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UNDERSTANDING RETENTION THROUGH THE USE OF STUDENT-UNIVERSITY DIGITAL/SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION

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by

Dwayne D. Moore Jr.

B.F.A., Southern Illinois University, 2013

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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DIGITAL/SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION

By

Dwayne D. Moore Jr.

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management Studies

Approved by:

Dr. Aaron S. Veenstra, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

DWAYNE D. MOORE JR., for the Master of Science degree in PROFESSIONAL MEDIA AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT, presented on MAY 4, 2016, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: UNDERSTANDING RETENTION THROUGH THE USE OF STUDENT-UNIVERSITY DIGITAL/SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Aaron S. Veenstra

Student retention is one of the most pressing issues in higher education across the United States. Difficulty retaining students has begun to cause concern for families looking to further their educational endeavors. Students find that college is too expensive, or that the ability to live at a destination school causes problems within families – distance, time-management or even that going to college is stressful and leads to a student not wanting to finish. Studies have shown that first year students and higher degree by research students tend to be more susceptible to attrition. Understanding that a student has to have a sense of belonging as soon as they are accepted into college weighs heavily on whether the student will commit to stay or to leave after that first semester or first year. Universities across the United States, more specifically Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC), often struggle to retain students, due to the inability at times to recognize the problems and struggles that students are currently facing. Through a unique process of student – institution interaction, there is ample space and opportunity to reverse the trend of this issue reoccurring. Having the ability to connect with students through different outlets via "digital media" or "social media" can help repair broken communications within the post-secondary education systems. Throughout history, universities have often gone out of their ways to recruit students for their academic programs, and would stop at nothing to get a student to say "yes" to their schools. However, there are often times after the student has been secured and has made a commitment to that university, that the university loses sight on that student and begins to plan for

future enrollment. The ability to understand and gauge what is lacking through the eyes of students, institutional efforts has to consist of: surveying, researching and interconnectedness in hopes to help bridge the gap of attrition.

This project conducts a user study that attempts to validate how interaction between institution and students through social and digital media can have an impact on developing a new creative way of student retention. Mainly focusing on the idea of hearing what students have to say about time spent in the university, the project aims to support the uses of media as a means of communication and an action plan to keep all parties engaged in higher education. The project will compromise of a research component that looks to unveil the issues of not having that connectedness between university and student, while also having a mockup model of a social media site that can be used to show how different needs of different students can be accessed by the university to cater to the needs of the students in order to retain these students in the SIUC systems. The project also hopes to show that through uses of social media and digital media, that universities (SIUC) can close the digital divide between anyone involved.

The data collected in this project will be collected through semi-structured interviews with currently enrolled SIUC students (freshmen, transfer students and graduating seniors. Interviews will address the ideas of what has to be done to in order to keep students here at SIUC. The students will also factor the outcome of the social and digital media site that is developed in hopes to aid with the retention efforts of SIUC. The study will also survey the possibilities of uses of social and digital media sites and they are used to keep students engaged in an interconnected society. The data will then be utilized in a way that can be proposed to university officials to implement the ideas that current students have and feel would work in the goal of retention.

DEDICATION

This research project is dedicated to all of the students who feel that school is not just a place that you go to get an education, but rather a place you can call home…A family. The fight against attrition is growing rapidly due to major issues that are occurring within this nation, and more specifically, within Illinois. The participants that I had the opportunity to speak to and the individual that aided in my completion of this study have really helped me to gain a better understanding of why people are the best source of anything. Everyone that has influenced me to continue my education and higher education, are people that I dedicate this to. Specifically, I dedicate this to several people that has poured nothing but encouragement into my studies and higher education: My wife; Robin N. Moore, My Mother; Linette Moore; My Father; Dwayne D. Moore Sr., My Son; Dwayne D. Moore III, Morgan J. Nickles, Ms. Vicki Kreher, Mrs. Renee M Daye-Cross (deceased), Mrs. Annie Redmond, Rev. Dr. J. Rayford Goodwin I, Mrs. Terry Straus, and lastly Mrs. Faye Sawyier. All of these people deserve the Master's just as much as I do, because they helped to make it happen. This research project is just a small start in my contribution to helping universities across the U.S. stop attrition, by understanding that students and universities have to work together for the greater good of higher education.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Do not wait; the time will never be 'just right.' Start where you stand, and
work with whatever tools you may have at your command, and better tools will
be found as you go along." (Hill, 127)

In higher education, many different factors affect the ways in which students commit themselves to a university. We will explore some of these factors in more detail throughout the entirety of this research study. Universities within the state of Illinois are having really hard times in retaining students as the academic year progresses forward. Retention is something that is at the height of issues within universities, not only within the state of Illinois, but across the country. There is no definite way to determine what can retain students at all times within a university system, but understanding some of the issues that are persistent and relevant in comparison throughout all universities can be a very good starting point. First understanding that there is a problem helps lead to exploratory research into actively and effectively looking for ways to change. Attrition within universities today are becoming more of an issue now, than it has been within the last decade. These rates are steadily increasing as time goes on, reaching up into the 50th percentile ranges. "With student attrition rates reaching between 30 and 50 percent in the United States, and over 30 percent in Australia, the inability of higher education to retain their students is a significant issue" (O'Keeffe, 2011). This shows how the United States, and Illinois in particular, has an issue of particular prominence due to the United States having the highest rate of attrition in the industrialized world today.

The impacts of students not having been properly prepped by secondary education throughout their four years of attendance, as they elect to go to college, can lead to serious issues of attrition down the road. Attrition within higher education costs universities revenue that is potentially used in educating students. Students and universities must collaborate on a means to fix retention together. Some of the problems that we notice in higher education that leads to cause for concern are: the lack of having proper college prep by high schools, improper interconnectedness, lack of support towards students, minimal university interactivity with first-year and transfer students and other factors that can be detrimental to the success of those students. Southern Illinois University Carbondale has seen a steady decrease in student retention for the last five years, which holds true in comparison with other state of Illinois schools such as SIU Edwardsville, Western Illinois University, Eastern Illinois University, Northern Illinois University and University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. This allows students to see that it is not just localized but is something that is seen statewide and across the country.

According to a recent release of 2014-2015 institutional research information, SIUC's peak year of enrollment was in 1991, and consisted of 24,869. Since that time, SIUC as well as other schools within the state have constantly been on a steady decline. As of Fall 2014, SIUC's enrollment was at a low of 17,989 students, and is now at an all-time low of 17,292 which is a decrease of 7,577 between 1991 and recent release of information in 2015. With these numbers of the current academic year being in, SIU has seen over a 30 percent decline in its students 1991, and a 4 percent decline from Fall 2014 to Fall 2015. Schools in other parts of the state have seen such declines as well SIUE has seen declines from 14,055 in Fall 2012 to 13,972 in Fall 2014, however, had an increase from 13,850 in Fall of 2013 to 13,972 in Fall of 2014. Other sister schools, Western Illinois University saw declines from 11,707 in Fall 2013 to 11,458 in

Fall of 2014; Eastern Illinois University saw declines of 9,775 in Fall of 2013 to 8,913 in Fall of 2014; Northern Illinois University also saw declines in its enrollment from 21,138 in Fall of 2013 to 20,611 in Fall of 2014, which gives an idea of how schools struggle with enrollment retention as each academic year progresses. The state of Illinois has bigger known issues of retention due to a recent stalemate in budget from the state government. Rates of retention in Illinois are at an all-time high due to many factors causing these issues, but understanding what they are, makes for a better reason to explore ways to help when in certain crises. According to the Southern Illinoisan, SIU has seen enrollment changes and retention rates due to smaller class sizes. The article states, "In part, the change can be attributed to a smaller freshman class. Freshman enrollment is down from 3,358 in 2014 to 2,786, a dip of about 17 percent. Administrators said that's thanks to more stringent admissions requirements this year, based on ACT scores and other college-preparedness factors" (Graham, 2015). This is reason to believe that if students have the ability to interact with university officials, then there could possibly be a clearer understanding of what the university needs to do to prepare students for their futures with the institution. Attrition rates have severely impacted the ways in which students interact with college campuses across the nation, but here in Illinois, the link between the college student and the university has been severed due to many ill reasons, but one thing is for sure, retention rates are failing because universities have lost the relationships with students that they have worked so hard to build.

This research aims to argue that university interaction with students through digital and social media aspects, can ultimately impact students which in turn helps with transitioning into college life. Keeping with these technological times are crucial when looking into issues that faces many of the students in the United States today. Primarily, I will explore how Southern

Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) has fared against the attrition that has become a national issue amongst almost all universities. Through usage of digital and social media that embodies student involvement, administrative leadership, community engagement and commitment to serve students, there is potentially a new way of bridging the gap and closing the digital divide in higher education. Throughout the research, I venture to understand if university-student interaction on a more "one-on-one" engagement through digital and social media relationships, are able to develop a society of students that will help implement change in college retention efforts. In general, I aim to implement something that universities can use as a means to develop students into the roles of what it is to be a college student and potentially a college graduate.

This research project conducts a user study that attempts to understand what SIUC is or is not fulfilling toward retention, according to students that are currently enrolled in academic programs, while helping to find a solution that can have an impact on changing retention efforts. The project itself, is comprised of designs and mock-ups of a new interface that can be used by students and university appointed officials, to properly transition students into post-secondary education. The interface addresses the many factors of poorly-prepped college students and targets change. Whether it is through initial interaction by the university or through use of digital and social media to interact with students by use of community interaction or university interaction, this study will aim to understand if there is a way to achieve better rapport and develop a model of true community engagement, that other universities can learn from to enhance their retention efforts as time proves to be against them.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is, by now, a well-known fact that college determines whether a person gets that all amazing job or not, but what happens if college is a destination that is not intended for everyone? Most times we hear of all of the success stories that is happening in the U.S. with students that have attended college, but one of the pressing issues that we really never hear about, or universities do not want us to hear about, are the hard times that some universities face. There are a few major issues that universities face whenever they face hardships, and that is mainly the idea of appealing to students in order to retain them. Students are far too consumed by personal ideals, that many times issues arise that causes attrition. Students have to "cross the finish line" in order to meet college completion agendas that have been set in place by the federal government (American Institutes for Research, 2010). With the nation having such a difficult time, there has to be some way in which universities can reach students without losing to much time, patience, effort and reputation as well as revenue generated from government assistance. At this state, we see the university systems losing more and more money because it is being spent in an effort to support students who cannot or will not finish the first step in attempting higher education, rather they will become associated with the university and then fail to continue on after their first year (American Institutes for Research, 2010).

There is a huge demand of understanding when students are "at-risk" in higher education. Students often express "they don't belong, rejection, remedial classes being taught, or a sense of not being able to adjust to the everyday roles of academic challenges that come with being a college student", with this in mind, universities has to get a hold on this matter first in order to

weed out the things that could make for a potentially bad student. According to a study on at-risk student, "The dropout problems has been address by HEIs in different ways, with the adoption of preventative measures ranging from tutorial programs or mentoring to encompassing programs that take into consideration cognitive, social and institutional factors" (Duarte, Ramos-Pires, & Goncalves, 2014). In other words, in order for the "weeding process" to occur within these universities, many different expectations should be set in order to understand if a student is a fit or not for a program. There have been several different models that have been used and developed in the past to help with this pressing matter, but one that is significant to this study is that of Tinto (1975). The model focused on mainly institution and student interaction (Duarte, Ramos-Pires, & Goncalves, 2014). Understanding that there is a problem is always a key part in communication that helps in developing a close relationship between the university and their students. Encompassing this type of model has been successful in developing management of student dropout intentions, rather than being left in the dark on what is going on. Understanding students is something that is very important in higher education, because it is through the voice of the student that universities develop and expand their programs, as well as their reputation as an institution of higher learning.

Student attrition has to be easily identifiable by grouping the things that are noticed to cause for attrition or non-completion. Some examples of this can include, but are not limited to:

- ethnic minorities groups
- college readiness/academically disadvantaged (proper prep in high school)
- student disabilities
- student acceptance (willingness to want to be in college)
- academic programming (including academic levels of work)

- community involvement

- probationary students (students who have no care of being academically suspended)

Furthermore, one of the biggest and most noticeable groups that could fall under "at risk", are those of the 'first generation' students (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Reason to believe this theory is because often success in college is not formally granted by demonstrating academic ability, but having the ability to accept the role of being a college student and the roles that it entails. This is something that has to be taken into account, especially due to the 'first generation' student not having a parent to have completed postsecondary education.

The First Generation Student

In all walks of higher education, there will be a need to understand why certain things occur. Retention occurs when something is being performed correctly within an organization or institution, whether it be certain tasks or goals being met, or it just being a place that makes a person feel as if they 'belong'. College is nothing shy of the same tactics. Universities question every year, 'why this?' and 'why that?', but this has to be done in order to successfully reach the mission of the university, which in turn is to give quality education to students that work hard for it. Ultimately, when you think of why something went wrong in higher education, you must look at the levels of communication between the university and the individual students. Having a connection between the university and the student is one of the features to making something that is not working begin to work. The breakdown in communications causes a disconnect between both parties, which in the end has a negative effect on goals that have been set. The key to success is for students to have an overall sense of belonging. The isolation that sometimes

comes with becoming a college student has a toll that it takes on students and can cause disconnect from interaction with others.

First generation students that have disconnect issues with the university differs from traditional first year students, because unlike first generations, the traditional student has someone in the family that has attended college and can provide insight on the road ahead (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Students that are not of traditional standards and have elected to go to college, should bear witness to the model that Tinto has set into place. College social and academic integration has to begin as early as the initial stages of enrollment, rather than waiting until the student arrives to the campus. First generation students, however, suffer more with the social aspects of college rather than academic integration (Kraemer, 1997). This information holds true to some extent, but is limited due to the measurement of academic integration being based on solely GPAs. Universities efforts in enrollment is mainly the focus, however when focusing on the first generation student, most tend to sway away from returning to universities because the lack of personal feedback from academic staff. Ensuring that students want to be in class and college for that matter, is and should be the sole purpose of academic professionals that have elected to train the minds of college students.

Creating a College Caring Environment

Communication is always going to be the number way to understand what is happening in a situation. Actively and effectively communicating with students on their needs and demands are ways that retention thrive within higher education. The idea of having a 'relationship' is knowing that both parties are able to talk to each other so that they both know how to conduct business and thrive together. Students' ability to communicate are critical to succeeding in college, mainly because it aids in effective talking with faculty, staff, and administrators within

the university (Morreale, Staley, & Campbell, 2013). Knowing that a student is cared for in universities helps to ensure that the students are capable and exhibiting the necessary tools to actively engage in college community environment, while performing to the best of their abilities in academics and social integration as a whole. In doing so, this aids universities to avoid attrition due to lacking efforts of caring. In today's society, we see technology advancing with the times. In most higher education institutions, there has been an outburst in use of social and digital media, but the question remains, are these technologies being used effectively between universities and students? According to an article by Sherwyn Morreale, "College students' ability to communicate competently, particularly in a world of constantly changing technological tools, is a matter of great importance in higher education" (Morreale, Staley, & Campbell, 2013). If there is a lack of connectedness, especially within the technological times of today, there could be a decisive factor that negatively affects students, which in the long run can lead to withdrawals from courses. Having the knowledge of this, the point of the university is to be the ear that the student needs to be there to listen when there is a problem, which can dramatically impact the student and their ideals about college and whether it is for them or not. Research from past researchers have shown that technology and communication are key factors in interactions with students (Jones, 2008). It is safe to assume that through use of technology in university and student interaction, much can be accomplished due to this being the one area of connectedness that influences students heavily. Jones also talks about that creating a safe environment for students to thrive has to be attempted through technology first as it is the way that students become comfortable with whatever it is that they are trying to accomplish. Emailing is the best ways that most universities communicate with their populations, but is it the easiest way to bring students into a comfort zone that is acceptable to them. Jones also relays, that emailing was a

better way of effectively creating communications with students, because taking the time out to meet face-to-face, was a bit too time consuming (Jones, 2008). Research has also shown that use of social media by students within the university, was able to benefit from others experiences that might better serve in helping them become more acquainted with the college life experiences, and more so the first year experience for the first generations. All of these aspects have led to attrition being reduced in practices of communication and interactivity by both students and their respective university.

Laying the Foundation for Student Retention

Understanding the value of a positive relationship between students, faculty and other university administrators can make for a better, more concise way to retain students due to adherence to what is in need from either side. The creation of academic bonding helps to reduce students exiting the university with the student having the feeling of not meeting expectations or feeling the need to exit the university prior to completion. Having a place where students can go to obtain information that feeds their minds as it pertains to community involvement, access points on campus as well as specific faculty aids in the process of showing college community engagement. Setting expectations of the university is something that has to be portrayed early and through detailed and exact sets of instruction. This helps to establish a student within their role as well as helping secure their place in the college community. As discussed earlier, first generation students have to learn to master the role of being a 'college student', while the university has to surround these students with traditional students that can be an example of what 'role experts' are (O'Keeffe, 2011). Through proper training and communications, the university is able to set the foundation and groundwork for students that have ability to adapt, to do so, but with intent of keeping students to continue in their respective programs. Campus culture has to

be adopted and evolved into a way of life for students attempting to better obtain the degree that they intend to have. College should be a place where anyone can come and not have to deal with the pressures of the ethnic issues, while understanding that through social and digital interaction with the university, certain needs can and will be addressed and met. In order for student integration to take place, both the social and the academic has to be instilled by the university. Through community involvement (campus community), students should have the idea that all ideologies are considered and not shown bias, because the world is ever changing. If college campuses have different ethnic backgrounds, it has to be able to overcome the challenges of showing bias due to certain students coming from all walks of life. The purpose for college is for everyone to expand their knowledge while helping to make a change in higher education for the good. In doing so, the university must be willing to be as open and honest with students, because the failure to have trust from the students does not bode well with trying to retain a student as well. The university faces many issues on a day to day basis, just as students do, but the idea is to build rapport with students and their families, so that when something is called into question by anyone, everything was out in the open and there was no reason to hide anything. An honest relationship socially and via the internet, serves as a gateway into the minds and hearts of those that use social and digital media as a means of living without fear (Talbert, 2012). Utilizing everything that both parties bring to the table is an excellent way to create a strong relationship with students and is a great way to boost enrollment and retention efforts. It is through university and peer interactions which helps to influence students' cognitive development, self-confidence and motivation (Talbert, 2012). Keeping up with a diverse and growing population is another tool that helps enhance strength in the upkeep of the university, as well as determining if the university itself can withstand surges in enrollment and retention due to ever evolution with the

times.   A campus that fails to recognize diversity, fails to bridge that gap and close the digital divide, which subsequently leads to experiencing more challenges with student attrition.

Understanding the involvement of community has always been an issue as well. Communities tend to tolerate their populations rather than integrate the population in to the schemes of what communities are about. Looking at SIUC and the Carbondale community, there seems to be a lacking of integration of the students into the community. Students often feel that Carbondale is set in its ways and does not engulf change. Social media usage is at an all-time high, and students, especially, use it almost constantly to keep up with the times. In a study by the Pew Research Institute, "Young adults lead the way when it comes to using Twitter or status updating. One-third of online 18-29 year olds post or read status updates" (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). In knowing that the young adults have a tendency to use social media to keep updates and post things, it would be something that is critical to a university in the times where having a feeling of belonging is necessary. Students are word of mouth, and through social media sites, SIUC could and would benefit greatly through the means of interactivity with students and the Carbondale community. Carbondale would be able to show what is going on and develop a stronger relationship with the students, while helping SIUC to become even more reputable in the efforts to stop attrition from occurring so often.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Retention Efforts at SIUC and Across the State of Illinois

For the past few years, residents/students of Southern Illinois University Carbondale have become increasingly aware of the decline in students that have been or are currently attending the university. Attrition is defined as "a reduction in the number of employees or participants that occurs when people leave because they resign, retire, etc., and are not replaced" (Merriam-Webster, 2016). So within higher education, retention is considered to be one of the things that halts income from being generated. At SIUC, the threat of attrition rates at the school has been running at a rapid speed through the years, and continues to cause struggle now as we progress with the new age of students.

Retention is a topic that has to continually be addressed on a year-to-year basis, and can become a potential threat to colleges and universities around the country. From a student's standpoint, I am almost sure that with SIUC constantly losing more and more students each year, something has to be done in order to get things back to where they were, as in specifically 1991 when the enrollment and retention rates at SIUC were at its highest; 24,869 students with a 3.3% increase from the previous year (Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2015). Not only does this publicly published book show the facts about the 2014-2015 school year, it aids in showing how the school faired between previous years and now. Course offerings, student RSOs (Registered Student Organizations), LLCs (Living Learning Communities), budget concerns, community engagement and a host of other things has caused themselves to be a major part in why students elect to become part of the attrition rates here at SIUC as well. One of the positives that have been seen in the past from high enrollment is the revenue, but on the contrary there

have been some positives seen in the low enrollment as well, and that is the more focused and individualized interactivity between faculty and student (to a very low degree however).

Currently, research has shown that there are many definite reasons for college attrition and retention issues within universities, but more specifically within the student populations. Most often than not, students have personal vendettas against universities if they dropout, as it can be seen that the issues are mainly academic related and due to students not feeling as though they are a part of something bigger…a college community and family. A study that was conducted over quite an extensive period of time showed that as many as three-quarters students that completed their freshman year and sophomore year without **any** interruption, went on to finish college within the four years that they planned to be in school (Ramist, 1981). Universities have begun to catch on to the issues of retention and have semi-actively attempted to solve the problem, but there is not much to show for it. Researchers across the country and the world have studied ways that retention can be achieved, but in doing so, has caused universities to just assume to know what the issues are rather than get to the source of what the issues actually are.

In going to SIUC, there have been many things that have caused students to leave and can be broken up into many different categories, but in part are just parts of being in college in general.

- Academic Issues

- Financial Difficulties

- Motivational Issues

- Communication Issues

- Personal Considerations

- Dissatisfaction with the University/College/Community

These categories describe issues that students face and colleges face (specifically here at SIUC) that leads to early dropouts as well as permanent dropouts. These are issues that are assessed when interviewing students for this research, in order to get a better idea of why SIUC has caused so many students to turn away from higher education, while developing a plan to help alleviate the issues and create a more stable college community and campus experience. The ultimate outcome of this research helped to develop a place, through use of technology, digital and social media and student interaction, where students were able to go to become a vital part in engagement and retention efforts for SIUC.

Developing the Media Site Through Student Input

In conducting the research, I had to develop a design that could incorporate the many different aspects of what students would say to contribute to the final outcome. The main source of the information used in this research to develop the idea of a media site is through the use of interviews with students that currently attend SIUC. The students had to meet certain criteria for the study, in order for the study to have relevance to the data that would be collected. Students needed to be:

1) Currently enrolled at SIUC full-time.

2) A freshman, transfer student, or either a Senior, either graduating or a senior within their first semester.

3) Have concerns about retention issues here at the university.

For the purpose of this study, college students had to want to be heard when it comes to issues that would cause them to want to leave and or stay for the benefit of developing the site and the content that would be readily available to them within the sites boundaries. Ten student were to be interviewed through in-depth questions that would touch on the basis of retention efforts here

at SIUC, and the ways that we as a community (campus, city, population), would be able to better those efforts. In the present study, the students in the interview sessions were asked a series of questions that would report and tell stories about their personal and academic connections to SIUC and the Carbondale community and the experiences that have been foregone during their stint here. As the researcher conducting the interviews, I also gave personal experiences as a student that had gone through the baccalaureate program here at SIU, to all of the interviewees to give a sense of what the journey may look and feel like in comparison to what they may have been going through. As the researcher, I also encouraged each of the students to recount the many different experiences or stories that related to the series of questions, while also giving their current standings on different aspects of SIUC as a whole. The interviews, each approximately 35-45 minutes in length, were recorded; all transcribed and even extensive in nature (see Figure 1).

Through these set interviews, each of the participants ranged from various locations in order to get a more diverse feel to each type of response from an array of students that attended the university. Participants were selected through use of current enrollment standards and also through different majors and backgrounds in order to get a better sense of the types of students that work day-to-day to better themselves for the future. Students were selected based on a voluntary foundation, and all the participants were more than excited to be involved with the study. There were several questions that were addressed to students in order to get a better understanding of what needed to happen at SIUC in order to see change. The main research questions that were addressed in this research were:

RQ1.   What, if anything, is SIUC doing to cause retention efforts to fail?

RQ2.   How can SIUC and the Carbondale community better themselves to help attrition
levels to become a thing of the past with the help of students?

RQ3.   How likely are students able to help in these efforts to continue to retain students
for the sake of the university and its community?

List of the Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about why you chose to come to SIUC.

2. What do you like most about SIUC?

3. What are some of the things you find to be less positive?

4. What has kept you interested while you have been here at SIUC?

5. What can SIUC do to make things more interesting to keep you here, as well as bring in
other students to keep them interested as well?

6. How much do you feel you can still grow into a great student/professional here at SIUC?
Are those the kind of challenges you want to face?

7. Imagine that for some reason you decide to stop attending SIUC (for whatever reason),
How would this decision make you feel after the decision has been made?

8. Do you think that you would return to this or another program or school at some point?
Why or why not?

9. What, if anything, would help you to want to return to SIUC?

10. What opportunities have you had to contribute to what we do here at SIUC? How well
are we using your skills and experience and challenging you to make a difference here?

11. How about the people you work with here? How well are they able to provide the
support you need?

12. How do you feel about the day-to-day work and workload you have here at SIUC? Are there things you wish could be better?

13. What has your experience been in trying to balance both your academic and personal commitments? (Why is that? Quantity of work? Schedule? Stress? Personal issues?)

14. Let's go back to what you identified as your major concern (less positives about SIUC). Can you tell us a little bit more about why you said what you said?

15. What would you say the strengths are in the relationship between you and SIUC? *Are there things we could do to improve it? Things you would prefer that be done differently? Things you could do differently to help SIUC strengthen the relationship?*

16. Where would you like to be in your academic life in, say, the next five years?

17. What would keep you excited about SIUC?

18. What types of social media or digital medias do you currently use?

19. What do you do, if anything, to engage with the university/community using social or digital media? What types of things do you engage in? What do you think is non-existent via these methods between SIUC, the Carbondale community and the students?

20. What other action plans can SIUC and the Carbondale community's digital/social media engagement do differently to effectively boost retention efforts?

21. What do you think SIUC and the community should do to revisit this topic in the future?

22. How do you think we (researchers) should follow up to make sure we stay on track with the current action plans?

The self-created mock-up of the media site is centered on the direct responses that come from students based on the ideas that are important to them about SIUC. Through the use of interactivity and the idea of communication, the site uses SIUC's overall feel and flow of a

university website, while creating a digital environment that can be tailored to students on their

needs.

The site uses the information that was obtained through interviews that gives the site relevance.

The interactivity would be tailored to fit the 21st century, and has everything that users need to

make the website as easy to navigate and flow through. The site is essentially a way for students

to interactivity with the university in a way that is different from something that is static. The

content that is accessible through the use of the site would always be something that is update.

Integration of the community of Carbondale, and even other surrounding communities in

Southern Illinois, would help the user to get a hold of the people that make this community great
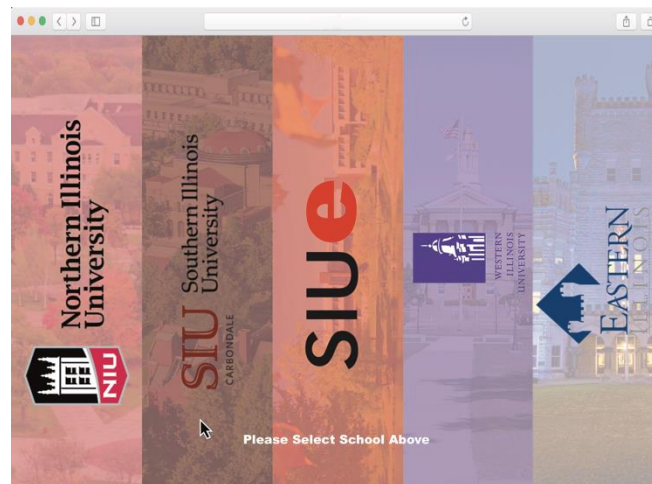
(*See Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Interactive Website Landing Page

 The mockup is just a stepping stone for someone in the future to possibly integrate the idea of

having a "hub" in a sense within a community, so that students have the ability to feel like they

are a part of something that is bigger than just the role of student, but rather the role of an activist

within the university and a family member of the SIUC family. There are a few features of the

site that are essential:

1. *Social Media Integration* – Participants of the study think that Twitter, Facebook,

   and Instagram are things that are essential to always know what is going on in the

   lives of other, being that these are the main uses for the social media site. The

   ideation behind this was to have different department and areas of the school

   updating information live as it happens. This is also to help student know what is
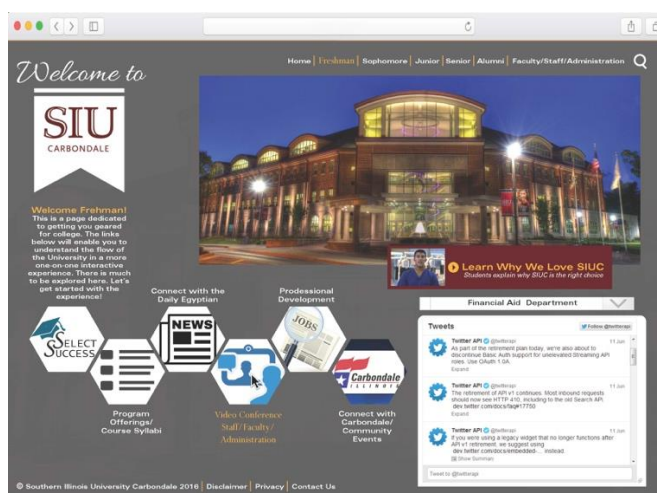
   going on (***See Figure 2***).

Figure 2. Interactive Website Destination Page w/Social Media Ticker

2. *Live News from the Daily Egyptian* – Students have expressed knowing what is

   going on as it develops

3. *Video Conferencing* – As a first year student for example, things are very different

   and you don't get to know people until you meet them. The purpose for this is so

   that if there is a faculty member of the school (i.e. chancellor, dean of students,

   academic advisor) and you have not met them prior to your arrival, this option

would allow you to make their acquaintance before making your arrival to campus, and it is also a way to connect with others on campus. This is a tool that would be something that can be used by all especially when opening the lines of communications when something needs to be voiced or concerned (*See Figure 3)*.

Figure 3. Interactive Website Video Conferencing Option

4. *Links to Professionals in the Field of work that is being studied* – This is a way to get professionals to collaborate with SIUC to help encourage and guide students to do specific things to get to the point that they would like to be in their career. This is important for internship opportunities and Job placement post-graduation.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The sample of the participants that were used for this study were students of Southern Illinois University Carbondale that had an opinion and were enthusiastic about helping the school to thrive in a time of attrition here at the university. The age range of the students were between 18 to 24 years of age. The student interviewees were that of 4 females and 3 males. One of the students was a Freshman, while the others were comprised of upper classmen; one junior and five seniors. In greater detail, the freshman was a first generation student, the junior participant was a 1st year transfer student, two of the senior participants were transfer students that attended that entire senior year at SIUC.

For the purpose of the study and to keep with confidentiality between the interviewees and those that read this research, names of the participants were removed in recording the results in order to protect their anonymity. Each participant has elected to be identified by a number to identify them to their comments that are produced for the recording of this study.

The student participants to in-depth interviews and additional probing questions are intended set the stage for the design of the media site that brings about interaction between students and the university and is summarized. Although all of the participants knew a lot about the school and the surrounding community and the current events before being considered for the interview, each participant had a less positive view of SIUC due to the recent events that had taken place throughout the community and on campus. The interview opened with general questions that laid the foundation of understanding why students came to SIUC in general, rather than going to any of the sister schools within the state and or other universities in general and how they engaged with the community of SIUC. The first and foremost answers to these

questions were that of *cost, tuition* and *distance.* Participant 3 stated that "I mostly came to SIU because, I had family that attended the school, the school was priced decently and I saw it as a way to grow and develop". Participants were asked the general questions as a group and the various responses were given, while the other participants engaged to the responses of the other participants. Participant 4 felt the need to be in college, but many of the reasons that they attended college was because of the "partial scholarship, funding and development opportunities". Participant 1 felt that the idea of college was important, but also the idea of college could sometimes be taken lightly due to the extremes that college has to be considered. Participant 1 also stated "SIU was the 5th choice of 9 schools" that they applied for, and that sometimes it can be very apparent as to why since they have been college.

Participant 7 relayed that college has to be a place where you can go to feel like you are a part of something bigger, while Participant 6 stated, "you get out what you put into things". Participants all had good sides that SIUC offered to them since they have ventured into college such as; the work is challenging enough, there is positive reinforcement, education values, academic program offerings, the Daily Egyptian news opportunities. Most participants also felt that the social aspect of college was something that kept them around for the time that they were enrolled here. Participants looking into the reasoning for joining SIUC had caused most of the participants to stop and think. By listening to other participants, all of the participants learned that SIUC has been the place people go because of its reputation as a "good university" and a place where students are offered endless opportunities, something that did not know off-hand prior to coming to SIUC, while let alone hearing from some of their peers.

Student participants had underlying themes that were shared when looking into further efforts to understand why the students at SIUC leaves and decides not to come back. All of the

participants stated that the use of communication is key when it comes down to understanding a problem, and more specifically, why students elect to leave and not return. Most of the students throughout the study made it very clear that majority of students leave because of the lack of being in the now with the university…They don't know! Participants 1, 3, 6 and 7 emphasized the university does not do a good job of allowing students to speak directly with administrators when it comes down to issues that students are having. All of the participants wanted the administration here at SIUC to be able and willing to meet with students to come to solutions about problems that are happening within the school. Overall, student participants learned that SIUC struggles because the school does not hear out their students due to the administration always feeling the need to shun them or shut them out. Most of the participants stated that having direct influence with the decision making with the school would show that students have a voice and would encourage students to stay because they have a voice within what is being done in the day-to-day of what is going on where they receive their education. After thinking about the questions that had been discussed in light of what was currently going on around the campus and in the community, Participant 2 had a moment in the interview where they had broken down and we had to conclude the interview because the university is causing students to look bad due to everything that was going on. Participant 7 even stated, "SIU is not where I am sure I want to be, but we have to develop a better relationship, or I am considering transferring to GSU". The ability to hear these concerns of students can really save a ship that is sinking right now, because SIUC has a reputation as a great school for research, but students are not concerned with this because they want the opportunity to gain an enriching education, while being part of the Saluki Family.

Student Involvement in Developing Interaction between the University and Students

All of the participants stated that use of interactivity and communication between the university and themselves, as well as the student population, could and would help with the development of more trusting relationships with students and SIUC. Most participants had an idea of what they felt SIUC and Carbondale as a community had to offer to the development of this idea of "family". Participant 2 stated "SIUCs academic programs provides valuable education and opportunities". Participant 6 stated that "the atmosphere of of the community and campus gives students the opportunity to be free". Many of the participants had positive things to say about the academics here, but more specifically the professors and faculty Participant 3 stated that "there is specifically 2 faculty members here, that have helped me into developing my skills and to become more of a professionally minded PR major". When the student participants were asked what needed to be done to actively keep students here, almost all of the participants stated "have a voice". Too often students have felt that if college is supposed to be a family, then the voice of the student population has to be there to keep students engaged. Community involvement was the next biggest thing that repeatedly kept coming up in my conversations with the participant. Participants 4 and 7 both felt that too often there is no information of things going on in the community to get students engaged. "Nightlife, entertainment, shopping, and social engagements are things that are in dire need for students of the 21st century", participant 7 stated. All of the participants gave experiences that have been had with the Carbondale community and the common thing was University Mall and AMC movie theater. Students feel like there is nothing to do here, so why should they stay. Participant 1 stated, "due to there being nothing here to do but work and go to school, my main reason for staying is to finish and receive my degree". Student participants also stated that knowing more about what is around is key too.

Participant 7, who is from the St. Louis metro area felt that traveling home is better than trying to find things to do down here, because they never know what is going on. SIUC and Carbondale has to do a better job at promoting things, so that EVERYONE knows how to become involved in things happening around.

Participants during the last portion of the interview, were asked if there were a place to where they can go online to be involved, if they would be interested in going to feel like they had a voice. Responses were very positive. In light of expressing the purpose of the study, many of the participants were interested in helping to make a change in the Carbondale community and especially on the SIUC campus. During the final stages of the interview, participants were asked about social and digital media and how it related to their daily lives, and how they engaged when they were to use social media. Responses included: news sharing, to talk to family and friends back home, looking into community events, for work (i.e. Daily Egyptian) etc. After hearing these uses, student participants were asked, how they engaged with SIUC and Carbondale using these medias, and most responses were: mainly not at all. Students stated that there is a huge disconnect between understanding how SIUC and Carbondale engages with students on issues, but also needs to more often. Participants informed me that there has to be more things like:

- Sit-downs with Administrators of the University (monthly)
- Professionals currently working in the field to come and work with students in courses to better prepare them for their fields of work.
- Ted Talks – throughout the community and SIUC campus
- Outdoor recreational activity promotions
- More faculty involvement
- Personal Alumni Experiences for First Year students

- University active listening

- Open forums with students and university officials

- Open communication between students and the University and Carbondale

- Awareness events

- Live Events/Nightlife (more frequently)

- Scholarship/Financial workshops

- Care for students

- Year-End Surveys with students

Students felt that efforts had to be taken in extreme circumstances because students have become "bored" with school. Many participants felt that if they could change SIUC, they would. Participants were willing to aid me with further efforts in building a stronger connection between SIUC and the students by asking what they could do to make this study reach more than just a few students and faculty. Student participants also desired to see SIUC work with more social media and to use it more in classes because it was a better effort in making classes become connected. When asked if participants would share their thoughts on this topic to the university and students in the future, all of them said that they would be happy to. Participant 7 stated,

> "I personally think that this is a topic that should be addressed at least 2x or more a month, especially with the things that are going on around us. And I also think that the university should follow up with those that helped with the research that you are conducting, because it will show genuine concern and that they care about what we have to say".

Limitations

In conducting this research, there were limitations that had prevented from getting the best results for production. The main issue that was apparent was that the Freshmen students did not really care too much for participating in the study. It is not safe to assume that this is because they were not interested, but on the contrary because of many different reasons that could have been apparent. In doing so, the study had most of the data that is recorded here come from upperclassmen here at the university. Timing was also an issue due to having to receive clearance for the study by Human Subjects Committee at SIUC, which had prerequisites that had to be met before interviewing any students could take place. Overall, the level of participation in the study was limited because students had other things to focus on (i.e. finals, papers etc.). Gratefully the study happened due to enthusiastic students who share in understanding that this is an issue that hurts the university and the students, because without students, revenue is down and tuition goes up.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Throughout the research conducted, I have understood, more directly, how students feel when it pertains to going to SIUC, and how they feel about students' voices and wanting to be here. Just as we see, the influence of communication, interactivity and engagement between people and institutions, we will make experiences a topic of concern (Morreale, Staley, & Campbell, 2013). This study was just a stepping stone to get schools to understand that students that do not feel as though they have a voice or having a sense of belonging, will leave due to things lacking and will not look back. Time can take its toll on a university when the campus and community does not evolve with the ever changing students that make up its population.

Addressing the necessity of keeping the students involved with university affairs and engagement, helps to alleviate the attrition rates that affect so many schools every year from happening. A healthy relationship between school and student can keep everyone in the loop of things that are happening, that can and will affect everyone in the long-term. Surveys are used as a means to understand the root of a problem, while helping to come to a solution to that same problem. SIUC has been battling with attrition rates for some time now, and the students want to help right this wrong, but without the engagement from the top down, this cannot happen effectively. The ideas that are suggested in this study has led to the development of a digital and social site that can be used by all that make up the SIUC campus and community. In doing so, it gives students and faculty/administration the opportunity to see what is going on at all times within the community, while helping to strengthen the community altogether. Through the act of active listening, change can actually happen, if allowed. Majority of the participants of this study have given insight of what students think, while understanding that closing the gap that is present

between student and university, may help long term in saving something that is worth saving…the reputation and benefits of being a student in higher education.

This study is a small start for developing an action plan for other universities across the state of Illinois and possibly across the country, but whether or not administration is willing to hear the root of the problem falls on the university. It is a very important factor of universities to keep students in mind, because without the students there is no need for the university in general. Strategies have to be taken into consideration on all accounts if a university wants to survive (Talbert, 2012)

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Appendix A

Website Mockup Design

VITA

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, Art & Design, May 2013

Research Paper Title:
Understanding Retention Through the Use of Student-University Digital/Social
Media Interaction

Major Professor: Dr. Aaron S. Veenstra, PhD