What Information Resources Managers Need to Understand about the Higher Education Enterprise

by Ronald Bleed and Polley Ann McClure

Last summer, the two of us spent three weeks in the Institute for Educational Management (IEM), sponsored by the Harvard Institutes for Higher Education of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. With our 98 fellow students whose areas of responsibility ranged from president to “other” (that included us!), coming from institutions of all sizes, types, and regions, we tackled the tough issues facing higher education today. We learned from our instructors, from over 2,500 pages of reading, and, most of all, from each other.

The purpose of this article is to share what we learned about the higher education issues that we and our staffs need to be aware of, to suggest some necessary skills and expertise that can be learned and practiced, and to encourage you to participate in IEM or similar programs to become a more effective information resources leader on your campus. The areas highlighted below are based on the IEM program content, designed to help us better understand the higher education enterprise in which we work.

Educational leadership. To lead in any environment, educational or other, requires a full understanding of the environment’s culture. Institutional missions, like those of our information technology and information resources departments, are changing, evolving, evaluating, questioning—sometimes remaining committed to goals set by earlier generations, sometimes redefining goals and mission with the changing times. As information resources managers, we need to be as familiar with the overall institutional culture as we are with our own organizational culture, and appreciate the importance of existing culture in determining the success or failure of change initiatives—especially those we may find ourselves facilitating and supporting.

External leadership. Similarly, it is as important to build networks of people and organizations as it is to build our more familiar networks of LANs. Colleges and universities have often enjoyed the luxury of focusing internally and managing with campus and departmental autonomy. The new reality is that in 1995 we must now manage many external factors. Effective leadership requires working with outside individuals and institutions for political and economic support. Our attitudes must be adjusted in the face of diminishing resources, increasing criticisms, and growing competition. “Politics” is not a dirty word. Understanding the political consequences of our actions is undeniably valuable because it can lead us to discover what we need to do to get resources and authority for our decisions.

Leadership within organizations. As organizations, colleges and universities are both complex and unique. Getting things done right requires not only knowledge (what is the right thing to do), but also ability (how to convince other people that this is the right thing to do, how to assemble resources and engage staff). In their book, Reframing Organizations, Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal identify four frames of reference or vantage points which can be used to assess situations and define leadership actions: the structural frame, the human resource frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. The different frames focus on different factors: formal rules and policies, motivating people, resource limits and power, or the elaboration of meaning. Like many administrators in higher education, information resources professionals generally function in the first, or structural frame. By understanding the other three frames of reference, we enhance our understanding of campus organizational dynamics. The true leader determines which frame to emphasize given a specific situation or challenge, and thereby manages the environment most effectively.

Academic administration. As information resources leaders, we also need to understand the fundamental issues related to academic adminis-
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Strategic planning. Two strategic planning concepts we learned about that are particularly useful to information resources managers are “gaps” and “supply chains.” Strategic planning to transform an organization—whether the information resources organization or the entire campus—must be done in the gap between the resources of an organization and the goals of its manager. This gap “stretches” the organization forward in more competitive ways. The vehicles used include cross-functional teams, fast development cycles, focus on core competencies, alliances with suppliers and affinity organizations, arrangements with competitors, and programs of employee involvement. What holds many organizations back is not a surfeit of resources but a scarcity of ambition! And we need to remember to focus on strategic planning for the entire supply chain, not just for our own organizational unit.

Vision. Vision is a picture of the future that we seek to create. It should be a set of compelling words that show where we want to go and what we want to look like when we get there. As information resources leaders, we should strive to design systems with a shared vision in which people in every part of the institution can speak from the heart about what really matters to them. By listening to individual voices, a community of cohesive voices can be built, all committed to finding the deeper purpose of our organizations. Some visions fail because of poor implementation strategies. Most visions that succeed are compatible with the organization’s capacity to support the vision, both because they involved people in the process and because they accommodated the power structure.

We are repeatedly told by the popular press and management consultants that the successful leaders in our profession will be those who best understand the business in which we are employed. Higher education is our business; to build and support information infrastructure and systems that are aligned to the mission of our colleges and universities, we need to take the time—to make the time—to learn about the challenges and key issues facing this business.