Growing an IR and IT Garden

As I write this column, spring is almos t here. A few buds ar e fighting the wint er cold t o start the blooming process, while others are waiting a little bit longer to sprout. The environment can affect the development of the fledg ling seedlings, fostering growth or h ampering development. Similarly, within every colle ge/university campus, diff erent interactions in the envir onmental landscape can define the connections between the Institutional Research (IR) and the Information Technology (IT) offi ces. These relationships may have been forged through the specialized language commonplace in eac h area, based on pr actical applications and/ or technical expertise. Or they may have resulted from shared reporting structures that can frame the lens shaping the interactions between the ar eas. Just as sunlight and w ater are key complements to the growth of plantings, the IR and IT offices need to collaborate, since each has a complementary role that is critical to the other.

Past Does Not Define Future

Every relationship has a his tory, just as all g ardeners have to start with their first planting. Some pathways are positive journeys that flourish fr om the b eginning, whereas others h ave lengthy stories full of r ocky tumbles. Past relationships do not need to dictate all futur e interactions. This can appl y to both positive and challenging relationships. If there is a constructive existing relationship, effort and ener gy need t o be expended to continue the r elationship, and these int eractions can b e positive models for other ar eas on campus. If ther e is a s trong relationship between the IR and IT offi ces, how was this partnership created and how h as it been sustained? What else is needed to continue to grow this relationship?

Despite all of the leaps forw ard in agri culture, no mir acle elixir or seed will gr ow in an y/all circumstances. Likewise, campus offices are built with people, who are fallible. As a result, miscommunication, frustration, and e gos can g et in the way of a cons tructive professional working relationship. Higher education is not a ut opia in w hich everyone always agrees. Competing resources and limited time to accomplish projects can result in less-than-ideal interactions. When a disconnect between the IR and IT ar eas emerges, it can be challenging (but not imp ossible) to overcome. Acknowledging past frustrations can be the first step in mending or r ebuilding relationships. If there is an ineff ective relationship, what tools or tips can b e utilized to rebuild the connections and collaboration?

Another danger is falling into the trap of feeling that a project was a f ailure if i t did not w ork out accor ding to plan. But an unsuccessful project does not have to lead to a complete failure if learning has resulted from it (and if the unsuccessful parts are not repeated). What methods have been successful in reframing an unsuccessful situation or challenging project into a more favorable outcome? How is this diff erent for individual versus group projects?

Regularly Watering the Plants

Although watering on a r egular schedule is an essenti al part of the gardening process, other aspects of watering can impact how much water the plants actually receive. Watering with a fire hose or watering at high noon in the middle of summer both may be ineffective at supporting budding plants. Similarly, verbal and nonverbal communi cations are important parts of the campus collaboration process and can b e shaped by how and when the communication is delivered. In her ar ticle "Effective Communication: Not As Easy As It Seems," Kathy Lang notes five questions for guiding communi cation.[1] Thinking through communicating messages and considering others' perspectives before sending messages can aid individuals in delivering them effectively, rather than with a fir e hose. W hat are some other successful tips for building eff ective communication within and between areas?

Regularly celebrating successes and gi ving credit where credit is due can be integral parts of building relationships and communicating effectively. Projects are not done in a v acuum. Acknowledging the assis tance of others can r esult in gr eat strides being made in building (or r epairing) relationships and trust. How have others na vigated acknowledgments th at may not have been as well r eceived as they wer e intended? How/ why did this happen? What are some other, well-received ways of celebrating success?
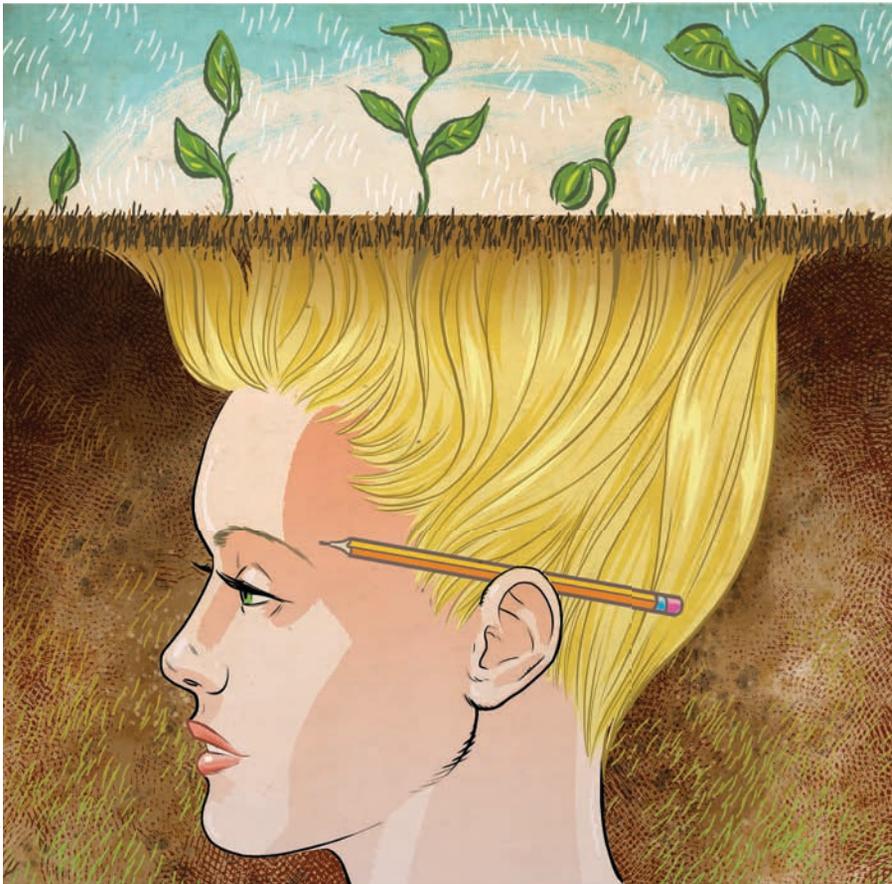
Reporting structures can influence the na tural interactions between campus ar eas. The IR and IT offi ces may not alw ays report through the s ame reporting structure. What impact does reporting structure have on building and maint aining a strong IR/IT r elationship? How have others b een able to create and sustain interoffice relationships and break down silos? How have these practices been integrated into sustainable and regular operations, rather than a one-time project or only with specific individuals?

The Higher Education Landscape

Many different issues affect our understanding of a landscape. In gardening, this can b e seeing how wea ther patterns, soil composition, and insects can affect the growth of the plants. In higher education, this can b e recognizing trends that can lay the gr oundwork for p otential future issues, pr ojects, or

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collaborations. Understanding the broader aspects of emerging higher education trends, initiatives, or new reporting requirements can help both the IR and the IT offices see the impact from a cross-functional perspective. This creates a better outcome than if either single area approached the project as a silo.

An example that those of us connected with community colleges (irrespective of our primary roles at the institution) need to be concerned with is student retention and completion efforts. One person starts this process by planting the seed of enrollment. Taking this first step to enroll (or re-enroll) in college can be a very scary or overwhelming process for students and/or their families. There are many different discussions, on state and national levels, about reducing the barriers to education to increase retention and completion, and these can have an effect on the technological infrastructure at institutions as well as the reporting from data that is collected. A collaboration between the IR and IT offices can improve institutional efficiencies regarding what information is tracked and where it is stored in database systems. Additionally the IR and IT offices can partner in "translating" the technical (and sometimes very complex) systems, processes, and limitations for the general campus community.

What are other emerging higher education issues that can impact both the IR and IT offices? What are issues that pertain to specific sectors, such as community colleges?

Outside of the Comfort Zone

Engaging in knowledge and learning communities outside of functional areas can bring additional resources and information. Attending conferences beyond the mainstream vendors or functional-area specialized conferences can highlight notable topics as well as challenges that other areas face. Funding for travel is something many offices may find challenging to obtain. Although some time and effort may be required to apply for grants, they can be an excellent way to stretch competing resources and to obtain additional funding. I was fortunate to have been awarded the Diane Balestri Memorial Scholarship to attend my first EDU-CAUSE Annual Conference in the fall of 2016; my interest in a strong collaboration with information technology had been sparked when I had worked closely with the IT office at a previous institution. Additionally, social media can be a great (low- or no-cost) way to supplement resources. LinkedIn and Twitter are two platforms with strong learning communities, many times with LinkedIn groups and Twitter chats constructed with cross-functional practitioners.

What other conferences or social media resources can assist in continued professional development outside of immediate functional areas? How can groups, both in person and through social media, create positive environments to reach out and welcome others who may not typically attend or engage?

Conclusion

The relationship between the IR office and the IT office has many different aspects that can influence how strong this garden can grow. Spring is time for renewal and growth. Whether the IR and IT offices have strong existing connections, or are just starting an emerging relationship, or are working to rebuild a strained one, planting a seed is always where this starts. ∎

Note
1. Kathy J. Lang, "Effective Communication: Not As Easy As It Seems," *EDUCAUSE Review* 50, no. 5 (September/October 2015).

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