Creating a Collaborative Environment: Instructional and Learning Services

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Abstract

Instructional technology consists of many elements, including information technology, knowledge of pedagogy and faculty needs, technical support, and training. DePauw University has recently reorganized its Information Services staff to include several staff areas, including technicians, library staff and help desk, as well as faculty support staff. As part of this reorganization, a new group, entitled Instructional and Learning Services, was formed. We will discuss the elements of this group and the decision to meld these individual areas together, our vision for this group and its identity on our campus. We will also talk about how collaboration within the group has been a catalyst for our successful integration. This discussion will appeal to those trying to integrate disparate staff groups, as well as those interested in collaboration within departments.

Introduction

DePauw University is a private, residential, undergraduate liberal arts college located in Greencastle, Indiana, with an enrollment of just over 2300 students, and 800 faculty and staff members. With the aid of a grant from the Lilly Endowment, in 2001 DePauw established an initiative named 361° to describe the University's commitment to preparing graduates to lead in the digital age.

The 360 degree symbol illustrates that DePauw students are confident to pursue any direction after graduation; the additional degree symbolizes that graduates are empowered to pursue new and innovative directions. As a part of this initiative special programs for faculty members and students were designed to support, enhance, and transform teaching and learning at DePauw. These programs include:

- Information Technology Associates Program (ITAP)
- Student Technology Assessment, Resources, and Training (START)
- Faculty Instructional Technology Support (FITS)

- ◆ Digital Media Lab (*dml*)
- ◆ Music Instructional Technology Center (*mitc*)
- ◆ Community Technology Enhancement Program (CTEP)
- ◆ University Libraries
- ◆ Eugene S. Pulliam Center for Contemporary Media (PCCM)
- ◆ Technology Center, Percy L. Julian Science and Mathematics Center
- ◆ Richard Peeler Art Center
- ◆ Opportunity Through Collaboration Program

Although each of these programs was established to provide distinct services, there were commonalities among them. For instance, some programs focused mainly on tools, others on facilities, and others on instructional learning (including multimedia development) and training. These services are spread across several buildings on campus, and some functions or groups have changed locations over the last few years. Over time, it became apparent that collaborative efforts between the different programs that had common focus areas would be much more efficient and productive if they formed a larger team. One such team, Instructional & Learning Services (I.L.S.) under the leadership of Carol L. Smith, Associate CIO of Instructional & Learning Services, is a result of this reorganization. In addition to the 361° programs of START, FITS, *dml*, and *mitc*, I.L.S. also is comprised of the campus Technical Training Coordinator and Special Projects Team.

In this paper, we will discuss the elements of this group and the decision to meld these individual areas together over the past year (summer 2004 to the present), our vision for this group and its identity on our campus. We will also talk about how collaboration within the group has been a catalyst for our successful integration.

Building Team Spirit

As this group was being created, it was decided to physically move the majority of the group together to share a common space. As space was becoming available in the basement of the Roy O. West Library, this became the home for Instructional and Learning Services (with the exception of *mitc*, which remains in the Performing Arts Center). One of the stated goals of co-locating these services was to draw from the expertise and experience of the different individuals in the group.

We knew there were many similarities in what we did (for instance, a FITS specialist might help a faculty member learn how to create a website, while a START consultant would help a group of students learn the same tools, and a *dml* staff member would provide the digital resources to incorporate into the website), so why not benefit from our similarities by working together as a team?

As we began to work and meet together, it became clear that we could collaborate on a number of projects, and perhaps share or distribute certain assignments so that we were not constantly "re-inventing the wheel". In fact, we have come to realize that collaboration and cooperation are probably our greatest strengths as a group. Learning to collaborate has provided a kind of synergy that truly gives our group more abilities than we would experience individually.

Another event that drove us to consider the importance of collaboration was second reorganization on our campus. Shortly before the beginning of our fall 2004 semester, the decision was made to merge our Information Services (IS) and Library staff into one organization. In a letter from our CIO, Dennis Trinkle, the announcement and some of the reasoning were described. He wrote:

> "I have recommended that we consolidate several mid- and senior-level managerial positions to create a flatter organizational structure that gets more staff members engaged with planning and decision making and that helps put faculty, students, and staff closer to the final decision makers. We anticipate that this will help improve communication, co-ordination, and, we hope, responsiveness to faculty, staff, and student needs, desires, and concerns."

With Instructional and Learning Services already located in the main library building, we had a unique opportunity to begin to collaborate in an even greater way with Library staff, particularly the Instructional Librarians.

Additionally, there are other benefits that have grown from this merger that we had not originally foreseen. For example, the reorganization of our student staff program that is currently taking place. Although most of our student workers are participants in ITAP (an honors program), we also hire several work-study students to provide support for the services offered by each of our departments. A concern of ours is that two students working in the same lab doing very similar roles do not communicate with one another simply because they have different job titles and report to different departments within I.L.S. Since we feel compelled to provide our students with the opportunity to interact with one another in order to share their experiences such as common challenges, solutions, and knowledge they have gained through supporting the DePauw campus, we are currently re-structuring our student staff organization so it focuses on functionality rather than the department for which they report.

Defining Who We Are

Since we were a newly organized team, Carol Smith provided us with the opportunity to define who we were. At a staff retreat at the end of the fall semester, the Instructional and Learning Services group met to discuss our core values and our vision for our team. The ultimate goal of this meeting was to produce a mission statement that we could use to quickly describe what we, as an organization, were committed to providing for the campus. In discussing our core values, we focused on three main questions:

1. How do people best learn and what elements/methods of teaching them help them learn most effectively?

2. What key elements of client service do you think are most important as it relates to our effectiveness as a department?

3. What do you see as the core factors that give life to our group?

Furthermore, we brainstormed a complete list of all the services and resources we provide to the campus. After much discussion and "thinking outside the box", we arrived at a condensed list that succinctly describes the functions of I.L.S. The final list includes:

♦ Engage in dialogue to promote awareness about instruction and informational technology
♦ Research emerging technologies
♦ Offer workshops
♦ Maintain our (including Library and Information Services) web sites
♦ Collaborate
♦ Support faculty projects
♦ Compile and create documentation, guides, and references about instructional and information technology
♦ Provide technical training and production support
♦ Support ITAP and our student employees
♦ Provide support for the career development of others
♦ Manage I.L.S. lab facilities
♦ Exhibit our citizenship within Library and Information Services
♦ Promote relationship / community building within I.L.S.
♦ Engage in our own professional development / individual growth
♦ Participate actively and be visible in the professional community

We also created a mission statement that described I.L.S.:

"Instructional and Learning Services collaborates with our clients – the faculty, students and staff – and with each other, exploring ways that instructional and information technology can support a learner-centered environment. We recognize the importance of dialogue and partnership in the effective integration of technology and support this philosophy by providing training and production support, researching new technologies and methods, managing our technology facilities, participating actively in the University professional community, and engaging in our own professional development."

We arrived at this mission statement after several weeks of discussion. It took much discussion and compromise to produce the final version. This process in itself was a sign of far we had come in learning to work together and value each other's opinions.

Obstacles Or Opportunities – Next Steps

When reorganization occurs, there are always obstacles ahead of you. By being aware of the obstacles, you can be proactive in overcoming them. One way to do this is to look at each obstacle as an opportunity for growth. Immediate opportunities for us to embrace are:

♦ Maintaining the feeling that we are "One Team" and conveying this to our student staff members
♦ Communicating our vision across the campus

♦ Collaborating with individuals and groups outside of I.L.S.
♦ Supporting a campus laptop initiative that will be implemented this fall
♦ Promoting new technology that focuses on pedagogical innovation that reinforces the University's values and strengths

Furthermore, cooperation and collaboration are key factors to improving the effectiveness of the services provided by I.L.S., particularly in managing and balancing the projects for which we are responsible. This leads to an important next step which is for everyone to stay on track as far as our new philosophy of approaching projects functionally instead of departmentally. This can be achieved by promoting a team environment where each member of the team understands, respects, and relies upon the expertise of one another. Also on our agenda is the reorganization of the student staff program, development of a method to organize and coordinate projects between all departments within I.L.S., development of a mechanism to facilitate the communication of project status reports so everyone is aware of what is going on in I.L.S., expansion of our client base in order to increase the number of individual clients with whom we work over the course of the year, work more closely with the campus Web Team to provide consistent support for our clients, and to grasp onto opportunities for collaboration with other Library and Information Services providers.

Conclusion

Seeing the many support needs on our campuses, from both a pedagogical as well as a technological standpoint, can be daunting. It is critical that we learn new ways to collaborate, in order to better meet the needs of our faculty and students. It is profoundly rewarding and exciting to be at the beginning of a reorganization such as this, as it leaves us open to all kinds of possibilities. Collaborating to form a mission statement and list of what we do as a team was certainly not the final step in our reorganization. There are many steps ahead of us in which we must continue to pool our resources and work together, in order to form us into the successful team that we envision becoming.