AOL goes for reality programming

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Reality television may soon need to be renamed Internet reality. Both Internet providers and small production studios across the globe are moving their ideas for reality programming online.

America Online's RED service for teens will premiere Project Freshman (a program they compare to The Real World meshed with Laguna Beach -- on a college campus) on Sept. 23rd. The Internet-based production will chronicle six students throughout their first semester at colleges across the country.

"The Internet is where the youth market is ... these kids live on the Web," said AOL Communications Manager Jo McKenna.

Each of the six students, equipped with a digital video camera, will record the ups, downs and everything in between on their college journey. Filmed confessionals and a daily blog also accompany the footage. Each segment runs about three to five minutes.

"There's nothing else of this scope and scale in Internet reality shows, we're one of the first," said Josh Mutchnick, general manager and creative director of RED. He explained that AOL is planning a number of online reality shows for the future, claiming, "Kids aren't necessarily turning to MTV anymore."

The six subjects are likely to mirror much of what students get worked up about these days.

Justin Gardiner is headed to Dallas Baptist University in Texas, where he will be trying out for the football team and attempting to form a band, all while being away from home for the first time.

New University of Wisconsin-Madison student Sara Whiteaker, known better as "The Story Teller," must maintain a 3.0 GPA to keep her scholarship, but she's worried about how her new college courses will compare to what she experienced in high school.

David Ubben is pursuing his dream of becoming a sports writer at the University of Missouri-Columbia. "I think my episodes will show more of the fun side of college," he said. David, like all of the students participating, is paid $200 a week but also spends anywhere from two to four hours a week on the project.

Brenna Slavens, a Marshall University student, wants to be president of the United States. Until then this small town girl is on scholarship and loans to make her dream come true.

A thousand miles away from her family and friends is Jessica Rudolph, a new University of Florida student. She's worried about missing memories with her younger siblings and simply being so far away from home for the first time.

The sixth and final person is Conor Kelly, a Notre Dame freshman who also wants to be the next president. However, for now he's pretty happy loving his time at his dream school.

Recently, AOL announced a partnership with Chevrolet and Time Warner Inc. to produce another online reality show called "The Biz."

Twenty contestants, two chosen by the audience via the Internet during the Sept. 15 premiere, will compete for the prize: presidency of a newly

created Warner Music Group record label. Ten finalists, as voted by viewers, will also travel to New York to continue the interactive competition and vie for victory.

Both Project Freshman and The Biz are accessible to all Web users.

Other Internet-based reality shows range from 13 weeks on NurseTV.com, a program observing the lives of six travel nurses in southern California, to BlogAbroad.com, a contest-based reality show assigning tasks to college students studying around the globe.

13 weeks, sponsored by Access Nurses, enabled online viewers to vote for the participants they wanted to move into an Orange County mansion and be filmed for, not surprisingly, 13 weeks. The final product, when aired, will mix "personal development goals" with the trials of new roommates.

BlogAbroad.com highlights the experiences of four students studying abroad (three American students overseas and then one student in the United States) through a combination of blogs, pictures and recorded segments. EDU Directories, the company that formulated the site, believes an interactive approach to such reality as studying in another country is vital to those who are interested in doing the same and also as a way for family and friends to keep in touch.

The visual additions to each profile are decided totally by the students, explained Matt Ulmer, public relations writer at EDU Directories. "They can upload as many pictures and videos as they want," he said.

Also gaining global attention is an obscure Croatian online program called Stado, which stars sheep instead of people. Viewers can see the sheep 24 hours a day and then choose which sheep to vote out of the 10-day program. The daily newspaper Vecernji List reported Sept. 14

that those voted out of the herd may be eaten.

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