

New technology to provide insights into the health of students

January 7 2016, by William G. Gilroy



Cellphones, any parent can attest, play a central role in the lives of college students. Studies show that nearly all college students own a cellphone, and most of those students use text messaging as their main form of communication. Researchers from the University of Notre Dame used the centrality of cellphones in college students' lives to delve deep into students' usage habits and how their social networks affect their everyday lives.

Results from the recently completed three-year study, dubbed "NetSense," provide a broader understanding of how technology is embedded in students' lives as they transition from teenagers to young

adults.

Notre Dame sociologists David Hachen and Omar Lizardo and computer scientists and engineers Aaron Striegel and Christian Poellabauer teamed with Sprint to provide 200 entering freshman volunteers with cellphones. The student volunteers signed waivers allowing the researchers to track their [cellphone](#) usage for two years in order to map their social networks. During the third year, Hachen, Lizardo, Striegel and Poellabauer analyzed the data on students' usage and behavior.

Some of the key research findings from NetSense:

- Entering freshmen quickly form their social networks, generally within 10 to 15 weeks.
- The size of social networks varies greatly, with some numbering five or six and others 50 or more. The researchers believe this may be a function of personality, with introverts having smaller networks of friends and extroverts having larger ones.
- Women tend to have larger social networks than men, as do minorities.
- The networks featured varied religious affiliations including Catholics, non-Catholics and "nones."
- Despite the stereotype that college-age students are tuning out of group settings and focusing on their cellphones, they are keeping their network informed of items of interest that are happening in the group they're currently in.
- While the size of a student's social network is fairly stable, the network's composition changes periodically.

Fresh off the three-year study of [social networking](#) habits, Hachen, Lizardo, Striegel and Poellabauer have again teamed up to conduct another, larger, technology-based study of entering college freshmen that they are calling "[NetHealth](#)." They have provided 500 freshmen with

Fitbits or other wearable devices to track their [physical activity](#) and sleep patterns, while a monitoring app will map their social activity by tracking communication via phones, tablets and laptops as well as in-person interactions with other participants in the study.

The researchers also will conduct periodic surveys with the core group of students and an additional 300 to 400 first-year [students](#) in their social circles.

The study will seek to answer questions such as: Is physical activity a factor in how friendships are formed? Do social circles influence a person's health and fitness choices?

With the NetSense study completed and NetHealth underway, the researchers are hoping to conduct future studies on the impact of social networks on people's physical and emotional well-being.

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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