In 2019, EDUCAUSE is launching a critical conversation in our community around digital transformation (Dx). Two years ago, this phrase popped up on our annual Top 10 IT Issues list at #10: Digital Transformation of Learning. We broached the topic on a broader level in our March/April 2018 issue of EDUCAUSE Review. In May of that year, the magazine published “Digital Transformation: What Is It?” by Ed Clark, University of St. Thomas chief digital officer. The article was among the top 10 most read EDUCAUSE Review articles for 2018.

The article subtitle—“What Is It?”—captures the fact that we are in the early stages of figuring out what Dx means in our unique higher education ecosystem. To help clarify the discussion, last year EDUCAUSE brought together influential leaders from member colleges and universities to create a Dx definition suitable for higher education and to help us, as an association, determine the best way to support this kind of transformational effort. As a result of the work by this task force, EDUCAUSE defines Dx as “a cultural, workforce, and technological shift ... being driven by technology trends and changes that include advances in analytics, artificial intelligence, the cloud, mobile, consumerization, social networks, and storage capacities.”

As for supporting this effort, I believe that in 2019 two approaches to digital transformation lie before us and that the path chosen by any given college or university will be consequential. First, we can dismiss digital transformation as nothing more than an underexplained, overhyped phrase that signifies nothing—it’s just another name for the technology innovation we’ve been working on long before the phrase emerged. We can shrug and point to the fact that technology is clearly continually transforming everything. Second, rather than dismiss Dx, we can intentionally embrace digital transformation as a powerful, deliberate choice and can work to energize our institutions around the ideas it encompasses.

George Westerman, research scientist at the MIT Center for Digital Business, encourages us not to confuse change and transformation. When we feel that Dx is nothing new and is simply the same kind of work we have been doing since the digital revolution began, we are likely missing the point. Successful digital transformation requires a broad team.
effort that includes senior leadership and alignment of effort across all of the well-established silos in higher education. Westerman suggests that when digital transformation is done correctly, “it’s like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly,” but when done wrong, “all you have is a really fast caterpillar.”

I recently overheard one higher education IT colleague ask another if they were engaged in digital transformation at their institution. After sharing their ambivalence about the term, the two agreed that if you have to ask, you’re probably not experiencing a digital transformation in progress. Which is to say that even if an institution is experiencing impressive ad hoc technology innovation, true digital transformation includes that innovation as part of a larger strategy that transcends the IT organization or any other single organization and that has the active endorsement of the campus chief executive and cabinet. Building out impressive digital capabilities is a feature of Dx only when the effort begins with—and is an intentional expression of—a larger institutional strategic priority. The technologies that enable Dx (e.g., analytics, artificial intelligence, the cloud, mobile, consumerization, social networks, and storage capacities) constitute only one of the levers involved. True Dx goes far beyond tools to include cultural and workforce changes in how we teach, learn, enroll, and engage in scholarship and research.

At EDUCAUSE, we think that what makes digital transformation, well, transformational is a commitment—made by campus leadership far beyond the IT organization—to the belief that the future of the campus will be an unapologetically digital future. The soon-to-be-released EDUCAUSE 2019 Strategic Technologies and Trends data shows clear signs that Dx is in place at only a few institutions (4%) but that it is exerting a “major influence” at two-fifths (40%). We are, therefore, convinced that the time is right to double-down on our understanding and promotion of digital transformation. The changes ahead in technology, culture, and the workforce are inexorable. Institutions that choose to be along for the ride will certainly not be alone. With the conversations we plan for 2019, EDUCAUSE will be making the case that we can accomplish so much more when we approach, together, these powerful forces—with deliberate intentionality embraced across our institutions.

Notes
1. For more on this topic, see the EDUCAUSE web page “Dx: Digital Transformation of Higher Education” (educcause.edu/dx).

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