

Connecting IT Possibilities and Institutional Priorities

One of my favorite leadership jokes is that being a college or university president is like being the superintendent of a very large cemetery: there are thousands of people under you, but no one is listening. This joke contains elements of truth, but in all candor I would say that we presidents don't do ourselves a great service by saying, "We can't do anything; we have no influence or power." Most people know that's really not true. Our power and influence are limited, and appropriately so, but they are real.

How can the influence of a presidency be used to make a difference in the application of information technologies in ways that advance the core missions of academic institutions? For decades we have talked about information technology and higher education. But we now see, for the first time, that technology is enabling—perhaps even causing—changes that are so substantive and pervasive that it is no longer possible or advisable to have a disconnect between an institution's strategic plans, goals, and directions and its IT initiatives, resources, and management.

Traditionally, governance within the academy has been a combination of executive leadership and the faculty. We call this shared governance. But now a third party has come to the table: IT leadership. How does that leadership fit in? How can it be made to work to serve an institution's needs and to transform the institution? Virtually every facet of the college or university now has, or can have, a key relationship to technology. IT significantly influences internal areas such as teaching and learning, research, administrative services, and the library. External

issues integrally related to IT include competition from corporate or online universities, accountability to boards or legislatures, services provided to meet the needs of the institution's region (such as course delivery through technology), and partnerships and other strategic relationships.

Technology can be used to help an institution achieve its goals and move forward in its development. To accomplish that, colleges and universities must make IT organic rather than using the old add-on or bolt-on model. That requires a clear knowledge and a public statement of goals. In addition, leadership must decide whether investments in technology are to be strategic or tactical. I would argue that significant technology initiatives are sufficiently costly that they should be truly strategic. We have to know what we are doing, from a strategic viewpoint, to justify the kind of investments that are called for if we are going to support significant IT initiatives.

When I came to the University of Central Florida a little more than nine years ago, I distilled—from an excellent strategic planning report—five institutional goals that I thought the university should focus on: (1) offer the best undergraduate education available in Florida; (2) achieve international prominence in key programs of graduate study and research; (3)

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provide an international focus to our curricula and research programs; (4) become more inclusive and diverse; and (5) be America's leading partnership university. Our institutional strategic plan was created with these five goals as a foundation and with a full awareness of the potential of information technology. We created a chief information officer (CIO) position and reorganized our information and technology units into a single division. The resulting strategic plan for the university now contains more than three-score specific references to technology, obviating the need for a separate IT strategic plan.

As a practical matter, how does an institution integrate technology into its strategic plan? It should begin by communicating the power that technology can have if used in an effective and integral way. That is a role for the CIO, but it has to be shared by key allies, optimally including the chief academic officer and the president. At the University of Central Florida, we are consciously connecting all of our technology initiatives with our five goals and with our institutional vision as it is represented by the strategic plan. The administration has provided the resources needed to carry out our technology vision because we believe that putting our

money into what we say is important. We are a little different from some other institutions in that we have a budget planning committee that is chaired by our provost and includes the vice-presidents as well as the chair of the faculty senate, the elected president of the student body, and the chair of the strategic planning committee. If an institution does *not* connect its strategic plan with its resource-allocation process, the strategic plan may end up having very little to do with the future of the institution.

We have also recognized the centrality of information technology in our cur-

riculum. For example, we merged our departments of computer science, computer engineering, and electrical engineering and a new IT program into a school of electrical engineering and computer science within the College of Engineering. At any institution of higher education, the power truly resides in the curriculum and with the faculty. If the two are not engaged powerfully in some way, a college or university may not be able to make the kind of changes that it wants.

Florida, it would be to give people the tools and support systems that will empower them. We have connected an expanding faculty and student body to build community, to help people communicate—campus-wide, department-wide, and class-wide. When I became president in March 1992, we had 21,200 students. This fall, we expect almost 36,000 students. We add about 100 faculty members each year, so creating a sense of community is a very important task.

We have had a great deal of success with our online learning initiative, which

has been recognized nationally as a best practice for its comprehensiveness and quality. One-third of our students take at least one course each year through distributed learning technology, and 14,000 students each semester take a course with a major Web component. Fully one-half of our faculty members regularly use the Web in their classes. We have empowered faculty members with technological resources and support systems, which they believe in and adopt. Some refer to this as the “quiet revolution in American higher education.” It represents a shift from an emphasis on what has always been called

“teaching” to an emphasis on “active learning.”

Distributed learning, not just distance learning, is our model. The difference is that our model serves students both on- and off-campus. Our model shows that we can improve learning, stimulate curriculum innovation, and make more efficient use of resources. The Web and other technology resources will permeate the vast majority of our courses over the next few years.

What we are looking for is not just change but a broad and deep institutional transformation grounded in our mission. We don't want to drift in random directions; we want to effect a transformative change that goes to the heart of what we've defined in our mission and our goals. Transformation is systemic and consistent, and it involves all of the key constituencies. It is a leveraged process, strategically built with the help of our key leadership, including our IT leadership. Leadership must have a vision; we must bring people along with that vision—integrating and implementing it. That vision has to be sensitive to quality, has to make the environment safe for change, and has to be assessed qualitatively and quantitatively. And we must use what we learn to guide improvement. It is no longer possible for a college or university president to safely delegate all of the decisions relating to technology. The costs are too high, the risks are too great, and frankly, the opportunities are too significant for the president not to be somehow personally involved.

The challenge for both today's and tomorrow's IT leaders is to help form the connections between technological possibilities and institutional priorities and to help presidents and other senior institutional leaders to use their power and influence to chart a successful course. The degree of success we achieve in meeting this challenge will have much to do with the future of higher education in our country.

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