

## Getting Connected on Campus:

How campus organizations can use social media to increase student involvement

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### **Abstract**

Social media marketing strategies have become increasingly popular amongst organizations that target young people. Higher education institutions commonly utilize social media marketing to attract prospective students. Little research exists on how campus organizations can utilize social media to engage students who are already on campus. The review of available literature delves into various topics related to social media use within higher education institutions. It was concluded that effective campus organization social media marketing strategies vary from institution to institution. The research strives to answer the question of how campus organizations at McKendree University can utilize social media to increase student involvement. The conclusion proposes that word of mouth marketing strategies should be implemented within social media marketing strategies, as well as offers five suggestions for campus organizations to improve their social media marketing.

## **Introduction**

Much research exists on how higher education institutions can utilize social media to attract prospective students, but little research exists on how higher education institutions can utilize social media to engage students who are already enrolled. Previous research has shown that student involvement greatly aids in student academic success, and that a high student-body success rate is crucial in order for a higher education institution to thrive (Hyer, 2019). In order to provide students the opportunity to get involved, institution staff or compelled students will form campus organizations. Campus organizations such as Greek Life, academic or recreational clubs, committees, and extracurricular programs host unlimited opportunities for students to get involved on campus. McKendree University hosts a variety of campus organizations, and many, if not all of these organizations utilize at least one social media platform. However, a majority of students report feeling uninformed about campus events. This research paper strives to answer the question: How can McKendree University campus organizations utilize social media to increase student involvement? The sections include the following: Introduction, Literature Review, Study 1, Study 2, Conclusion, and Opportunities for Further Research.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review delves into various topics related to social media use within higher education institutions. First, it is important to understand the effects of social media on college students in their academic and personal lives. Although some research has uncovered that social media may negatively affect students' self-esteem or their ability to focus in the classroom, research has also found that social media hosts potential to be a marketing tool that can be

utilized by campus organizations to increase student engagement and involvement in campus activities. Various factors that either encourage or discourage student involvement on campus are explored within the literature review. The sections include Effects of Social Media on College Students, Social Media and Student Involvement, Student Involvement and Student Success, Campus Activities Attendance, and Effective Social Media Marketing.

### *Effects of Social Media on College Students*

As social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, are often considered the best platforms for marketing information to college students, it is important to note the effects of social media use on college students in their academic and personal lives.

Terri Pinyerd, student at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, conducted an open-ended survey-based study to determine the effects of social media on the study habits of students. Participants of this study included 100 students at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo aged 17-22. Fifty-three percent of students noted that social media websites (such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and blogs) acted as a detrimental distraction, negatively affecting the students' ability to process information and study effectively. Twenty-eight percent of students claimed that social media sites did not affect their study habits. Only 14% of students stated that social media sites assisted with their studies, as these sites helped them achieve academic success by allowing them to access information for school-related projects. It was concluded that if a student accesses social media sites during times of study for purposes unrelated to academics, their productivity and information processing may be negatively affected. (Pinyerd, 2013)

Although social media may negatively affect the study habits of college students, Pinyerd's study also found that social media sites may positively affect the self-images of college

students. Some students chose to expand upon their reasons for using social media within the open-ended survey. Pinyerd concluded from the participant responses that social media sites provide a creative outlet for students to express themselves, allowing for a healthy mental and emotional well-being (Pinyerd, 2013). Participants stated that social media sites, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, can be used to receive compliments or flattery (via comments or likes from their Facebook “friends” or Instagram/Twitter “followers”). As college can be a mentally-taxing experience for students, many seek reassurance of self-worth via social media sites. Often, receiving flattering/complimentary likes and comments is an effective short-term self-esteem boost. The long-term effects of relying on social media for emotional reassurance were not investigated in this study.

Jan, Soomro, and Ahmad (2017) conducted a study published in the *European Scientific Journal* examining the impact of social media on self-esteem, using a sample of participants aged 18-25. This study focused specifically on the relationship between Facebook use and self-esteem. According to the results, approximately 88% of people engage in making social comparisons on Facebook. They stated the following about these results:

As people spend more time on Facebook, they visit other people’s profiles and they start envying certain individuals who they think are superior or better-off than them...Most people use Facebook to know what is going on in other people’s lives and judge others on the basis of the cues found on the profiles of these people. These individuals make upward comparisons with others. As a result they start feeling inferior, less privileged and ungrateful. (Jan, Soomro, & Ahmad, 2017)

This study suggests that although social media offers the opportunity to receive compliments and flattery from others, it also provides a platform for users to make detrimental social comparisons.

These social comparisons, when made continuously and in great amounts, can lead to feelings of inferiority and negatively impact self-esteem (Jan, Soomro, & Ahmad, 2017).

### *Social Media and Student Involvement*

Student involvement is defined as participation in extracurricular activities and campus life. The relationship between social media use and student involvement has been researched by Dr. Reynold Junco, psychologist and social media researcher, and cited by Ternes (2009). Results from Junco's research showed that social media use does affect student involvement, however, that effect can be either positive or negative. Junco found that activities such as engaging with campus organizations' social media posts through commenting or liking has a positive effect on student involvement. A direct positive relationship between students who engage with campus organization's social media posts and the involvement of those students in campus life. However, a direct negative relationship was found between students who use social media for general purposes and their involvement in campus life. The fact that students use social media does not necessarily make them likely to engage with campus organizations' social media marketing posts and therefore be involved in campus activities. It was concluded that campus organizations' social media marketing efforts are only effective in generating student involvement when students actively engage with campus organizations' posts on social media (Ternes, 2009). What compels students to engage with campus organizations' social media posts was not explored within this study.

Ha et al. (2018) conducted a study to understand how social media affects student involvement. Their study employed face-to-face interviews with a variety of students, as well as quantitative data. A few notable findings from their research include: communication and business students are more involved on campus and are more likely to use social media as the

primary communication medium than other majors; university departments, student organizations, and faculty advisors' emails are most likely to be avoided (the cause of this avoidance was not further examined within this study); Facebook is the only social media brand conducive to campus involvement (Ha et al., 2018).

### *Student Involvement and Student Success*

Student involvement is crucial, as much research suggests that it aids in student success. A high student-body success rate is essential in order for a higher education institution to thrive. Hyer (2019) conducted a study to understand the relationship between first-semester student involvement and the retention and graduation rates of college students. Specifically, Hyer studied students involved in Greek Life, recreational club sports, ROTC, and marching band. He conducted research by analyzing data from the Office of Institutional Research at Boise State University. Hyer found that students who did not participate in extracurricular activities had a lower GPA, were less likely to return the following semester, and were less likely to graduate (Hyer, 2019).

Modern research on student engagement in the classroom/involvement on campus has been widely attributed to Alexander Astin, founding director of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. He developed the Student Involvement Theory, which states that student engagement/involvement leads to higher rates of academic success.

The Student Involvement Theory explains that students must be engaged in their environment to advance in their personal development and to achieve a higher level of learning. In considering this theory, if students can utilize social media to create an environment where they are more comfortable to interact with their peers while

discussing and sharing information about the course, this could lead to a higher level of learning for the students. --Alexander Astin (Richardson, 2017).

It must be noted that engagement and involvement are not terms to be used interchangeably.

When a student is “involved,” they participate in extracurricular activities and campus life. When a student is “engaged,” they will be “focused, committed...and will seek meaning and value as they learn and complete assignments” (Richardson, 2017). When students are engaged in their academic environment, whether it be physically or online, they are more likely to be involved on campus (Richardson, 2017).

Richardson (2017) conducted a study on student involvement/engagement based on Astin’s theory. College students were randomly selected from a diverse pool and asked a series of open-ended questions. It was found that social media use negatively affects student engagement in the classroom. Participants reported feeling consumed with desires to check social media sites during class, and thoughts of notifications they may be missing while in class. Participants did note, however, that “they think that social media could be used more effectively to promote campus events and activities which would lead to an increase of student involvement and engagement” (Richardson, 2017). Overall, students report that social media has a negative affect on their engagement in the classroom, but believe there is potential for social media to have a positive affect on their engagement with campus organizations, and therefore, their involvement.

### *Campus Activities Attendance*

As it is evident that student involvement leads to academic success, it is important to understand what factors encourage and discourage students to be involved. Lubbers and Joyce (2014) at the University of South Dakota published an article in the Quarterly Review of Business Disciplines entitled “Promoting Campus Activities: Encouraging Student Participation.” 516 students at the University of South Dakota participated in an open-ended survey, administered by Lubbers and Joyce. Below is a summary of their research findings.

*RQ 2: What events or programs would students like to see brought to campus?*

- Concerts (68.8%)
- Comedians (12%)
- Magicians (4.2%)
- Dances (6%)

*RQ 3: What discourages students from attending events sponsored by the University Activities Board?*

- Homework/Classes/Tests (18.8%)
- Being too Busy (18.2%)
- Lack of information/Didn't know/Little notice (17.8%)
- Not interested (10.4%)

*RQ 4: How can we promote sponsored events to increase attendance?*

- Word of Mouth (58.3%)
- Flyers (42.8%)
- Facebook (38.6%)
- University website (25.1%)

(Lubbers & Joyce, 2017)

Notable conclusions can be collected from this research. Students are likely to cite their busy lives and academic schedules as reasons for not attending university-sponsored events. An especially intriguing result from this research is that word of mouth marketing is much more effective than social media in encouraging attendance to university-sponsored events.

### ***Effective Social Media Marketing***

In the Literature Review thus far, it has been concluded that students who are involved on campus are more likely to be academically successful, students who engage with campus organizations on social media are more likely to be involved on campus, and various factors contribute to the likeliness of a student to attend campus organization events. The question remains: What are the components of effective social media marketing? In Salem's article titled "Social Media Marketing in Higher Education Institutions" published in the Journal of Sea Research, Salem identifies two important factors of effective social media use: the inclusion of text, a photograph, and a link in each singular post, and daily posting (Salem, 2020).

The Ohio State Office of Student Life offers a few suggestions of social media practices to ensure effective social media use by student organizations. These suggestions are listed below.

- Be strategic: build a strategy that outlines the organization's social media goals, target audience, voice, and management processes.
- Be accurate: Fact-check before posting.
- Be active: Try to post a set-number of times per week.
- Be respectful: Be a positive representation of the organization, University, and show respect to the larger community.
- Be responsive: Respond to messages, mentions, and comments as quickly as possible.

(Social Media Tips...)

There is a limited amount of scholarly research that pertains specifically to campus organization social media marketing. This is likely due to the fact that most researchers agree that what counts as “effective” social media marketing varies from institution to institution. The following research aims to further explore student perceptions of effective social media marketing, and how campus organizations can utilize social media to increase student involvement at McKendree University. The presented research question is: How can McKendree University campus organizations better utilize social media to increase student involvement?

## **Study 1**

### *Purpose*

It has been determined that the most common marketing strategies used by McKendree University campus organizations are flyers/posters, email, and social media. The purpose of this quantitative survey was to understand the general impact of these marketing strategies on McKendree students. The results of this research were meant to act as supplemental evidence to accompany conclusions in the Discussion section under Study 2.

### *Method*

A quantitative selected-response survey was distributed to McKendree University students. Qualifications for participation in this research study were to be 18 years of age or older and currently enrolled at McKendree University. 50 students between the ages of 18-23 participated in the survey. All participants consented to their anonymous responses being utilized for the purpose of this research study.

### *Survey Questions*

The following questions were asked in the survey:

- What is your age?
- How much time do you spend on social media per day?
- Do you read the flyers posted in classrooms or in the hallways of campus buildings?
- Do you read emails sent by campus organizations?
- What campus organizations do you follow on social media?
- Do you feel informed about what's going on around campus?

## *Results*

<i>Q. #</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Option: # of responses (%)</i>
Q. 1	How much time do you spend on social media per day?	0-1 hours: 3 (6%) 1-3 hours: 14 (28%) 3-5 hours: 25 (50%) 5+ hours: 8 (16%)
Q. 2	Do you read the flyers posted in classrooms or in the hallways of campus buildings?	Never: 5 (10%) Sometimes: 24 (48%) Often: 15 (30%) Always: 6 (12%)
Q. 3	Do you read emails sent by campus organizations?	Never: 5 (10%) Sometimes: 30 (60%) Often: 11 (22%) Always: 4 (8%)
Q. 3	What campus organizations do you follow on social media?	None: 9 (18%) Only the ones I am involved in: 30 (60%) The ones I am interested in/involved in: 7 (14%) Every one I see: 4 (8%)
Q. 5	Do you feel informed about what's going on around campus?	Never: 8 (16%) Sometimes: 25 (50%) Often: 15 (30%) Always: 2 (4%)

## *Discussion*

Q. 1 revealed that 66% of McKendree students spend 3 hours or more per day using social media sites. These results indicate that campus organization social media marketing has the potential to reach the student body, as a large percentage of students are spending a significant amount of time on social media. However, according to Dr. Reynold Junco, the fact that students use social media does not necessarily mean that social media marketing will be effective. Students who actively engage with these posts or follow campus organizations are the

most likely to be impacted (Ternes, 2009). The goal of campus organization social media marketing is generally to attract and engage non-members to generate student involvement in the organization. As the results of Q. 3 reveal, only 22% of the surveyed student body reported that they engage with campus organizations that they are not involved in (“involved in” meaning being a member or representative of the campus organization). Campus organizations’ social media marketing efforts are only effective when students are actively engaging with the organizations and McKendree students are not actively engaging with organizations of which they are non-members.

Flyers/posters were cited as the second most effective campus organization promotional marketing method by Lubbers and Joyce (2014). The results of Q. 2 show that 42% of students read flyers posted in classrooms or in the hallways of campus buildings often or always. Lubbers and Joyce did not discuss the use of email as a marketing method, however, because it is so commonly utilized by McKendree University campus organizations, Q. 3 was meant to act as a comparative to Q. 4. Flyers/posters prove to impact students more than email, as only 30% of students reported reading emails from campus organizations often or always.

The purpose of these marketing materials is to get students involved in extracurricular activities on campus. Hyer (2019) and Richardson (2017) both completed research that proves student involvement enriches the academic experience. Even with various methods of marketing being utilized by student organizations, the results of Q. 5 reveal that 66% of students either never or only sometimes feel informed about campus events, activities, or other happenings. It can be concluded from these results that current campus organization marketing methods are generally ineffective in informing students about extracurricular activities.

Although these results show that McKendree University students tend to favor flyers/posters over email, these results do not explicitly reveal the most effective campus organization marketing method. However, based on the amount of time McKendree students use social media, it can be assumed that potential for exponential marketing success lies within social media marketing. As effective social media marketing varies from institution to institution, the “Interviews” section of this paper strives to answer the questions: what does effective campus organization social media marketing look like at McKendree University, and what can campus organizations do to attract the attention/participation of non-members via social media?

## **Study 2**

### ***Purpose***

Instagram and Facebook both offer the option to make a “business” profile. A business profile gives account owners access to their profile’s insights, which show post reach (how many users viewed the post and whether they were followers/non-followers) and number of post shares (how many users sent the post directly to another account/shared the post on their own profile for their followers to view). As business account owners are the only people with access to this information, interviews were conducted with campus organization leaders (business account owners) to gain their perspectives on what posts have the potential to generate profile engagement, and therefore student involvement. The purpose of these qualitative interviews was to examine the function of campus organization social media pages, determine what type of posts generate the most engagement, and explore opportunities for improvement.

### *Method*

Five leaders of campus organizations/campus organization social media pages were interviewed. A diverse collection of campus organization leaders were selected to partake in this study. Interviewees were involved in organizations such as fraternities, sports, academic and recreational clubs, and campus event committees. The interviews were audio-recorded and analyzed to determine common themes. These themes were noted under the “Common Themes” column within the “Results” table. Notable interviewee quotes were pulled from the interview transcriptions to act as supporting evidence. These quotes are listed under the “Notable Quotations” column.

### *Interview Questions*

The interviews conducted were discussion-based and did not follow a definite order of questions. However, the minimum following questions were asked to each interviewee:

- What social media platforms do you utilize for marketing?
- What is the purpose of your social media pages?
- What type of posts garner the most engagement/attention from students? How do you think this engagement is generated?
- Are there any strategies (that are not currently implemented) that you would use to generate more student involvement?

**Results**

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Common Themes</i>	<i>Notable Quotations</i>
Social media platforms utilized by campus organizations	Instagram, Facebook	<p>“Pretty much everyone has Instagram, so I feel like that platform is the most beneficial in targeting students.”</p> <p>“We utilize Facebook for our fraternity alumni to stay connected.”</p>
Purpose of campus organization social media pages	Inform students of events, generate student involvement	<p>“We used Instagram mostly for showing that the organization was there, it was active, and if you talked to people about the organization, they could go and check it out on Instagram.”</p> <p>“Our Facebook page is mostly used for brothers to get connected and stay connected.”</p> <p>“The biggest thing is informing people on what’s going on, who the members are, and what’s coming up.”</p> <p>“Our Instagram is primarily to announce events.”</p> <p>“We created the Instagram page to get people to understand the organization better and to get people to attend our events.”</p> <p>“Our purpose is to make announcements about events, inform students about resources, and increase campus and club involvement.”</p>
Most popular posts (in terms of engagement level)	Student features, infographics	<p>“When somebody is doing something that deserves recognition...those [posts] probably have the most impact and get the most interactions from other social media users.”</p> <p>“I made very easy-to-read infographics with date, time, and price for events. I used bold colors so it would catch the eye.”</p> <p>“The infographics for our events have received the most engagement so far.”</p>

		<p>“Student promotion and updates on what students are doing get the most likes and shares.”</p>
<p>What generates engagement</p>	<p>Content sharing</p>	<p>“Gameday posts get a lot of engagement because people share it on their stories, so I think a lot of people see the post from that.”</p> <p>“The initial post is needed to get the word out, but that post doesn’t really do much unless people are sharing it.”</p> <p>“If a member earns a cool award or accomplishes something and we post about it, all their friends are going to share that post as a way of showing support.”</p>
<p>Opportunities for improvement</p>	<p>Consistent posting, interactive posts, show more community culture, giveaways</p>	<p>“It would be fun to show more team culture...I think that would make the account feel more personal.”</p> <p>“An interactive post can be as simple as uploading to a poll or a question to a story, it can be ‘what do you all want to see?’ or ‘what do you all want to see more of?’”</p> <p>“I would designate one member whose sole job is posting on social media. This way, it would be more consistent and thought-out.”</p> <p>“I would do more video editing or TikToks...I feel like when you feature students in videos, or even just pictures, it can generate a lot more engagement.”</p> <p>“It would be cool if we promoted an event and then students who liked and shared the post were entered to win a prize of sorts and then had to be present at the event to win.”</p>

## *Discussion*

Almost every McKendree University campus organization utilizes at least one form of social media. The interviewees all utilized Instagram or a combination of Instagram and Facebook for their campus organization social media marketing. All five interviewees reported that they find either Facebook or Instagram to be the most effective platform in reaching their intended audiences.

Three of the five interviewees stated that the purpose of their social media pages is mainly to inform students of events and organization updates, while the other two interviewees noted that they aim to generate student involvement. Content is created and posted with the intent to fulfill these purposes or achieve these goals. The majority of informative posts, posts that announce upcoming events or organization updates, were created in the form of infographics (graphic visual presentations of information), as reported by interviewees. Three interviewees specifically indicated that their infographics did not reach high levels of engagement unless they were shared by current members of the organization. As 78% of students do not follow any campus organizations on social media, or only follow campus organizations they are already involved in, it can be assumed that infographics are unlikely to reach non-followers unless they are shared by current organization members or followers.

All interviewees noted that when any of their posts are shared by current organization members or followers, non-follower engagement increases. In Lubbers and Joyce's research study, it was found that 58.3% of students find word of mouth marketing to be the most effective tool in promoting campus events (Lubbers & Joyce, 2014). Word of mouth marketing can be translated to social media, as sharing a post can be considered a type of word of mouth marketing. Two interviewees noted that after they posted an infographic on a campus

organization account, they would ask their friends to share the post on their own personal profiles. A chain reaction would occur, as followers of followers would then be attracted to the infographic, thus generating higher levels of non-follower reach and engagement.

The chain reaction of online word of mouth marketing can be initiated by the campus organizations themselves. All five interviewees noted that featuring students in their posts generated higher-than-average levels of post engagement. Featuring students in campus organization social media posts can be considered a word of mouth marketing strategy. If students see their friends or people who are like them being active in a campus organization via a social media post, they are more likely to consider their own participation in the organization. If students see their friend featured in a campus organization's social media post, they are more likely to share that post to their own personal profiles as a form of showing support for their friend, thus generating higher levels of non-follower reach and engagement. High levels of non-follow reach and engagement are important, as they translate to higher levels of event attendance, membership, and interest (Ternes, 2009).

Interviewees offered various thoughts on how they would utilize their social media pages to generate more student involvement within their campus organization. Some suggested hosting giveaways, assigning a designated social media coordinator, creating interactive posts and videos, and showing community culture. These ideas hold potential to be effective strategies, but whether or not their implementation is necessary depends on the needs and goals of the organization.

## **Conclusion**

The three most popular marketing mediums utilized by McKendree University campus organizations are email, flyers/posters, and social media. McKendree University students tend to

favor flyers/posters over email. However, based on the amount of time McKendree students use social media, potential for exponential success lies within social media marketing. As what is considered effective social media marketing varies from institution to institution, five suggestions for effective McKendree University campus organization social media marketing were determined from the results of the interviews. These suggestions can be viewed below.

How campus organizations can use social media to increase student involvement:

- Highlight current student organization members and their successes
- Offer an inside-look into the culture or environment of the organization (students are attracted to personality)
- Determine incentives for students to attend events
- Utilize word-of-mouth marketing methods via social media (encourage students to share posts)
- Designate a social media coordinator

Research has shown that student involvement greatly aids in student academic success, and that a high student-body success rate is crucial in order for a higher education institution to thrive (Hyer, 2019). Social media is a useful marketing tool that can be utilized by campus organizations to increase student engagement and student involvement in campus life, however, campus organizations' social media marketing efforts are only effective in generating student involvement when students actively engage with campus organizations' posts (Ternes, 2009). Campus organizations must implement new strategies to engage students, inform students of campus events, and to generate higher levels of student involvement. Nonetheless, social media

marketing holds a powerful potential to influence students, whether it be in mass amounts or not. One interview participant stated, “I feel like it’s possible to gain at least one person’s attention from social media...and maybe that one person will say ‘hey, maybe I am interested in this, and maybe I should contact these people.” Levels of engagement and account reach are important, however, impacting just one person’s life is a feat that should not be overlooked.

### **Opportunities for Further Research**

As stated in the Literature Review, there is a limited amount of scholarly research that pertains specifically to campus organization social media marketing. Further research should consist of implementing the suggestions in the Conclusion section into a McKendree campus organization’s social media marketing strategy and analyzing their impact on levels of engagement and account reach. Further research should also consist of a study focused on student involvement and campus organization social media page effectiveness from the perspective of a McKendree student--what compels them to attend campus events, what prevents them from attending events, what type of social media posts earn their attention, etc.

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