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Wireless networks changing life on campus

GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

There's something different in the air at the University of British Columbia this academic year -- and a new buzzword to go with it.

UBC has a new wireless local area network that covers its huge 600-acre Vancouver campus, making it the largest and most advanced WLAN (pronounced "wi-lan") set up by any university or college in the world.

"It's already changing life on campus," says Ted Dodds, the university's associate vice-president for information technology.

"Students spend less time standing in line and more time learning," he explains, "while faculty spend less time administering research and are actively engaged in doing research."

The WLAN is just one part of UBC's three-year, \$30-million project to develop a comprehensive "e-Strategy" and upgrade its computer network that wraps up this month.

With the new technology, the university's students, staff and faculty can now compute and communicate over the Internet at high speed -- anywhere, anytime.

That's no mean feat, given the university's size.

UBC has 150 buildings on its main grounds as well as on sub-campuses across the city of Vancouver.

It also counts about 43,000 students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff as its network users.

"The goal is not to have a great wireless network," Dodds explains. "The goal is to have a great wireless network that will allow us to become a greater university."

"Anything that allows them to apply themselves to the real reason they are here -- research, scholarship and learning -- is a very positive thing,"

Wireless technology, he points out, is simply an enabler that lets users access applications on the network.

With UBC's e-Strategy in place, students can now submit their assignments, access their grades and interact with fellow classmates without be tethered to a desk.

It also means professors can efficiently manage their course workload, schedules and student e-mails on-line.

University administrators, meanwhile, can minimize their paperwork by using Web-enabled financial and human resource systems.

Even before they set foot on the UBC campus, prospective students can take advantage of the university's new technology.

Its Web-based self-admission software allows potential students to evaluate themselves against

UBC's admission requirements by entering data about their high school courses and grades.

"We want to make UBC less of a big, complicated institution," Dodds says.

"We are striving to make it easier for people to get things done and wireless is a key part of that."

UBC isn't the first Canadian university to enjoy the electronic edge such technology offers. But at the country's newest university, the school wouldn't even exist without it.

The University of Ontario Institute of Technology, which held its inaugural class 11 days ago, has the distinction of being the first university in Canada designed with such technology in mind.

So far, the UOIT has enrolled just 900 students, but that's expected to reach 6,500 by the year 2010.

Whether they're pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Integrated Justice Studies or a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, students are expected to tote a laptop computer from class to class -- and use it often.

Just as they would on the job as mobile professionals.

"There's a desire and need for greater collaboration and productivity in the workplace," explains Bill Muirhead, who is UOIT's associate provost for learning technology.

"If technology can facilitate that in the workplace, it can also do that on campus."

Wireless networks, Web-based learning tools and laptops have created a very different learning environment than what existed just a decade ago, he added.

Today, technology commonly used in the workplace has created a more effective way of teaching and a more efficient way of learning.

"We're seeing today that knowledge has a shorter shelf life," Muir says.

"The key to knowledge-building in the 21st century is how we manage information and how we share information."

Mobile students may need new skills than their predecessors a decade ago -- a more than cursory knowledge of e-mail protocol, computer troubleshooting and on-line, anti-virus security.

But they won't have to race across town to hand-deliver a paper late on a Friday afternoon. Instead, they can e-mail it with ease from a laptop in the dorm room -- or even during a round of drinks in the student pub.

Yes, universities' new technology now reaches where students traditionally took a break from learning.

"Learning will not be bound by place and time," Muir explains. "We will still come to campus, but what we do there will be different because much of the information transmission will take place on-line."

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