

# Foreword

There was a time when students expressed their rejection of heartless university bureaucracies by carrying signs reading “do not fold, spindle, or mutilate.” The ubiquitous punched card that gave them their slogan perfectly symbolized the reduction of human relationships to the level of the machine—most particularly, the computer.

Today, students are using information technology (IT) itself to fold, spindle, and mutilate received ideas about how personal relationships and communities operate. In social networking sites (SNSs), they’ve found one of those quintessential new forms that define a generation. This study’s Introduction by Nicole Ellison, assistant professor of telecommunication, information studies, and media at Michigan State University, tells us that SNSs are “fundamentally changing the fabric of the university” by helping students stay in touch with a broader range of people (and perspectives), by making it easier for relationships to form, and by providing a new channel for interaction with classmates.

Where students lead, institutions must follow, and the ambition of the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) in its annual studies of undergraduates and IT has always been to help the two stay connected. The tendency for IT to serve up hot new topics on short notice hasn’t always made

that easy, so with this fifth study we introduce a new element in our survey design: a focused special topic that supplements the more general core information that, with appropriate changes, we track from year to year. The social networking results presented here in Chapter 6 are the first fruit of what we hope will become a tradition of cutting-edge research on emergent (but still reasonably “ripe”) topics.

It didn’t take a lot of agonizing for us to choose social networking as our premiere focus topic. Our 2006 and 2007 studies told us that use of SNSs rose in one year from 72% to 80% among students at institutions that took part in both surveys. Facebook had become a classic example of dorm-room entrepreneurialism, the news was full of sometimes lurid stories of cyberstalking and naive self-expression on SNSs, and “Web 2.0” was driving a new investment boom in Silicon Valley. The need for some empirical information about this new phenomenon was clear.

So what did we discover? Reading Chapter 6 is the best way to find out, but overall we confirmed the extraordinary popularity of SNSs (85% of respondents use them, and an amazing 95% of those 18–19 years old), and we also found that students are neither obsessed with them nor careless in the way they share information about themselves.

Most of our respondents spend 5 hours or less per week on SNSs, and almost 9 in 10 place access restrictions on their profiles.

Some students vociferously objected in their written comments to any institutional intrusion into SNSs; others seemed to keep the door open at least a crack. Yet it's clear that, like other more traditional forms of student socializing, SNSs make a contribution to academics. Half of students report using SNSs to communicate with classmates about course work—almost 10 times the rate of those who say they use them to communicate with instructors. This is surely a place for institutions to tread carefully, if only to avoid the risk of stifling organic relationships that bring more benefit than any “official” initiative can. But regardless of how the institutional presence evolves, we can have little doubt that colleges and universities concerned about the quality of their communities have an interest in what goes on in social networking.

Besides our social networking focus topic, of course, our 2008 study continues to report on topics our past studies investigated, including students' ownership and use of technology, their self-assessment of their skills, and their perspectives on how IT affects their engagement and success in course work. One of the most significant trends we report this year is the continuing “mobilization” of the student body. Laptops continue to gain as the computer platform of choice, and two-thirds of our respondents report owning an Internet-capable cell phone, though a variety of barriers—probably high monthly data-access fees above all—mean that only a fraction use their portable devices to access the Internet. That caveat notwithstanding, it appears that the stage is set for a potential tidal wave of new student demands for mobile device support. We also report that students have had generally positive experiences with course management systems and tend

to agree that IT services are available for course work when needed, but they are more critical about their instructors' ability to use IT effectively in courses.

As always, this year's study required much collaboration and mutual support. For the second year in a row, our principal investigators Gail Salaway and Judy Caruso have coauthored a crisp and fascinating study. Caruso, who has been involved in every student study we've conducted since the series inception in 2004, managed a complex institutional review board (IRB) process with finesse and led the student focus groups that contribute so much of this study's flavor. Salaway contributed excellent methodological skills and an unbending concern for clarity and precision. ECAR Fellow Mark Nelson once again brought his qualitative research skills to bear on the survey's open response questions. We also thank our colleague Julie Little, interim director of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, for her expertise and careful review of the study text.

We owe a great deal to our colleagues and friends at institutions of higher education. Ellison, one of the pioneers in the blooming field of SNS research, contributed a fine Introduction that we recommend highly to anyone interested in what participants really get out of SNSs. She also reviewed the study text and made many valuable contributions to our analysis. We're grateful as well to James Jonas, Information Services/Electronic Resources librarian at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, for his assistance with our literature search.

From the beginning of our work on undergraduates and IT, we've been conscious of the sensitivities that surround the study of student populations. We could not possibly carry out the laborious and complex coordination of IRB approvals without the generous assistance of individuals at participating institutions, and we are further indebted to them for developing random samples

of their freshman and senior populations and for deploying the survey. One measure of our obligation is that these colleagues are too many in number to name here, so we direct the reader to Appendix A to find their names. In addition, we'd like to thank our colleagues at Coppin State University; Presbyterian College; University College Dublin; the University of Maryland, Baltimore County; and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke for organizing and hosting student focus groups, and we thank the participating students for their insights.

We are also indebted to a dedicated and professional production team for turning our analysis into a product that makes the proverbial ECAR "thump" on the table (and its virtual equivalent online!). ECAR Fellow Toby Sitko coordinated our study production with the skill, grace, and good humor that she brings to so many ECAR projects. We also thank Gregory Dobbin, EDUCAUSE's editor and project manager, and Nancy Hays, publishing operations manager, for editing the manuscript and managing the many details that brought this study to life.

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