CAUSE Constituent Group Meeting
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CAUSE97
IT Collaboration in State Systems

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About 26 people ate lunch together in the Oceanic 2 room from 12 until 1:40 on Wednesday. Several people left, and almost as many arrived later and filled their spots. Although no formal attendance record was made, the states people mentioned are indicated. The group chose to forego introducing ourselves and hopped right in with their concerns.

As the convener, I asked the group to vote on which of three topics they wished to start with. Slightly more favored information systems than staff recruitment and retention, with no one voting for systemwide CIO responsibilities.

The VT state colleges are looking at a new student information system and are encountering lots of challenges on the human side.

Maine's big concern as they have done more and more networking among the campuses is how to deal with the cross-institutional stuff such as interinstitutional registration among seven historically autonomous units. They are seeing a lot of process reengineering occurring as they begin discussions.

NH is doing systemwide data warehousing, with common data elements.

The Wisconsin system, serving 150,000 students, realized that the amount spent on administrative computing was limiting how much could be invested in academic IT, so they have begun to look at some centralization.

NC, looking to upgrade their systems, recommends the CAUSE-NACUBO resource on Campus Information Systems for the Future. See the CAUSE webpage.

As the investigations of new systems have progressed, the need for business process reengineering has become glaringly obvious. All the New England states are seeing a commitment to change basic concepts that underlie current business practices.

Would moving toward a system service center satisfy the need for efficiency without losing the responsiveness that is a hallmark of current indigenous operations? What have the experiences of other states been?

Wisconsin responded that its small central IT operation concentrates on policy, planning, and leadership, as well as support for the system administration, and relies on its largest campus, Madison, to provide personnel/payroll services for the whole system. Some expertise, such as all the details of the benefits administration system, are needed only one place in the state, and those services can be efficiently, effectively provided by the system. Madison provided a web-based benefits resource that is indifferent to geography. When the centralization was made, existing support staff were merged into the Madison operation so that people continued to have contact with familiar people.

The driving force behind centralizing services is legislative pressure as often as saving money. The questions of whether money was saved and from whose budget are too dangerous to ask.

MS is developing a new model for the legislature to determine how much funding is needed for IT. A coalition of K-12, libraries, community colleges, and universities are looking for comparison data. They are beginning from measurements taken by a coalition of 21 liberal arts colleges, from NCHEMS data, and from Kenneth Green's survey.

As Georgia begins a PeopleSoft implementation, they are asking what infrastructure is needed everywhere. How are other collaborations dealing with the huge disparities among desktop machines, networking, and staff-- numbers and skill levels?

Louisiana Board of Trustees system conducts a voluntary collaboration among IT directors. Their common theme - staff shortages - led them to ask whether they can afford to continue to work separately. North Carolina combined some years ago to save money in administrative computing. The result has been to have too few support staff with insufficient special expertise in all their distributed locations with the new environment. A consultant they engaged suggested that regional consortia might be a convenient compromise.

Although no one from Florida was present, former Floridians and neighbors reported that they tried regional centers and that they worked pretty well. The four consortia dealt primarily with K-12 problems, but also were available to higher ed. For more information, contact the Florida Information Resources Network.

Statewide systems would certainly make statewide data collection easier. At the very least, try to adopt a common data element dictionary.

Wisconsin has another systemwide project - Transfer Information System - that includes the technical colleges and is being expanded to become a degree audit system. Next, they hope to add institution-specific data. Arizona and Maryland also have transfer systems that include community colleges.

To deal with the salary scale problem, one state did a salary survey that included all university and state IT jobs. When the legislature voted to fund the increase, it required that the schools design a supply side response. They are first beefing up the IT-preparation at the community colleges, then permitting associate degree holders to enter jobs at the same level formerly requiring a baccalaureate degree. Although it will take longer to reach management status, these people will be able to achieve rank. Other partnering programs with industry are generating more people certified with particular skills, such as COBOL for year 2k problems. Coordination of these programs at the state level should be an attractive coalition to attract external funding.

When Wisconsin held a statewide staffing conference, they concluded that the supply pipeline really has shrunk, not just been confused by new names and programs. They discovered that adolescents, particularly girls, are losing interest at about age 12 - 14. Other studies show about 190,000 job vacancies in IT, an estimate that some consider low. At the same time, IT professionals cannot find work because the job skills that are in demand are very narrowly defined and may be specific to certain software and hardware combinations.

Oracle and Microsoft are both trying to partner with higher education to produce clients certified on their products at lower cost than the companies themselves can provide the training. It is hard to judge whether this is a real solution.

On behalf of the UC system, Berkeley has been studying indicators for effective, efficient computing. Several that they have identified so far are the percent of names in the phone directory that include an email address, what proportion of IT hires were their first choice, and how many training days per staff member per year. For more information, contact Stuart Lynn. UC has found that they can catalyze adoption of common systems if the system office throws in a financial sweetener for a common choice.

The Midwest Higher Education Consortium is beginning to collaborate on hardware and software acquisition in Wisconsin, especially among the two-year technical colleges. By going directly to the vendors, they get volume up enough to qualify for substantial discounts and gain enough influence to get assistance with training and certification. The CBT training system is one way to achieve relatively low cost training when many people need to adopt a new package simultaneously.

The U MA system has recently laid four strands of fiber across the state, forming a backbone connection among its five schools that has served as a good connection to the community colleges, who have extended it to local schools.

Initially intended for video and internet, it will soon connect the campus PBXs, greatly reducing long distance calls. The system office does little in operations, focusing on policy and standards. UC said its new network has been a great vehicle for collaboration, too, as has Maryland's.

In MS, the Council for Educational Technology formed by the state has laid a network. The legislature specified, "Here is a pot of money for a network. You may not spend it until you all agree on what to buy." It took a year of negotiation, but schools, libraries, and colleges are now reaping significant benefits.

One universal became clear in the discussion: collaboration spawns more collaboration.