AU's tech emphasis gets accolades from Apple, students, faculty

BY: Abe Hardesty
POSTED: 5:42 PM, Feb 12, 2015
UPDATED: 8:45 AM, Feb 13, 2015
TAG: local news (/topic/local-news) | news (/topic/news) | education (/topic/education) | aim (/topic/aim) | primary (/topic/primary)

Early in her first year at Anderson University, Wisconsin native Natalie Feder (pronounced FAY-der) thought it was a cool thing that the school handed her an Apple iPad.

She quickly learned that it was more than a toy.

For an Introduction to the Bible class, she used the technology to take a tour of the Holy Land, read various Bible commentaries on any verse, and get a glimpse of several translations — all elements that made the text and lectures easier to retain.

Three years later, those tools remain on her digital desktop.

“For me, it’s a valuable research tool. I use it every day,” said Feder, a new student when the school made what President Evans Whitaker calls “a committed use” of mobile technology and established the Mobile Learning Initiative.

Whitaker and Feder were among those at center stage Thursday, when the school announced that it has been recognized as an Apple Distinguished School for 2014-16. The Apple Distinguished School designation is reserved for colleges, high schools and middle schools worldwide that meet criteria for innovation, leadership and educational excellence.

Whitaker said the selection “highlights our success as an innovative and compelling learning environment that engages students and provides tangible evidence of extraordinary academic accomplishment.”

Apple representative Pete Davis said the Southern Baptist school is the first in South Carolina to earn the designation.
“What we’ve done here is unique,” Whitaker said following the 30-minute presentation. “I’ve been told by a number of people that we’ve used the technology more extensively than any higher education institute in the South.”

That fits the comments that Feder often gets as she leads prospective students on campus tours — something she’s been doing since her freshman year.

“When I show them how extensive our programs are, the students’ eyes widen,” she said. “I don’t know how much they’re using it at other schools, but the students who tour are surprised by the way we use the iPads.”

During the presentation, Provost Danny Parker thanked the students for their role in the school’s award.

“It was never about throwing a toy in your direction — it was a way to learn more effectively,” said Parker.

In 2013, AU created the South Carolina Center of Excellence for Mobile Learning through a grant awarded by the S.C. Commission on Higher Education. The center helps train teachers across the state in use of mobile technology.

Whitaker praised his faculty, which he considers the best he’s teamed with in 30 years of college administration, for creating “a collaborative learning experience ... which is what we hoped would happen.”

Professor Diana Ivankovic, the director of the Center for Cancer Research, said the emphasis “has changed drastically” the way she teaches genetics, cellular biology and microbiology.

“Many concepts that students had to imagine before, are now possible to create on the iPads and visualize them, move them in space, make movies out of them, share them, modify them,” Ivankovic said. “The possibilities are endless!”

Her students are equipped with e-books — created by the students — to refresh their memory on how to grow cancer cells, feed them, split them, treat them, by a click on the iPad.

“They snaps photos from the microscopes and share data with other students. We blog, keep in touch, and get to learning levels that we never dreamed of a decade ago,” Ivankovic said.
Christian Studies professor Chuck Fuller said the technology has dramatically changed the routine of his students.

“We’ve been able to move content delivery (lectures, etc.) outside the classroom so that class time is reserved for discussion, debate and application,” Fuller said. “In other words, we’ve “flipped” the classroom inside-out. Students view lectures and videos on the iPad, so that our face-to-face seated time can focus on active forms of learning.

“Once we adopted the new format, student satisfaction rates increased dramatically, and research showed that students were achieving course objectives more consistently,” Fuller said.

Feder, the senior class president, has observed an information flow that goes both ways.

“It’s fun when you see students say to a professor, ‘Did you know your iPad could do this?’” said Feder, who came to Anderson on a golf scholarship but intends to make the area her home after graduation.

Even for her, the rate of the iPad use has been a surprise.

“It’s been incredible to see how different departments are interacting with the students, in a fairly short amount of time. It’s exciting to think about what we’ll see in the next four years.”

Follow Abe Hardesty on Twitter @abe_hardesty