

Digitally savvy students play hide-and-seek with campus messages.

Katherine Mangan

As Students Scatter Online, Colleges Try to Keep Up

Colleges are trying to contact students where they really hang out--on Facebook and Twitter.

When Jerica Bennett, a senior at Frostburg State University, wants to know what's happening on the campus, she likes a message short and sweet. Ideally it would pop up on her cellphone as a tweet or a post on Facebook.

A classmate, Tyler Mathews, would rather be reached by e-mail, which these days is seen as the old-fashioned way, so that he isn't distracted by his friends' spring-break photos when he's looking up the schedule for band practice.

And that poses an interesting challenge for people like Rebecca E. Ramspott, a social-media specialist at the Maryland university. She's assigned to find the best ways to communicate with students when the target audience is constantly moving and, with the help of spam filters, frequently ducking.

"You have to be nimble and not get emotionally invested in one approach," she says of the university's foray into Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest (which lets users "pin" images to an online discussion board), and a handful of other social-networking sites. Send the same message to multiple sites, and students are likely to feel besieged. Rely on e-mail, though, and important messages may go unread.

While e-mail remains the official method of communication on most campuses, colleges are expanding their presence in the virtual world, trying to reach students where they hang out. But without careful planning, that can lead to a scattershot approach as new platforms keep popping up and students' attention becomes increasingly dispersed.

"Most campuses are seeing that we can't just keep firing this content out on all channels," says Malcolm Brown, a director at Educause, the higher-education-technology consortium. Not only do students feel inundated, but staff members may be overwhelmed by the extra work of reporting events and messages on multiple sites.

"Say you want to put the word out about a string quartet playing on campus," Mr. Brown says. "You post it on Facebook and Yammer." At that point students join the conversation, sometimes with insights that give indigestion to communications officers who are used to controlling the message. "What happens if someone starts trashing on your string quartet" on those forums? Mr. Brown asks.

Officials have to be ready to engage in a conversation, answer questions, and have a strategy to deal with people who post messages that are hostile or insulting.

"Social media is like a puppy. You have to take care of it," says Brandon Croke, marketing manager at Inigral Inc., which sells colleges a customized social-networking application.

Finding common ground with professors, staff members, and students is a constant challenge, he says. "You have super tweeters and texters on one end and people who refuse to use e-mail on the other. How do you bridge that gap and meet people where they're comfortable?"

Like a Jazz Composition

Few college administrators interact with students in as many virtual spaces as Kenneth Elmore, dean of students at Boston University. His home page links to Kenn 2.0, providing access to his Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and blog pages, as well as invitations to enter photo contests using applications like Instagram and Foursquare.

Mr. Elmore, who riffs on his blog about his passion for funk and offers up his playlist on the music-sharing application Spotify, says he doesn't let anyone else tweet or blog for him.

"I try to speak in the way I talk in my head," he says. "My style might make the English teachers a little perturbed, but students know I'm being honest with them."

While other administrators might wish for a simple way to deliver a message to every student, Mr. Elmore says that sounds like a recipe for spam: "Blast e-mails are too impersonal. People want to know you've thought about them." The university, he says, is like a jazz composition, sometimes noisy and chaotic, but richer for the diversity of voices.

"For me, the question is how do we keep a modicum of control over our messages, but not to the point that everyone is walking lock-step."

Emma Tangoren, a junior who has helped advise the dean on the best digital ways to reach students, says they are turned off by "cut and paste" messages.

"If students get the same message on five different sites, they'll be annoyed and frustrated," says Ms. Tangoren, who is working as a summer intern at Foursquare, a company that markets a location-based mobile application that lets users share information and meet up in the real world.

Some colleges use Foursquare as a magnet to draw students to campus centers. At Boston University, Ms. Tangoren says, the dining service might post a "secret menu" with a link for a free hamburger. During orientation, Mr. Elmore might invite students to swing by his office for a free T-shirt.

Colleges that plunge into social media without adequately consulting students often find themselves flailing.

"People tend to fall in love with the shiny new tool rather than talking to their students directly and finding out where they are," says Eric Stoller, a consultant who advises colleges and universities on their use of social media. "Everybody's looking for a silver bullet. They want it to be Facebook or Twitter or a blog or Pinterest."

Many colleges were slow to realize the potential of Facebook, says Mr. Stoller, a former academic adviser and Web coordinator for Oregon State University's College of Public Health and Human Sciences. "That experience has gotten us itchy with our trigger finger. We see Pinterest and think we have to get in early so we don't miss the boat the way we did with Facebook."

Meandering to the Point

Despite its limitations, most colleges still rely on e-mail as the default method of communication, typically assigning every incoming student a college e-mail address with a reminder to check it at least once a week. Students who prefer to keep their personal e-mail addresses can have their college e-mails forwarded there.

Still, in an era when many students view e-mail as too cumbersome or old-school, plenty of important messages slip through the cracks.

"Students might check on that e-mail communication from the university once or twice a week, and by that time there might be 200 messages," Mr. Stoller says. "We let too many people go to the well with e-mails that aren't targeted to a particular group."

His response to a common complaint he hears from both students and administrators: "E-mail doesn't suck. We're just not very good at using it." Students' spam and trash folders are brimming with campus e-mails with vague subject lines and messages that meander toward the punch line, he says.

At the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, "we try to be selective about what we send out by e-mail, so students pay attention," says Amy F. Ratliff, program coordinator for cooperative education. "We're constantly tweaking the way we reach them." Messages are delayed so they hit mailboxes between 5 and 9 p.m., when students are most likely to be checking.

"We have to be constantly dancing and aware of our surroundings," Ms. Ratliff says. "If we're not getting a good response with this, let's try that."

One of the most important messages her office sends out is the schedule of students' job interviews. When students come in to sign up for interviews, someone in her office hands them a sheet of paper with their tentative schedules and a handwritten message telling them to check their e-mail at noon on a specific Thursday.

"We look them in the eye, hand them the sheet, and tell them that if they don't respond, we're giving that interview to another student," Ms. Ratliff says.

If they remember to check, and the e-mail hasn't been diverted by a spam filter, the message reiterates their interview schedule and asks them to confirm the appointment times within 24 hours. If her office hasn't heard back within a couple of hours of the scheduled appointment, a text message is sent to the student.

For students who are constantly checking in with their smartphones, text messages can be an efficient and effective way to communicate. But while many students' cellphone plans cover unlimited texts, others charge for each incoming message, making texting an impractical tool for regular campuswide use.

Other methods, too, have their drawbacks. Ms. Ramspott, the social-media specialist at Frostburg State, says that when Facebook became the place to go, the university took pains to set up customized pages for several campus programs, only to find that photos had to be reformatted and pages tweaked as the site evolved. Now she encourages other members of the social-networking group to always be ready to move on to the next big thing.

Commencement Blitz

It's not always clear, though, that students want their colleges crashing their online party. At least that's how some students see it. Campus administrators who hope to fit in generally adopt a laid-back, chatty style and try not to talk too much.

"We don't want to be too big-brother and stodgy and car-salesman about how we reach students," Ms. Ramspott says. "We need to respect that they're having their own social experience on these sites."

But some events call for an all-out blitz. For commencement this year, Frostburg State created a Facebook page for photos and advice, like where to pick up caps and gowns; a Twitter hashtag for updates and shout-outs from students and their families; and a Pinterest board with graduation-themed images, including commencement cupcakes and glittery shoes to stand out from the crowd. Ms. Bennett, who is president of the Student Government Association, says she's accustomed to visiting multiple sites for information.

"With faculty and administrators, I reach out via e-mail because they're more old-fashioned, and that's what they're used to," she says. "With friends, it's more likely Facebook or Twitter." E-mails, she says, are way too long-winded. "Our generation is used to having everything at the drop of the hat. We want it quick and easy and to the point."

During freshman orientation, Ms. Bennett was overwhelmed by the amount of information flooding her inbox. "New e-mails were coming in every minute, and I was like, 'Back off a little. Leave me alone!'"

While she tries to keep on top of the messages, other student leaders can fall behind. "Most of my senators go days without checking their e-mails," she says. "Sometimes they'll miss an important message from a professor, so it can come back and bite them in the butt."

Frostburg State has tried to slow down the e-mail traffic by compiling routine announcements into twice-weekly newsletters. And its president, Jonathan C. Gibraltar, now invites students to sent comments to his Twitter account.

Ms. Bennett is appreciative. "They're trying to meet us halfway," she says.

Kenneth Elmore, dean of students at Boston U., relies on the advice of students like Emma Tangoren on ways to keep pace digitally.

Kenneth Elmore (right), dean of students at Boston U., communicates via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Foursquare, and blog pages. "My style might make the English teachers a little perturbed," he says, "but students know I'm being honest with them."

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