

# In Plain English, Please: Effective IT Communications

*Using established practices for good communication eliminates the missteps that hamper the effectiveness of IT messages to the campus community*

By **Lisa Trubitt** and **Mur Muchane**

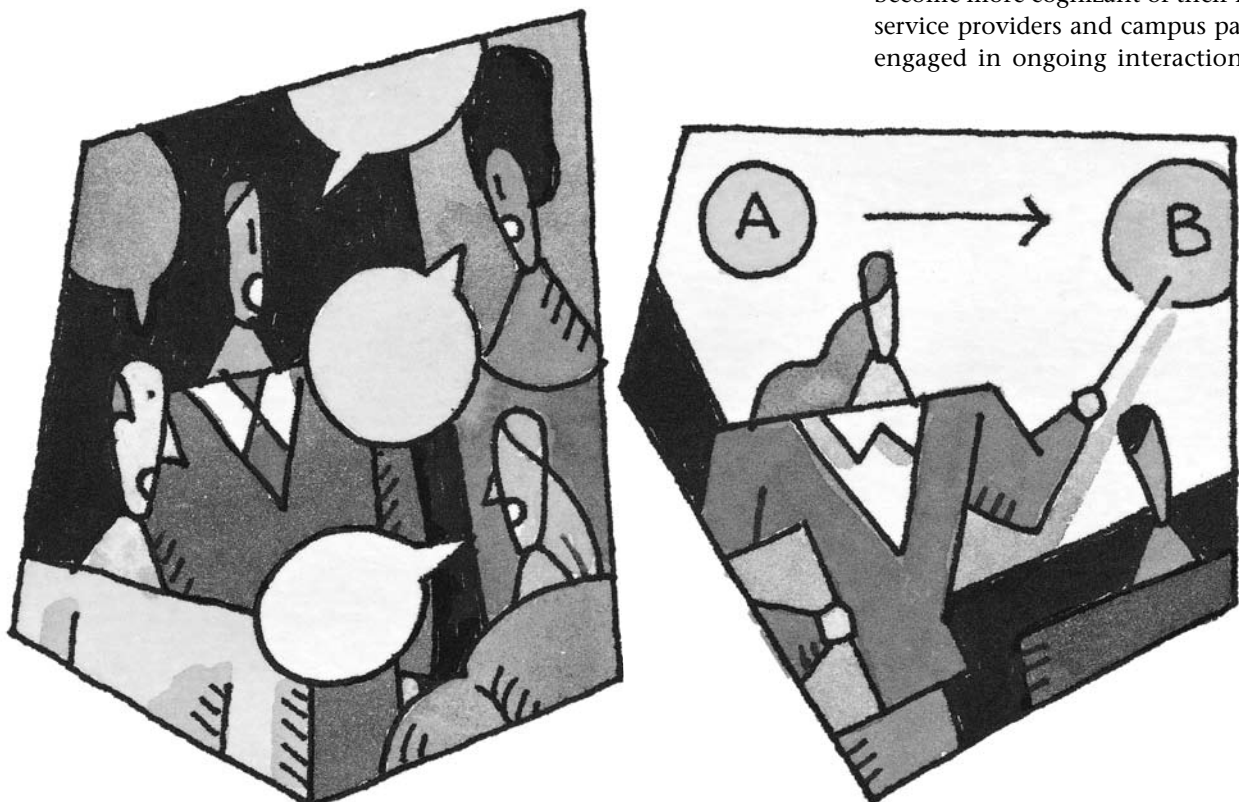
Colleges and universities have become increasingly dependent on technology to accomplish nearly every aspect of their work. The range of systems and services supported by IT staff enrich teaching, learning, research, and administration. As the systems and applications campuses rely upon grow in number and complexity, IT leaders increasingly face the challenge of communicating about technology in concise, understandable terms. How information is communicated to the campus is an important part of an IT organization's image. When this is

done well, it reflects positively on IT and inspires confidence across the campus in the organization's ability to deliver programs and services. If it's not done well, the organization may be perceived as out of touch with the community.

The good news is that this doesn't need to be a struggle. The keys to successfully communicating technical information are

- knowing your audience,
- keeping the message straightforward, and
- getting a lot of practice!

Before technology was such a pervasive part of campus life, IT professionals could expend far less effort communicating with their constituencies. As computing became ubiquitous, however, this began to change. The popularity of e-mail, the Internet, and interactive applications combined with the infusion of technology in work and play changed campus expectations forever. Between the new "anytime, anywhere access" standard and campus dependencies on IT services, IT staff can no longer rely simply on their technical expertise. Rather, IT organizations have become more cognizant of their role as service providers and campus partners engaged in ongoing interaction with



their customers. Never before has it been so important for IT professionals to share information in ways that will be readily embraced by their many constituencies.

The views and expectations of technical staff and users often come from vastly different perspectives. Many IT professionals are primarily concerned with keeping services up and running, requiring a deep understanding of the systems they support. Students, faculty, and staff, on the other hand, are often more familiar with the end result produced by a particular service. How or why it functions the way it does is far less important than access and output. Somewhere in between these competing points of view, IT leaders may be called upon to discuss decisions on making wise IT investments, explain the need to begin or end a particular service or the planning of a cyclical replacement schedule, or, far worse, why e-mail is down and when it is expected to come back up.

Whatever the reasons, the importance of good communication across IT organizations has reached new heights in the higher education community. Academics and administrators alike are busy people who won't spend a lot of time trying to decipher overly technical or complex messages. It is incumbent on IT leaders to ensure that staff share information with the community in ways that they can easily understand.

## **Different Environments, Similar Responsibilities**

On the surface, our institutions are very different. The University at Albany is one of four university centers in the State University of New York system. With over 17,000 students and approximately 4,400 faculty and staff, UAlbany is composed of 10 colleges and schools on 3 campuses. In contrast, Davidson College, a private liberal arts college in North Carolina, has 1,700 students—all residential—and is ranked in the *U.S. News and World Report* top ten of similar institutions. Yet the similarities in our IT communications challenges—and solutions—were remarkable.

We met in Dallas, Texas, at EDUCAUSE 2006. In talking about our profes-

sional work, we learned that we shared responsibility for communications in our respective IT organizations. We also face many of the same challenges in conversing with both internal and external audiences. We left the conference with an agreement to submit a proposal about IT communications the following year. The proposal was accepted, and we gave a presentation on effective IT communications at EDUCAUSE 2007 in Seattle, Washington. The advice summarized here draws from that talk.

## **"Don't Speak Geek"**

We both describe our roles as that of translator, taking technical details and working them into "need to know" pieces of information for various audiences. Messages at both our institutions often exhibit one of three characteristics: too demanding, overly apologetic, or highly technical. At Davidson, a common characteristic of IT communication used to be lots of behind-the-scenes technical details at the expense of conveying how the coming improvements would better serve the campus community.

Ironically, we found that the best way to convey information is by talking less about the technology and more about how IT services affect those using them. If a popular service needs to be taken offline in order to make an improvement, for example, a message focusing on the end result will be better received by the community than a notice that merely states the date and time of a service outage.

The primary reasons for IT communications typically fall into one of the following categories:

- Educating recipients
- Sharing information about programs and services
- Providing notifications
- Alerting the campus community to emergencies or service interruptions

When it comes to messages about technological issues, it can be difficult to share information that targets non-technical recipients. People might be overwhelmed by too much detailed information or unable to recognize

whether something pertains to them. Further, many are too busy to read all of the particulars, especially when they are uncertain what they mean. At the same time, it is important to recognize that technology lies at the heart of what IT staff do, and occasionally some of these details need to be shared. The key is to strike a balance between the technological aspects that customers need to know and the story that IT leadership wants to tell.

"Your VP or CIO will only have time to provide executive leaders with a high-level view of an important project," says Trubitt. "Since IT staff know the whole story chapter and verse, it can be difficult to separate the details from the big picture. I often find myself asking, 'If this is the whole story, what goes in the abstract?' That may be all you need to say to a nontechnical audience."

Technology professionals take great pride in their work, and for good reason. Part of what we do is help IT staff better appreciate the need for simplicity in communicating with nontechnical audiences. As important as it might be to convey information to people in plain English, however, it is equally important to do so in ways that acknowledge the accomplishments of IT staff and don't make them feel their efforts are being minimized. This might be as simple as summarizing a significant accomplishment in the body of a message to the campus community.

It may also be important to make information available about where to get technical details, however. At UAlbany, there are a number of distributed IT partners working in colleges and schools who are not part of the central IT organization. They often rely on ITS to provide them with the in-depth information that will enable them to better serve their customers. An embedded link to more details keeps the message simple while providing technical staff with a place to get the specifics they might need.

## **Strategies That Make a Difference**

At Davidson, Muchane pays a lot of attention to the various ways messages

are communicated and ensures that the language used suits the target audiences. Messages are simple and straightforward, using technologies from print to blogging. The emphasis is on timely communications, with a distinct focus on less e-mail clutter and delivering information in a variety of media and formats.

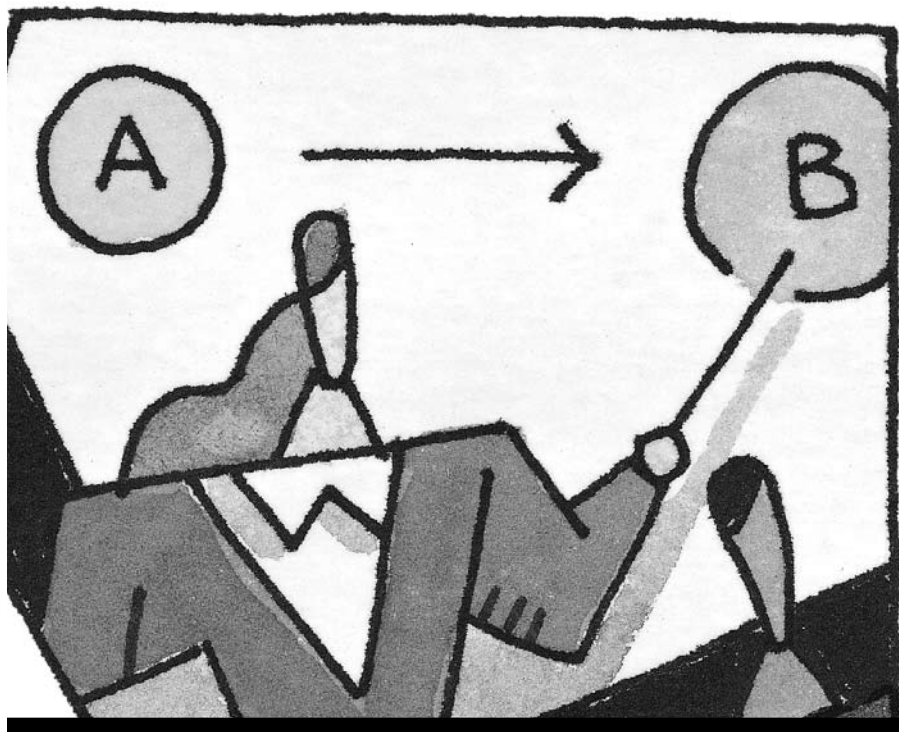
Using a “light touch” to address less pleasant topics is one successful approach. Davidson has created podcasts on such topics as how to avoid problems with the RIAA, online privacy concerns, and the details of the college’s acceptable use policy. More recently, cable TV in residence halls has been used to share tidbits of IT information with students, and IT podcasts are available as the background audio on the cable TV channel guide.

Flat-panel monitors installed in various locations across the Davidson campus broadcast “need to know” information about IT services to students. Messages tend to be conceptual rather than technical or operational, and, whenever possible, humor is a key ingredient.

One of the most important aspects of good communication is good relationships with colleagues and customers. Muchane regularly attends academic and administrative staff meetings, as well as faculty retreats, to make customers more aware of IT services. Technology advisory groups have become an important part of Davidson’s efforts to include stakeholders in various aspects of IT decision making.

At UAlbany, communicating clearly with customers is a responsibility shared by all staff members of Information Technology Services (ITS). Information is shared in a biannual printed newsletter, and efforts are under way to create brochures advertising a variety of IT services. The ITS website and e-mail are the most commonly used mechanisms for sharing information. Trubitt relies on input from staff across the organization for many of these communicative efforts.

Trubitt acknowledges the danger of overuse of e-mail (what Muchane calls “e-mail clutter”). Many campus divisions use e-mail to communicate with students, faculty, and staff; as the provider of the service, it is important for ITS to set a good example. Trubitt



**Campus communities have responded well to our strategies, and organizational efforts to streamline information have paid dividends with our customers**

believes e-mail is more effective when messages are short and direct. Recipients are likely to skim a few sentences or a short paragraph; if they are interested in the subject matter, embedded links to websites with more information are preferable to attachments.

The Office of the CIO is always looking for ways to improve how they “tell their story” to the campus community. On one occasion, Trubitt invited a staff member from the University’s Office of Media & Marketing to assist with a hands-on writing exercise. Staff drafted messages about real-life IT issues to different audiences. This yielded several examples of how the same facts could be communicated in a variety of ways and provided a forum for discussing the techniques that were most effective.

There is no substitute for face-to-face communication and building relationships with the community at UAlbany. ITS has several long-standing advisory groups including the Faculty Advisory Committee, Student Advisory Board, Technology Coordinator’s Forum, and ITS

Liaisons, a group composed of faculty and administrators who provide feedback and input for a variety of programmatic and business IT matters. The Office of the CIO meets with leadership across campus divisions. These ongoing discussions provide an opportunity to confer about technology needs and establish shared goals and priorities regarding IT services at UAlbany.

### **Good Communication Is an Ongoing Collaboration**

Communications between our respective IT organizations and our customers have improved. Campus communities have responded well to our strategies, and organizational efforts to streamline information have paid dividends with our customers. Although our constituencies have become accustomed to clearer messages, however, the challenges of implementing good communication practices persist. Our ultimate goal is to help IT staff better refine the balance between technical details and “need to know” information. The trick, of course, is recognizing what needs to

be conveyed to a particular audience and making sure that only the appropriate information is shared. Yet it is equally important to ensure that a good message does not come at the expense of technical accuracy. "I don't have a technical background," says Trubitt, "and I rely on our technical staff to correct me if my translation has inadvertently changed any of the facts."

Clearly, our communication responsibilities are part of an ongoing, iterative process. We don't think we will ever be "done" figuring out how to best communicate with either internal or external constituencies.

If our EDUCAUSE presentation is any indication, the focus on IT communications will continue to grow. Says Trubitt, "There are a lot of IT professionals who are concerned about how they communicate with their customers. What Mur and I hoped to create was a professional community to address communication challenges as a group."

Clearly, many attendees of the EDUCAUSE 2007 conference share our interest. "At the beginning of the presentation we asked how many people were there because they were responsible for communication at their institution," Muchane explains. "Nearly every person in the room raised their hand. It is very rewarding to know we are part of a community that shares these responsibilities."

We asked attendees at the presentation about their interest in an EDUCAUSE constituent group for IT communications. More than 50 people provided contact information immediately, and word traveled fast. We received additional requests from people unable to attend the session. All indicated an interest in an online community to discuss best practices and the challenges associated with IT communications. ITCOMM was established a few months later as an EDUCAUSE Constituent Group and

now has almost 90 members. (To join a constituent group, visit <http://www.educause.edu/cg>.)

Just a few years ago, we heard little about IT communications. Now an active online community of IT professionals who share communication responsibilities has formed—a refreshing development. We hope that participation in the ITCOMM CG will continue to grow. Not only does it provide a forum for sharing tips and best practices with colleagues, it can also be used to evaluate and deconstruct messages. "It's another opportunity to share information with colleagues," says Muchane. "Why reinvent the wheel if you don't have to?" *e*

---

*Lisa Trubitt (trubitt@albany.edu) is Assistant to the CIO for Policy and Communications at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Mur Muchane is Executive Director of Information Technology Services at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina.*