Campus Tech Leaders: People Matter Most. During a recent roundtable for academic IT leaders, a theme emerged: the importance of the human side of technology. In addition to technical expertise, they said, technology teams must learn to communicate clearly, build relationships, and be visible. Only then will they become trusted advisors in the intelligent use of an institution's resources.

Recently, IT leaders from eight U.S. universities and colleges, along with other invited guests,[1] participated in a two-day roundtable discussion hosted by Herman Miller. Throughout the discussions, a recurring theme became evident: the importance of recognizing and cultivating the human side of academic IT.

Participants agreed that in addition to technical expertise, IT personnel at all levels must develop and use their interpersonal skills. Communicating clearly and often, building relationships, being visible on campus–all are increasingly important as IT teams seek to improve the service they provide (even as budgets diminish) and establish themselves as trusted advisors in the demanding and complex arena of higher education.

"In bringing these professionals together, we provided a setting where, away from campus, they could collectively look at the bigger-picture issues they're facing during these times of rapid technological and curricular change," says Susan Whitmer, strategic education consultant for Herman Miller.

Serving and Working with Faculty and Students

Charged with serving the needs of students and faculty, technology teams are in a good position to learn about the expectations, concerns, and problems that each has regarding technology's role in their academic lives. While the two may have vastly different experiences with technology, both are affected by its ubiquitous presence and the impact it's having on curricular redesign initiatives. What seemed to work well in the past, like classrooms designed solely to support a lecture format, is being replaced, or supplemented, by spaces that are more student-centered, collaborative, and technology-rich. Instructors, hoping to encourage student involvement and participation, are turning to the immediacy of the Internet within classroom settings. Students are increasingly watching videos of classes online.

In this ever-evolving learning and teaching environment, the technology team is seeking to move beyond providing computer service and commodity maintenance toward increased involvement in planning and visioning initiatives that support longer-term organizational strategies relating to technology and the physical and virtual spaces that support it. Building relationships–within the technology team and with the students, faculty, and administration officials it serves–is a key component of pursuing that goal. Important as it is, technological expertise is no substitute for the human element of this endeavor.

Connecting with Faculty

One participant summed up a shift in attitude that must occur in the technology team's relationship with faculty: "We need to be consulting more broadly with faculty. Rather than going in with a 'tool mind-set,' we need to really focus on understanding what they are teaching, what they want to accomplish, and what learning outcomes they want to see."

While some faculty members seek and embrace the learning opportunities that technology affords, others see its often-interactive presence as a classroom distraction. It's not up to a technology team to attempt to change the views of hesitant faculty, but, since that hesitancy may be due to a lack of confidence in using technology, there can be real value in improving instructors' comfort level with technology and expanding their appreciation of its potential benefits. Roundtable participants suggested various ways to engage and involve faculty, whether they're eager, anxious, or on the fence.

Instructors may avoid using new technologies because they're worried about failing—and looking foolish—in front of students. To help them overcome such fears, or just to open their eyes to new possibilities, technology teams can provide a "safe" environment for faculty members to expand their understanding, try out new things, and hone their skills away from the critical eyes of students and prior to any classroom implementation. An apt metaphor for such a space is a "sandbox"—a place to experiment and maybe even have some fun in the process.

By building its familiarity with the ways that individual faculty members make use of technology, IT can serve as a kind of conduit between them and colleagues interested in specific examples of classroom applications—or how different types of tools are used with different types of learners. Encouraging or enabling such sharing can strengthen ties between faculty members and elevate their view of what the technology team can do for them.

In that vein, participants suggested ways to get faculty together in settings where they can learn more about technology and, perhaps, themselves. One such event, a "faculty showcase," would provide a venue in which faculty (invited by the technology team) could share their teaching techniques and uses of technology with colleagues. A faculty blog, administered by the technology team, would serve as another place where such sharing could occur. How-to workshops would be "down and dirty" instructional sessions aimed at increasing faculty's understanding and confidence. Speaker programs would bring in outside professionals to address, for example, emerging technologies or critical issues in higher education. The technology team could enlist the help of colleagues in communications in raising awareness of such events and increase their audience by making videos available later to those who couldn't attend.

Connecting with Students

Today's students have high expectations for technological interactivity. While technology teams may hear their general requests and complaints ("Connect us." "Get rid of boundaries." "Beef up wireless." "Provide for multi-user interaction."), it often encounters a communication gap when trying to deal with specific student needs. Roundtable participants agreed that IT needs to do a better job of letting students know that it's okay to call for help—and where to go to find it. Much of the problem lies in the difficulty of getting such messages across.

Students, leery of having academic "friends" on Facebook and unreceptive to more traditional means of communication, often cite texting as their preferred mode of communication. "But that's not our preferred mode," noted one roundtable participant. "There's a total disconnect there."

Some situations, though, provide communication opportunities that don't depend on texting. When it comes to using technology within the context of a specific course, for example, students are more likely to accept the authorizing voice of the instructor promoting it than the more distant voice of IT offering assistance. Such instances show how communicating with students via faculty can expand the technology team's ability to connect with students who may otherwise be reluctant to seek help. Similarly, communicating directly with faculty regarding the technology team's willingness to help their students with technical issues can also be a step toward more student engagement and strengthened IT/faculty relationships.

Technology teams are exploring other ways to improve student access to technical assistance. "Some students have this idea that they can't call the help desk," noted one participant. Others pointed out that while some students don't even know a help desk exists; those who do are often put off by its location or hours of operation. In response to that situation, one technology team moved its entire service organization and help desk into the main academic building, where students pass every day; another moved its help desk into easy view at the main campus library. And another is implementing an idea—proposed by the university's Student Government IT Committee—to have student IT representatives living in close proximity to those who may need help. "Just as we have resident advisors, we're working with the students to have incentivized IT representatives—one in every residence hall and one on every floor," said a participant. "That's their idea, and we're happy to support it and see if it bears any fruit."

Dealing with Reality

As they shared ideas about effecting change and strengthening the presence of IT on campus, participants also cited the obstacles they face, some from within their own cultures. "We do a lot of R&D in higher education but somehow in IT we're not comfortable with trying out 10 things and expecting eight of them to fail," said one participant. "Everything has to be 100 percent successful all the time with 24/7 uptime. We think of everything that way." That's largely because there's no time to fail. Needing to continuously meet or exceed high expectations, having to come up with a solution by Friday or in three weeks, being pushed to work in a reactive mode—all are symptomatic of a situation that stifles experimentation, innovation, and the thoughtful pursuit of "the ideal."

A lack of time also adds to the difficulty of evaluating and measuring existing technologies in terms of their technical effectiveness and impact on learning. While faculty would like to have this kind of information, and while technology teams would like to be able to help collect and mine the data, such an assessment would

go beyond typical IT criteria and conducting it would require the kind of extended research and commitment of time that technology teams have difficulty allocating. Adding to the problem is another time-related issue: the inevitability that the technology solution undergoing such scrutiny will be replaced by something new, bringing into question the value of the previous research while setting the stage for the same thing to happen again.

Like time, a lack of money puts constraints on technology teams, but in some cases those very constraints can be a catalyst for fresh views on a problem. "Money is a driver," said one participant, "it helps you get there. But the lack of it helps you get there real quickly." It does so by forcing people to explore other options and different solutions than they might have if unconstrained by time or money. During those intense explorations, technology teams can expand their knowledge of what's out there, what's worked for other groups, what's just become available, what's most affordable—sharing it among themselves as they work to make the most of the situation. And what's learned in the process could be valuable when other challenges arise—quickly and underfunded—in the future.

Citing the ongoing cost-cutting measures and mandates that are affecting all areas of higher education, participants expect their organizations will have to continue operating with static or diminishing funding. Yet, even as budgets are trimmed, IT's role is being expanded. Whereas in the past IT focused its resources on commodity computing and technical support, it's now taking on other areas of responsibility (e.g., managing multimedia resources, web development, audiovisual services, ERP) that are demanding new skills and, in many cases, new levels of involvement. In order to continue computer and technical support as they refocus their priorities, technology teams are having to look outside for help. A participant who had to outsource those functions said, "The challenge for us is to understand that these changes are coming like a freight train." As it approaches, that train is requiring IT departments to reevaluate the roles of team members and their ability to succeed in such a changing environment.

As team leaders and members confront this reality, the importance of the human, interpersonal side of IT comes to the forefront for both. Leaders, as one participant said, "Need to have honest conversations with their teams about what's coming and going. We need to create an environment of trust." Likewise, team members need to be honest with themselves, and open with others, about what such changes will mean for them and to be ready to take on new responsibilities that may be more dependent on their relationship skills than their technical experience. "We're in the middle of changing roles right now," said a participant. "Team members have to invest in the strategy. I'm obligated to provide them with the resources and training to get them there."

To that end, IT leaders need to help team members prepare for what's next. "You have to really work with your folks to get them ready to be able to listen—to understand, for example, whether something is a business need or a

learning-strategy need," said one participant. "It's no longer about commodity computing, and that's where many of my folks are comfortable because it's what they know and do really well."

In the process of all this, IT leaders are rewriting job descriptions and emphasizing performance evaluations. "As we move commodity computing out and try to increase higher-level activities, we're going to turn our organization upside down," a participant said. And as they do, they'll be looking for people "who are going to be more flexible, more able to do things that are experimental—this sandbox idea, for example—and to work in an environment where innovation and teaching are rewarded." That's one reason why IT leaders seek people with teaching experience. When interviewing candidates, said one participant, "I look less at their IT skills and more at their consultative, communication skills in understanding the faculty or student point of view. I like to have people with teaching experience."

Conclusion

With the right tools, skill sets, and personnel, technology teams can make a real difference in the lives of their campus customers and colleagues; each positive experience with IT raises the overall perception of its value to the larger institution. Well-managed, knowledgeable teams also strengthen the proposition that IT deserves a better seat at the big-picture table—in groups where long-term strategies are initiated, cross-discipline ideas shared, problems addressed, and plans created. Too often, in the experience of roundtable participants, technology teams are called in to carry out plans or implement changes after they've already been decided upon. "Something as commonplace as power supply to the campus needs to be thought of in a way that's flexible and creative," said a participant. Such lack of involvement on the front end is seen as a major impediment—not just to an IT team's performance but to an institution's intelligent, forward-looking use of its resources.

In order to further the understanding and appreciation of the technology team's role, participants agreed that they need to do a better job of promoting their presence. Key to this is empowering IT members to take the group's message out to others, to serve as "IT ambassadors" on campus. That message could be in the form of a story, the kind that Georgia Tech has told about its learning commons as an example of student-centered design and the role of technology within it. Participants expressed interest in developing their own campus stories to share with students, faculty, the community, and other IT leaders.

Endeavors such as these, and goals such as gaining more up-front influence, put into play the communication and relationship-building skills that are being recognized as a crucial element of a technology team's success. "It's a critical skill," said one participant, "for everyone on the IT team to be able to have healthy relationships within the team and with everyone they interact with—customers, vendors, students, faculty."

Building relationships. Consulting. Communicating. Developing and using skills that go far beyond technical expertise—all part of a "human side" of IT that's just waiting to be tapped, all crucial to its goal of becoming, if it isn't already, a "trusted advisor."

Resources

[1] Participants included Malcolm Brown, director, EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, Washington, DC; Alan Cattier, director, Academic Technologies, Emory University; Joseph Cevetello, director, Learning Environments, Information Technology Services, University of Southern California; Ming-Li Chai, Link Design Strategy and Planning Organization, Microsoft; Susan Clabaugh, manager, Instructional Facilities, University of Maryland; Jon Crutchfield, academic technology consultant, University of Notre Dame; Thomas Erwin, chief information officer, Butler Community College; Edward Gomes, senior associate dean, Trinity College of Arts and Sciences Office of Technology Services at Duke University; Jennifer Sparrow, director, Emerging Technologies and New Ventures, Virginia Tech; Paul Turner, manager, Academic Technologies, University of Notre Dame; Howard Wertheimer, director, Capital Planning and Space Management, Georgia Institute of Technology