Future Perfect

by Richard P. West

W e’ve all talked about it for some time, “it” being the future we imagine that will allow us to have widespread access to digitized information. Even more exciting is the ability to fetch the information from afar via electronic networks while we reside at home or wherever our office is that day. CNI was created to explore the possibilities of storing and communicating information across electronic networks—“To Advance Scholarship and Intellectual Productivity”—as CNI’s letterhead succinctly states. Throughout CNI’s Task Force meetings and projects the possibility of using networked information has been enthusiastically encouraged, examined, and envisioned.

In CNI forums, the nature of the changes required to implement the future world of networked information has never been restricted to the technical aspects of networked information. To be sure, the navigation and interoperability issues, which are primarily technical, constituted one of the five original CNI project themes identified at the first few organizational meetings of the CNI Task Force. However, institutional and user readiness, public policy, and the changing economics of networked information have always been part of CNI’s thematic tracks.

As I complete this article, Congress has passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996. As originators and now veteran users of the Internet, the higher education community has a lot riding on how the policy decisions made by the Congress are implemented. The actions of Congress have focused the leadership of our institutions’ funds that acquire information technology and support technology-based information resources and services are being deployed to incorporate change, both technologically and organizationally, as it continuously happens.

We should not be selling grand slams, moon shots, miraculous revolutions, or, perhaps the worst sin of all, all the great things technology will do for us tomorrow. Rather, we should be selling networked information as a powerful force now operating on each and every one of our campuses to lower the barriers of time and place to access facts, records, ideas, information, and people. We need to design processes appropriate to each of our campuses to implement the many changes that will be enabled by the new marketplace dynamics unleashed by the new Telecommunications Act. The simple selling of technology may be over, but the ongoing incorporation of its benefits into our organizational daily lives has just begun.

Today’s management of technology and the change created by it is as much about economics, marketplaces, and regulation as it is about hardware and software. We need to work with our presidents and other executives not on the next exciting piece of “future perfect” technology, but rather on how to manage a wonderfully rich and vibrant—and, yes, constantly evolving—campus information infrastructure that advances scholarship and intellectual productivity.

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Higher education institutions. The Principles can support the efforts of colleges and universities interested in developing and providing quality distance learning programs. By communicating some guidelines to enable such institutions to gauge their own degree of success, the Principles of Good Practice can provide a useful tool for institutions’ self-assessment. While they do not in themselves constitute policy, the Principles identify the areas that are crucial to address in policy development. The Principles might also eventually serve as a kind of “Seal of Approval,” enabling private, for-profit program providers to advertise their efforts to meet quality standards.

The regional accrediting associations. The accrediting associations’ Task Force on Distance Education has agreed to use the language of the Principles as the basis for standards being developed to address distance learning. As of this writing, the boards of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Institutions and the junior college division of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges have adopted the Principles exactly as written for inclusion in their handbooks for accreditation.

State higher education regulatory agencies and boards. Higher education offices in several Western states have committed themselves to using the Principles in their review of electronically delivered programs proposed by in-state colleges and universities. (States that have so far agreed to this policy include Alaska, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, and South Dakota.) In addition, the Western Legislators’ Conference passed a resolution encouraging all Western states to consider adopting the Principles as the basis for in-state assessments. The next step in WICHE’s project is to encourage the development of reciprocal agreements whereby any “receiving” state could rely on a home state’s review to ensure that the proposed program meets the Principles of Good Practice. Such agreements would in turn benefit program providers by ensuring that they would no longer have to meet the disparate requirements of fifty states’ regulations.

Prospective students. Empowering the learner is, finally, the only real way to ensure that higher education programs delivered via technology are of high quality. In this regard, the Principles can help prospective students identify the questions to ask of provider institutions. It will be up to students to ask these questions and to make sure they get satisfactory answers. Staff of the Balancing Quality and Access project are developing brochures on distance learning and the Principles of Good Practice to help students understand how to ensure that educational programming delivered to their homes and work places conveys the quality they are entitled to expect.

I t now seems possible that the Principles of Good Practice may become the basis for national agreement on the standards for education programs delivered via technology. If so, they will eventually provide—in most cases, for the first time—a basis for assessing the quality of electronically offered programs.

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We need to demonstrate to our presidents that we know how to consolidate our economic gains and change the ways of doing business to benefit from the constantly improving technology available to us. The lesson to learn is that while technological change is constant, our implementation of technology is discrete, although ongoing. We must not let the constancy of technological change blind our ability to consolidate our productivity gains by modifying our personal and institutional behavior.

One of the best pieces of advice I have ever received was to understand that “life is what is happening while you’re busy making other plans.” We have incorporated much of our networked information technology into our daily lives already. There are presentations that I prepare in hours and days with information that would have taken weeks to obtain without today’s networked information—and the information is more current and up to date. Electronic journals abound. And the Web gives me more digitized graphics and photos than I thought, as recently as two years ago, would be commonly available by now.

However, we still have scholarly journals increasing in price in some science and medical fields at 15–18 percent per year at a time of 2–3 percent inflation. The price of scholarly information in general has increased more than inflation. The technology is exciting and being incorporated into our daily activities, but our organizational and economic policy issues persist. To help our executive leadership we need to be vigilant and aggressive in identifying the barriers to changing our personal and institutional behavior to “advance productivity.” If we do that successfully, the investment and support we are seeking for our future perfect world of networked information will come quite automatically.