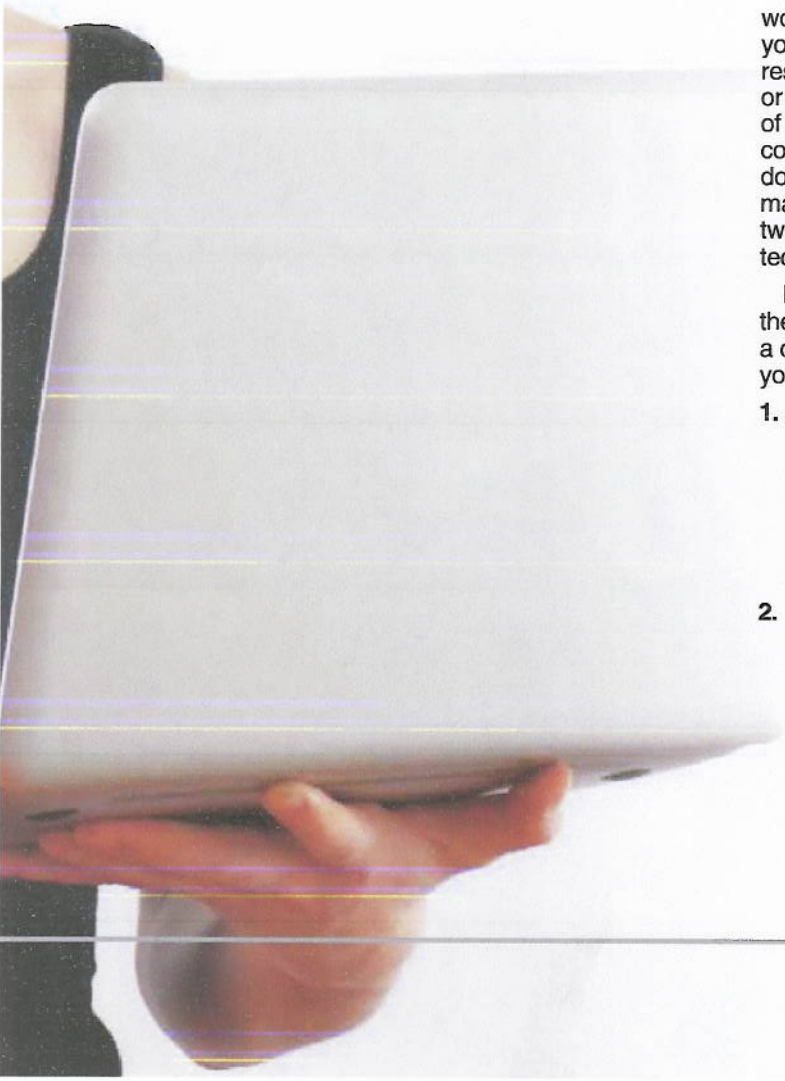
Technology Dancing through a College Campus

BY CURTIS J. BONK
Professor of Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University

Making a decision about a college or university today is never easy. Questions arise about distance you want to be from home, the size and type of institution, your major, the amount of funding needed, etc. Then once you get on campus there are dozens more issues you must overcome.

One of the increasingly obvious concerns today is technology. You need to make choices about the technology you use to complete your coursework, the technology labs, or other settings where you might complete it, and how you will turn it in. You also must find ways to access online course resources posted by the instructor as well as find additional ones to contribute to the class.

Selecting technology is a bit like attending a dance. You might not be sure when you should jump in and who you should select as your partner – Sony? Dell? HP? Apple? Verizon? Sprint?



Every day on a college campus is a journey into the world of learning technology. At each waking moment you will likely be using some technology device or resource. Such tools might be digital books on a Kindle or Sony Screen Reader. They might take the form of a podcast of a lecture to listen to on your desktop computer or iPod. Or perhaps you might have to download class lecture notes or agenda from the course management system on your mobile phone. In the twenty-first century, we are increasingly surrounded by technology options in our learning environments.

Below are 15 technology considerations. Some of these are items you must ask about before you select a college, and others will become more important once you arrive on campus.

1. **Campus Access Card:** Many campuses give students magnetic access cards which include their student identification information and also can carry a financial balance from which to make purchases when on campus. Such technology decreases what you need to carry while you are running across campus to get to your next class on time.
2. **Laptop Computer:** Another weight reducer is the ultra-thin laptop computer, but you must ask questions about computing norms, expectations, and policies. Are students expected to have their own laptop computer? Does the college have laptop discounts? Note that some private institutions give away laptop computers to incoming freshmen, whereas others might require or strongly encourage them.

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3. **Computer Labs:** You might not always want to use your laptop for coursework. If that is the case, you need to ask where the computer labs, workstations, or cyberports are located. In the dorms? In the library? In each classroom building? Perhaps a designated technology building? Or did the campus administrators decide not to install them since most students come to campus with their own laptop computer? You need to know this.
4. **Course Management System:** Does the college use a course management system (CMS) from which students will upload and download work? If so, how and where can you access it? How easy is it to use? Do the students you meet when on campus praise it or complain about downtime or access speed?
5. **Podcasts:** You might inquire whether instructor or department lectures are typically recorded for you to listen to later in case you are sick or need to miss class for personal reasons. Just what podcast initiatives are underway on campus, if any?
6. **Mobile Phones:** College administrators realize that communication of any type helps with both recruitment and retention. Today it is happening on mobile devices. You might ask whether the institution provides access to course schedules and class content from mobile devices. What about current events on campus and recent news? Note that some colleges and universities have special applications for the iPhone or other mobile devices. Ask.
7. **Wireless Connections:** How pervasive is the Internet on the campus? Is wireless access possible across most or all of campus? Do professors use outdoor classrooms where you can still access the Internet? Can you access the campus Internet from nearby cafes, restaurants, and bookstores?
8. **Course Schedules:** Your ultimate goal is to graduate and get a degree. This means taking courses! Hence, you are going to need access to course calendars, schedules, and grades when on campus as well as off campus. Is this information available online or via your mobile phone? Such access becomes critical in monitoring your course selections for upcoming semesters. Your parents might even be interested in this information when you are visiting them on holiday break.
9. **Collaborative Technology:** Many college classes include tasks and final projects that require teamwork and group collaboration. Are there large workstations or special meeting rooms where teams of students can plug in their laptops in semi-privacy to work on team projects? What groupware technology does the campus or program support?
10. **Social Networking Tools:** Does the campus use a social networking tool like Facebook or MySpace or a homegrown product to post valuable information about social and academic events on campus?
11. **Technical Support Personnel:** Face it. At some point you will experience a hard disk crash, computer virus, or problem accessing course content. We all do. Is there a phone number or email contact available for technology-related problems that you cannot personally resolve? Does the college or university provide an online database of technology-related questions and answers?
12. **Emergency Preparedness Systems:** Increasingly college administrators are becoming aware of the need for an alert system on campus for unforeseen events related to campus life and security. While extremely rare, issues at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University come to mind as well as the recent swine flu epidemic, Hurricane Ike and Hurricane Katrina, SARS, and various winter blizzards and ice storms in the midwest. Does your college choice have such a system in place?
13. **Free and Inexpensive Software:** Does the institution have a special deal with Microsoft as well as other vendors for discounts on software or even free tools that might enhance your academic productivity? And can such software be easily downloaded from a campus portal site?
14. **Technology Giveaways:** Many private institutions now entice high school students to enroll with freshman giveaways such as an iPod, iPhone, Mac Laptop Air, or other useful technology. If you run into this, be sure to ask about how such technology is specifically being used in teaching and learning.
15. **Exercise Rooms:** You cannot discount having campus resources that enable you to stay in shape and not gain the famous "Freshman 15." Recently, some exercise machines at places like Cleveland State University come with computers for students to do their work while they get a workout in.

These are 15 technology concerns or issues. There are likely dozens more. Suffice it to say, the technologies tools and resources you find on a college campus today will play a crucial role in your academic success and, in turn, shape your unique skill-set and career options. It is important for you to ponder the possibilities. Don't "save the last dance" for technology when you review your key college choices and options. It may not always be the prettiest or the most handsome one on your college consideration list, but it might be the most powerful and important.

Curtis J. Bonk is Professor of Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University. He has a popular blog called "TravelinEdMan" and is the author of *The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education; Empowering Online Learning: 100+ Ideas for Reading, Reflecting, Displaying, and Doing;* and *The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, Local Designs.*

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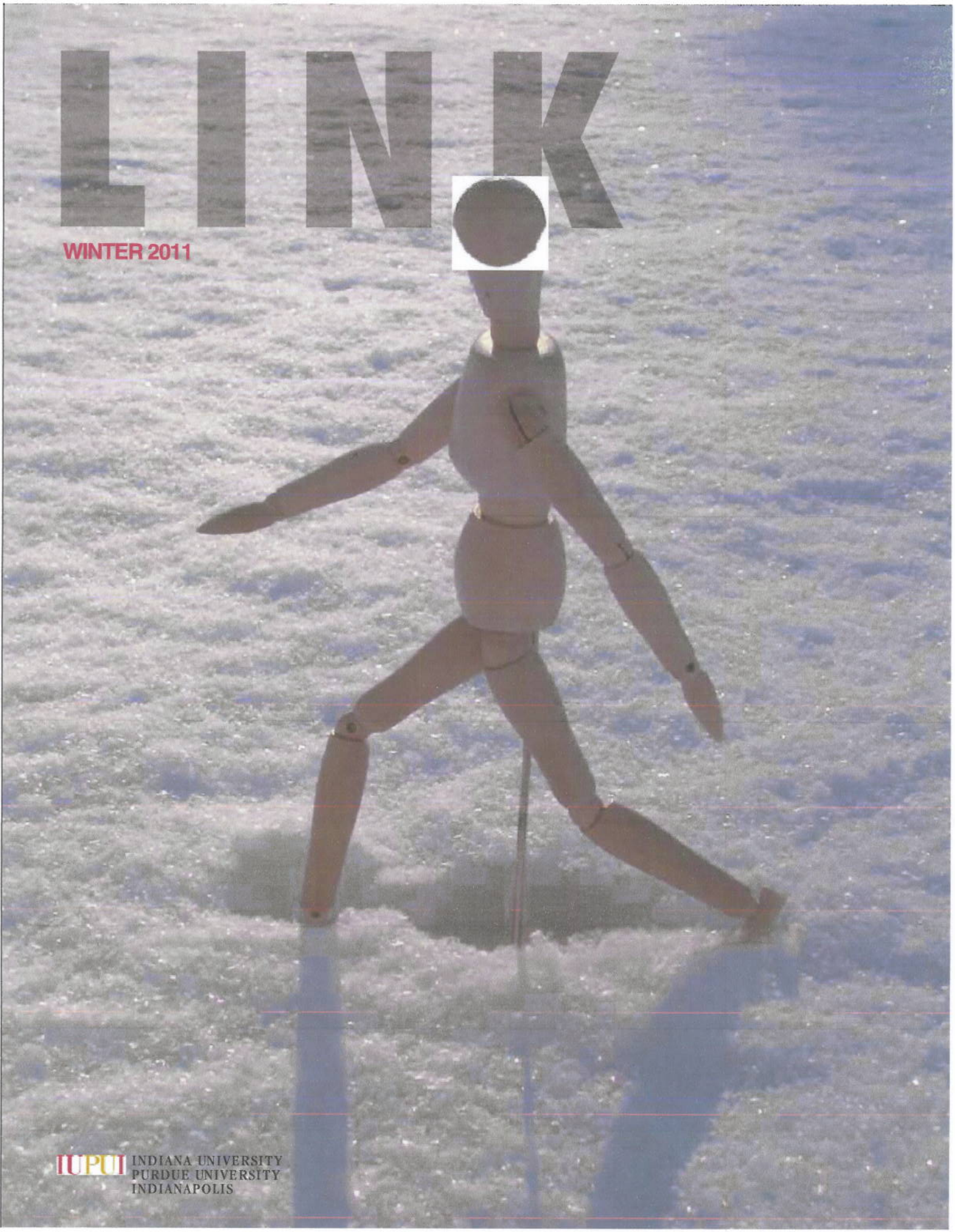

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Interim Dean of University College:
Rick E. Ward

Editor:
Harriett Bennett
Assistant Dean

Copy Editor:
Lynn Trapp

Cover Photo:
Diane Frederick

Photographer:
Peter Stamenov
Sara Crawford

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