



# Getting Reel: The Use of Video in Independent Schools

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March 1, 2016



## **Introduction**

Video has become an integral part of society in 2016. This is a research project designed to help independent school administrators and marketers understand select trends in video usage today, see how their school compares with top-performing peers, and gain insights into best practices. It does not aspire to assess the *effectiveness* of video in enhancing a school's reputation or increasing applications, acceptances, donations, and the like. These more nuanced topics will be covered in part II of this paper, due in the spring of 2016.

This examination of 30 schools' websites, presence on public video sites, and social media activity has produced many interesting findings. Read on for more about video communications strategy, the benefits of professional and "amateur" videos, the most common pages that house videos, and tips to enhance video content within your school. You will also see three "blue ribbon" schools that you may wish to model for your video strategy and implementation.

## **Research Methodology**

I started with 30 highly ranked independent schools, segmented into three groups of 10: boarding schools, K-12 day schools, and K-8 day schools. Each set of schools is balanced geographically, with a blend of coed and single sex schools. For each school, there was a review of its website to track the number of videos and where they most frequently appear; its YouTube presence, including whether it had an active channel page and uses playlists; its Vimeo utilization; and the frequency of videos that appear on its Facebook and Twitter pages. The study also assesses the amount of video content that is created by professionals compared with "amateurs" such as communications or advancement people, students, teachers and coaches, and parents.

Important note: these results are neither statistically valid nor scientific in tracking, because 30 and 10 are too small of a sample size, the search on the schools' websites was manual and may have occasionally missed videos, and distinguishing between pro and amateur videos isn't foolproof.

## **The Growth in Video: Background**

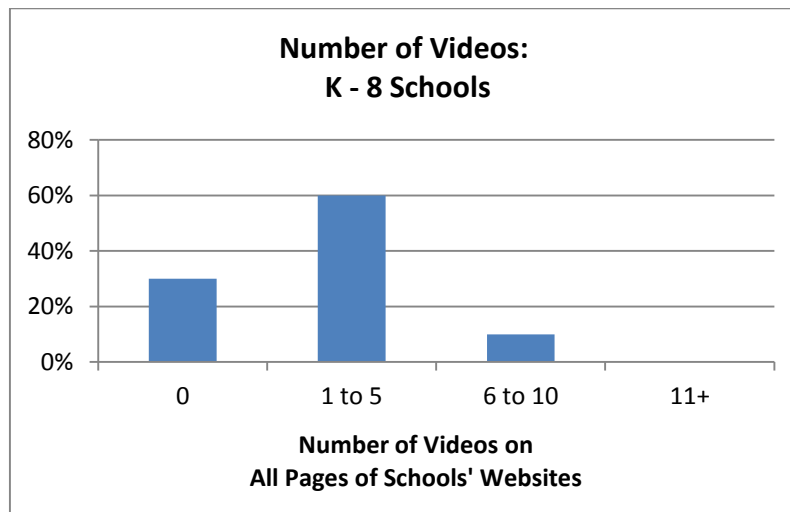
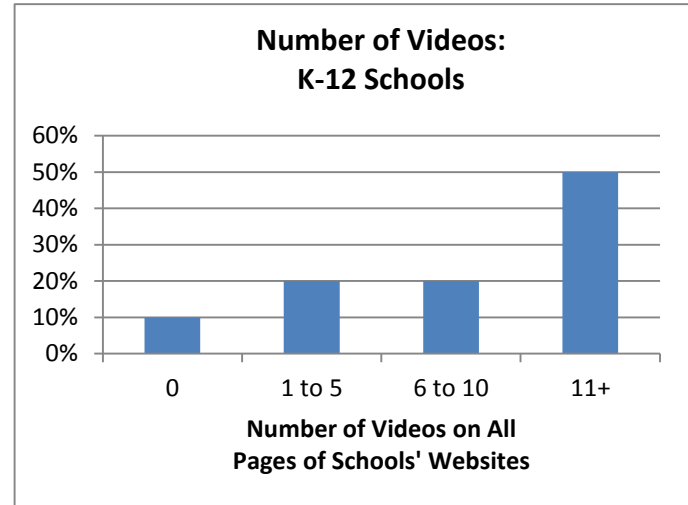
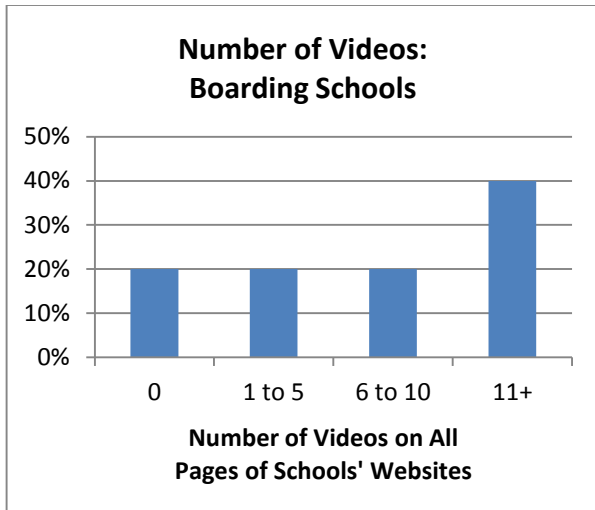
The explosion in video is due to a fascinating convergence of technical and societal factors. In the former category - massive growth in landline and wireless bandwidth, the increased photographic capabilities of cell phones, the surge in tablets after a decade of dormancy (thanks, Steve Jobs!), changes in wireless pricing plans, the stunning growth and ease of use of YouTube, and greater influence of search engine optimization and content marketing. These trends have worked in concert with significant societal changes, including an increasingly visual world and the "sharing" mentality of generations Y and Z.

Studies for the business world have shown increasing usage and effectiveness of videos in influencing consumers' opinions and purchase decisions. While I'm unaware of such studies for independent schools yet (readers - if there are, for schools or higher ed, please alert me!), intuition suggests that

this behavior, both in terms of interest and impact, would likely apply to school constituents as well. I will cover certain aspects of this discussion in part II of the study.

### **Strategic Observations from Research Data**

- The number of videos on school websites had wide variance, with several schools having no videos or just a handful, while many had 11 or more (see chart on page 3). Not surprisingly, large schools, boarding and K–12, tended to have more videos on their own sites, with 40% and 50% respectively showing more than 11 videos, while no K–8 programs had that many, and 90% of K–8 schools had either 0 or 1-5 videos on-site.
- The “professional” vs. “amateur” delineation is a more grey area because the origin is not always clear, especially on a quick review. That said, there appears to be minimal “amateur” video on schools’ sites; a high percentage of videos on school sites (70 – 80%) are professional (see chart on page 4). This was quite consistent across the three categories of schools.
- A majority of school YouTube and Vimeo videos are amateur, in many cases by a wide margin.
- Many schools do not appear to have a strategic approach to developing and managing their broader set of videos:
  - Many schools that commit to professional videos have strategic goals for the video itself, e.g. to increase awareness, define the mission or convey the culture, but tend to think very tactically about how and where to present the video.
  - Few schools integrate videos on their own site with YouTube and/or Vimeo.
  - The lack of connection can go both ways; many schools have significant numbers of videos on YouTube, but few embed them in or link to them from their own site. Conversely, at least one boarding school has many current student-created videos on its own site but only seven total and nothing newer than 2011 on YouTube.
  - LiveStream options are starting to be used more on the schools’ sites to show games in real-time, with the ability to watch on-demand later.



### Most Common On-site Pages for Videos

- There were some distinct patterns across the 30 total schools as far as the location of their videos on their own websites. These findings were not especially surprising, with the exception of Arts, where I expected more schools to show their plays, dances, and concerts in action. “Admissions” and home pages were easily the most prominent, appearing on 25-30% of the sites. “Academics,” covering many courses and faculty profiles, and “About Us,” which varies greatly in its sub-pages, were also fairly widespread, with “Strategy” videos appearing multiple times. “Arts,” “Athletics,” and “Student Life,” another category with a wide range of sub-topics, all showed a respectable number of appearances; a few Athletics pages were bolstered by the use of LiveStream for their games. The list in descending order of appearances:
  - Admissions
  - Home page

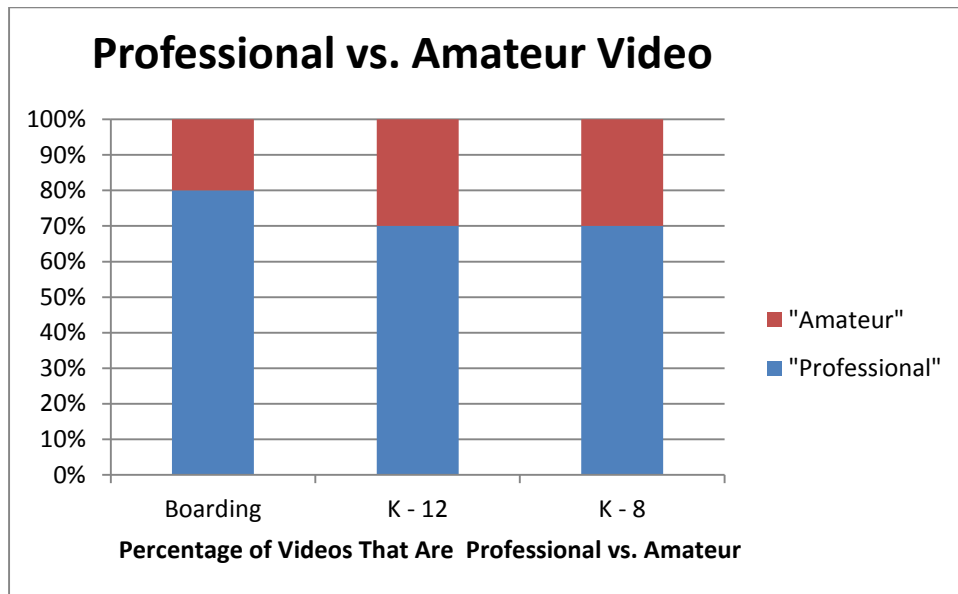
- About Us
- Academics
- Athletics
- Arts
- Other pages included clubs, trips, community service, and events.
- Few schools (10 - 15%) show video of their arts performances on their websites, or even have links to them on YouTube or Vimeo.

### Summary of “Amateur” Video

Though it can be difficult to ascertain from a brief view whether a video is “professional” or created by a skilled “amateur” such as a communications director, admissions associate, parent, student, or other constituent, I’ve used style, branding, and other clues to make the following assessments:

- Amateur video is distinctly in the minority on school sites (see chart below).
- Amateur video is, relatively, much higher on YouTube.
- Social media video is growing rapidly and is dominated by amateur video, often of “day in the life” scenes such as outdoor activities, community service, arts performances, and campus events.

Read more about amateur video in the “How to enhance your success...” (page 7) and “Opportunities in amateur video” (page 10).



### Additional Points of Note

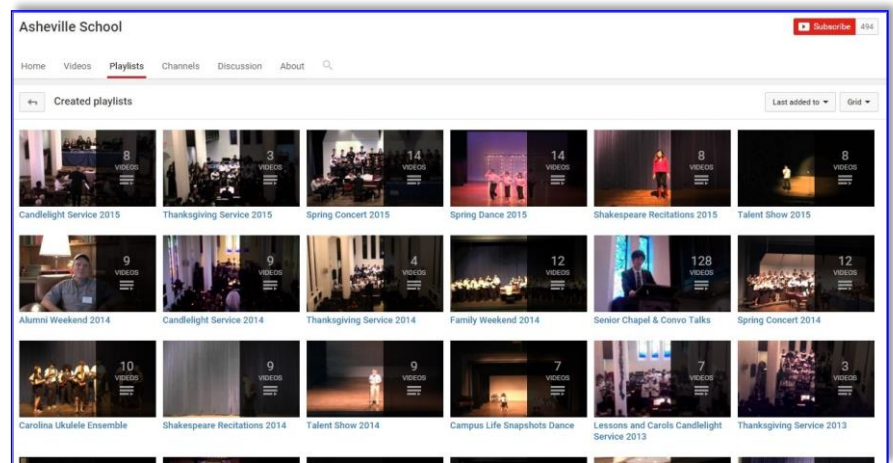
- The *average page views* per video on YouTube varied tremendously. It is very common, even for large schools, to have 5 – 20 views on many of their videos, depending on the subject and where they are marketed. While the average range is from a few to a hundred views, it is not

too rare to see videos with thousands and even tens of thousands of views. In these cases, it is almost always a large school, most likely with sophisticated social media capabilities. The grand prize winner that I saw was 186,000 for a student delivering his senior address to the school. There is surely an interesting story there.

- A **YouTube icon** is somewhat common on the sites, as around 60% of all school sites have YouTube or Vimeo in footers, headers, or other navigation. In a few other schools, Media Galleries also have links. However, a number of schools with a legitimate YouTube presence didn't offer constituents an easy way to find school content on the two video websites. While these on-site links usually lead to a reasonably useful channel page on YouTube, many schools haven't captured most of their videos on their channel page.

## YouTube and Vimeo

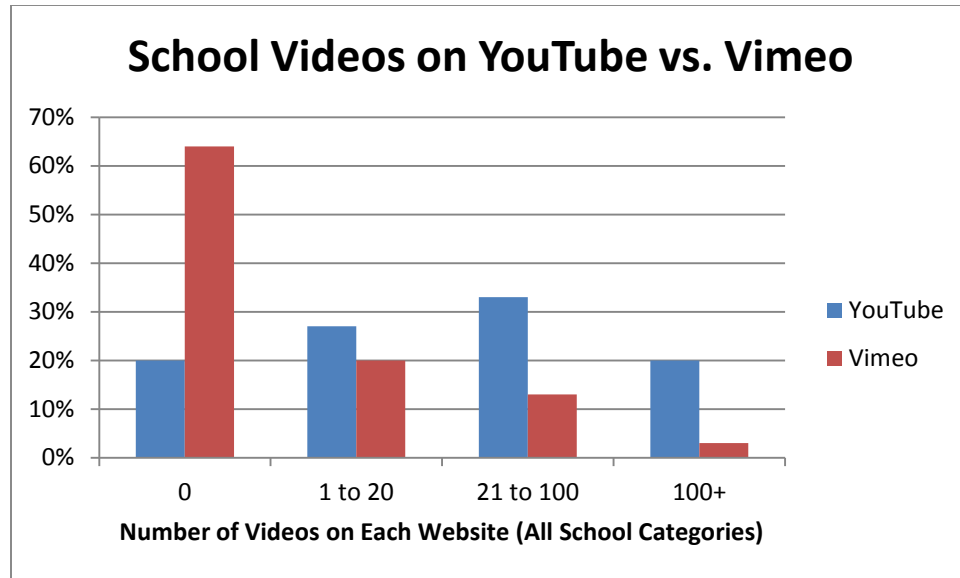
- In general, **YouTube** is a much more prevalent destination for schools than **Vimeo**, with over 75% of schools having a respectable set of videos on YouTube compared with fewer than 33% on Vimeo. See the chart below.
- While a few schools that have minimal or no YouTube presence have chosen to use Vimeo instead, it is more common for most schools with a solid Vimeo presence to also use YouTube.
- The number of YouTube **channels** can be misleading. That is the central hub where a well-organized school will load all its videos. However, while most schools have a channel, or multiple channels including areas such as arts, athletics or alumni, it's often the case that the videos are not systematically loaded under the main channel and only appear under a general search.
- A majority of schools with YouTube Channels do not effectively use **playlists** to categorize their videos, making it difficult for viewers to easily find topics of particular interest to themselves, reducing the risks of viewers being distracted by unrelated



Outstanding use of Playlists

links in the sidebar, and reducing the impact of search engine optimization (SEO) efforts.

- The comparisons between these two video websites were relatively consistent across the boarding, K–12 day and K – 8 day schools.



## Social Media and Video

While YouTube is definitely a social medium, the notes below focus on Facebook and Twitter. As Instagram has rocketed to prominence with students and young people, most schools have caught on and have active presences there. Virtually all school Instagram pages feature videos now, and the percentage is most likely rising rapidly.

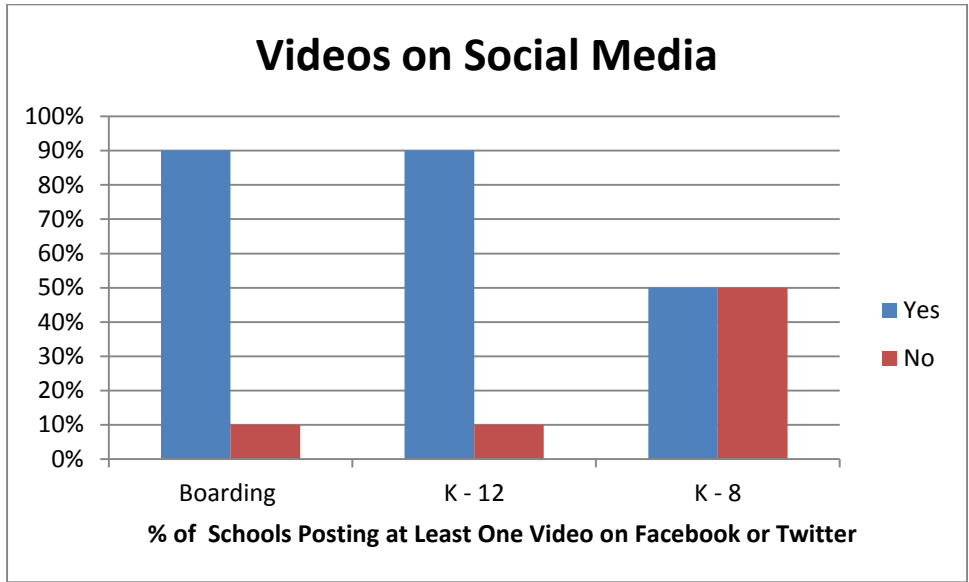
- Video posting on Facebook has been growing at a rapid rate, no surprise given the social goliath's more than 1.3 billion users and the relatively new video option (less than three years old). As video and social media continue to converge, Facebook has become a strong competitor to YouTube (see more in the "How to enhance your success" on page 8).
- Facebook was the more popular social networking service for school videos, with more than 75% of schools posting at least one video, while Twitter was considerably lower. This was somewhat surprising given that more schools are thought to be integrating their communication across the two channels.
- Virtually all Facebook and Twitter videos are amateur, most from the school's social media or communications managers, augmented by parents, alumni and students. Most of these social videos are quite short as well. Explanations for these results include the facts that the social sites encourage tagging and sharing from these other constituents, and that 60-70% of



**A fun amateur video on Facebook**



Facebook usage is now mobile and users like to watch shorter videos, making a perfect environment for fast, fun, home-made presentations.



### Blue Ribbon Schools

While several schools have very strong video strategies and presentations across a wide variety of channels, these three stood out to me:

#### Boarding Schools

#### Phillips Academy, Andover, MA

Day with Andover

[Leave a reply](#)

Thank you to the ~800 people who were able to join us this past Saturday for our annual Day with Andover open house.

We realize that many prospective families were unable to attend, either because of distance or winter snowstorm Jonas! For those of you who couldn't be here, we hope you will enjoy this recording of the welcome session with Dean of Admission & Financial Aid Jim Ventre '79 and Head of School John Palfrey. This video also includes our student panel discussion, moderated by Director of Enrollment Management Lisa Joel.

Phillips Academy  
ANDOVER

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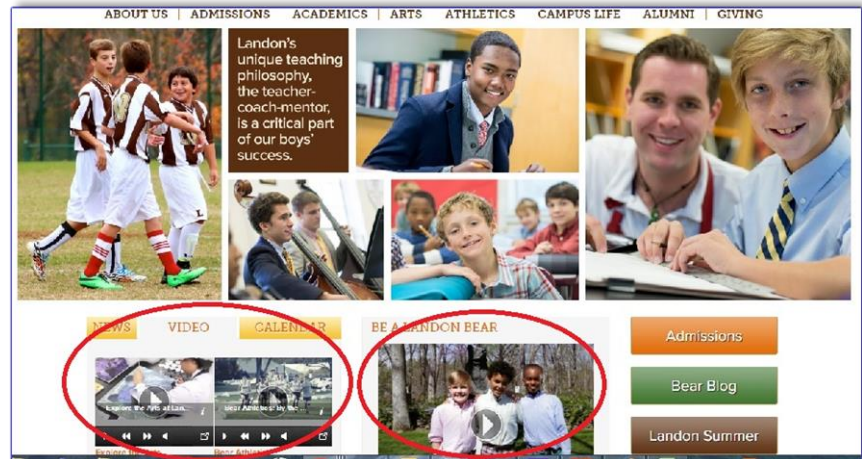
It comes as no surprise that Phillips Academy (Andover) has a leading video strategy. Their use of on-site videos combines well with a powerhouse YouTube presence that's driven by well-organized playlists, and a vibrant social media use of video. On their own site, they present videos on a wide range of topics, including Admissions "day with Andover," strategic plan, hockey games, and more.



## *K-12 Day Schools*

### Landon School, Bethesda, Maryland

Landon has a strong strategic grasp on using video on its site, blending professional pieces with a VLOG featuring student-generated videos, a video on the home page, and major Athletics and Arts videos highlighted in a separate section on the home. Their YouTube presence is extensive and well-organized and they use Facebook effectively too.



## *K-8 Day Schools*

### St. James Academy, Monkton, Maryland



This co-ed school in bucolic northern Baltimore County is warm and friendly, and they convey that effectively with several on-site videos, including their performances, an active Vimeo channel (one of relatively few schools that focus exclusively on that website), and a nice blend of fun amateur videos and pro on Facebook.

### **Tips: How to Enhance Your Success with Video**

While there are many ways to enhance your success with videos, this section will focus on a few that are directly correlated to the findings of the research. Ultimately, you would like to know the effectiveness of your videos: do they actually enhance your brand, drive inquiries and applications, increase fundraising, and increase satisfaction among your key constituents? These are the right questions – for part II of this project, coming in spring, 2016.

- ***Don't Forget the Basics:*** The research showed that a reasonable number of schools miss on some basic ways to publicize their videos:
  - **Tip:** Ensure you have an icon of YouTube or Vimeo on your site template if you have more than a handful of content on those sites.
  - **Tip:** On YouTube, at minimum, set up a channel and ensure that every video is loaded there first.
    - Playlists are also very useful to the viewer, and ideally you will see that they are easy to use once they are set up (hint: think of your web navigation or school department structure as potential guides).
  
- ***Be Consistent with Your Brand:*** It is critical that your use of video is consistent with your brand and image. Especially for venerable schools, many current and prospective parents have an expectation of formal, professional video that supports their pursuit of a premium service. In these cases, it is probably wise to use professional video on the home page, Admissions and Strategic Plan pages, and the like, and augment those with more fun or informal videos in spots such as Student Life and Events.
  
- ***Professional Options:*** Professional video is a very powerful tool in a school's marketing arsenal. Bringing in an expert who not only knows lighting and sound but also storytelling, eliciting joy and passion, and conveying a school's uniqueness visually, can do wonders for its reputation, brand, admissions and development work. While these projects are often done in conjunction with a re-branding or a sense (perhaps from research) that the school's mission is not well understood by the community, there are many other cases in which professional video can add tremendous value, including a positive return on investment. In part II of this white paper, I will feature testimonials and other material supporting the effects of video on a school's fortunes, many of which will relate to professional video content.
  
- ***Facebook Videos:*** Our research has confirmed what many of us guessed – that Facebook, a very big kid on the block, is becoming a force in video. With over 75% of our targeted schools posting a recent video on Facebook, we have the right intuition.
  - **Tip:** Optimize your videos on Facebook by uploading your own video using the ***Video tab***. That gives you the ability to optimize the post further on Facebook compared with just pasting in a link from YouTube or Vimeo. You can also use Facebook's Featured Video on the home page to further drive traffic to your school's website (add a URL in the description) and include it in a category of videos that people might not otherwise see if they weren't looking through the specific category. Facebook will give that video a higher reach than if it's streamed from elsewhere, and you can easily use it again in future posts.
  
- ***Amateur Video:*** There is another way to add video to your website and other channels: use your community to tell its own stories. It's important to note that presenting video content from students, faculty, coaches, administrators, and parents does not compete with professional

shoots. Student-generated content in particular will often be rough, raw, and unscripted, and some of it will be unsuitable for publication. However, students, faculty members and coaches can often capture a school's "realness" and convey life "on the ground" that is welcomed by classmates and parents as well as prospective families seeking to understand what Johnny or Susie's life would be like at X school. Video is great for conveying the heart of a school's daily activities - athletic practices, clubs, community service, dance rehearsals, trips, throwing a frisbee, and reactions to a lab experiment or a visitor in the classroom.

- **Tip:** Keep 'em short! A length between 30 seconds and 2 minutes is ideal, especially given the explosion in mobile, a great medium for cliff notes but not novels.
- **Tip:** on student-created videos, do not shy away from their ownership – embrace it! If the sound is a bit off, there are some goofy parts (but within reason – see “Opportunities in Amateur Video” below), or the cuts aren't perfect, that's okay. Communicate that these are from students, congratulate them for their efforts and publicize their work, of course within your privacy guidelines. I expect you will find your constituents not only tolerant of the bobbles but also impressed by your school's progressiveness and desire to prepare your students for the new visual world.
- **Tip:** use your phone, and/or teach other constituents to do so, to create and edit reasonably high-quality videos. Surely the students will grasp this capability faster than the adults! In reality, many of your students are already using similar methods – for a jumpstart, [check out this very helpful free course](#) from cutting-edge publisher edSocialMedia!
- **Tip:** Use YouTube itself to educate your communications and administrative teams, faculty and students. YouTube has become the wellspring of “How To's,” and as what is often defined as the “second largest search engine,” has tremendous tips on creating and polishing videos.

### **Opportunities in Amateur Video**

From this small sample size, amateur video is not widely used on school websites, though it is relatively more prevalent on YouTube and social media. Is this a conscious decision by senior administrators and communications directors or has the idea not been proposed? In the former case, there are several reasons for schools to proceed carefully, as described below. In the latter, you may choose to consider how to use readily-available resources at your school. In the case of student-created videos, that relies heavily on an academic policy of universal iPads or other computers with video capabilities, which have become increasingly common.

## *Hurdles to Creating Your Own Video Content*

Your Director of Communications is swamped with newsletters and web updates. Your Head is worried that student-created videos may contain inappropriate content or positioning of the school. The Dean of Academics frets that the new iPads required for all the students are causing distraction in the classroom. The IT Director knows the filters created to restrict the students' access to the Internet have holes. The Dean of Student Life is concerned that the students seem to be glued to their iPads all across the campus.

## *Solutions for Creating Your Own Video Content*

### *Short-term options*

- **Video clubs:** The advisor helps with technical skills and edits videos.
- **Parental volunteers:** Recruit people who are willing to film games and events, especially those open to doing basic editing, allowing for the development of short highlight videos.
- **Other student volunteers:** Create opportunities for managers of athletic teams and the set crew of arts performances to film practices/rehearsals as well as the live events.
- **Contests:** create an opportunity for winners to present at school assembly; request a committee of parent volunteers to be the judges.

### *Longer-term options*

- Add a video editing class to your curriculum
- Begin integrating student-created video into select classes
- Require occasional assignments to be in video form vs. paper or oral reports
- Hire people with the creative and technical capabilities to see and leverage the possibilities of this powerful medium.

Video is here to stay, and there is a major upside for schools that embrace it. Ideally this informal research, findings, and tips on enhancing your video programs are valuable for you and your school. I welcome your input! Please send any comments, suggestions or lessons you have learned to [mailto:w\\_bullard@comcast.net](mailto:w_bullard@comcast.net). Perhaps I can include you in part II of this project.

In part II, planned for the spring of 2016, I will tackle the topics of how school marketers are using video, and its effectiveness in addressing their strategic goals.

## *Acknowledgements*

The author expresses his gratitude to the following people: Jonathan Oleisky, President of Kalix Communications; Jeff Henn, Gerri Baum, and Greg Marsh, strategic partners for Kalix; Brendan Schneider of Sewickley Academy; Mike Connor of Connor Associates; John O'Brien of St. Anne School in Southern California; Bill Hargraves of Culver Academies; Pat McGraw of McGraw Consulting; and Ian Ouziel of AMA Boston.

### ***About the Author***

**William Bullard** is a strategic marketer who spent most of his career in the business world before moving into education. He has been the director of communications at two independent schools in greater Boston as well as a social media consultant for a leading literacy training company. He is especially interested in applying lessons from his early-stage work in direct marketing, the Internet, and digital marketing to schools. As the VP of Internet Marketing for the Boston chapter of the American Marketing Association, he is a frequent blogger and content creator. William is a strategic partner for Kalix Communications, focusing on digital and data-driven marketing.

### ***About Kalix Communications***

**Kalix** is a fast-growing, full-service independent school marketing agency located in Baltimore, Maryland. They can help your school enhance its image and increase enrollment, retention, and fundraising with their services, including marketing research, brand development, creative, social media, media planning and buying, public relations, and web development and digital marketing.