The Need for Student Social Media Policies

Today we live in the time of the social web, an interactive, engaging, and democratizing space where social capital—the resources obtained through interpersonal interactions—is of great importance. Alongside the expansion of the social web came a generation of students who have never known life without the technologies that many of us have come to depend on. Although there are significant within-group exceptions related to socioeconomic status and ethnic background, today's traditional-aged students are more comfortable than any other generation in history with expanding their lives by living in both physical and digital spaces.

The Positive Effects of Social Media

Research has shown that social media can serve important educational purposes. Two studies have found a positive relationship between the use of social networking websites and student engagement in higher education. For instance, frequent users of social networking websites participated more often and spent more time in campus organizations than less frequent users. More of the frequent users interacted face-to-face daily with close friends and felt strong connections to them.[1] Another, controlled study found that using Twitter in educationally relevant ways increased student engagement and improved grades.[2] Social media can also help students in their transitions and adjustment to college. In a fourth study, Facebook use was related to engagement with students' supportive social ties and to subjective measures of psychological well-being.[3]

The Negative Effects of Social Media

On the other hand, there is no doubt that using online technology at high rates and in certain ways is related to poorer academic and psychosocial outcomes.[4] Additionally, there can be insidious effects of online communication. Miscommunications often occur because of the limited context available in digital communication.[5]

Also, since the lack of face-to-face contact involved in using social technologies leads to limited context, it is incredibly easy, and takes very little ego investment, to propagate rumors and harassing content quickly and easily across the Internet. Behind a veil of actual or perceived anonymity, users can effortlessly post and repost photos, threats, or videos, among other subject matter, infinitely and with little to no consequence to the originator.

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Cyberbullying

Media reports have focused attention on the potentially dangerous use of social media by students. The most striking recent example was the case of Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University student who committed suicide after his roommate allegedly live-streamed video of Tyler kissing a man, and then tweeted about it. This incident is an example—an extreme one—of what has been appropriately labeled as "cyberbullying." Cyberbullying is when someone purposely embarrasses, harasses, or torments another using digital media.

As the web has developed into a more social space, online activities have taken on many of the qualities of offline activities and vice versa. We may not hear a lot about cyberbullying on college/university campuses because it typically doesn't reach the extreme level that it did in the Clementi tragedy. However, data indicate that cyberbullying is much more widespread and insidious than we might think. The Pew Internet & American Life Project states that 32 percent of teenagers who use the Internet report having experienced the publication of private content and/or pictures, rumor spreading, and threats online—all of which can be categorized as cyberbullying.[6]

Do We Need Student Social Media Policies?

Given the double-edged potential of online communication technologies, higher education professionals need to familiarize themselves with how such technologies can influence students. With this knowledge, professionals can (1) support usage that leads to positive outcomes, (2) intervene to help students whose technology use has caused or may cause negative outcomes, and (3) intervene to help students who are at the receiving end of negative social media behavior.

Because of the high-profile incidents involving social media, there has been a renewed interest in creating rational and effective student social media policies. Such policies would give the campus community guidance in behaviors that are expected online in the same way that campuses have honor codes to delineate expectations about academic honesty. Yet though industry policies offer some guidance in developing general policies, no best practices exist to help guide higher education institutions in creating policies for students.

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The Policy Development Process

The process used to create the social media policy is as important as the actual content. The following are some suggestions for this process:

- First, the institution should create a social media policy committee that involves the full range of institutional stakeholders (students, staff, student affairs professionals, faculty members, administrators, trustees, and other members of the community). In addition to a diverse set of stakeholders, the committee should include individuals with a wide range of technology skills and also members who are regular users of social media. There should be a broad call for participation in this committee through the typical campus channels (e.g., newspapers, fliers) as well as through social media websites.
- Second, the work of the committee should be transparent and easily accessible by the constituents affected by the policy. For instance, the committee should regularly post minutes to a website, a blog, a Facebook group, and/or Twitter. Ideally, live video and audio could be streamed from these meetings, with a call for real-time participation to those who cannot be in attendance. There should also be plenty of opportunities for input at various stages in the policy's development.
- Third, the committee's process should reflect the fact that social media can be used in ways that are beneficial for student development. The committee will want to focus on creating a policy that provides students with the freedom to explore their online identities, while also making clear the expectations of participation in online communities.
- Finally, the finished product should be readable, accessible, and jargon-free. It should also be as brief as possible, given the mission and the particular complexities that characterize the institution.

The Policy Content

General suggestions for the content to be included in the student social media policy include the following:

1. Lean toward a magnanimous rather than a draconian tone. That is, the students should read the policy and get a sense that the institution is interested in their well-being and is offering information to help them have a better online experience.
2. Include an explanation that other policies (e.g., the student code of conduct, hate speech policies) and laws apply to online social spaces as well.
3. Acknowledge that students use technology to connect, collaborate, and communicate with each other and that online forms of expression are as important to student development as traditional oral and written expression.
4. Recognize the value of open sharing, diversity of opinion, and civil debate.
5. Include an explanation of the limits of privacy in online social spaces.
6. Include a reminder that it is impossible to perceive "tone" in online communications.
7. Clearly state the expected positive behaviors. Examples of possible policy statements about appropriate online behaviors and community expectations might include: "Be respectful, be careful, be responsible, and be accountable."
8. Clearly state the behaviors that are considered negative and potentially dangerous. Also state the sanctions for negative actions—if the committee chooses to impose them.
9. Include guidance for handling an escalation of misunderstandings, with information about resources if things go wrong.
10. Recognize the role of faculty and staff in modeling appropriate online community behavior.

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In summary, although certain uses of social media can propagate negativity, appropriate uses can support student development. Therefore, it is imperative that higher education administrators help shape conversations online in ways that are similar to how they shape conversations in offline campus spaces. ■

Notes

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6. Amanda Lenhart, "Cyberbullying," *Pew Internet & American Life Project Report,* June 27, 2007, ⟨http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Cyberbullying.aspx⟩.

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