

Eight Things a Former Provost No Longer Believes about IT

A provost learns many things. With the lessons of experience, a provost gains wisdom, insight, and perfect objectivity. Of course, the confidence that others in the college or university have in the evolving wisdom, insight, and objectivity of the provost is ordinarily inversely related to the provost's own sense of personal development. That phenomenon gives the provost a rather peculiar perspective. Take information technology, for example. When I first became provost, I believed many things about information technology. I still believe some of them. Here are a few of the others—the beliefs that fell by the wayside as I gained experience.

1. *“Investing in IT will save the university money.”* And do you want to buy the Brooklyn Bridge? I remember well the early 1990s assurances that if we would invest \$15 million to implement new information systems, we would save at least \$5 million annually over the long run. As it's turned out, a more accurate statement would be that if we would invest \$100 million to implement new information systems, we would have the privilege of spending at least an additional \$10 million annually. For many institutions, this has been a hard-bought lesson.

2. *“Investing in IT will substantially reduce the number of books the library will need to acquire.”* What was that about the Brooklyn Bridge? At least in this context, investing in IT hasn't directly increased library book-acquisition costs (al-

though it has, of course, wreaked havoc on library budgets more generally).

3. *“It will be great for the educational process when students can bring their laptops to class with them.”* I believed this one until fifteen minutes ago, when a student casually mentioned to me that her classmates regularly use their laptops in class not only to take notes but to do crossword puzzles, check e-mail, follow sports scores, gamble, and bid on eBay (of course, not in my class, she hastened to assure me). In the old days, if a student tried surreptitiously to read a newspaper or pass notes, the professor could usually see what was

going on. The appropriate response (at least in law school) was immediately (but without admitting one's suspicions) to call upon the student. Today, the professor looks out at the class and sees only the backs of laptops, with innocent students seemingly hard at work. After this revelation, I will never see the back of a laptop the same way again. I now understand that the laptop is not an adjunct to education but a siren-like competitor for the attention of my students. The solution, I suppose, is for professors to wander casually around the back of the room while lecturing so as to sneak a peek at what's



Illustration by Steve McCracken, © 2002

really going on. How depressing! When everyone is wireless, the situation will be even worse.

4. "Trust me, we can handle it." This usually comes from a dean or a department chair who wants to add some idiosyncratic wrinkle to an otherwise standardized system to make it "just right" for the field. Three months later the provost is invariably inundated with pleas from the very same dean or chair for assistance (financial, technical, aesthetic, or otherwise). Actually, these rarely are pleas. More often, they're demands or ultimatums, accompanied by wholly fantastical statements about the many "promises" that were allegedly made by the provost or the CIO to support the dean's or chair's modification of the system "no matter what!"

5. "If you cover the initial capital cost, we'll handle the ongoing operating costs." This too generally comes from a dean or a chair, invariably one who has never encountered the concept of replacement cost.

6. "I need a 50 percent increase in my IT budget to cover the skyrocketing salaries demanded by IT professionals." Not any more you don't.

7. "Within a decade, distance learning will revolutionize higher education." This was first said to me ten years ago, and it's been said to me every year since. I'm sure it was also said more than a century ago when some bright soul first conceived of the correspondence course. Actually, I do believe that distance learning will revolutionize higher education, but the time required will be much longer than another decade. This revolution will require a huge investment of resources, and I fear it will not be for the better. The idea that Microsoft University will put everyone else out of business is terrifying but hardly unthinkable. One of the great strengths of higher education in the United States is that past a certain point, size is inversely related to excellence. As a result, no single institution can dominate the market. The same will be true in the future about excellence, but the economic advantages of scale in the realm of distance learning may finally break the back of distributed excellence. After all, do we really need more than one (or two or three) teachers of Aristotle or physics or constitutional law in the world of mass distance learning?

8. "E-mail adds nothing to the telephone. I'll never use it." This, sad to say, was my own declaration in the late 1980s. I couldn't have been more wrong. For a provost, or at least for me as a provost, e-mail became indispensable. Indeed, I find it hard to believe anyone did the job before e-mail. I averaged two hundred e-mails per day. The amount of information I could gather, the number of faculty members and administrators with whom I could stay in close contact, and the amount of trouble I could get myself into were simply staggering. There was seemingly no end to the number of "deals" I could make, complaints I could receive, or advice I could give. E-mail enables a provost to feel like the Wizard of Oz. On the other hand, the more access you invite, the more accessible you are. Familiarity, as they say, breeds familiarity. As time went by, and my circle of e-mail correspondents grew, I was asked to do everything from helping to get a leak fixed to finding someone to pull weeds. Moreover, the forward button was an ever-looming nightmare. Perhaps there was wisdom, after all, in my initially skeptical response to the advent of e-mail. At this point, however, I'm a confirmed junkie. I live for the thrilling "ping" of a new message. (Feel free to e-mail me anytime, by the way.)

Information technology is critical to the future of colleges and universities. If it is not always all that it's cracked up to be, this is only a matter of time. The future holds many surprises. The following, however, will not change:

1. Advances in information technology will be more expensive than you think.
2. They will not be implemented as quickly as you expect.
3. The faculty will be dissatisfied with the result.
4. The provost will be blamed.

Cheers!

Geoffrey R. Stone (g-stone@uchicago.edu) is the Harry Kalven, Jr., Distinguished Service Professor in the Law School and the College at The University of Chicago. He served as Provost of The University of Chicago from 1993 to 2001.



EDUCAUSE

Transforming Education Through Information Technologies

EDUCAUSE, a consolidation in 1998 of Educom and CAUSE, is a nonprofit consortium of colleges, universities, and other organizations, dedicated to the transformation of higher education through the application of information technologies. Through direct services and cooperative efforts, EDUCAUSE assists its members and provides leadership for addressing critical issues about the role of information technology in higher education.

EDUCAUSE Board of Directors

Martin D. Ringle, Chair
President, NorthWest Academic Computing Consortium
Reed College

Amelia A. Tynan, Vice Chair
CIO and Vice Provost
University of Rochester

Joanne R. Hugi, Secretary
Associate Vice President,
Information Services
University of Oregon

Joel L. Hartman, Treasurer
Vice Provost, Information Technologies and Resources
University of Central Florida

Kathleen Christoph
Director, DoIT Academic Technology Solutions
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Perry O. Hanson III
CIO and Associate Provost for Educational Technology
Brandeis University

Gregory A. Jackson
Vice President and CIO
University of Chicago

Joel W. Meyerson
Director
Forum for the Future of Higher Education

Susan L. Perry
Senior Advisor, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Mount Holyoke College

William H. Pritchard
Vice Chancellor and Chief Technology Officer
Foothill-DeAnza Community College District

Steven W. Relyea
Vice Chancellor, Business Affairs
University of California, San Diego

David Ward
President
American Council on Education

Ex Officio Member
Brian L. Hawkins
President
EDUCAUSE