

Beyond the Buzz: Planning Library Facebook Initiatives Grounded in User Needs

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Introduction

The Pew Internet & American Life Project reports that as of 2007, “55% of online teens have created a personal profile online, and 55% have used social networking sites (SNS) like MySpace or Facebook.”¹ A study at Michigan State University found that among users of SNS, the amount of time spent on Facebook was 53.76 minutes per day (up from 32.56 minutes in 2006).² Students use Facebook for relationship development and maintenance,^{3,4} making plans with friends, and flirting.⁵ With so many students spending so much time on Facebook and similar sites, it is no surprise that academic institutions have jumped on the social networking bandwagon, crafting campaigns to reach students where they are. Amid this excitement about Facebook’s academic possibilities, however, institutions often fail to realize that the presence of professors, librarians, or other adults in this social space is often perceived by students as intrusive, unwelcome, or just plain “weird.”⁶

Gelman Library, the primary research library and undergraduate study space at the George Washington University (GW) in Washington, DC, is no excep-

tion. In 2007, librarians launched the “Your Librarian is your Friend” campaign, in which instruction librarians created Facebook profiles and used them to maintain connections with students following the completion of library instruction sessions. These librarians used their profiles to share research tips, display library applications, and emphasize their availability to their student “friends.” Posters advertising this campaign were prominently displayed in the library building, and bookmarks highlighting individual librarian profiles were available at service desks. Despite these efforts, most librarians’ friends seemed to be librarians or other peers, and there was scant evidence that those profile features targeted at students were being used by students. These disappointing results led Gelman librarians to take a step back and ask a critical question: What do our students really want? That is, how do our students actually use Facebook, and what part can the library play in this social environment?

In order to answer these questions, Gelman librarians worked with an anthropologist to design a study to examine students’ experience with Facebook: how it is used, the role it plays in their lives and their

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understanding of Facebook overall. By developing a better understanding of Facebook's role in students' lives, librarians hoped to identify ways that Facebook could be used without being perceived as disruptive, inappropriate, or "weird."

Literature Review

Marshall Breeding, in his *The Systems Librarian* column, refers to Facebook as one of those "trends of our users that we just can't ignore."⁷ In the last few years, Facebook has emerged as a significant and useful method for professors, librarians, and campus administrators to reach students before,⁸⁻¹⁰ during, and after their collegiate experience.¹¹ While some instructors and administrators find it difficult to negotiate the line between responsible adult and SNS "friend,"¹² other educators are finding SNS useful for reaching students as young as eighth grade.¹³ Still others argue that teaching with or about SNS helps students build information literacy and "e-safety" through both formal and informal learning channels.¹⁴

Libraries in particular have been eager to capitalize on Facebook's potential for building and maintaining relationships with students. Libraries have created search bar applications (e.g., for JSTOR), communication tools, and more comprehensive virtual library service applications.^{15,16} Research on Facebook use in libraries has encouraged librarians and other library staff members to create their own profiles and join Facebook groups as a way of sharing information amongst colleagues and with patrons.¹⁷ "Friending" students from instruction sessions and customizing profiles to highlight library resources are other recommended methods of library Facebook usage.¹⁸ At one institution, a librarian created his own one-man Facebook campaign, sending direct messages about the library to more than 1,500 students through Facebook.¹⁹ The response rate to this campaign was low, but the responses—both online and in-person—provided opportunities for meaningful interactions between the librarian and patrons.

While the library literature acknowledges the social nature of Facebook, in practice libraries seem to assume that students will be open to developing relationships with librarians through Facebook based on personal interactions and the utility of the library resources now available through Facebook. This assumption that students will perceive and interact with the online presence of an institution like the library just as they do peers is

problematic and deserves scrutiny. By framing Internet-mediated practices largely in terms of information access and utility, libraries fail to recognize or engage the socio-cultural motivations behind Internet media and technology preferences. Research has demonstrated that media technology uses and preferences arise contextually, based on the specific social relationships they mediate.^{20,21} Use of Facebook is no exception. Features like the Wall, chat, notes, ads, and the Beacon service blur the lines between online and offline communication practices; this trend is familiar to students,²² but may cause difficulty for librarians who are new to the network. Ethnographic studies of online communities have shown that individuals employ Internet technologies to create subjective meanings, identities, and community values.²³ Social networking sites like Facebook are structured around and employ unique cultural and linguistic conventions to which librarians may not be sensitive. All of these features, affordances, opportunities, and concerns indicate that more research is needed before libraries and other academic institutions can become full (and appropriate) participants in social spaces like Facebook.

Methodology

The Gelman Library research team, comprised of two librarians and an anthropologist, designed a mixed-methodology study in three phases, with each phase targeting different aspects of Facebook-related behavior. In a prior library-sponsored study, a researcher used observation and interviews to assess student perceptions of library space and services. Recommendations made from this study affected substantive changes in library space, policies, and services. Since the goals for this study were similar, a similar methodology was crafted for the first phase. The anthropologist practiced an adaptation of participant observation, immersing himself in Facebook while preparing for later phases of the study. He searched Facebook for groups related to Gelman Library, then examined the groups' public content. He also reviewed the profiles created by Gelman librarians, comparing them with those of students. As a Facebook user and recent graduate of the university, he was familiar with his own online behavior and that of his peers, so his exploration of these groups, pages, and profiles was informed by his existing knowledge and past experiences. The goal of this phase of the study was developing an increased understanding of how the library was currently situated in Facebook as a social space.

In the second phase, the research team administered an online survey through SurveyMonkey.com. The set of primarily multiple-choice questions focused on participant usage of social networking sites in general, use of Facebook in the context of university life, and feelings regarding the use of Facebook by university personnel. The goal of this phase of the study was crafting an understanding of typical GW student behavior on Facebook as it compared to their use for academic purposes. Participants were recruited through advertisements on Facebook and the library’s homepage and were targeted via direct messaging through Facebook and GW course distribution lists. As an incentive for participating in this phase of the study, participants were entered into a drawing for a \$100 gift certificate. These recruitment methods resulted in a population sample of 105 participants.

In the third and final phase of the study, the anthropologist conducted semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions based on emergent trends in the survey responses. Interviews were conducted at Gelman Library or in a nearby coffee shop, and typically lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. During interviews, the anthropologist and the participant discussed the participant’s study habits, technology use, and experiences with Facebook and Gelman Library. Interviews often concluded with feedback sessions in which participants viewed and commented on Gel-

man librarians’ profiles. Throughout the interview, an informal, conversational tone was maintained. Participants in this phase of the study were recruited from the same population targeted for the survey, and were compensated for their time with \$25 Starbucks gift cards. These recruitment methods and incentives resulted in a population sample of 15 participants.

Data Analysis

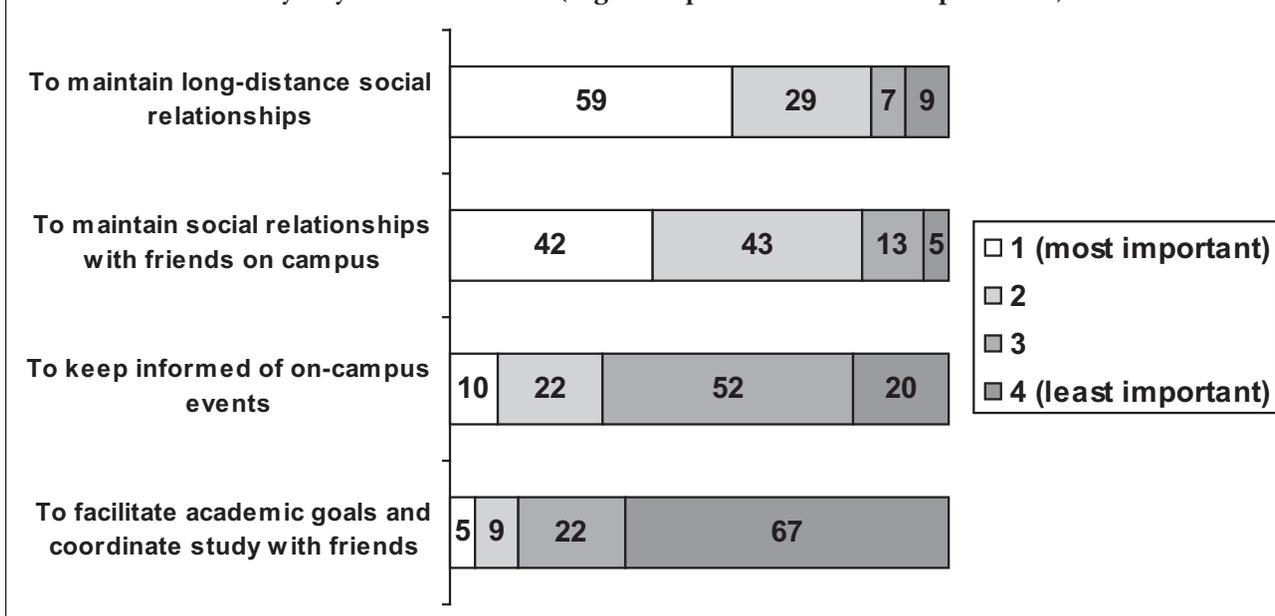
The empirical claims advanced in the following findings emerge logically from the quantitative and qualitative data afforded by this research methodology. Survey responses were collected and graphed automatically by SurveyMonkey.com. The statistical averages generated by this data were supported by patterns observed in interview responses. As a result, the process of data interpretation and analysis consisted largely of correlating majorities between survey and interview responses concerning particular research questions and topics.

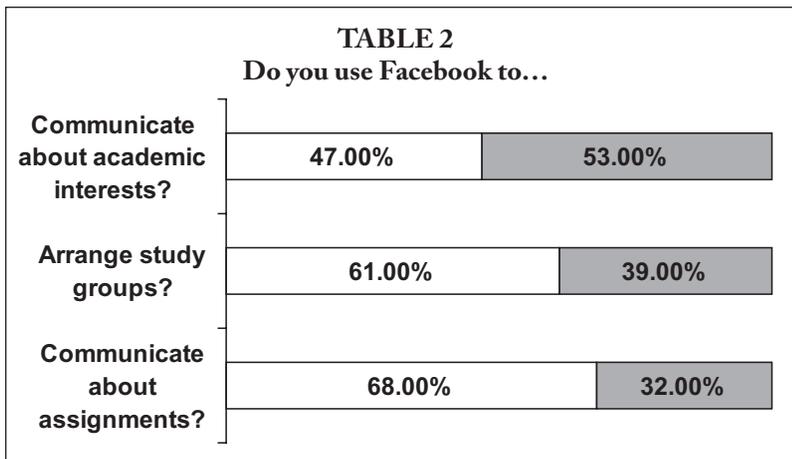
Findings

- **Facebook is a primarily—and often exclusively—recreational space, and is heavily used by students for social purposes.**

Most participants in both the survey and interview components of the project were frequent Facebook users. A majority of survey participants reported

TABLE 1
Why do you use Facebook? (Figures represent number of respondents.)





signing into Facebook multiple times daily, and all but two interviewees characterized themselves as heavy users. Interestingly, the one graduate student interviewed appeared to be the lightest user, and he cited his busyness with coursework as a factor in his declining use of the social network. Interview data and online observations reveal that students use Facebook primarily as a resource for managing existing face-to-face relationships, no matter how tenuous, but rarely use Facebook to initiate new relationships without at least some prior offline basis of interaction.

• **Students’ “academic” uses of Facebook are still inherently social.**

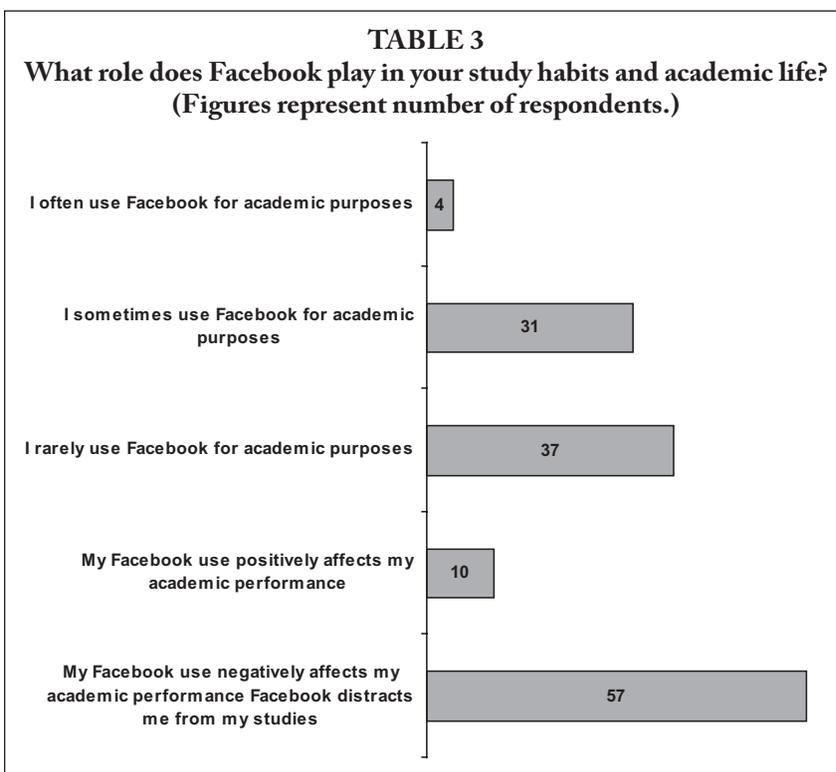
Almost 70 percent of survey participants reported using Facebook to communicate about course assignments (see table 2), but interview data indicate that this communication is primarily logistical and concerns such matters as missed lecture notes, paper due dates, and assignment guidelines. Although 47 percent of survey participants claimed they discussed academic interests on Facebook, all but one interview participant considered Facebook to be an inappropriate place for serious academic discussion.

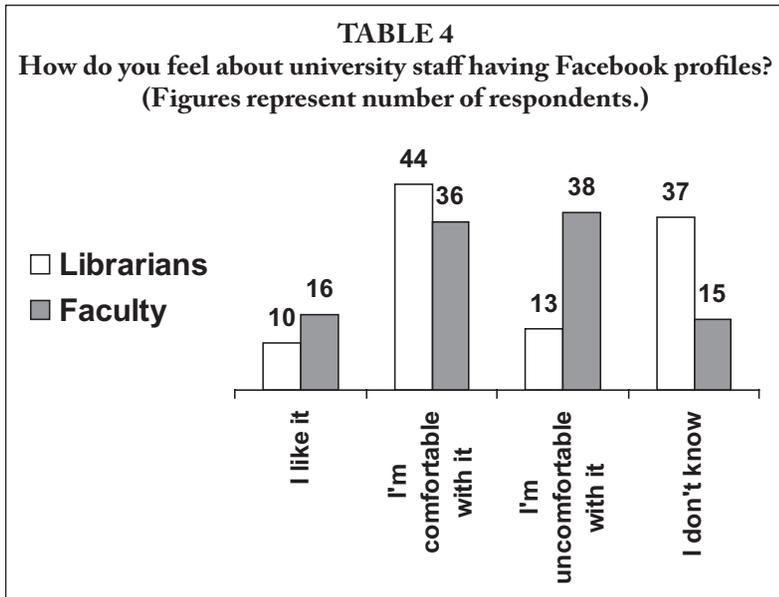
Sixty percent of survey participants and eight interviewees reported using Facebook to arrange face-to-face study sessions with friends and classmates. One student created a Facebook group for her geology class, invited her class-

mates to join, and uploaded pictures of rocks and minerals for exam preparation. Facebook’s most substantial contribution to academics, however, occurs when students take “Facebook breaks” as a reward for studying. Interestingly, a little over half of survey participants claimed that Facebook negatively impacted their academic work; interview subjects that agreed cited Facebook as a major distraction and a central cause in their procrastination of schoolwork (see table 3).

• **Students generally perceive the presence of non-peers—especially authority figures—on Facebook as an intrusion.**

Survey and interview data indicate student uncertainty regarding the presence of authority figures in Facebook. The distribution of responses to survey questions that asked how respondents felt about librarians and professors having Facebook profiles (see table 4) demonstrates a lack of consensus among students. Students expressed ambivalence in interviews, but tended (at least initially) to be more hesitant than enthusiastic about librarians’ involvement with Facebook. Interviewees typically described the





ing a balance between classroom “work” and extracurricular “play.”²⁴ For many contemporary students, Facebook mediates the same activities of “friendly fun” that characterized the extracurricular social world of Moffatt’s students: flirting and sexuality, drinking, entertainment, joking, and autonomy from parents and other older adults.²⁵ Whether for maintaining long distance relationships or socializing with on-campus friends, students explicitly consider Facebook to be intended for “fun.” This is not surprising; other researchers have noted college students’ primarily “social” use of Internet communications,²⁶ as well as their lack of interest in using Facebook for library purposes.²⁷ Although GW students’ study-related uses

prospect of student-librarian Facebook interactions as “weird” or “awkward.”

A majority of survey participants expressed willingness to communicate with librarians through Facebook (see table 5), but aside from one very receptive interviewee, however, all interview participants felt uncomfortable to one degree or another with the prospect of librarians on Facebook.

of the network indicate a potential among students for using Facebook academically, putting academics in a place “designed” for student recreation appears generally problematic to students. Most interview participants expressed the sentiment that library and scholarly uses of Facebook juxtaposed two separate dimensions (typically articulated by students as “fun” and “work,” or “social” and “academic”).

Discussion

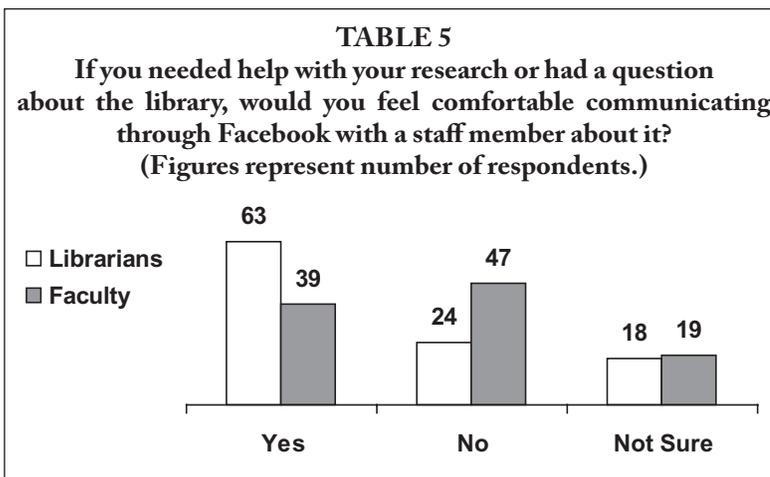
Facebook’s role in students’ lives presents both opportunities and challenges for libraries. Students can be reliably located on Facebook, but if students typically use the online network to get away from academic work, how eager will they be to embrace Facebook as an academic tool? On the other hand, if students’ current non-recreational uses of Facebook suggest a potential for more studious uses in the future, might the library play an active role in bringing about this change by using the network to provide useful academic resources?

Perceptions of Librarians

When asked how they would respond if a librarian “friended” them, most interview subjects expressed varying degrees of discomfort: approximately one-third thought a prior face-to-face relationship might justify the “friendship,” some found the idea unappealing, and others felt that an online relationship with their librarian would be desirable provided (1)

Facebook is Social

In his classic ethnography of Rutgers undergraduate students, Michael Moffatt describes a dynamic tension between academic and recreational spheres. The process of socialization and “coming of age” American students experience in college, he notes, is structured by their maintain-



the student had something to gain from the relationship and (2) the online interactions did not pose any social awkwardness for them among their peers. Another indicator of the sensitivity of this “friending” issue is that some students expressed interest in using the research applications available on a librarian’s profile provided they did not have to be “friends” with the librarian to use them. One student initially expressed interest in library applications on Facebook, but became less interested so upon viewing the application in the context of a librarian’s profile. The interviewee stated, “Okay, this is just too weird!” Some interviewees mentioned that they would be more inclined to “friend” a librarian if that librarian’s area of expertise (or the resources on his or her profile) were tailored to the student’s own interests and needs.

Many students appear to be uncomfortable with librarians’ profiles because they present an identity that does not reconcile with common student perceptions about librarians. While some interview participants found personal profile information engaging, others said that encountering librarians as “real people” on Facebook made them uncomfortable. For librarians attempting to create successful individual profiles, striking an effective personal-professional balance is critical. A template for constructing effective individual librarian profiles is difficult to formulate. Success will depend in part on the individual librarian and the pre-existing offline rapport he or she has with students. Note that students will sometimes eagerly “friend” a popular professor, even though many of these same students would claim that the presence of professors Facebook is generally “creepy.” The personality of the librarian—both online and offline—will have a critical bearing on the effectiveness of his or her profile.

Importance of Behavioral Norms

As an inherently social space, Facebook has a number of unspoken rules and conventions that interviewees struggled to articulate. Interviewees knew that a particular behavior was “weird” or “creepy”, but often had difficulty specifying what that was the case. They were able, however, to describe specific conventions for appropriate behavior. Generally, reciprocity is viewed as the guiding principle for socially appropriate Facebook interactions. If someone posts something on one’s wall or sends a message, students say it is polite to respond similarly. Librarians should

interpret a message sent by a student as an invitation to reply with a message, for example, but not as an invitation to post a comment publicly on that student’s comment wall. Informality is also an important feature of Facebook communications. Librarians should not strive to imitate their student patrons, but may find using more relaxed and informal language helpful in establishing rapport with students on Facebook. Interviewees were especially adamant that wall comments were not an appropriate place for academic remarks or messages from librarians. Most significantly, students indicated that they would be more comfortable with interacting with librarians on Facebook if they themselves initiated the conversation or “friendship.”

Recommendations

- **When developing a virtual presence, consider students’ actual perceptions of the library.**

While students had mixed feelings about using Facebook to communicate with individual librarians, many interviewees liked the idea of receiving information from Gelman Library through Facebook. Maintaining an organizational page is possible to do with little cost, allowing users to interact with the organization as a whole. Organizational pages can contain applications, news and information, and links to individual employees or services—exactly the kind of content students indicated that they would like to access. This type of official presence also skirts many of the aforementioned social and practical complications posed by individual student-librarian Facebook “friendships” while providing many of the same services initially intended in the “Your Librarian is Your Friend” campaign. Gelman Library introduced such a page in spring 2008, and by December 2008 had gained 121 fans with only minimal publicity. Gelman Library’s Outreach Committee is now planning to integrate the Facebook page and associated features in future outreach and messaging campaigns. This effort will be directed by the Student Liaison, allowing the institution to benefit from students’ insider insights and influence as library patrons and Facebook users.

- **Consider how students view and interact with librarians in the real world.**

One assumption prevalent among library forays into Facebook is that the measure of effectiveness is whether students can be persuaded to “friend” their

librarians. This was an assumption made in the structure and administration of this study; however, this may be a somewhat limiting view. It may be more appropriate to think of Facebook as a resource for enhancing face-to-face relationships or brand awareness, as is the case in many commercial applications. An examination of trade literature and blogs on commercial marketing through Facebook offers other ideas for socially acceptable interactions with customers or patrons through the site. Means of interacting with customers through Facebook include placing advertisements, developing applications, and maintaining an organizational page. While “friending” also has a place in commercial marketing strategies, it is not the sole strategy, as has been the case in many library initiatives. Facebook ads offer an effective means of sending targeted messages to students or other patron groups, as was discovered during the recruitment for this study. Students indicated that they were comfortable receiving messages from a centralized library presence, so a library ad recruiting participation in a study or announcing a library event may be received positively.

As librarians continue to be interested in making personal connections with students, “friending” will nevertheless remain a part of Gelman Library’s Facebook strategy. Students identified research appointments as a face-to-face context on which to build online relationships. Almost one-third of interview subjects had had research appointments with librarians. As these appointments are the most personalized service the library offers, they represent a valuable and socially acceptable opportunity to inform students about the library resources available on Facebook. Similarly, as was attempted in the “Librarian is Your Friend” campaign, a systematic introduction to Gelman Library’s Facebook presence and applications in the context of librarian-faculty teaching partnerships may help shape broader student perceptions about librarians on Facebook.

- **Provide resources, but don’t be surprised if students don’t use them.**

Although some students expressed no interest in Facebook’s library applications, many said they would be inclined to use them. One student, a junior who had expressed little interest in engaging librarians on Facebook throughout the interview, became interested upon actually viewing a librarians’ profile. “Oh, well I would use *that*,” she said in regard to a

JSTOR search bar. Similarly, receptive students typically found study tips (e.g., regarding what constitutes a “scholarly source”) and journal or catalog search bars on librarians’ profiles to be appealing and useful. Convenience was an important factor; these students liked the idea of accessing study resources without having to “leave” Facebook. A critical practical issue is whether or not the library resources available through Facebook applications are more useful and convenient than conventional channels of access. “I’d rather just search the catalog the way I usually do,” said one student, “going through Facebook is an unnecessary step.” For example, if using a library application requires the student to manually install it to his or her profile, some will not use the application because it seems an unnecessary hassle. But students may also avoid installing such an application because it could make their profiles appear bookish to peers.

- **Recognize that Facebook may play a role in librarians’ lives too.**

Many Gelman librarians were using Facebook for personal communication and networking prior to the “Your Librarian is Your Friend” campaign. In some instances, students found this authentic use interesting; in other cases, it made them uncomfortable. In addition to student perceptions, however, it is important to consider the personal impacts on librarians of making a previously personal space an access point for students. Negotiating the line between personal and professional spaces will be difficult for librarians and other educators—just as it is for students.²⁸

Conclusions

Since this study was conducted in 2007, Facebook has continued to launch new features that provide expanded services both within and outside the site. Use for commercial and political purposes has grown, and the behavioral norms within the site have become more formally articulated. As with any social environment, however, these norms and uses are constantly changing, so librarians participating effectively in this online medium will find social attentiveness and acumen to be just as necessary as professional and technological savvy. And while librarians should accept that their presence on Facebook may be unwelcome to some students, they should not be dissuaded from exploring the site and capitalizing on the promise that social networking tools offer for new and exciting library initiatives.

Notes

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