

*Sara Kathleen Henry reports some interesting findings from her study on the intersection between students' use of social media, social and psychological well-being, and sense of community.*

*By Sara Kathleen Henry*

# On Social Connection in University Life

**T**HE WAYS IN WHICH WE ENGAGE SOCIALLY seem to constantly move in new directions, with new technologies and social media emerging at exponential frequency. At networking events, the topic tends to initiate a flurry of personal reflections or commentaries on the state of human communication in our now-mediated world and how “students these days” are less able to interact effectively in face-to-face social encounters. It is evident in both our personal and professional lives that social ties are increasingly formed and maintained by means other than face-to-face communication.

Several years ago when I served as the director of a student affairs unit offering communication and leadership training programs, I was sitting in my classroom waiting for students to arrive for the first section of a seminar on interpersonal relationships. This particular seminar occurred immediately prior to the semester in which I would begin writing the research proposal for my dissertation. As was often the case during this period of time, I used these silent moments of waiting to let my mind wander where it might, hoping that the research question of my dreams would appear suddenly and with an air of certainty.

The door to the classroom opened and a student shuffled in with his baseball cap pulled down low over

his eyes so I could hardly see his face, his hands shoved in the pockets of his low-slung baggy denim jeans. He stared at the floor as he entered, somehow managing to avoid a painful run-in with the table that I'd strategically placed at the entry way to distribute the syllabus and collect signatures on the roster. He found a seat in the room, as far away from me and the front of the classroom as possible. I never stopped looking at him, but not once did he look up at me.

“Good afternoon,” I said in an attempt to reach out to him. It was common for students in this particular seminar to be a bit shy and somewhat uncomfortable in novel social situations.

I got nothing in response, only silence. Then, I noticed his head start to move rhythmically back and forth, and I watched as his shoulders started to follow the same beat. He was wired to his iPod. It was obvious this student was in his own world, and he seemed not to be aware of me or of this opportunity to connect.

As someone who approaches the world through the lens of a social scientist, I derive tremendous pleasure from altering how I might normally do things to just observe and learn. In this case, I avoided engaging in my typical pre-seminar chatter with students, and instead took note of how things might unfold if I just observed the natural flow of activity. Rather than encouraging the students to introduce themselves

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to the person on their left or right, I just sat still and watched with the curiosity of a small child.

The students arrived, and my new friend in the back row stayed where he was, plugged in and tuned out. A few students entered the room in a similar fashion—heads turned down and headphones turned up. Others arrived, noticed the silence, and immediately pulled out their laptops. A casual walk to the back of the room confirmed that each open laptop was logged into Facebook or some other social networking site. Instant messaging programs were in full use. Simultaneously, each student carried a cell phone and used it more than once in just a few minutes to send a text message.

I walked back to the front of the classroom and stepped toward the first row. I stood there in a stance that might have suggested I was ready to begin. A few students took the hint and unplugged, initiating what seemed to be a long stretch of shuffling in backpacks as they tucked away their cell phones and laptops and recalibrated their attention and focus to the person at the front of the room, me.

The seminar began as it does each quarter. I facilitated icebreakers to help the students connect with one another. We started exploring a variety of topics related to building and strengthening interpersonal relationships. In the first few weeks, we talked about strategies for enhancing social self-confidence and the meaning and importance of vocal and nonverbal communication behaviors. During the third week, we shared ideas for how and where we could practice and improve our social skills. I gave the students a challenge at the end of each week, and the challenge for this particular week was to make an introduction and initiate a conversation with someone they had never met before.

The student who had planted himself at the back of the classroom on the first day of the seminar, who I now knew as Michael, showed up in much the same way he had on the first day—hat pulled low to cover his eyes, head down, hands shoved in his pockets, and thin white wires connecting him to his tunes. At each session, he sat and looked toward the front of the room. I could

tell he was listening to the content, but he had a difficult time connecting with the other students during in-class activities. He usually responded to questions with only a word or two and never reciprocated an interest in getting to know the other students. Then, at the end of the third seminar meeting, Michael approached me, extended his hand, and introduced himself.

Michael conveyed that he had been listening for the past few weeks and felt he was ready to complete the challenge. He told me he was fearful of the exercise because he always felt anxious around people he'd never met before and tended to only talk to and spend time with friends from home. He felt lonely and depressed, and as a third-year student, he claimed he had not made a single close friend on campus. Michael had enrolled in the seminar to improve his social skills so he could maybe make a friend or two before graduating. We discussed a few strategies that he could use to connect with other students before or after class sometime in the next week. He thanked me, packed up his backpack, plugged himself into his iPod, and walked out of the classroom.

The following week, my dissertation topic arrived with the certainty I had hoped it would, like love at first sight or knowing you have met your partner for life. Michael approached me at the beginning of our seminar meeting and shared with me that he was devastated. He woke that morning feeling confident that he would be able to meet at least one new person before his morning class. He arrived to the lecture hall early and situated himself outside where the other students tended to congregate. Michael told me that there were six students waiting outside for class to start but he did not feel he could talk to any of them. When I asked why, he explained that three of the students were listening to their iPods, two were busy sending text messages, and the other one was talking on the phone while browsing the Internet on his laptop.

"I didn't know how to get in," he said. "I was ready to try and wanted to talk to someone new, but I did not want to interrupt or get in the way of what they were doing."

This was the moment I had hoped for—a sudden burst of intellectual curiosity that would ignite the next year or more of academic inquiry. Everything I had read about students' use of technology and social media had to do with what tools they were using and how, as educators, we needed to stay abreast of current technologies to be effective and efficient at meeting the needs of our increasingly tech-savvy students. Staying abreast of emergent technologies and social media seemed to be a worthy goal, if all the time in the world existed to commit to this complex and ever-changing

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# Understanding the influence of technology and social media on the lived experience of college students may actually be more influential in shaping the future of student development theory and professional practice in higher education.

endeavor. But it was evident to me, especially in this moment and ever since, that understanding the influence of technology and social media on the lived experience of college students may actually be more influential in shaping the future of student development theory and professional practice in higher education, specifically students' psychological and social well-being and the sense of community and connectedness they experience during their college years.

A thorough review of literature in disciplines that regularly study the use of technology and social media revealed a common theme—that communication mediated by technology is fundamentally different than communication in face-to-face interactions. In her book *Technically Together*, Michele Wilson described technologically mediated communication as “thinner”—void of the richness, depth, and nuanced meaning that accompanies our in-person conversations. Yet, the quality of students' interpersonal relationships has been linked to social and academic integration and a host of other outcomes related to college attendance. I had finally found a gap in the literature.

A number of questions surfaced and have continued to inspire my writing on this topic. If students connect more and more using technology and social media, and these tools fundamentally change the nature of the messages conveyed in social interactions, how then is a deep sense of connectedness and community established? How do students sense that they really belong or matter to others when connections occur more often by e-mail, text, instant message, poke, or wall post? How is social support conveyed when the number of characters is limited and nonverbal behaviors are absent from the interaction? It seems that students are increasingly connected to each other, but to what extent and at what level of depth? Do the random, surface-level moments of contact really foster students' sense of community and social connectedness on campus? Or, are students really more disconnected than we might think? And what implications does this have for students' social and psychological well-being?

Given this, I was motivated to further explore the extent to which college students' use of technology and social media influenced both their sense of community on campus and their perceived psychosocial well-being. In this article, I include a brief review of the framework that supported this research, an overview of the methodology and some interesting findings, and key implications for student development theory, research, and professional practice.

## FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

I CONCEPTUALIZED THE FOCUS OF THIS STUDY AS the intersection between students' use of technology and social media, indicators of their social and psychological well-being, and aspects of their sense of community during the college years. And, at the same time, I situated the discussion of these three intersecting constructs in the body of literature on student and adult development theory, including Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the development of mature interpersonal relationships espoused by Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser, and the concept of social integration (or social belonging) advanced by Vincent Tinto. I also reviewed work by Marcia Baxter Magolda and Robert Kegan, who highlight the central importance of the interpersonal stages of student and adult development.

Many academic disciplines outside of education had previously explored the ways in which technology and social media influenced indicators of psychosocial well-being and sense of community in college-student populations. I found that most of the work in this area was published in academic journals that do not necessarily reach the desks of those whose professional lives are committed to enhancing student services and student development programs. An extensive review of the literature included the work of Sheila Cotten, Reynol Junco and Jeanna Mastrodicasa, and Cheryl Gordon, Linda Juang, and Moin Syed, among others. A main motivation for pursuing this area of inquiry was

to translate research from academic disciplines outside of higher education into content that could be used to inform student development theory and professional practice in higher education administration.

## OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY AND SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

**THIS QUANTITATIVE STUDY EXPLORED** the relationship between students' use of technology and social media, indicators of social and psychological well-being, and students' sense of community. Participants for the study were recruited from the undergraduate-student population at a large, four-year public research university in the southwestern United States. The survey consisted of 200 items, including measures of students' use of technology and social media, psychosocial well-being, and sense of community. The total sample included 1,084 undergraduate students that represented the demographic profile of the campus where the research was conducted.

I identified time spent using technology and social media and motivations for use as the most relevant factors to explore. The items incorporated to assess time spent using technology and social media were those that most closely related to students' social worlds at the time of the study and included the following: (1) e-mailing on a computer or laptop; (2) texting or e-mailing via a cell phone or personal digital assistant; (3) talking via a cell phone or personal digital assistant; (4) networking online via Facebook or other social networking sites; (5) chatting on Instant Messenger or in a chat room; (6) watching television or movies; (7) playing video or computer games alone; (8) playing video or computer games with others; (9) listening to or using a personal MP3 player or iPod; (10) following Twitter, blogs, or other newsfeeds; (11) visiting YouTube or other video sites; (12) building or enhancing personal website(s); and (13) surfing the Internet/visiting websites.

The items included as motivations for use of technology and social media included: (1) meeting new people and making friends; (2) interacting with friends and social contacts; (3) conducting research or seek information; (4) working on school-related assignments; (5) learning more about hobbies or interests; (6) sharing photos, videos, or personal updates; (7) commenting on blogs or other news feeds; (8) seeking support for personal problems or issues; (9) purchasing or selling items; (10) looking for entertainment (e.g., music/video downloads); (11) wasting time or procrastinating; (12) playing computer games alone or with other users; (13) viewing pornography or adult con-

tent; and (14) sharing "true" self with others. For purposes of this study, the construct *psychosocial well-being* included measures of loneliness, depression, shyness, social anxiety, perceived social skill, social self-confidence, and social self-efficacy. The construct *sense of community* incorporated measures of mattering to others, perceived social support from friends, social connectedness, and social adaptation to college.

This study was exploratory in nature and looked only at correlations among the variables included in the research design. Although causality could not be determined from these results, the findings are interesting in that they point to the ways in which variables related to the use of technology and social media contribute to students' psychosocial well-being and sense of community.

In short, the findings from the study revealed that increased time spent using technologies that were social in nature (e.g., talking via a cell phone or personal digital assistant, networking online via Facebook or other social networking sites, chatting on Instant Messenger or in a chat room) contributed to more positive scores on measures of psychosocial well-being and sense of community. Conversely, increased time spent using technologies that were solitary in nature (e.g., playing video or computer games alone, surfing the Internet) contributed to lower scores on measures of psychosocial well-being and sense of community.

Further, motivations for the use of technology and social media that were social in nature (e.g., meeting new people and making friends, interacting with friends and social contacts) contributed to more positive scores on measures of psychosocial well-being and sense of community. In contrast, motivations for the use of technology and social media that were less "social" in nature (e.g., learning more about hobbies or interests, wasting time or procrastinating) contributed to less positive scores on measures of psychosocial well-being and sense of community.

These general findings make intuitive sense and, in many ways, are not surprising. Even so, some specific findings are worth highlighting because they point to trends in students' use of technology and social media. First, increased time spent playing video or computer games *alone* contributed to higher scores on measures of loneliness, depression, and shyness, and to lower scores on perceived social skill, social self-confidence, and social self-efficacy. Time spent playing alone also contributed to lower scores on mattering to others, perceived social support from friends, social connectedness, and social adaptation to college. Increased time spent playing video or computer games *with others* contributed to lower scores on depression and shyness and higher scores on perceived social skill, social self-confi-

dence, and social self-efficacy. Time spent playing with others also contributed to higher scores on mattering to others, perceived social support from friends, social connectedness, and social adaptation to college.

One limitation of these specific findings is the lack of clarity on how “alone” or “with others” is defined by students. Playing video or computer games with others does not necessarily mean that multiple users are occupying the same physical space. It is just as likely that playing video or computer games *with others* refers to others who share virtual time and space (e.g., avatars) but are physically located in any number of places throughout the world. Also, students who are physically alone may consider themselves in the company of others when engaged in multiuser play. Or, a student who is in the company of others in a shared physical space may consider himself to be alone if playing a single-user game.

Another interesting finding revealed that greater frequency in the use of technology or social media for the purpose of seeking support for personal problems or issues contributed to higher scores on measures of loneliness, depression, shyness, and social anxiety and to lower scores on perceived social skill, social self-confidence, and social self-efficacy. These findings suggest that students who experience psychological distress may turn to the Internet or other technologies to cope and find sources of support because they lack the social self-confidence or social skill to access a network of healthy and supportive interpersonal relationships. Similarly, greater frequency in the use of technology or social media for the purpose of wasting time or procrastinating contributed to higher scores on measures of loneliness, depression, shyness, and social anxiety and to lower scores on perceived social skill, social self-confidence, and social self-efficacy. These findings suggest that students who experience psychological stressors are using technology and social media to waste time or procrastinate, where students who perceived themselves as socially skillful, confident, and self-efficacious are likely engaged in other types of activities that contribute to a healthier and more productive lifestyle.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

IN 2006, ERNEST PASCARELLA IDENTIFIED ten directions for future research, one of which included investigating the impact of technology and social media on the lives of college students. In the September/October 2010 issue of *About Campus*, Reynol Junco and Arthur Chickering further encouraged higher educational professionals to familiarize themselves with how technology and social media influence students. As they state, students’ use of technology and social media “can benefit both learning and psychosocial development but can also cause negative psychosocial and interpersonal effects” (p. 13). College students’ use of technology has emerged as a crucial focal point for higher education researchers and practitioners, and it is evident that students’ proficiency in the use of technology and social media has transformed and will continue to substantially impact both the social and academic landscape on college campuses. This is a reality that has profound implications for the fundamental nature of students’ social relationships and their sense of community and connectedness on campus.

The following are recommendations for theory and professional practice:

1. *Revise student and adult development theories to account for the influence of technology and social media on students’ precollege characteristics and the college experience.*

The majority of students who enter higher education have had access to computers, the Internet, and various forms of social media since childhood, a reality that has implications for how students learn to connect with the world and with others. Most students are tech-savvy, but we know less about the extent to which these technologies have shaped students’ development prior to

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college and how they continue to shape their development during and beyond the college years. Further, foundational and current theories of student and adult development are predicated on the assumption that students' social experiences occur predominantly (if not entirely) on campus and through face-to-face social interactions with other students, staff, and faculty. Various technologies and social media have created a world where students can connect at any time and in any space, with new contacts in the immediate college environment *and* with their friends and family at home. The need to integrate socially in the immediate campus environment is no longer the priority it once was, as students now have constant access to the social network they established prior to college attendance—a shift that has implications for how we assess students' sense of community and social connectedness during the college years.

2. *Employ an institutional audit to determine the extent to which students' use of technology and social media is reflected in the assessment of various aspects of campus life.*

Educators and administrators on college campuses often assess students' sense of community or satisfaction with the social life on campus but fail to include questions directly connected to how students engage using technology and social media. When we assess students' sense of community or satisfaction with the social experience on campus, we have to account for how and where students experience community and the campus social life—off-campus and online communities influence students' sense of community and satisfaction with the campus social life as much as (if not more than) the community and social life experienced in the physical campus environment. Such assessment must

account for a student experience that includes but extends beyond what we traditionally think of as “campus.”

3. *Design and implement opportunities to help students learn about the positive and negative outcomes associated with the use of technology and social media.*

New student orientation and other student development programs can include both printed or web-based resources and educational programming on the positive and negative outcomes associated with the use of technology and social media. Students should be encouraged to learn how to balance their use of technology and social media and, at the same time, consider the importance of face-to-face social interactions for establishing healthy and supportive interpersonal relationships. Students can learn healthy Internet or technology use behaviors that will enable them to connect via technological media but also disconnect in order to engage in face-to-face social interaction with peers. Career Services centers and other programs that focus on professional skill development must incorporate this type of education as a priority in order to prepare students to successfully interact in professional environments.

4. *Provide students with opportunities to develop practical communication skills that will help them establish healthy relationships in their personal and professional lives.*

The need to teach practical communication skills should be a central focus of the college experience—for one, the National Association of Colleges and Employers consistently reports communication skills as one of the most important attributes sought by employers of college graduates. Given the

influence of technology and social media on how we connect with others in interpersonal relationships, it is not surprising that students do not necessarily arrive on campus with the capacity to communicate with confidence. Web- or text-based resources may provide students who struggle to engage in face-to-face contexts with some initial strategies for enhancing social confidence and taking small steps to approach social situations with increased comfort and a greater sense of efficacy. Social skills are not typically taught in academic classrooms, and yet these skills are critical to both personal and professional success. Attending to the social development of students requires more than the provision of social events and involvement opportunities. It requires intentional efforts in helping students learn, practice, and refine the social behaviors required to engage in all aspects of their social lives.

5. *Balance student services and programs with elements that are both high-tech and high-touch.*

Student services that are high-tech can serve to reduce financial cost and enhance efficiencies. And high-tech services often provide students with on-demand access to the information or applications they need. Further, services that are delivered in an online format are often better suited to meet the needs of students who do not feel they have the social skills to utilize services in a face-to-face context. Despite the apparent benefits of utilizing technology to serve students, it is important that we do not lose sight of the importance of including services that are “high-touch” and rich with opportunities to engage face-to-face with students. It is in these moments where we touch the lives of students—even in rote transactions that occur multiple times a day, we have an opportunity to express care and concern for students, to ask them about their day, and learn how to better support them. When mentoring or advising students, educators and practitioners have an opportunity to learn about students’ lives in depth and help them reach their personal and academic goals.

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

THE WORK PRESENTED HERE SERVES only as a framework through which professionals in higher education can better understand the intersection of students’ use of technology and social media, psychological and social well-being, and sense of community in university life. It does not suggest that students’ use of technology and social media causes a particular outcome in students’ psychosocial well-being or sense of community. It is more likely that there is a multidirectional relationship between these constructs, whereby indicators of psychosocial well-being and sense of community contribute to trends in students’ use of technology and social media, and in turn, trends in students’ use of technology and social media contribute to indicators of psychosocial well-being and sense of community. This article is an invitation to discuss in more depth and at greater length the ways in which technology and social media intersect with the lived experiences of college students.

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