Handheld initiative fuses technology with learning and life

CAL U FUSION ARRIVES ON CAMPUS THIS FALL

When the majority of Cal U’s current students were toddlers, the cell phone was still a novelty. The 12 million handheld devices in use in 1990 were bulky extravagances that promised convenience but frequently dropped calls.

While our Cal U students were growing up, so was this emerging technology. The demand for constant communication quickly expanded into a need for immediate information, and the cell phone evolved from a fad to an integral part of everyday life.

In 2009, there were some 4.6 billion cell phone users around the world. Another 20 million enjoy more than 225,000 applications available through mobile devices such as the iPad and iPod Touch.

The Cal U community has gone mobile, too. A study conducted this spring by BarkleyREI, a web development and interactive marketing firm, showed that 99 percent of current students and 97 percent of faculty use cell phones.

Nearly 22 percent of Cal U students also own an iPod Touch. Of the cell phone users, nearly 30 percent of students and 37 percent of faculty use smart phones to send text messages and access e-mail on the Internet.

C.J. DeJuliis ’02, ’04, of University Technology Services, understands the potential for mobile devices. In July 2009 he made a presentation to the PASSHE Summer Academy.

“Cal U Fusion is the blending of technology with learning and life,” explains President Armenti. “By making learning interactive, fun, exciting and rewarding, we can help to achieve one of the major goals of the University mission statement: ‘To instill not just learning, but the love of learning.’”

No other university in the State System — and very few in the country — had the vision to launch such a program. As a first step, the Cal U team tapped into the experience of Abilene Christian University (ACU), a first-mover in the use of mobile technology in the academic world.

George Saltman, executive director of the Adams Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence at ACU, visited California and explained various applications his school had developed to enhance teaching and learning.

An attendance-taking application was particularly interesting to Provost Geraldine Jones. With this app, professors can quickly match names with faces in the classroom. If a student is absent, the application generates an e-mail from the professor with a message of concern.

“This is a great way for faculty to make another connection to students,” says Jones. “It builds rapport and sends a signal to the students that professors really do care.”

During the next few months a faculty committee at Cal U will pilot new ways of using technology to teach. Later, a Teaching and Learning Center will train faculty and encourage an exchange of ideas.

Dr. Robert S. Whyte, associate professor in the Department of Biological and Environmental Science, already has an early adapter. Looking for a simpler way for research students to identify birds in the field, he discovered an existing bird identification application and downloaded it on his iPod Touch.

“This is a great tool to enrich the learning experience for students working on research,” says Whyte as students in related ecology classes.

“Yet it’s a unique part of the experience,” Whyte says. “I usually write a paper-and-pencil kind of person. But when I discovered how this technology could replace a field notebook, I was absolutely sold.”

A mobile version of the Cal U website also is set to debut, providing on-campus news, information and the helpful People Finder listing.

To support Cal U Fusion, the University will expand its Wi-Fi capability. Mance hopes that high-concentration areas on the main campus will be completely Wi-Fi enabled by the end of the year. Then his team plans to complete Wi-Fi installation on other campuses, including Southpointe and the Phillipsburg school.

A mobile version of the Cal U website also is set to debut, providing campus news, information and the helpful People Finder listing.

By Lindy Kravec, a Peters Township-based writer