

Facebook: Technical Foul



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Rumors of prospective employers and campus police informally browsing social networking sites have run rampant for several years, but a new program does the work for them, allowing universities to be informed when certain material appears on their students' pages. The program is designed to police the pages of student athletes, often the focus of such monitoring since they publicly represent their colleges and universities, and has some free speech advocates on edge.

YouDiligence was developed by MVP Sports Media Training, a company that focuses on preparing college athletes to interact with the media. The idea grew from athletic departments' complaints that student athletes' pages were being scrutinized by the media, often catching the players off guard with hard-hitting questions.

After a name is entered into YouDiligence, it searches the public areas of MySpace and Facebook, which include any areas that users have not set as private, for designated "red flag" words selected by each school—about five hundred words that deal with illegal activities, sex, alcohol, drugs, crime, guns and the like. If any of these words are detected by the program, an e-mail is sent to the school with the name of the student and a link to the student's page. What the schools do from there is up to them.

"We just provide the information," says Kevin Long, president of MVP. "The rest is up to the athletic department."

Although as of press time no schools have purchased the program, some schools are approaching the use of monitoring programs cautiously.

Herb Reinhard, the athletic director of Valdosta State University, in Valdosta, Ga., feels that the university is doing enough simply by urging its athletes to act responsibly and by occasionally performing spot checks of its athletes' MySpace and Facebook pages—a common tactic among athletic directors.

YouDiligence basically automates those spot checks. But some students and advocacy groups resent this practice, and fear the eventuality that schools will begin policing all students' pages.

"It is troubling for us to see all of the mechanisms by which universities are monitoring every aspect of student-athletes' lives," says Greg Lukianoff, the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonpartisan watchdog group that deals with abuses of student free speech. "We are very skeptical that administrators will have the ability to monitor students and not abuse it," he says.

But according to Long, the program works in the interest of students, helping to "protect the image of the athletes when they are done with school."

Ashley Anlauf, a swimmer at UCLA, recognizes that athletes are held to a higher standard. "It comes with the territory of being a collegiate athlete." She doesn't think it's fair that she has to be more careful about her Facebook page than her non-athlete friends, but says "it is what it is."