

College CIO academy: Translate the ‘techno babble’

Weeklong courses prepare aspiring campus technology chiefs to communicate, be wary of regulations, and more

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College CIOs could retire en masse over the next decade, creating a huge challenge for educational technology leadership.

The sometimes indefinable role of a college’s chief information officer has become clearer for five campus technology chiefs after a week of eight-hour days learning, among other lessons, how to communicate with higher-ups and manage dwindling IT budgets.

The college staff-turned-students attended Excelsior College’s first Center for Technology Leadership (CTL) program at the National Labor College in Silver Spring, Md., where educational technology experts led classes on topics ranging from how to lead a campus technology department to understanding local, state, and federal rules and regulations.

This month’s program had nine attendees. Tuition for the week-long program was \$2,500, and students stayed in the National Labor College’s dormitories.

A CIO academy designed specifically for higher education could be timely for campuses that might struggle to find a qualified IT director over the next decade.

Nationwide research conducted by Wayne Brown, vice president of IT at Excelsior, an online school, and executive director of CTL, shows that nearly half of college CIOs plan to retire in the next 10 years, and many campus technology staff who want that top role aren’t sure how to get there.

“For aspiring CIOs, we want to offer them a realistic look at the job and see, first of all, whether they want to do it or not,” said Brown, whose research showed the majority of people filling IT director spots in higher education are more than 51 years old. “If their answer is yes, then we want to help them build a network of like-minded people they can reach out to.”

The educational technology leadership program includes an entire day dedicated to communication, teaching aspiring college CIOs to “translate the techno babble” for presidents, provosts, and chief financial officers who control the campus purse strings.

A lack of communication, Brown said, “is the one thing that can really drive us into a ditch,” creating tension between the IT department and the rest of the university.

CTL student Kurt Ashley, systems and networking director at Albion College in Michigan, said the educational technology leadership program has clarified, among other points, what decision-making power a college IT director should have.

“I’m definitely more confident that I can do the job,” he said during an interview between sessions on security and compliance. “I’m not positive I want the job, but it’s good to know I could handle it.”

Rebecca Sandlin, deputy CIO at Bowdoin College in Maine, said CTL instructors have told students where campus technology chiefs should take charge, and when they should work with other department heads and faculty members.

A college IT director, for example, shouldn’t make the final decision on which learning management system (LMS) to use; rather, academic officials should have a say, because they’re better able to judge the curricular aspects of an online learning platform.

“We should never have an IT monarchy,” Sandlin said. “That’s why communication is so important in that role.”

The students’ IT network has formed over all-day classes, table tennis, and pool games in the National Labor College’s dorms, and dinners in downtown Silver Spring and Washington, D.C.

“We’ve spent an incredible amount of time together,” said Tina Finneran, education and research consulting manager at Bowdoin College.

For some CTL students, the sessions—which start at 8:30 a.m. and end at 4:15 p.m.—have provided some assurance that not all campus technology chiefs are technological prodigies bred for the job since childhood.

With a background in customer service and technical writing, Kristi Lenz, a business process analyst at Webster University in St. Louis, said she was relieved to find out that “technology wasn’t as important” as she thought it was in the college CIO role.

People management and consistent communication with other campus decision makers, she said, often trump a deep-seeded knowledge of all things tech.

“That’s really reinforced my decision to pursue a position as a CIO,” Lenz said.

Robert Loyot, IT director at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass., has attended his share of CIO training programs—including the renowned Gartner CIO Boot Camp—and said Excelsior’s CTL is the most valuable from a perspective of educational technology leadership.

The other CIO programs, Loyot said, are broad and often inapplicable to higher education.

“You get much more focusing and targeting here,” he said.

CTL instructors weren’t just showing students how to translate technology speak to plain English, Loyot said. They also helped translate the other end of the exchange: from CFO, for example, to IT.

“You have to have that in-depth knowledge about senior-level people and how they talk,” he said. “We need to be able to understand business talk and know what they really mean ... or we’re at a disadvantage.”