By Mike Cronin

'Bure' texting students say they're only multitasking

Texting became a point of contention during a panel discussion at Pitt last semester. It stunned some professors and administrators that students couldn't understand why texting during class, or in the middle of a face-to-face conversation, would be considered disrespectful.

Millennials don't view that as rude, because they grew up using technology that previous generations didn't have, said Kari Rosenkaimer, 20, a Pitt sophomore studying nursing. "One of the most important things we want to get across to professors is that we're not ignoring them when we're texting," Rosenkaimer said. "We're still listening. We're still taking notes. We're just doing something urgent."

As examples of "something urgent," Rosenkaimer cited a member of an extracurricular group needing a key or the creating of event fliers that "need to be done today."

Today's generation requires that, most of the time, millennials respond to texts immediately, she said. "That's the way technology has made it."

Not all students agree.

"I think it's disrespectful," said Nicole Roser, 22, an IUP senior majoring in journalism. "It's distracting to other students if you hear clicking. It disrupts the whole class."

Inconsistent expectations and behavior among professors about cell-phone use make it difficult to know what is allowed, said Amanda Reed, 22, a senior. "Some professors answer their cell phones in class," she said.

Seton Hill professor Mike Arznen puts his texting policy in the course syllabus: If students place his class in the background by texting, he marks them as absent.

"Because they're not attending," explained Arznem, 42, chair of the school's division of humanities. He has even experienced students answering cell phones in class.

"It's very rare, but I see it as rude. I take it as an insult," he said. "I tell them to take it in the hallway. Then, after class, I'll talk to them. Teachers find themselves policing basic civility more than we used to."

Mary Crane, 50, who runs a Denver-based firm that teaches companies how to deal with generational differences, said that to show respect to superiors, employees should turn smartphones off when they enter meetings. Colleges and universities could begin training students jobs by asking them to turn off smartphones when they start class.

"By the time they enter the work world, they'll be in the habit of turning it off," Crane said.

Kathy Humphrey, Pitt's vice provost and dean of students, said Pitt has no policy regarding texting in classes. Instead, professors set policies, typically in a class syllabus.

It's "quite fascinating," she said, that millennials don't regard texting as disrupting. "But it's such a part of their existence that they don't," said Humphrey, a mother of two 18-year-old high school students.