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Pinterest and Sustainability—Engaging Students in a Core Course

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Pinterest was only introduced in 2010 and already has over 150 million followers. Of those users, approximately 70,000,000 are from the U.S. When looking at the Millennial cohort, Pinterest continually falls between the top 4-6 social media platforms in terms of usage. This social media allows users to use their own creativity and interests by “pinning” this ideas on different “boards” and sharing them with other participants.

While Pinterest is still dominated by female users, growth of male consumers is growing. Forty-five percent of women with an online presence use Pinterest while only 17% of their male counterparts use the site. Consumers in the 18-29 age bracket are the largest consumers at 36% (Greenwood, Duggan, Perron, 2016).

Pinterest users consider pinning “aspirational.” In other words, users pin things that represent life as they want it to be, not the way they are currently living it. What they are pinning is what they aspire to—not current reality (Aslam, 2017). This makes it the perfect social media platform for a project that pushes students to search for information that is meant to help inspire them to see how sustainability can be incorporated into their current daily life and future professional lives. In addition, Millennials trust social media more than any other cohort.

Millennials are often described as Digital Natives. They cannot remember a time in their lives when they did not have a personal computer. For the majority of current college students, life before social media does not exist or is a vague memory. And, for a growing number of college students, they cannot remember when social media was not a part of their lives.

Our college core curriculum requires a class, for every student enrolled in the college, which includes the basic principles of consumer behavior, sustainability and corporate social responsibility, influence of media, etc. At the same time, other majors and minors, such as Global Studies and International Studies, require and/or recommend the class to their students. Due to its size (200+ each semester) creating projects that appeal to a very wide variety of majors is challenging.

The purpose of the Pinterest assignment is to enable students to utilize a social media network to demonstrate an understanding of sustainable practices that can be applied in their day-to-day and professional lives. Students must demonstrate an understanding of the concept of sustainability by sifting through and collecting resources utilizing a social media platform. They must identify sustainable practices that apply to their lives individually and are practical for them to achieve or implement, as well as, sustainable practices that will apply to their future professional life.

Grading criteria for the assignment include the creation and usage of an account on Pinterest. Choosing and identifying pins related to their specific major. Sifting through all the information and locating/discovering pins that have a practical application to their day-to-day and professional lives. If students were not able to find what they wanted in the current system, they were encouraged to add pins to the social media platform. They could choose Pins found directly on Pinterest or utilize the web to pin sustainability related content to your board. Creativity and reflection on the sustainability concepts learned in class and their personal lives.

A board was created that included both personal and professional pins. Each pin required that the student provide support that it clearly related to the topic of sustainability and/or personal or professional life. Explanations are required to be written in complete sentences using correct grammar. Additionally, a minimum of a two paragraph explanation of how the pins are meaningful and can be implemented in personal and professional lives—again with correct writing mechanics. For those not familiar with Pinterest, complete directions are explained in class and a handout is provided.

Based on student feedback, via course evaluations, the Pinterest Sustainability Project has been highly popular. Many students started researching as soon as the assignment was given and expressed that it was difficult for them to narrow down their choices to the parameters given in the project. (An antidotal side note, over 60% of students completed the project over 3 weeks before it was due. In my academic career, I have never had this high a percentage of students turn an assignment in early.)

Using a popular social media site, gained an enthusiastic response from students for this project. They were able to have fun and enjoy the research while, at the same time, applying the principles learned in class to their personal and future professional lives. One of the most interesting results was that two of the students stated that the project had so inspired them that they were writing a business plan for an organic make-up/skin care line.

The Sustainability Pinterest project has become a valuable learning instrument for encouraging student interest in an important topic. It combines a platform that students are participatory in and stimulates interest in an important topic. In addition, it helps reach students in a wide variety of majors with a wide variety of interests. This assignment will be used in future classes and has the ability to be expanded on the current topic or adapted to other topics.

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