

Elephants in Our Room

There's an elephant in the room. It is large, so getting around it is difficult. Yet we squeeze by, saying to each other, "How are you?" and "I'm fine" and a thousand other forms of trivial chatter. We talk about the weather. We talk about work. We talk about everything except the elephant in the room.

Higher education has at least two elephants in the room. Many describe the current economic and political climate of higher education as being conducive to a perfect storm. As federal funding is reauthorized, fresh and loud debates about the costs, social and economic value, accessibility, affordability, accountability, and financial transparency of higher education will be engaged. This hot-air system of external pressures will meet the cold-air mass composed of both internal campus strife, as faculty square off against administrators, and inter-institutional strife, as competition increases for the best and brightest students. Storm clouds will be salted with the aging of the baby boomers, leading simultaneously to the aging of the workforce and to likely shortages of key faculty, institutional leaders, and technical staff. This is certainly a healthy pachyderm.

Squatting in the other corner of the room is higher education's culture and, in particular, its belief in the inherent wisdom of distributing authority, systems, operations, and efforts as widely as possible in its organizations. This belief is deeply rooted in ideas and (mis)perceptions about academic freedom and finds its greatest proponent in the modern research university. This elephant is

so large that although we cannot discuss it, many of us in higher education spend large portions of our careers tiptoeing around it. While we talk publicly about the inherent costs of instruction and liken academic efficiency efforts to removing one member of a five-piece string ensemble, we whisper privately about the real costs of a culture that fosters a server, a Web designer, a security administrator, a firewall, and so on in every major or minor academic (or administrative) subunit of the institution. We talk only privately about the enormous, growing, and even "out of control" costs of operating such a massively distributed information system. And because of the way grants are funded and cuts are allocated, a little more of the ground for rationalizing or even (heaven forbid) centralizing some of the institutional IT operation is lost every year. So, there are two healthy pachyderms in the room.

Instead of discussing the fundamental costs and associated trade-offs of a massive organizational distribution of IT authority, chief business officers point fingers at CIOs as unbusinesslike, techno-centric spendthrifts while CIOs brand their business colleagues as myopic, bean-counting anti-intellectuals. Perhaps if those of us responsible for the stewardship and guidance of our institutions' resources could implement a cease-fire, we could then grapple with the real conundrum. That conundrum, of course, is the likelihood that (1) the IT costs associated with teaching and learning must and should overtake the IT costs for "administering" the institution; (2) the IT costs of administration are not

likely to go down; and (3) total revenues for higher education (on the whole) are not likely to rise. The two elephants are on a collision course.

This essay is not intended to either defend or disparage the practice of devolving responsibility for various IT operations at many colleges and universities. It is, however, intended to publicly reveal the elephants in the room. For the first time in the sixty-year history of computing, there is a real likelihood that advances in computing and communications will enable genuine breakthroughs in learning and instruction. A revolution in our core production function is possible if we in higher education information technology can acknowledge the elephants in our room. To realize the promise reflected in our investments in networks, enterprise systems, and so forth, we need to break out of the "zero-sumness" of our funding environment. To do this, we need to engage our colleagues and our constituents in an open discourse about the *real* costs and benefits of letting one thousand flowers bloom. Although it seems axiomatic that we should vest in our faculty and investigators nearly complete authority in the classroom and laboratory, can we continue to grant them de facto authority over large portions of the IT infrastructure, including the rights to adopt ad hoc technology standards, security protocols and practices, and equipment life-cycle management?

Can we talk about those elephants?

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