The Metropolitan Community Colleges

The Metropolitan Community Colleges (MCC) encompass several campuses in the Kansas City, Missouri, area: Longview Community College, Maple Woods Community College, Penn Valley Community College, and the Blue Springs and Independence campuses. Centralized services for the campuses, as well as leadership for districtwide functions, are provided by the MCC Administrative Center.

Although the MCC district was created by voters in 1964, the present community colleges inherit the long and respected tradition of their predecessor, the Junior College of Kansas City, which was founded in 1915. Today, the Metropolitan Community Colleges offer seventy career or transfer degree programs to 19,000 students, as well as quality, low-cost continuing education courses.

According to Chancellor Wayne Giles, “The district has worked hard at staying on the cutting edge of new technologies, while maintaining a high quality of instruction in traditional, liberal arts disciplines.” More recently, MCC engaged in a strategic planning process that included a focus on expanding technological support for instruction and administration.

The need to better leverage technology

Two years ago, Giles says, “We weren’t using technology as well as we could for delivery of instruction and support of administration. We had the resources to invest in technology because the state has been very supportive of technology—Missouri is enjoying increased revenues from casinos—and the governor is very committed to information technology in education.” But technology at MCC was managed in a very distributed fashion, with little central coordination or district planning.

When Giles became chancellor in 1993, he recommended expanding the academic vice chancellor position he had just vacated to include responsibility for providing leadership for information technology across the district. Thus the position of vice chancellor for educational services and instructional technology was created at the district level. This position, filled in the fall of 1993 by Don Doucette, includes responsibility for curriculum coordination, student services, professional development, research and assessment, distance education and television, and information technology (including instructional and administrative computing and networking), as well as shared responsibility for occupational and continuing education.

While initially there was some concern that adding technology responsibilities to the position might dilute academic advocacy at the district level, that concern has since been alleviated—Doucette says he spends more than 75% of his time serving in that capacity.
percent of his time in the academic officer role. Because of a reorganization and consolidation of technology staffing (see discussion below), Doucette can concentrate on providing strategic planning and policy-level leadership for technology, while the professional IT staff manage operations and provide user support and services.

**Strategic planning and budgeting**

In September of 1994, MCC published the results of a collaborative strategic planning process that had engaged more than 400 individuals from the three colleges and the Administrative Center in the identification of goals, strategies, and priorities for the district. An update to that plan was recently published. One of the major strategic priorities identified in both the plan and update was that “MCC will promote appropriate integration of technology into areas of instruction, student services, and administration.”

The resource allocation processes at MCC are driven by its planning processes; budgets are established based on institutional priorities. In addition, each year the financial plan has included $500,000 earmarked as discretionary funds to support strategic planning initiatives. These funds are awarded based on proposals called “action plans,” generated at the district level as well as by faculty and staff at the colleges. Of the twenty-four plans awarded funding last year, twenty were affiliated with the technology priority identified in the MCC strategic plan.

This year, increases in state funding brought MCC an additional $1.8 million for infrastructure investment, including library acquisitions and access, networking, and academic computing.

**Setting priorities for IT investments**

Since expenditures on technology represent an increasingly significant portion of MCC’s discretionary spending, in the spring of this year, Chancellor Giles charged Doucette with developing a technology plan to guide the allocation of resources in this area, through a process that would ensure districtwide acceptance of the plan. Doucette began working with a technology planning task force during the summer months, engaging more than thirty individuals from throughout the district in the planning process. A draft *Information Technology Resources Plan* was distributed this fall, outlining principles, assumptions, goals, policies, procedures, and priority applications.

One outcome expected from this process is a set of standards for technology used in offices, classrooms, and labs that will enable “institutional compatibility and efficiency, while allowing for individual differences.” Doucette emphasizes the importance of such standards for network and user services, but believes more freedom is needed with regard to instructional technology to encourage continued use and experimentation by MCC faculty.

A fundamental, underlying philosophy of technology planning at MCC is that “financial, human, and capital resources are finite, requiring MCC to make choices in building a sustainable infrastructure.” Says Doucette, “I can’t think of infrastructure without thinking of support. That phrase ‘sustainable infrastructure’ is really the key here.”

The plan also makes it clear that universal access to information technology resources—giving all students and employees the tools they need—is a primary goal at MCC. First priority is access on campus, providing multipurpose public labs that support a variety of programs and access to campus systems, and perhaps providing less support and investment for highly specialized, discipline-dedicated facilities. Doucette believes that this will help to alleviate the unevenness in access to technology that has existed among the campuses.

MCC has also explicitly adopted the goals of the *Missouri Community College Association Information Technology Plan* articulated in June of 1995 to guide investment in IT statewide. Those goals included ensuring “that students graduating from Missouri community colleges demonstrate the ability to use basic information technologies, that colleges have faculty and staff necessary to meet the goal of ‘information literacy,’ that each college have a fully networked campus providing convenient access, and that colleges establish networks which share resources and data on a broad and affordable basis.”

MCC’s campuses are presently networked through 56 Kbps lines between locations, with a plan in place to implement T1 lines and fiber in the coming year. In preparation for completion of the high-speed network, the desktop environment is also being upgraded. Currently 90 percent of employees are networked, most with 486-level devices. For the past two years, MCC has funded a program that has put state-of-the-art laptop computers into the hands of more than 60 percent of the teaching faculty, with the stipulation that the recipients complete a 45-hour training course in the use of the technology.

**Restructuring for effective technology management**

The creation of a vice chancellor position with technology responsibilities prompted a reorganization of computing services at the district level, and eventually throughout the campuses. The data processing center (primarily administrative computing), which was reporting to the vice chancellor of administrative services, was brought into Doucette’s line organization, and a new area was created, Network and User Services, to provide a central coordinative and leadership function for distributed computing and districtwide networking. Under the direction of Kathy Kamp, this new area now also encompasses voice communications (which formerly reported to the marketing department) and district-level library technical support services.

The spring following this restructuring, to address staffing needs districtwide, recommendations were made to establish new technology support positions at each college:

- a coordinator of networks and user services (essentially a college network administrator who would coor-
coordinate the development of the college’s network infrastructure and network-based applications in cooperation with the district’s Director of Network and User Services.

- a coordinator of instructional support to assist faculty in the use of technology for instructional purposes
- computer laboratory managers responsible for the college’s instructional computer labs
- computer support specialists to install and maintain hardware and software in labs and offices
- multimedia and media technicians to provide support for the use of traditional media and emerging multimedia applications

According to Mike West, dean of instruction at Maple Woods Community College, “We had begun to identify systematically our technology staffing needs. Basically, we believed we needed decentralized support in two areas—instructional support and technical support. Centrally, we knew we would need to establish a help desk/training function, recognizing that when we put technology into the hands of our faculty and staff, we must be sure they are trained to use it.”

After more than a year’s experience with these staffing positions, it became clear that additional changes were needed to ensure a broader distribution of services and better use of resources. This was effected primarily through changing the reporting line of the college coordinators of networks and user services. Rather than continuing to report to the dean or associate dean of instruction at their campuses, as of July 1995 these coordinators began to report to Kamp at the district level.

A significant benefit of the new arrangement is that college coordinators are now able to function clearly as members of a districtwide team, working with a coordinated set of priorities to benefit not only the college where they are located but MCC as a whole. Each coordinator will now be able to become a specialist in certain areas, so he won’t have to be skilled in and responsible for all technologies, and all campuses will have better expertise available to them. Kamp has assigned these new “team” members areas of specialization, such as LANs, wide area network, wiring, Internet, PC hardware and operating systems, remote access, video transmission, and e-mail/groupware and document imaging. According to Kamp, “We’re doing four times more than we were able to do before. The new structure hasn’t diminished campus support, and there’s still local oversight over how things are done. Everyone is benefiting.”

Aldo Leker, president of Longview (an MCC college known for being on the forefront of technology), believes it is helpful to have a central focus on technology “to address the larger problems that are not always evident to those in the colleges, who can be parochial in their views. We are beginning to see that the central planning and coordination is getting us more than what we gave up—that is, some of our autonomy.”

The instructional support coordinator positions have retained their campus-based autonomy. Instructional support by its nature deals more with faculty relationships and disciplines and needs to be close to those who are being supported. Chip Dube describes his instructional support coordinator role as primarily being an educational consultant to the faculty, with heavy emphasis on incorporation of technology while advising on pedagogical concerns—in short, a learning systems approach. “The best person to sell a faculty member on using technology,” he says, “is another faculty member.”

**Administrative systems development partnership**

When Doucette arrived at MCC, he found the district had been investigating new administrative information systems for several years and had come to the conclusion, after developing specifications, issuing an RFP, and narrowing the selection to three vendors, that no product on the market could meet the colleges’ requirements. Completely rebuilding the current legacy systems was out of the question—there simply were not enough staff resources to take on an internal development project. The solution to this quandary was entering into a partnership with The Robinson Group (TRG) to add functional modules to the existing student information for immediate benefits, while designing and developing a new integrated system over the next three years. This development would take place not only with TRG, but also in conjunction with a consortium of institutions participating in designing the system.

With this decision, MCC established a clear technology direction—distributed, network-based computing with centralized support—and placed a priority on the development of information systems that focus on student-centered applications that provide students with increased access to the information they need to support student learning. Until the new student system is up and running in 1997, three TRG products have been implemented to add functionality to existing systems: MetroTouch, a telephone registration system; IN SIGHT, a student tracking system; and InfoTouch, an information kiosk system that allows students to access their records and transcripts.

The eleven institutions participating in this partnership are:

- Kansas City Metropolitan Community College
- Metropolitan College
- Oak Cliff College
- Longview Community College
- Northeast Kansas Community College
- Northeast Kansas Technical College
- Southeast Kansas Community College
- Southwest Kansas Community College
- Western Kansas Technical College
- Central Kansas Community College
- Emporia State University

In keeping with its role as a leader in technology training, MCC provides computer labs at all of its sites across the metropolitan Kansas City area.
in the TRG consortium (including not only other community colleges but also several private universities and two California State University campuses) are working to develop a student system called SAN — Student Access Network. Many of the participating institutions, including MSS, are also working toward developing a Financial Access Network (FAN) system. Business process evaluation at each campus has played a significant part in the joint design process.

According to MCC Director of Student Services Malcolm Wilson, “The real value of the SAN project is that it is based on a collaborative effort. What we get will be much closer to what we need, and much better than what’s on the market. The process looks at what we do, then at what would be a better way to do it.”

Vice Chancellor of Administrative Services Ron Greathouse agrees: “We’ve done a thorough business process evaluation at MCC over the past year, mostly through continuous quality improvement initiatives. The partnership emphasizes that the business systems must satisfy the needs of the people who will use it, not just the financial personnel. So division chairs will sign off on the design before we proceed.”

MCC has bought a low-end ES9000 to provide continued support for the legacy systems until the SAN and FAN systems are implemented in 1997. The new systems are expected to run on the RS-6000 machines the district has been installing in preparation for moving to a client/server configuration.

Teaching, learning, and technology

MCC has been broadcasting telecourses since the summer of 1992 through its Distance Education Network. This network is part of KC-Ednet, a consortium of five two-year and four-year colleges which provides televised instruction to work sites and homes within a 40-mile radius of the city. This fall the district began experiments in two-way video.

Faculty at the Metropolitan Community Colleges have welcomed the infusion of technology funding and support in recent years. Doucette describes what he found upon arriving at MCC as “pent-up demand” — faculty were more than ready to use technology but many had been without resources to help make that happen. The recent widespread provision of desktop computing and ubiquitous access to the Internet have opened many opportunities for faculty to incorporate technology into the teaching and learning process.

Longview faculty member Priscilla Jackson-Evans says that one of the best things that happened as a result of MCC’s strategic planning was the setting aside of monies to fund action plans proposed by faculty. Longview’s Faculty Resource Center was one such funded proposal that has had a major impact. The Center, she says, “is not just a physical place where you find multimedia tools, but a nexus for faculty interest and expertise. It’s both a location and a state of mind — a virtual place where you are free to try new things.” What has made it so successful was its grassroots origin: “It wasn’t imposed, but evolved from individual faculty members who felt the need to investigate using technology to teach.”

At the same time, others at the college were conceiving a similar idea, from faculty in the social sciences and humanities, to the college librarian, to a task force on excellence in teaching.

Throughout the district, libraries and learning resource centers are playing an important role in paving the way for incorporating technology and information resources into instruction. Electronic resources are steadily being added to existing collections, and MCC’s participation in a consortium of libraries (known as KACEY), including the Kansas City public library, has enabled access to a rich set of online resources that would not have been possible had the district chosen to develop stand-alone systems.

Denise Zortman, director of the Learning Resource Center at Penn Valley, describes the MCC libraries as a “community resource.” Participation in the consortium has enabled the libraries to be a part of the ARIEL project, which will facilitate interlibrary loan via the network. An infusion of state monies last year allowed a significant investment in library equipment purchases that will help the library to move to a digital environment.

At Penn Valley the Learning Resource Center has become an effective facilitator of technology support for teaching and learning. The LRC building houses not only the library, but also an academic computing lab and a learning assistance center, with plans for adding media services in the future. Physically locating these components under the same roof helps to make the services more interconnected and is providing a model for other campuses in the district. Maple Woods is taking a similar approach, combining a learning center, multimedia lab, and the library into a shared “learning resources” environment. All of the libraries in the district plan to network their CD-ROM collections district wide once the fiber and T1 lines are implemented.

This sharing approach is certainly not new to the library community, and in fact extends beyond the campuses to the district level. While there is no single individual who coordinates all library activity throughout the district, library leaders from each campus work closely with each other and with Doucette’s organization, functioning as a leadership “team” to manage the district’s information resources. “Academic libraries have always been underfunded,” says Zortman, “so we learned long ago to collaborate and share resources.” She views the recent development of a library technical support function in Kamp’s Network and User Services department as especially helpful to the college libraries as they prepare for the emerging networked information environment.

What does the future hold for the Metropolitan Community Colleges? Chancellor Giles knows that changes are on the horizon, and acknowledges the role that technology will play in enabling them: “We have to get away from our traditional semester approach and change how, when, and where we offer instruction. Students want something different, so we will need to do things differently. We will need to change business processes and systems to accommodate the way students want to do business. All of this will be enabled by technology, and in fact using technology is probably the only way we’ll be able to make those changes.”