A Broad View for the Future

This issue of EDUCAUSE Review addresses our ongoing work, as IT professionals in higher education, of identifying and solving problems. Whether consciously or not, we move through multiple steps:

- Sensing: Are you aware of changes in your environment?
- Strategizing: What are your options?
- Deciding: Which choices will you make?
- Communicating: Are you able to help others see the need for change and their role in making it happen?

Yet we must do more than simply move through these steps. We must think ahead. We must have the right frame of reference and the humility to listen to others who might have better ideas. We need a broad view for the future.

In the article “The Changing Landscape of Higher Education,” David J. Staley and Dennis A. Trinkle help elevate the definition of challenges from issues such as choosing sourcing strategies or mobile platforms to deeper issues such as understanding the changing nature of students and the curriculum and demonstrating the value of a college education. In “Information Technology and Tomorrow’s University: A President’s Confessions and Advice,” Jolene Koester anticipates the question of what information technology has to do with such broad issues. She answers: “Remember that information technology exists to support, empower, and advance the institution’s educational mission and business processes.” Finally, Patrick Masson addresses these processes in “Open Governance in Higher Education: Extending the Past to the Future,” exploring whether colleges and universities can use open principles and practices to improve decision-making and institutional governance.

One theme of the articles is clear: we cannot focus on technology alone. However, we must be alert to the new models it has enabled: Amazon, eBay, Wikipedia, Facebook, Match.com, and Twitter, for example. New models and possibilities are emerging in education as well. Staley and Trinkle refer to the “new invisible college,” in which “networked and self-organizing teams of researchers are responsive to new ideas and new research problems.” They also note how some scholars have reframed the “brain drain” as a “brain exchange” among many countries. “Academic mobility,” which Staley and Trinkle call as much a state of mind as it is the travel of students, professors, and administrators, can be enabled by information technology. Today’s constant interconnection of individuals, ideas, and cultures has been accelerated by technology.

These broad issues are the ones that confront college and university presidents. Koester helps us understand the responsibilities of a college or university president in pursuing high-priority strategic goals. In the pursuit of those goals, she reminds us, the team is all important. And as a member of that team, the IT leader is someone who can contribute to the planning as an institutional leader: “The role is not merely one of vice president for information technology. It is one of university vice president or university senior officer.”

IT models can provide insight for institutional planning. While looking at these models and drawing parallels between open source and open governance, Masson cites truisms that we all should keep in mind. For example, if you aren’t solving the right problem, the solution isn’t of much value. “Often,
the most striking and innovative solutions come from realizing that your concept of the problem was wrong.” And: “The next best thing to having good ideas is recognizing good ideas from your users.”

IT professionals may be uniquely positioned to help higher education face the future. Yet as all of these writers remind us, information technology is not a sufficient scope for either identifying problems or finding solutions. We must see beyond the technology to the larger issues of strategy, organizational change, governance, and support of the institution’s mission. We must frame our issues broadly to find solutions for the future. This is challenging work, to be sure. In the words of Koester, a university president: “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.”

A worthy challenge to our profession. A broad view for the future will help us meet the challenge and succeed.

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