Technology Planning: A New Oxymoron?
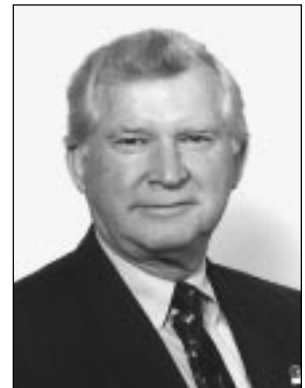
By Jerry W. Young and Paul J. Gomez

The environment in which community colleges operate today, as well as all other organizations, is the most rapidly changing in all of human civilization.

The pace of change in computer-driven technology is even more turbulent and unpredictable. Sometimes a product life-cycle may be as short as six months. Often, creating a strategic plan for a college is a multi-year process. How does one effectively plan for technology applications and solutions when there is such a mismatch?

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Follow-up studies on the implementation of technology in education has yet to show significant benefits to educational organizations. So, why is nearly everyone racing to buy the latest, fastest, most powerful communication systems, computers, peripherals, and software? It may have more to do with the general state community colleges find themselves in than the true benefits of technology at this time. Because of inadequate funding, escalating expectations for accountability, and greater state control, many college officials seem to feel that community colleges can no longer operate the way they have in the past. Technology may provide approaches to working more efficiently and cost-effectively.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding a technology planning effort, there are ways of organizing such an effort – choices that can improve college functioning, and priorities which can be established to make acquisition decisions less risky. Any college technology plan should include the following components:

- Communication System: What is the best hardware (servers, switches, and computers) needed to improve the college's functioning, and what is the best level of connectivity that the college can afford.

- Software: What software is required to maximize the use of the hardware and provides the best application solutions for the college. Again, it must be cost-effective.

- Maintenance: Sophisticated equipment and systems require adequate maintenance. Simplicity is important. It is much more difficult and costly to support ten platforms than two.

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- Training: The more complex computers and computer systems become, the more training will be required as an ongoing expense to support the technology. Highly complex systems, such as the newer fourth-generation language MIS systems, demand far greater training support than older software systems.

Every college has a history and the technology plan must consider former technology acquisitions made by the college, even though sometimes integration of the old and new technologies is not a possibility. The plan must have clearly thought-out goals that are directly related to the future development of the college.

There are some very tenuous dilemmas involved in technology planning. Some of these include:

- Partnerships: Given the cost of technology applications, avoiding unnecessary duplication and cost through partnerships should be given careful thought.

- Priorities: Since no community college can afford to do it all – especially not all at once – priorities must be established for areas such as distance education, management information systems, multi-sensory education, campus communications, teleconferencing, and research.

- Expectations: The more you buy, the more they want. Expectations tend to rise rapidly as new capabilities are introduced to the campus. Consideration must be given as to the best way to manage these expectations.

- Cost/Benefit: Some means of determining which areas of technology acquisition provide the best return on investment for the college should be developed and used as reference.

- Direction (future): Technology goals must be established which are consistent with the college's mission and strategic plan.

- Work Force: This is probably the area most neglected in technology planning. A technology-based organization, almost by definition, requires a different work force. Careful thought must be given to this facet of the plan, detailing skill level requirements, required new positions, and the ability to work more in teams and at a distance using the new technologies.

Technology planning is far from an impossibility, but it is quite different from planning experiences colleges have been used to in the past. A great deal more technical expertise is required, the life of the plan is much more unstable, and the return on investment is extremely difficult to measure.

BOARD FOCUS

Community Connections Provide Valuable Information, Visibility

Trustees who reach out to the communities their college districts serve provide a service that benefits both, say locally-elected board members.

Whether active in neighborhood groups, city commissions, professional organizations, or attending grand openings, trustees have an opportunity to "spread the good news" about the college as well as pick up valuable information on trends in the community related to the job market, perceptions about the college and needs of students. This information can be of great value to the chief executive officer and other board members during board presentations on college programs and services.

Fred Young, the board president at Solano CCD, says trustees and the college president in his district spend time at board meetings coordinating attendance at important future community events and then reporting back on those functions. "We've been attempting to be sure our curriculum meets the needs of the community. Meeting with the community helps us keep focused on what we should be offering."

In the Shasta-Tehama-Trinity CCD, trustee Judi Beck spends her workday as the chief administrator of a hospital. She finds time, though, to serve on the 13-county emergency medical systems board and several other organizations. "When you step away from the college and into the community, you learn a lot about how your college can better serve your constituents. They know I represent them, so they bring their concerns and questions to me that they might not otherwise address with faculty members or administrators."

Delsie Schrimp, the board president at the Yosemite CCD, agrees. "Some people won't criticize the district if they know you work for the college. I think being an elected official gives them permission to be more frank." Since the trustees in her district are elected from different trustee areas and all are involved in their communities in various ways, each gets a chance to hear about the needs of residents living and working throughout the entire district.

Dexter MacBride, the past board president in the Mt. San Antonio CCD, stays connected to the community through a regular newspaper column he pens. He believes trustees have a responsibility to ensure the community understands the important role colleges play. "We, as trustees, must reach out, via whatever media are available, to do the job the electorate expects of us. People wish to be kept informed, to be assured we are practical guardians and leaders."

In the Barstow CCD, staying connected to the community is critical, says board president Albert Carruthers. The board recently participated in the grand opening of a new natural history center sponsored by the college, the local unified school district and the Federal Bureau of Land Management. "We have a small community. If they don't see the trustees out in the community, they won't support you. We have a huge district geographically and we do quite a bit of traveling to stay in touch."

Long Beach CCD board president Dianne McNinch laughs when asked about her involvement in the community. She says the joke in the community is that "If Dianne is invited to the opening of an envelope, she'll be there." McNinch says she coordinates her community activities with President Jan Kehoe, "so the college is represented as much as possible at as many activities as possible."

Her involvement brings many benefits to the district. "Since my involvement crosses all economic, social and cultural sections of the city, I receive input from all stakeholders in the community. As a result, I bring a unique perspective to board meetings and have a pretty good sense of the needs of students and issues like emerging work force trends."

Keeping connected, says McNinch, allows community college trustees to "think beyond our experience and plan beyond our tenure."

Fred Young
Board President
Solano CCD

Dianne McNinch
Board President
Long Beach CCD

It's the Law

Trustee Compensation When Absence Excused

When a board member is excused from attending a meeting, trustees may be compensated if, according to Education Code 72425, "he or she is performing services outside the meeting for the community college district, he or she is ill or on jury duty, or the absence was due to a hardship deemed acceptable by the board."

According to a recent survey conducted by Sierra Community College District, most boards do grant compensation for trustees meeting one of these criteria. Of the 42 districts that responded to the survey, 34 reported paying trustees for attending district board meetings. Of those 34, 25 compensate trustees when their absence from the meeting is excused under the provisions of the law.

Attorney General's Ruling on Trustees and Teacher-Spouse

A probationary teacher whose spouse is elected to the governing board of a community college district cannot continue employment beyond the current year, according to a recent ruling of the California Attorney General's office. The AG determined that such continued employment would violate the state conflict of interest laws.

The ruling was made in a district where a teacher was denied employment during a second probationary year as a result of the spouse being elected to the district board. Government Code Section 1090 sets forth a strict ban on financial conflicts of interest, prohibiting, among others, district trustees from being financially interested in any contract made by them in their official capacity, or by the body or board of which they are members. The teacher was allowed to complete the school year.

The law treats permanent, tenured faculty whose spouse is elected to the local board differently, according to Warren Kinsler, a member of the law firm, Atkinson, Andelson, Loya, Ruud & Romo. Tenured faculty are able to retain their position if a spouse is elected to the board. The law states there is no conflicting financial interest if the faculty member has been employed at least one year prior to the spouse's election. However, the employee spouse may not be promoted or appointed to a different position while the board member spouse serves as a trustee.

Government Code 1090, along with other conflict of interest laws such as economic disclosure, gifts and honoraria, campaign contributions, and contractual conflicts, are outlined in the Community College League's "Pocket Guide to Conflict of Interest Laws." For a copy, call the League at 916-444-8641.