Meta-Challenges and Disturbances in the Force

I was talking with a colleague the other day, and I asked him how things were going. He usually says something like “awesome” or “great,” but this time he hesitated and replied: “I don’t know. Lately I have been sensing a serious disturbance in the force.”

In my best Yoda impression, I responded: “Also sensed this disturbance in the force, have I!” As we talked, we covered the typical things: budget cuts, furloughs, security concerns, more projects than we know what to do with, and wishing we could do more for our staff. After a short time, the focus of the conversation shifted, and we talked about how, although the challenges sometime seem insurmountable, incredible opportunities exist and working at a university remains one of the most satisfying options we could think of.

That’s life in higher education: seemingly insurmountable challenges, countless opportunities, and ultimately, tremendous satisfaction in knowing that what we do matters.

EDUCAUSE Top-Ten IT Issues
IT service challenges have been around since the first computer chip was put into service, and we in information technology have always enjoyed examining these challenges. Since 2000, EDUCAUSE has been conducting the Current Issues Survey and publishing a “Top-Ten IT Issues” article based on the survey. More often than not, I find that the issues highlighted are consistent with what I observe at my campus. Lately, though, I have been thinking less about the specific issues and more about the factors that influence why the issues exist in the first place.

Many of the “disturbances in the force” we all seem to be sensing result from inadequate attention to the processes, frameworks, and strategies that shape how we approach our work—processes such as how we engage faculty, staff, and students; how we define problems; how we work to understand needs; and ultimately, how we make decisions and communicate the results. The IT issues we face are magnified by several things, including service-delivery transformations, higher expectations, more choices, the emerging adoption of powerful consumer electronics, the collaborative web, the increased pace of technological change, and the mounting complexities of the interdependencies among all the components involved.

Service-Delivery Transformations
Over the past several years, colleges and universities have been moving from centralized and decentralized IT service-delivery models to more openly embrace innovation at the edge. In higher education, “the edge” may be departments, scholars, or students. Concurrently, we are working hard to encourage the innovators on the edge to leverage campus infrastructure and services to avoid unnecessary replication and high costs. Although we may acknowledge that this will be for the better and is in fact inevitable, it does dramatically change the culture of IT service delivery in higher education.

The edge is an interesting place. Campus community members expect that their personal devices and the applications and services they build or acquire beyond campus will not be bound by time or place and will seamlessly integrate into the mix of traditional campus-provided capability. As with most things, this is not as easy as some think and will require new approaches to partnerships within and among campuses. IT services that had traditionally been decentralized and disconnected from campus IT infrastructure now need to rely on infrastructure used across the campus if they have any hope of achieving their service goals. Some refer to this concept as “edge, leverage, and trust.”

Complexity
Higher education institutions are becoming more complex ecosystems. In November 2007, David Snowden and Mary Boone noted that for complex systems, the consequences of any decision are generally not predictable partly because of the dynamic nature and the large number of internal and external interacting forces. Exacerbating this is the increasing rate at which new technologies and services are being introduced. Campus IT platforms are quickly becoming a less than optimally organized conglomeration of cloud services, consumer products, locally produced applications, collaborative tools, and the traditional campus. It is no wonder that institutions are struggling with how to approach these challenges.

As a result of the service-delivery model transformations and the complexity of the related challenges, there are few instances in which an individual or a small group of individuals has all the information needed to arrive at a “best solution” and even fewer instances in which there is a single correct answer. If we accept the assertion that there will be fewer and fewer perfect solutions, it stands to reason that there should and will be closer examination of the processes used for engagement and communication. More often we will find ourselves in the position of defending and explaining processes rather than decisions.

Process
I was fascinated by a recent interview with former U.S. President Bill Clinton. The interview begins with Clinton saying: “Well, first, I think [it’s] important to get the framework right. For me
it starts with acknowledging that this is the most interdependent age in human history.” Clinton goes on to say: “My simple premise is that the mission of the 21st century is to build up the positive and reduce the negative forces of interdependence. If you ask me my position on anything, I may give you the wrong answer, I may make a mistake, but I think I have the right filter. I’ll ask myself on any profound issue: will this increase positive interdependence or reduce negative interdependence? If it will, I’m for it. If it won’t, I’m against it.”

A Focus on Meta-Challenges
This leads me back to my renewed focus on process, framework, and engagement. Again, complexity and process stand out:

1. The interdependencies among devices, projects, services, infrastructure, governance, and funding are creating complexities that require a renewed focus on problem-solving and solution-attainment approaches.
2. The processes used to make decisions are often of greater importance than the decisions themselves.

Everything we do in higher education information technology will need to be undertaken with greater attention to how the decisions and actions affect the members and services of the wider campus community. We must invest significantly more intellectual capital in looking beyond individual needs and considering how we work together on our own campus and across campuses.

We are at a major inflection point, with great opportunity to fundamentally change how we deliver IT services. Let’s commit to taking some reasoned risks and to growing trust through action. If we are willing to take a chance, I believe the extra investment will pay dividends in many new and exciting ways.

How do we rise above seeking specific solutions to specific problems and begin to invest more intellectual capital in higher-level challenges? We will still be asked to make decisions every day, often before we have established the appropriate framework within which the best decision can be made. As Clinton indicated, sometimes we will be right and sometimes we will be wrong. In the end, do our decisions help our institutions and our faculty, staff, and students get to a better place?

It might be that the most important thing we will do is preserve time to engage in critical thinking in areas of greatest complexity—at times in groups and sometimes alone. Perhaps the most precious contribution we will make is applying that critical thinking to help get our campuses to a better place. Individual challenges and projects will come and go, but finding the right balance between working on the “project of the day” and focusing on these larger, more fundamental challenges may be the deciding factor in our ability to make significant contributions to our colleges and universities in this complex, technology-dependent era.

Notes

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