

# Connecting with Faculty: A Path to CIO Success

In prior *EDUCAUSE Review* Viewpoints columns this year, several of my CIO colleagues offered advice for successful relationships with other institutional stakeholders. For example, Klara Jelinkova implored CIOs to be advocates for the end-to-end experience of students, faculty, and staff, particularly faculty and students who might not have a voice at the table where IT priorities are established. Eric Denna suggested that “CIO” should stand for “Chief Integration Officer,” and he advised that CIOs engage actively in the design of enterprise processes. Bruce Maas and Michael Gower advocated for CIOs to use analytics in support of the academic mission and to have strong partnerships with their chief business officers and provosts to drive institutional success.<sup>1</sup> All of my colleagues identified parts of the CIO portfolio that are necessary for success. I would like to propose one more activity for CIOs: true academic engagement with faculty. When done well, this will benefit each of the initiatives identified above.

Next year, 2018, marks forty years that I have been involved with higher education technology. I took my first programming course, “Scientific Programming Using Fortran,” in 1978 and have been either consuming or providing technology services to higher education ever since. After I graduated in 1981, UMBC hired me to work in what was then called the Academic Computing Services Department, a name that today sounds outdated. CIOs now are responsible for a broad range of IT-related topics, and most colleges and universities have integrated academic and administrative computing units, with the department names reflecting the broader nature of the services offered. (My organization at UMBC now is called the Division of Information Technology.)

Whatever the name, tracing an organization’s “IT ancestry” will most likely lead back to something closely aligned with academic computing, a group created to work *closely* with the academic enterprise to support the use of technology in research and instruction. I emphasize *closely* because this period of academic computing collaboration predated e-mail, videoconferencing, and text messaging and relied on direct interpersonal communication. Many faculty did not use technology; however, those that *were* using technology became true partners in trying to advance the state-of-the-art in their disciplines. This collaboration built strong relationships between IT experts and faculty. To this day, I have benefited from those early years in that I gained tremendous respect for the work of faculty, built lasting friendships, and learned how to work closely with faculty in a variety of disciplines.

My argument for CIOs to prioritize academic engagement focuses on two benefits: (1) building broad and strong relationships with faculty is essential to establishing the trust necessary to undertake and support the major organizational change that arises from significant IT initiatives; and (2) building broad and strong relationships with faculty provides CIOs with a better understanding of the diffuse power structures within institutions, including how decisions are made (or not made) and who makes them. My vision for academic engagement is not a call for more IT governance committees; although these committees are necessary, I don’t believe they are sufficient to achieve the broader goals. When CIOs establish governance committees, they often include deans or their staff to represent the “faculty perspective.” This makes sense, but it is unlikely to build broad-based faculty support. Instead, IT leaders not only should ask for a seat at the leadership table but also should become active participants in their academic communities.

In my discussions with faculty, a new administrator (whether a CIO or another leader) is viewed as “one of them”—an outside administrator who is brought in, often by other outside administrators, with no sense of the day-to-day experience of faculty. Without deliberate action, CIOs rarely get the opportunity to sit down and interact one-on-one with faculty, in unstructured meetings, to understand their everyday experience with technology or with institutional business processes in general. CIOs need to take deliberate action. Indeed, all of us who are technology leaders should make the time to develop strong interpersonal relationships with faculty and actively engage our institutional academic communities. By doing so, we will learn much about their experiences with technology and campus business processes, and we will find ample opportunities for improvement and collaboration.

For those IT staff who are early in their careers and planning to get a graduate degree, I strongly recommend completing a PhD. Having a PhD is an important way to connect to an academic community, even though simply having a PhD won’t be sufficient for success. I didn’t finish my PhD, and I now regret that decision. Early in my career, when I was taking graduate classes, I never aspired to be a CIO, and I assumed a PhD would be useful only if I wanted to be part of an academic department. After advancing through higher levels in my institution, and through my involvement outside my institution, I now see how the lack of a PhD removed some career options from my consideration.

CIOs who don’t have a PhD and have never been instructors or researchers or have never directly supported faculty may not



By JACK SUESS

know where to begin. Here's my advice: remember that colleges and universities are social organizations. Unlike corporations or government agencies, they are communities built on a foundation of social trust among members. The first thing a new CIO should do is to arrange to visit various faculty—not only full professors but also assistant and associate professors—in their offices or labs. This offers a better understanding of their research, firsthand observation of what technology they have access to and what technology tools they find useful, and the opportunity to listen to what their pain points are.

My second recommendation is for CIOs to find ways to get involved in instructional activities. If possible, CIOs should get into the classroom as an instructor; many faculty will gladly find ways to fit in a guest lecturer. I got my start as an instructor early in my career when a faculty member teaching assembly language programming had an emergency and couldn't teach the course. I was one of a few people with that expertise and was asked to teach the course. I learned firsthand how much time went into course preparation and grading, and I gained great respect for faculty who do this very well. This opportunity allowed me to teach the course for many years and helped me connect with faculty in the computer science department.

My third recommendation is for CIOs to find ways to involve themselves in the research experience of faculty. Every institution offers faculty seminars, department colloquia, artistic endeavors, or other experiences where faculty share their scholarship. When possible, CIOs should attend these events, which often have a social component and provide a chance to broaden connections to faculty in different disciplines. If a campus has a vice president of research, CIOs should meet him or her and find out who on campus is doing interesting research or creative work. I have yet to find a faculty member who is not interested in talking about his/her work.

As part of this outreach, CIOs will learn about areas where researchers need help or where business processes are onerous to them. These become opportunities for technology improvement that can help faculty. In my case, in 1996, I was working with faculty doing computational research, and I found out that our Internet bandwidth was insufficient and was impacting research. This was not long after the National Science Foundation (NSF) had launched the vBNS (very high-speed Backbone Network Service) project. I worked with those faculty, submitted a proposal to the NSF, and was fortunate to be selected and become a Principal Investigator (PI). This led to additional work with faculty in which I was PI, co-PI, or staff on various

proposals. By participating in and supporting research, I have been able to build strong collaborations that remain to this day.

My fourth and final recommendation is for CIOs to take the time to understand the diffuse power structures at their institutions and learn the informal centers of power. Faculty are always an important constituency, and each institution has a unique organizational culture. Understanding an institution's organizational culture is important to achieving big changes. Some institutions, especially those that use responsibility-centered management, place significant power in the leaders of the respective schools or colleges. Other institutions have a strong shared governance model, where power may be more diffuse across committees and governance groups. My campus has a strong shared governance system, and our faculty senate executive committee has considerable influence. I make a point of knowing who is on that committee and of working closely with faculty leaders to be sure I understand their perspective on major issues before I develop any significant proposals.

Most CIOs occupy a unique position in the higher education institution—with one foot firmly on the academic side and the other firmly on the administrative side. CIOs need to leverage the opportunity that this provides to truly engage with faculty and participate in the academic culture of their institutions. The benefit will be both personal and professional. From a personal standpoint, CIOs will meet and build friendships with faculty who are working to change the lives of students and whose research is making a difference in the world. From a professional level, CIOs will build trust with an important constituency and find ways to improve the experience of faculty through technology or business processes. As a result, CIOs can position themselves to support the organizational change required when undertaking transformative efforts in such areas as student success or the digital transformation of learning. ■

**Note**

1. Klara Jelinkova, "Spending Our Time and Using Our Voice," *EDUCAUSE Review* 52, no. 1 (January/February 2017); Eric Denna, "Is It Déjà Vu All Over Again?" *EDUCAUSE Review* 52, no. 2 (March/April 2017); Bruce Maas and Michael Gower, "Why Effective Analytics Requires Partnerships," *EDUCAUSE Review* 52, no. 3 (May/June 2017).

**Jack Suess** (jack@umbc.edu) is Vice President of Information Technology and CIO at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC).

© 2017 Jack Suess. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



Jung Breuel / Gettyimages © 2017