Watch What You Post: More College Officials Look at Applicants' Social Media Pages

By Catherine Groux
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Admissions officials increasingly look at applicant's social media sites. Today, most college applicants have blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, Pinterest boards, YouTube videos and other content posted on social media sites. While these websites can be useful - both academically and socially - it is becoming increasingly important for students to use them responsibly to avoid dashing their collegiate dreams.

College Admissions Officials Keep an Eye on Prospective Students

A new survey by Kaplan Test Prep shows that 27% of college admissions officers admit they Google applicants, while 26% said they check their Facebook profiles as part of the admissions process. These statistics should worry students who have not worked to keep their social media pages clean, as 35% of admissions officials said they have found something on these sites that negatively affected applicants' chances of being accepted to their school. Since last year, this figure has nearly tripled.

Jeff Olson, Kaplan’s vice president of data science, said admissions officers often feel social media pages can give them a better sense of who their applicants are as students and people.

"With regard to college admissions, the traditional application - the essays, the letters of recommendation - represent the polished version of an applicant, while often what's found online is a rawer version of that applicant," Olson said. "Schools are philosophically divided on whether an applicant's digital trail is fair game, and the majority of admissions officers do not look beyond the submitted application, but our advice to students is to think first, tweet later."

Sameer Hinduja, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center at Florida Atlantic University, said he feels this trend is likely to continue in the future as more students opt to earn associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees.

"I work at a college and know admissions offices are very busy," Hinduja said. "With the state of our economy, more and more people are going back to school to get advanced degrees. It's just a very competitive environment and the quickest way to thin out a pile of applications is to run searches and judge people based on their digital reputation."

The Most Common Social Media Mistakes Students Make

The survey indicates that the most common offenses students made on their social media sites include essay plagiarism, vulgarities in blogs, photos showing alcohol consumption, signs of illegal activity and other inappropriate material that made admissions officers "wonder."

Hinduja said college officials judge this content on a case-by-case basis, but if they find too much inappropriate content on applicants' profiles, it could cost them admission to the institution.
"If you do something that is incredibly obscene or offensive or demonstrates an incredible lack of character or self-control on a regular basis - for example, many [inappropriate] pictures or not being able to control their mouth on a subject - I don't think you would want to bring that person into your school," he said. "There are so many others willing to take their space."