

# CAMPUS TECHNOLOGY

Interview

## Shifting Campus IT Priorities

Purdue University rolls out a strategic plan that balances economic challenges with IT priorities and energy conservation

- By [Bridget McCrea](#)
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Like many institutions of higher education, [Purdue University](#) is dealing with its fair share of economic challenges right now. Balancing those hurdles with the need to remain progressive and in touch with student needs isn't always easy, as the university's board and administration have come to realize.

To better its chances of evening out those scales, the West Lafayette, IN-based school announced in January that its "renewed" strategic plan would focus on improving operations, becoming more energy efficient and developing more competitive compensation plans. Other organizational and process changes include a reevaluation of the school's IT governance structure and an expansion of its strategic sourcing efforts.

Driving much of the change is a projected \$67 million budget deficit that could rear its ugly head as early as 2013, thanks to the loss of \$35.8 million over the next 18 months in state appropriations for the school's West Lafayette campus.

Gerry McCartney, university CIO and vice president for IT, said the university has taken an active stance in managing the unexpected budget crunch. McCartney spoke with Campus Technology and shared details about the institution's plans as they relate to his department and the role that strategic sourcing, energy conservation, and other initiatives will play in the overall plan:

### **Campus Technology: Why is now the right time to assess Purdue's IT strategies?**

**Gerry McCartney:** It's no secret that state institutions are receiving less assistance from their states because of the economic downturn. Concurrently, IT didn't exist on campus 30 years ago, and if it did it served a small group of people with specific needs. In the 1990s there was a mad dash to get up to speed with IT, with an emphasis on effectiveness rather than efficiency. It's not news to anyone working at a large university that this wasn't the most efficient way of doing business, particularly when it comes to IT. We've been ripe for a while to take a closer look at how we're doing business institutionally, particularly when it comes to IT.

On the other side of the issue, technology has reached a "plateau of reliability and performance." Not only do we count on it to work, but we also expect it to be as reliable as the lights and the telephones. As an IT department, we aren't necessarily organized to support people in that way. We need to respond to this and other issues and feel that now is as good a time as any to do this.

**Campus Technology: What specific areas of IT will you be reevaluating?**

**McCartney:** We're looking at highly scalable, extensible services where reliability and efficiency are important. Areas like network provisioning, e-mail provisioning, and file services, to name a few. We'll also look at research and instructional support and other fast-moving, competitive advantage type[s] of areas. What we have right now is this hodgepodge of campus organizations. There are units scattered around the schools, and over time the local, administrative groups have grown up to supply their needs, namely because the "center" has done a poor job at providing such services.

**Campus Technology: How will you bring those disparate groups back to a more "centralized" IT department?**

**McCartney:** We'll do it through IT governance, which will involve moving functions to the center that actually belong there and taking functions into the center that are currently "at the edge" of it. Then, those more experimental technologies and services should be situated at the edge. Consider a highly scalable service like e-mail, for example. Why would you want to have two or three e-mail providers on campus? There's simply no competitive advantage to it. We only run one payroll system and one phone service, but those are mature technologies so everyone understands them and accepts that the "center" can handle them efficiently. In the end, the center should be large and should emphasize reliability and cost effectiveness, while the edge should represent agility, responsiveness, and responsibility.

**Campus Technology: How does this tie into Purdue's financial goals?**

**McCartney:** As it stands now, there's double spending or redundancy on products and services, namely because we just don't need as many types of a particular service that we have in place. Going back to the e-mail example, our e-mail system is duplicated on several levels. The financial goals will come when the ideal outcome (a strong center and strong "edge") is achieved and where the IT structure provides only the things we care about and in a reliable, cost-effective manner.

**Campus Technology: How does strategic sourcing play into Purdue's IT goals?**

**McCartney:** We're borrowing a term from the supply chain management industry when we talk about strategic sourcing, which is basically getting the best products and services at the best value.

If you were to ask a few people here what type of printer--or even which printer vendor--Purdue recommends, they wouldn't be able to tell you. That's because there isn't one. Everyone just buys what everyone feels like buying. It's hard to imagine a less cost-effective

way of doing business. Our goal is to reduce those choices from 68 million different options to maybe 20 or so that each person can pick from. We know that every vendor wants sole sourcing, but doing business that way can put you at great institutional risk because you're beholden to that provider. I'd like to see two or three vendors to select from; we'd be in a great place if we could get there.

### **Campus Technology: How will energy conservation help Purdue achieve its new strategic goals?**

**McCartney:** Energy consumption plays a major role at research universities. We have a lot of faculty researchers who have received \$50,000 to \$150,000 grants to purchase high-performing computer equipment, for example, and that requires energy to run. But while computing has gotten cheaper and cheaper, the school has been forced to buy more and more power to support its use. The fact that the machines are only used about 15 [percent] to 20 percent of the day, and that they're running all day, creates a climate where we can--with the proper policies and programs in place--recover millions of dollars in energy spending. Right now, for instance, we're implementing programs to save \$500,000 through reduced lighting, temperature adjustments, and electrical/electronic equipment cycling. We already have some building clusters that are using these initiatives quite successfully, and we'll be adding more over the coming months.

### **Campus Technology: What's on tap for the rest of the year for Purdue and its strategic plan?**

**McCartney:** Going forward I think we can expect to see a more strategic organizational view of IT here. Right now it's pretty tactical at both the school and unit level, as in: We do what we need to get done this month or this week, and that's about it. It's appropriate in many cases, since you can't use the words "three years out" and "agile" in the same sentence. We'll also see some rebalancing of portfolios and some movement of staff (as well as responsibility and how we do things) between organizations, particularly on the administrative side. Finally, energy conservation will continue to be a big part of what we're doing at Purdue to achieve our strategic goals in 2010 and beyond.

#### About the Author

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