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Electronic Anonymous Communications: Considerations for Higher Education Administrators

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ELECTRONIC ANONYMOUS COMMUNICATIONS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

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INTRODUCTION

Communications via electronic technology have expanded to encompass daily life for most higher education students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The Pew Research Center reports that nearly 100% of undergraduate and graduate students access the Internet (Smith, Rainie, & Zikuhr, 2011). Computers, cell phones, and tablets are an integral part of university life and student communications using social media websites, text messaging, online chat, and websites are widespread. Electronic communications can be categorized as websites, application, or social media. A subset of these electronic communications, characterized as anonymous, may present a particular challenge to those working in higher education institutions. Created to provide students an opportunity for free speech and expression, anonymous electronic communications offer mockers, bullies, and other tormentors a nameless venue to critique, harass, and verbally abuse other students. The anonymous behavior has expanded and escalated to threats of rape, murder, campus bombing, and other acts of violence, some of which occurs among groups communicating in real time.

The impact in the classroom and on student life is an important consideration for campus administrators today, especially with the proliferation of cyberbullying. Although there may be little that can be done to control participation, administrators can benefit from understanding the availability and nature of anonymous electronic communications and the influence they can have on all aspects of student life. Further, an appreciation of the modes and effects can inform policy and decision making to provide the most beneficial student services management.

TYPES OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION AND EXTENT OF ANONYMITY

Electronic communications influence every aspect of university life. Students utilize software on computers and other devices to organize and access school materials, participate in classes, and to complete course assignments. In addition to fulfilling the work required by their academic program, electronic communications also provide a means for students to maintain and enhance their personal life. Three possible routes for students to employ electronic

communications to enrich their social life are websites, applications, and social media platforms. Students may elect to participate in these venues through self-identification or anonymously.

Websites

Beginning in 2005, the proliferation of anonymous confession boards (ACB) over the last decade elevated the intensity of electronic communication for students on college campuses. Initially intended to provide an avenue for free speech for university students under the cloak of anonymity, websites such as Juicy Campus and College Anonymous Confession Board offered a place for college students to freely discuss sensitive or controversial topics such as race, politics, and sexuality. "The College ACB or College Anonymous Confession Board seeks to give students a place to vent, rant, and talk to college peers in an environment free from social constraints and about subjects that might otherwise be taboo" (College ACB, 2009, para. 2). However, these gossip and confession boards quickly evolved into a cyber bathroom wall available for unbridled comments targeted at classmates, colleagues, and even those unknown to the originator. Student targets were often identified by name. Information, whether true or false, was posted anonymously for all to see. In some cases, the impact on student life was devastating, resulting in self-harming or suicidal behavior (Storch, 2009).

While the availability and popularity of ACB websites has waxed and waned, some still exist today. Dartmouth College's Bored@ is active and controversial. College ACB was sold in January 2011 to Blipdar and closed in 2011 (http://collegeacb.blogspot.com). Matt Ivester, creator of Juicy Campus (closed since February 5, 2009) has done a reversal and rejects anonymity with his new application (app) named Reveal. "Ivester said that with Reveal, he wanted to avoid giving people the opportunity to be negative, something he says many social media companies similarly do" (Kingkade, 2015, para. 13).

Another anonymous website is College Confessions, www.http://college-confessions.com. College Confessions can be accessed by anyone and is used to confess the things one did or wish one would have done in college. According to College Confessions, submissions are kept anonymous and the website does not track any personal information from the individuals posting. The College Confessions website does monitor postings and will edit or reject postings that are deemed too graphic, too offensive, or includes names and details that could reveal the identity of the poster or the subject of the posting.

In addition to anonymous websites that are open to all college students, college specific anonymous confession boards require the participants to enter their university email in order to access their specific college website; the participant must be an active college student. These specific websites are typically created by a student or group of students and hosted off campus, not on the college or university servers. Websites hosted off campus make it impossible for college or university oversight and permits blocking of the website on university servers only (Straumsheim, 2014). Many colleges and universities attempting to respond to complaints and concerns have little or no recourse. Administrative efforts at communicating concerns with the

hosts of these websites result in the site being temporarily taken offline only to reemerge with a new name but the same following (Baker, 2012).

Applications

Applications, or apps, which require a download for access, are appealing to those who want to communicate on the go. Apps provide a faster, convenient, and more efficient way to communicate because they are mobile on either a phone or tablet. Yik-Yak, an extremely popular app, "has dedicated sections for more than a hundred college campuses" (Koenig, 2014, para. 2) and boasts that users "get a live feed of what everyone's saying around you" (http://www.yikyakapp.com/, para.1). It can be accessed by anyone by downloading the app to a mobile device. Yik-Yak then assigns a username when the app is launched; no additional personal information is collected or shown to users. The participant's GPS within the mobile device determines the network (zone) in which postings can be viewed. This ranges from a 1.5 to a ten-mile radius (Stoller, 2015). This differs from other social media platforms and applications with followers such as Facebook—Yik-Yak postings can be seen by anyone who has downloaded the app in the nearby vicinity. Participants are able to "yak" with others in proximity and this provides a real-time microblog for users. Yik-Yak participants can vote on postings, providing validation for the followers (Pot, 2015). Whisper, another anonymous app, is most frequently used by high school and college students to share personal confessions and photos. Whisper retains the rights to share the participants' postings and employs moderators to review a user's history, their IP address and the ability to see the user's past postings. Whisper checks for individuals who may be deemed as 'repeat offenders' that may have posted false or bullying information in the past. In addition, Whisper categorizes users into 'trusted' or 'untrusted' labels, resulting in the inability for untrusted users to post 'live' comments or images; untrusted users may be banned completed from any further posting (Donovan, 2014).

Social-Media Platforms

Technology has expanded the opportunities for students to participate and connect to confession board websites and apps through social-media platforms (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). Social-media platforms followers are able to use one or more pseudonyms to participate online regarding topics that they may not be comfortable within their social group of friends. The use of social-media platforms has made communication in confession boards easier to access by 'liking' the board; faster access by having one point of entry; claimed no lag time in postings; and, boosts the availability of archived confession logs for all to see (Isaac, 2014).

ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Accountability for hurtful, harmful anonymous postings and content through these electronic communications is unclear. Legal issues of liability, libel, and free speech surrounding

anonymous websites and apps are complicated and emerging. Website creators of ACBs enjoy immunity from libel by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 (the common name for Title V of the Telecommunications Act of 1996) which states "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider" (47 U.S.C §230, (c) 1). ACB website, social media, and app creators claim no responsibility under Section 230 because the content on these sites and boards is generated by higher education students, not the website creator. Students posting the content do so anonymously and either cannot or may not be traced, identified, or held accountable for their posts. Barring threats of extreme violence or terrorism, it may be at the discretion of the creator to determine whether sources of threats or illegal behavior will be revealed to authorities.

Therefore, while higher education institutions must contend with the consequences of the content on anonymous electronic communications, there may be little legal recourse. Mahler (2015), in reporting on the anonymity that Yik Yak promotes to users notes, "Colleges are largely powerless to deal with the havoc Yik Yak is wreaking" (para. 10). It is important for higher education administrators to recognize that, while technically a third party to these activities, there may be some institutional responsibility because developers or participants may use university computers and servers and/or a university ID to authenticate student status while participating in these communications.

CYBERBULLYING AND BEYOND

Anonymous electronic communications provide the ideal medium for bullying to occur. USLegal.com (http://definitions.uslegal.com/c/cyber-bullying) identifies cyberbullying as "any harassment that occurs via the internet, cell phones or other devices". Cyberbullying has been found to have negative effects on both perpetrators and victims. Consistent with the impact found on middle and high school students, recent research on college students indicates college students are adversely affected as well. Selkie, Kota, Chan, and Moreno (2015) surveyed 465 female students and found that those involved with cyberbullying as victims were almost three times more likely to meet criteria for clinical depression than those with no cyberbullying experience. The cyberbully perpetrators were found to be four times more likely to experience depression and problem drinking as compared to non-bullies. In a study of 244 college freshman enrolled in an introduction to psychology course conducted by Whittaker and Kowalski (2014), 18.2% of college students reported that they had been a victim of cyberbullying at least once over the period of an academic year. The study further indicated that 12% of the participants had perpetrated cyberbullying at least one time within an academic year.

It has been suggested that cyberbullying may extend further into other issues. Moreno, co-author of the University of Washington study, commented to CNN that "Some people have hypothesized that cyberbullying in that context — unwanted sexual advances — really starts to look like it should be on the spectrum of sexual violence rather than bullying" Lamotte (2015).

This expanded consideration of sexual harassment, coupled with the apparent psychological and health issues of depression and problem drinking raises the importance of awareness by student affairs professionals about the participation in these anonymous electronic communication venues, both as a sender and potential victim. Threats of violence to both person and institution have also been reported. "Students at multiple colleges have been arrested for using Yik Yak to post threats to campus safety" (Koenig, 2014, para. 1).

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

The effects of anonymous electronic communications on campus can be felt by individual students, faculty, or groups either as the perpetrator or victim of the exchange. The dynamic environment created by student participation in electronic communications requires ongoing review and oversight by higher education administrators to be proactive in managing students and the effects of the technological, interpersonal interactions. Working with campus IT departments, student organizations, and other stakeholders may be an effective strategy to attack the issues from many perspectives.

Administrators may wish to consider guidelines or strategies to educate and address both those initiating the communications and those on the receiving end. Some basic questions for consideration include:

1. What are the potential implications of these changing anonymous electronic communications for college and university student experiences on my campus?
2. How might the effects of such anonymous electronic communication impact the work of student affairs professionals and other university administrators and their relationship with students?
3. How can administrators and faculty work with students to be compassionate and responsible lifelong learners and users of electronic communications technology? Specifically, how can students utilizing these websites and apps appreciate the responsibility of their actions and the implications that their participation might have?
4. What, if any, is the responsibility of administrators, student affairs professionals, and faculty in regard to these new electronic communications?

Because cyberbullying is an important consideration when identifying concerns for participants, a good starting point is offered by The Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention which offers resources and tips for those on college campuses:

- Promote a more accepted and inclusive campus climate. Students who feel connected within the campus have been found to be more willing to report threats and bullying behaviors on campus.
- Share information regarding bullying/cyberbullying and how to report it with residents, sororities, fraternities, etc.

- Educate students on how to use technology safely and effectively, such as changing passwords frequently, printing out evidence of cyberbullying as it happens, and reporting instances of bullying to the proper authorities.
- Encourage students to talk to someone they trust if they or someone they know is being bullied, whether it is a resident advisor, faculty members, academic advisor, close friend, etc.
- Model respectful, empathic behavior to students in all settings.
- Be aware of campus policies or laws, and whether a certain bullying act violates these. Report any behavior in violation to campus police, local police, or an individual of authority. (Alberti center, n.d., para. 3).

CONCLUSION

Technology provides higher education institutions avenues to effectively manage classrooms and content as well as provides students the means to increase communications electronically. These electronic communications can occur through websites, social media, and applications. When done anonymously, these communications can offer students a platform to comment frankly about sensitive topics or discuss issues that may be politically volatile, clandestine or too sensitive to examine face-to-face. When student discourse through anonymous electronic communications becomes ugly, hurtful, bullying, or threatening in nature, the emotional and psychological damage can be considerable. Higher education administrators have a duty to be aware of these electronic communication pathways and consider the effect on the general student body, specific groups of students, and individuals on campus. Campus-specific approaches that may be employed will depend on the institutional climate, culture, and composition of the student body. Policies and procedures may then be developed to operationalize the strategies best suited for the individual higher education institution.

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