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Donors equip Hiram College students with iPads and footwear to boot

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Hiram College freshman Andrew Gard, 18, of Dayton opens his new iPad from the school's Tech and Trek program on Thursday in Hiram. All students and faculty members received an iPad and are getting hiking boots. (Leah Klafczynski/Akron Beacon Journal)

By Katie Byard

Beacon Journal staff writer

Hours after checking into their dorm rooms this week, freshmen at Hiram College all got iPad Pros.

On Sunday, they'll get hiking boots.

The giveaway — supported through private donors and a corporate gift from Red Wing Shoe Co. — is central to the college's new Tech and Trek program.

All of the roughly 800 full-time traditional students at the small, liberal-arts school in Portage County will get the iPads, as well as a free pair of Vasque hiking boots (made by Red Wing) that retail for about \$170.

The idea is to enhance learning in the classroom as well as encourage students to use the mobile technology during out-of-the-classroom experiences.

Alexis Robinson, 18, of Cleveland, was among the freshmen eagerly unboxing their iPads this week.

Though she used a laptop during high school, she knew the iPad Pro was a more sophisticated device that came loaded with apps.

"I wasn't as psyched about the boots, but I think it's going to be good," she said. "Participation is good in college. They [college staffers] told us today, 'Don't stay in your dorm. Get involved.' So I guess things like hiking are important."

Hiram College President Lori E. Varlotta came up with the Tech and Trek program after attending a gathering of educators at Apple headquarters in Cupertino, Calif., and learned there were some eight to 10 U.S. colleges and universities where all students and all faculty members have their own iPads.

Hiram College will be the first four-year institution in Ohio to have such a program.

"I wanted to be one of those colleges," Varlotta said. "I wanted to go about it in a very different way," adding the "trek" aspect.

"We really want to get our students more involved in learning that keeps them active" and engaged with their surroundings, she said, "as opposed to sedentary learning that has them typing on a keyboard."

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At Hiram, students are required to participate in out-of-the-classroom experiences, such as study-abroad programs and internships.

Varlotta envisions students studying abroad, for example, using the mobile devices to enliven their journals with photos and videos.

Grab a pencil, too

Colleges are behind when it comes to use of mobile technology, Varlotta said, noting it's much more common for high schools to incorporate students' use of mobile technology "into everyday teaching and learning."

Kole Jaber, 18, of Mogadore, said the iPad Pros will be much more helpful than the technology he used in high school.

Tablets he had in high school were "cheap and they never really panned out. People broke them."

Along with the iPads, Hiram students received keyboards and an Apple pencil — a specialized stylus for writing and drawing on the iPad, as well as highlighting passages in ebooks.

For Tech and Trek, Hiram upgraded its wireless network, allowing for students to be outside and connect to Wi-Fi, noted Matthew McKenna, director of learning technologies at the college. He joined the school this summer to head the Tech and Trek program.

Hiram students will gather on campus this Sunday for the launch of the initiative.

Activities will include discussions of being "mindful" when it comes to the technology," college officials said.

"I didn't want to be a school that simply distributed devices under the perception that more technology is always better," Varlotta said.

Hiram biology professor Brad Goodner said he is "bringing the iPad into all my classes. I'm jumping in with both feet. Biology is such a visual field."

At the same time, he said, it's important students know when to put their devices away.

"There's always going to be a need for that one-on-one or that small-group discussion when you don't need the technology," he said. "You need to be in the moment with somebody else."

On Sunday, as part of the Tech and Trek launch, students will take a hike with

1977 graduate Dean Scarborough and his wife, Janice Bini, whose \$2.1 million donation made Tech and Trek possible.

It's the largest single gift in the school's history. Tuition for the 2017-2018 year is \$32,700 – higher than tuition at Ohio's public four-year schools. But most Hiram students do not pay that amount; 98 percent of traditional students receive financial aid.

Hiram College officials note that the percentage of students who are first-generation college students is 35 to 40 percent.

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