

OBERLIN COLLEGE EDUCATIONAL GUIDELINES ON ELECTRONIC SOCIAL NETWORKING

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

The Oberlin College statement on electronic social networking serves as a guide for the campus community to better inform students, faculty and staff of the opportunities and consequences associated with electronic social networking. These issues could include policy and law violations, student privacy rights, reputation of self/other/institution, peer harassment, safety concerns, and impact on professional development. This statement will guide the campus in developing an appropriate educational response and materials.

WHAT IS SOCIAL NETWORKING?

Social networking generally refers to the use of online websites/applications such as MySpace®, Facebook®, and LiveJournal™ that help connect friends, groups, businesses, and others. These sites offer great opportunities to connect and communicate, but the hazards they present are often not clearly documented.

Oberlin College urges all users of online social networking sites to be cautious about posting personal information and to be aware of the potential risks associated with making personal information public.

MANAGING YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE AND THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH BELONGING TO SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Most members of any campus community have an online presence through email, websites, blogging, or online social networking sites. All of these sites present certain common risks that are often not considered or sometimes ignored.

1. **Legal Liability:** Be aware of the potential for wide distribution of your information and comments. You may be held legally liable for any comments made about other people. You could subject yourself to defamation or libel suits if information or images you post about someone else is proven to be false or damaging. The college reserves the right to discipline students for acts of misconduct wherever they occur. While staff and faculty do not “police” online social networks for possible violations, staff are obligated to answer all complaints and reports of alleged misconduct whether on campus, off campus, or online.
2. **Privacy/Safety:** Some sites allow students to post phone numbers, class schedules, hometowns, and birth dates; information that could be used for stalking or identity theft. Read any site’s privacy policy before creating a profile. Again, remember that people you don’t know may be reading your information. Trust your instincts if contacted by someone you don’t know—ask a lot of probing questions before allowing anyone to see your profile.
3. **Future Employment Problems:** Potential employers often search for information on prospective employees using the Internet. Information posted on personal websites and social networking sites may be readily available and should be considered

accessible. It is remarkably easy for people you don't know to gain access to social networking sites and profiles you may consider private. In addition to checking the personal interests of potential employees, some employers check sites for poor grammar and writing skills.

4. **Your Words Could Hurt You:** Several career experts say that people get their jobs through networking. Just as your positive reputation can be an asset in the job search process, negative statements you may have shared about a company, a particular person, or an issue could come back to haunt you in an increasingly global and networked world. If you're not absolutely sure you want it read, don't post it. Communication is very contextual, a pejorative word or phrase used in playful conversations with friends can easily be misconstrued.
5. **Use of Pseudonyms:** When some people are uncertain about how an online profile might affect their student experience or future career, they stay anonymous. Oberlin College's Rules & Regulations suggests that "members of the College are expected to take responsibility for their expressions; anonymous expressions are inimical to the free and open exchange of ideas." Posting anonymous comments about other people which are incorrect, false or hurtful, or photos that are misleading or damaging, is not only unethical but also illegal.
6. **It Could be Hard to Unsubscribe:** Caching means that anything posted on a social networking site may remain accessible long after it has been deleted. Google has a policy process for removing information from their caching technology but this can take time and may require many steps. If you no longer want to be part of a social network site, ask to cancel your membership. This does not eliminate the cache, however. If a social networking site goes out of business, content could be sold to others. Check the Terms of Service for any social networking site you decide to subscribe to. Some actually do offer ways to permanently delete your profile and personal information.
7. **Time Management:** Many students are unaware of how much time they spend on social networking sites and what impact this may have on academics and other student activities. If concerned about your use, contact Student Academic Services (x58464), The Counseling Center (x58470), or talk with your class dean.

The Center for Leadership in Health Promotion at Oberlin College

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[Information adapted with permission from Tracy Mitrano - Cornell University.]

Special thanks to members of the Oberlin College Ad Hoc Committee on Social Networking and Student Life 2006-2007 (Contact: L.Flood@oberlin.edu)