What Presidents Want from Their CIOs, and What CIOs Would Like from Their Presidents

As the starting point for this column, the two of us independently articulated the attributes and contributions we seek from the other in our critical partnership. We were struck by the significant synergy and overlap in our lists, so to create this piece we juxtaposed our wish-list items to capture this remarkable agreement while not losing our unique perspectives on what presidents and CIOs need from one another to further the goals of their institutions.

On Transformational Change

CIO: We need presidential leadership in transforming the ways we work in teaching, learning, and research contexts and in administrative departments serving the institution. Technical systems cannot transform learning or administration. CIOs need to be able to frame enterprise and academic technology projects in partnership with the stakeholders whose work is most interconnected with the data and systems in question, and with shared expectations that contemporary work requires us to learn new systems and update practices. Presidents can model comfort with change and offer influential support in emphasizing the benefits of absorbing a bit of uncomfortable change or inconvenience for the sake of broad benefits, and/or reduced risks, for the institution as a whole.

President: Transformation is key to our long-term success, but it is hard, and process is critical. Campus communities do not like change. Community members may approach technology issues in ways that seem illogical to CIOs. A CIO needs to understand institutional culture, involve all stakeholders in change decisions even if doing so is painful, and respect the needs of our many audiences. Most importantly, a CIO needs to communicate, communicate, communicate! The CIO can't say early enough or often enough that a change is coming and why it is necessary.

On Risk

President: Presidents don’t like surprises, and bad news doesn’t get better when you wait. If there is an information breach, an outage of a critical service, or a failing system, we prefer to know immediately. We can be good partners in moving our communities to where we need to be, and we will have ideas about the critical use of available support and resources. Depending on the situation, we may have reporting obligations to the board of our institution. And if the situation makes a bad turn, ultimately we are responsible.

CIO: Presidents need to support information security and other forms of system maintenance and protection as an institution-wide responsibility to ensure that all constituents with campus credentials, system access, and/or data access are doing their parts to mitigate risk. Presidents need to be willing to use the bully pulpit to affirm the importance of safeguarding institutional resources and reputation and/or maintaining or upgrading systems, even if this causes a bit of nuisance for community members, and to prioritize investments that help reduce risk and meet current standards for information stewardship.

On Supporting Technology Choices and Investments

President: Presidents are grateful for what CIOs do, and we want to understand this work fully so as to be good thinking partners and strategic allies. Yet sometimes we don’t have the underlying knowledge, the vocabulary, or the nuanced understanding of a technology issue or practice. The CIO needs to make sure that what we need to know is accessible to us. This may try a CIO’s patience at times, but in the long run it will make us better partners and will help ensure that technology needs get the same attention as areas that may be more familiar to us. Offer a framework or a set of principles to explain the rationale for a recommendation, since we may not always have that context.

CIO: Presidents should offer clear support for the use of institutionally available enterprise services, rather than adoption of redundant or overlapping local systems. Presidents must show how the institution benefits when community members adopt common tools and platforms that meet the vast majority of needs across departments, including increased technical support, reduced costs with savings to be reinvested in more impactful ways, and less complex data integrations to build and maintain.

President: Technology is supposed to create greater functionality and efficiency in our institutions, and yet so often new technology seems to require greater expenditures and more staffing (or the same staffing even as more work is automated). While it may be the case that efficiency is always a driving factor, efficiency often seems to get short shrift in proposals that foreground performance benefits or sophisticated technology. That said, presidents tend to focus more on increased costs and less on victories around savings—so CIOs should...
be sure presidents notice and celebrate when investment has indeed led to savings and efficiencies.

CIOs also need to be strategic in presenting investments in new technology and projects. Presidents often feel like they are being presented with an endless list of infrastructure improvements, systems upgrades, and needs for new products. The CIO should identify true priorities and a long-range, phased plan for how to achieve them—and that plan should be in sync with the institution’s budget. An ongoing list of projects with little understanding of cost or feasibility is easy to dismiss.

On CIOs as Partners in Strategic Planning

CIO: Presidents should position CIOs at the table where institutional context and priorities are discussed, so that data and technology planning is aligned closely with the aspirations and high-impact goals of the institution. Understanding what drives the institution is essential to shaping IT operations and prioritizing investments. When positioned as partners with other senior leaders, CIOs and their teams can help raise awareness of new possibilities that emerging technologies or new forms of access to data might open up.

CIOs hope that their presidents will convey the idea that “data-informed” is a better model than “data-driven,” ensuring that constituents on campus understand that institutional decisions are mission-driven and wisdom-driven, with data playing a supporting role in answering important institutional questions. Data is only as powerful as the questions we ask of it and the analysis we bring to it. Both quantitative data and qualitative data are important resources to collect in addressing complex institutional questions. CIOs and the data professionals on their teams can provide significant support to the institution by ensuring that platforms, tools, and expertise are in place to enable effective data collection, integration, reporting, and analysis.

President: The CIO should fully participate in the strategic planning and visioning of the institution. That can’t happen if CIOs don’t have a good understanding of the complexity of the institution and its mission—from academic programs to faculty research to the needs of students to the functionality of campus spaces. CIOs need to meet with fellow vice presidents and invest in understanding their work and must not allow themselves and their teams to be marginalized as a service department. The unique knowledge and institutional perspective of a CIO is invaluable to a strong vision, but CIOs can contribute only if they are—and are seen as—leaders who are fully versed in the whole institution.

On the Role of IT Professionals

CIO: Presidents need to support “out of the box” contributions from IT colleagues and participation in the overall educational enterprise. Presidents can benefit from encouraging IT staff to engage across the institution as a whole: serving on campus-wide committees; attending campus events; teaching courses in subjects where they have expertise; facilitating other forms of learning for students; or teaming up with faculty, students, and staff to create an inclusive environment in which everyone thrives.

Presidents can derive benefit from recognizing that information technology as an industry has developed standards and practices that may be useful models for the broader institution. These include project prioritization and management, service planning and delivery, and budget planning and tracking. The IT organization may also have strengths in change management and agile methods for accomplishing goals and in leadership and collaboration skills developed to stay on top of the fast-evolving cycle of technology change. IT organizations have had to focus on user design, client experience, customer support, consultation skills, and participatory design for new programs or services. And IT professionals tend to be lifelong learners and avid problem solvers. A president who recognizes the frameworks and practices that the IT organization cultivates through its work, and who encourages adoption or sharing across departments, will benefit by taking this systems thinking to the institution as a whole.

President: CIOs are critical to institutional success:

- CIOs provide mission-critical tools and institutional capacity on a daily basis so that presidents can do our jobs well, supporting our work across an incredible range of technology needs.
- CIOs bring unique knowledge and backgrounds that can advance the institution. Many IT staff have diverse work experiences that are invaluable to creative decision-making and flexible problem-solving. IT staff can also inspire colleagues to build strong technical skill sets.
- CIOs play a critical role in educating our students, from direct participation in courses, to supervision of projects in digital scholarship, to education programs in information security and software use, to mentoring students in campus jobs that help students build technical and professional skills.

Presidents can’t thank and encourage our CIOs often enough.

We enjoyed making explicit the underlying assumptions we have about what makes this institutional partnership effective. We hope our reflections spark many similar dialogues, and we welcome comments about what works from other institutional vantage points.

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