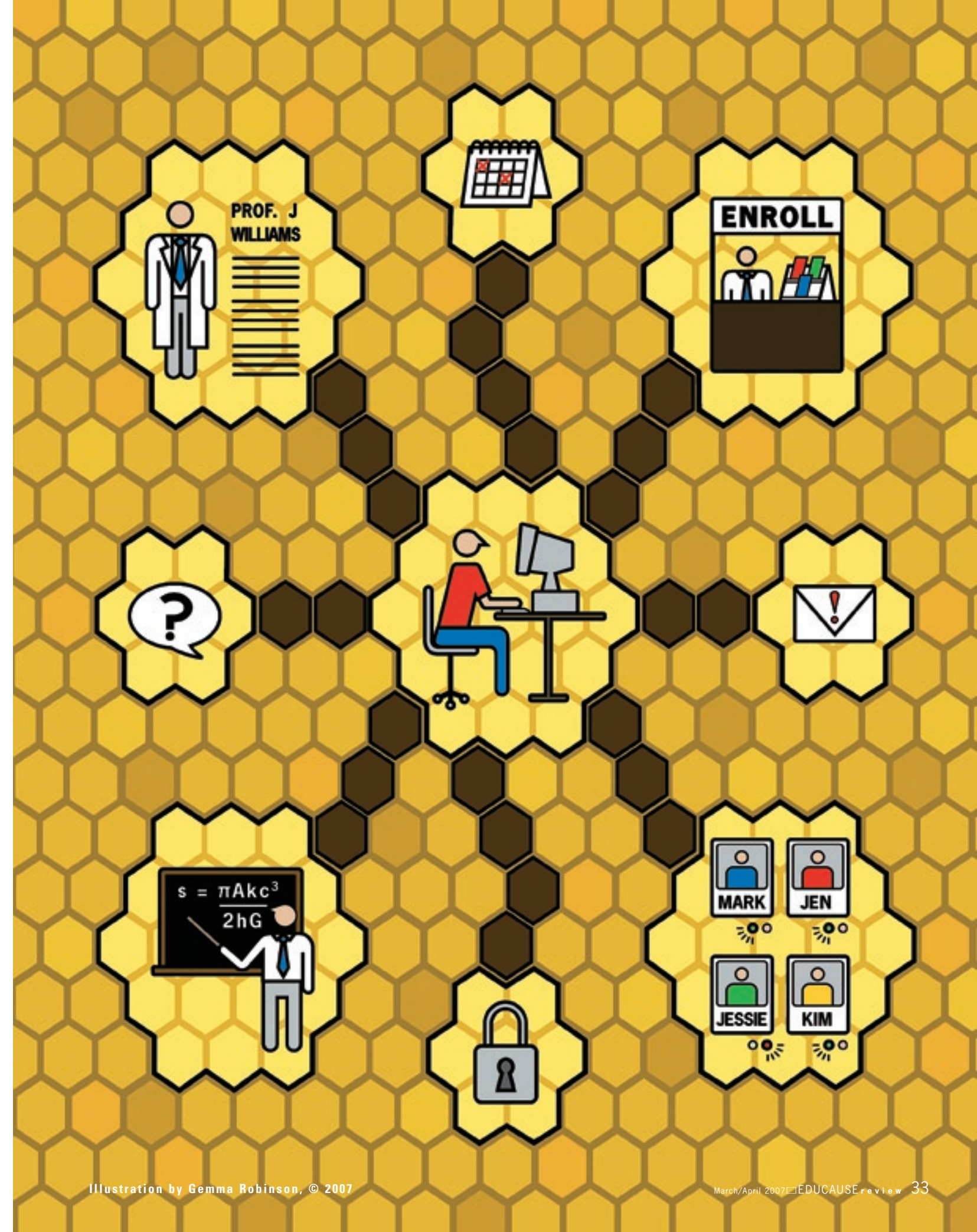


By Joanne Berg, Lori Berquam, and Kathy Christoph

# Social Networking Technologies: “Poke” for Campus Services

**H**andwritten notes, meeting for coffee, eye contact, a handshake, a smile—are these social practices of yesteryear, soon to be replaced by the “wall posts” and “pokes” of today’s social networking technologies? Although advances in social networking technologies allow for new and perhaps more efficient means of learning and communicating, they also pose some significant challenges in higher education. For example, how can campus professionals, especially those in student and academic services, learn to use these technologies to think differently about communicating with students and about facilitating learning? What aspects of Facebook, YouTube, wikis, LiveJournal, Flickr, and MySpace.com might translate into new ways for creating better and more effective student and academic services? Should campus professionals capitalize on these technologies to gain the attention of students? From class lists and class schedules to placement services, judicial affairs, and e-learning, campus activities and services offer a host of possible areas in which the features of social networking technologies could play a key role.

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For more than two years, the authors have been engaged in some provocative discussions about the various aspects of social technologies used by the “Net Gen.”<sup>1</sup> At one point, the phrase “Net Gen meets FERPA” was coined to address the quandary faced between the “old-fashioned” way services are delivered (a way intended to protect student privacy and maintain standards, as required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) and the “new” expectations of Net Gen students for flexible, seemingly less private and open-ended e-services. Numerous articles have been written about (and notable media attention has been given to) how the youth of today are using these technologies. Much of the attention has focused on the inherent dangers associated with a loss of privacy and security. Most recently, Tracy Mitrano, Director of IT Policy at Cornell University, wrote: “From the very beginning of the early applications, something was different. People had the opportunity to burst out of their parochial communities and make connections around the world.”<sup>2</sup> Instead of specifically addressing the issues of privacy and security, this article will focus on making connections—on the networking feature of these technologies.

### Finding the Opportunities

The goal for all of us in higher education is to identify where a good opportunity exists and to use that opportunity to make something happen. Campuses encompass diverse populations of students, administrators, and faculty—and along with them, varied possibilities as well as constraints. What works for one campus may not work for another, but getting together around an idea can provide inspiration for something that *will* work. Unlike those in the corporate world, those in higher education tend to share their ideas and their outcomes openly and proudly. By engaging in exactly this sort of sharing, campus professionals can capitalize on social networking technologies in ways that will benefit each of our campuses.

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison), we have been using the fervor surrounding social

networking technologies as a way for us to build better relationships with our students and with personnel from disparate parts of the campus. As a start, the three of us began talking with students about social networking technologies such as Facebook and MySpace. We asked how they use these technologies in the context of their experiences both inside and outside the classroom, and we gathered their opinions on which components of these social systems might improve the delivery of services such as enrollment, campus communications, e-learning, advising, and involvement activities. Our conversations have been energetic and productive. Our goal has been to learn more about how students think and work so that we can provide improved services.

### Getting Started

The following is a tested recipe for generating ideas: take a favorite social networking technology, add the college/university culture, the budget, and a few creative thinkers, and pour everything on top of current practices and IT services. Then listen carefully. Here is a taste of what students<sup>3</sup> might say:

- “Please just work on simplifying the portal.”
- “E-mail important information. I know when I receive university e-mail that I should read it. If I received deadline information any other way, I’d think it was a hoax!”
- “Don’t bother with IM or Facebook—that’s our way to network. Leave us alone. This is my way to procrastinate. I don’t want to feel guilty about it.”
- “Students are good at compartmentalizing information. Just tell us what we need to know but don’t enter our world to do it—we’ll come to you.”
- “I cut myself off [from Facebook].”
- “My privacy settings are all the way up.”
- “I have no privacy settings. If I were applying for a job or something, I’d shut [Facebook] down.”
- “I do care about privacy.”
- “LiveJournal and MySpace expose student stress.”
- “My sorority sends me e-mail every couple weeks telling me how I represent the organization. I get tips on

safety, privacy, and using Facebook. I pay attention.”

- “In real life, a million people can’t look at your profile.”
- “Keep it simple.”

If hearing from students triggers an urge to stir up current practices and IT services, then these ideas can be blended into a conversation with staff members. Here is a sampling of what campus professionals<sup>4</sup> might say:

- “Now I see, we were always thinking about what faculty wanted—not how students would benefit.”
- “I posted my unit’s holiday party invitation on Facebook. My students loved it.”
- “I had e-mailed a student about coming in for a meeting. I waited three days with no response. I tried contacting the same student through Facebook and received a response in fifteen minutes.”
- “What’s nice about social technologies is that they are completely opt-in.”
- “There are so many wonderful things we could do. How do we make it sustainable enough so that it is cost-effective?”
- “People here need training and interactive demonstrations to learn how to use our administrative and instructional services—nobody goes to a Facebook workshop!”
- “It would be nice to introduce a new feature and hear that it’s cool—it makes sense!”
- “As a support person, I’d like to work more like GameSpot, a community space where I offer information about myself and what I know. Others are welcome to learn from it. This is different from my current job, where I create Web pages about clickers, because that’s my job.”

### Moving Forward

To put social networking technologies to work in a positive and constructive way, campus professionals need to think about how to connect their ideas, capitalize on their strengths, and find efficient ways to provide flexible and meaningful services. We have created a way for readers to engage in this exercise. The matrix that follows (pp.

38–40) is intended to help stimulate thinking about how, and with whom, to best network ideas for improving campus services. The first column lists core campus activities, such as registration and advising. In the second column, corresponding to each of these activities, are ideas about IT-based improvements to these services in the context of the technologies that are available to students and the expectations and behavior of students. The third column lists possible campus partners for each of these improvement projects.

At UW-Madison, we shared the ideas with our various campus partners. As we listened to students talk about their registration process, we heard suggestions about the course management system, advising, residence hall life, the course catalog, and collaborative learning environments. Students asked about providing photos and profiles within the course management system so that they could get to know each other before meeting face-to-face for a group project. They want moving from one area (registration) to another area (course management) to be easy. They noted that they would like us to consider providing mass postings when a campus deadline is approaching or to offer opt-in class chats that may or may not involve the faculty member. They also mentioned the possibility of allowing anonymous e-chats with counselors and posting pop-up alerts about campus safety.

We found that the offices responsible for these traditionally somewhat disparate functions (registration, course management, academic calendar, FERPA, safety, and advising) have not regularly collaborated to provide a coordinated continuum of services. We are learning that as students (and parents) connect more frequently through social networking technologies, their expectations grow regarding their connections with and between campus professionals.

Following the innovation and creative brainstorming are the somewhat painful discussions about budget and reality (someone still needs to do the real work). Everyone needs to understand that the college/university is a large enterprise that must set standards and precedents. Faculty and staff governance, student

government, and unions all play a role in how situations can be changed and/or improved. When ideas that require business process flexibility are blended into discussions of customizing ERP and/or legacy systems, the ideas can sometimes get lost in a quagmire of long-term planning, campus politics, and budget analyses. However, social networking technologies are here to stay. Campus professionals need to find ways to implement their ideas for engaging with, and benefiting from, these fast-moving technologies.

While students compartmentalize, attend class, multitask, play games, listen to loud music, and talk to their parents, campus professionals work to keep students safe and to provide them with the resources they need to succeed. When campus professionals allow themselves time to think about the impact of social networking technologies on how students live and learn, they may also find ways to build collaboration and flexibility into their thinking by piloting projects, measuring success, celebrating failure, and sharing results—in other words, having their own brand of “fun and games.” Sometimes the ideas generated by talking with students

#### CAMPUS CONVERSATION STARTERS

- Why social technologies are different
- Distinguish fad from future
- Face-to-face is better when ...
- “Shelf-life” of an idea?
- How and when students procrastinate
- Students’ expectations and staff members’ assumptions
- Communication: fun, simple, and useful
- Proprietary rights of social technologies
- Student culture, adviser culture, IT culture
- Privacy, standards, and safety
- Convenience, simplicity, and presentation

Connect with other campuses:

[http://connect.educause.edu/wiki/Social\\_Computing](http://connect.educause.edu/wiki/Social_Computing)

Perhaps all that is needed is a simple enhancement to a delivered product.



and colleagues are exceedingly simple. Perhaps some feature already exists but was marketed inefficiently or was buried somewhere under four “clicks.” Perhaps all that is needed is a simple enhancement to a delivered product. Perhaps the first step is to have the conversation.

#### “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”

As noted above, after the brainstorming and goodwill that comes from listening to each other, reality takes over. How can the campus possibly afford to do all of this? Should students be given everything they want simply because technology makes it possible? What are the tradeoffs? What is lost when existing procedures and/or communications are replaced with e-everything? Where does expectation management fit in? It is exciting to be creative, but the key for student and academic service providers is to innovate where they can fulfill a need, enhance a service, and be

| CORE CAMPUS ACTIVITIES   | CONNECTING ON IDEAS   | MAKING CONNECTIONS   |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| <b>REGISTRATION</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Display information in a way that makes it more flexible for students to play with their schedules</li> <li>■ Access tentative snapshot of new syllabus or posting of old syllabus</li> <li>■ Check with friends about suggestions for classes and see which classes friends are enrolling in</li> <li>■ Read about the instructor, his/her requirements</li> <li>■ Access links to faculty evaluations</li> <li>■ See photos of instructors</li> <li>■ Identify courses with service learning components</li> </ul> | Registrar<br>Academic Technology<br>Service Learning Providers<br>Faculty<br>Portal Service Providers<br>IT Architects   |
| <b>TUTORING</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Poke an expert</li> <li>■ Know when other students from class are online and available to answer a question</li> </ul>   | Tutoring Services<br>Advisers<br>IT (identity management)  |
| <b>STUDY GROUPS</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Connect with other students, see their photos, form interest groups</li> <li>■ Build project teams</li> <li>■ Create online groups, in real-time</li> </ul>  | Academic Technology<br>IT (identity management)<br>Portal Service Providers  |
| <b>CLASS SCHEDULING</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Project the future</li> <li>■ Determine history of courses that “go with” other courses (Amazon.com model: “students who enrolled in this course also registered for . . .”)</li> </ul>  | Registrar<br>Academic Technology<br>Faculty  |
| <b>COUNSELING</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Have a place where difficult conversations can occur privately</li> <li>■ Follow up with students about campus issues</li> <li>■ Answers given 24/7</li> </ul>   | Dean of Students<br>Counselors<br>Advisers<br>IT Architects<br>Registrar (FERPA)<br>Health Services (HIPAA)              |
| <b>ACADEMIC ADVISING</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ E-mail/poke regarding progress in class/major</li> <li>■ Self-built portfolio of achievements ready to share with the world and updated regularly</li> <li>■ Poke an adviser (adviser to poke student)</li> <li>■ Ask a dean academic questions (provide support electronically)</li> <li>■ Online peer advising (volunteer opportunities on campus)</li> <li>■ More online “chat” features</li> <li>■ “Playing” with possible schedules, majors, and degrees (can it be a game?)</li> </ul>                         | Registrar<br>Advisers<br>Service Learning Providers<br>Academic deans<br>IT (identity management)<br>Academic Technology |

| CORE CAMPUS ACTIVITIES       | CONNECTING ON IDEAS   | MAKING CONNECTIONS   |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>DIRECTORY INFORMATION</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Provide photos and e-mail addresses in a portal environment; create groups easily</li> <li>■ Provide staff profiles</li> </ul>   | <p>IT (identity management)</p> <p>ERP System(s)</p>   |
| <b>COMMUNICATION</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Orientation on how things get communicated on campus (make it a game)</li> <li>■ Create student groups for information experts who can point students to where they need to go</li> <li>■ Lessons on privacy and safety; share stories and support; allow difficult conversations</li> <li>■ Open blogs without identities</li> <li>■ E-mail/poke when deadlines are approaching</li> <li>■ Occasionally mix things up with a hard-copy mailing</li> <li>■ Electronic pop-ups about privacy</li> </ul> | <p>Student Orientation Office</p> <p>Admissions</p> <p>Registrar</p> <p>Police</p> <p>Dean of Students</p> <p>Housing</p> <p>IT (identity management)</p> <p>ERP System(s)</p> |
| <b>TEACHING</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ See photos of classmates</li> <li>■ Let students decide which photos get posted to the class roster (make photos opt-in)</li> <li>■ Have a green-light that goes on to say that a classmate is online</li> <li>■ Provide a means for students to e-mail the entire class (make this opt-in)</li> </ul>   | <p>IT (identity management)</p> <p>Registrar</p> <p>Academic Technology</p> <p>Faculty</p> <p>Deans' Offices</p>   |
| <b>SAFETY</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Provide a campus e-map showing buildings, bus stops, lighted walkways, etc.</li> <li>■ Provide pop-up alerts</li> <li>■ Help students connect to one another through cell phones for "safe walking"</li> </ul>   | <p>Facilities</p> <p>Dean of Students</p> <p>Housing</p> <p>Police</p> <p>Portal Services</p>  |
| <b>PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Online, interactive sessions on stress and common avoidance behaviors (with effects)</li> <li>■ Ask questions anonymously</li> </ul>   | <p>Dean of Students</p> <p>Housing</p> <p>Health Services</p> <p>Police</p>  |

responsive to how students live, learn, and work.

So, what have we learned at UW-Madison? We know that students are savvy about gathering information. They use the Internet to find resources, to locate answers to questions, and to validate ideas through others. They get information through a network of resources and people. We must recognize this when we deliver services, and we need to become comfortable with not being the sole purveyor of information and services. Examples of other purveyors are RateMyProfessors.com and Schedulizer.com. The data used to drive these services may be incomplete or inaccurate, and the response rate may make the data unreliable, but some students are using these Web sites to make decisions. Finally, we have learned that as campus administrators, we can (and should) be listening more to students and collaborating more with each other.

In the end, it is most important to pay attention to the human spirit. Fortu-

nately, the human spirit doesn't morph as quickly as technology, and taking advantage of what the new technologies have to offer can be part of celebrating that spirit. As higher education professionals, we are obligated to think in terms of student satisfaction and long-term success.

### CONNECTIONS

Connect with an academic technologist, an academic adviser, a librarian, a registrar, an IT architect, and a dean on any number of topics listed here, or provide your own area of interest. The EDUCAUSE CONNECT wiki is available for readers to find commonalities, challenge assumptions, and share creative ideas about common campus services such as enrollment, advising, and teaching.

Share your thoughts:

[http://connect.educause.edu/wiki/Social\\_Computing](http://connect.educause.edu/wiki/Social_Computing)

We need to become comfortable with not being the sole purveyor of information and services.



Considering how students use social technologies can help us to build a strong network of information.



Considering how students use social technologies can help us to build a strong network of information, and it can help us to think differently about how we offer core services and how we communicate with students and with each other.

Collaborative, innovative teams that cross functional boundaries and are networked across the campus and the world are possible, now more than ever before. Perhaps it is time for the academic technologist, the chief of police, the IT architect, the ERP expert, the dean of

students, the registrar, and the chair of the college/university advising service to get together to talk about the future of student and academic services. They can meet for coffee, shake hands, write notes, and—oh yeah—a poke or a wall post might even be a way to get the conversation started. *e*

### CONCLUSIONS

- Listen to students.
- Be open to change.
- Be willing to try something new.
- Be aware of fears about technology.
- Create “collaboratories” (collaborative laboratories) of thought from across campus.
- Bring up social networking at every opportunity.

### Notes

1. See the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) Web page “Net Generation Learners,” <<http://www.educause.edu/NewLearners/5515>>.
2. Tracy Mitrano, “A Wider World: Youth, Privacy, and Social Networking Technologies,” *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 41, no. 6 (November/December 2006): 18, <<http://www.educause.edu/er/erm06/erm0660.asp>>.
3. These comments come from UW-Madison students who were interviewed by the authors in October and November 2006. We are grateful to the students for their honesty, their time, and their creative spirit. We acknowledge that students have differing opinions about social networking technologies.
4. These comments come from a mix of UW-Madison IT staff, student service providers, and academic advisers who were asked to discuss different ways of doing their jobs. We are grateful for their candor and their creative energy.