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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

*Information Technology***E-Mail is for Old People****As students ignore their campus accounts, colleges try new ways of communicating**

By DAN CARNEVALE

Bryn Mawr, Pa.

Maurice Johnson, a freshman studying interior design at Harcum College, spends hours each day online, both for work and play. One thing he rarely does, though, is open his campus e-mail account.

"I check it about every other month," he says.

Moe, as his friends call him, has his own fashion label and regularly corresponds with other designers through his MySpace page. He chats with friends through instant messaging. He also has a few commercial e-mail accounts that he checks daily.

But his Harcum account lies dormant. Not only does he prefer other means of communication, but the college e-mail addresses — created by a combination of a student's first and last names plus part of the student's identification number — are too complicated to give out to friends or to check online. "I don't like the Harcum e-mail," he says. "It's too confusing."

Mr. Johnson is not alone in his disdain for campus e-mail. College officials around the country find that a growing number of students are missing important messages about deadlines, class cancellations, and events sent to them by e-mail because, well, the messages are sent to them by e-mail.

In response, some institutions require that students check their college e-mail accounts so they do not miss announcements, holding students responsible for official information that comes through that medium. Other institutions are attempting to figure out what technology students are using to try to reach them there.

A 2005 report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project called "Teens and Technology" found that teenagers preferred new technology, like instant messaging or text messaging, for talking to friends and use e-mail to communicate with "old people." Along the same lines, students interviewed for this article say they still depend on e-mail to communicate with their professors. But many of the students say they would rather send text messages to friends, to reach them wherever they are, than send e-mail messages that might not be seen until hours later.

Students have not given up on e-mail altogether. In fact, a survey of more than 1,300 students at the University of Illinois at Chicago earlier this year found that 86 percent of them still use campus e-mail regularly. Eszter Hargittai, an assistant professor of communication studies and sociology at Northwestern University who conducted the survey, says students often ignore messages coming from their colleges, considering them a form of spam.

Brian Niles, chief executive officer of TargetX, a company that helps colleges use technology to recruit new students, says colleges need to branch out and find new ways to connect with students.

"It's not that they don't read e-mail," Mr. Niles says. "It's that they have their own world, and you need to know how to reach them in that world."

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'Big Family'

Harcum, a two-year college outside Philadelphia, enrolls about 900 students. It is the type of institution where the college president's wife can be found tending to the plants in front of campus buildings. "Harcum's a very big family," says Lisa A. Mixon, assistant director of public relations and marketing.

Ms. Mixon created the college's MySpace page (<http://myspace.com/harcumcollege>) after she realized that many students were missing important messages. They were paying no attention to the college e-mail newsletter. They were not even showing up for ice-cream socials — and everyone likes ice cream.

It seemed clear that students were not ignoring their MySpace pages, though. Some students here have more than one such page. Some have MySpace pages for their pet snakes.

A key feature of MySpace and other social-networking sites is the ability to link with another user by designating him or her a "friend." Friends are able to send each other messages and announcements, and view pictures and items that are blocked from other users.

After the college put up its site in August, Ms. Mixon searched online for Harcum students with MySpace pages and found more than 200 of them. She contacted the students individually, over the course of a few weeks, and asked each of them to become a friend of the college. So far, more than 160 have said yes.

Joseph J. Diorio, Harcum's director of public relations and marketing, who admits that he relies on Ms. Mixon to keep him "hip," says he finds the online service to be a good way for the college and its students to get to know each other better.

Using MySpace is like "being able to walk into a residence hall and everybody's door is open," says Mr. Diorio. "We knew that's where students were going."

Harcum keeps its MySpace page lively, with photos of students on the campus. Officials have also posted a picture of a cartoon rabbit with the caption: "College prepares you for the real world, which also sucks."

"We thought, What the heck, it's not the official Harcum Web page," Mr. Diorio says.

A student also writes a weekly blog for the college MySpace page. Current blog posts include some complaints about cafeteria food interjected in discussions about forthcoming events. Ms. Mixon plans to invite additional students to write for the blog, letting them vent honestly about anything on their minds. "They like Harcum," she says, "but they'd be honest about things they didn't like."

'Not As Formal'

In addition, the Harcum MySpace page includes dates of important events, such as volleyball games and alumni weekends. It also allows students to pose general questions to college officials, if they are not sure whom they need to talk to. "If they have a question and they can't get to the right person," Ms. Mixon says, "they have someplace to go."

Ashley M. Elliott, a veterinary-technology student in her second year at Harcum, says the Harcum MySpace page shows the college is making an effort to reach students. "It's down to the student's level," she says. "It's not as formal as the Web site."

Becoming MySpace friends with a college may seem lame to some students. But Steven J. Arnone, another veterinary-technology student in his second year at Harcum, wants to convince his classmates that all the cool kids are doing it.

"I'm spreading the word that it's not stupid," Mr. Arnone says. "To be honest, I'm proud. It's like slapping a college sticker on the back of your car."

The MySpace service asks users to rank their friends, which could put Harcum in the awkward position of seeming to play favorites. Ms. Mixon says she picks the college's top friends randomly. "I just keep rotating them," she says.

She says that the college may have a contest to determine who deserves to be listed as Harcum's favorite friend, possibly judging how much school spirit a student displays on his or her MySpace page.

While Harcum has convinced a good portion of its student population to be its friends, some friends are closer than others.

"I'm a friend, but I've never actually been to the site," says Shay Curry, who is in her first year studying early-childhood education at Harcum.

Ms. Curry says she felt obligated to befriend Harcum when the request came in — even though the

invitation did not indicate that it was mandatory to do so.

Matthew J. Roane, a Harcum psychology major who has four e-mail accounts, says he never uses his Harcum account or the college MySpace page. He finds out about announcements and events the old-fashion way — from printed fliers.

Trying Too Hard?

Just because students use new means of communication does not mean that colleges should, however.

Some students at the University of Maryland at College Park, for instance, say they would rather keep talking to professors and campus officials through e-mail.

"I like to separate my personal life from my school life," says Amanda J. Heilman, a freshman studying animal sciences at the university.

Emily Diehl, another freshman majoring in animal sciences, agrees. "It would be weird if all your professors had Facebook," she says.

But even the students who use their campus e-mail accounts will sometimes not open messages that appear to be from the college.

"These students are walking spam filters," says Paul Lehmann, the director of student activities at Utica College. "They are masters of multiple forms of communication and have perfected the skill of cutting through the multiple forms of communication that they are bombarded with to find what they are interested in and want to reply to."

The result, he says, is that no matter how important the message from the college, students will often choose to ignore it.

"Students receive multiple 'official' messages a day, with information that runs the gamut of importance," says Stephanie Dupaul, director of undergraduate business admissions at Southern Methodist University's business school. "A reminder that there is a free movie in the student center on Friday night hits their in boxes with the same level of urgency as an announcement of registration deadlines or changes in official university policies."

Pennsylvania State University has been trying different ways to use technology to reach students, including podcasts, RSS feeds, and Web video clips.

The university's latest attempt is to use cellphone text messaging, by setting up a service that can blast announcements to students using the technology.

Subscribers to the service can let the university know what types of messages they want to receive. Many choose to get updates on emergency announcements, such as school closures, and some also want to be notified about upcoming concerts or sports scores, which are available seconds after a Nittany Lions game has ended.

Bill Mahon, assistant vice president for university relations at Penn State, says many students use text messaging more than e-mail. So administrators expected the plan to be popular with the students.

"We thought maybe in a year we'd get 2,000 people," Mr. Mahon says of the program, which started in August. "As it turns out, in the first three weeks or so we have 1,000 subscribers."

Mr. Mahon says the service will really come in handy in the winter, when snow can create havoc on campus. And the service has already proved useful, he says. Not long ago, a road near the campus was closed because of an oil spill. Penn State officials were able to let subscribers know immediately, so they could plan an alternate route.

"In the old days, we couldn't do that," Mr. Mahon says. "We just let thousands of people drive on that road to find policemen sending them in a different direction."

Not all students want the cell-phone service, he says. It is best to give them many options. "The key is, you can't do just one thing," he says.

Web Portals

Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, a new institution that began enrolling students last year, has already run into difficulties communicating with students.

Because many students do not check their e-mail, officials are creating a Web portal for students. James B. Young, associate vice president for information services at the university, says the portal will be a place that lets students register for courses and find out about upcoming events, and that provides other services.

But, he says, it will be much more informal than the main university Web page. He hopes to put a "youthful edge to it."

"We're brand new and we're pushing habits early," Mr. Young says. "Hopefully MyHU will become an indispensable space."

The University of South Carolina Upstate, on the other hand, is sticking with campus e-mail accounts. Officials have informed students that e-mail is the official means of communication and that they must check it.

In the past, any student could send a message via campus e-mail to the entire student population. Students used the capability to find roommates and for other informal matters, but it also led to many unwanted messages for students.

"So they stopped checking it," says Laura Puckett-Boler, assistant vice chancellor for student and diversity affairs. "They were missing announcements."

So the university set up an electronic newsletter, called E-blast, that is sent out once a week with students' informal announcements and requests. Now only certain administrators can send bulk e-mail.

Despite the requirement, not everybody on the campus uses their university e-mail accounts, she says. But students manage to get by, either by forwarding the information to another account, or just learning what they need to know through friends.

"They're still responsible for the information," Ms. Puckett-Boler says. "Students figure out what to do."

REACHING STUDENTS

As some students reduce their use of e-mail in favor of other means of communication, colleges are trying new technologies to reach them. Among the new techniques:

Cellphone Text Messages

Students live and die by their cellphones. A few colleges now provide information, including snow closures and sports scores, to students instantly, wherever they are.

Instant Messages

Some professors now make themselves available to students via instant-messaging software, especially during office hours. And some admissions counselors use it to answer questions from prospective students faster, and through a medium in which many students are most comfortable.

MySpace and Facebook

Some colleges have begun using the popular social-networking services to provide information to their students, including calendars of events, deadlines, and other announcements. College officials also use the services to present a lighter side of an institution something different from the stuffy main Web page.

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