Serving Students in the Current Economic Environment

There is no past that we can bring back by longing for it. There is only an eternally new now that builds and creates itself out of the Best as the past withdraws.

—Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

Everyone has a story about the “good old days.” More often than not, we remember what was good and forget about the bad. In public higher education with regard to financial resources, some years are better than others. Huge endowments are few and far between. But that is not to say that state schools cannot compete with or even surpass private schools in academic programs. Creative problem-solving can help make up for a lack of funding.

An example is Buffalo State College's Communication Department, the largest undergraduate communication program in the sixty-four schools of the State University of New York (SUNY) system. The department serves more than six hundred students in the profession-based Public Communication, Media Production, and Journalism majors. It is the only SUNY program—and it is one of only six programs in the state—accredited by the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC), which accredits 15 percent of communication departments in the United States. This accreditation is a way in which Buffalo State can stand apart from its competition for students, alumni donations, and other forms of support. Another example is Buffalo State's Television and Film Arts (TFA) curriculum, an interdisciplinary program launched in 2007 within the Communication, English, and Theater Departments. TFA majors prepare for entertainment industry positions as screenwriters, producers, directors, agents, managers, and network/studio executives.

These programs rely on media-heavy lab facilities, loan-based media equipment, and online learning resources. There are four Mac media labs—each with seventeen computers, five edit suites, two audio production areas, a three-camera production studio, and a broadcast-quality digital control room that was funded by a special one-time capital upgrade. The equipment loan area struggles to maintain enough funding for student equipment. Currently, the Communication Department has an approximately 20-to-1 student-to-equipment loan ratio, with a projected ideal of 10-to-1. The labs are on a three-year hardware replacement cycle, but given the state's current financial crisis, this could change.

Budgetary considerations have always been an issue, but the last few years of economic gloom in the United States, and specifically in New York State, have been particularly trying. SUNY is dependent on the state budget and the state's financial health, with about one-third of Buffalo State's operating budget coming from state sources. Such budgets have been cut to the point that academic programs must consider eliminating elective courses and the adjunct faculty who teach them.

At Buffalo State, available operation and capital funds are allocated to those departments that can justify need based on enrollment and other factors. What makes the process difficult is that funding resources are a fraction of what they need to be.

Along with the Communication Department, all of the other departments in the School of Arts and Humanities (and in the entire college for that matter) vie for funding from these limited resources. So how do we make the most of what we have? One method is to maximize non-state revenue streams. Building on its ACEJMC accreditation, the Communication Department has begun actively tapping alumni for donations for both scholarships and equipment. Another method is to involve faculty and staff in technology decision-making. The college-wide Information Services and Systems (ISAS) Board meets monthly to review and recommend the allocation of funds: “The plan includes attention to classroom technology; student access to computer labs; a faculty and staff computer replacement cycle; and Web-based and distance learning.” The associate deans report this information to the faculty within the four schools of the college. Faculty and staff in each of the four schools have the opportunity to become part of the planning and selection process by serving on one of four Teaching, Learning, and Technology Roundtables (TLTRs). The TLTRs discuss the technological needs and concerns facing faculty and students in each department. The results of these meetings are reported to the deans' offices, then back to the ISAS Board.

But is the process effective if realistic funding requirements are overshadowed by insufficient funds? The answer is not straightforward. There are preexisting maintenance and
licensing agreements bound by contract. Also, the effectiveness of the justifications for purchasing technologies is tied to how well faculty, IT staff, and administrators understand and communicate the need.

A recent example of providing an improved competitive technology-learning environment for a fraction of the proposed cost was a direct result of discussions between Communication Department faculty and Computing and Technology Services (CTS) staff. In the Media Production and TFA majors, frustrated students were working in media labs and edit suites without the ability to store and retrieve video files from a central video server. The Media Production students produce television news and entertainment, documentaries, and other forms of video and audio content, whereas the TFA students produce short films from original scripts. Each student project is stored on a lab computer hard drive. The disadvantage is that because of the lack of a central video server, students must save their projects on the same computer. If a computer hard drive crashes, as occasionally happens, all student work is lost. In one instance, students lost projects after thieves stole a lab computer. Some students who tired of waiting for computer availability without server access bought their own hard drives and used the “sneaker net” approach—a minimally acceptable temporary solution to the frustration of waiting for production time. Obviously, the situation needed to be resolved in a more effective manner.

The Communication Department Technology Committee made a series of presentations to the faculty, the chair of the department, and the dean’s office demonstrating the need for a dedicated video server and highlighting the capabilities at peer institutions. Outside vendors provided quotes for a video server system, and additional presentations were made to faculty and administrators. Everyone agreed that a central video server was the solution, but proposed costs exceeded budget: $90,000 simply would not be available for the foreseeable future. The department initiated discussion with the college’s CTS administrators, resulting in a CTS offer to analyze server needs. Eventually an in-house solution was proposed. With existing hardware, a high-speed data-transfer infrastructure, and some very creative problem-solving, CTS configured a workable video server. The benchmark testing confirmed transfer speeds very close to those cited by the outside vendor specifications. The cost, however, was only $5,000—a mere 5.5 percent of the original estimate. Buffalo State now has media labs that provide an efficient, real-world production environment, with increased workflow and, more important, significantly less faculty and student frustration. The solution to the problem provided a much-needed work-around to budgetary constraints.

IT planners at Buffalo State have done an admirable job over the years in building and maintaining the technology infrastructure. The idea that one can separate the teaching of the theoretical concepts of media from the teaching of the actual practice of creating and distributing media is old-school. Pedagogical practices change because competition and student options demand they change. New and innovative thinking is required to stay viable. The Communication Department has been going through pedagogical change inextricably linked to the technology we use. How do we address our curriculum and technology needs in a competitive marketplace in which students evaluate their college choices based not just on program reputation and tuition cost but also on the technologies available within a curriculum? The infrastructure for progressive teaching technologies is in place, but how do faculty of diverse opinions integrate newer technologies into their classes? The modes of output have dramatically changed, and many forms of media can be labeled as being device-independent. Create for all; disseminate as needed.

The relationship that information technology at Buffalo State College has with other campus services and academic departments is an essential component to the overall effectiveness of teaching within the context of media technology. Like many facilities, information technology comprises multiple services and offices, each independent from one another but working toward the common objectives set forth in the college’s strategic plan. The success or failure of any campus technology-driven learning environment is a combination of a well-orchestrated research plan, universal and consistent implementation, and an administration that understands and is willing to take a lead role toward growth through future development and maintenance. By building on a solid foundation of smart purchases and long-term planning, Buffalo State can continue to offer students excellent academic programs supported with existing and evolving technologies.

The issue of funding reaches far beyond one department at one school in one state system, of course. As programs in higher education evolve, it is imperative to maintain an open dialogue among faculty, IT staff, and administration. At Buffalo State, we have seen that throwing money at a problem is not the only solution. Sometimes creative problem-solving comes from the need to work with what is available. With dialogue and creativity, those of us in higher education can continue to provide students with technology-supported degree programs so that they can enter the job market with confidence.

Notes

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