A few members of our community have expressed their confusion about why EDUCAUSE has taken two seemingly contrary positions at the same time.

As I write, my mind is spinning from watching a promotional video announcing one of the latest robotic digital companions. Launched by Samsung at the CES 2020 meeting in January, “Ballie” is a small, brightly colored ball that rolled onto the stage to a round of applause. After that, Ballie mostly followed the Samsung CEO around on stage. It is in the beautifully crafted video accompanying the product launch where Ballie, doing household chores set to waltz music, shines. And in the press release, we learn that Ballie “understands you, supports you and reacts to your needs to be actively helpful around the house.”

OK, yes, Ballie is adorable. Who wouldn’t want, as TechRadar says, “a cute, subservient companion rolling through the house to check that everything’s in order?” Watching the promo video tweeted by Samsung, I decided that I absolutely do, in fact, need a rolling robot that will open the blinds to wake me up in the morning, adjust the thermostat, and tell the robot vacuum to clean up after the dog while I’m not home. But that’s not all. We’re told that Ballie will be a “a friend to your kids” and that this anthropomorphized ball of cuteness is “a camera that records and stores special moments.” This is when things started to turn chillier for me. What “special moments” will the freely roaming Ballie store? At one point in the video, Ballie quietly rolls up behind a young woman doing yoga—surely a private moment?

Ballie is just the latest harbinger of a new decade, one that will be dominated by a choice between privacy and convenience. I hope the choice will not be binary, but however this unfolds, we are going to wrestle with which is more important—and whether we have much say in the matter. As we consider this same dynamic in the smaller world of higher education, the question becomes an issue of how comfortable we are with using student data not only to enhance the student experience but also to help students succeed. In higher education, we are determined to have it both ways: we want analytics and technologies that deliver convenience and progress on goals like student success, but we also insist on respecting our students’ privacy and ensuring that their data is used appropriately.

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Throughout the last year, I’ve been trying to have it both ways as well: I have been sharing my genuine enthusiasm for analytics and new technologies while simultaneously sharing my concern and sense of urgency about digital ethics. For example, at the same time that I was delivering keynote talks expressing the need for caution on digital ethics, I was working with EDUCAUSE partners at the Association of Institutional Research (AIR) and the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) to draft a statement that would express our belief that the value of embracing institutional analytics is high.¹

A few members of our community have expressed their confusion about why EDUCAUSE has taken two seemingly contrary positions at the same time. I agree: arguing both sides does seem paradoxical. Yes, we are taking the position that technologies hold great promise to solve institutional challenges. For EDUCAUSE, this belief in the power of technology innovation is at the heart of our promotion of the concept of digital transformation (Dx). And yes, we are simultaneously taking the position that caution, care, and thoughtfulness are needed when these innovations use student data. Once you get beyond the (intended) hyperbolic title of our joint statement, you’ll quickly see that analytics isn’t going to “save higher education” unless we incorporate analytics deliberately and self-critically at every step. As we stress in the joint statement, the “responsible use of data is a non-negotiable priority,” and ill-conceived or misused new technologies or predictive algorithms can “reinforce pernicious discrimination and bias.” Intentional or unintentional misuse of data can be avoided by matching technology investments with “an institution-wide program of awareness, transparency, and training.”

This issue of EDUCAUSE Review includes an excerpt from the 2020 EDUCAUSE Horizon Report, an excellent example of our combined focus on both promotion of and caution about analytics. The 2019 EDUCAUSE Horizon Report noted concerns about privacy and the appropriate use of data, in the context of analytics technologies, virtual assistants, and artificial intelligence. It promoted “Advancing Digital Equity,” for example, and pointed readers to New America’s “Predictive Analytics in Higher Education: Five Guiding Practices for Ethical Use.” Similarly, the Horizon Report for 2020 continues to underscore these themes, identifying “Equity and Fair Practices” as a social trend and “Analytics and Privacy Questions” as a technological trend demanding our thoughtful attention.

As Ballie and countless other devices that build on advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning roll onto the scene in the coming decade, the tensions between privacy and convenience will intensify, not diminish. As colleges and universities bring these technologies to campus, IT professionals will, as usual, have a difficult job to do. Without the luxury of being able to pick one or the other, we will need to balance our students’ demands for the cool and the convenient with the larger demand for data privacy and the appropriate use of data. The good news is that no one is better trained to handle paradox. Since forever we have been tasked to “do more with less,” and we’ve managed the impossible task of protecting information security in an environment that demands openness. Now we have another paradox to add to the mix. ■

Notes
3. The statement is reprinted in the Leadership column in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review.

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