

How USC Rossier scaled conference attendance 5x and strengthened alumni relations with integrated online events



LOCATION

Los Angeles, CA

TOTAL ENROLLMENT

2,500

PROGRAMS

- 5 doctoral degree programs
- 10 master's degree programs
- 10 professional development programs
- 2 undergraduate minor programs

The Challenge

As a graduate school at the University of Southern California (USC), Rossier's doctoral and master's degree programs focus on developing leaders in education. And like many universities, the strength and reach of their alumni network is a major selling point in attracting prospective students to its academic programs. Matt DeGrushe serves as the Director of Alumni Engagement in the Office of Advancement, and oversees alumni relations and career services for Rossier's 28,000+ alumni. His team also works to develop external partnerships to help graduates secure employment within K-12 and higher education systems.

Like many in alumni relations, Matt and his team relied heavily on in-person events to nurture and grow the Rossier community. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the U.S. in March 2020, Matt quickly realized USC Rossier's alumni events would need to be reimaged in order to survive. First up on the list: the annual summer Leadership Conference, slated for July later that year.

Typically a half-day event, Rossier's Leadership Conference was designed to connect current students and recent alumni with leaders in education—many of whom are Rossier alumni themselves. The conference featured a keynote, a few rounds of breakout sessions, and a networking session to cap it off.

The Process

What was at first a daunting challenge, quickly turned into a new opportunity. Without the constraints of hosting their usual in-person event, Matt and his team started to explore options for more expansive programming. “We no longer had to worry about things like sourcing local speakers for our event, or condensing programming to fit in a single day. We thought, ‘Why not turn this July event into an entire leadership month?’ That way, we could offer more sessions from excellent speakers, and attendees wouldn’t be forced to choose between competing breakout sessions.”

Perhaps an even more compelling aspect of pivoting this event to an online format was the fact that Rossier alumni from all over the world would be able to attend. By adopting and using Events inside their PeopleGrove platform (known to their community as the USC Rossier Career Network), Matt and team helped drive toward that mission by expanding their reach to alumni regardless of their location, as well as increasing the depth of content that helps them deliver on that promise. Attendees would gain valuable exposure to fellow alumni, enabling them to expand their professional network and access mentorship opportunities.

Not only would the live event have amplified reach, but capturing session content for syndication was a breeze compared to years past. A virtual conference allowed Matt to simply hit “record” in Zoom instead of hiring an expensive video crew to record sessions.

We’re so fortunate to have had the networking platform in place, and when we went virtual [with events], we really made a conscientious effort to figure out how to get even more people in the platform and really drive engagement.



Matt DeGrushe,
Director of Alumni Engagement, USC Rossier

Prior to March 2020, Matt had never orchestrated a virtual event, and felt apprehensive about how it would all pan out. “We’re so fortunate to have had the networking platform in place, and when we went virtual [with events], we really made a conscientious effort to figure out how to get even more people in the platform and really drive engagement.”

The Impact

In just a few short months since the school's events have gone virtual, the USC Rossier Career Network continues to grow, both in terms of reach and engagement. The team saw that with all the activity swirling around their virtual event programming, alumni were eager to connect online with one another. Prior to the pandemic, learning how to host virtual events wasn't at the top of Matt's priority list, but now recognized that "going virtual [with events] has really enabled us to bring people back to the platform and engage in a way they weren't before."

USC Rossier has seen their network numbers go "through the roof" since launching Events inside PeopleGrove. **"Alumni usage has doubled in the last six months.** We've seen an increase in the number of messages being sent, and number of connections being made [in the platform]." Matt and his team use Salesforce as their CRM to track alumni fundraising activity and performance, and combine it with PeopleGrove's Event data to get a more complete picture of each member of their alumni community. Now that each stakeholder's event activity is included inside PeopleGrove reporting, the Advancement Office plans to use it to help drive more data-informed decision-making. "I think we've only just hit the tip of the iceberg in terms of the data we have and how we can leverage it," Matt observed.

As part of its mission, USC Rossier strives to "improve learning opportunities and outcomes in urban settings and to address disparities that affect historically marginalized groups." The move to PeopleGrove's virtual events enabled them to deliver diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programming, and make it more accessible than ever before. "Removing Racism from our Campus Communities" was the second-highest attended session (after the keynote from Rossier's Dean, Pedro Noguera). "Your Curriculum is Irrelevant," a session about adopting race-conscious curricula in K-12 schools, is the most-viewed recorded session.

2020 Leadership Month by the Numbers



Women Speakers



Black & Latinx Speakers



Rossier Alumni Speakers

500%

Increase in unique attendees YoY

65%

Increase in number of conference speakers

50%

Increase in number of sessions

Forging Ahead

USC Rossier Career Network continues to host online events year-round for students and alumni, including its online Lecture Series. Matt also takes advantage of PeopleGrove Groups, which are smaller subpopulations organized around shared affinities. “For me, one of the biggest advantages to PeopleGrove is Groups, and we have them set up for different degree programs and different career paths that our students are pursuing. Before PeopleGrove, I had no way to figure out how to make that [invite] list targeted,” Matt shared. As an example, he recently needed to market an online lecture on mathematics education, and segmented his promotions using Groups to ensure that it was marketed to the most relevant audiences.

He’s also created a virtual alumni meetup for each group, where participants talk about challenges they’re facing related to remote work, and sharing support, resources and advice with one another. Yet another way he’s used PeopleGrove Events is to host monthly “speed networking” sessions. “The Rossier alumni who attend are from all over the world, and by the end of the session, each person walks away with about 6 new connections they didn’t have before.”

As for the 2021 Leadership Conference, Matt unfortunately can’t gaze into a crystal ball and see what lies ahead for the pandemic. But he feels strongly that the event—at least the majority of its components—will remain online. “We’ll probably host a kind of hybrid event...keep all our virtual programming, but also give attendees the opportunity to meet in person at the keynote address and networking reception,” he predicted. “We don’t want to give up the online format—it freed up so many restrictions for us.”

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