

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Social Networking: Strategic Use and Effective Policies in Higher Education

By Linda Marie Golian-Lui

The recent, highly publicized student suicide at Rutgers, which came about as a result of an online 'outing' and continual harassment, is but one obvious indication of the need for institutions to have social networking policies in place. Now that the social networking tidal wave has clearly hit our academic shores, administrators will want to have written policies to anticipate problems and also to help improve their institution's marketing and communication efforts. In doing so, campus administrators may wish to call upon their librarians to help craft the policies, because libraries have been using various social networking tools for several years now, to connect with users and expand the library's presence in the community. Two key components in using social networking tools effectively and efficiently include developing a strategic campus plan for all e-tools, and creating a broad and flexible e-policy.

Impact of E-Tools

E-mail is an essential electronic communication tool that has forever altered the ways in which we exchange information and conduct our professional relationships. Since the inception of e-mail, a plethora of ever-expanding high-tech tools have joined the electronic communication mix. Today, time spent on social networking exceeds time spent on e-mail, signaling a social, business, and technology paradigm shift that educators must acknowledge and embrace. It is no longer a question of whether higher education organizations should use social networking, but which e-tools they will choose, how they will use them, and what policies they should adopt.

While it is not uncommon for an academic organization to have an Internet and e-mail policy, many campuses are just now developing broader e-policies that incorporate the strategic use and best practices of all electronic tools. Colleges and universities must work to expand e-strategies thoughtfully for using currently available social networking tools, and to create flexible e-policies that will incorporate tomorrow's unimaginable "hot" e-tool. Fortunately, academic librarians are currently leveraging social networking tools to increase opportunities to connect with their patrons and are therefore uniquely poised to help shape their campus's e-tool strategies and e-policies.

What Is Social Networking?

Social networking is more than Facebook and Twitter. Social networking is defined as an e-technology or e-tool that allows users to join "networks" or to create "connections" among people and organizations who share common interests and activities. It is a process of building online communities for fostering greater interaction, learning, and communication. It is a form of electronic interconnection for the exchange of ideas, resources, and information. Social networking includes a wide variety of electronic interactive methods including: chat, text messaging, e-mail, digital video, file sharing, blogging, and discussion groups. Several popular

Coming Soon —

Faculty Commons in the Library

social networking applications include: Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Second Life, Flickr, LinkedIn, and Foursquare.

Benefits

The social networking phenomenon presents an opportunity for higher education to connect with all facets of the academic community by quickly and conveniently communicating strategic messages at low cost. Academic leaders can tactically use social networking in a number of ways.

Some of the most widely used ways are for sharing campus information, showcasing student and faculty work, or broadcasting campus events which could include marketing the events or providing an electronic forum to increase engagement during the event. Such sites are helpful in coordinating emergency notifications, the necessity of which has unfortunately been demonstrated lately by the need to spread news concerning a campus shooting or assault on a student.

On a more positive note, social networks can facilitate connections by providing a forum where new groups can easily be formed, e.g., assisting graduate students in forming an electronic research support group; they can become a place for hosting “office hours,” by creating an alternative to face-to-face office hours, especially for distance learning students. They also provide an alternative to face-to-face meetings for library research and reference support. Faculty can use social networks to enhance classroom learning by encouraging students to post questions and engage in discussion during and after a class.

Colleges and universities are using social networks to reach beyond the campus itself into areas of fund-raising, recruiting, and screening potential students, e.g., verifying information on scholarships or applications for entry into high-demand programs with limited spaces. These sites are more and more used to screen potential employees whether it’s simply to verify basic job application information, including degrees and employment dates or to view social networking posts to evalu-

ate a job candidate’s communication or life style.

Higher education leaders are choosing to use social networking tools in ways that blend work and social life. The strategic and cost-effective uses of social networking in higher education are in their infancy. As of October 2010, Facebook had over 500 million registered active users, with hundreds of new users registering daily. Two trends supporting the significantly growing impact of social networking in the academy are the creation of social media positions in both businesses and higher education organizations across the country, and the incorporation of social networking into higher education curriculum.

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Concerns

Since social networking tools are easy to use, many academic units are already incorporating them without a comprehensive organizational policy. The lack of strategic e-tool plans and broad e-policies increases an organization’s exposure to potentially costly and protracted risks including workplace lawsuits, regulatory fines, security breaches, and productivity drains. Social networking tools are potentially as damaging as e-mail and other conventional communications in higher education. A whole new world is developing on how social networking information can be used as explosive evidence in litigation. Below is a short summary of concerns:

Misuse. When an organization creates a post, social network “members” can comment upon information with unwelcome and inappropriate comments. Comments may contain offensive language or pictures, and may inadvertently be misused by disgruntled employees in ways that can do significant harm to an organization or an individual’s professional reputation.

Privacy Paradox. Social networking is creating a cultural shift in privacy expectations. People are finding it acceptable to expose more of their personal details, and share their likes, dislikes, opinions, and photos. At the same time, there are growing concerns over information security and the role of the academy in teaching privacy issues.

Child Safety. Information posted about minors on social network sites risks possible exposure to online sexual predators.

Cyber-Bullying. E-technologies have been used to purposely support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, with the intention to harm a specific individual. There are increasing incidents of victims being tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, and embarrassed via social networking sites in higher education communities.

Trolling. Defacing tribute pages, playing online pranks, and creating controversial comments with the intention to cause anger or harm are examples of trolling. Trolling differs from cyber-bullying because many of these acts are one time only.

Productivity. Employers have legitimate concerns about the degree of employee time-wasting. While creating e-policy prohibiting the use of Farmville on Facebook may be an easy decision, other e-policies associated with the use of social networking are not.

Commitment. Having a social network presence is an ongoing commitment. It requires consistent attention to remain a strong and useful resource. A social network site that is not maintained can give a higher education organization a negative reputation.

Qualified Professionals. Higher education employers need qualified professionals to create an effective strategy for the use of social networking tools. Just because someone knows all the ins and outs of *how* to use e-tools doesn’t mean that person understands the campus philosophy of “Why are we doing this?” and “What do we hope to gain?” in order to strategically select the best e-tools possible for their unique needs.

To avoid the concerns listed above, some organizations have sought to block all access to social networking sites. This approach is usually unrealistic and unproductive. Banning e-tools or creating rigid e-policies fosters an unmanaged, “back door” usage approach. When an organization fails to incorporate social networking and other emerging technologies into its current organizational strategies, ingenious employees will find ways to evade the organization’s banning. This is a recipe for disaster.

Savvy librarians determined to effectively manage e-technologies are engaged in the strategic implementation of a comprehensive program that combines a holistic utilization plan, written rules, employee training, and systematic policy monitoring. Social networking has significant organizational risks that mandate the development of a broad and flexible e-policy for institutions of higher education. Library leaders should work with other campus officials to effectively minimize risks while maximizing compliance with legal, regulatory, and organizational guidelines.

Tips for Creating a Campus-Wide E-Tool Strategic Plan

A key concept in developing an effective e-tool strategic plan is flexibility. Smart e-tool utilization plans and e-policies, need to feature wording that incorporates the new technologies of today and the not yet conceived technologies of tomorrow.

A team approach can be adopted for both the strategic use and policy formation for e-tools. The team needs to include representatives of all affected constituencies: legal, records management, risk management, marketing, foundation, alumni, athletics, distance learning, library, instructional technology, and all academic units expressing an interest in using e-tools. All of these representatives do not need to participate throughout the entire process, as long as specific constituencies are consulted appropriately.

Developing a campus-wide e-tool strategy includes conducting an assessment of current official and unofficial

e-tool practices, reviewing all official and unofficial print communication policies, conducting a needs assessment of how e-tools can assist the entire organization, and establishing a timetable for the perpetual review of current official and unofficial e-tool practices.

Steps for Creating a Campus-Wide E-Tool Strategic Plan

When developing a campus-wide, e-tool strategic plan, a step-by-step approach is highly recommended. Start by formalizing unofficial uses of e-tools already existent on campus. Next, roll out small projects or pieces of the overall campus master plan a little at a time. This allows the entire organization time to pause, evaluate results, and make adjustments to the overall plan.

A systematic approach usually works best. While all of the steps highlighted below might not be appropriate for all organizations, the fundamental principle of creating a thoughtful process is essential. Suggested steps include:

Step 1: Identify Objectives. Clearly state what goal(s) the organization would like to accomplish with the incorporation of social networking tools. Establish a specific time frame for collecting and analyzing data to determine how to improve using e-tools on a regular basis.

Step 2: Define Success. Once goals and time lines are established, document how the objectives will be measured.

Step 3: Identify Audiences. The wide variety of e-tools provides multiple resources to support individual preferences. Consider how e-tools help the organization communicate and enhance services to students, parents, alumni, faculty, and employment candidates. The strategic plan should identify who the organization is trying to reach and why, and review how these same audiences have been reached in the past, what worked and what did not work, and how social networking tools can make a difference.

Step 4: Determine Capacity, Tactics, and Tools. This might be the most critical step for implementing an e-tool

strategic plan. Document decisions via a matrix that identifies lines of responsibility for generating content on the different e-tools, what type of information will be communicated on each e-tool, how often communication should occur, and how each e-tool will be monitored. There should be one overall coordinator to ensure that all e-tools are providing a consistent organizational message. It is not recommended to try and implement all desired e-tools at once.

Step 5: Consider Outside Expertise. Every higher education community has a cadre of technologically savvy experts who can handle specific tasks or assist on an e-tool advisory board. Make wise use of your human capital.

Step 6: Build the Budget. Nothing is free and all costs associated with e-tools should be calculated, including staff costs.

Step 7: Create an Organizational Culture. Build awareness about the potential benefits and concerns associated with leveraging social networking tools. Achieve understanding and support before launching a full-blown social media strategy. Your boss, and your boss’s boss, need to know what you are doing and why.

Step 8: Track Usage. Be prepared to collect data to assist in the reviewing, analyzing, and modification of the e-tool strategic plan.

Step 9: Analyze Usage and Trends. Once you have collected data, make the time to analyze it and find trends. Similar to the phased rollout of social networking tools, consider doing some data analysis and trend spotting on a monthly basis, with a larger more thorough review after a year of data collection.

Step 10: Make a Decision and Document It. The plethora of e-tool options causes organizational confusion and indecision. Do not be afraid of making decisions or mistakes, but plan for necessary revisions throughout the process.

Step 11: Start All Over Again. After the initial time frame has been completed, plan on repeating a similar, but improved, process.

E-Policy Suggestions

While social networking is a relatively new phenomenon, the creation of policies in higher education organizations is clearly not. The documented campus policies for print communication, e-mail, and Internet resources provide an excellent starting place to develop the broader e-policy document, which will incorporate social networking and other e-tools.

When developing an e-policy document, the vision is to create a policy that is comprehensive and broadly written. While annual review of the e-policy is ideal, the policy must also be flexible enough to incorporate e-tools not currently in use by the organization or even in current existence. The document needs to clearly communicate organizational policies and consequences for policy violation, and that all employees (management, faculty, clerical) are expected to abide by the same guidelines. The newly created document must be both enforceable and consistent with other organizational policies.

While developing the e-policy, it is important to assign a leader to the project, but not assign one individual the sole responsibility for establishing the e-policy. Similarly, the document should address shared responsibility for communicating and enforcing the e-policy within the organization. It could address how employees will continuously learn about the policy and future revisions. Additional e-policy suggestions include:

Demonstrate that the organization has made every effort to manage electronic use and content, and create a process for handling official and

legal requests to produce electronic records. Review and document campus retention and archive policies for electronic communication.

Let employees know that the Electronic Communications Privacy Act (ECPA) gives U.S. employers the legal right to monitor all employee electronic communication. Remind government employees that the federal Freedom of Information Act and similar state statutes give the media and taxpayers ready access to electronically stored information, including organizational e-tools or communications from e-tools using organizational equipment.

Explain to employees that they have no reasonable expectations of privacy when using the organization's equipment or Internet service providers. This includes using the organization's resources when they are on break. Communicate that the organization's computer system is to be used primarily for business communication and that there are disciplinary actions if the policy is violated. This is also a good time to tell employees exactly how much personal computer time they are allowed to engage in, when, why, with whom, and under what circumstances.

Provide clear guidance on what is and is not considered appropriate business use and content of e-tools. Then make sure that employees understand that the established policies apply to all employees, regardless of classification or full-time status, and that they all play an important role in the monitoring and managing of e-tool behaviors. Remind employees that a policy is a policy, regardless if they are at the office, home, on the road, or on their work-provided cell phone.

Lastly, incorporate into the e-policy how e-tool usage must abide by the organization's discrimination and harassment policies, invest in campus-wide policy training, and establish a timetable for the perpetual review of current official and unofficial e-tool policies.

Final Thoughts

Social networking can be a valuable add-on tool to an organization's communications approach, creating the opportunity for conversation and collaboration at all levels. Social networking provides cost-effective tools for building communities of interest and fostering a sense of affiliation for the higher education community. Academic librarians should become campus advocates of social networking, and if the college or university is not ready to establish an organizational strategic plan for all e-tools and a flexible e-policy, librarians should be ready to act as campus leaders. *Linda Golian-Lui is the Library Director at the University of Hawaii at Hilo. golianlu@hawaii.edu*

Additional Resources

Steve Boese's HR Technology at www.steveboese.squarespace.com

Andy Burkhardt, "Social Media: A Guide for College and University Libraries," *C&RL News*, (January 2010) pp. 10-24.

College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) social media page at www.cupahr.org/socialmedia/

Nancy Flynn, *The e-Policy Handbook*, 2nd ed. New York: American Management Association, 2009.

Nancy Flynn's e-policy institute page at www.epolicyinstitute.com

Lon Safko and David Brake, *The Social Media Bible*. New Jersey: Wiley, 2009.



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