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Digital Transformation and Higher Education

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Abstract

Digital Transformation (Dx) is defined as “a series of deep and coordinated culture, workforce, and technology shifts that enable new educational and operating models and transform an institution’s operations, strategic directions, and value proposition” (Radhakrishnan, 2022). This definition doesn’t mean that it is just for information technology departments in higher education to learn and deploy. But it is an overall cultural and business analysis of a university or college to make sure that the technology investments in an institution align with goals of the institution with student success endeavors as a key measurement.

Unfortunately, it is often lost on many in executive leadership and faculty how the use of technology can impede progress at an overall level. This is often due to a lack of understanding on higher education as a comprehensive service industry. Many technology products are purchased with one specific goal in mind. And often fail to look at how one business tool can service a broader subset of needs for other areas of the institution. This often causes duplication of effort, inefficient business processes, and loss of overall focus on organizational priorities.

Keywords: Student Focus, Business Process, Digital Transformation

Section 1: Introduction to your Capstone Project

I have worked in higher education for the past twenty-five years. All of that time was spent in an ever-growing information technology (IT) department in a small subset of institutions. Much of the growth was unplanned and a reaction to current events and needs brought about by the dawning and rapid growth of the internet and other business technology advances. Most advances were very specific in use and many decisions that could have raised the return on investment for these large dollar expenditures were tabled for further discussion later. The cycle repeats itself with new products that get purchased to address a problem that earlier projects could have resolved proactively.

This cycle of inefficiency was exacerbated by IT departments that were unable to absorb their new responsibilities and technology architectures that grew year over year. In many cases, IT departments were expected to be the subject matter experts for business processes in other units in student services, finance, and human resources. And while they implemented various products for those constituency groups, IT didn't have a grasp of the significance of business process and compliance rules that was embedded in the product being used.

After watching this cycle play out over and over, I found myself asking why things had to be this way. Things that seemed so obvious to me were falling on deaf ears. What I found was that there was a broad swath of factors at work that were dragging our institutions down. In some cases, it was poor leadership and old institutional history that stopped the simultaneous growth. In others it came down to fear and lack of mutual respect for roles and responsibilities, and deflection and blaming. With the knowledge and skills, I have learned during my coursework at Boise State, I wanted to change this dynamic within my own institution with work that could elevate understanding not just for the University of Idaho, but others as well.

I have researched Dx from angles of inquiry that include not only higher education, but I've included perspectives from various high profile technology companies outside of the education space. I've done this because much of what higher education is doing parallels business practices used in private sector businesses. That comes with IT industry best practices and security measures that we too must comply with.

Section 2: Elements coming together

The decision making and culture of such an organization must change for Dx to succeed. With technology as a foundation of everything that higher education does, business operations, planning, and goals should be more inclusive of broader functions. From communications, to enrollment, to finance and research has become tantamount to productivity in educating students and running the institution. It will include a reconciliation of processes to better align the industry. In a Dx Special Report from Educause one section states "Dx describes a new value proposition that results from coordinated culture, workforce, and technology shifts that, when taken together, provide a catalyst for how an institution provides a service or addresses a need of its students, faculty, or staff" (Weil, 2021).

Much of the tenants of Digital Transformation involves bringing people through a change process that can be somewhat daunting. Change is always difficult and much of my research is focusing beyond technology systems and to people, attitudes, and cohesiveness. Sometimes just focusing on the small shifts can move an institution forward on the Dx journey.

Dx initiatives are going to have to persuade some to want to change what they feel is working in their favor. New process development will need to appeal to their sense of the greater good to prioritize the benefit of the broader community and students. That is a shift in

culture that takes time. It may take the use of a steering committee or task force to develop discussions with stakeholders from across the organization. It will need an evangelist.

With the more seasoned attitude of what higher education leadership and constituencies are comes various initiatives that have impacted their current ideas of how to lead areas. Each member of the teams will need to ask the question of how we can improve our work so that it is nimbler, student focused, and responsive to change without feeling threatened.

Technology has been a driving force in businesses for some time. In many ways it has eclipsed business processes and forced people to choose the needs of their software vs. the needs of their customers. In other cases, the choice was to keep old processes and not leverage all the new benefits a technology could bring. By doing either of these things we often lose out on how the data collected could benefit others in an institution.

With an integrative leadership focusing on these benefits and an inclusive approach to technology implementation and improvements we stand to gain more efficient processes that benefit the overall organization. In many cases it takes a step back from our own daily responsibilities to see the journey map that could change the culture of the institution we work for.

Culture changes gain us more innovative solutions to problems that have long standing in higher education. It could be the difference between broken relationships that hold us back, and common understanding that helps us all excel.

I've always been an "out of the box" thinker. I tend to look at the bigger picture when I'm observing what's going on around me. I challenge assumptions and ask questions for better understanding. Then I move forward with ideas for new strategies and ideas. That is what Dx has to do also.

I've started by employing my curiosity after observing IT operations through participation in meetings. Many in my institution are single focused which puts the organization in peril. This type of thinking also erodes the experience of the customer, in this case, the student. This may lead to the conclusion that many involved have lost sight of their place in the institution and the value of their participation to improve the student experience.

With good leadership employed in defining and implementing digital transformation strategies, the journey for the student becomes more of a focus. The leaders will have to employ strategies that include those most at risk in problem solving. This involves building trust and empathy for the employee while amplifying their value to the institution.

When we talk about anything digital, and efficiency, people become cautious and potentially distrustful. And because Dx is challenging, taking shortcuts may be tempting.

I think I've approached this differently because I've included people at varying levels of the organization in building a solution for the institution. With those people as the evangelists and involved in the day to day there are more involved in shifting the culture in the right direction.

Section 3: Results

An overview of the benefits of my project to the stakeholders has many facets. Currently, many higher education institutions think in terms of being a sum of its parts. A new leadership style that encourages, and then enforces, the need for thinking about a university as a whole. This creates the common goal of departmental needs being expanded to the broader needs of students and other stakeholders that are dependent on the university's success. Its designing the customer experience from the outside in (Behnam Tabrizi, 2019).

Digital transformation is a student-centered initiative. Students already have been whetted to information systems that talk to each other and are easy to navigate. The current processes at some schools are fraught with duplication of data input causing errors and detracting from resources students can use to monitor their progress in school. It creates a more seamless experience. And student reviews of universities tie into enrollment and retention goals. Alignment of departments and systems will make a university better positioned for competition with its peers.

Section 4: Conclusion

Digital transformation requires a rethinking of an age-old approach to managing business process. The development of new business process that use technology require a broader, and more balanced focus to how we run higher education institutions.

What I learned from my research is the necessity for this type of reorganization in decision making that goes beyond the IT department. The decisions for new technology purchases need a more comprehensive examination beyond their original proposed purchase to see if the software can be used to capture various data points that may be useful for other departments or processes. This can increase the efficiency in a student journey navigating various systems thus benefiting the student the most. If the student is having an easier time, that could create higher student retention rates than a university has seen previously.

Using skills like emotional intelligence and understanding why the change is necessary along with other leadership ideals that I have learned by following the likes of Simon Sinek and Brene Brown, have taught me that innovation and change can breed success for an institution that is open to new ideas. Changes are often thrust upon us when the negative and unplanned

scenarios occur. But by embracing these changes and approaching them slowly and methodically, we can make small improvements less scary and painful.

Attach a link to your actual project (pictures, training documents, etc.)

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