Each year, members of the EDUCAUSE Enterprise IT Advisory Committee comment on the EDUCAUSE Top 10 IT Issues list. In this article, three committee members consider the need to increase the efficiency and flexibility of IT areas that support everything from daily transactions to long-term innovation, including innovation that leads to digital transformation. They also describe how the connection between institutional strategy and enterprise IT goals can play a critical role in advancing the institutional mission. Three committee members shared their thoughts.

Committee members responded to three of the 2020 Top 10 IT Issues:

- **Digital Integrations (#4)**
- **Administrative Simplification (#9)**
- **Integrative CIO (#10)**

Taken together, these three IT issues suggest ways that IT leaders can prepare their institutions for the kind of flexibility, agility, and resilience that is required for innovation and digital transformation.

**What is your institution doing to ensure that systems and data are integrated in a way that provides the kind of interoperability and adherence to data integrity and governance called for in Issue #4: Digital Integrations?**

**Eckles:**
At the University of Tennessee System, the focus for digital integration has been primarily through the lens of business intelligence. In one way, focusing on business intelligence as the driver of digital integration completely walks around the issue of application-level integration by extracting data from the system and joining those data outside the application environments. This approach makes decision support, reporting, and similar functions much easier, though admittedly it leaves challenges remaining for day-to-day functional operations.

In another way, focusing on business intelligence gives us a way to digitally integrate the campuses and institutes in our system, transcending the boundaries of individual information systems or networks. We’ve focused our attention on giving campuses a secure means of transmitting necessary data to the system office while maintaining their local autonomy and control over who sees what data in their applications. It has also given us an opportunity to provide data-quality checking services that give campus constituents insight into their own data and ultimately improve service delivery to students and others.

**How have efforts toward Administrative Simplification (#9) improved operations at your institution?**

**Hough:**
Like most other institutions, Logan University is trying to make use of automation to make things work better. Ironically, it isn’t the technology that makes the biggest difference in our efforts to simplify operations; it is the quality of project management. One of the best things we have done to help with operational streamlining of projects is to identify the primary goal up front. For us, the goal is to make the students’ experience the best that it can be. When we approach projects through the lens of that goal from the beginning, the whole team gains clarity about what is important and how to make decisions. For example, we just went through the student orientation process while looking for ways to improve it. By being clear from the beginning that we were focused on improving the students’ orientation experience, and not primarily our employees’ experience of student orientation, we were able to get everyone “pulling in the same direction” from the start. It doesn’t matter what technology we are implementing; for us, the basics of establishing the goal up front, spending time in good planning, and communicating throughout the project help us improve operations.

**Eckles:**
About six months ago, the University of Tennessee president and the CFO launched a task force on efficiency and effectiveness of
administration and management. The task force looked at multiple areas of operations, not just information technology but also human resources, capital projects, procurement, and communications. An initial goal was to clarify the role of the university system office and the services delivered there vis-à-vis the functional offices at the campus level.

The resulting inventories and analyses of services put us in a good position to consider the quality of those services, the appropriateness of the delivery points, and the complexity of the processes involved. We have since engaged a national consulting partner to help us review those items and consider how we might make different choices that could lead to better service delivery with less overlap and a more effective deployment of resources.

What have the CIO or other IT leaders at your institution done to ensure the alignment of technology planning with institutional strategy and goals, and what impact has that alignment had on progress toward institutional goals?

Hough:
Aligning technology with institutional strategy and goals begins with the understanding that whereas technology can help an institution accomplish its goals, the technology itself can never be the goal. There are so many IT elements at a higher education institution that it is easy to get caught up in the shiny new technology and lose sight of how it might (or might not) help the institution achieve its mission. IT leaders need to regularly reground themselves in the “big picture” goals and initiatives of their institution and then align their technology plans with those goals. We get increased buy-in, better cooperation, and more successful technology projects when we make it clear how our projects help the institution successfully accomplish its goals.

Moriarty:
At SUNY Oswego, senior leadership views technology as instrumental in creating an environment for people to work efficiently, make data-driven decisions, enable student success, and make a mark on our community. To ensure alignment, we do the following:

- Involve all stakeholders in the design and execution of plans. The campus strategic plan (“Tomorrow: Greater Impact and Success”) and the IT Strategic plan (The Digital Campus) were both developed with extensive discussion and input from the campus community.
- Create and maintain strong partnerships with business units and academic departments. This is done throughout the planning and execution of projects. Success is usually achieved when the project management and technology acumen of the IT staff is brought together with the business process and subject matter expertise of the implementing unit.
- Develop appropriate guiding principles, processes, and guardrails for departmental staff to know how they can implement technology that integrates into the technical ecosystem, so that the institution achieves its goals and receives value from its investments.

Eckles:
At the University of Tennessee System, the campus CIOs are convened monthly by the system CIO for a conversation on local priorities and projects. We work together to find ways that we can support one another, share contracts and products, collaborate on solutions that fill needs at multiple campuses, and jointly prioritize system-wide initiatives.

A recent example is the system-wide rollout of two-factor authentication (2FA). The campuses and the system office all had this project on their “wish list,” but it wasn’t until one of the campuses made it a local priority that things really got moving. Other campuses were not necessarily ready to pursue 2FA. But recognizing the importance of a single system-wide solution, the other campuses adjusted their priorities to support the initiating campus. The result was a far more secure computing environment that directly supports information security policy and the goal of protecting the privacy of our students, employees, and constituents.

What advice do you have for other enterprise IT leaders who are trying to align their systems and services with institutional goals?

Eckles:
Sometimes the simplest methods are the most effective. If you haven’t already done so, write down and publish on your website a list of the services your IT organization delivers, as well as a list of the projects you are pursuing. Along with each of those services and projects, identify the institutional goals that the service or project supports. I am occasionally surprised to find that when I’m forced to put words to paper, I can’t muster a reasonable connection that I assumed would be easily made.

Things get difficult once you identify services or projects that do not directly support an institutional goal. You may know that the right thing is to let go of that work, but that work almost certainly benefits someone (otherwise you wouldn’t be doing it). One tough part of the job of an IT leader is declining to dedicate resources to an endeavor because you know the greater good is served elsewhere.

Moriarty:
The following actions work for us at SUNY Oswego:

- Have clear communication with senior administration on major campus initiatives and on prioritization of institutional objectives. Knowing the priorities defines the alignment of resources.
- Ensure that the IT organization has proactive, mature processes and that its communication with the community meets the needs of stakeholders. This has helped give the IT organization
confidence and standing in ensuring strong partnerships.

- Partner with departmental leaders who want to utilize technology and bring their units to the leading edge in service and efficiency. Their success acts as a model of how we can deliver value when we work together.

**Hough:**
In today's modern work environment, we often try to accomplish everything through technology and avoid human interaction as much as possible. I think it is critically important to have face-to-face conversations with the people who developed the institutional goals with which we are trying to align. When we don't make time for these conversations, too much information gets lost and we make too many assumptions and jump too often to conclusions about the purpose and importance of these goals. The skill of asking good questions, and then following up with more good questions, leads to understanding. Try to discern why the institution needs a particular goal, and then find the technology to help meet the need. One of my mentors once said to me, “The most powerful technology of all is the question.” He was right.