

When Colleges Look Up Applicants on Facebook: The Unspoken New Admissions Test

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Judging by its Facebook network, Hastings High School in New York has one strange senior class. A student named “FunkMaster Floikes” is somehow rubbing shoulders with Lizzie McGuire and the fictional parents from *That ‘70s Show*. Meanwhile Samwise Gams (a nickname of a hobbit in *Lord of the Rings*) is listed as a 2012 alum. At first glance, such social media profiles have all the makings of crude online pranks. But in reality, they have been strategically created by actual Hastings seniors determined to shield themselves from the prying eyes of college admissions officers. “There’s a fairly big party scene there,” says Sam “Samwise” Bogan, who is now a freshman at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania. “When the college search process comes around, people start changing their Facebook name or untagging old photos that they don’t want anyone to see. It’s kind of a ritual.”

Amid decades-old worries about GPAs, resumes, extracurricular activities and campus interviews, today’s college applicants must reckon with a new high-tech dilemma: Are colleges judging me based on my online activities? With top schools closely guarding the reasoning behind admissions decisions, many high schoolers are now assuming the worst and implementing online safeguards that would have never occurred to teenagers five years ago, when Facebook was just a private network and Google was still a noun.

It turns out students have good reason to worry. According to a recent Kaplan Test Prep survey of 350 admissions officers, more than 25 percent of school officials said they had looked up applicants on Facebook or Google. Off campus, a similar percentage of private scholarship organizations also acknowledge researching their applicants online, according to a National Scholarship Providers Association survey. Still, many admissions directors are reluctant to provide specifics in how they scour social feeds. No, many say, they don't look up every applicant online, but yes, if they somehow come across an inappropriate tweet or Facebook post, it could factor into their decision. No, they'd never use it as the deciding factor between two similar applicants, but yes, students should be mindful of what they post.

Such ambiguity has sparked an array of conspiracy theories. Bogan speculates that colleges use the emails they gather on campus tours to later find students online, even if they've changed their names to cover their tracks. Other students openly claim that schools are colluding with Facebook to gain full access to applicants' restricted online profiles. Meanwhile, some students worry that going dark on Facebook will make them seem anti-social, when colleges are actually looking for outgoing applicants.

Numerous students interviewed by TIME ultimately opted for a full social media lockdown, ahead of submitting their applications. Abigail Swift, a senior at BASIS Scottsdale in Arizona, deleted her Facebook account at the start of her junior year, just as she was beginning her college search. She says she plans to revive it in 2013, after being accepted to a university. "I don't want what I put on my Facebook or what I don't put on my Facebook to sway their opinion of me," she says. "I just don't think it's fair for them to base acceptance on that." Many of her classmates agree, and have already restricted privacy settings so that their names don't appear in a public Facebook search. One student went so far as to delete photos taken during 8th grade that didn't reflect the image she is now trying to convey to schools. As young as 16, some students are already making an effort to wipe the digital slate clean. Just in case.

Almost every student has heard a horror story. At the start of the school year, a BASIS college counselor told her class of a student whose acceptance to an elite college was revoked when he was caught badmouthing the school on Facebook. At Williams College, a student's admission was rescinded because he posted disparaging remarks on a college discussion board. At the University of Georgia, when an admissions officer discovered an applicant's racially charged Twitter account, he took a screenshot and added the tweets to the student's application file. Though these are extreme examples, it's difficult to pinpoint when a teenager's social media habits shift from innocuous to alarming in the eyes of admissions officers. Anna Redmond, a 30-year-old former interviewer for Harvard University who blogs about college admissions, says she began regularly googling prospective students years ago (interviews with alumni are a minor component of Harvard's admissions criteria). "You could sometimes find old blog posts where they were

complaining,” she says. “Maybe there was a photo of a kid drinking a beer. I don’t think it’s personally that damning, but somebody else might.”

With the Kaplan survey showing that only 15 percent of colleges abide by a strict social media policy when it comes to applicants, such vetting is often at the discretion of individual officials. College officials point out that time restraints would make it nearly impossible to analyze every applicant through social media. However, some admit to exploring applicants’ social media timelines to make a “high stakes” decision, like awarding a prestigious scholarship, says Nora Barnes, a marketing professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth who has interviewed hundreds of schools about their social media practices. She says the actual number of schools doing online sleuthing could be higher than statistics show, with some wary of being viewed as invasive if they own up to the practice. “It’s a touchy subject in academia,” Barnes says. “It’s common knowledge that employers do it, and people seem to accept that. But somehow higher ed is held to a higher standard.”

Nancy McDuff, associate vice president for admissions and enrollment management at the University of Georgia, says an applicant’s online profile is fair game to be evaluated. “If a student mentions something in their application that isn’t well explained, and you’re looking for more information, you may check their Facebook,” she says. “They’re writing about themselves. That’s no different from what a guidance counselor may write about them when they ask for someone to write a letter of recommendation.” But other admissions directors say including an inconsistent variable like Facebook profiles into the regimented application process can be unfair to students. “We like to get the same information from every candidate,” says Christoph Guttentag, the dean of undergraduate admissions at Duke University. “What one might find [on Facebook] would be close to random. There’s no guarantee that we would be getting the same kind of information between two applicants.”

For students who choose to change their Facebook names to ensure privacy, there can be consequences for violating the company’s official terms of use. About eight percent of the network’s 1 billion accounts are fakes or duplicates, according to summer filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Facebook can ban such users permanently when caught, and the company encourages users to report fake accounts. Some colleges might also view such tactics as unethical: “If a student changes their name on Facebook because they want to hide something, you just wonder whether they want to be at an institution that values an Honor Code,” McDuff says. Back at Hastings High School, students don’t view their actions as unethical. “One way a lot of people in my class coped with the stressful college application process was by being a little bit cynical about it,” Bogan says. “This is just a part of that. It’s kind of a coping mechanism.”

While some students rebel, others adapt. Among many high schoolers, there is a grudging acceptance that these are the new rules of engagement in the 21st-century admissions game. “Maybe it is a little unfair, but at the same time you’re being judged on what you have created for yourself in the past four years of your high school experience,” says Maxton Thoman, a freshman at the University of Alabama. “All that stuff is cumulative, and so is Facebook.” Thoman, who boosted his privacy settings and untagged photos of himself during the college admissions process, continues to keep a close eye on his digital profile at college. He knows that medical schools and later employers may one day be interested in what he’s posted online, so he considers his status updates before spouting off. He and many of his peers, rejecting the culture of oversharing, seem to understand intuitively a fact that has taken some adults years to grasp: “The Internet is written in ink, not in pencil.”