Those of us in higher education know well many of the challenges of information technology. The EDUCAUSE 2011 Current Issues Survey, which highlights the most important technology issues in higher education, reveals that IT leaders ranked “Funding IT” as the #1 issue critical for the strategic success of their institutions, confirming much of what we might already suspect. The EDUCAUSE survey also aligns strongly with the “Top 10” issues of the Council of Australian University Directors of Information Technology (http://www.caudit.edu.au/index.php/news/?id=98).

But as Stephen Laster, CIO of Harvard Business School, asserts in his article in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, other challenges may be deeper and more subtle. Although IT professionals focus, naturally, on information technology, important subtleties lie beyond the technology. It is thus important to heed Laster’s observation that “information technology—at its core—is a people business.” If we do not understand those we are trying to serve or if we do not take into account the people in our organizations, we risk becoming irrelevant. As the members of the EDUCAUSE 2011 Current Issues Committee remind us, IT leaders should “understand the needs, the perspectives, of both consumers and providers.” Information technology is a means, not an end. IT organizations enable technology to serve the institutional mission and its faculty, staff, and students. Laster states that information technology is about “working with and leading people with vision and passion in order to take the imperfect world of technology and apply it in a manner that enables the mission and vision of the institution.”

At the same time that we are focusing on current IT issues, we must also be aware of those issues lying just on the horizon. Scholars studying higher education and macro-trends warn that our current models—financial, pedagogical, and organizational—may be unsustainable. Laster explains: “The traditional teaching, learning, and research models of the past will not be and cannot be the models for the future. These models break down as costs (human and financial) continue to grow faster than they can be funded, as digital natives change forever the nature of being ‘in class,’ and as technology advances our notions of community, connectedness, collaboration, and learning.”

Likewise, the EDUCAUSE Current Issues Committee members observe: “For higher education, traditional revenue and costing models no longer scale, and conventional models of course delivery are being challenged.” Of course, it is not just course delivery that is being challenged. Just about every activity at every college and university, along with its underlying infrastructure, is being challenged. How can we meet these deeper challenges? The move to the cloud is one promising approach. Another is collaboration. The committee notes: “IT leaders are using budget constraints as drivers for change motivation and for evaluation of strategic technology direction.” The solution may lie within. As Ira Fuchs, executive director of Next Generation Learning Challenges, observes in his interview, there is “something important about the power of higher education institutions to organize themselves collaboratively in order to take more control over their destinies.”

Charles Henry, president of the Council on Library and Information Resources (and 2011 editor for the EDUCAUSE Review E-Content department), in his unpublished essay “A Case for New Partnerships for the Promotion and Deployment of Macro Solutions for Higher Education” explains that the concept of “the common good” can be traced to Aristotle. It means that something “can be shared without diminishing its supply and without necessarily excluding others from using it.” What if our colleges and universities expanded our application of the common good beyond collaboratively producing datasets, books, and learning materials? What if our institutions established processes for sharing library and IT services and for “de-duplicating” resources across hundreds of institutions? Henry suggests that higher education could redesign itself as a more coherent system of interconnected services and functions. He reminds us: “The digital environment is not a simple surrogate for past practice and

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procedure but a ‘place’ where new methods, new narrative strategies, and new objects will be encouraged by powerful tools and unbounded capacity.” Would this “coherent” redesign help our institutions cope with today’s challenges as well as tomorrow’s? Henry and others cite a body of emerging practice and prototypes for large-scale collaborative solutions that have national implications for a more efficient and cost-effective system of academic libraries and higher education.

The process of coherent redesign is not quick or easy. But it may be one of higher education’s best options for coping with a challenging future. Often these redesign efforts bring together regional coalitions of diverse institutions with goals of federating shared resources and interests (e.g., collections, technology, expertise). A key element is a genuine, volitional dependency on other institutions to provide what was once a locally owned and managed asset. As Fuchs notes: “When you put a dollar into a well-designed collaborative project, you get more than a dollar of value back, sometimes much more.”

IT professionals know that the past does not necessarily predict the future. But that does not mean we should not attempt to chart the future. It may be that collaboration and “the common good” are the cornerstones of our next decade.

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