



Summer 8-4-2004

## Communication Technologies Pose Potential Problems to College Students' Adjustment

Jeffery Hanna  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hanna, Jeffery, "Communication Technologies Pose Potential Problems to College Students' Adjustment" (2004). *News and Events*. 4957.  
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/4957>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

August 4, 2004

**CONTACT:** Jeffery G. Hanna

### *Communication Technologies Pose Potential Problems to College Students' Adjustment*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Technology has altered the way that parents communicate with their college student sons and daughters, and those changes bring potential problems for first-year students' adjustment to their new surroundings, says Illinois Wesleyan counseling service director Connie Horton.

In a much earlier era when college students queued up at the residence hall pay phone for long-distance toll calls or wrote letters home, the flow of communication between college and home was much different, notes Horton. Cell phones, e-mail, and instant messaging allow contact between parents and students to be virtually constant, not to mention inexpensive.

"The dynamics have been changed in ways that parents need to think about," says Horton. "With cell phones, it doesn't cost any more for a student to call Mom or Dad 20 times a day now. But is that helping or hurting the adjustment process?"

"I wouldn't want to be rigid about the rule for how many calls are too many. But students who begin to think that communicating with their mom or dad is the only way that they diffuse their anxiety, college becomes the source of the anxiety and the parent becomes the relief from anxiety."

Another problem that Horton sees with cell-phone usage is that parents don't know where the student is, physically or emotionally, when they call. If, for instance, a homesick student has called home earlier in the day, the parent is tempted to call back to check on the student later that day and can interrupt what has now become a much better experience for the student.

"Often the student feels a lot better after that distressing phone call, but the parent feels worse," says Horton. "But when the parent calls later, maybe the student is interacting happily with friends and starting to feel more settled and the call from home creates a set-back. On the cell phone, you don't know where they are physically and you don't know where they are emotionally."

E-mail and instant messaging can present a different problem - the inability to interpret the tone of a message.

"For instance, a parent may receive an e-mail from a student who indicates that he or she is not happy. You can't hear what the student is really saying in that instance," says Horton. Is the student bored, tired, mildly homesick, or seriously depressed? "Just as with any e-mail, it's possible to overreact or under-react to a message when you can't tell precisely what emotion is contained in the message on the screen."

Horton counsels students and parents to find the right balance to their communication. Parents and students may want to have a discussion and agree on a tentative plan. They might, for example, agree that parents will typically call one evening a week with the understanding that the student may call more often.

To help with adjustment phase, parents might want to wait for the student phone call and be judicious about how often they call back, she says. Students experiencing homesickness or adjustment problems might first seek on campus distractions or solutions (going out with new friends, visiting with a roommate, exercising, studying, visiting the counseling center, etc.) to calm themselves on the campus rather than always looking to parents to help with the anxiety.

Certainly, keeping an emotional connection with home, or calling parents as needed should never be discouraged, Horton just advises families to consider the potential unintended consequences of constant communication.

Contact: Jeffery G. Hanna, Illinois Wesleyan University, 309/556-3181, [jhanna@iwu.edu](mailto:jhanna@iwu.edu).