

More college students rely exclusively on cell phones

by Brenda Rios
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When Michigan State University junior Joe Romo lived in an East Lansing house with four roommates last year, he realized no one ever used the home phone because everyone had their own cellular phones.

This year, Romo and his roommates have joined the growing ranks of college students who have abandoned a wired home phone to save themselves money, confusion and hassles.

"The home line is an extra cost we don't really need," said Romo, a 20-year-old graphic design student from Trenton, Mich.

Romo figures he saves about \$12 a month by not having a phone line at home. And that doesn't include his savings in long-distance charges, which can vary depending on how many calls are made.

Like with many wireless phone plans on the market, Romo's service, which is part of his parents' family plan, includes long-distance calls.

The Federal Communications Commission reports that nationwide, 61 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds carry cellular phones.

Because so many college-aged people have cellular phones, not having a home phone line makes sense.

But colleges that make money from students using phones in their dorm rooms are feeling the pinch.

Both MSU and the University of Michigan say they have seen a significant drop in phone use in the dorms — largely as a result of increased use of cell phones. Neither university would say how much money they've lost as a result of the drop in calls from dorm phones.

Both universities include local phone service with cost of room and board at the dorms. MSU charges 7 cents per minute for long-distance calls, while U-M charges 6 or 7 cents a minute, depending on the time of day.

Tom Koch, MSU housing administrator, said 90 percent of students on campus were using the university's long-distance service 10 years ago. As of 2001, about 35 percent of the students who live on campus were using the service, he said.

Meanwhile, students at U-M's campus used nearly 43 percent fewer long-distance minutes last year. From July 2000 to June 2001, students living in the dorms used 11.9 million long-distance minutes. The following year, they used 6.8 million minutes.

"We expect this sort of trend to continue," said Andy Palms, director of information technology at U-M, in Ann Arbor. A university survey found that 70 percent of students had mobile phones, he said.

Palms said the university might consider removing phones from dorm rooms in the future if the rate of cell phone use rises and the technology for mobile 911 service is perfected.

Koch said an agreement with AT&T Corp. prevents

him from saying how much the university makes on students' long-distance calls. AT&T provides the service, but gives the university a commission for the calls. That commission is used to keep room and board rates down, Koch said.

AT&T spokesman Mike Pruy said the company launched unlimited long-distance plans to keep customers from dropping their home phones in favor of cell phones. Pruy said AT&T, which also has contracts with Michigan Technological University in Houghton and Lake Superior State University in Sault Ste. Marie, has seen a drop in long-distance use by college students, but he didn't have exact numbers.

Other schools across the country have lost hundreds of thousands of dollars from students who are turning away from campus phones and reaching for their cell phones instead.

The University of California-Santa Barbara lost \$500,000 in the last two years. Billing for campus calls at the University of Rhode Island dropped from \$800,000 a year five years ago to just \$100,000 in the 2001-02 school year, according to the Washington Post. But cost is just one reason students are getting rid of traditional phone service at home, students say.

For students who change dorms or apartments every year, it's more convenient to have just one phone number they can keep from their first day as a freshman until the day they graduate.

"Having to change your number every year can be annoying to students," said Michelle Gilbert, a Verizon Wireless spokeswoman.

Gilbert said that using a wireless phone allows students to rid themselves of the hassles of dividing up phone bills and waiting for roommates to get off the phone.

"Some of these things make it more viable for students than other people," Gilbert said.

But the number of people in all age groups going wireless is growing nationally. The FCC estimates that 3 percent to 5 percent of the country's 129 million wireless subscribers use cell phones as their main or only phone.

Kimberly Iott, who manages eight Sprint PCS stores, including one near Ann Arbor, said that she began to see students relying more heavily on cell phones about four years ago when rates began dropping.

Iott said usually she begins to see college students and their parents coming into stores in August just before the school year starts.

"They typically sign up for a family plan, which is more economical," Iott said.

Family plans, which usually start around \$50 for at least two phones, allow parents to have one calling plan for parents and children.

Parents can get their college children numbers local numbers so they can avoid paying long-distance calls to keep in touch, Iott said. Iott and Gilbert said students will generally buy plans that cost about \$35 to \$40 a month.

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