

Colgate University's ITS Study Groups: In-house Personal and Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Internal Study Groups at Colgate University have increased staff members' technical knowledge, encouraged additional study on selected topics, and resulted in achievement of industry certifications, and contributions to the successful completion of degree programs. The resources required to achieve this degree of success are low, and the rewards are high.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.1 [Computer Uses in Education]: Collaborative Learning, Computer Literacy

General Terms

Management, Documentation, Performance, Human Factors

Keywords: Training, Professional Development, Life Long Learning, Self-Study, Certifications

1. MAKING TIME TO MEET AND STUDY

We all know how difficult it is to carve out times during the regular workweek to meet with the full ITS staff present. Helpline shifts, on-call duties, afternoon and evening shifts, emergencies and a host of required duties all conspire against the possibility. We at Colgate have set aside Tuesday morning from 8-10 a.m. each week for mandatory meeting time, and all of our offices and services (except for responding to emergencies) are closed to the public.

Once a month, we have a regular business meeting. The other three Tuesdays during the regular fall and spring semesters, we meet in Study Groups. Our "Study Group Tuesday Mornings" go like this:

- Meet at 8 for food and informal conversation.
- Convene at 8:15 for general announcements and information sharing.

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SIGUCCS '03, September 21-24, 2003, San Antonio, TX, USA.

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- Disperse to Study Groups at 8:30.
- Open offices and services at 10:00.

2. FUNDING

The annual cost of support for this program has to date been less than \$10,000, and comes from the centralized ITS budget. That figure includes refreshments for all weekly meetings, and books, software, and certification exam fees.

3. HOW DO STUDY GROUPS WORK?

All staff members are encouraged to suggest study topics. If there are questions about which group is the right one for an individual, team leaders confer with staff, referring to annually developed training goals and objectives to help determine the most appropriate Study Group. The numbers of participants have ranged from 1 to 8. Some of the many topics we have covered are:

- MCSE certifications
- Cisco certifications
- Visual Basic
- Network certification
- A+ certification
- Network Infrastructure
- Adobe Acrobat
- XML
- GoLive
- Final Cut Pro
- PowerPoint
- MOUS (Microsoft Office User Specialist)
- Web development using tools
- Windows 2000
- OS X
- PhotoShop Elements
- Desktop Maintenance
- Subject Indexing

4. REQUIREMENTS AND PROCESS

In the same way that we have implemented other new programs over the years, we just came up with this idea and began doing it! During our regular review of processes, the training director met with interested individuals to consider how we might improve Study Groups. As a result, we made the following observations and recommendations to all ITS.

All Study Groups:

- Must have structure and be serious. We are learning about each other at the same time we are studying our selected topic, so it's important that each group reaches a shared vision for the outcome.
- Should accommodate different learning styles. Everyone learns differently and at different paces, so we have experimented with a number of different learning styles. We have purchased software and manuals, invited guest lecturers, and engaged in tutorials and workshops -- all within the Study Group framework.
- Should be flexible. In the same way that members' learning paces vary, so do groups' readiness to present. Groups should not be locked into a semester-long schedule, but should present their findings when they are ready. Homework may or may not be required; group facilitators can be elected for the duration or by shared responsibility; hands-on practice may be included.

5. FORMALITIES

We prepared a form for a Study Group Plan; primarily to help groups focus on their individual study needs, such as software and manuals; but also to encourage people to think about their objectives and the outcome for the group. Each group is also expected to have a facilitator, but the facilitator role can rotate throughout the group. The plan has a simple form, which asks four questions:

- Who are the members?
- What are the objectives of the group?
- How do you plan to measure your success?
- What materials would you like to use?

The culmination of each group's work is their presentation, which is given to the full ITS staff. This way, the learning opportunities are shared beyond the immediate small Study Group, and the overall knowledge level for ITS increases. Presenters are encouraged to include information on the big picture, whatever it might be, and how their topic fits in. For example, when the GoLive Study Group was working, we were able to identify implementation issues and address them before the product rollout. Our Adobe Acrobat group prepared some general use documentation

6. THE PRESENTATIONS

For some individuals, this prospect looms large; for others, it's a natural evolution of the semester's work. In general, we have discovered that the presenter should be a volunteer, not one who's dragged kicking and screaming into the biggest nightmare of his

or her life. At one point in the history of Study Groups, some folks began to compete with others to provide the ultimate presentation. Some examples will be shown, if time permits, at the end of this paper. This caused even bigger fears to develop for the already-nervous potential presenters. As a result, we created the following guidelines for presentations.

- The structure, content, and duration of a Study Group presentation should be determined by the members of the group and what makes the most sense for what they've studied.
- Presentations should consider "this is the impact on me, on ITS, on Colgate, on higher education."
- Some Study Groups will produce deliverables (documentation, web pages) instead of a presentation.

7. OUTCOMES

We have decided to continue with Study Groups for a number of reasons. They provide the opportunity to interact and work with others; to learn something new, and to have dedicated time to focus on learning. As a direct result of Study Groups, several of the ITS staff members have been able to achieve certifications and make progress toward degree programs. We feel that the training and collaboration in the Study Groups results in very positive outcomes, with improvements coming over time.

There is a great deal of value in keeping the community aware of what technologies are available at Colgate. We have found the Study Groups instrumental in helping us keep aware of what's going on outside of our institution, as well. We change topics every semester, and topics are suggested mostly because of personal interest and/or professional need.

8. BENEFITS BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

New colleagues:

We invite non-ITS staff from several departments to our Tuesday morning sessions, including the Libraries, Accounting, Art and Art History. These staff members also participate in Study Groups. Because the topics are not all arranged neatly along group or departmental lines, Study Groups are an opportunity to find new collegial relationships, and begin to know and understand others' perspectives.

Fulfilled documentation requirement:

The Network Infrastructure Study Group prepared documentation for data and voice lines, their paths, and the network equipment installed to support them.

Professional development:

We are provided with the luxury of time to think and learn about emerging technologies, new versions of software, and new ways of doing business both here and at other institutions.

9. THE FUTURE

We occasionally review all of our processes, including Study Groups, and as a result have changed some of our requirements.

When we first began to meet in Study Groups, we reconvened each week at the end of our study, in the full ITS group, with each facilitator giving a short report about what was learned that day. We have since abandoned the re-convening, and reports are only given when the group feels ready to report. Some staff members do not feel a presentation to be a necessary element of the Study Group, but we decided in favor of requiring the presentation. Presentations, we feel, help bring closure to a group process, enable the evaluation of progress and individual learning, and can reinforce learning.

We believe the Study Groups have been instrumental in the general elevation of knowledge in the ITS organization, and have also helped form new collegial relationships among the staff. Because of our ongoing review, and willingness to consider changes to the program, we feel the model of Study Groups will be successful well into the future.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

You will need to do some work to obtain support from the rest of the community. Your dean, vice president, and CIO can all be helpful as you make your case for regular training time for ITS. Since the community has become very dependent upon the services you regularly provide, they will need time and patience to prepare for your regular absence from being a service provider. With the proper preparation, all members of the community will be able to accommodate the absence of ITS direct support for two hours a week. Their rewards will come in the form of a better informed and trained ITS support staff.

Be prepared for the times when some members of the community lose patience with this process. Have some documentation ready

with all of the evidence pointing to the positive aspects of the programs, so you can easily counter any complaints.

Keep the benefits of the ultimate outcome in mind. There will be days when emergencies, new technology, or hot campus gossip make it difficult to impossible for all Study Groups to be completely productive. As long as it doesn't become a habit, let it go.

Involve all of the ITS staff in the process for planning Study Groups. Plan for the usual reluctance on the part of some individuals who never want to try anything new (what are they doing in the technology field, anyway?). Suggest that the process be reviewed after a semester, or better yet, a year, and that everyone will have input

Resist individuals' and groups' attempts to be exempt from Study Groups. You know the suspects in your organization who claim to be life long learners, good researchers, well-informed in their subject field. Claiming doesn't make it so, and we all can learn from each other.

Promote cross-group involvement. Our best Study Group results have come from groups who did not traditionally work together. At Colgate, the ITS staff are spread throughout the campus, in four separate buildings, and on multiple floors of some of those spaces. It's not always a simple task to work together, much less to become acquainted with others on the staff. Study Groups have helped with both.

Keep the coffeepot on. The need for consistently high quality food in sufficient quantities cannot be over-emphasized. It doesn't have to be elaborate, but it has to be there.