Higher Education IT Governance Checklist

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Introduction

How do you know whether your organization needs IT governance? You might need IT governance if:

- New IT policies are developed and approved and stakeholders are surprised by those policies.
- Stakeholders are unhappy with the solutions IT is providing and are resisting using them or are developing shadow IT projects and systems.
- IT organizations want more meaningful collaboration with stakeholders and would like to increase transparency around decision making.
- Central and distributed IT units are purchasing and deploying duplicative IT technologies and services, or costs related to such deployments are higher than anticipated.
- IT organizations are unsure how to best allocate resources to meet stakeholder needs or have internal disagreements about this.
- Institutional leadership views IT as a cost center rather than an effective partner in achieving the institution’s mission.

IT governance is an essential organizational process that allows an organization to successfully realize its IT strategy. IT governance proves its value by:

- Aligning IT decisions with institutional mission and stakeholder needs.
- Improving communication among the IT community and between IT and the rest of the institution.
- Ensuring stakeholder buy-in into policy decisions and IT budget and project priorities.
- Integrating risk management into IT decision making.

Establishing a higher education institutional IT governance program doesn’t have to be cumbersome, but the importance of thoughtful design should not be underestimated. This document provides a high-level checklist of the items to consider when creating an IT governance program.

IT Governance Checklist

This checklist identifies the most important issues to consider when creating an IT governance program. The rest of this document is organized in a way to explain the items on the checklist in more detail.

- Identify the goals of IT governance.
- Review literature and other institutions’ IT governance processes.
- Determine the decisions IT governance will make.
- Identify stakeholders for IT decisions.
- Compare the organization’s current state and goals to assess gap.
- Design initial structure.
- Distinguish advisory groups from decision-making groups.
- Assign responsibility for actively managing IT governance.
- Regularly review and refine IT governance processes.
- Develop continuous improvement process for IT governance.
Identify the Goals of IT Governance

For IT governance to succeed, the institution must acknowledge that it is critical to the successful implementation of IT across the institution. Such a critical process requires attention and support, including staff resources and funding. Institutions with successful IT governance processes deliberately plan for the staff time required to support IT governance. At some larger institutions, a full-time staff person is devoted to IT governance. At other institutions, the responsibility for managing IT governance is incorporated into other staff members’ duties. If IT governance is not actively managed, its effectiveness and credibility will suffer.

Clear guiding principles and high-level goals for governance provide a framework for developing an effective IT governance process. While every institution must determine for itself how IT governance should be structured and what role it will play, there are common principles that can be used to help the institution understand IT governance’s purpose:

- **IT governance is a strategic process.** Fundamentally, IT governance is a process for strategic IT decision making. It is essential to understand the mission of the institution and to weave it into the IT governance process to ensure that governance decisions align with institutional objectives.

- **IT governance is a community decision-making process.** IT governance will not succeed if there is a lack of clarity about who makes decisions and which decisions they are permitted to make. IT governance ensures that the entire institution has a shared value regarding the role of IT. This can help participants weigh options so that decisions are aligned with institutional and IT strategies.

- **IT governance is a technology process.** The “IT” part of IT governance reflects the scope and purpose of the process. IT governance is critical to successfully managing the technology assets that compose IT. Governance provides a mechanism to allow technology assets to be researched, proposed, reviewed, endorsed, supported, implemented, and communicated.

- **IT governance is a behavioral process.** IT governance is meant to “encourage desirable behavior in the use of IT.”¹ A fundamental component of IT governance is the identification of the criteria for which decisions will go through the IT governance process. Effective IT governance requires that it actually be used, and in order for the community to use IT governance it needs to understand when it needs to be invoked.

- **IT governance is a flexible process.** A challenge for IT governance is to balance the need for oversight with the potential for unnecessary bureaucracy. Avoiding bureaucracy requires that IT governance has clear, transparent, and well-understood decision making and escalation processes. It’s likely that processes will need to be refined or change as an institution’s IT governance matures. Because of this, it’s important to build in a regular review process to assess the effectiveness of IT governance.

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Review Literature and Other Institutions’ IT Governance Processes

There is no sense in reinventing the wheel. There are a number of popular IT governance frameworks to draw from. Some of the more popular frameworks are listed below:

- **ITIL**: Customizable framework designed around documents and processes to deliver an IT governance framework/life-cycle framework
- **COBIT 5**: Governance and management of enterprise IT
- **COSO**: Guidance on governance and operational performance through internal control
- **CMMI**: Delivering value by building capability in people and processes
- **ISO/IEC 38500:2015**: International standard of governance for corporate information technology
- **IT Governance: Developing a Successful Governance Strategy** (published by ISACA)

It may be helpful to review these frameworks for suitability in your campus environment, keeping in mind that they may be too detailed for your institution’s first attempt at IT governance. Nonetheless, the frameworks may provoke thought about topics to address in your institution’s own IT governance program and they can always be modified to fit an institution’s culture.

Reach out to other institutions to learn from their experiences. It is valuable to hear from institutions that are at the beginning of the process of developing IT governance as well as those with more mature processes. IT governance design is often part of an institution’s strategic planning process. Resources such as the EDUCAUSE constituent and discussion groups for Governance, Risk, and Compliance and IT Strategic Planning provide forums for contact with other higher education institutions that have faced similar challenges.

The resources in appendix B will give you accessible information about the development of IT governance processes, strategic alignment and influence, the relationship of IT governance to IT investments, and the role of communication and participation in developing transparency and accountability.

Determine the Decisions IT Governance Will Make

Information technology impacts nearly every aspect of higher education, from academics and student life to research, administration, public engagement, facilities, and infrastructure. With such a broad scope, the impact of IT decisions should not be underestimated. IT governance helps institutions optimize their strategic decisions by including stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Some examples of items that IT governance programs might address include:

- Policies regarding acceptable use, access control, data governance, disaster recovery and business continuity, and IT security and compliance
- Project prioritization and selection
- Resource allocation between competing priorities
- Risk management for innovative projects
- Approval of the institution’s IT strategic plan
- Communication between governance participants regarding their IT needs and related activities
Institutions vary in their approach. IT governance will not address every IT decision, and it will often have a more limited scope when it is initially developed. However, in order for IT governance to be designed well and to function effectively and credibly, institutions must explicitly choose what role IT governance will play in decision making. Questions to consider include:

- **Scope**: Does IT governance apply to central IT or to IT units across the university? Does it address IT projects coming from faculty and business units?

- **Roles and priorities**: Should IT governance primarily prioritize enterprise projects, or does it have an important role in facilitating innovation? Should IT governance facilitate collaboration and communication among IT units, between IT and academic or business units, or does that lie outside IT governance? How involved will governance be in risk management or budgets?

- **Functions**: Will IT governance weigh in on IT policy? Will it have a formal role in portfolio management or resource allocation or manage innovation seed grant programs?

- **Delegated decision making**: To what extent will IT governance committees make decisions? What weight do their recommendations carry? How will decisions and recommendations be communicated, reviewed, or endorsed? What is the scope of authority for each level of IT governance? When should decisions be escalated or deescalated to another level of governance?

Clarity here is fundamental to the success of governance.

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**Identify Stakeholders for IT Decisions**

While the idea that everyone involved at your institution is an IT governance stakeholder might be overly broad, it is important to make sure that those who are significantly impacted by IT decisions have a seat at the table. It is also important to ensure you include the perspectives of academic and business units and remember that people need to speak for themselves.

You will have to determine what role IT staff will play in IT governance, but the inclusion of non-IT stakeholders is essential. Some institutions substantially limit the participation of IT staff in IT governance in order to make sure that IT decisions are aligned with the interests of the institution rather than the interests of IT. It is more effective to allow academic and business unit stakeholders to represent themselves than to expect their IT staff to speak for them.

As you are identifying stakeholders who should be included, there are some key questions to ask:

- **Which functions should be represented?** For example, are IT decisions made that have substantial impact on human resources, college business offices, teaching faculty, research administration, public engagement, residential students, etc.? Look at your institution’s hierarchy and make sure key units are included.

- **Who should represent these functions?** In order for IT governance to be effective, participants need to be able to make decisions in the context of the university and should be at an appropriate organizational level to make decisions and commitments.

- **Are there other key influencers or decision makers?** Are there people or groups that influence IT decisions or their acceptance? Are there people with funding or budgetary authority whose voices need to be included?
• **Are there existing groups that should play a role?** Rather than reinventing the wheel, are there existing groups that could be brought into the governance process to provide efficient feedback regarding campus IT services? For instance, perhaps a faculty senate computing committee could provide comprehensive feedback for academic IT services. Are there business process or data governance committees that could provide feedback on activities using administrative IT systems?

Potential stakeholders for institutional IT governance processes include institutional leadership as well as leaders and representatives from academic units, business units, and IT units, both central and distributed. The users of IT resources (e.g., students, faculty, and staff) are also important stakeholders in the IT governance process. Start your assessment with a broad view and narrow it down as you reflect on the kinds of decisions that you want IT governance to participate in.

![Checkmark]

**Compare Your Organization’s Current State and Goals to Assess the Gap**

Once you have decided the goals and role of IT governance, it is time to take a look at where you are, and what has to be done to move toward the desired state. If you have IT governance in place already, consider whether it is meeting your goals and functioning well. If you are in the initial stages of implementing IT governance, look at the informal processes your institution has for making IT decisions. At a minimum, you should understand:

• Who provides input into IT decisions now?
• Who makes IT decisions?
• Who is accountable for them?
• How well are current processes working to achieve the new goals for IT governance that you’ve identified? What is working, and what is not? What is worth keeping?
• How supportive are the executive stakeholders and current decision makers of changes to the decision-making processes?
• What do you have to do to generate buy-in among key stakeholders for a new IT governance process or changes in participation or authority?

When you have identified the answers, it’s time to think through how to implement changes in your institutional culture. You will need an executive sponsor or champion who has the authority to make changes to IT decision making and governance participation and who approves of the proposed IT governance process.

![Checkmark]

**Design Initial Structure**

The structure for institutional IT governance programs will vary based on a number of factors such as institutional size and control (private versus public), the composition of IT operations across the institution (central versus distributed or some combination of both), the hierarchical structure of the
institution itself, and institutional culture. Previous research has identified two general types of IT governance structures within higher education: the hub-and-spoke structure and parallel structures.²

The hub-and-spoke structure is a single structure with specific functions delegated to subcommittees. The parallel structure has multiple IT governance structures for separate institutional functions. For example, there might be one governance structure for administrative IT functions and a separate structure for academic IT functions. It is possible to have a combination, such as separate academic and administrative IT structures, each composed of subcommittees for particular functional areas.

When deciding between parallel and hub-and-spoke structures, it’s important to consider your institution’s funding model for IT, its organizational structure, its culture and values, and its strategies and goals. If academic and administrative IT are funded and organized separately, it may make sense to use a parallel structure. However, if your institution’s strategy is to balance IT spending and project prioritization across academic and administrative functions, it would not be wise to separate these functions in the IT governance structure.

**Distinguish Advisory Groups from Decision-Making Bodies**

An effective IT governance process must be simple enough to be well-understood throughout the organization. Decision-making processes must be clear and sufficiently streamlined that IT governance functions as an enabler rather than a bureaucracy. At the same time, many stakeholders can provide valuable input into policies and decisions. You must distinguish between those who will provide input into decisions and those who will make the decisions.

Advisory groups are informed of IT governance agendas and decisions and may be consulted when their input will be influential. They may make recommendations to IT governance bodies. IT governance bodies make decisions and recommendations and could be asked to endorse decisions made by IT leaders. Advisory groups can have formal relationships with IT governance bodies. For example, the faculty senate could weigh in on decisions related to learning management systems or classroom technologies, while an IT governance body devoted to academic IT more broadly could be the decision-making group (presumably with faculty stakeholder representation).

An advisory role might be appropriate for existing groups that should not be replaced by IT governance. For example, your new IT governance bodies could comprise primarily non-IT stakeholders, but there may be existing groups of IT leaders and managers whose input is valuable and who will need to have some level of buy-in into IT decisions. IT governance bodies might need to regularly consult with technical groups for their expertise as well as user groups with valuable experiences and input.

When designing IT governance, you should identify and document potential advisory groups and ensure that your processes are designed to include them. Advisory groups play a key role in ensuring that IT decisions are optimal and achievable. It can be valuable to formalize the role of key advisory groups so that IT governance can be sure that the right people are consulted and informed.

See the sidebar for information on the role of the CIO in IT governance.

² See Understanding IT GRC in Higher Education: IT Governance.
Assign Responsibility for Actively Managing IT Governance

Implementing an IT governance program for the campus is a significant endeavor and needs to be understood as a collection of tactical projects that will require investment from the institution to complete. Once the initial IT governance program is fully vested and all departments have buy-in, the process still requires active management to be effective.

Some institutions devote a staff resource to managing IT governance, while others incorporate the management of the process into existing roles. In any case, staff effort must be deliberately devoted to managing the process. Some key tasks include:

- **Managing agendas**: This is not solely a clerical function. Instead, staff must ensure that important topics are on the agendas and provide supporting information. This may include communication with IT, academic, and business unit leadership. It also includes communication with committee chairs to ensure that issues that need the attention of upper-level committees are escalated or reported.

- **Attending to mechanics**: Scheduling committee meetings, publishing agendas and minutes in a predictable and timely manner, and other routine tasks must be accomplished.

- **Training governance participants**: Governance participants, particularly committee chairs, need to understand the goals of governance and their committees, their scope of authority or responsibility, and the process for escalating issues, as well as the standards for managing committee meetings, taking votes, and recording decisions and recommendations. Someone must be responsible for developing and providing regular training to new chairs and participants.
• **Building and sharing governance value:** Ensuring that IT governance is well-understood and used throughout the institution requires both creating and executing the communication plan, developing documentation and presentations, and meeting with key stakeholders to ensure that IT governance is functioning effectively.

• **Maintaining committee communication:** The staff managing the IT governance process need to ensure that communication between committees is occurring effectively. While some level of note-taking can be crowdsourced or delegated to a committee’s secretary, in some cases it is important to have a staff member who is able to not only record a meeting but also summarize its outcomes effectively. This potentially requires an understanding of issues beyond the scope of clerical staff.

• **Assessing participation:** Staff effort is needed to review attendance and to gather information about participant contributions. This may include reviewing minutes and communicating with committee chairs.

• **Reviewing governance effectiveness:** Staff effort is required to identify problem areas, resolve issues during the year, gather metrics, document outcomes, and assist with the annual review.

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**Regularly Review and Refine IT Governance Processes**

Attention to the processes that support IT governance will help you build a credible and effective governance program. Start by identifying the practical processes that make committees function, then think through the communication processes that underpin a successful program. Finally, institute a regular review that not only evaluates IT governance effectiveness but also adapts supporting processes to best facilitate governance.

**Committee Processes**

Committee processes must be responsive and consistent, and the mechanics of the committee functioning need to be clear:

• **Responsiveness:** IT governance success depends on responsiveness. *This cannot be overemphasized.* As the pace of change continues to increase, IT has to respond to changing paradigms. For example, cloud computing services can now be purchased easily and implemented quickly by business units and even individual faculty and staff. If committee processes are bureaucratic or slow, the campus community will simply bypass IT governance in order to get their needs met.

• **Consistency:** Stakeholders need to be able to predict when their issues will be addressed and to understand how to bring them before the committee. If this varies substantially from committee to committee, it becomes difficult for stakeholders to understand the process, and this leads to avoidance of the process.

• **Mechanics:** Committee mechanics should be as consistent as possible:
  - **Meeting frequency:** It is recommended that committees have meetings scheduled for the year rather than relying on ad hoc meetings, which make it difficult for stakeholders to know when their issues can be addressed.
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- **Chair selection and length of service:** Who selects the committee chair—the membership, the CIO, or the governance coordinator? How long will the chairs and members serve?
- **Participation expectations:** Can members send substitutes, and how often? Will there be a number of absences that will trigger replacement?
- **Voting:** These can range from simple definitions of how votes are taken and disagreements resolved or documented, to more formal processes such as in *Robert’s Rules of Order*.

Communication Processes

There is no supporting process more important than transparent, continuous, and effective communication. A communication plan should be developed that identifies the key messages that must be communicated. At a minimum, consideration should be given to communicating the following:

- **How IT governance works:** Stakeholders across the campus community must understand what kinds of issues governance addresses, how to bring issues to governance, how governance addresses them, and who their governance representatives are. This cannot be a one-time communication but must be an ongoing effort designed to reach important groups such as campus leadership in IT, academic, and business units (from C-level executives through line managers), IT staff, and governance participants. Don’t forget to publicly publish meeting times and locations.

- **Agendas and minutes:** Not only do governance participants need to know what issues they will be considering but the campus community at large should be able to find out what is coming before governance. A standard format and timetable for publishing agendas and minutes will facilitate communication. Agendas need to be accessible in advance and should be published publicly.

- **Decisions and recommendations:** It must be a straightforward process for the campus community to learn the outcomes of governance decision making. Generating buy-in may also require including some level of explanation of the rationale. The communication plan should take into account how quickly decisions should be communicated.

Review Process

Institutions evolve, strategies change, technologies come and go, people move on. These realities provide the context for IT governance—and if it is going to succeed, it has to adapt. It’s important for IT governance to be stable, but it is also essential that regular reviews are held to make sure IT governance is meeting its goals and fulfilling its role effectively. As you develop IT governance, build in an annual review that includes all aspects of IT governance, from the mechanics of publishing meeting notes to the effectiveness of decision making and level of stakeholder participation.
Develop a Continuous Improvement Process for IT Governance

IT governance is not a set-it-and-forget-it process. Institutions should build in processes to define and regularly review the success of IT governance and to make adjustments. A process for a continuous improvement will include:

- **Setting goals:** IT governance should have measurable, achievable goals specified at the beginning of each cycle (usually defined by the academic or fiscal year). As governance matures, these goals may become more ambitious. Will governance respond to requests in a particular time frame? Will the success of its decisions be measured? Could governance effectiveness be measured by whether units use or bypass IT governance?

- **Measuring outcomes:** At the end of each cycle, governance performance should be compared to its goals and the results reported.

- **Assessing membership participation:** Governance participants’ attendance and participation should be assessed regularly, and at least annually. If a participant is not contributing or attending, there should be a process for replacing them.

- **Conducting overall governance assessment:** The governance process should be analyzed at least annually to identify areas and supporting processes that need improvement. Is the scope still appropriate? Are governance participants able to follow processes? Can the campus community describe the governance process? Is governance used or bypassed? Are innovative projects able to make it through the governance process? Is portfolio management or project prioritization effective? Are the right stakeholders engaged? How is IT governance regarded on campus—is it a bureaucracy that impedes progress, or a process that helps move good projects forward?

A number of different models exist to help institutions gauge their IT governance maturity, such as COBIT and ITIL. Institutions may want to measure their maturity to understand the progress of their IT organization and to be able to communicate where they are, and where they aspire to be in terms of delivering IT services. IT governance maturity can be measured in four basic areas: process, strategic alignment and influence, IT investment, and communication and participation. In each area, you can identify characteristics of a mature process and identify steps you can take to improve your IT governance maturity. See appendix A for a sample IT governance maturity improvement plan.

**Conclusion**

When IT governance is done well, it enables institutions to make good decisions that are aligned with its strategies. It builds support for decisions among stakeholders and helps manage risk. Developing a successful, credible IT governance program requires careful planning, attention to detail, active management, and regular review. Effective IT governance should not be onerous to maintain or complicated to explain. If you follow this checklist, read about IT governance, and learn from others’ experiences, you can implement an IT governance program that your institution and your community will value.
Acknowledgments
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Appendix A: Sample IT Governance Maturity Improvement Plan

**PROCESS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mature programs include</th>
<th>Recommendations for improved maturity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Formal governance structure</td>
<td>• Determine where to assign responsibility and authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Process assigns clear responsibility/accountability</td>
<td>• Research frameworks such as COBIT and ITIL</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Coordinates distributed IT efforts</td>
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**STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND INFLUENCE**

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<th>Mature programs include</th>
<th>Recommendations for improved maturity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Clear institutional vision for IT</td>
<td>• Align operational plan with strategic goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Goals for IT outcomes are aligned with institutional strategy</td>
<td>• Demonstrate how IT governance can help with decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td>• IT governance influences decisions</td>
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**IT INVESTMENT**

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<th>Mature programs include</th>
<th>Recommendations for improved maturity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Full life-cycle costs are considered in decision making</td>
<td>• Propose funding models for IT projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>• IT investments are prioritized in alignment with institutional goals</td>
<td>• Evaluate time to reach a decision for projects or initiatives</td>
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**COMMUNICATION AND PARTICIPATION**

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<th>Mature programs include</th>
<th>Recommendations for improved maturity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Faculty, administrative, and academic leadership are committed to IT governance</td>
<td>• Communicate decisions transparently</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Technology standards and services are visible and broadly understood</td>
<td>• Include stakeholders in IT decisions</td>
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Appendix B: IT Governance Recommended Readings

Below is a list of recommended readings and resources on higher education IT governance by topic.

**IT governance processes:** Understanding how the institution manages IT governance across the institution, including management responsibility for governance activities across all major IT systems, domains, and departments.

- The Foundations of a High-Performance ITS Organization, *EDUCAUSE Live!,* 2014
- Understanding IT GRC in Higher Education: IT Governance, *EDUCAUSE Review,* 2015
- Governance, EDUCAUSE Library

**Strategic alignment and influence:** Understanding the institution’s programs or processes that ensure that the campus IT strategy is aligned with the institution’s strategic plan.

- **IT Risk Register**, EDUCAUSE Library
- **IT Governance, Risk, and Compliance in Higher Education**, ECAR Research Hub, 2014
- Strategic Planning, EDUCAUSE Library

**Investment:** Understanding how the institution prioritizes IT investments in alignment with IT strategy and institutional goals.

- Aligning IT Funding Models to the Pace of Technology Change: Enabling Financial Flexibility for Core, Flexible, and Transformative Services, ECAR, 2015
- **IT Restructuring: Challenges and Opportunities**, *EDUCAUSE Review,* 2014

**Communication and participation:** Creating an IT governance process that is strategic, transparent, and accountable across multiple campus stakeholder groups

- Information Technology Management and Leadership, EDUCAUSE Library
- Communications, EDUCAUSE Library

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**EDUCAUSE IT GRC Program and Resources**

The EDUCAUSE IT GRC program provides resources that help you define and implement IT governance, risk, and compliance activities on your campus. Learn more and view additional resources on the [IT GRC website](https://www.educause.edu/itgrc).