Inaugural Class Met on Facebook, Other Networking Sites Before First Day

By Don J. DeBenedictis
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IRVINE - Dean Erwin Chemerinsky and his top administrators wanted the UCI School of Law to be "student-friendly," so they threw a get-acquainted picnic for students and families before orientation week started. They set up a lactation room for the woman student with a newborn. They handed out lots of free food and smiles for arriving students last week and this.

But they also had help from an unexpected quarter, the students themselves, who began getting to know each other over social-media Web sites within days of being admitted.

A page on Facebook, open only to admitted students, got going back in February and is still active. "It's been a nice way to connect, even before we got here," said Lori Speak, who was the assistant pastor of a Baptist church in Fullerton before she was a law student.

One student early on started a Google group, an e-mail and Usenet connection point. Another has set up a Linkedin group for the future lawyers.

But it's the student-moderated Facebook page that has had the most traction.

The student who originated and still moderates it is Jeffrey Wachs, a former screenwriter and Hollywood agency employee. Wachs came up with the idea when Assistant Dean Victoria Ortiz sent a list of e-mail addresses of all the admitted students who were agreeable.

"It's not that hard to set up a Facebook page," he said. "I think it took three minutes."

He e-mailed everyone that the page was up and running and by the end of the day, 15 future students had signed on.

"It started to be fairly active fairly quickly," he said.

Initially, the student page "was a venue for anxiety," said student Ari Yampolsky, a former healthcare-worker organizer for the Service Employees International Union.

People "e-fussed" about reading assignments, living arrangements and everything else worrying them, added Emma Soichet, a former newspaper reporter and speechwriter for Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

But the page, which isn't available to the uninvited, quickly became more, Wachs said. It helped put faces to names before the students-to-be ever met, and it gave them an opportunity to meet before school started. They used it to arrange some informal get-togethers in Los Angeles and in the Bay...
Area early on.

"It's been really great for our class," Wachs said. "It's been a good way to give everybody a group before we were a group."

Even though all the students now are together in the classrooms and library, the page stays busy. Of the 61 students, 58 are members, and Wachs said he might encourage the three holdouts to join.

Of course, social media extends into all nooks and crannies of American society these days.

Not to be completely outdone, school administrators have set up a Facebook page, primarily to post press releases and stories about the law school. Rex Bossert, the assistant dean for communications and public affairs, also tweets headlines to Twitter.

And Ortiz has set up a Facebook page from which students are forbidden. That site, she said, is for UCI law students' spouses, partners, parents and friends to post worries like, "'God, is yours never talking to you either?'"

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