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With an eye toward environment, some profs. going paperless

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In the rush of shopping period, students in political science courses may not have noticed anything missing on the first days of classes. But since the department committed to becoming greener, professors are handing out fewer printed syllabus to their students.

Both convenience and concern for the environment have motivated a movement from traditional paper resources to electronic ones. The University's online programs, like MyCourses and Online Course Reserve Access, have helped to facilitate this trend.

According to Professor of Political Science James Morone, chair of the department, the introduction of MyCourses was a major factor in the political science department's shift away from paper.

"We were thrilled when that system came in," Morone said. The Department of Political Science began posting syllabi on MyCourses "maybe two years ago," and since then has instituted a departmental policy not to give out paper copies, he added.

"Brown as an institution really helped us go paperless," Morone said. For his department, moving syllabi online was a decision largely motivated by the environment.

"I think the faculty were delighted because of the environmental factor," Morone said. "We have a green political science department."

For other professors, the decision to use more online resources has been motivated by convenience.

Associate Professor of History Tara Nummedal eliminated paper course packets in her classes and "switched entirely over to OCRA last spring."

"There are a lot of reasons to put readings online," she said, and hers were not primarily environmental. Nummedal said that she made the decision because putting readings online is easier for her. "Once I scan a PDF, I always have it. I don't have to reassemble the course packet every year."

Nummedal said other professors in the history department were also reducing paper use in their classes, by having students turn in homework and papers via MyCourses or e-mail, and using online correcting tools to grade and give comments.

Morone said students seem increasingly able to deal with these paperless methods. "In the last two years we've seen a student population that is more comfortable online," he said.

"A lot of faculty are switching over to OCRA, but I'm not sure if it is environmental or if it has more to do with convenience," Nummedal added.

Although putting readings and syllabi online likely has some effect on actual paper use at Brown, it is unclear how large the impact is. Both Nummedal and Morone were optimistic that at least some paper is saved through these programs. Although many students will print out online readings, using the same amount of paper as a course packet would, OCRA "gives students who are environmentally conscious an option not to use paper," Nummedal said.

But Michael Glassman '09, a member of the environmental advocacy group emPOWER and former Undergraduate Council of Students president, said he doubts the shift to online resources is making much of a difference.

"Paper use is not really one (of the issues) that I've heard students getting excited about," Glassman said. He added that the movement away from paper is "technology-driven and not necessarily the result of groups on campus" advocating paper reduction.

"I think the impact would be ... pretty miniscule" relative to "other things that Brown could be focused on such as retrofitting buildings," he said.

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