Five Year Review

Educational Technology Services

Name and Signature of Director: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Introduction

In the time it takes to write about technology, it has already changed.

Fifteen years ago, the university still had chalkboards and overhead projectors in the classrooms. Now those same classrooms are fitted with Smartboards, document cameras, data projectors, and of course, computers with online access. And the changes are not just in the physical classroom—the definition of “classroom” has expanded to mean wherever a student happens to be: not just for distance learning classes, but also for traditional classes. This means incorporating more and more online tools, not only Learning Management Systems like ANGEL, but content publishing tools, social networks, wikis and blogs, mobile technology, and a host of other tools both available and not yet dreamed of.

Program, Mission

The mission of Educational Technology Services is “to provide materials and services in support of the teaching, research, and public service commitments” of UNA. ETS seeks to fulfill this mission through the activities of its four areas: the Learning Resources Center, Media Services, Academic Technology, and Distance Learning. The overarching goal of ETS is to keep abreast of the latest trends in technology; to make recommendations based on both those trends and the needs of students, faculty, and staff; and to use funds and personnel in the wisest way possible.

The staff of ETS is composed of nine positions including two tenured faculty members: the director, a professor and librarian; and the coordinator of academic technology, an instructor. Full-time staff members include the coordinator of distance learning, the coordinator of distance learning outreach, the coordinator of media services, the digital media specialist, and a library technical assistant. Two part-time employees, both library assistants, work during evening and weekend hours. One graduate assistant and ten to 15 student workers are also employed during fall and spring semesters (with two student workers covering the summer hours).

Evaluation

ETS depends on constant feedback from faculty, staff, and students to assess its role at the university and the needs of the university community. Formal evaluations are conducted regularly with students (course evaluations at the end of the fall and spring semesters, http://www.una.edu/ets/dl/DLSurvey.htm) and with faculty (http://distance.una.edu/faculty-evaluation.html). An online survey (http://distance.una.edu/surveys/interest.html) gathers information on what online courses students and prospective students want to see offered at UNA. Area educators are surveyed periodically (an e-mail invitation to fill out an online form) to assess their needs (for graduate level courses and for professional development).

But even more important than the formal gathering of data is the day-to-day contact with students, faculty, and staff. This year the department instituted biweekly staff meetings in order to share information with each other in a more formal manner: because individual staff members have daily contact with the university in varying degrees, it is vital to be able to assimilate input from the university community (and thus be able to address the community’s needs). Besides input from face-to-face communication, the department periodically solicits information from groups (meeting with academic departments, for example, to introduce faculty to ETS and offer services; conducting “distance learning forums” where faculty can exchange ideas; and depending on recommendations from the Distance Learning Advisory Committee and the Technology Committee). In addition, input from College of Education faculty is solicited for recommendations to enhance the collection of the Learning Resources Center.

It is clear from all evaluations that the most critical need facing ETS is to provide more training, and this must be the number one priority for the department in the coming years. This priority will encompass training in the use of technology for faculty and students through regularly scheduled workshops, through user groups, through one-on-one meetings, and, perhaps most importantly, through online resources (web-based classes and workshops, online how-to videos, web meetings). In addition to technical training, faculty must be offered help with instructional design, in order to make online and blended classes as effective (or more effective) than face-to-face classes.

Facilities and Resources

This year a testing lab was created specifically for online classes that offer proctored exams. Because of budgetary constraints, it was not possible to buy new equipment, and originally it was considered that the laptops available for faculty and staff to borrow through the LRC /Media Services might be pressed into permanent service in the testing lab, making fewer laptops available for faculty to check out. However, Computer Services was able to provide computers from other sources on campus (repurposing computers from the Academic Resource Center), so the laptops are still available. Now the problem is that the checkout machines are out of warranty and cannot be repaired in the event of hardware failure. These laptops should be replaced if at all possible so that they will be available for faculty who are travelling, or working on special projects that require a laptop.

The Smart Classrooms are in place for the most part, but equipment from the earliest installations is already in need of replacement or other upgrades.

Another urgent area for upgrade is in the media collection of the Learning Resource Center. There are still VHS tapes, phonograph records, etc., which need to be replaced with DVD or other electronic format as appropriate. The LRC also needs to purchase new shelving for books and for oversized materials (large picture books, kits, etc.)

Vision, Plans for the Future

If available resources remain the same, ETS can still accomplish its most vital goal: that of providing more training. Training will be offered in regular workshops on Smart Classrooms, SMART products (including SMART boards and panels), Tegrity (lecture capture software), ANGEL LMS (learning management system), and Elluminate (synchronous online meeting software). In addition, user groups will be formed so that individual faculty members can exchange ideas and learn from each other. An online course for distance learning faculty (and any faculty interested in using online tools) is being developed by members of ETS and several faculty experts in distance learning. The new online testing lab can be used for orientation for students who need help with ANGEL (or other online tools) and for faculty orientation/training/user groups.

But technology is changing, and it is inevitable that more and more of the university’s resources must be diverted to keep up with the demands of faculty and students. A method of centralized classroom support and control (for the technology components) would provide immediate assistance should a problem arise. New projectors (at a cost of $2,500 each) now being installed can be accessed and controlled through the campus computer network, allowing for troubleshooting and control from a centralized location. (The unit itself can actually e-mail the administrator if there is a maintenance problem that needs to be addressed.) As projectors are being replaced in Smart Classrooms, these units will dramatically cut down on lost instruction time due to technology failures—and, the technology is available to control devices in the classroom from the same central location, but at a cost of $2,000 per room (for 100-plus classrooms), the cost may be prohibitive.

Other specialized projectors needed are HD/3D units for science and art classes. In the past the cost of HD native units made them unobtainable, but as worldwide production has increased, the cost as gone down considerably (to $3,000-4,000 per unit). Moving to 1080p native projectors will double the available resolution, making them able to better display the fine details of works of art. Similarly, science classes need high resolution capabilities, and the recent acquisition of an electron scanning microscope that creates 3D images creates a need for 3D projectors (which are not much more expensive than an HD unit). The students would need to purchase inexpensive 3D glasses (which could be made available through the campus bookstore and other venues). The HD/3D units are just now becoming available, so they are extremely expensive but the price will drop as demand increases.

The ultimate dream would be to have a Technology Center, not unlike the Writing Center, so that students and faculty would have a place to go to ask for help with technical issues, instructional design, or whatever else they might require. A Technology Center with extended hours (7:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., for example) would be of immeasurable benefit to the university, but would require remodeling costs (est. $50,000) and additional staff ($60,000).

An alternative to the Technology Center would be a 24-hour help line available by telephone or e-mail to students and faculty (telephone help is now available during regular business hours and e-mail help, though offered as much as possible after hours, is also available mostly during regular business hours). This option could utilize existing technology (e-mail, telephone) and would not require additional resources except for staff (which could be supplemented by knowledgeable student workers/graduate assistants). (est. $50,000)

Recommendations

Training may be offered, but it must be attended in order to be effective. ETS asks that the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and the Associate Vice President for Academic Support encourage faculty in the strongest possible terms to take advantage of the training opportunities (workshops, online, and one-on-one) offered by the department. In addition, faculty should be required to have an online presence for every class taught—at a minimum, the syllabus and course calendar should be online. Faculty who do not utilize the LMS available to them are wasting what could be a valuable resource to enhance their students’ learning experience.