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College 'wiki' sites write the book on school life

BY KRISTIN PALPINI STAFF WRITER

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AMHERST - Colleges across the nation and in the Valley are harnessing the power of the wiki.

Wikis are online information repositories that take on an encyclopedic veneer, but usually tackle topics outside what a person would usually see in Britannica. They are the bottomless basements of knowledge eclectic and practical.

Possibly the best known wiki is Wikipedia.org, an online encyclopedia written and edited by anyone with an Internet connection. Created in 2002, Wikipedia contains over 2.35 million entries in English.

But Jose Fuentes thinks Hampshire College generates enough data to require its own wiki. Fuentes, along with a group of students and faculty, recently launched Hampedia.org, an encyclopedia dedicated to all things Hampshire College.

Among the 2,000 entries on Hampedia are a description of dorm life in "mod 104" (complete with a sample of roommate dialogue and favorite catch phrases), governing council meeting minutes, faculty biographies and academic department outlines.

Hampedia "is more of a reality and less of a product," said Fuentes. "I think that sooner or later Hampedia will become the official place for Hampshire in terms of information."

Student-created college wikis are becoming more common. In 2005, only a handful of colleges, including the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, had wikis. Now, according to collegewiki.com, there are over 160 wikis dedicated to American colleges.

In addition to UMass and Hampshire College, Smith and Mount Holyoke colleges are creating their own wikis. With its 174 entries, Smithipedia.org launched this month, but is open only to the Smith College community.

Although each wiki is different, the general goal of most college wikis is to document history and capture aspects of the student experience not normally found in institutional publications or Web sites.

Elsa Rosales, for example, is writing a history of racism at Smith College for her Smithipedia entry.

"I'm very proud of it," said Rosales of her work. "I think a lot of minority students feel underrepresented. They need to know Smith's history on it and sort of gauge how much is them being too sensitive or not and knowing about the background of the school and other minorities like them."

Nanci Young, a Smith College archivist, is heading up Smith's wiki efforts. Noting a lack of succinct Smith history, she proposed the creation of a Smith wiki a few years ago to President Carol T. Christ.

"Technology converged where we could say let's try a wiki, a Smith history wiki," said Young. "It's an ambitious project."

For college officials there are concerns about the creation of institution-specific wikis. By nature, anyone with a

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computer can create and edit content. This could lead to people posting negative entries about the college or misinformation.

So far, Smith College has not opened its wiki to the college community to post or edit content. For now information is being added by a select group of students, but Young said the college wants to eventually open the wiki to alumnae, students, faculty and staff.

"It's the price you pay for not having control," said Young. "We're hoping it will move in a positive way."

Hampshire College is also grappling with this dilemma. Now, anyone with a Hampshire College email address can post and edit Hampedia. Although there is a need for funding and a desire to better align the wiki with the college, creators are reluctant to open the site to potential administrative restrictions.

"There's a reluctance, in general, to have it overseen or directed by the administration. Now it's a very independent student-run thing," said Omar Dahi, Hampedia's faculty adviser.

Fuentes said he was encouraged to create Hampedia as a result of his quest to find a college. Fuentes, a Guatemalan native, said while researching colleges as a high school student he delved into institutional facts such as the size of a college's endowment and building conditions. He soon realized this data wasn't offering a clear picture of what the college experience has to offer.

"I realized that education is more about the content rather than the form. It's not really about the buildings available; it's about what happens inside the buildings," said Fuentes.

"It's important for prospective students to know what connections drive this institution," he said. "I hope Hampedia can do that."

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