

# Transforming Training Through Collaboration

*Through collaboration, Boston-area schools successfully address their shared information training challenges*

By **Laura Cannata, Jeanne Cavanaugh, Doreen Nicastro, Pattie Orr, and Colleen Wheeler**

In 1998, information technology training professionals from Boston-area schools began meeting under the auspices of The Boston Consortium for Higher Education (see the sidebar for a list of member schools). Group members sought to connect with their colleagues to discuss training problems and issues facing their colleges and universities. Some schools had IT training programs in place, others had seen their training programs downsize and diminish over time, while other schools were just starting to deal in formal ways with the varying levels of computer competency on their campuses. The newly formed group agreed that they shared similar concerns, including

- How should we develop and offer computer-related training programs to best meet the diverse technology needs of our faculty, staff, and students?
- How should we align our training programs to the work of departments and needs of campus communities?
- How should we provide on-demand and just-in-time training to increase productivity levels and enhance understanding of software applications and their uses?

Addressing these questions and implementing solutions — in an environment of continual IT changes, increasing complexity, exponentially growing demand, and shrinking resources — seemed daunting. However, group members began to see that collective action might increase their individual abilities to meet these challenges, providing a greater opportunity for truly transforming IT training

## Member Schools of The Boston Consortium

Babson College  
Bentley College  
Berklee College of Music  
Boston College  
Boston University  
Brandeis University  
Harvard University  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)  
Northeastern University  
Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering  
Tufts University  
Wellesley College  
Wheaton College

services on their campuses. They committed themselves to working together to do just that.

During the past four years, members of the Consortium's Information Technology Training Group (ITTG) have used ingenuity and collaboration to broaden training options and meet user needs, while decreasing costs and risks.<sup>1</sup>

## Why Collaborate?

The schools of The Boston Consortium run the gamut from small liberal arts colleges, to business schools, to large research universities. Their student bodies range

from 1,600 to more than 25,000. Each school has its own unique culture, complexity, and academic mission. A reasonable question is, "Why collaborate?" Or, why not just collaborate in teams of like schools? Working in smaller, homogeneous groups probably would have been a more manageable way to proceed. Instead, ITTG chose to include all schools, regardless of size and focus, in finding solutions that would align with each school's self-interest.

After four years of working together (meeting monthly and conversing almost daily via e-mail), group members strongly agree that this is still the best approach. Smaller schools benefit from sharing resources with larger schools that have more experience with, and funding for, IT training activities. Larger schools benefit by learning from smaller schools willing to "test drive" ideas and programs, and serve as pioneers for what could happen on the larger campuses.

The group's diversity provides participants with an enriched perspective.<sup>2</sup> Often, their collective efforts emerge as de facto standards for IT training. By including all schools in decision-making, work, and ITTG partnerships, the group successfully embodies the mission and vision of The Boston Consortium for Higher Education. (See the sidebar for information on The Boston Consortium.)

## Building a Strong Foundation

To get started, ITTG members first completed a formal needs assessment and

program survey. The 1998 survey results revealed that Consortium IT training departments served approximately 64,000 users (including faculty, staff, and students) out of the potential user base of 122,000 students and 45,000 faculty and staff. On some campuses, alumni, parents, and business partners also required training services. These individuals and groups ranged from novice computer users to technical staff — and their demands for IT training services were growing.

The survey indicated that for schools with IT training programs in place, training participants rated courses favorably, yet few schools could ensure sufficient attendance at basic skills courses (like Word and Excel) to make their continued presentation cost effective. In addition, the survey revealed that many schools could not afford the high-end technical courses many users required.

## Collective Solutions

With better appreciation for each member's perspectives, needs, and common concerns, ITTG developed creative approaches to mitigate risks and increase the effectiveness of individual computer training operations. This included launching several partnering programs that have netted significant benefits for the individual schools. Members of ITTG agree that through thoughtful planning and hard work, these efforts have provided their institutions with much more value than they could have achieved individually or in smaller groups.

Three examples illustrate key solutions put into action by ITTG.

### *1. Maximizing participation and resources through ITTG's "Seat Swap" program.*

Each school makes "extra" seats (seats without a registered participant one week before the class) available at no cost to Consortium colleagues. This has helped fill seats in both office productivity courses and high-end technical courses, such as Microsoft certification and Linux system administration. Before this program began, member schools reported a loss of approximately \$94,000 due to unfilled seats. The "Seat Swap" program lets schools recover lost opportunity costs (at

the local level). Swapping encourages collaboration without creating layers of administrative overhead.

### *2. Leveraging collective bargaining power through vendor partnerships for classroom training.*

ITTG used its collective power to construct advantageous relationships with several local training vendors through a new initiative called the IT Higher Education Learning Partnership (IT HELP). These vendors provide on-site courses at any of the Consortium schools' campuses and appropriate, high-quality training at vendor classroom sites. ITTG chose vendors through a competitive selection process: determining strict evaluation criteria, soliciting proposals from eight local training vendors, narrowing the applicant pool to five potential vendors, conducting site visits, hosting evaluation courses on campuses, and selecting the top two vendors. IT HELP vendors were awarded status based on the depth and breadth of their classes and their flexible pricing arrangements.

Rather than picking one "recommended" vendor partner, ITTG had the top two vendors meet and work out a mutually agreeable pricing structure. Thus two vendors were selected, offering deep discounts for courses that Consortium school personnel took at their sites and for courses the vendors taught on ITTG campuses, and even more deeply discounted prices for spaces in the vendors public courses not filled two weeks prior to the class. These courses, called "fire sale" courses, have allowed many schools to stretch their training dollars in ways they could never have done working alone.

### *3. Sharing knowledge and leveraging collective bargaining power through a vendor partnership for Web-based training.*

Using a selection process similar to that for choosing classroom training partners, ITTG set criteria and requested and evaluated "requests for information" (RFI) from more than a dozen Web-based training (WBT) vendors, then narrowed the field through an intensive evaluation process. (See <<http://www.wellesley.edu/ISPs/ITTG/rfiquestions.html>> for a sample of the questions used in the WBT

## Mission and Background of The Boston Consortium

The nonprofit Boston Consortium for Higher Education was established in 1995 by chief financial officers from Boston-area four-year private colleges and universities to explore ways to lower costs and improve quality through collaborative action. The Consortium

- Facilitates communities of practice for dialogue, innovation, shared effort, and learning between and among its member schools.
- Advances initiatives and programs that are quality-enhancing, practical, and cost effective.
- Supports the creation of economies of scale and intellect to push administrative costs down and drive quality up.
- Enhances individual and organizational capacity by supporting work-based learning and offering professional development opportunities.

Where traditional consortia often focus on combining forces for the purpose of purchasing goods and services at reduced rates, The Boston Consortium also provides informal forums for leaders and managers from nonacademic functions to explore similar interests and concerns. Consortium participants share best practices, employ systems thinking, and exhibit an intrinsic motivation to excel. They use the Consortium to augment and expand their ongoing efforts to reduce costs and improve operations on their individual campuses.

RFL.) The entire selection process went far more quickly than would have been possible with any individual school thanks to the combined efforts of all the schools.

The group's combined numbers gained extraordinary pricing arrangements with the top three vendors. In June 2000, the Consortium signed a formal two-year agreement with one vendor, bringing Web-based training for both end users and technical staff to participating Consortium schools. This training has helped the schools meet the challenge of providing on-demand and just-in-time training in a cost-effective way that no school could have accomplished alone.

## **Lessons Learned**

Faced with weighty considerations regarding investments in IT training, ITTG members agree that collective action increased their individual abilities to address problems and helped transform IT training services on their campuses. However, they also agree that effective collaboration is challenging and that introducing collaboration just because it "sounds good" would be short-sighted. Certain factors and characteristics significantly contributed to ITTG's successful collaborative model.

### ***Creating Powerful Partnerships with Shared Purposes***

ITTG used collaboration to meet its primary goals of reducing costs and increasing quality. Advantageous pricing arrangements with IT HELP vendors included stand-by savings and fire-sale classes. A fire-sale class typically results in a 50 percent reduction in the seat prices. Between July 1, 1999, and December 31, 2001, the schools participating in the Consortium's IT HELP partnership cumulatively spent \$688,503 on training programs with the two selected vendors. Without the consortia agreements, the cost for this training would have been \$1.2 million. As a result of leveraging the collective buying power of the schools and negotiating a favorable price point, cumulative savings during this period reached \$550,003 (a 44 percent reduction).

ITTG members also improved the quality and breadth of local training options offered to their home institutions by using

Consortium partnerships to extend and support customized training. The IT HELP partnership takes the burden off the individual IT departments to develop specialized training internally, and vendors recognize the value of keeping up with technological changes and providing high-quality, just-in-time training. With the IT HELP program in place, IT trainers can focus on applying technology learning and adding value to real work problems rather than spreading themselves too thin by having to teach introductory applications.

ITTG has established strong partnerships with training vendors. Many of their products focus on business, but with collaborative negotiation ITTG schools shape the products to meet their unique needs. Across the country, other schools working together can achieve similar results.

### ***Supporting IT Trainers' Professional Development***

Through their Consortium relationships and network, participants in ITTG quickly discovered that the combination of collective brainpower, passion, and commitment allowed them to gain information and experience at an exponential rate. Their professional learning has been enhanced and accelerated through sharing knowledge, and their colleges and universities have benefited from the lessons learned by their colleagues at other Consortium institutions. In addition, rather than feeling overwhelmed by their respective individual challenges, group members feel energized and inspired, knowing that they can call on each other for advice and support. This dynamic was established early, during the group's successful first projects.

Given that users today are typically more experienced with computers, IT trainers need to demonstrate a full range of skills besides technical expertise, especially in the art of training. This includes presentation and communication skills, as well as being an advisor, mentor, coach, and consultant to students.

To meet this challenge, ITTG members studied the "softer side" of training — the ability to anticipate questions, resolve misunderstandings, and evaluate users'

needs. Through the Consortium, ITTG members completed a series of facilitation classes, adding to their professional development and skill base.

### ***Offering Benefits for End Users***

Users today expect fast, customized service. Through preferred vendor arrangements and seat swaps, ITTG provided end users with more frequent opportunities for classroom-based training, but they still wanted just-in-time technology solutions and immediate answers to their problems.

With the growth of the Internet, ITTG looked for an opportunity to provide Web-based software training. A standard WBT partnership agreement allowed each school to work directly with the WBT vendor to implement this resource based on their local needs. End users can now personalize their training experience by accessing training from work or home, any time and anywhere. They also have access to support from the vendor partner by e-mail, phone, or live chat at any time. ITTG member evaluations have shown that users find this type of training effective and convenient, and it saves them time.

### ***Leveraging Size with Local Control***

Individual schools leveraged their "big-group" influence and buying power while maintaining local control. Successful first projects served as vehicles for convincing local (campus) peers and administrators of the benefits of partnering to improve local training opportunities. In 1999, one year after the start of the preferred vendor selection process, ITTG hosted the Meet the IT Training Vendor Fair. IT HELP was presented to approximately 30 training managers and human resource representatives from across Consortium schools. At the event, staff learned how their schools would benefit from the program.

Today, each school maintains its individuality by choosing its own method for promoting and implementing IT HELP. Many use the program to complement existing professional staff development training opportunities. Others publish program information on their school's training Web pages with direct links to the vendors. Many schools have made IT HELP a part of their training by offering classes on-site with a vendor trainer.

## **Establishing Trustful Relationships**

By making small agreements, seeing them through, and experiencing positive results, group members have developed trust within the group. This trust has allowed them to take on bigger agreements and expand to new levels of collaboration. Core to this success is the flexibility, openness, and willingness to share demonstrated by individual group members as a result of pausing to reflect on the implications of past efforts. Participants believe that their organizations and profession can be positively affected by working collectively.

They also agree, however, that not everyone has to agree with the group. If a member decides to opt out of a collective approach on a particular initiative, that decision is accepted. The group does not pressure individuals to subordinate their own interests to the group. There are occasions when individual and collective interests cannot be aligned, and forced conformity would limit the group's potential.

## **Partnering with Vendors**

ITTG focuses on finding effective ways to influence its vendor partners to focus on the unique concerns of higher education. This includes

- Having one contact person at each vendor. This encourages consistency and expediency in addressing ITTG members' concerns.
- Offering users access to vendor registration Web sites designed specifically for Consortium schools.
- Receiving quarterly reports and evaluation forms from vendors so that the schools can easily track savings and gather feedback.

## **Keeping It Simple**

ITTG deliberately keeps its internal processes and systems simple. This approach keeps barriers for entry low and incentives to participate high. Policies include

- No money changes hands between the schools during the "Seat Swap" program. This keeps the process simple and efficient.
- Team members take full advantage of e-mail and listservs, along with phone calls, to learn more about a class, initiative, and so on.

- The group is currently developing a Web-based central repository of marketing materials. This will assist members in rolling out training programs and initiatives on their campuses.

## **Encouraging Calculated Risk Taking**

Working within the Consortium, ITTG members believe they share the risk of innovation without risking their jobs or making ineffective use of resources. Using the collective brainpower of the group, they can vet ideas and carefully think through investments in IT, avoiding costly mistakes. As one member stated, "Being part of The Boston Consortium is like having 12 veteran consultants working with me to address my challenges."

## **Collaboration as a Tool**

Collaboration serves as a tool for organizational growth, innovation, professional development, and staff retention. As demonstrated by ITTG, collaboration also "raises the bar" for performance in all areas of IT training: course content, quality, and delivery; vendor relationships; new initiative pilots; professional development; and collegial networks.

An important outcome of ITTG's collaboration is an increased understanding and awareness of the importance of IT training on college campuses. Technology training is increasingly viewed as a strategy for organizational growth, innovation, professional development, and retention. ITTG has been recognized by the chief financial officers of the member schools (the Consortium's Board of Directors) for its cost-saving measures and improved return on investment (ROI) for computer training gained through the vendor partnerships. Because of this recognition, new proposals and ideas from this group are considered seriously at each school.

In the coming year, the members plan to build awareness and develop strategies to encourage increased use of IT training resources on their campuses. The group is working closely with human resources professionals (a group also active in the Consortium) to identify and promote IT core competencies. The goals are to make

IT skills assessment and development key components of every employee's job performance.

Keeping in mind the factors and characteristics of ITTG's successful collaborative model, other groups of schools can certainly repeat this success.<sup>3</sup> To learn more about The Boston Consortium's IT Training Group, contact Managing Director Phil DiChiara at (781) 239-4615. *E*

## **Endnotes**

1. Transforming education is difficult, as noted recently by Billy E. Frye: "By and large our response to our changed environment seems to be focused more on surviving and on maintaining the status quo than on accomplishing a deep reconceptualization." From "Reflections" by Billy E. Frye, *EDUCAUSE Review*, January/February 2002, p. 8.
2. As Edward de Bono stated, to arrive at high-quality ideas, you need many different ideas to choose from. Most often, the best ideas are selected after many different points of view have been considered; the best ideas emerge from groups which are diverse. Christopher Avery quoted this philosophy in his book *Teamwork Is an Individual Skill* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2001), p. 147.
3. ITTG's collaborative approach has interested large and small schools. The Web-based training program has received attention from NERCOMP, CLAC, SIGUCCS, and the EDUCAUSE Southeast Regional Conference. All were interested in the evaluation and implementation processes created by ITTG during the WBT process. Both NERCOMP and CLAC have adopted similar Web-based training vendor partnerships for the benefit of their constituents.

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