

Information Technology and Student Opinions at Amherst College: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Suggestions

An analysis of Focus Groups to assist the IT department in
maximizing their benefits on campus

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Introduction

Information technology has rapidly developed into one of the most important departments on campus. Because of the incredible reliance of the College's students, faculty and staff on a variety of electronic and computing resources, it is important that IT is able to best serve the interests of the campus. In order to gauge student interest and needs, focus groups were constructed to assess student opinions on a variety of issues. These focus groups were designed to collect data regarding a variety of services offered by the IT department, discover the strengths and weaknesses of these services, and create suggestions on how to maximize the use of information technology on campus.

Procedure

Students were randomly selected and invited to two focus group sessions regarding the role of the Information Technology department on campus. Respondents met on a Monday evening and a Tuesday afternoon at Amherst College to discuss these issues. The responses were recorded and compiled into a focus group transcript. These transcripts were analyzed for common themes, and the findings reported in this report.

Results

Computing Specialists

➤ Findings

Student utilization of student computing specialists was mixed. Some of the students reported never having used the computer specialists, most students reported having called the specialist and resolving the problem over the phone, and others reported that a computer specialist came to them to help. A common alternative to IT computer specialist was the students frequently asked their friends for technological support. When the specialist came, the students reported that the specialist was efficient and able to solve their problem. One student said that each specialist seemed to be overly specialized, knowing too much about detailed problems but frequently not having enough general knowledge. Students recommended increasing publicity efforts to increase awareness about (a) the availability of these specialists and (b) the exact services that these people are able to provide to students.

➤ Discussion

IT informed us we had lumped the computer center supervisors and the computing specialists together. But, the overall conclusions were still valid because the specialists took cases the supervisors couldn't solve. A recommendation was made to give students their case number when they call and their cases are handed over to the computing specialists. That way, students are able to call back and follow up on their specific request. In addition, IT is working on better ways to track requests.

Software Distribution

➤ Findings

A large majority of students were unaware about the major mechanisms of discounts on software offered by IT. Many students were unaware of the special Microsoft Office deals, “K:” drive software access, and other IT offers. Students seemed receptive to these offers once they were made aware of their existence.

➤ Discussion

We discussed having IT table in the campus center selling Windows XP. They informed us that students wouldn’t have to have money with them because it is charged directly to their school account or to the AC dollars. Having the XP box displayed was suggested to draw student's attention. Also, we suggested to have the boxes of programs available on the K-drive displayed on the table with a sign saying free and instructions how to access these programs.

Computing Centers

➤ Findings

Students reported that computing center computers were usually neat, well maintained, and easy to use. Students appreciate the inability to download programs that encourage procrastination such as “I-Tunes,” “AIM,” and other programs of their ilk.

Students reported widespread problems with 5-college student usage of the computing center computers and being unable to obtain a computer because many of the computers were being used by 5-college students. Despite the current policy that Amherst students have priority, this has been difficult to enforce, mostly because students feel too guilty or awkward to ask 5-college students to leave. This problem is especially pronounced during reading periods and finals periods. Some students suggested eliminating the ability to use computers as a “guest” and requiring an Amherst logon name in order to gain computer access. Additionally, some students felt that the Science library had too few computers, frequently citing a long wait time to use these computers during peak times.

Students are unaware of “special” capabilities that many of the computing centers have, such as scanners and other multimedia capabilities. Additionally, students do not know of the special programs that are available to them at computer centers. One student reported that he knew of a program that would have been helpful for his playwriting class, but was unable to locate it, and subsequently gave up. In general, students are largely ignorant regarding additional possibilities that the computing centers offer beyond what can be found in a standard laptop/desktop that the students may own.

➤ Discussion

The issue of 5-College computer use was discussed, and we planned a meeting with the library staff to look into the issue further. IT said that getting rid of guest log-ins would be more difficult than expected. Disabling guest log-ins would hurt Amherst students when the network is down. They also felt it would not be fair to suddenly cut off access to computers for outsiders who have been using the computers all year. There may also be a legal requirement to have them open to the public because the library has government archives. We discussed having card holders on the sides of the desks for students to display their ID, so it is easier to distinguish between Amherst students and others when computers are filled and people need to be asked to leave. A white board with a computer waiting list was also suggested to monitor how many Amherst and 5-College students are waiting. In addition, we asked that the Media Center supervisors take a more proactive role; when they see many Amherst students coming down and leaving because there are no available computers, they should seek out computers being used by guests.

The usage statistics were discussed. The number of guest log-ins in the Media Center was only 8.5% in the past six weeks. But the students discussed that this is probably because Amherst students use the computers for very short periods of times, thus possibly logging in multiple times of the day, but 5-College students are there for more prolonged periods. Since Amherst students often use the media center to print off papers because of its proximity to classrooms and dorms, we suggested that maybe having a printing station would alleviate some of the need to restrict guests. In addition, we were unclear about the printing capabilities of the card-catalog computers. If students are able to print off these computers, we suggested that be better advertised and signs posted in the media center saying "Just need to print? Use the upstairs computers."

We also discussed the possibility of putting printers next to other computers around campus, and IT informed us that someone would have to maintain the printers. Adding printers in the Campus Center, where the Building Manager could be trained to maintain them, was discussed as a compromise. Additionally, IT informed us that they are in the process of adding computer kiosks in Converse, and we suggested adding computers in Merrill to alleviate some of the overflow in the Science Library.

We met with the library staff to discuss our recommendations. They had been unaware of the patterns of student computing use that result in backups in the media center and the science library. Although they were reluctant to advertise printing on the upstairs computers because they feared it would interfere with use for library purposes, they did agree to consider other alternatives for people who just need to print documents. We extensively discussed 5-college computer usage, looking for both long term and short term solutions to the problem. The only feasible short term solution we came up with was to designate with a sign a certain percentage of computers for guest logins, and hope that the honor system would restrict usage on all other computers to Amherst College students. The library staff agreed to meet with the other five colleges about their policies and perhaps consider a more significant reform in our policies to keep up with the other schools. We discussed issues with eliminating guest logins: alumni, prospective students, and others we might not want to restrict would also be affected by the change.

Essentially, no agreement was reached on how to solve the problem, but a dialogue was started that we hope will eventually lead to a solution that benefits everyone.

Additionally we discussed having lists of what programs and multimedia capabilities are available on which computers posted in both Seeley Mudd and the Media Center. We also suggested adding eView to the computers in the Lane Room in the media center because it is only available in the main area.

Email

➤ Findings

Many students complained that e-mail accounts were too far small. Messages accrued quickly, and students were frequently asked to reduce the amount of messages in their inbox. This has caused many students to shift away from using their Amherst accounts to other accounts, such as “Gmail.” Students were also annoyed that they were unable to receive e-mail until their inbox was reduced. Students recommended putting e-mail’s sent to them while their inbox is full into an “e-mail purgatory,” where the messages would be delivered once the inbox size had been reduced.

➤ Discussion

IT informed us that expanding email storage space would be expensive. They were unaware how many students have their mailboxes closed and how often; we hope they will get that information and look into the issue further. We also discussed allowing certain students to apply for extra email space, such as organization leaders who receive a lot of emails or students studying abroad with no home computer on which to archive old emails. We thought this would be a good compromise to alleviate the expense but allow students who most need it to have extra space. Through this process, IT would be able to talk to students about how to reduce the size of their email accounts when going over their applications for extra space.

Webspace & U: Drive

➤ Findings

Few students knew that they had web space. Many students knew that they had web space, but did not know how to access it or use it. They also did not know where to find the information directing them about web space usage. The few students that did use web space found it incredibly useful for file sharing and allowing them to access files throughout campus. Similar problems were found with the U: drive—students did not know how to set-up the U: drive causing few of them to use it. Accordingly, many students chose to e-mail documents to themselves rather than trouble themselves with the U: drive. However, the few that used it, said it was extremely helpful, especially when doing a thesis that was heavy on media.

➤ Discussion

We discussed similar issues as with email accounts (see above), like the possibility of allowing students to apply for extra webspace under certain circumstances. Such a process already exists for expanding the U-drive storage, and we suggested publicizing or institutionalizing this process to make it available to more students. The larger IT committee will need to discuss any possible increases or changes in email, webspace, and U-drive storage.

School Computer Offers

➤ Findings

Many students believed that the computer offers from IT were overpriced. Accordingly, some students opted not to buy a computer through the College. One student reported that he thought that the computer was not powerful enough and hence decided to buy a different computer, while another student reported that the computer was loaded with things that he would not use. Some students reported either having difficulty with their computer, or having heard from friends who had had difficulty with their computer.

➤ Discussion

We discussed that many students had experienced problems specifically with the Gateway laptops offered in previous years, and IT informed us they were already aware of the problem and would not be offering Gateways in the future. We commended IT on offering this service, both because it reduces stress for students who purchased computers through the school and because it allows other students to clarify what they need or want from their computer before purchasing.

Software classes sponsored by IT

➤ Findings

Very few students had gone to the classes. Most students did not know about classes being offered by IT. Students suggested that rather than advertising events by program name (Come learn about Adobe Photoshop!), IT should instead advertise by applicability to student life (Come learn how to make cool posters and table tents!).

Students would like course offerings applicable to college work. Specifically, Adobe Photoshop for publicity and pictures, basic Excel for data analysis and organization, and basic web design tutorials. Students requested that the IT classes held over interterm also be held at regular intervals during the semester, either on weekends or at nights, so that students who are not on campus during interterm are able to take advantage of the classes.

➤ Discussion

IT was concerned that if they offered more software trainings throughout the semester, no students would come. We suggested requiring registration beforehand so that the sessions could be cancelled if there was not enough interest. IT also informed us that students could request software tutorials one-on-one with computing specialists, but since the program is so new they were unsure if the request form had been posted on the website. They will check to make sure it is available.

We suggested that software trainings be advertised in terms that catch students' attention. For example, instead of advertising "learn to use Photoshop," they could advertise "learn to make table tents and posters for your events!"

We recommended many possible options for publicizing software trainings. We suggested having trainings for senior thesis writes in senior dorms or through the Friends of the Library committee. We also suggested IT have information at the career center's junior symposium. We also suggested having a computing specialist from IT meet with freshman RCs to teach them how to help their freshman find the appropriate resources for their computing problems. We know in many freshman dorms the computing manuals are not even handed out, and we think that using RCs to help freshman adjust to computing at college would be helpful. We suggested working with Dean Haynes' office to send out information to organization leaders with instructions on how to use their organizations' technical capacities like Blackboard sites, email accounts, webspaces, and listservs, and perhaps to include these issues in the annual Student Leadership Conference. We also suggested adding an extra section of the website directed towards student organizations.

We recommended working with Mr. Hoffa to help study abroad students adjust to computing abroad, for example connecting to the VPN to get access to the U-drive away from the network. We suggested having information at the mandatory study abroad meeting and including information in the study abroad pre-departure handbook.

We suggested that professors should be encouraged to inform students about programs and trainings that might be useful for the class, in particular we suggested that math professors teaching Multivariable Calculus inform students about the availability of Mathematica.

IT Website

➤ Findings

Some students expressed dissatisfaction regarding the tutorials. Specifically, the "Managing e-mail limitations" and tutorials for Mac computers were pointed out by students. One student commented about how he found the website extremely helpful for the anti-virus sections.

➤ Discussion

We discussed setting the IT website as the homepage for computers in Seeley Mudd so that students could be more aware of the services offered by IT. IT said they were working on updating the Macintosh tutorials and making the website more user-friendly.

Summer Intern Program

➤ Findings

Students were not surprised a position was available, although none of them would be interested. Students believed that the job would consist of “sitting in front of a computer inside while it was very nice outside.”

➤ Discussion

IT was unsurprised by the sentiment, but made it known that there were still more applicants than spaces for the intern program this year.

New Intranet Website

➤ Findings

The new intranet was a tremendous hit. All students reported they liked the program, and appreciated how it consolidated all of the important links into one site. Students also prized the new course catalog format. One suggestion to improve the intranet would be to include Valentine menus there. Another suggestion was that one student wanted was to make the forums anonymous, so that they would be similar to the Daily Jolt website.

➤ Discussion

IT informed us that there was not space in the initial design to include Valentine menus, but that they are working with Dining Services on incorporating the menus. We commended IT and Public Affairs for the creation of this extremely useful resource.

Technology in the Classroom

➤ Findings

Students report that the Blackboard site is useful regarding many features, from syllabus storage to media distribution. Professors tended to fall along a spectrum regarding the use of technology of the classroom. Some professors used many types of new technology, while others still did not use e-mail. Students believe that IT should offer courses regarding new technology to professors, but that these courses should not be mandatory.

➤ Discussion

IT informed us that courses on technology are already being offered to professors. We were pleased with the increasing use of blackboard.

Speed of Network & File Sharing

➤ Findings

Students either did not have an opinion or had no problem regarding network speed. Students appreciated the current policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” regarding files being shared over the network.

➤ Discussion

IT was glad to know there were no problems with network speed. We discussed the current efforts to make the campus wireless. We informed IT of the dead spots in Frost and other wireless buildings which they are looking into.

General Recommendations

These recommendations only reflect what respondents found to be very important to them. They are by no means a comprehensive list of potential initiatives that could be undertaken by the IT department to improve its services, nor should they be in any way viewed as “demands,” but rather only as suggestions.

Publicity

Publicity was a unifying theme throughout these groups. Many students said that they would use more of the services that IT offered if they knew that they were being offered. Accordingly, one of the best ways to boost student utilization of IT services will be to enhance IT publicity in the following ways:

- Use more student-oriented medium: The best way to reach students is to advertise on what students use most. Specifically, table tents in Valentine would be helpful, since almost every student passes through Valentine at one point or another during the day. Other media for advertisements should include notices on electronic websites, such as NOTE, The Daily Jolt, and the new intranet site. While all campus mailings may seem like a good way to reach students, most instead choose to throw anything generic in their mailbox into the recycling bin. This frequently happens with Amherst *Notes*, and accordingly, publishing events there would also not significantly boost turnout.
- Cast themes in more concrete terms that are applicable to students: When students first arrive, they have little idea about the specifics of the “U: drive” or why they would need to use Endnote7. Advertising IT services in terms that students can relate to, rather than computer based abstractions, would dramatically increase awareness and utilization. Specific ideas may be some of the following:

Microsoft Excel: Graphing and Data Analysis for Natural and Social Scientists
Endnote 7: How to keep track of sources for that big research paper
The U: Drive: Making your hard drive portable throughout campus
The K: Drive: Free software to improve your computer at your finger tips
IT Computer Assistants: Portable help to make sure your computer runs perfectly,
able to solve any problem.

6-Month Follow Up

What has been accomplished

Software

Software sales have risen dramatically, mostly due to more effective publicity measures. Specifically, having tables at Valentine and the Campus Center brought software directly to the students. In fact, some of the tables were so successful that the table ran out of software, causing the person to bring even more software stocks. Using a card swiper and selling with AC dollars was a tremendous success because it was very convenient for students. All of these measures should be continued due to their tremendous success.

Computer Availability

Computing capacity has been increased by 10 computers, bringing the total number of computers to 48. Furthermore, Umass has just completed a large computer lab project that will substantially increase their capacity, which will hopefully ameliorate overflow to Amherst College computers. Visual data also indicates that the media center had yet to be filled to capacity, although it is admittedly early in the year. Furthermore, it was determined that Smith College does have computers that are available for 5-college use, but they are difficult to find. Students who need computing privileges at Smith should consult the reference librarians about the location of the open computers.

E-mails

E-mail accounts have doubled in size, assisted partially by the switching over to a new server. There has not been a time yet this semester when the IT staff has had to tell a student to limit their mail box, indicating that this increase in size may have solved the student's problems of limited e-mail space.

IT Classes

The popularity and demand for IT classes has increased significantly, also as a result of better publicity. Using the RCs to distribute messages, as well as the traditional sources of publicity (table tents in valentine, posting on NOTE and The Daily Jolt). Offering the Endnote class at the beginning of the year, as opposed to waiting for interterm, was a large success amongst senior thesis writers, and should be repeated on an annual basis. Furthermore, classes for Summer Science students were very well attended and educational.

Intranet Progress

The Valentine Menu has been posted on the intranet, which many students had previously suggested.

Orientation Events

The mandatory meetings for first years during orientation had good attendance, and the IT department introduced materials to them that would be helpful. This seems to be a successful way of getting in touch with first years, because they attend meetings marked as “mandatory.”

Plans currently in progress

IT Classes

A class on imaging and managing images in documents has been planned and was met with enthusiasm. This will make an excellent addition to the Endnote class held previously. An idea for the future may be to hold a “Thesis Computing Series” that incorporated all of these thesis classes into one, structured class. Furthermore, a series on computing for first year students containing Word, Dreamweaver, Photoshop, and InDesign has also been planned. In order to maximize the utility of this knowledge, the IT department is trying to get to students as early as possible in their Amherst careers.

Computing Services

Student Computing Specialists will be asked to give students their ticket number as a mechanism of tracking cases. This should help with case fluidity and coherency, while also expediting service by not wasting time bringing a new specialist up to speed. This project seems easy and feasible, and could be implemented quickly.

Recommendation to CAP

Computing classes and IT priorities should be communicated to the Committee on Academic Priorities (CAP) in order to facilitate integration into the curriculum. Furthermore, the CAP should also be updated on IT’s capabilities in order to ensure that all of the technology available can be used by students and faculty.

Plans currently in development

Expanding IT classes

Discussion of extending the Endnote class and an Excel class to first years would ensure that first-year students get adequate experience with the available software. Integrating the Endnote program, and any other applicable program, into the First Year Seminar (FYS) would be an excellent mechanism to ensure that students were exposed to this programming. A consultation with FYS professors should be made to see if it is feasible to use Endnote in these classes and how it is best to integrate IT available software into the seminar.

Printing Load

In order to reduce the load of printing jobs on the a few ideas were proposed.

- (1) Printing Kiosks in main campus areas- Specifically, Valentine and the campus center, in addition to the library, could be outfitted with printers. Maintenance could be done by people who work in these areas, such as the campus center manager.
- (2) Printers in dorms- This option would be more convenient since it would limit the walk around campus. Unfortunately, the main drawback of this system would be maintenance, in that it would be difficult to delegate responsibility to a single person. If this problem could be solved, then this option would have the best availability.
- (3) Remote Printing to Printing Centers-Enabling students to print to the computer center from their rooms would decrease the load on computer at the printing centers. Many students just need quick access to a printer but are unable to print when a computing center is full. This solution allows all students to print at home from their personal computers, and avoids a crunch on the computers at the printing centers.
- (4) Increasing Digital Drop-box usage- This would help the number of students who only use printers to print the final paper copy for their professor. It would also decreased the spread of illness from students to professors by eliminating direct contact between the two through the paper medium. Training professors in the use of the digital drop-box and encouraging its use would hopefully boost its appeal.

Transcript Notation for IT Classes

Another idea presented would be noting the attendance of IT classes on official transcripts, much like the College notes participation in gym classes, even though they aren't for credit. This would increase the incentive for students to join the classes, as well as reward them for going through training. Furthermore, it would allow the IT department to expand certain classes currently given in one session to be given in many sessions, allowing for more in-depth coverage of essential programs.

Focus On Study Abroad

Special considerations have been found that affect students abroad, especially those in Europe and Australia. Past experience and anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that firewall protection in these parts of the world are significantly more rigorous than in the US, and accordingly, VPN access is disrupted. A page in the Handbook to Study Abroad warning students of this potential problem, as well as giving other advice about computing while abroad, would help alleviate some of this unexpected trouble.