

# Crafting a Pinterest strategy to drive engagement

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## Abstract

*Social media has become an increasingly important part of communication and marketing strategy for higher education institutions. Skidmore College has dedicated time to develop sound strategies on many social media platforms and continues to investigate new platforms to achieve its goals. By using data to drive content decisions on the platform, Skidmore College has created a strong Pinterest presence relevant to its audience and developed a strategy for generating engaging and unique content.*

## Keywords

*Pinterest, social media, social media strategy, Pinterest for colleges*

## INTRODUCTION

Skidmore College is a private, liberal arts college in New York. With a diverse student body of 2,400 students from 70 countries and 45 states, and a faculty of 300 dedicated teacher-scholars, Skidmore College offers more than 40 majors in the sciences, social sciences and humanities, as well as in career-specific fields such as business, social work, education and exercise science.

Social media efforts at Skidmore College are housed within the Office of Communications and Marketing, which is also responsible for web development, graphic design, external marketing, news and public relations. Skidmore College's flagship social media accounts are maintained by the Social Media Coordinator, who also supports external departments — including Advancement, Athletics, Alumni Relations and Student Activities — with social media efforts.

The Office of Communications and Marketing at Skidmore College collaborates with numerous departments to achieve two main goals:

1. Engage donors, specifically alumni, to increase likelihood of giving from year to year and overall participation.
2. Increase applications by showcasing the unique aspects of an education at Skidmore College, while also encouraging prospective students to investigate Skidmore College as an option for furthering their education.

The use of social media supports these goals by maintaining quality presences on:

- Facebook;
- Twitter;
- Instagram;
- Snapchat;
- Google Plus;

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- LinkedIn;
- Pinterest; and
- YouTube.

Skidmore College has developed a strategy for each profile based on the general audience on the platform, past performance of posts and the overarching goals of the college. At Skidmore College, social media is not the silver bullet, but rather a means of supporting the culture, values and messaging developed by its community.

Skidmore College's Pinterest profile is built with the prospective student audience in mind, showcasing aspects of campus, tips for enrollment, recipes developed by Skidmore College's dining services, and other engaging and shareable content.

## WHO IS ON PINTEREST?

Many falsely stereotype Pinterest as a platform exclusively for content related to do-it-yourself projects, wedding planning and workouts. Because of this, higher education institutions and large corporate organisations ignore Pinterest as an opportunity to build a quality presence online, or give half or less of the effort they would to larger channels such as Facebook or Twitter.

Thirty-one per cent of online users in the USA use Pinterest.<sup>1</sup> Of these users, nearly half (45 per cent) are women, assisting the stereotype of the platform. Yet, it should be noted that there has been a sharp increase in the number of male users, from a recorded 5 per cent in 2012 to 17 per cent in 2016 (Table 1).

Higher education institutions use Pinterest as a means of reaching prospective students throughout the college search process. Sixty-seven per cent of millennials are on Pinterest,<sup>2</sup> using the platform to plan their future and find helpful tips for the next stages of their life.

**TABLE 1** Percentage of users on Pinterest who identify as men and women

Year	Men	Women
2012	5%	25%
2016	17%	44%

Source: Pew Research Center.

Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Pinterest users are not accessing the platform daily. Thirty-one per cent of users reported that they visit Pinterest weekly (compared to 25 per cent who reported daily use), which was the most popular reported frequency of the platform. Although not visited as frequently as the larger social media networks, Pinterest usage has shown a greater yearly growth rate than Facebook and Twitter from 2013 to 2016 (Table 2).<sup>3</sup>

## THE CASE FOR PINTEREST

Considering the large number of millennials using the platform as they begin to plan their next steps — the prospect of attending college — it is an opportunity for institutions to meet prospective students where they are and offer relevant content.

Skidmore College created a Pinterest account — as many institutions do — with little initial strategy. Even with a lack of planning and consistent content production for the platform, website analytics showed traffic directly from Pinterest. Pinterest content has a significantly longer lifespan than its social media counterparts (Facebook: 80 minutes, Twitter: 5–25 minutes) clocking in at one week or longer, which was likely reflected in the analytic report for the website.<sup>4</sup> Users are also able to pin content directly from the website, which also attributes to an uptick in traffic reported from Pinterest. This is an indicator

**TABLE 2** Percentage of online users who reported to use Pinterest

	<b>Pinterest</b>	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Twitter</b>
2013	21%	71%	18%
2016	31%	79%	24%
% Increase from 2013 to 2016	10%	8%	6%

Source: Pew Research Center.

that the content on the website is engaging and interesting to readers. Considering educating prospective students about opportunities at Skidmore College is a main goal of the college, it was important to utilise the platform to reach a large Pinterest audience with relevant content regarding the college search, as well as content specific to Skidmore College.

The user experience on Pinterest allows Skidmore College to take on a unique tone compared to other platforms. On Pinterest, the pins are lighter with large engaging images and a personal tone, helping prospective students answer the question asked most often in the college search process; ‘do I fit here?’ Pinterest gives Skidmore College the opportunity to speak to prospective students in a comfortable and warm tone, and also develop content for categories outside of ‘education’ to drum up interest in the institution. With specific categories such as photography, nature, DIY and even geek offered on Pinterest, Skidmore College took advantage of users’ hobbies and curiosities to put the institution at the forefront of their mind, even in a seemingly unrelated field.

## SKIDMORE’S PROCESS

After committing to dedicate equal time and strategy to Pinterest as Skidmore College would to platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, a plan was developed to utilise the platform in order to reach prospective students (its primary

goal) and instill Skidmore College pride amongst alumni.

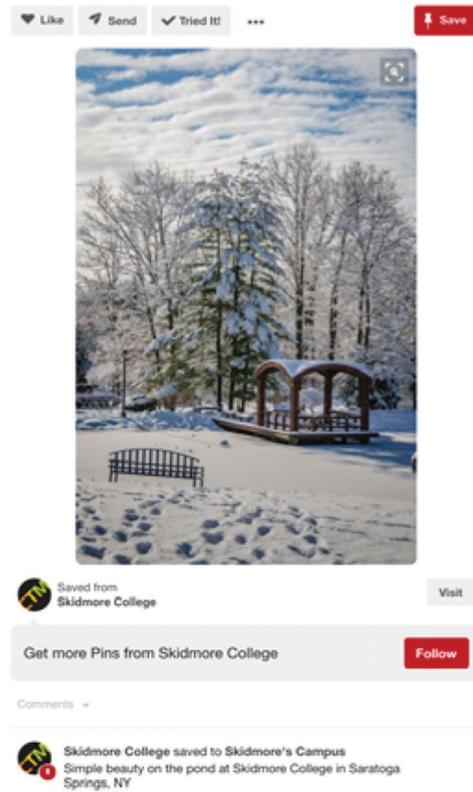
## Confirming Skidmore College’s website and creating a Pinterest Business Account

Pinterest allows organisations to become Business Accounts with a few simple clicks. This option provides deeper analytic data that would benefit an organisation, or in this case, Skidmore College, when developing a strategy for the platform. Aside from a new window into engagement and benchmarking, a Pinterest Business Account allows Skidmore College to invest in Promoted Pins.

After creating a Business Account, it was equally important for Skidmore College to confirm its website with Pinterest. Pinterest now associates all pins created from the [www.skidmore.edu](http://www.skidmore.edu) domain with the Skidmore College Pinterest profile. When a pin is created by a user from [www.skidmore.edu](http://www.skidmore.edu), the pin will automatically feature a direct link to the Skidmore College Pinterest profile, as well as the profile image from the profile (Figure 1). Confirming an institution’s website exploits existing content as a user develops pins to their own personal profile and boards.

## Cleanup of existing content

Initially, Skidmore College’s Pinterest profile featured a variety of content developed to drive users to its website



**FIGURE 1** Images saved from [www.skidmore.edu](http://www.skidmore.edu) automatically feature Skidmore College's Pinterest Profile information

as well as curated content from other sources. Before developing new boards or setting a strategy, the existing content provided a means of determining what resonated with Skidmore College's Pinterest audience. By assessing the boards, captions, images and destination links, 'best practices' and trends were developed for the profile. This included:

- Photos of people did not perform as well as images of buildings or landscapes.
- Pins with descriptive and concise captions were better received.
- Photos for a very specific audience (commencement, professor headshots, etc.) did not resonate.

Pinterest boards are structured to tell a story with pins that have quality images,

helpful captions and a relevant destination. These boards should contain a high number of pins, as opposed to an account with many boards hosting few pins. Pinterest will favour accounts with a 'few boards, many pins' strategy over 'many boards, few pins'.

### Using search terms for ideas

Skidmore College's website uses Google Search, which provides helpful insight to what users are looking for when they arrive. In order to create more relevant pins and boards, over 700 search terms were assessed and grouped into similar categories, such as:

- Employment, student employment, jobs, internships.
- Visit, campus visit, campus map.
- Study abroad, spring break.
- Dining hall, dining, food.

Pinterest offers a guided search bar that will predict the search term or phrase as it is typed. For Skidmore College, this provided an opportunity to learn what users are searching for and how. For example, 'what college should' prompts results including 'what college should I go to', 'what college is right for me' and 'what college is really like'. These key phrases provide insight on future strategy and search engine optimisation (SEO) for pin captions on boards.

Aside from Google Search and Pinterest search, websites such as Keyword Tool and Google AdWord's Keyword Planner provide significantly deeper insight regarding search terms and phrases that are searched in sequence yielding similar results. It is advantageous to understand these relationships when developing new board ideas as well as writing effective captions for pins. As these keywords and

phrases are discovered and developed, they should be logged for future reference to develop a strong, year-round strategy.

### **Developing new ideas based on trends**

With a better understanding of the audience and paired search terms and phrases, it was simple to take the next step in developing a strategy for Pinterest. New board ideas were created, including:

- Skidmore College Dining Hall Recipes: collaboration with dining services by hosting easy-to-make recipes on Skidmore College's website.
- Getting a Job after Skidmore College: using resources found on the Career Development Center's website to reach students who are entering the workforce.
- Get fit with Skids: Skids, Skidmore College's thoroughbred mascot, is featured on a series of infographics, with workouts users can do at home created by Skidmore College's athletic coaches.
- Global Skidmore College: display captivating landscape images of destinations available for study abroad as well as alumni travel programme opportunities.

Although these boards suggest each pin will be related to Skidmore College and therefore drive traffic to its website, this is not the case. In order to maintain a compelling story and drive traffic, Pinterest boards should contain a mix of organic content from the [www.skidmore.edu](http://www.skidmore.edu) website and external or collaborative resources.

### **CREATING A CONTENT CALENDAR**

At this point in the process, ideas for new boards and pins will likely be too

unorganised and overwhelming to begin implementing. Like other social media channels, Pinterest strategy is best supported by a content calendar. Although many use a content calendar to plan for the day or week ahead on each social media channel, a content calendar for Pinterest is formatted differently. While pins have a longer lifespan, they also may take more time to gain initial engagement.

To develop a calendar, Skidmore College considered local and national trends, as well as known cycles in higher education, including:

- Campus events including move in weekend, commencement, reunion and welcoming the newest incoming class.
- The admissions cycle from high school through acceptance, including national testing.
- Steps graduating students are taking in their final year at Skidmore College such as furthering their education, entering the workforce or determining the next step after graduation.

These trends and cycles can last for days, months or longer. Captivating images of Skidmore College's campus covered in upstate New York's iconic red, orange and yellow foliage will be successful throughout the entire autumn season, whereas students who were accepted to the institution may only be searching for 'dorm room decoration ideas' for a month or less before the semester begins.

With all this in mind — new board ideas, ways to improve boards with new pins, search terms and phrases, and a layout of trends and cycles — a calendar will begin to take shape. Unlike a content calendar for other social media platforms, it is advantageous to consider

a monthly layout instead of a daily layout. The key to a successful Pinterest content calendar is to consider these cycles and trends in advance of when audiences will be searching on Pinterest for related pins.

## TIMING AND FREQUENCY

Like other social media platforms, Pinterest requires a strong strategy, content plan and a consistent stream of content. When it was first created, Pinterest fed users a real-time updating feed of pins from accounts the users followed. This led to a wide mix of content, which was sometimes irrelevant to the user's interests. In 2014, Pinterest switched to the Smart Feed, which now feeds users content relevant to their previous searches, in the hope that the pins would be shared more frequently. With this in mind, Skidmore College worked to break through the Smart Feed and put its pins in front of users.

Channels such as Facebook and Twitter depend on many factors to increase

engagement and Pinterest has its own set of undisclosed variables that affect how users interact with each pin. An important factor to consider is pin frequency. Much like other social media platforms, a consistent sharing strategy is important — if not necessary — to build a following and increase engagement. Pinning between 5 and 30 times a day has proven to increase engagement and followership, allowing users to be exposed to content at different times of the day.<sup>5</sup> Visual marketing service Piquora interviewed 200 brands including Whole Foods, Lowes and LL Bean to investigate how pin frequency affects Pinterest growth (Figure 2). Brands that pinned 'a few times a week' to '3–10 times per day' showed the most consistent growth of their accounts over time.

For many higher education institutions, it can be a challenge to curate, develop and pin content numerous times per day, each day of the week. After building a content calendar, it was important for Skidmore College to begin pinning one

## Pinning Volume Matters

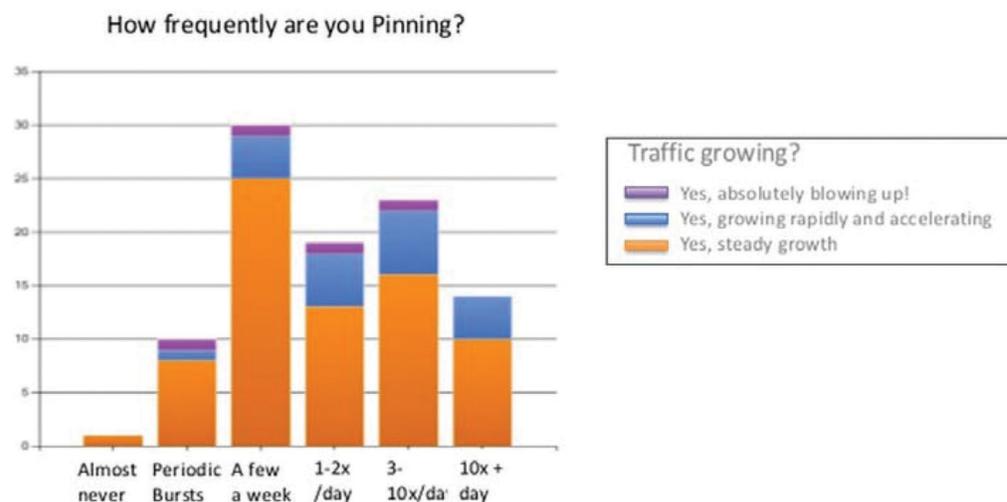


FIGURE 2 Piquora interviewed over 200 brands to investigate how pin frequency affects Pinterest growth

to five pins per day to assess workload and understand if it was a reasonable expectation that could be maintained. The important goal was pinning consistently — daily — instead of measuring success by number of pins per day. This strategy has resulted in steady growth in engagement for Skidmore College.

When considering content for pins in higher education, it may be challenging to understand how to fit inside of the unique segments Pinterest allows users to investigate. Content creation for Pinterest requires creativity and understanding of each institution's culture and type of student. The 'photography' category can easily showcase landscapes of campus or the surrounding city/town it is situated in; 'health' lends itself to workouts or tips for avoiding the 'Freshman 15' developed by coaches or experts on campus. Even with this in mind, it will become challenging to develop new content over the course of a year or beyond it. It is important that each board have a mix of content created by an institution and curated from other accounts to ensure that new content is being shared on a consistent basis. This strategy will increase engagement of users with the board and ultimately an institution's content.

### THE STRUCTURE OF AN ENGAGING PIN

Like a Facebook status, Twitter post or Instagram image, a pin is only as engaging as the elements of which it is composed. Each pin has three equally important components that are crucial to increasing engagement: quality images, detailed captions and a relevant destination or source.

#### Quality images

All pins require an image, a factor unique to the platform when compared to other

social sharing sites such as Facebook and Twitter. With this in mind, Skidmore College uses high-quality and compelling images to immediately engage the user and separate itself from the similar competing content displayed to users in the Smart Feed. Users may not take the time to read the written content below the image for a pin, underscoring the importance of a high-quality and engaging image that can tell a story on its own. A growing trend on Pinterest is to treat images with a text overlay if it is not immediately clear from the image alone what a pin is about (Figure 3).<sup>6</sup>

Pins are organised into columns on a user's feed, which grants more space to vertical pins than horizontal (landscape) ones, increasing the likelihood of engagement with those pins. It is especially important to consider a vertical aspect ratio as an increasing number of users are accessing Pinterest on their vertical smartphones.

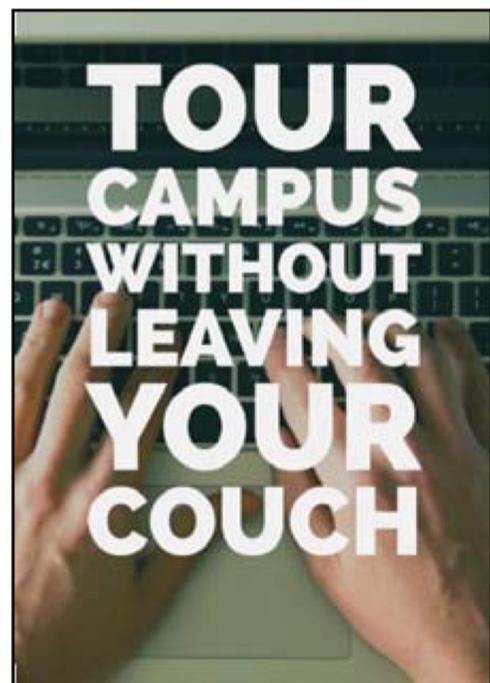


FIGURE 3 Example of pin with text overlay

While in the feed, pins will be resized to 238 pixels wide, and when expanded, 735 pixels wide. The height will be automatically adjusted in both cases, with a maximum vertical aspect ratio of 1:2.8.<sup>7</sup>

To shorten the amount of time spent developing images for pins, online software such as Canva and Adobe Spark can be used for text overlays and basic photo editing. These resources are especially important for higher education institutions, requiring little time to produce a quality and engaging image, with no subscription fee.

### Detailed captions

Embedded within Skidmore College's digital strategy is a strong sense of voice and intentional word choice to increase SEO. This strategy spans across all digital presences, including social media. For Skidmore College, Pinterest is no different. The captions created for generated content are crafted to tell a specific story, with a unique voice and relevant keywords.

In order to better understand its audience, Skidmore College uses a combination of Google Analytics and Google Search results to uncover keywords associated with the institution. With this in mind, each caption for generated pins is written to include them, when appropriate. The caption is also written with the Pinterest user in mind, considering what category the pin may be positioned under, working to create relevant content to the user after using Pinterest's search tool.

Although the image of a pin is the most eye-catching aspect, the caption plays a very important supporting role. Aside from working in the background regarding SEO and search results, it provides context of the pin to the user. These

captions should be detailed yet concise, and most importantly include the name of the institution. Skidmore College has developed a specific voice on each social media platform, even on Pinterest. It strives to be inviting, warm and personal, a tone unique to the profile.

### Source

While not required, Pinterest users expect a pin to lead to another site with detailed supplemental information. Most importantly, this destination should be relevant to the content of the pin's image and caption. Pinterest strives to confirm that destination URLs are relevant, not leading to third-party spam or unsecure sites. By confirming Skidmore College's website, no pins with the website as a source will be flagged.

Even after confirming the website, it is still important that Skidmore College generates pins that lead to relevant pages in regards to each pin to keep users satisfied and directed to the most helpful page on the site. Images of locations for study abroad lead to the Office of Off Campus Study and Exchanges, while inside-looks of residence halls on campus land directly on the Residence Life homepage. For each destination URL, Skidmore College appends unique variables to identify the board and pin traffic to the URL using Google Analytics and Campaigns. These variables are used to make future data-driven decisions regarding the content calendar and content (both imagery and caption) of specific pins.

### EXPLOITING RICH PINS

Successful Pinterest accounts exploit every tool available, especially when crafting captions for pins and working to bring content to the top of search results. A key

way to elevate these pins is by incorporating Rich Pins. A Rich Pin provides more than an image and a text caption; it includes detailed information such as price, recipe ingredient list, address of a specific place, headline of an article and more.

There are six types of Rich Pins:

- app;
- article;
- place;
- product;
- recipe; and
- movie.

Each type provides users with detailed information related to its type in the caption of the pin. For example, a Movie Pin can provide title, rating, cast and content rating. This information is immediately presented to users when a pin is clicked, easily fostering engagement. Each Rich Pin type requires a different set of Schema.org meta tags placed directly on the webpage to appear as a Rich Pin.<sup>8</sup> After the proper tags are placed and ultimately verified through Pinterest, the change will be reflected on any existing pins.

Initially, it was challenging to understand how Skidmore College could fit into these niche spaces and exploit the engagement opportunities that Rich Pins provide. The first attempts were Recipe Pins, showcasing the ingredient lists and serving sizes of recipes created by Dining Services and posted to its website. After developing a simple means of inputting tags and data using a custom-developed asset in its content management system, Skidmore College will implement the same strategy for Place Pins and Article Pins. These pins will highlight interesting news articles posted to the website each day and allow pins generated by

Skidmore College to rise to the top of searches for New York colleges, Saratoga Springs and other similar phrases.

## INVESTING

Similar to its social media counterparts, Pinterest offers a paid means of promoting content to users. These Promoted Pins allow for specific and strategic targeting for unique goals, including building awareness or increasing clicks.

### Promoting pins

After choosing an overall objective for a Promoted Pin campaign, it was important that Skidmore College determine which pin(s) to invest in. These pins should have the potential to broaden their reach on their own and able to maintain organic engagement after the paid campaign has completed. Pinterest Business accounts are provided analytics displaying best-performing pins in regards to impressions, likes and pins. Using this analytic data ensures better return on investment (ROI) than investing in a pin that would not maintain engagement on its own.<sup>9</sup>

Any campaign objective requires a strong understanding of SEO and keywords to associate with the Promoted Pin. Pinterest allows advertisers to enter keywords and search phrases, as well as selecting ‘interests’ the pin would be relevant to. With over 420 interest categories and subcategories, and an unlimited number of possible keywords and phrases, these Promoted Pins will be served to users in relevant ways, allowing the pin to be seen less as an advertisement but instead as relevant content.

Successful Promoted Pins are related to at least 30 keywords.<sup>10</sup> When developing keywords and phrases for Promoted Pins,

Skidmore College uses Pinterest Ads Manager's keyword suggestions based on its guided search. This source of inspiration multiplies one keyword into many related searches, such as *college room* to *college room decoration tips*, *how to get along with your college roommate*, *how should I decorate my college room*, and more.

Unlike pinned content, Promoted Pins should reflect trends of that time. Promoting a pin will immediately serve the content to audiences relevant to their search. With this in mind, Skidmore College strives to promote pins that are relevant to national trends including holidays, milestones such as commencement and the higher education admissions cycle.

## MEASURING RESULTS

Each social media platform has its own immediate measure of success. Facebook's reactions and shares on status updates, retweets and likes per Tweet, and Instagram's like counter all provide a simple way to determine 'success' on the platform. Pinterest offers re-pins and likes as a measure of engagement for most users, while Skidmore College's Business Account provides deeper insight into performance.

It is most important to establish how *success* will be defined for an institution and ultimately the ROI. With these benchmarks in place, Skidmore College combined provided analytics from Pinterest and Google Analytics to investigate growth and ultimately, success.

### Incorporating Google Analytics

Pinterest provides a variety of data for Business Accounts, including top pins driving traffic to a specific domain, best performing pins and impressions per pin.

In order to have a specific understanding of not only what pins were highest performing but the results of Promoted Pin campaigns, Skidmore incorporates Google AdWords' URL parameters in each destination URL on generated pins.

Google AdWords is used by Skidmore College to assess three measurements of success:

- traffic driven by specific pins;
- A/B tests of imagery or content for pins; and
- traffic driven by boards.

Each destination URL is appended with variables to describe the image of the pin and the name of the board to more easily assess not only volume of traffic, but timing. Unlike Pinterest's provided analytics, Google Analytics displays traffic over time for a better understanding of the amount of time each pin took to gain engagement. It is also clear to see if a pin 'went viral' by quickly spreading over a short period of time or did not foster engagement. These analytics allow Skidmore College to make more successful decisions for future content and images.

## CONCLUSION

Pinterest is a growing platform with a diverse user base, and should not be discounted as a social media and engagement strategy for higher education institutions. With a majority of millennials using Pinterest to plan their future, it is a means of meeting these prospective students where they are online and exploiting Pinterest's search and Smart Feed to provide relevant content. Although advantageous, it is important to consider, like any other social media platform, the resources required to create a strong profile. Pinterest differs from



its online counterparts as content will be posted throughout the day, every day, to increase the likelihood of engagement.

With this in mind, it is equally important to develop tangible goals to measure trends and ROI. Skidmore College developed monthly goals, assessing traffic to specific pages on the website, and engagement for Promoted Pin campaigns. It was also important to adjust strategy and time invested in the profile, ensuring that all other social media accounts maintained a strong presence.

A strong Pinterest strategy is a marriage of a content calendar and quality imagery and captions. The Smart Feed layout favours images with a vertical aspect ratio, having no maximum height, and limited width. These images, paired with a detailed caption using strategic keywords and phrases, tell the complete story of the pin, and explain the expected destination URL. Skidmore College assesses ROI and defines success by combining analytics provided by Pinterest as well as using Google AdWords. These analytics are reported on a monthly basis, continuously justifying the dedication of resources to the profile after seeing an uptick in traffic to its website.

The lifespan of pins greatly differs from posts on its social media counterparts. Content on Pinterest may take weeks or months to gain rapid engagement and some pins may sustain a high level of engagement over a surprisingly long period of time. Skidmore College continues to monitor engagement for all generated pins, assessing how they can be improved with imagery or new captions.

Investing time and resources in a strong Pinterest presence requires additional consideration when developing a social media strategy, as well as potentially seeking a third party application to assist in

content creation or delivery. Tailwind, a content scheduling tool for Pinterest and Instagram, allowed for an effective distribution of new Pinterest content, as well as assisted in discovering content to be repurposed on Skidmore College's Pinterest profile. With a social media profile there is a potential for work to increase, and Skidmore College relied on the social media coordinator to include Pinterest as a part of the overall social media strategy and daily responsibilities, as well as student interns in the office of Communications and Marketing.

Skidmore College noticed a consistent engagement pattern to its website due to Pinterest and decided to invest time and resources in the platform. Since then, Pinterest has moved to the front of its social media strategy, alongside Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, ultimately working to achieve its digital engagement goals.

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