Connecting with Presidents

By John O’Brien

A mantra for me since joining EDUCAUSE four years ago has been that the future of higher education information technology is not IT professionals talking more intensively to each other but, rather, IT professionals broadening the conversation to include other institutional leaders and, ultimately, the campus president or chancellor. This has been far more than a pithy turn of phrase for me, and my travel schedule is perhaps the best expression of my commitment to making these connections, as I have been intentionally seeking out opportunities to tell the story of higher education information technology to varied audiences of institutional leaders. In particular, having been a provost and college president, I’ve felt that this is a group I uniquely understand. So recently I jumped at the chance to join a session at the summer meeting of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), one of the six higher education presidential associations.

AASCU’s Summer Council of Presidents is a professional development opportunity for state college and university presidents to share ideas and knowledge with other presidents and chancellors, both new and experienced. I was honored to moderate a session on “Strategic IT,” beginning with a short presentation and facilitating a conversation with AASCU President Mildred García (also former president of California State University Fullerton and California State University Dominguez Hills, both AASCU institutions) and California State University Fresno CIO Orlando Leon. I’ve been writing and speaking about the topic of strategic IT for over a year, but this event brought together primarily campus CEOs, and I couldn’t have been more encouraged by what unfolded over the 90-minute session.

It was no surprise to me that cybersecurity and privacy (#1 and #3 on the EDUCAUSE Top 10 IT Issues for 2019) were top-of-mind for presidents and chancellors or that the audience members resonated with the institutional risks—financial, reputational, and beyond—involved. Recognizing that state universities, like many other institutions, frequently struggle for resources and staffing, I was pleased to share what EDUCAUSE can contribute on information security to member institutions. There is no better example...
Continued from page 5

than cybersecurity when it comes to demonstrating the institutional value of information technology. Strong IT operations are a powerful defense, but a strategically placed CIO is best able to ensure the coordinated approach needed to raise awareness across campus departments.

The conversation at the Summer Council repeatedly returned to innovation. Clearly, technology offers great promise in dealing with institutional challenges, from the need for improved efficiency to the need for better student outcomes in retention and graduation rates. This lens provided a context in which to share the case for including CIOs in the college/university cabinet. At the start of the session, Leon conducted a live-polling exercise that revealed only around half of the presidents reported that their senior IT leader had a place on the senior cabinet. All three of us shared our perspectives in support of having CIOs sit on the cabinet, reflecting the conclusions of the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) 2017 campus innovation study, which concluded: “The president needs to be certain that the institution’s commitment to technology is well funded and staffed; however, presidents must also consider the strategic placement of technology within the organization. It will prove difficult, for example, for technology to serve as a strategic asset for innovation if the CIO is not at the table when key decisions are made at the cabinet level.”

Coincidentally, at around the same time as the AASCU Summer Council, EDUCAUSE was wrapping up a new report, The Higher Education CIO, 2019, in which we examined the effects of cabinet placement for CIOs. “The report shows that CIOs who are on the president’s cabinet are considerably (four or five times) more likely to “almost always” shape or influence academic, strategic, and administrative directions. As technology becomes increasingly connected to everything we do—and plays an ever more critical role in creating a compelling student experience—the strategic placement of the CIO makes an important difference.

Since only around one-third of the presidents live-polled at this session considered themselves well-informed on technology topics, I shared former CIO Brian Voss’s exasperated complaint that it is simply no more acceptable for presidents to claim they don’t understand IT than it would be for them to say they don’t understand budgets, fundraising, faculty issues, or government relations! I strongly believe that sessions like this are valuable for drawing attention to the strategic nature of technology topics, I shared former CIO Brian Voss’s exasperated complaint that it is simply no more acceptable for presidents to claim they don’t understand IT than it would be for them to say they don’t understand budgets, fundraising, faculty issues, or government relations.

I strongly believe that sessions like this are valuable for drawing attention to the strategic nature of technology in 2019 and beyond, as well as for highlighting how presidents can become better informed, with the CIO taking a lead in this effort. As the session underscored, IT innovation has the potential to bring about positive change in areas such as student success, efficiency, and effectiveness across the institution.

Based on illuminations provided by García and Leon, as well as the number and quality of questions from the audience, I left this session convinced that we need more conversations like this in the future, especially as digital transformation gains traction at colleges and universities around the world.