

Review of current articles

**The Use of Social Media by
Student Affairs Practitioners**

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Abstract

Many student affairs professionals in the higher education sector consider the internet, social media, and other emerging technologies as peripheral to the real business of supporting students. There are however, many early adopters of this form of media driven engagement within the higher education sector. The 2011 Summer Edition of The Journal of Technology in Student Affairs (http://studentaffairs.com/ejournal/Summer_2011/) presents three articles which each offer an insight into the use of social media as a tool through which to engage, support and connect students and institutions. These articles represent the formative nature of online engagement and provide both encouragement and caution to the student affairs practitioners in higher education.

Introduction

Many student affairs professionals in the higher education sector consider the internet, social media, and other emerging technologies as peripheral to the real business of supporting students. Current conversations revolve around the use or otherwise of social media tools, including well utilized favourites such as Facebook and Twitter. Issues related to confidentiality, privacy, socially appropriate content within the context of learning communities is all bound up with opinions about whether the use of these emerging technologies is a legitimate means of engaging with and supporting students. For many practitioners, the focus is on the appropriateness of using the new tools and this can inhibit the adoption of new ways of working with students.

The 2011 Summer Edition of The Journal of Technology in Student Affairs (http://studentaffairs.com/ejournal/Summer_2011/) presents three articles which offer an insight into the current debate.

Sarah Jenness discusses how Facebook is currently used to engage students, and she offers some recommendations to student affairs practitioners regarding how Facebook can be used to positively impact student learning and development in her article *Rethinking Facebook: A Tool to Promote Student Engagement*. Amy Ratliff discusses how social media tools are currently used by students, administrators and staff members, in her article *Are They Listening? Social Media on Campuses of Higher Education*, and William Mallett shows how using an online social network has been successfully deployed as a means of assisting and welcoming international students prior to their arrival on campus in *The Use of an Online Social Network to Introduce and Connect Newly Admitted International Students*.

Rethinking Facebook: A Tool to Promote Student Engagement by Sarah Jenness

In this article, Sarah Jenness discusses the features of social media sites such as Facebook and she identifies a number of features which students find appealing. These include the range of tools and services available to users (such as online chat, and the ability to create interest groups); the ability of users to alter privacy settings; the capacity of users to control various aspects of their interactions with friends; and the potential of Facebook to create smaller and more intimate communities within the larger context of an institution. For educational institutions, she cites the value of 'maximising a resource that students are already tapped in to' as a real benefit.

This article looks at the use of Facebook to provide the traditional types of information to students which student affairs practitioners would normally disseminate through more traditional means. She demonstrates the use of Facebook to promote Orientation, to introduce students both to each other and to support staff. The provision of essential information prior to students arriving on campus is used as an example of how Facebook can be deployed to keep newly admitted students connected and involved throughout their first year. The State University of New York for example has used Facebook as a pre-orientation device for new students, creating engagement with them through the use of the wall and event

notifications. Advertising 'events such as 'stress busters' for finals week... and providing links to online campus publications detailing other news and events' are suggested as ways of engaging with continuing students.

She suggests that the current practices of using Facebook to connect like-minded students, to advertise student activities and campus events such as clubs, societies and sporting groups as well as promoting general entertainment offerings on campus assist in the transition to college life. It is interesting that she explores the role of Facebook in encouraging civic and political engagement within the student population but the link between Facebook pages addressing these issues and the volume of students who do engage in civic and political activities is unclear. The use of Facebook in this way is still exploratory.

This article introduces the potential to use Facebook into the future, as a tool through which to provide academic advising and to further engage students beyond the classroom is also discussed. Jessen outlines the opportunities to holistically engage with students across the multi-faceted student experience but she does offer a word of caution about the number of unknowns in using this media. She identifies that 'educators and student affairs practitioners have expressed a variety of concerns about the use of Facebook, which center around students' success and well-being as it relates to time spent online, privacy and online behaviour'. She further suggests that it is timely for student affairs practitioners to collaborate through research, informal sharing and more formal conversations about the use of social media in education. She quite rightly identifies that these media are here to stay!

This article provides an extensive reference list for interested practitioners to start to explore what is happening within this field.

Are They Listening? Social Media on Campuses of Higher Education, by Amy Ratliff

This article presents a strong picture of the immediacy of communication afforded through the use of social media. Responses to social media vary between the 'technologically savvy student' and administrators and faculty who may be intimidated by the emerging technologies but Ratliff suggests that as a result of new technologies, students now 'communicate differently, research differently and socialize differently'. The challenge for student affairs professionals is to understand and utilise the range of technologies to support their work with students.

Ratliff defines social media and then explores the range of social media sites currently being used. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace and others are described for those not familiar with these media

As identified in similar articles in recent times, the challenges of using these forms of social media include loss of control (by users and staff alike), time commitment to successfully utilise mixed media, information overload for users, 'the openness of these programs to allow creation of an 'official' account without formal channels' and the potential to create confusion through the use of multiple sites.

Ratliff suggests that higher education providers need to understand the different forms of social media, embrace the new technologies and explore ways of engaging with students who are active in these sites.

This article continues the discussion of similar articles but provides little in the way of evidence of the efficacy of these tools.

The Use of an Online Social Network to Introduce and Connect Newly Admitted International by William Mallett .

William Mallett presents a review of practices from East Carolina University's Office of International Affairs. He outlines the way in which social networking assists in the orientation and transition of new international students, prior to their commencement at ECU. Two months before commencement, ECU introduces a private social networking site to familiarise new international and exchange students with staff, information about arrivals at college, invitations to orientation and transition activities such as orientation schedules, peer mentoring opportunities and administrative information such as fees and tuition information. Essentially, ECU International encourages social networking between students and staff from a very early online first encounter. The article identifies that there is 'no single method to achieve a sense of belonging to the institution' but the author believes that this social networking approach is a step in the right direction. The article does not include evaluative data or participation statistics to illustrate the points being made.

Conclusion

Each of the reviewed articles provides an insight into the use of social media as a tool through which to engage, support and connect students and institutions. These articles represent the formative nature of online engagement and provide both encouragement and caution to the student affairs practitioners. The issues and concerns raised within these articles have been widely discussed but there is a lack of research-based data on which to base decisions about our future practices. For me, these articles provided an opportunity to reflect on current practices locally and to make comparisons about where we sit on the social media evolutionary chart.

References

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