IT and Governing Boards: A Conversation with Richard Legon

In November 2017, the Board of Directors of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) issued a best-practice statement on the challenges associated with encouraging and supporting a culture of innovation. The AGB Board of Directors’ Statement on Innovation in Higher Education not only made the case for building a culture of innovation on campus but also recognized the essential nature of information technology to such an effort.

EDUCAUSE CEO and President John O’Brien was a member of the task force charged with developing this statement. Earlier this year, he followed up with Richard Legon to talk further about how technology can help create a culture that welcomes innovation.

**JOHN O’BRIEN:** Do you think college and university boards are lagging in their approach to technology innovation?

**RICHARD LEGON:** There is a clear recognition among higher education leadership, including governing bodies, that technology has a direct bearing on how students learn and how students are recruited and enrolled. But boards have historically seen technology as a tactic that supports an institution’s priorities rather than as a strategy in itself. And so in today’s more volatile and uncertain environment for higher education, boards are responsible for asking about the cost/benefit of more expansive investments in technology.

Is the cost worth the benefit? Specifically, what is the benefit of investing boldly in technology—and will the institution be able to maintain its currency?

Happily, we see boards asking the right questions about technology at the strategic level. Presidents are engaging boards on the complex issues that are linked to technology. Some boards have established committees or task forces on the subject of innovation and technology. For a few trustees this is a learning curve, with boards enjoying the opportunity to learn and to ask the right kind of questions. In the end, boards need to add value by participating in the technology decision-making process, working with and supporting presidents, CIOs, and other institutional leaders. The process is part of both today’s challenges and tomorrow’s opportunities, and it relates directly to a willingness to assume risk on the path to innovation.

**O’BRIEN:** You just explained, rather convincingly, why technology innovation is such a challenge. But this sounds a bit like jumping on a train that may or may not have already left the station.

**LEGON:** Sure, except the train is driven by competing priorities and stakeholder interests. This is where governing boards need to temporize their input: they need to balance interest and curiosity in and assessment of risk tolerance with their responsibility to support effective institutional leadership. Boards shouldn’t get so granular that they are selecting which cars make up the full train. It’s a very tricky balancing act between appropriate board engagement and respect for administrative and academic leadership. The good news is that boards realize that for institutions to compete in today’s higher education environment, innovation becomes almost non-optional. And they know that innovating requires touching technology very directly and aggressively.

**O’BRIEN:** When you decided to develop a statement on innovation, you invited me to be a part of this effort. For me that was a powerful statement because EDUCAUSE has been working hard to ensure that information technology is “at the table” on campus.

**LEGON:** AGB’s board leaders and staff saw the challenges, across the sector, of addressing the changes confronting higher education. They believed that a governing board’s most essential contribution to the process of innovation is to set a tone (or to develop a culture) in which institutional stakeholders can find sufficient common ground to address the future collaboratively. From the start, they were intentional about technology. Clearly, institutional IT leaders are at the tables today—both the CEO’s and the board’s.

**O’BRIEN:** If I’m a senior IT leader, how and when should I interact with my board? Some would say that being on the board’s radar is great, and some might find the experience unnerving.

**LEGON:** I think the dynamic has changed—and certainly it should. I’m currently on the Board of Trustees at Spelman College, and we receive periodic updates from the CIO. His plans are relevant to our future as an institution that is changing for a very different future. The CIO should be an essential part of a president’s team. Likewise, IT administrators should be a part
of a board's agenda—or of the agenda of an appropriate committee. Being on the board's radar is important, and we need to keep in mind that as institutions establish specific funding campaigns, technology has become an increasingly important funding priority. Boards need to hear this and learn.

O'BRIEN: Information security risk seems to be on a lot of board agendas.

LEGON: Absolutely. It's essential that the board is fully informed, in an organized manner, about the scope of all institutional risks. The board needs to be certain that a comprehensive risk-assessment process is in place across the institution. Ultimately, the board should be made aware of those risks that pose the greatest threat and/or are being “watched” by the administration. A governing board must understand the nature posed by those risks that are presented as being high-potential/high-impact—and the board must be comfortable with how such risks are being addressed. Governing boards should be cognizant of their responsibility to support administration initiatives to anticipate risks as well to address those that are immediate threats.

O'BRIEN: What would you tell a CIO from one of our member colleges or universities about how to be effective in working with his/her board?

LEGON: Work with your supervisor to be sure that you have periodic airtime with the governing board or an appropriate committee. If you do present to the board, be certain that you frame the conversation in a manner that informs without getting too deep into the weeds. Keep in mind that your board has a strategic focus and a responsibility to ensure that the institution's mission is being met. What you do is a vehicle for meeting the latter priority. Most governing boards appreciate the changing role of technology in their institution, and they want to hear from you.

Today's higher education requires some bold thinking. Boards don't punish creativity or bold ideas. Your board may not support all of your ideas, but you should—we all should—be taking “shots on goal.” Some will go in.

Richard Legon is President of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB).

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