

## **Creating Connections through Online Resources**

*Susan Arnold Christian, Kimberly D. Douglas, Ashton Archer, Rebecca Greif,  
Sharnée Hudgins, Katie Kerr  
Kansas State University*

### **Abstract**

In communicating with the next generation of scientists and engineers, recruitment strategies must be both effective and efficient. It is critical to consider “how are students communicating with each other?” and “how can we tap into their world?” At Kansas State University, we began to ask these questions and we went to the experts for the answers. As part of our high school outreach, we have formed a team of leaders who are prior participants in our programs. As high school students they help us plan various aspects of the events we offer and serve as a sounding board for ideas. Late in the summer of 2007, the group met to recap and assess our summer events. One of the challenges we face with our high school summer events is increasing the number of participants. We discussed how we publicized for the events and the panel members asked us if we had considered using Facebook.com. The conversation continued and we agreed to start a Facebook group with our WESP staff member as the group administrator. This designation gives us the ability to control the postings, group membership and other safe guards. We have just begun this method of marketing and are still exploring its uses. We have found that those who are invested in our program respond quickly when events are posted and have a forum to ask questions that feels more relational. The students who participate in the group have added Susan, our Outreach Program Coordinator, as a “friend” and communicate more frequently than in the past. The students also communicate more with each other and their mentors from the events. This paper will outline lessons learned and will document the perspective of the student leadership in this process.

### **Introduction**

Despite the controversy surrounding Facebook, the reality is that over 61 million people are using this communication tool and more than half of those are not in college. In Kansas there are specifically 57,500 teenage girls, ages 13-18, who are current Facebook members (Facebook.com (a), 2008). Statistics tell us almost 75% of users sign on to their profiles at least once a day. The ability to send and receive information is unlimited. For years we have relied on third parties (e.g., teachers, counselors) to communicate with girls about our events. We have often heard young women and their parents say they have never heard of our programs even after we have sent packets of information to every school in state. Teachers and counselors have been

some of our best advocates, but this new communication vehicle reaches the students on a direct and personal level, and it does so very quickly. Not only it is a way to communicate with potential participants, but we also have a new forum to cultivate relationships with the young women who have attended our events. We have also found that many times it is quicker to receive a response to a message using Facebook than email. Not only do students tend to check their Facebook messages more frequently than email but many students have their Facebook messages forwarded to their cell phones. This level of communication promotes an ongoing relationship that otherwise would not be possible. Not only are we able to communicate with participants efficiently but the relationships with the college age mentors we hire are also enhanced.

Earlier this year one of our mentors came to my office and shared that Facebook utilization was one thing we didn't cover in the training we provided. One of her mentees lost her mom and had shared this with her on Facebook. We had the opportunity to make a deeper connection with one of our participants and show her how much we cared for her. We may never have known this event took place in her life if not for the fact that she was connected with her mentor on Facebook.

### **Who is Using Facebook & How**

Facebook is all about relationships and sharing information within those relationships. For years we have been looking for ways to make "real" connections with students. This is an opportunity to do just that. For many of us who run middle and high school outreach programs, our face-to-face interaction time with students is incredibly limited. Facebook can give us the potential to connect with students who have attended our events or who are going to attend our events on a daily basis and in a much more personal way.

According to the current statistics reported on the Facebook website (Facebook.com (c), 2008), these are the statistics on who is using their site and how often. It is evident that this is an online resource that is drawing in more students than we can reach through traditional methods and it doesn't appear to be going away anytime soon.

- More than 61 million active users
- An average of 250,000 new registrations per day since Jan. 2007
- An average of 3% weekly growth since Jan. 2007
- Active users doubling every 6 months
- Sixth-most trafficked site in the United States
- More than 65 billion page views per month
- More than half of active users return daily
- People spend an average of 20 minutes on the site daily
- More than 6 million active user groups on the site

### **Learning How to Use Facebook**

One of the best resources to learn how to use Facebook was the students themselves. Both our Senior Panel members and our college students have been excellent resources. Here are some of things we have learned.

Currently anyone can create a Facebook account. In the past this has been an online community only open to college students. A few years ago it became open to high school students as well and just recently has become open to anyone with an email address. Signing up for an account is a very simple process. The key to creating your account is setting the privacy settings. This will allow only the people you want to see your profile or a variety of elements of your profile. For example you can allow some friends to see certain photos, conversations or applications you have added but not others. You can also control who can find you in searches. This kind of protection is important for us to know and more importantly to share with the students in our programs. We have found that some students are unaware of these safeguards and it is not an automatic step in the registration process.

Other ways that you can use Facebook is to create a page for your Women in Engineering Program or outreach programs. As the group “administrator” you can choose the privacy settings. You can create a group that is open (anyone can join from any network), closed (requires administrator approval to join) or secret (membership is by invitation only). We chose to make our group closed. This allows the participants of our program to invite their friends to join but we have the ability to control the group. This also allows us to send personal messages to members we haven’t yet met in person. As the administrator we also have the ability to monitor all content posted on the group page. We can also create events for the group and the members can RSVP. To publicize the event we have the ability to message all group members at once. This kind of community building is what we try to achieve at the events we host on campus. Through Facebook we are able to continue and expand our relationships with the participants. This is an area that we are excited to collect data on as we continue our programs.

As we continued to fine tune our approach to market our Facebook group, the Senior Panel offered some suggestions. We wanted to make our group more active and more appealing. Since starting our group we have faced challenges to keep the momentum going within the group. Students tend to join the group and perhaps post a message saying hello to everyone but then have little interaction. We now publicize our Facebook group in our confirmation letters that go to event attendees in the mail. This approach allows students the opportunity to connect with us and with each other before they come to campus. Our goal is to make them feel like they are a part of the EXCITE! community and thus more comfortable coming to an event where they may potentially know no one. We are also using the Senior Panel to make our group site more appealing to their peers. According to them it is all about photos and creating more interactive conversations.

Facebook also caters to us in a mass marketing medium. One of the features available is a search where you can see numbers for your target audience (Facebook.com (a), 2008). This is where we were able get the number of females in Kansas that are current Facebook members. On the homepage there is a link for advertisers. Once you are on that page you can choose the “get started” box. This will take you through a series of steps to narrow your target audience search. For example it will give you a number of how many girls ages 13-18 in your state are Facebook members. You can also continue to narrow your search by city, interests, education status and more. This feature also allows you to create an ad that will be distributed to all members of your target audience. This is a feature requires payment.

Fundraising opportunities also exist. One of the unique features of Facebook is the ability to create “applications”. Applications allow members to interact with friends in a way that allow them to get to know each other better in fun, silly, serious and sometimes meaningful ways. One such application is “Causes” (Facebook.com (b), 2008). In their own words the creators of this application did it to “democratize activism by empowering activists with an arsenal of tools for users of Facebook who want to leverage their network on Facebook to effect positive change”. The Case Foundation joined in this effort in December 2007 by creating a contest with a grand prize of \$50,000 for the cause that received the greatest number of unique donors. In a New York Times article (Strom, 2007) one of the founders of Case Foundation was quoted as saying “Small amounts of money given by large numbers of individuals can be combined to do great things”. This is just another example of the power of relationships that students have and how many people are recognizing it as a valuable resource.

### **What Facebook Means to Students**

At our meeting this past summer the Senior Advisory Panel shared their vision for how we could reach more of their peers. Listening to their conversation with each other about their own interactions on Facebook gave us a feel for how important this communication tool could be to our program. Here are a couple of examples:

Rebecca Greif -

*Facebook provides me with a way to stay in touch with my friends and to meet new people. I can meet them through groups I join and through my friends in a safe environment. I also have the ability to express my personality through a controlled page that I design. I can share pictures, see my friends pictures, have conversations and invite people to events. It also helps me strengthen my relationships because I can learn about new things through groups and other friends activities.*

Ashton Archer -

*Facebook allows me to communicate with friends from all around the country without the cost of long distance phone calls. Before I had Facebook, it was not uncommon for me to make friends at an event and then lose touch with them because of lack of fast communication pathways, lack of internet, email, and long distances. Now I have closer ties with people that I might have otherwise drifted apart from. It also allows me to know how my friends are doing and makes planning events easier. With the ability to adjust my security settings, I feel much safer online, even though I still take the initiative to not put information I don't want others to know on my Facebook page. Facebook allows me to connect with others who have similar interests. Also I can spread the word to others quickly about events that they themselves might be interested in.*

Katie Kerr—

*Facebook has become a very important tool for me. I moved to a new town a year and a half ago and was afraid of losing all my friends and not being able to stay in touch. Facebook gave me the opportunity to be able to chat with them on a daily bases and get a good look at what is going on in their lives. I'm able to look at all their pictures and kind of experience life with them. I also found a wonderful friend that was a foreign exchange student and I wouldn't have been able to stay in touch with her considering that she lives in Uzbekistan. Facebook lets me talk to her daily by emailing her. Facebook was also very useful in getting me more involved in my new*

*high school. I was able to meet friends before I started at my new school so I wouldn't be so lost the first day. It also presented me with school events when my schoolmates would send me invitations to them. It has been a very useful tool and I am able to access it daily.*

## **Facebook vs. My Space**

As we began using Facebook and saw the possibilities of continued relationships with participants, we realized that MySpace.com may also be a resource option. We are still exploring the security and safety of this option. Facebook allows only those within a member's network to freely view random profiles, but outside the campus or network, a user must be a confirmed friend in order to view a member's profile. MySpace allows the random viewing of anyone's profiles. They do allow a member to block full access to their profile until they add the viewer as a friend. They also provide many of the same safety features for groups (closed, open and hidden).

One very important item to note is that the user population of this social network site may indeed be the audience we most want to target. According to a blog by Danah Boyd (2007), there appears to be a class division between the two sites. In her work with teens she has found that MySpace is "home" to the under-represented and the potential first-generation college students. This same thought is continued in a study based on a survey that was administered to students at the University of Chicago Illinois. Hargittai (2007) reported the findings of this study. The survey found that certain groups are more represented on some sites than others. The most pronounced findings concern students of Hispanic and Asian origin. Hispanic students are significantly less likely to use Facebook.

Women in Engineering and Science Programs are challenged to reach students who aren't typically self-selecting into our programs. In order to truly make an impact on the dearth of women in STEM field paths, we must reach out the students who would never imagine themselves as a scientist or engineer. However, first and foremost, we must find them. We must find them on their turf and tap into their world. MySpace must be explored as an option to market our message.

## **Conclusion**

By no means do we envision replacing our traditional recruitments efforts (e.g., mailings, face-to-face interactions, newsletters, teacher contacts) with online social network sites. These resources are tools that we can use to enhance our efforts.

Many of us are directing our outreach efforts to show young women how science and engineering make the world a better place and make a difference in the lives of people. We are doing this because we know that girls are relational—it is important to them to make personal connections. Why should our recruitment efforts be any different than our message? By allowing us the opportunity to continue the connections we have made with the students who attend our events not only will it be easier to track their future education decisions, but we have a greater opportunity to encourage them along the way.

## References Cited

- Boyd, Danah. 2007. "Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace." Apophenia Blog Essay. June 24. <http://www.danah.org/papers/essays/ClassDivisions.html>
- Facebook.com. (a) (2008) <http://www.facebook.com/ads/create/index.php?>
- Facebook.com. (b) (2008) <http://apps.facebook.com/causes/about>
- Facebook.com. (c) (2008) <http://ksu.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>
- Hargittai, E. (2007). Whose space? Differences among users and non-users of social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), article 14.  
<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/hargittai.html>
- Strom, S. (2007, December 13). Foundation Testing Potential of Philanthropy via Internet. *New York Times*. Retrieved January 3, 2008, from  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/13/us/13foundation.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/13/us/13foundation.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)

## Author Contact Information

Susan Arnold Christian, WESP Outreach Program Coordinator at Kansas State University  
[susanac@ksu.edu](mailto:susanac@ksu.edu) Dr. Kimberly Douglas, WESP Director at Kansas State University  
[kdd@ksu.edu](mailto:kdd@ksu.edu) Sharnée Hudgins, Katie Kerr, Ashton Archer & Rebecca Greif—WESP Senior Advisory Panel Members