

Last week I asked first year students, via e-mail, to give me some feedback on their first two months at Earlham. I asked them two questions: "What's been best so far about your experience at Earlham?" "And what's been worst so far?" A little feedback will help us make sure we keep doing the good things and work to solve any problems you've encountered.

I heard from about five dozen students. The predominant impression from their responses was that they are pleased with their experience. On the plus side, the first years mentioned classes they are taking, new friends they have made, the respectful and friendly character of the community, and the relationships they are building with members of the faculty. We know these are signature Earlham strengths.

In answer to the 'what's been worst' question, students mentioned quite a wide variety of things. We'll try to learn from all the responses, and address as many as we can, but here I want to focus on two responses that came up more frequently than others.

Several students identified their "Learning to Live in Community" (LLC) class as the biggest negative. "LLC is a wonderful concept, it just needs a bit of revision, thought, and student input," said one student. A few specifically mentioned the book being used as a negative. "Remedial and unhelpful," was one person's characterization. A few students made suggestions for improvement. "I would like it to include real life controversies that happen in the dorms instead of always talking about the hypothetical," suggested one first year.

This is our first year with LLC, as with other components of the new General Education requirements. We shouldn't be surprised that some of it needs work. Discussions about how to improve LLC have already begun among the faculty.

A few students mentioned another problem: difficulties with internet access. "The worst thing is that my internet seems to be down every weekend," said one. I thought that odd, and then another responded, "The internet in Barrett is down a lot and it is really unreliable and inconvenient." Puzzled, I asked Tom Steffes, Director of Earlham Computer Services what was up (or down) with the internet in the residence halls. Here's what he responded.

"Yes we have been having problems with the network connections in the residence halls. The cause of the network outages have been virus infected computers that have been overwhelming the network switches by flooding them with massive amounts of traffic. We created a web site with instructions for removing the virus, provided free anti-virus software to install, and made available the Windows patches to fix the vulnerability."

It appears this is a new kind of problem of community: some virus-infected computers making problems for everyone who uses the network. We all need to cooperate if each of us is to have good access.

Apparently a number of students ignored messages from ECS and continued to use their virus-infected systems on our network. ECS gave these students time to clean up their systems before disabling their network ports. Some of these students, however, rather than taking the effort to clean up their systems, found ways to connect them to ports that were still live.

ECS is continuing to work on the problem. Says Tom Steffes, “This whole event has brought up the need for us to have clearly defined expectations for the students to be on our network and to provide the students the means for keeping their computers up to date with the latest Windows patches and anti-virus software. I will be meeting with the Resident Life folks and the Instructional Technology Policy Committee (ITPC) later this fall to begin to put together a plan for addressing this issue.”

Here’s a real life lesson about learning to live in community. Maybe this is one of the “real life controversies” we should make a part of the LLC course.

My thanks to all the first years who responded to the request for feedback. We’ll use the responses to make Earlham better.

