

**The system takes advantage of passive tags already embedded in student IDs, to automate what is currently a manual process, saving time for instructors of large classes.**

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

May 24, 2010—Although under fire from an opposition group, administrators at [Northern Arizona University](#) (NAU), in Flagstaff, Ariz., say they are going ahead with a proposed system that would employ RFID tags embedded in student identification cards to automate attendance tracking for professors with class sizes exceeding 50 students. The protest group, started by an undergraduate student, claims the system would violate students' right to decide for themselves whether they need to attend classes. The group established a [Facebook page](#) that currently has more than 1,500 members.

University administrators, however, say that teachers are already asked to collect attendance manually—and to incorporate attendance data into students' grades—and that using the RFID cards to automate the system would simply enable those who teach large classes to save time. The administration also cites research demonstrating that students who attend classes on a regular basis tend to show better academic performance than those who do not.

## Northern Arizona University to Use Existing RFID Student Cards for Attendance Tracking

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*When it opens in 2012, NAU's Health & Learning Center (shown here in computer-generated mockup) will feature attendance-taking RFID readers.*

Radio frequency identification technology is not new to NAU. RFID tags have been embedded in student ID cards for the past four years, so most of the college's 18,000 undergrad students already carry the cards. The RFID cards are used for a number of tasks, such as unlocking doors to residence halls and an athletics building. The attendance application would be one more use for the card, says Joe Harding, NAU's systems administrator, and would further leverage the investments that the school has already made in the card system. Students can also use a magnetic stripe on the card to purchase food in the university's cafeteria, by charging the purchases to their student accounts.

Thomas Charles Eberly, NAU's director of dining and card administration, says the school is still plans to move forward with the proposal, which is to install card readers at the doorways of a number of classrooms in its new [Health & Learning Center](#), a 200,000-square-foot, on-campus facility currently under construction, and scheduled to open in 2012. The school plans to pull from \$85,000 in federal stimulus funds to pay for the interrogators and the attendance system—software that will collect ID

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numbers as students hold their cards up to the readers upon entering a classroom, correlate teach number with the student's name and then forward this information to the teacher for his or her class attendance records.

The exact cost of the system is still unknown, says Tom Bauer, the director of NAU's office of public affairs, since the number of classrooms that will accommodate 50 or more students has yet to be determined. That's because the building is still in the development stage, he notes, and "construction plans are in flux because of the university's and state's budget situation."

According to Bauer, the readers—provided by [HID](#)—cost \$250 apiece. This, however, does not include the cost of installing the devices and linking them to the school's network. "Any money that is left over will be returned to the general fund," he says.

At least [one news article](#) has erroneously stated that the RFID interrogators used would be "sensitive enough to pick up [RFID tag] signals from anywhere in the room." In fact, the RFID cards, also manufactured by HID, are passive and low-frequency (LF), operating at 125 kHz, and thus have a short read range. "I have seen them read as much as 18 inches away with a long-range reader we had installed at some of our ADA-accessible entrances," Harding states. "The distance is primarily determined by the reader we use. The standard HID RP40s, which is the majority of readers in use, usually top out between 4 to 6 inches."