A Message from the EDUCAUSE Executive Team

As IT professionals, we believe that information technology is critical to higher education. Technology underpins a vibrant and growing research enterprise. It has enabled teaching and learning to transcend space and time, making learning more flexible—and successful. Students say the Internet is like oxygen to them; they can't live without it. Likewise, the administrative business of higher education could not be done without IT.

Not only does IT make a difference, but so do IT professionals. IT leaders no longer need to worry about how to get on the “radar screen” of presidents and provosts. CIOs have taken their place on the senior leadership team because of the growing realization that IT is central to everything the institution does.

Still, IT looks different to a president, provost, trustee, faculty member, staff member, or student than it does to an IT professional. To some in the campus community, IT is essential to institutional transformation. To others, IT is a financial black hole that brings with it a host of other problems as well—security, piracy, and plagiarism, for example. These others are much less likely to see the transformational potential of IT and more likely to see its disruption of the status quo.

Perhaps these differences are due to the focus of the various communities. Many IT conversations revolve around enterprise systems, single sign-on, and replacement cycles. The impact of IT on mission-critical challenges—such as access, affordability, and competitiveness—is rarely part of these conversations. If IT is going to really matter in higher education, the IT applications that are deployed need to have direct relevance to the concerns of campus academic leaders.

At the same time, economic forces, rapid advances in technology, globalization, and private-sector competition are calling into question some of the basic operating assumptions of higher education. Higher education needs to find a way for members of the campus community to help and to support each other as we face what could be volatile changes. This calls for a new pattern of thinking.

As an executive team, we have begun to ask “what is next?” for EDUCAUSE as a professional organization and for the institutions we represent. We have borrowed a powerful metaphor from the National Science Foundation (NSF), which reinvented its agenda by asking not about scientific priorities but about global priorities with scientific implications. The NSF reframed its national dialogue and agenda by looking at what it described as grand challenges.

We must now reevaluate our roles and contributions in light of the grand challenges facing higher education. In this spirit, we are asking:

- What challenges and opportunities face higher education?
- How can technology be used to capitalize on opportunities or to mitigate risks in addressing these challenges?
- What can and should EDUCAUSE do, either by itself or in collaboration with other organizations, to address these challenges?

If transformational change is to be achieved in higher education, it is not enough for IT leaders to focus on well-planned and well-maintained infrastructure. All of us in higher education IT need to be partners in addressing campus issues, not just campus IT issues. We need to raise our sights. Our profession has evolved and our experience has deepened. It is time to engage in higher education’s grand challenges. We hope you will join us in this conversation.

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