

## Privacy and Pitch: How to Balance Student Privacy With College Application Success in the Social Media Era

In August 2020, as the world prepared for an unprecedented school year, one contingent of educators came across an unusual problem. Students in their senior year of high school still needed to apply for college. Given that this process had been moving online over the past few years, filling out online forms has become part of the digital native students' repertoire. Standardized testing caused an imminent panic, but most colleges eventually quelled that dilemma by simply suspending the requirement that students submit SAT or ACT scores for this application cycle. Students toured campuses via YouTube. But several conundrums still remained in the transition to a fully-online, remote, and virtual college application process. Notably, many college counselors struggled to understand how the student's online presence and activities would affect college applications.

During the first week of August, the annual Bloomberg-sponsored CollegePoint counseling training began in a virtual format. CollegePoint and its partners, including ScholarMatch, College AdvisingCorps, College Possible, and Matriculate, gathered their workers from around the country and began to prepare for the upcoming admissions season. In my capacity as a Common Sense Media privacy attorney, college professor, and a long-time volunteer college counselor for ScholarMatch, I presented a session designed to generate some thinking about students' use of educational technology and social media and their impact on student privacy. We looked at case studies and role-played through several possible scenarios for college applicants, from scenarios in which the student had little social media interaction to scenarios involving student influencers. In each instance, we analyzed how the student's online presence might affect their college application. In each instance, we discussed remedies after the fact as well as proactive activities that might positively affect their college application success.

For example, we talked about Zoom, an entity known to remote team workplaces for years, but a neophyte in the classroom. While I've moderated several discussions, spoken on panels, and lectured to large groups of adults via Zoom conferences, I noticed a plethora of problems associated with using Zoom as a substitute (pun intended) classroom. I shared with the volunteers that one of the best features I've discovered in online conferences is the chat function, which allows introverts and those concerned with privacy to have conversations when they would prefer not to speak aloud to the group and have the speaker window focus on them, recording their picture and voice.

It's a familiar adage that technology is fast and law is slow, but the addition of a pandemic to the educational stage has created a leapfrog situation. Similar to the leapfrogging of technology in developing countries, sociologically we've had to skip a few steps to get up to speed in distance learning. One remedy we discussed was how to assure, or at least encourage, both safety and privacy in one-on-one conversations between teachers and students. In some cases, in real life (IRL) measures worked- leave the door open, sit in a chair not the bed, stay in the realm of the appropriate. In other cases, teens have exposed and been exposed to a variety of inappropriate content via Zoom-bombing and other breaches of security and privacy. In the latter scenario, post-hoc measures such as password protection and email suffix checks have removed or reduced the threat going forward. We discussed COPPA, FERPA, HIPAA, and PPRA, but what the participants really wanted to know was how to relate to the new technology and how to manage student privacy. The college admissions process is not one that's particularly conducive to privacy. In fact, the whole goal is to reveal rather than conceal the student's essential information, personality, and preferences. And then there's social media, a sideshow of personal information that's often available to college admissions personnel. Whether the applicant is a dabbler or an influencer in social media, studies cited in the presentation indicated that 36% of 300 college admissions officers polled visit applicants' social media profiles, and 32% of those who visited profiles said what they found had a negative impact (Kaplan Survey, 2020). The presentation offered several solutions to student dilemmas regarding social media, including preventative measures such as creating positive branding and avoiding negative branding. We also discussed remedial measures, including deleting posts and state erasure laws. As a group, we ran through the often labyrinthine course on privacy settings and other protective measures in popular social media apps, including SnapChat and TikTok. Finally, we considered the impact of the current political situation, diversity, and possible social unrest on privacy. If students participated in political protests live or online, we raised the possibilities for protection of their privacy and selective sharing of information on social media and in the college applications themselves. Masks, for example, might be multitasking.

All in all, the process of considering student privacy is not one that simply ends when the student leaves the K-12 or university environment, and not one that ends when they leave the physical or even virtual classroom. Student privacy during this college admission season will affect the relevant student's college admissions choices, and their employment and social lives thereafter. In addition, the structure of privacy and security for this process may set precedents for future college admissions seasons and the educational technology field as a whole.