Technology and Shared Governance

Recently I have been immersed with my campus colleagues and with Drake University’s Board of Trustees in two streams of reflection and discourse. One stream is driven in part by very helpful external reviews of the university’s IT systems, practices, and policies over the past year and by the media’s feeding frenzy around terms such as “MOOCs” and “disruptive technology.” The second stream is a fascinating, ongoing discussion with our board about shared governance and the manner in which we make critical institutional decisions—how we strategically respond to what often feels like a meteor shower of new opportunities, demands, and challenges.

In the area of technology, our board members are doing an excellent job of carrying out their responsibilities in the shared governance model: asking the “big picture” questions and looking for evidence—both quantitative and qualitative (not just assurance)—that we have the right answers for Drake University (one of the things we’ve learned very quickly about technology is that there are very few, if any, “one size fits all” answers). On the administrative side, the board members’ questions reflect, for the most part, an even greater degree of familiarity with the issues, since most of them deal with these concerns in their professional lives. What are we doing to ensure business continuity and data security and disaster recovery? Do we have a comprehensive understanding of our risk exposure in information technology, and do we have safeguards against those risks? How are we using technology to increase operational efficiency and effectiveness and to lower costs? Are we recognizing the ongoing need for investment in IT infrastructure and support in our long-term budget development? How are we using technology to enhance our communications with institutional stakeholders—internal and external?

On the academic side, the board’s questions focus on the use of technology to enhance our ability to keep the promise of Drake’s mission statement to provide “an exceptional learning environment.” Should Drake offer MOOCs? As an institution with a powerful commitment to the intrinsic value of face-to-face, interpersonal learning (with a 12-to-1 undergraduate-to-faculty ratio), are we exploring and implementing, as appropriate, various learning strategies such as flipped classrooms and blended learning? How are we using technology to expand our campus-based learning communities and scholarly conversations beyond our physical borders—that is, are there ways to enhance, or replicate, part or all of that interaction through technology? How are we helping our students develop the critical judgment, analytical skills, and depth of thinking required to make sense of the massive amount of information (and misinformation) pouring out of their multiple screens? Are we using technology—especially social media—to strengthen our sense of community and common purpose? How are we using technology to engage with the broader community beyond the campus and fulfill our social compact? How are we using technology for producing outcomes assessment and reporting, for monitoring students’ progress, for providing formative feedback to faculty, and for advising students?

As the president of the university, I have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that we are asking these questions of ourselves in a systematic manner on a regular basis and that we have informed, strategic answers to them—not just for responding to the Board of Trustees but also for responding to our own, collective responsibility for the health and vitality of the institution. And it is essential that those responses have a clear line of sight to the institution’s strategic vision and strategic plan.

In this context, I was surprised by the following statement in the wonderfully useful article by Susan Grajek and the 2012–2013 EDUCAUSE IT Issues Panel: “In the absence of formal strategic plans, institutions should leverage whatever they do have—mission statements, overarching objective and goal plans, statements—to identify and respond to business goals and measures of success. . . . If a formal strategic plan does not exist, is there sufficient content from other institutional sources to create outcome and performance objectives?” The recommendations here are right on target, of course, if one accepts the basic premise that there are institutions that do not have an operative strategic plan in place. Given the collective experience and expertise of the colleagues who wrote this article, I assume there must be evidence behind that premise—which is truly worrisome.

The “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities,” to which virtually every non-profit higher education institution subscribes, notes the critical responsibilities of the board and the president related to strategic vision and plan-
ning: “The board should be aided by, and may insist upon, the development of long-range planning by the administration and faculty... As the chief planning officer of an institution, the president has a special obligation to innovate and initiate. The degree to which a president can envision new horizons for the institution, and can persuade others to see them and to work toward them, will often constitute the chief measure of the president’s administration.” In this foundational document defining the respective roles and responsibilities of the board, of the president (in many ways a placeholder for the administration as a whole), and of the faculty, there is a clear and powerful mandate for the vital necessity of an institutional vision for its future and a strategic plan that identifies the steps to be taken to make that vision a reality. I would like to think that most of us in higher education leadership positions have always embraced this mandate and acted accordingly, but in a world that Bob Johansen at the Institute for the Future describes as one of “Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA),” an institution that does not have a detailed and ambitious plan for achieving its mission/vision and for managing itself is putting its long-term viability at serious risk.

Drake University’s current strategic plan states the following as one of the university’s operating precepts: “Strategic Decision-Making: University decisions at all levels are data-and information-driven, supported by adequate resources and based on the priorities articulated in the University’s strategic plan and vision.” There will always be pressure (implicit or explicit) to respond to the latest innovation garnering attention in the media, there will always be the urgency of an unexpected opportunity, and there will always be the volume of the loudest advocates for a particular need. It is important to recognize and thoughtfully consider those pressures, opportunities, and voices, but our responses cannot be ad hoc—they must be strategic, embedded in a clearly articulated plan that provides the criteria for prioritizing the allocation of time and resources.

Responses to technology issues, and all decisions involving technology, must be made in the context of the same questions that should inform every major institutional decision: Where does this issue connect to the institution’s strategic plan? How does this decision improve learning opportunities for our students? How does this decision help move the institution one step closer to the realization of our strategic vision and the implementation of our strategic plan? In an environment of scarce resources, is this the best use of resources to take those steps forward, or can we take bigger steps by allocating resources elsewhere?

All this leads me to a very big challenge facing those of us in higher education—and not just in the realm of technology, but in everything that we do. I am, of course, clearly advocating strategic decision-making—a process that embraces not only data and evidence but the thoughtfulness, reflection, and discussion that are at the heart of the academy. Historically, however, that process takes time—a lot of time. To compound the problem, the manner in which we have carried out shared governance among faculty, administrators, and trustees tends to be serial. In the most efficient of current scenarios, the faculty and/or staff discuss and approve an initiative and forward it to the administration; the administration discusses and approves it and presents it to the board; the board discusses and approves it. Those discussions tend to take place in different places at different times, with very little synchronous communication among the three entities. It’s a highly inefficient model that devours huge blocks of time.

Yes, colleges and universities need to prepare their graduates to succeed in a VUCA world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, but they also need—with some urgency—to position themselves to thrive and prosper in that world. To do so, institutions need to be flexible, responsive, and agile—adjectives that, unfortunately, do not accurately describe the serial, protracted shared governance and decision-making of most colleges and universities today.

In many ways, technology has both created part of the problem and poses some of the solutions. There is no question that the volatile pace of change and innovation is driven by technology, that much of the need to embrace opportunities before they are lost (or snatched by a competitor) is driven by technology, and that the urgency of effective and accurate communication (especially in regard to social media) is grounded in technology. We—the higher education community—must develop models of synchronous, collaborative shared governance in which the stakeholders in important decisions can find an appropriate and useful balance between urgency, flexibility, agility, and responsiveness, on the one hand, and strategic, data-driven, thoughtful reflection and discourse, on the other. Technology—as a source of focused, relevant information and as an enabler of communication—can help us create the shared governance models that our institutions need.

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