Sometimes it is hard to explain what you do for a living. Recently, I had been wrestling with much success, with how to best describe what EDUCAUSE and higher education IT professionals do. Then I met Eddie Grant.

Grant, a professor in electrical and computer engineering and biomedical engineering, is a Scotsman with a wonderful brogue. It is a pleasure to listen to him—and fascinating to hear about how his work in robotics has the potential to help amputees, people with disabilities and sports injuries, and recovering stroke patients. But what I especially noted was his explanation, acquired from a mentor, of the field of engineering: whereas colleagues in the sciences study things, and those in the humanities focus on people, engineers do things for people. For me, the parallel with EDUCAUSE and the higher ed IT profession was obvious: we explore how IT can help make things possible for people in higher education—not only for students, researchers, faculty, and administrators but also for those in the campus community.

First, IT allows students to look for a college or university online. Once they are admitted and enrolled, students can register online. Their coursework is mediated by a course management system, while research is conducted, assignments are turned in, library reserves are managed, and grades are posted online. Some students can even check, via the web, when washing machines will be free in the residence hall and when buses will be arriving on the street corner. Facebook, multiplayer online games, and virtual worlds are a staple of their social lives.

Research is a fundamental part of college and university life. Here too, IT supports people in higher education, whether they are using a haptic device linked to physics equations to “feel” the forces around a carbon nanotube or are using complex visualization software to reveal relationships that couldn’t be seen otherwise. In addition, IT increasingly enables insight and innovation by bringing together virtual scientific teams, allowing them to work in new and different ways. Citizen scientists—volunteers who take observations and contribute to international ecological networks, for example—are also becoming a part of these virtual teams.

IT enables faculty to enhance student learning, both inside and outside the classroom. Sometimes this is by helping students listen—whether to a podcast of a lecture, to an audio comparison of normal and abnormal heartbeats, or to a story told by a native tribesman. Faculty use IT to make “learning by doing” possible, allowing students to work with the tools of their chosen profession—tools such as remote telescopes and shake tables. Other faculty use online 3D environments for group critiques involving students, faculty, and experts from remote locations. And IT makes it possible for faculty to remove distance from learning. Western Governors University, for example, offers online, competency-based licenses and degrees; students take classes from instructors around the country and receive credit for prior learning, whether in a classroom or on the job.

IT is also essential to administrators—those running the institution. Whether managing finance, personnel, and operations or monitoring energy consumption, IT has an enabling role. The same is true for security and communication.

Finally, IT enables the outreach and services that colleges and universities provide to communities around the world. Open educational resources have become increasingly common, allowing just about anyone to have access to a wealth of educational material. Vast digital libraries have been created to support K–12 teachers and to engage students with resources, authentic materials, and simulations. Students can participate in virtual field trips, whether to an estuary or to outer space. In the area of community service, IT has enabled field diagnosis of plant diseases through video streaming, has transformed rural health care, and has supported student-led service projects that are assisting groups such as the elderly or individuals in developing countries.

Obviously, the most valuable role of IT is as an enabler in higher education—IT enables learning, research, teaching, operations, and service. A unique contribution of the profession is understanding the problems in higher education, determining what is possible with technology, and then addressing the implementation issues—technical, human, organizational—that can make everything work.

So now when I ask myself what EDUCAUSE and higher ed IT professionals do, I know the answer. As Eddie Grant said, it is about doing things for people.

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