NEW YORK - For Valerie Douglas, an 18-year-old freshman at Wofford College in Spartanburg, S.C., the Internet helped her get settled before she ever set foot on campus. It found her a roommate and friend.

Before the term began in fall 2005, the school gave incoming freshmen the chance to meet and greet via a MySpace-style site called FYI (First Year Interface). After sharing profiles, photos, bedtimes and partying habits on the site, Wofford let students who hit it off become roommates.

"I had heard so many scary stories about bad roommates," says Douglas. "Luckily, I found myself a great one through the site. It was extremely important to me to have a say in it." Feeling comfortable with the roommate situation is also a great way to minimize the stress that comes with moving away from home, notes Douglas.

But social networking tools are only the beginning of the efforts schools are making to harness their students' willingness to live an always connected lifestyle. Cutting-edge tech services are a big draw in an increasingly competitive market for the best and brightest students.

Around the country, students are listening to podcasted lectures and taking exams online. But thanks to a group of technologies called Internet2, they're also participating in live classes via streaming video. At MIT, courses on anything from engineering to writing to tap dancing are shared over large screens with students at universities in Singapore. Professors from both continents teach the courses.

Internet2 is a network that allows more than 220 universities — and a few research-related companies and government organizations — to use advanced online services — although not the World Wide Web — at speeds 100 times faster than normal connections. It's what the Internet will be like for the rest of us someday, if we're lucky.

Even after class lets out, there's almost nothing students can't accomplish from their dorm rooms.

At many schools, entrepreneurial students have been sanctioned to sell food and make deliveries around campus. Students place orders via the Web and pay with their meal-plan accounts. Within minutes, goodies arrive at the door.

"We get students who have a wide variety of cravings in the middle of the
night," says Brandon Arbiter, a Columbia University student who helped launch CU Snacks. "They're desperate for anything, from fresh-baked cookies to pizza to condoms."

The Web is fundamental to his business, says Arbiter, who notes that students might be writing an essay on one half of the computer screen and placing an order on the other. Late at night, most students have no desire to wander around Manhattan looking for munchies. "This exists to make things easier for students," he says.

If there's one thing students hate to do, it's laundry. Fortunately, Web-based services have made even this mundane chore more convenient. Washers and dryers in dorm laundry rooms can be connected to the Internet via equipment from Mac-Gray or privately held USA Technologies, based in Malvern, Pa.

Students at dozens of colleges, such as Syracuse, American University and Marist College, can check online whether a vacant machine is waiting downstairs and how much time remains on each machine's cycle. They can also check when their dorm's peak laundry time is, so they can avoid having their sopping wet clothing taken out of the washer by someone else desperate to use the machine. Notifications are sent from the machines to computers, cell phones or PDAs.

Another technological perk many schools are now offering is access to TV, movies and music over the Internet connections on campus and in dorms. Rather than spend the money and effort cracking down on illegal file-sharing programs, some schools have decided to provide students with a legal, unlimited supply of digital entertainment.

At Alfred State College, in Alfred, N.Y., students have free access to movies, music and TV, provided by Ruckus Network, a Herndon, Va.-based startup that works with companies like Sony, Warner and Universal.

And should a student need to leave his or her techno-haven dorm room, not to worry: Ubiquitous Wi-Fi networks abound at almost every school. Some campuses have turned those networks into ways for students to keep track of one another. At MIT, for example, the iSpots Web page gives students the option of letting others know where they are at all times, based on the location of their laptop on a map of the campus.

Similarly, most campuses in cold climates offer sites for students to track the location of campus shuttles, so they don't have to wait in the cold for their rides to arrive.

Even when students make it into town, the long arm of campus tech follows them. Most schools have turned student ID cards into bank cards that can be swiped by local vendors. This way, students can pay using their meal-plan bucks, and student discounts can be applied.

BlackBoard manages the back end of such card models for more than 50 schools and has partnered with national retailers like CVS, Chipotle and Jack In
The Box to let students pay with their IDs.

But using the Web to get music, view lectures in faraway classrooms and do laundry isn't enough, some schools say. In the working world, expectations for "always on" connectivity can be even more intense. That's why the University of Maryland's Smith Business School is handing a free BlackBerry to each student — practice makes perfect. Business students at the Smith School learn to manage the 24/7 access to data and people they'll be expected to deal with as executives.

But for now, students can take it easy. After all, the real world is at least a few years away.

© 2006 Forbes.com

© 2006 MSNBC.com

URL: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10944795/