Use of Social Media by U.S. Colleges: Potential and Pitfalls

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Several institutions of higher learning in the US are using social media (SM) technology. The focus of the paper is on how a university's governance and administrative functions use SM technology as well as the utilization of SM to facilitate interaction with its faculty, staff, and students. In addition, current research attempts to understand the application of SM technologies to the student college choice model proposed by Chapman. This study proposes a model to examine implementation of SM applications throughout an institution and includes recommendations to expand the scope of SM technology usage in universities and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNSs) are interactive Web-based applications that facilitate social interaction in a virtual environment. Users can create their own online content, such as a public or semi-public profile, and upload pictures, videos etc, which they can then share with their friends. These sites also allow users to interact with one another through online messages. Facebook, LinkedIn, and Bebo are some of the widely popular SNS (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

SNSs fall under the umbrella of social media (SM) technology, which as Wikipedia defines is the media"…for social interaction…" SM uses Web-based internet technologies to transform "…communication into interactive dialogues" (Wikipedia, 2010). Facebook is the most popular of all SNSs and currently has about 500 million active users across the globe of which 103 million are in United States (US) ("Social Media Usage Statistics," 2010).

College students today are the most "wired" generation in history using a broad range of technology tools to interact and communicate (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008). Research suggests that SNSs such as Facebook and MySpace are the most favored among college students. According to a 2008 Pew internet survey of people living in the United States, 61% of 14-17 year olds use SNSs. Also, college students participating in this study stated that they spend on an average, 10-30 minutes daily on Facebook (Wandel, 2008). In another study involving 92 undergraduate students at a private university in a large metropolitan area in the US, 85% of the students used Facebook to interact with friends. On an average,

each student participating in the study had 358 Facebook friends (Pempek et al., 2009). Junco and Cole-Avent (2008) suggest that present-day young adults in United States and more specifically, college students are enthusiastic users of SM technologies. Consequently, a way to "grab" their attention is to exchange information with them via SM.

Purpose

Review of the literature on usage of SM technologies in US universities reveals that they are moving in the right direction concerning use of SM technologies. However, further analysis suggests that complete utilization of SM technologies is far from being realized.

The current study looks at how universities are applying SM technologies to facilitate their governance and administrative functions. Additionally, the paper attempts to understand the application of SM technologies to the student college choice model proposed by Chapman in 1981.

The specific focus of this study is to examine how SM is being employed by universities to efficiently conduct day-to-day activities, develop strategic initiatives, market themselves to prospective students, and improve student recruiting and retention efforts. The paper explores how institutions supplement conventional methods of communication with faculty, staff and students using SM technologies. The research also looks at how universities can form realistic expectations about college-life among students and counter online negative feedback posted by students and employees on SNSs, an important aspect for an academic institution to manage its public image in today's internet driven world (Tripp & Gregoire, 2011). Further, the current study proposes a model to understand implementation of SM applications throughout an institution of higher education in the US. The paper concludes with recommendations for expanding the scope of SM technology usage in university settings and directions for future research.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SM technologies and tools are transforming the way institutions of higher education interact with potential and current students; how they manage student affairs; how they market themselves; how they engage their alumni and manage relationships with them; and how their faculty facilitate student learning (Li & Pitts, 2009). There is a common perception among many university administrators, faculty, and even college students that academic institutions that use SM tools are benefiting significantly due to the ubiquitous user base of SNSs.

A report based on a study conducted between the years 2007 and 2009 by Nora Barnes from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth and Eric Mattson suggests that institutions of higher education in the US have increased their use of SM tools and technologies significantly. The report mentions that in 2007, admission departments of 39% of the colleges in the sample did not use SM, while in 2009, only 5% did not use any form of SM for student recruiting ("Using social media: Colleges and universities vs. businesses," 2010). The sample in this study included 4-year accredited institutions in the University of Texas's list.

Another study conducted by Pearson, New Marketing Labs, and Babson Survey Research group states that more than 52% of college professors use tools like video, blogs, podcasts, and wikis in their classes and over 80% of them believe that SM adds value to teaching practices (Aspey, 2010). The use of SM tools was found to be consistent across the board, that is, professors with more than 20 years of teaching experience used SM tools only slightly less than their younger peers. Across disciplines, faculty members working in the humanities and social sciences reported greater SM usage than their counterparts in mathematics, science, and business (Parry, 2010). The sample in this study included 939 professors from Pearson's database list of 10,000 professors.

Framework of Social Media Usage

Universities are using SM technologies in several ways, most of which includes applying these technologies to augment key functions and operations. It is believed that ease of information
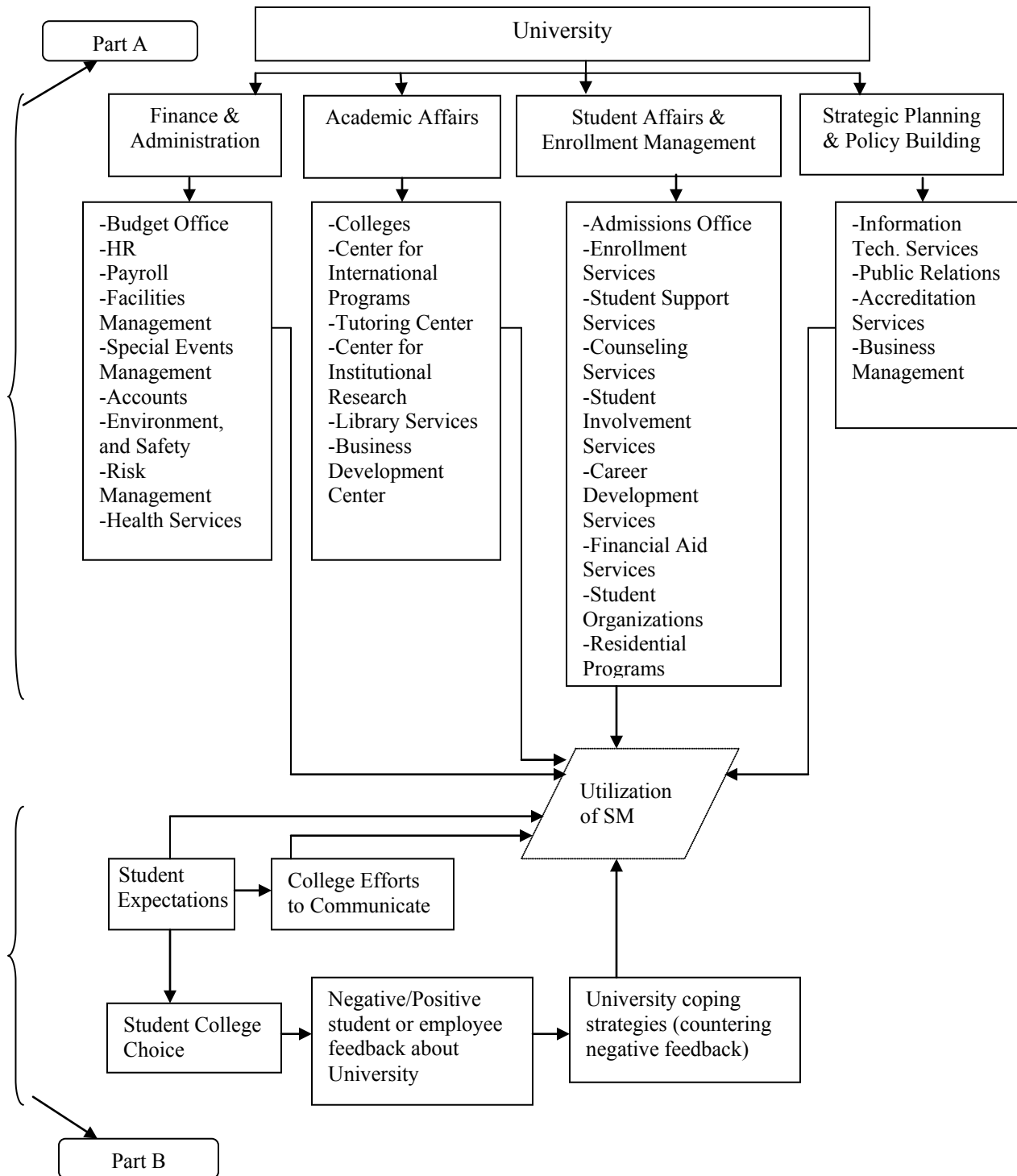
dissemination may be the common denominator on why SM technologies can enhance the standards of performance at institutions of higher education.

Figure 1 shows the framework of SM usage. Part A of this proposed framework highlights the key functional areas of the four major branches (Finance and Administration, Academic Affairs, Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, and Strategic Planning and Policy Building) of an institution of higher education utilizing SM tools to manage operations. For example, the enrollment services function included in the student affairs and enrollment management division uses SM for recruiting students. Similarly, college faculties extensively use SM technologies in their classrooms.

Part B of the framework conceptualizes how SM can be applied to the student's college choice model proposed by Chapman in 1981. Chapman introduced the college choice model to propose ideas that could enable a university to improve its ability to recruit college-bound students. For example, it was suggested that universities need to find ways to effectively communicate with college-bound students and market their strengths to influence a prospective student's choice of college. The current study suggests universities can use SM technologies to facilitate existing methods and further enhance recruiting efforts, among other things.

The next few sections of the paper will explain in detail, how and in what ways SM technologies and tools are being applied to manage some key operations of a university.

FIGURE 1
FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AT A UNIVERSITY

E-Recruiting (Student Affairs and Enrollment Management- Enrollment Services and Admissions Office)

Recognizing that there is great potential to complement existing student-recruitment processes by leveraging communication tools offered by SM technologies, university enrollment services are increasingly using these technologies to complement their recruiting process. This strategy of recruiting is now being popularly referred to as e-recruiting (Wandel, 2008).

The fact that a very large percentage of high-school students and young adults are active users of SNSs such as Facebook is helping the universitys' e-recruiting efforts (Wandel, 2008). In a 2007 survey of 1000 college-bound high-school juniors from across the US revealed that 72% preferred exchanging messages online on real-time basis with an admissions counselor. About 63% students liked reading profiles of college students currently enrolled at a university, enjoyed reading a blog written by a current student, and would appreciate the opportunity to get a virtual tour of the university campus. Many (64% college-bound students) also said that they would enjoy reading a blog written by a faculty. ("E-Expectations Class of 2007 Report", 2007).

SNSs such as Facebook is a popular forum for college-bound young adults to interact with college students to find information about a university, its facilities, courses offered, student experiences, campus life, faculty, and all other information that they need before making an informed decision about the college/university they would like to join. In addition, Facebook users can become "fans" of an organization, such as a university. Therefore, when a friend of a fan of the university sees this status, they are more likely to become fans themselves (Rueben, 2008). This is similar to the "network effect" which increases the spread and flow of information in a way that traditional recruiting techniques never could.

YouTube can also be a useful tool in aiding recruitment efforts. Video clips about student life, activities and the atmosphere of the campus can be uploaded for people to view. Flickr provides a similar platform and enables a university to show off its campus and activities through pictures and videos. Twitter is an effective tool to supplement recruiting efforts. Potential students can follow a university's posts on Twitter and decide if the mission and goals of the university matches their educational objectives.

In the recently conducted longitudinal study by Nora Barnes and Eric Mattson, a telephone survey asked 536 admission officers of 4-year accredited institutions about the importance of SM tools and applications in attracting potential college students. The survey revealed that as of January 2008, more than 400 universities had created an official Facebook page. Further, 41% of the college admission departments had blogs (Barn and Mattson, 2009).

Some universities that have started using SM capabilities to attract college-bound students are, Texas A&M, UCLA, NC State, University of Texas at Austin's McCombs School of Business, SUNY New Platz, and Arizona State University (Zanders, 2010). Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida uses SM tool to publicize its orientation program (Wandel, 2008). Agnes Scott College, a liberal arts institution in Georgia reaches out to high schoolers to join their Facebook admissions page even before they have started applying. SM allows the college a chance to have open discussions with prospective students about the challenges and myths associated with attending a women's liberal arts college (Schoepf, 2010). MiraCosta College in Oceanside, California uses Web pages on SM sites such as MySpace to provide information and communicate with current and prospective students about course offerings, important deadlines for tuition fee payments, deadlines to add/drop courses, important college-wide events, and other information (Wandel, 2008). John Hopkins University and SUNY Plattsburg have integrated SM into every phase of their admissions process, starting from initial recruitment to following up with students who have not confirmed their admission. Both these universities post video blogs on YouTube and maintain a presence on blogging sites such as Twitter (Schoepf, 2010). Twitter is being used extensively by University of Illinois as well as Oregon State University to follow up on student admissions. Universities are also using Twitter to inform potential applicants about new developments, such as changes in tuition fees, new academic programs, or new course offerings (Schoepf, 2010).

A number of universities are using SM tools to conduct background checks and verify information about students who are candidates for scholarships or have chance to be admitted into high-demand

programs. The objective of doing so is to avoid embarrassment and maintain the brand-image of the university (Barn & Mattson, 2009).

Freshmen Transition (Student Affairs and Enrollment Management-Student Support Services)

Universities can facilitate a high-school graduate's transition to college-life by using SM tools. They can create a 'group' on a SNS like Facebook, and incoming freshmen can join the group and interact with others entering the institution. This provides a platform upon which they can learn more about each other and reduce the anxiety associated with the change (Wandel, 2008).

Universities can use SM for new student orientation programs, academic advising, and career planning. For example, Indiana University has a page on Facebook and incoming students can join to exchange information with other incoming freshmen, allowing prospective students to build a sense of community even before arriving on campus (Schoepf, 2010). In 2007, the new-student orientation group at South Dakota State University created a Facebook profile to facilitate interaction among incoming freshmen. Students exchanged information, which allowed them to learn about each other even before they arrived on campus. Incoming students could share experiences, which helped them to deal with the initial feelings of "anxiety" and "apprehension" that are associated with initial phases of college life (Heiberger & Harper, 2008).

Another example is the "Swift Kick's Red Rover" program that deals with connecting new student orientation, student activities, and the college transition process by creating a communication channel between the students and the university using SNSs. Students can choose their interests from lists of options: activism, athletics, community service, culture, and business, among others. The Red Rover program examines students' interest and matches students with college organizations, majors, minors, careers, and others. This program demonstrates the immense potential SM technology has in its ability to engage students throughout the university and provide them with the best possible college-life experience ("E-Expectations Class of 2007 Report", 2007).

Student Retention (Student Affairs and Enrollment Management-Student Support Services)

SM technologies are being used to improve retention and graduation rates (Wandel, 2008). In a study conducted at Abilene Christian University located in Abilene, Texas, survey responses from 375 randomly selected students revealed that students who were active on SNSs are more likely to return to college after their first year. Junco and Loken (2011) conducted a semester-long experimental study to examine the extent to which using Twitter for various types of academic discussions affects student engagement. One-hundred and twenty-five students participated in the study (70 in the experimental group and 55 in the control group). Student engagement was measured using a 19-item scale obtained from national survey of student engagement (NSSE). NSSE is often used by administrators at academic institutions to improve the college experiences of undergraduate students. Analysis of the data collected clearly indicated that the group of students using Twitter was more engaged in learning.

A rationale for the connection between a college student being an active member in a SNS and continuing to pursue in his/her academic program is the student tends to become more embedded with activities going on in his/her college campus. Another reason is that these students are likely to be well "integrated" with life at their institution since they can share similar experiences with their peers.

There are times during college-life when students could find themselves in situations where they need to "cope" with grief or high-stress. In such circumstances, students can easily lose focus, or in extreme cases, even drop out of college. Universities can uplift the morale of students bereaved by a personal loss or tragedy, or under high stress, by creating a page on Facebook dedicated to posts and messages from friends, family, and others who are willing to share their grief and help cope with stress (Wandel, 2008).

Approximately, 95% of college students are Facebook users. If an institution interacts with students at the place where they are most available and provide them with a comfortable environment to get involved, it could strengthen the student "community" spirit and increase student satisfaction concerning college experience. Subsequently this could lead to higher student retention (Klingensmith, 2009).

Engaging Alumni (Student Affairs and Enrollment Management-Student Involvement Services)

Universities are starting to use SM to involve and build a network of graduates with a shared likeness for the institution (Lavrusik, 2009). Princeton and MIT use SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn as a central hub for their alumni to connect. SM is also used to facilitate the transition from being a student to alumni by helping the two groups connect and collaborate. Stanford University's Law School is an example of university using this strategy. The school has its own Facebook-like SNS for its students and alumni to network (Lavrusik, 2009).

Helping Alumni with their Career (Student Affairs and Enrollment Management-Career Development Services)

LinkedIn, a SNS for professionals is a tool that can be used to provide alumni with career resources. DePaul University has 5,500 alumni all networked through LinkedIn. More than 100 new members join this alumni network every week and help each other look for job opportunities (Lavrusik, 2009). Michigan State University uses both LinkedIn and Twitter to share job leads with alumni. The university's career services also use YouTube to offer students and recent graduates advice on their job search (Lavrusik, 2009).

Marketing the Institution (Strategic Planning and Policy Building-Business Management)

Many universities are exploiting SM's omnipresence. They are posting information about the university, the resources and facilities available, information regarding their expertise, information about reputed faculty, and information regarding high-ranked academic programs on SNS to highlight strengths and market their programs.

University of Minnesota has a following of 2900 individuals on Twitter and 1700 YouTube subscribers (Lavrusik, 2009). It leverages this "fan" base to promote its expertise to those interested in pursuing higher education. Georgia Tech has feeds posted on Twitter and a user can track events taking place in many of the University's academic departments, as well as activities related to sports, and updates on general campus news (Schoepf, 2010). Universities post videos on YouTube to deliver virtual campus tours, virtual visit to dorms, recreational facilities, and sample lectures from the faculty (Barn & Mattson, 2009). Stanford University uses SM to display work done by their faculty and students (Lavrusik, 2009). Facebook "office hours" is a concept based on idea of utilizing the capabilities of SM, which the University uses to attract people from across the globe. A note is posted on Facebook with the information relevant to a professor of the university who is hosting virtual office hours. Subsequently, a video is posted in which the faculty member talks about his/her research and its applications in the real world. Next, people who are members of the Facebook office hour's page have a chance to interact online with that professor and ask questions or comment about what they understood from watching the video footage. The faculty member answers questions through a second video, often addressing those commenting by name (Lavrusik, 2009).

Fundraising Activities (Strategic Planning and Policy Building-Business Management)

A few university alumni associations are attempting to send messages in the form of 'tweets' to their alumni asking for a gift to the university. The challenges universities face is to personalize these messages so that they are more acceptable to the intended recipients. Brown University uses Facebook to involve its alumni as part of its annual fund drive. Similarly, Emory University initiated a campaign to motivate its undergraduate students to donate to the school using Facebook and Twitter. The strategy seems to have worked since contributions from undergraduate students increased by 157% (Lavrusik, 2009).

Teaching in the Classroom (Academic Affairs-Colleges)

Faculties are using SM tools and technologies to engage students in classroom, facilitate learning, and improve the student-teacher relationship (Harris, 2008).

A professor at the City University of New York in New York is teaching journalism majors how to use SM for newsgathering. Students in this class are learning ways to use Twitter, FriendFeed, Scoopler,

and SearchMerge to do real-time searches to find breaking news ("13 Enlightening Case Studies of Social Media in the Classroom," 2009). A faculty member at Georgia Southern University teaches a course titled 'Making Connections: Facebook & Beyond.' The major theme of this course is to train students to improve communication and networking skills. The course requires students to use Facebook and Twitter to communicate and network, as well as, create and maintain their own blog. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, a professor has her students use an SM tool called CoveritLive. This tool can be embedded into a blog or Web site to provide distance learning education to students ("13 Enlightening Case Studies of Social Media in the Classroom," 2009). A history professor at the University of Texas, Dallas uses Twitter to allow each individual in her class of 90 students to communicate ideas or talk during the lecture (Roth & McCully, 2010). Facebook's instant messaging feature is being used by some university professors at Columbus State University in Georgia to conduct 'virtual' office hours. Students have expressed their satisfaction to professors who follow this practice (Li & Pitts, 2009). Miami University is using SM in the classroom by allowing journalism majors use tweets and blogs to get information regarding current events or class experiences (Claire, 2010).

Many faculties believe that use of SM in classrooms promotes active collaboration, engagement, and learning among students. SM can be used by an instructor to update students on class assignments, topics, and relevant information. SM can also be utilized in a variety of ways such as, facilitating classroom activities, generating conversations, and providing feedback (Minocha, 2009). SNS provides a platform on which students can share and discuss their ideas and thoughts with their teachers or other students, as well as individuals across the globe. Additionally, SM exposes students to new perspectives and resources they possibly could never have generated on their own. Furthermore, it allows students to learn about things they care about, in a way most relevant to them (Minocha, 2009).

Beyond the Classroom (Academic Affairs-Colleges)

SM can mitigate the 'lonely' experience associated with being in a distance-learning course or academic program. SM technologies allow distance learners to network with others and feel more engaged in learning. Interaction via SM facilitates collaborative learning while at the same time allowing its users the freedom and flexibility of maintaining their own space and schedule. Consequently, the traditional appeal of independence in distance learning can now be combined with the appeal of interaction and engagement in the classroom. According to a report, more than 4.6 million college students (about one in four) were taking at least one online course in 2008, a 17 percent increase over 2007 ("College Degrees Without Going to Class.", 2010). These numbers clearly reflect the popularity of using SM in distance learning.

College students are using SM to virtually connect to university resources resulting in enhanced peer learning. For example, Stanford University uploads faculty and student projects on its Facebook page so that other students can see and learn from them. Duke University and Georgia Tech allow their students to register for classes, check email and access class notes posted by professors using a mobile Web client and SM network. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill offers a number of helpful videos posted on YouTube relating to health and medicine, business and information technology which can be used to supplement classroom learning ("13 Enlightening Case Studies of Social Media in the Classroom," 2009). Journalism students at Northwestern University have created "newsmixer", a tool that pulls news from variety of sources and when integrated with Facebook can be used for real-time sharing of news (Claire, 2010). Students majoring in business communications believe that nowadays, SM technologies play a very vital role in the communication industry. To have the knowledge and expertise on how to effectively use SM tools for information gathering, sharing, and maintaining good public relations, provides a competitive edge to them. SM technologies are also being employed to conduct online academic discussions. City University of New York is using SM tools to facilitate academic discussion across its 23 campuses. This network helps faculty, staff, and students to share information on blogs, discussion forums etc), and participate actively in discussions (Kaya, 2010).

Courses in SM (Academic Affairs-Colleges)

SM has become so relevant that several universities are now offering classes specifically on the topic. DePaul University offers a class called 'Digital Editing from Breaking News to Tweets' which focuses on educating students about Twitter and its applications. There is a Web site called 'breaking Tweets' which is used to maintain posts from global 'hotpots' and students help write news for this site in addition to bookmarking tweets (Kurutz, 2009). Georgetown University offers a course called 'Global Communications in the Age of SM' in which students collaborate on a Wiki to help clients develop SM strategies. Their clients are located in different parts of the world (Garcia, 2009).

Extended Library Services (Academic Affairs-Library Services)

State University of New York at Buffalo's library uses Facebook to reach out to their students, staff, and faculty and to market the services offered by the library. The library page linked to Facebook has information for students, faculty, and staff about library resources, events, services, and workshops. It also has followers that comment and provide feedback on the library services. Librarians use the library page linked to Facebook as an outreach tool (Ganster & Schumacher, 2009). The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's undergraduate library has a feed that enables students to connect to library resources like journal articles, etc. ("The Web 2.0 College Olympics," 2010).

Emergency Alerts and Messages (Finance and Administration-Risk Management)

Capabilities of SM are being used to spread news during emergency by integrating applications such as Twitter and Facebook with a university's email and text alert systems. A case in example is University of Texas at Austin. The university used Twitter to inform students, faculty, and staff during the H1N1 flu epidemic. The University of Minnesota uses Twitter and Facebook to alert students about bomb or other security related threats (Lavrusik, 2009). University of Denver uses Twitter to provide faculty, staff, students, and visitors, traffic updates on a real-time basis. Akron University in Ohio is trying to introduce the idea of using Twitter to inform students about the wait time to gain access to campus lab facilities ("The Web 2.0 College Olympics," 2010).

The part B in the proposed framework (Figure 1) focuses on SM technology application and impact on student college choice model. This model first proposed by Chapman in 1981 is a conceptual framework that identifies the important factors (and their interrelationships) that drive a student's decision of the college s/he is most likely to attend. The model helps to predict a prospective traditional student's (those between the age of 18 and 21) choice of college based on several factors, including, but not limited to, recruiting efforts undertaken by the college.

SM and Student College Choice Model-Moderating Expectations

According to Chapman's (1981) college choice model, general expectation about college life affects a student's college choice. "Freshman myth", a term suggested by Stern (1970) refers to the unrealistic and 'idealized' expectations of the college environment that majority of college freshmen have and which are not a representative of any actual academic institution. Stern explains the reasons. He mentions that college-bound students are 'misinformed' about the extent to which their college is organized to serve their goals and pursuits. Current generation of traditional students' online activities revolve mostly around using SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace etc. In general, they gain or acquire information while interacting with others in SM platforms. SM technologies can serve as efficient tools to develop communication channels with students to moderate their expectations about college life and increase alignment of goals of the academic institution with that of the student's.

SM and College Choice Model-Augmenting Communication Efforts

Chapman's (1981) model suggests that if an institution communicates effectively with a prospective college student, it can greatly influence the student who might be otherwise not considering joining that institution. The justification is that students who anticipate pursuing a college education actively seek out information. Colleges that are able to successfully reach out and provide pertinent information are 'ahead'

in the recruiting 'game'. Traditional communication channels such as printed material in newspapers, magazines etc, can be augmented via SM technologies enabling academic institutions of higher learning to connect with internet 'savvy' generation of college-bound students.

SM and Strategies for Coping with 'Bad' Publicity

Online public complaints are becoming a cause for major concern for organizations that use SM technologies for communication, promotion, and interaction (Tripp & Gregoire, 2011). In the case of an academic institution, a disgruntled, frustrated, or unhappy employee or student could post online comments that might damage or hurt the public image of that institution. Universities need to formulate strategies to cope and respond effectively to such negative online propaganda. Tripp and Gregoire have suggested some methods. Firstly, universities should react 'swiftly' by identifying the source of the complaints and resolve issues with the complainants directly. Secondly, universities should acknowledge if there have been mistakes committed on their part, and post an apology online. Thirdly, institutions should have employees who are dedicated to the task of continually monitoring online postings, so that things do not go 'out-of-hand' or control.

POTENTIAL CONCERNS AND DISADVANTAGES

The benefits of SM technologies are obvious. However, there are several concerns and potential disadvantages of using SM. Concern is often about the quality and accuracy of the voluntary contributions in SM because of the lack in standard of verification. Of course, most blogs, tweets, posts, etc. are subject to some form of peer review. However, a few argue that the review process is not of the highest quality (Minocha, 2009). Similar concerns can carry over into projects, blogs, and papers when students are utilizing SM tools to develop them. With so many students working together and accessing a wide variety of information, how does one verify the source credibility?

Many university professors perceive that using SM tools in the classroom environment may endanger academic integrity. At the same time, they recognize that college students must be trained and properly guided on how to find appropriate and reliable content available on SM platforms to maintain the high standards of quality and correctness of content that they submit as a part of their coursework. SM is a very useful tool for teaching. However, college instructors should emphasize ethical standards of writing and publishing to their students. They should also outline policies and guidelines to discourage plagiarism and inaccurate reporting of factual content.

Another concern includes misuse of SM in classrooms. Some professors are not in favor of using SM tools as they believe these can be potentially distracting, time-consuming or overwhelming in light of all the other information students are given. However, SM is becoming a way of life for a college student. Therefore, instead of excluding the use of SM technologies in the classroom, a better option for professors is to innovate ways to educate their students on when it is appropriate to use SM in the classroom.

Additionally, universities have expressed concern over the loss of control. This is due to the ability of others to leave comments on university Facebook pages or student blogs. Critical comments posted might hurt a university's reputation or credibility. University authorities must realize that constructive feedback posted on SNSs can often be resourceful and bring to light the areas that need improvement. Filtering or restricting honest feedback posted on SNS forums may be viewed by many, including prospective students, as unfair or obstructive. This practice might even damage a university's reputation even more than leaving the content alone.

University officials monitoring the content on their Facebook pages, blogs, YouTube videos etc. must be wary of incorrect or erroneous statements about the university being posted or projected to the public. It is a good idea for universities to perform consistent checks on the Web for content that may have been posted about the university. A further issue universities have to deal with is who should be held responsible if a student, faculty, or staff posts something online (via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc) that results in litigation against the university.

An obvious disadvantage of using SM is the financial barrier that must be overcome for its implementation. First, monetary resources will be required up front for a university to implement the technical infrastructure to support SM applications. The costs of implementation may vary depending on how 'seamlessly' SM tools can be integrated with technologies being currently used by the university. Also, some universities may not have the budget, or they may have to cut costs in other areas to integrate and implement SM technologies. Moreover, institutions must make sure they have the personnel and expertise to support these systems and promote their efficient utilization.

Finally, and most importantly, any cultural "legacies" must be overcome. Many faculty, administrative officials, or staff may prefer the status quo. They might not understand or agree with the reason for making significant changes, such as using SM tools for marketing or e-recruiting. Training and information should be provided specifically to these individuals to enlighten them about the benefits of using SM tools. Operating procedures and ethical code must be developed and distributed before going live.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent years, there is a growing trend in the utilization of SM technologies in university settings. Just like any evolving technology that has tremendous potential, it is very likely that SM technology application is going to become more pervasive. Institutions of higher education will continue to capitalize on the ubiquity of SM. We are likely to see increased enrollment in online classes. Similarly, professors will increase their use of SM to facilitate classroom activities and learning and SM will be used increasingly to deliver important information and relevant content. We are also likely to see the use of SM increased in universities for student recruiting and retention.

However, to make the most out of SM technology use, a university must find out new ways to apply them. For example, universities should devise ways to make use of SM to enhance their stature in countries outside the United States. This will help them to attract international students to their programs.

Research suggests that there is disparity in use of SM for teaching among faculty, based on their academic discipline. Professors from social sciences and humanities use SM more extensively than their counterparts belonging to streams such as engineering and business. Therefore, universities should propagate a 'college-wide' approach and support their entire faculty irrespective of the discipline they belong, to use SM tools for teaching. They should reward instructors who implement effective techniques to use SM in and outside the classroom with the underlying objective of improving student learning and interaction. Institutional research centers should support and fund professors whose research has the potential to inform about the inventive ways to utilize SM technology in academic settings. Serious consideration must be given to funding and endorsing projects that focus on creating ways to integrate SM into the overall university information technology environment.

'Social' learning emphasizes the importance of shared interaction in the learning process. University professors should be encouraged to incorporate use of SM tools to propagate social learning. In addition, instructors should develop pedagogical models centered on the use of SM applications so that students are 'co-producers', rather than passive consumers of content.

Universities might also need to think about establishing a dedicated SM team of professionals to communicate and manage student online communities and to find novel ways to engage students. Further, a university's SM team must develop policies and strategies to manage online communities to lessen negative consequences and engender positive engagement. The primary responsibilities should include monitoring online communities that exist outside and inside the university, engaging those communities when necessary, and serving as first responders in the event of social media crisis (which refers to online public complaints or rumors posted in SM websites about the university).

Mere presence in SM, such as creating an official account on Facebook or Twitter, is adequate, but not enough. Institutions need to view SM as a critical medium for communicating and connecting with the world outside the college-campus boundaries and leverage its popularity and ubiquity to build and establish the university's brand. In addition, institutions of higher learning should use SM tools more

expansively to broadcast messages to their students, faculty, and staff, to provide access to university resources, and for outreach activities. The 'thrust' should be on continuing to use SM technologies to support key operations, such as enrollment and student retention activities, marketing, and public relations.

SM is here to stay and many people predict that the applications of SM technologies are endless. Academic institutions need to keep inventing ways to incorporate SM tool usage in functions that are not currently applying it. This approach will help them to remain relevant and competitive in today's 'virtually' networked environment. Universities that have not started using SM tools must certainly start to do so before it is too late.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In current academic literature, the extensive and wide-range use of SM technologies by universities is well documented. Nonetheless, a very apparent gap that exists is to find methods of measuring effectiveness of SM using cost-benefit analysis models. Empirical research about likes and dislikes of SM and how to overcome the challenges of SM and seamlessly integrate it with all functions of an academic institution needs to be conducted. Also, academic scholars need to develop theories about learning via SM.

SM technologies' impact on student college choice model should to be empirically tested. Research needs to focus on understanding of the effectiveness of the proposed strategies undertaken by academic institutions to cope with negative online comments. Studies should investigate the extent to which SM technologies such as blogs and YouTube can project and propagate positive image about a university. Finally, research on how to produce alignment of goals of potential students from multiple segments such as academic, athletes, and social-life seekers must be pursued.

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