

## HOW CAN SOCIAL MEDIA BE USED TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND CHANGE INSTITUTIONS?\*

Research into social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) and online tools (e.g. GoogleDocs) has shown that online activities can increase young people's civic engagement, regardless of their prior motivations. Online tools and social media are widely discussed—but not always successfully used—in the field of youth civic engagement.

Research on social media and young people often focuses on who is online and what tools they use (Pew Research; Edison Research, 2010). Some research has begun to investigate how the Internet and social media are being used for explicitly civic or political purposes (Smith, 2011; NCOC, 2008, 2009). Recent studies have looked at whether Internet use affects youth civic behavior (Kahne, 2011), and new research has found that online political activities are complements to offline activities (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). Yet, as with other civic research, we still need to know more about how engagement plays out in specific contexts. If institutions are going to use online tools and social media to engage young people and build relationships (despite widely differing levels of technological knowledge and access), they need more information about what works.

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Most efforts to use these new tools to engage young people in civic life have been conducted outside of educational institutions. While this is changing, many schools are still trying to figure out how online tools and social media fit into their structured programs. This article will provide insights based on an evaluation that CIRCLE helped conduct of a national network of college campuses connected to the Bonner Foundation ([www.bonner.org](http://www.bonner.org)).

Grounded in developmental theory, the Bonner Foundation works to improve college access and civic engagement by supporting students to engage in community service for four years while they earn money for college. They receive co-

curricular and curricular education through Bonner. In 2008, the Foundation received a Student Social Media grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service to learn more about how online tools and social media can be used by campuses to promote community engagement.

The project provided resources, trained staff and students, and encouraged experiments with social media in a portion of the 80-campus network. CIRCLE worked with the Bonner Foundation to understand several points, including:

- 1) How social media and online technology encouraged innovative work with community partners and how partners responded,
- 2) How social media and online technology influenced students' participation, and
- 3) What impact this intensive effort had on campus programs and the national network's capacity.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods, we sought to understand how social media tools were used on campuses and in communities. We gathered insights from campuses about the most effective use of various tools to engage students and to strengthen partnerships. Data came from:

- Baseline and concluding surveys of the whole network
- Biannual surveys of a subset of campus staff, community partners, and students on participating campuses, as well as random samples of students from the whole network, and
- Interviews and written reflections of campus staff involved with experimentation

A subset of campus programs developed strategic partnerships with non-profit agencies, including elementary and middle schools, youth development programs, refugee centers, homeless shelters, a city council's agricultural sustainability efforts, an artist cooperative, and an art museum. Students in the network created videos about agencies and issues, developed strategies for training peers and agency staff, and used media to spread awareness and engage their peers in service.

### HERE ARE SOME OF THE RESULTS:

In the project, online tools and social media were presented as means to other goals (not ends in themselves), and we



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found that they can be assets to student engagement and community partnerships, if used intentionally and strategically. The specific local context and programmatic goals will determine the appropriate tools, which should be viewed as complements to other forms of communication. Overcoming assumptions and misperceptions about online tools and social media was critical. Many staff needed to hear that the Foundation was not trying to replace offline communication with online communication.

Campuses experimented with many different platforms and tools, but in the end they chose a few to focus on. Staff and students felt overwhelmed with information coming from multiple sources, especially since each tool had to be regularly updated.

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### PARTNERS

67% of community partners said that the tools being used were “increasing access to other students, staff/faculty, offices or programs on this particular campus.”

Partners believed that they gained new volunteers from these efforts. They reported gaining access to individuals whom they did not already know, with an average of 27% saying that they agreed or strongly agreed that the project provided these new connections.

### STUDENTS

Campus staff noted consistently that student leadership affected the amount of time their programs could spend on the social media platforms and was critical to success. Turnover of student leadership often correlated with the abandonment of a particular platform, unless new students or staff took on their role.

It is not necessarily true that all young people are ready to use social media for programmatic or professional purposes, even though they are spending significant amounts of time online and on social media outlets. Campuses had to be very clear why they were using each tool.

The evaluation found that students were likely to see the tools as being helpful for coordination and for reaching other students. Fifty-four percent of students on participating campuses and 58% of students in the whole network reported that they had engaged someone else in providing service as a result of using online/internet programs or social media tools. Roughly 70% of students said that social media tools being used by their Bonner program increased their coordination with other offices and programs on campus. The students who thought that social media and online tools were increasing coordination were also more likely to say that they themselves had done additional and better service because of these tools, and had engaged someone else with these tools. Lastly, we found that students who have used online tools and social media as a part of Bonner community service projects were more likely to engage in online political activities. This preliminary finding is an example of how online activities complement programs and contribute to civic development.

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### ENDNOTES

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\* This article was written with the assistance of Ariane Hoy, Senior Program Officer at the Bonner Foundation.

