ITmyths

By Brian L. Hawkins and Diana G. Oblinger

The Myth about CIOs

"If We Could Just Find a Good CIO, These Problems Would Go Away."

Among the responsibilities of EDUCAUSE is actively educating and informing college and university executives about key issues related to information technology. The goal is to create a more realistic understanding of IT issues for presidents, CFOs, chief academic officers, and other institutional leaders. As part of this effort, the two of us produced, in conjunction with the American Council on Education (ACE), a seminar titled "Strategic Management of Information Technology: What Presidents Need to Know." However, rather than telling presidents what they need to know, we developed a set of myths about IT and then challenged the myths—as a way to change all-too-common beliefs about IT on campus. This new EDUCAUSE Review department—IT Myths—will present one myth in each issue of the magazine. We hope the department will allow discussions about the myths and the realities of IT to be held on individual campuses, creating a much-needed dialogue about the management of IT and about its impact beyond the CIO's office. We look forward to your comments about this department and to your suggestions for other "myths" we have yet to cover.

Have you ever heard, "If we could just find a good CIO, these problems would go away"? Certainly, having a strong and wise leader at the top of the IT organization is important; however, having such a person is not sufficient to effectively integrate IT into a key part of the institutional strategy. In a number of recent *EDUCAUSE Review* articles, the importance of involving the entire executive team in IT issues has been emphasized:

Hiring a CIO does not take technology off the plates of these senior leaders. Having a CIO is not a surrogate for the active involvement of the chief executive officer, the chief academic officer, and the chief financial officer in decision-making related to information technology across the functions of the campus. Senior campus officers must take responsibility for overseeing the systems that manage the information assets in their domains of responsibility and for working with each other and with the CIO to maximize the institutional effectiveness and efficiency in using technology. Instead of abdicating and distancing themselves from IT, all senior officers must learn more about IT, take more responsibility for IT, and engage in ongoing education so that they can assume these new responsibilities. The CIO must be integrally involved in shaping this education, but ultimately the campus strategy and the commitment of the executive team to work collaboratively will be critical.[1]

In the not-too-distant past, most business schools taught MBA students that they were to be the stewards of financial and human resources. But in the last fifteen years, the focus has expanded to financial, human, *and* information resources. Whether in a business or higher education institution, thinking about information assets and their management is still a relatively new phenomenon. Just like any other knowledge- and innovation-based organizations, campuses need to understand that the information, information infrastructure, and information systems on which each manager depends are critical to the effective functioning of the organization. The responsibility for these assets must be shared by the entire executive team; it cannot be relegated solely to the CIO. In a knowledge-based organization, information resources—along with the infrastructure and systems that undergird them—are not an individual responsibility; they are an institutional issue. As a result, information resources are the mutual responsibility of the entire executive team.

IT has implications across the institution. What unit doesn't utilize information technology or information resources? But the use of information technology and resources must be situated in the context of the specific unit. Merely hiring a good CIO will be an inadequate strategy. Beyond the ubiquity of technology, the shift from an analog to digital world raises all sorts of new policy and philosophical issues—issues that must be weighed from the perspectives of academic affairs, legal, fiscal, and so on. Twenty-five years ago, the management of technology was a service utility used by a relatively small sector. Those days are gone. The very nature of technology cuts across boundaries and cannot be neatly compartmentalized:

Although higher education has historically been organized in vertical administrative structures, technology is a cross-cutting function, creating horizontal interdependencies that require administrators to manage these campus-wide functions. This inter-

dependent and nonhierarchical characteristic of information technology implies that campus leadership teams need to develop competencies within their own functional areas and need to work jointly in defining the strategic value of IT investments—in short, defining information technology in terms of its instrumentality rather than as a cost center.[2]

IT brings its greatest value to an institution when it is integrated, not when it is isolated.

Beyond managing IT, the CIO, as an institutional leader, should ensure that the entire executive team asks a series of strategic questions:

1. *Where do we want (or need) to be with IT?* IT is not an end in itself but rather is a tool to support the institutional mission. That mission and the institutional goals are the responsibility of the executive team. Once these are defined, various resources—including

IT—can be allocated to achieving those goals. IT is not an end in itself. Perhaps instead of asking where we want to be with IT, it would be better to ask where we want *the institution* to be and then to consider IT's role.

2. *Which programs are our top priorities for limited IT resources?* Determination of the IT priorities hinges on the institutional goals and priorities. However, a campus would always like to do more things than are possible. How is this prioritization accomplished? In a January 2004 *EQ* article, Bob Weir, of Northeastern University, suggested a

useful process and framework for dealing with precisely this issue.[3] This process also helps to ensure that the entire executive team is both informed about and supportive of IT initiatives.

3. *How do we communicate priorities across campus?* The ethos of shared governance is pervasive in higher education. To promote open communication, a campus needs to widely share information about IT: campus IT in-

vestments, the progress of IT initiatives, and the assessment of these efforts. Implementing ERP systems has taught us that it is imperative to keep the community informed—and, where appropriate, involved. This involvement should extend beyond IT committees because IT is embedded in virtually all college and university activities.

4. *How do we align expectations with reality?* The alignment of institutional goals and IT initiatives is critical to ensuring optimal use of resources and to delivering value to the institution.[4] No campus leader should fall into the trap of not actively managing expectations of what a particular IT project will accomplish. In the absence of clearly articulated expectations, people will create their own. Only through clearly stated plans, well-defined assessment procedures, and adequate campus dialogue will expectations be effectively managed.

In summary, although it is important for a campus to have a good CIO, the CIO alone is not responsible for how well IT is used on campus. As information technology and information resources have become more pervasive and more important, the collective direction and wisdom of the entire executive team is required to ensure that IT fulfills its potential.

Notes
1. Brian L. Hawkins, "A Framework for the CIO Position," *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 39, no. 6 (November/December 2004): 96, ⟨http://www.educause.edu/er/erm04/erm0465.asp⟩.
2. David Ward and Brian L. Hawkins, "Presidential Leadership for Information Technology," *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 38, no. 3 (May/June 2003): 39, ⟨http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm0332 .pdf⟩.
3. Bob Weir, "IT Investment Decisions That Defy Arithmetic," *EQ* (*EDUCAUSE Quarterly*), vol. 27, no. 1 (2004): 10–13, ⟨http://www.educause.edu/eq/eqm04/eqm0412.asp⟩.
4. Judith A. Pirani, "Information Technology Alignment in Higher Education," *EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) Roadmap,* July 2004, ⟨http://www.educause.edu/Roadmaps/1773⟩.

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