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Students learning online pitfalls

Personal data can haunt them later

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In a world of Facebook, MySpace and blogs, online image management is becoming a topic campus administrators are forced to address.

"On the one hand they seem to promote community, networking and a forum for students to converse and share ideas and promote activities and like interests," said Matthew Webster, dean of students at Thomas More College.

"On the other hand, students are placing their most private information, both personal histories and sensitive items like birth dates, addresses and class schedules. And they seem to foster a one-up mentality when it comes to sex, drinking and other behaviors," Webster said.

A survey of 750 employers by aftercollege.com, a career networking site dedicated to recent college grads, revealed that half of them believe information found online should be used in the hiring decision.

"Five years ago you weren't able to determine who may be a user of marijuana from a résumé, but finding that a student is a member of the 'I can't go a day without smoking marijuana group' on Facebook may lead you to believe that they are a current user," said Peter Trentacoste, associate director of university housing at Northern Kentucky University.

Trentacoste has spoken at many universities about maintaining an online image.

"That information may play a part in a recruiter's hiring decision whereas in the past, a drug test would be the only way to garner that private information," he said.

Students are learning the effects of posting too much information online. In November 2005, four NKU students were fined, put on campus probation and required to attend a binge drinking class after posting pictures of a raucous dorm room party.

Last February, Miami of Ohio student James Sharpe, 18, was arrested for inducing panic after using a police sketch of a rape suspect as his own picture on his Facebook profile.

In April, University of Dayton junior Christopher Herbert was fined \$10,000 by the university for damage caused during an "open-invitation party" he announced on his Web site.

These behaviors are following students after school. Trentacoste and Webster highlight this fact to students and parents.

"We have taken a serious step in educating students of the dangers of these types of virtual communities by sending pre-school mailings to parents and students prior to orientation, addressing the issue at orientation and providing programs during the year," Webster said. "We have also instituted a policy that allows students to be charged with campus violations of policies when a complaint is filed and the images depict a clear violation of the code of conduct."

At NKU, Trentacoste addresses the issue in the school's University 101. The class acts as an in-depth freshman orientation.

"In a nutshell, I tell them to be careful about what they post online and also to consider that everything they post online has the possibility of ending up on the desk of a future employer," Trentacoste said.

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