These are interesting times for higher education and its supporting technologists. Never before has higher education been more expensive, and never before has technology been so well positioned to profoundly impact the future of teaching, learning, and organizational sustainability. The question for the EDUCAUSE community is, what are we prepared to do to help shape the course of change in education? Setting the stage for rapid innovation and disruption in current operating models are the dual forces of increasing costs and growing enrollments. According to the New York Federal Reserve, Bureau of Economic Analysis, student debt has increased a crushing 511 percent since 1999—to just over $550 billion dollars in 2011. This increase in debt has been driven by the continuing rise in tuition and fees, which have more than doubled since 2000. Meanwhile an increase in access partially driven by technology enhanced learning has contributed to a 38 percent increase in total enrollments for degree-granting postsecondary institutions between 1999 and 2009. Online and blended enrollments have risen as well: over 6.1 million students took at least one online course in the fall of 2010.

During this same time period, we have seen a migration from the “big box,” one-size-fits-all LMS to the rise of learning ecosystems. Lou Pugliese has elegantly argued that the future lies with LMS 3.0 (a platform), and Jonathan Mott has likewise argued that the future lies in Personal Learning Networks (a non-LMS approach). And, in working with my team at Harvard Business School (HBS), I too am embracing an environment of the future. HBS is leveraging a new breed of learning ecosystem—one that is connected through a shared identity provider framework and tailored to meet the unique needs of our institution and its diverse programs.

Today, I ask those of us who are technology leaders to step back and focus our discourse and energy on how we can use technology to improve education. As technology leaders, we need to focus on how we create value with technology so that we can contribute to lowering costs and increasing efficiencies across our individual institutions as well as at the industry level. This need is driven by my profound belief that the higher education business model is broken. I support this belief with simple facts. In our industry, virtually all of our customers are unable to afford our listed market price for tuition. A significant number of these customers experience an extremely long payback period, after which they reap economic rewards from having bought (invested in) our products. Further, many of our institutions are near or beyond bankruptcy when deferred maintenance and depreciation are factored in. The final signal that the business model is flawed is the rapid flow of venture capital and private equity into the education market based on the belief that there is a better model for delivering education. Yes, these are broad generalizations, and no, not every institution is in trouble, but we as an industry need to face the facts: our business model will not sustain us into the future.

So, where do technology and technology leadership come in? As I travel and meet with CIOs, presidents, and provosts from different institutions, I hear common refrains: “Why am I spending so much on technology? How do I know I am getting good value? Can I use technology to go online and save the institution?” These are the micro technology-focused questions that stem from a business model in distress. It is because of these real business pressures that our leaders are asking for help. As a result, those of us in higher education technology have an opportunity to take a prominent role in helping our institutions identify solutions and processes that will set higher education on the right course.

To contribute to solving this industry issue, we must look introspectively and rethink our technology strategy. Why do we all run our own data centers? Provide our own intranets? Develop and run our own learning ecosystems? Why do we try to persuade our customers to use our Web 2.0 solutions when in fact they would rather use theirs? If we were inventing information technology today, starting anew, what would it look like? Does our current model make sense?

When we think about technology, learning, and all the
amazing things we can do today, how often do we take a cold, hard look at the human skills on our campuses? What is the true cost of developing and leading an online course? Do we have the human capital to do this well? Is there a market for what we have to offer beyond the one we currently serve? How do we offer a quality education without making it too complex? If we were tasked with applying the minimal amount of technology necessary to maximize learning and community, what would the solution look like?

In the 1950s an innovator named Dick Fisher with a degree in philosophy imagined a new way to build a boat. Using newfangled materials like fiberglass, resin, and polyurethane foam, he invented what eventually became the Boston Whaler. He created a durable, unsinkable boat, many of which are still in use today. He changed the course of small-boat manufacturing and the boating industry forever. Today we need a few Dick Fishers in higher education technology.

If we begin to think like Dick Fisher, we can change the course and help correct the business model. We need to think about our collective industry spending on technology and reduce it. We need to find those areas where technology helps create research, teaching, and learning efficiencies and accelerate our investments there. And, we need to partner, where practical, to ensure the future of our industry.

I do not have all the answers. But I do have a few questions for us to consider. What can we, as a collective industry, do to help shape stronger standards? Can we stop the quasi-browser war that is currently raging? Can we drive down the cost of digital content creation? Can we enable articulation agreements and course sharing through the adoption of a universal student digital identity credential? Do we each need to run our own LMS and SIS, or can we drive toward stronger utilization of shared services? And do we each need to run our own network and data center?

If I were Dick Fisher today, in the higher education IT field (rather than the boat industry), I would find willing partners across institutional boundaries and reimagine how technology is managed in higher education. If we do not take on this challenge, others will shape the future for us, and my sense is that we may not like the result.

**Notes**


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