

## The Profession

### 1. What is the biggest challenge facing information resource professionals today?

*Linda Fleit, President, EDUTECH International:* Managing campus expectations is the biggest challenge and also the one that is most necessary to do well. The gap between the supply of and the demand for information resources will continue to be large—in some cases, overwhelming—and the technology will continue to change and be unstable to an alarming degree. Keeping campus expectations somewhat in line with reality is the key to being able to move ahead successfully.

*Robert Heterick, Fellow, Center for Organizational and Technological Advancement, Virginia Tech, and Visiting Research Professor, Lally School of Management, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute:* The biggest challenge facing information resource professionals today is to find a strategy that moves them from enterprise specialists to enterprise generalists. Too few executives in the mainstream academic management of institutions of higher education fully comprehend the power of information technology to address basic academic issues of teaching/learning, enrollment management, student services, etc. Information resource specialists need to be a party to helping devise solutions as well as implementing them.

*Polley Ann McClure, Vice President, Information Technologies, and Professor, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Cornell University:* Today's IR professionals must balance customer expectations of continuing increases in IT support with the limited institutional resources that are actually available for that support. Solutions can be found in the creative redesign of our organizations, in the courageous redefinition of our existing financial models, and in the invention of new business processes for service delivery. These changes—and the resulting new relationships—will certainly create stresses for our organizations and refashion the ways we relate to our customers.

*Martin Ringle, President, NorthWest Academic Computing Consortium:* Success. The unprecedented rate at which information technology is being absorbed into every aspect of daily life makes it increasingly difficult for IT/IR professionals to step off the treadmill and consider the long-range impact of key decisions. We are becoming mired in self-perpetuating trends and self-fulfilling prophecies.

*Jane N. Ryland, President Emerita, CAUSE:* We face many challenges: training and retaining staff; making appropriate technology choices; funding the investment in technology; determining if and how to incorporate distance or distributed learning; creating network-based libraries; meeting the support requirements of increasing numbers of users. But perhaps the biggest challenge is determining the right information resources environment, one that supports the specific mission of the institution, enabling the transformation necessary to ensure institutional success (or survival) in today's increasingly competitive environment.

### 2. How can information resource professionals best prepare themselves for the challenges of the twenty-first century?

*Fleit:* Preparing for the next century is best done by reading voraciously and listening intently—to the vendors, to the pundits, to the article writers, but most of all, to the campus community. It's not just about the innovations that will be coming in technology and information access; it's about what will be changing in higher education. Staying informed and using that information to stay flexible will help all of us prepare.

*Heterick:* They, of course, need to keep their technical skills current. By better understanding the "business" of higher education—which is primarily an academic endeavor—they can help lead their institutions in the transformation that will be focused on access, learning quality, and cost control.

*McClure:* Though the technical challenges are significant, these are not the difficulties that are limiting the success of most of our institutions. My colleagues who are making progress are doing so by establishing solid personal relationships, working in creative ways to engage their colleagues and customers in a search for workable, mutually beneficial solutions. There is much to be said for a general business education at the graduate or executive level in financial management, organizational behavior, and communications and marketing.

*Ringle:* Retreat(s). Periodically, information resource professionals need to remove themselves from the burnout pace of technical innovation in order to gain a better vision of the "big picture." In order to "think outside the box," one sometimes needs to "be outside the box."

*Ryland:* Perhaps because of my years with CAUSE, my first answer is to take advantage of the wealth of professional development available through EDUCAUSE: formal training (through the EDUCAUSE Institute or the new Frye Institute), EDUCAUSE publications, Web-based resources, and networking at events such as the EDUCAUSE annual conference. But equally important is to develop a greater understanding of our institutions so that we can be contributing members of the institutional leadership rather than just a voice for information resources.

### 3. Where will tomorrow's leaders in our profession come from?

*Fleit:* The leaders will come from among the many pools of bright and capable people on campus—from the computer center to the library, from the faculty to the finance office. More important than where they will come from is how well they will be trained to take on these leadership roles. We need to develop better training grounds so that regardless of where IR leaders come from, they are well prepared to do this most challenging work.

*Heterick:* If the rest of the business world is an appropriate example, they will come primarily from the ranks of business and academic officers already in our institutions of higher education.

*McClure:* Many of our future leaders will come from the faculty ranks. Faculty generally bring a deep appreciation of the fundamental purpose and culture of our institutions to their work; this will be increasingly crucial as we weather the challenges I cited above. We need to begin now to find ways to mentor faculty for such roles, identifying opportunities for them to learn the management and administrative skills that will be required for success as information resource leaders.

*Ringle:* As the profession matures, there will be increasing pressure, as well as growing incentives, to establish formal programs of training and certification for IT/IR professionals. The days when almost anyone, with nearly any background, could be considered IT/IR management material are coming to an end. Despite this, the *leaders* in the field are likely to remain mavericks, with unorthodox backgrounds and a natural tendency to swim in uncharted waters.

*Ryland:* Increasingly, the leaders of tomorrow for our profession will come less often from the ranks of the information

resources organizations and more often from the academic and other administrative departments on campus. More important than technology skills will be an overall understanding of institutional needs and the “business” of the institution and the ability to bring multiple diverse organizations and entities together in support of common goals.

### 4. What can information resource professionals do to be seen as more significant partners in institutional decision-making?

*Fleit:* The single most important skill an IR professional can possess is the ability to communicate well. With that skill firmly in place, a foundation of trust can be built with other institutional decision-makers, greatly increasing the likelihood of being asked to sit at the decision-making table. Influencing others, forming alliances, and fully propagating one's ideas—all part of institutional decision-making—depend on excellent communication skills.

*Heterick:* Develop and demonstrate an awareness of the critical issues facing institutions of higher education. Those issues are reflected in the transition of historically local, geographically franchised institutions to a global, competitive marketplace for learners of all ages.

*McClure:* IR professionals will have to *be* more significant partners! IR professionals must develop the interpersonal and communication skills critical to being good partners. These skills must then be integrated with a comprehensive understanding of the institution's business. Next, IR professionals must actually deliver results from these new arrangements. If IR professionals consistently help their partners achieve success, they will then be seen as significant partners in institutional decision-making.

*Ringle:* Information resources and technology are becoming more complex and hence more opaque to many institutional decision-makers. The ceaseless demand for more equipment, more staffing, and more networking may become an undifferentiated blur in the eyes of the key stakeholders. IT/IR professionals need to follow the advice of Henry David Thoreau: “Simplify, simplify, simplify!” Keep decision-makers focused on the costs and benefits of the most critical items and deliver information in terms that they can understand.

*Ryland:* We must reverse our perspective. Through our words and actions, we must be viewed first as institutional

leaders and only secondarily as information resource professionals. Rather than thinking and acting as technologists who look for ways our technologies can serve the institution, we must think and act as institutional leaders who consider the use of technology as only one of a number of alternatives available to help achieve the missions of our institutions.

**5. What can institutional leaders do to make information resource professionals be more effective partners in institutional decision-making?**

*Fleit:* All institutional leaders today need to know a lot more about IT and IR than can be learned from airline magazines. The institutions that are doing the best job with IR are the ones where the leadership is aware and knowledgeable—not at a technical level, of course, but at a strategic level. In this way, institutional leaders can be true partners with IR leaders and can ensure that IR is fulfilling its most important mission: supporting institutional goals.

*Heterick:* A chicken-egg question! Information resource professionals need to be at the table as strategies to address the critical issues for higher education are debated. To be invited to the table, information resource professionals need to demonstrate an understanding of those issues and of the paramount role that information technology will play in addressing them.

*McClure:* Allow the IR professional to participate in ways that go beyond the narrow, more traditional “technology-only” contributions. Expect the IR professional to have a broad understanding of the institution and its issues. Don’t tolerate the arrogance and “tekkie elitism” that have often been the modus operandi of many in IR organizations. And learn what *you* need to know about information technology so that you can ask good questions and assess the answers you get.

*Ringle:* Senior officers may view information resource professionals as a necessary but often incomprehensible component of their administration. The jargon, the agenda, and even the basic assumptions of IT/IR may be utterly foreign to them. Conversely, the jargon, agenda, and assumptions of senior officers may be obscure to information resource professionals. Including IT/IR professionals in the highest-level strategic conversations will achieve two-way communication and thus serves the best interests of the institution.

*Ryland:* While we are at work to enable transformation on campus, institutional leaders can encourage our own transformation into effective partners in institutional decision-making by acting as our mentors in institutional leadership, bringing us into their circles of colleagues and conferences oriented to institutional leadership so that we will begin to operate from an institutional rather than purely an information resources perspective.