Your mom ... is on Facebook

By Anna Rice

News correspondent

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Laura Nelson said she's been friends with her mother since January. “Friends,” at least.

At one point, only students could make profiles on the site. But since Facebook opened registration to anyone in 2006, the number of active users has increased from 12 million people to more than 175 million. More than half those users don’t go to college, though some have kids who do.

“I thought it was hilarious,” said Nelson, a sophomore journalism major who is a correspondent for NUTV. “I just wanted to know what she was going to make her Facebook picture.”

Nelson said she thinks parents on Facebook are harmless. For instance, her mom uses it to find old friends and to boast about her daughter’s achievements.

“She’ll put [a link to] my videos from NUTV on her status and say, ‘I’m so proud of my daughter,’” Nelson said.

According to a report on Facebook, the site’s fastest growing demographic is adults age 30 or older. The percentage of adults who have online profiles on any social networking site increased from 8 percent in 2005 to 35 percent in 2008, according to a December survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

“[Facebook] has reached the awareness threshold of the mainstream public,” said S. Shyam Sundar, professor and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory at Pennsylvania State University. “Previously it was a niche service.”

Some students said they are more concerned than Nelson about older relatives accessing their Facebook profiles.

“It is just weird,” said Rikki Lopez, a sophomore psychology major who is “friends” with her mom, aunt, uncle, some great aunts and her cousins. “They can see everything, which is sometimes not so great.”

For example, Lopez recently faced questioning when her mother found a few compromising pictures from her last trip to visit her boyfriend in Amsterdam, she said.

Further evidence of resistance to this trend can be found on the site itself. The Facebook group “Don’t Let My Parents onto Facebook!” has more than 3,200 members. Similar groups, like “What Happens in College Stays in College: Keep Parents Off Facebook,” boast hundreds of supporters.

“If you are a parent who is ... very controlling or very concerned about content, then your teen or your college student is going to be reluctant to friend you because every second you’re going to be following up with suggestions that they make this change or that change,” said Nancy Berk, a clinical psychologist in Pittsburgh, Penn.

Nelson isn’t worried about her mother looking through her pictures, she said, because she doesn’t think her mother even knows how to use the site’s photo sharing features.

Sarah Bork Dugan, a sophomore human services major, said her mother is similarly clueless when it comes to certain aspects of Facebook.

“I poked her and she was like, ‘What’s a poke? How do I poke you back?’” Dugan said.

Some experts concluded that most parents are using Facebook, and other social networking sites, to reconnect with old friends and to keep in touch with their sons and daughters who have gone off to college.

“They are introduced to this technology by their kids, and in part, their motive is to be in the same world as their kids and not be cut off,” Sundar said.

If there’s something on a student’s profile they don’t want their parents to see, chances are it’s also...
something they don't want potential employers to see, so they should remove it, said Scott Seider, an assistant professor at Boston University and an expert on adolescent development. “The safest bet for kids is to not put content on their profile that they wouldn’t be comfortable with people seeing,” he said.