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Community and Technology

by Skip Trudeau, Ed.D., and André Broquard

INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities, e-mentoring, electronic personalities and social computing are all terms that are used in conjunction with modern college campus communities. New and emerging technologies have transformed the teaching/learning process on many campuses at an alarming rate. But at what cost? There is some indication that the advent of new technology has outpaced policy considerations as to how the use of these new technologies has impacted the campus community. Gregory Blimling, Vice Chancellor for student development at Appalachian State University and editor of the *Journal of College Student Development* had this to say about this phenomenon:

Technology is not a new issue for anyone in higher education. Those of us who work with student programs and services outside the classroom may have come late to the conversation, but when the clamor from students and others grew loud enough, we entered the world of technology with gusto—only to discover that we were running hard to catch a train that was pulling farther and farther ahead of us. (2000, p. 3)

What Blimling seems to be implying is that the race to stay cutting edge in terms of keeping up with technological advances may have created a classic tail wagging the dog scenario in which potentially profound changes are occurring to campus communities in a vacuum of policy considerations.

The purpose of this article is to begin a dialogue on how technology has impacted community at Christian colleges. There are two underlying assumptions that serve as a context for this paper. First, community is a fundamental concept for Christian college campuses. Second, technology has dramatically changed all of higher education. This paper does not represent basic or original research, rather the authors reviewed and

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analyzed current literature in order to generate a dialogue concerning the impact of technology on community as well as make some recommendations for future discussion. This article is organized as follows: a development of the two underlying assumptions, a development of an operational definition of community from a Christian college perspective, a discussion of the impact of technology on Christian college community, and finally some suggested recommendations for Christian college student affairs practitioners.

The Underlying Assumptions

Assumption One: Community is a fundamental concept for Christian colleges. The small private Christian college has long been associated with a caring and nurturing campus climate. This atmosphere can be thought of as a sense of community where participants have shared experiences, similar values, and where students are exposed to Christian nurturing and care by faculty, staff and administration. A more detailed definition of community is developed later in this article.

This notion of community has a rich history in higher education as a whole. The earliest colleges founded in the United States existed as small living and learning communities where faculty and students lived and studied together in pursuit of a largely religious agenda (Brubacher and Rudy, 1958; Rudolph, 1962). The way we think about campus communities has changed over the 350 plus years of American higher education but the concept is still important to the modern day campus. Even at large research institutions administrators and faculty are still interested in developing learning communities where the benefits of students and faculty living in proximity to one another is maximized (Blimling, 2000).

The creation, support and maintenance of a nurturing community is likely more critical to Christian colleges. This sense of community is one of the major reasons why students choose to attend Christian colleges and parents support this choice (Holmes, 1987; Winston, 2000). Arthur Holmes in his seminal book *The Idea of the Christian College* that was first published in 1975 devoted an entire chapter to the importance of community to Christian colleges. A simple review of the admissions literature from the average Christian college will reveal each college campus desires a strong sense of cohesion and unity. The ethos of the campus is one of the first criteria that prospective students notice and a measure of how current students rate their experience. Community on the college campus is fragile and must be intentionally developed and enhanced by students, faculty and staff.

Assumption Two: Technology has dramatically changed higher education. There can be little doubt about the huge impact of technology on our lives. Computer based innovations have impacted nearly every area of our daily existence. The way we communicate, conduct business, entertain ourselves, provide healthcare, and on and on, has and will continue to change as new technologies emerge to replace the new technologies that were just put into service a short while ago. In purely economic terms the computer associated impact on our national marketplace is measured in billions of dollars on an annual basis (Dryer and Eisbach, 1999). Education has not been immune to this technological phenomenon.

The face of higher education is in the process of dramatic change. The students

coming to our campuses are different, the way they learn is different and the teaching tools, thanks in large part to emerging technologies, available to educators are different. Few could have predicted how the advent of the computer and other technological advances would impact education in general and higher education in particular. Approximately one half of all college courses offered utilize some form of computer technology and one million students took online courses in 1999 (Howard, 2000). The traditional classroom with a professor lecturing to students face to face is being challenged by virtual experiences which utilize tools such as Mentoring, asynchronous and synchronous discussions, computer mediated communications (CMC), computer supported cooperative work (CSCW) and multi-user domains or MUDS.

The rapid onslaught of technology has been experienced across the spectrum of institutional types from large public universities to smaller private schools. Many traditionally church-related institutions have joined in the technology race by utilizing computer based instructional aides and online course offerings (Winston, 2000). The need for cutting edge technology transcends institutional type and size and is a major player in terms of its importance to the success of any college or university.

Before turning to the discussion of the impact of technology on the Christian college communities it seems appropriate to attempt to operationally define what we are talking about. This is no easy task as defining community is a little like trying to define the wind. It can't be seen or held and it differs in intensity and frequency based on geographical location, but you definitely know its there.

A Definition of Community on the Christian campus?

With the escalating growth of technology, the definition of community has become very broad. Two CEO's of large omnipresent Internet companies: Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com and Steve Case of America Online (AOL) both claim that they are about building community. Bezos says that community is "neighbors helping neighbors" and that Amazon.com is about providing the opportunity for people around the world to help others. Case claims that AOL is not only a moneymaking enterprise but is in the business of reviving community (D'Souza, 2000). While these interpretations of community can be the starting point it is not what should be expected on a Christian campus. The level of "community" that exists between "shoppers" or entertainment seekers of Amazon.com or AOL does not suffice our institutions.

Another definition of community that has come about in our research is based upon shared values and ideas. A community is built of persons having common interests and desires. Whatever the value, idea or ideal, scholarly research or maybe the study of the fine arts for example, the coming together of persons in this mutual purpose is community. Learning communities ... are groups of individuals who come together based on personal decisions and shared interests to support and encourage each other in the educational process (Kowch & Schwier, 1997). This definition of community at first read is not far off what is happening at many Christian liberal arts institutions.

However, there are some glaring shortcomings. First, there is no mention of geographic location of the individuals within the definition. This is done for the purpose of expanding the possible influences that a student can experience which theoretically provides the opportunity for students to develop learning communities around the

state, nation and world. The other issue missed in this definition is the recognition that one of the benefits of community is that we learn most from those with whom we are most different. This being true, the call for “open” communities, where students are permitted to pick and choose individuals with similar interests, is a step backwards. Being able to filter out any person that does not share the communities “ideas and ideals” is not a positive step.

Even though many Christian colleges have a selective admission policy, there is always room for divergent thinking and various points of view. One of the greatest lessons of college is learning from and through a roommate or floor-mate. These sometimes-involuntary relationships are most instrumental for self-discovery and understanding the human experience. If a community is homogeneous by choice the richness of learning and growth will be limited and incomplete. Hence the community based solely on shared “ideas and ideal” can scarcely be classified as authentic community in the first place.

If community is more than passing “bits and bytes” of information on the Internet and deeper than shared ideas, then what is it? What is the definition of community as seen from the viewpoint of a Christian liberal arts institution? Steven Garber in the *Fabric of Faithfulness* says, “Community is the context for the growth of convictions and character. What we believe about life and the world becomes plausible as we see it lived out all around us,” (1996, p. 146). It is not something that takes place through Web relations or only with those who share our common thought. Instead, true authentic community involves direct, geographic contact with “real” people sharing not only similar ideas and ideals but also the whole of a person. Steve Bird refers to authentic community as “primary groups.”

Primary groups are collections of people who have consistent and regular interaction that is intimate and face-to-face such that the members of the group come to have a shared identity — they see a clear distinction of who they are as compared to outsiders. The people in our primary groups are the ones we hold near and dear. This is what we normally mean by community on Christian college campuses: close webs of close relationships that build us all up and hold us all accountable. We seek a collection of people who share a common heart and soul (Bird, 2001, p. 7).

Hence, authentic Community on the Christian liberal arts campus will be made up of groups of students with diverse backgrounds and interests who through daily interaction are on a journey through life; discovering, admonishing, discussing, serving, debating, supporting, caring with and for each other in every area of life.

The Impact of Technology on Christian College Community

First and foremost it is important to realize that this is not a question of whether or not technology should be imbedded in education. It is clear that this is a train that has already left the station and there is no stopping it now (Blimling, 2000). Overall, it is obvious that technology has a positive affect on education and higher education

in particular. The use of technology and alternative delivery techniques has allowed many individuals to earn further degrees. Technology has also enhanced students' access to information as they study and research. The overall benefits of technology are not in doubt, but the affects of technology on community need to be discussed and understood.

In the literature reviewed for this paper there are two separate schools of thought on this issue. These differing philosophical views may be best represented by two recent publications. The first is *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon* by Thomas Russell published in 1999 by the Office Instructional Telecommunications at North Carolina State University. This impressive work reviewed a large number of sources concerning the impact and effectiveness of non-traditional educational practices. Russell's basic conclusion was that in essence these practices, including many associated with the use of advanced technology, produce at least similar results as traditional methodology. Phipps and Merisotois (1999) provided a competing view with the publication of *What's the Difference?* These authors pointed to several differences between more traditional educational practices and those associated with advanced technology. One of their basic conclusions was that there is a difference in educational outcomes based on the methodology of delivery. For the purposes of this paper this raises the question of what is the impact of technology on the campus community. There is debate on this issue within the literature with one side saying that community is either not affected or is enhanced by technology (Bennet, 1999; Russel, 1999; Single and Muller, 2000) and the other side pointing to side effects of technology that could appear to erode community (Blimling, 2000; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999).

The authors identified two areas of concern in terms of how technology may be affecting the sense of community on Christian college campuses. We have called these areas interpersonal development and the learning environment. These are rather broad categories and the reader will notice some overlap in the issues under each. The authors also make the assumption that student affairs professionals should be significantly concerned and involved in both. In other words we contend that the learning environment is not the sole domain of teaching faculty but rather hold to the "seamless learning" environment associated with modern learning theory (Kuh, 1996). Conversely, we also contend that the interpersonal development area is also not the sole domain of student affairs but should be a central focus, especially at Christian colleges due to their emphasis on community building, of the entire campus.

There is no questioning that certain technological advances such as email and instant messaging have changed the way persons communicate on college campuses. To be sure these advancements have had numerous beneficial affects on campus communication. We are able to communicate faster, more accurately, more creatively, and have more choices on how to deliver our messages than ever before. Technology has enhanced our ability to "multi task" (Blimiling, 2000) and has encouraged those less likely to engage in personal communication to join the conversation with a sense of privacy and anonymity (Pallof and Pratt, 1999). The benefits are clear but what are the costs to community?

Maybe the greatest pitfall in the advances of technology is the effect of reducing the number of face-to-face interactions for students to students and students to faculty, the very interaction that is a hallmark of the Christian college experience. What

are the potential affects of this lack of face-to-face interactions? Some authors have claimed that there are not negative side effects and that virtual communications and relationships can go through the same stages as traditional face-to-face interactions. Moreover, they can even produce positive side effects such as better conflict management, enhanced ability to provide personal mentoring, and providing extremely introverted or shy students with opportunities to voice their thoughts in ways they have not been able to before (Bennet, 1999; Pallof and Pratt, 1999; Single & Muller, 2000). Other authors have identified some potential negative affects such as loss of intimacy, lack of social engagement, a dehumanizing effect on users, increases in addictive behaviors, an association with increased incidents of depression and the creation of a communication gap between those sophisticated in technology usage and those less adept (Blimling, 2000; Dryer and Eisbach, 1999; Pallof and Pratt, 1999; Wetsit, 1999). These negative effects would appear to serve as detriments to community.

Technology has also had significant impact on the learning environment. No longer is the teaching/learning experience totally dominated by the "sage on the stage" traditional classroom setting. New and emerging delivery systems such as distance education and the virtual classroom have become commonplace in higher education as a whole and they are increasingly becoming part of the landscape in the Christian college sector as well (Winston, 2000). Here again, the benefits of technology are noteworthy. Technology has greatly enhanced access to education to underserved populations, provided far greater access to a wider spectrum of information, aided in the communication between faculty and students outside the traditional classroom, and increased the opportunities for collaborative efforts via virtual and other electronic modes. However, again the question arises as to the cost to the community.

There is also significant disagreement in the literature concerning the affects of technology on learning. On the positive or enhancing side are claims of enhanced personal mentoring between faculty and students, increased collaboration in academic endeavors, and positive assistance in classrooms through media based technology and classroom friendly software applications (Bennet, 1999; Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Single and Muller, 2000). There are, however, potentially negative aspects that have been associated with technology. Here again, the loss of face-to-face contact, primarily between faculty and students but also between students to students, is a primary area concern for educators (Blimling, 2000; Wetsit, 1999). The fear is that the lack of face-to-face interaction associated with virtual delivery cannot produce the same experience as more traditional approaches. A particular concern for those working in the Christian college arena is whether or not schools will be able to transmit their specific religious agenda via virtual means. There is not a lot of evidence either way in answer to this question although there are those who have suggested that it is at least a very difficult way to provide religious values based education (Winston, 2000). A higher drop out rate has also been associated with non-traditional delivery systems (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999), which has an obvious negative impact not only on the learning environment but also on the campus community as a whole.

It is important to remember that we are not suggesting that Christian colleges go through an evaluation process to weigh the advantages of technology versus the negative side effects on the community. Technology is here to stay and any discussion to the contrary is fruitless in light of the market demands of students and their

families (Blimling, 2000). Rather our contention is that student affairs professionals at Christian colleges need to be proactive in the discussions concerning new and emerging technologies and to discover and implement strategies to maximize on the benefits and minimize the dangers to campus communities. In other words, we can't afford to let the train get completely out of sight without giving thoughtful attention to where it is taking us. With this in mind let us turn to some recommendations for how Christian student affairs and professionals can begin to discuss and address technological issues.

Discussion Few Recommendations

While the human inclination is to search for more convenient and faster methods of doing everything, human interaction must not be shortchanged. With the influx of technology, Christian colleges must not allow face-to-face moments to be overtaken by face to monitor connections. "While the relationships we develop on the Web may be useful and entertaining, they are generally too thin and ephemeral to constitute genuine community. The Web can supplement physical community but (*it cannot replace it,*)" (emphasis ours) (D'Souza, 2000, p. 9). Communication technology is undoubtedly helpful, however it must take place within an existing relationship: A relationship that is sustained by regular face-to-face contact. In other words, we are suggesting that a balance be struck between the fast paced development of new and emerging technologies and the continual creation and maintenance of community that is essential for Christian colleges to stay faithful to their heritages and unique niche within higher education. In the interest of achieving this balance, we offer these three recommendations to Christian college student affairs professionals:

1. First we make a clarion call for scholarly research on the relationship between community and technology. The infusion of technology into the college campus is a "delicate and challenging task," (Blimling, Whitt & Associates 1999, p. 165). It is hardly appropriate, or for that matter possible, to ignore technology. There is not a college campus in the nation that has not recognized that the direction of society is going toward more reliance on technology. They must find meaningful ways of identifying and then communicating any concerns that appear. In an academic climate that means research. For the Christian college, it is of utmost importance to fully understand the impact of communication technology on the ethos of the campus and to our thinking it is imperative that student affairs because of their vested interest in campus communities need to be active participants in this type of research.
2. It is imperative for student affairs to participate not only in the assessment process, but also be involved in the policy-making decisions. Decisions to embrace new technologies should not be made without first considering their impact on the campus community. Student affairs personnel at Christian colleges should insist on being at the table when technology decisions are being considered. This will require that the student affairs practitioner become well versed in existing technologies and mindful of advances on the horizon. In short, student affairs staff should not leave technology decisions to those who

work in technology related functions and they must become experts in how technology affects the ethos of the campus community.

3. Student affairs professionals at Christian colleges need to discover ways to use technology to enhance community on their campuses. They need to examine the available technologies and design approaches to their usage that will enhance existing efforts to create and maintain authentic communities.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, we are not advocating any type of competitive or aggressive relationship between emergent technology and campus community. Referring back to the two assumptions at the beginning of this article: One, community is a nonnegotiable for the Christian college and two, technology is dramatically changing the face of higher education. They both can and should exist together on the college campus. However, the objective for student affairs professionals is to discover avenues in which technology can be harnessed to support and enhance the learning environment and interpersonal development on campus. We must find ways to limit the negative impacts that technology has on community and uncover methods of positive integration. Now that we are on the train, we must climb into the conductors seat and take control of the engine.

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