



Continuum of Support

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Affinity Group Continuum of Support

Overview

The Continuum of Support Affinity Group was charged with exploring and discovering how the University community currently locates Academic Technology resources, and identifying barriers amongst the group that prevents them from finding this information. Using these findings we were charged to make recommendations that would help ensure that the University community is able to easily find and effectively use Academic Technology resources.

Findings

Our approach to understanding the current state of support within the University included a series of research methods:

- Interviewing staff members in colleges across the University
- Inventorying current online support resources
- Conducting surveys with students, staff and faculty

Finding 1: How colleges are currently supported

Through interviewing staff members across the University, we have found three major models being used for Academic Technology Support at the University. *Note: Not all colleges or departments fit these descriptions exactly; they may combine or fit in between these models.*

1. **Highly Integrated Local Support:** A college (or unit/campus) has invested in academic technologists and academic technology resources. Most requests are handled at the collegiate and/or departmental level. Central academic technology tools (e.g. Moodle, MediaHub, Qualtrics, etc.) are used when appropriate and discipline-specific academic technology tools are created/purchased/supported within the college. Central support services may also be used to provide services where the college has chosen not to invest (e.g. instructional design or production) or for services that are not realistic to offer at the college level (e.g. copyright experts, accessibility experts).

The College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) ([support map](#)) is an example of this model; they hire academic technologists at a department level.

2. **Coordinated Support:** College (or unit/campus) may have hired academic technologists who provide some level of support for day-to-day activities using academic technology tools. Other units may have no embedded or central academic technology staff. In both cases, these colleges look to central support units such as Academic Technology Support Services (ATSS), Center for Educational Innovation (CEI), or University Libraries to provide assistance with instructional design, production, and project management as well as copyright and accessibility experts.



This support is often provided by information technology professionals, academic professionals, or administrative specialists in the college or department. These colleges also typically focus on centrally supported tools and support very few discipline-specific tools at the local level.

An example of this model is College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Science (CFANS) ([support map](#)), which has academic technologists who work closely with central units to provide support for their faculty and instructors.

3. **Minimal Local Support:** College (or unit/campus) uses a decentralized model and typically does not provide support at the unit level. Faculty may be self-supporting their academic technology usage or they may look to central support units, for example ATSS, for assistance. There may be small pockets of support for discipline-specific technologies supported at the department or program level in these colleges.

The College of Design ([support map](#)) would fall into this category.

Finding 2: How Resources are Shared, Communicated and Used

Many want to be able to find and access both documentation and support people more easily. As we worked to create an inventory of online resources, we discovered that people did not distinguish between “documentation” resources and “people” resources. They were confused about what types of information should be shared; some people shared templates, others only phone numbers, etc.

Community members were also wary of contributing to an inventory that they didn’t believe would be regularly updated or used. This reticence to contribute also impeded our ability to do a true gap analysis. We asked specific contacts to update a previous inventory from the [2013 E-Learning fCoP](#). Even after committee members vetted and organized the [resources](#), many remained the same.

Communication challenges were also a recurring theme. The University as a whole has challenges with communicating the availability of existing academic technology resources. There was a lot of discussion among community members about useful resources, but they found it difficult to provide examples or links. Community members desired regular communication, but also acknowledged that communications are often overlooked.

Finding 3: Survey Summaries & Themes

Student input was gathered in random interviews and surveys at the Twin Cities, Duluth, and Crookston campuses.

Student Survey

Students prefer to go to their peers, professors, and online resources before going to University support



staff.

Video and text are their preferred formats for getting resources.

Most of the students surveyed at least somewhat agreed that their instructors used technology effectively in their courses and very few strongly disagreed.

The top three indicators of a course that effectively integrated technology were:

1. A well designed course site
2. Instructors that were knowledgeable about the technology used in the course
3. Technology being meaningfully used in learning activities and assessments.

Staff Survey

Support staff prefer to go to their peers for help, followed by online resources and the helpdesk almost equally.

Staff reported that the greatest barrier to using academic technology is the amount of time required to learn about technology.

Lack of models and/or examples were among the top five barriers for support staff.

Support staff most commonly report going to IT Staff (which, for the audience targeted, may or may not be their peers) to learn about new Academic Technology at the University.

Video and text are their preferred formats for getting online resources.

Technology training and one-on-one interaction are valuable resources.

Faculty Survey

Faculty want resources to help them learn and use technology on their own.

There was a strong preference for one-on-one, face-to-face help from a person.

Lack of time to learn, lack of models, and lack of funding were the largest barriers in using academic technology.

Video and text are their preferred formats for getting online resources.



Recommendations

The recommendations below encompass the major themes discovered through our research, survey results, and information gathering exercises within the University community. Throughout the process, three trends emerged:

- Service is shifting towards a user-centric (faculty/staff/student) vs. unit-centric approach.
- Users want consistent and up-to-date information no matter where they go, creating a seamless user-experience.
- Users want a coordinated service experience where all units work together and users are not “handed off” or have to check multiple services for a solution

Recommendation 1: Coordinated Support Processes

In-Person Help Triage

Two themes emerged in the process of our research. Participants preferred to have a “one-stop shop” -- that is, a single point of contact for academic technology support. Participants also expressed a preference for one-on-one support. A “triage” model of support could serve both preferences, while also addressing other barriers for accessing support that have been identified via survey.

In a triage model of support, a user would, for example, have an opportunity to contact a central contact point and receive direct support from staff. If the issue can be resolved immediately, the staff member will resolve it and communicate the availability of local or customized support to the user.

If the issue is complex enough to require specialized or localized support, the staff member will provide a referral to other units, individuals or resources for support. An existing “[warm transfer](#)” model, such as the one currently employed by OIT could be modified for this purpose, with the goal of getting the user to the correct resource as quickly as possible.

In order to support a triage model of support, front-line staff will need to have access to current and accurate information about existing resources, support systems, artifacts (e.g. training materials, user-guides, tutorial videos) and persons (e.g. instructional designers, desktop support personnel) at the campus, college and department level. Through continued use of the central contact point, users will also become aware of the resources that are available to them.

Promoting a Culture of Sharing and Coordinated Resource Management

Another theme that emerged during the research process was that community members expressed a desire to share and consume resources across units and groups, but they also expressed concerns that people are often initially enthusiastic about sharing but the motivation is not lasting. They also expressed concern about keeping shared resources up to date.



We recommend solutions that would make it easy for community members to share and keep resources current. First, explore whether a Drupal feed module can be developed that would enable users to tag their original resources and share these with other community members. Second, teach contributors search engine optimization techniques. This could help community members contribute to the feed module. Third, if the feed module is not feasible, investigate a coordinated resource site or other solution that would increase the findability of distributed University resources.

We want to encourage and promote a culture of sharing at the University. This can be facilitated by giving tips on how to tag things like University-wide resources versus resources made for a college or department that may need some modification or translation to be useful to other groups. This type of sharing will also reinforce the idea that there is no need to reinvent the wheel, while giving groups the flexibility to find and repurpose resources that are close to what they need, saving everyone time without sacrificing individuality.

Technology Training and Usability Services are engaging other units in community-sourcing efforts. These groups have indicated willingness to consider the AT fCoP findings and share the outcomes of their community-sourcing efforts. Currently, they are doing this by creating and sharing templates for resources such as Self-Help Guides, and plan to build on any momentum gained from this activity during the next year. We could also leverage the redesign of the IT website and its new topic-based “Explore Pages,” which have the potential to feature outside resources if the need becomes apparent.

Other on-going efforts such as the Knowledge Contributors iCoP and Academic Technologies iCoP can help facilitate and build a culture of sharing resources and best practices. There are also groups that regularly congregate across broader units, such as the new Women in Technology group which includes students and communicates with people outside of the University. These groups could be a source of resources and could work together to share methods they have found most helpful for finding, using, and sharing resources.

Recommendation 2: Multi-pronged communication plan

Another central theme was lack of awareness regarding existing resources. This ranged from the inability to find existing resources, to requesting the creation of resources that already exist.

The University's Central Services (CEI, ATSS, Libraries, DRC), particularly in light of the preceding recommendations, are well positioned to communicate to all groups. Since groups that are in the “Highly Integrated” or “Coordinated Support” models can, and should, be receiving communications from their own support partners, Central Services may have more impact by focusing on the “Minimal Support” model groups for any communication efforts.

Communication Recommendations:

For all groups

- Make support more discoverable



- In this context, support includes all types of services and support that students, staff, or faculty may seek and should be clearly identified as:
 - Solving an immediate problem
 - Assistance or consultation on a particular project
 - Broader faculty and/or staff development on integrating Academic Technology into teaching
- Links on MyU to support resources
 - These should either be campus specific or a resource that is relevant for all campuses
- Planned showcases or drop-in events (coordinated events) to encourage excitement/viral nature of communication
 - The current Moodle support clinics at critical times are a successful example of this.

For Faculty

- Request time in department meetings to introduce/inform about available resources
 - These should be coordinated with local and central support services where applicable
 - Central Services should focus on trying to get time with “Minimal Support” departments
- Communications with Deans/Chairs
 - We found that Faculty are more likely to read information from these sources
- Encourage faculty to list technology resources/links on syllabi
 - Create boilerplate information for faculty to customize and include in their syllabus
 - Create a template block for this information within Moodle
 - Support Staff should include this information at events and workshops and in relevant resources
- Host events or showcases to raise awareness of campus local and central support services that relate to academic technologies
 - Groups can showcase work they've done in the past year
 - New technologies can be unveiled
 - Support groups can learn what others are doing and what they could do better together

Overall, given the size and complexity of our University system, the expansive variety of existing resources and the communication required to keep all coordinated units involved, we believe these recommendations require careful consideration. With a sound understanding of the support issues and needs facing our current Academic Tools environment, we are prepared to provide the recommended solutions in support of the community.