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Email is Alive: How to Communicate with Graduate College Students

Valarie C. Burke

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EMAIL IS ALIVE: HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH GRADUATE COLLEGE
STUDENTS

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to ascertain how graduate college students prefer to be communicated with regarding academic deadlines, professional development events and social events. Living in a Web 3.0 world, where people are never alone, but rather always connected, there are several methods to share information. I focus on email, websites, text messaging, instant messaging, and Facebook. For the richest data, I used both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, I conducted focus groups and then designed and distributed a survey. If more engaged students are the more successful, they first need to be aware of ways to get engaged. What is the best form of communication to convey the information that will engage them? Results showed that graduate students prefer email over text messaging and instant messaging when receiving information regarding academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For those that decide to pursue graduate school, life becomes increasingly busier. I approach my dissertation as a doctoral student who is also employed full-time at the same four-year public institution being studied. With a strong interest in communication and higher education, I approach the research with my sociological lens. The sociological research on graduate students and communication is limited. However, one goal of this dissertation is to expand on the work of Anabel Quan-Haase and Jessica Collins (2008) from the Department of Sociology at University of Toronto. Their article “I’m There, but I Might Not Want to Talk to You” discusses the changes in social accessibility and need to manage it. I’m intrigued by public and private boundaries graduate students may (not) have, strive to have, or completely ignore. “Students face competing social and academic demands of their time” (2008:529) and a role of their institution is to offer resources to help them succeed inside and outside of the classroom. My purpose in this dissertation is to better understand how best to communicate information to students and why.

"The greatest problem in communication is the illusion it has been achieved"

-George Bernard Shaw

University faculty and staff strive to get students to meet deadlines and get involved in campus events and activities. As Karen Webber (2013) discussed in “Does Involvement Really Matter? Indicators of College Student Success and Satisfaction,” an engaged student is a more successful student and more likely to graduate in a timely manner. Faculty, staff, and students create opportunities to build the campus culture and get each other involved. My study wants to help build the campus culture by researching

the most efficient methods to communicate about important deadlines and events with students.

A 2013 article by USA Today College found that students feel left out if they are not keeping up with Facebook pages. A law student at the University of Nevada Las Vegas told *USA Today College* "if you don't have a Facebook account, you just miss out on a lot. You miss events that were only advertised on Facebook, you miss inside jokes among your classmates, you miss out on a casual online chat while studying that you otherwise wouldn't have and so on." In addition, being left out of extra-curricular activities in graduate school can harm one's future. Establishing friendships with fellow classmates can benefit one inside and outside the classroom with networking and building professional connections. Without knowing how to connect with the student body, how can we be certain they are informed of campus happenings and approaching deadlines? From a sociological perspective, computer-mediated communication can build and reinforce a campus culture; it can enhance solidarity and bring groups of people together to study for final exams, learn transferrable skills at the weekly workshop, and unite advisors with advisees on proposal writing. Effective communication can build a campus community and ultimately help students with a variety of achievements including: timely graduation, less debt, reduced stress, life-long friendships, networks, employment, robust resumes, and happier alumni who remain members of the campus culture.

The purpose of this research is to ascertain how graduate college students prefer to be communicated with regarding academic deadlines and events. My research questions are:

1. Do graduate college students prefer certain information about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events via a specific platform? Which?
2. Why do graduate college students access the university's website? What do they especially like and dislike about it, what best resonates with them?
3. Do graduate students visit their university affiliated Facebook pages (i.e. university, college, department)? What do they typically look for when accessing it?
4. Are graduate students reading emails from faculty and staff? If so, which aspect of the email makes it more likely that they read them?
5. How do graduate students typically respond to UNLV messages about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events via:
 - a. Email
 - b. Social Media
6. Does Age, race, gender, and student's department, program (masters vs doctoral) and enrollment status (full time vs. part time) matter in the preferences found?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

"The Triple Revolution - Social Network, Internet, and Mobile" (Rainie & Wellman 2012) has changed the way we live. Lee and Wellman state "many children learn how to use the computer before they learn how to spell" (p. 66) making the computer a constant device in life as they grow. Living in a Web 3.0 world we have high speed connections, Internet on multiple platforms, and read and write on the Internet" (Jurgenson 2010). Today people don't sit alone, walk alone, or do anything alone if they have their phone-they are "hyperconnected" (Jurgenson 2010:95). In addition, research shows "income and education levels are associated with internet skills" (Lee and Wellman 2012:76). This research contributed to the creation of my sixth research question where I ponder whether income level and education program, along with other attributes affects one's preferred communication method.

According to the 2010 The Pew Internet survey with 10,000 student respondents, nearly 100% of undergraduate students have Internet access, 86% use social networking sites, 96% have cell phones, and 88% have laptop computers (Smith, et. al 2011: 1). Clearly, undergraduate students have the opportunity to be connected, share and receive information through various technologies. In fact, the same survey demonstrates that 63% of this population uses the Internet or email on their cell phone.

While there is research on students' use of email to communicate with instructors about class material there is not very much research on the most efficient method to share information with undergraduate students. In addition, there is even less research on graduate students and their communication preferences. University employees across the gamut (admissions, registrar, campus life, academic advisors, clubs and organizations,

and faculty and staff) want to communicate information to students about campus happenings, policy changes, deadlines, events, internships, careers, counseling, advising, etc. What is the best method for doing so? How can university officials be certain students are reading their messages? With so many outlets now including; websites, email, text messaging, instant messaging, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram, how do faculty and staff optimize resources and select the most efficient manner to share information with the student body?

The research discussed in this section has helped me answer my first research question: Do graduate college students prefer certain information about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events via a specific platform? Which? The literature review also showed me what information we still need to seek. Technology and how we use it is ever changing. “Users of mobile information and communication technologies, as well as developers, nonusers, and even anti-users, continue to reconfigure where, when, and how these technologies are employed” (Kleinman 2007:224). Technology affects society, how we live, interact, and communicate. Sociology theorists “attempt to understand the forces of social change and what those changes mean for how we organize ourselves as a society” (Surratt 2001:3). Time brings new communication technologies that affect the way society members interact and stay informed (i.e. computers, cell phones, tablets). These technology changes are happening on college campuses and we need to study them. “Formal education has served the purposes of social integration, conformity to conventional social norms, the establishment of social relationships, social control, and reproduction of a status hierarchy. For all of these reasons, education has been and

continues to be central to the normative order” (Surratt 2001:3). It is vital to investigate and research how new technologies change higher education and its norm of communication.

College students are busy, and constantly connected to the Internet. Mary Chayko points out that “wireless Internet makes people less dependent on place” and “the person has become portal” (2008:93). Rainie and Wellman support Chayko argument by stating “the places and times in which people encounter information, media, and each other have expanded to anywhere at any time as long as there are mobile connections” (2012:255). Kavanaugh and Patterson found “people who used the Internet for a variety of interpersonal and small group communication activities were also likely to report high levels of community involvement” (2001:504). Combining the work of Chayko, and Rainie and Wellman stating that students can access the Internet everywhere and Kavanaugh and Patterson finding that people use the Internet for communication purposes report community involvement I have a strong base to begin my study. I will contribute to this sociological field of study with my findings. In the next section, I review the main findings produced by the research on the use of various communication platforms in institutions of higher education.

WEBSITES

This next section focuses on my second research question: Why do graduate college students access the university’s website? What do they especially like and dislike about, which aspect speaks to them the most? Every college has a website that is visited by former, current and prospective students. “The college website is rated as one of the top sources of information during the college-search process” (Stoner

2004:10). Therefore, it is imperative to keep websites up-to-date, easy to navigate, and appealing. Stoner has tracked college Web sites for years and found “Furman University appears to have been among the first institutions to showcase regularly updated, student Weblogs on its admission sites” (2004:10). Furman University created a forum for students to communicate with each other. Their creative style has proven effective as this institution has seen “return visits to the site, increased engagement with prospective students, and increased yield among others” (2004:10).

“Colleges are asking current students, speaking in their own voices, to communicate to prospective students via ‘Ask a Student’ email, Weblogs containing student journals, and even student-written sections of institutional Web sites” (Stoner 2004:10). Lewis & Clark College introduced “Real Life at Lewis & Clark College” where “blogs of seven students, chosen for a diversity of interests, hometowns, and ethnicities” are published on the site unedited. Students are reminded that the blog can be viewed by anyone including family, friends, faculty, and staff. Mike Sexton, the dean of admissions, states they have the highest traffic on their website the day after the blogs are posted.

In addition to seeing increased traffic on websites following student engagement, Stoner points out simply making sites easy to navigate can also help. By placing a direct link to the admission application on their homepage the University of Missouri at Columbia saw an increase in hits by 300 percent in the first month (2004:11). Hamilton College enters the Web 3.0 world and proves that personalizing information engages students and increases return visits. Via the college website, a prospective or current student can complete an interest form in “My Hamilton” that then creates a personalized

website targeted at the “visitor’s specific interests that delivers relevant news, events, features, and links” (Stoner 2004:12). My Hamilton is a great communication tool that the college can use to stay connected and engaged with students. This personal touch shows the institution is paying attention to one’s particular needs and in a 21st century American college setting this is important and sociologically interesting. Students agreed in My Hamilton’s popularity as “the class of 2007 yield for students who began using ‘My Hamilton’ as prospects was 56 percent, as opposed to 21 percent for nonusers. The yield for students who began using ‘My Hamilton’ after they were accepted was 40 percent” (Stoner 2004: 12).

Finding videos on websites is more common today than ever before. A 2018 Pew Research Center hosted between July 20, 2018 and August 12, 2018 looked at how 3,425 U.S. adults select to receive news. “Overall, 47% of Americans prefer watching the news rather than reading or listening to it. That is unchanged from 46% in 2016 and outpaces 34% who prefer to read the news” (Mitchell, 2018). In addition, 34% surveyed prefer the web specifically for their news, with those aged 18-49 preferring to get the news online while those over the age of 50 still preferring the television. This information supports the value of websites and Stoner’s finding that students “expect to find solid information that depicts the authentic texture of campus life” (2004:12) and videos accomplish that goal. In addition, perhaps with adding videos to websites a college can increase its viewability as students can visit them anytime. Finally, with increased views, students are more informed of campus information.

EMAIL

Like elsewhere across the country, students at the University of Nevada Las Vegas are assigned an email address upon admission. These email addresses are used for communication to students about classes, schedules, events, emergencies, etc. The 2002 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey found that “college students are frequently looking for email, with 72% checking email at least once a day” (Jones 2002:2). With this in mind, it makes sense to use email to communicate with this population. However, college “officials around the country find that a growing number of students are missing important messages about deadlines, class cancellations, and events sent to them by e-mail because, well, the messages are sent to them by e-mail” (Carnevale 2006:24). Through interviews, Carnevale found that students are using text messaging and instant messaging to communicate with friends and “still depend on e-mail to communicate with their professor” (2006: 24). When this article was written students were infatuated with MySpace, but as one student admitted ““I like to separate my personal life from my school life” (Carnevale 2006:24). With this in mind should colleges have a social media presence, if so, how and will it be useful? Can schools still rely on email communication with students? Or does the problem with email lie in another Pew survey finding that “66% (of students) use at least two email addresses” (2001: 2) and students simply don’t need another email address to check. To resolve this issue, some schools, including the University of Nevada Las Vegas, have allowed their email to be forwarded to another email address. This helps eliminate multiple email addresses to check and hopefully with being forwarded to a personal account students read it in their inbox.

In their survey research on 5,580 college bound students in February 2017, EAB's Royall & Company found that students of this generation overwhelmingly designated email as their preferred choice of communication, citing the "ongoing popularity of email may be attributed to the rapid growth of smartphones" (2017). Students can easily stay in touch with news via the cell phone they never put down.

"The University of South Carolina is sticking with campus e-mail accounts. Officials have informed students that e-mail is the official means of communication and that they must check it" (Carnevale 2006:24). How can officials mandate students to check email? They have listened to their student body, reduced the number of emails sent and no longer allow students to send mass emails. To curb the amount of emails students receive, a weekly E-Blast or newsletter with information for the week is sent in one email. The hope here is that with less email students will resist deleting and rather open and read school email. In attempt to curb email deletion as well, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa delays email messages "so they hit mailboxes between 5pm and 9pm., when students are most likely to be checking" (Mangan 2012: 3).

College students can use email to organize their busy and demanding schedules. "Email systems have developed into personal information managers and agenda-setting programs" (Shields 2003:146). However, Sherry Turkle found email for "most people under twenty-five a technology of the past or perhaps required to apply to college or to submit a job application" (2011:162). There are two interesting points made here by both Shields and Turkle. Turkle's findings show that college students have email accounts, but maybe are not using them. Meanwhile Shields demonstrates how college students can use email systems. The debate continues to play out as students may not use email as much

today as in the past, but, institutions like the University of South Carolina and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas continue to have policy in place declaring email the official communication to students, and thus demanding they use it.

To gather information on the newest incoming college student population Noel-Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive, and NRCCUA completed a 2013 E-Expectation survey. They found that “while there is a slight reduction in email usage, it is still frequently used by the vast majority of students” (Geyer 2013). Specifically, of the 2,018 high school juniors and seniors (evenly split in the sample) 80 percent use email at least once per week, down only 2 percent from the previous year. In addition, consistent with 2012 in 2013 students were 98 percent likely to open an email from an institution they were interested in and 68 percent were willing to open an email from a school they did not know. College administrators may also find it beneficial that “75 percent of students said they were interested in sending an email to a campus and students cited email as the second most influential resource after campus websites” (Geyer 2013). This survey clearly exhibits that incoming students are using email, however, are students staying on email during their college career?

After Mark Zuckerberg predicted the end of email while launching his new Facebook instant messaging system in 2011, the University of Maryland at College Park tasked a committee that included graduate students, to investigate the future use of email in that institution.. They found that eliminating email was not an option, as it still needs to be used for official communication purposes and a record log for various departments, including financial aid and admissions. However, the committee is trying to integrate communication, so there "aren't ten places to go for contact" (3). Google, which hosts 57

percent of nonprofit college email, actually sees a flat line or increase in email use, as does Microsoft, the biggest provider of student email. "Email is the most reliable" system of communication and while instant messaging and Facebook are increasingly being used, no one in the study found email disappearing from college campuses.

While there is extensive research on email usage it lacks details about the frequency of graduate college students reading emails from faculty and staff and what aspect of the email can increase or decrease the likelihood that they will read it. Trying to fill this gap in the literature I created research question number four: Are graduate students reading emails from faculty and staff? If so, what aspects of the email makes it more likely they read them?

SOCIAL MEDIA

(a) FACEBOOK

My third research question will focus on Facebook communication and ask students if they visit their university affiliated Facebook pages (i.e. university, college, department) and what they are looking for when they do. The Pew Research Center finds that Facebook is still the most used social media platform, at least for now, with “roughly two-thirds of U.S adults (68%) reporting that they are Facebook users, and roughly three-quarters of those users access Facebook on a daily basis. With the exception of those 65 and older, a majority of Americans across a wide range of demographic groups now use Facebook” (Smith 2018). “Facebook allows students to join their home college network or any other network” (Martinez-Aleman 2009:8). Students can meet other students, find out about the latest campus event and attend those together. This type of interaction and information sharing could create the campus culture universities desire. Research shows

the more engaged students are the more likely they are to remain in school and graduate sooner as compared to those who are not engaged. “Facebook is a milestone in the 21st century college experience, especially in undergraduate’ social and extracurricular experiences. The campus ‘social’ is now also online” (Martinez-Aleman 2009:10).

A late 2014 Pew Research Center survey looks at social media preference and Facebook across gender, race, age, and education statuses. Of the 1,597 surveyed 66 percent of men and 77 percent of women used Facebook. Among the respondents using Facebook, they found that 71 percent of white, non-Hispanic, 67 percent Black, non-Hispanic, and 73 percent Hispanic did. Age had the largest variation with 87 percent usage at 18-29 years, 73 percent at 30-49 years, 63 percent at 50-64 years and 56 percent for those 65 years or older. In contrast, education level revealed the smallest change with 70 percent with a high school diploma or less using Facebook, 71 percent with some college, and 74 percent with at least one college diploma. Five years later, in 2019, with technological advances in cell phones, tablets, computers, and even more social media platforms, it would be beneficial to conduct this survey again and see what, if anything, has changed.

“Facebook’s stock has soared by more than 80 percent so far this year. But company execs alarmed some analysts recently by acknowledging that teenagers are falling out of like with the site that seemed like a phenomenon when teens first discovered it” (Newman 2013:1). Newman didn’t have a large pool of interview subjects only his own two teenage kids, their friends, and a few recruited on Twitter. He found the following reasons teens are leaving Facebook for other sites such as

Twitter, Snapchat (Facebook failed to purchase), Instagram (Facebook owns), and Tumblr:

1. Parents (and family members): Teenagers don't feel like they can be themselves on Facebook if they know their parents, family members, or friends' family members can view what they post and comment. This population is also not keen on their relatives posting on their friends' walls and pictures.

2. Too much pointless stuff: Newsfeeds contain information users are not interested in. One interviewed college student from the University of Montreal "finds that other networks, with far less clutter, are now better at what Facebook used to be good at" (Newman 2013:1).

3. Too many ads: "Facebook no longer seems like a social networking site first. It seems like a gold mine for companies to place ads and is straying from its actual purpose" (Newman 2013:1).

4. It is vapid: People are too concerned with just gaining 'likes'. One interviewee complained about the amount of time and effort it takes to maintain her Facebook page with updates and new photos "just to get a lot of likes" (Newman 2013:1).

5. Fake friends: Teenagers interviewed say they are friends with people they don't know on Facebook, which is pointless. This also leads to the pointless newsfeeds with information on people they don't even know.

Will Facebook last forever or will it fall into emptiness like the once popular MySpace. "Teenagers rebel, do things their parents wouldn't do, and go places their parents never go. In other words, the last thing they want to do these days is log into Facebook"

(Fottrell 2013:1). Because Facebook is a social networking site for all ages, teenagers may want to congregate elsewhere like on Twitter. In 2013, “the percentage of teenagers using Twitter overtook Facebook for the first time” (Fottrell 2013:1). However, a recent survey conducted by investment banker Piper Jaffray showed both Facebook and Twitter decreased in teenage use from spring to fall 2017. Meanwhile, “Instagram use grew to 23% from 17% over the same 2017 period. “7 in 10 teens are friends with their parents on Facebook, according to Pew” (Fottrell 2013:1), and having them post baby photos of their grown up students or commenting on their wall just isn’t what younger users favor and to combat it they are finding alternative social media networks.

(b) LINKEDIN

Research questions one and five ask how students may use LinkedIn as a method of communication. LinkedIn, the network that aims to link professionals with potential employers, also hosts University Pages that assist prospective students in finding the college or university that fits them best. LinkedIn offers universities that create a page the following:

- A built-in audience. Every LinkedIn member that lists his/her school on the profile page will automatically follow the listed institution’s page.
- Access to alumni. Again LinkedIn members who list an institution will automatically follow their school’s page.
- More accountability for results. Students and parents can see what alumni from a particular major are ‘doing now’ (Visani 2013).

These pages connect prospective students with institutions, their alumni, current students and even other prospective students. This is a major move for LinkedIn to attract

the 14-18-age range demographic while they are searching higher education, help them make connections, and then hope they remain on the site.

The 2014 Pew Social Media survey conducted with 1,597 respondents (discussed in the literature review on Facebook), found equal LinkedIn usage among men and women, and among white, non-Hispanic (29%) and black, non-Hispanic (28%). On the other hand, these findings also report a dramatic decrease in Hispanic usage (18%). Another variation can be found among age groups with a 23 percent usage among those 18-29 years olds, 31 percent among those 30-49, 30 percent at 50-64, and 21 percent for those 65 years or older. As 50 percent, LinkedIn has the largest use among those with college degrees.

Universities can also benefit from the audience gain and use it to share information and engage prospective and current students as well as alumni. Since members have the option to opt out of following a school, it is up to the creators and managers of the university pages to keep information up-to-date, interesting, and engaging in the hopes of maintaining the audience.

Keith Hannon, the Associate Director of Social Media at Cornell University, also shows the importance of LinkedIn for university communication. He asked alumni relation professionals from 81 institutions to share their LinkedIn success stories. His findings included: posting information on job fairs, networking opportunities, and career services; sharing faculty news and updates; and soliciting advice from alumni for current students (2013). Hannon also states that the key to growing alumni engagement is daily engagement, “the only way to really get to a thriving community is to give it daily attention and lots of TLC, which can mean: posting, answering alumni questions,

promoting other people's posts, and commenting on alumni posts and discussions" (2013). While some subscribers may appreciate the constant contact, others may not appreciate being inundated with information and unsubscribe. Institutions also have to budget for at least one person to handle LinkedIn monitoring and posting. Lastly, LinkedIn is a for profit business and services can be costly, including monthly or yearly packages that assist in locating current students and alumni and providing their emails and phone numbers for even further contact.

LinkedIn could be the network students flock to for a more professional representation in social media. Universities have the option of creating a page and designing it to encourage engagement, information sharing, and community building.

(c) TWITTER

Pearson Learning Solutions and the Babson Survey Research Group surveyed over 8,000 faculty members and found that "41% of college professors use social media as a teaching tool, up from around 34% in 2012" (Dame 2013:1). If students use social media with professors then it may not be a stretch to have students use social media with campus resources like financial aid, career services, registrar, and professional development committees. Specifically, "a month before they walked into her classroom last fall, Krista Jackman told her freshmen writing students to join Twitter" (Dame 2013:1). This lecturer at the University of New Hampshire wants her students to get to know each other and be comfortable in the classroom as early as possible. Students are in favor and "say using social media for academic purposes can be beneficial, as long as it doesn't get too personal" (Dame 2013:1).

Outside the classroom universities across the country have Presidents joining Twitter and gaining more than 26,000 followers. Roger Riddell (2013) found “10 college presidents on Twitter who are doing it right.” He says college presidents like Santa J. Ono at the University of Cincinnati are frequently interacting with students and others of the community through Tweets. Specifically, Riddell finds presidents posting tweets on a variety of topics including: encouraging students to attend their school, institution information, higher education news, passion for academics and athletics, YouTube clips, school spirit, care for the student body, welcome messages, and humor. With some presidents having over 26,000 followers it can be surmised some respond well to this method of communication. I ask research questions one and five to help contribute to this body of research.

(d) TEXT MESSAGING

My fifth research question asks how students feel about text messaging as a form of deadline and event notification. While college students spend countless hours on their phones throughout the day, they are not necessarily talking to others anymore. Rather they are texting. In a Pew Internet survey, “some 84 percent of cell-owning teens say that they take their phones to bed with them to make sure they are aware of messages and status updates throughout the night. Others confess that their phone is part of their body” (Lee and Wellman 2012:95). With the increase of text messaging popularity, should universities consider sending text messages to students rather than, or in addition to, email? Currently, the University of Nevada Las Vegas, as well as other institutions, offer text messaging announcements for students in the case of an emergency. Pennsylvania State University offers students communication via text

messaging, but allows them to select what they want to be notified about. “Many choose to get updates on emergency announcements, such as school closures, and some also want to be notified about upcoming concerts or sports scores, which are available seconds after a Nittany Lions game has ended” (Carnevale 2006:24). The school received 1,000 subscribers in just three weeks. A follow-up on this study could explore if students favored the communication style, remained on the receiving list, and if more students signed-up.

Wildavsky’s “Nudge Nation” (2013) article offers a creative way to communicate with students via text messaging. “Giving students information-driven suggestions led to smarter actions, technology nudges are intended to tackle a range of problems surrounding the process by which students begin college and make their way to graduation” (1). Perhaps a nudge (a message via text) can remind students of ways to engage, seek guidance, find resources, and ultimately lead to successful graduation. “Nationwide on average bachelor’s degree students take 14 percent more courses than they need to graduate” (Wildavsky 2013:3), and text messages to a cell phone can nudge and remind a student to meet with an academic advisor and prepare an accurate graduation plan and course schedule. Universities can send text messages once a student begins an admission application and remind the prospective student what s/he needs to do to complete his/her forms. “Just 10 to 12 text messages sent over the summer raised college enrollment by more than 4 percentage points among low-income students in Dallas and by more than 7 percentage points in Lawrence and Springfield, Massachusetts” (Wildavsky 2013:2).

Another system popping up on college campuses is Degree Compass. This technology “combines data mining and behavior nudges to match students with best-fit courses” (Wildavsky 2013:3). At Austin Peay State University students are texted course suggestions that they can review with their academic advisor. Suggestions are based on hundreds of thousands of past students grades in courses and compared to the individual student’s transcript. The text reminder simply nudges students to think about their classes, offers suggestions, and can encourage students to meet with their advisors and make certain they take the right classes toward degree completion.

MyFuture “matches students not just with individual classes but with entire majors” (Wildavsky 2013:4). This device induces students to think about their major by sending a text that includes major options, careers, and salary information. From here, the text can then remind students to use campus services like career fairs, career counselors, faculty, and advisors to discuss options and the future.

Purdue University uses the Course Signals program that alerts students of class performance by a text message or a post on Blackboard that recommends the student seek resources to succeed. “The program has encouraged students to seek out academic support, thus improving retention rates” (Wildavsky 2013: 4). This method does require faculty to monitor student grades and input information into the Course Signal database so the system can output who needs to be contacted and what information should be shared.

“Persistence Plus provides students with regular personalized nudges via text...the company sends undergrads messages about time management and class deadlines, offers help coping with setbacks, and virtually connects students to their peers

in social networks organized around academic goals” (Wildavskey 2013:6). The University of Washington Tacoma pilot “found that students who received nudges performed better academically than those who didn’t” (6). Text messages can show students that “the university cares about them and their success” (Wildavskey 2013:7).

(e) PHONE CALL

I debated whether to include actual phone calls as a means for communication in my literature review, but what I found is quite interesting and very telling of our changing times. At the cusp of being a millennial, I begged my parents for my own landline phone and phone line growing up, which transformed into deal-making for a cell phone a decade later. While the primary use of the telephone is to talk, in 2019 that is no longer the case. A survey conducted in October 2018 by BankMyCell (a gadget retail site) with 1,200 respondents between 22 and 37 years old (a common age group for graduate students) from all around the United States found that this age group does not want to talk on the phone. MIT Psychologist, Sherry Turkle, discusses extensively in her research how teenagers and undergraduates are no longer talking on the phone and that we have lost conversation. She warns and worries about the social interaction being limited to texting and social media use.

I once received a phone call at my home from a professor and thought someone was playing a joke on me. “Who uses the telephone in the 21st century to actually call anyone” I thought? This reaction is in line with the BankMyCell survey that found “81 percent of respondents acknowledge that they often feel anxious about talking on the phone” (Meek 2018). One in five respondents in this survey stated they experience anxiety of interacting with others on the phone (a term coined telephonophobia). Turkle’s

research also finds that the art of conversation is dying with phone interaction and thus can lead to anxiety as well as other negative consequences. While she isn't anti-technology, social media, or texting, she warns that we need a balance and we need 'human' interaction. Accordingly, the telephone is not likely to become the primary method of communication to share information with college graduate students.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Does this current college generation even remember MySpace? From 2005 to 2008 it was the most popular social networking site. "In July 2005, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp bought MySpace for \$580 million. With its millions of members, MySpace was the sixth largest 'country' in the world and has far more monthly visitors than any other Internet site" (Rosen 2007). While once the most popular site, some would say it was left for Facebook, and now is hardly used. College students can select what social media they want to use, and they can engage and 'jump ship' whenever they want. College officials attempting to keep engaged with students and wanting to communicate with them via their preferred method need to stay up-to-date on the newest technology, features, and networking mediums.

Instant Messaging

Banks, travel agencies, and credit card companies now have live instant messaging for customers. This is an easy way to connect with someone, ask direct questions, and receive quick answers. Should this be implemented in universities? Carnevale found that "some professors now make themselves available to students via instant-messaging software, especially during office hours. And some

admissions counselors use it to answer questions from prospective students faster, and through a medium in which many students are most comfortable” (2006: 24).

My first research question asks how graduate college students prefer to receive certain information, I’m eager to see if instant messaging is a popular selection.

Tumblr

“Over 60 percent of teenagers ages 13 to 18 use Tumblr, while 57 percent of 19-25-year-olds use the services according to a 2013 survey by consumer research company Survata and blogger Gary Tan” (Fottrell 2013). This blog site has more than 144 million blogs and 65 million blog posts. Knowing students are on Tumblr, universities can create blogs that focus on academic and student affairs to communicate information.

EVERYWHERE

Summarizing the literature, it is evident that information is shared via various platforms. While some students prefer email, others prefer social media, so it could make sense to post different sorts of messages on those different forums to different categories of students. However, Katherine Mangan (2012) found through interviews that students can find the simple cut and paste method impersonal and avoid these messages. In light of the 2018 Pew Research Center’s Social Media Use report that 90 percent of LinkedIn users are also on Facebook, individuals managing communication on university campuses may want to pay attention to what they are posting on both platforms, so not to oversaturate messaging.

In addition, “colleges that plunge into social media without adequately consulting students often find themselves flailing” (Mangan 2012:2). For example, asking students if

they prefer Facebook messages or Twitter, graphics, videos, or text, can all assist a campus's communication coordinator in meeting student demand/preference rather than being swamped with messages to post that no one will view. Ms. Ramspott, the social-media specialist at Frostburg State, "now encourages other members of the social-networking group to always be ready to move on to the next big thing" (Mangan 2012:3). Van Lear and Van Aelst also find that Internet based communication has limitations: "people may participate, but not stay connected. There isn't a permanent engagement" (2010:1163). In contrast, Doctorow finds the Internet "lures people into participation through a series of ever-greater commitments" (Doctorow 2011:2). There are more outlets today than ever before for sharing news, events, information, and having discussion. As a result some institutions are creating departments for handling social media, such as Frostburg State that has a social-media specialist. Schools are finding it important enough to invest time, money, staff, and labor into researching, creating, and maintaining social media sites. This new development relates to my first research question: should all messaging be posted on every communication outlet? Or do graduate college students prefer certain information via a specific platform?

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to ascertain students' preferences for communication methods. A study of 315 students at Bowling Green State University found that 85 percent of the respondents students check university email daily and stated they are highly likely to read the message if it is from a faculty member. However, 54 percent of respondents said they don't always read emails from the university or from academic departments. Another important finding of this study shows that 55.7 percent

of business, communication and journalism majors use social media as their primary means of communication; double the rate of those not in these areas (Straumsheim, 2016). Lastly, students who used social media were also more likely to check email. Bernard R. McCoy, associate professor of journalism at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln leans toward social media and texting for communication because of its immediacy. Email you can ignore, open later, file in a folder etc. Texting has the expectation of quick reply, email doesn't. "Most of us have more junk mail to contend with than junk text or social media messages" yet another factor to take into account with my research. While this was a small study, at just one school, it does show communication usage differences among groups and the need for additional data. Effective communication may not be a 'one size fits all' in fact it may show preference differences via the various outlets.

Where do we go from here? We need concrete, recent data, from graduate students that inform graduate college faculty and staff on the best communication methods. The literature certainly demonstrates that there are various methods of communicating information across social media platforms and via email. While universities have gone as far as to hire social media coordinators and others have declared email as the only official communication between faculty, staff and students, the scholarship is still unclear as to what students desire. The majority of the research in this field focuses on prospective college students and undergraduate students working on their first degree. My research plans to fill in gaps where stakeholders continue to flounder trying to reach graduate students, but not knowing if they are being most successful.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

My research questions seek to answer how graduate students feel about the university use of emails, Facebook, and text messaging to inform them about academic deadlines and events. Graduate students are experienced college students who have already earned at least one bachelor's degree. Some may also be working while in school and/or have families. While possibly juggling quite a bit in their personal life, graduate students also need to stay up-to-date on campus happenings, including research symposia, lectures, receptions, faculty-student mixers, career fairs, workshops, trainings, etc. Research demonstrates that an integrated, involved student is more likely to progress and graduate. Specifically, the National Survey of Student Engagement shows that student success is directly related to student involvement. In addition, graduate students are usually trying to excel, to build a resume, to obtain a promotion or raise, to take courses, to pass exams, to defend proposals, to look smart, to discover themselves, to feel validated by one's advisors and peers, and to have fun. Knowing about campus resources (online, offline, on-campus, off-campus) can assist graduate students in achieving these goals. Graduate students also need to be informed about deadlines. College campuses have deadlines on everything from the admission and registration, to tuition payment, applications for scholarships and for graduation. How can college administrators best notify students of these deadlines? When missing a deadline can postpone graduation, keeping graduate students cognizant is vital for their timely success. In order to answer those questions I used a combination of focus groups and survey research with graduate students in four different universities.

I used convenience sampling to select the participants in this research. “A convenience sample is a non-probability sample in which the researcher uses the subjects that are nearest and available to participate in the research study” (Crossman 2006). I use the volunteer based subset as a representation of the entire student body and to “draw inferences about the population” (Crossman 2016).

METHODS, DATA SELECTION AND COLLECTION

As an administrator and graduate student at the large public university being studied I have digital access to the student body, email groups, Facebook pages, rooms to host focus groups, and equipment to record.

After receiving IRB approval, I first hosted seven focus groups between March and June 2018. As Morgan (1993) suggests, there are three situations when focus groups are appropriate for research:

1. *when there is a power differential between participants and decision makers.* “Normal channels of communication are sometimes not available and, when frustration is excessive, these situations can be explosive.” From my experience as an administrator, students are frustrated, angry, and upset when they find out they missed the deadline to apply for graduation and have to postpone a semester. Students protest that they were never informed there was a deadline and argue there is a lack of effective communication. “The interaction that focus groups bring is useful in these situations because it allows groups of peers to express their perspectives.” In addition, students may be more likely to share when they know others feel the same or have experienced a similar issue.

2. *when there is a gap between professionals and their target audiences.* The administrators at universities may not be in touch with the current generation and their preferred method of communication. “Because the interactions in focus groups provide a clear view of how others think and talk, they are powerful means of exposing professionals to the reality of the customer, student, or client” (3).

3. *when the researcher wants to learn more about the degree of consensus on a topic.* Using my open-ended research questions offers the opportunity for in-depth discussion and to learn if there is consensus, as well as nuances, on how students want to be communicated with. “One of the things that frequently becomes clear in such discussions is that each individual may have several different opinions about the subject” (4). Lastly, participants exchanging ideas can bring additional thoughts, positions, and information to the surface.

I conducted the focus groups at one large public institution. Using the university’s student email system, I staggered email messaging over three months (March, April and May 2018) and on the Graduate College’s Facebook page once in March and once in May.

Via email messaging I shared the available date/times for focus groups and volunteers ranked their preference. I then emailed them confirmation of their first choice in all instances. I followed up with a reminder email the night before each focus group as well.

I asked the same questions to all focus group participants in the seven groups:

1. How do you prefer to be communicated with regarding academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events?
2. Why do you access the university’s website? What do you especially like and dislike, what speaks to you the most?

3. Are you reading emails from faculty and staff? If so, which aspect of the email makes it more likely that you read them?
4. Do you visit your university affiliated Facebook pages (i.e. university, college, department)? What do you typically look for when you access it?
5. Would you like to receive text messaging about UNLV deadline and event notifications?
6. Would you like to receive “instant messaging to alert them of UNLV academic deadlines and events?
7. Do you prefer certain information via a specific platform?
8. How do you typically respond to UNLV messages about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events via:
 - a. Email
 - b. Social Media

I tape-recorded all sessions, after participants approved recording via signing the informed consent form. I also typed notes as volunteers were speaking and then listened to the recordings to fill in gaps.

I had nineteen RSVP's with two or more participants per each date, however, two people cancelled the morning of scheduled focus groups, one did not show on a scheduled day because of a fire drill, and two others did not show up and did not provide reasons. Four sessions had only one person, one session had two, one session had three, and one session had five people.

I reserved one room for each session in my University's Student Union. Tables and chairs were set-up in a circle; each person signed the informed consent form and

wore a nametag with a letter on it as their identifier (names were not used to keep the group anonymous as well as the tape recordings). The groups were asked the exact same questions, my research questions listed above, in the same order. Students answered as they wished, in the order they desired, no one was required to answer any question, participation was completely confidential. Because four focus groups had participants cancel or no show, I conducted four one-on-one interviews. The same protocol was followed with the interviewees i.e. informed consent, nametag, order of questions, and freedom to skip any question.

Each session took between thirty and forty-five minutes. Seven participants are pursuing a doctoral degree, six a masters or specialist degree, and one a graduate certificate program. Group representation comes from the following colleges: Allied Health Sciences, Education, Urban Affairs, Liberal Arts, and Law. Department representation included: Teaching & Learning, Health Physics and Diagnostic Sciences, Kinesiology and Clinical Studies, Criminal Justice, Social Work, Counselor Education, Education Psychology and Higher Education, English, Anthropology, Law, and Sociology.

After analyzing the focus groups data, I created an online survey using Qualtrics, which I administered between November 26, 2018 and January 8, 2019. I emailed the survey via university email to four large public institutions; University of Nevada Reno, University of Arizona, and the University of Hawaii, as well as the university where I hosted the focus groups, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Since I work at the latter institution I was able to email the survey invitation via various outlets: department email lists, weekly student newsletters, graduate faculty, and posting it on my Facebook page

and the UNLV Graduate College Facebook page. As for the other three large public institutions, on November 28, 2018 I emailed colleagues at those institutions, who all agreed to send out my email and survey once. While I planned on only feedback from these four institutions, I have additional results from posting the survey via Facebook. Using this social media outlet, 196 graduate students from nineteen schools completed the survey!

Over 200 students completed the survey, 196 met the criterion of being a current graduate student. 167 out of those 196 are from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

The survey was optional and any question could be skipped/left unanswered. At the end of the survey, students submitted their answers, and then are brought to a new screen that reads:

This concludes the survey. If you would like to be entered into a drawing to win one of the two \$50 Amazon Gift Cards please complete the survey that will pop up on the screen after you hit the "SUBMIT" button below. Thank you for your time and feedback, I greatly appreciate it!

ANALYTICAL, INTERPRETIVE, AND VALIDATION STRATEGIES

This research compare findings across institutions, enrollment status (part-time/full-time), race, gender, age, income, and employment status. I coded my qualitative data using grounded theory as it can enable prediction and explanation of behavior, have practical application, and help guide behavior research. “Grounded theory’s aim is to explore basic social processes and to uncover the multiplicity of interactions that produces variation in that process” (Heath & Cowley 2004:142).

“Adequacy of a theory can’t be divorced from the process of creating it” (Glaser & Strauss 1967:5). Through my open-ended questions and analyzing the data I collected

by conducting focus groups I gained all new information, including stronger patterns and categories; this is the basis of grounded theory: “In discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence, then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept” (23).

I use grounded theory to analyze the data I collected by using focus groups and open-ended questions that ask students to discuss their preferred methods of communication to be informed about academic deadlines and events and why. Having transcribed focus group answers I coded the data to find patterns as well as gaps. As this method suggests, I continued to hold focus groups with new waves of students until I reached category saturation, all gaps were filled and patterns vetted. Informed patterns I found in my analysis of focus groups data I developed a survey questionnaire that reached a larger population, but still included open-ended questions to give students the opportunity to share freely and provide me with rich, detailed data.

Ethical Considerations

As with any research study, ethical considerations need to be assessed. All the participants volunteered for this research and could stop the survey or leave the focus group at any time. Participants were not forced to answer any question. While no issues surfaced to my knowledge, students may have felt obligated to complete participation or questions may have made some feel uncomfortable. For example, a question on a survey or a student answer in the focus groups could have triggered an emotion from another, or remind another of a distressing incident. In the event those situations occurred, I was prepared to remind students that their participation was voluntary, skipping questions was

permitted, and I would make referrals to campus, community, and online resources when appropriate.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the results from both the focus groups and survey to answer each of the six research questions.

(A) FOCUS GROUPS DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

There were fourteen participants in seven focus groups. Their demographic profile is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Group Demographic Profile

<i>GENDER</i>	
Male	2
Female	12
Total	14
<i>ENROLLMENT</i>	
Full-time	12
Part-time	2
Total	14
<i>RACE - ETHNICITY</i>	
White	11
Hispanic or Latino	1
Other race	1
Prefer not to answer	1
Total	14
<i>EMPLOYMENT</i>	
Graduate Assistant	10
Full-time employment	2
Part-time employment	1
Unemployed	1
Total	14
<i>AGE</i>	
18-14	4
25-34	7
35-44	1
55-64	2
Total	14

(B) SURVEY RESPONDENTS PROFILE

Studying in nineteen different universities, 196 graduate students completed a survey that contained multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions.

Of those respondents 167 (87.8%) participants are graduate students at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and 23 (12.2%) are from eighteen other universities. Among these respondents 165 (84.2%) are full-time students and 31 (15.8%) are part-time students. Over half of the participants 126 (64.3%) are seeking a doctoral degree, 61 (31.1%) are seeking a master or specialist's degree, and 9 (4.6%) are working on a graduate certificate.

In terms of age, 115 (59%) students are between 25 and 34 years of age, 31 (16%) between 18 and 24, 28 (14.4%) between 35 and 44, 2 (1%) at 55 to 64 and, 6 (3.1%) preferred not to answer. As for race/ethnicity, 125 respondents (63.8%) are white, 20 (10.2%) are Asian/Pacific Islander, 17 (8.7%) are Hispanic/Latino, 11 (5.6%) are Black/African-American, and 2 (1.0%) are Native American/American Indian). In terms of gender, 142 (72.8%) respondents are female, 46 (23.6%) are male, 5 (2.6%) preferred not to answer, and 2 (1%) selected "not listed." Considering their employment, 117 (60%) of respondents work as graduate assistants, 42 (21.5%) work full-time, 12 (5.2%) are unemployed, and 19 (9.7%) work part-time. Lastly, 68 (35.8%) students have household incomes below \$20,000, 37 (19.5%) between \$20,000 and \$34,999, 19 (10.0%) between \$35,000 and \$49,999, 32 (16.8%) between \$50,000 and \$74,999, 19 (10%) between \$75,000 and \$99,999, and 15 (7.9%) over \$100,000.

Figure 1: Enrollment status

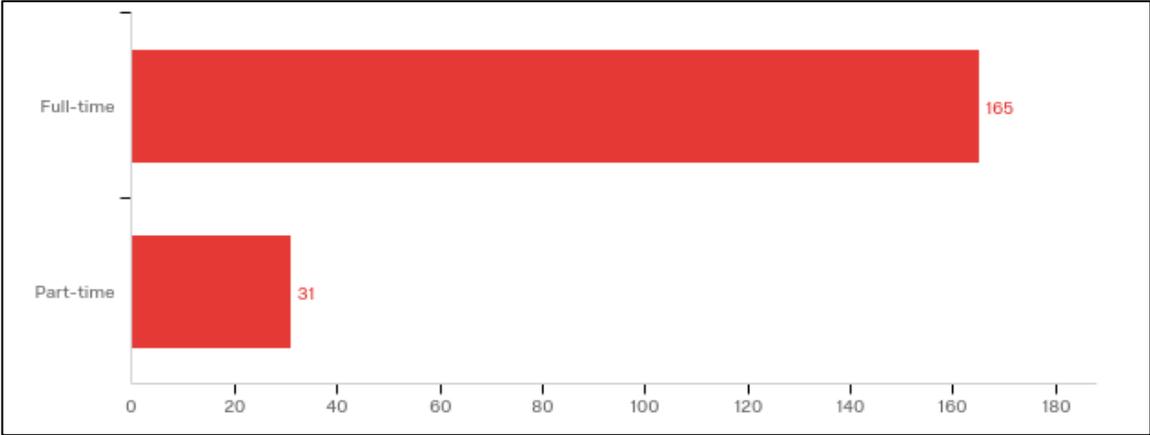


Figure 2: Ethnicity

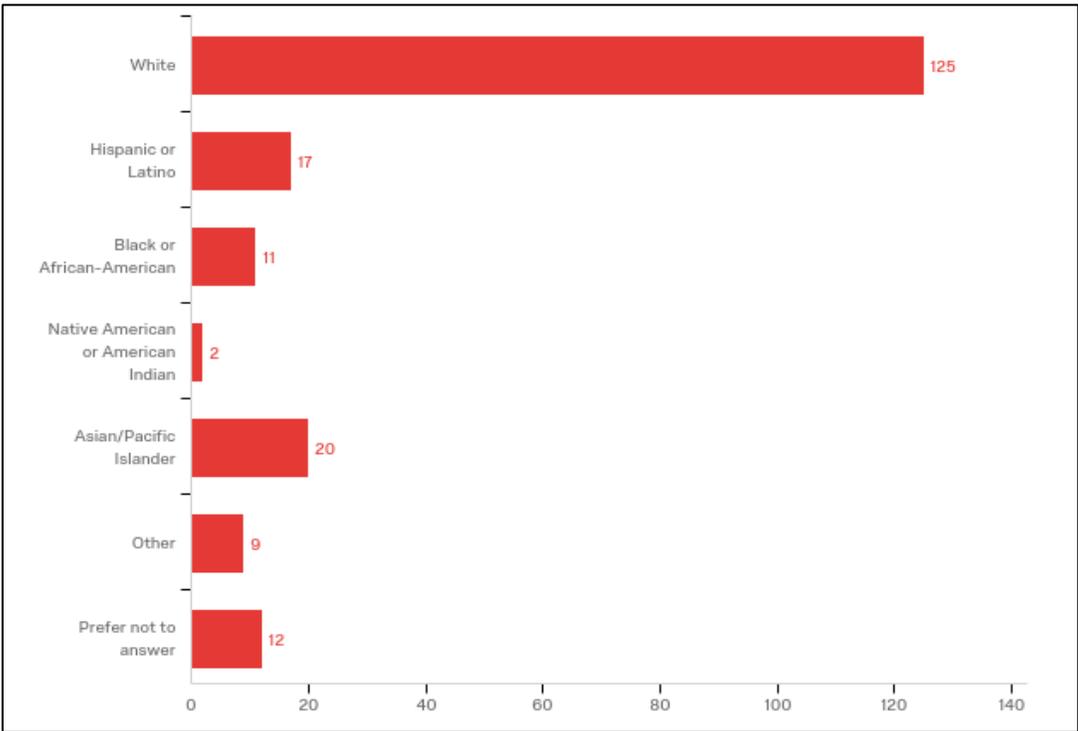


Figure 3: Employment Type

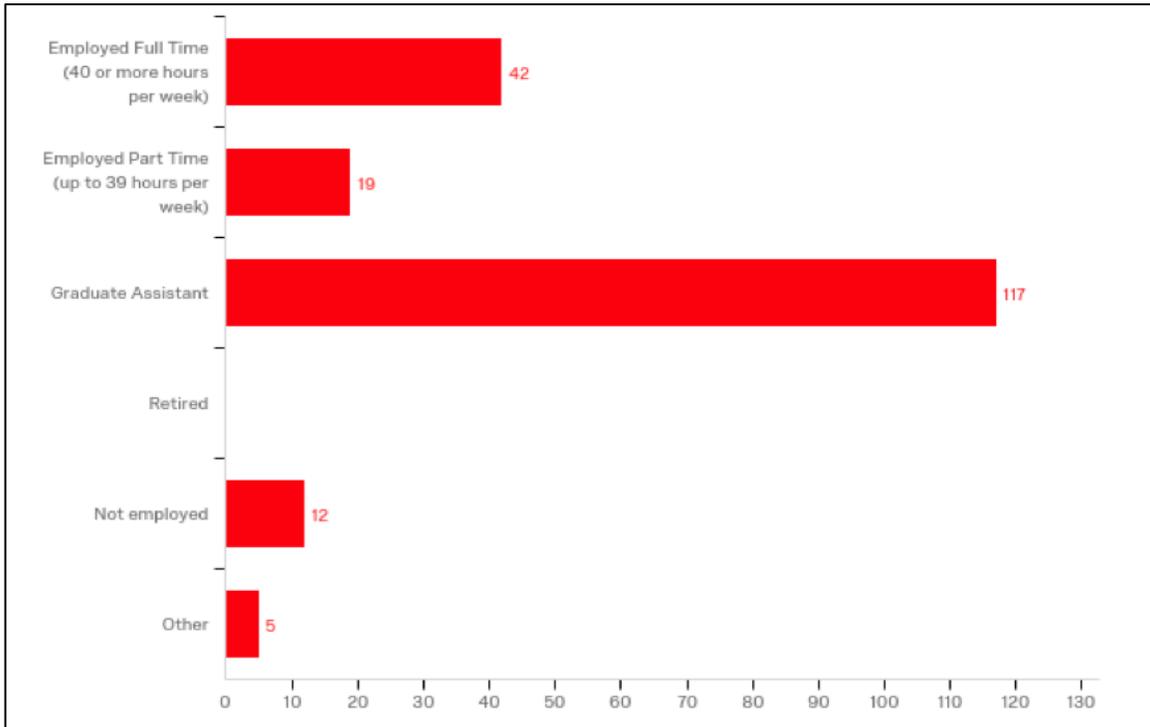
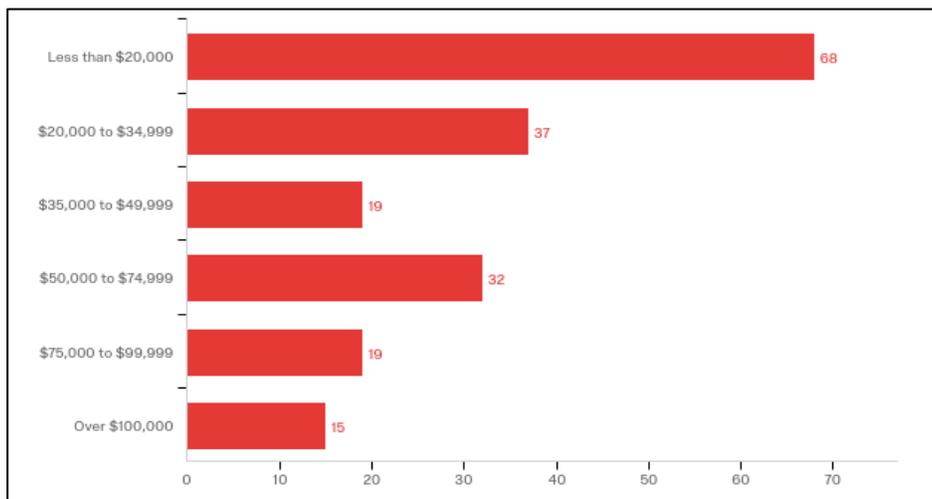


Figure 4: Annual Household Income



FINDINGS

(1) Research Question #1: Communication Preferences.

(a) Focus groups.

The focus group discussion showed that students preferred email as the method of communication to learn about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events. One student was very specific about her ideal email situation: “I prefer email, but really, one big email with all the important messages in one; this way my inbox is not flooded, I can see all messages in one email.” One student also talked about the perks of email stating: “with email I can add things to my calendar easily,” and another student said “email, because I mark it unread and go back to it, I like the control I have over email.”

I asked focus group participants whether they would like to receive text messaging about UNLV academic deadlines and events. While six students (out of fourteen) were in favor of text messaging, they said it had to come with an opt-in/opt-out feature, so they could tailor what they received. They agreed that “people don’t always look at emails, but are always on their phones, so getting a text could be nice.” Eight students (out of fourteen) declined to receive texts messages because they fear they would get too many: “I think I would lose my mind. I would get so many text messages; without it I can compartmentalize life.” This group was adamant that email is sufficient.

When asked whether they would like to receive instant messages about UNLV academic deadlines and events, focus group participants approved of instant messaging if it is on a platform they are already using frequently at UNLV i.e. Webcampus/Canvas,

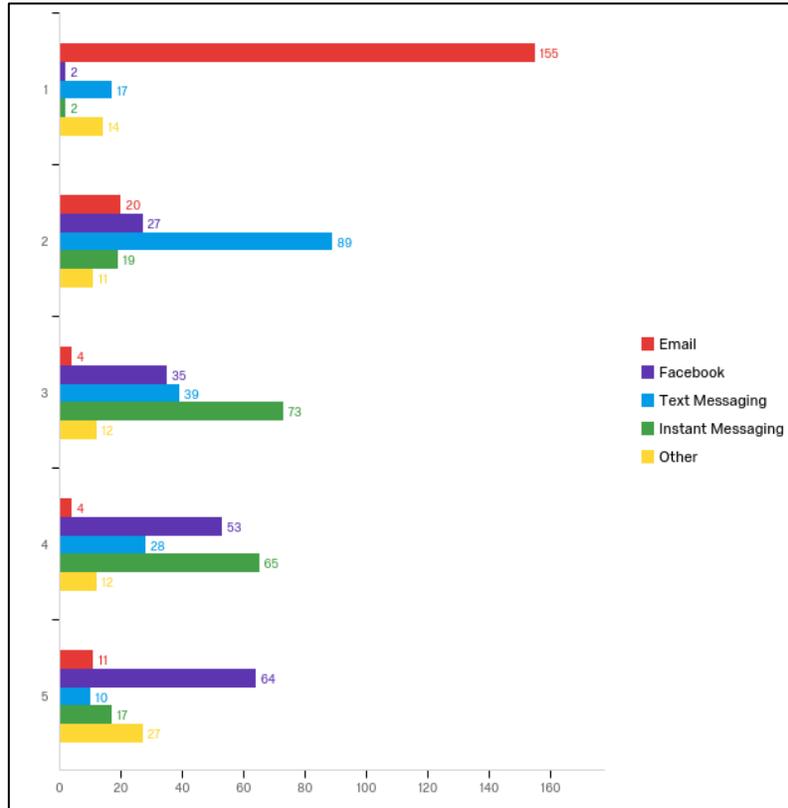
Grad Rebel Gateway, MyUNLV. As one respondent remarked: “I need everything in one place, one platform, rather than across multiple platforms.” Others agreed and cited being confused about where to find accurate information because they are currently referred to many different places. Thus, one respondent stated, “Instant messaging can also be a platform just for school information, not mixed in with family and friend messages. You can get instant messaging without being intrusive.” This perception also addresses the complaints raised against text messaging. On the other side of the argument, participants worry they wouldn’t check instant messages and still preferred email for all information.

(b) Survey.

In order to find out whether graduate college students prefer certain information about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events via a specific platform, I asked respondents to rank their preference for the method of communication about those. For each question, students were first asked to order Email, Facebook, Text Messaging, Instant Messaging, and Other from 1-5, with 1 being the most preferred. They were then asked to comment and/or explain their preferences for the three questions.

As Figure 5 shows, 155 (79.9%) students ranked email as their first preferred of the five methods of communication regarding academic deadlines; only 2 (1.1%) students wanted to learn about academic deadlines on Facebook and 17 (9.3%) preferred to be texted the information.

Figure 5: Ranked communication preference regarding academic deadlines



Similar results were found to the question asking respondents to order their preferred method of communication regarding professional development events with email ranked first among the five methods provided by 158 (81.2%) respondents. Lastly, email was also the preferred method of communication regarding social events, with 105 (55.3%) of respondents selecting it as their first choice. When it comes to social events, however, Figure 6 and 7 below show an increase in participants interested in using Facebook (55/30.1%) and text messaging (19/10.3%).

Figure 6: Ranked communication preference regarding professional development events

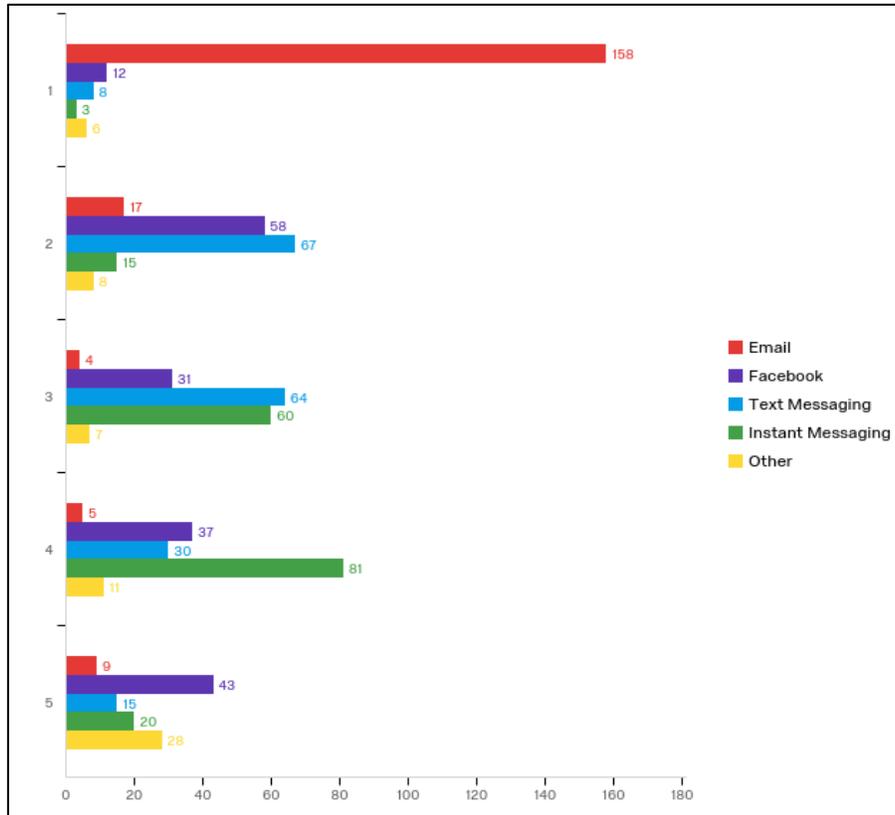
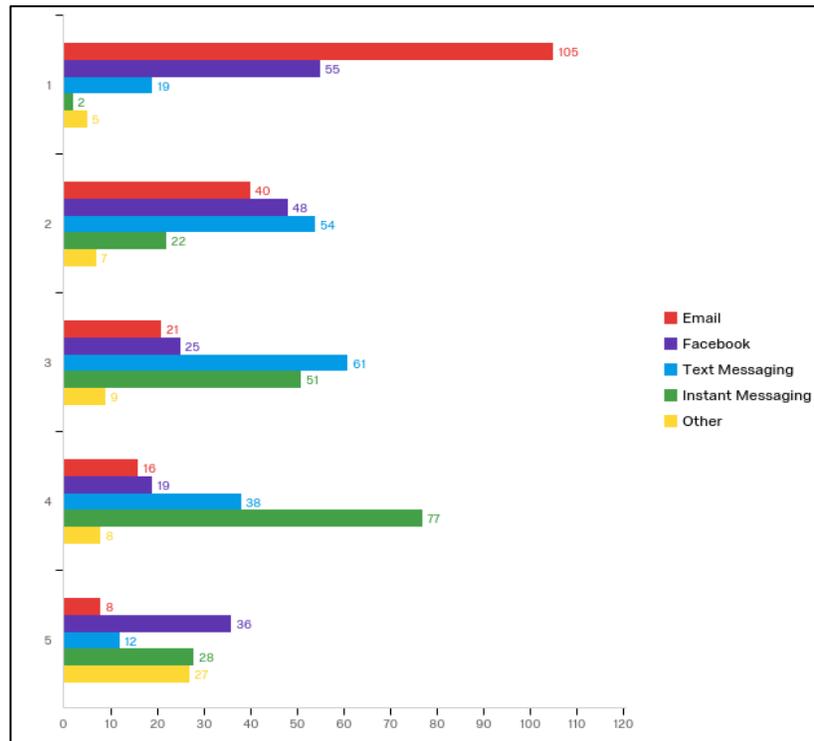


Figure 7: Ranked communication preference regarding social events



Respondents answered the open-ended question asking them to provide specific information for their preferences by stating that they found email as the most reliable, common, consistent, professional mode of communication, and check it daily. As they also noted, emails can also be saved, flagged, organized, and searched, which is helpful. However, replies ranged from students saying they read every email they receive to others saying they receive so many they cannot keep up with information. When they mentioned text messaging it was often in conjunction with email, as one student stated, “I work best with emails and text messages.” Respondents preferred text messaging for reminders and in addition to an email. Those who preferred text messaging to email

remarked that “text messages are most accessible to me, I have alerts on my phone for them.”

When asked to comment about social media, many participants reported that they simply do not have social media accounts while others who do have it preferred to keep it for personal, not university, use. They worried they could miss a message if it is only posted on Facebook. These findings indicate that when university administrators use Facebook they should also be use another platform like email, text messaging, or instant messaging, to ensure their a message is indeed received.

Meanwhile students mentioned they liked text messaging, instant messaging, and social media as additional communication methods to email. One survey question asked respondents whether they receive text messages about academic deadlines. Those students who answered they did not receive text messages about academic deadlines were then invited to answer whether they would like to. And if they did not, they were then asked to provide qualitative comments explaining their choice. This question sequence was repeated for students’ perception of text messages for events.

Of the 196 participants, 193 students (98.5%) are currently not receiving text messages about academic deadlines and 187 students (95.4%) are currently not receiving text messages about events. Of those who answered they *do not* receive text messages, 84 students (43.6%) indicated they would like to receive text messages about academic deadlines, and 64 (34.2%) answered they would like to receive text messages about social events.

The qualitative comments also revealed that students do not want to receive text messages about academic deadlines because text is too personal and they prefer email.

Respondents also indicated they are worried they would get too many texts and then just ignore them. They want to keep personal and school life separate and text would violate that boundary. Some also answered that it is easier to search and find messages via email. The comment box asking for justification for not wanting texts about events revealed similar reasons to those provided for not wanting them for academic deadlines, with one additional quote that is worth citing: “TOO MUCH INFORMATION. I AM BOMBARDED WITH IT DAILY. LEAVE ME ALONE.”

Because I am interested in the use of messaging, a survey question asked whether respondents would like to receive instant messages alerting them of academic deadlines. Students answering negatively were then invited to answer whether they would like to receive instant messages about academic deadlines. If they answered negatively, they were then invited to provide comments explaining their selection. I repeated this question sequence with ‘events’.

Only 13 respondents (6.6%) answered that they are receiving instant messages alerting them of academic deadlines, and only 59 students (30.0%) are in favor of receiving those. Similarly, only 12 respondents (6.2%) answered that they are receiving messages about events, and only 43 of them (22.05%) are in favor of receiving those.

In the open-ended survey questions, similar comments were repeated about preferring email to instant messaging for academic deadlines and events. Students are in favor of boundaries and not feeling like “they are always on call for a set of deadlines.” It was interesting to hear more participants found instant messaging intrusive than text messaging, since text messaging immediately pops up on one’s phone and text messaging is a platform you have to log-in to.

(2) Research Question #2: Accessing the University Website

(a) Focus groups.

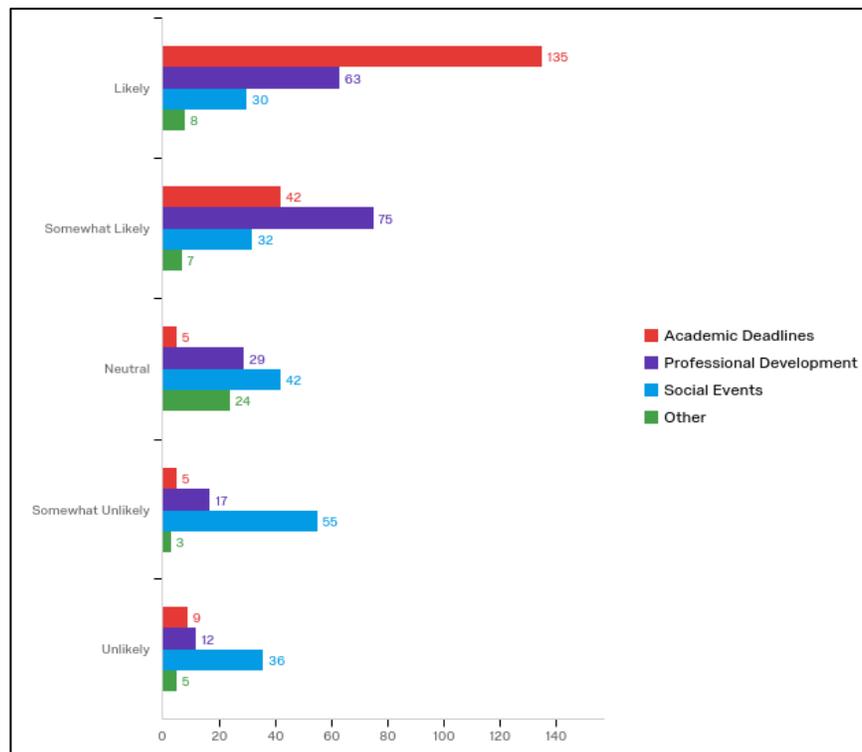
In order to understand graduate college students' patterns of access to the university's website, I asked focus groups members why they access the university's website, what they especially like and dislike about it, and what speaks to them the most. Discussions surrounded the desire for all information in one spot and for a user-friendlier mobile version. One student stated, "I wish the website was easier to navigate and I didn't have to make five clicks to find what I need." Another said, "it would be great to have one page with tabs to all the information I might need like scholarships, forms, deadlines, and easy access to other portals." An additional important take-away is students' complaint that the UNLV website information is not up-to-date: "if information on the website isn't accurate, how will I know? I use the information and get really frustrated when I'm told by faculty or staff that it is wrong."

(b) Survey.

In order to explore students' access to their university website more systematically, the survey questions asked respondents how likely they are to visit the university website to find out about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events. Respondents were asked to select between Likely, Somewhat Likely, Neutral, Somewhat Unlikely, and Unlikely for each of those. Respondents were then asked to provide their own comments about what they are looking for on the university website.

The results showed that 135 (68.9%) graduate students are likely to visit their university affiliated website for academic deadlines, 42 (21.4%) are somewhat likely, 5 (2.6%) are neutral, 5 (2.6%) are somewhat unlikely and 9 (4.6%) are unlikely to do so. The likelihood that a graduate student check his/her university website decreased when I asked respondents about visiting the website for professional development events, and continued to decrease for social events. Only 63 (32.1%) are likely to visit for professional development events, and only 30 (15.4%) for social events.

Figure 8: Likelihood that students visit their university website page for academic deadlines, professional development, and social events



Respondents' answers to the open-ended question revealed that they are visiting their university website to review calendars for deadlines and events, course information,

campus resources (i.e. Libraries, funding, student technology, discounts, access to other portals such as Workday, Webcampus/Canvas, MyUNLV, Rebel Mail), contact information, forms, announcement/news, and policies. As one wrote, “I access it because it is official.” In light of these answers, it seems clear that the websites should provide accurate and up-to-date information.

(3) Research Question #3: Visiting the University’s Facebook Page

(a) Focus groups.

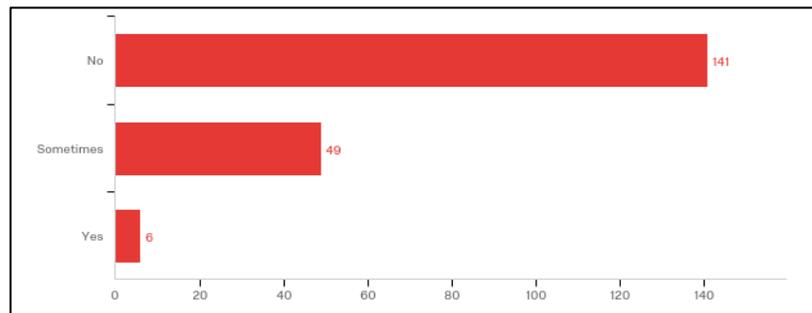
In order to understand students’ traffic to the university’s Facebook page, I asked focus groups participants whether they visit it and what they are typically looking for when they do. Participants’ responses indicated that they just do not have the time to be on social media while balancing school, work, family, and friends. Two more interesting quotes include “I recently deleted Facebook because I am on the job market,” and “I heard Facebook is for the older generation and I don’t really use it.” If universities want to use Facebook they may need to educate their population on why and how to use it. Four students even suggested alternate platforms to Facebook including: LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram.

(b) Survey.

Survey respondents were asked whether they visit their University Facebook page, and those who answered yes were then asked to provide comments about what they are looking for when they do.

Results show a very low count, with only 6 students (3.1%), visiting their university Facebook pages.

Figure 9: Students' Visit to their University's Facebook page



The open-ended question asking students why they are accessing the University Facebook page revealed they are seeking event information. One student wrote, “I can find out the date, time, location, as well as RSVP for an event, and see who else attending on the University’s Facebook page, sometimes this even motivates me to attend.”

Another popular reason for Facebook visits is to read about University announcements and news. As one student answered, “I like to read the news regarding the university’s impact in the community, highlights on research, who is winning awards, new developments, etc.” Lastly, students cited visiting their university’s Facebook page to view photos from an event they attended and following a link that was emailed.

(4) Research Question #4: Responding to Emails

(a) Focus groups.

In order to understand how students respond to the emails they receive from faculty and staff, I asked focus groups members to answer whether they read emails from these senders, and if so, which aspect of the email makes it more likely that they read them?

The answers respondents provided in the focus group are echoed in those they provided in the qualitative survey comment box. As one respondent offered: “Preference is given to who sent the email – faculty, current instructor, someone I have a relationship with and the subject line.” Students also favor emails that are personalized (not a mass email), relevant to them, and economic in length: “the shorter the email the more likely it will be read instantly,” answered one respondent. Students stated they are busy checking texts and email throughout their days for various reasons and are on message overload. Anything that makes getting all the information easier like an email with bullet points was suggested and can enhance student readership. Lastly, students’ comments corroborate the focus group data as they state, “I read all emails in my inbox.”

(b) Survey.

The survey questions attempted to examine the same issue by asking students to answer (with ‘no,’ ‘sometimes,’ and ‘yes’) whether they are reading emails from faculty and staff. Those who answered ‘sometimes’ or ‘yes’ were then asked to comment on which aspects of the email make it more likely they would read it. Findings indicated that 159 graduate (81.5%) students are reading faculty email, and 109 (55.6%) are also reading email from staff.

Figure 10: Students reading emails from faculty

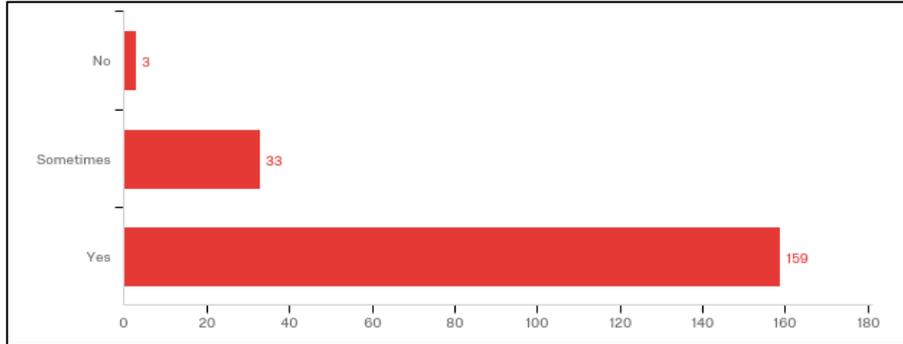
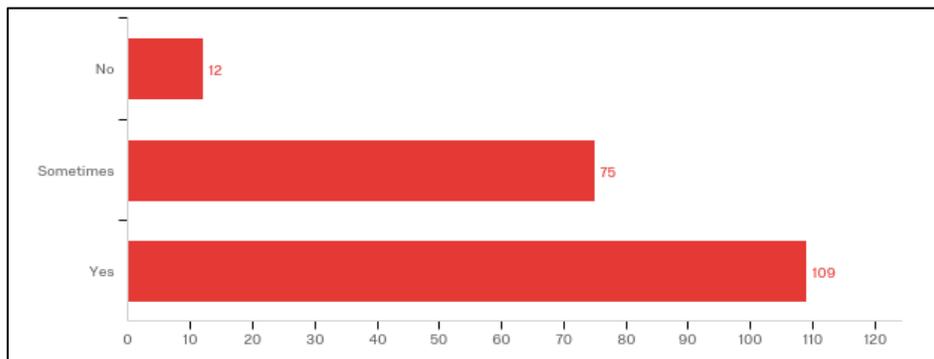


Figure 11: Students reading emails from staff



(5) Research Question #5: Responding to UNLV Messages

(a) Focus groups.

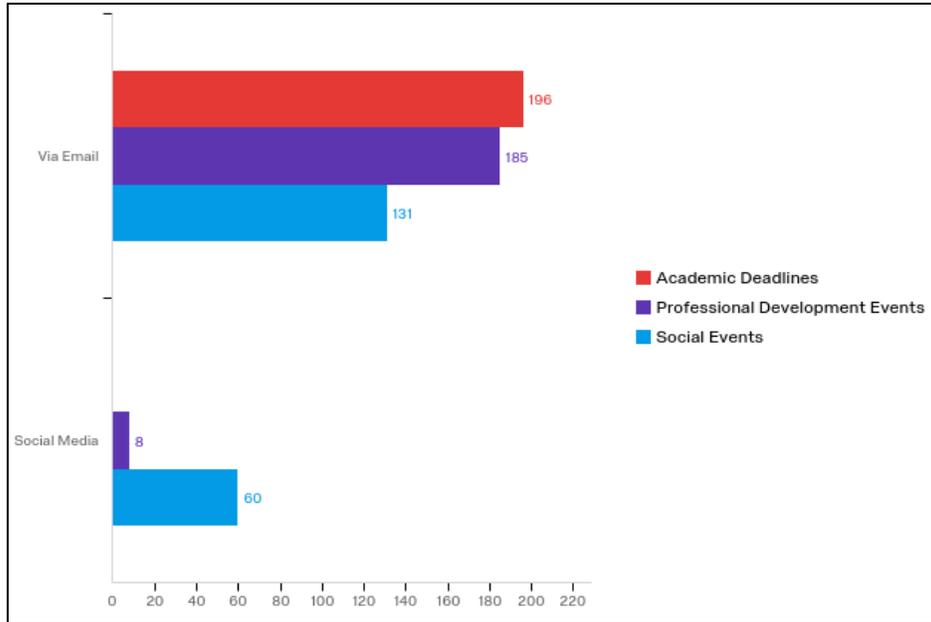
I asked focus group members how they typically respond to UNLV messages about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events that are communicated to them via email and social media. Most participants respond via email because it is more professional and separates personal and school life. In addition, as a

thread is created for each conversation, it is easier to return to the message and find the desired information. Respondents claimed they were also apprehensive about posting on Facebook and “everyone seeing my comments.” Age seems to be an important variable as one respondent remarked “it might be because I’m older, there might be an age thing involved, but I would email or call before I would post a question on Facebook.” Another participant said “Facebook is so public, maybe if I was younger I wouldn’t care, but I do care and it makes me nervous to post anything.” Although I did not survey in person contact and telephone use, three students did prefer these methods for asking questions. Lastly, students favor using social media for events, as it is a convenient method to RSVP and provide the event host an accurate headcount for attendance.

(b) Survey.

I asked whether they respond to messages about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events via email or social media, respondents’ answers to the survey questions showed similar patterns, As Figure 12 below shows, 196 students (100%) overwhelmingly use email to respond to messages about academic deadlines, 185 (95.6%) for professional development events, and 131 (68.6%) for social events.

Figure 12: How students respond to messages about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events



(6) Research Question #6: Statuses and Preferences

Do students' age, gender, type of degree/program, enrollment status, income, and college matter for communication preferences? To answer this question, binary logistic regressions ($n = 196$, $\alpha < .05$) assessed the associations between six independent variables:

- Age (ordinal scale, seven different categories; 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74 and 75 or older)
- Gender (male as the reference category, people who did not respond male or female were dropped from the model)
- Type of Degree (master or PhD, reference category is master's degree; certificates and 'other' were dropped from the model)

- Status (full-time or part-time, part-time served as the reference category)
- Income (ordinal scale, six different categories; less than \$20,000, \$20,000-\$34,999, \$35,000 to \$49,999, \$50,000 to \$74,999, \$75,000 to \$99,999, and over \$100,000)
- College (split up into STEM/Non-STEM, being in a non-STEM college served as the reference category. STEM included the Engineering, Sciences, Medicine, and Health Sciences Colleges; everything else was coded non-STEM)

Seven logistic regressions were run with the following dependent variables based on communication preferences: email, website, Facebook, text messaging, and instant messaging. Only one statistically significant relationship was found.

Table 2: Use of University Facebook Page

Logistic regression (N=166)					
Variable	Odds-ratio	Standard Error	Z value	P value	
Intercept	0.1173527	1.02531	-2.09	0.0366	
Age	1.3123681	0.24095	1.128	0.2592	
Female	2.9625067	0.48638	2.233	0.0256	
PhD	0.8273915	0.36911	-0.51	0.6077	
Full-time	1.1024192	0.57054	0.171	0.8643	
Income	0.9208879	0.11576	-0.71	0.4765	
STEM	1.1813474	0.37171	0.448	0.6539	

This model estimates the odds of visiting the University Facebook page (responding with ‘sometimes’ or ‘yes’ to survey question number eleven, “do you visit your university Facebook page?” Results show that the odds increase by a factor of 2.96

(OR= 2.96; p= .0256) that females will visit a university Facebook page compared to males.

The other six logistic regressions did not have statistically significant relationships. It could be difficult to find a relationship among the other variables and research questions due to the survey response rate. For example, if 5,000 or more students had answered the survey I would have more participants from each variable i.e. race, department, and enrollment status and it could alter the predictable relationships.

Table 3 presents the results from the logistic regression testing whether students are interested in receiving text messages about academic deadlines. No significant results were found among the independent variables of interest.

Table 3: Receive text messages about academic deadlines

Logistic regression (N=163)				
Variable	Odds-ratio	Standard Error	Z value	P value
Intercept	0.6252063	0.9142065	-0.514	0.607
Age	0.9453014	0.2301367	-0.244	0.807
Female	1.2183732	0.3844878	0.514	0.607
PhD	1.130185	0.3418963	0.358	0.72
Full-time	0.9993879	0.5175003	-0.001	0.999
Income	1.0189082	0.1042061	0.18	0.857
STEM	0.8319987	0.3431848	-0.536	0.592

Table 4 presents the results from the logistic regression testing whether students are interested in receiving text messages about events. No significant results were found among the independent variables of interest.

Table 4: Receive texts messages about events

Logistic regression (N=159)

Variable	Odds-ratio	Standard Error	Z value	P value
Intercept	0.6515244	0.97378	-0.44	0.66
Age	0.9667117	0.23712	-0.143	0.886
Female	1.758373	0.43081	1.31	0.19
PhD	1.015804	0.37047	0.042	0.966
Full-time	0.5265067	0.5402	-1.188	0.235
Income	0.9555192	0.11156	-0.408	0.683
STEM	0.94354	0.36887	-0.158	0.875

Table 5 presents the results from the logistic regression testing whether students are interested in receiving instant messages about academic deadlines. No significant results were found among the independent variables of interest.

Table 5: Receive instant messages regarding academic deadlines

Logistic regression (N=166)

Variable	Odds-ratio	Standard Error	Z value	P value
Intercept	1.091655	0.98196	0.089	0.929
Age	0.9071825	0.24876	-0.392	0.695
Female	0.8620193	0.40467	-0.367	0.714
PhD	0.9096336	0.36893	-0.257	0.797
Full-time	0.7155543	0.56509	-0.592	0.554
Income	0.8824472	0.11757	-1.064	0.287
STEM	0.8920865	0.37292	-0.306	0.759

Table 6 presents the results from the logistic regression testing whether students are using the university website to learn about academic deadlines. No significant results were found among the independent variables of interest.

Table 6: Using university website to find out about academic deadlines

Logistic regression (N=166)				
Variable	Odds-ratio	Standard Error	Z value	P value
Intercept	5.4954358	1.6521	1.031	0.3024
Age	0.7889207	0.3751	-0.632	0.5273
Female	2.4822529	0.5454	1.667	0.0955
PhD	1.5378898	0.5421	0.794	0.4272
Full-time	0.4043059	1.1524	-0.786	0.432
Income	1.3854227	0.204	1.598	0.1101
STEM	1.5922031	0.5801	0.802	0.4227

Table 7 presents the results from the logistic regression testing whether students are using the university website to learn about professional development. No significant results were found among the independent variables of interest.

Table 7: Using university website to find out about professional development opportunities

Logistic regression (N=166)				
Variable	Odds-ratio	Standard Error	Z value	P value
Intercept	0.5240796	1.00948	-0.64	0.522
Age	1.5958844	0.26699	1.751	0.08
Female	0.9671349	0.41586	-0.08	0.936
PhD	0.989408	0.37223	-0.029	0.977
Full-time	1.9284896	0.57626	1.14	0.254
Income	1.0755663	0.11824	0.616	0.538
STEM	0.7052597	0.36556	-0.955	0.339

Table 8 presents the results from the logistic regression testing whether students are using the university website to learn about professional development. No significant results were found among the independent variables of interest.

Table 8: Using university website to find out about social events

Logistic regression (N=165)				
Variable	Odds-ratio	Standard Error	Z value	P value
Intercept	0.2604398	0.96196	-1.399	0.162
Age	1.4144054	0.23824	1.455	0.146
Female	1.1277461	0.41193	0.292	0.77
PhD	0.8463358	0.36588	-0.456	0.648
Full-time	0.9752017	0.53839	-0.047	0.963
Income	0.9709969	0.11175	-0.263	0.792
STEM	0.6697605	0.37945	-1.056	0.291

SUMMARY

The literature review discussed whether email is a communication method of the past, but this study certainly shows that graduate students preferred this method of communication for information on academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events. The second preferred method for communication about those three types of information was text messaging. Students favoring text messaging cited the quickness and ease of viewing the message. The second preferred method of communication about professional development events and social events was Facebook. Students like it especially because of its event invitation function, RSVP features, and photo posting.

The data demonstrates that university officials should email students about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events. When doing so, the sender should have a relationship with the student, provide in the subject line a succinct description of the email content, write a short email, and use bullet point lists if the message is long.

The research also suggests that communication should not stop at email. Students did also favor text messaging and Facebook (and to a lesser extent instant messaging). Practically, this means that university officials should, for example, send a message via email and then also post it on Facebook, or use both email and text message.

Students use the university website to find out information about academic deadlines and to a lesser extent about professional development events and social events. It is imperative that university websites are kept up to date with accurate information as students are relying on them for those main purposes.

Limitations

When conducting research it is important to be aware of limitations. The limitations of this study concern sampling, researcher's influence, and research questions.

As most of the respondents are attending the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), are enrolled full-time, are between 25 and 34 years of age, white, doctoral-seeking students, holding graduate assistant positions, and making less than \$20,000, the results cannot be generalized to the entire national graduate student population. With fourteen participants in the focus group and 196 in the survey, generalizing the findings is not advisable. Similarly, as this study was conducted in four-year, public institutions, the results may not be replicated in other types of academic institutions (i.e. private

universities, liberal arts colleges,). If one were to replicate this study it would be beneficial to seek a larger subject pool including diversity by institution, enrollment status, age, race, program, employment status, and income.

As a key member of the Graduate College leadership team, my role at UNLV could have influenced participation. For example, I may have motivated students to participate as well as turned some students away.

Lastly, while I focused on six research questions, I didn't include all forms of communication. Omitting questions about face-to-face communication as a strategy for sharing information is a limitation as well. While the study compares and contrasts students' use of different internet platforms, it does not assess how students use face-to-face communication to learn about academic deadlines and events.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The goal of my research was to increase the sociological body of literature on graduate college students and communication methods by listening to students and creating and implementing an effective communication plan to keep them informed. As Kuh's (2006) extensive research, along with Webber's (2013) states, student success depends on student engagement. As students need to be aware of deadlines and events in order to be engaged, the results of my research might contribute to improve students' college experience. A communication plan based on student data will ensure that students are receiving the information they need in the format that they prefer, which will ultimately assist them in degree progression, completion, and satisfaction. If a student is aware of deadlines, professional development and event opportunities, he/she is more likely to attend to those, to be more engaged in his/her academic life, to progress, and to graduate.

The data collected certainly points to using email as the primary communication method for academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events. Anyone creating a plan to disseminate this type of information should first use email and then also consider using one other platform, such as a Facebook post or a text message. The research also reminds us that university websites need to be accurate and updated on a regular basis. Students desire control over their information gathering and want it at their fingertips, instant, accurate, and dependable.

With Web 3.0, these communication methods are likely to continue evolving, but maybe not as fast as one may think. While students prefer email, Facebook, and text messaging, discussion also arose in both the focus group and open-ended survey

questions about in-person communication, and speaking with faculty and staff face-to-face. Further research needs to be conducted to explore the preference for face-to-face communication.

In addition, the weak preference for Facebook and text messaging indicates that university faculty and staff should keep in mind that students are reluctant to have their personal and professional life intertwined. Without students engaging on multiple platforms they are avoiding message saturation, which can ultimately turn students away from reading any message.

As the Executive Director of Graduate Student Services at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, I'm excited about implementing the findings of this study. For one, my research finds that students want one big email with all the information they need in it, so we will continue our Monday weekly email newsletter that offers all upcoming academic deadlines, as well as, professional development and social events that are occurring that week and upcoming. Second, I host two new student orientations a year and will encourage students to follow our Facebook and LinkedIn pages for up to date information. Third, I will share my findings regarding websites with UNLV's campus communicators committee. It is vital that our websites hold accurate information and are easy to navigate. Lastly, email is alive and I will share with faculty and staff the need to be cognizant of their subject lines, length, personalization of emails, and using bullet points when necessary and applicable.

Moving forward, I want to continue to expand my research and the Quan-Haase and Collins study (2008) on communication and boundaries. From the sociological perspective it will be beneficial to conduct an ethnography on graduate students who are

successful in holding firm on private and public boundaries as well as those who are struggling with it and the reasons explaining these differences. Specifically, how does email, social media, text messaging, and instant messaging help or hinder one's boundary maintenance? My findings also prompt the questions on graduate students ideal total number of official emails per unit of time they prefer, as well as, what day and time they want to receive them. This information could assist in students opening and reading emails and then lead to increased engagement if they have the information they need.

“We are not going to get rid of the Internet” (Turkle 2011:293), so we need to learn how to control it and not allow it to control us. As Web 3.0 unfolds, we need to do just that and grow with it, learn with it, and use it to our advantage. Hopefully, the results presented here will help college administrators devise communication plans to share academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events with students and aid in graduate students' college experiences and successes.

APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How do you prefer to be communicated with regarding academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events?
2. Why do you access the university's website? What do you especially like and dislike, what speaks to you the most?
3. Are you reading emails from faculty and staff? If so, which aspect of the email makes it more likely that you read them?
4. Do you visit your university affiliated Facebook pages (i.e. university, college, department)? What do you typically look for when you access it?
5. Would you like to receive text messaging about UNLV deadline and event notifications?
6. Would you like to receive "instant messaging to alert them of UNLV academic deadlines and events?
7. Do you prefer certain information via a specific platform?
8. How do you typically respond to UNLV messages about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events via:
 - a. Email
 - b. Social Media

APPENDIX B: QUALTRICS SURVEY

Q1 In order of preference, how would you rank your preferred method of communication regarding *academic deadlines*? (1 - your most preferred)

- Email (1)
 - Facebook (2)
 - Text Messaging (3)
 - Instant Messaging (4)
 - Other (5)
-

Q2 In order of preference, how would you rank your preferred method of communication regarding *professional development events*? (1 - your most preferred)

- Email (1)
 - Facebook (2)
 - Text Messaging (3)
 - Instant Messaging (4)
 - Other (5)
-

Q3 In order of preference, how would you rank your preferred method of communication regarding *social events*? (1 - your most preferred)

- Email (1)
 - Facebook (2)
 - Text Messaging (3)
 - Instant Messaging (4)
 - Other (5)
-

Q4 Please comment on/explain why you made the selections in the above 3 questions:

Q5 How likely are you to visit your university's website for the following information:

	Likely (1)	Somewhat Likely (2)	Neutral (3)	Somewhat Unlikely (4)	Unlikely (5)
Academic Deadlines (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Professional Development (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Social Events (3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Other (4)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q6 Why do you access the university's website? (i.e. check for news, announcements, forms)

Q7 Are you reading emails from faculty?

- No (2)
- Sometimes (4)
- Yes (3)

Display This Question:

If Q7 = Yes

Or Q7 = Sometimes

Q8 What aspects of the email makes it more likely you will read it?

Q9 Are you reading emails from staff?

- No (1)
- Sometimes (2)
- Yes (3)

Display This Question:

If Q9 = Sometimes

Or Q9 = Yes

Q10 What aspects of the email makes it more likely you will read it?

Q11 Do you visit your University Facebook page?

- No (1)
- Sometimes (3)
- Yes (5)

Display This Question:

If Q11 = Yes

Or Q11 = Sometimes

Q12 What do you typically look for when you access your University Facebook page?

Q13 Do you receive text messages about *academic deadlines*?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Display This Question:

If Q13 = No

Q14 Would you like to receive text messages about *academic deadlines*?

Yes (1)

No. If no, why not? (2)

Q15 Do you receive text messaging about *events*?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Display This Question:

If Q15 = No

Q16 Would you like to receive text messages about *events*?

- Yes (1)
 - No. If no, why not? (2)
-

Q17 Do you receive instant messages to alert you of academic deadlines?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Q18 Would you like to receive instant messages about *academic deadlines*?

- Yes (1)
 - No. If no, why not? (3)
-

Q19 Do you receive instant messages to alert you of *events*?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Q20 Would you like to receive instant messages about *events*?

- Yes (1)
 - No. If no, why not? (2)
-

Q21 How do you respond to messages about academic deadlines, professional development events, and social events?

	Via Email (1)	Via Social Media (2)
Academic Deadlines (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professional Development Events (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Events (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q22 First and Last Name

Q23 Email Address

Q24 Phone Number

Q25 Admit term (i.e. Fall 2017)

Q52 University Currently Attending:

- University of Nevada Las Vegas (1)
 - University of Nevada Reno (2)
 - University of Arizona (3)
 - University of Hawaii (4)
 - Other, please input university name here: (5)
-

Q26 Are you a full-time or part-time student?

- Full-time (1)
 - Part-time (2)
-

Q27 Please indicate which category represents your current status/degree program:

- Graduate Certificate Program (1)
 - Master's or Specialist Degree Program (2)
 - Doctoral Degree Program (3)
 - Other (5) _____
-

Q53 Please indicate which college you represent (e.g. College of Sciences, College of Liberal Arts)

Q28 Please indicate which department you represent (e.g. Department of Sociology, Department of Civil Engineering)

Q29 Your current age:

- 18-24 (1)
- 25-34 (2)
- 35-44 (3)
- 45-54 (4)
- 55-64 (5)
- 65-74 (6)
- 75 or older (7)
- Prefer not to answer (8)

Q30 Ethnicity

- White (1)
- Hispanic or Latino (2)
- Black or African-American (3)
- Native American or American Indian (4)
- Asian/Pacific Islander (5)
- Other (6)
- Prefer not to answer (7)

Q31 Which gender identity do you most identify?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Not Listed (3) _____
- Prefer not to answer (4)

Q32 What is your current employment status?

- Employed Full Time (40 or more hours per week) (1)
 - Employed Part Time (up to 39 hours per week) (2)
 - Graduate Assistant (3)
 - Retired (4)
 - Not employed (5)
 - Other (6) _____
-

Q33 What is your household income?

- Less than \$20,000 (1)
- \$20,000 to \$34,999 (2)
- \$35,000 to \$49,999 (3)
- \$50,000 to \$74,999 (4)
- \$75,000 to \$99,999 (5)
- Over \$100,000 (6)

Q34 Your anticipated graduation date:

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