

Emphasis

Campus telephone system has its advantages, disadvantages

By Scott Wood
Emphasis Editor

At home, the telephone was something most students thought came standard with the house. It was there for use day after day without fail. However, at college students face the reality of having to pay for phone service and long distance calls.

Students living on campus at Elon must subscribe to the Elon College Telephone service. Elon's Private Branch Exchange, or PBX is shared by both faculty and resident students. Instead of a telephone number number, residents have an extension number.

The system here has its advantages and disadvantages. First, compared to rates charged by Southern Bell, Elon Telkom is quite a deal. According to Mrs. Ruth Fisk, of the Southern Bell Business Office, students living off campus can expect to pay about \$21 per month for basic service. Elon charges \$13.50 per month. Second, Elon has a \$7.50 connection fee compared to Southern Bell's \$40 fee. Third, Southern Bell may require a deposit of \$75 to \$200, depending upon a student's credit history. Elon requires no deposit.

Money-making Venture

Nevertheless, Elon Telkom is a money making venture of the college. Elon Telkom subscribes to AT&T's Wide Area Telephone Service, commonly called WATTS service. Instead of paying for long distance calls by the minute and the destination, Elon pays a flat fee per hour.

This is how it works. When a resident student picks up the phone and dials his personal long distance code and the telephone number, Elon's telephone system electronically selects the least expensive WATTS line available.

Say a student calls Baltimore and talks for an hour. Elon bills the student a retail rate of \$9, but the call only costs Elon Telkom the wholesale rate of \$7.50. Elon pockets the \$1.50 difference as profit. That may not seem like a lot of money, but when the phone

system processes an average of more than 4,000 calls per night during the week, it adds up.

Sharing is the key word behind Elon Telkom's system. All extension phones, both faculty and staff, share trunks. A trunk is almost like a telephone line in a home, except that Elon has special trunks which perform special functions. Some trunks only make outgoing calls. Others make only long distance distance calls. Some only receive incoming calls.

Ted Robins, a freshman from New Jersey, said, "My girlfriend has problems calling me. She sometimes gets a busy signal even though I'm not on the phone." This is because Elon Telkom currently provides 25 direct inward dialing trunks for incoming calls. This means only 25 people can receive a call at a time. If someone calls a campus telephone while all 25 incoming trunks are busy, the caller will still receive a busy signal even if the phone dialed is not in use.

The same busy conditions can happen when a student tries to call off campus. A certain number of trunks are reserved for off campus. A telephone rush hour can occur when more students are trying to call then there are trunks available.

Steve Holt, Elon Telkom's engineer, said he is aware of the problems students are having. Holt said, "A total of 15 trunks are going being added in 4 to 6 weeks to accommodate the high volume of traffic." He said this will include the addition of two incoming trunks and four outgoing trunks, plus 13 long-distance trunks. The increased numbers of students from outside North Carolina has necessitated the redesign of long-distance trunks to which Elon subscribes. Telkom has increased the number of long-distance trunks available for out-of-state dialing. Before this year Telkom largely concentrated on long-distance trunks for use in North Carolina.

Efficiency Rated

According to Holt, the additional 15 trunks will give Elon's phone system a "P grade 1" rating. This means Elon's phone

system is just as efficient as Southern Bell's.

Because students pay the retail AT&T direct dial rate they cannot take advantage of the Equal Access Ruling of the Federal Communications Commission. This ruling makes available other long distance companies, which in some cases are cheaper than the rates students now pay.

However, students are able to take advantage of other long-distance companies by subscribing and using a toll-free access number. Elon Telkom used to subscribe to cheaper systems such as Sprint and MCI. Buck Bayliff, director of auxiliary services, declined to comment on why Elon no longer uses these systems.

Surcharge Is New

New this year is a \$1 surcharge to students making operator-assisted calls such as collect and AT&T credit card calls. Bayliff said, "This dollar is not being charged by the college, but by Southern Bell." However, Gary Brinkley, assistant manager of marketing for Southern Bell, said in an interview, "I'm not aware of any dollar charge of this kind." Beverly Spann, service consultant for Southern Bell, said, "The dollar charge for operator assistance must be a university policy."

How do Elon students feel about their campus phone service? Dan Worrell, a freshman from Vincetown, N.J., said, "I have had no problems so far, but I do not agree with charging for unanswered calls that ring more than eight times." In fact this has always been a problem for Elon Telkom. Elon's system is unable to distinguish when the person called has picked up the phone. Because of this, the call tracking system automatically begins billing 30 seconds into the call, whether someone has answered or not.

Elon does not get billed by the phone company for the overring, but does expect the student to pay for it. On the other hand, if the person called picks up the phone on the first ring he or she gets about 20 seconds free.

There is a piece of equipment



MAKING IT WORK: Telecom engineer Steve Holt checks out phone circuits with a test set.
Photo by Ann Cralidge

available to correct this problem. It is called a Answered Supervised Trunk and is used on all Southern Bell lines. However, it is quite expensive, and Bayliff said that the monthly fee for service would have to be increased for Elon to correct the problem.

Teresa Weavil, Telkom manager, said the simplest solution, if a student wants to let the phone ring more than eight times, is to hang up and call again.

Other problems for Telkom are caused by growth. For example, resident students in Baxter House are still without individual phone service. About 20 women are required to share one central phone. According to Holt, a cable will have to be buried from the new Fine Arts Center across the lacrosse field to Baxter House. He did say the project would have to be approved by President Fred Young.

Another new feature of the phone system this year is that students living on campus can call from room to room and receive calls from off campus free of charge. However, with the Telkom system at its current maximum for

handling calls about 60 rooms or 120 students are without this service. Holt said this problem would be corrected with the addition of several new pieces of equipment, providing everyone with service.

Another problem that students are encountering is not being able to accept collect calls. This policy was effected last year to curb the problem of phone billing abuse. Many students were billing calls to different numbers other than their own, therefore trying to avoid payment.

The action has not solved the problem of billing abuse completely. Weavil said that part of the problem is students' unwillingness to protect their seven-digit access code. Some will write it on the wall next to phone, while others give it to their friends. Once the access code is available, a long distance call can be made from any campus phone and billed to another student without his knowledge.

To help curb this problem, Telkom has increased the access code from six to seven digits.