Chapter 19
Twitter Chat as an Informal Learning Tool:
A Case Study using #sachat

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study focuses on Twitter as an informal learning tool. Specifically, the authors examine user-created Twitter chats using one specific chat, #sachat, as a case study. #sachat is a weekly one-hour chat held on Twitter and populated by higher education professionals in the field of student affairs (e.g. college admissions, advising, housing, new student orientation). The authors contrast this chat with other ways in which student affairs and higher education professionals are using Twitter. Using methods of computer-mediated discourse analysis, they then discover and elicit defining characteristics of #sachat. Finally, the authors offer thoughts on why this chat seems to be successful as an informal learning resource, how it compares to other uses of Twitter by professionals, and implications for other communities interested in using Twitter or similar tools to create informal learning.

BACKGROUND

Student affairs professionals, at least in the U.S. context, are those college and university administrators responsible for the development of students outside of their classroom experiences. Since those responsibilities cover a lot of ground (e.g. residence life, psychological counseling and mental health, intramural sports), student affairs professionals regularly seek professional development. Despite a rich history rooted in educational practices and philosophies, however, student affairs professional development is largely left to the initiative of the individual practitioner (ACPA/NASPA Joint Task Force on Professional Competencies and Standards, 2010), unlike other fields in which specific professional development activities are required (teachers, counselors, etc.). #sachat, the topic of this case study, is an effort to provide professional development to student affairs professionals, founded in the midst of an economic downturn that negatively impacted travel and professional development opportunities for many professionals.

In the United States and in higher education institutions and systems influenced by the United States approach to higher education, student affairs professionals provide services and support for students in colleges and universities to enhance student growth and provide holistic development for learners. This definition may also include the following labels connected to the term student affairs: student life, college student personnel, higher education administration, and student affairs practitioners/professionals. *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession* (2011) and student affairs professional associations such as NASPA and ACPA identify and include the following departments on college campuses as likely falling under the organizational umbrella of student affairs: Academic Advising, Admissions, Assessment and Research, Athletics, Campus Safety/Police Services, Career Development/Services, College/Student Union, Community Service/Service Learning, Commuter Services/Adult Students/Non-Traditional Students, Counseling Services, Dining and Food Services, Disability Support Services, Enrollment Management, Financial Aid and Scholarships, Fund Raising/Advancement, Greek Affairs, Health Services, International Student Services, Judicial Affairs, Leadership Programs, Multicultural Affairs, Orientation/First-Year Experience, Recreation/Fitness, Spirituality, Faith or Religious Services, Student Activities/Involvement, and Residence Life Programs/Housing. In the historical context, student affairs developed as American higher education institutions emerged, student demographics shifted and learner needs continue to impact campus environments (Schuh, 2011). Since the higher education student population continues to evolve, it is critical for student affairs professionals to remain current with information, gain training opportunities, and be given access to professional development outlets on a regular basis.

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