

## RESEARCH ARTICLES

### Pharmacy Faculty Members' Perspectives on the Student/Faculty Relationship in Online Social Networks

Anne H. Metzger, PharmD,<sup>a</sup> Kristen N. Finley, PharmD,<sup>b</sup> Timothy R. Ulbrich, PharmD,<sup>c</sup> and James W. McAuley, PhD<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>James L. Winkle College of Pharmacy, University of Cincinnati

<sup>b</sup>Rudolph H. Raabe College of Pharmacy, Ohio Northern University

<sup>c</sup>Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy

<sup>d</sup>College of Pharmacy, The Ohio State University

Submitted June 9, 2010; accepted September 8, 2010; published December 15, 2010.

**Objective.** To describe pharmacy faculty members' use of the online social network Facebook and compare the perspectives of faculty members with and without Facebook profiles regarding student/faculty relationships.

**Methods.** An electronic survey instrument was sent to full-time faculty members (n = 183) at 4 colleges of pharmacy in Ohio seeking their opinions on student/faculty relationships on Facebook. If respondents answered "yes" to having a Facebook profile, they were asked 14 questions on aspects of being "friends" with students. If respondents answered "no," they were asked 4 questions.

**Results.** Of the 95 respondents (52%) to the survey instrument, 44 faculty members (46%) had a Facebook profile, while 51 faculty members (54%) did not. Those who had a profile had been faculty members for an average of 8.6 years, versus 11.4 years for those who did not have a Facebook profile. Seventy-nine percent of faculty members who used Facebook were not "friends" with their students. The majority of respondents reported that they would decline/ignore a "friend" request from a student, or decline until after the student graduated. Although a limited number of faculty members had used Facebook for online discussions, teaching purposes, or student organizations, the majority of universities did not have policies on the use of social networking sites.

**Conclusion.** Online social network sites are used widely by students and faculty members, which may raise questions regarding professionalism and appropriate faculty/student relationships. Further research should address the student/preceptor relationship, other online social networking sites, and whether students are interested in using these sites within the classroom and/or professional organizations.

**Keywords:** online social networking, Facebook, relationships, technology, network

## INTRODUCTION

To initiate a practice/teaching-based research network in Ohio among colleges of pharmacy, an initial project was proposed that stemmed from a junior faculty member asking a senior faculty member for advice about how to respond to an invitation from a student to be "friends" on the social networking site Facebook. An estimated 80% to 90% of US college students have a Facebook profile.<sup>1</sup> Facebook requires users first to join by registering and creating a profile. Once they have joined, users can invite others to be their "friends" and share pictures, messages, and other personal information. Facebook

has more than 500 million active users, with more than half logging on daily. The average user has 130 friends.

Privacy, safety, and revealing personal information were discussed in a *Journal* article on online social networking issues for academia in general and pharmacy education in particular.<sup>1</sup> One of the important issues for pharmacy students to consider in these online social networks is e-professionalism. Cain and colleagues published a paper examining pharmacy students' Facebook activity, opinions regarding e-professionalism, and their accountability in online settings.<sup>2</sup> A survey of 3 colleges of pharmacy found high social media usage among first-year (P1) pharmacy students; 244 of the 299 (82%) students had Facebook profiles. The students demonstrated a lack of awareness about accountability, but displayed a positive change in behavior after attending an e-professionalism

---

**Corresponding Author:** Anne H. Metzger, University of Cincinnati, College of Pharmacy, Cincinnati, OH 45267-0004. Tel: 513-558-0264. Fax: 513-558-4372. E-mail: anne.metzger@uc.edu

presentation. This issue of e-professionalism has been reported not only for pharmacy students, but also for medical students and medical residents.<sup>3</sup>

Use of online social networks is also popular among many younger and older individuals. For the typical pharmacy student, this “older” group includes potential employers, practitioners, and faculty members. Some colleges and schools of pharmacy maintain a Facebook profile for connecting with alumni, advertising events, and more. When students, employers, practitioners, and faculty members all participate in online social networks, the issue of relationship boundaries arises and the traditional student-faculty relationship can become blurred. There is little information in the literature on this changing environment of social media. Although some studies on student-faculty relationships have been published, more were from a student’s perspective rather than from a faculty member’s perspective.

As part of an ongoing study about student/faculty relationships on Facebook, undergraduate students at the Georgia Institute of Technology were surveyed about their perceptions of faculty members on Facebook.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, a third of the students thought that faculty members should not be present on Facebook because it was intended to be a social network for college students. However, other students viewed the presence of faculty members on Facebook as an opportunity for enhanced access to and communication with their instructors.

In a study of how Facebook affects education, Sturgeon and Walker found that students at Lee University desired to have relationships with their professors and know them as real people.<sup>5</sup> Relationships formed on Facebook between faculty members and students opened communication and resulted in an enhanced learning environment and students being more engaged in the classroom. This notion of teacher self-disclosure and enhanced learning is not new. A paper by Mazer and colleagues found that high self-disclosure on a faculty member’s Facebook profile may lead to higher anticipated motivation among students, affective learning, and a more comfortable classroom climate.<sup>6</sup>

From a faculty member’s perspective, concerns exist about the balance between being a teacher and being a friend to students in online social networks. There is a Facebook group developed by Mark Clague at Michigan State University to help faculty members negotiate the ethical issues of online relationships.<sup>7</sup> On the group’s Facebook page, a list of proposed ethical guidelines includes not spying on students, not “friending” students unless they request the connection, and more. It also reminds faculty members about the “uneven power dynamics” when determining online relationships with students.

Additionally, members can post threaded discussions on the discussion board.

Despite the wide use of Facebook among pharmacy students and the growing use among practitioners and faculty members, we found nothing in the literature that addresses the pharmacy faculty members’ opinions of Facebook and their perspective on the student/faculty relationship in online social networks. Thus, the purpose of this project was to describe pharmacy faculty members’ use of Facebook, and compare the perspectives of faculty members with and without Facebook profiles regarding student/faculty relationships.

## METHODS

This cross-sectional study was a collaborative effort among pharmacy faculty members at 4 Ohio colleges of pharmacy: Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy, Ohio Northern University, Ohio State University, and University of Cincinnati. Institutional review board approval (with waiver of written consent) for the study was obtained at each institution.

A survey instrument was developed and pilot-tested, and was made available on Qualtrics online survey system (Qualtrics, Inc, Provo, UT). An e-mail invitation was sent by each of the 4 authors to faculty members of their own institution, inviting their colleagues to provide opinions on the student/faculty relationships in online social networks.

If respondents answered “yes” to having a Facebook profile, a series of questions on various aspects of being friends with students followed. If respondents answered “no” to the profile question, they were asked fewer questions. All participants were asked to provide basic demographic information. Respondents completed the survey instruments anonymously. The online survey instrument was open for responses for 2 weeks. Descriptive statistics and student’s *t* tests were performed to compare groups (faculty members with and without Facebook profiles).

## RESULTS

One hundred eighty-three full-time faculty members at the 4 Ohio colleges were invited to participate and 95 completed the survey instrument, yielding a response rate of 52%. The demographics of the respondents are described in Table 1. Of those who responded, 46% maintained a Facebook profile, with 25% having more than 200 Facebook “friends.” The age distribution of faculty members who maintained a Facebook profile differed from that of faculty members who did not, with younger faculty members more likely to have a profile (Table 1). Although the average length of time on the faculty for those with a Facebook profile was less (8.6 years) than

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents to a Survey Instrument Regarding Faculty Members' Perceptions on the Faculty/Student Relationship in Online Social Networks

	Total Respondents N = 95 (%)	Have Facebook Profile n = 44 (%)	Do Not Have Facebook Profile n = 51 (%)
Gender			
Female	44	42	45
Male	56	58	55
Age, Y			
20 - 29	7	16	0
30 - 39	34	37	32
40 - 49	25	16	33
50 - 59	24	19	27
60 and older	10	12	8
Years as faculty member, Mean (SD)	10.4 (9.9)	8.6 (10)	11.4 (9.6)
Advisor to student group	66	69	65
Profile on other online networks	42	61	18
How many Facebook friends do you have?			
1 - 50		37	
51 - 100		26	
101 - 200		12	
more than 200		26	
How much time do you spend on networking sites?			
> 1 hr/day		0	
30 - 60 minutes/day		7	
< 30 minutes/day		19	
only few times/week		47	
once a month		9	
rarely		19	

for those without a profile (11.4 years), it was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.17$ ).

The majority of faculty members (75%) joined Facebook because a friend or family member requested them to join, or they wanted to connect socially with others. Only a minority joined to connect professionally with others; however 46% of respondents had used Facebook for professional networking or campaigning. The 54% of faculty members who did not maintain a Facebook page most commonly cited the reason as not having enough time (27%) or desire (40%) to maintain the profile.

A majority (79%) of faculty members who did maintain a Facebook page were not Facebook friends with their students. A minority (12%) accepted students as Facebook friends with access to view their entire profile, while even fewer (9%) accepted students as Facebook friends but limited access to their profile. Faculty members with and without a Facebook page were asked how they would handle a request for friendship from a student, and responses were varied (Table 2). Most faculty members, with and without a Facebook profile, reported they would decline the friend request at least until after the student

graduated. Only a small percentage of faculty members said they would accept a friend request (12%), and faculty members with a Facebook page were more willing to accept a friend request (19%) than those who did not have a Facebook page (8%). Every faculty member surveyed

Table 2. Pharmacy Faculty Members' Responses to the Question: "How would you handle/have you handled a request from a student inviting you to be their Facebook 'friend'?"

Response	Facebook Members, % (n = 44)	Not Facebook Members, % (n = 51)
Accept right away	0	0
Accept after some thought	12	2
Accept but limit access	7	6
Decline	31	41
Decline until student graduates	29	18
Ignore the request	29	14
Ask your colleagues	5	2
Other	2	2

replied that they would not initiate the request for a current student to be a friend on Facebook, although a small minority reported they would send a request to students who had graduated.

Faculty members who stated they had a Facebook profile were split evenly when asked if they felt their faculty appointment presented a conflict with social networking sites like Facebook. Faculty members who felt it was a conflict most commonly cited that they try to maintain a line between personal and professional relationships with students. Faculty members who did not maintain a Facebook profile were more likely to state that their faculty position created a conflict with social networking sites like Facebook than faculty members who did maintain a profile (63% versus 47%).

A limited number of faculty members had used Facebook for teaching purposes. One faculty member used it to initiate online discussions, and another used it to give fourth-year (P4) students in experiential education courses access to information. Four faculty members had used Facebook for student organization purposes. Additionally, most faculty members stated that their college or school of pharmacy and/or university did not have a policy on the use of social networking sites.

## DISCUSSION

Considering the lack of literature evaluating faculty members' use of social networking sites such as Facebook, the importance of the results of this research is apparent. Interacting with students on social networking sites may put the faculty member in an awkward position of defining the appropriate line to maintain between personal and professional relationships with students. Therefore, assessing how faculty members in the health professions use Facebook is useful to others who have joined or are considering joining social networking sites. As the use of social networking increases among pharmacy students (80% - 90% reported by Cain)<sup>1</sup> and faculty members (46% from this study), addressing the issue is important for faculty members and pharmacy departments.

An important question was raised regarding handling a Facebook "friend request" from a student versus initiating a "friend request" to a student. Initiating the "friend request" seemed to be of more concern to faculty members since respondents unanimously agreed they would not initiate a friend request to a student. Not requesting students as friends is 1 of the proposed guidelines on the "Faculty Ethics" discussion group on Facebook.<sup>7</sup> However, responses varied about how a faculty member would handle receiving a "friend request." More specifically, faculty members were evenly split about whether their

appointment presented a conflict with social networking sites such as Facebook. Considering the divide among respondents, it is reasonable to encourage faculty members at their respective colleges to have a discussion to see whether a consensus can be reached on the appropriate use of social networking sites while maintaining appropriate faculty and student relationships. A clearly defined stance or consensus may decrease faculty members' concern or discomfort about how to handle a friend request from a student. In addition, faculty members should begin or continue to converse about whether self-disclosure via social networking sites may improve student learning in the classroom as Mazer suggests.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, faculty members should consider that some students believe faculty members should not be on Facebook.<sup>4</sup> Including students in the discussion about Facebook and/or assessing students' input (ie, via a survey instrument) may help clarify this divide.

The results of this project revealed several areas needing further research. Because students spend a significant amount of time with introductory pharmacy practice experiences (IPPE) and advanced pharmacy practice experiences (APPE), the relationship between students and preceptors in these settings should be assessed. Also, the use of other social networking sites (MySpace, Twitter, etc) should be considered. Further efforts should assess why faculty members unanimously agreed they would not send a "friend request" to a current student, but disagreed on whether they would accept a student's "friend request." Also, consideration should be given to whether professional students are interested in using social networking sites such as Facebook within the classroom and/or for extracurricular activities (eg, professional organizations).

Strengths of the research methods include a collaboration of 4 colleges of pharmacy in the state of Ohio. This collaboration allowed the researchers to increase the total population sampled, and reduce outliers present within 1 college of pharmacy that showed abnormally high or low use of social networking sites, or extreme positive or negative opinions about social networking sites such as Facebook. Also, the 4 colleges of pharmacy differed in size, location within the state, and faculty members' backgrounds, allowing the authors to further increase the diversity of respondents. Therefore, although the researchers cannot conclude the sampled population was representative of the whole population, the large response rate and population sampled across 4 settings increased the external validity of the results. Also, the survey instrument was piloted prior to being administered, allowing for any changes that were needed to clarify the survey questions.

This project is not without limitations. Although a moderately high response rate was obtained, some of

the practice-based faculty members at the colleges of pharmacy may have had more than 1 work e-mail address. Therefore, the e-mail address used by the researchers may not have been the primary address used by the faculty member, ultimately limiting the response rate. Also, the research results were limited to faculty members at the 4 Ohio colleges of pharmacy. Although the survey instrument was pilot- tested, it was not validated prior to its use.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings provide a first look into how pharmacy faculty members use and view the dynamics of student/faculty relationships on Facebook. Online social network sites are widely used by students and faculty members, which may raise questions regarding personal relationships and professionalism both inside and outside the classroom. As the use of these sites increases, the need arises for faculty members to discuss and/or define clearly the appropriateness of social networking relationships without compromising the line between personal and professional relationships with students.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Cain J. Online social networking issues within academia and pharmacy education. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2008;72(1): Article 10.
2. Cain J, Scott DR, Akers P. Pharmacy students' Facebook activity and opinions regarding accountability and e-professionalism. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2009;73(6):Article 104.
3. Thompson LA, Dawson K, Ferdig R, et al. The intersection of online social networking with medical professionalism. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2008;23(7):954-957.
4. Hewitt A, Forte A. Crossingboundaries: identity management and student/faculty relationships on the Facebook. Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW 2006). [www.andreaforte.net/HewittForteCSCWPoster2006.pdf](http://www.andreaforte.net/HewittForteCSCWPoster2006.pdf) Accessed August 16, 2010.
5. Sturgeon CM, Walker C. Faculty on Facebook: Confirm or Deny. [http://www.mtsu.edu/itconf/proceedings/09/Faculty.on.Facebook.Sturgeon-Walker03\\_29\\_09.pdf](http://www.mtsu.edu/itconf/proceedings/09/Faculty.on.Facebook.Sturgeon-Walker03_29_09.pdf). Accessed September 22, 2010.
6. Mazer JP, Murphy RE, Simonds CJ. I'll see you on "Facebook": the effects of computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure on student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate. *Commun Educ.* 2007;56(1):1-17.
7. Clague M. Faculty ethics on Facebook. <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=2229343363&ref=ts>. Accessed August 16, 2010.