BALL STATE CHILD STUDY CENTER MEDIA STRATEGY: RELATING TO MILLENNIAL PARENTS

A CREATIVE PROJECT
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FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

BY
TIERNEY R. EDON
ADVISOR: MR. BRIAN HAYES

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCH PAPER: Ball State Child Study Center Media Strategy: Relating to Millennial Parents

STUDENT: Tierney Edon

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This creative project has developed a media strategy for the Ball State Child Study Center based on research that explored the impact of parental involvement in schools as well as millennial parents’ needs. Child care center websites are a developing feature of child care facilities to provide digital communication methods for parents. This study is based on Grunig & Hunt’s two-way symmetrical model and Epstein’s Model for Parental Involvement. A WordPress Blog, Facebook account, and Twitter account were created for the Ball State Child Study Center. Through this media strategy, parents are encouraged to interact rather than observe as well as participate in the way they choose.
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Introduction

The two principle influences in a child’s life are parents and school (Postman, 1982). Child care facilities have been working to bring these two forces together through traditional methods of communication, but digital methods are now becoming necessary through the Internet-culture shift. In order to stay relevant, the exemplary child care center should implement two-way communication and make resources readily available to families, because teachers and families should have a reciprocal relationship (McLane, 1995). Due to the current and upcoming generation of parents being of the millennial generation, child care centers should reevaluate their current communication in attempt to appeal to their most significant of stakeholders, parents.

Two-way communication can be defined as a reciprocal form of communication used to negotiate, resolve conflict, and encourage mutual understanding between the organization and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This type of communication promotes respect and honesty between the organization and its stakeholders and represents a willingness to adapt. In order for child care centers to stay relevant, they must adapt to millennial parent communication needs. For example, a child care center may implement a blog with updates, resources, and curriculum activities where parents can comment on posts. This way millennial parents may have access to all necessary information and have the opportunity to create a dialogue in the medium they are most accustomed to communicating through.

According to millennials’ needs, it is clear that an organization can no longer thrive on traditional methods of communication alone. Adapting to meet key publics needs are absolutely necessary. Traditional methods of communication are no longer enough, especially when appealing to the millennial parent generation (Ray, 2013). These parents prefer ample resources
and advice via a medium that allots interaction with the material which also allows collaboration with teachers. Digital methods of two-way communication can potentially impact teachers and families in a positive way, forming a stronger teacher-parent relationship, which allows parents to be further involved in their child’s education.

In order for children to receive the best education possible through teacher-parent collaboration, child care centers must first understand the communicative needs of their key publics, parents. Millennial parents’ needs are different from those of the previous generation and require careful deliberation on how and when to make communication changes. This research aims to address the millennial parent communication barrier by creating and implementing a media strategy for the Ball State Child Study Center in order to promote services and engage parents in a new way.
Review of Related Literature

Over the span of the last few decades, child care has become increasingly prevalent, leading parents to depend on child care centers to aid in the care, teaching, and development of their children. Research shows that early education experiences offer ample benefits such as “developing a love of school, healthy socialization, meaningful learning, and preparation for kindergarten” (Ransom, 2012, p.266). However, how do parents know that their child is receiving the best education possible? Parental engagement within their children’s schools can lead to enhanced learning and developmental success; however, minimal parent involvement can be just the opposite (Constantino, 2007). Now that the millennial generation is now becoming parents, parental engagement in child care centers is changing due to traditional methods of communication being outdated. This study will examine the Ball State Child Study Center shift from traditional communication to social media with the purpose of strengthening relationships and dialogue with millennial parents, using mediums they are most accustomed to.

Public relations communication has changed drastically when it comes to managing the relationship between an organization and its publics due to the Internet-culture shift. Traditional methods of communication are unidirectional and simple, but with the shift to digital methods, stakeholders want bidirectional and complex communication (Bussy, N. M., Watson, R. T, Pitt, L. F. & Ewing, M. T., 2000). With this communication shift, public relations becomes more about managing and adjusting communication with stakeholders due to its multifaceted nature. Taking advantage of every tool that the Internet has to offer is not enough, because communication must adapt to fit the medium and stakeholders. Communication should be personalized, reflecting the collective purpose of the organization as well as modified to stakeholders’ communicative needs.
It is imperative to grasp what type of communication parents need from their child care facilities in order to make them feel involved and connected. While studying parent involvement in child care centers, McLane (1995) discovered that the ideal center would encourage dialogue and make resources readily available to families. It is important for families to have a reciprocal relationship with staff, because if decisions affect the children, they also affect the parents. “Parents are and should be the principal influence in their children’s lives,” which means that all internal and external communication within the child care center should be focused on the most significant of stakeholders, parents (p. 28). The organization and parents should have a mutually beneficial relationship. In order to increase parent involvement, McLane developed a handbook that could be used to measure the level of parent involvement as well as suggestions to increase involvement. From this research, it is clear that child care administrators found staff-parent interactions to be vital to children’s success.

Family-centered child care centers allow facilities to move parent involvement to the next level. After analyzing family-centered practice, McMullen & Lash (2012) discovered that in order to achieve this concept, it requires staff to become partners and key informers to families when it comes to the decisions made regarding their children. In order for parents to achieve this partnership, they must understand families with “diverse linguistic backgrounds, structures, beliefs, and ethnicities” (p. 11). Staff must work to comprehend family differences so that they may implement a respectful form of caregiving by caring for children in a way that families want them to be cared for. Family-centered practice implies that staff does not determine what is best for children on their own, but instead makes decisions through collaborating with parents.

Parents who form partnerships with staff during their child’s earliest of schooling leads to improved “academic motivation, grade promotion, and socio-emotional skills” (Douglass &
Gittell, 2012, p. 270). A survey was presented to over 150,000 families of school children throughout the U.S. addressing the issues of welcoming school environments, strong staff-parent two-way communication, academic parent involvement, and the school’s support behind learning at home (Constantino, 2007). The biggest issues discovered as a result of this survey were lack of connection and ineffective two-way communication. Some suggestions that were made to improve these issues were to ensure that the school website was welcoming and made staff-parent communication and contact simple as well as make information and resources readily available to parents. Teacher-parent communication should be presented in a simple, effective way that appeals to the parents’ wants and needs.

Reedy & McGrath (2010) conducted a study asking child center directors their perspectives on relationships between teachers and mothers in a child care center. The study found that early childhood education fields need to focus more on the method of how information is given, received, and accepted by families. The study provided a theoretical model of how communication between staff and families can be viewed. It included: (1) The communication process is ongoing and continuous; (2) there is open, bi-directional communication; and (3) support of parents is provided through education. This research indicates that the method of staff-parent communication should be carefully constructed, because it marks the difference between informed and uninformed parents.

Like many of these studies have also discovered, establishing and nurturing child care center relationships with families is one of the weakest yet most salient factors in the movement toward quality child care (Douglass & Gittell, 2012). Douglass & Gittell’s research suggests that the issue lies in the formalization and standardization of early childhood facilities which increase bureaucracy and professionalism and act as a barrier to caring. As a result, child-care facilities
are no longer family-centered due to “positioning the professional as the expert with power over the parent or client” (p. 270). This means that educational and developmental standards that have been implemented in early childhood facilities assume that professionals are more capable of making decisions regarding children than parents are.

In order to overcome these barriers, child care centers must understand the type of communication that parents prefer so that teacher-parent relationships may be strengthened and a dialogue can be created. One way we can learn about the type of communication parents need is by looking at their generation’s communicative habits. The current and incoming generation of parents are of the millennial generation, which means these parents were born between 1982 and 2002 (Elam, Stratton, Gibson, 2007). They are the first generation of parents that have always had digital technology in their lives (Ray, 2013). Millennial parents prefer and respond better to media that encourages community and frequent communication such as social media. Ray also suggests that millennial parents prefer mentors when it comes to parenting, indicating that they prefer to be given resources and advice from child care staff, and print “hard copy” communication is often ignored in favor of “emails, texts, or tweets” (p. 332). According to The Pew Research Center (2010), Seventy-five percent of millennials have created a profile on a social networking site. This research indicates that child care centers should change their methods of communication based on the preferences and needs of parents.

Since millennial parents prefer media that encourages community, social media would be most appropriate in that it fosters organizational community (Ray, 2013). Social media serves as a community forum that is a very versatile medium, allowing for an “archivable support of group collaboration and community” (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht & Swartz, 2004). Yang & Kang (2009) also discovered that in particular, interactive blogs produce a personal connection with
followers as well as create positive attitudes toward the organization. When staff understand the features of blogging, for example, it can be used to their benefit through “issue framing, relationship building, fostering trust, and identification” (Kent, 2008, p. 37). Research shows that social media can benefit both child care center staff and millennial parents by fostering a communicative relationship that focuses on community, trust, and collaboration.

Based on this research, the goal for this creative project is to design and implement a Ball State Child Study Center media strategy that engages millennial parents in their child’s learning experiences through strengthening parent-teacher relationships via digital mediums that promote collaboration, community, and trust. Centered on this goal, there are two foundation theories that this project will be based on. The first is Grunig and Hunt’s Two-way Symmetrical Model which provides an outline to practicing public relations. The second foundational theory is Epstein’s Model for Parental Involvement which provides a model to strengthening parental participation in schools and in the community.

**Two-way Symmetrical Model**

The two-way symmetrical model was first outlined by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as a part of the four models to practicing public relations. The four models include:

1. Press agency/publicity
2. Public information
3. Two-way asymmetrical
4. Two-way symmetrical

Even though all of these models are currently practiced, Grunig and Hunt (1984) determined that the two-way symmetrical model represents the most ideal and ethical form of practice which makes it the only model that is applicable to this research. The purpose of the
two-way symmetrical model is to clarify how public relations should be practiced by encouraging respect and mutual understanding between the organization and its stakeholders. This model suggests that the interest of stakeholders should be an organization’s highest priority.

The two-way symmetrical model relates to this research in that it is an ideal framework that promotes relationship building and reciprocal communication between the organization and its stakeholders, which in this research would represent the Ball State Child Study Center and parents. According to Waddington (2013), in order to be considered an effective organization, internal and external communication and relationship building should be grounded in the two-way symmetrical model. This means that all communication should be focused on stakeholder publics, which is vital to an organization’s success.

Even though many organizations use Grunig & Hunt’s (1984) two-way symmetrical model as a framework for their communication, there are limitations to this theory. One limitation to this theory is that the end product may not reflect the initial plan due to the organization giving up control by implementing a willingness to adapt with publics (Pasino, 2012). The negotiations made with publics may slow the implementation of the organization’s strategy. Another limitation according to Edwards (2006) is the two-way symmetrical model is a narrow approach that may oversimplify human behavior. This research will attempt to overcome these limitations by implementing a communication strategy that is focused on stakeholder goals, not organizational goals.

**Epstein’s Model for Parental Involvement**

Epstein et al. (2002) formed the model for parental involvement for the purpose of maximizing parent involvement in schools and in the community. This model is meant to benefit
families and schools by bridging the educational gap. This model includes six types of involvement including:

1. Parenting
2. Communicating
3. Volunteering
4. Learning at home
5. Decision-making
6. Collaborating with the community

The first type of involvement is parenting which assists families in creating home environments that support appropriate age-level learning and development for their children (Epstein et al., 2002). This model encourages family support and education through provided resources and information, but also encourages families to share information with schools about their child’s specific needs, culture and background. All of this information is meant to work together so that children may be as successful as possible, because as McLane (1995) emphasized, a successful center would provide ample information and resources to families through an effective medium so that two-way communication is properly achieved. This model strongly relates to this project, because it highlights the importance of disseminating resources and information as well as receiving parent feedback through an effective medium which should be chosen based on communication mediums that current parents are most accustomed to communicating through.

The second model for parental involvement is communicating. This model highlights the creation of a two-way communication channel between the school and families from frequent child progress reports to school programs, activities, and policies (Epstein et al, 2002). This
model encourages clear, quality channels for two-way communication to minimize any ambiguity. Reed & McGrath (2010) also stressed the importance of clear communication by suggesting that staff-parent communication should be carefully constructed so that all parents receive the same lucid information. Related to this project, social media could be used as an articulate method of two-way communication, informing parents of programs, activities, and policies as well as the overall improvements of the center. Private information such as individual progress reports do not directly relate to this research.

Volunteering is the next model which promotes parent help and support within the classroom (Epstein et al, 2002). Parent involvement in the classroom benefits all parties in that parents feel welcomed and valued in schools, and teachers are made aware of parents’ interests and talents. Parent volunteering is significant, because parents should be the primary influence in their children’s lives (McLane, 1995). Applied to this research, social media could act as an effective form of communication and a way organize volunteer help, promote events that will allow for volunteers, and recognize parents’ for their time volunteered.

The model learning at home encourages teachers to offer ideas and information for families about how to improve their child’s curriculum-related and developmental skills (Epstein et al, 2002). This model can be achieved through providing curriculum information to parents as well as allowing parents to help make curriculum-related decisions. This model supports the concept of family-centered practice by staff becoming partners and key informers to families involving decisions regarding their children (McMullen & Lash, 2012). This model relates to this research, because appropriate curriculum and developmental-related activities that can be practiced at home can be posted via social media. This way, parents can also reply with their own curriculum-related suggestions.
The following model is decision making. This parental involvement model recommends that parents should be included in school-related decisions, developing parent leaders (Epstein et al, 2002). Parent leaders can help lobby for school reform and improvement-related issues. This model stresses Douglass & Gittel’s (2012) ideas by positing that parents should be the primary decision makers regarding their child’s education. This model does not directly relate to this research in that it is more applied to the grade school level and above; however, parents can be informed of and provide their input via the school social media regarding decisions being made at the center. Parents may even recommend certain announcements through the center’s social media that promote community events or important family practices.

The final model Epstein et al. (2002) proposes is collaborating with the community. This model incorporates community resources and services into school activities and family practices in order to aid in the learning and development of children. Collaborating with the community recommends that schools integrate community resources into curriculum-related goals while also informing families of learning opportunities through the community. For example, firemen may come to schools to talk about fire safety, and children may even get to explore the fire trucks to better grasp what the firefighting process entails. Related to this research, the center’s social media could inform parents of upcoming community events, days when community resources would be used at school, and provide a space for parents to post community-related information that the center has not posted.

There are a few criticisms raised by scholars in response to Epstein’s model for parental involvement. One criticism is that the model does not take into account race and ethnicity, but instead, provides a general parental involvement approach regardless of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic factors (Bower, 2011). Another criticism is that the decision-making process
within this model is defined under the school’s terms, not the families’ terms. In order to overcome these limitations, this research will attempt to take into account diverse backgrounds while also informing families of the reasons certain decisions must be defined by the school in order to obey state and national standards.
Method

The communication medium where teacher-parent conversations take place dictates the effectiveness of the communication. If centers are not communicating through the preferred medium that millennial parents are most comfortable, then children suffer as a consequence. When parents are involved in their children’s school, it can lead to improved learning (Constantino, 2007). Therefore, it is vital that teachers allow parents to create a presence in the classroom by providing ample opportunities for them to engage in dialogue. Providing additional resources to continue opportunities for learning at home is also necessary. Children will benefit as a result of adapting to meet parents’ needs.

“Relating to this new generation of parents requires a major shift toward digital communications” which include regular updates, Twitter announcements, classroom websites, links to resources, and a school Facebook page, because millennial moms spend up to 4.3 hours a day online (Ray, 2013, p. 322; Millennial Mom, 2014). For this creative project, a media strategy for the Ball State Child Study Center will be implemented that covers all of these areas in order to create a stronger teacher-parent relationship by providing parents with the digital opportunity to engage in two-way communication with the center and provide additional resources and information for continued learning opportunities at home.

This media strategy will involve three forms of social media: a WordPress blog, Facebook, and Twitter. Each social media will have a unique communication purpose and procedure for dissemination.

Creating a WordPress Blog

The first component of this media strategy is a foundational WordPress blog website. A WordPress blog was chosen as the foundational piece of this media strategy, because in order to
engage millennial parents, the Child Study Center must focus on digital forms of community, trust, and collaboration in a medium that millennials prefer. According to prior research discoveries, interactive blogs can produce a personal connection with followers as well foster trust and relationship building (Yang & Kang, 2009; Kent, 2008). Blogs also allow the opportunity for dialogue, safe information and photo sharing in a password-protected space, and frequent updates for continual involvement and additional resources.

The main Ball State University Child Study Center website page will be linked to this WordPress blog, and the blog will also be linked to the CSC Facebook and Twitter. This blog will feature a page for each classroom and provide teachers with their own password-protected space to post their classroom curricula, reflection posts, and any additional announcements or resources that pertains to their classrooms. This blog will follow Ray’s (2013) digital communication shift suggestions through weekly classroom updates, password-protected photos and activity videos, field trips, links to resources, and home learning activities. This blog will also provide a space for comments, which according to Grunig and Hunt (1984), two-way communication is monumental to an organization in that it promotes relationship building and reciprocal communication. This two-way communication not only strengthens teacher-parent relationships, but it also encourages community collaboration among parents.

Blog posts will replace the lead teacher’s weekly emails to parents. This way, there will be an archived, searchable channel where all information is in one place, and parents can choose to follow the blog in order to receive continual updates when posts are added. There will be two weekly posts per classroom with the exception of a possible additional announcement. On Monday mornings, there will be an introduction post with the curriculum plans for the week. On Friday, there will be a reflection post with a photo gallery that discusses the previous week’s
activities. On the announcements page, there will be center-wide updates as needed to remind parents of upcoming events, deadlines, and reminders. All posts will be proofread, edited, and posted by the Child Study Center administrative assistant in order to make posts as clear and consistent as possible. Parent comments will be approved by the administrative assistant before being publicly posted to the blog.

Creating a Facebook Page

The Child Study Center media strategy will also include Facebook. The Facebook medium was chosen, because it is currently one of the most preferred social media among millennial parents. According to the Millennial Mom Report (2014), 79% of millennial moms use social media with 86% of them using Facebook. Facebook is different from the blog, because conversations can be initiated by parents, and Child Study Center posts can be shared by parents. Through sharing and initiating posts, parents will have the opportunity to create the conversation, collaborate with other parents, and connect the community to the Child Study Center. The control shifts from the Child Study Center to the parents by allowing parents to be active participants through starting conversation instead of only responding.

Facebook posts will work in tandem with the “Announcements” page on the WordPress blog. Since Facebook is a public site, only center-wide, non-private information will be posted which includes center-wide updates, reminders, and deadlines. All posts will be posted between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. on weekdays. Comments by parents will be monitored and appropriately responded to daily by the Child Study Center administrative assistant. The profile picture and cover photo will correlate with the blog design in order to communicate a consistent image.

Creating a Twitter Account
The final component to the media strategy will include Twitter. Twitter was chosen for this media strategy particularly for brief activity updates that will allow parents to feel connected to their child throughout the day as well as to provide learning opportunities at home. According to Ray (2013), “communicating through technology seems to appeal to busy parents who like to receive brief information quickly” (p. 322). Through Twitter, parents can receive brief activity updates, which will make them feel more connected to their child’s school and learning experiences. Similar to Facebook, Twitter offers the opportunity to retweet, comment, or initiate conversations which encourages collaboration and community. Through providing daily updates of activities, Epstein’s Model, Learning can be archived by providing material for conversation at home, bridging the gap between school and home as well as making parents feel more involved in school activities. Parents can also have an archive source of activities that can be implemented again at home.

Twitter posts will be based off of the weekly curriculum plans. A content calendar will be created every week, and will be approved by the department chairperson as well as the Child Study Center director (appendix A). A tweet will go out for each classroom according to the daily activity, and each class will have its own hashtag. Posts will be posted at the same time every day, so parents can look forward to the update. The profile picture and cover photo will correlate with the blog and Facebook design in order to communicate a consistent image.

After creating an initial draft of the WordPress website, teaching materials were distributed to the Child Study Center staff (appendix B). These materials explained the media strategy purpose as well as specific directions on how to successfully navigate and post to WordPress. Following the training of the staff, an introductory email was sent to the Ball State families to prepare them for the transition (appendix C).
By implementing a media strategy based on parents’ communication needs and preferences, communication barriers may be eliminated which will then help parents feel more connected to their child’s school. This media strategy will provide parents with ample opportunities to collaborate with Child Study Center and other parents, initiate conversation, ask questions, and receive resources and information. These social media were chosen, because they encourage parents to interact rather than just observe. Parents will now have the opportunity to participate in the way they choose.
Body of the Project

The development and implementation of the Child Study Center media strategy for CSC staff, parents, and prospective parents required much research and deliberation in order to decide best practices regarding design, content, and sharing. After collaborating with CSC staff and University Marketing and Communications, the following decisions were made regarding the Ball State Child Study Center media strategy.

Design

A new logo was created to complement the new media strategy. Based on the logo design and color scheme, the WordPress.com Confit theme was chosen due to its simplistic nature and consistency. All of the fonts are easy to read with the largest being at the top, and the most relevant of information is “above the fold,” meaning users do not have to scroll.

Figure 1 - Screen shot of Ball State Child Study Center WordPress site
The side bar is present on every page. The side bar includes the logo, navigation bar, social media, contact information, and the Ball State University logo. The logo and navigation bar are at the very top of the side bar, so users do not have to scroll. Social media is included in the side bar as a call to action, so visitors and followers of the blog may also follow the center’s Facebook and Twitter. Facebook and Twitter profile pictures are the CSC logo for consistency.

Every blog post appears in the order it was posted with a date and time stamp. This design also invites two-way communication and interaction by having a “reply” box following every post.

Figure 2- Screen shot of WordPress blog post and rely box
Content

The content on the CSC WordPress blog is based on the center’s former communication practice surrounding each individual class as well as administration. This media strategy acts as a replacement for previous forms of communication with the exception of the Announcements page, which will be additional to an email. Based on the former communication practice, the navigation bar was formulated. The blog has five pages: Home, Announcements, Preschool, Triangle Classroom, and Circle Classroom.

The Home page is a public, static page that welcomes current families and prospective families to the website. It also directs visitors to the Announcements page as well as the main BSU site using hypertext links. The Announcements page is also public where parents can find center-wide information and updates. The Preschool, Triangle Classroom, and Circle Classroom pages are all private pages that are password protected. The passwords are shared with current parents only, and will be updated every semester. The classroom pages contain curriculum plan posts that will include a downloadable pdf and brief introduction of the weekly theme. There are also weekly reflections that include images of the children engaging in the activities from that week. All pages include a side bar with the center’s contact information.

The content for the CSC Facebook and Twitter pages are determined by the WordPress blog content. The content of Facebook complements the Announcements page of the blog, meaning whatever is posted to this page is also posted to Facebook. The CSC Twitter content is chosen based on the curriculum plans for the upcoming week. Each day includes three Twitter posts, one from each classroom that discusses activities from that day. Both Twitter and Facebook encourage interactivity.
The final social media links are as follows:

WordPress: www.bsuchildstudycenter.wordpress.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/bsuchildstudycenter

Twitter: www.twitter.com/BSUCSC
Summary and Conclusion

As a result of this research project, the Ball State Child Study Center offers a unique, progressive way to communicate with parents. According to WordPress statistics, the BSU CSC WordPress site has received 49 visits and 788 page views per week on average thus far.

![Graph showing WordPress site statistics]

Figure 5- BSU CSC WordPress site statistics.

Through secondary research on teacher-parent communication best practices, the Ball State Child Study Center media strategy encompasses a majority of the ideal features for the most effective communication possible. Some best practices that were implemented within the BSU CSC media strategy include comment boxes promoting two-way communication and a safe, password-protected space, giving parents daily updates. Particularly, evaluator, Kristen McCauliff of Ball State University found that the two-way communication was helpful for parents to feel included and show support for the efforts of CSC teachers. Evaluator, Jennifer
Young of Ball State University felt like Twitter was the most beneficial to parents in that they could receive short bursts throughout the day. Even one parent reported feeling more aware of what his daughter is doing due to the daily tweet updates.

The Ball State Child Study Center media strategy has been active for five months. While many best practices have been put into place, there is room for improvement. The strategy is meant to evolve, adapting to new parents and their needs as we continue to learn about the mediums. For example, evaluator Kristen McCauliff suggested to tap into the larger Early Childhood Education conversation that happens on the national and local level for Twitter and Facebook by retweeting and posting to spread information to parents. She also recommended to inform and possibly train parents at the back to school informational meetings.

Teacher-parent communication best practices research is still in its early stages, but was vital in the development of the Ball State Child Study Center media strategy. The biggest challenge for the BSU CSC staff has been getting parents to interact via the new mediums. Additional research could be done on what drives parents to interact on new communication mediums. The BSU CSC would benefit from follow-up research on what attracts parents to interact before adding a new medium of communication to the media strategy.
Outside Evaluations

Two individuals were asked to review the Ball State Child Study Center media strategy based on their knowledge of early childhood education, teacher-parent communication, and social media. Kristen McCauliff is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Ball State University and is also a parent of two children at the Ball State Child Study Center. Jennifer Young is the Ball State Child Study Center Director and an Instructor in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Ball State University. Each evaluator’s feedback is provided in the exact format in which they were provided to the researcher.

Outside Evaluation/Review of Tierney Edon’s Creative Project
By: Kristen McCauliff, PhD
February 25, 2015

I. Evaluator’s Credentials
As an assistant professor in the Department of Communication studies, I have the pleasure of teaching classes and researching many topics related to social media. In particular, I have taught a popular culture class that relies heavily on social media to extend our classroom space. In that class, my students have also worked on social media projects (creating promotional videos, updating webpages, and creating twitter accounts) with communication partners. Additionally, I have taught a graduate seminar about social media, advocacy and social media. In both classes, I have taught articles and theoretical concepts related to social media strategies, activism and persuasion. Moreover, my research often focuses on issues of advocacy, citizenship and social media.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention that, while I fall outside the “millennial” designation, I am a parent and have two daughters enrolled in the Ball State Child Studies Center (CSC). As such, I have been involved in an ongoing (albeit, informal) observation and evaluation of this media strategy.

II. Relationship to the student and subject matter
As I stated above, my children are enrolled in the CSC. Because of this, I have a close connection to both the student and the subject matter. I have known Ms. Edon for several years in a care-giving capacity as she has been a lab, practicum and graduate student in my daughters’ classrooms. In addition, she took a graduate seminar that I offered in the Fall semester of 2014. That graduate seminar was about persuasion, social media and advocacy.
As a parent involved with the CSC, I have received the tweets, blog posts and Facebook updates since the Fall of 2014 when Ms. Edon rolled out the media strategy.

III. Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

As a parent, my reliance on technology started when I was pregnant. I obsessively used a pregnancy tracker app to inform myself about development with my body. My reliance continued as I used apps to monitor my contractions and labor, new baby’s sleep patterns and breastfeeding information. Now with two toddlers, I use apps to do everything from document milestones, photograph (and edit those photos) special moments, archive art projects and so much more. Today’s generation of parents rely more and more on technology in life and in child rearing. As such, we expect all facets in our life to use technology—including our caregivers. Indeed, my anecdotal experience tells me that many parents crave more regular and instantaneous information from their child care centers. Many of my friends who are parents (and myself) look for a variety of types of information throughout the day. We often text with and send emails to teachers to receive updates about our children. Therefore, this social media strategy is in-line with parental expectations and the current cultural moment we live within. As such, I find the timeliness very appropriate for a creative endeavor for a graduate student.

IV. Evaluation of the student’s approach

The student’s approach is to use three different social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter and Wordpress) to communication the daily and weekly happenings at the Ball State Child Studies Center. I find this comprehensive approach to be very fitting and it makes both “real world” and academic sense. Please see section V(a) for a more detailed evaluation of the project.

V. Evaluation of the Body of the Project

a. I have evaluated the quality of Ms. Edon’s project on four levels: visual/design elements, navigation and clarity, interactivity and community, and content across the various platforms. While I do offer suggestions for the sites, I must say that I am incredibly impressed with this helpful and clear media strategy.

First, I love the simple and harmonious design on all of the platforms. The CSC logo is clear, unique and recognizable. Therefore, I’m glad that Ms. Edon repeats it on all of the platforms. The repetition establishes unity between all of the platforms. And, the brightly colored tree quickly draws a parent’s eye to the tweets and/or facebook updates. Additionally, I like the color and font choices on the Wordpress site as they are simple and clear. For hurried parents looking for particular posts and information, the design makes it easy for individual entries to stand out. Last, and not easy to do, Ms. Edon has designed the Wordpress site to
tie in both the CSC branding and the Ball State logo. I am impressed with the integration of the two brands.

Second, the navigation of all of the sites is very easy and intuitive. The Wordpress site has the most elements and it is very easy to negotiate. In particular, I like the links on the left hand side of the site that allows parents to easily navigate away from the main page to their child’s classroom page. Very easy for parents to find necessary information. The Facebook page is also very clear and easy to use. Since most parents are familiar with this medium, I think they understand how to post on the page and how to comment/like status updates. Ms. Edon also makes great use of Twitter. While I suspect this is the medium least used by millennial parents, I like how she has a blend of text, pictures and hyperlinks. All are high quality and easily viewed. Of course, I was an avid user of all of these sites before the CSC started using them. As such, I knew how to subscribe to a Wordpress site and log onto Twitter and, importantly, I already had accounts to both sites. A suggestion I have for Ms. Edon and the CSC more generally is to inform and almost train the parents at the back to school informational meetings. While Ms. Edon did prepare very informative and helpful emails, I still think the sites could be intimidating to those parents who do not use these mediums often. While many parents at the center are millennial and young, many of us are not! Many of us have also become accustomed to reading all of the information through our emails. To have an explicit training would be helpful to showcasing just how easy it is to use the sites.

This is related to the third aspect—community building and interactivity. Certainly these sites are more interactive than the previous way of transmitting information—through emails. I like that the Facebook site is open for friends to post and comment on posts. I also think that it is important that the blog, if you open an account, allows for posting and likes. This two-way communication is helpful for parents to feel included and show support for the efforts of the CSC teachers. While I suspect the community will broaden in the upcoming semester when more parents, teachers and lab students work with the CSC, there is not a lot of interactivity right now. The Facebook page has a few more than 60 followers and Twitter has only 26. I would recommend that the CSC put the Facebook, blog and Twitter information on all intake forms, receipts and applications. I am happy to see the sites linked to the webpage but I think many parents would also be enticed to follow along if they see the reminders on their “official” paperwork as well. In addition, I think the postings on the various sites can encourage more community building and interactivity. It might be helpful for Tweets and Facebook posts to ask questions or suggest parents chime in with their opinion or feelings. And, importantly, the CSC should respond quickly when parents do comment or post. The CSC webmasters should be active in cultivating a sense of community and responsiveness on the sites. Once they model that behavior, more parents will follow suit, I suspect.
Fourth, I want to comment on the excellent content found on all of the sites. Not only is the content innovative and informative but it is also very medium appropriate. I enjoy the long-form information found on the blog (very detailed curriculum plans and weekly updates), while Twitter is very useful for quick, daily updates (what stories are being read and pictures of fun activities). I really like the idea of using Facebook for weekly tips and announcements of community events. The different, yet continuous, content is helpful in reinforcing important information and keeping parents checking all of the sites. One suggestion I have is to tap into the larger Early Childhood Education conversation that happens on a national and local level on Twitter and Facebook. Some retweets/posts could be very helpful in spreading information as well as giving the sites more institutional notoriety and viability (#earlychildhoodeducation and @ECNews, for example). These education conversations are in-line with the mission of the CSC and could serve to further network the center.

b. As illustrated by my comments above, I think the campaign, as a whole, as all of the necessary components. The sites are well-designed and have unique content that overlaps with each other. The sites are designed with long-term growth in place. It will be very easy for more parents, teachers and lab students to participate in the conversation as they become involved with the CSC.

c. All information parent’s would want to find is found at the various sites—center announcements, curriculum plans, pictures, daily updates, and helpful reminders and tips. However, I do suggest Ms. Edon or the CSC solicit feedback from parents to see if they have any ideas for future content or any ways to make the sites even more user friendly.

VI. Evaluation of the student’s work as contributing to the field

The project by nature of its timeliness contributes to the field of public relations. While a lot of journalists and tech companies have realized and talk about the importance of apps, social media and technology, very little has been done on an academic level. Therefore, I applaud Ms. Edon in her creativity and cutting edge work.

OUTSIDE EVALUATION OF MEDIA STRATEGY PROJECT

An evaluation of Tierney Edon’s creative project, by Jennifer Young

March 23, 2015

I. Evaluator’s Credentials

As a faculty member of the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, I teach family and child development courses. Currently, I am the Director of the Child
Study Center, a child development laboratory, at Ball State University and have been involved in the Child Study Center programs since 1998.

II. Relationship to the student and subject matter

Tierney Edon has been associated with the Child Study Center for the past 3+ years; first as a student enrolled in infant/toddler development, then as a student employee, and finally, for the last 2 years, as a graduate assistant. I have worked with her extensively on this project as well as related projects for state and local conference presentations.

I have worked on several models of family engagement in my work at the Child Study Center over the years, changing the format and delivery to best meet the needs of the family. Earlier versions of parent communication centered around paper newsletters, curriculum plans and parent notes. A few years ago, all communication switched to electronic means with the use of email. I also participated in a pilot project last year to increase parents’ awareness of quality childcare indicators by increasing effective communication with families; namely, using multiple aspects of social media to connect with parents. I feel well qualified to evaluate Tierney’s project on the content of family engagement with the use of social media.

III. Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

As the child’s first teacher, parents have the greatest impact on their child’s development. Engaged, supportive parents provide the means for children to reach their full potential. How to engage and connect parents of today – millennial parents – with the school and curriculum is the core of the project. The email communication system that has been main method of communicating with families at the Child Study Center was not only becoming outdated but inefficient as well. A new means of connecting to parents using current technology and communication trends was sorely needed.

In spring 2014, a group of students working on an immersive learning project worked to develop an online blog for the Child Study Center. The project was created and launched in 2 months. Although the design reflected some of the staff input, some elements were missing. The greatest drawback, however, was the lack of sustainability. The blog outline was merely presented as a completed project instead of working with
staff to incorporate the necessary components and developing a method of effectively using the blog. The lesson from the immersive learning project clearly highlights the need to train teachers to use the new method of communication, as well as consider how the site will continue to be used from semester to semester.

IV. Evaluation of the student’s approach

Over the years as the Child Study Center has changed communication formats to best connect with families, it is apparent that not all families prefer nor have the means to communicate in the same way. One of the genius ideas of the media project design was the multi-tiered approach that allows teachers to connect with parents “where they are.”

Tierney first discussed informally with the teachers their struggles and needs as it pertained to communicating with Child Study Center families. Since Tierney knew the teachers well and had an extensive working knowledge of the center, she was able to gain insight quickly, picking up on the challenges and the “wish list” of the teachers. Next, she and I met formally to discuss the project components. Pointing out that there are several means of communicating with parents using technology the center was currently not using, she began to outline her project.

- A blog would be created to post curriculum plans for each classroom (3 total)
- Activity photographs of the children would be posted to the blog site
- A Facebook page would be created to post announcements, reminders, information from the office
- A Twitter account would be created to send daily curriculum updates

V. Evaluation of the body of the project

a. Quality

The creation of the blog site to host teacher and administration communication with families has streamlined the process for the teachers, making better use of their time. To create an attractive, modern look, Tierney also revised the Child Study Center logo. The fresh look of the blog design fits the center’s audience and goals as professional and user-friendly. The photographs that used to take the teachers quite some time to compile are now posted quickly. The teachers are also
delighted that old posts can be archived on the site to be used for their classroom accreditation documentation and portfolio, as well as for new families joining the classroom to view.

The Facebook page generally lists announcements from the office as well as community events families might be interested in attending. Parents are able to comment and share with extended family. Photographs are specifically not used on this site to protect children. In consideration, it would be possible to post photographs of curriculum without children. This would further enhance Facebook as a means of communicating with families.

The Twitter account is used to post daily feeds from all 3 classrooms. Interesting components of the curriculum plan are pulled from the activities. The goal is to engage families during their work day. In fact, one parent reported that he feels much more aware of what his daughter is doing on a daily basis by following the Twitter feeds. Interestingly, this component of the project provides the smallest segment of information, yet, because it is posted daily, potentially impacts families more than the other means by way of short bursts of information on a regular basis. And the information goes to the parent, rather than the parent seeking out the information. The Twitter account proved to be a highly valuable means of communication.

b. Depth of treatment

All components of the project were completed with precision and attention to detail. To maintain a system of checks and balances, Tierney created a weekly Twitter feed calendar that was preapproved by me and my department chairperson. The calendar was timely, organized, and reflected the curriculum activities insightfully.

Tierney designed and implemented the blog site, then taught staff how to navigate and post. Recently, the WordPress site reached maximum capacity. The center paid for additional space in order to preserve the archived material. However, this is a short term solution, considering we will at some point max out the additional
storage space purchased. Currently, Tierney is in the process of exploring an alternate means of archiving data through a BSU storage site.

The Child Study Center administrative assistant was trained on how to implement the social media posts. She is now able to effectively manage the WordPress site and posts regularly to the Facebook site. Additional training will be needed to transfer the responsibility of Twitter feeds from Tierney to the administrative assistant. Completing this task, as well as securing additional storage space for archives, will successfully secure the sustainability of the media site project.

c. Coverage

The use of social media was presented in multiple sources to actively engage parents with school curriculum. Coverage was extensive enough to meet parents “where they are” on a variety of levels, yet simple enough to be maintained by the staff after Tierney passes the project reins at the conclusion of the semester. Concerns and potential problems were identified and addressed during the planning and implementation of the project. As a result, the experience has been not only satisfying by meeting the center needs, but also encouraging for staff to experiment with additional media based ideas in the future.

VI. Evaluation of the student’s work as contributing to the field

The use of social media to connect families to school is not a new idea. However, the implementation of such projects can be time consuming, costly, and poorly designed for the users and content. This project successfully combines current media practices with needs-based functionality. In addition, thought to sustainability was evident from the beginning stages of design, allowing the project to continue at the conclusion of the semester. The project was carefully thought-out to address the special considerations in childcare, such as professionalism, confidentiality, and user knowledge.

The value of this project is demonstrating how childcare facilities can use technology to enhance programs and meet the needs of the staff, rather than creating a media outreach process that is costly to maintain and challenging to navigate.
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## Appendix A

### Twitter Content Calendar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>November</th>
<th>Monday 3</th>
<th>Tuesday 4</th>
<th>Wednesday 5</th>
<th>Thursday 6</th>
<th>Friday 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Circle Classroom</td>
<td>We read <em>A Snowy Day</em> and explored snow brought into our classroom. #csccircleclassroom #circletime</td>
<td>We felt different textures that were hidden under flaps on a poster board. #csccircleclassroom #texture</td>
<td>We explored what happens when water is added to potato flakes. We mixed and explored using whisks, measuring cups, and Dixie cups. #csccircleclassroom #discoverytable</td>
<td>We added sand to our clay sculptures. #csccircleclassroom #art</td>
<td>We felt different textures outside such as trees, bushes, fences, and the ground. #csccircleclassroom #fieldtripfriday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangle Classroom</td>
<td>We painted a box using paint mixed with sand. #csctriangleclassroom #art</td>
<td>We explored cardboard boxes that each had different textures on their surface. #csctriangleclassroom #texture</td>
<td>We sat on tactile discs and read &quot;If you Give a Pig a Pancake&quot; and sang &quot;Five Little Ducks.&quot; #csctriangleclassroom #circletime</td>
<td>We explored potato buds, shells, rocks, and beans with buckets and scoops. #csctriangleclassroom #discoverytable</td>
<td>We listen to and acted out the song “We’re going on a Bear Hunt.” #csctriangleclassroom #movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>We mixed and matched scarves, mittens, gloves, and hats of different textures. #cscpreschool #dramaticplay</td>
<td>We added shaving cream, salt, flour, pine cones, and glue to our winter wonderland paper plates. #cscpreschool #art</td>
<td>We practiced running, walking with socks, tip toeing barefoot, and rolling around on the astroturf at the Rec Center! #cscpreschool #fieldtrip</td>
<td>We experimented with corn starch and water in the discovery table. #cscpreschool #science #discoverytable</td>
<td>We read <em>The Mitten</em> and sang &quot;Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.&quot; #cscpreschool #circletime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Staff Teaching Materials

BSU CSC Media Strategy

**WordPress:** [http://bsuchildstudycenter.wordpress.com/](http://bsuchildstudycenter.wordpress.com/)

Our WordPress blog is going to be used for the purpose of providing parents with weekly updates on the curriculum plans, reflections, and center-wide announcements. This will serve as a replacement for the weekly parent emails that the teachers send out, but **not** as a replacement for center-wide announcements such as due dates, etc. It will only act as a complement to our regular announcement emails.

**We will post twice a week on Monday and Friday.**

On **Mondays**, we will send out an introduction of the weekly theme and link in the curriculum plans. We can do this either as a pdf or word document. We will plan on having the lead teachers send their posts by Monday morning by 9am. This way Megan can proof read and post by 11am on Monday mornings.

On **Fridays**, we will post our weekly reflections along with what would be our photo page. We will post photos directly to the blog post (parents will be able to right click and save pictures if they would like.) We will plan on having the lead teachers send their posts to Megan by Friday morning at 9am. Megan can edit posts and post them by 11am. Lead teachers will be responsible for posting their photos to their posts (I figured out how to do a carousel of photos, and it takes like 2 seconds! I will teach you how.) This way we aren’t sending 12 photo attachments to Megan. Lead teachers can either post their photos prior to the post being published or after.

The main reason why we are implementing a blog and social media is so that we can relate to millennial parents. We are taking our communication to the next level and meeting their needs. We are supporting two-way communication in that parents are able to comment through our blog, but all comments will be approved by Megan before posted. This is also a way of recruiting potential families.

**Facebook:** [https://www.facebook.com/bsuchildstudycenter](https://www.facebook.com/bsuchildstudycenter)

The purpose of Facebook is to have an additional communication medium to reach parents about center-wide updates and announcements. Facebook will be updated by Megan simultaneously to updating the “announcements” page of the blog. We can also use Facebook to communicate community events that we are promoting. There will not be a set schedule with Facebook posts, just whenever Megan normally sends out her updates.

**Twitter:** [https://twitter.com/BSUCSC](https://twitter.com/BSUCSC)

Our Twitter handle is @BSUCSC, so follow us! 😊 The purpose of Twitter is to have daily updates on activities the children are doing, so that the conversation can be continued at home. Posts will be short, specific and simple. Each classroom will have its own hashtag. Mondays will cover circle time. Tuesdays will cover art. Wednesdays will cover discovery table. Thursdays will cover environment. Fridays will
cover movement/science/field trips. I will create the content calendar, and send it to you all on Mondays in case there is anything you’d like to add. I will be doing the posting to Twitter.

Some example posts are:

**Friday**

*We saw our shadows on the projectile screen while singing "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" today.* (link to reflection post) #csccircleclassroom #funfriday

*We used magnifying glasses to look at leaves today.* (link to reflection post) #csctriangleclassroom #fallfriday

*We took a field trip to the Ball State REC Center to learn about reflection through dancing, moving and looking at the wall of mirrors.* #cspreschool #fitnessfriday

**Overall**

We will treat this as a trial and error process. We will edit as we go! Good news is that no one has ever done this before, so there is no standard to compare us to, right?

Let me know if you have any suggestions. This is a work and progress, and I would love for it to be a collaborated effort.

Thanks for everybody’s help in launching this media strategy!
Appendix C

Introductory Parent Email

Families,

We have exciting changes coming to the Ball State Child Study Center!

In addition to being the graduate assistant at the infant toddler lab, I am a second year public relations graduate student. Through the Department of Journalism, a graduate research option is a creative research project, which I have chosen. For my creative project, I am creating a media strategy for the Child Study Center for the purpose of relating to millennial parents by using new technology through social media and two-way communication.

The focus of my project promotes relationship building and reciprocal communication the CSC and families by maximizing parent involvement and bridging the educational gap.

This media strategy will consist of implementing a CSC blog, Facebook page, and Twitter. Our blog will be introduced starting Friday, October 3, and a link to the site will be emailed that day. This blog will serve as a replacement for traditional parent emails from your lead teachers. Lead teachers will post once on Monday morning to introduce the curriculum plans and weekly theme and also on Friday which will serve as a reflection piece for the week. We will also replace our weekly photo documentations with an interactive carousel of pictures. The blog will contain center-wide information posted on a weekly basis, but these posts will not replace the emails from csc@bsu.edu.

On the CSC blog, there will be comment boxes so that you all may interact with the lead teachers and with each other. Once you follow the CSC blog, you will receive email notifications every time a post is added.

**Our Twitter and Facebook will be introduced today!** Facebook will be used for weekly center-wide updates, community events that the CSC is promoting, and other announcements. Twitter will consist of daily updates of activities our children have done that day, so that you all may continue the conversation with your child at home. Please follow the links below to like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter @BSUCSC.

https://www.facebook.com/bsuchildstudycenter
https://twitter.com/BSUCSC

We hope this media strategy will encourage conversation and engage you all in a new, interactive way. If you have questions on use or suggestions about improving our media strategy, please contact me at tredon@bsu.edu.

Thank you for your support!

Tierney Edon