



Dynamic Campus

# Wake-Up Call: Technology Isn't Just the CIO's Job

by Michael Glubke

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“Information technology (IT) is already a commodity, like electricity,” said Purdue University CIO Gerry McCartney at the annual Campus Technology event back in 2011. “It’s essential but not strategic. You’re penalized heavily if you’re not there, and there’s no benefit if you are there.”<sup>1</sup>

McCartney wasn't looking to pound a nail in the coffin of IT when he addressed his audience of higher education IT professionals that day. His comments were intended as a wake-up call. From his perspective, the relationship between an institution of higher learning and technology had reached a tipping point of sorts. In order to continue to deliver value, higher ed IT leaders could no longer simply rely on their historical roles as caretakers of the campus infrastructure; they needed to recast themselves as strategic partners for the institution.

## Higher Ed's Growing Reliance on IT

How prophetic were McCartney's statements? Consider the results of a recent survey by the Educause Learning Initiative, or ELI. In late 2015, EDUCAUSE® asked their community of higher education institutions to identify the key issues in teaching and learning for 2016. Respondents identified 16 common challenges.

ELI's list ranged from the general—"academic transformation" and "adaptive learning"—to the specific, including "evaluating tech-based instructional innovations" and "next-gen digital learning environments and services." But one fact about the list stood out most: **11 of the 16 top issues identified were either *partially* or *entirely* dependent upon IT to deliver or overcome.**<sup>2</sup>

ELI's list is indicative of higher education's growing reliance on IT in all facets of the student and staff experience, but unfortunately many institutions are failing to take the steps necessary to address this fact.

"The speed of technological innovation and industry demands is moving faster than higher education's ability to adapt," according to a July 2015 article of *Harvard Business Review*.<sup>3</sup> "Students ... expect their institutions to deliver technologically enhanced experiences, yet higher education doesn't always deliver."

<sup>1</sup> "Reengineering IT in Higher Education," [www.CampusTechnology.com](http://www.CampusTechnology.com), Aug. 2011

<sup>2</sup> "The 2016 Key Issues in Teaching and Learning," Educause, Dec. 2015

<sup>3</sup> "Why Higher Ed and Business Need to Work Together," *Harvard Business Review*, July 2015

## New Roles for New Higher Ed Paradigms

“Technology is the most important agent of change today,” argues another *Harvard Business Review* article from September 2015. “Hardly any industry is immune to both its value-creating and disruptive potential.”<sup>4</sup> Higher education certainly isn’t excluded from this reality. The message for leadership is clear: *Technology isn’t just the CIO’s job anymore.*

As a growing percentage of the university’s value is delivered by or dependent upon technology, university presidents and chancellors need to assume active ownership of the IT functions of their institutions, not just in word but in deed. CIOs need to be more strategic, and institutional leaders need to be more technical.

## Indicators of Stronger Strategic/IT Collaboration

How does this interplay work at a practical level? We’ve seen it borne out within a number of institutions we serve, and we developed the following checklist based on our own observations.

How many of the statements are true at your own institution? Feel free to replace the terms “president” and “CIO” with the titles that apply to you.

- 1 The CIO is a trusted and active member of the president’s cabinet.
- 2 The president has a standing one-on-one meeting with the CIO.
- 3 The president participates in high-level IT governance meetings.
- 4 The CIO is involved in strategic initiatives that do not have a direct technology component, like task forces or committees.
- 5 The CIO or his/her direct reports have regular meetings with department or college leaders to ensure strategic alignment.
- 6 The president participates in project status meetings for major institutional initiatives.

As colleges and universities have grown dependent on IT over the last decade, there has been increasing pressure on the CIO to get out of the data center and assume a more strategic role as a true partner to the institution.

CIOs that can perform in that capacity deliver a significant advantage to their institutions. But we’ve seen firsthand how much *more* impactful it can be when the senior leader of the college or university also takes an active role in understanding the opportunities and constraints that today’s technology offers.

Institutions that exhibit this dynamic on a daily basis are the ones that demonstrate the greatest strategic alignment and are able to use their IT investments as a strategic advantage, rather than a liability.

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<sup>4</sup> “All Boards Need a Technology Expert”, *Harvard Business Review*, Sept. 2015