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## **FACEBOOK, “FRIENDS,” AND THE HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOM: STUDENT PREFERENCES AND ATTITUDES**

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### **Introduction and Background**

Social media has enabled multifaceted communication and sharing opportunities, providing often-authentic learning interactions and activities for many instructors and students and expanding the boundaries of the typical classroom. At the same time, the mere presence of social media – whether used in a class or not – has complicated the relationships between students and their instructors. Questions that must be dealt with, whether on a personal or institutional level, include: Should higher education instructors and students be connected to each other on social media systems such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn? How should they manage friendship requests? What action(s) should be taken when the virtual aspect of the instructor-student relationship becomes uncomfortable?

Facebook provides a solid example of this complex situation. Social Facebook use is high among college students, and it has been used increasingly to support learning in higher education, whether using it to replace a learning management system (Wang *et al.*, 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2012) or for an individual learning activity (Aubry, 2013; Miller, 2013; Shaltry, Henriksen, Wu, & Dickson, 2013). However, using Facebook to support learning creates a host of potential privacy concerns. The Facebook environment supports bi-directional relationships, in which both parties must agree to mutually become “friends” and share profiles. What students want to share with social friends may not be information they also wish to share with other “friends,” like classmates and instructors. Although Facebook has user-controlled privacy settings, in one study every participant suffered a discrepancy between Facebook settings and their desired sharing (Madejski *et al.*, 2012). Another study showed that 15% of people in the traditional college student age group have regrets about items they have posted (Madden, 2012).

In response to these concerns, this study explores student preferences and attitudes related to using Facebook in a higher education setting. The research questions guiding

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this study are:

1. What are college students preferences regarding Facebook use in a class setting?
2. What are college students preferences regarding Facebook friendship with their instructors?

## **Method**

Participants in this descriptive study were 169 students at a large public university in the United States. They completed an online survey about their Facebook use habits and beliefs in an educational context. The majority of survey respondents were female (88%), held undergraduate status (95%) in the College of Education (62%), were current Facebook users (95%), and ranged in age from 19 to 62.

The survey consists mostly of closed items inquiring about student's preferences and experiences when using Facebook. A few open items provided the opportunity for students to elaborate on their personal Facebook use policies and to share brief stories and experiences. Data analysis focuses on reporting aggregate findings, frequency distributions, and measures of central tendency. Open items were analyzed for emergent themes, with quotes used to help illustrate key issues.

## **Findings**

These findings represent highlights from the survey, owing to space constraints. Additional findings will be shared during the presentation.

When asked if they want to use Facebook in a class setting, students gave a split response between those who did (51%) and did not (49%) want to use Facebook in a class (see Table 1). When probed more specifically about engaging with instructors in a Facebook Group, which allows people to interact without having an established friendship on Facebook, they were more positively disposed, with 78% indicating they would be comfortable with that arrangement. However, 44% still felt that students who do not already use Facebook should not be required to sign up in order to use it in a class.

Table 1. Student preferences regarding Facebook use. User n=162. Non-user n=7.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Would like to use Facebook in a class	<i>Users</i>	17 (10%)	66 (41%)	57 (35%)	22 (14%)
	<i>Non-users</i>	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)	5 (71%)
Comfortable being Facebook friends with instructors	<i>Users</i>	16 (10%)	72 (44%)	59 (36%)	15 (10%)
	<i>Non-users</i>	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	4 (57%)
Comfortable using Facebook Groups with instructors	<i>Users</i>	27 (17%)	99 (61%)	32 (20%)	4 (2%)
	<i>Non-users</i>	0 (0%)	2 (29%)	0 (0%)	5 (71%)
People who do not otherwise use Facebook should sign up for accounts if a class is using a Facebook group	<i>Users</i>	31 (20%)	60 (37%)	60 (37%)	11 (7%)
	<i>Non-users</i>	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)	5 (71%)

Similarly, students were split on the issue of being Facebook friends with instructors, with only 54% comfortable with that idea. Very few of the students who were comfortable with these friendships were comfortable initiating these friendships under any circumstances (see Table 2), instead preferring to wait until after the formal student-instructor relationship has ended or following cues from the professor that a student-instructor friendship would be acceptable. When asked about instructor-initiated friendships, 43% were generally comfortable accepting these requests, with 25% only doing so to be polite and 12% declining but nonetheless feeling awkward. Table 2 further shares results of why students would or would not want to be friends with instructors.

Table 2. Student preferences related to Facebook friendship and instructors

	Users (n=162)	Nonusers (n=7)
Initiating friendship with instructors		
<i>Under any circumstances</i>	4 (2%)	1 (14%)
<i>Only if the instructor has indicated willingness</i>	48 (30%)	0 (0%)
<i>Only after class ends</i>	38 (23%)	1 (14%)
<i>Not comfortable</i>	72 (44%)	5 (71%)
Accepting instructor-initiated friendship		
<i>Yes</i>	70 (43%)	2 (29%)
<i>Only out of politeness</i>	41 (25%)	1 (14%)
<i>No, but worried about consequences</i>	19 (12%)	1 (14%)
<i>No, and not worried about consequences</i>	32 (20%)	3 (43%)
Reasons to be friends with instructors		
<i>Learn more about them</i>	44 (27%)	2 (29%)
<i>Interact socially</i>	31 (19%)	0 (0%)
<i>Professional networking</i>	114 (70%)	2 (29%)
<i>Don't want to be friends</i>	41 (25%)	5 (71%)
Reasons to not be friends with instructors		
<i>Maintain privacy</i>	109 (67%)	1 (14%)
<i>Feels inappropriate</i>	109 (67%)	6 (86%)
<i>Not in peer group</i>	63 (39%)	3 (34%)

Open responses were consistent with the forced response items. Students could see some value in the use of a tool like Facebook for group projects and communication, but they generally were not in favor of creating a relationship – albeit virtual – with instructors outside of the classroom setting:

*Facebook, for the most part, is not used in a professional way amongst students. It is a SOCIAL website. Therefore, I think that a lot of students would have to censor what they put on their page if they were friends with professors or other faculty members at their school*

*I think it should be avoided. I do not think it is necessary to use Facebook in higher education, especially with the various forms of communication: blogger, blackboard, tumblr, etc. I think students', as well as professors, social lives should be separate from material learned within a classroom.*

*I think that Facebook is a great tool that is useful for group projects and coordinating events but I don't think it should be made mandatory for all students. I also don't feel comfortable at all becoming friends with professors.*

The biggest challenge for using Facebook was succinctly summed up by one student: *It blurs the lines between things personal and professional.*

## Conclusion

Although the majority of respondents are not against using Facebook for course purposes, they offered the caveat that the use should be student-initiated and not a

mandatory part of their academic endeavors. Becoming friends with professors is not appealing to respondents; they see it as blurring the line between professional and personal

roles. Further, students are aware of the power differences in this relationship, even in a largely social setting such as Facebook. We believe these findings provide a cautionary tale for instructors who might wish to integrate Facebook use in their courses. Using tools like Facebook in higher education settings must be well thought through, and based on our findings, it should never be required.

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