

Tiny Electronic Devices Go to College

The proliferation of shrinking electronic technologies promise big benefits (and big headaches) for college and university administrators.

by Michael Fickes, staff writer

Photo courtesy of Ray Treat, Monroe Community College



At Monroe Community College, part of the State University of New York, a program to use handheld computers to record and track student performance has worked so well that it has been installed for a neighboring K-12 school district and configured for PDAs to evaluate the performance of teachers.

At Monroe Community College, part of the State University of New York (SUNY), the faculty in the Department of Nursing is using handheld computers to record and track student performance as it happens in the field.

At the University of Cincinnati, professors are recording their lectures as delivered and uploading the recording on the course's Website as a podcast — a digital recording of a program of some sort placed on the Internet in a way that makes it easy for interested observers to download the material and play it back on a laptop, desktop or personal audio player.

While portable electronic devices promise great benefits, they may also threaten to wreak havoc. Out

in the private sector, if not somewhere in the college and university network, for example, some health clubs have begun to ask members to leave their cell phones at home. "Our members have complained about the use of cell phones equipped with cameras in locker rooms," says one club attendant. "Members were afraid they might be photographed while showering or dressing."

If it hasn't already happened, sooner or later your campus will need to deal with the promises and the problems of proliferating small electronic devices: from laptops and cell phones to personal digital assistants (PDAs) and smart phones to memory sticks, iPods and MP3 digital audio players.

Promises, Promises

Pamela D. Korte, RN, MS, associate professor of nursing at Monroe Community College in Rochester, N.Y., was accustomed to tracking student performance on tests, papers, classroom performance and clinical performance by hand. "I used a handwritten sheet covering all student skills," she says.

All the handwritten files horrified an instructional designer brought in to help streamline the process. She created a template in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and asked Korte to take it for a test run using a PDA. New to Excel, Korte was stunned by the ease with which she could create and analyze student records. After playing with the system for a few hours, however, she erased the formulas governing the spreadsheet. "I thought I was helping to keep things neat," she explains.

Korte's error led to an innovative color-coded revision to the application. Anything on the computer's

screen that shows up in blue should not be changed. The formulas are now in blue. Faculty inputs, which can be altered, show up in yellow. "So we all remember that blue is bad and yellow is good," Korte says. "It's easy to use. We can teach beginners to use the system in a few hours."

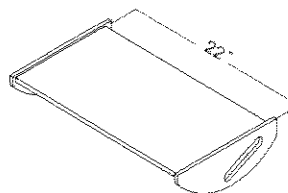
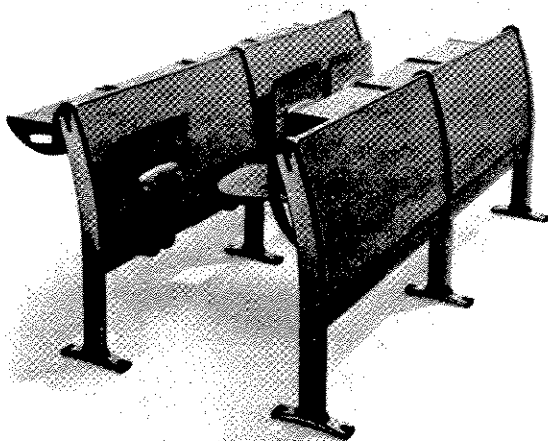
Widespread use promises dramatic increases in productivity. In the past, it has taken about one hour for a professor to carry out a student evaluation. The handheld computer has slashed that time by two-thirds, to just 20 minutes.

The system works so well that Korte's department installed it for a neighboring K-12 school district and configured PDAs to evaluate the performance of teachers. "You can easily convert it to track all kinds of information," Korte says. "You can use the same basic concepts to manage maintenance or food service, for example."

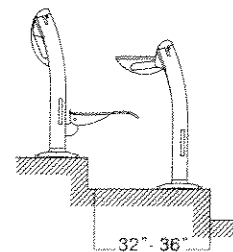
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A PDA (or a handheld computer or laptop) is also a storage device. Korte recently started installing textbooks on PDAs used by faculty and students. "We've put nine textbooks on the system," she says. "In a

clinical setting, the students use the PDA texts to look up information. If someone is not familiar with a particular medication, he or she can look it up in the Whole Drug Book on the PDA. There is also a medical dictionary, a nursing manual, a laboratory diagnostic book, a book about assessing patients, another covering characteristics of diseases and a number of other nursing texts."

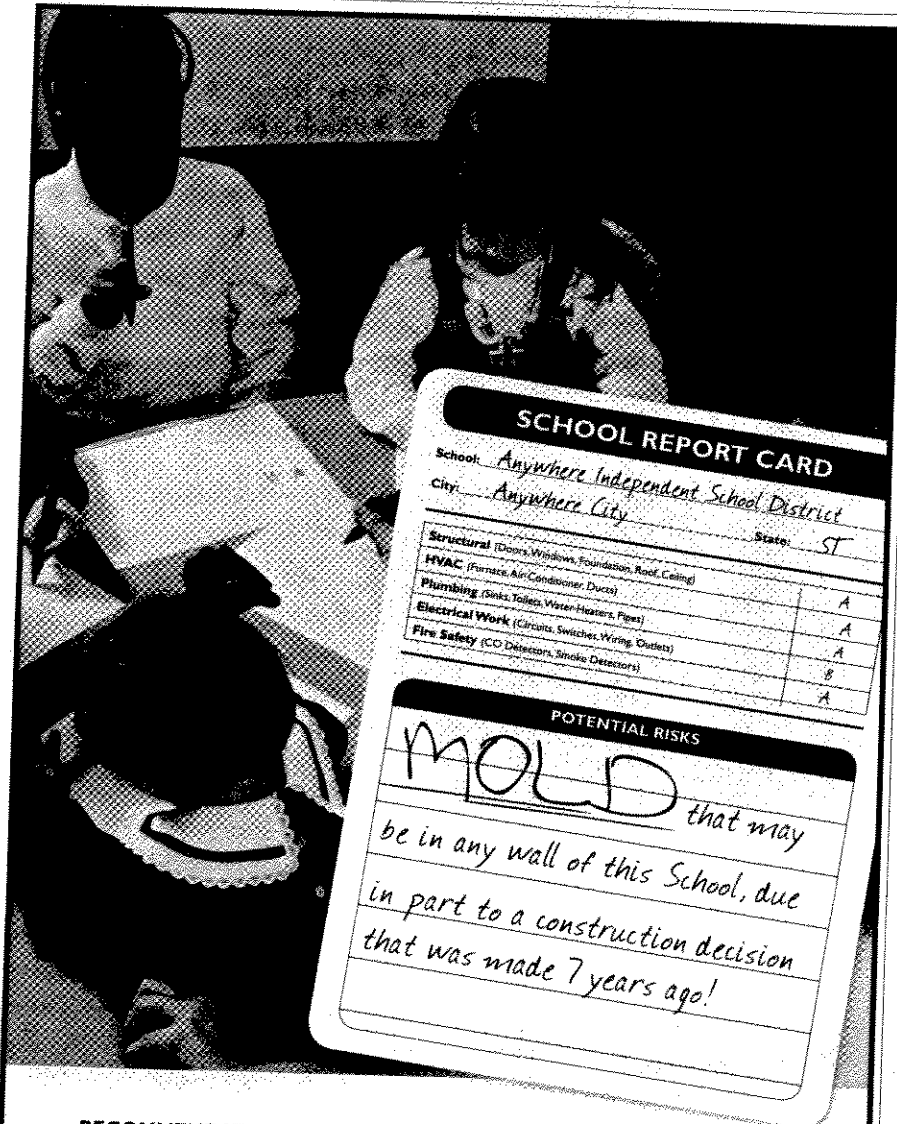
Korte notes that publishers that offer books formatted for use on a handheld computer or laptop have also made their books easy to update. "Instead of buying a new book, we can buy an updated file, which costs less," she says.

Korte and two other Monroe faculty members pilot tested the system for 18 months. This semester they have rolled it out to the department, which includes 360 students. "We got a federal grant for \$32,000 to buy 40 handhelds and nine textbooks that we uploaded," says Korte.

IT Problems

Handheld computers and other small electronic devices are flooding onto campuses across the country, setting up challenges for college and university information technology (IT) departments. "We see people using all types of cell phones and smart phones, PDA devices like Palm, Blackberry and Windows Mobile," says Mark Aseltine, executive director of Technology Support Services within the information systems and computing department at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. "By nature, these small devices are more personal.

People tend to buy the PC that they use at work, continues Aseltine. But they buy small electronic devices for personal reasons having little to do with work. A smart phone decision might involve who is on what family plan instead of what connects best to this or that system on campus.



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