Dangers of Social Media story

The Berry College community is highly involved in social media, and this is a reality that has been nationally recognized.

Out of more than 6,000 colleges and universities in the United States, Berry College ranked number 90 in the Top 100 Social Media Colleges ranking list on StudentAdvisor.com. A CNN Tech article titled "How colleges use, misuse social media to reach students," published on October 20, 2011 also mentioned a music video on YouTube made by Dr. Eric McDowell, math department chairman. The story mentions McDowell's "Derivative Rag" video and how it shows that Berry College goes beyond just running a Facebook page.

But while social media is highly integrated within the Berry community, this integration has not always brought safe results to campus. In an e-mail titled "Campus Alert" sent on September 21, 2011, Director of Campus Safety Bobby Abrams notified all students and faculty/staff members of the attempted rape of a student that occurred through social media contact.

The e-mail stated that "Campus Safety has received a report of a sexual assault of a student by a non-student who is known to frequent Berry official and unofficial social media outlets including Facebook and My Space pages. This person may claim to be a student and arranges meetings with Berry students. An investigation is underway, and students are advised to be extremely cautious making contact through social media with individuals they do not know."

The Floyd County Police Department's investigators who deal with sexual assault were invited into the investigation, and by mid-October the investigation was still active, according to Abrams. This is also the first incident to Abrams' knowledge of a sexual assault occurring on campus that resulted from contact through social media, and the disturbance worried some students.

"I guess it was like a reality check for myself," Freshman Stephanie Tomys said. "It made me think that I could have added them without realizing it."

"It turned my nose up and arched my eyebrow and said, 'really?'" said Anna Curtis, freshman. "I really couldn't fathom anything like that happening."

"I was kind of shocked," Sophomore Heather Barger said. "I remember texting my boyfriend, 'Oh no, Berry College isn't as safe as we thought it was.'"

Abrams warned the campus in his e-mail that students should be careful about communicating with students they do not personally know. While social media has helped Abrams contact his high school friends and people he knew when he served in the military, Abrams still thinks people should be cautious in sharing information because "what gets on the internet stays there."

"Once it goes online, it can't be taken back down," Barger said. "It's not that hard to find stuff once you delete it because someone can back track. You're putting your information out there forever."

While social media outlets have the intentions of keeping friends in touch and fostering new friendships, there are multiple potential dangers of it that students should also know. Employers use investigators more today to conduct intensive background checks by looking at potential employees' profiles on social media, according to Abrams. Some other possible risks of social media from Abrams include tarnishing a

reputation, identity theft from listing too much information, downloading a virus and possibly being stalked by frequently listing your location.

Sophomore Aaron Jackson said that because games like FarmVille require credit card numbers, the site itself needs to take precautions to keep that information secure since "financial things can actually be found on other social media websites."

There are also some other dangers of social media that students have noticed, including cyberbullying.

"Well predators for one is a potential danger," Grace Dunklin, sophomore, said. "Another is cyberbullying...because people are a lot more forward [online] because they have that lack of face to face communication."

Freshman Austin Mansour agrees that cyberbullying occurs online and that "you can attack somebody without being in person."

"Just in general, rumors can spread really fast on social media," Dakota Floyd, senior, said. "You just have to be smart about it I guess."

Another main concern among some students is stalking. As Barger said, putting all of your information out there "can lead to stalking. It can lead to things."

"People are Facebook stalkers," Curtis said. "Their pictures aren't who they really are, and most use cartoons anyway."

Tomys also notes the possibility of someone pretending to be someone else, and how that is risky.

"Its easy to pretend to be someone," Tomys said. "You can be innocent and not realize it when you add them. More chances than not they're going to be who they really are. It only takes one chance for them to be who they're not and that's scary."

To protect themselves from all of these risks, Abrams and some students have some tips for students.

"Using a lot of common sense is key," Abrams said. As a possible rule of thumb, Abrams also suggests not putting something on your profile that "your mom wouldn't want to see."

"There's 2,000 people on Berry's campus," Jackson said. "If you don't know them, don't add them."

"People don't think about who they add on Facebook and don't background check them," Dunklin said. "If someone adds me and doesn't tell me how I know them, I ignore their friend request. I've ignored friends on accident, but it's more safe."

"If you don't know somebody, everything could be totally inaccurate about them," Mansour said. "You don't know what people are thinking. Usually nothing's gonna happen, but you never know. Why risk it?"

While cyberbullying and stalking seem to be the two main concerns of social media, students can easily prevent this by limiting the personal information they put online and adding people they truly know.