New to Higher Education? A CIO Perspective

What is it like to be a CIO at a college or university? That was the topic of discussion for a breakfast meeting. I had signed up for this discussion as a favor to a colleague. Her husband had recently accepted a leadership IT position at a prominent college after a number of years in manufacturing and health care IT positions. Understandably, he wanted to find out the truths and realities of information technology in higher education before starting his new job. Ten years ago, I made that same leap. My move was from working for two decades in pharmaceutical information technology to serving as CIO at Kalamazoo College, a selective liberal arts college in the Midwest.

What I have discovered over the past decade is that information technology is just as integral to the success of a college or university as it is to a hospital or pharmaceutical maker. Surprise!

In health care, the most recent IT field for my colleague’s husband, continuity of operations can mean life or death, and unified electronic medical records, government regulations, and reform initiatives have had significant implications for the use of information technology. Both health care and pharmaceuticals are highly regulated, and this has large effects on the way that data is secured, transmitted, and made available.

The support of technology in higher education has certainly evolved too. Students—and faculty—now bring a wide variety of consumer devices to campus and expect them all to work seamlessly, connect wirelessly, and interact effectively with numerous applications and data sources. Technology plays an ever-increasing role in the management and availability of student records, in the recruitment of prospective students, and in the communication with alumni and donor relations. In a residential college, the demand for Internet bandwidth is ever-growing for scholarly and entertainment purposes. Academic freedom and the need for free exchange of ideas and communications make content filtering less feasible in higher education than in other workplace environments.

Technology is disrupting higher education as it has so many industries in recent times. Even, or perhaps especially, at a residential liberal arts college—a niche valued for its intimate learning environments—we are grappling with the role of technology in the support of teaching and learning. Students at liberal arts campuses specifically chose smaller classes and strong relationships with professors, but they are also digital natives who use and expect online resources and interactions as a component of their learning. Faculty are wrestling with ways to deepen and broaden student learning and educational outcomes. Some faculty have “flipped” class instruction, assigning information gathering and lecture watching to hours outside of class so that face-to-face time can be spent in richer group discussions or problem solving. Some faculty make extensive use of technology in the classroom to enhance learning, whereas others have applied, or are considering applying, the ideas of José Antonio Bowen’s 2012 book Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning in their classrooms.

At Kalamazoo College, we are exploring and forming ventures with other schools to enrich the offerings available to our students, including through technology. Kalamazoo is a member of the Great Lakes Colleges Association (http://glca.org/), a group of thirteen liberal arts institutions in the Midwest. In turn, the GLCA manages the Global Liberal Arts Alliance (http://liberalartsalliance.org), which includes twenty-seven liberal arts colleges and universities located in fifteen countries. The purpose of this alliance is to strengthen education in the tradition of the liberal arts through the exchange of experience and the development of mutually beneficial programs. This exchange includes a Global Course Connections program that pairs a U.S. campus with a non-U.S. campus through technology to enrich courses with an international perspective.

The way that we share ideas and information among “competitors” in higher education is unique—and very refreshing compared with sharing in other industries. The resources and relationships forged through EDUCAUSE are invaluable to someone who is new to higher education—and even to those who are seasoned in the field. In my realm, the Consortium of Liberal Arts Colleges (http://www.liberalarts.org)—comprising seventy of the top liberal arts colleges in the United States—has been vital in assessing and benchmarking how we approach common issues, in building relationships with people in similar roles, and in developing robust opportunities for communities of practice to enrich one another through collaboration. We gather for an annual conference, but we also connect with each other throughout the year to discuss approaches to common problems, ask advice from each other, and find partners with whom to collaborate. The depth and richness of these interactions is not common outside of higher education.
Another key to a leader’s success in higher education is understanding and, if necessary, creating the appropriate governance structures for one’s institution. In other industries, I have experienced very hierarchical and organizational governance. Technological and business standards are set at the top, and everyone is expected to follow in line. Business priorities are often measured by quarterly results.

In higher education, governance is often shared between faculty and administration; direction and even technological standards are generally charted through negotiation and persuasion rather than edict. There are a wide number of successful and unsuccessful IT governance models, and what works at one higher education institution might not work at another. Some require very formal, well-documented governance models, whereas others can operate successfully more informally. Whatever model is used, continual communication is important. A college or university IT department serves many different and sometimes conflicting constituents: administrators, faculty, support staff, students, and others. All constituents should understand how decisions are made and how these decisions contribute to setting and achieving priorities. A governance structure should be not only consistent but also accountable to each of the constituencies. The governance and prioritization of projects should be constructed in such a way that the information services organization aligns with, and supports, the institution’s priorities.

With that alignment, an IT leader can have significant influence in an institution’s overall leadership effort, especially at a smaller school. An IT leader has skills and experiences that can complement the leadership team. Leaders in information service organizations are often well experienced in effective project management and can help lead even when projects are not primarily technology-oriented. Plus, “technology projects” often disrupt existing business processes, and users can benefit from the IT organization’s guidance in managing those changes. Information service organizations that have created effective cultures for user support can assist, and learn from, other campus offices in that work.

As I concluded to my colleague’s husband, IT leaders in higher education—like IT leaders in manufacturing, health care, pharmaceuticals, and other industries—must build effective relationships across the institution, must understand institutional priorities and initiatives, and must be prepared to lead their organizations and institutions through change. That’s a universal reality.

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