Chapter VI

Information Management in Higher Education Administration:
A Slow Drive on the Information Superhighway

Gunapala Edirisooriya
East Tennessee State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Society has entered a new information age and higher education administration remains far behind its counterparts in the business sector. Educational information management is being drastically underutilized by higher education administration. Databases are used exclusively for record keeping purposes as an end in itself. They are not being effectively used for information management. Thousands of human hours are wasted annually to complete various types of administrative paperwork without using the existing databases as sources of input.

This new information age is categorized by ongoing developments in multimedia and information technology that are opening new possibilities and forcing most people to restructure numerous activities in their lives, encompassing personal, professional, social, and institutional spheres. Rapid advancements in quality and versatility of products in information technology bring new challenges to every working environment. While the specialists in electronic technology keep upgrading the hardware, system and application software specialists continue to upgrade existing systems and create new systems and programs to increase access to new technology for the masses.

In the computer industry, entrepreneurs who recognized the potential of the market transformed an industry of "computers for computer wizards" into an industry where the computer was destined to become an essential household item. Nevertheless, a great majority of end users are not up to par with the required repertoire of technical knowledge and skills to exploit the capabilities of available information technology. This is most certainly true in higher education. This case explores the underutilization of information technology in higher education administration and looks at whether higher education administration is ready for the new information age.

CASE QUESTIONS

- What are the problems with the current information management systems among higher education institutions?
- What type of restructuring might be necessary in higher education institutions in order to find solutions to information management problems?
- What are the hurdles to be cleared in implementing a plan of action for the redesign of education information management systems?
- What is the role of end users in the redesign process?

CASE NARRATIVE

Background

Generally, higher education administrative structure is based on the proliferation of administrative units centered on various functions. An unintended outcome of the growth of administrative progressivism concerns the building up of layers of super structures within organizations (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). This can be applied to both K-12 and post-secondary levels. Therefore, to understand higher education information management systems, one has to look at the evolution of various activities within these institutions.

There are three major administrative areas: student, finance, and personnel or human resources. These three areas present a major challenge in collecting, updating, and maintaining data in a way that is useful, timely, and efficient. They evolved as separate blocks in a centralized administration system. The collection of student records at various locations or units serves as an example of the current system. The admissions office admits students and collects the related data. Another unit, the registrar's office, collects records related to a student's program of study. The financial aid office handles matters related to financial aid, loans, pay plans, and so forth. Payments are handled by the cashier's office. Financial, human resources, and other divisions operate in a similar fashion. The budget office sets the budget. The comptroller's office controls expenses. The human resources office deals with hiring, promotion/demotion, firing, retirements, and benefits. Each of these offices collects, updates, and maintains data separately. Naturally, the redundancy of the system is guaranteed to generate errors (e.g., incompatible records) and leads to a waste of time, money, and resources.

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