

Community Colleges: Somewhat Different

Collaborating. Sharing. Advising. Supporting. Asking and answering. Commiserating. EDUCAUSE is incredibly important to all of us as it provides the venues, both physical and virtual, where we can engage in these activities with each other. And the value we gain from all working together is due to the fact that we are more alike than dissimilar in the services and support that we provide to our IT organizations and higher education institutions. We gather at local and regional meetings to hear peers talk about projects they are working on because we know that there is a very high likelihood we either are working on the same type of initiative or have talked about doing so. We participate in online discussion groups because we realize that when someone posts a hot issue of the moment, there is a good chance we are experiencing the same issue, have experienced the same issue, or soon will experience the same issue.

Yet we are also somewhat different from one another. We might share similar issues, but various twists make our situations unique to each of us. For example, the #1 issue on the EDUCAUSE Top 10 IT Issues list for 2016 is *Information Security*.¹ But though some IT organizations charge their chief information security officer and staff with worrying about and planning for data security, others simply ask staff members with other duties to temporarily change hats, and roles, when a data security concern arises. Or consider the #6 issue on the top 10 list:

IT Funding Models. Whereas some higher education institutions might plan to use endowment draws or the revenue derived from tuition increases to meet current and anticipated technology needs, others have little ability to control their overall budgets—let alone their IT budgets—since their budgets are appropriated on a yearly basis by a state legislative body. Finally, *E-Learning and Online Education*, at #10 on the list, has some institutions examining how to move more of their curriculum online, while others face the challenge of addressing the fact that some (or many) members of their student body have a lack of access to the Internet or technology when not on campus.

Community colleges are often in the “somewhat different” category. Our institutions frequently don’t have the ability to hire more staff to meet new technology challenges; instead, we ask our existing staff to change roles as often as a NASCAR driver changes hats at the end of a race. Although community

colleges have infrastructure needs similar to those at other institutions, we struggle with long-range planning and funding for technology procurement and replacement, since a large portion of our budgets are at the yearly discretion of legislatures and many of us have not seen a tuition increase in four or more years. And though all higher education institutions are engaged in conversations about the role of online education, open-access community colleges must respond to the very disparate needs of their students: from those who can readily afford technology to the often large population of students for whom owning a computer, or having access to the Internet, takes a very distant backseat to buying food, paying bills, and finding and keeping a place to live.

John O’Brien, president of EDUCAUSE, recognizes the differences between various types of higher education institutions and understands the need for EDUCAUSE to support the often unique needs of community colleges. To this end, John included a special focus group on community colleges as a part of the EDUCAUSE 2016 strategic planning initiative. And this column, Connections: Community College Insights, was created as a way to share some of the issues, ideas, and concerns that might be unique to community colleges but that also might be of interest to the broader membership and that would certainly benefit from wider input.

In February 2016, Celeste Schwartz and I became coleaders of the EDUCAUSE Community Colleges Constituent Group (CG).

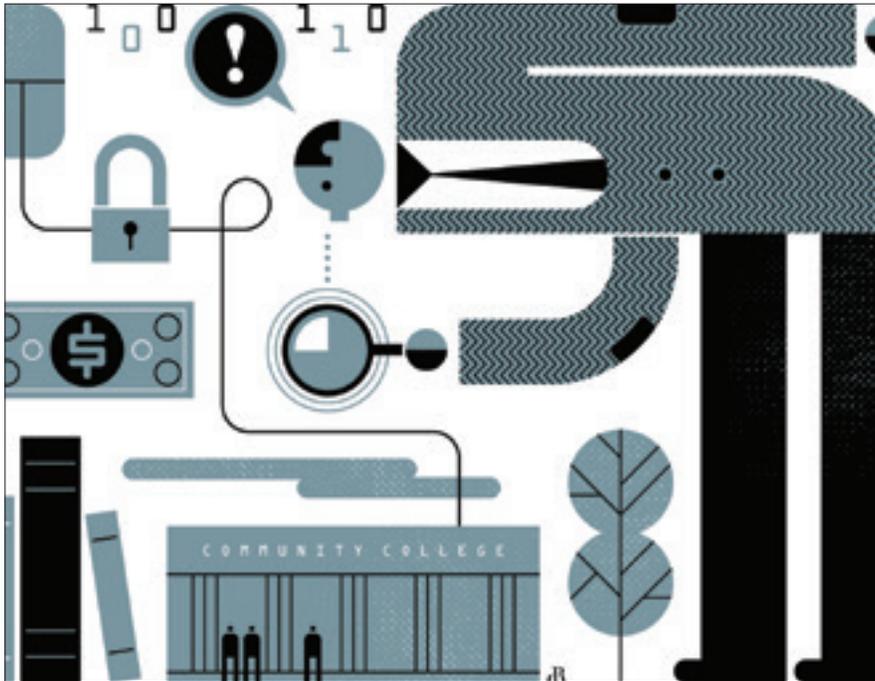
This CG, one of only 7 (out of 51 total) that focus on particular types of educational institutions, even has the notion of being somewhat different in its description: “Many of the problems and solutions relevant to community and two-year colleges are different from those of other types of institutions. This constituent group focuses on how to manage technology-based information resources in the community college environment.”

We will be using the Community Colleges CG listserv to discuss not only the issues that are unique to our types of institutions but also more broadly applicable topics that might have a slightly different feel at our two-year, public institutions. I recently reached out to group members to ask what they felt we should be discussing in the coming months. Although many of the suggested topics mirror those included in the 2016 EDUCAUSE Top 10 IT Issues list, some might be spotted only on the technology radar of community colleges:

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- Supporting traditional educational needs while also filling some of the highly specialized technology needs associated with degrees and certificates in fields such as nursing, firefighting, dental hygiene, and police training
- Recognizing the emerging role of open educational resources (OER), which not only can reduce educational costs to community college students, many of whom have significant financial challenges, but also hold the promise of ensuring that all students have access to educational materials on day one, which helps ensure success
- Addressing the sometimes significant lack of technology funding, or even the decreases in already limited funding, at institutions that do not have large (or any) endowments or the ability to raise tuition
- Ensuring that we can meet and balance the technology needs of students who want to bring their devices to class with the technology needs of those students who have no access to technology at home or at all

In the coming months, the Connections: Community College Insights column will be bringing forward more of the topics that are of particular concern to community colleges and two-year institutions. If you are interested in being a part of the discussion, we welcome you to join the Community College CG—regardless of your current position or type of institution. Because even though we all may be “somewhat different” from one another, we are more alike than dissimilar, and we all benefit from sharing, collaborating, and commiserating. ■

Note

1. Susan Grajek and the 2016 EDUCAUSE IT Issues Panel, “Top 10 IT Issues, 2016: Divest, Reinvest, and Differentiate,” *EDUCAUSE Review* 51, no. 1 (January/February 2016).

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