Ohio Association of Two-Year Colleges
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Editor's Comment
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Charting the Perfect Storm:
Convergence of Educational Challenges Faced by Ohio's Two-Year Institutions
Vicent J. Granito
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• To provide a forum in which all state-assisted two-year campuses can meet to discuss and addresses mutual interests;
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• To provide the viewpoint of the state assisted two-year campuses to the Ohio Board of Regents and to the State Legislature;
• To identify and improve the status, prestige, and welfare of all state-assisted two-year campuses in Ohio;
• To cooperate with other Ohio agencies, colleges, and universities in research and activities that promote the effectiveness of higher education in Ohio;
• To increase the contribution of the state-assisted two-year colleges to the total educational process in the state of Ohio.

PROVIDES:
• Conference and workshops providing opportunities for professional development, visits to other two-year campuses, presentation of papers, and socialization with other two-year campus personnel;
• The refereed journal which provides an opportunity for publication and exchange of scholarly views and concepts;
• A bi-annual newsletter which informs members of the proceedings and activities of the OATYC and of Ohio's two-year campuses;
• An open forum for the discussion of trends, problems, accomplishments, and challenges unique to state assisted two-year campuses;
• Collective influence on the future direction of Ohio's two-year campus system;
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Subscription is part of the OATYC active, associate, or institutional membership. However, single copies of the Journal are available at $3 each. A yearly subscription is available for $6 to persons or organizations who do not want membership in the OATYC. Postage is prepaid on all orders within the U.S.; $5.50 per year is added for Canada, $1 per year for all other foreign countries. Communications regarding orders, special subscriptions, single copies, advertising, and permission to reprint are to be addressed to:

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DEVELOPING AN IT DELIVERY MODEL THROUGH FACULTY COLLABORATION

Irene Edge

Executive Summary

The Computer Technology faculty of Kent State University have collaborated efforts to provide support to faculty throughout Kent’s eight-campus system by developing a portal which includes a centralized repository of technology-related lectures, curriculum information, and student and adviser resources.

The lecture modules database was developed to assist faculty in the instruction of computer-related topics and is searchable by topic, course, or keyword and is accessible by the students for purpose of review or research. This author has posted over 40 lecture modules to the site and uses the resources of the portal to enhance instruction of in-person as well as distance learning courses, drawing on the expertise of computer technology faculty throughout the entire university system.

Curriculum resources are posted on the portal providing information such as course content, student learning outcomes, and course goals and objectives to the faculty. This package of resources has provided a means by which faculty can consistently deliver individual courses and the entire program across all campuses.

The portal can be a great resource to Kent State University COMT faculty (adjunct and full-time), academic advisers, and students. In addition, some resources on the site are available to the world, providing valuable information to researchers and novices exploring the field of technology. The IT Portal is found at http://it.cch.kent.edu.

Background

The mission of Kent State University (KSU) College of Technology’s Computer Technology programs is to prepare students for the challenges faced in a dynamic workplace by providing seamless transitions from certificate to associate through baccalaureate degree programs in computer technologies.

The Information Technology Delivery Model for the COMT programs was initiated in Summer 2000. Its purpose was to assist the faculty in developing course material, sharing best practices, and providing topic support in the areas of technology. Providing resources to the students was also a great initiative of the project. The initial committee consisted of six full-time faculty.

Development of the IT Portal

Phase I

The initial phase of the IT Delivery Model was completed in May 2002, and accomplished the following:
• Identified hardware/software requirements & other needs to support this project
• Established a budget, then sought & received approval for acquisitions
• Redefined faculty roles
• Secured a public domain for the web site

The faculty recognized that, with the concentrations in the COMT program (i.e., programming, networking, internet/multimedia, and general technologies), not all faculty could maintain an in-depth knowledge in all areas of study. Some campuses had only one or two full-time faculty supporting all of the concentrations required, thus spreading themselves very thin across the curriculum. Providing the opportunity for faculty to identify an area of specialty was intended to stimulate research, provide support for course preparations to those with less experience or knowledge, and develop consistency across the eight-campus system.

The committee determined the preliminary function, features and appearance of the IT Portal. This task required that a support system be established which included hardware, software, and technical support services. Secure servers were purchased and installed to house the database system that was to be developed. One faculty member, given a partial load lift, provided system support for the Portal. The address http://it.tech.kent.edu was assigned to the Portal. A modular approach was established to develop and post lectures and support materials. By featuring distributed learning opportunities, the Portal provided support to the program’s concentrations and course offerings available at all campuses.

Redefining faculty roles became a controversial issue. Identifying strengths and weaknesses became a real threat to some faculty. The faculty did, however, agree that campuses should identify the areas of concentrations that would be offered at each campus. In so doing, faculty who were spread thin across course offerings had the opportunity to focus on a more reasonable load of courses.

Phase II
The second phase of the project is as follows:
• Manage and maintain current IT Portal services
• Expand the database of lecture modules
• Provide faculty a means to collaborate and contribute to discussions related to curriculum development
• Create student self-assessment resources
• Develop academic advising support services

Several faculty took the lead in developing support materials for specific courses or areas of concentration and six faculty have contributed to the centralized repository of lecture modules — currently over 140 lecture modules have been posted. These modules cover technical topics such as:
• A history of Windows
• File management techniques
• Number systems

• Visual Basic .NET programming concepts
• Working with pivot tables in Excel
• Making a patch cable
• Defining domain name services

Several faculty agreed to work on lecture modules for individual courses. Each identified course topics and prepared associated lectures as well as practical labs or worksheets, assessment tools (Test Your Skills), and sources for further study. The modules were rated by level of difficulty and entered into a database. Retrieval for a module can be found by keyword, course, or concentration category and the results sorted by module name, date last modified, or author. Since some topics are covered in more than one course, a modification to the database permitted multiple entries for search and retrieval.

An example of a topic is Number Systems. The faculty prepared the following:
• A web page containing lecture notes introducing the topic of number systems
• A hands-on worksheet allowing the reader to practice the concepts and methods presented in the lecture
• A quiz assessing whether or not the reader actually understands the concept
• Links to other sites (tutorials, resources, etc.)

Combined, these form the lecture module on Number Systems. The module’s author uploaded the files to the server and completed an online entry form to record the lecture module in the database.

The modules may be used to introduce a topic or to review a topic previously covered in the current course or in a prerequisite course. A faculty member not familiar with a particular topic can review the material on the IT Portal before making a class presentation (whether choosing to use the lecture module in that presentation or not). A student can use the lecture modules to review a topic or to research new topics.

The management of current IT Portal services includes user access and authorization (security), database maintenance, posting of curriculum-related documents, faculty online discussions. The curriculum of the computer technology program undergoes constant review and revision. The full-time COMT faculty at KSU frequently discuss opportunities to further expand these services.

All faculty have participated in curriculum-related discussions and in the development of course goals and student learning objectives. Discussion threads, supported by the server, are used to manage these conversations. In addition, documents (i.e., meeting minutes, proposed course information, and other faculty- and curriculum-related documents) are housed in secure folders on the Portal. Just having a centralized and accessible server to store these documents has been worth the effort, but there is so much more to the IT Portal.

New faculty (full-time and adjunct) – first time teaching a course or concept – can review modules related to a specific course, use the module for personal review, or include the module as part of their lecture. Existing faculty covering a topic outside of his/her area of expertise can review modules related to a specific course...
(as stated above), and many of the modules have additional resource links for further research. Students reviewing a class lecture or topic also use the resource links to find out more about the topic. Many of the modules have hands-on exercises or review questions for the students to test their knowledge and determine if further study is required.

One service currently in the development stages is student self-assessment—not only on a specific topic, but on entire course content. This tool will be used for accreditation support, as well as academic advising purposes.

Anyone in the general public researching a topic can also use the IT Portal. While at the Portal, guests can sign a guestbook or contact the author of the module. Students from other universities have indicated that specific lecture modules have been helpful in their assignments and research.

**Challenges**

"Collaborations need to be enhanced by a learning framework that can give students the skills they need for lifelong learning and can provide teachers with the methodologies to continuously improve their teaching" (Duchovnay, 2000). As with any complex, collaborative effort, there are many obstacles to overcome. The development of the IT Portal is no exception.

**Faculty**

Out of (currently) 17 full-time faculty, fewer than half have taken an active role in contributing to the IT Portal. Simply because a resource is available does not mean that people will take advantage of it. Several factors have been identified:

- **Not all faculty chose to identify areas of expertise.** Some expressed concern that by doing so would admit a lack of knowledge and, perhaps, be accused of not performing their job well.
- **Faculty felt threatened by the project.** There was concern that campus administration might view distance learning courses offered by other campuses as a sign of a diminishing need for resident faculty on their campus. Other faculty feared they would be pressured to offer web-based courses when that may not be the delivery mode of choice.
- **Some faculty did not support the redesign of the curriculum** (which the Portal was largely designed to help implement across the eight-campus system). Small campuses were at a disadvantage in offering the full spectrum of curricular options provided by the degree and did not see distance learning and the Portal as sufficient means of resolving those scheduling issues.
- **Retirements and personnel changes** have resulted in the loss of key faculty from the initial team, impacting interest and requiring that new faculty be involved.
- **The time involved** to keep the lecture modules current and develop new modules takes away from other responsibilities or duties.

Since the inception of the Portal, other expectations and priorities have been placed upon the faculty. Though using the IT Portal supports many of these responsibilities and initiatives, the fact remains that time is precious and one's focus must be limited. This applies not only to the users of the Portal and to the contributors of its content, but also to those responsible for its expansion and maintenance. In Fall 2007, this author surveyed the faculty to determine what features of the Portal are found to be most used and most valuable. The results of the survey are currently being analyzed, though early analysis of the responses shows that certain features of the Portal hold considerable value to the faculty. The final results will indicate whether funding and support should be sought for continuation of this project.

**Administration**

Due to a change in technical support personnel at the location where the secure servers initially resided, the servers were relocated to one of the regional campuses. Several security updates and patches (requiring considerable program modifications and server administration) eventually returned the operating system of the servers to an acceptable level of performance but resulted in significant downtime through this maintenance process.

It is worth noting, in the initial stages of the project, generous funding was made available by the regional campus administration. However, as the project matured, release time for required programming maintenance, database upkeep, and server administration proved to be insufficient for the breadth of work required. In order to offer a service that is responsive to expanded requirements and specification (both user-initiated, and server administration-based), the Portal requires constant attention to web design and the upkeep of the databases. Results of the survey may provide faculty with the justification they need to gain increased support (i.e., release time) of various administrative units.

**Students and Academic Advisers**

Making students and academic advisers aware of the resources available on the IT Portal has been quite a challenge. The Portal contains a wealth of information about the computer technology curriculum (course sequences, career opportunities, self-assessment tools) to assist students in planning their courses of study, choosing a career path, and evaluating their own skills. However, if students do not know about the resources, they are of no value.

One feature of the Portal that requires constant maintenance is posting and monitoring of local computer-related job opportunities. This feature could be very beneficial to students and to advisers as they recruit new students.

**Benefits**

The IT Portal supports resources benefiting faculty, students, academic advisers, and the discipline of computer technology.

**Faculty**

The IT Portal is a collaborative effort of the computer technology faculty as a whole, providing a means by which faculty can demonstrate their areas of expertise, share best practices, and take a new interest in research. Faculty used
the Portal to create lecture modules that were later used in publications – one being a textbook developed for the program’s introductory operating systems and networking course.

Faculty working together has been one of the greatest benefits of the Portal. The distance between the campuses has seemed nonexistent in some cases. Two faculty took advantage of the collaborating effort and prepared lecture modules with one preparing the lecture and the other preparing the hands-on lab. This has led to the expansion of several topics, tapping into the expertise and strengths of both faculty.

The Portal helps in mentoring new and adjunct faculty, acquainting them with the computer technology curriculum and specific course content. As part of the computer technology programs’ accreditations, standards must be put in place to offer courses and programs consistently across all eight campuses. In addition, a method must be implemented that will compare student outcomes with course and program objectives. The Portal is the central location for these assessments to take place.

Students

Using the Portal to bridge communication between faculty and students strengthens and enhances the computer technology programs and better prepares students for the workplace. This is analogous to partnerships that businesses build with customers. “The portal should be the first place customers think about going. It is not good enough to say, ‘If we build it, they will come.’ By building the portal with speed, efficiency and innovation, customers will have a reason to embrace the new technology” (Delinger, 2004). Students can access the Portal 24/7, providing a service only an Internet-based project can do. When first entering the program, students informed of the Portal find the most value in its resources and provide feedback to the faculty who then are motivated to post additional resources on the site.

The Portal also provides a means by which courses can be offered consistently across the campuses. As students register for courses at multiple campuses (and they often do), they can be sure that the outcomes from a prerequisite course have been met.

By searching the information available on the Portal, students are able to research topics of interest, use the lectures and hands-on lab or worksheet features to reinforce concepts, and perform self-assessments to see how much they understand the topic. In addition, students can explore degree program options and find information about course sequences. Links are posted to direct students to career resources as well.

Academic advising support

Academic advisers can access the Portal to help them better understand the computer technology curriculum. Recruitment documents are available promoting the COMT programs and providing information about related careers. With the available assessment tools, advisers can steer students into the correct course level or even advise to pursue credit-by-exam opportunities where appropriate.

General distribution of knowledge

The general public can access much of the information about the COMT programs (recruitment and advising) and many of the lecture modules. Numerous visitors have signed the “guest book” and reported that information available on the Portal satisfied their search or provided them with the resources they needed to further investigate a topic. Because visitors are not required to sign the “guest book,” it is unknown exactly how many visitors have found the Portal to be a comprehensive resource.

Conclusion

This paper explains a collaborative effort on the part of faculty to provide support to all COMT faculty at Kent State University’s eight-campus system through the design and implementation of an IT Portal. Students and academic advisers also benefit from the centralized resource of lecture modules, program requirements, career guidance, and self- and skills assessments.

Collaborative faculty efforts make for stronger programs. Resources on the Portal must be maintained and kept current in order to continue to serve the constituents. The consistent delivery of courses and (ultimately) programs across the eight-campus system is critical to holding program accreditations. “The portal should continually be modified for potential improvements. Input from users can be evaluated and provide direction to make the information in the portal more valuable—which, in turn, can result in making [users’] lives easier, more efficient, and can promote better communication between both parties” (Delinger, 2004). To be effective, faculty, students, academic advisers, and other constituents must find the Portal easy to use and provide a direct benefit to them. The COMT faculty at KSU are committed to academic excellence, and the IT Portal is an integral part of that effort.

References