During his career, John has been a professor of English, a faculty president, and an academic and technology leader. Following service at the system level as associate vice chancellor of instructional technology, he was president (interim and ongoing) of two colleges. With his depth and breadth of professional accomplishment, John could be on anyone’s short list of academic leaders destined for a major college, university, or system presidency. So, why choose EDUCAUSE? And why now? John points to his multiple, in-depth discussions with the EDUCAUSE search committee, executive staff, and board members during the recruitment and selection process. Through these interactions, he came to see the EDUCAUSE presidency as an opportunity of a lifetime—and a chance to return to his roots:

I became progressively more enthusiastic because of the quality of the conversations we were having. They reminded me of when I worked with technology as a professor and as a technology leader. That work inspired me. It captured my imagination, and I’m both grateful and eager to be returning to that original inspiration. In so many ways, I feel as though I’m returning home.

As the recruitment process progressed, John says he came to see the opportunity as more expansive and dynamic than he first imagined:

In an early interview, I asked everybody to volunteer, in one or two words, the characteristics that they were most interested in for the next president and CEO of EDUCAUSE. One person said courage, and others said creativity and agility and all these additional wonderful qualities. The next day I realized that nobody had said anything about technology, reminding me that the contribution EDUCAUSE makes is exceedingly broad, much bigger than just the tools and solutions we deploy.
Clearly, the next leader of the association needs to understand the technology, yes, but needs to understand that broader landscape even better. I also realized that the CEO must be able to make meaningful connections with presidents, provosts, faculty, business officers, and other senior campus leaders—which is something that I love to do and have a successful track record of doing. EDUCAUSE is critical to convening conversations and sharing best practices and ideas among these groups and also among association and corporate leaders. In other words, I saw that the influence of EDUCAUSE extends beyond the IT community and even beyond the campus. That’s when I realized this was both a unique opportunity and a great fit for me.

The need to listen carefully to one another—and to the EDUCAUSE community—is one of John’s signature themes:

A healthy organization is one that is always trying to improve. Former president and CEO Diana Oblinger has made the point that “just because EDUCAUSE is doing well, doesn’t mean we can’t do better.” I expect to continue that mantra, and I think the best way to improve is always to be listening carefully to the community we serve.

For example, I’ve been following the EDUCAUSE CIO Constituent Group discussions, and I see the topics the members bring up and the information they exchange. It’s very dynamic and energizing; clearly there is no shortage of strategic advice, opinions, and terrific ideas.

I will spend a considerable amount of time carefully listening, to find out what people love about EDUCAUSE and to find out what people want to reimagine—and then will work with EDUCAUSE members and staff to take us in some exciting directions.

John describes his time as a technology leader for the MnSCU system as among the most important roles of his career:

When I first served as associate vice chancellor for instructional technology in the MnSCU system, one of the key responsibilities I took on was bringing academics into the broader technology conversation. I saw it as my job to remind IT staff and academics that they were on the same team. In an effort to amplify that connection, I attended both the senior IT management meetings and the senior academic management meetings, allowing me to serve as a conduit and liaison to those two crucial communities.

From the very beginning, when I worked directly with system CIOs, I understood that the quality of the conversation changes in important ways when we bring the academic and the technology teams together.

Most CIOs agree that they can do their best work when they play a key role in shaping the strategic direction of their institutions. Broadening the IT conversation is essential if we are to increase the impact of information technology on campus and beyond. I believe no organization does a better job facilitating and encouraging technology conversations among everyone on campus than EDUCAUSE.

What’s encouraging is that so many CIOs are already reaching outside the IT organization and are already effectively leading change. These technology leaders have moved beyond having a seat at their institution’s leadership table. They are making collaboration across divisions second-nature, honoring the past work of our community members with wider conversations about the strategic importance of information technology in support of the mission of higher education.

Though John moved rapidly into leadership roles, he did not begin his faculty career with administrative leadership in mind. His passion still burns bright when he talks about his love of teaching and scholarship. And John expects that this foundational passion will always be part of the energy he will bring to his work for EDUCAUSE:

I never ever wanted to do anything other than teach. That was all I wanted to do: teaching and research. Nothing made me happier than walking through the famous 18th-century library at Trinity College, Dublin, when I was doing research for my MPhil degree, strolling by those marble busts and beautiful books from centuries ago. That experience powerfully grounds me in everything I do.

With my roots in teaching and research, I can see quite clearly the strategic opportunities for information technology. What is inspiring to me is that we are forging a path to use information technology to change the way students learn and the way faculty teach and the way they conduct research. At the same time, we are addressing current challenges in higher education by helping to manage costs and increase college completion and student success.

With the emergence of the Internet, John found new ways to channel his passion:

What I found was that the exact time when I started my academic career was the exact time when the Internet started to deeply affect teaching and learning, open doors, and inspire people with the ways that technology could significantly enhance teaching and learning by making it more interactive. I got so absorbed in that adventure as a faculty member—and it took me in so many new directions—that half a dozen years later I was a little surprised to find myself an associate vice chancellor and deputy CIO working on the administrative side of things.

I believe the twists and turns in my career give me a unique understanding of the perspectives of many EDUCAUSE stakeholders, and I trust it will serve us well in the years ahead.

At a time when the value of the liberal arts is questioned by some politicians, employers, parents, and most discouragingly, students, John is squarely in the camp of those who argue that a grounding in the liberal arts is essential, no matter what career objective a student may have:

I think my having been an English professor, and someone who still loves words, matters to me now more than ever. In a sense, everything is words, especially in our distributed world. So much of the way we communicate with one another is through writing (tweets, texts, e-mails, blogs). I love the challenge of finding the best way to say something in writing, and I think this will serve me well as I express myself across our distributed community.
John is looking forward to being part of the national and international effort to inspire the next generation of IT leaders. His self-appraisal about the drive and creative energy he will bring to the table gives us a strong indication of his priorities:

I’m unrelentingly curious, whether I’m discovering a new book to read or a new concept or model to test or a new musical instrument to take up (and play badly). This opportunity with EDUCAUSE finds me at the perfect time in my professional life. It allows me to feed my curiosity, along with my desire to learn and to make a bigger difference on the national and international scene. I’ll be part of some extraordinarily creative and strategic conversations about technology, and to me, that’s tremendously exciting. I welcome any opportunity to tell the story of technology and the future of higher education.

When we allow ourselves to tell our genuine stories about the difference technology is already making and can make in the future, our enthusiasm can be infectious. If we can bring a little bit of evangelical zeal to the conversation, people might even stop talking; they might turn around and listen. Then the real work of reinvention and rediscovery can begin. After all, this is what EDUCAUSE and its predecessor organizations have been doing for decades: building community around powerful ideas and leading the way forward.

Notes
1. Prior to his position as senior vice chancellor, John O’Brien was associate vice chancellor of instructional technology for MnSCU. He was responsible for providing system-wide leadership for instructional technology initiatives for colleges and universities across the MnSCU system.
2. See “About Us” on the MnSCU website: http://www.mnscu.edu/system/about.html.
3. John and his spouse, Kathryn, have three children and live in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is active in his community, and for nearly eight years he was a member of the selective Kantorei Chamber Choir: http://www.kantorei.net/about/ (he is pictured on the front row, far right). For performances, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICGP5Yz7Ms8 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUPsLhaANp4.

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