When I was named a university president, one of my first thoughts was that I needed to take down my Facebook page. Although I’d never used that site for highly personal revelations, rants or updates on my whereabouts, having an active Facebook page loomed as one more vulnerability in a role that is already highly public.

At the press conference announcing my appointment, however, someone snapped and posted a picture of the current president and me as we stood together, and it immediately had more than 100 likes. I then resolved to use that page—and other social media—to promote my university and community, to connect people, and to share glimpses of my own professional and some personal commitments.

I regularly post now about a range of campus and regional events, sharing pictures and brief comments about speakers, athletics, faculty publications and grants, construction projects, and performances. I often link articles from newspapers and our campus newsletter to feature people and ideas in the news. Others from within and outside campus chime in with their comments on events.

With high-resolution cameras in all phones now, every walk across campus is an opportunity for me to share simple moments of campus life: students drumming outside Mason Hall, a late-night team working on a fundraiser, the first tinge of yellow in the honey locust grove, a particularly muddy soccer practice, an animated study group in the library, friends trying an international lunch together, faculty and students huddled around a lab instrument. My pictures and videos show some of the life of a campus, and members of the campus community—whose permission I seek before posting—are glad to have me feature them on my page.

Because many of my “friends” and followers are not at Fredonia, they learn about the campus and its people, with some remarkable surprises. The head of my former high school drove 45 miles to come to a concert because she saw a comment on my post; a student from 25 years ago saw my Instagram photo of the set for Rent and came from two states away to see the Fredonia production. Alumni remark on the changes in the campus and share their memories. A flashmob we did ended up with more than 30,000 views on YouTube, in part because of Facebook and Twitter. At community events, people from town pick up the conversations we’d started online, and many of them are happy to see me posting pictures from their organization’s events.

I’ve been active not just in posting to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, but in using those media to hear the comments and voices that
are often inaudible to the president’s office. What sets these media apart from official press releases and publications is that they invite dialogue. I can glance through newsfeeds and tell, for example, when students and faculty are concerned about an issue, annoyed about a policy, elated about an upcoming performance or speaker. I can see faculty accomplishments being celebrated by colleagues, and with a simple “like” or “Congratulations!” immediately share in the great news about a publication being accepted, a child being born, or a person at the end of cancer treatments. If I hear sirens, I know which community members have police scanners and are likely to be posting about an emergency in town. And I can reach out in private messages to people whose posts suggest that they are struggling with something.

It’s amazing what a difference those small comments and likes can make. When I noticed last spring, for example, that a student was looking forward to the open house at another university, I sent a private message saying I’d be sorry if she left Fredonia. She immediately responded that it’s a graduate open house, and that she is not leaving our campus without her diploma. On her wall, she commented on this, and her parents and I ended up communicating about her plans for graduate study. I don’t recommend this as a retention strategy—to have this as part of presidents’ responsibilities—but those small moments at a residential campus can make a big difference in the sense of community we have.

Occasionally, I end up in online conversations with students I know well and others. I am asked about whether I’ll cancel classes if it keeps snowing, why the library closes early on Friday nights, where to look for scholarships. Recently, a student who noticed that I was online at 5:30 on a Sunday morning asked for much-needed help after a night of struggling with his sister’s death. I don’t always know the answers, and I direct people to the resources—including counseling—that many situations require. But being available in a more accessible way than the old “open door” policies means that I have a better sense of the people on campus and in my community, and I can share in their stories.

Based on these experiences, I offer these suggestions for senior leaders interested in using social media as part of their professional communications:

- **Do it yourself.** Your personal social media pages should be yours, not the official campus sites maintained by public relations professionals.
- **Set your own limits.** You can decide how much time you want to spend on this—10 minutes a day would be plenty—and which people/groups you include. You can use the settings in these media—such as revealing whether you are online—to ensure that you’re not interrupted or distracted by social media. You can turn off your accessibility whenever you like.
- **Use the share buttons on publications and posts.** Most likely, articles you read online and on your campus website have share buttons. With a few clicks, you can share these articles and pictures to your social media, adding comments of your own.
- **Be judicious in sharing personal information.** Share one or two pictures from big personal events (such as weddings, births, deaths), but avoid the subjects you’ll find on many people’s pages (such as details about one’s whereabouts or someone’s illness). If you want to show exquisite pictures from your travels, wait until you’re back to share them so as not to advertise that you are away. As in other communications, discussing politics, religion and controversial topics is a delicate matter.
- **Use the opportunity for informal dialogue.** Take advantage of the two-way communication that social media provides by commenting on others’ news, posts and tweets. A “like” or “favorite” from you tells a student, faculty/staff member or community member that you noticed what they did; a reassurance or congratulatory message can make someone’s day.
- **Set an example.** In your use of social media, set a professional example for students and others who need to see creative, respectful use of these communication tools. Complaints, unprofessional comments about others, violations of confidentiality (even without mentioning names), inappropriate pictures—these should never appear in professional social media forms. You are in a unique position to model this for others.

Virginia Schaefer Horvath is president of the State University of New York at Fredonia.