

Academic Libraries Using Instagram: A Case of Elusive Success

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In 2017, due to shrinking government funding and administrative skepticism about their worth, academic libraries cannot passively exist but must instead actively connect with students to encourage library usage or else risk demise. Social media has become the means of library–student engagement, with Instagram touted as the most effective platform. Why should academic libraries set up an Instagram account? Because Instagram’s photo–sharing format appeals to students, who are accustomed to and like the visual presentation of information.

Instagram Advantages and Disadvantages

Essentially, Instagram is a free mobile app that lets users record their lives in pictures, which can be adjusted through filters, shared either publicly or privately, and supplemented with hashtags and captions. According to Wallis (2014), Instagram is a good tool for academic libraries because of its high rate of use by college–age persons, not to mention its ease of use and cross-posting capabilities on other social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, which allows for a synchronized library social media strategy. Webb and Laing (2015) state another advantage is Instagram’s efficiency, which at their library required “one staff member [to] spend an average of fifteen minutes a day interacting with the platform” (p. 143). However, academic libraries should beware that Instagram “users tend to follow or unfollow accounts in a more fluid capacity depending on current interest” (Webb & Laing, 2015, p. 144). Salomon (2013) notes two further constraints: needing to edit photos to produce high-quality images to post and limiting posts to three images to avoid losing followers by overposting. Moreover, Instagram demands a continual cycle of attention to maintain followers and relevance: snapshot, filter, edit, post, like, comment, repost, follow, and so on. Yet, Instagram lacks reliable analytics, which might render it useless for quantitative in-house library assessment of student engagement and thus nullify any benefits.

An Informatics Analysis of Academic Libraries Using Instagram

The Student Audience

From an informatics perspective, Instagram helps academic libraries communicate with and connect to students since each incoming college class will consist of exponentially more Instagram users. Salomon (2013) affirms that, at UCLA's Powell Library, "Instagram makes sense for our library because it reaches a young, urban, and diverse demographic—one that reflects our undergraduate population" (p. 408). Reposting student photos, either those geotagged or those identified with an official library hashtag such as #unalibrary, builds library loyalty. As convincingly argued by Hild (2014), Instagram permits academic library staff to visualize how students are actually using library space, such as for group study sessions, and interpret how students perceive the library, whether the physical building, staff, collections, or atmosphere.

Content

Academic library Instagram accounts are most successful when staff administrators remember that they are conveying information to young adult students, who follow social media trends and campus events. Davis (2015) suggests several content strategies, including posting #tbt pictures of special collections items, tagging student organizations, having mini-promotional campaigns such as for extended hours during finals week, and using emojis. Additionally, Webb and Laing (2015) recommend posting pictures of books for various majors, promoting fun services such as digital collections, and showcasing local events. On the other hand, Hild (2014) raises an ethical question about what to do if students post sensitive images and then tag the library. Such content obviously does not need to be reposted and, if necessary, might be better addressed informally by library staff with a mild cautioning; otherwise, students could become uncomfortable posting about their library experiences for fear of official academic censure.

Information Literacy

Instagram's use by academic libraries also serves pedagogical purposes. Wallis (2014) designed a library introduction scavenger hunt for first-year English composition students where students answered questions, such as a book's location in the stacks, by posting pictures to the library Instagram account with hashtags and captions. Since students were already familiar with Instagram, Wallis contends that the activity "helped students navigate the unfamiliar academic library environment through the familiar medium of social media and alleviated library anxiety" (p. 182). Beyond library orientation, metaliteracy skills can be taught using Instagram with this student demographic. For example, Wallis explains that the Instagram scavenger activity saw students exploring several metaliteracy competencies within the social media realm, including original content production, jargon, privacy, and dissemination. Instructional librarians should further consider integrating Instagram into library class sessions because it coincides with the ACRL frames of authority is constructed and contextual and information creation as a process.

Student Success

In an educational environment where return-on-investment has reached paramount status, academic libraries must demonstrate their connection to student success and library Instagram accounts can function as either formal or informal altmetrics. Salomon (2013) describes that, at UCLA's Powell Library, "we regularly collect content about our library that students have created and posted publicly on their own," and that anecdotal information "in combination with quantitative measures, such as circulation statistics, [tells] a story about how we are making a difference in students' lives" (p. 411). Indeed, Salomon argues that visual data gathered from library Instagram accounts, such as pictures of students using study rooms, together with student comments and hashtags has a persuasive influence during library budget

presentations and upon funding proposals. Perhaps Instagram is the most efficient and effective means of conveying the library correlation to student success to higher education administrators since pictures expedite the information-sharing process and enliven otherwise mundane data.

Conclusion

Despite many positive aspects of academic libraries using Instagram, this social media tool often proves to be a case of elusive success. Brookbank (2015) asks, “Does it necessarily follow, however, that college students will want to interact with their library via social media?” (p. 236). For academic libraries with limited staff, assessing student interest in an official library Instagram account and the type of content to be posted, such as research tips or library resources, is essential. Also, Wallis (2014) advises allowing students to opt out of instructional sessions incorporating Instagram, both because of privacy concerns with some students objecting to be photographed and due to nontraditional students possibly being unfamiliar with utilizing social media. Nevertheless, Instagram has been a valuable promotional tool at academic libraries, such as at Vancouver’s Emily Carr University of Art and Design Library. Webb and Laing (2015) conducted a survey of current students and employees and found that “respondents noted it did not necessarily make them feel more comfortable using the library as a study space, to borrow materials, or talk to library staff, but it did encourage a majority to visit the library” (p. 142). Stating that students have requested books at the circulation desk after seeing them posted on their library Instagram feed, Webb and Laing assert that “this is the kind of interaction that we consider successful and engaging, especially given the relatively small amount of time it takes us to shoot a photo of a book and post it” (p. 144). Ultimately, academic libraries using Instagram should think of it as an experiment, which can provide more insight about the underlying links between libraries and students as well as how the library–student relationship can be improved.

References

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