Faculty Voices and IT Partners: A Thousand Points of Know

The New Horizons department in EDUCAUSE Review is the space in this magazine dedicated to exploring and articulating emerging IT trends in higher education. Beginning with this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, I assume the editorship from my colleague and friend Malcolm Brown, the recently appointed director of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI). Under Malcolm’s tutelage, authors scanned the horizon not just for technologies but also for institutional practices surrounding a multifaceted collection of emerging innovations.

True to the spirit of the New Horizons department, my selected authors also plan to explore the use of emerging technologies and innovative educational technology practices in higher education. However, I have chosen to study this landscape from the faculty perspective. To do so, I distributed a call for participation among my EDUCAUSE Frye Leadership Institute and my New Media Consortium colleagues. I asked them to nominate faculty to write about how emerging technologies and their associated practices transform teaching, learning, research, and scholarship. To my surprise, I received over thirty submissions, even though I made it clear that whereas EDUCAUSE Review is a well-circulated magazine, it is not a refereed academic journal (the traditional outlet for faculty writers).

I based my selection of articles and authors on the spread and relevancy of the topics, representation from different types of higher education institutions, and demographic balance. Judging from the great response, I surmise that faculty are indeed interested in voicing their opinions and sharing their successes and failures in adopting new and emerging technologies.

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So why should we IT professionals—who make up the majority of readers of this magazine—be interested in what the faculty at our institutions have to say? The answer, simply stated, is because many of us don’t often get the opportunity to hear the faculty perspective. We don’t often listen to our customers. We are usually sequestered in our cubicles in buildings often peripheral to the main campus, focused intensely on our computer screens. We don’t cross paths with faculty on a daily or even weekly basis. When we do encounter faculty, it is often in reactive mode—we are there to solve a problem, to fix a bug, or to defend a policy. As a result, many IT professionals haven’t had the opportunity to build faculty relationships founded on familiarity, mutual trust, and respect. This lack of contact widens a chasm between IT services rendered and faculty needs met.

I recall an EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) Symposium a few years back. One of the participants brought her husband, a well-respected philosophy professor. He attended the social events and listened politely to the conversations in which her colleagues traded faculty-support “horror” stories. After two evenings of this back-and-forth bantering, the gentleman politely interrupted the conversation and asserted that, based on his observations: “IT folks don’t like faculty very much.” In another example, Jim Collins, the general session speaker at the 2009 EDUCAUSE Annual Meeting, was applauded by the audience, comprising mostly IT professionals, when he referred to faculty as “a thousand points of no.” Generally alienated from the faculty they serve, IT professionals often have even less connection with the students who populate their campuses. For example, the general education (Gen Ed) requirements of most higher education institutions underscore the need to learn the theoretical and practical aspects of quantitative reasoning, communication skills, and critical thinking. Gen Ed principles call for the integration and application of knowledge, a collective intellectual depth and breadth, the ability to adapt to new experiences and surroundings, and an understanding of society and culture and its shifting values and ethics. This is in addition to the capacity to build literacies around new media and digital and information technologies. IT leaders should be innately familiar with these foundational principles and should be asking: “What do our students need to know to be 21st-century, global citizens, and how can our IT department support these goals?”

Unfortunately, this kind of response is often lost in the day-to-day business of running the department, managing operations, and balancing the budget.

It is not surprising that there is a gap between the strategic direction of many IT groups and the faculty they serve. IT departments are often guilty of offering services that are technically complex, user unfriendly, poorly communicated, and perceived as changing too rapidly. Many IT systems are based on technical requirements decided by the IT group alone and not on what is best suited for the faculty member undertaking research, advancing scholarship, teaching classes, and/or serving the community. On the other hand, faculty can be impatient with technology and...
often don't want to learn new systems or dig through documentation just to work through a list of steps to make something work. Most important, they do not want to look incompetent in front of their students when the technology doesn't work for them.

The first step to closing this gap is to provide an opportunity for IT professionals to listen to, and learn about, how faculty are using technology innovatively. And that is my primary goal for this year’s series of New Horizon columns. I plan to highlight the faculty voice so that others in our institutions, especially the IT professionals, can gain a better understanding of the academic experience. For the remaining five columns, I have selected authors from a mix of public and private research, business, and liberal arts higher education institutions, with campus sizes varying from large to small and with locations ranging from urban to rural. I asked each author to write about his or her use of technology and to provide concrete recommendations to IT leaders and professionals, so that IT staff can be better prepared to support faculty with similar projects and interests at their home institutions.

In the March/April column, Mark J. Hager, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Menlo College, and Raechelle Clemmons, Menlo’s CIO, will co-write an article in which they will introduce a model for successful collaborations between faculty and IT staff. They plan to tackle the overarching question: “How do faculty members work with a CIO and the Office of Information Technology to help students achieve desired learning outcomes?” By highlighting the larger systemic issues of planning, delivering, and assessing the use of academic technology and by addressing critical questions on communication and process, they hope to raise the level of conversation to move beyond bits and bytes to pedagogy. They posit that the IT office can extrapolate from faculty issues to larger systemic solutions and, given a seat at the academic table, can be a partner in curriculum design and delivery.

The May/June column will feature Elizabeth M. Hodge, Associate Professor of Education, and Sharon Collins, Project Manager, from East Carolina University. They will address teaching and learning in virtual worlds, to correspond with the May/June EDUCAUSE Review theme of cloud computing. Today’s gaming generation views virtual worlds as strong social and interactive mediums for communicating, socializing, and learning. Thus this column will focus on how faculty can adopt and integrate virtual worlds as an innovative practice for teaching, learning, and research and what IT professionals need to know to best support this complex, cloud-based technology.

For the July/August column, Lou Rera, Assistant Professor of Communication at Buffalo State College, will write about creating and sustaining media-based teaching and learning environments. He will focus on how educators, along with IT professionals, can provide learning environments supportive of creativity and innovation even though they must struggle with the cost, complexity, and provisioning of the quickly outdated tools and technologies required to produce and distribute media.

Both the September/October issue of EDUCAUSE Review and the New Horizons column in that issue will focus on student engagement. Rachel Ellett, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Mount Junior Professor of International Studies at Beloit College, will describe a successful pilot program using social networking, collaboration, and communication technologies for linking local and international students. Ellett encourages her students to share real-life stories to enrich their learning experiences. She also will describe the technical challenges that need to be addressed in order to scale this type of program to other courses and campuses.

The final column, to be published in the November/December issue, will be written by Virginia Kuhn, Associate Director of the Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML) at the University of Southern California. She stresses the need for humanists and technologists to collaborate on matters of cyberinfrastructure and emergent technologies. Kuhn argues that this collaboration is particularly crucial in times of sweeping technological change: whereas technologists imagine what could be, humanists imagine what should be. She stresses that although communication among educators, researchers, and technologists is vital, it is also an increasing challenge. She will use the example of the IML’s continuing effort to create a media-rich digital portfolio with various partners, particularly the high-performance computing community.

This January/February 2010 EDUCAUSE Review focuses on innovation and the future of higher education. My goals, as the New Horizons department editor for this year, are to inform, educate, and pique the curiosity of all readers—and also to persuade IT professionals to adopt a more holistic view of their professional responsibilities and take steps to contribute to positive institutional transformation. To ensure a meaningful future, we all must find ways to be true partners when working together to ultimately provide our students with the technological foundation that they desire and need in order to be successful scholars, careerists, and global citizens.

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