

College Applicants: Be Careful of Your Digital Footprints



THE INS & OUTS OF
COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

TOM
TONNESEN

Let's face it – with the ease of online, digital communications has come a corresponding loss of privacy: Facebook, YouTube, Google, Twitter, Instagram, Bing, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Yahoo, Snapchat, the list is seemingly endless. If you want to know something about someone, the means are readily available. Many of us might lament this loss of privacy, yet we ironically “bite off our nose to spite our face” by voluntarily posting information and our photos on the Internet's every nook and cranny. It is somewhat foolhardy to have confidence that anything is confidential, especially when we choose to blab it all over the Web. Unfortunately, many of us use smart phones to do dumb things.

At this moment, tens of thousands of high school seniors are receiving their admissions decisions from colleges across the country. For those applicants who utilized early action and early decision options, Dec. 15 is the customary reply date. At colleges that employ rolling admissions, decisions are being communicated continuously. A good number of these students will have their hearts broken as they read of their non-acceptance or being “deferred” to the regular decision pool, a type of limbo that may not be finalized until April 1 or, in the case of wait lists, even later. But might there have been other factors besides their GPAs, standardized test scores, class rank, etc., that kept these applicants on the sidelines?

A 2013 survey of 381 college admissions officers conducted by Kaplan Test Prep found that 29 percent of them used Google to learn more about applicants and 31 percent visited applicants' Facebook pages or other social media sites. When Kaplan first conducted this survey in 2008, a mere 10 percent responded “yes” to performing such searches. Clearly, this trend is scaling upward. Even more alarming, 30 percent of the respondents reported finding information that had a negative effect on a student's admission chances. In the past six weeks, such prominent online and print publications as Slate, Bloomberg News, the Washington Post and The New York Times (“They Loved Your G.P.A., Then They Saw Your Tweets”) all have published stories cautioning college applicants to check their digital footprints. Although this practice of checking applicants' online presence is not yet routine, very few schools prohibit it. Some high school students foolishly think that college admission offices are not tech-savvy enough to perform such searches, but the frontline employees in these offices are often in their mid-20s and do not take a back seat to teenagers in this category.

There will be several reading this article who will be angered and offended that some colleges do such “snooping.” (Snooping to some; legitimate research to others.) Remember, though, that what students and others put out there is overwhelmingly public. Colleges are not hacking into your phone calls like the NSA; they merely are viewing information – often for precautionary reasons – that applicants have chosen to make public. Precautionary, you ask? In just the past few years, colleges have been plagued by mass shootings, sexual assaults, racist graffiti, hazing resulting in death, cheating scandals, pseudo-racist hoaxes and omnipresent binge drinking resulting in medical emergencies and fatalities. If, indeed, proclivities toward such violent, self-destructive, anti-social behaviors can be detected, many admissions officers would argue that they have an obligation to consider them for the safety of all. After all, have not the business and public sectors been utilizing such procedures regarding job applicants for years?

Just as precaution is becoming the watchword for colleges and universities, I am suggesting that high school students apply this principle to their social media presence. The number of high school students (and adults, for that matter) who have not done something impetuous can probably be counted on one hand. As one of the aforementioned publications puts it, students should “scrub” their digital identities and “sanitize” their social media accounts. Please consider some of the following suggestions.

Begin by “googling” yourself. Find out what others might learn about you, and do all that you can to offset any negative information and impressions. By all means, scrutinize your Facebook site. Would you be willing to have your parents (or college admissions officers) read all the comments and “likes” you have posted? Those photos of you partying to the hilt, flashing gang signs, holding signs with offensive messages, etc., should be deleted pronto. In fact, it is not a bad

idea to “untag” any photos of you that have been posted, “unfriend” individuals with questionable sites and behavior and simultaneously strengthen your privacy settings. Posting “selfies” has become all the rage; be careful of the image they convey. (Dare I even mention “sexting” here?)

Be sure that you have a socially acceptable email address: luv2Bwasted@gmail.com is inadvisable. When it comes to Twitter and the hashtags you use, take caution in how they are worded. “Tweets” and hashtags can be followed; be aware of the trail that you leave. A sizable number of students have created blogs. The majority of them have a positive theme, but some may touch upon such topics as hating school or a particular teacher, include indiscreet revelations about yourself or others, become annoyingly boastful and/or be peppered with vulgarities. What about any YouTube, Facebook or Instagram videos that were posted by you or others? By all means, perform “surgery” on those that reflect negatively on your behavior and character, including all-out “amputations,” if necessary. Bottom line: Take nothing for granted, especially when it comes to expectations of privacy and confidentiality.

As this article nears its end, it is necessary to conclude with an important addendum. Up to this point, I have painted the Internet and social media sites as the enemy, chock full of poisonous snakes that lurk in every dark corner. On the flip side, though, all the social media outlets mentioned above are being put to excellent use by a growing number of applicants. Communications between high school students and their prospective colleges are increasingly moving beyond mere email to more sophisticated platforms, and students are using Instagram, YouTube and other such sites to send videos of honor ceremonies, community service work, athletic highlights, even recommendations from teachers, counselors, and coaches. Yes, all of these Internet networking tools can be a plus in the college admissions process. I simply do not want any student to receive a rejection or even a deferral and wonder, “What if . . .”?

Tom Tonnesen is the director of College Admissions Pathways (CAPs) and works with students and their families on the entire college search, admissions, test preparation and financial aid processes. He is a member of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Contact information: tonnesen@caps2college.com; 377-0302 (home/office); (262) 389-4588 (cell); or www.caps2college.com.