# [***Professors Vie With Web for Class's Attention***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:47KD-PN60-01KN-20DP-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:**  By JOHN SCHWARTZ

**Body**

Universities are rushing toward a wireless future, installing networks that let students and the faculty surf the Internet from laptop computers in the classroom, in the library or by those ponds that always seem to show up on the cover of the campus brochure.

But professors say the technology poses a growing challenge for them: retaining their students' attention.

In a classroom at American University in Washington on a recent afternoon, the benefits and drawbacks of the new wireless world were on display. From the back row of an amphitheater classroom, more than a dozen laptop screens were visible. As Prof. Jay Mallek lectured graduate students on the finer points of creating and reading an office budget, many students went online to Blackboard.com, a Web site that stores course materials, and grabbed the day's handouts from the ether.

But just as many students were off surfing. A young man looked at sports photos while a woman checked out baby photos that just arrived in her e-mailbox.

The screens provide a silent commentary on the teacher's attention-grabbing skills. The moment he loses the thread, or fumbles with his own laptop to use its calculator, screens flip from classroom business to leisure. Students dash off e-mail notes and send instant messages. A young man who is chewing gum shows an amusing e-mail message to the woman next to him, and then switches over to read the online edition of The Wall Street Journal.

Distraction is nothing new. As long as there have been schools, students have whispered, passed notes and even gazed out the window and daydreamed. The arrival of laptop computers, however, introduced new opportunities for diversion, and wireless introduces an even broader range of distraction, said Dylan Brooks, a senior broadband and wireless analyst at Jupiter Communications.

"They could have played solitaire or Minesweeper before," Mr. Brooks said. "Now they can do that or seven million other games, or watch a full-length feature film."

This is especially galling to law professors, many of whom still live in the world depicted in "The Paper Chase," the 1973 film in which an imperious Prof. Charles W. Kingsfield Jr. held his students in terrified thrall.

"This is an addictive thing that hurts the students themselves," said Ian Ayres, a professor at the Yale Law School who opposes much of the Internet's entry into the classroom, saying that computer use is rude and that other students are "demoralized" by seeing their peers' attention wander.

"When you see 25 percent of the screens playing solitaire, besides its being distracting, you feel like a sucker for paying attention," Professor Ayres said.

Unless law students are fully engaged in the class, he said, they miss out on the give and take of ideas in class discussion and do not develop the critical thinking skills that emerge from "deeply tearing apart a case."

Professor Ayres tried to prohibit all Internet use in his classroom. The students "went ballistic," he said, and insisted that their multitasking ways made them more productive and even more alert in class.

Lately, he said, he has loosened the restrictions, telling students they could surf from the back rows, so others would not be distracted.

One professor at a law school in Texas became so upset by the level of student distraction in 2001 that he took a ladder to school, climbed up to reach the wireless transmitter in his classroom -- and disconnected it. The students protested. The administration told him to plug it back in. But the point was made, he said, and he regained the attention of the class.

In 2002, he told his students that they could not use laptops in his class at all, even for taking notes.

"It has made an enormously positive difference to shut those computers off," he said.

Today's college students are a truly wired generation. A study in 2002 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in Washington found that 86 percent of students have gone online, compared with 59 percent of the general population. Although the study did not focus on wireless technology, the authors did delicately predict that "issues readily apparent with the spread of ***cellphones***, such as etiquette and distraction, are likely to emerge as students are able to access the Internet anywhere, including in classrooms."

Dozens of colleges are going wireless, including Dartmouth, Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, the University of California at San Diego and the University of Minnesota.

The wireless rollout at American University is especially ambitious, because it integrates ***cellphone*** coverage into a single data-delivery network that can deliver messages to laptops, handheld devices and telephones anywhere on the 84-acre campus. The university plans to stop offering traditional phone service in its dormitories eventually.

In any building, the wireless access ports are likely to be there, looking a little like the top half of a Lava Lamp, painted white and stuck upside-down to the ceiling.

The director of e-operations at the university, Carl Whitman, said being early to the wireless world created an advantage in attracting students who demand the latest technology and "becomes a plus for us."

Matthew Pittinsky, founder and chairman of Blackboard Inc., the large Internet education company that puts Professor Mallek's class materials online, said wireless access had "made higher education much more of a 24/7 educational environment than ever before," with instant access to classroom materials and research resources and a growing potential for collaborative study.

Mr. Pittinsky said the greatest power of wireless showed up in the dorm, the library and the commons. "There's less of an obvious use for wiring the classroom," where the benefits have to be balanced against the distraction, he said.

At American University, Professor Mallek said the benefits of the technology in his classroom far outweighed the problems. He ran the pilot project at the business school that helped the American decide to put in a campuswide network and said he had grown used to students' flipping their screens.

"It's a new type of social commentary, to hear clicking," he said. "It's an audible vote."

He suggested that it might even be making him a better teacher. He takes the threat of losing his students to e-mail and online newspapers as a challenge to keep lectures interesting and lively.

"As a professor," he said, "if you are not productively engaging them, they have other opportunities."

Mr. Whitman, the director of e-operations, said he was testing new programs that might address some of the problems of online distraction. A system that takes the locations of students into account could be used to set rules that varied from place to place. Any use of the Internet might be acceptable in the library or the dean's office, he said, "but if you're downstairs in Jay's classroom, you could not surf the Internet or you could surf the Internet but only go to CNN.com for in-class reading."

Joseph Sun, a first year M.B.A. student in Professor Mallek's class, takes notes with pen and paper. He owns a laptop but does not take it to class. Although it "comes in handy to look up an article or quote during discussion," Mr. Sun said, he has to resist "the temptation to surf the Net during lectures."

Students say they are finding a balance in the classroom between the good uses of online technology and its temptations. Tetse Ukueberuwa, a major in environmental studies at Dartmouth, said, "Over all, it's a great thing," being able to check e-mail messages and conduct online research anywhere on her campus.

Ms. Ukueberuwa said she preferred to take notes by hand, however, saying: "I feel I'm more in touch with what the teacher is saying. You're looking at the teacher instead of looking at your computer."

As a junior, though, she realizes that she may be "old-fashioned." Every incoming class, she said, seems "more technologically advanced" than the last.

[*http://www.nytimes.com*](http://www.nytimes.com)

**Graphic**

Photo: Prof. Jay Mallek and a student, Brian Betz, exchanging data on wireless laptops at American University. (Doug Mills/The New York Times)(pg. A14)

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