

Teaching & Learning with Social Media at the UW

Tara Coffin & Janice Fournier, UW Information Technology

For the last several years, the UW has participated in the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) survey, along with 250 institutions of higher education. Survey results provide insight into UW students' and instructors' use of and perceptions about educational technologies compared with their peers at other institutions with doctoral programs. ECAR survey questions differ year to year, and data may not be available every year, for every question.

Social Media in Higher Education: Opportunities

Students increasingly want their instructors to use social media as a learning tool. Research suggests that social media assists students with acquiring new information, facilitates connections with course material and peers, and improves productivity. Students recognize these benefits and want to take advantage of them. In 2015, 21% of UW students said that they want their instructors to use social media as a learning tool more frequently, compared to 10% in 2012.

Instructors should “relate social media and current events on website to our class material.” —UW Student, 2015

Instructors underutilize student mobile devices for learning.

Current trends suggest that access to social media increases along with growing mobile device ownership. And this increase may benefit students. Social media can be an effective learning tool in higher education, facilitating interaction between students and instructors, improving communication, promoting social and peer learning, and increasing collaboration. However, 2015 ECAR results demonstrate that UW students feel that their instructors are underutilizing students' mobile devices. In general, only 28% of UW students say their instructors take advantage of student devices, using these tools to enhance learning and to help students make connections with resources outside the classroom.

UW needs an “official social media app to get everyone in the university connected as a whole.” —UW Student, 2015

Students indicate that social media helps them remain connected with their peers and their institution. Social media enables students to build connections with instructors, peers, and campus community—interactions that improve retention rates. Students want to become better at using social media for educational purposes. In 2015, 31% of UW students said they felt they would be more effective if better skilled at using social media as a learning tool, up from 28% in 2014 ($p=0.029$).

More students report using social media as a learning tool in class and for course-related purposes. The percentage of students who indicated that they use social media, or Facebook specifically, as a learning tool increased from 33% of UW students in 2011 to 56% in 2015 (Table 1).

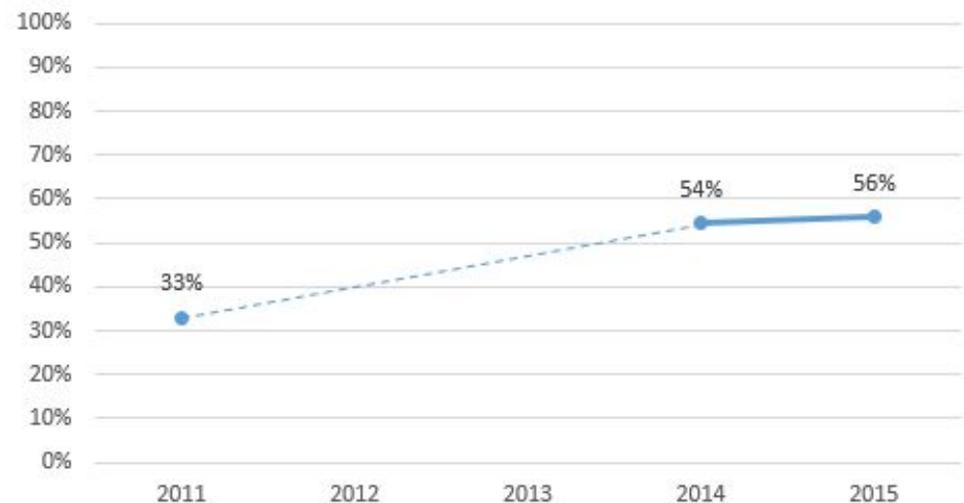


Table 1: Percent of students who indicated they used social media as a learning tool in at least one course. Note: Question not asked in 2012 or 2013.

Social Media in Higher Education: Challenges

Students want to keep their academic and social lives online separate. Students are wary of how the use of social media in an academic setting may impact their privacy. Results from the ECAR survey from 2012-2015 indicate that students are increasingly concerned about keeping their social and academic lives separated online. The percentage of students who agreed with the statement, “I like to keep my online academic and social lives separate,” increased from 43.5% in 2012 to 65.1% in 2015. Other researchers also report persistent privacy concerns surrounding the use of social media in the learning setting.

“My institution could use some more integration with social media, but not to a level that jeopardizes privacy of individuals.” —UW Student, 2015

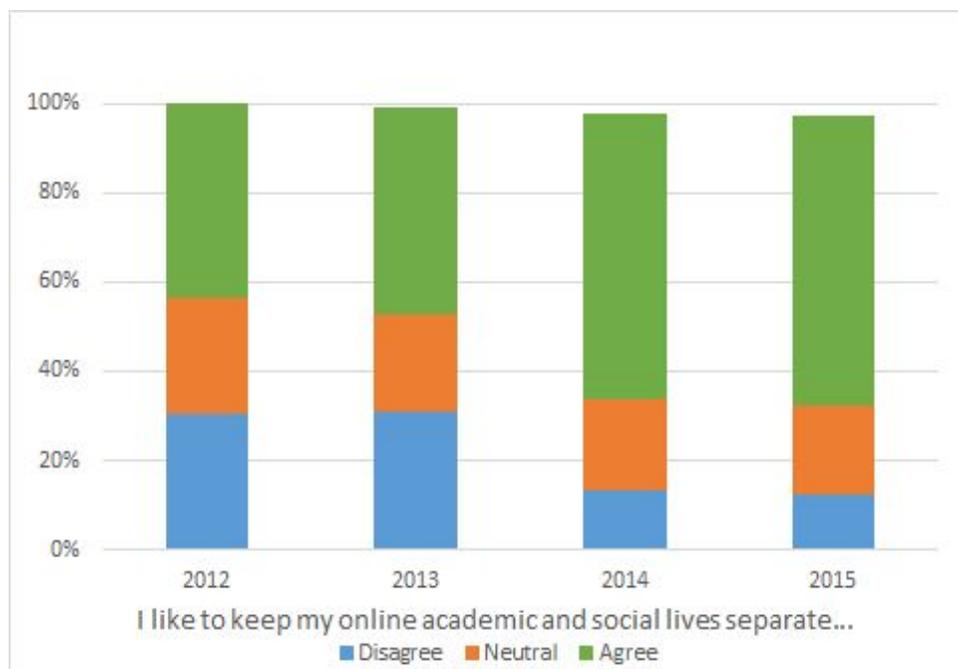


Table 2: Percent of students who indicated they prefer to keep their online academic lives separate from their online social lives.

Social media impacts both productive and unproductive behaviors. Research indicates that social media has “dual effects” on student learning. The intensity of social media use contributes to an increase in productive behaviors, such as task-oriented and relationship-building behaviors, and unproductive behaviors, including behaviors that may distract from the task at hand.



Student use of social media during class “seriously detracts from my learning.” —UW Student, 2014

Students and instructors are concerned that social media is a source of distraction. While only 29.7% of UW students reported in 2015 that technology interferes with their ability to concentrate and think deeply, 63.4% indicated that multitasking with technology devices and services, including social media, sometimes prevents them from concentrating. Instructors frequently regard social media as a source of entertainment, and thus a source of distraction when juxtaposed with academic work. In the 2015 ECAR report, 63.0% of UW instructors said they agreed that the in-class use of mobile devices is distracting for their students.