

My Roommate Posted This About Me on Facebook! Social Media in the Residence Halls

By:

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Move-in Day. First year students lugging TVs, laptops, stereos and other electronics into the residence halls and Residence Life staff greeting them with smiles and open arms. Every August, looks something like this. When I moved into Hedrick Hall at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1998, I had a laundry basket and shoes clutched tightly in my arms, dragging a green trunk filled with clothes. The item I carried more closely than anything else was anxiety. I had a conversation via telephone with Jennifer and Maria (my new roommates), using the advancement in technology at the time – three-way calling, but did not know what they looked like, how they would respond to me, or how in the world we would manage to live together for the next academic term.

This is not the case today. When our department sends out housing assignments and roommate notifications over the summer, the roommate “getting to know you” experience was a little different. Few phone calls are made. Fewer letters or cards are written to “soon-to-be” roommates. However, much inspection into the lives of roommate matches is being conducted. We received various calls concerning dissatisfaction with the random roommate selections made. Of the many explanations as to why a roommate change was of the utmost importance was, “I saw that person’s Facebook page and I do not think that our personalities will work well together.”

When I joined Facebook in 2004, you needed a “.edu” email address to create a profile. I remember finding out about this “awesome internet communication” thing from a friend, eager to stay in touch with fellow Bruins post graduation. It took me 3 weeks to log on the website, and another week before I gave in and made a profile. What was intended initially by Mark Zuckerberg to be a tool to stay in touch with friends from Harvard has become a premiere form of communication – a form of communication seemingly with limited regulation. As

some students have had the opportunity to speak with me about questionable information posted on Facebook, the meeting almost always becomes a deposition of sorts, in which I am being quoted the First Amendment.

Today, “online communities are no longer the province primarily of academics, engineers and college students – people from all walks of life and all parts of the globe can be counted as active participants” (Bruckman, Danis, Lampe, Sternberg & Waldron, 2006, 22). As student affairs professionals, we have already “faced it.” Social media is the method in which our students communicate. Young adults (aged 18 – 29) are not only the most active group of Twitter users, but 73% of online young adults have social networking profiles (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010, 3). “As of January 2009, the online social networking application Facebook registered more than 175 million active users,” at the end of December 2011 there were 845 million active users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, 59; Facebook, 2011).

Our students are connected. Knowing that, I should not have been surprised when my Residence Hall Director (RHD) came to me last year to discuss an interesting roommate issue, seeking some insights into the events that transpired. A very concerned resident came to him to discuss the concerns she had with her roommate, about information posted on Twitter. Much like any adept RHD he asked all the right questions, in a tone that showed concern but comforted the young lady. Of his many questions he inquired about the relationship between the roommates prior to the posts. To this, she responded that she believed their relationship was good and did not have any issues living together; however, since the posts, she had not engaged in a conversation with her about their relationship.

Immediately following this conversation, he alerted me of the matter and how he planned to proceed to ensure the safety and security of the

residents involved. In meeting with both young women to address the frightening statements posted on Twitter, the accused roommate's response was rather amusing. She was not posting comments about her own roommate, but remarking on the scenes and events in the 2011 film, *The Roommate*, using the movie's title as her hash tag (#ROOMMATE). In the film, "college student Sara finds that her new roommate Rebecca has an obsession with her, which quickly turns violent" (IMDb, 2012). A real life turn of events with a cinematic feel in retrospect.

My RHD and I were a little perplexed, left with many questions at the conclusion of this meeting. He and I, developing in a different time, wondered why the two young ladies could not just talk about their concerns, especially if there was no pre-existing issue between them. This situation, though, is no different than the roommates who instant message each other while in the same room, communicate almost exclusively via text message, or use social networking sites to find out more about each other as opposed to speaking in person. While I will not assert my two cents about appropriate communication methods, the reality is, as a residence life professional that is exactly what I am doing when I meditate a residential concern or student conduct issue involving information found on social media.

The Importance of Embracing Social Media.

If you are anything like me, you cringed when one of your student staff members requested you on Facebook or wanted to follow you on Twitter. Not so much that the information you post is inappropriate or confidential, but that in adding that person to your friends or followers, they were then connected to all your other lives, your family, current friends, acquaintances from college, and the random 10 people you cannot seem to remember where you met, but are hesitant to de-friend. My students might actually learn something about the current events and the global community from viewing my profile, or better, how to more effectively network online through being a friend or follower.

I have approached using Twitter with the same trepidation as Facebook. What should I post? How often should I post? Why is there a word limit? Why is this even important in the first place? When I step outside myself, I realize that I am not learning social networking for my own benefit, but for the benefit of

my constituents – the students. Knowing social media is like anything else in a generational divide. I may not have grown up on MySpace, but I did grow up using computers, something my parents have spent a tremendous time to understand. When I speak to them about the functionality of a program like Microsoft Publisher, I feel like I own a "dot com" company in Silicon Valley – they marvel at my understanding, and scoff it at the same time. In their day, when you wanted to make a picture of something, you used a camera – and got the film developed.

I have to know what my students know, so I can understand what is going on in their world. I may not want to be a community member in the realm of social media, but if I want my students to be successful, I do not have a choice. Scoffing at social media or turning a blind eye to it only increases the distance between us, the educators, and the students. I do not have to incorporate media like Facebook or Twitter into every aspect of my day, like many of our students, but I absolutely need a solid understanding of its uses, functionality, and culture. As a student development educator I need to be able to relate to my students in the real world and in the virtual world.

The Real Life Consequences of the Virtual World.

I find myself in a difficult situation when confronted with addressing online behavior in the real world. I rather enjoy my ability to share my ideas and perspectives freely; I do not desire to limit another's ability to do the same. However, as an agent of the institution, a student's behavior on campus, off campus, and in cyberspace comes into my purview, prompting me to respond as a concerned professional, and often times a hearing officer. In light of the increase in instances of cyber bullying and harassment online, many institutions, including ODU, has had to reconsider our response to such incidents. For this cause, many have revised or developed University Policies, Conduct Codes, and Residential Living Expectations related to harassment and bullying via social media and other technologies.

Cyber bullying and harassment have obvious adverse affects in our collegiate communities and beyond. We all have heard mention of the late Tyler Clementi, the Rutgers student who committed suicide September 22, 2010. While Clementi is mourned, the fact is that the consequences of his death are still prevalent in the life of his former roommate. "Twenty-

year-old Dharun Ravi faces 15 counts including bias intimidation and invasion of privacy against Clementi” (Associated Press, 2012). Not condoning the actions of Ravi, but it is clear that his life has been severely impacted by his reckless and uncaring use of social media. For a global perspective we can look to Asia. “In China, netizens have resorted to cyber manhunt, known as the “human flesh search engine,” to expose details of individuals who have violated social norms one way or another achieving social shaming, monitoring, and ostracism” (Cheung, A.S.Y, 2009, 323).

I do not want to police the residence halls – and I certainly do not want to police the internet. However, the internet is an integral part of how our students make friends, access information and develop community. Not only does drinking underage in the residence halls lead to a potential student conduct hearing, advertising the event on twitter “#KEGGERinROOM215” with photographs of other underage drinkers in a residence hall room is also fair game for a conduct officer. We want our students to be successful. Their actions in the classroom, on campus, off campus and in cyberspace will all play a part in their success at the institution and beyond. Fortunately, we have not had to deal with the issues currently facing Rutgers or China, but this could very well be our reality. Our students need to know the good, the bad and the ugly of social media; this begins with open dialogue, intentional conversations and programming centered on these matters. In a recent discussion with law students preparing for full-time employment, students were advised “to clean up, or even take down social media profiles,” summed up in the statement, “If you think you want to be a judge, take everything down now” (Tillman, 2012).

The Conversations and the E-versations.

If your electronic mail inbox looks anything like mine at 8:00am, you have contemplated grabbing your coat, scarf and keys, and leaving your office. But there is a duality in that feeling – for the sadness I may feel at the 100+ new messages, there is a comfort in knowing that some face-to-face conversations can be avoided with the click of a button. This is how many of us have transformed our communication with our professional colleagues and our students. Reflect a moment with me, how many times have you communicated with a student via email because it was

easier or saved time, as opposed to facilitating a face-to-face interaction?

In a time when meeting agendas look a lot like email inboxes, I would challenge us to think about the effects of social media and our roles as educators. Quite possibly, a student could go through an entire day without having a meaningful face-to-face interaction with anyone, including a roommate, because of their mastery of, or addiction to, social media and new technologies. Is this the world we want? If not, I implore you to consider adding an extra meeting or time slot in your day to find a student and give them an opportunity to practice a rather antiquated form of communication – an in-person conversation.

Social media is a great tool for residential communities. All of our residence halls and apartment complexes at Old Dominion University have Facebook and Twitter accounts and Blackboard communities – using them to connect with residents, market programs and events, and disseminate important information. As a department, we have further use online media via HooteSuite – a program allowing us to pre-develop posts and updates, scheduling them for future posting to our various media pages. We see and benefit from the utility of these online communities. As much as we would love for our residents to not launder their personal business online, or use it to facilitate passive aggressive arguments – hope alone will not change anything. We must be fearless in our approach to social media, proactive in our education of it with students, and decisive in how we address and mediate online behaviors in our residential communities and at our institutions.

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Hosting a Successful State Conference

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The Southeastern Association of Housing Officers (SEAHO) serves housing officers across the southeast, many of whom bear some responsibility for supporting residentially-based student leadership organizations. Many of our “RHAs” are affiliated with the National Association of College and University Residence Halls (NACURH Inc.), the largest student run organization in the world. Most of our institutions fall under the regional direction of NACURH’s South Atlantic Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls (SAACURH) with the exception of Louisiana institutions which are supported by the Southwest Affiliate (SWACURH). Although not officially aligned with NACURH Inc., many of our states enjoy thriving state organizations as well.

The Virginia Association of College and University Halls [VACURH] serves the residential student leaders of Virginia. The University of Virginia hosted the annual VACURH state conference in February, 2012. Our Harry Potter themed weekend drew upon an immensely popular series that lent itself easily to an immersive conference experience. We experimented with several innovations aimed at increasing attendance (as measured by both institutional and student registrations), expanding educational opportunities, and forging stronger connections between student leaders from across the state.

Ultimately, VACURH 2012 hosted 14 institutions and over 150 delegates. The \$20,000 conference

generated over \$800 in profit for our state organization while only costing students \$135 per person, including lodging. Delegates collected over \$500 in cash for the Kluge Children’s Rehabilitation Center and donated more children’s toys than the Center could accept. None of these efforts would have been successful without the dedicated work of the student leaders serving on the conference committee, the partnership of offices from across our university, or the infusion of positive energy supplied by the attending students and their advisors. We are excited to add to the knowledge base of the region by sharing our strategies with you now.

Our early marketing campaign required us to plan our registration and conference schedule carefully.

- 1) **Website:** We are particularly proud of our website which was live and collecting registrations five months before the conference began. We used WordPress and imbedded GoogleDocs to give students the ability to easily manage the site and our simple registration system:
- 2) **Online Credit Card Payments:** More than half of our institutions took advantage of this option. It cost approximately 2% in credit card fees but the convenience was appreciated by many institutions.
- 3) **Extended Conference:** To make the state conference worth the drive, we prepared a robust