

Social Media Adoption Soars as Higher-Ed Experiments and Reevaluates Its Use of New Communications Tools

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For the “always connected” generation, multi-tasking, hand-held devices and nearly constant communication are normal. Millennials, the generation born after 1980, are far less likely to have land-line phones, but they have Facebook profiles, a Twitter presence and send and receive as many as 50 texts everyday (according to a recent Nielsen Report). Their involvement with technology exceeds any other generation and presents an enormous challenge for those targeting this hyper-connected group. For US institutions of higher education, the competition for these students is fierce and survival ultimately depends on engaging them through the use of social media and new communications tools.

In 2007-2008, fascinated by the dynamic created by all the new tools and habits of Millennials, the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth [Center for Marketing Research](#) conducted the first statistically-significant studies on the usage of social media by US colleges and universities. The study explored this fundamental question -- How does a college or university recruit in this new, highly networked, constantly “on” world? That study has been repeated every academic year since and now provides a longitudinal look at adoption of social media by colleges and universities.

This latest study (2010-2011) analyzes the most recent trending of social media adoption among four-year accredited institutions in the United States. As in all previous studies, the colleges and universities were identified using a [directory](#) compiled by the University of Texas.

Under the direction of researchers [Nora Ganim Barnes](#) and [Ava Lescault](#), interviews took place with those who managed social media at these institutions from November to May of the 2010-2011 academic year.

A proportional sample of schools in all 50 states are included and with public (28%) and private institutions (72%) ranging in size from 4 to over 54,000 undergraduates. Tuition (without fees) ranged from \$1,700 to over \$53,000. Admissions officers at well-known schools like Brigham Young University, Syracuse University, University of Notre Dame, Duke University, North Carolina State and Colby College were interviewed as well as smaller lesser-known institutions in the US. The findings presented here from the 2010-2011 study are based on 456 interviews and are valid within the range of +/- 4%.

The results are fascinating and continue to support what the 2007-2008 study documented for the first time: Colleges and universities are using social media, especially social networking sites, not only to recruit but to research prospective students. It is clear that

online behavior can have important consequences for young people and that these tools can, and will, be utilized by others to make decisions about them. Additionally, schools are now moving away from some tools and embracing others, demonstrating a more strategic approach to their online communications.

Usage

Sixty-one percent of the respondents in 2007-2008 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 2009-2010 that number rose to 95% and in the latest study,

100% of colleges and universities studied are using some form of social media.

Usage continues to rise for the most popular tools, but adoption of others has leveled off or fallen.

Facebook is the most common form of social networking being used with 98% of colleges and universities reporting having a Facebook page (up from 87% last year). Eighty-four percent have a school Twitter account (up from 59%) and 66% have a blog (up from 51%). Podcasting has risen from 22% to 41% in just one year.

Admissions professionals are flocking to LinkedIn with 47% on the professional networking site, up from 16% last year. The number of schools using MySpace has declined from 16% last year to 8% this year. Foursquare and YouTube were included in the study for the first time and are being used by 20% and 86% respectively. The use of message boards and video blogging have remained at approximately the same level as last year (37% and 47% respectively).

Blogging continues to be embraced by colleges and universities. While other sectors are reporting a leveling off of blogging (i.e., Fortune 500, Forbes Top Charities) higher ed adoption has grown significantly in the past year.

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, blogging and podcasting are the tools of choice for US institutions of higher education. All of them have realized double-digit increases in adoption in the past year. Video continues to be strong with 41% using it. YouTube made its first appearance in this new study and debuted at 86% using the relatively new tools. It is interesting to note that podcasting now highlights faculty, students, lecture series etc. to create the experience of being on their campus. Even relatively new tools such as the location based Foursquare are being utilized by 20% of the schools studied in an attempt to bring prospective students to the campus. (See Figures 1a and 1b)

Figure 1a

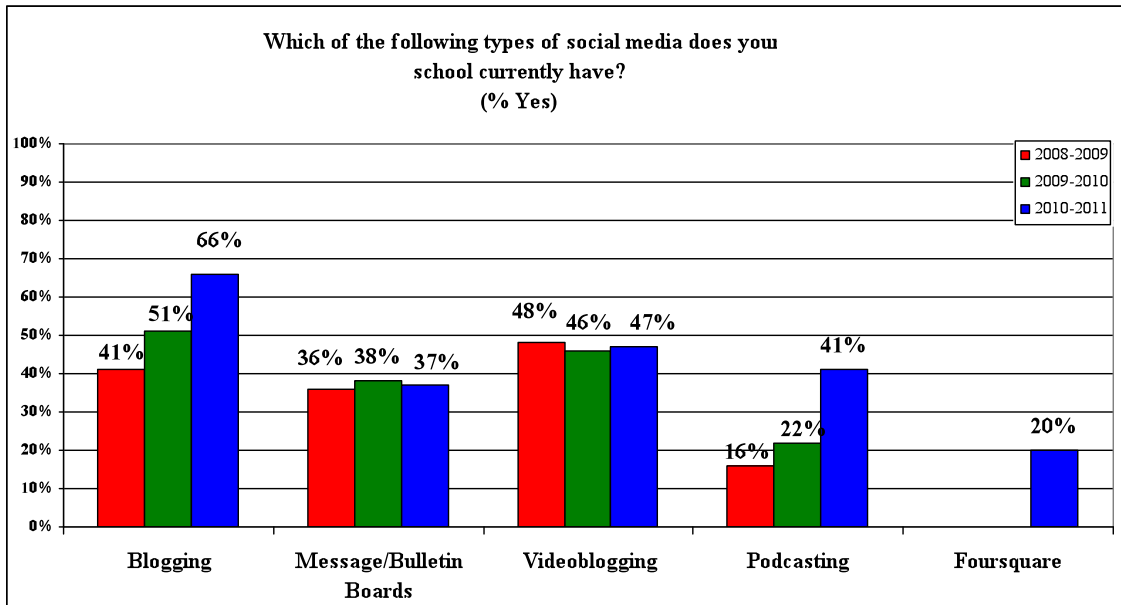
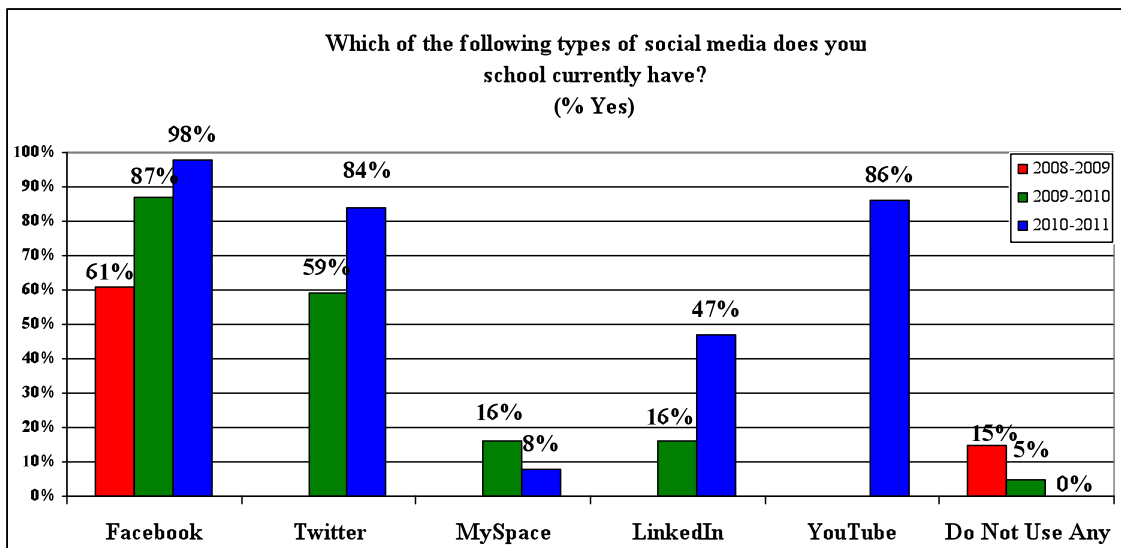


Figure 1b



Eight percent of schools with blogs are using some internally developed applications (down from 14% in 2009-2010). Others cite WordPress (38%) and Blogger (10%) as platforms. The use of WordPress as a blogging platform has doubled in the past year. It is not uncommon for those working with the school's social media to be unfamiliar with the platforms being used to host the school's blog (30%). At most schools, the IT department sets up the blog and the others manage it.

When asked who manages their blog, the most popular answers were the admissions office (including the director, staff and students), marketing and public relations. At schools with multiple blogs, the appropriate department manages their own (i.e., alumni, academic departments, etc.)

Are colleges and universities using social media effectively?

Usage of social media by colleges and universities appears to be a case study in the timely adoption of new technology. They demonstrate consistent evolution over the past four years in critical aspects of the technology necessary to maximize the effectiveness of these tools. Comparing the longitudinal data, it becomes clear that there has been significant improvement as we look at the implementation particularly with blogging.

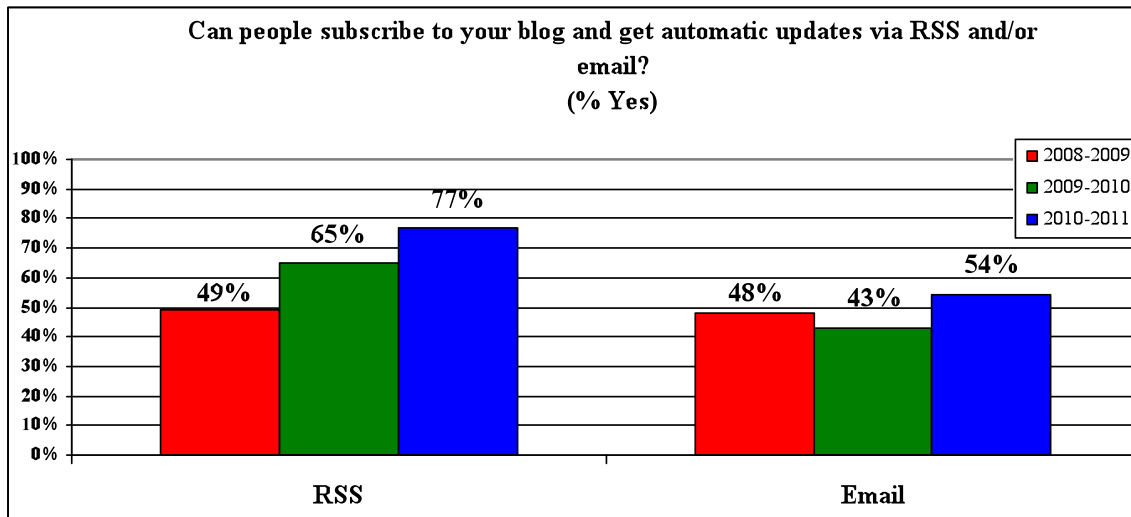
The survey asked about blog logistics like accepting comments, promoting the blog and planning for the future of the blog. The answers to these and other questions from schools with blogs are interesting in that they demonstrate how schools are learning about and using social media more effectively each 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%, then to 15% in 2010. 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.

Another blog characteristic that allows ease of conversation and increases participation is the use of RSS feeds or email subscriptions. 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 something new has been added.

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. The latest study shows 77% with RSS subscriptions and 54% allow email sign-ups. Again, the increased use of RSS and email subscriptions would indicate an increased sophistication in the use of blogging as a recruitment strategy. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2

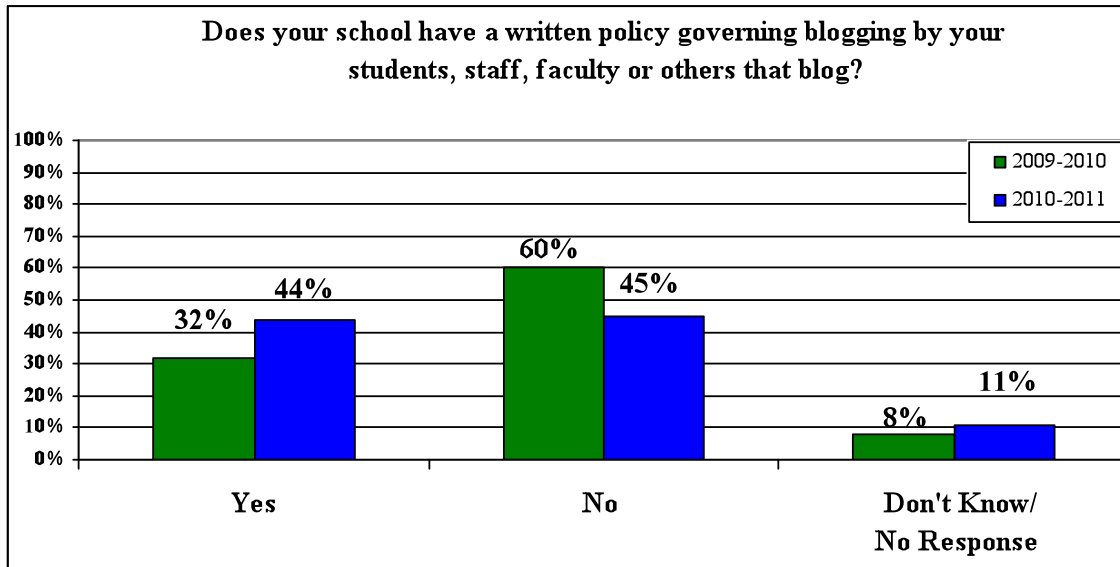


When asked what the future plans are for the school's blog in 2007, the most popular answer was that there are NO future plans for the blog. This was disconcerting considering the swift movement and evolution of blog technology. In the 2008 study, the most popular response was to expand the blog. Many schools began to include podcasts, video and live chats as part of their blog. In 2009, the most popular plan was to link social media sites to blogs. This year the goal was to involve more user groups in blogging by making the platform available to students, faculty and staff.

When asked how their school promotes their blog, the most popular answers were the school's homepage, the admissions website and the school's Facebook page.

One cautionary note has to do with having a blogging or social media policy that defines what is acceptable via the institutions' online communications. Forty-four percent (up from 32% last year) have such a policy in place for their staff or students who engage in online conversation as it relates to the school. Social media policies are now seen as important elements as an institution develops their social media strategy. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3



Those schools not currently using a particular tool, were asked if they planned to in the future. Of those without a Facebook page, 38% plan to create one. Almost half of the schools without a blog, video or Twitter plan to add them. Thirty-eight percent not currently using YouTube, plan to in the future. Only 1% of those not currently using MySpace plan to include it in their social media arsenal. (See Figure 4a and Figure 4b)

Figure 4a

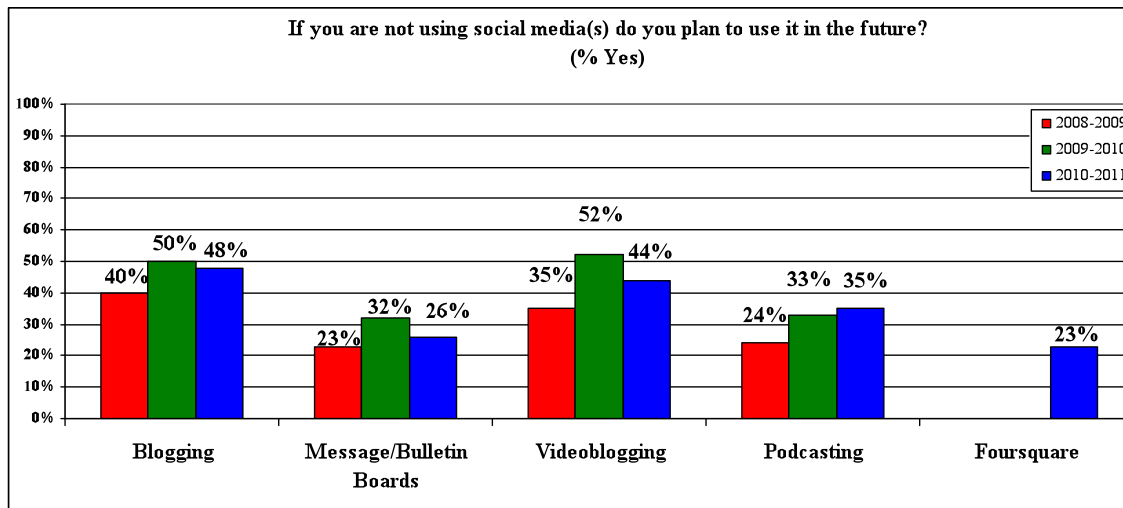
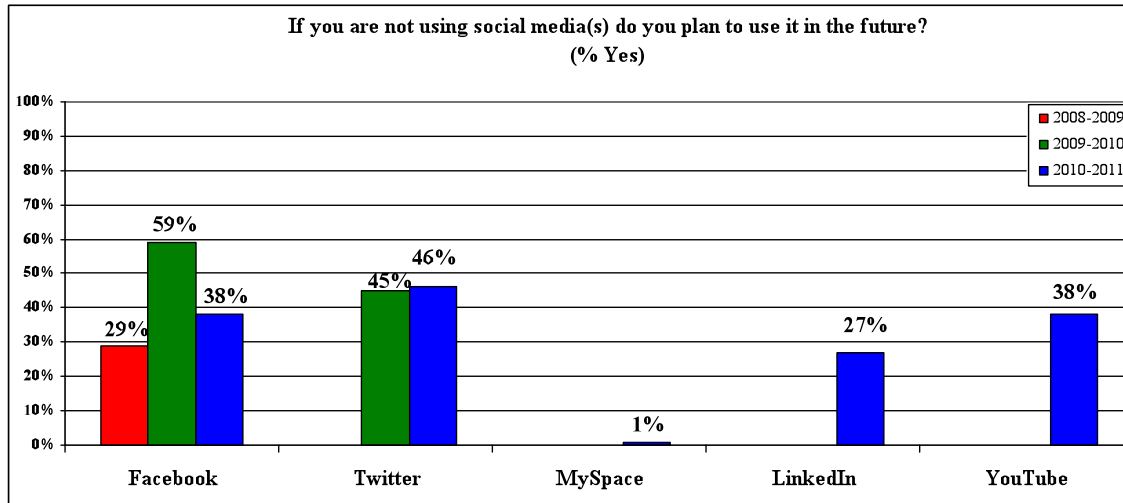
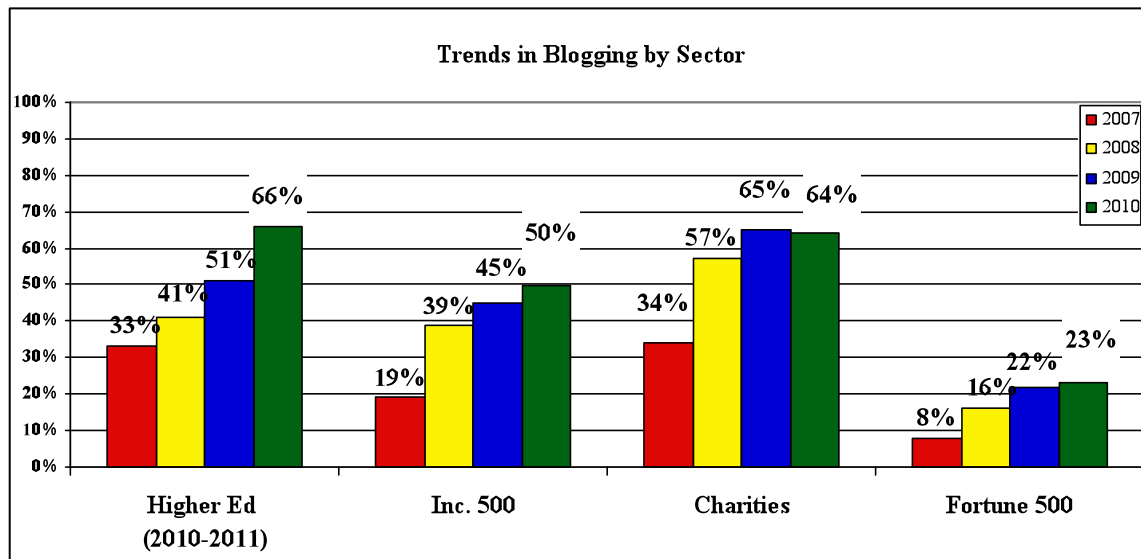


Figure 4b



The Fortune 500, Inc. 500, Forbes top charities and higher education have all shown increases in blogging every year from 2007 but things have begun to change. The 2010 data shows blogging leveling off in the Fortune 500 and among Charities. Higher ed is the only sector reporting a double digit increase in adoption of blogging. (See Figure 5)

Figure 5



Success of Social Media

When asked how successful social media tools have been for their schools, respondents have consistently raved about their experience, especially Facebook (95% success) and YouTube (92%). For every tool studied, a high degree of success is reported. The relatively new Foursquare is being used by twenty percent of those interviewed while 61% of them report success with it. The exception is MySpace which shows a decrease in perceived success from 42% to 34%. (See Figures 6a and 6b)

Figure 6a

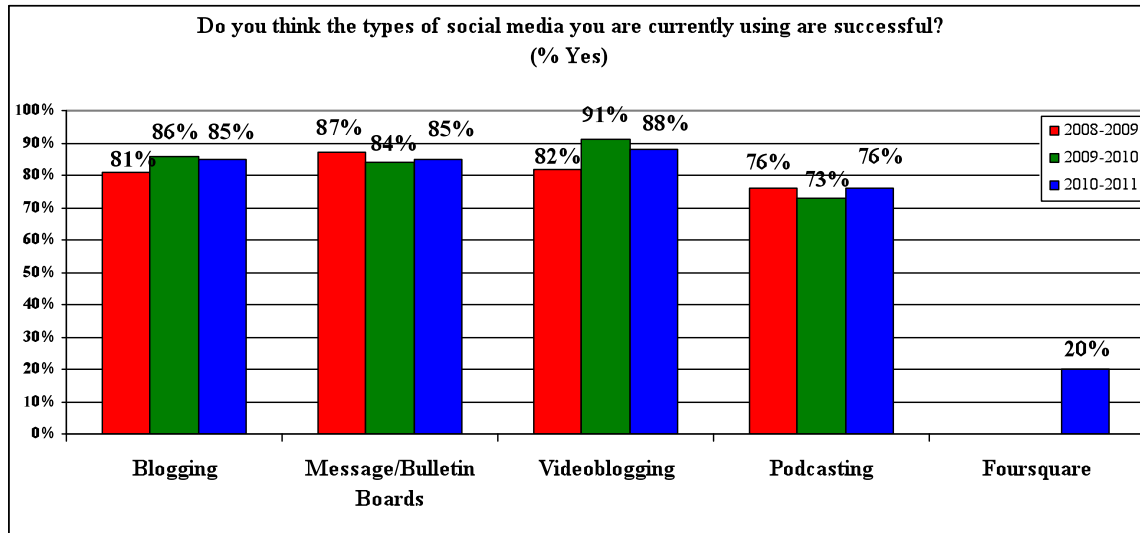
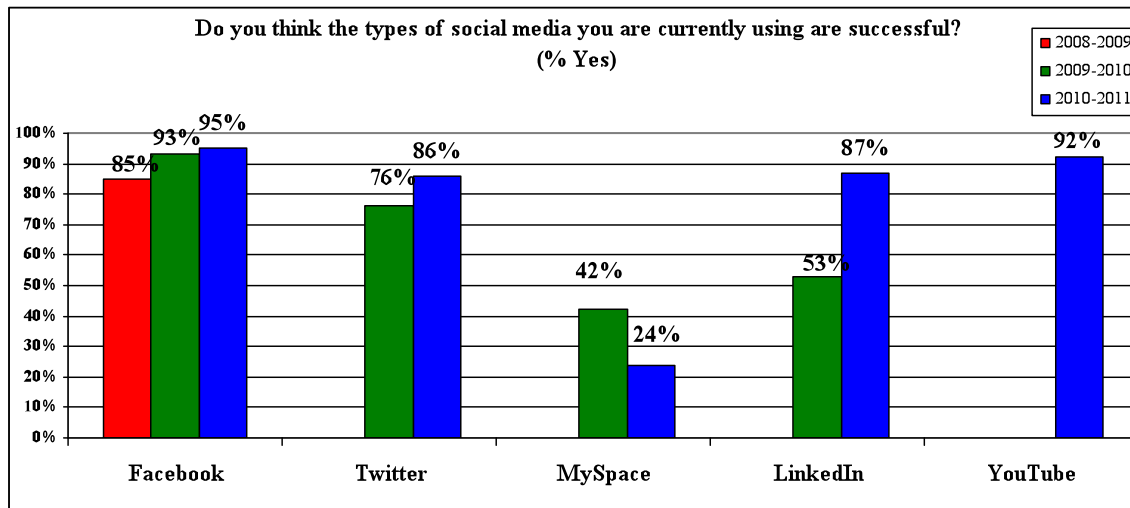


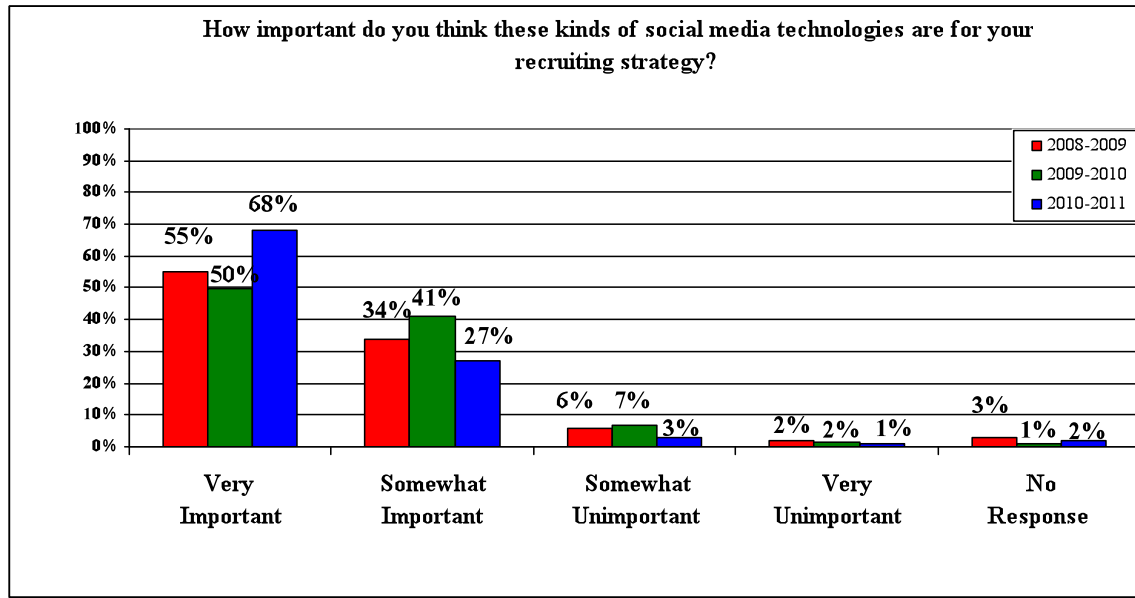
Figure 6b



Importance

The adoption of social media by colleges and universities is being driven by their recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in today's world. There is an 18% increase in the number of colleges and universities reporting that social media is very important. Conversely, 4% say these technologies are somewhat or very unimportant now compared to 9% last year. Clearly, attitudes towards using social media in recruiting continue to change. (See Figure 7)

Figure 7



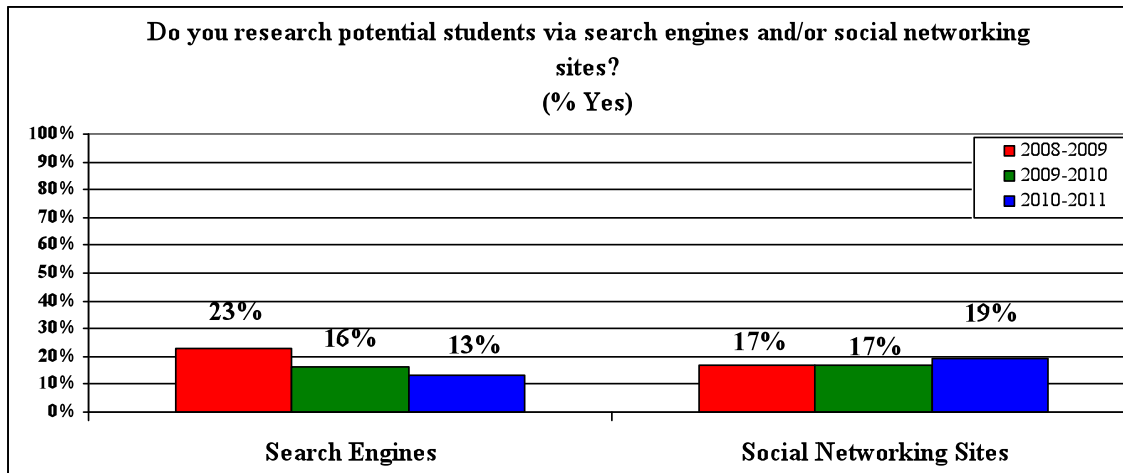
Student Research

A significant proportion of schools continue to research students via search engines (13%) and social networks (19%).

The colleges and universities interviewed for this study reported using search engines and social networking sites to recruit students. Most schools report looking for information about “the student’s activities or interests.” Many of them indicated looking for students by geographical region to target for their school. There were no reports of checking every applicant to an institution, no matter how small the school. Online research appears to be a new tool for marketing from which colleges and universities garner information that helps them better focus their resources on perspective students that might be a good match with their institution.

There is also some indication of using these sites for evaluation. Social networking sites provide an insight into the lives of students that cannot be underestimated. As more and more young people spend increased amounts of time on these online networks, those interested in them (employers or schools) will continue to watch and read the publically available information and include their impressions in their decisions to accept or hire candidates. (See Figure 8)

Figure 8



Are they listening?

It is clear that schools 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, 54% in 2008 and 73% in 2009 report they monitored the internet for buzz, posts, conversations and news about their institution. Our latest research shows a slight decrease to 68%. Given the ease with which monitoring can be done, it is surprising that all schools are not monitoring online buzz about their institutions.

US colleges and universities are taking the lead in using social media as part of their marketing and recruiting plans. Some schools will use search engines and social media sites to garner more information about perspective students. They are evaluating the effectiveness of tools that were adopted early on and making decisions about which new tools to add into their communications strategy. The goal is clearly to reach and engage those tech savvy young people who may be making at least initial decisions about a school based on its online presence.

To be added to our email distribution list for all of our social media reports, please sign up at <http://www.umassd.edu/cmr/studiesandresearch/>

Bios & Acknowledgments

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Nora has worked as a consultant for many national and international firms including Thomson Reuters, Scott's Lawn Care Company, National Association of College Admissions Counselors and the Board of Inquiry of the British Parliament. Working closely with businesses in the Northeast US, Nora and her students have provided marketing research assistance to hundreds of small businesses.

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