Embracing Differentiation and Reclaiming Audacity: An Interview with James Hilton

EDUCAUSE Review: We often hear that higher education is in a state of disruption. What do you see coming in the next five years?

James Hilton: Five years is a hard timeline. In five years, life is going to look very similar to what it looks like today. The more interesting question is, what will the trajectory over the next five years look like?

We’re going to see growing pressure on higher education to offer increasingly differentiated paths to education. Higher education has been in a growth economy for most of its modern life—for the last couple of centuries at least. And when you’re in a growth economy, it’s OK to have a relatively undifferentiated message.

One of the things happening now, however, is that the demographic bubble supporting growth—and a disproportionate investment—in higher education has moved on to health care and to end-of-life issues. That bubble is not likely to come back to higher education.

Inside higher education, we have a very differentiated view. We understand the differences between research-intensive universities, community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and institutes. We understand where various departments are strong and where they’re weak. We see higher education through a complicated lens.

But to the world, we present a relatively undifferentiated picture. I always tell people: “If you don’t believe me, go look at the mission statements of twenty higher education institutions. I guarantee you they’re all going to be very much alike.”

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James Hilton is the recipient of the 2015 EDUCAUSE Leadership Award, the association’s highest recognition honoring exemplary leaders whose work has had significant positive impact on advancing the theory and practice of information technology in higher education. The award is sponsored by Moran Technology Consulting, an EDUCAUSE Silver Partner. Hilton received the award for his visionary leadership in large-scale digital preservation initiatives, for being a leading voice in the national dialogue about the intersections of technology, scholarly information, and research; and for bringing a persuasive and unswerving spirit of collaboration and innovation to the challenges facing higher education.

Hilton is University Librarian and Dean of Libraries and Vice Provost for Digital Education and Innovation at the University of Michigan. He began his career as a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan, where he also served as special assistant to the provost for media rights, associate provost for academic information and instructional technology affairs, and interim university librarian. From 2006 to 2013, he was vice president and CIO at the University of Virginia.

Hilton was a co-founder of the Sakai Project, a collaborative effort to create open software that advances teaching, learning, and research; he provided crucial early support to the multi-institutional Internet2 NET+ and DuraSpace initiatives; and he led the creation of the Digital Preservation Network (DPN) to protect the scholarly record and born-digital scholarship for future generations. Recently Hilton helped spearhead the launch of the Unizin Consortium, empowering participating institutions to exert greater control over the infrastructure, content, and data of the expanding digital learning landscape.
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institutions. Leave out the religious institutions. Leave out the art institutes. Look at the mission statements of all the others. Print them off in plain text. Cut out the name of the institution. Throw the mission statements in a hat, and see if you can do better than random chance at matching them.”

We all talk about the importance of the student experience. We all talk about the importance of faculty contact. We all talk about the importance of research. We all talk about the importance of the life co-curricular. Yes, there are shades of differences. But together, all of us in higher education present an undifferentiated picture. In reality, the kind of education offered at a small liberal arts school is different—not better, not worse—from the kind of education offered at a research-intensive university. They should be different. These are different environments.

I think there is going to be intense pressure on higher education institutions to “find their North Star” and differentiate on that. Research universities need to be places where students go because they want to work on teams. At a differentiated research university, the line between graduate education and undergraduate education is going to blur. That educational experience is very different from the experience that students should be getting at liberal arts schools. Again, neither is better or worse—they’re just different. Each has unique capacities. The pressure is going to be for those of us in higher education to articulate those distinctions.

In addition, the tensions around cost are not going to go away in the next five years. The demand for more evidence-based demonstration that the methods of teaching and learning are working will continue to intensify.

We have to find ways to reclaim the conversation around the goals and purposes of higher education, because that conversation has become incredibly narrow. For understandable reasons, it has become focused on how costs have shifted. And it has become limited to the idea that the only reason someone attends college is to get a job. Colleges and universities were not founded to provide a pathway to employment. They turned out to be really good at offering this path, but that is not why they were founded.

The multivariant pressure on higher education going forward—over the next five years and beyond—is going to be to get better at telling a story that embraces differentiation.

EDUCAUSE Review: Do you feel a corporate influence has changed the conversation around the purpose of higher education?

Hilton: That’s certainly what the for-profits’ marketing has been about. Another interesting thing to think about is the way the costs in higher education are perceived. As a country, the United States has shifted more of the burden of the cost of higher education onto the students and their guardians, and that—completely understandably, with or without corporate influence—leads to a focus on, “Is there an economic benefit?”

One of the things that I find stunning about how much the higher education landscape has changed is that ten years ago, nobody would have questioned whether or not money spent for an undergraduate degree was a good financial investment. Today, despite the fact that the data continues to show that a degree is a very good investment—a hugely good investment—the default assumption is that the relationship is suspect.

Another thing those of us in higher education must do is find ways to tell stories that are backed by data. These stories need to be just as compelling as the anecdotes that are told when people criticize higher education.

EDUCAUSE Review: For much of your professional career, you have championed national technology initiatives that cross boundaries and encourage collaboration between and among institutions—projects such as Sakai, the Digital Preservation Network (DPN), and Unizin. What have you learned about multi-institutional collaboration? What are the critical elements for success?

Hilton: I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about these questions. One important lesson I’ve learned about multiinstitutional collaborations involves alignment. It’s critical from the beginning to not be in a rush. A collaboration needs to have a clearly aligned purpose behind it.

Part of the issue here, I think, is that people confuse the word collaboration with the word cooperation. In common language, we use those terms almost interchangeably, but they’re very different concepts. It makes perfect sense for me to say to you: “You know what? Let’s take a lifetime pledge to cooperate.” Because cooperation can boil down to something as simple as: “I won’t mess with you. You won’t mess with me. We’re good to go. We’re cooperative.” People often think of cooperation as: “Let’s be nice. Let’s be tolerant of each other.”

But collaboration, by contrast, is about investing resources, time, energy, passion, and people into a shared purpose. Collaborations last only as long as that shared purpose and the reasons for collaborating align. The minute the purpose and reasons start to go away, the alignment changes. That’s not a good thing or a bad thing. That’s just the way it is.

Understanding this at the beginning of a project means taking the time to
come to some clarity about why you're collaborating. Both DPN and Unizin spent 18 to 24 months conducting conversations with a variety of people before the public vetting even began. We spent a lot of time, including many facetoface meetings, determining whether or not there was deep-Enough institutional alignment to sustain the collaboration.

Collaborations are hard. They require a lot of energy. They bring huge benefits, but no one should enter into a collaboration lightly. You can enter into cooperation lightly, because it's always good to be cooperative, but you need to be much more intentional about collaborations.

A second lesson I've learned about multinstitutional collaborations involves how challenging it is to design collaborations and systems that are adaptive, that respond to the fact that the world is fundamentally a complex system. Whatever you plan, there's going to be a change somewhere down the line, and you're going to have to respond to that change. And this goes back to the first lesson: you need to be very clear, in the beginning, about alignment of purpose. Because whatever specific plan you lay out at the start of a multiyear collaboration is almost certainly going to look different at the end of that time period. What you hope will not change is the alignment around purpose and intention.

EDUCAUSE Review: How can leaders of IT organizations develop partnerships and collaborations across their own campuses? What if others don't want to collaborate?

Hilton: When I was the CIO at the University of Virginia, people would ask me how I described my job. I answered that basically, it's like setting a table. As CIO, I felt that a core part of my mission was to go out and invite people to the table—to the wonderful opportunities offered by technology. I couldn't make them like their dinner-mates or even the food, but I could constantly offer them the opportunity.

Information technology can enable great things to happen, and I like to focus on this enabling aspect. Clearly in some areas, such as network security, leaders of the IT organization need to be territorial and may have to say: “Security requires that we have central control over this." But most places in the higher education institution don't require this control.

One of the reasons I'm back at the University of Michigan is because I embrace this decentralized world in which what you're trying to do is enable experimentation out on the edges. Doing so requires approaching everything as a commitment to collaboration. To the extent that I can (again, some areas require control), I spend my time trying to get people to be attracted to information technology, not forced to it.

One other bit of advice for IT leaders: know your costs. Be aware of the resources of your IT organization, and understand what they cost, and be capable of translating those costs in discussions with other people who aren't going to understand the costs. When Teresa Sullivan became president at the University of Virginia in 2010, she came in, met with her leadership team, and said: “Know and understand your resources."

Increasingly, for better or worse, information technology is seen both as a strategic asset—that's the “for better” part—and as a cost center. As an IT leader, you have to understand your costs in addition to understanding the strategic capabilities that technology brings.

EDUCAUSE Review: You talk about the future being dependent on “the audacity of our shared vision.” How do we form and sustain this vision in light of budget cuts and additional regulations?

Hilton: I'm working on figuring this out. As a result of Tony Schwartz's recent New York Times article “The Bad Behavior of Visionary Leaders,” I've been reading the biographies of Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, and Jeff Bezos. The Musk biography in particular resonated for me. Musk has three businesses right now: Tesla Motors, which designs and manufactures electric automobiles; SolarCity, a solar power energy company; and SpaceX, involved in space travel and commerce.

If you were going to pick three industries that are heavily regulated and are challenged by their success in the 20th century, those would be the three. How can someone enter any of these industries and do anything new, given their regulations? But Musk is transforming each of those industries. He's building electric cars in Silicon Valley and rocket ships in L.A. County, and he made money in solar when everybody else was losing money in that industry.

What I find striking is that Musk is not actually driven by money—at least if I can trust the biography. He's driven by this really audacious, some would say crazy, vision. He's driven by the belief that the human race needs an exit strategy from the planet, and he wants to get us to Mars. He is in the transportation, energy, and space industries because he's trying to figure out what technologies we need to get us to Mars, and that audacious vision has allowed him not to be paralyzed by regulations.

Higher education is perhaps even more regulated than transportation. Yet we have the opportunity right now in higher education to build the world's largest living learning laboratories, as increasingly the interaction between content and activity is mediated by technologies and the Internet. We have the
opportunity to start looking in evidence-based ways, at what works and what doesn’t work. We have the opportunity to begin personalizing education at scale. Learning analytics may not live up to its hype, but we have an amazing possibility—unless we get trapped at the very beginning by controversy and concerns over privacy and FERPA. I worry that since we are heavily regulated, we will spend a lot of time focused on barriers. In some ways, that’s an outgrowth of the fact that in the academic environment, the coin of the realm is critical analysis. We’re really good at finding out why things won’t work.

I’m struck by the fact that when the world has changed, often that change occurred because somebody had a vision that was difficult to defend or that was easily attacked. I have some friends who use the example of the Declaration of Independence as an incredibly audacious vision. A ragtag set of colonies not even organized decided to declare their independence from Great Britain, the 18th-century world superpower. The colony leaders simply said: “We’re going to be independent.” If they had submitted that through a university committee process, it never would have happened.

I’m not trying to displace critical analysis. But I am trying to figure out how we can reclaim audacity. In the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, public education was the pathway out of poverty. Education—basic research—produced transformative changes and developments like the Internet. That was an audacious vision.

What is that vision now, in the 21st century? For me, it’s the notion that education can be tailored and customized for every single individual. There is not one single education that’s right for all people in the world. That audacious vision is very distinct from the one-size-fits-all, undifferentiated, 20th-century model of higher education.

**EDUCAUSE Review: **Do you think we can have mavericks like Elon Musk in today’s higher education environment? Because they would need to bypass committees to have that audacity, right?

**Hilton:** Yes, we clearly have mavericks. Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University, is one. So is John Sexton, president of New York University, and Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland Baltimore Campus. In each case, these leaders have intentionally sought to transform their institutions, to make their universities into something very different. For Michael Crow, it has been about taking on the twin challenges of rapid enrollment growth and service to the state while simultaneously escalating the research profile of the university. For John Sexton, it has been about morphing a university focused on and in New York City into a global center. And for Freeman Hrabowski, it has been about transforming a commuter campus into one of the most innovative research institutions in the country. I think all three have been controversial at various times, but there’s not much question of whether they have been leading.

One of the challenges we face is that higher education values management expertise, and it values leadership, but we confuse those two things all the time. What do I mean by that? There is tremendous short-term pressure to make the trains run better and more efficiently. Boards and constituents want to know how the institution is doing relative to its peers. Is it getting better or losing ground? Are admissions up? What about rankings? These are perfectly reasonable, even laudable questions to ask, but they have the unintended consequence of forcing a fairly narrow focus. That type of focus is great if you are in a period of refining and improving something, but the danger, at least to my eye, is that you miss the transformative opportunities. The danger is that we will concentrate exclusively on finding ways to refine the current system and we will lose the opportunity to reimagine higher education for this century, this economy, and this technology. We will miss the opportunity to redefine education for a world in which access to information, networks, and computation is ubiquitous. We will miss our chance to aim for Mars.

**EDUCAUSE Review:** Among your professional accomplishments, what makes you most proud?

**Hilton:** I guess it is launching multi-institutional collaborations that strive for achievements that are big and that matter. I love participating in teams. That’s how I like to run my own shops. I very much value and want to build a team around me. I look at multi-institutional collaboration as the opportunity to go out and pull a team together toward something that matters.

DPN, for example, is striving to ensure that the complete scholarly record is preserved for future generations. How can we put in place a system so that even in the face of institutional failure or catastrophic loss, the data survives? Unizin is striving to ensure that the tools and services of digital education are in the control of colleges and universities. How can we make sure that the learning ecosystem—the relationship between content, applications, and data—stays loosely coupled and under the influence of the academy?

Those are broad goals, and we’ve been able to get a variety of institutions to line up and say: “We want to work on that problem together.” Whatever role I’ve played in helping to form those collaborations is probably what makes me most proud. Even if they ultimately fail, I’ll be proud of what we attempted and what we achieved.

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**EDUCAUSE Review:** What are your goals and recommendations for the role of information technology in supporting higher education over the next ten to twenty years?

**Hilton:** First we need to embrace, fully, the duality of the fact that information technology is both a service/infrastructure and a strategic asset. Yes, IT commoditizes, standardizes, and becomes infrastructure. And yes, IT is an innovation platform. The two are not competing with each other. They’re complementary roles.

In 2004 Nicholas Carr published the book *Does IT Matter?* Hell yes, it matters. Information technology matters both as infrastructure and as strategic asset. We need to look at information technology both ways.

Second, we need to take advantage of the enabling role of information technology. Colleges and universities are designed to foster innovation, to create an environment in which people share ideas and come up with new tools and services. The role that communication technologies, computation, and networks play in enabling this innovation can be used to further our own goals and mission. We can’t get hung up on whether or not the IT organization is getting due credit.

Finally, and this may be the hardest in many ways, we need to continue to point to the joy that this kind of enabling brings and not be driven by fear. I struggled with this when I was CIO at the University of Virginia because I knew that if I wanted to build up my territory and my budget, the best thing I could do was to preach about security threats. Of course security is often job number-one for the IT leader, especially in a central IT organization. I think that being successful over the next twenty years, either for an organization or for an IT leader, will require being able to sit with these incompatibilities and to live in both places for a while.

My hope is that by accepting this ambiguity, we can focus on the part of information technology that excites me the most—the part that enables global discoveries in science and scholarship and the part that fosters the audacious vision of a differentiated, personalized, transformative education in the 21st century.

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**Note**


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