

College Campuses Get Social

Social-Networking Services on Cell Phones Keep Students and Faculty Connected

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The college campus of the future will offer students a way to know what's happening across their school in real time at any time.

From finding out about canceled classes and updated homework assignments, to pinpointing a friend's location on campus, students will know what's happening — and not happening — where and when.

With 15 colleges and universities in the United States offering their students a new service that achieves all of those goals and more, the future is now.

Rave Wireless is a company that's created a number of cell phone applications that connect students to their campuses, their teachers,

and even campus security through the phenomenon of social networking and the ubiquity of cell phones.

"The idea that you could use the phones to reach the students with assignment changes, to conduct online chats, get higher levels of communication — it tested very well," said Ed Chapel, associate vice president for information technology at New Jersey's Montclair State University, one of the participating schools.

"The faculty, students, staff and parents alike are very enthusiastic about all of the features that the program offers," Chapel said.

For a generation that has grown up communicating via e-mail, instant message, cell phone texting, and through Web sites like Facebook and MySpace, the service and others like it are a natural fit.

Freshmen of the Future

For many college freshmen, their first year at school signals their first time away from home.

Stepping out of high school and into college life can be overwhelming for some, but the people behind Rave say they have a way to make that transition a bit easier.

"Rave puts the campus on the phone," said Rodger Desai, CEO of Rave Wireless. "Today, it's all about having access to information. If you don't know what's going on, no one's going to tell you."

Desai says that the service reinforces a sense of community among students.

Big party Saturday night? Let everyone on campus know by sending out an invitation to the whole school.

Wandering around campus a little lost? Access a global positioning system map that will tell you the name of each building and what classes are taught there.

“This species of student is hyper-communicative, and this technology facilitates it,” Chapel said. “When the new students came to school last fall and this fall, the idea that they could build groups and could send text messages and invite people to join social networks — it was a true integration.”

Tools like those, Chapel said, are not only making campus life easier for students, but they are also giving them an education in what life in the “real world” is like, too.

With BlackBerrys, handheld PCs and inescapable communications, the modern businessperson is just as connected as the students studying to replace them.

“These tools will be pervasive beyond the scope of higher education,” Chapel said. “You see it making its way into K-12 and making its way into other social groups. I believe that these tools are preparing students for their professional lives.”

Keeping Your Guardian Up

Aside from the social networking abilities of the Rave Wireless system, the company’s Rave Guardian system gives faculty, students and parents some peace of mind.

A student alone and passing through campus late at night, for example, can turn on a timer that, if not deactivated within a given amount of time, will alert campus security that there could be a problem.

Because the phones used by Rave are GPS-enabled, security can see where the student was last and move quickly to make sure everything is OK.

“We now have the ability to know when things are going awry, and it doesn’t have to be a crime but it could be a medical issue,” Chapel said. “As an institution, it gives us peace of mind.”

Chapel says he’s also impressed with Rave’s Entourage component, which lets students set up a list of their friends and enables them to see where they are on campus.

Social Networking = Ego Stroking?

Though Rave has tapped into a way to bring the social-networking experience to college campuses, it’s not the only one tapping into the power of connectivity through cell phones.

AirG provides mobile-phone users with software that keeps them connected to each other and to the more than 10 million registered users in the community at large.

“Connection is what we’re born for,” said Frederick Ghahramani, director and co-founder of AirG. “We’re all needy. We all want attention. We all want to be loved.”

Ghahramani says that the company originally started as an online gaming company but found that players were spending so much time using the game to communicate with each other, that it decided to ditch the game and focus on the communication.

“I think the underlying reason this works is that human need for approval,” he said. “It’s just like when a peacock shows off their feathers.”

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