

Tuning Out By Tuning In

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INTRODUCTION

As technology advances, culture changes with it. The purpose of this study is to observe how that culture is changing on campus in two ways:

How does the use of personal technology impact interactions between students and non-academic college employees, such as receptionists, cashiers and advisors?

How does the use of personal technology impact how the student interacts with the professor, inside the classroom and out?

The primary focus of the study was not to gather empirical data, but to observe and record the perceptions and reactions of participants.

CAMPUS EMPLOYEES

Data was gathered from non-professor employees via informal surveys conducted at their workplace. Respondents were asked how often students made use of technology while engaging with the employees and what their reaction was to the use.

Generally, younger respondents (those in their early 30s or younger) reported higher rates of technology usage during interaction than did older ones. Employees over 50 universally perceived that students using their phone while working with them “virtually never happened.” This trend was consistent regardless of the type of employment. Receptionists, food service personnel and book store cashiers all followed a curve of decreasing student technology use as age of employee increased.

Additionally, younger respondents volunteered much stronger emotional reactions to perceived “disrespect” than did their older co-workers. Reactions from younger workers ranged from internal annoyance to refusing service or calling for the next person in line if the employee was busy.

Student technology usage was predominately perceived to be either texting or phone conversation, but occasionally included video chat, using social media and listening to music on headphones

PROFESSORS

Professors were formally interviewed either in their classrooms or their offices. These interviews included questions on the specific professor’s policy on technology use, anecdotes on student tech use, and observations of their perceptions of how technology affects daily life on campus.

Generally, professors who teach low level, general education classes experience a much higher incidence of in-class technology usage than do their peers. Professors who teach or have taught at the graduate level, at professional schools, or teach so called “weed-out classes” report inappropriate in class usage is borderline nonexistent. One professor offered the opinion that by the time students are taking these classes, the ones who are distracted by their phones have been long since weeded out.

Teachers of general education courses and/or entry level social science classes have reported that students have begun wearing earbud headphones during lectures as of the Fall 2016 semester. One professor had three students in as many classes wearing headphones during class in the fall, after never having experienced that behavior before.

Most professors interviewed have technology policies, but most don’t enforce them unless the violations are disruptive. One professor said “They’re adults. They paid to be here. If they don’t want to pay attention, that’s their decision.”

Professors who had students who are regularly distracted by their personal technology noted an unsurprising correlation between said usage and poor performance in the course.

