The Higher Education CIO in the 21st Century

Chief information officers must be more than information systems representatives to the executive team; they must be full-spectrum contributors. This will leave CIOs open to criticism, but it is an essential step toward becoming a valued executive team member.

by **Michael R. Zastrocky** and **Frank Schlier**

Globally, universities and colleges are relying upon a chief information officer (CIO) to bring order to the chaotic world of information technology (IT) on campus. As higher education becomes increasingly dependent on its IT capabilities, more CIOs are reporting directly to their organization's CEO and serving on the CEO's executive management team. While this new visibility may position the CIO to better serve the institution and the IT organization, the downside is that it often makes him or her a target for criticism. Longevity in the CIO position is still limited compared with other senior executive management positions as academic institutions continue to change CIOs on a regular and short cycle. We believe this is as much an indicator of the inability of many CIOs to gain acceptance from the college or university executive management team as it is a measure of failed technology strategies, decisions, or initiatives.

The CIO has two distinct roles within two different organizational units. The CIO is both the leader of the information systems (IS) organization and a member of the CEO's executive management team. In the latter role, many CIOs view themselves as a communicator or representative. They communicate executive management's strategies, views, and concerns to the information systems organization, and they communicate the IS department's issues, directions, and capabilities to executive management. By being present when business strategies are developed, the CIO can provide input on technology capabilities and

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requirements and can better align the IS department's strategy with the business strategies of the institution.

These roles are extremely important, but they will never make the CIO a true member of the executive management team. To be accepted as a member of the executive team, the CIO must be a full-spectrum contributor to the development and management of business strategies and directions rather than a niche player in the limited band of IT. He or she must participate in, and sometimes lead, discussions on general issues facing the college or university. Successful CIOs will suggest potential IT-driven opportunities and will think as profit-center managers even if the campus structure treats IT as a cost center. To function as a member of executive management, the CIO must learn about the issues that affect the entire academic institution.

Politics and Public Relations. The CIO must understand the key issues and legislation affecting higher education. He or she needs to know who the key political figures and major donors are at the local, state, and federal levels and the positions they hold on key issues. He or she must learn who the organization's political friends and enemies are and why they are friends or foes. The CIO must keep up with what the media is saying about the institution, its competitors, and higher education in general.

Finance. The CIO must understand basic financial reports for higher education and track monthly key numbers that are important. He or she must know the institution's financial strength and what financial resources are required to succeed in the changing marketplace.

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Marketing. Again, the CIO must know the key numbers associated with successful marketing of the institution, who the competition is, and what they are doing. An understanding of the enterprise's critical success factors in the marketplace is crucial as is an understanding of where the institution is strong and where it is weak.

The CEO. The successful CIO should know what concerns the CEO and what major challenges the administrative team is facing. He or she must also know the CEO's management philosophies and what changes the CEO is trying to make.

The Executive Team. The CIO should not always talk about IT or even about the business of higher education. He or she should develop a rapport with other members of the team by learning about them. In casual discussions the CIO should find out what nonbusiness subjects are common among members of the executive team and learn to talk about such issues.

General Strategy. The CIO should know the general business drivers affecting higher education and the organization and the changes the organization is facing to meet those drivers. It is crucial that the CIO has an understanding of the changes that are expected in teaching and learning (distributed learning or "e-learning"); research and community initiatives; and the issues that are important to the board, to the executive management team, and to the community.

Read, Look, Ask, and Listen. The CEO and the other members of the executive team are rich sources of information. Executives write policy statements and strategy papers. The CIO should read these and ask about their contents. The CIO should write papers on the use of IT in higher education at an executive level. CIOs should also read industry periodicals (for example, academic and business, not just IT, periodicals) and take courses in their areas of business weakness.

Bottom line: The successful higher education CIO in the 21st century must be a full-spectrum contributor to the development and management of business strategies and directions within the CEO's executive management team. Failure to be accepted by the executive management team minimizes the CIO's influence and places the IS department in a poor position.

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