

Facebook connecting more than students

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The Facebook, the fashionable online college social directory, may be connecting more than fellow classmates. With the growing popularity of the Web site, and the sometimes controversial content on student's profiles, schools across the country are struggling with decisions concerning administrative and disciplinary actions pertaining to this new technology.

At Fisher College, a small liberal-arts school in Boston, controversy arose after two students were expelled for conduct on their Facebook accounts. Kurt Vachon and Cameron Walker, a sophomore and the Student Government Association president, were both members of a group expressing anger at a specific university police officer. A confidential investigation began when a fellow student came to university officials with concern over the group. According to John McLaughlin, Fisher College chief of police and spokesman, members of the group were going so far as to plan a scheme to get the officer in trouble in a sexual-assault setup. "Essentially they were students conspiring to set up a police officer on campus," he said.

That, McLaughlin explained, was the problem -- a violation of the Student Code of Conduct and the computer usage policy (to have a Facebook account, a student must use a university e-mail account) rather than use of the online site. "The issue (was the) potential crime against a police officer. ... Facebook isn't the issue from the standpoint of the college, the activity was," he said.

However, the students involved contend their group was simply an online

joke. Walker told the Brown University Daily Herald newspaper in November, "I had bad judgment, but I did not deserve to be expelled. I clarified that the Facebook group was a joke ... but (Fisher administrators) chose to take it seriously anyway. They chose to make it an issue when it didn't really have to be."

Facebook officials are also finding themselves in a difficult position: how to balance administrative concerns with the freedoms to which users are accustomed.

"Faculty and/or administration are able to consider Facebook a forum of expression for their students, and they are legally able to regulate their behavior or use that information to make decisions," said Facebook spokesman Chris Hughes. However, users are able to adjust their privacy settings to only allow fellow students to see their profiles or even further the availability of their information so only their confirmed "friends" can see their information.

Facebook, the creation of Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg in April of 2004, now has over 6 million members at hundreds of colleges. Between 10,000 and 20,000 new members sign up daily.

"It's certainly not what we designed Facebook to be used for, but there's not much we can do about it," said Hughes.

At the University of Missouri-Columbia a new task force is addressing potential problems that may arise from student's involvement with Facebook. "We want to educate the students that the information they post is not private," said Donell Young, coordinator of student life and judicial coordinator at UM. The proactive initiative hopes to help students avoid future problems with either disciplinary or potential employment problems. If administrators are alerted to serious claims in violation of university policy on the site, Young explained they will not

hesitate to investigate.

"I have not disciplined one person due to Facebook, but that's not to say that won't change in the next few weeks," said Young.

Brandeis University now hosts a Facebook seminar for all students with a cautionary approach to the online service. The Boston Globe reported that school administrators even take into account individual's Facebook profiles before hiring them for an on-campus job. But school officials deny such claims. "Actually that is the opposite of true ... it has never been taken into consideration," said Dennis Nealon, Brandeis director of media relations. Regardless, administrators want students to remember that their information on the Internet is in a public forum. "Our intent (is) to caution students before posting their information on the Internet," Nealon said.

Other instances of Facebook controversy include: the University of California, Santa Barbara, which announced that students living in residence halls with posted pictures involving illegal activity (like drinking alcohol) may be disciplined; the University of New Mexico, which banned access on their campus network to the site; and the University of Miami, where students are under investigation after a student-newspaper story on their Facebook group about swimming in the university's Lake Osceola -- a practice that has been prohibited for 20 years.

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