

Social Media and Marketing:
A Budgetary Proposal for the Department of Political Science, Northeastern University

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Executive Summary

This research paper constitutes a budgetary proposal in the amount of \$12,028 for the purpose of social media implementation and revitalization for the Department of Political Science at Northeastern University. Currently, both Facebook and Twitter are underutilized by the department and there are many opportunities to expand into other areas of social media, like Instagram or Tik Tok.

First, the financial history of Northeastern University over the past several years is examined to establish the financial space in which the institution inhabits. Once historical context is established, the proposal is presented: funds will be utilized to fund a salary line for a part-time student worker to work in conjunction with department staff to properly utilize social media platforms, and in the appropriation of technological resources and tools to assist in social media management, development, and marketing. Specific allocations of these funds and descriptions of each service can be found in Table 1 of the “Cost/Benefit Analysis” section of this paper. Lastly, more data and research is presented in support of this initiative in the “Rationale” section, and includes connections with university, college, and department goals.

Institutional Context

Founded in 1898 as an Evening Institute of the Boston Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Northeastern University is a large, private, not-for-profit, R1 institution that offers undergraduate and research intensive doctoral programs across 35 specialized research and education centers. In particular, degree programs focus on profession related degrees and the arts and sciences and accomplish this by utilizing a unique experiential education model and incorporating interdisciplinary research to respond to global and societal needs (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2020; Northeastern University Snell Library, n.d.). The following analysis utilizes Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Feedback Reports for Northeastern University across the years 2016 through 2021.

A strong increase of graduate student enrollment is evident, growing by a shocking 28.57% since 2017. Undergraduate enrollment trends are significantly less, coming in at 6.01% over the same period. Year over year full-time equivalent (FTE) student populations had major gains in 2019 over 2018 at 5.74%, though numbers have dipped to just .6% in 2021. This is in direct contrast to the national trend of enrollment decline of 4.7% over the past five semesters (Moody, 2022b). Overall graduation rates have increased from 86% to 90%. Retention rates for full-time Northeastern students ranks as one of the largest in the nation hovering at 97%; furthermore, in 2020, full-time retention rates increase by 2 percentage points to 99% despite the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the national retention rate fell by the same amount (Lederman, 2021).

Trends in revenue indicate that the largest sources of funding, representing over two thirds of the institution's revenue, are consistently tuition and fees—though there has been a decline from 84% of revenue to only 74% since 2017. Reported data shows an 16.37% increase in tuition from 2017 to 2021; when adjusted for inflation, this percentage is 7.94%. As of June 23, 2022, there is no formal announcement of tuition pricing for the next year (Northeastern University, n.d.); however, a rise in tuition and fees is expected, as inflation rates in May 2022 reached 8.3% over the last 12, the highest rate since April 1981 (Moody, 2022a) and tuition increases at Northeastern have been larger than national inflation rates by at least a whole percentage point (Macrotrends, 2022).

Expenses are largely restricted to instruction, 42.05% on average; however, spending on instruction has decreased since 2017, from 44.41% to 39.77%. Overall expenses per FTE continued to increase year over year even when adjusted for inflation, and in 2021, spending per FTE totaled \$47,887 (or \$53,777 in May 2022 dollars). These numbers are in sharp contrast to national averages (at private 4-year institutions); in 2020, 30% of spending per FTE student was on instruction, and total spent per FTE accounted for around \$65,190 (NCES, 2022). This means that both by dollar amount and percentage, Northeastern University is spending significantly less than other 4-year private institutions.

This proposal is specific to the Department of Political Science, in the College of Social Science and Humanities. Currently, there are 30 full-time faculty in the department, and curriculum is managed by the Department Chair in conjunction with the Graduate Program Director, Undergraduate Program Director, and the Director of the Security and Resilience Studies graduate program. Day to day operations are conducted by an Administrative Officer who handles budgetary matters, an Academic Administrator who facilitates the graduate program, and an Administrative Assistant who coordinates the undergraduate program and special projects. Additionally, 4-8 work-study students are hired every semester to work on office related matters and additional special projects. Current undergraduate student population totals over 700; 145 undergraduate students graduated in 2022. Graduate student enrollment has declined, but across master's and doctoral programs there are approximately 100 students. Total monthly emails sent out reach over 1,300 members of the department community, including alumni (J. Joseph, personal communication, June 20, 2022).

Proposal

To further support the mission of the Department of Political Science at Northeastern University, and at the direction of the Department Chair, a stronger focus on social media and communications has been requested (C. Panagopoulos, personal communication, March 9, 2022). To properly facilitate and maintain these communication platforms, appropriate tools and personnel are required. Currently, the department maintains a Facebook and a Twitter profile, makes sporadic posts to the department website's "stories" sections, and sends out event newsletters as needed.

The goal of this proposal is to further the department's reach and strengthen communication to current students, faculty and staff, alumni, and other community members, as well as reaching prospective members and their families. To do this necessitates maintaining and adhering to a scheduled newsletter (and standard structure), creating and utilizing an Instagram account, properly scheduling and

curating posts across platforms, the necessary softwares to integrate the platforms, and, above all else, the staff to make this happen.

The current staff structure—Administrative Officer, Academic Administrator, and Administrative Assistant—does not set the department up for success in this endeavor, both by demographic factors as well as current responsibilities and available time. Rather than hire another full-time professional for this role, the ideal staff person for this position is a current student who could take on these responsibilities on a part-time basis; they are part of the target audience of the social media platforms and outreach campaigns, and young adults are generally more involved and in tune with social media platforms. This means students are aware of trends—as well as any potential faux pas to avoid. As this role would fall under the umbrella of special projects and would ideally be an undergraduate student, they would report to the Administrative Assistant. It is not expected that a part-time student should complete all related social media tasks alone; rather, they would be working in conjunction with the current web administrators, the Academic Administrator and Administrative Assistant.

Two options for fulfilling the staffing need are available: (1) post a job description on the student employment office available to all students across campus at a specified hourly rate, or (2) utilize work study students that are already allocated funds on a semester basis and require no additional departmental funds. Based on the history of work study students and projects that occur throughout the year, there is ample time for students to take on this role as a part of their work study package without compromising the needs of the department in other ways—there is always a student available for a project (J. Joseph, personal communication, January 20, 2022)

Additional requested resources are electronic subscriptions to services that facilitate the connections of multiple platforms and allow delegation of tasks to team members. Another tool that requires a paid subscription allows users to more clearly define groups for large emailed newsletters; this would allow the team involved in this project to better maintain lists and target newsletters or event

mailings to particular audiences, as current students have different needs and interests than alumni or faculty and staff.

Cost/Benefit Analysis

The proposal below is for one calendar year, to be subsequently renewed if positive results follow. Details on benefits of this proposal appear after this table.

Table 1

Projected Costs to Improve Social Media Management, Department of Political Science

Item	Description	Rate	Cost
Hootsuite	Hootsuite is a digital marketing tool that allows users to create, schedule, publish, and manage social media content and messages and conversations with followers across multiple social networks from a single dashboard. This particular plan allows admin users to assign tasks to other members of the team (Hootsuite, n.d.). It comes highly recommended from fellow department administrators and a marketing team member (H. Hardy & N. Holas-Huggins, personal communication, October 15, 2021)	\$129 per month, billed annually	\$1,548
Mailchimp, Standard Plan	Mailchimp is a marketing, commerce, and communication platform that maintains large and organized contact lists for email lists (Mailchimp, n.d.). Currently, the department utilizes the free license of Mailchimp. Utilizing a paid license would allow contact lists to be separated into categorized groups and increase the number of emails allotted each month.	\$90 per month	\$1,080
Student Employee	The student will work as a part of the current social media team for the department on a part-time basis. This position is available for 14 weeks each in Fall and Spring, and requires 15 hours of work each week.	\$20/hour	\$8,400
Discretionary Funds	Social media utilizes “boosts” across all platforms that are paid advertising tools and assists in making posts visible. Additionally, maintaining an active social media presence means flexibility is important, as the digital landscape is ever-changing. These funds can be used, but not limited, to boost a post when needed, acquire a new and necessary resource, or offer incentive as photo/essay contest prizes	-	\$1,000
<i>Total estimated cost</i>			<i>\$12,028</i>

Identifying the return on investment (ROI) of social media can be difficult in this particular case, as social media posts for a college department do not advertise a product that could show a ROI through increased product sales; however, social media is not limited to marketing, and in this context represents a pedagogical approach for an institution and should be regarded both as an investment but also an integral piece of the ebb and flow of communication in an institution's community (Condie et al., 2018; Manca, 2020).

Hard data sources can be used to identify the benefits of a strong social media presence, such as tracking engagement metrics across platforms, as engagement is imperative to successful social media implementation (Peruta & Shields, 2016)—even including the number of email opens or link clicks through Mailchimp . Where social media sees its strongest return, however, is in areas with much broader social implications: the real ROI of social media lies in creating and maintaining relationships in a technological space by utilizing authentic human operations and real connections (Ahlquist, 2020).

As a result, areas to look for improvement as a result of this proposal include: event attendance at publicized gatherings; increased number of applications for scholarships, peer mentorships, and Dialogues of Civilization; higher enrollments in new electives and traditionally under enrolled courses; alumni engagement; and admissions are some areas of potential growth (Newberry, 2021; Raman, 2018; Seymour, 2021). In the case of the Department of Political Science at Northeastern, there is the unique opportunity to see an increase in PlusOne enrollments (where students work on a bachelor's and master's program concurrently) or applications and acceptances of current Northeastern political science students into master's and doctoral programs in the department (P. Morency, personal communication, October 15, 2022).

Furthermore, with the addition of a student worker to assist in the management of social media, the academic administration of the department is likely to see an improvement in efficiency and availability to tackle additional projects or improve on current academic offerings. A social media

manager or content creator is not only building relationships with the community outside of the department; intra-department communication will also see an improvement.

Rationale

Like many institutions in 2020, Northeastern University reevaluated its goals and strategic plan due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “Northeastern 2025”, launched in 2016, represented the institution’s focus on how humans interact with machines in order to enable students’ success as the world began to experience unprecedented technological, social, and economic transformation; “Beyond 2025”—also referred to as “Experience Unleashed”—instead focuses on establishing connections across the physical, biological, human, and digital worlds (Ramjug, 2021). These goals are evident in both the missions of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH), and the Department of Political Science. Northeastern University seeks to become a positive influence in immediate communities and across the globe (Northeastern University, 2022). In furtherance of this goal, CSSH has several strategic areas of focus that all under the umbrellas of cultural resilience and transformation, network science, digital humanities and communications, and information ethics (Northeastern University, 2021a). The Department of Political Science prioritizes the creation and translation of knowledge and information as a tool to meet global and societal needs; ultimately, this means participating in a global community as engaged citizens (Northeastern University, 2021b).

To accomplish these goals, social networking in both the physical and digital world is imperative; in particular, since participating in a global community is both defined as a goal of the institution across all levels and an integral part of the institution’s structure—Northeastern has campuses in 5 other locations across the country as well as Vancouver, Toronto, and London (Northeastern University, 2021c), and incorporates international programs for study abroad, co-ops, and Dialogues of Civilization summer programs (Northeastern University, 2021d)—digital media and communications are important to establish community. The significance of maintaining strong and lasting relationships with their

stakeholders—in this case students and other community members—cannot be understated (Saraite-Sariene et al., 2019).

Social media is inherently a tool of experiential learning both in and out of the classroom, allowing students to control their own experience and inhabit a conversational space (Stathopoulou et al., 2019) which makes an engaging social media presence part of the Northeastern experiential education model. Tools like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter provide rich opportunities for peer-to-peer communication (Adalberon & Säljö, 2017), and students put the most value of social media on facilitation conversations that allow them to learn, engage, and experience education in all aspects of their student career (Neier & Zayer, 2015).

Students experience community in unique spheres in higher education; often these spheres overlap, but it is often difficult to properly define what synthesizes a group of students. Is it a major, a program, a college, an activity? Some students might refer to themselves as a student of the title on their degree, but their experience is much more holistic than a degree could simplify. As a result, understanding social identity and experience amongst a cohort of students involves weaving these groups together, particularly in areas of social study and for first year students (Challen, 2019). Social media serves both to share events that are ongoing so students see what is available to them, and to intensify and reinforce a sense of community across boundaries (Webster, 2019), and prepares students to engage in professional workplaces where social media holds great import, such as politics, journalism, and communications (Stathopoulou et al., 2019; Vasant, 2019).

The need for cohesive social media presence and focused attention to social media is also more important than ever, as it affects students' perception of an institution. Students report positive views on educators that utilize social media in the classroom and on institutions that have a consistent and exciting brand presence on social media platforms, including perceptions of innovation and sensitivity to students needs (Condie et al., 2018; Neier & Zayer, 2015; Newberry, 2021). Institutions that utilize social

media as a part of curriculum communication and assessment also see positive reactions from students, as communication on curriculum offerings enable students to look through all available options and choose courses that appeal to their areas of interest and assist them in becoming more employable, and have an easier time adapting courses and course materials to suit current social ideals (Gossain, 2019; Stathopoulou et al., 2019).

In a global community like Northeastern, creating, maintaining, and establishing community goals and values in a virtual space is integral to offering a sense of community and sharing experience in a space with no physical borders or cohabitation. Social media can bridge that gap, and assist in maintaining established norms across the globe. In fact, it is a unique tool that can connect current students with alumni, faculty, and staff (Lund & Wang, 2021). As higher education continues to globalize at Northeastern and at institutions around the world, institutions need to utilize these tools to stay relevant and competitive (Condie et al., 2018).

The content of social media posts has a significant impact on the engagement and reaction to that post (Lund & Wang, 2021), and posts at large universities like Northeastern experience more scrutiny and interest in social media presence (Saraitė-Sariene et al., 2019). Furthermore, different platforms have different purposes, and the ability of the target audience to utilize those features with consistency impacts the performance of these platforms (Luo et al., 2020). For one reason or another, many institutions across the globe are simply not utilizing social media to their fullest potential (Seymour, 2021). The people most likely to understand all of these tools and improve their utilization at an institution are students (Condie et al., 2018), as they consist of a younger population who, as a result, have a higher technological literacy and utilize social media platforms more consistently (Lund & Wang, 2021). For this reason, student workers are an important asset to the department and make ideal candidates for social media employees.

Conclusion

Social media is a staple of day to day life for millions of people across the globe. As higher education continues to globalize, successful social media campaigns are an integral part of an institution and department's image. In order to keep pace with institutions around the world, and to fulfill Northeastern's goal of participating in a global community as an engaged citizen, it is imperative that the department adopt and maintain a consistent approach to social media. In particular, hiring the right person for the job—a student—is one of the best ways to increase engagement across all social media. To set up social media marketing teams to achieve maximum impact also requires competitive analysis and tools, something the department currently lacks.

To accomplish this, funding for a student worker on a part-time basis and monthly technology subscriptions represent a relatively small investment on the part of the department that could see massive social return and affect perceptions of the department from students, fellow academics, and others from around the globe.

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