Information Technology in the News

STUDENTS AT A BRITISH UNIVERSITY OPPOSE LAPTOP REQUIREMENT

Officials at the University of Warwick in Great Britain are discussing a plan that would require incoming freshmen to purchase laptops. The plan would take effect with the 2003 freshman class. However, Warwick student leaders have already begun raising doubts about the plan, focusing on the cost students would have to pay. The president of Warwick's student union, Caitlin McKenzie, says many students may not be able to afford laptops, even if the university provides some assistance. “We do not believe any assistance offered will be enough and that parents will suggest to their children that they should look at alternative universities,” she says. McKenzie also questions the wisdom of having so many laptops on campus, as it could pose a serious threat of theft. In addition, she wonders if educators will be prepared to provide course content online, a key part of Warwick's plan. McKenzie and students from Warwick and other U.K. schools will protest the plan as part of a general demonstration against fees. Warwick officials would not comment on the plan directly but said they believe that nearly 70 percent of the university's student body already have computers. (Chronicle of Higher Education Online)

SOFTWARE TRIES “CONCEPT MAPPING”

New concept-mapping software is available for free-download from the University of Florida's Institute for Human and Machine Cognition. Researchers at the institute are working to make computers easier to use, exactly the theory behind concept mapping, which links information in a direct and understandable way. The researchers expect that concept maps, or Cmaps, will help change the information navigation on Web sites by providing a graphical depiction of how that information is linked and organized rather than by following the traditional method of organizing information page by page. Funded by NASA and the U.S. Navy as part of a larger project to create similar learning tools, the software is among the best Cmap programs available, claims Barry Brosch of Cincom, a commercial firm negotiating a software license from the University of Florida. Having already made the software available for nonprofit use, the institute is still in the process of deciding how it wants to offer it for commercial application. (Associated Press)

RX FOR LEARNING

Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston is earning rave reviews for its new Health Sciences Database. The Knowledge Management (KM) system has brought much of the school's curriculum online, allowing students to study and review a vast amount of course material that in the past was available only in professors' slide carousels and lecture notes. Tufts began work on the database in the late 1980s, receiving support and funding from the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the American Association of Medical Colleges. After meeting with faculty and students, officials decided to create a digital image library based on content from professors' courses. Officials say persuading professors to give up this material—and to accept that they were not going to be replaced by computers—was perhaps the most difficult aspect of putting the plan into action. The site launched in 1997 and added content from Tufts' dental and veterinary schools in 1999. Now, the database contains about 70 percent of the medical school's curriculum content. Although there has been no formal evaluation of the success of the database, students and faculty seem to be impressed. (CIO)

“ETHICS BOWL” TAKES A HIGH-TECH TURN

Students from fifteen Virginia universities recently competed in an
**Tech Watch**

**Publishing Industry Aims To Establish Web Presence Without Getting “Blindsided”**

Even as literary publishers have created a new niche for themselves on the Internet, they have had to confront the traditional problems of piracy and hackers. Publishers are carefully laying the ground rules for their e-book Internet operations and keeping a wary eye on the potential for piracy. “We want to deal with issues like intellectual property from day one, rather than try to get it back in the box after it is too late,” says Pat Schroeder, CEO of the American Association of Publishers. Ignoring the potential market value of the Internet is not an option for publishers; the new technology has motivated them to develop different consumer goods based on content they already own. By starting with an unblemished record, unlike the music industry, literary publishers may well set the standard for online consumer interaction. Digital Goods CEO Scott Griffith says the publishing industry is facing the Internet and e-book business with its priorities straight. “First you take care of your security and you protect your intellectual property” by constructing a well-designed digital rights management system. After that, “you can go out and really sell.” (Boston Globe)

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“Ethics Bowl” on prominent high-tech issues. Tech executives, professors, lawyers, and others asked teams of university students for their ethical position on a series of high-tech scenarios and then questioned the teams about those positions. The scenarios included university-specific issues, such as old term papers available on the Internet or Web sites that allow students to make unfounded accusations against professors, to more general tech issues, such as how Web sites make use of consumer data they have collected. Many of the students who participated say the issues facing the Internet generation are no more or less complicated than those older generations have faced. The Internet has only made it easier to encounter the issues. Many university officials at the Ethics Bowl say students must learn from kindergarten all the way through college that just because technology makes it easier to cheat and commit other unethical acts, it does not follow that such actions are acceptable. (Washington Post)

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**Some Professors Allow Students to Take Exams on Laptops**

Many university professors are weighing the pros and cons of giving exams for students to take on laptops. A number of technological concerns plague the practice, not the least of which is the ability to monitor cheating and making sure the hardware functions properly. Joel M. Smith, director for Carnegie Mellon’s Office of Technology for Education, says professors often use computers to prepare their students for class but adds, “You really worry about the systems being reliable and robust.” Some software solutions address both security and reliability worries. ExamSoft is software that restricts students’ access to information on their hard drive or network, should they be connected. Securexam is another program that keeps users’ exams safe during test-taking, even if their computers freeze. (Chronicle of Higher Education)

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