

An Antidote for the Faculty-IT Divide

Good relations between IT and faculty can be promoted by understanding and addressing the cultural divides that exist between the administration and faculty

By **Luke Fernandez**

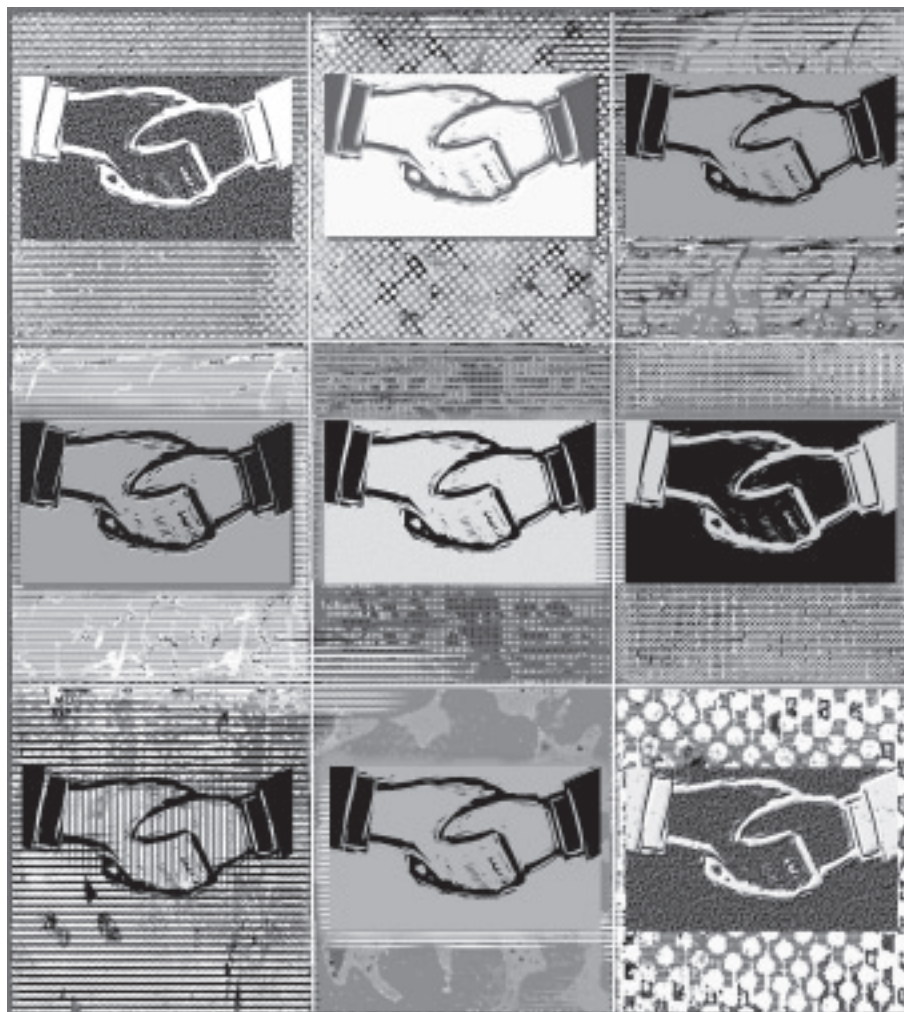
Do campus IT departments harm higher education? *Wall Street Journal* personal-technology columnist Walt Mossberg suggested as much during a speech he gave

to high-level administrators at last June's *Chronicle of Higher Education* presidents' forum. Mossberg caught the attention of campus CIOs when, according to the *Chronicle*, he

described large IT departments as "the most regressive and poisonous force in technology today."

Mossberg accused IT departments of centralizing technology and maintained that these centralizing initiatives discourage the development of solutions tailored to the needs of individual users. As Mossberg put it, "[Big IT departments] don't want to learn it because they don't want to support it. It's part of the problem of centralizing all this stuff."¹

While a full transcript of Mossberg's speech has never been released to the public, his indictment of IT caught the full attention of campus technology leaders. On the EDUCAUSE CIO e-mail discussion list, on a *Chronicle of Higher Education* podcast, and in the November/December 2007 issue of *EDUCAUSE Review*,² Mossberg's comments were debated and dissected. Since Mossberg (along perhaps with David Pogue of the *New York Times*) is one of the nation's most-read technology columnists, it's not surprising that his comments ignited widespread discussion. But the provenance of the comments is not the only reason the indictment enjoyed so much publicity. In describing campus IT as "regressive and poisonous" and in attributing this malaise to centralizing initiatives, Mossberg inflamed CIOs because he raised two issues that perennially challenge (and sometimes haunt) IT administrators.



- First, how should CIOs allay the perception that IT is a monolithic, self-serving bureaucracy that is corrupting—or, to use Mossberg’s term, poisoning—higher education and preventing faculty members from pursuing their central mission?
- Second, how should CIOs attend to the competing advantages of centralized and decentralized models of management, and how can they pursue these in such a way that faculty aren’t incited to level Mossberg-like indictments against IT?

CIOs with a strong technical background and faith in the chimerical “tech fix” are likely to seek technological solutions to these challenges. To people with this disposition, the famous Emersonian adage captures the essence of the strategy: “Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door....” My training as a political theorist and as a historian of American higher education makes me think that the problem Mossberg articulated isn’t strictly amenable to a technical solution because it isn’t strictly about the mousetrap. Instead, the problem is defined by the power relationships between the people who supply the mousetraps and the people who use them and a lengthy social history that insidiously divides the way administrators and faculty see the world.

The tensions between, on the one hand, a culture of administration that values efficiency, principles of scientific management, and standardized business processes and, on the other hand, an academic culture more focused on tradition, erudition, and innovation have existed in the university for about a century. From the point of view of many faculty, the growth of IT more often advances the interests and market-oriented perspectives of the administration, solidifying and securing the powers of the administration over faculty and narrowing faculty’s ability to teach with a modicum of autonomy. Rather than fostering a spirit of free inquiry and creativity, IT seems complicit in the promotion of “factory” models of education where innovation and exploration are

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Of course, the ideological distance separating administration and IT from faculty is diminished a bit by dint of the fact that administrators often come from the ranks of faculty. And some faculty (particularly in business schools) are likely to view efficiency and technology as benign forces rather than ideologies that promote and legitimate particular cultures or interest groups.

The division between faculty and administration does exist, however, and it is compounded by the rapid relative growth of university administration in the past three decades. Between 1975 and 1985, faculty appointments grew at a rate of 6 percent while appointments in administration grew by 60 percent.³ This administrative growth was followed by astonishing increases in IT budgets beginning in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, since at least the early 1970s, when higher education stopped expanding at the same rate as in the previous two decades, faculty have periodically complained that their numbers and their salaries have stagnated while those of administrators have grown.⁴

When faculty see the administrative arm of the university grow while their own ranks and budgets remain stagnant, and when they’re not sure that IT professionals see the university in the same way they do, it is not surprising that they would see IT as a poisonous and

regressive influence that is repurposing university life in the wrong direction. It doesn’t serve to dwell on a sentiment that could as easily be described as Nietzschean *resentiment*, or the envy one class displays toward another class that has through fortune or industry happened into a more lucrative profession. The division between faculty and administration is nonetheless exacerbated by these perceived remunerative differentials, and market forces make it difficult to resolve these inequities.

In the end, faculty will admit that progress, in at least some of its guises, benefits them. Like most Americans, faculty have an affection for technology, but tempered by a long-standing suspicion that it might be out of control and that it contains latent authoritarian tendencies to censor the critical thinking upon which much of teaching and learning rests. This willingness to stand at a distance from bureaucracy and from its technological agents has driven many faculty to regard technology with suspicion. In 1964, on the steps of Berkeley’s Sproul Hall, a young student activist named Mario Savio lent voice to the connections between technology and the authoritarian tendencies of the university in ways that still stir many faculty:

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part: you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop. And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all.

Others have also harbored worries about the authoritarian thrust of administrators and the possibility that technology might be used to further this authority. Take, for example, David Noble’s 1998 jeremiad “Digital Diploma Mills,” which is still often quoted:

Once faculty and courses go online, administrators gain much greater direct control over faculty performance and course content than ever before and the potential for administrative scrutiny, supervision, regimentation, discipline and even censorship increase dramatically. At the same time, the use of the technology entails an inevitable extension of working time and an intensification of work as faculty struggle at all hours of the day and night to stay on top of the technology and respond, via chat rooms, virtual office hours, and e-mail, to both students and administrators to whom they have now become instantly and continuously accessible. The technology also allows for much more careful administrative monitoring of faculty availability, activities, and responsiveness.⁵

In this vision, technology becomes the handmaiden of an authoritative, industry-minded administration that manages, through ever more refined technological means, to erode the autonomy that faculty jealously guard. Rather than creating and fostering innovation communities, campus IT is seen as an organization that curbs creativity and desiccates intellectual inquiry. Ten years after Noble's laments, most faculty don't couch their worries about technology in the university in such sensationalist language. Noble's vision of an academic 1984 has not (yet) come to pass, and faculty are more willing to admit that technology and bureaucracy have effects that sometimes hinder and sometimes enhance teaching and learning. Nonetheless, elements of Savio's and Noble's accusations resonate with Mossberg's: they are united in their suspicions that IT (or technology as wielded by the administration) is authoritarian, tendentiously technocratic, and creating a university life that is a bit too regimented.

Seen through this history, the tensions between IT and faculty (which lurk right below the surface in Mossberg's critique) are not entirely new; there is more than a little continuity



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between Mossberg's indictment and entrenched suspicions that faculty have harbored against administrators and the technology they employ. This doesn't mean that we should fatalistically accept this division. It is possible to work on building trust between these cultures as a way of bridging the faculty-administrative divide.

IT departments can ameliorate the sense of distrust by doing a number of obvious (and some less obvious) things. The obvious thing, of course, is to provide competent and reliable services that make the inequities easier to swallow—build a better mousetrap! A less obvious strategy is to engage faculty in discussing the university's goals and the role technology plays in promoting them. By doing this, administrators can disabuse faculty of the notion that IT is autonomous, guided by its own internal bureaucratic imperatives, or merely providing "improved means

to unimproved ends" (as Henry David Thoreau put it). We need to speak the language of academics, be familiar with the referents and paradigms they use, and have a deeper understanding of how the development of administrative bureaucracy and its attendant ideology in the twentieth century still shapes how IT is perceived. *e*

Endnotes

1. Dan Carnevale, "The Most Poisonous Force in Technology," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 22, 2007, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i42/42a03701.htm>.
2. The EDUCAUSE CIO Constituent Group (<http://www.educause.edu/groups/cio/>) includes an e-mail discussion list; Scott Carlson and Warren Arbogast discussed Mossberg's assertions in their podcast "Tech Therapy Episode 2: Centralization vs. Decentralization," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 10, 2007, <http://chronicle.com/wiredcampus/article/?id=2295>; and a group of CIOs discuss centralization versus decentralization of IT on campus in "The Organization of the Organization," *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 42, no. 6 (November/December 2007), pp. 24–53, <http://connect.educause.edu/library/abstract/TheOrganizationofthe/45222>.
3. Robert Zemsky, Gregory R. Wegner, and William P. Massy, *Remaking the American University: Market-Smart and Mission-Centered* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 20.
4. W. Lee Hansen and Thomas F. Guidugli, "Comparing Salary and Employment Gains for Higher Education Administrators and Faculty Members," *Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 61, no. 2 (March/April 1990), pp. 142–159, <http://www.jstor.org/view/00221546/di962524/96p01146/0>; and American Association of University Professors, "2005–06 Report on the Economic Status of the Profession: The Devaluing of Higher Education," 2006, <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/Z/ecstatreport2005-06/survey2005-06.htm>.
5. David F. Noble, "Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education," *First Monday*, vol. 3, no. 1 (January 5, 1998), http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_1/noble/.

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