



Do Students Use Technology Wisely?

Dr. Joyce Shotick and Dr. Paul Stephens, Bradley University

From NASPA's NetResults, December 21, 2005

In the past 10 years, communication devices such as laptop computers, MP3 players, the Internet, cell phones, and Instant Messaging programs and file sharing programs have exploded onto the college campus scene. In some cases, students cannot fathom living without their cell phones, IMs, and iPods! In their book *Millennials Rising*, Neil Howe and William Strauss indicate that one of the characteristics of contemporary college students is that they are “technologically savvy.” Most student affairs professionals would agree that they are continually amazed at how quickly students download, buy, learn, and become experts at new technology.

With the convenience and affordability of technology, what are the dangers of using high tech devices and gadgets? Should student affairs professionals be concerned about the overuse and misuse of technology? What are the major concerns that student affairs professionals have about college student technology advances?

What are the student issues?

At a recent NASPA regional conference, student affairs professionals conducted a technology roundtable discussion. Many concerns were expressed, and the following five issues were identified:

1. **Academic dishonesty through computers and sophisticated applications.** Cell phones allow students to request a bathroom break only to call a friend and ask for answers to the test questions. The Internet provides students with prewritten papers on nearly any topic for the choosing, which easily leads to plagiarism. On the flip side, many faculty are combating plagiarism with technology of their own, namely, turnitaround.com that scans for published documents.
2. **Isolation when students use computers exclusively to communicate.** When two roommates “talk” to one another by Instant Messaging on their computers rather than with a verbal conversation, do they lose their interpersonal skills? Students have created their own IM writing style to communicate to friends individually or in group chat rooms. Will they be able to compose essays and reports using formal English writing techniques? Does the elimination of face to face interaction prevent students from participating in social activities, programs, and organizations that the campus environment offers? Students communicate with faculty members via e-mail because they can do so at all hours of the day and night! Faculty have become disgruntled at receiving messages at 3 a.m. that a student cannot complete an assignment or is unable to attend class in the morning rather than talking on the phone or in person.

To further complicate this issue of student isolation is the prolific number of course offerings on line. Has higher education determined that the ease and convenience of distance learning exceeds the advantages of personal interaction? Do those institutions that grant degrees through on line course work deny students the opportunity to discuss, debate, and negotiate through verbal dialogue? Will the next generation of online professionals only be able to text message to convey an idea or thought? How will passion, energy, and ambition be expressed?

3. **Overuse of technology.** Students seem to be conversing on their cell phones on the way to class and on their way back from class. Do they have time to reflect and contemplate what they learned in class? Related to this concern is that of excessive distribution lists. Not only do students post “information” on distribution lists, faculty and staff send out wedding announcements, child updates, and jokes. Does this bombardment of news items prevent individuals from concentrating on their studies and work activities?
4. **Illegal use of computer technology.** Hacking into systems has become a frequent occurrence on college campuses (Nebeker, 2002). As colleges and universities upgrade their software, equipment, and systems, do we provide a technology-rich environment for students to experiment and test the edge of the law? Do students assume that as a “student,” the legal system will not prosecute them for downloading child pornography or copyrighted material (music and videos), or for creating a virus to infect systems? Can they claim that it is an expression of their freedom? Do they think they will not be “caught?”
5. **Unethical use or unpleasant behaviors that student affairs professionals must confront with students.** For example, as institutions that uphold the right to free speech, how should we handle rude and inconsiderate e-mail messages? With the anonymity of e-mail correspondence, are students more inclined to send harassing messages? Do they negate opportunities to deal with conflict appropriately and positively? If so, when will they learn to confront difficult situations with others in a diplomatic fashion? Now that camera phones are becoming a staple feature on cell phones, will this device allow students to photograph awkward, compromising situations and post them on the Internet? Will student judicial officers have the time and technical ability to investigate these numerous cases?

How can student affairs professionals use technology to help them with their workload?

The benefits of technology to student affairs are vast and varied. Using Global Positioning Systems, we can find students if they so choose. Instant Messaging and e-mail allows for instantaneous, inexpensive communication with a variety of individuals anytime of the day or night. Administrators, staff, and students can organize their days through PalmPilots (digital personal assistants). The latest information on our profession (NASPA Updates), justice reports (ASJA news), and upcoming seminars or conferences can be sent to us expediently and with minimal expense.

Many programming opportunities now exist for alcohol and other drug intervention. Classes are taught that may not otherwise be available to a graduating student. We are able to collect numerous amounts of data through interactive assessments and surveys. The ease with which we can disseminate and collect information has made our work more efficient.

There is also the advantage of firewalls to prevent viruses and privacy invasion. However, does this also provide higher education administrators with the ability to prevent “bad elements” from reaching the campus? If so, does this compromise our right to freedom of expression?

There are many savings that can be gleaned from technology, but there can be serious challenges with it as well. The key is to take advantage of the benefits of technology and to anticipate and prevent misuse of technology. In so doing, we can be even more productive student affairs professionals, and our students will learn to incorporate technology into their development. It is essential that every campus develop a statement on appropriate technology behavior and the possible ramifications of misuse of technology. To create this statement, student affairs professionals need to be aware of the possible abuses of our current technology.

What are essential elements of a technology policy?

In developing a campus-wide technology policy, the chief student affairs officer should consult with the university’s chief information officer about current technology capabilities, the student judicial officer about current offenses and sanctions, and with the local police, in particular, the computer crime unit. Establish what students can do through university technologies and how local agencies can be involved.

1. Establish the appropriate use of laptop computers in classrooms. Students need to be told that “games” and “emailing/iming” is not allowed during class sessions, and they need to be conscious of the noise and distraction that typing creates for fellow students.
2. Establish a university cell phone/PDA policy with faculty and the chief information officer that states that all cell phones must be turned off when entering a classroom/lecture hall, and that cell phones and PDAs may be collected by instructors during exams.
3. Develop programming in the residence halls in which students want to participate so roommates and floor residents have some face to face time. Be sure intramural sports teams at various ability levels are widely accessible in order to attract students away from video gaming. Be sure student activities are exciting and engaging, e.g., a “game night” in the student center, for example, may be a good way to gather students who are avid gamers. Or, try “speed dating” for those students who don’t want to spend “too much time” with other students.
4. Identify the advantages of technologies: having access to supplemental Web sites, i.e., WebCT, BlackBoard; being able communication via e-mail to faculty when not available (or late at night); conducting literature research through the library system; and letting someone know where you are with a cell phone call.
5. Share appropriate technology etiquette in an introductory computing skills class, as a program for the residence hall occupants, or at an orientation session. Such tips may include: typing only polite, thoughtful messages that will be well received (anything that is disrespectful, vulgar, or hurtful to someone can be used against you by student judicial services; sending messages only to those individuals who you know personally and who would appreciate receiving the information (spam messages are a waste of everyone’s time and effort); allow sufficient time for replies (don’t expect faculty and staff to respond at 3 a.m.); be cautious of responding to a listserv message – your response will be sent to everyone else unless you select “reply only to sender”; do NOT send late papers electronically to professors unless you have their permission; and always check

the next day that any assignment sent electronically was received (with programs designed to “capture” spam messages, student work can be lost before reaching the necessary destination).

6. Site the consequences of specific computer misuse such as downloading file-sharing data; logging onto child pornography Web sites; committing academic dishonesty via technology; harassing others through technology; and hacking into network systems.

This information should be shared with students at new student orientation programs, published in the Student Handbook/Code of Conduct, and discussed with Residential Life staff at floor/hall meetings.

References:

Howe, N. and Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials Rising: The next great generation*. New York: Vintage Books.

Nebeker, A. (2002). Addressing the behavior of student hackers. *NetResults*, July 10.