Have You 'Facebooked' Him?

New digital networks have quickly become part of social life on campuses

by BRUCE BEAD

E ven if you aren't a member of The
Facebook, a Web site that displays archives and short biographies of college students, it is linked to 115 of his classmates, friends, and acquaintances.

That can be a handy tool when you want to stay in touch or find a little social life on your campus. For instance, the site has helped students find jobs and get involved in campus activities.

The information that is displayed on the Facebook page is not limited to the student's personal information, such as name, address, and phone number. It is also used to track the student's online presence and behavior.

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That logic has been taken a step further by a similar site at Wesleyan University, called WeMatch, that focuses on making love connections. The service, which requires students to fill out a humorous questionnaire and then translate the results into compatibility rankings, was founded by a pair of Wesleyan students more than two years ago and has nearly 2,700 signed up so far. The site was recently copied at four institutions, including Williams College, where nearly 1,700 students have signed up.

"WeMatch really has become a community thing," says Don Stillman, one of the site's developers. "It's a way of taking dat- ing and making it into something less seri- ous that people can laugh about, and I think people kind of like that."

He and Mr. Hughes agree that the prin- ciples behind the popularity of their sites is simple: The networks make meeting people seem like a casual process. "There's an awkwardness if you meet someone at a par- ty and ask them to dinner on the net- working site," says Mr. Hughes. "But I think if you do the same thing through e-mail, it's worse. The reaction would be more like 'Who is this kid, and what is he doing?'"

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

Other students say TheFacebook makes the Web, and their universities, seem more manageable by representing them as sim- ple sets of social connections. "I like the fact that it decreases the perceived size of the university by showing how people are con- nected to one another," says Joshua Evans, a student at Penn who considers himself a devotee of TheFacebook.

Mr. Kearns, the Penn professor, decided to investigate TheFacebook when his stu- dents gave it the highest praise an online social network can get: Because it has no non-collegiate users, it's "better than Friend- ster."

For Mr. Kearns, the rise of such sites isn't just a curiosity; it's "an extraordinary research opportunity." The profes- sor's work applies principles of social networks to the science of computer programming—a combination of themes that academics have only re- cently started to explore, he says.

Friendster and TheFacebook, he ar- gues, bring something to his field that researchers have never had before: hard evidence. "Traditionally the only way to get empirical data on social networking was to bring a notebook to the bar," he says. "With the Internet, it's finally possible to measure so- cial activity."

For Mr. Kearns, that means having his students study their profiles to see whom they link to and what they do online.

In "Networking Life," a course he teaches about the social aspects of computer networks, Mr. Kearns asked students like Mr. Saccorotto and Mr. Evans to create their own Friendster pro- files. He then encouraged them to look up their peers' profiles online, and watched to see who linked to whom.

Mr. Kearns says the exercise helps him demonstrate concepts like "preferential att- achment," which states that in most net- works, a small percentage of people will be somehow linked to almost all of their peers. "We can graph the number of connections everyone on a network has," he says, and it shows that the rich get richer."

His students "definitely get it," he says. "They can talk about network properties broadly or specifically because they've lived with technology growing up, and they've lived with it in college."

ONLINE ENCOUNTERS

College students, in other words, expect to mediate their meetings in the flesh with contacts in the digital world.

Nearly every student talks regularly with friends using e-mail and instant-messaging systems, says Alpert Ip, another of Mr. Kearns' students. "I think online commu- nication augments real-life encounters for most of us."

The creators of TheFacebook are hoping their captive audiences can help them turn the service into a profitable business. Last month the site made its first foray into adver- tising, running a series of announce- ments for local events at Harvard. And Mr. Hughes says the site's creators are weigh- ing offers from a few advertising firms, which, he says could help subsidize the cost of the network—now more than $1,000.

But beyond a few small advertisers, it re- mains to be seen whether TheFacebook can be a moneymaker, says Mr. Kearns. He ar- gues that the service will not be a long-term hit with students and investors unless its creators more clearly define its audience. "In a year or two, is it going to be a net- work for alumni? Is it going to be a dating service?" he asks. "I think the site needs to develop a function that e-mail and course Web sites can't duplicate."

Mr. Hughes says TheFacebook will answer those questions in the summer, by bringing the service to more than 100 colleges and introducing new features. He declined to describe those features but said they would "bring social networking to the next level."

For the time being, he says, the service's popularity is accomplishment enough.

"Even though it's 80 degrees and sunny, there are still 200 people logged in to the site from Harvard right now," he says. "That's something else."