



By DIANA G. OBLINGER

# Innovation: Rethinking the Future of Higher Education

**T**he economic downturn has caused many college and university leaders to question—even more frequently than usual—what the future of their institutions will look like. But the future challenges for higher education are not just financial. Information technology has catalyzed society-wide changes. Rethinking the future of higher education must take the innovations of the digital age into consideration.

James Hilton, Vice President and CIO at the University of Virginia and an EDUCAUSE Board member, speaks of digital-age forces such as disintermediation, asking whether faculty, students, classrooms, and courses must always be bundled together as “a campus.” What happens if they are separated? Another force is consumerization. Will higher education in the future continue to look like traditional colleges and universities, or will it look more like the University of Phoenix or Capella? In addition, commoditization has already had an impact on campus IT organizations: students bring their own laptops, mobiles, and other devices, often preferring what they bring to what the campus might provide.

Many historic challenges are amplified by the digital age. Along with issues such as access, retention, and graduation rates, students of all ages today demand greater engagement and flexibility in terms of resources, support, courses, and degree programs. Cost, another perennial challenge, is driven by a human-intensive model, by IT and infrastructure needs, and by regulatory and compliance demands. Sustainability too has become a society-wide challenge in recent years: although information technology brings great power and opportunity, these come at a price in terms of energy and e-waste. Other challenges for the future of higher education include assessment, productivity, and accountability.

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The articles in this issue of *EDUCAUSE Review* address these future challenges and issues. Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, authors of the best-selling book *Wikinomics*, argue that if colleges and universities can open up and embrace both collaborative learning and collaborative knowledge production, they have a chance of surviving and even thriving in the networked, global economy of the future. According to Brenda Gourley, former Vice Chancellor and CEO of the Open University in the United Kingdom, lessons from our history lead to questions for the future of higher education: is innovation being embraced quickly enough, have we reached a scale necessary to the task, can technology help, can we bring more hands

to the wheel, and are we managing and leading in appropriate ways? The third feature article draws from a recent white paper compiled by four higher education associations: Australia’s CAUDIT, the United Kingdom’s JISC, the Netherlands’ SURFfoundation, and EDUCAUSE. These associations agree that although the purpose of higher education has not changed in centuries, information technology—with its drive for innovation and entrepreneurship—has increased the options for widening that purpose from the campus of today to the future of society worldwide. And lastly, in a web-bonus article, William H. Graves makes the case that the time is right for higher education to pursue “best for the world” strategies enabled by the strategic use of information technology to improve learning productivity by serving more students more effectively while simultaneously creating a privately and publicly affordable, stable financial model for learning—thereby transforming the educational opportunity of today into the educational assurance of the future.

Throughout 2010, EDUCAUSE will continue to explore the future of higher education in the digital age; these explorations may take the form of publications, podcasts, conference presentations, special working groups, and/or partnerships. A second EDUCAUSE theme for 2010 is cloud computing. In the future, owning an asset may no longer be the key to providing services to students, faculty, or staff. Access may be more important than ownership. In spite of the hype and hyperbole, many in higher education

information technology consider cloud computing to be the future. If so, much will change. Many services may no longer need to be provided by the campus; instead, the provider may be “above the campus” in a cloud. If the IT unit’s role moves more toward “sourcing” and away from “providing,” what does that mean for the skills needed by IT professionals? And if campus users access services in the cloud, how much can an institution trust the security and privacy promised by the service providers?

The third theme for EDUCAUSE in 2010 is student engagement. With demand for postsecondary education and student success being greater than ever, student engagement is key. Institutions can provide hands-on opportunities for students to explore by accessing remote instruments (e.g., telescopes) or data sets. Engaging students in problem-solving, in virtual communities, and in active learning is an effective learning strategy—and it is more affordable and scalable than in the past.

Underlying not only the future of higher education but also the themes of cloud computing and student engagement is the EDUCAUSE value of innovation—that is, the seeking of new insights and solutions. Although we cannot know for sure what the future will look like, the light of innovation reveals the outlines of areas we need to explore. I hope you will join all of us in the EDUCAUSE community on our explorations throughout 2010 as we continue “uncommon thinking for the common good.”



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