

DECISION GUIDE

Helping CIOs To Achieve Strategic Partner Status

By Michael Jortner

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Introduction

Inside Higher Ed partnered with Hanover Research to survey 175 university and college Chief Information Officers (CIOs) and related professionals. The goal? To understand the technological challenges facing their institutions in the United States – and how they perceive and approach those challenges.

One key challenge CIOs appear to be wrestling with has to do with how their IT departments are perceived, not only by senior administrators, but by the IT team itself. Consider these two statistics from the study:

1. 52 percent of CIOs said senior administrators at their institution treat the central technology unit more like a utility than a strategic partner
2. 57 percent said the central technology unit at their institution behaves more like a utility than a strategic partner

What do these majority opinions reveal? Are there benefits of being perceived and behaving like a “strategic partner”? What might be the consequences of not doing so?



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Meet Our Experts

To help answer these questions, we interviewed two luminaries of the higher ed IT universe, David Weil and Joseph Moreau. Weil is CIO of Ithaca College, a 5,000-student campus in New York. Moreau, former Vice Chancellor of Technology at Foothill-De Anza Community College District, is now senior consultant at Higher Digital, Inc., a digital transformation services company offering solutions to higher ed executives.

Their insights (edited for brevity) helped us produce what follows, a highly pragmatic nine-step guide CIOs can use to make progress toward achieving strategic partner status at their institutions. In other words, a seat at the proverbial table.

Decision 1: Where can you influence the student experience (SX)?

"There's absolutely a role for our technology professionals to look at [SX] strategically," Weil says. "And to help our institutions think about that differently."

Weil explains that students require services such as tutoring, housing and parking permits. In too many instances, he sees "inadvertent barriers to getting those services, especially as institutions struggle with staffing levels."

Unfortunately, graduating also has its barriers. "I can't imagine any reason why we would still require students to petition to graduate," Moreau says. Machines using artificial intelligence and predictive analytics could announce to students: "Hey, you're ready to graduate. Just take these three classes and you're good to go."

Decision 2: How to build stronger relationships across your institution?

"If you don't know the players at your institution, or they don't know you, your job is going to be orders of magnitude more difficult, and your ability to affect change is going to stall," Moreau says. CIOs need to have relationships in academics, student services, human resources, and finance. "Into all of the different components of an institution."

"It's beholden that the CIO work in partnership with colleagues across the institution to be seen as a trusted strategic partner," says Weil. Helping other teams achieve their goals is crucial. And when doing so, "use partnerships language."

The payoff? When needing another department head to allocate their resources to an IT project, the foundation for trust is there.



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Decision 3: How to partner with the right vendors?

Moreau advises being aware of a vendor's track record and looking for "partners" who will be there "for the long haul." He cites LMS companies as a cautionary tale. "Blackboard was the big dog in the market for years," he says, "and now they've been taken over by two other products, Canvas and Brightspace."

"We look for companies that are really entering into something as a partnership, where they're willing to understand our objectives and work with us to achieve that by our side," says Weil.

Weil also emphasizes how the solutions proposed, and the vendors proposing them, "really have to match." "We've made mistakes on this in the past where I think we have gone for something that's too complex for what we are able to do." New technology must fit with the size of the institution and its capabilities.

Decision 4: How to get stakeholders comfortable with automation and SaaS?

"There are things that we do manually that we have done manually forever," says Moreau. So, automate them. "Which things can machines do just as well, or even better than humans?"

Automation saves schools money, he adds, but it also "allows us to repurpose staff resources to higher-level,

higher-value tasks for students, faculty, and staff." That can mean better service thanks to "more real-time responses to requests, inquiries, or whatever."

Then there's SaaS (software as a service). "If we're not good at using those tools, we're going to limit our options," Moreau says. Gone are the days of hosting large-scale information systems and data centers on campus, which made customization, if not easy, at least possible.

Moreau says this means CIOs need to improve their business process reengineering. "We've got to get better at sitting down with our functional colleagues and saying, 'Well, let me make sure I understand what you do and how you do it and why you do it.'"

Tactic 1: "Get out of your comfort zone"

Those are Moreau's words, and he suggests two paths. First, "tap into the community of educators" across the country. Find a way "to contribute to each other" so no one IT department tries to solve big problems alone. "Develop your network of colleagues beyond your institution." Leverage this network to brainstorm how to tackle problems at your institution and identify the right vendors.

Secondly, "Do things you wouldn't normally think a CIO would spend time doing," like volunteering to be on an accreditation team. "You'll gain perspective

that's invaluable. You'll develop vocabulary that helps you be an institutional communicator." "It just really will add to your credibility."

Tactic 2: Don't talk tech

Weil says, "I don't talk tech. I talk about solutions." That's because non-tech teams "don't care about the technology," but about how technology "helps them achieve their goals." Focus on insights, outcomes and "the business problem they are trying to solve."

"All of our colleagues throughout the institution are evaluated on different kinds of criteria than we as technology leaders might be," says Moreau. "And subsequently, we may all have very different definitions of institutional success." Strive to understand which metrics teams outside IT use to measure impact. Some may be shared, but others won't be.

Tactic 3: Find a way to report to the top executive

According to *Inside Higher Ed's* recent study, 64 percent of CIOs indicated they sit in the top executive's cabinet or council at their institution. How important is that?

"It's absolutely critically important," says Moreau. Citing research done by EDUCAUSE, a membership organization describing itself as "optimizing the

impact of IT in higher education," he adds, "The CEO and the CTO need to have a direct pipeline to each other." The CTO (or CIO) must fully understand the high-level institutional expectations of all their colleagues, and how technology supports that.

Weil agrees. In July 2021 his role at Ithaca College was elevated to the cabinet level, reporting directly to the president. "I'm providing insights and helping the institution to advance in a way that I couldn't before because I'm in conversations at the very beginning of an idea. Or I'm making connections they hadn't seen before."

Tactic 4: Dive into data

"At Ithaca," Weil says, "we're really focused on exploring ways in which data can inform us on so many levels, whether it's student success or looking at our finances or retention or enrollment."

Data allows institutions to evaluate their current state and find previously unseen correlations. "And then you can see the effectiveness, or not, of your transformational effort." It can also provide early alerts.

Weil sees his role as "partly ensuring that data is flowing through the institution and getting to the places that it needs to get to in order to inform strategic decisions." ■

Embrace the EDUCAUSE Model of Transformation

“When I’m talking with the president or cabinet,” Weil says, “I’m thinking, ‘Well, what’s the culture change that we need to do? What’s the workforce change that we need to do? What is the technology change?’”

Enter the EDUCAUSE model of digital transformation. Both Weil and Moreau are advocates because they each see technology as the easy part. It’s the other two that are hard.

“Higher ed is risk averse and change averse,” says Moreau. “That’s just who we are.” To transform an institution, he adds, “We’ve got to overcome that culture while we preserve the best parts of it.”

Imagine a university wants to improve student retention. For that LMS change to be successful, Weil says, CIOs must “make those three shifts” EDUCAUSE suggests. “You just have to shift the technology, workforce and culture...and that enables the changes to the value proposition.”

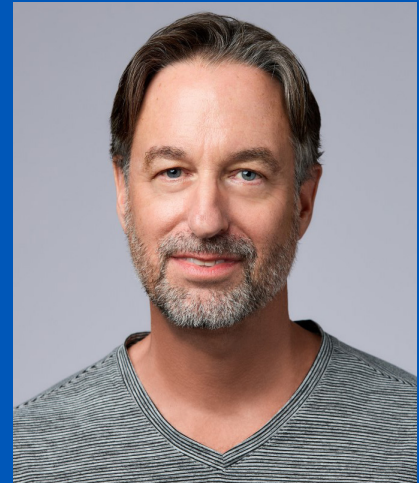
Joseph Moreau and David Weil, two of the most influential IT leaders in higher ed, have laid out clear, tangible actions CIOs across the nation can take to be perceived as a strategic partner by colleagues and, most importantly, by the CEO, president or chancellor. Technology isn’t the key to success. Instead, soft skills like influencing culture and empowering workforces will truly set visionary CIOs apart from those who remain aligned with the status quo.

Resources

- [EDUCAUSE](#)
- [David Weil](#) on Ithaca.edu
- [Joseph Moreau](#) on LinkedIn
- [“From Customer Experience \(CX\) to Student Experience \(SX\)”](#) (LinkedIn)
- [The New U: The Age of Continuous Connections in Higher Education](#) (JeffSelingo.com)
- [“Colleges jump on direct admissions”](#) (LinkedIn)
- [IHE research survey](#) (*Inside Higher Ed*)

About the Author

Michael Jortner is a freelance writer living in Phoenix. His work has appeared in USA TODAY Network publications The Desert Sun and Desert Outlook, Los Angeles Business Journal, The Bay Area Reporter and JazzTimes.



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