

# 7 things you should know about...

## Facebook

### Scenario

Angela will spend next semester studying at a university in Budapest, and—so she can make the most of her time in Hungary—she wants to learn as much as possible before she leaves. For a couple of semesters, Angela has had a profile on Facebook but hasn't posted much information about herself and doesn't use the site frequently. Because she attends a relatively small college without extensive resources for study-abroad students, she decides to find out what she can learn from other Facebook users.

Angela starts by updating her profile to include information about her upcoming semester in Budapest and her major. She joins several Facebook groups related to studies abroad and international student-exchange programs. Through these groups, Angela finds students at her own college who have studied abroad—even some she knows but who never told her they had studied overseas—and many more from around the country. Contacting members of these groups gives Angela insights into aspects of studying abroad that she otherwise would not have gained until she got there. She searches for users with “Budapest” or “Hungary” in their profiles and finds dozens of students from that part of the world or who have traveled there. From their perspectives, Angela learns about the current and past political climate of former Soviet Bloc nations. This, in turn, leads Angela to other Facebook searches focused on European politics and culture generally.

As the weeks progress, Angela's Facebook profile becomes increasingly detailed. She creates several new online groups, one of which quickly has more than 200 members. Other Facebook users regularly contact Angela, sometimes with questions, sometimes with answers to questions. By the time she leaves for Budapest, she has a good understanding of what to expect in terms of the study-abroad program and of local culture, restaurants, and weather. She has also met online several students from other universities who will be studying in Hungary next semester and whom she will meet for lunch in Budapest her first week there.

### What is it?

Facebook is a social networking site designed to connect users. Sites such as MySpace and Friendster are similar, but Facebook is generally considered the leading social networking site among college students. Facebook allows individuals to create profiles that include personal interests, affiliations, pictures, and—with some limitations—virtually anything else a user wants to post. Information entered in a profile links that user to others who have posted similar information. For example, all users who list a particular band or movie as a favorite or who share the same hometown constitute a group. In user profiles, each of these pieces of data is a link; clicking on it displays everyone else in the network who included that element in their profiles. Other connections are more structured, based on user-created groups that typically have descriptive titles, such as “Feminists are fun!” or the name of a fraternity.

### Who's doing it?

Although some faculty and staff have profiles, most Facebook users are students. Because social networking sites constantly create connections among users at participating institutions, the appeal is broad. Jazz aficionados, women in science, aspiring veterinarians—all of these and others have built groups of friends on Facebook. Others are starting to use Facebook also. At some institutions, following an incident such as a party that got out of hand, campus police have found information or photos on Facebook that incriminate the students responsible. Some employers look up students on Facebook to get a fuller picture of applicants. Not all Facebook profiles result in positive outcomes for the students.

### How does it work?

To create a profile, users—current students, alumni, faculty, or staff—must have an e-mail address in the domain of an institution that is affiliated with Facebook. Once you establish an account, you can update it as often as you like, adding or changing information including pictures, favorites, and blog-type entries. Users build networks of “friends,” people who have agreed to be added as friends to users' profiles. You can browse profiles based on criteria such as age, relationship status, or major or search the database for people you already know and contact them through

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private messages or public notes on their profiles. You can also send group announcements, such as a message about a political rally to all users at a particular institution who identify themselves as politically liberal.

## Why is it significant?

Creating or refining one's self-identity and values is an important part of college. College students are encouraged to discover who they are and how they relate to others. For many, Facebook has become a tool in that development, allowing them to define a profile, find others with similar interests, and then reassess how well they fit. This freedom can be liberating, but it also carries risks for students whose "just joking around" comments might be taken seriously by readers of their profiles. Facebook offers unprecedented ability to find other users based on specific criteria. It's a mass-market tool that facilitates niche relationships. Using Facebook, students can build the kinds of connections—with students and in some cases with faculty—that make them feel like they belong and are accepted. Connections with others are an important factor in student retention. At the same time, surrounding yourself with only those who have similar interests potentially limits your exposure to new ideas and experiences.

## What are the downsides?

Concerns about Facebook center on its being public even though it feels like a private forum. Moreover, there is little assurance that the people behind the profiles are who they represent themselves to be. The number of connections you have is sometimes considered a measure of personal popularity, and the desire to have a cool profile and large groups of friends tempts users to post information or photos that in other contexts they would keep private, such as embarrassing pictures or boasts about drinking. Although some students understand how and when to separate private from public content, many lack the discretion to present themselves—and others—appropriately online. Not only can students find themselves in hot water over pictures and comments about themselves, questions of libel and copyright come into play when users post content created by others or comments about other people. Internet caching exacerbates this problem, making Web content available even after it has been changed or removed from a Web site. Stories of "Facebook addiction" are also common. Many users say that after creating a profile, they found themselves spending hours a day updating their pages, looking for people with shared interests, and reading others' profiles and looking at their photos—exactly the kinds of activities Facebook facilitates. A seemingly infinite web of connections, however, poses a risk for never-ending wandering, seeing who knows who, who likes what, and how it all fits together, with no particular goal in mind.

## Where is it going?

Students will continue to think of creative ways to use Facebook to collect and share information among an always-changing network of friends and colleagues, moving beyond the strictly social aspect of the site. For some, the ability to send messages to targeted groups of users is the most important feature of Facebook. Leaders of campus groups can select a data point, such as political affiliation or hobby, and share messages and resources to all such self-identified users. If this practice grows, students not using Facebook may feel pressure to join so they can participate in and contribute to areas of interest.

As social networking sites become more mainstream, online groups might begin to resemble existing campus communities and be influenced by the social norms and protocols inherent in such academic communities. As users become more sophisticated and a broader population is represented online, students will start to use social networking sites to make professional connections with people through topics of deep intellectual interest to them. Connections to faculty and alumni might also provide new opportunities for professional development and networking.

## What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Information literacy—the ability to negotiate the opportunities and risks of the Internet age—is an increasingly important aspect of higher education. Facebook presents students with choices about how to use technology in creative and useful ways while avoiding the pitfalls. Even as a purely social activity, Facebook has the potential to teach students about appropriate citizenship in the online world. Like many emerging Internet applications, Facebook also emphasizes the importance of creating content over simply consuming it. By encouraging students to craft compelling profiles, Facebook allows students to express themselves, communicate, and assemble profiles that highlight their talents and experience.

Facebook has struck a chord with millions of college students, drawing them in to an online world where they spend countless hours browsing profiles, meeting new people, and exploring relationships. Any technology that is able to captivate so many students for so much time not only carries implications for how those students view the world but also offers an opportunity for educators to understand the elements of social networking that students find so compelling and to incorporate those elements into teaching and learning.