No E-Mail.edu? Pros and Cons of University-Provided E-Mail Accounts

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Given that most European and American students already have a consumer mail account, the question should be asked by universities whether higher education institutions need to provide e-mail services to students. The answer is of interest to higher education policy setters and IT personnel.

Key Findings

• Most students entering university already have e-mail accounts that they check on a routine basis.

• These mail accounts often have much richer functionality than those provided by the university.

• Roughly 60% of universities allow — explicitly or implicitly — the forwarding of mail from university-provided e-mail systems.

• Most universities will move to a no-fee, hosted mail service (or to a new premises-based system) during the next several years, then to a forwarding-only policy.

Recommendations

• Higher education institutions should consider whether they really need to provide students with e-mail services.

• Universities need to establish a loosely structured five-year planning horizon for e-mail investments.
STRATEGIC PLANNING ASSUMPTION(S)

By 2014, 25% of higher education institutions will provide only a forwarding e-mail address to students, in lieu of an actual mailbox.

ANALYSIS

Student e-mail in higher education institutions is in a state of transition, moving, in many cases, from a collection of open-source components to a complete, on-premises e-mail package from vendors such as Mirapoint or Yahoo/Zimbra, or to a no-fee hosted version from Google, Microsoft or Yahoo. The implicit assumption has always been that institutions must provide students with e-mail accounts. Some institutions, however, are starting to question whether they should provide student e-mail services, given the ubiquity of the rich consumer mail services used almost universally by students.

The alternative to providing e-mail services is to offer the student a university domain e-mail address, for example, joe.college@university.edu, and to have a mail relay (SMTP gateway) rout inbound messages to the declared student e-mail address (most likely a Hotmail, Google or Yahoo address) outside the firewall. In this way, the university does not provide the actual e-mail in-box, but employs only a routing rule — the student is obligated to supply the preferred e-mail address. If the student changes his or her e-mail address, then the student would inform the university of the change (presumably through a self-service portal), and a new forwarding rule is created. As is currently done, the university will inform the student that some official university-to-student correspondence will be via e-mail, and the student is expected to check e-mail on a regular basis.

We believe that most universities will move next to a no-fee hosted mail service or to a new premises-based system that will be employed for several years. These mail services increasingly will enable students to aggregate all their consumer mailboxes into the university-provided mailbox. However, after this cycle, we believe that many universities will eschew mailboxes altogether — by 2014, 25% of higher education institutions will provide only a forwarding e-mail address to students, in lieu of an actual mailbox. The situation is analogous to the phone; universities once provided phone jacks in student rooms, but, with the advent of ubiquitous cell phone connectivity, most no longer provide in-room phone service. It is important to note that we are not aware of any universities that have adopted this forwarding-only policy — some are seriously contemplating it now, and we expect a handful to skip the hosted e-mail stage and move directly to forwarding only during the next two years. Some universities take a half-step in the direction of forwarding-only by explicitly allowing students to forward e-mail from their university-provided mailboxes. This forwarding-only scenario is part of a long-term consumerization of IT trend, which postulates that the use of employee-owned equipment and consumer-oriented applications increasingly will be part of .com, .edu, .gov and .org computing strategies.

The arguments in favor of the forwarding-only approach include:

- Reduced IT group burden: Premises-based mail systems carry capital and operational costs, and no-fee hosted mail still requires integration for single sign-on, directory synchronization and oversight of the vendor relationship. Comparatively, the burden of maintaining a SMTP gateway and forwarding rules is minimal.
• Provides student choice: Students typically come to campus with a long-established preference for e-mail suppliers. In the forwarding-only model, students aren’t forced to move to a mandated e-mail service.

• Checked more frequently: Because the service uses the student’s e-mail address of choice, the student is more likely to check the mailbox frequently, because it already acts as the repository for preuniversity correspondence.

• Students forward e-mail anyway: Informal Gartner research indicates that when universities permit e-mail forwarding, anywhere from 10% to 50% of the student population forwards mail to personal accounts. So, if students are forwarding anyway, then, the logic goes, why not embrace it as a policy?

• Greater functionality: Although this isn’t as true for no-fee hosted alternatives, when compared with older premises-based mail systems, students’ personal e-mail accounts usually offer vastly larger amounts of storage, more mobility options, better Web interfaces, calendar and contact services, and more client options.

The arguments against the forwarding-only option include:

• No integration with campus systems: Outside e-mail services preclude tight integration with other campus applications, such as portal or learning management systems, although mashup capabilities may, in the long run, make at least superficial integration possible.

• Still not free: Although there may be a lesser IT group burden compared to other options, universities still must maintain mail relays (although open-source options such as Sendmail, Postfix and Qmail abound), and operational duties will include maintaining the directory and forwarding rules.

• No single point of responsibility: By dispensing with a common mail service, the university loses the ability to guarantee uptime and to enforce common policies around spam and virus filtering, message retention and message content. Many universities, however, may not have uptime service-level agreements or common retention policies.

• Lack of common collaboration services: All hosted no-fee mail options include not just mail but also calendar, instant messaging, presence, file stores and other services. In some cases, universities use these additional collaboration services across the student population. In the case of a forwarding-only policy, there is no option to have common collaboration services across the student population. Thus, universities likely will have to establish an alternative collaboration infrastructure to replace what might have been part of a student e-mail system.

• Confusing replies: Mail sent to joe.college@university.com can carry a reply from a nonuniversity address, thereby creating confusion and other possible problems in e-mail interactions. However, some e-mail systems allow a return address to be different from the actual return address.

• Entitlement expectations: Students (and parents) may arrive on campus with the expectation that the university is obligated to supply e-mail services to students.

• Message tracking: Forwarding services record only that the message was forwarded and delivered. Some universities are looking for ways to document that messages were opened, which is easier in a single-vendor system. In a forwarding scenario, however,
the expectation is that critical correspondences would carry a link to the university portal, where read-access can be documented.

- Student burden: Under the forwarding option, the burden of ensuring that the student has a functional, up-to-date mailbox is left to the student, a duty that some may shun.

There are other issues that arise when contemplating the forwarding option, some of which are unresolved. For example, in the case of government requests for access to student mail, the presumption is that the university will have no role, because the target mailbox is outside its control. The university may perceive this as a negative, because it may want to protect student privacy, particularly in the case of student faculty communication. Also, the forwarding scenario will preclude the university from accessing a student's mailbox, which, although rarely done, occurs when safety issues arise (for example, if a student is missing, harassment is suspected or illegal activity is detected). Any e-mail deployment raises Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) concerns. Universities that rely on e-mail for the communication of sensitive data will have to rethink this approach in a forwarding scenario and move to, for example, a policy of including a link back to the portal when passing sensitive information to the student. Disclosure of the actual student e-mail address would not seem to constitute a FERPA violation, although universities can refer to FERPA for more information. Finally, institutions will need to evolve their identity/access management capabilities to enable seamless use of the student's preferred e-mail address and the use of a different address for student e-mail from employee e-mail.
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