

IT Data Collection and Assessment

Higher education has a long history of struggles over how to effectively evaluate campus information technology environments, including a number of attempts to systematically capture key data about IT from U.S. colleges and universities. For over two decades, such data were captured in the longitudinal survey work conducted at the University of Texas at Austin by Charles Warlick; this project provided important comparisons among campus computer centers, but it ceased in 1991. The CAUSE Institutional Database (ID) Survey provided valuable data from the early 1980s through 1996, but the growing complexity of computing environments and the challenges of defining an instrument to capture data valuable to all types of campuses caused this effort to collapse under its own weight. The one remaining national study is the Campus Computing Project, which focuses primarily on campus IT planning and policy issues in the academic arenas of teaching, learning, and scholarship. So we find ourselves in an environment of incomplete data collection, as evidenced by the frequent EDUCAUSE CIO listserv queries seeking specific baseline data for comparison purposes.

A number of futile attempts at defining common benchmarks for IT on campus have been made through the years. One of the key metrics that emerged in this regard was the percentage that IT expenses represented as a function of the educational and general (E&G) budget in campus fund accounting—usually between 3 and 5 percent. This ratio has become obsolete because of the changes in

accounting practices as required by FASB Statements Nos. 116 and 117. E&G budgets have not been reported (or able to be calculated) for private schools for six years or so, and now these reporting changes apply to public institutions as well.

Such measures are also complicated because the technology has become more fully integrated into the overall fabric of the institution, making it increasingly difficult to isolate and identify IT expenditures, which extend far beyond the traditional computer center. Finally, benchmarking of any kind has always been challenging because of the difficulty in defining a set of metrics that could be relevant across the differences in institutional types, sizes, and Carnegie classes.

For nearly two years, EDUCAUSE has been preparing to introduce a new service that will fill the need for data collection for planning and benchmarking. When fully developed, the EDUCAUSE Core Data Service (<http://www.educause.edu/coredata>) will have three components:

- An annual Web-based survey, through which institutions will be asked to provide campus IT data in five categories and which will be available for sharing, through a secure Web-based service, among all who complete the survey
- An ongoing interactive database service, through which authenticated and authorized participants will be able to access campus-identifiable data, using tools that enable the creation of peer groups of like campuses, the cross-tabulation of data elements, and the creation of on-the-fly ratios

- Publicly available reports offering aggregated data in areas of special interest

Although we believe that this data-collection effort is sorely needed by the community, we also recognize that data alone will not be sufficient to meet the growing demands for accountability being made by campus presidents, governing boards, and others.

In a recent *EDUCAUSE Review* article (July/August 2002), William Graves wrote about the need to redefine and reconceive how we think about campus IT investments and the need to consider and develop ways to assess a return on these investments. As Graves suggests, the issue is larger than just examining IT. If we really believe that the importance of IT is in the enhancement of teaching and learning and in the increased efficiency of administrative processes, then we need to be able to assess these critical campus outcomes—a task that most colleges and universities have fairly consistently avoided.

Whether because of a historical avoidance or the very significant challenges associated with, for example, measuring learning, higher education must now begin to grapple with assessment more aggressively and systematically. IT professionals need to be actively involved in these discussions, but the discussions and directions must be led by the academic and administrative leaders of the institution. IT assessment cannot be done in a vacuum; it must occur in conjunction with the assessment of the core mission and functions that are being transformed by this technology.

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