

Chapter 4

Social Media Encourages Sense of Belonging among Off-Campus University Students

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research has shown that students who live off-campus during the academic year experience greater difficulty with social integration, and are at higher risk of dropping out. The aim of the present study was to explore patterns that may give an indication of the extent to which the use of social media websites can help social and academic integration among students who are living off-campus. A survey was distributed among a cohort of 370 first year undergraduate students, measuring their sense of belonging to the institution and their attitudes towards student life. Students who lived on-campus and who used social media websites reported a stronger sense of belonging than students living off-campus. A significant interaction effect indicated that using social media websites reduced the difference in sense of belonging between students living on- and off-campus. Scores on the attitude scale were significantly

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related to sense of belonging. The results suggest that online networking can aid social integration among students who do not have the advantage of the face-to-face interaction that takes place in residential life on-campus.

BACKGROUND

The University of Leicester has a high retention rate, a high widening participation rate, and consistently high scores in the National Student Survey (a measure of student satisfaction). The present study is part of the “University of Leicester Student Retention and Success Project,” funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England. A preliminary study identified feeling a belonging to the institution as one of the recurring themes in students’ positive evaluations of the institution. The aim of the project is to follow up these themes, examining fully what students think actually makes a difference.

SETTING THE STAGE

The use of social media has been shown to have an impact on important areas of student life. Heiberger and Harper (2008) found a positive relationship between Facebook use and student engagement and on-campus involvement. Similarly, Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2010) found that Twitter use lead to increased engagement. Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009) examined the role of Facebook in first year students’ settling in to academic and social life. According to their findings, more than half had joined Facebook to make new friends prior to entering university, while a further 43 per cent joined immediately after starting university. Nearly three quarters of the respondents said Facebook had played an important part in helping them to settle in at university. It was concluded that Facebook functions as a ‘social glue’ that helps students settle into university life, that keeps the student body together as a community, and aids in communication (especially about social events) between peers. Madge et al. also found that students preferred using Facebook for social reasons, rather than for formal teaching and administrative purposes. However, reflecting the ever increasing pervasiveness of social media, a more recent study (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010) showed that only a minority of students were reluctant to use social media for academic purposes.

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