

Posting & P think again

By Jocelyn Green

If you are like the vast majority of Xanga, Facebook and MySpace users, what you post online is intended for your friends. But imagine that others are looking at your posts, too — some of whom you really want to impress, but haven't met yet. People who are in a position to direct your future.

That's exactly what's happening all over the country. Regardless of how private you may feel your pages are, the fact is, if you're online, you're in public. And college admissions counselors are keenly interested in what you have to say on your site.

"Posting on the Web is like standing next to someone and wondering why they hear your conversation," says Nate Mouttet, assistant vice president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) in Washington, D.C. "Because Web sites are public information, it is something admissions offices can and sometimes do use. If it contradicts the way you present yourself in your application or interview, the admissions office will probably take that into account."

It's not that you shouldn't be involved in social networks online, Mouttet says, but you just need to be conscious that what you post is open for all to read.

Traffic on Facebook grew 272 percent for the year ending February 2006, making it the 66th most popular Web site, according to comScore Media Metrix. Traffic on MySpace grew 318 percent during

the same time frame, rocketing it to the top social networking site on the Web and the eighth most popular Web site overall. By May 2006, it had reached 50 million visitors.

Author Dawn Eden started her blog "The Dawn Patrol" in 2002. While she didn't always follow guidelines in her writing, in recent years she started being more careful. She doesn't write about everything in her personal life anymore, for instance, but chooses details with a universal aspect to them worth sharing. And she makes sure the stories are nothing she'd be embarrassed about.

Eden's tip for blogging teens applying to college? "For one thing, know how to spell," she says. "It just looks juvenile to write on your blog as if you're instant messaging someone. A college won't be impressed if they see your online writings are all in obscure acronyms and misspellings."

MySpace has become more popular among older Internet users comScore Media Metrix reports. While teens ages 12-17 accounted for 24.7 percent of the MySpace audience in August 2005, by October 2006 they represented just 11.9 percent of the site's total audience. At the same time, Internet users between the ages of 35-54 accounted for 40.6 percent of the MySpace visitor base, an 8.2 percent increase during the previous year. You'd have to think some of these 35- to 54-year-olds are working at the colleges you'd like to attend and are checking you out.

Palm Beach Atlantic University in Florida systematically searches for each applicant in social networking sites. "If there is any blatantly sexual content or content about drinking or drugging on the student's pages, those things would be concerns to us," says Buck James, vice president for enrollment services. "We would interact with the student about it and see what the response is."

James is quick to point out blogs can impress him favorably as well, such as photos and reflections about church involvement and missions work.

The concern about your behavior won't end once you've been accepted to college, either. No matter where you enroll, your online presence can directly affect your standing.

Slandorous comments about professors or descriptions about activities in violation of your institution's community standards can jeopardize your status. Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., temporarily suspended its women's soccer program last year after hazing photos surfaced online. At least one school, Kent State in Ohio, banned athletes from using Facebook.com at all. One student was kicked out of Arkansas' John Brown University in 2006 for activities he chronicled on Facebook that ran counter to the university's code of conduct.

Dan Mortensen,

vice president for student life at Valley Forge Christian College in Pennsylvania, says that while VFCC doesn't routinely peruse students' MySpace or Facebook pages, when alerted to inappropriate content, the college is obliged to check it out.

"We are careful about confronting students just because of what they say," Mortensen says. "Expressions of concern about a college policy do not typically result in staff intervention. However, if students are displaying photos or text describing behavior that is contrary to the college's expectation, that would concern us and we'd talk to the student about that."

It won't be just your college that's interested in your blog, either. Potential employers are forming first impressions long before the interview process begins. Even if some of your tales are fictional, the damage to your reputation can be very real.

A recent study by the executive search firm ExecuNet found that 77 percent of recruiters run searches of candidates on the Web to screen applicants; 35 percent of these same recruiters say they've eliminated a candidate based on the information they uncovered.

Jennifer George, former human resources administrator at the CCCU, Googled every candidate for hire to ensure that the information on the résumé and Web matched. In the process, she often discovered other insights. The candidate who wrote online that she "half-heartedly applied to a job in D.C." was, in George's mind, "asking not to be hired." Another candidate whose blog was full of expletives did not gain any points for the application process to the CCCU, a Christian organization.

In the end, it's not about

censorship or free speech. It's about people deciding how closely they want to be associated with you. And what you say online can radically affect those potential relationships. Keep in mind — what you say or show online is in the public square. **tpe**

JOCELYN GREEN is a frequent contributor to *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*. She lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

