Stewards for Higher Education: Looking at Clouds and the Top-Ten IT Issues

Although those of us in higher education information technology are always surrounded by work, and by the pressure to achieve more, it is important to pause to consider how we approach our work. Sometimes doing so implies prioritization — considering which issues are most important, such as the top-ten IT issues highlighted in the annual EDUCAUSE Current Issues Survey. Sometimes doing so involves judgment—deciding which solutions hold the most promise for the future, such as cloud computing, the topic of two feature articles and several columns in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review.

“The Top-Ten IT Issues, 2010” article mentions the concept of stewardship: “CIOs must focus on the wise stewardship and inclusion of all available resources, the appropriate restructuring of the IT organization, and the rationalizing and right-sourcing of the IT systems and service portfolio.” Indeed, stewardship is an important word—one that says a great deal about how we work. In his 1993 book Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest, Peter Block defines stewardship as “to hold something in trust for another.” IT leaders could be considered to be stewards of institutional resources (funds and personnel), of the environment (through energy consumption), and of higher education’s intellectual and cultural heritage (through digital preservation and data security). Stewardship implies that we will carefully guard those resources, using them for the best purposes and being judicious in their expenditure.

Cloud computing provides one approach to stewardship, as noted in the panel discussion “Looking at Clouds from All Sides Now.” Elazar Harel notes: “Cloud services are likely to use less-expensive energy sources and obtain better economies of scale than any college or university.” Michael King observes: “Cloud computing also offers an economic advantage by allowing institutions to focus more resources on differentiating value, as opposed to managing and supporting a full suite of services expected by their constituents.” Joanne Kossuth puts one rationale for cloud computing into context: “How can higher education provide its services at a lower cost? Tuition increases are unsustainable, and for-profit competitors have figured out how to provide a comparable education for less. The cloud must help us consolidate and collaborate.”

Stewardship also emphasizes that we aren’t responsible for doing everything, just for being sure that everything gets done. As Block explains, stewardship is the “willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the larger organization by operating in service, rather than in control, of those around us.” The notion is fundamental to cloud computing: an individual organization gives up “control” of an asset, relying on the service provided. Access to a resource becomes more important than ownership.

Our students, who use a variety of cloud systems (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) to interact with each other, may understand this intuitively. But colleges and universities are catching on as well. In “Cloud Computing and the Power to Choose,” the authors note that some 75 percent of colleges and universities in Australia and New Zealand, for example, have moved their student e-mail to the cloud. Sharing control is not always easy, however. Stewardship thus relies on partnerships—the partners share responsibility for ensuring that the right things happen. As Block notes, partnerships “recognize the interdependence of the parties and replace control with cooperation.” Researchers in the United Kingdom created e-Science Central, a collaborative model inspired by Facebook, to deliver cloud-enabled e-science capability to researchers. In Australia, Curtin University has set up a partnership among five service providers so that services can be moved between partners as required—an example of intentional interdependency. Still, some IT leaders are reluctant to give

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up the prestige that comes from owning and being responsible for large hardware installations, as revealed in the JISC studies discussed in the article.

Beyond investing the time to build relationships, it is important to have appropriate expectations of partnerships. Block explains: “Partnership does not mean that you always get what you want. It means you may lose your argument, but you never lose your voice.” Today’s difficult economic environment may challenge us all to moderate our expectations. As the 2010 EDUCAUSE Current Issues Committee asks: “Are IT leaders prepared to make the cognitive leap from identifying strategies to obtain additional funds to seeking to create consensus about what can be done given a stable (and limited) level of funding?”

As we think about our roles in higher education, stewardship may become a metaphor with increasing relevance. IT professionals have always had a strong philosophy of service, which is being enhanced through partnership. As we continue to replace control with cooperation, we embark on adventure. Block reminds us that partnership comes at the price of uncertainty and anxiety. Many IT professionals feel that uncertainty and anxiety, whether the issue is looking at cloud computing, financing information technology, managing security, or some other concern. If we are to be good stewards for higher education, we must support each other as we begin this adventure.