

Policies for Virtual Communities at Grinnell

(Based upon Grinnell Online Community Advisory Committee/GOCAC Recommendations)

(Please send questions, comments, suggestions to francisb@grinnell.edu)

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Introduction

The following policy statements provide policy guidance for the development and operation of virtual communities, online services, and account-based programs at Grinnell College. This policy statement is based largely upon the recommendations of the Grinnell Online Community Advisory Committee (GOCAC) as presented in their October 15, 2003 report. (Note: In several places, the policy recommendations make reference to documents that would provide sample policies or guidelines for administrators. The samples have not been drafted.)

1. Members of the College community may find it useful to create or install programs that act as communal services for a group of users. For example, a faculty member might create a chat board for a class or a student might create a book sharing service. Such services are an appropriate use of College computing resources.
2. Each such service must have at least one designated administrator. Typically, this administrator will be the author or installer of the service. The administrator must be a member of the faculty, staff, student body or board of trustees.
3. The administrators of any such service are subject to general Grinnell College guidelines and policies including, where appropriate, the student handbook, staff handbook, or the faculty handbook. For example, someone may not create a service whose primary intent is to harass or to threaten harm to another member of the College community or a service whose primary intent is to gather confidential information. Similarly, a registered student organization that creates an online service must make that service available to all members of that organization. Online communities developed on computers not owned by Grinnell College are subject

to all regulations of this policy while attached to the Grinnell College network.

4. Users of any such service are also subject to Grinnell College policies and guidelines. For example, the user of a service may not use it to harass or to threaten harm to other members of the College community.

5. At times, abuses of these services may occur. When someone reports an abuse to the administrator of a service, it is the responsibility of the administrator to make a record of that abuse and take appropriate action.

6. The administrators of such services must be prepared to take administrative action (e.g., deleting a posting or disabling an account) in response to violations of College policy or applicable laws when requested to do so by the Director of ITS or the Dean for Student Life. The College Administrator requesting the deletion will provide an explanation of the violation, any supporting evidence that can be shared, and the actions to be taken via email to the community administrator and the affected community member. If an account or posting is deleted in such a manner, the community administrator(s), author(s) of the posting, or user(s) of the deleted account(s) may obtain a meeting with the initiating College Administrator. After such a meeting the community administrator(s), author of a deleted posting(s), or user(s) of the deleted account(s) may, at their initiative, appeal the decision of the College administrators. Students may appeal to the Vice-President for Student Services, faculty may appeal to the ISC or the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and staff may meet with the Director of Human Resources for a review.

Notwithstanding any of the above, the College may take any steps necessary to comply with the law.

7. It is the responsibility of the community administrators of any such service to inform the users that they are subject to College guidelines. Typically, this announcement will be presented to users each time they use the service. Sample statements of the applicability of college guidelines are available separately.

8. Some users of services that require an account assume a certain level of security of the data stored and presented within the service. It is the responsibility of the administrators of such services to inform their users of the general state of security of the

service (e.g., if passwords are unencrypted). Sample security policies are available separately.

9. Some users of services that require an account assume a certain level of privacy of the data stored and presented within the service. It is the responsibility of the administrators of such services to inform their users of the general state of privacy of data on the service, including whether the service is publicly searchable, indexable or linkable (e.g., that accounts are used primarily for identification, and that all information entered in the system is available to anyone on the World Wide Web). Sample privacy policies are available separately.

10. Many services will provide a forum in which members can communicate with one another. Since different communities may have different expectations as to appropriate behavior, administrators are encouraged, but not required, to post appropriate use guidelines. Sample guidelines are available separately.

11. Except where indicated by other College policies, administrators of services may treat them as private communities and limit membership. For example, a service associated with a regular or EXCO class may limit membership to the participants in that class. Just as a student may choose to include only a few friends in a small party, so may the administrator of a service choose to limit membership in that service. Creators and administrators of online communities must take responsibility for the administration and maintenance of membership and privileges.

12. It may be beneficial for a service to include users other than Grinnell College faculty, staff, students, and trustees. For example, a service might include alumni, parents, prospective students, or others. Such users are subject to the Grinnell External Computer User Policies. It is the responsibility of the administrator to make it clear to such users that they are subject to these policies. (see section below)

13. Members of the College community may be asked or choose to build or install these kinds of services for a class, independent study project, or for general exploration. Such services are not subject to regulations 7-9, above during their development time. In the event that a community is under development for more than one semester or the four months of summer break and is not following regulations 7-9 above, the Director of ITS will contact the developer and discuss reasonable limits on exemptions from

regulations 7-9. During the development period the software author should present on the opening screen a brief statement naming the software author(s) and inform the user that the software is under development. At the conclusion of development, if the system remains in general use, then it becomes subject to policies 7-9 above.

14. Because the users of such services often rely on them for their regular work, ITS will provide the administrators of a service with both opportunity and reasonable time to correct any problems. In the event a service is terminated for policy infractions, the administrator or users of the service may obtain a meeting with the Director of ITS. After such a meeting the community administrator may appeal. Students may appeal to the Vice-President for Student Services, faculty may appeal to the ISC or the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and staff may meet with the Director of Human Resources for a review.

15. The administrators of an online community that provides service to alumni or outside users must gather the following information from each external user: (a) name; (b) email address; (c) mailing address; (d) telephone number. Administrators are required to verify only the email address for outside users. Administrators are required to verify the alumni status of alumni users with the Office of Alumni Relations and Development.

Required Functions and Features of Ongoing Virtual Communities: All virtual communities at Grinnell College are required to include the following features:

1. The virtual community must identify its administrator(s) and must provide contact information for the community administrator(s).
2. The virtual community must include a statement of purpose. In the minimum, the statement of purpose must include a description of why the community exists, which individuals or group will be the focus of membership for the community, and a disclaimer stating that the community is not a campus service.
 - a) Each virtual community must have a statement of terms and conditions for involvement in the community. The terms and conditions should address the following concerns:
 - b) Security of content
 - c) Privacy of content
 - d) A statement that community members may be subject to other Grinnell policies

- e) Problem/complaint resolution process and due process
- f) Procedures for backup, archiving and data retention
- g) Acceptable behavior in the community
- h) A statement that community members are expected to comply with inclusion, harassment and other college policies
- i) A statement about copyright, including the statement that authors should secure the permission of Grinnell College before using the College logo or reproducing parts of any College publication,
- j) A statement that authors should not use the name of the College in any way that implies endorsement of the author's personal ideas and opinions.

Desirable Functions and Features of Virtual Communities: In addition to the above requirements, there are a number of features and functions that are desirable in certain situations. These features are largely dependent upon the purpose and format of the virtual community. However, where appropriate, they should be considered for implementation in virtual communities.

- The ability to see a list of members of the community
- The ability to search the community for specific members
- An option to allow/disallow other members of the community to comment on an entry
- The ability to link to the entries of other members of the community from within an entry
- The ability to find where references to your username or postings have been made
- The ability to organize content by topics
- The ability to see a listing of topics
- No anonymous postings (unless appropriate to the purpose of the community)
- Help
- A means of contacting “expert members”
- The facility to customize the interface
- The facility to receive posting via email (push, not pull)
- Regular backups of the community site
- Digital signatures
- Review of the IEEE/CS/ACM “Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice” by the administrators of the community
- Ability to archive (e.g., copy to a text file) one’s own postings
- Ability to take an official “snapshot” of others’ postings

Access to Virtual Communities: In addition to current faculty, students and staff, the following two groups of individuals may request accounts for purpose of participation in virtual communities offered on campus.

Alumni accounts. Alumni of Grinnell College are permitted access to Grinnell College computer systems for purposes of participating in virtual communities offered on campus provided that such access is allowable under the terms of relevant licensing agreements between Grinnell College and its software vendors. Alumni wishing to receive an account must be registered with the Office of Alumni Relations and Development.

Alumni users are responsible for providing name, email address, mailing address and telephone number to the administrators of the virtual community.

Alumni requesting accounts must agree to the provisions of the alumni/outside users account agreement, which identifies the terms and conditions under which the account may be used.

Outside user accounts. An outside user is an invited guest who is not faculty, staff, students, trustees or alumni of the College in virtual communities. These individuals will typically be invited to participate in the virtual community and sponsored by the community administrator. Outside users are permitted access to Grinnell College computer systems for purposes of participating in virtual communities offered on campus provided that such access is allowable under the terms of relevant licensing agreements between Grinnell College and its software vendors.

Outside users are responsible for providing name, email address, mailing address and telephone number to the administrators of the virtual community.

An outside user for whom an account is requested must agree to the provisions of the alumni/outside users account agreement, which identifies the terms and conditions under which the account may be used. Outside user accounts will have an expiration date, which can be modified by the community administrator. After consultation with the community administrator, the Director of ITS can determine a fixed expiration date for outside user accounts.

Grinnell College External Computer User Policies: Alumni and outside users must agree to the following terms and conditions before they will be provided an account providing access to a virtual community.

1. When participating in an online community, the external computer user must abide by the guidelines of that online community.

2. Access to online communities at Grinnell is given to external computer users primarily so that it benefits current students, faculty, or staff. The College provides no guarantees of continued access.
3. The external computer user who has an account terminated may appeal through the Director of Information Technology Services.