Generation Communication: College Students, the Internet and Campus Activities

By Steve Jones, PhD

How did college students ever manage without the Internet? Doesn't it seem as if the Internet has always been around on our college campuses? The answers to these questions depend somewhat on your perspective.
For example, I was fortunate to have been a college undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the 1970s when that campus was fully utilizing a computer system called PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations). In its heyday, PLATO (at UIUC and other campuses where it was later deployed) allowed students, faculty and staff not only to access course materials such as lecture notes, study guides and quizzes, but it also included live chat, e-mail, multiplayer games, event announcements, and campus information and guides. Although lacking the multimedia elements that today's computers and Internet offer, PLATO served as an effective campus-wide communication tool.

You might assume, therefore, that PLATO competed for students' time and might have distracted them from campus activities (among other things). But while PLATO shared many similarities with today's Internet, and while there were heavy users of PLATO, the fact that it was invented before the PC and before high-speed Internet access meant it was impossible to play music or watch high quality graphics, animations or videos. To use PLATO also required leaving your apartment or residence hall, as the only access to it was in campus computer labs.

Today's student, however, has access to a wide range of communication and entertainment options from within their dorm room or apartment, far more options than any PLATO user had 20 years ago. And there is no doubt computers and the Internet are competing for students' attention and time. What are college students doing on and with the Internet, and how does what they are doing online have consequences for campus programming, activities and leadership?

### Studying Students' Internet Use

In 2002, the Pew Internet & American Life Project undertook research to learn about college students' Internet use. Of course, we knew that most, if not all, college students were by then using the Internet. But we knew little about what they were doing with it. Did they use it to keep in touch with friends? Did they use it for entertainment? Did they use it for shopping?

In the spring of 2002, we randomly distributed paper surveys to 27 institutions of higher education across the United States in the hopes of obtaining data to answer such questions. Additionally, teams of graduate students observed college students' computer use on various college campuses, spending time in computer labs, cafeterias and other public spaces where students were seen using computers and the Internet.

### Expected Findings

The data did show some things we expected:

- Virtually every college student uses the Internet.

### Unexpected Findings

But we also found some unexpected things:

- The majority (60%) have downloaded music.
- For all of them, the Internet is a commonplace fixture, a part of their world since they were teenagers. It could be said they are the Internet Generation.

- Most (78%) go online just to browse the Web and spend time.
- Nearly half of them (42%) use the Internet mainly to communicate socially with friends and family, but two thirds (69%) are more likely to use the phone than the Internet to communicate socially.
- Most are connected to friends they had before they went to college, such as those from their high school or hometown. Ten years ago, it would have been rare for a college student to hear regularly from anyone but a best friend, either because the cost of a long-distance call was too high to allow it, or the pace of writing letters was too slow and took too long. Now most college students can feel as if they have kept their circle of friends from before college.
and added new friends to their social circle. Indeed, the majority of a college student’s day is spent in communication, usually mediated by some form of technology like the phone or Internet, and thus a more appropriate nickname for this cohort of students is Generation Communication.

While it can be considerable work to include these technologies in what is already a heavy workload for programmers and activities leaders, the work will pay off, both in terms of generating excitement and participation among the student body, but also in terms of adding a new set of skills that student leaders can take with them after graduation.

- One of the most surprising findings in our data, particularly for those involved in campus activities, was that only 10% of college students said they use the Internet primarily for entertainment. At least as of 2002, it seems the Internet had not yet become an entertainment alternative for college students. However, as various computer makers, software companies, movie studios, record companies, and television studies have been working toward a convergence of home entertainment devices (imagine the TV, radio, PC, stereo, and video game console all in one machine connected to the Internet), it will not be long before the centerpiece of most apartments and dorm rooms is an Internet-enabled device. There is already plenty of competition for college students’ time from these individual technologies.

**Activating Technology for Campus Activities**

Will campus programming and activities need to change to keep up with technology? As is the case with most all manifestations of the Internet, the answer to that question is, “Yes—and no.” Some of the most important technological changes should be embraced by the leadership of campus activities and by those involved in programming. Others are likely to make the programmers’ task more difficult.

- **Wi-Fi**

One of the newest technologies, wireless Internet access (known as Wi-Fi), may have a very significant impact on programming. On many campuses, Wi-Fi access is available in most places already, including public places like cafeterias, lounges, and recreation areas. College students (and faculty, for that matter) are coming to expect that they will have Internet access everywhere, including at events, concerts and lectures. They may even expect to have access during performances. (At a concert on my campus last year, I was surprised to see that when the lights went down and the band took the stage, instead of fans lifting lighters high over their heads they reached for their cell phones, creating a sea of white, green, and blue light throughout the venue.)

These expectations can lead to some etiquette issues. Is it appropriate to hear the clicking of a keyboard and mouse during a lecture or comedy show? Might a band consider a laptop (or cell phone, for that matter) a form of recording device and be concerned about copyright violations?

These are examples of the possible negative consequences of wireless technologies. Might there be positive ones? There certainly are, and they are crucial for those wishing to reach college students with information about programming and activities. Information about events, about performers, even ticket availability and purchasing, can be made available online and accessed from any place on campus. Students can be encouraged to sign up for instant notifications (via e-mail or cell phone, using SMS [short message service] or text messaging) about new events. They can sample music, movies, or lectures when a new event or speaker is announced. Making it easy for them to do so by including multimedia files (or links to them) is something they will no doubt appreciate.

Indeed, as a general rule, the degree to which students are involved in activities and participate in events is becoming related to the degree to which they are contacted and informed online. Our research found that multi-tasking, the ability to do more than one thing at a time on the Internet, is commonplace, and reaching a student via the Internet is a good way to get their attention. Of course, you should always be careful about sending e-mail that could be misread as unwanted e-mail or spam, and it is helpful to get students to opt in to e-mail lists. It is important, too, with regard to matters of
etiquette, to keep in mind that students can be paying attention to a lecture, instant messaging a friend and browsing the Web at the same time.

● Blogging

Another new technological development that college students have quickly picked up on is blogging. Short for “Web logging,” blogging is the creation of an online journal or diary. Many blog sites now exist that focus on college students (xanga.com and myspace.com are among the most popular), and some sites add the capability to create networks of friends on campus (thefacebook.com is the most popular of these). Blogs can be an excellent source of information about student interests. Since many students update their sites regularly, it is possible to get a sense of which bands or types of music are popular, which movies are hits (and which are misses), and which comedians are getting high marks from students. Blogs can also be a source of feedback after an event or performance, as students will often write an entry soon after attending and participating.

● Other Possibilities

There are other possibilities to consider. There might be value in creating an activities portal for your campus to which students can go to learn about events, groups and campus programming. Such a site could include student preferences related to their interests in music, movies, games or comedy. When a new event that fits their interests is announced, it could be shown at the top of the page the next time they log in, or the site could automatically e-mail them about it. The site could include a bulletin board on which they could list the events or people they’re interested in having on campus. It could also encourage the formation of groups of students with similar interests.

Creating a portal site such as this can seem a very daunting task, but it may not be so difficult, particularly if you work closely with the information technology staff on campus. There are often many creative people working in academic computing departments who would welcome the chance to put their talents to such use. And, many students will already have some of the skills necessary to build and maintain such sites.

While it can be considerable work to include these technologies in what is already a heavy workload for programmers and activities leaders, the work will pay off, both in terms of generating excitement and participation among the student body, but also in terms of adding a new set of skills that student leaders can take with them after graduation. The entertainment industry itself is increasingly using these technologies in its efforts to reach audiences and fans, and anyone who has experience with these technologies will have positioned themselves well for work in that field.

Which Way the Web?

The only certain thing about the future of Internet use by college students is that both students’ habits and the technology will change. Just how they will change, however, is not known. We are, as of this writing, collecting and analyzing data from another study of college students’ Internet use. Already the preliminary findings are promising and surprising.

On one campus, more than half of the students surveyed said they use the Internet to listen to music or watch music videos. On another campus, two-thirds of the students surveyed said they use the Internet to look for information about movies, music, books or other leisure activities, while 80% of them had used the Internet to buy tickets to a concert, movie, play or sporting event.

One area worth considering is whether the Internet can itself be considered for use as an interactive programming medium. Perhaps, in addition to the traditional events and activities that might be programmed, there is room to add online components, ranging from webcasts of performances to online-only activities.

Clearly the Internet has become part of everyday college life. The better it can be used to encourage and enhance student participation in campus activities, the more there is to be gained by the campus community.

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