

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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Decoding “TechSavvy”

Students' ability to handle information on the Web
tells us more about their future success
than does their knowledge of
specific hardware or software



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Being “Tech Savvy” May Not Indicate Critical Thinking Skills

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At colleges and universities across the United States, technology is prevalent both inside and outside of the classroom. Through multiple electronic devices linking them to a vast array of information sources, College students remain the singlemost connected demographic group. They will spend most of their academic and work life in an era of computing, interactive communication and information overload.

However, just being able to navigate a website does not mean the individual can decide on a good, authoritative source. The ability to use technology for socializing is no guarantee of being able to find



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information, evaluate it, and then put it to good use. A student might not differentiate between sending an email to a friend versus a professor, and use the same format in both situations.

The inability to effectively handle excessive amounts of available information has led to a grow-

ing belief among institutions of higher learning that students often misjudge their familiarity with technology and equate the ease of manipulating and interacting with a range of devices with an assumed level of proficiency.

Failing to combine applied technology with critical thinking skills not only impedes learning and academic progress, but students without critical decision making skills will also be limited in their ability to stay competitive and economically stable.

To succeed will require more than just being “tech-savvy.” Competencies in navigating, critically
See *Critical Thinking*, page. 4, col. 1

**In today’s
workplace,
individuals must
be able to
combine
technical
skills with
experience and
knowledge.**

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evaluating and making sense of information are crucial skills needed to function in society. Without these skills an individual will be unable to use digital technology in order to make sound judgments and solve problems.

Digital Literacy: Critical Thinking for the 21st Century

Being classified as “digitally literate” refers to an individual’s ability to understand the fundamentals of computing. But technological competence alone does not equal proficiency with regards to the critical decision-making skills that are required for success in both real-world workplace and academic environments. The Internet’s evolution for college students, from basic email use and Web browsing, to search functions and social networking, highlights the need for ongoing consideration and development of critical thinking skills.

So, what is critical thinking? Simply stated, it suggests an individual is able to obtain information, then analyze and apply it to everyday problems. It incorporates the decision making and problem solving abilities needed in order to use technology effectively when dealing with and communicating information. For example, a student needs to know how to perform an Internet search and filter the resulting data before he/she can apply critical thinking skills to make a decision.

Need for Assessment

Education and business leaders question whether current skill assessments focus too much on measuring students’ ability to recall discrete facts at the cost of not adequately measuring the ability to think critically and solve problems. In addition, most assessment activity on campuses can be found within small segments of an institution and most has been undertaken directly in response to outside calls for accountability.

To be ultimately successful, institutions must embrace assessment efforts widely and it must begin with learning goals that students should derive from the curriculum. Without effective assessment, it is difficult to know if instructional programs are paying off – whether or not students’ information literacy skills are improving.

Technology offers teachers a broad range of tools to collect and analyze data, and richer sets of student data to guide instructional decisions. Several colleges have begun campus-wide initiatives to improve the problem solving and decision making skills of their students.

Bronx Community College in New York City is using preliminary results from assessments that measure critical thinking abilities to help prioritize education goals and guide instruction for their more than 11,000 students. Chief Librarian and Professor Teresa L. McManus said “proficiencies required to navigate in today’s information environment require the ability to deal constantly with new interfaces. The sources and tools are dynamic. Change is the norm and we have to be able to evaluate and determine how to accomplish the task at hand whether that is academic, professional, job related, or managing personal goals.”

Setting institutional learning goals that develop problem solving and critical thinking skills, McManus suggests assessment of these skills has been key a key determinant in how well the institution is doing to help achieve learning outcomes that are ideal for supporting academic

success.

“There is a need for students as lifelong learners to have the competency to navigate information sources,” McManus said. “Finding a tool to help evaluate if our learning goals are met allows us to see if we have prepared our students not only to perform well, but are independently prepared to move forward to be successful in achieving career and academic goals.”

Reliable Credentials

The Obama administration set a very ambitious goal of leading the world by 2020 in percentage of the population with some form of postsecondary credentials and degrees. However, whatever level of degree or credential is achieved, the point of a more educated population is lost if credentials don’t reflect real skills and knowledge appropriate for work and citizenship in the 21st Century. Credentials should signify the development of both technical and broader skills and knowledge.

In 2008, Educational Testing Service (ETS) partnered with Certiport — a developer of globally recognized professional certifications — to develop the iCritical Thinking Certification. This collaboration created a verifiable certification of critical thinking skills that is administered across Certiport’s established network of 10,000 testing centers worldwide. The assessment is endorsed by the Global Digital Literacy Council and aligned with the national recognized Association of Colleges and Research Libraries Standards.

ETS created an online environment in which students interact with simulated software to solve information problems, such as searching a library database, integrating information in a spreadsheet, and judging the reliability of information found in an Internet search. The assessment measures students’ critical thinking skills — not just their knowledge of technology — but students must be able to use both the tools (such as a mouse) and generic applications (such as a word processing program) in order to complete the tasks. But it is their critical thinking skills, the ability to process the information correctly, that will determine their success on each scenario.

When paired with well-known digital literacy and desktop computing and publishing programs such as the Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³®), Microsoft® Office Specialist and Adobe® Certified Associate, iCritical Thinking Certification becomes part of a 21st-Century, work-readiness solution that demonstrates a student has what it takes to succeed as a student or employee in today’s digitally driven academic and workforce environments.

As a large-scale measure, this certification was designed to be administered and scored across units of an institution or across institutions. As a simulation-based assessment, the tasks go beyond what is possible in a multiple-choice format. It provides students with the look and feel of interactive digital environments along with tasks that elicit higher-order critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students become engaged in the world of the tasks, and the task scenarios provide examples of workplace and personal information problems.

Both students and schools may rely on the assessment data provided to revise instruction strategies and the resulting certification could become significant added value for any school program. This type of certification could be especially significant to community colleges. Recent news accounts have noted a peak in college enrollment occurring concurrently with the

difficult labor market. Of the nearly seven million students registered for degree or certificate programs in community colleges, those students achieving this certification will enter the workforce with a credential to add to their resumes, and those progressing to a four-year college will have an admissions edge of real distinction.

Meeting the Challenge

In today’s workplace, individuals must be able to effortlessly combine technical skills enriched with experiences and knowledge. Students must begin to think critically and effectively to solve problems while using technology. Beyond just searching for information, users must evaluate the legitimacy of the information, put it in context, and then apply problem-solving and decision-making skills.

Although these skills are often gained through education, they extend well beyond academic life, to the workplace and other real world pursuits that help an individual function in an information and technology rich society. Ultimately, those students who are confident with their ability to effectively apply the latest technologies stand a greater chance of success in today’s information-based academic and business environments. ■

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