Traditions and New Traditions

Traditions lead to new traditions. Think of the university library. In the traditional library, voices were hushed, with barely a whisper heard among the stacks. In the new library, books have moved to off-campus high-density storage, making space for learners, resources, and support. As James Duderstadt suggests in his Leadership column in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, the library has moved “from stacks to Starbucks.”

The history of information technology is full of new traditions; information technology routinely breaks patterns and sets new rules. Traditionally, information technology has been used as a delivery channel. Technology delivers text, images, and music faster and more cheaply than other formats. Delivery is also more flexible, such as through a website, e-mail, or social media. However, a new tradition is to use information technology not only for delivery but also for the creation of unique experiences. Augmented reality allows “the virtual” to overlie the physical world, creating a different experience than either online or face-to-face alone. Games and simulations create experiences that are not possible in the physical world.

These new IT traditions are often accompanied by a change in business models—opening the door to more innovations and new industries, according to Clayton Christensen’s theory of “disruptive innovation.” The recently published EDUCAUSE book Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies illustrates a variety of these new models in higher education. Institutions such as Western Governors University, Empire State College, and University of the People were founded with unique ideas about how education might be structured, delivered, and assessed differently via new models based on information technology. “Big data” is also creating new traditions. We can collect data on student interactions, use analytics to predict who is at risk of failing, and tailor interventions to meet their needs. The same data can be used to create recommendation engines, reminiscent of Amazon or Netflix, that will help students select the best courses for an efficient pathway to their degree.

Information technology is likewise resulting in new traditions in scientific research, as George Strawn shows us in his article “Scientific Research: How Many Paradigms?” Information technology has been part of the research tradition for decades, of course. Few disciplines collect, tabulate, or analyze their research without information technology. But the simulation of complex phenomena, such as hurricanes, is creating a new tradition—thanks to data, processing power, and visualization. In addition to this computational modeling and simulation, other new research traditions include data-intensive science and the computer processing of scientific literature. Strawn concludes: “These are especially exciting times for science, and that excitement is due in no small measure to the effects that information technology is having on scientific disciplines and on the scientific method itself.”

As we shift our expectations and use of information technology, the top IT issues for campus leaders evolve as well. In the EDUCAUSE annual “Top-Ten IT Issues” article, updating IT professionals’ skills and roles, consumerization, and cloud computing head the list for 2012. Operational efficiency and institutional decision-making follow closely behind. Analytics, funding information technology, transforming the business of higher education, research, and IT governance round out the list. Changes in the CIO’s role are now influencing other parts of the IT organization, creating such new traditions as the need for information technology to be a service broker. Consumerization is another new tradition to which we are adapting. As the EDUCAUSE IT Issues Panel observed: “Any college or university that maintains hard-and-fast rules about which devices and communication tools must (or may not) be

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used risks being irrelevant. Yet the institution’s data and intellectual property must be safeguarded, no matter where it is stored, transmitted, or accessed.” And financial challenges continue to be part of the picture: “Using information technology to improve operational efficiency is no longer just desirable; it has become an imperative due to the ever-shrinking resources brought about by the current economic downturn.”

Finally, EDUCAUSE traditions are being augmented by new traditions as well. The annual top-ten IT issues survey morphed into the EDUCAUSE IT Issues Panel this year, using better methodologies to develop more predictive information. The EDUCAUSE tradition of EDUCAUSE Review and EDUCAUSE Quarterly (EQ) is also evolving. EDUCAUSE Review, EQ, EDUCAUSE Now, and experimental tools are being combined in a one-stop resource: EDUCAUSE Review Online. The EDUCAUSE Review print edition will remain, but readers will be able to find more and interact more by visiting online. We hope this new tradition will provide greater opportunities for readers to engage through mixed media, interactive features, and experimental digital formats (EDUCAUSE Labs). We will be releasing new content on a regular basis, as well as making material available through any mobile or tablet device.

All of us in higher education information technology owe it to our community to continue creating new traditions that will enhance our existing traditions. We honor our traditions by building on them to create a better future.

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