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Academic Honor Policy Committee at: <http://fda.fsu.edu/Academics/Academic-Honor-Policy>

Unauthorized Collaboration on Facebook: Threats and Responses

Recent events at FSU have uncovered a threat to academic integrity that might be flying under the radar of most instructors. This resource can help you understand and respond to this threat, while providing positive forums for student interaction and collaboration.

The Problem:

When students, faculty, and staff join Facebook using a valid FSU email address, they're offered the opportunity to join "Groups at FSU," which is a closed collection of groups. It's important to understand that this community is neither sponsored nor monitored by FSU; it is designed to help people make connections based upon their interests and locations. Students might not realize this and believe it is affiliated with or endorsed by Florida State University.

Facebook also allows students to create groups that others can join – even one using your course number and title. When your students provide information about their course schedules to Facebook, it might suggest that they join existing groups that have been created with your course number in the group title. Facebook allows anyone to create such groups and pages. Students who find these existing groups might think they were created by the instructor.

Even worse, a student who creates such a group can make it a "closed group." You would be able to see that a closed group is created, but you would not be able to join it without permission from the group creator. Several recent cases have emerged in which students were using such "closed groups" to share exam questions and to engage in other forms of unauthorized collaboration.

What Can You Do About It?

The first and most important step is to have a clear policy regarding collaboration on student work. Students need to know what is allowable in face-to-face study groups as well as in online collaboration. *When you explain your policy, be explicit about how it applies to study groups on Facebook and elsewhere online.*

New to Facebook?

For a quick overview of the Facebook phenomenon in the context of education, [see this article](#) from the EDUCAUSE "7 Things You Should Know" series.

You can also find several introductory courses about Facebook through FSU's license with Lynda.com, linked under Secure Apps in campus.fsu.edu.

For more about FERPA concerns with Facebook use in Higher Education, see [this recent article from EDUCAUSE](#).

To learn more about concerns with Facebook's "Groups for Schools" feature, see *Edudemic's Ultimate Guide* and *EdUniverse's Continued Thoughts* posts.

It's important that you explicitly inform students if there is an official group page for your course, and caution them against joining others and thereby potentially engaging in unauthorized collaboration. Instructors can also monitor Facebook from time to time to identify unauthorized groups, though they will not be able to enter any closed (private) group without the owner's permission.

If you do create an official Facebook page for your course, consider simply using it as a signpost that will bring students into a more secure environment, where they can make use of Blackboard's communication tools to collaborate and connect with each other socially. Good examples of how to encourage Blackboard use include:

- Using Bb discussion boards and blogs for student Q&A and group work
- Sharing documents and other files in discussion board attachments, blog posts, wikis, and file-sharing areas
- Creating icebreaker forums where students can share information about themselves with classmates
- Conducting online, synchronous meetings and tutorials using Blackboard Collaborate (available for distance courses only)

Using Blackboard instead of Facebook for these functions means that you don't have to worry about matching students with Facebook accounts, backing up or archiving student work and course materials, or potential exposure of confidential student information.

To learn more about these and other Blackboard communication and collaboration tools, see [this FSU Blackboard User Support page](#) and/or inquire about [technology training](#) from the Office of Distance Learning.

If you find evidence of [Academic Honor Policy](#) violations occurring in a Facebook group related to your class, secure the evidence and discuss the case with your department chair or director. The [Office of Faculty Development and Advancement](#) can also provide you with guidance as you implement the process.

Florida State University is a member of the International Center for Academic Integrity.