

# THE CUNY YOUNG ADULT PROGRAM - UTILIZING SOCIAL NETWORKING TO FOSTER INTERDISCIPLINARY AND CROSS-COHORT STUDENT COMMUNICATION DURING WORKFORCE TRAINING

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## ABSTRACT

The Center for Economic and Workforce Development (CEWD) at Kingsborough Community College is currently working on a workforce development project that contains innovative teaching tools that proved successful in overcoming issues of academic isolation

## KEYWORDS

Workforce development, community college, innovation, social networking, pedagogy, retention

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kingsborough Community College (KCC), located on a 70-acre campus in Manhattan Beach, is the only open admissions comprehensive community college in Brooklyn, and enrolls more than 15,500 students in credit programs and serves another 15,000 students in its non-credit courses annually. With 60% minority students, Kingsborough ranks in the top 3% of all community colleges in the number of degrees awarded to minority students, with students born in over 140 countries and 50% foreign-born.

KCC is one of 23 institutions in The City University of New York's (CUNY) system. As the largest urban university in the US, 46% or 480,000 of New York's young adults attend a CUNY school. As a University, CUNY has two defining characteristics, namely that it is located throughout New York's five boroughs and, secondly, that its massive student population is representative of New York City's population. It would seem strange then to be discussing methods of overcoming KCC's challenge of academic and social isolation perceived by CUNY's student body. CUNY's weakness is its commuter nature which greatly hampers the building of social connections, a growing challenge faced by two and four-year colleges across the United States, as students take greater advantage of distance/online learning opportunities in preparation for career placement.

The Center for Economic and Workforce Development (CEWD) at KCC is currently working on a work-

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force development project that contains innovative teaching tools that proved successful in overcoming issues of academic isolation facing the student body. The CUNY Young Adult Program (CYAP) is a partnership of three CUNY colleges - LaGuardia Community College (lead organization), Kingsborough Community College's (KCC) Center for Economic and Workforce Development (CEWD) and New York City College of Technology (City Tech) – that have worked together on several workforce development projects. LaGuardia, City Tech and KCC were awarded a \$500, 000 grant by New York State Department of Labor as a Consortium. LaGuardia offers GED, Professional Pharmacy Technician training and EMT training. City Tech offers Construction Trades and Direct Care Professional Training. KCC offers Food Service Operations with an emphasis on Green/Sustainable practices. Each college offers all the advantages of an existing program: a proven model with vocational curricula, fiscal controls, wrap-around services, experienced personnel, and an effective pattern of management and communication. Moreover, the existing partnership already serves the priority target population of out-of-school youth, provides vocational training in the program's two priority sectors (construction trades and health), combines all the desired program elements (i.e., career planning, work readiness, GED preparation, and post-secondary occupational training), and already encompasses other priorities of importance to the Department of Labor (i.e., green components, collaboration, leveraged resources, support from a broad range of business and community-based organizations, and service within environmental justice zones). All three colleges provide common services (bridge/vestibule training, occupational training, National Work Readiness Credential, a Green Component), after which program completers must go on to post secondary education or apprenticeship, or employment.

Among the Center for Economic and Workforce Development (CEWD) recruits are some of the estimated 12, 000 disconnected young adults residing in New York City. Applicants must be 18-24 year olds who score a 9th grade reading level or above on the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) test. CEWD has employment specialists/job developers on staff to develop an individual employability plan with each participant. The job developer/employment specialist also works with a case manager to identify and remove any barriers to successful completion and placement. The current cohort is comprised of 25 students who are completing the 12 week Food Service Operations program. The current training cohort (as of May 1, 2010) at CEWD saw a comprehensive infusion of social networking in the program. Social network can be defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” [ 1 ]. Upon review of the first round of CYAP (2009-2010), a need to include a professional social networking component to bridge the gaps was posited. While it was not a milestone of the program, it was hoped that social networking would keep students connected with instructors and program staff and keep them in touch with each other as a support system outside of class. The site served as a place students could learn about employment opportunities, homework assignments, reference syllabi and training curricula [ 2 ]. Other unanticipated outcomes - nurturing a community of learners who come together to achieve likeminded goals, who invest in each others' success, and who come to understand how to create their own professional and academic profile - represent initial findings associated with social networking and are consequently the focus of this case study.

## II. WHAT DIFFERENTIATES SOCIAL NETWORKING IN ACADEMIA

While technologies are adapting to enhance the educational experience, these changes are failing to move in synchrony with the behavior and demands of higher education's learning community [ 3 ]. The amount of time spent by students and faculty on their PDAs, iPods, the Internet, email, or social networking sites is

increasing rapidly [4]. Social networks are widely used by students for personal purposes but have seldom been used widely to support instruction, mentorship programs, or learning communities. The emergence of these applications into students' daily classroom experience is lagging far behind their presence in students' extracurricular lives. Perhaps educators are uncomfortable with online social networking and don't believe that in its present form it has a place in education and student/educator interaction. Additionally, the online educator seems as uncomfortable giving up control and facilitating communication as the traditional classroom educator. It seems that making social networking "respectable" in an educational setting can provide one way of enhancing student inclusion in academic life, particularly considering research suggesting that students regularly discuss schoolwork on their social networking site [ 5 ]. These networks (for example - [www.cunyive.ning.com](http://www.cunyive.ning.com)) are closed insofar as they are not open to the public. Instead, administrators invite people into the group. CEWD is building institutional respect for social networking in an educational setting by connecting students, faculty and external mentors. As laid out in the next section, social networking sites such as NING can provide the right blend of familiarity and professional appearance to put students at ease with its content yet make them professionally accountable for their online persona. First we provide a glance at the NING site as it is currently used by CEWD.

In its current state, NING is a free social networking service that has been customized and utilized by CEWD to enhance the Food Service Operations training provided to their training cohort. As can be seen from the heading in *Figure 1*, content is organized to help students gain access to group-focused content, but also information regarding events, resources, and internships/jobs. The design and initial setup of NING was provided by CEWD's Edgar Troudt, Technology Director, and Amalia Torrentes, Assistant to the Director, while content management is performed by Dina LiMandri, Instructor and Case Manager, and Alissa Levine, Associate Project Director.



Figure 1. CUNY Young Adult Program Homepage

All students undergo *Bridge Training* – a ten day “comprehensive course to enhance professional, academic, and personal development skills” [ 6 ]. Within this link, group members’ image and link to their personal page can be found, as can a closed discussion forum and comment wall to be utilized as a communication tool among group members. Subgroups based on student preference, for example *Food and Energy*, links off the homepage [ 7 ]. This group’s project goal is to “Establish an on campus juice bar to help refresh students and offer a healthy source of nutrition at an affordable cost”. Other headings such as *Student Resources* lead students to helpful links such as *Foodservice Employment* [ 8 ]. This link offers a “gateway to new and exciting careers in the world of restaurants and hospitality”, and allows students to search for jobs or add their resumes.

Next we explain how social networks can provide the right blend of familiarity and professional appearance to enhance institutional respect for social networking.

### III. BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL RESPECT FOR SOCIAL NETWORKING IN AN EDUCATIONAL SETTING

In the case of social networking, CEWD Case Manager LiMandri described how students seemed comfortable enough to communicate regularly [ 9 ]. Their prior knowledge and comfort with the social networking platform facilitated increased involvement in dialogue via tools such as posts [ 10 ]. Once signed in, membership-wide posts appear on the left in the ‘latest activity’ section. In addition, groups are created by CEWD Administrators based on the course curriculum and student career focus so that additional communication under the group heading can be seen only by that group. As previously mentioned, all students are invited to join *Bridge Training* – a comprehensive course to enhance professional, academic, and personal development skills . Students then choose from 3 career-focused groups – *Food and Waste*, *Food and Energy*, and *Food and Water*. With groups being reflective of student self-determined interest, communication can occur more regularly and with greater investment of interest.

While offering a comfort level with the social networking platform, there is a perceptible sense of permanence regarding the contributions made to these sites by students. This in turn encourages the development of a professional persona by creating a sense of accountability and responsibility that is in itself a pedagogical tool. To elaborate, it is helpful to compare aspects of the traditional classroom, traditional Course Management Systems(CMS) such as Blackboard, and the emerging teaching platform of social networking used by CEWD.

The traditional learning environment of a classroom is dominated by verbal interactions between teacher and student, which mostly reside within the confines of the class. While, of course, significant reference is made to material presented in written form by the teacher and to written products of students, there is nonetheless a distinct lack of permanence or trace to verbal commentary. The aim here is not to suggest this is an invalid means of teaching and learning, but simply to propose that, for the purposes of overcoming academic isolation and encouraging an investment in the professional persona of students, the traditional classroom may not be optimal.

Traditional CMS’s, such as Blackboard, are widely used in higher education, demonstrating its utility as a course delivery and support tool for online and hybrid instruction. While these learning environments are relatively simple to use for content organization, assignment creation and administration, they do not intrinsically foster levels of communication that go beyond the course requirement. In addition, traditional CMS’s seems not to be conducive to cross-disciplinary communication and is limited to the duration of the course by preventing students beyond the course period from remaining in contact with their community of learners taking the same course. In this way, students are locked into a closed and temporary community with

little incentive to actively network beyond the scope and timeframe of the course. Social networking sites (such as the previously mentioned NING), on the other hand, do allow students to communicate at multiple levels by giving them the ability to create their own – personal and group – spaces, which may often span not only across different course sections but also across different disciplines. CEWD managers (LiMandri, 2010, personal communication) are finding that, by using social networking, there is greater accountability experienced by students for their online persona. Students are guided to carefully select a professional photograph to upload. They are taught that the format and language of their postings or comments reflects on how they may behave in the workplace or other professional environments. In addition, the student become alert that their “online persona” is permanent and that there is a trace to everything they write.

The greater degree of aesthetic flexibility offered by social networking platforms means that designers can alter the appearance and tone to reflect both the objectives of the course and the audience it is intended for. Unlike traditional CMS, this provides a means for improving the delivery of the course objectives and creates greater ‘buy in’ from students. In fact, due to the comparability of social networking within academia and outside of the virtual classroom, students seem more comfortable to broadcast their accomplishments, motivate each other, and share a sense of community.

#### **IV. A COMMUNITY OF ONLINE-LITERATE LEARNERS**

Because a major goal in the case of CEWD was to facilitate the creation of a community of learners, the geographic dispersion of its student body made an overreliance on a traditional classroom setting suboptimal, while the temporary and rigid nature of traditional CMS did not seem suitably reflective of the needs of the student body or the goals of the course. By choosing social networking, students who enroll in the course instantly become part of a larger body of students, neither restricted by the short semester of the course or the limited number of students in a given semester. Instead, students are immediately linked with past and future attendees and, as such, can benefit from the shared knowledge, resources, and stories of successfully gained employment.

By virtue of the fact that social networking is now ubiquitous in student leisure time (10), a greater presumption by educators of student prior knowledge actually shortcuts much of the prep work involved in getting students ready to use new software, thereby creating an agency of learning by maximizing time spent on curriculum and professional development. As a case in point, other sources of electronic media such as digital storytelling and e-portfolios were used during the previous semester with moderate success but with some drawbacks. In meeting the objectives of the course, these tools were found to be cumbersome and labor intensive regarding learning technological procedures. In comparison, the current social networking platform being used ([www.cunyive.ning.com](http://www.cunyive.ning.com)) has proven simple and efficient in delivering information and achieving course objectives. The online-literate student, therefore, helps determine this choice of medium to the benefit of all collaborators.

Social networking provides an easily created point and click communication environment to share and communicate information, not just for a course period - but beyond. In a course such as this dedicated to workforce development objectives, it is important not to restrict the lines of communication to a limited student or professional body as can happen with other pedagogical platforms. Instead, students can feel that they are a vital and contributing member of an ever-growing, self-determined community of learners dedicated to similar goals and willing to share both resources and informative sound-bites. The larger workforce community that is comprised of CEWD alumni, consultants and fellows, partner program attendees, and incoming students all regularly receive and contribute to upcoming workshops and job openings, among other things, thereby expanding the support network available to students (see *Figure 2* for illustration).



Figure 2. Job-Seeker Information Housed on NING

In the case of the CEWD run CUNY Young Adult Program (CYAP), there are several faculty, administrators and case managers all communicating through the same social networking site. This delivery platform has the benefit of breaking down the academic silos traditionally associated with higher education departments, fostering a holistic learning landscape. Student can sense a unified message delivered in one online space, lending itself to interdisciplinarity and transparency of communication. All parties can see how course objectives are progressing among subjects or groups. Faculty regularly collaborates on problem-solving student issues that transfer across subjects. Due to the open plan style of a social networking platform, students also reach out across disciplines. Faculty have described how, due to this virtual constant contact, students have begun to look out for each other if the number or tone of posts changed.

## V. CONCLUSION

Academic social networks allow for the creation of a digital online space that can be utilized by multiple instructors to foster cross-disciplinary learning environment. The more traditional academic silos can be broken down by the open environment of social networks. In comparison to other CMS, social networks create a type of openness that allows no predetermined endpoint to the provision and sharing of information among members.

As communication between course managers and students can be targeted specifically to subgroups or subspecialties, the utility and uptake of such information can be maximized. Job postings on NING just following course completion (May 1, 2010) has led to 50% of students being fully employed. This represents an increase from 25% employed from the prior training cohort.

The 'buy in' to this pedagogical platform from students results, in part, from the ubiquitous use of social networking. Their prior knowledge of the content delivery platform allows for the transfer focus from 'casual' to 'professional' seamlessly. Further, because students have a chance to create their personal space on

the social networking site, they are assisted in developing a sense of agency and ownership for learning. The community of peers demonstrates this by constructing around shared interests within these learning spaces.

In 2009, the CYAP dropout rate as measured by students who did not complete the course was 36%. Data for the current 2010 semester shows a marked improvement in attrition rates with only a 12% rate of attrition. This data is valid as of the date of course completion (5/1/2010). Causal inference is, of course, not possible to discuss in this case however, the only difference in the course delivery has been the program-wide use of social networking as the primary communication platform.

It is likely and even justified that an opinion exists that the true ability to be a community of learners is undermined by the physical separation of people synonymous with online social networking. It is worth highlighting an aspect of the CYAP curriculum at this point. At the beginning of the semester, and again several weeks prior to its completion, students detail their circles of support – concentric circles in which the closest and most trusted people are placed at the circle's core and more removed or less well known people are placed further away. The case manager detailed the illuminating pre (beginning) –post (May 1) differences this semester in students' circles of support [ 11 ]. Fellow students, professors, and even the social networking site are moving inward to circles representing greater support or trust. It can be argued that, due to social networking, colleagues are becoming more relevant and effective support agents as displayed by the students' circles of support.

Other wrap-around services extended to CYAP participants rely on the open, continuously expanding communication platform of social networking. These include post-placement support services like peer support groups and job clubs, seminars on workplace issues, advice on the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Health Plus, and advisement on college admissions and financial aid. Through this continuity of support, students can openly share concerns with colleagues, but, importantly, this emerging workforce can feel confident and capable of giving back to those who are entering this growing support network.

## VI. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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