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**LIKES, SHARES, AND FRIEND REQUESTS: ANALYZING FACEBOOK GROUPS FOR
INCOMING COLLEGE CLASSES**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Ray Celeste S. Tanner

April 2016

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Ray Celeste Silverthorne Tanner
(digital signature)

04/29/16

Likes, Shares, and Friend Requests:

Analyzing Facebook Groups for Incoming College Classes

Ray Celeste S. Tanner

COMM 491: Spring 2016

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Anand Rao

With the rise of more and more students applying to and attending college, one might expect that colleges would start becoming more exclusive and less worried about fighting for students, but being the business that they are, schools try their hardest to keep potential students interested and engaged with the school. In an effort to attract students, 58% of college presidents have started Facebook pages, while 55% have begun tweeting to connect with the generation of college students who grew up with social media according to a 2013 study by Barnes and Lescault. Many students, preparing for all possibilities, apply to several schools before making the deposit on the school they decided on. Other students, still unsure of where to go after May first, the universal last day to decide and submit a deposit, decide not to make a decision, and instead send in deposits for multiple schools. In an effort to win over students who are still deciding, many schools provide a summer orientation to “seal the deal” and make one last argument in support of the school. While orientation is one way of making a final attempt at winning over the on-the-fence-students, the “Class Of” groups for each year is the way Universities try and win over students with the help of their peers over an extended period of time. These Facebook groups are usually open to all accepted students and serve as an online space for students to get acquainted with the school as well as meet other students who are planning on attending the university. “Class Of” Facebook pages are multifaceted though, and work to reinforce existing ideologies of the institution, convince on-the-fence-students to choose their school, inform students by using a medium they already use, develop a sense of inclusion and belonging before the students even arrive, and create and sustain a sense of excitement in the months between admission and move in.

While the study of Facebook and the way students use it is gaining attention in the academic world, there is not much research on the way institutions use Facebook to interact with

their students before they arrive to campus. Ha and Dong suggest in their 2014 article that the way students are communicating with their professors on social media is making them feel more connected to these professors. In a similar way, institutions are now able to communicate with their future students on these social media sites, which, I will argue, has the potential to make incoming students feel more connected to their university.

Why Use Facebook Groups?

“Class Of” groups, hosted on Facebook, exist to connect students of the same school and graduation year with each other before arriving to campus. While these groups differ from school to school and class year to class year, there are several defining elements. First of all, these are all groups, rather than Universities’ pages. While the words can sometimes be used interchangeably, the main difference between the two is that individuals can join a group to become a member, but only “like” a page and become a fan. Pages’ updates are public and may appear in one’s news feed, but standard notification settings do not notify fans when the page posts something new. On the other hand, the default settings for groups allow notifications whenever someone posts in the group. Pages are used for businesses, organizations, and public individuals, like celebrities, to communicate to their fans while groups are used for individuals who share a common goal or attribute to connect and communicate with each other. There is much more room for interaction within Facebook groups than on pages. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to pages, as described above, as “fan pages” and Class Of groups by both groups and pages, as the word page can be used to describe any webpage, including timelines, fan pages, groups, and news feeds.

When it comes to Class Of groups, the specifics vary. Some Class Of groups are entirely student run, where incoming students started the group. Other universities closely monitor their

Class Of pages and create “official” groups in order to be available should any questions or concerns arise. Privacy settings also vary. Some Class of groups are “open,” which means that while only members can post in the group, anyone on Facebook can read what is posted in the group. There are also closed groups, which seem to be the most common for Class Of groups. These groups allow anyone to find the group, and see its roster of members, but not see any posts. This is a common way of having Class Of groups because it retains a sense of privacy since no outside members can see or post anything, yet allows interested or accepted students to add themselves without an invitation for to join the show. Lastly, there are secret groups which are the most difficult, but safest groups to join. For these groups, one must be invited to the group in order to see and post in it. Secret groups are not listed when one searches for them in the search bar, and are hidden from everyone on Facebook unless they are added. Class Of groups that are hosted as Secret Groups can ensure that only accepted students are able to join the group. In these cases, the Office of Admissions would need to personally invite every accepted student.

Class Of groups on Facebook can be especially useful to Universities for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, they serve as a personal way for Universities to communicate directly with the student rather than the parents. Secondly, since students are already checking Facebook, they are more convenient for students to visit than online chat rooms or school-specific websites. Thirdly, students already expect to find both news and social information on Facebook. These Facebook groups function as a platform students already feel comfortable using, so students feel they can communicate on a more level playing ground.

Many high school students still use their parents’ email addresses as their primary email for college applications. While some students have and use their own email address, email does

not function the same way social networking sites do. Students do not talk about spending time “scrolling through their inboxes” the way they do news feeds or timelines. Email communication works well for relaying information to a large number of individuals but it is not conducive for interaction between the individuals. Additionally, email can seem more impersonal than a Facebook correspondence.

Since students are already on Facebook and using it regularly, it only makes sense for Universities to join the platform. According to a 2014 article on Bloomberg.com, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s founder and CEO, claims that United States citizens spend an average of 40 minutes a day on the site. More recently, the Facebook Newsroom page boasted an average of 1.09 billion daily active users and 1.65 billion monthly active users for March of 2016. While some young college students feel a decline in Facebook, it is still a popular site for students to spend time. While a few excited students may eagerly check their university’s website weekly or even daily, it would be impractical to expect all students to check their University’s website for updates and information. Since Facebook is already used by so many, asking students to check their Facebook notifications for updates is not too difficult of a request. According to a survey conducted by the American Press institute in 2015, 88% of millennials surveyed got news from Facebook. It is not surprising that colleges and universities have been distributing information and news on social media sites, including Facebook.

As far as group interaction goes, Facebook is the best platform. While Twitter and Instagram are gaining more popularity with a younger generation of social media users, they cannot support semi-private, large group interaction. Twitter and Instagram’s direct message tools are useful, but not at the same scale of Facebook’s group tool, which can support thousands of users. While Reddit can support large communities, it has significantly less users than

Facebook and is therefore not ideal for official university relations. Since their launch in October of 2010, Facebook groups have become an ideal way of connecting specific groups of people who share a common goal or attribute.

My Ethnographic Study

To conduct my research, I took an approach similar to Neil Selwyn's in his 2009 article, *Faceworking: Exploring Students' Education-Related use of Facebook*, where he collected and organized status updates made by 909 students in the school of social sciences at Coalsville University when I was coding the posts I found. I also kept in mind Eve Stirling's methodology in her 2016 article, titled *Technology, Time and Transition in Higher Education - Two Different Realities of everyday Facebook use in the first year of university in the UK*, when collecting the data for my two "primary admins" which I will explain further along in the paper. For this project, I joined "University of Mary Washington Class of 2020 (OFFICIAL)" and "James Madison University (JMU) Class of 2020- Official Site" Facebook groups. These groups are private groups run by their respective universities.

Founded in 1908, James Madison University (JMU) is located in Harrisonburg, Virginia and is home to approximately 20,000 undergraduate students. JMU is a NCAA Division I school with a graduation rate of 81%. According to niche.com, in recent years JMU has had a 60% acceptance rate with 29% of accepted students choosing to attend.

The University of Mary Washington (UMW), located in Fredericksburg, Virginia, was also founded in 1908, and is home to approximately 4,000 undergraduate students. UMW is a NCAA Division III school with a graduation rate of 70%. According to niche.com, in recent years UMW has had an 81% acceptance rate with 26% of accepted students choosing to attend.

I chose these two schools because they had similar starts but have become two completely different schools. 108 years later, the main similarity between JMU and UMW is that they are both public universities in Virginia. The difference can be seen in their Facebook “Class of 2020” group pages, as well. JMU’s Class of 2020 page hosts 2,310 members and has 9 site administrators while UMW’s Class of 2020 page hosts 981 members with 11 site administrators. Site administrators are members of the Facebook Group who have special privileges, including creating “pinned posts,” which are simply posts that remain at the top of the page, regardless of date posted or activity. Site administrators are also the only members authorized to approve member additions to the group. While the two schools have approximately 10 site administrators, each University has one administrator who posts most often. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to the administrator who posts most often as the primary admin.

An important factor to note is who runs the pages. While both pages are “Official” groups, authorized and recognized by their universities, JMU’s group page is run by current students elected to the Student Government Association. On the other hand, UMW’s group page is run by the Office of Admissions. Some of the site administrators on UMW’s page are students, but the primary admin, as well as the majority of site administrators, is an admissions counselor.

While this project focused on the Institutions’ use of these Facebook groups, students at both universities used the groups for primarily the same reasons. In a 20 day period starting April 1st, JMU’s group members made 219 introductory posts which included short, biographical profiles of students looking for roommates, while UMW’s group members made 61 of these introductory posts. Additionally, 18 JMU students made roommate posts with no introductory biographical information while 7 UMW students made roommate posts without introductory biographical information.

What makes an effective Class Of page?

Before comparing the effectiveness of each University's Class of 2020 group, I need to establish a criteria for what makes an effective group. After reading current literature on the topic, and being a member of the UMW Class of 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 groups, as either a member or an administrator, I have developed set of seven guidelines and expectations for what constitutes an effective group. Facebook groups should reinforce existing ideologies of the institution, sway students who are unsure of their decision to attend the school, develop a sense of inclusion and belonging, create and sustain students' excitement, answer questions, allow students to make connections, and prime students for campus involvement.

1. Reinforce existing ideologies of the institution

Each university has its own personality and sense of identity. While universities as institutions have distinct reputations from an outsider's perspective, the students attending the university give their own identity to the environment of the campus. For example, while some outsiders may see the University of Mary Washington as a small, historic school without Greek Life or a large party scene, students at the University see the school as an inclusive, community-driven university made up of an eclectic group of individuals. For this reason, it is important for universities to reinforce their own sense of identity to the incoming class, to insure that values are held constant with the incoming of a large group of new students. Additionally, community values, like inclusion, or a sense of honor and integrity, should be subtly introduced and reinforced. If a university has existing terminology that is important for new students to learn, the Class Of pages are a good place to introduce these new terms. While all these criteria are important, I would argue that reinforcing existing ideologies is the most important. Making sure

that incoming students know what is expected of them, and community values that the campus shares, is crucial to keeping institutional values alive.

2. Sway students on the fence

Class Of pages can be especially beneficial to universities looking to increase yields. While it is common for students to apply to several “safety schools,” where they plan to attend if their first choice school does not accept them, many students apply to several schools because they haven’t fully decided on one and want to keep their options open. Additionally, it is becoming fairly common for students to commit, by paying their deposit, to more than one school and then decide after each school’s orientation. Universities would rather have a student attend and pay tuition at their school, than have the student only attend orientation and pay the one time deposit. For students who are still unsure of where to attend, Class Of pages can be the deciding factor.

3. Develop a sense of inclusion and belonging

Students’ feelings of inclusion and belonging are important for many reasons. First of all, the feeling of inclusion can be a pull for students who are contemplating transferring. Having high retention rates is good for universities, as students are essentially customers paying thousands of dollars each semester. When students transfer, their tuition money goes to a different university. Retention rates also contribute to university rankings on college search websites, which means that they affect how outsiders view the school. A feeling of belonging is important for retention rates, but also for how students feel about the university after they graduate. If an alum felt a sense of belonging and connection to the school, they are more likely to donate than if they felt indifferent about the school. Class Of pages can help students make feel like they belong before they even step foot on campus for orientation or move-in day.

4. Create and sustain students' excitement

Students are usually excited about attending college when they receive their acceptance letters and send in their deposits. They then have to wait three or more months before actually attending. Class Of pages can help sustain students' excitement during the stretches between acceptance and decision, decision and orientation, and orientation and move-in. They can also help create excitement in students who either are nervous about school, or are disappointed because they will not be attending their first choice school.

5. Answer questions

So far, each of the criteria for an effective Class Of group has been about helping the university in both short and long-term goals. While these criteria can and do also help students, their primary focus has been on the institution. The Class Of groups are most obviously helpful to students, as they work as a platform for asking questions. Incoming students use the Class Of groups to ask questions about orientation, financial aid, nightlife, academics, residence halls, class registration, clubs, and more. The Class Of pages act as a source for students who have questions for either their fellow incoming classmates, or campus community members, including current upperclassmen students and administrators.

6. Allow students make connections

The second most obviously helpful aspect of Class Of groups to incoming students is the safe space to make connections. As mentioned above, students use Class Of groups to introduce themselves and find roommates. They start conversations on introductory posts, as well as clear "ice breaker" posts that ask things like "what's everyone's favorite thing to watch on Netflix?" or "who here was in Marching Band?" in order to make connections with future classmates. While this element focuses primarily on the student rather than the institution, it is crucial for

students to make the connections in order to sustain excitement, feel a sense of inclusion and belonging, be swayed if on the fence about the university, and accept existing ideologies.

Making and continuing connections are the primary focuses of social media, Facebook included, so it makes sense that students know to use the Class Of groups as tools for making online connections before getting the chance to make connections in person.

7. Prime students for campus involvement

Research suggests that student involvement on campus is positively related to increased abilities and critical thinking skills as well as higher grades (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Universities want their students to succeed, and campus involvement plays a role in student success. Class Of pages can prime students for campus involvement, so when they come to campus in August, they are ready and excited to join clubs, try out for sports teams, or apply for jobs and internships. Class Of pages can give students ideas for specific clubs to join, as well as create the mindset that students should be involved and most are.

How Do James Madison and Mary Washington Compare?

In an effort to fairly compare the two schools, I collected all posts made by site administrators, and coded them according to my list of criteria for what makes an effective Class Of group. Since I was primarily interested in the way institutions used Class Of groups, I only used posts made by site administrators to compare the schools. From the creation of the Facebook group until April 20th, the primary admin for UMW posted over twenty-five times, while, for the same period of time, the primary admin for JMU posted three times. For the first set of the criteria, reinforcing existing ideologies of the institution, I found only two examples from UMW, and none from JMU. UMW site administrators posted a meme of puppy giving a person a high-five, as well as picture of a man from the 80s wearing a pizza costume with the

post titled “Free Pizza!” While these posts do not reinforce institutional ideologies of the honor code, or community responsibility, they do represent the UMW sense of identity. On the other hand, since JMU had so few posts, it was difficult to get a sense of community values from the page.

For the next criteria, to sway students on the fence, UMW had one main post that attempted to sway students on the fence, while JMU had zero. UMW’s post was a Valentine’s day competition post that asked students to show why they loved Mary Washington. Students were encouraged to share photos, videos, poems, posts, or whatever creative form they wanted to, showing why they loved UMW. Almost 30 incoming students responded, which made for almost 30 peer testimonials on why other students on the page should love UMW, as well.

The next criteria was difficult to measure. As far as helping students develop a sense of inclusion and belonging, neither school made a specific post that could be coded for having that goal in mind. That being said, site administrators’ comments on student posts in both groups were constructed to make the student feel included. For example, in early January when students in the JMU group were asking about when they might hear back about acceptance, the primary admin commented that it changes from year to year and added the encouraging words “don’t be nervous!! Everything is gonna be okay!”

UMW posts helped create and sustain students’ excitement with the use of competitions for UMW spirit gear. On JMU’s Class of 2020 page, site administrators did not start competitions, but they did suggest students use specific hashtags when on other social media sites, which one might read as attempting to sustain students’ excitement.

Both universities answered questions made in the Facebook group. While neither schools’ site administrators made posts specifically asking about questions, both sets of site

administrators answered questions posted by incoming students and did so in a friendly way.

Both groups also allowed students make connections. These connections were made primarily through introductions and posts about potential roommates.

For the last category, priming students for campus involvement, neither JMU nor UMW made posts. Posts like “club spotlights” or suggestions for clubs to join could help prime students for campus involvement in August.

Discussion

As mentioned before, JMU and UMW have a different group of site administrators. The fact that UMW’s site administrators are paid employees undoubtedly has an effect on the way they post in the Facebook group. Employees not only have more time to dedicate to posting updates and responding to questions, but they also can have easier access to funds for contests and outings. Over a period of just almost five months, UMW site administrators posted over 10 times with information about contests and semi-local trips for pizza provided by the University. Additionally, UMW has a lower rate of accepted students choosing to attend the school. This may be why UMW seems to be more focused on keeping students engaged on Facebook. Furthermore, the role of their University on Facebook might be more important to some students than to others. While the criteria for an effective Class Of group is helpful to the institution, some students may prefer a more organic, self-created Facebook group maintained only by fellow incoming students. Lastly, as a student at the University of Mary Washington, I am more familiar with the campus climate and current ideologies present at UMW than at JMU, which means I have a limited knowledge of the campus climate and current Ideologies at James Madison University.

Social media, and Facebook in particular, is often times brushed off, as something less important than other aspects of student success. However, the effects of Facebook groups should not be overlooked when working on improving retention rates, keeping students involved and feeling included, and convincing students who have not made final decisions on which school to attend. Class Of Facebook groups are beneficial to both institutions and individual students, and should be studied more, as social media becomes more prevalent in students' lives.

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