

The Use of Social Media by Graduate Health Science Students: The Thomas Jefferson University Experience

The popularity of the Internet has led to increased usage of social media networking sites, which are becoming today's meeting halls and community centers. The US government has recently developed a website with policies and guidelines on social media.¹ This website highlights the growing arena of social networking for agencies by broadening collaboration and communication to users. A recent survey by the Nielsen Media Group found that social networks and blogs accounted for one in every four and a half minutes people spent online worldwide.² In this study, individuals spent on average 6 hours in the month of April 2010 using social media versus 3 hours and 31 minutes the previous year.

With the awareness that traditional 4-year college students were heavy users of social networking, the Office of Institutional Research developed an online survey to investigate the media preferences of Jefferson students. The purpose was to gauge their level of activity on social media sites, and to evaluate how they responded to advertisements on those sites. Respondents included 644 first-year students and 413 graduating students from Jefferson programs in biotechnology, couple and family therapy, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, public health, radiologic and imaging sciences and pharmacy. Descriptive statistics were computed for each group and are presented below.

Online media was identified as the primary source of information by the largest percentage of respondents, for all the age groups. Sixty-four percent responded that they made decisions based on advertisements they see on online media, higher than any other type of media

listed, followed by journals (59%) and television (55%). Facebook was used by 77% of the students. This included: 91% of students aged 18-25; 78% of students aged 26-35; 53% of students 36-45; and 33% of students aged 46 and above, showing that as age increases, the amount of Facebook usage decreases. The majority of students reported not using Facebook or Twitter's advertisements to gather more information for educational programs.

Eighty percent of graduating students reported using Facebook and, of those, 75% reported that they planned to use it to connect with fellow alumni. Only 18% of students reported using LinkedIn. Some of the reasons listed were connecting with employers, networking opportunities, keeping in touch with alumni and past professional colleagues, getting letters of recommendation, and being informed about job opportunities. When they were asked "Are there any other social networking sites that you currently use or plan to use for your professional career?" there were very few responses. Those mentioned included: Professional Association Sites, Professional Listservs, University Career Center website (Simplicity.com), and MySpace.

The results indicate that an overwhelming majority of Jefferson students prefer to get their information online, which is similar to findings by the national surveys of traditional 4 year students.³ Further, Facebook is used heavily by students of all ages and there is much less use of other social networking sites, such as Twitter, MySpace, or LinkedIn.

Understanding social media usage has several implications for higher education and the health professions. Social media has been

shown to improve student skills in technology and creativity, as well as their communication skills by facilitating access to new and diverse ideas of people they wouldn't be able to meet in person. Social networking online rather than face-to-face allows students to quickly make and keep connections, which is important in the fast paced, diverse world of the Health Professions. Implementing social media on a wide scale at Jefferson would result in more technologically savvy individuals and would serve as another avenue for communication. More importantly, it can draw traffic to the University, department, or program's traditional websites or blogs. It is a low-cost, viral way of getting the word out about school events and programming, and can be used to keep students informed of new classes, special lectures, holiday hours, special events, and even emergency notices.

A unique opportunity in social networking may present itself for university administrators if they are willing to think creatively. Above all this platform is about being social, allowing students a virtual meeting space to connect with alumni, establish school pride, announce reunions, sporting events, talk about group projects, interact with the diverse groups from across the world which will have profound social/emotional benefits to students. Research in this arena should continue into the future to measure not only student, but faculty, and administrative interest and usage in these to ensure the Jefferson keeps pace with emerging technological trends. ■

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