

Presidents and Technology

Almost everyone on campus today grasps the benefits of easy availability of information technology, but for college presidents, the expectations for information technology have been high from the early days. The grail in futurist dreams has been a machine that “thinks,” using a very big base of information to sift evidence, make judgments, and suggest courses of action. And presidents have been among the most hopeful of the futurists.

What have presidents glimpsed that most faculty members, students, and others on campus have not—at least, not until recently? Most obvious is the recognition that presidents routinely make decisions based on recommendations by others and concerning issues so big and so technical that it would be impossible for presidents, by themselves, to review all the details. Also, these issues frequently center on balancing resources among parts of the institution or committing the institution to a new course of action in relation to its external environment. Certainly, the capabilities of campus technology in collecting, analyzing, and displaying large amounts of data help presidents a great deal.

But some of the customarily presidential decisions are not as easily assisted by technology. Expensive propositions for an institution—to purchase or subscribe to electronic library resources, for example—can be partly addressed by the library director, who authorizes the expenditure of more money for online access. But the president may be the only one on campus to consider that if large expenditures for electronic library mate-

rials are carefully chosen, the pressure to build a new wing for the library building will be lessened. A shift between the capital and operating budgets is a major decision even for the president.

Easy access to online information can level the playing field for faculty members in their research ambitions, and this too has presidential implications. When a faculty member works at an institution that has a weak library collection, he or she can today often obtain access to specialized research materials without leaving the campus. The trade-off between the use of faculty development funds in such traditional categories as travel subsidies and sabbaticals, on the one hand, and expenditures for expanded electronic access to materials physically located elsewhere, on the other, can be highly attractive.

Another example is the use of technology-based instruction. Although “blended” approaches to instruction using live classroom settings in combination with media-based pedagogy have taken hold in many colleges and universities, much depends on the course management systems. The manufacturers of these systems continually add new product capabilities, which drive up the price and which many faculty members will never use. A president can authorize ever-bigger investments in these systems or can curtail them, but to make those investments wisely requires an understanding of pedagogical trends in relation to the costs of technological capabilities that are themselves in continuous evolution. The president’s search for sustainable equilibrium in the institutional budget involves more than solving a simple equation.

Several distinctive features of small colleges are especially being tested by what is technologically possible today, as some first-rate online courses become available. Should a college utilize courses that are not devised by resident faculty members? What are the implications of this approach for faculty hiring and promotion? What are the implications for colleges that attribute their superior results in student learning to frequent, live interaction among students and faculty members? Increasingly, the challenge for small-college presidents may be to lead efforts to clarify institutional mission while discussing pedagogical innovation.

Many presidents have come to understand that information technology expenditures can facilitate cooperation among institutions, as the stakes have become higher for failing to collaborate. Money is sometimes saved and services are almost always enriched when colleges and universities cooperate—as, for example, several private colleges in West Virginia have done in technology services and as the Wisconsin colleges and universities have done in a range of purchasing agreements and shared services. Presidents will need to think even more imaginatively in the future about such possibilities. Because institutions do not need to be similar in order to save money from shared, technology-based, back-office services or online instruction, colleges and universities—large and small, public and private, contiguous and scattered—have much to gain from collaboration through technology.

Certain aspects of presidential decision-making remain as opaque as

ever, despite the pervasiveness of campus technology. No one doubts, for example, that the threat to network security is real. Theft of confidential information that could affect public safety, information such as course grades or scientific research, will always be subjects for presidents' attention. But a decision to invest a lot of money in added security is usually followed only by a kind of negative evidence—that is, the feared breach does not take place. This unspectacular outcome thus does not allow experiential learning about what to do in the future.

But the gap among institutions is still wide for access to more ambitious kinds of information technology, such as Internet2, large electronic collections of scholarly journals, and ubiquitous wireless computing. Closing this gap will require not only continued efforts to familiarize campus leaders with what is possible but also additional financial resources. Presidents may be assisted by such tools as the Council of Independent Colleges' newly published presidents' guide to benchmarks for technology spending.¹ Whatever the rate of progress, we can assume



Illustration by Pep Montserrat, © 2005

Is there a digital divide in America? Surveys show that the gap is closing among Americans, whatever their economic status, thanks to the wider distribution of personal computers in schools, public libraries, and residences. Not only do more people have access to electronic means of communication, but traditional organizational barriers are being flattened as well. Every student, for example, can offer a quick opinion, by e-mail, of a college president's decision and can share it with hundreds of other students and faculty members; every college or university board member can be consulted by the president, even on matters that require fast action.

that college and university presidents will remain among the most hopeful advocates for closing the gap; as longtime futurists, they already understand many of the ways in which doing so renders their leadership more effective.

Note

1. David Smallen and Karen Leach, *Information Technology Benchmarks: A Practical Guide for College and University Presidents* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Independent Colleges, 2004), <<http://wireless.weblogsinc.com/entry/6562569602412224/>>.

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