

Walking the Tightrope of Faculty Support

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ABSTRACT

Determining the desired relationship between IT professionals and faculty is an important step in setting expectations and developing programs to achieve that relationship. Two colleges discuss how they have found a balance between a small staff and the rising interest by faculty to integrate technology into their classrooms and research.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.1 [Management of Computing and Information Systems]: Project and People Management – *Staffing, Training.*

General Terms

Management.

Keywords

Faculty development, Support.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is the appropriate relationship between Information Technology (IT) staff and faculty? What technology skills do we have the right to expect faculty to possess? And in reverse, what should the faculty be able to expect from us as an IT service organization? This issue is of even greater concern to smaller schools where IT support is spread thin.

2. DEFINING ENVIRONMENTS

Before we can discuss and evaluate the various faculty support models, we must first understand the college environments. For this paper, we look at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon and George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. Both of these colleges are considered to be small in size.

2.1 Lewis & Clark College

The focus of Lewis & Clark College is a small liberal arts education. They strive to build a strong local community with an importance placed on personal contact between the students and

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faculty. For that reason, the undergraduate college emphasizes students living on campus and really offers no distance education components.

This is not true of our Graduate School of Education and the School of Law, both of which maintain a strong on-campus program but have interests in providing some distance classes for students at remote locations.

Supporting the approximately 2500 students at all three schools and 400 faculty, Lewis & Clark employs an average size Information Technology staff of twenty-nine full-time people. These individuals support Network and Technical Services, Information Systems, Instructional Media Services, Telecommunications and Client Services on campus. Of these, there are five consultants to handle primary campus support, including academic support.

2.2 George Fox University

George Fox University is evenly split between graduate and undergraduate studies. Graduate students (1600) are spread across four campuses and two remote teaching sites. Traditional undergraduates (1400) are located on the Newberg campus, which is also home base for the entire IT staff of fifteen which includes the Service Desk with its seven “front-line” employees.

Technology is central to all levels of instruction. Undergraduate students receive a laptop as part of their tuition, and most undergraduate courses include an online component and/or special software requirements. Graduate courses are heavily focused on distance technologies to reduce seat time for a widely scattered student body.

3. THE TIGHTROPE

3.1 One End of the Tightrope - Faculty

Faculty and IT staff alike are faced with challenges in integrating technology into the teaching, learning and research processes. While we have developed our lists from speaking with faculty at our schools, your faculty have their own unique demands. The issues here are relatively universal.

3.1.1 Time

The first challenge faced by faculty is time. It was very common for our faculty to express that there is already not enough time to do everything that is expected. Some of the drains on their time include:

- Class Preparation (more for new classes)

- Grading
- Research
- Writing
- Advising students
- Committee work

When taking the time to learn more about technology could potentially harm their chance at tenure, the choice of where their time would be better spent seems obvious.

3.1.2 Resources

Another challenge faced by many faculty are the constraints of resources. According to EDUCAUSE's Core Data Service 2002 Summary Report, in participating schools, although an average of 81.5% of classrooms have a wired internet connection, only 39% have LCD Projectors and only 31% have computers. How can we encourage faculty to take the time to learn and integrate technology into their courses when we cannot guarantee that their class will be held in a classroom where they can utilize the technology? In addition, many times when they are in a classroom with technology, the technology does not operate as advertised, forcing the faculty to use valuable face time with the students trying to figure out how to make it work.

3.1.3 Knowing the Possibilities

One of our faculty expressed the next challenge when he said, "I don't want what I could want. I could want much more but I don't even know that there are technologies and programs that would allow me to do it." Faculty have no way of knowing the possibilities of technology. They are spending their time staying current on the research in their disciplines leaving them little to no time, and often no desire, to stay current on the available technology.

3.1.4 On-demand Assistance

The final challenge that we have identified with faculty is that there are not enough Information Technology professionals or hours in the day to provide the on-demand assistance that faculty crave. Most Information Technology professionals work an eight-to-five workday when faculty are embroiled in preparing or teaching classes. When they could really use our assistance is later in the evening and on weekends, when they tend to have time for research and development.

3.2 The Other End of the Tightrope— Information Technology

3.2.1 Staffing

Similarly, the Information Technology department faces challenges when working with faculty. The first of these is staffing. As mentioned earlier, there are simply not enough of us to go around. Currently, the IT-to-faculty ration is approximately 1:80. This does not include the other support that we are expected to offer staff and students. Does this allow us to provide an acceptable level of support to faculty?

3.2.2 Budget

We have also all dealt with budget issues over the last several years. In the Information Technology department, the Academic Technology budget always seems to be hardest hit because it is not as tangible as a server that must be replaced or bandwidth that needs to be increased. However, we must contend with scalability. As we are constantly bringing more faculty and new projects into the technology fold, how can we continue to maintain our current projects and successes? There is only so far the rubber band of support can stretch before it snaps leaving a failed project in its wake.

3.2.3 Time

Another challenge that is faced by the Information Technology department reflects one of the faculty concerns—time. In addition to our expanding support expectations, we must also try to stay current with existing technologies while keeping a finger on the pulse of new technologies on the horizon.

3.2.4 Understanding Faculty Needs

Finally, we must work to understand the needs of our faculty. We cannot be experts in every discipline represented on our campuses so how can we understand what faculty are trying to accomplish and the demands being placed upon them? This forces us instead to spend time building relationships with our faculty that will allow us to draw on our unique strengths in working toward a common goal.

3.3 The Tightrope Itself

"The future of technological successes at higher education institutions depends not only on the availability of technology but also on the extent to which faculty are supported as they develop innovative ways to integrate technology into the learning and research experience."¹ To be successful in supporting faculty, we must find a way to better connect what faculty want and need with the support Information Technology can offer. If we cannot find a balance in these competing demands, then we are in danger of failing our faculty.

4. FACULTY SUPPORT MODELS

Lewis & Clark College and George Fox University, through faculty surveys and interviews identified three models of faculty support:

- Full Support
- Empowerment
- Partnership

While each campus would like to focus on one model, it is important to realize that multiple models may be in play at any one institution. The key is to choose the model that will allow you to offer a consistent level of support across the broadest constituency.

¹ "Fourth Annual EDUCAUSE Survey Identifies Current IT Issue", Crawford and Rudy, *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 2003.

4.1 Full Support

The most popular model of support for faculty is one in which the complete onus of incorporating technology is placed on Information Technology. The role of the faculty member is to provide the idea. It is then the responsibility of Information Technology to take the idea and to make it work with the technology available on campus. It is also Information Technology's duty to maintain the project, updating and upgrading it when necessary.

An example of a project receiving full support from Information Technology at Lewis & Clark College is our Math Placement and Proficiency Exam. This is an exam that most incoming students are expected to take online the summer prior to arriving on campus. Due to the expectation of the Administration that this test be moved to an online environment and that it happen in a very short timeline, and due to the lack of expertise and knowledge in the Math department to execute this decision, Information Technology was pulled in to make the exam happen. The result was that the Math Placement exam was moved online and now each year Information Technology is expected to make all the necessary changes to the exam and offer technical support to students taking the exam.

4.1.1 Full Support Works

There are some very specific situations where full support is the ideal model. One such situation is when there is full support from the campus community, including administration, for this model. The backing of the administration is mandatory since they in turn must adequately fund the staffing of the Information Technology department to levels that can accommodate the demands placed upon them. Or, if the campus culture is such that only a few faculty employ technology, thus not placing much load on the Information Technology staff, this model could also be successful.

Another situation where full support is the optimal choice is when high quality results are expected. When they are not responsible for creating the end product, faculty have no need to compromise their vision to correspond with the level of their technical knowledge. This also motivates the Information Technology department to create a product that is stable and easy to maintain because they know that, in the end, they will be the ones looking after it.

4.1.2 Full Support Does Not Work

When technology integration is not a priority for the administration, and the funding to properly staff the Information Technology department is not available, then the Full Support model will not succeed. Especially as more and more faculty become interested in using technology, the Information Technology staff will be spread so thin that no faculty will get satisfactory support. Another result is that there will be a high level of burnout amongst the Information Technology staff, producing a high turnover rate and lots of time spent as new staff are trained and become familiar with existing projects.

4.2 Empowerment

Another approach is to place the full responsibility of integrating technology on the faculty. In addition to providing the vision for a project, faculty are expected to provide the content, learn the

necessary technical skills and then manage both the initial and continuing development. The Information Technology department is responsible for technical training and troubleshooting. They are responsible for knowing the available resources and presenting these to the faculty but the final choice of which option will work best remains with the faculty.

4.2.1 Empowerment Works

This is the choice of many faculty, including those at George Fox University, where the intellectual freedom that this model allows is appreciated. At the Seminary, for example, Institution Technology staff work with faculty to provide a "technology camp" each summer. Faculty attend with the expectation that they will be equipped to produce and maintain online content for their courses. Even though the faculty have IT staff helping them during the one week camp, the expectation is that they will do the bulk of the production once they have learned the skills involved. The end result is that faculty do not have to rely on others for creating class content, and if it breaks, they usually have the knowledge to fix it.

This is also the best model for a small Information Technology staff. Instead of working with individual faculty, they are able to train faculty groups on standard tools. This also makes this model very scaleable since you can always have additional faculty attend a training session. The end result is that the impact on the Information Technology staff is minimal.

4.2.2 Empowerment Does Not Work

However, this model also has a high failure rate due to the expectations placed on the faculty. The faculty who expressed that time was a major challenge are required to find time for both training and development in this model. This can be especially difficult for faculty who are working towards tenure and receive no reward for investing time in technology.

This model can also result in technology "have nots" on campus. If a faculty member does not have an aptitude for technology, and no amount of training will give them the necessary skills, they will not be able to succeed in the technical arena.

4.3 Partnership

The final model is one of partnership, where faculty are the content experts and IT staff are the technology experts. Partnerships are formed and in working together a goal is accomplished. It is the faculty's role to know what they want to do and to provide the discipline specific knowledge. It is Information Technology's role to know the technology that will help accomplish the goal and to work with the faculty to bring the content and the technology together. For a partnership to be successful, both sides need to be fully invested.

Lewis & Clark College constantly tell the faculty that we want to be their partners. During our annual Faculty Technology Institute, we actually practice what we preach. Each day of a weeklong session is divided into two parts. During the morning, we offer various technology workshops to introduce faculty to new technology and to give them some technology skills. Then the Information Technology consultants eat lunch with the faculty—an important piece in relationship building. Finally, in the afternoon, each faculty participant is paired with an Information

Technology consultant to work on the faculty's specific projects. We have offered the Institute for the past five years and continue to have a mix of new and repeat faculty participants.

4.3.1 Partnerships Work

In order for a partnership to be successful, all involved parties must fully understand their role in the process and have a sense of ownership toward the project. If the project becomes too much of a burden for either partner, there will either be resentment and the partnership will fail completely or another support model will come into play. Therefore, a key piece in making a partnership work is that time is spent to build the relationship between the Information Technology and the faculty.

4.3.2 Partnerships Do Not Work

As with the empowerment model, if technology integration is not a priority for the administration, it will not be a priority for the faculty. If a reward system is not in place for faculty using technology, and if they do not have time or if the faculty are simply apathetic, not even sharing the burden will entice the faculty toward technology.

5. FINDING THE BALANCE

As time passes, the use of technology is no longer considered a luxury in classes and for research but has instead become a

necessity. Even if the administration is indifferent to the use of technology our students are demanding it. Faculty can no longer stick their heads in the sand in the hopes that technology will go away. Instead time has proved that technology is here to stay.

If we as Information Technology professionals are to be successful in supporting our faculty's use of technology, we must make a conscious decision as to what level of support we can offer. To make that decision, we must evaluate the level of support desired by our faculty. You may be surprised that the level of support that you think they want is not necessarily the true level of support they do want. Next, you must look at the level of support that your Information Technology staff can support. Don't choose a level of support that will quickly burn out your staff or that is not scaleable as more faculty choose to jump on the technology bandwagon. Once you have gathered this information, then and only then can you find the balance and identify the support model that will work at your institution.

Once you identify the support model that you wish to promote, set the expectations and then be consistent in the level of support offered to all faculty. Of course along the way exceptions will need to be made but make them knowingly and make sure all involved know that it not the normal level of support.

Most important, never forget that you must communicate with the faculty and collaborate to find the faculty support model that will work for you.