

October 13, 2006

Memorandum

TO: Richard Myers

FROM: Herb Nickles

SUBJ: Importance of Technology to the Success of Strategic Initiatives

With information technology ubiquitous throughout the academy, we should assume that all strategic planning initiatives eventually funded will require technology and related support in some fashion, and some initiatives will require technology in ways that are unanticipated. We experienced this during the previous strategic planning endeavor. For example, it was not anticipated that the Poetry Center and the Kahn Institute would have any impact on Educational Technology Services. Little did we know then that the programs of these new centers would require significant use of multimedia and audio-visual technologies for public lectures and performances. This need competed directly with the growing demand for the same equipment and staff resources to support classroom teaching. We must proceed cautiously as we consider a Center for International Study, a Center for Environmental Studies or a Center for Community Engagement. The Committee on Administrative Technology Services (CATS) urges the CMP and CAP to carefully consider the implications for the use of technology in all initiatives under consideration and plan appropriately to adequately provide for the technology and staffing resources needed.

When reviewing the ideas emerging from the round table discussions, prospective proposals and initiatives that will require information technology as a significant component can be identified easily. The implementation of electronic portfolios, a web searchable course catalog, and a community service database will require software and hardware purchases, ongoing maintenance, and additional staff support. Perhaps improving communications with Smith students and faculty abroad could be more cost effective by using emerging Internet technologies that aren't currently supported at Smith? And it may make good sense to deliver continuing education programs to alumnae around the world over the Internet. However, Smith has not invested in distance-learning software, nor do we currently provide this support in Information Technology Services.

The most prevalent technology theme in the ideas emerging from the round tables is the use of the college's website to improve communications with our internal and external constituents. Some suggested uses of the website include providing better advising information to our students, improving public awareness of faculty research, creating more opportunities for networking between alumnae and students, increasing the visibility of the college's sustainability efforts, providing audio and video access to special events and lectures, offering a virtual experience of the Smith campus to prospective students, and supporting collaborations with faculty and students in other countries. Every strategic direction identified by CMP is represented in this list.

As part of the strategic planning process for administrative technology, focus group discussions were held last spring. Participants expressed frustration that Smith is falling behind relative to other institutions in providing the infrastructure and ongoing support for more sophisticated communications with our various constituencies. They felt that the lack of consistency between the lower and top levels of the Smith website and the lack of our agility in implementing emerging web technologies is a symptom of the failure of the decentralized approach to our website development and maintenance. CATS proposes that the college carefully review the current decentralized model as part of the strategic planning process, considering a move to a more centralized support model. This might require reallocation of personnel from several departments, the addition of new technical staff, and operating support for an on-line content management system. This review is critical in the light of the strategic importance that the Smith website will play in the success of the adopted initiatives.

In the college's last strategic planning process (Smith 2020), a one-time information technology initiatives budget was established to cover the cost of implementation of technology in support of multiple initiatives. The budget was spread over multiple years and paid for limited-term staffing and operating expenditures to implement the technology to support new initiatives. As ongoing needs were identified, they were vetted in the budget process and base budgets increased as appropriate. This model worked well then, and might be a good model to follow in the current planning process.

The focus group discussions also suggested a need for an administrative technology innovation fund. This budget could be used to explore emerging technologies, assessing their value prior to making long-term commitments to new technologies. A similar budget was established ten years ago for educational technology and is administered by the Committee on Educational Technology. It has been very successful at providing faculty with funds to integrate new technologies into their courses and to support new software for faculty and students' academic work. An administrative technology innovation budget could be a means of funding unanticipated technology needs of the various initiatives and departments' specialized technology needs that currently have little chance for funding. Using CATS as the gateway for reviewing and approving proposals makes good sense and provides a parallel structure to the innovative classroom technology budget.