Staying “Plugged In”

In the March/April 2014 EDUCAUSE Review, Susan Grajek and the members of the 2013–2014 EDUCAUSE IT Issues Panel outline this year’s top-ten IT issues for colleges and universities. Their descriptions of the issues are clear and their recommendations highly useful. Campus IT leaders and staff must focus on the present—but they must also stay “plugged in” in order to anticipate the future and be ready for whatever comes next.

Over the last two decades, CIOs and their IT departments have become increasingly powerful. No longer relegated to infrastructure, IT leaders today have a massive span of responsibility: just about everything is touched by information technology. And therein lies the dilemma. Although information technology has become the foundation on which institutional processes depend, the units that control those processes may also control a corresponding portion of the IT budget. Across all industries, spending on technology by departments outside the central IT department is on the rise. According to one report, 61 percent of enterprise technology projects are now funded by the business rather than by the IT department, and IT spending driven by non-IT departments will outpace spending by the IT department in the future. To find parallels in higher education, we can consider administrative systems. Even though critical IT systems underpin areas such as finance, human resources, and student information, the functional unit may have more say in making system decisions than does the central IT department. Just because a system involves information technology doesn’t mean it is controlled by the IT department.

Although cloud and sourcing strategies are an issue for today, they may lead to a different issue tomorrow: control. The IT department’s “control” probably began diffusing with outsourcing; the cloud and BYOE may diffuse that control even more. Perhaps the IT department itself will move into the cloud. Regardless of the degree to which the IT department is physical or virtual, insourced or outsourced, IT leaders may have fewer staff. Industry now talks about CIO success as being “measured not by the number of staff and projects on the books, but by how few.” Might that be the case in higher education someday?

Yet control is not the same as influence. Presidents, provosts, and trustees have more knowledge of—and interest in—information technology today than they have in decades. CIOs are being looked to as collaborators and co-creators of new environments, such as MOOCs. How IT leaders manage this moment of increased influence may make a huge difference in their future.

The key to this future involves much more than technology. “Technology alone delivers no value. It’s the combination of a clear strategy, the right technology, high-quality data, appropriate skills, and lean processes that adds up to create value.” Do higher education institutions have a strategy for the digital enterprise or the digital experience? In business and industry, chief digital officers (CDOs) are on the rise. “What’s really new and different is evidence that CIOs are increasingly evolving into ‘chief digital officers’ (CDOs). This is more than semantics; it suggests a shift away from overseeing systems and applications to overseeing their organization’s efforts to build new channels and markets.” CDOs are emerging in higher education as well.

A shift from CIO to CDO may signal another shift in emphasis. Businesses are asking how information technology will change the basis of competition in their industry. Should those of us in higher education be asking a similar question? Competency-based education is rapidly attracting interest among adult-serving institutions, sidestepping the credit-hour-based model. Extra-institutional courses and credits (whether from for-profit providers or prior learning assessments) are becoming a part of

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many students' education. New channels and new markets are being created, with MOOCs as just one reminder. Companies such as Starbucks, Amazon, and Apple understand that users expect an ultra-convenient experience, personalized in real time. What is the digital translation of that experience for college and university students, faculty, and staff?

As Grajek writes: “Those who have been sitting back now need to sit up.” Even if we are tired of hearing words like transformation and disruption, “the phenomena they describe are very much alive and well.” Just as information technology is transforming and disrupting our colleges and universities, it is also transforming and disrupting us. Perhaps by being aware of the top IT issues—by staying plugged in—we can begin to understand the rebirth and redefinition of what information technology means to colleges and universities. That is, we can be the change we see.

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