President’s Faculty Advisory Committee  
Tuesday, December 8, 2009 1:30-2:30  
MINUTES

Members Present: President Benson, Melissa Hughes (Chair), Morgan Koerner (Secretary), Bob Mignone, Celeste Lacroix, David Mann, Deborah Miller, James Neff, Scott Harris (sitting in for Leslie Sautter), John Walsh, Elijah Siegler

Special Guests from Administration in Attendance: Bob Cape, Marsha Moore, James Williams, Andrew Bergstrom, Susan Beatty, Deborah Osborne, and Steve Osborne

Agenda Items: Discussion of Faculty Concerns regarding IT

Melissa Hughes began the meeting by noting that there would not be time to address all of the concerns raised in the agenda (see attached), and suggested instead that the meeting focus on clarification of issues raised in the agenda, as well as developing longer-term strategies for addressing these concerns.

General Concerns

• The Committee described the general sense among faculty that the needs of the faculty are often more diverse than administrative needs. As a response to this disconnect, an IT “gray market” of sorts has resulted in which faculty solve problems on their own or seek “off the books” assistance from contacts in the IT department. This “off the books” assistance from IT staff can be extremely effective, but is mostly done in secret, apparently due to fear of being penalized.
• The Committee further raised concerns about the lack of clarity of the structure of IT; faculty expressed confusion about where to seek help for different issues and frustration about the quality of the responses from the Helpdesk.
• Bob Cape (Senior Vice President of IT) noted that it is not uncommon for faculty members to help each other with technology issues. He reminded the committee that the Helpdesk is intended as a point of contact for remedial, classroom-related issues and, otherwise, for pointing faculty in the right direction. He further underscored that his team envisions the Helpdesk as an effective starting point for faculty members and a place that can log and keep track of computing issues at the College.
• Bob Cape agreed that it would be good to provide faculty with an IT flow chart to help them find more quickly where to turn for help with a specific issue.

The Consistency of Computing Resources Across Campus

• The Committee highlighted faculty frustration with the inconsistent classroom technology standards across campus. The Silcox Physical Education Center and the Math Department classrooms were raised as particular examples of outdated classrooms.
Bob Cape responded that IT is currently moving the college towards a standard classroom configuration with a straightforward control panel. This process, however, is only in its early stages. The Committee voiced concerns regarding the lack of support for Macs. Bob Cape described the IT department’s difficulties with certifying technologists to work on Macs. In a recent development, IT has made sure that every helpdesk staffer has a Macintosh and a PC. This has been a first step in raising the level of support for Macs at the college. The Committee discussed frustrations with outdated computers and inquired about the computer replacement policy. Bob Cape described the replacement process at the college. IT has 250,000 dollars per year for PC and Mac replacement, but this amount is not enough to solve the problem and get the college on a 4 year replacement cycle. Every year, IT therefore picks the oldest machines to replace, without any preferential treatment for specific schools or departments.

**The Banner System / Cougar Trail**

The Committee related faculty and staff frustration about the launch of the Banner finance system, and noted faculty concerns that the replacement for Cougar Trail might be just as problematic if it is not adequately tested before its launch. In particular, the Committee noted that the new system did not appear to have been tested in Macs, and the lack of user-friendliness in the finance module. Bob Cape noted that the Banner system, when first implemented, will be at the basic level with no localized frills, etc. When the student Banner system is launched it will be “out of the box,” i.e. in its most basic form. He emphasized the very large scope of this project, noting that while the transition may have some rough spots, there would be further modifications of the system with time.

**Encryption for External Hard Drives**

The Committee brought attention to security issues involving external hard drives used by the faculty to save their work. Bob Cape argued that the faculty should be using the campus server to back up sensitive information. The Committee highlighted the practical difficulties of using the campus server. Whereas external hard drives can back up files automatically, the campus server requires the conscious decision to decide which files are sensitive and then save them daily. The Committee further expressed a desire for information regarding how faculty use resources (including grading software) to be considered in IT decisions.

**Forum for Continuing to Address IT-Faculty Issues**

The Committee discussed the possibility of an ad hoc committee to pursue these issues further. The standing IT committee, which contains representatives from the departments across campus, was mentioned as a forum in which these issues might be best addressed.
• Concerns were expressed about the efficacy of the current IT committee of department representatives, since the meetings have to date been focused on the implementation of the Battery Project and a new LMS and not specifically on the issues discussed in today’s FAC meeting.
• Bob Cape suggested holding a meeting of the IT department representatives in January in which they will specifically address the issues discussed in today’s meeting.
• The Committee suggested that it would also make sense for IT to meet with representatives from constituencies that require specific IT resources (e.g., scientific computing resources, off campus access, etc.) to address needs that are unlikely to be uniform across campus, and thus are likely to be overlooked by the standing IT committee.

Final Comments from the President
• President Benson noted that the IT financial gaps described in the meeting will be useful information for him as he continues to explain the necessity of a new financial model to the board of trustees.
Annotated agenda: Faculty Advisory Committee, December 8, 2009

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 turn-over 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.