

# Columbia Business School: A Case Study in Information Technology in Academia

As part of its strategy to leverage technology in the development of global business leaders, Columbia Business School has had the longest running (launched in 1992) notebook computer initiative for MBA students in the world. During this time, the nature of the technology being utilized and the services that are provided as part of this strategy have qualitatively changed.

Initially, the students purchased notebooks with Intel 286 architecture running Windows 3.0, and they connected to the School's network, primarily for printing, via 72 public jacks that were interconnected with an early implementation of Ethernet that also sent power to the students' network cards. Today's students continue to come in with state-of-the-art notebooks, but the power and functionality of those notebooks has changed dramatically, and the network has grown to encompass 1,800 jacks in public spaces for student connectivity, all of which are interconnected via a switched Ethernet network that runs 10/100/1000mbps speeds. Wireless technology complements this extensive network to provide connectivity in areas where no jacks exist (large hard-to-wire indoor areas and exterior spaces), but the ubiquity and superior security, speed, and control of the wired networks has lowered the School's need to move to wireless technology at this point in time.

The most visible indicators of the new policy in 1992 were the conversion of the School's student computer lab into student study space, and the empty space that suddenly appeared in the School's Network Operating Center when its miniframe with its roomful of attached DASDs was replaced by a small rack of Novell servers. Today, the small rack has grown into multiple racks of servers and UPSes, the Novell environment has given way to a multi-operating system distributed computing environment, and extensive multimedia technology has spread to each of the School's 25 classrooms.

But the most visible sign of the School's commitment to a robust technological infrastructure is seeing how technology has changed the life of a typical student. It is not just that students are no longer tied to computer labs for printing or working on papers or spreadsheets. They cluster around their notebooks to study anywhere, even outside during fire drills; they no longer queue up to gain access to a computer in a lab; they no longer submit paper forms with preferences for their courses or job interview slots, or cluster around the results, taped on a wall, after their requests have been processed; they no longer have to go to the Student Activities office to check when an event is going to be held; they no longer get all of their material directly from their professor in class; and they no longer are required to do most of their work or networking face-to-face.

Now, all of this information is available for submittal or review online. The students have the means to participate from on- or off-campus, and the School has invested substantially in the applications and technology to facilitate and broaden the flow of information into, through, and out of the School. The entire life cycle of a student – from initial inquiry to participation in the School's active, world-wide alumni network – is now supported online. This includes all aspects of the following processes:

- **admissions** -- inquiring, applying, tracking status, communicating with other future classmates;
- **instruction** -- bidding for courses, getting course materials, taking exams, extending course discussions outside the classroom, seeing grades, reviewing professor and course evaluations;
- **job acquisition** -- identifying job possibilities, networking with alumni in a wide range of industries, management levels, and countries, and bidding for job interview slots;
- **student life** -- communicating with fellow students 24x7, joining student clubs, checking event calendars, buying and selling books or entertainment tickets, finding apartments or roommates, getting locker assignments;
- **alumni networking** -- keeping in touch with classmates, fellow alums in the city in which you work or in your industry; finding out about school events; identifying job opportunities.

These developments increase the depth of the MBA experience not only for those students who spend most of their waking hours on campus, but also for students who live far away from New York City but are enrolled in either of the School's exciting joint Executive MBA programs (the EMBA Global program, with the London School of Business, or the Berkeley-Columbia program, with the Haas School of Business at the University of California Berkeley). These executives can have an on-going, in-depth involvement with their fellow students, instructors, and either School's administrators despite not living or working in the proximity of either school.

In many ways, the life of the student in 1992 was similar to what it is in 2002. But the student of 1992 would have had to fantasize wildly in order to describe the technological advancements, and the changes they make possible in the intervening ten years. The same would be true if we were to try to describe the life of an MBA student at Columbia Business School in 2012 as today's trends toward mobility, 24x7 connectivity, and self-service continue.

One thing is certain, however: Columbia Business School will continue to be among the leaders in deploying stable and appropriate technology to enhance the activities of the School's community.