

# 7 things you should know about...

## Facebook II

### Scenario

Paul is nearing the end of his third year as an undergraduate in the School of Agrology. He plans to start graduate school after he finishes his bachelor's degree, and his advisors encourage him to spend the summer learning about institutions that offer graduate programs in land management, his area of interest.

Paul does some research and identifies half a dozen universities that offer graduate programs that sound good to him. The Agrology Club at his university maintains a group on Facebook, and he browses the members of the group, looking for people who attend any of those institutions. He finds people at four of the universities and contacts them, indicating his interest in the graduate programs at their schools. Through those people, he connects with students at the other two institutions also, as well as several faculty who teach in the various programs.

One of the graduate programs Paul thinks might be a good fit is hosting an open house, which they advertise on Facebook. Paul adds the event to his profile, where he can also see others who plan to attend. Three days before the event, the organizers have to change the time that it will start. Because Paul added his cell phone number to his Facebook account, he receives a text message on his cell phone alerting him to the schedule change. When he goes to the event, he meets many of the people whose pictures he has seen on Facebook and with whom he has been corresponding. They are glad to meet Paul in person and talk to him about summer internship opportunities the institution offers.

After the open house, two of the students and one faculty member from that institution send Paul regular "pokes," which remind him how well he got along with them and that they would like to see him study at their university. Through Facebook, as well as phone calls and e-mail, Paul stays in touch with the agrology community at that institution and decides to pursue a summer program there.

### What is it?

Facebook is a social networking site where users interact through a constantly evolving set of networks based on college or university, friendships, interest groups, favorite movies, and other criteria. Since ELI first wrote about the site in August 2006 (see <<http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ELI7017>>), it has undergone significant changes. Foremost among these changes is that anyone can now join: users no longer need to be affiliated—as a student, alum, faculty, or staff—with an institution of higher education. Where Facebook networks formerly centered on colleges and universities, the site now offers networks based on location (cities or towns), workplace, high school, or college or university. Facebook offers a long and growing list of features, as well as tools to tie the site's functions into other Web-based applications. With the added functionality, Facebook users have far more power to create and share online identities and to use the site to locate and interact with other users. Added to this flexibility is what some believe is one of the industry's strongest, most detailed privacy policies, one that puts unprecedented control into users' hands to determine who can see their information and what they can do with it.

### Who's doing it?

Some estimates indicate that upwards of 80–90 percent of U.S. college students have profiles on Facebook. At the same time, the changes to the site have drawn in tens of thousands of new users seeking networking opportunities based on personal or professional interests or on where they live. In addition, many teenagers—who tended to favor MySpace—have begun creating Facebook profiles. Given that Facebook is the preferred social network among college students, allowing high school students to join means that by the time they enroll as college freshmen, many students will already have years of experience with Facebook. When they arrive on a college or university campus, all they need to do is join that institution's network.

### How does it work?

Facebook functions on a relationship model, based on "friends" and network membership. When users register, they select a category of network, such as workplace or college, and then choose from a list of available networks in that category. Users can be members of multiple networks and, with some restrictions, can change networks. Based on mutual agreement, users can become "friends," and this designation dictates how certain functions work.

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Facebook users have a wide range of tools at their disposal. For example, users can upload an unlimited number of pictures. A “gift” feature lets users send clip-art images with short messages attached. Another tool lets users search the contacts list of e-mail accounts, looking for other users who have profiles in Facebook. For all of the various tools and features, users have the ability to decide who has access to specific information and who is permitted to take certain actions. Beginning with the profile page, users can decide which of the elements are displayed and to whom. A phone number, for example, can either be included or not in a profile, and, if so, can be restricted so that only friends can see it. Another setting lets users specify who is allowed to see their profile in search results—profiles can be open to anyone, to users in some or all of the user’s networks, or only to friends. When users take specific actions, such as updating their profile picture or adding someone as a friend, these changes—depending on the privacy settings—can be fed to other users’ profiles as News Feeds. At the same time, users can decide how many and what kinds of News Feeds their home page will display.

## Why is it significant?

With the changes it has instituted, Facebook has redefined what “social networking” is all about. In a sense, Facebook has grown beyond social networking into a new kind of portal, giving users broad control over what they see and how they see it. The application is still fundamentally about relationships and the always-changing networks among individuals, but these relationships are increasingly based on professional interests, political activities, and other connections that are not strictly social. The means of communication—e-mail, cell phones, instant messaging—have proliferated to the point of saturation. Facebook lets people assert control over this flood of communication. Facebook turned considerable control over to users, and results suggest that they are willing to take the time to understand and use a broad range of privacy settings.

## What are the downsides?

Being able to control access to personal information does not necessarily imply an understanding about the ways—both good and bad—that the information might be used. Facebook lets users make decisions that many of them may lack the judgment to make well. Moreover, users who “learn the online ropes” using Facebook might come away with misconceptions about how other Web sites work and the amount of control users have over private information.

Facebook is far from the only social networking site, and if someone decides to switch to another site, that user must create an entirely new online persona, one based on the available networks and users of the new site. Another concern is that the actions and activities on the site may lack substance. Keeping in touch with a circle of friends and colleagues is fine, but if Facebook enables trite, superficial interaction, there is little educational value. Users control how the records of their activities are shared, but what

would happen if Facebook decided to mine the vast amounts of data it collects? Data-mining projects typically promise improved user experiences, but they also raise important questions about appropriate use.

## Where is it going?

Social networking applications are here to stay, though as sites like Facebook continue to evolve, so too does the definition of social networking. Facebook has evolved from a fairly self-contained networking tool to an application that ties in to other sites, such as Flickr and e-mail applications, using RSS feeds and other technologies. We might one day see functional interaction among social networking sites. Facebook’s integration with cell phones—the ability to browse the site or upload photos from a phone and communicate with the site through text messages—moves the notion of social networking away from computers and into the realm of an “always on” application. The interesting question is whether expanded access and a growing number of functions will lead users into more substantive activities on the site. Facebook may become a channel for dialogue and a destination for people interested in learning about or sharing information on current issues. In addition, the site offers Facebook Flyers—paid advertisements created by users that are shown only to members of networks selected by the user. In this way, a campus can advertise jobs, a campus election, or other activities to students at that institution or perhaps also at nearby institutions. Online ads increasingly target narrow audiences, and Facebook is part of this trend.

## What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Classroom and lecture-based experiences are an important part of higher education, but so are the relationships students cultivate with one another and with faculty. Facebook’s structure encourages users to view relationships in a broad context of learning, even as affiliations change—from high school, to college, to graduate school, to the workplace. By opening itself to virtually anyone, Facebook has become a model for how communities—of learners, of workers, of any group with a common interest—can come together, define standards for interaction, and collaboratively create an environment that suits the needs of the members. For many, a central part of the college years is “learning to be”—experimenting with different personas, engaging with a variety of groups, and developing a set of core values. By allowing users a range of tools to negotiate and inhabit online networks, Facebook and sites like it can be an important part of this developmental process.