Jumping Into TIER (Headfirst) at Mines

Several years ago, Colorado School of Mines was (I would expect) like many in the Internet2 community – we were aware of efforts around something called TIER, and it had to do with Trust and Identity.But we had a vendor solution around identity and access management that served us (relatively) well, we were members of InCommon, relied on Shibboleth, and we didn't quite understand where TIER fit in. At some point we even became aware that there were member institutions investing time (and money!) into this effort – but again, it was something on the radar – something that we would pay more attention to "someday". That day came in mid-2017, when it became clear that we faced the unenviable task of replacing our vendor IAM solution. As one option, we reached out to Internet2 and inquired about TIER, and about what it might take to become a part of the investor program. As luck (would continue) to have it, we were told the initial investor program was coming to a close. However, the inquiry would prove serendipitous, as we were told there was a new opportunity that would soon be announced – the TIER Campus Success Program.

As we learned more about the goals of the Success Program – and its core approach built on the collaboration of other institutions with a common need and goal, our local IAM architect was sold. We are a (relatively) small central IT organization that is known (as my predecessor noted) for "fighting above our weight class". The thought of being in the ring with others who shared our need, had similar goals, and was working alongside us in those efforts was a reassuring one. As it turned out, we were fortunate to be accepted into the program and joined nine other institutions in this collaborative effort.

Adoption and implementation of the TIER framework at Mines is appealing from several perspectives. First, it provides a potential solution (albeit with significant effort) to a problem that we were facing with no easy, cheap, or fast solutions (nor likely even two of the three). Second, the path to success is via collaboration with Internet2 and other higher ed institutions – some more like us, others not so much like us – but who all share a common need and an interest in a community-built, open-source, IAM solution. Finally, it affords an opportunity to be an active participant in and contribute to the development of what will hopefully come a broadly adopted R&E solution.

There are days I acknowledge that going this route (vs implementing another vendor solution) is a gamble – but I'd like to think it is a calculated one. We're not in this effort alone – that's one great thing about the CSP approach. We're in it with other institutions that have a stake in the success of TIER – and with access to and the support of an incredible group of architects and developers within I2 that are committed to the success of all of us. Internet2 has a history of creating an environment of facilitation, collaboration, and partnership that leads to the development of some indisputably key solutions for the national and international R&E community. I believe TIER has the potential to be another of those solutions.

I like to think we jumped in with our eyes wide open, but it's impossible to see where all the landmines (or sharks?) may be hidden. We'll certainly encounter those – but challenges, frustrations, and compromises exist in pretty much any solution. Continuing the metaphor of "jumping in", I could say things are "going swimmingly", and that we don't appear to be "in over our head", or even "Come on in! The water's fine!" Or... perhaps not.

We're giving it our best – and we'll let you know how it goes.