

College students limit technology use during crunch time: study

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A student studying in one of the college libraries where Project Information Literacy conducted its survey. Credit: Project Information Literacy

A new University of Washington study found college students – only weeks away from final exams and in the library – tend to pare use of electronics. It's their way to manage technology that permeates their lives.

Today's students may often be considered "heavy multitaskers" who are unable to concentrate on one activity at a time. However, based on 560 interviews in 11 college libraries around the country near exam time last

spring, researchers found most students using only one or two technology devices to support only one or two activities at a time — coursework and to a lesser extent, communication.

"Our findings belie conventional wisdom about the multitasking generation – always online, always using a variety of IT devices to communicate, game and do their homework," said Alison Head, a research scientist at the UW Information School who co-directed the study. "Our findings suggest students may be applying self-styled strategies for dialing down technology when the pressure is most on them."

Many students were using the library as a refuge and to limit technology-based distractions, such as Facebook. Few had used books, electronic or print resources, or librarians in the previous hour.

Most said they were in the library because it was the best place they could concentrate, feel more studious and take advantage of library equipment, such as computers and printers. Almost 40 percent had used the library's computers or printers; the rest depended on materials and devices brought with them.

The researchers also found that students use Facebook as a reward after 15, 30 or 60 minutes of study. During the interviews, one student said, "If I get done reading a chapter, then I get on Facebook as a reward."

But while students pare down to essential technology at crunch time, some were inventive in the way they had used it earlier. Two thirds said they had used social media for coursework during the term. In post-interview discussions, students mentioned Facebook for coordinating meetings with classmates, and to a lesser extent, YouTube tutorials to understand material not clear in either textbooks or classroom instruction.

"I am no longer bound by what the professor gives me in a class, and his perspective on something," said one student. "There are lots of engineering forums that I can just Google."

Students were inventive in other ways as well. One said she used her smart phone to record lecture notes so she could listen again and again. Another student said he photographed problem sets from a library-reserve copy of a math book he couldn't afford. He planned to study the problem sets while riding a bus. Yet another used a website, StudyBlue, to create flashcards to review on her smart phone.

"The means by which students learn is fundamentally changing," Head said, "and educators from kindergarten all the way through graduate school must recognize it."

In some cases, students said they left laptops at home to avoid temptation, and relied on library equipment to write papers or study. And again, despite the vast amount of information available on the Web, 61 percent of students had only one or two websites open.

Researchers observed and interviewed [students](#) rather than merely rely on self-reporting. The 10 colleges where data was gathered included the UW, the University of Puget Sound, Northern Kentucky University, the City College of San Francisco, Ohio State University and Tufts University.

More information: The full report (72 pages, 6.1 MB) is also available at: projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fa...dy_FullReport1.1.pdf

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