

Living and thriving with library/ ITS collaboration

The Hamilton College model

by Randall L. Ericson

At Hamilton College, the library has adopted a policy of aggressive collaboration with Information Technology Services (ITS). We believe it is in the best interest of our students and faculty, as well as in the best interest of the library, to foster a spirit of collaboration with ITS and to actively seek out opportunities for such collaboration. In this article I will discuss the ways the library and ITS have collaborated over the past four years, the benefits of this collaboration, and some of the issues we have encountered. I will also discuss three main examples of collaboration: the Multimedia Presentation Center, the HILLgroup, and the Information Commons.

Background

The Hamilton College Library and ITS are separate entities with different reporting lines. The library has a professional staff of five public services librarians, three technical services librarians, and two systems professionals, as well as approximately 20 FTE support staff. ITS has a staff of 26.5, divided into seven teams. The two that work most closely with the library are Instructional Technology Support Services

(7.5 members) and Help Desk and Training Services (4 members). The college librarian reports to the vice president for academic affairs, while the head of ITS is the vice president for information technology who reports directly to the college president. Hamilton College has a student enrollment of 1,760.

In 2002 the college adopted a strategic plan that contained the following core objective:

Hamilton will strive to become the national leader among liberal arts colleges for teaching students to demonstrate their knowledge and insights effectively through written, oral, and other forms of communication.

Hamilton students are expected not only to develop critical thinking and research skills, but also to communicate their understanding effectively, both within and across disciplines. Each student is required to take a sophomore interdisciplinary course, which culminates in a public presentation by each student of his or her final project. In addition students are required to complete a senior project.

Multimedia Presentation Center

Given the strong emphasis on presentation

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along with the development of new media and new forms of presentation, the library and ITS developed a plan to establish a Multimedia Presentation Center (MPC). In order to be excellent communicators, our students must be capable of accessing information in all its forms; evaluating, synthesizing, and analyzing that information; and transforming it into knowledge that is communicated to others. The goal of MPC is to provide integrated services to students and faculty to support presentations and class assignments. As a collaborative activity, MPC draws upon the expertise of librarians, instructional technologists, audiovisual specialists, faculty, other staff, and students to provide a full range of support.

At the most elementary level MPC provides assistance in identifying, locating, and accessing relevant information; converting it to digital formats; and integrating it with common communication tools (e.g., oral presentation, performance, word processing, presentation software, Web pages). For the most advanced users of new media, MPC offers state-of-the-art technologies for creating and presenting knowledge). One of the most common uses of the advanced capabilities of MPC is to create large format posters for poster presentations (common in the sciences and growing in the social sciences), and creating and editing video clips.

In order to create MPC, the library provided space and one staff position and ITS provided the technical expertise. The library and ITS collaborated in the planning and development of the MPC. While MPC is part of the ITS organization, the director of public services for the library meets regularly with the head of ITS Instruction Support Services to review the activities of and plans for MPC.

For students, it really doesn't matter who owns MPC. It is situated in the library, it provides a valuable service, and it has been very well received by students. MPC and the related faculty workspace were used by 750 members of the college community in connection with course-related multimedia

projects last year. In the final analysis, we identified a need and found a way to meet that need through this collaborative effort.

HILLgroup

The second area of collaboration, the HILLgroup (Hamilton Information and Learning Liaisons group) is a collaboration between the library, Instructional Technology Services, and Oral Communications. More than three years ago, we began to analyze where services provided by the library and ITS overlapped and where there was potential for collaboration. At the same time, Hamilton was looking for ways to expand the use of technology within the classroom by faculty.

As a result of that analysis, HILLgroup was formed. The goal of HILLgroup is to support faculty in the identification, selection, and use of technologies and content applicable to their teaching or research needs. When faculty express an interest in employing technology in the classroom, we form a team consisting of a reference librarian, an instructional technologist, and possibly someone from Oral Communications to work with them in developing their plans. We focus on both content and the technology used to deliver the content.

In spring 2002, HILLgroup supported three pilot courses for the new sophomore seminar program—courses structured to emphasize interdisciplinary studies and public presentations. Students in these courses were required to research interdisciplinary connections in course theme and then present their findings in a public presentation.

In working with faculty and students during these courses, HILLgroup and the Oral Communication Center began to recognize a learning path as students progressed through their assignments. This path had three identifiable, but interrelated phases: research to find information, manipulation of the information with technology, and the development and delivery of their public presentations. The transition points for these phases were critical in the students' learn-

ing path. Recognizing this, it was a natural step for the three support groups providing resources to coordinate their services within a course to best support students through all phases of the learning path.

Faculty were pleased with the results of this new collaborative support given both to them and their students. As a result of their response, HILLgroup offered a faculty development workshop in May 2002. In this workshop we explained our coordinated support service model and worked with faculty members in small groups to develop services tailored to their course goals. Feedback from the faculty after the first semester of sophomore seminar offerings clearly indicated that the students' level of success was significantly influenced by the extent to which the faculty member had integrated our collaborative support into the course. This experience was the springboard for our current working model of coordinated academic support, which is now integrated across the curriculum. In the past year HILLgroup supported 19 courses and 2 independent study projects.

Information Commons

The third area of collaboration is the new Information Commons (IC). IC is a pilot project that began in fall 2004. At other institutions, IC is typically a large collection of computers clustered in one area of the library with a computer help desk as well as the reference desk close by. Our vision was to bring the coordinated service we were providing to faculty through HILLgroup directly to the students. The traditional reference desk is being replaced by the IC desk, which will be staffed jointly by reference librarians and instructional technologists.

When students approach the IC desk they will be able to consult initially with either a reference librarian or an information technologist, and, if needed, with both. And the two professionals at the desk can turn to each other when the query requires a coordinated response from the two.

IC together with MPC will provide the opportunity for students to conduct their

research, use library materials in the development of their ideas, and produce a final product, whether it is a printed paper incorporating graphic elements, a poster session, a PowerPoint presentation, or a video. The proximity of IC and MPC (both on the first floor of Burke Library) will allow students to easily move between the two as they refine their ideas and undertake further research. IC and MPC will provide a full spectrum of resources from locating information, evaluating and analyzing it, to ultimately presenting the knowledge developed from that information in a concise and compelling manner.

Issues

These collaborative efforts, though successful to date, have not come without some conflict and adjustment in our thinking. Librarians and information technologists have had to consult with each other more frequently which has led to occasional clashes.

We have learned that both our librarians and information technologists have different perceptions of how each group thinks and works, and the expectations they have of their colleagues may be different from those of the other group. We have identified the following areas where we have had different perceptions, and often misperceptions:

- scheduling appointments vs. maintaining walk-up service,

- extending our service beyond the normal expectations,

- training faculty to accomplish tasks themselves vs. providing a finished service for them,

- seeking out new opportunities for service vs. waiting for requests to arrive on our desks,

- sharing each step of a process with each other vs. trusting others to fulfill their responsibilities,

- acting independently following explicit guidelines vs. building ongoing consensus, and

- staffing service desks with professionals only vs. using intensively trained students to assist.

Through our work together we learned

that some of these differences were either stereotypes or a reaction of a lack of clear understanding of each other's methodology and approach. Some of these differences also arise from different approaches to managing expanding services within fixed budgets and staffing levels. Realizing we were bringing together two groups who came to the process with different perceptions, we began our collaboration with a two-day retreat facilitated by a consultant. We then established a steering committee consisting of two people from the library and two from ITS to guide the planning for IC. All committees formed for IC had members from both teams. Librarians and instructional technologists developed a needs and offers statement on what each could offer the other and what was needed from the other team. Each also developed a typical day statement to provide others with an understanding of what each team did on a daily basis. These exercises were intended to reduce misconceptions on both sides and to generate ideas on how we could best collaborate.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges we have faced in de-

signing and implementing these collaborative projects, we believe that the time is long past when librarians and technology organizations can work in isolation from each other. Nor can we be grudging in our collaborative efforts. At Hamilton we have decided not to merge the two organizations but are committed to working together. For us what is important is not the organizational hierarchy, but the collaboration among the members of the two organizations and the effectiveness of the service that is provided. We believe this service is best provided, and the students best served, through a coordinated approach by the library and ITS. Rather than having vying organizations seeking to provide parallel services with a sense of competition between them, we believe it is important to harness that energy into a cooperative, collaborative approach. This commitment extends to the issue of space, as well. The library and ITS are located in the same building (Burke Library). We believe this co-location significantly facilitates our collaborative efforts and the quality of the service we provide our users. ■