Social Media and Higher Education: Changing the Way We Learn, Recruit and Apply for College

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Introduction
Social Media has transformed our lives in so many different ways so it should be no surprise that higher education is going through an evolution of its own. According to the U.S. Census, there are over 17 million students enrolled in about 2,400 four-year universities. Educators and third party organizations are now leveraging digital tools to tap into this large lucrative market through the application of various tactics.

Facebook
The largest age demographic on Facebook is 18-25 year-olds as illustrated by the graph below.

A large number of this demographic is either a current college student or a prospective college student. Many higher education institutions have now taken to Facebook as that is where their target demographic resides. Universities are slowly adapting to the new age marketing model that suggests that brands, products and services are coming to the consumer instead of vice versa.
Facebook can be a double-edged sword for prospective students. Although students can connect directly with universities on the social media, admissions officials sometimes use Facebook to weed out applicants.

A Kaplan survey of 320 admissions officers from the top 500 schools found that one in ten visited applicants’ social networking profiles during their decision-making process. Of those visiting student pages, 38 percent reported that what they saw generally had a negative impact on their evaluation process. Comparatively, one quarter of these respondents said these background checks improved their opinion of applicants (Schiffman).

Facebook isn’t always a detriment to prospective students. Facebook has given students unprecedented access to direct sources and accurate information during the decision-making process. While weighing his options for college, Yotam Tubul, a 17-year-old high school student from Caldwell, New Jersey, used Facebook to connect with current students from the schools he was considering, which he says he found more informative than official university websites and promotional material (Schiffman).

AdmissionSplash

AdmissionSplash is a Facebook application that just launched on February 8, 2010 by startup Splash Networks. The app shows prospective college students how likely it is that they will be admitted to the college on their lists (Kessler).

When students use the app they are asked to input information such as: address, test scores, grades, volunteer work, sports and other things that affect admissions.

It then uses an algorithm to give users a desirability rating along with the likelihood of getting in, ranging from “very poor” to “very good.” AdmissionSplash currently runs customized equations for 1,500 schools based on respective admissions data (Kessler).

Foursquare

In September of 2010 Foursquare introduced its Foursquare for universities program which is designed for students, alumni and staff to share information about classes, building hours, campus activities, traditions, and other information (Indvik).

Pictured above is an example of a university’s Foursquare page.

For its initial launch, Foursquare partnered up with 20 universities along with student
ambassadors at several others. However, the key to the success of this program lies within the engineering (Indvik).

Foursquare made it easy for users to claim and build a university page via a short questionnaire. Students can even request badges for their school (Indvik).

By the beginning of February 2011, the “Foursquare for Universities” program was available for every college in the world. That means university badges can be unlocked by any relevant check-ins at any university campus (O’Dell).

Since the Foursquare for Universities launch, more than 25,000 badges have been unlocked, and Foursquare said it received more than 1,200 requests from non-partner schools to bring the app to their campuses.

Students are also encouraged to sign up for Foursquare’s ambassador program. Participants can get free Foursquare gear and tools for spreading the word about the startup (O’Dell).

**Twitter**

A recent study, published in the fall of 2010, suggests that Twitter increases student engagement.

The study used a 19-question survey based on The National Survey of Student Engagement to measure student engagement at the beginning and at the end of a seminar course for first year students in pre-health professional programs (Kessler).

Seventy students who were broken up into four sections were given assignments and discussions that incorporated Twitter. Fifty-five students who were broken up into three sections were given the same assignments and given access to the same information but didn’t use Twitter.

In addition to showing more than twice the improvement in engagement than the control group, the students who used Twitter also achieved on average a .5 increase in overall GPA for the semester (Kessler).

**Tufts University**

Tuft’s official online social media strategy is somewhat unique compared to most universities that maintain an official Facebook fan page out their admissions or PR departments.

The university recruited students who were already blogging, or involved in social media independently, to transfer their content to official university forums, without
guidance or censorship. Although Tuft’s open forums do contain criticism of the university, officials believe students will respect and appreciate the honesty, and that it will allow for more informed decisions (Schiffman).

"One of the challenges in the admissions process generally is cutting through the background noise, the kind of propaganda people really get numb to," says Daniel Grayson, Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Tufts. "I think social media gives students agency; it puts them in a position to make informed decisions, and when you do that you can have a lot more pride in your school" (Schiffman).

Tufts University also allows its applicants the option of submitting a one-minute YouTube video instead of writing the traditional application essay (Schiffman).

Rutgers University

Rutgers University has found a compromise between offering students total honesty and preventing negative comments from overshadowing the positive ones. In addition to their official student blog, the school recently created an invitation-only social networking platform called Go-Rutgers to connect current and admitted students.

The site is restricted to remove "the creepiness factor" of open-access communication forums, Lee Ann Dmochowski, GO-Rutgers site coordinator and senior officer of undergraduate admissions, said (Schiffman).

International Recruiting

Another area where social media is making an impact in admissions is with the targeting of international students.

A recent study conducted by Judith Olson, the Bren Professor of Information and Computer Scientists at the University of California, Irvine, found that certain behavior in online social interactions foster a sense of trust and build relationships, like responsiveness. For students who are committing to a college that they have not visited, universities that can develop a positive online relationship with prospective students are likely to recruit more passionate and committed individuals (Schiffman).

Many schools, including Tufts, where Grayson says they study analytics for their blog site to trace page views from foreign countries, prioritize their international students in their social media plans for this reason. The principle of expanding the college-search experience to paint a more
comprehensive, accurate portrait of the student and the school has the potential to drastically improve the decision-making process (Schiffman).

Local Colleges (Western New York)

Local colleges have also joined the social media trend.

Niagara University produced a reality-TV style commercial that was aired on TV and on YouTube in which 30 high school students were brought to campus on a bus. Kids were able to tag themselves in the video and forward it to their friends (Becker).

At Daemen College, prospective students and their parents are offered an array of social networking opportunities during the application process. They’ve incorporated Twitter to answer questions and QR codes to direct students to a specific URL (Becker).

Donna Shaffner, dean of admissions at Canisius College (Becker).

Tim Lee director of admissions for Hilbert College, setup a Hilbert College class of 2014 page on Facebook. Since important deadlines for financial aid applications and other important forms were posted on Facebook a higher percentage of students and parents were filling them out on time or even early (Becker).

Conclusion

Social Media appears to be more than a fad within higher education. Statistics, as the one presented by Shaffner, are already showing that schools that incorporate social media are more successful whether it is for the application process or in the classroom.

The colleges and universities that are quickest to adapt to this new educational environment will be the ones more students seek out. Social media has the ability to increase enrollment, increase student engagement and enhance learning.
Works Cited


