

# Facebook: A confidence boost for first-gen college students

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Facebook connections can help first-generation college applicants believe in their abilities to both apply to school and excel once they've enrolled, according to a new study from the University of Michigan and Michigan State University.

"We are very excited by these findings, because they suggest that the kinds of interactions supported by Facebook and other [social media](#) can play a role in helping young people, especially those who are traditionally less likely to go to [college](#), feel more confident about their ability to get into college and to succeed there," said Nicole Ellison, associate professor at the U-M School of Information.

First-generation applicants might not come into contact on a daily basis with people who support their interest in college or who can answer questions about it, Ellison said.

"Our message to high school [students](#) is that even if they are disadvantaged in terms of financial resources or parental support, social media can help them access resources they may already have in their extended social networks," said D. Yvette Wohn, a [doctoral student](#) at MSU and first author of the study.

The researchers surveyed more than 500 [high school](#) students in lower-income Muskegon County, Mich. They used statistical models to examine how various factors were correlated with the students' confidence in their ability to apply to college and their expectations of

success there. The factors they examined include demographics, family history of [college attendance](#), parents' community involvement, and both informational and [emotional support](#) by parents, friends and Facebook connections.

To gauge how well the students understood the college application process, the survey asked participants about social media use and to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with four statements such as: "I know how to apply for financial aid" and "I know what I need to include in a college application." Of the sample, 12 percent had used social media to get information about how to apply to school.

The researchers found that after controlling for all other factors, first-generation students who "strongly agreed" that they used social media in this way, felt 1.8 times more confident about their understanding of the application process, compared with students who did not use social media for this type of information. This correlation didn't hold true for students whose parents had graduated from college.

To see how well the participants expected to do in school, the researchers had them rate on a scale from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree," statements such as "I am confident that I will fit in socially in college" and "I am confident that I am able to successfully graduate from college." Overall, first-generation students reported much lower expectations, with a mean score of 2.84, compared with 4.01 for the others.

A full 70 percent of all students had a Facebook friend who either was in college or had gone and could answer questions about it. The researchers found that all else being equal, first-generation students who strongly agreed that they had this type of Facebook connection were 2.3 times more confident in their ability to succeed in school, compared with their peers who had no Facebook friend they could talk about college with.

The study authors say more research is needed to figure out why these correlations exist, but they have some initial ideas.

"We think social media may demystify the college experience, because kids are able to see how others like them experience the process," Ellison said. "Also, sites like Facebook make it easier to ask questions of one's network."

The researchers urge guidance counselors and administrators to explore new ways to help juniors and seniors navigate their next steps through social media. Perhaps they could offer application help through Facebook.

Ellison and colleagues from the University of Oxford and MSU are developing a Facebook app designed to help students identify people in their networks who might be good sources of information and support about college. They plan to launch it later this summer.

In this study, the team only examined students' perceptions. The researchers are currently studying how students use social media to seek information about college as well as factors related to actual enrollment.

The study, titled "[The role of social media in shaping first-generation high school students'](#) college aspirations: A social capital lens," will be presented June 18 at the International Communication Association conference in London, and was recently published in the journal *Computers and Education*. The research was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

**More information:** [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...  
ii/S0360131513000080](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0360131513000080)

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