

## The Myth about Putting Information Online

*“No One Cares What You Say Online.”*

Over 7 million students from 2,600 colleges and universities use Facebook.com, a social networking site.<sup>1</sup> The Web site states: “Facebook is an online directory that connects people through social networks.” In September 2005, an estimated 85 percent of students at participating colleges and universities had profiles. The numbers are even higher when including students who also use similar social networking sites such as MySpace.com or Friendster.com. Of those who use Facebook, 60 percent log in daily, 85 percent log in at least weekly, and 93 percent log in at least monthly.<sup>2</sup> In its 2006 annual market research survey, Student Monitor rated Facebook #2, tied with beer, among the most “in” things for undergraduates (the iPod was rated #1).<sup>3</sup>

Online social networks began appearing in the late 1990s, with sites such as Classmates.com or SixDegrees.com. Friendster emerged as a popular social networking site in 2002. Google launched orkut.com soon after. There are now an estimated two hundred social networking sites. Facebook is particularly popular among college and university students.

Registered users of Facebook create profiles, which list contact information (e-mail, IM, and physical addresses), personal information, photos, and lists of friends. Users are encouraged to share their interests (movies, music, TV shows, books, quotations), which will link them to others who share those interests. Users post photos and can send messages and party notices through the site. Access to the profile can be limited to those from the same institution or to confirmed friends.

Students say they use Facebook to find others with similar interests, to talk about themselves, and to create their own identity. That identity may not always be accurate, however. One student mentioned a friend’s profile, which made the friend sound like a “party animal.” According to the student, in reality the friend was closer to a nerdy wallflower. “You’d think he partied all the time to look at his profile. But I know this guy. That isn’t him at all.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, the information in student profiles is “often not exactly ‘G’ rated. Some students make the mistake of posting information about excessive drinking, gambling, sexual contact, etc. and mistakenly feel that no harm can come from their posting of what used to be regarded as private behavior.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, many students are initially “addicted” to Facebook, spending hours looking at others’ profiles. Over time, many develop a circle of friends and spend less time on Facebook.

Although Facebook is the most often discussed social networking site, it is not the only one that shares personal information. For instance, the Nokia Lifeblog is “an Internet community that allows owners of Nokia mobile phones to document and share every aspect of their lives in real time. The phones capture photographs, sounds, and other artifacts, then instantly share them with family, friends, and the general public. Content could be breaking news or the discovery of the latest food hotspot.”<sup>6</sup> Because the blog is an Internet community, a lurker can view what might be considered personal experiences.

Likewise, students are not the only users of Facebook. Increasingly employ-

ers, law enforcement, and campus personnel are using the site. The director of career services and alumni affairs from Indiana University described how an employer used current and former interns to check the profiles of other interns. “Upon finding distasteful information and pictures of a former intern and current IU student, the employer ‘demanded’ its name and the student’s internship status be removed from the Facebook profile.”<sup>7</sup> Employers are using Facebook as an additional source of information in hiring decisions. The candid, unedited information found in a student’s profile may present a completely different image from that portrayed by the student’s resume.

Anyone with an edu-domain address from a member institution can access Facebook, which includes faculty, staff, and alumni. As Tracy Mitrano, director of IT Policy at Cornell University, explains: “Such people might be members of your family, your parent’s neighbors, the local bank manager where you want to get a loan for a new car, your insurance agent, an advertising industry in NYC with whom you might want a summer internship, or a law firm where you want to work your second summer of law school—anyone, worldwide!” Her question—“Do you really want [them] seeing a photograph of you bombed out of your mind?”—is a good caution for students and one that many wish they had heard before they posted incriminating material.<sup>8</sup>

For example, the Secret Service investigated a University of Oklahoma student who made assassination references about President George W. Bush in Facebook. Two swimmers at Louisiana State University lost scholarships because of com-

ments they made about their coach on Facebook.<sup>9</sup> And a student at John Brown University was dismissed for posting pictures of himself on Facebook, along with other material suggesting he was gay.<sup>10</sup>

This online information is accessible not only by employers, law enforcement, and campus officials but also by those who may be mentally ill or have criminal intent. Students often have a false sense of security. Mitrano advises students: “Very likely you would not place a placard in the front of your house or dorm describing intimate details of your personal life, private sexual matters, detailed comings and

team should ask themselves the following strategic questions:

1. *How do we help students balance free speech with responsibility?* Students have the right to express themselves. Colleges and universities have always been advocates of free speech. But freedom comes with responsibility. How can the institution help students understand that something that might be fun to post today could be something they will regret for years to come? How can the institution help students understand that how they represent



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goings or anything else that someone less careful and competent than you might construe as an invitation for communication or even harassment and stalking that could prove dangerous.... What you wouldn't put on a poster on your dorm room door you might want to think two or three times about posting online.”<sup>11</sup>

Anything that is posted online, including personal information, is public information. It can be used to find friends—or it can create short- and long-term problems. Information that is posted for just a few days may remain accessible for years due to caching. Removing that cached material means that students must make formal requests to search engines, such as Google. And if information posted by a student is untrue, it may set the stage for a lawsuit charging defamation or libel. Finally, posting photographs of others can be an invasion of privacy, also creating legal risks.

In thinking about the use of Facebook, the CIO and members of the executive

themselves online may be almost as important as how they represent themselves in person?

2. *What kind of image does our students' use of Facebook present to employers, alumni, parents, and other students? Should this be our concern?* Students may damage others through their poor choices about photos, statements, or actions taken online. Are there ramifications for how employers will perceive the institution? Could the institution develop a reputation as a “party school”? Will others interpret the fact that some students may act irresponsibly online as an indication that the institution is not instilling responsibility and ethics in its students?
3. *Can we afford to not alert our students to the consequences of ill-informed use of Facebook?* The use of Facebook can put students at risk in terms of reputation, safety, and legal liability. Prohibiting the use of Facebook may not solve the problem: blocking one site may simply drive students to another. To

avoid negative consequences for students, what information should the institution share with them? What is the appropriate forum for discussion? How can the institution reinforce the message to be sure that students are making well-informed choices?

One college recruiter advises students to post only information that they would want to share with their grandmother. “Posting information on-line is like getting a tattoo. There's nothing inherently wrong with posting information on-line or getting a tattoo, but in both cases you need to be prepared for it to be out there forever.”<sup>12</sup> As educational institutions, colleges and universities must help students make wise choices about what information they put online.

#### Notes

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4. “A Day in the Life,” presentation at The Key to Competitiveness conference, University of Central Florida, Orlando, June 27–28, 2006, <<http://www.educause.edu/aascu06>>.
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