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Strategic IT and the 2018 Top 10 IT Issues

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the founding of EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit association created from the merger of CAUSE and Educom. These two respected organizations had each contributed more than three decades of support to the higher education IT community.\(^1\)

Anniversaries are wonderful opportunities to look back, take stock of what has been accomplished, and consider the future. As I reflect not only on this significant milestone but also on the 2018 EDUCAUSE Top 10 IT Issues, I’m increasingly convinced that we are at a remarkable moment when it comes to the full realization of information technology as a strategic asset for our colleges and universities.

In so many ways, EDUCAUSE has been engaged in a conversation about the strategic nature of information technology since the association was founded. However, it seems to me that beyond the campus IT organization, a broad understanding that technology is much more than a utility has been intermittent over the years. The view that information technology should be, as Dartmouth College CIO and Vice President Mitch Davis says, “silently awesome”\(^2\) persists in some circles as senior campus leaders hold on to these legacy perceptions. Still, as new technologies have been deployed and paradigms have shifted, the strategic nature of technology has revealed itself “gradually and then suddenly” (to repurpose Ernest Hemingway).

I have a very clear recollection of a campus meeting in the late 1990s. We were engaged in a brainstorming session to address some of our most pressing challenges. Enrollment down? \textit{Solved:} online courses! Parking lots too full? \textit{Solved:} online students! I even recall that a campus official wondered out loud whether the solution to a notoriously asbestos-ridden building might well be—you guessed it—online programs. In those days, technology-fueled possibilities such as online courses became an unprecedented strategic fulcrum. That thrill eventually faded, to be replaced with other moments of strategic illumination including social media, big data, the cloud, MOOCs, and more—all very promising developments that captured the imagination of those outside the traditional sphere of IT influence. But as these ideas moved from headlines to project charters, non-IT senior leaders were free to resume their regularly scheduled programming.

Still, the landscape and strategic placement of technology has changed. IT advances are constant, not occasional, and technology on campus is ubiquitous and enterprise-critical. Meanwhile, presidents, provosts, and boards—under considerable pressure to improve student success—appreciate that technology offers some of the brightest hopes for moving this hard-to-move needle. For this reason, among others, \textit{student success} became the foundational focus of the 2017 Top 10 IT Issues. And the 2016 Top 10 IT Issues stressed the degree to which information technology is an \textit{institutional differentiator} when it comes to not only student success but also affordability, teaching, and research excellence.\(^3\)

It’s one thing, of course, to ask ourselves about the strategic nature of information technology and quite another to find evidence that those outside the IT organization are experiencing this strategic sea change. Yet in recent months we’ve seen exactly that. One example is the \textit{American College President Study 2017}, from the American Council on Education (ACE). Written by and for college and university presidents, the report advises presidents to attend fully to technology, especially “using analytics functions to make better decisions and leveraging technology to scale out quality, cost-effective best practices.”\(^4\)
Another compelling indicator that strategic IT is more than just a story that those of us in campus IT organizations tell ourselves is the Statement on Innovation in Higher Education released in November 2017 by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB). Representing trustees, regents, and presidents at over 1,900 colleges and universities, AGB assembled a task force to develop a statement to address what it considers the “innovation imperative.” The statement begins by acknowledging that innovation has shaped higher education throughout its history. Tellingly, all the examples cited are either technologies (e.g., online courses and MOOCs) or innovations that heavily depend on technology (e.g., competency-based education). The statement concludes by spelling out six innovation principles. The last principle—on “the strategic role of technology”—is worth quoting in its entirety:

Innovation requires adequate resources, but that is not always enough. Because technology is a foundational part of virtually every innovative strategy, it is crucial that technology is recognized and treated as a strategic asset, not a mere utility to be paid for, turned on, and forgotten about. Boards should ensure that campus technology professionals are thoroughly involved in those projects that depend on technology for their success, including the planning stage. The president needs to be certain that the institution’s commitment to technology is well funded and staffed; however, presidents must also consider the strategic placement of technology within the organization. It will prove difficult, for example, for technology to serve as a strategic asset for innovation if the CIO is not at the table when key decisions are made at the cabinet level.

The AGB statement is primarily intended to underscore the vital need for a campus “culture of innovation,” but the conversation is framed by expressions of the transformational promise of technology and by the insistence that “a new level of collaborative leadership” is required, one in which information technology is part of the strategic decision-making fabric.

My favorite moment during the popular Top 10 IT Issues session at the EDUCAUSE annual conference in October 2017 was when someone in the audience observed that what’s not in the top 10 lists may be as important as what is and asked: “What’s not on the top 10 list for 2018?” The answer: technologies. When the value that technology brings to an institution is the value of a utility, the technologies themselves are the focus. But when information technology brings strategic value, the solutions and the technologies that power them are less important than the people and processes—which make all the difference in the 2018 Top 10 IT Issues.

Notes
2. Mitch Davis, personal conversation with the author.
5. AGB Board of Directors’ Statement on Innovation in Higher Education, November 7, 2017; “The Innovation Imperative,” Trusteeship 25, no. 5 (September/October 2017). Full disclosure: I was one of three external members of the innovation task force involved in creating this statement.

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