2013

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Substantive Collaboration: Are We Ready to Lead?

Although MOOCs have received the most attention in higher education this year, another issue is affecting colleges and universities and the IT community on a much broader scale: the perception that the higher education business model is “broken.” This isn’t an IT problem by definition, but IT leaders have not contributed effectively to a solution. At least not yet.

So what can we, as IT leaders, do individually and collectively to change the outcome?

The answer is clear. We have to collaborate. Substantially. And in ways that are far-reaching and very challenging. We have to change our core processes and our default approach, and we have to take some calculated risks. Our institutions, and perhaps our IT community, have largely resisted these changes to this point.

Something has to give, and that something is our very expensive cultural heritage of maintaining uniqueness where it doesn’t matter. I am sure that any IT leader who has implemented an ERP system in his/her career is quite familiar with the situation where customizations are needed because “This is the way we do things at our institution, and it would be too difficult/impossible/expensive to change.” We’re not talking here about processes that distinguish an institution from competitors or that help an institution take important steps toward meeting its full potential. Instead we are often referring to core processes that are critical but that don’t require—even benefit from—being unique.

We all know this issue well. And it goes far beyond the business rules encountered in enterprise system implementations. We need to identify, and make, large-scale investments in strategic differentiators for our institutions. The core mission areas of learning, research, and community outreach are where the majority of our time and efforts should be focused. To do that, we need to drive the costs out of our core administrative commodity services, which is where the resources are. And we need to drive those costs out relentlessly.

Industry consultants have pressed us on this issue for many years. Since their studies have sometimes been clumsy, repetitive, and weak in terms of grasping the nuances of how we operate in higher education, we’ve tended to broadly dismiss the consultants as not understanding our colleges and universities. Unfortunately, they often understand our problems all too well, even if they have not been successful in defining solutions on a transformative scale.

This leaves us with several choices:

- We can continue to work on the margins to extract small efficiency gains. Our collective best efforts have largely brought us to this point.
- We can declare victory with the results of our major IT investments and services strategies over the past fifteen years. Thousands of institutions are largely doing the same core processes in hundreds, if not thousands, of different ways. And many of these solutions are clearly in need of a next round of investment.
- We can change—dramatically and intentionally. And we can start brainstorming on how to begin now.

If we go with the last choice, what would a change of this magnitude look like? It would involve making sure that the senior leaders of an institution understand what we are spending on business processes—not just the IT portion, but all of the staff time and other costs. For example, Brad Wheeler and other campus IT thought leaders have recently raised, within EDUCAUSE, the issue of studying the approach of reallocation of a significant portion of our administrative expenses directly to instruction and research. This type of discussion needs to involve the chancellors, provosts, chief financial officers, and CIOs of the institutions to describe a starting point.

In spite of our overall state of higher education resource allocation, clear and impressive evidence points to our collective capabilities to drive transformative change within our IT areas of responsibility. The following examples demonstrate the effectiveness of collaboration:

- High-Performance Networks. Both Internet2 (http://www.internet2.edu/) and our regional networks have shown tremendous leadership over the past decade. Working in collaboration in this space hasn’t been easy historically, but this is clearly a shining example of what we can do with technology to benefit our institutions when we work together.
- Community-Source and Open-Source Software Development. Colleges and universities working together to create cost-effective enterprise software solutions really does work. The Kuali Financial System (https://www.kuali.org/kfs) is one of a handful of major success stories in both the community-source and the open-source communities in recent years. Choice is good for all of us. And complex software development does scale.
- Procurement and Support Consortiums. We have collectively worked to leverage our purchasing power, and regional groups such as the Midwestern Higher Education Compact...
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(https://www.mhec.org) provide extensive value in aggregating purchasing demand. National and international support groups such as the Higher Education User Group (http://www.heug.org) show the power of higher education users working with a major solutions provider (in this case, Oracle). These areas of collective procurement and these support organizations are adding significant value, and they have the potential to do even more.

Net+ Services. Shel Waggener’s leadership of this area for Internet2 (http://www.internet2.edu/netplus/) has changed our world in terms of what’s possible. Aggregating demand to work out effective terms and conditions for our community with willing and engaged cloud partners is even more important than the significant price discounts that have also been negotiated. Net+ Services has produced great accomplishments within a very short time, with an even brighter future within our reach.

These projects were originally considered, in some circles, unlikely to succeed. They represented efforts that were judged to be too complex and too impractical to work in our culture, with too many risks and far too many obstacles. Yet they have succeeded, due to tremendous personal leadership, and they have also demonstrated that our community is willing to invest in substantive collaboration when the business cases are right.

So, can campus IT leaders drive a collaboration transformation both within our individual institutions and collectively with peers? And can we stretch that transformation to add value to the college/university as a whole—well beyond our traditional IT boundaries?

Absolutely. I believe we can do so even though, given the magnitude of the challenge, the odds may be against us. This transformation will happen at some point at our institutions. It is inevitable. The question is whether IT leaders will partner with other campus senior leaders to define and drive the transformation or whether we will keep doing what we’re doing now, which for the most part seems unlikely to produce the changes needed in a world that is moving much faster than we are. If current IT leaders do help spark this higher education transformation, will we do it in our time or will we rely on the next generation of IT leaders to do the heavy lifting?

I encourage current IT leaders to step up and get started now. We’ll need participation from both the current and the next generation of IT leaders, as well as from a broad set of our most-senior campus leaders, present and future. This is our opportunity to transform higher education by fixing the “broken” business model and reinvesting in the core mission at our campuses going forward.

If we collaborate, we can do this.

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