

# Hey, Alexa, Should We Bring Virtual Assistants to Campus? These Colleges Gave Them a Shot

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## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Technology:

Hey, Alexa, Should We Bring Virtual Assistants to Campus? These Colleges Gave Them a Shot

Technology

By Lindsay Ellis August 02, 2018



An Echo Dot device is among those in use at Arizona State U.'s Tooker House, an engineering-school dormitory.

Charlie Leight/Arizona State U.

Research universities are squeezing an extra roommate into residence halls: Amazon's Alexa.

The Georgia Institute of Technology, Northeastern University, and Arizona State University last year provided students with Echo Dots, puck-shaped, voice-activated devices programmed to answer campus-specific questions about meal plans and business hours for campus buildings.

Some of these Echo Dots, programmed by n-Powered, a Boston-based start-up, can relay individual students' data, including financial aid and grades. The company's founders installed 60 of the virtual-assistant devices at Northeastern this past spring.

Call it a next-level chatbot, a natural extension of existing smartphone apps, or even a way to demonstrate technological prowess in a crowded student-recruitment market. Believers say that the use of the technology will only expand, and that lessons from the first year of student use across the country can instruct future adopters.

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At Arizona State, where 1,600 students in an engineering-school residence hall were offered the devices last year, developers at first gave Alexa the ability to answer fairly basic questions. The Arizona State "skill" — Amazon's term for an add-on that Alexa users can download — can play the university's fight song or describe forthcoming campus events.

Students first had to learn to bring the device into their daily routines, said John Rome, Arizona State's deputy chief information officer. They would ask about the weather, call Mom, play music.

Only then would they start asking university-specific questions: How late is this building open? When are finals? Arizona State's Alexa skill could answer those, too.

Soon students wanted yet more-personalized answers: What did I get on my last test? What assignments are coming up?

Those are more complicated, Rome said, because users would repeatedly have to confirm that they are authorized to receive that information.

"We're trying to figure out the best practices there," he said. He hopes that those capabilities will be in place by the end of the fall semester. The "nirvana" of voice technology, he said, is to develop smart tutors with which students can study.

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Arizona State has several full-time employees to sustain the program, Rome said. Students have developed new capabilities for the university's "skill."

## Don't Just Go for the 'Wow'

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"There is a cool factor, but that shouldn't be a driving factor for a nonprofit institution," said Somen Saha, co-founder and CEO of n-Powered.

The software must be useful in various aspects of the life of the university, he said. For example, faculty members could push supplemental audio after a lecture to reinforce a course topic.

Colleges that give out popular technology are often accused of resorting to gimmickry. But merely distributing the small Echo Dot devices, which retail for less than \$50, wouldn't be enough to woo prospective students, Rome said.

Programming at Arizona State adds to the appeal, he said. About 700 students signed up for a new scholarship through which they can participate in a fall hackathon to develop new capabilities for their Echo Dots. Top performers earn a \$5,000 scholarship, and a tour of Amazon's Seattle headquarters.

Engineering courses at the university have also introduced projects to develop students' voice-programming skills, Rome said.

Surveys have been crucial in helping Arizona State officials discover what students most want from Alexa, Rome said. Many want the devices to relay to them key deadlines and dates on the academic calendar.

But students also want information not captured in databases, like faculty office hours and campus dining menus, he noted. That material is often posted to individual websites but not centralized. Now, administrators are wondering how to capture that data, he said.

At Georgia Tech, students can use Echo Dots to track meal swipes and check the balance of BuzzCards, which they use to buy items from campus stores.

After Northeastern's pilot program, Saha said, he realized that students wanted their devices to be proactive. Students wanted to wake up with a morning alarm followed by a daily briefing: Your physics class is canceled, but don't forget your appointment with your academic adviser.

"We got to peek into how, really, students think," he said. "They almost want a personal assistant versus a reactive device. Now I know there are more kids out there that are just like my son."

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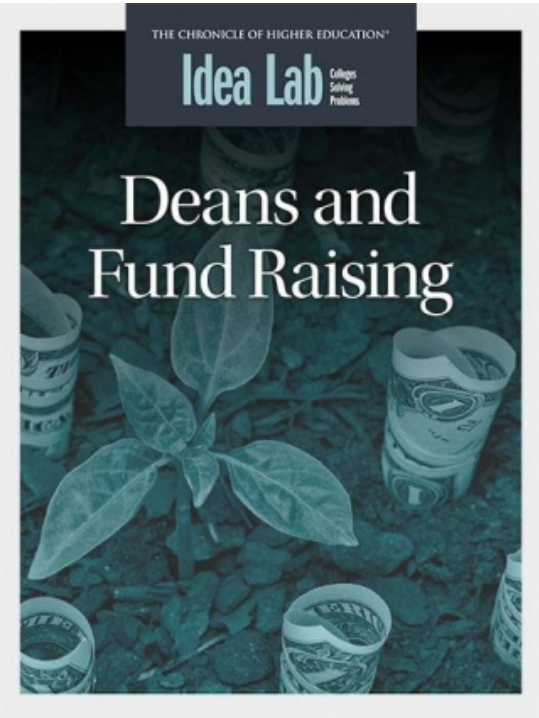
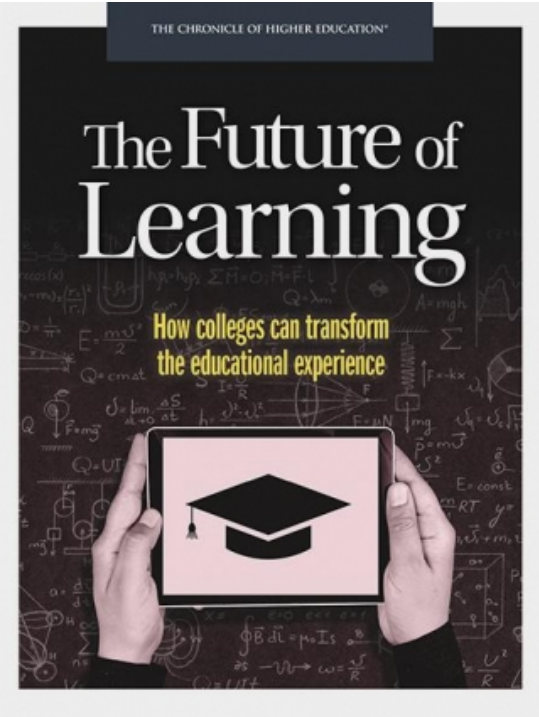
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