Demystifying Social Media

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Recently, it has been speculated that higher education has neither kept abreast of changing technologies nor taken advantage of the opportunities they offer for use on the college campus (Fischman, 2010). We suggest that social media offers higher education professionals an opportunity to catch up. To this end, we offer an approach to these à la carte technologies that can be adopted and integrated to achieve many productive outcomes for professionals in the academy.

Social Media: Where Our Students Are

Before setting foot on our campuses, students use technology to seek out information about our institutions, form connections with peers, and determine potential fit. While many may begin with the institutionally maintained site, their quest for information—real, insider knowledge—quickly extends beyond the virtual confines of the “.edu” domain. Soon they have hopped onto College Confidential and found a plethora of information on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. While institutionally owned sites may remain the destination for

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official information, the savvy surfer gleans much by browsing search results. It is often outside of our formal domains and within these electronic encounters that students learn much about what an institution looks like, feels like, and ultimately how closely it matches their academic and social ideals.

Social media has become a part of our students' daily lives. Often used interchangeably, Web 2.0 and social media refer not only to a set of nascent Internet technologies but also to a new form of communication that promotes interaction and dialogue (Parr, 2009). Parr suggests that in 2009, social media officially overtook Web 2.0 as the terminology of choice. By its very nature, social media invites online community members to contribute to the conversation and values this engagement. To be clear, social media is not about complex technical changes that have occurred "under the hood," rather it is a shift in the way in which sites are designed and users engage with them ("Social Media," 2010). By extension, the most successful social media platforms have been able to harness user input to create dynamic, relevant, real-time web communities.

While we may each wish we invented Facebook, what we can do is proffer new ways of merging and presenting content. A mashup is a web page or application that combines data or functionality from two or more external sources to create a new service ("Mashup," 2009). In short, it allows us to take our students’ online behaviors and bring them into our mainstream practices. The following are some examples of the mashup as it relates to student affairs work: (a) integrating room assignments with Google Maps technology to provide instant access to housing locations and academic classrooms (Combs, 1999), (b) streaming an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed of campus events into an admissions site, (c) integrating a survey or poll with live results into a course website, (d) creating online forums for first-year students to ask questions and get instant responses, and (e) blogging as part of a course, including YouTube video, Flickr photos, and Twitter stream.

At this stage, the power play in social media is not in isolation but in integration, in harnessing these technologies so that information streams are instant and far-reaching. Content, be it written or multimedia, remains essential. In this landscape, we are tasked with not only doing our work but also sharing it in innovative and interactive ways. A printed brochure becomes an interactive .PDF, an email to first-year students becomes embedded with pictures and video, and our campus spaces are simultaneously virtual and physical.

**Implications for Higher Education**

This trend towards integration and interaction enabled by Web 2.0 coupled with the challenging economic environment has many implications for the way in which we think about information Technology (IT). Whereas it makes sense to integrate easy add-ons like
"share this" or RSS fees, more expansive and fundamental changes require human and technology resources. As reported by Young (2009) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in tight times outsourcing services, such as e-mail, is especially tempting. For example, Young notes that colleges cannot match the mailbox sizes that free services offer and they struggle to keep up with security patches that block hackers. Meanwhile, the latest e-mail services from Google and Microsoft do more than just e-mail—they include instant messaging, online word processing, web-based applications, and more. In the near future, IT departments will find that creative minds who can learn and teach social media technologies become vital to their success and relevance. Similarly, staff and faculty may find junior colleagues and students to be their most valuable resources.

As campus communities embrace these technologies, administrators must consider the significant policy and management implications. Maintaining authenticity and making real connections with constituents via social media poses a significant challenge. Social media must bridge the physical and virtual worlds in a way that is mutually reinforcing. Generating relevant and interesting content is a potential hurdle as many other online entities vie for student attention (some with enormous budgets, flashy products, and without educational goals). This inevitably leads to the question of who manages the process. Will universities add additional marketing professionals? Or will we entrust students to use their voice to frame conversations? Is the culture of the academy one that will allow us to grow into this media, including the challenges and pitfalls? Ultimately, the interactive nature of successful social media means that institutions are ceding some control of content while beginning new, authentic digital dialogues with their communities.

Furthermore, social media should not be exempt from assessment. While many platforms offer direct insights (number of fans or followers, number of views or page visits), quantifying the value of new relationships can prove cumbersome. Beginning with clear, measurable objectives, strategies and tactics while viewing social media as one part of a broad campaign remain critical to success.

Internally, the often-disjointed and uncoordinated organizational structure of large institutions presents challenges for effectively managing a social media presence. Do campus policies extend to the virtual world? Can information gathered from Facebook pages, blogs, and Twitter serve as grounds for an admission decision or as evidence in a judicial proceeding? How do we unite the efforts of social media adherents across campus to present a united and coordinated campaign?

Diving into the realm of social media should not be done at random, but it should be done nonetheless. If you are not poised to launch your own campaign, a good first step is to listen. We stand to benefit if we connect with constituents in new ways and hold ourselves accountable as stewards of our electronic identities. If we choose to extend our identity, we
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are likely expanding our audience to include members of the virtual world who have never and will never visit our campuses. In essence, we are redefining our communities. Significantly, when we explore the opportunities offered by social media, we find that much of our audience is already there, ready and waiting.
References


