

NEWS: E-skipping the line

New site guarantees spots in full courses

By: [Niall Mackay Roberts](#)

Issue date: 1/4/06 Section: [news](#)

A Web site promising to notify McGill students when spaces appear in fully registered courses has raised security concerns in both the Registrar's Office and Information Systems Resources, the administrative unit responsible for Minerva. CourseAlerts.ca charges five dollars per student per course to send an instant text message or e-mail as soon as registration for a class drops below its predetermined capacity. According to Alexandre Roche, the Concordia student responsible for CourseAlerts, just over 20 students have used his service thus far.

Roche describes the service as a relatively cheap way of ensuring that participating students need not settle for less desirable courses simply because they are unable to find space in their first choices. On his site, Roche explains that he was frustrated at being locked out of the classes he was most interested in taking at McGill, and that several McGill students encouraged him to develop this service as a solution.

"I would say that, within a week, almost 100 per cent of people who sign up [to CourseAlerts] get into the course they want," Roche said.

However, the code running CourseAlerts has attracted the attention of the McGill administration, as its heavy use of the system is a potential drain on access speed for others. According to ISR, Roche's use of Minerva has been monitored, and records indicate that his code is active every five seconds.

Roche himself said that the delay between the opening of classroom space and the notification to CourseAlerts subscribers is nearly nonexistent, suggesting that his service is continually active. On his Web site, Roche also describes CourseAlerts as "constantly checking Minerva... twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

Roche declined to reveal the exact workings of his program, but he argued that the effect of CourseAlerts upon McGill server speed was negligible.

"I really don't think it's too much load on the server," he said. "If [the administration] were to give me sanctioned access to the site, I guarantee there would be a lot less load."

Roche added that he expected further use of CourseAlerts to siphon away a certain amount of student demand on Minerva.

Doug Jackson, director of ISR, said his department would continue investigating the effect of CourseAlerts on server speed. Jackson also questioned the fairness of providing certain, paying students with an advantage in course registration.

"I think this particular service is unfair to students because it creates a two-tier system for course change," he said. "Students who are aware of the service and can afford it are going to get an edge over those who don't know or can't afford it."

For the time being, however, it appears that McGill policies do not prevent the use of any pay service such as CourseAlerts.



A frustrated Concordia student launched the CourseAlerts Web site after he was unable to register in capped McGill courses.

"There are McGill policies in place, but I'm not sure they're going to apply in this case," said Jackson. "We have to look at how [CourseAlerts] actually works first."

While Roche has not been contacted by McGill administration, it appears that the university has been aware of his Web site since at least mid-December. It was then that Alexandra Kapelos-Peters, U2 English, reported the service to ISR security. Kapelos-Peters discovered the site through a CourseAlerts advertisement placed on Facebook.com.

At that time, CourseAlerts-which launched in early December-was using the publicly accessible online McGill calendar to provide students with class-capacity information. On Dec. 20, after Kapelos-Peters reported the site, this information was limited to Minerva, which is password-restricted, though neither Roche nor McGill administrators will confirm any connection between these events. Regardless, Roche has regularly altered his program to allow his service to continue functioning in spite of Minerva's password restrictions.

Sylvia Franke, registrar and executive director of ARR, is responsible for the decision to remove class-capacity information from public access. She was not available for immediate comment.

In spite of her initial concerns, Kapelos-Peters recently used the CourseAlerts service to register in two previously at-capacity classes.

"I used CourseAlerts, and I love it," she said. "I just wish I didn't have to shell out five bucks for something McGill should do for free."

In fact, a number of other universities do provide a similar service through class waitlists on their online registration systems. Minerva already provides for such a service, should administrators choose to implement it. According to Jackson, trial waitlists will open on Minerva in March, for Fall registration in the Faculties of Law and Continuing Education.

While course waitlists could spell the end of CourseAlerts.ca, Roche said he supports the idea.

"I think it's good," he said. "Implementing a feature like that-or sanctioning me to do the same thing-would reduce the load on the site because people [won't be] checking the site four or five times a day."

[National College Advertising and Marketing](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) [Article Syndication](#) [College Scholarships](#)