Undoubtedly, the future of higher education will involve change. The demand to educate greater numbers of students, a financial model that is increasingly unsustainable, new tools for scholarship, and pressure for greater accountability all signal change. The question is, What should we change and what should we hold on to in the coming future of higher education?

In 1995, Jim Collins answered a similar question in his article “Building Companies to Last.” Speaking about the corporate world rather than higher education, he argued: “In a turbulent era like ours, attention to timeless fundamentals is even more important than it is in stable times.” He added that companies need to be “clear about their core values and guiding purpose—about what should not change.”

Fifteen years later, Collins’s statements apply equally to higher education—particularly to higher education information technology. Indeed, the ultimate strategic and societal value of information technology may hinge on a deep understanding of our “timeless fundamentals.”

One might assume that Larry Sanger, co-founder of Wikipedia, would argue for new rules and new models in higher education. However, he too cautions us to pay attention to the fundamentals: “To claim that the Internet allows us to learn less, or that it makes memorizing less important, is to belie any profound grasp of, or at least any concern about, the nature of knowledge.” He continues: “The point of a good education is ... to develop judgment or understanding of questions that require a nuanced grasp of the various facts and to thereby develop the ability to think about and use those facts. If you do not have copious essential facts at the ready, then you will not be able to make wise judgments that depend on your understanding of those facts, regardless of how fast you can look them up.” Sanger argues that core basics of a liberal education—not only memorization but also individual effort and book reading—are prerequisites to intellectual growth, no matter the technology environment.

The title of Larry Lessig’s article—“Getting Our Values around Copyright Right”—signals his focus on the fundamentals as well. With the advances in information technology and digital reproduction, change is certainly called for in the copyright arena. Lessig clearly states: “The existing system of copyright cannot work in the digital age.” He argues that a focus on the historic mechanics of copyright makes little sense in today’s world, since the laws were originally written for a print-on-paper world rather than a digital one. But he adds that we must not lose sight of the core purpose behind copyright laws, which were put in place to “promote the progress of science and useful arts”—to provide the “incentives that artists and creators need in order to produce great new work.” We must remember the fundamentals at the same time that we need to change the system.

Finally, in his discussion of scholars, scholarship, and the scholarly enterprise, Richard Katz explores the digital age and the changes faced by other industries—music, newspapers, book publishing, and television, for example. “Consumer expectations and technological innovations not only make new possibilities evident and desirable but also put old capabilities and investments at a competitive disadvantage.” Katz adds: “Unless we plan for the changes that we can reasonably forecast, the changes ahead will be accidental ones.” Addressing timeless fundamentals such as educational philosophy, academic standards, and delivery systems will aid higher education in facing the uncertain future.

What should we change and what should we hold on to in the coming future of higher education?

(continued on page 6)
(continued from page 4)

The introduction of technology can add confusion to the ideas of what should change and what needs to remain central to the mission of higher education. Although information technology provides us with opportunities to make learning material more visual, interactive, and accessible, significant intellectual effort is required, regardless of the format of the material. Learners must read. Learners must think. Learners must write. And learners must analyze. No matter how advanced and engaging the tools and techniques available, learning requires hard work.

Focusing on the fundamentals does not mean a total absence of change, of course. As Collins asks: “How can we do better tomorrow than we did today?” Improvements can and should be made. Innovation can and should be fostered.

Higher education’s mission of learning, scholarship, and outreach benefits individuals and society. Information technology supports—it does not supplant—the mission of higher education. Each of the feature articles in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review illustrates the importance of maintaining a focus on fundamentals as a way to ensure that the changes we make are the ones that will really matter for the future of higher education.

Diana G. Oblinger (doblinger@educause.edu) is President and CEO of EDUCAUSE.

© 2010 Diana G. Oblinger. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).