IT Service and Superpowers

As we all faced unprecedented challenges caused by the pandemic over the past several months, I thought a lot about whether humans have "superpowers." I don’t think those of us who are working in higher education IT service can compare ourselves to the incredible frontline people in health care, the first-responders, and many of the others who have served our communities to keep us safe and alive, but our role in education remains essential to a high-functioning society.

As my family isolated ourselves and found new ways to get work done, we used some of the "non-work" time to do a March Madness Bracket for the Marvel Cinematic Universe films. I had no idea that there were more than twenty Marvel superhero movies. Watching each movie and assessing each character’s superpower, I realized that the real impact was the combined value of all the superpowers when applied to a common objective. Over and over again, the superheroes managed to save humanity against overwhelming odds. In almost every case, no superhero acted alone.

So, what do superpowers have to do with IT service? Over the years, I have been inspired by the incredible talents and abilities of so many IT professionals. None of them could time travel, change shape, or teleport. One of my staff members once told me he could make himself invisible, but I think he just took long coffee breaks at the student union.

Some of the special powers that I have witnessed in IT professionals are related to technical work or efforts that support teaching, learning, and research. Other IT professionals show incredible capabilities in leadership, management, empathy, self-awareness, and/or communications. Yet even with all of these individual talents, no one was able to deliver extraordinary results or serve at a high level on their own.

The incredible powers exhibited by higher education IT professionals become superpowers only when we work together, relying on the contributions of others. I have consistently observed three collective superpowers that seem to set us apart as we serve our faculty, students, staff, and community with unparalleled distinction.

Our first superpower is collaboration. We exercise collaboration with energy, enthusiasm, consideration, and care. We share what we learn from our successes and our failures across our community and beyond. We admit our mistakes and come together virtually or in person to learn, teach, and listen. We enjoy and respect one another, and we recognize that we are better together. We give and receive with humility, expecting nothing in return.

Our second superpower is diversity and inclusion. This is not only about the color of our skin, our gender identity, our spiritual beliefs, or our ancestry. We recognize and appreciate that every person’s experiences, perspectives, and energies fuel our creativity, productivity, and capacity to deliver. We fundamentally believe that education belongs to everyone: the privileged, the disadvantaged, and the disenfranchised. We embrace exceptional IT service as an equalizer. Diversity enriches each of us and our organizations as we help students learn, as we support faculty members’ teaching and research, and as we provide systems and applications essential to our campuses across the globe.
Our third superpower is adaptability. Over the last forty years, IT professionals have been challenged to continuously rearm ourselves to create, manage, and deliver IT services as our systems have evolved from mainframes to minicomputers, to client-server architectures, to a web-enhanced desktop/laptop world, and now to mobile platforms that embrace and leverage cloud services. We have adjusted and learned, and we have helped others apply IT services in their work with agility and skill. As we have worked through the most recent pandemic, we applied responsiveness and adaptability at superhero pace as we helped transform our campuses to virtual delivery systems in teaching, learning, research, and administrative operations.

IT service providers don’t tap into our three superpowers—collaboration, diversity and inclusion, and adaptability—simply when it is convenient or when the situation calls for application of a superpower. As we have evolved into higher education enablers, partners, and service providers, these superpowers have become fundamental components of who we are.

As a result of the pandemic and months of social distancing and isolation, I know much more about the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Yet while I watched superpowers come alive in these movies, I realized that superpowers in the real world are much more important.

Higher education will change as a result of the pandemic and the subsequent financial crisis. It is incumbent upon each of us to make sure that we emerge better, stronger, and more resilient. As our colleges and universities face these challenges, exceptional IT service will be needed more than ever.

I take comfort in knowing that higher education IT service has many superheroes. I also realize that we all don’t need to be superheroes. We don’t even need to be “everyday” heroes. If we simply demonstrate care and respect for one another and maximize the application of our talents as we embrace collaboration, diversity and inclusion, and adaptability, we will contribute more than most of us thought possible.

As one Marvel superhero said, “It is a privilege to be among you.”

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