

# Online Behavior Jeopardizing College Plans

## Admissions officers checking social-networking sites for red flags

By Robin L. Flanigan

Stellar transcripts aside, students now have to worry about an increasing number of colleges peering at their social-networking pages online—and potentially denying their applications because of what they find there.

The number of college-admissions officials using Facebook and other social-networking sites to learn more about applicants quadrupled over the past year, according to New York City-based Kaplan Test Prep, the test preparation division of Kaplan Inc.

In the company's 2011 survey of admissions officers from the top 500 colleges and universities, 24 percent said they have viewed publicly available pages to get a clearer picture of an applicant, while 20 percent turned to Google. Twelve percent reported that their discoveries, including photos showing underage drinking, vulgarities in blogs, and plagiarism in essays, negatively affected the chance of admission.

Educators, mostly at the high school level, use assemblies, classroom discussions, and guidance sessions to warn students about such consequences. But even educators who say they continuously hammer home the golden rule—in essence, that students should never post anything online they wouldn't want their parents to see—are finding it hard to get through to a generation raised on social media.

"The disconnect happens because of their age and level of maturity," said Franklin N. Caesar, the principal of the 1,875-student Central Islip Senior High School in Central Islip, N.Y. "We're constantly dealing with students who are inappropriate in what they say online."

### Enlisting Principals

Two years ago, Mr. Caesar started meeting with principals at lower-level schools to talk about the daily altercations he was dealing with because of comments posted on Facebook and other social-networking sites. They have met regularly since, and this year began an education program for 5th graders to address the potential ramifications of their online behavior—including a rejected college application.

"By bombarding them with information at that age," said Mr. Caesar, "and then again in the sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade, we're hoping that by the time they get to high school, they'll understand and it will make a difference. It's too late if they get here and they haven't been hearing that message."

In the meantime, guidance counselors at Central Islip convey that message in a senior assembly at the beginning of the year and during an annual technology fair.

Eric Sheninger, the principal of

the 680-student New Milford High School in New Milford, N.J., recalled having students in a Digital Journalism class Google themselves to become more familiar with their digital footprints. The students, in grades 9-12, were surprised at the "page after page of content" that came up. One girl was astonished when she found a picture of herself she'd never seen before; she couldn't even remember where or when it was taken.

Next, Mr. Sheninger took a poll: Seventy-five percent of the students had accepted a "friend" request on Facebook from someone they'd never met. He had them consider the fact that if they post an inappropriate picture, anyone can easily take a screen shot of that image and post it anywhere online without permission.

"Then I told them, 'Let's say a college pulls up that image. They're going to think twice about accepting you.' You use an example like that to rev it up a notch," he said.

Mr. Sheninger added that he repeated that point in two recent assemblies: "You can get a good feel of whether students are engaged. Every one of them was quiet and their eyes were forward. You could tell they were thinking, 'Wow, we've never really thought about this.'"

### Formalize Instruction?

That's exactly why Fredrick McDowell, the headmaster of the 1,150-student Brighton High School, which is part of the Boston public schools, believes schools need a greater effort across the board to formalize instruction on making positive social-media choices—and on the growing number of repercussions that can result from poor ones.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find schools that have an official curriculum they're using about this," he said. "And I think that, as educators, we start too late with these conversations."

At Brighton, behavior on social-networking sites that has spilled over into schools has been directly linked to suspensions, assaults, and criminal records. In an attempt to fix the problem, the school has intensified efforts to teach juniors and seniors about appropriate Web use, with involvement from classroom teachers, guidance counselors, administrators at grade-level assemblies, and guest speakers from local law-enforcement agencies.

It's even harder for middle school students to make a connection between their current social-media behavior and future college plans. In fact, they often separate their actions from consequences in general. Students regularly post comments online that they would never say in person, and as they try to deal with

new social pressures, they tend to forget that the virtual worlds they create are far from private.

As a result, sometimes the character portrayed online bears little resemblance to a student's true character, a situation that routinely continues into the high school years when it's college-application time, said Carolyn Walker, the vice principal of curriculum and instruction at Natomas Middle School in Sacramento, Calif. The school serves 950 students in grades 7 and 8.

"Everybody wants to fit the norm, to be cool," Ms. Walker said. "These kids are digital natives, and social media is a way for them to get their voices out there and be heard."

"We just have to keep talking more and more with them about how they can do that in a way that gives an image of themselves that's real," she said, "as opposed to what they think people want to see and hear. We don't have a proper avenue right now to communicate that, though. We could be doing more."

Kaplan's annual survey also pointed out that most higher education institutions do not have official guidelines governing how social-networking pages should factor into the admission equation. Social-media experts predict the ethical and legal implications will likely remain uncertain until there is clear legal ground on the subject.

At some colleges, admissions officers track an applicant's digital footprint only after receiving an anonymous tip—likely from a competing applicant or parent, according to some college admissions experts.

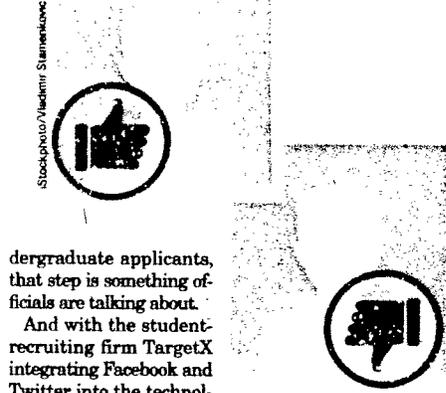
"We recommend that there be a policy in place on the use of information that bubbles up through these very public sites, but the one thing a policy doesn't always cover is what happens when the information is just laid on the table," said David Hawkins, the director of public policy and research for the National Association for College Admission Counseling, based in Arlington, Va. "Colleges can't just ignore something that has been brought to their attention."

North Carolina State University has denied applications based in part on information gleaned from publicly available sites. Administrators conduct online searches only after red flags are raised during the application process.

"Before we bring new people into our campus community, we want to make sure they're going to be a good fit for us," said Thomas Griffin, the school's director of undergraduate admissions.

The rejections are due largely to safety concerns and are handed down only after "a thorough, thoughtful evaluation of the situation," added Mr. Griffin.

Though North Carolina State is not yet doing random online searches of its more than 25,000 un-



dergraduate applicants, that step is something officials are talking about.

And with the student-recruiting firm TargetX integrating Facebook and Twitter into the technology program it designed specifically for admissions offices, those searches are getting even easier. The Conshohocken, Pa.-based firm has made it so that with one click on a social-network icon, admissions officers can instantly link to an applicant's profile, allowing institutions to see "the most complete and authentic picture" of their prospects, said Chief Executive Officer Brian Niles. (On one random search while providing a remote demonstration of the technology, Mr. Niles quickly came across "sexy time" as one student's entry under "activities.")

### Information Alerts

Entrepreneur Geoffrey Arone, seeing a business opportunity in social-networking searches, co-founded a Web-based Internet-monitoring service for parents that lets them stay informed about the status updates, photos, videos, and other personal information their children are sharing online. SafetyWeb, which Mr. Arone helped devise after seeing the searches firsthand while conducting college-admission interviews for his alma maters, Brown University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, automatically sends alerts when personal information is posted that could put a child's privacy, safety, and online reputation at risk.

Some students acknowledge that they post questionable statements online despite warnings at school.

Nick Cicchinelli, a junior at the 2,800-student Lakota West High School in West Chester, Ohio, said that he tries for the most part to keep his Facebook comments "PG" because his parents are in his network, but that he occasionally writes things he shouldn't.

"Sometimes I just don't think about it," he said.

Robin L. Flanigan is a freelance writer based in Rochester, N.Y.

Special coverage on the alignment between K-12 schools and postsecondary education is supported in part by a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education, at [www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org).



## Teaching Better Online Behavior

Experts say schools can take steps to help students avoid engaging in online behavior that could jeopardize their chances of being accepted into college. Steps include:

### Start Discussions Early

Conversations about the impact social-media pages can have on the college-admissions process should start long before high school. Students have had years of opportunity by then to create questionable profiles.

### Encourage Web Searches

Have students Google themselves. They'll likely be surprised and sometimes very concerned at what turns up.

### Repeat the Message

Drill home in classrooms, assemblies, and guidance-counselor meetings the potential dangers of inappropriate social-media behavior.

### Get Parents Involved

Chances are that parents are unaware that their child's digital footprint can affect college applications, and many times what happens outside of school ends up spilling onto school grounds and quickly onto social-networking sites.

### Craft a Formal Plan

Lower-, middle-, and high-school-level educators would do well to co-develop a formalized plan for encouraging positive social-media choices and stressing the dangers of poor ones.

SOURCE: Education Week