

CREATING COMMUNITY ONLINE:
THE EFFECTS OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING COMMUNITIES ON
COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES.
HOW CAN STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS BEST RESPOND TO THIS
EMERGENT PHENOMENON

by

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ABSTRACT

Student usage of online social networks (OSNs) has grown in recent years to be incredibly prominent in the lives and experiences of today's college students. While not every student may be actively using OSNs, cognizance of their existence is ubiquitous, and the majority of students are avid users. The potential drawbacks have been focused on in the news, and yet students continue to use these online communities. The overarching research question for this study is: what are the effects of online social networking communities on the experiences of college students? In order to truly ascertain what the effects of OSNs are on college student experiences, it is important to understand the student perspective. In looking at this phenomenon from the student perspective, it becomes apparent that students have a fairly comprehensive understanding of drawbacks with regards to OSNs. When balancing the drawbacks versus the benefits, students clearly indicate that they will continue to use OSNs. Students predominantly believe that limited interaction and presence from their universities within OSNs would be acceptable or tolerable. In many cases, students welcomed the university presence as an opportunity for universities to be more aware of the student culture of the campus, and for the university to educate students about how to be safe and smart in their online activities. Through a more comprehensive understanding of student perceptions of the uses of OSNs, the benefits and drawbacks of OSN, and what level of involvement staff, administrators and universities should have within OSNs, student

affairs practitioners can be more supportive of student participation within OSNs, and through that, their engagement with the university.

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CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Introduction

An emerging issue on college and university campuses became more evident in February 2004 with the initial release of www.Facebook.com (Facebook) and its proliferation across the United States. As an online social networking community, this site and others like it have been widely adopted for use by college students. However, rapid student acceptance of Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks and its incorporation into students' lives has largely left student affairs practitioners trying to catch up in terms of understanding how this phenomenon affects college students. Student affairs practitioners will best facilitate student success in their college and developmental experiences through more robust knowledge of students' activities and experiences, in-person and online (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). By understanding student online behavior, student affairs professionals will be able to incorporate online communities in interactions with students and better serve their student populations through enhanced engagement. The following vignette provides a framework for this dissertation.

Nesha, a third-year Resident Advisor (RA) in the undergraduate housing residence halls of Shell Rock University (SRU) shuts off her TV in shock after hearing about two stories on the news. The first story was about a

high school student who flew to a foreign country to meet a man she met on Myspace. The second story was about a security concern for her sister's high school as a result of a 'post' (message posted on an online message board) on the popular website Myspace declaring that day 'Take your guns to school day'. She immediately calls home to check on her sister before heading downstairs to the dining hall for lunch. As she walks through the residence hall, she checks to see if any of her residents would join her for lunch. Her schedule this quarter is hectic in the afternoons but she enjoys having lunch with her residents before class.

On her way through the hall she observes Brian, a first-year student, typing with the telltale sounds of Instant Messenger, which is a type of computer program where users can chat with each other. At the same time, Brian is viewing his friend's Facebook page in one window and someone else's Myspace profile in another. His cell phone is flashing with an incoming text message or phone call while he is on the phone with someone else. Nesha knows that some of Brian's friends jokingly refer to him as 'Mr. Facebook', because he has befriended over 300 students via the website that he has no connection to in "real-life". Nesha wonders if Brian ever comes out of his room, since he always seems to be on his computer. As she invites him to join her for lunch, Brian responds with a hurried "no, sorry, maybe at

dinner,” as another instant messenger window pops open on his computer monitor.

Hannah, a second-year resident, is coming out of her room, complaining that her blog (web log or online diary) keeps getting blocked by the university server. Nesha has seen Hannah’s site and blog before, and knows that a number of students are big fans of it, and check regularly for updates. Hannah admits that some of the content she posts might be viewed as risqué (e.g. provocative pictures and messages related to underage drinking), or highly opinionated and politically charged, such as her views on hot political issues. Yet, she feels she has already paid for the right to host the blog on her personal website. She does not understand why the university is blocking her access to that site now, when she accessed it freely on a frequent basis during her first year on campus. Hannah heads down to lunch and tells Nesha she will talk to her more about it later.

Lauren and Zack, both third-year students, are talking about their old high school friend, Mark, who also attends SRU and was put on probation by the University for posting pictures and comments on his Facebook profile that offended his hallmates and classmates. The profile included a particularly inciting remark about how pretty one of Mark’s professors is, in spite of not learning much from her class, prompting his classmates to shun him in class for the next week. In addition, most of Mark’s hallmates,

including Lauren and Zack, were sanctioned by the Residence Life staff after seeing pictures of them engaging in underage drinking. Nesha reminds Lauren and Zack that the workshop they are supposed to lead about drinking responsibly is coming up soon.

When Nesha walks into the Dining Hall she sees another resident, Melissa, sitting by herself in the back corner, her eyes are watering, cheeks red, and she is eating very nervously and slow. When Nesha asks her what's wrong, Melissa begins to sob and confides to Nesha that she has been getting harassing phone calls on her cell phone, and harassing messages written on the message board outside of her room. The messages are from a male student who has been bothering Melissa and a few of the other residents with late-night phone calls and electronic mail (e-mail). The messages range from talking about notes from class to asking her out for a date, and occasionally threatening messages demanding that Melissa talk to him. As Nesha probes to find out more about the identity of the stalker, Melissa states that she thinks it's a person who keeps trying to add her as a "Friend" on Facebook. As Melissa gets up to leave for class, she states that she has been too afraid to talk to anyone about it, except her roommate who is also worried.

As Nesha eats lunch with a few of her fellow RA's, José and Saul, they talk about the incidents they have seen their students experience within online communities and online social networks. Their supervisor, the

Resident Director, stops at their table, listens to a bit of the conversation and tells them to bring their lunch to the conference room for a last-minute staff meeting to discuss the effects of online social networking communities. As the three RAs walk to the conference room, José wonders why there are so many concerns about this phenomenon. Saul muses to himself that it seems that everyone is ignoring the positive aspects of Facebook and Myspace, namely that it allows him to keep in touch with friends from home who are attending other schools, and other friends he does not see regularly. Nesha becomes even more frustrated with the whole situation, and tries to think of how she can help her students avoid the negative consequences and take advantage of the benefits of the phenomenon of online social networking.

From this vignette we can see that Brian is so engrossed in online social networking and other technological pursuits that he misses in-person contact while Hannah is frustrated by the limitations SRU is putting on her online activities in blocking her from accessing her blog. Mark has also been limited in what he can do online and is actually on probation as a result of some of the content he previously posted. Lauren and Zack have to plan a workshop to educate their peers on drinking responsibility as a sanction for posting pictures of themselves drinking heavily at an off-campus party. Melissa's troubles are more severe. She is facing harassment and possibly stalking from someone who is using online social networks to learn more

about her and bother her endlessly. Her fear and crying has disturbed her Resident Advisor Nesha, who was already distraught over concerns for her sister's safety based on a random Myspace comment. While this vignette focused on the potential drawbacks of online social networking, this study will also examine the positive effects associated with online communities.

Background of the Problem

College students today are more “wired” than previous generations. They are more connected to information and to each other electronically than previous generations. Most students are digital “natives” meaning that they have either grown up with these technologies, or they have become so common-place in their lives that using them is part of the norm. Students are using a wide array of modern technological media (e.g. cellular phones and the Internet) to communicate with each other with increasing regularity. E-mail, cellular phones and increasing usage of instant messaging (real-time person-to-person chats that occur online) have provided a more rapid and direct form of communication. The World Wide Web offers a variety of communication tools, recreational gaming options (video games people from the entire world can play together) and resources. Scholarly academic research has also been affected. A great deal of research can be conducted on the Internet, which has the capability to connect students and researchers with online versions of

library content, and a wealth of other materials or resources that may not be available in print form.

The effects of the Internet on college students have yet to be adequately determined. Part of the function of student affairs staff at the university level is to facilitate a first-rate undergraduate experience both educationally and developmentally. Yet many of these professionals may not have extensive experience with computers and the Internet, let alone online communities. Thus, they may not be familiar with the experiences and exposure or vulnerability college students have online. This lack of knowledge of the impact of technology on students' experiences is a gap needing to be filled to ensure that student affairs professionals can serve all aspects of student developmental needs.

The Internet is transforming communication much like the telephone did 50 years ago. Today, the Internet serves as a form of peer-to-peer communication, which directly connects people over time and space. Researchers have noted that technological advancements are outpacing professionals' ability to keep up with the developments (Duffy, 2006; Holt, 2004; Krupnick, 2006). Students are taking full advantage of cutting edge technological communication (e.g. online communities and online social networking) by participating in and developing new means of communication and new uses for the communication media that exist. For example, students have adapted Facebook.com to be used for reasons other than what it was intended. Political campaigning, lobbying, and commercial enterprises have

discovered the benefits of advertising via Facebook (Hirschland, 2006; Facebook, 2006; Kushner, 2006; Grynbaum, 2004).

While technology has been advancing, it has also become more accessible, meaning larger numbers of people have more access to technology. The digital divide (i.e. the disparity in technological access and the skills to use it across certain demographic groups such as age, ethnicity, class, and geography) has been evolving, translating to more students from underrepresented minority groups being represented online (Salmon & Bustamante, 2006; Sharif, 2004). One illustration of this was the California high school walkouts protesting immigration reform in spring 2006. These walkouts were organized primarily via Latino students communicating through Myspace (Salmon & Bustamante, 2006). However, the evolutions in the digital divide now indicate that there are distinctions between those who have broadband access versus those with a dial-up modem (Digital Report, 2005).

A growing phenomenon in society is the increasing use of Online Social Networks (OSNs) as a way to communicate frequently with people all over the world. The recent growth in participation in online communities and OSNs among college students is becoming a larger component of the college student experience (Paperclip, 2006). Online communities and OSNs are any form of virtual community organized and hosted through the Internet. This includes Instant Messaging programs (examples include AOL, Yahoo, MSN, and ICQ.), web logs (blogs; online journals or diaries that someone posts for the express reason of wanting others to read it),

dating websites (e.g. www.match.com, www.eharmony.com), and alumni and peer communities (e.g. www.Friendster.com, www.Classmates.com).

The Internet is by nature a constantly evolving entity (as with most forms of technology). Everyone with access to the Internet can post their own content and adapt the Internet as their own tool for virtually any use they desire. The evolution of the Internet, online communities and online social networks combined with increasing student participation in them, makes it logical to assume that college students will use Facebook and Myspace on college and university campuses with increasing regularity (Salvo, 2004; Schackner, 2004).

This study will focus on two online communities that are heavily used by college students: www.Facebook.com and www.Myspace.com. The growth in student usage of these communities is a recent development. Facebook.com started at Harvard University in February 2004 and over time has expanded at colleges across the country. As of March 2006, over 2,200 four-year colleges and universities were represented on Facebook, with over 8 million registered users (www.facebook.com, 2006). Two-thirds of these users log in daily, with an average usage time of 18 minutes (Facebook.com, 2006). Myspace boasts over five times the total number of users that Facebook has, but the age profile of users is 14 and over, whereas Facebook is generally 18-24 plus recent graduates. As a result of the difference in user demographic, primary focus of this study will be on Facebook, yet the findings of this study should be applicable to other OSNs.

Statement of the Problem

This study will examine the impact of online social networking communities on the educational and developmental experiences of undergraduate college students. These online social networks (OSNs) are an increasingly significant component in the life of today's college students. Therefore, student affairs professionals need to develop a firm understanding of how OSNs contribute to or detract from the educational experiences of students.

The problem with online social networks is determining their impacts on college student experiences. It will be important to determine whether OSNs can be a positive contributor to students' educational and developmental experiences, despite some negative ramifications. If OSNs are ascertained to be a worthwhile component of the student experience, then it will be important to determine what student affairs professionals can or should do to incorporate this phenomenon into their work with students. Student affairs, as a profession, may need to adapt to student needs in changing times. It is common for student affairs professionals to want to "meet students where they are at," in order to engage students at a time, place, and through a medium in which they would receive and respond to the message and be more engaged.

There is little research about the effects of online social networks on their users. Despite an increasing amount of online communication from the university, and encouragement to use the Internet for scholastic purposes, there is little research

that examines the effects of participation in the Internet on college experiences. Given that a growing proportion of student-to-student communication is conducted through the Internet, there is a significant gap in student affairs research on the effects of Internet-based communication on student experiences. There is a need to study this so that student affairs administrators can understand another facet of the student experience. Thus, this study will look at research on community theory, and sociological research on communities and networking, to extrapolate a frame of analysis for the effects of OSNs on college students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand students' perceptions about the importance of online social networking and their views on the role that colleges and universities should play in managing student usage of these phenomena. This study will employ the use of the student voice to examine the effect of student use of online phenomena (e.g. Facebook and other online social networks) on their educational and developmental experiences, campus communities and the practice of student affairs. In doing so, student affairs professionals can determine the best ways to interact with online communities like they do with in-person communities. By gaining a better understanding of the effects that OSNs have on college students' experiences, student affairs professionals will have a stronger sense of how to work with students in this new type of community. This study will help

student affairs professionals understand what OSNs are and how they function, the role they play in the student experience, and how student affairs professionals should think about how to interact with students using online communities.

Though this study will generally focus on Facebook as the primary online social network that students use, there are a wide variety of other online social networks that function in comparable ways, in terms of their role in students' lives. Other technologies to be discussed will include academic-focused systems such as Blackboard and WebCT, instant messaging, website hosts, blogs and online social networks such as Xanga and Myspace. This study will look at all online social networks, but for the purpose of analysis, this study will pay particular attention to Facebook, the college campus-based online community. This study will identify current best practices on university campuses for working with students on issues related to Facebook and other OSNs, and use those practices as models for additional interventions.

This study will also help student affairs professionals to understand what online social networking communities are, their importance to students, and what role students think the university should play in these online communities. Student affairs administrators and staff have limited to no exposure to this phenomena (NASPA conference, 2006; Trotter, 2006). Yet in order to do their jobs effectively, student affairs professionals need to have a working knowledge of all issues that might affect students' development, including online issues (Willard, 2006). To do

this, the researcher will utilize the student voice for this phenomenological study to shape and frame their perspective and inform student affairs professionals and administrators about the online social networking experience. In addition, this study will help the reader understand how social networking communities in general and online social networks in particular affect students, and what steps might be needed to protect student and societal interests.

Research Questions

The first two research questions will be answered primarily through student focus groups, observations of student interactions within online social networking communities, and survey data. The third research question will primarily be answered through the survey of undergraduate students and student focus groups. All methods of data collection, including document analysis, the online survey, focus group and participation in online communities to observe student interactions, will contribute to answering all three of the research questions.

1. How do students utilize online social networks, and in what ways do they engage with each other?
2. What do students feel are the benefits and drawbacks associated with their usage of online communities and online social networks?
3. What are students' attitudes and perceptions about staff and administrator involvement in online social networks?

Answering these research questions will student affairs practitioners understand what OSNs are and how they function, the role they play in the student experience, and how student affairs professionals should think about how to interact with students using online communities. This could lead to student affairs professionals integrating OSNs into a productive college student experience.

Significance of the Study

According to Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, there are over 8 million users of Facebook and nearly two-thirds of these users login on a daily basis, for an average of 18 minutes over the course of one day (March 2006). This makes Facebook the most popular among over 65 different online social networks (OSNs) that college students are using regularly (Berkeley survey, Winter 2006). Myspace, which boasts the most overall users, has less college student users than Facebook, but a greater majority of the non-college student population. Students will continue to explore new facets of existing OSNs and create new OSNs (Sharif, 2004). This study's aim is to educate student affairs professionals about what students are doing in online communities and online social networks, and what student affairs practitioners can do to help integrate OSNs into a productive college student experience.

The multitudes of technological advances enable more uses of the Internet for student peer-to-peer interaction. Some OSNs enable you to post web logs (blogs), or

diaries about everyday experiences (www.blogger.com). Others allow you to post unlimited amounts of pictures, photo albums, and digital video (e.g. www.youtube.com). Among the many issues related to OSNs of relevance to student affairs professionals are: 1) university's liability for student-posted online content using university resources, and a host of other issues centering around liability, 2) inappropriate content posted by students, 3) the quality of communication between and among students, 4) increased organizing of student interest groups (quasi and real student organizations), and 5) ways to effectively use online social networks to supplement the educational experiences of college students.

This study proposes to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by synthesizing existing research about in-person communities, communication, and networking. Community theory will shape our understanding of online communities as communities (Granovetter, 1973; Hampton, 2002). Social network analysis (Stutzman, 2005) will provide a sense of interconnectivity amongst student users of OSN. Synthesizing the mission of student affairs (Evans et al, 1998; Kuh et al, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; NASPA and ACPA, 2004) and student development theories (Astin, 1984; Schlossberg, 1984; Maslow, 1943) with community theory and social network analysis will frame this study. That framework will support the analysis for examining the impacts of online communities on students' college and developmental experiences. There is a gap in the limited research on online social networks in that little qualitative research has been done with the student users of

these online communities. This study will make use of the student voice, through focus groups, an online survey and participant-observation.

By understanding students' perceptions about the importance of online social networking and their views on the role that colleges and universities should play in managing that phenomena, student affairs professionals can determine the best ways to interact with online communities like they do with in-person communities. In many ways, understanding the relationship between students and online communities is a tool for student affairs professionals. The knowledge of how students operate within OSNs may translate into programs and support services that professionals can use to engage students using online communities as a new venue for programming. It is important for student affairs practitioners to be able to understand and respond to any forms of community and any types of activities that students are engaging in, incorporating them into the educational and developmental experiences of college students.

As a product of this study a new guide will be developed for student affairs professionals to help them respond to issues related to student interactions and experiences with online social networking communities. Student affairs professionals can proactively address issues regarding the drawbacks to online social networking by expanding components of orientation or welcome week programs. These programs can be used to educate students about issues related to personal safety and identity theft online, as well as highlight the impacts that negative online behaviors

might have on their future. Lastly, student affairs professionals will be able to incorporate online social networks as one of many campus communities, and utilize the positive effects of online social networks as a student engagement tool.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study is limited by factors that may confound the results of the study. One of the limitations of this study is that there is no clear ruling on a university's liability for content posted online by a student. Regardless of whether the student uses university computer equipment or their university email account or neither, the legal responsibility of the university is not clear. Therefore, no established set of practices has been widely implemented and tested to guide university practice with regards to students' Internet content. Clear right or wrong actions have not yet been established, and student affairs professionals are largely reliant on good judgment to protect the best interests of students and their universities. This is a limitation because a clear ruling from the courts would guide university actions with regards to students' online behavior. A court ruling in the near future, presumably after some actual incident of violence or other criminal act that was referred to online by the perpetrator in his or her profile occurs, is a distinct possibility (French, Lukianoff & Silvergate, 2005). That will likely result in case law to set precedence and possibly even Federal legislation to attempt to control liability.

The gap in available research on these online phenomena, although not a limitation of the research design, does limit the framing of the study. The majority of research done on online communities and online social networks is found in student newspapers rather than scholarly articles. There exists a limited number of published research findings on the effect of online social networking on the student experience, particularly research focusing on the administration of higher education in student affairs. Therefore, many references in this study as to the effects on students' experiences will be from college student newspapers across the country.

The first delimitation of this study is choosing to conduct multiple focus groups at only one institution of higher education. It was determined that more informative results would be produced by having small, intimate groups of three to ten students representing first through fifth year undergraduates. In addition, as much as possible, the students participating in the focus group will represent variance in their level or type of campus involvement. Another delimitation was the decision not yet to conduct staff focus groups. Most current professionals have limited to no experience with Facebook. Those professionals that do have experience with Facebook are usually new to the field, and likely were exposed to online social networking prior to entering the profession. Thus, these professionals are more akin to the student users, sharing their opinions about these phenomena as opposed to looking at them through the student affairs lens (Stephens, 2006).

It was determined that focusing on the student experience and perspective would yield more complete results. Also, by focusing primarily on Facebook, and to a lesser extent Myspace, as the chief portal of student usage for online social networking, the researcher is excluding potentially useful information from other particular individual OSNs. Students that participate in the focus group or complete the online survey that happen to be avid users of Facebook or Myspace will have a vastly different opinion of what those online communities provide than someone who has not yet taken the time to participate or actually has made a conscious decision not to participate in those communities. By intentionally soliciting survey responses through Facebook ads and messages, the results may not be completely representative of the entire college student population, but will still demonstrate the perspectives of avid users of online social networks.

The primary university selected, the University of Southern California (USC) was chosen particularly because USC is reported to have the highest percentage of registered users of Facebook (Facebook, 2006). As such, the number and extent of online interactions, online content, groups, etc. is higher within the college-based Facebook network associated with USC than it would likely be at most, if not all, other institutions. While students representing a cross-section of universities across the United States were desirable for responses to the online survey, the costs of advertising repeatedly across the entire Facebook United States college-based

networks would be grossly prohibitive. The choice of institutions is a delimitation as it will limit the generalizability of the study.

Six student focus groups will be conducted at the primary institution of study, the University of Southern California. In addition, an online survey will be conducted, hosted online at [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) and advertised through email and Facebook to undergraduate college students from around the country. This survey may spread via word-of-mouth, but will only be directly advertised to students at particular large institutions, and students that are participating in some of the largest online groups and discussion threads on Facebook. Analyzing focus group proceedings, survey data and observations of online communities and online social networks will overcome any sample limitations. This intentional or purposeful sampling, while reducing generalizability, will yield a better foundation for results.

In addition, given the widespread and growing concern by professionals about what students are doing within these online communities, there may be training programs being implemented to educate first year students about being safe and smart online. To account for that development, the focus groups will intentionally involve various students from each year of undergraduate study.

One limitation will be the way in which students are selected for participation in the focus groups. The most useful feedback for this study will come from students who are familiar with and/or active users of OSNs. Participants will be selected by soliciting students through Facebook's advertising feature called "Flyers" (see

Chapter II). With an estimate of 75% or more of the enrolled students at any given university having a Facebook profile, and logging in to it more frequently than his or her Myspace profile, Facebook advertisements that will elicit participation in the focus groups seems most prudent (Brooks, 2004).

Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, the author has assumed that students will continue to use these online social networking communities, or other portals that function in similar ways. It is assumed that student usage of Facebook is largely indicative, inclusive and reflective of all of the types of communication and interaction that can take place through other online social networks. Though there are some detrimental effects associated with some uses of online communities, it is also assumed that student affairs professionals can find ways to help these students overcome these detriments and make use of the positive aspects of these tools (e.g. Facebook). This assumption was made because it is the mission of student affairs to support student development and their educational experiences (Kuh et al, 2005; Komives et al, 2003; Evans et al, 1998). Given that use of OSNs is not likely to dissipate, student affairs practitioners need to learn how to interact with students in this new and growing arena of communication and formation of communities.

Definition of Key Terms and Related Concepts

- 1) Online Social Networks (OSN): refers to all of the online social networking venues. A 2006 Berkeley survey identified over 65 OSNs that are currently popular and being used by students.
- 2) Social Networking Communities (SNC): a broad term including all forms of social networks, whether they exist in-person or online.
- 3) Online communities: a broad term including all online social networks and instant messenger related programs or websites that allow personal profiles, information and communication options. This classification is broad enough to include online academic portals as well. According to the Digital Future Project, “an ‘online community’ is defined as a group that shares thoughts or ideas, or works on common projects, through electronic communication only.”
- 4) Facebook: “an online directory that connects people through social networks,” that can be used to “look up people around you, see how people know each other, and make groups and events with your friends,” (Facebook.com, 2006). While this refers specifically to one of many online communities, and most likely the most popular one amongst college students, this term has multiple applications. Brian can “Facebook” another student (e.g. add that student as a friend, send that person a message, or look up

information about that person). Please see Chapter 2, for an in-depth discussion of how Facebook functions.

- 5) Myspace: this is an online community with a much wider audience than Facebook once was, as it is not college-specific. There are no intentional subdivisions within Myspace, although there are interest groups on Myspace. This online community functions in very, very similar ways to Facebook. In addition to the above features, Myspace is the venue of choice for new movies and bands to publicize. Separate from actual advertising, which occurs on both Facebook and Myspace, bands and movies will create a Myspace profile and actively participate like an individual user.
- 6) Digital Natives: A term to describe a constituency that has not needed to become accustomed to a particular technology as it has little to no understanding of what life without that technology was like. This group may even exhibit signs of taking this particular technology for granted.
- 7) Netizens: literally, cyber-citizens. Usage of this term would imply that just as there are commonly-held assumptions of decency and respect in in-person communities, that there are similar, comparable assumptions of decency and respect for users in the online community world. With increasing use of the Internet, students are no longer simply “citizens” of the campus, but “netizens”, meaning they are frequent or habitual users of the Internet.

- 8) Blogs: short for a web log, or diary/journal that is posted by someone to her or his website or profile page for everyone to read. Some web portals allow users to limit access to blogs to only those who subscribe to it, but generally blogs are viewable and accessible by anyone.
- 9) “Fakesters”: students who create fake profiles, either for an alter-ego or unauthorized profiles of others (oftentimes celebrities and university staff).
- 10) Weak Ties: casual or informal connections between people. Typically these are between acquaintances or fellow group members.
- 11) Strong Ties: strong and often formal connections between people. Typically these are between family members or close friends.
- 12) Nodes: this is the term for the person at the other end of the tie or connection. Oftentimes student affairs practitioners are nodes for students to access campus resources.

Organization of the Dissertation

This first chapter of the dissertation serves as an introduction to the research problem. In the next chapter, all relevant research and literature will be reviewed to establish a framework for the research study and findings. The third chapter will discuss the methods used in conducting this qualitative study. Subsequently, in the fourth chapter, research results will be presented, discussed and analyzed. Finally, chapter five will present the conclusions of this study, recommendations to student

affairs staff in working with students through online communities and online social networks, and future directions for additional research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter, relevant literature and research related to study will be analyzed and reviewed to structure this study to present research findings in subsequent chapters. By understanding students' perceptions about the importance of online social networking and their views on the role that colleges and universities should play in managing that phenomena, student affairs professionals can determine the best ways to interact with online communities like they do with in-person communities. As this is a phenomenological study, an understanding of what online communities and online social networks (OSNs) are, how they function, and how they integrate both into the lives and experiences of students, and the functions and operations of the university, will evolve over the course of this study (Creswell, 2003). This literature review will first provide a framework of student development theories and social network analysis. Looking at Astin's Student Involvement theory (1984), Schlossberg's Transition theory (1984), and Maslow's theory of Human Motivation (1943), as they relate to online social networks and social network analysis will provide a good foundation to understand the complexities of students' online interactions. Then the in-person and online communities will be discussed, with a specific focus on Facebook and Myspace, as those two online social networks are largely representative of online social networks as a whole. A discussion of the legal issues surrounding OSNs and the university completes the chapter.

Framework

Student affairs professionals serve as “institutional agents” or individuals who have the ability and knowledge to connect students with institutional resources and support. Relationships with student affairs professionals help students to access programs, resources and opportunities that they would not otherwise know about or find (Nuss, 2003). Student organizations function and operate under the guidance of the campus activities staff and connect students with similar interests, passions and hobbies. Simply having a social network of peers from a common background allows students to feel comfortable displaying their identity and beliefs when they might otherwise shelter themselves from the possible risk of being put down for their beliefs.

Student development theory, as a field of study, is what guides student affairs professionals in helping students negotiate many of the challenges they are faced with during their college experiences and beyond. The variety of developmental issues (e.g. cognitive, moral/ethical, identity) that confront students are more complex today than at any other time in higher education (Evans et al, 1998, p. xi). Chickering (2000) argues that each institution’s educational environment bears great influence on the developmental experiences of its students. According to Chickering student development occurs through seven vectors: 1) Developing Competence, 2) Managing Emotion, 3) Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence, 4) Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, 5) Establishing Identity, 6)

Developing Purpose, and 7) Developing Integrity. These vectors describe factors that contribute to the formation of identity. For most students, the time spent in colleges and the experiences they have during that time, mold their lifelong identity.

Development of identity, whether it is in the form of cultural, religious, sexual orientation/preference, gender, occupational preference, emotional, relationship (including familial), or any other types of identity typically involves a process of stages, or phases of development. Understanding how students develop and behave, and what factors influence that behavior and development, helps student affairs professionals interact with students more effectively. Oftentimes, student affairs professionals need to be able to apply multiple theories to any student. At any given time each individual can be experiencing their development to varying extents in terms of identity, cognitive, emotional and social development, and need to be approached accordingly.

The role of student affairs professionals is to contribute to the educational and developmental experiences a student has while in college. A student's college experience can be broken up into in-class and out-of-class activities. Student affairs professionals predominantly work on issues relating to those out-of-class experiences, of which online social networking is the newest and increasingly prominent component. This study will look at the role of student affairs professionals in providing programs and services that cultivate the educational and developmental experiences of undergraduate students. There will be a particular focus on the effects

of OSN communities on the student experience. Specifically, understanding how student affairs professionals can manage both the positive and negative effects of OSNs on the educational and developmental experiences of college students.

Student affairs professionals work with many diverse student populations with varying needs and interests. Students needs and interests range from community service, multiple types of student organizations and underrepresented minority student program offices. There are also services for students with disabilities, professional organizations, and academic support services for students to participate in. These groups of students or communities are supported and funded by the institution because student affairs practitioners believe that doing so helps to facilitate the experiences, skill-building, growth and development of students.

One principle of student affairs is that students learn and develop most effectively when they are able to interact frequently with students from diverse backgrounds. It is a desired outcome of student affairs to have students from diverse backgrounds and experiences engage each other as part of their academic, social and personal education. Diversity of culture and background is a necessary and vital component of the college experience (Saunders, 2003). Diversity in student populations and campus activities are important for development of the student's identity. College students have easy access to computers, in their apartments or residence hall, and campus computer labs. Student computer usage is highly encouraged by universities, who frequently employ academic web portals such as

WebCT, Blackboard, and library e-resource databases to support students' academic experiences, as well as mandate the use of university-assigned email accounts for most communication.

The concept of social networks, to be discussed more in-depth, is significant for approaching multiple contexts of interpersonal and group interaction. These networks also provide support to the lifetime success of college students as each network can support each student in individual ways and scenarios. Examining the effects of online iterations of pre-existing social networks, and separate or new social networks existing primarily online on the experiences of students will help student affairs practitioners connect student development theory to online communities and support students' in their online activities. Student affairs professionals need to become knowledgeable about students' online activities, understand how these activities impact college experiences, and determine how to incorporate the engagement of students in this phenomenon into the field of student affairs work.

Student Development Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding

Student Usage of Online Social Networking Communities

Astin's Student Involvement Theory

Astin's (1984) student involvement theory links traditional pedagogical theory variables such as subject matter, resources, individualization of approach and desired learning outcomes. Involvement theory is concerned with the behavioral

processes that facilitate learning, rather than developmental outcomes (Astin, 1984, 1993). The overarching argument of the theory is that in order for student learning and growth to take place, students must engage in their environments (Evans et al., 1998). Astin (1984) defines involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience, and involvement is viewed as what the student actually does (their behavior), rather than their feelings, thoughts or motivations. According to Astin (1984), involvement requires the investment of physical and psychological energy into the activity, whether it is classroom related or entirely out-of-classroom (p. 298). Involvement also requires a time commitment proportionate to the level of involvement (Astin, 1984; Borden, 2004).

Students spend a significant amount of time on computers to complete coursework, as well as engaging in non-academic pursuits (Bollier, 1994; Bourne, 2004; Brazzel, 2005). Students may allocate less time for in-person involvement because of this amalgam of online activities they are engaging in. Thus, they may be uninvolved in the traditional definition of campus life and activities, or less involved because they view involvement as a valued resource of time. Student involvement theory proposes that the most precious institutional resource may be student time. Additionally, student's achievement of developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains. The theory acknowledges that the psychological and physical time and energy of students

are finite and that educators compete with other forces in a student's life for a share of their time and energy (Astin, 1984). However, evaluating student involvement in a physical time and energy sense is still contingent on traditional definitions of student involvement—that is spending time and energy on campus, or at least in-person with other students. It is not yet clear how applicable this is to students' online involvement or engagement. Brian, the student from the vignette in the introduction to this study that stayed in his room at lunch to interact within the online social networks versus going to lunch with his RA and hallmates. From Brian's perspective, he may be fully engaged in campus life, even though that does not fit the traditional sense of engagement.

The level of involvement a student may experience will fluctuate over time and over a multitude of different activities. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours she or he spends studying) and qualitatively (whether she or he reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams). The same differentiation can be applied to out-of-classroom involvement. Astin's theory also argues that the effectiveness of any policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement and level of engagement with the university. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. As universities consider

interventions or other programs to incorporate student online activity into their work, the quality and quantity of student involvement in online social networking should be taken into account.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg (1984) describes transition theory as a vehicle for analyzing the human response to transition. For Resident Advisors like Nesha from the vignette, this theory facilitates an understanding throughout the year as her residents adapt to their changing environment. Over the course of the academic year, students will be experiencing a number of fluctuations in the amount of friendships and connections, as well as their depth of interaction. Some of these changes will occur as a result of: fall move-in day, changes experienced in relationships within their prior social network over winter break and evolving peer relationships at school until summer starts. Whether a student is preparing for transition, moving through it, or ending the transition and looking towards what's next, the theory explains the need of support for the transition, and the opportunity to eliminate barriers to the transition. Life transitions are often the reason an individual seeks learning (Aslanian & Brickell as cited in Jacoby, 1989; Schlossberg, 1984), and transition theory can be applied to learners of any age, gender, or ethnicity, but is typically categorized as a theory of adult development (Evans et al., 1998).

The psychosocial effects of a student's transition from high school into college, with new surroundings and new people, will cause that student to want to overcome barriers to the transition. Schlossberg (1984) defines a transition as "any event or nonevent that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles within the settings of self, work, family, health, and/or economics," (p. 43) and stresses that a transition is not the change itself, but the individual's perception of the change. As the student moves through the transition into and through college, a key challenge for that student is finding a way to balance new activities and people with other parts of life. Student affairs professionals can use these challenges to provide support to students (Levin-Epstein & PaperClip Communications, 2006; Stephens, 2006; Stutzman, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d).

This theory argues that in order to understand a transition's meaning for an individual, the type, context, and impact of the transition must be considered. To assess an individual's readiness for the moving in stage of a transition, the framework of situation, self, support and strategies should be used and the resources available in each component should be evaluated to determine how the individual will cope with the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Transitions can be categorized as predicted, unpredictable/unscheduled, or nonevents—expected but did not occur. The context is the individual's relationship to the transition or its setting, and the impact is the degree that the transition alters the individual's daily life. (Schlossberg et al, 1995). For many high school students, abandoning the social

network they spent upwards of 12 years building for a new social network to start completely from scratch can be unsettling.

Today's college students are even more susceptible to this phenomenon (Beavers, 2004; Coomes, 2005; Esposito & Lang, 2006). Pressure to fit in and feel like full-fledged members of the community leads students to seek out as many new friends as possible by any means available to them (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1999). There are two typical high school-to-college transitions. The first is a difference in the academic rigor between the student's high school and their university. The second main transition is the newfound freedom of being away from home and not being forced to attend class or complete assignments and study. Students will want to address transition of leaving the breadth and depth of their pre-college social networks to fill that void in their lives, and thus, participate in online social networking, in order to achieve the fulfillment of their needs as described by Maslow.

Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation

Human or individual motivation is driven by the desire to fulfill certain needs. These needs must be fulfilled sequentially, that is one can only be motivated to strive for fulfillment of one need provided that the need before it has been achieved. In fact, according to Maslow (1943, 1954, 1968), "no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of

satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives,” (1954, p. 167). There is a concept of a need for freedom that underlies the other basic needs. “We are motivated by the desire to achieve or maintain the various conditions upon which these basic satisfactions rest and by certain more intellectual desires,” (p. 176).

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954) essentially says that there are five levels of basic needs that every human has, but the needs are generally felt only as the need before it is met (Maslow, 1943, 1970). The needs, in order from most essential to higher needs are: 1) Physiological: water, air and food; 2) Safety: shelter, protection, health, routine/rhythm; 3) Love: love, affection, belonging, comfort; 4) Esteem: value, self-worth, respect; and 5) Self-Actualization: the tendency for a person to reach her or his full potential. Thus, a human will generally not be concerned about love, esteem or self-actualization, until her needs of food, air and water are met.

Maslow’s hierarchy is not pure, and there are exceptions to the general principle that more basic needs are met first. Some people seek self-esteem before love; others release their creativity (self-actualization) not as a result of achieving the first four basic needs but in spite of doing so. Some people really will feel happy just by having food and shelter/safety, and will not strive for higher needs, while others do not feel the need for love, perhaps because a lack of experience with it (Maslow, 1943, 1970). Maslow writes, that if a need “has been satisfied for a long time, this need may be underevaluated,” (Maslow, 1954, p. 173). Just because a person will

tend to desire the more basic of two unmet needs does not mean that she or he will act in that fashion. Individuals that develop strong character, and general success fulfilling each of the levels of needs, can then sustain a lack of fulfillment in that given area for an extended amount of time (173), but will eventually need to have that need met once again.

A person does not need to have physiological needs one hundred percent fulfilled before safety needs emerge. A person will be motivated to fulfill various needs through a variety of fluctuating factors. Gratification of these five basic needs plays an important role in motivation theory, “a basically satisfied person no longer has the needs for esteem, love, safety, etc,” (176) and that person will invest their time and energy seeking out fulfillment of more advance needs. According to Maslow, “everyday conscious desires are to be regarded as symptoms,” (p. 175) or superficial indicators of basic needs. These needs must be addressed at a deeper level in order to be satisfied. At a precursory level, one might predict that online social networks primarily address the latter three categories of needs.

In the vignette Hannah’s self-actualization needs are at least partially addressed by the blog she was actively writing, yet Lauren and Zack appear to be striving to meet their self-esteem needs by proudly displaying pictures of themselves inebriated at recent parties. The need most relevant to the setting of social networks is that of love; that is, the need to feel comfort, a sense of belonging and that the student is a part of a community. Maslow argues that a person’s actions will be

driven by their desires to fulfill particular needs. Looking at online communities as organizations, a student user may already have her or his physiological and safety needs partially or mostly fulfilled. That being the case, the purpose these Facebook groups serve then is to help fulfill the love needs. Students want to feel like they are not alone, they want to belong to groups and interact with others sharing similar interests. That is why students will create or join subgroups within Facebook; groups that mirror officially registered student organizations on campus, and groups that are just based on hobbies, favorite TV shows/movies and political or other special interests (Business Week online, 2004).

Social Network Analysis

A number of researchers have studied the methods, frequency and extent of connections between individuals through analysis of blogs, and online social networks, and how those connections might define and shape a community (Stutzman, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Hampton 1979, 1990, 2001; Granovetter, 1973, 1990; Wellman and Hampton, 1999). Social network analysis classifies people as *nodes* and the connections between them as *ties* (Granovetter, 1973). This analysis is based on the notion that social cohesion is based on the strength and function of the ties between people. A strong tie is characterized by a number of factors: 1) mutual confiding in one another, 2) emotional intensity of the relationship, 3) amount of

time spent interacting, and 4) reciprocation of the connection (Granovetter, 1973; Hampton, 1990).

People actually benefit both from strong and weak ties (Wellman, 1998; Granovetter, 1973). The premise is that although one's relationships with family and close friends (the strong ties) are necessary and important to supporting that individual, maintaining a number of weak ties with a diverse group of acquaintances and other friends will provide a wider base of support and knowledge (Granovetter, 1973, 1978).

In looking at online social networks as communities, Hampton (2001) identifies the concern that Internet use at home and engaging in OSNs detract from a 'true' sense of community and damage social capital. In actuality, Hampton is arguing that OSNs and the Internet have the opposite effect. OSNs, or what Hampton calls computer-mediated communities, increase access of diverse populations to each other, thus increasing social capital. Additionally, in the Netville study, where a small neighborhood was wired to provide wireless Internet access to over half of the residents, the wired residents demonstrated greater off-line interactions and familiarity with their neighbors than the non-wired residents (Hampton, 2001).

Importance of Developing Communities

The university, as a marketplace of ideas, is not only a bastion for academic innovation and societal discovery, but also a forum for civil discourse (as evidenced

by *ACLU v. Mote*, 2005; *Glover v. Cole*, 1985). As such, it is important developmentally for students to interact with and engage with students from multiple backgrounds and those with a variety of experiences. Through this diversity of opinions and perspectives, students will gain a more robust educational and developmental experience (Nuss, 2003).

Communities organize around areas of common interest. Universities offer support to a variety of student constituencies or communities, such as cultural student program offices (serving Chicano, African, Asian-Pacific, Native-American students); and resource centers (serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender individuals; women and men; students with disabilities). Other communities of students supported by universities include: student athletes and students interested in physical fitness/recreation, students involved in campus activities and events and those active in student organizations. These organizations include: fraternities, sororities, community service groups, religious organizations, special-interest groups, academic and professional organizations, honor societies, recreational groups, and arts or publications. Each student organization and campus community within the institution offers a sense of belonging and comfort to students, as well as a place to network and befriend their peers, and communicate outside of class (Astin, 1984; Schlossberg, 1984; Maslow, 1943).

Although there are other campus communities that have not been served adequately, universities in general, and student affairs practitioners as a whole, have

identified most student constituencies (Evans et al, 1998; UCR Student Affairs, 2006). For example, in *Engaging Diverse Populations*, Harper and Quayle (2008) write that there are a number of student populations that are known to exist, but not yet adequately served, including students with disabilities; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning students; and international students. Commuter, part-time, transfer or returning students, for example, are not yet served to the best of staff abilities but they have been identified as an important community to focus attention towards (Silverman, Aliabadi & Stiles, 2008). Undoubtedly, additional campus communities will be established or identified over time. As an example, in the early 1990's, LGBT Resource Centers were not very common, yet they now exist on a number of university campuses (UCR LGBTRC Establishment petition, 1991). Online communities and OSNs are similar to other, in-person communities, and just as important. However, OSNs fundamentally differ from in-person networks in the nature, content and frequency of interactions between members (Levin-Epstein & PaperClip Communications, 2006; Stutzman, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d).

In fact, most of the identified in-person campus communities are also represented as OSNs within online communities. Myspace presents a highly accessible venue for community groups organized around shared cultural values, experiences and interests. Facebook is regularly utilized by officially registered campus student organizations for event planning, invitations, and communication.

Even unregistered student groups or informal social networks use Facebook to communicate, particularly for party and event invitations (Arrington, 2005).

Categories of Online Communities

There are multiple types of online student-to-student communication. Some of this communication is set up by the university in an academic portal (e.g. Blackboard and WebCT), and some of this communication is structured by the university for student organization use (e.g. the Symplicity web portal). Students use Myspace, Facebook, Xanga, Friendster, and others to communicate and interact with students at their school, students from other schools and sometimes even non-students (Myspace and Friendster, generally not Facebook). In addition, Instant Messaging programs like AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Microsoft Messenger and 'I Seek You' (ICQ) messenger allow for students to chat with each other in real-time through sending messages back and forth. Sending text messages through cellular phones, which is essentially a blend of e-mail and instant messaging, is another frequently employed student communication tool. Each of these types of online communities influence and shape student experiences in a variety of ways, providing multiple opportunities for potential engagement.

Academic Web Portals Employed by Universities

Web portals such as Blackboard, and WebCT are frequently utilized by colleges and universities to supplement classroom instruction. For example, Blackboard is a popular tool for universities to post pertinent course documents (e.g. syllabi, assignments and sample tests) as well as host virtual classroom chats or moderate a discussion board for class-related topics, and allow students to submit assignments and view their grades online. Howard (2002) argues that students are in some ways more involved and engaged in online courses than they are in the traditional classroom setting. A website devoted to identifying academic integrity violations relating to plagiarism, www.Turnitin.com, is also a tool for faculty to record grades, and students and faculty to review and revise student work.

Co-Curricular Web Portals Employed by Universities

In addition to the academic portals referred to above, non-academic, or co-curricular-focused portals are also available. Blackboard provides a module that allows for increased productivity for student organizations to operate and function online the same way that classes do on Blackboard. In addition to a student seeing all of their classes when they log in to Blackboard, they would also see all of the student organizations they are involved in. The fundamental difference between this and its academic version, besides the lack of grades, is that the president of the organization moderates the student group listing, while the faculty member moderates the course

listing. There are other types of online portals for student organization operations, all of which offer online storage of student organization documents (minutes, budgets, Constitution), up-to-date membership rosters, discussion boards and chat rooms for online 'meetings' (www.symplicity.com, 2006; www.blackboard.com, 2006).

Online Social Networking Communities

From one of the earliest online social networks, or OSN, (www.Friendster.com) to the most current and commonly used (Facebook), these virtual OSNs fulfill a variety of functions for students. Some students use social networks to seek out relationship opportunities, but in general, they are used by students to connect to others with similar interests. This is particularly true of online social networks. Students want to make new friends and reconnect or stay connected with old friends (Fosbenner, 2005; Georgetown Voice Editorial Board, 2004). Online dating websites will be discussed first, followed by the World Wide Web, E-mail and Instant Messaging. Then, online social networking in general will be discussed, with a specific focus on Facebook and Myspace.

Online Dating Websites

While this component of online social networking is not of primary focus for this dissertation, this is a phenomena employed by a number of students to meet others (mostly students) they might not otherwise meet. Students do not necessarily

meet most of the dating website contacts for a face-to-face encounter. Yet the purpose of dating websites is for singles to get to know someone online and then meet in person to initiate romantic relationships. Hundreds of different dating websites exist to serve multiple needs and interests. There are both general dating websites (e.g. www.eharmony.com, www.match.com) and specifically targeted dating websites (e.g. www.jdate.com, geared for Jewish singles; and www.stdsingles.com, which provides a venue for individuals that have sexually transmitted diseases to connect to others with the same affliction).

For students who are looking for a relationship with someone that shares similar interests, online dating websites provide a method to meet and interact with a wide variety of people. In addition, a user can pre-screen other people by searching only for the criteria or interests she or he is looking for (e.g. www.dating.com, www.match.com, www.americansingles.com).

World Wide Web, E-mail, Instant Messaging

The World Wide Web is a system of accessing content and communicating with others over the Internet. Almost any type of content one could think of would be available on the web, including research material, instruction manuals, shopping, and music and videos. Two of the major forms of communication over the Internet are E-mail (electronic mail) and Instant Messaging. Fundamentally, the difference between the two is that E-mail is sent from one person to a computer that holds the

communicated message until the recipient logs in to their e-mail to view it, while Instant Messages are sent user-to-user in real time.

E-mail has increased the frequency and speed of communication amongst people all over the world. Students at most universities, and some high schools, get an email account on the institution's server, just like employees for most corporations and organizations. Instant Messaging programs (e.g. AOL, Yahoo, MSN, ICQ) each have a buddy list, a list of "friends" or contacts that the user has identified as people she or he wishes to communicate with on a more frequent basis. Usually, when a user signs on to an IM program, his or her contact list appears, and anyone who has that user on the buddy list will be notified that she or he has signed on. Both E-mail and Instant Messages can also transmit files as attachments (e.g. music, pictures, video, and documents).

There are also blogs, discussion boards and chat forums, that function both independently and as part of other social networking websites. As mentioned previously, Facebook and Myspace are the two OSNs of particular focus for this study as those are the two that are engaging the highest numbers of student participants. The next section will explain in more depth how those OSNs function.

Facebook as a model for most OSNs

Facebook is currently the most popular online social networking community amongst college students, and currently is the sixth most trafficked site on the web,

meaning that it gets the sixth highest number of visitors (Facebook.com, 2007). In addition to the 2500 college networks, that is, the setting within Facebook organized around college campuses, there are also 22,000 networks for high schools, and another 1000 corporate networks. The college version of Facebook was the first to be released, starting in Harvard in 2004 and quickly spreading nationwide. In this sense, a college portal means that membership and access is restricted to students attending the same college (see “Registration and Access” below). There is a way for someone to have a Facebook page under multiple networks (high school, university, additional universities, corporation), and link them together. As a user of Facebook, generally a user can only view the profiles of other students enrolled at the same institution, or living in the same city proximity. For example, a University of California, Riverside [UCR] student can view profiles of other UCR students or anyone living in Riverside. Each of the following subsections will explain a different feature of Facebook. It should be noted that statistics and specifics of features are current as of Fall 2006, unless otherwise noted.

Registration and Access. The only form of identity verification that Facebook currently employs is requiring new registrants to have a “.edu” e-mail account, specifically one that is particular to that university. For example, a student from the University of Southern California can only access Facebook by using her “@usc.edu” email account. Upon completion of the registration form online, a confirmation e-mail is sent to the students’ account. Thus, if a profile exists for a

staff colleague, but that staff person depicted did not set up the profile, looking at the e-mail address of the profile can help in determining what person set up the account. If the e-mail address is jdoe@student.ucr.edu, one can determine that John Doe created that profile.

Viewing Profiles. Users can only view the profiles of users within their network and anyone else that they are friends with (see below). A Facebook user can adjust their privacy settings to affect what information can be seen by friends, acquaintances and users-at-large.

Friend Requests. Within each Facebook network (e.g. based on the university attended or geographic location of residence), any user within that network can view the profile of anyone else within that network. Any user can request to be linked as a friend to any user from any network. Once a user sends a friend request, the second user has to confirm or deny that the two are 'friends'. If the friend request is denied, the first user does not get a message indicating it was denied. As far as that user knows, the second user just has not reviewed the friend request yet. A large number of Facebook users approve most friend requests, whether or not they know the person in real life.

Messages. Any user of Facebook can send a message to any other user. Members can elect to block someone to prevent that person from sending them messages.

The “Wall”. The message wall is a venue for members to post a message up on another member’s “wall” or message board. Oftentimes, these posts relate to birthday wishes, a quick note about needing to get together, or a message about upcoming event. There is a feature here to view the shared wall messages between two users. Called “Wall-to-Wall”, the users that posted the messages, and anyone else from within their network, can see the string of messages back and forth. Another feature of the “Wall” is that when students have pictures posted, other students may post a comment about that picture, and that comment will appear on the wall.

Event Announcements/RSVPs. Students will post an event on Facebook and invite their friends to attend. Oftentimes these events are related to officially registered campus student organizations, or Facebook groups that are not officially recognized by the university as a student organization

Facebook Groups. In addition to campus-recognized student organizations that also operate as groups on Facebook, there are some Facebook groups that are not official student organizations on campus. One such example at the University of California, Riverside of a Facebook group that is not registered with the university is the Jamaican Heritage Club, which claims to appreciate Jamaican culture, but in actuality uses fundraisers to buy beer and marijuana for members.

“Pokes”. Facebook.com itself actually has no stated purpose for the “poke” feature. It functions as a flirtatious or teasing way to say hello, or that one user is

thinking about another. The closest parallel to real-life is the colloquial and casual “What’s up?” that one person would say to another in passing, without expecting an answer. Comparable features on other websites include the “Wink” on www.match.com, or the “click” feature on www.americansingles.com.

Birthdays. When a user registers for Facebook, she enters her birthday, and from that point on, all of her Facebook friends will see a notice as soon as they log-on indicating that their friend’s birthday is coming up. Many users have indicated a strong affinity for this feature (Facebook.com, 2006).

Pictures and Comments. Students can upload an unlimited amount of pictures on Facebook. Once the pictures are posted, the student can go through each one and “tag” their friends that are in the pictures. A “tag” is a way for a user to identify who is in the picture. To “tag” someone, the student posting the picture has to click on the face of the person in the picture, and a window pops up for the student to type in the name of his or her friend. Once someone is “tagged”, the picture now appears in his or her photo album. Facebook itself has a disclaimer and policy that prohibits postings of a “harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, vulgar, obscene, hateful, or racially, ethnically, or otherwise objectionable” nature (Facebook.com, 2006), and there are a number of staff at Facebook that review profiles for content (typically only when they receive a complaint or concern).

Since there are over 8 million college student users, and millions more still in high school, Facebook does not actively peruse student profiles; Facebook would need to exponentially increase staffing in order to come close to keeping on top of

user-posted content. While this also seems like a lack of oversight on the part of Facebook, the disclaimer policy about content and their terms of use policy seems to have staved off litigation on this point thus far. An interesting aspect of Facebook is that the staff frequently implement changes to the features, as well as the wording of their policies, without much warning or notice to users. Users are expected to frequently review the policies for changes, and if a user does not speak up, it is presumed that the user is in agreement with the changed policy.

Status Updates. Students on Facebook can optionally choose to update or enter their status each time they sign on or whenever desired. The status might be something real, such as where she or he has signed in from, or current activity, or something of a more joking nature.

Effects of Online Social Networking

In March 2006, when the immigration issue in California became a heated, daily discussion about political actions being debated at the Federal, State and local levels, high school students organized walkouts via their Myspace profiles and pages. While some walkout participants were not fully cognizant of what they were doing, the fact that the walkouts were so widespread, with significant participation rates, speaks volumes for the increased presence of underrepresented minority students online (Salmon & Bustamante, 2006).

In high school, most students are sitting atop social networks that have, for the most part, been building for 12 or more years. Students are accustomed to seeing their friends and contacts on a daily or regular basis. Apart from students who change schools and/or move to new areas during the latter years of junior high or high school, and not counting the online social networks high school students may already have established, seniors graduate with very large social networks that have great influence on their lives (Antonio, 2004). As students transition out of high school into college, many of their friends might be working or going to school in other parts of the state or country. Each student has to basically rebuild his or her social network, and students will want to fill the void in their social network as quickly as possible (Schlossberg, 1984; Antonio, 2004), enter Online Social Networking Communities such as Myspace and Facebook.

Negative Effects of OSNs

In the recent past (since January 2006 at least), popular press and media have reported numerous negative impacts of OSNs like Myspace on society. In fact, the phenomena of increasing Myspace usage has evidenced itself as references in comedy routines on The Tonight Show, Saturday Night Live and elsewhere throughout the media and society. Cyber-stalking and Internet predators are both severe drawbacks of online social networks. That is one of the largest negative consequences of having so much personal information listed online.

At Kent State University, athletes were banned from using Facebook.com and given a deadline by which they had to remove their current profiles completely (The Wired Campus, 2006a). This is, in part, to stave off potential for recruitment from sports agents, but due mostly to the desire to avoid NCAA and legal ramifications of inappropriate pictures that would reflect negatively on the institution, and athletic department. Kent State's Athletic Department is trying to protect itself as "pictures of hazing and underage drinking aren't exactly good news for athletics programs," (The Wired Campus, 2006a). Similar issues with athletics departments have occurred at other institutions, such as Elon University and Northwestern (The Wired Campus, 2006c). Thus, there appears to be a growing trend starting in athletics departments nationwide to at least warn athletes of the perils to themselves, the department and the institution of using Facebook.com (The Wired Campus, 2006a). In most, if not all, of these cases, the prohibition on using online social networks has not lasted, as will be discussed later.

Some professors are now using Facebook to check up on students' claims of being sick as an excuse to miss class (Applebe, 2004; Holt, 2004; Snow, 2004). When the professor checks out this alibi on the students Facebook.com profile, and sees that the student actually was at a party the night before, the requested accommodation from the student (e.g. a make up exam) is routinely denied (The Wired Campus, 2006b). It also is not surprising that employers, both inside and outside the campus environment, are finding ways to look up job applicants on

Myspace.com, Facebook.com and other online communities and online social networks (Hirschland, 2006; Krupnick, 2006; Lester, 2004). Potential employers are using this as a method to screen out candidates whose actions outside of work might reflect negatively on the employer (Bugeja, 2006).

At Brandeis University, a student posted a comment to her Facebook profile referencing her marijuana-smoking habits. Word of this reached her parents and grandmother, leading to their disappointment and her embarrassment (Schweitzer, 2005). Schweitzer goes on to write that Brandeis University began implementing educational seminars for students soon after this incident, on how to avoid the pitfalls of online communities such as the Facebook. Public safety officers at many campuses have utilized online social networks to find out about inappropriate activities and respond to them. This includes the University of Mississippi, where a Facebook group stated the desire to have sex with one of the university professors (Schweitzer, 2005), and the University of Southern California and UC Berkeley, where campus security officers broke up parties that they found out about online (Nguyen, 2004; Springer, 2006).

Alter-Egos Online. One of the freedoms that the Internet allows is for students to pretend to be someone other than themselves. Students will create fake identities or fake personas on their Myspace or Facebook accounts. It is not clear whether students are using the personas to explore new interests, hidden elements of their personality, a completely separate identity, or just to have fun. For example, a

student might never tell people in-person that he is a fan of a particular genre of movies, but he might list them on his favorite movies list on his Facebook profile. Some students will create entirely fake profiles under the name of their favorite superhero or cartoon character, movie or TV star, or university administrator. These unauthorized profiles of others are expressly prohibited in the Facebook terms of use (www.Facebook.com, 2006).

Of some concern are the profiles created by ‘fakesters’ pretending to be university administrators or staff members (Facebook.com, 2006; Carducci & Rhoads, 2005). Anyone who views the profile is going to assume that information is entirely accurate. For example, there are many potential problems that would arise if there is a fake profile for the university president, with comments that imply the president thinks the university is a horrible place to be and a bad learning environment.

With regards to fake profiles and “fakesters”—those who create the fake profiles, Facebook official policy states that when they are notified of the fake profile they will remove the profile and suspend the user who posted it. Another drawback associated with fake profiles is that other students do not know what information is real and what is fake. This is also important for regular profiles that may or may not reflect the true persona of the student who posted it.

People also will sometimes lie about their age on Myspace. A number of adult males have been arrested for lying about their age (or even telling the truth

about their age) just so they can meet up with underage boys or girls (NBC To Catch a Predator, 2006). In online chat rooms there are a lot of people who lie about their age or other characteristics.

The most obvious reason for a fake profile is just for fun. It is possible that students might just feel more comfortable sharing information online than in person (Shuey, 2005; Stutzman, 2005a). For most students a hobby or particular interest might not come up in casual conversation with most people, and is something only their friends know. Students might actually display less information online than their friends know about them (Stutzman, 2005a). That could be that they are too lazy to complete the profile, or perhaps they know how to exercise their privacy rights and have actually limited who can access what information.

Safety Concerns. There are a number of indications that there are significant safety concerns associated with the use of online communities. Foremost among them has been the NBC Dateline segments entitled “To Catch a Predator”, in which older men are caught in a police sting trying to meet up with an underage minor (To Catch a Predator, 2006). Cyber predators are a commonly recognized phenomenon, referenced repeatedly on television news, in print, and even popular shows like Saturday Night Live (Saturday Night Live [SNL] May 13, 2006). In an episode of SNL, one skit portrayed a number of adults sitting through a workshop on how to set up a profile on Myspace. Out of 15 people in the room, one was a woman who wanted to set up a profile of her own, and had questions about what her daughter was

doing online. The rest of the community participants were men in their 30s and 40s who were setting up profiles for themselves, but making it look as though they were in their mid-to-late teens. At the end of the scene, a police officer mistakenly walks into the room and all of the men in the seminar ran out, underscoring their knowledge that their behavior was inappropriate.

College students may not be soliciting interactions with underage minors, but they are posting messages and pictures of themselves and their friends engaging in underage drinking, the consumption of illegal drugs, and other behaviors and actions that would be considered inappropriate according to the university student code of conduct (www.ucr.edu, 2006; www.usc.edu, 2006). When these behaviors occur offline, for example the residence halls, and are reported, they typically result in judicial action.

Positive Effects of OSNs

Using online social networks, students can keep in touch with friends that are not attending college with them, as well as seek out new friends. Over summer, when students are separated from college friends, Facebook, Myspace and other OSNs serve to facilitate communication and camaraderie while these students may not be able to see each other. In fact, any student user can message any other user through these OSNs. Many online social networks also provide a venue for creating online event or party announcements and inviting friends and others to the event. There are

some websites where the primary function is to manage party and event invitations (www.evite.com).

Another function of online OSNs, and actually the stated purpose of Facebook, is to be an online directory of information, including: email addresses, phone numbers, hobbies, interests, pictures and messages.

Retention. Student retention rates are important issues of concern for every university. Students that are involved in campus activities, such as student organizations, internships, and other out of classroom activities are less likely to drop out of the university. Students that are involved in campus life have multiple social networks that support them during their time at the university. These networks include the organizations they are members of, their roommates and hallmates, study groups for each class, as well as their network of friends. All of these networks serve to support the student during college (Astin, 1984; Ellis, 2004). Research has shown that online social networks serve a similar supporting function; they offer support, comfort, camaraderie, and even a distraction or pastime. The structure provided by these in-person and online social networks (Granovetter, 1973) provide emotional support and a sense of belonging, which provides them a crucial foundation for student success in college (Kuh et al, 2005; Maslow, 1943).

Easing transition. OSNs help ease the transition for students from high school to college. Some universities have encouraged summer orientation leaders or resident advisors to go onto Facebook and search out their students before meeting

them in person to get them involved and engaged that much sooner. Students are also using Facebook shortly after they get their university email account, checking out the profile of the student who they are assigned to room with, and checking their ‘compatibility’. This is both a positive and a negative, as Housing Services has had to deal with an increase in roommate change requests before move-in day (Schweitzer, 2005).

Increased connectivity with multiple, diverse populations. Access to technology, specifically computers and the Internet, among the disadvantaged has become increasingly common. As mentioned above, in April and May 2006, California experienced a large number of walkouts and protests related to the issue of immigration reform that were organized through Myspace and other online social networking phenomena (NBC, 2006a). This means that populations of students previously without much access to the Internet or technology in general, now have a presence online (Salmon & Bustamante, 2006). Additionally, the increased presence of multiple, diverse populations online and within online social networks will stimulate more interactions between students with different backgrounds, leading to more understanding of each other and each other’s experiences.

As Figure 1 shows, when looking at a college student’s in-person experiences, completely separate from that student’s online social networking activities, a lot can be gleaned from the student’s social interactions. For this student, spheres of social interaction may be loosely connected. There may be some

individuals from one social sphere that exist also within other spheres, but that crossover is disconnected.

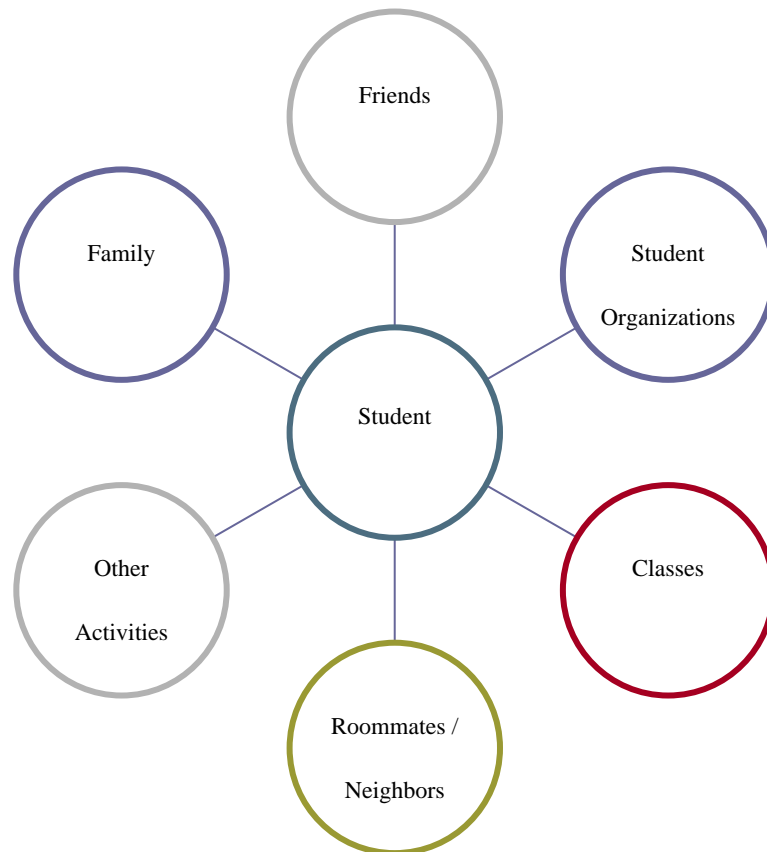


Figure 1. One conceptual model of a student's in-person interactions.

However, when looking at the effects of social interaction due to online social networking, a very different level, type and frequency of interactions is evident. As shown in Figure 2, the multiple spheres of social interaction present in this student's life overlap when the student is interacting with these constituencies online.

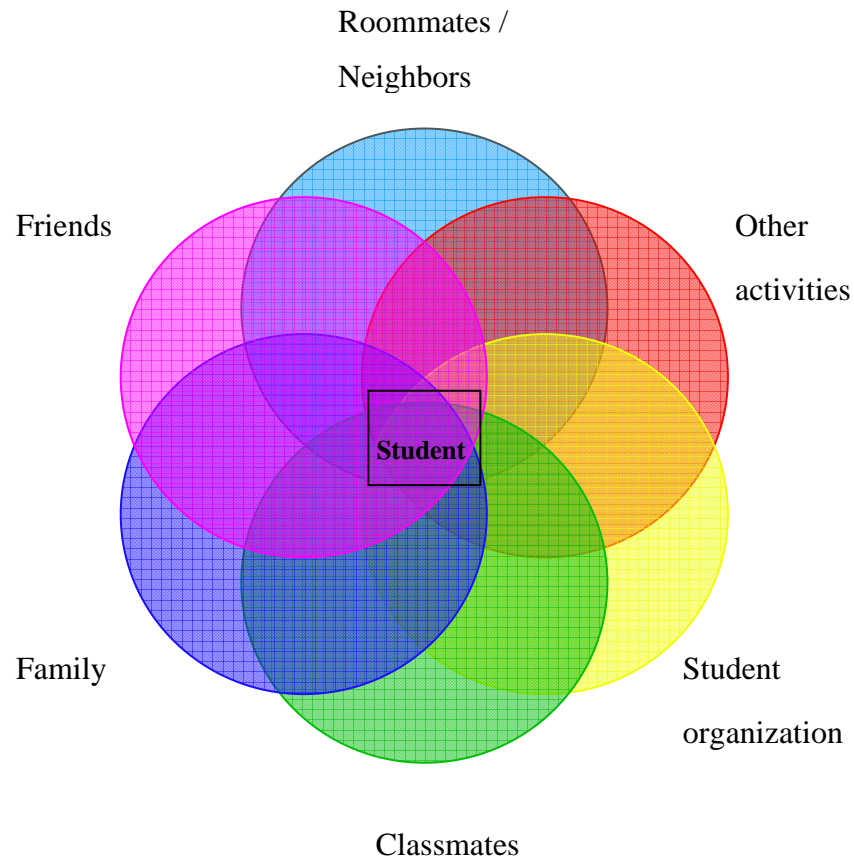


Figure 2. A conceptual model of a student's online interactions.

Conceptually, the theories of Astin, Schlossberg and Maslow woven together with Granovetter's social network analysis provide a foundation for understanding online communities. The resulting comprehensive theory indicates that through online social networking, a student can interact with many formerly distinct constituencies simultaneously. Additionally, that person's friends and contacts will be more likely to connect to each other independently of that primary individual than they would

had the interactions only been in-person. This conceptual framework will be tested as part of the survey and focus group protocol throughout this study.

The remainder of this chapter will explore court cases and legal implications for Universities, followed by conclusions. The next chapter will present this study's methodology. Chapter IV will convey the results of this study that are applicable to the three research questions. Finally, Chapter V will present conclusions, recommendations and implications for further research.

Court Cases

In Loco Parentis

Though they are not the legal guardians of students, universities are often seen as guardians nonetheless. This concept of university staff functioning “in place of the parent” or *in loco parentis*, implies that there's an expectation that universities have responsibility to function in the same way as parents would, while the student is at school (Larabee, 2006). That is, society generally has the expectation that the university will educate students, monitor what they do, and help discipline them appropriately much like a parent would discipline his or her children. It is not to say that parents do not want to take a role in their college student's education, but rather that most of the educational experiences take care of itself. One application of the principle of *in loco parentis* is whether or not the university maintains a duty of care

to its students and the community to monitor the online content posted by students (Mawdaley, 2004).

Communications Decency Act

First proposed in 1995, and passed in February 1996, the Communications Decency Act sought to ban specific words and content from being available on the Internet. This included fiction like “Catcher in the Rye and “the 7 dirty words” (Center for Democracy and Technology, 2006). In addition to barring offensive content such as cyberhate or pornography and vulgarity, the CDA would have made “criminals out of anyone transmitting these materials electronically,” which Shari Steele says would have contradicted a number of court decisions at the time that upheld the freedom of speech on the World Wide Web (Steele, 1995; Johnson, 1995). The CDA dealt not only with the Internet, but other forms of electronic media are addressed, including harassing phone calls, charges billed when calling toll-free numbers, and increased fines for radio and TV obscenities, (S. 314-CDA; Center for Democracy and Technology, 1995). The CDA was a way for adults to satisfy their “duty to take responsibility for adult misbehaviors and to quit blaming them on young people,” (Males, 276).

The Citizens Internet Empowerment Coalition filed suit to overturn the CDA, challenging “that the Internet is a unique communications technology which deserves First Amendment protections at least as broad as those enjoyed as by the print medium,” (Center for Democracy and Technology, 2005). The CIEC goes on to

say that individuals and families should exercise discretion in their own activities online; as opposed to having the government prohibit content. The CDA was eventually struck down by the Supreme Court on June 26, 1997, citing the Internet as a “unique medium entitled to the highest protection under the free speech protections of the First Amendment to the US Constitution. This gives the Internet the same free speech protection as print (media). The Internet is the first electronic media to achieve this because of low barriers to access, abundance, many speakers, no gatekeepers,” (Center for Democracy and Technology, 2006). In the Court’s decision, the Court resoundingly rejected the notion of “censorship of the on-line medium and establishes the fundamental principles that will guide judicial consideration of the Internet for the 21st Century,” (Electronic Privacy Information Center, 2006).

Network Neutrality

On May 25, 2006, the House Judiciary Committee voted in favor of the network-neutrality bill, the Internet Freedom and Nondiscrimination Act, HR 5417, which would make it an “anti-trust violation for telecommunications companies to favor certain types of network traffic with fast-lane delivery to people’s computers and put other traffic in the slow lane,” (Free Press, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2006). As this quote suggests, the bill ensures fair and equal access to the Internet by everyone without discrimination or prejudice, as opposed to Internet Service Providers currently being able to limit who can access

what arbitrarily. “‘Freedom of communication is an essential prerequisite for the restoration of the health of our democracy,’ former Vice President Al Gore declared in a recent speech. ‘It is particularly important that the freedom of the Internet be protected against either the encroachment of government or the efforts at control by large media conglomerates,’” (Free Press, 2006c).

According to the provisions of the Bill, the four essential Internet Freedoms that are included are: “1) Consumers are entitled to access the lawful Internet content of their choice; 2) Consumers are entitled to run applications and services of their choice, subject to the needs of law enforcement; 3) Consumers are entitled to connect their choice of legal devices that do not harm the network; and 4) Consumers are entitled to competition among network providers, application and service providers, and content providers,” (Wikipedia, 2006, p. 4).

These four provisions, should the Bill pass, will set up a new framework for analyzing some First Amendment Rights and applications on the Internet. These applications will provide guidance to student affairs professionals in responding to issues of concern with student-posted content online.

Court Cases and Judgments

Reno v. ACLU, 521 U.S. 844, 853, 870 (1997) says that, “First Amendment rights apply with full force to the Internet,” (Levy, 2006, p. 5). How that applies, however, has not yet been exhaustively determined for various types of content within various forms online. The courts distinguish between passive sites (for

example, a university website) and highly interactive sites (websites like match.com, Myspace.com and Facebook.com would be considered highly interactive) and everywhere in between, in determining jurisdiction for lawsuits. At issue for most universities, is the appropriateness and/or legality of student-posted online content, communication, and file-sharing through online social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace. These online communities where participants post personal profiles, information, interests, pictures, messages and other communication pose significant questions for society (Silverman, 2006).

One main problem is that most users do not exercise restraint in what they post, blatantly bragging about their illegal activities, latest sexual exploits, and even tactless insults, both in comments and pictures. It is not yet clear if students would exercise restraint if they knew how the content they post affects how they are perceived (Bugeja, 2006). Even if they do realize the detrimental effect their content might have, they may not be aware that the entire Internet is considered public domain, whether or not a password is required to log-in.

There is not much that can be done about the offensive and inappropriate content on some sites, or even the existence of some of the websites themselves. However, university concern tends to be related to general worry about what students might be running into online, what students might be posting and how that might affect them long-term (Mawdaley, 2004; Wellman & Gulia, 1997). Societal concern,

of course, includes this, and broader concerns covering all constituents, most notably, Internet predators.

The First Amendment will not allow for society to prohibit most offensive, inappropriate content from the Internet. Even if universities were to have enough staff to monitor and regulate all student-posted online content, it is not clear that that would be an appropriate action (Levy, n.d.). Most Free Speech litigation and news stories mention that if party A is saying something that offends party B, the university cannot stop party A from saying it (unless it falls under the unprotected speech category), but the university is obligated to offer party B equal time and opportunity to present his or her own viewpoint (Calleros, 1997; French, Lukianoff & Silvergate, 2005).

Looking at possible legal questions that might arise out of actual incidents that have occurred at the primary institution of study, the University of Southern California, and the University of California, Riverside as the institution where the researcher works, will provide clarity in applying this phenomenon to legal applications. For each of the four issues listed below, two or three bullet points will follow demonstrating possible outcomes to legal questions that might arise:

- 1) a student talking about his severe depression online right before successfully committing suicide;
 - a. The student's family could very well sue the university for negligence and win, if the university had a stated policy of reviewing Internet content.

- b. Without a stated policy of review, the student's family could probably sue for negligence for not catching other warning signs, or educating student up front about warning signs.
- 2) students exchanging insulting remarks through their Facebook.com profiles;
 - a. Without any physical altercation, any legal action on this depends on the severity of the harassment, but will probably not be negligence.
 - b. With a resulting physical altercation, negligence seems a valid argument.
- 3) proof (in pictures and messages) of students engaging in underage drinking and the use of illegal drugs;
 - a. There are grounds for negligence at a later date because there is reasonable evidence to predict continuance of this deleterious behavior.
 - b. The students and their families can argue that it was the university's obligation to protect their students from the harmful behavior of themselves or others.
- 4) Cyber hate, that is, a student posting messages of a hateful nature, including swastikas and messages related to specific, targeted groups being inferior, on his website and Facebook.com pages, as well as using his university email account to harass students.
 - a. Harassment here is easier to prove. Should the university know about this and let it continue, the university might be held liable for negligence for letting the harassment continue (and likely get worse over time).

- b. Again, the university might also be held liable for negligence in not educating their students properly to avoid this sort of confrontation.

One additional area of concern is that if the university receives hints or tips from students and other campus community members about incidents or pending issues, they might be sued for negligence just because everyone might assume that they were told about a pending online issue or concern and chosen not to do anything about it. This is potentially the case even if the university makes no official statement about regular and consistent review of online material, but particularly so if there is an official statement.

Legal Implications for Universities

Institutions of higher education have a moral and legal obligation to protect the rights of their students in their pursuit of education, while maintaining the sanctity of the university as a “marketplace of ideas” (Kaplin & Lee, 1995). In *ACLU v. Mote* (2005) the District Court for the Maryland-Southern Division, quotes *Glover v. Cole*, 762 F.2d 1197, 1200 (4th Cir. 1985), that “a college milieu is the quintessential ‘marketplace of ideas’.” Essentially, one of the benefits of the college environment is its place as a venue for every perspective and viewpoint to contribute to learning and development. For all public universities, all private universities in California (Leonard’s Law) and other states with regulations imposing Free Speech requirements on private institutions, and most private universities receiving a great

deal of Federal funding, there is an expectation that universities need to balance individuals' rights to freedom of speech with the need to maintain a campus community of respect, and preserve the university as a marketplace of ideas.

Universities typically employ student conduct codes to address behavioral issues that the institution expects to be of particular relevance to students during their college experience. Given the growing cognizance of Internet-related questions of free speech, will universities turn to their codes of conduct and add wording to specifically address online content and speech that students post? Yet, if universities have a specific, enumerated policy declaring that they will monitor online content of student web pages, profiles, and user-created online social networking communities, are they then opening themselves up to liability on a number of issues? These issues are: 1) negligence for failing to catch warning signs of a potential problem before it happens, 2) possible infringement on First Amendment rights to Freedom of Speech, 3) failing to establish or preserve a safe learning environment free from harassment that is conducive to a positive learning experience.

Liability might still exist without a formal policy, but that has yet to be determined by the Courts, and even so, it is likely much weaker than the liability attached if there is a formal policy. There is a chance that someone can sue a university for negligence for *not* warning a student about the pitfalls of participating in online communities. Based on the earlier discussion of what constitutes

negligence, any reasonable person would most likely educate students about these pitfalls, so universities ought to pay attention and educate their students.

The role of student affairs professionals on campus is to support the educational and developmental experiences of college students to supplement their in-class education with a co-curricular or out-of-class experience. Given the increasingly prominent role that the Internet and developing technology is playing within the lives of today's students, it is important for universities to pay attention to online issues of free speech. By doing so, student affairs professionals can understand what students are doing online, outside of the classroom, and how to support their students in their online activities.

Negligence and the University

Negligence is defined as a failure to exercise the duty of care towards others which a reasonable or prudent person would do in the circumstances, or taking action which such a reasonable person would not, and is a "legal cause of damage if it directly and in natural and continuous sequence produces or contributes substantially to producing such damage, so it can reasonable be said that if not for the negligence, the loss, injury or damage would not have occurred," (Lectric Law Library, 2006). In essence, negligence is the failure to protect society against unnecessary or unreasonable risks, and any person or institution that neglects to protect society, particularly a specific individual or group of individuals, can be held liable for the

ensuing damages (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2006). In any legal action in which negligence is one of the theories used, the court will evaluate the facts of the incident to determine what a reasonable person would have done in the same circumstances.

In some instances, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have been found negligent for failing to protect its users (customers) from harm that a reasonable person would have taken action to prevent. Plaintiffs are increasingly suing Internet Service Providers for failing to police the Internet for porn, Internet predators, or other objectionable content. Not only are they suing these ISPs, but oftentimes, plaintiffs are winning their cases in the courts. The argument is that “ISPs are not only failing to monitor their Web sites properly, but federal laws are also contributing to the problem by granting ISPs broad immunity from suits challenging content they carry,” (Baldas, 2006). The Federal law Baldas is referring to is the Communications Decency Act, which would have made it easier to sue ISPs for content posted by their customers; it was eventually thrown out by the Supreme Court.

Baldas (2006) writes that in *Doe v. Bates and Yahoo*, the plaintiff and his parents sued Yahoo, Inc., alleging that Yahoo allowed Bates and others to share pornography on a website created and accessed through Yahoo (No. 5:05 CV 91). This website included nude pictures of the minor who had allegedly been molested and photographed by a neighbor. The plaintiffs in this case are arguing that Yahoo itself is in violation of federal child pornography statutes “by receiving, distributing,

storing and disseminating child pornography,” (Baldas, 2006). In *Barnes v. Yahoo* (2005), a woman sued Yahoo for allowing her ex-boyfriend to post nude pictures of her on an online profile. This legal action also alleges that in response to a formal complaint that she filed with Yahoo, Yahoo promised to remove the pictures, but had not yet done so (Civil No. 05-926-AA).

An attorney for one of the above plaintiffs believes that the reason why there is so much concern over Internet content and behavior is that “people can do whatever they want under the guise of free speech. People are allowed to peddle whatever they want on the Internet and ISPs have just turned a blind eye,” (Baldas, 2006). Under the guise of the Communications Decency Act, which was eventually struck down, ISPs enjoyed federal shielding from prosecution for the actions of its customers, though even in the mid-1990’s ISPs were working to educate their users (particularly parents) over how to be safe online (Baldas, 2006). It does seem as though current law is placing increasing liability on ISPs for the actions of their customers, so ISPs are likely to develop stricter regulations and more diligent enforcement, since there is established liability and an expected duty of care.

As institutions of higher learning, virtually every university functions in the role of Internet Service Provider in some way. Most institutions offer high-speed Internet service through the campus network. What this means is that the university plays a dual-role in relation to Internet usage by its students, that of Internet Service Provider, and that of *in loco parentis*, which guides universities not to control or

parent students, but to guide them along cognitive, moral, ethical and identity developmental pathways. In this instance, the university's role is to educate student about the implications and effects of content they might choose to post online.

For this discussion, negligence could be applied to the university for failing to act on suspicion of students engaging in illegal activities that result in "loss, injury or damage" sustained by another individual or group of individuals per the definition used above. This does not necessarily mean that because a student puts up pictures of him or herself engaging in underage drinking that the university can be sued for not forcing that student to go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, or an educational workshop. Undoubtedly, if that intoxicated student would get into verbal and physical altercations with other students that resulted in assault, the university might be facing a lawsuit, for failing to be aware of what was occurring. This would be particularly true if the student would post pictures from the wild party he had been at and talk about how crazy he acted, and other students were aware of all of this.

This might be considered a lack of oversight on the university's part. The university would be in a significantly worse position should there be an official or understood policy that the university would be regularly monitoring Facebook.com (Lectric Law Library, n.d.; Kaplin & Lee, 1995). In that case, the lawsuit from the students injured during a physical altercation with the underage drinker, would allege that the university was negligent for knowing what was going on, and failing to do something about it (Kaplin & Lee, 1995).

In addition, there are few universities that could afford to monitor user-posted online content, even if the university wants to. Wise institutions will only follow up on *reported* instances of problematic issues with student-posted online content. The university itself cannot officially seek out problems up front without facing severe liability. Universities do not have enough funding or staffing to realistically monitor all of the online content posted by their students, and thus should not create the expectation that they will do so.

It is unclear what levels of liability can be assessed to universities for the Internet content posted by students in OSN profiles. Universities might very well face liability even without an official statement of monitoring student-posted Internet content. Yet, the biggest concern seems to be that if universities officially state that the university will monitor the Internet content posted by their students it may face liability for negligence. This is particularly the case if that content includes explicit or implicit pictures, messages or comments pertaining to illegal activities or some other questionable activity. Neither legal theory has been tried in the court as of yet, but an official statement of reviewing online communities for content, whether it is made in the Student Code of Conduct, university handbook, or even vocalized in a university orientation session, sets up an expectation of a duty of care. The university is obligated to protect its students from injury and insult, harm and harassment, as well as an obligation to follow up on every problematic issue with interventions or sanctions, judicial or otherwise (Bugeja, 2006). In fact, it is highly likely that

universities need to take reasonable steps to educate students about potential pitfalls and risks in order to minimize their liability.

Conclusion

In this chapter the researcher has reviewed all of the relevant literature connecting student involvement, transition and human motivation student development theories to social network analysis as that framework applied to online communities and online social networking. In addition literature about in-person and online communities has been presented to frame a possible data result that online communities fulfill a similar purpose and function as in-person or online communities. Finally, the researcher has reviewed the legal implications posed to universities by student participation and activities within online communities and online social networks.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Chapter Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand students' perceptions about the importance of online social networking and their views on the role that colleges and universities should play in managing student usage of these phenomena. This study will employ the use of the student voice to examine the effect of student use of online phenomena (e.g. Facebook.com and Myspace.com) on their educational and developmental experiences, campus communities and the practice of student affairs. That will shape and frame the student perspective and inform student affairs professionals and administrators about the online social networking experience. The student voice will be gathered through conducting focus groups and an online survey. Additionally, by participating in and observing online social networks (particularly Facebook), the researcher will gain insight into actual student interactions within online communities. By gaining a better understanding of the effects that online communities and online social networks (OSNs) have on college students' experiences, student affairs professionals will have a stronger sense of how to work with students in this new type of community, and how best to support students in their online interactions.

This study will help student affairs professionals understand: 1) what online communities and OSNs are and how they function, 2) the role they play in the student experience, and 3) how student affairs professionals should interact with

students using online communities. This researcher will also identify current best practices on university campuses for working with students on issues related to Facebook and other online social networks, and use those practices as models for additional interventions.

The research questions in this study are:

1. How do students utilize Online Social Networks, and in what ways do they engage with each other?
2. What do students feel are the benefits and drawbacks associated with their usage of online communities and online social networks?
3. What are students' attitudes and perceptions about staff and administrator involvement in online social networks?

This chapter will provide a detailed description of the procedure to be followed during the course of this proposed study, including the design, sample and population, data collection and analysis. This chapter discusses the research methods used in this study to understand student perceptions about the importance of online social networking and their views. First, the qualitative methods approach to this phenomenological study will be presented and justified. Then the sample and population, data collection procedures and data analysis procedures will be presented and explained. The ethical considerations will also be addressed. Finally, the demographic information for actual focus group participants and survey respondents will be presented.

Research Design

This study will be qualitative in nature, and data will be collected through a combination of surveys, focus groups, document analysis, and researcher participant-observation within Facebook as a model for all online communities. Reviewing and participating in a number of online social networks or online communities, mainly Facebook and Myspace, will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the way these communities work and the varied types of interactions students have within them. Additionally, that understanding will assist in the formation of survey questions and focus group protocol. The surveys collected and focus groups conducted will yield data that will answer all three research questions.

The online student surveys and focus group protocols each contained a number of questions that are applicable in answering the first research question: How do students utilize Online Social Networks, and in what ways do they engage with each other? These survey and focus group questions included variations along the following lines: “what do you use online social networks for and how do you expect your usage to change”, “what role do OSNs play in your life and college experiences”, “what would make you stop using any particular site”, “what types of in-person communities and online groups are you a part of”, “what is the difference between in-person communities (i.e. your school, your neighborhood, your city, and other actual communities you identify with) and online communities”, “what is the difference between online social networks and other online communication tools and

academic portals”, etc. These questions were asked in various forms, and even those with different aims sometimes resulted in similar responses.

The online student surveys and focus group protocols each contained a number of questions that are applicable in answering the second research question: What do students feel are the benefits and drawbacks associated with their usage of online communities and online social networks? These questions included variations along the following lines: “how do you think participating in OSNs affects your college experience”, “what drawbacks do you see in this form of communication”, “what questionable content have you run across on Facebook, Myspace or other online social networks”, “what are the positive and negative effects of OSNs on college student experiences”, “what is your opinion on the benefits and drawbacks of students using OSNs”, “how often has the student experienced some of the various features of OSNs”, “in what ways might online communities or online social networks be able to help students achieve their personal growth and developmental goals”, etc. Variations of these questions were asked in order to answer the second research question about the benefits and drawbacks students perceive in using online social networks.

The focus groups and some of the survey questions contributed to answering the third research question: What are students’ attitudes and perceptions about staff and administrator involvement in online social networks? These questions included variations along the following lines: “what is the appropriate response to content

students post and who should be responding to that content”, “what liability does a university face for content that students post”, “what level of involvement (advertising, participation, recruitment, etc.) is appropriate for the university”, “is your university checking online social networks for potential policy violations”, “what should universities know about student participation in online social networks”, “assuming there are significant concerns related to what happens within online social networks, what do you think the university should do”, “what interventions has your university taken to educate students about the benefits and drawbacks of using OSNs”, “does your university have any formal or informal policy related to reviewing student-posted online content”, “have you ever been advised to review your profile to remove questionable content or adjust privacy settings”, “what do you think the university could do to help educate students and what material and methods should be included in any such educational program”, etc. These questions were asked in various forms in order to answer the third research question about the role students believe universities and staff should play within online social networks, if any.

Sample and Population

This research study intends to gain an understanding of student perceptions about the importance of online social networking and their views on the role that colleges and universities should play in managing that phenomenon. Thus, student

affairs professionals can determine the best ways to interact with students in online communities like they do with students engaging in in-person communities. To do this, student surveys will be conducted across the country through the college network of Facebook.com, and student focus groups will be conducted at the University of Southern California.

The University of Southern California (USC), a large, private institution of Higher Education in Los Angeles, California was the institution selected for this study. As a large, private, four-year institution, USC has a total enrollment of about 33,000 students (USC, 2006). Thus, it is not surprising that USC reportedly has the highest percentage of its enrolled undergraduate students registered for and actively using Facebook on a regular basis (Facebook staff, 2006). As of July 2006, USC had over 1,000 active Facebook groups.

By conducting focus groups of undergraduate students at this institution, the researcher will be able to present an understanding of students' perceptions about the uses, benefits and drawbacks of online social networking, and what role students think the university should play in these communities. Student perceptions about what they see as the potential benefits and drawbacks, and the university's role, will help student affairs professionals incorporate these communities into their work. It may be useful for universities to use a media that students are going to use increasingly on an ongoing basis to communicate more effectively and efficiently, depending on the data collected from students.

Six focus groups will be conducted at USC. Each will consist of four to ten undergraduate students. Each student focus group session will last 40-60 minutes. In addition, these focus groups will also highlight specific incidents and problems that have occurred involving these online communities, which will be incorporated into the student focus group discussions. These focus groups will also indicate any interventions these institutions might already have implemented.

The primary units of study for this research problem are students enrolled at USC. The data collected should be fairly representative to be generally assumed as applicable to all students across the country. In order to understand this phenomenon, and to individual students engaging in these online communities and online social networks, the student's voices themselves must be heard (Patton, 2002). In addition, the secondary units of study are undergraduate students enrolled at colleges and universities all over the United States to understand their notions and conceptions about online social networks. Thus, the focus of data collection will be on student surveys and focus groups, document analysis, observation and participant-observation within online communities.

Data Collection Procedures

Using the research points enumerated in Chapter One, and the focus group and survey protocols found in Appendixes A-D, this will be a qualitative, phenomenological study of students' experiences in the online social networking

environment. The data collected will be qualitative in nature. Data will be collected through surveys, focus groups and reviewing the content and interactions within online social networks like Facebook. Surveys will be collected from students enrolled in colleges around the country. Respondents will be recruited from amongst those that participate in Facebook.com through the posting of Facebook flyer advertisements on the college network pages, and posting messages on the wall of the largest Facebook groups (totaling over 1.5 million potential survey respondents). Focus groups with groups of three to ten USC undergraduate students each will be conducted.

The researcher will also make use of Facebook and Myspace in particular to gain a first-hand understanding of those environments. The data collection process will include researcher-participation in Facebook and Myspace to get first-hand experience with how these online social networks work, what they do, and all of the different purposes students use them for. In addition, document analysis of current research related to online interactions, theories related to social networking, communities and student development, and preexisting research data, findings, reports and presentations will contribute to the research.

Each student focus group will consist of three to ten undergraduate students, and participants will be requested to represent a variety of constituencies within the university as well as represent a variation in activity level. Participants will be solicited through a variety of means, including Facebook flyers, message boards and

email. Each focus group will last approximately 40-60 minutes and be audio taped. Each focus group will be fully transcribed. It will not be important for focus group participants to have completed the survey first, but survey respondents who indicate that they attend the University of Southern California will be invited to participate in the focus groups.

In addition to the surveys and focus groups, the researcher will explore various online social networks, with a particular focus on Facebook and Myspace, and other Internet communication technologies, such as Instant Messenger programs, Youtube and others. Examining the online social networks students participate in will provide a more in-depth understanding of what students are doing in these communities. The author will observe student participation and interaction within these online communities as well as look at specific incidents that are referenced in the collected data. This level of analysis will possibly reveal additional resources of interventions those universities or others might be implementing to alleviate concerns about online communities. As possible, all documents and resources referenced online or mentioned by participants will be obtained for subsequent document analysis.

Validity of and Confidence in Findings

The validity and accuracy of this phenomenological study will be based on triangulating data obtained from document analysis, student focus groups, an online

survey and participant-observation of student interactions within online communities and OSNs. Triangulating various sources will provide a more robust understanding of this phenomenon, more credible findings, and thus, a better justification for concluding recommendations (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). For this study, data triangulation will strengthen the findings, as no individual method or data source will reveal a clear and accurate understanding of the phenomenon. For example, comparing observed OSN interactions with the focus group data, or focus group responses with survey data, or even any differences in the types and nature of responses gathered within the surveys or within the focus groups will contribute to a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

This will be a phenomenological study to provide student affairs professionals with an understanding of students' perceptions about the importance of online social networking, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of interacting within online communities, and their view on the role, if any, that colleges and universities should play in managing these social networks. Through that understanding, student affairs professionals can determine the best ways to interact with online communities like they do with in-person communities. Creswell (2003) writes that a phenomenological study in this area uses student voice and stated experiences to identify and define the nature of the phenomenon. By studying a few hundred students through the online survey, a small number of subjects through the focus groups, and including participant-observation of student interactions within

OSNs, patterns of relationships and meaning will become clear (Creswell, 2003). In addition, a great deal of emphasis will be placed on best practices currently being employed by universities, and other practices that universities might consider employing in working with students with regard to OSNs.

Data Analysis Procedures

As mentioned above, the surveys and focus groups will provide rich information for qualitative analysis. As a reminder, the research questions are:

1. How do students utilize online social networks, and in what ways do they engage with each other?
2. What do students feel are the benefits and concerns associated with their usage of online communities and online social networks?
3. What are students' attitudes and perceptions about staff and administrator involvement in online social networks?

Question 1 will be partially answered as a result of document analysis and researcher participation and observation of Facebook and other online communities. In addition, research questions 1, 2, and 3 will be answered through a combination of the student surveys and focus groups being conducted at USC (see Appendices A through D).

Systematically reviewing online social networks to see student participants actively engaging in their online communities and online social networks will further enhance the results collected from the student surveys and focus groups. In addition,

document analysis will provide additional insight for all three of the research questions.

Surveys

An online survey will enable the researcher to collect the opinions and perspectives of a large number of individual students on a substantial number of questions or points. Additionally, an online survey is more convenient and rapid than some other data collection method, such as focus groups. What focus groups lack in breadth, surveys compensate for. Surveys, on the other hand, can lack depth, which is a strong benefit of focus groups.

The survey data collected was analyzed rigorously. First, the researcher used the analytical tools provided through the survey mechanism on www.surveymonkey.com. Those tools tabulate data for survey questions with defined responses, indicating the number and percentage of respondents indicating each response. For all of the open-ended survey questions, the researcher read all survey data to get an initial idea of categories of responses for each question. Once initial categories or themes were identified, for each question the researcher classified each response by theme. The researcher reviewed the themes and the responses within each theme and collapsed categories as appropriate. This continued until all questions had been coded thoroughly. Though the intent of the researcher was for each survey question to ascertain different information about the student

experience within online social networks, many participants felt that some questions were not very different. As such, the researcher clustered like questions together, and in some cases, grouped the responses accordingly. It should be noted that in the case of similar questions, the resulting data exhibited little if any difference.

Focus Groups

Using a particular protocol (see Appendixes A, B and C) to facilitate focus groups with a small number of participants in each, the researcher can direct the line of questioning (Creswell, 2003). Additionally, by conducting focus groups as opposed to one-on-one interviews, the student subjects will interact with each other during the focus group in a potentially similar fashion to their online interactions. A limitation of focus groups is that the information presented might be out of context for the setting. It may be difficult for a subject to explain what they mean by an answer without showing an example of the online content being referenced.

The researcher reviewed the audiotapes and handwritten notes of each focus group repeatedly during the transcription phase of data collection and analysis. After each focus group was transcribed, focus group responses for each question were coded into themes identified by the researcher. Data was analyzed focus group by focus group as well as question by question for all groups simultaneously, and data presented according to the latter. Initial themes and classifications of responses were collapsed into broader categories as necessary for ease of comprehension.

Observations

The benefit of observations as a method for qualitative inquiry, and in particular for a phenomenological study is that information is provided in its natural setting and context (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2003). This will serve as a natural and necessary complement to focus groups, as observations will help overcome one of the limitations of focus groups. In addition, observations will enable unforeseen issues to emerge that bear relevance on the study (Creswell, 2003).

One of the main limitations with observation is that the subject may behave differently when she or he is aware of being observed than she or he would naturally behave. Observation bias may affect the accuracy of online social networking observations. Thus, a student who is being observed unknowingly will be likely to engage in OSNs just as they would if not being observed. As the observations in this study will be conducted through the average and general usage of Facebook by the researcher, students will not be aware that their online interactions are being observed, and no identifying information about any particular student will be recorded or maintained. That may help to minimize abnormalities in the behavior student participants engage in during the ongoing observation.

For this study, the researcher participated in multiple online communities and OSNs. Primarily, the researcher was an active participant in Facebook, and focused participant-observation within that particular OSN. The researcher interacted with numerous students in a variety of capacities on Facebook, mimicking actual student-

to-student interactions. This was aided by the researcher's close working relationship with students over the course of the release and expansion of Facebook to various campuses, and thus the researcher experimented and grew with students from the researcher's primary networks as they became increasingly familiar with the OSN.

Document Analysis

Analyzing documents such as e-mail, memos, reports, newspapers and documents related to any interventions each institution may have implemented will provide another lens for analysis and triangulation for this study (Patton, 2002). Using document analysis, the researcher will identify and adopt the language of participants, and gain insight in a way that the study's participants might not otherwise be able to convey (Creswell, 2003).

One limitation to document analysis will arise if any of the documents are private communication that cannot be released to the public (Creswell, 2003). Other limitations exist because the documents may be very hard to find, inaccurate, or unauthentic. To overcome these limitations, the researcher will seek out documents for analysis from multiple sources and constituencies.

The researcher read any published article or research that could be reasonably attained over the course of this study. Though by no means does the researcher believe that all published articles, research or other news stories related to OSNs has been referenced in this study, particularly those published most recently, the breadth

of the documents analyzed for this study has provided a solid foundation for the survey and focus group protocol. This study is based largely on the little that was known about OSNs prior to the commencement of this study, and is also based on the researcher's own experience within Facebook and other online communities and OSNs.

Trustworthiness

Ethical Considerations

The University of Southern California Institutional Review Board's procedures for conducting ethical research will be followed. The anonymity and identities of all participants will be protected and ensured. Any information that might link a student participant to their university or risk breaching their anonymity will be prevented. In the event that specific content from Facebook, Myspace or other online communities is given particular focus or discussion in this study, or printed for more analysis by the author, personal information will be withheld. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Participants will understand that their participation will be voluntary, and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Researcher's Subjectivity

The researcher's personal interest in this research is partially a result of current and previous work experience at the University of California, Riverside.

Previously, I served as the Executive Director for Hillel, which is a Jewish version of an ethnic student program department that is separate from the university's administrative cluster. I have also worked as a graduate assistant in the student activities area of that campus, working directly with a number of student organizations. As an undergraduate and graduate student at that campus, I served in a number of student government positions, and was very active in multiple student organizations. All of these experiences exposed me to various aspects of student-staff interaction, and multiple exposures to these online social networks. In my previous role, I spent a great deal of time utilizing Facebook and other online social networks to locate students that would be potentially interested in programs or events or to send out announcements to those already affiliated.

In my current role, as the Coordinator of First Year Programs at the University of California, Riverside, there are no work needs that *require* the use of Facebook. However, various individuals, departments, student organizations and others make avid use of Facebook in a variety of interesting ways. We have used it to recruit Orientation Counselors, advertise for Homecoming and promote school spirit. My continuing interest in this phenomenon is to contribute to the profession's (and society's) understanding of student communication methods and media, so that we can continue to communicate more effectively with students. The intent in this study is to provide a bias-free examination of OSNs and how student affairs professionals can best incorporate OSNs into their work with students.

Survey Participants

The survey conducted through this study was completed by using SurveyMonkey.com as the host for the online survey, and participants solicited through the use of email, and advertisements posted on Facebook.com. Facebook.com participant solicitation took multiple forms, including paid “flyers” advertising the survey within the college-based networks of USC and other large universities, a Facebook “event” directing students to complete the survey, messages posted on the walls of some of the largest Facebook groups in existence, and overall word-of-mouth marketing. The survey was active from December 2006 through early February 2007. In total, 367 students participated in the online survey, and most of those students successfully completed all sections of the survey. There are 126 students who did not complete the demographic information about themselves or their college or university.

The university information reveals information not only about the size and type of universities, but also begins to show some of the presence that each respondent’s university has within online social networking communities. Table 1 displays student responses to descriptive questions about their universities and their own demographic characteristics. Most of the respondents are enrolled at public universities, with the plurality of respondents attending institutions with over 30,000 students enrolled. The institutions most represented by survey participants were the University of Southern California (as the institution of primary study received more

intentional advertising) and the University of California, Riverside (as the institution where the researcher currently works and had multiple student contacts).

Total Student Enrollment at University										
<2,500 25 (10%)		2,500-4,999 19(8%)		5,000-9,999 35(15%)		10,000-19,999 54(22%)		20,000-30,000 40(17%)		>30,000 68 (28%)
Public University		184 (76%)			Private University			57 (24%)		
Do staff interact using online communities or Instant Messaging?				Do you think university staff should interact using online communities or Instant Messaging?						
Yes 118 (49%)		No 21 (9%)	Not sure 102 (42%)		Yes 96(40%)		Maybe 101(42%)		No 44(18%)	
How many hours per week do you spend on the following activities?										
		0-4 hrs		5-10 hrs		11-15 hrs		16-20 hrs		>20 hrs
Using the Internet		17(7%)		50(21%)		46(19%)		51(21%)		80(33%)
Online Communities (i.e. Facebook, IM)		83(34%)		82(34%)		33(14%)		20(8%)		26(11%)
In-person interactions		23(10%)		52(22%)		60(25%)		43(18%)		74(31%)
Class		32(13%)		28(12%)		69(29%)		72(30%)		44(18%)
Work		78(32%)		38(16%)		33(14%)		29(12%)		65(27%)
Other Rec. Activities		44(18%)		97(40%)		58(24%)		34(14%)		14(6%)
Which of the following best applies to your student experience?										
Class Yr	First Yr	Soph	Junior		Senior	5 th year	Grad	Not enrolled		
Last year	48(20%)	44 (18%)	36 (15%)		34 (14%)	3 (1%)	12 (5%)	64 (27%)		
This year	54(22%)	47 (20%)	38 (16%)		36 (15%)	12 (5%)	16 (7%)	38 (16%)		
GPA	0-1.99		2.00-2.49		2.50-2.99		3.00-3.49		3.50-4.00	
Last year	17 (7%)		3 (1%)		34 (14%)		84 (35%)		102 (42%)	
This year	14 (6%)		4 (2%)		37 (15%)		92 (38%)		93 (39%)	
Residence	On campus (Res. Halls)			Off-campus (w/ 3 miles)			Commuter (>3 miles)		Not enrolled	
This year	73 (30%)			66 (27%)			44 (18%)		58 (24%)	
Last year	81 (34%)			80 (33%)			45 (19%)		35 (15%)	
How involved / engaged are you in campus life?		I do not participate in any activities / events		I participate in a few activities / attend some events.			I participate moderately in a number of activities or events.		I am an active participant in many areas of campus life.	
Last year		46 (19%)		86 (36%)			56 (23%)		53 (22%)	
This year		37 (15%)		94 (39%)			49 (20%)		61 (25%)	
For each category below, please indicate the response that best categorizes your identity.										
Ethnicity	Chicano / Latino 3 (1%)	African-American 3 (1%)	Native American / Alaska Native 1 (0%)		Asian Pacific Islander 5 (2%)	Asian Indian 2 (1%)	Caucasian 187 (78%)	Mixed Ethnicity 11 (5%)	Other 9 (4%)	Decline to State 20 (8%)
Gender		Female: 179 (74%)			Male: 57 (24%)				Prefer not to answer: 5 (2%)	
Age	18 48(20%)	19 50 (21%)	20 40 (17%)	21 34 (14%)	22 24 (10%)	23 21 (9%)	24 6 (2%)	25+ 18 (7%)		

Table 1. University Information and Student Demographic Responses

Universities represented by survey respondents included a number of two and four year public and private institutions, heavily representing California institutions, followed by New England area universities. Table 1 also shows that almost half of the student respondents believe that staff on their campus interacts using online communities or Instant Messaging, while less than one-fifth of respondents stated that they do not want the university to have any online presence. This demonstrates that students are open to universities having a presence online, yet the specific details of those interactions are covered in more depth in chapter 4. The answers marked in bold are those receiving the most responses from students.

Students completing the online survey tended to have a relatively balanced split of time spent on various activities. The most surprising responses were from two-thirds of students who indicated that they spent five or more hours within online communities. Since Facebook stated that users spend between 18-20 minutes daily on Facebook, which amounts to a little over 2 hours weekly, the other hours students spend within online communities are on Instant Messenger and other online social networks. Given that one of society's concerns related to online social networking is that students will spend less time interacting with friends and other people in-person, it was also surprising that over two-thirds stated that they spent 11 hours or more interacting with friends in-person.

The demographics of the student respondents themselves are interesting. There were significantly more females responding to the online survey than males.

This may be due to differentials in student involvement by gender. Similarly, nearly eighty percent of respondents were Caucasian. It is possible that this is partially a result of the survey dissemination method, which included the researcher directly contacting a number of former colleagues that work for various Hillel chapters around the country with the request to disseminate the survey to their membership.

Another surprising finding is that student respondents, as a whole, had a significantly higher grade point average than would be expected based on the high amount of time spent within online communities and the Internet as a whole. Most students either lived on campus or within a three mile radius, and a large majority of them said that they were somewhat to actively involved in campus life.

Focus Group Participants

The second phase of this study involved conducting focus groups of students enrolled at the University of Southern California. Participants for these focus groups were solicited through targeted emails to specific, identifiable pockets of students. Six focus groups were completed, with the number of participants ranging from four to ten students in each. Out of the 43 students who participated in these focus groups, only 11 of them were male, and seven of those were from one focus group conducted in a fraternity house at the University of Southern California. One focus group was conducted with student officers from the Undergraduate Student Government. Another focus group was held with the officers and some members of another

student organization. The other three focus groups were held at the Joint Educational Project office due to the convenience of location and student traffic; participants included both student employees and their friends. All focus groups were completed at the University of Southern California in February 2007.

Each focus group participant, upon reading the Information Sheet, was asked to complete a short questionnaire that included some demographic information and basic questions about their online activities. Table 2 displays those responses.

Online Communities	Facebook 100%	Myspace 75%	Youtube 75%	Xanga 75%	Email 100%	IM programs 75%
Other Online Social Networks		Bebo, People.com, Friendster, Gmail chat, Google notebook				
Instant Messaging Programs		AIM, ICQ, Yahoo, MSN, I-Chat, Gmail chat, Skype				
Focus Groups	Group	Class	Majors	Gender	Ages	Online Communities
Focus Group I	Hillel Executive Board Officers	2-Sr. 1-Jr. 3-Soph. 1-1 st year	Cinema-Television, Political Science, Communications, Religion, History, Interdisciplinary Studies, Business	Female 5 Male 2	18-24	Facebook Myspace Youtube, Friendster Bebo and Xanga
Focus Group II	Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity	2-Jr. 5-Soph.	Business, Communications	Male 7	19-21	Facebook Myspace/Youtube
Focus Group III	Joint Educational Project Employees, and friends of employees	10-Sr. 7-Jr. 5-Soph. 3-1 st year	Public Relations, Psychology, Music, Sociology, Health and Humanities, Poli. Sci., American Lit., English, Education, Communications, History, Business.	Female 24	18-27	Facebook Myspace Youtube, People.com, Friendster, Gmail chat, Google notebook and Xanga
Focus Group IV				Male 1		
Focus Group VI						
Focus Group V	Undergraduate Student Government	3-Sr. 1-Jr.	Accounting, Poli. Sci, Business Communications	Female 3 Male: 1	21-22	Facebook Myspace Youtube
Other activities involved in: Sororities and Fraternities, recreational sports activities, community service endeavors, informal involvement and activities that they participate in as part of the organization, working Resident Assistants or in the Orientation office and elsewhere on campus. Over 80% of participants in these focus groups named at least one other student organization they were in.						

Table 2. Focus Group Participant Information

Each of the focus group participants indicated that their primary online social networking community is Facebook.com, yet there were additional OSNs and Instant Messaging (IM) programs listed, as shown in Table 2. The class levels, ages, gender and majors of focus group participants are also listed in Table 2.

Focus Group I was held with most of the executive board, and some members of Hillel, a campus-based student organization based on cultural, religious, spiritual and historical context. Focus group II, at the Alpha Epsilon Pi house, consisted of men only, and as a fraternity, it should not be surprising that many comments related to recruitment and social endeavors. Focus groups III, IV and VI, were held at the Joint Educational Project, which is a service-learning program that provides USC students with an opportunity to gain experience working in the community and collaboratively help give teachers in the community new tools and ideas for teaching their own students. These student participants were so eager to offer their input, that Focus Group VI, which started with a much lesser number of participants (three), rapidly grew to ten as new people walked in and heard the subject being discussed and asked if they could participate. Focus group V was held within the offices of the Undergraduate Student Government, with four of the executive officers participating. These students are obviously heavily vested in the interests of student engagement and avid student participation in campus life. Each of the participants spoke from that lens when answering the focus group questions. These students have been

involved in both the student usage and application of online social networks, as well as seen these complexities from a more holistic university perspective.

With the demographic information from the participants in both the surveys and focus groups presented, the actual research findings will be presented next. As a reminder, the survey and focus group protocols were designed with the intent that each question would produce different responses. In actuality, respondents to the surveys and focus groups tended to interpret some of the varied questions as similar, or at least responded as though some of the questions were similar. Thus, these responses and questions were synergized to provide a more comprehensive analysis. There are themes found while collecting survey and focus group data to answer the three research questions, and the duration of this chapter will be organized according to those themes. While some of these themes were also apparent in answering the other research questions, the researcher has made every effort to categorize themes and answers by the research question that it most appropriately applies to.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has explained the methodology for qualitative data collection and analysis to be used in conducting this phenomenological study. This design will help understand the data collected through the focus groups, observations and document analysis. In the next chapter, the research findings will be presented and analyzed. In the final chapter, legally acceptable recommendations

based on current trends, best practices, focus group data, survey responses and participant-observation will be presented.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Chapter Overview

This chapter will present the results of this study of student participation within online social networking communities. The overarching question of this study is: what are the effects of online communities on the experiences of college students. This question was examined by conducting an online survey, holding multiple focus groups with students from the University of Southern California, document analysis (including presentations, reports and other resources) and researcher participation within the key online social networking communities (Facebook and Myspace). Collecting data from multiple means and venues has provided a comprehensive base for understanding the effects of online social networks on college student experiences. The following three research questions were used to collect data in completion of this study:

1. How do students utilize Online Social Networks, and in what ways do they engage with each other?
2. What do students feel are the benefits and drawbacks associated with their usage of online communities and online social networks?
3. What are students' attitudes and perceptions about staff and administrator involvement in online social networks?

For organizational purposes, this chapter will be organized by each research question, and within each of those three sections, will be broken up by the themes found in the study results.

Research Question One: How do students utilize (OSNs), and in what ways do they engage with each other?

To understand the effects of OSN communities on college student experiences, it is important to fully comprehend what purposes students have for these sites, how students use these sites and in what ways they interact with each other. By understanding the multiple means of online communication that students utilize, what purposes they apply this medium for communication to, and the varied functionalities of these OSNs, educators will be able to better understand the role this phenomenon plays in the lives of today's college students. To answer this first research question, the researcher examined the perceptions of students who are regular participants in and users of OSNs. In particular, the researcher studied students' perceptions of the ways in which they utilize OSNs and their interactions within these online communities.

The themes that emerged in answering this research question from conducting the surveys and focus groups are that students: 1) feel that their usage of online social networks is highly flexible, 2) appreciate that OSNs serve as a maintenance-free online directory, and 3) value interactions with each other online.

These student perspectives will help student affairs practitioners understand the uses students have for OSNs and how they engage each other.

Students feel that their usage of online social networks is highly flexible.

Students participating in this research study resoundingly voiced that the uses they have for online communities differ largely based on their needs and interests at the time. Students feel that all online communities have different uses at different times for different needs and that their usage of online social networks will evolve over time. This is critical to the understanding of online social networks because the functions and features not only fluctuate from OSN to OSN, but the ways that users employ the online social networks will differ greatly as well from one person to the next. Each of the categories of online communities fulfills different purposes and sometimes each of the particular online communities within a category function differently than its peers. Oftentimes, even if there are similar features within multiple online communities or online social networks, users will tend to use one feature mostly in one OSN, and another feature mostly in another, as opposed to using both features avidly in both OSNs. For example, a student may post all of their pictures to their Facebook profile so they can ‘tag’ all of their friends—link that picture to the profile of all of their friends within that picture, but may continue to write most of their blogs and notes in Myspace. This section first describes which OSNs students participate in, followed by the differences students perceive between

in-person communities and online communities. Finally there will be a discussion of how different features fit in to student usage of OSNs.

Table 3 displays the student survey response rate for the main types of online communities (as categorized in Chapter 2).

How will your participation in/usage of online communities change over time?					
Usage would evolve into different features and purposes 52 (14%)	Overall usage will increase 56 (15%)		It will probably stay the same 95 (26%)	Overall usage would decrease 161 (44%)	
What is the benefit you receive from using online communities?					
Easier access to contact info to connect with people 288 (78.5%)	Event Scheduling 13 (3.5%)	Entertainment (includes photos) 31 (8.4%)		No benefit 6 (1.6%)	Other: 27 (7.4%)
How do online student-to-student interactions differ from in-person? How are they comparable?					
Less risk in online interactions 66 (18%)	Less personal / formal online 95 (26%)	Easier/More convenient 59 (16%)	They don't differ 37 (10.1%)	More personal / formal online 16 (5.2%)	Other 92 (25.1%)
Which of the following statements best describes how you use Facebook, Myspace and other OSNs? (you may select more than one)					
Keep in touch with old & new friends, & make new ones 255 (69.7%)	Only to keep in touch w/ old friends 136(37.2%)	As online directories of my peers, but I haven't sought out old friends on it 39 (10.7%)	I registered because my friends kept pressing me to do so, but I don't use it much. 29 (7.9%)	I post pictures, videos, journals, blogs to express myself and share experiences with friends/others. 206 (56.3%)	
Other: 60 (16.4%)					
How does your participation in OSNs such as Facebook or Myspace differ from participation in online academic portals (i.e. Blackboard, WebCT)?					
OSNs and online academic portals are unrelated 233 (63.7%)	Equally important to college experiences and lifelong success 58 (15.8%)		Facebook helps me connect to classmates that I otherwise might not have, that has helped my academic performance. 91 (24.9%)		Others 96 (26.2%)
Please indicate which OSNs you participate in and add any that are missing.					
Facebook, Myspace, Xanga, Friendster, Classmates.com 360 (98.4%)	eJournal, LiveJournal, Blogger.com 85 (23.2%)	FlickrR, Youtube, Photobucket 165 (45.1%)	AOL, Yahoo, MSN and other Instant Messaging programs 297 (81.1%)	Online dating sites-match.com, eharmony.com, etc. 38 (10.4%)	
Other OSNs: 63 (17.2%) bbs, pc games, Bebo, Friends Reunited, Yahoo Groups, Blogspot, Webshots, Cyworld, deadjournal.com, Deviantart.com, mixi.jp, gmail chat, Greatest Journal, GAIM (not aim), guidepostssweet16mag.com, hi5, http://slashdot.org/, http://www.somethingawful.com/, http://www.digg.com/, Nexopia, mass mutliplayer online role-playing game, Jdate, LinkedUp, Koolanoo.com, Last.fm LinkedIn.com, internetDJ.com, MyYearBook, namesdatabase.com, Neopets, OKCupid.com, OnlySimchas, orkut, tagworld, del.icio.us, xuqa.com, hotornot.com, Skype, G Talk, teamspeak, snowboard.com, studivz.net (german facebook), tagworld, WAYN (Where are you now), webshots.com, vouthink.com					

Table 3. The flexibility of usage of online social networks.

Online social networks, such as Facebook and Myspace, predominated, though a very large number of respondents indicated that they use AIM, Yahoo, MSN, and other instant messaging programs. As Table 3 also shows, students also use some form of photo or video sharing websites or participate actively in blogging or journaling websites to varying degrees. One of the survey questions asked respondents to identify which OSNs users participate in (and to list any additional sites that may be missing). Respondents could select from choices of clusters of OSNs, and occasionally, student respondents would submit their own answers which were various combinations of the choices presented. For example one student who said, “To clarify: I use Facebook, YouTube (not posting, though), and AIM.” Over 50 different online social networking communities and online communication media are represented in Table 3, but there are many more that exist. As mentioned previously, a survey conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, identified over 65 different OSNs excluding online dating sites.

Since there are a large number of online communities or online social networks, understanding the differences in student perceptions between in-person communities (i.e. their school, neighborhood, city or other actual communities they identify with) and online communities may not be readily clear. Most respondents stated that it is easier to get involved in activities online. Whether that involvement would classify as such by Astin remains to be seen and will depend on the depth of that online involvement. An action as passive as clicking a mouse to indicate interest

in joining a group based on affiliation, hobby or opinion is not as engaged as another student who may not just click to join that group, but actively post comments on that group's discussion board, or become friends with fellow members, etc. Additionally, a number of focus group participants commented that in-person communities are generally associated with stricter standards of conduct and friendship, where, as participant IIIF puts it, "I would pick and choose who I affiliate with." A participant in Focus Group VI went even further to state that an in-person community "demands more mutual interaction and mutual investment" and meaning than an online community does. That may be a part of why online communities have become so popular: users can engage in them as frequently or infrequently as they choose from the comfort of their own homes.

Another part of the reason that these sites have become so popular is that they allow for each user to define the experience they each want to have, to a great extent. Users can pick and choose what features to use and to what extent they will use them. That the usage of these sites is flexible over time goes hand-in-hand with the self-defined, user-controlled experiences that are the norm of online social networks. This is significant to understanding Research Question 1 in looking at how students utilize OSNs and in what ways they engage each other because students will continue to want to explore and experiment with different features and venues of social networking regardless of the medium involved.

When asked how their participation in online social networks would change over time, one survey respondent said “I think that the reasons I’m participating will change and have changed. Before it was a way to look at other people or just to have [a profile], now it is a means of keeping in touch with a variety of people.” Oftentimes, focus group participants and survey respondents echoed this sentiment. Of the large number of students who said that they expected that their usage of Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks would decrease, most felt like they would have less time for it. “Hopefully my usage will lessen as I get in touch with people—online communication replaced with actual communication,” said one survey respondent. The summary of other respondents revolved around students saying that their usage of OSNs would decrease as the length of time since they graduated increased, underscoring the notion that some students perceive online social networking to be largely a college phenomenon.

Facebook, Myspace and other OSNs are filled with features that allow users to access various levels of content to various degrees of intensity. As a result of avid and increasing student usage, these features are expanding in terms of number and type of features, frequency of use and utility. Students themselves are adapting existing features for their own uses and creating new features and plug-ins for the OSNs that they are then sharing with others. At the time of the completion of this study, the most recent new feature and functionality to any of the most prominent online social networks was the creation of the developer’s platform, and the wide

variety and large number of “applications” stemming from individual users contributions to the site. These “applications” were not in existence at the commencement of this research study and are therefore excluded from this study. These features are only mentioned here as an additional tool for customization and individualization of the online social networking experience for all users.

Students were also asked how participation in OSNs differs from participation in online academic portals such as Blackboard or WebCT. Most respondents said that online academic portals and online social networks are not related, because Facebook and other OSNs are used for social purposes while academic portals are limited to class-related pursuits. Some students see online academic portals and OSNs as interconnected and equally important to their college experiences and lifelong success, but in different ways. Some identified that Facebook and other OSNs help them connect to classmates that they may not otherwise have had contact with, and that has helped their academic performance. One student in particular commented that:

“Facebook and Myspace are websites that allow me to keep friends posted about my life: friends, love, school, etc. Blackboard, in my experience, is not a very interactive website. I log on to this site to view syllabi, homework assignments and class discussion groups. I may occasionally use it to send an email to a classmate if I do not know their email address.”

For students, it seems clear that they tend to keep their academic and social experiences separate, but know how to tap into additional resources when necessary.

Other participants described the utility of Facebook and online communities as providing a means of knowing exactly who you are talking to online. While the possibility of people using incorrect pictures or information was not addressed at this point, the participants in Focus Group IV discussed the ability to use Facebook and see someone's picture and know that you are talking to that person, versus finding their email address on a directory, and not knowing who you are talking to.

Regardless, all of the focus group participants indicated that they check their online social network of choice (mostly Facebook) as part of their regular "ritual", meaning that whenever they check their email, they check their Facebook. This point was made particularly poignant when participants commented that they would check Facebook even more often than they check email. Others did not value Facebook as much. For example, one respondent mentioned that if the communication is urgent the person would make a phone call. "Communication on Facebook, while I enjoy and appreciate it, is generally nothing urgent or highly important. That does not mean that I would ever stop using it though," (Focus Group V). Interestingly, some survey respondents admitted registering for Facebook or other online social networks because of peer pressure, but do not log in to it that much. One student commented that "I was pressed to join (but I grew to enjoy them) and deepen friendships." Even

those students who did not intentionally join OSNs have found productive and meaningful uses for them in their lives and experiences.

Students appreciate that OSNs serve as a maintenance-free online directory.

One of the key ways that students use online social networking communities is as a directory of their friends and contact. Students identified one of the purposes of online social networks as an online directory that the user does not have to self-maintain. This function is also one of the primary and essential functions of these sites from the point-of-view of their creators (Facebook.com, 2006). As a participant from Focus Group I said, “I do not have to write down emails or numbers anymore. All I need to do is remember someone’s name. All I have to do is go to Facebook and find the easiest way to contact anyone.”

In many ways, using Facebook and other OSNs as a live directory of friends and contacts also allows students to stay up-to-date on their friends lives and experiences and vice versa. Data evidencing this is displayed in Table 4.

What is the benefit you receive from using online communities?				
Easier access to contact info to connect with people 288 (78.5%)	Event Scheduling 13 (3.5%)	Entertainment (includes photos) 31 (8.4%)	No benefit 6 (1.6%)	Other: 27 (7.4%)
Which of the following statements best describes how you use Facebook, Myspace and other OSNs? (you may select more than one)				
Keep in touch with old and new friends, and make new ones 255 (69.7%)	Only to keep in touch w/ old friends 136(37.2%)	As online directories of my peers, but I have not sought out old friends on it 39 (10.7%)	I registered because my friends kept pressing me to do so, but I do not use it that much. 29 (7.9%)	I post pictures, videos and journals /blogs as a way to express myself and share experiences with friends/others. 206 (56.3%)

Table 4. Students use OSNs as online directories.

As Table 4 shows, a significant number of student respondents identified OSNs as making it easier to access contact information in order to connect with people thus fulfilling the purpose of at least Facebook—according to its creators, if not other OSNs as well, as online directories. A number of respondents reflected on the utility of online social networks both in checking in with their friends as often as just to “let others know how you have been.” Getting updated on current news involving their friends and other people they know is as important to the student experience as having the ability to contact them whenever you need to, from anywhere. This is particularly beneficial, said some students, when you do not yet know someone well enough to have each other’s phone numbers.

Whether students appreciate the directory functions of OSNs so that they can keep in touch with friends, make new friends and acquaintances, post pictures, videos, and journals/blogs as a way to express themselves and share their life and experiences with friends/others, etc. (see Table 4), clearly the directory feature has a high utility. Some respondents directly answered that they use these sites as online directories of their current peers and friends but have not sought out old friends. This was echoed during the focus groups. However, survey and focus group responses clearly identified the live and up-to-date directory as one of the best uses for OSNs. Rather than the user contacting all of their friends to get updated contact information, as soon as someone updates their contact information online, all of their friends can

log on to their profile page to access it. Thus, OSNs provide maintenance free directories that make it easier for students to communicate with each other.

Students value interactions with each other online.

Students participating in the focus groups or responding to the online survey readily agreed that online social networks allow students to interact with each other more frequently and regularly than they would without the existence of online communities such as Facebook and Myspace. This point is important in our understanding of how students utilize OSNs and how they engage with each other because the utility of interacting with friends online is as important as the online directory function, if not even more so. If anything, the two are related, as most students identified the reason the directory function is useful because it promotes further interactions with their friends and contacts.

Of importance is the value students place on OSNs. Students feel that online social networks like Facebook would (or potentially even have) become as influential in today's society as the telephone once was. Whereas the online social networking phenomenon has not always been so prevalent, it is widespread and pervasive in the experiences of students today. Some participants knew other people who gave up Facebook for Lent or themselves had their Orientation Counselor take their current Facebook profile picture (Focus Group I). Other students commented that Facebook and online social networks are "integral to the student experience" since making friends on campus was a top priority when coming to campus, and

continued to be a high priority and primary focus for most students. One of the students from Focus Group III, who did not have Facebook when first starting at USC, said that, “making friends was most important to me, including meeting people from the residence hall, my friend across the hall and other friends through her... That group of friends was inseparable that very first week, and we continue to be close today,” (Participant IIIG). This student went on to draw connections between that experience, and the experience she continues to have by connecting to people through Facebook, Myspace and other online communities.

Oftentimes, students turn to Facebook and Myspace as a preferred venue for communicating with friends. Table 5 displays student responses related to how students interact with each other online.

How do online student-to-student interactions differ from in-person? How are they comparable?					
Less risk in online interactions 66 (18%)	Less personal / formal online 95 (26%)	Easier/More convenient 59 (16%)	They don't differ 37 (10.1%)	More personal / formal online 16 (5.2%)	Other 92 (25.1%)
Which of the following statements best describes how you use Facebook, Myspace and other OSNs? (you may select more than one)					
Keep in touch with old & new friends, & make new ones 255 (69.7%)	Only to keep in touch w/ old friends 136(37.2%)	As online directories of my peers, but I haven't sought out old friends on it 39 (10.7%)	I registered because my friends kept pressing me to do so, but I don't use it much. 29 (7.9%)	I post pictures, videos, journals, blogs to express myself and share experiences with friends/others. 206 (56.3%)	
Other: 60 (16.4%)					
How does your participation in OSNs such as Facebook or Myspace differ from participation in online academic portals (i.e. Blackboard, WebCT)?					
OSNs and online academic portals are unrelated 233 (63.7%)	Equally important to college experiences and lifelong success 58 (15.8%)		Facebook helps me connect to classmates that I otherwise might not have, that has helped my academic performance. 91 (24.9%)		Others 96 (26.2%)

Table 5. Student-to-student online interactions.

As discussed repeatedly during the focus groups, students will go to Facebook, Myspace or other social networks first. If the need to communicate is urgent, or it is

important to set up a meeting, etc., then students would use the phone. Yet, general communication, since it is not usually time-sensitive, tends to start online for students. Students completing the online survey also expressed that when they “have questions from class”, “want to say hi” or “stay in touch”, etc., they turn to Facebook, and other online communities first. When describing OSN use, one student mentioned that OSNs are “easier than using the telephone [and a] fun way to express yourself.” Respondents also use OSNs for the pursuit of entertainment for themselves and others. For some students, this means using Facebook or other online communities to communicate with friends instead of doing something else, “procrastination from university assignments”, and “boredom” topping the list. A few students expressed sentiments best summed up by one given response: “It’s a distraction from all the hard work and stress. When you receive a message, it makes you smile.” Others also talked about the ease with which they can share photos, stories and jokes with friends, as one respondent put it, online social networks provide “quick communication with friends, a place to post photos and artwork of myself and receive feedback and admiration and/or negative comments, [this is] a place to let people know about myself and to learn.”

Table 5 also displays survey respondents’ views on how student-to-student interactions differ from the in-person versions of those interactions. Students generally felt less risk when interacting with other students online. However, there were those that believed online interactions felt less personal, less formal and less

risky. These students also felt they were less trustworthy and fair, or that people are more likely to say “stupid things online than in-person”, as well as be “more curt and/or to-the-point”. A number of other students specified that they felt people will be more honest online and thus, able to better express themselves. As one student stated, “people I chat with online are a little bit looser with what they talk about online and in person they can be a little more guarded with what they say because someone can reply immediately to them.”

Another student mentioned that their utilization of OSNs centers mostly around “having an established and trusted reference where if one friend mentions another friend, I can look up the other friend.” This means that this student will potentially make meaningful connections by looking up friends of their friends. In many respects, this is where the networking function of OSNs really comes in handy. Study participants frequently pointed to the ability to learn more about and then communicate with friends of friends as a positive feature of online social networks. Yet, students are wary of the presence of others within their online communities for fears of reprisals based on content they post. By understanding how students are engaging in social networking through online media, student affairs practitioners can better support their students while they interact online, and adapt this understanding to future social networking methods or technologies. Both the benefits and drawbacks associated with online social networking will be addressed in the next section, as research question 2 is answered. Responses addressing research question

3 will be in the following section, and include an in-depth discussion of the presence of others within students' online social networks.

Research Question Two: What do students feel are the benefits and drawbacks associated with their usage of online communities and online social networks?

Essential to the understanding of student participation within OSNs on college experiences is the examination of the benefits and drawbacks associated with online social networking. By looking at what students define as the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking, educators will have a better understanding of the role this phenomenon plays in the lives and experiences of today's college students. Educators will be able to understand how students balance the benefits versus the drawbacks in determining to what extent and for what purpose they will use OSNs.

The themes that emerged in answering this research question from conducting the surveys and focus groups fall either into the category of benefits or drawbacks. Some of the aspects of these online social networks can be interpreted as a benefit to some and a consequence to others. The themes that identify OSN benefits are: 1) OSNs allow students to keep in touch with friends and meet new people; 2) students perceive that OSNs provide a sense of community; 3) students believe OSNs provide opportunities for entertainment and involvement; 4) OSNs Reduce Students' Inhibitions and Enhances their Socialization. The themes that

identify OSN drawbacks, which are issues that students are concerned about, are: 1) students are somewhat concerned about their safety while online; 2) students have mixed feeling about the repercussions of online actions; 3) OSN use can prevent students from completing work and interacting with peers face-to-face; 4) students had varied opinions of inappropriate content. In terms of drawbacks, students focused mostly on mitigating the impact of drawbacks instead of simply stating what the drawbacks are. From these findings, educators will see that students have a clear understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking.

BENEFITS

OSNs Allow Students to Keep In Touch With Friends and Meet New People

An overwhelming majority of respondents identified both positive and negative effects. In some cases the respondents who recounted positive experiences had not encountered negative experiences. In one case, a student only had positive experiences because she “only let my friends see my profile, and do not do anything stupid on there.” One of the other positive-only responses stated that “because college is a very fast paced life, using Facebook or Myspace allows for socialization and small talk during the late hours of the night when you don’t have time to make phone calls.” Other positives included “more connection, more modern way of communication”, “found great people”, “more friends, greater understanding of

background”, and “you can expand your friend network by getting in touch with old friends through mutual friends”.

One of the most significant benefits of OSNs, as identified both in the focus groups and survey data, is meeting new people and keeping in touch with friends. OSNs are important and beneficial in keeping in touch with friends and family due to their widespread usage, ongoing, anytime access from anywhere in the world. This is important for our understanding of the role of OSNs in students’ college experiences as connecting to other students is one of the concerns foremost on the minds of today’s college students (Focus Group III). These online communities enable students to be “more connected to more people at the same time” (Survey respondent). In terms of meeting new people, online social networks allow for students to find people that share similar experiences or common interests and forge new bonds along those lines. These sites can allow users to get “to know someone before [meeting] them in a class or something in a social situation,” (Survey respondent). In addition, another respondent stated that “Facebook makes it easy to contact friends – to say hello, plan something in the future, laugh about something that happened, gossip and homework, etc.”

As a whole, students do not necessarily befriend everyone else they meet and interact with online, or even those they interact with in person. Table 6 identifies the benefits students associate with OSNs.

What is the benefit you receive from using online communities?					
Easier access to contact info to connect with people 288 (78.5%)	Event Scheduling 13 (3.5%)	Entertainment (includes photos) 31 (8.4%)	No benefit 6 (1.6%)	Other: 27 (7.4%)	
How do online student-to-staff interactions differ from in-person?					
Better in person / I avoid interacting with staff online 6(1.6%)	More available online 77 (21%)	I don't know/Have not used it for that/N/A: 193 (52.7%)		Other: 90(24.6%)	
Please answer this question for each of the following acts, behaviors or observations on OSNs like Facebook or Myspace. How often have you either experienced, or heard of the following acts occurring, within the OSNs you participate in? (Select all that apply)					
	Myself	My friends	Heard of it happening at my school	Heard of it happening elsewhere	Never heard of this happening
Getting help in a class from a classmate	156 (58%)	142 (53%)	113 (42%)	82 (30%)	43 (16%)
Reminders of friends' birthdays	261 (97%)	183 (68%)	105 (39%)	96 (36%)	1 (0%)
Keeping in touch with friends	263(98%)	186 (69%)	115 (43%)	103 (38%)	1 (0%)
Status updates on your friends	249 (93%)	188 (70%)	108 (40%)	94 (35%)	3 (1%)
Meeting and finding new friends	146 (54%)	165 (61%)	132 (49%)	105 (39%)	12 (4%)
Joining new student organizations	127 (47%)	131 (49%)	125 (46%)	84 (31%)	33 (12%)
Getting involved in campus activities	145 (54%)	150 (56%)	133 (49%)	92 (34%)	24 (9%)
Creating "events" & tracking RSVPs	155 (58%)	188 (70%)	133 (49%)	104 (39%)	15 (6%)
Sharing personal experiences through blogs/notes	149 (55%)	215 (80%)	127 (47%)	99 (37%)	3 (1%)
Find out common interests between you and someone you just met	208 (77%)	169 (63%)	99 (37%)	95 (35%)	15 (6%)
Seeing pictures of your friends & self	260 (97%)	202 (75%)	123 (46%)	108 (40%)	0 (0%)
Can you identify any other specific benefits associated with student-to-student interactions within OSNs?					
Finding new people 11 (4.1%)	Connect to friends 36 (13.4%)	Networking 23 (8.6%)		Not applicable 199 (74%)	
How do you think that participating in OSNs affects your college experiences?					
Reduces Inhibitions 113 (33%)	Grades / Interaction have dropped 19 (6%)	Sense of community / commonality 121 (35%)	Enhance feelings of purpose and worth 31 (9%)	Not much effect 50 (15%)	

Table 6. Benefits students associate with online social networking.

Participants in Focus Group III, including current and former Resident Advisors

(RAs) and a summer camp counselor, specifically pointed out that they are careful

about befriending their counselees, residents, etc. on Facebook or Myspace. Some of these students, such as the camp counselor, flatly refuse to let any of the counselees add them as a friend. Others, such as one of the RA's, do not seek out her residents to add them as a friend, but will confirm the Facebook or Myspace "friendship" if initiated by the other students. In their own way, each of these students is exhibiting varying levels of discretion and setting boundaries between themselves and the students they work with. It is not clear whether or not the camp counselor or one of the RAs ever befriends the students they counsel after that role-relationship has ceased, or if those boundaries are preserved. Nor is it clear if the other RA limits the extent to which she interacts with her residents online in terms of limiting their access to her profile content. These students did voice their beliefs that most of their peers in similar student leadership or quasi-supervisory capacities also exhibited discretion in their online interactions with those students with whom they counseled.

A large majority of students said that they personally keep in touch with friends through online social networks. "It's nice knowing what your friends are doing that you may have lost touch with or don't have time to communicate with as often as you would like," said one respondent, discussing the convenience of OSNs. Since this medium for communication and socialization is online and available all the time from anywhere, it is incredibly beneficial for users. Many students commented through the survey that, "I'm not always available to talk on the phone or [instant message] for most of the day, so [online social networking] allows me to

keep in touch or up to date without having to really be there,” or “I can keep in touch with friends who are far away, without too much hassle. I can find out more about them too, from profiles and [conversations] they have with other people.”

A lot of students also said they use Facebook to check on their friends’ status updates. Other respondents knew of friends who used OSNs to keep in touch with others, to check on status updates, or to meet new people. Some respondents had even done so personally. While these answers were not mutually exclusive, and thus difficult to determine the level of overlap in student answers, it does appear as though a plurality of students are aware of these features involving friends, and a majority of these students and their friends have used them.

Students Perceive That OSNs Provide a Sense of Community

Online social networks such as Facebook and Myspace provide a forum for students and all users to share their interests with each other. This sense of commonality and community is a key benefit identified by students and speaks to the need students have to bond with others that share common interests and/or experiences. For educators, understanding the extent of these feelings of community and commonality provided by OSNs will help explain part of the importance and value students ascribe to online social networking.

Most survey respondents said that the primary effect OSNs have on their college experience is to help them “find a sense of community and commonality”.

On campuses with high student populations, this may be extremely important as the students may not feel they have the ability to bond with staff as readily. Responses included: an OSN “allows me to feel more connected to my peers and classmates”, “easier way to keep in contact with people”, “definitely makes the school feel smaller and more connected”, “facilitates communication, study groups, events, clubs.” In addition, students expressed, “I don’t feel so isolated because I can still keep in touch with my old high school friends”, and “I especially like it for keeping in touch with my college friends while on break”. Online social networks provide a means for ongoing, convenient and rapid communication between people, as well as a forum for making contact with new people.

Students can create their community online and continue to build and interact within it whenever they want with whomever they want. One respondent said that “In the past people wrote letters to one another. Today, these are our pen pals. This screen is our paper and our hands type the ideas that our minds desire to be expressed.” Looking at this response, it becomes clearer that communication is occurring through this new online medium. Additionally, community exists, but through a different and innovative context. Survey and focus group respondents stated that connecting to “others that share similar interests and experiences” is an important function of these online communities.

In addition, some students thought that online social networks enhanced feelings of purpose and worth for members of those online social networks. This is

particularly relevant for the sense of commonality and community responses as enhanced feelings of purpose and worth tend to result from an increased sense of community. OSNs help students remember people's names and birthdays, or their favorite bands and movies for birthday gift ideas. While most students had direct experience with birthday reminders on Facebook, the true extent of the benefit would depend on the mutual interaction and sharing of that information. Due to the increased connectivity between people and amongst overlapping and intersecting social spheres, every member has the potential to be connected to a lot more people online than they would have had a chance to be in person. The student who provided the above comment links increased connectivity to feeling greater sense of self-worth. Regardless, increased connectivity does appear to result in a stronger sense of community because there are an increase in the number of both strong and weak ties within these online social networks that would have organically existed from society alone.

One of the added benefits associated with student-to-student interaction within online social networks is that of networking with the increased variety and number of strong and weak ties. Through Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks, students can network with each other and professionals in various fields. One student said that you can use online social networks to find “out about job opportunities or people working at the company you’re going to be working for, etc.”

This networking allows students to capitalize on the connections they make online in terms of long-term career benefits, classes and socialization as a whole.

Students can connect with classmates—which may be acquaintances, or what Granovetter might classify a “weak tie”—that they may not talk to much in-person, and maintain a safe and distant online social interaction. “We would help each other in cases such as with class notes or getting an opinion about courses or professors,” said the survey respondent. This student would likely agree with others who thought that students becoming friendlier with each other through online social networks would “make for a better collegiate experience”. A large number of students have used OSNs to connect with classmates, or know others who have. Students have found ways to utilize Facebook and other online social networks not just for social purposes, but for academic and other pursuits as well.

Students Believe OSNs Provide Opportunities for Entertainment & Involvement

One survey respondent clearly stated that the benefit she perceived from participating within online social networks involved “getting involved with campus activities.” The creation and management of event invitations and announcements, student organization presence and publicity and opportunities for involvement and attendance in campus activities and programs were identified by a majority of students as important benefits of online social networks that they had experience

with or knowledge of. As such, student affairs practitioners should be able to not only understand how they function, but how they fit into their own campus' vitality, programming and involvement goals. Table 6 shows that most study participants stated that they were more involved in campus activities or attended campus events as a result of their membership within online communities such as Facebook or Myspace, or had joined student organizations as a result of their online interactions. Students also expressed a great deal of experience with the "events" feature on Facebook by creating "event" announcements on Facebook for publicity and to track RSVPs. One student in particular mentioned that OSNs are tremendously useful for organizing large events, as well as "keep contacts warm without seeing or calling them for months...We're far more connected now than we were before – at least that's how it seems."

A few focus group participants identified an even more effective means of publicizing events through online social networks. One student in Focus Group II said that "creating an event is more pervasive than flyers on campus bulletin boards" because news can spread widely through word-of-mouth, or viral, advertising. While the mini-feed form of viral messaging is tied to the event-RSVP system, which participants already identified as inaccurate, it is effective, participants said, because if someone RSVPs to go to a certain Facebook event or program, then all of their Facebook friends will find out through the mini-feed and be able to click onto that event listing. Potentially they might RSVP themselves, and then all of their friends

see it, and so on. Participants IIIA and IIIG also indicated that they sometimes use the Facebook or Myspace status features to a similar effect. Regardless of the form of the advertising on Facebook and other social networks, they were identified by students participating in the focus groups and responding to the surveys as a “good forum to reach the mass audience” and “the best way to advertise to college students” (Focus Group II). An overwhelming majority of survey respondents identified the utility of Facebook events and status updates to spread news about themselves or an upcoming event rapidly to a large number of their peers.

Students completing the online survey were asked a series of questions related to on-campus student organizations (or in-person organizations in general) and online groups that they may be a part of. Table 7 compares the responses for in-person organization membership with online group affiliation.

	WHAT TYPES OF “IN-PERSON” ORGANIZATIONS ARE YOU A PART OF?	WHAT TYPES OF “ONLINE” GROUPS ARE YOU A PART OF?
1) Academic/Professional	103 (38.6%)	107 (40.1%) (+)
2) Arts, Entertainment & Publications	71 (26.6%)	101 (37.8%) (+)
3) Fraternity / Sorority	49 (18.4%)	39 (14.6%) (-)
4) Governance / Advisory Boards	32 (12%)	17 (6.4%) (-)
5) Honor Societies	58 (21.7%)	25 (9.4%) (-)
6) International Cultural	29 (10.9%)	26 (9.7%) (-)
7) National Cultural	15 (5.6%)	28 (10.5%) (+)
8) Political	34 (12.7%)	40 (15%) (+)
9) Recreational	77 (28.8%)	65 (24.3%) (-)
10) Service	63 (23.6%)	45 (16.9%) (-)
11) Social Issue	41 (15.4%)	89 (33.3%) (+)
12) Special Interest	49 (18.4%)	99 (37.1%) (+)
13) Spiritual/Religious	88 (33%)	93 (34.8%) (+)

Table 7. In-Person Organization Membership vs. Online Group Membership

For purposes of this study, the researcher used categories of student organizations and groups currently utilized by the office of Student Life at the University of California, Riverside as the basis for student responses. Students were given free range to indicate as many categories of student organizations they were a member of as they chose to. The table indicates the number and percentage of students stating membership or affiliation in groups of that category (in-person or online). The third column of this table also indicates whether more or less students indicated affiliation with online groups than with actual, in-person organizations for each category.

For most categories, student responses indicate an increase in organizational affiliation if the group is online versus in-person. In four categories—Fraternity/Sorority, Governance/Advisory Boards, International Cultural, and Recreational—fewer students were involved in online groups fitting these categories than in-person iterations. In two additional categories: Honor Societies and Service, the differences were more pronounced, with even less students in online groups of these categories than in-person organizations. For the other seven categories, more students identified membership in online groups than in-person organizations. It should also be noted that most survey respondents indicated membership in in-person organizations or online groups representing at least four distinct categories. While that may not indicate exactly how many groups or organizations students are affiliated with, it is important to note that students completing this survey did tend to be heavily vested in multiple venues of social networking, both on and offline.

The majority of students responding to the survey perceived that online groups both serve a practical and recreational purpose. These students often would say the practical groups they were in were x, y and z, and the recreational groups were groups 1, 2 and 3. Most students had more generic responses. One student said that “some [online groups] are for fun, but many do have purposes and many students are concerned with the direction our society is headed. They want to make a difference. Online versions exist for easier communication.” Thus, whether a group existed for fun or served a purpose depends on the focus of the group. Other students agreed that “some online groups raise awareness on subjects, and some have petitions in order for a voice to be heard. Many, however, are just for fun or due to common interests.” For example, while certain online groups “are just for fun”, others served a serious purpose or cause, like “the political ones” or some that “organize community service”. Almost one-third of students stated that online groups are just online versions of in-person organizations.

Respondents were asked how the functions and operations of the online groups differ from in-person counterparts and what their purpose is online. For the groups students are in that are only online, students were asked what they gained out of participating in them. The responses collected from these questions in particular yielded little in the way of new information. Respondents identified interacting with friends, connecting with other people that share similar interests, having fun and being entertained as the primary purposes of affiliating with online groups. Some

students felt that a major benefit to OSNs was that “you can be a member and you don’t have to attend any meetings”, which students prefer so that they can “be involved in multiple groups at the same time”. Other students identify that they can “gain some information from seeing those groups and gain notification of their events” as well as allowing “me to talk to people I was once friends with and may have lost contact with over the years”.

Study participants largely label event scheduling, entertainment and involvement opportunities as benefits of online social networking. This is partly a result of the individual utility of each of these functions with Facebook, Myspace and other OSNs, but also the social needs that students have and are expressing through OSNs.

OSNs Reduce Students’ Inhibitions and Enhance their Socialization

Another benefit to online social networking is that online communities tend to help members develop greater social skills and be more open with each other. This includes reduced social inhibitions, which could potentially involve positive and negative consequences. On one hand, reduced inhibitions could allow people to be more open with each other and get to know each other better, deeper, etc. On the other hand, reduced inhibitions could embolden members of these online communities to be more careless in their actions and behaviors online (see inappropriate content section under Drawbacks below). Additionally, enhanced

social skills and overall socialization to campus culture are perceived by students to be natural by-products of online social networking. This provides an intriguing venue for students to develop and hone their own skills. For example, students believe, like one student, that “you can talk to people and get invited to social events. If people think you’re cool online, you’re invited.”

Another student explained that through OSNs, “you meet more people, which is basically the social aspect of college,” but it also, as one student mentioned, “allows less confident people to interact with others which may eventually allow greater social interaction in person.” As this student mentioned, students build confidence in themselves while interacting online, perhaps due to perceptions that online social networking is relatively low-risk. This does not refer to the risk of identity theft or stalking but rather to the risk of one’s ego, embarrassment or shame that more shy people may face in public social situations. As a case in point, one student identified OSNs as the venue for him coming out of his shell and having more in-person friends than he would have had without the existence of OSNs.

There are additional means by which students believe that online social networks help reduce inhibitions of their users and provide them the social skills and opportunities to interact more with one another. Most of the students responding to the survey stated that they themselves, or their friends, had shared personal experiences through blogs or notes. Students are familiar with the features and that they are used widely by students at most institutions and probably by people they

know. Through the sharing of blogs or notes, people can keep up to date on their friends' experiences and anecdotes, as well as discover commonalities.

Students also discover common interests by randomly searching out people with interests in common or finding friends of friends and then discovering commonalities. A great deal of students indicated that they or their friends shared a number of common interests with a peer whom they had just met through OSNs. Students identified this as one of the primary benefits, and indicated through their responses that by finding common interests between two or more people, they are more likely to want to engage that person both in dialogue and socially, in-person and online. Students completing the survey discussed their own networks of friends, acquaintances, colleagues, classmates, and fellow students. Most discussed the extent to which their online and in-person friendships and acquaintanceships have grown as a result of shared interests or experiences discovered through online social networks.

The third indicator of reduced inhibitions and enhanced socialization experiences pertained to seeing pictures of themselves and friends online. Every student responding to the survey expressed familiarity with this function. An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they had seen pictures of themselves or others on Facebook or other online social networks, while over three-fourths knew of friends who had pictures on their online social networks. While picture posting and photo-tagging may not be the primary feature of Facebook and

most of the online social networks, they are apparently significant in most users' online social networking experiences.

One student identified positives as networking, keeping in touch and social functions and negatives as creepy people and losing a job because of content students post. This student addressed some of the prevalent benefits and drawbacks with online social networking. Many of the briefer responses were similar to this student that said that online social networks allowing “non-threatening social interaction” is a positive, while putting “information on the web that should not be public” as a negative. The breadth and depth of responses to this question in particular indicates that students are relatively cognizant of the concerns associated with engaging in online social networking. Table 8 displays students' responses on the positive and negative effects of online social networking.

What are the positive and negative effects that online social networks have on college student experiences?				
Only Positive Effects 16 (4.4%)	Only Negative Effects 44 (12.2%)	Both Positive and Negative Effects 260 (72%)		N/A 41(11.4%)
How do you think that participating in OSNs affects your college experiences?				
Reduces Inhibitions 113 (33%)	Grades / Interaction have dropped 19 (6%)	Sense of community / commonality 121 (35%)	Enhance feelings of purpose and worth 31 (9%)	Not much effect 50 (15%)
Which of the following statements best describes your opinion on the benefits and drawbacks of participating in online communities? (Select all that apply)				
Never thought about it that way 30 (11.1%)	Very glad these OSNs exist, could not imagine life without them 65 (24.1%)	There are some concerns about Facebook & Myspace, but that does not affect me at all 115 (42.6%)	There are both benefits and drawbacks, but the benefits outweigh the drawbacks 162 (60%)	I am very concerned about what happens within OSNs. I am very careful about my own participation. 86 (31.9%)
Other: 21 (7.8%)				

Table 8. Benefits versus Consequences

Students expressed some variety in their opinion on the effects of benefits and drawbacks of online social networking. The greatest number of responses agreed with the statement that they “know there are both benefits and drawbacks, but the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.” Students also expressed that they were very concerned about what happens within online social networks, and that they were also careful about their own participation.

Students who added their own response to this question largely said that they are careful not to do anything incriminating. They also say that if they do something incriminating they do not link their name to the incriminating activity and that anyone who is not careful is, as one student put it, “just stupid, no one is a victim on Myspace or Facebook unless they choose to be.” Some respondents are just worried about potential employers looking at the sites, while others are worried about anyone other than their own friends viewing their information, so they adjust their settings accordingly. One respondent was quick to point out that “it’s easy to avoid consequences (don’t friend people you don’t know, don’t post pictures where your doing something illegal and don’t post anything your school/employers can hold against you).”

A number of focus group participants felt as though there are no new activities or behaviors that are happening on Facebook that would not otherwise have happened, “it’s just that the behavior is being shown in new ways,” and “perhaps to more people,” (Focus Group Participants VC and VD). Participant IIIG commented

that Myspace and Facebook exhibit both bullying behavior from some users on others, and “students posting things that aren’t correct about someone online.” some of the many concerning or problematic behaviors that existed before online social networks became so prominent, but the online communities are a new medium for conveying those messages and behaviors. The next section will look at students’ perceptions of the drawbacks of participating within OSNs, as well as how they mitigate those drawbacks.

DRAWBACKS

Students Are Somewhat Concerned About Their Safety While Online

Students participating in each of the six focus groups referenced safety concerns in general as one of the largest drawbacks to using online social networks. A number of survey respondents echoed these findings, underscoring the need for students to learn how to be safer in their online social networking activities. An understanding of students’ safety concerns will aid educators that want to help students be safer online. The safety concerns students mentioned included identity theft, cyber bullying, cyber hate and stalking, which are many of the same concerns shared by society-at-large and universities themselves. The issue of cyber hate generally centers on what the students referred to as prejudice and bias that some users express against individuals or groups of individuals based on their demographic characteristics. Some of the specified examples included Anti-Semitic

or homophobic remarks, racial slurs and other derogatory language being used, and similar sentiments expressed through pictures. Survey respondents also worried about cyber bullying, where on a discussion thread for a politically themed group, one user would state his or her belief, and another user, the bully, would write them messages, make repeated posts on the message board, etc. lambasting the first user in an attempt to stifle “their opinions, sentiments or beliefs”. This also indicates that although students may not be as outwardly concerned about issues to the same extent that their parents or university staff are, they still acknowledge the concerns as issues to be aware of.

In terms of this, Myspace was highlighted as a creepier online community than Facebook, due in part due to its indiscriminating and widespread usage. However, participants were quick to point out their concerns that Facebook had already expanded beyond the college-specific phenomenon it had once been lauded for, as well as the evolution of Facebook’s features continually making it seem more and more like Myspace every day. Of the safety concerns, stalking was at the top of everyone’s list. One participant, during Focus Group III, commented that she used her privacy settings to prevent certain people from knowing where she was. “Nobody who is not my friend can view my profile. On Myspace, everyone can access too much. I even debated getting rid of Facebook at one point,” said this student, who thinks that there is too much information available online.

This student was not alone in her belief that having too much information available on her Facebook or other online social networking profiles posed potential risks for stalking, and at least annoyance. Some participants commented that they did not like random people knowing details about their interests and lives. Students frequently commented that even though privacy settings do exist, most students do not know how to fully utilize them. When discussing privacy settings, one participant from Focus Group I stated that people either do not realize they exist or do not use them adequately. Either way, she went on to say, “it doesn’t necessarily mean that people are: a) responsible about it, or b) realize what’s going on. I think Facebook has the potential to be 99.99% safe.” Many survey respondents echoed this sentiment, provided that users adjust their privacy and access settings accordingly.

However, one of the concerns students had centered around random people being able to know where you are at any given time of day due to the status updates, class schedules, organization meetings for groups that you list involvement in and even people identifying places where you have been by pictures posted on your profile. That over-exposure of information may be the reason why a majority of students responding to the survey identified stalkers, predators, creepy people, cyber-bullying, offensive comments and harassment as the category of issues they see with regards to online social networking that are most concerning. As Table 9 shows, students have a wide array of opinions and experience concerning student-posted online content.

Please discuss any specific examples of content you came across in one of your OSNs (Facebook, Myspace, etc.). What are the most concerning issues you see with regards to OSNs?				
Underage drinking, illegal drug use (pictures and comments) 30 (11.1%)	Stalkers, Predators, Creepy people, Cyber-bullying 139 (51.7%)	Fake identities 15 (5.6%)	I don't see any issues, nothing bothers me, not that serious 78 (29%)	Concerned about universities convicting students without enough notice 7 (2.6%)
How do you think that participating in OSNs affects your college experiences?				
Reduces Inhibitions 113 (33%)	Grades / Interaction have dropped 19 (6%)	Sense of community / commonality 121 (35%)	Enhance feelings of purpose and worth 31 (9%)	Not much effect 50 (15%)

Table 9. Drawbacks students identify with online social networking.

Some of the specific concerns mentioned were that Facebook users (particularly within groups) “should not be allowed to contain some inappropriate and/or offensive statements”. One student had received random pokes—flirtatious ways of saying hello—from males wanting to flirt with her and misreading communication from her, said “people attack others for no reason. There are quite a few rather racist and/or sexist groups out there.” One student even stated that she did not think “these networks should allow individuals to post their addresses and phone numbers,” to help protect them from themselves and others. Another student suggested that the most pressing concerns would be addressed if “people would only think of the Internet as a place open for everyone to see, even if their pages are protected. If one is certain not to reveal possibly incriminating, compromising, or overly personal information, one can be fairly certain of security and freedom from harassment.”

A number of student respondents thought that it was important that students, as users of Facebook and other online social networks, should be responsible for their own online behaviors, and should exercise their own judgment and discretion in

terms of what to post or not post. This sentiment was echoed repeatedly by other respondents. Students said that their peers should think about the content they post carefully, as it all affects the image they portray of themselves. “Putting up pictures of drinking/smoking isn’t as impressive as they seem to think, and they should realize that they are being judged by what they post, the same way they are judging their “friends”,” said one respondent in talking about why his peers post what they post. This is particularly poignant as students widely acknowledged that most student affairs practitioners, parents or other authority figures now could easily access Facebook or Myspace content to check on students. Furthermore, the wide net of access cast by these sites allows anyone to view a lot of personal information, whether their intent is nefarious or constructive. Respondents did not think that just because students could limit their privacy settings in order to minimize the access non-friends would have to their profile, that it would stop stalking, cyber hate or cyber bullying concerns or problems from occurring. They did believe that these particular issues would become less prevalent if users were wiser in the information that they provided. This is also the case for other safety concerns.

Identity theft and other safety concerns were also cited during the focus groups, even if less frequently. Some students were concerned about the high number of scams run through the Internet. Other students had similar concerns with scams and spam. “I am being spammed with fake profiles and people fishing for my personal information on online networks. Too much spam makes me quit using the

network. Maybe spam filters need to be installed to prevent the very obvious spam,” said one survey respondent. The volume of scams, spam, phishing and fake profiles was described as annoying by those respondents who addressed these issues, but the number of students directly addressing these issues was relatively low. Others were concerned with “fakesters”, users who pose as alter-egos of themselves or celebrities through their online social networking profile.

Additional concerns students identified explicitly were cyber hate, which is online content or speech bordering on hate speech, and cyber bullying, where users will send messages or write posts to others yelling at them or arguing with them. All of these student concerns could potentially be mitigated once university student affairs professionals understand that students are aware of these issues and express concern about them as well. However, how the university might mitigate these issues is still a contentious issue, as will be explored further when answering research question 3. The next student-identified drawback to be discussed relates to students perspectives on whether or not they feel sanctions are warranted based on content posted online.

Students Have Mixed Feelings about the Repercussions of Online Actions

By and large, students participating in this study were concerned about the repercussions of content posted online. This parallels nicely with university concerns, as educators are increasingly interested in responding to problematic

content with sanctions or proactively reducing the incidences of problematic content through educational interventions. Thus an understanding of students' opinions and perspectives of what sorts of responses might be appropriate to content they or others might post will be important for an educator's overall understanding of student usage of online social networks.

Generally, students participating in the focus groups expressed that there was little in their profile to be concerned about. This contradicted other statements from students saying that they were going to check their profile for content and edit as appropriate following the completion of the focus group, or some students who stopped by during a later focus group to say that they had already completely reviewed their profile. A large number of survey participants echoed similar sentiments. Whether or not there were any concerning issues or problematic content still remaining on their profiles was not discussed.

What students readily asserted is that they thought it not only completely appropriate but entirely necessary for sanctions and other repercussions to be applied to other students who had posted something inappropriate. "If you are dumb enough to post something inappropriate, you deserve to be punished for it," said one respondent. Most focus group participants and survey respondents echoed this sentiment. However, students expressed sincere concern that they would be punished for something they perceive to be an inside joke or a private thing to share with their friends. From the student perspectives presented, the concerns about possible

repercussions depend almost exclusively on three things: 1) the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the content, 2) who posted the content, and 3) the extent of the repercussions or sanctions. Through an understanding of these student concerns, student affairs practitioners can more adequately support students in their online social networking. This is particularly important to overcome the distracting and less personal qualities of online social networks as discussed below.

OSN Use Can Prevent Students from Completing Work and Interacting With Peers Face-To-Face

Each focus group had at least one student remark that Facebook and online social networking as a whole is a waste of time and serves as a venue for procrastination. Usage of OSNs can detract from engaging in other productive activities. However, the students making those remarks gave no indication that they would be cutting down on their usage of and participation in these online social networks anytime soon. On the contrary, the majority of students tended to most often comment that if they were not wasting time being on Facebook, Myspace or another online social network, they would be procrastinating and wasting their time doing something even more frivolous. What this means to educators is that despite student perceptions that OSNs are considered a waste of time or form of procrastination by students using them; students will continue to engage in online social networking. Students largely stated that they are able to maintain

communication with more people regularly, and while not all students would agree that OSNs are less personal, it appears as though most would sacrifice depth of communication for breadth if it came down to doing so.

Students largely said that OSNs are important to their college experiences and that even if Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks did not exist, they would simply be spending that same amount of time on other activities. One respondent in particular wrote that OSNs do not impact his college experiences very much: “I make friends and hang out with people in person. It is only amusing when you feel like posting on a friend’s wall or seeing pictures from a party. I could take it or leave it though.”

One group of students felt that either their grades or interactions with others in person (and often both) had decreased due to online social networking. One of the students who answered in this fashion commented that OSNs take away “from time I should be spending studying, but don’t let that get back to my parents! I’d be a lot less stressed if I got all my work done first, I’m sure, but the networking sites are also convenient because I can stay in contact with my friends who don’t go to the same college as me.” This student acknowledged the impact of online social networking on her own experiences, but explained why she continues to use it. Another student stated that she did not get as much work done as a result of being distracted by Facebook. However, she said, “it’s a good social tool for staying in

touch with people and to follow up on meetings with people. It makes it much easier to learn who people are.

However, though OSNs may be conducive to more frequent or regular socialization, some students also feel that the quality of interaction declines as a result of online social networking. “Things can be taken out of context online. Someone I knew made a Facebook group about the cheer team I am a part of, and all of my teammates were mad at me,” said one student who had to deal with the repercussions of some online content. The number of students who identified online social networking as a time-waster, form of procrastination or a venue for less personal or emotional connection was significantly smaller than those who identified positive impacts through the online survey. Yet this population will continue to use OSNs and would likely benefit from an understanding of how to use them to positively affect their college experiences rather than detract from it.

Opinions of Inappropriate Content and the Response to it Differed Widely

The most important drawback students reported for OSNs pertained to inappropriate content. The appropriateness or inappropriateness of different content posted within online social networks is in the eye of the beholder, meaning that the student or staff person or community member seeing the content would decide whether or not they perceive it to be inappropriate. Therefore, even if content is perceived to be inappropriate, the requisite response to it will also depend on the

constituency deeming it inappropriate. Educators should understand the complexities of the sometimes questionable appropriateness of content posted online from the student perspective as well as student opinions on the responded to that content. That sense of understanding will enable educators to understand what role inappropriate content plays within online social networks and students experiences within OSNs such as Facebook and Myspace.

The appropriateness of the variety of materials (pictures, comments, etc.) posted within online social networks such as Facebook or Myspace is largely determined by who views it and in what context. Students responding to the survey did not necessarily agree with students participating in the focus groups as to what content was appropriate versus what could be considered inappropriate. The general consensus of the focus group participants could best be summed up by a student who said that

It's dangerous how public everything is. People don't realize the severity of what they post. People will join a group because they think its funny, but not realize how it makes them look. Particularly the groups that are like: I hate this group, or I think this person is dumb, etc.

This student's examples concerning content show that some of the groups students may join can be as troubling as individual messages and posts.

Generally speaking, students may find certain questionable content to be inappropriate or unnecessary, but may disagree on whether or not it was ok for the

student who posted it to do so. Most of the focus group participants and survey respondents seemed to believe that it was up to the user's own discretion as to what they choose to post or not post. The consensus: post at your own peril.

On the questionnaire focus group participants filled out, students were asked if they knew that Facebook, for example, has a policy that anything posted on their site is co-owned by Facebook, until such time as it is taken down by the original poster. In each focus group this prompted a discussion about how the content posted on Facebook and other sites is very likely not only maintained or archived on some servers in that website's headquarters, but there is a high probability that some content may be printed up or saved by individual users and will one day come back to haunt the original poster. One respondent said that she fully expects future political candidates "to get completely screwed because of what they have posted online."

Students resoundingly affirmed that inappropriate content could be found throughout online communities. There were various types of content that fell into the realm of questionable appropriateness (see Table 9). Nudity, and other sexually-explicit content was cited as a concerning issue due to the popularity amongst even younger users of these sites in posting provocative and evocative pictures of themselves in scantily-clad poses. Substance abuse, including the consumption of illegal drugs, underage drinking and binge drinking, was also often cited as inappropriate content that students were posting online, in the form of pictures,

messages and comments, etc. Most participants in Focus Group III agreed with the sentiments of one respondent who said that “90% of pictures on these sites are bad, showing underage drinking, drug use, and perhaps even underage students at a bar, blatantly using Fake IDs to have gotten in,”. A large proportion of survey respondents echoed these sentiments.

Focus group participants seemed more concerned about the nudity and sexually-explicit content spattered around online communities. However, when survey respondents were asked to discuss any specific examples of concerning issues in content they came across within online social networks, respondents did not identify nudity as a major concern. Some survey respondents did identify responses that fall into the category of underage drinking and illegal drug use (pictures and comments). More students said that they do not see any issues, or that nothing that serious bothers them. While both material might be posted as a way to boost someone’s ego or status (Focus Groups I, III, IV and V), students in Focus Group VI asserted that students engaging in over-consumption of illegal drugs or alcohol (including underage drinking) would have done so even if online social networks did not exist. On the contrary, these students point out their belief that the nudity and sexually-explicit content within online social networks might not otherwise have happened in the absence of the convenient venue for sharing pictures and comments that these online communities provide.

Focus group participants also identified property damage, destruction and graffiti as content likely to be inappropriate to post on their online social network pages. Focus group participant IIIA, an RA in the residence halls, mentioned the dilemma she faced with whether or not to check out her residents profiles. If she were to look, and notice evidence of property damage, she would be duty-bound to report it. If she reported it, she would damage her relationship with her residents, and if she did not, she would lose her job. A common element of discussion in all six focus groups was the USC Senior Fountain Tour, an underground tradition at USC where graduating seniors have a route of all of the water fountains across campus, and pick a day where all of the graduating seniors that want to, jump into each of the fountains, in order. From the perspective of these student participants, the administration of the University of Southern California is adamantly opposed to this “tradition” as it poses liability issues for risk of harm, as well as the added cost of re-sanitizing and chlorinating each of the fountains after the run. During Focus group III, one respondent revealed that the “information on the date and time of the fountain tour is kept secret to that the campus administration cannot stop it,” and she went on to say that by using Facebook to organize this year’s Senior Fountain Tour, the students were attempting to prevent the fountains from being drained in advance, and garner even more attendees and participation.

A number of groups within Facebook networks have made the news during 2006 for their questionable nature or content posted within them. Some of these

groups were discussed during the focus groups. One respondent discussed how there are Facebook groups entitled “Guys who have hooked up with (insert name of specific female student here)”. Another type of group often mentioned by focus group participants is “If 1,000 people join this group, my girlfriend will have a threesome with me”. As one of the focus group participants explained, the student who created that Facebook group was subsequently kicked off of Facebook. These groups cause problems for the group’s creators and administrators as well as the members of these groups, as it reflects negatively on their judgment and discretion, let alone taste and sense of decency in some instances. In a number of instances, these groups may contain content that slanders or libels individuals and sometimes groups of people. Additionally, some of these groups promote or condone racist or bigoted sentiments. One such Facebook group from the Facebook network at the University of Southern California that received a lot of negative attention was called: “White Nation” (Focus Group Transcripts). With this particular group, it “started as an inside joke from the football team. It made a lot of headlines and upset a lot of people,” (Focus Group VI). It is questionable whether or not the entirety of the USC football team thought this ‘inside joke’ to truly be amusing, but certainly a large majority of the USC campus took offense to the connotation associated with this group. These types of problems range in severity and frequency, and oftentimes will ebb and flow, but their existence at all is certainly a drawback to online social networking.

While this may not be an exhaustive listing of the inappropriate content students post within online social networks, some of which was addressed in previous sections, it is a first step in fully comprehending what content students post that may be considered inappropriate. Study participants were asked why they or their peers would be willing to post content of such questionable appropriateness; and what the appropriate response to such content should be (and by whom). By looking at these responses, one can begin to ascertain the role that students think their online social networking plays within society as a whole.

Research Question Three: What Are Students' Attitudes And Perceptions About Staff And Administrator Involvement In Online Social Networks?

This research question examines students' attitudes about staff and administrator involvement in online social networks users of these online social networking communities. The themes that emerged in answering this research question from conducting the surveys and focus groups are that students: 1) do not believe universities should be held liable for student-posted online content, 2) believe that involvement from non-students is ok to a limited extent, 3) see the benefits in and need for educational materials and workshops, and 4) adjust their settings and edit their content in response to university staff involvement.

Universities Should Not Be Held Liable For Student-Posted Online Content

The amount of liability that may be assessed to universities for the content posted online by their students is not clearly known. Students participating in this study did discuss the extent that they thought universities might be liable. On the whole, students generally felt that universities cannot be held liable for any inappropriate content or behavior exhibited by their students online. Students stated that there is nothing inherent about the behaviors and content being posted online that warrant any more liability or duty of care than if those same behaviors were being depicted in other forums. However, students felt it justifiable, and in some cases necessary, for universities to educate their students about the potential pitfalls of online social networking. For student affairs professionals, understanding this balance will help when planning whether or not to have any educational interventions and workshops about being proactively positive within OSNs.

Some focus group participants felt that their university had some liability or responsibility for online content that their students post. Participant IIB said that “USC has to look when it is a concerning issue,” to which another Focus Group II participant responded that she “wouldn’t be surprised if the university is liable. I’m sure they are bound to look out for student’s best interests, and monitoring Facebook is the cheapest and quickest way to do it.” A great majority of the perceived liability stemming from the survey and focus group data center around the university’s obligation to protect its own students from harm from themselves or others. Thus,

underage drinking in fraternities and sororities, in the residence hall, and any of a host of other behaviors students may engage in could harm those students or others, and the university should prevent whatever they can (Focus Group I, II and IV).

However, both survey respondents and other focus group participants readily pointed out that monitoring Facebook would be cost-prohibitive; most universities would not have the fiscal resources or staff to monitor all online content of all of their students.

A few focus group participants keenly pointed out that the liability for the university could potentially exist if a university official was engaging in problematic, inappropriate or illegal behavior online, or knew of students doing so and took no efforts to stop it. In Focus Group VI, one respondent said that he “did not think they could be sued, since USC is not endorsing any of this; unless, a university official was engaging in bad behavior.” A participant from Focus Group V, with the Undergraduate Student Government, agreed, ‘if you have two girls that are 18 and drinking underage, and an employee in the picture is laughing, then that’s a problem on multiple fronts.” Focus group participants commented that this applied primarily to professional staff, although student employee behavior online may also reflect negatively on the university.

Other focus group participants (I, III, IV, and VI) felt that their university “should do more to regulate online content. They might lose out on possible donations or other consequences, such as tuition dollars, etc.” This is because students may not want to have their university regulate online content at all, and

students thought that might deter students from enrolling. A participant in Focus Group IV identified this as “a social liability, not a legal liability,” which her peers interpreted as the university being socially responsible for what its students are doing, and have an obligation to educate students to be better, more productive members of society. However, many students do not feel that universities bear a legal responsibility for the behavior of its students. “They should regulate it somewhat, to say otherwise is ludicrous. They should keep their ears open to problems that are brought to their attention,” (Focus Group VI).

Even though most students agreed that universities would be unable to monitor all online content, a number of participants and respondents thought that it would be important for universities to generally know what was going on online. Participants from Focus Group II, some of whom are aspiring legal professionals, said that this speaks to “reasonable precautions”, the precautions any reasonable person could expect the university to undertake to exhibit due diligence. At USC, students identified that the Department of Public Safety was looking “on Facebook to find parties and close them down,” (Focus Group I). Since it is there, it will make it easier for the university to do its normal functions. In the words of one respondent, “all the university is technically doing is using the same resources students use to find out what is going on, to know what is going on around campus. DPS is not preemptively closing down parties.”

A larger majority of focus group participants felt that the university was not liable at all for the online content their students post. Students like participants IA, IB and IF felt that it is not the university's responsibility to police Facebook, and thus, the university cannot be held liable. If the university does not face liability for some potentially offensive or problematic content that their students write in their own email messages to others, said participants in Focus Groups I, III and V, then why should potentially offensive or problematic content posted within OSNs be any different. For these students who feel the university is not liable or responsible, it does not matter what the content is. Some students felt that the university should publish a statement saying that the university "ignores" online social networks, or only "specifically monitors" them to follow up on reported complaints. Fellow participants in Focus Group III pointed out that such a statement would incur added liability. Consistent with the comments of some survey respondents, students in some focus groups said that although the university "does not need to check out [Facebook content], they have the right to," or that the university "should keep [its] ears open to problems that are brought to their attention," (Focus Group VI). Students responding to the online survey perceived no liability that can be assigned to a university because of the content that any of their students choose to post or any behavior they might espouse.

Students believe that involvement from non-students is ok to a limited extent.

Students participating in this study had mixed feelings about universities and outside entities being involved in OSNs. Outside entity involvement or presence was clearly least favored by students, though participants acknowledged that corporate advertising within an OSN is what made it free for them to use.. Students were largely opposed to employers using Facebook or other OSNs to evaluate prospective or current employees, despite one student who asserted that personal and professional lives “do collide. You can’t say they are totally separate. If they have to hire you and cannot separate out your personal behavior, then shouldn’t they look at your profile first?”

This section, while classified under “Drawbacks” also includes some positive examples of university presence within OSNs. It is important to acknowledge that from the student perspective, there is a fine line between searching OSNs for offensive and inappropriate conduct (which students clearly oppose), and participating within OSNs to help connect students more closely together and more efficiently to campus resources.

In terms of university involvement, students widely believed that the primary function of OSNs is for students to communicate through them. This was particularly the case when discussing Facebook, specifically that it should be for college students only. However, students also saw the benefit in having campus job announcements,

event promotion, and information about campus resources within OSNs. In some cases student-staff interactions were referenced as potentially useful.

Participant VIC had a different response because at her previous job (athletics department) she was not allowed to befriend any of the athletes on Facebook. She “eventually changed my privacy settings so that my bosses couldn’t see what I was doing. I could see the point if I was trying to take my relationship further with them, but I was not.” This student skirted her employer’s non-fraternization rule by reducing opportunities for her employer to find out, and participant she was glad that her bosses did not force her to show them her friend’s list. Some survey respondents described similar situations, and in some cases the students changed their online name to their middle name or nickname so that their employer or anyone who they did not want to befriend online could not locate them.

Very few students said that they knew their university regularly reviewed the online content of their students. One student said that every time she logs in “to the student computers, it informs me that my history is being tracked and basically not to participate in any criminal activity.” Other respondents mentioned that athletes’ profiles are monitored regularly, and if inappropriate behavior or content is portrayed, the athlete risks a loss of their scholarship or other sanctions.

Some respondents indicated that their university does have a policy to review content of a student, but only when complaints are filed against that student. Some of these students asserted that this must be because the university does not have enough

money or “time to constantly look at everyone’s profile,” whereas other students did not assume that their university wanted to seek out all of the problematic behavior of its student body. In some cases the university did not have a separate policy, but that the overall student conduct code they signed when being accepted to that school applied to OSNs as well. One example of a student conduct code specifically referencing online content was given by a survey respondent, “if we are caught breaking rules online, the same penalty applies as breaking rules offline.”

Some students qualified their response to this question by clarifying that their university treats online misdeeds the same way it would treat misdeeds that happen face-to-face, or in print, etc. One survey respondent clarified this point:

If the school sees something that is against its formal policy, it punishes the same as it would if you were caught in person. However, the only time actual profiles seem to be reviewed is when someone complains about it. So, as long as you don’t have offensive material, you don’t get bothered. Resident Advisors (who write you up for breaking rules and keep the peace within the dorms) avoid looking at their resident’s profiles in order to avoid seeing underage drinking.

Participants like this respondent clearly see their university’s perspective as fitting with a “don’t see, don’t tell” mindset, “as long as you’re not in danger of harming yourself or others and aren’t being destructive, they will not write you up.” Other students echoed this sentiment that if you are careful in your own behavior you could avoid incurring the wrath of university involvement in your online social network and sanctions or other punishment.

However, if such a policy did exist, some students believed that their university needed to do a better job of educating its students about it. One respondent felt that there might be a policy at his institution but hopes the policy “would remain along the lines of the counseling center’s policy: unless there is an immediate threat to a person or private property, everything is confidential/none of their business.” Students also acknowledged awareness of some of their peers losing work-study jobs or other positions “because of information that staff found on their profiles.” Though whether or not the staff proactively looked for such content or if it was brought in by another student as part of a complaint was not made clear. One of the issues survey respondents were concerned about is that universities would convict students of violating student conduct codes or other policies without having sufficient evidence.

Online advertisements somehow related to the university were identified as important to the student experience, whereas commercial advertising was not. This is the reason why a majority of students from Focus Group III said that they would be more interested in university-related advertisements than those from corporations, companies or other outside entities. The only other distinction participants made between university and commercial advertising is that the commercial ads may be more aesthetically pleasing, and thus more readily received and viewed by students.

A number of focus group participants indicated that though they doubt if the university is entirely aware of how much university-related or ‘semi-legitimate’ advertising exists on Facebook, the students themselves find value in it (Focus Group

III). Participant IIIA even commented that the university may not want to know how much presence they have online. The types of university-related advertising mentioned were: recruiting for student employees, recruiting for students to take this minor or major, campus events, Housing, Bookstore sales, Alternative Spring Break trips, student elections, etc. Participants IIIA, IIIG and a few participants in Focus Groups I and VI identified that campus student organizations as well as student groups sponsored by the university (i.e. Undergraduate Student Government, Program Board, and Athletics) were among the most frequent university-related advertisers. Additionally, participants commented that posting “flyers” on Facebook was more effective than posting flyers on campus, in that “students seem to not pay attention to on-campus flyers much anymore,” (Focus Group IV). Collectively, student respondents appreciated online advertising for campus activities, with a general preference for those advertisements and events that are student-initiated or student-driven.

When participants were asked what other ways the university is present in their online communities, most respondents indicated that they have online friendships with teaching assistants, professors, staff, and even non-university employees that work for campus-based organizations. While the latter are not directly related to the university, participants categorized these individuals as equally significant in terms of their own online interactions with non-students. In terms of these online friendships with non-students, teaching assistants, staff and professors,

oftentimes the online friendship is matched with a stronger person-to-person connection in real life, though it was not always clear which came first or was more prevalent in these students' experiences. Participant IIC and a number of survey respondents pointed out that they had an experience where their professor set up their own Facebook account and profile to memorize the names and faces of his or her students. "It was really creepy the first day when he came in, and picked out a girl and said: 'you like this, this, this, and horseback riding. The girl freaked out and dropped the class after, but I added him as a friend. I guess it's a good tool when you have a lot of names and faces to memorize,'" (Participant IIC). At least in this one class, this professor uses it to get to know all of the students' names, by face, very early in the term. Other students in Focus Group II thought this to be a positive example of staff interaction and involvement within online communities.

Some of the more passive positive effects of university presence within OSNs were also identified. Participants commented that campus resources and information are more accessible as a result of university presence within OSNs. A student can befriend a student or staff person who works for a specific department, and through that node of connection learn how to benefit from the resources of that department, and get their questions answered if they were not necessarily comfortable asking the question in person directly. This connection between students and staff may also lend itself to increased retention, as one survey respondent mentioned that during a rough period in her life she stumbled onto a campus resource and staff person within her

Facebook network that she eventually met with to help her through her troubles.

Other students echoed this sentiment.

Table 10 displays student survey responses with regards to concerning issues with regards to OSNs, and what the appropriate response to those concerns from the university might be.

Please answer this question for each of the following acts, behaviors or observations on OSNs like Facebook or Myspace. How often have you either experienced, or heard of the following acts occurring, within the OSNs you participate in? (Select all that apply)					
	Myself	My friends	Heard of it happening at my school	Heard of it happening elsewhere	Never heard of this actually happening
Mini-feed feature causing problems	55 (20%)	86 (32%)	69 (26%)	63 (23%)	116 (43%)
Offensive images / pictures	28 (10%)	41 (15%)	67 (25%)	91 (34%)	112 (41%)
Discriminatory or hatred					
Pictures of Underage drinking	16 (6%)	53 (20%)	91 (34%)	124 (46%)	96 (36%)
Pictures of nudity/lewd conduct	6 (2%)	23 (9%)	40 (15%)	98 (36%)	146 (54%)
Inappropriate or offensive messages	5 (2%)	31 (11%)	63 (23%)	94 (35%)	128 (47%)
Experienced identity theft or stalking	20 (7%)	46 (17%)	60 (20%)	87 (32%)	130 (48%)
Someone is denied a job or internship based on profile	4 (1%)	12 (4%)	24 (9%)	118 (44%)	136 (50%)
Spam and junk email or messages; fake profiles	108 (40%)	100 (37%)	89 (33%)	98 (36%)	71 (26%)
Unwanted contact from anyone	147(54%)	138 (51%)	103 (38%)	102 (38%)	49 (18%)
Assuming there are significant concerns related to what happens within online social networks, do you think the university should do which of the following:					
Educate students about how to reduce negative consequences 120 (44.9%)	Participate in and monitor OSNs being used mostly by students 20 (7.5%)	Work with the staff of Facebook and Myspace to suggest changes to reduce the risks 63 (23.6%)	Do nothing. The university has no place / interest within my OSNs 116 (43.4%)	Do nothing. We're mature enough to make our own decisions about what we do online 146 (54.7%)	
Other: 26 (9.7%)					
Do you know whether or not your university has any policy of when to review students' online content and what to do about it?					
Yes, they review regularly 8 (3%)	Yes, they review when complaints are filed 15 (5.7%)	I don't know, but probably 165 (62.7%)	No, they don't have a policy 36 (13.7%)	I have no idea, I hope not 15 (5.7%)	

Table 10. Concerning issues in OSNs

As Table 10 shows, though a large number of students can identify most of the major drawbacks and concerns associated with OSNs, 40-50% tend to say that they have never heard of this actually happening, though they are sure that it has somewhere. Regardless, groups of respondents clearly believed that their university ought to “educate students about how to minimize negative consequences of their online activities,” though as other question’s responses will show, the suggested medium for conveying that educational message will differ widely by student. Other evidence that students would tolerate some university presence within their OSNs comes from a student who said that “when I checked above that university staff should monitor frequently trafficked areas of their students, I actually think they should do this to learn about their students and know about the campus culture,” of their student body. This student thought that universities could use OSNs to keep their fingers on the pulse of their campus community.

A number of students felt that online interactions with staff are beneficial because they felt that staff members were more available and accessible online than they are in person. This is largely a function of the challenges a student faces with making it to a staff or faculty member’s office hours, as much as it has to do with students feeling more comfortable asking any number of questions online versus face-to-face. As one student remarked through the survey, “[Online interactions with staff] are less personal, but at the same time may get more done. When interacting via [the] Internet, we have the opportunity to ask questions we may not have

otherwise asked for any myriad of reasons.” Most students who indicated that they interact with staff and faculty online said that it is generally through email. Very few specified that they use online social networks or online communities to interact with any university professional.

Some students expressed concern over the true motivations of staff interacting within OSNs. A few of these comments were similar to one student’s response that “[staff] become much more nosy in the fact that they use these communities to find students who break rules.” Another student said she had only had one brief discussion with a staff member on Facebook, “he said that he joined to see what students were saying about his test. There are not many staff on Facebook.” However, most students differentiated between email and other online interactions with staff. Many students would email staff or faculty with questions or for other reasons, but would not dream of communicating with them through OSNs.

Students from both the surveys and focus groups perceived their OSNs to be private, closed media for communication, and stated that they draw distinctions between their professional and social or personal lives. Essentially, these students did not believe it appropriate for employers to be able to access these communities in the first place (despite one student who admitted to walking her employer completely through the online social network). Even if the employers were participating in the online communities, students believe that they should not make hiring decisions or potential job-actions based on content within the online communities.

In the words of some of the participants from Focus Group VI, the password required for signing in to an online social network is just there to “control what you say or do”, but does not imply privacy. This lack of privacy has spawned some students from the focus groups to think more carefully about what they post, to minimize embarrassment to themselves, their employers and their friends. However, students were quick to point out that some of the privacy settings can be adjusted to limit who can access what on your profile. Others responded that companies often look at Facebook, if not directly, than through current employees who can access and view within the networks of their applicants. In addition, the privacy features and settings of Facebook and other OSNs can not only be adjusted, but new capabilities for those features and settings are constantly being developed. This was identified as a huge down side, as these settings are little more than “an illusion of privacy,” (Participant IIIA). One student said “when I put something on Facebook, I do it with the assumption that anyone can see it.” This is largely because users cannot be 100% sure that anything they may want hidden from some people really is hidden from view. Participants in Focus Group I commented that they actually posted certain things hoping that others, from friends to everyone else, will see it.

One of the concerns that students expressed about university participation in and monitoring of online social networks is that the university might try to get too involved. As a result of that “over-involvement” the university might try to stop things that participants felt were either harmless or so important that it should not be

prevented. The chief example here is the Senior Fountain Run, which was discussed previously. “The Senior Fountain run organizers would not post the date so that the university won’t stop the event. I talked to someone who said that if they knew what date the event was happening, they would empty all of the water fountains the night before,” because they would have to empty them and clean them if the Fountain run had occurred (Focus Group II). In the eyes of participating students, this would not be the best use of university knowledge of OSNs. However, other examples, such as underage drinking, or racist groups such as the “White Nation” incident, would be appropriate for the university to respond to.

On one hand, the university can sanction a student for inappropriate content that they post, just as if they exhibited the same inappropriateness in terms of behavior. On the other hand, the university can educate students to reduce the incidence of inappropriateness. Many students saw a need to balance both, and as one participant said: “There’s going to be a difference between proactive educational measures and saying ‘you did this and now we’re going to kick you out of school’,” (Focus Group VI). Many universities, like USC, have begun educating subpopulations of their students, chiefly through new student orientation and student leadership staff training on being smart and safe in their online social networking. This will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

Students working in on-campus jobs are told to review their online content regularly for appropriateness, just as it is suggested that students review their profiles

before applying to law schools and other jobs because potential and current employers and universities are likely to not only see what content is posted, but potentially find issues with the level of appropriateness of some of it. Focus Group Participant VB commented that most or all RAs, particularly those that she knows, are looking at Facebook and other online social network profiles to see if there are any concerning issues that need to be addressed for themselves or more important their residents. “When, how and if USC should check Facebook, Myspace or other profiles depends on what their intent or cause is. If they are really limiting what you can put on your profile, then that’s too far. But on the same token, by being a student of USC, you are agreeing to be a representative of USC,” (survey respondent). The intent behind reviewing the profiles may be important in understanding what a university may want to do in response to potentially inappropriate content. Some focus group participants assume that USC is checking out Facebook and other online social networks because the university itself, its affiliates (student organizations, departments, etc.) and individuals (i.e. staff, faculty) are using Facebook, advertising on it, and generally aware of what is going on.

One concern mentioned by students is whether or not student employees or student leaders on campus will be required to show their employer, or student organization advisors and leaders the entirety of their profiles (Focus Groups III, IV and VI). To some extent, in some instances, that is already being done. Participant VC said that the Panhellenic Council reviewed Facebook and other online social

network profiles to review candidates for board positions of Panhellenic. Another concern a few participants expressed is the belief that student employees (whether they are working on-campus or off) should not have their Facebook checked as part of the hiring process (Participant VIC), or even if such a check would be legal (Participant VIA).

In addition, participants also focused on the individual and collective responsibility that users of these OSNs have for their own content. Many students feel as though users of these OSNs are responsible for the content that they post. As such, they should be prepared to face any negative consequences as a result of the content they post. Additionally, users should be aware that everything they post is basically public information, and they can never be 100% confident that what they are posting is only visible to those whom they want to see it.

Students' thoughts and perspectives on potential university support of OSNs indicate that students will want very particular and limited support from their university provided that the university does not overstep its bounds into excessive monitoring. Additionally, students stated that receiving advice and coaching from university staff, faculty and mentors through OSNs could be both productive and of high utility and benefit for the students and the university. This might include the university paying "attention to the causes and petitions students are advocating for" within OSNs and promoting faculty student interactions. A few students referred to additional opportunities for collaboration within OSNs between students and their

university. The ability to publicize their Facebook group on campus, and have a staff person serve as a co-administrator of the online group (i.e. a student organization advisor) were desired by study participants.

A number of students identified the benefit to non-residential or commuter students. Specifically, university support of online groups “will help keep students who don’t live on or near campus still involved within the school,” said one student, and other respondents expressed similar sentiments. Students also thought that universities should support online versions of groups that exist on campus. These responses included complaints about on-campus organizations already being underfunded—related to a desire for funding of online groups, an interest in “the university [creating] groups which are related to the same in-person communities”, support/promote in-person events for online groups, and other suggestions particularly applicable to the developers of the online social networks. These suggestions included: for Facebook group-related flyers to include not only the poster’s email address but the web address of the group/organization, and hybridizing various online social networks with the university, or developing a home-grown, university specific OSN. This university-specific OSN would need strict guidelines to minimize negative or detracting behavior, but most focus group participants stated that they did not think students would use university-specific, closed OSNs. Alternatively, students said that universities can link the university homepage and clubs’ pages to online communities. OSNs are like an access point for

a variety of in-person organizations and activities; they also may help develop social skills by serving as an anxiety-free intermediary in between in-person interactions. As one student said, “I think these communities would work if they were highly organized and were also coincided with in-person meetings/discussions. I believe online communities should work in partnership with in-person causes. They can both compliment each other but having one more than the other will not be optimal.” A number of other students echoed this sentiment.

University staff can take from this an understanding that to a certain extent, students acknowledge that they would benefit from university presence and university-student interactions within OSNs. While this does not extend to university monitoring of OSNs to detect problematic content and behaviors, which students clearly oppose, most participants felt that it was justifiable and necessary for universities to follow up on reported complaints.

Students see the benefits in and need for educational materials and workshops

Every focus group participant, with the exception of participant VB, felt that while the university may not be liable for the online content posted by their students, the university did have both a responsibility and a compelling opportunity to educate its students about the risks and benefits associated with online social networking. By doing so, the university would be saying that “we are looking out for our student body,” (Focus Group IV). During Focus Group I, a student said that not only have

current students grown up with the Internet (particularly true as time goes on), but that there are so many stories on Dateline and other news reports or shows, that, in the words of participant IIE, “it is not the university’s job,” to educate students about OSNs. However, most participants agreed with the sentiments raised by one of those respondents, in that the university is in a position where it could help, even if it may not have to.

Students responding to the online survey were asked what interventions their university had implemented to educate students about the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking. The vast majority of students completing the survey said that their university had not implemented any educational interventions yet. Some students said that their university has not taken much action (proactive or reactive) with regards to online social networks. One student in particular said that their university had no education measures, though “housing does something, but mainly they have made lots of threats that I don’t think they have the man power to follow through on.” Responses from some other students focused on the punishments doled out by their university since there were no educational interventions:

There have been *NO* (*sic*) interventions...only punishment. My school cracks down on parties that have been listed as an event (because yes, they are monitoring the events) and put three students on academic probation (the fourth transferred schools) because the students created a group voicing their

dissatisfaction about a specific teacher. The only thing we've learned is that if you have an opinion, you better keep it to yourself.

Another student said that their "school has not taken the 'education' route," because it is a small Christian college that had decided to prohibit student access to online social networks from on campus. Southern Virginia University, which a survey respondent identified as a campus that also elected to "block Facebook and Myspace from on-campus access" reversed that decision after facing opposition from a sizeable population of students. This student went on to say that "Facebook and Myspace are not destructive sites to visit IF (*sic*) you know how to use them wisely," and others expressed similar sentiments, implying that students might appreciate education on how to use online social networks appropriately, wisely and safely.

Of the actual educational interventions students did identify, the types that elicited the most responses were newsletters, flyer and email campaigns to educate their students about using online social networks appropriately. These educational interventions were described by students as passive, "I saw a flyer telling us to watch what we say", because who knows who else might be reading it. The most active intervention described by students in this category of responses is that some universities have sent letters to their students' parents informing them of the risks associated with online social networking, such as "stalking, losing a job opportunity, and being denied admissions because of Facebook posts." Other semi-active interventions included students receiving "encouragement to be careful and use

networking in moderation” or occasional email warnings describing that types of behaviors or actions online are likely to cause concerns, and what the ramifications of those actions or behaviors might be. Another respondent said that they have “seen flyers posted about [online social networking] in the dorm lobby, but haven’t really heard much else about it.” Of the more active interventions, seminars and workshops were indicated by respondents as an educational intervention their university had been utilizing to promote wiser participation in online social networks by their students. Slightly fewer students identified Orientation as the primary avenue for conveying information about wise use of online social networking. Table 11 displays student responses regarding current and possible educational interventions.

What interventions has your university implemented to educate students about the benefits and drawbacks of OSN?				
Orientation program 13 (4.9%)	Seminar or workshop 16 (6%)	Newsletter, flyers, emails 33 (12.4%)	Nothing that I know of 205 (76.8%)	
What are some possible approaches the university might take to educate students about the issues of concern? What are additional steps the university might take to educate students about the benefits and drawbacks of OSN?				
Orientation program 32 (12%)	Seminar, workshop or class 42 (15.7%)	Pamphlets and flyers 23 (8.6%)	Emails, newspaper articles 26 (9.7%)	Other or No idea 151 (53.9%)

Table 11. Students’ thoughts on educational interventions.

There is some overlap here, in that the workshops that were discussed by students often occurred as part and parcel of the Orientation program. These active interventions allow students to interact with upper class student peer educators, mentors or role models and professional staff. As opposed to just seeing a flyer or newsletter, these students would be able to engage and interact with the presenters or

facilitators to gain a more comprehensive understanding of online social networking's benefits and drawbacks.

Some students thought that “providing a session dedicated to [online social networking] awareness during new student orientation” would ensure that all incoming students receive the same message. That information session during the first year orientation could address the benefits and drawbacks of online social networks. This would have the same effect throughout the academic year. One respondent, a resident advisor, said that one of the first-year student workshops the RAs facilitate for residents could also serve this function. “We are informed by Housing on Facebook dangers and we inform the residents,” which provides them an opportunity to ask pressing questions and get practical tips to apply to their own familiarity and experiences with online social networks.

Not all students think educational interventions would be helpful:

I think that universities can implement education for students but that doesn't mean that students will listen or even heed the warnings. It is my experience that people will do what they want. People need to be informed about the risks associated with what they post (especially about personal information).

Even with universities informing their students about the risks associated with their online content and behaviors, some respondents stated that they doubt that many students would heed the warnings. Some believe that this is because the university has no business being involved with OSNs, and thus, students would distrust any

advice offered by universities. Other survey responses in this vein included, “if a college-level student does not understand the social consequences of behaving in certain ways, both in reality or online, then they should not be in college,” and that any such university-sponsored educational endeavor should be optional as opposed to required. Overall the majority of students said educational interventions from the university are both necessary and valid, and that they should be required for all students to participate in and benefit from.

Survey respondents tended to identify the same educational interventions as either ones their university had implemented or those they thought their university should implement. This shows that those universities that have already implemented some interventions (flyers, emails, newsletter articles and Orientation or other workshops), are on-track with what students who have not seen any interventions think would work best. Students with responses falling into these categories suggested a multi-faceted approach through which the university could offer tips, hints or suggestions for what students should and should not do online, including both warnings or potential consequences (generally and from the university or employers) and tips and hints for positive practical applications of online social networks. Including the educational component as part of a seminar or class was identified by students as a suggested action universities could take. One respondent in particular identified this as ideal because it could become a “part of general education English composition...[online social networking] is a new forum of

communication...or critical thinking as we should all be” able to decide how and what to do once all benefits and drawbacks are understood. Other suggestions also surfaced:

During the Weeks of Welcome and to first year students or in the Student Union building they could hand out pamphlets and have a booth at the clubs fair, or organize a day where they give a lecture. It’d be best if other students did the talking and not the professors [or staff], students will listen to other students who experience the same things as them more willingly than listen to a staff member that didn’t grow up in the technological age that my generation has.

The concept of using students to deliver the message runs across the media for conveying that message. “Education on issues of concern could be addressed in a workshop during freshman orientation,” so that all incoming students would receive a uniform message. A number of students had no suggestion for additional interventions. While some of these were students who felt it was inappropriate for the university to be concerned about OSNs and their students’ behavior within them, a greater number of these respondents indicated that they either were not sure what else universities could try, had general answers (i.e. ‘educate students’, ‘tell students what they should or should not do’, etc.), or thought that what their university was already doing was sufficient.

Content for Educational Seminars, Workshops and Orientation programs

Both the focus group and survey participants identified key elements as important to include in any educational endeavor related to online social networks.

One of these important elements is making sure that students are aware that employers and other people can see their profile, and see what they are doing and posting online. The “realities of people’s access” is that in the virtual world, virtually anyone can see virtually anything that virtually anyone else posts (Focus Group VI). As participant VA said, “letting people know who has access would be the most important thing, and also going over the key elements in the terms of use as an FYI.” Publishing tips highlighting key issues in the terms of use and user agreements would help students understand some of the hidden complexities and intricacies of the policies they agreed to when first signing up for these online social networks. As discussed previously, students completing the focus group questionnaire were unaware of some of the more concerning elements in these policies, and were quite frustrated as they discussed the implications of those policies. However, not all participants agreed. Participant VD, for example, felt that it was not “USC’s responsibility to go over the terms of use for [students]. It’s our responsibility to know what they’re about.” Focus group participants routinely felt that information about privacy settings, safety, identity theft, and the dangers of posting too much personal information online were all crucial elements to include in any educational measures. While these issues may be some that many students responding to the survey feel they have a comprehensive understanding of, further discussion and probing through additional questions implies that students would be receptive to additional effort on this front.

Additionally, over 80% of survey respondents and focus group participants identified discussions about the effects of online social networking content on job applications or current employment as educational elements that they had participated in or received. Participants from Focus Group II and III both identified the Career Center having specialized workshops about editing your profile and adjusting your settings before applying for jobs, and brought up an idea to bring in business to give examples of people they wanted to hire but did not based on what they found in their online profile. More students identified this material as important content than any of the other issues to potentially educate users on. Fewer survey participants identified bad or inappropriate content, or potentially inappropriate content, as an important element for any educational measure. Dissenters on this point primarily focused on their perception that it is up to each user's own discretion what they post. Focus group participant VB commented that people who post inappropriate content indiscriminately only benefits him and anyone else who does not do anything "stupid on their profile". This participant was quick to point out how it might seem selfish to not care as much about what others do to themselves and focus on their own well-being, but his rationale is that each person is responsible for herself or himself. Other dissenters felt that the definition of what is or is not appropriate would be arbitrarily set by whoever is evaluating the situation. Students distinctly stated that the definitions the average university would come up with would not match the average student's definition of what is appropriate.

In each focus group, students stated a desire for Frequently Asked Questions and answers to be a key component of any efforts to promote greater education and understanding of the uses and implications and effects of online social networks. These frequently asked questions, student participants felt, would likely highlight important issues from the perspectives of the students, their university, and even society-at-large. Even students who believed that the university should not be participating in online social networks, stated that if the university were to conduct educational interventions, discussing current hot-button issues and frequently asked questions would be productive, “as long as the university did not say what I could or could not do online,” (Focus Group Participant IIIIG). Participant VB agreed, in that he felt education was different than a warning of likely repercussions.

However, participants largely did feel that teaching students about the possible short-term, medium-term, and long-term repercussions of their actions would minimize the likelihood of students being surprised later by the effects that their online content have on others and on themselves. The repercussions students seem most concerned about, and wanted to avoid the most, involved the ability or inability to get jobs, social isolation or humiliation by others due to what they post, embarrassment from family members viewing their online content, and the inability to completely eradicate content from the Internet once it has originally been posted. Possible job action and punishment from the university, or the government, while identified by study participants, were neither overt nor widespread student concerns.

Furthermore, while none of these possible repercussions were shared by all study participants initially; many focus group participants readily affirmed their agreement once the repercussion was first mentioned.

In terms of the medium for conveying this message, students offered a few options that they feel would be particularly well-received by students. Students in Focus Groups III felt that a repetition of messages through a variety of means would likely be more comprehensive and effective. One student noted that she expected to hear messages about being safe online from her professor, career counselor and mother, and that that would help students better understand the repercussions of their actions (Participant IIIC). Participant IIIG had a specific suggestion:

There should be something. I think there should be a seminar for every single entering freshman student about privacy and online communities, posting comments, pictures and messages, interacting with fellow students as well as community members or people in authority like staff and faculty, as well as email scams or fraud, identity theft, etc.

This would address not only issues pertaining to online social networks, but other pertinent issues related to student usage of the Internet.

Participants identified delivery through the Orientation program as a great medium for educating all students, even though it would only get the incoming students each year. One respondent said, when “I came to Orientation, someone asked me if I had Facebook yet, and so I signed up right away.” Clearly, if an educational intervention were to take place during Orientation, every incoming student would be more informed about how to maximize the benefits of online social

networks while minimizing the drawbacks. “I think students are oblivious to the fact that Facebook is so public, and that they should go to a seminar for a half-hour about it,” (Participant IIIG). Additionally, “the presenter has to be able to answer a lot of questions about” online social networks in order to be effective in conveying that message, and thus their knowledge of the benefits and risks of online social networking should be thorough (Focus Group participant VA).

However, participant IE thought that an educational seminar at Orientation may not be as effective as other media for conveying that message and participant VB wonders what the university would sacrifice to address online social networking. “You have a limited time at Orientation. What will you take out to talk about Facebook? Are you going to cut alcohol awareness information which I feel is important?” (Focus Group V). Some of her fellow participants thought that the university could consider pamphlets to supplement the presentations. In addition, during the presentations, respondents felt that it would be productive and meaningful to show a few sample profiles from the audience receiving the presentation. The presenter could learn some things about those example students, and ask the audience to “think about what strangers might be learning about you,” (Focus Group V). Some focus group participants felt that personal accounts or horror stories from students who got into trouble as a result of content they posted would be a vital component of this presentation as well. Such testimony would help students understand that the risks and drawbacks are real.

Equally meaningful to the students receiving the educational intervention might be the use of peers to convey the message, as highlighted in discussions during Focus Group I, III and VI. Students already experience “peer pressure” to use Facebook and exhibit potentially risqué or problematic behaviors, and a number of the focus group participants asserted that peer mentors or student leaders (student organization officers, Resident Assistants, Orientation Leaders, etc.) could convey the message in a memorable and productive way. Participant IIIA mentioned her own training as a Resident Assistant, which included a session about Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks:

We had a session about Facebook, and it was probably the most interactive session because it attracted everyone’s attention. All these privacy issues that they were talking about and all of the things we would be liable for. That was probably the most interactive. I think that if they were to have that kind of thing with Orientation, then in addition to the students eating it all up, I think it would attract a lot of their attention, particularly if we, as upper-class students can help facilitate that message.

Other students participating in the focus groups agreed with IIIA that student-to-student discussions and presentations about online social networking’s risks, pitfalls and benefits would reach new students more effectively than hearing the same material from staff.

As an alternative or additional educational intervention, an online module similar to Alcohol.Edu (which is akin to online driver’s education, but about alcohol abuse awareness and college social issues related to alcohol) could be very useful (participant VIC and others). A little promotion of that or message of things you

need to remember when you come to school. It was felt that if the educational intervention is not interactive, it would not get read. While participants did admit that they did not pay much attention during Alcohol.Edu, or were very glad that the requirement to complete that module did not affect their class year, they did feel that a module pertaining to Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks would be beneficial for students. Conceivably, students mused that of all of the online modules or campus requirements they have to satisfy, this would likely be among the least boring to complete. One possibility mentioned during Focus Group II is that this module could be mandatory or optional. However, this fraternity member felt that if it was only optional, then the university should have a zero-tolerance policy on judicial actions if a student does not complete that module. Focus group participants also felt that it was important to include some sort of quizzing feature to ensure that students completing the module have achieved the learning outcomes of that educational intervention. Repeatedly, some participants raised the concern that students will simply click next on each screen and not pay attention, and the quizzing feature may help address that.

One participant in the sixth focus group felt that sending an informational letter to students and parents about how the students can protect themselves online would be effective. “At the very least,” said one student, “the parents will read the letter and then talk to their students about the issues,” (Focus Group VI). Participant VIA mentioned that she had received a similar educational notice from the university

in advance of her 21st birthday, which prompted her parents to talk to her about drinking. While the participants were eager to voice their consternation about a measure such as this, they agreed that it would be effective in getting students to think more holistically about their online activities (Focus Groups III and IV). One participant in Focus Group IV particularly felt that an interactive intervention would be more effective than the letter that may not get read, and an in-person interactive measure would be even better than the online module.

Study participants also identified a series of smaller, more frequent and ongoing interventions. Open forums or other discussions on Facebook content, settings and safety seemed appropriate to participants as a measure to educate currently enrolled students in general, as well as provide ongoing educational interventions. This would be critical, commented a few of the respondents in Focus Group III, as the features and functionality of these online social networks are constantly evolving, and practically looks different each and every day. In addition, it may be practical to have an article in the Daily Trojan periodically (Focus Group Participant IIIA). Some of the messaging that would be important to include in these or any educational intervention would be: “Remember, people can see what you do on Facebook”, “nothing is private”, While there is no guarantee that any one intervention would reach all students, a combination of multiple media and venues for the educational materials.

It was clear from both the surveys and focus group data that students would not trust any educational intervention designed by the online social networks and websites themselves. That is not to say that students would not appreciate Facebook or other online social networking site to more fully develop and enhance their privacy settings, and better explain their utility. On the contrary, respondents felt that Facebook and other online social networks should do that, and the university should provide its educational interventions.

Vast numbers of survey respondents and focus group participants commented that their participation in this research study was particularly effective in getting them to think about issues related to online social networks. Participating students would comment that they were going to go look at their profile and adjust their settings after the focus group had concluded, or after they completed the survey. Students in the third JEP focus group (Focus Group V) commented that their peers from JEP, Focus Groups III and IV, had been seen revising their profile and adjusting settings. While it is impractical for every student to complete a survey or participate in a focus group about online social networking, these comments and observations from students imply that any discussion about the risks associated with online social networks will help students be safer and wiser in their online activities.

Educating students about the dangers and risks of using online social networks is not only as important as helping students understand the benefits of using them responsibly, but as important as educating students on a variety of other

things. As one student from Focus Group I drew a comparison to walking across the street: “If your parents never told you to look both ways before you cross the street, then someone has to tell you.” Participant VA said that “in high school it may not have been as big a deal. But now as a first year student, you should be aware that your faculty may add you as a friend or see your profile,” and you should know that they will judge you by what they see. Universities could positively contribute to the experiences of their students by imposing educational interventions through a variety of means, giving students the tools they need to be productive users of OSNs.

Students adjust their settings and edit their content in response to university staff involvement.

Study participants were asked if anyone had ever suggested to them to review their profiles for content, and if they had ever done so for any reason. Focus group participants, as discussed previously, were quick to mention that as a result of participating in this study, they intended to log on to Facebook, Myspace and their other OSNs to begin adjusting their settings and editing content. In fact, a few focus group participants who managed to be nearby during subsequent focus groups mentioned that they had already done so as a result of the discussion they participated in the previous day. This is important for educators to know as it speaks to the responses students might have to educational interventions.

As Table 12 shows, survey respondents specifically were asked if they had ever been advised to edit or review their profile to remove content or adjust privacy settings to minimize their online exposure.

	General seminar / program	Staff in response to seeing content	Family	Friends	Potential Employer	Organization's headquarters	You reviewing own profile
WHAT MATERIAL WAS THE ADVICE ABOUT?							
a. Remove content	6 (2%)	4 (2%)	7 (3%)	11 (5%)	3 (1%)	7 (3%)	9 (4%)
b. Adjust privacy settings	0 (0%)	1 (0%)	10(4%)	10(4%)	2 (1%)	3 (1%)	31(13%)
c. Reduce personal info	3 (1%)	0 (0%)	11(5%)	10(4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	25(10%)
All of the above	19 (8%)	4 (2%)	14(6%)	12(5%)	3 (1%)	8 (3%)	48(20%)
Only a and b	1 (0%)	1 (0%)	1 (0%)	2 (1%)	2 (1%)	0 (0%)	6 (2%)
Only a and c	1 (0%)	1 (0%)	2 (1%)	2 (1%)	1 (0%)	1 (0%)	3 (1%)
Only b and c	2 (1%)	2 (1%)	13(5%)	5 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	22 (9%)
No this has not happened	209 (87%)	228 (95%)	183 (76%)	189 (78%)	230 (95%)	222 (92%)	97 (40%)
WAS THE CHANGE OR MODIFICATION A DIRECTIVE OR SUGGESTION?							
"You must do this or get in trouble"	2 (1%)	2 (1%)	6 (3%)	4 (2%)	1 (0%)	2 (1%)	4 (2%)
"You're in trouble, now fix this"	1 (0%)	1 (0%)	4 (2%)	2 (1%)	3 (1%)	4 (2%)	1 (0%)
"Be careful about what you post"	30 (13%)	8 (3%)	45 (19%)	46 (19%)	7 (3%)	8 (3%)	88 (37%)
"This violates our code of conduct"	0 (0%)	3 (1%)	3 (1%)	2 (1%)	2 (1%)	5 (2%)	0 (0%)
Not applicable	206 (86%)	225 (94%)	181 (76%)	186 (78%)	226 (95%)	220 (92%)	147 (61%)
DID YOU MAKE THE RECOMMENDED ADJUSTMENTS?							
Yes	25(10%)	8 (3%)	45(19%)	43(18%)	9 (4%)	13(5%)	124(52%)
No	8 (3%)	8 (3%)	15(6%)	15 (6%)	8 (3%)	10 (4%)	6 (2%)
Not applicable	206(86%)	223(93%)	179(75%)	182(76%)	222(93%)	216(90%)	110(46%)
DID YOU CHANGE YOUR SETTINGS?							
Yes	25(10%)	8 (3%)	44 (18%)	37 (15%)	8 (3%)	12 (5%)	122(51%)
No	10 (4%)	7 (3%)	15 (6%)	19 (8%)	8 (3%)	9 (4%)	16 (7%)
Not applicable	204(85%)	224(94%)	180(75%)	184(77%)	223(93%)	218(91%)	102(42%)

Table 12. Students' Responses to Suggestions on Editing/Reviewing Content

These respondents were also asked to indicate who might have made those suggestions and whether or not the student went ahead and made any of the recommended adjustments. The great majority of students stated that they had not received any advice about removing questionable content, adjusting their privacy settings or reducing the amount of personal information they had posted online. Very few students indicated receiving advice through general seminars, staff suggestions after viewing their profile, family, friends, potential employers or their organization's national office. In fact students generally said that the main source of suggestions at all about their online social networking profiles and content came from family, friends or themselves. Family and friends had each told these students to "be careful about what you post", while less students had heard that message in a general seminar or program. A larger number of students responded to this same message as the reason they reviewed their own profile. Less than six students in any category answered that the modification suggested came in the form of "you must do this or get in trouble", "you're in trouble, now fix this" or "this violates our code of conduct".

When asked whether or not the respondent made the recommended adjustments, a small number of students said that they did make the recommended adjustment brought up during the general seminar or program, while very few said no. An astounding majority of students said there were no recommended adjustments

to make, or “not applicable”. When asked the question a different way—“Did you change your settings”—the answers were not noticeably different.

Students completing the online survey were given an opportunity to offer any additional thoughts they would like to share about their use of online communities that they felt was not yet adequately covered by their responses to other survey questions. One respondent said that he “didn’t want anyone to judge me based on what I wrote on the Internet – they should get to know me in person first.” Others indicated that they feel Facebook is a form of self-expression. One student said:

I feel that students should not feel an authoritative eye on them in online communities. Very often in Myspace or with Youtube, I see people using it as a form of expression that they are unable to have in person because they’re ashamed, or it’s difficult information to share in person. I think that they need this outlet for them to express their emotions and thoughts without feeling like someone is going to come after them for it. Free speech, right?

Many survey respondents echoed these sentiments. Another student pointed out that people are making their lives more digitally based, such as in multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft. “We’re digitizing our personalities and our lives. For better or worse, the Internet is becoming another dimension in which we interact, learn, grow, fight, celebrate, live and die,” said one participant. This student went on to state that they felt passionately that online personalities and personas could probably shed a lot of light on society in the way that everyone interacts.

Some students offered responses related to them changing or adjusting their own settings. One student referred to an incident she had with stalking, where the stalker took pictures of her walking home and to school, then sent them to her,

finally causing her to contact the police. Another student adjusted her settings for professional reasons, saying “I am going to be a therapist, so obviously I do not want my clients researching me on the Internet and finding personal information about me on there which is why I made my Myspace profile private.” Students frequently mentioned that when they set up their profiles, they were unaware that all of the information they were supplying was all going to be visible on their profiles, and thus they did not initially realize how much of their information was out there.

Survey respondents as a whole identified a number of varying attitudes and perceptions pertaining to the need for and extent of staff and administrator involvement within online social networks. Focus group participants also expressed differing opinions as to the need for or value of university presence and involvement within online social networks. Largely, these opinions and perspectives were accompanied by reasoning and explanation which, when combined with responses and data for the first two research questions will serve to help guide universities in moving forward to guide and support all students’ behaviors, in-person and online.

Closing

The next and final chapter of this research study will further summarize the entire research study. This chapter will also offer conclusions based on the research data collected. The researcher will draw upon the research and conclusions to state recommendations for student affairs practitioners. The researcher will then discuss

implications for future research into how mediating social networking through technology affects college student experiences.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter Overview

This chapter will review the most pertinent results and relate those results to the reviewed literature. These findings will lead to conclusions related to student perceptions of the effects of online social networks (OSNs) on their own college experiences. Next the researcher will present recommendations for student affairs practitioners based on this research study. Though this research study could not examine all possible areas of interest with regards to online communities and OSNs, this study contributes insights to the limited research on online communities or OSNs to, with regard to student opinions, perspectives, and experiences. Thus, this study serves as a foundation for future studies and sets a baseline for later comparisons. The researcher will present implications for future research as part of this chapter. Finally, this chapter and study will wrap up with some closing thoughts.

Summary of Findings

The overarching question in this study was, “What are the effects of online social networking communities on college student experiences?” An online survey and student focus groups contributed to answering these three research questions:

- 1) How do students utilize Online Social Networks, and in what ways do they engage with each other?

- 2) What do students feel are the benefits and drawbacks associated with their usage of online communities and online social networks?
- 3) What are students' attitudes and perceptions about staff and administrator involvement in online social networks?

As discussed throughout the previous chapter, students' perspectives on the uses and utility of participating within online social networks vary widely from individual to individual. What remains consistent is that the vast majority of students indicate that participation within online social networks such as Facebook and Myspace is important to them, and many feel like it is a pervasive component of their college experiences. Some students even expressed the desire to have Facebook remain only for college students as they saw it as a right of passage for high school students transitioning into college, and then getting a Facebook profile.

Students identified a number of important risks and drawbacks associated with using OSNs. These risks and drawbacks generally center around personal safety and public image. Despite the severity of these drawbacks, the benefits from online social networking that students defined clearly lead them to believe outweigh the drawbacks and risks. As such, it is not surprising that online social networking continues to grow in popularity and frequency of usage. The benefits of online social networking ran the gamut from increased socialization opportunities, to the convenience of anytime, anyplace instant communication, to an increased sense of community and a venue for entertainment and involvement.

Students were also particularly concerned with the incidence and extent (or in some cases even the necessity) for universities and other entities to have an online presence within Facebook, Myspace and other OSNs. A constituency of students felt it not only unimportant or unnecessary for universities and other entities to participate in online social networking, but also identified that as a violation of students' rights to privacy and free speech. While this, of course, would depend on what actions or inactions the university or other entities might take with regards to content or behavior they might run across, nearly every student did feel it would be wrong for those entities and universities to actively seek out problems online. Nearly all students stated that outside entities (except for universities—with a limited presence) were essentially unwelcome within their OSNs. However, the majority of students felt that a university presence, or preferably just the presence of individual staff, faculty and administrators from within the university as users participating within the OSNs would not only be ok, but might be positive contributors to students' experiences online. In addition, students said that these interactions would positively affect their level of engagement and affinity with the university, as well as support throughout their college experiences.

Discussion of the Study

As technology grows, in both the variety and scope, people have been concerned there may be more breadth and less depth in social connections. That

being the case, people will need venues for an interconnected environment, or multiple, overlapping social spheres. Online communities in general and online social networks (OSN) specifically provide a forum for multiple, simultaneous, overlapping spheres of social interaction that many users feel is important to their lives and experiences. This is certainly the case with college students who, in many ways, are already using the Internet and associated technology in every aspect of their lives. Students order food and do other shopping through the Internet. Students also use the Internet to turn in their assignments, collaborate with classmates, and research for their assignments. Today, an increasing amount of student-to-student communication and socializing occurs online. The Internet, through online communities and OSN, is doing to communication and socialization today what the advent of the telephone did 40 to 50 years ago. Students back then chose to make calls rather than walk to their friend's house; now they choose to send e-mails, text messages and instant messages instead of making phone calls. It is likely that in the long run, OSNs will prove to be even more relevant in our daily lives.

As recently as the past three or so years, universities have transitioned away from print copies and snail mail to preferring e-mail as the desired mode of communication to students. Additionally, it is much more common for college applications and acceptances to be conducted completely online. Transitioning to electronic communication as students became more familiar with that technology not only saved universities money, but time as well. Universities can communicate with

more students more efficiently online than they ever could on paper. Thus, as students have increasingly become digital natives, universities should not be surprised that generally, students know more about the technology than staff, and will find innovative uses for the technology that the developers and educators would never have imagined. Also, students tend to be more open, comfortable, and less concerned with the disclosure of personal information online, at least initially. This might be because many students tend to feel a certain level of anonymity in their online interactions and behaviors. Whether or not a student discloses their contact information online, there is usually at least a photo and name affiliated with their profile.

Interestingly, students are generally using little discretion in their online activities (Arotzky, 2004; ARS Technica, 2006; Paperclip, 2006; Facebook, 2006). Oftentimes, students are doing and saying things on Facebook that they would not do or say in person (Bugeja, 2006). As one student at Harvard (which was the launching point of Facebook) puts it: “I realize that someone looking at my profile might get a different impression of me than I intended, but it’s not supposed to encompass yourself – everybody’s profile changes daily...it’s completely ephemeral,” (Schweitzer, 2005). As this quote illustrates, students tend to have little concern for the potential negative consequences of what they post online. Some students express themselves in the form of alter egos online, and will say anything and everything that comes to mind because they feel invincible.

Students may perceive online communities as being exclusive to students and having no bearing on their future lives, careers or families (Stutzman, 2006; Paperclip, 2006). Wellman and Gulia (1997) found that the Internet can effectively maintain the quantity and diversity of weak or informal ties between users. According to the authors, intermediate-strength ties between people who can only interact on a face-to-face basis infrequently, are supported and enhanced by the Internet. These online relationships tend to be mostly founded on shared interests, and less on socio-demographic characteristics. The authors go on to describe some of the differences between in-person and online relationships:

Although many relationships function off-line as well as on-line, [computer supported social networks] are developing norms and structures of their own...the limited evidence available suggests that the ties people develop and maintain in cyberspace are much like most of their 'real-life' community ties: intermittent, specialized and varying in strength. (Wellman & Gulia, 1997, p. 16)

This quote suggests that the users themselves see this phenomenon as just another normal part of life. This would explain why most student users of Facebook have no qualms about what they post about themselves, their real friends, or their Facebook friends.

In the near future, as Facebook expands to high schools and as technology advances, students are going to be increasingly exposed to OSNs at an earlier age, and will continue to keep up with technological developments. Rupert Murdoch, who recently purchased Myspace for \$580 million, said of online social networking that:

To find something comparable, you have to go back 500 years to the printing press, the birth of mass media – which, incidentally, is what really destroyed the old world of kings and aristocracies. Technology is shifting power away from the editors, the publishers, the establishment, the media elite. Now it's the people who are taking control, (Wired Magazine, 2006).

However, this study will be applicable and transferable to the impacts of emergent technology students use on their educational and developmental experiences. What this could mean for educators is an opportunity to help students navigate the challenges of preserving the depth and breadth of their communication with friends, family and others without sacrificing their many other pursuits.

It is not the intent of this writer to scare student affairs professionals from making use of online communities and OSNs, or prohibiting their students from using them. In fact, it is important to understand what activities college students are engaging in online, and why. Oftentimes this user-created content is full of pictures or statements that run contrary to what the average reasonable person would deem appropriate. Pictures showing illegal activity, such as underage consumption of alcohol and any consumption of illegal drugs, or those of an overt sexual nature, are as prevalent as an abundance of personal identity and contact information that can be used by complete strangers to contact a user without that user having known the person (Facebook.com, 2006).

Most if not all of these concerning behaviors, actions and messages occurred before the advent of OSNs. The concerns and responses to in-person concerns should be the same for online depictions of the same behaviors, actions, messages and other

content. It is not surprising that the same should occur for online offenses. In the next ten years or so, we will have candidates for political office that face embarrassment over some college antics posted on the Facebook, and probably within five years, we will see an even larger increase in litigation, perhaps to the level of the Supreme Court with issues of Free Speech online, particularly with user-created content.

As a result of the emergence of these phenomena, and the latency with which society often catches up, universities, and society at large, now have to contend with emerging problems associated with student behavior and actions, which occur online through social-networking portals such as Myspace and Facebook. Universities differ on whether or not they sanction students based on what is published on their profiles, and to what extent (Trotter, 2006; Willard, 2006; Wissner, 2005). A more important question might be whether or not the institution will make any formal or official policy with regards to online communities and OSNs (Willard; Stephens, 2006; Steiner, 2006). The extent that students' online activities might pose liability issues for universities is still largely undefined. It will most likely depend on a number of factors, including whether the institution is public or private.

As discussed previously, society and universities have already identified a number of concerns with respect to online social networking. Generally, these concerns center on an interest in protecting the students from harm due from their own behavior, and protecting the university from legal action. As a result of those concerns, some universities have considered taking action to control what students

can or cannot view and post or even access. Other universities have opted to take a more educational route, addressing issues as they are brought to the university's attention by talking to the student about the issues of concern their posted content brings up. Some universities are realizing that the wisest and most prudent course of action is educating each of their students about the benefits and drawbacks of engaging in online social networks. In order for each university's student affairs staff to make the best decisions for their institution, they need to know what students' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of participating in OSNs are.

Despite these concerns, this form of communication is so popular amongst college students and so prevalent in their lives that students will likely continue to utilize OSNs regardless of any interventions that universities might consider implementing. This is apparent due to students' general recognition of many of the issues and concerns related to online social networking. Online social networking, as a phenomenon, is not likely to go away anytime soon. In fact, while the specific web sites, networks, or means (for example, as mobile device technologies improve), may change over time, students are going to continue to engage each other and interact online. At the same time, universities want to meet students where they are at: academically, emotionally, cognitively, in terms of their developmental stages, and physically. Given these factors, if our students are not at a location where we could offer them our services, programs, counsel, advising, etc. then we need to find new ways to reach them. This does not mean that the university should abandon its

existing programs, and services that are offered in person. Rather, the university should consider supplementing in-person services and interactions with online interaction.

College students are creating community online through online social networks. Since students will continue to participate in OSNs and other online communities because they believe that the benefits of doing so outweigh the drawbacks, universities ought to educate students on being safer in their online activities. More importantly, student affairs practitioners, educators and administrators have the unique opportunity to support students in their online social networking and utilize this medium for enhanced integration, engagement, involvement and retention within the university as a whole.

Conclusions

Facebook, Myspace and other OSNs, despite some of their disconcerting attributes and features, play a key role in the campus socialization process for new undergraduate students. This is particularly important for new first-year students as they transition from the social network they had been building for oftentimes 12 or more years through high school to college, where everything and everyone is different. However, ongoing participation in online communities and OSNs plays at least an equally prominent role in the lives and experiences of continuing students.

Additionally, student affairs staff members that want to engage students in campus life and activities and connect them to services, resources, and to each other, will need to be innovative. Instead of programming to where we want the students to be, universities need to read out to students and program where they are at, in this case, online. At least in part, our students are online, and OSNs are an important medium by which universities can integrate students' lives and outside experiences with the university resources and programs. In the words of Cathy Small, author of *My Freshman Year*, today's campus communities are "small, individualized networks formed early, by choice, mediated by technology, and not really connected to academics," (Small, 2007). As opposed to the traditional sense of community—a sense of identity or affiliation based on shared experiences, geography, beliefs, needs preferences, etc.—college campuses are personalized communities of choices and individuals. In college, community is typically elusive and not automatic. Generally, we see small peer networks with close-knit, but often closed communities. OSNs break down those barriers to interaction so that in addition to the close-knit, often closed in-person communities or social networks, there are also numerous, open, loosely woven together and overlapping spheres of online social interaction existing simultaneously and continuously.

As a result, students are interacting online more than anyone would have thought possible four years ago, prompting universities to be concerned that students would be less involved and engaged on campus, and prompting society to be

concerned that OSN users would be disconnected from real life. Despite the potential for negative applications that online communities and OSNs have, they still engage students, oftentimes in more ways than any campus activities office could think to attempt. The depth of that engagement remains largely undefined, but our understanding of it is enhanced by this research. In reality, the data shows that students are not less connected in person as a result of interacting online with increasing regularity. However, evaluating student involvement has traditionally required looking at the commitment of physical time and energy sense; it is not yet clear how applicable this is to students' online involvement or engagement.

From this study, educators can reflect on the student perspectives of OSNs and other online communities, and re-conceptualize student involvement and engagement. Relationships with student affairs professionals help students to access programs, resources and opportunities that they would not otherwise know about or find (Nuss, 2003). As institutional agents, student affairs practitioners can serve as nodes connecting students to campus resources, to each other, and to their educational growth and personal development.

In addition, the benefit students receive from being loosely connected to multiple individuals is as important a component of students' college experiences as having really strong and close connections to fewer individuals. This speaks to Granovetter's concept of the strength of weak ties (1973) as discussed in chapter 2. A strong tie, which Granovetter states are an essential component of functioning

communities, is characterized by a number of factors: 1) mutual confiding in one another, 2) emotional intensity of the relationship, 3) amount of time spent interacting, and 4) reciprocation of the connection (Granovetter, 1973; Hampton, 1990). Thus, students can maintain strong connections to other individuals through online communities despite the interaction not necessarily occurring face-to-face. Furthermore, this study shows that OSNs help fulfill three of Maslow's hierarchy of needs for student experiences as discussed in chapter 2—the need for love and sense of belonging, the need for esteem and self-worth, and the need for self-actualization or reaching their full potential. Students interact within OSNs to find others that share similar interests. These commonalities then lead to students valuing and depending on each other for support and respect.

OSNs offer students the opportunity to be increasingly connected with multiple facets of the diverse population, both of their university and others—as well as non-college student constituencies. Students are able to maintain participation within these social networks with much more regularity than they could have with their in-person equivalents. Transitions in the student experience, both initially to college, and then throughout and beyond those experiences, are made easier as a result of students having more regular interactions in these social networks. Since enhanced interaction and engagement in general tends to speak to retention and persistence within the university, and online social networks lead to enhanced

interaction and oftentimes engagement with the university (staff, resources, etc.), it is logical to conclude that OSNs may help these effects.

Recommendations

This study proposes that online communities warrant attention and support similar to that provided to other communities within the institution. One of the results of this study is that student affairs practitioners will be better able to determine the appropriate level and type of attention and service to direct towards online communities and OSNs. As this online phenomenon is similar in function to other campus communities and has been increasing in popularity, student affairs professionals should consider targeting programming for this community. Targeted programming can be in the form of educating students on how to protect themselves while online as well as how to use OSNs productively and meaningfully. This will provide student affairs professionals with the knowledge necessary to effectively and positively contribute to student experiences and success, given the increasingly prominent role the Internet plays in students' daily lives.

Students sometimes have no idea about some of the comments or pictures posted involving them, since a lot of things may be posted by their friends. Thus, they are the recipients of the benefits and consequences associated with this content that may not even realize had been posted. Due to this, universities should take care when following up on complaints. This will minimize the possibility of a student

getting in trouble for content they themselves did not post. At the same time, if universities are educating their students to be proactive in reviewing what their own profile contains or displays, as well as what else might be said about them online, students themselves can then reduce the likelihood that content involving them will get them in trouble.

Since applying the principle of Free Speech to the Internet and specifically OSNs is relatively untried in the courts, universities need be careful to balance the Free Speech rights of their students, as well as staff, faculty and others within their communities, with principles of respect and community that are upheld on the campus. With that principle in mind, and an eye towards being preemptive with educational material, I suggest that universities make a concerted effort to address their concerns over content on the Internet and educate their students over what is considered to be inappropriate or offensive content. This includes the types of content issues that run contrary to the university's principles of community, respect and tolerance (University of California, Riverside, 2003). Every university has some version of a student code of ethics or conduct that serves as a framework for participation on that university's campus community. However, I am urging universities not to create new policies to specifically address behaviors, content or concern within online social networks. There are no new behaviors occurring as a result of the existence of OSNs, rather the same behaviors are being depicted and conducted through different media.

Instead, universities should think of Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks as a new medium for the same behaviors. If you would follow up on a complaint from a student who says someone in her hall is writing her threatening messages on her message board, then you would do the same if another student is receiving threatening posts on his Facebook “wall”. If a student brings you a picture, or claims to know that his roommate has a drinking problem, and you would normally bring that student in to talk to them about risky behavior and the law, then you would do the same if someone shows you a Facebook profile portraying the same behaviors. The same actions, through a different medium, warrant the same responses. Facebook and Myspace may just provide additional evidence.

This does not necessarily mean that you could dismiss a student because there is a post on their ‘wall’ that discusses the joys of drug use. However, if the student is caught at some point, under suspicion of drug use, or even without being caught, you could educate the student about the dangers of drug use, as well as the long term implications of that sort of post online. If the problematic behavior is a negative post about someone else, but it doesn’t rise to a concerning level, you could not force the offender to take down the content, but you could bring them in and talk to them about how that action will affect their perception by others. Presumably, that is similar to the process for judicial affairs at most campuses. The best advice is to treat these communities like you would any other venue for information distribution. The only difference is the semi-permanence of the evidence.

Thus existing university policies should be sufficient to address any issues that arise. Some universities are inclined to develop a whole slew of new policies and procedures for dealing with complaints they receive related to other students' behaviors on Facebook or Myspace. This is both unnecessary, and unwise. Doing so would imply that for every new medium of communication and behavior, new policies would need to be developed. Also, students will be more likely to find loopholes and slip through the cracks of haphazardly developed policies. Universities would not want to get in the habit of creating a new policy for every new technological development, but rather, have a holistic policy that can address anything that comes up. Thus, if university administrators feel that their current policies are insufficient to address concerns about student participation within OSNs, then the same policies likely do not address other communicative media such as Instant Messenger, cellular phones, etc. This is particularly important as communication, and therefore social networking, will occur through any emergent communication technology.

Students should ask themselves about the choices they make regarding how they present themselves to others (including practices involving alcohol, drugs, and sex). Do they result in the type of personal experiences and exposure they want to have in their life (Chapman, 2005)? As Chapman goes on to say, there are a number of teaching moments and opportunities for learning, challenge and support for student affairs professionals to educate students about OSNs. The Josephson Institute

for Ethics, on its *Character Counts* website advises individuals to think about their behaviors and actions with the perspective that they should be comfortable with their parents or grandparents seeing what decisions they make on a billboard or the front page of a newspaper. Educators can help students think about their online behaviors and content from these perspectives. Specifically, talking to students about how the online sphere functions much like the “public square”; there is potential for everyone to know what is going on. Particularly because once something is posted, there is no way to be sure that it has not been printed by someone else, or stored in the cache of someone’s computer or server. Even if the student who posted something offensive removes that content within an hour, it may already be too late, and the damage may have already been done.

By examining the impact of OSNs on student experiences, student affairs professionals can reach out to and program for online communities in similar style as they would for the Greek community, Cultural Student Program Offices communities, and other constituent groups. The time students spend doing their social networking online, and the nature and variety of these interactions versus doing the same in-person will be important to note so that student affairs practitioners can more fully understand how OSNs shape the student experience. That knowledge will provide programming for a campus community that has not previously received attention.

With the growing trend in the usage of online phenomena such as Myspace, Facebook, and personal blogs by college students, and the connections between that usage and the university environment as outlined in Chapter 2, it may be important to reexamine the standard free speech rubric of “time, place and manner” and determine when a university will respond to content posted online and what that response is likely to entail. That is not entirely within the limits of this dissertation study.

Student affairs professionals can help minimize the negative impacts of OSNs on college students while making use of their positive effects. A likely byproduct of this study will be a guide for new student affairs professionals in terms of what they should or should not do with regards to OSNs, as well as a resource that can be distributed to students as part of a Welcome Week or Campus Orientation activity that would help them make the safest, most effective use of OSNs.

Campus Programming and Events

As students have increasingly engaged in online communities and online social networking, they themselves and their universities have increasingly advertised and promoted events and campus programs. In some instances, traditional programs, such as an in-person student organization fair, may be drawing significantly fewer attendees. One possible solution is for universities to support their student organizations and departments by having information available online about each of these resources, perhaps through group pages within OSNs, or

enhancing the web presence through websites and other technological communication (email, Instant Messenger, etc.). The most essential advice for universities based on the findings in this study is that promoting the campus events through OSNs is generally both anticipated and appreciated by the students themselves.

Managing and Reducing Liability

A university should have no official policy stating that monitoring of online social networks will occur. The liabilities that such a statement would incur upon the university are unknown but expectedly would be huge. Most of the liability issues will remain unresolved until there are court cases resulting in judicial decisions and actions one way or the other. It may very well be possible, that the university might be liable, even without an official policy of monitoring.

Advertising for university events, and staff or faculty having intentional interactions with students within online social networks may contribute to liability. Certainly, the perception of liability or responsibility will be questioned at some point in court. Participation in the sites may warrant a duty of care for the university to have noticed some problematic behavior before it harmed persons or property. This would be exacerbated by any official policies of monitoring. However, educating the student body about the risks and concerns would likely stave off that

possibility. However, there are certain important points to explicitly address when considering any policies about university participation and involvement.

Principles for University Policies and Sample Policy

Any university that is considering any policy revisions or new policies regarding how the university and its employees should or would interact with students within online social networks ought to consider the following principles in developing such policies or initiatives. These principles will guide universities in developing or revising policies that are comprehensive, inclusive and broad. These principles will also help universities to avoid assuming additional and unnecessary liability. These principles will adapt and evolve as more case-law around this area is developed.

- Universities should not explicitly state, nor imply, that the university will be monitoring online social networks for concerning or problematic content, or student conduct violations.
- Universities may consider stating that any complaint or concern filed with the university about a student's conduct or actions could include online content as material on which to establish said claim. This is no different than a student filing a concern about a peer based on a behavior they witnessed in person.

- Universities should not explicitly state that participation within online social networks is part of the job description for any professional or student staff. The university would have difficulty regulating what that staff person did within the OSN outside of the scope of her or his employment.
- Universities could refer to utilizing OSNs as a venue for event promotion, publicity and marketing to their student populations.
- University policy should certainly commit to educating students about the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking, just as university policy generally would indicate that the university exists to provide education to its students to prepare them for further studies, the work force, and to be productive members of society. Training should be tailored to new students, student leaders, staff, faculty and administrators separately, as each constituency will be utilizing OSNs differently.
- University policy ought to include provisions for campus resources to support student engagement through online communities, OSNs or any other emergent technological phenomena for communication.
- Universities can look to OSNs as one of the best ways in which to reach out to traditionally unengaged students. Through OSNs, engagement is shattering the mold of what was once considered traditional, yielding ample opportunity for outreach and involvement to spread campuswide.

Using these principles, Nesha and other characters from our vignette can develop a policy regarding online social networks for the office of Residence Life at Shell Rock University. This is what that policy or guiding document may look like:

At Shell Rock University, the office of Residence Life is committed to supporting the ongoing and varying needs of our residents to promote a vibrant and actively engaged student experience. SRU acknowledges that students are interacting online, within such online communities or online social networks as Facebook and Myspace, as well as through other technological media.

Working with the office of New Student Orientation, the office of Residence Life will educate all new incoming students on the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking in the hopes that students will maximize the utility of these online communities while mitigating negative consequences. All students will receive this message and training from us during Orientation, whether they will be living on campus or not, as we anticipate residential and off-campus students to be interacting significantly online. Residence Life will also work with the Campus Activities office throughout the year to promote ongoing education and tips for students to continue to use these forms of technology positively.

Any student groups forming online that are interested can apply for programming funds to support an in-person social gathering or activity

pertaining their stated interests. The Residence Hall Association in concert with Residence Life staff will review such requests and make allocations accordingly. In collaboration with the office of Campus Activities, all student groups online on Facebook, Myspace or other online social network, will be able to register for campus recognition for room reservations, as well as to provide a list to residents of all Facebook groups so that students may intentionally seek them out online.

The office of Residence Life, and Shell Rock University as a whole, is not in the business of seeking out student conduct violations on Facebook or other online social network. As with student conduct violations that occur in-person and are reported to the university, the university is obliged to follow up on any reports, whether the behavior that has allegedly occurred is depicted within online social networks or not. The role, purpose and function of university professional staff participating within online social networks is not mandated by the university whatsoever. Some staff, as well as student leaders or student employees, may use online social networks for publicity, marketing and event promotion, much akin to some aspects of how students as-a-whole utilize online social networks.

The office of Residence Life encourages our staff to engage with our students in ways that are meaningful, productive and effective from the student point-of-view. Resident Advisors, Resident Directors and other staff

will want to keep up on the venues for interaction preferred by students and will participate accordingly. Should you have any questions or concerns about this, please do not hesitate to contact your Resident Advisor or Director so that you can offer feedback.

Other individual departments and the university in general will want to adapt the principles mentioned herein, other gleanings from this dissertation, and insights both from the university's own experiences, structure and culture, to develop policies appropriate in scope and content to reflect university interaction or involvement within online social networks.

Helping Students Stay Safe and be Smart

Since there are a lot of liability concerns associated with students posted content on these or other online social networks, there are some reasonable precautions that every university should take. Educating their students, staff and faculty about the benefits and risks associated with online social networking will go a long way towards minimizing the university's liability for what its constituents might post. Of course, each constituency requires educational materials with content tailored to the issues they face and needs they have. It is entirely possible and strongly suggested based on the data collected during this study, that universities consider utilizing an online educational module, similar in structure to Alcohol.edu.

Alcohol.edu is in use to educate students about alcohol abuse, safety, etc., and a module pertaining to online safety and online social networks would be received by students in more earnest than alcohol awareness. It should be noted that some students will not approve of this measure, particularly if forced, but it will undoubtedly be effective.

New Incoming Students

Our newest incoming students should be a prime target for educational messages regarding Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks. As it is these students already come to campus for an orientation program to learn about all of the things they need to know related to their new university. Some of the topics most often covered include: campus safety, registering for classes, academic advising, school spirit, campus activities and opportunities for involvement. One of the reasonable precautions the university should take is educating students during orientation about not only the concerns of using online social networks, but tips and suggestions for making the most positive use of this phenomenon for their own experience.

In addition, supplemental workshops or materials should be made available periodically for the students' benefit. Welcome week, transitional programs with topical workshops such as a first-year success series, and print material (i.e. flyers posters, brochures, etc.) will all help educate our students to be wiser and safer in their online activities. Additionally, e-mail messages in general, and messages, posts,

groups, etc. on Facebook or other online social networks may be an even more effective method of reaching students. Some of the critical elements to include in the presentation and education materials to the students are:

- Critical issues in terms of use agreements. For example, Facebook can change its terms of use policies without warning, and by signing back into the site, you have agreed to the new terms. Additionally, Facebook co-owns the content you post until such time as you decide to remove it, and if Facebook gets sued for something you post, you are liable for the damages. Educating students about the terms of use that they agreed to is critical, as most users scroll through and agree to them without reading or understanding them.
- Contact information and personal safety. Students should know that they do not need to fill out every field of data that Facebook (or other sites) asks for. Although Facebook was designed to be a live, up-to-date and evolving directory and database of information about people within your network and/or social spheres, students should know that each piece of information that is given out cannot be taken back.
- Privacy settings. Adjusting the settings will help students minimize some of the risks, particularly if they only allow their full profile and content to be seen by real friends. However, most students know about the settings but do not take the time to fully explore all of the adjustments and how it can result in differences in who can access what.

- Netiquette and perception. Just as there are appropriate and inappropriate things to say to someone in-person and standards that govern the conduct of everyday behavior, there is an online version of those standards of appropriateness. Educating students about netiquette will hopefully stave off some of the interpersonal conflict and confrontations that occur online.
- The long-term effects of short-term actions. The actions students take and depict online are likely to affect job and graduate school applications, let alone their ongoing interactions with each other. This would be the ideal time to talk about content that could be perceived to be inappropriate. For maximum benefit, explaining why some content could be perceived as inappropriate and by whom, paired with the effects and damages it could do to the poster's reputation, would aid the student in deciding what to post and not post on his or her profile.
- Community Builders. These online social networks will help students build new, expanding and overlapping social spheres rapidly and frequently throughout their college experiences.
- Emotional support. As evidenced by the aftermath of the April 16, 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, online social networks have become a venue for grieving, mourning and emotional support. Students (and others) have come together from all around the country and world to express condolences, support, and even petition Facebook to change the colors of the website to

Virginia Tech's colors for one day. The connectivity that these online social networks have engendered, allows for meaningful interactions on a variety of levels.

Student Leaders

It is equally important to provide educational measures for students in leadership roles. Student orientation counselors, student government officers, program board members, tour office ambassadors, Resident Advisors, and student organization leaders are role models for the rest of the student body. As student leaders, and oftentimes, student employees, these students represent the university. The behaviors they emulate and actions they take will be replicated by others. The images that these student leaders put forth may be seen as sensible behavior by new students. It may even be perceived to be acceptable behavior by current students.

On a similar note, student employees become representatives of their department by virtue of their position. This does not necessarily mean that a department could tell student employees what not to post, or that the university force student leaders keep some content off of their profile. Of course, if that content poses an imminent or upcoming threat of bodily harm or damage to persons or property, the university could keep their employees from posting it or sanction them for doing so. More practical solutions range from the above to also include educating student leaders and employees about the image attributed to the university or department by

the content that students post. Appealing to common sense will often be helpful in the situation.

One way to appeal to common sense would be to display some sample profiles from student leaders in attendance at the session. The Internet, and these OSNs, are public domain. Highlight some of the positive aspects of said profiles, and pinpoint the issues that the university finds disconcerting and explain why. Most of the student leaders will understand the point, even if they do not accept it, or follow the advice.

Additional issues to consider center around liability and legality. The university might not be able to prohibit the posting of certain content by its student leaders or employees. Any such requirement might be illegal. However, suggesting to the student that they adjust both their privacy and access settings so that their information and content could only be fully accessed by their friends and random others would only see a limited profile, will likely prevent the department or university from unnecessary embarrassment from that student's behavior.

At the same time, it is still worthwhile to be concerned about students' behaviors, even if they are not depicted online. It has become clear that there are really no new behaviors that are happening because of the existence of these online social networks. It is just that the existence of these online social networks has made it possible for a wider audience to see what each person is doing.

Staff and Faculty

Some of the same issues that apply to students also apply to staff and faculty. Specifically, remembering that what you say and do on your profile will be seen as an example of behaviors to mimic and emulate by students and others. If we are concerned about the behavior of student leaders, we will want to educate staff and faculty accordingly. We should keep in mind that protecting an individual's right to Free Speech is important, and coaching someone on the implications of what they post and suggestions for online behavior does not infringe on the First Amendment.

That being said, some faculty have been using Facebook, Blogger.com and other online social networks to communicate with students, maintain discussion boards and submit assignments (mainly responses to discussion prompts). The most unique of these is communicating with students, for there are countless other academic portals that can be used for online discussion boards and assignments. One of the most pressing areas for discussion about Facebook and Myspace is sanctioning students for the content they post.

Recommendations by Functional Area of Campus

Though the vignette at the opening of this study is framed around the office of Residence Life, it should be reiterated that the phenomenon of online social networking is prevalent campus-wide, and across most, if not all students' experiences. Table 13 will show recommendations by area of campus.

Functional Area	Recommendations for Practice How can OSNs be used to engage students in campus life?
Residence Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RAs can form a group for residents on their hall/floor/building for convenient event promotion or announcement. Can also be used to ask students what programs they want to see. • RAs can check out student profiles to determine their interests, and plan group outings accordingly
Student Life and Campus Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A virtual student organization fair can be conducted online with campus student organizations and online Facebook groups, etc. • Campus events and resources can be promoted online. • Commuter students, already less likely to be involved/engaged in campus life, can be “plugged in” to the campus through OSNs, where they can connect to resources and individuals through online communication. Contact made by the commuter student at their convenience, response by the resource or staff member during work hours, communication received when the student is out of class or back home, etc. • Other student populations that have not been as engaged with campus life can be connected to in a similar manner (Transfer, Returning and International Students) • There can be specific Facebook pages set up for each type of student constituency.
New Student Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate students about the benefits and drawbacks of using OSNs. • Orientation counselors may form groups for the students they had interacted with over summer (i.e. “Scott was my Orientation Counselor” and all of the students I had from each Orientation session may join). This would be useful in following up with students to see how they are doing throughout the year.
Academic Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty advisors can communicate with students rapidly through OSNs. Helpful for schedule building, but even more so for offering help in coursework. • On the same token, teaching assistants can also have virtual office hours to be available for initial contact with students. • Faculty-to-student mentoring can occur online
Alumni Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can track what interests and activities students participated in while on campus, which will help when soliciting for donations later. • By looking up friends of alums that are active in the Alumni Association and already giving to the University, more support could be sought after.
Student Peer Mentors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer mentors can connect with their mentees more readily through OSNs. This can be useful for setting up the initial meeting, to introduce the mentee to the mentor, for the mentor to find out what interests or classes the mentee has, etc.
Gender and Cultural Student Program Offices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As one of the benefits of higher education is exposure to people of diverse backgrounds (in terms of demographic characteristics, identity and upbringing), one recommendation is for services offered by these offices to be available online as well as in-person. At the University of California, Riverside, the LGBT Resource Center has instituted weekly online chats with student volunteers for anyone who wants to talk about their sexual/gender orientation, etc. • Create Facebook groups both for the office as a whole as well as student sub-groups affiliated with the office to reach out to a larger population of students.

Table 13. Recommendations by Functional Area of Campus

Students may be engaging in different technologies for communication, online social network or online community, Facebook and Myspace or Youtube and Instant

Messenger, and any of another host of configurations of usage. While these recommendations were classified by the functional area of campus, a number of them apply to multiple functional areas all of which will help student affairs practitioners and other university staff successfully integrate OSNs into a productive college experience. Additionally, these recommendations are simply a launching point. Each university would need to think about what the particular challenges are facing their campus, what their campus' student culture is, and how best to program to their student body, integrating OSNs for a more productive student experience. Through any of the above recommendations, a university can embrace OSNs as components of the campus community just like Intra Mural sports are common avenues for university support of students' campus culture.

Implications for Future Research

This study has examined the perspectives and opinions students have about OSNs, and the role students think universities should or should not play within this emergent phenomenon. However, this study has only answered some questions about this phenomenon, and it has raised quite a few more. Continued research on this phenomenon should focus on attaining an ongoing and deeper understanding of multiple facets of online social networks. This section will discuss possible avenues for future research that should be considered by researchers wanting to know more about particular facets of OSNs.

One area for further research would be to look at the difference in usage between and across online social networks. As Facebook's developer's platform has expanded and increased the number of plug-in features, the uses and interactions students have within the networks are likely to change and adapt. Similarly, students see this development as another stage of Facebook's evolution into Myspace, a transition that nearly all student users of Facebook would oppose. With the large number of online social networks in existence, exploring the difference in usage that students have from one online community to another would shed light on the different role that each plays within the student experience.

It may be beneficial to observe students actually interacting within OSNs in future studies to witness first-hand the levels and types of interaction students engage in online. This would be different than this study's participant-observation of OSNs because the researcher could conduct an in-person observation and interview the student at the same time to ask probing questions about specific actions they do online. It may be difficult for a subject to explain what they mean by an answer without showing an example of the online content being referenced. In addition, future studies including observations in this manner can highlight specific incidents and problems that have occurred involving these online communities, which will be incorporated into the student discussions.

An interesting area for additional research would be to use the data collected for this study as a baseline and foundation for a collective understanding of student

perspectives on OSNs. Using that baseline to create an annual survey will provide a comparison of student perceptions of OSNs and social networking through additional emergent technologies over time. Additional research studies on the effects of Internet-based communication on student experiences should examine this phenomenon both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Future research could take this basis for an understanding of the student perspective of OSNs and apply it to focus groups with representative student affairs staff (from entry- to senior-level). Doing so will determine whether the student perspective has contributed to more comprehensive awareness of the OSN phenomenon. Additionally, staff focus groups will provide insight into their perspectives and opinions on the subject. The staff focus groups will possibly reveal additional resources of interventions those universities or others might be implementing to alleviate concerns about online communities.

Given the findings of this study, that OSNs serve a productive purpose despite potential drawbacks or other concerns, and that students will continue to use them, it would be beneficial to coordinate future research studies with the developers and managers of the various OSNs. This could provide detailed usage statistics and other institutional research they might have conducted. Given Facebook's particular relevance to the college community (as opposed to Myspace and others, and ignoring Facebook's recent venture into the High School and corporate arenas), interviews with the executive officials of Facebook would offer additional insight.

Another direction for future research would be to look at the difference in usage of OSNs based on institution type, geographic region, and demographic characteristics. As the primary institution for this study was the University of Southern California, a large, private institution in Southern California, there are a number of potentially rich comparisons that could be explored. One possibility is to look at a public institution, particularly one with a highly diverse student population. The University of California, Riverside (UCR), a moderately-sized public institution in Riverside, California and part of the larger UC system, could be selected for comparison with USC. UCR happens to be one of the universities boasting the most diverse student body, recently being cited as the public institution with the widest array and enrollment of diverse student subpopulations and still consistently ranks in the top five (US News and World Report, 1999-2006). As a public institution with a total enrollment of about 17,000 students (UCR, 2006), UCR is about half of the size of USC, yet there will be breadth in the sample populations. The high level of diversity at UC Riverside contributes to the breadth of the students participating in online communities. Comparing the results from multiple institutions to check if there are differences in the motivation and intent students have for using these online social networks, will identify if there are substantial variations in perception based on student population and demographics.

One of the experimental techniques tried out during the online survey of this research study was the use of an online version of the Rorschach psychological ink-

blot test pertaining to the features of online social networks. Each student was asked to give their first response when they saw each prompt (Facebook or OSN feature, or an action typically occurring on Facebook). While the resulting data did not directly speak to this study's research questions, examining of how students' perceptions of various features and functions change over time as those features evolve might prove interesting.

Further research could also examine the role of OSNs as emotional support for students and others. Students have used OSNs to write farewell messages to recently deceased friends, and in doing so, gain support from other friends as they mourn together. Following the tragedy at Virginia Tech in 2007, and other similarly tragic incidents, survivors band together through message boards and other areas of OSNs to talk about where they were when the incident happened, to form support groups, etc. Researching the function of OSNs as tools for emotional support would aid universities in responding comprehensively to crises on campus and in the community.

It may also be interesting to examine the exposure to diversity through online social networks as compared to in-person experiences with diversity. Similarly, looking at a more comprehensive analysis of engagement and involvement through online or technological means would help student affairs practitioners connect to students more meaningfully and effectively in the future. Additionally, this may help the online social networks, and the groups within them, serve student interests and

thrive more fully, help college and university staff better plan programs and services to meet students at their developmental and involvement levels and possibly even help colleges with online programs embark on student development programs and services.

As this phenomena is relatively young, and certainly only recently so prominent, an interesting avenue for further research might include looking at how student perspectives of OSNs will change now that college students will increasingly have had much more OSN experience by the time they enroll at the university. This is relevant to a window of further research that may be closing. As of right now, it may still be possible to gather substantial data on the effects of OSNs on college persistence, retention and performance (both academically and developmentally). This study shows that OSNs help students build community, and that community complements the on-campus community, which plays a major role in student persistence, retention and performance. As student usage of OSNs increases, further research may shed light on the different effects of each particular online social network on the student experience.

Closing

Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks have become prominent fixtures in the lives of our college students. In fact, in many instances they have pervaded multiple facets of society. Myspace has been avidly used by teens for a

number of years and now Facebook has expanded from being college-specific to include high schools, corporations, geographic regions, and anyone with any kind of email address. Long before the onset of online communities such as Facebook and Myspace, instant messenger programs were one of the preferred modes of communication on a peer-to-peer level. Certainly online social networks, instant messenger programs, and to a lesser extent e-mail and cellular phones have become preferred means of communication for maintaining contact with a larger number of casual friends.

There are many factors related to student usage of Facebook and Myspace that remain unknown. This is but a sample of the issues and complexities universities should deal with before making the decision to engage in OSNs. In addition, other concerns include the "coolness" factor declining with increasing university presence in the online social networks. Will students stop using OSNs if their university has an increasingly prominent presence within them? Will students just gravitate to a new OSN that will require universities to spend a great deal of time learning about it in order to then help students be safe and smart in their activities there?

It is clear that in terms of the student experience, Facebook and Myspace are strong contributors. Even if the university would want to prohibit their usage, students will either find a way around it, or develop new sites or methods of engaging in the same 'sharing' behaviors. With all of these and other concerns, it is clear that we are going to have more questions, not less. Some research has already

been done, but a great deal more is needed. As technologies evolve, it is incumbent upon university staff to understand the uses of the technology, its implications, and the role that the university should take, if any. Thus, universities should embrace student usage of these online communities, find ways to engage within them that does not detract from the student experience or scare them away, and educate students about the benefits and risks of online social networks so that the risks can be mitigated and benefits propagated.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Consent Form

University of Southern California
Rossier School of Education

INFORMATION SHEET FOR NON-MEDICAL RESEARCH

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Creating Community Online

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Scott C. Silverman, Ed.D. candidate, from the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California because you indicated your desire to participate through an advertisement on Facebook.com. The results of this study will be used in the completion of a doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctorate of Education. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you use Facebook.com and responded to the inquiry posted there. A total of 120 subjects will be selected from all USC undergraduates to participate in these focus groups. All subjects must be of at least 18 years of age. Your participation is voluntary.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand students' perceptions about the importance of online social networking and their views on the role that colleges and universities should play in managing student usage of these phenomena. This study will employ the use of the student voice to examine the effect of student use of online phenomena (e.g. Myspace, Facebook) on their educational and developmental experiences, campus communities and the practice of student affairs. In doing so, student affairs professionals can determine the best ways to interact with online communities like they do with in-person communities. By gaining a better understanding of the effects that online communities and online social networks (OSN) have on college students' experiences, student affairs professionals will have a stronger sense of how to work with students in this new type of community. This study will help student affairs professionals understand: 1) what online communities and online social networks (OSN) are and how they function; 2) the role they play in the student experience; and 3) how student affairs professionals should think about how to interact with students using online communities.

Response to the interview questions will constitute consent to participate in this research project.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

Answer questions to the best of your ability. The focus group will be tape-recorded. There are alternate arrangements that can be made should you choose not to be recorded. Specifically, you will be excluded from the focus group, but will have the opportunity to offer your input and responses directly to the researcher at a separate time without being recorded. The questions to be asked will largely focus on your experiences on Facebook.com, your perceptions of the benefits and risks of using online social networks, and what role, if any, you think universities should play in that phenomena.

Your focus group will take approximately 60-90 minutes. The investigator may ask if you are willing to engage in a follow-up interview. That is entirely your choice as well.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no foreseen risks associated with participating in this study. You may experience some discomfort at responding to the interview questions or you may be inconvenienced from taking time out of your day to participate in the focus group.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Apart from a more comprehensive understanding of some of the questions associated with the usage of online social networking, you may not benefit from this research study.

Universities, and society-at-large will gain greater understanding of what students are doing online and why, as well as the student perception of the role universities should play.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not be paid for participating in this research study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

There will be no information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you. Your name, address or other information that may identify you will not be collected during this research study.

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. As a participant in this study, you may elect to review the audiotape or transcript of the focus group. Your identity will be protected during the focus group as you will not be referred to by name during the proceedings.

If you elect not to participate in the taped focus group session, you will be excluded from the focus group. You will still have the opportunity to answer the focus group questions in a separate session with the researcher. After the study is completed, transcripts of the focus groups will be archived.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Scott Silverman, at his office, 951-827-3469, 145 Costo Hall, Riverside, CA. 92521.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the University Park IRB, Office of the Vice Provost for Research, Grace Ford Salvatori Hall, Room 306, Los Angeles, CA 90089-1695, (213) 821-5272 or upirb@usc.edu.

Appendix B: Individual Questionnaire for Focus Group Participants

Subject _____ (to be filled out by researcher) Date _____

1. Class year? _____
2. Major? _____
3. Age? _____
4. Do you regularly use e-mail? Yes No (circle one)
5. Do you regularly use instant messaging (AIM, ICQ, Yahoo, MSN)?
6. Please list the specific online communities/online social networks that you participate in: (Facebook, Myspace, Xanga, Youtube, Blogger.com, others?)
7. Do you know anyone who has friends on one of the online social networks (online communities) that are not friends in real life? If so, why do you think people foster these types of friendships?
8. Are you aware of what you agreed to in the terms of use policies/user agreements for Facebook and Myspace?

Here are a few samples:

- *These sites claim ownership of any content you post, with the rights to reproduce it at their discretion, until such time as you take the content down.*
- *If you post something that is libelous against another student, and that student sues Facebook, you are 100% liable for any damages.*
- *Facebook and Myspace can change the user agreements at any time, for any reason, without any notice. Continued usage of these communities indicates ongoing agreement with whatever policy is in effect at the time of that usage.*

What reactions do you have to these excerpted terms you've just read?

Appendix C: Student Focus Group Protocol

Good afternoon. I would like to thank you for participating in this focus group for my research on the effects of online social networks (i.e. Facebook and Myspace) on college student experiences. My name is Scott Silverman and I am a graduate student in the Rossier School of Education pursuing a doctorate in Higher Education Administration.

This study, which aims to understand the student perspective on online communities included a survey that you did not need to complete in order to participate in this focus group. My study's purpose is to answer three important research questions:

- 1) How do students utilize Online Social Networks, and in what ways do they engage with each other?*
- 2) What do students feel are the benefits and drawbacks associated with their usage of online communities and online social networks?*
- 3) What are students' attitudes and perceptions about staff and administrator involvement in online social networks?*

Questions for focus groups:

1. What do you use online social networks for? (RQ 1 and 2)
2. What role do online social networks play in your life and college experience? Specifically, if you had to rate the use of Facebook on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being most important, how would you rate it? Is it “an integral part of your socialization on campus”? If so, why? (RQ 1)
3. Do you see any drawbacks to this form of communication? What are those drawbacks? (RQ 2)
4. Have you ever noticed content on Facebook, Myspace or other online social networks that you or someone else may feel was inappropriate, illegal or a violation of the student code of conduct? Please give examples. (RQ 2)
 - a. Why do you think you and your peers would be willing to post content of questionable appropriateness so freely online? (RQ 2)
 - b. In light of that potentially inappropriate content, what is the appropriate response to that content? (RQ 2)
 - c. What liability or level of responsibility does a university have for content that students post? (RQ 3)
 - d. How should the University be involved, if at all? (RQ 3)
5. What is the difference between in-person communities (i.e. your school, your neighborhood, your city, and other actual communities you identify with) and online communities? (RQ 1)
6. Do you know if USC ever advertises on Facebook, Myspace or Youtube and other online social networks? (RQ 3)

7. What is the difference in advertisements (i.e. Facebook flyers) from the university and advertisements from businesses and companies, if any? (*RQ3*)
8. In what other ways is the university present within your online communities? (*RQ3*)
9. What level of advertising, marketing and event promotion/staff recruitment from the university are you likely to be comfortable with within online social networks? (*RQ 3*)
10. Is your university checking Facebook, Myspace or other profiles for potential policy violations? Should the university be checking? Why or why not? (*RQ 3*)
11. Many students completing the online survey have indicated that they believe Facebook or Myspace to be private sites and that the university has no right to look at what is posted there. Do you consider the Internet and anything posted on it to be a public domain? (*RQ 2 and 3*)
 - a. Why might online content be seen as completely public domain? (*RQ 2 and 3*)
 - b. Why do you perceive it to be private content? (*RQ 2 and 3*)
 - c. Given that anything posted online is considered completely public domain, what recommendations do you have to raise awareness of this amongst your peers? (*RQ 3*)
12. What do you think the university could do to help educate students? What is important to cover in any such education project? (*RQ 3*)
 - a. What might the university do to help students mitigate negative aspects of their participation in online communities? (*RQ 3*)
 - b. What about to help students take responsibility for their own actions? (*RQ 3*)

Other questions

1. What other questions do you think that I should have asked in this research study?
2. What questions do you have for me about this research so far?

Appendix D: Online Survey Protocol and Informed Consent

Thank you for clicking the survey link posted on Facebook. Your input on the following survey will be invaluable for the research study I am conducting on the effects of online communities on college student experiences. Your voice, and those of your peers, will be my data. I encourage you to share this survey link with friends of yours that use Facebook or other online communities/communication.

Please take the time to complete every question. I sincerely appreciate the time you are taking to do this, and it will yield more productive results. There are less than 30 questions, and many of them are drop-down menus or short answer. Every answer you give in detail will be important for my analysis. Thanks again, for completing my survey.

Sincerely,

Scott C. Silverman, Ed.D Candidate

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You must be of at least 18 years of age. Your participation is voluntary.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to understand students' perceptions about the importance of online social networking, the benefits, drawbacks and uses of online social networks, and their views on what role that colleges and universities should play in these phenomena. This study will employ the use of the student voice to examine the effect of student use of online phenomena (e.g. Facebook, Myspace, IM, etc) on their educational and developmental experiences, campus communities and the practice of student affairs. In doing so, student affairs professionals can determine the best ways to interact with online communities like they do with in-person communities. By gaining a better understanding of the effects that online communities have on college students' experiences, student affairs professionals will have a stronger sense of how to work with students in this new type of community.

This study may help student affairs professionals understand: 1) what online communities and online social networks are and how they function; 2) the role they play in the student experience; and 3) how student affairs professionals should think about how to interact with students using online communities.

Response to the interview questions will constitute consent to participate in this research project.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to complete the following survey. The survey should take less than half an hour to complete. The questions on the survey relate to your experiences with online communities, including online social networking such as Facebook, Myspace, etc.

Additionally, if you indicate a willingness to do so by including your contact information on the last question, you may also be asked to participate in a focus group which will be tape-recorded. There are alternate arrangements that can be made should you choose not to be recorded. Specifically, you will be excluded from the focus group, but will have the opportunity to offer your input and responses directly to the researcher at a separate time without being recorded. The questions to be asked will largely focus on your experiences on Facebook.com, your perceptions of the benefits and risks of using online social networks, and what role, if any, you think universities should play in that phenomena.

The focus group will take approximately 60-90 minutes. The investigator may ask if you are willing to engage in a follow-up interview. That is entirely your choice as well.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Universities, and society-at-large will gain greater understanding of what students are doing online and why, as well as the student perception of the role universities should play.

CONFIDENTIALITY

There will be no information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you. Your name, address or other information that may identify you will not be collected during this research study.

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. As a participant in this study, you may elect to review the audiotape or transcript of the focus group. Your identity will be protected during the focus group as you will not be referred to by name during the proceedings.

If you elect not to participate in the taped focus group session, you will be excluded from the focus group. You will still have the opportunity to answer the focus group

questions in a separate session with the researcher. After the study is completed, transcripts of the focus groups will be archived.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Scott Silverman, at his office, 951-827-3469, scotts@ucr.edu, 145 Costo Hall, Riverside, CA. 92521.

BY CLICKING "NEXT" BELOW, YOU ARE CONSENTING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY

Survey Questions

1. Do you use Facebook, Myspace or any other online social networks? [An online social network is any web-based venue for social networking between individuals, including instant messenger programs, blogs (web logs), Facebook, Myspace, Friendster, Youtube, etc.]

2. If you have used any particular site or program in the past and are no longer doing so, please tell me why you stopped using that site/program. If not, please write N/A

3. In a few sentences or less, please tell me more about your usage of Facebook, Myspace or other online communities.

- How will your participation in/usage of online communities change over time?
- Is this just a college phenomenon?
- What is the benefit you receive from using online communities?
- How do online student-to-student interactions differ from in-person?
- How do online student-to-staff interactions differ from in-person interactions?

4. Which of the following statements best describes how you use Facebook, Myspace and other online social networks? (you may select more than one)

- I use them to keep in touch with old and current friends, as well as make new ones.
- I only use these online social networks to keep in touch with old friends.

- I like using Facebook, Myspace and others as online directories of my peers, but I have not sought out old friends on it.
- I registered because my friends kept pressing me to do so, but I do not use it that much.
- I post pictures, videos, and journals/blogs as a way to express myself and share my life and experiences with friends/others.
- Other (please specify)

5. How does your participation in online social networks such as Facebook or Myspace differ from your participation in online academic portals such as Blackboard or WebCT? (You may select more than one)

- Online social networks and online academic portals have nothing to do with each other. My schoolwork and my social life are unrelated.
- I see them as equally important to my college experiences and lifelong success.
- Facebook (and others) help me connect to classmates that I may not otherwise have contact with, and that has helped my academic performance.
- Please include your own response here

6. Please indicate which online social networks you participate in and add any that are missing (Select all that apply):

- Facebook, Myspace, Xanga, Friendster, Classmates.com
- eJournal, LiveJournal, Blogger.com
- Flickr, Youtube, Photobucket
- AOL, Yahoo, MSN and other Instant Messenger programs
- Online Dating Sites (match.com, eharmony.com, etc)
- If there are any others I missed from within the above clusters or other online communities/social networks in general, please include them here:

7. For each of the features of online social networks, or how they are used, below, please indicate the first statement that pops into your head. Please note that while the features I highlight are specific to Facebook, other online social networks often have similar features.

- Facebook Friends
- "Pokes"
- Messages
- Wall-to-Wall
- Facebook Notes
- Status Updates

- News-Feed and Mini-Feed
- "Share's"
- Photo Tagging
- Merging High School, College and beyond networks
- Facebook Flyers
- Events
- Facebook Groups
- AIM message forwarding
- Commercial Advertisements
- Inappropriate Content
- Universities following up on complaints, conduct code violations found on Facebook
- Potential Employers Reviewing Facebook before making hiring decisions
- Privacy concerns, Facebook is public information
- Messages, Pokes and Friend Requests from people you don't know

8. How do you think that participating in online social networks affects your college experiences?

9. What are the positive and negative effects that online social networks have on college student experiences? Please indicate which effects are positive, which are negative and explain why you think that is so.

10. How do online social networks differ from in-person social networks? In what ways are your in-person and online social networks comparable? Do you interact the same way online or off-line?

11. Which of the following statements best describes your opinion on the benefits and drawbacks of participating in online communities? (Select all that apply)

- I have never thought about it that way.
- I am very glad that these online social networks exist. I could not imagine my life without them.
- I know there are some concerns about Facebook and Myspace, but that does not affect me at all.
- I know there are both benefits and drawbacks, but the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.
- I am very concerned about what happens within online social networks. I am very careful about my own participation.
- Other (please specify)

12. Please answer this question for each of the following acts, behaviors or observations on online social networks like Facebook or Myspace. How often have you either experienced, or heard of the following acts occurring, within the online social networks you participate in? You may select more than one answer per row.

- Myself
 - My friends
 - I've heard about this happening at my school.
 - I've heard about this happening at other schools.
 - I have never heard of this happening.
- The mini-feed feature causing problems between people, or displaying too much information for everyone to see.
 - Offensive images/pictures (discriminatory or hatred).
 - Pictures of underage drinking or illegal drug use cause problems with the University.
 - Pictures of nudity/lewd conduct cause problems with others or the University.
 - Someone gets in trouble with others or from the University due to inappropriate or offensive messages that were posted.
 - Experienced identity theft or stalking.
 - Someone is denied a job application, internship or scholarship based on their online content/page.
 - Spam and junk email or messages; fake people/profiles.
 - Unwanted contact from people within or outside their network.

13. Please discuss any specific examples of content you came across in one of your online social networks (Facebook, Myspace or others). What are the most concerning issues you see with regards to online social networks?

14. Please answer this question for each of the following acts, behaviors or observations on online social networks like Facebook or Myspace. How often have you either experienced, or heard of the following acts occurring, within the online social networks you participate in? You may select more than one answer per row.

- Myself
 - My friends
 - I've heard about this happening at my school.
 - I've heard about this happening at other schools.
 - I have never heard of this happening.
- Getting help in a class from someone else in the class.
 - Reminders of friends' birthdays.

- Keeping in Touch with friends.
- Status updates on your friends.
- Meeting new people, Finding new friends.
- Joining new student organizations.
- Getting involved in campus activities.
- Creating "events" and tracking RSVPs.
- Sharing personal experiences through blogs/notes.
- Find out common interests between you and someone you just met.
- Seeing pictures of your friends and self.

15. Can you identify any other specific benefits associated with student-to-student interactions within online social networks? If not, please write N/A.

16. If there is anything else that you want university administrators to know about student participation in online communities and online social networks, please include that here. If not, please write N/A.

17. Assuming there are significant concerns related to what happens within online social networks, do you think the university should (Select all that apply):

- Educate students about how to minimize negative consequences of their online activities.
- Participate in and monitor online social networks being trafficked frequently by students.
- Work with the staff and managers of Facebook and Myspace, for example, to suggest changes to reduce the risks.
- Do nothing, as I believe the university has no place and no interest within my online social networks.
- Do nothing, as I feel we are mature enough to make our own decisions about what we choose to do or say online.

18. What interventions has your university implemented to educate students about the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking?

19. What are some possible approaches the university might take to educate students about the issues of concern? What are additional steps the university might take to educate students about the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking?

20. Do you know whether or not your university has any policy of when to review students' online content and what to do about it? What information can you provide about that formal or informal policy?

21. The following are types and descriptions of student organizations typically found on college campuses. Please use these categories to answer the questions below. 1) Academic/Professional, 2) Arts, Entertainment & Publications, 3) Fraternity/Sorority, 4) Governance/Advisory Boards, 5) Honorary/Honor Society, 6) International Cultural, 7) National Cultural, 8) Political, 9) Recreational, 10) Service, 11) Social Issue, 12) Special Interest, 13) Spiritual/Religious -----courtesy of Student Life at the University of California, Riverside, www.studentlife.ucr.edu

- What types of "in-person" organizations are you a part of?
- What types of "online" groups are you a part of?
- Are these online groups just "for fun", or do they have a purpose or cause? If some of your groups are just online versions of in-person groups, mention that here too.
- How do the functions and operations of the online groups differ from in-person counterparts? What is their purpose online?
- For the groups you are in that are only online, what do you get out of participating in them?

22. Your university likely supports a number of "in-person" communities, including, but not limited to: student organizations, residence halls, classes, athletics, learning communities, peer mentors, etc. The support the university provides is often in the form of financial and programming resources, space to conduct activities, advice, counsel, and more. Usually, one of the university's aims is to promote the personal growth and development of its students, and sees these various communities of students as helping to achieve that. Within online communities, there are often subgroups that reflect the in-person on-campus groups. There are also separate and distinct groups that exist only online. In what ways might your university be able to support online social networking communities in comparable fashion to the support of the in-person communities that exist on campus? In what ways may these online communities help achieve the student personal growth and development goals?

23. What is the name of your institution? Please do not use acronyms, spell out the full name.

24. Please answer the following set of questions about your university.

Number of Students (include Undergraduates and Graduates)

- Less than 2,500 students
- 2,500-4,999 students
- 5,000-9,999 students
- 10,000-19,999 students
- 20,000-30,000 students
- More than 30,000 students

Public/Private?

- Public Institution
- Private Institution

Does any university official (staff person) interact using online communities or Instant Messaging?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Do you think the university should interact using online communities or Instant Messaging?

- Yes, it's an effective means to communicate with students
- Maybe, but I don't see why they would want to
- No, I don't want the university to have an online presence

25. Have you ever been advised to edit/review your profile to remove content or adjust privacy settings to minimize your exposure? If so, who advised you to do so (select all that apply)? If you then revised/edited your profile, please indicate that accordingly.

What material was the advice about?

- a. Remove Questionable Content
- b. Adjust Privacy Settings
- c. Reduce personal information
- All three of the above
- Only a and b
- Only a and c
- Only b and c
- No, this has not happened

General seminar or program
 Staff-in response to seeing content
 Family
 Friends
 Potential employer
 Your organization's headquarters
 You reviewing your own profile

Was the change or modification a directive or suggestion?

"You must do this or get in trouble" "You're in trouble, now fix this"
 "Be careful about what you post" "This violates our code of conduct"
 Not applicable Response

General seminar or program
 Staff-in response to seeing content
 Family
 Friends
 Potential employer
 Your organization's headquarters
 You reviewing your own profile

Did you make the recommended adjustments?

Yes No Not applicable Response

General seminar or program
 Staff-in response to seeing content
 Family
 Friends
 Potential employer
 Your organization's headquarters
 You reviewing your own profile

Did you change your settings?

Yes No Not applicable Response

General seminar or program
 Staff-in response to seeing content
 Family
 Friends
 Potential employer
 Your organization's headquarters
 You reviewing your own profile

26. If there is anything else about your use of online communities, such as Facebook or Myspace, or Instant Messaging programs, or the phenomena in general, that you would like to share, please do so in the field below. This may include: why you changed/edited content in your profile if someone suggested you to do so, and if you might do so now that you've completed this survey.

All of your opinions, comments and input about online communities and online social networks that you feel are not yet covered in the questions already asked, should be included here.

27. How many hours per week do you spend on the following activities:

0-4 hours 5-10 hours 11-15 hours 16-20 hours +20 hours

Using the Internet

Online Communities (i.e. Facebook, IM, etc.)

Interacting with friends in-person

Class

Work

Other Recreational Activities

28. The next few questions will be about your particular student experience. Please indicate your responses below. Please indicate which of the following descriptions best apply to your student experience. Please select ALL that apply for Last academic year and for this academic year.

Class Year: First Year (Freshman), Sophomore, Junior, Senior, 5th year Senior, Graduate Student, (not enrolled in college)

Grade Point Average: 0-1.99, 2.00-2.49, 2.50-2.99, 3.00-3.49, 3.50-4.00

Residence: I live on campus (Res. Halls), Off-campus (within 3 miles), Commuter (over 3 miles), (not enrolled in college)

How involved/engaged are you in campus life?

I do not participate in any activities/events.

I participate in a few activities and attend some events.

I participate moderately in a number of activities and events.

I am an active participant in many areas of campus life.

29. For each category below, please indicate the response that best categorizes your identity.

Ethnicity: Chicano/Latino, African-American, Native American/Alaska Native, Asian Pacific Islander, Asian Indian, Caucasian, Mixed Race, Other, Prefer not to answer

Gender: Female, Male, Prefer not to answer

Age: 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25+

30. Please include your email address and/or phone number if you are interested in potential follow-up questions (that will not be linked to your previously submitted answers) or a Focus group on your campus.

Appendix E. Other Interesting Findings

There were a number of interesting findings that do not directly address any of the three research questions but still seemed important to mention, albeit briefly.

Do you know anyone who has friends on one of the online social networks (online communities) that are not friends in real life? If so, why do you think people foster these types of friendships?			
Yes I know someone (or myself) who has online friends that are not real-life friends		43 (100%)	
Are you aware of what you agreed to in the terms of use policies/user agreements for Facebook and Myspace? <i>These sites claim ownership of any content you post, with the rights to reproduce it at their discretion, until such time as you take the content down.</i> <i>If you post something that is libelous against another student, and that student sues Facebook, you are 100% liable for any damages.</i> <i>Facebook and Myspace can change the user agreements at any time, for any reason, without any notice. Continued usage of these communities indicates ongoing agreement with whatever policy is in effect at the time of that usage.</i>			
I am aware of these terms	I think I may have heard about this	I am unaware of these terms	
4 (9.3%)	6 (14%)	33 (76.7%)	
Is this just a college phenomenon?			
Not just a college phenomenon	This is just a college phenomenon	Probably a college phenomenon	Unclear or Unknown
224 (61.4%)	93 (25.5%)	40 (11%)	8 (2.2%)

Table X. Other Interesting Findings from Focus Group and Survey Data

Focus group participants all stated that they know someone who has friends on any of the online social networks that are not friends in real life. When asked why people might foster these types of friendships, typical responses included: “logging additional friends” to be seen as more popular, or because “there are things they have in common”. Others cited the lesser risk involved in communicating and reaching out online versus in-person. A few respondents said that they add casual contacts so that they can “find out information about people before meeting them” and “network with people you think are interesting”. One respondent, a female junior majoring in political science, said that the reason why people have friends on Facebook that are

not friends in real life is because “people somehow feel the need to have as many friends as possible. I think people also do it in order to have class contacts or to be associated with people who are in the same social group but who do not know each other.” Interestingly, most focus group participants used terms like “online-only connections” or “acquaintances” in place of “friendships” to symbolize a perceived or actual distinction.

Participants were also asked to read a sample from the Terms of Use and User Agreements of Facebook, Myspace and some other online social networks. Not surprisingly, only four respondents claimed to have been aware of these selected policies prior to reading them on the questionnaire. The overwhelming majority were not really aware of these policies and issues. Perhaps it is because users tend to “click ‘accept’ to the terms of use / user agreement without reading the contract,” because they want to use the site regardless of the costs involved (Focus Group VI participant). This theme was echoed throughout other focus groups as well, the respondents implying that from the student perspective, the benefits of using these online social networks outweigh the drawbacks. Some students at least, think that the OSNs do not care about the users of their online communities as long as they get the revenue from advertising that they need to operate.

Most responded that they were not happy with those terms but they acknowledge why the online social networks themselves would implement such policies. One respondent, a female senior from focus group VI majoring in business

administration, said “Horrid, horrid people...but it’s logical, people should be held accountable for their own actions. Facebook is its own world. You cannot sue God or Allah for giving someone vocal ability.”

Survey participants were posed with a series of features or functions of online social networks, some specifically themed to Facebook for clarity, and asked to indicate the first statement that they thought of when looking at each feature. In many respects, this can functionally be compared to the psychologist Rorschach’s “Ink Blot” test where a subject will see an image and comment on what it makes her or him think of. This was an interesting technique, and garnered hundreds of responses for each of 20 different components, to lay a foundation and base of knowledge for these functions. These findings do not directly answer the three research questions of this study, but the responses were intriguing. Most notably, on the prompt for “Facebook Friends” a lot of responses were the actual number of friends in the respondents’ friend’s list, speaking to the ego effect.

Although most students surveyed acknowledge that OSNs are not just a college phenomenon, many expressed a desire for at least Facebook to revert back to exclusively college students. Facebook recently opened its systems up for users not currently affiliated with a college (i.e. High Schools, Corporations and opening up its systems for the public-at-large), and most college users of Facebook were opposed to that decision. A number of these respondents also said that some of the features that make it popular (group affiliation, communicating with others, sharing information

and pictures about events and keeping in touch with people) make them beneficial resources for all, not just for students.

Generally, students participating in these focus groups perceive that their peers do not believe their current actions within online social networks will have any long-term effects or implications on their lives or futures. This is identified as a primary reason why students would be willing to post content of questionable appropriateness. Occasionally, participants felt that this is because at least Facebook used to be a much smaller potential network, and thus students were not concerned “since it started off in such a safe environment, students continue to feel that it’s a safe environment,” (Focus Group I). Survey respondents repeatedly echoed this sentiment. Effectively, students are not concerned about other students interacting with them and their content as much as they are concerned with non-students viewing their online content and profile.

A second, and largely related, reason why students are willing to post potentially questionable content is that by doing so they can boost their status and ego. One respondent from Focus Group VI generally thought that people are naïve about the content that they post, failing “to acknowledge the amount of people who have access to their information. You think, oh, only USC people can see my profile. It’s also the age we’re at, where people don’t realize the risks or drawbacks.” Perhaps the most poignant response came from Focus Group III, the first one at the JEP House, when a female junior said, “You don’t (*sic*) think of the negatives, you

just think of the positives.” This line of thought was echoed by many survey respondents and focus group participants, who expressed that apart from occasional stories in the news media, and this focus group, they had not heard of any concerns related to the use of online social networks, nor of any means to adjust privacy or other settings. During the second and third focus group at the JEP House, many of the participants from earlier focus groups stopped by to mention how they had logged into Facebook and Myspace to adjust their settings as a result of the focus group discussion they had participated in.

Focus group participants expressed some level of difference in their responses to what the appropriate response to inappropriate content might be, and who should be making that response. Some participants felt that there does not need to be an external response. This is consistent with the beliefs espoused by Facebook creator and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who believes that students will monitor their own and each other’s content and will self-regulate the online social networks. A majority of students participating in this study agreed with this sentiment that students should themselves be responsible and held accountable for what they post. This does not necessarily preclude responses by others, as the survey and focus group data both show that students are somewhat receptive to hearing from their friends or family that they may want to edit the content they have posted.

There was limited discussion as to the role that the websites themselves should play in reviewing or monitoring content and removing content when it is

reported or discovered. A number of responses were similar to this one from Focus Group VI, “if you look at [online social networks] as a public space, the rules that apply are based on appropriateness,” and each website is responsible for keeping out inappropriate content. Some thought that OSNs should add more disclaimers to their user agreements or as participant VIC said that “Facebook needs to take more responsibility to mitigate negative effects of these online social networks. I feel that one day they’ll face a huge lawsuit and be forced to educate their users.” This would likely necessitate a revamp of their user account creation system to educate new users more (Focus Group Participant VIB). However, a majority of survey respondents expressed concerns that any additional education conducted by Facebook or Myspace or other OSN developers may not be trustworthy, indicating that they would prefer education provided by a non-biased third party.

In addition, some focus group participants brought up the idea of university involvement in responding to potentially inappropriate content. While this possibility was a contentious point that echoed through additional discussion in the focus groups and as part of the online survey, the more that these students discussed when and how it might be appropriate or necessary for the university to be involved, the warmer that possibility was received.