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Bridging the Divide: Combining Faculty Centers and Instructional Technology Support

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Overview

Combining a teaching center and instructional technology support into a single support unit is often times a challenge. Placing this combined unit within a central information technology (IT) organization is an adventure that few institutions in higher education have been willing to attempt or even to consider. Despite significant challenges in organizational behavior, socialization, communication, and priorities, this model of faculty support offers unique possibilities for cutting across many of the real and perceived barriers that characterize the relationships between central IT organizations and support units for faculty in their roles as instructors. This research bulletin explores

- the sources of this divide from an organizational behavior framework;
- the challenges of facilitating the development of attributes of communities of practice across these barriers to create and leverage the knowledge that is needed to allow technology to truly add value to teaching and learning; and
- a case study where this approach is taking place, the Faculty Center for Teaching and e-Learning (FCTeL) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte).

Highlights of Faculty Centers and Instructional Support

Institutions of higher education, especially large ones, have organizational characteristics that provide opportunities for divides to develop and prosper. One characteristic is their hierarchical structure that often creates information silos between the academic units and central IT. Interaction occurs most often at the top of such organizational structures and undergoes a series of filters within each silo based on its goals and responsibilities. Unless there is a very inclusive institution-wide mission and vision, each silo operates somewhat independently to develop its own culture, where basic assumptions are invented or developed to deal with external relationships and to support internal integration. When these assumptions work well enough to be considered valid, they are taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.^{1,2}

Organizational Behavior

Difficulties arise when two different cultures, with differing assumptions about how an institution in higher education should operate, must find common ground to develop support structures to meet new university-wide needs. Because of their long relationship in meeting financial and administrative systems needs, central IT organizations have often operated beyond the attention of many faculties. Faculty members have focused on their roles as developers and overseers of curriculum and instruction, as well as researchers. IT's increasing importance in most aspects of higher education, however,

including technology in teaching and learning and in research, has necessitated new strategies to realign values, perceptions, and expectations between the two cultures.

Central IT units and faculty differ significantly in a number of ways, including the models they use to describe the institution and the assumptions they make about what should be valued. IT organizations use a business model for how universities should operate. The greater world of IT uses many of the effective practices that come from business. They use language like “customers” and “markets” and strive to develop “standards” and “enterprise-level” solutions. They develop training for faculty, staff, and students and talk about interaction across “networks.” Due to rapid changes in technology, they employ rapid decision making.

On the other hand, faculty find fault with the business model for a number of philosophical reasons. In a review of relevant literature, Swenson suggests that faculty are reluctant to switch from the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake to preparing students for careers in the information economy because it seems like a less worthy pursuit and may lead to pandering to students.³ He indicates that faculty members have been shielded from the realities of competition and want to remain aloof from the market.

Other authors, however, blame attempts to force business concepts and procedures such as “faculty productivity” and “cost-benefit” into practice in higher education without a clear understanding of the impact on academic culture. Chickering⁴ laments the triumph of the national and international market mentality and its associated values that have had many intentional and unintentional consequences on society. Massey and Wilder⁵ indicate that conventional productivity-improvement methods borrowed from business don’t work well in academic departments. Increased class sizes and heavier teaching loads may produce gross measures of productivity that look like improvements, but faculty perceive that these measures lower teaching quality and restrict research. The conflict arises when faculty are told that technology would allow them to cut costs and increase productivity in ways that are counterintuitive to them. The academic culture tends to equate an institution’s use of resources with quality.⁶ Higher-quality institutions are typically characterized by larger faculty-student ratios, smaller classes, and more expensive instructional and research facilities. Finally, Wright suggests many of these tensions arise from faculty reactions to distance-learning initiatives. Faculty are considered only content experts, the curriculum becomes an assembly-line course production, and they are subject to “deprofessionalization,” in which highly respected and reasonably paid professionals are replaced with part-time employees.⁷

In addition to divides over business models, central IT organizations and faculty tend to disagree over some basic values associated with tradition. Although faculty participation in shared governance (their role in running the institution) is a cherished notion, in practice it can lead to cumbersome decision making, especially when rapid change and institutional transformation are involved.⁸ Many technology-related issues require speedy decision making. Faculty complain when they are left out of the decision-making processes, but they also object when they are asked to divert time away from what they consider their primary work to participate in committees and advisory groups.

Another divide occurs over each group's perceived roles of the other in the institution. Neither group has a clear sense of the other group's conflicting responsibilities. In 1981, Dressel indicated that "since the major purpose of an academic institution is to provide education and related services, the faculty, which is the immediate means for providing these services, deserves first attention."⁹ More than 20 years later this perception is alive in the minds of many members of the faculty, but not practiced by many central IT organizations. Instead, IT organizations must devote much energy to administrative and financial systems, as well as extending and shoring up networks, security, and the like. These functions sustain the institution but don't necessarily directly support only the faculty.

Faculty roles are also misconstrued, mainly because of the diverse demands that are placed on them. Austin et al.¹⁰ describe the environment of increasing faculty roles and mixed messages about the reward structure as faculty are asked to teach greater numbers of students with varied levels of preparation, engage in more research with funding from external sources, and provide labor-intensive learning opportunities for students such as service learning and research experience for undergraduates. Faculty feel they need to fulfill a variety of responsibilities with excellence, and must have the ability to prioritize their time and energy in the face of multiple demands.¹¹ Anything that takes up their time without enhancing their most valued activities will likely be avoided or at least carefully scrutinized. In many instances, the use of technology in teaching and learning falls into that category.

A recent ECAR bulletin identified why it is so difficult for IT professionals to obtain faculty's trust and why IT professionals often hold in disdain the seemingly disorderly world of the academe: "Academe is fluid, nonstandardized, seemingly unfocused in the pursuit of knowledge using shared governance to arrive at decisions. In contrast, technology requires standards, conformity, predictability, control, and calls for fast decision making."¹² No wonder these two worlds are often at odds with each other and struggle to communicate; however, since technology is becoming critical to the core business of higher education—teaching, learning, and research—institutions must find ways to bridge this gap.

Moving Toward Communities of Practice

One such concept that shows a promise of bridging some of the divides between central IT organizations and the faculty are communities of practice—groups of people who share a concern or a passion and interact regularly. In pursuing interests in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. Through interaction, they develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice and not a formal structure like a committee.^{13,14} This type of relationship takes time and sustained interaction in various types of activities.

In the world of higher education, communities of practice might cross formal boundaries, like the reporting silos mentioned earlier, to bring together practitioners (faculty and faculty support people) who are facing a common challenge (enhancing teaching and

learning) to learn from each other, develop new solutions to problems, find commonalities across organizations, and coordinate efforts. Communities of practice by themselves cannot provide the full range of development support faculty need to enhance teaching and learning, but rather should complement more formal organizational structures.

It's not particularly easy to build and sustain communities of practice or integrate them with the rest of an organization because they tend to be organic, spontaneous, and very resistant to supervision and interference. Communities of practice are informal and self-organized—they set their own agendas and establish their own leadership, and membership is self-selected. In other words, people in such communities tend to know when and if they should join.

One way to begin to bridge the gap between central IT organizations and faculty is to establish a faculty support structure that

- reflects some of the values of a central IT organization;
- can adapt instructional technology to better relate to the faculty culture; and
- promotes the development of communities of practice among faculty, as well as between faculty and their support staff.

This process requires participants to “agree to disagree” on a number of issues, but also to seek solutions that may require them to think outside of their respective domains. The challenge is to find ways to accomplish these goals while keeping one’s sanity.

A Case Study: FCTeL

For more than a dozen years, the faculty at UNC Charlotte had been requesting the creation of a formal teaching center to support them in their efforts to enhance teaching and learning. Before the center’s creation, faculty development was typically arranged by a faculty committee of volunteers, the Faculty Committee for Teaching Excellence. Faced with increasing pressures for faculty to greatly enhance their research activities and large enrollment increases of diverse students, the idea of a one-stop faculty support center took hold at UNC Charlotte.¹⁵

Background

In fall 1998, the provost recruited a faculty associate to develop a strategic plan for a teaching center, and in spring the institution formally established the UNC Charlotte Faculty Center for Teaching. During the summer of 2001, the director of the Faculty Center for Teaching was charged with developing an instructional technology plan. The first step in the plan was the expansion of the Faculty Center for Teaching to include the support for instructional technology, which reflected a strong desire that teaching and learning “drive” the use of technology. The planning coincided with the hiring of a new CIO who participated in the implementation of the plan and supported the notion that the university would achieve the greatest benefits if the center were expanded. FCTeL, the Faculty Center for Teaching and e-Learning, was founded at UNC Charlotte to serve as

a catalyst for the enhancement of instruction by engaging faculty in the discovery, dissemination, synthesis, and application of knowledge and technology related to teaching and learning.

Solution

A faculty support center was created with the responsibility of providing assistance and resources in both areas: pedagogy and instructional technology. The center began with combined staff positions from the Faculty Center for Teaching, Library Media Services, and Information and Technology Services. Six months after its launch, it assumed the responsibilities for technical support for distance education and absorbed those positions into the center. The center's creation was achieved following a phased approach (shown in Table 1), without any increase in staffing or capital outlays by reallocating staff. This plan was reviewed by various stakeholders on campus, approved by senior administrators, and integrated into the broader campus Information Technology Plan in 2001.

Table 1. Phased Approach to Creating FCTeL

Phase 1	<p>Laying the Foundation</p> <p>Focus on backstage reorganization; form teaching and learning team; create advisory committee composed of faculty and instructional staff who have interests in teaching and learning and/or in instructional technology; identify human and technical resource needs; create Web site; expand library of resources from the Teaching Center to include books/videos on instructional technology; and expand workshop offerings in teaching and learning and instructional technology (WebCT).</p>
Phase 2	<p>Faculty Productivity</p> <p>Focus on productivity of faculty associated especially with large classes and general education courses so faculty can focus more directly on teaching and learning strategies; automate multiple steps in WebCT (student lists/quizzes/exams and communication elements for course); and "package" descriptions of common software and their application in teaching and learning.</p>
Phase 3	<p>Content Enhancement/Production</p> <p>Provide faculty with tools and strategies to create a variety of learning environments through joint workshops/summer and winter institutes and offer presentations by e-learning innovators and pedagogical innovators in the center and in departments and colleges, as well as individual consultations and other resources.</p>
Phase 4	<p>Assessment, Research, and Development</p> <p>Evaluate emerging technologies, assess proposed technology programs (grants/in-house), and assess teaching and learning with and without technology.</p>

Faculty are encouraged to use the center's resource materials; work on extended projects; participate in a variety of workshops; set appointments with staff consultants; partake in development activities; and use computers, multimedia equipment, and other technologies in the Faculty Technology Lab.

FCTeL's characteristics make it somewhat unique among support centers for faculty. First, FCTeL and Research Computing, both units within ITS, are headed by senior faculty members. Both units' directors are members of the ITS senior staff who meet weekly with the CIO to discuss program planning and implementation. With this organizational structure, faculty perspectives are regularly heard at the highest levels of ITS.

Second, FCTeL provides many of the activities associated with both a teaching center and an instructional technology center from a single unit. There is significant cross-developmental work, with technical staff learning more about teaching and learning and teaching and learning staff having responsibility for learning enough about technology to see how it might best be applied in a learning environment. Joint presentations and publications are encouraged, as are development activities at conferences as varied as EDUCAUSE, the Professional and Organizational Development Network (POD), the Lilly Conferences on College Teaching and Learning, and the UNC TLT Collaborative Conference. FCTeL offers programs and workshops on topics such as learning and teaching styles, what's fair and legal in the classroom, and developing culturally relevant syllabi, as well as hands-on workshops on WebCT tools, digital media, and introductory digital video and audio.

Third, although the efforts are just now beginning to crystallize, the center has facilitated the creation of communities of practice in a number of ways. The center's director meets informally with small groups of faculty and other campus leaders to develop programming in different topical areas, such as diversity in teaching. One activity included organizing teaching circles—groups of faculty (or graduate students) who meet on an ongoing basis to discuss issues of teaching and learning and determine the focus and topics for discussion. Although some FCTeL staff participation in teaching circles reflects their interest in a topic (such as teaching large classes, problem-based learning, or student research), facilitators are faculty or instructional staff who infrequently interact with FCTeL after the circles' inception. The Enrollment, Retention and Learning Improvement (ERLI) initiative involves collaborations among faculty who teach large-enrollment courses, distributed instructional technology staff in the colleges, and some of FCTeL's staff. They are working together to find ways to enhance learning, expand the number of "seats" available in large-enrollment courses, and address other issues in their classes.

What It Means to Higher Education

This approach to a faculty support model offers a way to increase the odds of bridging divides between central IT units and faculty culture. One reason why this organizational structure can work at UNC Charlotte is the location of ITS within Academic Affairs, with the CIO reporting to the provost. This affords the CIO a better understanding of the critical academic issues the academic side is facing, which helps bridge a gap that often occurs when ITS sits outside academic affairs and therefore overlooks academic needs within a much larger pool of administrative and business needs. This reporting structure

also provides a context for nontechnology directives that may come from the provost to FCTeL to support the institution's broader mission.

Benefits and Barriers

This case study shows that instead of having two centers that compete with each other, one devoted to IT and the other to faculty, a combined center can offer both pedagogical and technical resources that are critical to the UNC Charlotte's goal to enhance teaching and learning with technology. A combined center ensures that achieving the goal is driven by pedagogy rather than technology. To ensure a solid technical foundation, as well as access to IT resources when required, FCTeL is part of the central IT organization and its director is a long-term faculty member. This builds a bridge between the often different worlds of academia and technology and fosters discussions that lead to a better understanding between these two worlds.

Nonetheless, having the center as part of the IT organization is controversial and presents a management challenge. Faculty and IT cultures often collide, and it takes a lot of good will on both sides to accommodate different views on how to approach and implement projects. This is particularly challenging when a decision must be made that might benefit the broader goals of ITS but conflicts with faculty's immediate instructional needs. There is also a tendency for the teaching and learning side to be overshadowed by the greater emphasis on technology in ITS.

Another challenge is to figure out how to better align FCTeL with other academic support units that are not as deeply engaged with technology, where a technological solution is only the first step in a much broader solution. It is often difficult to understand how a significant part of the center's work involves building informal relationships to discuss concerns and find solutions to issues such as student learning communities, retention, and differences in learning and teaching styles—especially when the outcomes of these activities will take years to observe.

In the long run, however, the organizational structure has proved beneficial for both sides, and each has gained much better insight into the other's viewpoints. This structure has helped the "core" IT staff become aware of faculty's views and requirements and provided IT with a much needed link to the faculty.

Key Questions to Ask

- How well do your faculty support and IT departments work together?
- What are your institution's expectations for teaching and learning with technology?
- Does your institution have formal avenues for faculty involvement in IT?
- Is there a one-stop IT contact for faculty?
- Do your institution's goals include the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning?

- Is technology being used to strategically address academic concerns such as student diversity and retention?

Where to Learn More

- American Association of Higher Education Special Reports <<http://www.aahe.org/specialreports.htm>>.
- EDUCAUSE Effective Practice Detail, Faculty Center for Teaching and e-Learning, <http://www.educause.edu/Browse/705?ITEM_ID=214>.
- Faculty Center for Teaching and e-Learning at UNC Charlotte, <<http://www.fctel.uncc.edu/>>.
- Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education, <<http://www.podnetwork.org/about.htm>>.
- The TLT Group, <<http://www.tltgroup.org/>>.
- University of North Carolina Teaching and Learning with Technology Collaborative, <<http://www.unctlit.org/tlt/>>.

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