Facebook, MySpace, and other Online Communities: Are You Putting Yourself At Risk?

If you are a Facebook or MySpace user there are some important questions you should consider when posting information on-line. Yes, on-line communities are a great way to get to know new people and stay in contact with old friends. However, there may be people viewing your homepage whom you don’t wish to share your personal information with (e.g. employers, teachers, parents, or strangers). Information you may have posted on-line could cause you the loss of a job opportunity from potential employers, get you into legal trouble with your University, or even affect your personal safety. Are you putting yourself at risk? Ask yourself the following questions, make any necessary changes to your account, and most importantly, learn how to set your privacy settings so that you can limit who has access to your homepage.

Am I sharing too much personal information?

Sharing too much personal information, including your address, telephone number, birthday, class schedule, etc., can put you at risk for identity theft, stalking, harassment, and other problems. Just because there is a field for certain information, does not mean you have to fill it in.

Are there things on my site (pictures, stories, etc.) that depict or describe illegal activity?

Pictures or other evidence of illegal behavior, such as underage drinking, could put you at risk for legal consequences, including violations of the Student Conduct Code and Housing and Residential Life policies.

Are there things on my site (pictures, stories, etc.) that are inappropriate or potentially embarrassing?

Some of the materials that you or others may post on your site might be of an inappropriate or embarrassing nature and may reflect poorly on you, your friends, family, or on members of organizations with which you are affiliated. It is possible that current or potential employers may have access to some of these sites and may make decisions affecting your employment based on what they see.

Do I have my friend’s permission to post pictures or stories about them online?

It is natural to want to share pictures or stories that include you and your friends online. However, you should check with your friends first to make sure that they do not object to being included in whatever you are posting. You should ask them to show you the same courtesy.

Have I chosen the appropriate privacy setting for my account?

Many sites allow you to select different privacy settings so that you can control who can view your profile, postings, etc. You should make sure you choose the setting that gives you the privacy you desire. Remember that on Facebook.com potentially anyone with a “bemidjistate.edu” account (including all students, faculty, staff and alumni) can access your profile.

Have I read the terms and conditions of use for the Web site I am using?

It is very important that you read the terms and conditions for any Web site where you create an account. Several sites, including Facebook.com, retain ownership of any information that you post on your profile and can use the material any way they want, whenever they want.

Should I just stay away from them completely? These online communities sound scary.

This information is not intended to scare you away from online communities. The University just wants to make sure that you make choices that allow you to experience the benefits of these sites and avoid the negatives.