Making Digital Transformation Part of the Curriculum for Colleges and Universities

The higher education industry, like most industries, is experiencing an increased focus on technology and efficiency as the world has become progressively virtual. Join us as we discuss how your institution can keep up with the changing landscape, automate your most time-consuming processes, and get critical insights on how to retain and graduate more students.

Find additional resources on our event page: https://www.claconnect.com/events/2022/making-digital-transformation-part-of-the-program-for-colleges

Here is a transcription of this session:

Tyler Gerig:

Hello, everybody. Thanks for joining us today. I get the pleasure of kicking us off here because after you hear from our other three presenters, it's going to be a tough act to follow. But I just wanted to mention a couple things before we got going. First is just that we're excited. We think we have some great content to share with you all, and this is going to be a great conversational piece.

Tyler Gerig:

But we really are relying kind of on some interaction from the audience. We're hoping you guys can answer the questions as we go along just because that's going to really lead our discussion and just keep the conversation going around different ideas we're covering. We've got Matt, Deirdre and Ryan that are going to really take the bulk of this presentation.

Tyler Gerig:

But one last thing I did want to mention before we got going was that disclaimer on slide two. You can go ahead and look through it yourself, but we just want to make sure we mention that before we get going. But I'm going to kick it off to the team here.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah. Awesome. Thanks, Tyler. I really appreciate it. Great to be with you all, either this afternoon or this morning, depending on where you're at. Really happy to be joining you all and great to be presenting with Tyler, Deirdre and Ryan as well. And just wanted to give maybe some brief introductions on our side.

Matthew Lang:

So my name is Matt Lang. I'm a principal in our digital group here at CLA, been with the firm for about a couple years now, been consulting for about six. I have a bunch of higher ed experience when I was down in Texas and then a bunch of K through 12 experience as well. I have a wide variety of political science degrees.

Matthew Lang:

I was going to be an academic and then started having kids and met my wife and just had to move closer to home just due to some family circumstances, but that's okay. I'm still with y'all here today, former college professor, so I will be okay with long periods of silence to Tyler's point around participation. So, just a little bit about me. Deirdre, do you want to go next?

Deirdre Hodgson:

Happy to. Nice to be with everyone today. Thank you for joining us for this webcast we're doing today. My name is Deirdre as noted. I sit in our Minneapolis location. I lead the private college segment of our higher education practice here at CLA. I've been doing this for over 17 years now, working with all types of institutions, large, medium, small, and really have a passion about this and have had a ton of conversations around digital transformation.

Deirdre Hodgson:

And so really looking forward to talking to Matt and Ryan about this today, and all of you. So thank you for joining, and I'll turn over to Ryan to give a little bit about himself.

Ryan Merryman:

Hello, I'm a principal out here in our Sacramento office. I've been with CLA for about 12 years. My background is that of, I began in audit and then I spent the majority of my career doing forensic and forensic data analytics in the context of investigations and fraud risk management. And over the past several years have focused in bringing clients digital solutions.

Ryan Merryman:

So kind of a diverse background there, but looking forward to talking about how to use these concepts at colleges and universities.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Can I ask you two a question to start off with? Because hopefully, everybody caught the play on words on the title of our webinar, Making Digital Transformation Part of the Curriculum. We're obviously not talking about credits here that students are attending. Although Matt, you said you're okay with kind of sitting in a professor role.

Deirdre Hodgson:

But we hear that digital transformation terminology thrown around a lot across all industries, but in particular, we're talking about higher education. What does that mean, Matt, when you hear it?

Matthew Lang:

Yeah, Deirdre. It's a great question. Ryan, I'll be interested to hear your take on this as well. But when I think of digital transformation, I really put it into three buckets, which is somewhat analogous to how we have our practice set up here at CLA. That first bucket is really around business intelligence, reporting, dashboarding.

Matthew Lang:

I'm sure you all have heard Power BI, Tableau, Qlik, Sisense, whatever it may be to do your foundational reporting that's really, really operational in nature. It can be a leadership dashboard or a finance dashboard, financial aid, whatever it may be.

Matthew Lang:

Usually, that's around one application within your ecosystem. But that really starts to gravitate towards what we call automation and integration. That's when you want to take all your applications, start to blend that data together, make sure they're integrating back and forth, data is pushed out of one system into another system. So that's really the second bucket. And it's hard to really do that without having some of the foundational operational reporting in place with the Power BI or a Tableau, whatever data visualization tool that is.

Matthew Lang:

And then I think the third bucket is what a lot of people call us for, which is around artificial intelligence, machine learning, data science, some of the advanced analytics and predictive methods. But it's really, really hard to go and do those things if you haven't done those first two buckets. And we'll dive into that a little more. But I think that's how I would answer the question. Ryan, is there anything you'd like to add to that?

Ryan Merryman:

I think that is a great synopsis and maybe a couple of general thoughts. When you speak to the leaders at an organization and you ask them how is technology working for you, you'll get a particular answer. And then if you go and talk to folks at various levels of the organization and you ask that same question, do you get that same answer? And is there a picture and is there some consensus at different levels of the organization?

Ryan Merryman:

And when we find that there is a big difference, that there's some room for improvement with some of these digital transformation concepts that we'll be talking about.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah. Ryan, that's awesome. I think, Deirdre, is there anything maybe specifically that you're hearing from your clients in the higher ed space around digital transformation?

Deirdre Hodgson:

Maybe I'll just start with, I hear everything a lot. We're hearing the topics of data, data analytics, technology, digital in every conversation. I talk about being in the assurance world, working on audits and going through audit planning meetings. You would think we're talking only about new standards and other audit risks, but really this data and digital topic creeps into basically every planning meeting that we're having because it is something that our institutions are dealing with.

Deirdre Hodgson:

And so I think our first polling question is getting into hearing from you all, the audience. What do you think when you think of digital transformation? We put some areas here, but is the biggest gap that you're finding in higher education? Is it a manual process? Is it systems that aren't talking to each other?

And is it dashboards or reporting? Or you hear the term data-driven organization or data-driven decision making? Is it lack of using data for that, or is there something else?

Deirdre Hodgson:

Let's maybe start with that and talk a little bit about the results.

Matthew Lang:

And I think, Deirdre, as people are beginning to answer those, I think when Ryan and I get a lot of calls from current clients or potential clients of the firm, they may call for one thing, but in reality, they may need something that really needs to happen two steps before we actually go and attack that specific outcome for the university or the college.

Matthew Lang:

So depending on what your answer is there, it may be more than that answer, maybe two or three of those. I just think that's a common thing that we see in the digital space specifically within higher ed.

Deirdre Hodgson:

So the results are coming in. It looks like the number one answer is disconnected systems. Coming in second is lack of using data to make decisions and third, manual processes. So not as much the dashboarding or the reports, but disconnected systems coming out on top of that survey. And I know we have a case study that we're going to talk a little bit about later.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah, Deirdre. I think when I see those results, I'm not surprised at all, to be honest. And to your point there, we're going to go through some case studies on our side about some projects that we currently have going on, some projects we've done in the past for institutions that are similar to the individuals that are on the webinar here today.

Matthew Lang:

So we'll go through those. We'll have some collaboration back and forth between the three of us, and then obviously, make sure to use the Q&A functionality within the webinar to ask us questions. More than happy to stop at any point to answer those and then we'll go from there.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Great.

Matthew Lang:

So I think with that being said, I know, Ryan, this is one that you and I have worked on. I know you've worked on this one in a little more detail for some colleges and universities, and that's really around the topic of endowment automation. Can you maybe speak to this in a little more detail? Just give us the high 30,000-foot view around how we got contacted, what the pain point was and then kind of what our solution was as well.

Ryan Merryman:

Yeah, we had an institution. They were using a stack of products that they really liked. They were using Fundriver for their endowment accounting, and they were using Blackbaud for their GL. And the recurring month to month procedures to ingest and utilize the data in those systems was getting overwhelming.

Ryan Merryman:

So they had over a hundred different fund statements that they had to deal with on a monthly basis. Some were on a quarter and some were even on an annual basis. They would get these statements at different frequencies, and then they would have to manually ingest the data off those statements, key it into a Fundriver. The information in Fundriver was great, but it was only as updated as the last import. And that process alone was pretty complex and it took some of their higher level people and many, many hours to keep that updated.

Ryan Merryman:

So that was just getting the statements into Fundriver. And then they had the issue of now Fundriver not reconciling to their GL. And so they would have to do a manual mapping over into their GL. And so the process involved some of the highest level and most experienced folks in the group to partake in spending a significant percentage of their time just managing the Excel ingestion manual keying into these different statements and getting them updated.

Ryan Merryman:

So it really was a challenge. They wanted to see their balances in different funds. And in order to get those answers, it was the wheels would come off. They would have to go to one place, see, "Hey, it hasn't been updated in 90 days," then they're going to a manual reconstruction in Excel. Now, it doesn't reconcile to anything.

Ryan Merryman:

So, we're helping them to come up with a better process beginning from, "Hey, how do we ingest these statements in different form? Can we automate that? If not, how do we create a process that's scalable for them," where they could leverage and be transparent from the top down of, what's been updated when, and they can answer questions for their constituents in a more timely manner.

Ryan Merryman:

So it was really a stack of different solutions that were helping them to work with those issues.

Matthew Lang:

Hey, Ryan, to that point, I know I just wanted to hit on one of the words that you said, and that was automate. So I think when a layperson hears automate, they think of no human intervention. A machine's going to do all the work. And I think for you and I, they are really doing this on a daily basis. And Deirdre, who's hearing about it and seeing it at our clients, I mean it's not really all machines, right? There's no human intervention. Can you speak to that a little more?

Ryan Merryman:

Yeah. So that is a good point. Certainly not taking away all the manual effort. So the different fund statements, it's really kind of infinite how those would look and they change. So in order to pull the

information off that statement, can you come up with an import template? For many of those, we could not. It was not feasible to do it.

Ryan Merryman:

So we created a process where we came up with a schema of what information we needed to grab off of those statements that was related to what Fundriver required. And we created a process of instruction on how to manually do that. So now the highest ranking people in the accounting organization weren't responsible for that, but others could do it.

Ryan Merryman:

And then we also created a schedule, basically an app with a screen showing the last time it was updated, how much was updated, how much is still yet to be done. And that gave a lot of transparency into the process. And then once we had those data fields, we were able to then work in better automation. "Hey, how do we upload this? What does the reporting look like?"

Ryan Merryman:

So those steps, the importation into the tools was more automated. And then the reconciliation was more automated. So on those fronts, we were able to get more towards that complete automation whereas the import was still a mix bag.

Deirdre Hodgson:

What's interesting to me on this topic is I see a lot of different endowment tracking processes all the way from a spreadsheet with hundreds of tabs that is very manual and dependent on the knowledge of maybe that one person that has created this endowment tracking process, to kind of this stage in the game where we have an institution that has purchased a tool off the shelf, that will be helpful, that is helpful, but isn't necessarily optimized or integrated in a way that is gaining them much efficiency beyond the spreadsheet.

Deirdre Hodgson:

And they're kind of like in phase two. And then the opportunity that I think this type of project or that they can get to by creating these templates and the things that you just talked about, creating efficiencies, I think of a number of institutions going through turnover in a lot of different positions. And if you are creating a process beyond gaining efficiency, you're allowing somebody else to come in, to be able to do that as opposed to it being solely on one person's historical knowledge. Right?

Ryan Merryman:

Yeah, absolutely. And that scenario was ... Probably the main reason that this client came to us is that they had a small group of individuals responsible for this. And it was these complex multitab Excel files. And as long as they didn't go on vacation, things got updated. And they had time.

Ryan Merryman:

But what was happening is that they're growing and some of these individuals were going to move on to different roles and move on. And there was some contingency planning risk there on, "Hey, if this file gets lost, or if this person, if their institutional knowledge leaves, is our process broken?" And the answer to that was yes.

Ryan Merryman:

So just sort of drawing up a process that made sense and drawing up technology based procedures that were not specific to an individuals in their name was a real win in this scenario because it gave leadership a lot more confidence that they could transition people to other roles, and that it wouldn't break if someone went on leave or on vacation or something like that.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Matt, I think we have a polling question. Just wanting to hear a little bit from the audience on this one.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah, you bet, Deirdre. Effectively what we're asking here is that endowment accounting process that Deirdre and Ryan have been talking about at your institutions, I guess, on a typical Likert scale, that five point that you see in the slide there in the polling question. How manual is that process for y'all is really what we're trying to get at. Because I think, Deirdre, what we've talked about, this isn't just like a small college or a medium sized college. This is something that's probably across the board. Is that fair?

Deirdre Hodgson:

Yeah. I mean any college that has an endowment is somewhere on the spectrum here, but if you're an institution that is part of a state system and there's a foundation that is managing an endowment, there's kind of a lot of application amongst all different sizes and types of schools here with endowments. And I think what we're seeing from the results of the survey is that the majority of you all agree with that statement, that it is very manual.

Deirdre Hodgson:

There is a good crew that's answering strongly agree, and some that are neutral and only a couple that disagree. So, those institutions that are disagreeing probably have gone through a process to automate to the extent that they can is what I would guess, or has a module within their overall system that is highly integrated. That would be my guess. I don't know if you have any other comments as a result of this survey.

Matthew Lang:

I think, Deirdre, to add to your point there, I think that makes a ton of sense. And I think the endowment accounting is just one of those areas within higher ed that is just generally high in terms of manual process and hours for those individuals within that department to go and make that happen. And to Ryan's point, as long as someone doesn't go on vacation, it'll probably run.

Matthew Lang:

Ryan, is there anything else you wanted to say before we jumped into another case study?

Ryan Merryman:

No. I mean, we've heard of certain clients electing to go the custodial route and sort of outsource that challenge so that they ... And one of the main benefits of the custodial route is that they may get some of that data as an output that's ripe for the appropriate analysis. So they're able to sort of outsource that process that we described at the outset there.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah, it makes a ton of sense. So I think, Ryan, kind of transitioning from endowment to internal audit. So I know that's something that you're familiar with just given your background at CLA before transitioning over to the digital team and data analytics space. Can you talk about some of the work we've been doing with some of the larger institutions around internal audit and some of the manual processes and maybe a lack of support and resources in those departments?

Ryan Merryman:

Yeah, absolutely. We're seeing a trend of internal audit groups that are operating very lean and having trouble identifying and keeping staff with the requisite skillset to do data analytics, maybe only having one or two folks with those skills. And so they're reliant on traditional manual sampling based internal audit techniques. And it's really hard to do more in that scenario with a fixed head count and a fixed budget.

Ryan Merryman:

So year over year, their programs and the procedures are feeling very similar and the value add is similar year to year. So what we're finding is that a number of our clients or institutions that have become our clients are looking for help in developing a data analytic program. And what we're doing there is helping them to touch more areas using analytics and using data analytics tools like ACL, IDEA, Alteryx and Power BI to get the job done.

Ryan Merryman:

So what we're doing with those clients is identifying what areas make the most sense to touch, generally on a risk based approach. "Hey, where can we make a biggest impact? Where is there a lot of risk? Where there key controls that we need to measure or key processes that we want to get some transparency on," and we'll help them build up a program where they obtain their data from their system in a scalable way and maybe get a connection to that data, or learn how to run a repeatable query.

Ryan Merryman:

And then we'll stand up, help them stand up a set of analytics that gets the job done, that looks at the risks that they want, looks at the controls that they want, the fraud risks that are interesting to them or that we help them to develop. And then we might automate that, give them some macros or some method of rerunning those analytics on a monthly basis or ongoing basis. And then as time passes, we can help them to touch more areas.

Ryan Merryman:

So this slide here, this is just a brainstorming slide. It applies to higher ed and other industries as well. But these are just common data sets that we see at organizations where you might use data analytics in the context of internal audit. So for the client that we were ... The case study that we were exampling there first, we're starting to help them analyze their GL and their journal entries. And just get a sense of, "Hey, what sub-ledgers are rolling into our GL? Who's posting what? What are controls that are not being utilized," looking for just traditional solid accounting procedures cut off, and then some key fraud risk that we wanted to look for.

Ryan Merryman:

And then next year, we're going to be going into financial aid and payroll. And so now, we're helping them to stand it up the first time. And then in future periods, they're going to take the steering wheel and be able to execute it in their own instances of the software with their own data polls.

Deirdre Hodgson:

What's interesting to me, Ryan, is that we hear internal audit in the higher ed world and we think big institution, internal audit department. But I know of private colleges in my experience that don't have internal audit departments. They don't have an internal audit, but have benefited from internal audit like procedures to identify maybe a fraud risk or compliance risk for areas that have a ton of data like in student financial aid or other grants that they're getting.

Deirdre Hodgson:

So you've seen that compliance aspect as an area that schools can utilize this data analysis for?

Ryan Merryman:

Yeah, definitely. If you're at an institution that doesn't have an internal audit group that's doing it, you could still benefit from the insights that the procedures derive by finding someone to help you get those run on a timely basis.

Ryan Merryman:

And then you can get them to be updated on a monthly or weekly basis, but look for key risks. In financial aid, there's lots of things that you can do. Comparing the recipients of financial aid to employee ledgers, if they're employed and receiving financial aid, doing related party lookups, just looking for norms. Are there amounts that jump off the page for certain types of financial aid? Are people getting financial aid and not completing units?

Ryan Merryman:

These are the kinds of questions that you can answer by utilizing data analytics. And the tools necessary to execute those analytics don't have to be particularly expensive. And that's pretty exciting as well is that this doesn't have to be six or seven-figure engagement to get the job done. And actually in most cases, it's not.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Matt, we have a polling question on the tools and I think we can maybe launch that and talk a little bit more after that.

Matthew Lang:

I think, Ryan, to your point there at the end around cost, I think three to four years ago, as early as that, a lot of the things that we're talking about today were really devoted to larger enterprise corporations, maybe some of the larger, higher ed institutions across the country. But I would say over last three to four years, that that isn't the case anymore. Was there anything you wanted to add to that in terms of just the availability across the board of some of these tools?

Ryan Merryman:

Yeah, I think that's absolutely true. Some of the tools that we enjoy using, just to name a few, all tricks, idea, ACL, these do come with an annual license to get the job done. But they're affordable from the stance of the bang for your buck. Generally, our clients are happy with that value proposition and now there's additional tool sets available. Even Excel and Power BI, for example, you could do a ton of these procedures without even an annual licensing costs. Power BI desktop is free. And so you just get into the cost when you want to publish those dashboards to your user groups, and that's very low cost.

Ryan Merryman:

So, we can design a program that is leveraging available tools.

Matthew Lang:

Awesome. Deirdre, what are the results look like with regards to the question here?

Deirdre Hodgson:

It looks like we asked, "Do you have all the tools or data you need to effectively manage my internal audit department," which is kind of a broad statement. But the highest vote getter was neutral. So I'm assuming there's definitely folks on this webcast that don't have an internal audit department. The second highest being disagree. So, we know there's a need for tools out there and coming from, I sit a lot of my time on the assurance side of things. And we have been integrating the data analysis into our audit plans for the last several years, but continue to ramp that up and utilize new tools as needed.

Deirdre Hodgson:

And I think having the capabilities to do that cost effectively is huge for institutions, as well as utilizing it in a way that as Ryan said, you don't need to have just one person that has a PhD in data analytics to do this. It's really setting up the framework and the system addressing the risks out there that you're seeing. So, I think that's great.

Ryan Merryman:

And one of the programs that, or one of the things that often gets missed is that there needs to be some change management and there needs to be a learning plan on scaling up on that skill set and who's going to possess that on a go forward. We have plenty of clients that buy the software and then never use it. And that's one of the key things that we're always picking up is, "Hey, who owns that knowledge? Who is responsible for partaking in that continuous learning, and is that a requisite skillset for the whole team?"

Ryan Merryman:

It should be over time, but that's not always the case. You don't want just one person on staff that does it all. That traditionally doesn't work very well. And so that's something to consider.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Awesome.

Matthew Lang:

Deirdre, Ryan, great points. Ryan, before we go to our final case study here, is there anything else that you wanted to ... Knowledge that you want to drop on the group here before you got to go?

Ryan Merryman:

No. I appreciate the time to speak with you all today. If there are any questions that come up or anything that I said that I can help you to answer, just please don't hesitate to reach out. Happy to answer any questions and point you in the right direction if I can, so thank y'all. Appreciate it.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Thanks, Ryan.

Matthew Lang:

Thanks, Ryan.

Ryan Merryman:

You're welcome.

Matthew Lang:

All right. So just kind of jumping into our last case study here, I think one of the things that we talked about in some of the polling questions around manual processes, systems aren't integrating, whatever it may be really comes to light in these phase zero assessments. So, we do a good amount of these for a lot of clients across industries, but the main focus is really the ones in higher ed.

Matthew Lang:

And the reason for that is in higher ed, it seems like you all have been a little late to the game in terms of upgrading systems. There's a lot of legacy systems within higher ed institutions. And there's also a lot of them, right? There's a lot of applications for all. Maybe it's from career services to admissions, to marketing, to finance. Each of those has their own systems that they're utilizing on a daily basis to go and hit their operational goals.

Matthew Lang:

So a lot of times, we get called in to do these assessments as a result of a broader initiative. But sometimes we get called in because to Ryan's point, Deirdre's point, somebody leaves, as a result of that individual leaving, the institutional knowledge leaves as well. And the individuals that are there are left trying to put the pieces together of how these systems work together and how to make that Excel spreadsheet with 20 tabs sing.

Matthew Lang:

So what we go and do is we want to go and talk to everybody within the organization from a key stakeholder perspective within functional departments. So, we'll go talk to admissions. We'll talk to individuals in finance and marketing, career services, alumni relations, whatever it may be. And in this law school case study, as a result of those conversations, there was an extremely big process to effectively get students in the door to graduating students, and then getting those student services from a career standpoint and then staying connected with them from an alumni relations perspective.

Matthew Lang:

And as a result of that, almost 45 step process, there are about 30 systems within there. Some of those being modern systems like you would expect from Salesforce, student information systems such as

Jenzabar and Banner and different things like that, but also very archaic systems like Microsoft Access. There are also some very old SQL servers in there as well. That were on-prem that were end of life.

Matthew Lang:

And as a result, some of those legacy systems started to break down and there were some examples where they would admit a student into the law school and then the marketing department would then send them an email saying they need to apply. So, there was a real breakdown in systems and then a real, I call it degradation in the student experience. Student just got admitted and then you're telling them to apply and they have questions and things like that. Now a lot of that came from a lack of system integration and process integration.

Matthew Lang:

So as you can see on this slide here, we do a quick phase zero assessment, small dollar amount, small timeframe, and we really want to dive deeply into those data sources. We want to catalog what those are, really understand what the existing reporting and dashboarding is around those and understanding how each functional area or department is doing their work on a daily basis, integrating those systems in there.

Matthew Lang:

And then as a result of all that discovery work, we map out what the current state processes are. But then also we map out what the future can look like as well in terms of some of the automation that Deirdre and Ryan talked about at the beginning. Here's where you can insert an automation piece, here's maybe where you can cancel out a redundant system and save some dollars. And then we build a roadmap as a result of that as well. Over the next three months, six months, nine months, 12 months, here's what you need to go and do to go and achieve the current state.

Matthew Lang:

And then we'll also put together a use case prioritization matrix that essentially illustrates here are all the ways that we heard in our discovery sessions, how people want to utilize data and systems and begin that transformation. We plot all of those on a graphic, basically with everything in the upper right hand corner being high value and high feasibility to the organization. And then that helps shape that roadmap and helps the organization figure out these are our quickest items in terms of ROI and this is what we need to go and focus on first, not only to enhance the student experience but to make those individuals that are doing the work on a daily basis make them happier and prevent turnover as well.

Deirdre Hodgson:

I was just going to add on this. This is one specific case study, but I think we've seen this at several different institutions where, as you said, the number of applications, the folks that are included in this project are surprised. Actually when you map it all out, it's a little alarming when you kind of map out the roadmap of all the applications and what they're doing and how they're not talking to each other integrated. It's kind of crazy to see the diversity in systems, the age difference, the variety, who even is aware of what's being utilized. I don't think, until they go through this process, some institutions know really the full picture.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah. Absolutely correct. And we always ask the question, how many applications do you think you have within your organization whether it'd be a college university, private organization, whatever it may be? And usually we'll hear 10 or 20, but after we go through this exercise, we always just add 30, right? So the actual answer is 40 or 50. Sometimes I've walked into a college where they had 110 different applications. And it wasn't even that big of a school, maybe 5,000 students. And to be able to manage that and keep all that information flowing alongside the student experience is it's incredibly difficult when you have that amount of sprawl and a lack of documentation around those systems.

Deirdre Hodgson:

And so when does a problem like this bubble up? Is it in those kind of maybe student experience issues that are being reported or workforce just having frustration? Who's calling us for help in this situation?

Matthew Lang:

Usually it's the finance, the head of finance, that's calling us. The reason why is in a lot of institutions, the IT is residing under finance. And for that reason especially now, there's high turnover among IT individuals within colleges and universities. There's a lot of institutional knowledge within the heads of those individuals that leave. Things end up breaking maybe a week after that individual leaves. Student experience deteriorates. Numbers aren't checking out in different systems and that's generally when we get called.

Matthew Lang:

Now the issue around that is it's very reactive and it does take some time to do this work. So in this situation, it was three to four weeks. So, it's three to four weeks before we can get you an answer and really begin to help. The right way to do it would be a proactive approach where we want to get all these systems mapped out. We want to understand how data flows. We want to understand how the data flows with regards to the student experience proactively. That way when something like that happens, you already have the information at your fingertips to go and make an immediate impact as opposed to waiting until that assessment is done.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Absolutely. And I think of not only institutions that have off-the-shelf solutions and several of them, I know of institutions that just have very, very highly customized kind of solutions that have been built and added on to over time. And again, turnover can obviously really negatively impact those institutions as well as just technology advancing with those customized solutions and not really knowing everything that's out there.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah. I mean, absolutely. The customized solutions, I think that's somewhat coming to an end. But over the last 10 to 15 years, a lot of those systems that people utilize on a daily basis will get customized over time. Well, we have this specific use case that we got to customize our system to fit. And then you do that three times a month for over 15 years. I mean, you have a lot of customization that probably wasn't documented in the proper way. And it's really hard to reverse engineer what the developer was doing if they're not there anymore.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, let's go into kind of our final polling question or an interaction here. We want to hear from you all using the question and answer portal within this webcast, looking to hear kind of what is holding you back from becoming a data-driven organization? It can be anything. We'll watch for kind of things that folks are dropping into the chat. Maybe Matt, when you hear data-driven organization, what does that make you think of?

Matthew Lang:

Yeah, so I think to me, that makes me think of key performance indicators. So, my guess is most institutions on the call and on the webinar here have those KPIs, but it's maybe way too many KPIs. If you're measuring too many things, you're not measuring anything. So we've gone into some institutions and they'll have a hundred, 120, 130 KPIs that they're trying to measure, hold each other accountable to be transparent upon. And that makes it incredibly difficult to go and be a data-driven organization when you're trying to go and get data from all those different sources to measure all those different KPIs.

Matthew Lang:

What do you think of it, Deirdre?

Deirdre Hodgson:

I think that data driven, being able to utilize those data points to make decisions. And in an industry right now that is dealing with enrollment decreases, very highly competitive environment and going into, don't know what's going to happen in the future as far as the investment market and those that are relying on philanthropy, the need to kind of use the data that's at your fingertips is huge, being able to make these decisions and be strategic around operating your college or university.

Deirdre Hodgson:

I think what we're seeing in the results, people putting in information into the chat, I'll just read a few of them and get your reaction. One individual said old habits or full buy-in throughout the organization is one kind of hurdle that, is that something that you see when you're going through these projects?

Matthew Lang:

It is definitely a real thing. And I think Ryan hit on it a little bit with change management. And I think one thing that you can't do halfway is digital transformation. You have to get full buy-in throughout the organization. But I think the way to do that is not with some gigantic project where we're going to completely redo all of our systems.

Matthew Lang:

We're going to go build those great data warehouse and all this reporting. I think you got to take bite size pieces of it to where maybe it's going and implementing that endowment solution that we talked about specifically in an accounting that show the great things that assuming the ROI that it's getting. And then you start to build advocacy that way through departments, as opposed to, that's more the bottom up approach as opposed to a top down. And I think the top down approach is generally where we start to see a lack of buy-in because people are being told what to do as opposed to being open to it and do it themselves.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Right. I see employees and collaboration, I think also along that same tone, getting that buy-in, that makes a lot of sense. I'm seeing knowledge of technology. Maybe people think, "Yes, this is great," but I'm not a technology person. I know how to utilize the systems. I know how to utilize, so how do we deal with that?

Matthew Lang:

So I think in that last case study, some of the themes that I'm seeing here around employees, knowing when data is available, right? Knowledge of technology, a lot of that comes to light in that phase of your assessment, because we're taking a data catalog and an application catalog as well. And showing people, "Here's where all that information lives, here's how you utilize it. Here's how I can get the information out in a timely and consistent way. And here's the roadmap back to the old habits and advocacy part of that. Here's how you go and build that over time by taking those short bite-size chunks out of the roadmap. Just takes one step at a time, but you got to have a plan and a strategy in place before you go and do that if you really want to maximize success."

Deirdre Hodgson:

Yeah. And obviously, resources from a cost or human resources standpoint is popping up as well. Institutions are looking at what might be a large project in their mind and saying, well, we can't afford that. We don't have the people that can spend the time on that.

Matthew Lang:

So I think the solution there is like right now, it's really hard to find really good digital people and data people and to keep them. So what a lot of individuals have started to do in institutions is to build really centers of excellence and power users within their organization, specifically colleges and universities. And they're hiring a third party like CLA to build maybe the specific thing like, "Hey, go build the endowment solution," but then have somebody internally go and manage that solution because we don't have the skillset to go and manage it and maintain it over time. We just need someone to build it from a point in time perspective.

Matthew Lang:

So our philosophy is we don't want any client to be dependent on us for the solution over time. We want to be able to help in a very tactical specific way to build it and then turn it over to the organization. And I think by doing that, you have to empower people and be willing to train people on those tools that get built.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm hearing a little bit on sometimes technology is letting people down. There's a glitch, there's something crashes. Part of that, I hear maybe there's something that needs to be fixed or upgraded. But it's not going away, is it? We're not going to go back to our green bar paper.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah. So things are always going to have glitches. Things are always going to break. The key is having a process in place and being proactive and making sure that risk is mitigated. And you can do a lot of that through a great strategy and a great plan and just making sure individuals know and are accountable to ensuring that doesn't happen as often as it is.

Matthew Lang:

I think things are always going to break. It's like the water heater in your house, it's going to break at some point. It's just making sure you're doing the preventative maintenance and things like that to make sure you get maximum life out of it.

Deirdre Hodgson:

So one thing from an IT department perspective, they're coming alongside the group that would be at the phase zero assessment, or within these projects and internal to the institution, IT department, or head of IT to help be an advocate. Is that right?

Matthew Lang:

Can you say that one more time? I just want to make sure I'm understanding you properly.

Deirdre Hodgson:

For each of these kind of projects that we're dealing with, we're also dealing with the information technology person from the institution to help not only be an advocate, but help find the data, explain what the systems are. They would have a ton of insight into the information.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah. Those individuals have a ton of insight and we need to work with those individuals. However, in my experience, it's best to have somebody from the non-technical side be the actual leader of digital within the institution, not someone that has a technology background because that shows the evangelism and it shows the buy in that it's not the IT director or whoever it may be.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Absolutely. And that person may be somebody who has built up these customized solutions or integrations over time and has some ownership and pride in what is there and may not want to admit that something's not working perfectly, or that it needs to evolve.

Matthew Lang:

Yeah, absolutely. But I think in the engagements that we've had that are successful, IT is always a friend, not an enemy. We're leveraging their resourcing and their knowledge to make it better for everybody within the organization and institution, and not trying to alienate those individuals. So it's definitely a collaborative approach, and we definitely need the help or just to think in terms of advancing data analytics and digital capabilities across the org. I just think it's best for that to be somebody outside of the IT department.

Deirdre Hodgson:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, this has been great. I think the interaction from the folks on the line has been amazing. Is there anything else, Matt, that you think we should sum up our first kind of webcast on this digital transformation series that we're doing? I know we have a couple more coming up over the summer and fall, but anything else that you want to kind of sum this up with?

Matthew Lang:

Yeah, that's a good question. I think for me, the advice that I would leave you all with is to start small and think big. So by starting with a really small project, you can start to gain ROI quickly and start to spread the good news across the organization. And if you start with an extremely large project that takes a while to see the exact and definitive results of that, you'll probably still be working on that in the next two to three years. So start small, think big, and I think it'll be well on your way.

Deirdre Hodgson:

That's great. Well, again, thank you all for joining us. We'll give you a few minutes back to your day, but this has been great. If you have any questions or followup for us, Matt, I or Ryan, we are here to address those. We're happy to do that and really appreciate being part of the higher education industry. And I look forward to hearing from you all and thanks for joining us today.