The Return of the Opportunity Manager?

In the November/December 2008 issue of *EDUCAUSE Review*, Georgetown University Vice President and CIO David Lambert described the role of leaders in higher education information technology as one of exploiting opportunity and managing risk. I agree. As information technology has moved from the margins of our society and economy to the core, the issues of concern to IT leaders have shifted from making electronics work to automating our work, to transforming our work, to socializing our new work. Today, our technology works, and it works really well. As information technology began to enable more aspects of our lives, more of the technology came to be regulated. As a professional community, IT leaders began to worry less about how to move messages across diverse computing platforms and more about how to ensure the integrity, security, privacy, confidentiality, and (legal) discovery of those messages. We worried less about our ability to communicate with one another and more about our identities and authorities. And during a very prosperous time in higher education in the 1990s, we learned that maybe it was better to preserve what we had—that is, manage risk—than to fiddle with organizations whose stakeholders don’t really want to change anyway. Our experiences with ERP and Y2K reinforced a new conservatism.

Today we are facing unprecedented economic challenges. Endowments have been ravaged. Students’ and their family members’ jobs are at risk. Credit is frozen. Business travel is being curtailed. Banks are zombies. States, like California, are making unprecedented cuts in services. The news is bad. In every conversation with every colleague, I am reminded of just how bad things are and of the unprecedented magnitude of the budget cuts that loom on the horizon. I am reminded that endowment draws are based on moving averages of return rates, making 2010 and beyond more uncertain and grim than our current times.

Among the gloom, I wonder if this might not be the ideal time for the IT community to assert its role as an opportunity developer. Rather than—or perhaps alongside—cutting the IT budget, shouldn’t we be asking how information technology, along with process reengineering, can fundamentally change the way we do things? Can we not only reduce the IT consumption of campus power but also implement environmental systems to monitor and control building temperatures and other sources of energy consumption? Can we continue to create the incentives and the infrastructure to promote the effective consolidation of servers, storage, and other campus IT services? Can we deploy the analytical engines and develop the predictive models that will allow our colleagues to optimize classroom (and other resource) utilization and to engage in “what if” scenarios that help us understand the economics of hybridizing courses or other e-learning strategies? Can we organize and harvest information from our student and learning management systems to identify at-risk students and harness this information to improve retention rates? How might the exploitation of these and other IT-enabled opportunities change the financial complexion of our institutions?

Our technologies are advanced enough. The state of our practice is advanced enough. Perhaps it is time to reassert our legacy as change agents and lead our institutions through this economic devastation toward a new and smarter scholarly enterprise. Perhaps—despite all the pressures and the temptations to turn inward and focus on the efficiency of the IT organization—we need to help our colleagues discover new and important opportunities that they may never have imagined possible. This will take vision, and it will take courage, but a crisis is the crucible in which an organization’s leadership is formed.

“Didn’t someone say something about not wasting a crisis?”

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