Bridge or Barrier: The Impact of Social Media on Engagement for First-generation College Students

A vast majority of non-first generation students use social media

Slightly fewer first-generation students use social media

Students differ in WHO they connect with through social media

The proliferation of social media on college campuses has created new avenues for students to build and maintain connections to their peers, to faculty, and to staff members. Though this technology creates a new medium for developing social capital in college, this research illustrates that these new media are subject to the same systems of privilege that have traditionally advantaged upper-class students. Though first-generation students only use social media slightly less than their peers, there are significant differences in the types of interactions they are having and the social capital they are building during college. First-generation students are not making the same connections with peers on campus or connecting to information channels to learn about student activities and opportunities.

In their first-year of college, there was no significant difference in the amount of interactions with faculty, but in their senior year, first-generation students less often communicated with faculty. The fact that in their last year of college, first-generation students are not connecting with faculty in the same way is particularly concerning because these are the relationships that could lead to positive letters of recommendation or other connections to possible employment or graduate education opportunities.

Financial Aid Staff

First-generation students communicated with financial advisors more in both their first-year and senior year, in both active and passive communication. This is likely because more first-generation students utilize financial aid and that they have less access to knowledge about the financial aid system through their parents. Though being able to access information about financial aid through social media is of extreme importance during college, these connections are not likely to yield lasting social capital that will help students beyond college.

Student Activities Advisors

First-generation students interacted less with student activities advisors and more often had passive communication. This difference was statistically significant for first-year students. This disparity in connecting with student activities personnel is problematic not only in the capital students are building or not with the actual personnel, but also in the missed information about opportunities that could lead to other social networks and opportunities to build capital. This disparity in interaction may affect students differently throughout their education. Students in their first-year of college may miss out on opportunities that could better connect them to the campus community or build relationships with their peers on campus. Seniors who are not connecting to student activities personnel may be missing opportunities to build networks that could connect them to opportunities and resource beyond college.

Social media use is significantly related to increased connections with faculty and the quality of relationship with students and staff on campus.