

The Legacy of Diane Balestri

The 2002 EDUCAUSE Leadership in the Profession Award—for exceptionally effective leadership in campus information technology use and management and for the mentoring of other professionals—was awarded posthumously to Diane Balestri, former Vice President for Computing and Information Services at Vassar College. Trained as a humanist, Balestri had a successful career as a faculty member at Bryn Mawr College before accepting an assistant dean position at Princeton University in 1985. She began full-time work in information technology in 1992 and was named associate director of computing and information technology in 1995.



Balestri moved to Vassar in 1997 and had been selected as vice president for computing and information services at Brown University shortly before her death in March 2002.

Diane Balestri was one of the most perceptive leaders in the higher education IT profession—and one of its most articulate speakers and writers. We hope here to honor her legacy by identifying key themes in her thought. Diane's own words, extracted from her writings, reveal insights concerning three broad areas of high importance to her, as well as more specific lessons for effective IT leadership.

Insights

Diane's major contributions and insights can be found in her thinking about teaching and learning, about the IT profession, and about collaboration both within and

across institutions. In the 1988 seminal book *Ivory Towers, Silicon Basements*, Diane discussed early efforts to incorporate technology into the teaching and learning process:

If an institution wishes to place better learning outcomes for its students among the benefits to be gained from the investment of the whole community in computing, it will need to understand what benefits to learning are made possible by computing, and how those benefits can be achieved: Is there a compelling vision of education enabled or supported by computing, one that is worth the risks and costs that institutions will have to accept in order to pursue it?

... computing will play a critical role in shaping the future of higher education. Some of us predict that technology will help revive traditional concerns for teaching and learning and infuse them with new and much-needed energy within the established structure of higher education. Others of us think that as the new information and telecommunication technologies become pervasive, they will—and should—subvert traditional academic structures and eventually change the course of higher education.

A year later, writing for the EUIT (Educational Uses of Information Technology) Committee, she said:

The value of information technologies for higher education in the 1990's will be determined in large measure by the ways in which we use those technologies for teaching and learning. That use can and should occur across the whole spectrum of disciplines and institutions—not just in science and engineering, not just in research universities, but in

humanities and social science classrooms as well, in rural and urban institutions, and in the community colleges that are the gateways to learning for the largest percentage of post-secondary students in this country.

In a paper presented with Ruth Sabean at the 1995 Cause annual conference, Diane framed the issue of professional development in the IT field:

Professional staff are too often narrowly defined by their particular expertise, or even more narrowly by the specific technologies with which they work.... The specialized expertise of these diverse professionals seems necessary to provide first-rate customer service. But a narrow emphasis on specialized expertise as the primary characteristic of the IT professional can hobble the IT organization, making it difficult both for individuals to grow professionally and for the organization to respond quickly and with a clear sense of its mission as technologies evolve and customer needs increase and change. Furthermore, this emphasis on specialized expertise has led to subtle, technology-based class distinctions among IT professionals, with the result that as technologies merge, productive synergy between groups can be unnecessarily hard to generate. Where groups on collision course have been asked to cooperate or even merge, these distinctions have made collaboration difficult.

She added that the profile of the IT professional should include four primary characteristics: customer-orientation, creativity, collaboration, and communication.

Diane had a deep understanding of what it means to collaborate. Her early IT work was as the integrator and scribe for a

group of people who were looking ahead to the impact of technology on the way faculty teach and students learn. Diane specifically addressed the topic of collaboration in an article in the fall of 2000:

Collaboration becomes especially seductive to contemplate whenever costs are high and expertise is scarce. But the barriers to successful collaborations ... are formidable, and the benefits are not always realized. The most significant barrier is the failure to abandon the stance of competitors and to espouse a common goal. Other barriers are organizational, ranging from cultural chasms and hierarchies that separate the partners to unequal distribution of effort and the fear of lost identity. Collaboration outcomes can be unsatisfactory if reduced, as they often must be, to suit the lowest common denominator, and the logistics of sharing at a distance can frustrate the whole enterprise.... Nevertheless, in the highly connected, resource-rich, interactive, and unfortunately, expensive environment now being created with information technologies, isolation is simply not an option.

She ends by stating: *On the excellence of all will the excellence of each be built.*

Lessons

Diane's recent work discussed four critical missions for IT leaders. For each mission, she offered a lesson. In 1999 Diane wrote:

The challenge is two-fold. The first challenge is to determine how information technologies will be positioned by strategic planning as agents of institutional excellence, on the one hand undergirding and stabilizing the institution's core and on the other hand enabling necessary and appropriate transformation.

The second challenge is to turn that strategic vision into an operating plan ... that effectively balances the maintenance of a ... stable working environment with projects that ... enable change by adopting, adapting, rejecting, [and] even inventing information technologies as they suit the mission of the institution.

Diane's first challenge states one of her critical missions: determining how technologies will be positioned as agents of institutional excellence. Overlooking the role that technology can play to preserve and enhance the traditional missions of

higher education institutions is, at the very least, a missed opportunity. And minimizing the concerns of those who worry about the impact of technological change on colleges and universities is a serious mistake. Diane's first lesson: Technology is at its best when it helps to sustain the core mission of an institution even as it transforms the way that mission is pursued.

Diane's second challenge stated above—balancing a stable working environment with necessary technological change—relates to another mission for IT leaders: having the courage to resist conventional wisdom. The safest strategy is not always the optimal one. Determining the path that is best suited to the mission and the specific needs of an institution, regardless of the popularity or unpopularity of that path and regardless of external and internal pressures, requires courage as well as insight. Diane's second lesson: The exercise of IT leadership must transcend the pressures of conventionality.

In the last few years, Diane had become excited that pivotal milestones for educational technology were finally being reached. She noted:

In the past decade ... significant numbers of faculty members in all disciplines and at every sort of institution ... have been using whatever information technologies are available ... to supplement, to develop, and ... to improve their teaching and their students' learning. Suddenly, the [demands] ... that faculty members are [making] ... of technology, and their desire to implement advanced and multiple technologies in courses, are ... outstripping the solutions that available technologies can provide.

The fact that most faculty have accepted the transformative potential of IT led Diane to a third critical mission for leaders: addressing the rising tide of users' expectations. Faculty members' fertile imaginations often prompt them to seek technologies that are perhaps years or even decades away. Rather than recoiling from this situation or framing it as the familiar problem of how to manage users' expectations, Diane viewed it instead as an opportunity to capitalize on the motivation of faculty members and to collaborate with them on the definition of innovative strategies.

Diane's third lesson: Users' demands that may at first seem to be unreasonable can—if treated properly—become the key to technological innovation.

Late in 1999, at the height of the longest economic expansion in U.S. history, Diane raised concerns about the future of IT funding. When the economy began to falter in the spring of 2000, Diane wondered if the free-flowing resources of the 1990s might soon be replaced by budget cutting. Her insight in this regard was nothing short of prophetic. Diane once again departed from conventional thinking when she stated: *Strategic planners need to conceptualize the entire information infrastructure as an essential physical asset that ... requires its own guaranteed funding, or endowment.* This involves the fourth critical mission for IT leaders: tying IT resource issues to cost-benefit analyses. Institutional leaders need to be convinced that effective pedagogy—a core institutional mission—depends on reliable technology, which in turn depends on stable financial support. Diane's fourth lesson: Coupling careful tracking of IT investments with compelling assessments of IT benefits is the key to convincing institutional decision-makers that stable, long-term funding for technology is essential to achieving and maintaining institutional excellence.



A humanist, Diane was the model of the twenty-first-century technologist. She understood early on the role that technology would play in teaching and learning, she thought carefully about how IT managers could best work with staff to build a new service profession, and she strongly believed in the need for collaboration both within and among campuses. She had an intuitive grasp of the “big picture” of technology in higher education and an uncanny ability to articulate the intricate relationship between that picture and IT leaders' critical missions. Her insights and lessons—as well as her enthusiasm, generosity, and warm sense of humor—form her legacy of leadership.

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