Teen Online Activity Can Harm Future College Admissions and Employment

Teens and Privacy, 2011

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You've been working hard trying to get into college—researching schools, refining your essay, collecting glowing recommendations, studying on nights and weekends for the SATs or ACTs, maybe even preparing for a campus interview. Throughout all of this process, you've made a great impression as a serious, promising college student. Wait, though. Before you can relax on the couch to watch Dancing with the Stars, and Glee on DVR, there's one more detail to take care of—your Facebook profile.

Social Networking Profiles

Whether it's through Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr or another social media service, students are online—online sharing details with friends, online for everyone to see.

These sites help you keep in touch with friends and allow you to meet new people. Many students spend hours each day updating their profiles, messaging their friends and clicking through photo albums. It's harmless fun, right?

Now, how would you feel if your teachers saw your profile? A college admission officer?

"Well, I would be a little angry because there are things in my profile that I don't want them to see," said Aubrey Fait, a freshman at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College (IN). "There is some information that I want to keep private between me and my friends, so I would prefer if my parents and college faculty not look at my Facebook profile."

Other students don't think what they do in their free time influences their schoolwork, so it shouldn't matter what information they have online. They may be right: You can be a great student, regardless what you do outside of school. When the embarrassing details of your social life are online for anyone to look up, though, you might want to reconsider what you post.

Students in middle school, high school and college are being suspended and expelled for their online indiscretions.

You might not like it, but you should know that adults—from your schools, families and even law enforcement—are looking at your pages.
The Consequences of Social Networking

Most colleges are not surfing the Web for your profile. However, when other people bring students' blogging to their attention, schools do respond.

- At least one college applicant was denied admission in part because of his blog on LiveJournal. The admission dean said the student's blog, which was brought to his attention, included seemingly hostile comments about certain college officials.
- Swimmers at Louisiana State [University] criticized coaches on Facebook and were kicked off the team.
- A high school freshman in Maryland was reportedly suspended because of online photos.
- Police busted an underage drinking party at George Washington University after they found invitations online.

Many middle and high schools have banned the use of these social networking websites on campus. Some private schools have even banned students from joining these sites altogether.

"I've been on MySpace and I can see that for kids it's like their hangout place, their place to vent, their place to maintain instant contact—it's hard for them to give it up," said Judy Oberlander, a counselor at Ojai Valley School (CA). However, "since MySpace was taking a toll on study time and classroom engagement, in addition to the danger of the imprudent things being posted by students, we decided to outlaw MySpace use at school or any time."

It's happening all across the country: Students in middle school, high school and college are being suspended and expelled for their online indiscretions. Even if you disagree with these policies, they can affect you. And as much of a cliché as it is, your school officials are just trying to protect you.

The College Admission Effects

With the social networking bans in schools, students need to be careful of what they post. Some zero-tolerance polices make it fair game to punish someone who is in a photo even holding what appears to be an alcoholic drink. Explaining this type of suspension to a college doesn't really make a good bullet point for your resume.

Even if your school doesn't have these rules, your postings could affect your college admission. Most colleges do not look up students on these sites, but when other people draw attention to these possibly offensive blogs, then schools often take action.

"We have just started letting students know that employers, college admission personnel, and others may be checking their postings.... Our students seemed very surprised by this," said Julie Davis, Thomas Worthington High School (OH).

"In terms of college admission, I talk with the students about the importance of projecting a professional impression through voice mail messages, e-mail account titles and social media postings. I tell them a story once told to me by an admission counselor who said a student gave her
e-mail address as partygirl@hotmail.com. She didn't get accepted to that college," said Margi Wieber, college counselor, Providence Academy (MN).

**The Positive Side of Online Sites**

Some college admission officers make themselves available for students on these sites as a convenient forum for Q & A.

"I have accounts on Friendster, Facebook, LiveJournal, Xanga, and MySpace. I do interact with a variety of students via these communities, however, it's our strict policy that the Internet should only help applicants, not hurt them.... I, personally, don't think it's fair for college officials to take advantage of [these online interactions]—the one exception being a student's safety," noted Ben Jones, communications manager for the MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] Office of Admissions.

"I don't 'research' applicants online using their pages in these communities—although other schools do, from what I read in the news. My interactions with applicants and current MIT students are initiated by them—not by me."

Jeannine Lalonde, assistant dean of admission at the University of Virginia [UVA], also talks to students online who contact her. "After seeing current UVA students answer questions on MySpace, I decided to step in and offer some advice to the high school students who were posting. I knew it would open the door, but I also knew that seeing an admission officer on MySpace might:

1. Make a few kids stop and think before posting info about questionable behavior on their sites; and
2. Make some students realize that admission officers aren't as scary as they might have thought."

Sometimes students include Web-based communications such as blogs in their college application. Daniel Creasy, from Johns Hopkins University (MD), explains his experiences with student blogs as part of the application: "Many times, the work the students have done adds substance to their file and truly helps, but there have been occasions where this information raises questions and concerns."

Creasy also cautions that when students contact admission officers through the school's message boards and blogs, the information becomes part of the formal correspondence and can be factored into the admission decision.

**Beyond School Impact**

Applying to college isn't the only thing you should worry about when you post your information online. Your profile can follow you as you try to get a job.

According to the 2005 study by executive job-search agency ExecuNet cited in the Chicago Tribune, 75 percent of recruiters use Web research as part of the applicant screening process.
The same article notes that a recruiter withdrew a job offer after seeing the candidate's blog.

Whatever you post, it never goes away.

One recent grad took down his profile when someone called him about a friend he went to school with. The caller identified himself as an employee at a consulting firm who was "Facebooking" all the applicants and contacting their friends to check them out.

An intern was fired when the CEO [chief executive officer] discovered that the intern's Facebook profile noted that he would "spend most of [his] days screwing around on IM [instant messaging] and talking to [his] friends and getting paid for it."

There's even a verb for people who get fired for what they put on their websites—dooced—named after the blog of a woman who was fired for writing about her job in her blog.

Basically, the point is that whatever you post, it never goes away. Once your information is online—even if you take it down—it becomes public information, as your page can be saved on anyone's computer.

**Steps to Protect Privacy**

- First, be safe! Never post personal information such as your address, daily schedule, phone number, etc. Check out these safety guidelines from the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use and WiredSafety.
- Make your profile private so that strangers can't look at your information, and be cautious about adding new friends who you do not personally know.
- Take down any questionable photos or exchanges between you and your friends. Give it the "Grandma Test." If you wouldn't want your grandmother to see it, then you don't want other adults to either. Remember, pictures and references of you on your friends' pages can be damaging too. You can ask them to take down this kind of information.
- Don't get a false sense of security on social media sites. It's easy for faculty, alumni and random people to get on and look at the information you have posted.

Although social networking can be fun, remember that sometimes what you post will be in public view, like broadcasting it on the six o'clock news. So when it's time to apply for college, give your social networking profiles a second look to make sure you feel comfortable sharing everything you have posted with an admission officer and, later, with potential employers because your site becomes permanent, public information about you.

**Further Readings**

**Books**


**Periodicals**


• Nancy Gibbs "Birth Control for Kids?" Time, October 18, 2007.


• Eric Hartley "Sometimes, Privacy Must Take a Back Seat," *Capital* (Annapolis, MD), June 14, 2009.


• Lucy Morgan "94% Who Ask Get Abortions," *St. Petersburg Times* (St. Petersburg, FL), October 19, 2006.


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