

Could your Digital Footprint Affect your College Admissions?

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Harvard University made national news in June when it rescinded its offers of admission to at least 10 graduating high school seniors who had posted offensive messages on a Facebook chat. While this action caught media attention because it involved a fairly large cohort of students engaged in the same activity, it is not uncommon for individual students to have their college acceptances revoked when admissions officials become aware of behavior that does not meet the standards that were assumed when the decisions to admit these students were made.

Most colleges require students to submit final transcripts at the end of their senior year, and these are reviewed by admissions officers. Lower-than-typical grades, as well as any disciplinary actions, are likely to be questioned, and offers of admission may be revoked if there are no satisfactory explanations for what went wrong. Online behavior is not routinely checked at that time for newly admitted students unless something or someone alerts the admissions staff to issues. But this does happen, and the Harvard incident suggests that you should continue to be extremely careful about how your online posts and photos reflect upon you.

For students who have not yet applied to or been accepted by a college, it is even more important that you are aware of the extent to which your online behavior can affect admissions decisions. If you assume that your posts are private and that college admissions officials will never see them, you might take more risks online than you would in other social situations. But there is little on the Internet that you can be sure will remain private, and the footprint you leave there can definitely affect college admissions decisions. Some students try to erase embarrassing photos and posts before they apply to college, but these may have been copied by others and might still be available online.

The use of the Internet by admissions officers to learn more about their applicants is growing rapidly. A recent survey by Kaplan Test Prep found that 40% of college admissions officers reported visiting applicants' social media pages, in contrast to a decade ago when it was closer to 10%. In addition to reviewing social media sites, 29% of those in the recent survey reported Googling an applicant to glean more information. Students applying for prestigious scholarships may receive special scrutiny in order to determine worthiness for the awards.

Admissions officers may search the Internet for positive or negative reasons, and what they find may positively or

negatively affect their decisions. For example, they may want to check how prestigious an award was or see how engaged a student was in a particular activity. If they find that a student understated his or her accomplishments, the additional information may have a positive impact, while a denial of admission could result if it's discovered that the student falsified or greatly exaggerated his or her achievements. Be aware that jealous classmates or their parents might even alert college officials to an application that includes exaggerated claims and falsehoods, so be sure you are completely honest in the picture you present of yourself.

Of course, the most negative consequences can result when admissions officers discover photos of drug or alcohol use, other inappropriate behavior, or racial prejudice. You may think you were just fooling around with such posts, but college admissions officials will take them seriously.

After working so hard throughout high school to gain the achievements necessary to be admitted to the college of your choice, don't let your online activities stop you from achieving that goal. Whenever you post a comment or a photo on a social media site or in a chat room, consider whether you will be embarrassed if others see it. Post only what you wouldn't mind your parents, teachers, even Grandma, and, yes, those college admissions officers, seeing. And if your friends post comments or photos of you that could prove embarrassing, don't hesitate to ask them to remove them. You might also remind them to be conscious of the consequences that their own digital footprints could have on their college admissions. ■

