

To online or not to online

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In any college student's perfect world, no one would have any obligations aside from their studies. Unfortunately, the majority of college students have more pressure on them than papers and finals. Many can relate to the demands of jobs, bills, clubs, sports, and families. Registering for online courses may be a way to alleviate part of the stress associated with attending traditional classes.

Erik Steigler, IST, junior at Penn State Harrisburg, is committed to registering for as many online courses as possible to fulfill his required general education courses. Steigler has taken 7 courses through the E-Learning Cooperative system, the system provided by University Park through which these online courses are offered. The professors teaching these courses are also generally based at University Park. Courses through E-Learning usually weigh in at about the same price financially as a traditional class.

"I really like how I can work at my own pace. I can get online and go through my lesson plan when I have the time," Steigler said, "whether it's at 3 o'clock in the afternoon or 3 o'clock in the morning." He then added with a laugh, "Plus, when you take classes online, you don't have to listen to your professor go off on tangents and drag on and on about irrelevant stuff."

Enrolling in courses through E-Learning may be a viable solution for those among us who are chronic "class skippers," because online courses usually have no daily attendance. Dr. Jerrold Maddox, a professor at University Park who taught the first web-based course ever, described how attendance affects his students, "[There is] No attendance policy - they are judged on the basis of their work." Maddox, a pioneer of online instruction, has been teaching online courses since the spring semester of 1995.

Being the experienced online student that he is, Steigler explained that in an online course, each student takes a lesson, and then completes a quiz at the end of each lesson. Many of the courses are taken through Angel, which tracks each of these students' online activities. This is usually the only form in which attendance is taken.

When it comes to the flexibility online courses provide, Eric Liskow agrees with Steigler, "Online courses are nice because they aren't as time consuming as regular set classes. I can finish an entire week's worth of

classes in three hours." Liskow is a junior majoring in Computer Science. He is currently enrolled in his first online course, "Material Science."

Students aren't the only people who appreciate how accommodating these courses are to their personal schedules. Dr. Jonathan Mathews, also a professor at University Park who teaches both traditional and online courses, enjoys this perk of E-Learning. "After a rough week, I enjoy the flexibility I get from teaching online. In the last few years, I have been teaching the class [EGEE 101 Energy & the Environment] while away for a week or two in England, South Africa, Japan, and many locations within the U.S." Mathews has been teaching online courses for three years and "was until recently the largest enrolling WEB class at Penn State."

As agreeable as they may sound, online courses do have their drawbacks. A major aspect missing from these courses is any real human contact. Students admit they miss the interaction included in traditional classroom settings, which is often a key factor in learning. Consistently left without the responses and questions posed by others in a class, these students usually learn through only their own reactions to material. There is a lesser flow of ideas to utilize. Liskow acknowledged there are discussion boards that students can use to communicate with each other, but the boards are usually chats based on topics aside from the core of the class.

Steigler also explained just how strange it is when one cannot actually see who else is in the same class. He recalled a time when he had to come on campus at PSH to take a test for one of his online courses. "It was weird, because I didn't know who to expect when I showed up where our test was being held. The funny thing was, there were six other people from our campus enrolled in the class who were supposed to be there with me. Nobody showed up for the test but me."

Most online courses are aided with video and audio supplements. Mathews described his way of drawing students' interest to class material, "I strive to have a personal presence online and to make the experience interactive rather than a passive experience. In my lesson introduction movies I do donuts in the car park, climb out my car window (homage to Dukes of Hazard), get thrown in jail, and generally have lots of fun!"

Because of the pictures and videos included, many of the

students are able to put a face to the e-mail address with which they correspond; however, this does not necessarily satisfy the need to be acquainted with their professors. Both Steigler and Liskow agreed that although they have generally had pleasant experiences with the E-Learning system, they wish they could get to know their professors and they each feel they are nothing more than just an e-mail address to their professor. Often, the actual professor of a course is not the person checking and grading assignments; rather, it is a teacher's assistant who gives feedback on assignments.

Not only do students desire more personal feedback from professors, they feel that actual human contact would provide far more insight in most courses. Steigler described two courses he took in which he felt getting to know the professors would have enhanced his experience. He took both "Ukrainian Culture and Civilization" and "Russian Culture and Civilization." The professors instructing the courses were actually from the countries whose culture they were teaching. Steigler explained, "Getting to know each of these professors could have added to their classes, because they're from the places they're teaching you about. They've experienced the culture themselves. It could have provided us with an even better understanding of the material."

Also, according to Steigler, online courses "are not cruise courses." Those enrolled in online courses may not need to get dressed and go to class; however, these courses may require more self-discipline than ordinary classes. Students must take the initiative to complete each lesson plan on their own, before an established deadline.

Mathews explained how he motivates his students. "They do submissions before and at the end of each lesson so I know when they start and finish. I have lots of procrastinators, but I also remind them they have items due and jokingly threaten to call their mother."

Other shortcomings of the E-Learning system include a lack of consistency in teaching styles and the sheer fact that the system is technologically based. Liskow explained that he accidentally took a test before he was ready because the link was set up incorrectly. He meant to take a practice test, but the link he clicked on took him straight to the real test. The pressure was on for Liskow, as with no way out of his misfortune, he was trapped into taking the actual test that was set

on a timer (most tests for online courses are timed) before he felt fully prepared. He felt that if there were a standardized way for professors to set up their online courses, situations like this could be avoided.

Steigler expressed the wish for more professors to offer online courses. He said, "Once you get through your gen. ed. courses, you are extremely limited in the online courses you can take. There are no IST courses offered online at PSH." However, he did add that talking to an advisor could be a way to schedule online courses not offered by PSH. When asked what could be done to encourage more professors to instruct online courses, Maddox answered, "I don't know - most [professors] don't like the idea."

In contrast to Maddox, Mathews seemed to be optimistic about the support of E-Learning by the university. "It [E-Learning] needs to be better integrated into the fabric and reward system of the university. We are moving in that direction."

Whether or not a student likes the idea of becoming acquainted with E-Learning, Mathews indicated that it is an essential detail in the future of each student in his field, "It is a desire that all the College of Earth and Mineral Sciences students have a quality online experience to better prepare our students for life long learning." Both Steigler and Liskow also recommend online courses to anyone who has a difficult time fitting set class times into their schedules. This would be especially convenient for students who maintain a full-time job - whether it be in an office, running a household, caring for children, or any combination.

With all the advantages and disadvantages laid out, a vital question remains: how high are the grades of students in online courses as compared with those of traditional classes? It turns out, students fare about the same as they would in any other kind of class. "Good students do as well or better, poor students (C average and below) do worse," said Mathews.

However, a student who maintains a "C" average in traditional classes shouldn't eliminate E-Learning from their future schedules for fear of a low grade. Each kind of learning presents some benefit to students, and E-Learning is no different. Mathews summed up the E-Learning experience in two words, "Flexibility and professionalism," and then added, "Plus my wit and wisdom - complete with English accent."

Down with dial-up

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Recent research at Penn State Harrisburg by the IIT department to determine how many of the current dial-up modems on campus could be eliminated has created a project led by IT director Robert Brinkley. The research has shown that only about half of the ancient hardware is used at any given time throughout the year, with most activity occurring during everybody's favorite times of the year, midterms and finals week.

Currently, there are 142 dial-up modems on campus; this project aims to disconnect 48 of them as soon as possible. The University is billed \$23,628 annually by the phone company, whether the modems are used or not. The project when completed will save the University about \$11,700 in phone bills.

Dial-up modems are used by students to connect from off campus locations to the PSH network, allowing access to all the features available from any campus computer. However, with technology constantly changing and improving, dial-up has become a thing of the past. Students now have a number of options how to connect to

to the decline of dial-up modem use. Both cable and DSL are roughly 50 times faster than a 28.8K modem, on average.

Even with the amount of modems being disconnected, students should still see no more than two to three busy signals at the most active time of year. The few, if any, busy signals are greatly overshadowed by the benefit that will come from the money saved.

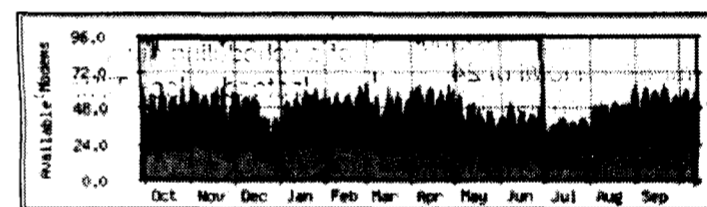
"We want the most students to benefit from this, as much as possible," said Brinkley

"the savings will be used other places around the campus on the IT infrastructure". Brinkley encourages students to visit the Information Technology Fee website to see a complete breakdown of where your IT dollars go, and also remind students that they always have a say in where exactly the money goes,

by contacting their representative for the information systems and technology committee (ISTC).

As the Harrisburg campus continues its leadership role with this initiative to disconnect unused modems, Brinkley plans to eliminate more modems in the future as fewer and fewer are being used, but will never eliminate all of them. "There will always be a need for a few" said Brinkley.

"The savings will be used other places around the campus in the IT infrastructure."
- IT director
Robert Brinkley



Graph courtesy of personal.psu.edu/ryb2

This graph represents how much modem use has declined, with students barely using 72 of the 148 modems provided by PSH.

the school. Students living on campus have a direct link to the 100MB network at PSH, while students living off campus can use dial-up, or newer, faster technologies such as DSL, cable, or even wireless, depending on their proximity to the campus. With better performance, and increasingly lower costs, Brinkley feels most students are opting to use the broadband technologies while off campus, contributing

For more information visit Robert Brinkley's website at <http://www.personal.psu.edu/ryb2>, the IIT website at <http://www.hbg.psu.edu/iit/>, and the Information Technology Fee website at <http://www.hbg.psu.edu/iit/mw1/infotechfeww3.htm>.



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