Should We? Can We? May We? Will We?

Change. It is noted often in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review:
- “Education will never be the same.”
- “Information technology can, and should, disrupt entrenched processes and facilitate new and better ways of working.”
- “The future of technology in higher education will be determined less by the technologies themselves and more by the leaders guiding the strategic use of these technologies.”

Some approaches are suggested:
- “Analytics, and the data and research that fuel it, offer the potential to identify broken models and promising practices, to explain them, and to propagate those practices.”
- “Technology can now harness three new superpowers to drive exponential improvement in human capability in education: telepathy, total recall, and communication with perfect fidelity.”
- “An IT project that sets out simply to automate an existing process, rather than to challenge that process, is likely to fail.”

The urgency is clear:
- “We must respond to the wake-up call.”
- “If not now, when?”

However, calling for change does not provide a path for how to manage it. IT professionals are left to do the very hard work of anticipating the future, responding to current needs, and getting work done effectively and affordably. As Tom Warger notes in “Surveying the Landscape,” this issue’s feature article, CIOs and senior IT leaders “need to be aware of the current education concerns and views not only of the wider higher education community but also of non-academic CIOs and the general public.”

With demands, technologies, and organizations in constant flux, two features stand out. First, information technology is a system. In “Developing an Information Strategy,” Terry Hanson observes that “a business process and its information infrastructure cannot and should not be separated” and that “the university is a single, integrated organization.” Second, information technology is about service. Jim Spohrer, director of IBM Global University Programs, noted at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Systems Sciences in 2005 that as a discipline, service science involves science, engineering, business models, and management:
- **Science** as a way to create knowledge
- **Engineering** as a way to apply knowledge and create value
- **Business models** as a way to apply knowledge and capture value
- **Management** as a way to improve processes of creating and capturing value

These elements of service science apply to IT units as well as to colleges and universities. Higher education excels at creating and applying knowledge. We are entering an era in which educational leaders must experiment with alternative business models and focus on how to improve processes to capture value.

Service systems also parallel information technology and higher education in that they involve a coproduction relationship between the client and the provider. IT units provide services that are defined and valued by the user. Colleges and universities represent a complex coproduction relationship between the institution and its students and other stakeholders. Both those relationships are being challenged today: IT units, by consumerization and control; traditional universities, by alternative providers.

While higher education believes it provides great value to society, the public—its coproducer—may not always feel the same. According to the Pew Research Center, 57% of survey respondents said that higher education fails to provide good value for students and families. This may represent the classic dilemma of services. In a steady state, satisfaction with services decreases over time. Original benefits are forgotten, and problems become more visible. In her article in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, Susan Grajek observes that many IT professionals sense declining influence and sometimes feel more like a “plumbing shop” than a strategic unit led by a C-level executive. Constant innovation is required to battle the decline in client satisfaction. Perhaps
we should return to the fundamentals of service systems: creating knowledge, creating value, capturing value, and improving processes. In “If Not Now, When?” Adrian Sannier suggests: “Combinations of old institutions and new business models will create new forms of ‘school’ to meet the escalating demands for and challenges of education in this century.”

Our world is being reconfigured, whether by technological, financial, or social forces. Work systems evolve, just as IT systems are evolving. The members of the 2011 EDUCAUSE Evolving Technologies Committee reflect that much of the future of technology in higher education will be determined by the strategic use of technology. But how do we decide what is strategic?

Service science offers four questions, which can provide guidance to today’s IT organizations as well:

- **Should we?** Is there enough demand and sufficient value to make this something we should do?
- **Can we?** Is it technically possible, and is there a process that will support the effort?
- **May we?** Will our governance systems allow use? Will stakeholders support it?
- **Will we?** Is it a high-enough priority, where the value justifies the investment?

As the Evolving Technologies Committee suggests: “Knowledge unshared is knowledge unknown.” Perhaps the knowledge of service science can augment what we know to help us build a better future. If we learn nothing more than to ask “Should we? Can we? May we? Will we?,” those of us in higher education information technology will provide better leadership at a time when change is urgent.

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