

The Wall, an immersive video display, in the lobby of Newhouse 1 at Syracuse University's S.J. Newhouse School of Public Communications.

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Universities Use Video Walls as Storytelling Tools

Digital displays mounted in communal spaces are giving schools a chance to exhibit academic success, celebrate athletic performance and illustrate student life.

by Erin Brereton

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

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In fall 2022, installation of [Samsung's](#) large-scale immersive display technology, dubbed The Wall, helped update the lobby in Newhouse 1, the I.M. Pei-designed building that [Syracuse University's](#) S.J. Newhouse School of Public Communications added in 1964. The video wall gives the university's communications school a dynamic way to depict students' experiences.

Five [MicroLED video panels](#) separated by a 3-inch gap are used to highlight program initiatives, such as film projects and student profiles, according to IT Director Brian Tibbens.

"We wanted to tell our story as a school," Tibbens says. "We have really great facilities, but they don't always showcase for students how they fit within that story. Newhouse 1 is where every single visitor and potential student comes in. This was a great opportunity to give it a look and feel that met our aesthetic design criteria."

The school typically selects five or six students per semester to feature in videos that touch on their achievements and goals.

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"Our communications team tries to look at the broad student population — students who have interesting stories, from different programs," Tibbens says. "For potential students who are interested in coming into the school, instead of staring at a big poster board, it's a board that's constantly changing and rotating, showcasing what we're doing."

The video wall is powered by an [HP Z8 G4](#) desktop workstation located behind the display and a [NVIDIA](#) Quadro RTX video card, hardwired to the screens to provide consistent video sequencing with little frame loss.

Content is pushed via a local network from a shared text, image and video sequence database housed on an [Intel](#) NUC 11 Enthusiast computer, which also supports an alumni gallery wall composed of four 65-inch [NEC](#) touch panels located on the second floor.

The Newhouse 1 lobby display, according to Tibbens, has added "a new form of life to the building."

"Even on the brightest day, it's absolutely illuminated with this interactive colorful wall," he says. "But at night it really shines. It literally illuminates the entire atrium of the building in bold colors and stories that just really pop. We have a lot of visitors come through our building, and you always see them hanging around watching the storylines and asking follow-up questions."

Universities Use Visual Systems to Laud Extracurricular Triumphs

Colleges and universities initially relied on digital displays primarily for wayfinding and [relaying safety information](#), but today a number of schools are using the technology to personalize the university experience, says Brian Gorg, executive director of the [Digital Signage Federation](#), an industry association.

"Whether it's campus news, a promotion for research that's been done or awards, we see it a lot on the recruitment side," Gorg says. "When a prospective student comes to the campus, now they're immersed in what the university's about. They can even go to touch screens to see information while they wait."

The [University of Tampa's](#) Benson Alex Riseman Fitness and Recreation Center has found numerous applications for its pool-adjacent [Planar](#) outdoor LED video wall since the facility opened in 2022.

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The display's uses have ranged from a swim meet scoreboard to a movie night screen and outlet for upcoming activity notifications, says Parker Sheppard, associate director of aquatics and safety in UT's Office of Campus Recreation.

"We get students who walk by, going from any given parking garage to any given class," Sheppard says. "It's a very central location for people to see information and to hold events. It allows for just about any kind of use; it's an incredibly versatile piece of technology."

With an HP desktop computer, he's able to broadcast [music and other audio elements](#) through a dozen speakers placed around the pool deck and project visuals onto the 16-by-10-foot multipanel wall. These visuals include swim team member photos, which were placed in rotation after a conference win, when the athletes were training for an upcoming national competition.

They seemed elated, Sheppard says, to see themselves on the screen.

"I'd hear them up on the blocks all the time saying, 'Oh, hey, look, it's you!'" Sheppard says. "Swimming is not the most visible sport, especially at bigger universities. You don't get as much visibility as you do in football, so to have this capability to display the success of our athletes is wonderful."

User-Friendly Access May Help Displays Supply Social Benefits

At [Clarkson University's](#) main Potsdam, N.Y., campus, students can directly control the content that's shown on the student center's [Planar TVF Series](#) video wall.

"The system is set up to be self-serve," says Jeff Yette, manager of customer service and communications. "You have to reserve and check out things like microphones, but if students want to watch soap operas or a sporting event, they can turn the system on and change the channel, or they can stream the university radio station."

During the 2020 winter break, the school removed its previous standard-definition, tile-based video wall, and an [audiovisual](#) company installed a new one that stands 14 feet wide by 8 feet high in just a few days.



Photography By Gregory Heisler

A screencasting device lets students [wirelessly share content](#) to the high-definition video wall from device.

The video wall has helped increase the student center's use, Yette says. The university's [health sciences](#) graduate program, for instance, hosted a ceremony in which participants, as their names appeared in a [Microsoft](#) PowerPoint presentation playing in the background, received a lab coat, signifying they'd advanced to the next stage of their education.

"Parents and students will stay after an event just to get a picture in front of the screen with the departmental logo on it," Yette says. "People will grab food and, rather than going into the dining hall, they will sit at the nearby tables because somebody pulled up a sporting event. We have alumni who have worked on some of the space rockets; we'd have the live stream of those launches on, and you'd see a large number of students hanging out to watch."

Utilizing Digital Displays Requires Logistical Considerations

As manufacturing practices continue to bring the technology's costs down, Gorg says, expense may not be an institution's deciding factor for video wall implementation.

"It's not even the [physical infrastructure](#)," he says. "It's how do you actually utilize it? How are you feeding content that's relevant to people to make it an effective solution?"

To facilitate the system's operation, he advises schools to identify who will manage it, such as a department-specific IT role, communications team or other entity. Installation needs can also be a consideration, particularly in older campus buildings where drilling into walls might not be feasible.

However, even with some logistical challenges, Gorg says, higher ed has become one of the most active sectors for digital displays.

In addition to using the displays' visual appeal to engage students, institutions may also use them to attract future [digital-native cohorts](#) who'll likely expect technology to play a central role in the recruiting experience.

"Schools are focused on making sure prospective students are interested and feel like this is a modern university that aligns with their values," Gorg says. "And the technology is being used to make sure when they're on campus, they feel connected; that the university can be a home for them."

MANAGING DIGITAL DISPLAY UPKEEP

Successfully incorporating a large-scale video wall in a campus building requires more than just putting up commercially available flat screens in a highly trafficked area.

While the Planar video wall in Clarkson University's student center is occasionally shut down at times like winter break, finding a tech solution that could handle near-constant use was a key consideration for the school, says Yette.

"We wanted to make sure this was intended to be industrial strength," he says. "We certainly don't want to be replacing a video wall [every two to three years](#) because we've left it on too long and burned it out."

Ongoing maintenance needs are another element to consider. Yette says the repairs have been minimal in the year and a half that Clarkson's video wall has been in heavy use. That's thanks in part to its individual LED tiles, which (unlike the school's prior display) can be accessed from the front of the wall and removed fairly easily using a magnetic tool.

"With the previous system, a lot was tucked behind the wall, and you had to get in there and disconnect cables," he says. "If a panel somehow gets physically damaged — somebody bumped into it or scraped something up against it — we have spares on hand, because that was part of the initial purchase. We literally can pop that tile out, pop a new one back in. It takes less than 30 seconds."

PHOTO COURTESY OF SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



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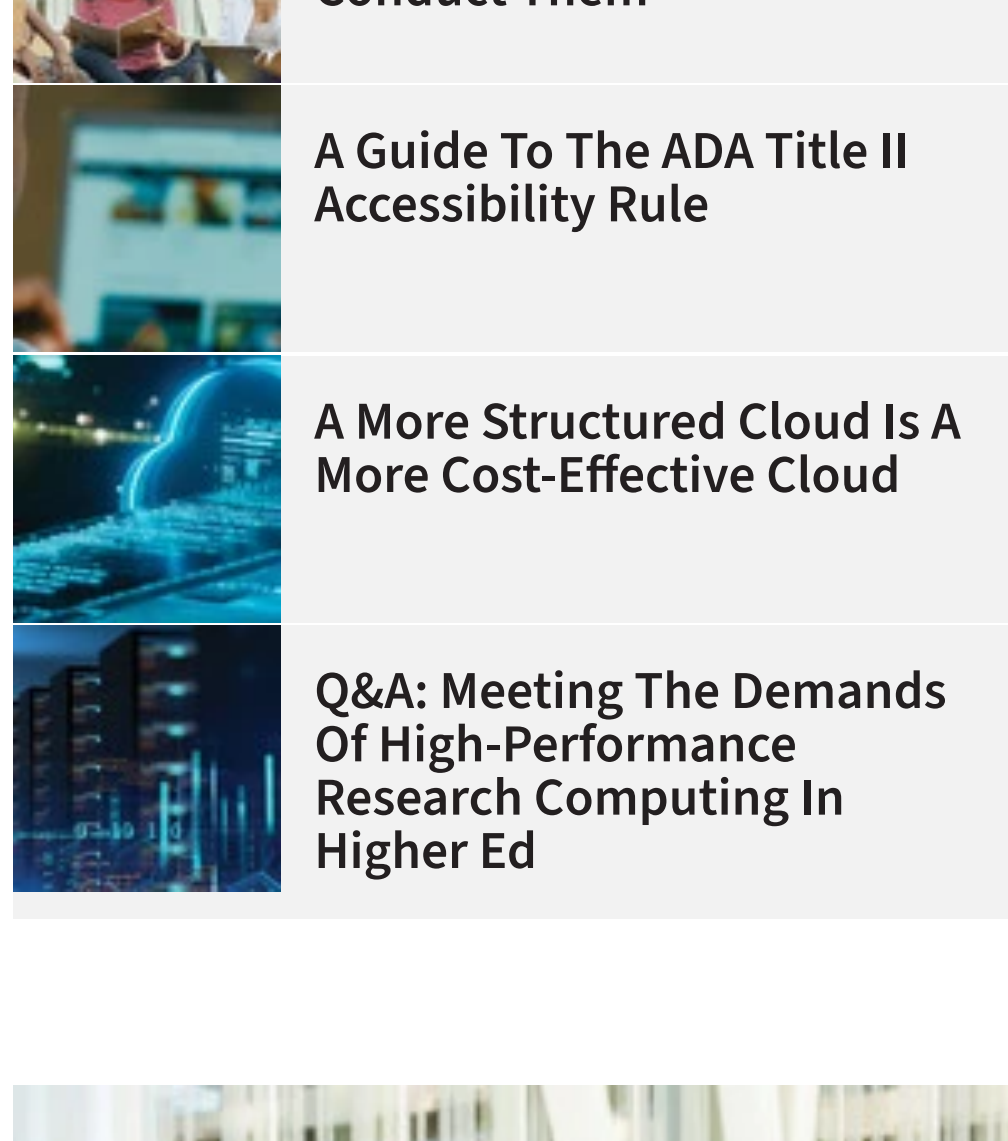
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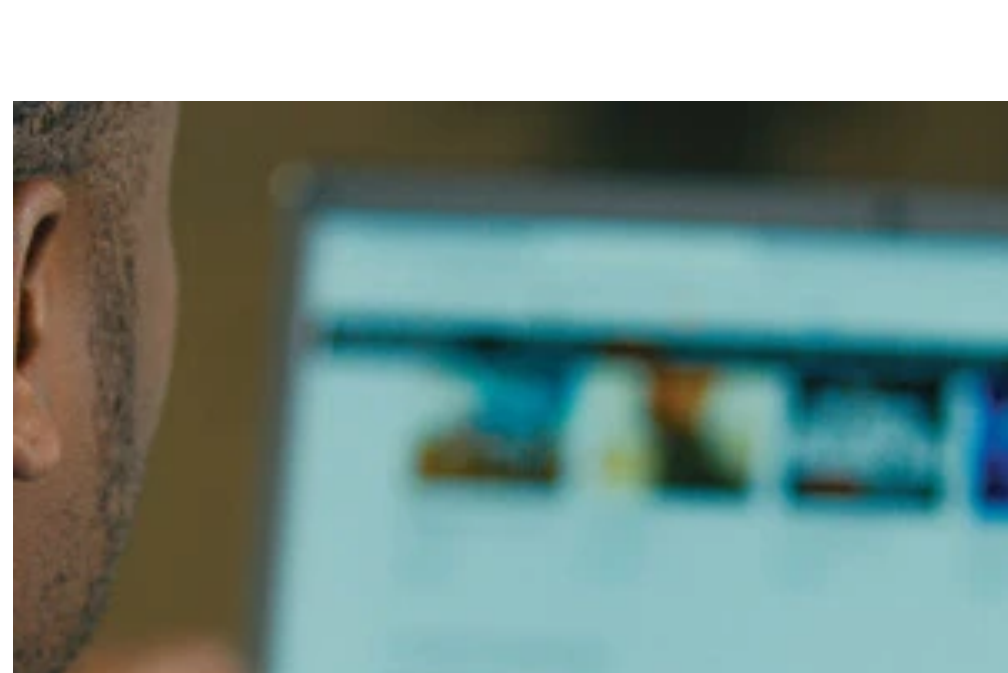
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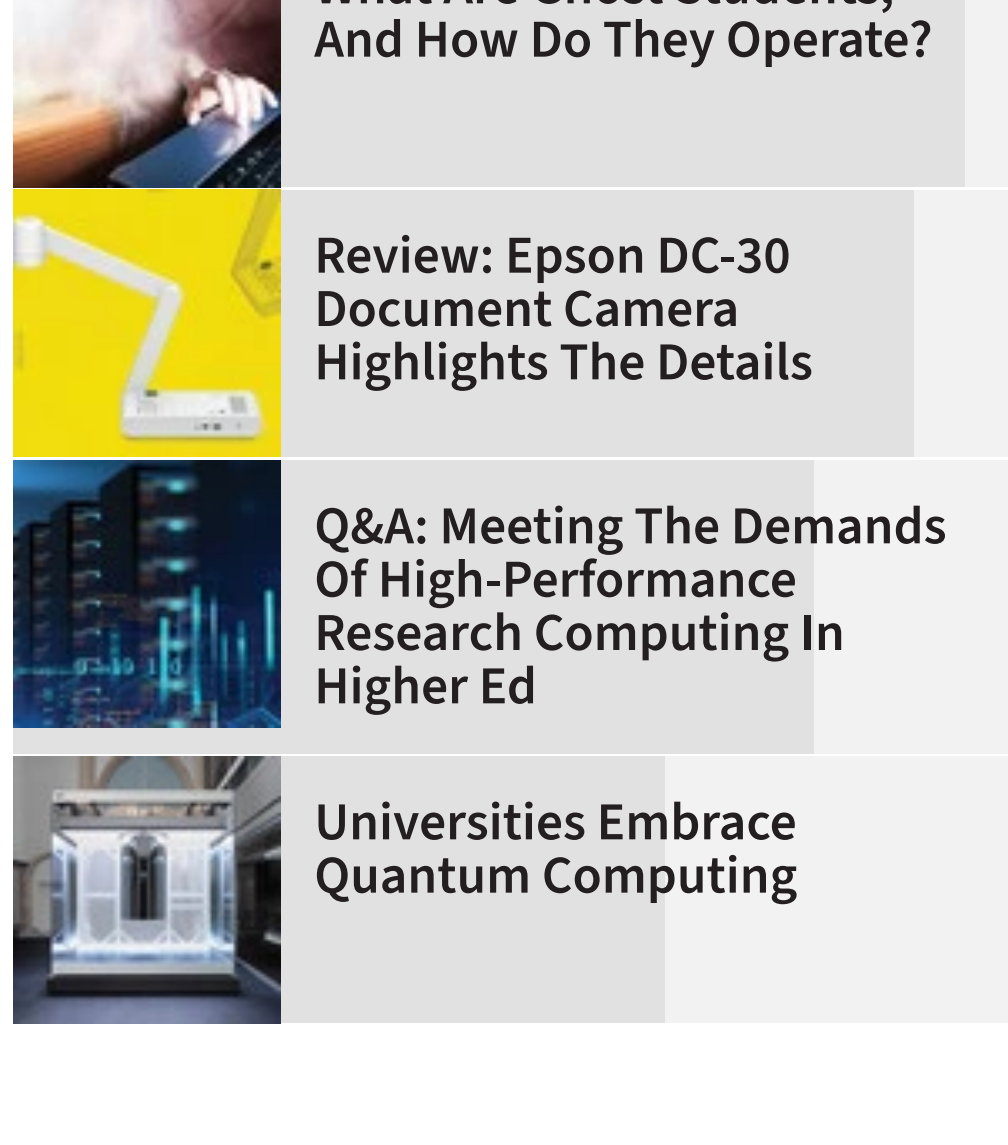
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