



Examining social adjustment to college in the age of social media: Factors influencing successful transitions and persistence

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ABSTRACT

Social adjustment plays a critical role in student persistence at college. Social media such as Facebook, used widely by this population, have the potential to positively enhance students' transition to college by encouraging connection and interaction among peers. The present study examines the role Facebook plays in students' social adjustment during their first year of college using survey data ($N = 338$) collected from students at a private, liberal arts college in the Midwest. We develop and test a model that includes both traditional and Facebook-specific predictors of social support and social adjustment, as well as explore the role that these factors play in predicting students' enrollment status the following year. Results indicate positive relationships between two Facebook variables—the number of Facebook Friends students have at the college and their engagement in collaborative behaviors with classmates through the site—and measures of social support and social adjustment, as well as a positive relationship between social adjustment and persistence at the university.

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1. Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2011), college enrollment has increased 38% since 1999. More students than ever before are currently enrolled in college, and with good reason: obtaining a college degree provides a number of benefits including increased job opportunities and increased lifetime earnings potential (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). In addition to these tangible benefits, attending college serves an important socialization function in the lives of young people. For many young adults, moving to college represents their first experience living outside their parental household, a move typically associated with increased autonomy. Beyond academic learning, these “emerging adults” (Arnett, 2000) are engaging in a form of social learning, whereby they learn how to socialize with others, develop deeper cultural awareness and critical thinking skills, and negotiate interpersonal and group work challenges (Astin, 1993). The extent to which new students are able to manage this transition and socially integrate into the institution is an important factor for determining future success, as measured through traditional academic markers, such as grades (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004) and college persistence (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2008).

In addition to more long-standing opportunities to meet and interact with other students (e.g., shared residential spaces and student organizations), today's generation of students enters the college environment with access to social media tools offering communication affordances that may prove beneficial for the adjustment process. Social media—including social network sites (SNSs), personal blogs, and geographically bounded discussion forums—may ease students' transition from high school to college by providing them with informational and social support as well as a way to find and connect with other students. Of these social media tools, Facebook is the site most embedded in the lives of U.S. college students (Hargittai, 2007; Smith, Salaway, & Caruso, 2009). Like other SNSs, Facebook contains social and technical affordances that enable individuals to engage in relational maintenance activities, learn about others, and exchange a variety of resources, including emotional support (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, & Vitak, 2010). These tools may reshape the ways young people

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connect with others during their transition to college. For instance, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) speculate that Facebook might ameliorate “friendsickness” (Paul & Brier, 2001), the distress associated with missing old friends after moving away to college.

Beyond the purely social purposes for which students use SNSs, such as connecting and communicating with existing friends, many students have repurposed these sites for academic activities (Lampe, Wohn, Vitak, Ellison, & Wash, 2011) and associate them with positive benefits, such as the ability to connect with other students about course-related work (Dahlstrom, de Boor, Grunwald, & Vockley, 2011). For example, in a national study by the non-profit organization EDUCAUSE, more than half of U.S. college students reported using SNSs for purposes such as communicating with classmates about school (Salaway, Caruso, & Nelson, 2008), and more than one-quarter of students reported using a SNS as part of a class (Smith et al., 2009).

The present study considers the role that both traditional markers of adjustment and various characteristics of Facebook use play in students' social adjustment to college and, subsequently, their persistence at the institution. We test the role Facebook plays in students' social adjustment to college—including their integration into the college community and formation of college-based ties—which research suggests is one of the most important predictors of persistence (Astin, 1993; Haussmann, Schofield, & Wood, 2007). Factors shown to be important in the literature, such as race and first-generation status (i.e., first in their family to attend or graduate from college), are included to account for the effect of Facebook use on persistence above and beyond these control variables. To analyze these relationships, we develop and test a model that focuses on the critical role of social adjustment to college and the role that Facebook plays in this process. Following analysis, we discuss theoretical and practical implications of social media's role in the college adjustment process.

2. Social adjustment to college

Arnett (2000) frames the period between the ages of 18–25 as “emerging adulthood,” a critical developmental stage when individuals are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. During this period, individuals determine the kind of person they will be in regards to issues such as personal values and perspectives, love, and livelihood. This liminal developmental stage is important because individuals are able to experiment with their identity within a context that is often free from the constraints of parental oversight that characterize adolescence or the responsibilities associated with adulthood. Moving away to college can play a key role in this process, in that it typically leads to increases in emerging adults' autonomy, spurred by changes in residence, places of employment, and the formation of new circles of friends (Arnett, 2000). College students are expected to make a series of adjustments to cope with their new ways of life; these adjustments range from academic assimilation to personal, emotional, and social adjustments (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Hiester, Nordstrom, & Swenson, 2009).

The majority of students who drop out of college do so in the first year (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006), suggesting the transition process is a significant factor in student success. Social adjustment to a college environment is one facet of student adjustment and serves as one of the most critical activities emerging adults undertake that predicts success in college and beyond (Baker & Siryk, 1989; McEwan, 2011). As defined by Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994), social adjustment is the process by which students become integrated into the campus community, build support networks, and negotiate the new freedoms afforded by college life. Student adjustment, by contrast, is a combination of students' social, personal-emotional, and academic adjustment along with their reported feelings of commitment to the institution (Baker & Siryk, 1989). Students who report difficulty socially adjusting to college are more likely to suffer from feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006). Understanding how students adjust to college has long been of interest to institutions of higher education, and research has examined this process in order to advise educators of differences across diverse student populations (Hertel, 2002; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994; Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010) and to evaluate the use of certain programs or innovative steps to improve overall student adjustment (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Mayhew, Stipeck, & Dorow, 2011).

Social integration and adjustment can be measured through students' reported satisfaction with (and the quality of) informal interactions with faculty, staff, and peers (Jones, 2010; Kraemer, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Because of the strong relationships between social adjustment, successful transition to college, and persistence, many researchers have explored predictors of social adjustment in order to enhance the student experience by way of implementing support systems where needed (Lau, 2003; Mayhew et al., 2011). Personal characteristics (e.g., race, self-esteem), individual behaviors (e.g., socializing with peers and faculty), and stressors in students' lives influence the level of social adjustment that students report (Chartrand, 1992; Elliott, Alexander, Pierce, & Richmond, 2009; Hays & Oxley, 1986; Hurtado et al., 1996).

2.1. Personal background characteristics and social adjustment

A primary focus in the literature centers on students' race/ethnicity, and researchers have highlighted some of the struggles that minority students face at college, as well as how these challenges historically have predicted college adjustment. In general, Caucasians are more likely than minorities to attend higher education institutions (both private and public). In a meta-analytic study of Latino adjustment to college, for example, Quintana, Vogel, and Ybarra (1991) found that Latino students typically were more affected by financial stress than Anglo-American students, and the resulting psychological stress was associated with reduced intent to continue in school (Chartrand, 1992). More recent research shows that Latino students who are socially and academically engaged at college and who are able to navigate diverse ethnic campus environments report a greater sense of connection with the university (Nuñez, 2009).

Scholarship on college transition and persistence has also explored African American students' challenges to social adjustment. Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn (1999) compared the college transition outcomes experienced by White students and African American students and discovered varied effects of race on adjustment to college. African American students reported fewer positive social experiences with student peers and also performed slightly lower academically than White students, suggesting that there are different facets of the transition to college, such as socialization, that may be more difficult for minority students (Cabrera et al., 1999). In fact, more recent research supports the idea that the discrepancy between African American and White students' rates of retention and academic success at college stems from challenges to African Americans' social adjustment, not from a lack of academic preparedness as previously believed (see Guiffreda & Douthit, 2010). The campus we studied is more diverse than many other private colleges, with minorities

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