

# BusinessWeek

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## Facebook Faces Up

As the social networking behemoth meets new challenges, three startup college networks are waiting in the wings

by [Maha Atal](#)

Facebook has had a rough ride of late. Users complain about the site's frequent shutdowns, with some observers seeing the malfunction as a possible troubling security breach (see [BusinessWeek.com, 07/31/07, "Facebook Outage: Wakeup Call"](#)).

And though the news media continue to talk about the network's rapid growth and market dominance, commentators have expressed misgivings about Facebook's ability to sustain and monetize that expansion (see [BusinessWeek.com, 8/6/07, "Fogeys Flock to Facebook"](#)) and (see [BusinessWeek.com, 8/6/07, "Too Old for Facebook?"](#)).

Now, with founder Mark Zuckerberg heading back to court Aug. 8 to defend himself against accusations that he stole the site's concept from ConnectU, another collegiate social network with its roots at Harvard, the vultures are on the sidelines, flapping their wings.

### STAYING IN SCHOOL

Not least among them are those looking to fill the void they claim Facebook has left behind by deserting its core audience, college students. According to ComScore, 71% of users are now outside the college age-bracket. As of May, anyone could join the network, whereas users once needed a .edu e-mail address (as proof of college affiliation) to join.

But the demand for student-only online spaces—the very thing that made Facebook take off in the first place—remains. And that's where three ventures by young alumni—[CollegeOTR.com](#), [CollegeTonight.com](#), and [CollegeWikis.com](#)—hope to come in. Their success and strategy depend on staying loyal to that college niche, and they're looking to find ways to complement rather than compete with the networks students already use.

Niche marketing has been the strategy of choice for many new networks in the last year (see [BusinessWeek.com, 3/14/07, "Social Networking Goes Niche"](#)). Users have responded well to being a part of a distinct community, whether grouped by profession, ethnicity, or school. And advertisers like that specificity too.

### COLLEGE-SPECIFIC BLOGS

Furthermore, research done this April by iProspect shows that among the younger age group, the top social networks have overlapping user-bases. For each of the eight social sites in the report, 30% to 40% of 18- to 24-year-olds surveyed reported some involvement, which means most respondents are frequenting more than one of the sites. According to iProspect, the likely overlap is three to five networks per average student user. If that's true, the niche model just got a whole lot more interesting to mainstream business.

College campuses provide an ideal niche case, not only because they are self-contained, but because they are

communities with ample social needs and active online populations. "[They] are probably the best example we've seen of communities that can be easily activated by online media," says Columbia alumnus Doug Imbruce. This September, Imbruce is launching a series of college-specific blogs called CollegeOTR.com, where students can post information about their schools, their peers, and their professors and administrators, while using a pseudonym.

Content will be managed by student-editors reporting to an editor-in-chief in CollegeOTR.com's New York offices. Though the controlled structure and pseudonyms may seem impersonal, Imbruce promises that editors will be chiefly concerned with controlling logistics, technology, and privacy. He predicts a site culture in which students collectively feel free to post the truth of college life as they see it. By virtue of its selectivity—students can only contribute to their own college's page—Imbruce believes Off The Record is "more intimate" than a larger network or more public blog.

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