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Who Needs Paper? Not Iowa College

Katie Dean 08.06.02

Students at an Iowa college can forget the quintessential experience of pulling all-nighters at the library poring over stacks of books.

For one thing, there's no library. For another, there are no books.

The Des Moines Area Community College's [West Des Moines](#) campus is the newest of the college's six branches. It opened last fall with the mission to collaborate with companies to beta test education technologies.

Instead of a library, the school has a resource center equipped with computer workstations that can access the Web, e-books and online journals. The resource center also houses several meeting tables, audio-visual materials and a few paper magazines -- but no books.

The school plans to be an entirely paper-free campus. Last year, about 75 telecommunications students participated in a pilot program to go paperless. Each student used a Compaq iPaq handheld to access e-textbooks, syllabi and class materials, and to take notes and exams.

This fall, the paperless program expands to include all technology courses and some business and liberal arts courses. All of the students concentrating in tech fields such as network administration and information technology are required to have their own handheld. Campus Dean Tony Paustian estimates that over half of the campus community will be totally paperless this fall.

"Hopefully within a year, we'll have the whole campus paperless," Paustian said.

The campus has its own wireless infrastructure. Faculty use smartboards, which work like giant touch screens for professors to jot notes. Students can download notes from the board to their handhelds.

All data, including each student's work, is kept on the school's storage area network and is accessible through the Web. A memory module slides into the back of each iPaq and also stores student work that can be synched with a home computer or laptop.

Campus leisure activities are also tech focused. The campus provides several Xbox and GameCube consoles for student use. Students can check out games, and in the main student common area, the games are projected onto a large empty wall. The school holds regional gaming competitions every two months.

Some people would associate this agriculture-rich state with serious farmers rather than serious techies, but this school is evidence that Iowa offers more than its "[American Gothic](#)" image suggests.

Indeed, Paustian is as eager as any Silicon Valley true believer in his quest for a technology-rich education.

"Students have required two things: They want mobile access to everything and, No. 2, they want media-rich content," Paustian said.

"We are heading toward a world where, instead of reading a bunch of Bill Gates' quotes, you want to have a video clip of him actually speaking that quote," he said.

"It really makes the learning experience more dynamic."

Karl Lantz, a telecommunications major from Red Oak, Iowa, participated in the handheld program last year and said, "The best part for me personally (about the iPaq) was getting everything organized and in place."

But he admitted that the absence of a traditional library "felt kind of odd."

"You don't always find stuff on the Internet about the older technology," he said.

His telecommunications instructor, Jay Nickelson, provides a minilibrary in his office in case students need books on older technologies. Only a few students borrowed books last year, Nickelson said.

"Most students would rather just look (information) up on the Web," he said.

Some librarians agree that digital resources are useful and save time but say it's too early to banish books entirely.

"Electronics are perfect for journals if you are looking for a tiny piece of information, like a paragraph or a few pages," said Bill Crumlish, library director at [Hobart and William Smith Colleges](#). "But when you have a topic that requires 300 pages to develop an argument or provide a history, books are the perfect container for something that requires that depth of exposition.

"To say that we do without books is far, far premature," he said. "We're just not at that point right now."

Going digital also creates more work for faculty. Paustian said they are responsible for putting their own e-resources online.

Nickelson said he and another instructor wrote their own e-textbook for telecommunications since they could not find one that fit their needs.

Even with more digital tools, people haven't given up on paper entirely.

Faculty at the [Fox School](#) at Temple University use [Blackboard](#), an online course management tool, to post links, documents and syllabi for their students.

"The faculty believe that they are moving to a largely paperless classroom because they don't carry stuff to class," said John DeAngelo, associate dean for information technology at the Fox School. "In their mind, they've created a fairly paperless environment."

But in reality, students often print articles for their class, preferring to read on paper rather than on the computer -- especially if they are in a hurry, he said.

"Despite everything we think about the e-generation, students are still pretty dependent on paper," DeAngelo said.

In fact, the school's printing costs have increased significantly, so this fall the number of free printouts will be limited to 20 pages per user per session.

Paustian admitted that students still print out e-documents, but like the Fox School, they limit the number of printouts students can make. Then they start charging.

"Once they have surpassed that amount (of allotted printouts), they have to go back and add more copies to their account," Paustian said. "Otherwise, they'll print off reams of paper."

Instructor Jay Nickelson said the switch from paper to digital takes a little getting used to.

"It's just a matter of shifting your mind-set a little bit and becoming less reliant on a piece of paper."