

The Game Has Changed: College Admissions Outpace Corporations in Embracing Social Media

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Introduction

Universities are a mixture of powerful and often contradictory forces. The unlimited potential of young people, ever-increasing budget pressures, academia's love of new ideas, and strong traditions combine to create a culture that is simultaneously incredibly innovative and slow to change. How then, are colleges and universities responding to the new wave of social media?

This study seeks to answer that question in a definitive manner by following up on our previous research into social media adoption. Recently, we revealed how fast-growing companies of Inc. 500 were embracing social media. Using a similar methodology, this research reached out to the "marketing teams" (i.e., the admission departments) of over 2,000 accredited four-year colleges and universities nationwide to learn how they were using these exciting new technologies. Their answers are fascinating and prove (in a statistically significant way) that the use of social media in the "ivory tower" is outpacing even the business world.

The analysis that follows is based on detailed interviews with 453 admissions departments. The responding institutions are diverse in student size (from under 50 students to over 50,000), annual tuition (from less than \$1,000 to over \$40,000), funding (69% private, 31% public) and location (49 states are represented). The sample includes well-known private schools like Duke, Carnegie Mellon, Vassar and Wesleyan as well as many large public universities from states like Arizona, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Massachusetts.

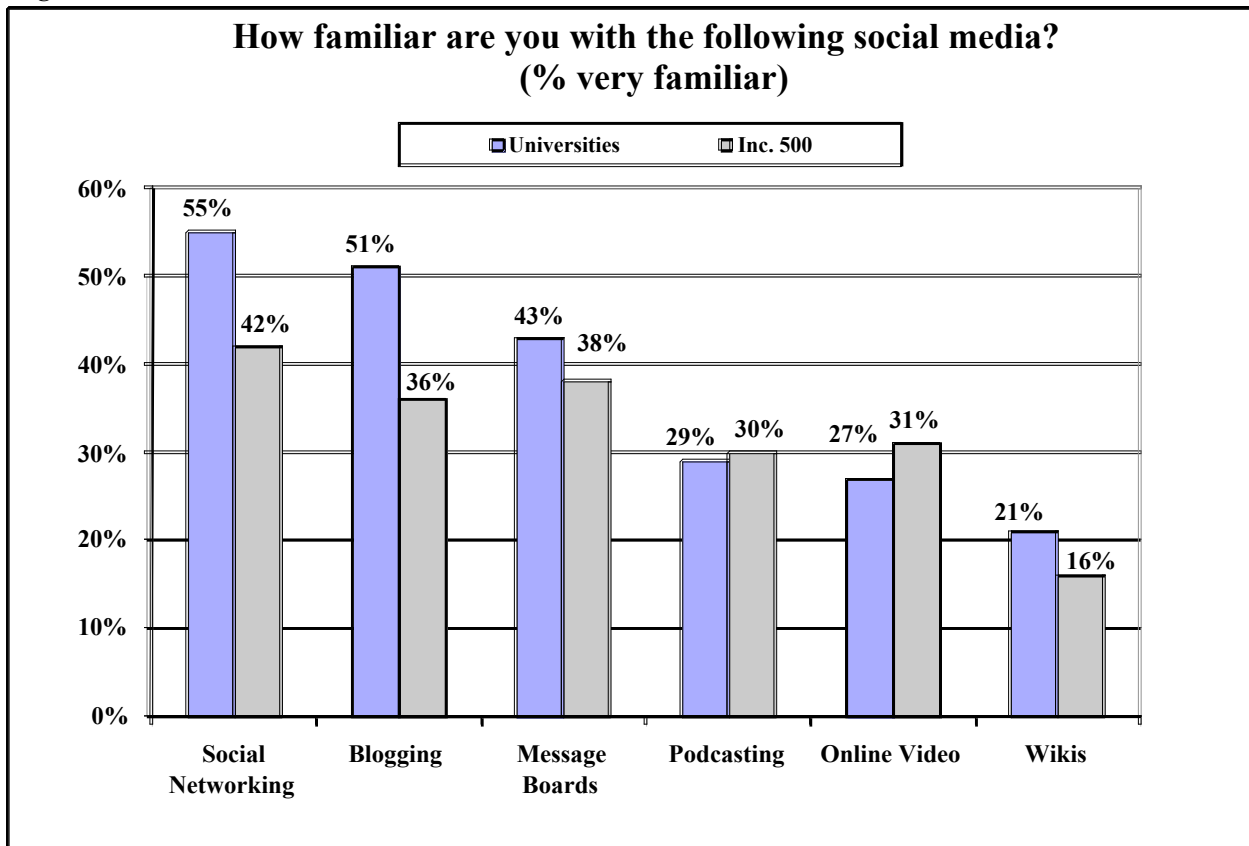
In order to enable a valid comparison this study followed a similar pattern to our corporate social media research (<http://www.umassd.edu/cmr/studies/blogstudy2.cfm>) and asked detailed questions about the organizations' familiarity with, usage of, monitoring of and attitude towards six common forms of social media (blogs, wikis, podcasts, online video, message boards and social networking). Given the frequently uncertain definitions of these media, common understanding was sought by providing definitions from Wikipedia at the time of the survey.

The results are very interesting and in some ways more surprising than the previous Inc. 500 adoption data. The new data indicates that college admissions' social media usage is racing far ahead of predictions and even ahead of corporate usage. The research results that follow are statistically valid at +/- 4%.

Familiarity

To begin, respondents were asked to rank their familiarity with each technology from “very familiar” to “very unfamiliar”. The social media that was most familiar to college admissions departments is social networking with 55% of respondents claiming to be “very familiar with it”. However, as the graph below shows, a significant percentage of admissions departments are “very familiar” with all the technologies. In addition, for almost every technology the admissions departments are equally or significantly more familiar with the technologies than the corporations of the Inc. 500. This is the highest familiarity rate documented for a group with respect to blogging. (See Figure 1)

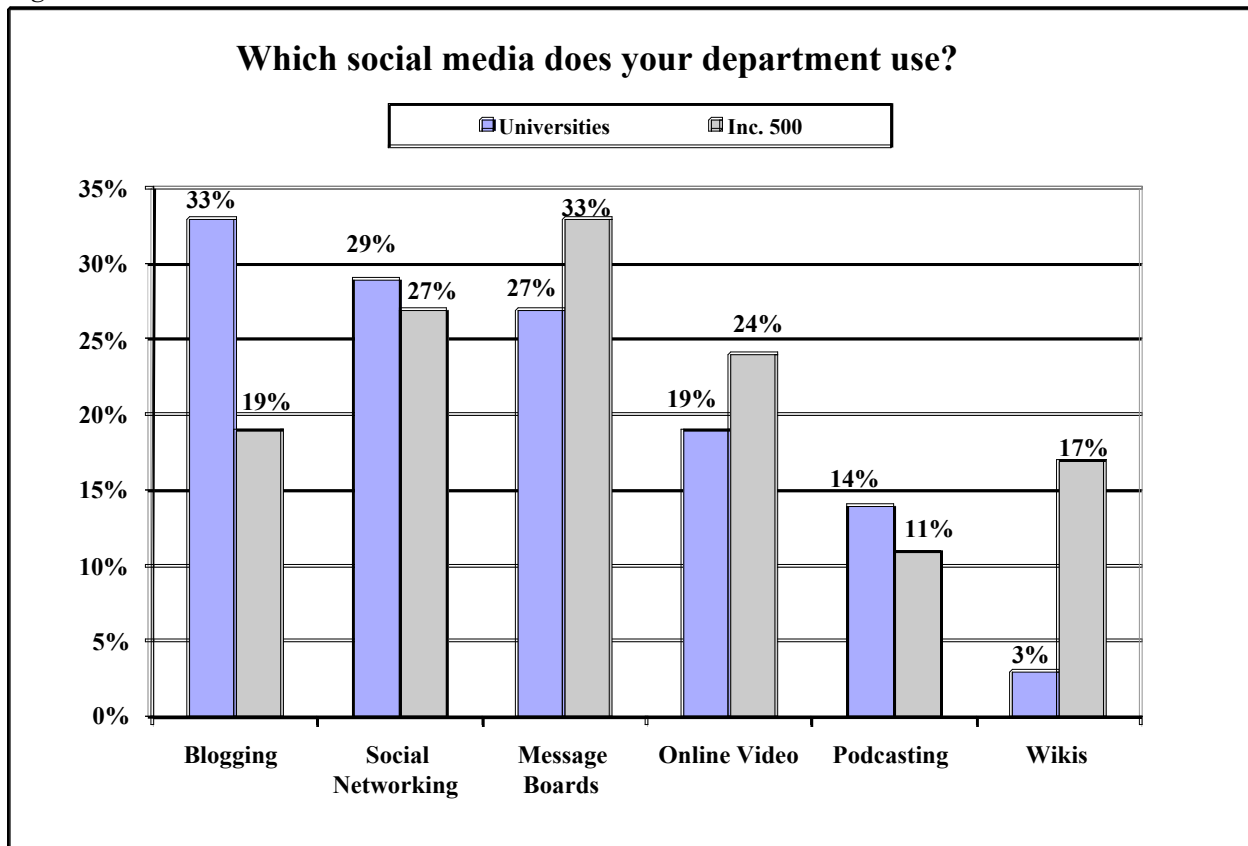
Figure 1



Usage

From familiarity the survey moved into examining actual usage of social media by the admissions departments. Sixty-one percent of the respondents use at least one form of social media. Blogging is the most common form with 33% of admissions departments using it. Notably, this usage rate is 14% higher than that of the Inc. 500 respondents. Four of the other six social media also have strong adoption rates that are similar to those of corporations. The only exception is the adoption of wikis which are used by only 3% of admissions departments compared with 17% of responding businesses in the Inc. 500. (See Figure 2)

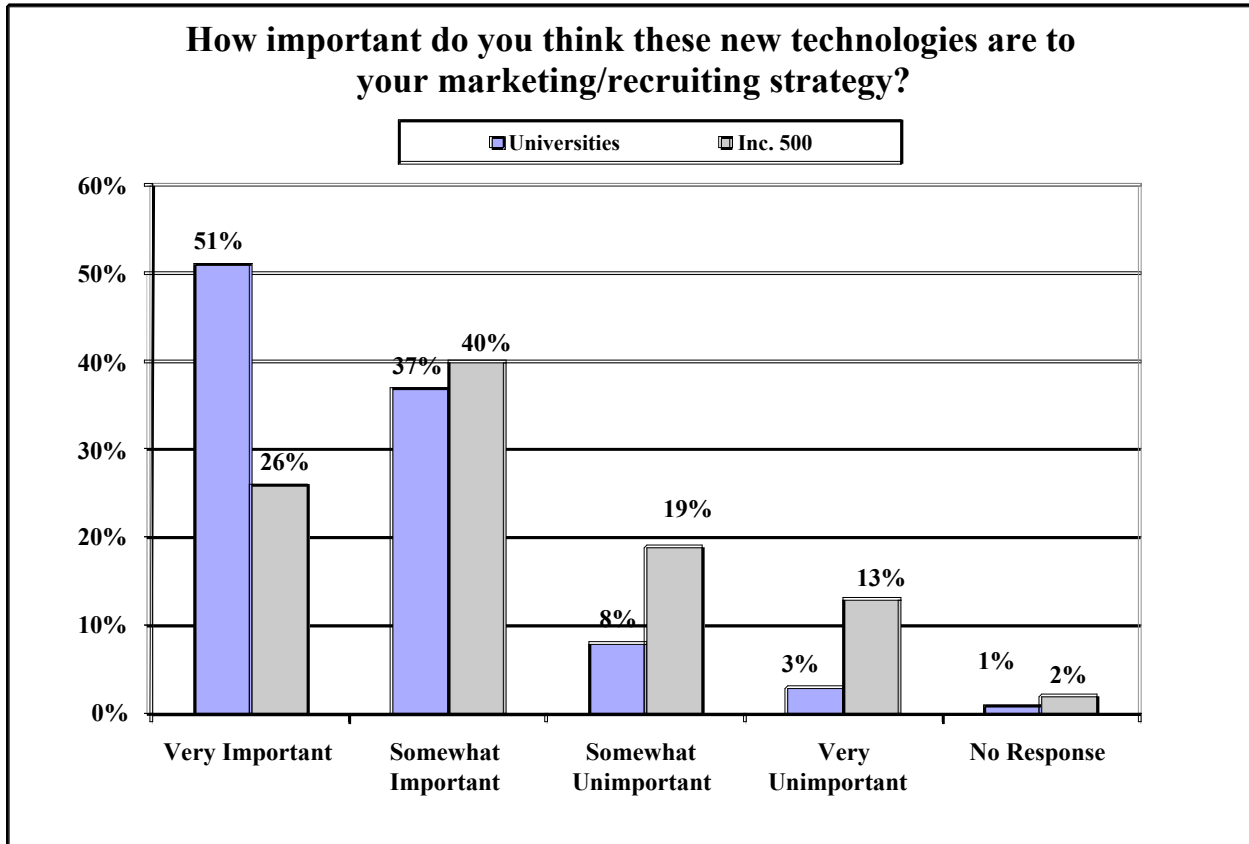
Figure 2



Importance

The adoption of social media by admissions departments is being driven by familiarity and their recognition of the increasing role of social media in today's world. Interestingly, admissions departments feel that social media is "very important" to their future strategy in almost a 2:1 ratio to Inc. 500 businesses that feel the same way (51% compared to 26%). (See Figure 3)

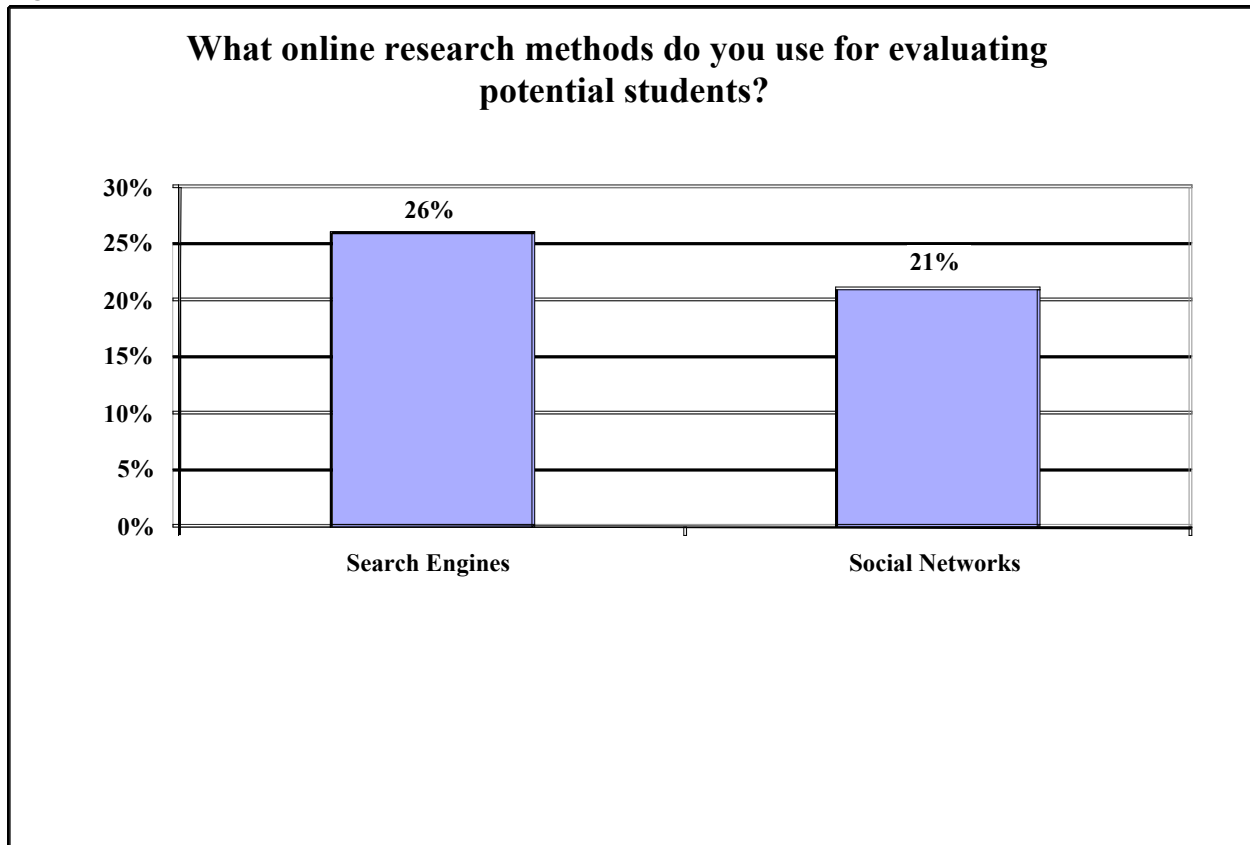
Figure 3



Student Research

These results only begin to scratch the surface of the data gathered. And while we're saving some additional detailed and exciting results for several academic articles (see below) later this year, there is one point that must be shared right now because of its ground-breaking nature. **A significant proportion of schools are beginning to research students via search engines (26%) and social networks (21%).** While certainly the traditional factors will still play dominant roles in admissions decisions, no longer can students place damaging material online without potential consequences. (See Figure 4)

Figure 4



The results are conclusive. Social media has arrived in college admissions. The ivory tower is innovating even faster than the elite Inc. 500. And the game has changed forever.

A more thorough write-up of our research into social media adoption by university and college admissions departments will be published in several journals in the second half of 2007. To be added to our email distribution list so that you can stay abreast of our research and writings, please email us at eric@ericmattson.com or nbarnes@umassd.edu.

Bios & Acknowledgments

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Nora Ganim Barnes earned a Ph.D. in Consumer Behavior from the University of Connecticut and is a Chancellor Professor of Marketing and Director of the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Nora has worked as a consultant for many national and international firms including the National Pharmaceutical Council, the National Court Reporters Association, and the Board of Inquiry of the British Parliament, Scotts Lawn Care Co, Distilled Spirits Council of the US and others. Working closely with businesses in the Northeast US, Nora and her students have provided marketing research assistance to over 200 small businesses.

She has published over 125 articles in academic and professional journals and proceedings, has contributed chapters to books, and has been awarded numerous research grants. Her areas of expertise include Consumer Behavior (both online and offline) and Marketing Research. She has been named a Senior Research Fellow by the Society for New Communications Research. Nora can be reached at nbarnes@umassd.edu.

Eric Mattson

Eric Mattson is a leading marketing consultant and social media scholar. He helps high-potential companies strategically build competitive advantage and increase market share. To learn more about his consulting practice, please visit www.ericmattson.com.

Eric's research into social media has been featured in BusinessWeek, Inc.com, The Journal of New Communications Research and numerous blogs. His popular podcast interview series (www.jenerous.com) with leading social media thinkers, entrepreneurs and marketers has been downloaded over 100,000 times.

Prior to joining the social media revolution, Eric ran direct marketing, market research and marketing analytics for SanMar, one of the largest generic clothing wholesalers in the United States. Eric is a proud graduate of the University of Washington where he earned dual degrees in business administration and mathematics as a Washington Scholar. He can be reached at eric@ericmattson.com.

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