


## Poplarville community seeks to further online presence

 [picayuneitem.com/2017/02/poplarville-community-seeks-to-further-online-presence/](http://www.picayuneitem.com/2017/02/poplarville-community-seeks-to-further-online-presence/)

Pearl River Community College and the Poplarville Area Chamber of Commerce held their first Lunch and Learn program of 2017 on Thursday to discuss the community's online presence.

Dr. Roberto Gallardo, associate extension professor at Mississippi State University, presented research conducted by Blair Kirkpatrick about the online presence of Poplarville.

The goal of the project, which stems from Gallardo's research into the digital divide in rural areas of the country, was to see the outside perspective of a community from a simple Internet search.

Vice President for General Education and Technology Services Dr. Martha Lou Smith introduced Gallardo. She was quoted as saying "don't focus on your needs, focus on your assets."

And discovering Poplarville's assets online are somewhat hard to find, Gallardo said.

According to Kirkpatrick's research, Gallardo said the city of Poplarville needs to focus on making its website more prominently on search engines, update broken links and consider using more social media platforms. However, Gallardo praised the city for its user-friendly website and strong Facebook presence.

Brenda Wells, director of institutional research at PRCC, later said the city didn't have a website until three and a half years ago.

Wells also praised Carol Williams, who volunteered to run the city's Facebook page.

As far as Poplarville's assets go, Gallardo said the researcher found no mention of the community college when she searched "Poplarville, Mississippi" and "schools in Poplarville, Mississippi."

As one of the best community colleges in the state, Gallardo urged both the city and the college to update their website and keywords to ensure potential visitors and residents know everything the college has to offer.

While most of the image searches appeared positive, Gallardo said, in November, that same search pulled up negative images, including those of a KKK rally held in front of the courthouse about a decade ago.

He suggested the city continue to post more positive photos with keywords linked to Poplarville to push negative images further down the results page.

In terms of social media, Gallardo said, "I'm aware that many communities cannot handle all social media accounts," but encouraged Poplarville to look into slowly introducing some new platforms.

Those include not just Facebook, but Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat and YouTube, he said.

Poplarville also doesn't have a current hashtag, which Gallardo said could be used to market the city, particularly for tourism.

In conclusion, Gallardo said Kirkpatrick concluded the city's online presence is essentially a "positive blank slate."

In the future, the city should build upon its current website for upcoming events, he said, and not rely on Facebook to disseminate information.

"Poplarville has a tremendous asset other communities do not, and that's the community college," Gallardo said.

He encouraged the college to promote student involvement to help brand and market the community.

"We all know how important first impressions are, from driving into town or walking into a home, but online presence is critical and an excellent tool for us to move forward," Wells said.

The next Lunch and Learn is scheduled for April 6 where members of the Pearl River County Board of Supervisors are expected to speak.

