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Slaves to the Web: Students becoming Net Addicts

Some are using the Web up to 18 hours a day as life passes them by

By CLAIRE ZULKEY
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Robert Arcola says he paid the price for his obsession with online comics.

"I ended up dropping classes my senior year because I would stay up until five in the morning looking at comic Web sites," says Arcola, who graduated from Ball State University in May. "I had to take a couple classes in the summer to make up for it. I felt pathetic."

Arcola's not alone. A recent study says that 10 percent of college students may spend too much time online, resulting in missed classes and social isolation. These results may seem to come as no surprise. Much Internet and computer technology is developed on college campuses, which are updated in order to lure potential students by being state-of-the-art.

Meanwhile, students are encouraged to use campus email and electronic research systems to their advantage. Even the media associates college students with living life online, from a commercial showing a student ordering a car via his computer, to Kozmo.com, which comes close to eliminating any need to leave one's dorm room.

Kenneth J. Anderson, a psychologist at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, N.Y., decided to conduct a study on how much time college students spend online. He had been counseling a student who flunked out after spending an average of 18 hours a day online. The student talked about other problems he had, such as depression, missed classes, clashes with his parents, and lack of sleep.

"Interestingly, while he did not know his next-door neighbors, (he) drove to Tennessee, some 1900 miles roundtrip to meet a woman that he met during MUD conversations," says Anderson.

"Students will always take advantage of things that make their lives more efficient," is how Anderson explains students' readiness to spend a lot of time online. "However, sometimes they just lose track of time, as anybody does. They have more independence, there is nobody telling them when to do their homework, or go to class, or go to bed," says Anderson.

From 1998-1999, Anderson surveyed 1,300 students from American International University, Black Hawk College, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rensselaer, Siena College, the State University of New York campuses at Albany and Buffalo, and the University of Ulster, in Northern Ireland. What he found is that at least 10 percent of college students use the Internet to the extent that it interferes with their grades, their health, or their social lives, and that the problem is not only limited to science and engineering

institutions.

For his study, Anderson used criteria from alcohol and drug addiction, such as withdrawal from other activities because of the addiction, unsuccessful efforts to cut down or quit, and a tendency to consume larger amounts over a longer period of time than they had intended. The students who were characterized as Internet-dependent spent an average of 229 minutes a day online for nonacademic reasons, compared with 73 minutes a day for other students, according to Anderson.

Do certain types of people tend to become Internet addicts? According to Anderson, "A disproportionate number of Internet dependents are found among the hard science majors." Of the 106 classified as Internet dependents, 93 were men, and 76 percent of the dependents majored in chemistry, computer science, engineering, math, physics, and compute science.

"These types of students tend to be more comfortable with the technology," says Anderson, "and are less comfortable socially."

In order to remedy this problem, Anderson suggests that some schools look into a system in which students are granted a sort of debit system for Internet time. He is aware, however, that this may be unpopular with many colleges.

"Schools are trying to increase access, not decrease it, and they may look at this suggestion as a bigger problem than it's worth." Anderson also applauds schools that emphasize the importance of and reward students who get involved in campus activities.

Ball State grad Arcola agrees. "I used to do so much my first couple years of school at night intramurals, going to see local bands. Then I just started sitting in front of my computer screen," Arcola said. "It took me a while to snap out of it."