

The Facebook issue

The good, the bad, and how to avoid the ugly

Facebook has captivated the college crowd.

A recent Educause Center for Applied Research (ECAR) survey found that 85 percent of college students use social networking sites, with 89 percent of participants choosing Facebook.

Facebook's popularity with college students has triggered a rush by "official" university units to get in on the action. But like most experiments, this one presents risks.

UM's Chief IT Officer Ray Ford wants users to consider what they might be giving up when they agree to Facebook's terms and conditions. UM attorney David Aronofsky is concerned about protecting individuals as well as the institution from a variety of risks.

This issue of *Bits* examines how two UM departments—English and Enrollment Services—use Facebook. The vetting of the English department's Facebook strategy led to the drafting of a best practices document to help guide other departments. (see www.umt.edu/it/policies/facebook.aspx).

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Facebook's rewards and risks

Engaging students through Facebook acceptable, but academic departments should be aware of the perils

Laura Wright communicates with 600 students in her job as academic adviser in UM's English department.

"Emailing that many people is horrible," Wright says. "We don't have a mailing list, and keeping one would be a nightmare.



"No one checks our bulletin board," she adds. "And our bulletin board gets covered with ads from other departments.

"There's a lot of important information that just doesn't reach students."

Wright says she logs into Facebook every day for personal use, and she thought the popular social networking site might be the answer to her professional dilemma. She imagined an English department Facebook group where she could post information about events, scholarship opportunities and advising deadlines. She also recognized the community-building potential of Facebook.

"I was envisioning a community where people would talk outside of class about what they were reading and working on." She says. "Maybe find tutors or study buddies."

She presented her idea for a Facebook group at an English department retreat in August and received support

from faculty, many of whom were uncomfortable with the idea of "friending" their students in Facebook, but recognized the benefits of participating in an online community.

The department approved the Facebook plan. Everything was a go. There was just one last suggestion.

Run it by legal counsel.

Risks abound

"We may be damned if we do and we're damned if we don't," says UM attorney David Aronofsky on the subject of University departments using Facebook for official business. "If we don't do it, we look like we're back in the 19th century. But if we do it, we may have a variety of complex legal issues to deal with such as potential liability for content misuse or privacy."

The biggest issue, Aronofsky says, is that students invariably say things that are harmful to others and therefore harmful to themselves. He has concerns about students receiving academic punishment for what they say in Facebook.

"I view this, in some instances, like a group of faculty and students getting together after hours at the faculty's house or a pub," Aronofsky says. "We would almost never permit academic punishment in that case. Unless a

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Facebook's rewards and risks

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student violates the law, nothing they say on Facebook can be used to punish them academically.”

Privacy issues also concern Aronofsky. He points out that federal law bans the University from disclosing educational records without a student's consent, while state law says that no student information can be disclosed to the public without consent or a court order.

Any one-on-one communication about grades or other privacy-protected issues has to take place through secure, University-controlled channels.

And although UM departments can require students to access official University channels of communication, such as GrizMail, Blackboard and UM web pages, they can't require students to participate in a non-University forum like Facebook. Aronofsky says that any "official" communication posted to Facebook must probably also be available through official UM channels.

Best practices

At Aronofsky's suggestion, Wright and IT collaborated to develop a "best practices" document to help guide departments as they venture into Facebook and other non-UM web services.

The document is available at www.umt.edu/it/policies/facebook.aspx

Recruitment and retention

Using Facebook to connect students before they arrive

Jed Liston, UM's Associate Vice President for Enrollment Services, was convinced that a social network could help UM's recruitment and retention efforts. The question was whether to develop a UM social network, or go where students were already gathered -- Facebook.

"The idea is to let them build a community of their own. It's nothing that isn't going to happen the first week in study lounges and around campus . . ."

- Jed Liston, Enrollment Services

Focus groups initially told Liston to stay out of Facebook. But things change fast in the online culture.

"We were almost to the point of launching a third-party social network," he says. "We did one last focus group and asked students if they would jump on our site. Everybody said they wouldn't log off Facebook to visit it. In a relatively short time, perceptions had changed. Now it was OK to have institutional pages on Facebook."

So Enrollment Services created a "closed" Facebook group for the

incoming class. They sent postcards to applicants and admitted students inviting them to join.

"We told them they would only be talking to their fellow classmates, and that we wanted this to be a place for them to converse," Liston says. "It exploded. In the first four weeks, we had more than 600 people join. We only have about 1,900 new freshmen, so that was pretty good."

Liston and two staff employees are group members, but they mostly just "listen." They only enter the conversation to correct misinformation.

"The idea is to let them build a community of their own," Liston says. "It's nothing that isn't going to happen the first week in study lounges and around campus—that exchange of getting to know one another."

Liston acknowledges the risk of exposing uncommitted applicants to unfiltered dialogue. But so far the experiment appears to be successful.

"We've found that these students really started sealing the deal for themselves," Liston says. One group decided to all meet at the Grizzly statue on the third day of classes. They had already developed friendships. That makes or breaks a person staying here, if they feel connected."

