

Tweeting to Learn

When millions of students make their treks from home to  college campuses this year, they'll carry with them their most valuable possessions—their favorite clothes, pictures from home, room décor and even small pieces of furniture. In addition to bringing those priceless items meant for creating the collegiate home away from home, most will bring hundreds—or thousands—of personal connections made through their online interaction on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and MySpace.

The college-age segment makes up the largest and most active user group on sites such as Facebook and MySpace. According to a January report by , more than half of Facebook's 500 million active users are in the 18-34 age range. Chances are, if you throw a rock at a college or university, you'll hit a Facebook user (right before security carts you off).

Before Facebook merged its way into mobile phones through a growing number of devices such as BlackBerrys and iPhones, Twitter paved the way for up-to-the-minute updating through text messaging. Although Time magazine once proclaimed of Twitter, "[It] makes a terrible first impression," the microblogging social-networking site has managed to outpace the growth of most competitors. Currently it has 175 million registered users who write more than 95 million tweets a day.

Today's Christian collegiate leaders and staff, who once may have labeled social networking as unproductive or a waste of time, are now viewing social networking sites more like star pupils. They are using the social media to better connect with enrolled students, keep their institutions before the eyes of prospective freshmen, teach courses and even reconnect with alumni. And in the process, social media are rewriting the textbook for how colleges and universities offer a well-rounded educational experience today.

“More colleges and universities, including Liberty University, are accepting the wide use of social media throughout the entire student lifecycle,” says Katie Foraker, social media specialist for the university located in Lynchburg, Va. “We encourage prospective students to connect with us on our admissions Facebook pages [resident and online] where we have an admissions counselor available at all times.

Prospective students planning a visit to campus can also interact with other high school students planning to attend the event and form friendships before ever setting foot on campus.”

Liberty’s Facebook page currently has more than 34,000 online fans and gives students and potential students a one-stop shop of information about university activities and student life.

Similarly, Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va., utilizes social media as a window for prospective enrollees wondering what it’s like to be a Regent student. Regent makes use not only of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts but also spotlights student and alumni blogs.

“We have developed several *Day in the Life* videos showing our students’ experiences at Regent,” says Mindy Hughes, director of public relations. “We also leverage influencers such as alumni and current students by showcasing their blogs. Social media utilization has also increased our visibility in search engine rankings.”

The two-way street of online interaction provides schools with the ability to listen to prospective students, an aspect that Spring Arbor University’s Dave Buchanan says is an important one. Buchanan, a social media strategist for the university, located in Spring Arbor, Mich., says his school has adopted the notion that “good communication is more about listening and engaging, and less about saturating the market with a generic marketing message.”

The university has a team that works alongside its traditional media-release efforts to “amplify” the school’s message. The team interacts with students online, as well as responds to mentions of the university across a variety of social media platforms.

At Trinity International University (TIU), which has regional centers in Illinois, Florida and California, the social media approach is to “join in” the discussion already taking place online involving the school.

“We know that people are blogging or posting about us, so we think, *Why not be a part of that conversation?*” says Marketing Manager Kathryn Scott. “The primary reason for using social media is building community online. We want to foster the same type of community that you will hopefully experience on campus—online.”

Phil Cook, vice president for enrollment at Lee University in Cleveland, Tenn., says the school’s strongest Facebook connections lie with his admissions counselors, who make themselves available for questions through their pages.

“They post pictures of campus events, update statuses with important deadlines and activities, and ‘friend’ prospective students they meet,” Cook says. “We have been successful in connecting with prospective students in this capacity, and it has assisted our promotional effort and communication plan.”

Applicants should also be aware that college decision-makers can (and do) access their social networking profiles. And what they see may influence their decision on whether to admit the student.

“A Kaplan survey of 320 admissions officers from the top 500 schools found that one in 10 visited applicants’ social networking profiles during their decision-making process,” wrote Elizabeth Schiffman in *Politics Daily* last May. “Of those visiting student pages, 38 percent reported that what

they saw generally had a negative impact on their admissions evaluations.” By comparison, 25 percent of the respondents said these background checks improved their opinion of most applicants.

Linking Teachers and Students

Social media sites, in addition to providing tools for promotion and admission, are adding a new element to the learning process, as professors utilize the new technology to assist in teaching.

“Many of our staff members use [Facebook] as a way to build community among students and employees,” Cook says. “Students respond to inquiries through Facebook much more quickly than e-mail.”

Spring Arbor’s Buchanan echoes that, saying professors who use social media are providing a communication experience that students are comfortable with. “The conversation can be carried out of the classroom through channels that are easily accessible,” he says. “Whether it is downloading a podcast of a lecture or sending a tweet to a professor, we strive to give students the ability to engage in an experience that best fits their learning practices.”

At Regent, faculty blogs, in particular, provide additional space for information about class subjects. “Our faculty members expand on material they are covering in the classroom or researching within their blogs,” Hughes says. “This enhances and expands the educational experience for our students and also allows them to see and read external reactions to the blogs.”

At Liberty, says Foraker, social media offer benefits to students and professors alike: “Students can get updates from the university itself via social media as well as coordinate group projects, share about a reading, ask questions about homework and engage in discussion outside of class with their

peers in a way that other mediums don't allow."

She explains that professors who use social networking benefit by monitoring discussions with students online, using Twitter to update students about class-schedule changes and deadlines, continue discussions from classes, share examples from lectures through links, and promote their published works and interact with peers.

The university has also recently unveiled a mobile application through the Blackboard Mobile Learn software that facilitates two-way interactions between students and teachers on mobile touch-devices such as BlackBerry, Android, iPad, iPhone and iPod. The Mobile Learn app enables students to stay updated on college news and sports scores, browse images of the school and its activities, add contact information, and connect with iTunes to watch chapel services and classes.

For Biola University, social media are "always about sharing information," says Steve Jin, manager of recruiting and outreach. "Our mission is to impact the culture around us with Christian thinking and engage the world with virtues of Christian character. So we have regular blog pages that engage the culture with helpful information, as well as share resources of Biola through mediums like iTunes University."

Although social media usage enhances the educational dynamic, Cook of Lee University considers familiarity and accessibility between professors and students to be a two-edged sword. "In my experience, there are varied opinions on the use of social media in the education process," he says. "Some embrace it, and others reject it.

"Social media can humanize faculty members to students by making them more approachable and real. However, that may also make the teacher-student dynamic too informal," he explains.

"The critical component required to engage this process successfully is setting proper boundaries. Then again, isn't

the purpose of social media to eliminate boundaries?"

Keeping Alumni Logged In

Another promising benefit of social media's growth is the opportunity it provides for schools to stay connected with their graduates about current projects, especially for the sake of donations and gifts from alumni. Andy Guess, in his article "Taking Facebook Back to Campus" for *Inside Higher Ed*, detailed a tension with universities hoping to find the best solution for keeping their alumni records updated.

"Keeping in touch with alumni is always a daunting project, especially so for recent graduates who may be more mobile and less rooted to a permanent address or phone number," he wrote.

Universities, he explained, were having trouble finding the perfect solution for connecting alumni through social networking because older users were more reluctant to use an "open" system such as Facebook. Its popularity is growing with older people, however, and it may yet rise to the top as the most viable and reliable connection point.

"Social media is one of the most effective ways today for universities to ... maintain community with their alumni," says Jeremiah Miller, dean of administration for Elim Bible Institute in Lima, N.Y. "For example, we try to keep a regular stream of photos and event updates on our Facebook page, and our alumni regularly comment and engage with what we're posting."

While social media clearly have created a new world within higher education, college life as a whole isn't in danger of being replaced by virtual experiences online. Instead, social media sites complement the college experience by providing a connection point for all interested parties.

"As far as relaying pertinent information, social media is not

the place,” says TIU’s Scott—while adding a reminder not to overlook the obvious: “Information generation isn’t the primary use for social media. It’s supposed to be ‘social.’”

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Find out how one school is using Twitter to create academically engaged students at