The “Long Tenure” Approach

Polley McClure

Twenty years ago I first visited the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) as an outside consultant. Between then and now, I have visited the campus several times as part of peer consulting groups, and so I have had an opportunity to see the evolution of IT services there—almost as a time-lapse movie. If even half of the other institutions I’ve worked with could post the progress I’ve seen at this one, there would be many more happy and well-served presidents, faculty, students, and administrators.

After my most recent visit to UNCG, I reflected on this good story, thinking about how this success came about and why the situation at many other institutions didn’t work out this well. I should say, up-front, that my definition of a “good story” is not about technology per se (although the technology in this case is quite progressive) but, rather, is about the fit of technology to the purposes of the institution and about a respectful and comfortable position of the IT organization within the institution. I’ve come to think that there are two major themes to this story. Below and in an extended article, Jim Clotfelter describes one theme: his insightful and sensitive steering of the ship. Almost all of the points he makes would be met with positive head nods from other CIOs. The remarkable thing is that he was able to accomplish all of his goals. And that brings me to the second theme: longevity.

Wayne A. Brown, founder of the Center for Higher Education Chief Information Officer Studies (CHECS), surveyed CIOs in higher education in 2016. Of the 340 respondents, the average tenure in their role at their current institution was six years and eight months. Only 6 had been in their role at their current institution for twenty-six years or longer. In contrast, 61 had been in their current role for one year or less.1 Up until recently, I thought this turnover was a result of the rapid changes needed in our business and the fact that any given CIO will not usually have the skills necessary to lead all of the changes that must happen. I still think that good leaders often succeed by making themselves obsolete, but I also now see the institutional downside of continuous transition.

CIOs may get impatient when new technology implementations stretch out by months, but they need to appreciate that human relationships and cultures tend to change much more slowly than the technology evolves. We can all agree that we want IT staff to communicate better and to see their role as positive enablers of other people’s goals rather than as experts who know more than everyone else. But not many of us can honestly claim to have seen that transformation happen. I think part of the reason is that with a relatively short tenure at any given institution, CIOs don’t have enough time to build up the trust of their staff and others in the institution—a trust that is essential to sustaining deep cultural change.

I am not advocating the “long tenure” approach for every institution or every CIO. Many CIOs do not have the right balance of skills or the patience required to make that work. But when they do, they can produce deep and satisfying progress.

Jim Clotfelter

For more than twenty-five years, before my retirement at the end of July 2016, I was vice chancellor for an IT department at a mid-sized university in the University of North Carolina system. I’ve seen the tumultuous IT changes everyone else has seen over the past quarter-century, but I’ve seen them from the vantage point of the person who is responsible for navigating those changes at a single institution.

When I first became vice chancellor in January 1991, information technology was not large enough to justify its own division. My department included what I used to say was “everything that doesn’t fit somewhere else.” This included the central IT organization (academic and administrative computing had already been combined), but there were only thirty staff, the largest number being programmers in support of administrative systems. The department also included university planning, institutional research, space management, legislative relations, and community partnerships. As IT needs grew, these other responsibilities dropped away, until we became purely Information Technology Services.

When I started, many people on campus didn’t know what an email address was. Our clients were the fifty or so faculty who regularly reserved the computing labs or who used computing in their research, along with the administrators who handled the separate student, finance, and HR systems. Our IT resources were modest, but we had the expectations for what information technology could do for the campus. All of that changed—seemingly over one weekend in the mid-1990s when all of our 850 or so faculty and most of our students discovered the Internet.

Suddenly, everyone wanted more, and none of our new clients wanted to read manuals or look up instructions. As
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at many other colleges and universities, our budget and staff grew much more slowly than did campus expectations. The university had to find ways to support a department that—unlike its siblings (academic, business, student)—was relatively new, with new kinds of financial obligations requiring new financial models. Campus leaders with experience in the traditional areas of the university had to cope with new language, new opportunities, and new risks. In no area other than finance, perhaps, are campus leaders required to trust more, and this trust had to be re-earned with each change of senior university officials.

To repeatedly re-earn this trust, leaders of the central IT organization must address numerous elements in numerous areas, including people, time horizons, vision, political realities, governance, money, critical issues, partnerships, and benchmarking (all discussed in “Culture Change and IT Leadership”). But first, if you are the central IT leader, you must start with yourself. Any leader, I believe, must meet three “P” standards: for people, problems, and perspective. You don’t need to be an extrovert, but you need to find people interesting. You must treat everyone with respect, including the people with whom you disagree and the staff you’re firing. You also have to enjoy solving problems—there will be more of them than you can imagine. Few things are as professionally satisfying as solving apparently intractable problems. Finally, you have to have perspective. That means not getting overwrought about problems or risks. It means being confident you can get through anything and conveying that confidence to others.

In addition, the central IT leader must learn how to explain technology to non-IT people. Many non-IT people feel awkward dealing with IT issues. If these conversations aren’t handled properly, other senior officials can feel they have been talked down to, have been bulldozed into approving something, or have been simply confused further. For twenty-five years, I’ve tried to use English instead of tech-talk, but I’ve never succeeded in making my explanations short enough. I’ve always tried to give a chancellor or a provost choices, even if some of the choices are not the ones that I think are most wise. But I always gave them choices and identified the costs and risks of each option. I’ve tried never to tell a chancellor or a provost “you must do X.” Even when we entered new areas, with new technologies, I tried to play down the newness and the change. I conveyed the message that we were trying to do what we had tried to do before, but this time in a different way and with these outcomes. As quickly as possible, I turned initiatives into routines. Routines can produce calm. Whatever today’s problems are, we can solve them; whatever tomorrow’s opportunities are, we can help the institution get there.

Not many CIOs will be at the same university for twenty-five years. But if you are a CIO for longer than five to six years, and if you possess the three “P” standards, you will have the opportunity to reshape the campus culture that grows up around information technology. Some goals will take longer to accomplish than you expected, but you’ll be able to keep pushing until you reach them.

Note

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