The Paperless Campus

In trying to make a campus "paperless," you will end up needing to buy more paper along the way

By **Brian A. Young**

I s it me, or has the "paperless" revolution suddenly come out of hibernation? It seems to have awakened from a two-year rest following its advent, when the world was energized by the notion that the Web and e-mail would let us eliminate paper. Campus leaders, chief financial officers, budget directors, chief information officers, and procurement managers at the time stood up and unanimously rejoiced (one of the few times they all agreed on any topic) at the opportunity to save costs and save trees. Well, get ready — the paperless discussion is back on campuses. I've heard it, seen it (on the Web), and been involved in the conversations around it for the past months, via EDUCAUSE and CIO listservs.

So, what is the issue this time? What makes the discussion any different from what it was two years ago? Our economy. Yes, IT leaders and CFOs are being asked to cut back, trim expenses, and bring technology into a collaborative, innovative state where it can work for us. Why? Because of tight budgets and economic pressures — again. The cries come from all around to get more from current resources and do more with less: "Can't you make the system do just a little more?" or "If you can tweak the program this one last time, it will be the last time I need help." Then, of course, there is the common IT response to that call: "Sure it will, yeah right, last time — for that day!"

But the paperless argument is a function neither of budget nor of environmental issues. Rather, if your campus wants to go paperless, the change begins with your culture.

Changing the Culture

Many organizations that promote paperless environments have not achieved the nirvana they seek. Rather, they have simply moved printing (paper) from one area to another. For example, the school calendar is no longer printed and stuffed in student mailboxes; it is posted online. A campuswide e-mail goes out so that students, faculty, and staff can print it for themselves.

Consider human resource and registrar forms converted to PDFs. Place PDFs on the Web, save the department from printing those forms. All this really accomplishes is to displace the workload or costs from one department to another. If "going paperless" merely displaces work and costs from one area to another, how do we achieve real change?

Real paperless environments must begin at the cultural level. We must invite people into the conversation. We need to understand how and why our

organization uses paper (files, storage, record keeping, mailings) before we promote or suggest a technological solution (knowledge management, data warehousing, storage area networks). Moreover, we must reflect on those conversations and see how they connect to the common theme found in every organization: "We do it that way because that's how we have always done it." Like any good change agent, you must be proactive and anticipate needs. Hold discussions, forums, info sessions, lunch-time talks — whatever it takes to bring people together.

Be warned, cultural change can get expensive. It can also exhaust you, both physically and mentally. A fundamental reason for printing things is to make them easier to read, whenever and wherever we want — on a plane, in a favorite chair, in bed, on the beach. So, to avoid printing and thus avoid consuming paper, how do we make accessing electronic documents and e-mails as easy

and ubiquitous as the printed form? How do we make our paperless documents as mobile as the printed versions? (Mobility being a relative term, of course. I don't think I would want to travel with the eight-volume set of higher education regulations from the Department of Education.) To change the culture and promote a paperless environment, we need to introduce the culture to new methods of viewing, reading, and transmitting.

Initiating this cultural change is where real costs begin to appear. We can help the paperless shift by using technology that makes it as easy or easier to read electronically what would normally be printed. To promote the new ways of viewing, reading, and transmitting documents, we need to provide mobile and reader-friendly paperless devices. The better we do this, the more likely we will see progress toward a true paperless environment.

Unfortunately, "technomics" (tech-

nology + economics) means that newer mobile, easy-to-read devices are priced out of the reach of the tightening budgets of higher education. Flatscreen displays of 17 or 21 inches might convince people to stop printing and read from their sleek new screen — if we could afford them for everyone on campus. Mobile, flexible, lightweight viewing screens such as found in the new e-book technology would help meet our goals, but although these technologies are becoming less expensive, the price point and technomics still significantly hinder the paperless change process. Until we see real technological advances to support paperless environments, most people will continue to use the most affordable technology available today — paper.

Brian A. Young (byoung@hws.edu) is the Vice President for Information Technology and CIO with Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York.