

Standing Out in a Crowd of Peer Institutions: Leveraging Your IT Investments and People for Routine Innovation

By President Kevin M. Ross, Lynn University

We have been informed for decades now about the transformative powers of technology and how the development and deployment of software and hardware will allow our institutions to become more efficient and effective. In the mainstream media and on our own campuses, we can cite numerous examples of how the utilization of technology allowed us to perform critical tasks faster or even better than in the past (i.e., the development of course management systems; administrative office suites; and more recently, a dizzying array of social networking applications that seem to have rendered our students' campus email addresses useless). In many cases, technology has allowed achievements to occur that quite simply would never have been possible before. There is no doubt that ongoing IT expenditures in people, hardware and software are here to stay. The key is getting the most out of these investments on a routine basis.

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The investments made in IT over the last 30 years have been unprecedented and oftentimes have produced great dividends for our students, faculty and institutions as a whole. It would be difficult to imagine a president, board or campus community that didn't have significant expectations, both now and in the future, about the percentage of an overall budget that should be devoted to IT. However, some of these

costs can be confusing at times and often don't receive the same scrutiny as other institutional expenditures because of the near ubiquitous opinion that if some IT is good, more IT is better. However, like other areas of the campus enterprise, IT must also be managed for efficiency and effectiveness and through the primary lens of your institutional mission.

Lynn University is a relatively young institution (we will be celebrating our 50th anniversary in 2012). We have experienced significant development programmatically and through the growth of our physical campus since our founding as Marymount College, a two-year, women's Catholic college. Today, as Lynn University, we are no longer religiously affiliated and have 2,400 students from more than 80 countries and 40 states attending our primarily residential institution.

Because we are a relatively young school with a history of strong entrepreneurial leadership, we tend to look at structure and solutions in terms of sustainable progress, instead of quick fixes.

We simply can't afford to spend time or money advancing toward our strategic plans in fits and starts. We try to do our homework, survey the independent higher education landscape, look at the available data (which admittedly is a new discipline for us, but catching on like wildfire) and put structures and systems in place that permit our divisional leaders to have concrete goals that stem directly from our strategic plan. It also allows our leaders to define for themselves how they are going to reach those goals. In short, we are at a pivotal point in our history where we must be more intentional about how we plan to move our institution forward. Crucially important to that work is our use of technology.

Like most other institutions, we have made investments in IT for years based upon the expectation that they would make us more efficient and overall better. However, we quickly came to realize that we had to find ways in which to truly leverage our investments in IT to serve the entire campus community. If we are going to stand out among our peers, we wanted to do so not just in a few instances, but consistently. Being relatively new when compared with peer institutions that have many more years and significant endowed funds behind them, we knew we couldn't compete in a technology arms race, nor did we want to.

Because we recognize the value of IT and encourage tinkering in the hopes of finding new and better solutions across campus, we have thought long and hard (and continue to) about how to proceed with IT investments and how those investments would support our institutional mission. We studied and talked with other institutions that seemed to be having success in the areas of teaching and learning through the use of IT, as well as looked at their trends in spending. We chose the components we admired most and sought to emulate those practices that were aspirational, but only if they resonated with our institutional culture and strategic planning goals. Then we got to work on how to make the IT arm of the university consistently engaged in supporting teaching and learning across campus on a more sustainable basis. This required a rather significant structural change for a small institution like ours, which does not even offer an information technology degree.

Previously, IT served under the vice president of business and finance and concentrated its efforts in supporting technical commodities and business services (a technical mechanic). This structure worked fine for that time, but prior to 2006, more than 75 percent of our IT budget was geared toward business systems. Most initiatives were non-academic in nature and were designed to assist business processes or student experience outside of the classroom.

In order to ensure that strategic planning goals and ongoing university objectives had the best chance of being successful and contained all the resources of those significant investments we made in IT, we no longer wanted to rely on informal information networks or personal connections between department leaders to be successful. So, in addition to creating a formal chief information officer (CIO) position, we had to reposition IT from an administrative branch committed to serving business operations to a strategic partner with all branches of the university. This included adding

the senior-most IT member (the CIO) to the president's cabinet, where the CIO reports to the president. This structural shift was a big change for us, and it has made a world of difference.

Once the CIO position was created and filled, IT was able to play more of a strategic role and become a partner with academics and all other institutional divisions. The CIO, through the direction of the president, also refocused IT goals and strategies to concentrate efforts, resources and knowledge in academics. Through this repositioning of IT, new initiatives were created to utilize technology in and out of the classroom to support teaching and learning.

- ❑ Efforts such as the Academic Spaces Task force, a task force co-chaired between the CIO and the academic dean, were created to evaluate and recreate more effective and technically equipped learning environments (whether that meant hanging smart boards or applying a new, more vibrant coat of paint to the classroom walls).
- ❑ The creation of our Center for Instructional Innovation provided a lab-like environment and academic/technical staff to assist faculty in the development of technical skills and competencies.
- ❑ During our new core curriculum development, the IT department became responsible for the creation of the student learning outcomes embedded in our new core. The IT department and academics collaborated in the creation of the Student Technological Literacy program.

The number one priority in the IT strategic plan is now "to promote teaching and learning through the use of technology." Most new initiatives are prioritized by how we are improving or promoting teaching and learning. This is a significant cultural change for IT and our institution — one that took several years but began with the creation and empowerment of our CIO role. Today IT spends more than 50% of its overall budget on academics or academic-related initiatives.

The one caveat I would offer is that the temperament of our CIO has been key to our success. Sustained adoption and use of information technology goes well beyond hardware and software purchases. An effective CIO under this model is someone who has patience and takes the time to listen and explore what individuals across campus are trying to accomplish through the use of technology. This individual must have the capacity to be technical when necessary, but also possess great people skills as he or she seeks to understand, explore and explain new ways of enhancing teaching and learning, as well as other campus operations. We are fortunate to have an individual with these talents and skills as our CIO.

Our structure is only a few years old and we already have seen great dividends in cost savings, efficiency and the accomplishment of many of our strategic planning goals related to teaching and learning. In fact, both our CIO and some of the programs created under this new structure have begun to gain recognition for the early adoption of emerging technologies. I realize this

is a significant shift for some institutions and politics abound. However, in my experience, it has absolutely been worth having another direct report in the CIO. With the right person in the job for your institution, you can leverage the significant investments you have made in IT and set yourself apart from your peers in a consistent, sustainable way.

About the Author



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President, Lynn University

Kevin Ross was named the fifth president of Lynn University, succeeding his father, Dr. Donald E. Ross, who was Lynn's president for the previous 35 years. He took office July 1, 2006.

President Ross has held numerous administrative positions in educational institutions, including Lynn. In his role as chief operating officer (COO) immediately preceding his presidency, President Ross initiated and oversaw completion of Lynn's long-range strategic plan.

President Ross came to Lynn in 1999 as associate dean of the Eugene M. and Christine E. Lynn College of International Communication, where he facilitated installation of its state-of-the-art broadcast journalism curriculum, studios and equipment.

President Ross also served as director of special projects, director of development, and vice president of institutional advancement before assuming the COO position in 2004.

President Ross earned his A.B. degree in English in 1994 from Colgate University and his Master of Arts in Liberal Arts in 1997 at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md. He recently received his doctorate in higher education leadership and policy from Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. His dissertation topic was "Bridging the Gap: A Multi-Case Study of the Adoption and Implementation of Instructional Technology in Higher Education."