Technology helps schools meet strategic goals

From building a 'brand' to creating new revenue sources, here's how campus leaders are leveraging IT to meet key objectives

It's tough being a campus administrator today. Expectations from the board and other stakeholders are high, budget dollars are scarce—and the competition for students is fiercer than ever.

"There is a lot more competition now than just a few years ago," says John Ebersole, president of Excelsior College, an online institution based in New York.

Traditional schools are competing with for-profit colleges and other non-traditional programs to attract—and retain—students, and the old adage "differentiate or die" has become a mantra among many in higher education.

For campus leaders, thinking strategically about how to address these challenges involves asking questions like: How can we build the brand of the university? How can we bring in research dollars, woo donors, and attract more students? And, increasingly: How can technology help?

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"Technology allows us to deliver increasingly sophisticated forms of instruction, recruit and serve students, and stay in touch with our many constituents," Ebersole says. "Thanks to technology, we have a growing number of faculty who live elsewhere in the world but contribute to the college's work on a daily basis. In the future, it will allow us to reduce costs even further—while delivering ever more rigorous and relevant … instruction and assessment."

That's certainly true for online colleges, but it's no less true for brick-and-mortar institutions. From helping with recruitment to opening up new revenue streams, technology has become a key tool in meeting a university's strategic goals.

Fulfilling expectations

At the very least, students and faculty have come to expect a robust and seamless technology infrastructure on campus—and this has become an important consideration when choosing a school.

Today's students typically own a number of devices, from smart phones and tablets to laptops and iPods. They bring their own devices to college and expect information to be available on demand, whenever they need it—and on their device of choice.

"It used to be that schools told students, 'This is the computer you have to buy, this is the software you need.' Today's student doesn't work that way. They want information when they want it and how they want it, served up in a variety of ways. The seamless wireless connection is what makes that happen," says Art Rankin, director of education solutions at Panasonic.

Instructors have the same expectations. They're increasingly seeking an integrated ed-tech infrastructure to meet students where they are and create a more dynamic learning environment. And schools are finding that it's critical for different technology solutions to work together seamlessly.

"The financial package, HR package, LMS [learning management system]—they all come from different providers, and I want them all to work together," says Kenneth C. Green, founder of the Campus Computing Project.

Today's learning management systems allow campus officials to monitor student activity closely, analyze this information, and feed it back to the instructors and students. "They might say, 'Hey, you're only spending 15 minutes on your widgets course, and most students are spending an hour. Historically, we're seeing that people who only spend fifteen minutes on widgets get into trouble, and we don't want you to get into trouble with the class,'" Green explains. "They're giving real-time feedback."

But for information to be leveraged in this way, campus officials must be able to share it across multiple systems. If these systems don't integrate very well, "then you're absolutely going to have data inconsistencies among systems," says Barry Walsh, former associate vice president for enterprise software at Indiana University and strategic adviser to the Kuali Foundation.

Even the simplest data, like personal information, can get scrambled if systems don't talk to each other.

"What if I'm a student and also have a part-time job? There's a person element in the student [information] system, and a person element in the human resource system. It's not smart to have two separate records for the same person, or if you do, you better make sure they match correctly," says Walsh. "If you don't have that, and if an analyst in the dean's office wants to do a cross-system analysis, it's a nightmare on your hands."

The Kuali Foundation is an open-source community development consortium designed to create high-end enterprise software for higher education, with products that include a student information system, a financial system, a system to manage research administration, and more. All are open-source programs that integrate very well, says Walsh, who adds: "You don't have to have all of them to make them work, but if you do have all of them, they work very well together."

Building a brand

But the need for technology integration extends far beyond classrooms and administrative offices. Campus leaders know that technology has become a major differentiator in higher education and that, when approached strategically, it can help increase enrollment, generate new sources of income, create operational efficiencies, and make institutions seem more relevant to today's students.

While technology can support a school's strategic goals, not every institution has been driven to think of how it can be used in transformational ways, says Brent Ramdin, vice president of product management for higher-education software provider Campus Management.

So far, many schools have used technology to improve incrementally on their current practices, rather than reinvent these entirely. But a growing number of universities are beginning to talk about "transforming the operation," Ramdin says. "This can vary across the spectrum, from something as simple as not dealing with paper applications to changing the mode of communication for those students who are more likely to contact you via social media."

Today's students expect seamless technology.

Nyack College in New York is one example of a school that has used technology to differentiate itself. Campus officials "realized they were competing with bigger brands in the Northeast, with smaller community colleges that were cheaper. They took to heart that technology was needed to institute change," says Ramdin.

College leaders looked at their fastest-growing campus, which is in Manhattan and is aimed at adults and nontraditional students, an important demographic in higher education today. Nearly 85 percent of all college students these days are nontraditional—they're over 22 and are primarily working adults balancing work, family, and school, according to the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), a community working to accelerate the adoption of technology-enhanced teaching and learning in higher education. These nontraditional learners need programs that are flexible, challenging, and relevant to their career.

Nyack College officials decided they needed a constituent relationship management (CRM) system that would allow them to focus on this type of student, through more online interaction in ways they had not yet thought of and across multiple systems. They began using channels such as eMail and social media for processes that traditionally were done by paper.

"We see social media as a channel for campaigning, for communication and meaningful interaction," Ramdin says. "That's a growing, emerging channel that will drive strategy in higher education."

Ray Schroeder, associate vice chancellor for online learning at the University of Illinois, Springfield, agrees that social networking tools are important in building numbers and participation of prospective students.

"Twitter, blogs, Facebook—social networking is the current thrust of building a brand name and building interest among prospective students," he says. "While web pages continue to be important, it's really the outreach via social networking that is bringing students to the campus."

Building a brand name is increasingly important for colleges and universities—and many colleges are turning to online learning to help differentiate themselves and reach new student groups.

One strategic goal of the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) was to improve its stature as a leader in education. Looking for needs that were unmet in higher education, UNC discovered there was a tremendous shortage of interpreters for the deaf, especially in rural areas of the country. Some states don't have a single program for training interpreters for the deaf. But UNC officials also realized it was better to train interpreters in areas where there was a need, rather than on the UNC campus.

"If there's suddenly a deaf child in Dillon, Montana, you'll have more luck if you train someone in place, because it's hard to get someone to move there," says Russ Poulin, deputy director of research and analysis for WCET.

UNC, having identified a need, put a distance-learning program into place to train interpreters for the deaf. Now, adult students from across the country are in class together, training to become interpreters in areas where there previously were none.

Other schools have increased their reach successfully via distance learning. The American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service now serves a large number of students out of state.

"Here you have a place that trains people in funeral sciences so [they] can work in a funeral home or be a funeral director, but there were several states where there was no such program," says Poulin. "They became the first to develop an online program in funeral sciences. It's become a huge thing for them in terms of the growth of their institution. They saw a way they could expand their market, and they've done it successfully to meet their strategic goals."

Opening up new revenue streams

When implemented strategically, technology also can save institutions money or even create new revenue streams.

Salisbury University, a member of the University System of Maryland, is a regionally accredited, four-year institution that found a new source of income with the help of cutting-edge technology.

The university was looking at audio-visual solutions for its newly built Perdue Hall, where the Perdue School of Business is located. The new building includes a 200-seat auditorium, specialized labs, team study rooms, and 20 classrooms dedicated to business programs, and it needed a flexible AV solution that could be used for a multitude of purposes, including presentations and video conferencing. Campus officials also wanted to provide a "wow" factor for students and faculty. And they wanted top-notch AV tools that would draw corporate organizations to rent out the classrooms for training sessions and small conferences, according to a case study.

Campus leaders worked with RCG Architects, which designed the new building, and Baltimore-based technology consultant Convergent Technologies Design Group Inc. to help them find a solution that fit these requirements.

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Collectively, they decided on Panasonic 103-inch TH-103PF12U professional plasma displays. Besides their "wow" factor, and the additional revenue that has come from renting out the space to local businesses, the new displays have enhanced the education of Perdue students. Combined with a teleconferencing system, they have allowed students to learn from business leaders from New York City and around the world, providing valuable insight to students without disrupting the executives' work schedules.

Schroeder says there are many ways technology can bring much-needed revenue to institutions, limited only by the imaginations of campus leaders. One example he mentions is the potential of massive open online courses (MOOCs) to enhance a school's image and burnish its brand. These courses are freely available, though some schools are looking at offering certificates for completing the courses, for a modest fee.

There's also the possibility of including advertising during a MOOC. "Commonly with MOOCs, you can get hundreds of thousands of students to sign up, and it's a great way to reach them," Schroeder says. While he doesn't believe the University of Illinois, Springfield, would consider advertising in MOOCs today, he adds: "I feel confident that many universities are looking at that possibility."

Colleges and universities also are generating revenue via advertising on digital signage displays typically used for communication, according to Frank Covelli, national sales manager for Panasonic.

This is an example of how thinking strategically about technology can help campus officials accomplish multiple goals at once: The same digital signage that communicates information to students also can serve as an emergency notification system *and* a source of new revenue.

"Digital signage is now being … tied into the security system for emergency lock-down situations," says Covelli, explaining that the two can become a single, cohesive system that work in tandem. For instance, a school's digital signage system can be integrated with its security camera system, so if a campus safety official spots an emergency on camera, he or she can trigger an alert automatically.

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Partners can help

But while technology can help institutions reach their goals, it's not always as easy as it sounds.

Deans, provosts, presidents, and other high-level administrators know they need to think strategically about the future, "but at that level, they sometimes don't have time to be visionary or strategic," says Rankin. "The phone is ringing, students are complaining that they can't get the right technology in the classroom." Campus administrators, he adds, can benefit from "a strategic adviser to keep them abreast of the trends."

Panasonic, which is best known in higher education for its projectors and other electronics, has launched an education vertical and has begun working with partners to help institutions formulate their strategic long-term plans.

For example, officials at one university told Panasonic they wanted cutting-edge technology for their medical school that would enable them to show human anatomy in 3D, which—in addition to being beneficial to medical students—would help attract new students and corporate sponsorships.

The Panasonic solutions team worked with the university to walk through the various questions such an ambitious project raised: How do you shoot video in 3D? How do you process it? And, how do you build an entire new curriculum around 3D content?

"We used a solutions architecture team to build a scope of work that can address the needs they have for a 3D curriculum for the medical school," says Rankin. "Now, we're putting the partners together, the strategic long-term plan—and we're working hand in hand to build this kind of thing from scratch."

Rankin notes that many of the deliverables in such a project would not come from Panasonic directly. "The 3D cameras would be ours, the displays and projectors would be ours, but everything in between—the curriculum development and all that goes along with that—would be provided by our strategic partners who are under contract with us to provide the solution."

Rankin believes working with strategic partners to provide total solutions to colleges and universities is important, in part because it's much easier for schools to deal with only one company. Dealing with multiple vendors can be challenging to manage. Worse, it can create all kinds of headaches for schools if a vendor goes out of business.

Schroeder agrees that collaborating with service providers can be valuable for universities.

Such partnering is happing already to some extent, Schroeder says, but often administrators are too busy with current matters of the day to engage with vendors. For campus leaders, the easiest time to work with partners on strategic planning is later in the school year, he says, once enrollments have been dealt with and before the crush of recruitment begins. Come January, there's a little more time to communicate and respond to industry vendors.

"It's important to build communication between hardware and software providers and the institution," Schroeder says. "We need to keep the lines of communication open, so the institution can understand what's possible and to see the potential of new technologies they might not have realized, and so the providers can understand what the institution needs." eCN

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