As a friend’s ten-year-old daughter was carpooling in an older automobile, the temperature outside was scorching. The family’s ten-year-old daughter wanted to put the window down. After staring blankly at the door, she pointed to the manual crank handle and blurted, “What is that?” Power windows were all she knew.

She is among the ninety-million-plus children, teenagers, and adults born since 1980. For them, digital technology is a natural part of their existence. They have never known life without twenty-four-hour news; personal computers; UPC symbols, microwaves, CDs, VCRs, or the Internet. Acquainted to online encyclopedias, instant messaging, Internet shopping, and a host of other easily accessed services, this generation possesses decidedly different attitudes and behaviors from those of any generation that has come before—a fact that should have those of us in higher education asking ourselves how well colleges and universities and their communities are meeting the growing expectations of this “plug-and-play” generation.

Students in this generation demand constant connectivity. The Federal Communications Commission estimates that 69 percent of all American households now use the Internet, with more than 700 new households added every hour, and virtually all U.S. classrooms are connected to the Internet today, compared with less than 3 percent in 1995.1 In the most recent national survey of entering college freshmen, 96 percent of all college freshmen, a record 84 percent said they were frequent computer users.2 Those who staff academic libraries can probably confirm that students prefer to “Ask Jeeves” rather than seek the services of a librarian. In fact, the majority of students don’t go to the library to read or study. In a national survey of second-year students, only 26 percent said they went to the library for these purposes; 78 percent said they frequently searched the Web for course-related information.3 A consequence of students’ elevated expectations is that colleges and universities need to adopt a more student-centered approach. As a learning community, we in higher education must put our students and their development at the heart of all we do. Technology can help us accomplish this goal. It not only allows students to customize their learning options but also permits us to structure our online services, giving students more control over their educational experience and providing them with the 24/7 environment they seek.

Like bats, owls, and vampires, students are creatures of the night. They avoid early-morning hours if they can. They steer clear of 8 a.m. classes, have meetings in the evenings, populate the fitness centers at 10 p.m., keep pizza deliveries going past midnight, and send e-mails at 1 a.m. Every year, I spend some time in the residence halls, roaming for an evening with incoming freshmen. It’s part of the way I keep in touch with students. And over the years, I have learned a lot about their lifestyles and expectations. Borrowing from this ritual at Penn State about eight years ago, and it was in this first year that I discovered that students’ expectations for social activities increase as the clock moves closer to midnight. I had just finished boring about a dozen young men with magic tricks when, at 11 p.m., one of them asked, “So, what should we do now?” The clock meant little to these students, who were gearing up for the evening.

If we can recognize that the social life of students picks up significantly as the clock ticks forward, why haven’t we noticed that other aspects of their lives also follow low nighttime schedules? Why do we persist in running colleges and universities on an 8-to-5 schedule tailored to those staffing our offices and teaching our classes rather than to those using our services and taking our courses? Our institutions are meeting the growing expectations of students—an increasing number of opportunities for advancing their education, alternative, will be residents on campus but will spend more of their time learning in higher education. For students, it means becoming more responsible for their own education and initiating many of the interactions and transactions that were previously passive occurrences. Perhaps most important, becoming a more student-centered college or university means many unresolved challenges, among them the need for an IT infrastructure that can support the educational experiences of students—however they are, whatever they need, and whenever they need it, day or night.

Most institutions have already made substantial progress in the area of student services, offering registration, financial aid information, and academic advising online, for example. A bonus of these changes has been increased efficiency. Other institutions are lagging in the e-services arena when compared with the business world, where students are accustomed to easily and securely accessing information and completing transactions online. Instituting e-services must be done as part of a broader strategy that improves the relationship we have with our students. We need to ask ourselves if our services are really student-centered or if they have arisen simply as a result of the needs of administrative offices. Do the e-services connect students more fully to the learning community?

Albert Einstein once defined insanity as “the belief that you can get different results by doing the same thing over and over.” For decades, American higher education has performed well the same thing over and over, following Einstein’s theory, but technology has dramatically changed the playing field. It has touched all of the critical processes of the college and university, from teaching and research to administration and student life, and we must respond accordingly. It’s time to rethink our organizations, from the services we offer to our methods of instruction, so that they better meet the expectations and educational needs of our students—an increasing number of whom will pursue these opportunities for advancing their education, teaching and learning, but we must choose the educational technologies that best support and inspire learners of all kinds. For faculty members, it means embracing the use of technology as a creative tool for instruction and collaborative learning. For students, it means becoming more responsible for their own education and initiating many of the interactions and transactions that were previously passive occurrences.

Notes
4. Presentation by George Kim at the First-Year Experience National Conference, February 19, 2002. This presentation was based on the College Student Experiences Questionnaire—<http://www.indiana.edu/~coep>.