

# USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO BUILD DIVERSITY IN YOUR REU

**Curious about Facebook? Thinking about starting a blog for you summer research program?** The most popular social media platforms are easy to use, widely accessible, and provide a convenient channel for questions and discussion. These online platforms can support dialog within a defined community. We conducted a literature review and talked with 9 program facilitators using social media platforms across 12 programs (including 4 NSF REUs) in order to find out how well these tools met expectations or goals. This handout presents a brief summary of how-to's and what-not-to-do's.

*To access the full article, which contains in depth information and research references on the pros, cons & potential of these social media tools, visit The Resource Toolbox at [www.pathwaystoscience.org](http://www.pathwaystoscience.org).*

*Many thanks to the following individuals for their input:*

*Elizabeth Bahe (Project Director, AIHEC Student Success Collaborative); Tim Dellapena (PI, Summer Internship Program at Texas A & M Galveston); Deana Erdner (PI, Research in Subtropical Marine Ecosystems REU, at University of Texas at Austin); Sara Xayarath Hernández (Director of Diversity Programs in Engineering, Cornell University); Chloé Newcomb Hodgetts (Education Coordinator, Bermuda Institute of Ocean Sciences (BIOS) REU); Kathryne Piazzola (Program Coordinator, Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP), Stony Brook University); Pam Shill (Program Coordinator for Human Computer Interface (HCI) graduate program and SPIRE-EIT REU, at Iowa State University); Yolanda Treviño (Assistant Dean of the Graduate School, at Indiana University, Bloomington); Renetta Tull (Assistant Dean for Graduate Student Development at UMBC and Director of PROMISE: Maryland's AGEP)*

## WHAT WOULD I WANT TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR?

- ® **Outreach & Recruitment:** informing and engaging current and prospective students about a program
- ® **Developing a Sense of Community:** supporting and enhancing peer engagement before, during and/or after the program, and generating excitement and community
- ® **Facilitating Student Presentation and Dissemination of Work:** both explicitly related to program content, or reflective and experiential
- ® **Tracking:** students after their participation in a program

**Using it really opened my eyes to how generational differences and preferences can inform program strategy. Paper outreach may miss key age groups and prospects.**

*Liz Bahe, project coordinator for AIHEC Student Success Collaborative*

## HOW TO CHOOSE? WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM FOR WHICH PURPOSE?



Choosing a platform (or platforms) to use will depend on your social media goals, the amount of time you can invest, and the interest and abilities of the program staff.

### **Facebook**

- *Outreach and recruitment:* Create a public [Facebook webpage](#) for your program. Post frequent updates on program activities, including photos (be sure to get permission from participants), program highlights, student successes, upcoming events, and opening program application announcements.
- *Creating community & peer to peer and engagement:* After participants have been selected but well before a program begins, create a closed [Facebook group](#) and invite all participants to join. Use prompts to elicit student introductions including photos, and “ice-breaker” posts to promote peer engagement. Also use the group for posting logistical information and to prompt and answer questions from participants about prepping for the program.
- *Tracking:* make an effort to stay in touch with program alums via Facebook.
- *Creating community:* Program alums can serve as models and mentors for current students, so prompt and promote their engagement in FB groups.

### **Linked In**

- *Community and Tracking:* recommend that program participants create a Linked In profile prior to completing the program and share it with peers and faculty.
- *Outreach and recruitment:* Stay in touch with program alums via Linked In and highlight their profiles across other outreach platforms, such as Facebook. Visible program alums can serve as models and mentors for current students, and can be an excellent recruitment source.

### **Blogs**

- *Academic support and peer engagement:* Integrate student blog posting and responses into your program curriculum. It may provide a convenient and familiar way for students to communicate and process their learning, and it allows for frequent monitoring of student progress. Blog posts and responses provide a channel for critical peer engagement and peer support.
- *Outreach:* Integrate student blogs into your public outreach and recruitment efforts. Their writing can provide a window onto the student experience for others in the community, including family and potential students, and it supports those who are posting in being engaged and responsible representatives.

### **Listservs**

- *Outreach and recruiting:* Listservs, such as [Google Groups](#), provide a social media platform that is easy to understand and administer, and works well for those who



prefer e-mail over web-based interaction. Post program updates, events, application information, and specific requests for candidates, as appropriate for the community.

### **Twitter**

- Twitter gets an honorable mention. It is a popular medium for extending the reach of other social media platforms (such as Facebook), but be choosy about what gets re-tweeted so followers are not desensitized to your “tweets.” Linking Facebook pages and twitter accounts is straightforward and covered in the help guides of both sites. Twitter has lately been met with some enthusiasm by students and faculty in classroom experiments seeking to enhance student engagement.

### **WHATEVER YOU DO, REMEMBER THIS:**

#### **□ Map out your social media strategy!**

Begin with your goals and map them to potential social media tools. What is it that you want to accomplish? Decide how you will gauge the success of each social media element and plan to collect the information you’ll need to gauge whether it’s working. If you consider the investment made in the setup and ongoing maintenance of a social media system, it makes sense to allocate at least a small percentage of effort up front to ensure the best possible results.

#### **□ Assess your social media impact**

Add questions related to your social media efforts to the pre- and post- program surveys you already give to your students. Many social media tools provide an array of straightforward and free engagement statistics that can be helpful in assessing the impact of your social media efforts. [Facebook Insight](#) is available to administrators of Facebook pages (but not Facebook groups), and provides a simple set of tools that show user demographics and statistics about your page. [Google Analytics](#) can be used on any of your web pages to show access statistics and other information about your visitors. If you use Wordpress as a blog platform, there is an additional [Wordpress plugin](#) that can be used in conjunction with Google Analytics.

#### **□ Provide training**

The landscape of social media is constantly evolving, forcing even committed users to keep current. Take time to familiarize yourself with a particular tool. Provide training and ongoing refreshers for administrators, faculty and staff. Even if *you* think the tool/app/website is self-explanatory, not all users will agree with you!

#### **□ Acknowledge communication preferences among different demographic groups**

Social media can be powerful in connecting those with online access, but don’t forget that not everyone has online access. Furthermore, different demographic groups may prefer different communication channels. Many students already use Facebook and Twitter as primary

communication channels. In contrast, it appears that many faculty members find that e-mail meets their online communication needs, and have not (yet) found social media useful.

Students as well as faculty have cited a variety of reasonable concerns that make them hesitant to embrace social media tools. Some have voiced concerns about privacy, while others hold the opinion that the informality of social media tools conflicts with the needed formality of research. Still others have said they simply do not wish to learn how to use each new and passing communication fad. If possible, sample for the preferences of group members during the planning process, to provide for equal opportunity for communication and engagement in the target community.

#### **□ Make sure the links to your social media tools are consistent**

As in, consistently present in all outreach materials – including web pages, presentations, flyers, etc. This allows interested individuals to easily select the one that best suits them.

#### **□ Realize: it takes time**

Without exception, interviewees considered frequency and relevance (“freshness”) of content crucial for keeping students, faculty and alumni engaged. This requires a planned content management routine. Interviewees reported spending anywhere from an hour or two per week for basic Facebook page outreach, to 10 hours per week for multiple social media platforms and audiences. For all interviewees, more time spent correlated with greater feeling of success. But beware: it is possible to over-post and cross the threshold from engaging to bothersome.

Also plan to allow time for administrative focus. For example, managing a listserv requires tasks related to moderating discussions and establishing communication norms for the group. Similarly, if you plan to host a private Facebook page, you will need to manage subscriptions, monitor security, and possibly moderate discussions.

**“It really helps to have someone who is Facebook savvy! We hire a coordinator to help us with the program every summer – someone who is less intimidating than the program directors and closer to the student demographic that the students are more comfortable with.”**

*Deana Erdner, assistant professor, University of Texas Marine Science Institute*

#### **□ Find the right person to keep it going**

In short - find someone who likes to do this stuff! Someone who already enjoys engaging in Facebook or blogs (or whatever platform you are using), and who already knows the ins and outs of the technology, will be the right person to take on regular maintenance of updating and monitoring these platforms.

#### **□ Don't be afraid to experiment!**

While it will likely take time and effort to grow a vibrant and engaged virtual community within the social media spaces you create for your program, you may find yourself surprised.

For more information visit [www.pathwaystoscience.org](http://www.pathwaystoscience.org) or contact the Institute for Broadening Participation at [contactus@ibparticipation.org](mailto:contactus@ibparticipation.org).



Tim Dellapena (associate professor and PI at Summer Internship Program, Texas A&M University at Galveston TAMUG program) began a basic Facebook page primarily to track program participants. He began simply by asking students to “friend” the page, and found that the page took off, evolving into an engaged community of students and alumni. Tim’s advice is “It’s great— just do it!” Similarly, we advise you not to be afraid to experiment! And remember: each situation is different, and what doesn’t work in one setting might work well in another.

