Not even in cyberspace can we get a free lunch

By John Lombardi
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Computers, they say, will change our lives, improve our education, enhance our businesses, and make everything less expensive and more wonderful. The age of the Internet, they say, will transform us into a nation of sophisticated learners, members of a global village joined by the virtual space of computer-generated universal communication.

Everyone, whether in inner city or remote prairie, belongs to the virtual university. What vision, what promise ... what hype.

What are we to make of the millenarian ravings of our multimedia moguls whose corporate combinations have enriched a generation of merger-and-acquisition technicians? What are we to do with the blitzkrieg war of advertising about the second coming of Windows 95? When will we reap the harvest of prosperity from all this commotion?

I don't know. What I do know is that we ancients in the computer wars, we venerable punch-card retirees, we snowbirds of computing now vacationing in the land of the Internet, have some perspective on the promises of paradise.

A computer convert from way back in the '60s

Let me confess my conflict of interest here. I love computers. I have bunches of them. I waste endless hours playing with them. I write about them. I'm a true believer. The moment of my conversion dates from 1967, when I met an IBM counter-sorter and submitted a card deck to the CDC 3400 mainframe. Some, behind my back, have the effrontery to call me a nerd (of which designation I am secretly proud). So I love this stuff.

Computers have certainly changed our world and will continue to do so. They make it possible to do things unimagined before. From the words we write to the science we do, from the pictures we see to the businesses we run, nothing we do today is the same as it was in 1959, when the Strategic Air Command tracked missiles with huge vacuum-tube machines.

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has cost me money I wouldn't have spent if I had just stayed with my little typewriter.

Am I more productive? Well, I write more words. Are the words better? Probably not. Can I do more? Yes. Does it help my employer serve more students? Yes. Does it make more money for me? Clearly not, because I spend more money and time staying with the technology than I earn extra doing the technology.

Our colleges and universities have all partially computerized in recent years. As a result, the libraries work better, the registration and financial-aid processes work better, the faculty and students interact better and the quality of written work has improved. But no savings appear because we need more money to computerize, not less.

Computers do not generally save money. What they do is enhance the quality, expand the scope and improve the delivery. They almost always increase total cost while they reduce unit cost. I serve more students with computers than without them, so my total cost goes up and my unit cost of serving the students goes down. The cost is worth it, but it isn't less money.

Creating a virtual university won't shrink the budget

Will the Internet make college budgets shrink? Not anywhere I know. Instead, it makes college more accessible and more effective, it enriches the college experience, it

But while we celebrate our achievement and sit dazzled by the future before us, let's try a cold shower to gain some perspective.

... expands what we can teach the students, it improves the student's understanding of the technology, but it doesn't make college cheaper.

More power
but not more savings

Computer power has gone up, and price has gone down. That's terrific. Has this saved us money? Not really. My first computer was an Apple II. It cost me $2,400, and it could do stuff. I checked my local ads in *InfoWorld* magazine, and a reasonable machine today for my desktop is about $2,400. Is the new machine better, faster, fancier, colorized, sound-carded, hard-drived and modemed? Yes. Can I do more with it? Yes. Did I save any money over the years by the increased power and lower cost of computing? No. In fact, I spent lots of money.

When I had a typewriter, I just typed. Now I word process, and the copy is more or less error-free, thanks to the spell checker, and the type is proportionally spaced and nicely laid out. If I want to put in a graphic, I just do it without scissors and paste. If anyone wants, I can print a zillion copies on my laser printer. But to do this I am now on my 10th word-processing program, my fifth computer, my fourth printer. Each of these items

Most computer savings is invisible. If computers help our students learn more, help us teach more of them effectively over the next four years, lets us handle their registration painlessly, and shows us how to use our classrooms more efficiently, the savings are money not spent. Money not spent next year because we graduated students faster and took new ones in quicker. We save nothing this year. If I don't spend money this year for the computers, no one will know next year that the efficiencies possible were lost.

Absent computers, we will have fewer students. Absent computers, the ones we have will learn less effectively. The cost of not doing computers disappears into the general decline in effectiveness and quality. It doesn't cost anyone directly, it just costs all of us indirectly.

The cost of computers is immediate and direct; the benefit is general and indirect. Yes, computers do help us work better, faster and more effectively, but don't believe for a minute that they can help us work cheaper.

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