

College asks students to power down, contemplate

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Writer



In this Dec. 14, 2009 photo, Stephens College president Dianne Lynch talks to students about the necessity calming your thoughts before she asked the students to turn in their cell phones during vespers in the Stephens Chapel on campus in Columbia, Mo. (AP Photo/L.G. Patterson)

(AP) -- Dianne Lynch wanted to give the students of Stephens College a break from the constant digital communication that pervades their generation. So she asked them to put their phones and computers away and revive the 176-year-old school's dormant tradition of vespers services.

On a bitterly cold December night, with the start of final exams just hours away, about 75 of Stephens' 766 undergraduates grudgingly piled their cell phones into collection baskets and filed into the school's

candlelit chapel, where they did little but sit, silently. For an hour, not an iPod ear bud could be seen. There were no fingers flying on tiny computer keyboards, no chats with unseen intimates.

Alexis Dornseif, a senior from suburban St. Louis majoring in fashion marketing and management, said she needed time away from her busy life.

"Sometimes it's really overwhelming," she said. "It's good to have time to think, to not worry about what's going on tomorrow."

Lynch, the president of the women's college, is no technophobe. Her doctorate research focused on "digital natives," teenagers who grew up with "the Internet as a part of their operating assumption in the world." She knows most of her students consider their cell phones a social necessity. The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project has found that 82 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds own cell phones. Ninety-four percent of teens spend time online.

But Lynch fears all that time spent in the 21st century's town square leaves few opportunities for clutter-free thought. She wants the students to also pursue the more elusive state of mind that comes with silence.

Several other schools are encouraging technology-free introspection. Amherst College in Massachusetts hosted a "Day of Mindfulness" this year, featuring yoga and meditation and a lecture on information technology and the contemplative mind entitled "No Time to Think."

"Students welcome it," said Amherst physics professor Arthur Zajonc, director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. "It's a complement to the very hurried world of gadgets they normally live in."

At Stephens, Lynch hit on the idea for reviving vespers after an alumnae

group regaled her with fond memories of Sunday nights in the school chapel. Once a Baptist school but now secular, Stephens required vespers services as often as four times each week starting in 1920.

"Just a wonderful opportunity to calm down," said Neel Stallings, a career-development consultant in Charlotte, N.C., who graduated from Stephens in 1967. "To have a place to go to just tune out all of the extra noise, and to tune into yourself, was the most valuable thing."

By the late 1960s, vespers had become more spiritual than religious, no longer mandatory and held only once a week. By the 1980s the program was gone.

The new vespers program is voluntary, at least for now. Lynch hopes to have the services twice a month, to reinforce the school's mission of teaching young women to be self-reliant.

"You will need to be able to sit, to be quiet, to be alone with yourself, to have those moments of self-reflection," she said.

Those moments are infrequent on the modern college campus. Seconds after the end of the first revived vespers service, students got their cell phones back, and the flickering assortment of screens replaced the need for mood-setting candlelight.

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