

After a few weeks at the University of Maryland, Chapel Hill, N.C., native Emma Atlas still knew no one. Like so many, she turned to the Internet – in particular, she turned to reddit.

And she discovered reddit was filled with people like her.

“I went to a reddit meet-up, and it was so much fun,” the freshman government and politics major said. “It was so easy [meeting people]; everyone had something in common there!”

Reddit has been an Internet staple since its formation in 2005. The website functions as a community, as topics ranging from humorous pictures to world news are discussed and voted on by its hundreds of thousands of users (in February, reddit’s blog reported that the site had more than 1 billion page views. Each month since has also eclipsed 1 billion). The more “upvotes” content receives from these users, the higher it is listed on the page.

But what sets the website apart is its ability to bring people together. It contains thousands of subreddits, which serve to unite people over a specific topic, location, interest or even school. Atlas has been a “redditor” for about a year, but found the University of Maryland subreddit, which contained 841 members as of print, when she struggled socially at the university.

“I looked, and Maryland did have [a subreddit]!” She said. “And I saw there was a meet-up soon, and I didn’t know anyone on campus. So I went there and I was like, these are my people! These people enjoy bacon!”

Bacon is a common meme of the website, as much of its content involves users salivating at the sight of its sizzling. But reddit has proven to be much more than a joke-filled time-waster. With nearly 500 college subreddits, it is allowing many socially-inept students to meet and bond over a commonality, even if that commonality is a favorite website.

“A college campus is a complicated place with lots of different things going on,” said William Sedlacek, Professor Emeritus of Education and former assistant director at the University of Maryland Counseling Center. “It isn’t always easy to figure out how you can form relationships when you’re finding out who you are and trying to determine the rest of your life. Something like reddit can help facilitate those relationships.”

These relationships are integral to successful college careers, Sedlacek said. Part of Maryland’s problem is its tendency to group like-minded students in classes and in dormitories, he said, which wastes the opportunities inherent in such a large university.

“We’ve done studies from time to time, and we know there are students that get isolated. Even with so many different types of people, students kind of stay in the same pockets of existence. If you don’t get along with these people, or if you want to meet other people, sites like reddit can be extremely helpful.”

Atlas said she felt more comfortable with college life after the meet-up, and she bonded with students at the meet-up because many were members of the video game subreddit.

“We went to Jason’s Deli for the meet-up, and I’m part of the gaming community on reddit, so I met some people there that are also part of it,” she said. “I never find people as interested in gaming as I am, but these redditors were.”

Baltimore native freshman psychology major Dylan Manning said Maryland’s presence on reddit helped him transition into the university. And once he was in the university, he said, the subreddit shrank a vast, intimidating campus into a personal home for him.

“In the big city that is College Park, it’s so easy to get lost in the shuffle, and it was so hard to meet people,” he said. “The subreddit has a sense of community – people look out for each other there. Maryland’s not this huge, anonymous entity anymore.”

Dominick Scalise, a staff counselor the University of Maryland Counseling Center, said that while feelings of isolation are common on every college campus, Maryland is unique because so many of its students commute.

“[Many students] live from home for financial or other reasons. A significant amount of students experiencing isolation, loneliness do so because of their living situation,” he said.

“Another contributing factor is anxiety. There is a common feeling of being ‘alone together’ here and that raises people’s fears that he or she may be the only one who is not part of the bigger better group who are all connected.”

While the students of Maryland may be unique in commuting, the university is not unique in its presence on reddit. While nearly 500 universities have subreddits, Rochester Institute of Technology, despite being a school with just 14,148 students according to U.S. News & World Report, has the biggest subreddit, composed of 2,879 members as of print.

“Getting a subreddit has really brought a lot of the campus together,” Jay T. Walker, a senior biology major at RIT and the creator of its subreddit said. “We have meet-ups probably monthly or so, and we actually have a whole lot of people who turn up for them.”

And universities are not the only entities present on Reddit. The state of Maryland has over 1,000 subscribers to its subreddit, where Maryland residents discuss various issues affecting the state. Many of its cities have subReddits, too, with Baltimore possessing the most subscribers – over 2,300.

Professors and mentors so often encourage people to follow their hearts; but Atlas had the most success following her clicking finger.

“I had these worrying few weeks where I was like, I haven’t met anyone that I actually know!” the freshman government and politics major said. “Then I go to the meet-up and realized there are people like me – there are people at Maryland who like bacon!”