Lessons of Leadership

This issue of *EDUCAUSE Review* features EDUCAUSE award winners from 2013, individuals who exemplify the best of our profession. Their articles highlight how to frame challenging issues, the importance of transformative people, and the value of peer networks.

Brad Wheeler, recipient of the EDUCAUSE Leadership Award, addresses the issues of scale and interdependence. He makes it clear that scale matters. “Three components will most likely favor scale beyond any of our individual institutions: content, distribution platforms, and analytics.” He cites content changes in textbooks, simulations, and learning objects. Distribution platforms “become increasingly important as education becomes more digital, . . . these platforms are how our educational services reach markets of students both near and far away.” He emphasizes the importance of analytics, where “every click of online engagement, especially when correlated with other data from institutional system information systems, can provide the basis for greater insights via big data and learning science.” In all three areas, scale matters.

Wheeler also pushes us to think about our independence, dependence, and interdependence. Our “campuses are on islands only a digital stone’s throw apart, all imitating one another. We are leading and lagging each other by about a year or two, solving all the same problems.” Much of our future hinges on strategic decisions about independence, dependence, and interdependence.

Bill Hogue, the first recipient of the EDUCAUSE Community Leadership Award, reminds us that “many of life’s most important leadership lessons happen when our sense of ‘normal’ is challenged or disrupted. We’re forced to adapt, improvise, and invent new pathways for achieving our objectives.” He describes “close encounters” with transformative people. These transformative people “can cross our paths anywhere. . . . They disrupt our sense of what is normal.” In the aftermath of these close encounters, “you can’t go back to your old reality.” But these transformative people aren’t just the great names of our age; they are all around us. One of the reasons they are transformative is that they help us move beyond the limits of our own unaided vision. Hogue explains: “What I saw in front of me, on the surface, might be only a tiny fraction of what I could see if I tried hard enough. The person I saw in front of me might be only a tiny fraction of the person I could see if I tried hard enough.” Our individual futures, and the future of our profession, hinge on our willingness to be transformed by these close encounters.

Another of Hogue’s lessons is about fear. The unknown—aka the future—is often a source of fear. As Hogue says, “fear controls if you allow it.” The fear of the unknown might be a new situation, as he describes, or uncertainty about the future. Wheeler too discusses the unknown, using a metaphor of curves. As he suggests, “curves are full of unknowns,” but “our timely actions can actually co-create and change the shape of a curve. . . . There is tremendous opportunity in speeding up on curves. We can bend them in a direction that favors the extraordinary mission of higher education.” We cannot allow fear to slow our forward momentum.

Barron Koralesky and Jennifer Sparrow, co-recipients of the EDUCAUSE Rising Star Award, illustrate how we can become stronger leaders by leveraging peer networks. Sparrow notes: “Peer networks are the source of encouragement, wisdom, and moral support on a variety of leadership, professional development, and even day-to-day operational challenges. The personal aspect of my peer networks challenges me to be a better me.” Koralesky advises us.
to “reach out to others without fear.” He reminds us: “It is very difficult to network if you are head-down working at your desk. Get away from the office, get your chin up, and dedicate some time to connecting and learning.” Sparrow adds: “Peer networks should not be seen as an addition to your work but, rather, as an integral part of the work itself. . . . The better your network, the more minds you can tap into, the more ideas you can gather, the more inspiration you can benefit from, and the better solutions you can find for your work.” To illustrate their belief in peer networks, Koralesky and Sparrow quote many of their colleagues, one of whom advises: “give as much as you can without keeping score.”

The EDUCAUSE awards program honors exemplary leaders who advance the use of information technology in higher education. We can learn from Wheeler, Hogue, Koralesky, and Sparrow, who offer good advice for all of us. We must learn to speed up on curves and act on the trends shaping our future. We must be willing to have our sense of “normal” disrupted. And we must rely on each other.