Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, and dozens of other online social networks are substantially changing the way students interact with others. For good, or ill, it's time that colleges and universities learn to effectively deal with the impact.

Facing Up to Facebook

By David M. Eberhardt

WHILE COLLEGE EDUCATORS have long recognized the intensely social quality of campus life, many faculty and administrators have watched student culture become even more social in recent years as various interactive technologies, including online social networks, have emerged. Starting before students arrive on campus and continuing into their days as alumni, online social networking has become routine behavior for many college students on American campuses. Brief scenarios like the following one, included throughout this article, illustrate how commonplace this behavior has become.

> Andy, Malcolm, and Kate, first-year undergraduates and high school friends, and Yvette and Maria, Kate's residence hall mates and newest campus acquaintances, have spent the past several days settling into their new residences and attending Welcome Week activities. It's now the night before classes begin, and each of them is hanging out with their new roommates and sitting in front of their computer, updating their information on Facebook. While she is online, Kate sends electronic invitations to Yvette and Maria to be her *friend*[1] and wishes Andy and Malcolm good luck through notes on their *walls*. Yvette and Maria look up other peers whom they have met in their residence hall, while Andy and Malcolm search through the list of hundreds of *groups* on their school's network.

Socializing with roommates and playing on computers is not new, but interacting with peers through online networks is. Indeed, this behavior is so new that the first cohort of four-year undergraduates who have identified with this situation from their first days on campus will not graduate until spring 2008. Despite its newness or perhaps because of it, connecting to collegiate peers through Facebook, MySpace, and other online social networks has rapidly developed into a significant technological and interactive feature of contemporary student life. In fact, Michael Arrington, who profiles Internet-based companies on the weblog TechCrunch, suggests that more than 85 percent of the undergraduates on campuses with Facebook networks participate in this activity, while a 2006 survey by the Syracuse University Online Communities Research Team found that 92 percent of their student respondents use Facebook. A recent Pew study posted by Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden indicated that more than 60 percent of individuals between the ages of fifteen and seventeen maintain online network accounts. Assuming that these younger individuals will remain interested in virtual networking when they enroll in college, this phenomenon appears to have become an established aspect of campus life.

As online social networking has spread, numerous questions have emerged about its implications for today's college students. Perhaps the most important one is, How significantly does it affect their learning? Then there are these related questions: Does this activity create challenges for students' intellectual development? Can it produce benefits for such growth? How do online social communities affect students' face-to-face interactions? Can they promote students' personal and interpersonal development? How does or can this behavior help students develop the identity they need

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to effectively address complex questions, take a stand based on their own beliefs, and negotiate meaning with others? Research has yet to answer these important questions. Because of these concerns, educators need to rise to the challenge of understanding this phenomenon so that they can guide students' behavior in ways that facilitate their learning and development.

Online Networking: The Basics

ONLINE NETWORKS essentially establish parallel realities and extensions of the social environment that allow students to interact virtually. These networks operate by providing individuals with Web pages or *profiles* that can be customized to varying degrees in order to display personal information. *Profiles* may include items such as relationship status, political views, contact information, personal interests, favorite books or movies, educational background, academic coursework, and many other types of data. Users can also upload photos and videos. Individuals' pages typically have a comment section or *wall* as well, where visitors can leave messages that others can view.

Beyond providing online *profiles,* these services become networks by offering several means for individuals to link with each other. The most common method of connection involves members becoming online *friends* with each other. An individual searches the database of *profiles* and invites friends, acquaintances, and anyone else they discover to become their *friend* through the online service. Individuals can also establish or join *groups* of members that have their own page and that cover a wide range of issues and connection points. For example, within the context of higher education, student organizations often maintain pages that detail their events and provide contacts, while informal and strictly online *groups*—for example, *groups* of students who like certain television shows or those who claim to be the most fervent fans of particular athletic teams—also exist. In addition, members can create and link to pages for *events,* which include activities such as campus fundraisers, parties at students' residences, and concerts at local venues.

While numerous details about these online services are not discussed here, this overview outlines how these networks have become immense virtual communities comprising innumerable subcommunities, which students join more easily and in which they sometimes interact more frequently than at the physical campuses that they inhabit. These online communities are both similar and considerably different from the traditional social environments in which students interact. Within this expanded community context, networking behavior influences students' educational experience in subtle and substantial ways that bear examination as educators strive to create healthy and positive learning environments.

Transition to College

> Three weeks into the fall semester, Kate has invited Yvette and Maria to join Andy, Malcolm, and her for dinner off campus. While they eat, Kate talks about spending several hours on Facebook the previous night, looking up former high school friends, and they all launch into animated discussion, boasting about their number of online *friends.* Andy tells about looking up his roommate when he received his housing assignment and thinking that he seemed really odd, which made him feel nervous and expect that they would not get along. He relates that they do not hang out together now but that their relationship has been positive so far.

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Back at the residence hall later that night, Yvette looks up some of her past friends and begins to feel mildly homesick. She soon finds encouragement, however, as she visits a few other peers' *profiles* and sees that they have also indicated that they are feeling homesick these days. She leaves these *friends* notes on their *walls,* telling them that she feels the same, and then, feeling better, starts to read her history chapter for tomorrow's class.

Online social networking can benefit students by facilitating an initial sense of connection and community, important support factors that Nancy Schlossberg and her colleagues discuss as essential for successful educational transitions. Even before individuals become undergraduates, they often begin to identify as a part of its community by adding their chosen college or university and their anticipated year of graduation to their *profile.* When they search for other students who have indicated a similar intention, they will likely soon find numerous peers, including some who come from their geographic region, share their anticipated major, or prefer the same types of music and movies. Many of these students will also discover that at least one *group* already exists for their student cohort, especially on the college-oriented Facebook network. When these students establish virtual links with each other and join cohort *groups,* they find themselves connected with some of their new classmates many months before they enroll and personally meet, which can provide an initial sense of belonging at their new school.

As students arrive on campus and begin making the transition to college life, many extend their sense of community by establishing virtual links with new peers they meet, including hall mates, classmates in first-year experience programs, fellow participants in social activities, and others who are navigating their way through initial college experiences. As these early connections develop, individuals can view their *friends'* or *group* pages and may discover that their peers are also stressed by the amount of reading they are suddenly confronting, frustrated by limited student parking, excited about their first weekend on campus, or feeling many other emotions common to new undergraduates. Students use statements on their *profiles* as an outlet to express their feelings, and they also express themselves through *groups* they create and join. From comments on *friends' walls,* they can also identify peers who experience similar emotions. For many students, such virtual experiences of identification and connection can be powerful steps toward feeling an early sense of belonging in their new campus community.

Early online knowledge of the educational environment and initial virtual connections can also provide a sense of comfort for students in a new social setting. This comfort may help facilitate their first learning experiences. Through enhanced social connections, students gain a degree of social confidence, which may somewhat reduce the anxiety they feel about college life. Decreased anxiety allows students to focus more effectively on succeeding in their immediate academic responsibilities, and when early stressors occur for new students, these students have access to an additional outlet that allows them to express themselves and find connections. Online networking obviously does not remove all the anxiety that students feel as they begin to function in a new college setting, but it can provide support and help ease the social and academic transition.

Online social networks also assist students' transition by allowing them to maintain links with individuals from their past. Even when students become excited about meeting new friends at a different institution, they often wish to maintain connections with peers from their previous high school or college. While today, e-mail and cell phones function as the most common and convenient channels of communication for geographically distant friends, virtual connections provide students with another avenue for remaining tied to friends and acquaintances from their past. These connections help them preserve contact with each other over time and can be especially beneficial when homesickness arises because they offer the Internet-oriented generation of students a meaningful way of connecting with people with whom they can not be physically present.

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Students' online networking behavior can also interfere with their transition to the collegiate environment, however; for example, some students form negative opinions about their new peers before they ever personally meet them. Elizabeth Farrell notes in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article that many incoming residential students use online networks to find information about their assigned roommate, if they do not know the person. The Syracuse University survey confirmed this behavior, finding that 33 percent of incoming students looked up the online *profile* of their new roommate. When this occurs, residence life offices and deans of students sometimes receive complaints and requests for modified living arrangements from parents of students who believe that the student is not likely to be compatible with their assigned roommate.

Such prejudging behavior can rob incoming students of significant social learning opportunities (and produce immense administrative problems for student affairs offices). If a student remains paired with the same roommate whom they had concerns about, he or she enters the relationship with adverse expectations and is much less likely to learn anything about or from the roommate. When they refuse to accept the other person or demand and receive a new housing assignment, students miss a valuable opportunity to develop personal flexibility, adapt amid difficult circumstances, and learn to get along with people different from themselves. Missed learning opportunities may occur if new students search online networks for information on their new peers and decide that they cannot connect with an individual primarily because of their online information. Individuals learn and enhance essential interpersonal skills through challenging relationships and interactions with diverse people, and new students' substantial reliance on online network information can hinder such personal development.

Further detrimental consequences of online networking emerge when new students spend excessive amounts of early collegiate time connecting with individuals from their past school and hometown. Rather than investing in relationships with the new peers who are physically around them, some students rely on virtual networks and other technological means of connecting with friends elsewhere to fill their need for social comfort and interaction. They do not participate meaningfully in their new social environment but instead reside psychologically with peers in other places. These students do not form important bonds with friends in their current social context by experiencing early emotional highs or sharing low points together, and they are likely to soon find themselves isolated outsiders, unhappy with their choice of college.

Similar feelings may emerge when students allow their perceived level of campus connection to be substantially influenced by their degree of online connection. For the current generation of students, virtual connection seems to have become the norm, an expectation that may put harmful pressures on students who tend not to connect well online or who simply prefer not to participate in the virtual community of their campus. These students will likely also feel like outsiders who do not enjoy their accepted campus culture, and feelings of separation may soon follow. When feelings like these develop, students cannot excel socially or academically, and the likelihood of dropping out or transferring to another institution increases.

Involvement and Identity

With the beginning of a new semester in January, Malcolm has decided to try some different activities from those he enjoyed last term. He rowed for his high school's crew team one year, and he has heard that there is a club team on campus. He goes online and finds the team's *profile,* in which an announcement indicates when and where the team will have an open meeting for interested students. Malcolm decides to attend.

Meanwhile, Maria has been struggling with feeling overwhelmed as she tries to balance making good grades with getting hours in at her new job in order to help pay her college expenses. She has not been sleeping well and has felt down since the new term began. One day, while she is logged into Facebook, looking for other students who feel stressed, she finds a student organization's *group profile* that provides information about relaxation methods for stress reduction as well as a link to the Web site for the campus counseling center. Reading the center's information causes her to wonder whether she is mildly depressed, and she begins to think about seeking help there.

After students have progressed beyond their initial transition to college life, online social networking can continue to aid them by providing a valuable means of discovery and connection within their educational community. As students change, they may find that they wish to engage in different activities. They can more easily pursue these endeavors by searching their institution's online networks for individual *profiles* and *groups* that match their interests. Whether they desire to try out a new sport such as rugby, want to support social causes like caring for the environment, decide to join a student political organization, or simply hope to find out who else enjoys activities like paintball, students will likely find other individuals who share their enthusiasm, and they may even find out about meetings and events that they are welcome to attend. The survey of Syracuse University students confirmed this seeking behavior; results indicated that a large majority of respondents initially linked to *groups* because of similar interests.

When students begin to deal with deeper identity issues, academic difficulties, or personal problems, online social networking can serve as a valuable resource. Among the many profound issues that students tend to encounter through their collegiate experiences are questions about their purpose and direction in life; what religious beliefs, if any, to adopt for their own; and what values they want to guide their life decisions. In addition, many students wrestle with issues such as racial or sexual identity, unhealthy relationships, a difficult background, or other challenging personal concerns. Whether dealing with typical developmental concerns or more serious problems, students tend not to seek mentors' advice or professionals' assistance first but instead turn to their peers. As students work through these issues, online social networks can provide an entry point for some students to find individuals with whom to share their journey, as well as learn of *groups* that can help them express their emerging identity. While this type of connection may seem somewhat detached, it is important to many students; 28 percent of the student respondents to the survey at Syracuse University indicated this was an important reason for linking to the *groups* to which they belonged.

Perhaps even more important, these networks can become information sources and connection points through which college officials can try to reach struggling students who may not immediately come into their office. Research has yet to determine whether such use by educators is beneficial, but virtual connections seem to provide a less intimidating means for students to discover the support services available to them through various departments—for example, academic advising and personal counseling centers, eating disorder clinics, or other health services. When these services are promoted in online network *profiles,* students may initially connect to educators through those links because they find such links less personally challenging. Once students have made initial contact, college personnel can encourage them to seek help more formally.

Alongside these meaningful benefits, some students experience challenges to their involvement in college and identity development when they participate in online social networking. As these networks have emerged, many educators have expressed safety concerns related to the amount of contact information that students display for others to view, which they fear could lead to online stalking or real physical attacks. Educational programs on many campuses encourage students to restrict access to their *profiles* or limit the amount of information they post about their location. Online network services typically allow users to block access to specific individuals if they prefer. Even with these efforts, many students continue to display substantial personal information, exposing themselves to unnecessary risks that could disrupt their collegiate experience.

A related challenge stems from the physical separation provided by online connections. This distance permits some students to behave more negatively toward peers than they might otherwise—for example, by posting comments on others' *walls* or establishing *groups* that foster harsh feelings toward others. While not common behavior, this unwanted online attention harms victims by creating a hostile environment. Such interactions can further hurt involved students by impairing their development of valuable interpersonal skills. Because online networks allow damaging expressions to occur while

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individuals are physically apart from each other, students can not directly see the pain that their comments may cause. These exchanges can foster anger and discord, which diminishes participation in the educational environment for individuals involved in the negative situation. Situations of this nature can also prevent students from learning how to resolve conflicts constructively.

The separation of students' *profiles* from their physical self seems to encourage uncensored displays of negative behaviors by some individuals, which can substantially affect students' educational experiences. When students praise drunken behavior, laud academic irresponsibility, honor the use of illegal substances, celebrate immature sexual activities, or otherwise espouse unhealthy behaviors through their online pages, they reveal troubling attributes about themselves. Even if these depictions do not reflect their true values or actual behaviors, students who represent themselves in these ways can quickly become associated with these negative qualities. These images can become detrimental to students when they attempt to become involved in student leadership positions or academically enriching activities—for example, when they apply to be orientation leaders, residence hall assistants, study abroad candidates, or undergraduate research assistants. Students' *profiles* are generally easily viewed by individuals whose input is influential in the selection process. Even if an individual's own *profile* remains free of damaging content, *friends*' *profiles* or *group* pages may have pictures or statements that implicate the individual in negative behaviors and, ultimately, limit the learning opportunities available to him or her. A related, though controversial, problem arises when students' online material becomes a factor in campus disciplinary processes. David Berland noted in a recent conference presentation that news agencies have reported on online social networking situations in which college administrators relied on students' *profile, group,* or *event* information to initiate or strengthen judicial actions against students who appeared to have violated campus policies.

This use of online networking services is developing beyond campus. Internship hosts and employers have begun to search online information for background material on students under consideration for hiring, according to an article by Kate Lorenz on CareerBuilder.com. When organizations find behaviors displayed that do not match their expectations, they sometimes eliminate these students from their applicant pool. While a discussion of such use of social networking sites and its attendant ethical and legal considerations falls beyond the scope of this article, the reality is that this type of screening occurs and can inhibit students' educational and professional prospects beyond college.

Considering how students portray themselves through online social networks raises concerns about how online social networking affects students' integrity and identity formation. When students depict themselves as something other than their authentic and developing self, whether online or with those who are physically present with them, they must attempt to express behaviors that match that image. If students choose to act in this manner, many of their personal resources may become directed toward fulfilling a vision of themselves that has been created to match their perceptions of what others expect rather than learning to find their own voice and determining their genuine identity. These pressures certainly exist even for students who do not participate in online networking, but virtual connections may add another level of pressure to present a false image rather than invest one's collegiate experience in discovering one's true self.

Student Learning

When Kate returns from spring break, she spends several hours a day for more than a week connecting with new *friends* from her trip, posting and captioning photos, finding out what her friends at other schools did over their break, and otherwise interacting online. She knows that she has mounting coursework to complete but finds it difficult to readjust to academic life when she can have fun through activities like facebooking.

Yvette, however, has come back from break determined to find some new friends. She had fun with her peers while away, but in quiet moments of reflection, she senses that she is growing beyond those ties. She remembers her orientation leader suggesting that

students use Facebook as a means to connect with interesting and different students, and she has decided that this avenue suits her.

Online social networks offer students much potential for learning about themselves, others, and relationships. When students peruse the profiles of friends and acquaintances, they begin to learn more about their peers through the personal statements, quotes, comments, and many other pieces of information on their pages—things that they may have never known otherwise. Finding out such details about others often leads individuals to reflect and discover different aspects of themselves as well, spurring their own development. When these friends interact in more traditional ways, the information they share online can become the basis of deeper friendships between them. In addition, when students avoid judging others and stay away from conflict situations online, virtual connections can be a valuable method for finding new peers with whom they identify and then initiating meaningful connections with them. Online interactions such as these provide important lessons in interpersonal growth, which students can then transfer to their more traditional connections with peers.

As for academic learning, research has yet to determine whether online social networking competes with other free-time pursuits for students' attention, diminishes time spent in academic engagement, enhances the classroom experience, or a combination of these. Many students necessarily face a demanding schedule; they often must balance schoolwork, a job, and simply taking care of themselves, in addition to any cocurricular commitments and social activities they decide to enjoy. Networking online with peers—a voluntary, interactive behavior—falls into this last category of social activity. Problems can arise as a result of this leisure activity, as it can with many others, activities in which students spend a substantial amount of time. Some students may indeed be overly engaged online. The survey of Syracuse University students found that 11 percent of respondents spend more than five hours per week working on their profiles and interacting through them. Whether this free-time activity detracts from academic learning or enhances it is uncertain, but what has become clear is that creating and maintaining profiles and links to friends, groups, and events demands an investment of students' time and energy, reducing the amount of these resources that is available for traditional academic engagement.

Enhancing Student Learning and Minimizing Challenges

Andy, Malcolm, Kate, Maria, and Yvette represent the millions of current and prospective college students involved in online social networking, which educators must recognize has become a central feature of campus life. Rather than reject it as wasteful of students' time or ignore its many potential influences, faculty, staff, and administrators should develop approaches and strategies to help students use their networking behavior to enhance their learning and development. The following list offers a few suggestions for how this objective might be accomplished:

- Educate incoming students about the advantages and disadvantages of online social networking through printed materials, online resources, orientation programs, first-year experience courses, and other relevant means. When possible, ensure that new students critically examine the culture they will be involved in when they engage in online social networking, and discuss how they can effectively manage their online behavior and experiences.
- Train student leaders, such as resident assistants, peer advisors, and campus organization presidents, to promote the diverse learning and developmental benefits of online social networks. Urge student leaders to show their peers how the networks can help them identify others who are having similar experiences and how they can use *profiles* and *groups* to explore interests and activities they wish to pursue.

Finding out details about others through online *profiles* often leads individuals to reflect and discover different aspects of themselves as well, spurring their own development.

Encourage students to promote their own safety by limiting the contact and location data that they display.

- Host campus programs that engage students in discussions about the roles that online networking plays in their life, offering concrete examples of how they can facilitate their learning and development through their virtual connections. Provide models for the constructive use of online networking as a means of portraying oneself authentically and in ways that will foster beneficial connections that may lead to stronger learning opportunities. Ask campus newspapers to publish columns that encourage students to take responsibility for the content of their *profiles.*

- Encourage residence hall staff to promote the value of online networking in remaining connected to peers from the past, but ask them to also be vigilant in order to notice students who seem to spend substantial amounts of time on this activity, particularly if they seem disconnected from the peers around them. Suggest that residence hall staff present programs in which the detriments to learning and social interaction that can result from excessive time online are highlighted.

- Distribute materials throughout campus that warn students about the potential danger of displaying some information online. Encourage students to promote their own safety by limiting the contact and location data that they display.

- Through programs for new students, career center workshops, classroom discussions, and student leader training, ask students to consider the negative images that their *profiles* and *groups* could generate, and inform them about the consequences that these portrayals could have on their campus involvement or future professional life. Remind them that this type of Web content is cached, meaning that even if they and their peers believe they can revise their information later to remove negative content and enhance their online image,

Because on-line networks are a common form of communication for college students, hundreds turned to Facebook in the wake of the April 16, 2007, shootings at Virginia Tech. Students communicated for three primary purposes:

1. *Building community*. In the hours immediately following the shootings, students created numerous Facebook groups to memorialize individual victims. Members posted photos of the deceased students, often tagging, or captioning, the picture with a brief memory or quote that captured their sense of loss and grief. Students organized groups of various sizes and affiliations, with memberships ranging from several dozen to more than 300,000. Groups like RA's Remember and Lebanese Students for VT served as an outlet to honor victims of shared backgrounds while demonstrating support for all who were dealing with the tragedy.
2. *Communication*. Facebook pages served as outlets for distribution and consumption of information. Many students posted links to online news stories about the incident; individuals updated their pages immediately after the shooting to indicate that they were safe; and students posted comments on friends' *walls* to offer support.
3. *Activism*. In addition to petitioning the public for support for victims, students also monitored and edited information posted on Facebook message boards about the incident. Individuals frequently spoke out against derogatory speech and removed racist or insensitive posts from group message boards. One group administrator deactivated his group's *wall* at night to ensure that information was not posted during the hours when he was unable to monitor it.

Grieving students were likely offered solace when they digitally reached out to others who shared their personal mourning or to those, near and far, who were dealing with the tragedy. Online communication and face-to-face communication each have advantages; the educator's challenge is to determine how best to use both in a time of tragedy.

—Brianne MacEachran

Web searches may still uncover material that students wish to keep hidden.

- Work to find ways to express support for students who choose to remain separated from the growing phenomenon of online social networking, and encourage their involvement in traditional campus life.
- Initiate conversations with colleagues about how departments can create their own socially networked *profiles* as ways of promoting their services and connecting with students who might not otherwise be willing to seek professional assistance from them.
- Develop policies within student conduct codes and professional offices for dealing with behaviors related to online networking. Address concerns when they emerge and take steps to reduce problems, such as individuals who want to switch roommates before they meet them. Information on institutional Web sites and in official communications may be used to assist this effort.
- As educators, create *profiles* that model appropriate material and allow students to connect with you. Avoid posting overly personal content, and be vigilant about the content that students post through comments, but be willing to participate in online social networking in order to tap its beneficial features.
- Research student involvement in online social networks on your campus. The survey at Syracuse University provided valuable information to educators on that campus, and similar research will likely produce significant insights on other campuses, helping them to determine how to maximize the learning benefits of online social networking as it becomes increasingly prevalent among students.

Online social networking has not yet completely revolutionized student life or learning on college campuses, but it does represent an increasingly significant feature of campus culture that affects students' educational experience in both academic and social spheres. (See the sidebar for an example of how students used online social networking to deal with the shootings at Virginia Tech.) Like many student behaviors, online social networking can enhance students' educational experience or interfere with learning and development. Educators now need to meet the challenge of working with college students to foster valuable learning and meaningful developmental outcomes through this new medium.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, terms that refer to online networking features and functions are italicized, to avoid confusion between them and more common terms with traditional meanings. For example, "*friend*" refers to a peer with whom a person is virtually networked, while "friend" refers to a peer in the physical and more traditional sense of the word. The need to establish this distinction indicates the impact that online social networking has had on our language and on our campuses.

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