It's a Bird. It's a Plane. It's a . . . Portal?

What is a campus portal strategy and why do you need one?

by **Richard N. Katz**

Information technologists yearn to be wordsmiths or pundits and are at the very least fascinated by language. On one hand, we are a professional community that has managed to reduce irreducible concepts to streams of incomprehensible acronyms. On the other hand, we borrow rich and descriptive language from other disciplines to illuminate our own. Terms like architecture, ecology, and webs have originated elsewhere, emerged anew from the IT cauldron, often to re-emerge as a new part of the vernacular.

The most recent linguistic borrowing is the term portal, which the *Winston Dictionary* defines as "a gate, door, or entrance; especially one that is stately and imposing, as of a cathedral." Given the ecclesiastical origins of the modern university, perhaps it is fitting and appropriate that the latest information technology metaphor is one that fits the collegiate idea so well. The term portal, however, is a somewhat troublesome metaphor because it leaves as much unanswered as it purports to answer. One might legitimately ask, a doorway to what? What on earth, our campus colleagues must wonder, is a portal strategy and why is one important to me?

From its invention less than a decade ago, the World Wide Web has purported to be a newsletter, an advertisement, a policy manual, a community gathering spot, a marketplace, a library, and a virtual university. In essence, the Web has elements of all of these things and yet is not any of these things. The Web is the first ever medium that allows essentially anyone to become a content creator, developer, organizer, distribu-

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tor, broadcaster, intermediary, buyer, or seller at any time (and in fact to be all of these things at different times) and, as a result, the Web remains today the ultimate frontier. As a frontier, the Web defies precise description or characterization. It is bounded less by physics than by our imaginations. Hence our tendency to borrow metaphors.

Frontiers seem to me to be inherently messy places—untidy and even unsafe places that attract adventurers and miscreants and await some measure of guidance, if not law and order. The portal, in this context, is more than a gateway. It is perhaps a unifying principle that may enable organizations—including colleges and universities—to leverage their investments in enterprise systems, in data warehouses, in reengineered institutional processes, and in staff talent.

Recognizing the powerful opportunities for colleges and universities to rethink how their Web sites can be reorganized to serve and transform their institutional mission, private firms have been quick to act. Firms such as Youth-Stream Media, MyBytes, Jenzabar.com, and Campus Pipeline are offering colleges and universities sophisticated Web sites through which students can obtain campus (and other) information and engage various institutional services. Other firms such as click2learn.com, Hungry Minds, Blackboard, and Ziff Davis are seeking to attract students to specialized learning portals.

Many campuses have also been quick to recognize the powerful and transformational potential of portals and have developed and implemented their own.

Numerous of our colleagues from institutions such as Louisiana State University, University at Buffalo, University of British Columbia, and the University of Washington will present their experiences in this arena at EDUCAUSE 2000 in Nashville.

Finally, some of the technologies underlying the Web—Java in particular—are making it possible for colleges and universities to develop shareable software solutions. The Java in Administration Special Interest Group, known as the JA-SIG, is leading this work (see www.ja-sig.org).

The EDUCAUSE Advisory Group on Administrative Information Systems and Services affirmed the importance, or even centrality, of portals at its meeting in February of this year. Members of this group requested that EDUCAUSE organize a forum on the subjects of portals and e-business in higher education in conjunction with NACUBO, the National Association of College and University Business Officers. This forum, held in May in Arlington, Virginia, with more than 50 financial and information technology professionals participating, was followed by a conference delivered in collaboration with *Converge Magazine* at which more than 200 participated. Finally, EDUCAUSE and NACUBO are working now to develop a series of essays to share in the broadest way possible some of the insights and cautions that leading practitioners are discovering on the path towards formulating and implementing campus portal strategies, to be published and distributed to members later this year.

The participants in the forum and conference agreed that the implementation of a portal strategy is necessary, difficult, and perilous in higher education. It is necessary because colleges and universities—to both compete and realize the full benefits of their investments in data warehouses, enterprise systems, and other elements of the campus infrastructure—will need to integrate information, services, and infrastructure across a seamless and easy-to-navigate Web interface. A portal strategy is difficult and perilous because many on campus are weary and suspicious of yet another new enterprise-wide information technology initiative, and because portal initiatives, by definition, require across-the-institution agreements on approach and design that are hard to achieve in loosely coupled organizations like academic institutions.

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Whether or not the implementation of a campus portal strategy is difficult or perilous, participants in these recent events agreed that this activity is necessary and complex. In the months ahead, collectively and individually colleges and universities will have to grapple with a variety of business, organizational, technical, and policy issues related to portals. For example:

• How will institutions regulate advertising on their Web sites?
• Will institutions be able to muster the political wherewithal to make institution-wide decisions over IT and standards to create compelling and "sticky" Web environments that create communities rather than attract surfers?
• How will institutional privacy policy be shaped to accommodate the creation of portal sites that remain compelling to different members of the campus community throughout their lives?
• Can we create either the technical or organizational infrastructure to foster what Robert Kvavik calls "cradle to endowment" relationships via our virtual environments.[1]
• How will we integrate our physical and virtual sites to foster social and intellectual interactions worthy of our mission?

The challenge of a portal strategy is no less than the challenge of bringing higher education fully into the new wave of technology. This challenge, like so many we have encountered and overcome, seems to depend less on technology *per se* as on our ability to create a compelling vision for our institution and to galvanize the institutional will to think about how to personalize the institution for everyone in the community. It is clear in this instance that IT professionals, acting alone, will likely achieve only imperfect results. This is a daunting challenge and the months ahead are sure to be exciting ones for us. *e*

Endnote:
1. Robert Kvavik, "Transforming Student Services," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly,* 23(2): 30–37.

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