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The Wired Campus: Enough Is Enough

By GREGORY A. JACKSON

My son starts college this fall. On our grand tour, admissions officers and student guides spent substantial time showing off their institution's computer capabilities. Each asserted that his or her college provided better information technology than the competition, and that the comparison should matter to us.

Those administrators and students were making a mistake -- the same one that Yahoo! Internet Life makes when it publishes its "most-wired colleges" rankings. The rankings encourage institutions to compete in an inappropriate and unnecessary technological arms race. Some institutions have supposedly even exaggerated the data that they've submitted, in an attempt to improve their rankings. Moreover, such rankings stimulate colleges to focus their high-tech expenditures narrowly on those activities that the rankings measure -- and not on what's best for their students and employees.

But those are just the immediate reasons why the University of Chicago, like many of its peers, decided not to participate in the Yahoo! survey this year. On a more fundamental level, the rankings promote a simplistic view of educational quality. Yet quality depends on many complex attributes, which play out differently at different types of institutions. We should think and speak about campus information technology in a far broader context than technological rankings, and should help potential students and their families focus instead on other attributes -- those that truly differentiate colleges in important ways.

As my son chose among colleges, information technology was not among his key criteria. That's not to say information technology is unimportant to him. Although his academic interests lie in the humanities, my son, like most of his peers, uses computers routinely and is comfortable with electronic interactions and materials. But he and other prospective students know that precisely because information technology is important to them, it is important to colleges as well. So most of us at higher-education

institutions have invested heavily in the important technological necessities: campus and dormitory networking, multimedia facilities, help desks, site-licensed software.

While it may be useful to distinguish between those institutions that have made such investments and those that haven't, it doesn't make much sense to differentiate among those that have. But we in higher education persist in touting our capabilities -- high-speed connectivity, cutting-edge multimedia, fancy displays, extra megabytes for online storage -- because we have become too insular in our thinking.

We forget that colleges exist primarily to provide teaching, research, and community service -- and that we need information technology only to make those core missions more effective and efficient. We should brag about our technological resources only when bragging about our mission. For a few institutions, whose missions center on technology, that may mean touting computer capabilities. But for the rest of us, trumpeting information technology for its own sake is a disservice to students.

We should -- but often don't -- remind students, both prospective and current, that different types of institutions require different types and amounts of information technology.

Let's evaluate, for example, dormitory networking, supercomputing, and online courses from the varied perspectives of a residential liberal-arts college, a research university, and a community college, each of which has different goals and, therefore, will value and use technology in different ways.

In most cases, a liberal-arts college will value dormitory networking most highly, a research university will value supercomputing, and a community college will value online courses. Why? Because, to put the matter in microeconomic terms, as we so often do here at Chicago, the three institutions have different utility functions. Each type of institution needs to invest in ways that maximize its desired outcome, given its resources and its most important audiences.

For example, although a research university needs the same kind of dormitory networking as a liberal-arts college, it needs a more complex -- and expensive -- research infrastructure. The research university thus faces different tradeoffs than its liberal-arts counterpart does -- and, given similar resource constraints, the two will invest differently. Because community colleges rarely house students or do research, and often seek to educate in nontraditional

ways, they have little use for dormitory networking or supercomputing. They find appealing the distance-education mechanisms that research universities and liberal-arts colleges often dismiss, at least for now.

When, during campus tours and in recruitment publications, we emphasize any one such area consistently over another -- say, dormitory networking over supercomputing and online courses -- regardless of our institutional type, we misrepresent our essence. Even worse, in our efforts to win the rankings game, we convince ourselves that more is better -- and forget that sometimes enough is enough.

Take, for example, classrooms outfitted and networked for computers and other electronic media. At most research universities, only a minority of faculty members -- substantial and growing though it may be -- uses computers or networks in class. Even allowing for growth and logistical inefficiencies, we usually need far fewer of those classrooms than the number that we have available.

Yet once we have equipped an adequate number of rooms, most of us attach substantial value to equipping more. Similarly, we boast about 24-hour public computer labs, even when such facilities are usually empty several hours a day, and about help desks open from 7 a.m. until midnight, even when most help calls come weekdays between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. In short, by acting out "more is better" indiscriminately, we send the wrong message.

What's the right message?

The reports that I've heard from my son and his friends about their visits to college campuses, and from people whom I know in admissions, suggest that once an institution has the appropriate level of information technology for its type, having more really does not "count." Our prospective students and their families evaluate most campus information technology simply in terms of whether it's sufficient or not.

So how can colleges determine what's "sufficient"? I can sketch the basic requirements for the sector that I know best: research universities with substantial programs for resident undergraduates. Such a university has sufficient information technology if students have reasonable access to high-tech facilities and resources, like public computer labs, electronic classrooms, and multimedia tools; networking is pervasive and accessible, and distributing U.R.L.'s instead of paper copies raises no eyebrows; and academic services

and materials -- class assignments, administrative documents, library resources -- are typically posted online.

Other items on my checklist? The institution makes clear its preferred standard for widely used equipment and software, and provides discounts, loans, or other incentives to encourage their use. Students get help within a reasonable time when they encounter computer or network problems, whether through a central help desk, consultants in each dormitory, or public computer sites. And computer policies limit network use only for legal or financial reasons, not in response to censorship or pressures to be politically correct.

When evaluating an institution, prospective students and their parents should value those that satisfy all of the criteria more highly than those that do not, but they should not value institutions that exceed one or more criteria any more highly than those that simply meet them. With that in mind, two observations strike me about my list:

First, a majority of research universities do, in fact, satisfy all of the key criteria. That reinforces my argument that information technology is not a useful discriminator -- at least within this higher-education sector.

Second, the institutions have met those criteria only recently. Even five years ago -- the point at which Yahoo! surveys made sense -- pervasive networking, Web-hosting standards, site licenses, appropriate policies, and online materials were still remarkable. Five years earlier, they were rare. We are coming off a period of rapid change. Our misguided attempts to outrank each other, rather than to provide sufficient and appropriate high-tech resources to our students and faculty members, in part reflect our confusion as we've tried to grapple with that change.

What about institutions other than research universities? Their checklists probably would differ not in size or substance but rather in emphasis. For nonresidential colleges whose students need access to the institution from home, the quality of networking in a neighborhood or a city is obviously more important than high-performance campus networking. Online materials also are more important than they are at a research university. On the other hand, access to specialized research technology -- supercomputers, special instruments, analytic software -- may be less important.

But my three central points -- that information technology is not important out of context, that we should evaluate campus

information technology along relatively few dimensions, and that customers should consider sufficiency across all those dimensions rather than rank institutions according to each one -- remain valid beyond research universities.

Information technology has made discourse on campuses today very different than it was when I and, I suspect, most readers of this article were undergraduates. Back then, interaction with faculty members was in class or during office hours, people physically gathered for informal discussions and bull sessions, registration required standing in line, bibliographic research at 3 a.m. was difficult, and not being able to locate a certain publication in the library was a major problem. Recent technological changes have been important, and we need to celebrate them. But neither our customers nor we should take such change as anything more than it is: a change in the technology of academe, which may or may not be a change in academe itself.

My son is right. Although information technology will be important to him as a student, all he needed to know was whether each of his prospective colleges provides enough. They do. Enough is enough: Let's talk about differences that are more important.

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