

Faculty and Staff Use of Social Media: Sample Policy

Social media¹—including sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, blogs, and other online discussion forums—has extended its reach into many areas of modern life, including (or especially) the lives of students, as well as teachers and administrators. While the origins of these services are social in nature (i.e., not job-related), they have evolved to the point where certain uses of these outlets may impact the reputation and well-being of your school and its members (for example, if they inadvertently serve as a conduit facilitating inappropriate relationships between students and faculty/staff). Due to this possibility, the use of social media resources becomes part of the school’s appropriate purview with respect to employees.²

ISM encourages all schools to implement policies that will help the school and its employees to more safely navigate the uncharted waters regarding the impact of social media activities on the school and its students. The following represents a sample policy designed to serve a range of private-independent schools. As with all policies, we recommend that you modify it

as necessary to align with and support your mission, culture, and values—and, prior to implementation, all policies should be reviewed with your employment attorney.

Please note: This policy concerns the personal (but job-related) use of social media by individual employees. This is only one part of the entire social media equation, however. The other significant part is the school’s “official” use of social media for its own purposes—such as staying in touch with alumni, parents, and potential donors, or getting its message out in an accessible way to prospective parents and students. In this way, the marketing, admission, and development functions of the school all may have direct need of social media resources (e.g., setting up a Facebook page for the school, sending out regular “tweets” on Twitter). As noted in provision No. 2 of this policy, we recommend that the school develop a second policy describing how the school uses social media resources for official purposes—and delineating which individuals or departments are responsible for managing this usage.

Policy Regarding Faculty and Staff Use of Social Media

Policy Text

Commentary

Context

As social media can bridge both the work life and personal life of employees, some conflict of responsibilities may occur. The school’s interest in establishing this policy is to define the educational and work-related contexts of social media and blogging, for the protection of our employees, students, and the school community as a whole.

The school should stress that its interest in this topic is solely school related (i.e., it doesn’t seek to extend its reach into purely personal, non-job-related matters).

Who This Policy Covers

This policy applies to our adult community—principally, faculty, staff, and administrators, and other adults acting on the school’s behalf.

A separate-but-related policy for students and parents should be published in the student/parent handbook.

Key Principles

Interacting online with colleagues, students, alumni, and other community members is no different than interacting with these individuals or groups face-to-face—i.e., we are required to maintain the respect, dignity, prudence, and professionalism reflected in our Characteristics of Professional Excellence, and concern for the safety and protection of children in all interactions.

Establishing overarching principles will help guide your school when circumstances (or new technologies) develop that don’t exactly match the provisions of the current policy, as will inevitably be the case.

With specific regard to social media, as a school employee, you must:

- Understand that you are accountable for your postings and other electronic communications that are job-related, particularly online activities conducted with a school e-mail address, or while using school property, networks, or resources.
- Recognize that:
 - social media activities may be visible to current, past, and prospective students; parents; colleagues; and community members;
 - serving as a role model is a critical aspect of your work at the school; and
 - accordingly, you must exercise appropriate discretion when using social

The school may wish to reference its “Acceptable Use of Internet and E-mail” policy here.

Role modeling of behavior is the central argument for the position that personal social media activities can come into the realm of the job.

media (even for personal communications) when those communications can impact your role at the school.

- Keep in mind that the uneven power dynamics of the school—in which adults have implied authority over former students—continues to shape those relationships after the end of the school day and year, and even after graduation. Employees must act in a manner that always respects and never exploits the power inherent in these relationships.
- Balance your right of individual expression with the valid interests of the school in promoting and presenting its mission, culture, and values to the community at large (as reflected by the public actions and statements of school employees).

Please be aware that the school considers discretion in social media activities to be a serious matter in protecting the school. Violation of this policy may lead to corrective action, up to and including termination of employment.

This is meant to acknowledge the fact that there is a tension between individual rights and responsibility to the group.

While the threat of disciplinary action must always be used judiciously in policy communications, it is used here to emphasize the seriousness of the matter.

Guidelines

1. Classroom/Professional Use of Social Media

Faculty are expected to limit class activities to school-sanctioned online tools (including social media and blogs), a current list of which is available from _____.

New social media tools and features that may or may not be appropriate for course use, are being continually introduced. If you find a social media tool that you think will be useful in your classroom that is not already on the “approved” list, please contact _____ and request approval of the tool prior to using it.

If the school does not maintain an “approved” list of sites—or, if in the future this becomes impractical to maintain—the sentence should be changed to “... age-appropriate or educationally appropriate tools.”

2. Use of Social Media for Development/Alumni Relations Purposes

The school may choose to establish a social media presence (e.g., Facebook page) for development, alumni relations, internal marketing, or other school-related purposes. All postings to this site will be initiated under the direction of the _____ Department.

All use of school-sponsored social media sites will be conducted under a separate policy established specifically for that purpose. A copy of the “Official School Use of Social Media Resources Policy” is available from the _____ Department.

Name whichever department in the school is appropriate.

3. Relationship-Building with Students, Alumni, and Parents

Do not initiate or accept social media “friend” requests from current students (of any age) or former students under the age of 18.

Use professional discretion when “friending” alumni 18 years of age and older. When doing so, recognize that many former students have online connections with current students (including younger siblings and underclassmen friends), and that information shared between recent alumni/ae is likely to be seen by current students as well.

Employees are discouraged from friending parents of current or prospective students due to the inherent conflicts of interest that may raise.

Note: Terminology describing the building of relationships online varies from site to site. “Friending” is meant to include following, subscribing, adding as a contact, or any other term meaning establishing an online relationship between two people.

“Friending” prohibitions are among the most important elements of this policy, as “friend” status is the doorway through which student access to an employee’s personal information and postings can most readily occur—bringing with it all of the attendant role-model issues.

With regard to “friending” parents, schools may wish to change “discourage” to “must use caution.” Depending on how well-developed the school’s “official” use of social media may be, friending parents may be a significant benefit from a marketing perspective (e.g., for successful viral marketing campaigns).

4. School-Related Adult Friends (co-workers, supervisors, and subordinates)

Employees are asked to use good judgment when making or accepting “friend” (or “link” or “connection”) requests to or from school colleagues.

Employees in supervisor/subordinate relationships are particularly encouraged to use caution, due to the potential for both parties to feel pressured to accept the request, potentially impacting the work relationship (as well as raising conflict-of-interest, unequal treatment, discrimination, or similar concerns).

5. Non-School-Related Friends

Remind all other members of your social networks of your position as an educator whose profile may be accessed by students and other members of the school community. Ask them to monitor their posts to your network accordingly. This includes (but is not limited to) being “tagged” in photos on the sites of friends or others, especially where the photos may imply activities not appropriate for viewing by students and other community members.

6. Groups in Your Social Network

All employees are asked to use good judgment in visibly and publicly associating only with social media groups consistent with the mission of the school.³ At the same time, this provision is not intended to limit valid intellectual discourse on a wide variety of subjects or viewpoints. (See “Online Identity and Posting to Blogs” provision, below, for further details).

7. Posted Content

Exercise care with personal profile data and posted content to ensure that this information does not reflect poorly on your ability to serve as a role model or otherwise create a conflict of interest. Content should be placed thoughtfully and reviewed periodically.

Social media sites are increasingly interconnected—i.e., linked to one another—in ways that may be largely outside the direct control of the users on any given site. Exercise caution regarding posting of inappropriate content to any social media.

8. Privacy Settings

On most sites, privacy settings can be changed at any time to limit searchability and access to profiles. Employees must be prudent in allowing access to their online content, consistent with other requirements of this policy. Changes should be made whenever necessary.

9. Time on Social Sites

Employees must refrain from using social media or blogging sites for personal use during work hours except for incidental usage (e.g., spending a moment or two checking a site in between work activities). In no case may the use of social media resources interfere or impede the employee’s completion of his/her job duties and responsibilities to the school and our students.

10. Online Identity and Posting to Blogs

As a vibrant academic community, we encourage active engagement in a range of activities, intellectual pursuits, causes, and the like—including social, political, religious, and civic-oriented groups, blogs, etc. At the same time, an individual’s right to participate in these groups must be balanced with the school’s right to manage public communications issued in its name or on its behalf.

The school’s stance on this provision largely will be driven by its culture. In most environments, the risks of inappropriate or unequal supervisor-employee relationships will outweigh the potential benefits.

This provision should echo similar standards in other school policies that variously define appropriate, expected, and prohibited employee conduct. This may be defined in your “Code of Conduct” policies.

New users of these sites may not be aware of their interconnectedness—thus, they may be under the false impression that their content is protected from access when it may not be.

We find rules prohibiting all usage while on duty to be impractical, ineffective, and risky (i.e., vulnerable to claims of inconsistent enforcement), unless access to these sites is completely blocked by the school’s network.

This is the key provision that governs how an employee represents his/her opinions to the online world—i.e., indicating whether the opinions presented are those of the school or solely of the writer.

When posting messages to blogs (i.e., meant to broadly include a variety of online discussion forums), employees may not state or imply their connection to the school in any way without the prior written consent of the School Head.

Example: If an employee chooses to post a personal message on a blog, he/she must not sign the post, “Jane Smith, Faculty Member, ABC School,” but rather only “Jane Smith.”

Similarly, when making personal, non-work-related posts to blogs, employees may not use their school e-mail address in the message or for reply purposes, to avoid implying approval of the message’s content by the school.

11. Protecting Confidential Information

All confidential school information must be protected and may be disclosed *only* pursuant to school policy or as otherwise required by law. No social media or blog posts may communicate any confidential information.

See the school’s “Confidentiality Policy” for further details.

12. Use of Logos, Trademarks, and Intellectual Property

Employees are not permitted to use the school’s logo, trademarks, official photographs, or any other intellectual property or proprietary materials in any postings without the written consent of _____.

13. Use of Social Media Sites in Background Checking

Background checking is a serious matter that is governed by specific regulations and that creates a variety of risks and liabilities for the school if not handled properly. No employee is permitted to engage in “freelance” checks of any type. The school maintains specific background-checking procedures, under the direction of _____.⁴

14. Acceptable Use and Monitoring of Electronic Activities

Employees are prohibited from engaging in illegal activities or accessing Web sites with illegal or otherwise prohibited content when using school networks or school equipment on or off school property, during or after working time, or while directly or indirectly representing the school in any way.

The school reserves the right to monitor employee electronic communications and activities that are transmitted through school networks and/or using school-provided equipment to protect the school,⁵ its students, employees, and other community members from potential harm, liability, or other risk.

For further details, please see the school’s “Acceptable Use of the Internet, E-mail, and Network Resources Policy.”

An alternative version of this provision would be to allow references to your school and the individual’s position, but requiring the individual to include the statement, “The opinions expressed are solely my own and do not necessarily represent the views of my employer” in all posts or signatures.

Both the school’s confidentiality and intellectual property policies (see next provision) are vital to protect school, student, and parent data.

Name the appropriate individual or department.

All schools should clearly define and consistently follow background-checking processes in order to limit legal liability with regard to discrimination—in addition to other requirements under the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA).

While this provision reiterates the key aspects of the “Acceptable Use” policy, we recommend its use here as a matter of emphasis, serving as a reminder regarding the need for proper conduct when using school networks.

The school may also reference its “Principles of Conduct” and “Harassment and Non-Discrimination” policies.

Note: While this policy document touches on legally related topics (such as federal and state employment and privacy laws), ISM is not a law firm and none of the information presented should be construed as legal advice. We strongly recommend that schools should review all legal matters with legal counsel qualified in your state, prior to implementing employment policies.

¹ The term “social media” is meant to include a wide range of sites where users control the content. Additional examples of sites that are well-known include YouTube, Flickr, and delicio.us.

² While the role-model nature of faculty/staff positions gives the school some room to provide guidance on proper social media behavior, this must always be balanced by an individual’s privacy rights. Accordingly, you will notice that this policy reiterates the job-related nature of this topic at several points. As certain states may provide employers with greater or lesser leeway on this issue, please review this policy with your employment attorney so that you may find a balance that is acceptable within the legal framework of your state or jurisdiction.

³ As a related aspect of the prior footnote, schools should be aware that overstating restrictions on the right of association may be problematic. Example: California and other states prohibit legal off-duty activities from being used against employees with regard to their employment. Due to the nature of the teaching role and of the school itself, though, schools may take the position that certain public associations—such as participation in groups in conflict with the school’s mission and values—are job-related and thus reasonably within the purview of the employment relationship. Consult with your school’s employment attorney regarding current interpretations in your state or jurisdiction.

⁴ See “Social Media and Background Checks,” *To The Point*, 15-6-31.

⁵ While the school has the right to monitor all traffic on school networks, recent court cases have affirmed that this right does not extend to gaining unauthorized access to employees’ personal computers and/or accounts that in no way involve school networks. Example: An employer does not have the right to access an invitation-only, password-protected group on a social media site by pressuring co-workers to reveal their passwords to the school. Schools are strongly cautioned against attempting to access personal social media pages by disingenuous means (e.g., asking to borrow other members’ user names or passwords to access restricted groups, or by creating false accounts for the same purpose).

Future issues of *I&P* will discuss the appropriate use of social media in a private-independent school setting, particularly in the areas of admission, marketing, and development.