MIT students no longer need to share class schedules to keep track of each other on campus.

New software released in beta by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Senseable City Lab on Wednesday creates a map that plots friends’ movements on the university’s campus in real time.

The software, called iFind, looks at first like any typical instant-messaging program. But iFind’s buddy list is augmented by a map showing where on MIT’s campus those buddies are in real time. The map plots buddies who are logged on to the MIT network via Wi-Fi, allowing users to create unique mini avatars for each friend. Users can see who is hanging out on the banks of the Charles River and who is one floor up from them in the library.

François Proulx, the iFind software architect, coordinated the “friendspotting” application development under Senseable City Lab Director Carlo Ratti. Ratti is responsible for Real Time Rome, a real-time mapping program that tracks people a cell phone signal.

“When you hover your mouse over your friend, a little ripple or star blinks, and you see a pop-up with the name of the building and room where he is. You can then double-click to start a chat,” Proulx said.

As with instant-messaging applications, iFind requires reciprocating invitations in order for people to be on each other’s buddy lists. Users have the option of temporarily hiding themselves from a specific buddy or the entire group. They can also take someone off their buddy list entirely.

Unlike instant-messaging programs, however, iFind users do not have to be specifically connected to a network to be “seen.” Since iFind is tuned to MIT-operated access points, it can “find” any iFind user with an enabled wireless card.

iFind is expected to be very popular among MIT students. As of Wednesday afternoon, about five people were downloading iFind every 5 minutes, according to Proulx. And that was before news of the new program even hit the school newspaper.

The iFind program is available to anyone with an "mit.edu" e-mail address, including faculty and administrative staffers. But Proulx’s group plans to release the open-source iFind client under the GNU General Public License so that any school or group network can use it.

“If you compare (iFind) to other similar projects, most of them use a central server to gather the locations. Everything is peer-to-peer so at any given moment, we have no location data on the server,” said Proulx.

Proulx said this was purposely done in order to keep the privacy of users and avoid personal-data collection. The program may track general-usage statistics on which Wi-Fi access points are used the most.

The application grew out of iSpots, a program the MIT Senseable City Lab worked on with Nicholas Negroponte of $100 laptop fame. iSpots tracks the usage of Wi-Fi access points on MIT’s campus to determine the patterns of building and space use, according to Proulx. MIT’s sprawling campus has more than 2,800 Wi-Fi access points; people are able to be tracked within feet.

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