideas and profiles may be written up and added to the plus 50 website or used in our bi-weekly electronic newsletter. This gives your college additional recognition for its work and helps us inspire more colleges to improve services and programs for baby boomers.

AACC’s staff work with the news media and other colleges on a daily basis, and we often refer to these stories for guidance. If you would like for us to consider your story ideas or student profile suggestions, please email your story ideas to mvickers@aacc.nche.edu. Here is a sample information form for a study story profile with questions.

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<tr>
<th>Student Story Nomination</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student name:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community college:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student phone number:</td>
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<td>Student email address:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student age:</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the student studying?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the student’s long-term goals?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What brought this student to community college?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How has community college helped this student?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What challenges has the student faced in reaching his/her goals?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there anything else you think would be helpful for us to know about the student or the Plus 50 Initiative program at your college?</td>
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<td>Nominating college staff name:</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Nominating college Staff phone number:
Nominating college staff email address:

Please attach at least one photo (minimum resolution 150 dots per inch) for us to consider for inclusion on our website. It’s best if the photo show a single student doing an activity. Try to take a picture with the head looking up, and eyes into the camera if possible. The image should be in focus and not blurry. A completed and signed photo release form is needed. Send to mvickers@aacc.nche.edu.