Research on Online United Front Work in Colleges and Universities Settings

Xiaofan Liu

Guangdong Pharmaceutical University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 10006, China

Abstract: With the rapid advancement of internet technology, online united front work in colleges and universities has emerged as a critical task in the new era. This paper delves into the essence, significance, application, and challenges of online united front work within the university context. It argues that online united front work represents an organic integration of information technology and united front efforts, playing a vital role in fostering virtue through education and uniting non-Party intellectuals within universities. The paper also analyzes the opportunities facing this work in the new era—such as technological advancements, the proliferation of new media channels, and cultural exchanges in a globalized context—alongside challenges including outdated hardware and software, insufficient innovation capacity, and inadequate working mechanisms. Finally, it proposes innovative approaches and methods to enhance the effectiveness of united front work, cultivate online leadership talent, and address risks and challenges. These strategies include improving the timeliness and interactivity of platforms, optimizing the institutional framework for united front work in universities, empowering the united front workforce, and strengthening risk management and emergency response mechanisms.

Keywords: online United Front Work, university United Front Work, risk Management, new Media Technology

1. Introduction

According to the 54th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development released by the China Internet Network Information Center, as of June 2024, China's internet user base reached nearly 1.1 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 78.0%. College students constitute the primary demographic within universities and are major users of the internet. Furthermore, non-Party members in higher education institutions are predominantly highly educated and skilled individuals. Mobilizing their strength is crucial for advancing online united front work in universities. Therefore, as a vital frontline for the united front, universities shoulder the important mission of educating talent for the Party and the nation. With the rapid advancement and widespread adoption of internet technology, united front work in colleges and universities now faces new opportunities and challenges. The growing number of individuals targeted for united front efforts and the increasing diversity of their values undoubtedly heighten the complexity of this work. Effectively conducting and advancing online united front work in the new era holds significant importance for the Party's overarching united front efforts.

2. The Essence and Importance of Online United Front Work in Colleges and Universities Institutions

2.1 Essence

The definition of online united front work evolves alongside technological advancements. The term was first formally proposed in 2005 by Comrade Xiqing Chen. Scholar Xin Yan describes it as "a modernized approach that employs the internet as a tool, the united front as its foundation, and aims to innovate work methods—an organic integration of informatization and united front efforts"[1]. The Central United Front Work Department later defined it as united front activities that utilize the internet as a carrier, integrating traditional and contemporary approaches, characterized by openness, equality, interactivity, and transcending time and space[2]. More recently, Xiqing Chen emphasized that it represents a new concept—re-examining and transforming the constituent elements of united front work through internet thinking, constituting an innovation in its fundamental approach[3].

In essence, online united front work refers to the use of information technology to target key figures in new media, employing a "big network, big united front" mindset to consolidate and develop the united front. It signifies innovation in methods, exploration of new domains, and a transformation in underlying philosophy, synthesizing technology, systems, and concepts[4].

2.2 Positive Significance

2.2.1 Unity of Hong Kong/Macao Students

As frontline bastions for knowledge dissemination and cultural exchange, universities' online united front efforts can effectively counteract the lingering influence of colonial culture and external misinformation affecting Hong Kong / Macao students[5]. Leveraging unique advantages in online interaction, these efforts foster a deeper understanding and identification with Chinese culture among these students. Through dedicated platforms, universities can establish diverse, interactive cultural exchange spaces. In these spaces, Hong Kong / Macao students can engage with China's traditional, revolutionary, and advanced socialist culture in a relaxed atmosphere, thereby strengthening their cultural confidence. Furthermore, this work facilitates in-depth exchanges between these students and their mainland peers, breaking geographical barriers, enhancing mutual understanding and friendship, and jointly building a foundation for the Chinese nation's community of shared future. This cross-regional, cross-cultural connection helps cultivate correct national and ethnic perspectives and lays a solid foundation for these students to become future bridges between the mainland and Hong Kong/Macao, holding significant value for promoting integrated development and safeguarding national unity.

2.2.2 Positive Significance for Uniting Non-Party Intellectuals in Colleges and Universities

An increasing number of non-Party members, including returning overseas scholars, have joined the higher education sector. Through their work, they clarify political affiliations, engage deeply in political affairs, and contribute to institutional development or social service initiatives[6]. Online united front work must therefore encompass renowned scholars, research experts, and corporate advisors, thereby cultivating a powerful "think tank" for the national united front. Most non-Party intellectuals in universities hold advanced degrees and senior professional titles. They undertake crucial roles in talent cultivation, scientific research, social collaboration, cultural heritage, and international academic discourse. Possessing significant decision-making authority and social influence within their institutions and beyond, they form a vital foundation for united front work in higher education. Effectively uniting them through online means amplifies their positive role and contributions.

3. Opportunities and Challenges for Online United Front Work

3.1 Opportunities

3.1.1 Continuous Advancements in Network Technology

Technological progress has revolutionized online united front work. The high speed, low latency, and massive

connectivity of 5G communication technology provide robust support for real-time information dissemination and interaction. This enables universities to facilitate instant cross-regional and cross-cultural communication through high-definition video conferencing and online seminars. Simultaneously, big data analytics allows for more accurate assessment of the needs and preferences of united front targets, facilitating more precise strategies. Artificial intelligence technologies offer intelligent analytical tools and automated management platforms, significantly enhancing both the efficiency and quality of united front work.

3.1.2 The Popularization of New Media Channels

The proliferation of new media has opened new, dynamic communication channels. With the widespread use of social media, instant messaging tools, and online video platforms, information dissemination is no longer confined to traditional campus media. It can now reach broader audiences rapidly and with extensive coverage. These platforms feature strong interactivity and participation, enabling united front information to be presented in more vivid and intuitive ways, thereby enhancing its appeal and influence among students and faculty.

3.1.3 Cultural Exchange in a Global Context

Globalization offers new perspectives and opportunities. Cultural interactions among university faculty and students now transcend national boundaries, enabling online engagement with peers worldwide. Such cross-cultural exchanges broaden horizons, foster understanding and respect for diversity, and provide a broader stage for united front initiatives. Universities can use online platforms to showcase their cultural distinctiveness and academic achievements, attracting more international talent to participate, thereby enhancing their international influence and cultural soft power.

3.2 Challenges

3.2.1 Outdated Software and Hardware Technology

Outdated technology and inadequate hardware infrastructure represent a primary challenge. While emerging technologies provide new tools, universities often lag in upgrades and development. This limits the efficiency, interactivity, and reach of information dissemination. In the new media era, where speed and breadth are crucial, technical obsolescence prevents universities from fully leveraging new media advantages, undermining the effectiveness of their united front efforts.

3.2.2 Lack of Innovation

United front work requires continuous innovation in strategies and methods to adapt to the rapidly changing online environment. However, universities often lack the necessary innovative mindset and capacity. This deficiency may manifest as inadequate proficiency in using new media tools, delayed analysis and response to online public sentiment, and insufficient sensitivity to emerging trends and demands in the online space, leading to outdated and ineffective approaches.

3.2.3 Inadequate Work Mechanisms

Inadequate coordination and information-sharing mechanisms pose significant challenges. Effective online united front work requires robust systems to ensure systematic implementation. Current practices often suffer from departmental silos, poor information flow, and a lack of integrated resource utilization. When confronting complex online public sentiment, the absence of effective response mechanisms and strategies can result in passive and inefficient efforts. Additionally, coordinating the schedules and securing funding for non-Party faculty involved in united front activities remains difficult, hindering the building of a robust workforce[7].

4. Innovating Pathways and Methods for United Front Work

4.1 Enhancing Platform Timeliness and Interactivity

"The effectiveness of united front work is directly linked to the professional competence and leadership capabilities of its cadre"[8]. To improve effectiveness, universities can adopt three strategies. First, establish a networked joint

conference platform mechanism for information sharing, guided by the needs and evaluations of united front targets. This strengthens connections among members, boosting their confidence and encouraging active participation. Second, continuously explore cutting-edge information technologies like cloud computing for data processing, mobile applications for accessibility, and AI algorithms for personalized information recommendations. Developing interactive online forums and social media is also crucial. Third, strengthen content innovation and cultural development by producing high-quality content aligned with young students' tastes, such as engaging online courses and cultural festivals, to enhance cultural confidence and value recognition.

4.2 Optimizing University United Front Work Systems

Ensuring efficient operation requires establishing a refined cross-departmental collaborative system with clear responsibilities and feedback mechanisms. First, improve the multi-departmental coordination mechanism under the leadership of the Party committee to achieve political guidance. In the "everyone has a microphone" era, this mechanism ensures diverse voices disseminate positive energy and tell China's story effectively, while guiding public opinion and constructing a comprehensive work system. Second, prioritize cultivating student online opinion leaders through specialized training programs in digital communication and online persona building. Providing practical opportunities, like participating in online discussions and organizing digital events, enhances their hands-on experience and leadership capabilities.

4.3 Enhancing Information Technology Application

A high-caliber, professional workforce is essential. Four strategies are key. First, strengthen the IT capabilities of personnel through targeted training in big data collection, processing, analysis, and application, using lectures and case studies. Second, establish multidisciplinary teams by leveraging disciplinary strengths to include faculty and students from diverse backgrounds, fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration and innovation. Third, strengthen political literacy and ideological awareness through regular political theory study and current affairs education, alongside professional ethics cultivation. Finally, establish a robust incentive mechanism and support system with scientific assessment and rewards, ensuring personnel have the necessary conditions and resources to dedicate themselves to their work.

4.4 Strengthen Risk Management and Emergency Response Mechanisms

To address increasing uncertainties in cyberspace, universities must establish and refine risk management systems. Proposed strategies include: First, employing a risk identification subsystem using technology and expert analysis for precise assessment. Second, establishing a risk prevention and control subsystem to formulate countermeasures and build resource frameworks. Third, activating an emergency management subsystem during crises to deploy measures and minimize impacts. Fourth, implementing a post-crisis recovery subsystem for relief and restoration. Finally, a learning and optimization subsystem should synthesize lessons to refine future plans. Strengthening organizational command mechanisms ensures rapid response, safeguarding the stable advancement of united front work.

Conclusion

United Front workers in colleges and universities bear significant responsibility on the primary battlefield of online ideology. They are not only disseminators of knowledge but also guardians safeguarding ideological security and promoting cultural identity. Facing a complex and ever-changing online environment, they must maintain keen insight and heightened crisis awareness. Looking ahead, as internet technology advances rapidly, online united front work will encounter both greater opportunities and challenges. Workers must continuously innovate, enhance their digital capabilities, and elevate their professional expertise. This will propel online united front work in higher education toward higher-quality development, contributing significantly to cultivating a new generation with unwavering cultural confidence and a strong sense of national identity.

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Author Bio:

Xiaofan Liu (born October 1997), female; Han Chinese; hometown: Chaozhou, Guangdong; educational level: Master's degree; title: Assistant Lecturer; research direction: Ideological and Political education.