

College Applicants, Beware: Your Facebook Page Is Showing

By JOHN HECHINGER

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High-school seniors already fretting about grades and test scores now have another worry: Will their Facebook or MySpace pages count against them in college admissions?

A new survey of 500 top colleges found that 10% of admissions officers acknowledged looking at social-networking sites to evaluate applicants. Of those colleges making use of the online information, 38% said that what they saw "negatively affected" their views of the applicant. Only a quarter of the schools checking the sites said their views were improved, according to the survey by education company Kaplan, a unit of Washington Post <http://online.wsj.com/public/quotes/main.html?type=djn&symbol=wpo> Co.

Some admissions officers said they had rejected students because of material on the sites. Jeff Olson, who heads research for Kaplan's test-preparation division, says one university did so after the student gushed about the school while visiting the campus, then trashed it online. Kaplan promised anonymity to the colleges, of which 320 responded. The company surveyed schools with the most selective admissions.

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Admissions officers have acknowledged looking at social-networking sites like Facebook to evaluate applicants.

The vast majority of the colleges surveyed had no policy about when it was appropriate for school officials to look at prospective students' social-networking sites. "We're in the early stage of a new technology," Mr. Olson says. "It's the Wild, Wild West. There are no clear boundaries or limits."

The lack of rules is already provoking debate among admissions officers. Some maintain that applicants' online data are public information that schools should vet to help protect the integrity of the institutions. Others say they are uncomfortable flipping through teenage Facebook pages.

Colleges' recent interest in social-networking sites is leading many aspiring students to take a hard look at their online habits and in some cases to remove or change postings. With a high-school graduating class nationwide of 3.3 million students, colleges are

expected to be sifting through a record number of applications this year.

Nicholas Santangelo, a senior at Seton Hall Prep, a private school in West Orange, N.J., says he expects colleges might look at his Facebook site but hopes admissions officers realize the postings reflect only a partial view of any student. "There are some things I might think about getting rid of," says Nicholas, 17, who is considering such competitive schools as Amherst College and Wesleyan University.

Sites like Facebook and MySpace let users set up online profiles -- including pictures, videos and other personal information -- then solicit others to join their network of online "friends." Users can exchange messages, often publicly, and sometimes offer detailed descriptions of their activities, dreams and fears.

The sites have inspired many a national conversation over privacy and exhibitionism. Some job applicants have already discovered the hard way that employers often examine the sites to weed out candidates. Representatives of the sites say users can establish online privacy settings that let their pages be viewed only by invited "friends." MySpace is part of News Corp., which owns The Wall Street Journal. Facebook is closely held.

But Kaplan and many high-school guidance counselors say students often don't restrict public access on social-networking sites and, in any case, damaging information can find a way to leak out. David Hawkins, director of public policy and research for the National Association for College Admission Counseling, a professional organization, says schools don't have time to scour the Internet systematically to check out thousands of applicants. But he says admissions officers at times receive anonymous tips, which may be from rival applicants, about embarrassing Facebook or MySpace material, such as a picture of a student drunk at an underage party.

In another recent study, Nora Ganim Barnes, director of the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, found that 21% of colleges used social-networking sites for recruiting prospects and gathering information about applicants. It's especially common when universities are awarding scholarships because it isn't hard to go online for a handful of finalists. "No one wants to be on the front page of the newspaper for giving a scholarship to a murderer," she says. "Everybody is trying to protect their brands."

Thomas Griffin, director of undergraduate admissions at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, says the school will do an Internet search, including Facebook and other sites, if an application raises "red flags," such as a suspension from school. Mr. Griffin says several applicants a year have been rejected in part because of information on social-networking sites. In a recent case, the university researched a student who disclosed on his application that he had been disciplined for fighting. The school found a Facebook page with a picture of the applicant holding a gun. "We have to use this information to make the best decision for the university," Mr. Griffin says.

Janet Lavin Rapelye, dean of admission at Princeton University, says the school hasn't

rejected any applicant because of information posted on the Internet. Princeton doesn't have time to look at all applicants' online information, but if an offensive Facebook post came to the college's attention, the school would examine it, Ms. Rapelye says. "All of us would consider anything that would cause us to doubt a student's character," she says.

Greg Roberts, senior associate dean of admission at the University of Virginia, says his staff is free to check out anonymous tips about social-networking sites or make use of the information if the admissions committee is evaluating a "tight" decision.

Sandra Starke, vice provost for enrollment management at the State University of New York at Binghamton, says she instructs her staff to ignore Facebook and other sites because she considers postings to be casual conversations, the online equivalent of street-corner banter. "At this age, the students are still experimenting," she says. "It's a time for them to learn. It's important for them to grow. We need to be careful how we might use Facebook."

Marc Prablek, a senior at Ladue Horton Watkins High School in suburban St. Louis, considers Facebook information "out in the public" and fair game for colleges. The 17-year-old, with some 550 "friends," says, "I don't have anything bad on Facebook," but he may tweak his profile to be "more sophisticated."

Marc, who plans to apply early to Stanford University, says he won't mention that he loves to read X-Men comic books. His Facebook literary picks currently include "Crime and Punishment" and "Pride and Prejudice."

High-school guidance counselors advise applicants, even if they restrict public access on their sites, to refrain from including anything that could hurt them in college admissions. They especially caution against foul or offensive language, nudity, or photos of drinking and drug use.

"Students need to be accountable for their actions," says Scott Anderson, director of college guidance at St. George's Independent School, a private school near Memphis, Tenn. When writing on Facebook or MySpace, he says, they should be thinking, "Is this something you want your grandmother to see?"

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