

Faculty on Facebook: Confirm or Deny?

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Abstract

Since its creation in 2004, Facebook has become one of the most frequently visited websites on college campuses. Because of this rise in popularity, the subject of social networking has grown as an idea and concern for both faculty members and students. At Lee University, it has been observed that a growing number of faculty members have indeed created Facebook profiles. According to Pascarella and Terrenzini (1991), some of the most effective faculty members are those that create an informal relationship with their students. Over recent decades, numerous studies have suggested that student and faculty interaction has a notable impact on students "outcome, both in the intellectual and the social realm" (Endo & Harpel; 1982). This study examines the opinions and reactions of faculty members and students at Lee University in Cleveland, TN in reference to their use of Facebook and how it affects ones education, directly or indirectly.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was initially to fulfill a course requirement. It ultimately evolved into a research project that appeared to be a hot topic of discussion among faculty members on the Lee University campus. After a conversation between Michael Sturgeon and his student, Christin Walker, they discovered a common interest in the exploration of this topic. They agreed to collaborate on a research study to see if their hypothesis would be confirmed through a combination of survey responses and faculty interviews. Both agreed with the suggestion by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) stating, "Facebook constitutes a rich site for researchers interested in the affordance of social networks due to its heavy usage patterns and technological capabilities that bridge online and offline connection. We believe that Facebook represents an understudies *offline to online* trend..." (p. 2).

What is already known about Facebook? Some details that are of concern relate to how it is used, what is placed on the site, and the matter of student and faculty privacy. These topics and many more have been addressed by a number of other authors. The matter of privacy alone seems to have come to a point to where students should no longer consider this a place to be their "true selves" as employers are looking into Facebook accounts before hiring. See the **Figure 1** with the graph chart below:

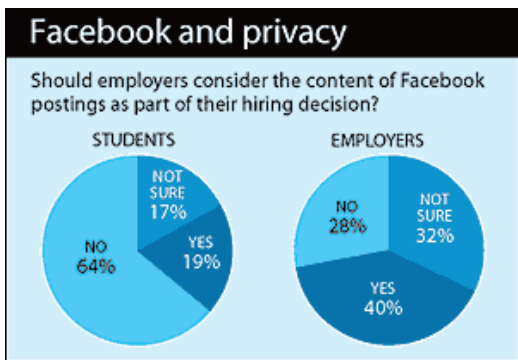


Figure 1 - SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON/RICH CLABAUGH - STAFF

These data show that though students believe their Facebook should not be considered by future employers, the employers still want to look. If employers will peruse a students profile, why not an instructor possibly do the same to get more insight to the students' lives?

The purpose of this study was to discover a number of different factors that might influence the relationships among faculty and students. These factors are as follows:

- the frequency of faculty/student access to Facebook
- the probability of communication resulting from Facebook usage
- faculty opinion of their perceived approachability
- the sense of connectedness as a possible result of Facebook
- faculty attitudes toward self-disclosure
- student engagement in the classroom as a possible result of Facebook
- faculty/students increased understanding of one another
- faculty opinion toward Facebook's relevance to teaching/learning

There was a need to incorporate quantitative and qualitative components in this study, taking into consideration all of the aforementioned factors. The specific methodology applied is in the following section.

Methodology

The researchers hypothesized that ...

- Students use Facebook more frequently than faculty.
- Faculty with less than 10 years of experience put a higher value in social networking.
- Students are more comfortable in communicating with their instructors in and out of class if their instructors have a Facebook profile.
- The relationships resulting from Facebook enhance classroom learning experience and academic outcome.

Lee University is a private Mid-Size Masters University with an emphasis on teaching versus research. Lee is located in Cleveland, TN with a Full Time Enrollment (FTE) of approximately 4100. The topic of this study, social networking, arises frequently among faculty conversations, so a curious audience is already interested in studies and data that become available.

The Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB) met and approved the proposed research project, giving the interviewers permission to conduct their research on the Lee University campus. The approved IRRB form is located in Appendix C.

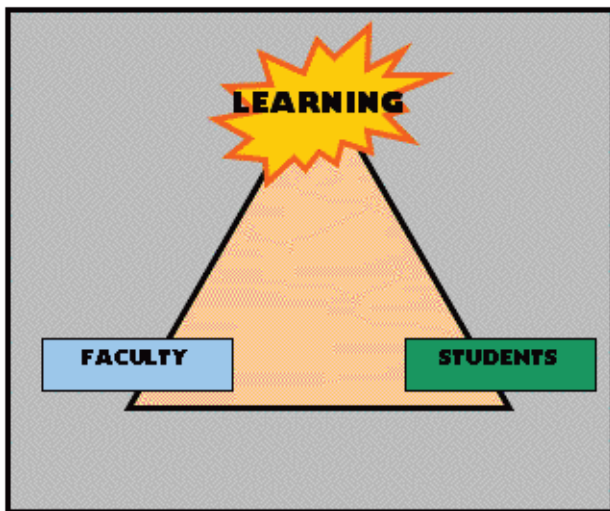
Mixed methods, qualitative and quantitative components, were applied for this study. The researchers concluded that there was a need for interviews to reveal the opinions and descriptive thoughts of the faculty using Facebook. This study also sought to reveal student opinions. To be realistic and keep the study manageable, the faculty of Lee University campus received an email containing a link to the survey. In turn, a large number of students received the survey. This allowed for comparison of points of view on identical matters pertaining to the use of Facebook between students and faculty. Student participants voluntarily took the survey when it was posted on Facebook and passed the link on virally to others, ultimately reaching a larger group of students. The survey was compiled using the Google docs option to create surveys and can be viewed in Appendix D.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in on-campus meetings with faculty members. Twenty faculty members were initially contacted for interviews, and twelve were able to meet with the researchers to participate in the study. They were interviewed based on a short list of questions which would potentially lead to more conversation. These questions can be found in Appendix A.

Results - Qualitative

The qualitative component of the study resulted in mixed opinions and viewpoints from the interviewed faculty members. Several common threads became evident within the interviews. Faculty self-disclosure and faculty-student boundaries were found to be of some concern and interest, while other, more positive aspects like classroom engagement and teaching relevance were a focus of discussion as well. Several faculty members claimed to have created a Facebook account to assuage their own children or families, but they have since recognized the academic benefits, with over 50% of them mentioning that Facebook has the potential to be a useful academic tool.

The idea that Facebook provides an open line of communication between faculty and students was mentioned by over 90% of the interviewed faculty members. One professor in particular confirmed this thought stating, "***Anything that helps students feel more comfortable in the classroom environment, where they can feel a connection with their instructors, opens the door to better understanding, better communication, and better learning.***" It can also be inferred that making connections with students was of considerable interest to the interviewed faculty members. The term "making connections" can refer to several different aspects of the triangular relationship between faculty, students, and learning. As students and faculty become closer through open communication and building relationships, the closer both parties get to the ultimate goal of learning (see image below). Over 50% of faculty members believe that Facebook gives both faculty and students the opportunity to know each other better, in a more personal way. These personal connections are possible, according to one interviewee, when faculty members can "***see the kinds of activities their students are involved in, they can use that information to make connections, helping people to be drawn into the course a little better.***"



On what appears to be the other end of the spectrum are nearly 75% of the interviewed faculty members' concerns about the balance between being a teacher and being a friend to their students. There was a general consensus that faculty do not want to be viewed by students as equals, and the line that differentiates faculty and students seems to fade with the incoming of social networking. This line might blur as a result of a mutual sense of transparency through self-disclosure on both parts of faculty and students. This topic is further discussed in the quantitative portion of this study.

The interviewed faculty members also discussed the idea of creating a "persona" for themselves through their Facebook profiles, emphasizing a conscious effort to maintain professionalism and keep their audience(s) in mind. Over 80% of them made reference to this "created self" as being not one of falsified statements or images, but one of a limited proportions, relating back to the idea of self-disclosure.

Every faculty member who was interviewed made a point of cautioning students when it comes to the content of their Facebook profiles. Hewitt and Forte (2006) found that students felt that Facebook was a place where they could have privacy in their profile. Some of the respondents of Hewitt and Forte's study found that students expressed concern about faculty seeing them on Facebook and felt it could potentially skew their academic outcome. This suggests that students are aware that they should be cautious with their content. In the study at Lee University, this was an issue that emerged from interviewing faculty. Many Lee faculty suggested that students are not being cautious about the content they post on Facebook. Students were not interviewed or directly asked any questions that would indicate their concerns about professors forming an impression of them

based solely on their Facebook profile. So this study does not have data to inform the reader as to their perceptions on that issue. Additionally a study examined the observers' impressions based on one's Facebook profile (Walther, Van Der Heide, Sang-Yeon, Westerman & Tom Tong, 2008), suggesting that some users of Facebook garner interpersonal impressions from what is posted on others' profiles.

Results - Quantitative

The quantitative survey distributed to faculty and students brought about data that demonstrated consistencies among students' opinions about faculty using Facebook and its impact on their classroom experience. Faculty members also had consistent opinions in the survey responses. In order to get a balance in our results, the hope was to have as many faculty members participate in the study as there were students participating. In **Table 1** the results of participants are presented. Of the participants, 49.3% were faculty and 50.7% were students. In **Table 2** the student respondents are displayed by classifications; observably the largest group of respondents were seniors being 55.4% and the second largest being juniors at 29.7%. Though there were a number of respondents that seemed to agree on the same issues, there were also many that did not agree. Faculty and students alike disagreed with their colleagues and peers on certain matters. In this section the results of both faculty and student perceptions are presented with some discussion of possible inferences, based on these data.

Status of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Faculty	72	49.3	49.3	49.3
	Student	74	50.7	50.7	100.0
	Total	146	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 – Status (Faculty / Student)

Student Classification

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Freshman	3	2.1	4.1	4.1
	Sophomore	4	2.7	5.4	9.5
	Junior	22	15.1	29.7	39.2
	Senior	41	28.1	55.4	94.6
	Grad Student	4	2.7	5.4	100.0
	Total	74	50.7	100.0	
Missing	System	72	49.3		
Total		146	100.0		

Table 2

The survey was helpful in attaining a variety of information about the faculty and student respondents. However, it was not helpful to this study unless the students had faculty members as friends and the students had faculty members as friends. These results revealed if faculty had students as friends on Facebook and if students had faculty as friends on Facebook. The results out of 147 respondents showed that over 75% responded saying *Yes*. With such a large percentage of respondents communicating or connecting in some manner there was an opportunity to manipulate these data for more information. In **Figure 2** the chart displays an at-glance view of the faculty having students as friends and the students that have faculty as friends.

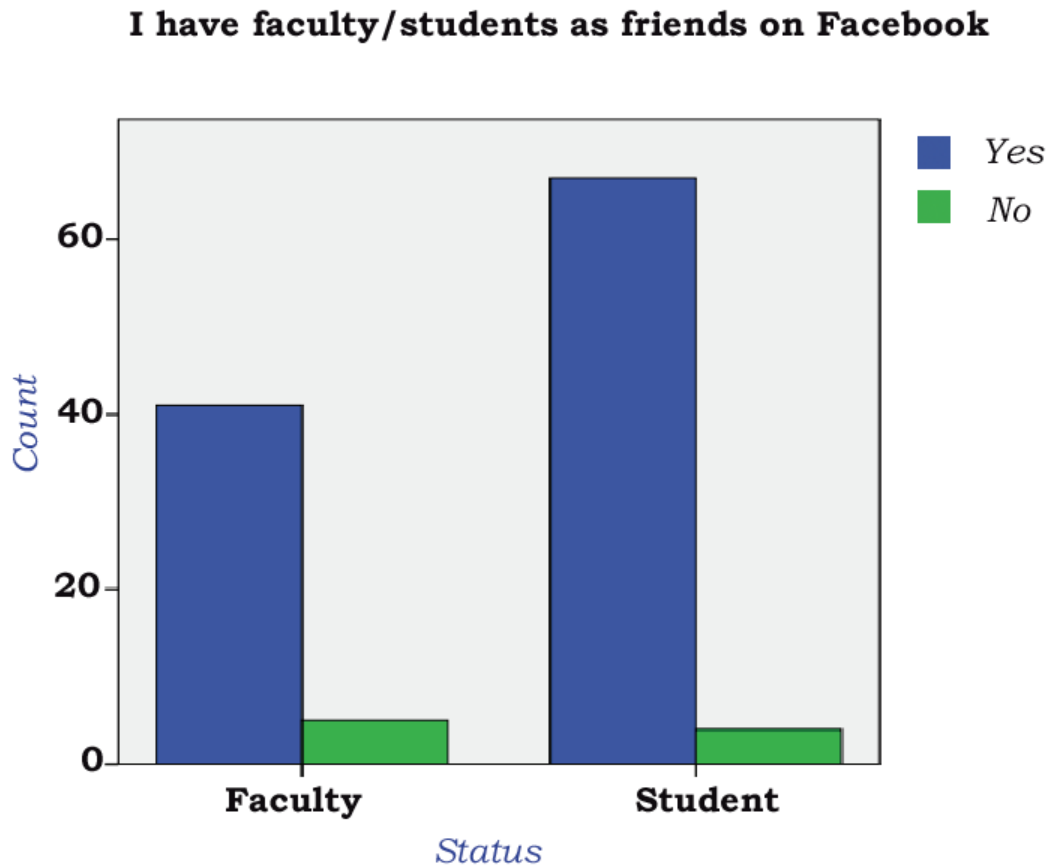


Figure 2

As may be expected, the frequency of Facebook access was much higher from student results than faculty. There is the possibility that higher frequencies of accessing Facebook can be credited for other results that otherwise appear surprising. The faculty results were scattered in the sense that the number of faculty accessing seldom were no different than those accessing often or occasionally. The only count that seemed a bit different was the *Very Often* option, where faculty were higher than their colleagues that accessed *Often* to *Seldom*. See **Figure 3** for Facebook access results.

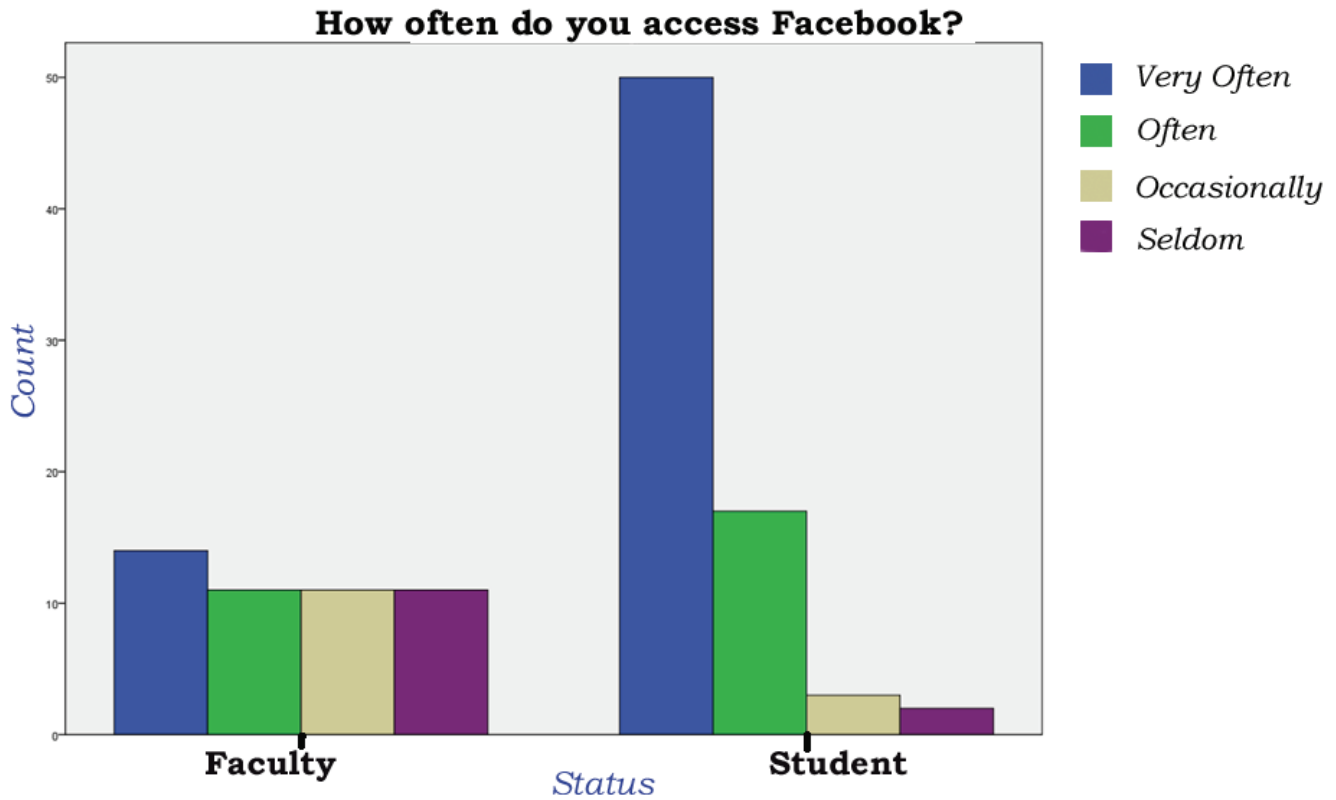


Figure 3 – Access Frequency

Looking further into the matter of Facebook access and the frequency thereof, results were surprising. The researchers ran a crosstabulation to look at the number of years the faculty has been teaching and the frequency of accessing Facebook. In **Table 3**, it is clear that the anticipated number of potentially "younger" and less experienced was not the highest count for accessing Facebook. When looking at merely numbers, it suggests just the opposite. The quantitative data demonstrates 10+ years teachers accessed their Facebook account more than any other group. Based on the quantitative data alone it is difficult to conclude what these data mean; however, the qualitative component did shed some light on this matter from the interview results. The interviewed faculty revealed that their reason for starting a Facebook account in many cases was to keep in touch with their children and / or grandchildren. Only later did they begin to connect with students through Facebook. It can be inferred that the teachers of 10+ years of experience are in the same category as those that started their Facebook account for family reasons.

How often do you access Facebook? * Number of years teaching Crosstabulation

Count		Number of years teaching			Total
		1 - 5 Years	6 - 10 Years	10+ Years	
How often do you access Facebook?	Very Often	3	2	8	13
	Often	3	4	4	11
	Occasionally	4	3	4	11
	Seldom	4	1	6	11
	Total	14	10	22	46

Table 3 – Frequency Crosstabulation

The survey results also revealed student perspective on relating to their instructors based upon if the instructor has a profile on Facebook. This is demonstrated in **Figure 4**. Students appear to be more willing to communicate with their instructors if they already know them through the use of Facebook. This relationship might suggest that the in-class interaction between student and instructor is enriched based merely on the use of a social network. These specific results suggested that students felt that Facebook gave them more of an opportunity to communicate than the faculty felt about their communications with students. Since there were about as many faculty as there were student respondents the count was used to measure versus percentile. Looking at the count in the bar chart of **Figure 4** there were more than twice as many students that agreed on the matter of Facebook working as a platform that could help facilitate the opening of communication lines. In turn, there were more faculty that disagreed on this matter than there were students, however it was a slim margin. This could be either because of the *N* was only 147 total therefore the differences were not in contrast or it could mean that students and faculty are not far from agreeing with each other on this matter of communication and Facebook assisting. This was interesting information, but not statistically significant in either direction. More in-depth studies may reveal statistically significant results. See the recommendation section for further studies suggested. For the most part, it appeared that students were quite comfortable and open to communicating with faculty on Facebook. In another study by Hewitt and Forte (2006) it was reported that students had positive remarks to make about faculty communicating on Facebook with them and they felt that it gave "... potential for students to get to know professors better" (p. 1).

An important factor to be considered is the faculty perspective on the importance of communicating with their students outside the classroom. The faculty members of Lee University, a teaching institution, put an emphasis on their connectedness, availability, and openness to students. The faculty see this as an essential component to student academic experience. That said, it is suggested from the results that many faculty may not be ready to move to the social networking world in a virtual sense.

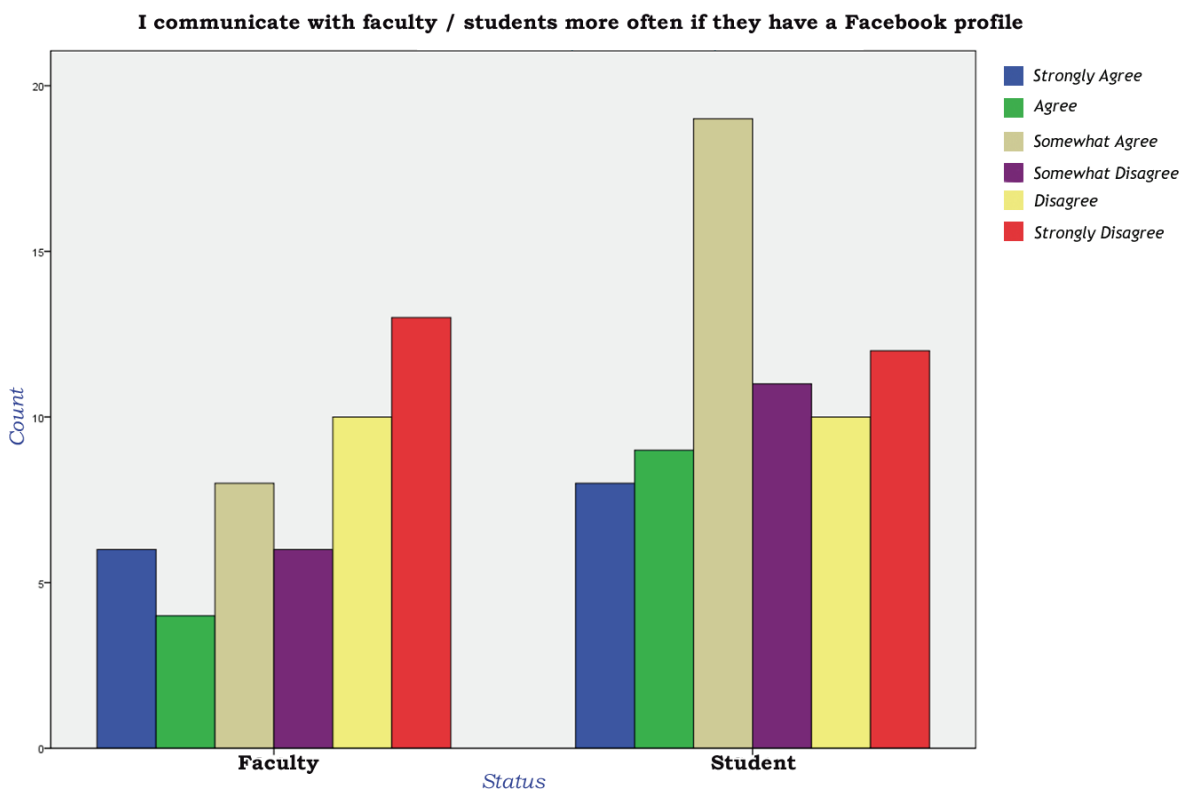


Figure 4- Communicating Chart

Faculty were surveyed on the matter of being more approachable as a result of their Facebook profiles. The results show that over 75% of the faculty responded with some level of agreement that credits the Facebook social network with molding student perception of faculty "approachability." Again, the matter of being open and accessible to students is very important to Lee University faculty. In **Figure 5** the attitude of faculty members' might suggest a discovery that the Facebook platform offers an additional route to their students communicating with them simply because they are more approachable.

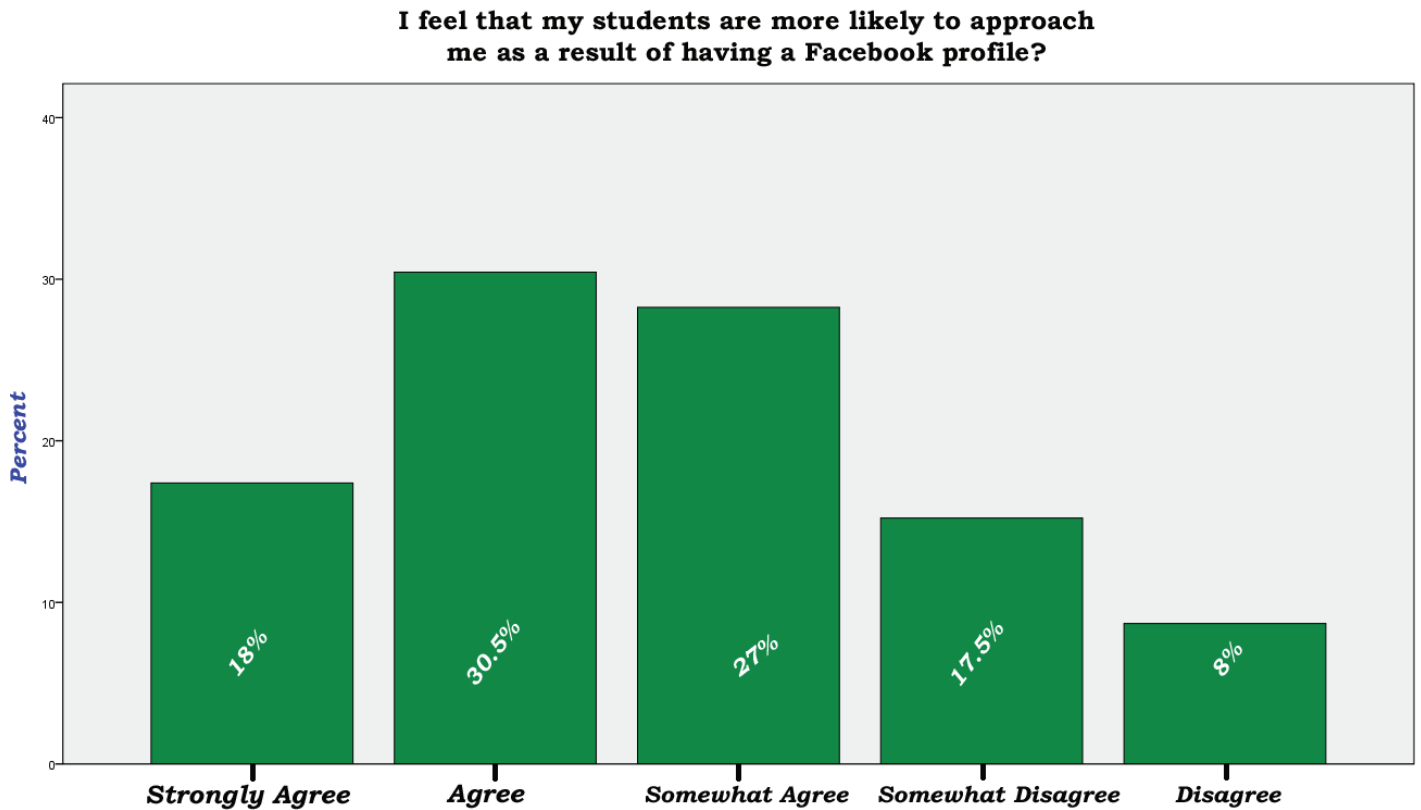


Figure 5 - Approachability

Goldstein and Benassi (1998) suggested that faculty self-disclosure influences student classroom participation. This idea is consistent with the reciprocity effect, where self-disclosure from one person compels another person to self-disclose (Won-Doomink, 1985). In various studies on relationships between faculty and students there have been findings that confirm that the "openness" of faculty does help the student feel more connected, therefore encouraging participation in class. The survey had a number of questions that would give some insight as to how the faculty members and/or students felt about Facebook helping them to connect. As the graph in **Figure 6** suggests, there were more students that felt a connection with their instructors because of Facebook. However, the faculty responses did not suggest that the connectedness was felt in both directions. As instructors, the concern of how connected the faculty members are to students is seems to be less important as looking into the students' perception. Apparently, students feel that there is indeed a connectedness and it could be inferred that students are beginning to see faculty members as normal people in their world versus having the mysterious wonder that most adults over 40 experienced as students in college. Students having an this attitude of connecting with their instructors because of Facebook relations was one of the major focuses of this study. The study has revealed that the social networking technology does open opportunities for positive experiences in academics and life in general.

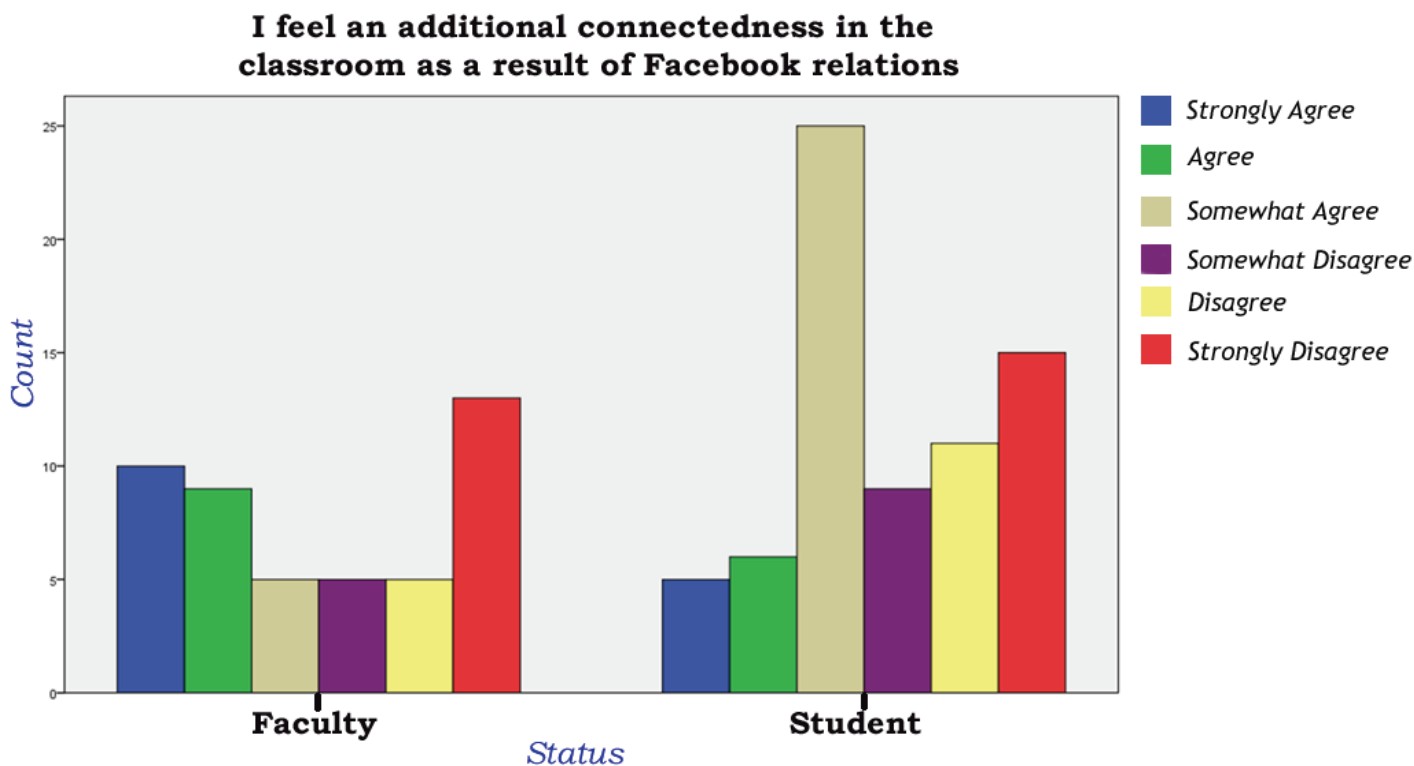


Figure 6 - Connectedness

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study did reveal to the researchers the attitudes of both faculty and students. This section is presented as bullet points but not to be taken lightly. These items listed are the main thoughts that emerged as results were analyzed from the study.

- Considering both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of this study, the researchers concluded that there is indeed an *indirect* connection between faculty use of Facebook and academic performance. Enough evidence suggests that the relationships built on Facebook between students and faculty members can make for a more open line of communication, resulting in a better learning environment and more student engagement in the classroom. Like one professor said in his interview, ***"The more relaxed the student is, the more relaxed the faculty member is and the more learning can take place. If the relationship that exists is what makes for a better learning experience for the student, then Facebook most certainly has an indirect impact."***
- Faculty members do not put as much weight into the use of Facebook for relationship purposes as students. Students want to have relationships with their professors and to know them as real people, not as people who are always kept at arms-distance. They do not necessarily put a great amount of emphasis on how these relationships affect their academic lives, but nevertheless the desire for that connection is present.
- Students feel more connected and are more willing to form relationships with others as a result of online communication, that just happens to be a part of a 21st century student's life. Observably, faculty see relationships between themselves and students as an important matter. However, it appears that not all faculty members are recognizing the importance that students put on using technology as a way of building and maintaining these relationships. One professor stated, ***"I think that a lot of people who have trouble with Facebook may be people who have trouble with a lot of cultural change in general."*** Though some faculty members might remain hesitant to utilize such technology, they must keep in mind that it's not all about them. As teachers, it is their job to put the learner's needs first, and if that means having to use Facebook or any other social network, then so be it.

"The longer I teach, the more I realize that it's the relational aspects that stay with students longer than any fact that they learn in class."

Recommendations

As social networks become more popular among both students and faculty, there is a limitless amount of information that can be gleaned from research in this area. The social network technology is relatively new; so much research is needed to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of using such cutting-edge tools in the academic realm. This research study collected general data that showed a considerable amount of information, but more in-depth research is needed. Longitudinal and comparative research carried out over a broader spectrum of participants would provide more specific data resulting in a deeper understanding of the connections between social networks and academic performance.

One-on-one interviews with students, with and without faculty "friends" on Facebook, would provide more insight into the students' perspective of social networking's impact on academic performance and student experience inside the classroom.

Comparative studies are needed to determine specific connections between logistical statistics such as faculty/student age, gender, openness to technology, etc. It would also be interesting to compare the grades of those students who have formed relationships with faculty members on Facebook with the grades of those who have not. Perhaps that would provide results that explicitly state whether or not social networks have a direct impact on student learning and academic performance.

Based on other studies that appear to conflict in some results compared to this study, comparing students' and faculty members' attitudes at different university types would shed light on the reason of finding diverse responses. For instance, Hewitt and Forte (2006) of Georgia Institute of Technology found that one third of the student population did not believe faculty should be on Facebook. GIT is a public research institution. Compared to the results from Lee University the attitudes are dynamically opposing. Lee University being a private teaching institution, where faculty to student relationships are strongly encouraged, the results show students welcoming faculty on Facebook.

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Appendix A - Qualitative Inquiry

- If Facebook has affected your relationships with your students, how so?
- What evidence is there to back up your position?
- Are you conscientious of the information that your students see when you use Facebook, and how does that affect the way you edit your profile?
- In what “light” do you present yourself through your profile, and how does that reflect your teaching style in the classroom?
- Do your comments, notes, and the like intentionally present you as you would have your students perceive you?
- How does the relationship that you’ve built on Facebook affect your students' experiences in your classroom?
- Does the relationship you’ve built on Facebook have a positive impact on your learners?
- Does this relationship make for a more comfortable classroom environment?
- How has it affected the way you teach?
- What are your thoughts on the professionalism and credibility aspects of faculty members using Facebook?

Appendix B - Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Project: Course Research Project

Topic: **Faculty on Facebook: Confirm or Deny?**

Researcher: Christin Walker, Lee University; Cleveland, TN

As the researcher and student of this study from Lee, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of person obtaining consent

Date

I have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and have received a copy of this form. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions before signing, and have been told that I can ask other questions at anytime. I understand that I also have the right to withdraw as a participant of this study at any time I so desire.

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated to preserve my anonymity and reported in the research documented only in aggregate form or with all identifiable attributes masked. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am not waiving any of my legal rights.

Printed Name

Date

Appendix C - IRRB Form

LEE UNIVERSITY

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW FORM

Completion of this form is required for each research project using human subjects. This document acts as a statement by the investigator that the project complies with The Public Health Service Act (P.L. 93-348) as implemented by HHS regulation 45 CFR 46 and Lee policies.

Principal Investigator: *Michael Sturgeon*

(If a student, please list faculty advisor as co-investigator)

Department: Education Address: 7904 Holly Hills Dr; Chattanooga, TN 37421 Tel No.

Co-Investigator: *Christin Walker*

Department: Instructional Technology Box No. 3450 Tel No.: xt. 8556

Estimated Period for This Project: *One Semester*

Source of Funds/Funding Agency: *n/a*

Project Title: *Faculty on Facebook: Confirm or deny?*

Please check one of the following:

1. This project meets the requirements of Paragraph 46.101(b) and is exempt.
(Please complete sections A [check the appropriate exemption category] and B and attach a copy of the survey if applicable).
2. This project does not meet the requirements of Paragraph 46.101(b) and is not exempt from committee review. (Please complete Section B and C and attach a copy of the survey and/or Informed Consent form if applicable).

Appendix D - Survey

Faculty on Facebook: Survey

Thank you for participating in this survey. It's only 16 questions, and it shouldn't take you that long to complete.

***Since the respondents to this survey are both faculty members and students, the questions are often worded "faculty/student." Please answer according to your status.

Name

Please select your roll at Lee. *

- I am a student.
- I am a faculty member.

If student, please select your classification.

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Grad Student

If faculty, please select your professional experience in higher education.

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 10+ years

Gender *

- Male
- Female

I have a Facebook account. *

- Yes.
- No.

How often do you access Facebook?

- 1 2 3 4
-
- Very often. Seldom.
-

I have faculty/students as friends on Facebook.

If your a faculty member, do you have students as friends? If your a student, do you have professors as friends?

- Yes.
- No.

I communicate with faculty/students more often if they use Facebook.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

I would like to be "friends" with more faculty/students on Facebook.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

I feel an additional connectedness in the classroom as a result of Facebook relations.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

I feel that academic results are enhanced when faculty/students establish an online relationship.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

I use Facebook for academic purposes.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

I am conscientious of the information (i.e. comments, photo, etc.) I post on my Facebook profile, knowing that the other party can view it.

"Other party" refers faculty/student.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

Question for STUDENTS--I feel more open to communicate with my professors as a result of Facebook.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree

Question for FACULTY--I feel that my students are more likely to approach me as a result of Facebook.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Agree Strongly Disagree
