

Personal Communications and Social Media Guidelines*

The current William & Mary Faculty Handbook (Section III.A, p. 19) provides the following guidance in the section entitled Academic Freedom and Personal Ethics:

Faculty members are also entitled to their political rights and should be free from institutional censorship or discipline for exercising them; however, their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As members of a learned profession and officers of an educational institution, when representing that institution they should at all times endeavor to be accurate in their assertions, they should exercise appropriate restraint, they should show respect for the opinions of others, and they should make every effort to indicate that they are not institutional spokespersons.

The guidelines set out below include strongly recommended strategies for distinguishing between personal and professional communications. Practical tips about managing interactions with reporters and media related to your scholarship and employment with W&M can be found in the Media Guidelines for Faculty Work, which is also available on the Provost's website.

Guideline 1: Professional and Personal Accounts

- Be mindful that if you identify yourself in your profile or anywhere else in a social media account as an employee of William & Mary, your posts may very well be interpreted as expressing viewpoints held by the institution or as being connected to your job. If you want to develop an online presence, you should create separate accounts, one for professional use in your role as an academic, and the other for personal use. Please reference the [Acceptable Use Policy](#) for Faculty and Staff for more details about accounts related to your William & Mary email address.
- The use of your W&M email account to express personal opinions encourages recipients and other readers to assume that what you say is or should be related to your employment. As with social media accounts, you should create separate email accounts, one for professional use and the other for personal use.
- In all posts you must provide context for the information being provided and in what capacity you are speaking/writing. Even when you are speaking in a professional capacity as a researcher, for example, you are not speaking on behalf of or representing the position of the university.
- In cases in which you identify yourself as an employee of W&M, you must insert a disclaimer notice making it clear that any statements are your own opinions. A typical disclaimer is "The opinions expressed in this content are solely my own and do not reflect the policies or positions of William & Mary." For spaces such as Twitter or other social media, a shorter statement would suffice (e.g. "Opinions are my own.").

* While these guidelines were prepared with a faculty audience in mind, the recommended strategies are useful for all employees.

- As a public university, William & Mary typically refrains from taking political positions. Therefore, when you take a political position, you are by definition not speaking for the university, nor in your employment capacity, and should not cite your affiliation as authority for the position you are taking.
- Remember that anything you post could potentially be disseminated widely among audiences you did not anticipate. Privacy settings do not prevent someone from taking a screenshot and sharing it with others.
- You should also remember that all records, including but not limited to emails, paper and electronic documents, and audio and video recordings, held by employees of William & Mary in the transaction of public business are subject to [FOIA](#) requests under state law. While exemptions exist, it is safest to assume that you have no expectation of privacy when using your W&M email account, or if you use a personal account to transact university business. Whether or not a record is subject to FOIA depends on the content of the record, not the device or account on which it is stored. As a matter of practice, you should conduct all communications related to your job from W&M accounts to facilitate proper collection and retention of records. (See the [Acceptable Use Policy](#) for Faculty and Staff for more details.)
- Additional information on posting to William & Mary social media accounts can be found [here](#).
- The cautions set out above also apply to communications using William & Mary letterhead. Letterhead should only be used to communicate in your professional capacity and should not be used to express personal opinions or engage in advocacy.

Guideline 2: Confidentiality

Please remember that as a member of the W&M community, you have a responsibility to your students and your colleagues to protect their confidential information, including educational records that are protected by FERPA, and personnel records. These types of records are considered protected data under the university's Data Classification Policy. The Faculty Handbook states (I.A.5) "Each member of the university community has the right to privacy in their dealings with the institution, including...The right to expect that all records of their association with the institution are treated as confidential." "Each member of the university community shall have the responsibility to respect the aforesaid rights of their associates" (Section 1.A). Please never post any protected data or other confidential information online. Doing so is a violation of the Faculty Handbook and of the [Acceptable Use Policy](#), and you may be subject to disciplinary proceedings as a result. As noted above, any online posts can be shared widely in ways you did not anticipate, and privacy settings do not protect against that.

Guideline 3: Pedagogical Obligations and Social Media

Students are sometimes eager to engage with their instructors and the staff they work with over social media. However, by its very nature social media enables wide-ranging communication with disparate audiences. A post targeted at one group of friends or followers may land very differently with others. In spite of the apparent "leveling" effect of social media platforms, you are in a position of authority over your students while they are still at W&M. Students have a reasonable expectation

of being graded based on their academic performance and not on other matters that may be revealed through social media (such as affiliations, political expressions, etc.) The perception of fairness in faculty evaluations is foundational to the trust on which an educational community depends. Faculty should be cognizant that their presence on social media may impact that perception and that trust. It is recommended that faculty avoid contact with students on social media, particularly when using accounts that are primarily personal rather than professional in nature.

Finally, as explained in Guideline 2, faculty must always be cognizant of their obligation to protect the private information of students and colleagues. Avoid any comments on social media, whatever the context, that could be construed as revealing information about or reflecting negatively on students.

Guideline 4: Potential for Liability

Although much communication on social media is informal, you remain legally liable for what you post on your own site and on the sites of others. Individual bloggers have been held liable for commentary deemed to be proprietary, copyrighted, defamatory, libelous, or obscene (as defined by the courts). Furthermore, if there is confusion about whether posts were made when you were acting in your personal or professional capacity, the university could be vicariously liable for your online conduct. Think of your posts as creating a record of your interactions and strive to avoid conduct that could raise questions about your professional or academic integrity or ability to do your job. Be sure that what you post today will not come back to haunt you.