Social Media and College Admissions: Higher-Ed Beats Business in Adoption of New Tools for Third Year

Conducted by:
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The youth of today, the “Millennial” generation, represents a tremendous communication challenge for everyone from parents and politicians to colleges and companies. Millennials thrive in an always “on” world filled with digital music devices, cell phones, the Internet, instant messenger and social networks. They are in constant touch, updating their friends with texts (80 per day on average according to Nielsen), tweets and messages on the “walls” of their Facebook profiles. This world of interactivity and hyper-communication has fundamentally changed how teenagers and young adults receive, process and act on information.

In 2007, fascinated by the dynamic created by all the new tools and habits of Millennials, the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research conducted one of the first statistically significant studies on the usage of social media by college admission offices. The study explored this fundamental question -- How does a college or university recruit in this new, highly networked, constantly “on” world?

The first study of the schools and their use of social media revealed that institutions of higher education were outpacing the more traditional Fortune 500 companies as well as the fast-growing Inc. 500 companies in their use of social media to communicate with their customers (i.e., students). For example, at that time, 8% of the Fortune 500 companies were blogging compared with 19% of the Inc. 500 while 32% of colleges and universities were using this tool.

In 2008, in a follow-up on the original study, The Center gathered the data again in order to conduct one of the first statistically significant, longitudinal studies on the usage of social media by college admission offices. That study compared two years of data, 2007 and 2008. Given that a detailed wiki and a longitudinal University of Massachusetts study showed that in 2008, 13% of the Fortune 500 and 39% of the Inc. 500 had a public blog, it was interesting to see that college admission departments continued to lead the organizational pack with blogs at 41% of US colleges and universities.

This year, the Center’s first longitudinal study has been extended by adding 2009 data. This new study analyzes the most recent trending of social media adoption by the admission offices of all the four-year accredited institutions in the United States. As in all of the studies, the colleges and universities were identified using a directory compiled by the University of Texas.

The newly-extended longitudinal analysis shows that colleges and universities continue to embrace social media as their adoption of blogging again outpaces both the Fortune
500 (22% have a corporate blog) and the fast-growing Inc. 500 (42% have a corporate blog). The latest research shows 51% of colleges and universities have an admissions blog for their school.

Like the 2007 and 2008 studies, the 2009 study is the result of a nationwide telephone survey of those four-year accredited institutions on the University of Texas list, under the direction of researchers Nora Ganim Barnes and Eric Mattson. All interviews took place with Admissions Directors/Deans or other admissions officers in November and December 2009. Schools in all 50 states are represented and include public (30%) and private institutions (70%) ranging in size from 10 to over 41,000 undergraduates. Tuition (without fees) ranged from $1,000 to over $56,000. Admissions officers at well-known schools like Brigham Young University, Carnegie Mellon, George Mason, Ohio State and Howard University were interviewed as well as smaller lesser-known institutions in the US.

All three studies examined the familiarity with, usage of, and attitude towards social media by the admission offices at US colleges and universities. The findings presented here from the 2009 study are based on 478 interviews and are valid within the range of +/- 4%. To date, this is the most comprehensive study done of American institutions of higher education and their use of social media in their admission activities.

The results are fascinating and continue to support what the 2007 study documented for the first time: Colleges and universities are using social media to recruit and research prospective students. It is clear that online behavior can have important consequences for young people and that social networking sites can, and will, be utilized by others to make decisions about them.

There is continued evidence of enthusiasm and eagerness to embrace these new communication tools and there is also evidence that these powerful tools are being utilized more effectively each year. Schools using social media are clearly studying the “rules of engagement” in the online world in order to maximize their effectiveness at recruiting prospective students.

**Familiarity**

To begin, respondents were asked to rank their familiarity with blogging, podcasting, social networking, message boards, wikis and Twitter from “very familiar” to “very unfamiliar”. Social networking, the social media that was most familiar to college admissions officers in 2007 and 2008 is still the most familiar. Familiarity with social networking has jumped from 55% reporting they were very familiar with it in 2007, to 63% in 2008 and now to 83%. Admissions officers have clearly embraced Facebook and other social networking sites as viable forms of communication with their constituency.

The micro-blogging site Twitter was included in this study for the first time since its use among colleges and universities (as well as businesses and non-profits) has skyrocketed. Fifty-five percent of admissions officers report they are very familiar with Twitter.
Traditional blogging also continues to be a tool that many admission offices are already “very familiar” with and many more are learning about – though not quite as quickly as social networking. Those admission officers reporting they are very familiar with blogging rose from 44% in 2008 to 55% in 2009.

In fact, as the graph below shows, a significant percentage of admissions departments are very familiar with most of the technologies studied. Even wikis -- the technology least familiar to admissions officers -- is very familiar to 19% of those surveyed. Familiarity is up strongly over the past year for social networking and blogging. It is slightly down for video blogging and wikis, while message boards and podcasting remain about the same. Notably, Twitter already has a familiarity second only to social networking.

This high level of familiarity with social media tools is, as you will see in the next section, translating into usage. The bottom line is that admissions officers are moving in the direction of becoming familiar with new tools of communication at a rapid rate, often through or in preparation for actual usage. (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1**

![Graph showing familiarity with social media technologies]

**Usage**

From familiarity the survey moved into examining actual usage of social media by the admissions offices. Sixty-one percent of the respondents in 2007 reported they used at least one form of social media. One year later, 85% of college admissions offices were using at least one form of social media. In 2009 a record breaking 95% of college admissions offices use at least one form of social media. Usage is up for almost every tool studied.

Social networking is the most common form with 87% of admissions departments using it. Fifty-nine percent have a school Twitter account and 51% have a blog. Almost all of those using a blog are using other forms of social media as well. Thirty-eight percent use message boards, 22% use podcasts and 13% use wikis.
Many respondents report faculty often set up wikis for research projects and sometimes students do for group projects, but it was not one of the tools that admissions departments commonly used. (In addition to these tools, schools reported using chat rooms, instant messaging and email to reach prospective students or alumni.) (See Figure 2)

The use of social networking sites and blogging has increased dramatically. At the same time, video is still being used to deliver virtual tours of campuses, virtual visits to the dorms and sample lectures from the faculty. Twitter has stormed onto the scene to have a strong presence in the social media toolbox for admissions officers.

No significant differences were found between the use of blogs by public or private schools, or by size of undergraduate population. Fourteen percent of schools with blogs are using some internally developed applications (up 6% from 2008). Others cite WordPress (19%) and Blogger (7%) as platforms. It is not uncommon for the admissions professional to be unfamiliar with the applications being used to host a blog (27%). At most schools, the IT department sets up the blog and the admissions office manages it. When asked who manages their blog, the most popular answers were the admissions office, marketing and public relations.

Blogging continues to grow across sectors. (See Figure 2a) The Fortune 500, Inc. 500, and higher education have all shown increases every year since 2007. The most recent data (2009) for the top 200 charities as identified by Forbes Magazine will be released soon.
**Importance**

The adoption of social media by admissions departments is being driven by familiarity and their recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in today’s world. Interestingly, more admissions departments feel that social media is “very important” to their future strategy than Inc. 500 businesses (50% compared to 43%). Even more powerfully, it is worth noting that 91% of admissions departments feel that social media is at least “somewhat important” to their future strategy.

(See Figure 3)

**Figure 3**

**How important do you think these kinds of social media technologies are for your recruiting strategy?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Unimportant</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Unimportant</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Research
A significant proportion of schools continue to research students via search engines (16%) and social networks (17%). While these numbers are the same for social networking as they were last year, fewer schools are reporting the use of search engines in their recruiting strategy. In 2007, 26% reported using Google or Yahoo, in 2008 that number dropped to 23%. There seems to be a preference for information from social networking sites.

The admissions officers interviewed for this study reported using search engines and social networking sites to verify information or research students who were candidates for scholarships or entry into high-demand programs with limited spaces. In all these cases the intent was to protect the school from potential embarrassment. No school wants to announce the winner of a prestigious scholarship only to have compromising pictures be discovered on the Internet the next day. There were no reports of checking every applicant to an institution, no matter how small the school. Online research appears to be more of a precaution at this point or a source of additional information for critical decision making.

The search engines used most often are Google and Yahoo while the social networking sites include Facebook and MySpace. The value of these social networking sites for college admissions offices cannot be underestimated. As more and more young people spend increased amounts of time on these online networks, an institutional presence will be mandatory. (See Figure 4)

Figure 4

Are colleges and universities using social media effectively?
At first glance, college admissions’ usage of social media appears to be a case study in the timely adoption of new technology. A closer look shows consistent improvement over the past three years in critical aspects of the technology necessary to maximize the effectiveness of these tools. Comparing the 2007, 2008 and 2009 data, it becomes clear that there has been significant improvement as we look at the implementation of one popular tool, blogging.

The survey asked about blog logistics like accepting comments, promoting the blog and planning for the future of the blog. The answers to these and other questions from schools
with blogs are interesting in that they demonstrate how schools are learning about and using social media more effectively each year.

The mantra of the blogosphere is “conversation.” Blogs that do not facilitate engagement and conversation tend to lose their audience. In the 2007 study 37% of those schools with blogs did not accept comments. By any measure, this is a problem if the goal is to connect with prospective students through ongoing conversation with the school. In 2008 that figure dropped to 22%. The 2009 data shows another drop to 18%. Schools are mastering the tool and embracing its true spirit of two-way conversation.

For students or their parents looking to have a conversation online about particular aspects of university life, this increased interaction through comments can be significant. With more and more schools moving into multiple channels of social media, schools that don’t allow for conversation will quickly be passed by. Schools are clearly learning to use social media more effectively. (See Figure 5)

**Figure 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you accept comments on your blog?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another blog characteristic that allows ease of conversation and increases participation is the use of “RSS” feeds and other notification methods like email or text message. This simplifies the blogosphere for readers who may want to keep up with a certain conversation or be informed of new information without having to check the blog of interest every day to see if there is something new.

In the 2007 study, 46% of schools had an RSS feed available and 31% allowed email subscriptions. In 2008, those numbers rose to 49% and 48% respectively. In 2009, 65% were taking RSS subscriptions and 43% enabled email sign-ups for their blogs. Again, the increased use of RSS would indicate an increased sophistication in the use of blogging as a recruitment strategy.

When asked what the future plans are for the school’s blog in 2007, the most popular answer was that there are NO future plans for the blog. This was disconcerting considering the swift movement and evolution of blog technology. In the 2008 study, the most popular response was to expand the blog. Many schools began to include audio podcasts, video and live chats as part of their blog. In 2009, the most popular plan is to incorporate social media sites into blogs.
When asked if they felt their blogs were successful, 86% of schools with blogs said yes. This percentage was fairly consistent across all three studies (86%, 80%, 86%). This finding is also consistent with studies in business that have shown those using social media are satisfied with it and feel it provides positive results.

One cautionary note has to do with having a blogging or social media policy that defines what is acceptable via the institutions’ online communications. Thirty-two percent of schools have such a policy in place for their employees or students who engage in online conversations as it relates to the school. Social media policies are now seen as important elements as an institution develops their social media strategy. Less than 25% of the Fortune 500 companies currently have social media policies in place even though many companies have hundreds of employees that utilize blogging, Twitter or Facebook on a regular basis.

Those schools not currently using social media, or a particular tool, were asked if they planned to in the future. Fifty-nine percent plan to add social networking to their current media channels. Fifty-two percent plan to make increased use of video on their blogs and 50% of those without blogs, plan to add them. (See Figure 6)

**Figure 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blogging</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Networking</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message/Bulletin Boards</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videoblogging</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasting</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikis</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Are they listening?**

It is clear that admissions offices are now communicating in new ways. The next question is: Are they listening to what’s being said about their school online? Fifty-three percent in 2007 and 54% in 2008 report they monitored the Internet for buzz, posts, conversations and news about their institution. Our latest research shows an increase of close to 20% with 73% of schools now monitoring their school name. Given the ease with which monitoring can be done, it is not surprising that so many institutions studied are now doing it. (See Figure 7)
Over half of the institutions monitoring social media reported doing so manually. Most were using simple Google searches using the name of their school.

Those schools that monitor online activity as it relates to them tend to be schools with higher tuitions, private rather than public. They tend to be users of all forms of social media including blogs, podcasting and video. These schools are also more likely to research students online via social networking sites.

Perceived importance of social media to the school does translate into monitoring behavior. Those schools with a culture where online communications are respected as having value are more likely to fully embrace that activity. They are gathering critical strategic information by listening to what is being said about their institutions and their competitors in the social media world.

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Bios & Acknowledgments

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Nora Ganim Barnes 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. Working closely with businesses in the Northeast US, Nora and her students have provided marketing research assistance to hundreds of small businesses.

She has published articles in academic and professional journals and proceedings, has contributed chapters to books, and has been awarded numerous research grants. Her work has been covered online and in print by Business Week, the NY Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Fox News and Computer World among others. 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 the CEO of Financial Insite Inc., a Seattle-based boutique research firm focusing on technology innovation in finance and banking. He’s also an independent social media scholar whose research has been covered online and in print by BusinessWeek, Inc. Magazine, the NY Times and a number of other publications.

Prior to his current endeavors, 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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