

Social Media and College Admissions: The First Longitudinal Study

Conducted by:

Nora Ganim Barnes, Ph.D. (nbarnes@umassd.edu)

Eric Mattson (eric@ericmattson.com)

It's no surprise that social media has changed the landscape of college admissions. The current generation graduating high school has been exposed to the Internet since childhood, and as such has been dubbed the "wired generation." Be it wired or wireless, the 16-24 year olds of today are constantly connected — plugged into digital music devices, cell phones, the Internet, instant messenger and social networks, perhaps all on the same device.

This world of interactivity and hyper-communication has fundamentally changed how teenagers and young adults receive, process and act on information. How can a university reach the eyes and ears of an audience that is largely responsible for the over one **billion** text messages sent per day in the United States? Furthermore, how do you capture the attention of a generation entirely raised on broadband Internet and instant gratification?

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth [Center for Marketing Research](#) recently conducted one of the first statistically significant, longitudinal studies on the usage of social media by college admissions offices. The new study compares adoption of social media between 2007 and 2008 by the admissions offices of all the four-year accredited institutions in the United States. The colleges and universities were identified using a [directory](#) compiled by the University of Texas.

In early 2007 the first study of these schools and their use of social media was [released](#). It revealed that institutions of higher education were outpacing the more traditional Fortune 500 companies as well as the innovative Inc. 500 companies in their use of social media to communicate with their customers (i.e., students). For example, at that time, 8% of the Fortune 500 companies were blogging compared with [19% of the Inc. 500](#) and 32% of colleges and universities.

This study revisits the admissions offices at institutions of higher education approximately one year later in the first longitudinal study on college admissions and the use of these new technologies. Given that a detailed [wiki](#) and a [new longitudinal University of Massachusetts study](#) now show that 13% of the Fortune 500 and 39% of the Inc. 500 currently have a public blog, it is interesting to note that college admissions departments continue to lead the pack with blogs at 41% of US colleges and universities.

Like the 2007 study, the 2008 study is the result of a nationwide telephone survey of those four-year accredited institutions on the University of Texas list, under the direction of researchers [Nora Ganim Barnes](#) and [Eric Mattson](#). All interviews took place in October and November of 2008.

Both studies examined the familiarity with, usage of, and attitude towards social media by the admissions offices at US colleges and universities. The findings presented here from the 2008 study are based on 536 interviews and are valid within the range of +/- 3.6%. (The 2007 study was based on interviews with 453 US colleges and universities and is valid within the range of +/-4%). To date, this is the most comprehensive study done of American institutions of higher education and their use of social media in their admissions activities.

The results are fascinating and continue to support what the 2007 study documented for the first time: Colleges and universities are using social media to recruit and research prospective students. It is clear that online behavior can have important consequences for young people and that social networking sites can, and will, be utilized by others to make decisions about them.

There is evidence of enthusiasm and eagerness to embrace these new communications tools but there is also evidence that these powerful tools are not being utilized to their potential. Schools using social media must learn the “rules of engagement” in the online world in order to maximize their effectiveness.

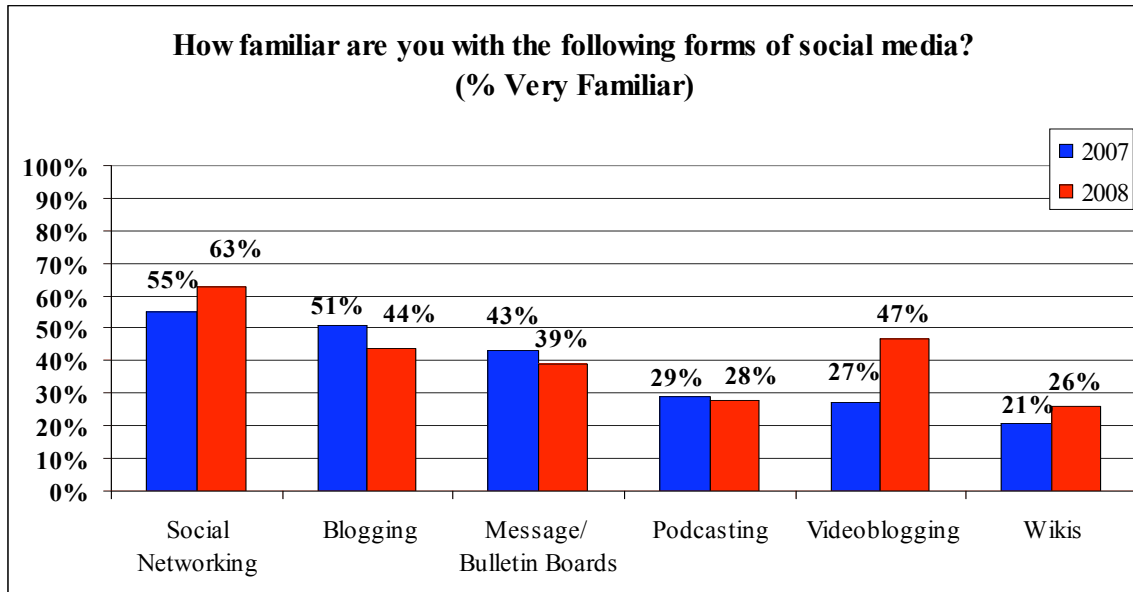
Familiarity

To begin, respondents were asked to rank their familiarity with blogging, podcasting, social networking, message boards and wikis from “very familiar” to “very unfamiliar”. The social media that was most familiar to college admissions departments both in 2007 and 2008 is social networking with 55% of respondents claiming to be “very familiar with it” in the first study and 63% in 2008. Forty-four percent report they are very familiar with blogging.

In fact, as the graph below shows, a significant percentage of admissions departments are very familiar with the technologies studied. Even the technology least familiar to admissions officers (wikis), is very familiar to 26% of those surveyed. Familiarity is up over the past year for social networking, video blogging and wikis. It is slightly down for blogging, message boards and podcasting.

This level of familiarity with social media tools is high and translates into usage. It would appear that college admissions officers are moving in the direction of becoming familiar with new tools of communication at a rapid rate. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1



Usage

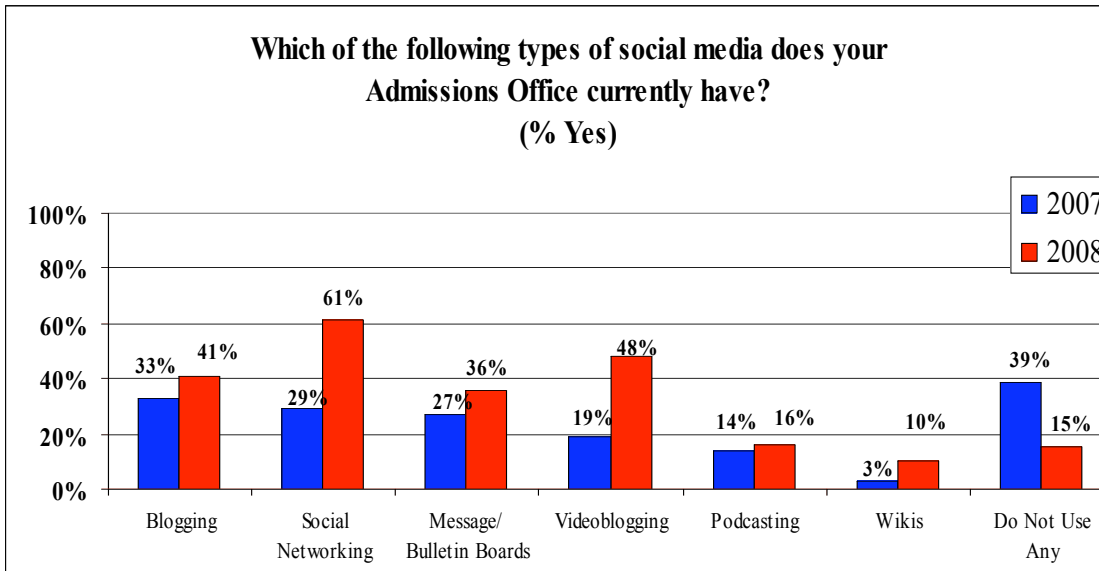
From familiarity the survey moved into examining actual usage of social media by the admissions offices. Sixty-one percent of the respondents in 2007 reported they use at least one form of social media. One year later, 85% of college admissions offices are using at least one form of social media. Usage is up for every tool studied.

Social networking is the most common form with 61% of admissions departments using it. Forty-eight percent are using videoblogging and 41% have a blog. Almost all of those using a blog are using other forms of social media as well.

Thirty-six percent use message boards, 16% use podcasts and 10% use wikis. Many respondents report faculty often set up wikis for research projects and sometimes students do for group projects, but it was not one of the tools that admissions departments commonly used. (In addition to these tools, schools reported using chat rooms, instant messaging and email to reach prospective students or alumni.) (See Figure 2)

The use of social networking sites and video blogging has increased dramatically. This demonstrates increased sophistication with the use of sites like MySpace, Facebook and YouTube. At the same time, video is being used to deliver virtual tours of campuses, virtual visits to the dorms and sample lectures from the faculty.

Figure 2



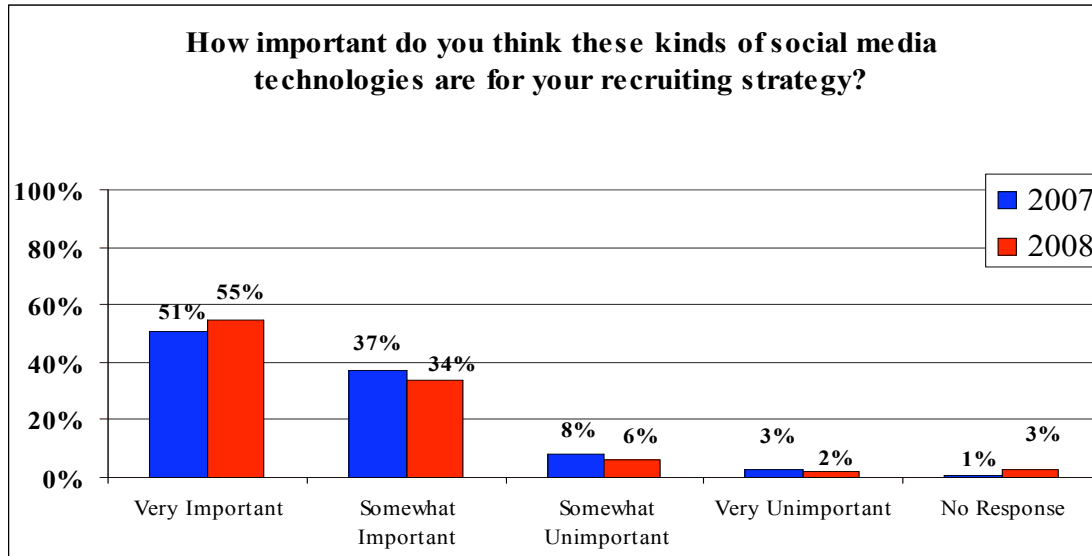
More private schools have blogs than public schools (72% vs. 28%) and 50% of schools with undergraduate populations of less than 2,000 have blogs. Eight percent of schools with blogs are using some internally developed applications (down 3% from 2007). Others cite Blogger and WordPress as platforms. It is not uncommon for the admissions professional to be unfamiliar with the applications being used to host a blog. At most schools, the IT department sets up the blog and the admissions office manages it. When asked who manages their blog, the most popular answers were the admissions office, marketing and public relations.

Importance

The adoption of social media by admissions departments is being driven by familiarity and their recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in today's world. Interestingly, admissions departments feel that social media is "very important" to their future strategy even more so than the Inc. 500 businesses (55% compared to 44%). Even more powerfully, it is worth noting that 89% of admissions departments feel that social media is at least "somewhat important" to their future strategy.

(See Figure 3)

Figure 3



Student Research

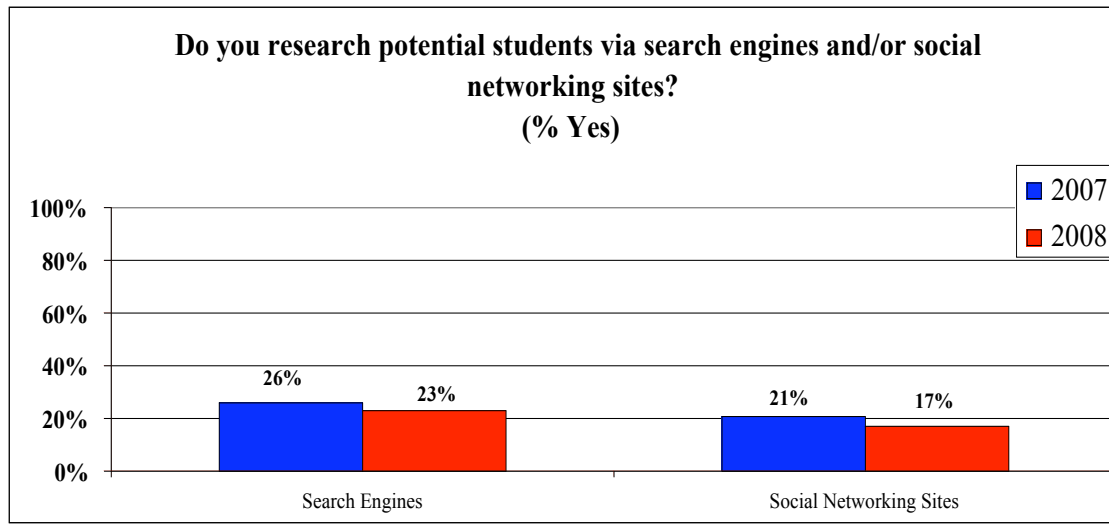
A significant proportion of schools continue to research students via search engines (23%) and social networks (17%). While these numbers are slightly lower than those of the 2007 study, they are within the margin of error and cannot be considered significantly different. Certainly the traditional factors will still play dominant roles in admissions decisions however no longer can students place damaging material online without potential consequences.

The admissions officers interviewed for this study reported using search engines and social networking sites to verify information or research students who were candidates for scholarships or entry into high-demand programs with limited spaces. In all these cases the intent was to protect the school from potential embarrassment. No school wants to announce the winner of a prestigious scholarship only to have compromising pictures be discovered on the Internet the next day. There were no reports of checking every applicant to an institution, no matter how small the school. Online research appears to be more of a precaution at this point or a source of additional information for critical decision making.

The search engines used most often are Google and Yahoo while the social networking sites include Facebook and MySpace. The value of these social networking sites for college admissions offices cannot be underestimated. As more and more young people spend increased amounts of time on these online networks, an institutional presence will be mandatory.

(See Figure 4 on the next page)

Figure 4



Are colleges and universities using social media effectively?

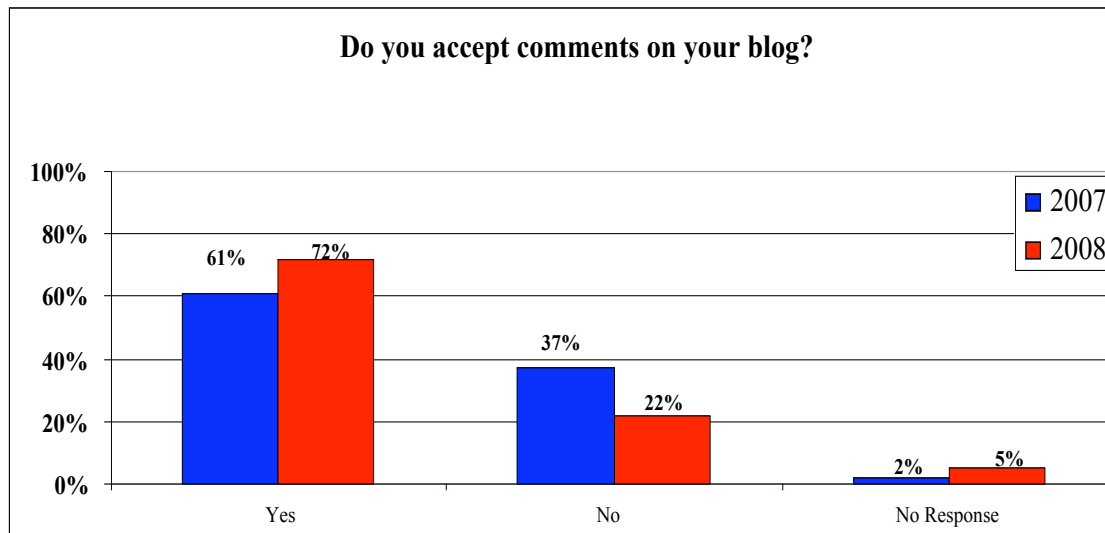
At first glance, college admissions' usage of social media appears to be a case study in the timely adoption of new technology. A closer look shows some improvement necessary to maximize the effectiveness of these tools. Comparing the 2007 and 2008 data, it becomes clear that there has been significant improvement as we look at the implementation of the most popular tool, blogging.

The survey asked about blog logistics like accepting comments, promoting the blog and planning for the future of the blog. The answers to these and other questions from schools with blogs are interesting as it becomes clear they are learning about and using social media more effectively one year later.

The mantra of the blogosphere is "conversation." Blogs that are unattended lose their audience. In the 2007 study 37% of those schools with blogs did not accept comments. By any measure, this is a problem if the goal is to connect with prospective students through ongoing conversation with the school. In 2008 that figure dropped to 22%.

For students and their parents looking to have a conversation online about particular aspects of university life, this increased interaction through comments can be significant. With more and more schools moving into multiple channels of social media, schools that don't allow for conversation will quickly be passed by. Schools are clearly learning to use social media more effectively. (See Figure 5)

Figure 5



Another blog characteristic that allows ease of conversation and increases participation is the use of “RSS” feeds and other notification methods like email or text message. This simplifies the blogosphere for readers who may want to keep up with a certain conversation or be informed of new information without having to check the blog of interest every day to see if there is something new.

In the 2007 study, 46% of schools had an RSS feed available and 31% allowed email subscriptions. In 2008 those numbers rose to 49% and 48% respectively. Statistically, only email subscriptions show significant change.

If students cannot easily connect and reconnect with a blog conversation, it is unlikely they will return. It is likely that some students are now choosing schools because of the relationships developed through the blog. Every school should make it easy for students to be informed of new information appearing on their blog. It is quickly becoming a necessary feature of any blog.

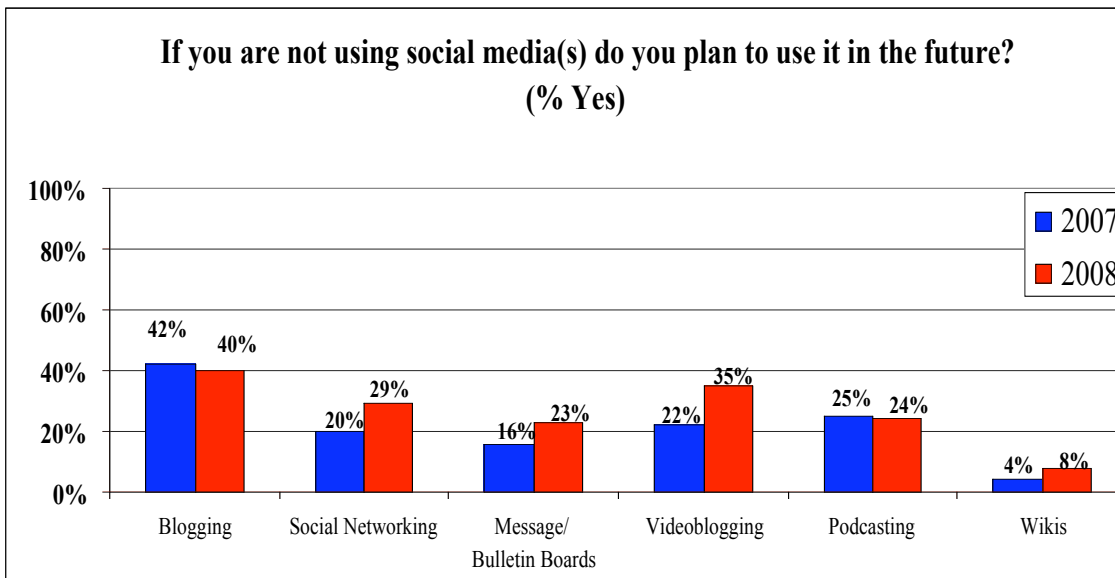
When asked what the future plans are for the school’s blog in 2007, the most popular answer was that there are NO future plans for the blog. This was disconcerting considering the swift movement and evolution of blog technology. In the 2008 study the most popular response was to expand the blog. Many schools now include audio podcasts, video and live chats as part of their blog and others are sure to follow.

When asked if they felt their blogs were successful, 81% of schools with blogs said yes. This percentage was consistent across both studies. This finding is also consistent with studies in business that have consistently shown those using social media are satisfied with it and feel it provides positive results.

Those schools not currently using social media, or a particular tool, were asked if they planned to in the future. Forty-two percent planned to add a blog in 2007 and 40% said

they planned to in 2008, making blogs the most popular tool now and for the foreseeable future. Podcasting and video will probably be added quickly as part of the blog growth. (See Figure 5)

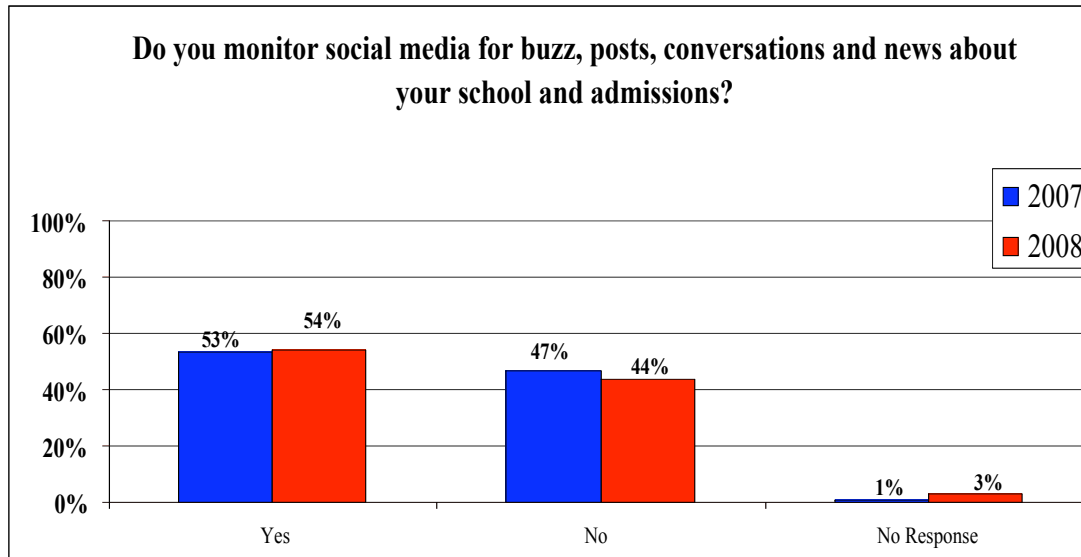
Figure 5



Are they listening?

It is clear that admissions offices are now communicating in new ways. The next question is: Are they listening to what's being said about their school online? Fifty-three percent in 2007 and 54% in 2008 report they monitor the Internet for buzz, posts, conversations and news about their institution. Given the ease with which monitoring can be done, it is still somewhat surprising that just slightly over half of the institutions studied are doing it. (See Figure 6)

Figure 6



The institutions monitoring social media reported doing so manually. Most were using simple Google searches using the name of their school.

Those schools that monitor online activity as it relates to them tend to be schools with higher tuitions, private rather than public. They tend to be users of all forms of social media including blogs, podcasting and video. These schools are also more likely to research students online via social networking sites.

Perceived importance of social media to the school does translate into monitoring behavior. Those schools with a culture where online communications are respected as having value are more likely to fully embrace that activity. They are gathering critical strategic information by listening to what is being said about their institutions and their competitors in the social media world.

To be added to our email distribution list so that you can stay abreast of our research and writings, please email us at eric@ericmattson.com or nbarnes@umassd.edu.

Bios & Acknowledgments

Nora Ganim Barnes, Ph. D.

Nora Ganim Barnes is a Chancellor Professor of Marketing and Director of the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Nora has worked as a consultant for many national and international firms. Working closely with businesses in the Northeast US, Nora and her students have provided marketing research assistance to hundreds of small businesses.

She has published articles in academic and professional journals and proceedings, has contributed chapters to books, and has been awarded numerous research grants. Her work has been covered online and in print by Business Week, the NY Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Fox News and Computer World among others. She has been named a Senior Research Fellow by the Society for New Communications Research. Nora can be reached at nbarnes@umassd.edu.

Eric Mattson

Eric Mattson is the CEO of Financial Insite Inc., a Seattle-based boutique research firm focusing on technology innovation in finance and banking. He's also an independent social media scholar whose research has been covered online and in print by BusinessWeek, Inc. Magazine, the NY Times and a number of other publications.

Prior to his current endeavors, Eric ran direct marketing, market research and marketing analytics for SanMar, one of the largest generic clothing wholesalers in the United States. Eric is a proud graduate of the University of Washington where he earned dual degrees in business administration and mathematics as a Washington Scholar. He can be reached at eric@ericmattson.com.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank those that made this report possible. The 536 universities and colleges who responded to this survey were candid and generous with their comments. They represent all the qualities that make the study of new communications channels for organizations so exciting. Special thanks are also owed to Ava Lescault, Senior Research Associate and the staff and students from the University of MA Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research for their endless enthusiasm and dedication to this project.