

Colleges try new phone systems

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Marjorie Leffler, the student government president. "They hoped to provide cheaper service than the phone company."

It hasn't quite worked out on other campuses yet, either.

The jury is still out on college-owned telephone systems, says Michael Toner, president of the Association of College and University Telecommunications Administrators (ACUTA).

Some schools considering telecommunications equipment purchases still are appraising the mistakes of colleges that have already ventured to become their own phone companies.

"Most (systems) have been in service for less than two years," Toner notes. "Some schools that had the old Centrex (Bell-owned) system would have been better off not to switch as Bell rate decreases have made some alternative systems more expensive."

While most schools buy phone systems to save money, expenses for new staff and equipment can mount up quickly, he adds.

The University of Chicago's three-year-old system cost nearly \$15 million to install, administrator Carol See explains, while the university hopes to save only \$10 million over the next five years.

UCLA expects to save \$15 million over the next 15 years with its \$19 million system, says John Terrell, system manager.

But Larry Larson, University of New Mexico telecommunications manager, claims UNM has cut phone expenses by 50 percent since its December, 1983, purchase of a \$6 million state-of-the-art Nippon NEAX 22 system.

Monthly phone bills have decreased from nearly \$270,000 to about \$107,000 a month, he says.

University of Missouri officials hope redesigning the telecommunications system at all four UM campuses will save up to \$10 million in 10 years.

Beginning with its Kansas City campus, UM officials are developing long-distance and local service for faculty, administrators and students, reports Coleman Burton, UM's director of

telecommunications.

"Another reason for the system is to get out act together," Burton admits. "At Kansas City there are eight different phone systems for three different locations. With the new system, we hope to save \$3 million to \$5 million at KC alone in ten years."

Despite anticipated savings, many campuses still are finding a few bugs -- and some resentment -- in their systems.

University of Tennessee dorm residents charge the number of available AT&T lines has been cut to force users onto the university-owned In-fonet system.

Students at other schools complain of high rates, poor long-distance connections and unprofessional maintenance, but "the issue is here to stay," predicts Phillip Beidelman, president of Western Telecommunications Consultants, Inc. "It's good and bad news both ways, not an open and shut case."

Schools which have purchased their own equipment seem to be learning to run the systems and to solve the problems that

arise, he notes.

"We anticipated problems during the cutover to the new system," UCLA's Terrell remembers. "One minor problem occurred, but users didn't even notice because our service was so lousy before."

"There are good and bad systems," ACUTA's Toner explains. "Some systems are absolutely horrible. Schools putting more work into the selection decision generally get a better system."

"Universities have to find and train qualified people," Beidelman continues. "They have to be able to offer competitive salaries."

If my clients don't make commitments, they fail and there's nothing I can do about it," he adds. "They're very aware of problems, but I can't say they all know what they're getting into."

Schools must choose equipment, services, and options based on such things as the college's location, the type, age and cost of the current system, penalties for conversion, and the school's academic mission, Beidelman says.

The biggest complications, he insists, are politics and competition.

"Cost is approximately \$1,000 per line," he says, "and it's a highly politically oriented expenditure. Pressure by vendors on governing boards and universities becomes hostile and extremely competitive."

But a more obvious problem, especially to colleges selling dormitory phone service, is student abuse of long-distance service.

Colorado State University students recently ran up \$6,245 in illegal phone calls by breaking assigned long-distance codes. Two students face felony computer fraud charges for calls of more than \$200.

The University of Oklahoma's six-digit billing codes have tempted some students to charge long-distance calls to as many as 30 different codes.

"Students like to try to find ways to beat the system," Wayne Olson, OU telecommunications manager observes.

But OU officials quickly caught the culprits, Olson says, and withheld their transcripts and admission approvals until the charges were paid.

"We held out the cookie jar," Olson comments. "Then we carefully watched the cookie jar."

College towns adapt

WASHINGTON, D.C. (CPS) -- College students get drunk, try the patience of local police and monopolize public parking spaces, but a new survey of "town-gown" relations finds that most college towns take these inconveniences in stride.

More city officials than five years ago cite alcohol and drug abuse as their worst town-gown headache.

Student alcohol and drug use was the number one campus-related problem for 74 percent of the 56 cities surveyed by Newark, Del., city planners and the National League of Cities.

Almost all the cities listed parking problems and off-campus housing restrictions as other major problems of hosting college students.

"These are the old standby problems in any university community because young people make up a disproportionate share of the population compared to other towns," says Nancy Minter, manager of the league's Municipal Reference Service.

In a similar 1979 survey, only 55 percent of the cities rated alcohol and drug abuse as the number one campus problem.

"The increase in cities reporting problems with alcohol may reflect the nationwide concern with drunk driving," Minter speculates. "And the raised drinking age in some states

makes many students legally underage."

But the most dramatic change in the 1984 survey is the increased cooperation between city and college administrators, she adds.

In the 1979 survey, only one city reported a joint economic development program with its college. Nearly 60 percent of the surveyed cities had such projects in 1984.

"The effects of back-to-back recessions on community finances and the effects of budget cuts on universities make for cooperation," Minter explains.

Colleges and communities are joining forces in such projects as research parks, sports arenas, street and sewer projects, buildings, mass transit,

student internships, and small business research and development, she adds.

"Cities have lots of respect for universities and want to get along better," Minter stresses. "We didn't conduct the survey to draw attention to universities and students as problems, but to determine what problems municipalities face having a college in town."

The 1984 survey included 45 cities of less than 100,000 people, and 11 cities of over 100,000.

"Cities were chosen whose main game in town is a university," Minter explains. "Very large cities were not included because, while they may have many schools, their politics, history and development are not directly related to a university."

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