

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a black computer mouse. The mouse cord extends upwards and curves to the left, framing the text. The background is plain white.

# Quick Clicks

You, Your Safety &  
Cyber Communities

# Quick Clicks



## How This Relates 2U

If you are like a majority of college students today, you are probably a member of one of the fastest growing communities in the world, a community that encourages people to interact through the virtual environment of the World Wide Web. Whether you have a profile on a directory-type site in order to meet other people, use a journal-type site as an outlet for your thoughts, or chat with classmates through an academic “chat room,” chances are you're part of the growing trend of using virtual communities to build real relationships!

These sites can be wonderful tools to express yourself and learn about others around you, but it is important to keep in mind both the benefits and risks inherent with use. You might ask yourself: what are the risks? Is there really any risk in joining a community that is not “real”? Perhaps you have never considered the potential cost of creating a profile or revealing personal information. Have you considered how many people are able to see your information and what they might be able to do with that information? How does your profile reflect your true identity? Can your professors or future employers see photographs posted on a photo-type community site? These are just a few of the questions we will ask you to ponder in this brochure. Our goal is to inform you about the many benefits, challenges, and critical issues surrounding virtual communities so that you can make the best choice for yourself when deciding to join and engage in this fast-growing community!



### Just Among Friends?

*How many people can see your profile? The profile community Facebook has over 3 million registered members! You may think you are just among friends, but there is worldwide access to your information!*



## Benefits & Challenges of Cyber Communities

### Benefits of Cyber Communities

- **Convenient way to connect with other students on campus from the comfort of your home.** Every campus is a little different, but the web is certain to be the fastest way to meet and keep up with everyone on campus.
- **Learn about other students who may share your interests.** Clubs and groups create online communities for members and potential members to interact.
- **Advertise events to a wide audience.** Online community websites often provide cost effective ways of reaching a wide audience. It makes marketing a snap!
- **Meet people in your classes.** You can easily coordinate study groups and materials, catch up on notes you might have missed, get help with tough subjects, and engage in academic dialogue with your classmates.
- **Communicate quickly and easily with friends.** Many students are able to reconnect or stay connected with friends in other states and countries.
- **Have fun meeting and interacting with people.** Why not take a break from studying, catch up on what your friends are doing, and learn about technology?

### Challenges of Cyber Communities

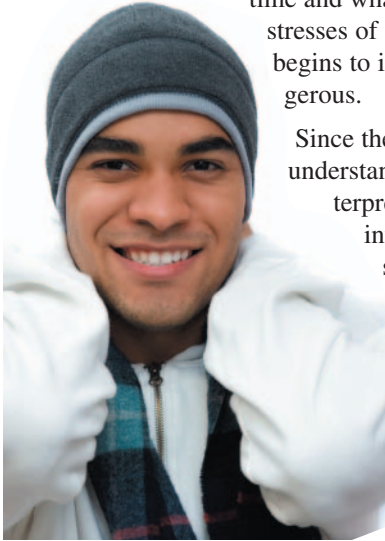
- **People can be artificial/insincere about information.** Have you seen SpongeBob walking across the quad? Maybe not but he probably has a Facebook profile at your school. The point is, you may not always know the truth behind any profile.
- **Personal and often private information is available to a large population of people you do not know.** Did you know that all information posted on the Internet is considered to be in the public domain?
- **Spending too much time online can interfere with schoolwork.** Internet addiction is a real affliction.
- **Don't judge a person by their profile!** It can be easy to make assumptions about other people based on the information they provide in their profile. Your roommate's favorite movie is the one you can't stand? Don't rule him or her out until you meet!





## Living the Virtual Life

Many people find that they are less inhibited when they are interacting online. You might say or do something online that you wouldn't normally do in the non-virtual world. This false sense of security can lead to many problems such as losing touch with reality. It's possible to become completely engrossed in a virtual world and lose track of time and what's happening in the rest of your world. Escaping the stresses of every day life is necessary sometimes but, when it begins to interfere with your perception of reality, it can be dangerous.



Since the nature of online interactions doesn't allow you to understand tone or see non-verbal cues, it can be easy to misinterpret another person's meaning. In school we are taught to interact directly with other people. Yet, some people are self conscious about talking directly with others and find it easier to interact online. It's good to be able to communicate effectively online, but not at the expense of losing interpersonal skills!

### Are Words Just Words?

Imagine reading this blog entry: *"I am so tired of stress from my family and academics... I think I'll just end it all."*

What message is this sending? Is the person actually suicidal? Are they joking or being dramatic? It's impossible to tell and should definitely be taken seriously.

Writing something is as serious as or even more serious than SAYING something. When people feel less inhibited online they may say or do things they would not do in the non-virtual world.

Ask yourself... what do my words mean? What message am I trying to send? How might someone interpret what I write?





## Risky Business: Online Safety

**Think before you write!** Just because a profile asks for a piece of personal info doesn't mean you must provide it! Do you really want your class schedule available to the whole campus? How about your cell phone number? Identity theft is a fast-growing crime! Be sure you aren't placing yourself at risk for this crime by providing detailed personal information online.

**Check privacy settings.** With many online communities you have the option to make parts of your profile accessible only to your friends, while leaving other parts public. The default setting is usually ALL PUBLIC.

**You can be vague about your location!** Want to list where you live? How about just offering your city and state? Listing your room, apartment, or house number provides a specific address for someone to find you. This can leave you vulnerable to identity theft, a stalker, unwanted visitors, or unsolicited mail.

**Be careful what you write.** Free speech doesn't protect hate speech.



## What Are You Joining?

There are some communities online that may reinforce unhealthy habits. Many college students are lured by the ease of joining these communities with the chance of some benefit. An example of a potentially dangerous one is an online gambling community. Lured in by a cheap sign-up fee and the chance to win big money, many college students are falling deeply into debt. Be aware of how much money an online community requires for you to sign up.

### *Creating a Safe Password*

- *Create a unique and complex password, using a combination of letters and numbers*
- *Choose a password that is not related to a part of your name, or a familiar date that could be easily guessed*
- *Change your password periodically to ensure security*
- *Don't share your password with anyone*

If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is! Sure, some people have obtained free iPods by signing up for online offers and soliciting their friends but, in reality, these programs often lead to unnecessary and/or unwanted subscriptions. Companies are counting on the majority of people unsuccessfully completing the offers for free electronics, but still signing up and spending money on other offers.



## You and Your Reputation Online & Off

### Who's Looking at You?

When joining any virtual community on the Internet, it's important to remember that the Internet's pseudonym is the "World Wide Web." Almost anyone in the world can access information that you post from a personal computer in your living room or your residence hall. While commercial sites maximize security to protect your private information, sites dedicated to building and establishing social networks may not be held to the same standard.



### Your Reputation is at Stake!

Your safety and security are very important but so is your reputation! It isn't difficult for anyone to gain access to this information on the web, even when it may appear to be an anonymous arena in which to express yourself. The key is

to ask this question: Is this a true representation of who I am and of how I want everyone in the world to see me? It may not always be fair for a book to be judged by its cover, but the reality is that people seldom have the chance to fully get to know you beyond what you present to them. In today's world, web search engines can narrow down any topic or area of interest. If someone has reason to be interested in knowing you, the Internet might be the first place they look! It's a good idea to make sure your online profile is squeaky clean, even behind the ears!

#### *Reflect on Your Involvement in Online Communities...*

- *Could you jeopardize your opportunity to obtain a leadership position on your campus or in your community by posting personal information on your online profile?*
- *Is it possible for potential future employers to see a photograph of you engaged in unethical, dangerous, or even illegal activities?*
- *Would you be proud to present your online journal entry to members of your family?*



## Online Danger Zones

### If You See Something, Say Something!

Sometimes you will view something that makes you uncomfortable or that you believe is unsafe. It may be an Instant Message or a blog entry. If that happens, it's a good idea to let someone know! You can save or print the information that concerns you and bring it to the attention of a staff member.



Cyber threats, harassment, aggression, and stalking are real problems that take place in both the virtual and non-virtual world. While some people may feel a sense of detachment and freedom while online, this truly is a false sense of security. These behaviors are not acceptable online or offline. Keeping the safety tips we mentioned in mind is a great way to help protect yourself. When your personal safety is threatened or in danger from another Internet user, report that user to the service provider. As an example, if you are harassed by someone while using a gaming website such as Pogo, you should document and report it to Pogo customer service. *(Note: Also make sure you report any threatening or harassing behaviors to campus officials, too!)* The only way to reduce these dangerous behaviors online is to be proactive in responding to them if they happen to you or someone you know.

### Warning Signs of Internet Addiction

Due to the nature of interactions people have online, it can be addicting to spend time on the Internet. There are some activities available online that can be addictive such as fantasy gaming, gambling, and social networks. If you recognize the signs below in yourself or someone else, contact your institution's counseling center for assistance:

- Feeling preoccupied with the Internet
- Choosing to spend time on the Internet rather than with friends or family
- Spending more time than originally intended online
- Using the Internet as a way of escaping from problems
- Jeopardizing school, relationships, or career because of time spent on the Internet
- Having a hard time connecting directly with other people and choosing to interact online instead
- Denial of amount of time spent online, or using the Internet alone so others do not know how much time is spent
- Checking for messages repeatedly
- Inability to spend any length of time away from the Internet

Remember, none of these signs are an immediate indicator of a more serious problem but, when they are combined or happen repeatedly, it's good to seek outside assistance.



## Meeting Online Friends

### Tips for First Meetings with Online Friends

It can be exciting to meet new people online, and while you can build real relationships with well-intentioned people, it's always good to practice safety precautions such as the following:

- Choose a public place like a coffee shop for your first meeting.
  - Set a time to meet (ex. We'll meet from 5-7pm) so that your time together has a definite end point.
  - Let someone know where you will be and make a plan about checking in with that person at an agreed upon time.
- Remember, people are not always as they appear! It may



be a good idea to plan your first few meetings using the three steps listed above.

- Until you develop trust, take your time in giving out personal information. You can let someone know which part of town you live in without telling him/her the number and the street.

### *Think Before You Upload/Download!*

*Many students are being held accountable for their online behavior, in the same way they are held accountable for their non-virtual behavior. Judicial offices are now managing cases where institutional rules are being broken online. With the ease of printing and saving information produced online, students sometimes create a written record of policy violations. Online behavior can affect your judicial status as a student at your institution, just as your behavior off-line does.*

#### **About the Authors**

Laurel Christy and Anna Schmidt both earned masters degrees in Student Personnel Administration at New York University (NYU). Anna serves as the Assistant Director for Academic Development and Laurel is a Community Development Educator for Judicial Affairs in the Department of Residential Education at NYU. Laurel and Anna share a passion for technology and how it can enhance the work they do in student affairs.