How Change Has Changed: The Community College as an IT Enterprise

Change has changed. For a surprising number of colleges and universities, this is not understood. In particular, this is not understood by community colleges. While there are many components to the decline of higher education, particularly in the United States, realizing how change has changed is the most open to correction but also the most critical to recovery. Doing so requires a very serious review of the college as an entity and a rethinking of why it exists and how it should evolve. This rethinking needs to focus on information technology as it has shaped and continues to shape the structure and nature of the institution and the campus.

Historical Development

As in businesses back in the 1970s and 1980s, information technology on campus used to be managed by technicians who were located in a back office somewhere and who focused on records and billing. Often the IT department was part of the accounting division, since IT employees were seen as operators of a glorified adding machine. This was the logical model for large mainframe record-based computers. But the arrival of PCs disrupted this model: the back-office systems shrank in size and became specialized while PCs appeared on people's desks and grew into departmental networks. Still, the traditional IT technician didn't touch the PCs, which were viewed as amateur (if not outlaw) devices.

The conquest of information technology by the client-server architecture reshaped the institutional IT environment into a world of servers, clients, and help desks. This happened very rapidly in some parts of the business world and much more slowly in other areas that could not afford a separate, fully staffed IT department. Community college campuses fell into the latter category. Generally, a responsible person was pressed into service, without having the knowledge to do more than turn things on and perform basic backups or updates. In small colleges this was covered by release-time faculty, helped by AV (audio-video) staff and maybe a facilities telecommunications person. Meanwhile, the transition to the internet and the web in the 1990s complicated things quickly—a situation exacerbated by the arrival of distance (online) education. Online education was clearly a “faculty thing,” whether faculty wanted it or not, but who would take care of the technology? The answer was AV staff because this was clearly some kind of correspondence or TV course.

Many campuses managed to drag the 1990s well into the 2000s. For the most part, community colleges too stayed caught in some distorted form of the late 1990s, with faculty and staff left on their own to handle their PCs and online courses (whoever was silly enough to do so) while the IT department remained concerned with registration and back-office accounting, plus HR (human resources) and ERP (enterprise resource planning) in larger systems. This continued to hold true up until 2010 or so, when enrollments began to decline as students dropped out before completing their degrees. Something needed to change to fix this situation, and not surprisingly, IT solutions began to be developed to track students and flag them for assistance before they disappeared.

Still, for a number of campuses—and again, particularly for community colleges—information technology remained in the back office or continued to be decentralized in administration, records, engineering, and other scientific departments. Media centers evolved to be more like IT services or were allowed to atrophy as younger faculty, mostly adjunct, had no choice but to provide their own computing systems and applications. Enrollment losses continued, and tenured faculty retired—to be replaced, if at all, with adjunct lecturers. The primary solution to these problems was the purchase and partial integration of student pathway systems, tracking systems, an improved student management system (SMS), and maybe a new learning management system (LMS)—all chosen from nearly identical lists of offerings.

The Failure to Succeed

None of these systems offered the magic bullet. Improvements were made, however, by giving a new generation of students access to information on their programs and progress and by sending them notifications when/if things began going downhill. This access was expected by the newest, always-connected generations and non-connected students. Unlike previous generations that have been either dismissive or silent on things they
environments, but only—for many faculty—if they can avoid putting their courses online. Years of surveys and analysis have proven that students prefer courses that incorporate online components for at least some of their courses but also like good face-to-face presentations and direct interaction with their instructors.¹ What more reason is there to keep things the way they are?

The Missing Force

Again, a major issue is the failure by many in higher education to understand how change has changed. This is a direct result of the failure to identify how the new process of change must be managed. The Western higher education tradition is based on scholarly communities that became modern institutions managed structurally and administratively by faculty and committees. That worked for several centuries. But it does not work well in the IT-based organizations of today and will not work well in the college or university that is organized as an IT enterprise.

We have watched the accelerating destruction of powerful organizations in industries that have been forced through the transition to e-commerce: music, books, travel, entertainment. We are currently watching the collapse of very nearly all the once-great department stores and retailers. And we are beginning to watch a transportation transformation that will redesign our cities. Meanwhile the banking industry is starting a second round of evolutions that will lead to a completely modernized financial-management world based on fully virtualized currencies and ledgers using blockchain technology. This same blockchain technology is beginning to replace all contractual, identification, and educational certifications.

The successful new organizations that have resulted are all IT-based. They are all IT enterprises. Managing them requires extensive IT experience and specialized application and content knowledge. Staff with this experience and knowledge are the UI (user interface) and UX (user experience) workers and managers who support and deliver services and information within evolving environments for specific populations and requirements.

How many community colleges are organized as IT enterprises or even as technology enterprises? The simple reality is that the world we now live in requires this change in organization. Do it sooner and win. Fail to do it and die. We need to restructure our institutions, and we must learn to be ready to do so again—quickly. Change has changed.

Note


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