Professional Development for Aspiring CIOs

Constant change in higher education means that those aspiring to the CIO role must explore new avenues of flexibility and involvement to prepare for the future

By **William F. Hogue** and **David W. Dodd**

Leading a campus through rapid IT change is a challenge, particularly from the perspectives of planning and leadership. At the same time, many observers would concede that today's highly competitive, resource-constrained, global environment offers the greatest opportunities for fundamental change in higher education since the emergence of Clark Kerr's concept of the "multiversity" in 1963.[1] Diminishing financial support, greater user expectations and functional requirements, increased public and constituent accountability, economic globalization, deepening concerns over privacy and security, digital content and intellectual property conflicts, changing political climates, and escalating competition from both traditional and nontraditional education "franchisees" can be viewed as threats and pressures, to be sure. But they may also be viewed as opportunities—both for institutions of higher education and for the chief information officers (CIOs) who serve those institutions.

As Dolence and Norris wrote in their seminal work *Transforming Higher Education: A Vision for Learning in the 21st Century,*[2] we must transform higher education to meet the needs of the information age, and information technology must be an agent of that transformation. At best, we are now only in the infancy of that transformation. As with most things, this transformation does not represent an event, but rather a continuous process of strategic change that will be catalyzed by leadership. The effective CIOs of today and the aspiring CIOs of tomorrow understand this responsibility and the central role that leaders with vision and a "change agent" mentality will have in its realization.

As Hawkins,[3] Bruce and McDonald,[4] and others have noted, the CIO position has changed dramatically over the past two decades, expanding in scope of responsibilities as well as qualifications for the position. There are two critical facets of the CIO position today. First, the CIO must fundamentally transform IT divisions into strategic organizations capable of meeting current needs and future positioning requirements, and that in turn serve as models for the campus. This is largely consistent with excellent execution within the traditional CIO model. Equally significant is the fact that successful performance in the CIO role today and in the future would essentially make this ability a given. In other words, this transformation of IT is the minimum achievement for a CIO's performance to be considered acceptable.

The second, and probably more important, responsibility of today's CIO is at a level far beyond keeping the IT house in order. The CIO must participate in and influence change in

the institution's structure, processes, and culture, transcending boundaries in instruction, scholarship, service, business processes, and administration. Full partnership in decisions concerning academic programs, course delivery, research, strategic initiatives, and institutional administration is essential. Successful performance at this level requires a very well-developed set of skills and experience. This is the essence of leadership in the CIO position today, and the fundamental difference between a leader and an administrator.

How should one aspiring to these leadership roles prepare for the opportunity? Because of the rapidly evolving nature of higher education in general, and campus IT and the role of the CIO in particular, professional development for this position may involve a lot of unconventional thinking and planning. Individuals preparing for success in a position in a higher education environment several years hence should consider this premise carefully. Flexibility, adaptability, vision, innovation, and creativity will play very important roles in helping the next generation of leaders think beyond current paradigms and move toward fundamental transformation. Experience will in many cases become only a foundation, or a starting point.

The most valuable professional development opportunities are varied and diverse. They may involve participation in formal professional development programs such as the Frye Leadership Institute (http://www.frye.org/), where exposure to visionary leaders and working with gifted colleagues is a vital part of the experience. But aspiring leaders should also look more broadly for insights, ideas, and answers. What can we learn about leadership and career development from the private sector, the military, not-for-profits, and other public sector entities? What opportunities are there for exposure to other views and approaches to innovation and problem solving? Continued exposure to new ideas and gifted thinkers and leaders may spark an entirely new set of insights about how to approach the problems of higher education—and pos-

sibly provide a new set of interests for where to take your career next.

Engagement with other leaders at your institution is crucial. To develop a clear understanding of the issues faced by the provost, CFO, admissions officers, research faculty, or student life staff, you have to spend time with them. Volunteer for a campus committee appointment in one of these areas. Inviting someone to lunch or scheduling a regular get-together should be an important part of your activities and something you make time for. If you don't have connections with these individuals, request an introduction from a colleague. Attend a regional or national conference that is not about IT; being the only IT professional among a large group of people who have a focus on academics, student support, fund-raising, or university business issues can be an eye-opening experience.

Building your professional network is also a critical part of preparing for leadership roles. Cultivate the new relationships you developed over lunch or during a reception you attended at a conference. Invite colleagues from your region to campus for a morning of idea exchange around a hot topic. Introduce yourself to a speaker you hear whose work is relevant to one of your projects. Stay in touch with the cohort of people who attended your last leadership development event. Don't be shy. Ultimately, it is your personal connections that will pay off—from providing counsel or advice on a difficult issue to alerting you to an upcoming job opening or an opportunity for participation in a regional or national event.

The future of higher education will be in the hands of visionary leaders capable of driving fundamental transformation. As the late management guru Peter Drucker noted more than once, however, imagination, creativity, and great ideas by themselves do not equate to effectiveness and accomplishment.[5] Transformation of vision into reality is demanding and rewarding, but it's not magic. It requires a commitment to understanding diverse perspectives, building relationships, and systematic planning and execution.

That's the true value of professional development: improving your ability to understand broad issues, build partnerships, plan, and execute. CIOs deserve a seat at the table where decisions are made, but only if they earn it—and continually invest time and effort to keep it. Step back and think about the present and the future. Invest the time to assess your professional situation, reflect on your goals and align them with those of your institution, and plot new directions and strategies for professional development as necessary. Invest regularly, and you'll be welcomed to the table. Professional development is one of the best investments of all. *e*

Endnotes

1. C. Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963). Kerr was chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley (1952–58) and president of the University of California (1958–67). He noted that "The university started as a single community—a community of masters and scholars… with a single animating principle." The university has since evolved into a "series of communities and activities held together by a common name, a common governing board, and related purposes… and is neither entirely of the world nor entirely apart from it."

2. M. G. Dolence and D. M. Norris, *Transforming Higher Education: A Vision for Learning in the 21st Century* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Society for College and University Planning, 1995).

3. B. L. Hawkins, 2004. "A Framework for the CIO Position," *EDUCAUSE Review*, Vol. 39, No. 6, November/December 2004, pp. 94–103, <http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ERM0465>.

4. J. D. Bruce and B. McDonald, "Perspectives on IT Leadership," in *Cultivating Careers: Professional Development for Campus IT*, Cynthia Golden, ed. (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE, 2006), <http://www.educause.edu/cultivatingcareers/>.

5. P. F. Drucker, *The Essential Drucker* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

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