Faculty and IT: Conversations and Collaboration

“IT staff don’t get it.” “Faculty members don’t get it.” Comments like these highlight larger systemic issues of planning, delivering, and assessing the use of academic technology in higher education and prompt critical questions about communication and process:

- How do we bring IT staff to the classroom?
- How do we bring faculty members to the data center?
- How can faculty members and IT staff work together to help students achieve desired learning outcomes and to help faculty advance both teaching and scholarship?

Faculty may think that they want a particular program or technology—Blackboard, perhaps, or a clicker. This can promote a reactive response from IT staff: “That tool will work,” or “This tool is better,” or even, “No, we can’t support that.” When IT staff are brought into curricular and pedagogical discussions from the outset, they can suggest comprehensive technological solutions and develop a sense of shared ownership for the successful implementation and use of the technology. In higher education, we need to change the level of the conversation to move beyond bits and bytes to pedagogy and student learning outcomes. Our goal in this column is to propose a framework for initiating and managing a conversation that brings IT staff and faculty members to the same table, laying a foundation to achieve richer pedagogy and leading to the greater goals of higher student engagement and achievement.

Doing so involves three steps.

**Step 1: Get IT staff and faculty members in the same room. Build trust both ways.**

At Menlo College, this collaborative process has been facilitated by the hiring of a CIO. Charged with broad oversight and visioning of IT priorities, the CIO must ensure that technology helps fulfill the institutional mission and instructional goals. A first step has been to build confidence and trust that faculty work and student learning will be top priorities for IT staff—by focusing on building relationships and establishing open communications with faculty and the campus community. The CIO has employed several effective strategies to facilitate this process:

- **Informal lunches:** Many Menlo faculty lunch in the dining commons, and the CIO makes a point of eating with them regularly. There is no agenda, and technology is rarely the topic of conversation, but faculty teaching and student learning often are. Informal conversations have led to new collaborations (e.g., this article) and to new channels for faculty input into IT priorities.

- **Regular communications:** Improved systemic communication means that the CIO’s “Monday Memo” is now a fixture in faculty inboxes, informing the Menlo community about technology priorities, planned outages, and current technology trends. Written in plain English, not geek-speak, the “Monday Memo” establishes transparency and a foundation for trust.

- **Open doors:** Improved communication extends to the CIO’s open-door policy and attendance at Faculty Senate. The visibility of the CIO has brought faculty to the IT offices to discuss individual and program needs. Faculty members are learning to live in the present and think forward. That is not always easy when old infrastructure challenges obscure new advances, but maintaining an open mind—on both sides—is part of developing these new collaborative relationships.

**Step 2: Encourage conversations about student learning outcomes and information literacies that prepare students to succeed in higher education and beyond.**

Teaching for information literacy requires faculty and IT staff to know each other’s business—or at least how to talk about it. IT staff should participate in academic planning to develop course projects and institution-wide outcomes, and faculty should sit on technology committees to develop shared goals and values with IT staff. Only with the insight this provides can IT staff propose systemic technological solutions that meet the specific needs, as well as the broader academic objectives, of faculty. For example, if students need detailed notes as an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accommodation, a podcast and a course webpage could include up-to-date lectures and course resources, and a discussion space could provide students with an open forum for information sharing and peer tutoring. Both solutions provide a technologically enhanced “accommodation” that could benefit learning by all students. Yet the conversation should be more than student-centered: it should include students. As Ben McNeely explained in his article on educating the Net Generation, faculty need to know how students learn with technology and what students can create or do because of it.

The conversations should also be pragmatic: faculty need technology that helps them to be better professors and that
helps students become more sophisticated learners. In 2006, Punya Mishra and Matthew Koehler proposed the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK) framework for knowing how to use technology to enhance instruction. This is a potentially useful model for thinking about how to institutionalize the integration of instruction and technology, and it works both ways: faculty learn about technology, and IT staff learn about pedagogy. In the spirit of building relationships and sharing knowledge, IT staff could sit in classes to observe the teaching and learning process and to see how technology is—or could be—used. Faculty could attend academic technology conferences alongside IT staff. And when a technology solution is warranted, IT staff could provide faculty with a vetted set of instructional technology tools to explore and choose from. In return, faculty can invest in becoming tech-savvy enough to assess, and ultimately use, those tools. Faculty won’t be blindly “window shopping” for technology tools, and IT staff won’t be proposing solutions in a vacuum; instead, they will be sharing in goals and challenges.

**Step 3: Set goals, prioritize to achieve them, and become data-driven to measure achievements.**

Once the conversations have started, it’s important to keep them going and make the discussions actionable. General conversations about technology and pedagogy can be beneficial and educational for all involved, but the most effective collaborations come from a common sense of purpose and goals. Faculty can start by identifying specific teaching and learning challenges they are trying to resolve, as individuals and as a faculty body, and can then challenge themselves and IT staff to find creative ways to solve them.

Faculty need to consider why and how they incorporate technology into courses. It is equally important to understand the assumptions and myths that may lead a faculty member to resist using particular technologies in the classroom. Access to the Internet during class can create endless opportunities to expand discussions and learning opportunities, but it also provides the potential for students to “goof off.” IT staff can show faculty tools to help them control Internet access. Similarly, though some faculty may think lecture podcasts will decrease class attendance, recent research suggests that lecture podcasts do not necessarily lead to increased absenteeism but are “important learning aids” for students. IT staff can help faculty test these assumptions in their own environments and measure the results for themselves.

Faculty members should also set goals to take charge of their own technical education. If faculty aren’t knowledgeable about and aren’t using the latest technology tools, how can they prepare students to do the same? At Menlo, the CIO surveyed the faculty and found that most do not know about the wealth of technology services and resources available to them. The “IT Satisfaction Survey” provided a first snapshot of the IT user profile, helped IT staff prioritize information and service needs, and revealed that participation and communication are missing links in the utilization and development of academic technology. Likewise, IT folks need to set goals to develop a deeper understanding about effective teaching and learning strategies and about how faculty engage in teaching and scholarship. The TPCK framework assumes both pedagogical and technical knowledge and can be the vehicle to mutual engagement and shared knowledge. In goal setting and assessment, both faculty and IT staff need to be open and transparent. They should be proud of their strengths, promote their accomplishments, and own up to their weaknesses. Doing so will help to reinforce the trust being built.

At Menlo, one faculty member challenged the CIO to provide a “trouble-free semester,” a request that seemed innocuous to faculty. But it prompted reflection about user errors, systemic failures, and tracking and reporting. As a result of this collaborative process, faculty are learning that the technology is not always at fault. External forces and operator errors often are. Tracking incidents and reporting to the community demonstrate how faculty members and IT staff share accountability and responsibility for technology challenges and successes. At Menlo, as we explore and grow in this process, a request that started out as a faculty challenge to the IT staff has morphed into a challenge for us all—one that we can successfully accomplish only in conversations and collaboration.

**Notes**


Mark J. Hager (mhager@menlo.edu), Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Menlo College and Faculty Senate President for 2009–2010. Raechelle Clemmons (rclemmons@menlo.edu) is Chief Information Officer at Menlo College.