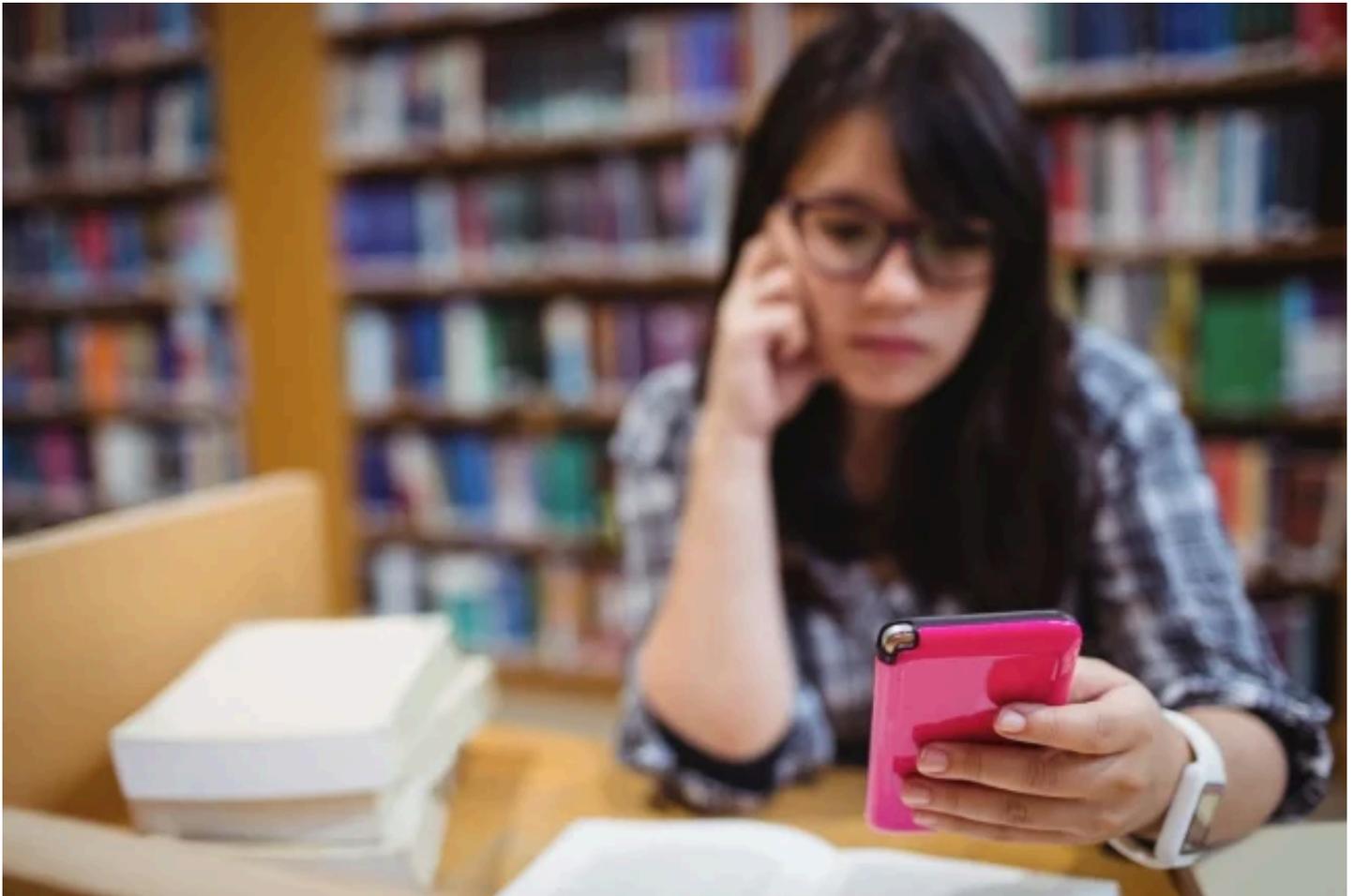


March 13, 2024

University of North Carolina System Banning Apps Over Cyberbullying

UNC's president says these four social media apps that allow anonymous posting have a 'reckless disregard' for students' wellbeing.

By [Lauren Coffey](#)



The University of North Carolina system will ban social media apps that allow anonymous posting, which the university says causes cyberbullying.

Getty Images

The University of North Carolina system is working to ban several social media apps that administrators say incite cyberbullying.

The system's IT and legal departments were instructed to begin blocking a handful of social

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“We’re targeting a handful of smaller, hyper-local platforms that have shown a reckless disregard for the wellbeing of young people and an outright indifference to bullying and bad behavior,” Hans said in a [speech](#) to the Board of Governors. “These apps ... are the modern equivalent of scrawling cruel rumors on the bathroom wall, except now with a much larger audience.”

He added the apps can also incite drug deals and sexual harassment.

A UNC system spokesperson said there is no timeline for the ban’s implementation. Hans was unavailable to comment further to *Inside Higher Ed*.

The UNC system joins several others across the nation that have banned or cited concerns with social media apps. While banning apps specifically for cyberbullying is common in the K-12 space, UNC is one of the first universities in the nation to take such an action.

Hans said he learned of the apps after a group of student body presidents flagged their potential misuse.

If the ban goes through, students could still use the apps on campus, opting in to different networks or using their own data plans to access the apps on their personal devices. Hans acknowledged that reality, adding that the ban is more to give students pause than to remove the apps entirely from campus.

“My hope is that this action, admittedly a small step, will prompt deeper reflection about how we’re encouraging our students to spend their time, engage with their peers and cultivate a public square that’s worthy of a public university,” Hans told the Board of Governors.

Stephanie Fredrick, associate director of Alberti Center for the Prevention of Bullying Abuse and School Violence at the University of Buffalo, said that while bans are one step, broader plans are needed.

“I think it needs to be part of a larger conversation and we need to be teaching kids and young adults to use social media safely and responsibly,” she said, “versus taking it away and hoping all

our problems will disappear with that ban.”

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relies on a user’s location to allow posting, while Sidechat asks users to simply be affiliated with a university. (Sidechat acquired Yik Yak in 2023.) Fizz is nearly identical to Sidechat, which also asks students to use a university email to create an account. Whisper, which launched in 2012 and is the oldest of the four, has the least restrictions. Any user can post on Whisper, regardless of school or location.

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In January, Harvard University officials asked leaders of the Sidechat app to tamp down on “concerning content” following student complaints of antisemitic messages. Last year, several institutions—including Texas A&M University, Arkansas State University, Georgia’s university system and several Florida universities—banned TikTok after FBI director Chris Wray voiced national security concerns about it in December 2022. The concerns related to TikTok’s parent company, China-based Bytedance, having access to user data.

That ban brought its own set of challenges. In July, the Knight First Amendment Institute sued the University of Texas system, arguing that the TikTok ban infringed on academic freedom. A federal court upheld the ban in December, with the judge noting professors could still access the app on their personal devices.

Anonymous app Yik Yak was under scrutiny before it shut down in 2017 after several bullying and

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Sameer Hinduja, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, said he believes anonymous apps do more harm than good, although he pointed to a previous trend of anonymous apps, such as Gas and tbh—both now defunct—that were used to spread positive messages.

“It’s easy to classify these attempts as “uncool,” but I give props to those young people who take a risk and attempt to improve the climate and culture at school by utilizing a popular medium for good,” said Hinduja, who serves as a professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University. “I’d love to see more strategically designed approaches to promote civility instead of contributing to the extant toxicity that is currently rampant both online as well as offline.”

While Hinduja believes UNC’s actions will remain rare in higher education, Frederick guessed university bans against these tools and platforms could see an uptick as more information comes out regarding the mental health implications of social media usage.

“I think we have seen an increase in some restrictions surrounding social media use and the use of apps with a focus on adolescents and young adults,” she said, pointing toward the [Surgeon General’s advisory](#) issued in June. “I think a lot of restrictions are a bit newer but could be a result of that guidance.”

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