Investing in IT Today; Reaping Rewards Tomorrow

by Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller

The continually accelerating pace of technology presents a good news-bad news scenario for CEOs of institutions without deep pockets. On the one hand, it offers many more possibilities for attracting, retaining and serving students, and further, it provides significant support for marketing, institutional research, and networking. On the other, though, it raises constituent demands for improved access and convenience in the delivery of education and requires start-up expenditures beyond the means of many with the risk thatsystems may quickly become outdated.

In our experience, technology in higher education is best understood and managed, not as a one-time expense, but as an ongoing investment for the vitality and growth of the institution. These investments need to be appropriately fueled by presidential leadership and leveraged to reap future rewards.

Every year, college presidents in institutions large and small are confronted by IT professionals, faculty and campus leaders with annual budget requests for new equipment, software, interconnectivity systems and the people to support them. As our colleague Laurence W. Mazzeno, president-emeritus of Alvernia College in Pennsylvania, noted, "One of the key reasons presidents need to think of 'investing' in technology rather than 'spending' on technology is that we are conditioned in our society to think differently about expenditures and investments. It may be a cliché to say that we spend in the present but invest for the future—but that cliché has merit." When we are *investing*, as Dr. Mazzeno goes on to say, we tend to make purchases that support strategic institutional growth.

Further, presidential leadership is key to effective use of technology that serves not merely as a stand-alone goal, but as part of a broader, strategic institutional objective. How should presidents use and lean on other institutional leaders to help factor technology into broader strategy and vision? What level of technology vision should presidents themselves have? How do

institutional and technology leadership intersect? The answers to these and other questions pose challenging dilemmas for campus CEOs while suggesting some solutions.

From a cost standpoint, it is imperative that campus leaders clearly understand the implications and value associated with recurring technology costs. Students and prospective students demand the latest generation of computer-assisted, computer-based systems 24-7. Institutions that don't keep up may never even have these would-be matriculants on their radar screens; many simply won't bother to inquire. Skeptical faculty who initially express reservations about high start-up costs may be converted when convinced that those whose teaching and research are aligned with institutional objectives will be supported appropriately. Finally, developing a long-term *investment* stragegy will enable you to make appropriate decisions to purchase and upgrade information technology as a means of enhancing your educational enterprise.

Campus CEOs who have committed to viewing technology as an integral part of a plan often caution that we should think of such a plan as we would for a personal investment strategy. They also point to one of the primary pitfalls of many technology plans—the failure to anticipate and build in "people" costs. In fact, training and investing in technology support personnel correlates positively not only to improved productivity campuswide, but also to job satisfaction and to our core business, that of student learning.

When we first began to recognize and strategically plan for the IT revolution more than a decade ago, many prescient presidents recognized that these costs were going to be an ongoing investment, a given, rather than a one-time expense. We realized that high technology management needed to be high on our radar and that whether to invest was no longer the issue. Rather, we began to assess such factors as to how to integrate, rather than duplicate technology; how to set and measure effectiveness and efficiency criteria; and how to use technology to

improve flexibility and reduce complexity. We continue to manage what our colleague Michael K. Townsley, former president of the Pennsylvania Institute of Technology, has termed "the six conditions of high technology management," including the need to change structures, policies, processes and delivery of services to accommodate new technologies.

Most importantly, we need to remember that ultimately, technology must serve the ultimate user, the institution, and not the other way around. Randomly spreading technology around campus, Dr. Townsley emphasizes, will neither automatically yield operational efficiency, nor will it enhance strategic value.

Every national issues survey we've seen reveals that appropriate funding remains the number-one IT-related issue in terms of the strategic importance to the institution. More than a decade into the IT revolution, it is clearer than ever that while new technologies continue to level the playing field for smaller institutions, they continue to represent a major expense stream that can, if properly managed, yield significant improvements in productivity. We remain more convinced than ever that the need for presidents to develop the "investment" mindset is critical.

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