State of NIU Students: Technology

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Message from the Vice President

Dear Campus Partner,

As with the entire Northern Illinois University community, student success is at the heart of our work in Student Affairs & Enrollment Management. To attain this goal, one of our ongoing priorities in the division is to identify how we can provide student-centered service in all of our units. One recent project investigated students’ current practices related to various technologies to determine how we might enhance our service in that area.

Thus, we formed The Student Culture/Technology Committee. This cross-functional committee of NIU faculty, staff, and students worked for over two years to meet my initial charge: Investigate the NIU student technology culture and identify any strategies we could implement to enhance the work of Student Affairs & Enrollment Management as we strive to support students’ pursuit of learning.

The report that follows is the culmination of the work of the Student Culture/Technology Committee. The findings reported relate to a wide range of topics such as the average daily use of various technologies to students’ views on usefulness of technologies for professional, social, and school purposes. Recommendations of the committee based on the data collected range from investigating the use of the Blackboard Academic Suite for use in select Student Affairs & Enrollment Management areas, to developing and using departmental Facebook pages, to conducting regular reviews of students’ use of technology in order to stay current.

This was a monumental task for which I am profoundly grateful to the many individuals who have tirelessly offered their guidance, support, and participation. I want to particularly thank the members of the Student Culture/Technology Committee and our student and faculty partners in the Counseling, Adult and Higher Education department. Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank those students who contributed to this effort, both on the committee and as study participants.

I look forward to implementing these recommendations in the most effective manner possible as we continue to live out our vision of inviting students to strive to become active community members and inspire them to succeed in their individual pursuit of learning as they transform into dynamic leaders.

Brian O. Hemphill, Ph.D.
Vice President for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management
Executive Summary

Over the course of 30 months, the Student Culture/Technology Committee conducted a study to assess NIU student use of technology, with the specific aim of identifying how Student Affairs & Enrollment Management might better serve students via technology. The primary data were collected through an online survey. This document includes a collection of compelling findings of that survey as well as the related recommendations that follow:

**Consider using Blackboard Academic Suite.** Student comments indicate their belief that increased use of Blackboard could benefit their overall educational experience. Student Affairs & Enrollment Management may consider implementing an enhanced Blackboard presence in select areas, with corresponding staff training regarding effective application of Blackboard in the identified environment.

**Consider development and use of departmental or group Facebook pages.** Students find Facebook somewhat useful for school use. If this recommendation is pursued for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management, it should be accompanied by a targeted campaign encouraging the professional use of Facebook.

**Use caution in adding significant presence in online virtual social environments.** Students generally are not using online social environments, with 92% of the survey respondents stating that they never use them.

**Provide staff development opportunities related to any new technologies.** If new technologies are implemented, it is essential that staff learn those new technologies, along with any pertinent legal and accessibility issues. In addition, it will be important for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management to develop and achieve a common language to discuss technology.

**Expand campus wireless availability.** The most commonly cited student comment was that participants would like expanded wireless Internet access on campus, better Intranet systems, and improved network accessibility and reliability. Existing university projects already underway would likely impact this recommendation. Departments and/or buildings within Student Affairs & Enrollment Management may consider further investigating whether this service could benefit the students they serve.

**Conduct regular reviews of technology.** Given the dynamic nature of technology, in order to provide relevant services to students via technology, it will be important to review technology use, function, and satisfaction data on a regular cycle, every 2-3 years.
Online Survey Overview

After completing a benchmarking project that investigated strategies used by other campuses to reach students via innovative technologies, and collaborating with an assessment class in the Counseling, Adult and Higher Education department, the committee embarked on developing and implementing an online survey. The survey, conducted from October 27, 2008, to November 14, 2008, explored students’ behaviors and attitudes related to various technologies. With committee member assistance, Dr. Betty LaFrance, in the Department of Communication, designed and implemented the SurveyMonkey tool used for the data collection, while Ms. Evelyn Comber conducted the qualitative and quantitative data analyses.

Upon study approval from the Institutional Review Board and mass e-mail approval from The Office of the Provost, Dr. LaFrance sent an initial e-mail and two follow-up messages to a random sample of 6,000 undergraduate students’ electronic mail addresses, which were supplied by Registration and Records, achieving a response rate of 17%.

Once data were collected via SurveyMonkey, reviewed for input error, and transferred to a Statistical Software for Social Sciences worksheet, a missing values analysis was conducted. The resulting analysis determined that demographic data were not missing in a systematic manner. This analysis was important to examine, since the responses ranged from 511 to 1,019 participants. The majority of the drop-off in responses occurred at the point in the survey where the survey style went from a simple “check the circle” to a more complex set of drop-down menu choices.

Demographics achieved in the sample included the following:

- Mean age = 23, ranging from 18-65
- Gender: 48% female, 32% male (20% did not respond)
- Race: 64% Caucasian, 5% African American, 5% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 3% other (20% did not respond)
- Sexual orientation: 71% Heterosexual, 3.5% LGBQ (25% did not respond)
- Disability: 10% reported disability, 90% did not
- Housing: 15% on-campus, 65% off-campus
- Distance: 55% live within 5 miles
  - 15% live within 5.1-50 miles, and
  - 3% live within 50.1-100 miles of NIU
- GPA: 9% less than 2.5, 47% 2.5-3.5, 22% over 3.5.

Open-Ended Survey Question Results

The end of the survey included two open-ended questions, resulting in the following summarized responses:

**Students want:**
- Immediate and up-to-date information
- Online access to university departments, along with quicker response times
- Better equipment that is more accessible
- More computers (including Macs); printers, with remote printing capabilities, and accessible labs
- Campus-wide Internet access.

**Students also:**
- Acknowledge positive and negative aspects of technology
- Had mixed comments about NIU being on Facebook and Second Life
- Are concerned about the security of their data/information
- Offered suggestions for technology not currently available/limited in availability.

Quantitative Survey Question Results

The next section of the report provides bar charts of the results from the online survey, along with a general description of the findings displayed. For each topic addressed, the exact question wording is listed, followed by a table depicting the results, and ending with text describing the results. Also included are any applicable student comments provided in the open-ended survey questions, “What else, if anything, would you want to tell us about your use of technology?” and “What technologies would you like to see used at NIU that are not being used currently?”
Summary

Some participants claimed to be using technology 24/7, an unlikely occurrence. The technologies most used are personal computers, cell phones, Internet browsing, and text messaging. Those used the least are virtual reality, online gaming, PDA, MySpace, Internet shopping, YouTube, offline games, and Blackboard. The graph displays the average daily use of specific technologies.

Student Quotes

- I am sort of afraid of technology; I use my personal computer to check e-mails, and my bank account, and that is all. I use the computer lab to type papers, and print off lectures for class. I really don’t know much else to do with computers.
- I use technology a lot, everyday, and I think it is much more [convenient] because you can access information at any hour of the day.
- I use technology very frequently; I think I may have a technology addiction. Anything in dealing with technology, I have it, or know about it, but I most likely use it either way.
Students reported a high level of comfort with, liking for, and skill with the technologies about which we asked. They appear to be very comfortable with most forms of the technology surveyed. The one they were the least comfortable with was virtual reality environments, responding on average with the neutral statement “neither like nor dislike.” They are so comfortable with e-mail and Facebook that none of the 1,019 participants said they were “completely uncomfortable” with those two technologies – with the average response being “completely comfortable.” There was more variability in the responses when asked how well they liked the technologies, but overall they tended to like, rather than dislike them, again with the highest dislike for virtual technologies. Overall, the average responses were near “comfortable.” Regarding their perceived level of skill, no one stated “completely uncomfortable” for e-mailing and using their personal computers. Once again, the least level of skill was assigned to virtual environments. Overall, the responses tended to be in the “completely comfortable” to “comfortable” range.

Student Quotes
- I eat, sleep, and breathe technology
- Like it, Love it, can’t live without it
Summary

It appears that, overall, the students believe technology is both effective and efficient. The highest means are for technologies that are less likely to be used in their education—games, virtual reality, PDAs, and social networking sites. Even so, those items' averages were in the mid-range. Nearly everyone agreed that cell phones and e-mail are “very effective” and “very efficient.”

Student Quotes

• I think that the effectiveness in communicating in many of the mediums mentioned in this survey depends a great deal upon the ability and effort of the person using them…It’s a matter of training, attitude, and awareness.

• I use technology to enhance and help; I am not overly reliant on it like some of my schoolmates.
**Question:** Please rate the following items based on the qualities listed below:

- Professional Connections, Social Connections, and School.

**Summary**

Here we see that, for entertainment technologies (gaming, music, social sites, shopping, virtual reality), students distinguish between professional and school use and social use. This is the first set of questions where we have means higher than mid-range, going into the “unuseful” category. Cell phones and e-mailing remain relatively constant across all three categories and in the “very useful” range. In fact, not one respondent chose “very unuseful” for the e-mail categories of professional and social use.

**Student Quotes**

- I love the computer labs… I go online a lot, and anything available online… I’ll probably look into it.
- My life would be drastically different without it.
- When one is knowledgeable of its use and mindful of its application, technology is almost exclusively positive.
**Question:** Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with these statements considering each type of technology.

- I believe using *(fill in the technology)* can be distracting for me.
- I believe using *(fill in the technology)* can lead to problems for me.

**Summary**

Here, the higher the mean the more they disagreed with the statements. So, most respondents believe that Blackboard does not cause a problem for them, while many agree that Facebook does. The students generally “agree” that technology is distracting for them, with the standard deviation being up/down one statement. That is, their responses ranged from “strongly agree” to “neither agree, nor disagree.” This suggests that the students do notice some distractions caused by the technologies about which we asked.

Regarding respondents’ answers to whether technology causes problems for them, responses range from “agree” to “disagree,” which suggests that while some students notice problems, others do not. The qualitative data supports this observation with comments regarding how technology is useful, but can be overused, how technology is reducing interpersonal face-to-face social skills, and how technology increases an individual’s ability to maintain and enhance social networks.

**Student Quotes**

- I feel somewhat addicted to my phone and computer (Internet/Facebook)...they’re a blessing and a curse because they’re very helpful yet very distracting and can create problems being so easily accessible to people
- Love to use it but it can cause problems when you least expect it. Losing data, etc.
Summary

It appears that students believe cell phones are excellent communication devices, with e-mail being seen as a close second (but losing ground on its ability to communicate emotion and accuracy). Again, the scores generally stayed in the mid-range, with higher means for the ‘entertainment’ technologies (social sites, virtual reality, and YouTube).

Student Quotes

• Text messaging, IM’ing, and e-mail put conversation out of CONTEXT!! That’s why the phone or in person is the best way to communicate!

• Very challenging and isolating, I miss the face to face interactions, even though online is more convenient

Question: Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with these statements, considering each type of technology.

• I believe that (fill in the technology) is the most meaningful way to communicate.

• I believe that (fill in the technology) works best for allowing me to interpret others’ messages.

• I believe that (fill in the technology) works best for communicating emotion.

• I believe that (fill in the technology) is the best way to accurately receive or convey a message.
**Question:** Please respond to the following items regarding the likelihood that you would engage in the following behaviors when interacting with departments within Student Affairs at NIU.

**Participant Ratings of Likelihood of Engaging in These Behaviors**

- [ ] Go on virtual tours
- [ ] Use online registration
- [ ] Read departmental blogs
- [ ] Online scheduling
- [ ] Download podcasts
- [ ] Online applications
- [ ] Use remote printing
- [ ] Join NIU Island on Second Life
- [ ] Receive digital invitations
- [ ] Allow non-emergency text messages
- [ ] Purchase products/services

**Summary**

These results suggest that students would schedule appointments and make reservations online, communicate online with departments, submit applications online, and take advantage of remote printing, if the capability were available (and known) to them. They are less likely to join a listserv, download podcasts, make friends with NIU on a social network, or become an active NIU member on Second Life. The qualitative data support the desire for online communication with departments, digital information (particularly journals and books), and for remote printing capabilities. Further, the qualitative data indicate that there are wide ranges regarding downloading podcasts, with students commenting on a desire to be able to do so; meanwhile, the qualitative data also suggest that Second Life is an expensive proposition for students and so they would curtail their involvement in it.

**Student Quotes**

- Not everyone has an iPod, so podcasts might not be efficient
- I think scheduling appointments online and live instant message help from various departments would be very worthwhile and time-saving, particularly the live help via Internet
- Online registration for events would make a lot of paper work easier
Summary

For the most part, students feel technology is affordable. In particular, none of the participants indicated that Facebook or email was “very costly.” The entertainment-type technologies (gaming, virtual reality, and shopping) were considered somewhat costly.

Student Quotes

- I don’t like buying computers because something always goes wrong with them right after the warranty is up. My hard drive is failing after 2 years of owning this computer and I have to buy a new one.
- Using a cell phone that has everything on it has made my life a lot easier, and it is not that expensive.

Question: Please indicate the extent to which you feel the following technology is affordable for you.
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