



Teaching Digital Identity

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Whether we call it protesting, mudslinging, or “digital hate,” as Chancellor Phyllis Wise did in [her blog post](#) addressing University of Illinois’ Twitter incident, there is nothing new about very public, incendiary criticism occurring online — or in person. Racist and derogatory slurs and innuendos happen every day, in our college and university student centers, in our residence halls, out on the field at games. And numerous colleges and universities have felt the wrath of social media outrage in response to a decision, changes in leadership, and other developments.

As those of us in higher education know all too well, we lack the time, staff and resources to police our students on the Internet through disciplinary action. It’s simply not feasible or reasonable, nor is it conducive to free speech.

Our colleges and universities need to take a proactive stance and realize that digital identity development – something that [thought leaders such as Eric Stoller](#) have highlighted as part of the conversation defining student affairs and higher education – can and should be a part of our institutional curriculums. This is more than just a major in social media that focuses on marketing skills, or the occasional guest speaker at a student event. This goes beyond our coaches handing out guidelines to athletes.

This is student affairs and academic leadership making a commitment to offer educational outreach and resources to students campus-wide, ideally through first-year courses, so that all freshmen benefit. Colleges are increasingly offering classes that cover important topics like financial literacy, as part of their orientation classes for incoming students. What if more colleges and universities devoted some orientation class time to digital identity topics such as personal branding, where students were required to critically examine case studies of individuals (companies, politicians, actors, etc.) who suffered the consequences of doing something awful online? Such an exercise would surely help them realize their mistakes live on in infamy online. Knowing how to unplug and be present and in the moment is another area where first-year students would benefit from receiving ideas and resources to discuss and develop with one another. Basic digital literacy skills, such as knowing the professional benefits of writing emails so that they don’t come across as casual, flippant texts to friends, would be worth sharing in a first-year course experience for all incoming students.

Career services also has a part to play in providing regular, ongoing guidance and resources so students can market their ideas, potential and leadership online, not just their senior years, but right from the beginning, as part of their experiences in pursuing internships, degrees and

ultimately, jobs. If you talk to your average college students, surprisingly, some of them think LinkedIn is something that their parents use, not something they should be tapping into to network and explore jobs and internship options. If career services counselors started working with them early on to develop LinkedIn profiles, imagine how much easier it might be for students to research great internships and connect with potential employers, alumni and mentors throughout their time in college.

The pressure is on for higher education to get with the program and be more relevant to what students need to become gainfully employed after college. How far into the future will these hateful tweets haunt University of Illinois students once they start looking for jobs? My guess is forever. How will these students, many of whom have grown up in a highly digitized world where communication is immediate and readily shared through numerous technologies, realize their potential as online ambassadors without some sort of educational outreach?