

# CAMPUS TECHNOLOGY

From the  
Syllabus  
Media Group

www.campus-technology.com

DIGITAL TWEED ♦ October 2004

## Trust, But Verify

Kenneth C. Green

However you feel about Ronald Reagan, there is no question that he truly was a Great Communicator. Reagan (and his handlers) could create or turn a sound bite into a phrase that would linger long beyond the moment. You may recall that in 1987, Reagan, citing an old Russian proverb, told Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev that the foundation for the new US-Soviet relationship surrounding arms control would be “trust, but verify” (*doveray, no proveryay*). In fact, Reagan’s comment to Gorbachev has found life well beyond the context of the 1980s US-Russian discussions on arms control: Google cites more than 16,000 references to “trust, but verify.”

Interestingly, in recent months I have been hearing that Reaganesque “trust, but verify” theme, as senior campus officials discuss IT issues affecting their institutions. For example, “trust, but verify” was clearly the message that Miami University (OH) President James Garland offered to the 200 campus IT officials from Ohio colleges and universities who convened on his campus for the April 2004 Ohio Higher Education Computing Council (OHECC) conference. In his welcoming statement to the OHECC audience, Garland, a physicist by training, described himself as a “fan of good technology.” But, the best technology, Garland observed, “is that which you don’t notice, unless it is to admire its elegance or effectiveness. Unfortunately,” he added, “we’re still noticing computers—and not for their elegance or effectiveness.”

### Who Can We Trust?

Speaking about his presidential colleagues and directly to the OHCCE audience, Garland noted that a key challenge confronting senior campus officials is, “Who do we trust about IT needs?” Noting that presidents and provosts “often lack the technical knowledge to evaluate proposals,” he stated that it is senior IT people who must translate technology options and vendor proposals into real and effective campus solutions. Garland’s public statement echoes the growing number of private conversations (rants?) about IT issues on campus and in higher education.

What, precisely, has fostered the “trust, but verify” mentality among college presidents, provosts, and trustees, not to mention many faculty?

**1—Tech consumes big bucks.** Perhaps the most obvious factor is that colleges spend lots of money on technology: hardware, software, tech people, administrative systems, course management systems, digital content, campus Web sites, and more. Moreover, the decentralized nature of much of campus

IT spending means that most colleges and universities probably need a small team of forensic accountants to unearth exactly how much campus money is actually spent on information technology.

That said, there are some general indicators for campus IT spending: data from the Campus Computing Project ([www.campuscomputing.net](http://www.campuscomputing.net)) as well as from the EDUCAUSE Core Data Survey ([www.educause.edu/coredata/](http://www.educause.edu/coredata/)) suggest that total campus IT spending now runs about 7 to 8 percent of institutional budgets—almost double the level that colleges and universities spent on IT in the late 1980s and early 1990s. (Alas, I’m not aware of any reliable campus IT expenditure data for the late 1980s. There are certainly “consensual estimates,” but no hard data for this period.)

**2—Tech consumes everyone’s bucks.** The forensic accountants we would need in order to get an accurate number for total IT spending would find that there are technology expenditures across the campus, not just in selected academic departments or for centralized IT services. The physics department needs its own server, while the photography program requires equipment for a digital darkroom. Individual faculty and individual departments pay supplemental fees for online journals. Student labs and faculty computers may be both a departmental expense as well as an institutional expenditure. The emergence of internal service fees for network connections and user support contribute to rising technology costs and growing frustration about campus IT services.

**3—Missing bang for the bucks?** IT spending in the Information Age seems to run counter to the layperson’s “textbook” understanding about the link between productivity and technology. In the Industrial Age, investing in technology reliably led to reduced costs and rising productivity. In the Information Age (at least in education and on college campuses), many presidents and provosts feel that the continuing investment in technology for research, academic programs, and campus operations seems to lead to still more investments in information technology without the documented gains in productivity and educational outcomes, and without any reductions in IT or other costs.

**4—Operating vs. capital costs.** Because IT is really an operating cost as opposed to a capital cost, the continuing (and rising!) campus expenditures on technology required to support research, academic programs, and administrative services are an ongoing irritant for many senior campus officials, as well as for

many trustees. The structural obsolescence embedded in hardware and software, coupled with annual licensing fees for system software and digital content services, means that colleges and universities are continually buying—and often buying more—technology.

The ongoing investment in technology seems to lead to still more investments in IT—without documented enhancements in productivity, enhanced educational outcomes, or reduced costs.

**5—Digital life in the new world order.** Finally, in the weeks and months following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, colleges and universities (like corporations and government agencies) incurred significant additional costs to address critical IT security and disaster recovery issues.

Is it any wonder, then, that Miami University's Garland reports that he and his presidential colleagues feel IT costs are "out of control"? Admittedly, desktop and notebook computers cost significantly less today and do more than the products we purchased five or 10 years ago. But campuses are buying more computers, and more of other "stuff"—software, digital content, user support services, etc.—as well as upgrading aging, if not ancient, administrative systems

(student information, finance, human resources, etc.) that, on many campuses, may be a decade or more old (according to the 2003 EDUCAUSE Core Data Report Survey).

#### **Managing Expectations**

The lesson of the "trust, but verify" message may be a variation on the "do more with less, and do it better" mantra espoused by many college presidents during economic downturns. After all, in the case of IT, there's no question that we are doing more, and we often are doing it better.

Yet, in addition to our efforts to control costs, we also may need to manage our IT aspirations and expectations. (One of the key lessons of the 1990s dotcom economy, for instance, was that the Internet changes many things, but not everything.) Consequently, for those of us who work in or with IT, the "trust, but verify" message means that while we can still trust with our hearts ("I believe in IT"), we will need to verify with our heads (document that the technology will produce and perform as promised). Our goal should be to align heart and head, aspirations with implementation.

To sum it up, we can certainly trust, but we also must verify.