

# TWU Counseling Center

## SAFETY ON COMMUNAL WEBSITES

Students are taking advantage of technology to communicate in new and different ways. At the same time, it is important to understand how the technology may take advantage of you. Thinking through where and how information about you is made available to others can help you maintain the level of privacy you wish and increase your level of safety and security. Communal websites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, Xenga, etc.) offer the attraction of being able to communicate with an ever-growing circle of friends and acquaintances. At the same time, they offer more opportunities for others to have and use information about you in a way you had not predicted or wished.

Here are a few things to consider when registering on a communal information site:

1. Default security settings provided by these sites is relatively low because the sites assume that you want as many people to have as much information about you available as possible. If all you do is register for the site and provide the information they request, it is easy for third parties to find you and to know about you, based on the information you provide. If you choose to use one of these sites, it is important that you investigate the types of security settings that are available and to understand how you can control access to your information.
2. What happens here stays here...forever! You must assume that information you post on your website will always and forever be available to someone. Even if you put up information which, an hour later you choose to remove, you must assume that, in that hour, someone has viewed that information, copied it, and posted or stored it elsewhere. It is probably better, in most cases, to be cautious about what you post about yourself and others. "Cute" or "angry" motivations for placing material on pages had led many to regret their decisions later, after they had time to think about and suffer the consequences of the ramifications of their actions.
3. It is critical for you to understand that your friends may not have the same rules or concerns you have about who may obtain information about you available to them. More and more, students are finding that their friends have posted pictures and personal information about them on their pages which the student would never choose to put on his or her own page. For example, university police departments on several campuses have already used pictures posted by students on communal websites to identify and arrest students involved in illegal activities. Digital cameras and cell phones with cameras make it easy to record, upload and display events almost instantly.
4. While communal websites portray themselves to its users as safe and secure, the reality is that they base these claims on the assumption that everyone using the site is honest and following the rules they have created. This makes them feel like they are being responsible. However, there are hundreds of cases of users creating accounts by lying about who they are. For example, some students think it's "funny" or "cute" to use the information they have about others to create profiles for them, without the knowledge of that person. These profiles often contain false and damaging information for the unsuspecting student.

5. An assumption is often made that information posted on personal websites is accurate and truthful. If you look for someone with particular attributes, you are running the risk that this person has developed an on-line “persona” that makes them feel better, but isn’t accurate or truthful. While it is certainly true that this happens in face-to-face communications as well, the internet makes it harder to have as many verbal and non-verbal cues available to help you make those decisions.
6. Third parties are getting smarter about how to use information contained in these pages. Police departments and university administrators routinely use these pages to detect “problems” among students. These include illegal behavior, threats to others or self, violations of student codes of conduct, etc. In addition, potential employers are now routinely searching these sites as another way to gather information about the character of potential employees. There have already been documented cases of applicants being refused employment because of the websites they maintained which show them in a less-than-flattering light to employers.

The staff at Instructional Support Services is available to help answer questions you might have about internet safety and security issues. They can be reached by dialing 8-1-3971 or by emailing them at [helpdesk@mail.twu.edu](mailto:helpdesk@mail.twu.edu).

#### REFERRAL SOURCES

The TWU Counseling Center provides free and confidential counseling to currently enrolled students. Listed below are the telephone numbers for the Counseling Center.

In addition, our website contains information about our services, on-line assessments, on-line workshops, and other self-help materials.

Our web address is: [www.twu.edu/o-sl/counseling/](http://www.twu.edu/o-sl/counseling/)

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<b>TWU Counseling Center Locations:</b>	<i>Denton West Jones Hall 940-898-3801</i>	<i>Dallas- Parkland FPH 120 214-689-6655</i>	<i>Dallas- Presbyterian DPB 16 214-706-2416</i>	<i>Houston 6700 Fannin Suite 2250 713-794-2059</i>
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