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?
Walk into any college or university classroom, student union, residence hall lounge, or public space on campus, inside or outside, and you will see the obvious effect of information technology for today’s students: everyone is connected. This is not a dramatic observation, but underneath this ubiquitous connection is an emerging change in the nature of the college experience—both in and out of the classroom.

Many today decry the loss of personal connection and face-to-face communication. However, for student affairs staff, information technology has opened new opportunities for the creation of communities and for student engagement. From the day the notice of admission hits a student’s mailbox, the following months of social connection begin to build a sense of community for entering students. This social connection continues in classrooms, around issues of common interest, and in all manners of the college/university experience. This experience has become a rich blend of online and flipped classrooms, social media, and complex gaming mixed with the more traditional face-to-face experiences on campus.

The challenge for student affairs staff is to make some of the virtual campus experience educationally intentional and purposeful. We need to challenge students to become critical thinkers, develop an appreciation for intercultural differences, and become citizens of the campus community in both virtual and face-to-face interactions. Another growing challenge involves how to address some of the negative outcomes of the connected college student: the potential for isolation and poorly developed interpersonal skills; the time-management issues in the face of highly stimulating gaming options; the effect of online harassment and bullying; and the anonymity of racial, ethnic, and religious acts of intolerance that can fragment the college/university community.

Need: What does your community need most from information technology?
The opportunities for partnerships and collaboration between student affairs and the IT side of the campus are enormous. Just as IT professionals were at the center of the transformation of the learning process through the integration of learning management systems (LMSs), the same potential exists for student affairs professionals and the co-curricular experience for students.

Student affairs will benefit from a closely linked relationship with IT professionals to source and evaluate a range of commercial cloud-based solutions that can help address traditional student affairs services. We need IT expertise in evaluating security issues and possible integration of the student information system (SIS) with these emerging commercial solutions.

Few student affairs departments are using the LMSs already deployed on most campuses. These LMSs present an untapped resource for leadership development training, career exploration, and peer education programs. Many elements of the LMS—such as the creation of profiles, file sharing, discussion boards, and blogs—could have application in the non-credit environment.

In the same way that telemedicine is taking hold in the healthcare industry, student affairs and IT staff should begin exploring how synchronous, virtual connections to staff might be used to augment health services, counseling services, and career counseling. As the student experience becomes less place-based, these options will need to be explored collaboratively between student affairs and IT staff.
Direction: Where does your community see information technology headed?
In this era of data analytics and “big data,” information technology will play an increasingly important role in the assessment of the co-curricular experience for students and in the development of a fuller understanding of what activities and what experiences are linked to degree progress, persistence, and degree completion.

Automated reporting (AR) and data-oriented dashboards are becoming more sophisticated and more central to the business community. These same tools have enormous potential for administrators on campus. Real-time data on the co-curricular experience will allow for timely strategic decision making and the development of evidence-based programs that are more effective in achieving learning outcomes for students.

The wealth of information about student behavior could prove to be incredibly useful for student affairs. For example, students’ participation in campus events or their visits to the career center could be connected to the campus SIS to help develop a picture of the variable impact of co-curricular experiences. Other data from the college/university “one card” campus ID system could significantly expand an understanding of the student experience.

Finally, it is likely that most student affairs departments are struggling with the ability to document and authenticate campus experiences such as peer leadership, paraprofessional jobs, service learning experiences, and a wide range of leadership roles held by students on campus. These valuable learning experiences are not captured by the academic transcript, and yet, in the form of an institutional co-curricular transcript, they could be a valuable asset to students in the job-seeking process.

Message: What key message do you have for the IT community?
Historically, the biggest challenge for student affairs and IT professionals has been time and access. Understandably, the scope of SIS and LMS implementation has created significant time constraints on campus IT staff. However, from a campus strategy standpoint, it is important for IT and student affairs leadership to ensure that the co-curricular experience also benefits from the learning innovations made possible by technology.

Finally, a few emerging issues will need high-level collaboration. For example, the explosion of social media has created new challenges for all of the ways in which students experience the campus. The campus curriculum needs to be expanded to include “real-world” skills such as managing digital identities, dealing with online harassment, and balancing online civility with free expression. In addition, the “digital divide” still exists. As the college/university demographic profile shifts in the next decade, institutions will see increases in low-income, first-generation students. We will need to make sure that all students are prepared to successfully utilize technology in the learning process—both inside and outside of the classroom. WICHE’s publication Knocking at the College Door outlines a clear vision of this future racial and ethnic breakdown.¹

The campus areas of student affairs and information technology share a great deal of common ground. The success of the modern college or university will require creating holistic, seamless learning environments for students. A close alliance between student affairs professionals and IT professionals will go a long way in making this a reality.

Note

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