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Logged in and Engaged: Examining How Social Media Can Develop, Maintain, and Increase College Student Engagement

Matthew Moquin
Merrimack College, moquinm@merrimack.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how student affairs professionals, primarily those

working in student involvement, utilized various social media technologies to increase their

engagement with undergraduate college students. This study utilized Astin's (1984) theory of

student involvement, as well as a collection of literature surrounding the impact of social media

on college students and their engagement in order to understand the influence social media can

have when engaging with students. Since there is a limited amount of literature and research

surrounding the subject of social media and its role in student engagement, a study was done that

involved interviews with the staff in Merrimack's Office of Student Involvement (OSI) to better

understand how social media can be used to connect with students. In addition, an online audit

of other institution's social media platforms was conducted in order to compile recommendations

for best practice. The literature examined, as well as the research study that followed, suggest

that social media can be an engaging platform that allows for strong, digital engagement between

professionals and students.

Keywords: social media, student involvement, digital engagement

Introduction

Social media is a seemingly simple and familiar subject, but at the same time it holds many complexities. To provide a solid definition, "social media are defined as applications, services, and systems that allow users to create, remix, and share content" (Junco, 2014b, p.6) or "media used to enable social interaction" (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & González Canché, 2014, p.2). Starting out as nothing more than a virtual realm in which to communicate, social media has expanded into a technological phenomenon that is ingrained in our society and our lives. As long as humans have been on this planet, we have been communicating. Now, it is easier than ever. David Berry stated "today we live in computational abundance whereby our everyday lives and the environment that surrounds us are suffused with digital technologies" (Berry, 2014). Social media, a digital technology, has become part of our lives whether we want it to be or not. To give an idea of how much social media is in our lives; Maeve Duggan, Nicole B. Ellison, Cliff Lampe, Amanda Lenhart, and Mary Madden (2015) reported that in 2014, 52% of online adults used two or more social media sites, which is a 10% increase from the same statistic reported from 2013. Given the possibilities that social media brings, this technology also serves as a way for students to engage with one another. This need to communicate, however, is not new.

While social media does indeed command a great deal of our attention across all aspects of society; as an emerging student affairs professional, it is worth studying how this phenomenon plays out in the realm of higher education. Neil Selwyn (2012) stated that it is essential that higher education professionals approach social media in an objective manner in order to adapt to this social media age. Social media, however, does present higher education with the challenge of adapting to it in a way that is still be beneficial to students as well as how to best utilize it in

appropriate ways (Selwyn, 2012). While there are studies that certainly argue that social media

is beneficial to a student's social capital, higher education still needs to take an active role in

shaping the development of social media in college and university settings (Selwyn, 2012).

Since social media technology is a platform where increased levels of social engagement can

occur, practitioners in student affairs need to stay focused on how they can adapt to this digital

age while still serving the needs of their students.

       To provide a brief context of social media's influence in higher education, a study done

by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 2011 showed that over 90% of

college students have profiles on Facebook alone (as cited in Davis et al., 2012). But is higher

education keeping up? A study done by Barnes and Lescault in 2011 which included a national

sample of 456 four-year accredited U.S. institutions, 100% of the schools reported using social

media in some form (as cited in Davis et al., 2012). While these percentages are indeed high and

may seem promising, they do not necessarily speak to the quality or effectiveness of social media

use. However, these percentages do show that higher education professionals are aware, to some

extent, of the cultural impact that social media has. It certainly shows that college students are at

least mindful of social media if they are not already utilizing it when they come to college.

Student affairs professionals can apply social media utilization to their practice in order to

facilitate digital engagement with the students with whom they interact.

       In essence, student affairs professionals make their careers centered on the goal of

reaching students where they are and being able to engage with them (Junco, 2014b). Junco

(2014a) states that numerous studies have proven that college students are utilizing the internet

and social networking sites at high rates. Additionally, according to Junco (2014b), college

students are already on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter when they enter

college. This can support the notion that these are platforms where student affairs professionals

can engage students in a familiar medium. For the purpose of this capstone project in its

entirety, the research study following the literature review will specifically look at the Office of

Student Involvement (OSI) because of the role that type of office has on campus as well as their

high level of interaction with the student population. While it is often the case that offices such

as student involvement (or equivalents) are focused on student engagement and student life, it is

only fitting that this environment is the center of a study looking at social media and student

engagement. Thus, this capstone project focused on the following question: How can an Office

of Student Involvement, such as the one at Merrimack College, use social media in order to stay

engaged with students and develop stronger, digital relationships with them?

In order to answer this question, the concept of social media, as it relates to student

engagement, must be understood in addition to understanding how student affairs professionals

can benefit from this knowledge. By conducting the research study that utilized a social media

evaluation rubric as part of an online audit, coupled with in-person interviews, it was the goal of

this study to present concrete findings, both quantitative and qualitative, that highlight how use

of social media can strengthen student engagement efforts at Merrimack College. The

recommendations made provide optimal suggestions for best practice in student affairs.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

There is a limited amount of literature that currently exists on the measured impact of

social media in higher education. There is less literature on how social media could be used in

higher education by student affairs professionals who are seeking to actively engage their student

population. Additionally, most of the research done on social media and engagement tends to

focus on academic engagement and the benefits or limitations social media has had on student's

academic performance. Within the pool of research that has been conducted, Facebook tends to

be the main subject of studies that revolve around student engagement and social media.

Although much research did focus on Facebook primarily, these findings may be applicable to

other social media because of the high rates in which college students use Facebook. However,

there is adequate literature that does focus on how social media, mostly social networking sites

like Facebook, provide higher levels of student engagement amongst peers and student affairs

professionals.

   The review of the literature on the topic of social media and student engagement offered

insight into general student perceptions of social media and the future of social media in higher

education and student engagement. The literature that is explored primarily focused on student

engagement and social media through the lens of student involvement in higher education, and

how offices of student involvement are utilizing social media. Specifically, the literature

reviewed on Student Engagement and Social Media (Haeger, Wang, & BrckaLorenz, 2014;

Hottell, Martinez-Aleman, & Rowan-Kenyon, 2014; Creighton, Foster, Klingsmith & Withey,

2013; Junco, 2012; Yang & Brown, 2013; Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Astin, 1984) and offices of

student involvement and engaging students with social media (Junco 2014b; Gray, Vitak, Easton,

& Ellison 2013; McGough & Salomon, 2013; Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez

Canche, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Junco, 2012; Jenness, 2011; Junco,

Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Leece & Campbell, 2011; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Pempek,

Yermolayeva, & Calvert 2009; Heiberger & Harper, 2008, Ellison, Stenfield, & Lampe 2007;

Astin, 1984) is vital to understand the concept of social media and student engagement.

Student Engagement and Social Media

Astin's theory of student involvement

Astin's theory of student involvement, which he later renamed engagement, is defined as the

amount of physical and emotional energy that a college student invests in their academic

experience (Astin, 1984). The theory suggests that students who are highly involved commit

ample amounts of energy to studying, spending time on campus, engaging in student social

organizations in addition to interacting with faculty members and other students (Astin, 1984).

On the contrary, he also pointed out that a typical uninvolved student neglects their studies,

forgoes participating in any extracurricular activities and does not engage in faculty and student

relations (Astin, 1984). More recently, Junco (2012) described engagement as encompassing

various factors such as investment in the academic experience, interactions with faculty, and

involvement in co-curricular activities. It is with this, that Junco (2012) believed in the strong

need to examine social media use and student engagement because of sites like Facebook that

provide a student engagement platform. Junco (2012) used this theory that social media

engagement most notably that of Facebook, influences or is influenced by real-world

engagement.

In Junco's (2012) study, he sought to determine if there is a relationship between

frequency of Facebook use and student engagement using student involvement (engagement)

theories such as Astin's (1984). The study utilized a 19-item scale from the National Survey of

Student Engagement in order to measure student engagement (Junco, 2012). The participants

came from four-year residential institutions in the Northeast and were given links to a survey via

their college emails. Junco (2012) recorded that 2,368 surveys were completed for a total

completion rate of 44%. The findings conflicted with previous studies that resulted in positive

correlations between Facebook use and real world engagement.

Junco's (2012) findings from the data collected in his study, showed that time spent and invested on Facebook does not seem to be positively related to real-world engagement as depicted by Astin (1984). Specifically, Junco (2012) noted that Facebook use for the purpose of playing games negatively impacts engagement, while using Facebook for more of a communication forum positively impacts engagement. However, unlike the negative correlations between times spent playing games on Facebook and engagement, the study showed positive correlations between times spent on Facebook and involvement with co-curricular activities (Junco, 2012). The latter is also supported by Heiberger and Harper (2008) who found that students who spend more time on social networks seem to also spend more time engaging in real-life social activities and participating in clubs or groups on campus.

Studies such as this are informative in that they provide context to social media use and engagement in the realm of higher education. Junco's (2012) study in particular provides links to exactly *what* students are doing on social media and how those activities are related to how they engage in the real world.

Social media in higher education.

Social media has certainly helped to bridge the gap between student affairs professionals and their connection with their students, but it is also not a fool proof method of engagement. However, to understand the basics of how to even engage these students in the first place, it is important to realize that the process can start even before they begin the transition into college on move in day. According to Hottell, Martinez-Aleman, and Rowan-Kenyon (2014), social media has the potential to increase the impact of practices and programs that are positively related to student success and engagement, without increasing costs to the college (p.34). In the study, the researchers, in an effort to understand how social media can improve the college experience of

first-generation college students, conducted a research study with a summer bridge program at a

highly selective private institution. The study took place over two years and collected qualitative

and quantitative data from the students in the program in order to gather information about their

social media use. One of the methods used was creating a Facebook group page that only

allowed the summer bridge program instructors and the students who were a part of it to

participate.

       After they concluded their findings, they noticed that the students who participated saw

social networking sites as ways of keeping their existing relationships strong (Hottell et al.,

2014). They suggested that social media engagement can supplement, to an extent, summer

bridge programs because of how efficient social media can be. They also noted that first

generation students could benefit more from engagement with peers, faculty, and student affairs

professionals, than actually attending a summer bridge program (Hottell et al., 2014). While

summer bridge programs can certainly aid in fostering a student's transition to college, a student

may benefit more if they transition on their own terms, through social media, as opposed to a

structured program that is constructed in a way that could make them feel singled out. Students

are already on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, so it would only be more

cost effective to build upon their familiarity and engage with them through those sites as opposed

to developing an extensive bridge program. Methods such as this could work in the sense that it

would save colleges money and provide them with the chance to approach college students of all

ages in a way they are already familiar with.

Social networking sites.

       Social networking sites like Facebook can also help students develop a social network in

their college community before they even arrive for orientation. This is imperative for a college

student because if they feel as if they have a strong sense of community within their college

environment, they may develop a sense of belonging that could lead to and support behavior that

makes them want to stay at that college (Hottell et al., 2014). This would, in turn, allow the

students to arrive on campus with a pre-established social network because of social media

engagement. Hottell et al. (2014) also mention how the students in this study claimed social

media was not a way for them to meet 'strangers' but to keep in touch and connected with people

they already knew. Furthermore, in an earlier yet similar study done by Yang and Brown (2013),

which yielded similar findings, it was concluded that students were more interested in using

social media to maintain social ties rather than search for new relationships.

        This is also supported by a study conducted by Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2011)

which found that students were able to better connect with peers and faculty via Twitter

interactions. The study included seven sections of a first-year seminar course that were used in

an experimental study to examine the effects of social media use on student learning and

engagement. Findings showed that if the quality of engagement between students and others

within the college community is strong, they will feel a stronger sense of belonging (Junco et. al,

2011). The study also found that sites such as Twitter can improve the level of contact between

students and others in the community by taking advantage of the student's digital lifestyles

(Junco et. al., 2011). What these claims suggest is that social media platforms, most importantly

Facebook and Twitter, allow students who may normally struggle to engage socially, connect

with peers and staff alike by engaging them in social networking environments.

        Social media technologies have also been linked to academic success and engagement. A

recent study by Creighton, Foster, Klingsmith and Withey (2013) sought to better understand

how traditionally aged college students perceive social media use and how it contributes to their

academic success. The authors picked a focus group as part of their overall study so that they

could facilitate a discussion that would capture the experiences of students and their use of social

media. The focus group discussion went over commonly used social media sites and apps such

as Facebook and Twitter. The focus group findings concluded that the participants agreed that

social media brought a lot of benefits with it in terms of academic success and engagement

(Creighton et al., 2013). Participants also mentioned in the discussion that they use some aspect

of social media to do homework, stay in touch with classmates, keep in touch with professors,

and conduct research for projects (Creighton et al., 2013). The findings also reported that the

students who participated in their study felt that without the use of social media, their

relationships would not be as strong and without it, they would not be able to maintain

relationships or engage faculty or staff at the college (Creighton et al., 2013).

In another recent study, Haeger, Wang, and BrckaLorenz (2014) used data from the

National Survey of Student Engagement in order to analyze how students are using social media.

They also administered a survey that inquired about student's interactions on social media, how

they spend their time on social media, and the quality of their interactions (Haeger et al., 2014).

The questions were asked of 19,000 students from 42 college and universities and found that

social media sites provide students with greater access to a broader network of social support and

can close the distance between students and their relationships with faculty and staff (Haeger et

al., 2014). If students are not building the appropriate relationships and engaging within the

college community, then they risk losing a sense of belonging in such a critical time of their

lives. Relationship building is an essential driving force behind the level of success a student

will have in college. The earlier students start to develop a strong and successful social

connection to their college community, the easier it will be for student affairs professionals to engage them.

Offices of Student Involvement and Engaging Students with Social Media

Similar to engagement, the term social media is generally defined depending on the context in which it is used (Leece and Campbell, 2011, p.10). Also, according to Leece and Campbell (2011), social media delivers action and a connectedness to a community of peers and aids to link the student to others involved with similar activities and like-minded interests. For student affairs professionals, engaging students can be difficult especially when a student does not want to be engaged. More specifically, when student affairs professionals who work in an office of student involvement, student engagement, student activities, or student leadership development (often used synonymously depending on institution), engaging students effectively can be the make or break difference in how they build relationships with their students. Alexander Astin's theory (1984) as well as Junco's (2012) interpretation of it in the digital age can help to understand the foundations of student engagement and how students invest their time in their college careers. This far into the digital age, Astin's decades old theory is still being used by researchers such as Heiberger and Harper (2008), Junco et al. (2011) and Junco (2012) to understand the role of social media in student engagement.

For professionals who are working in an Office of Student Involvement (OSI), there is a unique challenge and importance to how they engage their students. For an OSI on a college campus, their purpose is to provide programming and environments that contribute to both a student's college experience and their social development. In a recent study by Gray, Vitak, Easton, and Ellison (2013), they included two data sets which included survey data from first year college students and then combining that data set with data from the college's registrar

office in order to collect first-year GPA's and re-enrollment status. The researchers used their

data to answer their original question assessing the role that social media had on a student's

transition to college. Their findings suggest that a students' ability to develop strong, meaningful

social connections, affects their successful adaptation to college (Gray et al., 2013).

Furthermore, Gray et al. (2013) found that social media use, Facebook in particular, was

positively linked to the student's social adjustment to college. One could ask why it is important

for student affairs professionals to engage students through social media when it could be argued

that it is the role of the student affairs professional to help the college student foster strong social

development, amongst other things. The findings in the Gray et al. (2013) study support that

social media is a familiar outlet in which to engage with especially since the current generation

of students going through college have been growing up in a digital age.

It is safe to say that student affairs professionals can help with this social development by

engaging students through a medium that has been proven to be a significant influence in their

social development. Heiberger and Harper (2008) state that engagement and involvement

theories, such as Astin's theory of involvement (1984) that was mentioned earlier, can help to

"refine and refocus student affairs professionals' abilities to react to students by better using new

technologies" (p. 33). Because college students are so familiar with wanting consistent upgrades

and reliability on technology, student affairs staff must be adept to similar changes so that they

can keep up with the students (Heiberger and Harper, 2008; Jenness, 2011). While every

student's social abilities may vary, it is important that those who work in higher education both

explore and strive to implement the most effective methods in order to engage their students.

To answer the question of how student affairs professionals can better engage students

through social media, professionals must understand how students are using and navigating

social media platforms in the first place. It is more practical to assume that students are coming

to college with an already existing presence in social media, especially given that Junco (2014b)

states that social media sites are incredibly popular amongst college students. Also, given the

findings of some of the studies mentioned earlier like Creighton et al. (2013) and Gray et al.

(2013), social media services such as Facebook and Twitter see extremely high rates of use from

college students and even college and university administration. With this understanding,

student affairs professionals can establish a better idea of how to use their students' presence on

social media, and implement it into their outreach efforts.

Utilizing social media

It is one thing for a professional working in an OSI to use social media to broadcast

information about events and programs but it is another thing to use social media to engage with

their student audience. The latter can help build relationships between the two parties that go

beyond just getting numbers at an event. What is intriguing about social media is even if

students are not currently using it, they are more than likely open to do so (McGough and

Salomon, 2013). However, because students on a college campus can so easily utilize social

media, this places more importance on the effective use of social media by student affairs

professionals seeking to strengthen student engagement through such means.

Social media has established itself as a primary tool of digital communication to the point

that it has become part of student's social development. If this is where students are engaging

with each other most frequently, then student affairs professionals should opt to engage with

them on this platform. One such study done by Ellison, Stenfield, and Lampe (2007) used a

sample of 800 undergraduate students at Michigan State University in order to link uses of

Facebook and the student's gain of social capital. Social capital, as defined by Coleman (as cited

in Ellison et al., 2007) is the resources accumulated through relationships with others.

Additionally, Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela, (2012), state that social capital is important

because it can have a positive effect on social development. Studies such as this one have shown

that Facebook seems to be the most efficient social media site for student affairs professionals to

engage students on.

For their study, the researchers sent out a survey and received 286 completed surveys,

which was a total response rate of 35% (Ellison et al., 2007). The findings from the study

suggested that there is a positive relationship between Facebook use and the creation of social

capital (Ellison et al., 2007). This study is important when looking at how student affairs

professionals can engage students online because it sheds light on how students develop socially

through social media. According to Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert (2009), "social

networking sites are designed to foster social interaction in a virtual environment" (p.228).

These studies show correlations between social development and how social media plays a part

in that. Because students are so ingrained in social media and are using it extensively for various

purposes, this is where student affairs professionals can come and take advantage of this. Park,

Kee, and Valenzuela, (2009) also agree that sites such as Facebook as an online tool play a

significant role in fostering engagement in young adults.

It can be concluded that engagement through social media in higher education can

certainly yield successful results. In higher education, traditional-aged college students have

embraced social media technology as the normal and expected way of communicating (Davis et

al., 2012). According to Davis et al. (2012), it has become a major part of their everyday lives

making it safe to assume that by the time college aged students are entering college, their social

media identity and presence is fairly strong. Because of this, it is important for student affairs

professionals to adapt to this "millennial" generation, people between the ages of 18 and 25 (Davis et al., 2012) in order to find the most effective ways of engaging them. With social media already being used in many ways on college campuses, higher education professionals need to figure out how to keep improving social media use. Reynol Junco (2014b) states, "with social media use in education, it is important to know what works and what does not" (p.51). Furthermore, the literature supports that social media can be used to increase engagement with students on digital platforms that they are already invested in.

Project Plan

This study aimed to discover best practices for student affairs professionals who work in student involvement and how they could effectively engage students on social media. Furthermore, it aimed to provide insight into the use of social media as a tool for student engagement and make recommendations for best practice at Merrimack College and for higher education in general.

This research study was approached with a pragmatic methodological point of view. This point of view utilized mixed methods in order to match the best research method to specific questions. According to Mertens (2015), pragmatic research implores mixed methods in order to gather data from various points of view. Mertens (2015) also states that pragmatic research is grounded on the fact that there is only one reality but that individuals can have different views on how they perceive that reality. Implementing Merten's (2015) definition of what pragmatic research entails, I concluded that the approach that I had at the beginning of this research study helped me to identify individual interpretations of the reality of social media in addition to gathering a plethora of data focused on its place in higher education. With that being said, the research yielded various findings detailing how social media should be treated and utilized for

student engagement by student affairs professionals. How the participants perceive social media

use on campus and what their experiences with it have been while at Merrimack was essential for

this study in the context of understanding the effectiveness of social media engagement.

For this study, the staff and graduate students who were highly involved with the Office

of Student Involvement were best suited to participate in this study because of their role in

campus life and student engagement. In order to examine how the Office of Student

Involvement at Merrimack College used social media in order to stay engaged with their students

and develop stronger lines of ongoing communication with them, I conducted an online-based

social media audit that was followed by a series of interviews with staff and graduate students

working in the office. The online-based social media audit was conducted before the interview

portion of the study so that the data and findings of the audit could be compared with the

findings of the interview and help explain any patterns that arose.

In order to formulate best practices on social media use and student engagement, a social

media audit of a similar schools' office of student involvement or equivalent was conducted

before conducting the interview portion of the study. In addition to auditing a school that is

similar to Merrimack in type and size, I also examined an institution that Merrimack aspires to

model itself after in terms of growth and attaining institutional goals, as well as a much larger

institution with a significantly larger student and staff population in order to see the kind of

resources such a large school is able to invest in social media operations. The data that was

gathered from benchmarking and observing the social media accounts of these institutions

allowed me to use that data and analyze its content to assist in strengthening my interview

protocol. It also provided a data set with which to compare the findings from my interviews.

The data that was the main focus in the audit included: (1) how each institution uses their social

media, (2) what sites the institutions use the most, and (3) how much they are engaging with students. Furthermore, I constructed a social media rubric that I used to score the institutions based on how well their social media accounts fulfilled four major categories. Those categories, *Content, Consistency, Engagement,* and *Ease of Access*, allowed for a basis upon which to critique the institutions and allowed for a detailed examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the various institutions. In the findings portion of this study, I outline why I chose the specific categories for the audit, as well as provide brief literature as to why I constructed the categories that way I did.

For the interview method of my study, a selected sample was chosen amongst a pool of graduate students and staff who worked in the Office of Student Involvement at Merrimack College. Via email, I reached out to selected individuals to take part in individual interviews where I asked various questions that were focused on their experiences with social media as a professional, their philosophies on social media use for student engagement, and examples of successful social media practices they have seen while at Merrimack, to name a few. The reason the study focused on these specific participants who work in the Office of Student Involvement was so that the data collected would be in line with the research question on wich the study focused.

The interviews also provided insight into how staff of the Office of Student Involvement uses social media to meet their goals of engaging students and whether it is effective. Through the interviews, I was able to clarify how professional staff associated with student involvement utilize social media in their office, who in their office is in charge of managing their social media accounts, the consistency of their use of social media, and how they view their office's experience engaging students with social media and if they see room for improvement. As far as

human subject issues go, I did not encounter any sensitive issues raised in either the audit or the interviews. Any privacy issues that surround individual social media accounts was not disclosed, nor intended to be disclosed, while I conducted the audit. For the interviews, I created pseudonyms that masked the identity of the participants. Detailed descriptions of the participants in both the audit and the interviews are described before the findings are discussed.

The sample of participants for the interviews in my study were chosen amongst the pool of graduate fellows and professional staff that work in the Office of Student Involvement at Merrimack College. In total, four individuals were interviewed as part of the study all of whom are currently working in the Office of Student Involvement (OSI) in some capacity. Two of the participants that were in the study were graduate fellows who worked in their positions in the office for approximately one year, and the other two participants in the study were full time, professional staff. Although this was a small participant pool, it is interesting to note the various time lines that each participant has been associated with their role at Merrimack and in the field of higher education. The reason the study focused on these specific staff and graduate students was to ensure that the data collected would be both in line and more appropriate with the research question of this study.

Thomas, one of the participants, was enrolled as a full time graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program at Merrimack College. In addition, he also served as one of the two graduate fellows within Merrimack's OSI. In his position in OSI, he had his own specific responsibilities which primarily included leadership development and Greek life.

Rachel, the other graduate fellow, was also enrolled as a full time graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program at Merrimack College. In her role as a graduate fellow in Merrimack's OSI, Rachel was primarily responsible for student programing.

Cindy is one of two professional staff members that were interviewed in this study and

currently works full time in Merrimack's OSI. She oversaw the graduate fellows in the office as

well as the programming and student organization functions of OSI.

Caitlin was the other professional staff member that was interviewed for the study and is

also currently working full time in Merrimack's OSI. She oversees the advising of the Student

Government Association as well as the entirety of the Office of Student Involvement. As part of

her position, she also oversees any and all social media accounts that are associated with the OSI

and monitors their content. Although, it should be noted that both full time professionals and the

graduate fellows are responsible for maintaining the social media platforms associated with the

OSI.

Description of Institutions Included in Audit

For the purpose of the social media audit, I designed four major categories in which to

assess the effectiveness and use of the various social media platforms among the offices of

student involvement, or equivalent, at the institutions included in this study. This audit included

Merrimack's OSI as well as (1) an institution that is similar in size, student population, and

institutional type, (2) an institution that is moderately different from Merrimack in terms of size

(slightly larger), student population (slightly larger), region, and institutional type, and also (3)

an institution that is vastly different from Merrimack in the sense that it is much larger in size

and student population, is a public state institution, and cannot be compared to Merrimack in any

way.

The first institution that was used in the audit, which is similar to Merrimack will be

referred to as Institution A. The reason Institution A was chosen as being the similar institution

is that, like Merrimack, it is a small, private, four-year, and liberal arts institution with similar

student enrollment numbers. By including an institution with similar characteristics to

Merrimack, it allowed the audit to compare Merrimack's OSI to an equivalent office at similar

institution in order to see how schools that mirror Merrimack in many ways are using social

media. This may help to identify realistic expectations and recommendations for Merrimack's

social media use in its OSI.

The second institution that was chosen for the audit will be referred to as Institution B.

Institution B is slightly different from Merrimack in the sense that it has a slightly larger

undergraduate enrollment rate, but it is the same in terms of institutional type, and religious

affiliation. Institution B was chosen in order to see how schools that are within reach of

Merrimack in terms of development and growth are using social media and perhaps find areas

where Merrimack's OSI can increase effectiveness.

The third and final institution to be included in the Audit will be referred to as Institution

C. The reason for including Institution C in the audit was to be able to look at an institution that

has a considerably larger access to financial resources and operational resources (larger staff).

These factors may influence the ability of Institution C to commit more resources into social

media investments for the institution.

For the purpose of reviewing the findings of this audit and to avoid disclosing the names

of the institutions being used (other than Merrimack) I have outlined the pseudonyms for the

three institutions that were used in the audit. To give a brief overview of the institutions

involved in the audit, Table 1 further details the information of those institutions by including

pseudonym, size (number of students), institutional type, and name of the office of focus (for the

audit).

Table 1
Overview of Audit Institutions

Institution	Size (students)	Institutional Type	Office of Focus
Merrimack College	2,752* (2014-2015)	Private, 4-year, religious	Office of Student Involvement
Institution A (Likeness)	2,015* (2014-2015)	Private, 4-year, religious	Office of Student Activities
Institution B (Aspirational)	3,381* (2014-2015)	Private, 4-year, religious	Office of Campus Life
Institution C (Large Sized)	10,660* (2014-2015)	Public, 4-year, state school, non-religious	Office of Student Activities and Student Organizations

*Numbers of total enrolled students includes undergraduate enrolled students only. Numbers above were gathered based on data from U.S. News and World Report (2015).

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to this study that are important to consider before reviewing the findings from either the social media audit or from the interviews. The first, and probably the most significant limitation is that the number of interview participants included in the study can be viewed as difficult to compare to other institutional offices. While this portion of the study includes all full time staff and graduate fellows in Merrimack's OSI, the data gathered may not be generalizable to offices of student involvement or equivalent across higher education. Even though all available participants who could have been interviewed were indeed interviewed, institutions who have much larger offices may have provided a wider range of answers, thus giving more diversified data. The interview process was also limited in the fact that no undergraduate students were interviewed. This prevented the ability to gather information on how undergraduate students at Merrimack College have experienced social media during their college career. More specifically, because of the lack of undergraduate student involvement in the study, there was no way to see how undergraduate students have viewed their

interactions (if any) with the OSI's social media sites. This information would have been viable

as it could have helped when comparing the views of the graduate and professional staff to that

of undergraduate students in order to identify any possible online engagement patterns or

inconsistencies.

      While the social media audit does serve to expand the research outside of Merrimack

College, it also comes with limitations itself. The social media audit did not lead to, nor was it

designed to, have any contact with representatives at the institutions that were included in the

audit. However, this limitation can be viewed multiple ways. Without reaching out to

professionals or to the various offices at the institutions in the audits, there is a limit to how

much data the audit could reveal. While the audit was helpful in researching the online presence

of these offices, there was no way to gather more information or research the office goals that

may have explained certain patterns or activities on their social media sites. At the same time,

by not reaching out to the offices themselves, it allowed for a more authentic and un-biased form

of data collection. During the audit I was able to navigate the social media sites of the

institutions in a similar way that their students would. This gave me the perspective of what their

students would experience and see if they were attempting to reach out to these offices via their

social media sites.

      Finally, an additional limitation that was expected from the beginning is the fact that this

study is grounded at one institution. While the audit did open up the research to more

institutions, the only office of student involvement that was included in the interviews was

Merrimack's OSI. While some of the literature in the literature review suggests that social media

practices for student engagement in student affairs is applicable to the majority of higher

education, Merrimack's OSI does not have the same social media practices, resources, staff power, or knowledge that other equivalent offices across higher education may have.

Findings

The findings section of this study is comprised of benchmarking data gathered from the social media audit, and interviews that were conducted with four professionals in Merrimack's Office of Student Involvement. Upon organization and analysis of both sets of findings, I concluded that the findings from the social media audit provide a broader scope of looking at student engagement via social media. Alternately, the major findings from the interviews give a more in depth look at how student affairs professionals working in student involvement are using social media for student engagement. Although the audit was started and the majority of it was completed before the interviews took place, some of the findings from the interviews help to explain, in more detail, the results from the audit.

Of the findings that were gathered solely from the interviews, there were two that were considerable. These findings included Visual Stimulation and Twitter Engagement. These findings also coincided with findings from the audit and helped explain why some institutions may not utilize certain sites or utilize certain sites more than others. While the interviews did provide additional data other than the two findings that were mentioned, these two findings were the only ones that were substantial enough to discuss in full. These findings were evident throughout all interviews and they were also the only findings that showed a significant pattern in the interview data. Additionally, these findings heavily related to findings in the audit. There were minor findings from the interviews that are not discussed in full that are still mentioned briefly in order to add some context to some of the audit findings. Recommendations for best practice will follow after findings from both parts have been reviewed.

In order to evaluate the institutions in the social media audit, I constructed a social media evaluation rubric that would allow me to compare how each institution uses their social media, what sites the institutions use the most, and to what extent they are engaging with students. In designing this rubric, I developed four major categories in which to include in the rubric in order to accurately assess the institutions and their social media. Table 2 details the four major categories of the audit and the questions that they asked.

Table 2

4 Categories of Social Media Audit	
Content	What is the office posting? Is the content attempting to draw the interest of the students or encourage any form of dialogue? Are the offices posting information/posts that are appropriate for reaching their audience? Is there creativity in their posts?
Consistency	Are they using their social media on structured intervals or certain time frames or just when they have a specific use for it? Will be looking to make sure that they maintain consistency with posting or if their posts seem to display a certain pattern/timeline of when they post.
Engagement	Are they engaging with students on their social media platforms? Are students engaging back? Is there any displayed effort of the office responding to interactions? To quantify this, I have observed and studied the interactions and activity on the social media platforms of the various institutions that I am looking at.
Ease of Access	Are they advertising their social media/putting links to their social media pages on their institutions website? On the offices web page? Are their social media platforms distinguishable in the sense that they use unique twitter handles, or user account names?

To formulate the categories in Table 2, I used a study that researched how marketers use social media to grow their businesses (Stelzner, 2014). The reason I used a study focused on using social media for marketing in the business world is because the principles in which the study speaks of are relatable and transferable when devising social media strategies aimed at interacting with students.

In his study, Stelzner (2014) surveyed over 2,800 marketers in order to understand how they are using social media and to determine the most efficient ways to use social media. Each of his major findings is relatable to the categories chosen for this audit *Content, Consistency, Engagement,* and *Ease of Access*. His major findings from the survey showed: 94% of marketers agreed that the majority of their content was original written content and that they saw more success when they were posting such content *(Content)*, 84% reported that using social media as little as six hours per week generated more exposure *(Consistency)*, 77% of marketers in the study attributed social media use to an increase in developing a larger and more loyal fan base for their organizations as well as increasing the number of partnerships they had *(Engagement)*, and 92% of the marketers agreed that committed social media use was increasing traffic on their online platforms *(Easy of Access)* (Stelzner, 2014). From a marketing stand point, social media can help an organization excel at reaching their audience and increasing engagement with that audience. These marketing concepts and Stelzner's (2014) findings help to develop a better understanding of why student affairs professionals should be utilizing these sort of strategies for their social media use.

The content of the posts should be original in order to display the creativity and uniqueness of the office and encourage curiosity and dialogue from the students. The marketers use of social media should have consistency and strive to increase the office's exposure and online presence and commit a certain amount of time per week in order to keep their content flowing. Professionals in student involvement should also be aiming to create a fan base and strengthening the relationships they form with students. If they invest and interact with the student off-line then they can most certainly maintain that engagement on-line. Finally, there should be an ease of access to their social media sites. Offices should advertise their sites,

provide links on the institution's web pages, and create original account names so that they can

stand out and develop an online identity.

Using the four categories described above, I then utilized the social media evaluation

rubric to assess the social media use by using a grading scale with the four main categories as a

guideline. Out of the four categories, *Content, Consistency, Engagement,* and *Ease of Access,*

the Institutions were able to score a possible three total points for each category. The final scores

are comprised of all of the institution's social media platforms combined. The point system was

as follows:

1. Exemplary = 3 Points
2. Proficient = 2 Points
3. Adequate = 1 Point
4. Unsatisfactory = 0 Points

After scoring each institution in each of the four main categories, each category and its

corresponding score were added up in order to assign an overall score. Since there were four

categories and a maximum of three points for each category, the highest possible score was

twelve with the lowest possible score being zero. Final analysis was given based on the overall

score. Table 3 details the rubric and how each institution was graded. Also, the explanation and

definition of each of the point categories mentioned above are included in the rubric. The major

findings from the audit are in Table 3.

Table 3

Category	Exemplary 3	Proficient 2	Adequate 1	Unsatisfactory 0	Points
Content	The content of the posts is original and displays creativity and uniqueness of the office and encourages curiosity and dialogue from the students.	Most of their content is original, creative and displays uniqueness. Some efforts to increase dialogue and encourage interaction with students.	Little original content, mostly recycled or borrowed posts/content. Little effort to establish creativity or dialogue with students.	Almost no original content or effort to establish dialogue with students. Content is stale is lacking material that is engaging.	/3
Consistency	Their use of social media has consistency and strives to increase the office's exposure and online presence. It is clear that there is a solid effort to keep their content flowing.	Most posts are consistent and display a flow of content on their sites. It appears to have some pattern in which they post their content.	Although there are posts and content, there seems to be no pattern or consistency in which they post. Posts are random and vary in terms of 'down time' between each post.	There is almost no consistency in their social media activity. Posting is random and few and far between and shows neglect on the office's part in handling their social media.	/3
Engagement	There is a clear effort that they are establishing rapport with their students and that they are interacting and engaging with students through online communications.	Engagement is above average and most interactions are positive and promote increase engagement. More engagement could be done.	Posts show little attempt to engage with students or interact with students. Little interactions beyond "likes" or "retweets".	Almost no level of interaction or attempt to engage with students online. Posts are evident but there is no indication that the office is reaching out to students.	/3
Ease of Access	There is strong evidence that the office advertises their sites, provide links on the institution's web pages, maintains account names that make them stand out and develop an online identity.	Most of their social media links are easy to find and provide easy access to their sites. Account names are relatively easy to identify.	Minor difficulty in finding social media links and/or accounts. Institution website has little advertisement for office's social media sites.	Almost no links found on institution website to office's social media sites. Social media sites are hard to find and there is no clear effort to provide social media outreach.	/3

Social Media Audit

I chose three major social media platforms in order to provide a basis to evaluate each

institution. The three social media sites included in the audit are: Facebook, Twitter, and

Instagram. According to a survey conducted in September of 2014 by Duggan et al. (2015),

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are all among the top five social media sites used from 2013-

2014. It should be noted, however, that this survey also shows Pinterest and LinkedIn as part of

that top five but they were not used in this audit because those sites are not primarily used for

engagement in student involvement settings (LinkedIn is for professional and business use and

Pinterest is more of collection and sharing of interests via 'pinning'). Table 4 shows the three

sites that were mentioned above and which of the four institutions were found to have accounts

on that platform.

Table 4

Social Media Sites and Their Usage

Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
Merrimack College	Merrimack College	Merrimack College
Institution A	Institution A	*N/A**
*N/A**	Institution B	Institution B
Institution C	Institution C	*N/A**

*N/A indicates that an account was not found on the SM site listed in that column.

From the audit, there is one considerable finding that was found after analyzing the data.

As seen in Table 4, even though some of the institutions were not found to have accounts on all

three social media sites, all of the institutions had Twitter accounts. In the Duggan et al. (2015)

study reviewed earlier, it was shown that although Facebook remains the top most popular social

media site, Twitter is the fastest growing. Table 4 indicates the possibility that institutions could

be investing more time into Twitter and focusing more of their social media strategies around the

site.

Even though Table 4 shows that some of the institutions did not have accounts on all of

the social media sites included in the audit, I did not use this factor to 'score' any of the

institutions as there may be particular reasons as to why an institution does not utilize a certain

site. For example, after trying to search for it, I did not find Institution A to have an Instagram

account. However, this could be because Institution A may not include Instagram in their social

media efforts or it could be possible that it is controlled by another office and not their Office of

Student Activities. This audit served more to evaluate the social media sites that the institutions

are using. Table 5 briefly outlines the scores based on the criteria detailed in Table 3, for each

institution including their overall score.

Table 5

Institution	Content	Consistency	Engagement	Ease of Access	**Total**
Merrimack College	3	2	3	3	11
Institution A	2	0	0	1	3
Institution B	3	3	3	2	11
Institution C	3	2	3	1	9

Merrimack College

Overall Score: *11/12*

Merrimack College was tied with Institution B with having the highest score in the audit.

What contributed most to Merrimack's high score was having 3/3 points in three out of the four

categories. The categories that Merrimack scored 3/3 were *Content, Engagement,* and *Ease of*

Access. Merrimack was the only institution in the audit to score a full 3/3 in the *Ease of Access*

category. This was mainly because Merrimack was the only institution that had well-constructed

links and advertisement for their social media that made it easy for their sites to be found. The

only category that Merrimack did not receive a full 3/3 was *Consistency*. While Merrimack's

content on their social media pages is engaging and meaningful, there were slightly noticeable

laps in time frames in which they were posting to some of their sites. More specifically, their

Facebook page did have certain segments were there would be sporadic "down time" between

posts. Their OSI's Instagram was also few in posts and showed considerable amounts of time

between previous posts as well as the most recent post at the time the audit was conducted.

However, after interviewing the professionals in Merrimack's OSI, all participants

acknowledged the opportunity for growth in terms of how they use social media in the office.

Specifically, Rachel mentioned,

> I know we have goals and we have talked about how we wanted to be more active
>
> on it [social media]. So I think we definitely have gotten better at it but I think we
>
> are still working on it.

Having a demonstrated goal for the office to strive for can certainly improve any areas where

their social media practices may be weak.

All in all, their Twitter account was the most active out of all of the institutions and

showed ample activity and engagement. Merrimack's OSI was also the only institution to have

accounts on all three social media sites (this did not contribute to their score and is merely being

noted as a principle finding). This finding indicates that it is possible that Merrimack's OSI

could be shifting their efforts into Twitter due to experienced success with the site over others.

Institution A

Overall Score: *3/12*

Institution A had the lowest overall score out of all the institutions included in the study

and showed the weakest online presence. After researching the Facebook page and Twitter

account of Institution A's Office of Student Activities, I found what I will refer to as "dead

accounts." To provide context for how I am using this term for the purpose of this study, I

define "dead account" as an account that shows no sign of activity within one year of the time of

visitation. Upon visiting the Facebook page of Institution A's OSA, I found that their most

recent post was in Fall of 2012. I did further research to see if a new page had been created

perhaps under new leadership or other purposes but I could not locate one. Similarly, when I

visited the Twitter page for the same office, I saw their last "tweet" was in 2013 and I found no

other page for their office after conducting an additional search.

        After seeing the prolonged inactivity of both (and the only social media accounts of theirs

that I could find), I gave Institution A the score of 0/3 for *Consistency* and *Engagement* for the

above stated reasons. For *Content*, I did give Institution A 2/3 as the content they *were* posting

on their sites was relevant and appropriate for their office with some effort to increase online

dialogue. For *Ease of Access* I gave Institution A's OSA a 1/3 due to the fact that they had no

links on their institution's website that brought me to any active social media sites. The one

point that I did give them was for having "like" and "follow" buttons on their OSA web page

which showed effort to increase online outreach. However, these buttons were not links but

rather served as an easy way to follow their social media pages without leaving their website.

Seeing as how no active sites were found and that clicking the buttons did not seem to follow any

of the sites they did have, there is small benefit to having a useful tool such as that.

Institution B

Overall Score: *11/12*

        Institution B, like Merrimack, scored eleven overall points in the social media audit. One

interesting finding is that both Merrimack and Institution B scored 3/3 for *Content,* and

Engagement. However, they both had differing "strong points" in their score. While Merrimack

scored 3/3 for *Ease of Access*, Institution B only scored 2/3. This was due to Institution B not

having any clear or concise links or advertisements to their social media pages. Also, Institution

B did not have the same (or similar) names on both of their accounts. One account was named

"Student Life" while the other was called "Campus Life." This kind of inconsistency with online

branding can make it difficult for an institution to establish an online identity and make it more

difficult to be noticed on social media. However, Institution B scored 3/3 for *Consistency* while

Merrimack scored 2/3 for that category. This finding was particularly interesting because

Institution B, as noted in Table 1, is the institution that was chosen as being an institution that

Merrimack sees as a competitor school and has developed to a point that is slightly above

Merrimack in terms of enrollment and growth. This is also considerable as these two schools are

also both tied for the highest score in the social media audit. From this finding, I drew three

conclusions.

First, it is possible that two institutions, similar in size and type, who might be in the

process of working towards their strategic plan and are in the process of growth, are gathering

and implementing new institutional practices to incorporate into their organization (e.g. social

media practice). While Merrimack is certainly in a time of growth and development, Institution

B may be going through the same process which is why they are considered a competitor school

to Merrimack in some way. Schools that are going through change may be more prone to

integrate new practices and commit resources into new assets. Second, these two institutions

were found to have two different strong points in their social media practices in the offices that

were focused on for the audit. Therefore, information could be gathered from Institution B in

order to improve the practice of Merrimack's OSI social media practice. Finally, they were also

the only two institutions to have Instagram accounts. Even though having a certain account did

not affect scoring, it was interesting to see that these institutions, out of all that were included in

the audit, were investing in and utilizing Instagram.

Institution C

Overall Score: *9/12*

Institution C was in the middle with a score of nine, just two points below the top two

institutions in the audit. Institution C had two categories in which it scored 3/3 and they were

Content and *Engagement*. For *Consistency*, Institution C scored 2/3 and its lowest score was

Ease of Access for which it only scored 1/3. The reason for the low score for Ease of Access was

because Institution C did not have adequate links or any form of advertisement for their office's

social media pages. It was difficult to navigate the Institution's website and even find the page

for their Office of Student Activities and Student Organizations, and once there, there were no

hyperlinks leading to social media. The most interesting finding of scoring Institution C was that

it was the outlier institution in the audit and was significantly bigger in size and enrollment. It

was the only school in the audit that was as a public, state-system college and although

seemingly more apt to have significantly higher access to resources to put towards social media,

did not score the highest in the audit. In fact, the two schools above it in points (Merrimack and

Institution B) are significantly smaller than Institution C.

An assumption going into the audit was that a school such as Institution C with its size

and access to state funding, would display more advanced and efficient use of social media.

However, after completion of the audit, Institution C was found to have average social media

performance. It was interesting to see that Institution C, a larger school, was not heavily

outperforming the other schools on social media. A larger school with more financial resources

may be able to invest in a full-time staff member who is responsible for social media, but that

may just end up depending on the school's needs. For instance, when asked if a full time staff

member dedicated to social media would be beneficial Cindy stated,

> We all try to do our part but when there is a question on Twitter and I am like oh
>
> where is that login I do not know where it is…but if we had someone who was
>
> constantly tweeting stuff out or just constantly putting stuff out or your know just
>
> updating it would be helpful.

From Cindy's statement, it could be argued that having someone to at least consolidate social

media responsibilities would be helpful. However, sharing the responsibility of the office's

social media utilization is also important so that the office can stay consistent and the staff

members are not ill-informed because only one person is doing social media.

Finally, it was found that although Merrimack and Institution C are vastly different in

various aspects, Merrimack's OSI Twitter page had 1,500 tweets, 611 followers, and was

following 806 accounts at the time this study was done. This is compared to Institution C's

OSASO 1,816 tweets, 1,630 followers, and following 224 at the time of this study. This was

perhaps one of the most interesting findings of the audit as it shows that Merrimack's OSI

Twitter page is only ~300 tweets behind Institution C which was presumed to have more social

media activity because of its much larger size. Also, Merrimack's OSI Twitter page has been

active since December of 2011 versus Institution C's OSASO Twitter page being around since

January of 2011. Even though Merrimack's page has been around for less time, it has still

managed to maintain enough activity to the point where it could surpass the tweets of Institution

C. This data suggests that institutional size does not necessarily have an impact on an intuition's

social media presence and utilization.

Visual Stimulation

A common finding that came up frequently in the interviews and was mentioned by all four of the participants was the importance of picture and image based engagement, or, as one participant called it, "visual stimulation." Although findings from the interview all concluded that Instagram was not a primary method of Merrimack's OSI social media engagement, all participants agreed that it does have a significant impact on how well they engage with students. Additionally, all four participants agreed that Merrimack's OSI should devote more attention to using Instagram in their social media efforts.

Rachel, one of the graduate fellows, explains that Instagram could definitely be utilized more by the office. Rachel stated, "So Instagram can be used a lot more than we use it now I think …visual stimulation gets more activity than just a typical post."

Continuing to talk more about Rachel's thoughts on pictures and Instagram, I asked Rachel if she thought using Instagram or pictures on social media in general would be successful to which she explained,

> Pictures…totally. I am a big visual person like I love Instagram…people want to know what they are going to they do not want to just hear 'come to the involvement fair!' or 'come to cram jam!' they want to see what it is what it looks like and what is being offered.

Rachel's statements about using Instagram in social media engagement do raise an interesting point. While sites like Twitter and Facebook allow for posts and blurbs about certain events or programs that offices of student involvement may hold, Instagram does allow the opportunity to share a "wow" moment and in a way sends a "do not take my word for it, see for yourself"

message to students. Cindy also stated how she feels pictures open a new avenue for

engagement and advertisement. She stated,

> I think that Instagram is a good form just because a picture is worth a thousand
>
> words so I think that is one method that has been very beneficial to our office.
>
> You can talk about how good an event is but if they [students] can see a picture
>
> then they are more likely to go 'oh that is really cool!.'

Again, both Rachel and Cindy talk about how pictures allow students to see what their office is

offering. This visual engagement may help to catch the attention of a student who is often

wondering what Merrimack OSI can offer. It can also convince the student who is not likely to

leave their room or travel to campus to attend an event to actually do just that because they can

see their friends in pictures attending an event. Visual engagement can allow students to

discover what their peers are involved in, as well as visualize what campus involvement can look

like.

Interestingly, Thomas also spoke to the importance of Instagram but also went on to

explain how the office has been exploring various ways to engage using pictures. Thomas

described how Twitter and Instagram contests have helped with student engagement. Twitter's

active and constant broadcasting and Instagram's ability to share pictures allow for easy

engagement with photos. Describing the ways the office has been using Instagram and Twitter

Thomas stated,

> We have been doing a lot of prizes and a lot of twitter competitions and Instagram
>
> competitions where you tweet at us or you tag us in your photo and then the best
>
> tweet or the best photo or the first one to retweet x would get a certain prize. We
>
> have been using them a lot for engagement with the students.

There is obviously much potential using visual forms of social media in the form of

pictures. After hearing Thomas' description of ways Student Involvement is using social

media to engage with students, another interesting point surfaced. Because Twitter

allows for photo sharing and Instagram allows the user to tweet a picture directly after

taking a picture on Instagram, student affairs professionals should be taking advantage of

the direct and instant nature of Twitter and using it to enhance visual engagement with

their students. Contests like the ones Thomas spoke of, allow the office to engage with

students while at the same time increasing the awareness and presence of the office

amongst the institution's community; both on-line and off-line.

   Caitlin also expressed how Instagram holds untapped potential, especially since it

has quickly become popular in the realm of social media. Caitlin does admit that the

office does not use Instagram as much as other social media platforms and feels as if OSI

could definitely start utilizing it more. Specifically, Caitlin states,

> We have an Instagram that is probably the least used platform we have right now
>
> even though it is probably one of the most used platforms that students are using
>
> nowadays that and Snapchat. I do not know if student involvement wants to dive
>
> into Snapchat but I think that would be cool.

Although Caitlin does mention that Instagram should be used more, she was the only participant

from the interviews that mentioned the possibility of implementing Snapchat. Snapchat,

although popular, does not serve as an easy platform for student affairs professionals to engage

students with as it lacks accessibility. Snapchat, a mobile only application that allows users to

send brief picture messages to others after which they disappear for good (unless quickly

screenshotted) could not be used in the same way as Instagram or Twitter are used. Unlike the

latter two, Snapchat requires the exchange of phone numbers (in most cases) and it would likely

not be feasible for an office of student involvement to utilize in order to engage students with.

Visual Stimulation was the most significant finding from the interviews and certainly was

not a pattern that was expected. To relate this finding to the audit, it was interesting to see how

all participants viewed Instagram as something that could be useful for engagement, however the

audit showed that Instagram may still be under consideration by professionals working in student

involvement or activities. As the audit findings showed, not all of the institutions were invested

in Instagram and judging by the amount of posts on the accounts of the institutions that did have

it, it was certainly not a primary focus.

Twitter Engagement

As Table 4 indicated, Twitter was the only social media platform that was utilized by all

institutions. After organizing the findings from the interviews, it was clear that Twitter was the

most popular site compared to other social media platforms. Comparing this finding with the

information provided in Table 4, it could be suggested that Twitter is likely the primary social

media site that student affairs professionals use to engage with students. Even though Duggan et

al. (2015) reports Facebook being the most popular social media site, when one compares the

findings from the interviews and the audit, Duggan et al.'s claim does not seem to be apparent in

this study.

The participants from the interviews all agreed that Twitter provides a platform that

allows direct, constant, and engaging interactions between Merrimack's OSI and students.

Thomas explained,

Twitter is probably our most active social media platform. Twitter is constantly

active it is constantly being used. I think because of its active nature people tend

to use twitter more and be on it more and checking it more as opposed to waiting

for a notification in a box on Facebook that they can go back to at any time.

Twitter is constantly moving and if you are not checking it throughout the day

then something is going to get missed.

The most evident advantage of Twitter, to which Thomas spoke of the most, is its ability to

provide much more constant communication and engagement compared to Facebook. Thomas

had gone on to say how Facebook was helpful if OSI wanted to make events or group pages for

clubs and organizations, but beyond that it was of little use. They found that once the groups

were actually made, they would not see much more use beyond that.

Rachel also felt that Twitter allowed OSI to reach out to students more effectively and

engage with students more directly. Twitter, unlike Facebook, is focused around constant

updating and interaction. She also felt as if Twitter's ability to "tag" students or vice versa by

simply typing the "@" symbol and their name and instantly connecting was much more efficient

than Facebook. She explained,

Twitter you can directly reply back to students. After the involvement fair we did

a contest and we actually tweeted out to the student organizations saying

congratulations on winning or something like that. I just think Twitter is more

direct nowadays, you can tag people, share things, retweet etc. and that just

expands your audience too.

This also ties back to the importance of expanding your audience and increase the presence of

your organization on social media. In the case of higher education, an office of student

involvement or activities can increase their presence on the campus by increasing their

engagement with students on social media. To relate to what Rachel was saying, increasing the

office's audience can allow OSI to reach out to more students and therefore increase the quality

of engagement they have with those students.

Furthermore, Caitlin expressed how Twitter is also useful for rapidly sharing information

on a medium that students are more apt to use. Specifically, Caitlin stated,

> Sometimes we will ask others to tweet stuff like to help getting information out
>
> about moving cars or for move in day. I will contact the big organizations like
>
> SGA and MPB and be like 'hey can you put this out there?' They [students] are
>
> more likely to check their Twitter than their email and definitely Twitter over
>
> Facebook.

The way of rapidly sharing information like Caitlin described is easily accomplished through a

site like Twitter, especially if the office has already established a solid presence on the site as

well as a significant follower base, namely students. Cindy also agrees that Twitter is an easy

form of sharing information and connecting with students as opposed to email or Facebook and

states,

> We use it a lot for updates, upcoming events, and anything of that nature. Right
>
> now I am working with the senior class on making sure that the seniors know
>
> what is going on for their class…a lot of them do not check their emails so we
>
> kind of try to reach everyone in a different aspect.

If Merrimack's OSI is able to use Twitter successfully to reach out to students and share

information through social media in a way that is much easier than sending mails or using

Facebook, could it be that this is the case across all higher education?

With all of the information that the findings from both the audit and the interviews

provide, it is clear that social media engagement is vital to student engagement specifically

within offices of student involvement. Based on the findings as well as connections and support

from the literature that was reviewed earlier in the study, the following recommendations for best

practice are designed to help student affairs professionals in higher education who are working in

offices focused on student involvement, activities, or equivalent, use social media to engage with

their students and increase the quality of that engagement.

Implications

The data collected through this study has been used to create suggestions for social media

use and policies that can be used both on Merrimack's campus and in other higher education

institutions. A majority of the literature on student engagement and social media suggests that

college aged students are familiar with utilizing social networking sites because they have not

known a life without internet (Davis et al., 2012). Specifically, the data from the study was also

able to identify areas that should be focused on when using social media for student engagement

purposes.

Additionally, the data that highlighted any inefficient uses of social media amongst the

institutions in the audit was analyzed in order to identify areas where proper improvements can

be made. I was also able to see how Merrimack's Office of Student Involvement stood against

other student affairs related offices in terms of social media use, utilization, impact, and methods

of social media engagement that are effective and those that are not effective. Along with the

information/findings of this study, I was able to combine research and data in order to propose

recommendations for best practice for using social media to engage with students through an

office of student involvement. Common methods of recommendations that have been suggested

in some of the literature that was already reviewed, include trainings and sometimes speakers.

While recommendations will be discussed later, the possibilities of improving social media

engagement in higher education can vary depending on institutional and office needs.

Recommendations for Best Practice

In order for student affairs professionals to efficiently utilize social media for student

engagement, a number of recommendations for best practice have been proposed based primarily

on the evidence from this study. Since the findings from the study are not completely

generalizable to Offices of Student Involvement or equivalent across higher education, the

following recommendations aim to provide general guidelines and suggestions that institutions

can follow. From there, student affairs professionals in higher education can use the

recommendations as a framework that can be fused with their office's specific needs. The

recommendations that will be discussed are:

1. Constructing a concise and consistent 'social media mission statement'

2. Effectively and consistently organizing social media responsibilities within the office

3. Evaluate the social media use of the office utilizing a rubric

4. Reduce reliance of Facebook

Recommendation #1: OSIs Should Construct and Adhere to a "Social Media Mission Statement"

Offices of student involvement, or equivalent, should design a social media mission

statement for their office to use as a guideline for social media efforts. This would be similar to

that of an institution's mission statement in that it outlines the office's ideals and values relating

to social media engagement. This mission statement would not have to be public, but rather exist

for the purpose of organizing their intentions with social technologies. It could be a sentence, a

paragraph, or a few pages that were constructed from the combined views and philosophies of

the professionals in the office. It allows for the staff to collaborate and create something with a

consolidated view. The findings from the interviews suggested that the participants in the OSI

did not have reciprocal views or desired outcomes in regards to social media use for student

engagement. While they all wanted to see successful and desired outcomes from their social

media use, they could benefit from constructing a social media mission that outlines their hopes

for student engagement. The research study suggests that inefficient use of social media, as it

pertains to professionals working in student involvement, can derive from a lack of vision; that

is, a unified ideal outlining the office's objectives for social media engagement. Much like an

institution uses its mission to outline its strategic plans, a social media mission can help an office

of student involvement stay consistent and effective in their social media use. Perhaps with

common goals that everyone in the office can contribute to, an office could start to see steady

improvement in their digital platform endeavors.

   To provide an example of what a social media mission statement might look like, one

could read:

   As the [name of office here], we dedicate ourselves to providing a quality level of

   engagement with our students in all social mediums. In an effort to reach

   students where they are often found most, we, as an office, will strive to increase

   our presence, identity, and level of engagement on social media platforms that we

   collectively agree to associate ourselves with. Using social media to engage with

   students, we will strive to increase dialogue, outreach, and communication in an

   attempt to promote successful digital relationships.

Of course, as previously mentioned, the mission statement can serve as a framework for the

office but also adapt in order to be congruent with their aspirations. This is not to say that a

social media mission statement is needed in order to effectively execute social media initiatives,

but it does allow the office to conceptualize their values as they pertain to social media.

Recommendation #2: Offices Need to Effectively and Consistently Organize Social Media

Responsibilities

From the interview findings, it was evident that responsibilities in the OSI, as they relate

to social media, are not specifically delegated to specific individuals. A lack of an apparent

understanding of who is working on what or who is in charge of specific projects in terms of

office social media can lead to ineffective digital engagement. Each participant in the interview

had a different answer when asked how social media responsibilities were delegated in the

office. It seemed as if social media was something they were all expected to contribute to, when

they had the time to do so. Some of the participants felt as though having one single professional

handle all of the office's social media would be helpful. However, some of the participants felt

as though it would be too much for one person as they felt that social media engagement would

require attention from more than just one person. Therefore, it is recommended that the office

organizes and prioritizes any and all social media work that they want done. From this list, they

can delegate the various work that needs to be done evenly among the staff within the office

instead of trying to guess who is doing what and when they are doing it. This way, social media

does not become something that the staff members will do if they have time, but rather it

becomes part of their overall responsibilities.

While some schools may have resources to hire staff members to only do social media,

smaller schools may not benefit from this. Depending on the size of the institution and the

office, one person would not be enough and this could in fact hinder the office's social media

activity even more. Hiring a specific staff member to only do social media related work may not

work regardless of institutional size or type. Social media, especially when being used to

increase student engagement, should be a collective experience and effort. If only one person in

the office is engaging students with social media, then they run the risk of diminishing the

relationship building process between the students and the entire office. While one person doing

the social media work may hold some degree of consistency, if no one else in the office is using

social media to engage with students then the increases the amount of professionals in the office

who have little knowing of what their office is doing on social media. When being used to

interact with students, social media engagement should be a community effort. An office's

social media should be reflective of all of the personalities within the office.

That being said, however, it is imperative for maintaining the quality of online

engagement that everyone in the office is contributing equally to the office's social media

platforms. It may even help for the director of the office to start including it as a principle

responsibility in all future job descriptions so that it remains a priority in the office and does not

feel more like an afterthought.

Recommendation #3: Offices Need to Evaluate their Social Media Use

The third major recommendation is for offices to evaluate their social media use by using

the rubric that was constructed for the audit. The social media evaluation rubric, or a similar

tool, can help an office self-critique their social technology performance based on the categories

established in the rubric used in the study. An important aspect of implementing anything in an

organization is assessment. By assessing various facets of an organization, those within the

organization can identify areas that need improvement or areas where they have seen the most

progress so they know what works and what does not. The rubric also serves as guide for

student affairs professional looking to create a social media engagement platform for their office.

The categories and their outlines contextualize what successful social media engagement

encompasses and provides a knowledge base that professionals can work off of.

Social media evaluation is not a subject that is rich in literature but is essential

nonetheless. As reviewed in the literature, Junco (2014b) had stated that when social media is

being used in education, it is essential to know what works and what does not. Student affairs

professionals can appear to be using social media well if they think what they are doing is

efficient when in reality they could be doing it poorly. However, this does not mean that my

rubric is the only way to evaluate an office's social media performance. The Social Media

Evaluation Rubric may help one office redefine and restructure their social media use for the

better but it might not help another office of the same type in the same way. The rubric that was

used serves as a way to look at an office's social media sight and ask the questions such as "what

are they trying to accomplish? Are they working towards that goal? Is there a clear effort of

engaging with students?"

Constantly evaluating an office's social media use can also lead to more effective goal

development and execution. It is almost impossible to accurately construct goals as a team if the

team itself has a limited idea of how much work needs to be done. Evaluating social media

efforts can highlight errors, inconsistencies, or even areas that an office might be excelling in so

that they know what is working well and perhaps collaborate with colleagues. For instance,

proper evaluation of an office's social media activity may reveal that the office Instagram

account has been inactive since the individual who was maintaining it left the institution. From

there, the office can identify what needs to be improved upon and then design a goal to

effectively address it. This also relates to the recommendation of effectively delegating social

media responsibilities equally throughout the office. If something such as a staff member

leaving the institution were to happen, any social media projects or duties they were given

specifically would be halted thus hindering the online presence of the office.

For the context in which it was used for the purpose of this study, the importance of

evaluation is knowing whether or not a specific method of practice is effective for attaining the

goals set forth by an organization. For student affairs professionals working in student

involvement, ideally, student engagement is at the forefront of their work. Social media, as the

research suggests, is constantly ushering in new avenues that bring student engagement to the

realm of internet technologies. When exploring new avenues to engage with students online and

interact with them digitally, it is essential to use tools such as the rubric used in the audit to

constantly be aware of your progress and the quality of engagement that your efforts are

producing.

Recommendation #4: Facebook Utilization Should be Lowered

The last recommendation, which may be considered bold and difficult to adopt, is for

student affairs professionals working in student involvement to decrease their dependency on

Facebook. As the literature reviewed earlier supported, Facebook is indeed the most popular and

most widely used social media site on the internet. However, the research portion of this study

suggests the opposite. Additionally, some of the school's Facebook accounts seemed to receive

less attention than their Twitter accounts and one might say considerably so. Further research

might want to explore the role of Facebook use by student affairs professionals as a tool to

engage with students. However, the findings of this study may help to shed light on that matter.

Facebook, in its nature, is a massive social networking site that serves as a way for people to stay

connected by sharing events, pictures, posts, birthdays, news, etc., and it allows people from

across the world to feel like they are rooms away. That being said, the findings from the study,

as mentioned earlier, suggest that Facebook lacks the direct contact and constant sharing those

sites like Twitter provide. Twitter is a dedicated, live updating stream of all the people you are

connected with on the site. Sharing, tweeting, retweeting, "favoriting," and "following" all

require no more action than a quick tap on your phone or keyboard. For student affairs

professionals looking for that constant engagement and real-time interaction, Twitter

undoubtedly provides that type of digital environment.

      Still, Facebook does allow some features that student affairs professionals, especially

those working in student involvement, can utilize. Principal findings from the interview showed

that Facebook allows for student organizations to form groups, create events, and connect on

their own group page. However, as one participant noted, that is where Facebook's utility seems

to fade. Recalling earlier, Thomas had stated that once students started using these groups on

Facebook, there was no continued engagement from there on. Twitter on the other hand,

provides a much more suitable environment for professionals to reach those students. It is much

more personable for an office to tweet to students or share things on Twitter with students than it

is for a professional to post something on a student's Facebook wall. It certainly does not deliver

the same message or have the same meaning. Tweeting to a student's twitter handle is much

easier than finding them on Facebook, friending them, and then posting on their wall.

      It is perhaps more accurate to say that Facebook is better for students interacting with

each other, staying connected to their friends and family back home, and expressing more of

their personal selves. Like (Hottell et al., 2014) suggested, students saw social networking sites

as ways of keeping their existing relationships strong as opposed to creating new ones. With the

utility of Twitter and the easy access to instant interactions it provides, it would make sense that

students and professionals have moved on from attempting to engage on Facebook.

These recommendations serve as four specific best-practice models that were drawn from the entirety of literature research and the study. Certainly, there are additional suggestions and recommendations that could be made, but the four above can lead to effective student engagement via social media technologies. Additional recommendations for best practice may also include, but are not limited to, annual staff social media trainings in order for an office to stay current on digital trends, researching case studies that outline successful practices of social media use for student engagement, and networking with other professionals in higher education to learn various facets of social media engagement. Ultimately, the best recommendation that can be given to professionals who are looking to bolster their social media engagement is to know what works best for an individual institution. Institutional fit is essential in many factors throughout higher education and methods of student engagement through social media are no exception. Effective social media practices that work well for one school may not bode well for another. Therefore it is up to professionals at various institutions to identify their office's specific needs.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

Social media, and its role in higher education, are in the hands of student affairs professionals. In a field where engaging with students is the crux of our responsibilities, having outlets to do so is of the utmost importance. The purpose of this study was meant to understand where social media is most effective in the field of student affairs. To revisit the original question,

> How can an Office of Student Involvement, such as the one at Merrimack College, use
>
> social media in order to stay engaged with students and develop stronger, digital
>
> relationships with them?

I believe that the collected data was able to answer this question. As the data from this study

suggests, along with the literature, social media is a well-oiled machine with the ability to

perpetuate student engagement. When it comes to the Office of Student Involvement (or similar

offices) student engagement is particularly key, being an office that experiences high levels of

student contact.

Social media, as the literature and study supports, has become a means for student affairs

professionals to take advantage of the possibilities that it brings. As the findings, most notably

Visual Stimulation and the use of Twitter, suggest, there are ways that social media can be used

for engagement that are not too complex to adopt. What made these two findings easier to

understand was that the information in the audit supported the data from the interviews. From

the beginning, the audit was designed to use a framework that could look at social media use by

OSI professionals and identify how it plays a role in student engagement. The audit provided the

means to look at the social media and see what it was doing, where it was going, and how it was

working, and then compare it to how the participants experienced it.

Regardless of where the data in the study originated (audit or interviews), they help in

understanding the notion of how social media is never fully understood and that the opportunities

it presents are never completely untapped. If used effectively, social media provides a familiar

outlet where students and professionals feel comfortable developing relationships that foster

increased dialogue and quality engagement within a healthy, digital community. This is where

social media finds its place in higher education: student affairs professionals who experience an

excess of student interactions in offices of student involvement or similar areas, can use social

media to connect with students at all times, no matter if they are at home or on campus. They

can develop creative ways to get students to be more proactive on campus and become more

involved in the campus culture. Future research may want to explore, in depth, the avenues of student engagement that social media can provide. There is limited research on the topic of social media and student engagement and certainly there are aspects of it that could yield expansive and prolific results.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Interview Protocol

Warmup Question: *What is Social Media to you?*

1. How do you use social media on a daily basis? How much do you use per day, if at all?

2. To what extent have you had experience using social media in a way that was not for personal use? (i.e. business, academics, work)

3. How would you describe your philosophy regarding the use of social media on the Merrimack campus, in terms of student engagement?

4. In your experience, what are some of the most successful results of social media use that you have seen on the Merrimack campus? What is a negative result you have seen?

5. As a professional working in OSI, how are you using social media to engage students at Merrimack? Do you feel as if you are doing it effectively? Have you reached your goals or made progress towards reaching your desired results from using SM?

6. In terms of the Office of Student Involvement, do you feel as a member of MPB that they are effectively engaging students through social media and establishing a relationship with students? How does MPB utilize social media? (Graduate Fellow Question)

7. When it comes to utilizing social media in Student Involvement, how are the responsibilities of managing of the office's social media accounts delineated? Is it one person's job, a part time position, included in certain position's responsibilities, or split up between members of the office?

8. How do you feel the college's administration is integrating social media effectively into the college community in order to strengthen the relationship between administration and the student body? If you don't think they are, why do you feel this way?

9. Have you ever seen or heard of a social media policy (e.g., administration limiting the use of social media or requiring a certain standard of social media use, requiring reports from the staff on their work using social media at the end of each month, etc.) in higher education that you want to see done here at Merrimack?

10. How do you think Merrimack administrators in student life could better improve SM use on campus? Do you think it is important in order for student engagement to increase as well as strengthen the relationship between administration and students?