The CIO-CBO Partnership

Information technology continues to have a major impact on the evolution of higher education, constantly creating new opportunities and challenges for all aspects of the institution. In the “IT Matters” department of EDUCAUSE Review, EDUCAUSE asks representatives of major stakeholder communities to reflect on how IT developments have changed their world and may continue to do so in the future and also on what those changes mean for their relationship with the higher education IT organization. In the following column, EDUCAUSE talks with John D. Walda, President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO).

Impact. How has information technology made an impact on your community?

WALDA: During the past several decades, information technology has greatly affected both how students learn and how colleges and universities operate. At the most basic level, campuses have automated institutional record-keeping and administrative processes to improve customer service and operating efficiency. Prospective students learn about educational opportunities through interactive websites. Students come to campus with the expectation of 24-hour service; they anticipate that they should be able to register for classes, access course materials, monitor their account information, and request transcripts at any time. They spend much of their days and nights connected to the campus via smartphones, tablets, and social media. Recent data indicates that the average student comes to campus with at least three Internet-enabled devices and that they expect the high level of connectivity they enjoyed at home. This has placed significant demands on campus networks and wireless infrastructure.

Faculty utilize technology to schedule classrooms, purchase lab supplies, advise students, and deliver course content, as well as to send and receive tests and papers. They also work to keep current in their respective areas of expertise and to conduct research. Campus administrators manage complex building structures and utility requirements to maximize building efficiencies. Additionally, their work and connection to other people and departments becomes governed by computers and e-mail. In fact, so much of our administrative and academic activity is now mediated by information technology that even a minor IT service disruption has a significant impact on productivity.

At more advanced levels, learning management systems and data analytics are contributing to improved opportunities for student retention, classroom utilization, and development efforts. As stewards of our colleges and universities, business officers are interested in and concerned about all of these various applications and how they are affecting the student experience.

Although these advancements have improved student satisfaction and success, increased the potential for faculty productivity, and generated operating cost savings, they have not come without cost. The sheer amount of technology being used on campus today has completely changed how people work and interact and has elevated interest in IT expenditures.

Need. What does your community need most from information technology?

WALDA: While recognizing that colleges and universities must continue to deploy new technologies to advance their campus missions, business officers need specific information and assistance from IT leaders as they contemplate IT investments for the campus. The partnership of the chief information officer (CIO) and chief business officer (CBO) is critical for CBOs to better understand the total cost of ownership and the measurable cost savings, revenue enhancements, and service improvements for any technology project, in order to be able to accurately calculate the potential return on investment for specific technology improvements. For example, CBOs and CIOs must work together with other campus leaders to determine whether better-informed student advising improves student retention and, if so, by how much. How will this return translate into additional revenue dollars and net annual operating savings? Most CBOs rely on CIOs as they seek to guide their institutions along the path of more data-informed decision making.

Direction. Where does your community see information technology headed?

WALDA: In this rapidly changing technological world, CBOs rely on the CIO community for sound input and advice on operational issues, particularly in the areas of emerging technology and current IT issues. The campus must work together to determine when a critical organizational need can be better addressed.
by a cloud application or an on-campus data center solution. When might a shared-service approach, either on a single campus or on multiple campuses, be most cost-effective? Are costly software customizations necessary for an ERP upgrade or a new ERP implementation, or might it be wiser to re-engineer work processes to fit existing applications? There is no doubt that IT applications will get bigger, faster, and better. The challenge is to determine which applications will be most cost-effective and will best serve the unique needs of each campus.

As big as these operational issues are, there are even larger issues going forward. The significant challenge for CBOs will be finding new business models to replace those that are no longer viable for our institutions. Much of the change needed concerns the fact that higher education has reached the limits of both real and perceived affordability—along with the effects of globalization, changing student demographics, and new forms of competition. The resulting fiscal and political realities will continue to put pressure on our traditional economic models.

Using information technology as a means and a tool to fix broken business models is clearly a part of the solution. We must think in a holistic way about how technology can support institutional goals and objectives. For example, we know that technology tools can help us reach new levels of scale for our programs. This is one way that we will accomplish cost-effectiveness for our students.

Taking full advantage of the available opportunities for overcoming the constraints of time, geography, and access on our existing business models will require a more robust partnership between technology administrators, business officers, and academic leaders. Institutional leaders must share an understanding of the total costs—and opportunities—of various IT solutions. In the end, the collective goal must be to increase efficiency, reallocate resources to the core mission, and extend access and opportunity to students.

**Message. What key message do you have for the IT community?**

WALDA: My key message to CIOs and others in the IT community differs little from what I would offer to academic, student affairs, research, human resource, procurement, or physical plant leadership. We must find ways to work more closely together for the overall benefit of the enterprise. Everyone’s input must be sought and encouraged. Every idea must be compared with alternatives as a way to focus on obtaining the greatest possible return on the investment of precious campus resources. The complex challenges facing higher education in the United States will be best addressed by inclusive processes that encourage diverse perspectives.

John D. Walda ([JWalda@nacubo.org](mailto:JWalda@nacubo.org)) is President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO).

© 2014 John D. Walda