

Article 13

## **Ethically Assisting Students Via Social Media**

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### **Abstract**

Social networking creates a new forum for counseling yet poses many ethical challenges. Although educators tout increased student engagement when using social media (Kessler, 2010) and counselors state many advantages to using this cutting edge technology, school counselors realize utilizing social media can pose an ethical grey area. As a result, the use of social media requires much consideration so it is not used in a way that causes harm to individuals or the profession. This article conveys information on the history and prevalence of social media as well as implications of implementing a professional social media page as part of a comprehensive guidance and counseling program in the school setting. A discussion regarding legal and ethical implications is offered to guide school counselors considering the use of social media in counseling.

Approximately 75% of students in grades 7 through 12 participate in a social media forum (Kessler, 2010; Youth Suicide and Social Media, 2011); kids between the ages of 2 and 11 are increasing personal internet use (Kessler, 2010); and two-thirds of those who utilize the Internet visit social networks (Shallcross, 2011). This new online environment offers a new motivating culture that school counselors can use to easily reach students and parents, as well as communicate with peers (Kessler, 2010; Shallcross, 2011). At the same time, new hazards including ethical and legal issues must be

considered before sharing information or jumping into counseling programs utilizing social media (Greysen, Kind, & Chretien, n.d.; Parish & Friedman, 2011; Rollins, 2012; Youth Suicide, 2011). As a result, many school counselors are looking for ways to incorporate social media into comprehensive guidance and counseling programs as based on the *American School Counseling Association's National Model* (2008) without damaging professional image or violating laws or ethical codes. This article addresses these concerns by offering a definition, history, and prevalence of social media followed by advantages and ethical and legal issues school counselors must consider before integrating social media into comprehensive guidance and counseling programs.

### **Definition and History of Social Media**

Social media includes sites such as: Facebook, Habbo, MySpace, Nexopia, Twitter, Second Life, Yahoo Chat, IMVD, other virtual worlds, blogs, wikis, podcasts, and video sharing sites (Eid & Ward, 2009). Social media has been defined as a computer-based environment whereby information is sent or shared with a group of individuals who have the ability to respond to that information via the Internet (Shallcross, 2011). Thus, social media has created an interactive culture involving human relationships not seen in previous generations (Belkofer & McNutt, 2011). While many fear this new forum and understand the ethical grey area evident in using social media in school counseling, others remind us that social networking is becoming an everyday phenomenon that cannot be ignored (Kessler, 2010).

The popularity and growth of social networking sites is inseparably connected with high-speed Internet access. Sites such as Six Degrees, Classmates, and Friendster evolved in 1995 and, combined with the expansion of Internet access, paved the way for current social media sites (Belkofer & McNutt, 2011; Shih, 2009). For example, from 1999 to 2009, home Internet access expanded from 47% to 84%; and Internet access in the bedroom increased from 10 % to 33% among all 8 to 18- year-olds (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). During this period, some famous social networking sites were found one after another: MySpace appeared in 2003; Facebook and Twitter were created in 2004 and 2006. These social networking sites emerged after only a few years yet continue to have a tremendous impact on the world. For instance, MySpace reports they have over 185 million users and 10 billion active friend relationships at present (Social Network Stats, 2008). Twitter creates about 90 million tweets a day and has 165 million registered users (Williams, 2010). Facebook reports they have 845 million monthly active users and 483 million daily active users as of December 2011 (Facebook, 2012). Moreover, Facebook had 8,695,560,138 visits and generated a staggering 770 billion page views per month in 2011 (Graphicsms, 2011). A complete list of social networking sites is difficult to compile since technology constantly evolves and changes. As a result, the aforementioned sites are only a partial listing and are included because they are some of the most popular.

It seems clear that times have changed and school counselors either utilize new opportunities to reach students and build professional identity via social media or get left behind. At the same time, ethical school counselors understand that social networking sites allow for the leak of personal student information and can compound boundary issues. Further, social media can damage a professional school counselor, school district, or profession's image if used inappropriately. As a result, caution must be used so

students are unharmed, a counselor and the profession's image remains intact, and legal and ethical issues are considered. The next section describes the prevalence of social networking and its implications to school counseling followed by practical ways school counselors might use social media. We also explore ethical and legal issues inherent in the use of new technology.

### **Prevalence of Social Networking**

Data reflect the enormous appeal social networking sites have on young people. It is reported that 22% of social networking users range in age from 13 to 17 years old (Graphicsms, 2011). Rideout et al. (2010) also found social networking to be the most popular computer activity for students ranging in age from 8-18. For instance, 40% of 8 to 18-year-olds spent approximately one hour per day on social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook.

Gender and cultural differences were also inferred regarding time youth spent logged on to social networking sites (Rideout et al., 2010). In a typical day, girls between the ages of 8-18 spent 25 minutes on social networking sites whereas boys of the same age spent 19 minutes. Further, students identifying themselves as Hispanic spent 29 minutes per day on social networking sites whereas students identifying themselves as White spent 19 minutes per day. Those referring to themselves as Black averaged 21 minutes per day networking via social media (Rideout et al., 2010).

While differences between gender and ethnicity are illustrated in the aforementioned data, the mainstream nature and impact on today's youth is also evident. In other words, youth are utilizing social media for information whether we like it or not. School counselors can choose to become part of the phenomenon or ignore the culture in which students exchange ideas and receive information. Consequently, we offer suggestions for appropriately engaging students with social media as well as discussing some ethical and legal considerations.

### **Engaging Students Via Social Media**

The *ASCA National Model* (2008) encourages school counselors to utilize systemic means in order to reach all students. The Internet has created a convenient new medium, social media, where school counselors can reach large numbers of parents and students daily, exchange ideas with colleagues, and network with community members. It seems reasonable that school counselors use this source to disseminate information in a familiar format that furthers rather than marginalizes a school counseling program. At the same time, school counselors must maintain professionalism and adhere to ethical standards, legal codes, and school policies. If all these aspects are carefully considered, social media can be used in an advantageous manner. Several ways social media can be used appropriately are discussed as follows.

### **Advantages and Strategies for Use**

While some fear the use of social media and advocate complete abstinence of the phenomenon, several advantages are evident in the creation of a professional school counseling networking page via social media. Many researchers state students are more likely to read relevant information if it is easily accessible through Facebook or other

such forums (Kessler, 2010). Kessler (2010) states that students given assignments over social media spent more time on relevant homework and discussions than when given an assignment during a face-to-face class. Further, shy students or those who might otherwise show apathy regarding school or counseling issues may be motivated to gather important information via social media (Kessler, 2010). For the aforementioned reasons, we suggest school counselors establish a professional school counseling “page” offering easy access to pertinent school and counseling information (Shallcross, 2011).

Since approximately 25% of individuals seek health information online (Shallcross, 2011), the aforementioned professional school counseling page set up via social media can be used to inform parents, teachers, and students about existing school counseling programs; offer links to relevant mental health information; provide information on college readiness and scholarship information; share relevant course or testing information; offer details about school counseling groups or programs; share parenting tips; and provide links for books, articles, community resources, scholarship and career information, suicide hotlines, and many other relevant sources. School counselors might also post procedures students need in order to visit with a school counselor during the school day; guidance and career information; and links to relevant data that help students improve achievement, career, or personal/social issues (ASCA, 2005).

In order to maintain a professional image and avoid “friending” students on a personal level, we suggest establishing a professional school page rather than an individual page. All information on the page should relate to school counseling activities and be approved by the school principal in advance. Further, school counselors should notify students, parents, and other stakeholders that the page is not to be used as a replacement for counseling services. A written informed consent document (located on both the social media page as well as in other written forms given to students and parents) should indicate that school counselors do not respond to emergency issues via the social media page. We also suggest that “wall postings” on this social media page be either blocked or carefully monitored to ensure only appropriate and accurate content appear publically. Finally, students and parents must be informed that counselors will not respond to counseling issues or requests via the social media page. We suggest that postings be a way to disseminate information rather than a way to communicate or counsel students. Appropriate disclosures in student handbooks as well as on the site itself ensure all stakeholders receive informed consent regarding the nature of the social media site. Specific reasoning for our suggestions will be discussed in the following section on ethics.

### **Ethical and Legal Issues**

While many see the advantages inherent in using social media, school counselors must be cognizant of ethical and legal issues, including potential hazards to children as well as professional image and licensure violations. Educators have been reprimanded or fired for online discretions or violations of social expectations via the Internet (Foulger, Ewbank, Kay, Popp, & Carter, 2009; Shapira, 2008). Furthermore, the entire counseling profession can be tarnished when a school counselor violates social expectations online (Greysen et al., 2010). These and other boundary issues are often blurred and confusing when using social media. The leap from real life to online “life” brings with it no clear

boundaries, but rather questions as to the “extent of influence” a professional school counselor may have on the world of a student.

Once a professional uses social networking with students, some important boundaries may be crossed. First, if a professional school counselor observes a behavior displayed by a student online, what responsibility does the professional school counselor have? Second, does a professional school counselor have the legal obligation to notify parents of their child’s activities online? Does anyone have a right to expect privacy or confidentiality online? Should social media even be used as part of a school counseling program? These issues make it imperative that school counselors carefully review ethical codes and decision making models before engaging in any form of online networking. We address each question below with regard to ethical standards.

The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2010) contains several items that address some of the aforementioned issues. First, we shall address the question asked above: Should school counselors use social media as part of a comprehensive guidance program? The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* states that all students have “access to a comprehensive guidance and counseling program” and a right to information leading to “self direction and self development” (Preamble). The code also states that all stakeholders be informed regarding ethical responsibilities, values, and behaviors expected of school counselors and that parents be informed about the nature of counseling services offered to students (B.1.d.). Additionally, the standards remind school counselors to “extend their influence” and “collaborate with community resources” and “promote equity through community resources” (D.2.c) such that “a comprehensive school counseling program is available to all students” (D.2.b). Finally, school counselors are to provide information to families to “increase understanding” and create a “welcoming school climate between families and the school” (E.2.f.). This means school counselors have an ethical obligation to provide counseling resources, community resources, and information to every student and parent while also educating principals, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders about the role and expected ethical behaviors of school counselors. We believe a professional informational social media page endorsed by the principal and school district can address many of the aforementioned areas.

When creating this professional page, however, the school counselor must ensure content is approved by the principal and school district, and upholds district policy. The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2010) states that school counselors “clearly distinguish between statements and actions made as a private individual and those made as a representative of the school counseling profession” (F.1.f.). Further, the standards tout the student’s right to privacy and safety, encourage professional distance (A.1.g; A.4.a; A.4.b), and advocate avoidance of dual relationships via social media (A.4.c). For these reasons, we do not endorse the use of personal social media pages as part of a school counseling program but believe social media, when used via a professional “page,” is not only appropriate, but can enhance a school counseling program. Even with a professional “page,” however, some cautions are in order.

Confidentiality is a factor when considering the use of any type of social media. Previously, we asked the question, “Does anyone have a right to expect privacy or confidentiality online?” The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2010) clearly touts the importance of maintaining confidentiality and explaining the limitations thereof. The ethical standards state that students be informed of the “purposes, goals,

techniques, and rules under which they may receive counseling” (A.2.a.), and that informed consent be given regarding the limitations of confidentiality (A.2. a; A.2.b.; A1.c). Finally, school counselors are charged with recognizing and protecting students even through electronic communications (A.2.h.). For these reasons, school counselors should never post personal information about students on social media and further, should post information on the professional “page” regarding the limitations of confidentiality. School counselors must read privacy disclosures posted by social media sites such as Facebook and ensure that students and parents understand limitations. We also suggest that school counselors distribute the aforementioned information in brochures, parent/student handbooks, and other school based sources.

Dual relationships and parent rights are other important ethical issues that surface when discussing social media and school counseling. We previously raised the following questions: If a professional school counselor observes a behavior displayed by a student online, what responsibility does the professional school counselor have? Second, does a professional school counselor have the legal obligation to notify parents of their child’s activities online? The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2010) states that school counselors avoid dual relationships that lead to student harm (A.4.a) and “infringe on the integrity of the school counselor/student relationship” (A.4.d.). This is another reason we do not endorse use of a personal social media page when counseling students. A professional page creates a clear boundary where students see a connection between the page and the school. Further, students become a member of a group when adding the page rather than becoming personal “friends” of the school counselor. In order to “promote the autonomy of the student to the greatest extent possible” (A.2.e.), students should be informed that joining the group allows the school counselor access to personal information. Further, informed consent can be shared not only on the Web site and in school handbooks but also discussed in classroom guidance lessons. It is imperative that students understand the difference between public and private information, are encouraged to block personal information from disclosure, and fully understand that disclosed information may be shared with parents.

Parents must also be notified about the “confidential nature of the counseling relationship between counselor and student” (ASCA, 2010, B.2.a). School counselors must balance parent rights to information with student confidentiality (Froeschle & Moyer, 2004). The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2010) states that the “developmental age and circumstances requiring the breach” be considered” (A.2.e). To alleviate many concerns, we suggest that “wall postings” on the professional social media “page” be either blocked or carefully monitored to ensure only appropriate and accurate content appear publically. Further, we do not endorse perusing student personal pages and information on the page should relate only to school counseling activities as approved by the school principal. Should a concern arise regarding confidentiality, we suggest consulting with other professional school counselors and using an ethical decision making model.

## **Conclusion**

Social media sites present a complex set of ethical and legal issues. Debate exists over educator conduct in social networking sites as well as whether to use this forum as a

tool for educating students. Some schools advise school employees to avoid social networking sites while others provide guidelines for ethical use (Foulger et al., 2009). School counselors who utilize social media via a professional “page” can offer a unique and progressive method of ethically and legally assisting students and parents. Nonetheless, careful review of ethical codes and legal issues must be addressed before utilizing any type of social media in the school setting. For example, school counselors should post only content related to the school counseling program as approved in advance by the school principal. Further, school counselors should notify students, parents, and other stakeholders that the page is not to be used as a replacement for counseling services. A written informed consent document (located on both the social media page as well as in other written forms given to students and parents) should indicate that school counselors do not respond to emergency issues via the social media page. If these and other ethical issues are addressed, we believe a professional page poses more advantages than disadvantages when used as an extension of a comprehensive guidance and counseling program.

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