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North Carolina State University

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SHORT PIECES

NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

JOHN WALL

For the past two years, the University Honors Program at NC State has co-sponsored with the College of Engineering a wireless laptop program. Incoming students in the Honors Program are offered the opportunity to purchase specially-configured and specially-priced laptop computers with wireless cards. Students then enroll in Honors seminars and other classes that meet in rooms with wireless access to the Internet. In the first year of this program, about 40 students participated. This year the number of participants has almost doubled.

The program is viewed as a pilot, with potential for expansion across the campus. NC State does not have a laptop or computer requirement at the moment. We believe that before we ask students to invest in computers we should understand how to make them worthwhile for the educational mission of the institution. The Honors/Engineering Pilot Program is a way to discover whether and how the use of computers in the classroom can enhance learning.

So far, the experience has been both exhilarating and daunting. With this equipment, students and faculty can have full and fast Internet access without wires, cables, or cords. Battery life for the laptops is easily long enough to accommodate a two-hour seminar class. Communication among students and faculty is also greatly enhanced, with message boards, chat rooms, and other forms of electronic connection making it possible to continue class discussion outside the bounds of the regular schedule.

The challenge for faculty has been to discover ways of taking advantage of this technology in the classroom. Technology has affected both course content and class process. Students communicate with the teacher and with each other, submit assignments, and make class presentations using their computers. Faculty make assignments, respond to student work, and receive feedback from students on the progress of the course. Assignments take advantage of streaming audio and video as well as text-based communication.

In the area of content, faculty use electronic syllabuses, making assignments that are linked when possible to on-line databases. Classes explore computing resources in computer-assisted design and mapping. One faculty member in Freshman Composition had students read a hypertext novel, exploring this new form of fiction. Other faculty find they can dispense with textbooks because of the availability of on-line course materials. Faculty have come to rely on the availability of information during class; issues that come up in class discussion can be researched and explored on the spot rather than being deferred to later classes.

Overall, we believe this program is very successful; we plan to expand it further.

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