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Is the admissions office Googling you? More colleges screening applicants' online profiles

If you are about to send out your college applications, you might want to think about cleaning up the language in your Twitter posts and deleting those racy photos from your Facebook page, according to a new survey.

The number of college admissions officers using Google, Facebook and other social networking sites to check out applicants' online profiles is rising, according to a survey released yesterday by Kaplan Test Prep.

Nearly 29 percent of college admission officers have Googled an applicant's name and 31 percent said they checked out Facebook or other social networking pages to learn more about a student, according to Kaplan, a private test tutoring company that is a subsidiary of the Washington Post Company.

The percentage of admissions officers doing internet searches on students has been rising steadily since 2008 when the company began polling colleges on the issue. In the first survey, just 10 percent of admissions officers said they had looked for an applicant's Facebook page.

"Granted, most admissions officers are not tapping into Google or Facebook, and certainly not as a matter of course. But there's definitely greater acknowledgment and acceptance of this practice now than there was five years ago," said Seppy Basili, vice president of Kaplan Test Prep.

Kaplan surveyed 381 admissions officers by phone over the summer, company officials said.

The survey also found students may be getting more cautious about what they post online. This year, there was a decline — from 35 percent to 30 percent — in the number of admissions officers who said they found something online about an applicant that negatively affected the student's chances of getting accepted into college.

"Many students are becoming more cautious about what they post, and also savvier about strengthening privacy settings and circumventing search," said Christine Brown, executive director of college admissions programs at Kaplan Test Prep.

If admission officers at New Jersey colleges are Googling applicants' names or checking Facebook pages, they are reluctant to talk about it. Several college officials said they don't have time during a busy admissions season to check hundreds or thousands of students' social media pages.

"Quite honestly, we're very busy," said Alyssa McCloud, vice president for enrollment management at Seton Hall University in South Orange, which does not regularly screen applicants' online profiles.

Items posted on students' Facebook or social media pages might only influence admission decisions in extreme cases at Seton Hall, McCloud said.

"If something ever came to our attention, it might give us pause," McCloud said. "It would have to be something very, very severe."

Officials at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, the state's most selective public college, said students don't have to worry that their applications will end up in the reject pile based on something that pops up during a Facebook search.

"We don't look at applicants' social media sites," said David Muha, a College of New Jersey spokesman.

At Montclair State University, admissions officials also said they are not regularly doing internet searches on potential freshmen. But, they advised students to start cleaning up their online profiles as soon as possible.

"Now is the time for them to start. Irresponsible social media conduct could negatively impact a student's education in other ways, their future careers, and/or relationships with peers," said Lisa Kasper, Montclair State's director of undergraduate admissions.

Montclair State recently began including an article from Mashable.com, titled "12 Things Students Should Never Do on Social Media," in its guide for first-year students. The article advises students against posting anything about illegal activities, trashing teachers online or threatening violence on social media sites. Students also should never rely on a site's privacy settings and assume information is hidden from the public, the article said.

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