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Social Media and Communication Centers: An Introduction

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While many communication centers actively use social media to engage with different publics, there is a need for scholarship addressing how centers can best use social media to enhance student professional development, cross-campus connections, branding, and center visibility. This introduction to the *CCJ* special section on social media and communication centers offers a rationale for centers' strategic incorporation of social media platforms. In particular, we discuss the importance of strategic branding, engaging different publics, and using social media to enhance consultant professional development as key features of social media use by communication center professionals.
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Introduction

In the past two years, 88% of 18-29 year-olds, 78% of 30-49 year-olds, and 64% of 50-64 year-olds have used some form of social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018; Perrin & Anderson, 2019). To account for the majority of the US adult population accessing a range of social media platforms, universities rely on social media to market to and reach these varied demographics. Communication centers on college and university campuses have followed suit with many centers using social media to market their centers and engage with target publics, such as students, faculty, staff, administration, and alumni. This special section of *CCJ* explores how communication centers are strategically using social media to reach these publics and create authentic and meaningful relationships that can support – and mimic – the face-to-face interactions that students

experience with communication center staff every day.

While everyone may be doing social media--and may have even been doing social media for over a decade (see Harrison, Southard, & Cuny, 2019 in this section), the social media scholarship coming out of communication centers is relatively sparse compared to the breadth of social media scholarship in the fields of communication and higher education. Among the existing scholarship, scholars in communication and writing centers have examined how centers create digital communities using social media (Buck, 2017); how they use social media for consultant professional development and personal branding (Truman, 2019b); and how they rely on platforms like Facebook to extend social justice conversations (Naydan, 2013). Along with these published accounts of social media use, there are articles that appear on blogs highlighting specific social media best practices within centers (Fandel,

2018; Marciniak, 2012). While the scholarship on social media is certainly increasing, the scholarly landscape of best practices to support social media coming out of those *doing* social media work in the communication center field is needed.

This *CCJ* special section is a first step at addressing that gap. The articles and case studies offered here provide examples of how centers of all sizes and budgets are doing and making social media work for their centers while offering best practices and guidelines for others to follow. Guiding this special section, we ask how, at a time when everyone "does" social, can communication centers create a unique voice for themselves on social media to stand out and how can they approach content in a way that is relationship-focused and not transactional? With limited time, budgets, and other resources dedicated to marketing efforts, how can centers create and maintain a successful social media presence? The articles that follow weigh in on these topics and other issues centers face when attempting to get social.

Connecting these articles are ways to address budgetary, personnel, and time constraints to leverage social media and more effectively engage with multiple publics. While social media appears to happen ubiquitously, communication centers should use social media rhetorically – carefully crafting personas that reflect the many populations they serve. What we explore here are several considerations for communication centers wishing to enhance social media use, including branding and crafting an identity to address multiple audiences. These considerations should underlie the work communication centers do when they engage with others on social media. Engagement is a key term as we also highlight how social media can be used to reflect an *engaged* communication center. Engagement means reaching the appropriate

stakeholders as well as providing students working in those centers with opportunities to succeed. Along with highlighting the status of their own center, communication centers should be invested in social media because of the professional development opportunities it provides students. Enhancing center profiles, engaging with others, and providing consultants opportunities to succeed are three themes we expand upon here but are weaved across the articles featured in this special section.

Enhancing Center Profiles: Brand Identity and Reaching Multiple Publics

As is true in many other areas, "new media are changing the ways colleges and universities serve students" (Corwin, 2014, p. 104). Postsecondary institutions use social media for many reasons, including pedagogically (Hurley & Hea, 2014; Wells & Vie, 2017; Vie, 2017), to network and connect various audiences (Corwin, 2014; Donelan, 2016), and to brand themselves to prospective and current stakeholders (Barnett Love, 2015). Branding is particularly important for service-oriented organizations that can struggle to communicate their value and purpose compared to organizations that produce physical products (Lowrie, 2007). This section will focus on the importance of centers developing strategic branding and marketing plans on social media in order to meet the needs of different audiences. While early higher education branding efforts focused on traditional brand communication that largely ignored social media, today they embrace and recognize the power that social media has to "drastically impact a brand's reputation and in some cases survival" (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016, p. 3096). Today, colleges and universities competing for brand-savvy students are placing increased importance on including social

media as part of their communication strategy. Similar to commercial brands, higher education institutions can and should use social media and marketing plans to develop a distinctive brand presence that can create a sustainable competitive advantage (Aaker, 2004; Barnett Love, 2015; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). By using social media to create a unique look and feel, higher education institutions can create "communities of learners where education and contemporary culture intersect" (Kurre, Ladd, Foster, Monahan, & Romano, 2012, p. 237). To facilitate internal communities, many colleges and universities publicize their branding guidelines, further solidifying the story they want the institution to tell.

Centers relying on institutional guidelines and following this industry trend of incorporating a social media plan into their communication strategy can create a brand presence that increases engagement, satisfaction, and brand loyalty with current students while allowing them to recruit prospective students (Casidy, 2013). While developing a marketing plan and social media presence may seem daunting to "those ill-equipped for the challenge: directors who are typically hired on the basis of expertise in the area of teaching oral communication, rather than marketing expertise" (Barnett Love, 2015, p. 37), Chasteen, Cole, & DeRoss (2019), Crowley-Watson (2019), and Truman (2019a)'s articles in this special section provide resources for directors just getting started. These articles focus on involving consultants to assist with branding and content development, and using aggregators to make posting more manageable.

By taking the time initially to develop a marketing plan and social media presence, directors can continue building on that work in subsequent semesters (Barnett Love, 2015). As Rutter et al. (2016) write, "The shift in emphasis from traditional brand communication to the use of social media often leads to positive outcomes for the brand, particularly in the case of co-creation of content between consumers and brands, and enables brands to reach new consumers" (p. 3096). Students, and other publics, can engage with communication centers and publicly show their support and brand affiliation by following centers on social media, liking their posts, replying to their posts, sharing their posts, tagging them in posts, checking-in while visiting their spaces, and more. A student who likes a center's Facebook page or re-tweets its event on Twitter, for example, is openly endorsing the center by engaging with its brand presence. As such, communication centers can use social media strategically to enhance their brand and to communicate and reinforce the kinds of work they do. For example, a blog post can detail or chronicle the work a consultant does with students; Twitter can be used to host a Q&A session with a faculty coordinator; a Facebook photo album can document annual events; a customized Snapchat filter can engage visitors on-site; Instagram stories can be used for a student takeover; and LinkedIn can spotlight professional achievements for the center and its staff (see Bales & Dunaway, 2019; Bryant, Bianco, Riddell, Gardner, Vaught, & Carpenter, 2019; Clements, Foltz, & Gullo, 2019 in this section for case studies of what this kind of engagement looks like in different contexts). The varied ways of using social media platforms can speak to the needs of the different demographics wishing to learn more about particular centers.

Incorporating Social Media Channels to Target Multiple Publics.
Communication centers have many publics – current students, prospective students, parents, administration, partner organizations and more – and therefore their

social media strategy should include a variety of channels that best target and engage these respective audiences. Different social media platforms have different affordances and "there are different ways in which visual and multimodal resources are configured on particular social media platforms, differences that shape how social media are taken up and used" (Adami & Jewitt, 2016, p. 264). While posting the same content to all social media channels is certainly the most efficient way to spread information, it is not the most effective way to engage with different publics. As Bales & Dunaway (2019) and Harrison et al. (2019) illustrate, different demographics access content in varied ways across channels. For example, while traditionally aged undergraduate students are more likely to follow and engage with a brand on Instagram or Snapchat (Perrin & Anderson, 2019), their parents are more likely on Facebook, while administrators are more likely checking out the competition on college review sites. For centers wishing to connect with similar businesses or brands, like other communication centers or professional writing organizations, they should visit LinkedIn, the social media channel created specifically for professional networking. As authors across this special section illustrate, taking time to develop content suitable for each platform can enhance the kinds of connections possible between centers and the publics they serve.

In addition to tailoring their social strategy to their target audiences, communication centers should also consider a platform's specific purpose and the types of content they want to share with these audiences when communicating their center's mission and vision (see Bryant et al., 2019 for Twitter and Clements et al., 2019 for Instagram specifically). Centers regularly producing professional video content should develop a YouTube channel

to permanently store this content using strategically labeled playlists that followers can subscribe to. Centers that have hundreds of photos showcasing events or recent center renovations should be archiving them using Facebook photo albums or photo carousels on Instagram, so that they can share their story visually with followers. Centers wanting to engage followers remotely should use Facebook or Instagram live to showcase workshops and events as they are happening to make followers feel like they are part of the action.

While many brands race to "do social" with an extensive channel lineup that can lead to dormant platforms or repetitive content, centers should be strategic with the platforms they incorporate into their communication plans by focusing on their target demographics, audience preferences, and the content that best shares their stories. Flexibility is an especially important quality for centers that wish to maintain social media longevity. In their articles in this section, Harrison et al. (2019) and Truman (2019a) describe the evolution of their respective center's social media presence over the years. By embracing shifting technologies and putting trust in their consultants as content creators, Harrison et al. (2019) and Truman (2019a) both show how centers can maintain relationships with alumni while developing new relationships with students and consultants over time. Centers that are most successful in their social media use are ones that use different platforms to highlight their centers' successes while tailoring their content to audiences that matter.

Enhancing the Professional Identities of Communication Centers and Peer Consultants

Acts of professionalization, such as increased training, accountability, research,

and recognition, help transform what might be considered "just a job" into something recognized more as a "profession." As the work of communication center directors and peer consultants becomes increasingly professionalized, it is important for them to develop and maintain strong professional identities at their institutions, where their work may not always be understood or highly recognized. As part of a strategic marketing plan, centers can use social media to make their center's work visible to stakeholders across an institution. This section will focus on how communication centers can use social media to enhance their professional reputations through engaging multiple publics and how they can offer peer consultants professional development opportunities through participation on social media teams.

Elevating Status as an Engaged "Center." Many in the communication center field have recognized that thriving centers are actively engaged with programming throughout their institutions (Carpenter, 2018), whether it be with academic departments (Fairchild & Carpenter, 2015), student life / student affairs initiatives (Conners & Brammer, 2018), or libraries (Dvorak, 2018; Mabrey III, Clarke, & Schubert, 2018). While many of these engagements require collaborative planning efforts that often occur months in advance, centers can elevate their status on campus by developing social media platforms that allow them to engage more frequently, and often less formally, with departments and programs across an institution. By tagging, liking, and interacting with other handles at their home institution, centers can connect with departments that require communication-related assignments (which is likely all of them), and with offices outside of their typical daily interactions, such as

admissions, marketing, or student media. This increased activity can help communication centers clearly articulate their missions and show what they do on a daily basis to an entire institutional community.

Engaging students. The most important audiences for communication centers to engage are students, faculty, and administration. Barnett Love (2015) recognized that "because college students are intense consumers of social media, our centers need to harness this form of communication for our individual purposes" (p. 45). Since "communication center directors, staff and tutors must continually analyze student perception of the center space in order to promote long-term campus viability" (Strawser, Apostel, & O'Keeffe, 2018a, p. 2), it seems imperative to use social media to shape students' perceptions about how communication centers can be valuable assets to their education. A center's social media team can begin engaging students--and shaping their perceptions of the center as a professional, student-centered environment--even before they visit to work with consultants. By posting regularly and connecting with first-year students as soon as they arrive on campus, centers can inform students about the effectiveness of one-to-one and small group consultations, as well as any other opportunities they have to learn at the center. Early interaction can hopefully lead to long-term engagement (ideally a student's entire duration at the institution and as alumni). Since many students are members of student-run clubs and organizations, centers can engage the social media accounts for those organizations as a way to become a regular, expected part of student life.

Engaging faculty. In addition to students, communication centers should be

engaging faculty in an effort to inform them about their services. It is common for communication centers to continually have to "prove their institutional worth" (Strawser, Apostel, & O'Keeffe, 2018b, p. 13), and it is also common for centers to have to teach / remind faculty and administrators about what they do and how they do it. While faculty may not use their own social media accounts for these purposes, it is likely they have department-specific accounts that will engage with a center's. Faculty are heavily influential in the academic lives of students, and thus, they are in excellent positions to refer students to communication centers for assistance (King & Atkins-Sayre, 2012).

Engaging "administration." While faculty are often thought to be the first in line to refer a student to a communication center, student affairs professionals, advisors, librarians and other similar members of the "administrative" (non-faculty) side of campus life are also in prime positions to be communication center influencers. Student affairs professionals are charged with organizing student orientations, recruiting events, and other major campus-based activities; advisors meet regularly with students about academic progress; and librarians are in daily contact with students working on research projects. Engaging their offices' social media platforms can help raise awareness of communication center services, and it can remind those areas to include the center in some of their student-centered activities (e.g., orientation or a finals week study hall).

A second reason to use social media to engage administrators is to promote the communication center's value to the institution. Through the process of careful storytelling, Twitter and Instagram posts can serve as a way to highlight how a

communication center helps an institution achieve its mission and core values. While directors are typically asked once or twice a year to produce reports about a center's services / effectiveness, social media platforms allow directors to share updates regarding the type of positive information that might appear in a report to larger populations. As such, a social media platform can serve as a communication center's digital archive that showcases events, student and consultant success stories, campus collaborations, and faculty / department partnerships.

Engaging prospective employees. Human resources and hiring departments across industries are increasingly using social media to seek out and recruit prospective employees, particularly students (Dery, Tansley, & Hafermalz, 2014; Giordani, 2013). They also use social media as a way to assess potential candidates (Hood, Robles, & Hopkins, 2014). While engaging with different administrative-type groups across campuses, centers can share flyers, job fair ads, and consultant success stories to recruit other students to communication center positions. Students engaging with a center's social media can learn more about the different positions and consultant success stories from accessing center archives of events and activities.

Engaging external communities--local and professional. Finally, a social media team can enhance a communication center's professional status by engaging external stakeholders, including those in the local and professional communities. For example, a center may engage local employers, especially if they have communication center alumni working there, which may increase opportunities for collaborations, such as communication-related workshops for the workplace.

Connecting with other communication centers and communication center-related organizations, such as the National Association of Communication Centers, can help peer consultants understand and develop stronger professional identities knowing that they are part of a larger field and professional conversation; those connections may also help faculty and administrators understand how communication center work is part of a larger, academic field, too.

Providing Peer Consultants with Additional Career Readiness Skills

Developing and maintaining a social media presence and engaging with multiple stakeholders does not have to be the job of directors alone. Beyond alleviating some of the stress and work involved in maintaining social media platforms, consultants can gain valuable transferable skills by being part of social media teams. While much has been written about the best practices for training peer communication consultants to assist students (Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012; Turner & Sheckels, 2015), directors typically do not expect peer consultants to be marketing experts (Barnett Love, 2015) as that is not the core of the work peer consultants do each day. However, it is increasingly common for directors to enlist peer consultants to help promote communication centers due to the latter's familiarity with social media (Barnett Love, 2015; Bryant et. al., 2019; Chasteen et al., 2019; Truman, 2019a). Providing peer consultants with the opportunity to be part of a communication center's social media team is an excellent way to afford them additional professional development opportunities that align with career readiness skills established by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

NACE (n. d.) defines "career readiness" as the "attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace." While the skills NACE identifies can be developed by consultants through their daily work with students, each skill can also be further developed by working as social media team member. Below is a list of six NACE skills followed by an explanation of how working on a communication center's social media team can build that skill.

1. **Critical Thinking / Problem Solving**: analyze institutional context to develop appropriate content; consider audience expectations; use center data to create effective content
2. **Oral / Visual Communication**: present text clearly and effectively; produce effective visuals
3. **Teamwork / Collaboration**: communicate with team members to achieve common objectives; collaborate on creating a social media calendar; meet deadlines
4. **Digital Technology**: edit images; manage platform; understand graphic design
5. **Global / Intercultural Fluency**: develop content that meets the needs of various audiences and is culturally sensitive, respectful, and inclusive; interact with various publics
6. **Leadership**: promote center to institution; mentor new team members; motivate colleagues

In addition to developing these career readiness skills, a communication center's social media team members may also develop a stronger sense of professional identity, as A. Buck (2017) has shown. The opportunities to create, write, and edit content for a professional entity, as well as working as part of a marketing-based team, can not only enhance a communication

center's professional identity on campus, but can also enhance the co-curricular experiences of the peer consultants who work there.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why communication centers should develop and maintain a social media presence. The articles presented in this special section highlight the different approaches that centers can take depending on the budget, time, and personnel they have available. Not every platform or every approach will work for every center. The social media work taking place in our own center has been an experiment over the last few years--one that has truly been a pleasure to perform. We believe that when approached with a playful attitude, a center's use of social media can help them stand out on their campus and highlight the personality of that space. We hope that this special section will propel communication centers to continue thinking about what it means for our centers to do social media and we look forward to engaging with you on social!

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