

Handhelds aided hearing-impaired protesters

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Student activists at Gallaudet University used wireless tech to mobilize

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WASHINGTON - After a sleepless night protesting at Gallaudet University, student government leader Christopher Corrigan was ready to crawl into a tent near a campus gate at 7:45 a.m. Then he felt the familiar buzz on his Sidekick wireless handheld computer.

The message: "Emergency."

Within minutes, Corrigan and others had joined their friends at another gate, where protesters say campus security officers were removing their belongings with construction equipment, among other things.

"As soon as it happened, people were paging, 'hey, we need help,'" Corrigan signed through an interpreter, describing last month's incidents.

Many protests that begin heatedly lose momentum and fizzle out. But student activists at the nation's only university for the deaf and hearing impaired surprised school administrators with their tenacity and organization. Their demonstrations led to the ouster of incoming President Jane K. Fernandes — who students and faculty said was autocratic and unable to tackle the school's long-term problems during her years as provost.

The successful mobilization can be partly credited to a technology that did not exist a decade ago: the wireless handheld computer. For a month, protesters used the mobile devices to wage a wireless war via messages to each other, the media and the international deaf community.

Almost every Gallaudet student has a BlackBerry, Sidekick or other handheld. The students say the technology has brought them more equality and has opened up the world.

Before the mobile devices came along, deaf people relied mainly on Telecommunications Devices for the Deaf, which work through phones. Another service, Telecommunications Relay Service, uses an operator who repeats the words to a hearing person and then translates them back in text.

T. Alan Hurwitz, dean of the Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf, said wireless handhelds, as well as services like AOL Instant Messenger and real-time captioning, have made communication instantaneous for deaf people.

"The advances in technology have truly leveled the playing field, allowing deaf people to work in jobs never before possible," Hurwitz, who is deaf, wrote from his BlackBerry.

Corrigan, a 20-year-old junior, used his Sidekick II for weeks to send out mass e-mails about the protests and alert friends to his whereabouts. "Without the pagers, we would have to have people running to the dorms to get people," he said.

He and other protest leaders created committees to handle different communications, such as one for media and one for rally planning. Then, "people paged several people who paged several people," Corrigan said. The messages spread like a virus, reaching hundreds on campus, who then relayed them to thousands of people and spread them on deaf-focused Web journals and other Web sites. Students, alumni, members of the deaf community and others had up-to-the-minute news, and many monitored or joined in the

protests.

Even Corrigan's parents showed up to support their son. After his mother felt a buzz on her own Sidekick at home in Frederick, Md., she found an e-mail from a campus activist about the scuffle at Gallaudet.

Within a few hours, Diane Corrigan had the "blow-by-blow" of the Oct. 25 events that had awakened her son that same morning, she said. She left work and drove with her husband to Gallaudet's campus, where students, faculty, staff and alumni were demanding Fernandes' resignation.

Fernandes, the university's former provost, was selected in May by the board of trustees to replace I. King Jordan as president when he retires in January. But following the persistent protests, the board gave in to students' and faculty's demands and on Oct. 29 revoked the appointment.

On Gallaudet's campus, the most common mobile device is T-Mobile's Sidekick — with its flip-out color screen and a thumb keypad. The device, known for its cool factor and popularized by hip-hop artists, is also popular with deaf people because service provider T-Mobile USA offers a data-only plan that usually costs between \$30 and \$40 a month.

T-Mobile says it offered the data plan — which only allows 911 calls — in response to the deaf community. The carrier maintains that it is the only wireless service provider that has made such an accommodation.

Sidekick II gives users access to their AOL Instant Messenger account, while the newer Sidekick III also provides access to Yahoo Inc.'s and Microsoft Corp.'s MSN instant messaging services.

From their mobile devices, protesters say they sent batch e-mails with information and updates to large lists of e-mail addresses. They also instant-messaged fellow protesters to tell them where to go for impromptu rallies.

Although technology is understandably ubiquitous at Gallaudet, its students aren't the first to use the Web and electronic devices as a way to organize their protests.

Howard Rheingold, an expert in the culture of personal communication technology, describes the phenomenon in his book "Smart Mobs."

He writes that frequently updated Web sites helped street demonstrators with their activism at the anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in the late '90s. And in 2001, a popular movement believed to be largely organized through text messages brought out an estimated 100,000 Filipinos for protests against then-President Joseph Estrada.

Cheryl Small, a Gallaudet graduate student from Canada, said that without handhelds, the protest probably would not have been as successful.

"I get messages all day, every day," she said while on a hunger strike during the demonstrations last month.

But the effects of wireless socialization are mixed, said Ryan DiGiovanni, a second-year student who is deaf.

"I'm a people person, and I like to talk to people face-to-face," DiGiovanni said. "A lot of people talk on computers, and you lose the tone and intent that way."

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