

TOUCHSCREEN DIRECTORY CONTAINS PORT BYRON ALUMNI
INFO

A finger on the future: Touchscreen directory connects Port Byron students to alumni

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PORT BYRON | The touch of a finger connects the past to the future for Dana L. West Jr.-Sr. High School alumni and students.

On March 13, an interactive alumni directory went live at the school when a 40-inch monitor was installed in its lobby. Its touchscreen surface directs current students who are thinking about life after high school toward alumni who've stood in their shoes.

Referred to as the "Key to the World," students can learn of the academic and career choices of alumni who've signed up to participate in the school's database. If they've agreed to it, some alumni have volunteered to become mentors to students who have questions about college or workplace opportunities.

In what began as a conversation of how to honor alumni, a design team comprised of former and current students, faculty,

administrators and community members spent three years devising a way to join soon-to-be graduates to those who've come before them.

"But it was kind of a daunting task to find individuals in the alumni association," said senior Michael Vitale, a design team member. "We have such great alumni who can connect young adults to their careers."

It then dawned on the design team that the common ground between the two populations was what nearly everyone has in their pocket: a cellphone.

"Technology is what interests kids," Vitale said.

Transforming the guidance office's paper "database" into computer technology involved research to find the software that could update the former system to one that would appeal to students, no matter where their post-high school life leads them.

In between classes, a student has only to stop at the screen and touch one of five buttons to activate a series of menus that guide them to specific careers, such as engineering, the arts or business. Another way to access the directory's information is to select a specific college or university, which brings up an array of schools alumni have attended.

There are even more ways the touchscreen directory helps students connect to professionals. Alumni who wish to not have their identity appear on the directory have their names number-coded so that a student can submit the code to the guidance office. There, they can determine if the person is willing to be contacted.

"We connected our students and alumni to talk about degrees, college and after-high school opportunities to allow every one of them to

know what came out of Port Byron," Vitale said. "What we've learned is that there's no substitute for experience. People have done things that are absolutely remarkable."

Current students are able to ask alumni any kind of question to help them figure out their next move, such as what classes alums took in college to prepare them for their careers, or if they'd rethink certain choices made along the way, Vitale said.

Convincing the Port Byron school board "to fall in love with this idea" meant putting together presentations introducing them to the innovation. Superintendent Neil O'Brien, a design team member, told the group the possibility existed of a budget surplus to put toward the directory's design.

"Within two board meetings, we found that there was a capacity to support our project," Vitale said of the \$8,000 project.

Design team members next contracted with the Electronic Directory Corporation, which provided software Vitale used to program the directory. Next year, Vitale will be a freshman at Colgate University, but a student contingent will remain to continue updating the database and tweaking the directory, he said.

"We are trying to set a precedent for other schools to try this and pioneer a new age for kids who want to go to college," Vitale said.