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Engaged Social Media in Higher Education While Avoiding the Label of "Striving"

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Engaged Social Media in Higher Education While Avoiding the Label of "Striving"

Abstract

Striving has become a word laden with problematic meanings in the world of higher education. For instance, if a university is too aligned with business, or becomes overly selective, or deviates from original purpose or mission, then, at times, those actions are seen as striving (O'Meara, 2007). O'Meara (2007) defines striving as participation in efforts to improve status and prestige in line with the hierarchy. Allen (2021) echoes the problematic nature of this practice witnessed abroad, equating striving educational practices with neoliberalism, potentially overshadowing primary purposes of the institution, such as learning and teaching, or drowning out important parts of institutional culture, such as integrity and equity. It is an odd and problematic paradox, that as the institution strives to appear ranked higher, it, in fact, downgrades its connection to its mission and values. The practice of striving as an area of concern in higher education can be traced back to the California Master Plan (California State Department of Education, 1960), and the inception of higher education in the United States and abroad (Rudolph, 1990). Part of what can be problematic about striving is this - as a higher education strives for more status, it can leave behind those it purports to serve, thereby limiting the diversity of ideas, cultures and identities within the institution.

Keywords

striving, socials, higher education, critical theory

Author Statement

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Striving has become a word laden with problematic meanings in the world of higher education. For instance, if a university is too aligned with business, or becomes overly selective, or deviates from original purpose or mission, then, at times, those actions are seen as striving (O'Meara, 2007). O'Meara (2007) defines striving as participation in efforts to improve status and prestige in line with the hierarchy. Allen (2021) echoes the problematic nature of this practice witnessed abroad, equating striving educational practices with neoliberalism, potentially overshadowing primary purposes of the institution, such as learning and teaching, or drowning out important parts of institutional culture, such as integrity and equity. It is an odd and problematic paradox, that as the institution strives to appear ranked higher, it, in fact, downgrades its connection to its mission and values. The practice of striving as an area of concern in higher education can be traced back to the California Master Plan (California State Department of Education, 1960), and the inception of higher education in the United States and abroad (Rudolph, 1990). Part of what can be problematic about striving is this - as a higher education strives for more status, it can leave behind those it purports to serve, thereby limiting the diversity of ideas, cultures and identities within the institution.

If an institution is attempting to address striving behaviors and be an inclusive campus community, there may be conflicts with social media programming related to striving behaviors that are inherent unless acknowledge and addressed. Each one is looked at more closely with the university function, the translation into a social mode of communication, and a community engaged solution to attempt to resolve.

Retain and Grow

The university function is that every department, college and program needs to keep number, keep people, increase enrollment, retention, graduation and more. These are student success-centered numbers looked at frequently by a university. Related to social media use, this can translate out a number of different ways into the medium, including asking open ended

questions, social media polling, hashtags, and other community building. This can be used in a community engaged way to counter striving by connecting to community efforts. As an example, instead of an Instagram poll about the location of the new climbing wall, maybe have a hashtag about the higher education community doing a community service day, or taking a poll on what nonprofit to serve next. It might be a striving behavior to talk about how many people were turned away this admissions cycle, while it might be a more inclusive growth opportunity to talk about the student mentoring and opportunities to volunteer on campus for commuters (O'Meara, 2007).

Promote to a younger audience

Given the primary audience of incoming students and the age demographics related to that audience, every university has an objective to stay connected with a younger audience. This audience receives media and messaging a different way on specific platforms. Generally, to reach the student audience, in a poll of students, they request to be engaged via Instagram. This is not in itself a striving behavior and effectively can run counter to striving since use of preferred student platforms may foster more two-way communication.

Inform

The university function reflected in this effort is to drive attendance, promote the department, unit, program or college, and to make sure that what is invested in has the maximum impact including events, info sessions and programming. The social media translation of this potential striving behavior is to create events, countdowns and reminders, items frequently seen on social media. It is important to stay engaged with the community in order to avoid potential conflicts with striving. So for instance, it might be a non-striving behavior to create an event related to a nonprofit walking distance away while also connecting students with meaningful high impact practices.

Increase ranking of program

Universities regularly compete for rankings and are scored and observed year round for these rankings. Ways this manifests itself in social media include having an interesting fact of

the week related directly to ranking and judging criteria. For instance, if graduation rates are a criteria for ranking, the university social media might have a “fact of the day” or other themed graphic on their social media talking about aspects of this scoring. Many of the scoring criteria are directly related to “striving” (O’Meara, 2007) and so it is important to note which scoring criteria are not. New in 2020, US News and World Report is considering high impact practices including capstones, internships and study abroad programs in their rankings (Morse, R., Brooks, E., & Mason, M., 2019), items not necessarily linked to striving and also known to be beneficial to students.

Celebrate successes

After rankings are acquired, universities and colleges tout those rankings. Social media is a place to personalize wins in the context of the people doing them, making this a space in social media rife with striving behaviors including celebrating awards of the department or unit, faculty, “research stars,” grants won, or research at a large scale, all things not necessarily related to the teaching successes (O’Meara, 2007). One way to counter this can be to celebrate successes in a personal or community engaged way. How many hours of service did the program do and what impact did it have. How many times per day will someone get the assistance they need to complete their day in classes without distractions related to housing or food. These are huge successes, and are not striving successes, and there is an opportunity to further explore this area.

Conclusion

Overall, while the purpose of higher education is a conversation with longer implications than the purpose of this paper, social media use by higher education without insight linking the two can unintentionally affirm striving behaviors of the institution. Through awareness and exercising choice about how to complete the important functions of university and college social media accounts, much can be done in the way of neutralizing any unintended striving behaviors to more closely align with the intent of the institution, whatever they may be.

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