

On iPads and Board Books

BY SLADE SULLIVAN

What will come of Apple's new iPad? How might it, and devices like it, transform the way we live and learn?

It's too soon to know, but since its debut in March of this year, the iPad has been flying off store shelves and into the hands of educators who recognize the tablet computer's unique characteristics: its ability to mimic much of what has made laptops indispensable and e-readers so popular, but with even more portability and with a few features enhanced in the interest of versatility.

The team that serves our board at Abilene Christian University has long wrestled with the problems of so-called "board books," specifically with their production and distribution. The weeks leading up to every board meeting require hours of staff time and significant expenses to produce these behemoths: huge binders stuffed full of minutes, agendas, action items, and appendices.

And that's where the iPad comes in. We quickly saw how the device might be used to upend old habits, diminish drudgery, and—most important—enhance the board-meeting experience.

We got the idea during the Workshop for Board Professionals at the 2010 National Conference on Trusteeship. Attendees discussed both the ease and convenience of using Web-based board materials and the difficulty of convincing board members to go paperless.

We saw the opportunity to say goodbye to board books once and for all, including the thousands of dollars spent each year on paper, printing, binding, and mailing, plus the aggravation of handling the cumbersome volumes. We recognized early on that this effort would involve our board in the campus-wide push to adopt innovative new education technologies; would make our board more environmentally friendly; and would give our trustees real-time access to the information they need to make informed decisions. Ultimately, we were convinced that our board would be excited enough about the initiative to let go of their attachment to paper. The project also was a natural outgrowth of our university's comprehensive commitment to technology that

allows the education process to take place anytime, anywhere.

The board first used the iPad during its May 2010 meeting. In the weeks prior, trustees had been offered a deal many found difficult to resist: They would be provided an iPad for the sticker price less a \$300 subsidy from board funds. Board members were encouraged, not required, to participate in the program. It was made clear they could print whatever board documents they liked to use in tandem with the new electronic device.

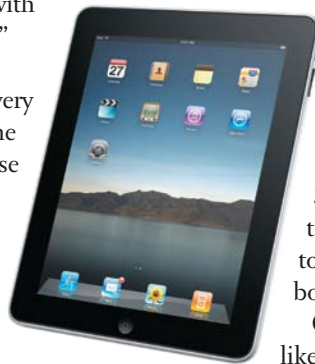
It has been a win/win from the start. The vast

majority of our trustees received a device that for many around the country was still in short supply. By our calculations, the subsidies will be recovered through cost savings within two years. Thirty-two of our 35 members have purchased iPads; of the three trustees who have chosen not to participate, two are rotating off the board.

Our trustees have taken to the devices like ducks to water. We faced almost no resistance, in part, we believe, because we assured them they would be given proper training and full IT support from the moment their units came out of the box. Many were already comfortable using smart phones, so the touch-and-feel aspects of the iPad were familiar. We also redesigned our board Web site to make it easier to read and navigate on mobile devices.

Our board members enjoy being able to quickly search for and find supporting documents during meetings; they appreciate the ease with which they now communicate with their board counterparts and with our new president; and they like knowing that they are participating in our university's campus-wide culture of innovation.

Making the change from board books to the iPad has been effectively painless and extraordinarily effective. Experiments don't always work out so well, but this one looks like a winner.



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Slade Sullivan is general counsel and secretary to the board of trustees at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas.