

THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

Promoting a Positive Personal Digital Presence Among College Students

Students often choose online college courses because of their convenience and flexibility. Online courses allow students to pursue their higher education aspirations while working and juggling family obligations. There are some students who go online because they like the isolation from others. Others use online classes as a springboard for their academic goals.

As stakeholders in higher education, we must consider student development for those students who experience most of college completely online. The traditional, on-campus setting requires students to step out of their comfort zones and develop skills that help them transform into effective future employees. Online education can provide opportunities for students to develop these same skills while crafting a positive personal digital presence.

Guidelines for crafting a professional digital or online presence exist, but these guidelines give the false sense that a digital presence can be binary; that a person can have a professional digital presence and a completely separate, private digital presence. Although individuals may attempt to separate a personal and professional online presence, the two can never be divorced. When employers look to hire or promote an employee, they do not just visit the candidate's LinkedIn profile page; employers also research his or her social media platforms for additional information.

The concept of a personal digital presence (PDP) encompasses a student's entire digital footprint. PDP can be defined as how well an individual represents themselves through text, social media, live web conferencing, and recorded video presentations. A positive PDP is the culmination of being an outstanding digital citizen and maintaining an appropriate digital footprint. Institutions of higher education must consider promoting a positive PDP among all students to prepare students for the 21st-century workforce.

Why PDP?

One of the first steps in preparing students for employment is to explore the new landscape in which employees operate. Employers and businesses interview candidates through Skype, Zoom, WebEx, and other video conferencing software. Many employers now allow employees to work from home offices and to conduct business meetings via webcams. This shift in how employers conduct interviews and establish remote office space has created a new set of skills needed by employees. If colleges want to prepare students for the workplace, these skills must be considered.

Students must also be taught what is appropriate behavior in online learning spaces. It has been observed by many community college instructors that when students are asked to record themselves, they may not adhere to the same norms as if they were physically attending an on-campus class. For example, a student may post videos while in her pajamas, but one would hope she would not consider attending an on-campus class in pajamas. It is the role of institutions of higher education to promote digital employability skills and train students on what is appropriate and inappropriate in a digital setting.

Finally, students must be taught digital employability skills. Although the online student is the most likely candidate at an institution to be required to record themselves giving an online presentation or attending a synchronous class meeting, these digital employability skills need to be shared with traditional on-campus students as well. Public speaking courses must consider adding digital employability skills to their learning outcomes. Colleges do a disservice to students by not exposing them to digital communications. If a student's first experience using a web-conferencing tool is during a job interview, he will be more anxious about the technology and the awkwardness that comes with talking to a webcam than he will be with answering the interview questions. It could be the difference between being offered or denied the position.

The promotion of positive PDP can be approached as an aspect of student development. Knepelamp's Practice to Theory to Practice Model includes an 11-step process that can be used to systematically address this as a student development issue¹. This model

allows instructors to identify an issue and design an intervention to address the issue. This article will use steps one through eight to create an intervention into the issue of student PDP that can be tailored to any institution.

1. Identify an Issue That Needs to Be Addressed

Although many students are comfortable with the use of electronic communications, many do not know what is culturally appropriate for the online classroom or professional setting. Students may also not realize that they leave a digital footprint starting as soon as they begin interacting with any online platform.

Online instructors are increasingly noticing students that do not use proper “netiquette” (etiquette for the internet), such as emailing in all capital letters, using cell phone texting language in emails, sarcasm, and improper dress code during videos. Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter often are used in ways that are not appropriate and professional in terms of a digital presence. Students have not been taught what behavior is inappropriate in a professional setting and when they attend college. Community colleges must teach students to be good digital citizens while in a safe learning environment that molds them into model digital citizens.

2. Determine Desired Goals and Outcomes

Institutions of higher education must teach students to:

- Demonstrate proper netiquette and digital citizenship within an online environment.
- Become aware of their digital footprint and the consequences of an inappropriate footprint.
- Establish a positive PDP and maintain that presence to prepare for the workforce.

3. Investigate Theories That May Be Helpful in Understanding the Issue and Achieving the Desired Goals

One of the theoretical perspectives on student development is the Digital Experiences and Identities Theory². This theory provides a framework that explains how individuals build identities through digital experiences.

4. Analyze Relevant Student Characteristics From the Perspective of the Theories Identified

The Digital Experiences and Identities theory addresses the need for constant research in a field that is evolving due to the rapid increase in technology. Since the theory was proposed in 2016, society has seen the growth of Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and several other social media platforms.

In 2001, two classifications were created for the culture of technology: “digital natives” and “digital immigrants.” Digital natives are becoming more common, and even those that may be considered digital immigrants have assimilated into this technology-based

environment. This means all college students need education in regards to maintaining a positive PDP.

5. Analyze the Characteristics of the Environment Associated With the Issue From the Perspective of Identified Theories

Most student development theories revolve around students who attend on-campus classes and are engaged in activities and opportunities offered on campus. These activities facilitate the development of employable skills. The growth of online enrollment has left many students without access to the developmental opportunities available to traditional on-campus students. Many online students work from home, which may leave them isolated with very little exposure to different cultures and ideologies.

6. Identify Potential Sources of Challenge and Support, Taking Into Account Student and Environmental Characteristics and Recognizing Factors That Produce a Balance

The Digital Experience and Identities Student Development Theory recognizes its own shortcomings by addressing the fast-growing digital environment. A college that chooses to address student development in the online environment must address it in a way that is malleable and can be easily adjusted as the digital environment evolves. This requires stakeholders to stay abreast of the technology that students are exposed to and relevant issues at the institution.

The focus of this proposed intervention is students who are enrolled in online courses. Therefore, the intervention to foster positive PDP should be offered in an online platform. A challenge to the institution will be to identify a delivery method that will be available to the online student who cannot attend campus. This requires collaboration among instructional designers, student affairs, and academic advisory committees. Advisory committees are made up of faculty, student support services, community members, and local employers. These stakeholders help define the expectations of college graduates and the online behaviors students are expected to develop while attending college.

7. Reexamine Goals and Outcomes in Light of the Theoretical Analysis

After using the Digital Experience and Identities Student Development Theory to examine student PDP, a broader approach must be identified. The concept of “digital citizenship” is a broad topic that can help define the way students behave online and interact with their classmates, peers, and future employers. Digital citizenship is defined as exhibiting appropriate and responsible behavior with digital technology. By adopting digital citizenship as the benchmark for student behavior in class, the instructor can focus on tools and strategies that encourage and develop positive PDP.

After examining the aforementioned goals and outcomes in light of the theoretical analysis, the intervention includes outcomes focused on developing a positive PDP among students, one that fosters a good digital citizen with digital employability skills. Online netiquette has often been approached with what is “right” or “wrong” in the online environment. However, a key point of this intervention is faculty and staff modeling appropriate digital behavior and correcting the inappropriate behavior instead of “punishing” a student’s behavior.

As a result of the intervention, students will:

- Learn the difference between informal digital social engagement and professional, formal digital social engagement.
- Demonstrate proper netiquette and digital citizenship within an online environment.
- Strive to be good digital citizens in college and in the workforce.
- Learn how to have civil discourse with instructors and future employers.
- Learn tolerance for all individuals and respond appropriately in the digital environment.
- Understand digital footprints and the consequences of an inappropriate footprint.

As a result of the intervention, faculty and staff will:

- Learn to appreciate the digital experiences of students leading up to enrollment at the institution.
- Learn how to respond to inappropriate behavior in the online environment, including cyberbullying and inappropriate posts.
- Respect digital privacy.
- Learn how to model appropriate digital behavior.
- Become aware of their own digital footprints.

8. Design the Intervention Using Methods That Encourage Achievement of Goals

The proposed intervention needs to be addressed in multiple ways. First, teaching and modeling of digital citizenship must be part of the first-year experience (FYE) course that is required for all freshmen. A one-week module should be designed within the FYE course that explains the importance of maintaining a positive PDP, and these ideas should be reinforced throughout the term.

The instructor of the FYE course provides students opportunities throughout the semester to demonstrate proper netiquette through written and video communications. Assignments in the FYE course

serve a dual purpose: they help students successfully transition into college while also allowing the instructor an opportunity to provide feedback on the level of professionalism exhibited by the students with each assignment.

It is important to include faculty in the development of standards for the online classroom. Allow faculty the opportunity to debrief and share areas about PDP. The development of standards should also include a survey of industry partners in the community to identify areas where students or employees can improve their PDP. After summarizing faculty and industry partners’ feedback, the college should develop standards that will become part of each online course in some way.

Again, faculty should approach this intervention as an opportunity to teach, model, and reinforce PDP, not as an opportunity to “punish” negative behavior, since this may be students’ first exposure to PDP. Faculty should also consider not only using written communication in their online courses, but also requiring live video conferencing and recorded video presentations. These different means of digital communication provide students with the opportunity to apply digital skills in a safe learning environment. They also allow instructors to provide honest feedback on a student’s PDP while differentiating instructional strategies to reach all learners.

College students often have very little exposure to a positive PDP. As the educational and work environment landscape shifts online, it is the duty of institutions of higher education to prepare students for a digital workforce. Student development in higher education should nurture a positive PDP and should become a common standard across all curriculum.

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¹Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2009). *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. John Wiley & Sons.

²Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., Quayle, S. J., Evans, N. J., & Forney, D. S. (2016). *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/eastcarolina/detail.action?docID=4389946>