

Student Responsibilities Regarding Websites, Blogs, E-mail, E-mail Signatures, and Answering Machine Messages

When students and trainees post personal information on publically available electronic media sources, they unfortunately may forfeit control over how that information is used or how it reflects on themselves or their training program. Recent concerns have heightened awareness of this fact, and of its potential implications, including:

- 1) Internship programs report conducting web searches on applicants' names before inviting applicants for interviews and before deciding to rank applicants in selection or matching systems
- 2) Clients are conducting web searches on trainees' names and finding information about therapists. There have been many documented instances in the health professions of patients subsequently refusing to be seen in a clinic based on what they have found.
- 3) Potential employers are conducting on-line searches of potential employees prior to interviews and job offers.
- 4) Legal authorities are looking at websites for evidence of illegal activities. Some prima facie evidence may be gained from websites such as photographs, but text may also alert authorities to investigate further.
- 5) Postings on a variety of listservs may reflect poorly on you or on the training program in which the student is enrolled.
- 6) Although signature lines are ways of indicating uniqueness or personal philosophy, the lack of control over e-mail forwarding makes it impossible to know who will read electronic postings. Signature lines may affect how others view your professional standing. Quotations on personal philosophy, religious beliefs, or political attitudes might cause adverse reactions in other people.
- 7) Answering machine messages might be entertaining to your peers, express your individuality, and be indications of your sense of humor. Greetings on voicemail services and answering machines should be thoughtfully constructed. If cell phones are used for professional communications (e.g., research, teaching, or clinical activities), be sure your greeting is appropriate to the context in which it is used.

There is now ample documentation of instances in training programs and at universities where students have been negatively affected by material on websites, e-mails, and answering machine messages. There are examples of e-mails from faculty and students getting published in newspapers, causing harm to recipients, senders, or others.

Information that seems to be fun, informative, and candid might put the program and the student at risk for adverse consequences. What might be seen as private self-disclosure may actually be very public. This includes information posted on blogs, personal pages

in FaceBook, MySpace, or other similar sites, including ones started before undergraduate or graduate school. *Anything on the World Wide Web is potentially available to all who seek.*

Trainees are reminded that, if you identify yourself as a graduate student in the (INSERT NAME OF PROGRAM) program, we have some interest in how you portray yourself. If you report doing, or are depicted on a website or in an e-mail as doing something unethical or illegal, then this information may be used by the program to determine your standing or retention. As a preventative measure the Program advises that students and faculty approach online blogs and websites, including personal information, very carefully. Is there anything posted that you would not want the program faculty, employers, family members, or clients to read, view, or share amongst themselves? Students are advised to engage in “safe” web practices and be concerned now about professional demeanor and presentations.