

Achieving College Access Goals: The Relevance of New Media in Reaching First-Generation and Low-Income Teens

With so much interest around the use of new media, many people concerned with improving college access are striving to master this emerging set of resources in order to better reach students who, without encouragement, are unlikely to pursue higher education. But, how much do we understand about the way low-income, first-generation, and other underserved students use new media? Do organizations perform audience research, create a strategy and include an evaluation plan as part of their new media efforts? This brief explores the meaning of new media and what research tells us about how underserved students use it. It also summarizes the results of a recent survey of low-income, first-generation students' media use. In addition, the brief discusses the implications of these results and other national research for using new media communications strategies to focus students on actions they need to take to prepare and plan for college.

Defining New Media

What is 'new media'?

There are multiple definitions for new media. *PC Magazine* describes it as “the concept that new methods of communicating in the digital world allow smaller groups of people to congregate online and share, sell and swap goods and information. It also allows more people to have a voice in their community and in the world in general.”¹ As new forms of media continue to develop, the ‘newness’ in this definition encompasses the collaborative ways in which we communicate, not just the format or platform. This definition is in contrast to ‘old media,’ which refers to everything from analog (non-digital) television and radio, print, outdoor advertising, and information generated or accessed without a computer. Such older forms of communication do not allow for consumer input or two-way discussion. They are produced for consumption by the target audience and do not anticipate the audience or others providing changes, converging views, and additions to the final content.

What about 'social media'?

Included in new media is social media: a form of digital communication that allows users to be actively involved in online communities around a particular forum or topic. Examples of social media are online social networks (MySpace, Facebook), blogs and forums (CNN Blogs, Blogger), instant messaging (AIM, Skype), social bookmarking (Del.icio.us, Digg) and others. For further definitions of these media, see the *New Media and Technology Definitions* section at the end of this brief.

Social media outlets also include basic email and list serve functions. Most high school students have an active email address, and some have multiple addresses through a variety of services.

Although some students view email as archaic, social media remains an easily accessed medium by both organizations wanting to reach students and students alike, and it is a useful communication option for outreach programs and campaigns.

Social media work, in part, because people choose to participate. They are not forced to communicate or add their personal opinions, comments or expertise. Because of this freedom to act and react, social media are powerful communication tools and work best when used in an open, non-structured way. When using such media in college access efforts, one must remember to determine audience wants and needs, and the viability of using such tools for a desired outcome to determine the value of this open form of communication in your strategy.

What about mobile technology?

Technology advances have greatly increased the amount of access people enjoy via mobile and smart phones (a phone with advanced pc-like functions, such as a BlackBerry™). Students are able to access web sites, social media such as My Space, email, and other functions via their cell phones anywhere they happen to have reception. These circumstances make it possible to communicate in real time, allowing for updates, reminders, and other supportive contact with students.

Having a clear understanding of new media and how to use such resources will make it easier for you to convince others that they are valuable options for reaching your target audience. Because of their ‘newness,’ it also is important to educate decision-makers about such media options before pitching their use.

What does research say about whether underserved students use new media, and if so, how?

Researchers have completed various studies on the media-use habits of low-income and traditionally underserved students that show the value of using social media with such groups. In *Expectations Class of 2007, African American Students and the Web*, Noel-Levitz found that 85 percent of surveyed college-bound African-American high school seniors had access to a broadband connection, similar to 86 percent of Whites. They also went online at home at rates comparable to Whites (78 percent compared to 81 percent of whites).² A similar study by Noel-Levitz found that 77 percent of Hispanic college bound seniors had broadband access.³ These findings suggest that the “digital divide” may not be as wide among under-represented students as originally thought.

While broadband access at home is important, students also access the internet from other locations. Rainie and Hitlin of the Pew Internet Project found that while 87 percent of teens using the internet go online at home, 75 percent also access it from someone else’s house, 61 percent from a library, and 11 percent from a community center.⁴ EduGuide’s *Digital Disclosures*, presented data showing that of the teens surveyed, 70 percent of Latino, 68 percent White, and 62 percent of Black teens with only a high school diploma use the internet.⁵ This study also found that 60 percent of first-generation-to-college teens had cell phones, with 40 percent of them sending text messages. These findings further underscore the value of new media in reaching underserved youth.

Some research suggests that Hispanic and African–American teens are more open to text messaging. In Noel–Levitz’s *Expectations Class of 2007, Hispanic Students and the Web*, 61 percent of Latino students surveyed were open to text messages compared to 46 percent of Whites (see Footnote 3). In the African–American version of this study, 59 percent were open to receiving text messages compared to 43 percent of Whites (see Footnote 2). These findings indicate that underserved and first generation teens would be served well by updates and reminders via cell phone regarding college access activities.

Research shows that Hispanics are early adopters of mobile technologies, with 77 percent using text messaging compared to 74 percent of Whites. They also use instant messaging, streaming audio, streaming video, internet music downloads, social networking sites and video downloading sites at rates higher than non–Hispanics.⁶

Studies by Noel–Levitz and Venegas found that that they would like to engage in the following interactive activities online:

- Complete a college financial aid estimator (87 percent)
- Use a tuition cost calculator (84 percent)
- Complete a portion of their financial aid package online (80 percent)
- Communicate with a school via instant message or text (60 percent; see Footnotes 3 and 7)

This information is insightful for those trying to extend valuable information to this audience and hints at either a lack of these offerings or the need for expanded publicity of their existence.

Is it necessary to conduct local audience research?

Yes, if you possibly can. People’s needs, attitudes, and beliefs change depending on geographic location, age, ethnicity, sex, and level of education. It is essential to understand different segments of your target audience in order to determine what social media to use and how best to use them. Conducting a media use survey with your target audience can also help build the case for using new media to effectively reach the people with whom you are most concerned.

TERI Survey of New Media Use by Low-income and First-generation Students

Recently, TERI, a non–profit organization in Boston, conducted a survey of 640 students participating in the TRIO and GEAR UP middle and high school programs it operates. Students responded to multiple choice and short answer questions regarding their current internet and new media use. They also answered questions inquiring about their interest in receiving communications via new media from their program advisor or other students in the program.

Generally, 69 percent of the students responding accessed the internet daily, with roughly 75 percent staying online for at least 30 minutes. Eighty–six percent used the internet from a home computer, and 45 percent from school. In addition, 32 percent reported using their cell phone to access the internet, indicating that cost is not a barrier for a significant number of students. Students surveyed rarely visited public libraries to access the internet, suggesting that

libraries either provide insufficient access (few computers, long waits) or do not do a good job of publicizing the availability of internet access to teens. The survey also found that cell phone ownership, and therefore mobile technology use, increases with age among teens, with minimal ownership among 7th and 8th graders, and the majority of 11th and 12th graders owning cell phones.

What activities do students use their cell phones for?

Eighty-eight percent of the students who owned cell phones use them for text messaging, and 53 percent use them for instant messaging via an internet connection. Thirty-four percent browse the internet from their cell phones, while 27 percent access MySpace or Facebook. These findings show that mobile phone technologies provide excellent opportunities for college advisors, outreach programs, and other adults to have instant two-way connection with the students they are assisting with college preparation and plans.

Are students accessing the internet at a high enough connection speed to make it easy for them to work on-line?

To gauge this issue, the survey asked students to report which internet programs they used on a regular basis. The top three answers were MySpace, YouTube, and AIM (AOL Instant Messenger). Only 10 percent reported using Facebook. Because each of these programs requires a decent high speed connection, we can assume that students are accessing the internet on a computer with ample connection speed for most applications. Also, if students cannot access these programs at home, they are finding another place to do so, since most respondents reported they had at least two places for using the internet.

Regarding what activities students did most online, the majority responded they watched videos or listened to music. Fewer reported reading (34 percent) or contributing to a blog (23 percent). When asked what services they used to search for videos, most identified YouTube (97 percent) or a Google search (57 percent). This is important information for those outreach campaigns creating viral videos – placement on YouTube and taking time to ensure that your videos are searchable will help boost search rankings. Google AdWords grants that offer free online advertising are another option available for charitable organizations (www.google.com/grants/information.html) as is YouTube's non-profit application (www.youtube.com/nonprofits).

Do students use the internet to prepare or plan for college?

A high proportion –63 percent– of the students surveyed indicated they use the internet to prepare for college. When provided with a list of college preparatory activities they could complete online, 86 percent said they check out colleges, 62 percent said they research specific careers or programs, and 60 percent said they search for scholarships. Nearly half of the students surveyed use the internet to learn about financial aid (49 percent), determine what classes to take in high school (29 percent), or study for the SAT/ACT tests (28 percent). The under-utilization of the internet for important college planning activities such as these suggests an important area for outreach programs and campaigns to address.

Would students be willing to connect with a college advisor via new or social media?

Students who reported having an email address or cell phone number, or using MySpace or Facebook, were asked if they would be willing for their outreach program advisor or mentor to contact them through these channels regarding upcoming application deadlines, opportunities to visit campuses, and other college planning information. Eighty-six percent of the students with email accounts said they were willing to receive email communication from their advisor or mentor. Seventy-six percent of MySpace/Facebook users said they would like program advisors or mentors to contact them in this way, while 82 percent of the students owning a cell phone said they would be willing to incur the cost of text messages from their college advisor or mentor.

What about podcasts?

Of the students responding to the survey, 85 percent said they do not listen to podcasts. Of those who do listen, 85 percent said they would listen to a podcast on college access issues. This finding suggests much more needs to be understood about the use of audio on websites for underserved teens. With the majority not listening to podcasts, it appears not be a viable tool for reaching this target population; it may also be that the students surveyed do not understand that a podcast is actually just audio accessed through a website.

Using New Media in College Access: Implications of National Research and TERI Survey Findings

These findings indicate opportunities for organizations interested in reaching out to underserved youth with messages about planning and preparing for college.

Access and Outreach Programs

Programs such as GEAR UP or TRIO could harness the power of new and social media in a multitude of ways without fear of the digital divide. By performing simple audience research, programs can determine the best channels to connect to students, such as online social networks, email, or even radio outreach. Surveying students to understand their likes and dislikes helps greatly in creating an effective outreach or media campaign. The more specific the information programs have, the better equipped they are to capture the attention and meet the needs of their students.

For example, although the information provided in the TERI survey was anonymous, students reported which school they attended, their grade, and which program they participated in (GEAR UP, Upward Bound, or Talent Search). Program staff then broke down the data in various ways, making it possible for them to develop different strategies to meet the needs of specific participant groups (middle school vs. high school, etc.)

Using the data collected through the TERI survey has allowed GEAR UP and TRIO programs in the Boston and Brockton, Massachusetts areas to make informed decisions about integrating new media into their program activities, including the recruitment of new participants and retention efforts. By using these channels, staff can provide timely information and reminders to students. They can also use these media to continually support students as they make transitions between middle and high school or between high school and college. In addition,

they can encourage students to use these channels to form study groups and support each other in many different ways. Lastly, new media can be used to evaluate the program by allowing easier follow up with students when their families move and mail and phone numbers change or when they go on to college.

Colleges and Universities

Because teens today, regardless of their background or economic circumstance, are using new media and technology at an accelerating pace, such resources have great potential to help students make successful transitions as they move from high school to college. An example is Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Admissions Web Portal and Community (www.mitadmissions.org). This interactive site allows prospective students to communicate directly with MIT students, faculty, and staff. For those students who cannot visit the campus in person, this site becomes even more important. Students can ask questions and engage with MIT peers who share their interests and provide them an in-depth understanding of many aspects of campus life –academic programs, the social environment, and other common concerns. Such interaction generates a feeling of community and provides an opportunity for students to become connected with the institution long before they arrive. It also allows students to interact with people they typically would not have met in person during a campus visit (deans, financial aid staff, alumni, etc.). Another example of this inexpensive use of the web is virtual college tours, such as CollegeWeek Live (www.collegeweeklive.com/index.php), which allows students from across the world to experience a college fair from a wide variety of institutions, as well as real time interaction with professionals and students.

State Based Organizations and Campaigns

Broad outreach campaigns can benefit from the interactivity that social media provides. These campaigns can implement new media applications in a variety of ways, one of which is online social networks such as MySpace or Facebook. The Delaware Department of Education's *Yes You Can* campaign utilizes a MySpace profile (www.myspace.com/delawareyyc). This allows the program to communicate with students and provide them with timely information on college going. It is also the main source of traffic for their web site (www.yesyoucande.com/main.html). Information on free financial assistance, as well as facts about Delaware students, high school completion, and college going are provided to students to help influence their attitudes and beliefs about going to college. MySpace allows a fun, friendly, low-cost and recognizable way for the message of college access to be heard. Another example of this is Massachusetts' College Goal Sunday program (www.myspace.com/masscollegegoalsunday), which helps students understand where to go for information and assistance on filling out a FAFSA form.

Internal Uses of New Media

New media are important tools for interactive communication and sharing of information within organizations and programs. Using new media effectively helps staff share information more easily, stay up-to-date on issues, and build and maintain organizational knowledge. Online social networking sites can keep staff informed and connected, no matter where they are located. Because these services take place over the internet, access –especially mobile access– can be made available easily and inexpensively to a broad range of employees. Blogs can be a way of communicating openly and allow for immediate comments and responses from all.

Wiki's can be a strong tool in harnessing the power of organizational knowledge. In many organizations, questions that arise are answered yet never shared with other colleagues who would be interested. By using a Wiki, staff can update content and create an online database of knowledge that others can readily access and use.

New media are powerful tools for communicating with underserved teens. They also provide easy ways for staff to stay informed at the organizational level. Used thoughtfully, they offer inexpensive ways to target messages to your audiences in a medium that they are comfortable communicating in. By integrating new media into your existing communication strategy you will effectively engage your audience and leverage the visibility of your messaging.

New Media and Technology Definitions

Online Social Networks (OSN)

On-line social networks (OSN) allow users to create a web-based profile of themselves, including identifiers such as age, race, location, likes, dislikes etc. A profile is basically a web page for each individual person. This profile can be hidden from others (private) or open for all to see. Once a profile is created, users may search for and add friends to their profile. These can also be viewed by others and networks created among friends or complete strangers.

Users create a community around topics or common friendships (college or high school alumni, location, pets, etc.). Most programs allow users to create a blog, send emails or messages to friends and add music or video to their profile. Groups can also officially form by creating a group page within the OSN and inviting people with profiles to join. Conversations can be posted for all to see, as well as dates for special events, pictures, video, and other content.

www.facebook.com

www.myspace.com

www.bebo.com

www.linkedin.com

Instant Messaging (IM)

Instant Messaging or 'IM' is a service that allows users to send messages to other users in real time. Similar to a 'chat' function, IM connects people through text, much like email, but with the ability to respond instantly as if talking on the phone. Most IM programs are enabled for mobile phone use as well.

www.aim.com

www.messenger.yahoo.com

www.webmessenger.msn.com

www.meebo.com

www.twitter.com

www.skype.com

Meebo provides a function that lets users with multiple IM services access their accounts from any computer. Users no longer need to download the software to a new computer.

Twitter allows users to follow friends throughout their day through short updates accessible via mobile phones or the web. Many professionals use this to promote their recent blog postings or to update people on conferences they are attending.

Skype is a broader service that in addition to the instant message function allows users to make free phone calls via the web, including video calls.

Blogs

Blogs are online posts, often mimicking a journaling effect or news release. The user sets up an account with a blog service (many are free, but some are pay services) which works much like an independent website within the larger web service.

Blogs can be on any topic; users post content and have others react to this content, forming a discussion around a 'blogger's' thoughts. Popular blog sites can be searched for specific topics or strings of conversations, and an RSS reader (RSS = Real Simple Syndication) can send updates as they are posted to a reader's account. This makes it easy to read up-to-the minute news and posts from popular bloggers.

The blogging community helps raise awareness of less popular issues or those not covered in the media. Bloggers also help spread news by word of mouth (WOM) and increase visibility of anything from special events to a new book release.

Blogs can also be audio based (often referred to as 'Podcasts') or video based (sometimes called 'Vlogs'). Many news outlets (CNN, NYT, Reuters, etc.) now have blogs based on topics normally covered in the print versions of their publications.

www.blogger.com

www.wordpress.com

www.typepad.com

www.nytimes.com/ref/topnews/blog-index.html

blogs.reuters.com/us

www.cnn.com/exchange/blogs

www.utterz.com/

Mobile Text Messaging (TXT, SMS)/Mobile Internet

Text messaging (TXT) allows real-time interaction anywhere a user receives cell phone reception. Communication applications for programs include sending updates on deadlines for financial aid, college applications or other program deadlines. Many people also access their email, OSN, IM and other internet functions via their mobile phone, making interaction quicker and instantaneous.

Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking or 'tagging' allows users to tag items and save them to their own online library. Most articles and blogs have icons that represent the most popularly used social bookmarking services. Users who have an account may click on their respective service's icon, and the content will be bookmarked and saved to an account that maybe accessed by the user or others as allowed by the person holding the account. Articles can be further categorized by the user – or the greater community – by 'tags' created by the user. (For instance, an article on the Superbowl may be saved and further categorized by football, sports, Superbowl. This makes it easier for the broader community to find resources on particular topics.)

www.del.ici.ous.com

www.technorati.com

www.digg.com

www.google.com/reader

-
1. *PC Magazine.com, Encyclopedia, 2008*
 2. *NRCCUA, Noel-Levitz, Expectations of 2007, African American Students and the Web*
 3. *NRCCUA, Noel-Levitz, Expectations of 2007, Hispanic Students and the Web*
 4. *Raine and Hitlin, Pew Internet Project, Teens, Technology, and School, 2005*
 5. *EduGuide, Digital Disclosures, 2007, Bryan Taylor*
 6. *Forrester's NACTAS, 2006 Benchmark Survey, 2007 Hispanic Fact Pack, Advertising Age*
 7. *Venegas, Low-Income Urban High School Students Use of the Internet to Access Financial Aid, 2006, NASFAA Journal*

This brief was prepared by Jessica Krywosa, Project Manager, Pathways to College Network, TERI.

CollegeAccessMarketing.org (CAM) was created to provide advice, support, and resources to college access marketing practitioners. The site is continuously updated, and maintained by partner organizations Pathways to College Network and the Southern Regional Education Board's *Go Alliance*.



**Pathways
to College
Network**

DIRECTED BY TERI

Pathways to College Network is an alliance of prominent national organizations committed to advancing college access and success for underserved students, including those who are the first generation in their families to go to college, low-income students, underrepresented minorities, and students with disabilities.

Pathways is directed by TERI and its pathwaystocollege.net web site provides evidence-based resources to support the work of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

For more information about Pathways, please contact 617-535-6829.

Media inquires may contact 617-556-0565.

© 2008 The Education Resources Institute, Inc.