Scenario

What do meaningful partnerships look like?
John O’Brien, EDUCAUSE

Diverse perspectives on IT solutions and strategies are an integral part of the advancement of higher education. In this way, higher education institutions and corporations can learn a lot from each other. By accessing the creativity and vision of corporate members, higher education organizations can help achieve their goals of staying competitive and technologically current. Likewise, by seeking to understand the unique needs of higher education institutions, corporations can innovate their product development and grow more responsive to current industry trends. Clearly, our fates are interconnected, and when we are working well together it is mutually beneficial for all involved—especially our students.

We hope the following tips and insights from higher education IT leaders can help you create the beginnings of a winning and long-term relationship.

1 What does it mean to “partner” with higher education?
Renee Patton, Cisco Systems Inc.

Many corporations shy away from the word “partnership” in higher education because they think this might mean that a college or university is solely looking for donations, discounts, or in-kind services. Institutions look to business partners to help them address challenges that are at the heart of how most for-profit companies do business. These include learning more about how to increase efficiencies, reduce costs, find new revenue, or attract customers/clients. CIOs hope to achieve the same benefits for their institutions, and these discussions are a terrific way to partner with—rather than sell to—higher education. Colleges and universities also look to partners to develop creative and innovative ways to transform their institutions. This might be in the form of public-private partnerships, which often create win-win-win relationships between the institution, local government, and the business community.

2 How can I find high-quality prospects?
Kim Thanos, Lumen Learning

Higher education institutions share far more information than commercial entities. Public databases such as IPEDS include significant profile data, and most institutional websites include organizational charts, contact information, strategic plans, and information about infrastructure and investments. This can assist in targeting, but it also increases expectations that sales reps will do their homework. Sales reps who target technology leaders ineffectively, or who expect prospects to educate them about information that is publicly available, appear lazy and disrespectful. Take time to review public information, and approach leaders with knowledge of their context and priorities.

3 What factors does higher education consider in purchasing?
Kelly Doney, Ellucian

Unlike industries that guard information from competitors, higher ed is highly collaborative and connected. Before making technology decisions, colleges and universities consult peers to understand
Building Higher Ed Relationships

why they made certain decisions and whether they are happy with them. These conversations will be frank—people want others to learn from their mistakes. Make sure you know which institutions your customer considers to be peers, and know what those peer institutions are doing and what they might say about your product or your competitors. Differentiate yourself by using examples and language from the perspective of business problems; resist the urge to focus on your technology’s features and functions. You will also need buy-in from functional users, so a trial period can be very helpful.

4 How should vendors approach higher education?

Ron Kraemer, Notre Dame

Higher education leaders receive dozens of cold calls and emails each week. Many of those start with “I am interested in learning more about your initiatives.” Virtually no CIOs pay any attention to such inquiries—some get filed, most sent to the trash. Take time to learn about an institution’s initiatives and show that you have done some homework. You might start with a conversation at a conference or corporate event. Inform yourself about the institution’s strategic initiatives (which are generally available online). Consider asking a current client if other institutions might be interested and whether an introduction might be in order. If an institution is working on new initiatives, it will actively seek great products, services, and companies. If you did great work with another institution, others will be more interested in talking with you. If you did not do great work, we will know that too. With higher education, business comes after relationships are built.

5 How can startups begin a relationship with higher education?

Scott Siddall, Longsight

Start by understanding how the higher education marketplace is unique. Relationships, and especially sales strategies, typically work differently in higher ed. Higher ed folks are sharp, busy, and under-funded. Campuses are swarming with great ideas—everyone has more to do than can possibly get done. IT leaders must be selective, so it’s not easy to get their attention and pitch your service directly. Ask yourself if direct marketing fits your target audience. By and large, cold calls and email blasts are ineffective with higher ed. Instead, look for opportunities to show your audience how you’re leading the way in your service area so that when a need surfaces, they think of you. A reputation for understanding higher ed is money in the bank.

6 What role does culture play in higher education?

Cole Clark, Deloitte

Understanding that higher education is unlike any other enterprise is paramount to being able to engage with the sector. Higher ed culture is not monolithic—similarities are pervasive in certain categories of institutions, but each place has a unique culture. To succeed, one must understand the institution’s norms to be in a position to effect change. All of what we do must help higher education pursue its core functions: teaching, learning, developing and transforming lives, and conducting research. Doing this requires some ability to move entrenched culture that has both positive and negative aspects, through change agents in different leadership roles in the institution. Understanding that, almost to the point of being accepted as one of the “tribe” by institutional leaders, is key to making progress toward higher education’s goals.

7 How do you account for higher education budget cycles and processes?

Margita Blattner, EDUCAUSE

The sales cycle in higher education is often longer than in other industries. It’s critical to understand the budgeting cycle and procurement process of the institution you’re working with so you can set realistic timelines and expectations. Public and private institutions can have different purchasing requirements. Find out whether the institution must follow regulatory requirements. Understand the rules and guidelines so you can move through the process efficiently. Know when the fiscal year starts and how the budgeting process works. Must the cost of your product or service be part of the budget cycle, or can it be purchased with discretionary funds? Who is the budget owner and decision maker? Is the institution in the middle of a fundraising campaign that could impact financial decisions? Finally, learn about the institution’s culture. Understanding whether decisions are made collaboratively across departments, by designated committees, or by key decision makers is critical in navigating the process.