When Universities Act Like Businesses
Quick decision making may be anathema to academia, but at Drexel, the motto is, “Just do it.”

BY JOHN BIELEC

Drexel University, Philadelphia’s technological university, has accomplished an impressive list of national firsts, including a fully wireless cybercampus, distribution of speech recognition software to all students and staff, an online affinity bank, and a “computers-for-all” employee-benefit program. Over the past five years, since so many of these measures were put into place, freshman applications at Drexel have tripled, full-time undergraduate enrollment has doubled, research funding has doubled, and endowments have tripled. What a sharp contrast to what the institution was experiencing in the mid-1990s. So, what changed?

Change came with a new president, Constantine Papadakis; a focus on Drexel’s inherent strengths in technology; and a new, aggressive plan that set the stage for future growth. Today, Drexel is viewed by many as a “corporate-style” university with top-down leadership, quick decision-making, and a focus on the bottom line.

Nowhere are these changes more apparent than in information technology. Universities typically use a very costly, process-intensive, time-consuming approach for selection, development, and implementation of IT applications. But because Drexel officials understand that the IT world is clocked in Internet time, the school’s actions are not typical. Drexel officials know that time to implementation, for instance, is critical, because in today’s IT world, six months equals three years: If an IT solution can’t be implemented in six months, it may not be worth doing at all, for a better solution will exist. In the administrative area, for instance, Drexel looked at the traditional 35-step financial system selection-to-implementation process as outlined by NACUBO and EDUCAUSE and reduced it to 10 steps. This enabled going from vendor evaluation to implementation in six months, saving the university millions of dollars over traditional implementations.

Yes, this pace is more closely aligned with the corporate world (where “time to market” is critical) than that of higher education (accustomed to implementations taking years, not months, and often costing tens of millions of dollars). At Drexel, we insist on the rapid delivery of results—as President Papadakis says, “Just do it.” IT acts as system integrators, buying applications rather than building, where possible. Drexel’s strategy is top-down driven, identifying areas where IT can enable improvement, selecting market-leading vendors, conducting a “proof of concept” test in the actual environment, committing at the beginning of a product breakout cycle to maximize ROI, and—just as importantly—changing business processes to leverage new functionality.

This corporate-style model enabled Drexel, in a unique acquisition and merger, to upgrade and replace all of the IT systems at MCP Hahnemann University (the largest private medical school in the U.S.) via a Drexel-based ASP paradigm. Within six months, Drexel implemented SCT Banner systems for finance, human resources, and student records at MCP Hahnemann. A new MS Exchange mail system was implemented, all PCs were upgraded, and a metropolitan area network was installed, connecting the university to Drexel. The system was a mirror image of what Drexel was providing its own constituents.

Similarly, portal options were evaluated and Campus Pipeline applications were selected as Drexel’s digital integration platform, leveraging Pipeline’s work with uPortal. An excellent ROI was created while delivering highly personalized campus information and services within a 10-week timeline. A few weeks later, Web services (e.g., student grades) from any mobile device were added.

Recognizing the shift in higher education from owning assets, to having access to the provision of IT services (and again, “thinking like a business”), Drexel launched new, strategic business relationships with other area colleges such as Neumann College and Cabrini College. Cabrini, working with Drexel, is replacing its student, finance, and human resource systems with SCT Banner provided from Drexel. The implementation of additional new systems, including WebCT (for course management) and Campus Pipeline (for personalization, single sign-on, and authentication) are scheduled for July 1, 2003—an eight-month timetable.

Public resources are becoming scarce, resistance to increased tuition is mounting, and competition from for-profits is growing. It’s time for university presidents to ask themselves whether they are getting “business” results from their IT investments.

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