The Architects of Online Learning: A Strategic Partnership for the Sustainability of Higher Education

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 Robert J. Hansen (rhansen@upcea.edu), Chief Executive Officer of the University Professional & Continuing Education Association (UPCEA).

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

The observation that technology has brought extraordinary change to nearly every precinct of modern society is so commonplace as to be almost cliché. Yet it is not an exaggeration to say that advances in academic technology have enabled our community to fulfill the mission that has defined UPCEA since its inception in 1915: expanding access to higher education for adult and nontraditional students.

For most of the past one hundred years, UPCEA has been known as the association for continuing education. Our roots began with the mission of serving rural America through the extension movement popularized by "the Wisconsin Idea." Our urban institutions were the first to offer night school for working adults. The field grew dramatically and found a home at hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the United States to meet the education needs of the millions of GIs returning from the battlefields of World War II. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, we worked with our partners in instructional technology to pioneer distance learning modalities such as interactive TV (ITV).

These efforts advanced the access mission by helping to bridge either distance (extension and ITV classes) or time (night school, weekend college). Then, with the advent of the Internet, continuing educators and campus IT professionals partnered to defy the barriers of both time and space for millions of adult and nontraditional students. Together, we were the architects of online learning at a great many higher education institutions. IT organizations built and maintained the technology infrastructure, while continuing education units developed the academic programs, the student services, and the marketing expertise that define a mature online learning operation. Now, years after refining those operations, continuing education divisions and schools still dominate the online space. Some have even morphed into online global campuses, taking the access mission

of continuing education to its logical conclusion.

Not surprisingly, the rise of online learning has led to an important evolution in the identity of UPCEA. Increasingly, UPCEA has moved beyond our traditional role in continuing education and has emerged as a leading association for online education, with preeminence in the aspects of management that are so crucial to a successful online enterprise: entrepreneurial leadership; strategy; quality instructional design and delivery; sound financial models; marketing and program development; student services; and effective partnerships.

In 2013, UPCEA established a Center for Online Learning and Strategy. Two of our four major conferences are dedicated to online leadership, strategy, and policy, and nearly half of the concurrent sessions at our annual conference focus on online learning. By any measure, then, the impact of technology on our community has been nothing short of transformative.

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

The transformational impact of online education has profound implications for the sustainability of many traditional higher education institutions. As we all know, nontraditional students became the new majority well before the turn of the past century. More than 75 percent of today's higher education students are nontraditional. As enrollments at many tuition-dependent institutions have declined, colleges and universities have turned to the adult market to stabilize their budgets. This means that having a clear vision for online education—the preferred format for so many working adults—has become a strategic imperative.

And yet, even though many college and university leaders acknowledge the value of serving adult and nontraditional students, it's fair to say that serving these students continues, more often than not, to be marginal to the mission—a noble afterthought to the core enterprise of serving first-time, full-time residential students. In other words, today's colleges and universities are still designed to serve yesterday's students.

But the pressure to change has increased. In addition to the demographic shift that resulted in the misalignment of mission and market, a second fundamental change in higher education is financial in nature. The long, slow decline of public funding for higher education led to tuition hikes that massively exceeded inflation. Then, more recently, the Great Recession and the slow recovery made those high tuition costs unsustainable for many Americans.

In short, we are experiencing a perfect storm: traditional

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institutions that are poorly equipped to serve the majority of learners, skyrocketing tuition costs that result in unstable enrollments, and a global economy that requires far more graduates than colleges and universities currently provide.

Whether or not higher education is the next bubble, it is clear that online education is creating winners and losers. In order to thrive—or, in some cases, to survive—many institutions (especially regional colleges and universities) must use online education as the foremost opportunity to reach new markets.

The key message is that online education is not "just another learning modality." It is also a complicated enterprise that requires entrepreneurial leadership from, and collaboration between, chief online learning officers, continuing educators, and IT professionals.

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

Our students are using smartphones, tablets, and phablets at a rapidly increasing rate. We need IT organizations to lead—providing training, devices, and online class design for mobile platforms. The field is changing so rapidly that IT leaders must anticipate needs in order to keep pace with the demands of our students.

Video is the new "print" in education. Our faculty members and students are demanding that course materials be delivered in video. We need IT organizations to provide bandwidth and streaming servers to ensure that materials are delivered in the formats that work best for today's mobile devices. And we need rapid-response captioning devices that will keep our video materials ADA-compliant.

It is nearly impossible for the academic community as a whole to keep up with trends and developments in the delivery of online learning. We must depend on IT professionals to understand the academic needs, the technological innovations, and the social changes that are shaping the vision of learning in the future.

Finally, IT leaders must be able to communicate—in nontechnical terms—the potential of emerging technologies so that we can respond to the changing environment and make informed decisions about technology.

Direction: Where does your community see information technology headed?

IT leadership is crucial in two major new frontiers: (1) data analytics; and (2) the emergence of adaptive learning, gaming, and simulation.

The effective use of data will reshape the landscape of learning. We will need IT professionals to lead us in the use of descriptive, diagnostic, predictive, and prescriptive analytics. The strategic use of data will result in improved retention and graduation rates, which will in turn benefit students, institutions, and society at large.

Adaptive learning, gaming, and simulation will revolutionize pedagogy. With the rise of outcomes-based or competency-based education and the increasing public policy focus on career-readiness, technological advances will enable students to put into practice the concepts and theories they have been taught. Navigating these sophisticated technological developments requires IT leadership and expertise.

We propose a renewed partnership between those who are innovative with technology (IT professionals) and those who are innovative in creating new academic programs and ways of reaching new audiences (continuing and online educators). This partnership has become a strategic imperative: the technical has become entrepreneurial, and the entrepreneurial has become technical. Our worlds have converged. Together we can help lead our institutions and, in so doing, advance our communities, regions, and national competitiveness. ■