Social Media Policies for School Psychology Training Programs: Issues and Considerations

Problem Statement

Social networking sites and programs (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram) create the opportunity for graduate students in school psychology training programs to rapidly and widely communicate with others on a public forum. Social networking site (SNS) use is widespread, with 69% of all internet users and 92% of 18-29 year olds reporting use of social networking sites (Brenner, 2012). Because school psychology graduate students typically fall within this age group, training programs need to be alert as to potential problems that may arise through SNS use among students.

Social networking use raises old concerns in a new medium. Generally speaking, information disclosure using SNS is similar to face-to-face conversation, letters, emails, or public statements. What differs significantly is the sheer number of people who can be reached through SNS. Additionally, the inaccurate perception that social networking communication is private, when in fact SNS policies and settings may make the information disclosure public to more than the "intended" recipients. Finally, online posts are permanent in the sense that it is possible that they may be accessed many years later, even when the user has "deleted" them. Past research suggests that 20% of undergraduate SNS users report having items on their SNS that they would not want current or prospective employers to view (Peluchette & Karl, 2008).

Problem Analysis

SNS add unique challenges for graduate students who are being acculturated to the standards of professional behavior in school psychology over the course of their graduate coursework, practicum, and internship experiences. Student use (and misuse) of often difficult-to-use SNS privacy settings may increase risk. While it is not possible to identify all SNS behaviors related to standards of professional behavior that may necessitate response from a school psychology training program, some issues may include online harassment, cyber-bullying, defamation of students, faculty, or supervisors, reports of illegal behavior (i.e. drug use), reports of unethical behaviors such as multiple relationships, or disclosures of confidential student information.

Rather than recommending the development of separate SNS policies, the National Association of College and University Attorneys has concluded that problems associated with SNS are generally covered by current institutional and program policies (Burl, 2011). School psychology programs often have policies in place addressing inappropriate student behavior directly observed in the university classroom, clinic, and at clinical/school-based practicum and internship sites. For example, one NASP- approved training program includes the following language in their course bulletin:

Each semester, the student's progress is reviewed by the program faculty. Because of the sensitive nature of the work that students are qualified to do during and upon graduation from the program, the review will focus on factors other than course work, as well as formal academic progress. Nonacademic factors may include personality, interpersonal, and/or ethical issues that may impact the student's judgment and/or ability to function appropriately in a school setting. The director of the program will discuss any program faculty concerns with the student promptly and, where possible, will work with the student toward remediation of the problem. In extreme cases, it may be necessary for the student to delay further course work and/or practicum/internship placement during such remediation. In the event that a remedial plan is not possible or does not prove effective, the student may be removed from the program.

Additionally, this program annually evaluates students on the 10 NASP Domains of School Psychology Education and Practice, which includes knowledge of ethical, professional, and legal standards and practice consistent with these standards. These evaluations reflect ongoing evaluation of both academic and nonacademic factors that may affect a student's ability to perform appropriately as a school psychologist.

Deciding when and how to address SNS violations that may fall within existing university and program policies, such as the one described above, requires careful consideration. Consultation with your university's legal counsel is recommended, as determining what SNS behavior is and is not within a student's constitutionally-protected rights is the subject of ongoing debate.

Need for Education
Graduate students may not recognize that their SNS behaviors may have far-reaching implications. Therefore, it is important that graduate students be educated about the responsibilities they have to act in an ethical, professional, and legal manner in their professional conduct. Training programs should explicitly identify and discuss how SNS behavior *may* violate ethical and professional standards across students' graduate training. Potential issues to discuss may include avoiding multiple relationships (i.e., through "friending" students or parents), not respecting a family's right to privacy (i.e. through posting about an interaction with a student), or behaviors that could compromise their professional effectiveness (i.e., through posting images or text about intoxication, complaints about co-workers or supervisors, etc.). In sum, education about SNS behavior and its relationship to the practice ethical of school psychology appears to be an important, and needed, discussion among trainers and graduate students in school psychology.

Issues to Consider
Due to the complex range of issues connected with SNS use and monitoring, a variety of issues should be examined when considering the development or implementation of a SNS policy. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- What are your university, college, and program's existing student conduct policies? Consider how SNS behaviors fall within these policies and whether or not a separate, enforceable policy is needed.

- What is the goal of the proposed social media policy? If the goal is for students to be more educated about potential risks of SNS use and more careful in their
- SNS practices, an educational learning module may be more appropriate than a social media policy. If the goal is to have a policy for sanctioning, suspending, and/or dismissing students, consider first whether or not existing student conduct policies encapsulate SNS use and consult your university's legal counsel.
- If your training program decides to develop a specific SNS policy, it is important to consider that different legal implications exist for protected (First Amendment) speech on public state universities versus private colleges and universities. Any policy developed must align with current institutional policies and state and federal law (see Burl, 2011 for discussion).
- If a SNS policy is developed, has it been reviewed by your university legal counsel? Would it call for active or passive monitoring of SNS? How would this policy be implemented?
- What are the social media policies of the public schools where practica and internship students are placed? How will students be expected to abide by these policies during their training experiences?
- How can your training program best educate students about both the risks and benefits of SNS use? How can trainers and advanced graduate students model appropriate behavior (e.g., does your program use SNS to communicate? Are trainers "friends" with graduate students? Do students use SNS to communicate with each other?)?

References

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