From the President

I am still not used to it.

As I walk in front of ISET, our still-new science, engineering, and technology complex, I am aware of a solitary student walking behind me. Suddenly I hear a warm “Hello!” I turn around quickly, open my mouth to return the greeting, and then I notice that the student is talking on her cell phone.

I go into Mortensen Library on the first day of finals for the fall term. Not unexpectedly, the library is full of students—at least 30 within my sight as I stand in the middle of the first-floor lobby. But none of them has an open book.

Every student, every one, is hard at work on a computer. Many sit in front of desktop computers at the well-equipped computer center there. Others slouch on comfortable chairs and couches, working on wireless laptops. Still others are grouped—three or four each—around the collaborative computing pods on the edge of the library’s central area, intently poring over some text on the flat screen that is linked to the laptops they are using together.

On a snowy December night I stop by an end-of-semester party held by the honors wing of Hawk Hall, our newest residence hall. There, in one of the first-floor classrooms, I find a couple dozen students dressed in suits, formal dresses, and tuxedos dancing to some wonderful music being pumped out of small-but-powerful speakers and a subwoofer, all powered by a laptop. I marvel over the speakers’ quality. “They’re my roommate’s,” a student tells me. “He got them at Target for $30.”

Also in December, I attend the Student Government Association’s Christmas tree-lighting ceremony in front of the Auerbach Administration and Computer Center. The students are huddled together on the sidewalk, sipping hot chocolate and eating cookies. In the middle of it all is an elaborate audio hookup provided by WSAM, the student-run radio station. It features very large speakers that are playing Chanukah songs and Christmas carols, all powered by an iPod.

While I could talk about the strategic decisions the University of Hartford has made to keep ahead of the information technology curve, the most striking evidence of this phenomenon for me is the use that our students make of the technology. It is they who are leading us, not vice versa.

It is all new and a bit challenging for me (and I am neither a technophobe nor the most technologically advanced university president in the United States). In embracing technology, I believe our students are returning to practices followed by medieval students in founding the first universities. In those times, students fascinated by learning gathered together and hired teachers who could lead them in discovering new knowledge. Now students come together, empowered by technology, and say to us in the administration and faculty: find ways to use the technology we are comfortable with to teach us about our world.

I see evidence of technology all around the University. The University of Hartford Magnet School has whiteboards and computers in every classroom, so our prekindergarten through fifth-grade students are learning via this technology from the get-go. The University High School of Science and Engineering building, currently under construction, will be organized around a central computer study area in a wireless building. Most of our classrooms are now “smart,” and the entire academic side of campus is wireless. Our most popular majors reflect the impact of technology in society—multimedia Web design, audio engineering technology, acoustics and music, computer science, electrical and computer engineering, media arts, and music and production technology. And virtually every field—from art history to physical therapy to music composition—has been changed by technology.

Our faculty also demand more and better technology resources, both for teaching and for research. At a recent dinner in which we brought together some faculty members and members of the board of regents to discuss the strategic needs of faculty, the most...
intense discussion at my table centered on providing more databases for faculty research.

This is both exciting and challenging, especially for those of us charged with planning for the University’s future. Let me give you an example. Ten years ago, when I first arrived on campus, our administrators were especially pleased that they had invested $1.5 million in “wiring” our residence halls. “A port at every pillow,” was the expression I heard. Now our students are complaining that the residence halls (except for our newest one, Hawk Hall) are not wireless. “We don’t want to be tied to our dorm rooms,” one student told me when I tried the “port at every pillow” line on her.

A strategic planning subcommittee charged with looking at the campus’s future just forwarded me a draft of its recommendations for the next five years. Near the top of the list is “Make the residence halls wireless.” The cost, according to this draft: $800,000. Is it worth it? Will the technology change again within the next few years, making wireless a thing of the past?

These are wonderful challenges to face. Technology is driving learning, driving curiosity about the world, driving a deeper understanding of ourselves as people. Sometimes, in the language of John Perry Barlow, the former lyricist for the Grateful Dead and now a leader in the Electronic Frontier Foundation, I feel like a lost tourist on a strange new continent.

At least I know that I can always find a University of Hartford student to help me explore these strange new surroundings.