



Tarleton State University

Interim CIO Provides Strategic IT Roadmap

When the existing CIO at Tarleton State University announced her retirement, the University moved quickly to ensure that strategic initiatives and organizational goals requiring technology capabilities were not impacted. Due to the Great Resignation's increased pressure on existing staff, the challenges at recruitment in general and the nature of strategic searches, the University wanted to assure that there was no gap in management attention during a search.

Challenges

Although there were many strong members of IT staff, none were ready to lead the department through its next phase. In reviewing the current state of IT Services (ITS) in relation to supporting the University's strategic plan, *Tarleton Forward*, the group was found to be operationally sound, with a wide variety of skills among its staff.

ITS had an excellent quality physical infrastructure and plan to build upon. However, it still operated as a traditional service organization. Years of continued operations in this state with university views of ITS as a service-only group had relegated the department as a reactionary team and not a center of growth and innovation from which the university could benefit.

Additional challenges in ITS included communications, recruiting/staffing, lack of governance, and the lack of centralized data access. In particular, the CFO identified the following key focus areas:

1. Improvement of the IT organization's overall development, skill, and maturity level
2. Solving data governance issues including data sourcing, ownership, stewardship, location, and quality
3. Improving speed and execution of Applications Development related to student services

Strategy

CAG has extensive experience in providing Interim CIO Services for this purpose and a unique approach to the process. Since many of CAG's senior managers have served as CIOs in many industries, including higher education, CAG was able to provide a rigorously vetted, experienced and capable CIO on an interim basis and support the CIO with the expertise and experience of the entire CAG senior management team. CAG has used this combination many times to achieve a high level of success.

The Interim CIO began by assessing the department and developing a technology strategy to support *Tarleton Forward*. Development of the technology strategy involved research into how ITS was currently operating and relating to other teams and functions across the university, learning the history of how it came to be where it is today, discovering its challenges, and exploring possibilities based upon the talent and systems already in place. From this perspective, an evaluation began of how the goals and objectives of *Tarleton Forward* could be supported with current resources and what changes, modifications, systems, or services were needed to support the strategy.

Interviewing all ITS staff provided additional insight while allowing strategic concepts to be introduced to gauge acceptance, gather additional information, and build support while preparing individuals for change.

Supporting *Tarleton Forward* required a review of the individual goals, strategies, and core action items. This review found that comprehensive data, analytics, predictive analytics, artificial intelligence, a comprehensive communications plan, and staffing strategy could form the basis of support for the *Tarleton Forward* strategy.

Outcomes

The Interim CIO outlined the technology strategy in a governing document. The strategy focused on several key focus elements with each element divided into actionable tactics that could be accomplished in 60–90-day periods:

- People
- Communication
- Data/Analytics
- Infrastructure
- Applications/Systems
- Security
- Governance/Audit/Compliance
- Service/Support
- Innovation
- Community Involvement

Some achievements since the execution of the strategy include:

- A modern cloud-based data warehouse was created, and core student data transitioned, supporting capability for future analytics and insights for all areas of the university including admissions, recruitment, and student engagement and retention while paving the way forward for future data integrations for advanced analytics, machine learning, and artificial intelligence.
- The new cloud-based data platform enabled Tarleton to set up the Tarleton Technology Service Center in compliance with state code (final approval pending). This service center will allow ITS to generate revenue and more efficiently provide services to accommodate research and grant projects, in addition to offering service to other federal and state agencies.
- A new IT Service Management process was developed, and implementation initiated. This new process and approach aligns all university technical service and academic technology support with the best practices of IT Services Management and addresses several objectives including modernizing service support, improved speed and efficiency of service, reduced internal IT costs, lower issue resolutions timeframes, improved service levels, and simplified the user experience for students, faculty and staff.

- The Interim CIO also restructured the student worker program that provides students with real-world experience as part of the ITS team. This restructured program has already led to the first student worker internship and job offer with a national company.
- Innovation projects have been initiated. For example, Starlink satellite-based wireless service was added via a mobile unit with solar generator backup, available on-call 24/7/365 at any location. This supports data recovery, field research programs, events, and remote agriculture campus locations, as necessary. It will also support improved student experience for events such as Freshman immersion camp, which is held at a remote site previously with limited Wi-Fi access.

"I was skeptical about the notion of transitioning to an interim CIO initially, but I have been amazed by the impact our interim has had upon our organization," explains Lori Beaty, Chief Financial Officer and Executive Vice President for Finance and Administration. "He is motivated and developed our IT team members and even initiated some cybersecurity-related student recruitment and career development partnerships in our community. CAG brought in both higher-ed experience and broader IT perspectives that were exactly what we needed, when we needed it."

For more information on CAG's interim and virtual IT leadership services, please contact John D'Annunzio at jdannunzio@columbiaadvisory.com.