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Examining current issues in education that highlight the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

Letter

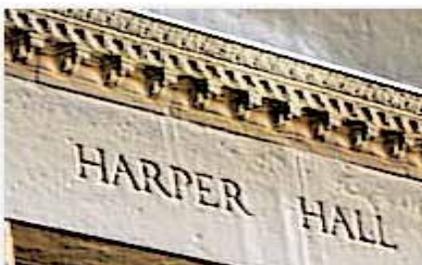
Getting Connected: Harnessing the Power of Social Media to Enhance Community College Student Success

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Today's college students have embraced social media/social networking sites. These technologies are reshaping the way students communicate generally and within their college community. But more than utilizing a new way of communication, college students are using social media to connect, to create and consume content, to use and generate applications, and thus to experience college in both real and virtual or on-line communities (Rios-Aguilar, González Canché, Deil-Amen, & Davis, 2012).

Despite the widespread use of social media among college students, little is known about the benefits of its use in diverse contexts (e.g., community colleges) and for specific purposes (e.g., social, academic, and professional engagement of students).

The most recent Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2009) found that the more students use social networking tools to communicate with other students, instructors, and college staff regarding coursework and other academic purposes, the higher their levels of engagement. There is no reason why postsecondary



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For more than 80 years, the School of Educational Studies (SES) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) has been a leader in providing graduate education. Many of our more than 5,700 alumni have held positions as college presidents, superintendents, principals, award-winning teachers, and tenured professors at colleges and universities around the world.

educators in general, and community colleges in particular, should not begin to explore the potential to intentionally and strategically harness the power of this revolutionary transformation to better serve the needs of students to enhance their success. As we imagine the “community” in community colleges today, the potential of an on-line community in a social media platform is perhaps even more applicable. Community colleges enroll under-represented, commuting, non-residential students whose busy lives are often filled with family and work obligations. They therefore tend to lack participation in the “campus community” of more traditional and elite students (Deil-Amen, 2011). How can social media fill that void, and how can it be deliberately used by community colleges as a tool to engage students with each other, with the college, and with the college’s faculty and staff to create more of a “community” within a community college? Traditional frameworks used in higher education research emphasize processes of integration (Tinto, 1993), involvement (Astin, 1984), and engagement (Kuh, 2001) as central to reinforcing the “glue” that binds students to their college of enrollment thereby enhancing the likelihood of persistence. Most of these theories were developed prior to the emergence of social media as a central player in the lives of students. Therefore, the rise of such platforms and students’ use of them offer opportunities to explore how social media may support such student engagement and involvement.

Simultaneously, the use of social media for business and organizational purposes has exploded in recent years. Institutions of higher education, nevertheless, had a very slow start in social media in comparison to the nonprofit and business sectors. Colleges and universities were afraid of losing control of their online messaging, and while they were not participating, students and alumni were creating communities for their colleges and

universities on Facebook and YouTube (Mansfield, 2010).

Slowly, though, institutions of higher education have recently begun to embrace social media. Currently, presence in social media for colleges and universities is now commonplace. Indeed, colleges around the country are increasingly viewing social media as valuable channels to communicate with students, potential students, alumni, and the community in general.

The most frequently stated benefits of using social media in higher education include: (1) being where your “target” is, (2) increasing cost-effectiveness and time-efficiency, and (3) building relationships (Mansfield, 2010).

While higher education institutions seem to be utilizing social media more and more, there still exist enormous challenges in trying to understand the new dynamics generated by social media in higher education, particularly for the context of community colleges. For instance, very little is known about: (1) how effectively community colleges use social media to accomplish their mission; (2) how community colleges find and allocate resources to develop coherent institutional strategies around social media; (3) how community colleges train staff and faculty to use these tools on the job; (4) the challenges social media pose for the operation of these institutions; (5) the value of social media; and (6) the potential benefits of social media use or specific purposes (e.g., marketing, recruitment, and social and academic engagement of students).

Why is Existing Research Limited?

First, the few empirical studies of social media that exist have examined “traditional” college students rather than community college student populations. Second, very few of the studies used data actually generated from social media sites rather than self-reported data on the use of social media. Third, those studies that have used actual data generated from a social media platform have examined only one dimension of

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students' networks – racial/ethnic ties with peers. This excludes a variety of other components relevant to how college students form and benefit from their social networks. Finally, prior research has failed to engage the content and meaning of students' interactions and exchanges on-line. While some educational institutions are creatively finding ways to use social media to reach out to students and strengthen their ties to the institution, there is a need to know how to skillfully negotiate these technologies to develop learning networks that can help college students succeed.

Our Research Project: Getting Connected

In March 2011, my colleague Dr. Regina Deil-Amen (Associate Professor at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona) and I received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to collaborate with the League for Innovation in the Community College, Inigral, Inc. (the developers of the Schools App) and 9 community colleges across the U.S. to: (1) explore the relevance of social media and its use across a wide spectrum of community colleges across the U.S., and (2) examine if and how commuter-based community colleges attempt to use social media as a mechanism to increase students' connection to college.

As stated earlier, existing research suggests that a student's ability to connect academically and socially to college is a key component of success. However, we do not yet understand whether social media might function as a community college alternative to the more traditional opportunities for student engagement that have been shown to benefit residential students. Existing research suggests that colleges are important venues for the formation of social networks, and the resulting social contacts can have far-reaching impacts. Nevertheless, we do not know how community college students form social networks and how these networks

shape their educational and career pathways. Therefore, our research project is timely, innovative, and promises to close important knowledge gaps. Furthermore, we expect that the findings of our 3-year research study will offer solutions for institutional policy, practice, or interventions that address the unmet needs of our most vulnerable student populations.

Preliminary Findings

As of May 2012, we have accomplished the following objectives. First, we published a literature review on social media in higher education (available at: <http://www.league.org/league/projects/gettingconnected/index.cfm>). In this report we review the existing research on social media, in addition, we provide specific directions for future research on this important

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topic. Second, throughout the Spring 2012, we conducted over 350 interviews and over 20 focus groups with students, faculty, and staff in the 9 participating community colleges.

Third, we are currently conducting social network analyses and qualitative data analyses to examine the patterns of interaction in the School App, as well as the content and meaning of the interactions on-line. Our preliminary findings indicate that approximately 15% of community college students have joined the Schools App in their respective colleges. The data also suggests that community college students are creating new friendships through the Schools App. On average, 18% of “new friendships” among

students are being created through the on-line communities. However, we also found that the on-line networks formed through the Schools App are low-dense networks. This concretely means that not all students are connected to the entire network. With respect to the content of students' exchanges in the on-line community, we found that the most frequent use of the app among students was posting on their wall or in a “community” for the purpose of: (1) soliciting friendships, (2) finding other students with common interests and placed off-campus to pursue these interests, (3) arranging events/activities or arranging to do things with those who share, and (4) connecting with others taking the same classes or classes at the same campus location. Students' posts also frequently included broadcasting positive feelings about the college, their college experiences, and to wish other students happy holidays. Taken together, such posts displayed how these commuter students used the on-line app to access traditional forms of involvement (Astin, 1984) and social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993) with their peers in ways that students in residential institutions have the routine opportunity to do. Our preliminary results suggest that networks of individual affiliation and interaction within the social media space may be sufficient to create the feelings of belonging and connection community college students desire and the procedural, social-capital rich information exchange they seek. However, the content of the interactions further suggest a desire to connect with other college students to actually get together socially to do things with similar others beyond their home and community networks.

Finally, we published a report that examined college leaders' perspectives on the role of social media in community colleges (available at: <http://www.league.org/league/projects/gettingconnected/index.cfm>). Some of the most important findings of the report include the following:

- A relatively low proportion of community college leaders report that they never use social media for personal (8%) or professional (11%) purposes. Surprisingly, among those leaders who use social media daily, a higher proportion of them use it for personal (40%) rather than for professional (24%) purposes.
- As reported by leaders, with some exceptions, 3 social media platforms emerged as the most widely used among community colleges: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.
- Community college leaders think of social media as having a moderate to great value for delivering information to current students.
- Community college leaders think that social media has minimal to moderate value for improving students' outcomes.
- The more frequently college leaders use social media for personal purposes, the more they think it has value for (1) building campus community, (2) student and faculty interactions, and (3) delivering information about college events to current students.
- The more frequently college leaders use social media for professional purposes, the more they think it has value (1) for building campus community, (2) as a vehicle for students giving feedback, and (3) for promoting campus or online student activities.
- The overwhelming majority of college leaders (73%) mentioned that insufficient staff dedicated to support the social media technology is a major impediment to using social media.
- Forty-four percent of leaders think that their division will use social media to a moderate extent in the following 2 years, whereas 30% report they are going to use social media to a minimal extent.

Given the findings of this report, we provide community college leaders with some recommendations as they continue to think of purposeful ways to integrate social media into the fabric of their educational institutions. These recommendations include: (a) have a strategic plan, (b) get buy-in from executive leadership, faculty, and staff about the importance of social media, (c) think about your resources, (d) add value by using social media applications and other social media platforms, (e) maintain privacy and confidentiality, and (f) define your metrics to assess the effectiveness of social media.

The tipping point has passed, and almost every community college leader now knows that the social media revolution is here to stay. Technology has introduced new forms of connecting and networking through social media platforms. We must collaborate to provide community college leaders and practitioners with good research and with examples of effective practices that can inform their social media strategies, successful implementation, and timely and on-going evaluation.

In the next stages of our study, we will combine social network analyses in a more sophisticated way with institutional data to identify the network patterns that seem to produce the desired outcomes. In other words, we will examine whether or not the use of the Schools App and the creation of friendships is related, in some way, to community college students' outcomes (i.e., persistence and success). In addition, we will continue studying the meaning, purpose and function that students ascribe to friendships and on-line interactions. This will allow us to give summative feedback to the participating colleges about how students are using and responding to the implementation of the social media, including changes over the two-year period in student use and response. We will also report on whether or not the social media has been utilized as expected and if it has been effective in the expected ways with regard to the

desired "connection-forming" outcomes and academic attainment outcomes.

A major aim of our research project is to understand, implement, and assess how social media can be used in new and unique ways to encourage efforts to improve persistence and degree completion for a population of students that has historically had lower rates of completion - community college students. Therefore, this project encourages the innovative use of technology to meet the needs of a less traditional population of postsecondary students in particular need for such efforts. Studying the utilization of social media in community colleges provides a unique opportunity to merge varied strands of prior research and theory. By applying multiple lenses, we can perhaps better understand issues relevant to social media and its ability to connect students to others, to information, to institutional sources, and to ultimately impact student retention, and other related outcomes. What we know now is that both institutions and students are relying on these technologies to communicate and to connect with others. Unfortunately, what leaders, educators, researchers, policy-makers and the public in general do not have is adequate documentation of "best practices on social media" that effectively increases community college students' success. Our project: *Getting Connected*, will provide all stakeholders with some concrete guidelines that can, hopefully, contribute to improve community college students' educational and occupational success.



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Dr. Cecilia Rios-Aguilar is an Associate Professor of Education at the School of Educational Studies. She earned a Ph.D. from the University of Rochester, Rochester, New York in 2007. Before joining Claremont Graduate University, Dr. Rios-Aguilar was an Assistant Professor at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona, and a visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Rochester. Also, Dr. Rios-Aguilar worked for the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans as a graduate fellow.

Dr. Rios-Aguilar's research is multidisciplinary and uses a variety of conceptual frameworks—funds of knowledge and the forms of capital—and of statistical approaches—regression analysis, multilevel models, structural equation modeling, GIS, and social network analysis—to study the educational and occupational trajectories of under-represented minorities, including Latina/os, English learners, and immigrant and second-generation students. Dr. Rios-Aguilar's applied research also includes the design and evaluation of different programs and policies targeted to under-represented students. Dr. Rios-Aguilar has published her work in several journals, including Teachers College Record, Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, Volume, Language Policy, Community College Review, and the Journal of Latinos and Education.

In 2010, Dr. Rios-Aguilar collaborated with the UCLA Civil Rights Project on the Arizona Educational Equity Project. Most recently, Dr. Rios-Aguilar and her colleague Dr. Regina Deil-Amen, received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to conduct the first study to assess how community colleges adopt and use social media technology for strategic purposes. The three-year national project will explore the relevance of social media technology to engage students, build connections, and improve outcomes within community colleges.

She teaches a range of substantive courses in education including the following seminars: Funds of Knowledge and the Forms of Capital, Social Network Analysis, Quantitative Research Methods, and Survey Research Methods.



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A SNAPSHOT OF SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

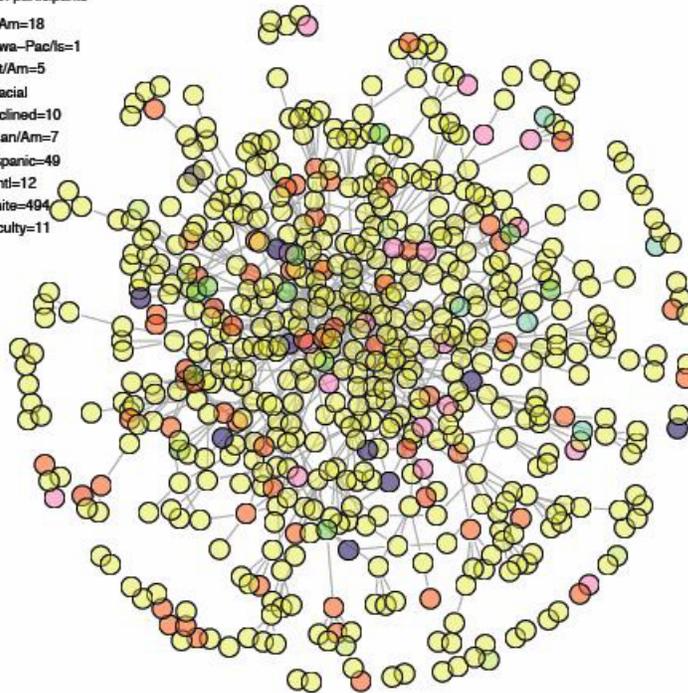
Social network analysis is the study of the patterns within a social structure. Wellman (1983) argues that social network analysis goes beyond a simple visualization of relationships: “Network analysts search for deep structures - regular network patterns beneath the often complex surface of social systems. They try to describe these patterns and use their descriptions to learn how network structures constrain social behavior and social change” (p. 157).

Patterns of friendship ties among community college students in an on-line community

MPCC On-line Community (by race/ethnicity)

Race of participants

At/Am=18
Hawa-Pac/Is=1
Nat/Am=5
Biracial
Declined=10
Asian/Am=7
Hispanic=49
Intnl=12
White=494
Faculty=11



Vertices = 607, Edges = 838, Density = 0.0045

The closer to the center, the more important the users are in the network

References for social network theory and analysis

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