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## Laptops lap at blue book's domain

By TIM SIMMONS, Staff Writer

If Jocelyn Neal could get rid of college blue books tomorrow, that wouldn't be too soon for the assistant professor of music at UNC-Chapel Hill.

It won't happen that quickly, but the day might be closer than Neal ever imagined.

She is among a small group of North Carolina instructors using software that allows students to take exams on their laptops without teachers worrying about whether those laptops might also be used to cheat.

Instead of scribbling long passages in blue books, students use their keyboards to compose -- and only compose. The testing software denies access to all other files during the exam.

"You can't surf the Web or send instant messages or do anything except take the test," Neal said. "It is very secure."

Once students close the computer file containing the test, the results of the exam are locked in and can't be changed. The test is then sent to the teacher, and the computer works normally again.

The program, made by a company called Software Secure, was used by several hundred students this year at UNC-CH, said Charlie Green, associate director for academic technology in the College of Arts and Sciences. About 500 to 1,000 students are expected to use it next year.

It also was used this spring to give English and foreign language exams at Meredith College. Wake Forest University's School of Law uses it to administer 4,000 exams a year.

"We've never lost a test," said Edward Raliski, Wake Forest's director of educational technology.

Software Secure founder Doug Winneg said he developed the program after listening to teachers and students complain about struggling with long answers written on paper.

"It just didn't make any sense to me that colleges were still using that approach when students hardly write anything of length anymore with a paper and a pen," Winneg said. "And then the instructors would complain that they had to spend hours deciphering the handwriting."

Teachers were reluctant to let go of blue books, though, because they feared tests given on laptops would be vulnerable to cheating.

"A lot of these kids are more comfortable behind a computer than their instructors, so bringing laptops in the classroom was mostly seen as opening a Pandora's box," Green said.

But instructors who have used the software have been pleased.

"I'd be surprised if 90 percent of our testing isn't done like this in five years," said Todd Taylor, an associate professor of English at UNC-CH.

### **Online or off**

The program can be used online when students have access to the Internet, or tests can be taken offline. When tests are offline, students must e-mail the file of the test from a site where they can tap into the Internet.

In classrooms at Meredith, where wireless Internet access is available from almost anywhere on campus, students can take exams online through a secure browser site and hit the send button when they are done.

The software that enables teachers to set up a secure browser site for taking exams also can be used for teaching. That's because the software requires students to get access to the Internet through a site controlled, filtered and monitored by the teacher.

If students should decide they would rather visit the NFL draft board or their favorite Web site during class when the teacher had the Library of Congress in mind, the students will not only find access blocked but also find their efforts can be monitored.

The same holds true if students should try to send instant messages to one another through the site controlled by the teacher.

Instructors aren't quite as impressed with these features of the software, but Taylor said the potential is obvious.

"I have always worked hard to bring technology into the classroom," he said. "So I understand the first time you do anything there are glitches."

Melonie Ivey, who works in the technology services department at Meredith College, agreed, saying the software should eventually make it easy to use specific pages within The Wall Street Journal Web site for business classes or to ask students to compare art pieces from around the world.

### **Access with control**

About 160 schools use the software in one form or another, Winneg said. Several states also use it to administer the bar exam.

Software Secure is not the only technology on the market offering electronic testing programs, but technology directors in North Carolina say they are impressed with the product's stability and its potential to reach into undergraduate classrooms.

"Stability is so crucial if you are using it for testing," Green said.

Winning said he expects instructors will eventually like the ability to grant access to the Web without losing control of what students are viewing.

But after 10 years of fusing teaching and technology, Taylor said he has come to accept that an instructor in front of a class isn't as interesting as moving images on a screen.

"You can't really compete with the screen," he said. "You just need to make it clear to the students that they have the responsibility to remain focused."

Put another way: Those who fool around in class and don't pay attention will soon find themselves flunking the next test -- regardless of how it's given.