

Make New Friends Online, and You Won't Start College Friendless

Kate Stone Lombardi

Monique Yin is months from starting her freshman year at New York University, but she has already chatted online with hundreds of classmates and met many of them, too.



Andrew Henderson for The New York Times

Monique Yin, a senior at North Haven High School in Connecticut, started a talk group for other incoming New York University freshmen on the Facebook Web site.

As soon as Miss Yin, a 17-year-old high school senior from North Haven, Conn., received her acceptance letter in November through early decision, she logged onto Facebook, the social networking site, and created the group "NYU 2011." She gave it this simple description: "Join this group if you are attending NYU next fall."

So far, the group has more than 650 members — incoming freshman from as far away as Belgium, Singapore and China, and ones from Long Island and Texas. By December, when Miss Yin attended a university orientation, classmates recognized her as the creator of the group. By February, 60 people from the group met in Washington Square Park. Later, some went ice-skating together; others shopped in Greenwich Village. This month, smaller groups have met in California and Philadelphia.

Facebook and other social networks like MySpace have transformed the social lives of teenagers in many ways, and that includes how they make the transition from high school to college. Hundreds of colleges have their own Class of 2011 groups on Facebook. They are generally not formally affiliated with the universities and are begun by students who want to connect with classmates months before they set foot on campus.

Facebook was originally available only to college students, and expanded to include high school students in September 2005. As soon as the first college acceptances began rolling in that fall, the first future college class groups appeared on Facebook.

Early decision candidates usually create the groups, and others join later as they are accepted. Despite the variety of colleges, the conversational subjects are universal. Typical early postings are laced with excitement about college acceptances "I got in!" and "I'm so excited." Eventually, practical matters dominate — what dormitories to live in, and finding roommates. Discussions about favorite bands and sports teams also proliferate.

Large universities inspire more groups. Cornell, for instance, has 10 groups for the Class of 2011, including ones for the Hotel School, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and Cornell 2011 Athletes. There are also "Cornell 2011 Anti-Freshman 15," a reference to the common freshman weight gain ("I'm just scared that all my clothes will be too small and

completely useless by Christmas”) and the group for those who missed on early decision (“What are you doing to get in?”).

Mostly though, the talk is about personal, if virtual, connection. Ashley Hollier, a senior at St. Thomas More High School in Lafayette, La., will attend Tulane University in the fall. She and five other students who met through a Tulane 2011 group arranged to visit New Orleans at the same time. After taking a tour together, they went out to dinner.

“It was six people who had never met each other — two from Massachusetts, two from Louisiana and two New York kids,” Miss Hollier said. “Sitting at the table we felt like old friends.”

She knows a freshman at Tulane, who told her it was good she had made online connections ahead of time.

“When she first got there,” Miss Hollier said, “she didn’t have to worry, ‘Who am I going to sit with at lunch?’ because she already had familiar faces from Facebook.”

Not everyone is enthusiastic about meeting future classmates online.

“Basically it just provides people with an opportunity to brag about their grades or talk about how they go out and party,” said Adam Muchnick, a senior at Riverdale Country School who will attend the University of Pennsylvania in the fall.

There is some posturing, like the students on the Penn 2011 group discussing how low they can let their grades drop without having their acceptances rescinded. (“It feels so good not to care. I haven’t done homework once since I found out I got in.” “Tell me about it. I let my grade drop from a 98 to an 86 in physics, and for once I could care less.”) Or the conversation about whether to take your fake ID to Tulane. (“I was assuming a big smile/plunging neckline would do the trick.”)

Colleges know about the sites; Robert Alexander, assistant vice president of enrollment management at Tulane, said reading the discussions was a good way for the university to learn students’ interests and concerns. Tulane has also created its own online group for admitted and prospective students.

“It’s not Facebook, so we can manage the content,” Mr. Alexander said.

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