College roomies meeting face to Facebook

Social networking sites let students -- and their parents -- get a sneak peek

By CHRISTINE FREY
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George Roth hasn't actually met the other student he'll be living with his fall. But he already knows what he looks like, where he's from and that he likes to work with computers.

When Roth received his roommate assignment from the University of Washington earlier this month, he didn't call or e-mail him. He logged onto Facebook to look up his profile.

Colleges typically provide students with the name and e-mail address or phone number of their new roommate. Now students are able to find out much more by looking them up through networking Web sites.

In some cases, parents have called university officials to complain about their son or daughter's assigned roommate based on an online profile. For the most part, though, such sites have helped students make friends before arriving on campus and figure out who's bringing the minifridge.

There are already Facebook groups for the class of 2011 at the UW and Seattle Pacific University, both with hundreds of members who trade stories about orientation and where to buy cheap textbooks.

"It kind of removes a little bit of the uncertainty and, you know, the awkward experience that you might have if you're meeting someone for the first time, and you don't know that much about them," said George Roth, a UW student.

Colleges usually assign roommates, though students can sometimes request to live with a specific individual. Housing departments often use a student questionnaire to help match students with similar habits or interests: What music do you like? How clean do you keep your room? Where do you prefer to study?

Officials expect students to learn to live with one another, despite differences. If there is a serious problem once the two move in together, most universities have systems to deal with it. But officials won't just switch roommates because of something a student or parent doesn't like in an online profile.
"Our expectation is that if you want to be part of a community you're going to be accepting of other people," said Paul Brown, director of housing and food services at the UW.

SPU has received a few phone calls from concerned parents who didn't like what they saw on the profile of their child's new roommate -- a student who looked like she partied too much and another who made a joke in poor taste. The university never received such calls two years ago, said Kimberlee Campbell, director of residence life.

Officials caution students and parents against making assumptions or judging people based on their online profiles. Seattle University, in fact, specifically suggests during summer orientation that incoming freshmen call their roommates.

"We explicitly tell them that they need to have a ... conversation with their roommate," said Romando Nash, director of housing and residential learning communities. "Facebook is not communicating. Talking to a person is still the best form of communication."

Marissa Violante joined a Facebook group for new UW freshmen back in March and met a student from Bellevue. The two got along so well that they asked to have each other as roommates this fall.

They've since met in person a few times for coffee and dinner. "It's a good way to start off, to not be totally alone when you get there," said Violante, 18, of Renton.

Since meeting online earlier this month, Roth and his roommate have been messaging back and forth on Facebook. They're found that they're both interested in computers and determined that Roth's roommate, who is from Everett, will supply the minifridge.

They've also started to talk about their personal habits -- when they like to wake up and go to sleep, for instance -- but some of those issues will have to wait until they move into the dorm next month.

"We actually feel like it's almost too early to be discussing that," he said.

"A lot of this stuff might be better discussed when we're sitting in our dorm rooms rather than right now, because right now we don't know what conditions are going to be like actually living there."

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