

Student Input in College Decision Making

Students—often the largest group of users of institutional services—can be a pivotal voice in campus technology decisions involving outsourcing

By **Celeste M. Schwartz, Emory M. Craig, Jeff Trzeciak, Julie K. Little, and Veronica Diaz**

Colleges and universities face increasing pressure to provide a long and growing list of technology resources that students expect and on which faculty increasingly rely to support the teaching environment. Institutions are pressed to expand available services while ensuring network and data security and user privacy, even as funding remains a contentious issue, prompting debates over rising tuition and the declining role of state governments in supporting higher education. In this climate, the question of outsourcing institutional services is a common topic, given its potential to free up critical resources by taking advantage of partnerships and contractual standards. Indeed, many institutions already rely on third parties for data storage.

Of the numerous candidates for outsourcing, e-mail frequently works its way to the top of the list. As institutions weigh the benefits of outsourcing e-mail against the drawbacks, soliciting the student perspective is an approach that is often overlooked, yet it can be critical in making appropriate and effective decisions that benefit the campus community.

Balancing Institutional Obligations

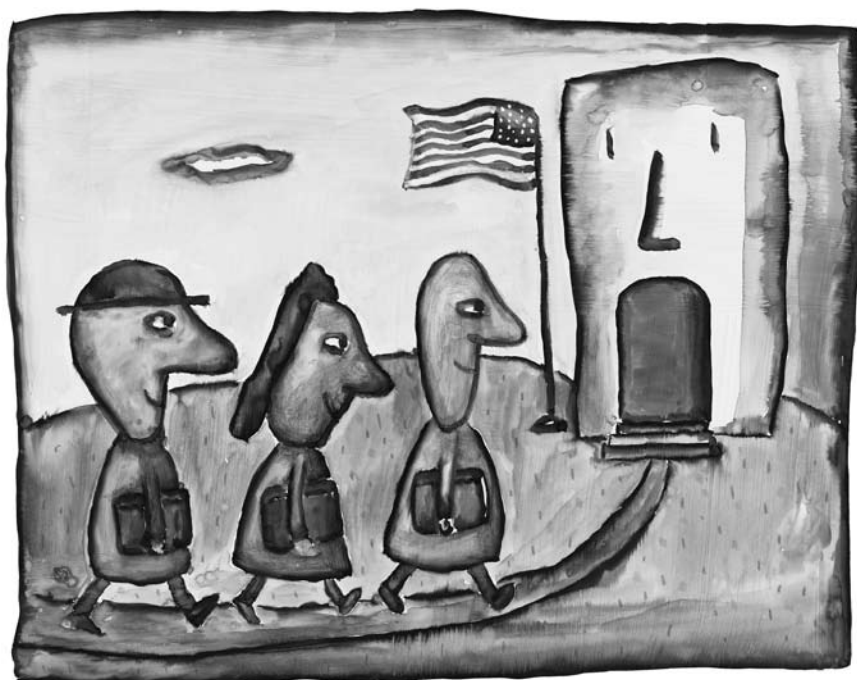
Because outsourcing involves the transfer of responsibility for an institutional service to a private corporation, an institution must evaluate a provider's ability to support its technology initiatives and its broader mission. Potential issues, such as theft of data and transfer

of agreements through corporate acquisitions, need careful consideration.

Most corporations function as for-profit entities, seeking to maximize the returns for investors. Offering free applications for higher education is at heart a business strategy with a long-term goal of expanding (or supporting) a customer base. That these services can serve areas of a college or university's technology initiatives benefits both the corporate and educational realms—as long as each recognizes and understands the unique needs and goals of the other party.

Much of the debate over outsourcing has focused on potential requests for university correspondence under the Freedom of Information Act (in addi-

tion to the variety of state freedom of information laws) and adherence to guidelines under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Although companies including Google and Microsoft claim that they diligently safeguard the privacy of users and their data (Google cites its defense of user records in a 2006 case with the Justice Department), it is safe to assume that other situations are likely to arise that will test corporate commitments to protecting sensitive data. Indeed, the intersection of responsibility between vendors and higher education remains a work-in-progress. FERPA includes a broad definition of what constitutes an "education record," and some



governmental entities (such as the state of New York) are considering even more stringent regulations on the privacy of student data. The related question of e-discovery in litigation has also been raised, though most providers claim that the data remain under the control of the institution and its users.¹

Cross-border issues also arise for institutions outside the United States. Canadian and European educational institutions that might use Google Apps for Education, for example, may be sending e-mail and documents through U.S.-based servers, where the USA PATRIOT Act lowers the threshold for privacy of online communications.² In response to this issue, David Girouard, vice president and general manager of Google, noted, "There is no easy answer to that. We may move to a model in which we can promise data is not located in the U.S., but that is difficult because we and everyone else work on a distributed data model."³ Institutions have to balance these and other concerns against the enhancement of services and the financial benefits that outsourcing can provide.

These issues illustrate the complexity and some of the risks of outsourcing applications such as e-mail and collaborative tools. At many colleges and universities, institutional leaders might choose to forgo outsourcing in favor of a more conservative approach and local control.

Students as Catalysts for Change

Students bring a different perspective to the decision-making process from that of faculty and university administrators. Students today are vastly different from their counterparts of just 15 years ago, when a university e-mail account and a network account were typically their first experience with a ubiquitous computing environment. A new generation of millennial students is arriving on campus, the vanguard of a profound cultural change in our relationship to information, media, and community. From their perspective, outsourcing offers compelling benefits with few if any tradeoffs.

Unlike the university's own relationship to technology, in which control is predicated on ownership, today's students are comfortable working in an environment where both technology and the responsibility for its use function on a distributed model. Supported by multiple relationships with external providers hosting social networks (Facebook, MySpace), videos (YouTube), and photos (Flickr), students question the need to control all aspects of such services—a notion that university administrators have often taken for granted. As Theresa Rowe, CIO of Oakland University, said of higher education technology leaders, "I think sometimes they fear losing control. [W]e're replacing the technological controls with contractual controls and service-level standards, and that's challenging. You really have to think that through."⁴

From an institutional perspective, including student voices in discussions about whether to outsource, as well as the selection of outsourced providers, might appear to complicate the decision-making process. However, the university needs to balance the student perspective with its institutional obligations to maintain student privacy, data security, and network integrity in support of the academic environment. Incorporating students into the decision-making process not only engages them in questions about the institution's technology investments but also can serve as a catalyst to help faculty and administrators reconsider questions of outsourcing and which services should be locally maintained. Just as technology is giving rise to a highly student-centered learning environment, technology is expanding students' role as stakeholders in determining how the university allocates its resources for technology initiatives.

Outsourcing E-Mail at MCCC

The Information Technology All-College Committee (ITACC) at Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) in Pennsylvania includes faculty, administrators, staff, and a student representative. It is the official technology governance body of the college. The 20-member committee is charged

each year to research, review, and recommend approximately six significant technology hardware, software, policy, or training initiatives. Each of these technology-related initiatives must align with one of the college's six strategic initiatives, found in the three-year strategic plan, *Great Expectations: The Strategic Plan to 2010*.

In Need of a New Student E-Mail Service

One of MCCC's current priorities is the evaluation of student e-mail use. The institution asked ITACC to comprehensively research student e-mail service, reviewing the following aspects:

- Level of use of the existing, college-provided e-mail accounts
- Possible student benefits of an outsourced e-mail solution
- System ease of use
- Value of an e-mail system based on a familiar brand

With these criteria in mind and with the assistance of technology staff, ITACC researched various outside e-mail systems. The committee's research quickly narrowed the scope to two commonly used e-mail systems—Microsoft Live@edu and Google Apps for Education—and the IT department set up a test system for each product. ITACC members were given a system feature fact sheet that included a side-by-side comparison matrix, a demonstration of each system, and login IDs for each of the test systems. Members were asked to evaluate the e-mail systems over a two-week period.

At the meeting following the research and testing phase, committee members quickly came to the conclusion that either the Microsoft or Google solution would offer significant improvements over the college's in-house e-mail service. In an effort to reach a decision about a recommended solution, the committee moved on to a discussion about the pros and cons of each product.

Something Missing

Typically, deliberation in ITACC quickly leads to consensus and a written

recommendation to the president. On the topic of e-mail, however, it became apparent that the committee members had differing ideas regarding which product should be recommended, and the group agreed to take a vote.

Then, just as the final vote was to be cast, members of the committee questioned whether the selection process appropriately represented student wants and needs, despite the presence of a student on the committee. The committee's discomfort in representing student preferences was based on the lack of input coming directly from the MCCC student body. As a result, ITACC raised the following two questions:

- Although ITACC has a student representative on the committee, were the voices of the student body really being heard?
- Would the ITACC recommendation be accepted by the cabinet and the president without more student input?

Two Weeks for Student Input

The committee put its vote on hold, and the remainder of the meeting was spent putting plans in place to gather student input. With the goal of implementing a new student e-mail system the following fall semester, the plan needed to be easy to implement, take little time to administer, and quickly provide easily summarized results. With a target of two weeks to complete the process, committee members began suggesting ideas for data collection.

Because the faculty members of the committee represent all academic divisions of MCCC, they agreed to take a few minutes of class time to demonstrate the two e-mail products and then poll students on their preference. The library representative offered to develop a brief web-based survey and place it on the library web page, with additional links permitting students to further explore both products. Last, the student representative offered to take a laptop computer to the cafeteria and the Student Success Center to demonstrate each e-mail solution and then ask students—representing both day

and evening classes—to complete the online survey.

Student Input Leads to Action

The online survey gave students four choices to indicate their preference for campus e-mail:

- Microsoft Live@EDU
- Google Apps for Education
- Either product (leaving the selection up to the college)
- The current student e-mail system

Even though the committee had struggled with what direction to pursue for a new e-mail system, students shown the two products had no problem making a decision. Students had already been using these or similar programs, and they made their selection based on features and ease of use rather than on the broader institutional implications of the technology.

The message from the students was clear: provide integration and support services rather than local implementation. Based on the student responses tallied within the two-week period, ITACC moved from a split decision to unanimously recommending Google Apps for Education. The ITACC recommendation was presented to and supported by the president's cabinet and approved by the president.

Conclusion

Instead of supporting students where administrators believe they "should be," institutions should consider how to support students "where they are," namely in spaces such as Facebook or Google. As institutions review their investments in local systems to determine which are important in a local context and which should be offloaded to third parties, it is important to engage students and solicit their feedback.

Rather than investing time and energy in convincing students to move to "our system," institutions could be investing time in connecting with students in more meaningful and engaging ways. As demonstrated through the choice of student e-mail services, student views were clear while committee opinions

were unclear. The merging of these voices supplied MCCC with the information needed for informed decision making. Moreover, an initiative that lacks widespread support from students might not be viewed favorably by the institution's executive leadership.

Engaging students in making decisions, especially those that directly impact student life, benefits the institution and the students themselves. Students are often asked to evaluate faculty, courses, campus services, and their overall college experience, but their opinions are too rarely solicited for input about new institutional initiatives. While valuable information is derived through collaborative committee processes and extensive research, expanding students' role adds an important dimension to the decision-making process. *e*

Endnotes

1. Andy Guess, "Text, Trust, and Third Parties," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 21, 2008, <http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/03/21/privacy>.
2. Hurley Goodall, "Google E-Mail Service Inspires Fears of U.S. Spying Among Canadian Faculty Members," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 27, 2008, <http://chronicle.com/daily/2008/03/2259n.htm>.
3. Peter Wolchak, "Google Apps Is Great, Except for the Patriot Act and Confidentiality and All That," *Backbone Magazine*, November 13, 2007, http://www.backbonemag.com/Backblog/1_11130701.asp.
4. Guess, "Text, Trust, and Third Parties."

Celeste M. Schwartz (cshwartz@mc3.edu) is Vice President for Information Technology, Montgomery County Community College; Emory M. Craig (ecraig@cnr.edu) is Director of Academic Computing at The College of New Rochelle; Jeffrey Trzeciak (trzecia@mcmaster.ca) is University Librarian at McMaster University; Julie K. Little (jlittle@educause.edu) is Interim Director of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative; and Veronica Diaz (veronica.diaz@domail.maricopa.edu) is Instructional Technology Manager, Maricopa Community Colleges. All are members of the EDUCAUSE Advisory Committee for Teaching and Learning (ACTL).