

Study: Faculty on Facebook will not ask students to be friends

January 24 2011, by Emily Caldwell

In a recent survey of pharmacy professors, 100 percent of the respondents who had Facebook profiles said they would not send friend requests to their current students.

Just fewer than half of the responding [faculty members](#) had a Facebook profile, and of those, most said they also ignored friend requests from [students](#) – especially current students.

It was a small study, with 95 faculty members from colleges of pharmacy at four Ohio institutions participating. But it is among the first studies to examine college professors' use of the social network, especially with respect to how they interact with students online.

Though the study was limited to pharmacy schools, senior author James McAuley, associate professor of pharmacy practice and neurology at Ohio State University, said the findings have potential to be applicable to other disciplines.

"I would imagine that if faculty members in other colleges got requests from students, the same questions might go through their minds," he said.

The study was designed primarily to document whether and how faculty use Facebook. But because respondents are divided on the subject, the researchers suggest that faculty might benefit from attempts to reach consensus among their department and college colleagues about the

appropriate use of social networking.

"A clearly defined stance or consensus may decrease faculty members' concern or discomfort about how to handle a friend request from a student," the researchers wrote.

The study is published in a recent issue of the *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*.

The survey was launched after a former resident sought McAuley's advice about Facebook etiquette. Lead study author Anne Metzger, who teaches at the University of Cincinnati, received a Facebook friend request from a student. She called McAuley to ask for guidance on how to react to the request.

"At the time she was a relatively new faculty member, and she wanted to learn from her more senior peers," McAuley said. "That was the premise of doing a broader survey."

McAuley and Metzger joined with two other Ohio State pharmacy resident graduates, Kristen Finley at Ohio Northern University and Timothy Ulbrich at the Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy, to survey the pharmacy faculty at all four institutions.

The researchers distributed surveys to 183 full-time pharmacy faculty, and received 95 responses – a 52 percent response rate. Among those who responded, 44 professors (46 percent) had Facebook profiles, and 51 (54 percent) did not. The longer the respondents had been on the faculty, the less likely they were to have Facebook pages: Those with Facebook profiles had been faculty members for an average of 8.6 years, vs. 11.4 years of faculty status among those without Facebook profiles.

The most common reasons cited among faculty who did not use Facebook were lack of time or lack of interest in maintaining a profile.

Nearly four out of five faculty who did use Facebook were not friends with their students. Among those who were friends with students, 12 percent gave student friends access to their entire profile, while 9 percent gave student friends only limited access to their profile.

All respondents said they would not ask current students to be friends on Facebook, but a small minority said they would send a request to students who had graduated.

"My stance, along with everybody else, is that faculty should not reach out to current students on Facebook," McAuley noted. "But if I get a request from a student, I will accept their friendship."

Professors who did use Facebook were evenly divided about whether their faculty status presented a conflict with social networking sites. Those who thought being faculty members did pose a conflict typically reported that they try to maintain a line between personal and professional relationships with students.

Very few faculty had used Facebook for teaching purposes – one respondent had used it to initiate online discussions, and another used the network to provide information to students in experiential education courses. Four faculty members had used Facebook in connection with their roles as advisers to student organizations.

McAuley co-advises a large student organization at Ohio State's College of Pharmacy, and in that role, spends a lot of time with students. In addition, he participates in social activities designed to bring students and faculty together – for example, gathering for pizza and soft drinks or attending a sporting event.

"There is generally this desire for students and faculty to get to know each other outside the classroom, but some people might feel that even that blurs the line," said McAuley, who added that his Facebook use is personal rather than professional. "I don't see a big difference between participating in these social events and allowing a student to be a Facebook friend and see my post about my dog graduating from puppy training."

In general, previous research concerning social network use among college students suggests that because of the power differential between students and the professors judging their performance, students are the ones taking risks in the online relationship. McAuley said that in his experience, being Facebook friends with current and former students has not led to any surprise revelations that might influence his opinion of students.

"I would think most students are aware of the potential problems with putting something on their page that is inappropriate or unprofessional," he said. "If you're friends with a faculty member, then it's not a good idea to post pictures about getting drunk Friday night when on Monday morning, you have to go to a job interview or to a site as a student in a professional practice."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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