

# GETTING CONNECTED

## A SOCIAL MEDIA PROJECT

### Report by

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## Why Are We Doing This Research?

Online interactions have changed the way college students communicate, get information, and connect with others. But despite the widespread use of social media among students and the increasing numbers of institutions using social media sites to reach out and connect with students, little is known about the benefits and challenges of using social media and mobile technology in certain educational contexts, such as community colleges, and for specific purposes, such as increasing student engagement and improving student outcomes (e.g., academic achievement and persistence rates) (Fagioli, Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen, forthcoming).

Community colleges are, currently, the most important higher education institutions in the United States. Indeed, they play a key role in educating the large number of nontraditional, low-income, and underprepared students who have entered higher education in the past several decades. Despite increased access, community colleges are struggling to graduate students. Almost all scholar-provided strategies to improve community college completion rates revolve around the notion of engagement: improve student engagement, enhance faculty engagement, and enhance engagement outside of the institution (CCCSE, 2009; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

In particular, social media has been offered as a solution to improve student engagement because of its capacity to

connect with thousands of students in a relatively short amount of time. In fact, the 2009 Community College Survey of Student Engagement found the more students use social networking tools to communicate with other students, instructors, and college staff regarding coursework and other academic purposes, the higher their levels of engagement (Saenz et al., 2011).

Simultaneously, colleges have begun to embrace various technologies to communicate with students, potential students, alumni, and the broader community. But, while both students and institutions utilize various forms of social media more and more, we know less about how these new technologies affect students' success, particularly for community colleges. For instance, very little is known about how community colleges find and allocate resources to develop coherent institutional strategies around social media, about how community colleges train staff and faculty to use these tools, and about the value and impact of social media on institutional processes and student outcomes (e.g., providing financial aid information, marketing, academic success, retention, and graduation) (Deil-Amen & Rios-Aguilar, 2014).

Given the low levels of academic achievement and college completion rates across the country, and knowing their unique dynamics and complexities, community colleges must find cost-effective ways to

*(Continued on page 2)*



## Project Partners



## Community Colleges

- Chandler-Gilbert Community College (AZ)
- Cuyahoga Community College (OH)
- Laramie County Community College (WY)
- Los Angeles Trade-Technical College (CA)
- NorthWest Arkansas Community College (AR)
- Onondaga Community College (NY)
- Phoenix College (AZ)
- San Jacinto College (TX)
- Western Technical College (WI)

(Continued from page 1)

increase student engagement and success by altering the context. Our project, *Getting Connected: Harnessing the Power of Social Media to Enhance Community College Student Success* ([www.gettingconnectedresearch.com](http://www.gettingconnectedresearch.com)), does that. It considers student engagement in an innovative way (e.g., real-time, multiple locations, student-driven, mobile, and highly visual), diverging from more traditional ways of understanding engagement. Though social media is certainly not a silver bullet, it does differ from previous efforts to leverage technology: The interactional component of social media facilitates person-to-person contact and communication in ways that other technologies are unable to accomplish. Can the dynamic nature of social media better address some of the most pressing issues community college students face? We think so. Actually, we believe that an often unrealized benefit of using social media is that it provides an opportunity to observe, or make visible, student interactions that reveal their struggles, which is an important tool to aid reform at these institutions (Deil-Amen & Rios-Aguilar, 2014).

## What Is the Purpose of This Research?

Beginning in fall 2011, as part of a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant-funded intervention, nine urban, small town, and rural U.S. community colleges (located in Arkansas, Arizona, California, New York, Ohio, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming) were selected to adopt a Facebook-based application, known as Schools App, for limited use by invited students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

This is the first longitudinal research study to use real-time data generated by the users of Schools App to examine how commuter-based community colleges attempt to use social media technology as a mechanism to increase students' connection to and success in college.

The purpose of this research project is to answer the following questions:

- What is the relationship between the use of the app and students' success outcomes?
- In what ways do students feel they belong to college and try to interact to create community?
- In what ways do students feel connected to/integrated into college?
- In what ways do students strategize success?

## Community College Partner Campus Characteristics

INSTITUTION	ENROLLMENT	LOCATION	STUDENT RACE/ETHNICITY		
			WHITE	HISPANIC	AFRICAN AMERICAN
CC #1	15,734	City, Large	6%	52%	27%
CC #2	8,365	City, Small	77%	11%	2%
CC #3	31,250	City, Large	54%	4%	33%
CC #4	13,000	City, Large	33%	33%	11%
CC #5	12,296	Suburban, Large	60%	18%	4%
CC #6	11,783	Suburban, Large	73%	3%	10%
CC #7	28,549	City, Large	38%	41%	10%
CC #8	5,573	Rural, Medium	89%	1%	2%
CC #9	4,905	Rural, Medium	83%	7%	3%

Source: Based on information from IPEDS and the Carnegie Classification, 2010.



# Who Is Using Schools App?

Total Number of App Users\*

**38,704**

29% average adoption rate

\*As of March 25, 2014

## Recruitment Strategies

Colleges used the following strategies to increase adoption rates:

- Student Ambassadors
- Reengagement Campaigns
- Opportunity Drawings
- Contests
- New Student Orientation
- Classroom Presentations
- Videos and Flyers
- Promotional Giveaways (e.g., T-shirt)

## What About Faculty and Staff?

**157**

highest app enrollment at a single college

**110**

second highest app enrollment at a single college

## Number of Schools App Users by Institution

Institution	Enrollment	App Users	Adoption Rate
CC #7	28,385	12,682	45%
CC #3	31,000	8,204	26%
CC #1	15,000	4,249	28%
CC #2	8,341	4,389	53%
CC #6	12,000	4,240	35%
CC #4	13,000	1,968	15%
CC #9	5,000	1,711	34%
CC #5	19,791	1,066	5%
CC #8	1,200	195	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>133,717</b>	<b>38,704</b>	<b>29%</b>

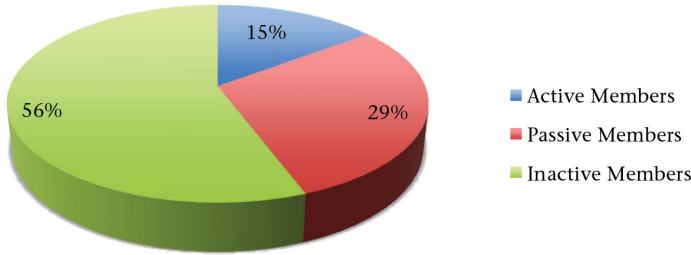
Sources: Number of app users based on information from Schools App at each institution, April 2014. Total enrollment figures obtained from college websites or reports.



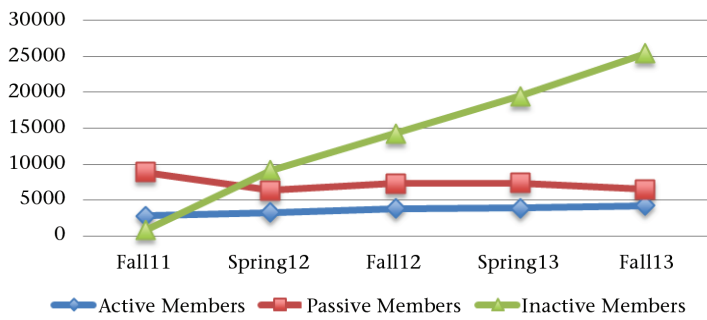
## Types of Schools App Users



Percentage of Users by Type



Change in Numbers of Users by Type



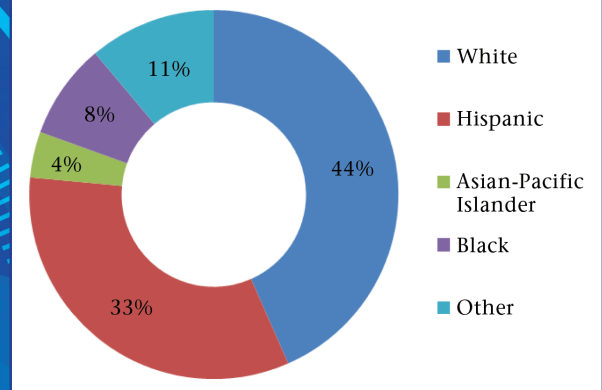
Percent Change Fall 2011 to Fall 2013



## Schools App Member Profiles Fall 2013

- 64%** Female Students
- 41%** Nontraditional Students
- 31%** Remedial Students
- 45%** Full-Time Students
- 60%** Persistence Rates
- 56%** Receiving Financial Aid
- 2.48** Average Term GPA

App Membership by Ethnicity

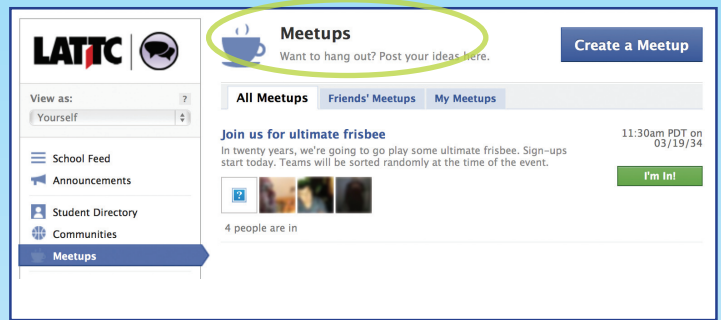
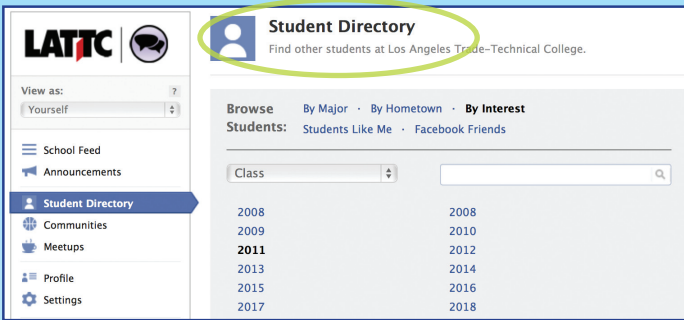


\* Other includes: Native Americans/Alaska Natives, Multiracial, did not specify, and missing data.

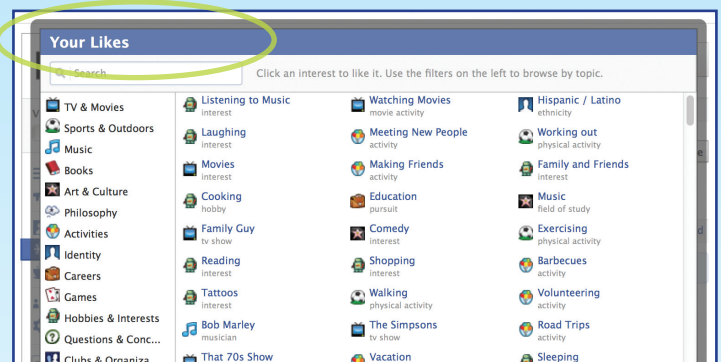
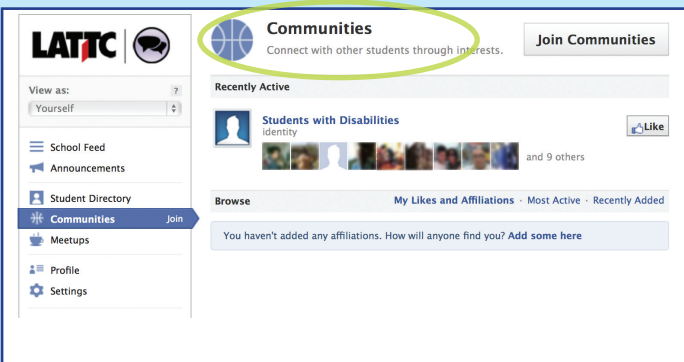


# Schools App: How Does It Work?

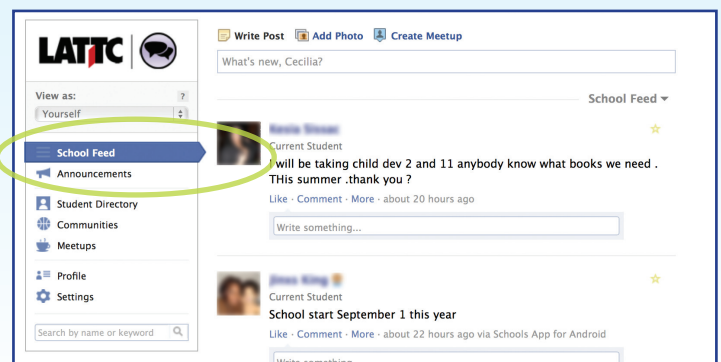
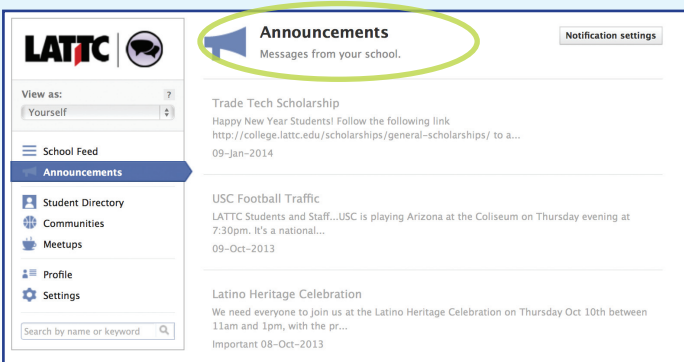
## A Way to Find Other Students



## Opportunities to Connect With Students With Similar Interests



## Access to Campus Information and Updates



\* Source: Los Angeles Trade-Tech Community College Schools App

## KEY INDICATORS OF SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY SUCCESS

The amount of time users spend on social media

The level of engagement and interactivity users have with content

## Did You Know?

91% of college students use Facebook  
(Wiley & Sisson, 2006)

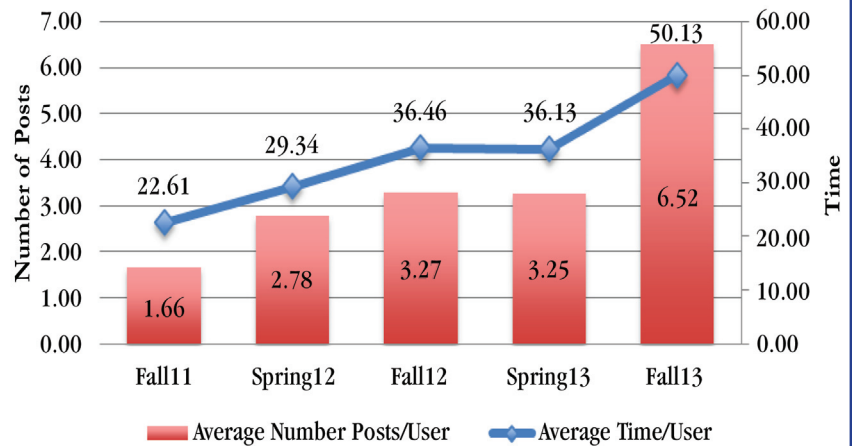
61% of social media time is spent on smartphones and tablets  
(BI Intelligence, 2014)

On average, college students have between 200 and 249 friends on Facebook  
(Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009)

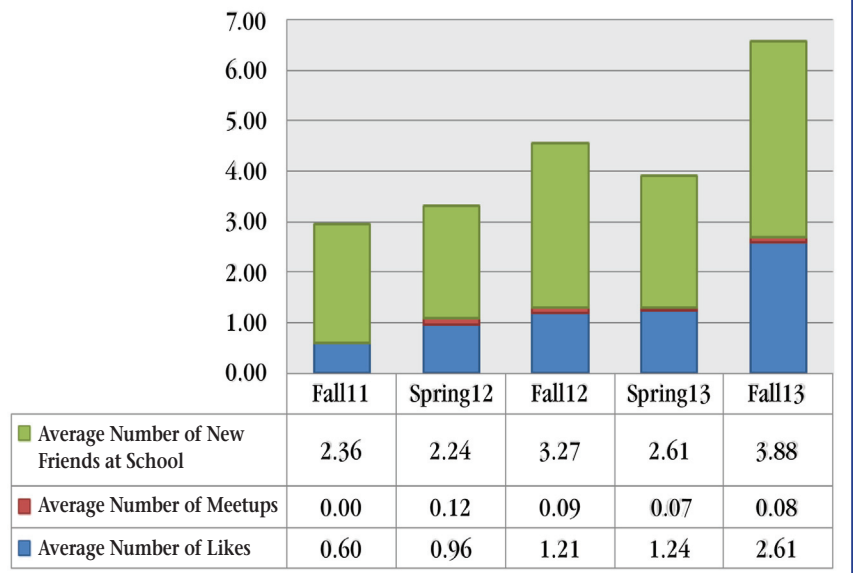
On average, college students report between 30 and 60 minutes of daily Facebook use  
(Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009)

## How Are Members Using Schools App?

Relationship Between Average Number of Posts and Average Time Spent on App  
Fall 2011-Fall 2013



Average App Usage  
(by New Friends at School, Meetups, and Likes)  
Fall 2011-Fall 2013







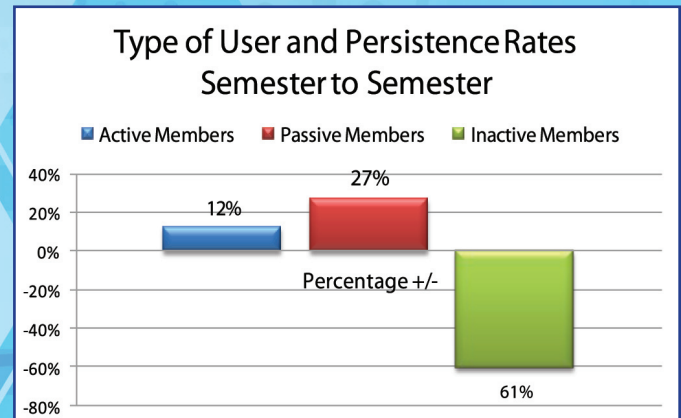
## What Is the Relationship Between Schools App Usage and Student Success?

Results for persistence and GPA across all colleges are provided below. Overall, the study found that both active users and passive users across all colleges were significantly more likely to re-enroll in college (12 percent and 27 percent, respectively) compared to nonmembers. The analyses used sophisticated statistical techniques, including propensity score matching and regression analyses, which controlled for students' background characteristics and enrollment status; thus, accounting for factors that might otherwise explain differences in persistence or GPA.

### Across All Community College Partners

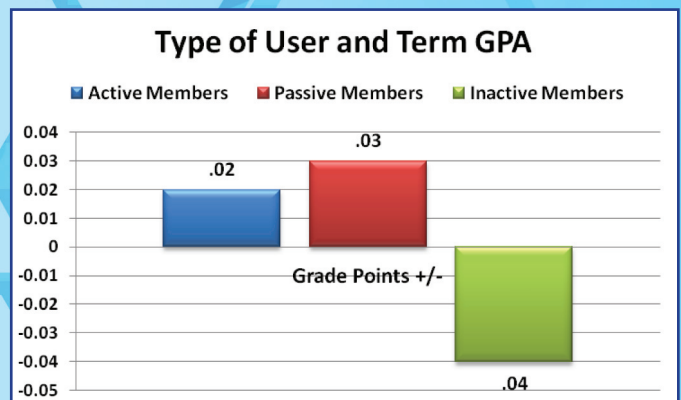
#### Persistence Rates Semester to Semester

- **Active Users** are **12% more likely** to persist to the next semester compared to nonmembers of the app.
- **Passive Users** are **27% more likely** to persist to the next semester compared to nonmembers of the app.
- **Inactive Users** are **61% less likely** to persist to the next semester compared to nonmembers of the app.



#### Term GPA Improvement

- **Active Users** have a term GPA which is **.02 grade points higher** compared to nonmembers of the app.
- **Passive Users** have a term GPA which is **.03 grade points higher** compared to nonmembers of the app.
- **Inactive Users** have a term GPA which is **.04 grade points lower** compared to nonmembers of the app.



## How Can Schools App Be Used More Strategically?

### I. Exposure to the Technology

The impact of Schools App was restricted by gaps in students' exposure to it. Many who had not joined the app admitted in interviews that they were not even aware it existed. Overall, we observed that all colleges made efforts to increase the number of app members. However, given the low persistence and high stop-out rates at community colleges, the students actually enrolled could change drastically each semester.

This necessitates a more pervasive and continuous digital promotion. Digitally, in print, and physically on campus, Schools App was not consistently visible. There were not enough ways for students to become aware of how to sign up as members. The primary means through which students were made aware of the app was through an email invitation to their college email account. This was problematic because many students regarded the invitation as spam or believed it was irrelevant. Some schools provided a link to the app from their school's Facebook page, but the link was not evident on the mobile version of the page. These seemingly minor issues constrained the spread of Schools App. We recommend that colleges consistently make the sign up process transparent and visible to more effectively expose students to the app.

### 2. Awareness of Its Value

Many students we spoke with did not understand how Schools App could serve them. Specifically, students were unaware of the multiple purposes the app could serve to meet various community college needs, such as the potential to create a socio-academic, financial, and procedural help-seeking community that students needed and desired. In general, these purposes were not a thrust of campus marketing campaigns.

Based on their personal experiences with Facebook, students assumed the app was a space to socialize with other students, and felt they did not need a tool for that.

In interviews and focus groups, students noted they would be excited to join if it provided a space to engage with others across similar classes or program/career trajectories, in ways that differ from traditional course management systems, which function more like email lists than spaces to interact with classmates individually.

### 3. Routine Engagement

Schools App relies heavily on the social component of social media; in order for a single user to reap benefits, other college users must be present for social interactions to occur. It relies to a greater degree on widespread use by an entire school, college, or community. The relatively low proportion of active users limited the routine engagement of the other students at some colleges.

When looking at adoption rates, we learned that some colleges actually succeeded in enrolling most of their students; however, after students signed up, they did not find it valuable to use the app. Thus, students' willingness to engage after joining seems to depend in part on the extent and frequency of engagement of other students within the college.

It is important to remember that not all users have to be active users to benefit from the app. As presented earlier in this report, we found that both active users (i.e., members who spent time on the app commenting/posting) and passive users (members who spent time only observing comments/posts of others) across all colleges were significantly more likely to re-enroll to college (12 percent and 27 percent, respectively) compared to nonmembers. The analyses, using sophisticated statistical techniques (including propensity score matching and regression analyses) which controlled for students' background characteristics and enrollment status, accounted for the factors that might otherwise explain differences in persistence or GPA.



### Getting Connected A Social Media Project

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