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This chapter explores Facebook.com's current and potential uses for increasing college student involvement. Ideas based on Astin's model of student involvement provide a framework for discussion.

Have You Facebooked Astin Lately? Using Technology to Increase Student Involvement

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Enter a college student union, and you will see students standing in line for their favorite lattes, meeting with friends, laughing about last night's *Colbert Report*, promoting campus events, studying, and even sleeping. Take a closer look, and you will notice that a student in line at Starbucks is checking the fat content of the latest holiday beverage at Starbucks.com. Others are promoting campus events using Facebook mobile to update their friends about this week's concert. Even the students sleeping or studying have their cell phones ready for incoming texts and are plugged into their iPods. In a room off the main lounge, several young men are involved in a LAN (local area network) party, competing in an online game. The entire student union is served by wireless access to the internet, so that laptops, personal digital assistants, or other handheld devices may be used constantly to connect with people, news, and events.

Students today network with each other using technology as much as, if not more than, face-to-face communication. College administrators must not only recognize this phenomenon, but learn to use the variety of electronic media available in positive ways: to stay connected to college social networks, promote relevant events, and help students feel safe and at home on campus.

Facebook, an online communication tool that allows users to connect individually and with large groups, began with a Harvard student who saw

untapped potential in taking the college's traditional freshman directory to an electronic, student-directed format. Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook in spring 2004 (Kushner, 2006). With over 100 million active users, Facebook now holds an 85 percent market share of four-year U.S. colleges and universities (Facebook, 2008a). Facebook is a synthesis of many Internet-based communication tools previously in wide but disconnected use. It integrates static user-designed Webs (personal pages), synchronous (instant messages) and asynchronous chats (wall posts), picture uploading, group formation, event hosting, Web development tools, dynamic searches, RSS feeds (news feeds), blogs (web logs), mass and individual messaging, and e-mail, plus two unique qualities: networks and friends. These last two functions give users a one-of-a-kind online socialization experience, allowing them to limit the visibility of their content based on school affiliation, region, and friends. Facebook offers all of this with one log-in on one Web site.

Facebook puts a massive amount of information and communication power at a student's fingertips, making it possibly the ultimate synthesis of student-relevant data. Previously an individual would have to design and host a Web site, join a chat group, upload pictures to a separate site, form an online group, use instant messaging and e-mail services, join listservs, and create a blog just to rival all of the features Facebook offers.

Facebook's keen focus on the user experience remains clear. It defines itself as a company in tune with its customers' experiences, and when it makes mistakes, it apologizes and quickly remedies the situation. The 2006 news feed fiasco evidences this well: it infuriated users and gave them a sense of insecurity because all their friends were given notification of their recent activity with the newly implemented feature. Users had no control over the publication and visibility of their content (among friends). Zuckerberg immediately apologized and within hours had news feed settings added to standard security settings (Zuckerberg, 2006).

Facebook is theoretically different from typical online socialization companies' groupthink. MySpace.com (2008) says it is for "single people who want to meet other singles or matchmakers who want to connect their friends with other friends" (MySpace, 2008). And Match.com says it "lets our members take their romantic destiny into their own hands" (Match.com, 2008). These sites focus on the discovery of new people and experiences. This is not so for Facebook, which is purposely designed as a distinct social network or, as Zuckerberg emphasizes, "a social utility," continuing: "We're not thinking about ourselves as a community—we're not trying to build a community—we're not trying to make new connections. . . . What we're trying to do is make it really efficient for people to communicate, get information, and share information" (Locke, 2007, p. 5).

A new and unique form of user and company collaboration has earned Facebook media attention as well as increased sustainability and viability. An announcement entitled "F8" declared Facebook open platform software, creating excitement among users, entrepreneurs, and educators (Geminder,

2007). Becoming open platform means that users and creative thinkers can access certain pieces of Facebook's programming code to develop applications. This action is well defined and controlled through Facebook's security settings. Since inception of this change, programmers have written and published over twenty-four thousand applications (a number rapidly rising) for use by Facebook users, with over 95 percent of users having at least one application built on the platform (Facebook, 2008a).

The F8 announcement includes several key points. It is clear that Facebook now views itself as an operating system within which other companies can build programs. Zuckerberg continually stresses the idea that users are real people with real connections who need to share information easily and quickly. Facebook's goal is to be the biggest and the best communication system in the industry, and the facts support this aspiration. According to the Facebook (2008a) statistics page, Facebook now has two times the photos of all the other photo sites combined; it recently surpassed eBay in traffic counts and will soon overcome Google. Facebook users average fifty page views per day. Facebook is now available in over fifteen languages. The events application hosts three times the invitations of the largest event-based site on the Web, evite.com. Fifty percent of Facebook users log in every day, and no other social network can claim over 15 percent daily log-ins by its users (Zuckerberg, 2007). An independent tracking service puts Facebook in fourteenth place for unique U.S. user traffic (comScore, 2007); according to the Facebook (2008a) statistics page, Facebook also has the 4th most traffic in the world and the most traffic of any social network.

Most notable for educators is another announcement from the employee blog at Facebook: the removal of the integrated courses feature. This feature allowed users to list their current course schedules and link to discussions and uploaded files, as well as communicate with other Facebook users in their courses. Initially this removal may have seemed to eliminate any education-based functionality from Facebook. But along with this announcement came a "call for the education community to create robust education programs to interact with Facebook" (Morin, 2007). At the time of the writing of this chapter, hundreds of applications have been written under the education heading, and numerous others with the potential for educational use have appeared as well.

One of these applications is the fantasy stock exchange (FSX). When helping students put economic theory into practice, professors use Web sites like Stocktrak.com that offer simulations similar to the fantasy stock exchange application (Stocktrak, 2008). This Facebook application meets students where they are, as well as adding fresh possibilities for student interaction to this standard out-of-classroom experience. FSX shows innovative ways for students to participate in learning beyond the classroom yet within a socialization context, potentially building and maintaining relationships formed from this activity. Such applications can be created and used by students, faculty, and staff who have specific educational interests

and may also be integrated into the structure of a college to enrich the student experience.

Theory and Research

College student development theories exist to help higher education professionals conceptualize, design, and evaluate their practices. Ideally these theories provide frameworks for understanding and maximizing student development. Alexander Astin's theory of student involvement (1984) is widely endorsed as a straightforward, well-used model in many areas of student affairs work, and it can be used to support new thinking regarding student involvement with the features of Facebook.

Student Involvement Theory. Astin's theory of college student involvement has five tenets that can be used to gauge the level of involvement in a particular experience. Student involvement theory has and continues to take many forms in the student affairs literature. It was recently readdressed in *Student Success in College* (Kuh and others, 2005) as student engagement. The examples that follow show how student involvement theory is a lens that can be used to evaluate and examine college student development in the new communication milieu of Facebook.

Involvement Requires Physical and Psychological Energy. This tenet states that "involvement requires the investment of psychological and physical energy" (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, p. 53). By this definition, evidence abounds that students are highly involved with Facebook. In August 2007, comScore reported that Facebook had the highest percentage of university visitors of all Web sites in the United States. Furthermore, Facebook ranked eighth in terms of the percentage of university audience reached among all U.S. Web sites. The problem pushed to the forefront by many administrators and parents is the widespread complaint that students spend far too much time engaging in nonacademic activities using the Internet and other technologies. But as the First College Year survey report by the Higher Education Research Institute (2007) states, "Students who spent more time per week on online social network sites did not seem to spend less time on any other activity" (p. 2), such as studying. Students themselves admit that they are frequently online communicating with each other. A recent study found that students were logged onto instant messaging services a median of thirty-five hours per week and actively chatted eighty minutes each day (median) (Junco and Mastrodicasa, 2007). Three-quarters of college students spend between one and three hours per week using the Internet for social communication; the remaining one-quarter spend three or more hours per week communicating socially online (Gemmill and Peterson, 2006). Almost half of the 100 million active Facebook users are members of a college network and, according to Facebook, spend an average of twenty minutes per day on the site and view over fifty pages per day. Half of its active users log in every day. Facebook (2008a) also claims to have 85

percent of the market share of college students. Obviously students are highly involved in online social communications, and Facebook is the primary vehicle for this interaction.

Involvement Occurs Along a Continuum. This tenet says that “students will invest varying amounts of energy” in different areas (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, p. 53). Instant messaging systems and Facebook allow not only more connections but also more options for communication. The appeal and growth of these options, including voice and video feeds, have been instrumental in Facebook’s ability to sustain interest and use by young people. Facebook adds new features almost every fiscal quarter. It started by giving users the ability to create basic profiles and post one picture. Now users create personal pages that feature demographic information, favorite books, movies, shows, and quotations. They can also load an unlimited number of pictures and videos, create their own blogs, and even use Facebook development software to create programs to run off Facebook information (Facebook, 2008c).

Although Facebook has been in existence only since 2004, student involvement along this continuum has increased exponentially. Students today join groups that grow to over 100,000 people within one day of being created (for example, “For every 1,000 people that join this group, I will donate \$1 to Darfur”), and grow to nearly 5 percent, or 500,000, of Facebook members within a few days (Cox, 2006). Although the student-to-student communication continuum has always existed, its medium has dramatically changed because of the features that Facebook offers.

Involvement Has Both Quantitative and Qualitative Features. This point references the fact that students invest various amounts of time in an activity and that student involvement can be measured using qualitative and quantitative measures (Astin, 1984). It has yet to be documented, but the physical and psychological energy expended in student interplay with Facebook may be measurable in both of these ways. College students are obviously devoting time, joining a number of groups, involving themselves with a variety of political and other issues, and making numerous friends through Facebook (Facebook, 2008a). One study shows students spending an average of one to two hours a day on Facebook and logging in an average of three times per day (Heiberger, 2007). Recent data from the Higher Education Research Institute (2007) also show 94 percent of students using social networks in a typical week and approximately 60 percent spending one to five hours per week.

Qualitative features could be pursued through focus groups, interviews, and the like that explore in more personal terms what Facebook activities add to students’ lives. Students often display emotions, their true or ego-casted selves (misleading display of identity), in online formats. This too could be explored through qualitative research. In fact, the question of Facebook addiction has surfaced, along with concerns that the time students spend online interferes with personal (face-to-face) interaction, study, work, and other activities. Facebook reports a high number of visits per user per day, averaging over eighteen minutes per person per day and three log-ins

per person per day (McElvain and Smyth, 2006). Students are also attached to information sharing and gathering using the site. More than 85 percent of college students use online communities, and two-thirds are logging on daily (Mannix, Snyder, Torrielli, and Christy, 2005).

Development Is Proportional to Quantity and Quality of Involvement. This tenet states that students will develop in proportion to the amount of time spent and nature of their involvement in an activity (Astin, 1984). There is little current investigation of student development with regard to the quality and quantity of a student's involvement with Facebook. It would be fascinating to investigate, for example, whether a correlation exists between Facebook use and a user's level of social, cognitive, or academic development. Such a relationship might be revealed as either positive or negative, but in either case relates to this portion of Astin's theory. As students vary aspects of their involvement with Facebook, their educational and developmental benefits may change in a proportional manner. Similar questions regarding students' initial qualitative and quantitative involvement could be examined as well.

Educational Effectiveness Is Related to Capacity to Increase Involvement. Astin (1984) says that programs and services should be evaluated in terms of their ability to induce greater student involvement. This factor too will be a challenge to investigate but may be an area in which student affairs administrators can evaluate their institutional Internet-based programs (among them, MyStateOnline, myBama, WAM!, WebCT, WebAdvisor, and Blackboard) in comparison to Facebook and assess their relative effectiveness. Students have been shown to spend more time on and are logging in more to Facebook than they are to university portals and e-mail accounts (Heiberger, 2007).

Engagement. Facebook is a multifaceted tool with exciting prospects for student affairs professionals. Recently Facebook engineer Dave Morin announced that Facebook is testing a new ranking for applications based on user engagement; previously the focus was on simply the number of users. Facebook will track activity within each application from midnight to midnight and compare it to the number of users who have the respective applications installed, thus giving an engagement rating for each application. Facebook counts active users when reporting numbers to the public. It focuses on those who have logged in at some time during the past thirty days rather than their actual unique user count, which must be much greater (Facebook 2008a).

Facebook designers seem to understand Astin's involvement theory (at least in terms of how they run the company), and effective educators will want to explore, create, and use positive, educational, engaging Facebook activities. As student affairs administrators invest financial and human resources on programs designed to involve students, the parallel universe of social communication on Facebook is an exciting option.

Tinto and Others. Student retention is of utmost importance to any institution. Vincent Tinto (1993) created a longitudinal model of institu-

tional departure to explain why some students withdraw from college. This model takes into account many different markers (see Figure 2.1) in a student's life that affect persistence in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many of these markers are potentially related to students' uses of Facebook. Facebook offers opportunities for extracurricular activities, peer group interactions, social integration, and faculty-staff interactions. Involvement with Facebook may help or hinder a student's academic performance, academic integration, and intentions. Student affairs administrators and faculty members can explore the question of whether or how Facebook activity is related to student retention or attrition; thus, intentional efforts to involve students through Facebook may lead to stronger retention by a college.

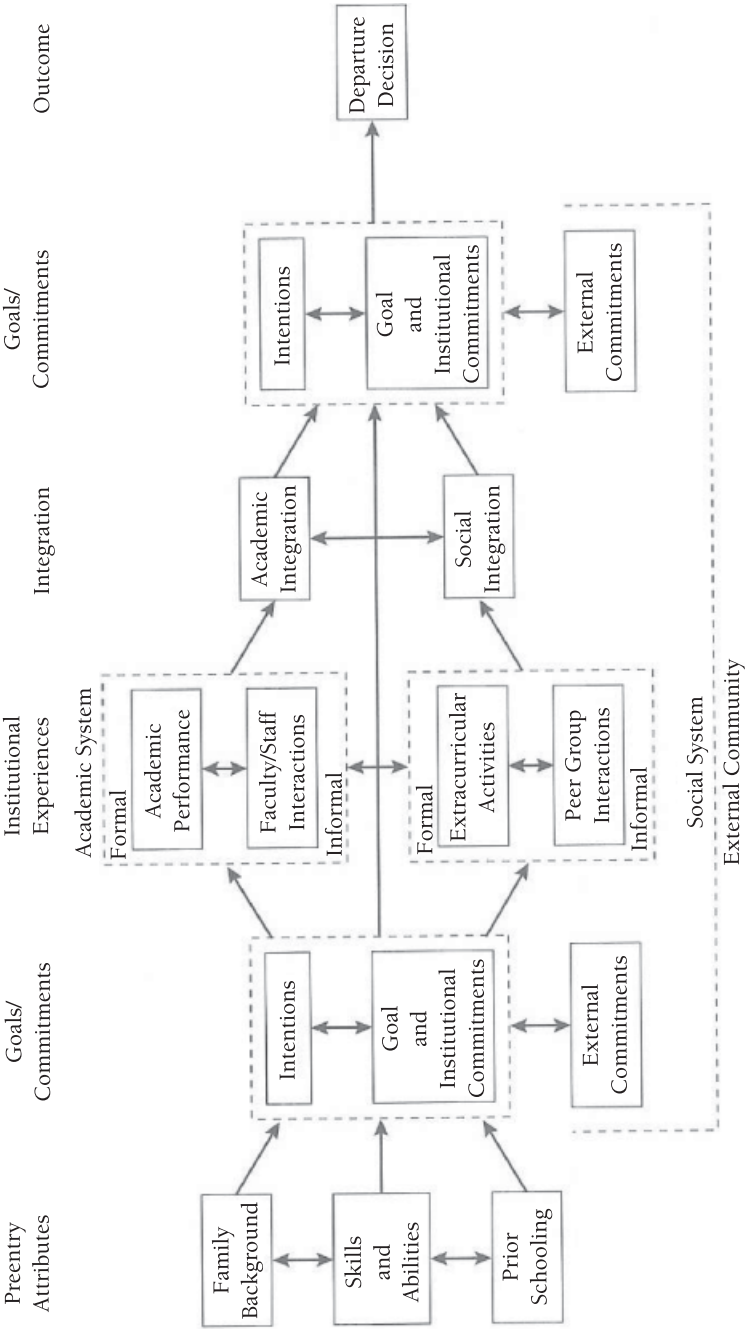
Although Tinto's model of student departure has been critiqued, the role of social integration continues to be seen as central to student commitment to staying in school. As researchers have concluded from empirical study, "The greater the level of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution" (Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson, 1997, p. 131), "which in turn positively affects the likelihood of student persistence in college" (Elkins, Braxton, and James, 2000, p. 266).

Institutional fit is an important factor in student retention (Berger and Milem, 1999). Facebook has the capacity to help create small communities within large institutions, making students more comfortable and connected (Read, 2004). A floor in a residence hall can have its own group (for example, Wenona Third Floor Rocks!), as can majors in a particular field (an example is Seniors Psych Out). Facebook assists students in seeking out homogeneous groups of friends more easily. Conversely, use of this technology may contribute to information overload and overwhelm or even intimidate some students. Research needs to be conducted to determine whether and how institutional fit may be affected by Facebook use.

Berger and Milem (1999) use Astin's theory of involvement (1984) to help explain Tinto's model of institutional departure (1993). They show that not only are Tinto's fourteen markers important, but a student's involvement with each is key to persistence. From this perspective, as well as Astin's, students must do more than locate activities, faculty-staff interactions, peer group interactions, and so forth on Facebook; they must take steps to become involved if this medium is to be proven useful in student retention. Research about Facebook's influence on college student development may need to integrate multiple theories and explore, for example, how students' goals, aspirations, external influences, and social and academic interactions are played out on Facebook. Further research can investigate whether Facebook is a tool for students to strengthen their chances to persist by offering opportunities to interact on yet another level (easily accessed, ever present) with peers, family, and their institutional counterparts, such as faculty and staff.

Recent Research and Results. Facebook is becoming a new milieu for research on college students. The *New York Times* calls it "a petri dish

Figure 2.1.1. A Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure



Source: Tinto (1993). Reprinted with permission.

for the social sciences” (Rosenberg, 2007, p. 1). Analyzing responses to the only existing study to compare student involvement with Facebook use (Heiberger, 2007) and a report from the Higher Education Research Institute (2007) may foreshadow the implications of students’ uses of online social networks. Findings from a survey of 377 undergraduates at a mid-sized public midwestern university regarding Facebook are reaffirmed by HERI data, which look at all social networks.

Using the Your First College Year (YFCY), consisting of data from 31,500 first-year students at 114 colleges and universities in the United States, HERI issued a report on college freshmen and online social networking sites in September 2007. As noted earlier, 94 percent of students report using social networks weekly, and these students are not spending more or less time studying or doing any other activity than their counterparts who do not use social networks. It appears that students who spend more time on social networks are also spending more time on real-life social activities such as interacting and connecting with friends and participating in student clubs or groups, and they have a stronger connection to their institution and feel better about their social life.

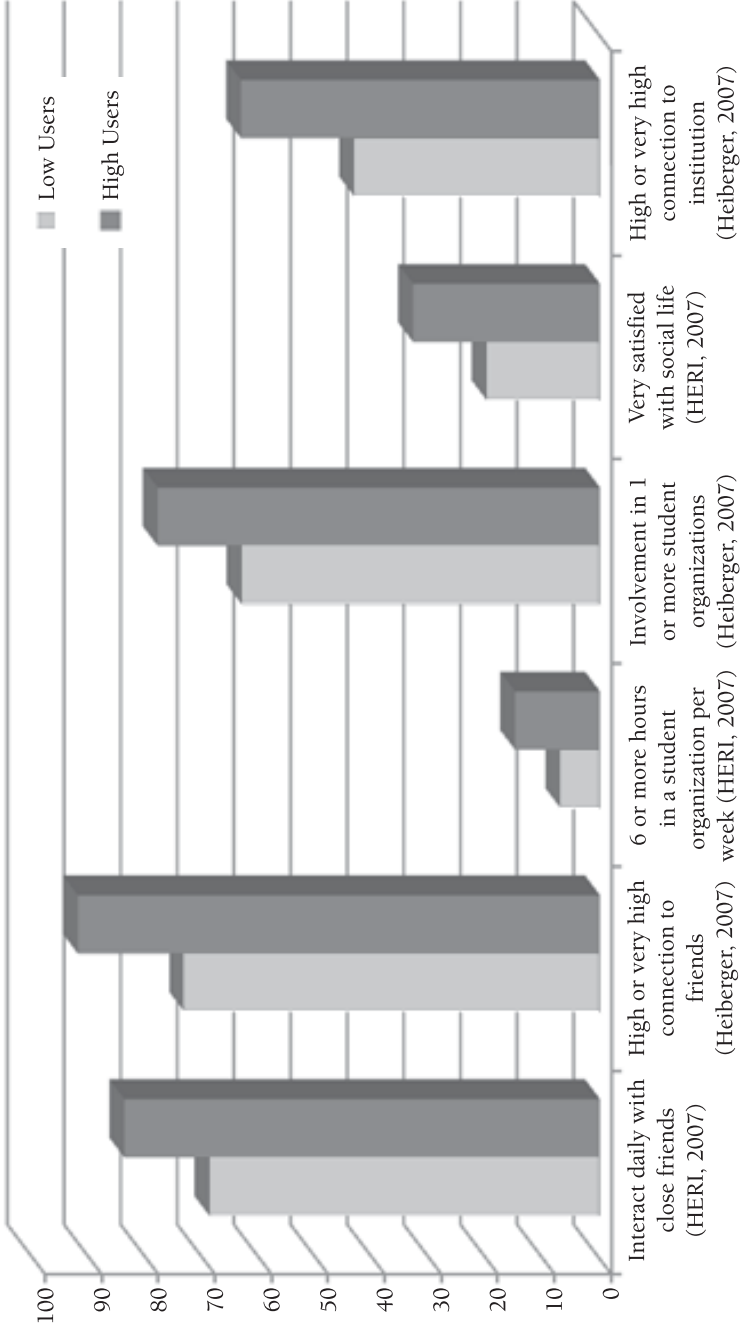
Heiberger (2007) showed that 73.4 percent of students who spend less than one hour per day on Facebook rated their connection to their friends at their university as very high or high, compared to 92.2 percent of those who spend more than one hour per day on Facebook. The HERI (2007) report shows 84 percent of students who spend greater than six hours per week on social networks interact daily with close friends at their institution compared to only 69 percent who spend an hour or less on social networks.

Heiberger (2007) also found that 63.3 percent of students who spend less than one hour a day on Facebook participate in at least one student organization, compared to 78.1 percent of those who spend more than one hour a day on Facebook. Also, 15 percent of students who spend over six hours per week on social networks also spend over six hours per week in student clubs and groups, whereas fewer than half of that group (7 percent) who spend less than one hour on social networks spend over six hours per week in student clubs and groups (HERI, 2007).

The HERI (2007) report shows that 33 percent of students who spend over six hours per week are very satisfied with their social life, compared to 20 percent who spend less than one hour per week. And Heiberger (2007) found that 43.4 percent of students who spend less than one hour per day on Facebook feel very highly or highly connected to the university they attend, compared to 63.4 percent of those who spend more than one hour per day on Facebook.

According to HERI and Heiberger, then, students who spend more time (more than one hour per day in the Facebook study, and more than six hours per week in the social network study) on social networks and Facebook are not spending more or less time studying and are spending more time socializing with the university community (friends at their

Figure 2.2. The relationship between the use of Social Networking Sites and campus engagement



“Low Users” for the Heiberger study were classified as those who spent less than one hour per day on Facebook and for the HERI study, “Low Users” were classified as those who spent less than one hour per week on Social Networking Site. High Users were classified as those who spent greater than an hour per day and those who spent greater than six hours per week, respectively.

institution). These students are spending more time participating in student clubs and groups and are more satisfied with their social lives.

Finally, looking at these data using the synergetic lenses of Astin (1984), Tinto (1993), Berger and Braxton (1998), Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson, (1997), and Berger and Milem (1999) may lead to some theoretical implications for student affairs work. Berger and Braxton (1998) state, "Social integration positively predicts subsequent institutional commitment, which in turn positively predicts students' intent to return" (p. 110). Thus, students' social integration through student organizations and with friends at their institution comprises a substantial piece of their summative social integration, which then predicts institutional commitment (for example, their connection to the university). Thus, social integration predicts students' intent to return. Following this logic, students who regularly use social networks would be predicted by these theories to have higher retention rates (using HERI and Heiberger data) than their counterparts who do not use social networks as frequently.

Since academic and social systems are affected by student affairs practices and policies, creative ways of enhancing such practices must be explored. It is vital that student affairs professionals find positive ways to use the technologies most popular with students. The alternative is facing the consequence of having less interplay with the variables that Tinto (1993) claims factor into student attrition.

Administrators and practitioners are encouraged to refine and remodel academic and social systems to include structures for learning and development within the world of Facebook. Many administrators and faculty are reluctant, to say the least, to use these new technologies, but staff involvement will be crucial to opening up the possibilities of Facebook's use in and beyond the college classroom.

Faculty and Staff Apprehension

College students are active users of Facebook and similar technologies. As millions of students check their accounts several times each day, faculty and staff members who may be sitting nearby in the student union or coffee shop will still be checking only e-mail and perhaps a few favorite Web sites. Given this cyberdivide, how will higher education professionals learn to use new technologies in order to increase communication with students and encourage student involvement?

It may not be easy. Facebook has been staked out as the territory of the young and hip. According to Michael Bugeja (2006), "Many professors and administrators have yet to . . . evaluate its impact" (p. C1). Negative faculty perceptions abound. "Facebook substitutes electronic relationships for real ones. It's also bad for people who have trouble drawing boundaries," says one professor. Others may experience a sense of trespassing when and if they decide to create a Facebook account. A faculty member remarked, "To me, Facebook is like my kid's diary. I don't go there!" And a university

counselor with a Facebook account notes that a former client had tried to “friend” her recently: “I wasn’t sure how to respond, but I decided to say, ‘That’s very kind of you, but the code of ethics of my profession precludes this kind of thing.’”

Many students agree. A recent article on social networking technologies written by University of Wisconsin-Madison administrators quotes a student as saying, “Don’t bother with IM or Facebook—that’s our way to network. Leave us alone” (Berg, Berquam, and Christoph, 2007, p. 34).

A recent experimental study by Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) looked at the effects of faculty self-disclosure through Facebook on student motivation, learning, and classroom climate. Results indicated largely negative associations between faculty use of Facebook and their credibility. Three themes emerged from student responses. First, there was concern about teacher professionalism; second, students did like to learn more about a professor’s personality and style although (third) students were troubled by the idea that faculty members would judge them or use Facebook as a way to “get gossip or . . . spy on students” (p. 12).

This last fear could be well founded. Many faculty and staff members, as well as employers, admit to checking a student’s Facebook page when doing routine screening for hiring or admission to a program. Reports range from 11 (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2007) to 22 (Careerbuilder, 2008) percent of employers who say they review social networking profiles during the hiring process. One university department head said, “I don’t see myself using it as a social or educational tool to communicate with students. I have, however, used Facebook to search out students who have applied to the program.”

Nevertheless, growing evidence of positive uses of Facebook by university administrators is becoming apparent. Given the many recent tragedies on campuses, deans and directors of student affairs, campus security, and academic technology experts are working together to communicate quickly with students using Facebook ads, mass e-mails, cell phone text messages, and digital signs in unions or residence halls (Dobnik and Foley, 2007). Sadly, it may take creative responses to safety issues to motivate some higher education professionals to look more closely at what social networking and other new technologies can do to enhance the college experience for students. But if that concern starts the exploration, other options will be generated as well. Ideas like “providing mass postings when a campus deadline is approaching or [offering] opt-in class chats that may or may not involve the faculty member” are being tried on many campuses (Berg, Bergaum, and Christoph, 2007, p. 36).

Another faculty member with student affairs experience notes:

Facebook has considerable potential to increase student involvement, providing we are willing to suspend prescriptive notions of what it means to be involved. A Facebook group for a traditional student organization on any

campus can enhance members' involvement by establishing a stronger connection than they otherwise might have achieved by merely attending meetings. Likewise, Facebook has potential for establishing close connections with students in an arena that presently lacks positive administrative presence. I am currently using Facebook to publicize a study abroad opportunity being organized by a team of faculty. Students can join our Facebook discussions, sort through information, and ask questions. I am meeting students as if I am sitting down with them at lunch, in the residence hall lounge, or in a coffee shop off campus. Facebook opens a whole new context for discussion about formal and informal interactions in higher education.

Although these new applications are obviously exciting to some, others in student affairs still have doubts. One experienced adviser says, "I have very strong feelings about how the new technologies are a big negative, particularly for interpersonal communication. I'll see four students sitting together, all using their 'walkie-talkies' to communicate with someone else." He continues, "Another issue is students' increased use of cell phones for texting in class, during appointments, basically all the time." And a director of a student union and student activities remarked,

Facebook doesn't lend itself well to person-to-person contact and student engagement. I have worked with a young man who has struggled immensely academically. He is a graphic design major, and spends hours creating the most captivating Facebook site; he skips class to catch up on Facebook. While this is only one example, and an extreme one at that, Facebook doesn't reinforce engagement with the college experience—a factor we know determines a student's satisfaction and sometimes successful matriculation through to a degree.

Faculty and staff members who listen to students will discover high expectations about the speed and quality of campus communication. Flexibility, open-mindedness, and creativity will be needed as higher education professionals seek appropriate, timely ways to use social networking options like Facebook.

Facebook and Increased Student Involvement

Current successes with Facebook in postsecondary settings may span the spectrum, but a few examples will illustrate what can be done to increase student involvement. In the fall of 2007, administrators at South Dakota State University observed and assessed the interactions of student leaders, as well as new students, with Facebook. Many incoming students used Facebook to connect with others entering the institution that semester. New-student orientation staff created Facebook groups for each summer orientation session, and students responded strongly, joining groups and initiating communication with other group members. The quantitative and

qualitative results show success with minimal institutional funding and resources. One student said, “I feel it was a good way to get in touch with other students attending the same session, and I made a few connections prior to coming.” Students joined and participated in groups at a high rate: nearly 24 percent of orientation attendees joined a group within six days of an e-mail invitation, and the ratio of discussion posts to members was nearly 90 percent. Positive feedback from both new students and student leaders indicate that this use of Facebook demonstrates an effective way to support students in the college transition process.

Facebook also proved to be an effective target marketing device for a weekend programming initiative. Students can self-select to join the Weekend Stuff programming group and then receive invitations to sponsored events every weekend. This inexpensive medium for promoting weekend programs has allowed students to opt in to receiving information they feel is relevant. Students can see on Facebook that their friends are attending, for example, the Native hoop dancer performing in the student union and plan to go as well. According to the *Student Activities Journal*, Facebook can be “like word of mouth on steroids” (Lambert, 2006, p. 8).

Using Facebook to Increase Student Involvement: Examples and Recommendations

Just as students are multidimensional in their talents, interests, and abilities, so must student affairs staff members be creative in implementing programs that support these talents, interests, and abilities. Informed by theory and practice, effective student personnel administrators will find innovative ways to involve students. Astin’s theory of student involvement is a highly useful framework for evaluating how much or whether Facebook use affects student engagement.

To support and communicate well with college students, student affairs staff must embrace and explore new technologies. Facebook is one vehicle for achieving the goal of maximizing this communication.

College students are beginning their developmental path toward becoming adults. Facebook gives them opportunities to learn about and self-select into programs and services beneficial to them. Success will come when students are educated about programs and freely choose to become involved. Facebook can help students simplify and prioritize their choices, manage their time wisely, and be aware of the wide variety of options available to them on campus. An example of a program meeting many of these expectations is the Facebook application (Lil) green patch. This application is the seventh most used Facebook application and has over 6 million active users in the last month. In an attempt to fight global warming the (Lil) green patch application donated proceeds to the Adopt An Acre program of the Nature Conservancy in July 2008 and saved over 48 million square feet (approximately 1110 acres) of rainforest (Facebook, 2008d). This applica-

tion involves and engages millions of students, who self-select it, use it for fun friendship connections, and also to share campus student issues.

In addition, student affairs staff must be adept at change. Students are accustomed to and expect rapid upgrades and technical reconfigurations. They welcome change more than many older adults do and expect higher education to adapt quickly and responsively to their needs and interests. Engagement and involvement theory, paired with models of retention and departure, can help to refine and refocus student affairs professionals' abilities to react to students by better using new technologies. Whether Facebook itself maintains its status as a dominant social network is ultimately irrelevant, because responsible administrators must constantly strengthen methods of evaluating and responding to change with ongoing respect for the theories that drive good work in the field of student affairs.

Finally, student affairs administrators must face the future. An example of an exciting emerging program is Swift Kick's Red Rover, a program that addresses connections among orientation, student activities, and the college transition with a dynamic online bridge between the university and the student. Swiftkickonline.com states:

Red Rover's goal is to increase student engagement. Breaking the ice into new organizations and groups of people is tough for students. It is not a secret that most students don't get involved in school-sponsored activities because they do not receive the right kind of introductions. Red Rover is a system that solves that. Swift Kick proudly offers schools a new way to get oriented all year long. Efficient, friendly, and relevant, Red Rover assists schools in going from introductions to engagement [Swift Kick, 2008].

Students self-select their interests from lists of options: activism, athletics, community service, culture, and business, among hundreds of others. The Red Rover program analyzes these interests and matches students up with possible college organizations, majors, minors, careers, and others like them. The program also creates a recruitment list for organization leaders, matching students with their university-recognized, campus-based groups, as well as their Facebook groups. This program shows the potential for technology to engage students throughout the university experience. Student affairs and faculty must be alert to this kind of option and not be left out of the engagement loop. Red Rover has great potential for use by new student orientation, academic advising, and career planning professionals.

When the first student unions were created, responsible administrators hired staff members to create programs and services for students in these campus centers. Similarly, today's administrators need to dedicate resources to meeting college students where they are: www.facebook.com. McElvain and Smyth (2006) compare Facebook to a virtual student union. Both provide opportunities for students to meet, share interests and notes, plan gatherings, and form common interest groups. Facebook has the potential to

shape college interactions, just as brick-and-mortar student unions traditionally do on campuses. The *Student Affairs Leader* (Magna Publications, 2006, p. 2) notes, “Don’t count on Facebook fading away,” and advises professionals to “make Facebook your new best friend.”

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