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Summer Bridge Program 2.0: Leveraging Social Media to Foster Campus Capital

by Derek L. Hottell, Ana M. Martinez-Aleman and Heather T. Rowan-Kenyon

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Abstract:

How can higher education facilitate matriculation for a larger population of lower-income students while keeping the price of college relatively stable? An action research study offers intriguing possibilities for how faculty and administrators can leverage social media to foster campus capital among first-generation college students and encourage college-staying behavior.

In his 2014 State of the Union Address, President Obama identified the need to make “concrete commitments to reduce inequality in access to higher education” by helping “every hardworking kid go to college and succeed when they get to campus” (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2014). Political rhetoric encouraging the use of college education to facilitate social mobility is not new. However, given existing financial-aid and college-funding policies, the current conversation has shifted to how higher education can facilitate matriculation for a larger population of lower-income students while simultaneously keeping the price of college relatively stable.

If institutions are to meet the wide-ranging needs of students, they will have to think twice about raising tuition faster than the rate of inflation, as has been their practice. Programs and activities that improve the persistence of traditionally underserved and low-income students will need to be scalable and cost effective to avoid creating financial barriers that prevent the participation of the very students institutions are attempting to serve.

So how can colleges and universities meet the academic and social engagement needs of traditionally underserved student populations while still holding the bottom line? Social media, whose use among college students is ubiquitous, has the potential to increase the impact of practices and programs that are positively related to student persistence without increasing costs.

The Power of Social Media

College students spend a significant amount of time using various social-media platforms to both produce and consume information. While they all continue to grow exponentially, Facebook
continues to be the dominant social-networking platform among traditional-age college students in the US. Fortunately, recent studies indicate that the use of Facebook correlates positively with traditional measures of college student engagement.

Providing Access to College Capital

We know that social-networking sites, especially Facebook, offer all students the means to accumulate social capital through connection strategies. But developing social and academic connections through Facebook is particularly important for first-generation college students (FGCS), who may find participating in traditional engagement activities and behaviors difficult.

Normative engagement constructs such as interaction with faculty, participation in living-learning communities, study abroad, collaborative learning, and participation in co-curricular activities are all examples of means by which students develop a sense of belonging to the campus community. For many FGCS, though, engagement in traditional academic and social experiences is problematic because they may need to work long hours and/or to spend time compensating for academic under-preparation. This leaves little time for activities that help create the cultural and social capital that facilitates engagement and persistence to graduation and that affects individuals' life not just on campus but beyond college.

Improved access to this campus capital may foster a sense of belonging among FGCS that can support college-staying behavior. Colleges provide access to relational networks and create the other conditions that enable that access. As Briggs notes, educational institutions are uniquely positioned to provide "lower-status out groups" with the opportunities to acquire “information, vouching (recommendations and other social endorsements), preparation, mentoring.” By providing opportunities for students to connect to others on campus, colleges can “reduce inequality directly” (Briggs, 2007, p. 266).

In an effort to better understand how social media can be leveraged to improve FGCS’s accumulation of campus capital, we conducted an action research study with a Summer Bridge Program (SBP) at a private, urban, highly selective predominantly white institution (PWI). The institution offers conditional admission to low-income individuals who are FGCS and who often have a traditionally marginalized racial or ethnic identity. Then, like many colleges, it offers a summer program to help these admits integrate socially and academically into the campus community. Across a two-year period, the research team collected qualitative and quantitative data from students in the SBP about their social-media and mobile-technology usage.
It is expensive to provide an adequately comprehensive and immersive transition experience for students, so the number who are able to benefit from participation in the program is often quite small due to cost constraints. By leveraging social media, it is possible to scale the program, broaden its impact, and increase the depth of connections made by the students within and outside of the program.

**Academic Engagement and Social Media**

The FGCS who shared their experiences with us use different social-media platforms for different functions. Generally, the closer students perceive their relationship to be with the person with whom they want to interact, the more informal the platform they will choose.

Email is reserved for the most professional and formal correspondences. But in situations where a response is not explicitly required (and sometimes when it is), students often do not respond: Emails get lost in the shuffle due to their sheer quantity and because some students only sporadically check their inboxes. “Marta” (all student and faculty names used here are pseudonyms), one of the FGCS we interviewed, described the danger of relying on email: “You have to check your email every day...because...like, they’re flying in. If you don’t check, it’s, like, you’re going to miss something important, or you forgot something.”

But while email is something most college students become conditioned to check, it is not their preferred method of communication. Facebook is far easier for students to use in connecting with their peers or acquiring information—because, said Celia, “everybody is constantly checking Facebook.” Facebook is where students hang out, and while they would consider it inappropriate for all modes of communication, for reminders, due dates, group discussions, or brainstorming sessions, it is a more useful platform than methods traditionally favored by their professors.

For students, Facebook usage is largely governed by the perceived nature of the intended connection or relationship. For example, it was a chief venue in which to coordinate group projects for classes among the students we interviewed—for instance, by scheduling meetings and identifying times to discuss the projects. Additionally, if students were unclear about an assignment, deadline, or class meeting, they used Facebook to solicit such information from classmates.

Facebook, which facilitates weak ties between people, seems to allow students to solicit feedback and assistance in a crowd-sourced fashion. When a student who is a member of a Facebook group asks when the mid-term paper is due, the question’s ownership is diffuse and the response is available to everyone. For students such as FGCS, for whom impression management is
imperative given their limited campus capital, asking such questions is less a public disclosure of their deficient knowledge and more a service to the group.

**Faculty Members’ Role in Creating a Walled Garden**

When asked about using social media to communicate with professors, Henry said, “I would rather have that kind of split privacy area where I don’t want my professors to know anything.” Nevertheless, in some cases Facebook was used to communicate with SBP faculty. Students enrolled in one class were asked to join a Facebook group that served as an online space for class communication. This allowed students in the class to transfer knowledge among themselves, develop peer knowledge networks, and more effectively and efficiently organize class projects and activities.

The faculty administrator of the group only approved students enrolled in the class as members, which maintained a level of privacy in the academic space that was acceptable to students. More important, group members (including the instructor) were not able to view each other’s profile pages. Because students understand those pages as personal spaces that should be kept private from faculty, and because Facebook limits members’ access solely to the group page, the faculty member was not perceived as intruding into students’ private spaces. And no student's grades or assessments were made public on the page.

This use of a Facebook group was particularly beneficial for FGCS because it created a platform upon which they could curate and edit their responses and practice classroom discourse skills and behaviors. Initiated and led by an extroverted student, student postings on the group page were easy and relaxed interactions about academic matters.

The walled garden of the group page signaled safety for students while enabling academic exchanges for students who find such exchanges anxiety producing. For example, many FGCS who had reported positive experiences with their summer course Facebook group felt intimidated by their professors during the fall semester, especially in large survey courses. They felt ill-equipped to approach the professor before or after class or raise questions in class, and they felt uncomfortable using Facebook or other social-media platforms to communicate with the professor because no group page had been created. So they refrained from such communication during those semesters.

Many college students feel uncomfortable approaching faculty or staff due to the power differential involved, and the problem is exacerbated for students who have less campus capital. Because many FGCS do not have knowledge of behaviors that will help them stay in college (e.g.,
creating relationships with faculty or negotiating course selection and major) and make cultural
missteps due to their unfamiliarity with college culture, they feel they don’t belong on campus.

So they attempt to persevere in relative isolation. Social media may help to remove a barrier
for these students as they seek the assistance they need to succeed academically.

Social Integration

Despite the commonly held misconception that individuals use sites such as Facebook to
create meaningless online friendships that do not extend into the “real world,” the students in the
study almost unanimously indicated that Facebook was a way “to connect with people that I’ve
already met,” not “strangers.” Facebook is especially important in broadening a student’s network
of campus friends outside of other SBP students. When discussing how they experienced their first
semester on campus, many students expressed regret about not extending their social networks. As
one student put it, “After first semester, I realized that I do want to get to know different people,
and I want to kind of build my network, and so I, second semester, I decided that I wanted to meet
more people, and that’s basically what I did.”

To be clear, the students almost unanimously indicated that friendships formed through
SBP are a chief benefit of the program and a major contributor to their feelings of comfort and
support within the institution. But they also often expressed feeling a sense of isolation from the
institution and from other students who were not part of the SBP. Facebook allowed them to
leverage their pre-established network of SBP friends to connect with other students as they
transitioned to the fall semester.

One student called Facebook a “friendship resume.” It is where many FGCS make
evaluations about the types of social connections they would like to make, especially with students
with whom they are indirectly connected by performing what another student described as
“Facebook stalking.” As opposed to viewing this as an invasion of privacy, she thought that not
engaging in it “would make it harder for other people to like, I guess, see me, I guess, or want to
know me.” Facebook is, in short, an essential aid as students integrate themselves into the campus
community and a means to efficiently and effectively increase students’ campus capital by
increasing their connections and associations.

In addition to establishing friendships through indirect peer connections and stalking,
Facebook also facilitates opportunities for follow-up meetings, conversations, and connections with
campus acquaintances. When asked how she would maintain these connections if she did not have
Facebook, Asha made the following observation:
I guess I’ll just hope to see them around on campus. I know that a lot of students exchange numbers, but I’m not comfortable with that. I think that you have to really know someone in order to exchange numbers. So if it’s not through Facebook, then I just hope I’ll see you again on campus, and that’s pretty much it.

Almost every student named Facebook as an essential source of information about campus events, activities, and organizations. The platform provides a far more extensive opportunity to learn about campus events from other students than traditional word-of-mouth information exchanges, because the student does not have to publicly disclose his/her interest to discover an opportunity.

Information about campus opportunities is especially important for FGCS. As Troy indicated when discussing the value of Facebook in navigating co-curricular learning opportunities,

I feel like I get more information through Facebook just because people who aren’t in your core friend group can still invite you to events, and post events, things like that. But with word of mouth, unless the person’s interested in what’s going on, the same things that you are,...then they’re not really going to say very much about other things going on. So, I feel like Facebook has more of a benefit.

But once weak ties transition to strong ties, Facebook becomes less important in continuing to maintain relationships with campus friends. While it remains the preferred option for group planning, chatting, or event announcements (because “it’s easier to, I guess, talk to a large body of people without talking to them all directly”), students move to other more informal or pictorially based tools such as Snap Chat or Instagram to maintain established campus social connections.

All of these platforms feature relatively quick exchanges, which work with friends who require little to no context. Students also use them to kill time, break up studying, or “have fun” with their friends. These continual, informal chats help to deepen relationships with their campus peers, which in turn serve to deepen their connection to the institution.

**Maintaining Connections to Home**

Facebook, Skype, and Facebook messenger also provide important links to home for many FGCS. Some scholars have argued that maintaining these ties prevents students from developing a
sense of self, integrating into the institution, and persisting to graduation (Arnett, 2000; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 1993). However, the FGCS we spoke with told us that rather than distancing them from the campus community, closeness with their friends, siblings, parents, extended family, and teachers from home enabled them to tap sources of support in their home communities and provided them with the resilience they needed to persist at the institution.

Social media not only provided the FGCS with a much-needed connection to familiar cultures and contexts—it also reassured students who had some responsibility for their families’ well being, financial or otherwise, that everything was “okay” at home. The FGCS also spoke about the utility of Facebook as a means to provide family and home communities with information about their college experiences.

While attending institutions outside of their cultural ken, these lines of communication with home provided important anchors to students’ socio-cultural identities. Students who expressed concerns about a relative lack of racial, ethnic, and SES diversity on the campus also used social media to feel connected to campus peers like themselves. They saw Facebook as an essential tool for maintaining racial and ethnic identity on a predominantly white and affluent campus.

Encouragingly, this study suggests that social media can play an integral role in helping students to negotiate the campus environment without having to sacrifice the meaningful values, connections, and relationships from their home communities. Administrators and practitioners should abstain from problematizing such behavior as developmentally inhibitive for FGCS, even if students with more privileged identities may benefit from the level of challenge offered by the institutional culture.

**Recommendations**

Social media can usefully supplement transition programs, such as the SBP, that have been linked to positive student persistence patterns for FGCS. College students are already on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, etc., so utilizing these platforms should not increase the cost of running these programs.

However, this neither obviates the need for qualified, competent people to facilitate interactions among students nor eliminates the need for support programs for FGCS. Ultimately, social-media platforms are tools that can assist students with the formation of the campus capital necessary for persistence, but faculty and staff still need to implement the technology and encourage its use.
This study’s findings lead to the following recommendations for administrators who wish to meet the many needs of FGCS:

- Avoid problematizing the usage of social media (and other communication platforms) to connect to home communities.

- Facilitate such connections for students who may not have access to the requisite technology (iPads, Lap Tops, Computer Labs, etc.).

- Consider how social-media platforms might be used in the classroom to encourage deeper and broader student participation. Some examples include:
  
  ▪ Establishing a Facebook group page and inviting students to use it to exchange information across classes and for brainstorming sessions, class discussions, or project planning.

  ▪ Using Twitter for student responses to a thread on a class topic. This may be especially beneficial in large survey courses.

  ▪ Conducting one-on-one meetings with students using Skype. This may be especially important for commuter students.

  ▪ Encouraging classmates to coordinate group projects by exchanging Facebook posts or creating their own Facebook group pages to conduct virtual study sessions.

  ▪ Live Tweeting classes, so students do not have to expend as much campus capital to ask a question.

  ▪ Encouraging students to make Facebook friends of other students, especially as a means of meeting friends of friends who have shared interests.
- At the level of institutions, departments, and programs, using Facebook and Twitter to provide important updates and due dates for students. Some examples include housing-selection notices, registration, career fairs, and financial-aid deadlines.

- Consider which experiences that are currently provided in person can be supplemented or replaced by virtual or social-networking alternatives.

- Promoting activities, organizations, and programs through Facebook.

Most important, campus leaders must motivate faculty to use social media. Institutions need to provide both training about how to deploy it in the academic setting and incentives that matter to faculty. Faculty’s chief currency is time. Institutions interested in integrating social media into instruction should consider how faculty time can be freed up to participate in semester-long instructional-technology practica.

Other specific considerations for encouraging such usage include the following:

- Include specific questions about faculty’s use of technology and its connection to student learning in student course evaluations.

- Create benchmarks on the educational use of technology for tenure and promotion processes and evaluation.

- Provide training for teaching assistants on using technology for teaching and learning who can assist faculty.

- Conduct technology and teaching audits at the department level, and identify where social-media platforms can be integrated into departmental courses.

- Conduct a services audit at the department level to identify savings from the integration of these technologies, and assess how these savings could be shifted to fund other supports for FGCS.
These are just a few examples of ways faculty and academic deans and administrators can benefit from this study. They are certainly not comprehensive, nor will every solution work for every problem. But social media do provide intriguing opportunities to encourage broader and deeper participation among first-generation college students without pricing institutions out of their reach.
Resources


