Conclusion

Most of the respondents to ECAR student studies fall into what is frequently described as the Digital Generation or Net Generation. They are comfortable with many of the technologies we asked about, including some, such as e-mail, that we no longer query about because the technology has moved through the adoption cycle and has become all but ubiquitous. Despite their general comfort with technology, our respondents have been surprisingly consistent over the years in both technology adoption and desire for technology in the classroom. They are more likely to describe themselves in terms of mainstream adoption of technology, and they consistently report that they prefer only a moderate amount of IT when it comes to their courses. Although a majority of respondents to the ECAR student survey don’t identify themselves as what we call early adopters or innovators, it appears that a revolution in undergraduates’ use of the mobile Internet has already begun. A quarter of the respondents to this year’s study told us they are using handheld devices weekly or more often to access the Internet. This level of use may not be taxing the support capacity of higher education IT departments at the moment, but if the numbers of users increase, as they likely will if the cost of mobile Internet access drops, institutions could be quickly overwhelmed with demands for technical support and development of new mobile services.

Will student adoption outpace institutional support capability, or will institutional support rise to the challenge of student demand? Perhaps institutional implementations of mobile services will encourage even more student use of the Internet from handheld devices. In the EDUCAUSE Quarterly article “The Revolution No One Noticed: Mobile Phones and Multimobile Services in Higher Education,” Alan Livingston describes college students’ use of mobile technology as “a revolution no one noticed,” one that is laden with opportunity to improve the educational environment for college students.

No matter how extensively the mobile revolution—or any other technology-based disruption for that matter—impacts higher education, respondents to our survey consistently tell us that they want to see the use of IT balanced with the human touch in their academic environment. In their responses to the final open-ended question of our survey, students wrote explicitly about a preference for “real books and people” and said that “shiny new tech is still no substitute for well-trained, passionate instructors.”

Of the many comments expressing this sentiment, perhaps this one summed it up best: “There is still a big disparity among academic staff when it comes to use of IT in class. Some professors are obsessed with their technology and some don't like to use it at all. There needs to be a balance between human interaction and IT-based learning.”