

Authors find social networking technology helps reveal what matters most in campus culture

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Facebook and other social networking sites aren't just online spaces where students can connect, they're the frontier of self-definition and identity to the first generation raised with the Internet, according to a new book about online campus life by Boston College Professor Ana M. Martinez Aleman.

Based on in-depth research into the online social networking habits of college students, *Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding What Matters in Student Culture* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group) describes how websites and applications such as Facebook, Instant Messenger, Live Journal, and blogs provide college students with a new social space, as well as powerful media tools.

For Martinez-Aleman, Chair of the Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education in the Lynch School of Education, the rapidly evolving role of the Internet in campus culture and student expression represented an exciting research opportunity.

"No one has ever taken a look at social networking sites like Facebook and thought about them as a form of self-expression to a generation that has always known technology; has always known the graphical user interface of a computer screen, and asked students themselves what meaning they make of this communication," said Martinez-Aleman, who co-authored the book with Katherine Lynk Wartman, a PhD candidate in the Lynch School.

Martinez-Aleman surveyed 500 students at 20 institutions throughout the Northeast and followed that up with guided tours from 20 students who provided a bird's-eye view of their online communities.

The comfort level today's college students have with technology may make them early adapters of the latest online tools, but it also presents new risks, according to Aleman-Martinez. The powerful social mediums these sites present challenge ethical decisions about social propriety, self disclosure and acceptable behavior. But at their core, social networking sites, like traditional bricks-and-mortar campus centers, are valued as places just for students.

"The students tell us what they appreciate most about Facebook is that it's a space about their college, their fellow college students, and their student life," said Martinez-Aleman.

Family members or co-workers may be welcome, but the "friends" students give permission to view their personal online spaces are predominantly peers from their class, their college or their college years.

Students communicate about themselves and their friends through a variety of tools and applications the websites offer. Lists, postings, photos, video, links to other web content, and surveys on everything from movie compatibility to favorite shoes allow students to define themselves almost instantly, 24 hours a day, seven days a week to dozens or hundreds or thousands of friends and friends of friends, Aleman-Martinez found.

So with all these students online, do college administrators belong there too? Opinions are mixed, said Martinez-Aleman, who wrote the book with college administrators in mind.

"Some students don't care because they manage their privacy settings very closely," she said. "Other's think that crosses the line. They don't want to be policed."

Though tech savvy, today's students are not much different from their offline predecessors, who often tested the reach of authority. For the student who posts inappropriate content, there can be consequences with parents, administrators or law enforcement.

"Students have always negotiated the gray space between their behavior and adult monitoring or adult interference," said Martinez-Aleman. "They are still testing, trying to see how far they might transgress before someone tries to limit their behavior."

Source: Boston College

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