

Bats, Owls, Vampires, and Other Creatures of the Night

As a friend's ten-year-old daughter was carpooling in an older automobile, the temperature outside was rising. The youngster wanted to put the window down. After staring blankly at the door, she pointed to the manual crank handle and blurted, "What is that?!" Power windows were all she knew.

She is among the ninety-million-plus children, teen-agers, and adults born since 1980. For them, digital technology is a natural part of their existence. They have never known life without twenty-four-hour news, personal computers, UPC symbols, microwaves, CDs, VCRs, or the Internet. Accustomed to online encyclopedias, instant messaging, Internet shopping, and a host of other easily accessed services, this generation possesses decidedly different attitudes and behaviors from those of any generation that has come before—a fact that should have those of us in higher education asking ourselves how well colleges and universities are meeting the growing expectations of this "plug-and-play" generation.

Students in this generation demand constant connectivity. The Federal Communications Commission estimates that nationwide, 61 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds carry cell phones.¹ Nearly half of all American households now use the Internet, with more than 700 new households being connected every hour, and virtually all U.S. classrooms are connected to the Internet today, compared with less than 3 percent in 1993.² In the most recent national survey of entering college freshmen, a record 84 percent said they were frequent computer users.³ Those who staff academic libraries can probably

confirm that students prefer to "Ask Jeeves" rather than seek the services of a librarian. In fact, the majority of students don't go to the library to read or study. In a national survey of second-year students, only 26 percent said they went to the library for these purposes; 78 percent said they frequently searched the Web for course-related information.⁴

A consequence of students' elevated expectations is that colleges and universities need to adopt a more student-centered approach. As a learning community, we in higher education must put our students and their development at the heart of all we do. Technology can help us accomplish this goal. It not only allows students to customize their learning options but also permits us to offer myriad online services, giving students more control over their educational experience and providing them with the 24/7 environment they seek.

Like bats, owls, and vampires, students are creatures of the night. They avoid early-morning hours if they can. They steer clear of 8 a.m. classes, have meetings in the evenings, populate the fitness centers at 10 p.m., keep pizza-delivery services going past midnight, and send me e-mails at 3 a.m. Every year, I spend some time in the residence halls, rooming for an evening with incoming freshmen. It's part of the way I keep in

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touch with students. And over the years, I have learned a lot about their lifestyles and expectations. I first began this ritual at Penn State about eight years ago, and it was in this first year that I discovered that students' expectations for social activities increase as the clock moves closer to midnight. I had just finished boring about a dozen young men with magic tricks when, at 11 p.m., one of them asked, "So, what should we do now?" The clock meant little to these students, who were just gearing up for the evening.

If we can recognize that the social life of students picks up significantly as the clock ticks forward, why haven't we noticed that other aspects of their lives also follow nighttime schedules? Why do we persist in running

colleges and universities on an 8-to-5 schedule tailored to those staffing our offices and teaching our classes rather than to those using our services and taking our classes? The fact that most college and university offices close at 5 p.m. is a source of great frustration for students, who are in the habit of having the world at their fingertips all day. Don't get me wrong. My message is not that we should shift our workday by several hours. The real message here is that we should understand our customers better and think more creatively and responsively about answering their needs.

Most institutions have already made substantial progress in the area of student services, offering registration, financial aid information, and academic advising online, for example. A bonus of these changes has been increased efficiency. Other institutions are lagging in the e-services arena when compared with the business world, where students are accustomed to easily and securely accessing information and completing transactions online. Instituting e-services must be done as part of a broader campus IT strategy that improves the relationship we have with our students. We need to ask

thing over and over, following Einstein's theory, but technology has dramatically changed the playing field. It has touched all of the critical processes of the college and university, from teaching and research to administration and student life, and we must respond accordingly. It's time to rethink our organizations, from the services we offer to our methods of instruction, so that they better meet the expectations and educational needs of our students—an increasing number of whom will not be residents on campus or, alternatively, will be residents on campus but will spend more of their time learning

tween distance education students, commuter students, and residential students will be increasingly blurred. We can expect to see students living on campus while taking online courses. There will be more flexibility in scheduling. For example, a course could involve weekends in residence at the beginning and end of the course, with online learning sandwiched in between. As video, audio, and data transmission converge and become more universally available, we will discover abundant opportunities for advancing teaching and learning, but we must choose the educational techniques that best support and inspire learners of all kinds. For faculty members, it means embracing the use of technology as a creative tool for interactive and collaborative learning. For students, it means becoming more responsible for their own education and initiating many of the interactions and transactions that were previously passive occurrences.

Perhaps most important, becoming a more student-centered college or university means many unresolved challenges, among them the need for an IT infrastructure that can support the educational experiences of our students—wherever they are, whatever they need, and whenever they need it, day or night.

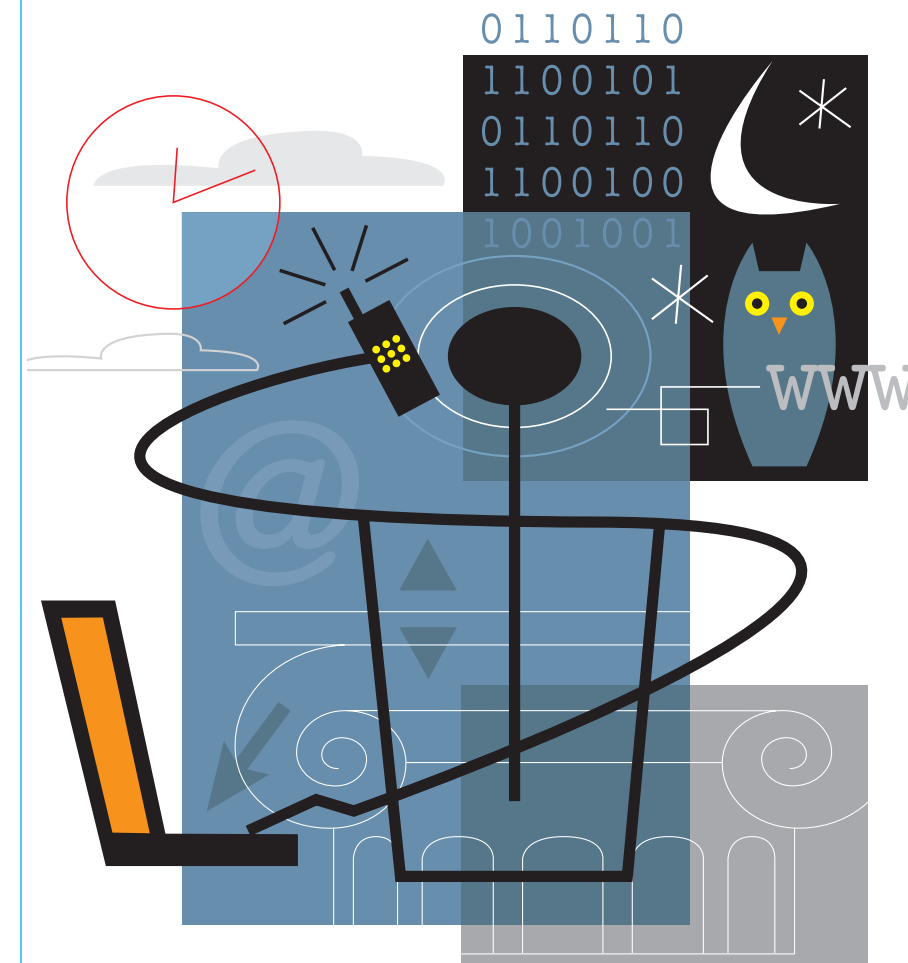


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ourselves if our services are really student-centered or if they have arisen simply as a result of the needs of administrative offices. Do the e-services connect students more fully to the learning community?

Albert Einstein once defined insanity as "the belief that you can get different results by doing the same thing over and over." For decades, American higher education has performed well doing the same

from behind a wired or wireless device. In fact, demographically, almost 75 percent of U.S. undergraduates are considered "nontraditional." Nearly half of all college students in the United States today—some 6.5 million—are over the age of 25, and that number is expected to increase to 7.1 million by 2010.⁵

What does this mean for higher education? For institutions, it means realizing that the current rigid distinctions be-

Notes

1. Stefanie Frith (Associated Press), "Students' Cellular Phone Calls Mean Universities Lose Millions in Charges," *washingtonpost.com*, June 24, 2002 <<http://www.uh.edu/admin/media/topstories/2002/06/wpost062402telephonecharges.html>> (accessed February 25, 2003).
2. Interagency Working Group on Information Technology Research and Development, National Science and Technology Council, "Information Technology: The 21st Century Revolution," September 25, 2000, <<http://www.itrd.gov/pubs/blue01/bb-2001.pdf>>, p. 1 (accessed March 5, 2003).
3. Shaena Engle, "College Freshmen Spend Less Time Studying and More Time Surfing the Net, UCLA Survey Reveals," January 27, 2003, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/02_press_release.pdf> (accessed February 25, 2003).
4. Presentation by George Kuh at the First-Year Experience National Conference, February 18, 2002. This presentation was based on the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (see <<http://www.indiana.edu/~cseq>>).
5. Carol B. Aslanian, *Adult Students Today* (New York: The College Board, 2001).

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