The Selection and Implementation of a Web Course Tool at the University of Texas at Austin

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INTRODUCTION

For the past 10 years, the University of Texas at Austin has pursued the goal of integrating information technology into instruction. Through the Center for Instructional Technologies and its parent organization, Academic Computing and Instructional Technology Services, the University has recently developed a centralized approach to Web course development by selecting and implementing a tool for voluntary use by the faculty. This case study illustrates some of the challenges encountered and the lessons learned in initiating such a plan, given the institutional and personnel constraints of a large, historically decentralized research university.

Educators from universities of all sizes realize that technological change has created a new reality for higher education both by intensifying the need for ongoing education and training and by creating tools that have changed the teaching and learning process. This study indicates that a small staff, even without overt institutional support, can have a large impact on this process by choosing an appropriate tool, actively promoting it, and conducting effective training.

CASE QUESTIONS

- What criteria should be used to select a Web course development tool from the multitude of available products?
- What factors should be considered when evaluating a Web course development tool for use at a large research university?
- Once a tool has been selected, how can interest in Web course delivery be generated among faculty members?
- What issues should be considered before a training program is designed and implemented for the faculty and staff who will be publishing online courses?

> • How can the organization charged with selecting, implementing, and supporting this tool achieve its goals given personnel, budgetary, and institutional constraints?

CASE NARRATIVE

Background

The University of Texas at Austin (UT) has continually sought to incorporate information technology into instruction. As early as 1993 when two of the 125 Web servers worldwide were at the Austin campus, faculty members were using the Web to supplement instruction. The following year the award-winning World Lecture Hall (http://www.utexas.edu/lecture) began as "WWW for Instructional Use." Many of the early adopters who used this new resource served on key committees that had great influence on information technology at the University.

One such committee, the Faculty Computing Committee (FCC), developed a Vision Plan in 1989 that shaped the University's efforts. This original Vision Plan urged the development and funding of campus-wide academic computing facilities and services and recommended that the University identify key programs, projects, and individuals to integrate these facilities and services into research and instruction. Four basic compo-nents—information environments, access laboratories, information age classrooms, and infrastructure—were identified as essential elements. Later, the FCC submitted a revised plan, the 1995–2001 Vision Plan. The goal of this plan was to establish the University of Texas at Austin as a leader in the effective use of information technology in instruction, research, and service. To reach this goal, the University would be called upon to increase its investment in information technology and to forge new connections among its many academic and administrative units (Faculty Computer Committee, 1995).

Two other committees, the 1994 Multimedia Instruction Committee (MIC) and the 1997 Long-Range Planning for Information Technology Committee, had a large impact on the infusion of information technology into teaching and learning. From recommendations proposed by the MIC, then-Provost Mark Yudof brought together three smaller entities in 1996 to form the core of a new Center for Instructional Technologies (CIT) to champion the development of innovative instructional technologies on campus. The new organization was part of the restructuring of the Computation Center—founded in 1961— into Academic Computing and Instructional Technology Services (ACITS).

ACITS' representatives on the Long-Range Planning Committee, along with those from Administrative Computing, the Office of Telecommunications Services, the General Libraries, the MIC, the Telecommunication/Distance Learning Committee and High Performance Computing, were instrumental in issuing the 1997 report *Information Tech-nology in Higher Education*. This detailed work attempted to coordinate information technology efforts at the University of Texas and suggested that goals and supporting policies for technology-enhanced learning and online course delivery be developed. The report led to a survey of how major universities were using the WWW in instruction (Schulman, 1997) and culminated in the decision to charge the CIT with selecting a viable World Wide Web course development tool for the University community.

Since its inception, the CIT has grown to incorporate multimedia, information and Web-based design, instructional design, distance education, and expert programming staff devoted to research and development of emerging technologies. The CIT offers services and facilities that promote, support, and integrate digital technologies in learning, teaching, and

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