FACULTY ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE PRESIDENT

Meeting agenda December 8, 2009

Concerns regarding IT
  Clarification of issues outlined below
  Development of strategy for progress

‘One-size-fits-all’ approach to information technology
  Poor support for Mac/Unix systems; no support for Netbooks
  Limited access or no access to servers from off-campus
  Poor support for scientific computing
  Computer replacement
Faculty interactions with IT
  Lack of trust and frequent reports of unpleasant demeanor
  “Gray market” in IT services
Banner system / CougarTrail
  Banner Finance system
  CougarTrail
Additional concerns:
  Wireless coverage and bandwidth
  Security concerns
  Management issues
  Smart classrooms

2009-2010 Members
Melissa Hughes, Biology (chair)
Morgan Koerner, German and Slavic Studies (secretary)
Celeste Lacroix, Communication
David Mann, Political Science
Robert Mignon, Mathematics
Deborah Miller, Health and Human Performance
James Neff, Physics and Astronomy
Leslie Sautter, Geology and Environmental Geosciences **
Elijah Siegler, Religious Studies
Katina Strauch, Library
John Walsh, French and Italian
**Scott Harris, Geology and Environmental Geosciences, will attend in place of Leslie Sautter.
Annotated agenda:

1) ‘One-size-fits-all’ approach to information technology: given the diversity of research programs and expertise among faculty at the College, it is no surprise that we use a variety of systems and hardware. Finding support for the various hardware/systems that we use, however, is surprisingly difficult; this may be a result of the underfunded/understaffed nature of the IT department.

   A. Poor support for Mac/Unix systems (absolutely essential for some research programs; also unnecessarily limits teaching technology); no support for Netbooks (a highly cost-effective solution for faculty who travel extensively).

   B. Limited access or no access to servers from off-campus (again, absolutely essential for some research programs; also essential if teaching off-campus or at College-supported remote campuses.)

   C. Poor support for scientific computing (likely to also be true of other disciplines): distributed computing, VPN access, access to/from specific computer-driven equipment (remote telescopes, microscopes, etc). Ideally, faculty and IT could work as a team, sharing expertise, to facilitate these diverse computing needs, but that rarely happens (or happens through unofficial channels, see 2B below).

      i. School/departmental liaisons rarely trained in specific computing needs of schools/departments – perhaps greater role for schools in hiring/evaluating liaisons would facilitate greater more of a team approach?

   D. Computer replacement: A perfectly fine computer for one faculty’s needs is completely inadequate for another’s.

      i. Ordering computers to match specific needs is difficult.

      ii. There does not seem to be a consistent roll-out policy that allows for efficient planning. It is also inefficient if computers are replaced on a prescribed cycle regardless of when it is necessary to replace them. It seems unrealistic to expect IT to be able to anticipate and track the individual needs of faculty with regard to computer replacements. A chair in HSS had this recommendation: money for computer replacements should be made part of departmental budgets; allocation of this money should be at the discretion of the chair, who knows better than IT what individual faculty needs are.

2) Faculty interactions with IT: Faculty perceive IT has having ‘my way or highway’ approach. IT staff may be too swamped with basic questions to adequately serve advanced computing needs. Our computing needs do not always fit under the IT standard system, and as a result, there is often friction between IT and faculty.
A. Lack of trust and frequent reports of unpleasant demeanor (ex: “rude”, “surly”); also comments of “treat me like I’m stupid”, and “I asked them not to do X to my machine, but they did it anyway”. Faculty expertise in computing is generally disregarded, both at individual levels and at administrative levels (i.e., interactions between department chairs and IT regarding purchase and/or implementation of specialized technology).

B. “Gray market” in IT services:

i. Within IT: Some IT staff are very knowledgeable and willing to help; much of this help ends up being off-the-books, however, as it falls outside the ‘official’ systems or approaches supported by IT.

1. Finding this expertise is very difficult, as there is no directory reflecting who to contact with specialized problems (who has specific expertise); all initial inquiries go through HelpDesk, which can be extremely inefficient (HelpDesk staff do not have adequate training to deal with specialized problems, and/or may not know who at IT has the appropriate expertise). Faculty rely on word-of-mouth to figure out who to contact with specific problems. High turnover exacerbates this problem – you may find someone who can help, then discover they are gone the next time you need someone.

2. IT staff who help faculty with officially un-supported problems can be penalized for doing so.

ii. DIYs: If IT doesn’t provide support for needed services, faculty look elsewhere. Many faculty are their own IT-support. Particularly knowledgeable members of some departments become de-facto IT staff for their (or other) departments.

3) Banner system / CougarTrail: The implementation of the financial aspects of the new system have caused a great deal of difficulty for faculty, particularly those who manage large grants; as faculty use of the financial system has not been considered in the design and implementation of the financial modules, there is considerable trepidation regarding the implementation of other modules, especially those involved in student records management, as it is not at all clear that the new system will remedy the woes of CougarTrail.

A. Banner Finance system – ‘unmitigated disaster’ for faculty managing grants; faculty use of the financial module does not seem to have been considered in the design and implementation of the system. External grants are of increasing importance to the College; faculty are responsible for managing significant sums, and do so ‘on the side’ (without, in most cases, administrative support or compensation). The new system makes this work more difficult.

i. Too long for current transactions to be posted (many still are not)
ii. Too long for inclusion of previous fiscal years (most grants are >1 year; this information is critical to grant management)

iii. Not user-friendly: no standard reports; basic information needed in grants management requires obscure queries followed by drill-down; it is very easy to miss critical information.

Obviously all new systems will go through an ‘adjustment’ phase, and regular users can learn any system, with time; however, the lack of user-friendliness of this module and the lack of recognition that faculty might have different needs than other users raises considerable concerns for the student records module.

B. CougarTrail: Obviously we all know that CougarTrail will soon be history; there are some common difficulties with that system, however, that we hope can be corrected in the new system.

i. We cannot access student records as necessary to do our jobs. (Students requesting overrides into classes, students interested in independent studies, tutorials, or other specialized classes with gpa requirements, etc.)

Informal student advising has plummeted since this new policy was enacted (many faculty now refuse to do any informal advising – advising of students who are not their official advisees – because it is quite difficult to do under the current system). Students are not well served by this policy.

ii. Every action is tied to a term. When a former student or advisee contacts you, you have to guesstimate when you had that student in class before you can find the records. The default term is often not helpful (for example, during registration, have to switch term for every advising session).

iii. The time-out period is rather short. If timed-out of a CougarTrail connection, it will sometimes refuse log-in attempts (this may be a ‘doesn’t play well with Macs’ issue).

4) Additional concerns:

A. Need more wireless coverage and bandwidth.

i. Coverage is spotty (particular in RHSC, perhaps elsewhere)

ii. Difficulties in teaching if whole class can’t access wireless

B. Security concerns

i. Coordinating security between IT (Windows-based) and other systems is difficult, given very Windows-biased expertise within IT; there is a need for staff with expertise in security-related issues, particularly with regard to non-Windows systems.

ii. Cougars password is not secure; this is a disaster waiting to happen.

iii. Cougars password allows access to any else’s Windows machine; another disaster waiting to happen.
iv. There is inadequate space on server to back-up files, but encryption for external hard-drives has not been provided – leaving faculty to choose between security and backing up critical files.

v. Physical security is also a concern – although IT is not directly responsible for this, more effort in educating the community about the need for better security would be helpful.

C. Management issues

i. Better enforcement of appropriate use of listservs is necessary. (On a related note, spam filtering is much improved.)

ii. Recognition that web server is more than marketing tool; as a marketing tool, recognition that marketing means different things in different disciplines. As above, one-size-fits-all chafes.

iii. Little consistency between departments in terms of who pays for which IT resources (i.e., IT or department).

iv. Need for guest access to IT resources, to facilitate collaborative work

v. Need better FTP access

D. Smart classrooms

i. More! (All classrooms should be smart classrooms.)

ii. Irregular maintenance (replacement of bulbs, failing projectors etc.) is a problem.

iii. Important (and seemingly standard) technology is missing from many ‘smart’ classrooms (for example, sound).

iv. Regular review, reconsideration, and up-date of what technology is offered in smart classrooms would be ideal.