It is a truism that every part of the global economy is being dramatically affected by the infusion of new technologies. Perhaps it is simply because of my professional background, but I strongly believe that nowhere is that impact being felt more strongly than in higher education. I see the reason as threefold.

First, we are welcoming to our campuses students who have an expectation of the highest levels of IT support—in residence halls, classrooms, and laboratories. Try to tell them about a time—in the not-so-distant past—when students who brought electric typewriters to campus were the ones on the leading edge of communications technology, and you will get either blank stares or incredulous laughter. Keeping up with the demands of interconnectivity and bandwidth is a major financial issue for colleges and universities.

Those high expectations relate to a second issue. For our students, the language of the Internet is their native tongue. Whenever those of us who are not digital natives start to pick up on a trend, it is already out of fashion in the online world where our students live. We must learn the language and understand the trends.

The third factor concerns outcomes. We are educating students to take a place not just in today’s world but also in tomorrow’s. So those of us in higher education must tune in to the needs of the fast-changing world of international commerce and must become just as far-sighted as the most successful entrepreneurs.

This means that higher education institutions need to become more nimble.
and responsive: less dinosaur-like and more gazelle-like. College and university leaders must make decisions faster, based on an identified body of knowledge. In truth, closely monitoring trends and waiting for the conventional wisdom to form before we take action will often leave us behind the curve.

But college and university leaders face hurdles, particularly in the budgeting process, that make the institutional transformation from dinosaur to gazelle particularly challenging. For example, a college or university typically has a capital improvement plan that projects the needs for new construction and renovations decades into the future. Putting enrollment and population projections together with the predictable wear-and-tear on existing buildings results in a reasonably accurate appraisal. But even though it is equally important to have a plan for maintaining and improving the IT infrastructure, who can predict, with a similar level of certainty, the shape of the IT world in future decades? Technology needs can emerge quickly. When they do—and when they are costly enough to require additional allocations—a public university usually must seek funding from the state legislature. The outcome of that process is seldom either swift or certain.

Still, even in these changing times, some things are immutable. Quality, accountability, and transparency should guide the decision-making process as colleges and universities compete in the global economy. Technology will hold many of the keys to our success moving forward. For instance, we must increasingly guarantee that our IT deployment is scalable, robust, ubiquitous, reliable, and secure. Learners accessing our educational services have come to expect nothing less, and their choice of an educational partner will be based on these expectations.

One of the greatest powers of the Internet is its ability to dissolve barriers of distance. Today, articles from a newspaper in another country are a click away, just as are the contents of a reader’s local newspaper. If a shopper cannot find a specific product in a local store, he or she can buy it on the Internet from a merchant located anywhere. By making distance less relevant, the Internet permits exceptional educational programs to emerge, no matter their location. But for those colleges and universities that are seeking to export their educational programs, the Internet also introduces an unfamiliar world of unbridled competition.

Today’s learners want access to education when and where they are, at the most affordable price point. Therefore, colleges and universities are seeking to expand their inventory of offerings through collaborative partnerships both domestically and internationally. Because of slowing economic conditions, the educational collaborative partner must increasingly bring financial resources to the table. Not surprisingly, Dubai is currently a country of choice. The delivery model will combine both physical presence and the infusion of technology designed around learners’ needs and expectations.

Technology can certainly facilitate efficiency, but it will not necessarily manifest cost savings at the levels that many policymakers seek and desire. Nonetheless, the availability of technology solutions has become the gold standard of student selectivity and choice. Admissions officers understand that in order to recruit the best and brightest students to their institution, they must know the bandwidth capacity of their campus, the number of electronic course offerings, and the variety of academic majors available online.

Higher education is becoming more customer-driven in its response to learners. Increasingly, institutions are conducting market studies and are developing business plans as they enter new fields. Rather than being resistant to change, college and university leaders are realizing that appropriate strategies must be developed to respond to change at every level.

Consumer-driven, market-conscious, not just open to change but actively pursuing it—that is not the traditional profile of colleges and universities. It will, however, be the profile of those institutions that will best serve their many constituencies in the years ahead.

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