Each summer for the past fifteen years, I’ve been an instructor at the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents. I facilitate a session for new and aspiring presidents on building effective leadership teams and enabling transformative change. Over the past two decades, I’ve also worked with dozens of new presidents at public and private institutions as they’ve transitioned to their roles and responded to a range of challenges. Several insights emerging from these interactions have proven to be valuable for college/university presidents and also for new leaders in other settings. UMBC CIO Jack Suess and I agree that these insights may have particular value for campus IT leaders, who confront the inevitable challenges that arise in an area characterized by increasing complexity and rapid change.

My first piece of advice is to learn and understand the campus culture by meeting and getting to know a variety of campus leaders. In his book The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement, David Brooks postulates that culture has everything to do with our habits, beliefs, practices, and relationships—afflicting even the kinds of tensions that impact our lives and relationships. In higher education, we define our role on campus both in terms of how we see ourselves as individuals and in terms of where we want the institution to go. To lead effectively, one must understand the diverse viewpoints held by members of different groups, including students, faculty, staff, and alumni. I encourage new leaders to seek out individuals from each of these groups for intimate one-on-one discussions. I recommend that in these discussions, leaders ask stakeholders to share their visions of the future and also to identify others they consider to be leaders on campus.

Many institutions are focused on student success, and we know that academic departments—and faculty in particular—are the key agents for strengthening an institution’s approach to improving student success. As a result, an institution’s faculty culture, which is built on critical inquiry and healthy skepticism, must be understood in order to begin changing deeply held beliefs, attitudes, and priorities. Strong leadership—through shared governance—can create the vision, set the tone, emphasize critical values, and build trust among diverse groups. Strong management can ensure that appropriate functions are executed properly and are fully assessed.

My second piece of advice is that it is important to build strong teams. Leaders work with others to set the agenda. Effective leadership teams build trust among the team members and with the campus as they manage day-to-day operations and implement new initiatives. New leaders must balance the advantages of keeping the current team in place in order to leverage existing relationships and move quickly versus the possible benefits of hiring externally and bringing in fresh perspectives.

No matter the approach taken, vacancies in the leadership team will occur over time. When I have critical vacancies, I first look closely at campus leaders to fill those roles. I look for leaders who understand the university’s institutional culture, share the values of the institution, and have effective relationships with others. I have selected two provosts and a dean who were all former leaders of our faculty senate. These leaders understood our culture, had demonstrated sound judgment in difficult situations, and had built strong relationships with others on campus. I knew they would offer the President’s Council and me valuable counsel and would make their decisions in the university’s best interest.

In building a team, new leaders need to take the time to make certain that members can work well together. Obviously, conflicts or a lack of trust among members of this group can undermine their ability to execute strategic priorities. This does not mean that the team should always be in agreement on what or how something should be done; however, once everyone has been given the chance to raise concerns and a decision has been made, the team must agree to fully support the decision. I’m often asked how to develop a shared vision among these leaders. First, it is important to make certain that when making a decision, we are focused on how we can advance our mission, especially when it comes to the core values of helping students succeed. Second, I encourage members of the leadership team to meet regularly with each other in both private and group meetings. They need the opportunity to understand how each person approaches a problem. Finally, when I meet with them in one-on-one sessions, I encourage them to collaborate with others on campus on specific ideas and initiatives.

I often encourage leaders to inspire those around them by focusing on personal stories that connect to the mission of the university. We know that education has the power to change lives, and many of us have seen that power firsthand. For my
By FREEMAN A. HRABOWSKI III, with JACK SUESS

Institutions, telling meaningful personal stories inspires all of us to do more and gives the broader leadership team a sense of purpose.

In summary, these three actions form the basis for leading: (1) learning, through discussion, the core values and principles of the institution; (2) building a strong leadership team that represents all constituent groups and that can work cohesively to execute plans; and (3) using personal stories to connect your efforts to the core values of the institution. But how do these lessons apply more specifically to IT leaders?

As the president of a research university, I understand that technology plays an important role in the success of any major campus initiative. For the institution to be successful, the IT leaders need to be viewed as collaborators and thought partners on campus. IT leaders must understand the institutional culture and be willing to build relationships with faculty and staff across the campus. For faculty and staff to use technology to its fullest potential, they must believe that the technology leaders understand and share the core values of the institution. Technology leaders must work closely with other members of the leadership team to learn how they have successfully engaged campus stakeholders and how they structure their advisory committees to support making decisions and setting priorities. To the extent that IT leaders understand a campus’s research initiatives and its interest in the teaching and learning process, they are able to engage faculty and others in the substantive work of the campus. The best IT leaders, in fact, see themselves as educators. They are engaged with others in thinking about effective teaching and learning, innovative research, and the influential role played by robust discussions about the integration of technology in the implementation of new initiatives.

Successful IT leaders bring the key members of their team into campus decision-making committees. By having other IT members serve on campus committees and participate in the formal and informal governance structures used on campus, the IT organization becomes embedded in campus decision making. As part of building the IT team, leaders must look for people who understand and share the values of the institution. At UMBC, we have a long history of IT staff participating in shared governance. In addition to the CIO reporting to the president and sitting on the president’s council, one of our emerging IT leaders is now president of the Professional Staff Senate, and another is the campus representative to the Council of University System Staff. Through efforts of this sort, the IT organization can build bridges across the different units on campus while developing staff leadership skills.

Successful technology plans further the efforts of a campus to improve student success, advance scholarship and research, and change the way we teach. All of these efforts require data and analytics to change perception and thinking. This is another area where information technology can play a critical role. IT organizations can support assessment by showing how data in separate systems can become very useful when captured and correlated. By leveraging data analytics, we are able to better assess student risk factors and develop interventions targeted to specific students.

Finally, successful IT leaders—just like successful institutional leaders—should identify and use their personal experiences to relate to the core of the institution: the academic program. Crafting and telling these stories will build a campus culture that embraces technology and enables transformative change.

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