Promoting Diversity in the Sciences: The Potential for Online Social Networking in Virtual Organizations

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Social networking sites have become an increasingly integral aspect of the lives of individuals. One group of individuals I examined was scientists given the importance placed on scientific education in society. To examine the intersection between scientists as well as social networking proved useful to understanding how scientists use this technology to combat the issue of underrepresentation in the sciences. Specifically, my project focused on examining a site hosted by a very prominent scientific journal and the conversation that takes place on this site.

The underrepresented groups in question refer to women as well as racial/ethnic minorities within the United States. Working in the newly established Social Network Innovation Lab allowed me to work with other summer researchers to collect data from the forums, such as the users as well as the conversations that take place within a forum. My Gibbons award allowed me to play the role of a social research by qualitatively analyzing the data that other members of the lab collected. To do this I had to use software called NVivo where I uploaded text documents of the forums and the replies and coded them. The codes were developed using emergent coding which simply means that I created codes as I read and coded the data, in order to fully reflect the patterns and uses of the forum as the users might see as well.

In addition to finding and coding the patterns, I created a presentation as well as co-authored a couple of papers with Professor Murthy as well as another member of the lab about the findings. My research allowed me to generate this tag cloud with the codes from a specific forum called FemaleScientists1 and this tag cloud shows the most popular codes and from this I was able to derive that the forum seems to provide support towards its users in three different ways for female scientists however this type of support remained nonexistent for racial/ethnic minorities and this might arise because of the diverse nationalities of the users. I hope to continue this research my senior year somehow since there is more work to be done such as interviewing the users or seeing how other prominent scientific forums compare to site.

Figure 1: Tag Cloud representing the codes found in the Female Scientist1 forum.

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