4-2-2013

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Student Project Tracks Building Efficiency with Twitter

DURHAM, N.H. – Is it hot in here, or is it me? At the University of New Hampshire, a student project is engaging up-to-the-minute social media to combat the age-old issue of classrooms that are too hot or too cold.

The project, called Tweeting (Dis)comfort, encourages students to use Twitter to report classrooms that are uncomfortably hot or cold. Tweets to @unhbuildings will help close the feedback loop between UNH’s campus energy office, which sets the thermostats in each classroom, and the users of those rooms.

“The heating system might be working fine, according to the energy office, but people are still hot. This will help us know if the thermostats are set to make the classroom environment comfortable,” says civil engineering student Andrew Wells ’14, who is leading the project. “If they’re not, how can we adjust them to make sure the people in the classroom have a good experience?”

Piloted in December and officially launched earlier this month, Tweeting (Dis)comfort is tracking temperature trends in primarily overheated classrooms. “Conant 8 is sweltering!” writes one user. “Big lecture hall in Spaulding is a sauna.” Room 185 in the new Paul College gets lots of feedback: “Paul is beautiful but it’s wicked hot in 185,” tweeted a student.

Wells will track tweets and monitor for patterns within buildings through the spring and next fall. He’ll present a final summary to UNH’s energy office, which aggressively monitors building energy use and constantly adjusts heat and air conditioning to meet pre-set temperature levels.

“The findings will most likely tell us that a system has failed and continues to provide heat or A/C even though we don’t want it to,” says Matt O’Keefe, campus energy manager. “The hope is that the information will support the need for repairs to areas that repeatedly cause discomfort.”

O’Keefe adds while his office will not be able to respond to tweets of discomfort in real time, he anticipates the data collection and long-term data analysis will help UNH save energy dollars and add to the comfort of future occupants.

Wells, from Keene, is working with assistant professor of civil engineering Tat Fu, whose research concerns green buildings. Fellow civil engineering student Paige Dickie ’14 recently signed on to help with the project, and three seniors in information technology – Ben Couture, Kyle Foster, and Willy Vasquez-Morales – are managing the data once it’s tweeted. Wells and the team will present this project at UNH’s Undergraduate Research Conference, the largest event of its kind in the country, on Wednesday, April 24, 2013, at the Interdisciplinary Science & Engineering Symposium in Kingsbury and Morse halls.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state’s flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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