Productive Impatience

Recently I was talking with Steve diFilipo, CIO at the Milwaukee School of Engineering, and in an hour-long conversation he took me on a whirlwind tour of his hopes and dreams for EDUCAUSE over the next decade. What about this? What about that? Have you considered this? That? He was irrepressible, and he was impatient.

The same day I sent a private chat message to an EDUCAUSE employee at the end of a virtual meeting. “Great presentation!” I said, and the chat box was immediately filled with her response:

Thanks. Sometimes I am proud of what we've accomplished. But usually I'm just impatient about how much we still have to do!

And then I read the three feature articles in the current issue of EDUCAUSE Review and again heard the drumbeat of productive impatience. It's not hard to imagine why a higher education IT community would find itself drumming its collective fingers, given how difficult it is simply to keep up with the technologies themselves. On the other hand, this restless impatience is, I'm convinced, our greatest strength as a community.

Richard Van Eck's engaging update on the state of digital game-based learning offers an excellent review of developments and research in this crucial area over the last decade. His productive impatience frames the article, from the subtitle—“Still Restless, After All These Years”—through his closing statement: “Whether we choose to take advantage of the opportunity before us is a completely different question.” As he points out, “The question of whether games can teach or not seems to be settled science.” The real question, emerging from restlessness, is: What are we going to do about it?

Restlessness becomes queasiness in Joanna Young's article, “The Tech Talent Wars and #WomenInTech.” Underscoring with urgency the fact that only 26 percent of professional computing jobs in the United States are held by women, she stresses—with even more despair—that this proportion is shrinking, not growing. “A 19 percent drop in women being awarded computer science degrees is simply unacceptable. Cue more queasiness.” She reviews the spectrum of positions in the field and notes that as jobs become more technical, the number of women holding them gets lower, including only 18 percent serving as CIOs. Like Van Eck, Young offers concrete suggestions and an unmistakable call to action—but leaves readers with restive uncertainty about the future.

Adam Newman rounds out the theme with his feature article, making the case for evidence of learning as a hallmark of educational attainment. Dissatisfied and unimpressed with traditional transcripts, which he considers “inadequate and archaic” as a record of learning, he presses hard for alternative ways to gather, present, and assess the evidence of what students have learned. Not only, he insists, must these new tools be available, but they must be integrated with our existing systems, processes, and services to realize the traction that needs to be achieved. Newman presents the Evidence of Learning Framework as fundamental to advancing this ambitious goal.

In so many respects, agitating for action is exactly what we expect from the higher education IT community, and leaders willing to ask “Why not?” are a crucial part of EDUCAUSE. This issue also proudly showcases the ideas of the three 2015 EDUCAUSE award winners: James Hilton, recipient of the 2015 EDUCAUSE Leadership Award; Beth Schaefer, recipient of the 2015 EDUCAUSE Community Leadership Award; and Brandon Bernier, recipient of the 2015 EDUCAUSE Rising Star Award.
Schaefer’s engaging essay is a welcome reminder that understanding people and building relationships is a core competency, while Bernier advocates for leaders with a new set of skills (“what got us here won’t get us there”) and a reenergized commitment to service. Both are compelling voices.

In his interview, Hilton’s ideas on “reclaiming audacity” may well be considered a kind of final exclamation point to the feature articles in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review. Using the example of the Declaration of Independence, that quintessentially American statement of geo-political impatience, Hilton revels in the audacity of a group of “ragtag” colonies telling the superpower of the century that they’d had enough. He observes: “If they had submitted that through a university committee process, it never would have happened.”

Thinking about these voices, productively impatient and patient alike, I appreciate that in the EDUCAUSE community, impatience generally doesn’t follow the familiar progression of frustration to inaction, and inaction to exasperation (and more frustration). Rather, when impatience is most productive, it is because we push for what can be done instead of dwelling on the obstacles. We collaborate, we innovate, and we share what we have learned with each other. All of these responses are on display at the 2015 EDUCAUSE Annual Conference. There is no better time or place to celebrate the voices that energize the give-and-take of ideas across our community.