Where's the Beef?: Implementation of Discipline-Specific Training on Internet Resources

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With the recent explosion of Internet information resources, Academic Computing and Library organizations face the dilemmas of who is responsible for Internet services and how to best provide these services. This paper describes how two very different universities solved these problems by having Academic Computing and University Libraries jointly develop a series of discipline-specific seminars on Internet resources.

This paper will cover how the seminar series idea developed; seminar logistics, content and organization; how these seminars differed from previous Internet workshops; the strengths both organizations brought to the efforts; measures of the program success; and differences in the implementations.
With the recent explosion of Internet information resources, Academic Computing and Library organizations face the dilemmas of who is responsible for Internet services and how to best provide these services. This paper describes how two very different universities, Vanderbilt University and Western Michigan University, solved these problems.

At Vanderbilt University, the situation was made even more problematic by the recent split between Academic Computing and the Central Library. While the two units once reported to the same Associate Provost of Information Technologies, they now reported directly to the Provost and each was headed by newly appointed Acting Directors.

The past also had its share of turf issues over who would be responsible for Internet resources and support. There had even been an attempt to teach jointly a few Internet workshops. While these workshops were successful if judged by attendance, they were a failure in that the instructors stopped working together. Instead the instructors divided up the courses and went back to offer them in their respective units. The other problem with these workshops was that faculty did not attend in any significant numbers.

So, Academic Computing and Central Library were faced with the challenge of an ever increasing demand for Internet services, a confusion over whose responsibility it was to provide these services, and a partial solution in place. The Acting Director of Academic Computing approached the Acting Director of the Central Library with the idea of focusing on service rather than turf. Instead of dividing up the Internet responsibilities by organization, it was decided to merge the strengths of the two organizations to provide seamless support.

The Acting Director of Academic Computing offered the Central Library more than just rhetoric. She offered a plan for supporting faculty exploration and development of Internet resources. The plan was to have Academic Computing and Central Library jointly develop a series of discipline-specific seminars on Internet resources. The two organizations would offer faculty seminars demonstrating discipline-specific resources available via the World Wide Web (WWW). The seminars would take advantage of the Central Library’s departmental liaison program and Academic Computing’s expertise in overcoming technical difficulties.

The Central Library’s departmental liaison program provided the fundamental infrastructure for building the seminar series. At Vanderbilt, each Arts and Science department has one faculty member who is designated as the library representative. This person works directly with one librarian who is designated as that department’s bibliographer. The departmental bibliographer makes most of the purchasing decisions regarding the departmental material funds. In order for the bibliographer to make good choices, the bibliographer has to know the department well. The bibliographer has a variety of ways to stay abreast of the departmental needs: course schedules, faculty information sheets, individual meetings, guest presentations, and library in-services. For some faculty members, the bibliographer is their “personal” librarian. The end result is that the bibliographer is extremely knowledgeable about the department’s interest.

The library representative also plays a key role in the departmental liaison program. The library representative usually does the announcements and public relations for the library
in-services. Having a faculty member recommending a seminar series helps boost faculty attendance.

In spite of building upon an existing infrastructure, several factors had to put into place before the seminar series could be offered. Support for the program had to be built across the campus. As the Acting Director of Academic Computing met with the deans of the various schools, the idea of the seminar series was discussed and support for the program was acquired. Deans had to be reassured that the seminar series would not be used to increase the demand for more computing resources from them.

Support for the seminar series had to be developed not only across campus but within Academic Computing and Central Library as well. Careful consideration was given as to whom would be chosen to lead the seminar series within each organization and to coordinate across organizations. The library consultant was chosen based on her expertise in coordinating with the library's departmental liaisons to deliver successful faculty seminars. The computer center consultant was chosen based on his communication and technical skills.

While support for the program was developing, the details of seminar series were being worked out. It was decided that the department's library liaison would work with the department on scheduling a convenient time for the seminar. Then the library liaison and computer center consultant would work together on the seminar content. The computer center consultant developed a World Wide Web page of key resources for the discipline which would be distributed at seminar. Upon request, computer center personnel were available to help faculty set up their office equipment to access the Internet resources. In order to assess the quality of the seminars, an evaluation form was sent as a three week follow-up.

The program at Vanderbilt has been judged successful as measured by high faculty attendance and favorable evaluations; academic deans praising the program; professional growth of librarians and computer professionals; increased requests for network connections; increased requests for instructional computing support; and renewed respect and cooperation between the organizations.

Faculty attendance at these seminars was unusually high. All but three departments in the College of Arts and Science have participated in the program. Faculty attendance has ranged from 26% to 100% of the department attending the session. Even in the case of the lowest percentage attending (26%), a total of 27 faculty members attended from that department. Seventy-five percent of the people who returned the evaluation form rated the session as helpful to very helpful. People attending the sessions responded that their competency had improved based upon attending. One of the highest compliments for the seminar series was unsolicited and came from the Associate Dean of Arts and Science. He stated that the seminar series was the “best program the Computer Center had ever provided”.

The seminars have resulted in increased demand for networking services and instructional computing support. Recent audiences spend less time asking about other Internet services, such as electronic mail and newsgroups, that interested earlier audiences. Instead, recent
audiences are asking about how to construct web pages for the department and their courses.

The seminar series encouraged the professional growth of the librarians and the computing professionals. The librarians’ use of the Internet in answering reference questions has grown from virtually no use to daily use since the beginning of these seminars. By preparing for these seminars, librarians have learned how to more effectively use the Internet. While the Internet is great for many things, the lack of quality control and source verification often makes it the last place to go for a definitive answer. Therefore, many librarians avoided the Internet. However, since the librarians began giving the Internet seminars, most of the reference librarians have turned to the Internet for answers they could not obtain elsewhere. A year ago, they would not have known how to do that. It was the training session provided by the Computer Center that provided the skills set and the need to co-teach the faculty members that provided the opportunity to use the newly acquired skills. As subject bibliographers, many of the librarians now use the Internet to read electronic journals, check other libraries’ catalogs, and to stay current in the various disciplines. The librarians now provide the Computer Center with complete HTML listings for the department’s resource page rather than having the Computer Center representative construct the entire page.

The computer center consultant has grown professional as well. While he continues to be a statistical consultant for the Computer Center, he now serves as Vanderbilt’s Webmaster and is well respected on campus for his Internet expertise.

The seminars resulted in renewed respect and cooperation between Academic Computing and Central Library. Holding the seminars in the Central Library’s classroom meant that the computer center instructor had to go over to the Library on many occasions. The librarians got to know him and feel comfortable with him. Now many of the librarians view him as their own liaison in the Computer Center. Academic Computing is no longer some vague department, it was at least two faces associated with it.

Given these seminars were so successful, it was important to understand what distinguished them from previously offered Internet training. One key difference was that the seminars were discipline-specific. They were tailored to meet faculty interests. The faculty were not simply shown a tool and left to explore the vastness of the Internet on their own instead they were given access to key resources while being shown the tool. The emphasis was on the content not the tool.

Another difference was in how the seminars were advertised. First they were announced in the Computer Center’s newsletter. Then each librarian contacted the library representative to make arrangements for the seminar. Since the seminars were scheduled to accommodate faculty schedules, these seminars were more widely attended by the faculty than any other seminar series. Do not underestimate the power of accommodating a department’s schedule. While we had planned initially to offer the seminars as brown bag lunches, we found that each department had its own unique time for meeting. By accommodating those times, we were able to make sure our seminars were well attended.

Distributing copies of the WWW page of discipline-specific resources also contributed to the success of the seminars. This saved the faculty the time and effort required to relocate
the resources. The pages were available in Macintosh and PC format to accommodate differences in platforms.

Another way we addressed the challenge of supporting multiple platforms was by being willing to follow up on the seminar. Computing personnel were available to install and demonstrate browsers when requested. From past experience, we knew how easy it was for someone to lose their enthusiasm for a computing tool when faced with the frustration of getting it installed and working. The follow up visits and demonstrations not only saved on faculty frustration but allowed the seminar leaders to use their platform of choice and defer specific platform issues to another time.

The seminars were so successful because of the partnership of the two organizations. These seminars represent the best of both organizations. The seminars capitalized on the strengths of each organization. Central Library contributed its established departmental liaison program, in-depth knowledge of the workings of each department, knowledge of faculty interests, knowledge of content areas for the disciplines, and experience in reference techniques. Academic Computing contributed technical expertise in Internet services and resources, experience in net surfing, in-depth knowledge of campus network, and experience with regional and national networks. An added value in partnering together is that the seminar developers were able to take advantage of each other's individual strengths. There were several times when the individual strengths were different from the organizational strengths. For example, there were librarians who were well versed in the development of Internet and computer center consultants who had a thorough knowledge of a content area.

Given the enormous success of this seminar series at Vanderbilt University, the question became whether a similar program would work at other universities. Vanderbilt is a Research I (Carnegie Foundation rating), medium to large size, and private university. Fortunately, we had the opportunity to introduce a similar program at Western Michigan University. Western Michigan University is a Doctoral I (Carnegie Foundation rating), large, and public university. We are in the process of planning the seminar series for Western Michigan University. There are differences and similarities in the implementation of the two series.

First of all, computing support at Western Michigan University is centralized in the office of the University Computing Services which reports to the Provost. Funding for campus academic computing is from a single source in central administration: the Provost's office. These funds are allocated by University Computing Services, unlike Vanderbilt, where the individual deans are responsible for funding computing for their schools and colleges. What this has meant for the discipline-based Internet training at Western Michigan University is that the deans have been uniformly supportive of such training of their faculty, without the concern that occurred at Vanderbilt that such training would create a demand for computing which might exceed the ability of the deans to provide it from their own resources. While access to computing resources is not uniform across the disciplines and departments, the Computing Center and University Libraries can depend upon the deans to support a program of Internet training both to their own faculties and to the Provost. While it may seem basic that deans would support so manifest a "good" as Internet training, in fact their strong support promises to be important in convincing
departments that such training is sufficiently valuable that departmental meeting time be devoted to it.

An important similarity that Western Michigan University shared with Vanderbilt is a lack of tradition of joint training between the Computing Center and the University Libraries. University Libraries, which is dependent upon the Computing Center for programming and network support in library automation, has enjoyed a most satisfactory relationship with the Computing Center. However, with the exception of cooperation in the development of a hypermedia presentation used for undergraduate library orientation, the Libraries and Computing Center have had little experience in joint instruction of any kind, much less instruction of the Internet. It was not until November 1993 that staff from the two organizations cooperated in a series of workshops for faculty and those dealt with multimedia and presentation software rather than the Internet. Shortly after arriving in the fall of 1993, the Dean of Libraries proposed joint discipline-specific instructional sessions regarding the Internet and gophering. The departure of the Computing Center's Internet trainer and the impending retirement of the Director of the Computing Center delayed further formal relations until the arrival of the new director of computing.

A second challenge to effective discipline-specific training -- and one shared by most institutions -- has been the uneven level of Internet expertise among librarians. University Libraries has instituted an active and successful liaison program with all the departments. Under this program a librarian is assigned liaison responsibilities, including collection development and instructional services, to one or more departments. Nearly all library faculty have liaison responsibilities. Each academic department, in turn, assigns liaison responsibilities to a member of the department. As might be expected, interest and level of activity of the liaisons vary greatly, though commitment from the library liaison is uniformly high. As was the case at Vanderbilt, when librarians offered instructional sessions for the faculty at brown bag sessions, attendance was spotty. Based on that experience and the experience of Computing Center staff’s faculty development programs, we had no reason to believe that general instructional sessions in the use of the Internet would be significantly more attractive. Indeed, when these general Internet seminars were offered, attendance was low.

That experience suggested that two factors would be important in a successful instructional program for the faculty: securing a captive audience and providing specific information that faculty could use immediately using their existing computers. The Dean of Libraries had already arranged to meet with teaching faculty and their library liaisons at their regularly scheduled departmental meetings. At those meetings library collections and services were discussed and the meeting ended by the dean offering to host a subsequent departmental meeting in the library's electronic classroom. At those subsequent meetings, library liaisons were allocated the first 45 minutes or so of the meeting to instruct the faculty in the use of electronic resources and document delivery systems. While there was insufficient time to introduce Internet resources, the added value which librarians could bring to faculty research and teaching was made emphatic, even for faculty who had previously had little contact with librarians. While a few of the most sophisticated library users were a little bored, most learned something and more than a few learned a significant amount. The important advantage of this captive audience was that the librarians approached the faculty as if they were not skilled users of electronic resources and therefore, those who were, in fact, unskilled did not have to admit it. They did not have to admit a need for help, which
few, if any, would have done. At the same session, library liaisons offered to provide private individual instruction at a later time. The success with the captive audience approach also paved the way for subsequent instructional seminars; these will be Internet and WWW discipline-specific. 

In an effort to generate interest in the Internet and Web among administrators, librarians and computer center staff presented sessions at regularly scheduled Deans’ Council. Again, this was a captive audience, this time consisting of deans, Provost, and associate provosts. A similar session was presented to the vice-presidents. Since most of these administrators did not have a command or even hands on experience with the Web at that time, the impression on them was powerful. Their strong positive response has been important in generating top-down enthusiasm for Internet training in their schools and colleges and, not the least important, for generating across the campus support for making Internet access and training a high institutional priority. The presence of both library and computing center staff at these meeting was important because the questions asked could only have been answered by staff from both organizations. 

Key to successful discipline-specific Internet training are the computer center staff’s knowledge of computing hardware and networking and librarians’ knowledge of the Internet resources. At Western Michigan University, as we began making plans for the seminars, it became clear that a number of library liaisons who were otherwise knowledgeable of electronic resources and skilled instructors were uncomfortable with the prospect of instructing faculty regarding discipline-specific Internet surfing. A number of library faculty began expressing concern that the dean was getting too far in front of the faculty in committing to Internet instruction for specific academic departments. 

In early summer 1995, the Dean of Libraries challenged the entire Library faculty, not just the liaisons, to become not simply familiar with the Internet and the Web, but expert in their use, especially in the resources which apply to the disciplines for which they had liaison responsibility. The goal was for them to become expert by the beginning of the Fall semester. In return for that commitment, librarians would receive both in-house training and external training, if they thought it necessary. In addition, they would be provided the release time necessary to acquire the expertise and practice searching and teaching techniques. The library purchased Web manuals for all library faculty. Two experienced Internet trainers from the library faculty provided the basic training and conducted laboratory exercises. Four librarians were funded to attend the Technology in Learning and Teaching workshops at Northwestern University. The dean has recognized those key librarians who have provided Internet training by making Internet instructional efforts the most important criterion in assigning administrative merit pay this year. The Library faculty met the dean’s challenge enthusiastically. The result has been the integration of Internet and Web components to library instructional sessions with teaching faculty as time permits and the planning for joint discipline-specific Internet seminars with the computing center staff. 

In Fall of 1995, computing center and library staff began planning the seminars with the goal of winter semester presentations. At Western Michigan University, library and computing center staff selected four departments to be the intended audience of the seminars: sociology, education (K-12), business information systems, and art. Those departments were selected because we regarded early success of the seminars to be
fundamental to successful university-wide discipline-specific training. Each of the
departments have the requisite level of computing and network capacity and library liaisons
who are expert and experienced in Internet training. These departments also represent a
broad cross section of disciplines. In addition to the roles of computing center and library
staff, we expect the faculty members who are liaison to the Computing Center and to the
Libraries to play an active role in the planning and implementation of the seminars. It will
be important that the departments assume an active role in the seminars and share in the
assurance of a positive outcome.

Cooperation between the departments, Computing Center, and Libraries is fundamental to
successful discipline-specific Internet training. That is true at Vanderbilt, Western Michigan
University, and virtually every other institution. At Western Michigan University, we also
believe that this training should be grounded in sound academic principles. Two principles
are especially important to our efforts.

The first principle is the belief that just as students find bibliographic instruction much
more useful when it is are linked to specific assignments, so too is Internet training more
valuable to faculty when it is linked to their specific research and instructional needs. It is
through disciplinary-specific rather than general skill-based training that success is most
likely to occur.

The second principle is that every student and faculty member deserves equal opportunity
to become proficient at utilizing the incredibly rich resources of the Internet -- regardless of
their major or discipline. We regard that as a right and not a privilege available to only
those whose library and computing center staff are so motivated to provide effective
Internet instruction.

We regard those principles to be sound at all institutions of higher education, regardless of
size or research and instructional missions. We anticipate that the foundation of successful
discipline-specific instruction will be the same at both Vanderbilt and Western Michigan
University: professional expertise and commitment from computing center and library
staff; cooperation of both organizations to maximize the expertise wherever it is and to
develop it where it is lacking; and support of central administration to the goal of access to
the resources of the Internet and delivery of those resources.