

Connecting a College Community with Social Media

Three benefits of internal networking sites for college campuses.

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The Project for Wellness and Work-Life (PWWL) is a consortium of scholars who examine the intersections of work, domestic life, and wellness. Research foci include workplace bullying, emotion labor, burnout, conflict, gender and work-life negotiation. PWWL holds a use-inspired research approach, developing projects that increase theoretical knowledge while simultaneously impacting policy and improving the everyday lives of women and men. PWWL is a strategic initiative of The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. For more information, please visit our website: http://humancommunication.clas.asu.edu/about/wellness_and_worklife. For correspondence regarding this article please contact sarah.tracy@asu.edu.

Executive Summary

Within large university systems students often claim they feel anonymous, lost, and may opt to leave school altogether. Faculty and administrators are not impervious to feeling overwhelmed by vast university systems as resources are often dispersed and seemingly inaccessible.

The question is: How do vast and dispersed colleges cultivate *strong, vibrant communities*?

One practical solution is social media. Internet technology is ubiquitous and has rapidly become embedded into the lives of college students for kindling and nurturing social relationships (Steinfeld et. al, 2008 & Ellison et. al, 2007). Social media scholars agree that social media should not be prohibited from college students (Ellison et. al, 2007), but rather social media should be used as a vehicle to create connections.

Social media, specifically *internal networking sites*, employed within a university setting can be useful for promoting social connectedness while concurrently accomplishing university goals. In fact, a few organizations have harnessed such internal networking sites and have successfully facilitated social connections among sizable and dispersed employees (Dimicco, 2008; Brzozowski, 2009). Certainly increased communication networks within a college campus could benefit individual well-being, enhance organizational functioning, increase productivity and collaboration, and broaden community engagement.

This white paper proposes that the integration of social media on college campuses can create an environment rich with social capital. Consequently, increased social capital would be beneficial to students, faculty, staff, and the community. We draw on extant social capital and social network literature to suggest that the benefits of internal networking sites are numerous and vast.

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges within large college campuses is nurturing social connections. One modern-day solution to minimizing social disconnectedness is with the use of social media. Internet technology is ubiquitous and has rapidly become embedded into the lives of college students for kindling and nurturing social relationships.

One of the biggest challenges within large campuses is nurturing social connections. While in fact “the most important objects in anyone’s environment are other people” (Parkinson, 1996, p. 664). Well-being literature is quick to point to social relationships as a dependable resource for happiness throughout one’s life (Seligman, 2002). Without question cultivating and maintaining social ties helps individuals flourish. Social media is an accessible vehicle for fostering these vital social connections.

Social media, specifically *internal networking sites*, employed within a university setting can be used to promote connectedness while concurrently accomplishing university goals. Internal networking sites are similar to external

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sites in that both allow individuals to construct personal profiles and connect with peers, colleagues, and acquaintances. A unique feature of social networking sites is that users make their social networks public, which enables and encourages individuals to become friends with other people’s friends. Public social networking sites, like Facebook, are all inclusive, while internal networking sites are privatized, and membership is exclusive to those individuals affiliated with the organization.

Undoubtedly, increased communication networks within a college campus could benefit individual well-being, enhance organizational functioning, and broaden community engagement.

The present paper proposes that the integration of social media on college campuses will create an environment richer in social capital, consequently benefitting the individual, creating a sense of community, and increasing organizational level functioning. We present extant social capital and networking literature to suggest that the benefits of internal networking sites are abundant and vast.

Social Media Generation

The popularity of social media is exceedingly high among college students. The second most visited website in the United States is the social networking website Facebook, second only to Google (Alexa.com). Researchers claim that 79-95% of undergraduates have a Facebook profile (Ellison et. al, 2007; Steinfield et. al, 2008). The use of social media has become commonplace, and its usage seems to be mounting.

Today's college students, comprised largely of the Millennial generation, view technology as an integral component to daily life. Sometimes called

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Generation Me or the Digital Generation, members are always connected and “treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like a body part – for better and worse” (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 1). The incorporation of the Internet into everyday life has shaped a generation that thrives on and expects connectivity, investigation, openness and immediacy. Millennials expect to integrate socialization with technology into all aspects of their lives, making social media worthwhile to consider in a university context. Furthermore, the benefits of social media use are broad and can also extend to both faculty and staff.

The present paper describes how the integration of an internal networking site into a college campus may contribute to a positive college community. Social media is valuable in a number of ways; we specifically suggest that an internal

networking site within a college community will help create social capital, resulting in benefits for the individual, the organization, and the community.

Three Levels of Benefits of Social Media

1) INDIVIDUAL BENEFITS

The consensus among social media researchers is that internal networking sites have the potential to augment social connections, both in universities and within organizations. Social media allows individuals an added platform for social networking and building social capital. Networks and social capital are essential resources to maintain and enhance well-being. Public social networking sites also assist others with sensemaking and forming an organizational identity. Lastly, individuals are more likely to remain committed to social groups once embedded into corresponding social networks.

Rich Social Capital. One of the most valuable uses for social media is in building social networks. Social networking sites are named such for a reason;

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they are websites that enable individuals to be *social*. Well-being research has demonstrated that the happiest people have rich and fulfilling social lives (Seligman, 2002, p. 56), and social media research has yielded similar results (Ellison et. al., 2007; Valenzuela et. al, 2009). The most valuable

asset within social networks is their corresponding social capital.

While engaged in social activity, individuals expand their social networks and thus develop invaluable social capital. Social capital includes the capital or resources available within one's network of relationships with other people (Lin, 1999). The qualities of ties within a network are valuable for understating accessible resources. An individual's social network is comprised of both strong and weak connections (Granovetter, 1983), both valuable for different reasons. Strong ties, or bonding capital, are typically connections with close family members and/or friends that provide emotional and psychological support.

Certainly, strong ties can be nurtured with the use of social media (Ellison et. al, 2007). Similarly, instant messaging among friends has been found to enrich the social lives of college students (Quaan-Haase, 2008). Secondly, weak ties, or bridging capital, are typically comprised of connections with distant friends and acquaintances. Perhaps equally as valuable as strong ties, weak ties provide individuals with exposure to new ideas and increased access to novel information (Granovetter, 1973).

Building New Connections. One college, Michigan State University (MSU), has long examined the use of Facebook within their student body. Roughly 94% of MSU undergraduate students were using Facebook to maintain connections from high school as well as for developing new connections (Ellison et. al, 2007). Additionally, newer college students were more likely than juniors or seniors to

New college students are eager to build new connections with those around them.

use Facebook to build new friendship ties. This would suggest that new college students are eager to build new connections with those around them. As such, college students commonly turn to social networking sites to build these new connections. A recent study identified the

social motivations for students' use of Facebook, which include initiating new relationships, maintaining relationships, and seeking social information (Ellison et. al, 2011). Interestingly, Facebook was used *least* for initiating new relationships and most often for social information seeking, which involves learning about people they have met offline or who live nearby. This finding supports previous research (Ellison et. al, 2007) that in fact there are not online and offline relationships but rather an integration of the two that is practical for maintaining an abundant social life.

Well-Being. Forming new friendships is particularly important for the well-being of incoming college students. College students often leave home to study and find many of their connections and ties have been displaced. As college students move away to college they often decrease communication with ties back

home and increase communication with those nearest them. Opportunely, social media use enables and facilitates an adjustment in one's social network (Ellison et. al, 2007). Similarly, college students that use social media intensely also have a higher level of social trust (Valenzuela et. al, 2009). Connections with others are integral for maintaining optimal well-being, and social media has certainly proved itself as an invaluable tool for connecting with others.

An added bonus of social media sites is that they may be particularly beneficial for individuals with low self-esteem. College students with low self-esteem found Facebook to be a useful tool for becoming socially engaged (Steinfeld et. al, 2008). Similarly, Leier and Agars (forthcoming) found college students with low self-esteem preferred e-mail for career networking over face-to-face communication. Consistently, socially hesitant and shy individuals find the controlled and concealed social environment of social media a safe environment to form new social connections. Additionally, “[s]tudents who...fail to develop... social support and involvement may still be at risk of dropping out [of school]” (Lotkowski et. al., vii). An internal networking site would be particularly beneficial for this subset of students.

Retention. Once integrated into social networks, individuals are more committed to the community and will be more likely to stay engaged. Networks have been deemed advantageous for retaining community volunteers. A survey of social organizations in Spain indicated volunteers had higher intentions to remain

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volunteers if they were well integrated into a supportive social network. Intentions to remain volunteers were also influenced by supervisor support and organizational training. Findings suggest that individuals invest in an organization that provides the investment of peers and the investment of

management (Hidalgo & Moreno, 2009). It is expected that students and professors will remain within the university once they are embedded into online

and face-to-face social networks.

Sensemaking and Identity. To no surprise, individuals within large organizations commonly find themselves uncertain of who is in their immediate surrounding. Social media use has recently been found to facilitate the learning about of others through a process termed people sensemaking. Sensemaking is the mental process of gaining a concrete understanding of the individuals in one's environment. Internal networking sites allow users to browse content-rich profiles and networks of social connections. It has been asserted that an augmented understanding of one's community might enhance internal communication and facilitate relationship formation. For example, IBM's Big Blue site allowed new and distant employees to engage in sensemaking within the organization (Dimicco et. al, 2008).

Moreover, social media is a valuable resource for personal identity formation. Clear and accessible representations of others within an organization allow newcomers to gain an understanding of their role within this much larger entity. An internal networking platform is also maintained within the Hewlett-Packard

Social media is a valuable resource for personal identity formation.

Corporation called "WaterCooler." Similar to Big Blue, users of WaterCooler have also found this internal site beneficial for sensemaking in such an enormous organization. One WaterCooler user attested to its value: "HP is a giant corporation. At times it can seem fairly anonymous.

WaterCooler puts names and faces to the people behind the company. It has given me a broader understanding of HP as a whole" (Brzozowski, 2009).

2) ORGANIZATIONAL BENEFITS

An additional benefit of social media is that it increases overall functioning of the organization. Social media tools such as microblogs, instant messaging, and internal networking sites all increase the amount and efficiency of communication processes. These social media tools might also facilitate professional engagement between faculty and students. Overall, using social media to improve the ease of

communication between levels will benefit the individual as well as the organization as a whole.

Increased Communication. The vastness of a college or an organization can be overwhelming for employees and managers. Social media resources can increase the efficiency of communication in both large organizations and colleges. Discussion boards, internal networking sites (DiMicco et. al, 2008; Dimicco et. al, 2008), microblogs (Zhao & Rosson, 2009), and instant messaging (Quaan-Haase, 2008) are all tools that have been employed in an effort to streamline communication.

Microblogs, such as Twitter, are a popular tool for internal communication. This informal communication tool is useful for keeping up with people, sharing information, and engaging in discussion similar to the in person “water cooler conversation” (Zhao & Rosson, 2009). The value of microblogs at Dell, Inc. was

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found to increase both professional and personal relationships between colleagues. Additionally, there was an overall increase in group cohesiveness (Baehr & Brown, 2010). Overall, microblogs offer both an increase in informal and formal communication between colleagues in

organizations, and this will likely be similarly true in a university setting. In other words, short mediated messages can lead to in-depth, face-to-face conversations.

Instant messaging has also been deemed a valuable communication resource. It is suggested that widespread instant message use on college campuses facilitates greater internal communication (Quaan-Haase, 2008). One such example is Dartmouth College, one of the first campuses to utilize an internal e-mail system called Blitzmail, a system that has been successful in immediately connecting professors, students and administrators. In the mid-2000s most students opted to use Blitzmail rather than a cellular telephone (Wikipedia, 2011).

In addition, instant messaging has been demonstrated to facilitate positive social connections in organizations. For example, a quick instant message saying “Hi” or “Good Morning” to a colleague sends a message of concern and care (Nardi, 2005).

Finally, internal networking sites have been employed by a few organizations to both enhance communication and create community. Employees who work for IBM use an internal networking site called Big Blue. Big Blue (formerly known as Beehive) was found to be a valued method for forming relationships with individuals outside of one’s immediate social network and academic department. Employees formed connections with people with hopes of campaigning for new projects, forming caring work relationships, and advancing one’s professional career (Dimicco et. al, 2008). Social media is an efficient medium to communicate quickly and the associated outcomes of these tools have been overwhelmingly positive. This type of networking could be extremely beneficial given the demand for interdisciplinary answers to society’s toughest questions, like sustainability, borderland issues, and health/well-being.

Student and Faculty Engagement. A recurring concern for integration of external social media sites like Facebook into university life is the maintenance of personal privacy and identity for both faculty and students. For example, one survey of college students revealed 66% of those surveyed indicated faculty

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presence is acceptable. However, a closer examination indicates faculty presence was rated acceptable by male students (73% said Yes), while female students were hesitant (35% said Yes). These results suggest that self-presentation is a greater concern for females engaging with faculty on Facebook (Hewitt & Forte, 2006). The advantage of

internal networking sites over public sites like Facebook is that both students and faculty can maintain separate identities for school, work and home. Additionally,

an internal networking site facilitates the polishing of skills in online professionalism, an important skill to cultivate in an era where online career networking has become universal (Wikipedia, 2011). As such, college students and faculty may be more likely to collaboratively use an internal networking site rather than public sites like Facebook or MySpace.

3) COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Just as social media benefits individuals and the organization, social media can also facilitate a greater sense of community. Specifically, the integration of people through social media creates a sense of trust within the community. Next, social media provides a platform for individuals to become involved with their greater community.

The trust built through well integrated social communities would be exceedingly valuable for students and teachers.

Trust. The Internet facilitates an awareness of the individuals outside of one's immediate social network. Additionally, there is an expansion of the number of weak ties within a community. These large networks with numerous ties have enduring outcomes such as social generalized trust. Furthermore, tight knit communities promote reciprocity and integrity within one's community (Best & Krueger, 2006). The trust and civility built through well integrated social communities would be exceedingly valuable for those in a college community.

Civic Engagement. Internet use has been demonstrated as a valuable tool for community engagement. It was determined that college students who were Facebook users were more likely to be involved civically and politically (Valenzuela et. al, 2009). Internal networking sights might also encourage faculty and students to become more aware and engaged of each other's work and play.

A similar study investigated whether community engagement was more common among high or low Internet users. Interestingly, it was determined that socially active individuals continue their community and political involvement online. Conversely, individuals with low community engagement were also less involved online. This finding highlights the Internet as a valuable resource for augmenting community engagement. An additional advantage of community engagement online is that high Internet users perceived a greater efficacy for collective social change in comparison to low Internet users (Kavanaugh et. al, 2005). These findings serve as additional evidence that Internet behavior essentially mirrors that of social life. The Internet should then be recognized as a valuable resource for social action and collective efficacy.

A Note on Cyber Bullying.

The adoption of an internal networking site is not conducive to cyber bullying.

It is important to note that cyber bullying is most common in online environments that permit users to maintain anonymity. The adoption of an internal networking site is not conducive to cyber bullying, as one's name and identity are clear and forefront in the mediated interaction. Furthermore, as internal networking increases, external networking might correspondingly decrease. Hence, internal networking may reduce one's chances of becoming a victim of cyberspace attacks.

Additionally, while high Internet use has been linked to cyber bullying (Mishna, 2012) this experience is not the typical online experience. Individuals engaging in cyber bullying may do so as the result of suffering from behavioral issues and problems stemming from the home. Studies also suggest that students who engage in cyber bullying are more likely to exhibit verbal and physical aggression such as cursing or kicking at school (Mishna, 2012). Furthermore, low parental support is positively associated with cyber bullying (Wang, 2009). While cyber bullying can be an issue among social network users, the benefits of social

networks among college students outweigh the possibility that cyber bullying will occur.

Conclusion

Technology use is growing every day. If our aim is to prepare students and faculty to be invaluable members of society, social media use should become well integrated within our educational systems. Personal well-being, improved communication, social networks, community trust and engagement are just a few of the many residual benefits of social media. Universities would be well served to adopt internal networking sites into their college communities, as the potential benefits are infinite.

Expected Benefits of an Internal Networking Site within a College Community

Individual Level Benefits

- Strong Social Networks with Rich Social Capital
- Well-being and Life Satisfaction
- Sensemaking and Identity

Organizational Level Benefits

- Increased Communication
- Professors and Students Engagement

Community Benefits

- Generalized Trust
- Civic Engagement

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Appendix A

This white paper emerged as part of a final project for Dr. Sarah Tracy's COM 691: Communication and the Art of Happiness/Well-Being class at Arizona State University during the Fall 2011 semester. The second half of this final project includes a video entry to ASU's 10,000 Solutions project (solutions.asu.edu). 10,000 Solutions is a contest designed to get people thinking about and offering solutions to local and worldwide issues. To view our video, please visit <http://www.10000solutions.org/solution/sparkplug-connecting-sun-devils-across-asu>.

We propose integrating an internal social network into ASU called SparkPlug. The title of our solution is SparkPlug: Connecting Sun Devils Across ASU, and the challenge our solution addresses is education.

Size and diversity are assets to many universities, giving students broad latitude in choosing their courses of study, networking with faculty and peers, participating in student organizations, and finding a unique social niche. But great size and diversity can also overwhelm students and lead to feelings of anonymity, disconnection and in some cases causing students to transfer.

How can ASU, a university the size of a small city, feel more like a community?

ASU can harness the power of social networking to build a strong, vibrant community among its Sun Devils. The Millennial Generation, which comprises the majority of college students today, views technology as an integral component of daily living. But students today are still entering old-fashioned, traditional classrooms on campus. And faculty often lack a place to discover research across the university to better engage in collaborative, interdisciplinary opportunities. In short, the interactivity of communication technology at ASU has much room for growth.

Social connections are essential to student retention and are increasingly being made online. Well-being experts agree that the happiest people have rich and fulfilling social lives. We propose integrating an internal social networking site called SparkPlug into My ASU. As an internal site, membership is specific to those affiliated with ASU and would be tightly woven

into the My ASU experience, allowing prospective and current students, faculty, staff, and alumni to interact with one another in one, easy location. In addition to enabling student success, the site would allow faculty to discuss and display their work, facilitating interdisciplinary research and fusing intellectual disciplines.

The advantages of internal networking sites over public sites like Facebook include the separation of identities for different areas of one's life, such as school, work, and home. Internal networking sites also encourage users to develop their online professional skills, something that is of utmost importance in an era where online career networking is becoming universal.

The benefits of social connections are numerous and include but are not limited to: increased social embeddedness, improved communication, the opportunity to build and maintain social capital, enhanced community engagement, better student retention, psychological well-being, and positive work relationships. To read more about the literature supporting these claims, please visit links.asu.edu/sparkplug.