Calling All Myth Busters!

Write about one or more of these IT myths and contribute to the debate swirling around them—are they really myths? Or tried and true solutions?
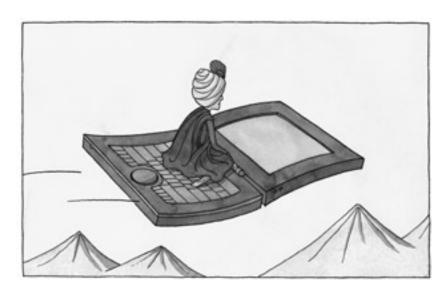
By **Fredrick Miller**

As part of my duties as outgoing chair of the *EDUCAUSE Quarterly* Editorial Committee, I prepared a few remarks for the committee meeting at the EDUCAUSE 2006 Annual Conference. My comments touched on the purpose of the journal, the nature of peer review and peer-reviewed articles, and some topics I personally would like to see addressed in future issues of *EQ*. This last proposal sparked considerable debate among the committee members.

Brian Hawkins and Diana Oblinger write a column in *EDUCAUSE Review* (http://www.educause.edu/er/) called "IT Myths." Borrowing that theme, I offer 10 "IT myths" I'd like to see explored in future issues of *EQ*. Writing for *EQ* is not a daunting task. (See <http://www .educause.edu/eq/> for an author's guide and author testimonials.) It's my hope that someone—perhaps you?—will write about these topics in *EQ*. Are these really myths, or are they proven solutions? *EQ* readers surely can provide evidence for one side or the other.

1. "Standardizing on a single computing platform reduces costs and enables better support."

Some campuses only support a single desktop operating system, but I don't recall any peer-reviewed articles that support this premise. I know there are vendor-sponsored studies, but I'd like to see some data and assessment from higher education institutions about this topic. David Smallen and Karen Leach began the COSTS (Cost of Supporting Technology Services) Project in 1997 to compare IT support costs in higher education. Information collected by that study has now been incorporated into the EDUCAUSE Core Data Service.[1] Perhaps some comparisons could be drawn between similar institutions that use a single computing platform and others that support multiple platforms. Another perspective could be how an institution switched from a single platform to multiple platforms or vice versa. Either way, such a study could provide interesting insights for *EQ* readers.

2. "Requiring students to own a computer (or laptop) will improve the quality of education at an institution."

Although some institutions require students to own a computer, I've seen little assessment of the impact of computer ownership on learning. Certainly having a control group would be an important part of such a study. Usually ideas for such programs indicate that the laptop program will allow the institution to reduce support for computer labs on campus. I'd like to see that corollary explored as well. [See the Good Ideas in this issue on notebook versus general-computer-lab model costs by John Bryan.—Ed.]

It's also interesting to note that a recent EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) study of undergraduate students and information technology found that nearly 98 percent of undergraduates already own a computer.[2] Aside from financial aid implications, does such a requirement affect learning outcomes when nearly all students already own a computer?

3. "Having a campus subscription to a music download service will reduce the incidence of online copyright violations."

This type of service is fairly recent and appears to be heavily advocated by vendors and organizations such as the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). I have read about student resistance to such programs (because of lack of Macintosh and iPod support, for example). Evidently, some students do use such services, but I've seen little written about their impact on illegal file sharing. In fact, at least one of these services has recently changed their business model to allow any student with a .edu e-mail address to use their service. I would be particularly interested in data showing whether using such programs actually reduces the number of copyright violations reported on campus.

4. "Current students were 'born digital' and need little instruction in the use and application of digital technologies."

My own experience shows a wide range of student familiarity with digital technologies. The ECAR study of undergraduates also noted that while most are comfortable with electronic communication tools, only 3 in 10 are able to create Web pages, and less than 30 percent can create or edit digital audio or video.[3] Certainly the range of needed digital skills will differ based on the particular academic discipline, and some areas of the curriculum may need more advanced digital skills. The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative has created a number of Web-accessible resources on the information literacy problem.[4]

I'd particularly like to see some data about successful ways to improve students' abilities to effectively search for information. A peer-reviewed article in *EQ* could help make the case for providing sufficient institutional resources for information and technology literacy. I'd like to see some real assessment data bout the effectiveness of such instruction.

5. "There's 'no significant difference' between online and face-to-face instruction."

I'm well aware of the "no significant difference" literature comparing the outcomes of online versus face-to-face instruction. I'm also aware that some

have indicated that students in online instruction are less likely to persist in completing their studies. I'd like to see more of this type of assessment within *EQ*. (See Hawkins and Oblinger's November/December 2006 column in *EDUCAUSE Review*, "The Myth About No Significant Difference: Using Technology Produces No Significant Difference."[5])

6. "In the future, we won't need a library because all needed resources will be available digitally."

I personally believe there will always be a need for a library as a place in higher education, but I could be wrong. Certainly, electronic media have transformed and will continue to transform the library and the services it provides. The recent work to develop institutional repositories is a positive step toward enhancing and transforming traditional library services.[6] I look forward to reading more about how technology can be used to transform and improve library services, as well as how library and information technology organizations can effectively collaborate to support these efforts.

7. "In the future, we won't need to keep track of physical papers because everything will be digital."

Enterprise content management (ECM) is one of the new frontiers in managing information in higher education. Is it possible, or even desirable, to eliminate the tracking of physical papers? If we did, would it be an improvement? I'd like to read about ECM successes in *EQ*, especially with regard to how such a project works with the institution's library. If you have a successful ECM system, do you also have an institutional repository? Or is it all the same system? EDUCAUSE sponsors a constituent group focusing on "Enterprise Electronic Content Management."[7] I'd very much like to read about how tools such as digital asset management systems can effectively enable the work of an entire institution.

8. "Commercial software is more stable and has better support than open source software."

A few of my staff would argue that, in an age of continued cost-cutting, we often receive better support when we use open source software. Whether operating systems, network and server utilities, development tools, administrative applications, course management systems, portals, or institutional repositories, there is a lot of open source software available of interest to higher education. Brad Wheeler provided a good overview of the state of open source, and what he calls community source, in a recent *EDUCAUSE Review* article.[8] I'd like to see some data and success stories in *EQ* comparing costs and effectiveness of using open source versus commercial software.

9. "If you have a well-designed Web site, it will increase the number of applicants to your institution, help retain students, and increase alumni giving."

Design is an interesting term. Is it the pretty pictures and colors, or is it making the Web site more useful and usable? We've certainly progressed beyond thinking of the university Web site as just another publication. What lessons can we learn from computer-human interface design that will make higher education Web sites more successful?

Published reviews of successful use of Web usability studies explain how to improve academic Web sites, especially with regard to academic libraries.[9] I'd like to see more such studies in *EQ*, especially those that document improving usability for a wider range of academic services on the Web.

10. "If we have a campus emergency/disaster, we'll shift more of our communications online."

Perhaps your campus is prepared for just such a contingency. Have you actually had to put these plans in place? What lessons have you learned? Joy Hughes and Keith Bushey's recent *EQ* article on George Mason University is an excellent review of improvements they made after the events of 9/11.[10] Lessons learned from such articles can help build a case for emergency preparedness. Not

that I'd want to wish an emergency on anybody, but I'd appreciate more such articles in future issues of *EQ*.

If your campus is doing something with technology you think *EQ* readers may find of interest, please consider writing for *EQ* as a way to tell others about it. Putting together a feature article is not that difficult if you have a story and data to support the lessons you've learned. Even if you don't have all the data or complete assessment, you could write a Good Ideas (a concise case study), Research in Brief (a report on current research), or Viewpoint (a short opinion piece). If some of the ideas I've presented here strike you as controversial or you have data proving or disproving one of these "myths," I'd like to read about your work in *EQ*. Remember, when you write for *EQ*, all of us in higher education will benefit. *e*

Endnotes

1. "EDUCAUSE and COSTS Higher Ed Technology Surveys Will Merge," EDUCAUSE press release, May 2, 2005, <http://www.educause.edu/PressReleases/1175&ID=1190> (accessed February 5, 2007). For the COSTS Project archive, see <http://www.costsproject.org/>; for the EDUCAUSE Core Data Service, see <http://www.educause.edu/coredata/>.
2. G. Salaway et al., *The ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology 2006*, (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, Research Study, Vol. 7, 2006), <http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ERS0607>.
3. Ibid.
4. "Net Generation Learners," EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, <http://www.educause.edu/NewLearners/5515>.
5. D. G. Oblinger and B. L. Hawkins, "The Myth About No Significant Difference: Using Technology Produces No Significant Difference," *EDUCAUSE Review*, Vol. 41, No. 6, November/December 2006, pp. 14–15, <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm0667.pdf>.
6. T. O. Walters, "Strategies and Frameworks for Institutional Repositories and the New Support Infrastructure for Scholarly Communications," *D-Lib Magazine*, Vol. 12, No. 10, October 2006, <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/october06/walters/10walters.html> (accessed February 5, 2007).
7. Enterprise Electronic Content Management Constituent Group, <http://www.educause.edu/EnterpriseElectronicContentManagementConstituentGroup/6672> (accessed February 5, 2007).
8. B. Wheeler, "Open Source 2010: Reflections on 2007," *EDUCAUSE Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1, January/February 2007, pp. 48–67, <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm0712.pdf>.
9. B. J. Cockrell and E. A. Jayne, "How Do I Find an Article? Insights from a Web Usability Study," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 28, No. 3, May/June 2002, pp. 122–132.
10. J. R. Hughes and K. R. Bushy, "Learning the Hard Way," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2006, pp. 55–57, <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm0648.pdf>.

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