

Chapter 89

Innovation Through Diversity and Inclusion: A Roadmap for Higher Education Information Technology Leaders

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ABSTRACT

IT leadership involves technology, but it is mostly about people. This chapter discusses how organizational diversity has a critical impact on innovation and the role of leaders to create an environment where everybody feels a sense of belonging and where all kinds of people can flourish through safety, awareness, hiring, mindsets, and listening. Leaders are sometimes unsure how to achieve a more inclusive culture. This chapter provides research, definitions, details, and actionable recommendations for change so that leaders can create an organization where diverse employees can thrive and innovate for the benefit of the university and its community.

INTRODUCTION

University employees help create the next generation of innovators, researchers, and explorers. However, not all departments have the same focus. Higher education information technology (IT) has historically been focused on operational excellence, efficiency, and “doing more with less” while often leaving activities related to exploration and innovation to researchers and academic departments.

But just as universities as a business model start to struggle (Fain, 2017), IT is starting to reinvent itself to become a strategic partner (Gates & Cheverie, 2017). Ubiquitous, easy-to-use, and quickly changing consumer technology raises expectations of students, faculty, and staff regarding technology

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services offered by the university. The struggle for IT leaders is how to deliver innovative solutions, help the university navigate change, and meet rising expectations in the context of dwindling budgets and declining enrollment.

This chapter will focus on the ways diversity can contribute to innovation, and examine the particular role that IT leadership plays in making these departmental culture efforts toward innovation, with recommendations on how to start creating and sustaining positive organizational diversity in an IT department. First, some background on diversity and inclusion will be explored; second, detailed information about psychological safety and growth mindsets as they relate to innovation; and lastly, the role of IT leadership in creating an inclusive environment in which innovation can thrive. Most of the existing literature tends to be applicable to a variety of industries, without particular focus on universities. In this chapter the authors present the available research and contextualize it for IT leaders in higher education.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Analysis of existing literature on the relation between diversity and innovation shows that while the topic seems particularly popular right now, it has been studied for decades. Diversity proponents defend that more innovative outcomes are achieved through heterogeneous teams incorporating varying points of view. Skeptics of that theory argue that the link between diversity and innovation is not strong enough and that diversity decreases efficiency through an increase in social tension (Mannix & Neale, 2005). To better understand diversity, one must understand the different types (gender, race, age, among many others), how a range of diverse individuals contribute to the group, and how diversity and team environments affect one another.

While there is little research on diversity and its impact on innovation in higher education IT, the following literature review covers research on diversity, innovation, and culture, which the authors connect to IT leaders in higher education.

Types of Diversity

The term *diversity* encompasses a variety of types such as age, ethnicity, gender, cognitive and thinking styles, veteran status, and others (Allegis Group, 2018). These different types of diversity have been grouped in many ways, such as inherent and acquired diversity (Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013); informational, demographic, and diversity in goals and values (Stanford, 1999); and demographic, experiential, and cognitive diversity (de Anca & Aragón, 2018). Similarly to the latter, Gartner groups them in three dimensions of diversity: Legacy, Experiential, and Thought (Logan & Rozwell, 2016). Legacy Diversity is what is traditionally thought of when the word “diversity” is used; these are physical characteristics such as race, gender, LGBTQ+ status, physical or mental disability, et cetera. Legacy Diversity is generally visible and static. Experiential Diversity is comprised of experiences one has in life and includes social identity and behavior, such as job experiences, relationships, and education. Lastly, Thought Diversity looks down to the neurophysiological level, including cognitive styles, emotions, and personality. A diverse range of employees in all of these categories is important to experience the breadth of people, cultures, experiences, and ways of thinking.

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