

Surprise! Social media can help, not hurt, your college prospects

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

35% of college admission officers say they check students' social media, according to survey
47% said social media positively impacted application; 42% said it was a negative factor

(CNN) — By now, the idea that some college admissions officers might check an applicant's social media accounts shouldn't sound too far-fetched.

With the explosion of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and all the others, there have been plenty of stories about how a student's social media could hurt their chances of getting into the school of their choice – enough accounts to worry teenagers that what they post could come back to haunt them at college time.

But what teens – and their parents – might not be aware of is how often college admissions officers say social media positively impacts a prospective student's application, as opposed to reducing their chances of admission.

Thirty-five percent of the 365 college admissions officers who participated in a telephone survey by the educational services company Kaplan Test Prep said they check social media during the admissions process. That number is down from 40% last year but dramatically up from 10% in 2008, when Kaplan started asking the question about social media as part of its annual survey.

Of those who said they look at a student's social media networks, a larger number said the review benefited the applicant: Forty-seven percent said what they found had a positive impact on prospective students versus 42% who said what they discovered had a negative impact.

One example, according to Yariv Alpher, executive director of research for Kaplan Test Prep, is a student who took to Twitter to describe facilitating a panel on LGBTQ rights. It was not something the student had mentioned on her application, he said.

“There are a lot of positives here,” Alpher said. “It shows diversity, it shows initiative, it shows leadership, and it stood out positively to an admissions officer.”

Colleges today, he said, are very mindful of who they admit because they think of the incoming class as a community. “Getting that better idea of who the entering class is pretty important to them,” he said.

There's no question that grades, test scores, recommendations and activities, the traditional factors, are overwhelmingly going to impact a student's admission, said Alpher. But when admissions officers are looking for something more to get a sense of a student, social media can provide some additional clues.

"This, I think, is what we're also hearing between the lines is the need to get a slightly more nuanced picture of an applicant and that social media can actually be very helpful with that because it's unstructured," he said. "There's a degree of being unscripted" that stands out to admissions officers.

A 'virtual first impression'

Alan Katzman is founder and chief executive officer of Social Assurity, which provides social media education to students for college and career readiness.

He and his colleagues encourage students to create profiles on LinkedIn, a network traditionally used by working professionals, to help an admissions officer get a better sense of who they are and what skills they bring to the table.

"We kind of encourage them to focus along the lines of teamwork, time management (and) problem-solving," he said. "We want them to get self-reflective and authentic and not see LinkedIn as a résumé, but see it as really a portfolio of who they are as a person."

Based on feedback from students he's worked with, Katzman said that about 80% who create LinkedIn profiles and include them on their applications report that someone from the college they're applying to has looked at their profile. (LinkedIn is one of the few social media platforms for which you get notifications about who has reviewed your profile.)

There is no way to know whether the LinkedIn profile swayed school admissions officers, Katzman said. But he says the students who said someone from a university or college looked at their LinkedIn profiles usually report that they got into that particular school.

"It goes into this whole fact of, if you're offering it up, they're going to click," Katzman said. "The link is right there in front of them."

And, it can be influential, he believes. "It gives you a window into that applicant. It gives you a lot more data on which to assess that applicant than you can within the four walls of the common application."

Another way social media is playing a role in the admissions process, Katzman says, is during alumni interviews. These are interviews of prospective applicants conducted by graduates of the college or university who happen to live in the same area as the student.

The interviewer very often tells the student they have checked them out on social media, he said.

“The student didn’t invite them to do that,” Katzman said. “This is something that is offered by the interviewer, ‘I checked you out. I have a few questions, but I learned a lot about you,’ so it helps set that virtual first impression.”

Most admissions officers: Social media off-limits

The majority of college admissions officers say they do not check an applicant’s social media, according to the Kaplan survey.

Beth Wiser, executive director of admissions for the University of Vermont, said that as a matter of policy, her school does not review a student’s social media accounts.

That said, if a student includes a link to a digital destination, a YouTube account or possibly a social media platform, the reader of the application may check out that link, she said.

“It’s not possible to check every single one, but there are times where we are able to do that,” Wiser said.

She offered the example of a student who was very interested in organic gardening and organic farming who hoped to major in food systems at the university. She built an electronic profile around the work she had done in that area and shared that digital destination on her application.

“It did show a level of engagement that she’s really thought out well what her future plans are and how the university’s academic course of study really fit nicely with ... things she’s already doing,” Wiser said.

When social media can hurt

As anyone knows after going through the college admissions process, either themselves or indirectly through their children, the process is already daunting, with pressure to have terrific grades, test scores, recommendations and a slew of unique activities to set you apart from the immense competition.

There is some concern on the part of people close to the admissions process that if students realize social media can help them get into the school of their choice, they may add perfecting their accounts to the already long list of things they need to do for college.

Kids should still be able to be kids on social media, Wiser said. “We want to make sure that students still have a means to have fun and be able to connect socially and not have to worry about ‘how I am presenting myself for a college,’ except for the fact of just make sure you’re not posting things that you’ll regret.”

Though more admissions officers in the Kaplan survey said social media positively impacted a student's application, there were still 42% who said it made a negative impression.

Katzman tells parents and students that it's not a photo of the student with a beer bottle that is likely to hurt their college chances but something controversial that they might have said or posted.

"We see this a lot, just emotional outbursts, 'I can kill my teacher,' or quoting a song lyric that somebody might not recognize as being a song lyric and thinking it's you, and it could have a racial tone to it," he said.

Those first impressions are strong. When an admissions officer sees something controversial or offensive, they might think, "wow, I don't want this person here," he said.

It may be hard to believe in the digital age that many students still don't necessarily realize that everything they post is permanent, Katzman said. "And if it's permanent, it's discoverable, and the potential audience is anyone in the world with an interest in finding it."

Monitoring a student's social engagement with colleges

What students might also not realize is how admissions officers go on social media to see what prospective students are saying about their institutions, said Alpher, of Kaplan Test Prep.

This can help or hurt a student, he said.

For instance, on the negative side, if a student takes a tour, posts a photo from the school's cafeteria with not very flattering words about the food offerings and tags the school, there is a chance someone at the university will see that post, he said.

If someone in the admissions office sees the post, they could take it as low enthusiasm on the part of the student for the school, and that could impact admission, Alpher said.

Katzman said many schools across the country are very concerned about yield, ensuring that they ultimately end up with enough students who were accepted and who choose to enroll. If a school has two candidates with the exact same credentials but there are signs – including through social media – that one of the candidates is more excited and engaged with the school, the more enthusiastic and engaged candidate may win admission.

He encourages students he works with to engage with universities through social media but also warns them to be mindful that when they engage, someone from the university could visit their profiles.

As an example, Katzman, who follows about 100 colleges on Instagram, noted how Dartmouth had posted a photo on Instagram of its library and how someone commented on the post about how much he loved the place.

When Katzman checked that student's profile, one of the first pictures he noticed was the student wearing a Harvard shirt that said "Go Crimson." If someone from Dartmouth's admissions office sees that post, they could question how much the student's heart is really set on Dartmouth, Katzman said.

This doesn't mean students shouldn't be themselves when they are engaging on social media with universities. In fact, admissions officers are schooled enough to understand what is authentic communication and what is not.

Still, a student might want to make sure a post that seems good at the moment might not be the best in the long run.

"You may get your likes. You may get your shares, but you may also get somebody reading more than you intended to in that" post, Alpher said.

"Be mindful of what you put out there. ... So when in doubt, leave it out." Do you think college admissions officers should check students' social media profiles?