

## It's Facebook vs. Princeton in study smackdown



The ivy-leafed campus of Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey.

**(CNN)** -- It's an Internet feud between polar opposites: East Coast vs. West Coast, old school vs. new media, Ivy League gravitas vs. Silicon Valley geekery.

In one corner is Princeton University. In the other, Facebook.

At stake is the credibility of Princeton's research and -- gasp! -- the future viability of Mark Zuckerberg's network. Or, at least, the hearts and minds of the thousands of observers taking sides on social media.

It all started last week when [a group of Princeton researchers published a paper](#) that suggested Facebook could lose a whopping 80% of its users by 2017. They based their projection on epidemiological models, typically used to chart the spread of disease, using the demise of Myspace as a case study.

Data "suggests that Facebook has already reached the peak of its popularity and has entered a decline phase," the researchers wrote in the paper, which has not been peer-reviewed.

[Recent research has suggested](#), and [Facebook has admitted](#), that younger users are abandoning Facebook for other social platforms. Even so, many observers were skeptical of Princeton's methodology.

"It's an old journalistic trick: Just add the words 'research' or 'study' to a sensational claim for instant credibility," [wrote Slate's Will Oremus](#), who criticized news outlets for reporting uncritically on the paper. "Best of all, you're absolved of any responsibility for verifying its truth, since everyone knows journalists aren't qualified to dispute scientific findings."

On Thursday, Facebook fired back. But instead of a canned statement or a point-by-point renunciation of the researchers' methods, they took a more playful tack.

"Using the same robust methodology featured in the paper, we attempted to find out more about this 'Princeton University' -- and you won't believe what we found!" Facebook data scientist [Mike Develin](#) [wrote in a blog post](#) on his page.

An examination of Facebook and Google patterns spells bad news ahead for the university, Develin said, tongue firmly planted in a sarcastic cheek.

"This trend suggests that Princeton will have only half its current enrollment by 2018, and by 2021 it will have no students at all, agreeing with the previous graph of scholarly scholarliness. Based on our robust scientific analysis, future generations will only be able to imagine this now-rubble institution that once walked this earth," he added.

"Although this research has not yet been peer-reviewed, every Like for this post counts as a peer review. Start reviewing!"

By Friday afternoon his post had attracted more than 8,100 likes and comments such as "well played!"

"You come at the king of social media, you best not miss," [wrote Chris Taylor on Mashable](#). CNET called it "[the comeback of all comebacks](#)."

The smackdown also spilled over to Twitter, where the Huffington Post called it a "nerd brawl" and most observers gave credit to Facebook for having a sense of humor.

A Princeton University spokesman did not immediately respond Friday to CNN's request for comment.

In reality, neither institution is in danger of wasting away any time soon. Princeton received 24,498 applicants for its current freshman class and accepted only 7.4% of them, ensuring its status as one of the nation's elite universities. And as of September 2013 Facebook had 1.2 billion monthly active users.