

**Facebook and the First-Year Experience:
Promoting On-Line Education through New Student Orientation**

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Introduction

Electronic technologies can serve as an effective way to enrich the educational environment and promote student engagement (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). However, little has been published about the impact of on-line networking communities on college students. The electronic community Facebook, for example, connects people through social networks by allowing anyone with a valid e-mail address to create profiles, connect with friends, join interest groups, exchange messages, and post photos. The site has grown to support over 42 million registered members (Read, 2007) "in over 40,000 geographic, work-related, collegiate, and high school networks, and...ranks as the seventh-most trafficked site in the United States" ("Microsoft and Facebook," 2006).

Increasingly, information is surfacing about safety, privacy, and ethical issues related to on-line communities (Read, 2006). This includes disciplinary infractions as a result of information posted on-line, incidences of stalking and harassment, and issues related to potential employer access to on-line profiles. In response, educators are grappling with ways to educate and protect students from the risks of the technology, while effectively using it as a community-building tool.

New student orientation is a prime opportunity to send consistent messages to large numbers of students and help them set informed and realistic expectations for college life (Miller, Bender, Schuh, & Associates, 2005; Rode, 2004), including those associated with technology (Twale & Schaller, 2003). The College of Arts and Science (the "College" or "CAS") at New York University uses their first-year student orientation program as a vehicle to promote safe and constructive use of on-line communities. This article describes the approach the College uses to educate orientation leaders and incoming students about this technology.

Student Staff Education

Because the undergraduate orientation leaders (UOLs) for the CAS orientation program are key to reinforcing expectations of incoming students, their education on these relevant issues is critical. As part of their application, UOL applicants are required to sign a statement acknowledging the importance of how they present themselves in on-line profiles, since they represent the College as leaders and role models. This prompts them to consider the content of their on-line profiles, and gives them the opportunity to edit anything that might be inappropriate. Administrators do not formally review such profiles as a part of the application process, since such scrutiny can subject them to potential liability (Jones & Soltren, 2005).

This topic is reintroduced during the UOL group interview, in which all new candidates must participate. Students complete a series of interactive tasks in groups of ten. For one task, students are given short biographies of ten mock UOL candidates and must decide which five students to hire. Information related to Facebook is included in two of the profiles, which promotes discussion on how such information shapes impressions people make about them.

Once UOLs are hired, they attend a spring training meeting, as well as a week-long summer training program just prior to orientation. Issues related to on-line communities are presented at both points. During spring training, UOLs sign a staff contract, which includes a statement about representing themselves as role models in all forums, including electronic ones. This provides another opportunity for student leaders to consider their on-line presentation of themselves and understand the implications this has on their position as a UOL.

The student leaders are also presented with a Facebook workshop, described below, during their summer training. This workshop, also offered to incoming students during orientation, provides more in-depth coverage of the topic. Through these efforts, the staff is better equipped to consistently reinforce messages about on-line communities to new students.

New Student Orientation Workshop

During the College's three-day residential orientation program, incoming students attend at least one of 15 workshops offered by various campus offices, one of which relates to safety, privacy, and ethical issues surrounding on-line communities. The 35 to 45 minute interactive workshop, which works best in groups of 15 to 25 students, is organized into four parts, each supporting a central message (see Appendix). The program does not discourage students from participating in Facebook, but encourages them to understand the broad accessibility and implications of having certain content displayed in public on-line profiles.

The workshop begins with an "Assumptions" exercise, during which pairs of students make judgments about each other by guessing the answers to questions, such as "Where are you from?" or "What kind of music do you listen to?" Students then introduce themselves and reveal what assumptions they made by merely looking at their partner. The discussion is opened to the group to gauge students' reactions and reveal misperceptions that were made when drawing their conclusions.

Next, students are prompted to share their current knowledge of Facebook, and asked to re-create their current Facebook profile using a blank Facebook template. Those who do not have Facebook profiles complete the template as if they were creating their actual page. Honesty is encouraged, as the profiles are not shared with the group.

Part II provides a brief literature review on Facebook, including a "Fast Facts" worksheet on Facebook's history, current membership statistics, case studies of university disciplinary proceedings connected to Facebook-related issues, and tips for getting the most out of this on-line networking opportunity in a safe and smart way.

For Part III, participants are given a packet of actual Facebook profiles, used with permission, that have had personally identifying information changed or removed. Students browse through them and circle anything they would like to bring to the group for discussion. They are not told to judge the profiles, as the intention is to have them realize the power of the judgments they make on their own through this process of browsing. These profiles, intentionally selected for their content, are not necessarily meant as examples of negative profiles; however, a surprising number have been interpreted by students with extreme harshness. This reveals people's tendency to make character judgments based on a limited amount of information.

Part IV invites students to return to their own Facebook profiles, created at the beginning of the session. This opportunity for self-evaluation often leads to a significant revelatory moment for participants, who may address their own susceptibility to be judged by peers, administrators, and potential employers based on their seemingly innocuous on-line profiles. The workshop closes with tips and tools for empowering students to put their best face forward in on-line forums.

Challenges

Despite efforts to present information and raise awareness in a positive, non-confrontational way, administrators have observed defensive responses toward this topic from student leaders. Where incoming students attending the orientation workshops consistently offer positive feedback and express intent to practice the recommendations, many undergraduate staff members express resistance, and insist that administrators and employers should not invade this "private" domain for students. These concerns were assuaged with specific references to current information and

cases, and student staff gradually acknowledged the importance of addressing these issues with our first-year students. While this eventual staff acceptance allowed administrators to move forward to host successful Facebook workshops, there is something to be learned from the student staff's initial negative reaction.

Conclusion

Student affairs practitioners must continue evaluating their role in educating students on concerns surrounding on-line networking communities. They must consider the ways in which communities such as Facebook affect student leadership and development in determining what boundaries or privacy policies should be adopted to address these issues on their own campuses. An approach that is successful within the context of one college community may not be true when applied to a completely different population of students. Still, there is merit in evaluating the impact this technology is having on student behavior and safety. In doing so, we may meaningfully and effectively engage college students in a reflection on the effects of posting personal information on Facebook and other on-line networking communities.

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Appendix

Facebook Workshop (35-45 minutes)

Part I

Materials: pass out blank Facebook profile template & have students complete assumptions exercise on the back

- Assumptions Exercise (10 minutes)
 - Do not have group members introduce themselves until after icebreaker
- Introductions / Discussion (5 minutes)
- Recreate/Create your Facebook profile (5 minutes; when completed, have students turn this sheet face-down and put it away until the end)

Part II

Materials: pass out "Fast Facts" worksheet

- Fast facts/Case study discussion (10-15 minutes)

Part III

Materials: pass out “mock” Facebook profile packet (collect packets at the conclusion to prevent them from being circulated)

- Browsing Facebook activity (sample profiles) (5 minutes)
- Browsing Facebook discussion (sample profiles) (5-10 minutes)

Part IV

Review of personal profile & discussion (10 minutes)