Engaging College Students through Online Social Networks

Doug Olson
Vice President of Student Affairs
Triton College
dolson@triton.edu

Quincy Martin III
Dean of Student Services
Triton College
qmartin@triton.edu

Technology continues to rapidly emerge with new and innovative utilities that keep today's college student more connected than ever before. These technologies provide students with immediate access to resources and information. Communication, social networking, content sharing and posting are all aspects of the daily rituals that are part of the digital students today. Through the use of computers, cell phones, Internet, text messaging, and other technologies, students are engaged in virtual environments which researchers believe could be supported at a greater level by higher education. We will continue to see an increase in emerging technologies and will significantly expand and intensify the domain of social connection (Gergen, 2005). Online social networking sites are an essential ingredient of emerging technologies, and it is evident that college students are using these sites as social mediums.

Research is emerging on the use of online social networks and their relationship to college student engagement. There may be a perceived lack of knowledge in this area by student affairs professionals, as all of them may not have the experience utilizing these technologies. Yet they are serving a student population of digital natives (students who have grown up with new technologies) who are increasingly relying on the online social networks as a primary means of communication, interaction, and engagement. It is through this means that student affairs practitioners are identifying ways to better engage students into general student development practices.

Student Engagement

The concept of student engagement can be defined in many different ways. In this case, student engagement can be viewed through several lenses: from the perspective of engaging students in the learning process; engaging students through activities in and out of the classroom; and, engaging students in the campus community to form a greater affinity to the institution and college personnel. There are two primary fundamentals of student engagement: (a) the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and educationally purposeful activities, and (b) the way an institution uses its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to encourage student participation (Kuh et al., 2005).

Online Social Networking

In simple terms, an online social networking site is an Internet-based platform where a user can create a profile, connect with friends, and build a personal network that connects him or her to other users. Some of the most common social networking sites that college students currently use are Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, although, the list of these types of networking sites continues to expand.

There is significant growth in popularity of social networks and a broadening of audiences who use these sites (Nielsen, 2009). Added to this is the significant increase in the amount of time people are spending on social

networking sites which has an impact on the way people spend their time online. The popularity and considerable amount of time users spend online affects how people behave and interact within their daily lives (Nielsen, 2009), hence, the importance of student affairs professionals to connect with students through their preferred mode of communication.

Making the Connection

Adapting new technologies like online social networks into learning environments that support higher education may create desirable ways in which students may be involved. Students may use technologies in which they are interested, thus possibly motivating and engaging them to a greater degree. Online social networking utilities may play an influential role in heightening a student's college experience and creating the potential for student affairs practitioners to form social learning environments that offer social communities of practice.

Currently, student affairs units utilize online social networking sites to connect to students through an array of entry points. Some of these include, but are not limited to, support groups, clubs and organizations, financial aid, new student orientation, admissions, commencement, support services, and campus activities.   Various networking sites provide an innovative approach to reach and engage students in virtual environments in which they are familiar. When effectively used, student affairs professionals experience an increase in their programs, services, and activities.

Future Implications

Research on social networking sites is key because its population of users continues to grow considerably. Since there has been such massive growth in online social networking sites over the past few years, student affairs professionals should continue to place value in familiarizing themselves with the various uses of this technology. Therefore, it is important to understand the significant access people have to these social utility sites and what they are doing with it (Preece, 2001).

There are many dimensions in which the new technologies are being applied and adopted in higher education. The changing dynamics of today's technologically-advanced student requires student affairs professionals to stay abreast of emerging trends and develop practices that adapt to the needs of students. Student Affairs professionals can use the research for new practices that can be integrated into the overall college environment, while enhancing the students' academic experience. Should higher education and student affairs professionals wish to strengthen student engagement, it will be necessary to continue to have a strong, working knowledge of social networking opportunities to better interface with the students of today and identify trends of the future.

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