



HOME >> MANAGEMENT

JUL 25 2021 MANAGEMENT

University IT Leaders Share Their Advice for Campus Readiness

As schools prepare for students, faculty and staff to return to campus, university IT teams are coordinating enhanced in-person and remote resources.

by Erin Brereton

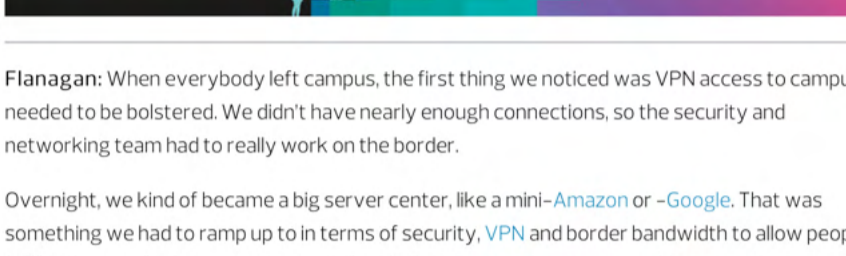
Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

LISTEN 09:53

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, universities' IT capabilities, and the CIO's contributions, took on heightened importance.

The ability to quickly transition to online environments proved critical for faculty members to do their jobs, for students to learn, and for the entire university community to collaborate and communicate.

EdTech: Focus on Higher Education recently spoke with a collection of university IT executives from around the nation: Sharon Pitt, vice president for information technologies and CIO at the University of Delaware; Helen Norris, vice president and CIO at Chapman University; Kelly Flanagan, vice president of digital transformation and CIO at Utah Valley University; and Baz Abouelenein, the former CIO and vice president of IT at Grantham University. Here's what they had to say about higher education's pandemic response and the critical role IT is playing as schools look to a large-scale return to campus.

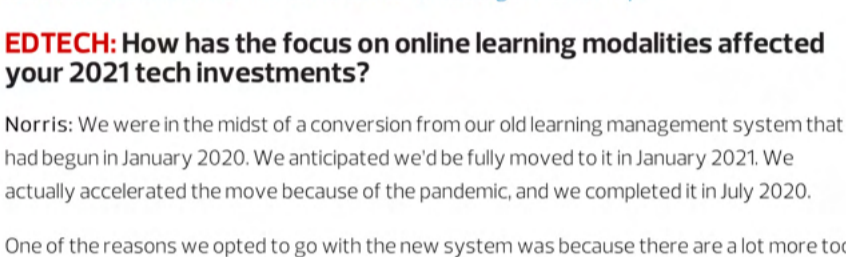


EDTECH: How are you positioning your university's IT infrastructure to prepare for the return to campus?

Pitt: We found most staff are very interested in continuing to work in a hybrid manner. We are trying to figure out how we support them, from having a robust identity and access management system to doing an inventory of what kinds of tools employees have, either for their on- or off-campus activities.

Norris: We retrofitted all of our classrooms during summer 2020, so we had technology to allow a faculty member to be in a classroom with some students and have some participate from outside the classroom. Some are seminar rooms with really powerful webcams, while some classrooms require much more complex technology.

Our president and provost have determined, unless something happens with the pandemic, our intent is to be fully in-person in the fall. This summer's focus is on ensuring classrooms are prepared for the in-classroom experience. Providing tools to collaborate is something we'll continue to see. If students are working in groups and sharing information with the rest of the class, making sure the technology supports that is critical.



Flanagan: When everybody left campus, the first thing we noticed was VPN access to campus needed to be bolstered. We didn't have nearly enough connections, so the security and networking team had to really work on the border.

Overnight, we kind of became a big server center, like a mini-Amazon or -Google. That was something we had to ramp up to in terms of security, VPN and border bandwidth to allow people in. Now that we've moved a lot of services to the cloud, as people return, those services are going to be consumed on campus. Do we have the incoming border bandwidth to deal with it? I think we do, but that's certainly something we will have to watch.

Abouelenein: Some of our recently hired positions are remote. We have people in different cities and states working at Grantham who have never been physically on our campus, really. That's a trend at many organizations. They've learned they can actually use that hybrid model permanently.

EDTECH: What are some solutions you've invested in that might have been a harder sell to university leadership prior to March 2020?

Norris: We were in reasonable shape in terms of equipment. For faculty and staff to work remotely, we had to supply a number of laptops, Logitech Brio webcams and Poly headsets. Early in the pandemic, there was a supply chain issue with computer equipment, so it was a case of getting whatever you could.

DIVE DEEPER: Here are 5 tips for avoiding supply chain disruptions in higher ed.

Flanagan: The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act money enabled us to do things like buy licenses from Microsoft for five years with a large capital outlay that wouldn't have been possible in normal times. I won't see those bills for four to five years, which will allow us to do things we probably couldn't have done otherwise.

We didn't deal a lot with individual faculty and staff needs during the pandemic. We did purchase several hundred hotspots from T-Mobile with two-year unlimited data plans for students to check out from the library. We loaned students several hundred Lenovo ThinkPad E15 laptops.

Pitt: We have made additional investments in our classroom facilities. We had lecture capture in many of our classrooms; we've now tried to do that in every single technology classroom across the institution. We're actually piloting some new capabilities with Zoom to try to have that level of engagement with students who are both in and outside of the classroom.

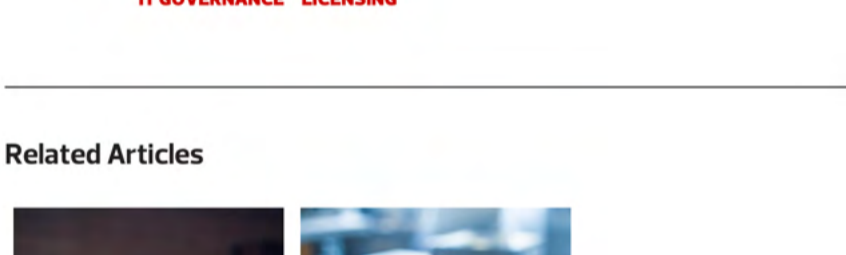
READ MORE: Sharon Pitt shares her advice for strategic IT leadership.

EDTECH: How has the focus on online learning modalities affected your 2021 tech investments?

Norris: We were in the midst of a conversion from our old learning management system that had begun in January 2020. We anticipated we'd be fully moved to it in January 2021. We actually accelerated the move because of the pandemic, and we completed it in July 2020.

One of the reasons we opted to go with the new system was because there are a lot more tools we can plug into it. We did a fair amount of evaluation during the pandemic for tools that we can connect to it, whether it's providing a better way to integrate some lab activities — tools to manage that process — or integrate some reading materials or collaboration between students and faculty. I expect we'll continue to invest in tools that integrate well into our learning management system.

Abouelenein: We invested a little more in the cybersecurity space, just because we wanted to make sure our digital assets are secure. We are trying to expand multifactor authentication on the applications we have on campus, such as identity management, instant response and Trojan detection. We're looking at several different proofs of concept at the moment.



Baz Abouelenein, the former CIO and Vice President of IT, Grantham University

Flanagan: We had an aging PBX phone system and were calling students who didn't need many credits to complete their certificates or degrees to say, "What can we do to help you finish your education?" But we were all working remotely, and we were calling these students on our random cellphones instead of university phones. So, we were not getting answers from students, even to text messages.

We decided to invest in new Microsoft-based telephony so we can make office calls with office prefixes and area codes from any device running Teams, just so students know this is UVU calling. The system is going to be replaced before fall starts.

RELATED: Here are 4 signs that you should say goodbye to legacy technology.

EDTECH: What factors are you considering when planning for fall 2021 that you might not have considered in the past?

Flanagan: We clearly need better ways to communicate. A student-centric application will deploy in the fall, and it isn't just a menu of things you can find on campus but much more process-driven — for example, here's how to pay tuition on the phone or how to register for classes.

The open rate on pandemic news-related emails to students was low. That got us looking at our campus portal, which, frankly, was in really poor shape. There's a real push in 2021 to improve our intranet.

Pitt: We need to be thinking about collaborative space in much more meaningful ways. For instance, my security team works remotely, but comes into the office to work one day a week in a conference room so we have a room of belonging and working together. But that also means we have a conference room that's out of commission one day a week, so we've got to schedule to allow flexible work to happen and achieve a level of productivity in IT.

Norris: We're expecting the unexpected. We plan to have people in person, but things can change pretty quickly, so we will be ready to be a bit more agile, or continue to be, as we face the future.

MORE ON EDTECH: How automation adds agility to campus service delivery.

EDTECH: How can IT departments best use their technology investments to highlight and emphasize the critical role that IT plays in the university's overall success?

Abouelenein: Institutions need to talk about student success. How do we ensure we keep them engaged throughout their academic journeys? How do we tell when a student is at risk? Technology can play a part in that.

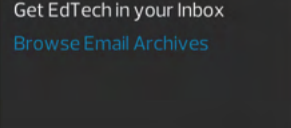
You have to have a system in place, for example, that can detect when students are not posting in a learning management system — an automated trigger that initiates some events on the system, so that a faculty member can promptly reach out to the student and ask why they aren't participating or why their grades are dropping.

Pitt: One of the most important things we put in place was a project management framework and office, because we're able to showcase the value of bringing technology experts into those kinds of discussions.

There's a tendency — and I don't think it's unique to any particular higher education institution — for people to see a tool and want that tool. At that point, you want to step back and ask, "What are your requirements? What do you need to accomplish?" Because there are multiple tools out there to do what you want to do, and you want to make sure you get the best tool, that it's secure, accessible and integrates appropriately with your environment.

Norris: For a university, it's important to have IT at the table as you talk about the future. Whether that's teaching and learning and the research side, or even on the administrative side, it's important to ensure IT is there from the beginning and not as an afterthought, to understand what the university is focused on and how technology can support that.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX WILLIAMSON



Become an Insider Sign up today to receive premium content! Sign Up

- More On CLASSROOM DIGITAL AND VIDEO CAMERAS COLLABORATION HARDWARE LAPTOPS MANAGEMENT DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION INVESTMENT IT GOVERNANCE LICENSING

Related Articles



Management Advancing and Streamlining DX in Higher Ed



Hardware Extending the Life Span of Computers, Laptops and Notebooks



Management Should Higher Ed Be Worried About the Colorado Privacy Act?

Latest Articles

- Advancing And Streamlining DX In Higher Ed
- How To Know If Your Campus Is Ready For Wi-Fi 6
- Can Elon Musk's Satellite Wi-Fi Improve Digital Equity?
- Using Power Over Ethernet To Support Connected Devices

MANAGEMENT Advancing and Streamlining DX in Higher Ed

NETWORKING How to Know if Your Campus is Ready for Wi-Fi 6

VISIT SOME OF OUR OTHER TECHNOLOGY WEBSITES:

- BizTech FedTech StateTech HealthTech

EXPERTS WHO GET IT Increasing Engagement in Blended Learning Read the Blog

Get EdTech in your Inbox Browse Email Archives

Subscribe to EdTech Magazine Browse Magazine Archives