

WHAT EVERYONE OUGHT TO KNOW ABOUT FACEBOOK.

by: The Student Center, University of West Virginia – December 15, 2009

If you're like most college students, you have a Facebook profile. But what does your profile say about you? And who actually has access to your profile? Read on for some tips on having fun with Facebook and other communities without compromising your safety or image.

THE BENEFITS OF FACEBOOK

Two words: social networking. Facebook is the place to go if you want to meet fellow students who may love Katy Perry or Family Guy. It provides a way to connect with friends, classmates and people in your residence hall. Many students use Facebook to keep in touch with friends from high school. Undeniably, for thousands of students, Facebook has made the transition to college easier—future roommates frequently share information before ever setting foot on campus. It's a place to make new friends, catch up with old friends and, of course, share all those photos from your trip to London and last night's party.

THE DOWNSIDE

If all of the above sounds too good to be true, that's because it is. Any forum for online information sharing carries with it certain risks. Some of the annoyances and dangers associated with Facebook include:

- Your GPA. Let's face it - Facebook can be addictive, especially if you want to know immediately when one of your 537 friends posts a new picture or joins a new group. Many college students have performed poorly because they devote too much time to Facebook. Remember, just because you're sitting at a computer in the library, you're not necessarily doing work.
- Embarrassment and humiliation. You're not the only one who can post pictures of yourself. Anyone with a Facebook account can tag you in a photo and, voila, that picture shows up in your profile.
- Identity theft. How much personal information have you posted?
- Harassment. Did you post telephone numbers for your room and cell? And there's nothing to stop someone from posting hateful messages on your Facebook Wall.
- Cyber-stalking. Depending on what contact info you've posted, you could receive unwanted messages through your Facebook Wall, AIM and e-mail.
- Stalking. Anyone who sees your profile probably knows what you look like, what school you go to and perhaps which residence hall you call home.
- Violent crime. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have been implicated in a several stalking, rape and murder cases involving high school and college students.

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

Along with safety, Facebook users should think about the image they want to project to the world. More and more, school administrators, professors and potential employers are using Facebook to learn about students and make decisions that could have long-lasting consequences for your future. Here are some issues to consider:

- Groups. Facebook is filled with humorously titled groups such as "National Go To Class Drunk Day" or "I Would Totally Have Sex in the Library." However, when you're being considered for that summer internship, do you want your potential employer to see that you are a member of such groups?
- Illegal behavior. Your friends may laugh at those pictures of underage drinking, trespassing or vandalism. Those same pictures have been used as evidence to get students arrested or expelled.
- Skin. You may look great in that Speedo or the latest from Victoria's Secret, but do you want your professors and school officials seeing those pictures?
- Profanity and offensive language. Keep track of the posts to your Wall. The people who view your profile will associate your friends' postings with you.

On the flip-side, if you're job hunting or looking to impress your professors, you can use Facebook or MySpace to your advantage. Think about posting pictures that make you look good: that hiking trip in Costa

Rica, that great catch in the football game or your performance at the orchestra concert. Also, join groups that focus on positive topics like breast cancer awareness, fighting global warming or supporting an athletic team.

FACEBOOK SAFETY TIPS

Luckily, you don't need to delete your Facebook account to stay safe. A few simple steps can help protect you, your identity and your image:

- Restrict access. Using the settings under "My Privacy" and the edit feature of "My Profile," you can change the security settings so that only designated friends can view your photos and personal information.
- Don't list your residence hall, room number or home address. Do you really want the person who's become obsessed with you to know where you sleep?
- Don't post provocative pictures. They may get a chuckle from your friends, but they could also increase your risk of being harassed or stalked.
- Police your profile frequently. Keep track of your Wall and pictures tagged by others. Promptly untag and delete undesirable material.
- Don't harass others. Free speech has limits, especially on college campuses that take pride in being open and safe environments. Hateful messages and pictures, even if not illegal, might violate your school's code of conduct and could result in expulsion.

TO POST OR NOT TO POST

Before putting up personal information or a new photo in Facebook, remind yourself who other than your friends can view your profile:

- Your professors
- Your RA
- School administrators
- The police, campus security
- Future or current employers
- A jealous or angry ex
- John and Jane Doe. Always keep this one in mind: Picture the most violent, creepy, drunk, perverse person who might have access (or have a friend who has access) to an e-mail account from your school.

Note to MySpace Users

The guidelines offered here for Facebook can be applied to MySpace or any other social community as well. Realize, however, that MySpace offers even fewer personal protections than Facebook. Whereas Facebook defaults to regional privacy settings, MySpace is open to everyone.