

Computing Labs and Technology Classroom (CLTC) Initiative: A Model for Distributed Support

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ABSTRACT

DePauw University is a small, liberal arts institution with 2200 undergraduate residential students and 222 faculty members, located in Greencastle, Indiana. The challenges of supporting a campus with multiple and diverse facilities are further amplified by limited staff support resources. One of the strategies for addressing these challenges led to the formation of the Computing Labs and Technology Classrooms (CLTC) initiative. The CLTC recognizes and draws on the strengths of support specialists with a wide variety of professional training and experience, who regularly collaborate in the support and management of campus-wide labs and technology classrooms.

The veritable explosion of new technologies presents its own fiscal challenges. As with many other institutions, our financial ability to hire enough staff with the requisite skills to fulfill the ever-increasing support requests is very limited. In an effort to address these concerns, a committee was formed of individuals active in supporting technology in their respective disciplines.

The committee includes faculty members, technical and administrative support specialists, instructional technologist, a graphic artist and the director of Instructional Media Services. Their individual support perspectives combine to provide a broad understanding that enriches and increases each committee member's ability to provide support at all levels. In addition to the focus on support, the CLTC initiative has also provided a forum for collaborative work on budgets, policy and planning.

In this paper, four committee members describe the CLTC initiative and the distributed support model developed at DePauw

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University, along with its impact on labs, technology classrooms and the broader campus community.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

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1. INTRODUCTION

Initially, the support of technological resources on the DePauw campus was not highly organized. In addition to the few specialists who provided support and training, there were also several non-specialists who relied upon their past experiences to offer assistance where needed. The limitations of this model of support had distinct ramifications. First, a decentralized budget model left each department individually responsible for the purchase and upgrade of hardware and software resources. This resulted in a lack of hardware and software standardization on the campus. Because of the diversity in equipment and configurations, sharing of knowledge among support staff became impractical. Information Technology staff found it a challenge just to maintain expertise in their own area of responsibility. It was impossible for any individual to be prepared to support all facets of technology on campus. This discontinuity gave rise to client dissatisfaction—the user did not feel enabled when a problem would arise with the end result being a general perception of computing support as one of disorganization and ineffectiveness.

2. HISTORY OF CLTC/PRESENTATION OF DISTRIBUTED SUPPORT MODEL

While additional support staff with increased specialization was gradually added to the support infrastructure, the growth of

computing continued to escalate beyond the support capacity of the Information Technology staff. This was further complicated when departmental technology purchase decisions were made without consulting with computing services. This led to Information Technology staff being expected to support unfamiliar or incompatible hardware or software. Decisions made in one area were not shared with those who were expected to support the decisions in other areas. Not only did this lead to widely diverse hardware and software resources across campus, but it also made inventory tracking a nightmare and created an environment of competition rather than collaboration.

The Computing Labs Committee originated in the early 1990's but its focus was very broad and membership was constituted primarily by support staff. The current Computing Labs and Technology Classrooms (CLTC) committee emerged from a group of individuals interested in supporting campus computing, many of whom were faculty members responsible for supporting discipline specific labs. The committee is appointed by the Vice President for Academic Affairs and reports to the Coordinator of Information Services and Technology. The committee includes faculty, support personnel, administrative computing staff and administrators who work together to provide a holistic view of the campus computing environment. The committee recognizes the challenge of trying to maintain a significant diversity in facilities and academic/administrative needs without adequate support.

The goal of the committee was to develop a centralized model for communication and support that would more effectively foster the sustainable adoption of curricular and administrative technology. This model had a two-fold purpose. First, it served to bring the committee together in the spirit of shared knowledge for the purpose of developing efficient and consistent support of public computing facilities. This was an important step in making sure that individuals responsible for public computing facilities were adequately informed and had an opportunity to reach a mutually agreed upon philosophy of support. Secondly, once this level of agreement was in place the individuals involved could more effectively disseminate needed support and information in their respective areas of responsibility and/or nearby departments.

3. COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

The first responsibilities included consideration of models for a centralized budget mechanism and processes for standardizing computer lab and technology classroom configurations as well as managing decentralized resources. As the committee experienced growth, it began a process of maturation. In addition to sharing knowledge related to the support of public computing facilities, the committee developed a mentality of collective problem solving. An outgrowth of this process was a streamlined approach to responding and tracking helpdesk calls and training opportunities for the members of the committee. The committee members were, in turn, better able to support a wider variety of needs by having the necessary information to direct the client to the appropriate source of service. In its present form, the committee is now responsible for developing planning and policy recommendations for the administration. Furthermore, the committee devotes much of its time to collaborative research initiatives.

Table 1: Composition of the Committee

Coordinator of Information Services and Technology
Instructional Media Services Operations Manager
Associate Director of Libraries
Coordinator of User Services and Support
Coordinator of Client Service and Special Projects
Faculty Instructional Technology Support Specialist
Digital Media Lab Computer Graphics Specialist
Associate Professor of Music
Associate Professor of Chemistry

One of the most significant outcomes of the CLTC has been the development of a campus community that has an awareness not only of support resources, but of the overall concept and direction that computing is taking at DePauw University. As well as faculty response to standardized technology classroom and computer lab configurations being positive, overall student response has also been positive. Additionally, this standardization has led to more effective and quicker response time from helpdesk and other support services.

Furthermore, where we once had clients who were dissatisfied, we are now experiencing a community where users who experience a problem feel confident of a satisfactory and timely resolution. The once wide spread perception of computing services as one of disorganization and ineffectiveness has shifted to a more positive perception of dependability, reliability and effectiveness.

4. CONCLUSION

An effective model of support does not present itself overnight. Through trial-and error, collaboration, a great deal of reflection and sheer determination to meet the needs of our clients, the CLTC has evolved into a committee that is beneficial to all members of our campus.

Because of the breadth and depth of perspectives the committee holds by virtue of its diverse membership, we are better able to consider and share a wider view of the overall campus computing needs. We bring our diverse expertise and knowledge of specific technology resources together, enabling us to plan and prioritize with both an eye for the specifics, as well as, a view of the campus-wide picture. We believe that this model would be highly successful in a variety of implementations.

5. FOR MORE INFORMATION

More information about DePauw University's Computing Labs and Technology Classrooms Committee is available at <http://www.depauw.edu/it/cltc/>.