

Gaining the President's Support for IT Initiatives at Small Colleges

Presidential support is imperative—now how are you going to get it?

By **Laurence W. Mazzeno**

In my work at a number of small private colleges, I have had numerous occasions to interact with IT professionals who express frustration at attempts to “get the ear” of their presidents. Part of the problem may lie in the structure of the institutions—most small colleges don’t have IT vice presidents who are members of the president’s executive management team. As a consequence, many IT professionals charged with selecting hardware and software, implementing new systems, or maintaining current technology find that the hard work they have done goes unnoticed or unappreciated. It can be especially frustrating to spend time investigating systems or practices that might improve educational programs or support services only to find that they are not welcomed by the college hierarchy.

While there is no sure-fire way to guarantee access to the president for IT professionals to pitch enhancements or major changes on campus, I’ve found some practices that can help. The remarks below are designed to help those of you in small institutions become more successful in promoting IT improvements.

I encourage you to begin by studying your president’s habits and assessing the president’s “ITQ”—Information Technology Quotient. Does he or she think information technology is important? What evidence leads you to that conclusion? What might lead you to think otherwise? If IT doesn’t seem to be a priority, what are your president’s priorities?

How can you link IT to those priorities?

Presidents tend to fall into one of several categories. A few are totally informed and totally committed, aware of the latest developments in IT and ready to support you. More likely, however, your president will be informed and interested but busy, or uninformed but interested and busy. In these situations, your president needs information and a plan—but note what I have to say later about how to present your case.

Unfortunately, some presidents don’t know much about IT and don’t care to learn. They appear to be “in denial,” hoping that some cheap, quick fix will come along to solve what they believe is too complex an issue for them to handle. They may claim they are too busy raising funds, promoting enrollment growth, supporting faculty teaching, or dealing with alumni and community members who have their own ideas about what the college should be doing. These presidents often leave it to staff to take care of IT matters—until they see the bill. Some of the suggestions I have later may help you get through to a president who falls into that category, but working with such a president will take patience, coaching, and some attitude adjustment.

Once you think you know your president, you need some strategies for overcoming reluctance, or ignorance, or both. Following is my short list of “do’s” and “don’t’s” for IT professionals who want to get their presidents’ attention and support.

First, the “do’s”:

■ *Have clear, measurable goals.*

Having a way to measure progress in improving technology on your campus will help your president sell your program both on campus and in the community. Remember, you will be asking for what many perceive to be a major portion of your college’s budget. You will need to help the president explain how technology is going to help others on campus. Anecdotal information is not going to be sufficient.

■ *Do your president’s homework.*

Most presidents are not aware of the technical specifications of individual hardware or software products that you believe are going to make a positive difference on your campus. Some may not want to know, either, but many will welcome a brief lesson if you can summarize key information about the latest developments in the IT arena. Build your president’s expertise in these matters by doing the research for her or him.

■ *Speak English.*

Too frequently, good ideas are shot down because decision makers cannot understand either the problem or the recommended solutions. You must recognize that not everyone understands the shorthand and the lingo that IT professionals use every day to communicate with each other. Find ways to make those unfamiliar with the vernacular under-

stand what you're proposing and how it will improve campus operations. Frequently, relating IT operations to everyday events can make your point. For example, comparing the idea of bandwidth to a highway that can accommodate more lanes of traffic allows anyone who drives a car to see how "wider" bandwidth can be helpful.

■ *Provide written summaries of information and action plans.*

Presidents are busy people, but most of them read voraciously. Having a two-page summary of an issue or an action plan will allow your president to digest the essentials and leave details to you and other professionals.

■ *Use real-world examples of success stories.*

Showing your president how others have achieved success will build his or her comfort level with what may at first appear to be a risky endeavor; presidents don't like to adopt programs that appear likely to fail. I especially encourage you to use examples from peer institutions. Presidents of small colleges don't really care what the people at MIT or Case Western are doing because they can't afford to replicate those systems.

■ *Enlist allies on campus.*

Unless you work directly for the president, having a vice president or senior staff member speak on your behalf is essential. You should also seek allies among faculty, staff, and students. These allies can help you convince your president that the investments you propose will make a difference to students. Presidents tend to listen to such arguments, especially when the end users support them.

■ *Ask your president to assist you in appropriate ways.*

Presidents are hired to be decision makers, not staff-support specialists. Once you know what you plan to do to improve campus IT, it is perfectly appropriate to ask your president to speak or write on the issue to the campus community and to establish or endorse publicly a campus-wide plan. Don't ask the

president to be directly involved in every meeting of a working group. If you can get the president to set the right tone, a majority on campus will likely follow her or his lead in supporting the changes and improvements you recommend.

■ *Prepare your president to deal with anticipated opposition.*

Some on campus will not embrace your ideas willingly; presidents will take the heat when expensive technology fails to perform to expectations. Give your president the answers needed to address the concerns of those who oppose your programs.

■ *Determine interest among trustees and build your campaign to satisfy these constituencies.*

There is growing awareness among those entrusted with governing colleges and universities that investment in technology is necessary. Many of these individuals, however, are skeptical about spending scarce resources on systems or software that will be obsolete before the last payment has been made. As you do with your president, prepare simple, plain-language information to make your trustees aware of the college's needs and the ways you propose to meet them.

Having made some suggestions on what you might do, let me offer some important "don'ts":

■ *Don't bring problems without suggested solutions.*

The president will rely on your expertise for advice in selecting and implementing IT systems. Don't simply whine about problems; instead, be prepared to suggest some ways the campus community can work collaboratively to use technology to reach agreed-upon results.

■ *Don't confuse means with ends.*

Even today, nearly two decades after IT has become a staple of small-campus operations, too many professionals charged with its management focus too much on the bells and whistles of the latest systems rather than on the uses to which those systems can be put on campus. Having the latest technology is of

no value unless people use it; they won't use it unless they see it as a means to an end, whether that is better instruction or more efficient administrative support.

■ *Don't confuse activity with productivity.*

Simply being busy doesn't mean you—or the IT systems you manage—are contributing to the college's core business: the education of students. You should be prepared to demonstrate how the work you do and the systems you manage are improving education for students or streamlining the support systems necessary to conduct the educational programs at your college.

■ *Don't oversell your approach.*

Presidents tend to be skeptical of zealots. Be realistic in what you propose, and don't spend time demanding that you be given special treatment. If you have a good plan that will make the campus climate better, you will be given priority.

■ *Don't promise more than you can deliver.*

No single IT solution is going to solve every current campus problem, reduce the need for additional staff or faculty, or result in savings so significant that the campus need not charge tuition until the next millennium. If you want to succeed in making IT an integral part of campus operations, offer realistic suggestions that will allow the president to point to measurable results in a moderate time frame. Real success will be achieved gradually; anyone who thinks otherwise is simply out of touch with the realities of the educational enterprise.

Following these suggestions won't guarantee success, but they should help you become known as a professional who does the requisite homework and builds coalitions to invest others on campus in improving students' college experiences. Remember, if your aim is to promote a better learning environment through technology, you can go far if you let others, including your president, help you reach that goal. *e*

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