

## Making Uncommon Common

“Uncommon thinking for the common good” describes the higher ed IT profession. IT professionals use information technology to catalyze innovation for the benefit of higher education and society. But perhaps the phrase should be “*common* uncommon thinking for the common good.”

Information technology underpins higher education around the world. Colleges and universities, whether in developed or developing nations, all use course management systems, networks, e-mail, identity management, and so on. And, IT professionals worldwide face similar issues: funding, security, enterprise systems support. These issues are so similar, in fact, that a natural question arises: What if those of us in higher ed information technology looked at worldwide trends rather than campus, state, or national ones?

Recently representatives from EDUCAUSE, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the United Kingdom, and SURF in the Netherlands compared the percentage of institutions that are outsourcing e-mail in the three countries. The estimates were each around 20 percent, which doesn't seem like a significant trend. But adding the numbers represented by the individual estimates shows a relatively significant amount of outsourcing. Perhaps we miss the big picture when we look too close to home. What would we learn if we shared such trends or data across countries? We might find we have even more in common than imagined.

Likewise, what if we approached com-

plex issues together rather than independently? For example, e-scholarship (also termed *cyberinfrastructure*, *e-research*, or *e-science*) is receiving considerable investment in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. E-scholarship presents challenges such as curating data, working in a virtual organization, and establishing trust. If we made a point of sharing information across our countries, would we solve those problems more rapidly?

What if we used materials generated in one country to inform thinking in another? For example, the recent U.S. National Science Foundation report on cyberlearning, *Fostering Learning in a Networked World*, might influence government policies in the United Kingdom or the Netherlands. The work of JISC on the subject of open educational resources might benefit discussions in the United States. Or SURF's views on openness (open standards, open access, open source) might advance initiatives in other countries.

What if we used what we know about the evolution of information technology as a profession to help emerging IT units in other countries mature more quickly? In the United States, the IT profession has evolved from being about wires and networks to being about technology as a strategic asset. We know that IT managers in Australia benefit from professional development similar to that in the United States. In fact, the EDUCAUSE Institute Management Program and the Council of Australian University Directors of Information Technology (CAUDIT)-EDUCAUSE Institute are

aligned. Are there common lessons we've learned in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, or Australia that would benefit colleagues in China, the Philippines, Croatia, or Brazil?

In *The World Is Flat*, Thomas L. Friedman argues that geopolitical changes, information technology, and the emergence of English as a universal second language have eliminated the traditional boundaries that previously defined international markets. The result is a world in which goods and services flow seamlessly across borders based on global supply and demand. Globalization used to mean that business expanded from developed to emerging economies. Now it flows in both directions.

Like businesses, many colleges and universities around the world are eliminating boundaries by establishing physical and/or virtual campuses in other countries. U.S. institutions have campuses in Qatar, London, Moscow, Shanghai, and Mumbai, among others. U.K. universities have campuses in Dubai, Malaysia, and China. Southeast Asia is home to many Australian institutions. And even more universities have alliances with overseas partners.

If business and higher education have “gone global,” why can't information technology in higher education do the same? Perhaps if we focused more closely on what we have in common, we could better leverage our knowledge, benefiting our own institutions and each other. Perhaps the best way to be uncommon is to look for the common.

Diana G. Oblinger is President and CEO of EDUCAUSE.