We all know that higher education is in a transformational period. I believe that information technology will play a central role in this transformation, offering unimaginable opportunities and demanding unforeseen responses. I thus also believe that IT professionals can and should be at the core of envisioning and shaping the future of our colleges and universities. As someone with more than twenty-one years of experience in the administration of comprehensive regional universities—ten-plus of those years as president—I offer here my confessions and also my advice on leading information technology in higher education during this exciting time of transformational change.
The Confessions

Over ten years ago, I became president of California State University, Northridge, a regional comprehensive university serving approximately 35,000 students in the metropolitan expanse of Los Angeles and southern California. Most are commuter students, and about 60 percent of the undergraduates are transfer students from local community colleges. The university’s mission focuses on learning, particularly student learning and student success, and on regional needs. Our faculty members engage in scholarship and creative activity that is primarily applied. Northridge is the third-largest of the twenty-three campuses in the California State University system. As a result, neither I nor the campus can act as a free agent in any key area of the university, including information technology.

Before becoming president, I knew the academic side of a higher education institution very well. I had started my career as a professor in communication studies, eventually becoming department chair. I then took positions in academic administration with wider university responsibilities. As a vice president for academic affairs and later as a provost, in addition to fulfilling the traditional academic administrative roles associated with teaching and learning, I learned about the institutional budget, personnel, student services, and fundraising, and I started to hone my instincts around the public reputation of the university. However, information technology remained, frankly, an almost complete mystery to me.

When I became president, Cal State Northridge had a CIO in place. About half of the CIO’s portfolio reported to me (as president), and the other half reported to a vice president. There I was, with a limited IT background yet responsible for ensuring that the university used information technology well and for ensuring that we planned well for the use of information technology in the university’s future. Becoming president was exciting yet often daunting, even when confronted with issues that I understood well. A university president is looked to for intelligence, steadfastness, insight, skill, and knowledge. A president is expected to make wise and good decisions for her/his university. But when faced with making major and minor decisions in leading information technology, I confess that I sometimes felt as though I were holding warm Jell-O and that it was running through my fingers—certainly an image that is neither dignified nor “presidential.”

I mention this part of my background because I know that many college and university presidents have had similar career trajectories. A president’s level of knowledge and comfort leading with and through information technology is typically not as high as his or her knowledge of the other divisions of the institution. With information technology, I confess that I felt unease and, yes, occasionally even anxiety. But I learned to ask the right questions. I worked to probe beyond first-level responses. I initially chose trust, I migrated to some micromanagement, and I sometimes turned to outside help to identify the available choices on a number of key issues.

For some time in my presidential role, I was comforted by the comparison of information technology to a utility. Many of my colleagues in higher education told me that I simply needed to ensure that information technology, like electricity and water, was reliably available and functional for our faculty, staff, and students. This seemed quite possible to achieve. However, over the past several years, it has become clear to me that the role of information technology in my university is far more strategic, far more ubiquitous, far more integrated into multiple business practices, and far more integral to the core university functions of teaching and learning. I no longer regard as valid the comparison of information technology to a utility. And thus, disquiet occurs.

I recently served as the chair of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Board of Directors. In that role, I was responsible for selecting the theme that would guide the AASCU’s 2009 Annual Meeting. Initially, I had a difficult time zeroing in on a theme. There are so many compelling challenges, consequences, and issues facing higher education. But this difficulty ended when I asked myself two questions: First, which of these many challenges or issues has the capacity to fundamentally change the nature of higher education institutions over the next decade and to affect how they conduct core business processes, including teaching and learning? Second (a question that is more personal and, certainly, more “confessional”): with which part of my university and my decision-making am I least comfortable?

The unequivocal answer to both questions was—and still is—“information technology.” I then shaped a theme focused on “Leading Tomorrow’s University Today.” This theme allowed the meeting participants to focus on how their colleges and universities were changing, and it simultaneously provided an opportunity for presidents and chancellors to increase their knowledge and confidence. We learned about several issues:

- The challenges faced by today’s “digital students” in our analog colleges and universities
- Gesture-based computing
- Sourcing and the cloud and what these could mean to our institutions
- How information technology is transforming instruction and learning, moving away from teaching as delivering knowledge to instruction as facilitating discovery

Over time at that meeting, many of my presidential colleagues confessed, both privately and publicly, that they too are challenged to understand and feel comfortable in making decisions—big and
small—about information technology. And that leads to my next section: advice on how information technology can be an effective contributor in the work of higher education.

The Advice: Four Elements

For the past several summers I have served on the faculty of an academy for new college and university presidents from across the United States. Two of the key concepts taught in this academy are strategic focus and change management. I also teach two core units in the academy: one on building a team and one on creating effective presidential communication. It is these four elements of a president’s work—strategic focus, change management, teamwork, and presidential communication—that I want to link to leading information technology, with the goal of providing insight into how a president does his/her work and advice for how IT professionals can be effective contributors to the overall work of the higher education institution.

Strategic Focus

Strategic focus lays the foundation. In the words of an experienced president: “Effective presidents are those who pursue a limited number of high-priority strategic goals, stay focused on them, with intentionality and discipline.” A highly regarded translator of this perspective for organizational leaders is Jim Collins, the author of the popular book *Good to Great*. Collins describes great organizations as having a relentless culture of discipline—that is, disciplined people who engage in disciplined thought and who take disciplined action.

This relentless focus on strategic priorities is tough to achieve. There are innumerable other worthy goals and objectives. There are also, inevitably, people within our communities who don’t accept the strategic focus, who wish to pursue other goals. There are always attractive alternatives for the institution’s time, energy, and resources. But strategic focus is absolutely essential for achieving improvement and change because we simply cannot accomplish everything we might want. My university, for example, has—for almost ten years—been strategically focused on five priorities. We start each year with a plan around those five priorities, and they are a filter and guide for our macro and micro decisions. This means that what we do in information technology at Cal State Northridge is guided and controlled by our five planning priorities.

Advice for IT professionals: Understand your institution’s strategic focus, and appreciate the necessity to be fully oriented to that focus. As you try to convince the person to whom you report of
the importance of or need for a particular project or innovation, demonstrate its ties to your institution’s strategic focus. Sell the project by linking it to the institution’s overall goals. Additionally, develop a robust IT governance structure that involves constituents from all parts of the institution. Establish appropriate consultative governance, listening carefully to those who are concerned about what the institution needs technology to do but who are less immersed in the capabilities and limitations of specific technologies. Remember that information technology exists to support, empower, and advance the institution’s educational mission and business processes. Seek input from institutional leaders about what is working, what is needed, and what needs improvement. Be prepared to listen well and to act on what you have heard and learned from others.

Change Management
The second element of a university president’s work is change management. I believe that information technology has set in motion fundamental changes to the nature of higher education and that IT professionals have the exciting potential to be agents of transformation. But change does not typically come easily to a college or university. Colleges and universities are organizations with structures and values that protect the status quo; the governance of the modern university has in place deeply embedded processes that constrain and control change. Yet, change is necessary and inevitable.

Very shortly after I became president at Cal State Northridge, I heard a colleague talk about managing change at his university. He described the process as a dialectic, a balancing act between the “covenant of change” and the “covenant of tradition.” That description had a profound impact on me. I realized that while I need to both push and pull change, I also need to honor the current environment. I need to balance aggressive initiatives and efforts with periods of rest and consolidation.

Advice for IT professionals: Develop your own sense of how you can balance the covenants of tradition and change. Be purposeful in slowing change as well as pushing change. Not every college or university will have the same balance or pivot point. You need to be mindful of where the balance point is for your institution and for your leadership team.

Teamwork
One of the sessions I teach at the new presidents’ academy is on building a team and shaping the organization. I challenge my new colleagues from the beginning of their presidencies to build a strong collaborative leadership team. Patrick Lencioni, a popular author and consultant who works with organizations, lays out the imperative: “Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare.”

My emphasis on building a collaborative team to lead the university demands the use of the all-university frame for decision making. Operating in silos doesn’t help an institution achieve its strategic focus. I believe that any president is only as good, and will be only as successful, as her/his vice presidents. It doesn’t matter how smart or capable I am, without vice presidents who are competent, committed, and willing and able to work collaboratively, I cannot and will not be successful as president. The vice presidents on my cabinet are each involved in the planning process. Contributing to the institution’s strategic plan and focus. Get involved in the planning process. Contribute to institutional planning as a university leader. Keep the basic IT infrastructure, systems, and services functioning reliably and well. When basic and key systems do not work, the IT vice president loses credibility, and his/her ability to be an all-university vice president is diminished.

It is my firm belief that given the centrality of information technology to achieving my university’s future, the CIO should be a vice president and a member of the senior leadership team.
Communication

The fourth element of a university president's work—and another session I teach at the new presidents' academy—is communication, both communication skills and, most important, the president's role in shaping internal and external audiences' understanding of the strengths and mission of the university. I approach much of the presidential role influenced by my academic discipline of communication. I am acutely aware that my methods of communication—verbal and nonverbal, formal and informal, public and private, planned and spontaneous—all contribute to how our faculty, staff, students, community, alumni, trustees, chancellor's staff, donors, media, public officials, and others see Cal State Northridge. This applies to IT leaders too.

A great scholar of U.S. higher education, Robert Birnbaum, offers this description: “Presidents provide interpretative leadership when they change perceptions by highlighting some aspects of the institution and environment while muting others, by relating new ideas to existing values and symbols, and by articulating a vision of the college in idealized form that captures what others believe but have been unable to realize.” Birnbaum is describing the role of presidents in creating a sort of “sound and light show.” In a sound and light show, the light pops into view something that had been obscured in darkness; color brings a different hue to what was already present; sound, with changes in tonality and volume and rhythm, adds effect and understanding. And this is what presidents do with their colleges and universities. But we need the participation of everyone in the institution to produce the “show.” We want and need everyone to be on the same stage.

My session on presidential communication also includes some basic discussions about how people process the meaning of verbal and nonverbal symbols. For example, some words and phrases that I have frequently heard IT professionals use are “easier,” “user friendly,” “faster,” “enable,” “robust,” “innovative,” and “streamline.” I have heard all of these words used—usually to reassure me or to convince me that some IT change I am considering, or some IT change I am frustrated with, is good.

Advice for IT professionals: Think about the “sound and light show”—the construction of reality that your college or university president is creating about your institution. How can you make that reality more vivid and real and compelling through your communication with faculty, students, and staff? Also, work toward being translators of your world for those of us who are not familiar with the technical words and who are not conversant with the changing ways that common words (e.g., “cloud,” “virtual,” “sourcing”) are being redefined.

I have presented a view of the college or university as planned, focused and strategic. I have talked as if I am “in charge” on my campus, aided by our vice presidents and their incredibly hardworking staffs. And then I am hit by reality when I think about how students, faculty, and staff are pushing us to adopt and support their chosen technologies. Student behavior has changed dramatically in just the past year. For example, the first day of the fall 2010 semester at Cal State Northridge experienced a nearly 95 percent increase in the number of unique wireless users on campus compared with a year earlier—demonstrating the ever-increasing use of mobile device connectivity. We also saw significantly reduced use of the student administrative system to print class schedules the weekend before classes started, with a high peak usage on Monday morning—signifying a shift among student expectations to “just-in-time” access to information. As users change their behaviors and their expectations, we are increasingly pressed to “keep the trains running” while keeping up with (and trying to keep ahead of) these behavioral changes—all while challenged by the limits of funding and resources.

Although anxiety and unease thus remain, I have offered advice on how IT professionals can best serve higher education institutions in this exciting period of transformational change. This leads to my final confession: if I could start over with my career in higher education, I would immerse myself in the world of information technology. Those of you in information technology have the potential for the most exciting present and future work in our colleges and universities. Out of your expertise and vision, in partnerships with those in the rest of the institution and in many cases with other institutions, will emerge major transformation and redefinition of the role and contributions of the college and university. You are at the center of what will change our higher education institutions. You are at the core of the excitement and energy that will shape tomorrow’s university.

Notes