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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Short Subjects

For Professors, 'Friending' Can Be Fraught

By SARA LIPKA

The old guy in the corner at a college party can come off as creepy. The same goes for a faculty member on Facebook, the online hangout first populated by students.

"Facebook was created as a place for students, not for professors," says Steve Moskowitz, a sophomore at the State University of New York College at Oneonta. Students should be able to express themselves freely there, he says, without worrying what some professor will think.

One way to do that is by joining groups. Their names, often clever, mark identities like bumper stickers. Mr. Moskowitz formed the group "Gee, I don't think I want my professors on Facebook anymore." Its icon is a lecturer crossed out with a big red X.

He started it when he discovered his music professor on the site. The professor had commented on another group, which students had created to mock his resemblance to a character in a local TV commercial.

"This is the funniest group," the professor wrote. "The guy that you say looks like me is my cousin (well 2nd cousin)." The students were mortified. Banter ceased.

But like it or not, professors are logging on. The number of Facebook users is doubling every six months, and adults, including professors, are the fastest-growing group among them. Some want to track down students who no longer respond to e-mail. Many are curious to see for themselves the addictive gabfest. As they sign on, they are negotiating the famously fraught teacher-student relationship in new ways.

People connect on Facebook by asking to "friend" one another. A typical user lists at least 100 such connections, while newbies are informed, "You don't have any friends yet." A humbling statement. It might make you want to find some.

But friending students can be even dicier than befriending them. In the real world, casual professors may ask

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students to call them by their first names, meet them for lunch, a beer, even. Most still don't think of themselves as pals.

Ian Bogost, an assistant professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, sent "friend" requests to several of his students, but then second-guessed himself. Would they feel obligated to accept? Would they think he expected something from them, maybe more participation in class?

It seemed unfair, says Mr. Bogost, who teaches in the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture. "I've definitely kind of backed off the undergrads," he says, "certainly in their earlier years."

Nancy Baym worries more about students' expectations of her. A few weeks ago, a young man she did not know tried to friend her, says Ms. Baym, an associate professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas. The same student e-mailed her the next day, asking to get into a class that had a waiting list. He must have thought, "If she's my friend, then she'll let me into the class," she says.

Young, female faculty members already struggle to be seen as authority figures, says Ms. Baym. It was easy to imagine what might happen: "But how could you have given me a D? You're my friend on Facebook!"

And so, when undergrads ask to friend her, this professor politely declines. She encourages them to contact her again when they graduate — when there's no chance of their turning up in another class, or before a judicial panel she is on.

Most faculty members on Facebook keep their profiles professional — nothing racier than would be posted, say, on an office door. The consensus on friending seems to be: Accept students' requests but don't initiate any.

That's one of the guidelines for "Faculty Ethics on Facebook," a group started by Mark A. Clague, an assistant professor of musicology at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "Since there's an uneven power dynamic, giving the power to the students to control the relationship" is good policy, he says.

Several dozen professors have joined the group, which also urges members not to troll students' profiles, friends or not. Even though students have become savvier about what they post — and how they adjust their privacy settings — faculty members still might discover things they wish they hadn't.

Richard Scott Nokes, a professor of English at Troy University, in Alabama, knows how that goes. A student once approached him late in the week to ask for an extension on an assignment. He said he was going to a relative's funeral. Mr. Nokes happened to sign on to Facebook a few days later, and something in his news feed — the site's voyeuristic compilation of friends' updates — caught his eye.

There was a new picture of the bereaved student, posted by a friend, on the beach in Panama City, Fla. Mr. Nokes,

who had suspected as much, decided not to say anything. "I guess it's not the first time I've been lied to by a student," he says. But "it was the first time I had a photograph."

For all its pitfalls, Facebook can prompt meaningful exchanges. Some professors look up students who e-mail them with questions or are scheduled to come to office hours. What the professors learn, they say, makes them better advisers. Comments that students have posted — concern over a bad class presentation, for example — can provoke a thoughtful conversation. One professor knew to go easy on a student when he saw his status change from "in a relationship" to "single."

Cindy Lee, a senior at Simmons College, once "poked" a professor — Facebook-speak for a friendly nudge. He poked back. That virtual informality, she says, gave her a mentor she wouldn't have felt comfortable approaching otherwise.

Modern times have dealt the teacher-student relationship many challenges: sexual harassment, political correctness. "It's harder to have an earnest, and still professional, but personalized relationship with students," says Mr. Bogost.

A modern tool may complicate that relationship further. Or, with its quirky brand of humanity, help recover it.

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