

OIT Recommended Choices of Audio/Video/Chat Software

Washington College's network is an educational resource designed to support the mission of the college and members of the college community engaged in that mission. Use of the college's network resources are guided by college policies and expectations for respectful use, including a respect for its shared nature. As members of the WC community, faculty, students, and staff are encouraged to be good citizens and respectful consumers of network resources. As stewards of the College's network resources, OIT strives to deliver network services which meet the needs of the majority of the campus while also providing the community with a secure network environment. Maintaining the balance between a secure network environment and the community's interest in new and expanding technologies can prove to be challenging. This is the case with the community's desire to use Chat clients that integrate audio, video, and text functionality on the College network. OIT seeks to balance providing its network users the ability to use multimedia Chat software while at the same time maintaining a relatively secure network structure.

There are many Chat programs, all of which give users the same functionality, but each works differently with regard to network security. To find out which products integrate best with the College's network, OIT evaluated several packages against an established list of criteria. The goal of the evaluation was to identify and support a few Chat programs that comply with the College's standards for maintaining a safe and secure network. Persons remote from the College who communicate with College students using the chat clients should also use the same client.

OIT evaluated several programs including Skype, Ventrillo, MSN Live, Yahoo! Messenger, and AIM/iChat. For a program to be considered both manageable and relatively secure it must meet these five evaluation criteria. 1) The program operates through fixed outside servers rather than directly to any computer on the Internet. 2) The program uses a limited number of TCP/IP ports that are not blocked to prevent some already known type of malware. 3) The program uses one or more protocols that do not turn the user clients' computers into "supernodes" that, in effect, turn the users' computers into servers that adversely affect the College's Internet bandwidth. 4) The program must be available globally without charge for its services. (For off-campus clients there may be an Internet connection charge from individual homes, e.g., cable, DSL, or dial-up services). 5) The software must be available for both Windows and Macintosh and possibly other platforms.

Most programs that were evaluated had some undesirable feature or protocol. For example, MSN Live uses the BitTorrent protocol. That protocol is bad for the College's use of bandwidth because it turns every computer using it into a server that can accept connections from hundreds of computers remote from the campus. The Skype program license requires that users accept that they will share the College's bandwidth so that other Skype users (not in any way connected to them) can use the College's bandwidth to complete calls that have nothing to do with the campus community. Of course individual users are not authorized to let outside users make use of the bandwidth paid for by the College and those processes effectively reduce the Internet bandwidth that is available to the campus community.

The best programs that meet all the desired specifications are the SightSpeed, the AIM/iChat and the Yahoo! Messenger software packages. They are available at no charge. They support audio, video, and text chat including other features. They communicate to remote clients through a group of fixed servers. The ports and protocols that they use are compatible with the College's firewall and user policies. Both packages are available for Windows and Macintosh computers.

OIT, therefore, recommends that students use the SightSpeed, the AIM/iChat or the Yahoo! Messenger software clients for online audio, video, and text chat.

SightSpeed is available at www.sightspeed.com.

AIM is available at www.aim.com

Yahoo! Messenger is available at messenger.yahoo.com.

iChat comes with the Macintosh operating system. It requires OS X 10.4 or higher for video support.