

Article 12

The Use of Social Media in Counselor Education

Douglas R. Tillman, Julie A. Dinsmore, Christine L. Chasek, and David D. Hof

Tillman, Douglas R., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling & School Psychology at the University of Nebraska Kearney. His teaching interests include clinical coursework, appraisal, and theories of counseling. His research interests include spirituality, wellness, and social media's role in counselor education.

Dinsmore, Julie A., is a Professor in the Department of Counseling & School Psychology at the University of Nebraska Kearney. Her instructional and research interests include Multicultural Counseling, Social Justice and Advocacy Issues in Counseling, and School Counseling.

Chasek, Christine L., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling & School Psychology at the University of Nebraska Kearney. Her teaching and research interests include drug and alcohol counseling and counselor development. She has 15 years of clinical practice specializing in substance abuse treatment.

Hof, David D., is a Professor in the Department of Counseling & School Psychology at the University of Nebraska Kearney. For over 16 years, his clinical practice has focused on high-risk youth.

Abstract

Examined in this article are ways the use of social media can enhance a counselor education program's activities in the areas of recruitment, curriculum, pedagogy, extracurricular student contact, and alumni connections. Also discussed are privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, boundary, copyright, liability, and free speech issues related to the administrative and instructional use of social media in a counselor education program. A social media policy is proposed to help counselor educators use this potent tool ethically and effectively.

The digital age marches on with or without counselor education programs being prepared. Of late, digital activity is being spearheaded by the growth of social media. The days of needing a desktop computer to engage in social media is a relic of the past. Now, the space is filled with smart phones, tablets, and iPads and the mobility of these platforms adds to the always on and always connected landscape of the 21st century. The explosion of social media, like Facebook and Twitter, is challenging counselor education

programs to consider how to best assure its effective, safe, and ethical use by both students and faculty.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) has begun to embrace social media as a way to communicate with its membership in real time by creating a Twitter account where news, conference updates, trainings, and a variety of blogs are linked to followers. In addition, since 2007, ACA has operated an Online Library, a Podcast Series, and an Online Learning Web site to support the professional development of counselors. Yet, at present, the profession has developed few specific policy or practice guidelines related to the ethical use of social media by counselors and counselor educators. Neither the current version of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005) nor the 2009 revision of the standards of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) address the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Since 1999, task force reports or position papers related to technology competency of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2012), the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES; 1999, 2007), and the American Psychological Association (APA; 2002) have addressed knowing the purpose of various forms of technology such as blogs, chat rooms, technology enhanced classrooms, distance learning platforms, online continuing education, ethical use of email, and Internet counseling service delivery. However, the professional and/or personal use of social media like Facebook and Twitter are not discussed. Recognizing the need to establish policies related to social media use in counseling, ACA has formed a Cyberspace Technology Task Force and has initiated discussion on the use of social media during the ongoing revision of the 2005 *ACA Code of Ethics*.

The laws governing social media are changing and evolving as rapidly as the changes in technology that create the social media outlets. Currently there is a lack of law regarding social media, freedom of speech, copyright issues, liability issues, and federal regulation such as HIPAA and FERPA, especially when used in the higher education setting (Melroy, 2011). The courts and policymakers continue to debate social media laws with no strong legal precedents yet established regarding the use of social media in education programs. Until professional policies are established and legal issues clarified, this leaves counselor educators using their “best judgment” to consider how to integrate social media in the administrative and instructional activities of programs and to create policies to regulate themselves.

Use of Social Media in Counselor Education

Administration and Governance

In terms of the administration of counselor education programs, faculty are starting to consider how social media may impact the recruitment, admissions, and student progress monitoring aspects of program governance.

Recruitment. In a discussion paper for the National Association for College Admission Counseling, Barnes (2009), found that 61% of universities are currently utilizing social media in some form to recruit students. Further, 88% of universities see it as part of their future recruitment strategies. Historically in counselor education, recruitment has been done by making presentations to undergraduate classes in fields close to counseling, producing print media for distribution, conducting one-to-one

meetings between interested students and faculty, and relying on the department Web page to communicate the salient facts about the department's programs. For some potential students, this face-to-face personal connection is valued, but Barnes has articulated that for 16-24 year olds, the "...world of interactivity and hyper-communication has fundamentally changed how teenagers and young adults receive and process information" (p. 2).

At a time when student recruitment is increasingly important and programs are seeking to diversify their student demographic, if one counselor education program is using social media, others may need to as well. YouTube has begun to be utilized in the recruitment of students by counselor education departments. For example, short video clips can be found that show a program's promotion of their on-line coursework as flexible and financially responsible for the student, an alcohol and drug counseling specialization endorsed by celebrity testimonials, and faculty members discussing their school counselor program with student comments about their experiences. The idea of concentrating a counseling program's message into a 30-second YouTube clip becomes very attractive when one further considers the advantages. Not only does doing so allow for broad dissemination of the program's identity and message, it is free to programs and provides statistics on marketing effectiveness by tracking the number of views the clip has received.

When giving advice to undergraduates considering graduate school, Agre (2001) stated that students should seek advice, over a year or more, from professors knowledgeable about the graduate program they are considering. Counselor education departments who create a Facebook page devoted to recruitment could facilitate this type of ongoing contact by "friending" upcoming undergraduates. In addition, the use of Twitter allows for mass, instantaneous notification to "followers" of a particular individual or program. Current students of a counseling program who use Twitter could "tweet" a particularly powerful learning from a class, conference, or experiential activity and could then field questions posed by their "followers" around the experience. This type of exchange could deepen the conversation and generate excitement among potential students about the department and its programs.

Admissions and monitoring of student progress. The role of social media in the admission process of counselor education programs is a contentious one. It has become common practice in business to check an applicant's social media postings as part of completing a background check. Yet is it appropriate to review these posts when considering admission into university degree programs? Barnes (2009) found that 47% of university admission officers engage in the practice, particularly around admission to programs with limited space or the awarding of prestigious scholarships, and suggests the practice continues largely because very little case law exists setting up boundaries on such action. Postings made by individuals on social media sites have a lesser expectation of privacy than other forms of communication, so the practice of examining social media for admission decisions is legal at present. But is such behavior ethical? Cohen (2007) suggests the practice is not ethical; that it is analogous to reading a person's diary and that there is no guarantee that some of the information available is accurate or reliable. In addition, despite the information being public knowledge, in terms of due process, it can be problematic to consider any applicant's social media postings unless one plans to do so for all applicants. Faculty should also consider whether their university has a campus

or system-wide policy in place that would preclude consideration of social media information in making admissions decisions.

On the other hand, the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005) emphasizes that both counselors-in-training, as well as counselor educators, have a responsibility to monitor whether there are physical, mental, or emotional problems that might prevent counselors-in-training from achieving competence and performing adequately and ethically (ACA, 2005). In addition, CACREP requires training programs to track the personal development and professional comportment of trainees to assure they meet the expected level of professionalism and ethicality (CACREP, 2009). Should these gatekeeping responsibilities extend to review of student social media postings? If a faculty member becomes aware of a posting on social media that is or could be an indicator a student is experiencing problems and engaging in unprofessional behavior, is there a responsibility to address it with the student and perhaps remediate based on knowledge received from this source? In some cases, students have been expelled and suspended from school because of what they have posted on Facebook (Flynn, 2012; O'Dell, 2011). Section A.2.a of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2005) implies that informed consent must be made regarding decisions of counselor education programs to search social media when making decisions to admit into their programs of study, or for ongoing evaluations of student progress. Lehavot (2009) suggests:

It is incumbent on faculty and students alike to actively consider the potential ethical problems associated with disclosures via the Internet... [and that] increased attention [be given] to this matter both within and among graduate programs in psychology for the purpose of decreasing the potential for harm to applicants, students, student-advisor relationships, and clients. (p. 139)

Should programs decide the practice meets their ethical expectations and fits within their application or student progress monitoring process, it has been suggested that programs establish policies and advertise to potential students what information will be used in the decision making process (ACA, 2005; Lehavot, 2009).

Instruction

Curriculum. Faculty in counselor education programs are also being challenged to determine how curriculum may need to be revised to help students understand how social media is intersecting with counseling practice. For example, in training school counselors, it is important to create awareness of how social media can create mental health issues for students, such as through online behavior like cyber-bullying. As Paterson (2011) points out, "...online attacks are both different from and more insidious than traditional bullying" (p. 44). These attacks can be anonymous and viral, amplifying the scope and impact of bullying behavior. ASCA (2012) suggests that school counselors become involved in helping develop school social media policies, detecting bullying and at-risk behavior on social media, responding to online incidents, and dealing with how students represent themselves online. In 2012, Facebook initiated an effort to target school counselors by publishing "Facebook for School Counselors" in partnership with the Internet Keep Safe Coalition and the American School Counselor Association. Marsalil Hancock, president of iKeepSafe, stated, "It's important to provide school counselors—often the first line of defense in managing digital incidents with students—the necessary tools and skills to be competent and confident" (Lytle, 2012, para. 3).

The use of social media is also raising new opportunities and challenges in clinical mental health practice that should be addressed during training. The Pew Internet and Family Life Study (Fox & Jones, 2009) found that 61% of Americans use the Internet to find health care information, and 21% of Americans look online specifically for mental health information. Should practicing counselors use social media to advertise their services and connect with potential clients? Should they create a social media site where they can share helpful information and have others “friend” and “follow” them? Shallcross (2011) suggests “Facebook can be a great avenue for counselors to advertise their services...” (p. 26) and that social media has the potential to reduce the stigma of counseling and make it more socially acceptable. If clients want to use social media to connect with a counselor, how can privacy be assured and ethical boundaries maintained? As Royal (2012) points out, many counselors

... use social media on a personal and/or professional level... Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogs. As a result, we may be contacted or followed by clients or colleagues through these social media outlets. Counselors may find themselves having thoughts that could be categorized as falling in a bit of a "gray" area. If I am "friends" with someone on Facebook, is this a dual relationship? Why wouldn't I want to connect with a "digital native" using social media... this is how they interact with the world... I'm meeting them where they are..." (para. 1)

Once a client/counselor relationship has been established, what should counselors do to provide informed consent and help clients understand the limits to confidentiality inherent in exchanging information digitally? These are clinical practice issues that can and should be addressed in training programs.

Counselor educators can also consider how to use social media to help students engage outside the traditional classroom space in order to develop a professional identity and stay abreast of current news and trends in the profession. Yaremich (2012) has suggested that counselor educators are uniquely positioned to encourage the use of social media to more closely connect students to leaders within the field of counseling, breaking news pertinent to student learning with links to blogs, news articles, and many other forms of supplemental literature. For example, in addition to following ACA on Twitter, students can also connect with The Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership (CESCaL) whose mission is to promote excellence in the field of school counseling, or they can connect through social media to most state counselor associations. It has been suggested that students can be encouraged to “follow social media posts... of today’s top counselors and psychologists... to put them in closer contact with industry leaders” (Yaremich, 2012, para. 3).

Pedagogy. In addition to impacting curriculum, social media has the potential to impact pedagogy. It can offer new options for how faculty structure student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction. Twitter can be used in the classroom to create an in-class Backchannel discussion that allows real-time commenting by students, to create collection of responses to open or guided questions that can be analyzed, to allow students to express difficulties with course content, or to solicit course feedback (Sample, 2010a). It can provide a way to engage less vocal students or to increase the participation of all students in larger classes. Faculty can use Twitter to have students extend class discussions or use each other as resources regarding class assignments. Students can be asked to follow experts in the field on Twitter or to connect with students from other

countries, thereby exposing students to a broader multiple perspectives discussion about material presented in class (Sample, 2010a). Student Twitter responses can be tracked, archived and analyzed. Sample (2010b) suggests faculty “dump your class’s Twitter output into Wordle and see what ideas stand out” (para. 15). Wordle is a program that generates “word clouds” and gives greater prominence visually to words that appear more often. Charts can also be developed from archived tweets that indicate the level of activity of each student. Challenges associated with the use of social media instructionally include setting norms for frequency, posting content and etiquette, as well as how, or whether, to assess student social media contributions.

As Yaremich (2012) points out, virtual world platforms like Second Life, “allow educators to create virtual classrooms or walk through other universities’ virtual worlds” (para. 2). She cites the example of Montclair State University’s “Theorist Project” that “allows anyone, including educators, to enter a virtual psychologist’s office where students can ‘meet’ Sigmund Freud, for example, and learn about his theory from either Freud’s—or a patient’s—perspective” (para. 2). Other counselor educators are experimenting with creating clinical counseling simulations (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009), counseling facilities (Walker, 2009), and even conducting class in the Second Life virtual environment. Under the leadership of Marty Jencius, a counselor educator at Kent State University, a communication and information Web site called “Counselor Education in Second Life” (CESL) has been developed for counselor educators who are using Second Life for pedagogical use in classes and training. The CESL center supports an annual virtual conference, a Scholars in Residence program, and training support for faculty and graduate students in counseling in the use of Second Life.

When counselor educators use social media for instructional or marketing purposes, copyright issues must be considered. Counselor educators are typically familiar with the fair use exception in the copyright law that allows use of copyrighted materials in the classroom; however, translating this exception to the new digital online society and social media has been more challenging. Rodriguez (2011) maintains that the fair use exception can still be applied in the digital world and advises that a statement regarding the adherence to copyright laws be made in the program’s social media policy.

Extracurricular Activities/Contact

Student blogs. Some students have chosen social media as a way to start to have a voice relative to current professional counseling issues. For example, a student in a CACREP-accredited master’s degree program in clinical mental health counseling started a blog which is now linked to ACA and has commented on various issues such as the conscience clause, spirituality in counseling, and counselor self-care. Blogs have become a way for young counselors to join the professional dialog that bypasses the peer-reviewed publication process and establishes a closer, more personal, interactive connection around current issues. Yet, when do students become autonomous from the program in which they are enrolled? If a student is participating in an internship as part of the training program, should the student have free rein to publish on a blog about experiences related to the internship?

Student groups. Social media holds promise for student groups such as Chi Sigma Iota. One challenge of such voluntary groups is building engagement and energy for the mission. The national level of Chi Sigma Iota currently has a presence in the

social media world with the formation of a Facebook page. On this page, proposals for presentations at the national ACA conference are sought, information on future trainings and webinars are provided, and job opening are posted to serve Chi Sigma Iota at the national level. Perhaps more closely connecting and supporting student groups via social media not only enhances the experience for the field's emerging leaders but also instills a sense of ownership in the profession through leadership.

Preparing students to access future professional development. Enhancing the professional development of students is the goal of every counselor educator. While completing counseling training, most students will have taken some courses through on-line learning platforms like Blackboard. Ideally, students in counselor education programs will be made aware of the role of technology in their future professional development and how to access it. For example, CounselorAudioSource.net, a podcasting site, provides 20-40 minute interviews of professionals in the field of counseling, which can be streamed to play on a desktop computer and stored for use in the future or captured for play on any MP3 device. The counselor education program at the University of Nebraska at Kearney has created an online Professional Development Academy for Counselors specifically to provide continuing education for its alumni, site supervisors, and other practicing counselors. In addition, the CESL center is sponsoring its 4th annual counseling conference in the Second Life virtual world platform. The conference offers sessions on counseling topics similar to those you would find in a traditional conference format, but presenters and attendees interact as avatars in a virtually created conference venue, eliminating the costs associated with traveling to land-based professional development conferences.

In addition to using Backchannel in the classroom, it provides some exciting professional development opportunities at conferences. Backchannel offers individuals a space to “tweet” about an event or experience using a hashtag. These tweets are then combined creating a running conversation. Bruff (2011) discussed the advantages of Backchannel to enhance a conference experience, such as connecting individuals with similar interests who might not have otherwise connected and giving participants of the conference a space to share ideas regarding sessions. If conference planners are successful in implementing a Backchannel conversation, the potential it offers to enrich the experience is immense.

Alumni contact. CACREP (2009) is calling upon counselor education programs to improve their alumni tracking systems, a task for which Facebook holds a great deal of promise. No matter how many times former alum changes his or her email address, Facebook stays a constant source of direct contact. Once an individual is accepted into a departmental Facebook account as a “friend,” the matter of contacting them for these purposes becomes far easier and more stable. Further, it allows for an enhanced sense of connectedness, which may pay dividends for recruitment of future students, supervisors, and advertising for departmental professional development opportunities.

Faculty/student “friending.” When discussing the boundaries between teachers and students in “friending” one another, Long (2011) states that some educators hold two separate Facebook pages, one for personal use, and the other for professional use. As Hara (2011) points out, if faculty “blog or use Twitter or Facebook under our given names, the words we write are attributed to us, and they can be easily misunderstood. If we blog or tweet under a pseudonym, the work isn’t directly linked to us as individuals,

but it can be linked to our friends and followers” (para. 1). She urges faculty to avoid writing anything that might detract from a positive and professional online presence. In other professional areas, teachers have been fired over both comments and pictures posted on Facebook (Edelman, 2012; Melancon, 2011; Whitney, 2012). The *ACA Code of Ethics* (2005) states that counselor educators must maintain appropriate boundaries with students, that “nonprofessional relationships with students should be time-limited and initiated with student consent,” (p. 16) and that before entering that type of relationship they discuss with students the potential benefits, drawbacks, and possible consequences for the student. Some teachers choose to delete friend requests from students and follow up with a discussion of the inappropriateness of the relationship (Long, 2011). Having a clear policy regarding this aspect of social media gives direction to faculty and can avoid students becoming offended when they are not “friended” or “followed” by the faculty member.

In addition to boundary issues, confidentiality can be a concern. Students who are a “follower” or “friend” of departmental social media could potentially post information about clients with whom they are working in practicum or internship settings. To prevent this occurring and to make students aware of consequences of violating confidentiality in this manner, a departmental social media policy must clearly outline parameters for acceptable expression and monitor social media traffic so that inappropriate postings can be removed and individuals held accountable.

Suggested Policy for Use of Social Media

Given the issues raised in this article, it is evident that educational programs who use social media must develop policies related to the conduct of students and faculty that specify the legal and ethical consequences of using social media (Anderson, 2012; Kind, Genrich, Sodhi, & Chretien, 2010; Melroy, 2011; Skiba, 2011). A policy for the use of social media in a counselor education program should include a definition of the term “social media” and provide informed consent by stating how student social media will be accessed and used related to student progress decisions. In addition, the policy should state who will have access to department social media outlets, who is allowed to post information, whether the department will prescreen any content and if so what types of content require prescreening, and that the department has the right to remove any content. It is also important the policy provides norms for expected social media etiquette and designates a social media representative who will monitor the access and posting of information. The policy should address privacy, confidentiality and proprietary/copyright issues, and reference any existing university social media policies.

The suggested policy included below incorporates these suggestions and provides an example that may be useful for other counselor education programs as they start to address the issues associated with the use of social media. The framework of the social media policy presented here was adapted from the Division of Student Affairs with the University of Nebraska at Kearney (n.d.) and reflects how university-wide policies can be expanded and individualized for the purposes of counselor education. These guidelines are shared in the hope that they will initiate a dialogue among counselor educators that will help identify all relevant issues and contribute to refining effective and ethical responses to these emerging issues.

Department of Counseling and School Psychology Social Media Guidelines

Social Media Definition

Social media includes user generated Web-content and mobile technologies used to turn communication into interactive dialogue. Social media is an important method of interaction and collaboration between students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, and more. Examples include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and blogs.

The social media guidelines described here will apply to all personnel (professional staff, support staff, and students) connected to the Counseling and School Psychology Department at the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) and are consistent with the guidelines for the Use of Technology Resources at UNK and Executive Memorandum No. 16, the policy for Responsible Use of University Computers and Information Systems.

The department Social Media Representative and the graduate assistant under his or her direction are the only persons with authority to post to social media on behalf of the department. The term of appointment for the Social Media Representative is three years, renewable upon agreement of the Department Chair.

Informed Consent

- Social media of students will not be reviewed by faculty of the department for purposes of admission into programs of study or to monitor student progress.
- Departmental faculty may connect with students on social media strictly for educational/instructional purposes and will not connect with students on social media for non-professional purposes (“friending,” “following,” etc.).

Access

- The Social Media Representative and/or graduate assistant will evaluate individuals requesting a connection to any departmental social media. Individuals who are current faculty or students of the department, alumni, and current undergraduates of the university will be allowed the connection. All others will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.
- If content violates UNK policies or guidelines, the Social Media Representative will be contacted and the person who posted the content will be asked to remove it. If the posting violation is egregious, the person who posted the content may be banned from future participation.
- Postings must follow federal requirements such as FERPA, HIPAA, NCAA regulations, as well as university privacy and confidentiality policies.
- Copyright and fair use statutes must be followed. Any questions related to copyrighted material should be directed to staff at the Calvin T Ryan Library (308) 865-8598.
- University computers and time on the job are reserved for university related business as approved by office supervisors.

Content Guidelines

- The Counseling and School Psychology Social Media Representative reserves the right to remove any content he or she deems inaccurate, inappropriate, offensive, or cyberbullying.
- It is not allowed to post confidential or proprietary information about the University of Nebraska at Kearney, faculty, students, employees, or alumni, or any information about activities in field placements, such as internship.
- All policies, procedures, and guidelines regarding university trademarks, names, and symbols apply to social media networking sites. Direct questions regarding appropriate use of logos to staff in Advertising and Creative Services (308) 865-8134.
- If you identify yourself as an employee or student of UNK in a social media communication, you should not post your personal views/opinions.
- Whenever appropriate, link back to the UNK Web site.

Social Media Etiquette

- Use good judgment. Think twice before posting. Privacy does not exist in the world of social media. Consider what could happen if a post becomes widely known and how that may reflect both on the person who posted and the university.
- Remember your audience. Be aware that a presence in the social media world is, or easily can be, available to the public at large (e.g., prospective students, current students, colleagues, peers, parents). Consider this before publishing to ensure the post will not alienate, harm, or provoke any of these groups.
- Strive for accuracy. Get the facts straight before posting them on social media.
- Review content for grammatical and spelling errors.

Conclusion

On today's technological landscape, social media is here to stay. Individuals, businesses, and programs are using social media to speak economically to the masses in an instantaneous way, bypassing many of the traditional safeguards. It holds great potential to connect with and among people on a scale nearly unimaginable. Counselor educators are finding a tool as powerful as social media comes with the responsibility to use it ethically and legally and to teach emerging professionals of its potential advantages and disadvantages. Social media should not be feared by counselor educators or seen as a genie that, once outside the bottle, refuses to return; yet it seems clear that it is important that policies and procedures are established to help both professionals and students navigate the emerging issues specific to social media successfully.

A policy on social media and a designated social media representative to monitor its implementation are necessary for counselor education programs to utilize the advantages of social media, yet control for its ethical use. If programs are strategic, thoughtful, and organized around its use, the ethical concerns can be greatly minimized. For the profession of counseling to continue its advance, social media must be included in that vision and embraced.

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