Joe Anderson: In our experience, there are three primary reasons why schools are making investments in mobile applications. First, student communications has historically been one of the top priorities for educational IT departments, and today it’s even more critical because smartphones are in the hands of all the important demographics: students, recruits, parents and alumni. The second reason for investing is university brand. At least 60 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds have a smartphone, and 80 percent of their time is spent in mobile applications. Very little time is actually spent in a browser. So the message is pretty clear: If your university is not in the app store, you are missing out on an important channel to represent your brand properly.

The third reason is the fact that two of the largest IT investments for universities are the student information system, or ERP; and the learning management system. Providing mobile access to both of those really enhances their value.

AT&T Campus Guide Plus is an integrated platform built on an open-source core. It provides a service that can be brought to market very quickly, assembled rather than programmed or developed, and done at a reasonable cost. It provides what we like to refer to as a “glanceable,” actionable, very integrated and seamless experience for the end user. And because it’s built on an open-source core, it provides a very high ceiling for future expansion. The options for development run the range from a non-programmer creating and assembling content all the way to a professional developer who wants to write code, and everything in between. So it allows for collaboration between the development and non-development communities within a school.

Ideally, universities are looking for unique systems for their mobile applications. Nobody wants to be a “me too.” But everyone has a budget that they are working within. This platform approach provides the best of both worlds in that it gives a base set of functionality along with the ability to make investments in your system unique to your school.

We integrate with some of the very specific systems that are in universities, such as Oracle, PeopleSoft, Ellucian, Banner, Colleague and so on. We create a user-friendly experience, so that as a user goes through some tasks, they are not backing in and out of siloed modules. Rather, modules are connected together for a seamless experience. For example, a student can register for a course, locate the classroom on a campus map and research the professor from his or her phone. To make that work we touch about four different systems, but to the end user, because of the architecture of the Campus Guide Plus system, it looks and feels like a single application.

Shani Lenore-Jenkins: We want to make sure that when students get here, they stay here, they graduate and then they become active, engaged alumni—because we know that will continue to help us recruit future students. So the key here is making sure that at every stage of the student lifecycle, our students are engaged with our community.

Engagement has changed a lot over the years. So we said, “What do we need to do to make sure that Maryville University continues to engage with their community on-the-go?”

After our evaluation process, we chose the AT&T Campus Guide Plus solution because it provided us what we were looking for: an open-source platform, sensible price and the ability to have our team help the app evolve. It’s easy to add functionality. We are working on a few new releases, including a module that allows students to see the hours and daily menus of all the dining facilities, a module that relays the announcements from clubs and organizations that are posted on the digital signs around campus, and a career and professional development module where employers can post jobs and look at our students’ resumes.

And because we had the ability to fully customize the mobile app, it doesn’t look like the cookie-cutter apps that you may get through some other vendors. The campus decided to move from D2L to Canvas, and we expect it to be a smooth process to integrate with Canvas. We also integrated Ellucian Datatel Colleague, so our students can register for courses through the mobile app, which is phenomenal.

We have had this new mobile experience for less than a year now. In that time we’ve seen a 40 to 50 percent increase in downloads of our mobile app on iOS and about a 20 to 30 percent increase on the Android platform. A lot of that has to do with the fact that students are seeing things on the app that are relevant and that will make their lives a little bit easier.

Anderson: St. Louis University is another interesting case study for Campus Guide Plus. They wanted a highly customizable solution using their own developers. They implemented the open-source solution themselves, and so any of the customizations they were going to do, they were going to do on their own. And they wanted to ensure that whatever platform they selected didn’t nickel-and-dime them when it came to supporting those customizations.

Their most popular module is transit. The app gives users the ability to see where the campus shuttles are, when one is expected at your next stop, etc. The map app is popular as well, obviously; SLU has a lot of historical aspects to the campus, and it helps for new-student tours. Our Division I athletics department is also represented. To find game scores and schedules, it’s easier and quicker to use the app than to go to a responsive website on your device. SLU had a fast time to market. They launched the core services very quickly, in less than two months. That’s 20 months from signing the contract to deploying on the app store. They started with 10 modules, and in less than a year have added six to eight more. One is a laundry module—developed in-house—that makes use of data feeds from the washers and dryers to indicate when machines will be available.

To plan all of this, it’s important to create a mobile strategy team. Identify the people who will be users and who will be providing content. Get them all engaged early. The sooner you can get student feedback, the better, because their priorities are going to drive your enhancements; the quicker you can get on the students’ mark, the more usage you are going to get. Also, engage admissions, alumni and athletics earlier than later. These are sources of content and they can drive the deployment and adoption of the application.

It’s really interesting to look at the evolution of SLU’s app in such a short time, and the way that they accomplished it with their own development team. This was not a situation where they were writing checks to AT&T every month for consulting. They pay an annual fee for licensing and an annual fee for support. So they can tightly manage the budget while providing an app that is always evolving.