



## College Admissions: The Complete Guide to Social Media

As you prep for college, admissions officers are watching. According to a 2016 Kaplan Test Prep survey, 40% of college admissions officers browse social media profiles to learn more about admissions candidates\*. That means it's pretty likely that decision-makers at colleges and scholarship-granting organizations are taking a peek at your profiles.

Some students take control by shutting down Facebook, Twitter—everything—entirely. Some try hiding their online identities. You can, however, continue to be yourself on social media with just a few extra filters.

### The Role of Social Media in College Admissions

According to the 365 colleges across the United States we recently spoke with, 35 percent tell us that they have visited an applicant's social media page, such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter to learn more about them\*. While that percentage is slightly down from last year's record high of 40 percent, it's still a lot higher than what it was when we first asked this question in 2008—when social

media was in its early stages and Facebook was pretty much the only game in town. Consider that Twitter didn't launch until 2006; and Instagram wasn't around until 2010. Oh, and hashtags weren't a thing until 2007.

Here's where the data gets even more interesting: Of that 35 percent, nearly half say that what they found has had a positive impact on prospective students—up from 37% last year. On the flip side, 42% say that what they found had a negative impact, up from 37% last year. Kaplan's survey also found that of the admissions officers who use social media to help them make decisions, 25% do so "often"—more than double the 11% who said they did it "often" in last year's survey.

### Positive Social Media

- "One student described on Twitter that she facilitated an LGBTQ panel for her school, which wasn't in her application. This made us more interested in her overall and encouraged us to imagine how she would help out the community."
- "There's such a negative stereotype of social media that people often forget about the positive effects of it. One student had won an award and had a picture with their principal on their personal page, and it was nice to see."
- "One young lady started a company with her mom, so it was cool to visit their website," added another admissions officer.

### Negative Social Media

- "We found a student's Twitter account with some really questionable language. It wasn't quite racist, but it showed a cluelessness that you'd expect of a privileged student who hadn't seen much of the world. It really ran counter to the rest of her application."
- "A young man who had been involved in a felony did not disclose his past, which is part of our admissions process. His social media page shared his whole story. If he had been forthcoming, we would not have rescinded his acceptance offer, but we had to."
- One admissions officer said that pictures of a student "brandishing weapons" gave him pause when deciding

whether to admit the applicant.

## Should You Post That?

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Here are the top five things you should ask yourself before you post:



### **DOES THIS POST MAKE ME LOOK LIKE COLLEGE MATERIAL?**

When a college admissions officer or the Kiwanis Club's scholarship committee reads your status update, is it a positive reflection on you? Make sure you are appropriately attired in all your pics and that you come across as level-headed in your posts. Maintain A+ spelling and grammar, and if you express an opinion, make sure it's one that can be backed up with sound facts and intelligent analysis.



### **WOULD I SAY THIS ON TELEVISION?**

You are, in effect, broadcasting your personality on your social media accounts, so watch the language, seal up the mug shots, and mind your manners. Period. About the worst thing you can do on social media on your path to college is trash talk a school you've attended, a school you want to go to, your teachers, or your boss. Admissions officers consider these comments a red flag.



### **DOES THIS POST COURT EXCESSIVE COMMENTING?**

Rethink posts that are likely to trigger a barrage of crazy or controversial comments that you'll have to edit out of your timeline. There are much better ways to spend your time—like building your LinkedIn profile  
[

[possible/2015/05/15/linkedin-the-new-social-media-hotspot-for-high-school/](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/possible/2015/05/15/linkedin-the-new-social-media-hotspot-for-high-school/)].



### **IS THIS FUNNY? IS IT OFFENSIVE? DOES IT REQUIRE TOO MUCH EXPLANATION?**

What's funny to one person can rub someone else the wrong way. If you think you're going to have to explain or defend your post, it's probably best to pass. Furthermore, a vague or potentially offensive post runs the risk of triggering that onslaught of comments you just tried to avoid—comments that are all but guaranteed to further obscure your meaning or end up putting words in your mouth.



### **DOES EVERYONE NEED TO READ THIS?**

If the answer is no, don't post. It's fine to share personal news, but choose your words carefully. What might be intended as inspirational can be interpreted as bragging, especially if you're posting about your high school accomplishments. One great alternative way to share positive news on social media is by expressing your support for an important organization or social cause. Keep friends looped in on this kind of info and give them a chance to get involved in positive ways that also make them look good to college admissions officers.

## **Cautionary Tales: Facing the Consequences**

Social media can help and hurt you in all stages of the admissions process. Just because you have your application sent in or have received an acceptance offer does not mean you no longer need to exercise discretion over your social media accounts. Take these two cautionary tales as examples.

## Revoked

Harvard University took some drastic actions earlier this month when it was discovered that nearly a dozen of their incoming freshmen were posting some truly deplorable photos and memes on a private Facebook page. In their posts, students mocked the disabled, the Holocaust victims, and other groups in some of the most mean-spirited ways possible. Apparently, someone with a guilty conscience in the group alerted the school's newspaper. When the administration found out, it revoked the admissions offers of the offending parties involved.

As Yariv Alpher, Kaplan Test Prep's executive director of research said, "The Harvard situation should underscore to college applicants that the application process doesn't end after you've accepted an admissions offer. Administrators and college students remain deeply protective of their school's brand and are willing to take measures to defend it." There are some valuable lessons in this for college applicants. Among them: Think before you post...or in this case, don't post at all.

## Rescinding a Letter of Recommendation

At a high school in Massachusetts, this midyear report is causing a real uproar, as [a teacher rescinded her letter of recommendation \[https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/07/teacher-suspended-withdrawing-college-recommendation-letter-student-who-displayed\]](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/07/teacher-suspended-withdrawing-college-recommendation-letter-student-who-displayed) after a student she had written one for created a swastika out of tape and propped it up on a garbage bin. For unknown reasons, the teacher who did this was disciplined.

This action taken by the school against a member of its faculty is coming under criticism. "From an ethical standpoint, I would argue that the teacher owns the letter and has the right to rescind," said James W. Jump is author of the [Ethical College Admissions blog \[http://ethicalcollegeadmissions.blogspot.com/\]](http://ethicalcollegeadmissions.blogspot.com/), who seems to defend the teacher's action .

Two lessons here: Specifically, NEVER make a swastika. It's not artwork. And it's never funny. It's offensive. Secondly, even if you're already submitted your application, the admissions process isn't over until you get word.

## Final Thoughts

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So what does this tell us? It means that among the admissions officers who check out applicants online, what they find is having greater impact than it did a year ago. Here's our advice:

While your college admissions chances are still overwhelmingly decided by the traditional factors such as your GPA, scores on the SAT and/or ACT, letters of recommendation, extracurriculars, essay, etc, social media can act as a real wildcard. And in a hypercompetitive admissions environment, it makes sense to use caution when posting something that could make a school pause when deciding to admit you. Getting a lot of likes and comments on Facebook is good for the ego, but at what cost? Use our adage of "When in doubt, leave it out."

On the flip side, we encourage you to share things on social media that portray you favorably. Colleges want to enroll students who strengthen the student body. While you don't want to be a social media show-off, don't be shy about sharing accomplishments on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or anywhere else in an interesting and respectable way.

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