

How to sabotage your chance of getting into college

Watch what you post online because your 'digital footprint' can pose risks

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It's not a new warning to young people — but with social media use up during the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, it may be more important than ever: Be careful what you post. This piece, with advice from college admissions directors, explains why — and it is written directly to students who are applying to college or some day will.

It was written by Brennan Barnard, director of college counseling and outreach at the Derryfield School in New Hampshire and college admissions program adviser with the [Making Caring Common](#) project at Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is co-author of [“The Truth About College Admission: A Family Guide to Getting In and Staying Together.”](#)

By Brennan Barnard

Are you one click away from sabotaging your admission to college? According to a [recent survey](#), you could be. For over a decade, Kaplan, the educational services company, has been conducting an annual survey of admission officers to track trends in policies and practices. Since 2008, it has explored the role of social media in application review, and not surprisingly, it has been growing every year. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of admission officers in the latest survey said it is “fair game” for reviewers to visit applicants’ social media pages.

Just as the popularity of various social media platforms (Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, etc.) [continues to expand among young people](#), the pandemic has [increased their use by admission offices in recruiting applicants](#). This means that admission professionals are spending more time in this space trying to connect with students and encourage them to apply. While they may not be actively checking your social media profiles — though some are — you cannot control what they stumble upon.

Those reviewing your application don’t necessarily have nefarious intentions; they are not always looking for dirt. But, let’s say you mention on your application an award, club or organization with which they are not familiar. A quick Google search for that award, club in which you participate or organization where you may volunteer, could surface something you would rather they not see — and cannot un-see.

Kaplan’s survey also found that 36 percent of the admission officers who responded not only think it is “fair game,” but do visit applicants’ social media profiles. Of that 36 percent, 17 percent do it “often.” You may be thinking, “But my profile is private and only my friends can see what I post,” or “I doubt the colleges I am applying to are part of that 17 percent.” Think again. Do you want to risk potentially negating all the hard work you have invested throughout high school with one thoughtless post or comment? The reality is that many admission officers are right out of college, often in their early 20s. Guess where a lot of them spend their time? You’ve got it ... social media.

If you learned that admission officers checked the social media of *all* applicants, would your posts or behavior change? If you answered yes, it might be time to reconsider how you approach your online presence. The truth is, your “digital footprint” can be deep and lasting. Sandro Galea, dean and professor at the Boston University School of Public Health, [recently wrote](#) that social media has “incentivized some of the most counterproductive forms of human engagement, along with habits of mind which have not served us well.” “It has amplified some of the very conditions which can sway our decision-making off the road of reason and into a ditch,” he said.

Angel Pérez, chief executive officer of the National Association for College Admission Counseling asks students: “If I were to log on to your social media right now, would you be embarrassed by what I saw? If so, you probably have some cleaning up to do. Regardless of whether admission officers look at social media, this is a great time to reflect on your social media footprint and be strategic about what you post.” He added: “I know employers who look at the social media feeds of potential interns and employees. There are scholarship providers who look at them too.” Pérez said that taking down a post does not mean it disappears. “Students should be judicious about what they share on social media. It could limit their opportunities in the future,” he said.

Kim DeRego, associate vice provost for enrollment management and marketing at the University of New Hampshire, said, “One thing students need to realize is that by posting anywhere on the Internet — a post or even a comment on someone else’s social media post — they are effectively publishing their opinions or actions.” “If someone raises a flag about a student’s social media presence, colleges will take a look,” said Kortni Campbell, the vice chancellor for admission and financial aid at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, who has worked a small private college and a public state university. “If we encounter something negative, inappropriate, or inflammatory, it will likely impact a decision on an application,” she said, adding: “Colleges are not simply admitting students to our classrooms, we are admitting them to our communities. Who you are, what you think and say, and (yes) what you post matters.”

The “who you are” is more important than many applicants think. It is not just what you do or how you have achieved academically, athletically, or artistically, but also your [character that counts in college admission](#). Unfortunately, the tools that admission officers have with which to assess character are limited. “That some college admission officers are seeking to glean insights about students’ character by combing their social media posts is concerning,” said Richard Weissbourd, faculty director of [Making Caring Common](#), a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is the lead author of the “[Turning the Tide](#)” report, a collaborative statement from admission leaders that seeks to reduce achievement pressure, emphasize ethical engagement, and level the playing field in college admission. “It’s also a reflection of the failures of our current character assessment tools,” he said. “We’re using too many outdated character assessment tools that aren’t based on research, creative thinking or a commitment to equity.”

Until admission offices are equipped to effectively assess these attributes in applicants, he said, they are likely to increasingly default to drawing conclusions from resources like social media. “What you post allows others to form opinions of who you are, both positively and negatively,” said T.J. Snowden, director of admissions and recruitment at Morehouse College. “The ability for people to create, or curate, a desired story/persona through social media speaks to what the creator (the student) believes to be important. The story you create is your digital reputation, or how the student shows up in online/virtual spaces. That story, that reputation, should be valued the same way you want others to view you in the physical (in-person) sense.”

This caution is not limited to the application process. Every year, there are high-profile cases of newly admitted students sharing a [meme](#), posting a picture, or making a [statement](#) online that is inappropriate and leads to their offer of admission being revoked.

Before you snap, post, share, or comment, run it by the “grandparent gauge” or “counselor caliper” (copyrights pending). Would you want your grandmother to read or see what you are putting online? If the teachers and counselor writing your college recommendations had access to your social media posts, would it leave them with a less favorable impression of you? Be smart about your digital footprint and how you interact online. Not just for college admission, but because it is the right thing to do. Colleges want to enroll people of character, and we also need communities — online and in-person — that cultivate kindness and citizenship. Happy scrolling.