

# How Can Students Use Social Media Effectively for College Admissions?

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It's almost impossible to picture how college admissions officers became familiar with applicants as recently as a decade ago: the information to evaluate applicants consisted of hard-copy materials mailed by the student, school, and recommenders, supplemented by an in-person interview.

How our world has changed!

Over the past few years, colleges and students alike have been increasingly using social media in the admissions process. How can we guide our students to make the most of the following trends?

## 1. Social Media helps colleges communicate information to students

Colleges' social media presence on Twitter and YouTube actually exceeds that of college students! According to the recently-released *2013-2014 Almanac of the Chronicle of Higher Education*, 95% of all colleges reported a presence on Facebook in 2012, ranging from 98% for private research universities to 92% for public research universities. Eight-five percent reported a presence on Twitter and 83% on YouTube.

One of the earliest adopters of social media is Matt McGann, MIT's director of admissions and a 2000 alum. Matt began writing a blog in 2004, and was influential in humanizing the institutional face of MIT.

Here is Matt's illustrated portrait on the MIT blog—looks like someone students could relate to, right? Matt interacted with students on sites they most frequented—often on *collegeconfidential.com*. In 2013,



he blogged the following post, a mixture of informal updates about MIT and a casual comment reflecting Boston's pride in the Red Sox.

AUG 28 2013 • Your Questions

*I can't believe I've been blogging as an admissions officer at MIT for 9 years. Over that time, I've periodically opened up the*

*comments to your questions, and then tried to answer them (this is now much easier with the advent of threaded comments)...Let me give you a brief update from campus...The Class of 2017 has arrived and is doing Orientation. Classes will begin next Wednesday. The Red Sox are in first place. And MIT Admissions recruitment travel season has begun, with our first meeting tonight in Orlando; we'll finish in a month in Chicagoland.*

## What Can IECs Advise Students To Do?

Although students are savvy with their smartphones, their ability to research colleges through the web seems more limited. IECs can show students how colleges use social media platforms. Colleges have invested time, money, and staff to develop an identity on Facebook, Twitter and blogs in order to communicate their "brand" as well as timely information on their academics and activities. Students can learn about a college's priorities and flavor by becoming familiar with their online presence.

I advise students to "follow" the colleges that appeal to them the most, in order to understand each college and differentiate among the schools. This information can help students decide which colleges they should visit and, eventually, apply to. If you feel your high school student would use Twitter and Facebook responsibly, and does not currently have accounts, demonstrate how to obtain valuable information through colleges' social media. A side benefit is that more and more colleges, such as University of Rochester, are tracking whether students follow their college on Twitter, blogs or Facebook as a sign of "demonstrated interest."

## 2. Social Media provides colleges with access to students' personal information

The growing practice among admissions officers of scrutinizing applicants' Facebook pages and Twitter feeds has stirred up some controversy, and a lot of stress among potential applicants. According to this year's Kaplan Test Prep Survey, the percentage of admissions officers who have Googled prospective students or visited their Facebook or other social networking pages has reached an all-time high: 29% and 31%, respectively. "It's something that is becoming more ubiquitous and less looked down upon," as Christine Brown, the executive director of K-12 and college prep programs at Kaplan Test Prep, said in a recent *New York Times* article entitled *They Loved Your GPA. Then They Saw Your Tweets*.

In fact, according to Cindy Boyles Crawford, senior assistant director of admissions at the University of Georgia, many see social media as the "true view" of a student's character. And even though an admissions office may not always look at students' accounts, other college departments such as athletics and financial aid offices might.

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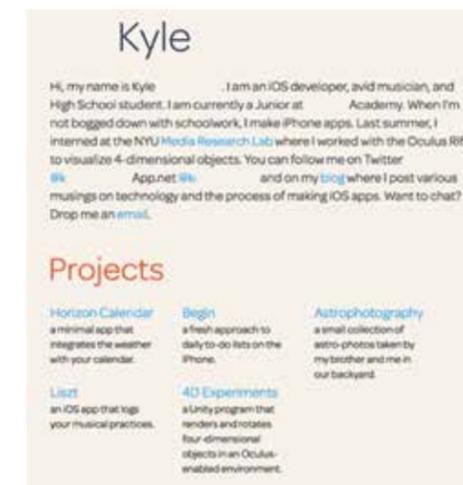
Tell your students to tidy up their social media footprint! The first thing students should do is Google themselves. Last summer, I suggested this to students who were attending my summer workshop on Interview Skills; they were shocked at how easy it was to find inappropriate information about themselves that they had considered private and inaccessible. I explained that it's important to treat their social media accounts as if they are virtual interviews.

On Facebook, students should review and set their privacy settings. Tell your students to pay close attention to who is allowed to see their wall, photos, and likes, as well as who can tag them in photos. On Twitter, encourage students to make sure their handle is clean and professional, and to delete old, inappropriate tweets. On all social media, students should review and clean up their pictures, and remove everything embarrassing or inappropriate. Students should ask themselves: "if my Facebook or Twitter account were the only view the admissions office has of my personality, would I feel confident about my admissions chances?" It may even be advisable to consider shutting down a Facebook profile or Twitter account altogether and starting fresh.

## 3. Social Media provides students with the opportunity to share their accomplishments.

Creative, enterprising students can use their own social media to communicate their unique talents, interests, and personality.

Here's a great example of a junior who developed his website as his



"landing page," with links to his blog, Twitter profile, and email!

Kyle has a passion and knack for developing iPhone apps that receive millions of downloads and rave reviews. The clean, elegant design of his

website mirrors his quality of thought and the functionality of his apps.

One click from his homepage takes you to Horizon Calendar, a unique app that displays the user's calendar events with the forecasted local weather. Another click takes you to his blog, where he opens the window on the process and challenges of app development.

Yet another click takes you to his Twitter feed, and here's a sample entry:

*Took out the telescope over the weekend, here's a shot of M81/M82. I think it's my best one yet.*



Within a minute, an admissions officer could see a creative, intellectual teen with genuine passions for math and science—from a more human angle than his application.

## What Can IECs Advise Students To Do?

As IECs, we can think creatively of ways our students can make the best use of social media. Here are a few examples from my own consulting experience. David established himself as a professional-level magician by the age of fifteen through attending magic camp every summer and constant practice. He enjoyed sharing his magic with his family and friends. We brainstormed how he could start a business to provide magic shows for parties and restaurants, through the use of a website to advertise his services.

Another student, Stacy, developed a program at her high school to certify seniors in CPR and raise awareness of heart safety issues. I worked with her to build a website through which she could blog about heart safety, and incorporate a PayPal link to raise money to buy defibrillators for her school. She is now using the site to establish a Safe Hearts Club at the University of Michigan.

As with any other aspect of their lives, students have the opportunity to make good or bad choices in their use of technology. They can take advantage of the power of social media to extend their influence in the world, promote their values, and share their knowledge. A student's identity on Facebook, Twitter, and blogs can provide an extra lens into his or her life and personality that doesn't necessarily come through on a college application. It's good practice for the future, as they'll soon need to use LinkedIn to find internships and jobs!

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