Growing an IR and IT Garden

As I write this column, spring is almost here. A few buds are fighting the winter cold to start blooming, while others are waiting a little bit longer to sprout. The environment can affect the development of the fledgling seedlings, fostering growth or hampering development. Similarly, within every college/university campus, different interactions in the environment can define the connections between the Institutional Research (IR) and the Information Technology (IT) offices. These relationships may have been forged through the specialized language commonplace in each area, based on practical applications and/or technical expertise. Or they may have resulted from shared reporting structures that can frame the lens shaping the interactions between the areas. Just as sunlight and water are key complements to the growth of plantings, the IR and IT offices need to collaborate, since each has a complementary role that is critical to the other.

Past Does Not Define Future

Every relationship has a history, just as all gardeners have to start with their first planting. Some pathways are positive journeys that flourish from the beginning, whereas others have lengthy stories full of rocky tumbles. Past relationships do not need to dictate all future interactions. This can apply to both positive and challenging relationships. If there is a constructive existing relationship, effort and energy need to be expended to continue the relationship, and these interactions can be positive models for other areas on campus. If there is a strong relationship between the IR and IT offices, it can be challenging to overcome. Acknowledging the assistance of others can result in great communication or frustrating interactions. How have others navigated acknowledgments that may not have been as well received as they were intended? How/why did this happen? What are some other successful tips for building effective communication within and between areas?

Regularly Watering the Plants

Although watering on a regular schedule is an essential part of the gardening process, other aspects of watering can impact how much water the plants actually receive. Watering with a fire hose or watering at high noon in the middle of summer both may be ineffective at supporting budding plants. Similarly, verbal and nonverbal communications are important parts of the campus collaboration process and can be shaped by how and when the communication is delivered. In her article “Effective Communication: Not As Easy As It Seems,” Kathy Lang notes five questions for guiding communication. Thinking through communicating messages and considering others’ perspectives before sending messages can aid individuals in delivering them effectively, rather than with a fire hose. What are some other successful tips for building effective communication within and between areas?

Reporting structures can influence the natural interactions between campus areas. The IR and IT offices may not always report through the same reporting structure. What impact does reporting structure have on building and maintaining a strong IR/IT relationship? How have others been able to create and sustain interoffice relationships and break down silos? How have these practices been integrated into sustainable and regular operations, rather than a one-time project or only with specific individuals?

The Higher Education Landscape

Many different issues affect our understanding of a landscape. In gardening, this can be seeing how weather patterns, soil composition, and insects can affect the growth of the plants. In higher education, this can be recognizing trends that can lay the groundwork for potential future issues, projects, or
collaborations. Understanding the broader aspects of emerging higher education trends, initiatives, or new reporting requirements can help both the IR and the IT offices see the impact from a cross-functional perspective. This creates a better outcome than if either single area approached the project as a silo.

An example that those of us connected with community colleges (irrespective of our primary roles at the institution) need to be concerned with is student retention and completion efforts. One person starts this process by planting the seed of enrollment. Taking this first step to enroll (or re-enroll) in college can be a very scary or overwhelming process for students and/or their families. There are many different discussions, on state and national levels, about reducing the barriers to education to increase retention and completion, and these can have an effect on the technological infrastructure at institutions as well as the reporting from data that is collected. A collaboration between the IR and IT offices can improve institutional efficiencies regarding what information is tracked and where it is stored in database systems. Additionally the IR and IT offices can partner in “translating” the technical (and sometimes very complex) systems, processes, and limitations for the general campus community.

What are other emerging higher education issues that can impact both the IR and IT offices? What issues that pertain to specific sectors, such as community colleges?

**Outside of the Comfort Zone**

Engaging in knowledge and learning communities outside of functional areas can bring additional resources and information. Attending conferences beyond the mainstream vendors or functional-area specialized conferences can highlight notable topics as well as challenges that other areas face. Funding for travel is something many offices may find challenging to obtain. Although some time and effort may be required to apply for grants, they can be an excellent way to stretch competing resources and to obtain additional funding. I was fortunate to have been awarded the Diane Balestri Memorial Scholarship to attend my first EDUCAUSE Annual Conference in the fall of 2016; my interest in a strong collaboration with information technology had been sparked when I had worked closely with the IT office at a previous institution. Additionally, social media can be a great (low- or no-cost) way to supplement resources. LinkedIn and Twitter are two platforms with strong learning communities, many times with LinkedIn groups and Twitter chats constructed with cross-functional practitioners.

What other conferences or social media resources can assist in continued professional development outside of immediate functional areas? How can groups, both in person and through social media, create positive environments to reach out and welcome others who may not typically attend or engage?

**Conclusion**

The relationship between the IR office and the IT office has many different aspects that can influence how strong this garden can grow. Spring is time for renewal and growth. Whether the IR and IT offices have strong existing connections, or are just starting an emerging relationship, or are working to rebuild a strained one, planting a seed is always where this starts.

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**Note**


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