

AS SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE HAS BECOME MORE widespread and mature, many institutions of higher learning are recognizing not only the opportunities but also the risks associated with social media. Almost 10 years after Facebook was launched, more than 98 percent of universities and colleges in the United States have a presence on the social networking site, according to a recent study from University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Other popular social media activities of choice include YouTube, Twitter, blogging, and podcasting. Institutions use these social media tools to both recruit and evaluate potential applicants as well as to communicate with current students. And education abroad and international student service offices are no exception to this trend.

“There is a potential risk to the university’s brand. When I first started, I believed that social media should be totally dynamic and free, but I’ve changed my mind,” says Jessica Winters, head of marketing and recruitment at University of Groningen in The Netherlands.

She shared an example where an international student assistant posted a link on the university Facebook page to his personal blog that ranted about a local realtor. “I told him, ‘You are posting this in the name of the university, so the university can be held liable for this,’” she says.

That is not to say Winters doesn’t think the benefits of social media still outweigh the potential risks. However, she believes that institutions and their employees need to be conscious and strategic of how they use social media.

“Regardless of whether you are on social media, people are going to be talking about you anyway. It’s easy for these discussions to start a life of their own. It allows you to respond (to potential situations). Plus, it’s still one of the best ways to create a community among your students,” she says.



**Social media is all the rage—
but there are risks that
institutions should prepare for
to use social media
responsibly.**



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BY CHARLOTTE WEST



Creating a Social Media Policy

With nearly a decade of experience working with social media in international higher education, Winters has become increasingly aware of the importance of creating guidelines for both employee and student use of social media.

“A social media policy protects your university, your employees, and your users (the students). It will give you something to fall back on in case something goes wrong. But we’ve never actually had issues that were so big that we had to grab out social media policy and smack someone in the head with it.

Most people are well meaning, but they need guidelines,” she says.

For example, employees at the University of Groningen are asked not to tweet about anything confidential as well as put a disclaimer on their personal accounts that their opinions are their own and not those of the university.

Mandy Reinig, director of international education at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, shares Winter’s belief in the necessity of a social media policy.

“The policy doesn’t need to be extremely detailed but can simply be a statement about what is appropriate and what isn’t and the consequences for inappropriate posts. I think the more general you make it the better since social media is ever-changing, and it would be extremely difficult to have a policy that encompasses everything social media can and will do,” Reinig explains.

Jeremy Johnson, vice president of development of study abroad provider Academic Programs International (API), adds that it isn’t necessary for international offices to reinvent the wheel. “Your campus communications department likely already has such a policy that can be adopted or amended,” he explains.

“A lot of your legal cover can be maintained by borrowing from the communications policies of your college or university, seeking advice from your legal department, and reviewing policies of similar insti-

tutions/organizations. This can certainly be helpful regarding the (intentional or accidental) sharing of personal information.”

He adds that effective social media policy generally comes down to common sense: “Before you post something, ask yourself—is this appropriate? Will I cause offense? Is this in keeping with my office or university mission? If not...don’t post.”

Winters also recommends that institutions develop policies about how their institutional logos may be used. It is easy for students to use the university logo on personal pages, which can easily be mistaken for being an official page. A written policy gives institutions something to point to if they ask that a logo be removed from an external website.

Mitigating Negative Comments

Many institutions are also concerned that establishing a social media presence will open them up to criticism. As Reinig says, even negative comments can be turned positive depending on how the institution responds to them: “For example, if you take a negative incident and demonstrate how you took swift and appropriate action, your institution/office could be seen in a positive light even though something negative happened.”

And if you have a social media presence already, you can be proactive. “You can mitigate some of what is being posted about and also assist in promoting your brand by posting yourself,” says Reinig.

In addition to creating guidelines for employee and student use, international offices might consider creating acceptable use policies for users who post on their social media sites, as well as guidelines about how the institution will respond to any negative comments.

“While you never want to stop someone from expressing their opinion, even if it is negative, there is an appropriate and an inappropriate way to go about that. If someone posts something positive or negative, the institution should have a policy about how it will respond. Sometimes this means taking the conversation offline. It also may mean having statements on your sites about appropriate language,” Reinig says.

She adds that institutions should never delete negative comments unless they are offensive or could be viewed as harassment.

For its part, API has developed codes of conduct that detail what constitutes acceptable communica-

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Five Tips for Mastering Social Media



Don't try and start using every social media platform at once.

Pick one or two and become good and create a presence with those before jumping into others.



Have social media guidelines, at least for your office.

This should be for posts and responses generated by your office. It doesn't need to be detailed but puts everyone on even ground when it comes to the social media presence you want to create. If your institution has a policy, it can simply be this same policy if you want.



Remember nothing you post is truly private.

Every post, every tweet, and every picture you post can be seen by someone. Keep this in mind when you post.



Use common sense.

If you wouldn't want to read that post or you don't think your grandma would approve of it, then you probably shouldn't post it.



Finally, don't forget to monitor.

This not only means what you are posting on your sites but also using analytics, such as Facebook Insights, to monitor which posts and what types of posts are working best for your office and institution.

Tips provided by Mandy Reinig,
director of international education
at St. Mary's College of Maryland

tion between users of the site for areas where the organization actively monitors dialogue and/or has some degree of editorial control, such as its Facebook pages, groups, and blogs.

Johnson also suggests attempting to engage disgruntled users offline, rather than just banning them from the site, if at all possible.

Copyright Infringement and Site Terms and Conditions

Other potential risks of using social media involve violating image copyright.

“Everyone that posts should be aware that not all images are free. Just because you saw them posted online, on Facebook or Pinterest, doesn’t mean you can repost or should repost. For example, people who have posted images owned by

Getty are now being sued for copyright infringement since Getty

owns the rights to the photos and they didn’t have permission to post. Some of these fines are in the thousands of dollars or more,” Reinig warns.

She advises that if institutions are posting photos to their page, they should make sure either they took the photos they are posting or they have the photographer’s permission to post. “This could be as simple as a written e-mail or a disclaimer on your website for photo contests or events saying submitted photos are giving the institution the right to post them as they see fit simply by the act of their submitting the photo,” she says.

Johnson adds it is helpful to develop and/or review terms of use for any types of contests or promotions you choose to run, such as a photo contest or scholarship promotion. He recommends a book called *Navigating Social Media Legal Risks: Safeguarding Your Business* by Robert McHale as a resource.

Institutions should also be aware that most social media sites have their own terms and conditions. For example, some institutions might assume that a Facebook page is the same as a Facebook profile. A page is intended for commercial or institutional use, while a profile is an individual account. An institution or



international office that has a Facebook profile rather than a page violates the Facebook terms of service, and they run the risk of having the profile shut down, consequently losing all the friends associated with the account.

Training Staff and Students

Johnson, Winters, and Reinig all emphasize the importance of providing social media training for not only employees and student workers, but also the general student population.

Johnson alluded to the importance of having a staff member who is well versed in social media involved with outreach efforts. “Too many think they can plug anyone into the role (of social media manager) with no guidance and expect them to do well,” he says.

Reinig also points to the importance of having a professional staff member monitor all social media activity, especially if student workers or volunteers are involved: “If you have a page or other social media account and have students running it for you, you need to be careful and make clear what is appropriate and what isn’t to post. Having clear guidelines for them and helping them understand they are not posting on behalf of themselves but the office and/or institution is key...You should never simply expect a student to completely control your social media content without feedback from you.”

Reinig and Winters both offer workshops for all students in how to manage their digital footprints. Winters

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described a social media marketing class she taught in Denmark. Prior to meeting the students for the first time, she researched their social media presence, which she presented to them on the first day of class. "I could paint a picture of about two thirds of them. And I'm not the only one doing this," she explains.

For students studying abroad, remind them that different countries may have different laws regarding freedom of expression and it's important to be mindful of potential ramifications of their posts. "I advise all institutions to be honest with their students about the long-reaching ramifications of using social media especially while abroad. Some students, not all, feel invincible while traveling abroad since they are relishing in their new-found independence and experiencing new and exciting things. While we want them to be able to tell others about their experiences and express what they are going through, they also need to be aware that what they post can have consequences. Also, helping them understand what is appropriate and what isn't is also important as is explaining how privacy settings work," Reinig says.

But sometimes even privacy settings are not enough. "Students and employees should understand that even comments they post on their personal pages can affect their job and their studies. Even if you have the highest privacy settings, comments and posts are still being posted on the internet where someone could potentially find them. My principle on this and advice I give to people is to not post anything you wouldn't say to someone's face or that your grandma wouldn't approve of," Reinig continues.

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