

To Twitter or Not to Twitter

BY REYNOL JUNCO

Because of my research on social media, people often assume I am a cheerleader of these technologies. While I clearly see the benefit of using social technologies to connect with colleagues for professional development and for increasing student engagement, it is clear that these services are not for everyone.

As a senior student affairs officer (SSAO), no doubt you have been exposed to multiple pleas to join Twitter. The 2011 NASPA Annual Conference featured sessions designed to explain Twitter and what an SSAO can do with it, Twitter tutorials, and colleagues sporting “Tweet Me” ribbons. If that exposure to Twitter was not enough, a close friend or a colleague may be cajoling you into setting up an account.

All of these circumstances might have you thinking: “Should I be on Twitter? I am a senior leader in the field, after all.” The honest-to-goodness truth is that you might not be ready to engage on Twitter, and that’s okay. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. While you have heard the cheerleaders telling you why you should use Twitter, let me present some reasons why you should not:

1 It is yet another thing you have to do. You are busy with meeting after meeting, an inbox that you can barely control, reports to write, and people to supervise, all of which does not leave much time in your busy schedule. Twitter has a steep learning curve and once you are comfortable with the technical aspects of the platform, it requires ongoing attention.

2 It will make you uncomfortable. Twitter is an environment very different from the world of an SSAO. From the start, the Twitter platform has democratized roles and relationships. For instance, it is not uncommon for a famous author to communicate directly with readers. Twitter blurs the boundaries of hierarchies and allows “the little people” to have as strong a voice as those in leadership positions. Generally, this is not how the workplace operates. The student affairs office has a fine delineation between the entry-level workforce, mid-level managers, senior professionals, and students. Imagine the ramifications of such a technology on campus—students can have both individual and collective voices stronger than your own. Whoa!

3 You will do it wrong. Twitter is a tool better utilized to interact and engage with students, faculty, staff, and other SSAOs, not to broadcast messages. SSAOs who are currently on Twitter are less likely to engage in conversations with their followers than mid- and entry-level professionals. You do not need feedback from your “fans,” and they probably do not want to engage with you in that manner, either. Leave that side of social networking to celebrities.

4 You will be challenged to consider, and in many cases respond to, new perspectives that have very little to do with your substantive work. While that sounds like a good thing in principle, imagine the cognitive dissonance it

will create as well as extra work. I’m sure that when you were in graduate school, Sanford’s notion of challenge and support really resonated with you; however, these days, the challenges you receive are more often related to strategic planning or budget cuts. Engaging with others on Twitter might challenge you in insufferable personal and professional ways. That’s just not fun.

5 Backchannel communications are time killers. A backchannel is a running public dialogue on Twitter aggregated around a specific topic. It is called a backchannel for a reason—it is in the background and not typically noticeable. On top of all of your other responsibilities as an SSAO such as meetings, supervision, strategic planning, and possibly even fundraising, Twitter can open the flood gates for communication with students and other constituents. Most universities have a backchannel, but students rarely share any feedback that a student affairs division could use constructively.

My Twitter followers agree, providing the following comments when I asked them why SSAOs may want to avoid Twitter:

“All of the information sharing from other institutions and colleagues will just complicate things.”

“Why waste your time on Twitter when you can ask the same question in a meeting you attend with 20 people—who needs Twitter?”

“[Y]ou’ll find yourself wanting to consult your network for a better answer than the one you’re getting in person.”

“You may have your way of thinking challenged and be forced to consider new, previously unconsidered perspectives.”

“You won’t like getting instant feedback from students.”

So, my advice is to keep a level head and stay off of Twitter. Your e-mails are waiting.

If, after all the above admonitions, you still want to try Twitter, the following is a good starting point: <http://goo.gl/rJzDh>

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