

Make Mine Vanilla

In August 2001, I spoke at the Seminars on Academic Computing (SAC) about the need to create a *culture of evidence* within the information technology ranks in higher education and the need to supplement the time-tested methods of learning primarily through professional literature and conferences. I argued, in effect, for the creation of new research literature.

The EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) embodies major aspects of this vision and challenge, and EDUCAUSE member colleges, universities, and corporations have been quick to support this venture. During 2002, its first year of operation, ECAR will have produced four significant studies and more than twenty-five research bulletins and case studies for an audience of nearly 120 subscribing institutions.

In the spring and summer of 2002, ECAR researchers studied enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, arguably one of the most important higher education IT developments of the last decade. Indeed, between 1995 and 2002, higher education spent an estimated \$5 billion replacing, upgrading, and maintaining the student, financial, and human resources systems that compose higher education's "engine room." Only the massive investments in networking, in the physical plant, and in the life sciences infrastructure rival this investment.

The forthcoming ECAR study on the promises and performance of enterprise systems chronicles the massive renewal of the IT applications environment in higher education. The data supporting this story point to general success. Although earlier adopters of new and, in cases, immature solutions paid a price for their leadership and risk-taking, most

colleges and universities appear to have met the renewal challenge directly, and the vast majority have accomplished the task on budget and on time.

Bob Kvakik, the principal investigator of this study, led a review of more than 900 variables related to this phenomenon. (Bob has kidded that his resulting publication will be limited to only 267 of those variables!) Although many observations rivet my attention, I will focus on only one here: the proportion of institutions that are committed to maintaining a largely unrevised code set from ERP systems suppliers. In this light, the ERP systems phenomenon of the late 1990s and early 2000s is a revolution in standardization—or, a revolution in vanilla. Significant elements (80%) of higher education have quietly decided that competitive advantage and freedom of expression will not be demonstrated in payroll, student, or financial transactions.

The implications of a revolution in vanilla are important. First, common systems suggest the possibility of common processes. To the extent that procedural standards—where desirable—are efficiency seeking, higher education may work itself out of a negative limelight as an inefficient advocate of the unique and idiosyncratic. Arguments of "We're different" have fallen on unreceptive ears among legislatures, financial overseers, boards of trustees, and others. But a revolution in vanilla also subjects higher education institutions, in an unprecedented way, to the benefits, vagaries, caprice, and often irrelevance of a small number of software suppliers. For many institutions, this is not new. For those who mastered applications development—who pioneered networks, content management, workflow, and other elements of the IT

environment—the prospect of a vendor-driven future is loathsome at best and unacceptable at worst.

The issue cuts both ways. Creating standards can position higher education to benefit from (some) innovation driven by other industries and to create the preconditions for Web Services, the next possible wave of standards. On the other hand, the higher education voice could become lost in the larger chorus of manufacturers, financiers, and other consumers of future ERP enhancements and plug-ins. From this crucible, therefore, those in higher education must work together to develop new and constructive ways to engage software suppliers so that their needs are met—and so that their innovations are brought to market. They also must find ways to reconcile the software industry's needs to maintain revenues for shareholders with their own needs to control and manage costs (and their own tendencies to defer maintenance).

Finally, it is clear that vanilla cannot be everyone's flavor *du jour*. Research-intensive universities are, to a very large extent, custom job-shops that serve simultaneously the highly idiosyncratic (and necessarily so) research enterprise and the academy. Although significant standardization of engine-room functions is a worthwhile goal even in these institutions, it is an elusive one. Unless higher education as a whole develops a rubric and language to describe the nuanced complexities of these research institutions, they will remain on the sharp end of unfair comparisons borne of the majority's experience.

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