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Facebook to Promote Extracurricular Experiences

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Abstract

Students aspiring to become health professionals often need extracurricular experience to be admitted to graduate programs. We have successfully collaborated with our student club to use Facebook to maintain an up-to-date and extensive list of extracurricular opportunities in our community. This article reviews some of the opportunities, challenges, and practical considerations for using Facebook to promote students' engagement in extracurricular experiences.

Introduction

Students aspiring to become health professionals often need extracurricular experience to successfully transition from undergraduate studies to post-graduate programs such as medical school or dietetic internships (Grove, 2015). This add-on requirement presents a challenge both for students and academic faculty. Students need to find time and energy for community volunteering; for clinical shadowing; for showing their leadership ability (in student clubs or projects); and for participation in professional organizations. Faculty need to impress upon students the need for career-relevant extracurricular experience. As advisors and mentors, faculty also need to help students decide which opportunities to pursue. Another significant challenge for faculty is keeping students informed of the different community, university, and professional opportunities for extracurricular experiences. Using Facebook, we have efficiently overcome this last challenge. This article seeks to provide suggestions to help other academic departments leverage this resource to do the same.

In this article, we describe how we have effectively used Facebook, in an academic setting, to gather and disseminate timely information about student opportunities for extracurricular experience. We describe the unspoken but real challenge to students for obtaining extracurricular experience. We provide brief background on the opportunities and challenges of using social

media, and particularly Facebook, in higher education. We provide data on Facebook's use by our students and faculty and provide practical information on delegating, to student club leaders, the task of maintaining a Facebook group. We provide specific recommendations to faculty advisors for encouraging students to act on and gain benefit from the extracurricular experiences. We conclude with suggestions for continued research on using Facebook in academic settings to support students' engagement in extracurricular experiences.

Background: Health Professions Students' Need for Extracurricular Experience

As the United States population ages (Wan, Goodkind & Kowal, 2016) and healthcare consequences of chronic diseases are realized (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; McPhail, 2016), the need for health professionals--including doctors, nurses, dietitians, physical and occupational therapists--is projected to rise (Martiniano, Chorost & Moore, 2016). Undergraduate college enrollment is also on the rise. Between 2000 and 2015, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased 30 percent, from 13.2 million to 17.0 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Many undergraduate students are interested in becoming health professionals. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Health Statistics reports that the number of health professions and related degrees conferred increased significantly--65 percent between 2008-09 and 2013-14 (2016).

For many health professions, however; the growth in student interest has outpaced availability of supervised practice training positions. For example, in nutrition, there are only about half as many spots in accredited supervised practice training programs to become registered dietitian nutritionists as are students qualified to fill them. While match rates for other health profession residency programs are on the rise (Weissbart, Kim, Feinn & Stock 2015), overall consensus is that there is still more student interest in these professions than training positions available. This leads to heightened selectivity among accredited health profession training programs (ACEND, 2009).

Among factors considered by health profession training programs when selecting students for coveted spots is profession-relevant extracurricular experience. Usually neither the number of hours nor the nature of what counts as extracurricular experience is specified by training programs. However, these two factors often are scored by committees charged with selecting among applicants. Since the need for extracurricular activity is widespread, but not usually specified in official education pathway descriptions, some have called this added obligation the "unspoken" requirement (Prep, 2012).

The responsibility for obtaining extracurricular experience rests primarily with students. Nonetheless, since a primary objective of universities is to prepare students for success in their lives and careers, undergraduate programs need to find ways to encourage students to engage in extracurricular activities relevant to their career goals. Toward that goal, we oversee a Facebook group devoted to that purpose. Using Facebook this way has allowed us to engage students, alumni, faculty, and the community in the work of helping solve the extracurricular experience problem. The opportunities, challenges, and practical considerations for using Facebook in this way are outlined below.

Using Social Media to Facilitate Students' Extracurricular Experience

The most popular social media web sites include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (Dunn, 2017). Social media sites are considered “Web 2.0” because they contain mostly user-generated content; promote virtual “communities”; allow users to easily create content from different types of media (video, photos, links to other websites, etc.); and allow users to access the site using a variety of devices (computers, tablets, cell phones) (di Stefano, 2007). Facebook is the most popular social networking site, with an estimated 2 billion users (Dunn, 2017). Pew Research Center estimates that 88 percent of US internet users ages 18-29 use Facebook and 75 percent of these use the site daily (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016). In an April, 2016 earnings call, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg reported that users spend an average of 50 minutes daily on its Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger platforms (Stewart, 2016).

Facebook Benefits and Drawbacks

Facebook is a potentially important tool for supporting students' higher education experiences. Some educators are experimenting with using it as a resource to support student connections and facilitate student engagement. Early findings suggest that Facebook can increase students' information sharing and feelings of mutual support, and that it encourages collaboration (Rojas-Kramer, Esquivel-Gómez, & García-Santillán, 2015). Researchers examining the use of Facebook for promoting student engagement in a campus recreation event found that while status updates increased students' event awareness, it did not increase event participation (Bayne & Cianfrone, 2013), suggesting there are still opportunities to best understand how to use Facebook to promote student engagement.

Concerns about Facebook are numerous, prominent among which is privacy. While the medium tends to imply that users' posts and “likes” are conversations with friends, the reality is more nuanced. Third parties track users' “likes” and posts on Facebook to create “profiles” of individuals. More, users' posts and pictures, potentially visible to prospective employers, are likely “forever” or not retractable. Facebook can also have adverse psychological effects (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). In addition to maintaining their in-person identity and friendships, users must use time and energy to maintain their online equivalents. The medium provides ample opportunity for feeling insufficiently “liked” and relevant compared to others. Questions also have been raised about Facebook use to communicate with students and the degree to which students appreciate this medium as a method of communication with their instructors (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). Mandated Facebook use or faculty presence in students' Facebook groups can make students feel reticent to post certain ideas, feel coerced, or that their privacy has been compromised. Detailed recommendations for using Facebook in higher education have been published elsewhere (Helvie-Mason, 2011).

Basic recommendations are for faculty to carefully consider pedagogical intent; avoid mandating students' participation; and consistently apply well-thought-out personal policies about students' friend requests (faculty should not send friend requests to students); how often to check it for messages from students; and personal disclosure.

Using Facebook to Encourage Students' Extracurricular Engagement

At Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver), nutrition students are using Facebook to share information, ask each other questions, sell their used books, and to promote club events and community opportunities for extracurricular experiences. Members of the student-led nutrition club--officially called the Auraria Campus Student Dietetic Association--(see <http://www.acsda-nutrition.com>) maintain a Facebook group and control who may join. According to club leaders, without question, MSU Denver students who are nutrition majors or alumni may join and MSU Denver nutrition faculty and staff may join. Others who are interested (students from other majors or universities, potential employers, or businesses) must explain their reason for wanting to join the group; club officials evaluate their responses to decide whether adding them to the group would benefit members. At the time of writing, we have approximately 500 nutrition majors and there are more than 750 members of the club Facebook group.

There were 796 posts made to the nutrition club Facebook group, by 185 different people from July 30, 2016 to July 30, 2017. Faculty made 27 of those posts. The first author counted and categorized the different types of posts as follows:

- 260 (34%): Information about research, policy, or general commentary related to nutrition or higher education;
- 128 (16%): Student-reported extracurricular opportunities (posts about profession-relevant jobs, volunteer opportunities, or opportunities related to the local, state, or national professional association);
- 113 (14%): Books or equipment for sale or want to buy;
- 113 (14%): Questions to the group about professors, classes, requirements, etc.;
- 101 (13%): Nutrition club event information (meetings, bake sales, etc.);
- 35 (4%): Other (deletions due to copyright, rooms for rent, personal updates, etc.);
- 23 (3%): Advice or support (encouragement for finals week, advice about internships or classes, etc.); and
- 14 (2%): Nutrition faculty reported extracurricular opportunities.

These data support the idea that, for our program, Facebook is an effective tool for getting the word out about extracurricular opportunities. Combining students' and faculty posts, 142 mentions were made about opportunities. The data also support the idea that using this Web 2.0 platform increases efficiency and reduces faculty burden. Faculty made a total of 27 posts while students made 769. These findings emphasize the power of using a Web 2.0 resource to accomplish a collection and dissemination goal. The 750-person Facebook group knew of more opportunities for extracurricular opportunities than did faculty.

In our Facebook group, one third of the posts (34%) were related to nutrition research, policy, nutrition commentary, and/or higher education. Past reviews (Ellefson, 2016) suggest that Facebook groups might help students begin developing discipline-specific professional identities and may heighten students' interest in discipline-specific academic topics. Follow-up research is needed to understand the extent to which, for our students, participation in Facebook groups affects these other student success goals.

Our program supports the Facebook group in a variety of ways and merges it with other means of promoting students' extracurricular experience. In advising and classes, our program

professors explain extracurricular experience needs and that a good way to find out about opportunities is through the student club Facebook group. We have prepared a brief information handout for new-to-the-program students; the handout includes information on how to join the student club and its Facebook group (see our Department site for more information <https://msudenver.edu/nut/studentresources/>). We further promote students' use of the group by explaining that upperclassmen use the site to sell their old textbooks. We emphasize that new students can use it to find their "tribe" at the University and to connect with others through extracurricular activities and face-to-face club meetings. Each year, faculty advisors for the club share with new club leaders, our department values and mission. Faculty also encourages the club to model its leadership style and Facebook post tone after those. The faculty advisors also ensure that specific students are in charge of regularly monitoring Facebook posts and that these student leaders know what to do if they see questionable content: they may hide it (in the case of something obscene, threatening or offensive); comment in a way that offers an alternative perspective; or contact faculty if they are not sure what action should be taken. In the 7-year history of our 750-member plus Facebook page, only one post needed to be hidden. All faculty in the department are encouraged to share with the Facebook group information they receive from the community about potential extracurricular opportunities.

Advising Students to Make the Most of Extracurricular Experience

Taking advantage of the power of the community--both to know about opportunities for extracurricular experiences and to post messages quickly about them--makes Facebook communication much more effective than other websites types maintained by individuals in academic departments. However, it is clear from past research that knowing is not sufficient for doing. While technology and social media interfaces have potential to engage students, they cannot replace the individualized attention of an advisor/mentor. It has been demonstrated that student success and persistence is impacted by individualized faculty advising (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon & Hawthorne, 2013). It may also be true that diverse students have different aptitudes for, resources for, and barriers to gaining extracurricular experience and benefit from individualized advising. With advisors' support, students may be more likely to recognize the value of things they have done already. Further, they may be better prepared to identify opportunities that fit into often already hectic schedules and avoid burnout. Lastly, advisors can help students keep in mind the types of benefits they may receive from experiences. By learning more from faculty about the proficiencies selection committees are apt to look for, ask about, or be impressed by, students may gain more from their extracurricular experiences. Students who receive this mentoring may be better prepared to translate experiences into written and verbal descriptions--in their personal statement and in personal interviews--of how they have prepared themselves for success with extracurricular experiences.

Recommendations to faculty advisors based on our experiences are to:

- Delegate to student club leaders the task of maintaining and monitoring a Facebook group that disseminates information about opportunities to gain extracurricular experience, participate in club events, and share interesting nutrition-relevant news and perspectives.

- Provide support to student leaders by reminding them of the mission of the department and how the Facebook page supports that mission; the importance of their oversight of other students' posts and of their Facebook post role modeling; and that faculty advisors stand ready to support them whenever questions or problems arise.
- Act as Facebook post role models. Make posts about community, university, and professional association opportunities. "Like" student posts describing extracurricular opportunities.
- Promote the student club Facebook group by talking about it in classes, in advising, and by providing links to it from your program's website.
- When advising students, remind them of the need for extracurricular experience and the resources available to them for finding opportunities. Help them focus their participation on right-for-them opportunities and support them to recognize the merit in things they may already be doing or have done. Lastly, help them anticipate explaining, to selection committees, the benefits gained from their extracurricular experiences.

Summary and Suggestions for Continued Research

College students aspiring to enter health profession training programs generally need not only good grades, strong letters of recommendation, and compelling personal statements, but also profession-specific extracurricular experiences. Faculty members at MSU Denver collaborate with our undergraduate dietetics students to maintain a Facebook group where students and faculty post opportunities for extracurricular experience. Facebook is the most popular Web 2.0-type website where content is primarily user-generated and a wide variety of content types can easily be posted and accessed by users. Since most college students already use Facebook, it can be an effective medium for collaboration between students and faculty to spread the word about opportunities.

Additional research is needed in our program, and is recommended to others planning to use Facebook in this way. Further assessment is needed to determine whether students who join the Facebook group, and who meet with faculty advisors, go on to successfully gain extracurricular experiences and post-graduate placements. In instances where this is not the case, students' feedback could be used to discover what additional support students believe is needed. Evaluation could also discern whether students welcome faculty presence in their Facebook groups or have concerns. Additionally, data could be collected to discover whether students join the Facebook group early enough in their academic careers to gain optimal benefit and whether the Facebook group confers other advantages--such as increased sense of connection with peers and professors; increased sense of professional identity; and increased interest in professional/academic topics. Lastly, evaluation is needed to discern club leaders' satisfaction with faculty support and lead students' perceptions of the impact of this type of service on their academic success.

In conclusion, our findings support the idea that Facebook can be an effective tool for engaging students and faculty in the work of gathering and disseminating information about extracurricular opportunities. More, we find that with support from faculty, the work of maintaining a large Facebook group can be delegated to student club leaders. We suggest that, while Facebook is an effective means to provide timely information about extracurricular opportunities, faculty

advising is also needed to fully support students to engage in and benefit from extracurricular experiences. Finally, we suggest that further research is needed to confirm other potential benefits of a student-maintained Facebook group designed to promote students' participation in extracurricular experiences.

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