Report of the CLA Technology Review Committee

Submitted by Elizabeth Nelson
February 10, 2016

Committee Members:

Elizabeth Nelson, Communication;
Dana Lindaman, Foreign Language and Lit;
Ryan Bergstrom, Geography

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The CLA Technology Review Committee includes Elizabeth Nelson, Ryan Bergstrom and Dana Lindaman.

The committee met on November 24 and December 1, to coordinate our process, to discuss the self-study provided by Peter Angelos, and to develop questions for conversations scheduled with Peter Angelos and Dan Lackore. Both Peter and Dan were provided with advance copies of our questions. We met with Peter Angelos on December 3 and Dan Lackore on December 10.

From the outset committee members expressed support for the CLA Technology enterprise. We noted both the effectiveness of and challenges to the current status of Technology in CLA and wish to develop our report in that order.

Success and Effectiveness of the CLA Technology Program

Careful review of the self-study by all committee members yielded the conclusion that CLA is very fortunate to have the technology support offered through the efforts of Peter Angelos and Dan Lackore (and students). Their commitment to providing the newest and best technology necessary for instruction, research and community engagement has yielded a valuable resource for faculty, students and staff in CLA. It is important to note here that the review committee frames our judgments about "strength" and "effectiveness" in the context of what we deem to be a problem of shrinking resources (see next section, "Challenges").

The CLA Technology Program does an adequate job of supporting Faculty in both teaching and research. All full-time faculty, whether tenure-track or term, are provided with a new computer -- in most cases a laptop -- in order to facilitate instruction and research at the University. These computers are equipped with appropriate software to maximize the effective classroom use of technology. While faculty members are generally entrusted with responsibility to familiarize themselves with the use of this technology, Peter and Dan, along with ITSS staff, are available for advice on its use. Beyond provision of computers to individual faculty, the CLA Technology Program has developed several portable computer carts that allow for recording of student work, and uploading of said work so that students and faculty alone have access.

Technology support for faculty research includes not only the provision of computer and software, but also information on cutting edge research practices. ITSS provides some of this support, as do staff members at the KAM Library. The largest source of this information in CLA rests with Peter Angelos, and his commitment to maintaining connections with researchers across colleges at UMD, the University system-wide, and across the globe through his ongoing participation in such organizations as EDUCAUSE. Through networks such as these, Peter Angelos brings the best and most current information about technology in research and teaching to CLA, and simultaneously represents CLA initiatives to the UMD community, to the U of M system, and to the broader technology community.

CLA Technology leadership does a good job of managing the technology, both in terms of computer maintenance and life-cycle management. The equipment selected by Peter and Dan for use in CLA is chosen in part for its durability, and is therefore delivered with a four-year warranty. The expectation is that faculty will receive new hardware on a rotating basis, timed according to said warranty. When resources have become limited, Lackore and Angelos have sought to meet faculty needs by reusing working parts from older computers. In some cases faculty using well-functioning computers that are beyond their warranty, are asked to continue with the older technology.

While working with older technology is not optimal, the approach of the CLA Technology leadership maximizes the ever-more-limited resources available to them for this support. As the funding for technology in CLA is generated exclusively by declared majors, and as this number decreases (as it has in recent years), and as this technology supports instruction in LEP courses to numbers of students in other majors that far exceed other colleges' contribution to LEP of CLA majors, it is clear to the review committee that the demand for technological support in CLA grows while the resources for this support dwindles. Within this context, CLA Tech asset management has allowed for the flexibility to deal with emergencies when something truly impedes a faculty member's work in the classroom.

The CLA Technology Program maximizes the contribution made by each worker at each level. Peter Angelos, the Technology Director, works under the supervision of the CLA Dean, Sue Maher. The director supervises the Information Technology Professional (formerly Chad McBride, currently Dan Lackore), who in turn manages duties for the student workers (typically 2).

The CLA Technology committee members were concerned with questions related to stability of resources. We were particularly interested in the "career development" vision for the person in the role of Information Technology Professional. The CLA Technology Self-Study (pp. 10-11) outlines the duties and roles for this position, noting that "with a highly skilled, dedicated and creative person," this position serves a "vital role" within the CLA Technology Program. The position is structured with the understanding that this position is likely to be "rolled over" within 5-10 years, as the person in this position develops the skill and experience to move to a more challenging leadership position. The idea here is that the Technology Professional position is filled by a worker who is perhaps new to the profession, with the appropriate skill and demeanor, who will not initially command the salary necessary to compete with other information technology positions. As this worker's skill and experience expand, it is reasonable to expect this worker to reach a salary threshold in CLA that would warrant their moving on to another more challenging and rewarding experience.

During our interview, Peter confirmed that, in his estimation, Dan Lackore is doing a very good job. Moreover, Dan expressed strong appreciation for the opportunity this position has afforded him and indicated that he has no plans imminently to leave the CLA Technology Program, he does understand that the position he holds as Information Technology Professional may not be a lifetime position for him.

Initially the review committee members were concerned about the idea that this position is understood to be "shorter term," almost an apprenticeship; but upon discussion with Peter and Dan, we came to understand that until there is the promise of growth in the CLA Technology Program, a talented Technology Professional best serves that middle level of service to CLA.

Challenges Confronting the CLA Technology Program

Lack of sufficient funding stands at the core of the challenges noted by members of the CLA Technology Review Committee. We also noted several issues that result from what we call "Communication" issues.

Funding Issues

The source of funding for CLA's Technology Program has resulted in a chasm between its mission and its focus. The mission of the CLA Technology Program is to "provide technology and information systems support for the unique teaching, learning, research and administrative needs of CLA students, faculty, Dean and staff in the humanities and social sciences" (Self Study, p. 1). While this mission highlights development and creative application of new technologies, the details accounting for much of the work being done is more related to problem-solving, putting out fires, and managing the technology demands that occur on a daily basis.

As has been the case for since 2002, the funding formula for the CLA Technology Program derives from a per-FTE Collegiate Fee, charged to full-time students declaring a major in CLA. As the Self Study notes, there has been an increase in numbers of CLA faculty (by 2014, up to 170 faculty), warranting provision of technology support for an increased head count. There are also 50 staff members requiring technological support. During that same time period, the number of declared CLA majors has dropped by 18% (between the 2006 peak and the most recent measure in 2014). In terms of "absolute numbers" then, the demand is rising as the source of support is in decline. (CLA Technology Self-Study, pp. 13-16).

Were it the case that the majority of CLA instruction targets CLA students, this might be a reasonable formula. Review committee members understand that all collegiate units provide instruction for students across the university, primarily in the form of courses in the Liberal Education Program. However, we note that CLA alone provides support to students in courses required across the university (e.g., Writing Studies courses are required of all UMD Freshmen; Communication courses in Public Speaking and Interpersonal Communication are required in many majors across UMD). So while students may select majors in colleges other than CLA, denying their fee support for our technology needs, students from across UMD benefit from the technology that CLA does -- MUST -- provide. This formula does not, in the opinion of review committee members, provide adequate, reasonable, or fair support for CLA's contribution to the mission of UMD.

In interviews, both Peter and Dan expressed their frustration with the hyper-orientation to solving immediate problems, leaving less time for attention to working with faculty, staff and students in

developing innovative new programs. Both Peter and Dan acknowledge the intersection of short-term immediate needs and a larger strategic or procedural change within CLA. However, both observe that it is difficult to proactively develop a five-year plan when day-to-day demands occupy so much time. In other words, without an alteration to the formula by which technology is funded in CLA, or without scaling back services, the CLA Technology Program is not on a trajectory to meet its mission.

The Self-Study provided by Peter Angelos effectively sets forth the structural challenges facing the CLA Technology Program. The survey results (Self Study, pp. 19-23) confirm what interviews with Peter Angelos, Dan Lackore, and casual conversations with CLA staff and faculty members suggest. In the context of dwindling resources of support for technology in CLA, resulting from fee structure and diminishing CLA declared majors, the energies of technology personnel (Angelos, Lackore and students) are focused increasingly on maintaining basic standards of technology necessary for teaching and research, and less on the development and implementation of new initiatives. The points of dissatisfaction among users of CLA technology in many respects reflect the frustration resulting from time spent putting out fires (Self-Study, p. 20, item 10).

Technology Review Committee members expressed concern that the funding formula for technology in CLA resulted in the GISL move to SCSE, and questioned whether that move might recoup dollars previously lost to CLA. Peter and Dan explained that the GISL resulted in a $130k / year "loss" to the CLA technology budget, claiming, also, that any possible savings have already been off-set by losses in student enrollment and rising costs (Notes from Angelos interview, p. 3).

The CLA Technology Self-Study identifies the paucity of sources for additional funding, while also noting some possible loci of revenue. These include diversion of salvage / disposal of used technology to sale, adoption of BOYD policies by which the University of Minnesota infrastructure would reduce technology purchase costs, establishing shared service models with other departments, and fostering private corporate partnerships with external entities, such as NGOs, non-profit groups, government or private sector entities. Review committee members deemed these options to be "potential," but not immediately feasible. To date, none of these options has been pursued in CLA (CLA Technology Self-Study, pp 17-18).

Peter and Dan have initiated practices to maximize the longevity of technology provided to faculty and staff (detailed in the previous section, "Strengths") within the context of diminishing resources. The committee noted that some of the problems and challenges identified by faculty members across CLA, result in part from problems with communication.

Communication Issues

Review Committee members, along with CLA faculty and staff express general confusion about what it is that Peter and Dan do, and what duties and fixes fall under the purview of their responsibility. The communication-related component of several CLA Technology Program challenges are confirmed generally in the User Satisfaction Survey results (Self-Study, pp 19-21). Specific points of dissatisfaction affirm the problems of communication (Self Study, p. 20, items 14 & 15), addressing respondents' understanding of whom to contact with specific technology problems.

This was an important interview point for both Peter and Dan. There persists some confusion, at the level of faculty and staff, regarding the proper experts to call for specific kinds of technological help. UMD does have a campus-wide technology program. Many persons in CLA call Dan or Peter first when the issue is a relatively "simple" one that can easily be addressed by consulting the UMD Help Desk. For example, workers at the Help Desk are able to help faculty when they need access to the administrative rights for their computers. Dan and Peter affirmed that this stratum of protection will soon be moot. Still, in many cases the issue is more correctly the purview of the Help Desk. Not aware of "who does what," faculty and staff call Dan or Peter, and express frustration when their calls are not returned immediately. Notwithstanding the fact that several months ago Peter sent to staff and faculty a document outlining the kinds of things that may best be handled by the campus technology personnel (entitled Whom and When to Call), "misplaced" calls to Dan and Peter continue to consume their time, and continue to foster frustration among faculty.

Some faculty members express confusion regarding the "research / teaching" distinction where technology resources are concerned. From a faculty perspective, research and teaching constitute a symbiotic relationship. So when faculty members call Peter or Dan with an issue, many do not understand nor appreciate the question of whether the issue is a "teaching" issue or a "research" issue. This is an important distinction because as Peter notes, the "nature of the collegiate fee FTE funding model mandates that technology fees are spent on services that directly benefit students, but are not part of actual classroom instruction or direct faculty research" (Notes from Angelos Interview, p. 2).

Another communication-related problem involves faculty and staff perception of the appropriate time for turn-over of older computer technology. Most faculty members, when hired, are offered a choice of top-performing computer equipment, with the promise that the CLA Technology Program personnel will help train, maintain, and ultimately replace that technology. However, as indicated previously, part of cost management has included the expanding use of computers beyond their warranties, and seeking to repair rather than replace when at all feasible. Some faculty members wonder why, after four years, a new computer has not been offered to them.

In sum, the CLA Technology Review Committee members believe that some of the challenges detailed above might be mitigated by a rigorous commitment to communication between the Technology Program, CLA staff and CLA faculty.

Potential Solutions Advanced by the Technology Review Committee

First, it seems clear that some sort of adjustment to the formula for funding the CLA Technology Program is in order. If CLA majors continue to decline under the current formula, we predict that some form of technological support will have to be scaled back.

> 1. Could CLA levy a "charge" to other collegiate units for the technologies that benefit ALL UMD students?

2. Is there a way to structure a cost to UMD writ large for the courses in Writing Studies, and Communication that are not in any measure balanced by CLA students' enrollment in courses within other colleges?

3. Does CLA need to advocate for a central position for someone like Peter who would oversee the entire campus (or at least CLA, SFA, and CEHSP)?

Second, a rigorous communication campaign is in order to inform faculty and staff of important technology considerations.

1. There must be a way to bring Peter's "Whom and When to Call" more centrally to the attention of faculty and staff. Casual conversations with faculty and staff members indicate that many are simply unaware of this information or its importance.

2. Both Peter and Dan energetically addressed our question asking "what would you like faculty, students and staff to know that you think we don't already know?" Dan suggested that there is a LOT of free software, the use of which might reduce some costs incurred by faculty and staff -- but we don't tend to ask about them. Peter suggested an array of policy and procedural support they could offer us -- security, data privacy, digital media, etc. Both Peter and Dan indicated that it would be helpful if faculty and staff understood the nature of the fiscal challenges the CLA Technology Program confronts.

3. Just as individual departments have (or used to have) Library Liaison representatives, and representatives to college-wide campus committees, we propose that each department establish a Technology Liaison individual who would be responsible for vetting technology needs and demands within a department and communicating those needs to Peter and / or Dan. We do not envision that this person would be responsible to call Peter or Dan whenever there is an immediate problem. But to the extent that a cluster of immediate problems might index a larger systemic problem, this liaison might be able to signal important issues to CLA Tech as trends rather than individual instances. Departmental liaisons might better be able to direct help and questions using the "Whom and When to Call" recommendations. These individuals could also meet monthly (semi-monthly) with Dan and Peter and other departmental liaisons, so that they can report back to departments new developments, protocols, divisions of labor, etc.

Conclusion:

In the context of increasingly limited resources, the CLA Technology Review Committee members believe that the leadership in the CLA Technology Program is managing those resources as well as might be expected. Clearly, for several reasons, maintaining technology for use in classroom is a top priority, though it becomes increasingly difficult as financial support wanes. Developing innovations for online teaching and research then becomes secondary to maintaining classroom technology. Some of the perceived problems (e.g., getting a "timely" resolution to a computer problem, contacting the correct office for solving problems, explaining to faculty and staff free software options that might facilitate their work, etc.,) might be mitigated with a systematic commitment to communicating key issues to faculty and staff.