

Building a University IT Community: Strength Through Collaboration and Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

What can universities do to create an IT community that can share expertise, insight and creativity? Often, it is the IT divisions themselves that bridge the gaps, providing the conduit for communication, the tools to facilitate collaboration and initiate partnerships. NC State University's Information Technology Division (ITD) has undertaken several projects that provide the framework to facilitate collaboration. In this paper, we will focus on the recent partnerships and collaborations which ITD has found to be most rewarding and those with prospects yet to be fully realized. These partnerships, with academic units and student service organizations alike, bring opportunities to promote learning in a technology rich environment while providing the framework for true collaboration.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.1 [Project and People Management]

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Management, Economics, Human Factors

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1. INTRODUCTION

Building partnerships at a large university requires creativity, flexibility and foresight to juggle the day-to-day requirements of

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existing services with the call of “what’s next”. Budgeting resources, both financial and human, becomes an increasing challenge as clientele demand new technologies while simultaneously insisting on a reliable, scalable IT infrastructure. At NC State University, we have learned that partnerships and collaboration are essential as we seek out and test new technologies.

Technology support at NC State University is distributed. The Information Technology Division, (ITD) is primarily responsible for academic computing while other units on campus provide the support and infrastructure for administrative functions. Additionally, many colleges, and even units or departments within a college, often have their own IT staff who work both independently and collaboratively with larger divisions such as ITD.

Given this environment, it is our goal to foster and nurture those areas where multiple units benefit from collaborating and partnering with one another. The benefits are not simply found in a savings of money. Instead, some of the most valuable benefits come from saving time and from sharing ideas, resources, and creativity. In ITD we are learning that sometimes the best and most successful partnerships are those in which money is not the issue.

2. SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS

2.1 What Drives Successful Collaborations?

Many factors motivate ITD to pursue partnerships and collaborations. It can be money, a great idea in need of help to get off the ground or even limited resources. Like many public (and private) universities and colleges, budget cuts have become the norm. At the same time, faculty, staff, and, most importantly, students are calling for new technology that is cutting edge, reliable and available on demand. Added into these challenges, NC State is completing its 10 year SACS re-accreditation¹. The Quality Enhancement Plan theme of “Learning in a Technology-Rich Environment” has added additional emphasis to providing meaningful technology (<http://litre.ncsu.edu>). Combining all these influences, it becomes essential that we look for ways to meet new

demands by making our money go farther and our services reach a broader audience.

What ultimately drives a successful partnership or collaboration however is that collaborations and partnerships help ITD generate ideas as we seek to put the right people and resources together. The goal is to combine a great idea with a real “people person”; someone who can effectively communicate their idea to others and then continue moving the idea forward. Collaborations and partnerships require creativity, perseverance and patience to pull everything and everyone together. It is the team and their ability to work effectively with a great idea that ultimately drives a successful partnership.

An additional feature of successful partnerships involves good communication. For example, as we worked on a recent project to implement multimedia student meeting space, we made our desires for flexible scheduling known to all partners early on in the process. Anytime you are involved in a partnership, it is essential to make the ground rules known up front.

2.2 Where to Look for Partnerships

ITD looks to build partnerships with both academic units and student service organizations on campus. The idea for a partnership or collaboration is not typically a top down decision but rather it comes from all levels of staff. There is a real benefit to having staff from our unit out on campus gauging the pulse of the campus. This occurs both deliberately and serendipitously while staff are helping faculty, working on committees or implementing new technology. In this way, ITD staff are well placed to be in the right place at the right time in order to become familiar with what other academic units are doing, what areas are generating interest, and where computing expertise is needed. Through this type of contact the seeds of partnership and brainstorming are often sown. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of being available and active on the campus when it comes to getting the right people together.

An example of an unexpected opportunity to forge relationships occurs through our free training classes and workshops which are attended by faculty, staff, and students. Here we meet people from all colleges and organizations as well as from all different levels on campus. We have opportunities to assist them with their computing needs and at the same time, explore what types of activities or projects they are working on or might wish to start.

It will come as no surprise that participation in conferences is another way to meet potential partners. Participation in UNC CAUSE, a conference devoted to North Carolina’s 16 campus university system, recently resulted in just such a collaboration. During a discussion following a talk on IT initiatives for students, several attendees realized there was a continuing, mutual interest in how to coordinate and refine the information technology communications within universities. As a result, Collaborative Ink! (<http://www.collaborativeink.org/>) was formed to share information among its members. As in this example, BOFs (birds of a feather meetings), presentations or simply browsing through conference proceedings are great ways to identify potential partners.

In addition to the example of finding potential partners through workshops, conferences and training, it is often possible to initiate collaborations in conjunction with committee work or participation in standing groups. Having staff on various

committees throughout the campus has been an important way of gaining access to the University infrastructure. Especially beneficial has been work on the LITRE committee that informed decisions on NC State’s SACS re-accreditation (see section 3.1 NC State’s Flyspace initiative). Additionally, opportunities for collaboration have occurred through participation in ongoing groups such as The Teaching, Learning & Technology Roundtable (<http://www.ncsu.edu/tltr/>) and Multimedia Users Group for Teaching and Learning (<http://lts.ncsu.edu/resources/programs/mmug.cfm>).

We think it is important to note here that partnerships are also required among your internal staff. They have to be team players and they have to be willing to share ideas, delegate responsibilities, and work together towards a common goal. Like many things, partnerships and collaborations start at home!

2.3 Starting Small

One of the ways that ITD often makes contact with departments and service organizations is to suggest a pilot project. Ideas are typically generated quickly, but may get bogged down in concerns about money, schedules and implementation. With smaller scale pilot projects, we can move more quickly to implement an idea, and then receive the feedback and data needed to help in the decision to take a project out to a wider audience (or not). It is these proof-of-concept pilots that allow everyone to more reliably gauge the probable outcome. Similar to using focus groups, pilot projects help indicate what the campus really needs and wants. In addition, they allow technicians to better determine what it really takes to make new technologies work. We investigate on a small scale how a project should be administered. Through these pilot projects we have learned that teamwork is a very important component of partnerships.

3. BRIDGING THE COMMUNICATIONS GAP: EXAMPLES OF NC STATE INITIATIVES AND COLLABORATIONS

3.1 Introduction

Several successful initiatives and collaborations are worth specifically mentioning as they can in some cases be easily transferred to other institutions. Wherever possible, we include web addresses that will provide further details and contact information. Following are just some examples of what is going on at NC State University.

3.2 NC State Flyspace Initiative

<http://www.ncsu.edu/flyspace>

Flyspace is one of our newest and most exciting initiatives. It is a collaborative effort between ITD and NC State’s Talley Student Center. In addition, we are working with the NC State Libraries, who have recently opened a small collaborative space in their main building. The Flyspace project is also part of our Quality Enhancement Plan for our SACS re-accreditation (<http://litre.ncsu.edu>). The Talley Student Center Flyspace is due to come online in the fall of 2004.

Simply defined, Flyspace is meeting space for students that mimics conference rooms available to faculty and staff by allowing them to work together on group projects while enjoying

the benefits of modern multimedia. We have designed the space to be inexpensive, modular, and compact. As indicated by numerous studies done on group size, smaller is better. Limiting room size to 5 or 6 occupants will help foster an intimate space for collaboration. An added bonus is that this will make it more likely that other spaces can be built around campus.

Another important (and perhaps the most important) feature of Flyspace is an open scheduling system that allows any student at NC State to schedule the space for a meeting or group project. We will start off with an initial two hour limit on the room and will not allow students to schedule recurring meetings. These meeting rooms must be available and be flexible!

Benefits of the Flyspace partnership

- **For Students**
 - Windows Desktop will match the standard lab computer setup² students are familiar with in a central location with convenient hours.
 - Access to: meeting tables, whiteboards, projectors, phone, computers, hook-ups for laptops, network access.
 - Improved ability to interact with peers in a quiet, well equipped location.
- **For Talley Student Center (TSC)**
 - TSC will continue to be a hub for student gatherings that are both social and academic in nature.
 - Better use of space not fully utilized. Increased traffic to TSC's other attractions (art gallery, theater, etc.)
 - Compared to a full lab installation, Flyspace is ultimately less expensive and markedly easier to implement.
- **For Information Technology Division (ITD)**
 - Opportunity to explore different ways that students learn; we are helping to continue the dialogue on campus of how to use technology appropriately and in a pedagogically sound way.
 - Increased funding. ITD will be able to use Education and Technology fee³ money to fund these spaces.
 - Opportunity to lead a project that will inform decisions all across campus

Another partnership that will come out of the project will be one with faculty. We must assess the use of this space and we need both faculty and students to help us do this. Initially (and as part of our SACS re-accreditation), we will select 2-4 faculty members whose courses require a lot of group work. We are envisioning a two-pronged approach:

1. Some faculty will be asked to have their students use the space for at least some of their work; ITD will assist

them in learning how to use it and offering faculty ideas for their students.

2. Other faculty will simply leave it up to the students whether or not they use the Flyspace. They will tell the students about it and why it might be beneficial for them, but they will not assign them to use it.

Beyond some basic assumptions about group dynamics and collaborative work, it is important to understand that this project is somewhat pedagogy neutral -- it is a physical space that is being designed to accommodate students' needs. It will be ultimately up to faculty and students to determine how best to use these spaces in learning. A large portion of this project's intent is to study how faculty and students utilize this space in academic projects, and also to study how students use the space for non-academic purposes. The opportunity to forge new partnerships based on the Flyspace collaboration is exciting to everyone involved.

3.3 The Help Desk

One of the most advantageous partnerships for ITD has been with the campus help desk. In 2004, the NC State Help Desk was reorganized to consolidate Tier 1 support for the entire campus. (<http://help.ncsu.edu>) Previously, the various support divisions on campus each had their own help desks, protocols and procedures. By directing initial customer contact to one central help desk, it has been possible to standardize and offer clients a more consistent help desk experience. This was the ideal time to reinforce a close working relationship with the help desk. The resulting collaboration provided a wealth of information about what is happening on campus. As ITD personnel provided tier two support, we forged relationships across the campus. Our staff became known in their areas of expertise and subsequently involved in the brainstorming and later stages of various projects around campus. In this way, ITD was again given the opportunity to build new partnerships.

3.4 EdTech Conference

On a large campus, chances are an expert resides someplace at the university. The challenge is to find them. ITD has worked to create a community of experts by fostering events such as the annual exposition of educational and instructional technologies. "EdTech", currently in its 9th year, (<http://www.ncsu.edu/edtech/>) allows educators, staff and students from NC State, the K-12 community, and area community colleges the opportunity to showcase what they are using in their classrooms or offices and demonstrate new technologies specific to their area of expertise. Too often we found that faculty and staff were isolated and unaware of what others were doing on campus. Many times resources were being used to re-create projects that had already been completed in other areas. We don't need to re-invent the wheel; we need to share that wheel. Hence, EdTech was started and consistently draws 400-500 attendees each year.

The implementation of this exposition is in and of itself a partnership. Cosponsored with our distance education division, and implemented with the guidance and hard work of many committees, ITD has been able to provide the framework necessary for sharing expertise.

3.5 Mailing Lists

When it comes to bridging the communications gap, the implementation of mailing lists is an instant winner. ITD at NC State administers approximately 900 lists using Majordomo. (<http://lists.ncsu.edu>) While many lists are quite specific in nature, there are also those, which cover general computing areas such as the Network Administrators list. By monitoring and corresponding to this list, ITD is able to maintain a public presence and disseminate timely information to the individuals on campus who will act on changes. As mentioned earlier, the opportunity to be in the right place at the right time is occasionally all that is required to initiate collaborations.

Mailing lists also allow ITD to improve communication within specific groups. For example, ITD recently spearheaded the planning and implementation of the state wide conference UNC CAUSE (<http://www.unccause.org/cause03/>). Organizers and committee members from across the eastern region of North Carolina were able to stay in touch and keep each other informed in the planning process in part because of the two mailing lists we implemented: ‘Causeplanning’ and ‘Causesteering’.

Through the implementation, use and management of mailing lists, ITD has been able to provide the conduit for communication. This tool has made it possible to facilitate collaboration and initiate partnerships. We have been able to build an online community of experts.

3.6 Volume and Software Site Licensing

The process of negotiating volume or site licensing agreements is an excellent opportunity for collaboration across the university campus. The benefits of volume purchasing are well documented and apply to many types of acquisition. By bringing the campus together, ITD has been able to negotiate volume pricing for such software packages as Matlab, AutoCAD, Macromedia products and Adobe products to name just a few. The implementation of the university software committee has made it easier to locate potential partners and selling the idea to them is not usually difficult if the timing of our purchases matches their budget constraints. Besides the obvious benefit of financial savings, it is possible to build a community around the partners who participate in the purchase. Opportunities for training, information about updates and questions of support have a ready audience in the volume licensing partners. Similarly, by tapping into user communities across the campus, ITD was able to realize significant savings on hardware purchases as well. By consolidating orders for Macintosh computers and similarly for Dell PCs, campus hardware units were able to save money for many divisions including our own.

Similar to volume licensing, site licensing has made it possible for ITD to offer antivirus software to the entire campus including faculty, staff and students. (<http://www.ncsu.edu/antivirus>) The collaboration involved in this process was not about finances at all, since ITD was willing and happy to cover the entire purchase, but rather it occurs in the implementation of the antivirus software. We need all units on campus committed to the message that antivirus software is an essential component in today’s computing environment. By supplying the tools necessary for our partners to carry home the message, we are able to foster good will and help to keep the campus safer from attacks.

It is worth mentioning here that not all collaborations need be confined to the geographical limits of your campus. Significant savings were realized when ITD partnered with North Carolina’s Office of Information Technology Services (<http://www.its.state.nc.us/>) in the purchase of Symantec Antivirus Software. We envision similar opportunities in negotiating agreements with Microsoft in order to maximize everyone’s IT purchasing power. By consolidation and leveraging the purchasing power represented by many organizations throughout state government, it is possible to focus on the products and services of greatest need at the best possible price.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Combining what has been learned through outreach with the abilities and expertise of the IT staff is essential to making successful partnerships. The critical factors include:

- The right team players
 - IT communities can know who on campus has the expertise necessary
 - IT communities can encourage staff to participate in campus committees and meetings.
 - IT communities can encourage staff to participate in conferences.
- Good Communication
 - IT communities can implement and support mailing lists and centralized web pages that share information.
 - IT communities can ensure that expectations and technical limitations are clear at the beginning.
- Credit where credit is due
 - IT communities can be flexible and enthusiastic in allowing others to participate.
- An environment that values creativity, flexibility and foresight

Don’t let money, or lack thereof, discourage you from pursuing partnerships and collaborations. Partnerships don’t necessarily have to be 50/50; if a unit has the space and another unit the money, work together. In the long run, the shared burden will result in successes that perhaps you never even thought of (such as volume pricing discounts, less staff burnout and more thorough consideration of all angles of rollout).

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6. ENDNOTES

¹ SACS (<http://www.sacs.org/>) Southern Association of Colleges and Schools - recognized regional accrediting body in the eleven U.S. Southern states

² Windows Desktop in ITD supported Unity Computing Labs: (http://www.ncsu.edu/it/essentials/connections/unity_computer_labs/unity_labs.html) Windows PC environment deployed in our labs are authenticating to the Novell Network and AFS space with a single login. Over 150 different applications are delivered via the Novell Application Launcher and represent categories such as Office Applications (including the Microsoft Office and Star Office Suites), Math and Statistics Applications (such as Matlab, Maple and SAS), GIS Applications (such as ArcGIS and ArcView), Graphics and Web Tool Applications (including Dreamweaver, Flash and Photoshop), General use applications (such as PowerArchiver, WS-FTP and Acrobat) and Assistive

Technologies applications to facilitate computer access for users with disabilities.

³ The Educational and Technology Fee (ETF) is used for two major purposes:

- the provision of equipment, supplies, and maintenance for departmental laboratories with specific curricular objectives,
- the provision of campus-wide student computing services.

(http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/admin_resources/etf/ETF.pdf)