

## **Collaborative Initiatives within an Information Technology Organization**

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### **Introduction**

This document outlines in a very broad sense one institution's interpretation of collaborative relationships within the IT department. Franklin College has a small support organization that handles most IT support issues. Because of the size of the organization, size of the school, and ultimately the size of the IT budget, Franklin College has been creative in the ways IT support is handled.

Organizationally, the IT department uses collaboration decision making techniques within the group to handle issues ranging from long term planning, application development and processes based on daily support. This document will explain the collaboration process, discuss the organizational structure, and highlight ways to promote institutional, departmental and personal growth for Information Technology members.

### **The Three Faces of Information Technology Support**

Franklin College is a small Liberal Arts Institution just south of the metropolitan Indianapolis area. Franklin has always been known for strong residential academic programs. Franklin has limited distance education initiatives and community education programs under way. For the most part, traditional classes, at times blended (combination of online and seat) rule at Franklin College. Franklin College maintains a large number of media rich classrooms, a video conferencing facility and a small percentage of faculty utilizing advanced technology in their classrooms. Currently, Franklin College has 25% of classrooms deemed "Smart Classroom" outfitted with permanently mounted dvd/vhs players, projection and sound equipment.

In addition to the media rich classrooms, Franklin College will have all meeting and academic spaces in our wireless network by the fall of 2004. This wireless network will be open to all faculty, staff and students. Visitors will be able to access the wireless network for web browsing purposes after a simple registration process.

In total, there are 12 members of the Information Technology Support team. Those 12 people cover all Information Technology support services. In the last two years, the IT department has expanded to include the following components:

- Networking Support
- Networking Security Support
- Web Application Support
- Telecommunications

- Residential Computing support
- Administrative Systems Support
- Helpdesk
- Academic Computing Support
- Teaching and Learning Support
- Copy Shop Services

The areas listed here are the primary areas covered in the IT department. We also have one support/clerical person and one Director. In order to cover each of these areas with the limited number of staff available, there has been a need to work as a close knit collaborative group. Many people wear multiple hats, and are called on in various roles dependent on the situation and project.

Marilyn Bedford is the Training and Development consultant for the Human Resources Department of Indiana University Purdue University in Indianapolis. Marilyn defines collaboration as a process for “solving complex, systematic problems, making decisions that affect people from many constituencies and generating creative ideas. Collaboration is based on philosophy that respects and values individual perspectives as they work together equally with commitment to advance common good.”(Bedford) According to David Chrislip’s book Collaborative Leadership, “The premise of collaboration is when you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization and community.” (Chrislip)

Based on the definitions listed above, and the fact that we have identified more IT areas to cover than we have people, members of the IT department fulfill many different roles at different times. The IT department has adopted a very open attitude in dealing with change. Change is often created by or embraced by the IT department. In the last 4 years, we have organized and reorganized 3 separate times to accommodate institutional, departmental and individual member’s strengths and talents.

Currently, we have identified three broad areas of support forming teams to accomplish the goals in each of those respective areas. Academic computing, Administrative computing, and networking and infrastructure support represent the over arching themes within the department. Individual team members work from a general job description on a day to day basis. As mentioned before, reorganization occurs often within the department but **always** with the support of the collective collaborative team (the IT department) – more about that later! Members of the IT department “float” into and out of those three teams depending on current projects and initiatives. For instance, the Telecommunications Administrator, who happens to also be the Audio Visual coordinator may be at any given time participating in a Networking project as well as an Academic computing project on two separate initiatives. Another example might be the Network Security Administrator also writes administrative software applications. At any given time, he may be participating in a Networking/infrastructure project as well as an Administrative support initiative. In each of these areas, one team member acts as a team leader, overseeing a bulk of the projects in their area. Listed below is a breakdown of what is included in the three areas of support.

### **Academic Technology Support**

The Team Leader holds a title of Collaborative Technology Administrator. Services that occur in this area include:

- Hardware Support for faculty
- Software support for Faculty
- Instructional Technology Support
- Video Conferencing
- Lab software support
- Course Management support
- A/V Support

### **Administrative Technology Support**

The team leader for this area holds the job title of Administrative Systems Analyst. Support in this area includes:

- Administrative Systems
- Transaction Systems
- Application Development
- Hardware Support (occurs in all three areas)
- Helpdesk (occurs in all three areas)

### **Networking and Infrastructure Support**

The team leader for this area holds the job title of Network Administrator. Support in this area includes:

- Network support
- Network Security Support
- Telecommunications
- Copier/Printer Support
- Residential Computing

### **Information Technology Organizational Model – How to make it all fit?**

As a manager of this kind of fluid organization, it feels as if that old saying “herding cats” is truly a common practice. The biggest managerial challenge for the Franklin College IT department is staying focused on the long term goals and steering the group to those ends. From the inside of this team, the work assigned to and volunteered for by team members makes sense. I can imagine from the outside, it would appear as if the IT department moves as an amebic organism. The relationship between the IT department and the rest of campus is based on a level of respect and perceived competency for the IT group.

The collaborative principles including equality and trust are practiced and visited often within the IT department. There is a delicate balance at times to make sure all perspectives are represented. The trust within the department is based on the fact that everyone has something to contribute, and not one of us is as smart as all of us together.

After all that, please note there are times where collaboration is not appropriate. In an emergency situation, or when there is little time to decide, full blown collaboration is not the best decision making style. Even when collaboration cannot be used, one of the benefits of using a collaborative model, is the team members know intimately strengths and weakness of each member. Team members can find answers and solicit assistance when needed.

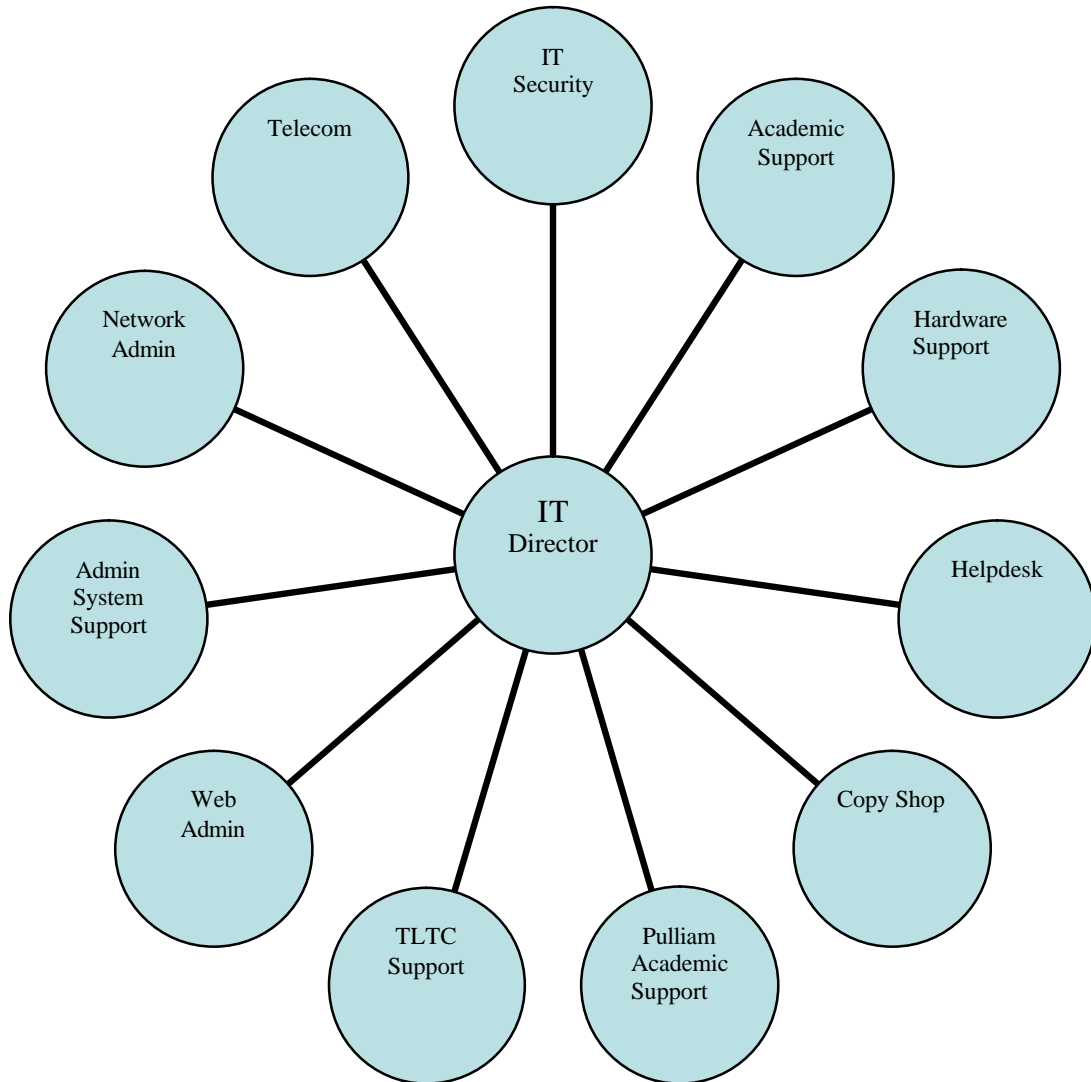
### **Management Model**

The role of the IT director at Franklin College (among other things) is to foster an environment of open communication among the team. Communication, communication, communication....The IT Director is responsible for providing the resources and the group authority for projects. Many times the IT Director is the one who ultimately has positional power within the group, can reward and in the worst case, coerce. In all cases where collaboration is used to solve problems, the IT team knows the leader has (good or bad) final responsibility for the decision.

In times where collaboration is not appropriate, it is the responsibility of the IT Director to inform the team (usually in an informal manner) that other decision making styles will be used. Consultative and Executive decisions must be used when appropriate. Each team member participates from a Consultative perspective to the IT Director and other team members when called upon to do that.

### **Organizational Model**

The IT department is a very flat organization. As has been suggested throughout this discussion, team members don different hats as is dictated by current projects. Often, team members perform the role of “project manager” eliciting the help and support from other IT staff people. Each team member reports directly to the IT Director, in theory fostering a feeling of equality among the group. The following is a pictorial representation of the Organizational structure.



### **Balancing Institutional, Departmental and Personal Growth**

As stated earlier, the key to collaborative successful teams is communication. The IT department is very intentional about how communication happens formally within the group. The IT department meets one time per week on Tuesday mornings for 1 hour. This is an opportunity for the entire group to come together and help solve problems. It is referred to as the “problem” meeting. Each member gets a chance to share current problems or challenges where they need to assistance of other IT team members. Discussions occur within that hour with the entire group.

On Thursday mornings, the IT department meets for 1 hour. This meeting is set aside for long term planning involving the entire group, policy discussions, or specifically designated agenda items suggested by the Director or other group members. In some instances, small groups are established for this time to talk in the three broad support areas. The agendas for the small groups are established by the Director.

On Friday mornings, each team member meets with the Director privately for 15-30 minutes to give an update on current projects and generally “check-in”. This way the individual team members have a voice in the overall process.

Sound like a lot of meetings? It is. We also have 2 retreats (a summer canoe trip) and a winter planning day. Both retreats are off campus and involve social relaxed time. The times the department spends together does not necessarily mean we “like” each other, although it does mean we are forced in some ways to communicate. This type of communication elicits buy-in and understanding among the group.

### **Training and Personnel Considerations**

There is a delicate balance in this model. It is imperative the organization is deliberate in making sure personal growth and interests are met. In order for the group to function in such a fluid environment, each team member must always feel their contributions are valued. If the team members feel they need to be retrained, retooled and refreshed in their skills, training should be provided. As a leader in this type of group, it is imperative the collaborative team recognized every effort will be made to “pay attention to” the individual first, but sometimes departmental needs, then ultimately institutional needs may sometimes take precedents over individual. The attitude where “individuals matter” seems to motivate team members to give over and above when necessary.

Each team member is expected to attend one conference or training session to learn a new skill every year. Those conferences and training opportunities vary by location and content. Each team member is also expected to participate in campus committees. Many IT team members serve on search committees, staff elected committees and panels for student projects. This involvement (which could in fact be more) forces the IT department to look outward to the rest of the campus rather than only focusing on departmental issues.

### **Conclusion**

In as much as this seems like a very complex model, but dealing with people is a complex endeavor. Franklin College is committed to serving our faculty staff and students. The IT organization is lean. The structure of the organization is efficient with the overall goal of meeting the needs of the Institution, department and individual team member. There is an understanding among the department that the order of priority changes as the needs change. The IT department has grown by 2 people in the last 18 months, and will grow by 2 more as we bring on a technology rich Student Center and a “One Card” this summer. The IT department has enjoyed a low level of turn over within the department. This model has worked for the number of team members currently employed and I suspect will work for a slightly larger group.

Change is welcomed, embraced and met from the Franklin College IT department.

### **References**

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