Does ‘Facebooking’ lead to greater student engagement?


**Student Engagement and Social Networking**

Student engagement is an evergreen topic in higher education, and, at times, contentious.¹ The concept stems from Astin (1984), “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 297). While an exact definition is still a matter of debate, student engagement is generally thought to include, investment in the academic experience of college, student-faculty interaction, participation in co-curricular activities, and interaction with peers (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In the years since Astin first formalized the term “engagement”, faculty, administrators, researchers, and policymakers have attempted to better understand and promote meaningful practices that foster students’ involvement, both inside and outside of the classroom, increasingly with the use of technology (e.g., social media).

Social media, such as Facebook (FB) is also a somewhat prickly topic in higher education as the stakeholders listed above attempt to harness it to engender engagement. While the novelty of this medium in higher education may have crested, some have speculated about the utility of social media sites, and related networking technologies, as a means to encourage engagement. Recent research by Junco (2011) indicates that FB use can, in some cases, be a positive predictor of student engagement.

**Data & Methods**

To investigate the relationship between use of FB and student engagement, Junco surveyed over 5400 students at a public, residential university in the Northeastern United States. Junco’s response rate was 44 percent (N=2368). First-year students represented the largest percentage of participants at 31 percent. Seniors followed at 22 percent, followed by sophomores (22%) and juniors (20%). The vast majority of participants were Caucasian (89%). Female participants (64%) overrepresented the male participants (36%) in the sample. Seventy-eighty percent of the participants were between the age of 18-22, while all respondents ranged in age from 17-61 years old.

For data, Junco used a 19-item NSSE-based scale developed by the author in another paper (Junco, Heiberger et al., 2010) to measure engagement. Part of the survey also included items about demographics and technology use.

Citing limitations of prior research with how frequency and type of activities were measured on FB, Junco’s predictor variables, activity and time, were measured in two specific ways. Regarding activities, the students were asked about the different types of FB activities they frequently participated in (e.g., updating status, playing games, view pictures). To measure activities, Junco developed a 14 item, non-overlapping list (generated by Junco through his social network). Time also was measured in two specific ways. First, students were asked to estimate Facebook Time (FBTime), time spent—converted to minutes for analyses — on FB. Second, students were asked to estimate Facebook Check (FBCheck), the number of times they checked FB, daily and “yesterday.”

¹ Student engagement benchmarks in higher education largely stem from National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its ilk. Some researchers have recently called into questions NSSE’s validity, for example: A special issue on student engagement. (2011, Fall) The Review of Higher Education, 35(1). The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD. Additional commentary from the Research and Evaluation Team about student engagement and NSSE can be found here: http://z.umn.edu/nsse.
For analysis, Junco conducted six hierarchical linear (HLM) regression models to determine which factors influence the three dependent variables: engagement scale score, time spent preparing for class, and time spent in co-curricular activities (e.g., greek life, intercollegiate athletics, student organizations). In essence, a model for each research question (e.g., Is there a relationship between frequency of FB use and student engagement; Is there a relationship between frequency of FB activities and student engagement). The engagement instrument showed that the data from the current administration were internally consistent with a Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) of .80.

**Findings**

Junco found that FB use and activities were significantly predictive across the six models, both positively and negatively. Overall, the type of activity, rather than time, was a stronger predictor of engagement, time spent preparing for class, and time spent participating in co-curricular activities. Depending on the outcome variable (e.g., engagement, time spent preparing for class, time spent in co-curricular activities), Junco found certain FB activities to be positive predictive, negatively predictive, and positively and negatively. For example, FBTime and FBCheck were both negatively predictive of engagement, while FBTime was positively predictive of time spent participating in co-curricular activities. With regard to both positive and negative predictors, being male was a positive predictor for engagement while being male was negatively predictive for time spent preparing for class. Other interesting predictors appear too, such as viewing photos as a positive predictor while posting photos was negative for the co-curricular variable. Junco posits that the act of viewing photos may be more strongly associated with “reliving a moment or event shared with friends or making decisions about future events” whereas simply posting photos is a rather technical process, rather than an engaging one. Positive predictors for the outcome variables appear as follows: Creating or RSVP’ing to events, commenting, male, viewing photos, advanced graduate degree, FBTime. Negative predictors include: playing games, posting photos, chatting, male, FBTime, checking up on friends, FBCheck, and parental high school degree.

Regarding usage, respondents in the sample spent a mean of 101.09 minutes (SD 99.16) on FB per day and check FB about six (mean 5.75) times a day (SD: 6.78). Viewing photos, commenting, and checking in to see what friends were doing were the three most popular activities among the FB activities. Students in the study said they spent a mean of 750.75 minutes preparing for class each week and were involved in co-curricular activities, on average, 298.50 minutes during that same time span.

**Discussion & Implications**

All told, Junco’s findings suggest that students spend ample time on FB and embark on wide variety of activities, though general cohesiveness of the findings does not exist. In addition, the study stops short of any causal relationships. However, the study sheds some light on how social media is utilized by students, particularly on the most dominant platform. Depending on the variable of interest, time and type of activity positively, negatively, or positively and negatively predict engagement. Junco’s findings support existing research that suggests that the type of activity, rather than amount of time, are better predictors for realizing the potential of social media in higher education. Junco concludes there are elements of FB that do positively predict engagement yet understanding the “how” and “why” of social media’s application to higher education remains a topic for further investigation. So, while FB might not be a “magic cure” to foster engagement, it may be harnessed in certain ways that complement existing good practices for engaging, and retaining, students.

Limitations should be mentioned with this study, namely the nature of self-reported data. For example, frequencies of time spent on activities and events are highly personal tasks that can introduce biased or incorrect responses due to a number confounding of factors, such as individual memory/recall. Junco’s study is also a cross-sectional treatment and is correlational, rather than causal. Alternative designs (e.g., experimental, observation) might help elucidate the relationship between FB and
engagement. In addition, multi-institutional data would help researchers understand differences across a representative sample with regard to a number of variables (e.g., race/ethnicity). Also, the “14 time non-overlapping list” generated by Junco through his social network captures a variety of activities on FB, though more scientific means might have been used to ascertain a more comprehensive list. The study’s participants were mostly Caucasian so future research might draw from a sample that is more representative of the race/ethnicity population of college-going students. Finally, the findings of this study might support a more longitudinal effort where participants can be measured over a number of different points in time over their academic careers.

References