INIGRAL INSIGHTS
The Social Side of Student Retention

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Student retention is a leading issue in post-secondary education today. With nearly half of students failing to graduate, administrators, educators and vendors are taking a closer look at the complex student success equation. Research across academic disciplines highlights the role of social integration as a big piece of the retention puzzle, especially during the critical first year. However, traditional integration programs like learning communities and freshman seminars have met with limited success.

The current social media explosion represents a powerful new opportunity for retention efforts. Nearly all colleges are already using social media tools – with Facebook currently in the lead (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Council for Advancement and Support of Education [CASE], 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2011a).

New research and social media programs are contributing to emerging best practices that will help administrators leverage these tools for better student engagement and community building initiatives. Read on for a deeper look into the research, an overview of social media use across colleges, and best practices to boost your college’s social media profile.
Research Shows: Social Integration is Key

Education researcher Alexander Astin (1993) boldly states that fellow students are “the single most potent source of influence” in the college student experience, and his claim is backed by substantial academic research (What we learned section, para. 14). Numerous studies have found student-peer culture to be a key predictor in a range of education outcomes including persistence rates, commitment to the institution, and departure decision (e.g., Nora, 1987; Spady, 1971; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1997; Tinto, 1993).

The most notable work on student retention is Tinto’s Student Integration Model (1975, 1987, 1993), which was the first to highlight the role of academic and social environments in student retention rates. It presents social integration, such as the connections made between students during their critical first year, as the central piece of the retention puzzle.

Support for the role of social integration in student retention comes from across education research (e.g., Astin, 1975; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) as well as from psychological, sociological, and economics perspectives (e.g., Bean & Eaton, 2002; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Tinto, 2007).

While methods and perspectives vary, they all agree on one thing: social engagement is an essential component of retention, especially during the first year.

From Retention Theory to Practice

How can institutions help students stay and succeed? There is agreement that social integration is a key element of retention but it is unclear how to foster it across diverse educational institutions. Essentially, the task for effective schools is to help create supportive communities for their students. Often, the work of student engagement, community programs, and retention initiatives is carried out by student affairs departments. Traditional social retention practices have focused on campus activities including the following:

- Freshmen orientation
- Freshmen seminar
- Learning communities
- Mentoring programs
- Student organizations

However, despite various retention programs and volumes of research, little change has been seen in retention rates over the past decade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Tinto, 2007). The average degree-completion rate for private universities is 57%, and just over half of schools have specific goals about raising this rate (with an average target of 80% completion) (ACT, 2010). This leaves colleges in search of more effective means of engaging students and raising retention rates.
New Wave of Student Engagement through Social Media

The rise of Internet technology and social networking sites like Facebook has led to a new wave of student social engagement and retention efforts focused on social media. Students spend a significant amount of time on social media sites and colleges have recognized the enormous potential of connecting with their students through various social media channels for admissions, community building, and leading edge retention efforts. Overall, colleges report high satisfaction with social media tools across the board (e.g., Barnes & Lescault, 2011; CASE, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2011a), though their effectiveness is still in question (Noel-Levitz, 2011b). With such widespread usage, new methods and measures are emerging to help administrators effectively use social media tools.

Reach Students Where They Are: Online

In a report by the Higher Education Research Institute (2007) nearly all students reported using social networking sites, and 80% reported spending one hour or more on social media every week. To give perspective, this is roughly the same amount of time students spend partying, and more time than they spend watching TV, participating in student groups, and playing video games. Students who spend more time on social networks also reported being more satisfied with their social life: 33% of students using social networks for six or more hours a week reported being very satisfied with their social life vs. 20% of students using social networks for less than one hour a week. Notably, the amount of time spent on social networks had little connection to time spent on academic work.

With such high social media use amongst students, most colleges are now using it to connect with, recruit, and build a sense of community for current and prospective students. The use of social media by college officials has also risen dramatically in the last 4 years, and by 2011 100% of colleges in a recent survey reported using some form of social media (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). The most frequently used social media tools include Facebook (98%), Twitter (84%), and blogging sites (66%) (see graph below for more).
Facebook Leads in Social Media

Despite mixed approaches and policies on social media, Facebook is by far the most widely used social network by students and colleges, and it is overwhelmingly chosen as the most effective tool for college social media programs (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; CASE, 2011; Noel-Levitz, 2011a).

Facebook provides colleges with a simple way to engage students with informal conversations, build community, and easily view prospective students’ public activities and interests for recruitment and admissions efforts. In a recent survey, 95% of colleges reported high satisfaction with the popular network (Barnes & Lescault, 2011).

Social networks like Facebook are also valued from a student perspective; 74% of students expect colleges to have social media sites, and 1/3 of prospective students reported searching for colleges on various social media sites (Noel-Levitz, 2011a). The student demand doesn’t stop there: 76% of prospective students said they would join a private social network for their college. Take advantage of this large student demand for social networking opportunities and help foster student engagement at your college through social media.

Student Engagement and Social Media Tips

Social media represents a significant opportunity for colleges to engage current and prospective students and create a broader sense of community online and off. Sites like Facebook allow students a comfortable and familiar environment to navigate challenges like choosing a college, major, and new friends. The Schools App made by Inigral helps bridge the gap between high school and college by allowing students to engage in a private community with other prospective students.

Most colleges also recognize social media’s large potential to impact retention rates, leading many to seek outside resources and vendors to maximize their online reach and effectiveness (CASE, 2011). With nearly all colleges on Facebook and other social networking sites, emerging best practices and measurement tools to maximize student engagement will continue to boost social media initiatives and help lead to student retention success.
Tips for Social Media Success

• Create social media goals, but don’t be afraid to try new initiatives and experiment.

• Spend less time planning and more time doing. Change happens fast online.

• Choose or recruit a member of your team who “gets” social media, then let them go.

• Don’t be overwhelmed by all of the social networking sites and tools. Stick to where the majority of students are (on Facebook).

• Provide prospective, incoming, and current students with a private community for them to express their interests, ask questions, and engage with one another.

• Be there to monitor conversations and ask questions, but let students talk to each other with minimum interference.

• Empower student ambassadors to drive comments and interaction.

• Create discussion threads around common topics like tuition, housing, and orientation.

• Use social media and online tools to facilitate offline in-person connections. For example:
  » Events
  » Meetups
  » Orientation
  » Campus scavenger hunts

• Measure friends, likes, posts, and overall volume of participation.

• Track growth over time and in response to new initiatives.

• Test your initiatives with focus groups of students. Design with them in mind.

• Remember that free social media sites that need content are NOT free, you must feed them content for them to be successful. They are free as in puppy, not free as in lunch.

• Explore solutions from outside vendors; don’t be afraid to spend money if you truly want to create social media results.
REFERENCES


Barnes, N.G., & Lescault, A.L. (2011). *Social media adoption soars as higher-ed experiments and reevaluates its use of new communication tools.* Center for Marketing Research. University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, North Dartmouth, MA.


