Getting to know students, Facebook to Facebook

by ANGELA PUTNAM, Published March 2, 2009

If you think Facebook is exclusively a student communication zone, like a club house with a sign marked "No professors allowed," you may be surprised to learn that many of your colleagues consider this new form of communication an invaluable tool for connecting with students and keeping them engaged.

If you are a professor and you are not on Facebook, you need to get there—fast.

Why Facebook? It is difficult to assist students if we do not understand how they think and where their interests lie. How can we effectively teach students about the Web trail they leave and open a dialogue about what personal image is appropriate online if we do not meet them on their turf? I am a firm believer that sometimes we have to meet students at their level, even though we may want to bring them to a different one.

I have had my Facebook page for two years. I developed it to relate better with students in my classes and to stay connected with them outside of my classroom and beyond as they continue their education at four-year universities. I have 416 friends on Facebook, and at least 200 of them are current or former students. Every one of them has requested that I become their "friend" on Facebook; I do not ever send friend requests to students. I want that decision to be theirs and do not want them to feel pressured to be "friends" with their professor.

I tell students that if they have an urgent need to reach me, to use the college e-mail system, but I have found that they like to leave messages on my "wall," which is like a message board on a Facebook page. They ask me if I am going to the basketball game, or how my weekend was, or how my training for the Susan G. Komen Walk is going.

There is a distinct difference between a friend and a Facebook friend, as far as I am concerned. My students know we are not friends.

Rather, we are professor and students. They know this because I make it very clear. I set appropriate guidelines with students on Facebook, and they know where the line is. I let students know there is no swearing on my wall. They do not call me by my first name. I do not socialize with them outside of class, and we do not discuss topics I would deem inappropriate.

Some professors think having students as Facebook "friends" means becoming friends with your students, or crossing some sort of professor/student line. On the contrary, I would assert that it is simply another way to connect with our students and help them to see us as real people. We cannot sit idly waiting for them to e-mail us or come to our office hours. We have to go to them and meet them where they are.
I have a high retention rate, and I believe this is due to the personal connection I have with my students. I disclose appropriate information about me in class, so the students feel connected to me. I also ask them about their lives in class and use Facebook to wish them happy birthday, tell them good luck before a job interview or tell them to play hard in an upcoming basketball game.

I do not have an attendance policy and have never used one. My students attend class because they feel a connection to me and to their classmates, and they enjoy coming to class. Often, after class, I will read comments on their Facebook walls like “Can you believe that discussion we had in class today?” They continue the class discussion with each other through Facebook. We are overly optimistic to think that students will stay in touch with us through e-mail or even attend office hours. However, I have frequently learned about their graduations from universities, first jobs and decisions to attend graduate school through Facebook.

The professors we remember are the ones with whom we connected. If Facebook existed when I was a student, I am certain that the professors who impacted my life the most would have been on Facebook. We know that our students are on Facebook and use it on a daily basis, which is more than we see them in our classrooms. How then, as a professor, can you rationalize not using this tool to connect with your students? Ask one of them to help you get on Facebook—now.

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