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# Electronic devices bad for students in class

One of the most striking behavioral shifts we have observed in college classrooms over the last few years is the pervasive use of electronic devices by students during class. Whether using their cell phones, tablets, or laptops, more and more students appear wired to their devices. They check social media, read their email, play video games, do homework for other classes, and even – at least I have it on good authority – watch pornographic material all while the professor keeps lecturing.

Many of us find these behaviors uncalled for not only because they distract the students who are on their devices from the objectives of the classroom experience, such as being engaged in the subject matter, but also because they distract other students and the overall educational experience.

That is why there is an increasing movement among faculty members to prohibit the use of these devices in the classroom unless they are required for the purposes of the class itself. Students do not always respond well to these regulations, with many becoming repeat offenders trying to hide the use of those devices by placing them on their laps and under their desks. Some simply stop going to class since it seems that being connected to the internet is more important to them than getting the education for which they are paying.

Now a new study published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the National Bureau of Economic Research substantiates the fear of many college professors: electronic devices negatively affect student performance.

In a report titled “The Impact of Computer Usage on Academic Performance,” professors

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from the United States Military Academy found that the average final exam scores among students assigned to classrooms that allowed computers were 18 percent lower than exam scores of students in classrooms that prohibited those devices. The study also showed that males are more negatively affected than females by the use of these devices in the classroom and that they affect people equally regardless of ethnicity.

The study, published this month, was conducted among 726 students attending the West Point military academy.

This is interesting because the way that school is set up makes the control of the methodology for the study very rigorous. This military academy is very homogeneous in terms of distribution of students among class sections, the syllabi for different sections of the same course are identical, the classes are small (similar to that of small liberal arts colleges), students typically sit in the classroom in a “U” formation around the professor, and students are disciplined in ways students from other colleges are not, including long marches over weekends. Because where West Point students rank in their graduating class determines their choice of assignment as officers, the pressure for them to do well is very high. Therefore, one can expect that the negative effect of using elec-

tronic devices in other higher education settings will be worse because of less disciplined environments, less pressure to succeed and larger classes.

The study concludes that the use of electronic devices “draws a student’s attention away from the class, resulting in a lower understanding of the material.” Also, according to the study, students are not as effective at taking notes when required to use pen and paper, which, in turn, could also lower test scores. The message seems clear: students perform worse when personal electronic-related technology is available in the classroom.

This disadvantage is true even when students are allowed to keep their tablets flat on the desk. What happens is that most tablet computers use a mobile device operating system, which allows for cloud access to web applications, the same technology that is used on smart phones. While professors are able to monitor usage, students have greater propensity to access distracting web applications via the tablet computer than with a laptop computer.

The report says that while students may have used regular computers in secondary school, tablets are a relatively new technology for them, limiting their ability to effectively take notes on a tablet.

This problem is more serious than it may seem. Not only is the presence of these devices hurting student performance, but also the kind of technological environment provided by colleges. Many college rankings place a value on how much connectivity there is on campus. There is a

heavy burden on these institutions to “look good” when it comes to those rankings, meaning more expenditures to ensure that Wi-Fi connections are available at all times, particularly at noon when many students connect their smart phone, tablet, and laptop at the same time, and at night when they download movies and music. That demand for bandwidth means more expensive hardware technology on campus, as well as personnel to service it.

On top of that, the increase in the number of online and/or “hybrid” (combination of online with certain personal interaction with the instructor) courses by colleges and universities, as well as the increased use of “E-text books” with video features, places even further pressure on these institutions.

In this day and age of increasing measurements for accountability by colleges and universities to demonstrate that they are doing their job of graduating students on time, they should ban the use of electronic devices in the classroom unless that use is required for class activities. Such a ban would be for the benefit of all: students’ performance, professors’ ability to deliver their material in a distraction-free environment, and for educational institutions themselves when it comes to their performance in graduating students on time.

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