Trees, Forests, and the 2020 Top 10 IT Issues

By John O’Brien

The 2020 Top 10 IT Issues are both familiar and new. I’m sure no one will be surprised to see that Information Security sets an unprecedented reign as the #1 issue for the fifth year in a row. Meanwhile Privacy, which appeared in 2019 for the first time in the Top 10 (as #3) moved to the #2 issue this year—a move that will surprise no one who has been reading the media headlines about privacy. These predictable placements are joined at #3 by Sustainable Funding, which has waxed and waned over the years but remains a recognizable feature of the Top 10 landscape. These are familiar trees in the topography of higher education information technology, but this year you’ll notice a distinct “forest view” as a handful of the Top 10 IT Issues are less about technology and more about broader institutional efforts in which technology plays a role—but not necessarily the leading role.

Without a doubt, issues like Student-Centric Higher Education (#5), Improved Enrollment (#7), and Higher Education Affordability (#8) are crucial institutional issues for 2020—and they are fundamentally top IT issues because technology issues and opportunities are increasingly inseparable from the larger grand challenges that keep presidents, provosts, board chairs, and other campus leaders awake at night. Clearly, institutional leaders’ ability to respond to these grand challenges will depend on technology solutions that are supported by the culture and workforce shifts required as part of a larger digital transformation.

These more expansive, forest-sized issues are not completely new to the Top 10 IT Issues list. Higher Education Affordability was on the list last year, for example. The difference this year is an important change in perspective: for the first time, we interviewed twenty campus presidents, provosts, and other senior-level leaders, asking about their priorities and intentionally framing our consideration of the Top 10 IT Issues by focusing on the forest and not the trees.

We’ve never done this before, and now that we have, I must confess that our omission seems remarkable. How can we tell a story about the strategic value of technology and its crucial role in
addressing campus grand challenges if we start the conversation with the technologies themselves? At EDUCAUSE, we are typically the first to say, “It’s not only about the technologies.” Now we’re putting that statement into motion.

This is what happens with digital transformation. Technology does not “save the day.” Rather, technology is part of the solution to extremely complex problems and notoriously hard-to-move needles. In many cases, technology is a proven/promising new lever to try for efforts in recruitment, marketing, student success, research, and operational efficiency and effectiveness.

An excellent example is the #5 Top 10 IT Issue: Student-Centric Higher Education. There’s nothing easy about “creating a student-services ecosystem to support the entire student life cycle, from prospecting to enrollment, learning, job placement, alumni engagement, and continuing education,” yet it is the right thing to do. In our work to address this essential campus priority, technology can connect the dots and accelerate the effort.

Finally, this “forest focus” also underscores the importance of the #10 issue: The Integrative CIO. While the role of the CIO has appeared in the Top 10 IT Issues list in one form or another over the years, the sense of urgency this year is impossible to miss. For those of us in the higher education IT profession to reframe our priorities in terms of institutional priorities and to move from “digital transformation” as a rhetorical flourish to an irreversible reality, we need leaders who are prepared to work effectively in this role. As stated in the report: “Not every institution is ready for an integrative CIO, and not every CIO is ready to be one. One or both circumstances will have to change if institutional leaders want to realize the full value of digital technology.”

The 2020 Top 10 IT Issues may be less about individual technologies than in the past, but as we start this new decade, it is clear that IT leaders need to take a broader, forest view. For college and university leaders to achieve their strategic goals and solve their grand challenges, they will depend on technology more than ever before. ■

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