Four or five years ago, I sat in a room with about forty of my fellow Chief Information Officers (CIOs) from research universities to discuss trends in our profession. Someone asked about career aspirations—in particular, about who among us wanted to become a provost or a president. One hand went up. It wasn’t mine. Yet today I am serving as Interim President of the University of Hawaii (UH) System, which comprises all public higher education institutions in Hawaii, from community colleges to a major research university.

Selecting the Vice President for Information Technology & CIO (my position) as Interim President may seem to be an unconventional choice by a board of regents. But after some initial raised eyebrows, there have been more nodding heads than might have been expected.

Why? One factor was that I was one of the sitting vice presidents; the local press described me as a “longtime UH administrator.” In addition, information technology is now widely appreciated as an element of higher education that touches all activities and aspects of our mission. Our IT organizations are as complex as any other organizations in our institutions, facing strategic, operational, financial, and human resource challenges every day. And in a higher education system like UH, information technology is a powerful tool that creates efficiencies and enables the diverse campuses to work together to serve students across the state.

Since I was an internal candidate, the board had a chance to evaluate what I had done in my years at UH. So as I wrap up four years of service on the EDUCAUSE Board and my year as editor of this Viewpoints department, I’d like to share some of the qualifications and experiences that led to my selection. This is not intended as a recipe or a how-to for becoming a permanent Chief Executive Officer (CEO). I was selected for interim service while the board searches for a permanent president. In addition, not many of us stay at one institution as long as I have. Still, I hope to present here some useful ideas for those who aspire to higher education leadership roles beyond the CIO position.

Know your institution. I know my institution, and my institution knows me. I’ve worked here for decades, making my way from an entry-level IT staff position through successively responsible management and executive roles. I helped many current UH faculty and staff with the selection of their first PC, the connection of their first modem, and the use of their first e-mail system. During my initial stint as the first CIO-equivalent, reporting to the Senior Vice President for Finance and Operations, I was in weekly staff meetings with the directors of budget, human resources, procurement, finance, facilities, and auxiliary services. I learned more than I could have imagined about how those parts of the university actually work—and about how information technology could help in these areas.

Understand students, faculty, and researchers. Though not a faculty member, I have taught at UH. I’ve taught in person and online in four different academic departments on campus, with content ranging from computer science and telecommunication management to distance learning and e-commerce. I “ate our own dog food,” using our LMS and online learning tools. I’ve also been taught at UH. I’ve taken classes for personal enrichment, and I eventually went on to earn a UH PhD. In addition, though not an active researcher, I am a principal investigator (PI) with several hundred million dollars in contracts and grants from multiple agencies. I’ve reviewed proposals for federal sponsors, and I’ve learned and lived the institutional processes that our faculty must use to develop and submit proposals and to administer extramural projects and funds.

Participate in the business. I’ve been active in improving business processes across the institution (some might say too active for a CIO). I conceived and convened our Business Process Council, a cross-functional representative group of executives, business process owners, and stakeholders who have the collective capability to drive change in almost any of our administrative processes. I learned where the pain points are and where we sometimes need to press relentlessly for change. This will serve me well as economic pressures drive UH to continue to reduce administrative costs through improved efficiencies.

Collaborate. I’ve collaborated with community partners, perhaps most importantly by working closely with our statewide K12 system for over twenty years on networking and distance education. I also served on the board of our local PBS station, volunteered with environmental organizations, served on the
board of our High Technology Development Corporation, and chaired the Hawaii Broadband Task Force. These relationships will be even more important as I lead UH's work to increase the educational capacity of our state and diversify our economy.

*Engage with government.* I've engaged within the local political environment, walking the halls of the state capitol to support IT projects and university initiatives and to assist others in advancing statewide priorities. I've worked with our congressional representatives, their staffs, and federal agencies to advance Hawaii's interests. Clearly there will be much more of this work in my near-term future.

*Take risks.* I'm inclined to take risks when the situation and expected rewards line up. The nature of risky decisions is that they don't all pan out as hoped. So I've weathered some storms and the attendant publicity. I've been the institutional face of several data breaches in distributed units outside our control and the representative of our mitigation program, which has (so far) been successful. Although no one wishes for these experiences, at one time or another most presidents will find themselves facing hostile audiences and an unfriendly press.

*Join peer communities.* I've engaged with peers nationally and internationally, keeping an eye to balancing my work across information technology, networking, and applications to research, administration, and teaching and learning. EDUCAUSE has been a big part of that work, along with WCET, Internet2, Kuali, and the Pacific Telecommunications Council, to name a few. I learned more than I could possibly have contributed, serving with some of the most committed and innovative leaders in our communities. And I've brought those lessons, connections, and relationships back to my institution, to help us succeed.

The conversation four or five years ago in that room of CIOs started with a discussion of whether we're seeing a trend toward a lowered stature for the CIO position. In particular, the question for those of us with a direct reporting line to the CEO was whether we believed that this reporting line would be maintained for a successor CIO if we were to move on. A companion question was whether the CIO is—and will continue to be—a core member of the CEO's cabinet, playing an active and strategic role in the institution's directions and strategies.

I believe the answers to these questions are shaped by the people involved and their experiences, by the CIOs and also the CEOs who are looking for assistance in advancing the institutional mission. We talk about whether CIOs should be “plumbers” vs. “strategists,” but the truth is that CIOs who are seen primarily as plumbers are less likely to be accepted as contributing members of the cabinet or to enjoy direct reporting lines to the CEO. Effective CIOs must create and lead teams that provide both effective IT plumbing and visionary IT strategy for their institutions. In addition, those CIOs who aspire to higher leadership positions must leverage their opportunities to go even further. They must demonstrate to their communities that they can provide broad internal and external leadership in areas that matter not only to the IT organization but also within their institutions and beyond.

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