Campus Technology: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

When I started college in East Tennessee in 1973, "high tech" wasn't even a phrase in Americans' conversations. My fellow students and I were awed by the gigantic Radarange and 26" television in our dormitory's common area. The digital pinball machine in our student center was discomforting and commonly described as "just too weird for words." Our exposure to computing was writing lines of BASIC code to run on a series of circuits inside hardware that took up half the basement of one building. Our idea of what today would be deemed a virus was running a program routine that made a telex terminal's bell ring incessantly as a prank.

Student services personnel didn't have to worry about cyber-addiction, on-line stalking, mental aberrations arising from lack of human contact, or having to constantly revise an already too-long policy on appropriate use of the school's technology infrastructure. We worried about ethical and legal violations of our President and his Cabinet, not widespread, organized, ethical and legal violations among our fellow students.

My, how times have changed…

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, (UT) has been identified as the seat of more on-line music piracy than any other college or corporate entity in the U. S. Students at five schools were identified as particularly exploitive. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) obtained a federal court order requiring the targeted schools to forward demand letters to students who have allegedly violated copyright laws by downloading music without paying required royalties.

UT complied, but it is poised for further battles. The RIAA action probably results from a 2004 decision by the state's Board of Regents, which governs UT and 40+ other state-supported colleges. The Board responded with a resounding "No!" to demands from the RIAA that all 180,000 students enrolled in Tennessee's public colleges be assessed an across-the-board fee of $9.99 per month for music downloads. UT faces another potential issue that will likely end up being litigated in federal court. UT is required to comply with applicable Rules of Criminal (and/or Civil) Procedure. However, the university has a mandate to aggressively protect its students' privacy under the Federal Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA). Under subpoena, UT could be required to provide a large amount of FERPA-protected data to the RIAA.

What relevance does this event have for student services at UT? Student affairs personnel will likely be charged with preparing letters and other documents designed to reassure students their rights are protected. Student affairs offices will probably face a significant increase in student complaints if global measures are

implemented by UT's IT department to monitor students' bandwidth and Internet traffic. And, student affairs personnel will probably be charged with reviewing, revising, and getting signatures on a university-wide code of ethics for technology usage.

The cost of UT's involvement in this protracted litigation will also be borne – directly and indirectly – by students. Should UT reduce services to avoid raising fees (its historical response), students will suffer once again. For the most part, UT's student population could care less about the alleged illegal actions of approximately fifty individuals. The general consensus among students interviewed by news agencies is that students who want to download will find somewhere to do it. Why shouldn't they be able to use available facilities on campus?

More important than this, student affairs personnel will likely bear the brunt of campus-wide ethics training for students in response to local and state governments, alumni, trustees, innocent students, and the general public's increasing outrage at guilty individuals' lackadaisical attitude toward their allegedly criminal behavior.

What lessons does this experience hold for UT and other colleges? Students should respect the school's assets and applicable laws. If they don't have those values upon enrollment in higher education, can students acquire them from campus-instigated training? Unfortunately, it is unlikely. What responsibilities do student affairs departments have to provide such training? That is multi-faceted and open-ended and can only be answered, for the most part, by each campus according to its local culture. What kind of burden would these departments face in developing, delivering, documenting, and reporting such training? Undoubtedly, the direct and indirect costs would be substantial. Would the departments' budgets and/or personnel be increased to cover the added expense and activities? In today's economy, such expansion is rare.

It seems to me as though student services – not the RIAA – could ultimately be the injured party.

Resources

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